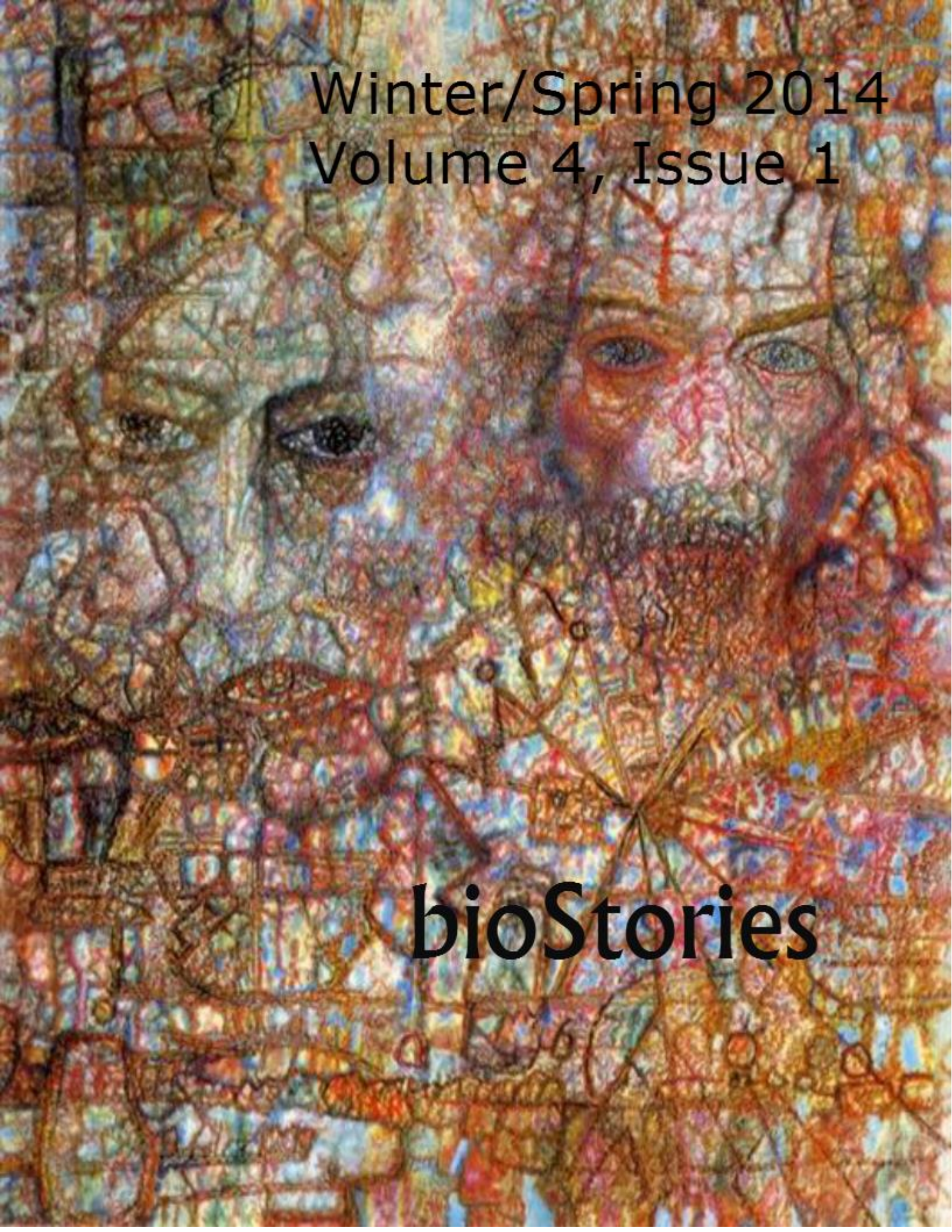

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"Sharing the Extraordinary in Ordinary Lives"

Cover Art: "Faces" by Pavlo Filono

Contents

The Old Spiral Highway

by **Liz Olds**

At 15 I read On the Road and wanted to be Jack Kerouac. I wanted to live big and travel far. I wanted to hop on a freight train and go to the edge, to get picked up hitching by road-crazed hippies in beater cars going nowhere. I often put on my orange aluminum-frame backpack and, with nothing in it, walked to the edge of my suburban Maryland subdivision and imagined I would stick out my thumb and hitch to San Francisco, land of Ginsberg and Kesey. I had read Howl; I had read One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. I was well-educated in the ways of the literary travelers, although I never walked that extra mile to the highway. But I dreamed, despite the lightness of the empty pack on my shoulders.

At 18, finally free of the constraints of family and subdivision, I chose Idaho for college. Idaho represented the frontier and freedom to me. More practically, I picked Idaho because a high school friend also went there, although I chose Moscow, up in the northern panhandle, and she chose Pocatello in the south. I had the idea that we would see each other on the weekends, not realizing that we were actually 700 road miles apart. On my map Idaho looked like Maryland sitting on its edge. I had no idea how vast it was.

I had only hitched once, during my freshman year, down the Old Spiral Highway from Moscow into Lewiston, to scrounge in the Goodwill for the men's shirts and pants I felt most comfortable in. But I had dreamed many times of a longer trip and looked forward to the time when an opportunity would present itself. How hard could it be? I would just stick my thumb out and magically a real Kerouac would appear to whisk me back up the Old Spiral Highway home.

Thanksgiving weekend of my sophomore year, 1976, I decided to go to Corvallis, Oregon to visit an old flame I'd met at Girl Scout camp and hadn't seen or spoken to in three years. I didn't call ahead because it would rob the trip of its Kerouac-ness if I did.

On Wednesday I took the Greyhound to Corvallis. Dusti, the object of my affection, wasn't home. Her confused mother stood with the door slightly open and advised me to come back Saturday. I took the 'Hound back to Moscow on Wednesday night, and on Friday night, with only the price of a one-way ticket left, took the red-eye bus back once again to Corvallis. My desire for a dramatic reunion replaced whatever common sense my 18-year old self may have possessed. I would trust to the gods of the road to get me home somehow.

The romance part was a bust. In the end, Dusti and her mother did put me up for the night, and Dusti agreed, rather too hastily I thought, to drive me the ten miles from Corvallis to Interstate 5, the inland highway that followed the line of the Oregon Coast. There I could catch a ride to Portland and then on east to Idaho. Early on the Sunday morning after Thanksgiving, wisps of fog curled around the pine trees and swaddled the foothills. I caught a ride after just a few minutes and was in Portland by 9 AM.

I bought a pack of strong, foul-smelling Egyptian cigarettes in Portland to pass the boring wait between rides.

Still lucky, I was picked up by a travelling salesman in a Datsun 240Z and we cruised down Interstate 84 past the series of Corps of Engineers Dams on the north and the little streaming waterfalls coming down the high hills on the south. We topped the speedometer at 90 MPH which made me nervous, but the little sports car was built for speed and so was the highway.

The salesman was a chatty guy. He talked about his own life on the road, which was pretty straight and not what I was dreaming of with my romantic notions. He said he had thought I was a 14 year old boy standing by the side of the road when he picked me up. He bought me a hamburger and fries and I thought that was nice. Closing in on Walla Walla he suggested that I spend the night with him in his motel and I wasn't sure if that was nice or not but since he didn't push I didn't need to know.

We reached Walla Walla, just 2 hours from Moscow, at 3:00. With plenty of daylight left and a stream of students heading back to school at the end of the long holiday weekend, I thought for sure I would get an easy ride and be home by dinner. The salesman dropped me off at a small strip mall on the outskirts of town. All the stores were closed. There was a bank with a time/temperature sign in front of it at my end of the mall. When I got out of the 240Z the sign read 3:00 PM/20 degrees.

I stood under the sign, smoking with one hand and hanging my thumb out with the other. For warmth I had on an old green parka with a fake fur hood and an orange lining I had bought at that Goodwill in Lewiston. It looked warmer than it was.

I measured the wait in cigarette puffs, drawing the smoke in deep while watching the number in the pack dwindle. I noticed the temperature numbers gradually going down as well. Apparently a cold front was coming in. But, not to worry. A ride would surely be along soon.

As time passed, so did the cars. No one stopped. No one would even meet my eyes as they sped by.

I could hear the buzz of the sign and watched the numbers on the temperature side falling. At first I didn't feel it getting colder, but numbers never lie. Then the wind picked up.

My feet numbed. I wore high-top Chuck Taylors and some wool socks I had stolen from a friend. I hopped from foot to foot to keep the circulation going. No gloves, I didn't like gloves. Can't hold a damn cigarette with gloves on. The numbers on that temperature sign were rolling like a pinball score going the wrong way.

So was the sun. I would like to say at least it was a beautiful sunset, but the outskirts of Walla Walla are flat and that stretch of road with the little shoe repair shop and H&R Block office in the strip mall was pretty ugly. The sun just went down.

And the cars kept going by.

By 5:00 it was dark and 6 degrees. I had to admit to myself I was getting a little afraid. I didn't really think I would die out there, but I would be in for a miserable night. I lit my last cigarette.

I jumped up and down, waving wildly as the cars passed. I could see into the warm interior of the cars, surprised at how clear the faces of mostly young students appeared as they averted their eyes when I tried to implore them with my own.

Now it was dark, a couple of hours into my wait by the side of U.S. 12 in Walla Walla, Washington. Time slowed, my blood was slowing, and the only thing going fast was that damn temperature sign, now at minus 2.

I've experienced colder temperatures, but never for so long and never so exposed. Every breath I took hurt my lungs and froze my boogers solid. My eyeballs felt like they were freezing. Shutting them didn't help, they hurt closed and they hurt open. And I was getting pissed. There were plenty of cars on that road, occupants ignoring me as they drove in heated comfort home. Home. Why the hell wouldn't someone pick me up and drive me home?

I stood by the side of that road for 6 hours.

Then, over a little rise came an old white Chevy panel van. I nearly cried when the yellow blinker came on and the van slowed. The driver reached across the passenger seat and opened the door.

"I'm just going ten miles up the road but at least you can get in and get warm for a while."

The man seemed old to me but he couldn't have been more than 35. He had a long, slightly disheveled and thinning blonde ponytail and a big full-faced beard. He asked was I going up to Moscow and I said yeah and that was the sum total of our conversation. The weak little heat fan blew on me from the dash and everything tingled.

After 15 minutes he pulled into a gas station, filled up the tank, went in to pay and came back with two Styrofoam cups of hot coffee.

"I believe I'll drive just a little further up the road."

We drank the coffee in silence. I knew I was taking a risk as he drove "a little further up the road." It occurred to me that he might be a serial killer. In my young teenage dream I had not imagined this freezing, lonely trip, nor possible outcomes other than absolute safety. It was too late for second thoughts now; I was committed to this ride. But after a moment of doubt I opted for trust. Even though he didn't say anything there was no menace in his demeanor. All I knew for sure was that the coffee was warm and so was I and the miles were rolling by under my butt. There didn't seem to be much to say. We didn't exchange names.

Sixty miles later we reached the bottom of the Old Spiral Highway, the pass from Lewiston that rose 2000 feet in 9 miles of switchbacks, a two-lane monster road with 7% grades and no-shoulder drop-offs into thin air. This

wasn't all the way home, and I had a nasty stretch of road ahead, but it was a major crossroads with two 24-hour truck stops and plenty of cars and semis, a place to get more coffee and be inside, warm and safe until I could snag a ride up the pass into Moscow.

As I was getting out of the van I calculated the miles and realized his generosity added up to hours rather than minutes. He still had the ride back. I hoped he had music to keep him company. I didn't really know what to think. Both the tough Kerouac part of me and the little kid who bravely carried an empty backpack to the end of the subdivision were astounded by his generosity. I didn't know how to simply be present with his kindness. For the first time in an hour I felt compelled to say something.

"Thanks, uh, give me your address; I'll send you some money."

"No need. I've been where you are and I know how it feels. Just pass it on, man, pass it on."

It seems important to me now that he did not take me all the way home. I noticed it then, but didn't think about it much. Who in the world would want to drive up and down that Old Spiral Highway in the middle of the night? One moment of inattention could send a car over the side into oblivion.

Now I think that it was more than self-preservation. He did not patronize me by assuming I couldn't take care of myself. I felt welcomed into the brotherhood of the road, the home I wanted at the time. A home I knew more about when I asked a young couple going up the hill for my last ride of the night than I had at the beginning of my long, cold day. Whether he realized it or not, he was treating me not as the fourteen year old boy I appeared to be, but as a fellow-traveler, and as someone who really would remember when I got the chance later on in life to "pass it on".

"The Old Spiral Highway" was the winner of the 2014 bioStories essay contest, themed "Kindness".

The Kindness of Oscar and Thomas

by **Eleanor Fitzsimons**

On Monday, May 17, 1897, three frightened children were made to stand in line in the high-ceilinged central inspection hall of Reading Jail in Berkshire. The two older boys had been issued with coarse prison uniforms, each one emblazoned with a pattern of broad arrows signifying that the wearer was, for the time being, the property of Her Majesty's Government. The youngest boy was so slight that no uniform could be found to fit him and he wore instead the ragged clothes that he had been arrested in. Each boy carried his bed sheet under his arm. All three had been convicted of snaring rabbits and were waiting to be escorted to the cells that had been allocated to them.

By chance the three lads were spotted by Prisoner C.3.3 as he was being escorted back to cell number three on landing three of C Block, located high above where they stood. A compassionate man, he was moved by the abject vulnerability of these children; they reminded him of his own two sons, aged ten and almost twelve at the time, although thoughts of his own beloved boys caused him nothing but anguish. Prisoner C.3.3 was due for release within two days, but the crime for which he had been convicted carried with it the probability that he would never see his sons again. He missed them dreadfully: 'I envy other men who tread the yard with me. I am sure that their children wait for them', lamented the man we know as Oscar Wilde.

Wilde encountered a good many child convicts during the seventeen months he spent in Reading Jail, but he had never before seen one as young as the little lad who couldn't find a uniform to fit him. Determined to help if he could, he made inquiries and learnt that the boys would be freed if someone paid a fine that was clearly beyond the means of their parents. Once he was back in his cell, he scribbled a note on a scrap of paper and slipped it under

his door in the hope that it would catch the eye of Warder Thomas Martin as he patrolled the corridor. This scrawled note has survived and reads as follows:

> 'Please find out for me the name of A.2.11. Also, the names of the children who are in for the rabbits, and the amount of the fine. Can I pay this and get them out? If so I will get them out tomorrow. Please, dear friend, do this for me. I must get them out. Think what a thing for me it would be to be able to help three little children. I would be delighted beyond words: if I can do this by paying the fine tell the children that they are to be released tomorrow by a friend, and ask them to be happy and not to tell anyone.'

The fine was paid and the children freed.

Wilde's reference to 'A.2.11' demonstrates that he had also used this opportunity to inquire about a fellow adult prisoner, a young soldier named James Edward Prince who was being held in a cell located on the landing below him. Although it was perfectly obvious to the inmates of Reading Jail that this unfortunate man was suffering from some form of mental disturbance, his unorthodox behaviour had earned him the label 'malingerer'. Rather than dealing with him sympathetically, the prison authorities prescribed a regime of regular beatings, and his anguished howls reverberated throughout the jail. Once he had discovered this man's name, Wilde planned to use his access to the popular press to raise awareness of his plight and shame the authorities into intervening. His primary concern however, was for the children.

The notion of imprisoning children might seem barbaric to us now, but it was common practice in Victorian England, and represented a significant improvement on the treatment that had been meted out during the early part of the nineteenth century. Under the Bloody Code, a set of draconian

laws that were in force between the years 1688 and 1815, children and adults alike were regularly sentenced to death for stealing; as recently as 1814, the year before the code was repealed, five children, all of them aged under-fourteen, were hanged at the Old Bailey for relatively minor transgressions.

Although their lives were spared during the years that followed, children frequently lost their liberty and their dignity. More often than not the crimes perpetrated by them were a direct response to the awful poverty they experienced; convictions for poaching and stealing food were commonplace. During 1845, seven children—six boys and one girl, not one of whom had reached his or her tenth birthday—were incarcerated in Reading jail. All had been sentenced to hard labor, with several suffering the further indignity of being whipped on release. When seven year-old Frank Stockwell was convicted of arson in 1884, he became the youngest prisoner to serve a sentence in Reading Jail. In 1891, a ten year-old boy was sentenced to three days in Reading for stealing cherries. The following year, an eleven year-old boy got twenty-one days hard labor followed by twelve strokes of the birch upon release for poaching rabbits.

Many of the warders in Reading Jail were family men who sympathized with the children under their charge, but each was fully aware that any attempt to express their compassion could lead to their instant dismissal, and leave their own families vulnerable to the very desperation that might result in their incarceration. One man among them was prepared to act on the pity he felt in defiance of the very real threat hanging over him. Warder Thomas Martin had been assigned to C Wing in February 1897, just two months before Wilde was due for release, and during that time the two Irishmen had struck up a strong and unlikely friendship.

Thomas Martin soon earned a reputation for compassion. He shared Wilde's concern for the children who had been sent down for poaching rabbits and as soon as he realized that the youngest of them was too upset to eat the unpalatable, dry bread that constituted a meal, the kindly warder brought the boy some sweet biscuits that he had paid for himself. The poor child was so grateful for this act of generosity that he mentioned it innocently to a senior warder, having no notion of the harm this would cause. For this minor act of kindness, Thomas Martin was dismissed from his post and obliged to forfeit his pension.

Days later, Wilde, a free man by then, was horrified to read of Martin's dismissal in the Daily Chronicle. Since he had been assigned to C-wing, Martin had shown great kindness to many of the inmates, and in particular to the man he called 'the poet'. In defiance of prison regulations, he had kept Wilde supplied with copies of the Daily Chronicle and a steady delivery of Huntley & Palmer Ginger Nut biscuits, which he obtained from the factory next door. On one occasion, as Wilde lay ill in his prison bed, Martin fetched him a prohibited bottle of hot beef tea, which he concealed beneath his shirt to avoid detection. As he returned to Wilde's cell, Martin was summoned by the Chief Warder and obliged to stand talking to his superior for several minutes as the scalding bottle burned his skin.

Wilde had long planned to use the unique insights gained during his time in Reading Jail to campaign for prison reform and in a letter he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas, later published as de Profundis, had declared: 'The prison system is absolutely and entirely wrong. I would give anything to be able to alter it when I go out. I intend to try.' Martin's dismissal gave him the impetus he sought. Although Wilde had left England by then, and was in Dieppe at the time, he wrote a long letter, which he telegraphed to Henry William Massingham, Editor of the Daily Chronicle, protesting at the dismissal of Martin and highlighting the cruel treatment meted out to the

children that were held in English prisons. This letter was published in full on May 28, under the heading: 'THE CASE OF WARDER MARTIN: SOME CRUELTIES OF PRISON LIFE'. It began:

> 'I learn with great regret, through the columns of your paper, that the Warder Martin of Reading Prison has been dismissed by the prison commissioners for having given some sweet biscuits to a little hungry child'.

The thrust of Wilde's argument was that children, unlike adults, simply do not have the capacity to understand, let alone reconcile themselves to, the notion of being punished by society for some perceived transgression: 'The terror of a child in prison is quite limitless', he wrote. Realizing that his argument would be more persuasive if he cited individual cases, Wilde described how on one particular occasion, as he was heading to the exercise yard, he witnessed the small boy who occupied a dimly lit cell located across the corridor from his own being spoken to sternly by two warders, one who was in the cell with him and another who stood outside.

Wilde describes how, in the face of this onslaught, the boy's face became, 'like a white wedge of sheer terror', adding that, 'there was in his eyes the terror of a hunted animal'. The next morning, Wilde overheard the child crying out for his parents and begging to be released. Rather than offering him any words of comfort, the warder on duty repeatedly told him to keep quiet, although in the man's defense it must be remembered that he was prohibited from offering assistance and would have been dismissed if discovered doing so. To compound matters, this particular child had not even been convicted of any crime, but was being held on remand at the time.

One practice that concerned Wilde in particular was that of keeping children locked in their cells for twenty-three out of every twenty-four hours. Reading

was primarily an adult prison and few special provisions were made for its younger inmates. If several children happened to be present in the prison at any given time, then they were permitted to receive one hour of school instruction in the prison classroom. Besides this, and the short time they spent in chapel, each child would pass the remainder of the day in solitary confinement, obliged to confront the horror of their circumstances while utterly alone.

Perhaps the most poignant line in Wilde's epic poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, written while he was in exile in France, reads: 'For they starve the little frightened child, Till it weeps both night and day'. Wilde was horrified by the poor quality of food provided to inmates: breakfast at half-past seven consisted of a small piece of dry prison bread accompanied by a tin of water; at twelve midday each prisoner was served a main meal composed of a tin of coarse Indian meal 'stirabout', a type of cornmeal porridge; finally, at half-past five, a supper that was identical to the unpalatable breakfast was brought to each cell. Children who were upset and frightened could barely stomach this indigestible fare, but no alternative was offered.

Wilde proposed a series of reforms to address the shortcomings he highlighted, the most fundamental of which was that no child under the age of fourteen should be sent to prison at all. Yet he was pragmatic enough to realize that there was little likelihood of such a radical proposal being adopted and suggested instead that children who were incarcerated should at least have access to a dedicated workshop or schoolroom during the daytime and at night should sleep in a dormitory overseen by a night-warder. Wilde also advocated that children be allowed to exercise for at least three hours a day and receive a diet of tea, bread-and-butter and wholesome soup.

As to the warders, Wilde allowed that they were decent men on the whole who were constrained from showing any kindness to their charges, but he singled Thomas Martin out for particular praise, writing:

'I know Martin extremely well, and I was under his charge for the last seven weeks of my imprisonment. On his appointment at Reading he had charge of Gallery C, in which I was confined, so I saw him constantly. I was struck by the singular kindness and humanity of the way in which he spoke to me and to the other prisoners'.

Although Wilde's letter whipped up considerable public sympathy for Martin, the Prison Authorities would not entertain his reinstatement, and vociferously defended their actions in dismissing him.

Although little is known of what became of Thomas Martin after his dismissal, what is certain is that, in spite of Wilde's eloquent plea in his defense, he experienced a long and difficult period of unemployment, although efforts were made to raise funds on his behalf. In February 1898, a sixteen page reproduction of Wilde's letter in pamphlet form, entitled The Case of Warder Martin was published by Murdoch and Co. and offered for sale to the general public at a penny a copy. A note from the publisher, carried on the front page, read:

> 'Martin was dismissed. It happened in May last year. He is still out of employment and in poor circumstances. Can anybody help him?'

Wilde continued to campaign for prison reform. On March 24, 1898, a day that fell during the week that the Home Secretary's Prison Reform Bill was due to be read for a second time, he had a follow-up letter published in the Daily Chronicle outlining, 'what reforms in our present stupid and barbarous system are urgently necessary.' It seems his campaigning was effective as, when the Prison Reform Bill became law in August 1898, a number of the

changes contained within it replicated exactly the proposals proffered by Oscar Wilde.

As to the friendship between Wilde and Martin, although the two never met again, the warder maintained his admiration for 'the poet'. After learning of Wilde's death in 1900, Martin contributed a chapter entitled, 'The Poet in Prison' to R.H. Sherard's Life of Oscar Wilde, published in 1906. Sherard, a loyal friend to Wilde, dedicated this biography to Martin and his touching dedication reads:

> To T. M., who in the extreme of adversity, proved himself the true friend of an unhappy man'.

Escape

by **Julie Goodale**

As the Arusha traffic falls away, we become a steady stream of safari vehicles, shades of khaki and tan. I have left behind the slopes of Kilimanjaro and my thirty-nine companions, all dressed in red, to head off to my solitary adventure. We drive on roads of red dirt, through vegetation in variations of green, toward our destination. Serengeti. A dream of adventure. A dream of the wild. A dream of Africa.

School uniforms—maroon and white, green, orange and blue— filled with waving arms dot the side of the road. The mothers, and their mothers, flash red, orange, purple, green. Maasai grace by, draped in red and purple. A morning flurry of bee-eaters and sunbirds writ large upon the African landscape.

We were forty on the mountain, plus a hundred porters. Cancer survivors and cancer caregivers. Unlike most of my climbing companions, I have become an old hand at cancer. I am beginning my eleventh year of surviving. They are more recent members of our flock, some less than a year.

I recognized the greenness of their fears and pain. I remember navigating the new landscape of a freshly-scarred body: the clothes that no longer fit, the muscles that no longer move the way we expect, the unrelenting fear that this might be the day cancer comes back. But the scars fade. Like just-picked flowers, the vividness of the color fades with the passage of time. They do not go away, but they are no longer bright red.

My scars are grey. They are the color of weariness—the weariness I sometimes feel after a decade of survival. I cherish the beauty of the colors that fill my life, but of late I feel the pull of the losses.

Kilimanjaro was not my first climb. I started rock climbing years ago with my father. We were on vacation, just father and daughter. He wanted to try climbing. He remembered climbing once as a young man and thought it would be fun. I was afraid, but I would not say no. At first, it made no sense to me: knots, rope that became spaghetti in my hands, the jigsaw puzzle of my body moving over the rock. Then, after two days, a new world appeared in those rocks. The ropes did not bind me; they led me up a path most could not follow. They connected me to a world where body parts became chess pieces on a Precambrian board; where I could look down upon the back of a Red-tailed Hawk soaring below, calling to its mate. Two years later, ropes fluid in my hands, tethering me to my companions, I ventured into the barren, glacial world of high-altitude mountains. We climbed through the Cimmerian hues of pre-dawn, the only sounds the growling of the wind and rhythmic crunching of our crampons on ice. I glanced behind me. The clouds lay like silvered pillows below us. Above in the midnight blue, stars shimmered. The sky was just beginning to lighten to a deep cerulean in the east, silhouetting the crater rim. I turned back into the wind and continued climbing, tears stinging my face in the cold.

The last day with my Kilimanjaro friends is spent visiting schools in Moshi, then an orphanage run by a young Maasai teacher and an expat retired doctor from northern California. It is here that I peer into the eyes of my loss. Brown eyes so dark as to be almost black stare at me as a coffee-colored hand reaches out to grab mine from an aqua gingham dress. Esther

is ten, the same age my daughter would have been had cancer not changed my plans.

I had put off having children although I had always wanted them. In college I could more easily imagine myself with a child than married. And I imagined myself with a daughter. A rocky career path and rocky relationships made it easy to put her off. Then it became easier to wait until after the next adventure. There were always exciting things to do first, and there always seemed to be more time.

Through all the adventures, all the relationships, she would whisper to me from the back of my dreams. Softly calling. Finally, it was time; we would try for our child. After just one more adventure.

The Atacama was summoning me to Chile, to Ojo del Salado, the Eye of Salt. I was still in the midst of planning—pouring over maps, estimating how many loads of food and water would be needed while climbing in the driest desert on the planet. But the subtlest change in the topography of my body interrupted the calculations.

The children at the orphanage sing a song about a doctor to the tune of "My Darling Clementine" as they act out a skit for us. Call the doctor. Call the doctor, call the doctor right now. Call the doctor. Call the doctor, call the doctor right now. Doctor's coming. Doctor's coming, doctor's coming right now.

My diagnosis, the first one, was non-invasive breast cancer. Stage zero. Ten hours of surgery would transform my body into a patchwork quilt of scars, but I could still go to the Atacama in January, and I could still have my child.

A week after leaving the hospital my plans were interrupted once again. At my first post-surgery check, my surgeon was on vacation, so I saw her sub—a surgeon, not my surgeon.

This surgeon gingerly removed my bandages, revealing wounds like a map of highways and subsidiary roads leading nowhere. My pathology report was delayed. There was yelling, more delays, more yelling. Finally, the light on the fax machine began to twinkle as it spit out pages. The surgeon, not my surgeon, talked as he read the report. He stared at the floor. His words swirled about my head. Tumors, poor margins, necrosis, lymph nodes, sorry. There would be no climbing in January. This surgeon—a father, picture on his desk of his son rock climbing—asked me if I had children. Well, at least you won't have to figure out how to explain this to them.

My plastic surgeon came in. He had left his art-filled office with the vases of fresh-cut flowers to check on me here, where battles are fought, where lives are saved and lost, where old magazines piled up and posters hung slightly crooked. He gave me a long, gentle hug.

An oncologist came up to meet me. An oncologist—he was not yet my oncologist. I did not yet feel possessive of him. He was not yet what he would become—the most trusted man in my life. I stared at the buttons on his white shirt as he asked if I had children. At least you won't have to deal with caring for small kids while going through this.

The fourth day on Kilimanjaro I became sick. It was too early, too low on the mountain to be altitude. It was either food or the flu. I spent much time outside my tent during the night in the rocks, throwing up. Between heaving, I looked out at the lightening illuminating distant clouds. Above me the sky was clear.

While in my first round of chemotherapy, my sister-in-law—then pregnant with her second child, my niece—invited me to accompany her to her ultrasound, knowing that because of my chemo there was a very good chance I would never experience my own baby's ultrasound. I sat in the

exam room with her and my brother. The doctor spread the bluish gel on her belly. I held my breath as we waited for a heartbeat. I sucked it in deeper when the heartbeat wasn't there. And then it was. The room exhaled. I listened to that heartbeat, to the tiny, rhythmic whoosh. I listened to the breath of my brother and his wife. The room was pulsing and rhythmic. I smiled.

The sound of that heartbeat, from a child who was not mine, rose in my ears. My chest tightened. Salty tears slipped into my mouth, and dripped off my face, leaving dark, expanding circles on my shirt. I took in more breaths because I could no longer get any air, as though the grey blood pressure cuff beside me had wrapped itself around my chest. I fled the exam room—the doctor's office and my sister-in-law with her unborn daughter. I escaped into the hallway, but still there was no air, the cuff ever inflating. My chest heaved, but my lungs could not supply enough oxygen to my brain. The hallway began to darken and move; I could hear footsteps—rhythmic clicks—echoing down the hall as I reached for support. Still my lungs could not provide the needed oxygen. Until the sobs came. Then, with soft moans, my breathing regulated.

In the mountains, when I was too tired to have any sense of time, I would play mental games with myself to keep moving up the mountain. Walk until your steps fall out of rhythm. Climb to that rock where the raven sits. Don't think about quitting until you get to that next crevasse. When my will failed even with those games, I would listen to the crunch of my footfalls and count my steps. I'll just climb eight more steps, then decide if I'll quit. And then, I had always gone on.

One, two, three, four…That was what ran through my mind as I sat on the side of the bathtub, crying yet again. In the third week of radiation I was too exhausted to continue, too tired to face another morning in a cold room,

lying in my awkward plastic mold. Each night for more than a week I had cried, sure that this would be the time that I could not continue. Each night I was sure that in the morning I could not return to the sad, dark room where children lay like corpses, where parents cowered in the hallway, where fear was tattooed on our bodies as they roasted from the inside out. Each night, tears burned my face. Then, each morning, I would decide to go just one more day. One, two, three, four . . .

I was forbidden to climb during treatment. Instead, I would hike in the hills near my house. The sun would shine through the trees, creating a dappled pattern on the leaf-covered trails. I would stop frequently to catch my breath as I struggled up to the bare rocks atop a ridge, and feel the texture of the sun-warmed stone. I would feel the sun toast my bald head in spite of the cool autumn breeze. I found a small piece of quartz, white with sharp edges tinged in black, which scratched slightly but did not hurt. I liked the way it felt in my hand. I put it in my pocket. I felt happy.

After my initial cancer treatments, I could have tried to get pregnant. Chemo had not thrown me permanently into premature menopause. Later rounds of chemo did not either. Nor did attempts to chemically shut down my ovaries, or a new trial drug. I had been in and out of sudden but temporary menopause more times than I could remember, each time filled with glimpses of my face changed to purple and clothes darkened with the swamp of sweat pouring from my body. But each time faded with a return to normalcy, my body asserting its natural function.

On a hike, just a week before leaving for Africa, I discovered a stone deep in the pocket of the pants I had dug out from the back of my closet. A small piece of quartz, white with sharp edges tinged in black.

Most of my Kilimanjaro teammates were new to high places. They had never climbed before, but had come to climb Africa's highest mountain. They, like me, had come here with Above and Beyond Cancer for their own reasons: to test themselves, to prove they could, to overcome fears and discover new strengths, to reclaim their lives. In doing so, they discovered the difficulties of life in thin air. They retched, they gasped. They cried, and they moaned. But they, like me, continued up the mountain.

After enough healthy years had passed, at an age when many people are sending their children off to college or welcoming their first grandchildren to the world, I found myself finally comfortable enough with my cancer to try to get pregnant. Without success. Or rather, with only partial success. It seemed that getting pregnant at my age, after so many years of so many cancer drugs, was not as difficult as staying pregnant.

This group of cancer survivors, my Kilimanjaro companions, was full of life. Charlie's wife was about to give birth back home. He carried a card from his four-year-old declaring him World's Best Father. It was laminated. Jed carried a stuffed animal from each of his three daughters up the mountain. They hung on his belt. Kerri carried her three-year-old daughter in her eyes. It was her first time away. Stories of children and grandchildren abounded.

Esther, in her aqua gingham dress with the pink and orange buttons, has a strong voice. She is 10.

As the children at the orphanage sing us their songs, the colors of their dresses and shorts fade from my view. I see only the grey gravel of the playground. Their voices echo in my ears as the air grows thin. My lungs cannot get what my body requires, despite my gasping. I try to leave, but the gate is shut. And where would I go? Instead, I hide in the corner—grey gravel, brown gate, tan walls—out of view, until the sobbing subsides.

On this mountain, on Kilimanjaro, where life was stripped down to its most essential elements, there was no moment of crystalline clarity for me. I knew already that I was strong. I knew already that I would always continue. I knew already that unspeakable beauty and unbearable pain could exist in the same moment. On this climb, the truth played out for me in ways more subtle: the father, whose replaced joints were not as strong as his will, being helped up the mountain by his son; a pack being retrieved for a teammate as he stumbled into camp after dark, too tired to find it himself; a hand reaching out to steady me as I retched in the rocks; the eyes of someone whose thoughts were on her joy, half a world away.

When the children finish singing and introducing themselves, they invade our ranks, spreading like a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds through a field. They show us their rooms, play some version of Ring Around the Rosie, reach out for a hug. Esther makes a direct line through the crowd toward me, never taking her eyes off me. She leads me to the swings. I push her; she laughs. She wants to go higher; I start to feel nervous. She swings higher than all the other children, laughing. When I accidentally step in the way of another swing and am struck in the leg, she looks worried. These are not flimsy, lightweight swings; these are two-inch thick planks. A purplish bruise immediately begins to show. I tell her it's fine, knowing that the hurt will stay with me for days. We trade places, Esther pushing me. She is strong. I swing high. I soar above walls painted with blue waves.

As long as I can remember, when the reality of my life became difficult, my escape hatch—my fantasy—has been running off to Africa to care for hungry children. When rocky relationships ended, when injury delayed my career, when doubt arose, I dreamed of Africa. I suppose most people have an escape fantasy. I suppose most people leave their fantasies firmly in place as fantasy, never confronting the reality. It is fantasy, after all, and the reality of a fantasy is often dirty, ugly, and scary.

But here in this country, with its dirt and poverty, its pit latrines and lack of clean water; in this place of need, with its walls of blue waves and multi-colored flags, I look into the brown eyes of both my loss and my fantasy. And far from frightening me, the reality of my fantasy pulls me in. A hand reaches for mine and invites me to play. It is small and soft, fitting easily in my hand. Rough nails scratch me slightly, but do not hurt.

Part of me longs to stay, to don bright colors and walk barefoot in red dirt. I long to flee the dung-colored hills of a snowless mid-winter back home. For now though, I'll continue to wear shades of khaki and tan, and head further west into the Serengeti in our tan jeep, and then home as planned. But I'll continue to dream in color—the colors of bee-eaters and sunbirds.

Summer Crushes

by **Jono Walker**

Rumor had it Jimmy Brusco went to reform school for hitting a cop with a two by four in broad daylight on Main Street. I have my doubts about that. Most of the folklore that circulated about Jimmy in those days couldn't possibly have been true. All I can say for certain is that he was the scariest greaser in town and that for one long summer back when my cousin Bud and I were around twelve years old he was also a pretty good friend. Of course, I can see now that the crush he had on our older cousin Kelly had a lot to do with that. Why else would he have hung out with a pair of little squirts like us? Although we were too young to actually realize it at the time, unless my memory has totally failed at this late date, I can assure you that Kelly was a stunningly voluptuous 14 year old, which explains a lot.

It all began when Bud and I were riding our bikes down Mayfair Lane, the long private drive of what my Uncle Toppy dubbed the "Wassell Arboretum," an eight acre enclave with housing lots Bud's grandfather, YiYi, had set aside for each of his children. A sizeable part of the estate was eventually turned into the three-hole golf course that we remember from those years—that golden decade not long after three of YiYi's sons who were meant to build their houses in the big field were killed in the war. In spite of its tragic history, Bud's neighborhood was an idyllic spot to grow up—a protective cocoon with only one occasionally worrisome drawback. We were uncomfortably close to Narrow Rocks Road, a heavily wooded tunnel leading to some neighborhoods of much smaller houses that adjoined the railroad bridge with its splintery walkway and rusted railing that served as a gateway to the nexus of the real danger: Saugatuck, the part of town where the greasers lived, the kids with rolled-up sleeves for cigarette packs, pointy

black boots, slicked hair, and sinister sounding surnames like Izzo, Kondub, Shipple and Slez.

At the end of Mayfair Lane there was a traffic island with a patch of grass lined with Belgian bricks and a big maple tree, and as Bud and I got closer it was evident that some kids were hiding behind it. Bud, who had stronger territorial instincts than me, sniffed his disapproval and pedaled a little faster while I, feeling more cautious and sensing danger, was content to coast. Something wasn't right. Sure enough, first out from behind the tree were the Sendecke brothers, Al and Joe, and hissing out from behind them came that nightmare of nightmares, Jimmy Brusco. He was short for his age, but built like a bantam boxer, with skintight black Levis and a plain white t-shirt, icy cold blue eyes and distinct signs of stubble along his handsomely chiseled jaw.

"This is private property," Bud announced with an air of authority as we neared the big tree, leaving me thinking he had lost his mind. Couldn't he see who we were dealing with? We could get killed and he was worrying about property lines? Alas, there was no time to sound the alarm. We were already too close to turn around when the Sendecke brothers sprang into the lane and grabbed hold of our handlebars. In an instant, Al had me in a crushing half nelson and all tangled up in my bike just as Jimmy got up in Bud's face, launching into a string of taunts that was solely intended to escalate matters into an all-out melee.

From beyond the sounds of my own gasps for breath I could hear Jimmy's tirade—half of which I could only dimly comprehend—and I was now thinking okay Bud, do the right thing. Politely agree to everything he says about the rinky-dink golf course and our sexual preferences. Just tell him "Yes sir! … Yes Sir! … Yes SIR!!" but for reasons I can't possibly begin to explain Bud took a more combative approach. I suppose his ill-advised comeback could

have worked if it hadn't been for his tone of voice which was so sarcastic and snotty I knew immediately we were toast. With just a single word our fate was set:

"So!" he said, and the punches flew.

Bud succeeded in fending off the opening flurry of blows and managed somehow to stand up on the pedals of his bike, pressing down with his full weight to get some momentum going. It looked for a moment like he may even escape (which, by the way, would have left me in a world of hurt) but as he leaned down for a second mighty heave on the pedals, the mechanical failure every boy fears most when riding a two wheeler occurred: the chain slipped off the crank set and sure enough, down Bud crashed with his crotch hitting the crossbar with such force I swear I heard a "pop" and half expected to see his family ornaments bounding onto the macadam.

The poor kid slumped onto the crossbar while slowly rolling away in debilitating cross-eyed pain. His bike wobbled along with a mind of its own which happened to be down the gentle incline off the side of the lane and into the big green hedge. The best friend I would ever have in my life remained upright for a second staring mutely into the prickly branches of the hedge before he and his trusty Huffy Flyer—now fused between his knees—went down together like a felled tree.

I got a clear view of all of this through the pungent strands of Al's hairy armpit, and when Bud went over like he did, all four of us—Al, Joe, Jimmy and I—said "whoa" in unison. It was an accident breathtaking to behold. Before anyone could fill the awkward silence that began building over the moans emanating from beneath the hedge, I feigned one of those laughs that come sputtering out like a cough, and before I knew it I was released from the headlock and found Jimmy, Al and Joe laughing right along with me. Sure, we were having a hoot at poor Bud's expense, but I did all I could

to encourage the sudden surge of merriment that seemed to be miraculously clearing danger from the air.

By the time we caught our breath, Bud was sitting up. He was going to live. Jimmy and his henchmen were wiping tears from their eyes, and I realized the moment had arrived for some audacious diplomacy; something ventured that just might change the subject and avoid any further bloodshed. "You guys want to come for a swim in the pool?" I asked as casually as my pounding heart would allow. After shooting quick glances around at one another, the trio of the meanest looking greasers I had ever seen shrugged their shoulders and to my profound relief Jimmy replied in his best tough guy accent, "Sure, what da fuck?"

We made our way slowly up the lane towards the distant sounds of kids playing in the pool. Jimmy gently nudged Bud aside and took up his bike with its drooping chain. This touching act of kindness allowed Bud to limp gingerly along behind us, nursing the ache between his legs. The Wassell's in-ground swimming pool was a magnet for the entire neighborhood in those days so when we rounded the pool house and saw the usual swarm of kids jumping and splashing around the sheer chaotic volume of the scene made the three of them pause. They seemed suddenly shy and I think would have bolted had it not been for my Aunt Betsy who was just then walking down from the house. She looked over at us with one of her winning smiles and waved us in without a moment's hesitation or a single question about the disabled bike or the lingering greenness around Bud's gills.

Our new friends stood poolside wondering what to do. Behind them their shit-kicker black boots were lined in a neat row beneath the fence where they had hung their T-shirts. I demonstrated for them a simple feet-first jump into the deep end and they tentatively followed suit. Jimmy, Joe and Al were awkward swimmers at best, handicapped all the more by the weight of

their long jeans. I wondered how guys who just minutes ago could look so menacing could now look so harmless—vulnerable really—as schools of well-tanned little kids darted to and fro like dolphins beneath their pale and pimply backs. That's when Kelly stepped up to the diving board in her emerald green two piece bathing suit.

Jimmy was off to the side treading water when she made her dive, intently scanning the surface in anticipation of her return for air. I might have been only 12 years old that summer, but when Kelly came up and blinked the water from her eyes, I could tell she was conscious of Jimmy's stare and was keeping him in her periphery as she calmly breast-stroked towards the aluminum ladder. And in that moment I received my first inkling of just how far away those houses at the other end of Narrow Rocks Road actually were. When I turned back to Jimmy, who was still sputtering in place, I knew he knew much more about that distance than I could understand and saw for the first time the look of someone hopelessly surrendered to love at first sight.

The Name My Parents Didn't Use

by **KJ Hannah Greenberg**

"Ken" was a boy's name, was an appellation, which I also associated, in the 1960s, with a male doll. It was, as well, the means I had of summoning my partner, in the 1970s, on my high school's debate team.

Such a name lacks frills. The name possesses no soft-edged phonemes, no feminine prefix or suffix, en total, no petticoat wisdom at all. As evidenced by my debate partner, that particular means of calling up a soul was commonplace back in the day. Had I worn a different configuration of stuff between my legs, that name would likely have been mine.

However, I was born a girl.

I grew up in a household of women whose lone male resident, my father, was wheelchair bound. There was no talk of sports in my home. No toilet seat was ever left raised. Machismo, in my childhood, was found only on my family's TV. The fashionable contemporary social belief of the time, in the supremacy of men over women, only made itself manifest when my sister and I played chess or sought to wear pants. On such occasions, we wondered, aloud, how boys did such things.

I knew that "boys" existed. "Sons" appeared in high school literature homework assignments. "Brothers" were bothersome creatures that constantly interrupted my girlfriends' lives. It was my family, alone, that seemed to hold little that was virile, brave, or strong. Simply, my family lacked a man, in the conventional sense of such things.

Since our nucleus was deficient of any able-bodied male, as defined by dint of genetics, we got by with fulfilling that social need via inventing a man. My parents assigned that social portion, which was ordinarily assumed by

fathers or brothers, to me. I became my family's male surrogate. During my formative years, I was forced to operate as a boy.

It was my job, for instance, to lift and to dress my father. My chores almost always also included: doing yard work, taking out the trash, and bringing in the groceries.

Likewise, in keeping with the social order of the age, it was expected of me to be accomplished academically. "Girls" were cared for; "boys" found means, first in school, and later, in jobs, to provide sustenance. As the latter was my destiny, any grades that I brought home that were less than supreme cost me my allowance. Any high marks I earned raised my parents' expectations for my future performances. 99+s, the highest score possible on standardized tests, were lambasted by my mother and father because they were not 100s. When I wanted to write for my high school newspaper as a lifestyle columnist, they coerced me to campaign for editor, instead.

I hated my assigned job. I hated being the heavy. I hated being the star. I wanted to wear ornamented clothing and to sing in a chorus of modest achievers. I wanted to experiment with opalescent eye shadow, to laze about with romance novels, and to study baton twirling. Instead, I was pushed to try for the lead in a school play, to excel at weightlifting, and to win my state forensics tournament. My built up biceps and triceps notwithstanding, I was and would always be a girl.

I'm not sure how I would have responded, during that part of my life, to being treated as inferior to males, as was the fate of girls with normal social function. I'd like to think that I would have appreciated being noticed and fawned over by boys. I had no confusion as to who I was. As it is, I'll never know.

I was biologically a girl. I had a woman's secondary sexual characteristics. Plus, I liked boys. I considered their fledgling facial hair and other

manifestations of masculinity's relatively more hirsute nature, down right sexy. My synapses fired whenever a locker room-scented young man walked past or sat next to me. My endocrine system went into overdrive if one of them, even if he was among the group with whom I competed in classes, in intramurals, or in interscholastic math or writing tournaments, so much as looked in my direction. I had no problem discerning for which team I batted.

I didn't want to be like boys; I wanted to be liked by boys.

In college, nonetheless, I dutifully studied for a science degree. Thereafter, I sought to fulfill the destiny that had been artificially created for me: I followed the route to becoming a professor.

As an academic, I reached for professionally normative accolades. I engaged in a rigorous program of research, taught a variety of upper and lower level classes, and participated in academic discussions at the national and international levels. I could have been a wonderful good 'ol boy had I not been a girl.

The older that I got the more I failed to experience the social equilibrium that my family imagined for me. I could never be "one among men." as long as tenured sorts, who were twenty or thirty years my senior, noticed my female attributes and found no reason not to comment on them. It didn't matter to those more senior faculty members whether or not I could shoot baskets from court keyholes with regular precision, whether or not I could swim an hour's worth of laps, or whether or not I exploded with footnotes faster than most of those trussed thinkers. To my surprise, shortly after taking my terminal degree, I found myself litigating against a bunch of boys, i.e. male colleagues, who acted on their articulated hatred for accomplished women.

My experience of gender identity changed further when my sister and I each got married. My husband was a dutiful son. Her husband was a man of

means. At last, the male void in my family was filled. I was no longer needed to take up that position.

Shortly after my sister married, I got pregnant, a very female thing to do. Gestating, nursing and fostering helped me to redefine myself. My burgeoning belly, my leaking breasts, and my years spent away from my career, surrounded by diapers, larking at museums and playgrounds, and cooking all manners of child-sized treats, yielded, for me, a different sort of understanding of myself than the one I had been forced to endure earlier.

Accordingly, I invited myself to study herbal medicine and basket weaving, intentionally picking endeavors that I associated with female traditions (few folks, Yours Truly included, realize that basket weaving, among indigenous people, is a male art). What's more, I again embraced creative writing, intentionally endowing most of my narratives with a woman's point of view. I learned how to belly dance. I wore dresses and skirts and I grew my hair past my shoulders.

Interestingly, in the face of those facts of my working so hard to reclaim my living as a girl, I was not willing to release all I had gained when I had lived as a boy. I still enjoy weightlifting, landscaping, and all manners of academic challenge. Whereas I have become convinced that the world of women ought to be celebrated as such, I have never been entirely willing to leave the world of men.

My father passed away years ago. During the span from the onset of his illness to the time of his death, my sister, my mother, and I experimented with integrating male and female social purposes and with appreciating and encouraging a mixture of those traits in the people in our lives.

To wit, my older son, who trained as an army sniper, remains one of my family's best cooks. My younger daughter wears braids and ribbons, colorful nail polish, and other female-assigned artifacts, but insists she's going to use

her interpersonal robustness to become a criminal lawyer. My older daughter dresses in traditional female garb, but is among the most respected teachers in her all boys' school. My younger son, the family member who is physically larger than any of the rest of us, is also the first to offer hugs when siblings or parents feel down. My husband, a software architect of the highest caliber, can sigh or cry as well as any lady and considers his comfort with expressing his feelings to be the hallmark of a true man.

Ironically, these days, the complaints I had as a child, as a teen, and as a young adult about my ill-fitting social responsibilities would attract as much attention as would any other literary detritus; no one would care. As a culture, we are, at least superficially, able to accept women in men's roles. At present, it's no big deal if a lady is an athlete, a nerd, a breadwinner, or an emotional toughie.

Regretfully, our civilization continues to fail to likewise celebrate women's roles, whether those roles are assumed by girls or boys. Until such time, we will lack authentic social success.

As for me, in particular, as I ride through midlife, I remain aware that I can like perfume and disdain body powder, wear hoodies, but stay far away from camouflage prints, and expect respect from my university students, but insist that my own sons and daughters continue to regard me as both cuddly and fallible. As such, I am no longer a token male. I live the life that my female body parts and inclinations had always prescribed for me. I am still not the name my parents didn't use.

Listening to the Wind

by **Catherine Mauk**

In November, my sister's husband, a lifelong diabetic, went into heart failure. Doctors successfully inserted heart stents, small mesh tubes, to open his coronary arteries. During the procedure he had a mild heart attack. In December, surgeons attempted to insert more stents to enable blood flow to another part of his heart, but the procedure failed. Open heart surgery was proposed as a future option.

It is now January. In Alaska, where my sister and her husband live, snow piles in the driveway and drifts down the back slope to the river. Their house sits in the cold shadow of short days. Despite the seven stents that keep arteries open in my brother-in-law's legs, circulation to his lower legs is constricted, his legs cramp, and he cries out in pain in the night. He has returned to work, but his concentration lapses and he struggles with his memory. My sister and her husband worry about the loss of his job, the loss of his health insurance, the loss of the life they know. They worry about losses they cannot bring themselves to name out loud. Each of them is seeing a separate therapist for depression. The unspoken resentments and disappointments of 37 years have become a bellicose rumbling. They have stopped eating meat, poultry, fish, dairy, nuts, avocados, and all other fats in a war on cholesterol. They have lost weight. They are starved of joy. Each night they fortify themselves with martinis - Vitamin M.

I ring repeatedly from Australia where the inferno of summer slows time. My sister has stopped answering her phone. "Call me," I say to the voicemail, curbing the concern in my voice.

The preceding August, my sister and her husband left their twenty-year-old daughter in Spain to attend university. The night they flew back to Alaska, their daughter's roommate was drugged and raped and dumped on a sidewalk in Barcelona. At the same time, though not related to the incident with her roommate, my niece began vomiting black blood. My sister held this news inside for weeks. She held inside the unpleasantness of her trip to Spain: the press of people, the foul smells, her husband's failing health, her torn rotator cuff, gastro poisoning from contaminated olives, the death of a man with a mouth full of rotten teeth whom she attempted to resuscitate at a bus stop in Madrid.

When she finally wrote to me in late September, it was not about Spain but of autumn: "nearly clear blue sky with a sprinkling of cloud puffs, golden leaves of birch mixed with the dark green spruce, a dusting of snow on the peaks. Have thoughts today of driving out Turnagain Arm to catch a glimpse of the migrating snow geese." She wrote of the outback where we had gone when she visited me in Australia the previous September—the year before Spain—of the dingo we saw at dusk, of her longing to return.

The day we saw the dingo had had a difficult start. My sister and I had a clash of tempers. We were all edges as I ground the gears of our 4WD and headed out of Alice Springs towards the MacDonnell Ranges, the stony rises and chasms that are the remnants of ancient mountains once as high as the Himalayas. The vexation between us evaporated as we entered a desert that had become a rowdy botanic garden after unusually heavy winter and spring rains. Meadows of yellow cassia, salt spoon daisies, and desert fuchsia spread across the floor of red earth. We couldn't stand the distance. We clambered out of the car and walked into the desert where the blur from the windows contoured into the particular. Dormant Ruby Dock, which had

looked like fading autumn leaves from the car, turned into pink pouches veined in ruby that hung in clusters from soft green stems. Spinifex sported copper tips that rattled in the breeze. Budgerigars pecked noisily at a feast table of Spinifex seeds in the camouflage of grasses. Suddenly, hundreds of budgies rose from the clearing and streaked the sky with lime, shifting direction en masse, first one way, then another, and another, as if pushed and pulled by currents, before diving back into cover. When I turned to look at my sister, she stood in a band of sunlight, her hair a shimmer of platinum, her mouth open, her arms raised as if to catch the moment with her whole body.

Many times we stopped the car and spilled into the bush to fill our senses with the desert. Our ears captured the songs of rufous whistler, mistletoe bird, and zebra finches marking their territory as they flitted from branch to branch. At Trephina Gorge, clouds of grasshoppers swarmed around us on the trail. We climbed from the cliff down to the river, rolled up our pants legs, took off our boots and socks and waded into the milky red water. The coolness swirled around our ankles and calves as we scrubbed our feet along the coarse sand and moved deeper into the gorge where blazing walls of rock closed us in on two sides.

We were like a pair of ballroom dancers practiced in our routine, taking cues from one another through the tiniest of motions – a nod, a turn of the head, a change in gaze, a press on the arm, a hand to the heart - to stop, to listen, to regard. Words were rarely necessary between us.

We came across a young woman, also wading in the river. She had a Glossy Black Cockatoo feather banded in scarlet stuck in her hair. "How beautiful!" I said as we pushed through the water past one another. She stopped, reached up to the feather, pulled it from her thick brown plait, and handed it to me without a word. Smiling, she turned and continued, her long skirt

dragging through the water. As much as I wanted the feather, I offered it to my sister. Feathers, shells, rocks, and pieces of wood are often our most treasured gifts from one another.

We left Trephina Gorge driving away from the receding sun to N'dhala Gorge, where we hoped to hike to ancient rock carvings. But we had dallied. We had stopped to inspect a frill-neck lizard sitting on the road absorbing heat. By the time we reached the turnoff to N'dhala Gorge, the sun was too low in the sky for us to attempt driving over sandy river beds and into unknown bush.

At dusk, the dingo appeared from out of nowhere. He saw us at the same time we saw him. He ran parallel to our car until we stopped in the middle of the empty road. Then, he veered in front of us. He could have been a stray dog with his curled tail and ginger coat, shiny and neatly matted, but for the fire in the eyes. He fixed us in his gaze with an unnerving penetration as he moved in front of the car and continued to watch us as he crossed the road. When he reached the edge of the road he gave us a final look, then broke into a run and disappeared into the bush.

We sat in in the stillness with all the windows down, breathing in the coolness and slight moisture that infused the evening air. Surrounded by the vast outback, it felt as if we and the dingo were alone in the desert, that it belonged to the three of us, that the three of us belonged nowhere else. It was as if my sister and I too had crossed that road with our smouldering wildness and released ourselves into the bush.

We drove on in silence. A full moon was on the rise with Venus watching on. As neither of us was in a hurry to leave the bush, we pulled off the road to drink a beer and watch the clouds streak across the moon. Black descended around us like a lace curtain backlit by moon silver.

"Sometimes, a day like this is the only thing that makes sense to me," my sister said.

A week later, we were on the south coast of New South Wales. In contrast to the desert, grey watery skies and cold air draped over our days. The sea churned. The wind blew. On a day when the weather confined us to the house, my sister disappeared into her room for hours. "Join me," I said each time she reappeared in the living room where I was curled up on the couch reading. She paced for a few minutes, then again retreated to her bedroom. I worried about what churned inside her.

"I love the sound of the wind," she said to me at dinner. "In my room I could lie on my bed and hear it like a song, drift with it. I kept coming back into the living room, but it wasn't the same, and all I wanted to do was go back to my room so I could float on the wind."

The weather cleared the next day. We hiked down the headland and onto the beach to walk to Mossy Point. My sister fell behind. I waited for her to catch up several times. At one point when she joined me she said, "Do you know there are over 400 different species of seaweed?" and leaned down to scoop up a handful of leathery jade strands dotted with green pearls of seaweed fruit. For an hour we picked through the seaweed that had washed up on shore the length of the beach. We identified nine different types. There was the jumble of grapelike balls tethered by green rope and the seaweed that looked like boughs from a pine tree. Some was rust coloured, some a dirty brown purple, other olive. One bunch looked like the charred remains of a fire. Another, like green petticoats.

I think often of those weeks with my sister. About how we let our spirit selves run with the dingo with the fire in his eyes to howl and wail into the soft curtain of night. I imagine my sister drifting on wind currents or riding the tide wrapped in seaweed, protected from the pain for which she has no words. I think of how we are with one another in nature in a way we are with no other. Of our comfortable silence. But now, with time and distance between us, I worry about her silence. I once read that the dingo mates for life. When it loses its mate, the dingo may mourn itself to death. This is what I fear for my sister, that her grief will consume her.

A short email arrives in late February. "The wind is blowing," my sister writes, "and my tree out front is covered with cedar waxwings eating the beautiful red berries. They come thru every winter and strip the trees. I love listening to the wind and seeing the trees bend under its power."

Starting Out

by **Jean Ryan**

When I was twenty-two and just out of college, I left the green mountains of Vermont and moved to Boston. An English Literature major, I was looking for a job in publishing, which I saw as a gateway position to my true profession: renowned book critic. I pictured a tasteful apartment in Cambridge, witty, cultured friends. I knew this manifestation might take some time, but I was certain of my trajectory. This was the life I wanted: why would I sabotage it?

Fortunately, I had a friend living in a Boston suburb who offered to put me up while I searched for a job and an apartment. Each morning I boarded a commuter train, then fumbled my way through the city, often taking the wrong subway line and winding up far off course. Exhilarated by everything around me, sights and places I'd only heard about—Quincy Market, Faneuil Hall, Copley Plaza, the Swan Boats, the Common—I didn't mind these accidental forays and saw them as part of the adventure. At that point, you see, I wasn't afraid of anything.

Three weeks into my search, I received a call from one of the four employment agencies I had registered with. A small publishing company on Columbus Avenue needed a billing clerk—was I interested? Not the position I had in mind, but a foot in the door, right? I was running out of money and didn't want to impose on my friend any longer. The apartment I found (a tiny studio off Beacon Street) was also a disappointment, but I signed the six-month lease anyway, figuring I'd be moving into something better by then. I slid my name into the mail slot and beamed. There I was: a voter, a tax payer, a citizen.

If anyone else had wanted me, I would never have taken the job at Benson Publishing. I might in fact have fled the interview, having seen enough.

Benson Publishing, I soon learned, was a vanity press, though we were not supposed to call it that. Housed in an old warehouse, it was dying by degrees, dying along with its owner, an 88-year-old Christian Scientist named Edward Fleese. To this day, I can recall his Dickensian scowl and the croak of his voice, and I can see the greasy brown suit coat he wore every day, the shoulders littered with dandruff. Every few seconds, if you were close enough, you could see the bits of skin falling off his waxen face and onto his desk pad. A few long strands of oily brown hair looped over the spotted dome of his scalp. His yellowed fingernails, which I couldn't bear to look at, were long and chipped.

Somehow Mr. Fleese managed to employ seven of us, though of course he paid very little. We all sat at what looked like military surplus desks, in a big room that was always too hot or too cold. Each of us comprised our own department. I was the billing department, and my desk was next to the room's entrance. What I did each day was type up letters to our clients, requesting prompt payment for services rendered, and at the bottom of the page I'd stick on a Dunn and Bradstreet label for emphasis. These letters were sent to the same list of authors on a rolling basis; when I reached the end of the list, I would start back at A.

Sandra had the job I wanted. She was our editorial department and was responsible for evaluating and editing the occasional manuscripts that came her way. Because new authors equaled revenue, Sandra approved most everything before turning back to her real passion: her elaborate wedding plans. Sandra was a tall, soft-spoken woman, and nothing ruffled her, a knack that made me wistful. She had a habit of tilting her head to one side,

probably to keep her long blonde hair out of her face, and so she appeared kind and attentive.

Sam, our funny man, was in charge of marketing. I'm not sure what exactly he did for Benson Publishing, but he was very skilled at marketing himself. We were all trying to get out of there, but Sam was especially energetic about it, each week coming up with ingenious new resumes—which he'd hand over to me for proof-reading (there was no automatic spellcheck back then; this was the era of noisy, balky typewriters). I adored Sam. He made me laugh, the way he mugged faces when Mr. Fleese walked past, and I loved the notes he used to drop on my desk on his way to the men's room, quips that amused and sustained me.

Ida was the art department, in charge of designing book covers. Ida had a face like a fox and was nasty in a smiling, backhanded way. No one liked her. She was a lousy artist, which didn't seem to matter to Mr. Fleece. Ida spent weeks laboring over a single awful cover, which she would then hold up for applause.

Fitz was . . . here's the thing: I never knew what Fitz was hired to do. Much older than the rest of us, Fitz was a corpulent alcoholic with flaming cheeks and a sweet nature. Stubbornly, oddly, Fitz dressed for success: black slacks, rumpled white shirt, striped tie (the rest of us wore casual clothes that reflected our opinion of our status). Fitz had positioned his department strategically, his desk being the only one that Mr. Fleese could not view from his office, and he could usually be seen with his head buried in his arms, peacefully sleeping the day away. We all liked Fitz, and on the days he didn't make it into work, we lied for him, assuring our boss that he had indeed called in, with the flu, a funeral, whatever we could think of; we usually agreed on something before Mr. Fleese arrived.

Last was the shipping department: Eddie and Zach, two part-time college students who could rarely be depended on to ship a box of books without incident. Much of what they sent out came right back to us—insufficient postage or a bum address. At these times Mr. Fleese could be heard haranguing them—the shipping room was a dark cubby off to the side—and looking up from my desk I could see, beyond Mr. Fleese's flying arms, the bored postures and hangdog faces of Eddie and Zach. Eddie, the more talkative of the two, would promise to do better, while Zach, who was constantly stoned, would just nod and smile. Then Mr. Fleese would shuffle back into his office, Eddie would try to look productive, and Zach would amble off to the stock room, where, in the towering stacks of books we would never sell, he had made a nest to nap in.

As you can imagine, booksellers were not exactly clamoring for our products, but we did have a few pearls—tabletop books with gorgeous photographs, slim volumes of surprisingly good poetry. Several of our authors were foreigners who did not understand the contracts they were signing; others simply trusted us, assuming we'd keep up our end of the bargain and get their beloved works out into the world. Sandra said that was the worst part of her job, calling those unwitting authors to give them "the good news."

It was a job, as one would say, and after a short time I got used to the degradation. My tasks were not difficult: answering the mostly silent phone and typing up form letters. Easy as the work was, it seldom passed muster. My biggest challenge was trying to figure out what I did wrong. When Mr. Fleese found an error or disagreed with my wording, he'd crumple up the letter without a word and toss it on the floor. After he went back into his office, I'd get up from my chair, pick up the ball and smooth it out. Sometimes I spent an hour looking for where I went wrong, which did, on the upside, fill the time.

When you're twenty-two, time is something you think you have a lot of. I stayed a year at Benson Publishing, rescued not by a better job but by the misguided notion that I needed to leave Boston and move to a place where my luck would change. Things had not worked out so well. No matter how many excursions I went on, the city held me at arm's length, kept her pleasures to herself. Finding no way in, I gave up and stayed home. The red felt squares on my bathroom floor kept peeling up, and the plaster on the ceiling was falling into the bathtub. The failing motor in the half fridge woke me up at night, along with panic attacks that kept me wide-eyed from midnight to dawn. The man in the basement apartment below me had lost his job at Honeywell and was now agoraphobic. Sometimes his letters wound up in my mail slot, and when I went down to his apartment to deliver them, he would not open his door all the way: I never saw his whole face. I began to fear the same fate, that one night my panic would never leave.

Little things helped. Lacing my morning coffee with Jack Daniel's. Watching TV before work, some mindless show from childhood. Checking my reflection in plate glass windows to make sure I was still there. Fortunately, I had made friends with a beautiful young woman down the hall who dated a succession of doctors and happily supplied me all the Valium I began to require. Panic attacks are common in the young, especially in women making the transition from college to career. You think you're ready for the world and you're not. There's nothing to be done for it; you just have to heal as you go.

My plan to become a book critic had slipped a few notches; I was allowing modifications, leeway. I had no idea how or why this happened. It is said that everything occurs for a reason, and we all wind up where we should. I doubt it. I don't think life has that sort of structure. I think youth is something we mostly bumble through, and usually squander, and that it

can’t be and shouldn’t be any other way. We are old so much longer than we are young, and there is ample opportunity to be wise.

I live in Napa now, three thousand miles from my past. Napa is a lovely place, and one that suits me. But Boston will always be my favorite city because I was young there, and scared, and hopeful anyway.

I remember one particular afternoon at Benson Publishing, when dust motes floated above us, and the hands on the wall clock weren’t moving, and a mantle of submission had settled over the room. Sandra was filing her nails, Sam was crafting another resume, Fitz was sleeping, I was leafing through a travel magazine, when Ida said: “It’s snowing.” We all got up then—even Fitz roused himself—and gathered at the dirty windows and watched the first snow of the year fall between the red brick buildings. Who would have guessed that decades later, I would look back on this scene, would see each of us with such clarity and tenderness, would love even Mr. Fleese, who did not come out to see the snow.

A Knack for Obsession

by **C.B. Heinemann**

The first thing everybody told me when, at the age of twelve, I announced my intention to become a professional musician—and what I was forced to learn again and again from bitter experience—is that for every successful musician there are thousands who never make it. Knowing who will make it as predictable as knowing who will be whacked in the head by a falling meteorite. Most great musicians are obsessive about their music, but aren't particularly photogenic, live in the wrong place, know the wrong people, and have no business sense. The ravages of fame and fortune are familiar to anyone who idly surveys headlines in gossip magazines, but a lifetime of unrecognized brilliance can warp a person in less obvious ways.

When I first met Mark, we were fourteen. His father had been murdered in Florida, and his too-hastily remarried mother and stern stepfather moved the family to Maryland. On the first day of school Mark and I got talking, and he later brought me to his house to show off his stash of monster magazines. It was an exhaustive collection, all neatly organized in a special trunk. He told me he had a tendency to "get a little obsessive."

Mark's mom and her new husband would get rip-roaring drunk every night, fight, tear the house up, and then go after Mark. Once thoroughly beaten, he was generally kicked out and forced to fend for himself—rain, shine, or snow. In order to survive he crafted a superficially pleasing personality to ingratiate himself to others. He frequently showed up at my window and asked to spend the night. The poor kid lived for weeks at a time like a stray dog, wandering from one friend's house to another hoping to get a meal or a place to sleep. He always looked slightly emaciated, and his dense brown

hair grew over his shoulders and down his back. Most of his clothes were given to him by friends and didn't fit.

He lost interest in monster magazines after living with two real monsters, and re-aimed his obsessiveness at playing the guitar. He saved up money from working odd jobs and bought a 1964 Fender Stratocaster. While his parents crashed and hollered upstairs, he locked himself in his room and practiced. He listened to the great guitarists of the time—Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Clapton—and started writing his own songs. All through junior high and high school he practiced during most of his waking hours, even bringing his guitar to school and playing scales in the back of the classroom. After scraping up the money for a tape recorder, he started recording his songs. By the time he was a senior he had written hundreds of what he called "cosmic dream songs."

Miraculously, Mark earned good grades. During the summers he would hitchhike up and down the East Coast. Whenever he returned from his adventures, he invariably had fallen in love with a girl along the way and obsessed about her--writing letters, calling, hitchhiking to visit her—until the girl couldn't handle the single-minded intensity of his interest. What he had to show from those broken relationships were dozens of new songs.

Mark was always in love, and always on LSD, speed, or the latest hallucinogen. But he never stopped practicing and writing. He left home and lived with various friends over the years, and we played in several bands together. I found his preoccupation with music admirable, and his songs were unlike anything else I'd ever heard. I started to think that he might be a genius. We wrote songs together and formed a country-rock band called Sleaze, along with David Van Allen, who later became a well-known master of the pedal steel guitar.

Sleaze went through several incarnations over the years, and Mark became locally known for his expressive guitar playing and songwriting. However, he could never break through to the larger world and remained a local phenomenon. When Mark hit his mid-twenties he got a job working for a lab cleaning out monkey cages and, frustrated by lack of real success as a musician, stopped playing. He and his girlfriend holed up together for four years, working all day then studying astrology at night.

When another friend and I finally pried him out of the house to help record our friend's new band, we started a chain reaction in Mark's life that led to him taking up music again with a vengeance. Punk rock had swept away the synth-rock bands and stripped rock 'n roll down to bare essentials, which was just what Mark needed to inspire him. When we had a chance to join a "punkabilly" band with the great singer Martha Hull, we both dropped what we had been doing and spent two years on a wild ride that took us perilously close to fame and fortune. After the band fell apart and the ride screeched to a halt, Mark married a woman who promptly dumped him and dragged him through a grinding divorce.

He responded by drinking more, writing more songs, studying the Tarot, and working overtime at two low-paying jobs. When my band, Dogs Among the Bushes, found itself in need of a bassist, I asked Mark if he would consider joining us. Celtic folk-rock wasn't his music, and bass wasn't really his instrument, but I thought it would get him out there playing again. I doubted he would take me up on the offer, so I was surprised when he jumped at the chance. He never felt comfortable with our music or the bass, and I could tell because once he figured out a bass line for a song, he never varied it from performance to performance.

I contacted an agent in Germany who set up a four-month tour. At that point, Mark was forty-one, divorced, and what some called a "functioning alcoholic." He worked day and night, lived in the basement of a friend's house, and spent his few off-hours recording songs and drinking vodka.

A couple of months before our tour he met a twenty-two year old girl and fell for her—hard. He talked about her, wrote songs for her, and repeatedly dismissed the age difference. She was flattered by the attention, but I knew she had no serious interest in a man so much older. When she made an off-hand remark about him being "stuck in a rut," he decided to prove himself by quitting his jobs the next day, buying a new car, and offering to run away to South America with her. Alarmed, she broke up with him, flinging him into a depression so deep that he didn't get out of bed for weeks.

That was unfortunate, because the band needed him to help prepare for the tour. He drank, he chain-smoked, he cried, he called me in the middle of the night to tell me that something inside had "broken." I knew that, after a crushing divorce and now a failed romance with a much younger woman, he was in the midst of a classic mid-life crisis. Younger woman, better car. Next, I guessed, would come a new obsession.

That guess came true with all the vengeance of the Lord. One evening he called me, insisted I come over, then sat me down and told me that the Holy Spirit had entered his heart and that he had finally accepted Jesus Christ as his "personal savior." It was only two weeks until our tour, and I saw dark premonitions appear on the horizon.

Mark didn't help with the earthly preparations for our tour—making phone calls, getting together press kits, CDs, posters, and photographs, or researching insurance and tax information we might need. He preferred to take care of what he called "the spiritual side" of the tour. It turned out that the bulk of his spiritual work involved reading the bible over and over again,

going to every Pentecostal church service within a hundred miles, and driving around looking for "signs" from The Lord. By sheer coincidence, those signs kept leading him to his former girlfriend's neighborhood to keep an eye on her and protect her from "demons." I worried, half-facetiously, that The Lord might next instruct him to "cleanse the sinners" in the band and deposit their bodies into shallow, unmarked graves.

I flew to Europe early and spent a week in Amsterdam looking for a van to buy for our tour. It was challenging trying to find a cheap but serviceable van in a foreign city and then take care of insurance and registration. When Mark and the rest of the band arrived and I picked them up at the airport in our Volkswagen Transporter, Mark gave all the credit to his "spiritual" work and didn't thank me for my efforts, since I was merely a vessel of The Lord's will.

During the first weeks of our tour Mark was unusually subdued, generally sitting in the back of the van memorizing the bible and grinding his teeth. I became increasingly aware that he was observing the rest of us. As long as I'd known him he had always been a talker, so his silence was disturbing.

One night at a gig he approached me during a break and whispered that other members of the band were "surrounded by demons," and needed to accept Jesus before it was too late. Another member was being "used by Satan" and had to be watched carefully. I later overheard him telling another band member that I was "falling under the influence of dark forces." To Mark, it was obvious that God had arranged for him to join our band for the express purpose of leading us to Him.

I reminded Mark that I'd put in some time observing him, too—through his phases of obsession with astrology, tarot, and drugs—and none of them seemed to make him happy or a better person. He answered that this was the "real thing." "You can see how I've changed," he insisted. "I've been

transformed by the Lord. Everyone can see it." I didn't have the heart to tell him that, if anything, he was more the same than ever.

In the German port city of Greifswald we got to know the manager of the club we played in, who happened to be an attractive young woman. I watched Mark employ the same pick-up tactics on her that I'd seen him use hundreds of times before his conversion, and for decidedly unspiritual reasons. He claimed he had no carnal interest in her—he was there to help her find The Lord. He looked quite pleased with himself when she agreed to go out for a picnic on the beach with him. When they returned she rolled her eyes and muttered something about him being a "holy prude." I had to give him credit—he really was trying to save rather than seduce her. The problem was that she would have preferred to be seduced.

He repeated this behavior in several towns, zeroing in on attractive but troubled young women, cozying up to them before springing the Lord on them. He grew more frustrated with our music when he realized that nothing in our songs glorified the Lord, and as he told me, any music that leaves out the Lord is dead and meaningless. As our tour reached the home stretch, Mark felt emboldened, preaching at us incessantly in traffic jams on the autobahn or while we were lost on country roads. One night as we sat on a bench overlooking the Rhine he harangued me until I literally had to run from the Good News before I lost my temper. Another night in a hotel he filled a bathtub in which he planned to "baptize" us, and begged us to allow him to save us. "It's only a little water and a few words and it's over—you're saved." He almost got a sock on the chin when he tried to drag one band member—one who he felt had been getting a bit too comfortable with Satan—into the bathroom.

Mark's fervor created a corrosive friction that brought the unsaved elements in the band closer together and eager to do Satan's bidding—fire Mark. This

became cemented into our plans on the night a tire on the van went flat and, while the rest of us dragged ourselves out into a rainstorm to change the tire, he stayed inside praying. Predictably, he credited his prayers for the new tire when we got back on the road.

After the tour he moved in with a German girl—attractive and troubled, of course—who was twenty-three but looked sixteen. The rest of us returned to the States and began looking for a new bass player. When Mark returned home after his girlfriend grew tired of his evangelical hectoring, we informed him that he was no longer in the band. It was an emotional meeting, and Mark gave us the same look that Moses must have given the Chosen People when he found them worshipping a Golden Calf. "So you all went sneaking around behind my back and plotting to get rid of me! After all I've done for this band, and all I've done for your eternal souls…"

"You moved in with that chick in Germany," I said. "We need a bass player, you know."

"I see Satan's hand in all this." He leapt to his feet. "I see demons all around you! I feel sorry for you, all of you!"

He proceeded to deliver a thundering, incomprehensible denunciation of our perfidy that was a cross between Jeremiah and Revelations before he finally withdrew in a chariot of self-righteousness.

I didn't see Mark again for fifteen years. I finally ran into him at the funeral of a mutual friend's mother, where Mark had been asked to play guitar on a song our friend had written. I hardly recognized him in a suit with his gray hair and stooped shoulders. He hugged me when I arrived, and told me that he hoped that Jesus had been with me all those years. Before getting up to

play he said, "I haven't played a note since that last gig in Germany. I'm too busy studying scripture. I'm kind of obsessive about it."

He fumbled through the song and I felt terrible. After all those years of brilliance he could barely get through one verse. Then, as the song built momentum, he stood up straight and his eyes brightened. For one glorious moment, that old obsession from his youth cut loose a guitar run that made the entire congregation gasp. He looked around self-consciously, his shoulders slumped down again, and he stumbled his way to the end of the song.

For just a few seconds, that obsessive genius in Mark asserted itself. And for once I did pray, and I prayed for Mark. But I doubt it was a prayer he would have approved.

The Root

by **Sue Hardy-Dawson**

Motherliness arrived with my first child but even as my belly swelled, and his butterfly limbs flexed inside, I could not believe or imagine him. It crept in with his smallness; some indefinable grace touched me as he shifted in sleep, his eyes shivering beneath paper lids, and love and fear grew with his delicate life. Wrapped in a blue cotton blanket, anonymous in a ward full of infants, I felt his difference. This, his root within me, so painfully beautiful, that until I met him I'd never known true fear.

That having my son created a closer bond between myself and my parents is indisputable, but, more than that, it fashioned a commonness with their humanity. Mum, thirty years before, mini-skirted, slenderly blond, stares into the camera from a grey beach. Dad, his arms around her waist, peeps from behind her, smiling. I'm not there, not born or thought of. I remember my childish confusion at this. I couldn't imagine a world that didn't contain me and I had never before that moment considered the effect my arrival had had on my parents. They seemed so naturally part of me; demigods, all-knowing, all-powerful, but essentially made of granite. That they might've been terrified of taking on these roles never before occurred to me.

Childhood is a scrapbook of images; some merely grey foggy awareness of being, others vivid, hot with colour and sharply focused. The latter often surprise me with their intensity; long forgotten, they hover, waiting to be triggered by some chance circumstance. One is of walking along a mossy path at my great grandmother's house near Whitby. There's seaweed and salt in the air but I don't hear the sea. I feel as if the gulls are screaming at me, like vast ships they sail above, sweeping away from the edge of the world. I pause before an old Belfast sink, it brims with slimy green water. I

imagine swallowing it; the thought of its looming foulness sickens me. In the same house I stand supported by mum on a shiny butterscotch eiderdown. Sinking into its surface unsteadily, I attempt to bounce. Great-Nana sits dark against the window, trailing a stiff finger across an oak dressing table. I'm drawn to its fine lace cloth and fascination of opalescent-glass pots and bottles. The room is striped with shadow and smells faintly of lavender-water. Her face is unclear, just a hint of white curled hair framing her sadness the downward ark of her bottom lip. I remembered this sadness. It was all around her, in the fabric of her flowered smock and in the ticking of the clock over the grey tiled mantel piece, it filled the house completely, seeping into its fabric. I've visited other houses that await death and this feeling is as vivid to me as the paint on their walls.

I suppose the parent I became was fashioned from the scraps that mine had given me. This reflection of them solidified into who I must be. It felt a strange pretence, as if I wore a coat I'd never grow into. Knowing this, I secretly checked the house while my children slept, wandering in the darkness looking for ghosts and other more personal monsters.

Recently, in Knaresborough, I found myself wandering along the street where I grew up. It was a strange thing because my house was all wrong; its new door indifferently double-glazed, its once frilly windows bearing stiff disapproving blinds. In the garden was a small girl, perhaps three years old, her dark hair falling softly about her face. She could have been me in a dozen faded photos, pale frocked, white socked. Except this, when she looked up she had the wrong eyes. Nothing stays the same. How could it? But old friends remain as you leave them, until middle aged and looking like their parents they surprise you in town. It was the same with my house; a kind of bereavement that finds itself longing for the familiar and safe.

My old school rises from a narrow ginnel laced with horse chestnuts and sycamore. It is almost unchanged, the tiny houses edging its pathway reminding me of quaint fairy dwellings. Running my hands along their low stonewalls brings back a shimmering purple dress pulled from the school dressing-up-box. Held up, it floats in sunlight, dusty with chalk and powder paint. I need this dress in the way only a child can. I'm conscious of the hopelessness, of being jostled away by bulkier children with harder edges, I don't ever get to hold it, which perhaps explains its mystery and impossible beauty. School was an uncomforting element. I was sensitive and therefore an attractive victim to both teachers and pupils. When there, I lived a kind of half-life of confused compliance, without any concept of how to make myself fit.

I think this is something of how my father felt about his work. Certainly when he arrived home in the evenings, his face and overalls dusted with oil, we knew not to hug him because it seemed he could hardly bear to be touched, as if the heaviness of his day was upon him and he needed the peace of his cleansing ritual before greeting us. Thus scrubbed, he would venture upstairs and create a riot of horseplay spiced with the naughtiness of mum's feigned disapproval. Still, the warm darkness takes me to evenings spent curled under his arm, the sandiness of his cheek on mine, his lively stories echoing under the soap flavoured, yellow bedspread.

Mum was all bustle and fresh air; practical and loving, she tidied and polished my brother and I, just as on washing days she organised the washing, sacrificing it to the shaking innards of the twin-tub. The steam laden air of our pink and orange kitchen called us home from our wanderings, for butter soaked bread, hot buns and syrupy jam or even our own dubious creations, their pastry grey with our assiduous enthusiasm.

Back then time seemed infinite; a Christmas or birthday's eve an eternity spent waiting for the first creeping light to break the sky, but this innocence was clouded by a cruel reality coming closer, its details quickening, leaving a bad taste. Life, which had seemed so perfect, was tainted. Childhood couldn't last forever and, accompanied by this growing knowledge, I began to look beyond the fences of comforting illusion.

With all the magic gone, night-time became a place of insecurity and doubt. I had discovered death, the euphemisms adults used for this shameful thing had deadened its scent for a while but I was too clever to be fooled for long. I had all the answers I had never wanted. And the imagination that had endowed childhood with such riches proved just as powerfully real in its pall of self-destruction.

I think of that time as 'the waiting', it is not unlike sitting in an empty station. Having fallen from the train you have ridden all your life, the next is nowhere in sight, but inevitably it arrives eventually. For me it was the first summer of boys, creatures completely unconnected to my father, alien gigglers and punchers who communicated through their friends. There was a kind of unspoken segregation in the seventies, unbreachable even years after puberty, which ensured a succession of embarrassed fumblings and toothy collisions.

Sadly the Great War had begun—the tearing of the root. Started by a rogue sniper, one day a voice just came out of me, braver and more reckless than I. Too stunned and ashamed to admit it, I built a wall to keep my parents out. Confused and hurt, they perpetuated the siege in a succession of revenge killings. No terms were agreed; the conflict just stretched into a long cold silence.

Nana's death broke the cold war; the pain of loss poured an icy bucket over us. In her silent house were all the words we had wished to say. Her beans

waited on the stove in her orderly kitchen. Her armchair still bearing needles and two rows of knitting and, as we walked in bewildered silence, the last piece of normality, a simple shopping list written in her hand, melted us. Suddenly mum and I were clinging together, while all about us the world indecently carried on. But this brought us back; it made us remember what little things had started the fight, and how precious was the love that must end it.

It's hard to reconcile the child I was and the mother I became. Still fragile, self-conscious, it seems the myth of adulthood is always somewhere distant; my place in the world often more about how I'm perceived by others. I realise now that my parents lied to me, every day for a time, though less so later on. They lied so convincingly that I never guessed for a moment. In every briskly pulled curtain or cursory check under the bed, with every smile of carefully practiced deceit, they told me there was nothing to fear, that they could make everything better. I know they lied because I became them. It was the root battered and stretched. I love well because I'm loved and born of that is the fear that everything will not be alright. So they lied and lied and their lies created a sanctuary, a safe place to come home to, and oh, how I love them for that.

Deserving Angels

by **Nancy Caronia**

In high school, I felt cheated by adults and ignored by peers. I had worked hard to pass the school budget, but we lost by less than 100 votes—it was the eighth time in nine years those who were old enough to vote decided against an increase. That year, my senior year, the school board deemed it necessary to cut all extra-curricular activities in order to convince its tax paying citizens to vote in favor of an increased school budget. There were no cheerleading squads, no sports, no musical concerts, no theatrical productions, no chess or folk music clubs—in short, there were no after-school activities. Longwood High School's halls were quiet in the early evening. My senior class experienced loss as promising football, baseball, and basketball players left for other high schools to compete for college athletic scholarships. Those of us who excelled academically learned that we'd have to find outside activities to show our intellectual and extracurricular diversity.

We were afforded one brief respite for three weeks in the spring. Against the school board's stringent rules, members of the faculty, staff, and student body enacted a yearly ritual—The Mad Show—on the school's outdated auditorium stage. This variety show, made up of skits from television and theater, raised money, ironically, for programs that were forbidden that school year. The faculty and school administration went forward anyway; they knew the show would boost an injured school spirit.

I had been cast as a performer and a student director/choreographer. It was a large cast of almost thirty students and a handful of faculty and administrators, including the vice principal. Most of my classmates didn't know me as anyone but a nerdy kid with a smart mouth who dressed in

Levis and big shirts. If boys found me attractive, I didn't know it. But under the big shirts I was a dancer with a lithe and muscular, if slightly curvy, frame. My body was put on display when the female student cast members performed "Don't Tell Mama" from Cabaret. By today's standards, we were modest. We wore Danskin leotards and tights with high heels. My body eclipsed the other, more popular, girls on stage. My plum leotard had spaghetti straps that crisscrossed through the back and was high cut across my thighs. I was proud of being asked to hold positions of authority in the show, but I was even happier when boys, boys who'd never noticed me before, wanted to talk to me after the show.

On Saturday night, I called home and told my mother I got a ride to the cast party with Opal and Eddie. I shouted over the music and chatter of the party: "Is it okay if I stay out a little bit longer? I think some of the teachers are coming. I'm with Eddie and Opal, and Eddie will drive us home. He promised." I twirled the cord on the yellow kitchen phone, eyed the pre-mixed Vodka and Orange juices sitting in gallon juice containers, and listened as she took a drag on her cigarette before she said: "Stay out as late as you want. Just be home by 1 AM." Always contradictory, I knew my mother trusted me, but trusted Eddie—an honors student like me—more.

I drank the pre-mixed vodka and orange juices and wandered from room to room. There were no teachers present. Within twenty minutes I was drunk—my guess is the drinks were 80 percent vodka and 20 percent orange juice. I lost Eddie and Opal in the crowd and boys who'd graduated, boys who might have been athletes, but were now nothing more than unemployed, made their way over to talk—to me. They were cute boys, but I didn't know them, and they didn't know me, except for what they'd seen of me on stage. One of them, with dark greased-back hair, blue eyes, and white teeth, leaned over, refilled my drink before he hooked his fingers in his Levi's belt loop, and asked me: "So, how did you get so pretty?" I smelled his Old Spice and

stared at the collar of his red flannel shirt; I didn't dare look too closely at his face.

I remember thinking, how did I get so lucky? I remember I hadn't yet kissed a boy. I remember thinking it was about time a boy kissed me. I remember flirting or what I thought was flirting.

Soon, as this handsome boy leaned into me and joked easily, even as I couldn't understand half of what he was insinuating, Opal and Eddie emerged at my side. Opal grabbed my wrist and said, "C'mon, Nancy, we have to go. We have to get you home."

I answered, "I don't want to go home yet. The party is just getting started."

The cute boy grabbed at my free arm and stared from Opal to Eddie and back. "Yeah, the party's just gettin' started!" he mimicked. Then he smiled, showing all of his white, white teeth, and said: "Don't worry. She can stay. I'll take her home."

I remember Eddie stepped between the cute boy and me and said, "I promised her mother I would take her home." I remember his voice shaking just a bit, but he held his ground.

Opal held onto my wrist and started walking away from the boy and his friends. The cute boy said, "Don't take her, don't take her from me. Please. Nooooo." He pretended to buckle at the knees as he reached his arms towards me and his friends laughed. Eddie, with his skinny pale body and kinky Afro, walked backwards away from the crowd while I whined, "It's too early. My mother said I could stay out late! Why do I have to go home now?"

Once I was buckled in, Eddie said, "We don't want you throwing up in the car," and demanded that I roll down the backseat window. Eddie and Opal remained patient, if frustrated by my non-stop babbling. I saw them shoot

each other a look and smile. The wind blew on my face and I dreamed about cute boys who were kissable. When we arrived at my house, Eddie jumped out and beat me to my front door where he rang the doorbell. When my mother opened the door, I whizzed past her and plopped down on the sofa in the den, next to my mother's recliner. She watched Johnny Carson while everyone else slept. She and Eddie whispered at the door. He must have told her that there was alcohol at the party but I didn't know what I was drinking. I heard my mother tell him not to worry and thanked him for bringing me home.

When my mother sat next to me, there was a small smirk on her face. She said, "Why are you home so early? I thought you'd be out until at least 1 am." Only an hour had passed since my phone call. I tried to pretend I was not drunk. My mother played along—this behavior was not a normal me so there was no need to worry. It was not as if I would do it again and again and again. I thought I'd fooled her. I said goodnight and walked up to my bedroom, but never made it to my bed. I dropped into my sister's instead and woke her up. She kicked and screamed: "Get out! Get out of my bed!" I was already half asleep and didn't budge. My mother told my sister not to mind me. I'd pay for my debauchery in the morning with a hangover.

Here's the thing, she was right. My head pounded, my mouth was dry, and my stomach ached. But that was all I felt. I wasn't ashamed of what I'd done or not done. I didn't wonder what had happened to me.

In the years that have followed, I have come to realize just how brave Opal and Eddie were that night. They were my protectors; they refused to leave without me. Opal was one of the few African Americans at the party—our high school was a fairly mixed population in terms of working class white ethnic, black, and Latino students, but that didn't mean the students mixed at after school activities. Opal was a beautiful and smart young woman, but

she was still a Black girl in the late 1970s. She put herself in the middle of what could have been trouble with older boys who had been former high school athletes—white male athletes. She held onto my wrist and refused to let go. Then there was Eddie—smart, small, wiry, a bundle of nerves—he looked like a young Woody Allen wearing a slightly less full Michael Jackson "Rockin' Robin" Afro. He did not allow those boys to dissuade him from what he took to be his promise although he never spoke to my mother prior to bringing me home. Opal and Eddie knew what would have happened to me if they left me at the party in the care of that cute boy.

Six months later during the first weekend of college, I was drunk—again. The drinking age was 18 and beers in the Rathskellar were 50 cents, not that it mattered since I didn't pay for any drinks. During Freshmen Orientation Weekend, a boy inserted himself into a small group of people I knew from high school, from my community theater group, and my dorm. It was my first time away from home. This cute freshman boy watched me down four beers in quick succession, danced with me, and then offered to walk me back to my dorm room. Gifford, another high school friend turned college-drinking buddy, stepped in after I laughed and said, "okay!"

I didn't drink and yet, here are two tales of drunkenness—tales of naiveté overriding judgment.

Gifford said, "No, I'll walk you home, Nance." My shaggy haired St. Bernard of a friend walked back to my dorm and hit the fifth floor elevator button—his body strategically inserted between this boy and me. Giff opened my door and watched as I hoisted myself up into my bunk. Then he turned to the boy and told him to leave. Gifford took my key and only after the boy left did he look me in the eye and state, "Go to sleep. I'll be back in the morning to take you for some hangover food. You're gonna feel like crap."

He placed a wastebasket on my desk under my bunk bed and walked to my door. "I'm going to lock your door now and then put the key under the door. Don't let anyone in," he said.

"Giff," I joked, "Now that I'm in my bunk, I don't think I can get down from here."

"Good," he replied, "just sleep. I'll come and check on you in the morning." And he did.

Hearing the verdict of the Steubenville trial, a case where an intoxicated high school girl was sexually assaulted by football players from her school and the act was documented on social media, I remembered Opal, Eddie, and Gifford, whom I never properly thanked. I was older than the girl in Steubenville, but I was at least as naive and helpless; Opal, Eddie, and Gifford saved me from her fate. They were angels who stepped forward when stepping forward might have placed them in uncomfortable (or even dangerous) positions. Eddie and Gifford were boys who didn't buy into the "boys will be boys" rhetoric and understood, at their core, that they did not need to be aggressive, violent, and destructive in order to prove their manhood. Opal stepped in for a young girl who didn't understand what might happen to her even though she appeared to want it—to want it all.

I remember that a month after the cast party Eddie was my date to my senior prom—he was only a junior, and no one had asked me. Eddie was coerced into being my date by a faculty member—"Nancy, of all people, cannot be allowed not to go to her prom," he'd told Eddie. And so I went. We were comrades-in-arms. We worked to pass the school budget together; I made phone calls that late spring in the hopes that his senior year wouldn't be like mine. It passed by approximately eight votes and Eddie thanked me for helping when I could have been bitter and walked away. But I never

thanked him or Opal or Gifford for the nights when they readily played my angels. I didn't recognize what protectors they were until the media saturation of the Steubenville trial brought back these memories of my innocent, yet drunken actions. Eddie, Opal, and Gifford deserve my gratitude for fighting for my safety in a moment when others might have thought I was asking for it. They deserve to be thanked for understanding that being drunk is not giving consent. Most especially, they deserve to be remembered for having my back when I didn't know my back needed protecting.

My friend Anna's four-your-old son tells everyone he meets that he is a protector: "I protect everyone from the bad guys. I fight all the bad guys!" Right now he thinks the only way to "fight the bad guys" is with swords or fists. The other day, I suggested, "there are other ways to ward off the bad guys." He gave me a look that says, I don't believe you, but go on anyway. "Sometimes," I said, "you need to use your words or you need to help someone leave. That can be a way to fight the bad guys too." He raised his eyebrows, looked down at his sneakers, and then said to his mom, "Can I have the cookie now? I need it." We were at the farmers market where the men all grow or make things with their hands. Anna gave him the cookie even though she knew the sugar would send him flying off. And he did. Everyone smiled as Eli ran from stall to stall, the little capes on his Superman socks flying behind him in the breeze.

A Deep Calm Breath

by **Katharine Valentino**

The story has it that the knock came long after the family had gone to bed. Dr. Waller answered the door nonetheless, for in those days, doctors were on call 24 hours a day. Standing on the porch were two swarthy men with long black hair, wide sleeves, intricately stitched vests—and knives. Come with us, they commanded. The doctor nodded soberly, reached for his medical bag, and left the house with one of them on either side.

My mother was never sure she actually saw her father leave with the Gypsies, but she always said she could somehow remember their knives glinting under the porch light.

As my mother tells the story, the men took my grandfather to their campsite and, still in lockstep, marched him within a circle of women attending one of their own. I don't know that the gypsies had princesses, but whoever the woman was, she was of that caliber. She had been in labor for many hours. She was gray with pain and close to death.

In my imagination, my grandfather stands still for a moment. He has already lost one woman in childbirth. He takes a deep, calm breath, looking at that moment exactly like the sepia photograph of him that my mother always kept on her bureau. Carefully, he sets his bag down on a blanket next the woman and kneels beside her. He washes his hands in a pail of water. Then, he goes to work.

Some hours later, the knives are put away. It is not necessary to threaten this white man to make him do his best for a Gypsy.

I know that the Gypsy princess lived. I know this not because I remember the end of the story I'm telling you. I don't. But I do remember what my mother told me about my grandfather:

In a career spanning four decades, most of that time as the only doctor in Angola, Indiana, my grandfather delivered thousands of babies. He drove a horse and buggy, or later on, a Ford Model T, to outlying farms where births were often already in progress by the time he could be summoned and arrive. He delivered babies with frightened husbands or children as assistants. He delivered babies in antique bedsteads, on scrubbed kitchen tables, even on un-scrubbed floors. He delivered babies with no more equipment than would fit in the kind of medical bag you now see only in old movies. Despite all that, my grandfather lost only one woman in childbirth.

That woman was his wife.

The child was my mother.

In my imagination, the circle of gypsies opens. My grandfather sees the amount of blood on the blankets. He stands very still for a moment, grief slicing through him. Then, he takes a deep, calm breath. Life. Only life. *This* woman will not die. His pain will be with him forever, but *this* woman and her child, too, will live.

When he goes to work, his mind is clear and his hands are strong and steady.

Open Holds

by **Mary Kudenov**

When I opened my truck door, I knocked the boy off his feet. I might never have spoken with him at all if he wasn't directly in my path, for I was living in a part of Anchorage where the smartest course of action was to mind one's own business. I had pulled into the parking lot of my no-bedroom, 450-square-foot "apartment" and lingered an extra few minutes in the driver's seat to finish listening to a song, something maudlin and full of angst, I'm sure. I didn't want to go inside because it was March, a month that straddles winter and spring and brings with it stir crazy and spring fever. I was just so tired of being inside. We had that in common.

"Hi, lady," the boy lying at my feet said. He held up a mittened hand, a cue for me to help him up. Instead I stared down at him while he pushed himself back to standing position. Normally I wouldn't have remembered many details about a child's appearance—I wasn't a mom yet, and children all looked generically cute, like puppies or kittens or any newly formed creature, and they invoked mostly fear and annoyance, emotions that I had neither the patience nor willingness to understand. But that boy was as classically memorable as Norman Rockwell subject: blonde hair, blue eyes, and plate-round face as symmetrical as a Disney character. He wore Oshkosh-by-Gosh overalls with a windbreaker. No winter coat. I thought *someone is missing him, someone close,* but dismissed the pang of worry.

I said something like, "Hi kid. Watch out," and turned back to the truck's cab to gather my things. He stayed close as I headed towards my stairs, close the way children do, so unaware of personal space that if I stopped walking he would have bumped into me. I ignored this. I didn't want his parents,

whoever they were, to discover me talking with their child and get the wrong idea. I should say here too that I was single and self-concerned (which might be a redundancy) and I didn't want to draw any attention from my neighbors who I, perhaps unfairly, assumed were all armed.

"Do you know where my mom is?" he asked, still following. "I can't find her and Jaden's mom said he can't play outside and I can't come inside because he's being mean to his sister."

I scanned the windows facing my parking lot. There were no over-protective mothers watching us. In fact, most of the curtains in the vicinity were still closed.

"He's in there somewhere." He pointed to the nearest building, four stories of rental units with dozens of doors and windows.

"Is that where you live?"

"No. I live in a yellow house with a brown roof."

So helpful, I thought. He stared at me with curious looking eyes. I was not used to the frank appraisal of children. His cheeks were dark pink from the cold that had not yet lost its February seriousness. I might have been a little squeamish about the snot streaming straight from his nose and into his mouth (something I wouldn't even see now) but his vulnerability was grossly conspicuous and even I couldn't look away.

I never wandered far in the winter. I stayed on my block, as near the wood stove and hot chocolate as a child could while still filling as many hours as possible with sled rides down snow piles. One spring day—very similar to the day I met Christopher—the sky was a Dodger-blue dome, both the sun and moon visible. The beach was pulling me and I was restless for the ocean and tide pools and hermit crabs. I wandered alone to the cruise ship dock in

Haines, the small town where I was born. Only it wasn't a cruise ship dock yet, just a long pier left standing by the remnants of the town's first harbor, reduced by then to tarred and barnacled logs poking up at low tide. Normally my second-oldest brother, Seth, would have been a chaperone, but he had left home an autumn earlier, *so sick of this town and its bullshit.* My mom, a single mother, was likely working or recovering from work, which on most nights ended hours before she made it home.

At the beach I gathered straw and seashells and really cool rocks. Old shipwrecks lined the shore, sand and ants spilling from their crevices. That seemed to preoccupy most of my time—gathering, exploring, pretending to captain. I couldn't use the bathroom at the Quickstop unless I bought something, so when the urge came I looked for a private place. The holds of the long-grounded fishing boats were split wide open by a half-century or more of winter storms. There were no leaves on the trees yet, so the bushes wouldn't work for cover and I *really* had to go.

I scanned the area for familiar houses. Did I have a friend near who would let me use her bathroom? The land sloped up from the ocean steeply, the Fort Seward part of town poised above the bay. From the beach I could see the field where Seth taught me to fly a kite. He had taken me everywhere with him when he lived at home. When I could not keep up with him, he carried me and when I grew too heavy to be carried he found a solution. (The last time I visited Haines someone I have no memory of said, *I remember when Seth used to pull you everywhere in a little red wagon*). *He would have known what to do*, I thought. I needed something near. I spotted a nice house, gray with big beach-facing windows. Behind the glass an adult woman moved about. I don't know why I chose that house, why I thought it would be safe.

When she answered my knocking I blurted, "Can I use your bathroom?" I think this made her laugh. It's hard to say. She may have regarded me with the same trepidation I gave Christopher, but in my memory she's morphed into a cheerful big-haired chubby woman. She smelled like cookies. She let me inside and led me across plush carpets and spotless linoleum to a bathroom near her kitchen.

On my way out I could see Glacier Bay and the beach I'd combed. The snow-covered mountains that normally seemed to loom over town appeared pastoral and dreamy from where I was. I felt like I'd made it inside a glass orb, inside something ideal.

"Did you wash your hands?" the woman asked me.

I hadn't. She ushered me over to her kitchen sink, turned on the water, and asked my name. I asked her for a cookie. I ran the warm water over my hands long after they were clean, not wanting to leave.

"I don't have any cookies," she said.

"Then what's that smell?"

"It's a cake."

"Can I have a piece?"

"It's for somebody's wedding. Have you ever seen a wedding cake?" she asked.

"Only at my brother's wedding. It was strawberry cake with vanilla frosting and it was beautiful but I like vanilla cake and strawberry frosting."

"What's your brother's name, dear?"

"Which one?"

"The one who had the wedding cake."

She knew my oldest brother, we discovered, and had in fact baked the cake I described. I thought for sure she would give me a piece of whatever smelled so good because she knew my oldest brother and *everybody* liked him, I was certain.

But she only said "I see," alert to who my family was and why I roamed around unsupervised, inviting myself into the home of a stranger. She propped her hands on her hips, striking the classic Super Woman pose.

"How old are you, Mary Beth?"

"Almost 8," I said, knowing the exact number of days left until my birthday.

"I bet you should check in at home," she said. "It's getting close to dinner time and it sounds like you're hungry."

"I guess so." I dragged my feet all the way to the door.

I was almost back to the road when she called out to me, "When's your birthday?"

"June 13th!" I said, and headed toward home.

I didn't know what to do with the boy following me up the stairs. I couldn't drive him anywhere—what if someone thought I was abducting him? I could have called the police but I didn't think they would arrive in a timely manner. I had called them recently for a woman who lived alone in the apartment behind mine. She was trapped inside while one of our other neighbors, drug violent and wanting her, kicked in her door. She slipped past him and hid in my apartment. The police came *several hours* later, long after he finally broke her door open, as though they thought a woman ought to know better than to live alone in East Anchorage. The police inspected her splintered frame, the door that would no longer close or lock, and advised

her to make a complaint to the landlord. The woman didn't insist they arrest the man, as though she too thought she ought to have known better.

I hoped the boy didn't wander as far from home as I did when I was a child. Haines was a small town, population in the lower four-digit range. The long distances trekked in my youth were likely shorter than my memory recalled. The boy lived in a rough part of Alaska's biggest city if he lived anywhere near me, and I assumed he did but thought to ask if his mom had dropped him off.

"No. But I wanted to play with Jaden so I came to get him but his mom says he's in trouble and he can't play. She's mean."

At the door of my apartment I said, "Wait right here. Okay? I'm going to walk you back home." He nodded. When I came back out he was trying to slip his head between the bars of the balcony.

"Which way is home?" I asked. He disengaged from the railing and looked around.

"It's somewhere over there." He pointed south. There were small houses a few blocks into the neighborhood, an elementary school where the District 22 folks voted, and softball fields beyond that, but I didn't think he came that far on his own.

"Let's trace your way back, okay? What is your name?"

"Christopher."

"All right Christopher, did you come down this hill?" I pointed to Fireoved, a street I suspected was misspelled and then renamed, which ended at my driveway where it intersected with another.

"Yes," he looked up at me. "Do you think I'm going to be in trouble?"

I thought of the sorts of trouble he could get into in our neighborhood. I had the sense not to scare him with stories of vicious dogs and pedophiles and men with guns. I told him I didn't know. We walked up the first block of Fireoved, past apartments with blankets for curtains, past a car on flat tires, past an overfull dumpster.

When we got to the first intersection I pointed to a house and asked, "Did you walk by here?"

"Yeah. That dog scared me." Christopher pointed to an American pit bull laying in a chicken wire enclosure. The dog watched us walk by without lifting his head, his eyes following our feet disinterestedly. Christopher was nervous though and slipped his hand in mine. His mitten felt warm and soft as summer sand. *He's so small*, I thought. My concern about being accused of kidnapping lessened some and I held onto him. After a couple blocks the houses appeared tidier, more like homes and less like rentals, but Christopher kept walking.

"What is your mom doing, Christopher?" I asked to make chit chat.

"She was tired so she told us to play outside," he said.

"You and who?"

"My little sister."

His *little* sister. "Where is she?"

"I dunno."

We walked for about 15 minutes, straight through a handful of no-light intersections. Christopher didn't show signs of stopping.

"Are you sure you came this far?" I asked

"Yeah. I remember that house," he said, pointing to a two-story. "Guess how old I am."

"Eight." I estimated up, hoping to flatter him.

"No!" He said and laughed. He held up his one hand and a one thumb. "I'm this many."

"Five?"

"Six!'

"Wow. Are you going to start school soon?" I asked.

"Yeah, I already did."

I told Christopher that I was in school too.

"No way!" he said. "You're way too *old* to be in school."

"I'm only 27," I said, my feelings a little hurt.

"Wow. You're *really* old. You're even older than my mom! She was in school but she had to quit."

"Are we getting close?" We were almost to the elementary school. I heard children playing on the next block.

"Look, it's Tommy!" Christopher yelled, pointing with his whole arm to a boy in the distance. "My house is bigger than his!" He began pulling away, his feet itching to run to the other boys.

"Wait a second," I held his arm. "I need to talk to your mom. Where do you live?" He pointed to a yellowish duplex with a brown roof and leaned away from me, but I didn't let go. "Which door?"

A silver truck pulled out of the driveway Christopher had pointed to. I held onto his arm as he tried to wriggle out of my grip. The truck was coming

toward us. It stopped in front of us and the driver's side window rolled down. I let go of Christopher's arm and thought*, I'm going to get my ass kicked now*. But Christopher froze at the sight of the male driver and I wanted, suddenly, to put myself between him and the man.

"Where's your sister?" the man asked. Christopher said he didn't know. And just like that, the man drove on. He barely looked at me. I asked Christopher if that was his dad.

"That's my sister's dad. Can I go play with Tommy now?"

"Go for it. I'm going to tell your mom you're with Tommy. Okay?"

"K. Byeeee," he said, stretching the last word into two syllables and already running.

I approached the door where I thought Christopher's mom might be and knocked. When no one answered I knocked harder. As I turned away the door opened and a woman around my age looked at me with sleep-crusted eyes. The house behind her was dark. She wore pajama bottoms, and her blonde hair hung in long tangles over a faded t-shirt.

"Hi," I said, hoping I didn't look like a crazy or a missionary. "I live by the highway, on Fireoved and Taku. Christopher walked all the way over there. By himself. I brought him home."

"Thanks," she said and shut the door. Firmly.

The night before my eighth birthday, a special cake arrived at the American Legion where my mom bartended. She didn't ask why I was gifted that cake or how I met the cake maker. Perhaps she already knew. The cake was suited for a princess, tiered like wedding confection, strawberry frosting over rich chocolate and a secret vanilla heart. But as delicious and pretty as it

was I felt hollow when my mom brought it home, embarrassed that it was delivered to a bar, embarrassed that I'd shown that woman how lonely I was. I don't know if it was that day or sometime soon after that I took to hiding in the gutted hold of my favorite wreck, where even on hot afternoons the sand inside stayed cool and damp. I wasn't afraid of the beetles or the sandworms that sheltered there. I wanted my brothers to come looking for me, but they had moved on. That summer I carried the sounds of waves and the smells of tar and seawater and rotting boards.

When I walked home from Christopher's the silver truck passed me twice. The man, at least, was looking for his daughter. I was angry because I thought I knew something of the longing that pulled that boy so far away from his front yard. I assured myself that he had good instincts. He was the kind of kid who would look for what he needed, regardless of how far it took him, and therein laid the tightrope of success and tragedy. Because I can't ever forget him I let my hope for Christopher swell in me like a cake rising.

Forgiveness

by **Susan Bonetto**

My steadfast Midwestern parents get credit for 'raising me right', but I didn't learn the consequence of forgiveness until I was well into adulthood in a land on distant shores. I grew up with the meaningful mottos, 'forgive and forget' and 'turn the other cheek'. I would have said that I practiced these moral codes but it was in Fiji where I learned how little I grasped of their meaning.

My husband, Oscar, and I lived for one year on Leleuvia Island, an infinitesimal atoll that juts out of Fijian seas. Leleuvia is a permanent home to no one, a backpackers' resort hosting the holiday comings and goings of youngish travellers. It is a landmass that, at high tide, spans a sum total of four blocks by one block. Twice daily, it stretches and yawns as the tide flows out, growing to a magnitude of nearly six by two blocks.

Given its size, staying on Leleuvia was akin to being placed under a microscope, where everything about you is known and discussed by the other residents. The resort staff observed our every move, dissecting our recurring interactions, clothes worn, food eaten drinks drunk, even our casual chitchat. Typically Oscar woke early and did a walk-about greeting our Fijian friends and co-workers. But, one morning, he slept late and it was I who, instead, stopped for tea at the back of the kitchen where the two cooks and their helper prepared the wood fire for the guests' breakfast.

"Where's bosso Oscar?" Lena asked.

I smiled a simple response, "Bosso's at home."

"He's still sleeping?" she wanted to know.

"Why, do you need him for something?"

"No, I just hope he's all right cuz he's usually up already," Lena cooed, starting to stir a potential pot of worries amongst the employees.

Since, perhaps, everyday life doesn't stimulate enough or, conceivably, for cultural reasons to which I never had birthright, this microcosmic indigenous community included its share of gossip. Fijians delight in recounting stories about people they know, stories being the precise term as truth is not a required ingredient in the telling. Mention to a Fijian that you have a bellyache and, by nightfall, people are discussing your likely appendicitis. Comment on the newly arrived, sculpted Italian beauty and during the evening's grog festivities you will be teased about your desire for her. At times, this type of gossip infected Leleuvia and, once, blew towards us with a full cyclonic force that bent and broke the boughs of our finest friendship there.

We'd met Judy and Hans, the dive masters and only other resident expats on Leleuvia, more than three years back when we all were visitors to the island—each couple with the pipe dream of living there. Our subsequent visits overlapped and we became fast friends given our shared thoughts of leaving our developed worlds behind and moving to an infinitesimal island in the South Pacific. Once located there we'd become daily coffee buddies and confidants.

But one day, long after our relationship seemed secure, a long-staying tourist shared ugly rumors with me. As the tale went, our marriage was in trouble due to our mutual, straying eyes. It was hard for us to believe that our marriage was a subject of intense analysis. Married eight years, without a day of regret and with a momentous secret—we were now trying to have a baby. Foolishly, we tried to understand the gossip's foundation. Apparently,

each week, when one of us departed on the daily ferryboat for an overnight shopping trip to the mainland and capital city, Suva, we started tongues wagging as, in Fiji, devoted couples do not travel alone or spend nights apart.

I knew that there's no sense in addressing rumors, as they take on a character of their own, expanding exponentially. But our local population was minute, and we discerned that, while the locals propagated the buzz, our good mates, Judy and Hans, had planted it. This data felled me; I couldn't help myself, wanted to clarify the 'whys' and 'what's' and visited Judy to ask "Really?" She confessed that she had made several comments about our relationship based on our abundance of independent overnight trips combined with our flirtatious manner with tourists, dancing and carrying on during the nightly entertainment. I started to debate her unsubstantiated facts but quickly grasped that she thought it amusing and didn't care that her opinions had wafted across the island.

We parted that day with animosity and proceeded to live side by side, un-speaking, on this miniature piece of land. For weeks, Oscar and I passed our once, closest friends multiple times each day and didn't concede a greeting. Nightly, we sat as strangers at the same picnic table, visiting with the ever-shifting tourists concurrently. We must have seemed an awkward quartet to the short-term guests. Four members of the Swiss Family Robinson living and working in enmity.

On top of everything, their two-year old son, Ben, was both our buddy and inspiration behind our fresh thoughts of parenthood. Our captivating adopted child, he unfailingly arrived at the bungalow with the sunrise, an elfin alarm clock calling out his version of our names. "Oska, Susi, we go fishing?" Ben joined Oscar at the reef on the edge of the island for some morning casting

and he sat on my kitchen counter licking spatulas and spoons as I baked cakes. Before day's end we showered off ten hours of sand and mango stains together. The disease that swept over our relationship with his parents didn't affect him and he continued his visits, taken home by Judy in icy stillness on warm tropical evenings. As they'd walk away I'd occasionally consider how to put things right but held onto the belief that we'd been wronged and, thus, our bond was broken.

Our indigenous friends surely watched in surprise as we behaved so differently from them. Months before there had been an argument between two of the 'boys'—the young men who worked on the island. Their angry words turned to shouting and broke into punches. I saw blood and thought they would destroy each other. They had to be wedged apart and taken to separate borders of the island to cool off. The next evening these two men sat together around the grog bowl, singing songs and telling stories. I expressed astonishment to my closest local confidant, Lena, at seeing the duelling, hate-filled men laughing together. She explained it to me simply, "Fijians always forgive. It's too small a place to stay mad at somebody." To this day I don't know if 'place' meant world, country, or our diminutive Leleuvia Island community when she gifted me these native pearls of wisdom.

But we were Americans, not Fijians, and I couldn't bear to look at Judy, aware of the callous thoughts that she'd scattered. And, so, we continued our stalemate. Two months later, we lived through a hopeless night when a hurricane devastated much of the island and closed the resort. A week thereafter, while mourning the loss of our island dollhouse, Oscar and I relocated to Suva. With no ceasefire in sight we left Judy and Hans behind without a 'goodbye' while we sought more favourable conditions.

Once settled into city quarters, we began making habitual weekend visits to Leleuvia. As our boat came ashore we'd hear Ben's small voice calling "Oska, Susi coming!" Throughout the weekends we played with Ben giving no acknowledgment to his parents. Six months later, through the same coconut grapevine that launched our cold war, we discovered that Judy was pregnant. As the months passed we watched her from the distance ripening and swelling like late summer fruit, Oscar and I ruminating silently over where she would have the baby. They had only a sparing business since the hurricane panted half the island away and eked out the most basic living with their dive business. The island had no medical facilities and Judy would need to find shelter in a developed location before long. One Sunday afternoon as we motored away, Oscar looked back towards our weekend sandbox where Judy sat playing on the beach with Ben. He shook his head, attempting to square his thoughts, then glanced at me and said, "I feel sorry for her; she'll need a place to stay in Suva when the baby comes." To which I half queried, half stated, "We can invite her to stay with us?"

And Oscar nodded assent.

That evening I placed a call to the island's radiophone. Lena's husband, Sireli, answered and, after a 'Bula Vinaka' greeting, I asked him, "Can you please find Judy and tell her that Susan wants to speak with her?" While waiting I imagined a new chronicle commencing about us peculiar foreigners. Judy came on the scratchy line and I spoke a mere one sentence—I asked if she wanted to stay with us until the baby was born. She didn't hesitate, breathed a "Yes, thank-you," and appeared on our doorstep three weeks later. The friendship resumed. No major discussion, psychoanalysis or sorting through feelings. Judy arrived with suitcase in hand, hugged each of us, and moved into the guest room. She stayed for

five weeks pre and post-delivery and during this period we shared coffees and cakes again, discussing safe tidbits of daily news until we regained a time when we could dive deeper into values and convictions once more.

This sort of thing never happened to me elsewhere. People who wounded me fell out of my universe and were erased. Judy, Oscar, Hans and I damaged and tried to shatter our friendship some years ago. But the forces of time and place wouldn't allow it. Instead we learned absolution. None of us live on Leleuvia anymore. Since then we have shared many substantial events—child rearing, parents lost, jobs gained, jobs lost, lives lived. Today we reside in different countries but remain united, communicating often and warmly as people can who, once upon a time, forgave each other in Fiji.

Letting Go

by Ute Carson

In the wintery spring of 1945, World War II had ended but not the chaos and misery suffered by its survivors. My mother received notice that her husband had been killed. She sought solace in the arms of the messenger, got pregnant, and remarried. The couple moved south looking for work. I was five years old and left in the care of my maternal grandmother in the bombed-out city of Kassel.

These were the happiest times of my war-torn childhood. I never wanted to leave my grandmother's side. Days were spent gathering twigs and branches for our wood-burning stove, source of warmth and light. We filled baskets with the white flower heads of chamomile, then dried them for brewing tea. We collected sugar beets in the fields, cooked and stirred them into syrup, a delicious treat over our watery oatmeal. But the evenings were the best. Warmed and protected by my grandmother's ample body we snuggled as she spun stories of imaginary places and events.

Months later my mother called for me. My grandmother prepared me with allusions to a happy family life and as it turned out, I would thrive in my new environment.

We arranged a meeting place where my stepfather waited in a horse-drawn carriage. The exchange was brief. I suddenly felt cramps in my stomach and barely had time to sling my arms around my beloved grandmother's neck before I was hoisted onto the seat of the wagon.

That was the last time I saw my grandmother. She waved and then her hand covered her mouth as if to stifle a sob. She had to stay behind, war-weary and lonely, while I was ushered toward a fresh beginning. I still see her

getting smaller and smaller, sinking into the shadow of the bright morning light.

Hope Diamond

by **Ute Carson**

"It fits." She pounded the left heel of her travel-weary brown shoes. In its hollow my grandmother had just buried a diamond-in-the-rough. A few days before, sitting on the steps of their ramshackle cottage near the diamond fields of the Namib Desert where my grandfather was an overseer, she had spotted an object in the sand. The African sun had reflected off its glittering surface.

British freighters, anchored in the bay off Lüderitz, were ready to transport German settlers back home following the English takeover of South West Africa in 1919. The diamond mine workers had already been evacuated.

Back in her native Germany my grandmother stored the shoes among other valuables in her closet. "You never know when we might need it," she told my mother.

A war later, fleeing invading Russian troops, my grandmother trekked westward. She wore her trusty worn African shoes.

In the icy winter of 1946 I contracted diphtheria. Although I lived in a cocoon of familial love, infected children were forcibly quarantined in a provisional hospital by American authorities. "Have a heart," my distraught mother pleaded. "We have never been apart." She was summarily ushered out.

I was delirious and barely aware of what was going on. I vaguely recall crying "Mutti" during nights of feverish demon-dreams as children around me died in droves. Once I threw my arms around a nurse, thinking she was my mother. Medicines were scarce and penicillin was available only on the black market. There was little hope for me.

My grandmother made contact with a street-smart volunteer in the hospital's storage room where CARE packages containing powdered milk and instant soup arrived from abroad.

That night she pried off the left heel of her African shoes, lifted the diamond out and spit-polished it with her handkerchief. "Your time has come," she whispered to it and then cloaked herself in a shabby gray coat. Under cover of darkness she descended into the underworld of our city where smugglers eagerly exchanged the precious stone for the new wonder drug. "Just in time," sighed the doctor at the children's ward. I soon recovered.

I was left with fear of separation, a damaged heart valve, and an amazing story. My grandmother had to recount her adventure again and again. It was the ending that I envisioned with vivid imagination.

"After being led through tunnels to a dimly lit shed, a bespectacled man examined the diamond under a magnifying glass and exclaimed: It's real! He then reached up to a shelf behind him and pulled down a box with black lettering: PENICILLIN. He dismissed me abruptly, urging me to go quickly before we were found out." My grandmother assured me that she had not been frightened until that moment. "But then I realized," she confessed, "that I might be followed and robbed." She hurried away, clutching the box of tablets to her chest, then stuffing them into her undergarments.

"But where?" I asked with childish curiosity. "Close to my heart," she murmured.

Contributors

Susan Bonetto grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin before moving to California where she met and married an extraordinary man who encouraged her to live abroad (with him) and travel as far and wide as possible. While living in Fiji, their son, Alejandro, was born. Susan works as a global Human Resources Consultant and has been fortunate to have lived in the U.S., Fiji, The Philippines, and Argentina and travelled to more than 30 countries. One of her Fiji stories, "Before We Lived Barefoot" recently won second place in TransitionsAbroad.com's 2014 Narrative Travel Writing Essay Contest.

Nancy Caronia is a lecturer at the University of Rhode Island. Her creative non-fiction, fiction, and poetry have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *New Delta Review, Lowestoft Chronicle, Tell Us a Story,* and *Don't Tell Mama! The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing*. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2013. She is co-editor with Edvige Giunta of *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and Culture in the Works of Louise DeSalvo* (Fordham University Press, October 2014).

A writer from youth, German-born **Ute Carson's** first story was published in 1977. Her story "The Fall" won the Grand Prize for Prose and was published in the anthology *A Walk through My Garden*. Her novel *Colt Tailing* was published in 2004 and was a finalist for the Peter Taylor Book Award Prize for the Novel and was followed by her second novel *In Transit* in 2008. Her poetry collection *Just a Few Feathers* was published in 2011 and her chapbook *Folding Washing* in 2013. Her poem "A Tangled Nest of Moments" won second place in the Eleventh International Poetry Competition 2012. An advanced Certified Clinical hypnotist, Ute Carson resides in Austin, TX with her husband. They have three daughters, six grandchildren, a horse and a number of cats.

Eleanor Fitzsimons is a freelance journalist and researcher. Her work has been published in *The Irish Times, The Sunday Times, History Ireland* and other publications, and she has researched documentaries for the Irish national broadcaster, RTÉ. In 2013, she won the Keats-Shelley Prize and was runner-up for the Biographers' Club Tony Lothian Prize with "A Want of Honour", her proposed biography of Harriet Shelley. She has an MA in Women, Gender and Society from University College Dublin. She is is

working on a book examining the influence of women on the work and life of Oscar Wilde. She lives in Dublin, Ireland.

Julie Goodale is a professional violist living in the woods north of New York City. She is also a passionate advocate and fitness trainer in the cancer community; her work in this arena can be found at www.Life-Cise.com. Julie is often found outdoors, running trails, climbing, hiking, or windsurfing. And although she is sometimes one of the slower skiers on a mountain, she likes to think that she's just searching for the perfect turn.

Faithfully constructive in her epistemology, **KJ Hannah Greenberg** channels gelatinous monsters and two-headed wildebeests. As such, she helps out as an Associate Editor *at Bound Off!* and at *Bewildering Stories*. Her most recent books include: *The Immediacy of Emotional Kerfuffles* (Bards and Sages Publishing, 2013), *Citrus-Inspired Ceramics* (Aldrich Press, 2013), *Intelligence's Vast Bonfires* (Lazarus Media, 2012), *Supernal Factors* (The Camel Saloon Books on Blog, 2012), *Fluid & Crystallized* (Fowlpox Press, 2012), *Don't Pet the Sweaty Things* (Bards and Sages Publishing, 2012), *A Bank Robber's Bad Luck with His Ex-Girlfriend* (Unbound CONTENT, 2011), and *Oblivious to the Obvious: Wishfully Mindful Parenting* (French Creek Press, 2010).

Sue Hardy-Dawson lives in the United Kingdom. She is a poet and illustrator and is widely published in children's anthologies including, among others, A & C Black, Macmillan, Bloomsbury, Schofield and Sims and Oxford University Press. She has an Open First Class Honours degree in Creative Writing, Literature and Supporting Teaching and Learning. She has been commissioned to provide workshops for The Prince of Wales Foundation for Children and the Arts. As she is dyslexic she takes a special interest encouraging children with special educational needs.

C.B. Heinemann has been performing, recording and touring with rock and Irish music groups for nearly twenty years. His Celtic rock band, Dogs among the Bushes, was the first American Celtic group to tour in the former East Germany and Czechoslovakia after the fall of communism. His short stories have appeared in *Storyteller, One Million Stories, Whistling Fire, Danse Macabre, Fate, The Washington Post, Boston Globe, Philadelphia Inquirer, Cool Traveler, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Car & Travel, Outside In Literary Journal*, and *Florida English*.

Mary Kudenov is an MFA candidate in University of Alaska Anchorage's Low-Residency Creative Writing and Literary Arts Program. Her work has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review, Chautauqua, Permafrost, The Citron Review,* and *F Magazine.* Mary has essays forthcoming in *Chautauqua, Vela,* and *The Southampton Review.*

Cathy Mauk left the US 23 years ago for the love of a man and has been living in Australia ever since. She came to writing late, but is making up for lost time. She has been published in *PAN: Philosophy, Activism and Nature*, an Australian journal. She was long listed for the 2013 Calibre Prize, Australia's premier essay prize. In 2012, she was accepted to Breadloaf in Sicily. She is currently revising a completed memoir *Out of Place*, which deals with place and identity, and is developing a collection of essays about our emotional, cultural, and moral relationships with place.

Liz Olds grew up in Maryland and fulfilled her dream of traveling the U.S. by Greyhound, Amtrak, a 1969 red VW van, and her thumb in her salad days. She finally settled down 35 years ago in Minneapolis, MN where she currently supports her writing dreams cashiering at a big box store. She has been published in *Inside Bluegrass, Paid My Dues, The Grapevine* and was the recipient of the 1983 ALA's Children's Recording of the Year for the song "Just like Sally Ride", which the late Ms. Ride especially enjoyed because it did not use her name as a pun. Liz plays the banjo and is a blues programmer on KFAI-FM. She recently graduated from the Foreword Apprenticeship Program through The Loft Literary Center.

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in Napa, California. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals, including *Other Voices, Pleiades, The Summerset Review, The Massachusetts Review*, and *The Blue Lake Review.* Nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published in April 2013 by Ashland Creek Press. Visit her website at: http://jean-ryan.com

Katharine Valentino, mother and grandmother, worked for 25 years at menial jobs before acquiring a BA in journalism, summa cum laude, from Indiana University in Bloomington. For the next 20 years, she worked at somewhat more interesting jobs, occasionally even being allowed to write some technical thing or another. In 2012, she retired and moved to Eugene, Oregon. She is writing her memoirs, each of which, when done, she reads to

her grandson. She also occasionally edits and publishes memoirs for others in Eugene.

Jono Walker is a writer and book review blogger who moonlights as an advertising executive and marketing consultant. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife Julia, their big weedy garden, a couple of poorly behaved dogs, and his trusty fly rod. Visit his blog at http://www.jonosbookreviews.com/