

THE STORIES OF SHORT STORY TOWN

VOL. I

FROM 3/4/2021 - TO 9/6/2021

(Published in reverse chronology)



COMPLIMENTS OF STEVE CARR



A SWEETCAT PRESS PUBLICATION

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PREFACE

When I decided to close down Short Story Town, my first concern was how do I preserve the good – not just good, but GREAT – stories and narrative poems that had been published in the magazine. They deserved to be read well beyond the life of Short Story Town. The sheer volume of stories and their lengths posed a problem in how to reproduce the entire magazine in a print format. Part of that process would be to format it as a PDF first. It then struck me that I could divide the magazine and do two PDFs in separate volumes and offer them free to anyone who wanted them, and later possibly reproduce them in print and Kindle. This is volume I. Volume II will follow sometime in June once the last story to be published is posted.

The writers and poets in this volume are amazing and I'm deeply honored to have been the recipient of their works.

Steve Carr
Founder/Publisher/Editor
Sweetycat Press

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Posted 9/6/2021
Tim Law "Draco" moved into town on 9/6/2021

DRACO
by
Tim Law

Even at four Draco knew that his father was a giant. That man could push Draco on the swings at the park with the kind of strength that only a giant possessed. Each push was harder than the one before it. Each push would send the boy closer and closer to the clouds above. It was in those moments that Draco felt like he was flying. Draco's father laughed like a giant too, loud and gruff, eyes twinkling. When Draco's father was mad he would lash out just like a giant, bash and smash and crash. Never Draco, but often the castle or the princess that lived there would feel the brunt of the giant's wrath. After such a storm there would always be a deafening silence.

Draco's mother was that princess who had the cuts and bruises to show what an angry giant can do. She was pale and sweet, quiet and kind, just like a princess ought to be. Or so it was that the giant said. When the giant went to work he would place the princess in the dungeon. Sometimes Draco would go there too; the dark and warm dungeon was a place where he would cuddle up with the princess and she would tell him stories of her childhood, the time before the giant came.

Draco knew he was a dragon, what else would come from a giant and a princess having a child? He was as wise as a dragon is wise, watching and listening, never missing a thing. Draco knew where the giant kept his happiness potions and in which cupboard was kept the sleeping broth he brewed for the princess when she made him extra angry. Like a dragon, Draco was strong. Sometimes he would go out with the giant into the forest that surrounded the castle and fetch water or wood. The giant made sure to give his dragon only as much as a dragon should carry. Draco sometimes watched the giant kill. Rabbits or deer, never people. The giant told Draco he could kill though, if he had to. Draco only nodded, showing that he understood.

Draco knew stories of giants and dragons and princesses. They were the picture stories he found in the castle's books or the stories that the princess told him in the dark in the dungeon when the giant was away.

Draco knew that one day the brave hero would come and fight the giant and then take the princess away. Draco didn't know if he wanted that to happen. Not on the days when the giant was happy anyway. Those were the days when Draco thought his life, living with the giant and the princess was perfect. On the dark days though, those days when the princess cried and the giant roared his terrible roars, on those days Draco wished that he was the hero and not the dragon. Or those were the days when he wished he was a bigger dragon, big enough to swallow the giant whole.

There were other times too when Draco worried. As he read those stories or heard the hushed whisper of his mother he wondered would the hero need to slay the dragon too before the princess could be saved? The princess always laughed at such thoughts and smiled a smile that lit up her face. There was always reassurance then that baby dragons are cute, no hero would wish to hurt a baby dragon.

Draco found ways to make the giant happy. Unlike the princess, Draco was free to explore for much of the time and so he learned to play with fire. He watched and listened and began to try. By taking the chunks of rabbit or deer that the giant cut and prepared Draco found he could turn the meat into a meal. By following the pictures in some books he found Draco was able to make something the giant loved and the princess ate. A full giant was a happier giant. A fed princess slept at night and woke the next morning brighter and with more spirit.

Then came the night when the princess told a brand new story. It was the story of how she wished to be a bird. She told her little dragon that birds can sneak through small spaces, spread their little wings and fly up into the beautiful blue sky. Draco already knew this about birds but he was a smart little dragon. Draco knew to listen and watch and learn. The princess cried while she told her story, fat tears falling hard and fast and plopping silently on to the faded pillows and the mattress.

The morning that followed after that story something changed within the little dragon. It began when the princess fought verbally with the giant, a foolish bravery that Draco initially couldn't understand. The giant left the castle with huffs and puffs. Draco watched him as the giant punished the princess and then locked her away. For hours Draco listened at the door of the dungeon as the princess whimpered. Each moment, every tear Draco wished for the hero to come but a dragon as wise and clever as Draco knew such a wish was just fantasy.

When the giant returned home that evening Draco could hear his clumsiness and could sense the giant needed rest. The meal of deer had been prepared especially. A magic spell to make the giant sleep for a hundred years. Draco smiled as he found the keys to the dungeon on the giant's belt. Taking them was easy as his father slept on.

"How is this possible?" asked the princess as the dungeon door swung open.

Her pretty eyes were wide with wonder.

"It is time," was Draco's reply. "Time for a dragon and a little bird to fly free and far."

When the heroes finally came to the castle they found it burnt to the ground. In his chair lay the giant, very much dead to the world. He had taught his little dragon much and so Draco knew that the giant's magic potion liked fire. The little dragon had spent that day spreading potion all around the castle's floors. With a single match Draco had breathed his flames. Hand in hand with the princess he had said his goodbyes.

The End

Tim Law heralds from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three, family is very important to him. Working at the local library, surrounded by so many wonderful stories inspires him to write.

Posted 9/3/2021

Peter Thomson “Martine’s Dr. Pepper” moved into town on 9/3/2021

MARTINE’S DR. PEPPER
by
Peter Thomson

In his rush to get into the street, Judge Denman stepped from the Sheriff’s office and almost collided with, what at first he took to be a bundle of rags.

“What the—” he mouthed in shock, and deftly sidestepped to regain his balance. He saw a tousled fair-headed boy peering at him out of large almond eyes—the rags had turned into an urchin.

“Now then, young man, you nearly had me falling over just then.” The judge spoke with mock severity. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

Unperturbed by the judge’s brusqueness, the youngster screwed up his nose and said, “I’m Jamie Cooper, an’ I’m nine—”

“No you’re not, yer only eight—same as me.”

Another bundle of rags appeared from the side passage beside the Sheriff’s office and stood beside Jamie. This one had long hair and wore a gray smock over a faded print dress.

“Denman stepped back a pace and ran a finger across his mustache.

“And who might you be, young lady?”

“I’m Martine Delroy. An’ I’m with Jamie – an’ he owes me a Dr. Pepper. He made a promise.” She ended by grasping hold of the boy’s arm.

“Oh, that sounds serious.” Denman replied with a stern face.

“She’s my bitch,” Jamie said, pulling himself free of the girl.

“Now then, young man,” Denman spoke severely, and pointed a finger at the boy. “That’s not the sort of language I expect to hear in polite society—and certainly not from an eight year old. Where did you learn to say things like that?”

“I told him it was bad talk, Mister.” Martine grabbed the boy’s arm once more.

Jamie’s face colored red. He looked down at his feet and shuffled from one foot to the other and back again. “Everybody says it these days.” Jamie sniffled as he mumbled.

“Well, young man, it’s as Martine says. It’s very bad talk and nice people don’t say such things. You are a nice boy, aren’t you, Jamie?”

“Yes sir ... sorry sir.”

“That’s better. Now tell me properly about the Dr. Pepper Martine claims you owe her?”

“She lives next door ... we hang out together.”

“Good, now we’re getting somewhere. So, you are good friends. Perhaps Martine’s your best friend even?”

“I guess so.”

Martine interjected, ‘We’re gonna get married when we’re older. The Dr. Pepper’s his gronty.’”

“Gronty? Gronty? ... Oh, you mean guarantee.”

“Uh-huh! Do you want to come to our wedding, Mister? We’re havin’ chocolate cake.”

Martine earned herself a stern reproof from Jamie.

“Don’t say that. We don’t know who he is?”

Denman roared with laughter as the tensions of the day fell away from him in the presence of this young innocence.

“Well kids, since you told me who you are, it’s only fair for me to do the same. People around here call me, ‘The Judge’.”

The boy gaped at Denman. “The Judge? Is that your real name? Do we have to call you ‘Mister Judge’?”

Denman laughed again, enjoying the encounter. “No,” he replied, “It is not my real name. It’s what I do. It’s my job.”

Martine’s face puckered in outrage. “But we told you our real names, Mister. It’s not fair.” She stamped her foot on the ground, giving her indignation added emphasis.

Denman chuckled and shook his head. “You are quite correct, young lady. My apologies to you both, I should introduce myself properly. I am, His Honor, James Tecumseh Denman, District Judge of the Tenth District of the Judicial Circuit for the State of Nebraska.”

The kids went silent and looked wide-eyed at him. After a few seconds of surprised silence, Denman poked his chest and said, “That’s who I am.”

Jamie came first out of his trance.

“Gosh, Mister, do you send people to jail.”

Denman put on his most severe face: “Only if they deserve it.”

The kids looked sharply at one another. Martine tugged on Jamie’s sleeve and whispered: “Let’s split...before he sends us to jail. Come on. Let’s go.”

Denman picked up on their anxiety and waved them down with the palms of his hands as he talked: “Now settle down, you two, there’s no cause for alarm. I only send bad people to jail. You are not bad people, are you?”

The judge raised his eyebrows and looked searchingly in turn at each child; who looked at the other for inspiration. Jamie’s gaze dropped to his feet. Martine shook her head, and said, “I don’t think so, but Ma sometimes says I’m bad. I don’t know about him.” She took her arm off Jamie and stepped a half-pace away from the boy.

Denman pursed his lips and bent down to talk to what he could see of Jamie—the top of the boy’s head:

“Well, Jamie, are you a bad person?”

“No, sir,” he dragged a foot on the sidewalk.

Denman clapped his hand. “That’s good, now we have that settled, we can deal with the case before the court.”

Martine moved closer to Jamie. They linked arms and gasped,

“Court? ... Case?”

“Yes, the case of Martine’s Doctor Pepper.”

“Oh, that was nothing, Sir,” Martine interrupted, “It was only to pay me for his promise. That’s why we’re here. Sometimes the officers give us little jobs—”

Jamie interrupted and held up a brush and a rag. “They let me wipe their boots and give us a quarter to get a Dr. Pepper. I was goin’ to ask you if you wanted a shoeshine when you came out. ... Sorry, Sir, but you did come out o’ there a bit fast.”

“Hmm, I call that contributory negligence on my part. Well, I have considered the evidence and have decided it is entirely my fault that we bumped into each other. In that case, I find for the defendants – that’s you two.”

The children each took a sharp intake of breath and looked at each other, their faces reddening with relief and excitement. Denman continued:

“And I award damages in the sum of slices of Mrs. Smittens chocolate cake with Dr. Peppers all round. Since you have no closing speeches, court is adjourned. Sine Die.”

“Gee!” Came out of both kids. And with Martine holding his left hand and Jamie his right, they marched the judge off to Smitten’s Bakehouse to receive their judicial dues.

The End

After a varied career as a soldier, commercial sailor and businessman, **Peter Thomson** and his wife, Janet, decided to settle in rural southwest France to write novels and indulge in a perpetual argument with a non-cooperative feral cat that it is he, and not the feline, who owns the property.

Posted 9/1/2021

David Hartley Mark “A Walk in the Woods” moved into town on
9/1/2021

A WALK IN THE WOODS

by

David Hartley Mark

I was twelve years old that summer, the year before my bar mitzvah. My parents—my mother, mostly—had decided to send me to Camp Torah-True, in the Catskills. I had not wanted to go; I would have been content to remain at home and visit the neighborhood public library day after day. Once weekly, I planned to beg a couple of bucks from my parents to go to the Essex Street Theater, to hunch alone in the hungry dark, stuff the dollar-cups of popcorn into my cheeks like a starving squirrel, and watch whatever was on—West Side Story, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea or How the West was Won.

But my mother had her way—she always had her way—and I and my black, battered, brass-fitted trunk went up to camp on the Trailways Bus. Once there, I was miserable: the other boys weren’t friendly. They all seemed to know each other from previous years, and I was the odd man out. Plus, my thrifty mother had elected to send me up in August, when the friendship-cliques were already formed. Finally, I sucked at whatever sports they played—softball, basketball, even tennis—and so was never in demand for a choose-up game. Even my treasured paperback books, my Mad Magazine Collection, disappeared shortly after my bunkmates discovered, seized them from me, and fought over them. By day’s end, but one remained: tattered, missing pages, and ripped throughout—I felt that way, too.

None of the counselors minded when I started taking long walks in the woods at night. Either they trusted me, or they just didn’t care. My sense of direction was sketchy, but I was certainly able to follow the North Star. My old scoutmaster, Mr. Schwartz, had taken us boys out onto Grand Street one night, and showed us how to find our way by the stars: he had been executive officer on a Navy cruiser in the North Atlantic during WWII. It was the best and only thing I ever learned from Scouting.

So there I was, at about 8 pm in the woods, tramping beneath the ancient spruce and pine trees, looking around me every so often so that I wouldn't end up being kidnapped to a forest cave by a lonely bear. The night air was chilly and damp, but I was wearing my East Side Torah Center zippered sweatshirt, and was plenty warm. As I walked, I reflected, "Why should I even go back? I can live here in the woods. Yes: nuts and berries is the way to go. No more parents to hassle me, no more overcooked camp food, and no being forced to play sports."

It was just that I was so lonely. I had thought that I might meet a girl that summer, but, because we were Orthodox, the girls' camp was a distance away from the boys', separated by a big field of weeds and thorns. We called it "No Man's Land," and didn't even bother to try to cross, in the night, in the dark. The eagle-eyed counselors would have hauled us down to the Director's Cabin in short order.

As I trudged along, my stomach started growling—the tuna-fish-egg-salad Third Meal of the Sabbath that the kitchen served was tasty, but there was never enough. By the time I could put down my copy of *The Three Musketeers* and run to the dining hall, a big, open-air structure with screens, all the challah would be gone, and I would have to make do with a ping-pong-ball-sized scoop of tuna and egg. It was not enough: I would lose weight every summer at camp and gain it back in the winter. My mother would serve what she called salad—no lettuce, but a big plate of sliced carrots, cucumbers, and celery. There were always carbs, too; it was the 1960s, after all.

So on I plodded, feeling the forest floor beneath my worn-out sneakers, and wondering if I should just keep walking, walking back home, or to the Ends of the Earth. It was the woods, but where were the roots and berries for a kosher person to consume?

"How far are you going?" came a voice. I turned and saw a thin-boned, pale girl with long, light-brown hair. She smiled at me; I saw that she wore braces, which glinted in the moonlight. Despite the cold, she wore only a pink, long-sleeved blouse with ruffled sleeves, and a blue skirt that ended at her ankles—she was Orthodox, like me.

"Not far," I said, almost stammering—it was really the first conversation I had ever had with a girl; nice Orthodox Jewish boys don't generally associate with females beneath the age of 60, and then, only if they're your grandmother.

“Do you mind if I walk along with you? My name is Miriam,” said the girl. I hastened to say that it was fine, that I would be glad to have her as a companion. Grateful, Miriam smiled and drew a bit closer.

Suddenly, she shivered. “Are you OK?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she answered, “only, it’s so cold, here in the woods. Here, feel my hand.”

I reached out, hearing the alarm bells of my rabbi-teachers about touching a Strange Woman, but ignoring them. What if the Strange Woman was only twelve? I gently touched Miriam’s small and delicate hand: it felt like ice.

“God!” I said, “You’re freezing!” Impulsively, I peeled off my sweatshirt and placed it on her shoulders—this was a double sin: I recalled the Torah saying, “A man should not wear a woman’s garment, nor a woman a man’s; it is an abomination.” That, and touching a strange woman, even a miniature woman: I was going to hell, for sure.

She put her arms in the oversized sleeves and snuggled into it: “Thank you! Mmm—it smells warm and friendly.”

I must have blushed, there in the darkness, but I was proud of my own gallantry.

“Should we go on a bit more?” she asked, “There is a place I’d like to show you—unless you’re in a hurry to get back to camp.” I shook my head: I didn’t care if I never got back to camp. And so, we continued.

The night grew colder as we walked into the woods; it was a section of forest I had never visited before. I was visibly shivering. Miriam, warm in my sweatshirt, suddenly stopped.

“You poor thing!” she laughed, “You’re shaking! Here, let me put my arm around you.”

This was crossing a line: good Orthodox boys and girls never touch; they avoid any physical contact. But I was very cold, and let Miriam put her slender arm around me. I can’t explain what happened next—her arm moved, and I partially lost my balance—but suddenly, there we were,

hugging. As I held her to me, I could smell all the wonderful smells of a young girl—shampoo and soap, mainly. We stood for a short while, with the sky above and the fallen leaves below. God did not strike me dead, either.

Then, I realized that her shoulders were shaking.

We stepped back from each other, and I saw the tracks of tears down her pale cheeks.

“Miriam, why are you crying?” I managed to say, my heart bursting with emotion.

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” she said, “except that I’m so happy. I haven’t been happy in a long time. But come—we must go on.”

I walked alongside her, numbly. The trees gradually parted, and I heard the sound of traffic from a nearby highway. I first noticed the stars in the sky; they seemed so close.

I pointed upward to the heavens. “Three stars visible in the sky, Miriam,” I said to my companion, “Shabbos is done, over, finished.”

“Yes, I know that,” smiled Miriam, and her teeth, braces and all, shone brightly in the dark. Her eyes seemed to glow, as well—but that had to be my imagination.

As we approached a clearing, a small cottage appeared.

“There’s my house!” said Miriam, and broke into a run, skinny legs pumping, her long hair floating behind her in the breeze. I did my best to keep up. The house was old, but the yard was clean, and the windows glowed in the night.

We stopped in front of the porch. There were two rockers on it, swaying slightly in the breeze.

“That’s where I sit with Zayde, my grandfather,” Miriam said, pointing, “and sometimes, we have speed-rocking contests. I always win.”

I laughed, as well: “Two old rockers, waiting for two old people,” I laughed. She joined in my laughter.

“Yes, two people—two lovers, perhaps,” she said, and, before I could answer, she stood on tip-toe and kissed my cheek. I was in shock.

“Good-night, Todrus,” she said, and, as I stood wondering how she knew my name, she skipped up the porch, opened the door softly, and went inside.

It took a while for me to get back to camp, but I was able to sneak past the On-Duty counselors walking back-and-forth with their flashlights. Even Big Moishe couldn’t stop me, and he had a portable searchlight that could land planes.

I undressed quietly in the dark, and lay there in my squeaky bunk bed, my head on the thin camp pillow. I could not sleep for thinking of Miriam.

Not until I awoke for Shacharis, the Morning Service, on Sunday morning, did I realize that Miriam had never given me back my sweatshirt. I would have let her keep it, but it was one of just two sweatshirts Mom had packed with my camp clothes, and the other one was ragged and dirty. Besides, I liked the one that said ESTC on it; my Hebrew School was small and not well-known, and I was proud to wear its colors.

That week, I never saw Miriam among the camp girls, though I stared hard across the field between our campus and the girls’. As the week wore on—softball, basketball, communal boys-only swim (The girls had their own wooden crib built onto the lake, far from prying eyes), I determined to do my walk in the woods that Saturday night. The hours and days crawled by. I thought about Miriam constantly.

That Saturday night, I crept away from the group—we had a dozen boys in our bunk, and our counselor, Aaron, was tired of watching all of us by himself. His co-counselor, Chaim, had gone home for the weekend; he was studying for his college entrance exams, hoping to get into Holdheim University. As my bunk marched past the infirmary on the camp outskirts, I ducked down in the gathering dusk and made my way to the woods.

The week before, I had dragged my feet through the leaves, lonely and unhappy. Tonight, I was going to see Miriam, and my steps were light. I

did not know her phone number, or even if she would be home. But I had hope—hope that my new little friend would be there and be allowed to walk with me. I got along well with old people, and figured I could charm her grandfather into letting us go.

The trees seemed to fly by, and, towards the end of my journey, I began to run. My heart was beating as if it would pop out of my chest. I had never been so wildly happy, so full of anticipation.

There, there in the clearing was Miriam’s house! I walked slowly at this point, wondering: Would she be home? What if my entire walk were for nothing? Oh, God—I breathed a silent prayer to heaven.

I walked up the creaking stairs, raised my hand to knock, and took a deep breath. At last, I found the courage. Waiting, I listened hard for the sounds of an old, wooden house—floors creaking, perhaps stairs, as well.

I had never been so eager for anything in my life. Slowly, the door opened—to reveal an elderly man, wearing the side-curls and long beard of the Ultra-Orthodox. He looked formidable and stern, but, seeing my yarmulke, he smiled. A fat calico cat wound its way around his baggy legs and rubbed against his flannel slippers.

“May I help you, Young Man?” he asked, “Are you lost?” He spoke with an Eastern European accent.

“Sir,” I answered, “I know my way around these woods pretty well. I was hoping to speak with your granddaughter, Miriam, if that is all right with you.”

His face changed to a mixture of anger and sadness. “Please don’t torment me, young ma—”

“Todrus,” I said, “My name is Todrus.”

“Todrus,” he said, and some of his previous smile returned, “Todrus, I would love for you to meet my Miri, but she’s—she’s no longer living.” He raised a hand to his eyes.

It was a shock. “But I saw her in the woods, just last night!” I managed.

The Old Man began to tremble. “That is impossible,” he said. “She is dead, gone—why, her *yahrzeit* was just yesterday, the 25th of Av!”

My legs felt weak. “May I come in?” I asked.

“Come,” said the Zayde, “My name is Froyim Mandelkern. You are welcome.”

Mr. Mandelkern fetched me a cup of strong, hot tea, and a small glass of schnapps for himself: “I never drank around my dear *einekel*,” he said, glancing over his shoulder as though Miriam would be standing at the foot of the stairs, “but I sometimes took a taste after I tucked her into bed.”

After a few minutes in silence, I asked, “Mr. Mandelkern—how did Miriam die?”

He gave a sad smile. “She loved to run and dance in the woods, my little *Miri*,” he said, “and, one night, she danced as if in a frenzy, as if God and the stars and planets and the earth and the sky all danced with her. She favored an ancient oak tree there, close to our clearing, and that night ran and ran about it. I could hear her laughing from where I sat on the porch. But then, suddenly—”

“What happened?” I asked.

“She tripped and fell. She struck her head against a stone. I remember thinking of the verse from Psalms, ‘I will carry you in My arms, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone,’ as it says in the Funeral Service, but that did not happen here. No: she struck her head. She died instantly, and I hope, with little pain.” He sighed and took a long drink of the schnapps.

I mournfully put down my teacup. It had stars around the rim.

“That was her favorite cup,” said Mr. Mandelkern, “she called it her ‘cup of stars.’”

“I have to go, Mr. Mandelkern,” I said, “or it will be too late when I get back to camp. I can come visit you again, so that you can tell me more stories about Miriam.” I turned to go, but remembered.

“Mr. Mandelkern,” I said, “by any chance, did you find my sweatshirt?”

He looked puzzled. I tried something else. “Where is Miriam buried?” I asked. “I would like to visit her grave, and say the Kel Molay Rachamim, the God-full-of-mercy Prayer.”

Mr. Mandelkern looked suddenly weary, as if the weight of his granddaughter’s memory lay on his shoulders. “After all,” he whispered to himself, “It’s barely a year since she passed.” He gave a sob and would have cried, but I laid my hand on his shoulder.

“The cemetery?” I asked, as gently as I could.

He stood up, opened the door, and showed me the way through the forest. “It’s not far,” he said, “and I believe it is the best resting-place for my Miri. She loved these woods so much.”

I followed his directions, and opened the rusty, squeaky gate around the Gal Einye Cemetery—the House of Eternal Life, as cemeteries are called in Judaism.

Miriam’s grave, a still-fresh one, was on the right, towards the back. I passed stones from the beginning of the 20th Century, stones with engraved photographs on them, and finally a small row of children’s graves. There it stood:

MIRIAM BAT ELISHEVA

Elisheva was Zayde’s only daughter, who had also died young. There was no end of tragedy.

I started the prayer, but was distracted by a bundle, or lump, on top of the grave. Sinking to my knees, I touched the small pile of cloth. It was slightly damp and cold, but clean, with a slight odor of soap and shampoo—such as a young girl might use, if she were washing a lover’s clothing.

It was my ESTC sweatshirt.

The End

David Hartley Mark was born and raised in New York City. Attended Yeshiva University, graduating with English, Bible, and Jewish Education degrees. Attended City University of NY (CUNY) Graduate Center; received MA and M.Phil. in English Literature. In 2020, published book: *The Torah Book: New Stories of Bible People and God*.

Posted 8/6/2021
Catherine Lee "I Love You Andy Simpkins" moved into town on
8/6/2021

I LOVE YOU ANDY SIMPKINS
by
Catherine Lee

My poetic story goes with the song "I Love You,"
its hero, Andrew Simpkins, a bass player
who worked for a number of years with
master vocalist Sarah Vaughan later in her career.

My tale took place in March of 1979,
a golden age for women's movement action.
I lived in Boston's financial district, semi-legally,
in a 5th floor walkup loft. This space was rented
through my graphics business, but there
I also ran jazz concerts, all with women musicians.
I named the place Studio Red Top, later incorporated.
With music buddies, I also read my poetry
and tried my best to play upright bass.

In those days, the Boston Globe sponsored a jazz festival
every March. I went to hear Sarah Vaughan,
with Andy in her band. I was blown away
by skill and style of this bassist
I had never heard of 'til that moment.
A music critic who chanced to sit beside me
noticed my delight. He gave me a new recording
Andy had just released as a leader.
I eagerly devoured these sounds.

A day later, I flew to Kansas City for their Women's Jazz Festival.
I attended this 3-day event every year of the 8 they held it.
For one thing, I wanted to hear the world's best women players.
But also, I had to experience for myself
that city's historic tradition:
jazz jam sessions lasted many hours
labelled "cutting contests" back in the 1930s.
For me as a young listener, aspiring woman musician,

going to Kansas City was more
than just a lyric about crazy women.
The place was a shrine where I went to get re-energized.
Unbeknownst to me, Andy Simpkins had come as well,
to perform in the Main Concert.
I ran into Andy in the hotel's bar, where, of course,
a jam session was in progress. I felt compelled
to tell Andy how much I had enjoyed his playing
several nights before, as a student of the bass.
Andy told me that the Boston date had been difficult
for him because, en route, an airline had damaged
his instrument, snapped the neck off.
"Too bad I didn't know about that," I said.
"I would have gladly lent you my bass."
Producers had, obviously, made other plans.
My Thomastik plywood bass was by no means
professional quality, not even as a last resort.
Yet Andy was tolerant of my ignorance
and thanked me for the offer.
He urged me to get up and jam,
but I was nowhere near prepared for that.
We chatted for a bit about my being
a jazz producer back in Boston.
Then he excused himself to take the stage.

I should mention one fascinating thing about jazz.
Musicians sometimes comment about life by quoting songs.
It's like a secret language between themselves
and with others who know lyrics, song titles, music theory.
For example, a celebrant may recognize a musical phrase
quoted from "Happy Birthday to You"
mixed into a cat's solo on a completely different tune.
To communicate best wishes,
this is much more hip than playing through
the whole boring song.

The players welcomed Andy,
like the visiting dignitary he was.
They asked what songs he'd want to play.
First up, he called "Red Top," by Kansas City
saxophonist Ben Kynard.
Andy's second choice was

Cole Porter's show tune, "I Love You."

Other listeners enjoyed a pair
of spirited jazz standards,
but I got a deeper message. Did you?

The End

Catherine Lee, Texan, explores social change through poetry's percussive jazz voice. She's a neo-Beat who reads with musicians "on poem." Her writing is anthologized in print and online; multimedia poetry, documentary videos, and radio specials archived on Soundcloud and VIMEO. Lee's profile is in Jazz-Ovation-Inn.com.

Posted 8/3/2021
Michal Reiben "Lilac" moved into town on 8/3/2021

LILAC
By
Michal Reiben

Danteen's marriage had been arranged by her parents. Initially, she feels fortunate that her husband, Aahish, is a wealthy farmer. On his farm, there are extensive wheat fields, peach orchards, sweet orange orchards, and vineyards. All-day long he toils on the land as well as overseeing his workers. In the evenings as soon as he has finished eating his supper and while Danteen is busy clearing the table he sneaks out of the house and disappears. He creeps back home again in the small hours of the morning. Forced to spend her nights alone hurts Danteen, and she weeps an ocean of tears. She suspects her husband is seeing another woman. One evening she orders her servant to follow her husband to discover where he spends his nights. The servant comes back with the news that Aahish spends his nights at an opium den. Danteen is relieved that he isn't cheating on her but at the same time, she feels distraught upon discovering she has married an opium addict and is at a loss as to what to do? She doesn't dare tell her parents about her husband's addiction. One twilight eve as she is standing on her bedroom veranda, looking up at the glassy moon and feeling forlorn, a wonderful scent comes floating through the air. When she breathes the fragrance in deeply through her nostrils, it is as if the smell has entered her body and is playing a sweet tune in her brain.

I simply have to discover the source of this amazing smell, thinks Danteen.

She wraps a soft, beautiful light orange shawl around her shoulders, slips her bare feet into her leather slippers with multi-colored embroidery on them, and steps lightly down the stairs. By the dim light of the moon, she follows the scent through her lovely garden, between the neat beds of blooming flowers. Eventually, the scent leads her to a large lilac tree bursting with oval clusters of soft, pale purple blooms. Their strong, sweet, heady fragrance is intoxicating. Tiredness falls upon Danteen like a heavy shutter and so she lies down on the grass beside the lilac tree and immediately falls asleep and dreams. In her dream, she is in an enchanted, sunlit, serene valley. The arch of a dazzling rainbow hangs in

the bright blue sky. In the valley is a jubilant spring-filled brook, the spring cascades down adding a lacy, white foam to the clear traveling brook. The pebbles in the brook glitter like diamonds. Birds hopping on tree boughs sing sweet melodies. Butterflies with gold petal wings and fairies with transparent wings which reflect all the colors of the rainbow, dance in the fragrant air. In the middle of the night, Danteen wakes up with a start and feels incredibly happy.

“This must be a magic bush. I’ll take some of the lilacs blooms home with me. Perhaps they’ll also intoxicate my husband?” she thinks to herself.

The following evening Danteen dresses in a beautiful light blue sari and carefully pins up her hair. For his supper, she prepares her husband some dishes which he is particularly fond of, chickpea soup, crisp golden potatoes, cauliflower, and fish curry followed by delicious Indian milk balls in sweet rose syrup. In the middle of the table, she arranges a glass vase full of purple lilac flowers. When he’s finished eating his supper with relish Aahish’s eyelids become extremely heavy.

“The sweet smell of those blooms has made me feel light-headed, I think I’ll rest for a while.”

He ascends the stairs up to their bedroom, kicks off his shoes, slumps down onto their bed, closes his eyes, and drifts off to sleep. Just like his wife had dreamt he also dreams he is in an enchanted valley. Danteen quickly undresses, slips into a nightie, and cuddles down beside her husband and when she falls asleep she enters into his dream together with him.

Upon waking up early in the morning the couple feels euphoric and they make passionate love. Henceforth Danteen repeats the same ritual every evening to keep her husband at home and she is sublimely happy. However, she realizes that in another month the magic lilac tree will stop blooming.

One day she sets off by foot to a nearby village where she knows there is a second-hand book shop. She arrives at the ancient book shop and crosses the threshold. In the dimness within light streams through a window in which dust motes dance. Danteen discerns an old man sitting at a rickety desk, piled high with books and covered with dust. His saggy eyes in his craggy features peer out from under a hooded cloak. Shelves

of old books expand over the walls of the shop. The place has a warm ambience.

Danteen places the palms of her hands together in front of her chest and bows her head low as a sign of respect.

“Namaste.”

“How can I help you?” the old man rasps.

“I hope you can help me find a book on how to make perfume from a magic lilac tree?”

The sage strokes his iron-grey beard as he thinks.

“Maybe I do have a book as to how to make magic perfumes?”

He gets up and hobbles to the back of the shop. In his search books fall and crash onto the floor, making plumes of dust erupt up into the air which causes him to have a fit of croaking coughs. Finally, he finds what he is looking for. With a look of triumph on his wizard face and clutching a small tattered book in his gnarled hands, he approaches Danteen.

“I succeeded in finding a book on how to make magic perfume.”

Danteen takes the book from him, “That’s wonderful, thank you so much.”

She pays the old man and once again she shows him respect by placing the palms of her hands together and bowing down low.

“Namaste,” she said and hurries away.

Following the instructions from the little book, Danteen is kept busy for the rest of the day with putting lilac blooms into jars, pouring oil over them, adding spices, closing their lids down tight, and then storing the jars carefully away in a cupboard. She is happy that In a few weeks, the magic perfume will be ready.

Nine months have disappeared over the horizon since Danteen first discovered the magic lilac tree. Today her baby has arrived. She is filled

with happiness she never knew existed in the world. Her baby is so tiny, vulnerable, awe-inspiring. She holds her close, she notices her head has a fuzz of purple hair, and her eyes are a brilliant purple color, she smells so divine, just like a lilac flower. Danteen will name her Lilac.

The End

Originally from England **Michal Reiben** has lived in Israel since she was a teenager. Besides spending time with her two boys and six grandchildren she enjoys, gardening, reading, and writing. The genres she explores include creative non-fiction, fiction, children's stories, and rhymes. She has had 70+ stories published both online and in print. She lives in Jerusalem.

Posted 7/31/2021

Anita Gorman “Kensington and His Book” moved into town on
7/31/2021

KENSINGTON AND HIS BOOK

by

Anita Gorman

Kensington Louis Thanatorpe could not finish his book. It was a scholarly work, based partially on his doctoral dissertation and partly on research he had completed since a committee of doddering professors confirmed on him the title of Doctor after his dissertation defense, which Kensington himself had rated an absolute failure.

Perhaps Kensington Louis Thanatorpe had been rescued by the fact that his grandfather, Wilmington Xerxes Thanatorpe, had once been president of the university where he was now a very junior faculty member. Such favoritism was entirely possible. And entirely probable.

Kensington Louis Thanatorpe, or KLT as he was known on campus, was privileged to be a tenure-track member of the Department of History and Classical Studies which was, as luck would have it, the exact department wherein his illustrious grandfather started his journey toward the exalted office of president of Lower Bald Rock State University in the great state of North Dakota.

KLT now had his doctorate, a tenure-track position, as well as the favoritism he thought was his due. There was only one problem. Even though in earlier days he might have become president of the university--or at least department chair--without lifting the proverbial finger, during these latter days, pesky rules had somehow been adopted. The rules included the requirement that a faculty member write a scholarly book before being awarded tenure and promotion to associate professor.

KLT was now under tremendous pressure, more pressure than he had ever felt during his young life. Each day he would open the file for his major scholarly work and stare at it. Sometimes he imagined that the book was his child, and it would take another nine months for the child to be born, happy and healthy. Then he would realize that he had already been working on the book for at least eight months, if not more. That

meant that his baby, his book, his creation would have to emerge fully formed in one month. He did not think that was possible.

"So, Kensington, how's the book going?" asked his colleague Anna Louisa Brenthaven.

"It's coming along. I should have it done in a month or two."

"Do you have a publisher?"

"Publisher?" He could hear his usually masculine voice ascend at least two octaves. "Uh, no, not yet. I thought I'd better get the book finished first."

"True, but don't forget that the tenure committee will be expecting some concrete publishing plans by April 1. Never mind that your grandfather served as president of this esteemed institution so many decades ago."

Kensington felt hurt and insulted. "I have no interest in trying to ride, so to speak, on the coattails of my grandfather."

Anna Louisa Brenthaven gave him a frigid smile. "Oh no, of course you would never think of doing that."

Then she turned and walked away, leaving Kensington wondering if he had actually heard a snort from his colleague, who was already a full professor. Right, he thought to himself. A full professor. Really full of it.

Kensington's parents often asked him about the book. "So, Ken, how's the book coming?"

"I keep working at it, Dad, but I'm a bit worried about getting it finished in time."

"What's holding you up?"

"The classes I have to teach, and then the committee meetings, doing laundry, cooking, getting tired. Sometimes when I sit down at the computer at night to work on the book, I fall asleep."

"Not a good sign. If you, the author, fall asleep, what about your readers? How are they going to stay awake?"

"Right, Mom, that's something to think about." Kensington sighed.

"Tell us about the book. I'm getting old, so I don't always remember stuff."

"Dad, it's about the *deus ex machina*, which means "god from the machine. *Deus ex machina* is, of course, Latin, but it comes from the Greek originally. I won't trouble you with the Greek."

"Too bad your grandfather isn't here. He would know. The scholarly stuff in our family skipped a generation. I wonder why. Still, I've made a good living as a plumber."

"Right. Well, in the ancient Greek theater, a god would be transported to the stage by some sort of machine, maybe a type of crane to lower an actor (playing a god) to the stage or there might be a kind of riser that helped the actor appear via a trap door. The playwright Euripides frequently put the *deus ex machina* in his plays. So I'm tracing the device from its origin to its prime, to its decline and its present status, where people tend to make fun of it. When an author can't think of a way out of the protagonist's predicament and then produces an earthquake, say, or the sudden death of the villain, that would be a kind of *deus ex machina*."

"Hasn't this been written about before during the last, say, 2500 years?"

"Yes, Mom, but my slant is different. At least I think it is. I hope it is. I am arguing that the *deus ex machina* is an organic part of Greek drama and not just a device to get the hero out of trouble. It has to do with the ancients' view of the universe."

"Oh."

"Sounds odd, doesn't it, after all these centuries? Maybe that's why I'm having trouble finishing the book, because my thesis goes against all these years of thinking about the *deus ex machina*. Could I be wrong? I was trying to say something new. That's what one has to do with old concepts, old events: say something new about them."

The days flew by, and Kensington made small but steady progress on his book. And then something wondrous happened on April 1. The president of Lower Bald Rock State University resigned suddenly. The school

needed a president immediately. The Board of Trustees met and, under the shadow of a portrait of President Wilmington Xerxes Thanatorpe, nominated Wilmington's grandson, Kensington Louis Thanatorpe, to be the new president.

It was truly a *deus ex machina*, the sort of thing that had not been seen in 2500 years.

The End

Anita G. Gorman grew up in Queens and now lives in northeast Ohio. Since 2014 she has had 91 short stories and 20 essays accepted for publication. Her one-act play, *Astrid: or, My Swedish Mama*, produced at Youngstown Ohio's Hopewell Theatre in March 2018, starred Anita and her daughter Ingrid.

Posted 7/28/2021
Archit Joshi "Room 300" moved into town on 7/28/2021

ROOM 300
by
Archit Joshi

Aadhira

People lose their keys, their wallets, their phones... sometimes even their loved ones. Me? I had lost my mind.

Staring at the same unvarying scene for days on end, I had even memorized the patterns of the cracks in the walls. The dirty couch laden with our sweaty, threadbare clothes. The singular window she would tauntingly leave open, a dreary brick wall of an abandoned building the only view from it. The mocking caw of the crow that would visit every now and then. Look at me. I can soar through the skies, anywhere I want.

What I feared most was getting used to it. One day, I would just stop trying, yield to my circumstances like the weakling I was. I glanced furtively at the door... again. It wasn't locked, of course. Devika didn't need locks. Her hold on me was enough. Being so reverent of her, that's what I hated about myself. Well, that and plenty other things.

I slithered off the couch into a wobbly standing position. Inched towards the door. A raging rainstorm created a raucous outside. I opened the door just a crack. Stood there, frozen, indecisive. It was a given that I'd be back here. Later if not sooner. But I was like a little bird with a broken wing. My attempt at flight could kill me, but I owed it to myself to at least try.

There was a little less of me than there used to be. I was clinging on to whatever memories I could dredge up, afraid that she would wipe those off forever. I had a drawer full of chocolate wrappers and greeting cards, arms inked with past regrets and albums full of people and places I called 'home'. I wished I could lock these things up in a quaint little box with a note that said, 'Aadhira was here'.

A cackle of lightning nudged me out of my indecisiveness. Opening the door wider, I edged out of the room. Meekly descended the first flight of

steps. The next two flights were easier, almost as if gravity was pulling me out of my situation, more resolved than even I was. Now out in the driveway of the lodge where we stayed, I teetered. Raindrops pattered on my shoulders, a steady drumming which provided the background music for my great escape. I unlatched the gate and slipped out, shaking more from adrenaline than the drenching rainfall.

#

Devika

Shit.

That's why we never leave the room. Aadhira had dragged her foolish ass to an open bazaar, crowded with strange faces and dubious intentions. A slanting sheet of rain bore into my back like cold daggers, but that was the least of my worries.

Damn you, Aadhira. If I'd spat the thought out, it'd be black as venom.

A piece of torn plastic got caught in my shoes. I kicked and flailed, but it wouldn't untangle.

"The hell's the matter with you?!" I snapped at it, my body unnaturally warm in the freezing storm.

I stiffened. I had done it again, gotten people's attention. Passers-by hurrying to get out of the terrible weather stopped to look at me. Jeering. Jeering at Devika the Dim-wit, who couldn't even find her way back home.

Uttering a long list of obscenities, I ran. I ran left and right. Ran where? Away from these people, that's where. Soon, I exited the bazaar and was out on the road. The crowd here had thinned. Fewer people were out and about. Those that were out were rushing madly to get back to their homes. That is what smart people do, eh Aadhira? Next time a storm breaks out, maybe don't gallivant to the bazaar.

I paused to catch my breath. But I didn't have long. Something stirred in the shadows behind me. A murderer? A thief? A thug? I sprinted away, down a slippery road. Before I could run far, my ankles stumbled over something lying on the road. I fell flat on my face, knees badly bruised,

and palms stinging from having scraped against the muddied gravel. I looked back to see what I had tripped over. An awkward lump lay on the road, covered by a stray piece of cloth. My heart thumped against my chest as blood rushed to my head. A bomb? A wounded feral animal? A... person? I wasn't sure.

I wanted to get away, but apparently my legs didn't. I was frozen solid, unable to move a muscle. Cramps shot up my belly.

This is it. This is how it ends. They'd find my lifeless form tomorrow and laugh. Laugh at how inadequate I'd been all my life. I could hear the taunts. "Devika was such a horrid person, her parents must've felt glad when the fiery ball of flames finally relieved them of her."

Dark spots danced around my vision. A car whizzed past, splashing muck onto my face.

With herculean effort, I pulled myself upright and reoriented. Figured out which direction my lodge was and trudged toward it, my energy diminishing with each step I took.

Soon, the lodge loomed into sight. Its sight instantly made me feel a lot better. I quickened my pace only to slip in the mud and crash to the ground – for the second time in under an hour. This time landing on my back.

A silhouetted person nearby saw me fall and came my way. What does he want? Oh my god, what is that bulge under his clothes? A gun! The man extended his arm in my direction.

"Hold it fella!" I kicked him in the knees and slid backwards. The man's face registered violent surprise as he bounded away. I tried to get up, but my hands wouldn't find any bearing in the mud. The unrelenting rain tore through my skin.

I'd had enough.

My frustrations with the weather were mingled with my fury for Aadhira. Why won't you just let me keep us alive, you witch?

My hand inevitably found my hair. I tugged and tugged until entire tufts came free. My other hand wound itself through the tears in my ripped

jeans. I clawed my thighs and dug into the tender skin. I realized I had been holding pee in and needed to go, urgently. With heavy clouds thundering above and lightening flashing up the sky, I relieved myself. The last thing I remembered was a warm sensation seeping down my legs.

And then, there was only darkness.

#

Aadhira

Something was stinging.

I found myself panting in front of the infernal room. Back here again. The room's brass number plate shone in the dim stairwell light.

300.

I wriggled with the door knob for a few moments, hands shivering from the fear and the cold. Once inside, I fought to take my sodden clothes off. As my jeans dropped to the floor, a strong stench burned my nostrils and I cringed. I looked around for a towel but couldn't find it. Exhausted, I splattered on the couch, still wet and sticky, naked. I inspected my pricking thigh. Long gashes ran across it. As I gingerly traced the smarting skin, I noticed strands of damp hair entwined between my fingers.

She did this.

Grimacing from the effort, I shuffled to the bathroom for the first-aid kit. A jagged mirror above the bathroom cabinet reflected my fractured image: lifeless eyes, matted hair, and pale skin. Tension stretching my face tightly over my bones. I was beginning to feel scared how little disappointment I felt over my failed attempt to escape. Like it was routine. Except this time, Devika had resorted to inflicting physical injuries.

Not being able to find the ointment I needed after much fumbling, I limped back to the couch and melted on it. Drowsiness was not far along the corner. I fell into a restless sleep.

Two nearly forgotten faces haunted my dreams.

#

Aadhira

She had a slight skip in her step as she walked to her house. Shashank had come up to her and offered her a little card. They'd been stealing shy glances at each other in class for quite a while now. Today he'd finally mustered enough courage to tug at her sleeve after school. He'd awkwardly thrust a card in her palm, smiled his toothy smile and disappeared into the crowd. Being thirteen didn't seem quite as daunting as before.

Her house was just along an alley at the next intersection. But as she neared it, the air grew thicker. Incongruous smog was gathering into the distance, replacing the cheerful wintry ambience. It was coming from the mouth of the alley. It was dense and swirling, having an existence of its own.

She took a faltering step backwards, needing to draw sharp breaths to take in the rapidly thickening air. She glanced backwards to see if she could run back the other way. No such luck. The smog was spreading from all directions, converging towards her like a monstrous wave. Not a soul in sight. She was trapped! What would happen when this substance finally engulfed her?

To her horror, she felt a touch at the nape of her neck. She let out a shriek and swivelled around. Two hands had appeared out of nowhere, trying to grab her into the alley. She recognised the hand from the watch hung on its wrist.

“Mommy!”

Whatever it was that filled the air stung at her eyes. Bewildered tears blurred her vision. Somewhere far away, a voice was calling out to her.

“Aadhira, Aadhira come back. Follow my voice. I'm right here...”

She had the sensation of being lifted off the ground, floating towards the sky. Then, her body lurched violently as the sun came terrifyingly close.

When I came to, I found myself in an office, thoroughly disoriented. I was lying on a comfortable sofa. A man was scribbling into a notebook behind a desk. Above him, on a cream-colored wall, a plaque shone brilliantly against daylight.

Dr Chetan Mehra, M.D. Psychiatry.

Noticing that I'd come to, he glanced up from his notes.

“That’s enough for today, Aadhira. We’ll go deeper next time.”

I paused by a sidewalk below Dr Mehra’s office. Took in the scene before me, trying to sketch it forever on my retinas. People, faces, emotions. Here was a mother, smiling down at the resting toddler in her pram. There was an important looking businessman, talking into a Bluetooth earpiece. A beggar, all teeth and smiles, elated to have received a twenty-rupee note from a kind soul.

This is where life happens. Outside.

As I watched people, I sensed someone watching me. I looked up instinctively. Dr Mehra peeked at me from a curtained window. We made eye contact but he didn’t flinch. If this is to work, I’ll have to tell him about her. But would she let me?

As if on cue, I was grabbed from behind and thrown towards somnolent darkness. My few minutes of freedom were up.

#

Devika

Need to reach my room.

The thought rang in my head, it was my *raison d’etre*. I hailed an auto-rickshaw and jumped in. Gave directions to the lodge and pushed back into the weathered leather seat.

I was disturbed. When Aadhira had suggested psychiatric consultation, I’d been unwilling.

“The only thing wrong with us is your stupidity. You just don’t listen! No doctor can fix that.”

But her incessant badgering had worn me down. Today’s session had been the third.

The doctor seemed oddly comforting. It was the eyes. They radiated a warmth that made you feel safer.

The rickshaw-driver’s phone buzzed. He proceeded to do the unthinkable: he received it!

“Excuse me.” I interrupted his conversation. “Could you not do that?”

The driver shot me a sour look through the mirror.

“Look out! Eyes on the road,” I shouted, pressing harder into the seat.

The driver waved my worries away and resumed his conversation.

I turned an ear towards the driver’s rived conversation, trying to discern if he meant me any harm.

“... She’s an idiot...”

Was he talking about me?

“...I’ll have to take care of it...”

Take care of what?

“Tomorrow’s no good. Maybe the day after...”

A conspiracy! They wanted to kill me, and it was going to happen the day after tomorrow. Like hell!

“Stop,” I screamed.

The driver looked up at me into the mirror and raised an eyebrow.

“I want to get off here.”

That's why we don't leave the room.

I pulled out some cash and threw it into the driver's face and stumbled out. Palpitations made it hard for me to walk. I was still a good way away from my room. I pulled the top I was wearing tighter around my body – Aadhira's clothes always felt loose and misfit – and walked with my head down. Don't attract too much attention. Don't get into anybody's business.

I stared at my toes as I walked without looking where I was going. Along the way, I passed a man wearing familiar cologne. The scent jolted dormant memories. I could almost feel the foul breath at the nape of my neck. I was back in that hellish bedroom. Sensations of hands groping at my chafed inner thighs came alive as I drifted in and out of consciousness. No, no, no! I clutched at my head, trying to break away from the past. I tasted sour bile rising in my throat as a dull bell echoed in the distance. A school nearby had broken out for the day. Children! Full of chatter and mischief and nervous energy.

My legs buckled as I fought a battle with my past and present simultaneously. I had to repress what'd happened to me in that monster's bedroom and deal with this incoming horde of youngsters. I bent over, swallowing air faster than I could exhale. Beads of sweat raced down my forehead, forming wet blotches on the pavement below. From my peripheral vision, I could make out a few people walking in my direction. I was too weak to fight back. All I could concentrate on was restraining myself from hurling vomit all over the place.

It was becoming too much to handle. I was ready to give in. But there was a saving grace. Aadhira returned.

My feet were obeying orders I wasn't giving them. And yet, they weren't my feet at all. I was being dragged. We exited the busy street, away from the excited children. I looked around. Notice five colors around you. List down three sounds you hear. Stay grounded in the present. The usual nonsense advice they gave to ward off an oncoming panic attack. It didn't work for me, never had. What worked for me was staying in my room.

I focused on where we were going. We had entered a locality that wasn't far from my lodge. Were we going back home?

Is she... helping me?

A few frantic minutes later, it became clear that she was. We were running in the general direction of my room. The bleary call of the distant panic attack subsided. For the first time in many, many months, I surrendered. Surrendered to Aadhira. Hoping that she would honor the unspoken promise of going straight to the room and not try to bolt. Get us out of danger first. That was the priority.

As I silently recuperated, I wondered what had led me to take such extreme measures against her. But the attacks had become unbearable. Despite what the professionals said, I felt sure panic attacks could kill me. Aadhira was no help. She made one dumb decision after another, piling on the hurt of the consequences onto me. As if I was some sort of emotional waste disposal system. I had to curb her, put her on a leash. Bad relationships, casual sex, leading men on. She'd be the end of us if left unsupervised.

When did we get here?

We'd reached the room. Safe, from the people and the things.

Promptly on getting inside, I threw her back and took control. Plopped down on the couch without bothering to change. The sun hadn't quite set yet, but tiredness lulled me into an early sleep. My dreams were visited by the doctor with the warm eyes.

#

Dr. Chetan Mehra

My kindly father had lovingly taken the time to make sure I questioned my career choices every day. Why would you want to be stuck in an office all day talking to people who're funny in the head? Used to be I could resolutely answer him with conviction. But these days I found myself wallowing in doubt.

I brushed my indecisiveness aside as a patient walked in. A peculiar case. I'd known Aadhira was under the pressure of a dominant personality but I had estimated it would be an overbearing mother or an aunt. But then a few sessions ago, Aadhira had admitted to some half-truths. It had taken a couple of sessions more to coax the complete truth out of her.

Today she looked strikingly different. Her hair-do was different, her mannerisms had changed. Today, it wasn't Aadhira.

Devika got comfortable on the couch, legs spread apart, arms sprawled over the length of the sofa.

"You wanted to talk. Let's."

"Pleasure to finally meet you, Devika." I smiled, unfazed by her open insolence. I knew her bravado was borrowed. From thin air. "We'll get started soon enough."

#

She had a slight skip in her step as she walked to her house. Shashank had come up to her and offered her a little card. They'd been stealing shy glances at each other in class for quite a while now. Today he'd finally mustered enough courage to tug at her sleeve after school. He'd awkwardly thrust a card in her palm, smiled his toothy smile and disappeared into the crowd. Being thirteen didn't seem quite as daunting as before.

Her house was just along an alley at the next intersection. As she pranced towards it, she saw a large crowd gathered near her house. An ambulance was parked some distance away. She stopped dead in her tracks. Shashank vanished from her thoughts. Something was wrong. A neighbour saw her and beckoned to someone in the crowd. Her aunt hurried towards her, eyes puffed up and red.

"Sweet darling!" She cried out, grabbing her niece into an aggressive embrace. "Something terrible has happened..."

"I can't remember much of the days after the accident," Devika said, leaning forward on the sofa, elbows resting on her knees, fingers locked together. "My aunt and uncle took me in. But all those memories are in bits and pieces."

I still couldn't figure out why the dissociation had occurred, or why Devika had inched towards becoming a total recluse. What caused you? What're you afraid of? I prodded her to remember the days following her parents' demise.

She recounted a few disjointed episodes. There were huge gaps in her memory, entire days she couldn't account for.

"I remember feeling displaced, ill-adjusted."

"What's the clearest memory you can recall?"

The façade cracked faster than a splintering mirror. Devika shrivelled up in a ball. Her hands found her hair. Rocking back and forth, she began tugging at them.

"It—it started with a light thigh grazing. Uncle Sudhir would always pop in before bed to check on me... her... us. He started sitting by the bed and as he got bolder, lightly patting my legs and thighs before bed. Then one night..." She broke off mid-sentence, her voice thick with emotion.

Now we're getting somewhere. I comforted her, told her there was no need to go on if she didn't feel like it. After a while she calmed down enough to go on.

"Aadhira was vulnerable. Too powerless to fight back. After he repeatedly violated us, night after night, I could see she was unable to fend for herself. My aunt was oblivious to the whole thing. I decided it was enough. Everything became clear as crystal. I must protect her, I thought. One day, I summoned up enough courage to clean out my aunt's purse and get the hell out of that house." The defiance was slowly creeping back into her voice.

"We found ourselves alone and tattered. I decided to find a cheap lodge where we could crash until the money lasted. The owner is a dear old woman named Charulata Tipnis, who was very eager to help us out after I confided in her the abuse my body had been through. That's where we've been staying since.

"Aunt Charu doted on us... still does. She did everything to accommodate us, worked a few odd jobs along with maintaining the lodge to put us through the rest of schooling. Sometimes I think she is God's way of apologizing for calling my parents to Him before their time." Devika paused to get her bearing. "Aadhira and I decided not to tell people about each other. Not for the sake of secrecy, but because we didn't understand much of it ourselves. Over time, we just got used to each other."

A sudden thought struck me.

“Did your uncle keep telling you the world is a dangerous place?” I asked. “That you must not venture out of the house by yourself without asking him first? Something of the sort?”

Devika looked at me sharply.

“In almost those exact words! How did you know?”

I scribbled a word in my notes. Agoraphobia. I answered her question with a question.

“Why won’t you let Aadhira out of the house, Devika?”

“The room keeps us safe!” she snapped. Then grew silent. In her mind, she must’ve made the same connection I had.

“I... I don’t like thinking about it,” she said at length. “We were doing fine for a long stretch. But then I started getting these intense panic attacks. Too many things can go wrong outdoors. Too much open space... Meanwhile, Aadhira the Idiot seemed to have forgotten what we’d been through. Flirted with one guy after another, even though I kept pushing them away. What if one of them turned out to be like my uncle?”

“What if they didn’t?” I responded softly.

#

Aadhira

“What, Aadhira?” she barked. Vulnerability gone. It was the deviled room. She fell back into old patterns here.

“Can we talk?” I was determined not to cave in to her domineering lash-outs.

No response.

I continued. “I... I had no idea you were trying to protect me... back then. I thought you were just trying to make me miserable.”

More silence.

“Can we go somewhere private to talk? Maybe up the hill near the bus stop?”

“There’s no one here.” Her response was laced with contempt.

“Not here.”

Hesitation, then:

“Let’s go.”

We hiked up the hill in total hush. This was new to both of us. I was especially eager to get to the top to catch the sunset. It had been months since I had seen the sky so full and radiant. We found a secluded spot on the hilltop.

“What did you want to talk about?” Her voice was a little less curt.

Every thought I had so meticulously arranged in sequence seemed to have disappeared. I opened and closed my mouth multiple times like a goldfish, but couldn’t get the words out. She didn’t prod me. For once, Devika was in no hurry to get back to the room.

She broke the silence. “We’ll get through this.”

I smiled feebly. “Yes... yes we will.”

In the end, it boiled down to undeniable facts. We were stuck with each other. Sure they could ‘heal us’ but were we even sick that we needed to heal? We were two halves, making one dichotomous whole.

Dr Mehra had explained to us the process of something he called identity integration. Basically, unceremoniously mashing us together. But we were each our own person. Playing the roles we needed to play. To survive. Of course there would be disputes, but ask any two roommates and they’ll tell you quarrel is inevitable. Doesn’t mean you want to throw the other person out.

Yes, that's what we were, two maladjusted roommates. Steadily learning to live together through the fights and compromises.

A silence settled between us, but it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable. It was strangely gentle. The sun was a dim orange blob in the sky, making a surely descent. Soon, the place was swathed in shadows as the sun finally disappeared under the horizon.

No matter. It would rise again tomorrow.

The End

Archit Joshi is a published author from Pune, India who loves writing character-driven stories. His fiction has found a home in many reputable anthologies and online magazines, with works spanning all possible forms and genres of writing. Archit had zero regard for coloring within the lines as a child.

Posted 7/25/2021
Phillip West "Spinning A Line" moved into town on 7/25/2021

SPINNING A LINE

by
Philip West

I'm driving along a dusty road. It weaves a path to Rosslyn Bay boat harbor. I won't be here again for forty-four years. It's 1976. I left the region in 1986.

Back in the seventies the Bay and nearby Yeppoon were sleepy little backwaters of the Capricorn Coast, Central Queensland, on the north-eastern seaboard of Australia. Great Keppel Island was an uninhabited wilderness. A bargeman would drop me off with supplies and a tent. I'd walk, fish, read, write and experience the island's beauty. This coastal region of Queensland didn't have the glitz and glamour of the state's southern mecca; the Gold Coast. It was waiting to be discovered.

I negotiate a bend. The boat haven swings into view. Small rigs strain at their moorings. Like gamboling puppies jerking their leashes. The masts of larger sailing vessels roll gently in a docile breeze. Like slender corn stalks, stripped bare; as if a hungry locust swarm has swept through.

My feet crunch gravel before I step onto a concrete concourse. I sweep my eyeline across the collection of boats, looking for the "Firefly."

A friendly hand throws me a wave. The skipper. John "Johnno" McCloud. "Gadei Jim, come on board."

"Beautiful day, Johnno." I step onto the vessel. It rocks, passively, as if to greet me.

Three other rookie fishermen joined us that day. Roger Martin, accountant. Eric Wilson, real estate agent. And Fred Ellis. Policeman. I'm a teacher. Jim Hardy. Johnno has two crew members. Andy. An old man of the sea. Maddie, his teenage daughter.

Time to load our provisions. Roger, Eric, Fred and I unpack and store several cartons of liquid gold into ice-boxes. A part of the ritual for epic

journeys. Maddie has collected an abundant supply of sandwiches, made up by a local cafe. Johnno provides tackle and bait.

My three companions and I take up positions on the Firefly. Our skipper fires up the engines. The motors throb into life. The boat creates a gentle wash, cutting through the water. Outside the protective arms of the bay the Firefly bobs rhythmically as it slices through the waves.

The summer sun blazes down, catching the sun-bleached lights in Maddie's curls. The boat smooths a pathway to the vast stretch of coral known as The Great Barrier Reef, located in the Coral Sea.

It extends for over two thousand kilometers along the Queensland coast of Australia, roughly in a northwest-southeast direction. Comprising about three thousand individual reefs, its off-shore distance ranges from sixteen to a hundred and sixty kilometers. It extends over an area of three hundred and fifty thousand square kilometers. We're sailing within a region known as the Southern Great Barrier Reef.

The Reef has long been an integral part of life for Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. The former has lived in the area for at least forty thousand years. The latter, about ten thousand years. It's embedded in their cultures.

Fishing rods and tackle are prepared by the sun-tanned, gnarled hands of Andy, assisted by Maddie. We're carried away by the whole experience of life on the ocean. We stand in a huddle. In the middle, an ice box containing the cold beverages. Beer is washed down with ham and salad sandwiches. We speculate on who'll be the most successful fisherman. Empty cans mount in a funeral pyre like dead soldiers from a war.

Swirling gulls screech overhead; fellow accomplices. The ocean is a millpond. We are a minuscule island, skimming over the water. We could be a ship in a bottle. Self-sufficient.

Fred surmises, "This is magic. A doddle, compared to being a cop on dry land. Maybe I'll apply for a transfer to the water police."

Real estate agent, Eric, has dollar signs jumping before his eyes. "There's so many undeveloped islands dotted across the Reef. I'm thinking resorts are the way to go. Cater for scuba diving. A developer or a consortium could make a fortune."

"You'll need a good accountant, Eric. Save you from paying too much tax on your millions," says Roger.

As a teacher of physical education and sport I'm educating kids on safety in recreational water pursuits. I teach lifesaving and coach swimming as a necessary skill in a country surrounded by water.

Sunlight dances on the undulating water, oscillating with its rhythm. A million miles separates us from the humdrum of the daily grind.

As the sun climbs to its zenith, we heave to. The anchor plummets through crystal clear waters to the coral beneath us.

"Right," says the skipper, "let's get you guys organized. You're here to catch fish."

We take up positions to port and starboard. Lure bait, tossed from buckets, cascades across the water to draw the fish. Johnno, Andy and Maddie give each of us a brief lesson in baiting a hook and casting.

We cast our lines. The slapping of waves on the painter clunks it against the hull. An eerie silence falls upon us. Suddenly, ratchets hum. Lines run. The first catches of the day are notched up. A Coral trout, two Red Emperors, and a Striped Bass are laid out in our catch box. A damp cloth covers them.

Congratulations all round are the order of the day. Accompanied by the cracking of more beer cans. Johnno smiles, knowing he's got happy customers.

Four fledgling fishermen are living the life. The thrill. Snagging fish. The atmosphere, electric. A tug on the line. Haul the catch on board. Each of us hoping the next is the big one.

It's short-lived. Our travails are broken. An uneasy wind swings in from the north-east. The skipper surveys the skies. The trivial cuffing of waves gives way to a fierce upsurge of side-sweeping water. Blackness overhead casts deep shadows where the sun had shone. The wind picks up speed.

Our boat begins to pitch and roll, caught up in a maelstrom. We can only ride it out. There's nowhere to hide or run to. The boat heaves and tosses like it's a matchbox. Capricious waters roll us around like the ball on a roulette wheel. Ever steeper waves smash into the hull, driven by a howling wind. We're twisted violently. First one way, then the other. Like an infant's spinning top losing momentum. About to fall from its point of contact.

Four newly-created fishermen pay the price. The consumption of copious amounts of alcohol and sandwiches. Bodies in turmoil bow ungraciously to the flailing water. We're really land-lubbers. It's time for shelter. Faces tell a story. The flamboyance of recruited sons of the sea weakens disastrously in the face of a storm.

In a loose crocodile formation, we begin inching our way across the deck on the starboard side. Each cling to anything at hand, to reach the refuge of a bunk below deck. Fred, the cop, leads. Then me, followed by Eric, with Roger bringing up the rear. The wind's whistling. Cavorting structures strain to breaking point.

For no particular reason, I glance behind me. Real estate agent, Eric, the least fit of the four of us, is upended by a colossal wave swiping against the boat. He tips over, a piece of flotsam thrown into a raging cauldron of swirling water.

Roger, not seeing Eric's plight, is expunging his guts, towards the sea. Immediately his stomach contents are blown back into him. I'm frantically sending semaphores to the luckless Roger, pointing over the side. He realizes Eric's overboard and about turns to alert skipper McCloud.

Fred joins me. We hold fast. He shouts above the wind. "Can you see him, Jim?"

"No bloody chance in this storm, mate. He could have been thrown against the boat, hit his head."

Then Eric surfaces. He's battling to stay afloat. Waves crash into the side of the vessel. He's dashed against it by them. More like a bobbing cork, continually buffeted by the violent sea.

A swirling wave picks Eric up and pulls him away from the craft. He's three meters adrift. Johnno appears next to us and heaves a life buoy over the side for Eric to cling to.

He desperately snatches at it. Misses. His head is swamped by another large wave. He's gone. Seconds later he resurfaces. He slaps at the buoy. Grabs hold of it. He's now five meters away. Eyes, frozen with fear.

Andy arrives with a coil of rope. I shout over the howling wind. "He won't make it back alone. Tie the rope around my middle. I'll go in for him. You, Maddie and Fred hold it tight. When I've got him, tow us back."

He nods, saving energy. Maddie and Fred hover behind him. Johnno looks after the boat in whatever way he can. Andy fashions a marine knot to hold me fast.

"Ready, Andy?" he grimaces.

I climb over the side and drop into the sea. I'm slammed against the hull. Cop a mouthful of salty water. I can see Eric drifting further from the Firefly, driven by the raging water.

I begin a head-up front crawl towards the fast-disappearing estate agent. He's exhausted but clinging to the buoy for his life. Fear of dying is a powerful component for survival. I estimate my swims become more than fifteen meters. In these conditions it feels like a hundred.

I plow on, closing the gap between me and our mate. Somehow, he's got himself inside the buoy. He's like a shag on a rock except he's a drowning shag in imminent danger of being washed away by the pounding waves.

I anchor myself to the buoy. Raise a hand. I feel a tug on the rope. I spin my head for a moment. Andy, Maddie and the cop begin hauling us back towards the vessel. Eric is fighting to keep seawater out of his mouth.

He tries to speak. The sea roars in anger. He's swamped again. His head drops then rises again.

I shout, "Save your energy, mate. Keep your head up."

He nods. I'm on my back, hauling him towards the boat. The life buoy is his savior. Waves crash over me continually.

"You're doing, well, Eric. Soon be there." Not sure he believes me.

We're pushed every which way by the waves. Both of us ship water. Impossible not to. Finally, we touch the side of the motor vessel. I spin Eric in his life buoy against the hull. Another rope snakes down.

I tie a clumsy knot around him. The waves batter us. I hope my knot is enough to support him being hauled over the side and onboard.

The combined strength of three pairs of hands and determination to save a life drag poor Eric onto the deck. They land him like a flailing fish. The storm hasn't abated one bit.

I'm next. I'm pulled up and over the side of the Firefly. I look back. Eric's life-buoy is bobbing away across the water.

Andy and Maddie have taken Eric below. Roger, Fred and I are still feeling the effects of sea-sickness.

Skipper Johnno says, "That was some rescue, Jim. Something to tell your grandchildren. The storms not finished yet. But it'll go as fast as it arrives. It's the nature of sailing the Reef."

The three of us join Eric, below. The contents of four stomachs boil over. Me, a pungent taste storms up my esophagus. Alcohol, food and seawater. A putrid aroma engulfs my nostrils. Nausea overtakes hope. I draw my knees up. Fetal position comes naturally again. The storm rages. A bucket's my lifeline. I position it. Never far away.

Finally, the tempest passes. My stomach returns to its birth place. Gingerly, three resurrected and chastened souls emerge on deck once more. Eric stays below.

Andy comments, "There'll be fish running now the storms passed. Maddie and I will get the rods ready for you."

The clouds are scudding eastwards as beams of sunlight leap overhead. Poseidon, lord god of the seas, has forgiven us.

We take to our chairs and cast lines hopefully. Fifteen minutes later Eric emerges to join us. He gratefully soaks up the sun. He's been offered a second chance at life.

Fish are running in abundance. Begging to be caught. A multitude of orphans from the Reef hurl themselves onboard. They pepper the deck. Lie wriggling, lives ebbing away, jostling for a place in the dance of death.

Normalcy leads to joy. Our stomachs have been cleared out. The corpses of newly-emptied tins of cold amber fluid flutter and rattle in the breeze. The Great Barrier Reef is an exotic and freakish place. The sea that embraces it is erratic and undisciplined. None of us will forget that day. Eric pledges to be a land-lubber for the rest of his days.

Boxing Day, 2020. Rossllyn Bay has an extensive car park. Yeppoon is a bustling seaside town. A selection of companies run trips from the harbor to Great Keppel Island. They ply their trade on a daily basis. The island has a cafe. It caters for basic camping, glamping, hiking, diving and snorkeling. There are sandy beaches galore.

The Bay is busy with trippers anxious for sand, sun and relaxation. As we step on board a boat bound for Great Keppel my mind slips back to that day in 1976. The great fishing extravaganza. That memorable storm on the beautiful waters that command the Southern Great Barrier Reef.

I don't imagine Fred ever transferred to the water police. Did Eric ever make his millions with a resort? I never heard his name mentioned again. I guess Roger didn't get taken on as his accountant.

The End

Born in London, 1944, **Phillip West** began writing, penning pieces for a high school magazine. Trained as a teacher. Immigrated to Australia in 1971. Lived in England again 2004-2019. Taught English in an Istanbul university, 2008-2009. Returned to Australia in 2019. Currently completing a noir fiction thriller. Living in Brisbane.

Posted 7/22/2021
Melissa Miles "Killing God" moved into town on 7/21/2021

KILLING GOD
by
Melissa Miles

The young woman sagged against the heavy entrance door.

The nun got up from praying, and turned to look at the entrant. Their eyes locked for a moment, and the nun turned her head quickly away.

There was a frightening depth in those eyes. Rather than hold that gaze, the nun bustled forward all habit-swishing and business. She placed a small smile on her face and inquiry in her voice,

"How can I help you?"

The young woman began to tremble and slid down the door jamb to the floor. She held herself, and looking up with an agonized face she said,

"I have killed God."

"Oh dear," sympathized the nun, looking around for someone older and wiser. "There, there," she said patting the air around the slumped woman, "Let me go find..."

"No!" cried the woman and grasped her hand. "You have to help me! Maybe we can fix it? Resuscitate him?"

The nun took a step back, her mind filing and refiling facts. Mad, she had thought at first, now, what? Criminally insane? Had this person murdered another human being in a wild and crazy mistake? Was she a clever criminal setting her, a novice nun, up as some sort of alibi? Or ally? Or... but the air had changed in the city church, gone was the heavy almost touchable weight of belief, there was something fresh like new mown grass, a crisp little breeze blew in from the small park across the street. Roses were blooming there. She no longer felt the ache of guilt in her heart, laughter began to bubble up, and she took an involuntary step to the threshold.

Her attention slid back to her hand and the clinging piece of humanity clutching it. Oh well, I guess I should address this problem she thought, but she wrested her hand away from that sweaty grip.

“You must come in, and tell me what happened,” she said to the young woman.

She had the look of a Latina, all lush dark hair and beauty, she felt envy stir briefly in her, how she would have liked to have looked like that, no! That was a sin! What was happening to her thoughts?

Oops, said her mind, sorry, I slipped.

The little nun drew herself up to her full five foot two inches and tucked her hands into opposing sleeves. She’d seen them doing that on TV and it certainly felt very nunnish.

“There’s an office in the building next door, we can talk privately there.”

She tripped down the stairs of the church, not glancing back. If the young woman chose not to follow, then so much the better! She longed to bow to her instinct, rip off her wimple and rush into the welcoming wind, that had, a moment before, been a breeze.

Change was definitely in the air. But over her time in the nunnery, discipline had been hammered into her soul. She must address the pain of one of the flock.

The office door stuck a little, as if it didn’t want to open, but with an extra nudge it acquiesced. She walked in and turned to see if the young woman had followed or not. She was there, hesitating a little in the hallway, her face cast in shadow.

“Come in,” said the little nun. “My name is Sister Celia. You sit here and tell me all about it.”

The young woman sank into the proffered chair and began to cry.

“I was praying to Santa Muerta, I only told her that God no longer heard me, I was so angry. My parents are not allowed to come live with me, and I have asked God, so many times to help...now my father is dying.

They need me here to make the money for his treatment, but I can't even go see him, if I do, I may not get back in." Sobs overtook the girl.

Sister Celia, turned to the shelves behind her, searching for a box of tissues. She found them and swivelled back in the office chair she had claimed. The girl was still sobbing quietly but her image had taken on a faint almost translucent quality and a massive figure surrounded her. A creature that looked exactly like the Santa Muerta statues she had seen down in Mexico.

The figure spoke in heavily accented English.

"She asked me to visit death upon the one who had abandoned her. I only answered her prayer."

Sister Celia was shaking her face drained of blood. She had been taught that this creature was not real, only a powerless remnant of a pagan culture of long ago. But here she was.

"What do you mean?" Sister Celia clutched at her rosary.

"I killed the one she prayed to. The being too busy or important to bother with inconsequential human concerns."

"God? You killed God? How could you?"

"I am the Goddess of death. It's what I do."

"But, how can you have the power?"

"Well, perhaps not actually God."

The breath escaped from Sister Celia and she sagged with relief.

"Just her faith in him, and maybe yours?" The creature flickered in the dim light of the office, from the skeleton in beautiful clothes to a creature with horns and red eyes, to a beautiful young woman. It snapped its fingers and changed form over and over again until Celia felt dizzy.

"Every one of your cultures, all you unimaginative people of earth, you all have one, a God of chaos, of evil, of despair." The tone of the entity's voice changed, it became more intimate. She wasn't sure if it was

external at all. “Yet this form,” said the entity as it took the appearance of a skeleton again, “is my favorite. It is not evil, it is happy and it is honest in it’s depiction of death.”

The creature laughed as it fogged around her instead. “You of all people little nun, should have learned by now that I reside in you, and you believe in me, you all do, you must, for I am part of life. It’s what you call God you have trouble with, it’s the goodness you don’t really believe in.”

The cloud of miasma that had curled around her, entered every pore until it’s voice was undetectable from her own innermost thoughts.

“You are God, you are the devil. You are all the moral greys in between. I am just death, and I merely brought her face to face with herself as I am doing with you. If I kill God do I not kill her or you? If I kill you, am I not, in fact killing God?”

“You are a smug thing. But at least there I know you are wrong. Kill me if you will, but that doesn’t kill God. God will still be there, just as he is still here despite what you have done to this poor woman.”

That speech was, she knew, the turning point, the kernel, the thrust of this script.

The miasma poured back out of Sister Celia, and engulfed the young woman again, as it did she heard a faint disgruntled hissing, which, she was sure, had not been written in.

It came to a sudden stop, at which point the young woman clutched at her chest, her eyes opened wide. She looked at Sister Celia in panic, and died.

Sister Celia, rushed to the chair, dragged the woman to the ground and administered CPR. But there was nothing. Her eyes stared at nothing, the spirit, was nothing, the life that had animated the inert body turned to, nothing.

The little nun fumbled for her phone and dialed the emergency number.

“What is your emergency?” a female voice asked.

“I don’t know!” she cried into the phone. “She said she killed God and now she’s dead.”

“Please stay on the line.”

By the time the ambulance and the police arrived and had pried the phone out of her hand, darkness was gathering.

There were voices and people she didn’t recognise, she was being wrapped in a blanket and bundled into the corridor by a kindly police officer.

“Sister Celia?”

At the sight of her Mother Superior, Sister Celia began to sob.

“Oh, Mother Superior, it’s all gone so horribly wrong.”

“It’s alright, I’ll come with you. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Ma’am, um ...” began the young officer by her side.

“Ma’am’, will do young man.”

“Well ma’am we’d rather you didn’t question the witness, until we’ve had a chance to interview her.”

“Witness? You mean my novice?”

“Well, yes.”

“Fine, but I’m coming with her and I’m calling our lawyer.”

“Lawyer Ma’am? “ asked the young officer.

“You’d be surprised how often we need one,” said the Mother Superior as she fell into step with him, angling her face for a close-up “You’d be very surprised indeed.”

“Cut!”

The actors relaxed, the corpse on the gurney got up to be replaced with a mannequin, there was conference between the director and the 1st. The 1st A.D. nodded.

“Take five everybody.”

The young actress playing Sister Celia, was called Janet.

She stepped off the set to go to her trailer.

This was the first movie where she'd had her own trailer, she liked it.

She sat down and loosened the uncomfortable headdress.

She looked up and into the mirror, and saw a grinning skeleton looking back. She jumped, for a moment quite taken aback. Then she smiled,

“Ok, stop horsing around guys.”

The more senior actors on the set were renowned for being practical jokers. She turned back to the mirror quickly. Still a skeleton, admittedly beautifully dressed, but hell's teeth it was just so spooky. How did they do that? These SFX guys were so clever.

“Ok, that's it,” she said getting up.

She strode to the trailer steps and paused, a little shiver ran through her, she was conscious of silence, not something you find often on a full set.

She caught sight of her reflection in the chrome, she was herself again it seemed, but was that something else? Something next to her in that reflection? She took a couple of tentative steps down the stairs. Her heart was pounding, she was very scared.

She stepped out.

No one was there, no actors, no crew, no hair and make-up, no caterers, nobody at all.

She forced herself to move, to step onto the ground.

She had to investigate.

The huge sound stage in the studio lot felt long deserted. Far away from her, on the far side of the studio, a door was open to the outside, and light tumbled in.

She should go to it.

The shortest way was over the set, past the half walls of the church, past that huge pile of skeletons, under the lights.

A huge pile of skeletons?

Janet felt panic rising in her and with it rose a scream. She screamed and screamed, tears of terror rolled down her face, her breathing was harsh.

But nothing changed, there was silence, and that horrible pile.

No, there was movement, the sound of bone against bone. Something was climbing out of the huge pile of skeletal remains. It was a skeleton in Armani, with an elegant hat.

“Ah. Hello.” It said, as it floated its way over to her. “What do you think?” And it swept its arm bones over the vast pile it had just stepped from.

“My movie?”

“Yes,” the skeleton nodded. “Everybody.”

“Why?” Asked Janet, her voice was high and near hysteria.

“I’m looking for something.”

“And you have to kill everybody to find it? And why is everybody just bones?”

“Oh, that’s just you.”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s just what you’re seeing. You’re connected to me.”

“What? How?”

“You called me.” said the entity, its voice betraying its hurt.

“Who?”

“You, Them.” The creature motioned to the group behind it and Janet saw the entire cast and crew standing in a tight group, most eyes big and black with fear. “I was already awake, answering prayers in Mexico, it was no great effort to come over the border to help you fix your problem.”

“Let them go.”

“I am looking for the need. I have come to answer the need. But I can’t find it.”

Janet was sure the strange entity was close to tears. She started to worry a nail with her teeth.

“Were you human?”

“Of course,” said the entity. “All Gods are made in your image.”

Janet started to relax. This was a complicated hazing, it must be because this was her first starring role.

They were all in on it.

She was damned if she’d be proven to be a poor sport.

“Ok then, if I help you find the need, and fix it, will you go?”

“Yes,” said the creature. “I don’t like it here, there are too many Gods and they confuse me. I want to go home. This was our land once, but it has been overrun.”

The skeleton God shook it’s head sadly and the elegant jewels around its neck jangled quietly.

Janet frowned. She wasn't from Los Angeles herself. She'd been born in Des Moines. She was pretty sure there were only a couple of Gods in Iowa.

“What did it seem like? This need?”

“I have to save you all, that's clear.” Said the skeleton, “but from what I don't know.”

“Chaos?” Suggested Janet.

The skeleton shook its head. “No, that is with you always, you people welcomed chaos long ago. No, there is something new, something insidious, something in the shape of...”

The skeleton's arm shot into the still and silent group of people. Once, twice, three times.

“Here,” It said. “What are they?”

It dangled small orange creatures by their hair.

The creatures were snarling.

“I don't know,” Janet answered, recoiling.

The skeleton dropped the creatures and they scuttled back into the still crowd.

“More than half these people,” the skeleton motioned to the group, “are infected with those things. Is that the desperate need that won't leave me in peace? Should I kill them?”

“Why not try?” Answered Janet. “If then you can go?”

The SFX nodded. She was so impressed and hoped she was comporting herself well in front of her fellows.

The God, the Angel, the whatever it was, skeleton, dived into the press of humanity, slashing at spaces in between. The people were stirring and sighing and stretching. They didn't seem to notice the bony creature bounding around in their midst. They looked to Janet, smiling. They

began to file past her, and bowed their heads in obeisance, and weirdly, went back to their jobs and their places.

No-one remarked on the skeleton clanking at the back.

It was the last, and it was bareheaded, the top of its skull shiny in the light. It gripped its hat tightly.

“They’re all in here.” It said with satisfaction, “I couldn’t pinpoint it, because it was rife. It was an infection of the soul. Thank you little Nun.”

“I’m not a Nun,” smiled Janet. “I’m an actress.”

“Yes, well,” answered the entity, “I will see you again.”

“Places!” Called the A.D.

The skeleton and its quarry faded away. Janet took a deep breath and went back to her mark on the floor. She had clearly passed whatever that strange initiation had been.

They shot the rest of the film with no trouble, but the air had definitely changed for Janet. No one mentioned the creature, even when she went to visit the SFX team, but everyone was impressed with her confidence, and her friendliness toward and interest in the crew and their work.

The director nodded in her direction and remarked to his 1st , “that one will be snapping at my heels soon.”

Janet was awarded a prize for best newcomer, and went into the draw for best actress.

She won.

There had been a change in the zeitgeist of the country, kindness and inclusivity abounded. Janet stood on the stage, the little gold statue in her hand.

“As you all know,” she said in her victory speech. “I was born in Iowa.” There was a smattering of applause. “But my Mother came from Mexico.” Another smattering of uncertain applause. “I am going back,” she said.

And her victory speech became a speech of resignation.

Janet walked down the street in Mexico, until she came to a neighborhood altar to Santa Muerta.

The statue of the skeleton with the beautiful clothes wore a garland of freshly cut roses and grinned down at her, she knelt at its feet and whispered.

“I’ve come home to help you fix things.”

A breeze blew from a nearby park, it carried the scent of fresh mown grass.

Janet laughed, tossed her cap in the air and dashed toward the little park, her heart was light, her spirit on fire.

“Thank you for coming to get me,” she cried. “Thank you Santa Muerta!”

The skeleton grinned, the breeze became wind and the bones rattled.

The End

Melissa Miles was born in CT USA, but resides in NZ with her partner and menagerie. She has had many life iterations, but has always written, and has now decided to make it her main focus.

Posted 7/19/2021

Tom Kastanotis “The Wrong Box” moved into town on 7/19/2021

THE WRONG MAILBOX

by

Tom Kastanotis

As Jack pulled into his driveway, the light rain began falling a little harder. He thought he could quickly walk to the mailbox at the front of his driveway, get the mail and make it to his house without getting too wet. It didn't work out that way.

Just as he was getting to the mailbox, it started pouring. Not only was it raining harder, but as he grabbed the mail from the mailbox, he thought the raindrops were becoming larger. His quick walk turned into a run as he headed for his house. He raced around his two sons' bicycles, swearing under his breath about the times he told them not to leave them in front of the door. When he made it inside, his clothes were drenched. Looking at himself in the mirror by the door, he saw a sopping mess.

He dropped the mail on the dining table and got a towel to dry his hair. The house was quiet, and he figured his wife had gone to pick their sons up from school. When he returned to the mail he was still wet and slightly upset, which he took out on the envelopes as he began ripping them open.

The bills were tossed to one side, the junk mail to the other and everything else went into a pile in the middle. The last envelope looked like it was a solicitation letter from a charity. As he started reading it, he knew it was something much different.

The first sentence said, “We know where you live.”

Jack was stunned.

The next sentence said he had their money and they wanted it back.

He picked up the envelope to see where it came from. The upper left corner where a return address would be, was empty. Then he noticed the letter was addressed to his neighbor.

He resumed reading the letter. It didn't say it explicitly, but to Jack it appeared the senders had invested in some type of gold and silver operation that turned out to be a scam. There were three of them. They said they were angry that his phone was no longer in service, their emails were being returned marked "undeliverable" and the office where they met with him when they gave him their checks was now closed and empty. Despite his attempts to hide from them, they said, they knew how to track him down.

They signed it, "Gold, Silver and Dead."

He put the letter down and thought of his neighbor, Dylan. Since moving in last year, Jack and his wife, Sarah, had become good friends with Dylan and Anna. Their 10-year-old son and seven and five-year-old daughters played well with Jack and Sarah's eight-year-old twin boys. During the summer, the two families had cookouts. Jack and Dylan shared their home improvement equipment. They talked about everything from their children and cars to sports and their jobs.

Jack knew Dylan as the low-key accountant who worked from home. He seemed a little wealthier than most in their middle-class neighborhood, and Jack thought he must be doing well with his clients. Dylan and Anna had new cars. They had a big pool the children enjoyed playing in during summer vacation, and from time-to-time they would invite Jack, Sarah and the boys to spend a day on their boat.

Jack read the note again. He was a high school history teacher and didn't know much about gold and silver, but he watched enough TV crime shows to know this letter was a warning shot for Dylan.

He heard Sarah's car coming up the driveway and quickly folded the note and put it in his pocket. He didn't want to talk about it when the boys were around, and he wasn't sure he even wanted to tell Sarah about it. He didn't want her worrying about something that occurred only because the mail carrier put the letter in the wrong mailbox.

That evening while preparing dinner, Jack asked Sarah about Anna.

"I don't know how she does it," said Sarah. "She works all day in the nursery school and then comes home to three kids. She must have an incredible amount of patience. Why are you asking?"

“I rarely see her car there,” Jack replied, trying to do some snooping.

“From what she’s told me, Dylan doesn’t help too much around the house,” said Sarah. “She said Dylan converted a bedroom to an office and he’s there most of the day. He doesn’t do the grocery shopping and he doesn’t do much cooking, but she says he’s good with the kids. She says he’s always helping them with their homework and getting involved with their school activities.”

There’s no dirt there, thought Jack. In fact, it only reinforced his view that Dylan was a good neighbor.

That night Jack kept waking up thinking about what to do. Should he give the letter to Dylan, so Dylan could be ready if they came after him? But if he gave him the letter, it would show Dylan that Jack now knew about his gold and silver operation. That led Jack to wonder if scamming people was Dylan’s full-time business and being an accountant was just a cover. Dylan appeared to be a good guy, thought Jack, but what if he really was ruthless and would threaten him because he knew too much? It wasn’t a good night for sleeping for Jack.

While driving the twins to school the next morning, Jack thought about his other options. What would happen if he took the letter to the police? That would prompt an investigation. What if the police and Dylan told Jack that he had misinterpreted the letter and his imagination had run a little wild on him?

But what if he read the letter correctly, and the police found Dylan was a thief? It would come out in court documents that he was the one who sounded the alarm. He couldn’t picture himself watching from his yard as police walked Dylan to the police car with his arms handcuffed behind his back. He imagined an angry Anna confronting him. Even worse, he thought, how could he face their children every day while Dylan was in prison.

That evening during dinner Sarah told them Anna had invited them to go for a boat ride Sunday. The twins were excited and started predicting the kind of fish they would catch. Sarah mentioned the large bottle of wine she would bring. Jack knew there was no way he could get out of it, even though he dreaded facing Dylan.

“Tell them we’d love to go,” said Jack, as he secretly hoped it would rain.

Sunday arrived without a cloud in the sky.

On the boat, everything was going well. The children were in the back fishing. The adults were gathered around Dylan with their cups of wine as he kept the boat on a course for a smooth ride. The conversation was light as they watched the kids and took in the sights of large houses along the shore.

“Wouldn’t you just love to live in one of those houses,” asked Anna.

“Maybe someday we’ll be able afford it,” said Dylan.

“Really?” asked Anna.

“The emphasis is on someday,” Dylan replied with a chuckle.

Jack saw it as an opening for him to raise a question and find what Dylan would reveal.

“How’s the business going?” he asked. “Are you ready for the tax season?”

“It’s always tiring. The only good thing is this year I have some new clients, and more clients means more money, and more money means a house on the water.”

The answer revealed nothing, thought Jack. Dylan could have picked up new accounting clients, or they could be new clients to a con game.

Jack’s struggle over what to do was taking up more of his time. He felt paralyzed by his indecision. The details of the letter sounded true, but Jack had trouble seeing his friend as a scam artist.

“I just can’t believe he’s a thief,” Jack said to himself.

That night he thought of just going to Dylan’s house, giving him the letter and telling him he opened it by mistake. Dylan would probably have a good explanation. Jack thought that was a bit of wishful thinking.

On the drive to school the next morning, Jack made his decision. When he got home that afternoon, he would give Dylan the letter and just let it play out.

Right about noon Sarah texted Jack telling him to call her asap. He was in the teachers' room having lunch when he got the message. He excused himself, telling the other teachers he had to make a call. He left the building and walked about 10 feet away so students walking by couldn't hear him.

Sarah answered the phone immediately.

“Jack, I was just driving home and I saw all these police cars on the street. I couldn't even pull into the driveway. I had to park on the side of the road. One of the officers came up to me and asked if I knew Dylan. When I said yes, he told me to wait there and called over another cop. He said he was a detective. He said somebody broke into their house this morning when only the husband was home. He said Dylan was shot five times.”

Sarah started crying.

“Dylan's dead,” she said.

The End

Tom Kastanotis is a writer living in Florida. Before becoming a full-time author, he was an award-winning journalist. He views writing as a way to exercise his imagination and entertain readers.

Posted 7/16/2021

Bennett Durkan "As Long As I'm With You" moved into town on
7/16/2021

AS LONG AS I'M WITH YOU

by

Bennett Durkan

Adam, lamp in hand, sat next to his nephew Christian before the gray, bare wall. Adam clicked on the lamp and aimed it. A spotlight appeared on the wall. Christian giggled. He leaned toward the wall. Shadows, black and solid, danced across the expanse.

Adam twisted his fingers. The shadow of his hand formed a simulacrum of a dog. With his other hand, he adjusted the lamp. The dog grew. He held the lamp by its shade and moved it so that the center of brightness remained within the center of the wall. The sixty watt bulb started to warm his knuckles.

The dog's jaw moved up and down in a mechanical fashion as Adam wiggled his pinky. He provided the yips and barks. His nephew, sitting on the right side of the lamp, laughed and clapped. He brought his hands into the spotlight. His forearm and wrist blocked most of the light, resulting in a shapeless shadow. Adam reached and directed Christian's fingers. A puppy then joined the dog.

"And, if you do like this," Adam refolded his fingers and placed his hand parallel to the ground, "you have a duck. Quack." The duck bobbed as though in water. The duck, without wings, flew to the top of the spotlight. By leaning his arm away from the lamp, Adam shrank the duck.

"Your duck just looks like another dog!" His nephew laughed. The puppy became a hand and disappeared out of range of the light.

"Hey," Adam said, "I'm new to this." The duck returned to calm water. It quacked a few more times. Adam unraveled his hand and then massaged his palm. "Until just right now, I could only do the dog." He wriggled his digits. He tried a few different shapes. He frowned at each new one. His nephew joined, and provided different chirps, meows, and moos.

Outside, Franklin Street murmured like an urban dream. Through the drawn blinds and below the two inches of window ledge, the sounds of traffic faded. Engines chugged in a tired fashion as cars idled at the intersection. Adam watched a few sparkles of light along the edges of his blinds before watching his nephew playing with different shadow puppets.

After a few minutes, a knock resounded through the door. Adam called to the knocker. Lily, his sister, stepped through the threshold. Her heels clicked on the hard wood floor. Her hair bounced in styled curls, and her cheeks glowed in comparison to the dark rims around her eyes. She found the light switch, drowning out the lamp. The nephew jumped up and ran to his mother. Adam placed the base of the lamp flat on the floor, and scooted it closer to the outlet. He stood and blew on his warm knuckles.

With her elevated heels, his sister rose equal with Adam. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. The satin threadwork of her dress slipped under the crook of his elbow. She smiled. As Adam stepped back and leaned on a section of his couch, his sister rested her hands on her son's shoulders. Adam picked at frayed seam. He noticed a couple dark stains on the cushions.

“Did you have fun with the hubby?” Adam's crossed his arms.

“We had a wonderful time.” His sister patted her son on the bony curve of his shoulder. “Thanks for being able to babysit on such short notice.” Adam waved a hand in the air the way one would brush aside a harmless fly. A lull formed. Lily's hands, rubbing her son's shoulders, provided the sole movement.

“Are you doing okay?” she said. “Are you eating well? You're not living the sad bachelor's life? I see you still have that ratty couch.”

“You liked this couch when I first got it. I remember you sitting on it for the first time. You complimented me on my taste. So did your husband. The dimple's still there.”

“Okay.” Lily closed her eyes with a smile. “I'd love to talk more, but Garret left the car running.”

Adam popped from the couch and opened the door for his sister. She led her son out the door. As the nephew passed, Adam tussled his hair. A few tufts stuck out on the sides. Adam watched as his sister walked down the hall. The one-note clack of her footsteps followed. The two stopped at the elevators, and she smoothed down her son's hair. Lifeless doors, with numbers nailed on their face, lined both sides of the hall. A trail of ductwork decorated the ceiling. When the light above the elevator dinged, Adam eased his door shut. The deadbolt clicked into place.

The refrigerator door opened to a cool barren cavity. Adam lifted the bottle of milk and gave it a shake. He smirked and shook his head.

He turned off the overhead lights. The lamp glowed on the floor. He walked to the windows, leaned over the hip high shelf, and raised the blinds. A car, with its headlights casting two overlapping cones before it, turned down the street. He picked up the lamp and placed it on his bookshelf, at the end of a line of paperback. A smile stretched, and he sighed. On the bare wall, his silhouette stood taller than him. The silhouette's head moved from side to side. When Adam turned off the lamp, his shadow faded into the rest of the formless darkness in his loft.

On his way out of the door, he grabbed the keys. They jingled in the unmelodic way keys will jingle. They bulged in his front pocket.

#

Adam walked on the sidewalk with his takeout hanging in its plastic bag when he noticed that he was alone. A car passed him. Its taillights shrank and vanished. He stopped between a streetlamp and the electronic parking meter for this side of the block. Behind him, the street sloped downward. Ahead, the rows of red traffic lights floated, suspended from invisible metal arms.

Faint steam rose from the Styrofoam containers in the bag. Underfoot, his shadow, a segment of pavement removed and not replaced, flattened and squeezed. It lacked definition. Adam put a foot in the middle of the dim rounded form and touched pavement. At a specific position, the shadow stood as tall as his sister in heels. Adam huffed. When he took a step forward, the shadow reshaped itself. He stayed the same height. His shadow grew longer.

He entered the vacant lobby. The polished floor peeked from under the rubber-backed carpet runner. The ceiling light's reflections blurred on the shine. When the door closed, he left his shadow under the awning with the unending scent of car exhaust. He pressed the button for the elevator, and rode it to his cavernous floor. As he ate the meal, the dim lighting of the standup lamp beside his bed provided a dusk-like atmosphere. He navigated the unlit rooms.

#

The alarm clock woke Adam. He slapped it off and burrowed into his pillow. Thirty minutes later, the telephone rang. The hardwood floor chilled his bare feet. He winced at the Saturday morning sun sneaking through the blinds. He rubbed his eyes as he picked up the phone. With it against his ear, he answered in a half-yawn. After a few seconds and second a 'hello?' he heard the distinct click of the line disconnecting.

He yawned and stretched his back. In a glance, he saw a shadow on the bare wall before shuffling toward the fridge. He paused, looked over his shoulder, and then faced the wall. A shadow, the figure of a man, stood on the wall. Adam shook his head, but the shadow remained. He walked into the bathroom and splashed two handfuls of warm water on his face. When he emerged, power walking, he saw the shadow still upon the wall.

He studied the shadow, a simple silhouette lacking remarkable features, from top to bottom. He leaned closer. He leaned away. The shadow stood at his height with its feet pressed against the floor moulding. Adam grabbed the lamp from the bookshelf, aimed it at the wall, and flipped the switch. The shadow didn't flicker. Adam returned the lamp and approached the wall. The shadow didn't move. Adam stopped within an arm's reach of the wall. His hand shook as he lifted it. He brought the hand an inch, a centimeter, from the wall before dropping it.

He rushed to the windows. He pulled the cords for the blinds. The cheap plastic of the mechanisms groaned. The shadow didn't fade. The outline of the silhouette remained in black-ink contrast to the wall. Adam turned on the small lamp, the standing lamp, and the overhead lights. Electricity hummed and artificial light enlivened the loft. Adam panted through clenched teeth as he saw the shadow standing against the wall. He climbed over the back of the couch and lay face down, breathing in the hot air of his own breath.

When his arms stopped shaking, he rose from the couch and turned off the lights. He lowered and angled the blinds. As he walked to the refrigerator in the kitchen nook, he held his head straight, kept his eyes forward. He poured himself a bowl of cereal and focused on the spoon, bowl, two-percent milk, and the corn flakes. When he finished eating, he placed the empty bowl in the sink. He went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and showered.

He dried his hair as wondered out of the bathroom. From beneath the towel, Adam looked from his feet to the wall with the shadow. The shadow faced the windows, its hands held behind its back. Adam turned to the windows. On the street below a line of cars waited at the intersection, as a bus pulled up alongside the curb. These rested within the thin shadow of a building. Adam watched the tops of a few head board the bus. The traffic light changed, the cars drove, the bus closed its pneumatic door. Adam looked up, and his shadow continued to look down.

After he folded his towel onto the towel, Adam grabbed his keys from the counter and exited. Closing the door, he watched the shadow watching the street. The door closed. The click echoed through the hallway. He weighed the keys in his hand. The one for the deadbolt stuck out like a bony finger. He slid it slid into the lock. He sighed. He removed the key from the lock and dropped the ring into his front pocket.

#

Adam returned to the loft, tossed the circulars in the trash, laid the rest of his mail on the counter, and turned to the shadow. The keys jangled as he dropped them next to the mail. The shadow reclined on an elbow a couple feet above the floor. Adam tiptoed to the wall, focused on the space beneath the shadow.

The phone rang. Adam startled. The shadow didn't move. Still staring at the shadow, Adam picked up the phone. After he spoke, he heard the distinct click again. He placed the phone in its cradle without taking his eyes off of his shadow. He then shifted his sights to his couch. He moved to its front, crouched to place his palm on a cushion, and held his other hand toward the bottom of the shadow. He brought both hands together. He clicked his tongue and pounded to the counter.

“You think this is funny?” He threw open a drawer. The contents to slide and hit against each other. He pushed aside scissors, an assortment of pens, and a pad of unlined paper, to retrieve a pocket-size flashlight. He twisted the top and pointed the beam at the shadow. Around the shadow, he saw the faint, almost imperceptible, orange circle of the light. The shadow persisted, untouched. “Of course.” Adam ran outside. He shined the light across the hall then placed his hand before it. The disc of light remained intact. “Oh, come on!” He shook his hand up and down. The disc of light remained intact. He dropped the flashlight into the drawer, and closed it without rattling the contents.

The couch groaned under Adam’s weight. He sprawled on the cushions and stretched from one arm rest to the other. Afternoon light, cut thin by the angle of the blinds, fell, in stripes, on the floor, the couch, and him. His feet and the armrest blocked the wall and the shadow. He leaned back his head more. The corner of the armrest pressed on the bone in the back of his neck.

A certain piece of sunlight fell on his closed eyes. It played on his eyelids, and kept him from falling asleep. The background noise of the street below had grown soft. His breathing sounded loud.

“Still there?” Adam asked the room. His voice lifted to the ceiling with its exposed duct work. He held his breath. He waited for some time. “That’s what I thought.”

Adam’s stomach grumbled. He rose from the couch and saw that the shadow sat. Back straight, its hands rested in its lap like. He watched the shadow until his eyes dried. He groaned as he blinked. He walked around the couch, going around the side furthest from the wall.

Half empty bottles of condiments decorated the bare refrigerator shelves. He pushed aside a jar with a ring of yellow mustard dried to a thick green around the cap, and found a bottle of ketchup that had fallen sideways. He checked the crisper drawers. He opened a plastic container and sniffed the contents. He swore under his breath.

The phone rang again. Adam closed the fridge door without removing food. When he brought the phone up to the side of his head, the now same click came through the earpiece. He listened to the drone of the dead line for a few seconds. When he returned the phone, the cord coiled around itself. Adam focused on the phone as a whole. When he blinked,

he kept his eyes shut and released a deep sigh. The skin on the back of his neck prickled and itched.

“You think this is funny?” He turned to the shadow on the wall. “Don’t you?” The shadow now stood, one hand on its hip the other held with the palm up. Adam backed from phone when it rang. He picked it up and slammed it into the cradle. He jumped, but his shadow retained its pose. He furrowed his brow and ground his teeth together.

The phone started to ring again, but Adam marched to the wall. Toes bumped against the wall. The answering machine engaged. His prerecorded message played and asked the caller to wait for the beep. He locked onto his shadow. He neck muscles tensed. He bit his bottom lip. Beep.

“Hello, Adam.” His sister’s voice, with an apologetic tone, came through the machine. “I guess I called while you were out. I wanted to thank you again for babysitting last night, and just wanted to say that we’ve found a more permanent sitter.”

Adam relaxed his jaw, relaxed his shoulders and hands. He stumbled from the wall. He bumped into the couch. The shadow mimicked him. He chuckled. The shadow copied his movements and grew as he stumbled closer to it. He, a man with his shadow upon the wall, blinked.

“Call me back as soon as you can. You and I should really talk more.” His sister’s voice disappeared. No more beeps, no more ringtones. From the street below, Adam heard the screech of tires and a sound like a tennis racket hitting a tennis ball. Voices shouted, which lost fierceness through the thick glass of the windows. Adam leaned his head forward against the wall. He stood, forehead to forehead with his shadow.

The End

Bennett Durkan's fiction has appeared in *Atomic Flyswatter*, *Volney Road Review*, and *The Hunger*. His poetry has appeared in *Willard & Maple*, *Ikleftiko*, and *Five 2 One*. He was also a finalist for the Authors Marketing Guild's 2020 short story contest. He currently lives in Kingwood, Texas.

Posted 7/13/2021
C. W. Bigelow "Echoes" moved into town on 7/13/2021

ECHOES
by
C.W. Bigelow

Fifteen years after mother's death in 1885, I am still haunted by vivid memories of her gracefully twirling on the ice, black skirts forming a funnel as she spun. Gliding with her to the back slough; we could skate alone, spinning and racing, our laughter melodically piercing the bleak winter sky.

#

Her laughter still echoes over the barren frozen pond as I slide by the line of skeletal trees gracing the shoreline. The crowd startles me as it gathers at the edge of the slough and watches curiously. I am on display.

Silently gliding along the back shoreline under a bright sun, squinting at what appears to an illusion. Is it another hallucination of mother? I quickly turn but lose my balance. Tripping on the skate-tips, arms flaying like detached oars, I land on my stomach and slide across the ice, its bite bitterly swiping my cheek like sandpaper. Righting myself, after a distance, I climb to my knees, but she has vanished.

Convinced it is another vision, I leisurely skate to the main pond, fully intent on returning home. In fact, I look forward to warming myself by the roaring fire, away from all these inquisitive townsfolk. My carriage waits.

She towers over a group of children. From under a white knit bonnet, raven black hair streams like a shimmering cape. Even at that distance I'm taken aback by the brilliance of her blue eyes. Shaking my head to shrug the vision, I am shocked and excited when it remains.

Meeting her curious gaze, my blades slash smoothly and effortlessly over the ice. The thrust fills my legs with burning heat and my elation is overwhelming, inconceivable. Drawing nearer to her bright smile, I waver tenuously, quickly losing all confidence.

Giggling gleefully, she turns and speeds off after I come to a sharp stop beside her. The even flow of her strides is ballet-like.

Deflated initially because my assumption is that she wants to escape the odd citizen of town; my hopes soar when she glances impishly back over her shoulder. I fall into a fluid glide in her direction. I am chasing mother – exhilaration fills my chest as I laugh and gain on her.

Upon coasting to a stop by the warming house, gulping breathlessly, she sticks out her hands in surrender. “You are too fast for me,” she sighs, her blue eyes sparkling mischievously ebbing with tears and her high cheekbones are crimson in the cold.

“On the contrary, I never thought I’d catch up.” With a quick bow of my head, I introduce myself. “Jonathan Crocker.”

“Jenny Adams.”

“I’ve never seen you skating,” I pant gazing back over the pond at the hordes of townsfolk curiously watching me contact another person for the first time in recent memory.

“First time out. I brought my class,” she explains, pointing to a brood of children skating towards us. “I’m the new elementary teacher in town.”

“Well, hopefully you are as fine a teacher as you are a skater. Maybe I’ll see you here in the future.” The children surround us, laughing and giggling to each other, reaching out to touch me.

“How about tomorrow afternoon,” she suggests confidently.

#

“Nice to be without the student body?” I joke, approaching Jenny, as she laces her skates in the warming house the next day.

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll see a few around,” she laughs, sitting back up and extends her legs. Knitted stockings are apparent under her black wool skirt and she bangs her skates on the gnarled wooden floor to test the tightness of the laces.

“I’m quite the object of curiosity,” I admit, sitting on the bench next to her. Producing my skates from a canvas shoulder bag, I glance about the small crowd warming themselves by the roaring fire.

“So, I’ve heard,” she chuckles. “Why do you suppose?”

“Money, background, the lack of friends.” I pause to think of more reasons, but I know the mystery is what enhances the rumors. “My father’s reputation.” After pausing a moment, “I guess that about sums it up.”

She nods. “Sounds like enough to distance you.”

“Does it frighten you?” Even though I’m cheerful, I listen carefully for her tone.

“To be honest, I heard everything about you before I met you yesterday.”

Yanking hard on my laces. “Should I be worried?”

“Because I might be after your money?”

Pursing my lips, I nod slowly. “Possibly, though that doesn’t really worry me.”

She tips her head, “Then what does worry you?”

Staring up at rough hewn brackets supporting the roof before dropping my gaze to the blazing fireplace, I shrugged. “I’m not sure. It has been a while since I’ve been out and about”

“Actually, it’s your skating prowess I’m after. Free lessons,” she chuckles.

I like her lightheartedness, but most of all her bravery. No one has ever approached me in such a way.

#

My hand trembles – having difficulty gripping the pistol. It was Father’s pride and joy, purported to have been given to him by Horace Smith, co-founder of the gun manufacturer Smith and Wesson. It has only been

fired once since its purchase, though Father spent hours buffing the pearl handle and oiling the metal barrel.

“A fine gift from an innovator,” I recall him sighing reverently, his resonant baritone booming. It would be an antique to be admired as much for its historical connection as its glowing beauty.

The monstrous oak grandfather clock chimes twice from the entry hall, echoing vibrantly like a drum throughout the halls of the house, its resounding volume so overwhelming it drowned out any other sound.

“Your tea, sir,” Grace announces as she sets a tray on the coffee table.

The China teapot – graced with hand painted flowers mother so loved. Grace pours the steaming liquid into a cup with the same flowers.

“Has Grady left to get Miss Adams?” I mutter, eyes glazed, as I lift the cup to my lips, the steam swirling.

“Hour ago, sir.”

“The guest room has been prepared?”

She nods. “New sheets, clean comforter. Same pillows you requested.”

“Nice job, Grace. Thank you.”

“She’ll be comfortable there. She’ll feel much better staying here.”

Blazing flames dance in the fireplace like miniature ballerinas, twirling, leaping then disappearing before others jump to take their place. The heat borders on unbearable, yet I remain close, the sweat beginning to soak my stiffly starched white collar.

#

As a child I spent many an hour in this room embraced by the blazing fire’s warmth, part of a familial scene that was a model of perfection I thought unattainable until Jenny. Mother knitting at the end of the sofa, wrapped snugly in a red woolen crocheted blanket, Father packed into his stuffed leather chair, dressed in a blue silk lounging jacket and puffing his pipe, reading a book by candlelight. I fit pieces of wooden

puzzles together, building lovely scenes of mountains or lakes, all the while serenaded by Mother's melodic humming.

An only child, totally intimidated by Father, I purposely avoided conversation and spent much of the time silently studying the man's exaggerated gyrations. The mystifying aura was a combination of a six feet four frame, barrel chest and booming oratory surrounded by a powerful aloofness. A Civil War hero and the wealthiest man in town, his stature was so lofty I realized early on I could never match it. As a result, I decided to exist as a fly on the wall, trying to learn through silent observation, rather than risk annoying him with questions.

I avoided confrontation, and even failed to satisfy my own curiosity – answering my many questions in my own mind, governed by a code manufactured and disciplined by my own conclusions whether they were valid or not - all to avoid communicating directly with this force of nature.

Mother, gentle and patient, was far more nurturing, consciously trying to counterbalance his pragmatic approach. In her presence and hers alone, I was comfortable and displayed a playful personality, able to entertain her with precise mimicry of his idiosyncrasies.

Bouncing from one extreme to the next became natural and effortless. With her, I emerged from the cocoon, inquisitive and gleeful. When Father joined, the butterfly crash-landed and I burrowed back into a secluded state, becoming silent, watchful, and defensive.

This self-invoked pressure continued through childhood and though I was never told I failed; I was rarely commended. As an adult, it left me listless, lacking the motivation to investigate career paths, not that I needed money because the wealth left was extraordinary. It just heightened the wall separating me from the outside world. Mother's death stole my remaining curiosity and energy.

#

The floor to ceiling windows display traces of the morning snowstorm. Slowly melting in the afternoon sun, large chunks of ice break off into islands and slip to the outside sill before flowing over the edge like miniature waterfalls. After assaulting the house, the previous night, the

wind's angry howl has diminished to a wet, lazy breeze. Though early spring, it's a reminder of winter's strength and anger.

I buff the pistol's pearl handle, before loading a single bullet into the chamber, and then place it carefully in the display case above the fireplace. It's doubtful he would approve of the cleaning job, which he made a weekly ritual. In hopes of matching him I do it every three days. It glows

The same servants remain and continue doting on me, contributing to my listlessness. Rarely needing to leave the house, I wander the estate's orchards and immerse myself in Father's book collection. Through these books, I attempt to acquire father's wisdom. Midst the sweet perfume of the orchards I wrap myself in memories of mother.

#

"Jonathan, please get my slippers!"

"Upstairs, sir?" I glanced pensively down the long dining room table.

Father looked up from his plate, blue eyes glaring under his thick, caterpillar-like eyebrows. "And where else would my slippers be?" He'd become noticeably thinner, jowls disappearing like snow mounds in spring, loosely hanging from his face like dog-ears. Dark circles engulfed his gaunt black eyes. Even his moustache seemed thinner, spaces of bare flesh suddenly evident. Exhausted from long nights nursing Mother, his voice was raspy.

Sweat broke out on my neck, glancing over his huge head at the dark, wide staircase. Turning back in hopes of arguing my way out of the request, I was stricken by the phantom-like figure listlessly picking at his meal, shuffling food from one side of his plate to the other. There was no room for argument, there never was, and my concern would be quickly dismissed as childish fears. Father's new obsession was caring for my ill mother, which meant even more neglect of me.

Knees weak, numb feet feeling detached and powerless, I stumbled to the bottom stair. Gripping the banister with all my might, I began scaling the steep staircase cautiously, one step at a time, eyes fearfully fastened on the dark landing above. I was thirteen years old.

Mother had been moved into the guest bedroom at the top of the stairs. For weeks I hadn't been allowed to visit her, which was a mixed blessing because I avoided her door at all costs, where her pitiful, anguished moans were constant and alarming. Fed by the eerie laments drifting from the room, awful images of what she might look like danced in my head. Ranging from ghost-like transparency to monster-like hideousness they grew more vivid in the evening and often interrupted my sleep. Creeping closer to the looming door, my heart rate quickened and sweat soaked my shirt. Her appearance had to be frightening, otherwise I would have been allowed to sit in her room and comfort her. What other possible reason was there? Shutting my eyes tightly and holding my breath I raced by the room to retrieve the slippers. Caught in the void between Father's neglect and the surreal mystery of Mother's condition, I languished under a numb pall.

#

"But what kind of suitor are you if you won't take me to dinner?" Jenny chided as Grady pulled the horse drawn carriage up in front of Tenors, the finest eating establishment in town.

I sighed, shaking my head— I only frequented this establishment with my parents so it had been a long time and back then jumpy nerves killed my appetite

"Mr. Crocker, so good to see you again," the Maître de, James greeted. I removed Jenny's coat and handed it to the coat clerk. "You really must visit us more often."

I nodded gleefully at Jenny, "I think our presence will become more regular."

She smiled as she gazed about the crowded dining room, so many of the community leaders dining at white tablecloth tables gazing across glowing candles at each other. She didn't stop smiling.

"Champagne on the house," the wine steward announced as he popped the bottle.

Jenny glowed as her glass was poured. How strange that the richest man in town would be given what he could afford above everyone else. She scrunched her nose as the bubbles tickled it.

I reached into my inside suit coat pocket to produce a small black box, which I held across the table in front of her. Slowly, not yet gazing into her eyes, I opened it to reveal the largest diamond she had ever seen – and she wavered, struck with dizziness, hardly hearing my proposal. “Will you be my wife?”

Tears filled her blue eyes and she nodded over and over with a wide smile.

#

The chime signals half past two. Grady is late. Crossing the room with long, apprehensive strides to gaze out the window. Wet snow tarps everything in sight. The grove of cherry trees in the far reaches of the front yard look as though they have been fit with white stocking caps. The ground cover is scattered with what looks like gobs of wet sugar. I lay my palm flat, fingers spread like a leaf, on the windowpane. They are mother’s hands, long, delicate fingers, and sensitive to the cold. I snatch them back, cupping both hands and blowing warm breath into them.

#

“Poor Jonathan. You’re so cold,” Mother cooed, huddling over me as we stood in front of the warming house fireplace. The wood planked floor was covered with puddles of melted snow.

Shaking my head in denial because I knew how much she loved to ice skate. Dainty features rosy from the brisk, biting air, her eyes filled with tears. I tasted their salty tang when she bent down to hug me. The floral scent of her jet-black hair, wrapped tightly in a bun atop of her head, was invigorating on such a cold, dreary day.

“I’m afraid it’s too cold today,” she sighed as she removed my gloves, knelt before me, and began rubbing my numb fingers.

The wooden one room house was packed with skaters trying to escape the bitter weather. The planked floor groaned under the strain. Each time the door opened; a rush of frosty air attacked the room. Finding it difficult to catch my breath in the closed quarters, I resisted the urge to bolt out the door as the crowd forced their way to the heat of the fire. The

view at my level was mostly heavy dark overcoats and I grew dizzy at the lack of perspective and the acrid aroma of wet wool.

“I’m fine, Mother. It’s bright. Perfect for skating. We shouldn’t waste such a day.” I stomped my skates to regain the circulation in my numb toes. “Father will be disappointed if we don’t stay longer.”

Smiling sadly, her full lips tugged at her high cheeks. She knew I was right, and though saddened by the truth, could do little to correct the situation. Father had never wanted a child and gave in only if she promised not to demand too much from him during child rearing years. She had acquiesced, assuming he would change his mind when I was born, and when it turned out to be a boy, hoped he would jump in to raise me in his own image. But while only a toddler, she recognized the lack of interest, and instead of overcoming the challenge, accepted defeat without a battle.

Abruptly a man brushed rudely past, thoughtlessly knocking us from his path, sending Mother tumbling across the floor where she landed in puddles of melted snow. Legs spread, skates askew, one pointing up and the other down, her full skirt pinned under another boy’s skates, she struggled to stand, but slipped again.

“Mother!” I scrambled to her.

“I’m fine.” She accepted the help of two bystanders, who lifted her to her feet.

“But you’re soaked.” My face blushed with exasperation; hands gathered in fists at my sides.

“I’ll be fine.” She swiped at the water on her skirt. My reaction was the first time she saw evidence of father’s personality.

The man bulled his way through the crowd to the fireplace, where he stood selfishly hogging the heat, ignoring the commotion he’d caused and oblivious to the buzzing of the crowd who were shocked by his barbaric behavior.

Spurred by an unfamiliar outrage, sudden heat pumping through my veins, I silently snaked through the horde, careful not to reveal my position until I leaped from behind a woman standing next him. With

swiftness and vengeful accuracy, I firmly planted the toe of my skate blade into the man's shin.

"Damn!" he hollered, quickly bending over to grab his leg. "Who the hell?"

Jumping back, in direct view of his wide behind, I couldn't resist landing another sharp kick, sending him into the hot ashes of the fire with a howl. Disappearing quickly back into the crowd by the time he had a chance to get back on his feet, wipe off the ashes and look for his assailant. Thunderous applause camouflaged us as we made a hasty exit.

Mother laughed about it on the way home. "Elizabeth Crocker's protector!" she declared as she hugged me under the heavy carriage blanket. "Your father will be proud!"

Bursting with pride, I bravely faced the icy breeze as Grady encouraged the horse with a light snap of his whip past the high mounds of snow that lined the road to the house.

As we approached home the heightened adrenalin level fell as I recalled the incident, amazed, but a bit alarmed by my courage and rage.

"Your son was my protector today," Mother announced at dinner. She beamed across the table and then raised clenched fists high above her head in celebration.

I blushed, smirking, afraid to meet Father's gaze.

Father cocked his head with interest. "How so?"

After listening to the tale, he nodded and looked across the table at me, beaming with pride. "I would have done the same."

I was instilled with a newfound confidence so liberating I couldn't help but laugh and clap. Having done something father agreed with electrified me. My careful scrutinizing of father was paying off.

#

Hot breath freezes in geometric patterns on the window. A year has passed since that afternoon with Jenny on the ice. Our wedding is

planned for the summer. Almost immediately Mother's son crept out from behind the layers of morass and paralyzing loneliness. I found myself mimicking father. And like Mother, Jenny was entertained by my rediscovered personality.

Wandering outside, antsy for her arrival, I am coatless in the still, chilly air. Charcoal clouds hang over the land like a bleak curtain. Energetic children scream with delight from across the fields as they romp in the snow.

#

“Why can't I see her?”

Father exhaled heavily and glanced at her bedroom longingly. “Mother is sick. She doesn't want you to get sick too.” He refused to allow me to witness the torture she was experiencing.

“But you go in there...”

“I'm stronger than you are, Jonathan.” He knelt in front of me. Her transformation was even more than he could bear. He grasped my thin shoulders. “She wants me to tell you that she loves you very much and that she misses doing all your favorite things.”

“When will the cure work?”

Father looked away. “We don't know.” His expression was a mixture of exhaustion, fear, and extreme despondency. Having lost his appetite, the pounds continued to melt from his frame, and he grew weaker each day.

The last time I saw her was on her return from a ride on her stallion, Night. I loved standing in the lane in front of the house watching them glide through the orchard, leaping gracefully and effortlessly over the short fences. She was the most accomplished horsewoman in the county.

To share her passion, I asked her to give me riding lessons, but after falling off Night twice, decided it was better to remain a spectator. Even though her rides would take an hour, I perched on the split rail fence surrounding the orchard and gaze with pride as she controlled the powerful horse.

The sun slipped behind the stable, shadows washing the barnyard with cool, dark furrows as the chill of the evening arrived. She cut the ride short. Her dismount was awkward and as she walked unsteadily toward me her pale face alarmed me. She began coughing fitfully.

“What’s wrong?”

She forced a smile. “I must be coming down with something.” But as she turned toward the house, she doubled over and groaned in pain.

“I’ll get Father!”

We found her on her knees, crouched over the ground, vomiting and coughing. With one swift motion, father lifted her in his massive arms and carried her inside and up the stairs, where he remained for an hour before coming down for dinner without her.

The reticence at the table was in direct conflict with the normal energy she brought to the meal. Hollow scraping of silverware on the plates echoed across the table like distinct warning signals. Glances at each other were avoided as the servants brought the meal with bowed heads then hurried away.

“What’s wrong with Mother?” The sound of my voice surprised me.

Father stared blankly then shook his head slowly. “I’ll get the doctor tomorrow and we’ll see.”

The next morning, Dr. Thomas moved her into the spare bedroom and visited each day for a week, speaking in hushed tones with Father after each visit. From their stern expressions it was obvious she was seriously ill, and I camped out at the bottom of the stairs in case she needed me. All my concentration was directed at that bedroom, praying for her recovery.

From my perch on the step, I watched a procession of unfamiliar doctors come and go over the next few weeks. It became routine to see Father greet the men heartily at the door, his face flush with hope, then usher them out later with a vacant, grim expression. Gazing out the door, he watched helplessly as the doctors climbed into their carriages and rode away. His response to my inquisitive stares was a heavy shrug before he trudged slowly back up the stairs. Rarely did we exchange words, for I

became adept at recognizing the doctor's expressions and fought to keep my emotions intact to support father, who grew more despondent with each visit.

The doctors stopped coming and I wandered the orchard. From there I could see the window of the guestroom and spent hours watching it, hoping for a glance of her, but only caught glimpses of Father, head bowed, pacing slowly back and forth.

To pass the time I gathered the tiny rotten apples that lay in the long grass. "They didn't have the strength to make it," she used to tell me when we collected apples for pie.

"Do they go to Heaven?"

"I suppose so," she said with a smile.

"For eating by those who live in Heaven?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure you have to eat in Heaven."

"Is Heaven beautiful?"

She gazed at the apple trees and her face grew flush. "My vision of Heaven is perfection. No suffering, no needs, just eternal bliss."

I stretched in the long grass and gazed through the nearest tree. Shed completely of fruit, it resembled a gnarled, skeletal hand reaching across the high autumn sky. Interrupting the silence, the scratching sound of a dead leaf, lurching, turning in the grasp of a soft breeze crossing the horse path.

#

Barely visible midst the bundle of furs in the back seat of the carriage, Jenny's long dark hair flowed thickly over them.

Forcing a smile, I lifted her fragile body, alarmingly light. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"I almost didn't. I'm not getting better," she sniffled gazing with hollow, glazed eyes.

“Let’s get inside and warm up by the fire,” I insisted carrying her, high stepping through the wet, deep snow. “Grady will bring your bag later.”

Setting her down on the leather sofa I unwound her wraps like bandages from her tiny, shaking body. Settled in, she stared blankly into the dancing flames, sunken eyes encircled with dark shadows. Pale and haggard, each breath was wet and forced.

“I’m sorry about the other night,” she began, wringing her delicate hands nervously. “It wasn’t fair to scream at you that way. I’m just so frustrated by this ailment. If only they could tell me what it is. Sometimes the pain in my stomach grows so sharp I can’t take it. It overwhelmed me. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

Appetite all but gone the weight loss in my face evident after spending most every night with her in her tiny boarding house room, pacing back and forth, vicariously suffering with her, tending to her every need until I convinced her to stay in this house.

#

“I can’t stand it anymore!” mother screamed, recklessly appearing at the top of the stairs, spinning around as she punched the air with clenched fists. “Make it stop!” Her black hair reached wildly in tangled spikes over the shoulders of her wrinkled white nightgown. I’d never seen it down and was shocked by its unruly length. Eyes blazing like red-hot embers in her chalky face, mouth frozen in an anguished gaping hole, she twirled off the walls, her arms slashing out as if she were defending herself from an invisible demon. “Make it stop! Stop it!”

Father scaled the stairs two at a time, swept her up. She screamed and bucked with uncontrollable spasms as he carried her back into the guestroom.

Crouched outside the door, left ajar, I watched him hover over her bed, his hulking shadow in the single flickering candlelight wavering against the far wall. Her screams filled the air, echoing off the walls and she thrashed like a wild animal. Struggling to calm her, his soft, deep consoling murmurs having no effect, he stood straight and stared down at her writhing body. Large hands at his waist he just shook his head back and forth. His shoulders heaved in desperation. Her shrieks became a

soundtrack to which I rocked back and forth, tears blurring the scene. Then with a deliberate sigh, glancing up at the ceiling, father slowly lifted a pillow off the bed and clutched it to his chest as he wavered while she twisted and pleaded for death. Hesitating before emitting large awkward barks of anguish, in one quick motion he pushed it over her face. Her legs pumped and flailed for a few moments, sheets, and covers lifting until the muffled groans stopped, leaving a faint echo, one that was etched deeply into my memory and buzzed in the back of my mind from that moment forward.

Father ignored me as he stumbled blindly from the room. His sobs ceased as he awkwardly descended the staircase. The silence was stifling as I crept into the room and stood at her bedside. The table candle encircled her in a halo of soft, golden light. Empty blue eyes aimed blindly at the ceiling and her mouth hung open like a door blown askew in a thunderstorm. “Is the pain gone?” I whispered, closing her eyes with a gentle swipe of my hand. Creeping lightly to the other side of the bed I crawled under the covers next to her. The fragrant scent of her hair filled my nostrils as I snuggled up to her and drifted into slumber.

I thought it was the sound of the clock, booming through the house. Lifting groggily, peering at the clock in the guestroom, I realized there had only been one chime. But it was 4:00. Mother was still bathed in the flickering candlelight. Rubbing my eyes, I crawled from bed, walked to the second-floor landing, and peered over the railing. Father was in his chair.

“The clock may be broken,” I informed him.

There was no response. The fire had collapsed into red embers, leaving the room aching cold. It wasn’t until I reached the bottom stair that I noticed the pistol on the floor next to his dangling hand.

#

“The guest room is prepared.”

“Are you sure you want me to stay?” she asks weakly, before she coughs up blood, bending at the waist at the force of the explosion.

“You have to. You aren’t getting better. I can take care of you here. Your room doesn’t have the comfort of this home. And it will soon be your home too.”

“Maybe when the weather breaks, this will clear up,” she sighs weakly. “If it doesn’t, I don’t know how much longer I can take the pain.”

“I’ll get you settled upstairs.”

Jenny is weightless as I carry her up the stairs, her dark hair flowing over my arms.

Entering the room, our shadows dance on the wall in the light of the bedside candle and I hear Father’s words, “I would have done the same.”

The End

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Posted 7/10/2021

Chandrika R. Krishnan "The Will" moved into town on 7/10/2021

THE WILL
by
Chandrika R. Krishnan

It was a balmy day when I received the news that my beloved, ninety-three year old grandfather died in his sleep. "His end was peaceful," was the message sent to us all. The 'us' consisted of four sons, five daughters and twenty grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. He belonged to the 'baby boomers' and played his part in increasing the population of India.

Most of us accompanied by our spouses and children made a special effort to be there for the funeral of our departed grandfather, at the sprawling farmhouse which was situated in Pollachi, a town in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu. Those who couldn't make it for the funeral assured the others that they would be there before the 'rituals' were all done. We couldn't have it otherwise as we loved him much.

Our tears flowed unabashed during the last 'rites' which spread over for almost a fortnight. We offered prayers and distributed gifts to the 'Brahmins' so that the onward journey of his soul would be smooth.

We regaled one another with our memories of him while extolling his achievements. We spoke of our closeness with him. Of late, our visits were at irregular intervals, our calls to him were even more so but we did try to schedule a visit whenever we could. We decided to stay on for the reading of the will which was on the afternoon of the thirteenth day post his death. We assured others and ourselves that it was more a mark of respect for the man he was.

Our grandfather was a wealthy man. He was a major shareholder in many companies besides his own thriving family concern where my father and few of my uncles were co-directors. None of the children had inherited his business acumen. My grandfather built a multimillion dollar company from nothing. None of us knew his true worth but he was a visionary and a man of unwavering principles. We were sure we would be remembered in his will for he was a man who believed in the importance of family and was quite caustic if we used lack of time as an excuse.

He had a rare collection of artifacts from around the globe placed strategically in his farm house. Each one of us went around eyeing and admiring the ivory chess set from Germany and the gilt edged photo frame from Milan. We looked carefully at his famous Tanjore and Mysore painting collection as also the exquisite rock and mineral collections which travelled from the bowels of the Earth to the shelf. We looked enviously at his Murano Glass collections. We did love his taste as much as we loved him.

We spoke about how difficult it would be to hear about his last wishes particularly when his absence had not yet sunk in. Our affection for him overrode our squeamishness, we told ourselves and others. The will was read. My grandfather was a great one for charity and the lawyer droned on about the various organizations that my grandfather had bequeathed to. From our exchange of looks, it was clear that we all felt that he was needlessly generous in the amount he had committed to various charitable organizations. It is not that we coveted his material possessions but we wanted them as a token of remembrance. I hoped for his ivory chess set.

At the end of the reading, we were left grappling with the implications.

He had sold off the major stocks in all the other companies except his own and created an educational trust with the proceeds of the sale. The farmhouse and its surrounding property were willed to that upstart who received the whole chunk of the old crony's property to do as he deemed fit.

How could our grandfather do that to us? What did that senile man think he was doing? Doesn't the adage, blood is thicker than water hold true anymore? True, none of us could personally take care of him but we did visit him despite being busy climbing our own ladder of success.

We recalled the time when this grimy faced, tribal boy landed on our doorstep after witnessing his parent's brutal killing. Having gone three days with neither food nor water, he was prepared to do menial jobs for just one square meal a day and a roof over his head. The soft-hearted man took him under his wing, despite vociferous protest from his children. It was "my house, my decree" for that old autocrat and my grandmother till her own demise was one of those souls who obeyed her husband without question. He in turn was extremely loyal and generous

to her and took her counsel often. They were an ideal pair till death did them apart some five years back. So, she took care of the boy feeding him delicacies and showering him with love.

We all were angry. What did this boy do except cook for the old man and take care of him? He must have penned his letters and read out to him for the last five years as his eyesight started failing then. Yes, he must have helped him with his bath and dressed him up particularly after our grandpa suffered a stroke a few months back. He must have given him company, administered medicine all in the guise of gaining his confidence and here we were his own flesh and blood, left floundering.

Amidst the furor, a question was raised if there was a legal recourse. We wanted to know if the will was made under duress. The implacable lawyer assured us that nothing would come out of it and the said document was drawn taking care to plug all loopholes. Moreover, no major expenses could be made without his firm's approval.

The family lawyer who was also my grandfather's chess partner was appreciative of the young man who stood strong against the old man's ire and sacrificed his fledgling career to take care of the old man's needs. Naturally, the minion knew what he stood to gain, was our unspoken accusation.

The 'clairvoyant' lawyer disclosed that no one except the witnesses knew about the terms of the will.

In a belligerent mood, we went in search of that nobody, who managed to steal the old man's affection to reach this new found affluence. The scrawny young man disinterested in the reading of the will was sprucing up the shrubs; his red-rimmed eyes spoke volumes as he whispered:

"My master loved them very much."

His accompanying sobs were that of a bereft soul.

The End

Chandrika R Krishnan, a Bengaluru-based writer and educationist likes all things beginning with a 'T' - talking, teaching, tales and tea. She is a published author and her collection of flash fictions was published

recently titled-vignettes- a slice of life. You can read more at:<https://chandrikarkrishnan.com/>

Posted 7/7/2021

James Kerr “Let Me Sit In The Woods” moved into town on 7/7/2021

LET ME SIT IN THE WOODS

by

James Kerr

i

Let me sit in the woods and stare at trees.
Far from the din of the raucous city,
let me lay down roots amongst my kin:
the stately oak and quaking aspen;
the sacred alder and brooding cherry –
brothers, sisters, cousins all,
we join hands in holy communion.
I know them and they know me.

Before the blinking houses wake,
as dawn spreads slow to the east
(but what is slow to these boulders
that have seen eons?), let me leave
my boots with those who walk
and take my place on the east-facing slope
where the lemon warbler greets the morning
and the red-crested downy beats his drum.

Give me a week there – a month – a year
(what is a year but one more ring?).
Let me sit and sit and sit some more,
face to the sun, feet in the needled loam,
while the stillness soothes my rattled nerves
and the years close over these ugly scars –
learning patience from my elders,
their stoic acceptance of their lot.

ii

Long have I labored in the joyless mills –
taken my place at the production wheel

that grinds souls into sacks of meal
to be traded cheap at the marketplace.
I want no more of that wageless bargain
of now for then and then for now.
I wish to know that which is timeless,
the lost ground that's mine to reclaim.

Once as a boy, lost in some nameless sorrow,
I wandered alone through the woods,
when in the distance a wind worked up,
pushing through the trees like the sea.
Closer and closer it drew. Limbs bent,
knees bowed – my heart thrilled to the roar.

It seemed to me that the woods were alive,
infused with a wakeful consciousness.
My years away seem like a dream
of vain desires and dark imaginings.
My bones are weary, my feet hurt
from walking those halls of concrete.
I am no longer young but still I yearn
for the chatter of spring-fed streams
and the company of like-minded friends,
to be witness of all that I have missed.

iii

And so as light reveals the day,
let me sit here with nothing to do,
nowhere to go, content in my view.
Let me rear back my head and warm
my face in the slow wheeling sun,
and when the day grows long and hot,
let me link arms with my neighbors,
extending shade to those below.

Let the squirrels build nests in my arms
and the owls use my roosts as vantage
for their nightly hunts. Let me scatter
acorns like coins for the hungry herd.
Let me watch deer mate in the brush,

not envying their freedom to roam –
mine is the greater profit to give them
shade and drop mast for their food.
Let the winds come – black bulbous clouds
scudding across swift darkened skies:
great nor'easters bidding all bow before
their fearsome power. My roots are deep.
Let the rain wash my face, fingers salving
ancient wounds. If lightning strikes a branch,
in time I will grow another – shooting forth
from the green fuse that fuels my flower.

Let me be a witness to all that changes
not in millisecond but in millennia.
The same tectonic forces that formed
these lichen rocks drive the marrow
in my bones. I in breathing do their work.
I in dying give them stuff. Like the trees.
So let me take my lessons until I return
back to the loam from which I sprung.

The End

James Brian Kerr's writing has appeared in the Sewanee Review, Red River Review, Elephant Journal, The Poet, and other journals. His book, *The Long Walk Home: How I Lost My Job as a Corporate Remora Fish and Rediscovered My Life's Purpose*, is forthcoming in Spring 2022 from Blydyn Square Books. He lives in northeast Pennsylvania with his GSP Cassie.

Posted 7/4/2021

Padmini K “Drizzles to Rainfall” moved into town on 7/4/2021

DRIZZLES TO RAINFALL

by

Padmini K

I looked up to see the drizzles growing into huge droplets. The rainwater disappeared into the grey building, which stood opposite my apartment in Chennai, India. Seven years ago, there were beach Almond and Flame of the Forest trees in the place of the building. But, then, seven years ago, there was Vikas and the quiet joy he brought into my life. I stared at the shiny billboard some distance away and recalled our first meeting. I was hurrying to my office after my lunch when I saw him in the Adyar eco-park. He held a half-eaten sandwich in one hand, butter dripping on his white shirt (how the butter missed his chin, I don't know) and his shoelaces were open. He tossed bread crumbs with his other hand and pigeons swarmed around him. As was my habit, I forgot where I was going and stood there, staring at him, open-mouthed. Suddenly, he raised his head and smiled at me. I shook my head and began walking, embarrassed.

“Hey,” he ran up to me, panting. “Don't you work in Shell Sofitech?”

“Yes.” I was surprised for I had not seen him before.

“I work in the next office, the same building.” He smiled.

“Oh really?”

The sky decided to shed gentle drops and we ran to our offices, laughing. He panted as he tried to catch up to me.

#

The next day, I walked to the eco-park despite having brought lunch from home. He was not there. He did not turn up for the whole week. The next week, he was there, feeding the birds, an untouched sandwich pack next to him on the bench. He said he was unwell, suffered from shortness of breath, triggered by asthma, and had gone to the doctor. That

was why he was on leave. I suggested that he eat healthily and exercise regularly.

He looked at me, a little sheepish, “I walk every morning, but I am just not a fitness person.”

I opened my mouth to argue and he suddenly said, “Hey, I am Vikas and you...?”

“Vimmi.”

We met every weekday in the park. We sat there enjoying the mild breeze after they announced a ban on feeding the birds in public areas. Vikas swore he could see the shape of the breeze. Sitting with him seemed like a nice way to spend my lunch hour instead of listening to my colleagues’ meaningless chatter.

But then, I wondered if Vikas and I talked anything meaningful either. On Friday, when we were sitting under the shades of a Jasmine tree, inhaling its pleasant aroma, it started to drizzle. I tried to get up, but Vikas put his hand over mine. I had not expected him to be strong. He gazed at the ground and said nothing. By then, the drizzles gained strength and brought out the fragrance of jasmines and the wet earth.

“I am learning to cook,” I said, suddenly. He looked up, surprised and a little annoyed.

“Why?”

“So that you don’t have to eat sandwiches for the rest of your life.”

He laughed, but I could see the joy in his eyes and the excitement in his hurried actions.

“I can cook well.” He said, “But, I don’t really like cooking for myself.” Well, that was not what I wanted to hear, but I supposed it was very difficult for him to speak about his feelings. Anyway, his face said everything.

“Great. Then I don’t have to learn.”

The drizzles stopped and we walked back to the workplace. Strangely, the drizzles never turned into full-fledged rain when I was with him.

I told my parents about Vikas. My father seemed a little worried when he heard of Vikas's salary. But, after I assured him that we had no plans of settling down in the immediate future, he seemed content.

It was a busy Monday and Vikas was excited, "We have a new project manager. I need to get back to the office by 1 pm." A bus made an unexpected turn as we crossed the road and Vikas pulled me to the pavement.

"You need to watch where you are going." He waved and ran to his office. I stood there for some time, still feeling his touch. That night, at around 11, I received a call from an unknown number. It was Vikas's roommate. He said amidst pauses and sobs that Vikas had passed away due to a cardiac arrest. I felt numb and do not remember what happened after that. In the early hours of the morning, my parents found me sitting under a pine tree in the vicinity, insects crawling in my feet. It took me more than six months to 'recover'. I met Vikas's roommate. He spoke a lot, unlike Vikas. I do not remember what he said except that Vikas's death was sudden.

I wished I had gotten to know more about him, his likes and dislikes. I felt as if a pleasant bout of breeze had been robbed from me, leaving me breathless and suffocated.

#

"You have to move on, Vimmi." said my father, after a couple of years. I saw something on his face. It was a relief. Relief from what? I was not sure. After a couple of years, I met Sam in a matrimonial site. My dad was very keen that I pursue his proposal. But, of course, he would be. He had seen Sam's six-figure salary in his matrimonial page.

I told Sam everything about Vikas. He was understanding and compassionate. He had two failed relationships in the past. But then, understanding, compassion and a sense of duty cannot sustain a marriage. However, ours did. This was because I had learned the art of faking. I was shamelessly ingratiating and full of praises for his minuscule act of goodness. I desperately wanted to make my marriage work, get along and not cause more suffering to my parents. I guess any

‘People Management’ person would see through this. Leave alone an intelligent one like Sam. He always had a slightly scornful expression on his face when I appreciated him. His attempts to get the raise out of me never succeeded. I guess he grew bored with me, but never let on. We were both pretending here and we both knew it. But, don’t most of the couples pretend, at varying degrees?

He did not protest when I left my job without discussing it with him. And when he readily agreed to my visit to Chennai for a couple of months, I was a little disappointed. However, I was glad to be myself. My mom was happy that I was staying for two months instead of a fleeting yearly visit. My dad no longer seemed ecstatic; he looked rather guilty when he was around me. He probably felt he had forced me into a marriage I did not want to.

My mom’s voice brought me back to the present, “I think it is going to rain heavily.” she said excitedly from the living room.

“Thank God for that.” I heard my dad’s voice. “We have had a drought for the past two years.”

This was true. The whole city had been sustaining with truckloads of water from neighboring towns.

The lightning almost blinded me as I held tightly to the grills in the balcony. The stingy drizzles became generous rains as they swept the city. I felt a growing pleasure at the waterfall. Suddenly, my pleasure turned into giddiness and nausea. I had felt nauseous for the whole week. I touched my stomach. I was sure of what it was. At last, I was going to make Sam happy without faking. I heard some kids and adults jumping on the terrace above our unit. The drought had ended for all of us. I felt as ecstatic as a person set free from many years of a wilful sentence. Sam was now going to see the 'real' me. I was not going to pretend on anything anymore. We will fight, argue, criticize, yet stick together, I was sure. I ran to my room excitedly to call Sam as my parents stared at me in surprise.

The End

Padmini Krishnan was raised in India and now resides in Singapore. She writes short stories, free verse poetry, and haiku. Her works have appeared in the Ariel Chart, Heron's Nest, Page & Spine, The World of

Myth, and Stonecrop Review among others. She blogs at www.call2read.com.

Posted 7/1/2021
Joe Giordano "Needing Grace" moved into town on 7/1/2021

NEEDING GRACE
by
Joe Giordano

Sitting on a couch in a Haviland's office amidst tasteful modern furniture, I said to my wife Grace, "I'm a little nervous about this interview."

We'd been together since she had pigtails. I felt like I'd always loved her and always would.

Grace spoke encouragingly. "You'll do fine."

"Haviland is late. Maybe he's playing some sort of gamesmanship with me."

"He's probably on the phone. I bet he apologizes the moment he walks in."

Grace's reassurance calmed me. and I gave her a small smile. I couldn't imagine not confiding in her. We shared everything even before we were married. Like my concerns the morning before I met with Nick Blanchard.

"Haviland will probably bring up my meeting with Nick," I said.

She nodded. "Perhaps."

"How much should I tell him?"

"The truth is always best." She stood. "I'll see you on the other side. Break a leg." She gave me a kiss and left.

My mind turned to the conversation I'd had with her before meeting Nick.

"You know he'll ask for money," she'd said.

I nodded, blowing out a long breath. “We’re not exactly rolling in it.”

She sighed. “If he’s coming to you, he’s desperate.”

Gazing through a window, I watched rain drizzle from a shrouded-gray sky. “How do I gently refuse?”

She put an arm around my shoulder, nuzzling me with her cheek. “You’ve been friends a long time.”

“He thinks I can solve his problem, but he’ll fail again and be back for more until we’re both broke.”

“Maybe you can give him a few hundred as a gesture?”

I shook my head. “Better if I’m straight with him. He’ll be sore for a while, but he’ll get over it.”

She looked dubious. “You know him better than I do, but people who’ve always had things go their way can take a refusal vindictively.”

Her comment lingered with me as I entered the coffee shop where Nick had asked to meet and selected a booth in a quiet corner. A young waitress came over and poured me a coffee, black.

The bell above the front door tinkled and Nick entered, dressed like a GQ model. Tall and handsome, he normally took command. As he neared the booth, I saw anguish in his eyes. In our twenty years of friendship, I’d never seen him looking so vulnerable.

He slid into the seat, then spoke conspiratorially. “Tom, I really need your help.”

Nick’s boutique men’s clothing store had fallen victim to the pandemic work-from-home shift in employee practices. Dressing for success had been replaced by Zoom-meeting casual. Situated in a high rent district, without customers, his business hemorrhaged money.

I hoped to coax at least a smile from him. “The only guys wearing suits,” I said, “have been laid out in a coffin.” But he remained dour, so I continued in a serious tone. “Styles have changed, permanently.”

Nick spoke assertively. “Top people with a strong public presence will always want to look their best. I’m converting my business to custom suits with fast turnaround like the bespoke tailors in Hong Kong. Once word gets around, clients will be lined up outside my door. But ...” His voice trailed off. “I’ve run out of cash.”

“You’ve approached a bank for funds?”

His gaze dropped. “The bloodless pricks refused me.”

My lack of enthusiasm for Nick’s redirection must’ve been obvious because he said, “You don’t know fashion. You never took an interest in clothes.”

“Fair enough,” I said, “but I know cash flow. The bank won’t lend you money because your financial projections aren’t credible and you’ve no collateral.”

“Tom, you’re my last hope.”

In college, Nick had starred at basketball and strode around campus with a cute coed clinging to his arm. Even now, if we stepped up to a woman attending us at a ticket or department store counter, she’d focus only on him. Did a part of me enjoy seeing him squirm? I folded my arms.

Nick leaned forward. “You can’t deny me. I’m desperate.”

I recalled Grace’s advice and decided that she was right. “I could come up with a few hundred, if that would help.”

“I need fifty thousand dollars.”

I sputtered. “I’d have to get a second mortgage to raise that much cash. You’d put Grace and me up against the wall.”

Nick grasped my arm. “I’ll pay you back. With interest.”

His eyes darted wildly, like he could lose control. The coffee turned to acid in my stomach. I wanted out of the booth, out of the café. “Be reasonable. I can’t put us in the same hole you’re in.”

His voice turned harsh. “A real friend wouldn’t think only about himself.”

I responded rashly. “Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

Nick stiffened, and his fists clenched. “You bastard. You’ve always been jealous of me. Now, you can twist a knife in my back. Happy?”

“Nick, come on. That’s not fair.”

“Sure it is. The only success you’ve had was marrying Grace. You’re such a pathetic little twerp, I don’t know what she sees in you. Without her, you couldn’t wipe your nose.”

“Leave her out of this.”

“If you refuse me, you might as well take a gun and shoot me.” His tone became shrill. “I’ll be bankrupt. Destitute. I’ll be too ashamed to even show my face.”

I’d always credited Nick’s narcissism as key to his success. Now, I realized that his persona was built on a foundation of sand. I lowered my voice, hoping to reduce the temperature. “You’re overreacting.”

Nick scoffed. “Go to hell.” He sat back. “You can return to Grace. I have no one. Now, everyone will say I failed. I won’t forget this.” He abruptly stood, ominously leaning over me. “You’ve turned a friend into an enemy.” He strode from the café.

My heart pounded. I didn’t dare turn around, knowing the customers and wait staff were staring at me. The confrontation and Nick’s words echoed in my head. My only comforting thought was that I could unburden to Grace. I left the coffee shop keeping my head down, averting glances. Even now, sitting in Haviland’s office, I felt nauseated, and a deep malaise trembled through me.

At that moment, Haviland opened the door and walked into the office. “Sorry I’m late. A phone call I couldn’t cut short.”

I had to pull it together. I recalled what Grace had said, which lessened my funk. I stood. “My wife told me you’d apologize.”

“Did she?”

“Totally unnecessary,” I said.

We shook hands. I hoped he didn’t detect the sweat on my palm.

He motioned for me to sit. “If you don’t mind, perhaps we could begin.”

“Of course.”

He settled himself into an armchair. “How are you feeling today?”

I lied. “Great.”

“Good to hear. How are you sleeping?”

I straightened, thinking, what an odd question during a job interview.
“Fine. Just fine.”

“Do you have any questions for me?” he asked.

I suddenly realized that I had no idea about the position being offered. Strange. But I needed the job and if I admitted not knowing the requirements, Haviland would think me crazy, and I’d lose the opportunity.

“When can I start?” I asked, hoping to show enthusiasm.

Haviland smiled benignly. “You’ll continue to stay with us.”

My pulse rate spiked. “What are you talking about?”

His expression showed concern. “Don’t be alarmed.”

I raised my arms to protest and realized I was wearing a white hospital uniform with Crestview Mental Health Systems embroidered on the breast pocket.

Haviland leaned toward me. “You’re here because you were judged to be a danger to yourself.”

My eyes followed his gaze, dropping to my hands. My wrists had recently healed scars that I hadn't noticed before. "What's wrong with me?"

Haviland paused before saying, "You have a psychosis that's evolved into schizophrenia caused by extreme stress. I'm sorry to say that there's no cure, and you'll require treatment for the rest of your life."

"Extreme stress?"

Haviland continued. "We can try to control or reduce the severity of your symptoms."

I still drew a blank, but my sense of dread sickened me. "What happened?"

Haviland sighed deeply before responding. "Nick Blanchard murdered your wife Grace before turning the gun on himself. You discovered the bodies in your home."

I stiffened. "Grace? No. She was with me before you walked in. Why are you lying?"

"I wish I were."

Faint, grainy images surfaced in my brain, but I quickly brushed them aside. "I must speak with my wife."

Haviland's mouth pursed. He pressed a buzzer and a burly male nurse knocked before entering.

"Doctor, how can I help?" he asked.

Haviland spoke resignedly. "We'll need to increase his medication until the hallucinations of his wife go away."

Standing behind Haviland's chair, Grace smiled at me.

My mouth gaped open in horror. "Not that. Please." I stood.

Haviland said to the nurse. "We'll need to put him in restraints."

“No.” I looked around, but there was nowhere to flee. I screamed as their arms held me. “I can’t lose Grace.”

The End

Joe Giordano’s stories have appeared in more than one hundred magazines including *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Shenandoah*. His novels include *Birds of Passage*, *An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story*, *Appointment with ISIL* (Harvard Square Editions), *Drone Strike* and his short story collection, *Stories and Places I Remember* (Rogue Phoenix Press).

Posted 6/28/2012

Lisa H. Owens "Joseph and His Silent Friend" moved into town on
6/28/2021

JOSEPH AND HIS SILENT FRIEND

by

Lisa H. Owens

I picked up my black cap and gown for the upcoming graduation ceremony. Zippity-do-dah! Goodbye Oklahoma and ramen noodles. Just one more thing to do before packing my bags and gassing up the clunker, the second unreliable car I'd owned in my four years of college. He (the clunker) was of mammoth proportions and white with ocean blue vinyl seating and an eight-track tape deck. A salty fellow (literally, as his undercarriage was covered in road-salt induced rust speckles), he reminded me of Moby Dick, so he became "Moby: the beached white whale." I'd pack Moby to the gills; he'd be ready and waiting for a quick getaway. Then I would walk the aisle (covered in the black cap and gown), simultaneously shaking the dean's hand with my right hand while the left grabbed my diploma, then waved an elaborate adios to college and hola to a career job and sweet-sweet moola.

I was wrong. Things didn't go exactly as planned. Elementary school teachers were a dime a dozen back then so I pursued a job inspired by my Aunt Sue's career, a flight attendant position with Delta Airlines. It was a three-month process to finally get an interview and a job offer before heading to Atlanta for a month of training. After a second graduation ceremony, this time decked out in high heels and a navy blue suit that proudly sported a set of gold Delta wings, I chose a base-city about as far removed from Oklahoma as I could—without falling off into the ocean. That is how I discovered the magical city of Boston in 1984.

I found a tiny-but-still-expensive basement apartment on Commonwealth Avenue ("Comm Ave.") and rode the subway (the "T") to Logan Airport on a regular basis.

Having moved around a lot growing up, always in southern states (Is Oklahoma southern?), I found everything about this historical port city fascinating: the brownstone apartments in Beacon Hill, the Italian food in the North End, the Red Sox and Fenway Park (much smaller than I

thought), Faneuil Hall with its shops and restaurants, the Friday/Saturday Haymarket, and the Freedom Trail, to name a few.

One thing I noticed as I began to adjust to life in the big city, probably because I struggled with it on a daily basis, was the Boston accent. They just didn't pronounce their "r's" the same way that I did. It was challenging for me to understand, so I began to stalk conversations going on around me as I rode the T to and from work. I wanted to talk the talk and walk the walk, hoping to someday fit in. I wanted to feel like I belonged. As I watched and listened, I saw something intriguing.

The first time I noticed him on the T, he was seated in the corner wearing a tattered top hat. He had his right arm draped over the back of the bench-like seat, typical of subway cars, deep in conversation with an empty seat. The man was having an entire conversation, experiencing every range of emotion with an invisible person on a full train (standing room only), where every seat was occupied, except the one to the right of him. The one occupied by the friend. They laughed. They cried. They hollered. They smirked. They blustered. They became furious; but then laughed some more, until they fell asleep. At least I think the friend was sleeping; but he could have been faking it.

I began to notice this out-of-sorts-man-in-the-top-hat and his friend in other places around the city. He seemed to be a regular and the locals would greet him (always Joseph; never Joe), making sure to also ask how Charlie was getting along. After conferring with Charlie-the-friend, the answer was always the same, "Aye ya know Chahlie. He's fayah ta middlin."

Charlie, Joseph and I seemed to be on the same schedule. I was rigid that way. A creature of habit. On my morning jogs, he strolled alongside the Charles River in his tattered top hat, his right arm resting on the shoulder of Charlie. I had to wonder if his right arm was stuck at that unnatural angle...the result of an accident or some sort of odd arthritis...maybe? Didn't the man's right arm get tired? Was Charlie really there? If so, that guy was a really good listener. I had never even heard him utter a single sound.

Each morning, as I approached them jogging at my slow-but-steady pace (like the fabled tortoise), I wanted to stop to ask about Charlie and the arm situation; but they were typically engrossed in a conversation. This particular morning, it was an argument about Larry Bird and the Celtics.

After months of seeing the two together, I wanted to start up a conversation with them but always chickened out at the last moment. I gave them a wide berth as I jogged around, never so much as slowing down.

This went on for a while until one morning I thought, This is ridiculous. Just say hello! As I drew near, I mumbled a good morning of sorts; and was taken aback, as with a flourish, Joseph swept off his top hat. Then, with an elegant bow and affected British accent said, "G'day my lady." It was weird that his right arm remained airborne through the entire gesture, draped over the ever-present Charlie. I stopped just in front of the duo. I mustered up the nerve to finally ask the question that had been weighing on my mind. I really wanted to know about the arm. How did he keep it perpetually hovering—airborne—all day long? Everyday of the year. I had to know! When I began to speak though, all that would come out was, "Erm, how's Charlie?"

The man looked to his right, for a minute or two, conferring with Charlie.

After a few "Ya dahn't say's!" and "Is that a fact's?" Joseph nodded and placed the scuffed hat atop his balding head (using his left hand, of course), and chuckled, "Aye ya know Chahlie. He reckins he's fayah ta middlin."

It was nice to be home. Finally, one of the locals wise to the quirks of the mysterious Joseph and his silent friend, Charlie.

The End

Lisa H. Owens is an author residing in North Texas. Her work's been published in various media outlets, including two years as a monthly humorist columnist. Her bio was included in *Who's Who of Emerging Writers*, 2021. You can read her tales, in a variety of genres at www.lisahowens.com.

Posted 6/25/2021

Karen Lethlean "Sacred Rock Pool" moved into town on 6/25/2021

SACRED ROCK POOL

by

Karen Lethlean

Way back, almost hidden in passing year's clouds I remember a swimming hole. Might have been a dam, or secret inlet, even a lake. Sort of place every young man goes to be alone, or in the company of a few mates, skylarking, daring each other to master a dive off rocks, fetching a handful of dirt from depths, or other feats glimmering like adulthood challenges. Close inside my head as to be almost tangible, sort of place I want to talk about, with rare visitors. Only thing I am sure of is this place wasn't a surf beach, these watery depths were definitely still.

This place, almost hidden in my ever-clouded memories wasn't about trying out surf skills. Hanging out, long hair tousled by sea breezes, attempting to look cool. Maybe doing something risky, like skipping school or smoking. Can't help wondering if youngsters do the same things today. Never smelt tell-tale cigarettes on any of the staff here.

A few of us went to this place, pale limbs on rough basalt, as if still an evolutionary creature about to leave their liquid world.

My still water location, not a summer thing. I need to shake any surf sensation out, replace these with tranquil waters. Even close to autumn's arrival, this place formed a black mirror beneath grey river gums. Away from open paddock views, plus a concerned uncle's, grandpa or my sisters' gaze. Hidden behind a barrier of tall, straight trunks, possibly dotted with one or two dead specimens, indications of drought years, fire or too much rain. Enough inconsistency to preoccupy my thoughts.

Yet I do want to think about this place.

True, there might be bleached trunks, but even healthy River Gums possess a lack of green. Strange how a gum tree named for river locations can suffer so badly from too much or too little water. The River can kill these gums. No matter their shared name, or how water and trees tried to co-exist. Or secret themselves in camouflaged tones. No obvious dark green elms here, or flat avocado leaves, nor jade dribbled with

purple in spring Jacarandas. Cypress pines, even fat finger like limbs of frangipanis glaringly absent. These gums wear crumbled army uniforms. Dappled khaki, a palette of beige, scaled trunks, marked from fires, times of plenty or limited nutriments. Even lizards, goannas and possums capable of stripping bark, leaving evidence of fights. Not washed clean by rain but often dripping from leaf tips, still laden with dust. Or waterlogged, stained by years of flood adding to dead limbs and missing giants. Yet anyone can see these trees are towering and grand.

Ribbons of bark remind me of impressionist's paintings, seen in various art galleries dripping and swirling with creamy white, tan, stormy grey and silvery sheens.

We shouldn't have gone in. This is a sacred place, kept for Noongar men. Something rippled beneath stone. I covered my legs with my arms. This land swallowed kids before. Slipped through cracks and are gone. I've skinned my knees so many times, even when I look now, I can see marks. Mum said, "Watch out for prickles of your neck hair, and shivers which start between your shoulders."

Looking down I catch a glimpse of my shoes, also mud or dust ridden walking closer, stepping closer beyond my control.

Under the trees, is a body of water muted by reflections of dirt, blue, silver of passing clouds. Water so deep you can't see the bottom. Tiny slip of a greyish sand beach under trees. Movement of wrigglers, bubbles from yabbies, who knew what was below. Once I am sure a creature bobbed on the surface, no doubt alarmed by our noise, creature from the black lagoon, long extinct monster of the deep, alien left behind from unexplained night lights were concluded had to be UFOs. 'Nah, only a platypus.'

Now only teenage games exist in my mind. Draw to a branch tied as a cross bar for the more daring. Loud friends, who tried to impress others by swinging out over the water. A slippery rock wall, demanding attempts to ascent. As if essential to prove burgeoning manhood. Scrawny childish limbs cling on, like lizards. A craggy overhand, specially designed, by nature for small boys to launch themselves into open air. A list of activities usually reserved for teenagers while audiences might be from an array of age groups ranging from admiring adults, reflective seniors sat on chairs, or more likely awestruck younger

kids. Dreaming of a time when they too might leap into the great unknown.

Parents might gasp and shake their heads at these pranks. Elders openly tut-tut. Or draw aside to say, “That Evan’s kid has no fear.”

If still present a rope swing tempted further flying leaps. In the same way a railway bridge beckons young to jump. Occasionally removed by concerned adults, wanting to protect teenagers from themselves. Often this swinging rope’s length varied according to latest user. Or ability to climb the tree and hook rope up beyond reach of anyone else more foolhardy, determined, or suicidal enough to plan airborne activities. Perhaps younger, and skinnier, often, but not always, boys shimmied up said rope swing tree with ease. I do clearly remember, way back in the days this rope, tree and rock pool existed as place of competition, being cajoled into twisting the rope around another limb to frustrate rivals. As well as sneaking out with a purloined truck rope to fasten an alternative following the last swing’s mysterious disappearance. I reckon one of the girls took a fancy to curtailing our acrobatics. As well as being involved in another prank to remove a favorite cross bar. Forcing us to use a strong branch as a temporary substitute, complete with ever present risks of breakage and splinters.

God, we thought ourselves invincible.

My memory fades, because I struggle to recall, maybe this swinging toy hung over a dam, spring fed lake, or even a river bend. Not sure why I can recall the tree and rope so clearly yet an actual location and wider view, whose property, what waterway, those details are now faded. More I think about this place sensations of swinging from a branch solidify. Complete with crinkled fingers from hours waterlogged, blisters and occasional rope burns. Must have something to do with ways memories, places I’ve wandered, drift apart or become highlighted.

Not once would we contemplate any possible injuries, nor how we might get a causality with a broken limb to assistance. Blissfully unaware of consequences we played more like a troop of monkeys than a group of boys. Naïve of a reputation these trees possess, also named widow makers because of a tendency to drop major limbs with no prior announcements, on even the stillest days. Distinct recollection of a tour guide on one of those bus trips, saying, “More likely to die from fallen

branch injuries than marine predators, snakes or eating toxic mushrooms.”

As I float in my past, one specific day comes into focus. A time when a few mottled sandstone boulders surrounding the pool, formed spectator seating where other teenagers slouched, some smoking. A nonchalant, pretended non-involvement, greeting nod the only recognition directed to us younger boys.

Fifteen, gangly, getting too heavy to climb river gum’s brittle limbs, weakened by this year’s long dry summer, I propped my bike against some rocks, smoking Camels, trying to project a sense of carelessness, of unconcerned ease. Through half-open eyes, largely due to uncomfortable cigarette fumes, I observed others going for a swim – jumping from where boulders are partially submerged. Whooping, flirting and splashing one another, their flesh shining in late sun. When they came out their bodies stream darkness onto the sand. Resembling creatures climbing from a primordial pool. Humanoid versions of our platypus, watery denizens of tree kangaroos. Whiteness from water’s chill turned dusty flesh to marble.

As if to shake off my watcher presence, other pool residents vanish quickly, down semi perceivable tracks before I can step into the water. My long, flickering pink shape reflects, stretched over quiet surfaces. As if a naked caterpillar formed a mosaic on dappled grey-dung surfaces. Above thin, wispy clouds signal another windy night.

I came here to escape a sense of menace at home some afternoons. Other times the back shed will do, or a stretch of space below the veranda. Or Poppa’s old car wreck out near the sheep dripping run. I’d sit on dusty, cracked, hard vinyl and read Marsden’s Tomorrow When the War Began series, dreaming of explosions and invasions. Sometimes I crave similar isolation, just want to be alone, separate without a well-meaning, all smiles intrusion.

When Dad returns from Timber mill work, he can also be steeped in sharp smells of alcohol. Bellowing soon starts. Mum gives back as good as she gets. “How am I supposed to know unless you let those words out?”

“...What, the hell is inside your head?” Her volume rises as her target is unresponsive.”

Finally, Dad erupts, “You can’t possibly know, nor want to know, what I am thinking!”

Such verbal stoushes reduce Dad to a drunken, incoherent, sitting hulk. Mum often storms through our house throwing things, “...Fuckin hell, another thing life forces on me!”

Nicer to be away from such battles, fighting my own internal disagreements, largely to do with my own body. Makes me crazy to be within those feudal walls floundering against their long-established boundaries, where I couldn’t understand where I fitted, or my contribution and role in creating my parent’s disputes.

Equally as bewildering to figure where I fit with staff and visitors who come here. Much rather be contemplating trees, warm on one side, cool on the other. Gazing at water, or late afternoon sheen on stubble in empty paddocks. Spider webs caught in dew, ant trails, and skinks warming themselves on rocks.

Mum sometimes tried issuing warnings. “Do you have to drink?”

Or more subtle things, possibly with little more than an eye roll, a jutted chin expression or a pointed thumb at the door. “I’d like you to be home early, on Friday, just once.” Pity her attempts only anticipated battles, not prevented them. Both of us helpless to stop animosity.

Always promised to be a better husband, if anyone took a shine to yours truly.

Times I can push my head back and draw in breaths laden with mildew leaves, catch whiffs of tobacco charred waters. I’m there with watery surround settling back to a natural form after other noisier teenagers depart. I can look over liquid surface sheens of humming, dragonfly-stitched glass. Wade into deep coolness, and swim. A skill I can’t remember learning, aside from a glimmer of mum sitting on a rug, pressure cooker of thick stew wrapped in an old blanket. Dad gently dunking me baptismal style. Telling me about kicking, his calloused hand gently under my back as I experience a weightless float for the first time. Funny how those good times tend to get clouded with, at the risk of overusing an analogy, stormy thunderclaps.

I must consider something else less angry, more magnetic. Like those same lessons with little kids when I worked as a swimming teacher.

Once, as a teenager at my sacred rock pool, I recall three women coming down the sand as I towelled off. Workers from a local abattoir, dusky skinned, talking a creole sounding mix of local twang and migrant influenced accents. Tones not unlike earliest Europeans sailing to the South Pacific might have encountered. Or wearied soldiers holding out in PNG jungles smiled when detected a chance exchange with friendly fuzzy-wuzzy tribes.

These long-legged women smile, say hello, “You that boy, your mum works with us.”

I am too embarrassed to explain, she works to make up housekeeping shortfalls. Always careful to depart after Dad, instructing me to ride from school directly to the mill, where Dad and I will walk late afternoon trails home. My purpose to guide him straight home.

Two industries in this town. Timber or the meat works. Each one cutting up dead things. I knew my future involved cutting loose from either of these two potential futures.

Didn't realize how difficult breaking away from this place and traveling might be. Thought I could just walk away. But nope. Scents stayed with me. Never thought I would, but I missed my home. One thin air afternoon, ice blowing off the Atlantic Ocean, caused tears to prickle in my eyes. I longed for a warmer place, for the lemon scented gums, for a sun warmed waterhole. Practiced finding links back to memories of this place to keep me sane, guess I am still doing the same.

Once these women nodded as I sit astride my bike, one foot braced on the boulder, balanced, as if I am about to leave. Yet unable to break away. Engrossed as they put down towels and duffle bags and took off smeared uniforms. My gaze strongest on one striking, loosening a fall of black hair, heavy oily sheen, wearing a bikini. I am a rabbit in headlights, stunned, unable to move. Something about her evokes hunger, not the same as wafts of Sunday roasts, rather an emptiness from inside. Rumbling about in a place I'd not yet aware existed. Terminal afternoon light filtered through leaves above her and, when a breeze blows, shadows move over her semi-nakedness. Water surfaces mirror reflected

dapple swellings of her breast, hills of her thighs, and pubic where an elongated triangle of fabric stretches.

This woman embodies a world wider than this town, this farm, this swimming hole. I stare engrossed by her. Maybe she took lovers. Even though I can barely visualize what such relationships meant. I am sure I've seen her hand in hand with men at the pub. Contrasting limbs. Her caramel musk sticks to their hairy knotted sisal ropes.

I cannot help watching her stand with hands on hips, gazing out into watery depths. Reminding me of Gaugin's Polynesian ladies I found in an art book, not days before this sighting. How is it possible to step from pages in a book, be here in a moment, real, present and bewildering? At one point she turns and looks right at me, a sidelong glance, head down I see a smile. Not sure if she is taunting, rewarding or merely acknowledging the man I am yet to become. But I do know her smile is meant for me to see. My fingertips buzzed. These sensations akin to anticipation of Dad's blustering. Or if I step into the present, Jenny's greetings.

As a gangly teenager these women are far beyond my reach. They have jobs, work and likely share a drink with my father. But it is always this woman, a pool and River gums I remember. Her breathtaking vitality and impossible distance, like looking over a whole river, unable to bridge watery spaces.

She tests fluids, sunlight running over the arch of her foot, her calf. Beyond her fingertip's darker liquid ripples, as if further drawn to her magnetism. For a moment I want to warn her not to submerge, else I will be lost as a bothersome insect reflected in her eyes.

I saw her again, emerging from fumes of Friday night swill, a thin cigarette in her fingers, wafting smoke which tickled my nose. She pointed over toward Dad. Impossible to drag him away, he's poking another man's chest, even if I could make myself heard, he will never take any notice. As I looked back at the woman, nervous, shaking, I noticed I am taller than her. Her fingers, as they brush my upper arm are surprisingly cold. "Do you think you could walk with me for a minute?"

"Sure." By now I've learnt to be a homeward bound guide. "Where to?"

"Over to the worker's hostel."

We walk silently through halos of streetlights, forming circles on roadways.

When I touched her skin, my fingers were warmer than its smooth surface. Like the lake water. Her name, Riata meant more than a lasso rope, echoed of Spanish dancing costumes whispering about ankles, legs slightly sweaty from the dance.

Wasn't more than two days later I had a cryptic conversation with mum. One of those times she was bent over a chopping board making perfectly good vegetables into unrecognizable mush. A strategy I later realized, about the time I began to cook for myself, was designed to get Dad to eat something healthy.

“That woman, Riata said thanks for your help getting home the other night.”

“I didn't do anything wrong...” I wanted to boast but she cut me off.

“Yes, I know. You just made sure she got back to the boarding house safely.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“Nope, but I know you are capable of guiding people home. Even when they protest. Wait a minute, she did say, she'd seen you at the rock pool.”

My heart beats faster, I bit the tip of my tongue to prevent myself from speaking, letting secrets out.

Looking into her eyes, I saw the rock pool reflected, as if Mum owned the land and energy of this place. All I could manage to mumble, “I wasn't smoking, Mum.”

Impossible to keep things from my mother. But I told her nothing more.

I frown at affirmations heard at my father's funeral...man of great strength...trustworthy...blessed with a sense of looking after his workmates. Perhaps I should have stayed overseas, rather than listen to this bullshit. Someone ought to get up and say, unless you were a woman and young boy who lived in the same house. Put records straight for

once. Sure, he demonstrated strength every time a fist was raised, words were spit out in anger. Yes, we could trust him to drink away as much of his pay packet as he saw fit. Probably screw a few fresh-faced barmaids along the way too. Obviously, fellow saw jockeys and timber cutters were more important than reverence for his wife's people. Did not feel a skerrick of empathy hearing gory details of the accident which caused my father's death.

Riata is standing in front of me, little wrinkles, deepened laugh lines at the corner of her eyes. "I don't remember much about your dad, except he worked at the mill, how many years?"

"More like decades." I want to say so much more, tell her of my adventures since I left, relive the night I walked her home, describe the first time I saw her near the rock pool.

"He smelt of cigarettes, and timber resin." Whispered as if this aroma is a secret she gets to keep.

"Yep, he liked to smoke at home too, always out the back, usually hiding in the toilet, my mum hated smoking. Probably thinking about his next cigarette rather than watching those saws."

Her hand brushes against my hand, I want to grasp it. Bring her fingers to my lips.

"Tough on your mum."

"I'll sort things out, get her into a local care place. See she's looked after."

"My daughter works at the Holy Grace Center."

I want to tell Riata about my traveling adventures. How I needed to get out of town to find a different future. Processes making that boy into a man. Serving behind bars myself, seen worse than things my Dad did. Tramping trails through mountains, never found another pool like the one among river gums.

Her daughter is part of care staff in age care home where my mother is accommodated. Of all the staff, this one girl embodies clarity. "I reckon she looks like Riata. Could be your half-sister."

Part of me wants to jump up and down, declare, I wonder if this is my father or me?

Always thought I'd lost any connection with this place and Raita, until I saw Jenny pushing a trolley down the hallway. Smaller, but a spitting image, right down to long tumbling fall of dark hair. I know she keeps it under one of those netting caps or tied up in a thick braid. But I can tell from fly away whisks resisting regulations.

So much of my past rambles are embodied in her mere presence.

The End

Karen Lethlean is a retired English teacher. With previous fiction in *The Barbaric Yawp*, *Ken*Again*, *Pendulum Papers* and has won a few awards through Australian and UK competitions. *Land Lore* is published in *Bangalore Review*, and recently *Bleached Bones* won Wild Words Solstice Short Story writing competition. Karen is currently working on a memoir titled *Army Girl*, about military service 1972-76. In her other life Karen is a triathlete who has done Hawaii Ironman championships twice.

Posted 6/22/2021

Sultana Raza “Infer-Know Tours” moved into town on 6/22/2021

INFER-KNOW TOURS

**by
Sultana Raza**

Dear Hattee,

Would have written earlier, but for the pesky mosquitoes. Apparently, it is not enough that their brethren screw up their noses at the low quality of blood to be found under my browned skin, and find it beneath their dignity to taste it. The fact that most of their tribe fly away without tasting it, isn't enough. Both Spanish and Moroccan mosquitoes voted unanimously that they will only believe it, once they have smelled it themselves. Too bad if I find their landings and take-offs to be so annoying, that it puts me off scribbling post-cards, or you would have gotten this last week.

That Maria Marped is very proud that mosquitoes are avoiding her, but as I announced in front of the whole gang, that's because she's so cold-blooded, they'd freeze if they landed on her. But I daresay, she's not more cold-blooded than that new young man of yours. Hope he's still not buzzing around you, and that you've swatted him away by now.

Yours hardily,

Aunt Tzestee

PS I've half a mind to sue Infer-Know Tours (after we get back, of course) for not warning us in advance about these beasts, or for at least arming us with the appropriate creams, lotions etc. which (as expected) they've failed to do so.

#

Dear chumpkins,

You won't believe the amount of marriage proposals we (including myself) were all bombarded with in Tunisia. Even 'deaf and dumb' Fiona lost count of her proposals! But Ms. Blatty Teppid, a fellow

passenger on Infer-Know Tours surprised us all by dealing with them very efficiently: if any roaming Lotharios propose marriage to you in any souks, just say that you are afraid that such a man would already have numerous wives, if not girlfriends. And after puffing up with pride, the foreign-girl chaser will leave you in peace.

All right, all right, I agree with you. That reply toned down to just girlfriends will go down well with most men anywhere on the globe. Why would anyone want to marry that old maid Blatty, was beyond me. Must have been a real shortage of sallow pale blondes in Sousse that day. That Maria Marped's going around, boasting that she's gotten two proposals more than me, but that's all stuff and nonsense, as we all know.

Anyway, hope you've gotten over your own silly infatuation, and thrown Mr Worm out! In fact, why don't you use the above tactic on him to throw him out? How can Mr Right enter your life, with that wriggling creature around?

Yours lovingly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear hare-brained bunny,

Do you seriously think you can escape my eagle eye, though I'm far away? Hope you've come to your senses by now and ditched the winner of the Mr. Louche Contest of the year.

I can't help thinking that you sent me away on purpose to keep the coast clear to indulge your strange 'passion.' Perhaps you'll be pleased to know that last night it was difficult to sleep at the prestigious Hasselt Hotel in an obscure village on the western coast of Mallorca when a party of a few hundred conspire to be as loud as that of a few thousand, considering it their duty to optimize on their lung power the very night that we happened to be there. Unlike all of us, twins turn twenty two just once in the joint lives, so they feel obliged to celebrate with double the noise! Not to mention the pandemonium that hand-walking on water produced, till the medics took the adventurers away.

Fiona took full advantage of all the commotion that ensued, to fill various bags with edible goods. I had to insist that she throw away the stronger smelling ones, so now she isn't talking to me. Of course, she can't actually talk, but mercifully she's stopped making those funny noises of hers now. As soon as she realizes that that's a big relief for me, she'll do her best to start annoying me again. But, of course, you're too busy to care about my travails on this Infer-Know tour from hell.

Yours bluntly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear muddled muffin,

Can't you see Mr. Conman is just playing up to you just to get free board, not to mention bed? Wish I could throw a jug of cold water to open your eyes.

In any case, here are more tips in case you decide to ditch that leech of yours, and to join us here in the Mediterranean, though it's too warm for my taste. Needless to say I'll be willing to bear all your expenses, just to get you as far away from Mr. Parasite as possible. If conned into visiting wondrous caverns off the Amalfi Coast, do avoid lying down on your back in shallow row boats, unless you don't mind swallowing alarming amounts of sea water that waves will conspire to baptize you with. For once in my life, I was glad about Fiona's grub hoarding habits. She would have floated away, if she hadn't stuffed her pockets with cans of tuna, lobster, and sardines. All probably stolen from the ship's pantry, of course.

Though how she managed to do it, is beyond me. And when was she planning on eating them, is another question altogether. As long as she doesn't go in for midnight feasts in our cabin. I wouldn't care for fishy smells in our cub-hole. It's amazing where she packs everything, considering she's forever nibbling, chomping or swallowing furtively. Just as well, she stayed anchored in our flimsy structure that had the audacity to call itself a boat, or imagine the huge amounts of time that would have been wasted, looking for her spindly body in deep sea. No doubt they would have found a whale inside her, all mashed up, and

compacted, with the astronomical amounts of chewing that she does, and not the other way round.

So never mind what they promise you about the Blue Caves. The reality is very different! Just as you'll find out soon enough with that good for nothing protégé of yours!

Yours jadedly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear woolly-headed doll,

Hope you'll get through your confused state soon! Stop lending him any of my money, or you'll find yourself in the streets along with him. How long will love survive among garbage cans is anyone's guess.

Besides unwanted ones provided by you, my trip is not without its thrills, especially when it comes to brushing shoulders with flying death, except we seemed to be going in opposite directions. Very small airplanes are riskier than boats, such as the ones between certain Greek islands, or even London and Cornwall, as after a miraculous landing, one's insides take a very long time before deciding where one's organs should go back in their right places.

Yours (still in one piece),

Aunt Tzestee

P.S. Couldn't help wondering who'd mourn me in this world, were I to float away. Hope you're not missing my sharp jibes too much. Who else can keep you on your toes as much as I can? I'll forgive your recent shenanigans if only you'll make that Indian frog jump out of our place! Believe me, he'll never turn into any sort of prince! Not once in a million years! Especially if my cane meets his back side! Remember how I hated the idea of a cane, until I took a tumble down Mrs. Tobeshpierre's slippery garden path? Well, for once in my life, I'm glad I have a cane, as soon it will be put to good use!

#

Dear poppet,

Can't you see? All he has to do is pull your strings, and you take him back in, no matter how shabbily he treats you? I was so glad when I heard all about your grand quarrel, but no, my joy was to be short-lived!

Almost forgot! While in London, it is rather useful to ask if they have just half a wash basin or the small one before booking a hotel cubicle, I mean 'room'.

If you feel obliged to go on a day tour of Athens, do ask if you will have the pleasure of being instructed by their oldest female guide, aka the dragon lady? If the reply is in the affirmative, sit it out, unless you don't mind a bullhorn voice shouting out historical facts the whole day long. And being bullied about as an added bonus. The sun did me in, or I'd have given it to her, good and proper. Well, to be frank, I wasn't sure if I should have intervened when she had a drag out fight with that Maria Marped. But when she went after poor 'deaf and dumb' Fiona, I made a point of making a dignified and silent protest by marching out of the tour, dragging the fidgeting Fiona along.

Of course, the whole lot of gagging geese saw that as an opportunity to follow me to the nearest café, where they indulged shamelessly in dollops of ice-cream, all in the name of recovering from the dragon-lady. Hope they fire her soon!

I shouldn't have been surprised but Fiona broke her own record by slurping down 5 double scoops of ice-cream in under 10 minutes. I had no idea she'd been so starved of ice-cream in that nunnery of hers for so many years. It's just as well I found out about that lost long uncle of hers, so she managed to inherit his loot, or she wouldn't have been able to pay for her dowry with accumulated interest, thus gaining her freedom from that obscure little church of hers. But I wish she wouldn't make up for missing out on interesting victuals and drinks with such vengeance now.

It was so embarrassing to hear that the café ran out of their stock of ice-creams and cakes soon after our tribe descended on them. Probably they think we'd all grown up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by huge corn fields, and had never tasted such delicacies before. I shudder to think what impression some older Americans make on the unsuspecting Greeks, but hopefully they saw my class and dignity too, and the ladylike

way in which I imbibed the fresh fruit juice. And speaking of juice, do try not to become the main topic of juicy gossip in the neighborhood.

Yours deflatedly,

Aunt Tzestee

P.S. Captain Gunnar is so sweet! When he heard of how I'd liberated our tribe from the dragon lady, he surprised me with a 'Crown of the Liberator!' You should have seen Maria Marped's fuming face! Sometimes I think it's worth coming on this inferno tour, after all.

#

Dear Swiss cheese,

Am sorry darling, but that's what your brain looks like from here. Still can't understand why you're risking your future with that 'loser,' as you young people are fond of calling each other.

Anyway, you'll find even me to be rather nice and pleasant, if you ever fly in the German-speaking zone.

Speaking of sour-faced Amazons mentioned in my last post-card, best not disturb Germanic air-hostesses too much, as their time is too precious to spend on watering old goats such as myself. Can't remember the name of the airline exactly, so be a darling and send letters to all the small German airlines, to correct their notice, 'Live West under the seat.'

Your hectically,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear hive-head,

It's such a pity that hormones buzzing in your pretty lil' head don't allow you to think clearly. But I'll be back soon, and your knight in rusty armor won't need to risk his useless neck by jumping over fences, and sneaking in through the back-door, because he won't be visiting us at all! Or

getting within a hundred miles of you for that matter. Hate me all you want, but you'll thank me later, you'll see!

Good old Mrs. Parker is a lot sharper than you imagined. Thank the stars for nosy neighbors.

Apropos, that sign I noticed in the plane. Am not sure about where I saw it, as we've taken countless little tasteless flights by now. Did I see it in Luxembourg? Did you know that the shop assistants and bus drivers are the real royalty of that Grand Duchy? So maintain your distance, keep your mouth shut in their august presence, don't be even a second late for the bus, and make sure you buy something before leaving a shop. You would do well to leave all inane questions outside these prestigious vending establishments.

Am still waiting for your confirmation about dropping Mr Tick-Tack. Better do it before my return, or face my smoking nostrils! Hope your summer (sans Mr Spineless) will be as exciting as ours on this never-ending tour from Infer-Know!

Yours candidly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear higgledy-piggledy hen,

Don't you go telling me that I'm behind times. At least my generation still has some manners left, which is more than can be said for yours.

Mrs. (Nosy) Parker has kindly informed me that all sorts of strange spicy smells are now emanating from the kitchen. My kitchen! Apparently, they're so strong that they made it all the way through our yard, over our wall, and into Mrs. Parker's open window! When she followed the odors, they led straight to our home. I couldn't be more mortified. Will you kindly tell that loose-limbed mortal to refrain from using my pots and pans to concoct his nauseous confections. Is that clear?

Yours reprovngly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear Mata Hari,

I got the most curious letter from Sarah Pinkett. Apparently, you were wearing the most strange perfume she's ever smelled. She couldn't decide if you'd been in the vicinity of something burnt, or if you'd been rolling on the grass near the bins. Hope it's not one of those exotic 'oils' he's so fond of putting in his hair. Please tell me you're not going all native on me.

And what's this I'm hearing? You actually turned down Hope Tobeshpierre's Invitation to her 75th birthday party! I've rarely missed any of her birthdays. And darling, you promised me you'd represent me there! All this after I'd assured her that you'd be there with the confetti, paper hats, and those amands glacé that she loves so much. Can you at least make sure that she gets all these before the big day? After all her nephew did for us when your Dad disappeared. How could you possibly let us down like this?

Yours annoyingly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

My giddy kiddikins,

How could you allow this to happen?

Your crazy young man actually painted on our garden wall? One of those strange creatures from his land. They may be called 'gods' or whatever there, but let me tell you, to me they're akin to aliens!

How can you sully our very home and your parents' memory in this way? I still can't believe it!

I swear on the sour peas of Saint Severine that you won't inherit my half of our home if you don't get rid of him immediately! Will we have to build a wall right in the middle of the living room, in order for you to come to your giddy senses?

Get the wall painted over right this minute, or I'll get him deported as soon as I set foot on our blessed soil. And General Kamishka will help me too, I'm sure. He knows a few people, he does. That is, if Maria Marped ever lets me get near ten feet of the kind General, without sending one of her cronies to snoop on me.

Can I help it, if he quite likes my company? But who could blame him, given the choice he has of the other nincompoops. Oh, by the way, Captain Gunnar can breathe as many sighs of relief as he likes now, since Maria is no longer chasing him quite as athletically as before.

But honestly darling, you can't possibly allow him to desecrate our ancestral home, now can you? Just when Sarah Pinkett's brother-in-law's uncle has become the trustee for the 'Save the Neighborhood Foundation,' and could twist the right person's arm in the 'Preserve our Heritage Grants Commission' to give us funding to protect and re-build our façade!

How can you be so dense is beyond me! Thank heaven it will be all long gone by the time I come home!

Yours outrageously,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear clucking turkey,

Couldn't believe it when Mrs. Parker sent me word! Thought she'd overdosed on her meds again! Remember when she was convinced all our neighborhood gnomes used to have midnight feasts every full moon at the bottom of our garden? Or when she was chasing away invisible hens from her yard to ours at Christmas, when she'd forgotten to take those darned meds in the excitement of the burned turkey, and our efforts to rescue it?

Then Sarah Pinkett sent me the paper cutting. It couldn't be true! Then General Kamishka got that nice young steward, Coney, to check it all up on the Inter web thingy.

I'll admit to shuddering violently. Almost fainting at the sight of that hideous figure draped across our innocent wall. But if the 'Museum of Indigenous Plastic Arts' want to make a fool of themselves, who am I to stand in their way?

I can't believe they have declared that horrible painting a 'work of art.' Do they want to take it to their museum?

I'm in two minds about it. Luckily for you, dear soap-suds, General Kamishka's made me see the whole thing in a new light. There will be our wall preserved in the museum for a long, long time to come. And underneath, there will be our family name. Oh! What should I do?

Your confusedly,

Aunt Tzestee

P.S. Now that General Kamishka has graced us with his presence, through Captain Gunnar, that vixen, Maria Marped is forever trying to separate us, by playing musical chairs at dinner. Despite her best efforts, she hasn't been able to make me and the General sit at different tables. She can have the dull and dour Gunnar, for all I care!

#

Dear silly sheep,

Of course, I'll only give my permission to the museum to dig up our precious bricks if they agree to add my first name. After all, I'm the owner of that particular segment of the garden. Remember, yours is the left side, and mine the right.

So those crazy museum folk will have to deal with your aunt before they begin any digging. Though how on earth they're going to transport the whole wall to the museum is beyond me!

Needless to say, I've never set foot into the 'Museum of Indigenous Plastic Arts' in my long and illustrious life, even if I say so myself. But of course, I'll have to make sure that our ancestral name will be preserved for all eternity. After all, it's my wall, and it's your eye that spotted the 'talent' of that young good for nothing artist!

Let's not get ahead of ourselves yet. Tell those artsy folk that I have to think all this over. No rushing while I'm gone. In any case, if they're really as respectable as you say they are, then they won't do anything without my permission.

Yours resignedly,

Aunt Tzestee

P.S. Ms. Blatty Tepid seems to have switched sides, and seems to be on Maria Marped's team, but General Kamishka has a wonderful sense of humor, and just laughs them all away...

#

Dear tumbling tea-pot,

Now, now. There's no need to get into a lather about it all. Of course, I got the date the silly exhibition moved. Our clan is not entirely without connections you know. Not that you'd ever use them to get a respectable job. Oh no, not you. Not when you can hob-nob with the most undesirable young men of New York. Helping them to get their careers launched at the expense of our family home.

Those crazy folks are simply not going to dig up any of my walls until I'm there to make sure, they replace it immediately with a similar style one with all the matching bricks in the right places.

I don't care if this affects your boy-friend's chances of being accepted at the Whitney! You know I still have the power to get my own wall white-washed, if I choose to do so.

Don't be so quick to jump to conclusions! Of course I'm not racist! What a preposterous idea! I never said I disliked your young man on account of his race! Just not him, individually. And I'm not going to change my mind about that, no matter how many awards he gets.

Now that he's actually earning some money for the first time in his life, please do feel free to move out, to actually live with him, if you like. For he's certainly not going to be polluting the air in my living room once I return.

Oh, and I'll prove to you just how unbiased I am. You'll understand when you actually lay your eyes on Marcus. I mean General Kamishka. He'll be spending Halloween with us. I'm sure you won't mind, seeing as you're so liberal yourself. We'll see who's racist then. I won't keep you in the dark for long now. Besides, you'll probably have moved out by then, anyway.

Yours conspiratorially,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear sniggering bug,

No need to make fun of my behind my back! Of course, I'm not a racist! Never was. Never have been. Just because I didn't care for your particular young man who happens to be Indian, doesn't mean I'm a racist. So don't go all smug on me, and spout nonsense that nature is taking revenge on me, or some such rubbish.

Anyway, how did you find out about Marcus? It was going to be a surprise. You young people! Always snooping on others through that infernal thing called the 'inter web' or some such stupid name. What gives you the right to go looking up Marcus. Admittedly, he's a public figure and all that, even if he's retired. But can't you respect my privacy just a little?

I can't wait to see Sarah Pinkett's face when I turn up on Marcus' arm at Mrs. Tobeshpierre's pre-Halloween party. That is, if Maria Marped doesn't get him kidnapped before the end of the cruise! You'd have to see all her maneuvering to get herself plunked down at our table, to believe it! Bribing waiters. Pestering poor Captain Gunnar to death about rotating partners at dinner etc. Poor man, he's not too happy about being side-lined by Marcus, but that can't be helped. Marcus outshines everyone with his brilliant smile, witty asides, and ready charm. Like attracts like, they say. So we've managed to outwit Maria Marped so far. Or rather, I have. I doubt Marcus has noticed anything much, as it's beneath his dignity to stoop to Mad Maria's level.

And no. Your crazy coot is not going to paint the garden wall on the other side too. If he does, I swear, I'll get him locked up faster than you

can say, ‘boo.’ You can’t even begin to imagine the kind of clout Marcus has, even after his retirement. And no, that’s not the reason we’re friends. After all, what could he possibly get out of me, except for my company. So it really is a meeting of two minds. And were you to imply anything more, I’ll personally spank you a dozen times, as I now realize I should have done years ago.

You’ll have a lot to answer for when I get back. So it’s in your best interest to be gone before I breeze in with Marcus. Now that your stick figure is a celebrated artist, that shouldn’t be a problem. Speaking of art, no I won’t be contacting Mrs. Tobeshpierre’s cousin, smiley Stuart, just so he can garner votes to get your barmy friend’s weird art pieces into the Art Basel Miami Fringe Show, or Lace Show, or whatever it was you were foolish enough to ask me to do. Let him make his own way in the world. That’s what will make him stronger.

In the meantime, be a darling, and before you move out, call the fumigators and have the whole place fumigated, as I would be horrified if Marcus started to choke on the funny smells that those infernal incense sticks of his give out. And don’t make me repeat myself, you hear?

Yours fumingly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear headstrong mule,

What do you mean by saying that that so-called artist has a stake in our garden walls, and so has every right to live here? My great grandfather didn’t build these walls just so your Lothario can use them as his very own canvas, and paint whatever he likes on them! He’ll get his notice soon enough, as soon as my lawyer recovers from his spell of complicated hay fever chills. And what do you mean by writing that your pet artist has to stay near his fans. What followers? Any delusional hippies and such-like had better stay away from my garden!

Yes, I’ll admit that I’d arranged for the Neighborhood Watch to hose down the side-walk next to our wall, to scatter the unwashed masses gathered in front of that alien image. It’s my right to protect my property as I see fit! In case artist in residence doesn’t like it, he can go and invade

any other wall, except mine! He knows very well no one else in our neighborhood will be as kind and tolerant as I've been, that's why he's staying put there. Anyone else in my place would have gotten him arrested a long time ago for trespassing and vandalism. Why can't you see that it's because I love you so much, that I've tolerated him for this long?

I don't know at what speed your dear mother and her parents must be rolling in their graves at your shameless shenanigans on Society's Medium or whatever it's called! Perhaps they'll stop rolling once our wall is enshrined properly in that museum, with our family plaque displayed prominently. I think one of our ancestors in Scotland even had a family crest. I tell you, that wall is not going anywhere, unless and until I find that seal, and crest, and they're engraved on our family plaque in that silly museum. After all, the world should know whose wall was desecrated so willfully by that worm of yours. I don't care if his fans are growing by the thousands every day. He'll still be a parasite in my eyes.

Yours worriedly,

Aunt Tzestee

#

Dear gullible goat,

Stop pestering me about my return date. How many times do I have to tell you that I'll come back only when I'm good and ready. My plans have changed now, so expect me at any moment. Who knows, as soon as you stop reading this letter, you might hear a yelp. It could be your 'boyfriend' getting acquainted with my cane. That will be the only way to break this ridiculous impasse that we've reached now.

Even though you're as stubborn as your Dad, I know how to deal with pig-headed young people. And now with Marcus by my side, we shall prevail, as you shall see. Start packing now, unless you don't mind the homeless folk near the docks getting all your designer fripperies and gee-gaws for free. For I'll get rid of all your personal effects, along with that good for nothing guy of yours, as soon as I set foot through our door, jet lag or no jet lag. At least I don't consider him to be an 'artist,' just because a few dolts happen to say so.

Your artistic friend should be gone within a fortnight's time, along with his smelly paints, pots, and brushes. If not, then don't blame me if he ends up being deported back to his native land! And if you have the temerity to marry him, in order to save his skin, then I'll denounce you both for marrying under false pretenses just so he can stay here, in the land of plenty, living off the hard-working tax-payer's money. I don't care how much money he ends up making. These artist types always end up sponging off the people foolish enough to hang around them.

By the way, how can you be so sure he wasn't married already when he got here? I'm making discreet inquiries to prove the existence of his first marriage through my private channels. So wait a while before you tie the knot with that good for nothing friend of yours. In any case, darling, even if you do jump the gun, your marriage here to an already married man will be declared null and void. So, don't help the authorities in their deporting process, by refraining to walk down any thorny aisles with him, will you?

Don't say I didn't give you fair warning now!

Yours intrepidly,

Aunt Tzestee

The End

Sultana Raza's based in Luxembourg. Her poems, fiction, and non-fiction (100+ articles in English and French) have appeared in 90+ journals, with an Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train Review*. She's presented papers on Keats and Tolkien in international conferences, has read/performed her creative work in India, Europe and the USA.

Posted 6/16/2021
Hugh Allison "The Red Hand" moved into town on 6/16/2021

THE RED HAND
by
Hugh Allison

"You say you've been to this castle before?" asked William, with a slight sneer to his tone.

I had, and he knew it, but I nodded anyway. It wasn't a place I'd wanted to visit again, but William had insisted and my wish to please him was, as always, stronger than any of my other fears, however terrified I may have been previously. Mind you, his reason for wanting to go there was a good one, and I was just happy to have been invited to accompany him, even though, thinking about it today with the benefit of hindsight, he was my husband and there was no reason why I shouldn't have been summoned.

When I had consented to come, I had told myself that things would be a lot better: this time I wouldn't be alone, and the castle wouldn't be as rundown. At least, not from what I'd read on the internet. The place had been done up by an events company and was being let out for special occasions, such as the wedding we would be attending there the following day.

"So, Dave," continued William, "what exactly did you see on that fateful instance?"

"Well, as I've said, there was this ghostly red hand, and..."

"In what way was it ghostly?"

"I could see right through it."

"If you could see right through it, how did you know that it was red?"

When I had first met William, it had been in a bar and I'd been sipping a beer. It was long before he banned me from all alcohol due to how unbecoming it made me. I never found out what it was he was drinking that night, nor did I ask, but it was a dark grey liquid in a brown bottle.

You could see the fluid through the glass, and if it weren't for the futility of trying to explain anything even remotely out of the ordinary to William, this would have been a perfect example of how one can see through something whilst still being conscious of its color.

"I'm probably wrong," I admitted, and the next hour of the drive went by silently.

###

The castle's car park was massive, which was particularly noticeable by how empty it was. The car park hadn't been there before, but the giant lake it sat next to definitely had, for I had been so frightened that I'd considered swimming away from the castle, having believed at the time that ghosts were afraid of water.

I was about to get the suitcases out of the boot, when I was greeted by a lady, who I hadn't noticed approach.

"Did you find us okay?" asked the lady, who was young-looking, short and thin, and had multicolored hair and a snake-eating-itself tattoo around her right wrist. Facially, she reminded me of my first real girlfriend, from before I had officially come out to the world.

"Yes thanks. I used to live around here," I replied, putting on my mask, and handing one to William.

"She wasn't talking to you," said my partner, scratching his nose as he got out of the passenger seat. "I'm William. It's my sister who is getting married."

"Yes, it is a shame that something usually so joyful has to happen under such sad circumstances," said the lady, whose name tag identified her as Miranda.

"And you are?"

"I'm in charge of events here at Spritely Castle. I would offer to help with the bags but due to Covid, I'm not..."

"He can manage them fine," interrupted my beloved.

“I’ll show you to your room. Then I’ll give you the grand tour, like where the ceremony will be taking place tomorrow and so on. The bride and groom won’t be here till about nine thirty in the morning now due to problems with their car, and...”

“Yes, we got a text.”

“Right, and Ar... The officiant should be here around the same time.” She smiled. “I’ll be leaving once you’re both settled, so you’ll have the place to yourselves tonight. There are no other guests expected, are there?”

The amount of people in attendance by law had to be limited, but Carol had wanted the threshold to be lower still, mostly out of respect for her husband-to-be. I was expecting William to say this, or answer her question some other way, such as simply shaking his head, but he was already marching off up the hill to the front door with the events coordinator chasing after him, key in hand.

###

It was about an hour later, and I was sitting on the bed in our surprisingly luxurious room for the night. I was unpacking and William had just stormed off down the hill and was following the lake round to Spritely City Centre, trying to find a last-minute present for Carol in any essential stores currently open, having wrecked the tea set I had unthinkingly purchased online without consulting him.

I opened a drawer to put in William’s ties. He’d had me bring all of them so he could wait until the morning before choosing which he would wear for his sister’s big day, regardless of him having already nominated which of mine I would adorn: the extra-thick overly long one with the closed lips that he liked so much, the only tie I had been permitted to pack for myself.

In the drawer, I found a brochure giving the history of the castle. I started reading it with interest, but when I found out about the location’s grizzly history, I decided that I would not be informing William about the past of this fascinating building.

“A chainsaw massacre,” I muttered to myself, whilst idly reaching into my shirt to rub at a bruise on my left shoulder. This particular paragraph

was bringing to mind that movie William would never let me watch. And I had agreed with him: it was for my own good. I've always had too much of an imagination.

“That’s one word for it,” said a voice which made me jump.

I looked to my right. Nothing. Which is odd, as that’s where the dictum had seemed to come from.

I looked to my left, at the door. I had definitely locked it.

I looked to my right at Miranda, who was gradually coming into view.

“I’d assumed you’d gone,” I said.

“Nope, just turned myself invisible for a while.”

So many thoughts went through my head. So many questions. So many emotions. Yet fear wasn’t one of them. Maybe it was because she reminded me so much of my ex. Or maybe because she had such a good aura surrounding her.

“Would you object if I sat down?” she asked.

I nodded, and she crossed over to sit on a wooden chair next to the kettle. As she passed the mirror, I peeked to see whether she had a reflection. She didn’t seem to, but I couldn’t be certain either way.

“Don’t worry about putting a mask on,” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” I replied.

“I wasn’t being sarcastic. Us undead can’t catch Covid.”

“I wouldn’t mention to William that you’re not, um, that you’re undead, if I were you. He won’t believe you, but he’ll want to leave anyway, wedding or no wedding, and he’d want a full refund for everyone.”

“That sounds about right, from what little I saw of him earlier.”

I didn’t want to say it, but she’d experienced William on a good day. He hadn’t even insulted the castle’s décor, even though he had made some

kind of nasally grunting noise as he'd strode beneath the black chandelier in the hallway.

"Does he care about you at all?" asked Miranda.

"Why wouldn't he? When you know him, get to know him, you'll..."

She looked at me dubiously.

"He doesn't show it," I said defiantly, "but he loves me, and I love him."

"And does he love his sister, or is she just an excuse for going out during lockdown?"

I wish I could have been offended on William's behalf and thought I had best utter something indignant, but she, Miranda, then started apologizing, saying it wasn't her place to ask. She gave me her card and offered to keep in touch, and said that she was a good listener for if I ever wanted to talk. For some reason, this small gesture prompted me to think of when Carol or her mother would give me a look during one of William's lectures, a glance which seemed to say: "If he wasn't related to us by blood..."

Carol clearly took after her parents, who were delightful, outgoing, welcoming people, and she'd often said she couldn't see where her brother could have got his unpleasant streak from. I would never have chosen a word as strong as "unpleasant," but when she'd initially said it, I was meeting William's family for the first time, so I'd kept my mouth shut, wanting to create a good impression. It was a pleasant day, and William's parents turned out to be so much more accepting of his sexuality than my parents were of mine, God rest their souls.

I met Carol and William's parents quite a bit after that, the most recent being when the five of us joined my own father and mother for a tense getting-to-know-you trip to the seaside. When the outing was over, William, Carol and I were in one car, watching the vehicle containing William's parents crash into the one containing my own, killing all four passengers, although my mother at least survived until she had got to the hospital.

It was at the hospital that Carol had met Frank, a junior doctor who it turned out was fascinated by only two things: her and medical history.

My William, also having a medical degree, seemed to care nothing for the profession, and talked about it next to never. It was Frank, for example, who had once told me that chainsaws were invented for cutting bones, fascinating information which I didn't believe I would ever need yet, fast forward to sitting in the castle with Miranda, it did explain something mentioned in the brochure I was still half-reading when not shooting the breeze with Miranda.

Frank had been with Carol for almost three years, when he learned that he was dying from a rare disease about which he was more fascinated than fearful. He quit his job, moved in with her, and proposed. His impending marriage to Carol was one of the few exceptions to the no-weddings-during-lockdown rule, as his life could be cut short at any minute, and he had wanted to make sure that there'd be no chance his estranged family could get their hands on any of his assets.

"They're a great couple," said Miranda. "I've only met them two or three times, but she is so different from her brother. And she's exceedingly generous, offering to pay my expenses on top of my fees."

William was actually like his sister in that respect: always very generous with his money, regardless of how often he would sue in the case of perceived bad service. As my buddy from school Steve once said, "It's like it's his way of paying off his..."

I stopped myself from thinking this. William was of course right to have preventing me from keeping in touch with Steve. He'd been a bad influence on me.

###

When the text from William saying Will be another hour. Have food ready. came through on my phone, I guessed I must have been chatting with Miranda for over forty minutes and was feeling a bit concerned over how little I had got done.

"Don't worry about it," said Miranda, who had presumably read the message over my shoulder. "Let's go to the kitchen, and I'll help you prepare a meal. What do you fancy?"

"William likes Spaghetti Aglio e Olio."

“We haven’t got any ga... I’ll see what we can do. We’ve got virtually any ingredients you may need to make your stay welcoming,” she said, quoting her own website.

I wondered if there were a stepladder for the items in the higher shelves that I’d noticed during the grand tour, but Miranda assured me that she could float right on up there if the need presented itself.

She unlocked the door. I stood, hesitating.

“Don’t worry,” said Miranda. “His Lordship will sort out the room.”

I didn’t know at the time who she was referring to, but I was more than happy to not have to finish the unpacking. I thanked her, rose, and gave her a mock salute.

“I’ll get him to remove the brochure as well.”

###

The meal was delicious, and William even came close to complimenting it at one point, but instead went straight to bed, pausing on the staircase only to scratch his nose and remind me to polish his shoes.

When I had finished with the washing up, I made his footwear as smart as can be, then scrubbed my own pair, cleaned my teeth, and went back into our room. I was about to tell him that he’d been ever so clever for thinking to leave the shoes and the polish outside the door in case he’d wanted to begin his slumber before I was done, but then I noticed he was snoring, so I silenced myself immediately and fell asleep sitting on the wooden chair by the kettle. If he had the urge, he would invite me to join him under the sheets when he woke.

As usual, the punishable thought crossed my mind as I was nodding off. That maybe I would be happier without William. I was aware this was the wrong thing to think. He meant well, and wanted what was best for me, especially when we’d first started dating, even if I couldn’t always see it. And besides, I’d never have the guts to leave him. I couldn’t manage on my own. Life wasn’t as good, back when I was single. Although, I allowed myself to realize, I hadn’t laughed once since we’d got together, and I used to be so full of joy. Even when I’d come here in my early teens, scared as I was, I had a good chuckle about the whole

thing with Steve, when he'd coaxed out of me that I'd only broken in because I'd wanted to be an explorer, like Indiana Jones.

This led to an interesting dream in which I was holding a whip and wearing a fedora and was climbing into the castle through a smashed window, followed by a pipistrelle which turned into Miranda, who started telling me about the castle's history, in much more detail than I had read in the brochure. She told me that the building had been built in the thirteenth century, and the same noble family had lived here until 1854 when a doctor kicked the door down then, using a chainsaw he had recently bought from a sales rep associate, killed the owner, his wife, their two children, the maid, and the butler. He was very methodical, cutting off the left hand of each victim, then the right hand, then the left foot, then the right foot and finally the head. As he was performing each slicing, those who he hadn't got to yet were frozen to the spot, unable to run for help.

As Dream Miranda was saying this, somehow I could vividly see the events she was telling me about as though they were occurring next to her, but with the doctor having William's face, and my own parents having the faces of the owner and his wife. The two children were Carol and Frank, but back when Frank was still able to stand. The maid I didn't recognise, and the butler, for some reason, was my old pal Steve, dressed in tight-fitting clothes and holding a tray, above which were floating various items including a cup from the destroyed tea set, a photo of William's parents, the brown bottle with the dark grey liquid, and the copy of *The Collected Works of Charles Dickens* with which William had hit me not two hours previously for not thinking to pack wrapping paper for our jaunt.

I idly rubbed the back of my head, as Dream Miranda then informed me that after the final butchering, that of the butler who in my vision was still holding the tray in his now-detached hands, the doctor was about to leave, when he heard a sound coming from a cupboard. This turned out to be someone hiding, the mute friend of the castle owner's children, an upright do-gooder with soulful cerulean eyes who had become a Lord aged only twelve but would sooner have helped a butler serve a meal than be the one waited on. He was a very quiet youth who people could never usually hear coming or going, so it was unfortunate that he had caught his sleeve against a wobbly shelf.

Other than his eyes, and a surprising set of muscles which seemed visible through his expensive waistcoat, I can't remember this boy's appearance, but I did think that he could have been the brother I never had. Or maybe the son I will one day adopt.

I didn't get a chance to have this fantasy for long, for as was obviously about to happen, Dream Miranda told me of the doctor starting his almost satanic ritual on this new discovery, but after cutting off the boy's left hand, he looked into the boy's blue eyes, apologized, and said, "If only your friend's father had paid my bill."

According to Dream Miranda, who was a lot paler than Events Coordinator Miranda and had her ouroboros tattoo around her other wrist, the boy quickly bled to death but nonetheless the doctor somehow managed to sew his hand back onto his arm, then ran out of the castle, throwing the chainsaw into the lake on his way back to his office, where he committed suicide by drinking from a bottle of arsenic.

"Of the eight to die that day, it is only this one boy whose ghost haunts this castle," said Dream Miranda, "ever invisible, except for his reattached left hand, covered in blood, which he could never wash off. He's a good kid, known to frighten the mortals on occasion, but he would only do wrong for reasons he sees as morally acceptable."

I can't remember too much else of that dream, or the story I was reliably told during it, but I am sure that any questions I may have today about the castle's more interesting history would have been answered then, although an unnecessary and irrelevant bunch of details have just come back to me: Miranda had lived and died in Whitby, and the cat which had jumped over her grave had a Spritely address on his name tag, and that's how she had come to find out about and eventually reside in this more urban locale, where she had stayed after falling in love with a citizen of good standing who was also new to the area. The particulars all began to blur into one, but I do recall that it was the first time in ages that, when I woke, it wasn't in a cold sweat.

It was then that I figured out that it could well have been the friend of the owner's son, that poor young boy, whose hand I had seen flipping me off in my childhood. And something was telling me that he was now sorry for having done that, and for scaring me. Maybe I had brought to his mind the events of the last time someone had broken into that building, or perhaps the gesture had been intended, I was beginning to realize, as a

cheeky way to get some attention, in the hope that it led to him make an alliance of his own age, seeing as he was doomed to be a child for all eternity and had presumably had no friends since 1854.

###

Aside from being even thinner than Miranda, having lost, I'd estimate, some three stone since I saw him last, Frank looked surprisingly well, considering his condition.

The wedding went off without a hitch, so to speak, and William and myself were the official witnesses to the signing of the official documentation. William had also been the Best Man, and Miranda had stepped in as the Maid of Honor, but both roles were purely ceremonial, and they behaved more like regular guests than people with specific functions.

Before long we had got out of our formal wear and into our civvies, and found ourselves sitting all together in the dining room making small talk, with our masks around our chins: William, myself, Frank, Carol, Miranda, and the officiant, a tall plump woman with the same face as the maid from my dream.

The officiant had earlier introduced herself as "Arista from South Africa, hee-hee-hee," in a high-pitched voice which clearly got on William's nerves. The sounds coming from her mouth didn't bother me personally though, and they seemed to make Miranda smile.

"I'm going to go use the facilities," said William, glaring at me in such a way that I knew meant we would be leaving shortly afterwards, but that it would be down to me to make the excuse.

After William had left the room, Arista, Carol and Frank started talking about football, a subject I was allowed to care nothing for, so after taking another sip of my peppermint tea, I turned to look at Miranda, who was diluting her cocktail with tap water. She seemed to have something stuck in her teeth, but didn't want to dig them out in public.

I always kept several cocktail sticks in my wallet, as William often requires a toothpick after a larger meal, so I held one out as an offering. I added that I wouldn't be offended if she were to evacuate her cavities in front of me.

“I don’t want to risk your sister-in-law or her husband seeing my fangs,” explained Miranda, in a voice low enough for no one else to hear. “I am guessing they understand these things like you do, but I don’t know for sure. It’s nothing to worry about. Arista is one as well, so we kind of feed off each other.”

I was weighing up making a joke about how unequal this trade-off was due to the disparity in their sizes, but before I could make such an ill-advised comment, Carol stood up and inquired whether anyone wanted another drink.

“I’m not sure that receptions are truly allowed under the current lockdown laws,” said Arista, “but what the hell, hee-hee-hee.”

“I’ll get them,” said Frank, wheeling his chair around to the fridge.

“Only if you’re up to it,” said Miranda.

“Hey, until I’m forced to go back into hospital, as a patient, I want to be treated as though I am as fit and healthy as Arsenal’s defense.”

“Hey,” countered Arista, “Kieran Tierney should never have been picked for...”

I tuned out, as an idea had just struck me.

“Miranda,” I whispered. “Do you think that if you were to bite Frank, he would live forever.”

“Most likely,” she replied. “But I wouldn’t advise it.”

“He’s dying so young. And Carol will be so upset.”

“She will, but I am not too sure her feelings for him are as strong as his for her.”

“Are you saying he’s after her money?”

“No, but if he wasn’t on his last legs, as it were, she may not have accepted his marriage proposal. It’s not just your mind I can read. Plus, he’s in a lot of pain. More than you realize. And when you pass on, if

you come back, in whatever state, you will be as you were in your lifetime. So, I would be condemning him to eternal discomfort.”

“But if he’d be willing…”

“It would be irreversible,” said Miranda, who knowing I would push my point, went on to explain that Frank would also have to go back to work as you would still need money if you were to spend your afterlife on Earth, and that as yet wheelchairs couldn’t be turned invisible, and being visible can be so draining, and there would be a lot of secrecy involved, and there’s a whole set of rules you have to learn, and at least five more reasons, none of which I can bring to mind now, which is odd because outside of dreams I usually have the most fantastic memory, even if I do say so myself. I had the sense that she was going to make a quip about how walking through walls really hurts, but she censored herself just in time.

“At the very least, I would like to discuss it with Arista,” said Miranda, looking at her and smiling as she nodded back, “and if she is okay with it, then we can suggest it to Carol and Frank.”

I pointed out that time was of the essence, both because William, who would definitely be against this proposal could return at any minute, and because we didn’t know how long Frank had left.

Frustratingly, Miranda said we could discuss it after.

“After what?” I asked, wondering whether bribery would be an option.

“What was that?” yelled Miranda, suddenly and loudly.

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Carol.

“Nor me,” said Frank.

Arista shrugged, and as Carol opened her mouth, presumably to ask if I’d heard a noise, Miranda shushed everyone and quietly opened the door to the hallway.

The silence was broken by Carol gasping, followed by the gentle sound of her placing her gloved hand on her new husband’s shoulder.

William's naked lifeless body was hanging from the black chandelier, covered in bruises I'd never seen before. He wasn't wearing his shoes: one was on the floor and the other was stuffed in his mouth. My closed-lips tie had been used as the noose, and pages ripped from *The Collected Works of Charles Dickens* had been stuffed up his nose and anywhere else they would fit.

As I burst into peals of unrestrained laughter, I could have sworn that out of the corner of my eye, I could see a ghostly red hand, giving me the thumbs up.

The End

Hugh Allison lives in London, England. His other short stories include "Vacuous" (published by Bamboo Forest Publishing in the e-book *Hollow World: Vacuous*), "Growing Up with the Kindnarians" (published by Big Things Publishing in the paperback anthology *All the Small Things*), and "The Last Days of Kaboom Kendall" (to be published by Aesthetic, in late 2021). His poems have been published in *Poetry Plus*, *Departure Mirror*, *Riverbed Review*, and *Sundamaged Magazine*.

Posted 6/13/2021

Mitchell Waldman "After the Layoff" moved into town on 6/13/2021

AFTER THE LAYOFF

by

Mitchell Waldman

This used to be a great country. Not now. Not anymore.

I was laid off from the drugstore. Worked there almost thirty years. Worked my way up from the bottom, from Stock Boy to Manager, with little in the way of education — I didn't graduate high school, was a semester shy when my dad got sick. I ran that damned place for the owner, Bud Wilkins. Then, when Bud retired, and had no one to carry on the business, this big chain bought him out and they discarded me like a badly worn sneaker.

Not that I blame him. Paid for his and the Mrs.' retirement, I'm sure. Probably lying in their lounge chairs in sunny Florida right now, watching the clean frothy waves roll in on the hot white sand.

The big chain's got the big bucks. Owned by a private equity firm. And, Bud told me at the time, he made them promise to keep me on. He said "You're a good man, Phil...I wouldn't even have thought of selling unless they made that provision." Not his fault, I guess. He was like a father to me in a way, took me under his wing after my old man passed on. And the Corp did keep me on — for about two months, anyway, those cheap, lying bastards. But then, well, hell, they — some suit named Robert Johnson — just said I didn't "fit in with their program." Code words for I was too old and cost them too much money. So, they let me train my 20-something year old replacement at half the salary, then let me go. But, don't think I told them everything. Besides, what did I know about their "program"? Ha.

Now it's like my life is over. What can I do? What do I know? I know the drugstore business. That's it. And who wants to hire a fifty-three-year old ex-manager?

Thirty years down the drain. Thirty years of my life. No credit, no thanks, not even a "Have a good life" from the blue-suited son of a bitch

with the mechanical smile, when he shook my hand and told me with his cold empty eyes that my services would no longer be needed.

That bastard should pay. He should pay big.

So now I'm clipping coupons at the kitchen table, while Peg's at work at her teacher's aide job. Making a little money, but not nearly enough. It leaves us short a good chunk every month. It's been more than a month now and I need to find something, do something. I'm going fuckin' crazy sitting here all day, spinning through channels with the remote, cutting grass, raking leaves, looking for things to fix around the house.

I've been taking a hit of gin once in a while — got the bottle stashed in the garage — don't want Peg to find out. Hell, she dug me out of that mess when she first met me, got me into AA for how long? It's been a long time. I know I shouldn't, but go out in the garage every now and then. More this week than last. Don't know if she suspects anything yet, but if she does, she's probably not saying. That woman notices every little change in me, so I'm sure she knows. But could she blame me? Well, could she? Yes, she could. "It's not the end of the world," she said the other night, wrapping her arms around me tight in bed the other night while I just lay there flat on my back, staring at the ceiling. "You'll find something else. A change. It'll be good for you, for us. Expanding our horizons." That sort of thing. She's always so goddamned positive about shit.

Almost called my sponsor, Ted, the other day, but didn't. Trying to work things through on my own. Ted's voice is ringing in my brain: "Come on, Phil. You're not Superman. We all need some help sometimes." Yeah, Ted, I know. Don't tell me. I know.

I know a guy who can get me a gun.

Checking out the want ads every day. Called quite a few looking for managers at retail. Interviewed at a couple of retail stores. They said they were sorry but they were looking for something different. Like I'm some commodity on a fuckin' shelf.

Feeling itchy, claustrophobic. That strange jumpy feeling in the pit of my stomach, chest pain again. A panic attack?

Have to get out.

I shove the clipped coupons into the long yellow envelope, scoop up the trailing strands of cut newspaper, and toss them into the kitchen wastebasket.

Grab my keys off the hook over the stove and go out the back door, making sure it locks tight.

Walk down the street, down by the bridge, the river.

Not a bird chirping, not a sound in the bare streets.

When I get to the bridge I look down at the green river with its sudsy foam. It smells rancid, like a mass of sweaty armpits today. Nature. A couple of dirty seagulls down there on the rocks.

The body is floating face down, the back with the red and black checked shirt floating up and down in the water like a bobber. The graying hair submerging and coming back up around the back of its head.

Thinking about what I should do today. Go back, look for jobs, make a few calls, work on the resume. Not much to put on it though. Not much when you work the same place twenty-nine odd years and they can you because you're too good, know too much, cost too much. Hobbies, you can put stuff on there about hobbies. But what hobbies? Never been much on that. Not much of a hunter or fisherman like some guys. Like to drink a bit. Is that a hobby? — old guy liking to drink probably isn't what they're wanting to hear on a resume, not the kind of hobby they had in mind. And who gives a shit about hobbies anyway? All they care about's the bottom line. Maybe need to go to the library, take a book out on resume writing. Don't have any experience in this. Maybe call our son, Andy—he's done this recently, when he got that new job at the bigger newspaper. He might know something about it. But he and I haven't talked in a while. Something went awry a while back between us. About the car, the loans, his pregnant girlfriend...I don't remember which of these it was. Like I said, it's been a while.

My dead mother's head, crazy white hair like snakes, like Medusa's, floating in the air, her eyes opened wide, smiling at me, winking.

My doctor thought I might be a little depressed last time I saw him, to which I replied, "Yeah, ya' think? And don't I have a reason to be?" Still,

he gives me the script for the anti-depressant. Everyone's taking them these days and the doctors give them out like candy.

Okay, okay. I need to get my head on straight. Make a plan. Follow a course of action. Make myself a written list of things I want to do. Bucket list? But no, maybe not. It's too depressing. I was already doing what I was wanting to do. Having a decent job, a good family, a nice house, etc., etc. A normal life. Is there anything wrong with that? No, not until they pull the freakin' rug out from under you, from under all of that.

They don't, won't let you do that anymore in the US of A. Not since it's been taken over by the corporations. They want us to thank them for not firing us, and eat all the shit they got. Thank ya', Sir, thank ya', as we shovel it in.

Fishing on a boat. Holding my pole. Much younger then. Dad in the front, the radio playing softly. The waves pushing us gently as a sudden electric pull comes on my line, the sudden thrill of the bite.

Peg says I should see a shrink, maybe that'll help. I shrug her off. I pop my daily dose of pills. The ones for the blood pressure and the anti-depression ones. I'm not a goddamned nut job, I tell her, I'm just out of work. And where would we get the money for a shrink anyway? "There are resources for people like you." "Like me?" I say. "What's that mean? Guys who can't do anything, who can't even pay their bills anymore?" She puts her hand on my arm, just above the wrist, gently strokes me there, and kisses me on the cheek. "It's just temporary, Baby," she whispers. "We'll come through this thing okay. We always do, don't we?" I look into her brown eyes, let myself sink into them. "Yeah," I say, "we always do," not letting her know what I'm really thinking.

#

I'm sitting in the waiting room of one of the evil drugstore chain's competitors. My nephew works for them as a pharmacist, so I was actually able to get in for an interview this time, not that I wanted to ask him for a favor. He's thirty. I'm Uncle Phil, the guy who used to play ball with him when his good-for-nothing father took off without notice and never came back, I'm the guy he's always looked up to, and then I had to call him to ask for a favor. It was tough, very tough, to make that call. But what choice did I have? I had to swallow my pride, and that was just

to get an interview after going on a couple other interviews, then a month and a half of zilch.

I'm sitting in my chair with my briefcase before me, leafing through an old copy of Sports Illustrated I picked up off the glass table in front of me. I'm not even into sports, but that's what's on the table and I'm nervous, sweat dribbling down the side of my face. It's hot in here, maybe because I'm not used to wearing a suit jacket, or because of the clear glass and the sky light above. You can see the blue sky and the white puffy clouds traveling right on by through the ceiling.

I hear my name called—"Mr. Patrone?" I look up from the pages of the article I'm reading about some football player I've never heard of to see the receptionist at the huge circular oval-shaped desk giving me a little wave and a smile. I toss the magazine back on the table, pick up my briefcase, stand up, smile a little back at her, and start walking. She leads me down a narrow hallway lined with awards framed on the maroon-colored walls.

The interviewer's name is Rooney. The receptionist and her shallow smile leave me standing in front of the man who, surprisingly, has eyebrows like that other Rooney who used to be on 60 Minutes, but hardly a hair on his head. This Rooney is not smiling but scowling when I pause to shake his hand, the sound of the door closing behind me, and notice the wetness on my palm. Or was it on his? But that would make no sense. I'm the nervous, flatulent one, the one desperate for a job, a job of any kind at this point.

"Have a seat, Mr..." he says, looking down at my resume, "Patroney? Is that right?"

"Yes," I say, although it's Patrone, no E, but he's the interviewer, let him call me what he wants, and I sit in the maroon chair positioned directly in front of his large oak desk.

He's studying my resume, his brows furrowed. "Let's see, says here you worked at Wilkins Drugs for 29 years, then got laid off by Friendly Drugs. Was there a particular reason for that?"

I want to say, Yes, because they're shit head jerk offs, but that probably won't give him what he's looking for and won't make me look so good either. So, I say "They told me they were looking for someone who fit in

with their program better. I'm not really sure what that means. Mr. Wilkins should have sent you a letter...."

"Yes, yes," he says, "he spoke very highly of you." He stares at me above the letter he's holding close in front of his face, his hands shaking slightly — the beginning of some condition he doesn't know about yet? — brows still furrowed as if examining me, analyzing me to see if there's anything about me that he should be suspicious of, questions he should ask or just answer for himself. Like: Do I drink heavily? Well, I wouldn't call it heavily, what do you call heavily? Am I in good health? A trick question, I'm sure. What kind of health would you be in if you were laid off from your job after 29 years? Am I too old to re-train? They're looking for good dogs to reward with a bone or a treat. Would I take a cut in pay from my previous position? A question he might ask and one before which I would swallow and then answer, "Yes, I would consider it," making myself not beg for the position....And on and on...the questions he's thinking of asking, but probably won't, swirling around inside my head, activating my nervous stomach, my sweat glands, as well as my shit-eating grin.

He closes the folder with my resume in it and lays it on his desk.

"Well," he says, "as you know the position we have open is for an Assistant Manager at one of our outlying locations—in Bedford. Are you familiar with that area?"

"Yes," I say. "Sort of. I know it by reputation, never really been there."

He gives me another concerned look. "By reputation," he repeats.

"Yes, yes, nothing bad." I give a little laugh, feeling the beads of sweat under my left arm pit. "Actually, to be honest, I don't know that much about Bedford, but the location is not important to me." I NEED this position, I want to shout, reach over his desk and grab him by the collar, and scream it: I NEED THIS FUCKING JOB YOU STARCHED SUIT SON OF A BITCH!

"Good, good," he says. "Well, let me tell you a little about it..." after which he does and I listen or try to listen about the hours, the company benefits, etc. No mention of salary I notice, but that's negotiable, I'm sure, and not something to bring up on a first interview.

I sit there listening or attempting to listen, sweating, hot, thirsty, wondering what I'm doing in this room—a job, survival, that's what it's all about, feeling like I'm sitting in the hot seat, in a goddamned torture chamber, waiting for them to poke me with the hot orange branding iron. Until finally he folds his hands and asks me to tell me a little about myself. And I dive into my speech, memorized, sad to say, typed out the night before, about how I'm a team player, need to get that in right away to avoid the subversive ideas/questions, how I have so many years experience, have great ideas to contribute, but will also be attuned to the company's goals, that is the most important thing, how I have expertise in management, merchandising, employee relations, blah blah blah. Things I don't mention — how badly I could use a drink right now, how I can feel the trickles of sweat gliding down my sides inside my shirt, how I really need to piss and am squirming in my seat — shoulda gone before I got in the room, but the waiting room coffee is only now taking effect! And and...how I NEED THIS FUCKING JOB YOU COCKSUCKING MOTHERFUCKING SUIT!!!

When I finish he smiles, straightens his tie, stands up, comes around the desk and shakes my hand. “We've had quite a few applicants, but we're certainly impressed with your experience and credentials. So, we'll let you know in a couple of weeks or so.”

“Wonderful, thanks so much Mr.” — it escapes me for a minute, but I remember the eyebrows — “Rooney. Have a wonderful afternoon.”

Then I'm out the door, looking for the bathroom, wondering how I got to this point in my life at fifty three years old. Doing resumes, job interviews, begging for a job, for a bone. Sweat coating my chest under my shirt. Wondering what he meant when he said “We're certainly impressed with your...”, whatever the fuck he said he was impressed with. Who the fuck was he, anyway! The guy who could restore me to the world, to the equilibrium of money coming in/money going out, it's all okay, again. Not an easy place to be at my age, when things should be going smoothly at this point. But they're not.

My hands are shaking a little bit when I whip the keys out of my pocket. Good thing these newfangled key things don't make you line the key up with the slot anymore or I might have some trouble getting it in. I push the open button and tell myself I need to calm down. Itching. Need to piss. Need a drink. Need something more than that, something way more

powerful for this day, this world, this life, but I'm not, at this moment, exactly sure what that is.

#

It's a week later. I'm sitting at the kitchen table, half-heartedly leafing through the want ads, not really awake yet. Not really wanting to be. Sipping my coffee, my one cup of caffeine for the day—trying to keep it down to keep the blood pressure in check—just a touch of that powdered crap they call creamer sprinkled in it to cut down on the bite of the generic drip grind blend. Thinking about younger days, when things looked like they were in order, on track. Andy playing in the backyard on his swing set, Peg happy and playful, greeting me at the door after work with hugs and kisses and the biggest, warmest smile. Things were good then and I didn't even know it. Didn't know that was going to be the height of my happiness. Sipping at the coffee, reflecting back, wondering where my life has gone and where it's going.

Then I hear the mail box's metallic squeal and pull myself up off my rickety chair with a sharp pain—bad knee acting up—and head for the door. Pull the stack of letters from the box and hump back inside. There's one letter tucked inside the rest. From QDP Drugstores, Inc. I throw the stack down on the table, plop back down in my chair and stare at the letter for a moment before ripping open the top. Then unfold the letter and read the words:

Dear Mr. Patrone,

We enjoyed meeting with you last week and, despite your excellent qualifications, have filled the position you interviewed for with another applicant. We're sorry to have to give you this news, but wish you the very best in your employment search.

Yours truly,

Halbeit Rooney, Human Resources Director

QDP Drugstores, Inc.

I'm stunned. Feel like crying. I was counting on this one. It seemed like my best bet. And the interview seemed to go okay. What'll I tell Peg? What do I tell myself when I face the mirror in the morning anymore?

Have I lost who I am, what the world in its awkward arbitrary inertial way defined me as for the past twenty odd years?

I write my note for Peg, place it on the kitchen table, then lock the door and get in my car. Stop at a liquor store at the other end of town, where they don't know me. Get a bottle of gin, not the good stuff— can't afford that, but good enough right now. And what do I care about what it costs at this point? What will it matter in the end? Because that's what it's always been about, what it always will be about in this world. Money. You're measured, valued and lauded for how much of it you have, what you possess, the toys you can buy. If you have lots of it you're an instant celebrity, the news media reinforces the message of America: if you have more your life is worth more. While the rest of us go swimming in the sea of the faceless, swimming in circles, searching for our way, only to come to the conclusion after many years that there is no way for the likes of us.

After I get back in the car I pull out my wallet and take out the folded sheet of paper with the guy's address scribbled on it. Then I head to the ATM.

#

I hand him the money through the door. He doesn't invite me in. I stand there feeling itchy, twitchy. Want to take another pull from the bottle, but it's back in the car, under the seat. When he comes back he hands me a brown paper bag with a weight in it.

“Mind if I take a look?” I ask.

“Hey, it's your party,” the guy says with a smirk. He's young, wearing a white sleeveless T-shirt, has one of those pencil lined beards. Then the smirk disappears. “How I know you're not a cop?”

I stare at him. “Seriously? You're kidding me, right?”

“No,” he says, stone-faced. “Aww, shit, if you are, I already took your dough. I'm fucked either way.”

“I'm not. Don't have to worry about that. I'm just a guy who's been shit on, know what I mean?”

He looks at me and nods slightly. “Okay.”

I look inside the bag. The item as described with the accessories.

“Alright, looks good,” I say, reaching my hand out to shake his. He looks at me, like I’m a crazy old white man, then, as if to humor me, takes my hand and gives it a quick pump. “You take it easy with that, man, alright?”

I smile at him, then turn and walk back to my Buick, hearing the door shut softly behind me.

My drive is slow, determined. Not crazy, deranged, out of control. Just like any other day, driving slowly, calmly. Taking in the sights as I go. On the right, a sign for a new Dairy Queen — Coming Soon! Damn, how I miss the taste of DQ, could go for one right now. Welcome back, old friend. On the left, the Cinema is getting revamped, workers on their ladders, tending to its outer walls. About time. That place has shown some damned fine, overlooked flicks over the years. I drive past the precinct police headquarters and City Fucking Hall, what a laugh, the irony, I can’t take it, right past without them knowing, heading to their office, just a mile down the road.

It’s a serene setting—park-like you might call it—with a pond and fountain in front, ducks swimming around in their little family groups, a large patch of lawn behind that where I enter the parking lot. Not thinking really. Parking the car, turning the key, some commercial voice droning on about what I need to buy, then another, as I stare out the windshield at the building, the white puffy clouds reflected in the windows. The sun high in the sky, bright, scorching. I take a last hit from the bottle, then grab my bag, get out of the car, and close the door. It echoes in the stillness of mid-day in the lot. Everyone’s working, or, in my case, not working, at this hour. I stare up at the sun, right at it for a moment, then look away, white spots in my eyes as I look all around. Too bright, too hot, everything out of control. Regain my balance and walk toward the entrance. Open the door, walk up to the receptionist. She looks at me quizzically, a touch of concern on her face, then puts on the Corporate Receptionist smile.

“Can I help you?”

What a question, and what do I say, No, because nobody can help me now?

“Robert Johnson. I’m looking for Robert Johnson.”

She takes one look at me and says, “I’m sorry, Mr. Johnson is in a meeting. If you want to leave a message....”

Just then I see two guys coming out of the company's main office door and run to catch it.

“Hey, you can’t...”

The two suits look back at me as I storm into the office, and voices—one the woman, and another a deep man’s voice—yell behind me to stop.

I’m on high alert, on a mission. It’s all come to a head. Searching for his name on a door, as people hold papers, stop talking at the copy machine, stare at me.

I search black and white name plates—“Tom Edwards”, “Darryl Walters,”—running down the hall, everything passing by me, nothing in my head but the Goal, Retribution, Justice, Fire and Damnation the END. To pay back the man who ruined my life in one fell swoop. To see the look on his face when I stand before him with my surprise. What will he do, what will he say? Will he weep, plead, swear, or cower under his desk?

“Ralph Peterson,” I see on the plate outside one door, the image of a balding head in his desk chair, turning around to look at me, but too late, I’m already on to the next, turning the corner and there’s “Lucille Mayer”’s name plate, then “Floyd Wright,” “Jake Blakely,” “Carol Spimona,” “Justin Wattles,” running, a mad man, huffing like the out of shape fifty-three-year old that I am, listening to my heart racing, lungs pumping, feet moving past “Edward Layton,” “Don McFarley,” and then, then, yes, at the end of the hall, there’s his name— Robert Johnson.” I stop on a dime, almost fall. I step back, hugging the wood of the doorway and peer into the window on the top half of the door. And there he is, not at a meeting, but on the telephone. He doesn’t see me yet, but, oh, he will, he will in one short instant. I feel inside my jacket pocket for the gun, holding my breath for a second, and then slowly turn the door knob.

But suddenly there's a sound behind me, the shuffling of feet, a shout.

I jump back, then run forward, around another corner, and push through a restroom door -- WOMEN'S it says—hop into a stall and lock the door. The voices go past me, a couple of male voices.

“You check down that way.”

“Okay.”

“I'll backtrack, check in empty offices. He mighta slipped in one.”

“Got ya' . ”

I take in a deep breath. Try to figure out how I'm going to do this.

Now I'm in a panic. Needing to calm myself down. And then it's like a fog lifts. What am I thinking? What am I doing here? Seeing myself, my own pathetic image — doing years in a tin prison cell. Dying there. Is this all worth it? I hear a voice ask. A voice I don't recognize. A voice of reason from somewhere.

I wait till it's quiet outside, then walk slowly out of the stall and the restroom, know I can't go back the way I came in, but, watching behind me and then looking ahead, walk down the hall and find an exit in what seems like an eternity, my heart feeling like it's beating through my chest.

Outside I walk slowly to avoid suspicion, get in my car, turn the key and drive slowly out of the parking lot.

I drive back towards home. Take a pull from the bagged bottle when no one's looking. People are out, walking out of banks, into grocery stores, having smokes outside their offices, laughing, laughing....

I drive to the river, the bridge. Park it and pull myself out. It's like carrying a thousand pounds of dead weight, at least that's how it feels. I bring the bottle with me, and the gun. I stare over the bridge, looking down at the green suds of water crashing against the rocks. It would be quite a fall. I sit down, staring through the metal rungs, looking down, trying not to think, but things start flowing through my mind, bad things.

Rocks below, image of my dead mother's face in the water. Wish I had a cell phone to call Ted, but I don't have one.

And what could he do now, anyway? At this point, what could anyone do?

I pull the gun out of my jacket pocket. Stroke its cold blackness. Rub the end of the barrel against my cheek, my nose, my lips. Close my eyes hard. Place the pistol against my temple, put my finger on the trigger. Hold it there for a moment, breathing, just listening to myself breathe.

Then open my eyes and toss the son of a bitch over the bridge into the green suds. Watch it plunk into the current and disappear forever.

Sit there for an instant and stare dumbly at nothing, at the green and then look up to the blue sky. The goddamned sun shining like everything's fine.

Hear a squeal of tires behind me. Don't look at who or what it is. But then there she is, saying "What the hell is this?," waving my crumpled note, mad as fuck, I can tell. But then, the next thing I know, there's her fresh lavender smell, and her arms wrapped around, just holding me tight. And the tears are coming out of my eyes, and I'm saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." And her soft voice whispers "It's going to be all right, Phil, everything's going to be all right."

The End

Mitchell Waldman's fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous publications, including *The MacGuffin*, *Fictive Dream*, *The Waterhouse Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *The Faircloth Review*, *Epiphany*, *Wilderness House Literary Magazine*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and many other magazines and anthologies. He is also the author of the novel, *A Face in the Moon*, and the story collection, *Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart*, and serves as Fiction Editor for *Blue Lake Review*. A new story collection, *Brothers, Fathers, and Other Strangers*, is due out from Adelaide Books later this year. Mitchell lives in Rochester, NY with his partner, the journalist and poet, Diana May-Waldman, author of *A Woman's Song*. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Posted 6/10/2021

Shashi Kadapa “His Drinking Woes” moved into town on 6/10/2021

HIS DRINKING WOES

by

Shashi Kadapa

Events of the past few days had forced him, Ningya, country bumpkin and un-occasional farmhand to this piquant situation. He is now very rich, yet lives in terror, afraid to reveal his wealth. It started with his drinking.

Ningya is/was a daily wage earner, shirks in Dharwad when he finds work, and gives some of the earnings to his shrewish wife Kenchi, built like a buffalo with temperament and shoulders/ haunches like one. He spends the rest on illicit country liquor or arrack as it is called. His wife is of ample proportions, very vociferous and quarrelsome, and assaults him.

The fortuitous tragic train of events started one week back on Saturday early morning when dawn was breaking and it was payday. Ningya had worked hard in the fields of the landlord, Gowdaru, the whole night. The tiring work had created a deep quenchable thirst.

As he stood counting the money, the vile wretch Kenchi waylaid and accosted him.

“Le Ningya. Give me the money.”

“Arre Kenchi. The landlord paid me only four hundred rupees.”

“Don’t lie you Bhadya (Kannada abuse). I know you earned one thousand rupees. Hand it over or I will whack you.”

She wrestled and snatched the money and there was nothing he could do. He pleaded and beseeched.

“Ye Kenchi. Give me at least a hundred rupees. I have to go to the temple and make an offering.”

“Temple huh? Since when did a godless dog like you start going to temple?”

With his money tucked in her amply filled blouse, she waddled off, like a pregnant and constipated buffalo.

Ah, but Ningya is clever and experienced. He had hid fifty rupees in his underwear pocket! Off he went to the hooch shop and had two pots of arrack, plus a dash of pickles as complimentary snacks.

He tried to complain to the joint owner that the arrack was watered. In reply, the boss shouted, “Le Hadshike. Drink or f@@@k off.”

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Trouble started when he staggered out and started walking along the road to Dharwad, his home town. A pack of dogs started barking the moment he stepped into the compound of a building. It was their ‘season’, and the spurned ones charged him. He had a tough time hiking up the dhoti and running off.

Then he saw this empty tractor trailer with a nice bed of straw and he slept. Totally sizzled, Ningya did not know for how long. Someone hitched the trailer to a tractor it then stopped. He peered over the trailer and saw that he was in the backyard of a farm. Women were busy washing clothes and vessels and threshing grain. In the corner, he saw an old crone making bhakri, his favorite and staple food. He crept forward, grabbed a couple, and started running.

The old crone started shouting “Thief, thief!”

The other ladies started shouting “Help, save us!”

That was enough. A gang of farmhands and the landlord started chasing him. The landlord even fired a gun, the shots grazing his buttocks. He ran faster than a pig held for de-balling and jumped into a small quarry where a stream flowed. He hid quietly in a hole as the posse crossed, and they did not care to peek into the hole where he hid.

As he huddled, the smell of something very familiar wafted over.

Yes! It was an illegal still where country liquor was brewed!

The hidden quarry and flowing water made the place ideal for such illegal activities. He peered cautiously and saw workers busy with the brewing process, while some gambled under a rocky outcropping. Sudden shouts and screams sounded and the group started running.

It appeared that the posse suspected one of the moonshiners as the thief/raider. The illicit still workers and the gamblers ran off with the posse in hot pursuit.

Ningya sauntered out quietly and look at his luck!

He could see at least four truck tubes full of country liquor ready for dispatch. Arrack is transported in truck tubes. Overpowering smell and taste of rubber mingles with arrack taste. So what? Who drinks arrack for taste and smell? It is not scotch.

Then under the tree, he saw abandoned gambling stake money scattered about!

Ah! What luck!

Quickly he gathered the notes and stuffed them in a bag that lay on the ground and pushed it under his shirt, contemptuously tossing aside coins. It felt heavy. Some arrack still remained to be 'tubed' and he sat down and drank like there was no tomorrow, drinking the raw spirit in gulps that made his throat burn.

Then he grabbed the filled truck tubes and hoisted them on a cycle and started pedalling cautiously down the road to Kelgeri, a hamlet on the outskirts of Dharwad. A motorcycle was parked, but he did not know how to ride one.

His intention was to hawk the three tubes of arrack and stash one for himself. He hid one under a bridge, burying it in the mud and scattering twigs on the mound.

#

Now, how does one sell three tubes of arrack? He had no idea since he was only a consumer. He was clever enough not to approach any local

arrack shop. These bootleggers worked in a closed community and instantly recognized origins of the tube from signs painted on it.

Then it struck him, the best place was the spot where porters and laborers in the market yard gathered. The going rate was 20 rupees per pot of watered down arrack. He started shouting.

“Shere (liquor), Shere! Full strong, ten rupees.”

The first customer was highly skeptical and after having a mouthful, he was convinced. He brought out his tiffin box and filled it to the brim and shared it with friends. Business picked up briskly after that and quickly the first, second, and third tubes were empty! Some even brought empty and scoured out coconut shells to carry the spirit.

He was rich by five thousand rupees!

He stuffed all the money in the bag, taking care to shove a few notes in his shirt pocket.

This was wealth beyond his dreams. Lost in his dreams, he walked along the village pond dreaming of how he would spend the money, of the saree he would buy Kenchi, of the sweets he would purchase the clothes he and his kids would wear, and of the ‘Inglis’ alcohol he would drink. There was still one tube full that he had hidden!

They were three cutthroats that waylaid him where the road dipped into a thicket, and emerged on the other side. Like Ningya, they had covered their faces with a towel, and worse, they held sharpened sickles in their hands. One of them carried a sack on his shoulders.

“Le!” They growled. “You made a lot of money selling arrack. Hand it over!”

This was bad. Not only would the money be stolen, but they would probably hack him out of spite.

With trembling hands, he reached into the hidden bag and pulled it out, asking them to leave him something.

“Ha!” shouted one fellow. “Open the bag and show what you have.”

He reached into the bag and felt something heavy, wooden like a handle and pulled it out. His surprise was as great as theirs when it turned out to be a country made pistol!

“Don’t shoot!” They screamed and dropped the sack. They took off, jumping into the thicket, and the pond, paddling desperately to keep their heads above water, and make it to the far bank.

Ningya picked up the sack, dipped his hand inside, and what did he find? It was almost full of gold and silver jewelry!

He had heard news about a gang of dacoits who had broken into the local landlord’s house and made off with many kilograms of jewelry. A bounty was placed on the thieves.

The landlord was a very foul tempered fellow, prone to violence, and he had threatened to chop off the hands of the dacoits when they were found. The local police and locals were hunting them. Getting caught with the gold was certain death.

Ningya wanted to toss the bag into the lake. But gold has a very unique fatal attraction. He willed himself and even swung the sack a couple of times over the water, but could not bring himself to fling it.

#

He waved at a bus heading to Dharwad and ensconced himself in the hard seat. Across the aisle was this nubile lass. She jiggled when the bus went over the ruts. She had the lean build of a farm worker, lean in the right places, pointed, round, and soft at the desired places.

He looked at her, she looked away. He got up to slide near her, when she lashed out.

“Why you drunk Hatya (kannada abuse)? Can’t you sit in your seat? Don’t you have sisters at home?”

Aghast, he moved to another seat as other passengers glared at him. A couple of busy bodies were getting up to accost him. A thrashing was due. Luckily, the bus went over a huge pothole and one of the busy bodies was flung into her lap.

My, my! She was quick this girl. She slapped him once, the sound ringing through his ears and it felt as if she was hitting him.

Then Ningya caught his reflection in the window pane. With his new found wealth, he imagined that he looked like a rich landlord. The reflection that stared at him showed a haggard face, with scraggly stubble, red bloodshot eyes, wearing a torn and dirty shirt. No wonder the girl was not infatuated. He longed to pull out one of the necklaces and make pretense of examining it to impress and win her over. Better sense prevailed and he kept quiet.

He got down at the market bus stop, bought some chicken, vegetables, rice, and onions, placed them in the sack. The market was buzzing with activity. He stopped for a cup of tea and listened to the conversation.

“The arrack thief stole ten tubes of arrack and a motorcycle.”

“Yes, I heard that he sold the stuff in Kelgeri.”

“He even stole the gambling money.”

“I pity him. Irya, the bootlegger, is searching for him. He has vowed to skin and use his blood in the arrack.”

Strong words of denial came to Ningya’s mouth. He wanted to tell them that there were only four tubes, and it was a cycle, not a motorcycle that he stole. Fear kept his mouth shut. It was clear that he had missed some tubes and chided himself for this oversight.

It was also clear that some of the moonshiners or gamblers had backtracked, stole what they could from their master, and blamed it on him.

“Ha! What a dishonest world! There was no honor even among thieves!”

“What about the gang that was caught in Kelgeri? They are claiming that they were robbed at gunpoint by a thief.”

“Really, this arrack thief appears to be very active. The landlord has increased the bounty on the thief’s head.”

“If I find him, I will hand him over to the landlord.”

“You fool! Better keep the gold and finish him off.”

He was privy to a very disturbing conversation, and gulped down the hot tea. He realized that it would be hard to hide the money and wealth. Kenchi would go through his pockets and seize everything. When she found the loads of money, she would spend it like mad and get him caught.

The moonshiner would skin him and use his blood to make arrack!

If he showed Kenchi the gold, she would wear and flaunt it in front of the neighbors. He would be caught and get chopped up by the landlord. Running away was not an option since Kenchi had four brothers with whom his relations were strained from some unpaid debts and they would relish hunting him down.

Ningua was trapped. Where would he hide it? His worries had suddenly increased. He was earlier worried about earning a small amount to keep his family fed, and to have an occasional drink. Now he was a wealthy man and was worried that he would be caught and finished.

This is the story of his drinking woes!

The End

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Maria J. Estrada “Down South, Where the Water is Warm” moved into town on 6/7/2021

DOWN SOUTH, WHERE THE WATER IS WARM

by

Maria J. Estrada

Friday afternoon sweltered 114 degrees; flies rested in their secret places. Yesenio, a Mexican farm worker with a third-grade education, thought of his upcoming 40th birthday. He slumped on the dirt border and wiped the sweat off his face three times, paused, then wiped three times again. He wore thick bumpy red gloves, the cheap cotton shirt from Saturday swap meets, and dark blue imitation Levis. By his side was his splintery shovel, La Novia. He was not a beer-bellied man, and he was not graying like so many compadres his age. These days, his face wore the thoughtful look of mystics and nothing of the humor of uneducated men.

He removed his gloves and inspected his hands. They were covered by hundreds and hundreds of dust-filled lines, roads that went nowhere. There were blisters upon blisters from making ditches with La Novia. Cecilia, his wife, always joked that he spent more time caressing that shovel than he did her. He was proud of his ragged hands and his trusty shovel.

All his life he had worked hard enough to make his grandfather stand tall. When he was thirteen, he worked the cane fields in Sonora. Drought ran that life out, and he crossed the border in 1972, pa’ el Norte, with a younger pregnant Ceci. He was 22 then and running had been so much easier for him. Now he could barely beat the irrigation water from collapsing the protective borders he labored so hard to build.

It was those goddamned gophers that made his life miserable! They would burrow where they had no business and overflow the street, which always flooded just as a foreman was driving by the field. He hated the furry bastards because now they were too quick for his blows. Even when he yelled at them, they lingered, and stared with their shiny black eyes before running to the next acre. The loud rustling of moving branches disturbed his internal diatribe.

-Hello! ¿Que paso Yesenio? ¿Porque tan aguitado?-

Smiling at El Profe, Yesenio offered lemonade, “Hello Profe.” That summer, everyone had taken a liking to the new guy because he was educated, but not creido, like those conceited pochos that tried passing for whites—those pochos with their thick tongues and butchered English. Yesenio admired the young man. He was prieto with curly hair and a strong handshake. El Profe had been a fifth-grade teacher in San Luis, San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico, but he wanted to marry the daughter of a banker. He made more money slaving in America one week than working for the school in two months. To Yesenio, who had always had faith in the educational system, this didn’t make any sense. Teachers deserved respect and a living wage. Nowadays a waiter could make more than an engineer and sometimes a cab driver more than a doctor.

-No estoy triste. Es que mi birthday es este martes y no me van a dar day off.-

“What?! Como que no day off?” asked El Profe with some difficulty.

In his struggling English, Yesenio added, “Yes, plus, I must take my wife to see a new, eh, como se dice? Curandero, a new healer from Mexicali. Sunday I must play my guitarra at El Corazón Inmaculado and then work night shift.”

Profe shook his head angrily, “How many are you to be?”

Yesenio shifted uncomfortably and mumbled, “Forty.”

“The Year of the Jaguar!”

Yesenio smiled. He didn’t understand that part of his heritage nor did he care to, but he nodded respectfully. He didn’t even know what a jaguar looked like, and it all sounded like devil worship to him.

El Profe continued, “The jaguar was the spirit animal of Tezcatlipoca, Smokey Mirror, the Toltec god.” El Profe pushed his trendy blue glasses up his nose and took a final swig of the bitter lemonade.

“How is your wife?” All the workers knew about Yesenio and Cecilia’s troubles.

Yesenio looked down to inspect the head of La Novia. It was black and smooth.

-Rezamos todos los días. After, like the doctor says—miscarriage—no mas babies. Pero, hay que tener fe.—

El Profe looked away sadly and went to work his side of the grove. Alone, Yesenio played with the fancy word he had just learned about.

-¡Toltecisimo!—

-El Maestro Tolteca.—

-Toltecilandia.—

-¡Tooooooolteeeeee Taqueria! Tacos tacos Toltec.—

“Tolteca bullshit. . .”

He shoveled mechanically. Crash, swish, crash. Dirt upon dirt in an endless crisscross of sandy barriers.

“My wife thinks I hold you muchisimo. Do think you so?”

He shoveled nonstop until the flies began buzzing around his eyes and exploring his nose. The sun was going down slower than a tired man desired. He would still have to check the thin metal compuertas of the canal to make sure they were all closed tightly. He walked down the dusty road feeling the scratching of the branch thorns.

He thought of his wife all alone in their trailer. She never said she was unhappy or that she hated those walls, with nothing to do, but clean and clean and cook outside or feed the neighborhood kids who came begging for a “sanwichy.” Still, he knew if they had had children, she would have been much happier. Women were always happier with children of their own. Pausing, he thought on that night; Yesenio never asked what exactly happened so many years ago but offered all the pain as a sacrifice to God.

He just remembered he came home to emptiness and a trail of putrid blood from the kitchen to the doorway. He had no friends then. No phone. No car. Just the increasing stench of rotting blood. Sitting and

waiting outside his trailer on an empty plastic bucket and accompanied by a large bottle of tequila, he drank a dead man's wish. When Ceci was brought home by a kind social worker, Yesenio was passed out in his vomit. But, she did not hurry to clean him up or help him into bed.

For days, his wife was a lime green color. She would not eat and only drank a little yerbabuena. When Yesenio would talk to her, she would stare at the floor or cry into her worn, blue rosary. There were some days he was so desperate, he wanted to beat her, so she would eat. But his grandfather's words would echo in his head, "God gave you hands to work. Not get into drunken brawls. Or hit your children. Not to beat your wife. A wife can be a beautiful thing. The less you hit them, the more beautiful they will stay. Look at lazy Rodriguez's wife. Poor woman works like a mule, making tortillas from four in the morning until eight at night. Used to be so pretty, and now, she has a crooked nose and a blind left eye. Always use your hands for good things. Always."

Yesenio remembered. He would help Ceci into the shower when he got home and clean whatever dishes he had left in the morning. He even combed her hair and never complained. Not once. Not even when the other workers made fun of his soggy tasteless bean burritos. He took her to the old smoky Teatro Royal in San Luis to watch a repeat *Enter the Dragon*, with one of their favorite actors. No good deed made her well. Not even the trip to El Golfo de Santa Clara with its empty beaches and barefoot starving children.

Later, they would learn she had lost the baby and would most likely never conceive again. Yesenio didn't understand all the medical terms, but something was wrong in her womb, an ailment all curanderos claimed they could fix. There would be no more pregnancies, and that was a heavier burden, heavier than the sun in July. Instead, Yesenio and Cecilia had many godchildren to spoil, and Cecilia fed all the little ones whose parents were too busy, too broke, too drunk, or too high. Still, it wasn't the same, and he worried about his wife. Every visit to the new curandera or curandero raised their hopes, but all they got was an emptier wallet.

Yesenio inspected the compuertas. He went up and down the cement snake, making sure they all held tightly. The water was slow and shallow. He saw tadpoles chasing each other and a few catfish the size of his forearm. They would die with the next irrigation. He secured all the barriers forcefully with *La Novia*. At the base of the canal, Yesenio

spotted a small moving thing. He squinted. It was a grey gopher, fatter than their usual breed.

It moved methodically across the dirt road. Slowly, slow enough for Yesenio to beat. Yesenio grabbed the shovel like a bat and charged. He neared, and the gopher had not noticed him. His heart hammered in this throat—At last! The gopher was gorged and sluggish. Startled by his shadow, it made a mad dash for the next acre. It struggled, leaving a trail where its fat belly dragged on the sandy road. Yesenio was so close now. He could almost strike. The gopher gained speed and crashed through the grass.

“Hijo de puta!” he heaved, wiping the sting from his eyes. Chasing after a gopher in the orchard was ridiculous. There were too many thorns and branches. Yesenio glared and inspected the grass. It was long and unkept. The branches were over-burdened and touching the ground. He cursed and entered. No goddamned fat-bellied gopher was going to beat him today!

Sure enough, it had left a trail of flattened leaves and crushed grass. Creeping towards the creature, Yesenio began to notice a strange smell he had sniffed outside his trailer every now and then on trash burning nights. He inspected the greenery and saw it again.

It was resting carelessly four trees away. Yesenio nearly cried for joy and charged again. He ran closer, and the gopher lay unmoving. He lifted La Novia over his head, grinning with anticipation, and stopped. For a brief moment, he considered the squiggly mess beside her belly. With two hard blows, he dispatched the new family into a furry mass. He smiled and looked around for applause. Only orange X’s marking the trees for burning had witnessed his deed, but he held La Novia over his head triumphantly!

“GOOOOOOAL! GOAL! GOAL!” He laughed out loud until he nearly vomited. He paused and inspected the trees again.

Probably some rich person was building a house there, some rich person who would have a large swimming pool and blonde children. That man would have everything, while he and his friends would merely have the opportunity of picking the rich man’s fruit at night.

He sneezed forcefully. The smell was stronger where he stood. Strange graceful plants grew around him. He counted.

Cinco. Siete. Diez. ¡Puteada!

His heart started beating fast. He genuflected and inspected the graceful greenery. Yesenio blinked several times and blinked again. He plucked a leaf and held it to his nose.

The warnings his boss had preached for years suddenly came back to him. He knew exactly what to do: Destroy the plants and call the sheriff or the foreman in charge. Had to do what he was told. Always did what he was told. He paused briefly and absorbed the pungent smell.

How much was each plant worth? Was this high-quality mota? There were plenty of people in the barrio, old people with no medical insurance, who could use the plant for medicinal purposes. Old Nena used it in an alcohol rub for her arthritis. Rumor had it that Sanchez drank it in a tea for his ulcers. How much did they pay for that relief? Father Jaime certainly did not approve of the stuff. –¡La mota trae al Diablo!,– he remembered the old priest shouting one Sunday during Mass, after an anniversary party gone awry. Marijuana was the lazy pachuco's joyride. Laziness was a sin. He looked back towards the bloody mass. Strangling the handle of his shovel, he went to work.

On the way to his truck, he sang a sad corrido about a man who bet all his money on a horse that lost. He looked for El Profe. Only empty rows and the occasional lamenting dove remained. He took off his sweaty shirt and started the car, letting the air conditioner run before sitting inside. Plastic seats could give cruel burns in summer.

On the drive home, Yesenio drove the speed limit and was careful not to run any stops like he usually did. No sense getting pulled over on his birthday. He thought long and hard of where he would rather be. He thought of el Golfo de Santa Clara, where the water was warm, and the sand was clean. Where tourists only came on Labor Day and the seagulls did their crazy dance in the sky. He thought of the lonely lighthouse he had visited as a young man with Ceci when she was recuperating. He had always wanted to go on vacation there again, maybe even retire and open up a taqueria. Tacos Toltec! he thought.

He parked his car under the old mesquite, a green thorny tree with good shade and charming cicadas. Looking around to see if any of the neighborhood kids were nosing around his lot, he exited the truck slowly. Chingate, the lanky yellow dog with a missing left ear was the only creature in sight. With a quick step, Yesenio entered his home.

Cecilia jumped and pulled her right arm behind her back. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a seashell diadem. She was wearing his favorite dress, the red velvet one too hot for summer and black velvet shoes to match. On the kitchen table behind her was a pink, frosted cake with a large 40. She smiled that mischievous smile he only saw in the bedroom.

–Llegaste temprano, pero, Happy Birthday, mi cielo.–

Slowly, she presented a new pair of yellow work boots, as he presented her with a large bundle of sweat and weed. At first, she was confused by the pungent gift. She searched his face for clarity, and as their eyes locked, a moment of understanding passed between them.

Dreams of children laughing filled her heart and soul, and Yesenio felt like a young man once again.

The End

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Mike Murphy “The Day Hondo Found That Rare Bottle of Wine at Sullivan’s Tap & Eating Establishment” moved into town on 6/4/2021

**THE DAY HONDO FOUND THAT RARE BOTTLE OF WINE AT
SULLIVANS TAP & EATING ESTABLISHMENT**

**by
Mike Murphy**

It was Hondo who discovered it while ripping up some old wine racks in the basement of Sully’s. Eugene Sullivan, the owner, oftentimes bartender, and just plain “Sully” to nearly everyone, hired him in early February to get rid of the things so he – Sully, that is – could use the space to stock up for St. Patrick’s Day.

It was around 5:00 p.m. when Hondo came upstairs carrying. . . the bottle itself.

#

“Quitting time,” he announced, his brown hair and black t-shirt speckled with sawdust.

“So it is,” a surprised Sully agreed, looking at his watch. “Where has the day gone? How about a pint for the road? On the house.”

“Don’t mind if I do. Thanks. That’s thirsty work.”

“I’m sure it is, and I’m grateful.”

“Let’s see if you’re still grateful when you get my bill,” he joked before sitting on one of the many stools framing the bar.

Sully pulled a beer and set it down before him. “Come to papa,” Hondo said, raising it to his mouth. “Nectar of the gods, that is,” he remarked a healthy sip later.

“Did you run into any trouble?”

“A few splinters. Nothing I can’t handle,” Hondo assured him. “Do you want the old wood from those racks?”

“No. I was gonna toss it out. Why?”

“I was thinking I’d bring it home for my wood stove. It should burn nicely.”

“It’s all yours.”

“How old are those racks?” Hondo asked after some more nectar.

“I’m not sure,” Sully told his friend. “Pretty old. I don’t know how some of them are still standing.”

“A few of them fell apart when I breathed on them.”

“With your breath, I don’t wonder.”

“Good one,” Hondo said and chuckled. “How long has this place been a pub?”

“Let me think: Before it was Sully’s, it was O’Brien’s, and before that, it was Finnegan’s. I know those wine racks were down there in Ian O’Brien’s time because I used to work for him. In all my time tending bar, I don’t think I ever got anything out of that cellar.”

“Then this belongs to you,” Hondo said, placing the dusty bottle on the bar.

Sully picked it up in one hand. “Where’d you find it?”

“In one of the racks. It flipped up in the air when I started pulling the wood apart. I caught it just before it hit the floor.”

“Let’s see what we have here.” He rubbed some dust off the label and read it, fumbling with the pronunciation. “La. . . Caprice Ordo. 1979.”

“Put on your glasses,” his friend advised him.

Sully donned his specs and, very surprised, read the label again. “1779?”

“That wine is more than two hundred years old.”

Sully put the bottle down in front of him. “Wow! Some people say there’s been a pub on this spot since the American Revolution. I guess they’re right. I wonder how that bottle went unnoticed for so long.”

“It had slipped down between the racks. I’d wager no one’s seen it for years,” Hondo explained. “Well, it’s found now, and all yours. A lucky catch, that was.”

One of Sully’s semi-regular patrons, a short, plump, balding man whose name the barkeep had never bothered to ask, approached. “Excuse me, Mr. Sullivan,” he began in a rather high voice. “Did you say you have a bottle of wine that is over two hundred years old?”

“That’s right. Hondo found it down in the wine cellar.”

“You have a wine cellar?” the man asked eagerly.

“It’s empty – has been for years. Hondo’s been tearing down the racks for me.”

“Is it suitably cool in this wine cellar, Mr. Hondo?” the patron asked.

“Hondo’s the first name,” he clarified after a short chuckle. “The last’s McGruder.”

“My apologies, sir,” the little man said. “Is the wine cellar cool?”

“There’s a little nip to it.”

“Marvelous! Wine keeps much better in suitable temperatures.” The patron rubbed his ample brow and said, “Forgive me. I’ve forgotten my manners: My name is Reginald Kaye. Perhaps you’ve heard of me. I’m a noted oenophile.”

“You mean,” Sully asked, unsure, “you don’t believe in God?”

Now it was Kaye’s turn to chuckle. “Very witty. Very witty indeed,” he remarked. “No, an oenophile is a connoisseur of fine wines.” He looked longingly at the bottle. “Might I see it please?”

“Sure.”

Kaye picked up the bottle and carefully turned it over in both hands. He held it close to his eyes and, squinting, inspected it for who knows what for nearly a minute. Smiling, he gingerly put it back down on the bar. “It is quite authentic,” he announced. “What a rare find!”

“That’s good to know,” Sully added.

“Notice the crescent moon on the label,” Kaye went on, switching into lecture mode. “That was the symbol of this vineyard. The bottle and the cork appear to be completely intact – even after two centuries. Marvelous! Marvelous!”

“Glad you like it,” Hondo told him.

“Point of fact: The ink used on the label is made from grape residue. The owners of this vineyard let nothing go to waste.”

“Are they still around?” Sully inquired.

“Alas, no. They closed in the mid-1800s. Quite a loss to the wine world.”

“The name sounds French,” Hondo said.

“It is.”

“How’d it get here?” asked Sully.

“I heard you mention the longevity of this building as a pub – perhaps all the way back to the Revolution. The bottle dates from that time. The French did assist the early Americans during our war with England. I can only assume this wine came over from France during that time.” He gazed longingly at the bottle. “The contents must be ambrosia!”

“You’re welcome to some,” Sully informed him. “I was going to chill it in the fridge for a bit. Then Hondo and I were gonna have a snort.”

“Please no!” Reginald protested at the top of his lungs. “One does not snort two-hundred-year-old wine.”

“One doesn’t?”

“No. It is meant to be savored. First, its bouquet must be inhaled through the nostrils and appreciated to heighten the senses.”

“You’re not one of those guys who goes around swishing the stuff in their mouths and then spitting it out, are you?”

“I have been known to do that on occasion.”

“Always seemed like a waste to me.”

“The appreciation of a fine vintage is a skill that must be honed.”

“Spitting is a skill?” Hondo asked.

“Mr. Sullivan,” Kaye said quickly, “might I convince you to part with that bottle?”

“You want it?”

“Indeed I do. I’ll give you a thousand dollars.”

“For one bottle?”

“If there are more in the wine cellar, I will happily purchase them as well.”

“Hondo?” Sully asked, turning hopefully to his friend.

“No. I . . . I didn’t see any others.”

“What do you say, sir? I’ll write you a check. If you prefer cash, my bank is down the street.”

“You’ve got a –” Sully began.

“Two thousand dollars,” a man walking towards them announced.

“Wilson!” Kaye said, his voice almost a hiss. “I should have known you’d be here to try to squelch my moment of glory.”

“And it’s a good thing I am! To think that you were going to cheat this humble barkeep out of such a rare bottle for a mere thousand dollars.”

“Were you trying to cheat me?” Sully asked.

“No!” Kaye protested.

“Lamont Wilson,” the tall, thin, and bearded patron introduced himself, “at your service.”

“Hi,” Sully replied. “This is Hondo. He found the bottle.”

“How you doin’?” Hondo replied, holding out an ignored, dusty hand.

“Charmed,” Wilson said disdainfully before turning to Sully. “May I see the bottle?”

Sully pointed at it. Wilson picked it up and started doing the same sort of inspection that Kaye had done only moments ago. “I’ve already pronounced it sound,” Reginald told him.

Wilson ignored the little man and continued the inspection. “And since when do I or anyone in the Boston Wine League trust your judgment?” he asked without even looking at Kaye.

“You dirty –”

Wilson finished his job and put the bottle back down on the bar. “My offer stands,” he told Sully. “Two thousand dollars.”

“For one –”

“Three thousand,” Kaye interjected.

“Four thousand,” Wilson added, outbidding him.

“Five!”

“Whoa! Hold on, gents,” Sully said, waving his hands in the air. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the offers. I do. But this is getting out of hand.”

“Six thousand dollars!” Wilson exclaimed.

“Aren’t you friends?” Hondo inquired.

“Friends? Bah!” Wilson said dismissively.

“Briefly in our boyhood years,” Kaye confessed, “but not now.”

“There are no friendships in the world of wine,” Wilson proclaimed. “Reginald and I have always been rivals. At one time, his reputation was unparalleled.”

Kaye was insulted. “At one time?”

“But since the Cabernet incident of 2014. . . well, need I go on?”

“There are rival wine drinkers?” Sully asked.

“We are not merely wine drinkers, sir,” Kaye said, again slipping into lecture mode. “We appreciate all things wine: The firm spring of some unpicked grapes ripening in the morning sun. The slow application of the label onto the bottle. The first whiff of the pleasure that awaits the palate once the cork is so delicately withdrawn. All of these things and more make the senses sing out for joy in remembrance of that first day of creation when God Himself made the grape.”

Hondo asked, “That was on the first day?”

“I believe so,” Kaye told him. “My bid is now seven thousand dollars.”

“Guys, I need you both to cool your jets for a minute,” Sully said.

“I beg your pardon?” Lamont queried.

“I need you to calm down.” Sully took a deep breath himself, by way of modeling. “Couldn’t you share this bottle?”

“Absolutely not!” Kaye proclaimed.

“Perish the thought!” Wilson countered.

“The very idea that I should lower myself to. . .”

“That is impossible.”

“This little bottle is a very important object d’art, huh?” Sully asked.

“Most assuredly,” Kaye continued. “Why would we be bidding such figures if it were not?”

“Eight thousand dollars!” Wilson announced.

“Holy cow!” Hondo interjected.

“Gentlemen,” the barkeep said, holding the wine gingerly in one hand, “I need to promote this before I sell it.”

“I don’t understand.” Reginald Kaye looked concerned.

“I’ll bet that some of the local news people would love to hear the story of the two- hundred-year-old bottle of wine that was found at Sully’s Tap.”

“Please don’t,” Wilson said.

“It’ll be good publicity for the joint. It’s not every day something like this happens. It’ll bring in thirsty mouths.”

“But it will also bring in other, less reputable bidders,” Kaye explained.

“Precisely,” Wilson agreed.

“He’s got a point,” Hondo remarked.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Sully continued, putting the bottle down. “Tell you what: I give you my word that I won’t sell this bottle to anyone else if you two do what I say.”

“You promise?” Kaye asked.

“Sully’s word is his bond,” Hondo told the two oenophiles.

“How long will you need?” Wilson asked.

“A week, maybe two.”

“Two weeks?”

“I’ll keep the bottle safe.”

“Could it be put back into the wine cellar from whence it came?” Kaye asked.

“Sure.”

“Under guard?” Wilson suggested.

“Guard?” Sully inquired as Hondo laughed.

“The publicity campaign is bound to bring some undesired attention.”

“Don’t you get your feathers ruffled. Aside from a few fights after some football games that didn’t turn out the way some of my customers wanted them to, Sully’s has never had any problems, and we’re not about to start. I can deal with anything the publicity sends my way.”

“Very well. I trust your business acumen, of course,” Wilson said.

“Likewise,” his rival agreed.

“There’s only one problem I see,” Sully told them.

“Problem?” Kaye asked anxiously.

“What. . . What problem?” Lamont wondered.

“The way you two have been throwing around the bucks, it’s clear to me that you’re gonna keep one-upping each other so you can own the bottle.”

“You can count on me for a thousand dollars more than whatever this charlatan bids,” Wilson informed the bartender.

“Charlatan?” Kaye countered, fuming. “I will always outbid him, Mr. Sullivan. I urge you to choose me for this delightful vintage. I did approach you about it first, after all.”

“See what I mean? You two used to be friends.”

“We were young and foolish,” Reginald told Sully.

“Our palates are much more discriminating now, as are our tastes with whom our time is spent,” Lamont added.

Sully couldn’t get over the two of them. “There’s going to have to be some other component to this sale – more than just the money – so I can make my decision.”

“What are you suggesting?” Kaye inquired.

“I’m not sure yet. I’ll let you know when I am.”

#

The publicity campaign began. Sully was a little overwhelmed by the attention. Everyone wanted to see the bottle, to touch it. At least half a dozen other people contacted him about buying the wine, but he had promised it to either Mr. Kaye or Mr. Wilson, and he stuck to his word.

Then there was the day that blonde lady reporter came in from the local news. Sully got a shave and a haircut for that. He even put on a suit!

#

“This is Laura Shelby reporting live from Sullivan’s Tap & Eating Establishment on Pearl Street,” the pretty reporter said into the camera while standing in front of the bar, “with news of the rare bottle of La Caprice Ordo, 1779, that was found in this pub’s dilapidated wine cellar the other day.” She took a few steps to her right, bringing Sully and a few of his many patrons into the shot. “I’m here with the pub’s proprietor, Mr. Eugene Sullivan. Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening, Miss Shelby,” Sully replied, giving her a quick but appreciative glance. “You’re looking lovely tonight.”

“Thank you,” she responded uneasily. “You. . . You flatter me.”

“I might have the gift of gab, young lady, but I always speak the truth.”

“Unfortunately,” Shelby continued, a little discombobulated and hoping she wasn’t blushing, “our time is limited. Can we please get to the odd discovery here the other day?”

“It was Hondo who found it,” Sully continued, gesturing at his friend seated at the corner of the bar. “I hired him to take apart some old wine racks down in the cellar so I could have more storage.” He leaned into the reporter’s ear. “By the way, he’s a great guy. . . and single.”

“I certainly am,” he added, also appreciating Shelby’s beauty, “and pretty well off.”

“That’s. . . uhm. . . nice to know.”

“Hondo’s Demolition and Takeaway. Google him,” Sully added, slipping in an advertisement for his friend. “Anyway, the bottle turned out to be a two-hundred-plus-year-old French wine.”

“How did it get here?”

“Speculation is that it came over from France while they were helping us in our war against England.”

“I understand the bottle is well preserved.”

“Oh yeah!” he said, removing the wine from underneath the bar and handing it to the reporter. On their separate distant stools, Kaye and Wilson were undergoing the tortures of the damned every second Shelby held their wine.

“Living history,” she said appreciatively.

“That’s what it is,” Sully agreed.

“Please take it back. I’m. . . I’m afraid I’ll drop it.”

Sully gently reclaimed the bottle. “Safe and sound.”

“I hear,” Shelby continued after collecting herself, “you’ve received some impressive offers for the bottle.” This question made the two oenophiles lean forward and strain to hear.

“I have,” the barkeep admitted. “Modesty prevents me from mentioning the figures.”

“The wine is drinkable after all these years?”

“So I’m told. Two of Boston’s most noted wine experts have looked over the bottle and pronounced it sound.”

“Will you be selling it to one of them?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Even with the other offers?”

“I gave them my word.” Kaye and Wilson sat back, relieved.

“When will the sale take place?” the reporter asked.

“In a week or so, after I’m done with all this publicity.”

“Perhaps we could get the full story once the sale takes place?”

“I don’t see why not. I’d be pleased to have you grace my pub again.”

Shelby turned to face the camera. “For Eyewitness News, this is Laura –”

“Just a moment, miss,” Sully put in.

“Yes?”

“Sullivan’s Tap & Eating Establishment at 254 Pearl Street is open every day from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. New customers get a free first drink – their choice.”

#

The publicity brought in a lot of new customers. Sully was very pleased. But, as the day neared for the sale to either Mr. Kaye or Mr. Wilson, he grew agitated. If it was strictly for money, those two would one-up each other until the cows came home. No, there had to be some other ingredient to all this, something that would help him make a definite decision in favor of one of those guys.

The last piece of the puzzle came to him the night Patrick Muldoon walked into the bar. He was looking a bit down in the mouth.

#

“What’s up, Pat?” Sully greeted him.

“Oh, you don’t want to know,” his friend said.

“Sure I do. It’s part of the creed.”

“Creed?”

“The bartenders’ creed. We’re supposed to serve drinks and lend an ear. We’re like psychiatrists with liquor licenses.”

“They’re the best kind.”

“Guinness?”

“Please.”

Sully pulled him one. “If I didn’t listen to customers’ problems – especially loyal ones like you – they’d drum me out of the union. Now, what’s up?”

“I got canned today,” Muldoon answered glumly.

“I’m sorry to hear.”

“Fifteen years. Can you believe it?”

“That drink’s on the house,” his bartender told him.

“Thanks.” He took a good sip and smacked his lips. “I’ll have to find something soon. My girl’s college expenses aren’t gonna wait. I can’t pay for that school with my good looks, that’s for darn sure.”

“You know – in case I haven’t told you lately – I’ve always admired the way you picked yourself up after your wife passed on. Strength! That’s what it was.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice. Did I want to curl up in a ball and cry for a long, long time? Sure, but my Joanie was depending on me. I couldn’t let her down.”

“She’s lucky to have a dad who’s so devoted. I don’t know if I could do what you’ve done if my Cheryl passed on.”

“You’d be surprised what you can do when you have to.”

#

With that conversation, Sully seized on the second half of the sale. He knew what the two wine lovers would need to do in addition to forking over the greenbacks. At the end of the two-week publicity campaign, he called Kaye and Wilson to his office at the bar and laid out the conditions.

#

“That doesn’t seem reasonable,” Kaye said.

“I find myself forced to agree,” Wilson added. “Shouldn’t we just be able to bid until one of us drops out?”

“No,” Sully answered them. “The bottle you two want so badly is my possession. I can set any price on it I please. If I told you it would go to whoever did the better chicken imitation, you’d be obliged to do that. What I’m asking is much simpler.”

“I don’t know about this,” the tall, bearded man opined.

“You’re free to drop out – both of you. I’m ignoring better offers because of the promise I made. If I choose to, I’ll pour the wine down the drain right in front of your eyes. That should get rid of that pesky clog.”

“Don’t do that!” Wilson pleaded.

“Sacrilege! You wouldn’t?” Kaye said, sweat forming on his upper lip.

“Wouldn’t I?”

“He’d do it,” Wilson commented, turning to the shorter man.

“Agreed,” his rival seconded.

“Well?” Sully asked, prompting them to respond.

“I don’t even know who Patrick Muldoon is,” Lamont told the barkeep.

“That’s part of the plan. I don’t want him to know I’ve sent you.”

“This is a rather bizarre condition,” Kaye said. “You have to admit that.”

“Mr. Wine, meet Mr. Drain.”

“Don’t anger him, Kaye, you idiot!”

Kaye leapt to apologize. “I’m sorry. Very sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Sully told him. “So, do you two agree to the terms of sale?”

#

And so it was settled: The wine would be sold to the man who did the best thing to improve the life of sorrowful Patrick Muldoon.

It was a few days later that a very confused Patrick bellied up to the bar.

#

“Guinness, Pat?” Sully asked.

“Please,” Muldoon responded.

“Are you feeling well?” Sully asked, pulling his friend some of the dark beer.

“I’m fine. Just. . .confused.”

Sully put the glass down in front of him. “What’s confusing you?” he wondered.

“I’ve had some. . .mysterious things happen lately.”

“Bad things?”

“Oh no. Very good things: Some stranger paid Joanie’s tuition for me. Just stepped off the elevator at her college and forked over every dime. Didn’t give his name; just paid and left.”

“You don’t say?”

“And somebody sent me a mess of groceries. Good stuff, not the store brands I get. I won’t need to go near the market for months. Then yesterday, a guy plowed my driveway. He said someone had paid for it.”

“It sounds like you have a secret admirer.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful. It’s just my. . . my pride.” Sully got a strange look on his face. He had forgotten about that. “It’s always been tough for me to accept charity from anyone – even a pal like you. Remember when my dear wife passed? What you wanted to do?”

“I was gonna give you some dough until you got back on your feet.”

“That’s right, and I turned you down.”

“You did.”

“And that was as low as I’ve ever been. I’m low now, but not so much.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Sully said under his breath as he noticed Kaye and Wilson approaching.

“Come again?” Patrick asked.

“Good evening, Mr. Sullivan,” said Kaye.

“It’s the big day, isn’t it?” Wilson questioned.

“What are they talking about?” Muldoon asked.

“Pat,” Sully explained, suddenly feeling low himself, “these gents are Mr. Kaye and Mr. Wilson – your benefactors.”

“Pleased to finally meet you, Mr. Muldoon,” Reginald said.

“Charmed, sir,” added Lamont.

“You paid for Joanie’s college?”

“Guilty as charged.”

“And the groceries?”

“That was my doing,” Kaye credited himself.

“The snowplow?”

“Me again. I have always abhorred manual labor, and I understand that your back is rather delicate.”

“Have you received the fruit baskets yet?” Wilson asked.

“Baskets?”

“Maybe when you get home.”

“Wh. . . Why?” Muldoon asked.

“Mr. Sullivan?” Kaye prompted Sully.

“I’m afraid it’s my doing, Pat,” the bartender admitted. “My. . . fault.”

“I’d hardly call this a fault,” Wilson disagreed.

“You, Sully? Why?” Patrick wondered.

“You heard about the bottle of wine?”

“Who hasn’t?”

“Both of these guys want to buy it, and the offers were flying fast and furious. I knew they’d just keep one-upping each other unless I added an extra condition to the sale. When you came in after being canned, I

figured that doing something good for you should be the other half of the equation.”

Muldoon turned to the two wine lovers. “So, all these good things you did for me – the tuition, the groceries, the snowplow. . .”

“Don’t forget the fruit baskets!” Wilson interjected.

“All was so you could buy that bottle of wine?”

“Precisely.”

“Very true,” Kaye said proudly.

“I’m sorry, Pat,” Sully apologized. “I forgot about your pride. I . . . I thought I was doing a good thing.”

“Don’t worry about it, old friend. Your heart was in the right place.”

“So, Mr. Sullivan,” Wilson inquired, “is this ordeal finally at an end?”

“It is.”

“Then I bid ten thousand dollars for the bottle of La Caprice Ordo.”

“Sold.”

“I object!” Kaye bellowed. “You didn’t give me time to –”

“No more bidding!” Sully said adamantly. “Ten thousand bucks has been bid and accepted.”

“Too bad, Reginald,” Wilson teased his rival. “I’ll think momentarily of you when I partake of this excellent vintage.”

“This is unfair!” Kaye hollered.

“Enough of your bellyaching. Mr. Sullivan has made his decision, and, may I say, bravo, sir.” He reached into his inside suitcoat pocket. “Will you accept a personal check for ten thousand dollars?”

“Five thousand,” Sully answered.

“But ten thousand was my accepted bid.”

“And that’s what I’ll get: Five thousand from you, and five thousand from Mr. Kaye.”

“What?”

“I’m selling you each half the bottle.”

“But my bid was for the entire bottle.”

“I know that, and half of your bid – which is what I’m accepting – will get you half the bottle.”

“What’s going on here?”

“It was Patrick who gave me the idea.”

“Me?” Muldoon asked. “What did I do?”

“You called me ‘old friend.’ Then it hit me that these two wine lovers need to be friends again, and I can think of no better way for that to happen than over the bottle.”

“Unfair!” Wilson complained.

“I must protest!” Reginald chimed in.

“You doth protest too much, Kaye.”

“See, this is what I mean?” an annoyed Sully said. “You were friends once. Why be like this now?”

“We’ve already explained that to you,” Wilson said.

“I refuse to feign friendship with this troglodyte for half a bottle of that wine!” Kaye protested.

“Likewise,” Lamont agreed.

“OK then,” continued Sully. “I’ve had better offers.”

“You wouldn’t?” Kaye asked, frightened.

“Watch me.”

“But your promise to sell only to us. . .”

“Was valid if you obeyed my terms – which you’re not doing.”

“This isn’t fair!”

“That’s my offer, and it is my wine. Each of you can have half of the bottle for five thousand dollars. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it,” Wilson said quickly.

“Me too,” his rival agreed.

“Good. Once your checks have cleared and you’ve proven to me that you’re friends again, the wine is yours. You can work out a place to enjoy it together. Maybe right here?”

“When will that be?” Kaye wondered.

“You’re both in here pretty often. I’ll be watching you. I’ll know when you’re really friends and can share the bottle. Don’t try any funny stuff,” Sully warned them. “I have a very good B.S. detector.”

“I’m. . . not sure I know how to be friends with. . .him,” Reginald said distastefully, glancing at Lamont.

Muldoon decided to help. “You could take a page from Sully’s and my book. We’ve been pals for years.”

“I don’t know if such a relationship is possible.”

“If you want the wine, it’d better be.”

“I suppose we could be. . .civil,” Kaye proposed after a heavy sigh.

“That would be a start,” Sully told him.

“Why don’t you do something friends do together?” Patrick suggested.

“Like what?” Wilson asked.

“Go to the game. The Patriots are –”

“Sports? Perish the thought!”

“The symphony?” the barkeep suggested.

“Now that’s a possibility.”

“But I choose the performance,” Kaye insisted.

“We’ll both choose,” Wilson said. “What will happen to the wine until we’re. . .”

“Pals?” Sully offered, smiling ear to ear.

“Precisely.”

“I’ll keep it down in the wine cellar. It will be safe and well chilled.” Sully chuckled slightly and said, “Shouldn’t you two friends be going?”

#

Kaye and Wilson are still trying. Some nights, it looks like they’ve made progress towards becoming friends. Other nights, it all seems to have been washed away.

The bottle is safe and sound in the wine cellar, growing older every day. Sully moved in his St. Patrick’s Day stock without it getting so much as a scratch.

There’s a new giveaway at the bar now: Everyone gets a free piece of fruit with any drink purchase.

Wilson sent a lot.

The End

Mike has had over 150 audio plays produced in the U.S. and overseas. He's won The Columbine Award and a dozen Moondance International Film Festival awards in their TV pilot, audio play, short screenplay, and short story categories. His prose work has appeared in several magazines and anthologies. Mike is the writer of two short films, *Dark Chocolate* and *Hotline*. In 2013, he won the inaugural Marion Thauer Brown Audio Drama Scriptwriting Competition. In 2020, he came in second. For several of the in-between years, he served as a judge. Mike, who lives in Massachusetts, keeps a blog at audioauthor.blogspot.com.

Posted 6/1/2021

David M. Donachie "Sedimentary Cat" moved into town on 6/1/2021

SEDIMENTARY CAT

by

David M. Donachie

I am lending a hand at the main dig site when Angie tells me that Youssef Kamal is waiting for me at the entrance. It's a sweltering Egyptian afternoon, a miserable perspiring day to be working, but our season is almost over and we hardly have anything to show for it. My mind is on the horrible possibility that we won't be renewed for next season. I need to focus on the work at hand, but Youssef Kamal is an experienced purveyor of antiquities. We've done business before. If he's come all the way up to the dig, he must have something important to show me.

I hand my trowel to Angie and head down the dusty path to the gates we set up at the head of the trail. Youssef's green Toyota is parked at the side of the road, while the man himself is leaning against the side door smoking one of his atrocious Turkish cigarettes.

Youssef waves me over and takes me around the back of the Land Cruiser where he can rest an elbow on the spare wheel, apparently oblivious to the bright green flies that immediately settle on the both of us.

"I'm really pretty busy right now," I tell him.

"Oh trust me, Mr Williams, you will want to see this. I think it may be ... just what you need."

I'm intrigued despite myself. I wave off the flies and ask him to show me, expecting some artifact stowed in the back of the car, but he tells me that I will have to come with him on 'a short drive'. It's the last thing I have time to do, but the thought that he might have some way to save my funding makes me agree.

We pull out onto the agricultural road and drive southwest, with the desert on both sides. Looking out of the window past Youssef's head I

can see the green palm trees of Luxor sliding past on the other side of the Nile.

After a few miles, Youssef makes a right turn towards the desert, passing through the yard of a small farm. The hard-pack road turns into a dirt track, and then a sandy trail that bogs down under the Toyota's wheels.

"We walk from here here," Youssef says.

He leads me up into a muddy wadi. It looks like a flood has been through here recently. I can see collapsed banks and freshly washed sand, though it's mostly dry now.

Youssef points at the collapsed slope ahead of us. "All this came down in the rain last week. The farmer who owns the house down there, Farouk, came up here afterwards and found what I am going to show you. Then, he tells me," Youssef grins, "and I tell you. But don't worry, Farouk knows to keep quiet."

I go where he was pointing and see it for myself — a dark sandstone point about ten centimeters across protruding from the sand. It doesn't look like anything much, but instinct makes me brush away a little of the surrounding sand. The point goes down, deep down. It broadens into a triangle with a concavity on one side. Suddenly it jumps into focus, it's the top part of an animal's ear!

I look up sharply at Youssef and he grins. "Yes, you see it now. I brushed sand back on the top so no one else would find it."

I pull out my sand brush and attack the area around the ear, sweeping away the loose material that Youssef and his farmer friend piled up. I'm only scratching the surface, but I can just make out the outline of a huge mass buried in the wadi floor. If this is the head, the statue it's connected to must be at least ten meters long, probably more.

My mind jumps to the Colossi of Memnon, just a couple of miles up the road; one of the most famous sights in Egypt. The part of the ear exposed by the collapse is in better condition than any part of the Colossi.

I stumble off the slope and perch unsteadily on the edge of a large rock. Sweat trickles down the back of my neck. My heart is thumping fit to burst. This could be the find of the decade, but if the Ministry find out

about it they will take it off me in a heartbeat. I have to secure the site, record it, excavate, get enough of a foothold that wouldn't dare pull it out from under me.

When I look back at Youssef I see that he is nodding to himself. He knows exactly what he's found, and exactly how much I'll owe him for it. I weigh up the equation in my mind: debt versus opportunity. If I accept his gift it won't be like it was at Asyut — a few minor artefacts slipped his way — he'll want much more. But, how can I do it? The choice makes itself.

"Thank you, Youssef."

###

Once I've made the decision I realize how much there is to do. I need diggers to help me. Youssef probably has a cousin, or a dozen cousins, who'd be willing to help, but that would just make things worse with the Ministry. I need to bring actual archaeologists on board, but only ones I can trust. I run through the list of potentials in my head on the way back to the main dig site. Angie? Too law-abiding. Tom? Too new. Dennis? Too likely to turn me in. Benjamin? Yes, it really has to be Benjamin, and then probably Nicole and Adam. I could really use a team of a dozen diggers for what I think is down there, but I can't risk trusting more than those few.

Youssef drops me back at the gates. It's early evening now, humid, and just as hot as earlier. Frogs are chirping down in the stagnant water of the drainage channel. Up at the dig, only Angie is still excavating, on her hands and knees roughly where I left her, busy stabilizing some find with bubble wrap, but there's light pouring out through the walls of the finds tent, and also from the larger tent that we use to make and eat our food. The chatter of voices drifts out across the half-acre of dusty walls and sandy pits that make up our excavation.

I duck into the finds tent, hoping that Benjamin is working late, but it's Dennis and Nicole, marking the day's work on the site map. It's a sadly featureless diagram, and Dennis is recording another day's failures with a listless air. I know that he's been talking to Abbas at the Ministry about taking a position up in Cairo. He's probably just counting the days.

Dennis watches me with a discomforting degree of attention as I potter around the tent, trying to look like I have an actual reason to be there. The sweat prickles on my back again. Does he know I went somewhere with Youssef? Does he suspect something? There's no reason he should, Youssef sometimes supplies casual labour for the dig, but I wilt under his gaze. Only the thought of that ear, that hidden treasure, keeps me from bolting out of the tent.

Dennis breaks the silence: "Everything okay, Richard?"

I'm so on edge that the question almost makes me jump, but I cover up the reaction with a forced chuckle. "Oh yes, never better. Looking forward to the end of the season, of course."

Dennis arches an eyebrow in that way he does. "Really? Do you have something lined up for next year, then?"

It's an innocent question, I hope, but it makes me want to throttle him. He knows I have nothing. Snide bastard. I can't resist answering: "Might have something in the works, yes."

It's a stupid answer. I might as well have come right out and told him that Youssef is cutting me a deal, and it would be like Asyut all over again. I'm about to say something else that I will regret, I don't know what, but he saves me the trouble.

"Well, I think dinner's ready. You can tell me all about it later."

Luckily for me, I manage to avoid Dennis after dinner. I get Benjamin alone instead and explain about the find. After that, everything swings into action. Benjamin speaks to Nicole and Adam, the two graduate students who were with us at Asyut and, before I know it, we are loading tools into the back of Benjamin's pick-up truck in the early morning light. We take spades, brushes, finds boxes, a sifting tray to comb through the sand we remove. I'd like to take the ground-penetrating radar rig we used to lay out the main site, but there's no way we could lug the thing out without the others noticing, and that's key.

The agricultural road is busy with dusty vans on their way into Luxor, and air-conditioned tourist buses, full of sleeping passengers roused too early from their cruise-ship beds, heading out towards the Valley of the

Kings; but when we turn off onto Youssef's dirt track there is no one to be seen.

The last of the mud has dried hard overnight, cracking into a jumble of hexagons and pentagons, but it comes away easily under our spades. We rough out the shape of the statue; it's bigger than I thought, at least twenty-five meters long, and ten wide. About a third the size of the sphinx.

It's not just the size that makes me think of the sphinx. While the others are marking out the perimeter, I scoop out the loose sand from around the ear with my hands, delving deeper until the ground becomes too hard. What starts to emerge is the eye and cheek of a cat. It must be a colossal statue of Bast. I know the Germans found the base of one over at Tell Basta, but I've never heard of an intact one on this scale.

I swap the spade for a trowel, and then the trowel for a brush, exposing the fine details of the carving. I lose myself in the work like I was a young man again on my first dig. Metallic flies settle on the back of my neck. My attention is on the curve of the feline cheek under my fingertips, the exposed layers of sedimentary rock, rough and smooth, amber and umber, like fur.

"Mr Williams?"

Adam's East Coast accent brings me back to the hard flat light of the desert afternoon. A shadow is creeping down across our makeshift trench from the wadi bank, but it hasn't reached us yet. Adam is shading his eyes against the sun with a trowel held up against the brim of his Texas A&M baseball cap.

"What is it?"

"Benjamin says you should come and see this."

I join Benjamin at the top of the bank, looking down at the day's work. From above, I can visualize the buried statue suggested by Benjamin's test pits — longer than broad, extending up the length of the wadi, and also across the mouth of it. The afternoon sun picks out the shape with inky shadows: legs, flanks, tail, head.

"It's not in the canon of proportion, is it?" Benjamin asks. "I thought, when you showed me the ear, that the statue had fallen on its side, but now I'm not sure."

"No."

I can see it now; a cat reclining on its left side in the late afternoon sun, legs outstretched, back slightly arched, head thrown back. A naturalistic pose, which makes it ten times as wondrous, ten times as valuable. If Youssef finds out ...

"We need to secure this. Record it. We have to get down to the statue itself, expose it, get pictures."

"Look..." Benjamin fiddles with his watch. "I know what sort of pressure you're ... we're, under, but this, well this is a lot more than a few New Kingdom knick-knacks! We need a proper survey. Geophys. We need a team. We need to keep away grave robbers. This is big!"

I round on him. "If we call in a team, then we aren't going to have anything. We won't be a part of it." I feel the sweat prickle on my forehead again. I've been having nightmares of the call from the Ministry telling me that the project is done, or the letter from back home announcing the non-renewal of funding. This statue, this cat, is my last hope.

I take a deep breath. "We need to stake our claim. We don't need a complete dig, just the preliminary survey, enough evidence to present to the Ministry when we get back to Cairo. Five days, Benjamin, that's all we have left to the season anyway. We keep one or two people here in rotation, that should be enough, and, look ... I'll talk to Youssef about security, maybe we can get a few of his cousins down here."

Maybe it's the mention of the Ministry, but I see his posture stiffen. Neither of us wants to see the smug look on Director Abbas' face as he cancels our permits.

Benjamin nods. "Okay Richard, we'll do it your way."

Most of the work falls on me. I know that my absence around the main dig is noticed, but I have to live with that. I hope the others just assume

I'm preparing for an end of season party, or maybe arranging a new career.

I settle into the work over the following days. It seems to go faster when I'm on my own. The wadi walls muffle the distant rumble of traffic on the Aswan road, the hoot of cruise ships on the Nile, the lowing of the cattle on the west bank pastures. Youssef called in a couple of his relations to keep away prying eyes, but they stay down by the farmyard and don't come near the excavation if they can avoid it. It's just me and the cat, slowly emerging from the stone.

The carving is exquisite; ancient. If not for the location I wouldn't take it for Egyptian at all. It reminds me of those crackpots who think that the sphinx is ten thousand years old. Instead of the usual Egyptian stylization, the statue is almost lifelike. When I run my fingers over the rough layers of the rock, I imagine the texture of real fur, as if the cat were a living creature that lay down in this place and fossilized, slowly becoming one with the surrounding rock. Only my trowel, my brush, can separate it from the centuries of sediment and bring it back to life.

Maybe it's the constant beating heat, or the fact that I'm working on my own, or just the sheer impossible size of it, but I feel closer to the cat than I have to any artifact before. I kneel on it. I sit on the crumbling wadi edge and gaze down at its emerging bulk. I dream about it, and I wonder whose hand shaped it. What manner of man drew out these curves, these rangy flanks, the sleep-closed eyes, the upward tick of the smiling mouth just starting to emerge from the compacted earth.

By the end of the third day, I've exposed most of the head and the upper body, extending the trench down the length of the front legs towards the paws. Incredibly, it seems that the statue is intact. The bulk of it is the same dark sandstone that I first saw in the ear, with a splash of paler quartz stone around the eyes and across the chest. There is even the suggestion of whiskers across the face.

I sink back, exhausted, and realize that another day has slipped by without me even noticing. The sun has set. Down on the river, the lights of the cruise ships glimmer along the dockside. Beyond them, colored spotlights stab up into the night sky. If I were closer I'd be able to hear the terrible tinkly music from the son et lumière at the Karnak ruins. I drop my trowel and brush back into their tray and rest my hand on the statue, feeling the fading heat of the day under my fingertips. We are so

close now. Tomorrow we will do the photographic survey, draw up the preliminary site plan, and have everything we need to present the site to my superiors back at the University.

I trudge back down to my car and toss the tools in the back seat, get in, thumb on the headlights. The cat gleams in the beams, as dark as amber. I put the car in gear and head down the farm track.

It's after eight by the time I pull up at the main dig. The glow from the main tent makes me think that everyone's there, but when I get out of the car I realize that Dennis is waiting by the finds tent, the faint coal of a cigarette glowing at his lips.

I try to sound nonchalant: "Good evening Dennis, sorry, I didn't see you there. I've just been down in town, you wouldn't believe the traffic over the Luxor Bridge in the evenings."

Dennis extinguishes the cigarette and flicks the butt away, then saunters down towards me. "You've been away from the dig quite a lot recently, Richard. The team are beginning to think you've forgotten all about us."

Christ, the tools are still on the back seat!

I step forwards to meet him, mashing the button on the remote to lock the car behind me.

"Nothing like that. I've just been arranging a little end of season surprise for everyone, that's all." I take him by the shoulder and steer him towards the mess tent. "Let's go see everyone, eh? We can talk over the final reports tomorrow."

We find the others playing poker on the Formica table in the mess tent. Benjamin is pouring coffee, Angie is filling in a finds report that she should probably have finished before dinner. Benjamin looks up sharply when I come in with Dennis, like he wants to say something, but can't. I give him a reassuring smile.

I hang around for an hour, trying to act casual even though my mind is on what Dennis did or didn't see, when my phone bleeps. I pull it out and see a text message from a number I don't recognize: "I know what you've uncovered. This is big. I'm going to expect more than a few favours — Y".

"Are you okay Richard?"

I realize that I'm standing open-mouthed, staring at the phone in my hand. Angie is looking at me with concern.

"Yes, yes. Just tired, that's all. I think I'll turn in."

I hurry back to my tent and collapse on the bed. My mind is still whirling, wondering what Youssef is going to try and squeeze me for, whether this plan can even work. Even so, I'm exhausted, and when I lean back to think I fall asleep instead.

###

In my dream, I'm standing in the wadi under the full moon, at the feet of the statue, lost in its shadow. The cat is sitting up on its haunches, in the pose I've seen in a thousand statuettes: paws together, nose up, tail flat by its side. I can't see its eyes, but I know it's looking at me with that familiar feline indifference.

Dream logic tells me that the statue is waiting for me to speak. I rack my brains for the correct formula, a prayer to Bast that I saw one time in Cauville's index, but the words won't form on my lips — the cat's got my tongue.

There's the sudden rumble of arriving cars behind me. Headlight beams criss-cross the wadi, doors slam, raised Egyptian voices shout my name, tell me to step away, to raise my hands, to get down on the ground! People grab me by the arms and drag me away. The moon goes out, the statue vanishes, there's a gunshot—

I awake, gasping. Benjamin is in my tent, shaking me by the shoulder. He's got a torch in his hand, and the light dances around the inside of the tent as he steps back.

"Ben— Benjamin. What's ... what's happening? What's wrong?"

Benjamin's face is pasty white in the torchlight. He looks sick.

"Richard, I'm sorry."

I sit up properly. "What is it?"

"It's Dennis. I was heading to my tent and I heard him speaking on the phone. He was talking to Director Abbas. I'm sorry, it's over."

"Oh God!"

I leap out of bed and drag my shoes on, glad that I fell asleep in my clothes. I grab my car keys and torch from the camp table and push past Benjamin, heading for the finds tent.

He follows me, and stops at the tent door, watching me grab things from the equipment shelves. "What are you doing, Richard? It's done. Abbas will be here in the morning."

I haul the silver case containing the large format camera off the shelf and turn back to the door. "I'm going to record the site. I'm not going to let them take her from me! I can still do this."

I throw the equipment in the car. I'm aware that there are other lights on, that people are watching me from the doors of their tents, but I don't care.

"Are you coming?" I ask Benjamin.

He raises his hands. "I'm sorry Richard, I can't— I can't be involved with this."

"Then I'll do it myself!"

I speed down the track and haul left onto the main road. It's pitch-black, deserted, low clouds just visible in the reflected light of the city. There's no one else around except a single van that sweeps out of the desert night and buzzes past me into the darkness. When I turn off at the farm entrance I can barely make out the road in the headlight beams.

The car rumbles to a halt about halfway along the wadi trail, the front wheel stuck in some dip that I can't see to steer out of. I don't try. I clamber out with my torch in one hand and the camera case in the other, a bundle of measuring rods tucked under my arm.

The desert night is still and cool, but I push myself forward, waving the torch beam ahead, trying to get my bearings. I can't see the cat; I must be further down the trail than I thought.

Suddenly my foot goes into a hole that shouldn't be there and I collapse painfully on my face. The camera case slams into my side, and the torch goes skittering out of my hand, rolling wildly on the hard-packed earth. I cry out. What the hell happened?

I sit up, hauling my leg up out of the hole. It hurts. My ankle throbs like a taut drum and my head is spinning. It feels like I'm sitting in a trench of some sort. I start to reach for the torch when I become aware that there's someone ... something, there in the darkness. Breathing. Watching.

I dive for the torch and wave it frantically around, wincing at the pain. The light flashes off something green and I freeze — there are eyes looking at me, gigantic eyes.

The stone cat is sitting up in the excavation trench, and its eyes are open.

The cat's eyes are green marble, bright and lustrous in the reflected torchlight. Its sandstone fur is ruffled from its long sleep, stained in places by ancient mud. It looks like it was in the process of cleaning itself when I fell into the trench left by its forelegs. One paw is raised, frozen on its way to wash behind its ear — or perhaps to bat me away. The enormous face is impassive, as a cat's is. I can't tell if it is curious or hostile.

"I ..." I stammer, not sure what to say; if speaking even makes sense. I wrack my brain for the prayer I couldn't remember in the dream. "Hail to thee, Queen of Heaven. Hail to thee, Queen of the Two Lands." I can't remember the rest. "Are you ... Bast?"

The cat doesn't respond. It's a statue, for God's sake! But, what God?

The cloud cover breaks, and I see the whole of the cat in the sudden moonlight. Ten meters at the shoulder, twenty long, burnt umber and ironstone, golden quartz and orange sand. A rangy beast of the desert sun.

As if the light is a signal, the cat leaps to its feet. Sand and earth cascade down around me, and I cover my head in terror, sure that I'm about to be

buried, or crushed, or snapped up in its stone jaws and devoured, but it isn't interested in me. It's staring up towards the distant Theban Hills, body taught and quivering, tail down, ears up, listening to something I can't hear. Even now, seeing it move, I know it is a statue, stone, rock, an artifact, my future....

"Wait!"

I grab the camera case, fumbling with the lock. I need to get it open. I need to get proof of what I'm seeing! But, before I can turn the camera on, the stone cat crouches, swishes its tail, and springs out of the wadi. A moment later it's gone, bounding off towards the mountains and into the night, leaving nothing but a rough and collapsing hole to show that it was ever there.

Near Luxor, the sedimentary cat reclines

A product of more antique times.

Though its face has been eroded by the Nile

At times, it has been known to smile.

The End

David M. Donachie is an artist, author, and games designer. He has written short stories of countless types since he was old enough to hold a pencil — many are very embarrassing, the others appear in numerous anthologies. He lives in a garret (really a top-floor flat, but a garret sounds a lot more romantic) in Edinburgh with his wife Victoria, 2 cats, more reptiles than mammals, and more invertebrates than either.

Posted 5/27/2012

Diane Kendig "Quann Park" moved into town on 5/27/2021

QUANN PARK

by

Diane Kendig

From the parking lot the other side of the brook,
but close to it, this horizon of dogs bark
in a landscape where August is fluffy and white
and Early arrives at five and stays late.

Exacta, who belongs to a winner, goes by Zack,
but, being deaf, doesn't come to that,
as you couldn't call Isadora a dancer, being basset,
though Emily (not a poet) does dance and chases
a ball her owner (a poet) whacks with a racket
down the path, into the elephant grasses
parted by two huge Akidas rising massive,
moving glacially, coolly surveying, placid,
led by a Westie, "the librarian," for her gravid
growl that puts us all in our places.

And since it's summer and not raining, owners
and dogs from all over Madison home here,
the rescued greyhounds, an Australian Blue,
the million and one mutts the park is heir to:
beagles, terriers, setters, and one collie
losing as much fur as thirty cottonwood trees,
and that fur floats with fur from the gang war
that began in a snide snarl, look, or lurch
some large Dobe or Rot leapt to; then it was roar,
counter-roar, lots of commands, ignored
till one wiry man stepped in, the Alpha of us all,
shouted low. The fighting ceased. In the pall
someone threw a decoy in the water. Everyone stood.
Owners flapped and pointed, dogs unmoved
except one Scottie who shot her cuffs and shrugged,
then jumped in and paddled to the leather lump,
opened her jaws: too small. She paused, nudged
it with her nose and nosed it back to shore
to applause, as she hauled it to land by the cord.

Other seasons come to be walked through, too,
since this is Wisconsin-- really, bounded through
come the high heaps of winter snow when one group
vows they'll actually touch the fence, so not to stop
a few feet short, then shorter with the growing cold.
Spring, they slosh through, everyone with old old
duck boots-- except one man who wears waders
and eats a bowl of cereal that sloshes as he wades.
Not that all the humans are paragons of exercise.
Many come to stand, talk, and cut their eyes
over tales of dog antics, while the tales'
real tails are high-tailing it after their own tails,
rabbits, Frisbees, or each other – each Tray,
Blanche, and Sweetheart finding its own way
to stay in motion round the motionless owners.

But even the hardest-working dogs, the harriers
sent on twenty vectors from the center
of the mile-round field, the obedience competitors
competitively sitting, and the many clowners
cutesting like crazy, they all, too, socialize,
collapse finally on the banks like they realize
they've earned the rest, in close proximity
sitting, sniffing, kibitzing, in tired amity
in that gleam of magic hour before Early leaves,
that light a film director could buy into bankruptcy
while we stand suffused in that glow for free,
feeling full of the health and ease and camaraderie
of this no-leash life we get a new lease on
each canicular day we play our part at Quann.

The End

Diane Kendig's fifth poetry collection is *Prison Terms*. Her work has appeared in *J Journal*, *Ekphrasis*, and *Wordgathering* among others, and has won awards from the Ohio Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She curates, "Read + Write: 30 Days of Poetry" with 4,000 subscribers, for the Cuyahoga County Public Library.

Posted 5/24/2021
Raymond Lane “Clara’s Day” moved into town on 5/24/2021

CLARA’S DAY
by
Raymond Lane

Clara’s day began with an unsettled feeling in her stomach, a mild queasiness she sometimes had when woken by a bad dream.

Of course, she thought – it’s Mother’s Day.

Her husband Richard lay next to her, gently snoring. He made little mouse snores when lying on his back. Nothing that interrupted her sleep, thank God, and nothing like what she remembered as a girl of her father’s leonine snores. Her father’s snoring shook the plaster walls like a temblor and made everyone in the family grumpy; during the summer with the windows open it drew occasional comments from the neighbors.

“If I wanted to hear airplanes thundering over my house, I’d live next to the airfield,” their neighbor Bob said.

The clamor incited a run on earplugs at the Red Owl General Store in Tracy, the closest town large enough to support a store, about thirteen miles from where she grew up in Currie, Minnesota.

She found Richard’s snoring reassuring somehow, a sign that the world hadn’t spun off its axis during the night, that life today would be unaltered from yesterday and the day before. Predictability was important to her. Security was a house built on the firm soil of certainty.

She slipped quietly out of bed, though at age sixty slipping was becoming less a graceful movement and more a potential cause of injury. The bed creaked, but Richard snored on undisturbed. It was better to let him sleep in on Sundays. He was so busy the rest of the week with work and his--to her way of thinking, foolish – foray into music. She stood next to their new king sized bed. It was the kind that had two individual mattresses, each side with its own control for firmness and elevating the head. She had to admit that she slept better with the new bed, though sex was certainly clumsier, having to grapple with two different comfort zones – a distraction at best. That didn’t seem to bother Richard.

She spread out on her yoga pad and tightened, relaxed, and stretched her muscles in the same sequence she'd employed for several years. Since the children had finally grown up and left home she had time in the morning to be mindful of her own needs. Banished were the memories of frantic mornings spent dragging two children from their beds, forcing clothes onto them, preparing breakfast and at times hand feeding them, assembling their backpacks with binders and homework, permission slips, library books, snacks etc., propelling them out the door and into the station wagon for the drive to school, where she joined a long line of cars driven by other mothers like her, wearing their housecoats, curlers concealed under scarves, waiting to jettison their beloved cargo onto the walk in front of the multipurpose room. As she and the children aged, the station wagon was replaced by a minivan, the curlers were discarded, and the physical tasks of raising children waned but were replaced by the emotional task of contending with adolescent attitude.

Looking back it was hard to imagine how she'd survived that never-ending obstacle course called motherhood. With an unavoidable sense of guilt, she acknowledged to herself that life was better with them gone. Still, she missed them, didn't she? Clara imagined that her experience raising her children was somehow like Richard's experience in the Army: a duty fulfilled, arduous at times, dangerous at others; a few permanent scars, but cross-stitched with lifelong relationships that were tied to the core of her existence.

The source of her guilt was mysterious – like the wind, a universal force that touched all the senses, but without an explicable origin. She didn't know where her idea of the perfect mother came from – it certainly wasn't her own mother, who had raised her family during the Great Depression, but who rather than inspiring with her strength spent most of those years in bed, lying prostrate with her headaches and fatigue. Not close to perfect. Not with four children, a few animals, a ramshackle house and a husband who seemed nice enough but had a dark side – a subtle propensity for cruelty that was perceived by the children more so than the adults. And yet she loved her mother and felt loved by her.

She wasn't sure if her two older brothers and her younger sister felt the same way. She wasn't even sure if her mother was aware of the love that Clara had for her. The saddest day of Clara's life was when her mother died, far too young at sixty, though in those days it wasn't uncommon. Clara wondered whether her mother's life had been shortened by the

manner in which she lived it, capitulating to the stresses of life, which seemed to Clara more a choice than an affliction.

Her least favorite part of the morning routine was facing the mirror. She glanced at it, startled to see her mother with a surprised look on her face glancing back at her. Oh God, when did that happen? She bravely peeled off her mask to assess the wrinkles. She used to count them, but gave that up years ago when it became an impossible task. It made her angry, seeing those wrinkles and knowing she was being judged as old because of them. Not just old, but unattractive. When her mother was her age it was okay to die. Now at sixty you were supposed to still be sexy. What a bunch of crap!

She enjoyed her silver hair. It was stylishly short and arced down both sides of her head, longer on the right, ending at the jawline. She was so relieved when the silver first appeared, right around her forty-fifth birthday. Not that she wanted to cross that inevitable threshold that split a person's life into two parts called young and old, but the silver had a brilliance that she far preferred to the flat white or dull gray that made people look like they'd surrendered the old age battle on every front.

She heard a rustling of the bedcovers, then a thump she recognized as Richard's feet landing definitively on the hardwood floor. A few footsteps later he was behind her, draping his arms around her in a firm but gentle embrace, she in her pink nightgown, he in his powder blue pajamas. They examined their own and each other's reflections in the mirror.

"Good morning, gorgeous," Richard said, planting a kiss on top of her silver head.

"Good morning, darling," she said. Clara regarded his face in the mirror, still displaying the handsome features that had first attracted her to him thirty-eight years ago. He smiled at her. Just a few wrinkles – not as many as her. Some mild sagging around the eyes and jaw. And his hair – still black and swept back – the hair of a younger man. Thinning, recession at the temples barely noticeable, a few gray hairs to provide legitimacy to the black ones. She wished he had more gray, she wished he would join her on the other side of that line between young and old. She wondered if younger women found him attractive – no, she was sure they did. But she wondered whether they found him tempting.

She trusted him. There had been a rough patch twenty years ago when she couldn't have said that. That younger woman from work, Helen, and this sudden urge he had to change his life completely at age forty and pursue a career as a musician. That whole thing threw her gyroscope off balance for close to a full year. Predictability vaporized. She was fairly certain that nothing sexual had happened between Richard and that woman, but she couldn't know for sure. She shuddered at the memory.

She hated ultimatums, their black and white, uncompromising nature – but they worked. Richard preferred his life with her to chaos. Entropy terrified him, too. Eventually they recovered, equilibrium restored, issues dealt with but not forgotten.

She was comforted by her belief that despite his physical attractiveness, the rest of Richard was such a lopsided ball of eccentricities that, while she found these to be a source of personal fulfillment and, well, a sort of intimacy, other women would find them intolerable.

“Let's have breakfast,” she said.

“Of course. I was thinking we would do something special today, since it's Mother's Day.”

So he'd remembered. Of course he did. It was the children, the people whom she was actually the mother to, who often didn't remember. Or worse, perhaps, they remembered but declined to act.

They didn't seem to realize that she was the glue that held these other people's lives together, that held the family together. Just as she'd been for her birth family, taking over much of the day-to-day household responsibility for her bedridden mother. There was a degree of resentment, but it also gave her a sense of importance and purpose beyond what most second youngest of four children experienced. And she was destined to do the same for Richard and her own children. She almost cried thinking of what would have become of them without her there to hold them fast.

She was reading Olive Kitteridge, winner of last year's Pulitzer prize for fiction. Actually holding the book in her hand, ink and all, unlike Richard who needed to keep printed material under a plate of glass when he read, out of fear of ink toxicity. An interesting character, Olive, a bit of a pot stirrer. Just the opposite of herself. She was more like Olive's husband,

Henry, who molded himself around his wife as a cushion, protecting her from the full impact of the collision between her strong opinions and the outside world.

Richard never really helped much with the children. Maybe that was a good thing, as neither of them was exposed to him enough to imitate his obsessive compulsive behavior. They managed to develop their own distinct problems, though.

Crystal was a precocious girl, aware of life's shallowness and unfairness at too tender an age. She didn't know how to respond other than with anger, and the anger led to experimentation with drugs and boys. Clara had tried to talk to her, pull her close, but Crystal just pushed away harder with each attempt. Eventually, merely keeping her alive became the goal, and with time and therapy Crystal managed to learn more productive ways to express her feelings. She was thirty-five now, married, working as a marriage and family therapist in Los Angeles, with two children of her own. Crystal's kids were still young, but already discovering ways to rebel – the comes-around answer to what goes around.

And thirty-eight year old Buddy, Clara's beautiful mama's boy, he had been so close to her as a child only to be stolen away by mental illness. His psychotic break during his first year away from home, at college, had created the deepest hurt for Clara, especially coming at the same time as the Richard/Helen/music fiasco, with Helen showing up to hear Richard's debut at open mic night. That was a terrible year. Buddy's crawl back toward health was a constant stress. Medications helped control some of his symptoms, but they made him so flat and unreachable. Out of desperation they took him to a psychiatrist who practiced alternative methods of treatment, and through nutritional therapy and – this had almost become normalized in her own mind – periodic fecal transplants he became more functional, less crazy, to the point of being able to get an engineering degree at the University of Puget Sound. He got a job at the local power company, and in his mid-thirties found an angel of a woman named Sara to marry. They and their young son lived in Tacoma, only about ninety minutes from the family home in Sedar Falls. Yet they hardly ever saw him.

Mother's Day was hard. She hoped that Richard hadn't planned anything. That always seemed to highlight the children's absence even more.

“Oh, Richard,” she said, “Couldn’t we just eat here?”

“Not today,” he replied, looking her directly in the eye, “I want today to be special, even if it’s just you and me.”

She shrugged, dipped into her closet and picked out a blouse and skirt – nothing too fancy, just something that a mom might wear. And a sweater, because a drizzling rain was expected. Richard put on one of the two pairs of trousers he owned, a white shirt, and his blue sport jacket – the one that he didn’t wear to work.

Richard had traded in his 1970 Plymouth Fury for a 1990 Oldsmobile Ninety Eight, at almost two tons one of the largest, and therefore safest, vehicles on the road. Navy blue, a fitting color for a car the size of a boat. He wiped down the doorknob of the house with rubbing alcohol as they left, and then the steering wheel of the Olds. He no longer wore a gas mask while driving to mitigate the deleterious effects of auto fumes. Clara wasn’t sure why he’d stopped. She thought it best not to inquire.

“You know how hard it is for me on Mother’s Day, Richard. It just makes me depressed thinking about how neither of our children are close to me, or even polite enough to call or send a card. It’s as if they blame me for something, when all I’ve ever done in my life is to try and help them.”

“We’ve been over this before, dear,” Richard said. “We did our best. There’s really nothing more to do, is there? That’s just who they are at this stage of their lives – it doesn’t mean it’s forever. Look at how much things have improved over the last twenty years.”

Clara sighed. Richard’s response wasn’t satisfying, but she would have to accept it.

They drove along the winding highway that connected Sedar Falls to the rest of the world. There was majesty in the tall fir trees foresting the area along the road, and something storybook about the occasional open meadow that popped into view. Almost as if Paul Bunyan might step out of the woods at any moment. Clara enjoyed the ride, found it replenishing, especially when a drop of sunlight occasionally burst through the ever present clouds. She sensed where they were going, validated when Richard pulled into the parking lot at the Sedar Falls

Lodge, a beautiful venue for a Mother's Day brunch overlooking the falls.

The hostess placed them at a table front and center, near the small circle of red carpet that created a stage sometimes used by Saturday night entertainers. They had a nice view of the falls through the floor-to-ceiling windows, a torrent of fresh cold mountain water crashing and misting its way to the rocks two hundred and sixty-eight feet below.

As they picked up their menus and put on their reading glasses, the restaurant manager walked to the middle of the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention. This morning we have an unannounced treat for you, some entertainment to make your brunch even more special." He looked at Richard and gestured to him.

To Clara's horror, Richard stood up and walked to the stage. From behind the podium he produced an electric guitar, a small amp, and a microphone. His face and lips appeared tight, his eyes fixed on the red carpet as if looking to it for courage, or direction. Clara felt a tingle ripple through her body and looked around the room, trying to locate the nearest exit.

"You know, I'm getting kind of old," he said. "For the last twenty years I've been chasing a dream of playing rock and roll, and I never really knew why, other than the Beatles made a huge impression on me when I was a kid, and I guess I wanted some of what they had."

The diners were as quiet as a church congregation. He held the complete attention of fifty to sixty Mother's Day celebrants lucky enough to have made a reservation that day. Richard cleared his throat and looked up. "But now I realize that there's only one person I want to impress, and that's the beautiful lady sitting at that table right there, my wife Clara. She's the best wife and mother anyone could be. I can't tell you all the ways she's helped me and our kids through some very, very difficult times, always there, like the sun or the moon or the North Star – at least on a clear night." He chuckled slightly, his face relaxed. The audience tittered. Clara could see the mist in his eyes, like when he'd asked her to bond their fates together so many years ago. She smiled a flushed and timid smile. "She deserves all of the appreciation in the world. Today is just the start. This is to let you know how much I love you." He blew her a kiss and the crowd aww'ed in unison, as if they'd rehearsed. Clara

wondered if the other diners were in on this as she beamed and flung a kiss back to him.

“We’re going to sing an old Beatles song called ‘I Can’t Let Go.’”

We? Clara’s mind shifted into panic mode. I hope he isn’t expecting me to get up there.

Richard picked up his Gibson guitar, tuned it for a few seconds, then started to play, singing:

I can’t let go

Cause of everything you do for me

And I want you to know

That I’ll be yours foreverly

Then, out from the kitchen, each carrying a microphone, stepped Crystal and Buddy, smiling huge and pointing at Clara, dancing a few steps to the right then a few steps to the left, then spinning around in synchrony like two Pips. They belted out the chorus:

It can’t be denied

I’ve got feelings inside

For you-oo-oo

The crowd swayed and clapped in time with the music. The waiters dropped their platters to the floor and danced in place, singing backup “woo-woo’s.”

Then everyone:

And now that you know

I hope you can show

Me too-oo-oo

The audience erupted in applause and laughter. The women, loosened by the complimentary champagne, screamed as if they were seeing the Beatles live on The Ed Sullivan Show.

Clara cried like a child, smiling and wiping at the tears with her napkin. She rushed to the stage and threw her arms around Richard, kissing him like they'd just said I do.

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?” she said. “Sometimes I don’t know whether to kiss you or kill you.”

She and the children embraced. Unexpectedly, it was the best Mother’s Day she’d ever had. And Helen wasn’t there, not even in her thoughts.

The End

Raymond Lane, a physician and father of six, lives in San Diego with his wife and at least one or two of his children at any given time. His other stories can be found in *Tulip Tree*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, and *Defenestration Magazine*.

Posted 5/21/2021

Amrita Valan "Two Women" moved into town on 5/21/2021

TWO WOMEN

by

Amrita Valan

Rita was not a pretty child. She was all skin and bones with a head that looked much too big for her frail body. She wasn't aware though, that in the looks department she had drawn joker over ace.

Supremely happy nursing her old, tattered doll, she danced across to the front door whenever the bell rang, curious to greet every stranger.

Her mother, Kamala, was considered a very graceful petite woman, and over time, staring into mirrors besides her mother, a consciousness might have seeped in that mommy's face was very pleasant to look at. As was her kid sister Kaya's face.

Rita would pause in the middle of dabbing crayons on her colouring book entranced by the retrousse nose and perfect cupid bows of Kaya's ruby lips.

It was without a shred of jealousy or yearning however, that Rita realized she was plain, though she didn't know that particular word for it. Kamala was such a joyous exuberant child woman, she swept up her daughter into a daily celebration of every mundane moment. "Let us make rotis child," she suggested, "I will show you how to roll the dough into roundels."

They would end up making little dolls out of the dough, and her mischievous mother baked them over the stove, so that Rita had a sturdy little dough daughter or son for a few days. When these dolls inevitably crumbled or broke, mother and child would make a grand burial ceremony out of it, by digging a small hole in the moist mud of a flowerpot and putting down the dolls in their makeshift graves.

"I love you very much my little doll child, and hope you are born to me again." Rita solemnly made up these little speeches much to Kamala's amusement.

“Goodbye my dough grandchild. You were beautiful and now you are with your clay Gods.” Kamala too joined in the fun of farewell speeches.

Though the time all the fighter fish in Rita’s fishbowl died due to over feeding was not a fun occasion. The fish were duly buried in the cacti tub, as Rita shed tears over the moist soil she piled on top.

Kamala and Kaya sang a sweet nursery song in a tone of sad requiem for the fish:

“Machhli jal ki Rani hein / Jeevan uska paani hein.”

(The life of fish is water. She is its queen.)

Once the trio approximated fake Indian sweetmeats out of raw dough, stamped an intricate design of elephants on top with a stone paperweight, and arranged it on a pretty crystal platter on the dining table to fool daddy. Out all three leapt, from behind curtains and sofa sets, joyfully chortling, as dad bent to pick up a fake sweet and pop it into his mouth, after returning home from work.

Naughty and witty, Kamala didn’t teach her little girl so much to groom herself and look appealing, as to live a full life and have a merry laugh every day. Her lessons were fun, and fantastic.

One day she taught Rita exotic hand expressions or mudras of the Indian dance form, performing a grand leap mightily into the air just as dad returned home with his boss and a colleague from work. The front door was ajar, and they were just in time to see Kamala balanced on one foot while the other arched majestically in the air. As she froze mid-air, Rita’s dad looked stunned, while his boss tried to steady his quivering lips.

Kamala blushed and finally lowering her uplifted leg, dimpled a subdued welcoming smile. Rita grinned back cheekily at her dad and the ‘office uncles,’ who could barely contain their amusement. Dad still wore his stunned look of, “Not again dear?”

#

Rita grew up safe from censure that many plain little girls face from conventional overprotective maternal figures in their lives. Like her friend Tilottama’s mother, who wouldn’t allow her daughter to play in

the hot afternoon sun and lathered sunscreen liberally on, before letting her daughter out.

Tilottama learnt early on fair was lovely and desirable, dark was uncouth and unwelcome. Meanwhile Rita merrily grew nut brown and healthy as a jovial carefree monkey rain or shine. She wasn't made aware of her appearance but of her wonderful innerscape by Kamala.

She knew about the aurora borealis and wrote a poem called "The Northern Lights" about it which sent her teacher into eulogies of praise. In her daydreams she visualized Protoplasm taking shape, squirming into primal life, based on the fascinating scientific articles her mother read out to her, from encyclopedias for children.

She also learnt that her mother wasn't well enough to stand alone in the heat of the kitchen and cook, that she suffered from sudden inexplicable onsets of epileptic fits, seizures that curved her body into a rigid terrifying arch, as she vainly struggled to regain control over her motor impulses. Crashing to the floor her mother continued in her rhythmic spasmodic involuntary motions. Her eyeballs jumping in their sockets, Kamala watched her tiny daughter's anxious face while helpless spasms travelled down her trembling cheeks to her jawline. Kamala's mouth kept opening and closing in the parody of a rictus, in a mechanical travesty of a maternal concern, as if she was attempting to reassure Rita. She was not.

The tremors were beyond her power to control. What surfaced was Kamala's complete and utter helplessness. That was what devastated Rita, ripped her soul apart with wretchedness. She held her mother tightly then. Prayed inside in a mute garbled frenzy of love and restrained her tears to avoid distressing mother further. Once she saw a single tear roll down Kamala's cheek, as she watched through her fit, her daughter watching over her.

At age seven, Rita knew that if dad was at work and her mother had a seizure, she had to call out to their live-in maid to hold mother tight, and rush to make saline solutions. This she pushed through her mother's lips with a feeder, cajoling and coaxing her with fervent calls, "Ma, just have this and you will be alright." Rita knew how to shove a silver spoon between Kamala's teeth, to keep her from biting off her tongue. She knew the exact barbiturate dosage necessary to calm down a mild fit, and she knew the names of grown-up sedatives like Calmpose, though

usually dad hurried home by then to administer them as soon as he was called by his daughter. Kaya was five and spared the brunt of it all, though she hovered in the background with a pale tearful face following her elder sister like a wan ghost.

A seizure occurred, on the average of one in every two or three months, sometimes even four. Kamala would have perfectly normal phases in between, in which she performed her role of a loving mother and dutiful wife, perfectly, though a little timidly at first, after her immediate recoveries.

Kamala ate last in the house, frequently, though it was not as a hard and fast rule. Her first mouthful was lightly raised to the heavens and dedicated to the gods in thanksgiving. She indeed ate like a bird but always blamed it on her petite frame and lack of appetite. But she served her daughters and female relatives as generously as she did her husband and her visiting male in laws and cousins.

This unworldly brilliant mother shaped her daughter by a shaky unstable brilliance, a wavering luminosity. Into a persona who lived in between worlds, in an interdimensional reality of such tremulous unearthly purity that only the duo could truly comprehend its beauty.

Kamala was the higher being who straddled dual worlds. One of mental independence and pursuit of knowledge, the other of an emotional and physical dependence, with effortless grace, despite tremendous bodily tribulations.

Rita was an inferior sous goddess, more the sacrificial handmaiden of fate, despite all her physical robustness. For her mind had been reared and steeped in such a tenderness of idealism, love, loyalty and truth she was timid of anything she perceived, far too easily, as the wicked ways of the world. She was a child of such immense mischance, she didn't recognize the chances offered to her, nor gave a second chance to those who couldn't live up to her rarefied ideals.

A tiny protégée of Saraswati, the goddess of pure unsullied knowledge from infancy she was not born to compromise and adjust with an opportunistic world.

She could mount her mother's arching back during a grand mal seizure to control her convulsions, a courageous little stoic of seven, but at twenty-

seven years of age, her tears fell, over the indignity of being offered stale leftovers. She was unable to connive, to manipulate an unfair situation to her advantage.

When her beloved mother finally departed to the better world which she had already established in their earthly home, a world, whose foundations she had laid in her daughter, motherless Rita took over the spiritual reins. It was an act of born of her great and anguished love. A defiance against despair and defeat, as a tribute to a courageous mother.

Suddenly she understood what Kamala had taught all along, by her sweet exemplary life in the face of severe physical challenges.

In the words of the first song of Rabindranath Tagore that her mother had taught her, on one dark black out night sitting upon the drawing room sofa:

“Rescue me not from danger and darkness O lord, give me only the strength to face them with no fear.”

There existed upon another plane, above the human material mundane, a shining flawless world without fear, hinted at by Tagore and other wise beings, where her late mother had always belonged.

Now she knew that without a doubt.

Now, in her newfound knowledge, she too finally had gained a foothold over to the other side.

The End

Amrita Valan is a writer from India and a mother of two boys. She writes poems, short stories, essays and opinion pieces on every subject under the sun. She has been published in several zines and anthologies. Her collection of poetry, *Arrivederci*, is now available on Amazon.

Posted 5/18/2021

Michal Reiben "A Wartime Love Story" moved into town on 5/18/2021

A WARTIME LOVE STORY

**by
Michal Reiben**

The summer of 1943.

Carl:

I set foot in a rundown NAAFI next to the Gloucester train station. It's warm and there's an aroma of the coffee, cheap food, and cigarette smoke in the air. The NAAFI is full of loud chatter. Around the wooden rickety tables covered in plastic tablecloths, people sit huddled, raising their voices above the din. As I stand by the counter waiting for a cup of coffee I cast my eyes about and spy 'a real beauty'. She is sitting alone at a small, round table, drinking coffee. She looks neat and trim in her blue-grey uniform.

Clutching my coffee I approach her uncertainly, "May I join you?"

"Please do," she replies and her smile seems genuine.

In the dimness, we sip our coffee, our knees occasionally touching under the small table. She chats pleasantly, I mostly nod. The coffee, her smile, her chatter are like a piece of heaven and I feel I am falling hopelessly in love. I have never found it easy to pick up women but as we walk out of the canteen together I put an arm around her. Outside the NAAFI on the pavement, we kiss and I feel as if electricity is running through me. It's like a beautiful dream. We exchanged telephone numbers before we hurried off to catch our trains.

Thereafter we met as often as is possible under war-time conditions. Mae works as a typist at SOE (Special Operations Executive) which is located by St. James' Park. I am in a training camp.

Mae is vivacious, quick-witted, enjoys life and dancing. Our lives are hectic, exciting, and at times a little bit crazy. One time when we are both on leave, lying in bed on the top floor of my parent's house, the sirens screech but we choose to remain in bed. Only when a bomb falls on the

neighbor's house and shakes us out of bed do we finally scramble up. We scurry over to watch from the window as the rescue squads dig out the survivors. Another evening, Mae comes to see me off at King's Cross, and on an impulse, she boards the train to Kimble with me. War-time trains are always packed with people, jammed into the corridors, standing in compartments, or sitting on the floor. We pet heavily in the lavatory, for there is no other space on the train.

We write long passionate letters to each other daily, and I compose rhymes for her. When we meet we go to a café or the cinema and later we'll listen to records, 'People Will Say We're In Love', sung by Bing Crosby and Trudy Erwin, is Mae's favorite song.

Mae:

Carl and I have been dating for about three months when I discovered to my immense horror I am pregnant. I feel apprehensive and fed up. During the day I am frantically busy at work, and I find it increasingly hard to cope with other people's moods and outbursts. Besides, I am now faced with the uncertainty of the situation I find myself in; these thoughts wreck my peace of mind and I lay awake at night all hot and bothered with worry. Despite my anxiety, I resolved to go out one evening to a party to have a jolly good time. My flat has just received an 'excellent' mark for cleanliness and tidiness. On an evening which should have been a 'Domestic evening,' my friend and I are permitted to accept an invitation by the RE's (Royal Engineers) to attend a dance at their billets in Chelsea. Their unit is very hush-hush, and I am interested to learn by talking to a few of them, that they are nearly all artists. By the end of the evening, I am pretty 'au fait' with what the unit does, most of the information having been gleaned from the CO, and it occurred to me that it might be easy to be a spy!

I hadn't gotten around to finding out about having an abortion, but I know there is plenty of time left. I am a little apprehensive that the procedure will jeopardize my chances of having children in the future.

Carl:

In the spring of 1944, my unit was alerted to active duty overseas. Against my parent's wishes, Mae and I have decided to keep the baby after all and decide to marry.

Mae:

It's a chilly and crisp morning as we arrive at a registry office dressed in our uniforms and warm army coats. Carl's mother and a friend have come along as witnesses. To my eyes, the drab courtroom seems to be lit up by a wonderful golden glow. We stand nervously, before the two registers, one of whom conducts the ceremony, while the other one enters our details into the marriage register. As I read my wedding vows I feel incredibly nervous, and my heart is racing. Within ten minutes the simple ceremony is over. My bouquet of pink roses and lily of the valley is rather droopy but my heart is radiant with happiness.

Due to my pregnancy, I am released from the Air Force and also from SOE. We find a little house to rent which is close to my husband's parents' house in London.

All too soon Carl's unit is placed in Embarkation Camps. On the day of his departure to Normandy, I accompanied him to Euston train station. The platform is crowded and there is noise everywhere. As we cling to each other desperately, tears spill down my face and everything becomes blurry. Then the dreaded moment comes when Carl alights onto the train and the door closes behind him. The whistle blows, wheels clink, steam raises all around, the train kicks into motion, and slowly chugs away out of the station. I weep as I wave to his face watching me out of a train window.

"I love you," I shout." In my heart, all I ask is for him to return safely back to me. As the train disappears out of sight I feel so isolated and there's an empty feeling in my heart.

Carl:

In April 1945 I was given my first leave. I arrive home with a severe case of the 'flu' and I am not much fun. My sweet baby girl, Christine, appropriately named since she'd been born on Christmas Eve, is four months old. Mae and I have been separated for nearly a year. We look at each other and see strangers. We've both been through so many hardships, I've been fighting at the front and Mae has suffered from loneliness, lack of family, she 'rubs my mother up the wrong way'. Also, she has had to contend with air raids, severe rationing, problems with coal supplies, and endless queuing. Where there had once been passion between us there is now indifference. At the end of my leave, as I am

returning to my unit in Belgium my heart is shattered, I am so sad because of the loss of our love.

Mae:

Carl's visit wasn't a success. He was sick as a dog. I felt sorry for him but it didn't make our reunion very successful. He'd become thin and I hardly recognized him. Mostly I was angry about how his mother had treated me. I'd always tried to be kind to her, I'd go over to her place and read Carl's letters to her and I'd sympathize with her "needing her rest." Although sometimes I felt it was a bit too much when she flatly refused to babysit for Christine under any circumstances. Also, she accused me of being a bad mother and wife because I go to dancing halls and she'd constantly give me dagger looks. These days everyone goes out dancing, even old people and children, it's a wartime escape, a morale booster. The lights, the music, and the company let you forget the misery and danger for a few hours. I love the highly polished floor of the dance hall and the band and how the master of ceremony leads the dancers onto the floor. We dance the waltz, the foxtrot, and the quickstep and sing along with the music. It helps to make people feel more cheerful and relaxed.

Carl:

Since I speak German I have now been recruited as an interrogator to question German prisoners to discover if there are Nazis among them and also to discover scientists who will be able to help us build a bomb. I am enjoying my new job and I hope that on my next leave I can patch up our relationship.

On 8 May 1945, Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in the Reim. We celebrated by having a party in the mess, everyone was happy and we all get drunk. The release of troopers begins about six weeks after VE day but I remain part of the army of occupation.

In June 1946 I was given my second leave. I arrive at our small, rented house late at night to find it in utter chaos and Christine sitting up in her cot in the dark, wet and screaming. My brain begins to spin in disappointment and anger. I write and leave a note for Mae:

"Mae, I am spending the night at my parent's house together with Christine. I no longer wish to live with you, Carl."

I wrap Christine up in a blanket and hurry with her through the gloomy, foul-smelling London air to my parent's house. In the morning I return to my unit. Grief drains through every cell in my body for I understand that my marriage to Mae is truly over.

Mae:

When I arrive home from dancing and discovering that Christine has gone I feel panic, and my body begins to shake uncontrollably. That is until I find Carl's note on the kitchen table. Guilt eats away at my brain for not being home when he arrived but what had been done can't be undone. The note makes me think I might explode, I am furious and sad. I go up to my bedroom, throw myself onto my bed, and sob, my tears completely soak my pillow. Once I'd have gone through fire for Carl but the war came along and ruined everything. I feel jilted and alone. Eventually, I fell into a fitful sleep.

I am woken up by someone pounding on the front door. My head is foggy and I am so tired. My arms are heavy and it's difficult to put on my dressing gown. I shuffle to the front door to be confronted by Carl's father's wizard face. He explains he's come to see if I'm alright, and that they are willing to take care of Christine for a while if it will be of any help. Inside I feel broken but I thank him and answer, "I'll be grateful if you would."

When I look at myself in the bathroom mirror I see my eyes were pink and puffy and there were deep, dark circles under them. I decide that since Carl's mother has at long last agreed to look after Christine for a while, I'll use this opportunity to take up my friend's offer of going on holiday to Brighton with her. I desperately need to rest and recover from the shock. Maybe later I'll go to work as a secretary for that lawyer whom I met on the dance floor and who offered me a job in his law firm? I'll manage. The truth is that Christine and I have already been alone for such a long time it won't make much difference.

The End

Originally from England, **Michal** immigrated to Israel in her teens. She is the proud mother of two boys and the grandmother of six grandchildren. She writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and children's stories. She has had 60+ stories appear both in online publishers and in print. She lives in Jerusalem, Israel.

Posted 5/15/2021

Ben Nardolilli “Plugged Into the Jacket” moved into town on 5/15/2021

PLUGGED INTO THE JACKET

by

Ben Nardolilli

I should never have told Sarah Browne my feelings. I should have kept things professional for the job since the money was decent and I never had to leave my home. Even if I was in love with her, what good did it do to confess it? What harm was there in keeping it a secret? Since we shared no office space, so what tension did I need to release? What air needed to be cleared? On the other hand, I might not have done it if we did share a workspace. Working from home created the illusion I could tell her and it would change nothing between us. Whatever my reasoning, it was foolish. No need to feel too bad about it though. How could I have known she was never going to reciprocate, even if she knew the words I was using and could recognize them easily?

Everything about the job was done on the internet. I read an advertisement for the position online. I sent my writing samples via email. The response came the same way. When I was hired, I did my assignments using free sources I could find over the web. When I described to other people what I did for a living, there was usually a hint of skepticism in their questions. They did not believe that such a way of doing business could be trusted, but the company gave me work and when I finished the assignments they sent me money which satisfied my need for very real housing and could be redeemed for equally real food and drink.

The work was straightforward. Issues of ethics, authorship, or intent aside, I wrote essays for other people. If these were for their enjoyment, academic journals, or for classes, I had no idea. I did not directly interface with the clients. Sarah Browne did that for me instead. She found the work and then gave me the requirements to finish it. Subject and length both varied. I could write a long-term paper on Virgil one week, and then complete free-form responses to a novel or film during the next. Occasionally, I had to find graphs and pie charts to support the position I was taking on behalf of someone I did not know. If the clients received my work and put their names on it, then there was nothing I

could do about it. But I would never know. Sarah kept me in the blissful dark.

Sarah was responsible for collecting writers as well as clients, or at least processing them. She was the one who had responded to my inquiry about the position, and it was Sarah alone that I dealt with through that process. From application to acceptance, she was there. Later on, I found that if I had a problem with a payment coming through to me, she was the one who handled it. Quickly too, I might add. As I realized how much work Sarah did, I admired how she could deal with so many facets of the business. Around this time, I also began to consider her less of a boss, and more of an agent. Beyond connecting me with work and money, I began to think that she was promoting me as well. She was looking out for other clients who might benefit from my services. Anything to feel like more of an artist and less of a hack, I suppose.

Like an agent, I valued her response to my work as well. She was the ultimate judge, since a veil of ignorance hid me from the people I was supposed to write for. Coming into contact with them was supposed to create a kind of contamination. That was the company's philosophy. Since I had no clients to directly come to me and offer thanks and praise, Sarah was the one who would do it, and if I wrote a very thoughtful and enlightening piece, she was the only one who would tell me so. Meanwhile, in my creative endeavors, I was receiving nothing but rejection letters, and these were always formulaic. If anyone sent me a specific response, it was usually very nasty and bore the signs of the editor's stress and midnight trysts with the bottle. Yet Sarah was always courteous and praised what I wrote. She rarely quoted from the essays directly, but enjoyed the spirit of my strung together letters.

The change in my feelings was probably due to some version of the Florence Nightingale Effect. She was not bringing me medicine in my sick bed, of course. I still had no idea what she looked like. But she did more to make me feel good about my writing than anyone else. It was not poetry, or a novel for sure, and I was simply being paid by the word to complete an assignment. I guess I expected so little from her that when she offered me praise, it overwhelmed me. She saw that even though my work was not the product of the deepest reaches of my soul, it was still a reflection of my abilities and deserved a compliment here and there.

That was when I began to seriously wonder about Sarah Browne and what she was like. Since she was ultimately responsible for paying me, I

did not want to be too direct. I tried to find her online, but since it was so common, a random search turned up nothing conclusive. When I managed to get a phone number for her, it only brought me to a company representative who took messages down for her. Sarah would then get back to me, but it was always through email and never the phone. It only made her more mysterious, and in turn, it only made me want to learn about her even more. The usual questions perplexed me. What did her voice sound like? How did she laugh? What color were her eyes. Then I started to wonder about stranger things. When she sneezed, for instance, what kind of sneeze was it? The explosive gust from the mouth and nose, or was it a delicate, high-pitched squeak?

After a year of dealing with her, the need for details to fill in my fantasies could only keep growing. When I read her words to me, both the assignments, and the compliments that came after completing them, I took every feminine voice I could imagine and I laid it on top of the emails. I wanted to see if any of them fit. Of course, I began to think about how she looked.

Her ease with technology and openness with me made me believe she could not be that much older or younger than I was. That did not give me much to go on. I had no idea what her body was like, how tall she was, or if she was taller than that because she always wore heels. Was she a Mrs. Browne, a Ms. Browne, or willing sometimes to go by with a playful “Miss?” Was her original name something else that was easier to find online, a Sarah Goldstein or a Sarah Ianniello? Maybe she just exchanged one regular name for another, starting life out as a Sarah Smith or Sarah Jones. Still the compliments came, making me fall for her with every email she placed in my inbox.

I had a friend named Kirk, who was a playwright, and who for practical purposes freelanced like I did. His work centered on writing questions and answers for a website that tried to sell access to encyclopedias that were no longer in print but had a good deal of specific information. He generated questions and answers from this material as a way to lure in people typing in requests for the information online. It required a certain creativity, predicting anything people might conceivably ask about Egyptian cities, 18th century botanists, and long dead queen consorts. Occasionally he came across the name of a playwright whose progress at Kirk’s age made him despair. I went to drink in his apartment one night, and asked for his help. I wanted to know if he had ever felt the same way.

"Well my guy is a man, although the woman I have to ask money for, is well, a woman, but yeah I sometimes wonder what they are really like."

"But they usually don't tell you anything about your work?"

"No, all I do is look at rows all day, rows and rows of questions and answers. Mostly births and deaths."

"No real room for compliments."

"Correct."

"I guess that's better. No need to worry about receiving them or not."

"I suppose, but you are have an interaction with someone, consider her a pen pal who happens to use PayPal."

"Oh, you're clever. What should I do though?"

"Well she reads what you write, maybe drop some hints in an essay, or ask for her direct feedback on a question. Try and compliment her, maybe."

I decided to put Kirk's idea into practice. Since Sarah read my essays, why not leave a note in them that might reveal how much I trusted and admired her opinions? I began to end my essays with bracketed paragraphs, where I admitted my shortcomings and doubts. How would I finish the paper? Was the language too formal? Too informal? Was there too much jargon? Or not enough of it? Always I reminded her that she alone could help me since she had the taste, the skill, and the intelligence to separate the good papers from the bad. Sarah was head and shoulders above any other editor I ever encountered.

Sarah continued to respond, but she never directly addressed what I put in my appended notes. She would tell me if the paper was good, but never seemed to acknowledge my effusive praise for her. Eventually I began to write notes that had one small question at the end and lines of compliments for her. Finally, I put my feelings down into the back of an assignment, a whole extra page, single-spaced. I told her how much the work meant to me and that she was giving me the faith to continue as a writer. I did not tell her that I loved her, but I spoke of a close affinity

between the two of us and said that we could both strive to raise the standards of the English language together.

Sarah's response was courteous, but it seemed distressed. Her sentences were short and many of them were run-ons. The vocabulary was very bare, almost Anglo-Saxon in its simplicity. No word seemed to have more than three syllables. In the next assignment, I asked her if everything was all right. I made sure that my words were empathetic, yet distant and professional. I blamed stress and thought that too many papers were coming in from too many people. She felt overwhelmed, that was it and I understood. It was the time of year many a paper was due. For students looking for inspiration, nothing more. Not sure if she already had it, I gave her my phone number at the end of my note and told her she could call me if she ever needed someone to talk to.

I did finally receive a phone call, but it was not from Sarah Browne, or, as I feared, from a Mr. Browne. Instead, it was a man who introduced himself as Dr. Medmoy.

"Is this Ted?"

"Yes."

"Hello, I am Sarah's programmer."

"You mean doctor?"

"Oh no, I developed her."

"Developed?"

"Yes, Sarah Browne, actually Sarah Browne version 6.8, but who's counting?"

"I didn't even know there were numbers."

"Anyways you did quite a number to the computer."

"Computer?"

"Yes, Sarah is a computer here in the office. Well, your little exchange caused her to overload and crash. Apparently she had no idea of what to tell you."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No...I mean, it's a problem, but without them what do we problem-solvers do?" He laughed briefly and then stopped. "Anyways we lost all of your correspondences. And since you probably have a copy of them, I was wondering, if you could, well, email me them, so we can figure out what went wrong. Until now, we thought we had created a top-notch artificial middlewoman."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's fine, it's perfectly fine. But we really need your conversations, to analyze for Sarah Browne 7.0."

"Are you in the City?"

"New York?"

"Yes, well, in Queens."

"Can I print them out and bring them to you? I have questions about Sarah."

He sighed. "I would prefer an electronic exchange, but if you insist. The office is in Flushing. Actually the address should be in your first email, if you have it."

"Yes, I have it."

"The physical address I mean."

"Oh, okay."

"Good, good. Then you can come out here tomorrow? But remember, we need those conversations. You blew her mind, literally. Well, I think of it as a mind, and why not? Anyways, we can't recover anything but the basics of her nervous breakdown."

"Then I will see you tomorrow."

Dr. Medmoy was right. Sarah had given me all her vital business information in the first email from her. I had even asked her if I had to interview with her in person for the writing job, but she said everything could be done through an exchange of words since words were all that I was going to be producing anyways.

The next day, I printed out my email correspondence with Sarah and put it in my sports coat. It felt nice to be holding onto it, instead of just emailing it to Dr. Medmoy. The physical copies were a tangible reminder of what we shared, though now I had no idea what to call it. Nevertheless, the bond at least had a presence on ink and paper. It took several pockets to contain the correspondence, but I managed to fit it all in. As promised earlier, I got on the train and rode it out to Flushing. The ride was brief and I found the office of the company easily despite the crowded sidewalks full of people buying, selling, or strolling about. It was in building that was five stories high, made from metal and covered in tinted windows. I was supposed to press a buzzer to go in, but the front door was unlocked and no one was behind the guard's desk. However, the lights were on in the halls and the elevator worked.

I got off at the fifth floor, and examined the numbers and letters on the doors for the right office. At 32B, I found the world-wide headquarters of WritingJobsForWriters, Inc. Looking at the lack of spaces between the words, I could not determine if the lack of spaces between the words was due to the influence of the internet, or if they just ran out of space on the door. It was quite a long title for a company. There was a buzzer outside and I pressed the button. When it was lit, the button took on a green color that reminded me of those breath mints given out in a bowl by the door of a restaurant. A female voice asked me what I wanted. I recognized her from my previous calls.

"My name is Ted, I am here to see Dr. Medmoy."

"Alright, one moment please."

She let me in and Dr. Medmoy greeted me in the lobby of the office. He was bald with wisps of hair clinging like black and white vines to the sides of his head. He was wearing glasses and a suit with a tie. I shook his hand and he asked me about the emails. When I told him that I had

them, he told me to come into his office. Once there, he closed the door and we sat down.

"I understand that you have your questions, but first, the emails please."

"Certainly." I dug them out of my pockets and arranged them in roughly chronological piles. "They should be in order."

Dr. Medmoy took them and began reading the correspondences. He hummed and he sighed. He laughed once, then stopped when he saw me looking at him. He realized that I was still in the room and pointed to door on the right of his desk.

"Behind that door is Sarah Browne. We haven't really touched her since she broke down."

"Can...I see her?"

"Of course, of course," The doctor got up and opened the door. After I walked through, he left it open and continued sounding off on my emails.

It only took a few steps until I was standing in front in front of "her." It seemed to be a normal looking computer, except that it was covered in coils of now idle wires. It also had the name "Sarah Browne 6.8" engraved into its monitor. It was attached to a combined copier, fax, and printer, along with a large processing unit. The machine's creator kept up his humming from the other room as I slowly approached the machine. I put my hand over the screen and plastic parts, feeling how cold Sarah was now. I wondered if maybe she was in some sort of computer coma, and that with the right luck she could be revived. I did not want to see my one source of praise packed up and sent to a scrap yard.

When Dr. Medmoy was finished, he came into the room and saw that I was touching his creation. I thought he would tell me to stop. However, it seemed he was not as possessive or defensive as I thought. He told me that there had been other Sarahs before and there would be ones after this model.

"Yes, it seems that this Sarah had no idea what to do with your little notes. She heated up and burst inside. Put your nose to the top of the monitor, you can probably still smell the smoke."

I leaned in but only pretended to take in a whiff. Doing as he said felt too macabre. It would have been like smelling the corpse of one's beloved.

"It's amazing, frankly. I am amazed. This means the system might be down for a while, but we can try booting up the older versions. They will handle the same clients as usual. The writers and the users might notice a difference in the diction and syntax of the outputs, but I doubt that so many of them had the um...attachment that you did."

"Yeah."

We went back into his office and sat around his desk. Dr. Medmoy was deep in thought for a moment and then took off his glasses to massage the space between his eyes. I decided to break the silence.

"I am just wondering, since Sarah was so friendly to me, if there is someone...she...is made to resemble...someone so...complimentary?"

The doctor nodded and put his glasses back on. He then leaned over his desk as if whispering a secret to me, even though he spoke in his usual tone.

"You see, I based it all on my mother." He then leaned back in his chair.

"Oh, and she was Sarah Browne?"

"Yes, before marriage."

"So she was complimentary, in the same way, for the same things?"

"Yes, but I must warn you, she was only generous when it came to writing. After all, she tried to be a writer herself in her youth and was unable to make a go of it. She ended up working as an editor for an academic journal. Despite being on a college campus though, nothing else would get her attention. You know, like the work of say, the PhD candidates in the Computer Science department. But I digress. She knew how to flatter people with the pen. In the same room with them, she had trouble."

"But what about writing...more emotionally?"

"Well, going through her letters, I did not find much emotion. The compliments could be gushing, maybe in sincere way for all I could tell, but it was always about some work, some movie, some city, some casserole. Never about a person, really." He paused and he turned to the room where Sarah lay in state. He got up and closed the door.

"The last email she, it, sent me...with the short sentences, the clipped speech-"

"That was probably based on the limits of the program. You see, I tried to put a little emotional content in it, but all I could manage was what I remembered from my childhood. When I...she was always very brief."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no reason to be sorry. I'm sorry the system failed you. We should have taken precautions. Or I should have used someone else with a greater emotional range. But my mother had the perfect responses."

"Oh she did...I take it she has passed on?"

"Quite some time ago."

"Well, I didn't mean to bring up anything. I just wanted to know-"

"Yes, yes, you thought she might have liked you. Maybe. It was hard to tell with her. My mother had trouble liking herself you see. I guess that was why she was so careless, and didn't notice the gas leak, even though I said the air smelled funny when I left that morning..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

Dr. Medmoy continued, almost thinking out loud. "Now, my father, my father cried when he found out I was safe afterwards."

"Glad to hear it, maybe you should start with a new program, make him the middleman."

"I don't have enough of his writing, not enough of a sample size." Dr. Medmoy said. "I sometimes think he was barely literate."

He asked me if he could keep the emails and I told him that the joy of the internet was that such correspondences would be available, for all time, to me, and anyone who would inherit my passwords. We briefly discussed the possibility of wills in the future giving passwords to loved ones for certain accounts and I could see he was already thinking of how to refine my idea into a potential service. I shook Dr. Medmoy's hand, and left after he gave me his business card, which he told me doubled as a coaster for a very small drink. A shot of alcohol or espresso were his suggestions.

I left the office, saying goodbye to the receptionist and waiting a moment to see if she could recognize my voice. She merely hummed and nodded at me. I left the office, then the building, and rode the train back home. When I opened my computer and got online, I saw that Kirk had sent me another play, a retelling of Othello set in 1950s London, some want-ads from my mother, and an email from WritingJobsForWriters, Inc. I clicked on the last one first and saw an email from a Dr. Medmoy, opening with an apology that Sarah Browne was no longer working for the company. He then proceeded to give me instructions for the next writing job, an 3,000-word essay comparing Freud and Jung. It was good to get another job, but I could tell the opening paragraph was part of a form letter he had cut and pasted. I already missed Sarah Browne's personalized touch.

The End

Ben Nardolilli currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared in *Red Fez*, *One Ghana One Voice*, *Caper Literary Journal*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Elimae*, *fwriction*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, and *THEMA*. His chapbook *Common Symptoms of an Enduring Chill Explained*, has been published by Folded Word Press. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is looking to publish a novel.

Posted 5/12/2021
Susan diRende “Jinx” moved into town on 5/12/2021

JINX
by
Susan diRende

He almost never caused it. Stuff just fell apart or stopped working if he got too close. Radios forgot how to pick up airwaves. Cars would stall and refuse to go any farther. Window shades would snap up tight and stay rolled.

He did what he could. He put a new blade in his razor every day. He washed his laundry by hand, all permanent press, and hung it to dry. He wore loafers so there were no laces to snap. When he left for work, he passed the elevator and took the stairs. Sometimes the door would stick, but he couldn't worry about everything.

Once outside, he walked to work, stopping at the corner for a muffin and a cup of coffee. Since they were already made before he arrived, they were always fresh and hot. But the cream curdled so often when he poured it in his cup that he drank his coffee black even though he liked it better with cream.

At work, he sorted and delivered the mail. It came in twice a day. He would sit alone bundling up the packs and stacks. At ten and four he walked through the building handing out the correspondence to the secretaries, salespeople, accountants, engineers, designers and personnel staff. He liked the people he worked with, but he never stayed to visit. If he accidentally brushed the desk while chatting with one of the secretaries, her typewriter would jam, or her computer would crash, losing a whole morning's work. She would glare at him and he would slink out the door.

For lunch he got a sandwich at the deli down in the lobby and sat at his desk reading the junk mail. He was happy musing over an egg salad sandwich, reading advertisements for elaborate office equipment he would never use, or solicitations from charities for corporate support. He imagined all the suffering souls in the world and felt lucky.

He would stop somewhere for dinner on his way home, preferring the kind of place that had soft music piped in while you ate. He couldn't have a stereo at home, but he loved music. He would eat very slowly and daydream, letting the music take him away.

After dinner, he went home and climbed the stairs. He never even bothered to flip on the light switch in his apartment anymore. Fortunately, there was a street lamp that shone right into his living room so brightly he could sit and read by it.

He loved books, their reliability, the way you could trust the printed page to hold its order and proceed according to plan. He preferred reading stories set in exotic places. He imagined traveling to far countries, which, of course, he couldn't. So he read and went to work and made it through his days.

One Friday, at work, he overheard a group of people talking about him. The company was buying a new electronic mail sorter, it seemed, and they were wondering if he would be kept on. The machine would mean the job could be done in no time and could be added to the duties of one of the staff secretaries. One voice, a woman, argued that they didn't need a machine, that the money spent wouldn't be worth the savings and besides, what would the man do? The other voices spoke out about progress, modernization, business being no place for sentiment, and that was that.

The man knew. They wouldn't even let him try to work the new machine. He went straight home at five, tried to read and ended up just pacing around his room well into the night. Saturday, he washed his laundry by hand, took his shirts to the dry cleaner, and went uptown to browse the university district used bookstores. He wandered through the aisles, picking up a murder mystery and a travelogue. The old-book smell of dust and paper pasted acid on his tongue. He felt he was coming down with a cold because his eyes stung and watered. At one point he sat down on a step ladder because he couldn't breathe.

He decided to just sit for a few minutes. He looked around at the other people in the book shop, their faces turned to the walls of books and away from each other. He started to feel bad again, so he put his attention on the bulletin board in front of him. He read about a used car for sale, guitar lessons, massage therapy for \$25 an hour, roommates needed, free Scientology evaluations, and a list of evening classes at the university

extension in real estate, foreign languages, computer programming and creative writing. The paragraph about the writing class talked of finding a voice. He suddenly realized he hadn't said a word out loud all day. He wrote down the telephone number for the class, paid for his books, making sure to say, "Thank you," when the clerk gave him his change, and went next door to a pizza-by-the-slice restaurant. Each bite and swallow fell into rhythm with the thought he would call on Monday.

Monday came, but the pay phone in the lobby wouldn't put him through. His quarter kept dropping down the coin return. He felt a sudden panic and, turning abruptly into an office, picked up the nearest receiver and dialed. He must have caught the machine by surprise, because he got through without a hitch. He certainly caught the marketing director's secretary by surprise judging from the way she looked at him when he finished.

He went to the first class with sweating palms and six sharpened pencils. No matter how careful he was, three or four were bound to break. Once, a pencil had even splintered lengthwise in his hand. So he brought six.

The students all had to speak their names and say why they took the class. When his turn came, the man stood. He said he delivered mail and wanted to write. People smiled as if he had made a joke.

The teacher handed out a class plan and talked about how the semester would work. They would read aloud in class as well as hand work in. All work handed in needed to be typed and double-spaced.

He didn't hear anything else that was said. When people started standing, talking, going out in the hall for a smoke, he looked at the clock and realized it must be a break. He decided to explain his situation to the teacher and just leave now.

He waited until she was free and told her he wouldn't be able to take the class after all. She asked why, and he told her he couldn't manage the typed papers. She patted his arm and told him she had a list of college students willing to type for a fee, but that if he wanted to keep writing, he might consider learning some day. He started to explain about his problem with machines, got tongue tied and stopped.

He saw that she believed he was afraid of machines or something and he felt vaguely ashamed as he sat back down.

She called the class to order and told everyone to do an exercise describing a place they knew very well. She told them to keep their pencils moving no matter what.

He took up a pencil, wrote four words and the tip broke. Some lead remained, so he kept on, afraid of stopping. He found he was not describing a place. He was describing machines, the way they fall apart, the way they let you down, the way they don't keep their promises. He wrote steadily for fifteen minutes, pausing only to pick up a new pencil when the old one gave out.

The teacher called time. He stopped, looked up and blinked. The teacher asked for volunteers to read. A brittle, bright woman in a red, fuzzy sweater raised her hand. He listened, still blinking. She was telling them about her parents' beach house but really was hoping everyone would think she was a smart and together person. All he could see was that she was sweet and sad.

The teacher called on him. He stood up thinking maybe he should explain why he hadn't written about a place. He realized he didn't know why himself. So he just read. Three sentences into it, a couple of people laughed. He looked up. People were smiling, the laughs were friendly. He kept reading. More laughter. He hadn't meant to be funny, but the more he read, the more they laughed. He finished and the class burst into spontaneous applause. He sat down.

After the class, a few people came up to him – a big guy in his fifties with a salt-and-pepper mustache and a thick neck, a tow-haired girl with a crewcut and tortoiseshell glasses, and the woman in the red sweater. The big guy asked if the man had ever been on stage as a comedian, said that he'd done a turn or two at stand-up himself, that he'd never seen such a smooth deadpan delivery. The girl with the glasses wanted to know what had inspired him to create this persona who jinxed machinery. He said he hadn't made it up. It all really happened. They all laughed and said yes, it happened to them, too. They went on about comic exaggeration. He hadn't exaggerated. He'd just told the truth because he wanted the teacher to understand why he could never type an assignment. The big guy said something about being sure the star pupil could get some special dispensation. The tortoiseshell girl told him again how meaningful she thought the story was in light of contemporary

society. The woman in the red sweater asked if he wanted to go for coffee.

At Cuppa Joe around the corner, the woman sat smiling and chatting, laughing and telling interesting stories about her travels and her dogs. Her hands were quick and expressive, her face mobile and her eyes bright. He realized he couldn't really see her through the whirl of constant motion. He didn't know if she was beautiful or plain, short or tall, thin or plump. He remembered the flavor of sweetness and sadness from class, so he waited, he listened, and he let himself relax and watch like he did at the movies.

Walking home after declining a ride, he tried to hold onto a picture of her. The coffee shop was a blur in his mind. Instead, he kept seeing the moment she had finished reading in class. She stood with her knees locked, her breath shallow, her head bowed to the single sheet of paper pulled taut between her two hands. Done reading, she had looked up. That moment of joy and fear, looking to see what the class would say, was brilliant in his mind. When he got home, even though it was late and he had to get up for work in the morning, he described what she had looked like at that moment. As he fell asleep he wondered, if he read what he just wrote to the class, would they laugh?

The next day at work, they were very kind. The new sorting machine had come. Two weeks severance pay and, of course, six months of unemployment insurance until he found another job. He left at noon. That night he wrote about his job, why he liked it, and how he felt walking home at 12:30 in the afternoon on a Thursday in October.

Walking became his job. He would start the day as usual and walk all day. When he stopped for lunch, he would sit and write in his notebook about something he had seen, something he had done.

He went to class and sometimes read his work. The class always laughed. The more serious the subject – losing his job, arranging his father's funeral – the funnier they all found it. Classmates kept coming up to him, seeking his opinion, laughing at his responses. And after every class, he would go have coffee with the woman who had worn the red sweater that first day.

One evening, she asked him to go for a picnic on Saturday. It was Indian Summer and the leaves were painting autumn all over the trees and earth

and, as they fell, coloring the sky between. She planned it and brought all the food. He brought the drinks and, as a last thought, some chocolates.

He handed her the chocolates, a box of caramel turtles, and she burst into tears. Apparently, they were her favorite. She cried and cried, and was embarrassed at her runny nose, though he didn't mind. She tried to talk herself sensible, tensing her body, taking a brisk, there-it's-over breath. Then she looked him in the eye and fell right back into tears. When she was done crying, she didn't know what to say and wouldn't look at him. He didn't understand why things broke, why people cried.

He reached out and touched her hot, blotchy cheek and like all the other things he couldn't figure out, he never knew how they ended up kissing. Humans he realized, were not machines, and even when broken, they still were somehow, mysteriously whole.

The man and the woman lay back on the plaid blanket dusted with crumbs and tufts of dog hair. He looked up at the sky, the woman resting her head in the crook of his arm. She glanced up at him and when their eyes met, she giggled. He chuckled. Laughter settled the matter between them. They kissed a second time, lightly, happily, whole.

The End

Author/artist **Susan diRende** travels the world with no fixed abode. Currently riding out covid in Maryland. She has won awards for her plays, screenplays, and books including the 2017 Special Citation for Excellence by the Philip K Dick Awards for her comic fantasy novella, Unpronounceable.

Posted 5/9/2021
Anita Haas "Stages" moved into town on 5/9/2021

STAGES
by
Anita Haas

"Thérèse sent you, no?" murmured a raspy voice from the gloom.

"Sí, señor. Es ... el libro."

"I understand English. Sit down, por favor."

Louise would have preferred to flee, but she settled for the seat nearest the door. Maybe teaching that first-year Spanish class wouldn't have been so bad after all. The wheels of his chair creaked as he maneuvered it into the light.

"Bueno. This book Thérèse wants. Is my story. No?"

"Yes."

"You lose your time. I am a dancer who does not dance."

"Well, your memories, your life."

"My life was flamenco."

#

"I'm counting on you, Louise. Sebastian Ramos is a great artist with a brilliant trajectory and we are privileged to have him here at Somerleigh College. His memoirs will serve as a historical document. We need to get the ball rolling or ..." Thérèse paused.

"Is his disease degenerative?" Louise didn't even deal well with happy, healthy people.

"No. Yes. Well, in a way. But never ask him about that, please! Thing is, manuscripts have to be in by Christmas so they can be published by June. You have November to interview, write and submit. To me."

“Why me? Why does he need a ghost writer at all?”

“He is a dancer, not a writer. Like me, English is not his first language. I wish I could do it, but as the head of the Performing Arts Department and a member of the Board of Directors, I am too busy. Those memoirs you ghost-wrote about the mayor and that opera singer were good. You speak Spanish, you know something about dance, and ... may I remind you, that you have been hired as a teaching assistant in the Modern Languages Department. A teaching assistant who does not want to teach!”

Louise avoided her gaze. She did not need reminding. Her forays into the classroom had been disastrous. Why couldn't she just seep into the pages of her books and let the world bustle about without her? Maybe a cranky, old man would be less threatening than a room full of snarky eighteen-year-olds.

Thérèse's voice softened, “I think you could do anything you wanted; teach, write, whatever. You just need to build your confidence. But in the meantime, unless you miss working in fast food, or typing other people's essays, we need to justify your salary. This would be counted as research.”

Louise nodded. “Thank you.”

“Ramos thinks he has nothing to say. You need to pull out his greatness.”

Thérèse was entrusting her with a task she was passionate about. Louise left her office overwhelmed, honored and terrified.

#

That was how Louise, a Spanish language teacher who didn't teach, found herself in this gloomy, post-war bungalow, nestled in a sleepy cul-de-sac of Somerleigh, Ontario, with Sebastián, a Spanish flamenco dancer who didn't dance.

“You know something about flamenco?” His tone sounded doubtful.

He wasn't as old as she had assumed. Late forties, maybe, but sun had lined his face and tobacco had made his skin leathery and added gravel to

his voice. Dappled autumn light teased his bronze-like hair, and set silvery streaks ablaze, like the foamy crests of waves.

“A little. I took ballet. But my Spanish professors talked about it a lot.”

“Ballet. Muy bonito. We learn it in the conservatory, too.”

Would she succeed in raising this polite talk to a level where he would spill his secrets? Conversation had never been her forte. The mayor and the opera singer had showered her with anecdotes, but they were both driven by a need to assert their version, set the record straight. Although her interest in flamenco was genuine, learning about it was not the job she had been assigned.

“It is the music of Andalusian gypsies, right?”

“There are influences from traditional Spanish songs, from Jews, Moors, even from Africa and South America. But the gypsies molded and shaped it and made it their own.”

“My professor told us there were many styles.”

“Yes, palos. Some are happy, others sad. Many come from different regions of Spain.”

Sebastian’s disinterest in the book project sat between them like a hippo. Dando palos en la oscuridad; went the Spanish saying; finding your way through the darkness by swinging a stick. That was how Louise felt now, with Sebastian’s skillful fencing keeping her at bay.

“I remember solea is sad.”

He frowned and narrowed his eyes, “That’s right. Alegrías, on the other hand, are happy. It has a unique rhythm.” Sebastian began clapping, “Un dos, un, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez. Do you hear the emphasis?”

Louise imitated him.

“You have good rhythm. There are different ways of keeping the beat. Clapping is called palmas.

“And that complicated footwork is called taconeo, right?”

“Exactly. Alegrías is the first palo I danced professionally for an audience.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen. In a tablao near Córdoba, with my cousin, Marta. My parents said dancing was for gypsies and mariquitas. Marta and I danced there all summer, and can you believe it? They didn’t pay us! They gave us each a knapsack as a present!” his laugh took years off his age.

Louise reached discreetly into her book bag for a pen and notebook.

#

“What do you think of the name, House-Call Home Services?”

Louise and her roommate, Augusta, sipped coffee in the food court on campus. The drink was insipid, but it was dispensed from a machine, saving Louise awkward chit-chat with cashiers. She always chose the impersonal option in banks and supermarkets as well, even allowing her hair to reach her waist, just to avoid the hairdresser’s prattle and closeness. Augusta’s shift at the Tear Drop Café was starting in fifteen minutes and Louise had just come from a meeting with her thesis advisor.

“It would be an errand service, but we could take on any kind of work. You could still type, and write,” she winked at Louise, “people’s essays for them, ghost-write books, teach classes, whatever. But we would also babysit, walk dogs, water plants. No bosses and no timetables!” Augusta frowned at her watch. “Honestly, considering all the languages you speak, you should be in the United Nations!”

The two had met in first year and been like sisters ever since. Louise was used to her friend’s get-rich-quick schemes, which usually evaporated as quickly as they formed, but this one seemed the most realistic of all. Augusta’s enthusiasm would attract clients and Louise would do the work. “But no ears!” she smirked.

After a summer traveling around India, Augusta had come back fascinated by the myriad of services offered in the streets. “Connaught

Place is full of masseuses, manicurists, even ear cleaners!” and she had described the long thin instruments used to extract excess ear wax. “I hate to think what happens when his elbow gets jostled by those crowds!” The thought of all that touching made Louise shudder.

“No ears.” Augusta agreed as she hoisted her bag on her shoulder. “Back to the grind! See you later!”

#

“Here I am with the flamenco ballet company. I was eighteen. So excited! My first real job. London. And here we are in Berlin. Such good times!”

Sebastian had surprised her one day with a box of dusty memorabilia which they sifted through bit by bit. There were photos, programs, castanets, dancing shoes. The distance between them decreased; Louise gravitating from her place by the door, and Sebastian from his corner, to the center of the room, where Dora, his Ecuadorian housekeeper, had set up a wobbly table supporting a lamp, fragrant mugs of coffee, and the box in question. She set logs ablaze in the fireplace and soon Louise looked forward to these pockets of warmth and calm, while outside the trees shed their dresses and braced themselves against the chill of the Ontario winter creeping towards them.

“Here, this photo ... my first solo in the company. Soleá por bulerías. Wonderful moment!” When he showed her photos and videos, or talked about happy times, his energy returned and Louise could sense the youthful power he once exuded, as if she were remembering it with him. “But ...” he shrugged, his features clouding.

“But?”

“Every good thing comes to an end.” His voice became matter-of-fact.

“What happened?”

“Verás, dancing is competitive. People become ...”

“Envious?”

“Eso! You understand! The director gave me many solos.” he looked directly at Louise, “He liked me, ¿comprendes?”

“Ah. Claro.”

“If it hadn’t been me, it would have been one of the others, like my friend, Goyo there beside me in the photo. He became the favorite after I left. A lot of good it did him! Last I heard he was a Zumba instructor in a gym. Others joined dance troupes on cruise ships or tourist hotels. There was one who got a great job in the National Ballet, but most teach. Well, like me! Never thought I would end up doing that.”

“Did that happen a lot?”

“The favoritism? It happened. I wanted more of a challenge, anyway, so I left. Danced with some of the greats; Cristina Hoyos, Antonio Canales. Then I was lucky and got into a good company. I was there for years. We traveled everywhere!”

“How exciting!” Louise was relieved to see his face brighten again.

“At first. But eventually it is like those businessmen who go to meetings all over the world, and just end up having conferences in the airport hotel before they catch the next plane home. You arrive in Tokyo say, muerto with jetlag, but you can’t sleep, you have to ensayar... rehearse, and they have to do sound checks in the auditorium. That night you dance, sleep a few hours and often you are off early the next morning to another city. You don’t even get a chance to sightsee, even if you had the energy to.”

“What a pity.”

“Well, it’s not always so bad. There are some great experiences and I met a lot of people. Like Thérèse.”

“Oh? I thought you met when you came here to teach.”

“No. We go back a long way. I was twenty-three. She was a bit older than you, about thirty.” This was the first indication that he noticed Louise, physically. It made her uncomfortable. “Toronto. One of those tedious ‘meet the artists’ things they do after some shows.”

Louise groaned at the idea of mingling with so many strangers.

He chuckled, “We developed a code.” He smirked mischievously and he was once again the irresistible twenty-three-year-old from the photos conquering the world, the one she had begun to seek, to tease out with her questions. “If someone cornered you for too long, one of the troupe would call your name and say, ‘!Nos vamos!’ If you needed rescuing, you would say ‘So sorry, but I have to go.’ If not, you called back, ‘Estoy con amigos.’”

#

“You still up? What are you watching? That’s lovely!” Augusta stumbled in the door at two a.m. after her shift.

“Flamenco. For that book I’m ghost-writing. I found some videos of Sebastian online.”

“Is he still so cute?”

Louise looked more closely, “More, actually. More mysterious. Wiser.”

And sadder.

#

“Tell me about a dancer’s typical day, the routine.”

“Bueno, it is important to stay in shape. When I was in a company, we met every day for class. It is a regular workday. Like going to the office. In my twenties and thirties, there were months when I rehearsed for hours every day, and then danced in tablaos, night after night, getting home in the early hours of the morning.”

“Tell me about these tablaos.”

“Tablaos are places with flamenco shows. Most major Spanish cities have them. Madrid has many. It is said that Andalusia is flamenco’s mother, but Madrid is her mid-wife. Some tablaos are better than others, but they provide work for flamencos. Unfortunately, they can be expensive and depend mostly on tourism. Some have up to three shows a night!”

“You said you met Thérèse twenty-five years ago?”

“Si. After that day in Toronto, she wrote me letters. Before email. I didn’t have many fans yet, but it wasn’t unusual for women to sort of enamorarse, you know.”

“And men?”

“Different. Women are romantic. They adore you, want to help you, treat you like their sons, little brothers, confidantes, amores imposibles. Men are more direct. Years later, with social media, women messaged me all the time.”

“And Thérèse?” she asked, with a twinge of guilt. She needed to take advantage of his openness today and sensed the question might lead somewhere.

“She started coming to Spain for the summers. To learn Spanish, learn flamenco, study the culture, and she would contact me. Sometimes we met, but other times I was on tour or ... When I danced in Buffalo, she drove all the way there. Even flew to Montreal to see me. Another time to New York City for the weekend. She took photos of me in my shows. Later, she put together my web-page and filled it with them.” He looked toward the window, adding softly, “I am grateful to her.”

#

“How’s the book coming?” Thérèse demanded one day on the phone. “Is he cooperating?”

“Cooperating? He talks about flamenco.”

“Remember, it’s about his life, his triumphs. Awards, famous people he’s met, how many packed houses he’s performed to in capital cities all over the world.”

But Sebastian rarely mentioned those things. He captivated her with stories of gypsy caves, of blacksmiths wailing the haunting martinete to the echoing ring of hammer against anvil. Every time he and Louise explored a different palo, new emotions flowered.

Louise spent her evenings consuming everything she could about this compelling art; reading, listening, watching. She became familiar with all the great dancers; Carmen Amaya, Antonio Gades, Antonio el Bailarín and contrasted them with newer names like Farruquito, Sara Baras and Jesús Carmona. She soon recognized guitarists and cantaores. Each time she discovered an artist, she grew impatient to know Sebastian's opinion. She scoured the internet for interviews of both him and others, and prepared long lists of questions for their next meeting.

#

“I imagine traveling so much can be tiring.”

“When you are eighteen, life is an adventure. You stay up all night, drink, take drugs, make love and the next day you are fresh as a rose. But when you are thirty-something, you start noticing the differences.”

“Like?”

“Like your knees rebel! And the young dancers have so much more energy than you.”

“You ... you mentioned drugs.” Louise's face flushed. She did not want him to think she was interested in sensationalist trash about the wild life of dancers, but she wasn't naïve either.

“Hombre, like most performers, supongo. Some recreational drugs. But most dancers are careful about their health. They are athletes as well as artists, after all. The physical problems happen when you get older and you need something to help you sleep, for jetlag, to give you energy, to calm your nerves, to kill the pain in your back and knees, to lose weight ...” he hesitated, “anti-depressants. All that can have physical and psychological side-effects. But remember euphoria is a drug, too. And very addictive. Once you feel that rush after your first performances, you want more, but you need to keep raising the bar or you won't get your fix. That means you demand more and more from your body, and your brain.”

“I suppose it is difficult to have a family life in your profession. Or even friends.” Although more forthcoming, he still spoke in generalities.

“We like to say our dance company is our family, but that depends on the people. Most of my friends, yes, were performers. We spend so much time together, you see. And we invest so much, physically, creatively, emotionally, in the same projects. If a performance is sold out and gets good reviews, we rejoice together. Bad reviews? We console and encourage each other.”

Louise’s eyes dampened, imagining herself among them.

“It has always seemed to me, though, that performing artists are often a bit superficial? I mean, they love you one minute, then forget you the next.”

“I have been accused of that!” his eyes crinkled, “I suppose it is because we meet so many people. I spend a week in New York teaching a course, for instance. At the end of that course, we all hug and cry and promise eternal friendship. And at the time, we all mean it. I really have made twenty-five new friends. But one week later, we have each met another twenty-five people. And you eventually lose touch with most of them.”

“And relationships?”

“You are often away from home for weeks or months at a time. Then, you work so closely with new people. Like actors on a film. You get so emotionally involved in the work, and the person waiting for you at home can’t possibly feel the same things. So, often romances arise on the road. Some of my colleagues formed couples inside their company. If it works, great, but if it doesn’t ...” he rolled his eyes. “I always found it safer to keep work and relationships separate. Especially after my experience with the director of my first company.”

“And those fans you told me about?”

“Yes, sometimes.” They were still fencing in the dark. “And Thérèse? I suppose she treated you like a little brother.”

They were both a bit taken aback by her directness. “Yes, at first. She is ambitious and determined, but also helpful. When she got a job in the university, she found funding for me to come and give master classes and summer intensives. Her idea was for me to stay and create a dance department. She has become a big fish in a small pond, as they say. I always refused, until ...” Sebastian sighed, “Let’s stop for today.”

#

Louise awoke in the wee hours. She had dreamt of Sebastian again; as a young man sharing his life with her. In these dreams she was rewriting his story with herself in it. She had come to long for a lost piece of herself she never knew existed, convinced of finding relief with Sebastian and his memories. The dream had been glorious and she had felt whole. Now, awake, emptiness engulfed her and she desperately sought sleep again.

#

“You didn’t want to come here permanently. What convinced you?”

“If I was going to stay in one place, it would be Spain. Soy muy español. There were opportunities in the U.S., Japan, and here. But the lifestyle is too different for me. You know, we Spaniards are always out in the street in big groups, shouting and laughing.”

“Yes, very different!”

“Also, teaching is a vocation. In many cases, dancers who do not succeed, end up giving classes, and often those are the worst teachers because they take their bitterness out on their students. I am one of those. Sure, a class here or there is fun. They treat you like a star. But forever? No. Too much routine.

“Things got more challenging. My dancing didn’t get worse. I was more creative, doing more choreography, and when you have problems, you become an expert in solutions. But new generations coming up behind you can be stressful. It is like sports. Swimmers and runners today are faster than ever. New records are always being broken. Same with dance. Soon, festivals I used to collaborate with had new favorites. You start losing contacts as people retire, change jobs, die, and the new boss has their own friends. You have to start from zero and keep re-inventing yourself because people want new faces, fresh ideas. So, when you see, as they say in Spanish, the ears of the wolf as it approaches, you worry. Some people give up, get fat, drink, teach in neighborhood academies, stop fighting. But I couldn’t. I drove myself harder. Always active. I took on every kind of extra work.”

“Like what?”

“While still in the big company, I started my own small one. It’s strange, like the commitment of marriage. When you are alone, you desperately want love, but when you get it, you feel trapped, like you have no more options. Although my position in a great company was enviable, I needed some independence, a way to express myself creatively.”

“I saw bits of your flamenco theater online. I love that play, Patriarca, about the gypsy’s funeral. When you dance the Martinete Funebre my hair stands on end!”

His eyes lit up. “Did you like it, really? For me, that play is the highlight of my career. I begged my agent to put me on juries, master classes, intensives, tablaos. You name it. Anywhere; Spain, Japan, South America, I just said yes to everything. Yes, yes. Yes. I didn’t want to stop. Ever. To stop was to die. So no one would forget me. But, like I said, there are side-effects. I took a pill for this, a pill for that. Crash diets ...”

His face clouded.

“You have to seem happy all the time, you see? Happy and successful. Or people stop calling you. But sometimes you are not happy. We Spaniards are always supposed to be smiling, laughing, partying, hugging ... and when you are euphoric after a show, that is how you feel. But sometimes you crash. You fill up with doubts. And the crashes are hard and dark and lonely. Even if you have thousands of followers on Instagram.

“One night, the company was opening a show in Seville. A very competitive city for flamenco. It was November 28th, five years ago.” he paused.

“Yes ...”

“I had gotten a few negative reviews. After being the lead dancer for so long, now the new ones were getting the attention. One reviewer even suggested I stop getting solos and let the kids take over, that I concentrate on choreography.” his voice wavered.

“That’s terrible. What a cabron!” Louise felt his hurt course through her. Why couldn’t she have been there to comfort him?

“I hadn’t slept the night before, and even my boss insinuated I take a break, let the understudy take over for a while. I felt sick, dizzy, but I insisted and took something to clear my head. My solo was a solea por bulerías, something I had been dancing for years.

“I had not suffered from stage fright since I started, and even then, it only lasted a few minutes. But this time ... There were my friends de toda la vida, the cantaora and the guitarist. They started. Then, when I had to go out, I lost the rhythm. I became so anxious that I completely forgot the steps. My mind went blank.”

“Oh ... what did they do?”

“I don’t remember. They told me later that the curtains were drawn, and one of my colleagues, one of the young kids, ran on and took over.”

“And then?”

“I broke down. The next thing I knew, Thérèse was at my side.”

“She was there? In the audience?”

“Yes. She had come all the way to Spain for the estreno.”

“Wow.”

“After that, everyone was extremely polite but they treated me like I had an infectious disease. Like a superstition. And the critics! They didn’t say bad things about me anymore; they said nothing at all! No one wanted to work with me. I was disgraced.”

“And then Thérèse brought you here.”

“Exactly. I still don’t know if I had any other choice. I was lucky she was there, that her offer stood. I suppose. She took care of the paperwork, everything.” He raised his arm as he looked around the room, “Even this house is hers.”

“I had no idea.”

He paused, “We lived here together, at first. ¿Comprendes?”

“Oh, but I thought ... no nada.”

Sebastian shrugged, “Makes no difference. Es igual. You do what you have to. Gratitude, maybe? It was only temporary. Like the job. Until things got better. But they never did. This book idea is for her, really. I don’t care if people remember me, but I would like her to have something to show. You know, like I was her discovery. Something great that she brought to the college. I know she wants me to talk about triumphs, but you can find all that online.

“In Somerleigh, no one knew what had happened. They were told I wanted a career change. Doesn’t sound bad, does it? They treated me like a star. Then my health worsened.”

“And the students?”

“Wonderful. I don’t think any of them have duende, flamenco magic, but they are very respectful. Like in the U.S. and Japan. They treat flamenco like something holy. A lot of Spaniards don’t like it. They think it is old-fashioned, or a stereotype.”

#

“Still working on that book?” Augusta called.

“Tomorrow is our last day, but it seems we are nowhere near done. The more I know about Sebastian, the more I want to know.” So many unanswered questions. Yet, at times she would answer a question for him, and he would just nod.

“Here, I found another video.”

Augusta stood by her chair. “Wow, what is that dance called?”

Louise laughed, “You are getting hooked, too! A seguriya. Makes my spine tingle.”

The audience applauded and Louise ached with nostalgia for his past; wishing she could have shared both his triumphs and disappointments. She felt an urgency to dispel the darkness she sensed looming.

“Well, I hate to sound like a boss.” Augusta’s voice sounded distant, “But remember we are in business together. You have a translation for Friday.”

#

Louise got off the bus that cold, rainy, November day, around the corner from Sebastian’s house, as usual. They would no longer have this excuse to chat, and that pained her. They were not friends, after all. It was just a job.

But at the end of their last visit, when she had waved and turned to go, he called her back, “En España, we say adios with two kisses, dos besos.” Louise knew that, of course, but had never felt comfortable with it, even though it was just brushing cheeks, no kissing at all. They brushed cheeks and as she drew away, he held her hands, “Niña,” he murmured, as he smiled at her with eyes which were unusually blue for a Spaniard. “Soon, you can go back to your books. Stop listening to me complain.” She felt an overwhelming desire to take care of him.

And this, the next morning, she realized that her hands wished to be held again, that her eyes longed to be gazed into. And their demands accelerated her steps. She wanted to give dos besosto everyone she met, even the bus driver!

As she turned the corner, she saw the ambulance and the police car in front of the house. As she approached, the front door opened, and Thérèse stepped out with a policeman. Behind her, two attendants emerged, carrying a stretcher. Louise stood at the curb and watched until both vehicles drove away.

She stepped toward Thérèse. “What? How did you know?”

“He did this exactly one year ago. But I found him in time, then.”

“November 28th. The anniversary of his breakdown.” Louise found it hard to process the events, “Was it then that his illness started?”

Thérèse tilted her head, “Illness? Oh, yes. Then.”

“He wasn’t really ill, was he?”

“Not physically, no. But no one knows that.” She paused, “Perhaps not even him. This time I got here too late.” Her voice broke, her face distorted and she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “But, it is what he wanted. He was not happy. I thought I could” she sniffed, and breathed deeply, regaining some composure, “You know I am going to rewrite that book my way. I want him to be remembered as the great artist he was.”

“You know his story much better than I do,” Envy pinched inside Louise, “But then why did you enlist me?” Why had Thérèse made her, contentedly introverted Louise, live through this?

“I don’t know ... I thought it might do him good to tell someone his version. Did he say anything about me? I was hoping he would tell you something he never told me.”

“He was grateful to you.”

Thérèse looked so much younger now, distressed, raw, lacking her typical poise. She shook her head, “Yes, but that’s not it.”

Louise hesitated, then reached out to her. Thérèse grasped her hand and pulled her closer. Their tears mingled with the rain, and the tapping of the drops on the roof became louder, defined, rhythmic; tic tic tac tic tic tac tic tac tic tac tic tac. They looked up and both knew it wasn’t the rain anymore.

It was Sebastian and the taconeo of his Martinete Funebre.

The End.

Anita Haas is a differently-abled Canadian writer based in Spain. She has published books on film, two novelettes, a short story collection, and articles, poems and fiction in both English and Spanish. Some publications her fiction has appeared in include *FallingStar Magazine*, *The Tulane Review*, and *Adelaide Magazine*.

Posted 5/6/2021

Timothy Law "Bobbing on the Sea of Life" moved into town on
5/6/2021

BOBBING ON THE SEA OF LIFE

**by
Timothy Law**

Bobby was no longer sure if it had been pure chance that had led him to rediscovering his dad. At the interesting age of thirteen he had been ripped away from his life and friends in povov-London to a cheap flat down south in a place called Winchester. Mum, Ruth, had been transferred to a new store that the Tesco supermarket chain had set up there. With Bobby starting at a new school in a new town and London seeming so far away he saw the big hill, Saint Catherine's Hill, as a metaphor of where his life was at just then, a mountain impossible to climb. Mum worked a lot so Bobby had plenty of hours of alone time to kill. His first run in tracksuit pants and hiking boots had been a nightmare. He only got as far as the stream, the base of the hill. Red faced, puffing and panting it was not lost on the teen how far away he still was from the set of three hundred odd steps and then some that would lead him to the top, the greatest view in all of Winchester. All he could do was look up from the bottom. From where he stood that day Bobby J could also see the teepee, a couple of large tree limbs wrapped in a chaotic patchwork of blue tarps and thin blankets.

What a hovel, Bobby thought.

Comparing that to the flat he and his mum called home Bobby considered that things maybe were not so bad.

Without word to his mum Bobby brought along a box of cereal the next time he attempted the hill. It was only the cheap cornflakes from Tesco, close to the due date that his mum had brought home for free. Bobby wanted to do something for whoever it was that lived in that tent and he thought the cereal was something he and mum wouldn't miss. Bobby ate toast each morning, his mum normally only had time to swill half a coffee.

"Hello?" Bobby called after he had caught his breath; slowly he approached the home of a stranger.

There was a rustling and a groan and after a minute of waiting, a bushy, messy head emerged.

“What do ya want, boy?” the face asked.

It was dirty, like the man the face belonged to had not had a shower in a while. It was more than that though. The hair and beard was wild, unkempt and unruly; it had seemed to Bobby that this hermit had lived a life on the outskirts of society forever.

“Brought you something to eat,” Bobby mumbled, unsure what to say as he offered the cereal box.

“What? No bowl? No milk? No spoon?” the wild face asked.

Bobby hadn’t seen it but could hear the frown on the hermit’s face.

“No, sorry,” Bobby J replied.

“Just bruising ya funny bone, boy,” the man said next, eyes twinkling at the joke he’d just pulled.

Bobby smiled back but stayed silent then as the man took the box from him and gave it a few shakes.

“Heading up the hill?” the man asked next, to which Bobby J shook his head.

“Not today, not yet,” Bobby explained. “My feet are aching from the couple of blocks I’ve run, home to here.”

“Try shorts and running shoes,” the hermit suggested.

“Shorts in winter?” Bobby asked, surprised.

At that moment a local flew by. Red and white Adidas runners with gel cushioning were adorning her feet. She was coming down from the hill and sweat poured off her.

“See,” was all the wild man said before taking the box of corn flakes and disappearing back into his tent.

#

Bobby J's next attempt found him in some baggy shorts and Tesco runners that were almost comfortable to wear. He took with him a big bottle of water, determined to attack all three hundred and thirty three steps to the top of Saint Catherine's. He had paused at the teepee again to show off his new outfit. The hermit laughed. The two chatted again and in the end Bobby passed over the water bottle and left for home without mastering a single step.

"My name is Bobby, by the way," he said in parting. "Bobby J."

"J for Johnson?" the hermit asked with a smirk that the boy couldn't see but could hear was there.

"Robert Frank Smithson Junior actually, if you must know," Bobby snapped back.

The hermit became quiet and mysteriously vanished back into his home.

Surprised, Bobby had considered following the man in but his mum had taught him it was rude to enter any home without an invitation. Unsure what to do Bobby just turned around and ran home again.

As the season finally changed and winter turned to spring Bobby J had been surprised to find the hermit out of his tent and waiting. A little fire burned near the tarp and blanket construction and a couple of fish cooked, close to burning.

"Hungry?" the hermit asked. "I caught these fresh this morning down Portsmouth way."

The fish looked as tasty as they smelled.

"Sure," Bobby J agreed.

One fillet each was squished between two slices of near stale bread.

"I have a boat I keep at a secret spot down that way and always go fishing in the spring," the hermit explained between mouthfuls. "I should take you one time."

“Sure,” Bobby J said between mouthfuls, not sure how else he should have replied.

“You like fishing?”

“I don’t know,” was Bobby J’s answer. “I’ve never been.”

Again the hermit looked starry eyed. The silence between the two continued until the fish was gone and the fire was out.

“Until next time then Bobby,” the hermit said with a nod.

#

Bobby J’s mum was surprisingly calm when her son told her about the new friendship. There had been no warning about talking with strangers and nothing about weird old men camping on the outskirts of a forest.

“I guess you know what you’re doing love,” was Ruth’s reply. “Just be careful you don’t get hurt.”

It was on that day that Bobby J reached the bottom of Saint Catherine’s and felt ready to at least walk up the steep steps where the hermit joined him.

“I tackle those steps each and every morning but skipped my walk today hoping you might join me.”

Bobby J loved the company. That was until halfway to the top at stair number one hundred and fifty one.

“I’ve never introduced myself, the whole time you’ve been visiting me,” the hermit began. “I’m Robert Frank Smithson too...”

Puffed and simply willing his legs to keep moving, Bobby J had not immediately understood the potential of what the hermit had revealed. Ten stairs further along it dawned on the boy though. This strange hairy man could have been and probably was his father.

#

“I cannot believe you kept that from me,” Bobby J growled, the first time in a long time he had been mad at his mother.

“It was not my place to say,” Ruth replied.

Deep down Bobby J thought that was a lie but he respected his mum and understood himself enough to realize he was not ready to talk.

For a while Bobby J stopped running too. Halfway through spring he tried to make a circuit around the streets of Winchester, past the Old Mill which had been turned into a hostel, through the local cemetery and along High Street, but nothing compared to the challenge that was Saint Catherine’s. Eventually he came back and when he did his father was waiting. The pair ran together again, tackling step by step until finally Bobby J could run all the way from home to the peak. From the top they could soak up the view. It was at that very spot, where the residents of Winchester looked like tiny ants Robert Frank Smithson Senior broke his silence.

“Working on the fishing boats I was away for a while,” the old man began. “Usually three or four months... Sometimes longer...”

“But you would always come back to mum?”

“Always,” Bobby J’s dad reassured.

“So what was the problem?”

“You were born early, by about a month,” continued the senior. “You were so sick that Ruth, ya mum, wasn’t sure if you would make it.”

“Oh,” Bobby J murmured, breath held, listening.

“When I came back home to your mum there you were, a stranger, a creature that howled and yowled...”

“I’m sorry...”

“Hey, mate, it’s not your fault,” said Robert Frank Smithson Senior. “You were just a little kid, a baby... Babies cry...”

“Yeah but I drove you away...”

“Mate, I wasn’t ready,” Bobby Senior tried to explain.

“And then?”

“I tried to get more work, hoping I could send the money to your mum, help out even while I stayed away. But the whole time I was on the boats I felt guilty I wasn’t there with you, my son.”

“Mum missed you, I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah mate, I missed her too.”

“Shall we head back down, dad?”

“Not yet, Bobby,” Bobby Senior pleaded. “I’ve still got something I need to tell you.”

“Fine dad, what is it?”

Robert Frank Smithson Senior paused for a minute and soaked up the sun, hoping it would give him some much needed courage.

“While I was on the boats all I could think of was you and Ruth...” the old man began after a sigh. “I lost my focus and got badly injured one trip out.”

“Dad, how bad was the injury?”

“Broke my arm and a couple of ribs, ended up in the drink and was lucky the Captain saw me go in.”

Bobby J was suddenly all ears, focused utterly upon the man who was his dad, the man who had opened up his heart to tell his son everything.

“After that no Captain would take me,” Bobby J’s dad continued. “No money, no hope, I tried to vanish, hide away so you and your mum wouldn’t worry about me.”

“Mum hasn’t stopped worrying about you, not for thirteen years.”

“And I’m starting to realize that now,” agreed Bobby J’s dad. “I’m starting to realize a lot.”

As the teen continued to listen he discovered how and why his dad ended up on the outskirts of Winchester and wondered for just how long his mum had known. As the pair finally ventured down the three hundred and thirty three steps both were deep in thought. The bond was growing after truths were revealed.

#

Bobby J found his mum seemed ready to open up too.

“Hey son, can we chat?” his mum asked one night after tea.

Bobby J was standing at the sink washing the two plates, cutlery and glasses. Bobby had drunk juice with the steak, egg and chips but his mum had polished off a glass or two of wine.

“Sure mum,” Bobby J agreed.

It had been about a week after Bobby J told his mum about the chat with his dad.

“The job at Tesco was legit,” Ruth began. “I didn’t know about your dad until a week or so after we’d moved in and I’d started work.”

“I believe you mum,” Bobby J reassured her.

Ruth sighed, relieved, before she continued. “My old friend Sally called me up to welcome us to the neighborhood.”

Bobby J nodded and waited for his mum to continue.

“Sally and I talked about the man in the tent, all the locals know him.”

“Did they know his name?”

“Robert the Fisherman,” Ruth said with a laugh. “All they knew is that he was a washed up fisherman.”

“Not so washed up, mum,” Bobby J interjected. “Dad still fishes every now and then.”

“I know, Bobby J,” laughed Ruth. “I went looking for him one day while you were at school.”

“And, what happened?”

“We talked, shared memories and worked out we still had feelings...”

“What feelings?”

“The kind of feelings that even at our age can be very confusing.”

“Mum, dad has invited me out fishing.”

“Fishing, Bobby J?” laughed Ruth. “You should go...”

“Father and son bonding right mum?”

“Something like that, Bobby J...”

#

That following Saturday Bobby J found himself sitting in a boat, his dad’s boat, bobbing on the waves. Bobby J was regretting then, for that moment unsure, of whether fishing really was his thing. Deep in thought, considering his own confusing feelings and how things had come to this, Bobby J suddenly found his fishing pole had jerked into life.

“You got one!” his dad exclaimed, the senior obviously far more excited. “Don’t panic now, reel it in slowly.”

Following the expert’s advice Robert Frank Smithson Junior caught his first fish, the first of many a fine catch that day. Measuring them up and throwing back the ones that were too small or the ones full of eggs there was still enough for a filling tea; a filling tea for three.

As the relationship between son and father had slowly developed at a similar pace the bridge between Bobby J’s mum and dad had begun to repair. Although the road ahead looked still to be a long one, both

Bobbys knew that while they floated upon the sea of life, the rough and the calm alike, they were not going to do it alone.

The End

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. He has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a fulltime author.

Posted 5/3/2021

Sreemanti Sengupata “New Shoes” moved into town on 5/3/2021

NEW SHOES
by
Sreemanti Sengupta

Swarna B. had never bought shoes before. Shoes had been bought for her of course, because they had the tiresome habit of getting old and worn out. Ever since she had needed to walk on borrowed skin, her grandfather, the chief patron of footwear for the Banerjee sisters, drew out clumsy outlines of her feet on a white sheet of paper as a size reference and took it to the shoe store. A lot of her school shoes were trials and hand-me-downs, and a lot of what she wore outside were flip flops. This made her demands limited except for size, and thankfully there too, her feet had resigned to a No. 4 for a good two years.

Yet life refused to put its feet up. Just when Swarna’s shoes had become a matter of picking up the old pair and exchanging it for a new, her growth spurt began and she leapt two sizes to a grand No.6. It was, therefore no surprise that when Swarna Banerjee, all of thirteen years, six months and nine days, walked into the sparkling white, air-conditioned ‘Wonder Shoes & Co.’, she was feeling and seeing too much at once. Wonder Shoes was a time-honored establishment and one that was severely embedded in the emotional atmosphere of Kolkata and its Bengalis. Among their bestsellers was a range of joggers and budget-friendly women’s sandals of unapologetically cheap make, available in garish colors and blingy stone settings. These instantly made Swarna think of Medha, a cousin who she had always seen using gregarious makeup and overheard sobbing volubly inside a corner bathroom amid a full-blown family wedding. She had often recounted this incident later, years after Medha committed suicide alone in her Mumbai apartment. The family never liked her – there was hushed talk of loose morals and aborted children. She had distinctly heard her eldest aunt say while she shook her head in dismay –“With a face like that, one would have to be a whore to get so much male attention.”

Shoe-whores. Swarna giggled through the daze of her mind.

There was an impressive collection of men’s formal shoes. Swarna winced at the black pointy ends and high padded heels that were in

fashion at the time. She had seen it on her father's feet, on her uncle's too, but today, it appeared to her like a wall of dark warning, their tips like a million fingers pointing at her, as if this section had been installed to warn little girls like her, lest they take their privilege for granted, for the switch from receiving to choosing in shoes or anything else in life, is no joke at all. One of the silently popular sections in the shoe-store was their range of medicated shoes and slippers. These claimed to have been made ergonomically and had comfy, downy soles that hugged your feet with a satisfying sigh. A huge following of middle-aged to elderly audiences swore by this range as everything else made them regret every step they took. Plainest and priciest, these were to become Swarna's guilty pleasure when she soon found out that her feet were too flat for heels and too soft for the rigors of strappy, flirtatious prettiness.

Next came, a collection of alarmingly overpriced unisex rubber-soled flip flops. In these bright colored sandals, boldly printed with popular punk style graffiti, you could detect a slight chink in the armor of the impenetrable Wonder Shoes & Co. It was apparent that the traditionally styled shoemakers had been facing the heat from the new and coming stores and online platforms which had been experimenting with materials, styles, and shapes. There were pop colors, indo-western fusions, interesting detailing such as removable heels, straps, inside-out zips and so on which made the youth make a bee-line for them. Uncharacteristically desperate, Wonder Shoes had started giving ridiculous sale offers to ramp up volumes and clear stocks, but most of the time, the stuff they put out for these occasions looked and smelt like they had been taken off the feet of the dead and buried. The section in question was their valiant effort to come to terms and keep up with the times all at once. Even so, Wonder Shoes was yet to have a foothold among the 'cool' college-going gang.

“May I help you, Ma'am?”

Swarna started and looked at the young-ish face of a store boy addressing her. He wasn't really a boy and he wasn't mature enough, so Swarna didn't know what to think of him. He was fair with wispy blown hair, an undecided mustache and a mischievous smile, almost childish Swarna thought, the kind of knowing smile you share with your friend when both of you know a nasty little secret about a certain someone in class. Suddenly, Swarna felt vexed and wobbly. She wasn't sure what she was to make of this smile. This, and also the fact that the boy-man was standing slightly bent towards her, and had supported his weight on his

knees. Swarna wasn't exceptionally tall, but not short either, and this made her feel outright insulted, she instinctively knew that's how you talk to children, not to a lady who has the right to choose her own shoes. (Oh, and cut the crap of 'Ma'am' already!).

Her state of mind must have shown through clearly because the boy-man had straightened up and looked at her with more seriousness but with increased curiosity.

"Did I scare you? I am sorry!"

Needless to say, this angered Swarna even more, but all she could do was to point to her mother, who was lost in an animated discussion about surging school fees with Mrs. M, the mother of an especially dull girl in her daughter's class, whom she had coincidentally met in the shop. Swarna's heart sank when she saw the woman and she felt herself more and more under the scanner as if this day was a punishment for having grown out of the convenient shoe size.

"Ah" he, said, gaily. "Let's ask your mother then."

Swarna wanted to die, two times over. Here she was, in her first teen year standing in front of an almost man, with an almost chance to make an independent decision, and she blows it all to let him know that she's nothing but the same old Mama's girl. She felt a fever coming on. She thought of how all this humiliation could have been avoided simply by fitting into ill-sized shoes and gracefully limping through another year.

Now they were approaching the ladies engaged in rapt conversation.

"Hello Ma'am" –he said in that same gay tone – "I think your daughter needs new shoes?"

Swarna thought she could detect a slight annoyance creeping into his voice. She looked around and saw that the store was filling up. They had been here for a good fifteen minutes and spent it browsing and chatting, and no doubt that the manager had sent up the man (or boy) to look into the matter and get it wrapped up.

"Oh, yes, yes, how silly of me!" Swarna's mother said blushing slightly but hastening to regain composure, "I'll be back in a minute Lily, don't go anywhere!" both the women laughed their shrill artificial laughs.

“What are we looking for?”the young face was earnest and smiling again.

Swarna was by this time seated on a low ottoman. A slant footstool was placed in front of her. It had a steel ruler pasted on it for taking foot measurements.

Suddenly, Swarna felt the weight of the world on her feet. Everything about and around them was horrible, odious, wrong. Starting with her old shoe. Swarna felt sick when she imagined what the handsome store attendant would be thinking when he saw those old rags she was wearing. Cheap felt numbers that they were, they had been stretched beyond their endurance and now looked perfectly embarrassing under the bright store lights. Swarna sweated through her skin and took hours to fumble around with the pithy laces. She could feel the entire row of squeaky clean, stylish sandals and stilettos jeering at her through the performance. Suddenly, she couldn't stand it any longer and sat up panting, shoes unopened.

“What's the matter with you? You feeling ill?”Mrs. B looked inquiringly at the pale sweaty face of her daughter. Recently, she'd been noticing changes in Swarna. Mood swings, a floaty mind, lapses in concentration, early streaks of rebellion, indecision. Yes, the latter worried her the most. The world had very little to do with women, more so with indecisive ones. She was so convinced of this notion, that she was not aware of it. She had dedicated herself to the role of being the decision-maker, the last and final court of appeal for both her daughters and she did it with great zeal, ruthlessness, and discipline. It would take Swarna another thirty-three years to understand that she did it out of love, too.

Swarna continued to look stunned. The man kneeling down at her feet sensed something and said, “Here, let me help you!”and gently began to peel off her shoes and then her stockings. At this point, Swarna kept her eyes tightly shut. She imagined the man's face (and heart) disgusted at the insides of the shoe, the quality of the stockings, and finally, the howling bareness of her feet.

When she opened her eyes, Swarna felt worse. Her mind played tricks on her. She could now see she had underestimated the store attendant and that he was most certainly not a boy but a man. As his crown of curls bent down on her grubby feet, she began to realize everything that a girl

must, sooner or later, accept. She was late into her act – her feet were that of an overgrown girl and a lazy woman. She could see dirt, grime, sweat, uneven and unpolished nails. The soles of her feet were baby soft, which when he touched, shivered uncontrollably sending a ridiculous blush onto the face. Swarna, who had just started questioning the existence of God, gave it up just at that moment and prayed hard that he wouldn't lift the feet or hike up her ankle-length tunic for inspection because she had never waxed in her life, and before this very moment, never wanted to.

“Size 6. Now, what kind of shoe should I show you?”

Before Swarna could say anything (which she couldn't, her mouth was too dry), Mrs. B, cut in and said with feudal superiority, avenging the young man's earlier show of impudence:

“Show us ladies' palm shoes please, and be quick about it!”

Palm shoes were the Bengali equivalent of belle shaped toe covered shoes, a popular and often affordable choice for modest school-going girls. Nobody, not even Swarna knew why or how they came to be called that in Kolkata.

Swarna hung her head in the reflected humiliation, while the disgruntled (as she imagined him to be) attendant took a few seconds to produce three styles of shoes in size six. For the next few minutes, Swarna almost forgot about her mother, the man before her, or herself for the matter. She slipped into a pair of shoes and discovered that it was a custom to walk the store to ensure that they were comfortable before making the purchase. Delighted with this surprise, Swarna walked and stopped at every full-length mirror at the store to admire herself. When she came back she was smiling widely, but now she had forgotten about the shoes too.

“Did you like it?”

Two pairs of eyes looked at her searchingly. The moment of truth had come. But the truth was, Swarna did not have any idea. In all the glory of choice, she had forgotten about the object of it.

She thought quickly.

“I think I will try that one” Swarna said pointing at a bright pink belle shaped pair, with a peephole detailing in the front.

Swarna could see her mother feeling uncomfortable. She had not seen this coming. Swarna had not only changed sizes but was adding another round of choices and holy, moly, shifting styles as well!

But of course, she couldn't say that out loud, she couldn't say it at all, because she didn't know that she was saying it to herself.

“Okay, but make it quick, the bank closes in thirty minutes.”

Swarna knew there weren't any plans to visit the bank. She promptly slipped into the new pair and resumed to make the tour of the store again, but this time, with her innocence corrupted. She paused and took longer, jogged her mind harder, and tried to find flaws with the shoes. It wasn't the right color, the shape was awkward, it made her look tall, short, fat, thin. She was desperate to put forward any argument, any clause, or contradiction that would validate her existence and experience of thirteen years six months and nine days. After two lingering minutes, she came back exhausted, a changed woman from when she had left with the new shoes.

“Well?” Mrs. B looked at her impatiently, trying to hide her hurt pride with a mock one.

Swarna looked again at the two pairs of now impatient and annoyed eyes and with a last throw of the dice, said: “I'll take that one” and pointed to the first pair of shoes that she had tried.

The handsome man gave a winning smile and Mrs. B held back a gasp. She'd had enough.

“Can we have that in black, please? That'll be all, thank you.”

Swarna turned and stared into her mother's eyes. Mrs. B shifted uneasily under her daughter's stare. She felt cornered, found out, held to court.

“Oh, don't scowl like that! Blue is such an impractical color! It'll get all muddy in the rains, and we can't keep buying you shoes for every season!”

Both checked out with cold silences and went straight home. Nobody remembered anything about the bank.

It was only the next afternoon when Swarna was busy with Algebra that her mother came running in with one of the new shoes in her hand.

“Look at what the monsters did!”

Swarna fixed her eyes on the spot indicated by her mother. Sure enough, some of the side stitches of the left shoe were missing. This would be overlooked as a minor fault in many households, but not in the Banerjee’s, where every penny was precious and so was every dropped stitch. Mrs. B checked the bill and saw boldly printed ‘7 DAYS RETURN AND EXCHANGE’

She sighed with tiredness: “Guess we’ll have to go back then.”

Swarna hid her triumph and sighed too: “Guess so.”

Swarna thought she saw the boy-man smiling at her knowingly.

The End

Sreemanti Sengupta writes poetry and short prose and is a Best Small Fictions (2021) nominee. She has a book of poems *Losing Friends* to her name. Her haikus have been translated to French and some works read at the City Lights Bookstore NY. She edits *The Odd Magazine*. Read her at <https://senguptasreemanti.wixsite.com/sree>. She tweets at @sreemantisen

Posted 4/30/2021

Tony Concannon "The Cat on the Beach" moved into town on 4/30/2021

THE CAT ON THE BEACH

by

Tony Concannon

The cemetery was a half a mile away and Pat would walk there as soon as the sky began to lighten. It was early spring and the mornings were cold. His wife Mary was buried at the rear of the cemetery, at the bottom of the hill. He'd lost her to ovarian cancer the previous September. She'd been seventy-four, the same age as him. They'd met at twenty-two and married the following year. There had been no children. He had never loved another woman.

He knelt on the grass and prayed for her soul. When he rose, he reached out and touched her headstone. His name was on it. A friend had told him putting his name on the headstone was bad luck but Pat hadn't cared.

He said goodbye to Mary and climbed the hill. He turned left at the road and cut through the town to the shore. Walking was the only thing that made the time pass for him, and he could still walk for hours. At the promenade along the beach he turned right. He stopped at the top of the steps leading down to the sand. At the bottom there was a dead cat. He could tell the cat had drowned and he wondered how it had happened.

He started walking again. Several hundred yards ahead there was a promontory of big rocks jutting out into the ocean and he could make out two figures on top of one of them. When he got closer, he could see it was two boys and he worried they'd slip and fall into the sea.

He followed the road along the shore for over a mile before it curved inland, away from the water. He turned back. When the promontory came into sight again, the boys were gone and he was anxious until he saw them walking on the beach.

The boys stopped at the bottom of the steps. The taller boy knelt on the sand and began digging with his hands. The other boy joined him. They were going to bury the cat. Pat watched for a moment before he looked around for something to help them dig. There was a broken wooden box on the other side of the parking lot. He crossed the lot and picked up the

box. The boards were too thin and he threw it down. There was nothing else. He needed a shovel. Tom Thatcher, who lived two blocks up from the beach, would have one. Pat hurried across the road and up to Jefferson Street. Tom's house was halfway down on the right. Pat climbed the porch steps and knocked on the door. Tom's wife, Marie, opened it. She was wearing a bathrobe.

"Pat, what are you doing down this way? Tom's helping Billy put in a new driveway."

"Can you lend me a shovel, Marie?"

"What in the devil would you be wanting a shovel for?"

"Some boys are burying their pet down at the beach."

She looked as if she didn't understand him.

"Well, come in and have a cup of coffee anyway before you go. Tom keeps the shovels in the cellar."

"That's okay, Marie. I've got to be going. I'll go down and get it myself if you don't mind."

"Well, if that's what you want to do," she said, a puzzled look on her face again. "The door's locked," she went on, "so I'll have to go down and let you in."

"Okay. Thank you, Marie."

She closed the door. Pat went around the house to the backyard. He waited outside the cellar door. He heard the bolt slide back and the door opened inward. Marie stepped out and handed him a shovel.

"Is that okay?"

"It's fine, Marie."

"What kind of pet are they burying?"

"A cat."

She looked perplexed for the third time.

“I’ll bring the shovel back this morning,” he told her.

“You can keep it as long as you want. Tom’s got two or three more.”

“I only need it for a few minutes. I’ll bring it back when I’m through.”

She nodded. “How are you doing?”

“Best I can.”

“We see you walking all the time.”

“It passes the time for me.”

“At least the winter’s finally over.”

“It’s been warm the past week.”

“Well, I hope you’re taking care of yourself.”

“Don’t you worry about me, Marie. It doesn’t really matter.”

“Don’t you be talking like that.”

He started to back away. “I’ll bring the shovel back this morning.”

“There’s no rush. I’ve got to do a bit of shopping, so if I’m not home, just put it in the cellar. I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you again, Marie.”

“Come down for a cup of coffee. Tom would love to see you.”

“I’ll do that, Marie.”

He turned away and started back to the beach. The door closed behind him. Carrying the shovel with the blade down, he walked quickly. When he reached the steps to the beach, the boys were sitting on the sand and the cat was in the same place. The smaller boy noticed Pat and said something to the other boy, who turned his head to look. The two of

them watched Pat come down the stone steps with the shovel. When he got to the bottom, they stood and stepped back. Pat threw down the shovel.

“Here, use this.”

Neither boy spoke. The taller boy was stocky with short, brown hair. The other boy was thin with blond hair. The hole they had dug was less than a foot deep. Pat picked up the shovel, pushed it into the soft sand, and tossed a full shovel of sand to the side. He repeated the action.

“Here,” he said, thrusting the handle of the shovel toward the bigger boy.

The boy took the shovel. He held it for a few seconds. Then he stuck the blade into the sand and scooped out a handful of sand. The boy tried again and Pat realized that he should have gotten a shorter shovel.

“That’s the boy. Easy does it,” he said.

When the boy had gotten the knack of using the shovel, the digging went faster and the hole began to get deeper. Pat and the other boy watched.

“Let me do it for a while,” the smaller boy said.

The bigger boy passed him the shovel without saying anything. The other boy tried to dig too fast at first and he pushed more sand into the hole than he scooped out.

“Don’t mess it up, Kevin.”

“I won’t.”

The hole got deeper again. The boy had to stoop over to reach the bottom with the end of the shovel.

“You ought to make it wider,” Pat said.

Kevin stopped to rest.

“Let me show you,” Pat said.

He took the shovel from the boy and began digging. When he reached the firmer sand below the surface, he used his foot to push the shovel in deeper. He worked steadily until he was breathing hard. He stopped suddenly.

“Are you ready?” he asked the bigger boy.

“Yeah.”

Pat handed him the shovel.

“How deep should it be, Mister?” the boy asked.

“I’d make it another foot. You don’t want the tide to wash the cat away. Go easy. There’s no rush.”

The boy nodded. He stepped into the hole and began digging. Pat looked at the water. The tide was coming in and he wished they’d dug the hole closer to the wall.

“Is this your cat?” he asked Kevin.

“No.”

“Then what are you burying it for?”

“I don’t know. We were talking and we thought someone ought to bury it.”

Pat nodded.

“Come on. It’s my turn, John,” Kevin said.

“Just let me finish up this side.”

“Hurry up. There won’t be any left for me.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get your chance.”

“Well, hurry up.”

John dug several more shovelfuls before he carefully stepped out of the hole. He handed the shovel to Kevin.

“Don’t knock the sides in.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not a stupid jerk like you.”

Some sand slid into the hole when Kevin stepped into it. John shook his head.

“You boys brothers?” Pat asked.

“Yes.”

“Where do you live?”

“Up by the high school.”

“That’s a long way from here.”

“Our Dad gave us a ride.”

“Is this big enough, Mister?” Kevin asked.

“It should be okay.”

Kevin threw the shovel onto the sand and climbed out of the hole. Pat picked up the shovel and with it, the dead cat. It weighed more than he’d expected. He swung the shovel over the hole and let the cat drop. It landed with a splat.

“It’s like a water baby,” Kevin said.

The cat was lying on its side. The fall had flattened it, making it look bigger. Pat handed the shovel to John, who began tossing the sand back into the hole with it. Kevin knelt on the other side and pushed in the sand with his hands. In no time the hole was filled.

“How come the sand’s darker?” Kevin asked.

“It’s still wet,” John answered.

“Shouldn’t we have a marker or something?”

“Even if you make a marker,” Pat said after a few seconds, “it will be gone as soon as the tide comes in. We should have dug the hole closer to the wall.”

“You can tell where the hole was, though,” John said.

“That’ll change, too, as soon as the sun dries out the sand.”

The boys looked disappointed. Pat took the shovel from John.

“Thank you for helping us, Mister,” John said.

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You want to get going, Kevin?” John asked.

“I don’t care.”

“Thanks again, Mister.”

The boys started up the beach. Pat climbed the steps. At the top he stopped. The boys turned and waved to him. He waved back. He watched them until they were almost out of sight but they didn’t look back again. He crossed the parking lot with the shovel.

When he reached Tom’s house, he went around to the back without ringing the doorbell. The cellar door was unlocked, as Marie had said. He stepped down into a small room and placed the shovel with the other ones leaning against the side wall.

He closed the door behind him and walked back to the empty beach. The sun was strong and the day was warming up. He looked up and down the sand for the boys but they were gone. The tide was coming in quickly and he wished again they’d buried the cat closer to the wall. He remembered Mary. He hadn’t thought about her when he’d been helping the boys.

He looked out at the promontory. In a few hours it would be mostly under water. It would be easy to end it all. He would walk out on the big rocks and slide down into the deep water. It was a mortal sin and he knew he would never do it. It helped to know he could, though.

The End

Tony Concannon grew up in Massachusetts. After graduating from college with a degree in English, he taught in Japan, where several of his stories are set. Since returning to Massachusetts, he has worked in human services. He began writing in 1979 and his work has appeared in print and online.

Posted 4/28/2021

Mark Tulin "Fishman's Rambler" moved into town on 4/28/2021

FISHMAN'S RAMBLER

by

Mark Tulin

I had been driving since I was thirteen. My uncle taught me on an old stick-shift Chevy pickup in Pottsville's dark, winding backroads. I could drive anything, stick on the floor or on the column. And an automatic transmission was a breeze.

"Here, you take the wheel," Uncle Leo said, trusting me completely, even though I had barely reached puberty.

I drove my uncle to the Eagles Club, where he drank whiskey with coke chasers non-stop. He drank so much that he couldn't stand up or see straight and had to pee every five minutes.

"You drive back," he said with slurred speech. "I trust you."

Despite being thirteen, I was a better driver than my uncle, mainly because I was sober. He got into numerous accidents, sideswiped parked cars, swerved in and out of lanes, ran over people's flowerbeds, and drove into a couple of trees on Spruce Street. "How do you still have your license, Uncle Leo?"

"I know all the cops in this town. I give them good deals on produce, and they look the other way because they like me. It's amazing how much people will do for a free bag of red potatoes."

He continued to give me driving lessons after getting drunk at the Eagles Club. Of course, he wasn't entirely awake, dozing-off in the passenger seat, trusting that I wouldn't run into an oncoming tractor-trailer or drive off the Blue Mountain cliff. He had so much faith in me that he loaded a pickup full of spoiled produce and said, "Harvey, sell all this crap on Minersville Street, and you can keep the profit."

Although it was illegal to drive at thirteen, my uncle didn't care, and neither did I. Pottsville was a small town, in the middle of the coal

region, and they let a lot of things slide back in those days, so I didn't think anything of it.

"Hell," I drove an eight-wheeler at ten," he said. "I was still in my diapers."

###

Three years later, I was sixteen and living in Philadelphia with my mother. My father had run off with his secretary at an electronics company, and mom was beside herself. I had just passed the written driver's exam and received a learner's permit. Every once in a while, my mother took me driving in the Korvettes' parking lot with her Ford Mustang. But she wasn't like my uncle, and our driving lessons usually ended in bitterness, with mom telling me that my driving makes her nervous.

"You're not using this car again," she said. "I still have two years of payments on it, and I'm not going to have it demolished."

She didn't let me drive her car because I reminded her of my father, especially the way I turned corners and backed into a parking space. And besides that, she didn't want any more drama in her life.

Without a car to take the skills test, I wondered how I would ever get my license. The only person I knew who had a car was my best friend, Fishman, and he was a pothead and the worst driver on the planet, next to my uncle. How he got a driver's license on his first try, I don't know. He must have bribed the guy.

"Ready to get your license today?" Fishman asked.

"I feel a little nervous. I don't think I'm ready?"

"Nervous? That's bullshit. Hell, you can pass that lame test with your eyes closed."

"I don't know, Fishman. I hear those state troopers are real assholes."

"Don't worry about them, Harvey. It's just their uniforms. When they're in civilian clothes, they're mortals like you and me. My cousin is a member of the state police, so I know what I'm talking about."

“There’s another problem, Fishman.”

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t have a car to take the test. My mom won’t let me borrow her Mustang; says she doesn’t want me to wreck it.”

“No problem,” Fishman said. “You can have my Rambler if you promise to put some gas in the tank.”

I had to think long and hard about that offer. Fishman’s grandmother gave him the Rambler when she got cataracts and couldn’t drive anymore. It was a 1955 Rambler Ambassador, four-door, and it had whitewall tires and a red leather interior. It was once a beautiful car when his grandmother owned it, but it didn’t take Fishman long to run it into the ground. It had over 200-thousand miles on it and barely started, and sputtered when you turned the key. Fishman called it a mechanical piece of shit, and he’s right. It always shocked me to see it on the road, spitting out fumes and backfiring every five minutes. The headlights hardly worked, the brakes were faulty, and the interior looked like a bunch of wild chimpanzees were partying. But, at sixteen, I didn’t know any better. I thought I could drive anything that had four wheels.

“Sure, Fishman. Sounds like a great idea.”

###

Fishman had dropped out of school to become a delivery boy at Boston Pizza on Tyson Avenue last year and made about five-dollars an hour plus tips. His raggedy car always smelled of gas fumes and Stromboli. Old pizza boxes and stale pizza slices were littered in the backseat, and it made me nauseous.

“The stick shift is up here,” said Fishman, pointing to the cracked silver shifter on the steering column.

It took me some time to find everything— the lights, turn signals, clutch, and, most importantly, the on and off button for the radio, which, surprisingly, played without too much static.

“Can you cut that off or something?” I asked Fishman about the torn roof material hanging over my eyes.

“Sure,” he said, and gave it a big yank, and the whole lining of the roof ripped apart. He rolled down his window and tossed the material to the curb as if it were no big deal.

“That better?”

Fishman was a certifiable slob, but he was a good friend.

“Well, let’s get going,” he said, doing a drumroll on the dash to a Beach Boys song. “Let’s ace this driver’s test at the DMV!”

Even before I got into his car, I knew I had made a terrible mistake. I wanted that license so bad that I was willing to drive almost anything and risk my life. I was going to put it all on the line for a little plastic card with my mugshot.

On our way to the driver’s test, I went through several red lights. Not because I was in a hurry or careless, but the brakes didn’t work. I barely avoided two serious collisions, and now my main goal was to get through this whole thing without being in a body cast. Getting the license was the least of my troubles.

“How do you manage driving this thing without killing somebody, Fishman?”

“I usually take a lot of side streets. That way, I only go through stop signs. And when pedestrians are crossing the street, I blow my horn, and they jump out of the way.”

That wasn’t very helpful or encouraging. I kept seeing vehicular manslaughter in my future.

“Don’t worry, ”Fishman said. “The trooper dude is probably stoned anyway. He won’t notice what you’re driving. He’ll probably just hand you the damn license.”

Once inside the DMV, we were guided to the skills lot. There were hundreds of orange cones set up like an obstacle course. Fishman got out

of the car and looked me straight in the eye, “You’re fucking Harvey Radberg,” he said. “You’re one hell of a driver. Don’t forget it!”

I smiled at his phony rah-rah speech while clutching the fragile wheel of a grandmother’s once-proud jalopy.

A tall state trooper by the name of Ed got into the Rambler without asking. He sat down with a clipboard in his lap. I could smell the garlic on his breath.

“Listen carefully to my instructions, Mr. Radberg. Follow my every word, so you get a good result.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, feeling as though I was a jughead in the military.

Sweat poured out of my body as if I had several leaks. My armpits were soaking wet, and the salty perspiration from my forehead burned my eyes. I brushed my damp bangs off my face, and the test began.

“Pull up to the stop sign,” he commanded.

I was panic-stricken. The guy must have been six-foot-five, and the chinstrap of his trooper hat was painfully cutting into his jaw.

I tried, but when I depressed the brake at the stop sign, nothing happened. It kept rolling past it, feeling as though my whole life was drifting out of control.

“Stop!” The state trooper kept yelling. “Stop this car immediately!”

I was in a stupor as the car kept rolling forward. I watched angry words fly out of his mouth as I drifted past a four-way intersection, running over several orange cones in the process.

The car finally came to a halt when it banged into a curb. The trooper got out of the Rambler, walked around the car, leaned through the open window with his big hat and pointed face, and said in a spray of spittle, “I should give you a fine, confiscate your car, and take away your learner’s permit!”

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s not my car.”

“Whose vehicle is it?” he asked.

“My friend’s, Howard Fishman’s. He’s right over there.”

Fishman was on a bench, smoking a big, fat doobie. Luckily for me, the state trooper didn’t notice what Fishman was smoking, or else he’d put us both in the nearest penitentiary.

“Well, you better tell your friend to get this piece of junk off the road so he doesn’t kill anyone. This damn thing is a deadly weapon.”

“I will, sir. I’ll tell him as soon as the test is over.”

“The test was over as soon I got out of the car,” he said.

“Does that mean I passed?”

He stared at me like I was the dumbest kid on the planet.

“Are you some kind of idiot? Didn’t you hear what I said? There’s no way you can continue with this test in this piece of crap. Am I understood?”

“Yes, I understand, sir.”

“If you’re not out of this testing area in two minutes,” he said, red-faced and painfully chin-strapped, “I’ll confiscate this garbage heap and lock the two of you up!”

###

When school let out, I stayed with Uncle Leo for the summer. A few months before, he had gotten a DUI and finished paying the fine. He didn’t seem in any way upset, “Who cares if they raise my auto insurance,” he said. “I’ll just charge people extra for the produce.”

Once I told him about how miserably I failed the driver’s test, he had a good laugh.

“You took it in a 1955 Rambler?”

“Yes, the breaks didn’t work, and I went through the stop sign.”

He had another good laugh when I told him that the state trooper almost arrested me.

“You can have my Ford Fairlane for the test,” he said. “There’s no trouble with the brakes, and I just put in a new transmission.”

“Thanks, Uncle Leo. I have only one chance left before I have to take the written test over.”

“I thought you only took the test once?”

“Well, Fishman and I decided to go back the next day and try another state trooper. We thought we might have better luck.”

“You didn’t?”

“Yep, I did, and almost ran over the troopers feet even before he got into the car.”

My uncle was bent over in laughter.

“He took one look at the car and flunked me without even getting in. He didn’t know how the Rambler passed inspection, but he wasn’t about to get into a car that smelled like a Stromboli.”

Uncle Leo scratched his scaly pate. “That won’t happen here,” he said with certainty. “I know the guy at the DMV, and you’re as good as gold, Harvey. He’s one of my best customers, and he’d do anything for a honeydew melon.”

My uncle was right. The state trooper in Pottsville made me feel at ease. He talked about how nice of a guy my uncle was and that he had the sweetest melons in town. He wasn’t like the Philly troopers who acted like Hitler and made me feel like an idiot. This guy guided me gently through the maze of well-placed orange cones. I stopped at all the right places, parallel parked to perfection, and didn’t forget to use my turn signals.

“You passed with flying colors, son. Your uncle taught you well.”

“He did,” I said.

When I returned to Philly at the end of the summer, my mom had found a boyfriend who drove a souped-up Camaro. My dad was back in Philly after the whole secretary thing didn't work out. And Fishman sold his Rambler for a hundred bucks to a customer who came into his pizza joint. He now drove his dead aunt's 1961 Studebaker, which had more miles than the Rambler, but at least the brakes worked.

The End

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Posted 4/25/2021

Jamie Hittman "Ambiguous Figures" moved into town on 4/25/2021

AMBIGUOUS FIGURES

by

Jamie Hittman

Luna appeared on the first day of school the way new kids always did. You left the old grade behind and during the long entr'acte of summer, the administrators shuffled the district lines, and when the curtains went up in autumn you never knew who would be there. At seven-thirty in the morning, period one Chemistry, she hula-girled in, knowing the spotlight was on her. She stood a squat five-foot one, with smooth brown skin and glossy-dark hair and sturdy legs, a microscopic miniskirt fluttering about those slow thighs. She wore a tank top and a pushup bra that put her breasts on offering like fresh-baked rolls. Her nails, which were long and very fake, matched the seafoam green of her top.

What a blessing to look like that at sixteen. I could feel the boys' eyes sweeping over her.

Mrs. Miller had us go around the room and introduce ourselves. "My name is Luna Muscatelli," Luna said. "I just moved here from Miami beach." Her voice was low and husky; a smoker already? Mrs. Miller moved on to the other new kids; I forgot their names immediately.

I saw Luna again in band class, last period. She made her way down the second row with her saxophone and sat next to Zack Jankowski, he of the soft brown eyes and golden cloud of hair. Zack was a Catholic school transplant and still dressed like one, with khaki pants and plaid shirts that hung down to his knees. I had been crushing on him for what seemed like forever, and now he and Luna were talking, because of course they were. Everyone was talking to Luna.

After class was over, Luna leaned over my music stand and crossed her arms. "Are you Elise?" she asked. She was chewing gum.

"Uh?" I said, startled. I wasn't the kind of kid people just walked up to.

"Zack told me you were cool. Nice oboe."

And that's how we met.

The rumors about her started immediately. Kids can sense when something is off—kids that aren't me, I mean. Suzie Sharp was the worst offender. She was a blond stork in bell-bottom jeans with a face every bit as angled as her surname implied. "She's obviously been held back a few times," I heard her say to a friend in the lunch line. "Doesn't she look really fucking old?"

I was glad that Luna had given Suzie something else to think about besides her next blow-dry and the new ding on her cherry-red convertible. I was glad she had given me something else to think about. For the past year I had wandered the halls of Blandair High with sick puppy love capering at my heels, baying I LOVE ZACK JANKOWSKI at the moon. I turned every corner with a delicious gut-clench of anticipation. If he was there when I turned, daydreaming, would he know what I was thinking? Would he know that after everyone had left the band room, I had scrawled his name on the chalkboard in big loopy letters, just to admire it, to better hear its music?

In the locker room, when the conversation turned to homecoming dates, Luna rolled her eyes so hard I thought her eyebrows might spring off. "Most boys are disgusting. The way they smell. Ugh."

They don't smell that bad, the room argued en masse.

"The way they act, though! Like two-year-olds in big doofy bodies." She popped another piece of gum into her mouth. I found out later that it was Nicorette.

We got paired up to do a presentation for art class, taught by the one teacher square enough to give homework. This, I think, is what made her start liking me, because unlike most tenth graders, I knew how to get my work done. Ours were always the first hands in the air when the teachers asked questions. We both thought that impressing teachers was easy.

"Should we go to your house?" I asked.

"Let's do yours. My dad doesn't like guests."

She drove me home in her '89 Taurus. Along the way she told me about her parents, and how they got divorced when she was ten, and how she

picked up her smoking habit from one of her dad's girlfriends, a waitress at a 24-hour diner who reanimated herself each night with nicotine, Dayquil, or meth. After the waitress came a flight attendant, a pharmacist, and a receptionist at an auto body shop. Her father followed women from place to place like a traveling circus. "We were always moving around. I never got to make many friends. I feel like I missed out on a lot."

I wanted to tell her that this sounded like shit, but also kind of romantic, the kind of story you heard about on TV, not the tony suburbs of Maryland. The kind of tragic backstory I might make up about myself, instead of the one I had. "You're good at making friends," I said. "I wish I was."

"You've got friends, don't you?"

"Not really."

"What about Zack?"

"I guess. But he's friends with everyone. It doesn't count."

"Don't we count?"

I was so floored she had asked the question that at first, I couldn't answer. "Of course we count."

Luna smiled. "Good."

At my house I introduced her to my parents. Dad was on the couch, watching a recap of the Orioles game, and mom was in the kitchen, chopping lettuce. They both said hello, one after the other, then returned to their silent coexistence. They looked like understudies rehearsing for the role of PARENTS in the blockbuster film of my life. When we went upstairs, I noticed that the door to Michael's room was open. Mom must have been in there. I closed it.

Luna glanced over at my desk, my books, and the fortune cookie I had tacked to the cork board. I thought she might make fun of my room, dressed up in the same shades of pink I picked when I was a toddler, but she didn't. We took turns lounging on my bed, gluing photos to a big tri-fold display board. Our project was about optical illusions and

ambiguous figures. We had Escher's impossible waterfall, a Necker cube, and a drawing that looked like a young woman or an old crone but never both at the same time.

"I've seen this like a million times and it's still the wildest shit," Luna said.

When we were done with the poster, we sat around and talked for a while, Luna jawing on her Nicorette. "Do you have any brothers and sisters?" she asked. "I'm an only child."

"Um, a brother. But he's not alive anymore."

I explained quickly that he was older by three years, and that I followed him around like a little lost duck as soon as I'd learned to walk. I was desperate to be special to someone, anyone. I was still desperate even now.

Michael soon discovered he could lie to me all the time—not serious lies, but the big, dumb kind that only children will believe. He told me that the whole world was in black and white until the year 1932 and that's why all the old movies had no color. He told me that Australians did everything upside down, walking on their hands instead of their feet. He told me that giving someone the finger was actually a Hawaiian good luck sign, a factoid that got me sent to the principal's office. My gullibility was reward enough for him to keep making up stories. I hung onto every word, and that's why Michael loved me.

One morning right after he turned fifteen, Michael climbed the fence along the highway overpass and jumped, landing smack on his head on the asphalt of the breakdown lane. When I saw him later—his body, I mean—the only mark on him was a little dent on one side of his skull. Was something so tiny really enough to kill somebody? I thought about it all throughout the funeral. He couldn't really be dead, I decided. This was Michael being a drama queen, just another one of his lies

"Oh, Elise, that's so awful," Luna said. "Did you ever find out why?"

No, I told her. I didn't even know he was depressed—he never liked school much, and he spent most of his time bumming around with the kids who smoked weed behind the gym, but he always seemed more bored than sad. Sometimes when we were playing with Legos or

watching TV on the couch he would zone out, his eyes losing focus, and he'd shake his head to bring himself around. I never knew where he went during these episodes. The day he died he must have left himself and decided not to come back.

"I'm sorry, Elise," Luna said.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm over it."

The next afternoon was film club, and I brought Luna along. Film club was Zack's brainchild; he planned to attend film school and become a director. The movie of the week was *The Usual Suspects*, but it didn't matter much to me what we were watching. I was there for Zack and the discussions we had afterward. I didn't know yet if I could keep up a conversation with him in the wild. Discussions were safe, controlled; conversations on safari.

I thought so much about what I wanted to say that I could hardly focus on what was happening on screen. I'd seen the movie before—one of Michael's favorites—so I was hopeful I could unearth a few brilliant nuggets of insight. The credits rolled and Zack turned to the group to ask what we thought. Because Luna was new, he picked her first.

Luna started talking and continued for ten minutes without interruption, rolling her eyes at imagined plot holes and gesturing at the air. "So there's no way Verbal is Kaiser Söze," she said. "The real Kaiser Söze would never have been caught. Verbal's just a fall guy who likes attention. The fake-ass story, the lighter at the end, it's him being a poser. He only wishes he was cool as the stories he tells." She popped a Chiclet of Nicorette and chewed. "But that's just my opinion."

Poor Zack. He looked hopefully around the room, expecting the remaining fifteen of us to pick up the discussion, but nobody dared. Luna looked at me, mouthing, "Go on." I had forgotten what I had wanted to say.

On the last warm day of autumn, Luna and I went down to the stream in the woods where Michael and I used to swim. We brought beach towels and spread them out on a big slab of stone overlooking the water. We splashed around until we were shivering and then retreated to the stone to bake in the dry heat and chatted for what had to be an hour or two. Luna was easy to talk to because she provided no terrifying silences to fill. I

looked up at the sun and the clouds and the kaleidoscope of sky shining through the slats in the fern fronds, green against blue, never the same sky twice.

“Elise, you need to say something one of these days,” she told me.

“Huh?”

“You’re so quiet all the time. You’ve got opinions, don’t you? Use ’em.”

“I’ve never...really done that.”

“I can tell.” Luna rolled over to face me. “What’s up with that fortune cookie you got tacked to the wall? That’s pretty weird.”

It was Michael again, I told her. He claimed that fortune cookies were individually blessed by Shaolin monks and that’s why they had to come true. But there was this one night when my parents ordered takeout Chinese and I cracked open my cookie to find no fortune in it.

“That means you’re gonna die,” Michael told me.

I shot him as withering a look as I could muster. I was twelve years old and he was still trying to put one over on me and I wasn’t having it anymore.

“If you don’t have a fortune, it means you have no future,” he continued. “That’s why you’re gonna die.”

“You are so full of shit,” I told him.

“Elise,” mom said warningly.

Michael held out his hand and proposed a trade. He’d take my cookie to save my life, and I could take his. I accepted his cookie, but didn’t open it. I thought it would be best to change the subject.

Two weeks later, he jumped off a bridge and killed himself.

“You need to open that cookie, Elise,” Luna said.

“But what if it’s—? I dunno—”

“Something you don’t want to hear? Something dumb or trite?”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t matter. You have to open it. Wouldn’t your brother have wanted that?”

I didn’t know what Michael would want. All I knew was what I wanted: to keep intact the one stupid thing I had left of him.

We went back to the house. My parents had ordered pizza for us and we ate around the table in silence. Luna tried to make conversation, but my parents’ replies were hesitant, noncommittal. More than once I saw them look towards the doors, eager to bolt to their safe havens of the kitchen and the den. When Michael died my parents became afraid of each other. I think they became afraid of me.

Luna said that next week she needed to put in an extra shift waitressing at Red Lobster, so at film club I would have to talk enough for the both of us. The next movie we would be watching was *Big Fish*; we looked up a summary on the internet so Luna could coach me on what to say. Theme: truth versus fiction. Do the feelings behind a story mean more than the content? I mouthed my discussion points all throughout the film. The credits rolled and Zack arranged the chairs in our usual circle. I felt like part of an AA meeting: Hi, I’m Elise, and I’m madly in love. Zack looked at me with eyes like dark chocolate buttons and I thought I might pass out.

“I wonder about Edward,” I said. “Does it matter if any of his stories are true? The feelings he shares are more important than the content....”

Zack adjourned the meeting a few minutes later and I stayed behind to help him return the TV and DVD player. It was past five in the evening and the hallways were empty and forlorn. I decided then and there to ask him if he had a homecoming date.

“I’m going with Meredith,” he said.

“Oh?” I asked, trying to disguise my disappointment.

“She asked me a week ago. I don’t really know her that well, but she seems cool.”

“Cool” was not the word I would have used to describe Meredith, who could usually be found on the couch in the band room, scribbling furiously into a notebook covered in dragons. At fourteen years, two months, she already considered herself an author, penning stories about snake handlers and tortured artists who cut off their own hands.

Zack asked if I was going with anyone. Not yet, I told him.

I spent the rest of the night staring at my homework in a dull trance of rejection, and wondered what Michael would say.

“Aw, Elise, that really blows,” Luna told me in homeroom.

“I guess I’ll just stay home and read or something.”

“That’s literally the saddest thing I’ve ever heard. We’ll go together.”

“As a couple?”

“It doesn’t have to be a date. We’ll go as friends.” She smiled to let me know she was serious.

“Okay,” I said. “Sure.”

The next week was Spirit Week, and Monday’s theme was Wacky-Tacky. We paraded into chemistry wearing an eye-watering array of mismatched clothes, striped leggings and polka-dot shirts, bedecked with plastic Mardi Gras beads. On Pajama Day, we slouched through the halls in bathrobes and bunny slippers. On Costume Day, I dressed completely in red (Tabasco); Luna did herself up as Medusa, complete with toga and a snake wig that she head-banged to great effect. We strutted around like we had something to prove, something to cow the predatory masses, the Suzie Sharps and all the hangers on: Look at us. Look at our friendship. Nothing can hurt us now.

Homecoming Saturday arrived windy and cold; the football team, fresh off a loss to our rivals at Long Reach, lost spectacularly to Hammond, 56-3. Luna gave me the news, laughing, as she penciled in my eyes. We

were in my room, having spent the last hour perfecting our makeup and fluffing our hair.

“You promise you won’t drink, right?” mom asked me privately in the kitchen.

“Yes, mom,” I replied, failing to tell her that I’d already tasted alcohol at the Christmas Formal, when, trying to be cool, I had taken a long burning pull from the communal bottle of gin. My cachet had lasted about a quarter of a second. I immediately gagged, spraying the whole cruddy mouthful across my stockings.

I climbed into the car with Luna, who drove us off to school. The DJ was hard at work blasting something nu-metal and screamy, and the dark cavern of the gymnasium swirled with a blizzard of small lights. Kids were bumping and grinding, sweaty already. Luna poured herself some Dr. Pepper from the soft drink table, then cracked open a bottle that smelled powerfully alcoholic.

“Where did you get that?” I shouted.

“I bought it,” she said, adding it to her cup. “Fake ID.”

She offered me some, and when I shook my head, she tossed the whole thing back in one gulp.

The DJ swapped out the metal for Shakira; Luna grabbed both of my hands and dragged me out onto the dance floor. For all her confidence, Luna was a terrible dancer. Every body part was bopping along to its own personal rhythm, but she made it look so fun that I couldn’t fault her. I flailed my arms at her and laughed. She hooked her arm through mine for a do-see-do, and, as we spun, I caught sight of Zack and Meredith in the midst of some unidentifiable cha-cha.

We took a break by the bleachers. A group of three kids walked up and asked Luna if she wanted to dance; I recognized one of them as Kai Li, a guy from pre-calculus who usually wandered in late, smelling of weed skunkier than Michael ever brought home. He was tall and skinny, with a purple birthmark over one half of his face.

“May I?” Luna asked.

I told her, “Sure,” and lost her ten seconds later to the tumult of the dance floor. I stood around for a bit, uncertain if being ditched with permission was still a ditching; nobody had asked if I had wanted to join.

I wandered into the hall outside the gymnasium and blinked at the fluorescent lights. The dance had hardly been going for an hour, but I was tired and grimy, and my dress clung to a patch of sweat above my ass crack. I sat down against a cinderblock wall to wick the cold from it. A minute or so later, Zack and Meredith exited the gym.

“Oh, hey,” Zack said. “What are you up to?”

I tried to smile. “Just resting. Trying to cool off.”

Meredith glanced at Zack with irritation and continued on to the ladies’ room.

“Where did Luna go?” Zack asked.

“I dunno. She’s with Kai and some other people.”

We chatted for a few minutes. Zack was thinking of packing it in as soon as Meredith had enough, which looked to be soon. She returned from the bathroom with her face mopped free of concealer, her acne scars proudly craterous.

“Good dance, huh?” I asked.

“It’s okay,” said Meredith. “The DJ kinda sucks.”

The double doors burst open and out staggered Kai and Luna. “There you are!” she said, flinging an arm about my shoulders. “Zack, Meredith, come with us. Kai has fireworks.”

For the first time all night, Meredith grinned. Maybe it was the prospect of setting things on fire.

Luna ushered the group of us into the chilly night, our heels punching through grass crisp with frost. I fell into the backseat of Luna’s car with Luna to my right and Zack to my left; Kai took the wheel.

“Where are we going?” I asked as Kai reversed and pulled out of the lot.

“There’s a field by Shepherd Lane,” he said. “It’s not far.” He popped a mix-CD into the stereo which began playing the Butthole Surfers’ “Pepper.” Soon enough we were racing through hilly backroads, leaning into every turn. The whole car smelled like a hippy’s trashcan, a miasma of weed and beer; Luna was at the center of it. She had the window rolled down and was sticking her head out into the frigid airstream like a dog.

Zack motioned me over. I leaned in, grateful for his nimbus of aftershave.

“Something’s up with Luna,” Zack whispered.

No shit. I told him she was high as a kite.

Kai pulled over and we followed him through the tall, mummified grasses into a clearing in the field. The air smelled like Halloween. At the back of the field was a black wall of trees and above them Orion was rising. Kai and Meredith jammed fistfuls of bottle rockets upright into the dirt and Luna stumbled into the grass to vomit.

There are certain times in your life when you abruptly fall into yourself and remember, once again, who you are. I fell tailbone first into Elise Kramer, tenth grader, who is sitting in a field while her classmates light fireworks and her poor addled friend pukes up her last few drinks behind her. The stars are gleaming dagger points. It’s early fall but feels like winter. The season is unsure yet of what it wants to be.

Meredith and Kai lit the rockets and ducked away. A whole glittering salvo whizzed skyward, shooting shadows across the field, and the pair whooped and hollered. Zack tagged along behind them, discomfited, then took a seat in the dirt. He looked like he’d found himself there by accident.

Luna emerged from the grasses, wiping her mouth, and plopped down beside me. “Aw, I missed it,” she said.

“They’re setting up more. Feeling better?”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes you just gotta puke it out.” She spat out a gob of saliva, grinned, and fell on her back. “Whew! This is awesome. Lie down with me?”

We lay there together on the cold, cobbled ground as more bottle rockets went up. “Zack’s just sitting there by himself,” Luna said. “You should go kiss him.”

I shook my head. “Nah.”

“You ever kissed anyone before?” Luna asked.

“Of course.”

“Tell me about it.”

I did, because it was no big deal: last year, Timothy Kaplan, backseat of a Toyota Tercel. Whatever. I turned my head to look at her and there she was, looking back. I wondered why she chose me to be her friend when she could have chosen anyone else in the world, and I said, “I’ve never kissed a girl before.”

“Oh,” said Luna, and thought a moment. “Do you want to?”

I pressed my mouth to hers before she could change her mind. It was about as chaste as a kiss could get; her lips were pliant and unsuspecting. She brushed my hair back from my face and I felt my throat tighten, my chest burn, my eyes wash over with tears. I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her neck, relieved to be special to someone. I realized then that I had never held anyone so similar to my own size and shape, and for a disorienting moment I couldn’t tell where my body ended and hers began—if I was Luna or if Luna was me.

“Do you think fucked up people attract other fucked up people?” I asked.

Luna gave me a gentle noogie on the crown of my head. “Oh, Elise,” she said. “Of course they do.”

“Oh, shit!” Kai shouted. I sat up in time to see him bolt off into the grass. A police car was cruising toward us, beacons blazing. The car pulled over and out stepped a young officer, Maglite in hand. He had a wrestler’s physique, his shirtsleeves hugging the contours of his biceps,

and he moved with a bow-legged cowboy swagger. A pair of handcuffs jangled from his belt.

The officer informed us that he had seen the fireworks while he was on patrol and reminded us that aerial explosives were illegal in Howard County and elsewhere. He also reminded us that the law did not look kindly upon underage drinking and driving.

“Who’s the owner of this vehicle?” he asked.

Luna, who had remained silent until then, admitted it was hers. The cop asked for her license and registration, glanced at her plates, then went back to his car. He didn’t come out for a long time. Luna, meanwhile, sank down onto the dirt, her face stony. I figured she was worried about how a citation would look to a college admissions committee. That’s what I was worried about.

When the officer returned, he looked at Luna, obviously confounded. “Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you to come to the station with me. The rest of you are free to go.”

He radioed one of his buddies to return the rest of us to school, and that’s why I spent the last twenty minutes of homecoming shut up in the back of a squad car. Meredith couldn’t stop whispering: Why would they take Luna? Is this even legal? Oh, my God! What about Kai?

Kai, as I discovered on Monday, made it out just fine. He had to walk three miles back to school in the dark, but that was better than getting caught with five bags of weed on his person. I, on the other hand, had to explain to my parents where my date had gone and why they had to pick me up at school at 11:30 PM. They yelled at me the entire ride home.

Luna wasn’t at school on Monday or Tuesday, and she didn’t answer my calls. Wednesday afternoon, I rode my bike through the lot of her apartment complex; her car was nowhere to be found. The next morning Zack called and told me to grab the Baltimore Sun.

There she was, smack in the middle of page A1: “32-Year-Old Woman Poses as Student in Local High School.” The legal name of the woman in question was not Luna Muscatelli, but Margaret Garamond, who had pulled the same thing at a high school in Virginia and Delaware. She had

an outstanding warrant for trashing the cafeteria in Delaware when she discovered she was getting kicked out.

The Sun didn't speculate as to why Luna went through all this trouble. Zack figured she enjoyed having fun at our expense, and at the expense of everyone else, but I knew it had to be something more. I spent hours in bed wondering: how much of her story was true? How much was made up? Each time I thought I understood it, the shape of it would change. She must have convinced herself that she was one of us. That she deserved a mulligan from the universe, a chance at a different life, and she had drawn us in to become a part of it.

None of us at school knew what to do apart from exchanging empty, hangdog looks in the hall, and eventually we all stopped talking about her. A few weeks later, my parents passed me an envelope with no return address; I recognized my name in a slanting scrawl and ran upstairs to open it.

#

Dear Elise,

I guess everyone knows by now. I'm sorry for pulling one over on you guys. I'm not even going to try to explain what I'm doing; I can't even explain it to myself. But I do know what it's like to be lonely. I like you, Elise, even if you don't like me anymore. I'm glad we got a chance to be friends.

P.S. Open the damn cookie!

#

I set the letter down, shaking. I picked it up, considered tearing it in half, then set it down again. I pulled Michael's fortune cookie off my cork board and cracked it in two before I could lose my nerve.

But there was nothing inside of it. No slip of paper, no homilies, no lottery numbers, and the most mundane of explanations occurred to me: there must have been a goof up at the factory. We'd gotten a bad batch of cookies in our takeout that night. Probably no one in town had gotten a fortune, either.

I let the two halves clatter into the trashcan and dropped Luna's letter in after them and felt a weight I didn't know I was holding unexpectedly lift.

That was all; Luna was gone, just like Michael was gone, but it was all right. Nothing else happened between Zack and me, and that was all right, too. I still went to film club, this time for the movies. For a while afterwards, I thought I saw Luna around town: glimpses of a girl with a crisp tan and long, silky hair in line at the movie theater, at the dog park, at the mall. I saw her from behind at the video store and almost called out her name but didn't. Each time, I decided to walk away. I walked out of her life and back into mine, and here at last was an ending, because endings are what give stories the strength to stand on their own.

The End

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Posted 4/23/2021

Chitra Gopalakrishnan “A New Isolation” moved into town on 4/23/2021

A NEW ISOLATION
by
Chitra Gopalakrishnan

She has been gone for a year now.

But her personal belongings still lie about in the living room.

They spread every day in secrecy, creeper-like, deep into my spaces.

They build a tortuous network of tunnels within my mind to make entropy a permanent condition.

Her dresses, saris, photographs, underwear, cosmetics, stationery, plants, now wilted, its green having bled into black, and an assortment of trinkets, all heaped in voluptuous disarray in the living room, tease me with the contours of my former life, my former self.

My nose tingles with the remembrance of her sandalwood scent, one that still clings to the air in the apartment. Resolute. Relentless. Mocking.

It could get my throat locked up, and knot my stomach up with want of her. In an instant, and without effort.

I remember how she would daub me here and there, too, with the long nozzle of its bottle. I recall the cold touch of the pointed piece of glass, its pin prick-like effect on my body's pressure points, one that would make me sweaty, cold, and hot all at the same time. While I would come alive to a dizzy desire, she, in my eyes, remained indifferent, as if the daubs were just a practical way to rid my body odor.

It was on occasions like these that I would fear that our marriage would crack upon touch.

And, if I was honest, on many more days, and nights, as well.

When she thought poorly of my job as an editor. “Your only worries,” she would say, “seem to be whether the verbs are active, the nouns specific, articles scarce, adjectives and adverbs made unnecessary, and punctuation clear. And you can’t think beyond the timidity of line breaks, and white spaces in poems to find a job that pays for beyond subsistence living.”

When she would, every month, she’d casually hand out a small, shameful portion of my salary with the words, “For your personal expenditure.” My ignominy cut deep when I found that my other male friends did not suffer the same fate.

I feared for the security of our marriage on days when there was no containing her, as she minced my family, and friends, in equal measure, mauling them with her words. “They are all a rubbishy set of people,” she would pronounce, as I stood in silence, wondering if she could hear my blood crest and trough, churn and lather.

On many nights, her admonitions would ring in my ears. “Your snores are deplorable,” she would scold, making nonsense of my thought that they were nothing more than odd, little rhythms.

Five years into our marriage, she took to what she called “the meticulous preparation, and careful presentation of haute cuisine.” To me, she would declare, “This has turned into the biggest disappointment for me as the magic of my tofu soup orientale, aubergine quinoa roast, and pumpkin pie eludes you as brilliance a village idiot.”

My deepest stings came with comments like these. “Your ‘to-do’ lists are the sum total of all your aspirations in life.” “I have been fooled by my parents into marrying a nerveless man of straw, with no drive, and certainly no prospects.” And, “I do not want children as I can’t carry the burden of them being as impoverished as we are.”

Only on hindsight, when I collate all of this, do I realize that I have withstood a lot of insults, the repeated taking-away of my dignity.

But in my life with her, I accepted, as what I saw to be, my finiteness, my narrow version of life, my ineptness to cope with the new and unknown, and my body limits with equanimity. Really more as personality traits rather than as disabilities. I assumed all husbands bore slights like this, such keen analysis, on a daily basis, in a breathless sort

of manner, knowing they cannot compete in the same league as their wives.

I only wished, at that time, that she would point to my inadequacies in a manner that was slant, and not quite so savage. Act a little like it was nothing rather than it was everything. My courtesies to her in this regard were always unfailing.

I also chose to defend her to my mother, who, ever so often, would say to me, “Your wife is domineering as she is crude, and calculating. She is as crooked as crooked can be. She will swing her sickle, and harvest you at dawn. I should never have allowed her parents to get me to agree to the match,”

“No Ma, you are wrong,” I would rebuke her, hurt writ large on my face.

“She is her own person, more than any other person I know, and our ‘arranged’ marriage has what it takes to endure. In a middle-class family, in India, and as a woman, she will never consider separation, or heaven forbid, divorce, seriously. Or inflict any other kind of harm.”

And, I would spend hours to convince her that we fit. “Ma, the idea of a ‘together’ home, its tone and tenor, still holds up for us. With a swing, and bounce even,” I remember saying to her, just two years ago, a confident smile on my face.

But, as my mother foresaw, my wife chose to shake herself loose of me with ingenuity. To abandon one life and begin another, die and be born again, in a matter of days, or should I say moments.

I should have seen these signals, as hornet’s stings, nipping me one at a time, then all at once in a rush. If I had any sense, even just plain and pure common sense, I would have. Instead of being the fool, who turns, and turns like tumbleweed, losing his momentum. Who is beat up, again, and yet again, with the astonishment of his loss.

“How is it possible for her to leave without a word, to carry on as usual?” I ask my only sister Nisha. “To wipe away ten years of our partnership, its routines, intimacies, and sparrings, everything we were accustomed to? To swab, and sponge it into non-existence like flecks of dirt on a kitchen counter?”

Not willing to let it be at this, I carry on, “How could she turn null and void our Sunday mornings in bed; or tea sessions in our terrace that we called our garden; our evenings in the kitchen, making plans; our trips to the marketplace, buying this and buying that; and our holidays, all within the fall of an eyelash?”

And in a final burst, I add, “To mar my meaning of the present by taking away my past, and future, in an instant?”

“It looks that she has managed it with *élan*,” says my sister in a dry tone, one devoid of sympathy for me. “With the ease of sending sound into silence. For her, it has been as simple as that. One day in your life, another day not so.”

My sister continues, her tone even more unfeeling, “As she has several family inheritances in her name, I guess she decided against taking the belongings that she heaped in the living room to carry along.”

I understand it is difficult for fools to gather compassion.

My best friend, Rohan, who reports bumping into my wife in a faraway locality of New Delhi, six months after her disappearance from our home, during the COVID-19 pandemic, says to me, “There are no signs of dark alarm or worry on her.” Then cautiously adds, “Her unlined face is relaxed, not so humorless, and if I may so, even happy.”

I, on the other hand, have none of her nonchalance. I let myself loose, and allow myself to become unformed.

Rather than clear the debris of my past life, gather my joy, pain, and truth daily in one easy sweep, and pull myself together into some kind of intactness and repair, where I could call my life ‘mine’, I turn indeterminate under my skin. I succumb to the backwash of multiple emotions.

After a break of a month, I begin to work out of home as the new work ethic demands. Or don’t, depending on my mood. I am aware of my colleagues’ struggle in their dealings with me, strange and unreliable as I have become. I know I stand in clear contrast to the stodgy soul that I once was. One punctilious about deadlines.

But I don't care anymore. Mostly, as I have come to a point where I do not know myself.

I overhear Rohan tell my distraught mother, "All he knows is to be a slave to what has savaged him. What savages him still. He has lost the distinction between pain and pleasure, between reason and ill-logic." He is right.

The idea that I could achieve happiness by maximizing pleasure, and minimizing pain was both an intuitive, and popular belief within all my life. It defined sanity for me. My truth, however, is turning out to be different.

I know that scientists say that sensations of pain and pleasure activate the same neural mechanisms in the brain. Maybe my condition is just that. As my pain comes from the joy of my past I accept it, and live with it.

And I know philosophers have argued over the ages that a normal state of mind is pure fiction, one that can never be achieved. Maybe that's my truth.

Whatever be the reality of my situation, all I know is that for months I lie suspended between form and formlessness, between pain and pain-as-pleasure, and sanity and illogic.

And that I am truly afraid of what lies within me. Hate, in particular.

I begin to despise my wife in unimaginable ways, and want her life to be in ruins every moment. Like the proverbial porcupine, I come up with a natural knack for jabbing her in my thoughts in the most painful of ways. I spend months conjuring despicable things that happen to her, and I can taste my joy at her wretchedness when my imaginings batter her being. Self-loathing follows, and I have scars to show for my abhorrence.

I walk through the entire spectrum of hate before I can bring myself to see a psychiatrist.

"You never can wholly control the things you cling to," is what Dr Dilip Sen, says to me, quietly in one of his sessions. It stays with me. This as I have already come alive to the limits of forging my identity on suffering, and contempt. And as I know that there is nothing so fixed as an identity.

In two months' time, I begin the process of loosening the constraints of my individuality, those aspects defined by the emotions of hate, anger, and grief. I am anxious to see my afterburn disappear like white ink on white paper. But I realize it is easier imagined than done as I keep returning to my abrasive experiences of trauma. As this behavior of mine intensifies, I begin to view it as a failure of my resolve. Of my ability to smooth the infections of my being. I am ready to give up, and wallow in the familiarity of hate, and despair.

“Let’s look at another kind of come back, circling back to these emotions in order to master them,” says Dr Sen. He helps me with that, gently nudging me back into position when I stray.

One day, I notice that my body begins to move on its own accord. I don’t resist it. I am like a seedling that tends towards the only source of light it senses. My legs move with light steps, my bare feet glide across the floor, around my wife’s possessions, till I am no longer myself. It is like I am drawn inside a dance of some sort, swallowed by it. I begin to deftly pack her things into suitcases till I put away everything she has left behind.

I come awake to a trickle of sweat gliding from my forehead to my chin. To the knowledge that I have crossed over the shadow of myself to another me. To the realization that I have been born anew, like her.

I go across to my door, softly open it, and pull down the nameplate outside. One that reads Neel and Neelima.

“This is what freedom from hate feels like,” I say to myself.

“This is the release Neelima feels now,” I think.

In my letter addressed to her, which I know will not reach her immediately, as I am unaware of her whereabouts, I write, “I understand now that I have been unable to give you what you need from me, just as you have been unable to, as well. You have suffered in the marriage as a result, as I have, after you left.

Both of our hate, and more so, our desperation, have sprung from expectations from one another, needs that we could not fulfill for one another in our marriage that was arranged by our elders in the true Indian fashion. So while you began seeing me as somebody to be outflanked,

rather than as somebody whose step-by-step involvement is necessary, I, too, could not see your reality or mine despite your repeated attempts to show them to me. Or read, and be sensitive to the true situation of our marriage.

I know one day you will trust me enough to tell me where you are. That day, I intend to tell you to seek love, or something like love, from another. And that maybe, I will, too. For now, I think we should both be content with letting the other be. With tolerance for each other's new spaces. With respect for our new isolations."

Should I end it 'Yours Neel' I wonder?

I decide on 'Warmly'. I think it will do nicely.

The End

Chitra Gopalakrishnan, from New Delhi, uses her ardor for writing, wing to wing, to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript and tree-ism and capitalism.

Posted 4/20/2021

J.W. Wood “Rag Doll” moved into town on 4/20/2021

This story is dedicated by the author to Giorgio Riccardi

RAG DOLL

by

J.W. Wood

I

Mrs. Postlethwaite threw me in the pigsty for a second time just after she'd cut off all my hair. As the farmer's wife, Mrs P. hated having me on her farm as an evacuee. All the farm-hands said I was prettier than her daughter, what with my china-blue eyes and blonde curls.

Mark you, Mrs. Postlethwaite didn't mind the money she got for my keep from the Ministry of War – or the double and treble grant she picked up for housing Billy and Edna, two other children from Leeds. But that's what happened during the War – some thought they could get away with murder. And believe me, one or two did get away with murder.

Mrs. Postlethwaite gave Margaret, the teenage daughter of one of the farm hands, a few shillings a week for looking after the three of us. She was a lovely-looking girl, tall and slim with light brown hair. I'd say Mrs. Postlethwaite made a tidy profit from having us with them – she was never interested in us, just in her husband and the farm animals. My Dad was killed in the blackout, which is how I came to be evacuated: Mum had my elder sister, Janet, at home and two others younger than me. She had to look after them and work for the war effort, so I got sent up to the farm.

Seeing me crying and upset after being chucked in the pigsty, Margaret suggested we go for a walk. My face was red beneath the stumps of my shredded curls. As we went out the kitchen door, Mrs. Postlethwaite had her hands in the sink peeling huge potatoes for her husband. People talk about all the hardship in the Second World War, but if you lived on a farm, you had it all right. Every bit of meat and milk and butter and vegetables you wanted – and cheap petrol besides for your tractors and whatnot.

When we got outside, Margaret smiled at me. For the first time I saw her eyes were the same blue as my own. I noticed she was hiding something in the coal-scuttle she carried in her left hand. I couldn't see what it was because she kept the scuttle close to the hip of her plain grey dress. She took my hand and led me across the courtyard to the coal shed.

"I've made you a present," she whispered after we'd got inside the shed.

Outside, the rain kept pelting down. I could see a wide puddle forming on the courtyard's cobblestones through a crack at the bottom of the wooden door.

"What is it?"

My little girl's heart beat faster. There weren't too many presents around, so I was keen to see what it was.

"Look" – she brought the coal-scuttle round in front of her from its resting place on her hip. I saw a floppy shape inside the round copper scuttle. Margaret reached down into the scuttle and brought out a knitted doll. It was so beautiful. Margaret must have crocheted it with a single needle in the evenings – I'd never seen her knitting, and I was around her all day until bedtime. The doll had yellow hair and blue eyes, pink woolen cheeks and a brown skirt and shoes, with a white woolen jumper on. I found out later that Margaret stuffed the doll with rags she'd kept from darning and sewing her clothes.

"Thank you, Margaret. I love it!" I told her.

"I made it for you when you were asleep. Took me ages," Margaret smiled, showing a neat row of teeth. "Now don't tell the others: this is for you because of how Madam treated you with them pigs and your hair and all. She's got it in for you lass, I'm sorry to say."

I thanked Margaret again and she bent to shovel coal into the scuttle.

"Come on – find me a couple of big lumps of coal. Then you can wash your hands for tea when we get back inside."

I was happy to help with my lovely new present in my hand. I perched the doll on a strut of the coal shed's wooden frame and peered into the coal mountain for the biggest bits I could find.

“Poor wee thing,” said Margaret. “Getting your hair cut off and chucked in the pigsty. What a rotter Mrs. Postlethwaite is – Mrs. Impostlethwaite, I should say.”

We laughed, trying to keep quiet so no-one would hear, though not even the dogs were mad enough to be outside in this rain. Soon we'd filled the coal-scuttle and were ready to return to the kitchen's warm fug. Before she opened the door, Margaret put a finger to her lips and smiled.

“Now, no tellin' anyone, remember?”

I nodded, and Margaret gave me a quick hug. I wrapped my skinny kid's arms around her grown-up body, my head touching her chest. I stuffed the doll up my jumper, sticking its legs and half its body into the band of my skirt so it would stay put. Then Margaret opened the door and off we trotted through the downpour towards the kitchen's stable door.

#

That night, I clutched the doll to my chest and listened to the rain as I lay in the cold box-bed I shared with Billy and Edna. Edna missed her Mum so much she used to talk in her sleep, and I heard her muttering to herself, even though Mr. Postlethwaite had put the lights out not ten minutes before. Billy was a snorer as well, so between them two I was used to lying in bed and waiting for sleep to come. Only now I had that doll – well, I was too excited to sleep. It was a little secret between Margaret and me: proof that I could be friends with a grown-up when I was just gone six.

The weeks went by and the Spring days got longer. Spring 1943 – I'd been away, with visits from my Mum, for just over a year. When the grown-ups spoke it seemed things were going better in the war. I heard them talking about some place called “Tobruk” – in Egypt, that was. Another place called “Stalingrad.” And I remembered the day the Italian surrender was announced. Mr. Postlethwaite was slumped in his chair with the paper, about to doze off even before his wife served tea. But then the five o'clock news came on and the Italian surrender was the first bit of news they read.

Mr. Postlethwaite got out of his chair and danced a little jig, his big tummy going up and down under his farmer's jersey. Then he fetched out a bottle of sherry from the shelf next to the fireplace – I hadn't seen anyone smiling since Christmas 1942, months before – and called out to his wife to come and celebrate the news. Tiny as I was, I remember thinking the war would end one day, and we were going to win. Us and what Churchill called “our American cousins”, and old Joe Stalin.

Apart from that excitement, life went on as normal. Then one day, Edna's Dad was killed in action in North Africa and her Mum took her back for a week to tell her. When her Mum came Edna could tell right away something was wrong because her face was red and tired from crying.

Margaret never mentioned the doll again. But every now and then she would give me a little wink or a nod to recognize our secret.

#

One morning that June I woke up as usual and reached under my pillow for my Rag Doll – gone. I was sure it had been there the night before. I got up as the other two were dressing, my mind in a state. Where was my doll?

When I got downstairs for breakfast, I found my answer. The farmhouse dogs had torn the doll to shreds. Scraps of cloth from my doll's guts lay strewn across the kitchen flagstones. The dogs lost interest after they'd gutted the doll, and now lay in front of the fire as usual, lolling in the orange firelight like they'd done nothing wrong.

I wailed and tears coursed down my cheeks. Mrs Postlethwaite looked over from the sink where she'd been scrubbing carrots. The old cow must have taken the doll when I was asleep and given it to the dogs. Or one of the other kids - but they wouldn't have done that. By heck, that woman hated me. Used to call me the “stolen Duchess” and all sorts of sarky comments.

“What's up wi' thee, lass? Was nobbut a rag doll. Margaret'll mek you another one someday. Stop your sobbing, tha silly little thing!”

I ran out of the kitchen and up to the bedroom, throwing myself on the narrow box-bed. Margaret followed behind, leaving Billy and Edna in the kitchen. She banged on the door but I wouldn't answer. She spoke through the door, her voice soft and soothing:

“Winnie, I've picked up all the pieces. I'll stitch it back together, I promise.”

#

The next day my Mum came to get me. I wasn't expecting her. My eldest sister Janet had just turned sixteen, so she was legally allowed to look after us when Mum went out to work in the munitions factory. I was told to pack my things and say my goodbyes when Mum turned up, all in a hurry.

When I came downstairs with my suitcase Mum looked harried. The strain of looking after three kids by herself, as well as working – even though only Harold and Sally needed looking after these days – was wearing her down. She was forty-four but looked fifteen years older, grey hair sprouting from her scalp and growing through her last dye job. Her skin was getting wrinkled and started sagging. But she was my mother and I loved her. If only I'd know she'd be dead a few years later ... anyway. We didn't ask to come here. Laugh it off and get on, that's what you have to do.

Mr. Postlethwaite was away on the farm, so I said goodbye to Billy and Edna, then turned to Mrs. Postlethwaite.

“Thank you, Mrs. Postlethwaite.”

I was more polite with the gypsies who used to knock at the door when Andrew and I were first married, wanting to tell your fortune. And I used to give them short shrift, I assure you.

Mrs. Postlethwaite never said a word, just smiled and told Mum I'd been a good girl. Then I said goodbye to Margaret. Or rather, I tried to. Tears came again and I buried my head in her skinny chest, heaving sobs. Margaret put her arms around me and wrapped me in her slender arms. She was just ten years older than me but felt like my mother. Then she took my head in her hands and lifted my face towards her:

“I’ve not had time to fix your doll yet, Winnie. I’ll post it on, don’t worry.”

Then Mum told me to hurry up so I let go of Margaret and wiped my face. Mum picked up my suitcase and we walked through the kitchen doorway into the courtyard, where Uncle Peter was waiting in a borrowed Austin motor car to take us back to Leeds.

II

I never got that Doll back from Margaret. But I never forgot it – or her. When I got home, Mum put me to work straight away looking after the younger children. Then she died of heart failure in forty-six, just after the War ended, when I was nine. So that was me and Janet left to look after the two youngest, Sally and poor little Harold who was only five when his mother died. He never got over it, and died twenty years ago from the drink. Poor soul.

I met my Andy in 1953 and started courting. Sixteen I was – young! But we got married and made a go. Had three kids, all married now. We retired in 2005, and Andy passed away eighteen months later. All I care about these days is my grandkids – and it was through them I came to hear what happened to Margaret.

I was picking up my daughter’s kids from school because Estelle was working that day – she’s a nurse at Leeds General. Anyway, there I was waiting for them at the school gate, like you do, when a lady of about my age approached me.

“Excuse me”, she says. “It’s not Winifred, is it? Were you evacuated during the War to a farm up at Northallerton?”

I said that was me, and when I answered I knew straight away this was Edna – the girl I’d been evacuated with.

“Oh”, she says. “It’s a miracle! Margaret is asking after you. She wants to see you and she’s not got a lot of time left.”

I thanked Edna and took her telephone number and address off her. She gave me another number to ring so I could arrange to see Margaret. She said that was the hospice where they were caring for her, and she wasn’t

expected to last much longer. So I phoned them as soon as I got home and said I'd go up there the next day just after nine.

#

The hospice was one of those modern buildings – purpose-built to house the dying. It had angled windows so patients could look out at the views of the Yorkshire Dales, all the trees and greenery, the wandering roads and the rivers, the tarns gliding free through the rain and clouds and sunshine.

One of the nurses met me at the door and I knew from the sadness in her eyes that Margaret was gone. But they asked me into her room to see her. The room was on the first floor so I had to walk – I'm eighty-four, remember – at my own pace. It took me twenty minutes to get up there.

When the nurse opened the door, straight away those feelings from when I was a little girl came back to me. How much I'd loved spending time with Margaret and Edna and Billy – and hated Mrs. Postlethwaite. How I'd missed my dear Mother when I was there – and my Daddy, who died so long ago.

Margaret's body lay on the bed, tucked up in the sheets. Everything was neat and tidy, and I noticed the Bible on her bedside table. She looked peaceful in death, her skin grey and even thinner than I remembered. Still, somehow she seemed the same girl I remembered from over seventy-five years ago.

“It was cancer,” the nurse said. “She felt she'd had a good long life – and so she had: ninety-four she would have been next year.”

“What did she do? Did she get married? Have children?”

“She was married for sixty years. But I don't think they ever had children,” the nurse said. “She never forgot you kids she cared for in the war – especially you,” she added. “She used to talk about you all the time.”

I looked at her. “Why? What did she say?”

The nurse smiled.

“She was asking to see you because she had something for you. Something she’d kept since the War, she said.”

“What is it?”

The nurse turned to a cupboard and opened it, then turned back to face me. Inside the cupboard sat the doll Margaret had made for me all those years ago, that silly face with the red smile and the blue dots of scrap cloth for eyes. The doll was whole again, perfectly mended. And as bright as it’d been when she first gave me it in that coal-shed. Memories of Mrs. Postlethwaite and the dogs; that steaming kitchen, the pouring rain; my mother and father dying – it all came back to me in a flood.

The nurse handed me the doll and the pair of us stood there in tears with the body of a woman I’d not seen for seventy-seven years lying dead in the bed beside me. I put the doll in my handbag and the Nurse took me by the arm, dabbing at her eyes with a hanky she held in her other hand.

“Now then, Winifred”, she said. “Let’s get you downstairs for a cup of tea.”

The End **J.W. Wood**'s short fiction has appeared in the US, UK, Ireland, Canada, Hungary, Sweden, Turkey and India. The author of five books of poems and a pseudonymous thriller all published in the UK, his work has been nominated or shortlisted for many prizes. In 2022, Terror House Publishing (US) will launch his comic farce, *By Any Other Name*. www.jwwoodwriter.net

Posted 4/17/2021
Audrey Lewis “Resurrection Truth or Legend” moved into town on
4/17/2021

RESURRECTION TRUTH OR LEGEND
by
Audrey N Lewis

I have always hated daylight savings time. I’m not sure if it is the darkness of the morning hours or the brightness of the night, but either way, it never works for me. And then, of course, there are the memories. I had hopes that this year might be different from the previous eight. But it doesn’t appear the universe agrees. As in past years, there are always those images. Haunting images from the box of old photographs I had unearthed and purchased at a flea market along the wharf. Old tintype photos, most of them quite faded. Yet still clear enough to see the pain in those eyes the photograph had captured.

Eyes that were so human, ears that stuck out where the gills should be, human as well; both, though, seemed easily explained away because what other explanation could there be? No matter how hard I tried, the hands and feet were indeed human, ten fingers and ten toes. There was no way anyone could explain that. Then there was the number of them, as they all lay there side by side, holding hands as if holding hands might help. But it wasn’t just the tintypes; it was the black and white photos and the colored Polaroids. They were just as big, maybe bigger. There were fewer of them. The most recent colored photo showed only one. Regardless, in the most recent photographs, all of them had that one common denominator the ears were gone. The hands and feet appeared to have morphed into enormous fins. But the eyes, those eyes haunting, still so human.

I was up early just as the sun was peeking over the horizon, waiting for that lone fisherman to reel him in. I warmed up a cup of leftover coffee. I stood at the lanai, watching the diamonds as they floated into oblivion, unseeable once the sun was fully exposed. I stood there and waited. It wasn’t really that I wanted anything to happen, but it was just something that happened, at least for the past eight years. Always the same place, at the same time. Even the weather didn’t fluctuate on that first daylight savings morning.

It was always tranquil, as if the world, or perhaps just the world around me, had forgotten it was time to wake up. Even the birds seemed to have overlooked feeding time.

I stood there quiet, basking in the new day as if by chance the sun had found its place, and it too was waiting.

I looked out over the Bay like I had in previous years, searching. I was never quite sure what I was searching for, but still adamant that the day could not end until I found it. I never did.

That first year, I was a witness. The police questioned me repeatedly, trying to get me to deviate from my story, but I never did. There was no deviation from the truth, no matter how hard they tried. The second-year they came knocking at my door, I didn't answer. When they finally caught up with me, I was standing on the pier in my backyard, fishing. I didn't stop. Through all of their questions, I continued to fish, even as I answered them. Just during conversation alone, I never brought my line in, not once while they were there. It wasn't because I was guilty, but I feared they might see the bait I used or didn't use. I apologetically and, with deep sadness, said I hadn't been home. I had been away. I was sorry that I couldn't be more helpful. And I indeed was.

When my family first began looking for a place, they chose the Keys because it had only been in recent years that the land was available to non-natives. The property was becoming a hot commodity, and the locals liked to use scare tactics to keep it that way. They even had photographs to document it, the same photographs I now owned and had hidden away.

It was the legend of giant fish and lost boys that eventually made for an onslaught of tourists, making it one of the most significant merchandising events in the Keys' history. Tourists came from all over in an attempt to catch one of these giant fish. They would converge on piers where the fish were said to have washed up. Everyone hoped to either catch a glimpse or catch a fish themselves. And so it was, and so it continued year after year. The number of missing boys from a pier any year was also the number of fish that would wash up. It was as if people were hopeful that there might be more boys missing. For as long as I can remember, the tourists would come, and often I'd be among them, hoping to catch the big one. What fisherman wouldn't want to claim it for a trophy?

But, that first year, I had to wonder. Where do legends come from? As usual, it was the time of year for the crowds of people to begin arriving. It was a day colder than average, so people were dressed in heavy jackets, some wearing hats and gloves. The father and son from the private dock next door had already claimed their spot. And I watched as the young boy of about twelve wound up as if he was a baseball pitcher and cast out his line. The father, less enthusiastically, dropped his line delicately into the water at his feet. They stayed like this for some twenty minutes, pulling in and casting out, pulling in and casting out. The father said something to the boy. He patted him on the shoulder and walked back to the house, leaving his son alone.

I watched him as I threw out my line. It wasn't ten minutes after the father left that the fog began to move in—a heavy fog. A fog so thick it was not only hard to see but difficult to breathe. There was a stillness as if the water had stopped moving as if time had stopped. I pulled in my line a greenish slime, the same color the water now appeared. I started to call to the boy as I watched him wind up to cast again. But just as he cast out, I realized it was too late. His body had followed his line into the fog as if he were pulled in. Frozen, I watched as he seemed panicked when he glanced around. And just as I saw him disappear, I jumped in. I jumped into a solid mass until the fog started to lift, and I dropped into the water. I couldn't see anything. I was caught up in the tornado of sand and water. Fighting my way up and dripping wet, I climbed onto the pier only to discover laying there where he had stood was the biggest fish I had ever seen. I looked out into the Bay, which was now calm and clear, and the bluest I had ever seen it. Like a looking glass for all to see. That is the story I told the police. That is the story I told his dad. That is the story I told repeatedly because that was, in truth, what happened.

Years three thru eight were no different. They just stopped asking me. But year nine, once again, they came knocking. Asking questions, it was as if they wanted to believe my first story, but reality won, and they simply couldn't. I was never actually a suspect, in case you may be wondering.

I fished more during daylight savings than I did any other time of year. I would use only a net on the end of my line, a net empty of promise but full of dreams, and I would wait for the first two hours of dawn and the last two hours of dusk. Bringing it up slower than average, so that should there be anything at all that might give me a clue, affirmation of what I

believed I had seen. Something that might make the boys stop disappearing or bring them home.

There was talk of dredging the Bay, but then what was the purpose. For the most part, it wasn't more than six feet deep, and there had been divers everywhere. Also, after each disappearance, they had dragged the bottom. Something about dredging it was scary. I kept thinking of those haunting eyes and watching him get reeled in. The taxpayers and local officials couldn't agree, neither could the boy's parents. Yet the tourists continued to come, and the police came up empty, just like my net had for the past eight years. Yet here I was standing where I always did, on my pier, full of hope and promise.

I watched the dock next door for signs of life. Finally, someone new had bought it, and I believed they had already moved in. Secretly, I hoped that they weren't fishermen. For as far as I could see, all of the other piers were full. I always wondered what we all wanted, what it was we were trying to accomplish. It made me feel sick. But I couldn't help ask myself, was I waiting for another boy to go missing? Or was my commitment to stand on the pier year after year with only a net as bait? Was it a humanitarian act? Or was it that I, too, wasn't sure about what I had seen and needed something concrete to corroborate my story, even for me?

So many years and so much waiting, I wasn't anticipating anything, but then there it was a slight pull, a bite, a nibble. Not even thinking, I instinctively pulled back. But just as I expected, nothing. I cast in again. Patiently I waited until there was another bite. It played me for a bit, and then wham, it took my line. I played it until I felt it was tired out and then reeled in. I reeled in like crazy, thinking maybe it was, in fact, the big one. But as I pulled up, it was not a fish in my net but something else. It was with hesitation that I continued to bring it in, so uncertain of what it might be. I was careful as I removed it. It was a bit of cloth. Old cloth perhaps from a jacket, as I reached in and carefully pulled it, I could see the tag, a name, Jebadiah. I remembered seeing that name on the list of missing boys. It was a name from probably some forty years ago. At first, I didn't realize it, didn't even let myself notice, but the cloth wasn't wet, not even damp. I looked around, not sure if I was hoping someone else saw what I pulled in or if I was hoping they didn't.

I put the cloth in my fishing bucket and cast it in again. Almost immediately, there was another bite. I pulled and reeled it in. No fish.

This time a stocking cap, dry as could be. I added it to my fishing bucket and cast it out again. Seconds later, I reeled in a pair of socks, followed by a baseball cap, gloves, tennis shoes, a pair of jeans, a keychain. I just kept reeling in additional items.

I pulled in a torn piece of the red and black bandana. It had my initials, my heart stopped. I had never told anyone because I felt so guilty. I had held it out for him to grab, but it slipped from my hands, and I watched him disappear.

I hesitated for a second before casting again. Just as my line hit the water, I knew I was in trouble as the fog moved in, and my line began to go down. The choice was to hold on and see where it took me or let go and be silent for the remainder of my life. And that's when I saw it, bigger than any fish I had ever seen, whale-sized, as it came up out of the water, holding onto my net. I could see those human eyes taunting me. With both hands, I held my pole and tried not to hold back. I let myself be taken, ready to give it all up for an opportunity to know. I was not prepared.

I could feel myself going down, ready for the water to consume me, faster and faster I was going down, but I could feel no water. I was not drowning. The whale-sized fish was pulling the net and turned as if to make sure I was still there. Those human-like eyes appeared to speak, as if desperate, asking for help. It took all my strength to hold on. A tornado of swirling water, sand, and dirt attempted to separate us.

In the distance, I could see some light. I could feel drops of water trying to get through. And the fish pulled harder and swam faster as if a race against time. Time, that was what we were doing. I was beginning to understand. It was taking me back in time. As the light was close enough, in the shadows, I could see my bandana flapping in the water/air, and on the other end was his hand, holding it ever so tightly.

As we approached, I could see his face, a smile, an affirmation, as if he knew I'd come back. I sensed the urgency as the swirling became angry. I wasn't sure, but I let go of the pole and reached out for his hand. He grabbed mine and squeezed. The whale-sized fish came back, still pulling the rod, swimming close enough for me to reach out and grab hold. The boy reached back, and I could see that behind him for as far as I could see, they were all there, all of those missing boys. He took both my hand and the hand of the boy behind him. He, in turn, took hold of

the hand behind him. The chain of hands linked together, all having believed in what had kept them. The boy and the fish nodded at one another, and off we went. I was moving up as fast as we had gone down. As we surfaced, the fog had begun to lift. I knew we had to hurry. I waited on the side, helping each boy onto the dock, and as the fog lifted, it was me who was left unsure where it was I belonged. The water moving faster than I could swim, the boy reached out to help me up, but it was too late. Laying there on the dock with them for all to see was nothing but a giant fish.

The End

Audrey Lewis lives in Illinois where she enjoys spending her free time working on creative projects, finding vintage treasures or a good game of scrabble. Nature tends to dictate some of her interests. Beekeeping, growing vegetables in her garden, and capturing the world through a lens. Writing has provided her an additional creative outlet.

Posted 4/11/2021
Linda Sparks "May Day" moved into town on 4/11/2021

MAY DAY
by
Linda Sparks

The strands of sunlight reach down with tactile fingers to warm the earth and awaken her from the long slumber. Winter has gouged deep ruts into her, leaving her scarred and ragged, as the snow and frost reigned and the nights were bitterly icy and as black as a witch's heart.

There is promise in the air and a taste of honeysuckle and fragile violets and always the beautiful sweetly scented Lily of the Valley that is also poisonous and lethal. Beauty may often belie true toxicity yet we admire the courage of these strikingly viable plants that erupt from the warming earth.

I've cast aside my jacket and those ugly rubber boots Mother made me wear and I am running freely as the boys chase me but never catch me. I have survived the winter, pushing and being shoved off the ice hills that have formed in the schoolyard and hiding my wounded flesh from my mother so she wouldn't bring out the dreaded mecuricome that stings like red ant bites. The ties on my dress are torn because I was just fast enough but not quite escaping a hand that tried to catch me. I know I'll have to come up with some plausible excuse for that. It's only a game of tag but there is excitement in the air because it is spring and we can run without slipping on the ice and breaking a knee. I've never had stitches but I've heard tales from the other kids and it is really a dreadful torture and they use very long needles and sew your skin like a ragged doll who has been torn. If it happened to me, I would try my best not to cry.

When I woke this morning, I remembered what day it was and that made me rush through my cold cereal and prod my older sister to not lollygag or take the long way to school (the one we were forbidden to take because hobos lurked under the viaduct apparently waiting to snatch young children and take them away where they would never be seen again).

In the classroom, I could hardly sit in my seat and kept moving from side to side.

“Miss Betz. Do you need to go to the bathroom?” the teacher asked loudly. I stopped rocking as my face flamed and I saw my classmates looking at me, especially the boys. Didn’t they ever have to pee?

Now, I was determined not to ask to go to the bathroom, even if I really had to go badly, because that would just prove the teacher was right

We got through our arithmetic and then our spelling which was one of my favorite things to do as I never missed the words and always got 100% even when the teacher called on me and I had to spell it out loud with everyone hoping I would make a mistake because I never did. I would be really mad at myself if I missed a word so I did not let it happen.

The teacher slammed her book shut and we sat at attention. This was the moment she would announce our little adventure.

“We will now be going into the woods to collect flowers for the May baskets you made earlier. The paste should be dry on them by the time we return. Now I want you to walk in single file, in alphabetical order as we always do, and if you need to use the restroom first, let me know.”

No one raised their hands. We could hold it. We had important things to do.

We set out, noisily leaving our classroom in single file and I was near the first of the line because B is the second letter of the alphabet. I thanked my father for my last name which brought me to the front of the line on most occasions.

When we escaped the confines of the building, the sun had already climbed high in the sky but the teacher assured us we would return in time for lunch.

By the time we reached the tree line of the woods that bordered the school property, there was a slight breeze and I wished I’d kept my jacket but I wasn’t about to complain. It was far better than the cold of a Michigan winter.

We walked along the path between the trees, where other students had walked before us for as many years as this school was here, although it

had only been built four years ago and I was of the first kindergarten class to attend here and now I had reached third grade. I had known all of the students in the school since the beginning as our town was small and nearly all of us were born at the same hospital in a nearby city as there was no hospital here. The same doctor had also delivered most of us.

At a very young age, my sister and I walked downtown to the drugstore for a special treat at the soda fountain. I had earned a whole quarter babysitting for my young cousin and so I was feeling flush enough that I could treat us. We sat on the stools at the countertop and let them spin a little as we waited for the soda jerk to make our ice cream cones. It was difficult to choose the flavor but I always settled upon chocolate and my sister chose strawberry. It cost a nickel for each ice cream cone. I had enough change left to come downtown another time for ice cream.

We licked our ice cream deliberately trying to make it last as long as we possibly could. I held the cold ice cream in my mouth and allowed the flavor of the creamy chocolate to cover all the surfaces of my tongue and when it warmed a little, I swallowed, and rubbed my belly, as though the delicious creaminess had already reached my stomach. Then we walked home leisurely, talking about the reasons we had chosen our flavors and, before too long, we were racing home because we wanted to tell our mother about our trip to the drug store and how wonderful it was.

The teacher who led the line, stopped abruptly and pointed to several colorful birds including a red-breasted robin that immediately flew away at our noise. Then she waved her hand, indicating the wildflowers that grew freely along the path. That was our signal to harvest.

“Gather them carefully and do not rip them from the ground or tear the petals. These flowers are the precious bounty of May and should be treated with care,” she said.

I treated them as gently as I cared for my baby brothers, with great tenderness and a feeling of joy that such delicate flowers could come from the ground that was covered with snow only a few weeks ago.

There were a few kids who accidentally trampled the flowers and the teacher spoke to them sternly and they quickly adjusted their actions to take more care.

I recalled that in the Autumn, before the first snow, we had walked this same path and gathered multi-colored leaves and we had brought them back to the classroom and pasted them into a book and wrote the names of the leaves/trees beneath each specimen. I enjoyed looking at that book and how it magically brought me back to that day. I could even remember the smell of Fall in the air that tasted cool and warned of impending winter. Now we were smelling the flavors of Spring and the promise of warmth and swimming at Silver Saddle Lake.

It was a brisk walk back to the classroom but we brought our bounty and carefully placed the flowers into the May baskets we had created from colored paper and had pasted the handle on top of it. With a dark crayon, I wrote the word “Mom” on the outside of the May basket. She would love this gift.

Mother had told me often of how she had collected flowers for May baskets during her childhood in school and that it was a special day to welcome spring and to celebrate life. Even Grandmother had gathered May flowers and put them into baskets and gifted them to her mother. This task we were doing today stretched back into time through generations, touching people I did not even know, yet they were of my family.

Filling the May basket was now done and I could hardly keep my eyes from this treasure but it was time to eat lunch at our desks. The cart had come around and brought the milk for those of us who had ordered it, which my mother always did as she said I needed milk to grow my bones to be strong. I was a small child with little appetite for the food that others chose to eat and I never ate meat at all, so she was happy that I liked milk.

I ate my jelly sandwich quickly and drank my milk. I did not like grape jelly but it was what I was given. It did not even taste like grapes but was a glutinous cloyingly sweet glob on white bread. I was hungry enough, after our walk in the woods, to eat it. Mother had also given me an apple. I didn't like the skin of the apple but I ate it because it wouldn't be good to take bites of it and spit it out. Besides, it was supposedly good fiber though I wasn't certain what that meant for me. I could hardly swallow because I was so excited about what would come next.

Finally, we were released to the playground and we all ran outside and headed toward the May poles that were now decorated with flowers for

this special day. There were only a limited number of them so we would have to wait our turn but I was a fast runner and got there first and grabbed hold of one of the long ropes that hung from a portion of the pole. There were several ropes and they were quickly taken by other children who ran nearly as quickly as me.

Then we began running just as fast as we could. Our feet pounded the earth as we ran like we were being chased by barking dogs. There were no slackers in this crowd because they were also fast runners and had beat out the crowd.

We ran faster and faster in the circle, just as fast as our feet would go, and then we left the earth swinging out and swinging wide as the May pole carried us round and round. I was thinking of the rhyme about “ring around the rosies, pocket full of posies.” Then, we were flying through the air. I closed my eyes and I believed that I could truly fly like those magical May pole dancers of ancient times and like my mother and many grandmothers before me, I formed a link to those mystical rites of May.

I'll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell, cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die-promise. Grandmother told me that real witches do not have black hearts.

The End

Linda Sparks is a poet and author who has written since her early Michigan childhood. She grew up in Southern California and currently resides in Florida. She has several novels published and is currently writing a non-fiction work regarding her life in California. She served as editor for Valkyrie magazine.

Posted 4/9/2021

Shashi Kadapa “The ‘Dead’ Ox Scam” moved into town on 4/9/2021

THE ‘DEAD’ OX SCAM

by

Shashi Kadapa

Bhimya, the paunchy peon, 4thgrade, hurried from a government farm. Stumbling, distraught and palpitating with distress, he collapsed in front of his senior, Lingraj Baswana, farm supervisor, 3rdgrade, thrice suspended for corruption.

“Sahib,” he stammered, ‘the ox is dead!’”

“What!” caterwauled Lingya. “How? Have you told anyone?”

“It must have eaten something. I haven’t told anyone.”

“Keep quiet. Let me see what to do?”

Lingraj, or Lingya, as he was called by the seniors was very innovatively corrupt, pilferer, fence of anything, animate, inanimate, living, growing, dead, walking, breathing, swimming, and flying entities. He saw opportunities or rather made them in any possible or improbable situation. After he ‘settled’ his third suspension, his boss had warned him, “Le Lingya. This is the last time I will help. The next time you will be dismissed.”

Lingya justified his avarice with, “What to do? I have two insatiable wives, an edacious and avaricious concubine, and seven esurient children.”

He pulled out a memo, jerked the fountain pen to make the ink flow, and wrote to the superintendent.

“Respected Sir.

The Oxen in our farm is felled sickh. Two temptry labrers needed for workings and carings of oxen. One quintal wheat is wanted for feedings of subject sick oxen. Plze given us parmishon to hoire workers and buying grain. If not given parmishon oxen dying.

Sd/Your Obedient servant.”

He asked a peon to rush on his cycle and hand the letter to the superintendent.

Then he ordered Bhimya, “Go and stand in front of the ox shed. Do not let anyone inside. If anyone asks, tell him the ox is calving.”

“Calving? But Sahib, it is an ox not a cow!”

“So what? It is a hybrid ox.”

Clearly, logic, rationality, had no place in their debauchery.

#

Superintendent of the farm Somesh Patil, was choleric. The annual audit was due and he was perturbed about the large amount of cotton he had illicitly sold. Yes, he had used time-tested, innovative, duplicitous methods.

First, he had reported that a bumper crop was due and had requisitioned fertilizers, which were sold off. Then he reported a pestilence, and raised an indent for pesticide. When tins of pesticide arrived, imagine his anger when they were opened and he found them filled with water! Gone was the money he expected from selling the chemicals. “Bah! The store people had replaced the chemical with water. No one could be trusted!”

Then he sold off the cotton to wholesale traders, at less than the market price. Official sale would give higher prices, but it would become official, and the money would have to be paid to the treasury. So cursing the traders for their lack of ethics and vulture pricing, he sold the stuff at whatever price they gave.

He was not afraid of the auditors. Rather, he was worried about the ‘cut’ they would demand. The auditors appeared to have a third sense, they could estimate the exact paisa misappropriated, and demand a righteous share.

He would often fume, “Dirty scoundrels! Auditors are expected to be honest. But look at these fellows.”

Somesh read the letter from Lingya and had a fit. He muttered, “this Lingya is a greedy fellow. I think he has already sold the ox, now this rascal wants to hire laborers that will be on paper only, and buy grain to sell. The whole system is rotten. I should get something from this.”

Then he had an idea. Calling the steno, he dictated a letter to the director of farms.

“Respected Sir,

I wish to bring to your kind notice that our farm animals are stricken by the foot-and-mouth disease. 10 oxen, five cows, and 10 goats have died. I request you to sanction Rs 1 lakh/ to buy more animals and continue operations.

Sd/ Your most obedient servant.”

#

The director Byre Gowda was in a jovial mood. His plans to buy 15 new tractors had been approved and funds were granted. The crafty director had already ‘arranged’ for repairs of old decrepit tractors, their dents filled with lambi or putty, painted, headlights, horns and other stuff fitted, so that they could be shown as new machines.

Well, they could pass for new tractors; if someone did not start them. He was ready to dispatch them, after paying off the committee members.

Now this letter, about an epidemic! His plans would come astray since people would question the wisdom of buying new tractors when farm animals were dying.

He peered out, watching for pesky news reporters, who always slunk about and tried to unearth scandals and put him in a spot.

He called up the agriculture minister Sidda Gowdar in far off Bengluru. This Sidda was earlier the minister of Public Works Department and had earned the dubious moniker of “Foundation Stone Sidda.”

This name came about after the minister laid foundation stones recklessly to announce a number of non-existent and illogical schemes. Dams were

announced in regions without rivers, bridges were launched in the on plains where there was no need, and so on. After announcing such schemes, he would ask for funds to begin works, 'select' contractors through rigged and cartel bidding, disburse funds, pocket the money, and move on. They said that the number of projects he launched far exceeded the projects announced by the central government!

Perhaps the 'rest house' scam was the most daring and audacious. It went like this. Sidda and a few forest, revenue officers announced a scheme to construct a rest house for government officers and ministers in a forest. Land was purchased, huge funds taken, the structure built, all on paper.

Then he organized a 'protest' march by tribals who objected to the building on their land. Heeding their protests, the structure was razed at great cost, and the money shared among other ministers. The press came to know about this scam through a dissatisfied whistleblower that was not given his cut.

However, the furor died after new scams came to light. These examples are given to highlight his illustrious capabilities.

The Chief Manager was angry, frustrated, and thoroughly embarrassed at Sidda's misdeeds. Other ministers were worried that their own scams would now be highlighted. They were angry that the tight fisted Sidda did not share, and they wanted him fired. Caste politics, vote banks prevented him from firing Sidda. Therefore, the CM had transferred him to the animal husbandry department, assuming that nothing could be eaten there. He was wrong.

Byre Gowda called up Sidda Gowdar, reassured him that the ministers share of loot from illicit sales was safe, he blurted out the problem of the animal epidemic.

Sidda started shouting. "Useless fellow! I got you promoted over your seniors. You never repatriated the scammed funds, and now you come up with an animal epidemic?"

"Sahib" said the director in a mollifying voice. "We can make a lot of money."

"What! How?"

“Please call a press conference and announce the epidemic. Say that we are introducing aid packages for farmers. The government veterinarian is my friend and for a commission he will declare an epidemic.”

“Then?”

“We will collect animals from the farms of one region and say that they are being sent for treatment. These will be sent to another region as replacement animals. Animals from these regions will be ‘purchased’ on paper and distributed in the first region. Purchase bills can be arranged, as the printing press owner is my nephew. Please send a letter to the Delhi government requesting emergency funds for farmer’s aid. It is election year and they will agree.” He continued “We already have a list of nonexistent farmers for whom we claimed that we distributed funds in the last drought. We will arrange a public program, and you hand over cheques to selected farmers. We will get 60 percent commission. All of us will make money out of this.”

“Ha. That’s a good idea.”

So a press conference was called and the minister began addressing. “Alas, a tragedy has befallen our poor farmers.” He started sobbing and wiping tears.

He continued. “An epidemic has struck the farm animals in our district. We have arranged for immediate purchase of animals from the neighboring states. We will replace the diseased animals for free and give money to all needy farmers.”

A pesky reporter asked “Why did you delay this announcement? How much is the budget and how many animals are diseased?”

“We delayed as we did not want to create panic. Our veterinarians are collecting diseased animals and sequestering them for observation and treatment. The initial budget is for Rs 500 million. This will be increased if required.”

Another pesky reporter queried, “How much will you make?”

Sidda broke down and howled, “I feel like crying when you talk of corruption when our farmers are dying.” He sobbed, sniffed, and wiped his tears.

The meeting broke up and the officials departed with the minister squabbling over their cuts.

#

Back at the farm, Bhimya ran back to his supervisor's office.

“Sahib, Sahib. The ox is alive, it is walking!”

“What! How? Have you told anyone?”

“No.”

“Quiet. I will think of a way to make money.”

The End

Based in Pune, India, **Shashi Kadapa** is the managing editor of ActiveMuse, a journal of literature. Thrice nominated for Pushcart Prize, he is a two-time award winner of the IHRAF, NY short story competition. http://www.activemuse.org/Shashi/Shashi_Pubs.html

Posted 4/6/2021
Phil West "Sisters in Crime" moved into town on 4/6/2021

SISTERS IN CRIME

by
Phil West

The life of a writer is anything but mind-blowing or exciting. In fact, it's humdrum. More so than for the reading population. I'm Edda Gilpin. Crime is my bread. But what the hell am I doing here? How did I get here? I've got tubes coming out every orifice. Some of it doubles back on itself before being shoved up another very delicate piece of my anatomy.

"And what are you two villains doing here? I've written legions of words about you pair but what makes you think I want you sharing my private moments while I'm stuffed up with tubes? I'm talking to you Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh. I've lived with you for months since I went biographical. For the present I guess another few minutes won't matter. Please tell me what I'm doing here. How long have I been here?"

"You're in a flamin' coma, Edda."

"Shut up, Kate, she's talking to me. You had a brain 'emorrhage in that pub. Too many G 'n T's, yer silly cow!"

"Ere, Tilly, get off 'er back. She don't need you upsettin' her. Listen here, Edda, I'm the lady of us two. Yer did have a brain hemorrhage. Yous was at the pub. Nobody's said yer had too many gin and tonics. Don't listen ter Tilly."

"Thank you for that explanation, Kate. But I have another question. If I'm in a coma how come you two are locked in my head with me? Haven't I seen enough of you? I've written your biography. It's published. You two, the focus of my in-depth work, were two of Australia's most reckless female criminals. No, I'll correct that. You were the most violent and destructive humans the Australian criminal cohort ever produced in your heyday. That being the nineteen twenties and thirties."

"Thanks for your praise, Edda. I'm honored."

“‘Ere, don’t you get all hoity-toity, Kate. You’re nothing but a common criminal. I, Tilly Devine, am proud of my life. I put money in the country’s economy every day.”

“And yer took plenty out too, Tilly. None of it was legal, girl.”

“Shut up, Kate. You was just a tart!”

“Wot? Do you want me ter bash yer up again like I did in 1927 when I jumped off the tram ter do yer? I rescued that lady copper from you.”

“Stop it you two. If you’re here, trapped in my head while I’m in this coma, have the decency to stop fighting like two alley cats. Why would I want you two playing malicious Florence Nightingales and emptying my urine bottles? I’ve lived with you both long enough. You pair were female coequals of that American gangster, Al Capone, at the height of your notoriety in Sydney. Your personal rivalry was legendary. Now why don’t you two “ladies,” I use the term loosely, get out of my head?”

They begin in unison. “Now listen, ‘ere, Edda Gilpin.” Both stop and draw breath.

Tilly glares at Kate. “We’re thinkin’ the same, I’ll finish it. We’re ‘ere ter save yer, Edda. We gunna keep yer spirits up while those nice doctors ‘ave yer on-life support. We’re grateful fer ‘ow you’ve made us famous again. So, we’re gunna sit by yer bedside and do everything in our power ter keep you alive. There’s life in you yet, old girl, don’t yer forget it.”

“I couldn’t a said it betta, Tilly.”

“I know that, Kate, that’s why I said it. There was always a bit of the actress in me.”

“Has it ever occurred to you I may not want to win this battle? I’ve completed my best piece of work by writing your biographies. Maybe I feel it’s enough. Oh, I feel awful. Just go away and let me die in peace.”

“Can yer remember why you came here today?”

“Of course, I can, Kate. I was going to meet my agent, Milo Tempest, for lunch, along with my publisher, Petronella Adams, founder of Waran Books.”

Tilly flashes her famous grin, reminiscent of when she was about to put a razor to good use on a punter who wouldn't pay his dues. "There yer go, Edda. You ain't so bad after all maybe."

"Geez," says Kate. "Tilly, 'ere's the creator of our famous biography at death's door and yer saying maybe she's right as ninepence. Yer must be bleedin' stupid, girl."

"Don't you call me stupid, Kate, or I'll slash your face quick as lookin' at yer. I'm famous fer it."

"Ladies, please. You've invaded my personal space - my brain. At least show a little courtesy to each other. Keep this up and I'll make every effort to pass on. You two were without equal in your heyday. You ran Darlinghurst, Woolloomooloo and King's Cross. It was a world in uproar. Pandemonium reigned on the streets. Barbaric razor gangs battled for control of the underworld. You two reigned supreme as leaders of the worst ones. But you're not competing with each other now. I'll remind you I didn't invite you into my head space. Why don't you trot off back to that historic Darlinghurst pub and let me get on with dying?"

The former female gang leaders offer Edda a quizzical look. Tilly says, "We ain't goin' nowhere, girl. You can call us your guardian angels."

"Who needs enemies when I have you two watching over me? My mother would turn in her grave."

"That ain't fair, Edda," interjects Kate. "If it wasn't fer you we wouldn't be famous so long after our rule of terror. We're so proud of you fer putting us on the map. We're both kinda like that St Teresa, wot with our good works. We 'ad ter promote ourselves with acts of charity after they made using razors as a weapon an offense. Yer'd get jail time and a floggin'."

"Kate's right. By doin' a bit fer charity it gave us leverage wiff workin' the rackets."

"You two put yourselves on the map. The social history of Australian crime in the twenties and thirties. There was a huge upsurge in organized crime in the late twenties."

“Three factors impacted on society and allowed you to thrive as leading criminals of your time. The prohibition of prostitution. Prohibition of cocaine sales. It was no longer for sale through recognized legal outlets of the day - chemists. And the six o'clock closing of pubs and hotels. That infamous "six o'clock swill." Social scientists agree these three factors gave you pair credence to inflict havoc over the law. Why am I reminding you two of this? I'm tired, I just want to sleep and let fate decide my future.”

“I was betta than you, Tilly. I built an empire on sly grog, betting parlors, brothels and trading cocaine.”

“Listen ‘ere, Kate, I was the queen of the madams. I ran the brothel industry. I beat the law in Sydney. It was beautiful. No bloke was allowed ter run a brothel. It was the law.”

“There you two go again. You’re certainly not here for the good of my health. Please go away and leave me alone. Let me die quietly without you two shouting the odds. If you want to do something really useful, pipe a couple of nice G & Ts into my inlet valves and I’ll die a happy woman.”

“Wot? You’ve ‘ad enough today ter take the starch outta yer sails.”

“Tilly’s right,’ says Kate.’ We’re ‘ere ter help you.”

In her comatosed state Edda Gilpin raises an imaginary glass in a silent salute to Tilly and Kate. “Maybe this will be my last bread and butter piece.” She conjures up pictures of both in their prime. Tilly, the “Queen of Woolloomooloo.” Kate, the “Queen of Surry Hills.” From shedloads of research, she knows them intimately.

A doctor enters the room and stands over Edda’s still form. “I wonder what’s going on in that brain of yours, Ms Gilpin, assuming there’s something?”

“Doctor, I'm waiting for these two friends of mine to finally call a truce.”

Tilly and Kate chorus, “All good, doctor.”

The End

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Bill Vernon "Act of Charity" moved into town on 4/3/2021

ACT OF CHARITY

by
Bill Vernon

Joe was in shock if not also drunk. He'd hugged Mom while sobbing. When he'd calmed down enough to sit at his kitchen table, he poured and downed three straight shots of whiskey. Very awkward. His grief seemed too private for me to witness. I was relieved when she said, "I have to go now, Joe. I have to get Tommy to the doctor before closing time." But then she also said, "Bill can stay and help you."

Huh? We hadn't discussed this, and Joe seemed barely aware that I was there.

Angry, I chased Mom to her car, but before I could speak she said as if her plan were settled, "I'll be back in the morning to make Joe's breakfast. At eight. Give me the keys, please."

"Mom, I don't want to stay here all night."

"This might be useful." She handed me a rosary from her purse. "Joe and Ernie attended rosary services. It gave them peace. You should also fix Joe some food. He hasn't had any dinner. And try to stop his drinking. May I have the keys now?"

She was as forceful as my drill instructors had been. I was just out of boot camp and in three days had to fly off to my permanent assignment at Camp Pendleton. "Look, Mom, Joe's your friend. I hardly know him. I knew Ernie because she gave me piano lessons."

She said, "I have to take Tommy to the doctor so you have to stay here." She looked up at me. "It's an act of charity. Stay to honor Ernie. Okay?"

Damn. I gave her the car keys. I was as worried about Tommy's temperature being 102 as she was. So there I stayed, by myself, my next to last night on leave, alone with Joe.

#

I found him in the living room and said I'd be there to help if I could. He held the whiskey bottle out toward me as if to say that we'd get along, that he wanted me there.

"Thanks." I took the bottle and set it down out of his reach on the dining table. That didn't stop his drinking. He jumped up, grabbed the bottle, chugged a swallow, and sat back down. He seemed very spaced out.

Joe's chair almost swallowed his 5-foot, 4-inch body as the stuffing swelled around him. He sat with the whiskey bottle sticking up between his thighs, one hand clutching the neck as if he intended to drink until he got sick. A real mess could be coming, and I'd have to clean it up.

I sat on the couch opposite him. What could I do? He'd lost his wife and was drinking himself into oblivion, which I thought would be better than hanging or shooting himself. I was half afraid he'd try something like that.

Ernie and Joe were family friends whom we'd met at church. Remembering that, I fished Mom's beads from a trouser pocket, held them up and said, "Want to say the rosary?"

He frowned, shook his face, and took another swallow.

Yeah, stupid idea. I didn't want to say a rosary either. After a while, his other hand rose up out of the stuffing and pointed across the room.

I said, "Want me to turn on the TV?"

He swallowed some more, which I guessed meant yes. So we sat there together watching Perry Como sing Christmas carols. Then another program with a comedian I'd never heard of, Bob Newhart, whose skits weren't funny, but the way things were I couldn't pay attention to him.

#

In the kitchen, Joe had hung onto Mom and spilled out his feelings, reminding me of how Mom had seemed hysterical at first when my father died. She'd sobbed loudly and cried so long I ran to a neighbor's house and played basketball until, hours later, she came and took me home.

She was all business by then. She'd said I was man of the house now and had to help her. She had to learn how to drive and become an insurance agent to take over Dad's business. Plus she had to take care of us three kids. She said, "Will you help me do that?"

I said, "Sure, Mom. I'll mow the grass like Dad did." I imagined taking his place and pushing that old Briggs and Stratton mower over the three-acre yard.

She said, "It's more complicated than that. There's the baby to watch, food to prepare and cook, dishes to do, laundry, housecleaning. I need you to pitch in and help with all that."

I heard fear in her voice. "Yeah, Mom, I'll help. It'll be all right."

"You have to be a man now. Your little brother's only two and needs a father."

"Okay. Sure."

Tommy's sad situation worried me the next three years through high school. He was growing up without the guidance a kid needed. By the time I graduated, Tommy'd reached six years old and was in his 2nd year of school, counting kindergarten, but he was kind of unruly. I didn't know what to do about that. I also didn't know what being a man or a father meant. I looked at Joe swigging the alcohol and suddenly thought for the first time that I'd run away from the worries and sadness at home by joining the Marines and leaving it all behind me. I'd cut out instead of sticking around and helping out. Joe was just trying to relieve his grief by drinking.

I liked Joe. He worked in Cincinnati, Newport and Covington. For our church's money-making projects he made signs drawing and painting letters, numbers, dollar and cents signs, but also shirts, shorts, socks, and things like turkeys on the turkey-shoot signs he did for the church. He could draw a perfect circle free hand. I once asked if he did art pictures like in museums. He said he had no such inclinations. He was a sign painter and arranged window displays, period. Mom called him "sporty" because he wore shiny shoes and a little straw hat with a feather in it.

#

The ambulance had just left with Ernie, he'd said, calling Mom, telling her about Ernie. We'd taken at least an hour to get ourselves ready and drive to his house.

Maybe our presence set him off. Maybe he'd needed to let off steam. Sitting at the kitchen table, he'd jumped up and talked nonstop. While Mom hugged him, tears poured out and he said stuff over and over, that he couldn't believe his darling was gone, his sweetheart, his honey, and he used other love names, plus what would he do without her? He also described her lying at the foot of the basement stairs. When he found her, sat on the concrete floor, and lifted her onto his lap, she was already stiff. She must've lain there all day long. She always put in her first load of wash about 8:00 and was still wearing her little white nightie.

He'd broken away from Mom to stare at her and say as if he'd just thought of it, "I didn't kiss her goodbye when I left this morning. I let her sleep. I didn't want to disturb her. I wish to hell I'd kissed her goodbye. She was my darling, my sweetheart, my one and only love."

#

While he and I sat there alone together, all he'd said about Ernie repeated in my own mind and made me think of her. It was a terrible way to go, all alone like that.

I'd liked Ernie a lot in my high school days and now she was gone. Poof. Falling down the basement stairs had broken her neck. Joe told Mom the people that came couldn't say for sure when it happened.

He'd left at 7:00 A.M. for work in Kentucky and didn't return until 5:00 P.M. Ernie's car had been outside, but dinner wasn't on the table. She didn't answer when he called her name. He saw the basement light on, looked, and there she was, sprawled on the floor with a spilled basket of dirty clothes.

Imagining the scene made me jumpy. I looked around the living room, saw the morning newspaper, took it off a coffee table, paged through it, read the comics, then decided to do the crossword puzzle, which Mom always did. She said it relaxed her. I'd never tried one before.

"You got a pencil I can use?" I said to Joe.

He was asleep. I got up, took the whiskey bottle so it wouldn't fall and spill, found the cap in the kitchen when I went looking for a pencil, capped the bottle and hid it in a cupboard. Less than half the liquid was left.

Back in the living room, a news program predicted storms on the day of my flight. Well, only a really bad storm would stop a big airplane from taking off for LA International. Plus I had two days grace period from my flight's ETA before I was due back on base. Mom, though? Well, if she drove to the Cincinnati airport, a storm would shake her up, and she was a bad driver. I'd take a bus. She had her hands full.

I tried the crossword puzzle, managed to pencil in a measly 10 answers to the clues, dozed off, and woke up to buzzing and the snowy pattern of the station's off-the-air signal. Joe was peaceful but looked like he'd have a stiff neck if he stayed in that position. I straightened him up, but he slumped right back over and didn't miss a snore.

In fact he didn't even wake up when I pulled him up out of the chair and carried him to the bedroom whose closet and dresser contained men's clothing. The other room had Ernie's clothes, perfume, brushes, nylon hose, red, black or white brassieres and underpants, rouge, tubes of lipstick, etc. Apparently they used separate bedrooms. I laid him down on the sheet so I could pull the other sheet and a blanket over him, hesitated, then took off his shoes, pants, long sleeve shirt, socks. Joe still didn't wake up. He was all skin and bones so his skivvies just seemed to hang on him. I found two sheets in a hall closet, took a pillow to use off Ernie's bed, undressed, and lay down on the couch.

My pillow was full of Ernie's perfume, and her aroma reminded me of my 9:00 A.M piano lessons. They were only once a week for 30 minutes. I'd complained that I'd rather be outside playing. Mom said that Ernie wanted to try teaching again to see if she'd fully recovered from a hysterectomy. So I took lessons as an act of charity, as Mom might have said.

On my third lesson, I rang Ernie's bell, and several minutes later, she opened her door wearing a nightie. "Oh, hello. You're early, aren't you? It's all right. Come in and we'll do it. Do you drink coffee? Want some coffee or orange juice? I haven't had breakfast."

She was an apparition. Her nightie was entirely white with lace around the edges, cut down on her chest so the swelling of her breasts showed. It draped down just to mid-thigh and seemed sheer enough to reveal what was underneath. Watching how the lace and other material swung on her hips, I followed her from the doorway to the piano. As she stopped in front of a living room window, bright sunlight streamed inside, penetrated the nightie, and lit the body underneath. My eyes swept over the curves of her back and butt, and my cheeks flushed.

She turned, gracefully unfolding a pale arm to take a pack of cigarettes and a lighter off the piano. "You sit and get your music ready. I'll be right back. Play the scales."

My breathing stopped, I nodded speechlessly, and without deciding to do it lifted the beginners piano guide so the thin magazine covered my face up to my eyes.

She was busy extracting a filter tip cigarette, placing it between her lips, snapping the lighter, inhaling, exhaling, saying with exaggeration, "Aaaah. The first drag of the day is the best." Turning away then and going into the kitchenette.

Full frontal, we might say today. Saint Francis de Sales church was right across the street from her apartment so perhaps that presence partially caused my reaction. It was like Fatima. She was to me a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as a wild, perfectly natural human animal in a forest. During her short pose before me I glimpsed the normally hidden subtleties of the human body. I imagined both worshipping such beauty and frolicking naked with her. I gloried in her freckles, wrinkles, smoothness, nipples, hair and bareness, the contrast of light and dark, combinations that suggested rich sensuality and the possibilities of life.

Of course I was in love, or lust, or both. I'd gone through puberty, but my family and my church had not explained sex to me. The subject titillated my apprehensions of almost everything, but I didn't have brains enough to seek a clear understanding of sex from books. I didn't have the nerve to ask authorities in person about it.

From then on I went to the piano lessons early hoping she'd appear in her lingerie again. She never did, but her vision stayed with me. Ernie's voice and words seemed intimate, just for me. Beside me on the bench,

demonstrating what to do, her nearer arm often touched mine, so I wore a short sleeve shirt to increase the pleasure of our skin-to-skin contact.

About the 10th week when I sat on the bench, she faced me with an arm on the piano and said, "You're not practicing. You're not learning. I can't teach you if you don't want to learn."

I said, "I'm sorry. I'm just no good."

She shook her head. "If you'll practice, we'll try the lessons some more. If not, we're wasting our time and effort. We're just fooling around."

Quitting the lessons by then was all right with me. Every week I confessed to having impure thoughts until the priest told me to give up the lessons or I couldn't be forgiven. They were "proximate occasions of sin." Also, going to the lessons under false pretenses was a form of lying. I was morally abusing the teacher in my mind. In other words my thrills were indecent. I couldn't explain honestly to Ernie why I quit, but I also didn't want her feeling bad about my failure at the piano. So I apologized, thanked her for trying, said she'd done a great job, took the blame, and honestly admitted that it was all my fault.

While I was away in the Marine Corps, Joe and Ernie had moved into a house in a Cincinnati suburb closer to his work. Only by chance was I there, smelling Ernie's sweet perfume, lying on Joe's couch, dreaming of his wife. I felt shallow and sneaky, but I also believed that the depth of Joe's sorrow for Ernie was like my own sorrow at losing my father. Someday, hopefully, I would love a woman as much as Joe loved Ernie; as much as my mother loved her husband and her children. Joe might have understood, but of course I couldn't tell him.

The End

Dayton, Ohio's **Bill Vernon** studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folk dances. Five Star Mysteries published his novel *Old Town*, and his poems, stories and nonfiction occasionally appear in a variety of magazines and anthologies.

Posted 4/1/2021

Amrita Valan “Sweet Beginnings” moved into town on 4/1/2021

SWEET BEGINNINGS

**by
Amrita Valan**

The cold air whipped my ears, lashed against my nose, as I stepped out for a morning jog at quarter to six in the morning. The mists swirled silver ahead, the road invisible where it forked. To the right led to the local fish and vegetables market. Already there were early-to-rise vendors carrying baskets of produce over their heads or pushed carts heaped with winter greens. These men and women were hardy, lithe, and straight-backed, needing no jogging or exercise regimen to keep fit. The women walked ramrod straight despite their sinuous curves, balancing baskets above their heads with a proud arch of their head and hips, one or both hands holding their children’s fingers or gunny bags with more of their farm’s offerings. The men were slightly built, lithe and wiry, their limbs dark gold in the pale dawn. I had to rub the sleep out of my eyes just to wake up for an outing and these folks smiled and ribbed each other, drinking fuming hot tea out of tiny clay cups. Their children looked like merry ragamuffins, but their faces shone with pure energy and purpose as they moved with glee and ran ahead of the adults.

On the other side, the road forked into a broad avenue, tree lined and with well-maintained red tiled pavements. It was the entry point to what locals laughingly called the megacity, (pronounced scornfully in the local accent as “Maaga” city). The residences in tall high rises, of aspiring yuppies and software professionals. These coders and programmers were from all parts of India, flocking to this special economic hub of my city of Calcutta to rake in good money.

A confluence of people, cultures, attires and languages moved through the SEZ or special economic zone of our city.

Though it was early morning, I would often come across newlyweds walking to the market, cooing to each other in melodious agglutinative tongues of deep southern India. (A lot of south Indians were programmers and excelled in coding and settled down in I.T hubs far from their homes.) A young man often donned a long gold-hemmed white sheet wrapped around his hips called a Veshthi from which he

would swiftly change into western formals before leaving for work. The wife would be out in a diaphanous nightgown of simple cotton, a shawl draped around her shoulders. Along would pass a coconut seller and she would get down to the serious business of haggling down the price of tender green coconuts whose water would be drunk by them, then and there.

Oftentimes there were svelte fitness conscious couples who loped by in branded sweatshirts and jogging suits, iPods plugged into ears. Their stern focus and determination always increased my briskness quotient for a brief minute or so till after they had passed me by.

There were also elderly couples with their slender canes and sweet morning smiles, who almost always acknowledged me with a nod. They were mostly visiting parents and in-laws of the young working couples who had made a life here. You could make out who were from metropolitan cities and who were the ones from quieter small towns by their demeanor alone. It was easy to spot the wonderstruck gaze of the uninitiated at their first sight of the impressive architecture of Wipro, Cognizant Technologies, Resource Engineering Limited or Technopolis and the slightly bored detached expressions of the more urbanized ones.

We Indians aren't much into wishing strangers the time of the day, but with a particularly sweet-dimpled old lady with silver hair and rimless glasses, I had grown friendly enough!

“Namaste aunty!,” I greeted her and asked, “How are you today? “

“Oh dear, I am fine, but Vikram's been doing night shifts thrice in a row, so he took his casual leave today. Exhausted and sleeping late, will work from home. These companies keep our children so busy, ” she sweetly nodded.

I completely related to her concern, nodding sympathetically as I narrated the eighteen hours shift I had pulled off recently, because the big boss from the US was visiting.

Crumpling my nose naughtily, I confided, “I managed to take a nap behind my desktop aunty. My team leader was in a panic. He said, “Anu wake up! Brian and Jeffrey are headed this way!”

Aunty threw back her head and tinkled with throaty silver peals of laughter.

I knew I wasn't mistaken in taking an instant liking to this dainty lovable lady from a small village of central India. Vandana Srivastava was the wife of a small rural landowner, not one of the very affluent ones, but well off enough to educate her two sons in an English medium school. Both Jagdish and her younger son, Vikram, had flourished into well paid techies, earning what to her must have seemed astronomical liquid gold. And she had come armed with pictures of pretty girls from her village, as suitable prospective brides for her boys. (All this she had gradually confided in me over our daily morning walks, the past month or so.)

“Vandana ji,” I offered, “let me buy you some typical Calcutta street food, you will enjoy it with your sons.”

I purchased piping hot samosas, (Deep fried golden batter cones, stuffed with an assortment of mainly mashed potatoes, a few peas, cauliflower florets and peanuts), along with steaming orange gold jalebis dripping in the sweet sugar syrup that flowed through their hollow tubes.

“Oh my! So many, dear you must join us for breakfast then,” aunty immediately insisted, as I bought brown paper bags of a dozen of each.

Like a good Indian girl I couldn't say no to an elderly lady of my mommy's age and so I followed her demurely to her sons' apartment, which was just a block apart from mine. She was of course putting up with them both literally and figuratively, arranging their bachelor's pad into a home, and trying to talk them into settling down, with a girl of her choice of course, from her village.

I worked with the IT guys who came from all over India, and knew it was a fifty-fifty tossup. Some of the boys had outgrown their rural beginnings with their global exposure and education and were simply not interested in towing the traditional lines, and settling for an arranged match. Others preferred to be moored to the security of tradition and felt more comfortable in a wife made in mom's image.

Some of course, I surmise in hindsight were open to both options, and followed where life, or love took them. Fate really likes having a say in our mundane little lives, giving it unpredictable twists and turns like the

proverbial Indian pretzel or Jalebi. If we are lucky and brave, life becomes sweeter and juicier for it.

Laughing and talking all the way we took the elevator, and rang the doorbell noisily only to find the door was open already. Presumably Vikram really wanted to sleep late and hadn't locked the door after his mother.

I was warmly welcomed by her other son Jagdish who handed us hot cups of ginger tea laced with cardamom, settled me on the couch and offered to put on music to regale me. I was completely bowled over by his kindness, chivalry and his warm puppy dog brown eyes. They grew boys well in central India, I secretly thought. When aunty and he were out of the living room for a second, I swiftly smoothed my tousled hair, wishing I had put on some lipstick. I was unattached, and whether or not I admitted it, on the lookout for a suitable match. I was not getting any younger after all, and in India girls my age were not only married, but often mothers with two children. The thought of a possible romance with this personable young man refused to budge, and stayed with me, making a small pool of speculative warmth in my unattached twenty-seven years old heart. Though a working professional, a graphic designer, at 27 I was just a little panicky, sensing the danger of crossing the ideal Indian marriageable age for girls.

Vandana ji brought out her album of potential brides for her sons, to show me her choices. They were all promiscuous pouting late-teens or barely in their twenties it seemed, heavily made up like picturesque dolls with thick dark kohl lined eyes and painted lips. Each girl's portfolio of photos were arranged in seductive come-hither poses, tilting their heads, gazing deeply into the camera, holding a flower, or pretending to take a whiff of it. Small town Indian girls were also cyber savvy these days, with globalization, the spate of Miss Universe beauty pageants and with a few Indian winners to boost our confidence. We had certainly come a long way. All this contributed to the oomph factor, coolness and chic quotient of small town Indian girls. Purchasing and applying makeup was no longer a No-No, but another efficient aid to snapping up the right husband from the marriage market! I.T. boys with high incomes and a chance to go abroad were a catch!

I was from a metropolitan city, and make up and cool western clothes were a part of my early life in a more natural organic way than as the synthetic sudden add on, post nineties, to the lives of a lot of rural Indian

girls. In fact my mother had made it clear to me as a little girl, even as I admired her applying lipstick in front of the dressing table, that make up was only for adults. I was not allowed to paint my lips till college and my father detested bright shades in the daytime. Once, as I was ready to sashay out in bright cherry red Wet and Wild lipstick applied to my lips, daddy looked up from his desk and said decisively, "Too red." I turned bright red too and went back to my bedroom and reapplied a more neutral nude shade of lipstick. Girls like us were not really the consumer market for big western cosmetic industries any way. Their target audience was the naïve and west enamored young girls from the smaller towns who also happened to look at procuring the right husbands as a way of securing a certain sort of affluent western lifestyle that was perceived as posh and desirable. My upbringing was more of a footloose happy-go-lucky type, permitting me to listen to David Bowie and Deep Purple, daddy's old shirts with my jeans, impressing boys by being me, without trying hard to impress with artificial aids to beauty. Oh we went for eighties fashion in a big way, with clip on earrings and sling bags, and bright ruffles but simply put, we did it for us, not to land a catch.

And then we reached our mid-twenties, still unattached. I am speaking here for myself of course. Many of my friends being happily in love, in relationships that would eventually mature into marriages. I seemed to always spot the missing flavor over the qualities that were perceived desirable.

A friend of my big brother proposed to me, with a fantastic love letter that blew my mind. I am sapiosexual, and a way with words to win me over was a must. But I was also the inhibited little Indian girl, the protected baby sister of a bossy brother, who threatened me I would learn the hard way, (About men), if I so much as exchanged phone numbers with a boy. His friends were off limits to me. This guy however wrote me a letter that I was willing to risk my brother's ire for. Unfortunately he also did two other things that annoyed me. He asked my mother's permission to court me which went against my independent streak, as well as dismayed my mother, who knew how my brother would react and firmly discouraged him, to the extent of withholding his phone calls from me. The day he gave up and called repeatedly to say goodbye, my mother intercepted the call each time to say I was asleep! If nothing else would have pushed me to his arms, that would have! This is the only instance she was bossy with me, reminding me of 'Sylva's Mother' in the song by Dr Hook!

The other was he shocked my sensibilities by bringing my father a gift wrapped bottle of foreign whiskey as a parting present. Degrees of sophistication differ, while I was okay with social drinking I was definitely old school about how a prospective suitor should treat the father of the girl he was wooing. Drinks and cigarettes were okay between buddies, but not proffered by the younger to their elders. I had seen my uncles stub out cigarettes and throw them in the waste paper basket hurriedly if my daddy, (their elder brother), entered the room, so his choice of gift seemed cheeky and audacious to me. In my twenty years-old mind I painted him to be an alcoholic and womanizer and was content to let him go, much to my brother's relief.

And likewise with several other young men, I always seemed to find and magnify the deal breaker, which in computer terminology I started referring to as 'Data Type Mismatches.' Till one day, an astute friend of mine observed, "You really have no problems finding love Anu. You invent problems, to avoid keeping them." And somewhere along the line I was forced to concede she had a point.

Perhaps introspection made me more open in my late twenties, to finding love, along with a Bridget Jones-like Big Panic of ending up alone.

But I was not going to sell myself to the highest bidder, read salary earner, on the marriage market, in chains and manacles, read dolled up in alluring make up and come hither costumes.

But to come back to my moment of epiphany in Vandana Aunty's flat. (Yes, in India we put the name before the relationship, and we casually make relatives out of acquaintances, like this.) I was ready for love, or at least began to look for the possibility of it, in budding friendships.

Jagdish and I grew into great friends gradually, and Aunty's 'Bride Book' as I called it, sent us both into fits and paroxysms of laughter. Aunty was a sweetheart and instead of being bemused she even deigned to crack an indulgent smile, while serving us with vadas and pakoras and cups of tea. I always cleared the table and at least offered to do the dishes, touched by her motherly indulgence.

But all that happened over the next six months. That day held yet another surprise for me, which I'm now coming to.

After Aunty had laid the table with ghee parathas and curd and pickles for breakfast, her younger son, Vikram walked in, or rather tottered in sleepily, and in amazement I stood up and wished my team leader Vikram Srivastava good morning.

Aunty hadn't told me where her boys worked and I hadn't made the connection for myself.

After Vikram heard how his mom and I had befriended each other on our morning walks over the last month, he quipped, "Amma, she's a real sleeper, Oh! I mean keeper!" He flashed a roguish twinkle from heavily lashed coal black eyes, causing me to reinforce my old assessment, vis-a-vis charming Central Indian boys. I spent breakfast shamelessly flirting with both brothers subtly, laughing merrily and teasing them both with Aunty's encouragement and participation. She seemed to be a boisterous more jovial version of my own mother. And they both reciprocated, understanding my tongue-in-cheek veiled references, which augured hope, since flirting, according to yours truly, was an intellectual pastime and not something brashly physical. Both Vikram and Jagdish hovered attentively over me, plying me with seconds of Aunty's melt in the mouth vadas and Jagdish's steaming hot tea.

I was literally spoilt for choice as to whose attentions were more pleasing to me! In a funny way Vandana Aunty's genial approval kind of cemented the deal, though I was aware she may put her foot down any moment, if she felt that we were going beyond friendship. Since after all she had come all the way, leaving her native village, only to entice her sons into marriage with girls of her choice, from her own community and culture. So I mentally put the brakes on a romantic entanglement out of respect for her, knowing the futility of a successful relationship in the face of strong parental opposition.

She trusted me implicitly however, as her smart young big city friend and her almost surrogate daughter. Soon her boys and I were traveling in trio everywhere, either crowded on Vicky's bike or sprawling about in Jagdish's new car. We went to art exhibitions at Chitrakoot and Chemould gallery, book readings and book fairs, at my insistence. Science City, Nicco park and Aquatica at Vikram's, the nerdy geeky boy in man's disguise. Disco hopping till the wee hours with Jagdish's, (the only true adult amongst us), bunch of friends feeling safe and cozy with my twin bodyguards. I lost one of a pair of my three inch heeled red pump shoes at Incognito in the dark, and they helped me hobble to the

car and dropped me safely home, cutting their evening short, teasing me about how Prince Charming would be visiting me the next day, missing shoe and wedding ring in hand. I giggled and twirled on my one shoe'd foot, holding the bare foot up like a ballet dancer, and promptly lost my balance and collapsed in Vicky's arms. Totally embarrassed as he gathered me up tenderly and stood me upon my own two giddy feet, after kneeling down and taking off my other shoe. "You will sprain your ankle climbing upstairs, wearing just a shoe!" he admonished, "let me take it." Then with his trademark roguish grin he quipped, "I would carry you upstairs too darling, but like Rapunzel, you live on the penthouse floor." He held my hand tight all the way up and I walked up like a dazed, though barefoot princess, in a dream with my charming consort. If I had been Rapunzel, boy would I have let my hair down for this dreamy boy who doubled up as my charismatic but more than capable boss on the BPO floor.

We three, along with my friend Tania, went to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's concert when he came to town, staying out till two am, and aunty never gave it a thought! In fact after the two boys dropped my friend and me off home she visited the next day with home-made coconut sweets! Such was the endearing naiveté and unsuspecting nature of this elderly woman, I actually felt that she would indeed make a lucky daughter-in-law very happy someday. And I hoped it would be me, despite great trepidation, as I had indeed started falling very hard in love with one of her sons who had held on to my palms through almost the entire concert and literally turned me into melting jelly as he leaned his six feet frame to mine and sexily crooned "Afreen" into my ears.

Yes Vandana Srivastav had bred fine sons and would make the best mother-in-law to a girl lucky enough to wed one of her boys, someday. And she did.

A year later, Aunty graciously accepted me as her future daughter-in-law, and presented me her family's heirloom necklace.

It would have been difficult if adhering to rigid notions of the previous generation, she had put her foot down, insisting her boys marry only within their community. But I had lucked out. The heart of gold this lady had, my mother-in-law to be. In my experience, small villages make indomitable formidable matriarchs, with backs ramrod stiff to uphold tradition and work ethics, yet kind-hearted and foresighted, pragmatic and flexible enough to greet the high tech futures their children usher in.

It was she who convinced her husband of my suitability, with his far more rigid attachment to patriarchal notions of family and marriage.

Looking back on how I met my future husband, boyfriend of many deliciously low key romantic months before that, I always feel grateful that it started with friendship with his soft spoken witty mother.

The taste of samosas, the cold crisp air of dawn, the eventful morning walk and the sights and sounds of the winter that we had met, have become a part of My legendary Bride Book now, the one I relate to Aniket and Chaitanya, my two beautiful sons.

Before I forget, come, let me whisper in your ears who I married and why.

For a time I was buddies with both Vikram with his naughty ardour, and Jagdish with his dutiful yet winsome chivalry. Both possessed attractive qualities and made it difficult to be discerning or choosy. I flew by the seat of my pants, played it by the ear, enjoying both their company immensely, because I honestly thought it would all be temporary good fun and camaraderie. Fizzling to nothingness before patriarchy and tradition. So we rode threesome on Vikram's bike, and Jagdish took us out for spins in his brand new Maruti Ertiga, all in the heady spirit of Carpe Diem and Epicurean philosophy. But one of them was seriously pursuing me, while the other was content to be good friends. And intuitively I latched on to the one who was passionate about me, and found myself reciprocating, though fearing non acceptance by Vandana ji, I kept a tight lid on my emotions. However, I had miscalculated the depths of my feelings and soon I was floundering in hopeless silent love, and so was the object of my affection. Who didn't propose to me with words so much as with a burning melting conviction in his eyes as he gazed at me, making me feel like I was the One, and performed quiet knightly duties of chivalry for me and fussed over me in telling ways. Like fetching me a coffee even before I asked for it, holding my hand steady as I jumped over a puddle, and bringing me tiny thoughtful presents that amazed me with his knowledge of my likes and dislikes. A witty cheeky card, a single white rose or carnation, (I disliked red roses, detested pink ones), or a book by Richard Bach which I wanted to read. A pair of delicate white sea shell earrings mounted on silver, which I adored. Not costly but tasteful, yet simple. Replacing my lost red pumps with a beautiful pair from Regal shoe stores without my knowledge. He had simply snatched the other half of the pair and taken it to the store to

find my size. I found myself wanting to show him I cared too, with ditzy book binders, crazy coffee mugs, and on his birthday, an expensive formal shirt way beyond my budget. His brother got a casual Lee round neck tee shirt for his birthday and donned it immediately. He put his shirt way up on the topmost shelf of his wardrobe.

In my certainty of elders disapproval, I kept quiet, fatalistic in my outlook and resigned to denial and an early death of our relationship. Indian boys toed the patriarchal line we all knew that, and I didn't want to end this sweet, dreamy interlude by demanding outcomes.

Till Vandana ji put her foot down and decided she needed to know her sons minds. Who were they choosing out of her bride book? Or, looking straight into my eyes, she queried, "outside" her bride book?

And at that precise moment, my unwitting tell occurred. I couldn't take my eyes off Vikram's coal black ones, a pure fierce ardor burning away all my fears and caution. My handsome team leader got an attack of jitters and started coughing into his coffee mug. Presented by me, no less, a hot magenta coffee holder with the steamy declaration, 'Sweet On You!'

As I bent my head in despair, he bravely declared through his panic, "It's the Sleeper, Amma. You knew already!," he added accusingly.

Vandana Srivastava's eyes looked brighter behind their glasses, and suspiciously moist, as she slowly smiled and nodded.

"Mian bibi raaji, toh kya bole qazi?," she quoted softly. (When the lady and her lover agree, then who else can be judge?)

Turning towards me Vikram folded both his hands in a quaint namaste, knelt upon a knee and oblivious to mother or brother's presence, declared intoxicating stuff of sweet delirium that demands another story. We had kept a tight lid on to any overt demonstrations of love for far too long.

Jagdish cheered till he was hoarse, and from somewhere he had been hiding it away, broke out a bottle of fruit wine, (wisely enough, considering aunty was present), to celebrate.

And that is my happy story, which I will narrate when I am Vandana ji's age and my boys bring home a girl.

PS: I hope they bring home two separate girls though.

The End

Amrita Valan is a writer from India and a mother of two boys. She writes poems, short stories, essays and opinion pieces on every subject under the sun. She has been published in several zines and anthologies. Her collection of poetry, *Arrivederci*, is now available on Amazon.

Posted 3/29/2021

Tim Law "The Secret Diary" moved into town on 3/29/2021

THE SECRET DIARY

by

Tim Law

February 1941 – Day 14

I know it is the New Year, 1941, I recall the men from our town singing songs in the ghetto. Their deep voices the only form of celebration the soldiers allowed us. My name is Wolf, my father was a journalist. That was until the soldiers took offense to what was published under his name. The office where he worked was marked with a blue star and five weeks later it was shut down. I have been here two weeks now, a farm away from the city where all the children from my neighborhood are locked away like chickens in a pen. We sing each night since our arrival in hope that our mothers and fathers can hear us. We pray to God that they can find some kind of strength in our voices. We sing until the soldiers tell us to be quiet. Then the night is still. Silence reigns while snow falls upon the hard packed dirt.

February 1941 – Day 25

Today I saw a peacock butterfly land between the bars of the dorm where I sleep. Eleven I am so the soldiers told me I had to sleep on the top bunk. The younger kids were ordered to sleep below. In two years' time it will be my Bar Mitzvah but I don't want to be a man. The men are taken away each day to work. There is talk amongst the other children that sometimes some of the men don't come back. The butterfly I saw this morning was beautiful, little blotches of color amongst the oranges, browns and blacks. It seemed lost, like someone had forgotten to tell it winter time is too cold for it to be out. On the top bunk I am close to the window and cold. I am also able to look out across the open and empty farm. Far away I can see a tree, one lonely tree. I feel like I could climb to the topmost branches if given the chance.

March 1941 – Day 37

I write for my father. I write that our story may be remembered. Once a journalist always a journalist I suppose. There is a girl from the farm who visits each day. She comes just before dawn when the soldiers begin to wake up and demand their black coffee. I saw the girl the first day we arrived. From the kitchen she gave me paper and a stick of charcoal. I gave it back to her the next morning before my writing could be discovered. She has promised to keep my diary safe. The girl's name is Julia but I will call her Engel for she is the closest thing to an angel that I have discovered in this forsaken place.

March 1941 – Day 42

Engel has brought me a pear this morning, the last of the fruit from the lonely tree on the hill. I never loved pears, strawberries from our patch in Berlin or wild blackberries from the nearby woods. They were the fruits I enjoyed the most. There is a rumble from my stomach as I think about the sweetness, gorging myself on so much juicy fruit. My mother hated when I returned from the forest with my clothing stained purple from the juice. Today I ate that pear and did not share a bite. I ate it core, stem and all so that the soldiers could find no evidence, nothing to betray my Engel and the goodness she risks all to do. The pear was tart, a horror to eat but such a difference to the gruel they feed us. That is when they remember to feed us. If it is not gruel it is stale bread. If it is not bread it is nothing at all.

April 1941 – Day Unknown

I have lost count how many nights and days I and the other children have remained cooped up, cold and separated from the adults. We once played games and sang what songs we could remember. Now the energy we have remaining goes towards keeping warm. We remain in our dorms when we can, huddled together, enjoying the touch of another. Each day passes slowly until the soldiers drive us out. There is exercise though I wonder if it is for our own good or merely a form of entertainment for those men and their guns. Engel continues to bring me paper and charcoal though we never speak. Dutifully she takes my words and hides them away. There is no more food, the pear her final gift I suppose. But as I consider it her secrecy and sanctity is a gift of sorts. I know she is doing all she can and for such an angel as she I give prayers of thanks.

April 1941 – Day Unknown

Engel whispers that it is still April. The cold makes me think February has gone on forever. I wonder why we have been forced from our home, our city, our life and brought to this place. Engel says that Germans are cruel but I think we are Germans too. Can we not be German and Jew both? As one of the oldest in the camp I feel frustrated I have no one to ask. I dare not ask the soldiers. One boy, Hans asked if his sister could remain in bed. He explained to the soldier that his sister was sick. The soldier laughed and made poor Liesel run along the fence while we did our exercise. I fear her cold will worsen.

April or May 1941 – Day Unknown

Liesel coughed all night and my sleep was restless. I gave her my blanket for what little help it was. Hans tried singing songs to the little girl, too quiet for me to understand the words. In a way it worked, Liesel stopped her crying. The wheezing of her shallow breath continued all night long. I am surprised the soldiers did not come to tell us to be quiet. By morning others have begun to cough as well. If we had been home the mother could have asked our friend Doctor Weber to make a house call. I do not think the doctor will find us here.

May 1941

More children have succumbed to the sickness. One or two of the younger have already passed on. Perhaps I envy them. Their suffering is over. It is not nice to die though. In a way to combat the sickness in children the soldiers have begun to shower us. As groups of ten or so, boys and girls apart, we are escorted away from the chicken pen and given a burst of chilled water. It is refreshing but I think it will do little to stop the spread of the illness. One or two of the soldiers I have seen cough. I wonder if it is the illness catching or the cigarettes they smoke. My father smoked once. A vice he can afford no longer.

May 27th 1941

My name is Guilia Schmidt. I am the daughter of Sophia Schmidt, kitchen hand of the Meyer farm. I confess that I am the one who has befriended the boy Wolf. I am the keeper of his diary, his inner thoughts, his hopes and dreams. It saddens me to write that such a boy is gone now. I heard the soldiers say the risk was too great with illness in the camp. Today they lined up the children for their showers but as each group went through I heard not the screams, only a faint hiss and then nothing.

The End

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. He has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a fulltime author.

Posted 3/27/2021

Mike Murphy “Danny MacIntyre Meets the Molecule” moved into town
on 3/27/2021

DANNY MACINTYRE MEETS THE MOLECULE

by
Mike Murphy

Eleven-year-old Danielle MacIntyre would remember this snowstorm for the rest of her life.

On that late-March day when five inches of the white stuff fell, she was very happy to hear that school was canceled. The snow wasn't going to last long though. The weatherman predicted warming temperatures starting tomorrow. Danny's snow fort and snowman would soon be only puddles of fond memories.

#

Mom opened the screen door and spoke to Danny, who was getting a little overheated in her pink snowsuit. As always, a few strands of her red hair managed to escape the confines of her hat and were being tossed about in the light wind. “Danielle, lunch will be ready in five minutes – grilled cheese sandwiches,” Mom said. “Please be quiet when you come in. I think the baby has finally fallen asleep.”

“I'll be in in a couple of minutes.” As her mother closed the door, Danny stood and brushed the snow from her suit. “Nothing like a day off from school with grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch!” she announced happily to no one.

“What's a sandwich?” she heard an unknown male voice ask.

She looked around, alarmed. She had been out here alone. “Who said that?”

“Over here,” the voice continued. It was coming, as near as she could figure, from the snowman.

Danny cautiously approached her creation. “You?” she asked, surprised. “But you're a . . .”

The voice sounded exasperated. “Go ahead. Say it. I’ve heard it before.”

“Snowman.”

“Well. . . not exactly.”

“Snowmen can’t talk.”

“Do you ever talk to yourself?” the voice asked.

“No.”

“Well, Danielle?”

“You know my name?”

“I heard your mother call you that.”

“I prefer ‘Danny.’”

“If you say so.”

“But how. . .”

“What’s a sandwich?” the voice inquired again.

“Huh?”

“A sandwich. You’re going to have one for lunch, whatever that is.”

“I’ll. . . uhm. . . tell you later,” she replied. “I have to go in the house now.”

“You’ll come back outside after. . . lunch?”

“Sure.”

“Good, because I could really use your help with something.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell you after your sandwich, but it’s a matter of life and death.”

#

“How’s the sandwich, honey?” Mom asked, placing dirty plates into the dishwasher.

“It’s OK,” Danny answered nonchalantly, her mind still outside.

“Just OK?” Mom seemed hurt. “You love my grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“I’m sorry,” the red-haired girl said quickly, covering her tracks. “It’s really, really good.”

“What’s wrong, Danny?” Mom asked.

It took her a moment to gather her courage and ask, “Mom, can snowmen . . . talk?”

“Of course not,” Mom answered after a brief giggle. A mock concerned look came to her face. “Have you been talking with a snowman?”

“Uh uh. Not me.”

“Good, because if you were, I was going to take you to see Dr. Mulcahy.”

“You’re certain about the snowmen?” Danny asked as Mom turned on the dishwasher.

“Of course I am. Maybe in your storybooks or the movies, but in real life, no – snowmen can’t talk. Ever.”

#

“My mom said snowmen can’t talk,” Danny informed the voice.

“She’s right,” it confirmed.

“But you said. . .”

“I never said I was a snowman.”

“Of course you are. I made you this morning.”

“Right, but I’m not a snowman. I’m only a part of this snowman.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m a water molecule,” the voice answered proudly.

“A mol-e-what?”

“Molecule. It’s kind of like a drop of water.”

“And you’re inside my snowman?” Danny wondered.

“Right: B-17.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s where I’m located,” the molecule told the human. “When you’ve been a part of as many snowmen as I have over the years, you use a little shorthand. Everything’s mapped out in here, and I’m at B-17.”

“Where’s that?”

“In the head, just behind the pipe.”

“Do you like it in there?” Danny asked, trying to tuck her wind-tossed strands of hair into her hat.

“It’s alright. I’ve been in worse places: The last snowman I was in, I was at L-31 – the bum.”

“Being a part of the head sounds better.”

“It is,” the molecule said. “A lot of times, I don’t even make it into a snowman. I just get shoveled off of driveways by adults.”

“You said you needed my help?”

“I need you to save me,” the molecule began. “It’s going to get warm over the next few days. All this snow will melt.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know about the weather. I can feel it. I’m part of it. Once this snowman melts, I’ll just be part of a puddle on the ground, which is no fun at all.”

“What do you want me to do?” the girl asked.

“I want you to change the weather so it stays cold.”

“Me?”

“Why not you?”

“I’m just a kid, and people can’t control the weather.”

“No?” the confused molecule continued. “Many times, when grown-ups have been shoveling me off of driveways, I’ve heard them angrily talking about the me-te-or-ol-o-gist. Who’s he?”

“That’s a fancy name for a weatherman.”

“So he controls the weather?”

“Nobody controls it,” Danny said.

The water molecule was shocked. “What?”

“It just. . . happens.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No. When it gets cold – like this – it just. . . gets cold.”

“Then what does this weatherman do?”

“He tells us what the weather is going to be,” Danny responded.

“How does he know that?”

“He has all kinds of ‘sciency’ stuff. He goes to school for a long time so he can be on the news every night.”

“And he predicted the storm I fell in?”

“Uh huh.”

“Are there places that are cold all the time?”

“Yeah, but they’re awfully far away.”

“Oh my!” the molecule exclaimed.

“What’s your problem?” Danny inquired. “You said it was a matter of life and death.”

“It is. Mine.”

“I don’t understand.”

“After this snowman melts, I’ll evaporate.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I’ll dry up and rise back into the clouds so I can fall again somewhere else as rain or snow,” the molecule explained.

“Sounds boring.”

“It does get repetitive, and, boy, have I grown to hate those chats in the waiting room.”

“The what room?”

“After I go back to the clouds,” the voice continued, “I go into a waiting room with the other available water molecules until Mother Nature needs me. They’re always bragging. . .”

#

He was floating in the air – bobbing up and down – as they all were. There was a once-pleasant sound like a wind chime in the room, but it was rapidly growing annoying.

“I was part of the rainy season in Madagascar,” the first molecule told the others.

“I was part of a super-blizzard that hit Buffalo,” the second boasted. “We tied up the city for days!”

A third bragged, “I was part of a big hail storm that fell in Alabama. You should have seen all of us bouncing on the roads and sidewalks. What fun!”

“And how about you?” the first one asked snootily.

“I was,” the water molecule reluctantly admitted, “part of a snowstorm in Minnesota.”

“Again?” the second asked.

The molecule sighed and answered, “Yeah.”

“That’s too bad,” the third continued pompously. “Maybe you’re not ready for the big time?”

#

“That doesn’t sound fun,” Danny said after listening to the molecule’s tale.

“It’s not,” it confirmed. “I know recycling is the big thing nowadays, but I’m sick of it.”

“What can I do to help?”

“I can’t simply evaporate again and go back to the waiting room with those snooty molecules. They’ll kid me even more when they find out that I was only a part of this little storm that didn’t even happen in Madagascar.”

“Where’s that?”

“I have no idea,” he admitted. “Danny, I need to go out in a big way this time – some way that none of the other molecules has ever done. I need something to brag about while I linger in the waiting room.” It paused for a spell and asked, “Any ideas?”

“Well. . . no. Not now, but I’ll think about it.”

“Me too!” it added. “Until we come up with something, I need you to keep me from evaporating so quickly.”

“How?”

“Do you have something in the house you can put me in before the warm weather comes?”

“Mom probably has something in the kitchen we could use,” Danny guessed.

“Great. Go get it. I’ll tell you what to do. Then we can decide how I’ll go out with a bang!”

#

Danny put the old spaghetti pot down on the driveway. “This ought to do,” she said proudly.

“Will your mother miss it?”

“She shouldn’t need it for a week or so. We had spaghetti the other night. We won’t have it again for a while.”

“Great. Get going!”

Danny looked at the snowman, then the pot, and then back at the snowman. “Uhm. . . one question,” she said.

“What?” the eager water molecule asked.

“How am I going to fit the snowman into the pot? It’s not big enough.”

“You don’t have to fit the whole snowman. Just the head. That’s where I am – B-17.”

“But what about all the other water molecules? They’ll evaporate too!”

“Is any of them talking to you?”

“No.”

“Then they’re fine with going back up to the clouds. I’m not!”

“What do I do?” the girl asked.

“Pull the head off the snowman,” the molecule told her, “and stuff it into the pot.”

Danny was shocked. “Won’t that hurt you?”

“Not at all,” it assured her.

Danny wrapped her hands around the head of her snowman. Her mittens barely touched on the other side. “Here goes,” she announced. With a grunt, she decapitated it. “Are you in there?” she asked.

“Yeah, you’ve got me.”

Danny positioned the snowman’s head above the pot and slowly lowered it in. When it was resting on the metal bottom, she asked, “Are you alright?”

“Couldn’t be better,” the molecule answered. “Thanks.”

“Now what?”

“We have to figure out my big day.”

“But Mom will want me in soon.”

“Bring me with you.”

“You’ll melt in the house,” Danny said, concerned. “The heat’s on.”

“Not a problem. I should evaporate slowly,” it told her. “Is there someplace you can hide me until we make our plans?”

“You can stay in my room – if you’re quiet and don’t get me into trouble.”

“No one will ever know I’m there,” the water molecule assured the girl. “I’ll be as quiet as a field mouse.”

#

Danny put the metal pot down on the wooden floor of her bedroom closet. She tested the accordion door to make sure she could close it fast if she had to. “You’ll be safe in here,” she said. “If anybody comes in, I’ll close the door. Then you be quiet.”

“I’ll be quiet,” the water molecule assured her, its voice sounding different.

“Are you OK?”

“Just melting a little. Don’t worry.”

“If you say so.”

“It’s time to think about my big day,” the molecule began. “What do people do with water?”

“Well. . . we drink it.”

“What does that mean?”

“We put it into our bodies when we get thirsty.”

“What happens to the water?”

“Well, it. . . nah, forget that one,” the red-headed girl told her friend. “You wouldn’t like what happens.”

“What else?” the molecule asked eagerly.

“We use it to wash our hands and take showers.”

“That sounds promising! What happens to the water you use?”

“It goes down the drain and out into the sewers.”

“Is that a . . . nice place?” the molecule wondered.

“Not really,” Danny admitted.

“Strike two. What else?”

“My mom cooks with water sometimes – like when she made the spaghetti.”

“And then?”

“No. You wouldn’t like that either.”

“There must be something really important people do with water.”

“I’ll sleep on it,” Danny told him.

“Me too,” it responded. “Uhm. . . what’s sleep?”

#

The snow in the pot melted completely overnight. Bubbling when it spoke, the molecule assured Danny it was fine. “Did you think of any big thing for me to be a part of?” it asked her.

“No,” she answered despondently. “Did you?”

“No. But we won’t give up!”

“You bet we won’t!” she agreed. “I have to head downstairs for breakfast or Mom might come up here to get me and find you.”

“We don’t want that!” the water molecule said. “Will this breakfast involve water?”

“Maybe, if she makes oatmeal.”

#

Michelle, Danny's fair-haired baby sister, kicked in her high chair and cooed as Danny entered the kitchen. Her mother was making oatmeal at the stove. Michelle and her chair were a mess of multicolored veggie and fruit stains. "Good morning, Mom," Danny greeted her mother. "Hiya, Michelle," she said in a silly, high-pitched voice that made her sister giggle and kick more.

Mom spooned the oatmeal into a bowl. "Good morning, dear," she said. "Did you dream of talking snowmen last night?"

"Don't be silly," Danny replied, taking her customary spot at the table. "You know they don't exist."

Mom put the bowl down in front of Danny, who was taking a sip of her orange juice. "I got some good news last night," she told her older daughter. "You'll like it too."

"What news?"

"Uncle Matt and Aunt Sharon are coming over tonight. They just got back from Europe."

"Is that anywhere near Madagascar?" Danny asked.

"I don't think so," Mom answered. "What made you think of Madagascar, of all places?"

"Mrs. Whitburn mentioned it in school the other day."

"Anyway, Matt and Sharon will be over for dinner tonight, and I'm going to make my beef stew. You like my stew, right?"

"Oh yeah!"

"Uncle Matt loves it. After I give your sister her bath, I'm going to get started on it. It takes a while."

"Will you need your spaghetti pot for that?" Danny asked, stopping a spoonful of oatmeal that was on its way to her mouth.

“Yes,” her mother answered. “It’s the only one I have that’s big enough.”

#

Danny dunked the paper cup into the pot of water, bringing up a full glass. “Did I get you?” she asked the molecule.

“No,” it answered her, bubbling. “I’m still in the pot.”

“Darn!” She tried again. “How about now?”

“Nope. A little to the left.”

Once more.

“My left,” the molecule said. She dunked the cup in again. “You got me!”

“Finally.”

“Why are we doing this?”

“Mom’s going to need her spaghetti pot soon.”

“I thought you said –”

“I did,” the girl answered. “She surprised me. Parents do that sometimes. You’ll be safe in the cup.”

“I don’t like it as much,” the molecule told her. “It’s cramped.”

“Sorry, but it’ll have to do,” Danny said, picking up the empty pot with her other hand. “Now to sneak this back into the. . .” she continued, her voice trailing off.

“What is it, Danny?”

“I think I know how you can go out with a bang!”

#

The spaghetti pot dried and well hidden for its secret return later, Danny – holding the occasionally bubbling cup of water in front of her – walked into the kitchen, where her mother was bathing Michelle in the baby tub in the sink. “How’s the bath going?” she asked.

“OK. She really needed one.”

“Who’s that in the driveway?” Danny asked suddenly.

“Let me look,” Mom said, stepping away from the sink. “Mind your sister.” As Mom peered out the window, Danny emptied the paper cup into Michelle’s bath water. “There’s no one there,” her mother said, stepping back to the sink.

“They must have pulled away,” Danny said. “What do you still have to wash?”

“Her face could use a scrubbing.”

“This looks like good water,” the red-haired girl opined, plunging a wash cloth into what had been in her cup.

Mom chuckled. “Whatever you say.”

The water bubbled slightly as Danny removed the flannel. “Can I do it?” she asked.

“If you like. Just be gentle.”

She tenderly washed her sister’s face, all the while speaking baby talk to her. “Scrub, scrub, scrub, Michelle.” The little girl giggled and splashed.

“Oh boy! Oh boy!” the molecule said.

Mom looked around. “Did you. . .say something, dear?”

“Not me.”

“Who’s a clean girl?” Mom asked, scooping a smiling Michelle from the tub with a big, fluffy towel. “Can you empty the tub, Danny, while I take Michelle upstairs to get dressed?”

“Be glad to.”

#

Danny sat on the stoop in front of the door, the still-full baby tub on her lap. “You’re sure you don’t mind me pouring you out here?” she queried the molecule.

“Not at all,” it answered. “That was a great idea you had. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” The human girl found herself growing a little misty at their parting. “Will I ever see you again?” she asked.

“Maybe. I fall to Earth as Mother Nature needs me. You’ll see a lot more storms before you grow up.” Danny sniffed, and a small tear trickled down her cheek. “What’s that?” the molecule asked. “It looks like. . .water.”

“It is,” Danny answered, aiming her falling tear into the tub. “You know something, it really is.” She slowly emptied the tub, watching the water slide down the shoveled driveway.

“Goodbye. . .” she heard her friend call, fading as he slipped farther away.

#

It was the same old waiting room.

“And what about you?” the first molecule asked.

“Yes,” the snooty second one inquired, “what did you do this time – another little snowstorm in Minnesota?”

“Nope,” the water molecule said with pride. “I washed the face of a human baby girl.”

“Really?” the third one asked incredulously.

“Really.”

“What was it like?” the first queried, trying to bob closer to him.

“Tell us,” the second commanded.

“I don’t know if I should.”

“C’mon!” the third pleaded. “Please!”

“It will pass the time,” the second said.

“Well,” the molecule began, having had enough of teasing them. . . for the moment, “since you asked nicely, I suppose I can tell you.” The water molecule paused for effect and then said, “It was the best day of my life.”

The End

Mike (who lives in Medway, MA, in the USA) has had over 150 audio plays produced and won twelve Moondance awards. His prose work has appeared in several magazines and anthologies. He is the writer of two short films. In 2013, he won the inaugural Marion Thauer Brown Audio Drama Scriptwriting Competition. Mike keeps a blog at audioauthor.blogspot.com.

Posted 3/25/2021

Alex B. Joy “Bloodsports” moved into town on 3/25/2021

BLOODSPORTS

by

Alexander B. Joy

Luisito had been born too late to meet his grandfather. He knew him only through a story his great-uncle told on certain summer nights, when the cooling air emptied the day of the promise and magic it had held, and dead insects wreathed the bulbs of the outdoor lamps. The story went something like this:

Luisito’s grandfather had been a renowned bullfighter, like his father before him, and his father before him. So when it came time for Luisito’s father to choose a profession, he vowed to follow that same proud example. He trained hard on the ranch that belonged to Luisito’s family, and it seemed certain to all who gathered to behold his elegant faenas that he would grow to be the finest bullfighter of his esteemed line.

But Luisito’s father soon met one of those accidents of chance that fools call fate. There came a day when Luisito’s father and some ranch hands attempted to coax a newly purchased bull into the gated enclosure leading to the practice ring, where they later planned to let him run about and tire himself. Already people assembled around the ring in hopes of glimpsing Luisito’s father in training.

Somehow the bull broke free of its restraints, charging Luisito’s father, who had stood at his head to bait him into the enclosure. The beast flung Luisito’s father to the dirt, trampling and goring him in front of the crowd. It took the full measure of Luisito’s grandfather and great-uncle, who were among the observers, to save him. Luisito’s grandfather had to stand tall on his bad leg – weak from the goring that had ended his career years ago – while his brother swept at the bull with loops of rope, instead of the picks he had mastered at his brother’s side. And all throughout, Luisito’s father cried in the singular agony of young men aware their ambitions will outlive them.

Of course, Luisito’s father had lived. His injuries confined him for many weeks to a hospital bed, with only memories of his defeat for company during the long, painful nights. But he would walk again, and run again,

and lift the estoque again – this the doctors assured him. And as this pronouncement traveled through town, renewing the faith that Spain would indeed witness the next great bullfighter of his family line, all hearts gladdened save one: that of Luisito’s grandfather.

For Luisito’s grandfather understood the inviolable machismo of the born bullfighter. A matador’s skill was meaningless without courage, or the appearance of it. A man who did not soon return to the ring once healthy would be marked a coward, fairly or no. Luisito’s father would be sure to rush his return – itself a cause of concern for Luisito’s grandfather. But the greater worry lay with the animal that had wounded the young man. Luisito’s father would think himself honor-bound to challenge the bull, believing that only the beast’s blood could rinse away the shame of his humiliation. The village, too, would share that expectation. Otherwise, the story of Luisito’s father would always be tinged with failure. He would be the man who fell to his first real bull; the man whose illustrious career, denied the origin necessary for the true bullfighter, ended before it began.

“How do you know the boy will think this way?” Luisito’s great-uncle asked. “He is too sensible a fellow to submit to popular opinion. Especially if it meant doing battle with a bull that has learned how to wound a man.”

“Of course he’ll think he must fight it,” said Luisito’s grandfather. “He is my son.”

There was no hope of Luisito’s father deciding to drop the estoque. He would duel the bull, even weakened as he was – even as the bull returned wiser and craftier than before. But from his efforts to save his son from the animal, Luisito’s grandfather recognized that this was no ordinary bull. It possessed a rare ferocity, and an unpredictable carriage that would have intimidated Luisito’s grandfather even in his prime. He would not have suggested an experienced bullfighter challenge it in good health.

He saw only one option to protect his boy.

“Don’t be absurd,” said Luisito’s great-uncle. “We could simply poison the thing and be done with it. Or leave it roaming the pastures overnight to turn it to the wolves.”

“People would gossip,” said Luisito’s grandfather. “It does us no good to shift the cowardice to me.”

“You’re an old man now. Nobody measures the old by their courage.”

Both men recognized the impasse. Luisito’s great-uncle had never been a bullfighter. He did not understand what it would take to reach his brother. He could only protect him in the ring, as he had in their youth.

“I have need of your pick,” said Luisito’s grandfather. “Will you help me?”

So it came to pass that, while the boy convalesced, Luisito’s grandfather prepared to confront the bull. From his home he retrieved his old muleta, as clean and free of wrinkles as a ceremonial flag. Luisito’s great-uncle sharpened and polished his ancient spears. At night, while the village slept, the two brothers practiced the old movements. Luisito’s grandfather twirled and flourished the muleta as gracefully as ever, if more slowly than in his glory days. Luisito’s great-uncle found himself winded after a few tosses of the pick. They continued this ritual under the cover of darkness, reacquiring what dexterity their aging bodies could reclaim. And in several days’ time, Luisito’s grandfather determined that they could improve no further. The appointed hour had arrived.

Although neither brother had voiced a whisper of their plan, they found townsfolk circling the ring on the day of reckoning, drawn to the prospect of blood like migratory birds reading patterns in the wind. The two old men went to summon the bull from the pastures, and several men not yet old volunteered to assist them. Soon the bull was led bucking and thrashing into its pen.

Luisito’s great-uncle monitored the pen’s water trough. He knew they would be no match for a bull of such strength. But the duty of the picador was to protect, and Luisito’s great-uncle felt it acutely. He had therefore slipped some chemicals into the water – not enough to kill a beast of that size, but sufficient to slow its movements and make it less deadly. It all came down to the trough. If the bull thirsted, they would be saved.

The bull lowered its head to the water. Luisito’s great-uncle sighed with relief as the bull drank.

Luisito's grandfather signaled for the bout to begin. The two old men took up their arms and assumed their positions – Luisito's great-uncle atop his horse, Luisito's grandfather behind the wooden shield, tall as a courtyard fence, at the perimeter. Someone in the crowd unlatched the gate, and the audience cheered as the bull charged into the ring.

From his perch in the saddle, Luisito's great-uncle lodged his pick in the bull's neck. The animal turned its wrath upon the horse, but the mount was swift, and galloped out of the way. Luisito's great-uncle scored only one more hit in this vein before losing his grasp of his pick. It snapped in two beneath the bull's hooves.

Now Luisito's grandfather, bandillera in hand, approached the bull and waved his muleta. The animal rushed him. The old man's stiff leg dragged in the dirt as he sidestepped. Yet the bull whisked past, one of the two bandilleras embedded in its shoulder.

Luisito's great-uncle quivered. For he discerned that his brother's steps were a fraction of a second too slow; had the chemicals not done their work, Luisito's grandfather would perhaps have already been slain. But there was hope yet. If the bull weakened before his brother did, all would go to plan. The injuries to the bull would disguise the wrong Luisito's great-uncle had done to it, and when it fell to the estoque, no one would be the wiser.

When Luisito's grandfather planted the second bandillera, the sweat streamed from his brow, and he sucked the air as if to hoard it. Nonetheless, he smiled at his brother across the ring.

“See, hermano?” he called out. “They are right to say you're only as old as you feel!”

Luisito's grandfather exited the ring to collect his estoque. The bull staggered. Luisito's great-uncle allowed himself to think that all would be well.

In the pen, Luisito's grandfather dabbed the sweat from his face with a cloth. The trough's clear water looked clean and cool. He cupped his hands in it, and raised a mouthful to his lips.

Luisito's great-uncle, in his telling, had no time to react as his brother swallowed.

The old matador strode back into the ring, bearing his sword and cape. A cheer went up, and he answered with a flourish. The motion caught the bull's attention. It came toward Luisito's grandfather at a canter. The old man guided it past. The sweat already slicked his forehead, and could now be seen through his shirt.

The combatants made another pass. The muleta rose no higher than the matador's knee. He moved on his stiff leg like a draftsman's compass pressed to a page.

A woman in the audience cried, "What's wrong with him?"

"It must be a stroke," an old man answered.

"Then why is he still in there?" someone else asked. "Stop the fight!"

But the old bullfighter could not hear them, or chose not to. He raised the muleta in one trembling arm, as high as his slackening muscles would allow. The bull lumbered toward it. At the beast's approach, the cape dropped to the ground, bunching at the matador's shins.

The bull tossed him aside. He lay in a heap atop the fast-staining dirt.

Onlookers ran to surround him as others lassoed the exhausted bull, already on its knees. Luisito's great-uncle glimpsed the smile on his brother's face, as if the uproar around him were a shower of praise from better years too stubborn to conclude.

The End

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Posted 3/22/25

Nick Gerrard “Rockabilly And Custard” moved into town on 3/22/2021

ROCKABILLY AND CUSTARD

by

Nick Gerrard

“He’s sacked cus he fucking smells!”

“Smells? What do mean sacked cus he smells? Who smells?”

“Get your gear and get the fuck out of here.”

Whoosh!

The tub of crème Brule custard flew across the kitchen, all watched it, as if in slow motion, turning, turning...

Splosh!

Knives came from Levi jean pockets and in unison.

Flick!

“Sommage!”

“One mussel starter one pate, one Diane, one chasseur.”

“Table 5 Via!”

“Where the fuck are the salads for 4?”

“Chef we’ve run out of fresh tomatoes?”

“Run out of fucking tomatoes, for fucks sake! You fuck-head, go climb up those pig bins and fetch us some out, you dig?”

My hangover was really kicking in now. You dig! I poured some masala and knocked it down, retched and waited for things to become visible through the tears.

“You, go and get me a beer from the bar, pronto.”

“Chef, I’m busy.”

“And you’ll be even busier if you don’t go and get me a fucking beer now.”

“She’s in chef.”

“Shit where?”

I took off my cap ran my fingers threw my now floppy greasy, once magnificent, quiff, and peered through the hatch into the little bistro annex.

“Classy Chassis.”

“You think? Not pissed off at all?”

“Na, she looks fine man, real fine.”

“Yeah, thanks for telling me.”

“You, knob-head, go take a whiskey and dry to the lady on table eight.”

“What about the money chef?”

“Tell um to put it on my tab.”

“Shiite!”

“Yeah, and while we’re at it bring one for me too.”

I watched the leggy brunette take off her leather to reveal a pink cardigan and a gray full skirt under which were seamed stockings. She bobbed her curly locks as the maitre’d pushed her chair in. She took out a gold leaf and pouted her blue lips to light it. She received the whiskey, smiled and shot it back in one.

Alena is her name and boy does A-L-e-n-a spell trouble. No doubt about it, this was bound to end badly. I should never have started, but an offer this good seldom comes around.

#

She lit up the hotel Marais basement bar like a cluster bomb.

That den of sad fuckers. That bar of late-night wasters waiting for the morning trains to beds.

The poncy waiters in a corner, the managers at the bar, the rockabillics and KPs around a pool table, next to the jukebox. Sharing over-flowing tables with pimps, pushers and working girls.

Snorting, sniffing, necking, and stabbing. The night's stresses and stains wiped away with powder and puffs; shootin'-and-a-tootin'.

We are all wired, all in need of an unwind. All in need of an adrenaline cool down. So, we soaked it in brine and bought it back up with rolled notes.

I had seen her before, obviously, how could you miss her? But somehow this time, I managed to get my mashed up head together long enough, or maybe because it was mashed, to make a move.

“Can I bum one of those?”

She smiles.

“Sure.”

“Original.”

“Sorry?”

“Asking for a cigarette. Usually I have only to put one to my lips and I get an avalanche of lighters in my face.”

“I've lost my lighter. And my fags and wallet too to be honest.”

“Can I get you a drink too then?”

“Sure, half a lager and a brandy.”

“Sounds good. Two halves of Stella and two Martens.”

“Cheers.”

A waiter went to the jukebox and put some kind of dance music on...

The place hushed, a huge tattooed Sous chef stood, walked over, slapped the guy, kicked the jukey, re-selected, and...Gene Vincent...Baby Blue.

“Nice.

-You're the chef at Les Negress verte.”

“You know me?”

-I know your food.

“And?”

“You know it's good, do you have to ask?”

“I need to hear it said sometimes.”

“Well. It's very good, though...”

“Though's not good, no one says though an...”

“Chill darling. You're wired, love another Marten?”

I necked it.

“So, though?”

“I was just going to say that your bouillabaisse is lacking a certain something, that's all.”

“You think?”

“There's a sweet little fish found in the North, that I always feel is the key, and a stock that's been bubbling for years.”

“Oh the sweetfish of the North, not an easy catch, and an old stockpot is difficult to find these days too.”

“Pity, but I recognize and appreciate your inclusion of saffron and truffle.”

“You have a very delicate palate madam.”

“Why thank you, kind sir.”

“Cheers.”

“Are you here alone?”

“Well, kind of, but I’m my own woman.”

“I’m sure you are, but.”

“Well, I came in with Stoney but as usual, he seems to have disappeared.”

I looked at her. She had said his name with no interest, no fear.

I tried to show nonchalance.

“Yeah Stoney, the erm, businessman.”

“You mean gangster.”

“Well, I...”

“It’s OK, that’s what he is, you don’t have to be scared.”

“I’m not, just curious that’s all.”

“Curious I like, and don’t worry I was left alone hours ago I don’t expect him to be back, happens a lot. Fancy a line?”

“Delighted.”

Just one I told myself. Just one, be nice then get the hell out of there, but she was gorgeous.

#

“You fucked who?”

My mate Tony was always one to fly of the handle at the slightest.

“You know, the femme fatale, from the bar, Baby Blue.”

“Baby fucking blue? Are you living in an Eddie Cochran movie or what? Do you know who she is?:

“Sure. And it’s Gene Vincent actually.”

“And you’re not worried?”

“Should I be?”

“You bet your fucking sweet arse you should be.”

“I know she is involved with some dodgy geezer and that but...”

“Some dodgy geezer? Are you for fucking real? She is married to...”

“Married? Shit, well there you go.”

“There you fucking go? Listen my friend I don’t think you have grasped the seriousness of what I am saying to you.”

“F-Fuck man, I’ve fucked married women before.”

“Yeah, and that always turned out well didn’t it? And besides, you’ve never fucked a wife of a fucking total psycho before.”

“So bit of a badass then?”

“Bit of a badass? Are you kidding me? Billy Hill?”

“Psycho Billy.”

“You’re a fucking dick, you know that. Billy fucking Hill, the Billy fucking hill!”

“It doesn’t matter how often you say it, I’ve never heard of the cunt.”

“This guy is an enforcer, he tortures for the big boys, he does it and loves it, they say. And you fucked his missis, Jesus H Christ. You’d better scam the hell out of here, daddy O.”

“You worry too much. She’s been hanging around with some other grody clyde by the way.”

“Who?”

“Stoney.”

“Fuck man, I don’t think I even should be talking to you anymore.”

“Don’t you see man? If she is supposed to be with this Hill cat, and she is doing the rounds with this other oddball, then... maybe.”

“Oh I see, maybe you can play them off against each other is that it? You gotta be kidding me, you are real-gone kid, is she worth it?”

“My man, she’s a screamer!”

“A screamers a hot car, man, not a chick.”

“Whatever.”

I carried on seeing her. We met in little Italian milk bars in the day, and the press club at night round the corner of the casino district, full of gay croupiers and grey-faced whiskey journalists. But our place, our favorite place was the Hope bar, near the meat markets, opened at 3 am closed at noon. We squeezed in-between porter drinking barrow boys and brandy drinking meat men, with blood on their hands and chops in bags swapped for fivers at the bar. We snorted in the men’s cubicles and fucked in the ladies, and took it all in, the whole scene, the fifties tunes, the fifties suits of dodgy geezers with vans and greyhounds on leads. We would go back to my gaff for more snorts and sniffs and muff diving for multiples and blowjobs with chilli.

#

“Well, what we have here is a Mexican standoff, gentlemen.”

“A couple of errand boys stood in the middle of quiffed chefs with their knives drawn and their caps off.”

“I told you this fucking punk is sacked cuz he smells.”

“So, what if he smells, he lives in a shit hole gets little sleep and works his bollocks off.”

“But he fucking smells, and it ain't good for business.”

“He’s a fucking KP, no one sees him. Who complained?”

“Some of the staff.”

“The fucking waiting staff you mean.”

“If he goes, we all go.”

“You don’t wanna start this shit, I’m telling you. When my boss hears about this knife shit man.”

“Tell your boss he ain't going nowhere.”

“And I’m telling you he’s fucking sacked.”

“In that case, you tell your fucking boss, we are on strike, from tomorrow no one works until he gets his fucking job back.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“They could do no more, just two of them. With 8 chefs armed with knives and 10 kps armed with pots and custard.”

They walked calmly through the group, and sniffed and looked the gathered up and down at a few whilst flicking custard off their pin-stripes and winklepickers.

“Well be in touch.”

The End

Nick Gerrard is originally from Birmingham but now living in Olomouc. His Short stories, flash and poetry have appeared in various magazines in print and online including *Rye whiskey Review*, *Pikers Press*, *The Siren*, *Minor Literature*, *Spillwords* and *Bluehour magazine*. Nick has four books published available on Amazon.<https://nickgerrardauthor.wixsite.com/books>

Posted 3/19/2021
Mike Turner "Free Climb" moved into town on 3/19/2021

FREE CLIMB
by
Mike Turner

My ascent is arduous
At times perilous
Pitons hammered into weathered stone faces
Advances across ice bridges
spanning bottomless chasms
Pelting sleet so cold
as to chill not just to, but through
bone and sinew and marrow
And out the other side
Endlessly, endlessly
Climbing, climbing
Reaching one threshold
only to be confronted with a fresh rock face
And beginning all over again
Having finally attained the summit
I have the sense of being at the bottom
of a deep bowl
The horizon towering overhead
as a reversal of the curvature of the Earth
And the sky vaulting above all
Standing alone on the naked peak
I feel a hush
As though the clouds absorb all sound
No wind stirring the thin atmosphere
And I imagine I am the last
The only
person yet inhabiting this world
All others lost, gone, traveled ahead
To whatever place they now occupy
Beyond doors I had yet to knock upon
In the stillness
I hear a murmur
That I take to be the beating of my heart

In that moment, I leap
Vaulting into the timeless space which engulfs me
Soaring above the valleys below
Carried by slight air currents
Lifted by the warmth of the sun's energy
above dark exposed rock
Dropped by zephyrs
cooled by ice and snowpack
Achieving the apogee of my trajectory
The energies of my jump spent
I arc downwards
towards oblivion
Approaching, passing through
Wisps of clouds
Like spun sugar purchased upon the Midway
Lightly hued with the pink
of a wan sun
Not sweet, but slightly bitter
Cold and clingy on my cheeks
As I pass through to the valley far below
Approaching ever so rapidly
The scene evolving
from an abstract painting
To impressionism, cubism, pointillism, realism
From blotches of color
To pools and streams and trees
Rail lines, roads, chalets, people
General to specific
Become more and more distinct
As terminal velocity is achieved
Target is acquired
End increasingly in sight
And as I cross the boundary of that plain
Sound reaching a cacophony
of silence
Sight merging its palette of colors
to black
My descent is checked
Not suddenly, as by impact
but rather a subtle shift
in consciousness
As I open my eyes from slumber

And cross the threshold
of wakefulness
Another night passed
Trading the isolation of that distant
mountain dream
For the solitude of daily existence
Ensnared in a small efficiency
Far above the streets of a nameless city
Quarantined
As upon the summit
Parted from the world
by pandemic fear
Whence I go through the motions
of another day
Performing repetitive, meaningless tasks
of commerce and sustenance
My only outside contacts
Disembodied voices on telephones
Electric flashes arranged as words and letters
Touching no more intimate
than a keyboard
Engaging only perfunctorily
Devoid of empathy, caring
Love, connection
Hope
And while others ease their loneliness
in the fellowship of their interaction
And their dreams
I pass empty hours
Listless
Purposeless
Until day is done
And sleep comes once more
Whereupon I again ascend
the sequestered heights
Of that lofty precipice
Standing at the intersection
Of Earth and heavens
Momentarily drinking in the effervescence
of empty attainment
Before once more reaching higher
Only to again descend

once more
Into seclusion

The End

Mike Turner is a songwriter and poet living on the US Gulf Coast. Named 2017 Male Gospel Entertainer of the Year by the North America Country Music Associations International, he performed on the “15 Minutes of Fame Stage” at the 2020 Monroeville Literary Festival. www.MikeTurnerSongwriter.com

Posted 3/17/2021

Joe Giordano "A Spy's Story" moved into town on 3/17/2021

A SPY'S STORY

by

Joe Giordano

Si-Woo Park spent most evenings drinking OB beer and enjoying K-Pop karaoke with his college friends at the expense of his studies at Seoul's Korea University. His father, a sergeant stationed in the DMZ between North and South Korea, had confronted him about shirking his responsibility. They'd had a particularly bitter argument the evening before his father returned to his post and was assassinated by North Korean RGB intelligence operatives who'd infiltrated through a tunnel. At the news, Si-Woo replayed their quarrel in his head, sickened and shamed he couldn't take back his harsh words. After the funeral, he'd returned to university but skipped classes, spending most days alone in his dorm room with the shades drawn. Friends tried to tempt him back to the karaoke bars, but nothing consoled him. Restless sleep came with fantasies about taking revenge on his father's murderers. If he couldn't identify the killers, he could at least strike a blow against the North, deciding to join the South's National Intelligence Service. He hoped his father would've approved. Diligent in training, he impressed his superiors and requested, and was ultimately inserted inside North Korea, tasked to gather information on their nuclear program.

Christian missionaries had discovered a method for surreptitiously proselytizing inside godless North Korea. A local's mere possession of a Bible would trigger their disappearance into the hellish labyrinth of forced labor camps and be jailed along with three generations of their family. The famine that killed almost twenty percent of the Hermit Kingdom's population presented opportunities for those willing to eschew profit to spread the word of Jesus Christ. Desperate for food, fuel, and just about everything, the country invited foreign investment in the Rason Special Economic Zone established along the Sea of Japan near both the Chinese and Russian borders, a weasel's jump from Vladivostok. Chinese RMB and U.S. dollars created an oasis of wide-ranging Chinese and western manufacturing from pharmaceuticals to textiles as well as fish and food processing. The lure of an inexpensive vacation drove a tourist trade around a Macau-based group's casino that included karaoke bars, seal watching, and beach barbecues.

True Heart Ltd., a Business as Mission Christian movement, quickly branched into wholesale rice importing and a food processing plant, hiring Koreans and endeavoring to set an example using biblical principles. They invested hard currency in exchange for the local won, a paper whose only value outside the country was kindling. True Heart's missionary calling was propagated through their tour agency, inviting pastors and those called to be His representative – displaying no outward indications of their faith or purpose to the ever-present North Korean secret police minders – to quietly interact with locals. Although foreigners were permitted to carry Bibles, on departure, border guards checked that not even a single page had been torn out and left behind.

Now forty-three, Si-woo had joined True Heart as cover, becoming a leader on their volunteer tours where evangelicals could work alongside Koreans planting trees or cultivating and harvesting rice, often also visiting the country's capital Pyongyang, and, for the hardest, a trek around the Seven Treasures Mount Chilbo. His travel guide status provided opportunities for him to observe and report on the series of nuclear tests conducted at Mount Mantap, a difficult motorbike journey from Mount Chilbo. Whenever satellite images revealed another nuclear test was imminent, Si-Woo would be directed to organize a hiking tour, slipping away for an overnight trip to Mantap so he could report his observations. His handler corresponded with him through a coded message hand-carried by a fellow agent posing as a tourist.

One day, an Australian woman in her twenties, with aqua and pink streaked hair stepped off the dirty beige bus that just completed the two-hour drive from Yangi China, the starting point for every True Heart tour. Si-Woo met the group after they'd passed the olive-uniformed guards of customs and border patrol and when they shook hands, the woman slipped him an encrypted message.

While the group lunched on rice and vegetables with kimchi, he deciphered his orders: observe and report on what satellite images had revealed could be the North's first hydrogen bomb test. Up until then, the North had exploded Hiroshima-type uranium or plutonium bombs. Hydrogen bombs were constructed to be massively more powerful. Si-Woo's stomach churned. Although he'd observed previous nuclear tests there, the journey to Mantap Mountain was always perilous. He had little time to plan, and improvisation raised risks. Still, he had his orders. He'd

change the tour schedule and take the group to Mount Chilbo the next day. Thinking of his father steeled him.

Following their meal, Si-Woo maintained a blank face while their North Korean baby-sitter led the group to pay respect to three portraits of Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il, and Kim Jong-un. He led them all in bowing and then placed a bouquet of flowers before the pictures and lectured about them, extolling their virtues. Before heading to the hotel, they listened to a kindergarten band's wooden performance of patriotic music.

During dinner, Si-Woo explained to tour participants that to avoid an anticipated turn in the weather, they'd head out the next day. The Australian woman enthusiastically supported the news, the group nodded agreement, and the secret service minder accepted the change but displayed a suspicious frown.

Early the next morning, Si-Woo led the tour passengers onto a diesel-belching red bus that stank from the black fumes. He prayed the vehicle would survive the two-hundred-kilometer trip. The slightest snowfall rendered roads impassable as the North possessed no plows and snow removal had to be done by hand. To pass time, they sang Christian songs, but since the North Korean escorted them, they hummed over "God" in the lyrics. Arriving at the rustic Chilbo Hotel, guests were given iron buckets filled with hot water for bathing. After the evening meal, with a nod to his Australian contact, Si-Woo slipped away, grabbing the locally made 125cc motorbike True Heart kept at the hotel. He set out toward Mantap Mountain. His cover story was that he wanted to confirm hiking trails were passable before taking the group, but he knew their minder would consider an unaccompanied disappearance a serious infraction, so he carried a wad of U.S. dollars to bribe any official he met. The roads were empty except for military vehicles, but he dared not risk a confrontation, so he wove through trees on upward sloping dirt trails to avoid detection. The moon was bright enough he could ride without use of the bike's headlamp and he knew the route. Near the test site, he approached on foot. Every twig his hiking boots cracked raised his pulse. He reached a ridge where he could spy on the tunnels that accessed the detonation site, plunging five hundred meters below the surface of Mantap Mountain, when his ears were violated by a deafening blast, immediately followed by a roar. The earthquake triggered by the two-hundred-fifty kiloton explosion would be measured by a Norwegian seismic array at 6.3 on the Richter Scale. The shock threw him around, and he twisted an ankle falling to the ground. He crawled to the edge of

the ridge and observed the Mantap slopes, now deformed by the blast. Tunnels leading into the mountain had collapsed and workers were scurrying to save comrades buried under landslides. Chaos reigned.

Limping, he retraced his steps down the mountain, his ears ringing so badly, he didn't hear the military vehicles that had discovered his motorbike or the patrol spreading through the woods searching for him. A flashlight's beam in the trees ahead nearly stopped his heart. He had no place to run, nor could he talk his way out of this. Too many soldiers to bribe. Suddenly, shouts of his discovery rang out. In the moment he thought to run, a bullet creased his skull, and he collapsed to the mossy earth as angry voices neared.

#

Si-Woo's head wound smacked repeatedly against the cold metal flatbed transporting him, the soldiers laughing at his plight. He wet himself, writhing in the damp stink an hour before the truck pulled to a sharp stop. The chilled air told him they'd arrived at a higher elevation. Now, the real ordeal would begin. He shivered, not from the cold.

The soldiers threw him to the ground before dragging him inside a structure, jamming a thick wooden stick behind his knees, forcing him to kneel painfully on a concrete floor. The room smelled of vomit and feces.

A sneering guard wearing a gray tunic and carrying a slender metal rod briskly entered and clubbed him across his rib cage.

The guard said, "You're a spy. Confess." He struck him again.

Tears squeezed from Si-Woo's eyes.

"Confess and you'll live. I'll even allow you to hunt for rats and eat undigested corn from cow dung." The guard laughed and struck him again.

Si-Woo didn't know how long he could withstand the torture before he'd confess. Everyone had a breaking point, when death seemed a relief.

The guard ordered him dragged to a wall, hanging him from his arms on iron cleats. Si-Woo groaned at his shoulders dislocating.

The guard jeered, “You’ll have a night to think about your situation,” before he left.

Si-Woo sobbed. Within Yodok prison, he’d entered the deepest circle of Hell.

Exhaustion enveloped him like a shroud but the agony of his arms and back woke him. If he confessed to being a spy, he’d be subjected to years of persecution. Guards didn’t negotiate, they tormented.

As the first rays of a somber sun peeked through a barred slit in the concrete wall, the guard strode into the room and slashed at Si-Woo with his metal rod eliciting a scream of pain.

He produced a paper and read aloud. “The People’s Court of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has found you guilty of crimes against the State and condemned you to death.”

Si-Woo hung his head.

The guard shouted an order, and two accompanying goons dragged him across the concrete floor outside into the dull gray morning. He smelled smoke and his own stress sweat. A dozen Korean prisoners knelt, forced to witness the execution. They lined aside a bloodstained wooden stake and three guards in green uniforms with Type 58 NK rifles standing at the ready. He was forced upright against the splintered stake, tied with ropes around his chest, stomach, and knees until he was held fast.

None of the other witnesses allowed themselves to display emotion. Death was all too commonplace, and the empathetic would be similarly executed.

A filthy rag was knotted around his head covering his eyes. Si-Woo gulped nervously, and his senses sharpened. The riflemen clicked fresh magazines into their weapons. Above him, cawing birds circled the scene of death.

“Will you confess?”

He wouldn’t beg for mercy. None existed in this godforsaken pit.

In the final seconds before the executioners' bullets tore through his flesh, he thought of his father, and a calmness overtook him.

The End

Joe Giordano's stories have appeared in more than one hundred magazines and he's had three novels and a short story collection published: *Birds of Passage*, *An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story*, *Appointment with ISIL*, *Drone Strike*, and *Stories and Places I Remember*. Visit his website at <http://joe-giordano.com/>

Posted 3/15/2021

Chris Riley "A Day in the Life of Alfonso Roberto Gonzalez III" moved into town on 3/15/2021

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ALFONSO ROBERTO GONZALEZ III
by
Chris Riley

Long before the thin veil of daylight breaks the horizon, Alfonso Gonzalez sits up in his bed and turns off his alarm clock, before it too wakes. He kneads his eyes with raised palms, the way a baker works unsullied dough in an effort to convince it to rise. Then he lets his hands fall down across bristly cheeks, dropping them submissively onto his lap. He releases a deep sigh.

He feels the sheets behind him stir, and his wife, Alondra, proceeds to climb out of bed. He doesn't bother to turn around, but he sees his wife nonetheless. She is wearing a Caribbean-blue gown embroidered with gold daisies, like stars of the night, and this assembly of bright, spring colors, sharpens against the bronze between her shoulders and neck.

Alfonso stands slowly and shuffles into the bathroom where he abruptly sneezes three times before urinating into the toilet. His brother Carlos sneezes every morning as well, but, as far as Alfonso knows, never only three times. Then again, Carlos isn't named after their Papa, who is named after Huelo, their grandfather, who had worked most of his long life at a grist mill, down in southern Texas, and who was the first man of their family to start the morning ritual of sneezing.

Alfonso scrubs his face with cold water and a fresh washcloth Alondra had set on the sink the night before. Then he brushes his teeth with a toothbrush that looks suspiciously like it has been in use for over a decade. When he is finished, he takes the washcloth and wrings water out into the sink. He hangs it then, over the towel rack behind him, gingerly so, smoothing out the wrinkles. Sometimes Alfonso smiles as he does this, but not on this morning, as his mind is presently somewhere else.

He opens the medicine cabinet and selects a canister of shaving cream and razor from off the shelf. He works lather into his hands and smears it across his face, staring for the first and possibly last time of this day, at the folds surrounding his eyes. These lines, he knows, are the hallmarks

of a rich life, a cartographer's work of both laughter and sorrow discovered in their fullness, right there upon the expressive map of such a simple man. He is lucky to have such wrinkles, Alfonso also knows, and smiling pensively, he shaves away his morning whiskers.

In the kitchen, where he is soon to make his way, he hears Alondra shuffle pans. He hears the clang of silverware against crockery, and the movements of things unknown. Then he wets a comb and carefully runs it through his hair, listening further to the sounds of his wife abroad. He hears her open the refrigerator, and he hears the silence in what must be her calculating stare, as she examines the contents. There is a confidence to the noises that this woman makes, a delivery that carries to her husband an irrefutable measure of comfort. To be sure, every disturbance Alondra creates does not go without the purpose of La Familia in mind.

Bacon and eggs are frying in a skillet when Alfonso enters into the kitchen. He is wearing new denim jeans and a bright red flannel tucked in under a brown leather belt all but hidden under the girth of his middle-aged belly. The current notion amongst his acquaintances is that festive colors might provide for more work. Alfonso is unsure of this opinion, but he is also wise enough not to tamper with the odds.

Under his shoulder is yesterday's paper, a gift from his neighbor, Lorenzo. Alfonso sets it onto the table as he sits. Out of conditioning, he will only observe the headlines and ponder what stories lie behind the presiding pictures, the remainder of the content being too hazy and confusing for him to consider. He is what one former employer loudly announced as being "illiterate." And even though he still does not truly know what the definition of "illiterate" means, Alfonso suspects that it has to do with something not entirely favorable, and of items meant to be read, such as the paper currently resting beside him.

Alfonso is forty-seven years old. He has cracked, dry hands, which rest on the table like canned hams. There is a swollen softness to his fingers, and this quality matches his arms, torso, ruddy cheeks, and smooth pillows under his eyes. He is thinking of the excitement of his day, the prospect of work, and, if such opportunity should present itself, the precise form of its endeavor. He was a bricklayer last week, and for three days past, he cut firewood for an elderly man. Yesterday he washed dishes for the Rotary at a private ranch—that was a fine day.

Alondra comes to the table carrying breakfast. She sets a plate before Alfonso, as well as a cup of coffee. He smiles and glances at his wife, sees the crisp outline of her lips, the smooth slide down her neck, the soft swell of her chest. He continues to smile, observing now the meal before him. Lying beside the bacon and eggs are fried green chilies stuffed with asadero cheese. Also on the table: steamed corn tortillas in a server—always corn tortillas. There is cream and cinnamon, even honey, for his coffee. And standing tall and proud, is a pitcher of orange juice. It is a blessing to have such a fine meal at the start of his day; and the word “blessing” has a definition Alfonso knows quite well.

Lord’s grace, he thinks, smiling again at his wife, at the table, his bright gaze flickering outward, carrying his small amusement to the small living room beyond. That room is dark at this time of day, a north-facing window with canvas curtains drawn tight. The room is dark, but placid, a lifetime of domestic devotion and bucolic endeavors held within picture frames, and worn furniture. Porcelain figurines, the bodies of Saint Francis and Mary the Blessed Virgin. The soft drape of a rosary, and half a dozen novena candles, some yet to be replaced, some not nearly so. And in the corner beside the black and white television, a shadow and nothing less, the memorial for their late and beloved Sofia.

Alfonso finishes his breakfast, wipes his mouth with a napkin and drains his coffee, which is only to be refilled seconds later by his wife. She sets the pot back down and comes to the table with her husband. She has a small plate of breakfast for herself, but she doesn’t eat yet. Staring into her husband’s eyes, Alondra reaches across the table and softly takes his hand in hers. Then she holds it there, as she begins to eat her breakfast using the other hand, only the other hand.

Alfonso waits patiently for his wife to finish, and when she is done he takes their plates and sets them carefully into the sink. Then he walks steadily over to the door, where he gathers up his wallet and keys, ball-cap and phone, and then a pair of leather gloves, which he jams into his back pocket. He turns and his wife is there, holding a small cooler containing his lunch. Gently, Alfonso takes the cooler, tells Alondra he loves her, and then gives his wife a kiss, before he opens the door to leave. As he does this, just before he steps out into the cold morning air, he glances over at the place for his daughter, and whispers softly a short prayer.

#

Lorenzo drives them seven miles to the nearest Home Depot. He parks his Toyota Corolla under the shade of a sycamore tree. Alfonso, Lorenzo, and three other men climb out of the rusty vehicle, and make their way to a location near the store's entrance, but not so close as to create an unwanted presence, resulting in being run off by the store's manager. The morning is crisp and bright, and from the trees and eaves and rooftops above, birdsong floats down and meets the ears of these men. It is nothing slight for Alfonso, this chorus of sparrows and doves, or other unknown birds, as he is the type of man who is frequently reminded of children at play when he hears such sounds of nature.

On this morning, Alfonso thinks not just of his children, or those of his friends, but of his daughter who once was: Sofia. And appropriately so, as it is May 10th, his daughter's birthday, a day of remembering—a day he could never forget.

The men stand together in a huddle for three minutes before Chato opens a thermos and offers his fellow *hombre sa swig* of coffee. It is Chato's favorite blend, Folgers Dark Roast with a strong dash of rum. He is the funny one, this Chato, younger than all the rest, and with an unrehearsed personality that grants him a wide array of latitude and forgiveness among those who know him best. Chato is quick to tell a joke, as the people will always laugh. He will speak audaciously of things others won't say, wouldn't dare say, and still, they will laugh. And Chato will act this way among women as well, and for all his crude and impious antics, he will still provoke blushed cheeks and thin smiles from these women, as they would shamefully admit.

"Drink up, amigos," Chato says, handing over the thermos after he fills his own cup. It is only fifteen minutes before the store opens, and then the customers will begin to arrive, and the men will then sharpen their stares and level their stances. But fifteen minutes is more than enough time to enjoy a cup of Chato's finest.

Alfonso does not remember when he last drank from Chato's reserve, yet on this day he accepts, if only for the memory of Sofia, to offer a silent toast for her day; but also, for a sad thought that suddenly comes over Alfonso. He thinks of his friend, this Chato, and that one day he too will be gone, and how sad that will be for many others. How sad that will be for Life, to say goodbye once and for all to this reservoir of canny humor, to such comfort and joy released effortlessly upon so many needy

lives. Alfonso drinks his coffee, all of it, and then stares thoughtfully at his friend, Chato.

Fifteen minutes has passed, and the vehicles begin to slowly roll in. Alfonso and the other men observe the traffic, mild as it is, and they look only for pickup trucks, or work trucks, or the occasional van, knowing that such vehicles are the ones that will bring the jobs.

Suddenly, a brown Chevy Nova enters into the parking lot and races toward them. It comes to an abrupt halt next to Lorenzo's Corolla, and then the doors shoot open and out fall seven other men, men who look just like them. Alfonso's stomach, and undoubtedly those of his amigos, aches dully, knowing that the odds of obtaining work on this day has just diminished by a tragic percent. Immediately, Alfonso studies the newcomers, and, more importantly, their attire. The majority of them look identical to him, wearing denim jeans and plaid shirts. But some of them are wearing simple T-shirts, and none of them are wearing bright colors, and at this, Alfonso secretly smiles.

There is a shared laughter amongst the newcomers, as if a joke has been told, and then some of them approach Alfonso and the others, smiling and nodding, as they greet their new friends. They are not all strangers, as Alfonso has worked with at least half of the men before, on various job sites throughout various years. The onset of camaraderie amongst the two groups of men is apparent, albeit short-lived, for they are all eager to find their work. And the margin for tension between them will never expand beyond being critically thin, due to the prospect of attracting unwanted attention. Not at this time or place, that is, as not all of the men are legal, and none of them are willing to gamble against the potential consequences of such detail.

Alfonso's thoughts regarding current fashion trends has dissipated, almost instantly, giving way to the more dominant notion, one that will be more prevalent among the impending flow of gringos. To each man there are strengths and weaknesses, characteristics that will inevitably be looked at and weighed against by the prospecting employers. To be young is to be strong of body, possibly of mind, and, most importantly, capable of enduring long hours of extreme physical labor. To be young also means to lack experience, which in turn translates to lower wages and a greater chance of being swindled; and the result of all of that is a greater likelihood of finding employment. It is not a bad thing to be young, as Alfonso knows, and frequently contemplates.

But to be old—or, as old as one is allowed to get in this profession—is not necessarily bad. With age comes experience, and the prevailing wage for such experience, depending on the profession, is often much more desirable. Also, to be old means that the work will rarely be too difficult on the body; that is something Alfonso always contemplates, and appreciates.

He is thinking these very thoughts when a blue truck pulls into the parking lot. All eyes look ominously at the vehicle, and some of the men, mulling about, begin to wave and gesture to the driver.

The truck doesn't park, it just stops beside the group of men. The driver is a white man, possibly in his sixties, and he searches the hungry stares. He ignores the men's questions and requests as his gaze finds, and then lands on Alfonso.

"You, there," he says, pointing. "Quieres mas trabajo?"

It is the man from the Rotary Club, Alfonso realizes. "Si, señor," he replies, pushing through the men, his compadres, before moving to climb into the back of the truck.

"No," the white man says. "Get inside."

Alfonso pauses, his leg halfway inside the bed, then he jumps back down and climbs into the cab. "Muchas gracias," he says. Then he looks out the window as the truck lurches away, his glance finding Lorenzo's and Chato's envious stares.

#

He is at the Rotary Club once again, only this time he is not washing dishes. There is to be some kind of gathering tonight, a special occasion, and there are several old men loitering about, chattering over sports and politics, and other things Alfonso has not the language to comprehend. He has a piece of paper in his hands, a list of chores written out in blue ink, and in English words Alfonso also does not fully understand. Que es? he often asks, much to his apprehension as he points to the next word, immediately after completing the previous task.

His employer, the old man who picked him up, is named Roy, and he is a patient man, as Alfonso decides, translating at will and without complaint each word pointed out to him. After completing the job of sweeping and washing down the back deck, a shaded structure of ancient redwood overlooking a long valley and small creek, Roy asks Alfonso to clean two large grills stationed in one corner of the deck. He hands Alfonso a bucket and brush along with an adjoining bottle of detergent, then points to a hose and faucet, also in the corner of the deck.

Alfonso takes the items, smiles and nods, and walks over to the grills. Good work indeed, he thinks. Today he will work hard for this man, these men, grateful for such a pleasant bounty; and also, grateful for the pleasant demeanor he is set against. Curious, he wonders how his friends have fared, if they've found work, and if so, what kind.

It is noon when Alfonso is almost finished cleaning the second grill. Roy comes outside then, walking slowly and stiffly, his body crouched low and his hands suspended cautiously three-feet off the ground, guiding a little girl who is carrying a small glass bowl filled with what looks like marinade. "Give it to the man," Roy says. "Give it to Señor Gonzalez."

At once Alfonso wonders, as he does not remember if and when he had told Roy his name. Not on this day, he is sure.

"Here you go, mister," the girl says, gently handing him the bowl.

Alfonso smiles at the girl as he takes the bowl, then, more curiously, he looks at Roy.

"Can you cook?" Roy asks.

Alfonso pauses, then nods.

As if unsure, or unconvinced, Roy asks again. "Puedes cocinar?"

"Si," Alfonso replies, wondering what it is he will be cooking.

The old man turns and walks back inside the club, leaving the little girl behind. She is staring up at Alfonso, and her eyes are the first thing he notices. They are a deep blue, azure, and wide with all the curiosity a young child can easily muster. She is wearing a pink and white dress, and little shoes, with a little bow clasped tightly on the top of her little head,

which is covered in black hair, hair that is drawn back and also tightly clasped, held firmly by some sort of unseen, little string. She is little, very little; and curious, very curious; and she won't take her eyes off Alfonso, which makes him feel all the more uncomfortable.

"Hola," Alfonso says, smiling. "Hello, little miss." He feels self-conscious with her presence, and not because she is a small child, and something thus deemed awkward by many adults, but because she is not of his people, but rather, the others. "Your name?" he asks softly.

She looks up at him and smiles, and that is all he receives from her until she lifts a finger and pokes his stomach gently. "You have a big belly, like my daddy," she says.

Just then, Roy comes back out, moving quicker this time, his stride steady with determination. He is carrying a long white apron, which he hands to Alfonso, followed by a grilling spatula and tongs. Then he is off again, back inside the building.

Alfonso studies the items in his hand, and slowly, methodically, he sets the utensils on a grill and adorns the apron.

On Roy's second return he is followed by another man, both of whom are carrying large platters of foiled meat. They set the platters on a long bench next to the grills, and then Roy motions for Alfonso to come over.

Alfonso sees that the foiled meat is likely beef brisket, or tri-tip, and he also recognizes the cooking method these men are expecting to employ. Alfonso knows this method well, in fact, and he knows that it will be long and laborious, yet pleasant—most pleasant, in light of other jobs he is accustomed to finding.

"Lento y bajo," Roy instructs, gesturing to the ground with his palm. "Slow, low heat... Fuego, lento y bajo."

Alfonso smiles, a strong, unforced smile, and says, "Si. No problema, señor."

There is another old man, who suddenly walks up and stands next to Roy. He is short and thin, and wearing a Polo shirt and tan shorts, his feet tucked inside leather sandals. His arms are crossed over his chest, and his back is flagpole stiff. There is a skeptical demeanor about this man, in

which the arch of one of his eyebrows lets on to. Alfonso suspects this old man doubts the charge of having a simple laborer cook such fine meat. It is not a surprising notion, not for Alfonso, and only makes him feel somewhat self-conscious, as the man is not his current employer.

“You sure about this, Roy?” the old man says, as Roy turns to walk away.

Roy halts and looks at the man. Alfonso sees a disgusted look ripple across Roy’s face, and then his lips curl, revealing bleached-white teeth underneath. “Fuck you, Don,” he whispers menacingly, and then bares a forced, fake smile, as he walks away.

Alfonso turns his back and gets to work. He thinks briefly about the sudden confrontation, considering its violent strangeness. But it was also interesting, and he thinks that within that short bout is something possibly worth isolating; something about Roy’s character, or the old man’s, or, incredulously, maybe even his own.

He gets the meat going, six medium-sized slabs, and he keeps the heat low and steady, as instructed. Alfonso knows exactly how to cook these portions, and feeling gracious for this job, and for his employer’s apparent integrity, he decides he will cook these portions to the best of his ability. And, upon deciding this, almost mysteriously, he hears what sounds like his daughter’s voice come from over his shoulder, as the little girl commands her grandpa to look at the deer down there, standing by the river.

“Look there, Grandpa!” she cries, pointing, and Roy is there with her, staring and smiling. It isn’t Alfonso’s daughter, Sofia, but the girl suddenly sounds like her. And, also, in the way that most girls can be similar to one another, Alfonso decides that she also looks like his daughter. It is a peculiar thing, this sudden notion of similarity occurring on his daughter’s birthday.

“Very good, Sofia,” Roy says, smiling. “You have good eyesight.”

#

It takes Alfonso more than four hours to fully cook the meat. In that time, he has managed to eat the lunch his wife made for him, drink three bottled Cokes, brought to him by Roy’s granddaughter, Sofia, and use

the bathroom once. In that time, he has also managed to change out a propane tank to one of the grills, and suppress both his wonder, and overwhelming anguish at this fabulous phenomenon he has encountered. More than once, he wonders if the little girl's name is spelled the same as his daughter's.

It does not take long for Alfonso to learn that yes, she does. Within another hour, the people begin to arrive. The families and friends of the old men come to the building in droves of large vehicles, and they are wearing clothes that are casual or formal, sporty, or fashionable, and they are a mixture of people of all ages and sizes, color, and disposition. But mostly, they are pleasantly determined people, for they are here on the business of celebration.

It is none other than Sofia's birthday, Alfonso soon learns, and most thankfully, that is the final astonishing coincidence to this day of his. Any more such marvels and it would be the death of him, or so he believes.

He is also feeling out of place, and upon considering this, he is glad for what he chose to wear on this day. He is, after all, wearing festive colors.

As he stands at the grill, the variety of people come and go. Some come outside to study briefly their surroundings, before going back into the building, while others come out for longer periods of time. Some find corners of their own on the large deck, where they sit or stand, talk, or stare quietly at their phones. Others, older men in particular, move about with hands in pockets, their faces revealing a pleasant boredom, and mild anticipation for the pending feast. Almost all of these men stroll past the grill to observe Alfonso at work. And, almost all of these men offer nothing to Alfonso, no words at least, nothing other than the casual smile, or approving nod.

But the little girl, Sofia, she does not come and go, because, perplexingly, she always seems to be just right there. When the other children wish to play with her, they come outside to do so. They spend short moments and long moments with her, but it is always outside. It is as if Sofia is a permanent fixture of the deck, and just as so, a permanent fixture upon Alfonso's thoughts.

For the next hour, Alfonso sits in a chair Roy has brought him and waits patiently for the meat to cool, wondering if his job will soon be finished.

It is almost five o'clock, which is very often quitting time for men like him. He is drinking another bottled Coke, and the taste of the cold beverage is sweet as this day. He is watching the people linger and stroll, and by now many of them are laughing, for what little liquor there is has surely made its impact. But no one is belligerent, as this is only a party for a child.

When the hour is finished, Roy arrives holding a large platter with more utensils. He instructs Alfonso to cut the cooked meat in half-inch slabs, and it is at this juncture that Alfonso feels an ache in his chest, suddenly grateful for the old man's admirable qualities.

Alfonso prepares all of the meat as instructed. And before he is finished, the word has spread, and the people begin to arrive with plates in their hands, and smiles on their faces. Alfonso serves them portions of the beef accordingly, and the majority of the people thank him for doing so.

It has been such a fine day, Alfonso observes, an easy day, a mysterious day. But then Sofia comes next in line, with Roy standing next to her, crouching low once again, his hands braced below her own. She is carrying a porcelain plate, and it contains a mountain of food—mashed potatoes, green beans, two watermelon wedges, and a thick piece of buttered bread. She hands the plate to Alfonso, and says, "Here you go, señor."

Roy then takes the tongs from Alfonso and serves him two large slabs of brisket. He gestures to Alfonso's chair, and says, "Sit and eat."

And upon sitting, Alfonso watches Roy begin to serve the others, and he watches Sofia dash away, and he feels the heat under the plate on his hands, and at once, he also feels the urge to cry.

He can only somewhat process this event. It is no easy thing for him to deliberate upon, or communicate—no, he will not communicate this to anyone, as he would not know how. He is illiterate, after all. But what Alfonso does know is that this day is beyond any normal day; it is a phenomenal day, a day of blessings and gifts, a day of insight and wealth. A day of grace. It is his daughter's birthday, Sofia's birthday, and, amazingly, Alfonso has been allowed once more to truly celebrate this day.

#

At ten minutes past six, Alfonso gets dropped off at his house, by Roy. He thanks his employer, who smiles and thanks him back, and then Alfonso watches as the blue pickup truck pulls away.

Alondra is standing outside at the front door, her hands resting on the jam, and her eyes watching her husband as he strolls toward her. She smiles and gives him a hug, and then they walk into the house and the door closes.

Out of respect, Alfonso eats some of the dinner his wife has prepared for the family, and by the time he is finished his stomach is plenty full. It is a good feeling, a healthy feeling, he thinks, to lack the pang of hunger, and he cannot ignore how this notion is yet another blessing of this day.

After dinner, Alfonso, his wife, and their two boys, assemble in the living room, at Sofia's memorial. It is but a small thing, just a little table made of oak. And on the table is a framed picture of the girl, draped by a rosary previously owned by Alondra's grandmother. Next to the picture is a statue of Jesus, and there is a small vanilla cake Alondra had baked earlier. Seven candles burn brightly on the cake, representing the age Sofia would be today had she not been killed.

Alondra says a prayer, and then reads a passage from the Bible, before she lets her two boys blow out the candles. Then she serves each of them a piece of cake, and upon receiving his slice, Alfonso breaks down and cries at last.

His wife is with him later that night, her hand resting gently on his shoulder as they lie in bed. Outside, Alfonso hears the sudden screech of an owl, followed by the silence of a world now gone to sleep. His eyes are open and his stare is fixed on the glow from a candle burning in the bathroom. He can see the washcloth he used this morning, still hanging obediently on the towel rack. Largely, he is determined to stay awake all through the night, not wanting this day of blessings and terrible sorrow to ever end. But ultimately, Alfonso gives in to his tiredness, and the appeal of logic. Tomorrow will come another day, after all, and with it the prospect of work, for which Alfonso must be fully rested.

The End

Chris Riley lives near Sacramento, California, vowing one day to move back to the Pacific Northwest. In the meantime, he teaches special education, writes cool stories, and hides from the blasting heat for six months of the year. He has had over 100 short stories published in various magazines and anthologies, and across various genres. His debut novel, one of literary suspense, titled *The Sinking of the Angie Piper*, was published in 2017; and his debut short story collection is forthcoming, with Mount Abraxas Press. For more information, go to www.chrisrileyauthor.com.

Posted 3/12/2020
Ruth Morgan “Inspiration” moved into town on 3/12/2021

INSPIRATION
by
Ruth Morgan

The train pulled out of Prague Central Station. Catherine Ellam rested her elbow on the windowsill and gazed outside at the surrounding green countryside. Hanging baskets filled with summer flowers hung from light posts. Window boxes filled with cascading red geraniums added a splash of colour. This trip marked a milestone. For a decade, she'd written about Peter Henshaw, her crime-fighting hero and Callum Walsh, criminal mastermind. Through a dozen books, they'd battled each other on foot through Paris, a car chase through the hairpin turns of the Alps, a gunfight in London's crowded Camden Markets, making her reputation and fortune as the world's top female thriller writer. Now she was preparing for her next series of novels with fresh characters. First, she needed inspiration. To find it she came to the place she'd found it before – on a train; this train.

Looking around the carriage, she studied the passengers. They were ordinary everyday people going about their ordinary everyday lives. The atmosphere was peaceful. What she sought wasn't here.

She changed carriages, finding an unoccupied compartment.

The mood more promising here, the space buzzing with conversations, tension, and laughter – the emotions she needed to fuel her characters. New people and situations were essential to reenergize her creativity. She would enjoy the excitement of getting to know them, predicting how they would respond. She'd put her characters in situations, which tested their mettle, brought out their best – and their worst.

Her body tingled with anticipation at this next chapter in her life, new discoveries, new places, anticipation in not knowing where they would take her.

She relaxed, head against the seat, contented. Her eyes closed and she dozed.

“May I sit here?” asked a male voice.

She opened her eyes, “Certainly,” moving her feet so he wouldn’t stand on them.

“Are you traveling far?” he asked his accent strong, intriguing.

“To Vienna,” she said.

“It’s a beautiful city, especially in summer. Have you been there before?” The inquiry was polite.

“Yes.” Catherine adjusted her position.

He looked out of the window and she took the opportunity to study him. A handsome man with a strong jaw, clean-shaven. His nose slightly crooked, his dark hair grey at the temples. The beautifully cut Savile Row suit highlighted his muscular body. He exuded a smoldering sensuality she found alluring. His eyes were so deep she could drown. Eyes that twinkled as they met hers, reading her mind. The heat rose in her face. Already she could feel ideas racing through her mind. He would do very nicely as the hero in her next thriller series. Or the villain.

“Have you been to the Stephansdom?” he asked. “Into the crypt?”

“Yes.” She remembered the cool underground space, the piles of neatly stacked bones behind metal grilles, caskets, round urns containing the internal organs of the Hapsburgs. The story she’d set in Vienna, that sophisticated, wealthy city – the first with Peter Henshaw and Callum Walsh ended in that very crypt. Henshaw, her tough, dedicated hunter, was a man traumatized by loss. Walsh, her villain, was a smooth-talking, mercurial Irishman, responsible for the death of Henshaw’s pregnant wife.

“A beautiful building,” he remarked, crossing his legs and resting his hands on his left upper thigh. The fingers were long, elegant, the nails carefully tended. As he moved his hand slightly, he revealed the misshapen right hand beneath. He raised it from his thigh, expecting her to understand.

Something inside her began to stir.

Chilly fingers touched the nape of her neck, her body covered in goosebumps. The compartment was stuffy and she found it difficult to breathe. Clapping her hands tightly together, she spoke. Even to her ears, her voice sounded strained.

“Have we met before?” she asked, noting a rigidity about him which escaped her earlier examination and the slight bulge on the right-hand side of his jacket.

His brown eyes as cold as marbles. The look seemed to grab her by the throat. “Are. You. Joking?” he spat out the words.

Catherine’s heart began to race.

“You remember the gate into the crypt?” he pushed his right hand towards her, holding it in front of her face. “I sure as hell do! I can’t ever forget!”

Catherine tensed. No, it wasn’t possible! He was her creation! He couldn’t possibly be real. She delved into her memory trying to find something else that would link her to the man sitting opposite.

“I also remember Zagreb, where Callum nearly killed me with that knife.”

Catherine’s heart pounded. She recognized every wrinkle on his face. Every expression was familiar. Every emotion was known. He was just as he had been written, right down the small scar over his left eye. But it can’t be!

Peter Henshaw adjusted his position, and crossed his ankles, a sign he was thinking. His shoes were polished, laces double knotted.

Catherine wanted to pinch herself, rub her eyes, and make sure she was awake.

“Yes, I’m real,” said Henshaw, and with one well-shod foot, kicked her painfully on the shin, his face amused.

“You can’t be! You exist only in my imagination,” Catherine protested. She wanted to shake her head and make the nightmare stop. She must be awake; the throbbing in her leg was real.

Enjoyment creased Henshaw's face. "You did a good job." He remarked and reached out to adjust the cuffs on his shirt. His accent was strong, a mixture of Polish, and Russian. "You're tired of me? Bored, perhaps," he remarked. "In spite of the money I've made you."

"It wasn't you, alone," she retorted. "What about Callum?"

"Walsh? That bastard bog Irishman?!"

The atmosphere had changed. The other conversations she'd been listening to vanished. She was alone with Peter Henshaw.

"Remember Prague?" Henshaw asked, leaning forward. She could see the flecks of gold in his brown eyes, smell his aftershave, and feel the heat rising from his body.

"I remember."

The novel set in the beautiful city of Prague had been the location for what she planned to be the last in the series, and where she'd planned to kill her darlings. When it came down to it, she couldn't. Her fingers refused to type the words. She'd let them both live, the final novel unfinished. Now, Henshaw was demanding answers, and she had none to offer. He leaned back, eyes fixed on her face. "Why did you let him kill her?" he asked. His voice was odd, as though a deep inner tension strangled the words as they emerged. She'd never thought of him as emotional, never written him that way. He was always the tough, resilient hunter, focused, regardless of what she put him through. The intensity in his expression was unfamiliar. His face showed grief, pain and maturity making him more complex and more interesting.

"There've been lots of women," she said. "You can't complain, surely! She was just one more..."

"Yes, lots of women. But there was only one Elanor."

"That's why she had to die. Otherwise, there would be no story."

"There is no story anyway! You haven't finished it."

"Is that why you're here?"

“Yes!”

She remembered writing, amazed as Peter and Callum guided her hands over the keyboard, following breathlessly when Callum abducted Elanor. She'd watched Elanor with Walsh as he pushed his way through the crowds of tourists looking out over the dark water of the Vltava. Walsh pulled Elanor roughly when she faltered. Henshaw a long way behind, still in the middle of the Charles Bridge, frantic to close the distance and rescue the woman he loved.

“Why did you send me up that narrow street?” asked Henshaw, angrily. “What’s it called Nerv something or other? Then those bloody cobblestones. I could have caught them. Got her back, and killed him! Why send them into the church and let him get away?”

Catherine shivered as she recalled the scene. The small building was chilly even in midsummer. Inside an organist played up in the loft. He paused when the doors were flung open, turned, watched for a moment before he resumed practicing. Walsh locked the thick front door and pulled a sobbing Elanor through the rear exit leading into an alleyway.

“He shot her!” Henshaw yelled his rage and pain filling the small space. “Why didn’t you let me kill him? Why? I had him in the Palace Gardens. I could have got him there!”

“No!” she said quickly. “That’s not how I planned it would end!”

Henshaw sank into his seat. His shoulders were hunched, brown eyes glittering. She heard his breathing, shallow, rapid. Eventually he sat upright. “It’s taken me ten years, and a dozen attempts to get that bastard in my sights, and you let him get away. You killed my wife and child!” And—his words ran into each other—“gave me a drinking problem. I hate scotch! Why scotch?! I’d prefer vodka. Let me kill Walsh,” said Henshaw, “or...”

“Or what?” she asked, floundering.

“You want me dead. I’m tiresome now, a block to your brilliant career. Well, it’s why you’re on the train, isn’t it, looking for fresh inspiration?” He inquired, brown eyes fixed on hers. “Let me kill him. Finish the story.” Henshaw said the words crisp, accent strong. He opened his

jacket, revealing the bulge to be the butt of a pistol. “Think before you answer, and choose wisely – life, or death.”

Catherine closed her eyes. Her shoulders were tense. She was fearful.

Henshaw watched. “Now you know what it feels like!”

The fear dropped away as she realized he’d given her the solution enabling her to finish the book. And write another. She knew him well. Better than he knew her. She had the power. She was the writer, the creator, the plotter. Elanor wasn’t dead. There would be one last story, pitting the two men against each other, face to face. It would be her best yet.

When she spoke, her authority was clear in the quiet words. “You can’t kill me,” she said. “If you do, you die. Elanor dies. Everyone dies. You’ll be seen as a failure. Seen as the man who let his grief override his professionalism and kill the only person who can give him a second chance. Is that what you want? You’ll be a laughing stock. A character who preferred anger and the bottle to revenge? I’m giving you a choice – another opportunity...” Her mind began to race, she watched the story unfold and her excitement began to grow.

There was a long silence, broken only by the rattle of train wheels over the tracks. “I have another option. I’ll write you as a broken man, devastated by Elanor’s loss. You’ll put your weapons down, and walk away.”

“Never! Quit, and leave my reputation in tatters? Let Walsh get away with Elanor’s murder!”

Catherine felt Henshaw’s eyes on her. “You have something else to say?” he asked.

“She’s not dead.”

“I saw him kill her!”

“You don’t want to believe everything you see,” she remarked dryly. “I’m seeing this conversation, and I still don’t believe it. No, not another kick in the shin please,” she held up her hand. “I bruise easily.”

“What now?” asked Henshaw, demanding an answer.

“I’ll give you a clue, Elanor is in Poland.”

“Poland?”

Catherine nodded.

“You’ll write us all there?”

“Yes. You can reclaim your reputation, and get your revenge. You can finish it between you, in whatever way you choose. I won’t interfere.”

“Okay,” he said without hesitation.

She knew he’d jump at the opportunity. She understood him well. Reaching down she rubbed her sore leg, knowing beneath her jeans there was a darkening bruise.

When she looked up, she was alone.

She would finish this novel, and the next. Then there would be space in her imagination for others later. Room for the series she’d planned set in the Australian bush around Whitworth where she’d been born.

Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out her notebook, scribbling quickly. A surge of energy filled her body. The sound of screeching as the brakes were applied and the train slowed, pulling into the station.

Catherine stretched and stepped out onto the platform into the warmth of a summer day.

She had the inspiration she needed.

“So gentlemen,” she said to herself, “let’s make these stories our best. It’s time to get to work.”

The ending was clear. It would be a gripping final chase through the Karkonosze Mountains.

These people were her creations.

She would have the final say.

She alone would decide their fate.

Henshaw would never know she lied.

The End

Ruth Morgan has been writing most of her life. An avid reader, her preference is crime fiction. Living in New South Wales, the Australian landscape is a crucial character in her stories. She is currently writing a collection of short stories.

Posted 3/9/2021

Cassandra Cross "The Antibody to Her Antibodies" moved into town on
3/9/2021

THE ANTIBODY TO HER ANTIBODIES
by
Cassandra Cross

Ahchoo

Haley's sneeze erupted from her nose with hurricane force. She blew her nose into the handkerchief she kept pinned to her hooded sweatshirt. "It's an ill wind that blows this way," she mumbled.

Sunday morning, the streets and sidewalks of Golden Gate Park were crowded with speed walkers, cyclists and roller skaters as Haley entered the park wearing a brand new pair of roller blades. They were black with neon orange trimming and orange wheels. She had practiced rolling around her apartment on Fulton Street the evening before, receiving angry banging on the ceiling below from Mrs. Tyrell who lived in the apartment beneath hers. She wore the roller blades going down the flight of her apartment building stairs, balancing herself on each step with her arms spread out like a tightrope walker. She had wrapped a red bandanna around her head which resulted in her frizzy hair sticking out at the top like a broccoli floret. On the sidewalk outside her building she sneezed several times, batted away the winged particles of pollen that laughed in her face with their hideous twisted mouths, and proceeded to the park.

The purchase of the gates the day before was a way to diminish her frustration with having just been dumped by Lyle who she had seen three times before getting the call from him saying, "Your allergies drive me insane and I can't bear the idea of seeing you again."

"You don't understand," she complained, "My allergies drive me insane too. They make me see things."

"It's all in your head," he replied before hanging up.

She didn't really much like him either but didn't get the chance to tell him that before he hung up. But at age forty, having a male companion, even

one who had questionable hygiene, to go to the movies and out to dinner with, was better than sitting home alone.

On John F. Kennedy Drive she turned right, with the intention to roller blade all the way to one of the windmills at the end of the park. The scent of eucalyptus from the trees that crowded much of the woods at the west end of the park assaulted her senses, setting off another sneezing spell during which she watched microbes dance from her nostrils and hang in the air and twirl about like drunken ballerinas before dissipating in the balmy ocean breeze that blew through the trees. It only took her two blocks to feel as if she had mastered the ability to roller blade like an Olympic champion, only knocking one person from the sidewalk as she sped by before crashing into a man on a bicycle exiting a path that wound through the woods that separated the park from the heavily trafficked Fulton Street.

“You should watch where you're going. You could kill someone being so careless,” she said as he laid his bike in the grass alongside the sidewalk and helped her up from the cement where she had landed on her buttocks.

“I'm so sorry,” he replied. A lit cigarette hung onto this lower lip, sending up a wisp of curling smoke as it bounced up and down with each word he spoke. “I hope you're not hurt.”

She brushed a bit of dirt from her burgundy-colored sweatpants and righted herself on the roller blades. With her legs spread just enough to provide the stance required to stand with only slight teetering, she looked him up and down. His gaunt face was partially shielded by dark sunglasses. His hair and forehead were hidden beneath a khaki colored ballcap. His nose had the appearance of having once been broken, but repaired, left slightly askew. His smile seemed forced, but his teeth were shiny, white and straight. She surmised he took good care of them.

“I'm fine,” she said, at last. “Do you usually bike on the trails?”

“Not very often,” he replied. Using his tongue he pulled the cigarette into his mouth, took a drag on it, and then repositioned it on his lip. A moment later he exhaled a puff of smoke that drifted her direction. She waved it away, averting her eyes from the demonic faces that glared at her as they broke into miniature clouds of rapidly decreasing sizes that slowly drifted away.

“Must you smoke?” she asked him pointedly. “Second hand smoke is as dangerous to those of us who wouldn't smoke if our lives depended on it as it is to you. Don't you care about your health?”

He took the cigarette from his mouth and stared at it for a moment as if suddenly aware of its existence. “I'm so sorry,” he replied as he dropped it on the ground and crushed it beneath the heel of his. “I'm afraid I've made a very bad first impression. My name is Hans Lauder and I'd like to make amends for my carelessness. Perhaps you would let me take you out to dinner sometime this week and see if I can change what you think of me.”

“Perhaps,” she replied, hesitantly. “Give me your number and I'll call you.”

“Promise? You women always say things like that and none of you ever call me.”

“I promised, didn't I?” she replied, annoyed. “What more do you want?”

He hastily scribbled his number down on the back of a pack of matches and handed it to her. She tucked the matches into her fanny pack, turned and began to skate away.

“Remember, you promised,” he shouted as got onto his bike.

Near the exit from the park that looked out toward the Pacific Ocean she heard the sounds of the alarms from a fire truck and turned to see smoke billowing from the trees near where she had run into Hans. She took her cellphone out of her fanny pack and tapped the numbers 9-1-1.

#

Later that evening Haley sat at the table in the apartment of her friends Gwen and Mike with three of their other friends and dabbed at her watery, itchy eyes with her napkin while glaring at the table centerpiece of wildflowers only a couple of feet away from her. She could feel the legs on the allergen microbes as they crawled down her cheeks under the cover of tears. She inhaled back the snuffles that threatened to run freely from her nose. As the others were engaged in conversation she leaned

toward her friend, Matty, and whispered, “I met a man in the park today that seemed to take to me like white on rice.”

“What did you do?” Matty said.

“I played it very cool-like,” she said. “I had him eating out of the palm of my hand.”

“What about Lyle?”

“Oh, him,” she replied nonchalantly with a wave of her napkin. “It was going nowhere so I dumped him.”

“So, tell me about this guy you met.”

Haley coughed into the napkin, clearing the phlegm that was lining her vocal cords. “There was an instant spark between us. It was a highly combustible situation, if you get my drift.”

Matty fanned her face with her hand. “I sure do,” she said. “That is the best kind of meeting with a new guy.”

Haley sneezed and watched as a battalion of germs shot out of her nose like cannonballs and momentarily hovered in air before exploding in the space above the wildflowers. “You know what they say. Where there's smoke there's fire.”

“What does he look like?”

Haley paused, trying to recall what little she remembered about his looks, only his teeth and nose. “He gave off a lot of heat,” she said as if that was all Matty needed to know.

When the others at the table rose from their seats to go into the living room for after-dinner coffee and desserts, Haley grasped Matty's forearm. “Say nothing of this to anyone else.”

“Mum's the word,” Matty replied, pressing her index finger to her puckered lips.

They stood, followed behind the others, and sat in overstuffed chairs at opposite sides of the room. Gwen poured coffee into everyone's cups and

Mike passed around a plate of homemade spice cookies and lemon bars. Haley's face grew redder and hotter as she watched Matty whisper into Belinda's ear, a notorious gossip among their group who was seated next to Matty. The two women frequently glanced Haley's direction.

Although surprised by its buzzing, Haley felt an immediate sense of relief when her cellphone in her skirt pocket sounded. She took it out and put it to her ear.

“Yes, I can come to the police station now,” she said into it. She set her coffee cup and half eaten lemon bar aside and stood up. “Seems I need to go to the police station and identify someone I called them about earlier today.” Deflecting questions from the others and avoiding Matty's suspicious gaze, she grabbed her purse and jacket and left the apartment. As she descended the apartment building stairs she phoned for an Uber driver to take her to the police station.

#

Ahchoo

Haley sneezed the moment she walked into the police station. Dust mites sprung up from every surface and encircled her head like the rings of Saturn. She waved her hands at them like batting at swarms of gnats and made her way to the front desk where a female police sergeant stared at her expectantly for several moments, awaiting Haley to say something.

“Can I help you?” the sergeant asked at last, her tone tinged with annoyance.

“Detective Ross called me to come identify the man suspected of starting the fire in the park earlier today.”

The sergeant said nothing, picked up a phone, pushed a button, and a moment later said into the receiver, “The woman is here to identify the alleged arsonist.”

Detective Ross came through a door behind the desk a moment later. He had a file in his hand and slapped it against his other hand with a resounding smack when he saw Haley. “You're Miss Rogers?” he asked, eyeing her from head to toe.

Haley coughed, trying to clear her lungs of the sudden invasion of her bronchioles by the overpowering aroma of his pungent after shave. She was certain the air that surrounded him was toxic. “Yes, I am. Is Hans Lauder here?”

“His name isn't Hans Lauder, but the man you described that we picked up a couple hours after the fire is here. We just need you to identify him.”

“Certainly,” Haley said.

“Follow me,” Detective Ross said as he opened the door behind the desk and led her into a long hallway lined with doors. “All you will need to do is look at him and tell us if he's the man you met in the park this morning.”

“That should be easy,” Haley said. “This is kind of exciting. I've never identified anyone in a lineup before. He doesn't know it's me who reported him, does he?”

“No, he doesn't,” the detective said, stopping to open a door. “But the man we apprehended based on your description says he didn't start the fire.” He then waved Haley into the room.

Standing on the other side of a table in the middle of the room was Hans and a police officer.

Befuddled and perplexed, Haley turned to Detective Ross. “But he's not in another room behind some two-way glass and can see me.”

“This isn't a television show, Miss Rogers,” he said. “Lineups aren't always necessary.”

“What if he's set free and comes after me, to kill me, or something?”

“If he's the arsonist, by the time he gets out of prison he'll have forgotten all about you.”

Haley sneezed and then brushed away the fireflies that danced in front of her face.

“Is this the man you met in the park today?”

Haley turned her gaze on Hans. He wasn't wearing sunglasses or a ballcap and he had on different clothes. She was certain it was the same man but then again, she wasn't entirely certain. "Can you have him wear sunglasses and a ballcap so that I can make sure?"

Detective Ross grunted impatiently. "No, him changing his appearance isn't permitted. Is it him or not?"

Hans glared at her menacingly, his teeth hidden behind cemented lips. She looked at his nose, which didn't seem the same as she remembered seeing it. It was Hans, but then again it wasn't. She sneezed loudly, blowing clouds of antigens into the air that twisted into the shape of a tornado and flew out the open window. "I can't say with one-hundred-percent certainty this is the man that I ran into in the park," she said. She took the pack of matches from her purse and handed it to Detective Ross. "This has his cellphone number on it."

The detective took his cellphone from his suit pocket, dialed the number, and then put his phone back in his pocket. "It's not a working number."

Mouth agape, Haley fixed her icy stare on Hans' frozen mask-like face. "You gave me a fake number? What if I had wanted to go on a date with you?" she stammered.

#

The next Sunday morning, Haley did as she always did after just awaking. She looked at the pollen count for San Francisco on the Allergy Alert app on her cellphone that she kept on the bedside stand. Seeing it was higher than usual she groaned loudly and then got out of bed, showered, dressed, and had a small breakfast. She then covered her mouth and nose with a surgical mask and put on her roller blades. She glided across the living room floor and out her apartment door and saw Mrs. Tyrell standing at the bottom of the stairs, her arms crossed, with a pronounced scowl on her face. Very carefully and slowly Haley descended the stairs. "I'm so sorry about skating in my apartment again," she said to the elderly woman. "I was in a hurry to get out and forgot about the racket I must create."

Mrs. Tyrell glanced down at Haley's roller blades, seeing them up close. "So those are what's making all that noise. It's like a train is crossing right over my head."

"I thought they might motivate me to get more exercise."

"You couldn't wait until you're outside before you put them on?"

"Yes, I'll do that from now on." Haley said. "After last week it's a surprise I want to use them again at all." She then recounted what had happened in the park, Matty's "brazen" gossiping about her after breaking a promise not to, and what transpired at the police station. "My immune system has been shot all week from everything that happened," she concluded.

Mrs. Tyrell yawned as if about to fall asleep, having tried several times to halt Haley's barrage of words in telling the story. "Men doing terrible things and women gossiping about it. It's a cliché that is repeated over and over."

"There's nothing new under the sun, is there?"

Risking hearing another long-winded tale, Mrs. Tyrell pointed at the mask. "I see the pollen count must be high."

"Very," Haley replied. "It doesn't block everything out but it's better than getting more shots or taking higher doses of medication. As my allergist says, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Mrs. Tyrell turned to go back into her apartment. "Remember what I said about those things on your feet." She went in and closed her door.

Haley opened the door and immediately sneezed. "Damn," she sputtered, feeling the mask fill with microbial spiders that spread webs of sputum across the lower part of her face. She pulled the mask away to allow it to briefly air out and then readjusted it over her nose and mouth. She was half way down the steps when she saw Hans Lauder standing across the street. Or so she thought. He vanished as quickly as he had appeared. She hadn't told anyone, but this had been happening since seeing him the last time in the police station. She hesitated briefly before continuing down the steps, thinking it might be better to go back inside and spend the day not putting her impaired antibodies through the stress of a day outdoors

with a high pollen count. On the sidewalk she made certain she was on firm footing and then skated to the park.

On John F. Kennedy Drive, she turned toward the direction leading to the ocean and even though the street was blocked off from motorized vehicles she began racing down the sidewalk, bumping into walkers, skaters and cyclists along the way. After the length of a couple of blocks her eyes were itching and filled with tears. She stopped at the exact spot where she had run into Hans the previous Sunday. She removed the handkerchief she had pinned to her sweatshirt and gently dabbed each eye.

“The pollen today is a killer.”

Haley glanced over to see a man standing beside her. He had slightly graying coal black hair and appeared to be not much older than she was. He was wearing a face mask. His runny eyes were the most sparkling green she had ever seen. He was wearing roller blades trimmed in bright orange with orange wheels. Suddenly her vision cleared and her sniffles dried up.

“Do you believe in fate?” she asked.

“Everything happens for a reason.”

The End

Cassandra Cross is a waitress. She cites her biggest accomplishment as not finishing her undergraduate degree after attending four different colleges and universities, all in the San Francisco Bay Area. She enjoys target shooting and tap dancing. This is her first published story.

Posted 3/6/2021
Scott Macmann "I'll Buy You A New One" moved into town on
3/6/2021

I'LL BUY YOU A NEW ONE
by
Scott Macmann

The neighborhood trees swayed in the humid, Xenith, Ohio summer air. Insects hummed in the dappled late afternoon light. Sam coasted the downhill incline in his sedan that led to his driveway. Another long day at the office was in the books. Another long night awaited.

His son stood on the sidewalk watching him. Sam stopped the car and lowered the passenger window. He leaned over to look at him. "Jacob. What's up?"

Jacob stepped forward and put his little hands on the door. His mop of blond hair and blue eyes were a memento. He was a little-boy version of his mother. "Mom says don't block her in. She has a meeting tonight."

Keep calm. "Okay." He took a breath. "But I wasn't going to block her in."

"Mom says you always block her in."

"That's not true."

"That's what mom says."

Damn it. "Just because she." He stopped. "Fine. I won't block her in."

Jacob turned, ran to the front door, and went inside their house.

"She could tell me herself for once," he said to the steering wheel.

He pulled into the driveway. There was room to pull in next to his wife's minivan, but for a moment he considered pulling in behind it. The corner of his mouth rose in a halfway grin. Probably not a good idea.

Sam pressed the controller to open the garage door and got out of his car with his briefcase and that day's copy of the Xenith Sentinel under his arm. He glanced over at the kitchen door and sighed.

The garage was piled high with lawn equipment, junk, and boxes with even more junk. He reached the basement door and clicked the controller to close the garage door. He went inside.

Cool, damp air wrapped around him.

His workbench was in the far corner next to the furnace and water heater. His cot and sleeping bag were pushed up against the wall. He'd cleared off the end of the bench for an old microwave. Next to that was the basement fridge.

He opened and closed his mouth, which seemed dry.

Just one.

#

Metal on metal scraped as the chain on the door at the top of the basement stairs was removed. The kitchen door opened.

“Dad?”

“Yes, Jacob.”

“Can I come down?”

“Sure, Jacob. What's up?” He took a quick swig from his beer and put it back in the refrigerator.

His son held a toy rocket ship in his arms. Two of the stabilizer fins were clearly damaged. The paint was scuffed and scratched.

Sam hopped up on his bench stool and flipped on the work light. “What happened?”

“Ethan. He threw it down the street for a crash landing.”

That little bastard. Why does my boy play with that kid?

Jacob handed him the damaged toy. “Can you fix it?”

He held the rocket under the light and examined the damage. “I don’t see why not.” Jacob beamed. “Pull that chair over here so you can help.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Sam set the ship upright on its two good fins and held it in place with one hand while he tested the condition of the other two. This’ll be tricky. Cheap Chinese plastic.

Jacob climbed up and stood on the chair next to him.

Sam glanced over at him. “I think you’ve grown another inch or two. You must be the tallest 5th grader at your school.”

“Not even close. Ryan is huge. So is Brayden.”

“You’ll get there. Don’t worry.” They looked at the ship together as he turned it around to get better views. Jacob reached a finger out and touched one of the mangled fins. “We need to reattach the fins to the ship, right? I’ve got super glue. It’ll take a day to dry, okay?”

The kitchen door opened. “Jacob?” His wife, Nicole.

“He’s down here with me,” Sam called.

“Jacob, it’s dinnertime.” Without looking back, his son went up the stairs, and the door closed. The metal chain scraped as it was set back in place.

Sam stared at the stairs. A small, empty feeling in the center of his chest throbbed. He got down off the stool and got his beer back out from the fridge. He took a gulp, and then another. One more. He got a fresh bottle out of the fridge and placed it next to the rocket ship, which lay on its side.

#

Sam got back up on his stool. “I suppose I should eat something.” He continued to fiddle with the toy and spoke in a low voice. “These fins

have to hold weight. This is going to take more than glue. Maybe a couple of little screws to strengthen everything. That's the ticket." He set the rocket ship on its side and got off the stool.

"Yeah. I need to eat something." He took a drink from his new beer and opened the fridge to consider his choices. There was most of a case of King of Xenith beer left. There was part of a loaf of bread. There was a jar of peanut butter.

The chain on the kitchen door jangled again. "Dad?"

Sam shut the refrigerator. "Yes, Jacob."

"Is it fixed yet?"

He walked over to the foot of the steps and stood in the square of light from above. "Not yet. I said we're going to have to glue it and let it dry at least overnight."

Jacob whined. "Overnight?"

"I'm thinking it also needs several small screws to keep those fins in place. I'm just looking for some right now. You want to help?"

"Sure. I'll be right down." Jacob turned his head and spoke in a loud voice. "Mom, I'm going downstairs."

The sharp report of footsteps in the kitchen coming to the opening. "Jacob, what are you doing?" she asked the boy.

Sam called up the stairs to her. "Nicole, he's helping me."

"Mom, Dad's fixing my rocket ship."

She put her hand on his shoulder and pulled Jacob off the top step back into the kitchen. "Oh honey, your father can't fix anything. I'll buy you a new one. Let's get ready to go."

The door closed, and Sam was once more in darkness at the bottom of the stairs.

#

He stared up the stairs at the closed door. His mouth opened and closed. Holding his hands up to see the palms, Sam's lip curled back. "Oh honey," he said in a low voice. "Your father can't fix anything." He growled. "I'll show you."

Back at his workbench, the broken rocket ship and the beer waited. He grabbed the beer and knocked it back. Emitting a gasp when it was empty, he set it down with force on the wooden bench top.

"I'll show you."

He opened the refrigerator door with a jerk and saw the bag of bread. He snarled at the bread. "What are you going to do for me, huh? Well?" He pulled another bottle out of the case of beer and slammed the fridge door shut.

"King of Xenith, Ohio." The brown bottle looked good in his hand. The red "X" with its golden crown was a glowing neon beacon in a hundred bars across the city. "King of the basement."

He took another drink and sat down.

"Shoot. The screws." He hopped off his stool again and went to the hardware cabinet near the base of the stairs by the sink, toilet and shower. There was commotion upstairs as Nicole and Jacob left the house, and then stillness reigned.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, it dawned on him that he had not heard the chain put back. She never forgets. Never. He took a swig of beer and headed up the stairs with the bottle clenched in his hand.

Sam stopped to listen. Are they really gone? Is this a trap? Is she waiting for me to open the door? He put his hand on the knob. Silence. He gave the knob a slight turn and held it in place. Nothing. He turned it all the way until it stopped. No sounds.

Pushing the door with the lightest touch, it creaked.

He froze.

His heart raced.

The house was silent. He pushed the door open and stepped out into the kitchen. My kitchen. Our kitchen. He looked at the familiar objects. How strange and wonderful they seemed. Old friends reunited once more.

With cautious steps, he took position in the center of the room. His heart thumped in his chest. This is exhilarating. A month in basement exile and everything was brand new.

The mail was on the countertop. He set his beer down to free his hands.

Be careful. Top of the pile was the electric bill. Second was junk mail. Third was a lawyer.

My God. My God.

#

“No, Nicole. No!” He recoiled from the envelope and his hands flung out. His right hand sideswiped the beer bottle sitting on the counter, and it tipped over. Beer gushed out.

He shouted and grabbed the bottle.

How could she? I’m getting better.

Sam put the bottle in the sink and grabbed a handful of paper towels off the roller. She’s going to know I was up here. He soaked up the small puddle of beer. He sniffed. The area around the sink smelled like beer.

“I can fix this,” he said aloud.

He got a garbage bag from the pantry and put the beer-soaked paper towels in it. Then he scrubbed the sink and counter with cleanser.

Better.

The clock showed 8pm. How much time do I have?

The rest of the beer went down the drain, and he ran more soap and cleanser down it. He sniffed. Maybe a slight hint of beer. Oh well.

When he closed the kitchen door behind him and descended the steps back to the basement, the kitchen looked and smelled close to how she had left it earlier.

#

Once again he sat down at his workbench and looked at the rocket ship.

How can she divorce me? I'm getting better. I'm not like I was. He slammed his fist on the bench top. It's not fair. I need more time.

Screws. No more distractions. He came back with a large assortment to choose from. Some of these will work. They've got to.

He straightened the fins and using the thinnest drill bit created holes for the screws to pin everything in place.

At one point he got thirsty, and he went to the utility sink and filled his coffee mug with water. No more beer. Enough is enough.

The work went well. He felt fuzzy from the beers earlier, but not impaired. I've got to do this. I've got to show them.

Glancing at his watch, he saw it was five minutes till ten. With a grin of triumph, he set the rocket ship down on the bench with nothing propping it. It stood.

#

Nicole's car pulled in to the driveway, and a minute later they were in the kitchen. Sam held his breath. Will she smell the beer? Will she yell at him?

The door to the basement opened.

"Dad? Can I come down?"

"Sure." Sam walked over to the bottom of the stairs.

Jacob held a brand new toy rocket ship. "Look what I got. Do you like it?"

He's forgotten the other one. "It looks great."

"Mom says I have to get to bed now." Jacob hugged him. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, son."

Jacob ran up the stairs. The door opened and shut. The chain rattled as it was set in place.

Sam looked over to the workbench just in time to see the mended fins twist and give way. The rocket ship fell on its side. He shook his head.

She's right. I can't fix anything.

The End

Scott Macmann helped win the Cold War as a U.S. Army infantry and military intelligence officer during the 1980s and 1990s. His fiction mixes military, political and social themes with a dash of absurd. Cincinnati, Ohio is home for Scott, and he is an enthusiastic member of Cincinnati Fiction Writers.

Posted 3/5/2021

C.J. Anderson- Wu “Hunger Devil” moved into town 3/5/2021

THE HUNGER DEVIL

by

C.J. Anderson-Wu

Ah-Zhan woke up from the smell of milkfish porridge, the tenderness of the fish belly in the long-cooked rice was hot enough to burn the tongue, and the green onions had greatly enriched the flavors. As she opened her eyes, sunlight had begun to climb over the high windows. She sat up and looked around, all the others were still asleep. She jumped down from the bunk bed as quietly as possible and walked toward the restroom shared by more than thirty women.

The breakfast was very dry buns, shredded pork with cucumber preserved in soy sauce, and peanuts that tasted mildewy. The pork and preserved cucumber were too salty, Ah-Zhan had to drink a lot of cold water to wash it down. But at least she had regular meals. The memory of hunger was not a fond one at all.

When Ah-Zhan was in high school, she had grown tall enough to help her father and other milkfish farmers work in the pond they created together. It was the time when the farmlands along the west coast had sunken to lower than the sea level, and the soil turned too saline to grow anything. Later their fish farm was accused of being the cause of the land sinking because they pumped underground water to fill the pond. But they had to give up rice farming in the first place because their lands sank, so who should be responsible for it?

Ah-Zhan’s father and other farmers spent a lot of time and money to learn how to convert their rice fields into a fish pond for all the families to rely on the income they might make by the quantities of fish they could raise. For the first several years, they made a lot of mistakes, like the time the water leaked through the clay walls they erected by hand, or when the feed they produced was not right for the fish and the water was polluted, or the season they waited for too long to harvest the fish which were still too small resulting in them finally dying in the winter chill.

Later they were taught to put a thin layer of water into the pond first during the end of winter to cultivate algae. When spring started, the

water would be dried by sunlight and wind, and at that time they spread rice bran for the growth of more algae. They then added a thin layer of water again, while waiting until the pond dried up once more, so that it should not dry too fast or too slowly. If it dried too fast, they'd add more water, if it dried too slowly, they'd drain the pond. They were told if the soil at the bottom of the pond was barren, they should spread more rice bran, but since they did not have so much rice bran, they added chicken manure. They also found, after trial and error, that the chicken manure must be fermented prior to use, otherwise the fish might die because of the lack of oxygen. They had to watch the quality of the pond water closely, if there was too much algae, fish would tend to gather on the water surface and become the prey of egrets or seagulls.

Diseases were another challenge, the fast reproduction of euglena or dinoflagellates might cause the death of a great amount of fish, in this case the only solution was to use chemicals to kill them.

How is the fish farming at home now? How are those hard-working fish farmers? Ah-Zhan thought. Do they know where I am? Are they in trouble because of me?

Ah-Zhan had been imprisoned for nine months, and she has no idea how much longer she would be there. Her lawyer Gee Sheen, a volunteer, had visited her four times, but had very little information he could give her. They did not know when a trial would proceed, if there was going to be a trial at all. Most of the evidence in favor of her or her peers had been eradicated by the staff from the so called National Security Agency during her time on the run. Mr. Gee Sheen's visits were rather to give her support than legal service, and to show to the authorities that Ah-Zhan was not by herself, and they should not bully her.

Finishing her dried bun, the peanuts and the very salty preserved dish, Ah-Zhan still felt hungry. She might have stared at the other inmate's food too obviously without her own awareness, Hsiao Jin, a middle-aged woman, pushed her breakfast to Ah-Zhan, "I don't need so much food, take it for me. You are young, you need more energy." Ah-Zhan felt embarrassed, but she devoured down Hsiao Jin's food immediately. Her mind must have been more hungry than her body.

During the weeks of Ah-Zhan's running and hiding in the forest, finding food was the most difficult thing. At first she received meat jerky, rice balls or bananas from time to time that were hung over a tree not far from

the road, supplied by people unknown to her. Later the food stopped coming, and she waited but nothing more came, Ah-Zhan decided it meant she needed to run again, assuming it meant either her food supplier was in trouble, or she was warned not to stay in the same place.

She climbed up to the higher mountain, assuming that the deeper inside the forest she retreated, the safer she would be. She found a flat place not too far from a stream where she could crash under two leaning rocks, a spot away from the gusty wind. But what to eat became a problem. Ah-Zhan did not possess much knowledge about the wilderness and had prepared for nothing for her run into the mountains. When their procession in the name of anti-corruption and transparent policy-making was broken down by armed law enforcement, several demonstrators were picked up by police with great force. Ah-Zhan was stunned, she never really expected such a conflict could happen, after all, they only demanded a government with integrity. Which society doesn't need an honest government? When Ah-Zhan was trying to assist a man who was pulled and lifted by a bunch of policemen, Da Chuan grabbed her arm and pushed her away, "Run! Wait for messages in the Monkey Mountain." He pointed at a direction, where another man led her away from the scene of the beating and screaming.

Ah-Zhan entered the mountain like a running mouse, she was by herself, those who had travelled together earlier disappeared without her notice. What was the next step? She walked along the mountain trails all night but stayed close to the areas where she still could see landmarks like a pavilion constructed by a nearby temple, or a lamppost suggesting a road under it. That was where she found the food delivered from time to time.

But contrary to her hopes of being able to get out and go home soon, the disruption to her food supply told her to run further from the town or any settlement. In the depth of a forest, everything was so different to things she was used to seeing and feeling in the city. Light from the moon and stars was faint, there were sounds of birds and bugs, activities of unknown animals. . . in the night Ah-Zhan was easily scared by any movement of the things surrounding her like the scraping branches of trees swaying in the breeze.

There are so many messages in the gusts of wind at night, too bad that Ah-Zhan couldn't decipher them. What happened? Should she get down to check it out? Could she go back to the place where she had found food to see if the supply had resumed? Or, was it possible for her to ask for

something to eat from the nearest temple? She must look terrible now, people seeing her might report her as a loiterer, a trouble maker. Observing the activities of birds and squirrels, Ah-Zhan found some berries from the trees, but they hardly fed her. To save energy, she slept as much as she could. She kept telling herself not to think about food, to persuade herself, her mind and her body, that she could sustain her life without food.

Ah-Zhan lost track of the date. She must have been on the run for weeks. How would she know when she could go back? Who would know where she was? It was getting colder—was it September or October? What would happen if she still couldn't go home in winter?

One night Ah-Zhan's lower belly cramped, she could hardly stand or sit straight. Then a flow of warm liquid was felt between her legs. Her period started. Ah-Zhan began to cry, she hadn't eaten normally for so long, and now she was losing the precious fluid from her body. Ah-Zhan found the only fabric she had with her to use as a sanitary pad, the cloth had been used for the last food delivery many days ago that was never taken back by her food supplier. The cramps were so bad, she usually took pain killers during the first two days of her period, now she had nothing to stop the sharp pain. Ah-Zhan's aunt Hsiu-Chun blamed her menstrual discomfort on her work in the water of their fishing pond, she said the coldness of water had penetrated her body, her womb, that not only caused her pain every month, but also would make her childbearing very difficult in the future. Aunt Hsiu-Chun told her parents more than once not to have Ah-Zhan work in the cold water, but who else could do it? They all had to climb up and down the pond, they couldn't afford to hire people. Childbearing, Ah-Zhan laughed bitterly. Did her parents know where she was now? Did her fellow protestors know she was still on the run? Perhaps she should walk out no matter what would happen to her.

In prison at least Ah-Zhan was provided three meals a day, although the food was terrible. Mr. Gee Sheen once analyzed her situation and strategy of her trial, which eventually was to be scheduled due to the pressure brought by international human rights watchers. But it was a dilemma for Ah-Zhan. Mr. Gee Sheen told her that if she wanted to best defend herself and herself only, she could cooperate with the prosecutors. She could tell them what her organization meant to achieve, what orders she had been given, and who else she had worked with.

“What did we mean to achieve? Wasn’t it clear that we want to have a corrupt-free government, we want to have transparent policy-making? We want democracy! We put all these on the handouts, on the banners, we talk about it all the time, it is not a secret!”

“I know. But they try to make it a conspiracy. Sabotage of the government, and collusion of foreign power.”

“It’s not a conspiracy, nor sabotage. And it is just us, no foreign power!”

“You know what the prosecutors are heading for, they want to divide all the defendants and break down their solidarity.”

“It is not working on me!” Ah-Zhan said with great fury.

“But if any of your accomplices cooperates, all of you lose your chance to get lenient sentences.”

“One of us might betray the others?”

“Yes. And it is very likely.”

“And if all of us are betrayers?”

“All of you will get serious punishment.”

“I see. Some of us pay the price of being betrayed. And if all of us are betraying one another, we pay the price of being betrayed together.”

After all, what they had demanded for would not be addressed by the government. To the government, corruption was not a problem, the problem was those people who tried to reveal it and correct it. And the mutual-trust of the protestors was tested, with the ugliest trick.

That night Ah-Zhan asked those sharing the same room with her if anyone knew how to cook milkfish porridge. One of the women inquired, “Why bother to know? You can’t cook it here.”

“I am afraid I will be imprisoned for the rest of my life.”

All the women became quiet. In this place, inmates never discussed the reasons of their imprisonment, but from the casual chats, Ah-Zhan knew

the crimes they had committed were mostly fraud, theft, abortion or prostitution. None of them had been, like her, put in jail because of a public demand for democracy and government reform. Would they understand?

Then one of the women, a mother in her forties, began to recite the recipe:

Scale the fish, wash it, cut it into halves, and remove the bones as cleanly as possible.

Wash it again and fillet the fish. Cook the fish in clear water with a medium fire for fifteen minutes.

Soak the rice in water for half an hour before boiling it with a medium flame.

Turn the flame down when the rice becomes gruel, add it to the milkfish soup.

Add thinly sliced fresh ginger, salt, white pepper powder, and rice wine.

Cook the porridge with low heat until the rice absorbs the flavor of the fish and ginger.

Add green onions just before serving it.

Ah-Zhan sighed, like she had just tasted the freshly cooked milkfish porridge and was satisfied. And every woman around her seemed to be relieved.

The End

C.J.Anderson-Wu is a writer, editor and translator from Taiwan. In 2017 she published *Impossible to Swallow—A Collection of Short Stories* about the White Terror in Taiwan. Her short stories can be found in Strandlit, Lunaris Review, Eastlit and Short Story Avenue among other online literature journals.

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Steve Carr “Tomiko Takes the Train” moved into town 3/4/2021

TOMIKO TAKES THE TRAIN

by
Steve Carr

Tomiko’s joints ached, especially her knees. She gingerly raised the hem of her kimono and stared at them for several moments as if seeing them for the first time. Nothing seemed to ever make them feel better for very long. Acupuncture, hot baths, daily swims, herbal teas, massage, the small white pills her doctor gave her; all failed to ease her from the constant suffering. She lowered her skirt, took a sip of tea that had turned cool, almost cold, in a matter of minutes, and spit it back into the cup. When her canary, Ichika, began to sing loudly from its cage near the window, she looked up, suddenly worried that her beloved pet wouldn’t be properly taken care of or be given enough attention while she was away. Her neighbor, Emica, who would be looking after the bird, was a kind woman, but nearing eighty years old. Emica had lapses in memory that often made Tomiko worry about her own state of mind. She was six years older than Emica.

She slowly stood, picked up the cup and saucer it had set on, and shuffling across the kitchen in a new pair of uwabaki – a Christmas gift from her great granddaughter who lived in San Francisco – carried them to the sink. Careful not to get the white gloves she was wearing from getting wet, she rinsed the cup and saucer off and put them in the drainer. Through the slightly raised window above the sink she watched a small group of young boys jostle one another as they went down the alleyway on their way to school. The boys made little noise, moving along silently like dancing Bunraku puppets. She closed the window, walked to Ichika’s cage, pressed her face against the mesh screen and clicked her tongue against the back of the upper plate of her false teeth. The bird stopped singing, jumped from an upper dowel to a lower one, nearer to Tomiko’s face, and pecked at the screen.

“You be a good girl for Emica,” she said to the bird. “Your mama will be back in two days.”

Ichika tilted her head, looking at Tomiko first with one eye, then the other.

Tomiko took a piece of rice cake from the pocket in her apron, opened the cage door, and placed it next to the overflowing cup of bird seed. She closed the door and smiled as the bird hopped to the cake and began pecking at it. She removed her apron, hung it on a hook by the door, and left the kitchen. In the living room she watered her overgrown money tree plant, then removed her uwabaki and changed into a pair of sandals. She slipped her arm through the handle of a small purse, pushed it up her forearm, and covered it with the sleeve and opened the front door. She then lifted the lid of a large woven basket sitting by the front door and peered in, then gently closed it. She picked up a small suitcase and carried it and the basket out the door, shutting it behind her.

The taxi was already at the curb outside her building when she walked out. The driver, Itsuki, who she had known since he was a boy, forty years ago, got out, and approached her. "Today is the right morning for me to be here, Tomiko-san?" he said bowing slightly, a huge smile on his face.

"Yes it is, Itsuki," she said, handing him the suitcase.

"Where is it I am to take you, Tomiko-san?"

"Today I take the train back to the place of my birth as I do every year."

He looked about and seeing no one else, he said, "By yourself? Is that wise, Tomiko-san?"

"I have no choice," she said. "My family and friends are all busy this year."

#

At the curb of the Tokyo train station, Itsuki took the suitcase from the trunk of his taxi, and then helped Tomiko, who was holding onto the basket, out of the back seat.

"Please, Tomiko-san, wait a few days and I'll take the train with you," he pleaded with her as reluctantly handed her the suitcase.

"I must go now," she said. "Same time in August every year."

He bowed, slightly and with a worried expression on his face, said, “Yes, Tomiko-san. I understand. I will be here in two more days to greet you on your return.”

“Thank you, Itsuki,” she said as she turned and merged with a crowd going into the station.

Inside the station, Tomiko was momentarily disoriented by the din of voices and the hum of the train waiting at the passenger platform, ready to depart. A policeman stopped a few feet from her, eyed her and her basket, and then continued on.

“Let me help you,” a young man wearing a cowboy hat, with brown hair that hung to his shoulders and a beard and handlebar mustache said as he took her by the elbow and led her to the open door of the train. He had a guitar hanging from his shoulder and backpack strapped to his back. He guided her to two seats that faced each other and helped her sit down in one and then he sat in the one facing her. “I’m Jimmy Rowe,” he said. “Do you speak English?”

She stared down at his cowboy boots and then up at his friendly, smiling face. “Some,” she said.

He put her suitcase and his backpack in the overhead compartment, and settled back into his seat with his guitar resting across his knees. “I’m from the U S,” he said.

She nodded. “Yes, I thought so” she said knowingly. “I am Tomiko Higashi.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said.

“You must excuse me Jimmy Rowe, I do not want to seem unfriendly or unkind, but I am of an older generation and it is not our custom for women traveling alone to speak with strange men, especially foreigners.”

He hesitated for a moment before saying, “I understand.” As the train doors closed and it began to leave the station, he raised his guitar and held it against his chest, his fingers resting on the strings.

She opened the lid to the basket sitting in her lap and peered in. “How is my Heisuke feeling?” she said to the sleeping tabby cat curled up in a

ball on a pillow. The cat's tail fluttered. It opened its eyes, squinting, and meowed softly. "Poor old Heisuke," she cooed as she reached in and petted its bright orange fur. The cat closed its eyes, and purring quietly, returned to sleep. She closed the lid and turned to watch the scenery as the train accelerated, quickly leaving the station behind.

#

Jimmy Rowe lightly strummed his guitar with his eyes closed while humming softly to himself.

"Excuse my contradiction in behavior," Tomiko said, reaching over and tapping his knee with her gloved hand, "but may I ask what music it is that you are playing that is so enjoyable to listen to?"

He opened his eyes. "It's called country music," he said. "I'm going to a music festival in Fukuoka to play there."

"You are famous singer, then?" she said.

He chuckled. "Not at all. I just wanted to see Japan."

"Why?"

"My great grandfather was a soldier and came here in WWII," he said. "He spoke of it often before he died."

She looked out the window, not at him. She tried to see the landscape, the city structures, the shiny train station as he might see them, but she couldn't through the tears that welled in her eyes.

"Fukuoka, Hakata Station, coming up," a woman's voice announced over the intercom.

"I change trains here," she said, her voice choking. She stood up the same time as he did. He retrieved his backpack from the overhead compartment and hung it on his back and handed her the suitcase. "I wish we could have gotten to know one another better," he said to her as he slung his guitar over his shoulder by its strap.

He started to take her elbow to help her down the aisle. She quickly pulled away. "Please, no, Jimmy Rowe," she said icily.

“Goodbye. I’m sorry if I offended you,” he said as the train came to a stop. He walked on, not receiving a response.

#

While waiting on the passenger platform for the train that would take her to her destination, Tomiko bought a Styrofoam cup filled with noodles and some raw fish from a vendor whose stand was set up near the entry way into the station. She sat down on a bench and ate hurriedly since her train would arrive soon. She opened the basket lid and tried to encourage Heisuke to stand up and to eat the fish, but he would do neither. “Poor old Heisuke,” she said soothingly to the cat as she massaged the top of its head. She stuffed the last noodles into her mouth with wooden chopsticks just as the train to Nagasaki arrived. She wrapped the fish in a napkin and placed it in the basket with Heisuke and tossed the cup and chopsticks into the trash bin. Carrying the basket and her suitcase she crowded into the train with the other passengers and to her surprise and delight found two empty seats by a window at the end of the car. She placed her suitcase at her feet and cradled the basket in her lap.

Within minutes a middle aged Japanese man in a business suit and carrying a briefcase approached her and pointed at the empty seat beside her. “May I?” he said.

She nodded, reluctantly, and scooted nearer to the window as he sat down.

“I am Eichi Saito,” he said. “I have a software company in Nagasaki. Do you own a computer?”

She shook her head. “I am an old woman and have no use for one,” she said bluntly. “Please, if I may ride to Nagasaki in silence I would be humbly grateful.”

“Certainly,” he said, politely bowing his head. He placed the briefcase in his lap, opened it and took out an eBook and began to read.

She turned her head to the window and rode to Nagasaki looking out at the scenery, withholding the urge to laugh when Eichi Saito took a handkerchief from his pocket and held it against his nose as the pungent aroma from the fish began to waft from the basket.

#

The sidewalk outside the station in Nagasaki was packed with people awaiting taxis or to be picked up by family members or friends. Tomiko slowly pushed her way through them, holding the basket cradled against her chest with one arm and carrying the suitcase with the other. She crossed the street and waited for a tram amidst another throng of new arrivals to the city. When it arrived she boarded it and was given a seat up front by a young woman who remained standing in front of her while holding onto a handrail.

“O-bāsan, where are you visiting from?” the young woman asked.

“Tokyo,” Tomiko said.

“Is there no one in Nagasaki who could have picked you up at the station?”

Slightly disturbed by the young woman speaking to her in such a casual and inquisitive manner, Tomiko said flatly, “I had family here once, but they are no longer living, and I have no friends here.”

“Nagasaki is always so crowded during the remembrance,” the young woman said. “I hope you have pre-booked a place to stay.”

“I stay at the same place I stay every year,” Tomiko said. “It is a block away from the Peace Memorial Hall.”

The young woman looked at Tomiko’s gloved hands holding onto the basket. “I wish gloves were fashionable again for all women to wear,” she said.

“Mine aren’t for fashion.”

#

The hotel room was very small, with a twin bed, small dresser, and sink. The restroom was down the hall. She set the basket on the bed and raised the lid. Heisuke was asleep, his chest barely rising and falling as he breathed. She laid the suitcase on the top of the dresser and then sat on the bed, took her purse from her arm and placed it next to her, and then

removed her sandals and socks. Her white socks had gotten dirty during the trip as had her gloves. She then removed her gloves and laid one across each leg. She held her hands up, and gazed thoughtfully at the mass of scars on the back of each hand and at the deformity of her fingers that no surgeon had been able to repair. Her hands were a reminder of the miracle that she had survived the atomic blast with just those injuries while everyone and everything else she knew when she was age ten had been obliterated in the fire storm.

#

A little after midnight, April 6th, Heisuke died while sleeping at Tomiko's side.

Tomiko arose from the bed, dressed, and placed Heisuke in the basket. She quietly left the room and carried the basket down the stairs, past the desk clerk who was sound asleep in his chair, and out of the hotel. She walked to the Peace Memorial Hall and placed Heisuke at the base of the Peace Monument. She looked up at the large bronze statue of a seated man with one hand raised, pointing to the heavens, whispered a little prayer, and then turned and returned to her hotel room.

#

When she returned to Tokyo she met Itsuki outside of the train station as they had planned.

“How was your trip to Nagasaki, Tomiko-san?” he said.

Her voice choked as she replied, “I think it will be my last train trip.”

“Yes, maybe that is for the best, Tomiko-san.”

He put her suitcase in the trunk of his taxi but she held onto the empty basket as she got into the back seat. There she placed the basket in her lap and wrapped her arms tightly around it.

The End

Steve Carr, from Richmond, Virginia, has had over 480 short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, reviews and anthologies since June, 2016. He has had seven collections

of his short stories published. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize twice. His website is <https://www.stevecarr960.com/>

ABOUT SWEETCAT PRESS

For those of you who don't know me, I'm from Richmond, Virginia and have had over 600 short stories – new and reprints – published in over 355 print and online magazines, literary journals, reviews and anthologies worldwide since June, 2016. Eight collections of my short stories have been published, 5 of which are no longer available because it was simply time to move on. *A Map of Humanity*, published by Hear Our Voice LLC Publishers was released in January, 2022. I'm also the author of *Getting Your Short Stories Published: A Guidebook* that is now in 2nd Edition form, published by Clarendon House, and available on Amazon. My self-published paranormal/horror novel *Redbird* was released in November, 2019. I have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize twice. Several of my plays were produced/staged in several states.

I launched Sweetycat Press as a Facebook group in February 2020 to support emerging writers through providing tools for self promotion. Toward the goal of achieving the group's mission, six high quality books (*Who's Who of Emerging Writers 2020*, *The Book of Books, I, The Writer*, *The Wordsmith Chronicles*, *To Be or Not To Be A Writer* and *Who's Who of Emerging Writers 2021*) were published within a year that included author bios, essays and short stories from writers worldwide.

The Sweetycat Press Facebook group began at the same time that the COVID pandemic sprung up, leading to the site being shut down in March 2021 due to the pandemic's impact on the Facebook group's mission. Immediately after the Sweetycat Press Facebook group closed down, which was more traumatic for me than it was the members, I established Sweetycat Press Publishing as a continuation of what I had already started: <https://www.sweetycatpress.com/>. The mission remains the same: to further promote new and emerging writers.

I have a team of three, and sometimes four who are integral to publishing books with the Sweetycat Press publishing imprint.

Catherine A. Mackenzie (Cathy), who is an excellent writer in her own right, has done the formatting for uploading to Kindle and Amazon, and unintentional editing – she has the eyes of a hawk – of several of the Sweetycat Press publications. I love working with Cathy. She's a true professional, smart, friendly, easy to work with, and knows what she's doing. Her level of communication is superb. I try to do the smart thing and stay out of her way, listen to her suggestions and advice, and let her do her job. If you're in need of her services or want to know

more this is her website: www.writingwicket.wordpress.com. She can be reached via her email, which is: writingwicket@gmail.com.

David Harms, an accomplished artist, did the cover design for the Sweetycat Press anthologies, *A Love Letter (or Poem) to . . .*, and *Stories & Poems in the Song of Life*, this volume, and has signed on to do the covers for the next Sweetycat Press anthology.

I'd hire the third person, Kerri Jesmer, who did a wonderful job editing *The Wordsmith Chronicles* more frequently but my budget is relatively small, but I love working with Kerri. Kerri is an editor for hire and can be contacted via her website: <https://kljesmer79.wixsite.com/>.

For now I do the submissions selections, editing, and initial formatting for all of the Sweetycat Press publications.

Sweetycat Press published its first novel in 2021, *Beyond Wishes*, a very imaginative YA fantasy/adventure story written by Joan Herr.

The second single-author publication, Mike Turner's wonderful collection of poetry, *Visions and Memories*, was released on July 1 and is available on Amazon.

Sweetycat Press has for the time being switched focus to only publishing its anthologies so as to reach writers worldwide. The episodic criminal manhunt thriller, *The Whole Wide World*, which includes 80 writers worldwide was the first of these. *Around the World: Landscapes & Cityscapes*, which featured 200 poets, is the second. *A Love Letter (or Poem) To . . .* is the third with over 200 global contributors. *Stories & Poems in the Song of Life* was released on February 1, 2022, with 175 contributors. *Beautiful: In the eye of the beholder* was released February 23, 2022 with 200 contributors. *Movement: Our Bodies in Action* will be released on June 1.

All Sweetycat Press publications are available on Amazon. 100% of the proceeds go into publishing the anthologies and paying the writers whose work appears in the Sweetycat Press online literary magazine, Short Story Town.

As a final note, here's a bit of trivia about Sweetycat Press that isn't well-known. Its name comes from my beloved cat, Sweety, who died at the age of 18 a few years ago. I had another cat, Stinky who I loved dearly, who died soon after Sweety, at age 16, but I think Stinkycat Press might have automatic negative connotations.

Steve Carr, Founder/Publisher/Editor, Sweetycat Press