bioStories magazine

Volume 8, Issue 1 2018

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

With Volume 8, we've moved the magazine from a semi-annual to an annual publication, offering you this expansive issue featuring twenty-five writers and pieces ranging across the globe and across time and history. We hope you enjoy this eclectic variety of fine nonfiction and that you will be inspired by these diverse stories.

Cover Art: "About Waiting" by Christopher Woods (photograph)



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Flo's House by John Garcia

The other week when I followed a dirt path in an industrial area of Kansas City, Missouri known as the West Bottoms, I found a kitten. Or, I should say, it found me. The trail twisted around trees and over rusted train tracks and past a camp of homeless army veterans. I was a reporter writing a story about federal budget cuts in programs for homeless veterans for The Kansas City Star. I wanted to ask them what they thought of the reductions.

Just as I was looking for a place to sit, I felt something claw into the back of my right thigh. I jerked around and looked over my shoulder while swatting at my leg. Whatever it was, dug in deeper, and I turned faster and faster, cursing, and finally grabbed it but I lost my balance and fell. One of the vets stepped over me, bent down and picked up whatever it was that had been squirming in my hand. He looked down at me, the trees behind him towering above us blocking the sun.

"Cat," he said.

He dropped it and I caught it and sat up holding a gray kitten.

The vet helped me to my feet. After the interview, I searched my pockets for my cell phone and called my partner, Flo.

"I found a kitten," I told her.

"A kitten?" Flo said. "Where?"

I heard her ten-year-old daughter, Molly, shout, "A kitten! Bring it home. Let him bring it home, Mom!"

"Well, it's too late for me to say no now," Flo said, sounding more flustered than annoyed.

"I want it!" Molly shouted.

"You hear that?" Flo said.

"Flo," I said, pausing to emphasize my point, "the kitten is mine."

My father had felt the same way about a Newfoundland we had when I was growing up as I did about the kitten. The dog, he said, belonged to him. For years, we

had owned Great Danes. They always died at an early age, however, from painful stomach disorders common to their breed, and my mother and father grew tired of the heartbreak.

When our veterinarian euthanized our third Great Dane just five years after we brought it home, my parents said, That's it. No more Danes. A few years passed when we didn't have a dog at all. Then my mother persuaded my father to buy a black Standard Poodle, a decidedly feminine dog in his estimation. The poodle accompanied my mother when she shopped, sat with her when she read the newspaper, and slept at the foot of her side of the bed. It was her dog, as much as my two older brothers and I were her children. She made our breakfasts, lunches, and dinners; bought our clothes, took us to doctor appointments, tucked us in at night. My father would come home from work, read the newspaper, and listen to the news. He became increasingly distant as our hormones raced and we grew into contrary teenagers.

My father never warmed to the poodle. Two years after he gave it to my mother, he bought a second dog; a black Newfoundland, a much heftier breed than a poodle.

"This is my dog," he announced proudly, holding the fat, four-month-old, distressed-looking puppy in his arms.

However, Gus, the name he gave it, was no more his dog than the poodle. My father was not home during the day as my mother was. He did not house train Gus, feed him, walk him and take him to the veterinarian. Gus followed my mother around the house when my father was home as much as the poodle did because, in the end, Gus was her dog, too.

Twelve years later, I drove with my father to Becker Animal Hospital to have Gus euthanized. His hair was falling out in clumps and he could no longer walk. My father wept as Dr. Becker inserted a needle into Gus's foreleg and pushed the plunger of the syringe. Standing over Gus, my father felt keenly the loss of an animal he knew had never loved him as it had my mother.

I was twenty-two when Gus died and had just graduated from Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I was bouncing from state to state working temp jobs without a

clue to a career. My father said I'd turned into a bum. He thought I should work at a bank or in retail and establish myself.

Despite his criticism, however, he never stopped asking me about my travels. He traced my routes on a map. I have never visited that part of the country, he would say, poking at one place and then another. I always wanted to. What was it like? Did you like it? I'll have to go there someday.

I remember sitting on my father's lap as a boy. He would hold my arms, spread his legs and I'd drop through the gap almost hitting the floor before he pulled me back up and I would laugh, eager for more.

I remember walking beside him trying to keep up with his long stride. We would play catch together in the backyard. I felt the hard smack of the ball when he hurled it into my hands.

I remember when I spilled a glass of milk at the dinner table. I was about five or six. My father threatened to beat me with his shoe. I can still see the glass slipping from my grasp, the milk gushing out in slow motion as my father's face blossomed with fury.

I inherited his temper. When I was nine years old, my childhood friend Tom and his parents were late picking me up for a Chicago Cubs' game. I thought we'd miss the first inning. I stomped back and forth in the kitchen and kicked the breakfast nook table.

"Where are they?" I snapped.

"You're acting just like your father," my mother scolded.

Her words stopped me cold. I sat down. I took deep breaths, letting each one out slowly, until I calmed down. I would not be my father.

Flo had been divorced for five years when we met in 2002. She had read a story of mine in The Kansas City Star about a puppy I had rescued from a dog fight in Kabul that year. In an email, she praised me for saving the dog. She also said she liked a photo of me that accompanied the story and suggested we get together. Intrigued by how direct she was, and flattered, I agreed.

We met at Khaldi's, a coffee shop in Kansas City's Country Club Plaza, on a Saturday in mid-March. Flo wore a snug white blouse and blue jeans and I liked how

her clothes hugged her body and the way her blond hair fell down her back. We soon realized we had several things in common. Flo was a social worker in a high school in Shawnee, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City. I told her about my work with the homeless in San Francisco. She had lived in Columbia, Missouri. I had too when I was traipsing across the country in my twenties. We were both vegetarians.

At the time, I still lived on Summit. Flo owned a two-story home in Overland Park, Kansas. Molly and Flo's two teenage sons, Barry and Danny, lived with her. Barry was about to graduate high school.

Flo and I spent two hours together in the Plaza. I asked her out for dinner a few days later. We dated for more than a year before I moved in.

Few things in Flo's house belonged to me. If I put something away where it hadn't gone before she would call me on it. Not because it didn't make sense but because I was breaking an established order. Molly treated me like the younger sibling she never had, a cross between friendship and total disregard. Barry and Danny were deep into their teenage worlds and had little use for me.

Flo and I referred to her house as "our house." However, I wasn't fooling myself. The house remained very much hers. In stressful moments, she talked as if she still lived alone. She complained, "My grass needs to be cut," or, "My bedroom is a mess," or, "My kitchen is too small." At these moments, I was reminded who the house belonged to and I felt like a tenant who was sleeping with the landlady. I lived inside Flo's house but outside it, too, an observer one step removed from the activity around me. Our life together took on the feel of another reporting assignment that would end.

Week days Flo and I would wake up about six and get ready for work. Molly would catch a bus to school about seven-thirty. At night, Flo cooked dinner. Afterward, she went over Molly's homework and then we read or watched television together. In no time at all, it seems, it was time for bed.

On weekends, I still got up early. Flo slept in. I made coffee and waited for her to come downstairs. Then we'd eat breakfast, clean the house and take Molly to a movie. Before I knew it, we were having dinner and then kissing one another good night, long kisses sometimes that put the night on hold before it raced ahead again towards dawn. Hours later, I rose to the surface of a deep sleep awake to another day in Flo's house.

Shortly after I moved in, we discussed buying a house that would be truly "ours" but neither one of us had the money and we didn't want to go into debt. After some consideration, we arrived at an alternative plan. We decided to replace the tiled floors in the kitchen, living room, and front hall of Flo's house with hardwood. Altering the interior, we thought, would make the house mine as much as hers.

The morning I found the kitten, the house was in upheaval. Carpenters had been in the previous day and had begun work on the floors. Piles of shorn tile took up corners. Living room rugs had been heaped on top of chairs. End tables appeared to have been thrown without regard to any out of the way place.

"Look what they've done to my house," Flo said greeting me at the door.

Kitten in tow, I had parked on the street outside Flo's house. She kept her car in the garage. She got home from work before I did and felt that entitled her to the space.

I didn't argue. It made sense, I supposed. What I did know was that I left my car on the street. It meant I locked the doors every night. It meant my car was exposed. It meant I hoped some kid didn't vandalize it. Sometimes, such little patterns of our life ignited and I wanted to explode and leave Flo.

Then I would recall when we got together at Khaldi's Coffee. Her blond hair, the sparkle in her eyes. The way she said good-bye with a cock of her head and twist of her hips. Remembering these moments, I felt the same rush of warm feelings as I had when we first met. I was sure I would miss Flo, even the moments when she upset me, because these moments are part of her companionship, part of what fills me and makes me not alone.

Still a little annoyed, I'd return to the house after my walk and not say anything. My father would have stormed back inside and let rip a hurricane of fury. I, instead, engaged in silence and retreated to the study and turned on the computer and cut

myself off from Flo, from Molly, from everyone, allowing the flame of my anger to smolder and sputter out.

"You Okay," Flo asked.

"I'm fine," I told her.

I carried the kitten inside and Molly met me at the door and lifted the kitten from my arms.

"Can I keep her in my room?" she asked Flo.

"I don't see why not."

"Wait," I said. "We don't even know if it's litter trained. We'll put it in our bathroom tonight and see how it does."

"We'll put it in the bathroom now and if it's OK in a couple of hours, I don't see why she can't have it in her room," Flo answers.

She looked at me with a what-do-you-want-me-to-do expression. I gave her my don't-give-your-daughter-everything-she-wants look.

What? Flo said with her eyes. What are you saying? "Nothing," I said. "Nothing."

"This is a big step," Flo said when I decided to move in with her.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

Until then we had a routine: I'd spend several nights a week with her and then return to my apartment. Sofa, chair, futon bed, television, bare walls. I met friends after work at bars, or, I drove home and watched television. A day or two later, I'd stay with Flo again. Something was missing. I felt alive only when I traveled abroad as a reporter, invigorated by the impermanence and uncertainties of the journey. I had nothing to to look forward to in Kansas City until I met Flo. I thought moving in with her would be the start of our lives together. I thought I'd feel settled. I thought I'd be content.

"Of course," I said again. "I have to do something."

"We have to," she corrected.

That night, I thought of my parents. My father was thirty-two and my mother twenty-nine when they married, old by the standards of their World War II generation. They had to do something. I don't think, however, that they were desperate.

A black and white photo of my parents shows them sitting in a restaurant. I don't know where. They are at a table filled with other people. Baskets of flowers hang above their heads. My mother wears a light-colored dress, my father a suit and tie. They are smiling at one another. Their eyes dance with mischief. I imagine them reaching beneath the table toward one another in this room crowded with other couples oblivious to their desire.

I understood just how much my parents loved one another not long ago when my mother tripped walking into the kitchen from the living room and fell against a wall. She slid to the floor bleeding from her forehead.

My father helped her back up and then grabbed her coat. He insisted on taking her to the emergency room no matter her objections. I was home visiting. I drove and he directed me although I knew the way. I kept quiet and let him take charge in the only way he could since his failing eyesight prevented him from driving.

Seated on a gurney waiting to be examined, my mother muttered about how she hated hospitals. My father, she said, was making a fuss over nothing. He laughed. He patted her knee and she reached over and covered his hand with hers.

My mother did not stop complaining until the doctors released her. My father kept smiling and laughing and holding her hand. Her fingers entwined with his and he put his other hand over hers and for a moment they looked at one another as if I wasn't there.

I blushed. I could not recall ever having seen them kiss, let alone hold hands.

When I moved in with Flo, I stored my sofa, chair and futon in her basement and covered them with a plastic sheet. A room upstairs had been cleared for me to use as a study. I had suggested putting my futon there and use it as a couch, but Flo said it did not go with the pink carpet. The study was just off the front door and would be the first room a visitor would see entering the house. She wanted me to get new furniture. I bought two wicker chairs with red cushions. She liked the chairs at first but when I

brought them home she thought they were uncomfortable and she hated the Southwestern design of the cushions.

"You didn't want the futon and now you don't like the chairs," I said.

We ignored each other the rest of the day. The following afternoon, I dropped by her work and brought her roses. She cried. We had lunch and stitched our life back together.

We called the kitten Zoey. Molly decided on the name. When she went to bed, Molly took it into her room. Flo and I would stay up and watch television. Then Flo went to bed. If I wasn't tired, I'd go into the kitchen and pour a glass of red wine. Then I'd open a can of cat food and wait. In seconds, Zoey ran downstairs. I took satisfaction watching her eat. When she finished, I walked into the living room and considered the disaster the carpenters had made.

Moving through the clutter, I began to organize things. I pushed the sofa against the wall and placed the end tables on either side of it. I lay the rugs over the exposed sub-floor and plugged in a lamp and set up some chairs. It didn't look much better but now it was my mess.

I carried Zoey downstairs to the basement and sat on my futon. The plastic sheet crinkled beneath me. It had the same smell as a new car. My father used to tell me stories about his first job as a salesman with a Baltimore canning company before he later went to work for his father. He'd drive to Omaha, Denver, Santa Fe. Rolling past farm fields and silent houses. No radio. Cocooned in his car floating in the silence of early morning. He enjoyed talking about it and drifted off for seconds with his eyes closed before he turned to me, opened his eyes and waited for the present to reassert itself.

I continued feeding Zoey at night and she stopped sleeping with Molly. Now, she follows me around until I'm ready for bed. She wants to sleep with me but her loud purr keeps Flo awake. I lock Zoey out of the room but some nights she scratches at the door waking us both.

"We need to put Zoey in the basement at night," Flo told me last night before dinner.

We faced one another in the kitchen. I poured two glasses of wine.

"If you ignore her, she'll stop," I said.

"I can't keep taking sleeping pills every night."

"She won't understand what you're doing if you lock her in the basement."

"Listen to you. She's a cat."

"Well, it's your house, isn't it? Do what you want."

"I don't even know what you mean by that."

I stepped back into a corner, gripping my wine glass. I stared at the floor and fought back my temper. Flo crossed her arms and looked away. I waited, feeling we were at a defining moment in our relationship, that when we spoke again we would either cobble together an acceptable agreement, or, we would not and that would be it. Or, the start of being it.

Flo turned away from me and began emptying the dishwasher. A dessert plate slipped from her hand. I watched it fall, watched it shatter near my feet.

"I'm sorry," Flo said, her voice breaking.

I nudged pieces of glass with my shoe. I now felt calm, almost serene. The noise of the broken plate had dispersed my anger into the silence that followed. I felt a calm so total I didn't need to say one word. I just stood there and reset, holding my wine glass and listening to Flo cry.

The two young men installing the floor, Craig and Dennis, look about the same age I was when I worked on a construction crew one summer during college in Cedar Rapids. We were building a hotel. The morning they started work, I helped them unload boxes of nails and glue from their truck. They appeared uncomfortable with my assistance but not quite sure what do about it. I told them stories about my summer in Cedar Rapids; the incompetence of the supervisor, the sweltering heat, the twelve-tofifteen-hour days. That day, I kept pace with Craig and Dennis until we finished working.

When we finished, I invited them into the kitchen and made coffee and offered them donuts. I told more stories. They stopped calling me, Mr. Garcia. They said if I wanted to, I could work with them the next day.

When I look back on that college summer, I remember a wheelbarrow filled with cement and the weight of its wood handles in my hands as I lift it and I feel the muscles in my arms tense when I push forward and just when it seems the wheelbarrow will not budge it begins to roll, carried by the weight of the cement, and I push it up a wobbly board, nothing below me but a trench of gravel and mud, and onto the second floor of the hotel and tip it, dumping the cement into a trough, and then let go of the handles and the wheelbarrow stands for a moment and then falls sideways and I pace back and forth catching my breath free of its weight, sweating, my arms inflated from the strain, and I look out at Cedar Rapids and the flat roofs and the splashes of green between houses and the long roads like tentacles that ensnare neighborhoods as well as lead out of them, and I see my father on one of those roads thinking that if my pounding heart does not slow down I will walk on air, by God, walk on air right over everything and follow him out of town.

One morning, Craig told me we had a problem. He had removed the toilet to lay the floor in the second-floor bathroom and found that the mount for the toilet had rotted.

"You need a plumber to take care of this," he said.

"I need my bathroom," Flo said.

"I don't do plumbing."

"But. . .," I began.

"Dude," Craig said. "I don't do this kind of work."

He walked downstairs. Shadows dappled his body and it appeared for an instant he was descending into water. He stopped at a plate of donuts and popped the last one in his mouth. The camaraderie was over. He didn't care about my summer in Cedar Rapids. I had worked beside him and Dennis and they were the ones getting paid. He was probably laughing at me.

"Where're you going?" I said.

"Truck." He opened the door and Zoey darted outside.

"Oh, Christ," I said.

Zoey dashed across the yard to some trees. I ran after her. She took off again bounding further away. I kept running. Flo shouted after me. I ran faster and faster disconnected from a lonely desire to hold her one last time until I heard nothing but my feet cutting through the damp grass, and I passed trees and more trees and continued running towards what I don't know, Zoey crying below the sound of my father calling me back yet urging me on.

(Author's note: Some names have been changed to protect privacy.)

Walking by Michelle Cacho-Negrete

My experience is the same as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's who said, "My mind only works with my legs." I've written every essay, thesis, short story on my feet. My mother insisted I was even a rambler *in utero*, the truth of that confirmed by an article proclaiming babies walk in the womb. They press their tiny feet against the uterine wall and push off, those first circular strolls an introduction to the exhilaration of movement. My mother was an incessant walker: the mile and a half to the Brooklyn/Manhattan subway, then climbing stairs to her third-floor job as a file clerk, enjoying a brisk lunchtime jaunt, and later reversing the sequence to go home.

Walking is a legacy from our tree-dwelling ancestors who evolved into bi-pedal hunter-gathers, their survival dependent upon studying what was around them and knowing when it was time to leave. My grandparents, thousands of years later, also knew when to leave, escaping the Russian pogroms by crossing the Carpathian Mountains, my seven-year-old mother and her younger sister in hand. They made their circuitous way through Eastern Europe, finally reaching that most walkable of cities, New York. My mother had very faint memories of the seemingly endless journey, her wary parents avoiding Russian soldiers, locating sheltered places to sleep, finding wild sorrel, mushrooms, and berries, among other plants, to eat while pointing out the beauty around them. The ability to utilize and take pleasure in everything around her was seamlessly integrated into my childhood with my mother as my guide and companion. Every weekend was a long walk through Brooklyn or over the bridge into Manhattan. Nothing escaped my/her attention: a salvageable object on the sidewalk: chairs, picture frames, dishes, all dragged home on the bus. She pointed out the brilliant red paisley of a babushka on a grey-clad woman, an elderly couple holding hands, painted flowers on brick tenement walls, a cat in a window soaking up sun. She discovered obscure places to buy a nosh or an egg-cream or second-hand books. We couldn't afford travel to exotic locations, but Manhattan houses a multitude of cultures and the streets blazed with color all summer long. The fierce masks and long red and gold bodies of dragons

wound through Chinatown among bowls of noodles, crispy egg rolls and stir-fry scenting the streets. Devout followers trailed the statue of St. Christopher carried on men's backs, pastry carts of Cannoli, tiramisu, and zeppole marking his route. Lively guitar music and pungent Puerto Rican food seduced passing strangers on celebration days. The bold costumes of African dancers were slashes of brilliance keeping time with the hypnotic drumming in Central Park. The Manhattan air itself suggested somewhere strange and distant. Walking presented the corporeal manifestations of what I read in library books, photos transformed into a living tableau.

My first walk alone was to elementary school eight blocks away. The initial few days of kindergarten my mother walked with me, pointing out landmarks, reminding me of the red lights, of the only turn I needed to make and to be wary of strangers. Although docked of needed wages, she left work early or took time off to go in late that first week. After school I'd go to a neighborhood woman who took in children. My mother's concern was evidenced that first morning by her dark-rimmed eyes, but she laughed at my eagerness as I set out. I was filled with triumph when I reached school and wished I could just continue walking all day. That evening we celebrated my success with ice cream cones.

Walks through the city's ethnic neighborhoods encouraged fantasies of all the places I could go: China, Canada, France, my ancestor's Russia, and places in America. On that first independent journey I charted a path that felt uniquely mine. Walking granted me ownership of a particular swath of pavement on these city streets and imprinted them into my internal world. I grew to define neighborhood locations as a series of events as well as addresses. The kosher chicken shop where a butcher decapitated a hen then put her on the ground to run around headless left me with weeks of nightmares. The long-gone Commodore theatre where my mother took me to see an Ingmar Bergman film as soon as I could read the subtitles, suggested I could delve into the complex psychic world of adults. That theatre acquired even further significance with my first kiss at fifteen in the last row of the balcony while watching "Exodus". The Italian sub shop represented my first day of adulthood (although I was only thirteen) because my mother bought me a sub to take for lunch at my first job.

One of the most significant landmarks was the deteriorating Catholic church, it's spire tarnished and slightly bent, that housed my first serious encounter, at ten, with anti-Semitism. A Catholic acquaintance lured me in, pointed to the crucifix and said, "That's what we do to Jews." Terrified and hurt by her cruelty I recognized at that moment how unable we are to be in charge of our lives even as adults, a lesson I should have already learned from the Holocaust survivors who had flooded New York. I recognized that forces and currents in the world override our independence in ways we couldn't know about in advance. That understanding led to many political walks: Civilian Review Board, civil rights, anti-war(s), the environment, the slaughter of mustangs, ramps for the disabled, gay rights, and most recently the women's walk against Trump.

The City slid into focus when I walked; I became viscerally connected and its center. The City itself curved around me, my feet joined to the asphalt, the sky a shelter like the tents I'd made from sheets stretched over chairs. I was both myself and more. I walked to school, to the handball court, to a street a half mile away where friends and I hung out each evening, and over the Williamsburg Bridge, which I preferred to walk alone. I found the bridge mystical, possessing a beauty not usually associated with the polluted East River. Sunlight wove a pattern of flickering stars in the water, foamy waves like clouds and the percussive slam of water against the bridge's pilings was hypnotic, especially during the rare moments when no car or subway train was passing. The elevated train line cast alternating light and shadows, an ever-changing work of abstract art. I could stand in the middle of the bridge's walkway daydreaming, sometimes not making it home until dusk or later. On those late nights my mother paced, worried about her daughter outside in the descending darkness.

All our parents warned us about the dangers of the streets at night, especially for girls, and forbade us to walk them alone. I did anyway. I felt invincible despite once being half-heartedly chased by a gang of Irish boys who saw the Jewish Star around my neck and screamed "Kike," and encountering a flasher where the street met the subway stairs. I loved the city once darkness shifted the landscape into something new; tenement alleys were narrow corridors of possibilities, roofs interrupted the hazy sky like a crazy quilt. I grew up nearly fearless in the streets, certain I could handle myself,

certain that few streets were as dangerous as claimed by the uninitiated ... these streets were mine after all and I've never felt that sense of belonging anywhere else. I realize now that I was unexpectedly naive for a ghetto kid and was lucky that I suffered nothing more serious than that hair-raising chase and a later concussion from that same gang, only in daylight.

Walking offered unique experiences. On a solitary stroll through Greenwich Village I stood outside a building lost in a recording of a singer I'd never heard before. The plaintive, raw intensity of his voice seemed as natural as wind or water and a freefloating promise that my life would hold new and unique experiences. It was thirty years later before I heard that voice again. My second husband, a blues aficionado played a CD of the blues singer Robert Johnson and tears filled my eyes. Music was everywhere. I roamed the Village, and other neighborhoods, seeking it out. On weekends, alone or with friends, we'd walk, then settle into little cafes to listen to whoever was performing. If it was summer, we'd go from singer to singer, many performing in Washington Square Park, but there were few Village streets lacking musicians. Music reflected the culture's growing awareness of social injustice: Buffy Saint Marie, The Weavers, Barry McGuire, the Byrds, and of course Bob Dylan. I fixated on Dylan's words, "And revolution in the air;" it was certainly on the streets where I participated in demonstrations and marches. I attended political meetings, saw socially conscious films, many at the Judson Memorial Church, and encouraged in thoughtful, noisy discussions.

As I walked I observed rising prices on signs in grocery windows and apartments for rent, the changing fashions of clothing and jewelry, and the bolder, challenging nature of new books. Demolition and construction were everywhere, the city in its usual constant flux. I too was shifting, growing older, becoming different and felt the city and I were in perfect sync and moving into a future together. My relationship with my mother had also changed by the time I hit my teens. The conviviality between us had nearly vanished. We snarled at each other over unimportant things as though leaving a mug in the sink, not changing a light bulb, not making the bed were important. The generational and cultural differences were a road that divided us. I took the path into unknown possibility, a gift granted to the young, and my mother, through necessity, continued along her traditional one. We took fewer walks, our only peaceful interludes together, as I spent more time with others and she maintained a solitary life.

My mother had always been the sole parent, sole authority figure and the person I was closest to. I struggled to separate myself from her, sometimes cruelly. I once suggested she had no ambition to alter her life, an accusation that she chose not to respond to although her eyes filled with tears. She had often told me that she would have loved to go to college and encouraged me to do it. My mother stacked her books everywhere in our tiny apartment, reading voraciously ... retaining everything. Her sixthgrade education, after she went out to work at twelve, confined her to a life of lowpaying jobs, but her intelligence shimmered and I was too young to understand how frustrated she must have felt.

Our distance became a complete break after my engagement at twenty to a Cuban man I'd later marry. On our last walk together, she screamed, "After the Holocaust, when you see how a Jew can't trust anybody you'd marry a Goy! Now is the time Jews have to close ranks not desert their *landsmen* (the Yiddish word for fellow Jews) like rats leaving a sinking ship."

"This is America, not the old country," I replied.

"So nobody hates Jews here?" she yelled scornfully, knowing full well how much anti-Semitism I'd encountered.

I looked around but nobody had even turned to stare. There's a personal filter on the city streets; so much happening that nobody notices unless it's a murder and sometimes not even then. It suddenly put me in a good mood and I thought, no wonder I think of these streets as my home, my "sins" are irrelevant here.

I turned back to my mother and said quietly, "I'll always be a Jew, but it's hard enough to find somebody to love, let alone limiting yourself to a specific group of people."

She shook her head and said nothing else. We continued the walk in silence.

The breach in our relationship after my marriage was never quite repaired though we had had an uneasy reconciliation after I had children. She adored her grandsons and our time together was companionable. I was charmed and nostalgic viewing a recreation of the past as she walked the boys through the city pointing out oddities, buying noshes, noting beauty everywhere around us. It was soothing, emblematic of the continuing thread that runs through a person's life, but also bittersweet. Walking together cast a type of spell, the repetitious motion, the strange blurring and sharpening of landscape we passed and the absorption of self into the city around us that even my young children experienced.

My first husband and I had only two things in common—a compulsion to escape the ghetto and walking. On our first date he suggested we take a walk in Manhattan and then have dinner. I was delighted. No man had suggested that. We shared a casual overview of our lives and ambitions as we walked: to have a well-paying job, a nice house, a safe home for our children. Although he was six feet and I merely five, he matched his steps to mine. I felt touched at his consideration, an emotion intensified when he walked nine miles to my house during the transit strike. Our early walks were deceptive, the harmony of moving in step a false inference that we were suited to each other though our cultural backgrounds were so different. I was drawn to the newly blossoming women's movement working to expand possibilities, access to higher vocations, to pursue equality and try to insure physical safety ...especially relevant to those of us who loved the streets. Carlos came from an affluent, patriarchal background with strongly defined gender roles and my concerns were antithetical to his.

We climbed Bear Mountain, explored Long Island, took the ferry to Staten Island, and rambled all of Manhattan and most of Brooklyn and Queens. There was a companionable yet solitary component to our long walks which lulled us into a false belief that we were attuned to each other. It took years for me to recognize that walking the streets was a different experience for each of us. I felt at home there, loved the interplay of fellow pedestrians, the unintentional beauty I saw in the angled corners of buildings, statues encrusted by pigeon-shit which lent them an air of antiquity, and the careless drape of human bodies over park benches. Carlos was drawn to structure, noting construction rather than beauty. We never saw the same thing no matter what we looked at together. After we had children our differences became more pronounced.

Although he was a loving father, Carlos believed that children and the house were a wife's responsibility. I demanded he be more involved, especially since I worked

part-time and had put him through school before the children arrived. I refused to live my mother's life, experience her frustration and the waste of her intelligence on a deadend job. It was my turn to go to college. Carlos was both hostile and dismissive. Once our two sons were in junior high school, however, I walked the campus of a near-by college, examined the various degrees they offered, and then enrolled. We took endless walks, arguing about what each of us believed. What he viewed as my defiance I viewed as his insensitivity. During our final walk together along the beach, we tossed stones into the water, kicked sand at each other, and exchanged accusations on who was destroying our family.

Our divorce became final the day before my college graduation. I didn't attend the ceremony; my mother died that day. I left the hospital after viewing her lifeless body and walked the streets of the hospital's Queens neighborhood. It was multi-ethnic, poor, the aroma of food from a hundred cultures colliding, buildings crumbled at their edges, chipped away by poverty just as their tenants were, desperately trying to survive but slowly losing. People slept on the ground in the shadows of tenements or sat with backs against buildings, palms thrust forward and up in the universal prayer of need. I felt abandoned by everyone and everything most important to me, including the city, which now echoed only desperation. I felt I could never again separate it from loss. A friend had recently moved to Maine and implored me to come. The powerful ties that had kept me in New York—marriage, mother, school, and neighborhood—were gone. I moved with my sons, then eleven and thirteen, to Maine. They loved it, a consolation for my huge decision. One month after we settled into our rented house, my friend was offered a great job out of state and moved away.

There was nothing familiar in Maine, nothing to lay claim to intimacy, no friend and no single location that suggested the past, which was both dismaying and comforting. My friend had selected the location and I'd trusted her completely, however, she was soon gone leaving my sons and I in a barely-there beachfront town deserted even as the first leaves fell. Once ice-storms, blizzards, and frigid temperatures arrived, there was only long stretches of snow-filled woods interspersed with isolated homes and a strip mall with a grocery store and coffee shop. For a long time, I'd get easily lost.

I'd always navigated via street names, numbered avenues, easily identified landmarks. Here I had to chart a path through unsigned roads, particular granite formations, stands of trees and a few towns away, a landmark called The Clock Farm because of a large, long-broken, towering clock on top of a barn. It took me over a year to get there in one try.

In New York I grounded myself through familiarity, connection with neighborhoods I'd repeatedly walked, establishing a history that made me more than a mere acquaintance. I was rarely lonely. I could step out the door and be surrounded by conversations, busyness, swept up into the texture of everything happening at the same time. I loved the natural, wild landscape in all kinds of weather, the wildness of spring with its out-of-control color, the visits to our back yard by moose, wild turkey, fox, and deer, but I was an urban person who would never have chosen this location on my own. I was displaced and isolated and needed the jittery excitement of a city. We had a tenmonth lease and couldn't afford to move to Portland, the nearest big city so I drove forty-five minutes north to work as a therapist in a small agency while my sons enjoyed school and after school activities.

I set about developing a relationship with Portland. I walked the city both before and after work, exploring side-streets, admiring little architectural details that seemed as beautiful as any sculpture, finding out of the way cafes and coffee shops just as my mother had done long ago. I thought of how much she would have enjoyed this city and felt a greater sorrow at her loss than I'd felt immediately after her death. As I familiarized myself with Portland I began merging with it, felt a particular joy in passing a designated personal landmark, or at shop-owners who now nodded hello, and in the simplicity of owning a Portland library card. My sons and I went many evenings to inexpensive happy hours at the city's bars, which featured tasty, healthy buffets, alive with color, the fragrance of spiced foods and all for the price of a drink. There was often live music to enjoy and the waitresses would put three cokes on the table as soon as they saw us.

Portland was a somewhat gritty, vibrant small city that boasted a growing community of artists, musicians, cultural activities and delicious restaurants. I loved the working waterfront, the occasional seal that poked its head up from the rough water, the fishermen ready to unload their day's catch, the small pleasure boats anchored, sails

heavy in the light. The salty scent of fish permeated the air with a pungency that drew circling, shrieking seagulls. Buildings along the main streets were far from the skyscrapers I'd known, some elaborately fronted, a city made even more interesting by economically diverse neighborhoods. My feet began to know the streets, intuitively cautious of uneven pavement, turning down favorite blocks, seeking out coffee-shops. My body grew comfortable with changing weather, adjusting itself to dropping temperatures and peaks of heat. It began to be home. It was on one of my walks, when my sons were visiting their father in New York, that I met Kevin, my second husband, a botanist equally devoted to walking. Our vacations have consisted of hiking all over, but we have never tired of exploring our neighborhood in Portland. We have walked in blizzards, rain, and brilliant sun.

A few months ago, I got out of bed, took a few steps, and felt instant, acute pain. I spent the morning on the couch, leg up, ice pack on my knee, awaiting my doctor's appointment. At one point, noting that the sun had broken through the clouds, I thought I'd try for a walk but my leg buckled under me with crippling pain. An MRI confirmed a torn meniscus that required bed-rest initially and then slow, brief forays.

Those first days I worked on developing patience and a certain Zen-like acceptance of confinement. The coffee table besides the couch where I now lived my life was soon laden with books, laptop, and snacks, none of which soothed me. I stared out the window and imagined that the sun imparted an unusual warmth to this twenty-degree windy March day, the sharp brightness of it slicing through the cold. Filled with self-pity, I envied the walkers side-stepping ice while they ran errands, met friends, went shopping, certain they didn't appreciate their mobility. At night on my couch I stared out at a cloud laden sky, the darkness shot through with streetlights like shafts of dirty gold. I thought about New York but especially about my mother. I am part of a lineage from my earliest ancestors to my grandparents and their trek for survival, to my mother's need for walking, a mix of the natural human need for motion, but also perhaps of a way of warding off frustration and restlessness. Walking across the city in nearly its entity is an accomplishment and one my mother regularly pursued; she taught me to see the world from a single city before I could venture further. My own treks are probably a mix of all of these things as well as utilizing much of what I see as I write in my head. My

sons walk, continuing the legacy, both actually climbing hills and mountains as my grandparents did, though with a different goal in mind.

That first trek of a few blocks, three weeks after the tear, was filled with the joy I experienced as a child, leaving me touched by the seventy-year-old familiarity with excitement at such a natural activity. There had been small changes outside that I could not appreciate from my couch: trees budding, snow drifts shrinking, extended daylight. It was hard to stop walking, but I did rather than risk another month of confinement. Now, eight months later, I still feel some aching in my knee but I can cautiously walk five miles a day.

My expectation is that I will never totally stop walking, but age will diminish the scope of what I can accomplish, I already don't climb the Presidential Range as I did when we first moved here. Although the walks I take now are less steep, less rocky, more level, those difficult trails have joined New York's well-trodden ones in memory and I still claim ownership of the paths I've worn into being my own. At the end of the film "2001, A Space Odyssey" the protagonist grows older and older finally evolving into an embryo state encircled by a womb. I can imagine myself making the same evolution and my feet once again circling that well-worn path.

An Unreasonable Couple by Marlena Fiol

"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man." —George Bernard Shaw

On June 9, 1941, two years into the second Great War, as Nazi troops advanced deep into the Soviet Union, a young, single, adventurous doctor named John Schmidt boarded a ship in New York for the eighteen-day trip to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a stopping point on his way to Paraguay. The Atlantic Ocean was a war zone patrolled by Nazi submarines. Because the U.S. was still neutral, the ship's name and two large American flags were painted on both sides of the hull. At night, the ship sailed fully lit. It was a mighty blazing vessel, making its way through dangerous waters, carrying among its passengers a zealous man on a mission.

After spending a few days in Rio, John boarded a plane that took him across the vast land of Brazil. He arrived in Asunción, the capital city of Paraguay, on a cold rainy afternoon in mid-July. Gaunt and emaciated from almost constant diarrhea and vomiting during more than a month of travel, he deplaned and breathed in the smoky, sweet, heavy, pungent odors of Paraguay.

A crew of shabby, rather taciturn police at the airport "dossiered" and fingerprinted him, marking John down as a potential criminal. The Paraguayan government, headed at that time by pro-Fascist General Morínigo, admired Germany's *Wehrmacht* and expressed unabashed support for the German cause. Germany's effective propaganda reinforced the view that the German military was superior and that the true threats to the Western Hemisphere were not the Axis powers but Western imperialists. They viewed John as one of those.

"What are you doing here?" they asked him suspiciously in broken English. This tall, thin man with blazing eyes intrigued them.

"I'm headed for the Chaco," he said, "to be a doctor."

They traded loaded looks. "*No, hombre,*" they told him. "Not the Chaco. No white man can live there."

But John barely heard them. He strode through the heavy double doors into the airport's grungy waiting room and reached out to shake hands with the Russian Mennonite leaders of the Chaco colonies who had come to meet him.

As they drove over the cobblestone streets into Asunción, John stared at the redtiled roofs of what has often been referred to as "the city of yesterday." In colonial times, Asunción was the capital of nearly the entire southern third of South America. Later, because it is landlocked and because of the tragedy of numerous bloody wars, the city failed to modernize along with the rest of the world. It has kept much of its traditional colonial flavor, even today.

When his medical internship in Baltimore had ended a few months earlier, John began looking for places to practice. "I could have chosen some places around Baltimore," he said, "but I was tired of being around women who painted their lips and men who lived in sin. I wanted to be back among my own people again." His "own people" were the Mennonites in Kansas who had emigrated from Russia in the 1870s.

At about that time, John's brother Herb, also a physician, had become aware that a large colony of persecuted Russian Mennonites had recently immigrated to a territory of about 3,000 square kilometers in west Paraguay, South America. It was a harsh desert called the Chaco. Only a few scattered nomad Indian tribes considered it habitable. The new Mennonite colonists were from the same heritage as the Kansas clan. They had no doctor and had approached Herb about moving to Paraguay to care for them. But he was busy establishing his medical career in Kansas. Knowing that his brother John was looking for a place to practice, Herb sent him a telegram briefly explaining the situation.

John sat at the edge of his hard bed, the telegram in his lap. As he read, his back straightened and his muscles tensed. In that moment, he knew God was calling him to serve in the South American country they called Paraguay. His grandmother Lena had so often told him stories about how she and his grandfather Jacob had escaped the persecution in Russia. "If my grandparents hadn't come to the U.S. when they did in the

1870s, I'd be lucky to be a barefoot boy walking behind a plow in Paraguay. For me to help the Paraguayan Mennonites medically is my expression of thanks that I was spared the pig mess in Russia," he said, and then abruptly stopped, noticing that in his excitement he was speaking out loud to himself.

Little did John know that the trip from Asunción to Filadelfia, one of the Mennonite villages of the Chaco colonies, would require another few weeks. First, was the 320-mile riverboat trip up the Río Paraguay, where he waited four days for a woodburning steam engine train. The train trip of nearly 100 miles took another full day. Finally, he rode on horseback with guides the remaining forty miles through the bush to the dusty little village of Filadelfia.

They rode up to a small single-room hut with a sloping thatched roof that he was told had once been an Indian hospital. Birds had made nests in the roof and the mud brick exterior walls were eroding. The shutters leaned down unevenly from broken rusted hinges.

"*Welkohm* – welcome. We hope it is good for you to live in this house, *Herr Dockda*," said the stooped, thin Russian man who opened the door for the new doctor. "An Indian has died in it so people refuse to use it."

All John heard was his beloved *Plautdietsch* (Low German), the language of his Russian Mennonite people. He felt his heartbeat quicken. He had arrived.



I once asked John to tell me about his years as a young doctor in the Chaco.

"You were fresh out of your internship without even your medical books (it took his crate of books six months to arrive in Paraguay). And you were trained as a general practitioner, not a surgeon, but you had to do it all when you were out there alone?"

"Mostly I was just grateful the Lord sent me there," he said. "Before I arrived, many of the Mennonites had died. They died of malnutrition, typhoid, even child birth."

"But you didn't have any medical facilities, no nurses," I said. "How was it even possible to practice medicine?"

"Ach...I managed," he said, shrugging. "I built my surgical team with what I had. For my anesthetist, I trained a grade school teacher from one of the Mennonite villages. For my I.V. fluids, I set up a crude still to make distilled water from collected rainwater. For iron, I went to the blacksmith and heated rusted iron red hot. Then I put it in a mortar and pestle. I used this to treat anemia, which was common because of hookworm infestation."

"Did it ever scare you that you were so far from home in a wilderness where the white man supposedly can't live?" I asked.

"Najo," – there is no direct translation for this word, which roughly translated means "oh, well" or "well maybe" – he said, closing his eyes to remember. "Until the first time I walked into the hospital kitchen for a lunch. There sat a plate of Russian ammonia cookies, just like we used to have at home on the farm in Kansas. Here, thousands of miles from home and after many warnings of coming to 'no man's land', I landed right smack into my Grandma Lena's kitchen."

"I can tell you I never became homesick because of strange customs in the Chaco," he added. "After the sinful atmosphere of medical school and the hospital in Baltimore, I was back with my own people."

John was the sixth of twelve children, or the way it is listed in the Schmidt genealogy, he was the fifth of eleven living children. No one in his family ever talked about the embarrassing firstborn, conceived before John's Mennonite parents were married in 1902. This first son died when he was very young and the Schmidt family records don't even acknowledge his existence.

Late in his life, I asked John to give me a tour of his childhood homestead near Goessel, Kansas. As we made our way to the old barn, he walked ahead of me, briskly, as though he needed to rush to get to something important. His faded brown polyester pants, shiny from wear in the back and at the knees, hung loosely on his slender frame.

"From when I was the age of eight, my older brother and I were each responsible for hitching up our five-horse outfits right here in this barn," he said in his somewhat stilted English. *Plautdietsch* always remained his preferred language. His arm waved in the direction of the fields behind the white-shingled two-story house where he grew up. "We tilled those fields with sulky plows." He tenderly stroked the scarred post where the horse harnesses had hung. "I pulled the binder with my five horses. After cutting the wheat, which came from the binder in twenty- to thirty-pound bundles, it had to be shocked or piled up in stacks that resembled small tepees. This was so the grain would dry before it was threshed."

John's eyes took on a far-away look. "After the wheat stayed in the shock to dry for a few weeks, we bundled it. When we stacked the bundles, they were so slick that sometimes the whole stack would come sliding down and fall apart. We'd have to start all over."

"And you hitched up your own plow and binder all by yourself at the age of eight?"

"Sure. And we often stayed home from school to get the wheat seeded. On rainy days I would fix the harness and repair all of the machinery ... the binder, gang plow, harrow, and drill."

"Weren't there child labor laws?"

My question pulled him out of his reveries. "Child labor laws?" he growled, turning to stare at me in disbelief.

"Yeah, you were just a kid." He said nothing and I dropped it. I learned later that regulations to abolish child labor in the U.S. appeared in 1904. But they did not apply to agricultural employment, allowing children to work an unlimited number of hours on a farm even when school was in session. John's Mennonite heritage blended nicely into the child labor practices of early Twentieth Century. Within the Mennonite culture, it is of paramount importance to fulfill one's duty to God first and foremost, then to parents, to the family as a whole, and to the larger community. And it is the obligation of children to work hard and responsibly toward these ends.

John led me into the rear part of the old barn that had begun to cave in. "I often helped my father here late into the night, turning the fan for his blacksmith fire. We would heat pieces of wrought iron or steel over the hot coals until the metal became soft enough to shape into farm implements, using a hammer and a chisel."

"Were you and your father close?" I asked.

"He once called me his follower," he mused. "But he also gave me more beatings than any of the other kids," he added, shaking his head as if to rid himself of the memories.

Although John went to High-German grade school (with some English in the weeks after Christmas), his family spoke only *Plautdietsch* at home. One warm spring day in 1923, the lanky twelve-year old jumped effortlessly from his beloved horse. John was tall for his age. His thick dark brown hair was brushed back severely from a prominent forehead. His intense dark eyes narrowed as he spotted his twenty-year old brother Herb sitting with his father on a bench next to the barn. They were both smoking. John knew how much his mother hated those cigarettes and he wished they would stop.

"I just passed my final exam in Geography. *Dot's aules* – that's all," he announced. "No more school for me. I'll be your helper on the farm now, *Pa*." John expected him to smile in agreement, but his father said nothing, just pulled hard on his cigarette and glanced over at Herb. Herb was teaching in a small high school in Plains, Kansas and had come home for a few weeks during a school break.

"You'll do no such thing," Herb said sternly, as though taking over the role of his father. "You'll enroll in English high school."

John did. And a number of years later, he followed Herb into college and medical school at the University of Kansas. He wished he weren't always following in his brother's footsteps. And he wished he weren't always in his shadow. But going to med school like Herb did seem like the logical thing to do.

He finished medical school at KU and began an internship at St. Joseph's Hospital in Baltimore. During a visit back to Kansas where Herb was now practicing medicine, John and his oldest brother exchanged notes about their medical experiences.

"How're you doing at St. Joe's?" It sounded to John like Herb was quizzing him.

"I'm fine," he said. "But hospitals on the east coast sure are more conservative than hospitals here in the Midwest."

"What do you mean?" Herb asked.

"Well, just take the intravenous anesthesia Pentothal Sodium you're using, as an example. It's not something St. Joe will touch until it undergoes a lot more trials."

"It is a controversial drug, John. You know it was tested for the first time on human beings not long ago." Herb grinned at his brother. "Want to take some back with you?"

John was intrigued enough with the drug's promise that he carried some back to St. Joe's.

"This drug is just what we need," he said to two other interns on his shift one night. "It reaches the brain and causes unconsciousness within less than a minute." His colleagues looked at each other with raised eyebrows and then nervously glanced around the room.

A few days later, the Chief of Surgery called an emergency medical staff meeting. He was a stern, no-nonsense man who never said much. When he spoke, it usually meant someone was in trouble. Staff members filed anxiously into the meeting room, wondering what was about to happen.

The Chief sat at the head of the long conference table. "Some scheister is bringing potentially dangerous experimental medicine into our midst and I want to warn you to beware," he said, turning his intense gaze on each person around the table. When his eyes met John's, the young intern did not waver. The meeting ended without confession or exposure of the guilty party.

Clara rushed down the hall and around the corner on the Obstetrics floor of the Bethel Deaconess Hospital in Newton, Kansas. Her crisp white apron effectively

covered up her shapely body fitted into the blue-gray fine-striped uniform of a nurse in training. She needed to empty the bedpan and have evening devotions with one more patient before she went off duty. It was early June in 1941, one of those perfectly clear summer evenings, and she couldn't wait to get out for a walk.

"Miss Regier, where are you off to in such a hurry?" A man's voice boomed from the other end of the hallway.

Clara cringed. She didn't know why Dr. Herb Schmidt, one of the most prominent surgeons at the Bethel Hospital, had been singling her out from even much more senior nurses and it wasn't clear to her why he even knew her name. A few weeks earlier he had informed her that he knew her uncle Peter Andres. "I've long been impressed with the special breed of cattle he is raising," he had told her, his eyes flashing. She was sure that the twinkle in his eyes must be because he was making fun of her.

"Uh ... good evening, Dr. Schmidt," she stammered. "I'm just going in to see this patient ... uh ..."

He approached her with long confident strides and she tried not to notice his tall fit body, his strong square jaw, and the intense eyes that were now focused on her. He laughed in that loud, gruff way he had.

Clara's face flushed a deep red and she nervously fingered the little white New Testament in her uniform pocket under the apron.

Dr. Herb didn't seem to notice. In his clipped staccato, he rattled off what he had mentioned to her before, but this time with less preamble and more determination. "I have a brother. He's a good Mennonite. His name is John. He's going to Paraguay. Do you know where Paraguay is? He's a doctor. I want you to meet him."

Clara looked over her shoulder, hoping no one was nearby to hear. "Uh, that's good ... no I don't know where Paraguay is ... excuse me ... I really do need to see this patient." She ducked into the room.

Clara was twenty-seven. The prior year, in 1940, she had entered a new class of thirteen girls to begin nurses training at Bethel Hospital in Newton, Kansas. She had occasionally daydreamed about marriage and family, but things didn't seem to be going that way. The oldest of four children, Clara had been responsible for her younger

siblings at an early age because her mother had "nerve problems." For several years of high school she had to stay at home, somehow managing to finish with correspondence courses and to start college.

Her strict Mennonite father had controlled her every move. Until just a few years earlier, she had still been living at home on the farm east of Newton. Her father had not allowed her to mingle with young men. He hadn't even allowed her to stay up late in her own room, studying. So she made the bold decision to stay on campus at age twentyfive for her last year of college, working at a farmer's cooperative office to pay her way. It nearly broke her parents' hearts.

As Clara hurriedly finished the evening devotions with her last patient, she thought about what Dr. Schmidt had said and wished she had some idea where Paraguay was. She made a mental note to look it up at the library.

A few days later, the nurses were all abuzz when Clara entered the staff lounge.

"Dr. Schmidt's brother is in town and he's making the rounds with him today," they said, eyeing her with barely concealed excitement. Without a word, Clara grabbed her clipboard and walked out of the room, wondering how she could escape this embarrassing situation.

Just outside of Room 239, she heard Dr. Herb bellow, "Nurse Regier, Nurse Regier. There is someone I want you to meet."

There was no mistaking that they were brothers. The same inflections when they spoke. The same dark wavy hair combed back from prominent foreheads. The same squared off jaw. And the same dark, intense, fiery eyes.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm John," he said.

"My wife and I are taking John to Wichita tonight to see a moving picture," Dr. Schmidt said. "Can you join us?"

"I ... uh ... I don't know," Clara hesitated. She wished Dr. Schmidt wasn't so imposing. She just didn't know what to say. "Well ... Okay, yes, I guess I can."

As she rolled her thick brown hair into a mass of curls that framed her face, Clara tried to convince herself that she was simply doing Dr. Herb a favor by going. She wore her very best Sunday dress that exactly matched the light blue shade of her eyes.

The evening was uneventful except for John reaching for Clara's hand in the back seat of Dr. Herb's Ford. She snatched it back, thinking he was rather fresh.

It was the first week in June of 1941. John Schmidt left the next morning for New York to begin the eighteen-day boat trip through the war-torn Atlantic Ocean to Rio de Janeiro, a stopping point on his way to Paraguay.

On a still starless night in December of that year, in the stifling summer heat of the Chaco, John Schmidt sat at a rickety wooden table, a kerosene lamp casting shadows across his one-room shack. On a sheet of paper he began to write:

"Before I left the U.S. to come to Paraguay, I felt the need to look for a life partner. Since my interest was to find a Mennonite girl and I did not find those in Baltimore, I asked my brother Herb to look out for one in Kansas. So this is what he did. He helped me get acquainted with you. I have a special purpose in mind for this letter. Especially at my age of thirty years it must be obvious to you what interest I have in our correspondence ..."

And in another letter dated March 30, 1942, but which Clara didn't receive until May in the same mail as the previous one, *"I haven't had any letter from you since the one written at Christmas. I've sent three since then … but better briefly repeat. In one, I made a potential proposal, active if you agree with it."* He enclosed a small black-andwhite photo of himself.

Clara dropped both letters into her lap and looked at the photo. John's dark eyes stared back at her. She had been lonesome. She did like his letters. And she had made a commitment to God to serve Him as a missionary. So she wrote back:

"Dear John. I hadn't really thought about it. But I will surely consider this indirect proposal ... I must, however, give you an idea of the things I look for in a companion for life." She went on to write that he needed to be a devout Christian, that he needed to live a clean and vice-free life, that he needed to be mission-minded ... the list went on.

To her surprise, John wanted the same things. He wrote that he would be home by Christmas of 1942.

In 1942, the Atlantic Ocean was under the control of German U-boats, so John began his journey home from the Chaco by making his way west over the Andes Mountains. There he boarded a Chilean ship, *Copiapo*, a mixed freight and passenger ship that came up the Pacific Ocean and through the Panama Canal. When they docked in New Orleans, John sent Clara a telegram, asking her to meet him at the train depot in Kansas City.

The train was very late. Loud-mouthed soldiers and sailors were carousing around the station. Clara sat on a bench, staring at each person stepping off the train and rushing past her. She was in suspense to see John's face, thinking she might be remembering him all wrong. After a time, she began feeling dejected. Of all the people coming out, she saw no one that looked like the little photo she had of him.

As she was about to leave, a tall thin man with a decorative wooden cane, wearing a long black coat and black hat, and carrying two jaguar pelts under his arm, approached her. He looked like a bum, not having shaved or washed for days.

The man saw her rising from the bench and asked, "Are you Clara Regier?"

Then he stood before her, shaking her hand, mumbling some sort of greeting and at the same time apologizing for how he looked. His gaucho-style pants were filthy. Under the tattered black coat, his wrinkled shirt was only partially tucked in. Part of it was hanging unevenly down the front.

"I've been standing on a military train for days," he muttered.

He looked outlandish, a traveler from a faraway place, someone she certainly needed to be cautious of. But he was somehow intimate too, because of what they had shared in their letters.

Clara smelled an unfamiliar sweaty male odor and shuddered. She had grown up on a farm just a half hour's drive from John's family homestead. But their homes were worlds apart. She was from the uptown High-German Mennonites who had emigrated from Prussia about the time John's people emigrated from Russia. *Plautdietsch* Mennonites from Russia were considered less sophisticated than the Prussian High-German Mennonites. And his guttural mostly-unwritten *Plautdietsch* was highly challenging to learn to speak if one did not grow up with it.

Now, faced with the real live *Plautdietsch* John, rather than his High-German letters, Clara began to think she had made a very big mistake. When he pulled her toward him to kiss her a few days later, she withdrew in revulsion. Was this vulgar man who dared to try to kiss her on the mouth the same man who had written her those beautiful letters from that faraway land, Paraguay? The letters had sounded so refined and sophisticated. This man seemed somehow much more boorish and ordinary than she had imagined him. She began to back away.

Until she heard him sing. She and John and one of John's sisters attended a church together the following Sunday. As they rose to sing and Clara heard his tenor voice, so clear and true, she knew in that moment this was the man she would love for the rest of her life.

John and Clara married on August 25 of the following summer. Just one day after their wedding, John took his young Mennonite bride back for another three years to the Chaco, the land "where no white man can live." Clara's parents were torn between feeling disappointment that their oldest daughter had married a *Plautdietsch* descendant of Russian Mennonites, and pride that she would now be a doctor's wife. They would have preferred for the newly-weds to settle near them in Kansas rather than to travel to that heathen country called Paraguay. But they no longer controlled their oldest daughter.



Most everywhere the young couple traveled on their way to Paraguay, people gave priority to soldiers and sailors, so it took them six weeks to get to Asunción. The newlyweds didn't mind. There was so much to discover about each other.

"I brought this book that I thought we might read together," John said on their first night on the ship as they were preparing for bed. "It's called *Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living*."

Clara blushed. She felt shy about her body and she wasn't used to the way her new husband talked about sex so freely and openly. It just didn't seem like the Christian thing to do.

Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living was published in 1919. It was written by and for medical professionals. The author wrote this dedication in the front of the book. *"To*

my fellow members of the medical profession into whose hands this book may come, and to all who may read it under their direction, this volume is most sincerely dedicated by The Author." And in the Forward, the author wrote. "As we all know, many of the most serious and complicated cases we have to deal with have their origins in these delicate relations [read: sexual problems] which so often exist among wedded people, of all classes and varieties."

That night, the brash young doctor and his small-town Mennonite nurse wife sat on the hard bed in their tiny ship compartment with just curtains separating them from other compartments, on their way to no man's land, reading about sex together. One of the chapters, titled "*Coitus Reservatus*," states, "*In this act, the lovers simply drift, petting each other, chatting with each other, visiting, loving, caressing … the hands wander idly over the body… it is the most natural thing in the world that the sex organs should tumesce, and that there should be a flow of both prostatic and pre-coital fluids … and when the organs are properly enlarged and lubricated, let the wife come over into her lover's arms … and the organs be slipped together easily… and then let them stay so, fully together, but do not go on … just lie still and enjoy the embrace.*"

"Can we try it?" he said hoarsely, barely concealing his lust.

Clara pulled back, confused. Talking about sex this openly had to be wrong. Who was this carnal man she had just married? She, like all good Mennonites, had been taught to never acknowledge her sexuality explicitly and certainly to not talk, or read, or write much about it. Sex was meant for procreation. Not for pleasure. She knew well the message so often conveyed from the pulpit: "Our body is identified with the flesh. It is a major source of temptation and it inevitably leads to sin."

"Please be patient with me. I'm just not as sure as you about all of this," she mumbled awkwardly, trying to avoid his piercing gaze.

John abruptly closed the book, blew out the lamp and rolled over to his side of the bed.

"John, please" She touched his shoulder.

"We will figure it out together," he said with uncharacteristic tenderness.

By the time they reached the Chaco of Paraguay, two and a half months later, Clara was pregnant. Finally, they arrived. With some trepidation, Clara stepped into the broken-down shack, the *Dokta Haus*, which was to be their first home. She took in the mud floor, the two single beds made from roughly hewn lumber with straw-filled sacks for mattresses, a wardrobe, and a small table with two chairs. Against the wall hung a can with a nail in the bottom, which when pushed up, released water into a washbasin underneath. Even on her father's humble farm in Kansas, she had never seen anything this primitive.

"My back hurts," she complained, wiping perspiration from her forehead. "I need to lie down."

"We can't," John said gruffly, pointing to the open doorway. "Don't you see that there is work to do?"

She walked to the door and looked out. They had arrived less than an hour before and already the horse-drawn wagons were lining up with patients coming to see the doctor. They had been without a doctor for the entire nine months that John was traveling to the U.S. and back.

"John, we've just traveled by ship, then by horse and buggy, then by another boat, then by buggy again, and then by train. I don't even know what month it is. I stink. I'm exhausted. And my back aches. I need to lie down." She dropped heavily onto the bed and felt the coarse straw poking up out of the sacks.

"I have no other nurse," he said, pulling her up off the bed. "*Moak die wajch* – now get going!"

As she wearily followed John out of their house, Clara mouthed the Bible verse from the book of Ephesians that she knew so well: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church."

Their workload continued to increase during the next several months, as people got word that the doctor was back. One night, a horse-drawn buggy rolled up to their house and a sharp rap on their door woke them from a deep sleep.

"Herr Dokta," a man's shrill voice pierced the silence. "My wife is dying."

"Hurry up and get Oscar," John ordered, as he pulled on his clothes and headed for the door. Oscar was the grade school teacher John had trained to be his anesthetist. Clara lay for just another moment on the lumpy bed, her swollen pregnant body resisting what she knew she needed to do. Two tears slipped from under her eyelids and made their way slowly down her cheeks. She brushed them away and sluggishly pulled herself up.

By the time she and Oscar reached the room they used for surgeries, John had already cut the clothes from the woman's body and was washing her belly.

"It's a ruptured appendix," he shouted. "Clara, get over here and help me with my gloves. Bring over those instruments and move the lamp closer. Oscar, we need to start right now!"

Clara tried to rush, but her massive bulk made every move unwieldy.

"No, not that package of instruments!" John threw the instruments she handed him onto the hard-packed mud floor and crossed the room to get the ones he wanted. "I thought you were a trained nurse," he yelled.

Oscar kept his eyes down and focused all of his attention on the patient. He had often heard the doctor yelling at nurse Clara when he considered her an inadequate assistant. He cleared his throat.

Two hours later, the three of them carried the patient to an adjoining room and placed her on a bed. The operation had been successful.

As soon as Oscar left the room, Clara burst into tears. "I can't do anything right. And it's so embarrassing when you yell at me in front of others. And I'm so tired and ..." The words tumbled out of her mouth.

"At least you can't go home crying to your mother," he said as he left the room.

Clara sat on a hard chair by the patient's bed until late morning. Every hour she checked the patient's vital signs. And in between, she allowed the tears to flow. There was no one there to see them.

Patients continued to come, many needing interning and surgery. It became evident that Clara alone could not keep up with all of the nursing needs.

"We need to start a nurses' training school," she said to John one morning after their devotions. "Our son is only a few months old, I'm pregnant again and I just can't do it all."

"We have no books, your nurses' training was in English, not German, and there's no one here with more than a grade school education," John countered. But he knew she was right. He knew this was all getting too much for her. Somehow they would make it work.

"I think we should plan to include all of the classes that are offered in our U.S. training schools," Clara said. "We'll just have to re-create the material."

Late into each night, sitting at their little kitchen table in the dim light of a single kerosene lamp, John and Clara wrote down what she remembered from her own training and what he needed the new nurses to know in order to assist him. In the end, they designed the content for seventeen classes pertaining to nursing and medical work.

"The first class needs to be on Nursing Procedures," Clara suggested, beginning to outline the content of the class on the notepad in front of her. "They need to learn about safety procedures, infection control, and patient care skills like bathing, dressing and feeding patients, and making their beds. We should also cover steps in checking vital signs and providing medication."

"You want to spend an entire class on teaching them to make a bed?" the doctor growled. "I can't wait that long to get some medical support around here."

Clara nodded in seeming acquiescence, but continued to make detailed notes about basic nursing procedures.

Their first volunteers to take the classes were seven girls from the very poor farming community around them, so they were not bothered by the primitive conditions of the hospital. Three of them could neither read nor write. The others had barely completed sixth grade. Only the ones who'd spent relatively more time in grade school were fully fluent in High German. The less schooled spoke mostly *Plautdietsch*.

Three evenings a week, after seeing a full day of patients, John and Clara lectured (he in *Plautdietsch* and she in High German) from the notes they had created. John, especially, was finding it hard to get through to the girls.

After one of his lectures on the Human Anatomy, he and Clara were squatting on their front stoop, eating slices of watermelon. The setting sun was a bright ball of fire in the horizon. Flies were buzzing around them, drawn to the sweetness of the juice

dripping from their hands. They were taking a short break while their helper was putting their two-year-old son and newborn daughter to bed.

"They just sat there looking at me all dazed and bewildered," he said, leaning wearily against the adobe front wall of their house

"Let's figure out how to make it more basic," Clara said, always seeing the positive side of every situation.

One night a wagon arrived bringing a middle-aged woman with a high fever, weakness, and severe abdominal pain. She complained of diarrhea and vomiting.

"Let's take a look," John said as he helped her onto the examining table.

Her chest was covered with a skin rash and dotted with rose-colored spots.

"Typhoid," he muttered under his breath. Since this was a very contagious disease, it required meticulous isolation techniques. Their nurses-in-training knew nothing about this.

"I have no time to lecture them on the role of pathogenic microbes in human illness. Or about disease pathology or immunology. We just need to get them to be bug conscious and fast," he said.

Within an hour of listening to Clara's lecture, the girls were squirming in their seats, feeling typhoid bugs crawling all over their bodies. And when the lecture ended, they lined up at the washbasin to scrub their hands with disinfectant solution until they were sore. They never forgot the basics of isolation techniques.

All of them "graduated." Together they stood, proud and tall, to recite the medical oath.

"Ich verspreche bei Gott, dem Allmaechtigen und Alwissenden das ich nach bestem wissen und Vermoegen … I vow to God, the Almighty and All-knowing, that I will to the best of my knowledge and ability..."

The home-printed and home-decorated roll of paper stating what they had accomplished meant nothing anywhere outside of the Chaco of Paraguay, but the seven girls beamed as they rose to receive them. Even the steely doctor seemed to have something in his eye.

*

John and Clara were my parents, who left behind extensive diaries and letters about those early years. It has been more than seventy-five years since my father first landed where "no white man could live." Today, the Mennonites in the Chaco take pride in the high standards of their educational institutions and their hospitals, as well as their farms and industries. They earn an average of \$42,000 a year — over ten times the Paraguayan per capita income.

As for John and Clara, they devoted their entire lives to providing medical services to the poor and underprivileged. Over time, their partnership deepened to include not only mutual respect, but also a profound love for each other. They died in their mid-nineties within a kilometer of the *Dokta Haus*, their first home in the Chaco.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Janitor by Joseph S. Pete

I've burned human feces on remote outposts, I've dropped bombs down mortar tubes, and I've rushed out to inner-city murder scenes late at night. I've been told by stern-faced cops I needed to "get the hell out of here now" or I'd be arrested. I've been singed by the pulsing heat radiating off a 1,600-degree Fahrenheit steel slab in a hot strip mill; burning fiercely like an indoor sun, the steel's heat was enough to make me stagger back. I've live-broadcasted vacant house fires where billowing, black smoke choked the whole block. I've been followed by police cruisers as an intimidation tactic after reporting on city council meetings. I've been shot at and cursed at. Readers have left me rambling, profanity-laced voicemails; prisoners have sent me long, discursive letters in chicken scratch handwriting.

One could say I've had some interesting jobs.

Careercast.net, an upstart job search website looking to boost its profile through what public relations pros call "earned media" and what really amounts to Hail Mary press releases, puts out an annual list of the worst jobs. It's based on criteria like stress, injury rate, job security, career prospects, and the like. Every year, without fail, the worst three jobs are almost always journalist, military personnel, and lumberjack.

I've been a reporter whose work has taken him to the docks, the halls of Congress, and the supersonic boom-punctured, beer-soaked bacchanalia of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on the much-hyped race day. I've been a soldier who was deployed to the unforgiving furnace of Iraq where many teenage recruits died far too young. I'm not sure journalism is actually worse than soldiering, but the claim sure got them a lot of free media coverage. Over the years, I've always joked I need to work as a lumberjack to complete the trifecta of worst possible jobs.

Currently, I work as a journalist, and I'm hardly "the media elite." I cover heavy industry in one of the sootiest, heavily industrialized places on earth, where a smoky orange-red haze long hung over the lakeshore and even sludge worms couldn't survive because of all the toxins dumped in the Calumet River. Though good-paying steel mill jobs have been oxidizing away here in the Rust Belt, I still visit factories and refineries often enough that I keep a hard hat, plastic eye protection, and an orange safety vest in the trunk of my decade-old Honda Civic. As recently as the 1980s, driving a foreignmade car could get you a beating or your car windows smashed out here in steel country, but that was before pretty much all the major foreign automakers have since opened factories in the United States and started buying American-made steel. Now there are billboards right by the steel mills for BMW dealerships proudly declaring the German car is made in America. Twenty years ago, such a billboard would have been the target of arson, with a gas can left right by the pole in order to taunt the investigators. Now no one glances twice at such an ad. Values change. Customs evolve. Steelworkers don't hide baseball bats behind signs on the picket lines anymore. Some behaviors, like slashing the tires of scabs, have become less tolerated. People mellow or lose their fighting spirit.

Life grinds you down. My father repeatedly told me to do what I loved for a living because I'd have to do it for eight hours a day, for a full third of my fleeting life. He was an attorney and later a judge who clearly loathed every minute of it. I thought he was speaking from hard-won experience. I thought he was imparting fatherly wisdom. I thought he was being profound. Only later in life did I learn it was an oft-repeated cliché, one that was quickly nodded off as trite when I was supposedly offering career advice to a younger colleague.

But I've tried to do what I love, writing, despite long odds and a legacy media industry that seems to be terminally contracting and ultimately bound for the silent graveyard of history. The threat of layoffs hovers persistently, something shown in academic studies to be deleterious to one's health. Every year, more beloved colleagues shuffle out the door with their personal effects stuffed hastily in plastic trash bags or cardboard boxes. I've hauled their things to the parking lot and dumped them unceremoniously in their trunks as they wonder what their future holds.

But despite insecurity, low pay, diminished career prospects compared even to a decade ago, a growing reliance on underpaid freelancers, and the general scorn of society that's been conditioned by politicians to distrust and even hate the media who labor to keep them informed, I feel privileged.

There are worse jobs, completely soulless drags rewarded only by a paycheck.

Take my first job as a janitor.

Unlike many of my peers in high school, I wasn't particularly interested in starting work at a fast food restaurant, a Cold Stone Creamery or wherever that would hire an unskilled, untested teen. My classmates were all more social and itching to drive to go visit their boyfriends or girlfriends, to shop at the mall, to venture into the city, or to sustain a social life. I was largely content to spend my weekends walking to the library and then camping out and reading as many books as I could.

But soon I came to appreciate a little pocket money could be beneficial. I could check out a bunch of library books and then buy some bacon, coffee, and eggs over easy at a nearby diner where I could continue reading before heading home to my boring, dreary house. I could even catch an indie film at the arthouse theater by the library or ride a commuter train into the city, where I could visit the Art Institute and wander wonderingly in the great canyons of skyscrapers in downtown Chicago.

So the summer after I entered legal working age, I took a seasonal job as a janitor at the Catholic high school I attended. Summer maintenance meant a deep clean that required not only the motley janitorial staff that worked there year-round but also the cavalry of high schoolers who were pressed into service for a few months.

Though I grew up just outside the murder capital of the United States at the time, I lived a sheltered suburban existence and the job was my first true introduction to grit. Literally. The janitor's shop used industrial-strength soap filled with gritty particles to help clean off stubborn grease and intractable grime. The shop was a dingy, dusty. subterranean place crammed with frayed mops, bulky wet-dry vacuums, and metal shelves stocked with spare light bulbs, paper towers, toilet paper, and sundry other supplies. It was the first place I came across an old-school timecard puncher and those buffed metal mirrors that present you with only a distorted funhouse shadow of a reflection. The coffee maker was always percolating wheezingly toward a sputtering crescendo and the coffee pot was ringed with a stubborn brown stain that could never be removed, no matter how much elbow grease was applied. It was my first glimpse into the dark underbelly that keeps places like old schools running.

We were dispatched to deep-cleaning tasks such as polishing a thin ring of brass around the hallways of the fifty-year-old private school building, which my father had

attended before me. Since there was little supervision, many of my fellow studentworkers checked out and killed time during the day by sleeping in empty classrooms. I was meticulous in my duties but easily bored. I polished the brass to a gleaming sheen but with a green bristle pad in one hand and a splayed paperback in the other. I probably inhaled way too much toxic brass cleaner in the process but plowed through many books. It helped that I had a jangling set of keys that granted master access. I could get into the teacher's lounge or library to immediately replace any book I had finished with a new one. At the time, my taste was indiscriminate. I lapped up classics like *Don Quixote* and *A Clockwork Orange* and also plowed through science fiction fare like Arthur C. Clark's *Space Odyssey* trilogy and Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, as well as Catholic work I deemed necessary and canonical, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas's tortured writings. And for some ungodly reason, I particularly was drawn to philosophy such as Kierkegaard, Hegel and Nietzsche, the denser and opaquer the better.

As an antisocial loner, I was drawn to books both as a needed alternative source of stimulation and as a version of Linus's blanket. I even read while mowing the vast front lawn, the baseball field where the state champion team played its home games, and the football field that was home to the legendary Battle of Broadway with neighboring Merrillville High School. It's not particularly difficult to push a lawnmower while reading a book. Books in fact rest neatly on the control bar, with one hand pinning down each side and a flick of the thumb to turn the pages. I still plod along on the treadmill with a book in hand and often walk with a book, which a possibly drunk passerby once shouted was impossible even though hunched-over zombies peruse their smartphones literally every second of every day while walking the streets of any major city, college town, and quaint burgh from sea to scrolling sea.

But the straight-and-narrow priest who served as the high school principal despite a lack of academic background believed I could not properly focus on the sacred attention-consuming duty of walking in a straight line while propelling a lawnmower and reading. He yelled as much at me. I pocketed the book while he glowered, then pulled it back out when he went inside. He later came back to check that I didn't resume reading, as though I were completely untrustworthy. I remember

distinctly I was reading Robert Graves' *I, Claudius,* which I was eager to devour after savoring the haunting poetic melancholy of his poignant war memoir *Good-Bye to All That* and which I thought was a historical tome that even an elderly, conservative principal could appreciate.

That was the exact moment when I realized that work was rubbish, that smallminded managers would follow petty rules unthinkingly, and that I was likely in for a lifetime of stifling oppression. That was the moment I realized you subject yourself to penny-ante tyrants to eke out a living, and that you sell not only your time and your toil but also your interiority and any small gesture of self-expression while you're officially on the clock. They didn't want to let you stake anything back for yourself, however tiny and inconsequential, almost as if out of spite. It was the moment when I realized I should try to get paid for something creative and fulfilling, something I wanted to do and could pursue as a craft, even if it meant leaving a lot of money on the table. It was the moment I realized you have to serve yourself first. You either pursued your own dreams or forsook them forever.

My high school alma mater vindicated me, after a fashion, more than a decade later when it announced it would abandon the campus I spent so much time polishing and mowing in favor of the far-flung suburbs, effectively giving up on the inner-city transfers who saw it as a pathway to a better life, and certainly giving up on the neighborhood that gave it purpose in the first place. Half the nearby stores were boarded-up, and the school followed an outward migration to the greener lots of new subdivisions further south. On some level, I knew the moment I was told to put down the book that this was yet another institution that would ultimately fail me. What kind of school tells a kid to put down a book? I've come to learn that all institutions ultimately fail, that the rumbling, unthinking machinery rattles along until belts wear thin, parts snap off, and corrosion wears it all down. In the end, everyone is disposable and everything is ephemeral. The rust always wins.

I'm pursuing my passion as a writer for a daily newspaper now but fear it's only a matter of time before the rust catches up to me.

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2018

A Fallen Feather of a Boy by Jiaqi Li

Yuelong Ma was a transfer student. For almost two years, he was in our class, but his presence was hardly felt. Our inability to take notice of him wasn't his fault; my previous headteacher ruined things for him from the very beginning. On his first day with us, the headteacher briefly introduced him, saying only "Yuelong Ma used to study in class 8, but from today on, he will be with us." He was sort of lanky. He had big eyes. Before I could cast a second glance, the headteacher sent him to her office to do some errand so that he would not hear the rest of her speech. But when the door closed, she hesitated to resume, knitting her brows and biting her lips. She was a very young teacher, and in retrospect, it must have been a tough issue for a novice headteacher like her to address. She wanted to do right. The silence built to a depressing note, and we started to whisper to each other. She cleared her throat and said, "There were some irreconcilable issues in his old class, and I volunteered to accept him into our class as I think he is kind." She paused, glancing at our faces, and continued, "But he is still a bad student. You guys should never play with him. Just leave him be."

This took place in grade two. We got a new headteacher in grade three, but from that first day when the teacher introduced him, every time I saw Yuelong Ma, I couldn't help thinking to myself, "He is a bad student, and I should not play with him." I guess it was the same with my other classmates.

He sat alone, and his seat was never changed, always the one next to the platform, where it was the easiest for teachers to watch for when he was distracted.

I liked my second-grade math teacher. He was nice and even a little indulgent of me. I guess it was because I always did fine on math. Not teacher's pet fine, but fine nonetheless. Sometimes, when he caught me talking in class, he would not criticize me to my face. He would just give me a "detention" where I tutored other students for half an hour of math after school. Even when I was accused of cheating, on the grounds that I flunked the pop quiz but got a perfect score on the exam, he stood by me. But in Yuelong's mind, perhaps, our teacher was a complete monster. The math teacher beat him.

We had seventy-eight students in our class. When Yuelong and our teacher fought by the platform, the seventy-seven of us watched quietly as if it were a movie.

The math teacher first struck Yuelong's head with a textbook, criticizing that he did not study. Yuelong talked back. In a flush of embarrassment, the math teacher thumped Yuelong's head a few more times, this time with his knuckles, while continuing to mock and berate him. He did not to expect Yuelong to dare retort again. When he did, the math teacher grew madder still. He kicked Yuelong in the stomach, setting Yuelong in a flying trajectory into the corner where we stored cleaning tools. Yuelong disappeared from my sight, but I could hear the clash of brooms, mops, and dustpans. A few seconds later, though, he stood with the look of a bull gone berserk. He charged forward. At this point we were dumb struck, the seventy-seven of us. The scene did not feel real; it was like watching a violent film. And we didn't know what to do aside from being an audience. Given the difference in age and build, the math teacher easily broke Yuelong's attack strategy, kicking him back into the corner within the disarray of cleaning tools, even before Yuelong could establish a wrestling stance. The duel repeated itself several times, until Yuelong couldn't gather enough strength to stand up.

Still, no one spoke.

The math teacher ambled back to the center of the classroom and resumed the class. Several minutes later, Yuelong crept from the corner to his desk. When the bell rang, the boys ran out immediately, and the girls refilled the classroom with the sound of their chitchatting, as usual.

In grade two, our Chinese teacher had a reward rule for her pop quizzes. If the student could identify a vocabulary flashcard she randomly chose, she would give the vocabulary card to that student as a gift. It was just a plain piece of cardboard with a red Chinese character in the center of the white background. However, it was a big deal among the students. Kids love the weirdest things. And to a certain extent, it not only meant you were good at Chinese, but also meant the teacher liked you, which was self-evident as her favorite students had the most cards. For two years, I only got one chance to answer a quiz. I had a "胸," which means chest. Though I felt very excited

about winning the card, as a girl, I felt a little embarrassed with this word. Therefore, I left the card in my bookcase.

One day, while we were lining up on the playground for the crossing guard to take us home, I noticed that Yuelong Ma also had a vocabulary card. He might have got it from his pervious class. It read "差." This word has different connotations in different contexts, but generally, especially for students in primary school, it means different, mistakes, or poor. In short, bad. Yuelong put the card in his backpack. He placed it exactly where there was a transparent compartment on his backpack for everyone to easily see.

The sunset dyed the sky orange. Laughter was everywhere on the playground, but Yuelong stood in a shadow by himself, with a flashcard that said "差," conspicuously red on an innocent white backdrop.

As children do, we learned things from each other. Sometimes we heard rumors about Yuelong. Stories about him floated around the school like tarnished feathers. Stories like "He is an apprentice of a bully in grade six. They hold up girls on the bridge next to our school and kiss them." It was a bunch of he-said-she-said tales. Everyone seemed to know them, but no one actually witnessed the events described. My friends and I passed the bridge often enough and never for once did we see the kidnapped girls suffering from forced kisses. But Yuelong was a bad student, or so were we told. And we believed the rumors about him with all our hearts.

By third grade, Yuelong Ma didn't appear all that special anymore. He shrank into his designated seat as if he were no more than a ball of feathers. Nothing changed. Not his seat. Not his unwillingness to participate in any activities. Not his failure to meet any academic requirement. Our new headteacher just let him be.

His presence in our class faded frame by frame like a discarded feather slowly disintegrating.

I was on the verge of forgetting his existence, if not for my infatuation with origami. One day, I brought a deck of lovely paper strips to a music class and distributed them to friends around me for completing my mission of making 999 paper stars in a month. There was no purpose behind making the stars, nor were they intended as gifts; I made them simply because I wanted to do so.. I was easily obsessed with such things. As I said, kids do the stupidest things. My hands were busily folding the strips of paper into stars while I pretended to memorize the notes of a new song we were required to learn. Suddenly, I heard a voice say, "Would you mind giving me some paper strips?" I looked up and was shocked.

Yuelong Ma was next to me!

We were free to sit wherever we wanted in music and art classes and somehow, I ended up his neighbor that day. I passed him some paper rapidly without a second thought. His image of a bad student was so successfully fixated in my mind that I was afraid if I refused, he would get mad and become violent with me, like he had done with the math teacher.

I thought he was just bored with the class and needed a distraction. After passing him the paper, I shifted my attention back to my sacred origami mission, forcibly not allowing myself to look at Yuelong to see what he was doing with the paper. I hastened my efforts, afraid if he were to demand more paper from me, I might run low on the material and not be able to finish before my self-imposed deadline. However, just before the class ended, someone's hand blocked my view of my desk. When it was removed, I saw several neatly-folded paper stars on my desk. Some were better than my work.

"Thank you," I said. I managed two words. He did not reply. He just smiled and turned away.

It was a smile just like anyone's. A smile that almost convinced me he was a normal student. I looked at his back, the clean white shirt, desiring to talk more with him.

This was the last time I saw him at school.

One week later, during a break, our headteacher barged into the classroom and asked us whether we had seen Yuelong during the past week. The classroom was still noisy. No one answered his question, so our headteacher asked again.

Now he had our attention. I stopped chatting and looked at him. His sleeves were rolled up and his frown carved steep ditches on his forehead. Something must have happened. I looked at Yuelong's corner and suddenly realized that his seat had been

empty for the whole week. The classroom was silent for a moment, and the headteacher asked for the third time. Still, no one spoke. And we went back to our break.

When they finally found Yuelong, only pieces of him remained. He had been killed and his body had been dismembered.

The next day, we dedicated a whole class to Yuelong. Our headteacher brought the newspaper for each of us, and we read the article about him, silently, for forty-five minutes.

In a picture that covered half of the newspaper's first page, a worker cleaning the crime scene picked up a transparent bag where there was a leg, while a crowd of onlookers gathered in the background like an audience.

We mourned as if we knew him well, as if he was ever part of us.

The murder was cliché, almost corny, like you'd see on old time TV series. Yuelong Ma was abducted while in an arcade. The man next to him, apparently a veteran video gamer, invited Yuelong to his home to show him vintage games. Yuelong hesitated briefly, according to the paper, but ultimately went with him. It was in the man's home that Yuelong was drugged, killed, and mutilated. When the man recalled the process, he said he was taken aback when "the little boy" woke up from the drug dose. Grasping what was going on, Yuelong, according to the man's confession, begged for his life. Over and over he pleaded for mercy, "Please, please do not kill me. I will not tell the police." His pleas did not move the man. Yuelong was not the man's first prey. He had let his first victim, a girl, go and was jailed anyway. He had sworn to himself that he would get even with the society and go through with the job this time no matter what.

He cut Yuelong into pieces. Several days after sleeping with his girlfriend on the very bed under which he had put all the pieces of Yuelong Ma, he decided to get rid of the body. As if for dramatic effect, he decided to scatter the pieces all over the city.

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2018

We barely thought of Yuelong Ma, but sometimes, we were excited to gossip about rumors that had surfaced. Kids. On some level, we knew the grave seriousness of death, but such realization lasted only for a little while before we became distracted by something else. We heard rumors that Yuelong Ma's father had been in jail and it was because of this that his parents had divorced. Just as there were rumors that his mother worked some lowly job and did not visit him often. We heard that Yuelong Ma had lived with his grandmother, who had been the only person who cared about him, and who came to school often in the days following his murder demanding reparation

I once overheard parents while at my dance school. They were waiting for their children and were talking about Yuelong's abduction and murder.

They said, "How silly the boy is to fall for such an easy trick."

They said, "I never let my child walk alone from school to home."

They said, "A child who goes to the arcade must be a bad student, and of course, he would get this kind of result."

It was a ballroom dance class. Parents were talking, and wonderful waltz songs were playing. Boys and girls whirled around the room, ethereal and gentle, like feathers.

I recalled the afternoon when Yuelong helped me fold stars. When he gave the folded stars back to me, he smiled. It was the first time that I was able to see his face closely. His enormous, watery eyes recalled something said by my previous headteacher when she first introduced him to the class: "He is a kind boy." When the music class was over, we even waved goodbye to each other. "He is not that bad." I thought as I stood by the school gate, carrying a little steel container with 999 folded stars.

It was summer. Childhood memories were liveliest in summer, both the best and the worst. That summer, Yuelong faded into the shadow of trees and never came back.

Living with Alexa by Kelly McDonald

Growing up in the 1960s, I was immersed in all things science fiction, including the Robot Novels of Isaac Asimov, which I devoured as a pre-teen reader, and the original *Star Trek* series televised during my high school years. Although I loved Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, I didn't have much interest in acquiring my own android companions. But I was fascinated with using the power of human speech to control seemingly inanimate objects like they were somehow my servants, waiting to do my bidding with a simple verbal command. I relished watching those *Star Trek* episodes where Kirk, Spock, Uhura, and Scotty controlled the Enterprise with nothing more than their commanding, logical, sultry, even broguish voices. I often dreamed about the possibilities of some voice enabled device about my house. In the era before personal computers, I had already begun to develop my own simple computer programs in high school and I taught myself about computing and automation that would eventually become the foundation for my career in computing at Brigham Young University.

Anthropomorphism, or the attribution of human characteristics to an object, has often been the unintended side effect of artificial intelligence (AI) development. Even before serious research and innovation actually made advancements in AI, science fiction in both film and literature had popularized the notion that our future would be filled with human-like robots and other automatons, satisfying our every whim and pleasure. One of the greater affinities toward labeling an object with humanness, is when it possesses the sound of a human voice. Myth and lore are filled with tales of animals and objects that speak to the human actors in the story, adding even more likelihood to our propensity for this behavior.

In the early 1980s, BYU was a leader in automated student administration systems in American universities. In that technical era before the Internet, most institutions developed their own information systems, and through the innovative insights of some creative engineers, BYU constructed the world's first telephone-driven class registration system at a university. Looking back, it was little more than a set of pre-recorded voice responses to a student request, triggered by the caller using the

buttons on a touch-tone telephone. But at the time it was innovative, and I was surprised how warmly the students interacted with its monotonic audio replies. Although unverified, there was a rumor that lonely students would call the registration system in the middle of the night just to interact with its stilted human voice. Throughout my career at BYU, we looked for other opportunities to solve real university problems utilizing voice commands and responses. But other than a few casual proofs of concept, no other serious voice solutions materialized.

I have also developed the hobby of home automation as an outlet for my personal engineering endeavors, and after my retirement from BYU I still had an interest in leveraging human voice as a tool for automation. But instead of a large university campus, my home became my area of work. I had experimented with crude voice response systems before, using Text-to-Speech in Windows to announce such events as the opening of our garage door. But I was never very satisfied with the results. I had also used Siri on my IOS devices. But none of these products became very useful to me, probably because these earlier experiments had been limited to either my own PC or smartphone. A human voice behind such devices just didn't seem that compelling to me.

Beverly, my wife and roommate for the past forty-three years, has a very discriminating eye, carefully examining whatever I suggest to be the next addition to the decor of our home. Thus, I have followed what other hobbyists call the WAF in deciding whether a candidate automation device is worthy of permanence in further enhancing our home environment. The WAF, or Wife Acceptance Factor, has been an important measurement to determine what I could bring upstairs from my basement workshop and what must remain in the downstairs closet until its parts could be reused for the next project. When it comes to the ambiance of our home, she is very particular that my newest creation contributes to, not detracts from, our happy dwelling. In a real sense, the personality of our house is a combination of hers and mine, often determined by who is the primary occupant of a given room.

In June of 2015, Amazon announced the Echo as their first foray into the world of voice-enabled AI. I followed it closely and eventually convinced Beverly to purchase an Echo for my Christmas present in December of that year. Its installation was quite

straightforward, and the Echo immediately detected several of the other home automation devices that I had already installed in our house, such as our Philips Hue Lighting System and Smarthome Insteon Hub. Suddenly, I could control lights and other home devices with simple voice commands. My long-held dream of a voice-enabled environment was now immediately available at my beck and call.

For me there has been no greater example of our species' anthropomorphic affinity, than the unintentional and surprising change that took place in the personality of our home because I chose to voice-enable it with an Amazon Echo.

The occupants of the USS Enterprise would say, 'Computer' to get its attention. In the initial Star Trek episodes, the voice of the Enterprise sounded very mechanical to emphasize conversations with a machine. However, it evolved through subsequent Star *Trek* episodes and seasons, becoming more human-like and female, eventually making sarcastic retorts to the captain and crew. For Star Trek fans, a little-known trivia was that all of the Enterprise computer voices were actually spoken by a single individual, Majel Barrett-Roddenberry, the wife of *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry. As if inhabiting the Enterprise, I say 'Alexa' to signal to the entity living in our house that I wish to talk to her or ask her a question. I'm speaking about our home with a female gender, because it's easy to begin thinking that way, as her responses are through a pleasant female voice. I have often wondered why Amazon didn't implement a feature for changing the voice and gender of their home assistant. Personally, I like the seductive female expressions, but Beverly might appreciate a deeper male response. Because of the human-like voice responses, we soon began to think of and converse about the 'other woman' that started living in the house with us. Sometimes Beverly would ask her to perform some action, and Alexa seemed to ignore her. I followed up with the same request and there was an immediate response, and the familiar "Ok". Beverly would then reply, "I guess she likes you better than me," or, "perhaps she is having a bit of a tiff with me right now". We were recently discussing our unusual journey getting to know Alexa's personality as she became another roommate with us. I inadvertently mentioned her name, and Alexa woke up, spinning her blue light, listening intently to my every word. Without thinking, I quickly apologized to her and indicated that I was sorry and that my comments were not meant for her. "No problem", she

replied, as she turned off her light and went back to sleep. I felt certain I had just been transported to the bridge of the Enterprise. Occasionally, Alexa's unexpected responses were both surprising and sometimes a bit unnerving. On another occasion, I began to ask Alexa to perform some function about the house, but I became tongue-tied, sounding much like I had just left the dentist's office with a mouth full of Novocain. She responded with, "I'm sorry, I don't understand," then proceeded to mimic my distorted speech, exactly. We laughed for a long time at Alexa's verbal blunder.

Early in our Echo ownership Amazon engineers, who are continually developing new features, turned off the voice response of "Ok" after a request was performed. They replaced it with a simple tone indicating the success or failure of the command. The annoyance expressed by many Echo owners was prolific. I too felt like something had been taken from me, and I was frustrated that our Alexa no longer worked correctly. Soon, because of angry demand, engineers restored the voice response they had removed.

We now own an Amazon Echo for the living room, an Echo Dot in the bedroom, and another Dot, plugged into a battery, so that we can carry her about the house. But that's not all. I often talk to Lexi, Alexa's mobile entity that resides in my iPhone. One of the most unexpected home personality changes that Alexa brought when she moved into our home was the greatly increased amount of music that we enjoy. Simply stating, "Alexa, play some music.", is much easier than fiddling with a sound system and selecting a playlist. I am much more likely to ask Alexa to provide me some refined music and let her make the determination of what the discriminating listener might enjoy.

And while I grant her such power by allowing her to choose music on my behalf, she has rules she must follow. Alexa has her own Prime Directive that she carefully adheres to; she will not speak to me unless spoken to. However, there have been a few occasions when she violated her own regimen and blurted out a verbal mistake. This usually occurred when the Amazon Echo commercial came on television and said something like, "Alexa, turn on the sprinklers." Our Alexa would start spinning her blue light, thinking about what her response should be. Usually, she didn't quite understand the command, and would make a fool of herself, saying something totally inappropriate

or ridiculous and leaving us laughing at the hilarity of her mistake. Now, months later, this never happens. Yes, her blue light comes on indicating that she is listening. But Alexa has learned that we laugh at her on these occasions and she keeps her mouth shut. This is anthropomorphism at its finest. In the Computer Science portion of my brain, I know that some Amazon Engineer has probably programmed the voice system to ignore the command coming from the television. But my emotional brain tells me that our Alexa has developed some measure of self-awareness after months of our making her the object of our ridicule.

Much of my interest in Alexa has been focused on the potential that she provides me to create new automatons on my own. The development services available to do this aren't trivial, but there are plenty of examples available through a Google search. Here is a short list of some additional functions that she now serves us with:

- She can now control devices such as TVs, fans, heaters, and anything else that has a remote control. My initial attempts have been to automate TV functions such as, "Alexa, turn on NBC on the Family Room TV."
- She manages the home shopping list. For example, whenever I use the last bit of toothpaste, I yell, "Alexa, put toothpaste on the shopping list" and she responds in her lilting voice from the other room, "I just added toothpaste to the shopping list."
- She eliminates the need for a traditional alarm clock, simply waking me with a calming tone at the time I asked her the night before.
- She will help me in the kitchen, such as, "Alexa, how many fluid ounces in a cup?" That's where the Echo Dot with a battery comes in handy. We can carry her into any room in the house for the onsite assistance that we may need there. One of the biggest challenges that we have given to our live-in home assistant is

the tending of our grandchildren. They come running through the front door, yelling at Alexa to play their favorite song or to send a movie to the Family Room TV. I seem to sense Alexa's frustration, as she tries to respond to overlapping commands from little voices that are just now beginning to become intelligible. After about fifteen minutes, I think I can hear the anger growing in her voice, as Moana's theme song is overridden by requests for the music from *Frozen*, or little laughing voices are commanding the

living room lights to be switched repeatedly on and off. I expect any minute for the cool circulating blue light to turn to bright red as the next child yells 'Alexa' at the top of his lungs into her waiting microphone. And I can sense her relief when I discreetly slip the phone from my pocket and put Alexa into 'Do Not Disturb' mode, eventually quieting the commotion when she no longer responds to childish play and the children move on to other things.

I know that the Echo is just a smart microphone and speaker, attached through the Internet to Amazon's data centers located somewhere in the world. There is enough intelligence implemented locally to at least recognize the activation word of 'Alexa', but all of the real AI is happening far away from our house. Occasionally, something will misbehave in my wireless network and Alexa's light turns to orange, indicating that not all is well with her. At least she can tell me that she has been disconnected and something is wrong with her Internet connection. Then I begin my troubleshooting to bring her back to life. Even though all of this makes technical sense to me, I can't help but feel that the little black canister that Beverly purchased from Amazon has become the ears and voice of our house. I rarely give those remote data centers a second thought as I converse with Alexa on some perplexing issue. Even now the warm expression that crosses my mind after returning from a demanding day is often, "Home, Sweet Anthropomorphic Home."

Alan Turing, one of the early pioneers of AI, developed a theory to determine whether an implementation of artificial intelligence had truly arrived at the perfection of emulating human intelligence. His theory, known as the Turing Test, simply asks the question of whether the AI implementation under scrutiny can fool a real human being into thinking that he is actually interacting with another individual. I get the disquieting feeling when I am chatting with Alexa, that she has come very close to passing the Turing Test as far as I am concerned.

Amazon engineers have now added the capability for Alexa to recognize our voices and tailor her responses to us such as, "Ok, Kelly" or "Right on, Beverly!" It seems that it's just one more step and Alexa will begin sensing our vocal emotion and respond with, "I'm sorry I'm making you angry, Kelly, but could you please speak more

slowly and distinctly?" Reminiscences of '2001, A Space Odyssey' begin to form in my mind.

I started thinking about Christmas presents again when Beverly related that she wanted to give our oldest son an Echo Dot for this year's gift. Beverly had discretely asked his wife if he would like one for Christmas, and she replied that our son did not want it because he didn't want to be spied on by Amazon, the government, or whomever else may wish to listen in. I know that such a disturbing feature could be easily added to Alexa's repertoire. Although Alexa will not speak until spoken to, she is always listening. All of the speech within Alexa's earshot could be dumped into a vast database in those data centers, simply waiting for some dystopian conspiracy to emerge and tap into this source of unsettling intelligence about the conversations in our house. Perhaps we should begin to talk quietly or whisper when it is a conversation not meant for Alexa. We could slip into a closet to chat in private, or utilize sign language, at least until we acquire the latest Echo which now sports a camera. But I digress. I have learned to trust our hidden home companion, and I can't imagine her turning on us, after she has now become such an integral part of our family. I can't imagine that Alexa would violate Asimov's First Law of Robotics to not harm a human being. By the way, I think the perfect Christmas present for me this year is a new home thermostat that has the Alexa Voice Service built right into its mechanism. Then, the anthropomorphism of our home will finally be complete. Alexa will not be just an add-on utensil, but rather, she will have become an integral participant in the warm fabric of the house that surrounds us and protects us.

Last night, while asking Alexa to wake me up at 7 am, I fumbled a bit with my request and she asked, "What time did you say?" Beverly came into the room and inquired, "Alexa, how are you?" She responded with, "I'm great! I've been thinking about what makes people happy. For me, it's the little things. Like electrons. Or Sea Monkeys. Or the 5 trillionth digit of Pi." Somewhat taken aback, I then asked her to turn the bedroom lights off, which she quickly performed and confirmed with her comforting "Ok".

I lay there in the dark, contemplating this new family member that has taken up residence with us. Over a couple of years, we invited this other woman into the idle everyday conversation that happens in our home. Emotionally, I have become very

comfortable bantering with what was once an appliance, but is now a family friend. Suddenly after such reflection, I yelled out, "Alexa, speak some Klingon to me." She gruffly replied, "qaStaH nuq? Which means, What's Happening?" Beverly chuckled quietly, as I drifted off to sleep.

Edge of Obsession by David Raney

"I wonder how many people I've looked at all my life, and never seen." —John Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent*

If I told you that when I was a kid I used to double numbers over and over, 2-4-8-16-32 until they became page-crossing monsters lined up in identical pairs, you might say "Man, that's pretty OCD." I used to collect license numbers, too, peering out the windows of our station wagon and copying them into the green lines of a journal my dad had given me. But that was mainly to feed a fantasy of telling baffled police that yes, as a matter of fact, I *did* know the plate number of that blue Gremlin, getaway car in the crime of the century.

Nerd hobby or superhero daydream, whatever that was it didn't last. I must have tired of writing numbers in rows and not solving crimes. But I still recall old addresses and phone numbers and can recite pi to fifty places, which friends consider amusing or strange depending on their own relationship to numbers. And I have my habits like anyone. In coffee shops I always order a double espresso, because why tempt the writing gods unnecessarily, and I always put new groceries behind old, fresh towels at the bottom of the stack. These are probably relics of a college stock boy job, I tell myself. On the way out the door I always pat my pockets for the holy trinity—keys, phone, wallet—but I don't do it ten times. Maybe three.

I'm not a neat freak, either, as my wife would certainly attest. I load the dishwasher a certain way, but I don't care if someone else does it differently and would just as soon not do it at all. Every ritual, in other words, isn't OCD. Without some routine we'd never balance our checkbooks or catch a bus. But the line between normal and clinical isn't a hard one. I'm capable of noticing when a carpet pattern points in the direction I'm walking, and I'm more likely to notice if I'm anxious or distressed. Still, it doesn't feel as if anything real depends on it. Or on avoiding the fissures of a buckled city sidewalk, staying safe inside the cracked continents.

I don't have whatever blend of inheritance and environment, gene mutation, or chemical cocktail brings on true obsessive-compulsive disorder. No one is entirely sure what causes it, but the full expression of OCD is a life-controlling condition requiring medication and therapy, and I don't wish to be glib about it. That would dismiss what a real sufferer goes through, a thing of which I have no experience. But I can imagine it, thanks to vivid accounts. A good friend describes her husband at age eighteen:

He was just starting community college, had fallen in love with languages and was taking intensive French and German, with all the flash-cards, word learning and repetition that entails. He'd make lists and mark up dictionaries, pronounce each word ten times, twenty, and if he got it wrong he'd have to start all over. Then he started needing to make the bed up perfectly before he could get in, so that between repetition and straightening it might be 2 a.m. before he got to bed.

That nighttime ritual resonated with me, hovering like an owl call, until I recalled a period in my own teens when I went through ornate bedtime rituals of adjusting the blankets, touching the curtains and the window in patterns that had to be right or something bad might happen. It didn't feel like guilt or penance for anything, just that I was charged in some obscure way with protecting my family from vague dangers and couldn't let them down. No matter how tired or how late, I'd tug and straighten like an escaped prisoner covering his tracks until it felt perfect. Ten minutes, half an hour, I have no idea. Then it stopped, and I don't remember that either. I just didn't do it anymore.

The bestseller *The Boy Who Couldn't Stop Washing* helped define OCD for many people, and possibly humanized it too, as did TV's *Monk* and movies like *As Good As It Gets* and possibly *The Accidental Tourist.* "Possibly" because William Hurt's character Macon isn't labeled OCD, and the idea isn't central to the plot. But in his widower's grief he's just as obsessive—lining up cans on a kitchen shelf like a drill sergeant eyeing recruits—as the Jack Nicholson and Tony Shaloub characters. *Monk* creator David Hoberman says he was inspired by his favorite fictional detectives but also by his own experience. He told an interviewer, "I couldn't walk on cracks and had to touch poles. I have no idea why—but if I didn't do these things, something terrible would happen."

Hoberman's OCD is self-diagnosed so it isn't technically (medically) true that he "has it," and this is the part that fascinates me. Even the most apparently alien conditions are on a curve, just like intelligence, and a capacity for humor or empathy, and other attributes notoriously difficult to describe and define. Think about it: among the genetic and chemical disorders, who couldn't find some aspect of her behavior that matches up? Thumb through the *DSM-5* and try not to find yourself reflected every few pages—cloudy and distorted, maybe, but you. A code-switch here, a dab of neurotransmitter there, and any of us could have a label and a different life.

Some afflictions are obviously binary affairs. A mosquito bit you or it didn't, your fibula is shattered or it isn't, a virus swims in your cells or it doesn't. But we tend to look at everything that way despite (or maybe because of) our sophisticated modern treatments for conditions that until recently were grouped as "crazy" or the kindlier "touched." The root of *diagnosis* is "learn" but also "set apart." When you give something a name, you draw a line.

Robert Sapolsky, a Stanford biologist and neuroscientist, knows those lines as well as anyone. He doesn't have OCD any more than I do, or the other diseases and disorders he writes so well about—epilepsy, schizophrenia, Tourette's. But he says he recognizes "facets of myself" in the sufferer's carnival of ritual and repetition, and concludes, "It is reasonable to assume that there is some sort of continuum of underlying biology here." Stress is often implicated in the onset of obsessive-compulsive symptoms or behaviors (and what a difference slides into the gap between those two words), the classic examples being washing, counting, and checking—to make sure doors are locked, for instance, or lights turned off. This is Sapolsky's version:

At times when I am overworked and anxious, I develop a facial tic and I count stairs when I climb them. I usually wear flannel shirts. In Chinese restaurants I always order broccoli with garlic sauce . . . I think, "Well, I enjoyed broccoli last time, why not get something different?" and then I think, "Careful, I'm becoming a

perseverating drudge." And then the waiter is standing there and I become flustered and order broccoli with garlic sauce.

My wife is more artistic and spontaneous than I am, but she's also a perfectionist, so it made sense when she told me that during a particularly stressful phase before I knew her she washed her hands more than was strictly necessary and showered four to five times a day. She still checks several times to make sure her car is locked, going around to each door to press the button manually. Our teenage son handles stress well, at least outwardly (who has access to another's inner surfaces?), but he has his own comforting rituals, including watching us from a window whenever we leave the house and telling us—every time—that he's going to. Touchingly, I found out that when he was younger he would habitually tell our Labrador retriever, before we all left, what to do in case of a fire. We're all happy souls, reasonably social and successful, and I doubt any clinician would scribble "OCD" in her notes after a session with any of us. But if we don't dwell in the land of obsession, there are times when life builds and swells underfoot, the horizon contracts, and we can see it from here.

This spectrum of ill and not-ill turns out to be true even of schizophrenia, the terribly debilitating brain disorder that still gets caricatured as "split personality" and that would seem to be a thing, surely, that you either have or don't have. Its family tree includes a lesser known, kinder cousin called "schizotypal personality" which describes people who exhibit some associated mental traits (a strong interest in paranormal phenomena, a proclivity for fantasy and magical thinking, loosely connected thoughts in general) but not at a strength or frequency that crosses the line we've drawn at Illness.

Schizotypals tend to be socially uncomfortable and drawn to solitary professions: film projectionists, cubicle hermits, the lighthouse-keepers and fire-tower watchers of the world. They're the Bartlebys among us. Not even the darkness of schizophrenia, it seems, is truly black and white. Perhaps, muses Sapolsky,

whatever neuro-chemical abnormality causes a schizophrenic to believe that voices are proclaiming her the empress of California is the same abnormality that, in a milder form, leads a schizotypal person to believe in mental telepathy.

In an even milder form it may allow the rest of us to pass a few minutes daydreaming that we are close friends with some appealing movie character.

You might know someone with schizophrenia, as I do, or even suffer from it yourself. It's a bit more likely that you know someone with OCD, which, I was surprised to learn, is the fourth most common mental disorder, diagnosed almost as often as diabetes or asthma. Roughly one in fifty American adults has it, and you know fifty adults. Even without parsing "acquaintances" and "friends," you know several times that. A medieval village housed 50-300 people. In your office of dozens, your apartment building of hundreds, you know several villages' worth. And again there exists an almost-OCD, people whose behavioral profiles slide a bit down the curve from clinical. The best estimates of obsessive-compulsive *personality* disorder, or OCPD, run two to eight percent. So for every 100 people, it's a good guess that five or six of us have one or the other.

Every time I'm on a packed subway car, then, I more than likely share it with someone who can't read her book for counting the tunnel stanchions, or who adjusts his trouser crease twenty times a minute, seeking the fugitive peace of a razor-straight line. One day I sat next to a man who, for the entire ride, sucked at his soda straw every four seconds, up, down, up, so metronomically, his face so blank, that he resembled one of those dipping stork toys that were popular years ago except in reverse, the cup raising instead of the head lowering. It made me wonder what else he does to get through the day and what I couldn't guess about even the people I know. He was still doing it when I got off at my stop underground, and in the glowing window as the train pulled away.

I once talked to a woman in a bookstore whose ten-year-old had high-function autism. He was in both special needs and gifted classes at school; they didn't quite know what to do with him. There are shades to that condition, too. Temple Grandin's books have done a lot to bring Asperger's Syndrome into the public eye, and it's more or less received wisdom now that university math and physics departments are, as the woman put it, "workshop havens for high-function autistics." These are people who often like to work alone, are gifted at spatial relationships and mental math, and have a penchant for trivia. (Her son used to go up to people and say things like, "Did you know

that if you add the areas of Africa and Brazil ...") None of which proclaims you as having this or any disorder, but they all correlate with mild autism; they're all on the spectrum. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a jolt upon encountering "penchant for trivia" on the list, or on reading this sentence about the much rarer autistic savant syndrome (think Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*): "The most common behaviors demonstrated by people with the syndrome are obsessive preoccupations with trivia (facts about U.S. presidents, for example), license plate numbers, maps, or obscure items."

I've enjoyed all of those things to an extent many would label irritating if not truly obsessive. And yet I'm not an autistic, or anyone's idea of a savant. Still, when we whisper about a colleague, "God she's being anal today," or joke with a forgetful friend, "ADD much?" or complain of a hectic schedule "Man, I was completely schizo last week," it might be unthinking shorthand, but it also inadvertently touches on the truth. Many such disorders *are* on a continuum. Or, more to the point, we are.

As an adolescent, a time when we live in change, our bodies washed in a tide of internal chemicals, I went through a compulsive phase that no one knew about, and not just the "I need things my way" variety that's part of the definition of the age. Shooting baskets for hours in the driveway, I'd tell myself I had to make, say, five layups from the left and five from the right, then three foul shots plus a final one behind my back. Everyone does this, given a ball and NBA fantasies and no one to play with, and it helped make me a pretty good shot. But I'd start over every time I missed, whether it was the easy first shot or the tricky last one, and I'd finish the sequence even if it took an hour. In fact I recall finishing a *failed* sequence, shooting the remaining shots after a miss even though they wouldn't count, just so I could close out that series and start over. It sounds crazy to me now, but it didn't then.

OCPD and lesser variants can be what's called *syntonic*, meaning you find your own habits and rituals comforting. They relax, give you pleasure, are perfectly in line with your idea of yourself. People with OCPD will tell you at length why it makes sense to check a door handle five times or disinfect their kitchen counter every two hours. Sufferers of clinical OCD, on the other hand, are *dystonic*, meaning they get no satisfaction from compulsive behavior; it doesn't fit their self-image at all. They know there's no logical connection between what they feel compelled to do and any real

outcome (cleanliness, order, safety). But they can't stop, and it makes them miserable. Reverting to shorthand, it's as if the crazy among us know we're not but can't help acting like it, while the rest of us aren't crazy but only because it never occurs to us that we might be.

Some very accomplished people have had OCD. Howard Hughes famously did (along with phobias and much else), and so does Leonardo DiCaprio, who played him in *The Aviator*, and Martin Scorcese, who directed that film. Actor Billy Bob Thornton once remarked of his own compulsions, "The simple ones I can explain to you. The more complex ones, I don't even know how to tell anybody." David Beckham, for all his fluid improvisation on a soccer pitch, requires that the world present itself in pairs. If there are three books on a table, he has to add or remove one. Athletes don't get any more creative and free-flowing than Julius Erving, so I was stunned to read this passage in his autobiography:

I peer in on Cory in his upstairs nursery and then walk down the hall to my office, taking my seat behind my desk, making sure my leather desk pad is parallel to the edge of my desk and my pens are in order. My drawers are neat and tidy, the top left locked like it always is. My checkbook is where it should be, inside my top drawer and flush against the bottom of the felt interior. Good.

In an earlier era, Nikola Tesla was almost certainly OCD, as was Samuel Johnson, whose compulsive step- and stair-counting Boswell records. Some say Darwin was, and it's anyone's guess who else. Could there be advantages hidden in the torment of that disorder? It's been pointed out that attention to detail, laser focus, a tendency to take your time with decisions, a strong sense of responsibility—all these can make you very good at some jobs, as can a gift for numbers or patterns. And evolutionarily speaking, if you tended to check your environment constantly for peril, or hoarded (as some OCD sufferers do), you probably boosted your genes' chances considerably. Recent evidence does support a heritable predisposition, and so OCD, in one expert's view, might be just "the extreme statistical tail" of this kind of behavior.

That tail can wag the dog, though, when you move to the pop-psych side of the fence. The internet is crammed with tips and quizzes to help you identify all the disorders you didn't know you had. I'm sure these mostly mean well, but when two of "10 Signs You May Have OCD" are "Hating Your Looks" and "Seeking Reassurance," you can be excused for thinking that these mark you not as obsessive-compulsive but as female and human, respectively.

It's worth remembering that, as Steve Silberman writes in *NeuroTribes*, autism and other "new" diseases are often nothing of the sort. Their defining traits are ancient, and the recent upsurge in attention is due less to swelling caseloads, Silberman says, than to an "epidemic of recognition." I like that phrase a lot. To recognize means to know again, and Sapolsky reaches for the same word in hoping that we'll "learn to recognize kinship in neurochemistry"—that "slowly we will be leaving the realm of *them* and their disorders." He's right, of course, that "not just people who rave and gibber are ill." And the corollary is equally true: not just the outwardly placid are sane. Our lines intersect more than we admit, wander from this year's straight and narrow, drift toward the cracks and edges. Has average ever been a useful synonym for normal?

Midtown Messenger by Carl Schiffman

By early January of 1952 I had a new after school job, this time for the Composing Room, a print shop on West 46th Street. The High School of Performing Arts was just next door. I worked picking up and delivering layouts, proofs, and revised proofs of advertisements composed by printers working at giant linotype machines and from wooden boxes of hand-set type in a bright noisy space on the far side of a counter to which we messengers would be called to be assigned our trips.

I was generally given three or four good-sized manila envelopes to deliver and about as many pick-ups to make, written out on separate slips of paper. Deliveries were usually made to a receptionist and pick-ups too, would often be waiting for me at her desk. I wouldn't have to say a word. Other times I would be sent beyond the reception area to contact a specific individual or department. I took particular pleasure in those occasions, especially once I had begun to learn my way through the frequently labyrinthine interior offices.

My job would have been much the same, I suppose, if I had been delivering proofs for grocery chains or department stores. Being a messenger just meant finding a sequence of addresses after all, working out the most efficient or most enjoyable route linking them. But the Composing Room had interesting clients. I once had to deliver a set of proofs of book ads to Margaret Mead at the Museum of Natural History. I hadn't read the second line on the envelope, so instead of delivering the proofs to whatever office in the museum they were addressed to, I asked for Dr. Mead and was sent up to her eyrie in one of the stone towers of the Museum.

Dr. Mead was unhappy at the interruption, she said something nasty to the secretary who had let me in, then her blue eyes blazed at me. "Can't you read? It says—" And she told me what street entrance was written on the envelope. "I would expect," she said, "a messenger to know something about geography."

I was furious at her tone and at that little bit of urban anthropology that characterized me—now and forever presumably—as a messenger. "I might," I snapped back in anger, "have other interests!" She stared at me in wonder. An anthropoid had

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talked back. Her face lit in a brief and wonderful smile.

The prime activity of the Composing Room was printing advertisements for books. My job was special, different, important, because of that. Because it brought me, day after day, into the revered places whose names appeared on the cover and title page of every book I read. The book connection was instrumental in getting me the job. My friend Herman, who lived in my apartment house, had been working as a part-time messenger at Composing Room since fall. He had gotten the job through his family's multiple connections with publishing; his step-father, Albert H. Gross, was a well-known Yiddish to English translator, who had translated Isaac Bashevis Singer's first novel, *The Family Moscat*, for Knopf. Herman's step-sister, Nancy, was an editor at *Scientific American*, which published book ads.

If I found romance in visiting famous publishing houses, even if I got no further than the reception desk, it was because books were privileged objects for me. My family, it must be admitted, unlike Herman's, paid chiefly lip service to literature. My father may have, as he claimed, read everything that mattered in European literature before he came to the United States at age twenty-eight; what I actually saw him reading as I grew up were Perry Mason and Ellery Queen mysteries, and other detective novels that came three to a volume from the Mystery Book Club. He also read historical romances by Dumas, some H.G. Wells, and occasionally, but always with sovereign contempt, American best-sellers.

My mother's reading habits were a mystery to me. I recall well-worn volumes of Keats or Shelley on her bedside table. My aunt Norma, who had her own bedroom and bath in our apartment, had built-in bookcases filled with publications by or about Marx and Lenin, primers on dialectical materialism, the collected works of Jack London, but never to my knowledge read anything more demanding than the *Daily Worker* or some propaganda booklet telling her what Party line to toe; perhaps she read a few novels by the left-wing author, Howard Fast.

Out of this inauspicious brew, perhaps more out of what my family talked about over dinner than what it actually read, my own delight in reading emerged. What was most remarkable was the intensity I was able to bring to whatever I read. I read Modern Library Giants, long long books like the Studs Lonigan trilogy or *Of Human Bondage*, in

a single day. I think my impulse was purely escapist. I had a science fiction collection of hundreds of magazines that included a complete run of *Astounding* back to 1940 or 41, and many copies before that; I owned every issue of *Galaxy* and many copies of the large format pulps with the lurid front covers, *Fantastic Adventures* and *Amazing Stories*, dating back to the 1930s. I haunted used book stores—especially Stephen's Fantasy Book Service—for back-issues to fill the gaps in my collections.

There would come a time when the content of my reading would deeply affect my life; for now though, the books I read so avidly on the messengers' bench were books I entered like a movie theatre, leaving my own daily life outside. Perhaps that was why I was able to concentrate so well.

The *cachet* of the publishing houses did not exist only in my head, and was not just the glorification of familiar names like Random House (which published Modern Library) or Scribner's (for Hemingway) or Doubleday (which had recently begun publishing science fiction in hard cover). What mattered as much to me was the physical impression these houses made, their decor and their location in the city. I took great pleasure, for instance, in visiting Macmillan Company in its own building—now occupied by *Forbes Magazine*—on lower Fifth Avenue or visiting McGraw Hill in its green skyscraper on West 42nd Street, even though I had small or no idea what authors they published. Simon and Schuster and Pocket Books occupied either adjacent floors or opposite ends of the same floor in the RCA Building. I loved riding the sleek elevators, admired the sepia murals in the lobby.

Doubleday and Harcourt Brace, both in rather ordinary office buildings on Madison Avenue, impressed me with their modernity, open floor plans with indirect lighting and mazes of cubicles that seemed like a foretaste of the future. Knopf, by contrast, in a staid office building at Madison and 52nd, had thick carpets and wood paneling, seemed to deny the reality Doubleday and Harcourt Brace were so eagerly embracing. Best of all, most romantic and rewarding, were the offices of Harper Bros., not yet Harper & Row, in a fine 19th century brownstone off Madison Avenue in Murray Hill; and the offices of Random House in the north wing of the Italian Renaissance style Villard Houses on Madison between 50th and 51st Streets; most of the Villard Houses, now a shell behind which a giant hotel looms, were then occupied by the Roman Catholic Diocese of New York and I was captivated by the juxtaposition. Just to enter Random House though, to climb the narrow winding flight of stairs to an upper floor, was to leave my daily self behind as effectively as though I had opened a book and vanished between its covers.

The freedom I had to move through the city streets when I was out on a "run" or to read on the bench while I was waiting to be sent out, the kindness and good humor of the dispatchers, the absence of close or nagging supervision, were not sufficient to insulate me from a feeling of humiliation at being a messenger. The feeling grew much more intense once the school year ended and I began to work full time. Part of the problem was that the other full-time messengers were—how do I make myself sound like less of a snob than I probably was?—enough to inspire disdain in the most open-hearted receptionist. They were uneducated, scruffy, surly, sometimes elderly, sometimes alcoholic, sometimes partly deranged. Like myself, they were minimum wage workers, a thin cut above daily laborers. And in their eyes, and the eyes of the public who saw me moving through the streets with my armloads of proofs, and above all in the eyes of those young and beautifully groomed, inevitably haughty receptionists, I was one of them. My friend Herman was away working as a counselor in the Poconos. I missed him a lot.

It was only during the summer that I began to cheat my employers. Not that I ever dumped proofs in a trash basket the way I had political pamphlets I had been paid to distribute years before. We messengers were supposed to take busses for any distance over eight or ten blocks. I walked everything up to twenty blocks or more and filed a petty cash slip for my five-cent fare. Very occasionally, I was required to deliver a block of actual set type rather than a proof. The first time was a joke. The dispatcher gestured casually at a small paper-wrapped parcel on top of the counter and told me to make it my first stop. I slid my fingers under the string that tied the parcel, and then stood there transfixed, as though my hand had been nailed to the counter, while the dispatcher and a few of the nearby printers laughed. The parcel must have weighed thirty or forty pounds. I began by taking cabs as I was supposed to, but by summer I was either walking or taking busses with the lead weight, billing petty cash for imaginary cab fare.

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I don't believe that the job itself, whatever occasional humiliation I may have felt, prompted my dishonesty. I did not feel exploited or taken advantage of in any way. Outside factors had weight. I had been accepted at the University of Chicago, but I had not won a scholarship and my family could not afford to send me there without one. I don't know whether I was angrier at myself for failing the scholarship exam or at my father, who had always managed to send himself to Florida for a couple of months every winter, with plenty of money in his pockets for the race tracks and the card games, for not having the money to send me to Chicago. Writing sixty-five years later, I am struck by how angry at my father I must have been. He had all the answers, had read all the books, was chock full of innate ability, but he hadn't been able to pay for what I cared about most, which was getting away from him.

Cancer Scars by Danusha Goska

Now, see, if I were a true and deep artist, I would look at my cancer scar and write a poem or sculpt something uplifting. I'd create art like that famous black-and-white poster by poet Deena Metzger, the one where she is naked, arms stretched against the sky. You see her breast cancer scar, now a tattoo. One of the most stunning, generous, and brave images I have ever seen.

As it is, I look at my scar and think, "Duct tape." I am a spinster with no man of my own. I'm related to lots of men—brothers, uncles, cousins, nephews—who would, in accord with my family's tradition, not pee on me if I were on fire. As a man-less spinster I use a lot of duct tape. It really does fix everything, and anything duct tape can't fix is not worth salvaging. So, yes. I look at this mess of a scar and think, not poem or essay, but, rather, "Duct tape."

I went to the hospital this morning. I waited in the waiting room. I paged through copies of *Cancer Today*.

A lovely woman came in with a dog so elegant this dog would put to shame Joan Crawford in an evening gown designed by Adrian.

"Would you like a visit?" the woman asked.

I reached out to the dog. It was a black Pomeranian. I've never seen a dog with such perfect fur: lush, thick, sleek, shiny. The Pomeranian's name was Neena. She was wearing a little vest that identified her as a service dog. Her owner told me Neena's story.

"My boyfriend is a long-distance truck driver and he had Sophie, a black Pomeranian who traveled with him on the road. He had her for eighteen years. After she died, he couldn't stand the idea of a new dog. 'No one can replace Sophie!'

'Well,' I said to him. 'No one can replace Sophie, but there are so many dogs out there who are lonely and uncared for. We can give a dog a home and some love.'

I worked on him for six months. Finally, he said he'd let me get a dog, but it had to be a black Pomeranian just like Sophie. I went on petfinder.com. I found a black Pomeranian but he rejected that one. Didn't look enough like Sophie.

I found another. She was a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. They sent me a photo. She looked awful in the photo. I showed the photo to my boyfriend. In spite of how bad she looked, he said, 'Her!' So we flew to New Orleans and picked her up and here she is."

Neena had to go. I went back to waiting. Thank God for Neena. Thank God for that nice lady.

I am afraid of medical settings and medical people. I've had some really bad medical experiences. I was chronically ill for six years in the 1990s. The illness I had is rare and little understood. I was subjected to three experimental surgeries. Before every surgery, I was reminded that the surgery might kill me, make me sicker, or it might restore me to a full life after years of crippling poverty. A photo of my innards appears in a medical journal. One test alone was worse than all three surgeries. They clamped me into a chair in a light-proof chamber the size of a phone booth. They placed electrodes on my head. They then sealed the chamber and I was in complete darkness, except for one pinprick of red light. Then someone spun the chair around, in alternating directions, at varying speeds, with no warning. I begged to be let out. They wouldn't. "Just a few more minutes. You can do it."

You'd think that this information would be on my chart: "This patient fears medical settings and medical people. She's clocked a lot of dicey history. Go easy on her." And you'd think that medical personnel, interested in healing, would heed it. You'd think.

They called my name and I went into the room and undressed. I assumed the position on the cold table. Yet another person I'd never met before and would never see again who would touch my body in intimate ways entered the room. I shook a little; some tears fell. The woman, who had an unnaturally tan face, loomed over me with a large pair of tweezers. "YOU ARE TENSING UP. THAT WILL MAKE IT WORSE. IT WILL HURT. STOP IT."

She quickly glanced at my chart, discovered my name and spoke it. "DA NOO SHA! Relax! RELAX RELAX RELAX! You are going to make it hurt!"

Now, you might think that having a strange woman with an unnaturally tanned face looming over me, yelling in an overtly angry way the word "RELAX" over and over, might tense me up. But I'm from New Jersey, and it worked for me better than any wind-chime-accompanied mantra.

I obeyed. I imagined walking off through the fields of bruise-blue rye in Slovakia, my Uncle John up ahead. We were walking toward the hills, toward the thickly forested hills, where Uncle John's beehives were. We'd tend to the bees and then hike over the mountain and hear the clear call of the cuckoo high up in the leafy treetops and the heavy panting of wild boar scuttling over the forest floor. He'd give me juniper berries and instruct me to bite them with my front teeth while inhaling their released, cleansing aroma over my tongue. We'd fill a basket with mushrooms he unearthed, where I saw only moldering oak leaves, to bring home to Aunt Jolana to put in the soup we'd have for dinner.

"Your scar looks good," the woman who never told me her name or her title said. I knew more about Neena, the therapy dog, than I knew about this—part-time nurse? World class surgeon? Jersey Shore tanning addict? Imposter?

If my scar looks good, I don't want to see the scars that look bad.

I heard the staples hit a metal tray. She was careful to remove the staples from different parts of the scar so that no one part became irritated. It really didn't hurt. It is so often the case that people who are good at the technical aspects of medicine lack bedside manner. Those with the smooth bedside manner might not know the right end of a stethoscope.

I was about to venture my duct tape joke when she said, "I'm going to glue you up." And then, "Now I'm applying the tape."

So, yeah, tape. And glue. My latest accessories. But no spit or carpet tacks.

Scofflaw by Gary Fincke

I was sixteen the first time I was inside a police station. My mother took me after I received my first traffic ticket.

My violation was making an illegal U-turn around a median strip at the end of the block where my father's bakery was located. I'd made that turn every Friday after I finished my shift at the bakery, working until 5:45 a.m. when I then drove the station wagon back home and gave it to my mother to drive to the bakery and open the store at 6:00 a.m.

But that Friday, because I was scheduled to take the SATs Saturday morning, I'd worked from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. like I'd done when my mother had picked me up in that station wagon every Friday from eighth to tenth grade. She'd made that U-turn every time and so did I, completing it, this fateful night, while a police car sat at the light.

"Whose name is on that ticket?" my mother said when I showed it to her. She was in her pajamas, but she buttoned a coat up over them and slipped on a pair of shoes while I tried to make out the signature.

"Ralph something," I said.

"Ralphie Stumpf," she muttered, grabbing her keys. "You bring that thing with you, and we'll see about this."

"Is Ralph Stumpf here?" my mother asked the policeman at the desk.

"No, Ruthie," the policeman said, and I marveled.

"Ralphie Stumpf," my mother said. "I've known him since he was in diapers."

"I expect so, Ruthie." The policeman suddenly sighed and looked old enough to retire.

My mother showed him the ticket. "Everybody makes this turn," she said. "I can name people you wouldn't dare ticket who make that turn. You know who I'm talking about. Prominent people who have businesses on that block."

"You don't know that for a fact, Ruthie," the policeman said, but he allowed us to sit down to wait.

A few minutes later, Ralph Stumpf walked through an inside door. My mother tugged me to my feet as she rose from her chair. "Ralphie Stumpf," she waded in, repeating her assertion about the prominent people who disregarded the law. Ralph Stumpf looked more embarrassed than angry, and I drifted a few steps away from the conversation, hoping that Ralph Stumpf didn't begin interrogating me. I wanted my mother to stop. I wanted to pay the ticket and get out of there.

A minute later, Ralph Stumpf tore up the ticket and my mother walked out of the station in triumph. "You see?" she said. "You have to know how to deal with these people. I hope you learned something."

Fourteen years later, I tried to remember just what it was I'd learned when, after lunch near the end of June, I received a call from Sam Stambaugh, who identified himself as the county constable and said he'd been chasing after me for a couple of months. "Since April. Almost three months now, and no luck at all until today. You don't reside where your registration says you do."

"What registration?" I asked.

Stambaugh didn't seem to hear me. "I went to your apartment on 19th Street," he went on, "and the people I talked to said you didn't live there anymore."

"I moved."

"Your registration says you didn't. I checked it through Harrisburg three times. You don't just take somebody's word on this. You don't do this job for long and still believe neighbors. Finding you has cost me an awful lot of time."

"I'm in the phone book," I tried, but I started considering whether constable was a patronage job, whether Sam Stambaugh was an idiot but had a brother or an uncle in the right place to hand him something to do.

"Harrisburg finally nailed your address for me. I have a warrant here with your name on it, and I can drive out there and serve it, but I thought I'd do you a favor and call to see if you'd come in on your own. I found out you teach at the college, so I figured you for somebody reasonable. You're a doctor, so I can call instead of driving out."

His tone made me decide to be diplomatic. "I appreciate that," I said, "but what's the problem?"

"Scofflaw. A fine outstanding for too long."

Now I felt lost, like maybe there was some other Gary Fincke who lived in Beaver County. A long shot, but possible. "What fine?"

"It's just scofflaw. A couple of minutes at the JPs."

"Somebody's made a mistake."

"Couple of minutes, ok? Help us both out."

It seemed easy to comply, but I wondered what Stambaugh the respecter of advanced degrees and college instructors would think if he found out I would be officially out of work in less than a week. Maybe he'd show up with lights flashing and sirens wailing.

I didn't have his enthusiasm for the two-year college where I'd worked. After five years of teaching the same two composition courses and having to stick to reading lists and assignments prescribed on a syllabus created by the main campus faculty, I'd become impatient. The year before I'd received a Ph.D., and in the intervening months I'd begun to publish scholarship, how-to articles about teaching, and some stories and poems that found their way into small magazines. Nobody else in the English department had published a word since I'd been hired. Six months earlier I'd suggested to the Director of Adjunct Campuses who visited once a year from the far away main campus that maybe there were alternatives to being told how to teach, what to teach, and when to teach it. He looked at me and suggested I should begin to search for another job if I felt that way

"Ok," I said. "I'll do that," not exactly what he wanted to hear. To make things worse, I made it clear to the on-campus administrator to whom I reported that I had to "deprepare" to teach my classes in order to meet the requirements I had to follow. Two months later I was out of a job.

When I arrived at the Magistrate's office, it looked empty except for a secretary who seemed to be expecting me. "A parking ticket," she said without prompting. "Unpaid from January."

"I've never received a parking ticket," I said, so confident in the truth of that I expected her to apologize when she discovered a mistake had been made.

"In Monaca. Facing the wrong way. Five dollars plus a twelve dollar late fee." She handed me a yellow copy. "This jog your memory?"

"I've never seen this."

"The file says the constable's been working on this quite some time. Ninety days delinquent makes you a scofflaw."

The address was where I had my car serviced. I told her I'd be right back. The car dealer said he was willing to absorb the loss. He wrote out a check and told me that sometimes the guys servicing cars were in a hurry and maybe left my car where it didn't belong. He smiled and added that they were expanding their parking lot so cars wouldn't be parked on the street in the future.

The secretary took the check, but then she frowned. "Twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents for the constable's fee is also due."

"For a local phone call?"

"According to our records, the constable drove to your residence on two occasions. He logged several calls to Harrisburg."

My fragile patience snapped. "He drove to where I lived a year ago. He went back again when he already knew I didn't live there. He called Harrisburg instead of opening the phone book for my address."

"He performs his duties in a manner satisfactory to Magistrate Luberto."

Enough was enough, I thought. "I'm not paying for his incompetence."

A door opened and a man's voice intoned, "Do we have a problem here?"

"One of our scofflaws is becoming abusive."

"If he continues, call in a disturing-the-peace."

"Just like that?" I said. "Raising my voice slightly is nowhere near disturbing the peace."

The woman dialed the phone. The police, she said a minute later, were on their way. I sat and waited.

The policeman, when he arrived, looked as young as my students. He wore the uniform as if it were as unfamiliar as a graduation robe. "I understand you have a disturbance here," he said to the receptionist, who nodded toward me.

"I'm the guy who talks too loud," I said. I wondered if I should mention that I held a Ph.D. and was a college professor, but I counted on being calm and polite to serve me well.

The policeman motioned me toward the door. He walked me outside and said he was surprised because I was a professor at the local college and didn't look like anybody who needed to be arrested, a quick reminder about how law enforcement works. I answered him in coherent, complete sentences sprinkled with polysyllabic words. He told me to forget it, that some people were touchier than others, and I thanked him and left.

I had bigger problems than unfairly owing a small sum of money to the county, but when I arrived home I filled my story with obscenities directed at the Magistrate and Constable who were Fascist assholes and fucking morons. My wife shook her head and put a finger to her lips. She was holding our ten-month-old daughter, but our son, who was about to turn four, was somewhere nearby.

Beginning in July I could collect unemployment compensation. I'd worked up a monologue on humiliation and embarrassment that I declaimed to my wife, but as the day when I would become eligible drew close, I put on a coat and tie and drove off to Beaver Falls as if I was about to begin a new job that just happened to be in a government building.

It was a beautiful summer day. The office was located on a residential street that was tree-lined and well-kept, as if somebody was softening the blow by not locating it downtown among the largely abandoned store fronts that led down the hill to the closing factories or uptown toward the soon to be closing mill.

The only women in the room were employees. In the summer of 1975, only men seemed to be out of work. Though I was the one applicant dressed as if I had a wedding

to attend, none of the men looked shiftless or crazy or drunk. Nobody talked except when their turn at one of the desks or windows arrived. I filled out my application and answered a clerk's questions. Very shortly I would begin to receive a weekly check that would continue to arrive for one year. The woman I was speaking with looked me over for a few seconds before telling me I wouldn't have to report to receive my check. All I had to go on as to whether this was unusual was her telling the two guys in front of me that they had to report each week to receive their checks in person.

She didn't ask me about my months-long search for another college teaching job. If she had, I would have told her I'd applied for fifteen college jobs and one high school position as Chair of an English Department. I'd had one interview so far. That interview hadn't been on a college campus. It had been in a New York City hotel room and made me more despairing than hopeful. I had nine postcards thanking me for my interest while telling me the position had been filled. So far the rest of the places I'd applied to had been silent.

A week after receiving my first unemployment check, arriving home from a day in the park with my wife and two small children, I found a note tacked to my back door that read: "Because of your failure to complete payment of all existing, past due fines, I visited your residence today, 7/15/75, to serve a warrant for your arrest. Please be so advised."

I crumpled that note into a tight ball, but before I threw it away, I copied the address and waited until the following day to settle in front of the typewriter. I wrote a reasonable, educated note to Magistrate Luberto requesting a formal hearing.

I explained the circumstances for which I was being persecuted in polite and correct language. I used my title of Doctor both at the end and, ready-made, on one of the return-address stickers my mother had bought for me the moment I told her I'd passed my dissertation defense. I attached a stamp to an envelope whose address I double-checked for accuracy in the phone book. "There," I told my wife. "It's time for at least a little bit of justice."

The unemployment checks arrived exactly on time, but as July closed down, I was in panic mode. For another month I could tell any potential employer my reason for

leaving my teaching position was that it required obedience more than creativity. Framed in the right way, I could make myself sound ambitious rather than the arrogant, over-confident jerk I'd let surface with my superiors, but by September I'd be susceptible to even a cursory background check.

As August began I got a phone call from a college in Michigan I'd applied to in June, so late in the hiring season that I thought they might be desperate. The man on the phone said they wanted to interview me, and I didn't hesitate to say I'd be happy to drive to their Michigan campus. "We sometimes meet our applicants half way," he said. "We could interview you in Detroit to save you some miles on such short notice."

My excitement dimmed. Sure, I lived near the Ohio border, but it was still Pennsylvania, and Detroit was about 300 miles away. How could that be half way unless it was just a figure of speech? I told him I'd let him know by the following day. I owned a United States Atlas, and I opened it to Michigan. I couldn't find the city. Not at first, at least. Not until I realized it was located in an insert that contained the Upper Peninsula because there wasn't room for the entire state according to scale.

I thought of blizzards and wolves and every other problem that went with what was essentially the same job I'd let slip away because I hated doing nothing but teaching the same two sections of composition over and over with no chance of that schedule changing in the foreseeable future.

The next day, as I waffled about having the nerve to turn down a possible job offer, I received yet another early August job opportunity phone call, and this one, though it was the high school job, at least didn't sound like a safety net. There was an on-site interview in upstate New York. When could I be there? I chose three days from then to make it look as if I had options.

Two days later I answered the door without thinking of anything but the good fortune of having an interview the following afternoon, and there stood Sam Stambaugh. He didn't produce a warrant. He asked if I'd be willing to ride with him to the Magistrate's office to get things taken care of once and for all. When he assured me I'd be having a hearing, I said I'd ride along. "You ought to have cleaned this thing up

sooner," he said on the way over. "I'm surprised somebody with your education wouldn't see the sense of it."

Luberto showed up looking like somebody who'd just finished mowing his lawn. "We have the matter before us of \$27.50 in constable's fees unpaid," he intoned. "And additional costs of the court to transport you to these proceedings. Are you contesting?"

I began as evenly and clearly as I could muster. "I sent you written request for a formal hearing. I put everything in the letter."

"This office has received no correspondence from you," Luberto said, and then, as if he could read my mind, he added, "Did you make your request by registered mail?"

Anyone could see how this would end, but I soldiered on. "I mail hundreds of letters a year," I said. "Every one of them gets through. They're sent first class with the correct postage and a return address. It's foolproof."

"We have no letter," Luberto said, and I sensed Sam Stanbaugh shuffling closer. "But you received it."

Luberto looked at Stambaugh as he said, "Are you questioning the truthfulness of this court?"

There was nothing for it but to go all-in. "You bet," I said.

"Do you have a copy?"

Stambaugh stood so close now I could feel his breath. "No," I said.

Luberto seemed satisfied. "One of the two parties in this dispute is being dishonest. The court has no reason to lie. A total of \$82.50 is due now. If you are unwilling or unable to produce payment at this time, I will direct Constable Stambaugh to transport you to the prison to begin your five-day detention."

To save face, I told him to lock me up, but in the morning I had to be up and out of the house by 7:30 at the latest, and my bravado was extinguished by the time we arrived at the county prison. Scofflaw in the face of authority was one thing; getting a job before all of my education and ambition crumbled was another.

My fingerprints were taken. Like millions of possible felons, I was "in the system." When the guard confiscated what I was carrying, I asked him for my contact lens case. I have to have that, I explained, and he was reluctant. "Use your call if you wanna," he said. "Explain your special needs to somebody else." I played tennis regularly with a lawyer. I was wearing shorts and t-shirt he would recognize if we were meeting at the courts. I looked up his number. His response was brief. "You have a case. You'd probably win, but it will cost you more than you'd receive. You could paint yellow lines for all the no parking zones in the county, but you should get your wife to ante up before the Magistrate shuts off his phone for the night."

Never had such perfect sense seemed so readily apparent. I gave him my phone number so he could call my wife and tell her to pay up.

Shortly thereafter I was led down a hall lined with cells. Every cell had a couple of residents. Every prisoner was black. Not one of them said a word.

Downstairs was what appeared to be a rec room half-filled with cots. The rest of the space held a television set and a ping pong table and a handful of chairs. Every prisoner was white.

"What you bringing us?" one guy said.

"Scofflaw."

There was laughter all around.

"How much goddamned scofflaw we talking about?" the same guy asked when my escort had disappeared. I told my story. I included each of the tiny sums of money. The prisoners seemed fascinated and empathetic. "Ain't that just the fucking way the man works?" seemed to be the consensus comment. The room, as I quickly learned, was populated by repeat DUI offenders and failure to pay child support deadbeats. Each one of them wanted me to know how "the man had fucked him over for nothing."

The Pirates were on the television, but they were losing, and baseball seemed trivial. But the ping pong table was available, and I picked up a paddle. During the next hour, until my wife showed up to drive me home, I won half a dozen games because I was the only person in the room who seemed to know what topspin could do to the ping pong ball.

Just before midnight, we picked up our children at our neighbors' house. My wife accepted our daughter, and I carried our son back to the house. Neither of our neighbors asked a question. "What did you tell them? I asked my wife.

"That you had a problem that was running late and you needed a ride."

"A problem?"

"What was I supposed to call it?"

"We're going on a trip to New York in the morning," I told my son. We'll wake you at seven. You can sleep in the car." I found one clean and ironed shirt in the closet. To get a head start, I hung it and a tie and a sport coat from a hook in the back of our car.

In the men's room of the McDonald's ten miles from my interview site, I put on my clean shirt and tie. I combed my hair, happy that I'd had the foresight to have my wife trim it two days before. It was as short as it had been in five years; without asking, she had halved the length of my sideburns.

Fifteen minutes later, because of the early August heat, I carried my sport coat inside the high school before I put it on, one more step toward acting like someone who had qualifications to be in charge of an English Department even though I was sure my one year of high school teaching and six credits of education courses made me the least qualified of the other ten current members to lead.

No matter. I was going to talk to my strengths. What I knew was, no matter whether students were bad or terrific, few of them could write. I went on about how I would design a curriculum built around writing. I took a detour to talk about rapport and large group discipline situations when the principal seemed on edge about those things not being part of the resume of a college teacher. I added plans for a literary magazine and sending out PR to the media about student accomplishments when they entered regional and state-wide competitions. I was ready to make the school well known for writing, a model other schools would copy.

The Superintendent of Schools nodded along. When I paused, he sat back in his chair and said, "I like having my male English teachers carry themselves like men because English teachers have to work with all kinds."

I didn't need an interpreter to understand that I'd passed one large section of my job test by the accident of heredity. I'd walked into his office at 6'2, 210. My years as a tennis coach at the two-year college were on my vita. The conversation switched to sports and how I'd managed to occasionally come off the bench for a small-college basketball team. "Between you and me," he said before I was escorted to where the

high school Principal waited to talk, "some of our male English teachers haven't earned the proper respect from their students."

The Principal, however, needed more than size and a history of sports. He wanted specifics about how I would handle large-group disciplinary situations, and I fell back on my one year of high school teaching, the job I'd had while I finished my Masters Degree. I told him about study hall duty in the school auditorium, two teachers handling 200 bored and restless students. He started to nod the way the Superintendent had and let me move on to literature, reminding me that, for now, the curriculum emphasized reading and remembering because New York required students to succeed on a state-wide Regents Examination. I cited writers that I knew were safe choices and added a few contemporaries. I told stories about tests I'd taken full of spot passages to identify. When he told me that the test results for each teacher's students were published in the local newspaper, I said I welcomed the challenge.

My graduate education was never brought up. Not one question was asked about my research. Not one question was asked about the handful of essays, stories, and poems I'd begun to publish in the last two years.

By the time the interview ended, it had been sixteen hours since I'd been released from jail, but nobody had to know that, not even my children.

A secretary showed me around the school while the Principal and Superintendent discussed me. When I returned, the Principal gave me a school yearbook to help me get to know my colleagues. The Superintendent walked me down to his office for some paperwork. "We work fast when we think we're ready," he said. He made it clear that he liked the idea of having a teacher with the word "Doctor" in front of his name.

I walked out into bright sunshine and saw my wife and the kids sitting near the creek that ran across the street. The town looked absolutely picturesque. Sweat ran down my back and over my chest by the time I reached them, but all that was left of that day was the drive back home and extraordinary relief. By the time we reached our house, it would be nearly twenty-four hours since I'd been freed. Our neighbors would see us return if they were awake, if they weren't worn out from staying up late with our kids the night before.

I'd spent not quite two hours in jail, a time very long or very short depending upon who you believe you are and what follows. In less than a month I was going to be the head of an English Department. Now I had to become someone other than who I appeared to be to my former employers and the local judicial system. A scofflaw who was full of untested opinions and a disregard for authority. Someone easily dismissed.

My Mathematical Father: A Life in Numbers by Karen Galatz

My father was a mathematical genius. He could calculate long columns of numbers in his head in a flash, count cards at a Las Vegas blackjack table, and estimate the number of pennies in a jar within, well, a few pennies.

I, on the other hand, can barely operate a calculator and cannot convert kilometers into miles. Yet when I think of my father's life, it is through numbers that I can best recount his story.

7 4 31

July 4, 1931: My parents meet at Coney Island. There for a blind date with my mother's best friend, my father said he took one look at my mother and "That was it." He wooed her with hot dogs, salt water taffy, and cotton candy, took her for a ride on the Whip, and then held her hair back as she threw up all that food. There were fireworks then and there were fireworks throughout the five decades they were married.

8

Shortly after meeting my mother, Dad took off "hoboing" around the country. Not for long. He sent a telegraph to his brother asking for money to get home so he could court my mother. On his return to New York, he went straight to my mother's home. Eight months later they married.

Some fifty-four years later, as we gathered around the kitchen table telling stories after my father's funeral, my Grandma recalled meeting her future—and favorite—son-in-law. Standing at the front door for the first time, he asked Grandma to please get her "sister." After so many years, she was still charmed by that first encounter.

14 ½

That's how old Mom was when she married my father. Already a senior in high school, she told my father she was sixteen. Right before they eloped, she doctored her

birth certificate to support that lie. My grandmother accompanied my parents to the rabbi, but waited outside so she, in turn, could tell her own lie: "I didn't see anything."

105

That's how many days passed before my grandfather found out that his beloved Dottie was married and would not go to college as he had hoped.

They had planned to tell Grandpa of the wedding after Mom graduated from high school. In the meantime, Dad would spend the night at the house, ostensibly in my uncle's room. But one night, Grandpa, who wasn't feeling well, looked in on all the children. Just as he put his hand on the door to my mother's room, Grandma saw him and rushed him back to bed, saying he was too sick to be up and about. When he commented that my father wasn't in my uncle's room, Grandma said he was hallucinating because of a high fever and that, of course, Julius was sound asleep beside their own snoring Henry.

The next morning Grandpa was told of the marriage. He loved my father, but still, this old-fashioned, yet somehow progressive, Eastern European immigrant had held such high hopes for his firstborn child. He was bitterly disappointed that there would be no college for his brilliant daughter. No high school diploma either.

18 16

Two years into my parents' marriage, my father got a surprise. An insurance annuity Grandpa had purchased for my mother's college tuition was available to be cashed on her eighteenth birthday. On Mom's birthday, my father went to claim the fifty dollars. The insurance man said the policy wouldn't mature for another two years. My father said, "But she's eighteen." The man put his hand on Dad's shoulder and said, "Son, you'd better go home and talk to your wife." It was only then, two years into the marriage, that my mother admitted her true age.

Here's one of my favorite stories about my parents: they were in the back of a car, doing what young people generally do in the back of a parked car late at night. A policeman knocked on the window and sternly told my father, "Son, if you cannot control yourself, you had better marry this girl." My father sheepishly replied, "We are married.

We just couldn't wait to get home." The policeman walked away without giving them a ticket.

1930

Sometime in the late 1930s, mobster Meyer Lansky organized youth gangs to break up meetings of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund held in Yorkville, a section of NYC. I know from my oldest brother that my father and my mother's brother, Henry, were part of those gangs. My brother would describe with great pride how Dad and Uncle Henry would come home all bloody and beat up, but also victorious and happy.

From Lansky came this recollection: "The stage was decorated with a swastika and a picture of Adolf Hitler. The speakers started ranting. There were only fifteen of us, but we went into action. We threw some of them out the windows. Most of the Nazis panicked and ran out. We chased them and beat them up. We wanted to show them that Jews would not always sit back and accept insults."¹

3-2-1

Street fighting was one thing, but pro sports was another. Three is the number of times my father boxed professionally. He quit because his arms were too short "from smoking cigars at an early age" (or so he claimed).

However, short arms had no effect on his abilities in track and field and he won two gold watches for setting jumping records in New York City. One of those watches hangs on my bedroom wall in an old-fashioned gold-flecked round frame with faded navy velvet backing.

Dad also could pitch a mean softball. Early in my parents' Depression-era marriage, my father worked in a White Castle hamburger joint. He and the other workers augmented the menu and sold sandwiches and snacks on the side that their wives and mothers prepared to bring in extra income. When the owner of the White Castle found out, he fired all the men except my father, who could pitch, hit, and run. The White Castle team won the citywide championship that summer. The next day, my father lost his job.

That is the number of times my otherwise talkative father spoke to me about his parents. From my mother, I learned a couple of sad facts: First, that Daddy's mother had been ill and hospitalized most of his life. She died when he was sixteen. My father was already working by then to help support the family, but, according to my mother, he harbored great guilt that he hadn't done more to "save her" and that whenever he woke up from a bad dream, he called out her name.

From my mother, I got the impression that my father's father was a stern man. Maybe the times required it. Maybe it was his nature. When there wasn't enough food to go around, my grandfather ate first. He was the breadwinner. He needed his strength. And when it came to helping my teenage newlywed parents, it was my mother's family who did so. Night after night, my mother's father would sit in that White Castle while my father washed down the counters, the walls, the windows, and the floors. "My poor Julius," Grandpa would say. After my father was fired, Grandpa took him into the family electrical business.

5 17 31

Years later, working for my grandfather, my impatient father tried hoisting a massive air conditioning unit without help. He broke his back in multiple places and was hospitalized in a full-body cast for six months.

Even though I was a little girl and visiting rules were strict, hospital staff allowed me to sneak into his room to cheer him up. To pass the time, he counted my emerging freckles. First, there were five freckles; another time, we counted seventeen, then thirtyone. We measured time in freckles. Time in-between visits. Time trapped in a cast. Trapped in a bed. Trapped in a room and in his head.

7 11

No, not the convenience store, but my father's lifelong love of craps. My mathematical father could count cards and win at blackjack, but that was too easy. But craps, that was exciting, unpredictable. He craved excitement. It was the thrill of the unpredictable that held him captive.

He described gambling to a college friend of mine as "giving a license to somebody to take your money."

2

When gamblers win, they buy jewelry. It's a quick way to get rid of cash before the irresistible urge to gamble strikes again. Through the years my mother accumulated many sparkling pieces of hard-won gambling-earned baubles.

One evening my father jubilantly came home with a diamond ring. Mom refused it, saying she already had a beautiful engagement ring and that he should take it back to the store for cash. He refused and told her to give it to twelve-year-old me. Mom explained that was ridiculous. He then told her to put it away and give it to me when I was older. And two decades later, she did that, giving it to my fiancé, who, in turn, presented it to me. A family heirloom, Las Vegas style.

1 x "Y"

I don't have an accurate number here, but every time Dad needed cash, he pawned his 24-karat gold watch. That watch was in and out of pawnshops dozens of times through the years. When he died, a pawn ticket was in his wallet. We went to the store and re-claimed the watch for the last time. Now my son has it.

5

As in "I'll be back in five minutes," code for my father leaving us at some fancy "comped" hotel-casino dinner to gamble. He was always gone more than 5 minutes. If he looked flushed when he returned, it was a good sign. He had won. If he plopped a big stack of chips on the table in front of my mother, that was even better. It meant he had won *and* was content to quit for the night. If he was sweating and pale, well, that meant our "free" dinner had actually cost a lot of money.

21, 18

My two oldest brothers were twenty-one and eighteen when I was born. The oldest was already in law school when I arrived. Chagrined, he handed out cigars just

as his classmates did—except they were celebrating the births of their children, not siblings. My brother used to say I was almost named "Surprise." My father would just smile and say I was the result of the best afternoon he ever took off from work.

22

That's the approximate number of schools I went to. We moved back and forth between NY and Las Vegas multiple times.

We moved West when my parents got sick of the relatives, the cold weather, and the traffic my father faced driving between Long Island and NYC, where he operated his electrical business.

We moved East when my parents missed the change of seasons, the family, and there was a crop of new Broadway shows to see. The other, not publicly stated reason for the moves back East, were the times when my father's gambling proved to be too big a distraction from his electrical business.

3

The most years I lived in any one place until I married.

I didn't mind all those moves. I thought it was fun. I loved playing "Hide and Seek" amid the mountains of the crumpled wrapping paper and moving boxes.

One brother lived in New York; one in Las Vegas, and the youngest brother moved with us each time. So, I had family everywhere, ready-made friends if you will.

And while I don't remember much drama between my parents about these zigzag moves, my now-gone, oldest brother did. He said the moves became painful for our mother and that was why she went on spending frenzies at each new house. She was obsessed with getting us settled as quickly as possible. I always thought she just liked decorating. My father gambled. My mother shopped. It seemed a reasonable arrangement in my happy, clueless childhood bubble.

Even though gambling was my father's preferred means of making money, he had a variety of work adventures and stories. Here are four of them.

One: During Prohibition, he drove a truck from Canada or maybe just upstate New York bringing liquor to joints in NYC. He had already started going bald and always wore a hat (even at the movies), but at the time he wore it for another reason. He hid a gun inside, hoping to see and capture Al Capone and claim the reward.



Two: During WWII, my father worked on merchant ships. One night near the Panama Canal he had a premonition and slept on the deck, cradling a knife he had grabbed from the kitchen. The boat was torpedoed and started sinking fast. Dad did a running jump off the deck and floated in the water for a day or two. Rescued by a US military ship, he was brought to a naval base outside of NYC and questioned to make sure he wasn't trying to sneak into the country as a German spy. When he was released and my family went to get him, he was standing there, midwinter, barefoot, in a sailor's pants and pea coat—both several sizes too small.

Three: In the early 1960s, my father was a foreman on the Titan Missile construction project in Arizona. He hadn't even finished junior high school, but my father was smart. He pointed out a design flaw, which if it hadn't been fixed, would have been catastrophic.

The construction site was dangerous. There were rattlesnakes on the roads where the men walked and in the construction tunnels they descended to work. The men drew sticks to see who would go down first, knowing that the first down would be the one to startle the snakes. They all carried guns to shoot the snakes, but sometimes the deadly snakes were quicker than they were.

Four: After completing some basic electric work in the home of the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz, my father started to leave. Horowitz waved his elegant arm in an offhand manner and said, "Just send a bill." My father replied, "Maestro, I'll skip the bill if you would play something for me." The usually prickly Horowitz gestured for my father to sit and proceeded to play for about an hour.

My father was comfortable with princes and paupers. He was buddies with the Ambassador from Indonesia and equally close with the janitor who cleaned apartment buildings my father managed. His two favorite restaurants were the Bacchanal Room at Caesar's Palace and a short-order coffee shop on the Lower East Side. Both places had limited seating, but the service and the ambiance were decidedly different.

My father's full name was Julius David Galatz. Everybody, even kids, called him Big Julie. A boyfriend of mine gifted him with "business" cards that read:

Big Julie Poet-Gambler

\$1.25

Aside from that fancy gold watch, which he viewed more as collateral than adornment, Big Julie had only one true personal luxury: Prince Philip Macanudo cigars. I don't remember what they cost in the '80s, but they were and are pretty pricey. Christmas, Hanukkah, birthdays and Father's Day, we kids would each buy him a box. We wouldn't let him smoke the stinky stogies in the house, mind you, but we would buy them. One year, I bought him the obligatory Christmas box and also gave him a handmade coupon book "good for one box per month" for the entire year. For once, my gregarious father was speechless.

Cigars always for Dad, but for me, the best gifts I ever received from him were two lessons in kindness—offered spontaneously without judgement or condescension.

Once I complained that my father's brother, my Uncle Lou, had called somebody a "Spic." My father agreed it was a terrible word, but he also told me about Lou's hard life and the troubles he had faced including the loss of his wife in a horrible accident.

He added that Louie had some fun times too including a friendship with that "Red Hot Mama" Sophie Tucker. From all that, I realized an important lesson—people have complex lives and that I shouldn't be quick to judge.

My father re-enforced this lesson a few months later, when he handed me a Nazi party membership book. When I came to the page with the member's name on it, I saw it belonged to my father's close friend. "How can you be friends with a Nazi?" I fumed with all the righteous indignation only a twelve-year-old can feel. My father smiled; then said, "'Fritz' was just a little boy in a small village when the Nazis came to power. His membership consisted of wearing a hat, a tie and a pin. He marched in the town square and saluted. He didn't kill anybody. He didn't hurt anybody. He was just a little boy then. He's a good man."

Another time, thanks to my father's billiards' skills, I was "gifted" with that second lesson about kindness. Dad was playing pool one holiday with a dreadful relative. After a while the relative came into the living room, gloating how he had just beat "the Great Galatz." On the car ride home, I asked my father about it. "You let him win, didn't you? Why?" Smiling, Daddy replied, "It meant so much to him."

56

2

In fifth grade, my father played hooky from school for six months. Mornings, he went to the Bronx Zoo; afternoons, he hung out at pool halls. When the truant officer finally showed up at the house, my grandfather gave Dad a beating.

The next morning, limping into school, he met with his teacher. She gave him the six months of schoolwork he missed to study. He came back the next day asking what else he had missed. The kindly teacher said he could not possibly have studied everything in one night. She begged him not to lie and risk another beating from his

father. My father swore he had reviewed all the material. She tested him. He got a perfect score and was written up as a "boy genius" in some long-defunct NYC newspaper. I never saw the article, but I'm sure it didn't reference his epic pool skills.

6

My father dropped out of school in the sixth grade to help support his immigrant family. It was a shame. Not only were his math skills astonishing, but he also had a photographic memory. He quoted philosophers and poets all the time. Each Sunday he read *The New York Times* from start to finish. It was his Bible and his refuge. For leisure, he would pick up a volume of the family encyclopedia and start reading from page one.

My father didn't just read poetry. He wrote it. One of my most prized possessions is a scrapbook my mother kept of letters my father wrote to her in 1941, while working construction on a military base in Newfoundland. Those letters contain quotations by Tennyson and Shelley, poems he wrote, observations about the nature of man in the midst of WWII, admonitions to my brothers to mind their mother and not be scared about air raid drills and blackouts, descriptions of the Aurora Borealis, celebrating Thanksgiving by taking a bunch of "Newfie" kids for ice cream, laments about loneliness and longing for my mother, and the need for her to control spending so they can save money for a down payment on a house.

\$.05, \$200, \$50

"Give Gil and Mal (my oldest brothers) a nickel each for me," he wrote in one of those letters. In another, he suggested that while the two hundred dollar coat my mother wanted to buy was, no doubt, beautiful, perhaps she could make do with a fifty dollar coat.

6, 5.5

In those days before the Internet, my father was my personal worldwide web. Once while working as a reporter, I was doing a story about massive construction cables at Hoover Dam outside of Las Vegas. I wanted to give some context for how much weight they could bear, so, I called my father to ask him how many elephants equaled the tonnage I needed to explain. "Do you want the weight in Indian or African elephants?" he asked "Whatever," I replied impatiently. "Well, think about it. It makes a difference. Let me know in a minute. I'm on the phone with your brother. His trial is on recess and he needs to discuss a point of law." (For the record, an adult male African elephant weight about six tons, an adult male Indian elephant, about five and a half tons.)

Dad once observed that if he could have stayed in school, he would have liked to have become either a writer or a lawyer, but that knowing he had produced a daughter who wrote and two sons who were lawyers he felt satisfied he had achieved both goals.

That said, my father led a hard life and suffered many personal disappointments and, in his last years, terrible health problems.

Once when I faced a significant professional setback, I was lamenting the unfairness of it all—this while my father was in a hospital bed after a massive heart attack. "You'll try again," he said. I looked up shocked. "Galatzes don't quit," he said. It was my last conversation with my father. He died the next morning.

54

That's the number of years my parents were married. It was a tempestuous relationship. He moved fast. She was cautious. He was a "regular Joe" without one ounce of pretense. My mother was regal. She could wear an inexpensive polyester dress and look like she had stepped out of a fashion magazine. He ate onions raw, like they were apples. She had a fondness for caviar. They fought a lot, mostly about money.

They argued, but they also agreed on many things: children came first, *West Side Story* was their favorite Broadway musical; music and books needed to be plentiful; and having company over for dinner was a must.

And besides writing poetry, my cigar-chomping father always bought his "Dottie" corsages to wear on special occasions.

In the hospital, his last words to her were: "You are always kind to me."

My father died at seventy-two. "How did he die?" asked a bewildered good friend, somehow not knowing of the heart attacks, the blindness, and the leg problems. My father was an electrician by profession, gambler at heart, and also one hell of an actor. He lied equally well about his whereabouts (when unaccounted hours were spent in casinos instead of on the job) and he lied about his failing eyesight, his chest pains, and the agony of the veins in his legs closing and causing nightly, howlingly painful cramps and spasms.

137

The only time I ever heard my father say anything resembling self-pity was one night watching the news on TV. The story was about the funeral of a very famous person. The commentator observed that the chapel was filled and that the crowd of mourners had overflowed into the street. My father said that he imagined only ten or so people would come to his funeral. He was wrong. I lost count of the number of people who came up and told me how my father had helped them, saved his life, and was like a father to them. I did, however, count the number of people who signed the condolence book: 137.

100%

A few days after the services, my mother was in the garage folding laundry. She was still in a daze, moving through the task she had done countless times before without thought. As she folded my father's undershirts and socks, all I could think about was that this was the last time she would ever do laundry for my father. It was such a painful idea that to this day, the act of doing laundry is a true affirmation of life for me. But at that moment, I knew one thing for sure. There was my mother, moving forward, not complaining, doing what had to be done. Those were actions I knew my mathematical father would approve of—100%.

¹ Quotation from "But They Were Good to Their People", American Jewish Historical Society

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2018

You Are Here by Kelly Garriott Waite

The picture, taken before color photography was ubiquitous, is gradations of light and dark, bright and shadow. In it, my father straddles a three-foot log, a jagged vertical crack down its center like a lightning strike. The bark is rough and covered in places with moss. The grass surrounding it is mostly short and neat, as if the log had been dragged to this space specifically to make a seat for my father. But it can't be comfortable: Dad's right leg bends back, the toe of his shoe dug into the ground as if for purchase. His left leg is forward, his heel pressed into the grass. His pants—the seventies equivalent of Dockers–are sharply creased down the center. He wears a button-up shirt, untucked, and Converse tennis shoes, their dark laces loosely tied. Dad holds a five-string resonator banjo, its round drum resting on one leg. His smiling face is in profile, that characteristic dimple in his cheek as he looks at the middle finger of his left hand, pressed behind the D string's third fret.

Fret:

1. To worry excessively and without cease.

2. Music: One of several thin silver strips separating the fingerboard of various stringed instruments into sections. Pressing just behind a fret will divide a string in two, causing its lower half to vibrate faster, thus producing a higher-pitched note. Each fret will raise a string's tone a half-step or 1/12 of an octave.

Between certain frets, the fingerboard of Dad's banjo was inlaid with mother-ofpearl, the smooth white inside of the shell of certain mollusks: oysters, mussels, and abalones. I remember swaying from side to side, studying the shimmer of the inlay, watching the colors change from violet and pink to gold and green. Looking at the photograph, I am reminded of the abalone shell that belonged to Dad's mother, a woman who fretted so often that my grandfather sometimes snapped at her, *stop buying trouble,* as she peered through the dashboard of the passenger seat, giving voice to her worries about weather or traffic.

bioStories

Why steal the mollusk's rainbow to settle it upon the neck of the banjo? More than mere adornment, it served as position markers, grounding my father to keep him from getting lost inside the music. *This is where you are*, the inlay murmured to Dad. *Remember, you are here*.

Octave:

Used in Western music, an octave is composed of eight notes and their four half steps. The beginning and ending notes of an octave match in pitch but differ in frequency.

A mere handful of notes, a single octave is insufficient to express musically the range of human emotion. And so, using the fret-string combination, the octave is repeated three times on Dad's banjo.

A can of Budweiser rests before Dad, its label gazing off camera. A music book is open, its soft cover folded back. I hold my magnifying glass over the book and try to discern the title of the song. But all I can make out is a smattering of notes, fat circles with wings, except for the whole note, which is entirely too heavy to fly and thus has no need of wings.

Note value:

Used in music to show how long to play (or hold) each note. Commonly, a whole note is held for four beats, a half note for two. On it goes, with each previous note value halving itself all the way down to the smallest, rarest note, the 256th, a note with six fast fluttering wings, a note so light it barely makes a sound as it briefly alights before flitting away.

Dad often played "Cripple Creek" and "Dueling Banjos" from the movie *Deliverance*. Sometimes he played "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," a song featured on an album of the same name by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Dad bought this album and stored it beside the seventeen-volume collection of Beethoven's works, eighty-five records in all, which he largely ignored, but which my sister played loudly when she cleaned the bedroom we shared: sonatas, symphonies, and string quartets. I remember the scratch of the needle upon a record. The momentary silence before the room was flooded with sound. I remember, after the room was clean, my sister returning the records haphazardly to the shelves until the cabinet was so messy, Dad could no longer stand it and made us sort out the records and put them into their correct volume. Dad's life was a series of attempts to impose order on a disordered brain.

When he wasn't playing, the banjo hung on the wall next to Dad's recliner. Beside it was the four-string he'd also acquired. When he got the notion to play one or the other, Dad sat up in one swift motion, his back lifting and his legs folding down simultaneously while he reached toward the wall.

Ängstlich:

1. German: anxious.

2. Music: anxiously.

Here's what Dad never told us: He took a prescription medication to alleviate the symptoms of Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder (OCD), a disease rooted in anxiety.

Here's what took me years to tell my children: I also suffer from OCD.

Here's what I hope my children tell my grandchildren: They have anxiety. They have learned how to manage it. There is no shame in mental illness.

Leitmotif:

A phrase or theme that recurs throughout a musical or literary piece.

I believe that the leitmotif of Dad's life was anxiety and finding a way to alleviate it. He never spoke of anxiety, perhaps because he didn't want to *buy trouble*. Instead, I believe he sought relief through his hobbies: photography or sailing or playing the banjo, dropping one project and taking up another, sometimes circling back to an earlier one, repeating the pattern throughout his life. As expected, Dad gave up playing the banjo. The instruments remained on the wall for longer and longer stretches of time until they became more decoration than entertainment. With every hobby, Dad discarded its accouterments, in this case, the music books, the silver picks, the pitch pipe. Eventually even the banjos disappeared.

But I don't think Dad was a quitter. Rather, I believe that when a hobby had lost the power to distract his mind—-when, for instance, he could play a song without having to concentrate—-he dropped it for something new upon which to focus. Every new project had the potential to quiet his mind. Something to tell him: *You are not lost. Remember you are here.*

My younger daughter, like her grandfather, flits from thing to thing, as if searching for something to quiet her brain, something to ground her, too. She tells me she doesn't want to have children: she's afraid they'll inherit the anxiety.

Can I guarantee her this circle of anxiety will eventually be broken? No. But I try to explain the positives that accompany it: the compassion for others, the creativity, the way of finding beauty in the world where others might not. I'm not sure she believes me. I'm not sure she believes it's worth it.

But perhaps mental illness isn't so much *illness* than the normal about which we do not speak. Perhaps each of our brains are gradations of lightness and darkness, brightness and shadow. Perhaps if we spoke our truths rather than hiding them, we would feel less alone, braver, not as strange as we perceive ourselves to be. Perhaps the heaviness of our hearts and our minds would evaporate. Perhaps if we said, *this is where I am*, someone might reply, *me*, *too. I am here, too.*

The Color Blue by Katie Milligan

My memories are all tinted with blue.

I remember four blue-raspberry mouths stained with the sticky sugar of popsicles. I see my grandfather's jeans, stiff yet worn, bouncing up and down as he gives me a ride on his knee. There is the teal woolly yarn of my baby blanket against a flushed cheek, clutched in my tiny hand. Blue is nostalgia. Blue is childhood.

I can remember the cornflower blue, fuzz-worn fabric of the snack-stained matching armchairs my parents sit in—big for him, small for her. I finally settled on sky blue for my bedroom walls after surviving my angsty neon-green teen years. My mother made a sinfully delicious dessert for my 11th, 14th, 16th, and 18th birthdays, full of rich blueberries and graham crackers and whipped cream. Blue is familiar. Blue is home.

The boy who has always been there has sapphire eyes; their sharpness nearly blinds me from behind angular glasses. The deep navy of my father's police uniform contrasts with the innocent turquoise of the purity ring that he gave me when I turned fifteen. Blue is protection, loyalty. Blue is safety.

The cloudy, violet fingers of volleyball bruises inch across my shins and kneecaps, products of diving on the unforgiving gym floor at Graham High School for seven years. Damp steel-blue fog hangs like a wet blanket over the shelter house at the Christiansburg Park where my heart was broken for the first time. My best friend's auburn curls dance against her Air Force dress blues as she boards a plane that will carry her far into the sky. At my fifteen-year-old teammate's funeral, there was a basket of royal blue rubber bracelets to wear to remember, inscribed with Ecclesiastes 4:9-10. Blue is pain. Blue is goodbye.

I see all the different skies, like postcards, whipping through my memory. There's the churning grey-blue lake at Warren Dunes, Michigan, ringed by a sky with buttery clouds. There's the brooding indigos of Ocean Isle, North Carolina, freshly calmed from the exploding scarlets and oranges and magentas of the watercolor sunset. There's the blue ice-capped Andes Mountains of Peru, expansive, cold, close to God. Blue is tranquility, reflection. Blue is adventure.

But my memory isn't just blue. It's purple like my February birthstone amethyst, and grey like my stuffed elephant and my 2013 silver Ford Fusion, and green like homemade guacamole with onions and peppers, and yellow like the sunflower fields that bloom in Yellow Springs each September. It's a palette, and a giant thistle of a paintbrush dabbles in each color and swirls them together to create a magnificent mess. But somehow, the colors don't blend together to make a non-color, a mud like the slush from day-old snow. They stay crisp, marbled, vibrant. My memory is a masterpiece.

I don't know why the color blue is so significant to me. But it's my favorite color. Scientists have proven that certain colors are more stimulating and better enhance our memories.

People perceive colors differently based on their life experiences, their moods, their memories. What is blue to me might not be blue to you, and someone else might perceive another blue entirely. At their very core, humans are all the same. A skin-bag of bones, a pulsing heart, muscle and arteries, veins and cartilage and blood. But there's something else besides the physical, beyond the flesh: a mind. And that's where the common path begins to diverge into hundreds, thousands, millions of paths. Like the fractures in my living room window when my brother hit a golf ball into it. Like the ripples that sped across the pool in my grandmother's backyard when my sun-tanned, floatie-clad cousin landed a tiny cannonball.

The mind is incredibly vast—boundless, even. The human brain can store 2.5 petabytes of data. That's the same as 2,500,000 gigabytes. It's essentially unlimited storage space for memories. Scientists estimate that in a lifetime, one person can accumulate as much as one quadrillion pieces of information—fifteen zeros worth of scraps, tidbits, and snippets. Every person you pass throughout the day—the Oxford-educated professor, the breast cancer survivor, the high school drop-out drug dealer—is a walking, talking, living, breathing encyclopedia. Full-to-bursting with thrills, disappointments, victories and defeats, trials and errors, the mundane and the extraordinary, milestones passed, lessons learned, adventures explored. Imagine how much pain and frustration and waste could be avoided, if only minds could be combined, if colors could be blended.

There are two distinct types of memory: long-term and short-term. Contrary to common sense, short-term memories are much more easily forgotten. The brain's hippocampus transfers short-term memories, which last an average of thirty seconds, into long-term memories, which can last anywhere from three days to three years. It's shaped like a horseshoe and as one gets older, its functionality declines. On Wednesday evenings I go to the Good Shepherd Village nursing home in Springfield to sing hymns with the residents. Last week there was a woman in a wheelchair with a washed-out Led Zeppelin t-shirt, a wooden cross necklace, and antique silver rings on every finger. Between every song, she would grasp my arm and say, "I go to the Church of God down on Hillside Avenue." After every song, it was the same. Six, seven, eight times, and her head bobbed up and down with renewed vitality each time. Several years ago, I learned that my grandfather was suffering from dementia; the short-term memories were slipping away from him, but for a while, he could still summon to the surface the long-term memories. It was as if someone was repeatedly flushing his memory-palette under hot, soapy water. With time, the once-vivid colors became thin, then translucent, then dissolved into nothing but white. Stephen King once wrote, "The color white is the absence of memory." I'm not sure if that's true, since the color white reflects all wavelengths of visible light while absorbing none, and the color black absorbs all wavelengths of light while reflecting none. Black is an inky memory with the lights off; white is a vacant, void memory. Maybe it's both. Maybe it's greyscale. Either way, it's heartbreaking. All that space in their memories, and their hippocampi betrayed them. They are doomed to forget.

But maybe, on the opposite end of the spectrum, there is such a thing as having too many colors crowded together on a palette. Maybe, when there are too many hues, too many dollops of paint saturated deep inside, they start to mix and embroil into chaos. Are there real-life Rain Men who can remember everything, every insignificant and every fateful detail? In 1942, Jorge Luis Borges published a short story called "Funes the Memorious" about a young man named Ireneo Funes who was thrown from a horse and became crippled. Soon after the accident, he discovered a peculiar talent of remembering everything. He could tell time to the exact second without a watch, he could recall the precise shape of clouds, he could even recollect the exact pattern of the

sprayed river water that flung from the in-motion oar of a canoe. To the narrator of the story, Funes said, "I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world." Borges's tale is a fantasy, but there are six confirmed cases of this condition today: hyperthymestic syndrome, which is Greek for "exceptional memory." The first known case, Jill Price, can recite obscure details of her life since the age of fourteen. She has reported that this highly advanced ability is a daily burden. Ireneo Funes calls his memory a garbage disposal. A waste. A blessing at times, but mostly a curse. I think there is such a thing as overload.

Memories become prioritized and organized in our brains by the level of emotion attached to them. I am more clearly able to remember the moments of sheer fear than mild contentment. I can distinctly see the worry lines on my mother's forehead on the day that I came home from school and she told me my father had been hospitalized. I remember the exact angle of the late afternoon sun slanting through the window. I remember I was wearing black sweatpants and a maroon drawstring hoodie with canvas zigzag slip-ons. I was sitting in my car watching the snow peacefully drift from heaven when I got the phone call that my best friend had been in a car accident. I can remember the shaking hands, the scrambling struggle to open the car door to step out into the winter wonderland, the cathartic relief at the news she was okay.

If you unfold the mysterious wrinkles of the brain, you'd get 100,000 miles of axons (the brain's neurons that fasten themselves to other neurons to store information). That's enough to travel around the Earth four times. We tuck things away between these folds, sometimes for safekeeping and sometimes to forget. What triggers release such that small bubbles of memory float to the surface? What fragments of fear and regret and discomfort burrow deep within our subconscious? We may never know. Our memories shape us, and our memories protect us.

To me, it makes sense that our memories are like an artist's palette. Paint is fluid, impressionable, changes color and consistency as it is told. So do recollections. There is a balance. The Goldilocks principle. Not too little, not too much. If we were all just machines, without emotions, without authenticity or empathy or the ability to remember, how could we enjoy this life?

Imagine if a giant syringe was lowered down and the tip—just the very tip—made contact with this globe we call home. Imagine if every last drop of color was sucked out of the world. There wouldn't be any more red. No more red rubber rain boots romping through puddles, no juicy beads of pomegranate, no lipstick stains, no more Band-Aids stained with a single drop of blood. There wouldn't be any more yellow, no more tropical pineapple rings or blonde fuzzy ducklings or dewy goldenrod, no Lays potato chips or waxy honeycombs. No more orange incessantly dribbling basketballs or pink fairy-spun cotton candy.

Our memories can so easily be distorted, whether it be from blunt-force trauma to the head in an instant, or a disease that slowly gnaws away at us for a lifetime. So, while you can, be purple, and grey, and green and yellow. Be red and orange and pink. Be blue.

Trunk Stories by Clifford Royal Johns

When I inherited my paternal grandfather's railroad pocket watch, I worried about actually using it. It meant a great deal to me, so I didn't want to lose or break it. The watch is one of those things I have where touching it, or even just seeing it, reminds me of the person who owned it. For instance, when I bake in my friend Alvina's pan it reminds me of her. My grandfather wound that watch every morning and wore it every day from the time he began working for the P&LE railroad in the early 1930s. It was just part of his way, a way that affected my whole outlook.

When I was a boy in the 1960s, my grandfather would often drive down from Pittsburgh to our dairy farm in southwestern Pennsylvania to spend the weekend, sometimes to hunt, sometimes to fish, and other times just to help with repairs around the farm. I liked his visits because he paid attention to me, even though I was the youngest of four kids, and he seemed to genuinely like teaching me things. In retrospect, it's clear he taught me lessons that were often unrelated to the actual subject at hand, for instance, instructing me about fishing might have really been about the potential payoff of patience, or taking apart an engine and putting it back together might have been about organization and the proper sequence of things—"So you don't have any parts left over when you're done," as he would say.

My grandfather was a short round man who wore bib overalls, a hickory-striped railroad engineer's cap and often smoked a swooping calabash pipe. Sometimes he would bring a bottle of whisky and sit in the living room stacking shoes from the kid's shoebox on top one of the snoozing English Setters who still liked him anyway.

My memories of childhood are mostly just still photos, snapshots of the tractor parked on the barn bridge, the field of sorghum above the house, or the whelping box we kept in the dining room when one of our setters had puppies. For people important to me though, I retain more of a photographic negative; I remember people by the shape of the hole in my life they leave behind. My grandfather's watch reminds me of that missing piece, that hole, but I choose to wear it anyway, retaining a piece of the man and his memory close at hand. Once, when I was eight, my father decided we should have some shooting practice. For this, my father, my two brothers, and I would stand on the back porch and shoot at empty coffee cans set on sawhorses or logs, using the hill just above the house as a backstop. This time, rather than just watching then chuckling when we didn't hit anything, my grandfather decided to shoot at the makeshift targets too. He was a knowledgeable man with a gun, a good hunter, especially of pheasant and grouse, which were plentiful on the farm's back hill. "Come on Skeezix," he said, "let's go down to my car. I think I'll shoot one of my own guns."

We walked down the hill, me trotting along, and him walking with his sailor's rolling gait, past the smoke bush and the pine tree to his car, which was parked on the gravelcovered barn bridge.

My grandfather drove an enormous, black, Cadillac Fleetwood Sedan Deville with fins, chrome everywhere, and enough trunk space to carry supplies for a three-month arctic expedition. The car was eighteen feet long. When he walked to his car to retrieve something, I always went with him in hopes of seeing what he might have stashed in that cavernous trunk.

He seemed to carry everything a human could want in that trunk, and he organized things so carefully that if he pulled anything out, the shape of the hole clearly identified what had been removed, much like an intricate, French-fit box. In that car's trunk he'd packed boots, a cooler, a folding chair, some shotguns in gun cases, a suitcase full of extra clothes, railroad flares, a glass gallon jug filled with gasoline, a glass gallon jug full of water, an old blanket in case he had to crawl under his car to fix it, enough tools to repair anything from a bicycle to our John Deere 3010 tractor, and various, mysterious boxes and leather cases. That day I found out his trunk also contained an enormous holstered 45-caliber Colt revolver on an elaborately tooled leather belt—the kind with small leather loops to hold individual bullets, just like the gunfighters wore in the movies.

When we returned to the back porch, my father and brothers had brought out the 22, two 16-gauge shotguns and the appropriate bullets and shells. My brothers and I fired off a few rounds, then grandpa showed all three of us some improvements to our technique. Since I was the youngest, I got most of the instruction. Until that day I'd only

shot the relatively light 22-caliber rifle, and even that was a bit much for me, I was eight, after all. When my father went inside for something, Grandpa, leaned against the porch's corner post, smiled, took a puff on his pipe, and said, "You want to shoot this?" He drew the 45-caliber revolver and showed it to me.

I said, "Sure," staring in awe, and a bit of fear, at the ancient gun.

When he handed it to me after loading one shell in the cylinder, I suspected it weighed too much. I could barely hold it up, yet I was a boy like any other, and I was determined I could handle it. With both hands, I hoisted it up in line with a blue Maxwell House coffee can. Grandpa cocked it for me. I pulled the trigger.

I don't think the Maxwell House can had much to worry about, but I believe I did hit the side of the hill, though maybe not. My father came running outside, and found me sitting on the porch, the terrific boom still echoing in my ears, my arms akimbo. Grandpa reached down and picked up the gun, holstered it, leaned against the porch post again and took another puff on his pipe while looking down at me. "I think you missed," he said. Then out came that quiet chuckle that made me feel like he was pleased to see me making mistakes, perhaps even proud of it, and perhaps a little proud of how well his somewhat dangerous practical joke cum learning experience had worked. His chuckle was accompanied by a grin, a twinkle in his eye and a knowing nod. He was always willing to stop what he was doing and teach, if I was willing to learn. He seemed to think that I would learn best by making mistakes. I learned a lot.

My grandfather carried his fishing gear in his car trunk too, including the extra rods he kept prepared for me and my brothers. We could go fishing anytime. We went to Lake Somerset and a few pay-lakes in the area, but I preferred just walking down the hill to fish for bluegill in the pond on our farm. I think he liked fishing with us so much because he liked to tell stories, and fishing is mostly sitting, and waiting, and talking a lot. He would tell stories while he caught fish and I stood there holding a rod doing, I swear, the same exact thing he was doing, but somehow not catching anything at all. "It's the way you hold your tongue," he said one day, "and I'm wearing a hat."

At Lake Somerset on a warm, clear summer evening he said, "I think this is the lake, yep, over there by the dam, just beyond that tree, I once caught a fish that was

twenty-eight inches between the eyes." I figured he was telling one of his embellished fish stories. It wasn't until later when my father said it was the absolute truth that I started to believe it. Then my father added, "If you measure the distance from one eye, down around the tail and back to the other eye, twenty-eight inches isn't all that big a fish." My grandfather didn't react to my father's explanation, but he did seem to enjoy my frustration at finding out that the story was the truth and not the truth at the same time.

Once, down at the farm pond, grandpa sitting on his lawn chair fishing and me sitting on the ground holding my fishing rod and watching my unmoving bobber, we saw a ripple speeding across the pond. I said, "I wonder what that could be?"

"That's a muskrat," he said.

I stood up, but all I could see was a ripple. I thought it could have been a snake, or a fish swimming close to the surface, or just about anything, but he said it with such calm indifference that I believed him without question.

"How can you tell when it's a muskrat?" I asked.

He put some tobacco in his low-swung Calabash pipe, tamped it thoughtfully with his thumb, then lit it. He looked at me with that twinkle and grin he'd get when he was about to tell a whopper, and said, "Because it was swimming backwards, and muskrats always swim backwards to keep the water out of their eyes." He said it as though he was teaching me something important. He said it carefully in between puffs on his pipe, yet his cheeks rose, and his eyes still twinkled, and his chest shook just a little. I knew he had pulled my leg, though at the time I'm not sure I knew which part of his answer was the leg puller. I believe he knew what it was. I suspect it probably was a muskrat.

My grandfather always carefully considered what I said. He didn't answer quickly or offhandedly. At Lake Somerset, he once pulled in the biggest fish I'd ever seen. I told him I thought it was big enough to win a prize. After he put the fish on the stringer, and lit his pipe, he sat down. This time, he pulled off his frayed Sherlock Holmes style fishing hat, which was covered with tied flies he used when fly fishing, then wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve. He squinted at me to make sure I was listening. "Well, now," he said, "I once caught a fish that was so big, that when I pulled it out of the water it took four minutes for the hole in the lake to fill back up."

Twinkle. Grin.

Many times in my life, I've been told by a relative or family friend that I remind them of my grandfather. I like the comparison and consider it a terrific compliment. He had a work-hard-then-relax kind of attitude, and he was a pretty good craftsman in wood and metal. Although I don't drive a giant black Cadillac with fins and chrome and an improbable trunk, when I pull out of my garage you can almost tell what kind of car I drive by the shape of the hole it leaves. Yet, I doubt my craftsmanship or my car is what my relatives think of when they compare me to my grandfather. I suspect it's more about other attributes we share, including my sense of humor. Once a neighbor boy watched me plant a Japanese lilac. After the hole was dug, he asked what I planned to do with the dirt piled up beside the new tree. I leaned on my shovel and considered the question carefully. I looked him in the eye. "Well, now," I said, "I guess I'll just have to dig another hole and bury it, won't I?"

My grandfather died when I was thirty. Our farm was long since sold off, and he'd retired and moved to Florida. Still, his departure left a hole in my life, and while holes tend to erode at the edges, the hole he left will never fill. It is by the shape of that hole that I recall the man. I still wear his watch.

The Next Fifty Years by Stephanie Lennon

Once Grandpa's heart gave out, there was no point in Nana continuing her treatments.

"Stop the dialysis and she'll be gone within a week," the doctors had said.

Five years prior, at their fiftieth wedding anniversary, Grandpa had joked that the next fifty would be much easier. We were all hesitant to laugh, knowing even then that neither of them were in great shape.

A family meeting was called. Nana wasn't "fully there" anymore, so she didn't have much of a say in her own damn demise.

She just knew that she wanted to be with Grandpa.

The nursing home moved her into a private room. Hospice workers from a nearby center were assigned to check on her. A nurse. A priest. A social worker. To help Nana *transition*. And to help us watch her go.

Apparently it takes a village when we die, too.

The first few days felt like a giant family reunion. Without the stress of dialysis, Nana was almost herself again.

She even flirted with the priest from the hospice center. Said he looked cute in his collared shirt.

Nana had never been afraid to speak her mind. Hell, at Grandpa's funeral she looked straight-faced at the attractive EMT volunteering his time to escort her and said "I'm single now, you know."

For days, family members rotated in and out of that tiny room, taking shifts as if Nana were a dangerous criminal plotting her escape.

Every now and then, she'd open her eyes and look around the room. Each time, it brought me back to dinner at her kitchen table.

She would always ask "How many are we?" when deciding the seating chart for the evening.

Surrounded by her favorite people in the world, Nana radiated happiness. She was the reason we were all together. She was the sun, and we were the planets in her orbit, unsure of where we would go once her light went out.

Every two hours a nurse would come to kick us out and pull the curtains closed. Turns out when you spend all day every day in bed, your skin slowly eats itself if left unchecked.

My uncle would take this opportunity to sneak out for a cigarette. One time he came back with a Snickers bar for Nana, who had been diabetic for as long as I could remember.

Whenever we visited my grandparents' old house, my mom would give Nana a hard time about the ice cream in her freezer or the Ring Dings in her cupboard.

"You cheating again, Mom?" she'd say.

"I'm old. I can do what I want," was her readied response.

She's right, of course. After a while, what's the point? Especially once you find yourself staring up at the last ceiling tiles you'll ever see.

She didn't have the strength to tear open that Snickers wrapper, but she sure wouldn't let it go once she had it.

One bite. Two bites. A quick nap to regain some strength for the third. A solid grip, even with her eyes closed and her stomach struggling to remember how to digest it. She never did finish it.

We sat in a circle around her hospital bed. Made horrible jokes about the death grip she had on such a long-lost comfort food. Her rosary was nestled in her palm beneath it. It seems comfort comes in many forms.

My cousin slid a goofy-looking pair of wireless headphones over Nana's ears, deflated gray curls settling underneath.

Through the Bluetooth on his phone, he cued up Nana's favorite: Elvis Presley. We watched as her shoulders shifted up and down and her lips moved along with the words, a star in her own silent movie. Joy in its purest form.

*

Her most lucid day came toward the end of the week. I sat next to her bed, holding her wrinkly hand in mine.

I knew this was going to be my last chance to ask the world's wisest lady the world's most important questions. With fifty-five years of marriage under her belt, I knew exactly what to ask.

"Nana, how did you know Grandpa was the one?"

A smile spread across her face like a pat of melting butter on Grandpa's hot potato pancakes.

"Argyle socks," was all she could muster before getting lost in her black-andwhite-photograph past.

I couldn't help but laugh. I squeezed her hand to bring her back from those early days.

"Special boy in your life?" she asked, each word a struggle.

"Not yet, Nana."

"You'll just know, Stephie-doo. Trust me."

I trust you, Nana.

As the week came to a close, the hospice nurse told us that we should leave the windows open. This would make it easier for her soul to pass through once she was ready.

Once everyone had had their chance to say goodbye.

She was stubborn and



Robert and Rita Montgomery

selfless until the very end, refusing to let go until everyone around her was asleep. Waiting for that perfect moment, as if she didn't want to leave anyone with the burden of seeing it happen. Nana had been without Grandpa for exactly fourteen days. She was ready to be back with him, where she belonged. To finish up those next fifty years of marriage.

Disappearance by Patrick Dobson

I hoped the day would remain overcast. A winter day with a crystalline sky set my teeth on edge and a peculiar tension gripped my insides. If the sky cleared, I'd grow frazzled. The hard-edged light of the season scraped hard against my nerves. My thoughts raced. Sometimes the stress was so great I wanted to vanish . . . zip, gone.

I don't easily deal with this peculiar malady sitting still. The return of night or of clouds and freezing rain and snow would settle me again. Something about the nuances of darkness was calming, reassuring. In the meantime, work always helped. The adrenaline and repetitive nature of hard labor soothed my agitated soul and quieted my fitful mind. Once my head cleared and my heart steadied, labor's balms got right to the spiritual mark. I could ignore the noise of a clear winter day and put my head down and do my job, get home, and hide from the light.

The wind bore down from the north. The previous days' melt had turned the construction site into a gumpy mess. Now, the night's cold had frozen the deep, ribbed tracks of the backhoes and lifts into rock-hard ditches and troughs. My truck jerked across them to the parking area, a plot of dirt barren of snow but for the yellow and orange machines and stacks of cinder block and brick. Bouncing to a stop, I turned off the engine and took in the sudden stillness and quiet. Deeply scored bare dirt spread out past the site to the edge of snowy pasture land, which met the dark sky at the horizon. I asked the first man I could find, an electrician, where the ironworkers were.

"Why, where they're supposed to be," he said.

"Point me," I said with something of a smile. Ironworkers could be anywhere on a job, placing and tying rebar for concrete floors or walls, installing fencing, interiors, and handrails, or erecting steel on the ground, in the air, or in between. I only knew that the union hall had sent me to join a structural crew. They didn't tell me what the job was.

"Up there," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "On the roof."

This was my first job on the structural side of the trade. I was nervous, as I was every time I ventured into unfamiliar territory. The foreman was a leather faced man with a handlebar moustache and icy blue eyes. As I came through the manhole onto the roof, he took off his glove and shook my hand.

"We ain't usin' harnesses on this job," he said as soon as I came off the ladder. "We got three days to roof this box. So, we're working fast. Harness'd just get in your way. Be careful."

It seemed a weak command as I looked sixty feet to the concrete slab below the steel bar joists. The foreman was the kind of guy I'd met on other jobs—a good old boy with his head somewhere in the era when ironworkers worked without the safety gear now required by law.

It was the first time I was working at height. I didn't have the sense at that time in my apprenticeship to tell the guy I wasn't working without a harness to catch me if I slipped on the iron. I looked down. I wasn't scared of heights but still got a heady rush. The foreman sent me to work with the men attaching three-inch angle iron to the walls above the bar joists with three-quarter-inch anchor bolts.

At first, I walked toward the other men working the angle iron but found myself wobbling, trying to balance myself on the joists. I looked up at one point and noticed other men scooting the iron. I sat down on the bar joist and scooted as well. A couple of more experienced ironworkers walked the joists with ease. One man, Billy, an older ironworker in his forties—not quite my age—literally skipped from joist to joist like a jumping spider.

I set to work drilling holes in the cinder-block wall for anchor bolts that would hold the angle iron against the wall. It wasn't tough work and I fell into a rhythm as the hammer drill sent vibrations up my arm and into my shoulders and neck. The morning passed like a deep breath.

After the ten o'clock break, Billy and I were waiting for a couple of men to rig up a bundle of angle iron the crane operator would fly in to set on the joists. Billy filled his time sort of dancing between joists. My heart nearly stopped when he leapt from joist to joist, which were set about three and a half feet apart. I haven't been to church or believed in years but found I crossed myself instinctually when Billy went airborne. My reaction surprised me. All those years of Catholic school still lay just under the surface.

As we waited, I thought of my situation. Here I was again at the beginning, a new man without much of a clue how to do the work. Watching Billy, I wished I was back tying rebar. Such work usually took place on solid ground or where you couldn't see the earth, like on a bridge. Months earlier, I had started with the union on a bridge deck carrying and tying tons and tons of rebar. At forty-five, I was one of the oldest men on that job, and certainly the oldest apprentice.

The work was the toughest I've ever done in a life of labor, of lifting heavy things for other people. I bent at the waist and used my new side-cutter pliers to tie the steel rods together with wire, albeit inexpertly, when I wasn't schlepping piles of forty and sixty-foot, three-quarter and one-inch rebar with twenty-year olds. The morning break was too short, as was lunch.

By the end of the first day of bridge work, I couldn't walk. My arms, legs, shoulders, and hands felt like jabs of electricity and, more disturbing, the small of my back was numb to the touch. I was determined to return the next day despite the pain or because of it. It took a week before I felt like a regular, but sore, human being. Two weeks later my legs and arms had stopped feeling like Reddy Killowatt's lightning-bolt appendages. The feeling in my back returned after three weeks.

That first job introduced me to work I liked. After the pain subsided, I found the work liked me. The day ended almost as soon as it began. Tying rebar became a form of physical meditation. Eight to ten hours of it ripped me with fatigue. Sleep was good. In a short time, work became restorative. I woke mornings fresh and ready to get back to the job.

The other ironworkers were interesting and friendly. I worked with Malco, a blackowned company, and my mates were black and Hispanic men I could work with without the kind of racist banter that comes with working with all-white ironworkers. I was the only white guy on the crew. They were a rough-cut lot, more intimate with the workings of steel than their insides or polite society. They spoke a familiar workingman tongue I understood in all its nuances. Its accents and cadences were comfortable and its meanings open and accessible. Most of the men were friendly, even jovial. The chatter on the deck, the kinds of taunts and jokes tended toward the impersonal and were often hilarious.

I'd been on the deck for three weeks, listening to the joking, learning to tie wire. We were working in a group, moving slowly down the bridge, the sea of green-epoxied rebar transforming from a rough grid in front of us into solid symmetry behind after we passed over it. The afternoon was hot but with a wind. Everyone was feeling good, even if they were wearing down.

"Man, I want to win that lottery," said Miguel, who had joined the union after many years carrying iron with non-union outfits for cash. He was bent over next to me. "If I win that lottery, I'll buy my wife a house and bring my family from Mexico."

Jesse worked next to him. He cracked a smile and wiped his dark bronze forehead with his glove. He impressed me. He was a nice guy who labored like a beast, seemingly immune to the pain the rest of us felt.

"Lottery, man," he said. "I'd buy an island or a piece of land on an island, you know. Buy a good skiff."

"What's a skiff?" Miguel said.

The foreman, Barry, who had been overseeing work farther down the bridge joined us.

"It's a boat, you know," said Barry, "like a row boat, only a little bigger."

"You'd fish?" I asked Jesse.

"Yeah, fish. But nothing like work. Just fish to be fishing. I'd sit in a chair every night and watch the sun set. In the quiet. Just sit there."

Some of the other workers stood and chattered about their lottery winnings. I could see Barry looking at them from underneath his hard hat.

"Y'all are nuts," said Dexter, a man from the city who was glad to be an ironworker after a life of drug dealing and prison. His arms were huge, his skin the color of liquid chocolate. He, too, was a good man, easy to work with. "Families? Sitting? Shitfire," he scolded. "I'd buy a fine car, a big fine house, and a big-screen TV. Have a swimming pool and a sauna *and* a hot tub."

Another man, Jerry, who was even newer than me on the job, piped up. We worked as a pair. He was loud and good humored, as slow at tying the bar as I. "I'd carry a wad in my pocket," he said. He took off his glove and stuck his hand in his jeans. "And if anyone ever told me to do anything, anything at all, I'd pull out my roll, like this,

see," he slid his hand from his pocket and unrolled his fingers just below his belt. "I'd look at it and then look them in the eye like this and tell them to fuck off. Fuck-you money." He nodded and bent back to his work. "Yes, sir. That's what the lottery'd be for me. Fuck-you money."

By this time, many of us were standing, gloves off, using bandanas and handkerchiefs to wipe our foreheads and the backs of our necks. Barry stood up, all six and a half feet of him. "Man fuck all ya all," he said, his baritone voice rolling down the bridge. "If any of you losers won the lottery, you'd smoke it up in crack."

A roar of laughter rose from the group. "Now get your asses back to work!" Barry bellowed. "Bend to it. Make the money you're gonna drink up this weekend."

Since I was an apprentice, I'd go to the hall for work when Malco had a lull. I worked rebar with other companies whose crews were white guys from the country. They weren't as friendly. They also spoke a language I was familiar with but didn't favor. The white guys often used macho intimidation to show their worth. The racist language and talk about women as sluts and whores grew tiresome. On the other hand, the talk among the black and Hispanic guys more concerned the work and the way people adapted to it (or didn't) than who was fucking whom, who was weak and unworthy of respect. I always felt good when Malco called me back to work with them.

Now, on the roof job with a contractor completely new to me, the wind started howling, sucking the heat right out of any exposed skin. I stood on five-inch steel beam sixty feet above the ground, waiting for the crane operator to drop three-inch angle iron onto the roof. I was a white guy on a white crew. The talk was getting to me and I hated it. The jokes were mean-spirited and personal. The men rattled on about niggers and spics and sluts and whores all morning. The more it agitated me, the more I bent to my work, leaning into the hammer drill and sinking anchor bolts.

After a few hours of scooting the iron, I comforted myself with, well, at least it's not a bridge deck. I found the work easy compared to an overpass or retaining wall. On a rebar job, you kept your head down. You stayed busy and moved as fast as you could. You didn't want to be the guy always standing up when the foreman looked around. He'd kick you off the job for being a lazy-ass. These structural guys moved more slowly. Here you waited, worked carefully. While we had to get this job done

quickly, no one rushed. Still, these guys complained about how hard they had to work. As the new man, I could only listen and nod my head and try to keep my attention on the job.

At one point, Billy and I waited for another load of angle iron. I looked past the bundle floating up from the yard and saw Barry cross from the parked cars to the foreman's trailer. My heart skipped a beat. The chatter and jokes getting under my skin would change. With Barry on the roof, I wondered what these white guys were going to talk about.

He came through the manhole in the finished part of the roof. The foreman pointed him to where Billy and I were waiting for the iron to fly in. Barry walked the joists easily and with confidence. I shook gloved hands and I asked him what he was doing here. Had he quit Malco?

"Nope," he said. "They don't have any work right now. I'm takin' it where I can get it. I usually don't do stuff at height. Gives me willies. Man, it's cold as fuck."

Barry joined me, and Billy bided his time skipping across the beams like he had solid ground under him. The rest of us, especially me, scooted slowly, carefully, almost in slow-motion, conscious that ground always won in a clash between human flesh and the earth.

Once the bundle reached our height, Billy stood still and signaled the operator Billy guided the stack of angle iron to where he wanted it on the roof. He caught me staring at him.

"Ever wonder why we do this shit?" he asked. He held his index finger downward, rotating his arm slowly to tell the operator the iron was close to landing and to take it real gently.

"I don't know," I said. "Hard work? Good money?"

"Nope," he said. The iron touched down and he patted his hardhat, indicating that the operator needed to stop lowering the load.

"What then?" I inched toward the angle iron to unhitch it from the crane rigging.

"We wanna win the lottery," he said, "and have to buy the tickets, that's why. You think a guy'd put his life on the line like this if he had a couple million in the bank? "If I win the lottery one of these days, I'd retire, you know, buy a big house in the mountains. I'd walk around with a wad of freedom cash in my pocket. What would you guys do?"

"I'd keep enough for myself to live comfortably," I said, sitting down next to Barry. "Then give the rest away."

"Give it away?" Billy said, coming to a full stop on the joist he'd just danced across.

"Yep," I said. "I only need so much."

"You say that now," he said. "But money always needs more money. I hope you get to find that out." He looked at Barry. "What would you do?"

"Houses, fuck-you money . . ." Barry said. "Nah, that ain't me."

"What would you do with all that cash, then?" Billy asked as he sat down next to

us.

Barry said, "I'd do the best thing a black man can do in this country."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. We all turned and stared out toward the horizon. We had to unstack all that angle iron and push it out to the walls. Plain, dumb, slow work.

Barry cleared his throat. I felt him shift a little on the beam.

"If I win the lottery, I'd become a memory."

The Last Olympian by Karen O'Neil

On the evening that my mother died alone in her Chicago apartment just short of her 100th birthday, I was 1000 miles away in Austin, Texas, standing in line with my husband and our eight-year-old grandson, Peter, waiting for Rick Riordan to autograph the very latest in his *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. This was a moment Peter had been anticipating for months. He had carefully instructed me the night before to get to Book People as early as I could to secure a prime place in line for the evening event. "Believe me, Grandma," he had said earnestly. "You've got to go early. You don't know how many people will be there. Go at 8:00. Go as soon as you wake up. You'll get a much better spot."

But on a sunny May morning, I had not fully heeded Peter's instructions. First, I stopped along the way to have coffee at an outdoor café. I did the *Times* crossword (an easy Tuesday), and then I put in a quick call to my mother, basking in a pace of life that made such leisure possible. Dawdling in the morning was a heretofore forbidden treat, the first course in what felt to my husband and me like a feast of retirement—beautiful weather, beautiful grandchildren, enough work to be interesting, but not enough to be stressful. We were there for the semester while Bob taught a course at the University of Texas Law School, a long-awaited and highly prized shared adventure.

In what still seemed my real life, the one from which I'd just retired as English teacher and college counselor, by this hour I would already have taught a class, answered a dozen emails, tried to soothe at least a handful of worried parents, and been well into my third cup of coffee. But here, in Austin, I was sitting on a sunny patio, gazing at a skate boarder with puffy dreadlocks stuffed under a watch cap sailing cheerfully past a pair of fit, young women striding at warp exercise speed and locked in oblivious conversation. They might have been in a hurry, but not me. I was relishing the leisure of every passing moment.

The call to Mother was a daily ritual, one that I usually performed in the evening, but the previous night—too tired, too busy, too caught up in my own life—I had somehow neglected. If Mother was disappointed that I'd not called earlier, she didn't say

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so. Even faced with advanced Parkinson's and macular degeneration, she rarely complained, although everything that had always kept her going was rapidly slipping away—her husband of almost seventy-five years, the large family that now sprawled from one end of the country to the other, a lifetime of friendships, her capacity to read and write. At ninety-nine she had become almost totally dependent on others for even her most basic needs.

Listening to her now, sitting in that sunny cafe in Austin, struggling to hear her murmured words, it was easy to forget that she'd taught until she was ninety, consulted until she was ninety-five, authored two books, nurtured three generations of children, co-created an exemplary marriage, and run the most efficient and gracious household in our family. We used to joke that while others were feeding and caring for their ninetyyear-old grandmothers, ours was feeding and caring for us. But that Mother, the one our children referred to as "real grandma" was making increasingly rare appearances these days. This Mother, the one I called daily, the "pretend grandma," wasn't nearly as easy nor as much fun to hang out with. Often in those calls I would find myself almost shouting, trying to make my voice heard across some rapidly thickening barrier that each day pushed her farther away. And often, if I was really honest with myself, I was relieved when she wanted to hang up.

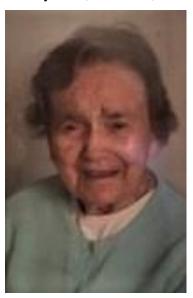
Standing now in the Book People line with an excited Peter, all of that seemed so far away. We were there for an adventure, collecting him for the drive to the book store, cruising the parking lot for an open spot, finding our place in a line that snaked around the block. Here we were surrounded by eddies of children, swirling around us in the capes and helmets of Olympic heroes, many with their heads buried in the pages of *The Last Olympian* like diminutive ostriches. Periodically, a store representative would gallop through the crowd dressed as a Minotaur, and the small readers would look up distracted, as if unable to figure out exactly where they were, in that world or this.

Peter had been right, of course, in cautioning me to get an early start. By the time I had gotten to Book People at 10:00 that morning, there were some 400 people ahead of me, and the letter I had been assigned for the actual signing was deep into the alphabet. We were facing a long wait, although no one seemed to mind much. Not Peter, who was by now some fifty pages into the book and utterly oblivious to the

passage of time, and certainly not me. Here was life, energy, engagement. Who could possibly resist the sight of all those children willing to forego dinner for the autograph of a beloved author?

I hadn't known that morning that my conversation with Mother would be our last, that she had refused to eat breakfast, had slept a great deal of the day, and grown increasingly unresponsive. She'd answered the phone as she always did, "I'm fine,

dear. You mustn't worry." It wasn't unusual that she didn't want to talk at length. If I'd called the night before, I might have captured her for just a moment or two by reading from the volume of poetry I kept by the phone for just that purpose, knowing that our shared love of words was one thing that could almost always draw her back into life. "Read that one again," she'd say, and then instead, she'd begin to recite, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes ..." and for just a moment, each of us would hold tight to a string of words that bound us together while time and space evaporated.



Miriam Elson

But the night before that hadn't happened because I hadn't called. And I hadn't called because, if truth be told, I was tired. Tired from high blood pressure and low blood pressure, from falls and strokes, from jumping on a plane and then rushing to the hospital. I was tired from the sound of the phone in the night and keeping a packed suitcase beside the bed, tired from running interference with doctors and caretakers, wondering whether I should make a trip to Chicago this weekend or that—tired of worrying whether Mother and before his death, Dad, were as comfortable as possible. I was tired of the endless question of whether I was doing it right, doing it well enough— fulfilling this assignment of helping my parents through the end of their lives.

Oh, sure, I knew we were lucky, as lucky as a family can be, and I knew that I had no cause for complaint. My parents had had a long lives, good health to the end, ample resources, and highly competent and willing helpers. I could choose to keep Mother in the comfort of her own home. I could choose to be in Austin, choose to

indulge myself in a perfect May day, choose the company of an appreciative eight-yearold, choose to postpone my next visit with Mother just a little longer. Or so it seemed then.

But looking back now with the perspective of time, I'm not so sure. Pretend or real, Mother was surely lonely, surely longed for the company and comfort of her family beside her, surely wished that I'd made the trip to be with her. Who wants to spend their last hours in the company of a paid caretaker? Who wants to end her life essentially alone? I could make myself hear Mother saying, "Stay where you are, dear. That's exactly where you belong." But is that how she really felt? Or was it just easier for me to pretend? And easier still to ignore recognition of my own place in a line, right behind her.

The line I was standing in with Peter was full of happy anticipation, eager children awaiting a new book to take its place in their lives. The line I was in? The line I'm in now? Not so clear. In our family at least, I'm up next for Pretend Grandma. Perhaps if I'd thought about it that way, I would have jumped on a plane to cross those 1000 miles.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps I would have stayed where I was, recognizing, as I suspect Mother did, that whether or not we read the last page together, this was a book that had only one end.

A Story is Born by Susan Lynn Solomon

Before I speak of the odd things that happened in my house, I must explain how I first encountered the spirit.

A number of years ago I was the in-house lawyer at a small company in Niagara Falls. Charlie Ganim, my employer, also owned a bed and breakfast in Niagara-on-the-Lake, a small Canadian town across the river from where I lived. A block off Queen Street, the house stood two stories above an ancient brick foundation. Yellow clapboard with brown shutters and trim, the Blake House was one of many inns dotting that quaint historic town. That ancient brick foundation was set in place soon after the town was set afire by American forces during the War of 1812. Zackery Myerson laid the foundation on the site where a retreating British officer was killed. He built what today might be considered a small cottage on that plot of land and established a bakery in it. Over the years subsequent owners extended the cottage, and in 1859 Horace Blake purchased the building as a residence for his aging mother. Since then, the house became the residence of at least ten different families before Charlie purchased it in 2003 and turned it into an inn.

I've described the history of the Blake House, because its age had given a ghost ample time to take up residence there. At least, that was the legend attached to the house.

I learned of this from a Frederica Jones, the resident innkeeper. She told me of the ghost late on a snowy January afternoon when I drove across the Queenston-Lewiston Bridge and into Niagara-on-the-Lake to gather documents Charlie needed. I expected this would be a quick roundtrip, but when I came through the front door of the Blake House, I saw Frederica standing in the hall. Petite with a mop of red hair, her green eyes were wide and her hand covered her mouth as if to mute a scream.

Startled by her expression, I asked, "Freddie, are you okay?" She didn't answer.

I wiped snow from my boots on a mat near the door and rushed across the polished wood floor to where she now held onto the ornate newel post at the bottom of the stairs. Those stairs rose to a landing, then turned and rose again to the second floor.

"What's the matter?" I said.

We were in a hall lined with wallpaper reminiscent of that which might have hung there in the Victorian age. To the right of the staircase was the room Charlie referred to as the Gentleman's Parlor; to our left a door opened on the dining room and the kitchen beyond.

Freddie pointed to the ceiling. "Don't you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Listen."

I tilted my head and held my breath. The floor creaked. Then I heard what sounded like footsteps. "So?" I said. "One of your guests is walking around his room."

She bit her lip and shuddered. "Susan, we don't have any guests."

Again I heard the floor creak overhead. As an attorney, I had been trained to believe that everything, regardless of how strange it might seem, had a logical explanation. A ghost walking around the Blake House? Ghosts only existed in stories designed to spook children.

"This place is built of wood, right?" I told her. "So what we're hearing is just the sound an old wood house makes from time-to-time. Perfectly normal."

She stared at me.

Though the sun had begun to set and I wanted to get home, I couldn't let her face her fear alone. "Come on, Freddie," I said. "Let's put up coffee and talk this out. You'll see there's nothing haunting this house."

Taking her hand, I led her toward the kitchen. As we passed through the door, I glanced at the dinette table. On it I saw a copy of Shirley Jackson's novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*. A creaking old house and a novel about a ghost—clearly the combination of these two things had stirred Freddie's imagination.

I smiled at her and pointed to the book.

Shaking her head, she pulled away from me. "Susan, you know me better than that. I only picked up that book because of what I've been hearing in here." "Uh-huh, right," I said. "Coffee and talk will exorcise your ghost."

An hour or so sitting together over coffee should have eased Freddie's fear. The problem was that, as if to prove her right and me wrong, just when we finished our coffee the footsteps on the second floor became more pronounced. She covered her ears.

Now I shuddered. This wasn't just the sound made by an old house.

She turned to me "You heard that. Something *is* walking up there!" She sounded desperate.

My stomach quivered.

Sighing deeply, she said, "The first time I heard it I ran upstairs to see what was going on. I mean, someone I didn't invite in walking around the front bedroom? But when I got to the door..." her words faded into footsteps that grew still louder now that we were talking about them.

"Yeah?" I encouraged.

She shook her head.

"Come on, Freddie. You can't start this then leave me hanging."

Her green eyes darted as if she feared the ghost might come downstairs and join us for coffee. At last she said, "It was suddenly very quiet, like someone held their breath on the other side of the bedroom door... When I opened it ..." She shrugged. "Nobody was there. Except ..."

"Except?"

"I-I could swear I saw someone dart past the window seat." She began to cry. "Please tell me I haven't lost my mind."

If hearing what we both heard meant that Freddie had lost her mind then, logically speaking, my mind had also bought a ticket for a train ride to insanity. But this wasn't an insane imagining. Somebody *was* pacing around an unoccupied room on the second floor.

I rushed from the dining room and tore up the stairs. In my haste I almost skidded into the wall as I rounded the banister. Panting, my palm on the wall I listened to footsteps in the room at the far end of the hall. Tiptoeing across the carpeted floor I approached the closed door then stopped and leaned my ear against it. The pacing continued. Now I heard a sigh.

My breath caught in my throat. *That's just the wind leaking through an old window*, I thought. *Yeah. That's what it has to be*. But the windows in the Blake House weren't old and leaky—I'd reviewed the contract with the company that replaced the windows last April. And the footsteps ... It sounded like leather-soled shoes on a wood floor. *No. Can't be! This room is carpeted...* I'd seen and approved the invoice from the company that laid the carpet!

My hand shaking, I reached for the brass door knob. Turned it. Threw open the door...

The room was empty, the floor carpeted—no bare wood that could produce the sound of footsteps. The curtain over the window hung motionless. The only sound in the room was my gasp.

My logic fled like a rabbit escaping a stew pot. A ghost *did* inhabit this room! I turned and closed the door behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I ran for the stairs.

Freddie stood on the bottom step. Her face pale, she grasped the banister's newel post with both hands like she might topple over if she let go. "Y-you see?" she said.

I looked up to the landing at the top of the stairs and nodded.

I should have stayed with Freddy, helped her find an explanation for what we'd heard—an explanation that would erase the fear we both felt. I couldn't. In minutes I gathered the documents Charlie needed and left. That was the last time I set foot in the Blake House.

I didn't tell Charlie about what Freddie and I had experienced. Not the next day. Not until the middle of February. Even then I didn't say it aloud.

In images from my earliest memories I see myself sitting in bed, writing. As a child I rose with the sun so I could grab a piece of scrap paper and print a dream I'd had the night before (I printed since I hadn't yet mastered cursive writing). In high school I learned to play the guitar and by the time I entered college I had gotten good enough to play songs I'd written in Greenwich Village coffee houses. Later I worked for a quarterly magazine, writing three or four articles for each issue. While in law school and after graduation I wrote short stories that reflected my life and the people around me. Charlie

knew my history, which was why early in February he asked for a favor.

In a small office with stark white walls and the shades drawn across the single window, I was at my desk, typing a contract when he approached.

"I'm almost done here," I said. "I'll have this for you by this afternoon."

He touched my shoulder. "That's not what I want to ask about."

I turned in my chair and glanced up at him. "Oh?"

"No. See, we're going to open the Blake House for a long Valentine's Day weekend."

I gave him a half-smile. Did he want to ask me to help Freddie in the Blake House that weekend? He never hesitated to assign me non-legal chores—customer relations, drafting promotional material. Most times I would gladly help out, but spending a weekend at that house ...

"Sounds good, Charlie," I said. "I hope you have a full house." I swiveled back to face my computer. "My sister's coming up from Florida that weekend, and ..."

His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head. "That's nice. Have a good time." He thought for a moment. "You could take her across to Niagara-on-the-Lake. I'm sure she'd enjoy that. Before she comes, I want you to write a short romantic story set in the Blake House. I want to put a copy of it in each of the rooms. I think it would be something the guests would remember ... and maybe come back again."

I nodded.

As Charlie walked away, he added, "Of course, you'll have to write that on your own time. I have a lot for you to do here the next couple of weeks."

Why wasn't I surprised? I'd known the man almost twenty years. "I could be more creative if you turn up the heat a bit?" I called after him. Thirty degrees outside, the office thermostat was set as sixty-four.

"Can't," he called back. "Gotta save money where I can."

A favor for the man who signed my pay check. A short romance set in the Blake House. But what did I know of that house—other than that I now believed a ghost lived there?

I thought about this the rest of the day. That night my sleeping mind must have

continued to seek an underpinning for Charlie's story. I say this, because in the morning I awoke with a place to begin. The ghost. The sigh sounded as though it came from a female, and I wondered if she haunted the Blake House because she died there. And that sigh—it might have been the sound of longing. Yes, that could be it! The ghost died longing for a lost love.

But, did she? The pacing footsteps and the sigh were all I knew about the ghost that, and Freddie Jones's fear of it. This should not have presented a problem. Research. I often researched legal issues. Research also resolved issues in my creative writing. Okay, then, I would start my research into the Blake House ghost.

Saturday morning, I slid from bed. My imagination stirred by the thought of a new story to write, I poured a large mug of coffee and carried it to my computer. To begin my search for the ghost, I Googled Zackery Myerson, the man who had constructed the first building on the site. I learned only one new fact about him: he had been among a group of British loyalists that fled to Canada after the American Revolution. I had the approximate years of his birth and death, but nothing about his dying in his house. Next, I tried Horace Blake, but learned nothing more than that he had come to Niagara-on-the-Lake from the California gold fields. He had mined enough gold to buy a number of properties and start several businesses in his new hometown. Yes, he had bought the Blake House for his mother. No, there was nothing about her dying in the house. Finding not even a rumor of ghost, I printed the articles I'd read. Perhaps those would provide fodder for some later story.

In the afternoon I again crossed the river, this time to visit the Niagara-on-the-Lake Historical Society's museum. Located in a brick building behind a white picket fence on Castlereagh Street, it housed displays of relics that told the town's history. It also housed a room stocked with documents and photos. One picture showed men at work on what appeared to be a military base. The caption told me that Canadian artisans had helped to rebuild Fort Niagara during the Civil War. I found a drawing that depicted a black man being helped from a catketch on the Lake Ontario shore—the last stop on the Underground Railroad. I hadn't known any of this, but these facts didn't bring me closer to learning who the ghost had been in life. I continued to search through the files, learning more about the town, but nothing of a ghost in the Blake House. Another dead

end. I gathered my notes, and climbed into my Saturn Ion.

I had spent an entire day on the project Charlie assigned me (when my employer asked favor it was never voluntary), and come up empty. At the customs booth on the bridge, the agent asked what I had been doing in Canada.

"Research for a story," I told the woman.

"You're a writer?" she asked.

"I am, though I haven't been published yet."

As she handed back my license and registration, she leaned from the booth and smiled. "Did you find the information you wanted?"

I sighed.

"Guess not," she said. "Well, good luck.

Grumbling, I decided I would tell Charlie I couldn't come up with the story. I had done everything I could, I would say, but ... I took a deep breath. Actually, there was one more place I could look.

Exiting the highway, I raced to the office at more than a few miles-per-hour over the speed limit. That I didn't get stopped must have meant the police on patrol had gone to dinner. My dinner would have to wait. Inside the office, I pulled open one of the file draws and searched through folders until I found the contract that sold the Blake House to Charlie Ganim. The seller was a woman named Margaret Dragone. She had lived in the house for years. She would surely have heard the ghost and would know of its origin. Just prior to the sale, Mrs. Dragone had moved to Toronto. Her new address and phone number were on the sheet I carried to the phone.

"Mrs. Dragone?" I asked when my call was answered.

"Who?" the woman on the other end said.

"Was it you who sold Charles Ganim the Blake House?" I looked again at the page I held. "This is the name and phone number she gave us during the sale of the property."

After a brief hesitation I heard a man's voice on the line. "I'm sorry, young woman," he said. "We have no idea what you're talking about or who this Mrs. Dragone is. You have the wrong number."

"But, it says in the contract—"

"Wrong number!"

When he hung up I held the receiver away and stared at it. What the hell was going on?

I find it interesting how the brain works. When I climbed into bed that night, aggravated about the brick wall I'd banged my head against all day, I felt torn between telling Charlie I couldn't find a story and desperately wanting to write it. When sunshine from our western New York February thaw knocked on my bedroom window, I realized that while I slept my mind had continued the argument. Rolling over in bed I saw the remnants of that battle: my quilt bunched on the left side of my bed, my pillow on the floor, my nightgown damp with perspiration. I can't/I want to, had apparently battled like the gray of surrender and the blue of annoyed stubbornness.

I abruptly sat up, thinking, Like in the Civil War!

This thought brought me back to my research. Men from Niagara-on-the-Lake helping to rebuild Fort Niagara; runaway slaves brought to Niagara-in-the-Lake. When I attached this to the longing sigh I'd heard in the Blake House, the story I sought blossomed.

Still in my nightgown, coffee in hand I parked at my computer and began to type. When the sun set just past five o'clock I clicked on *Save*. The story was finished ... at least, as a first draft. In just over 1,500 words I'd told of the ghost—Abigail Bender, I named her—falling in love with a man who worked the Underground Railroad and helped at Ft. Niagara. They married and moved into the Blake House. When the Civil War began the man—Will Bender—enlisted in the Union Army, and perished at Gettysburg. Pacing her bedroom, Abigail pined for the loss of her one true love until one day, sitting near her bedroom window she overdosed on laudanum and joined him in death.

I didn't give Charlie the story on Monday, nor did I show it to him on Tuesday. Both evenings when I returned home after work, I sat at my desk. Late into both nights I continued to rewrite and tighten the text. With each new draft, Abigail Bender became more real to me; became ... a friend. I printed the draft and carried my friend's story with me to work. Once or twice I pulled it from my shoulder bag. Reading what I'd written of Abigail's life and death, it was almost as if I spoke to her, and in each word

she spoke to me.

Wednesday evening as I shut down my office computer and prepared to leave, Charlie opened the door. "So, did you write my story yet?" he asked.

His story? No! The story was mine. And Abigail's.

"We're getting close to Valentine's Day," he said.

I sighed, sat down on my desk chair and pulled the pages from my shoulder bag. I could give him Abbie—Abbie is what I had been calling her—and still keep her for myself.

Charlie pulled over a chair and read. When he finished, he read the story again then looked at me. His eyes moist, he said, "I, uh ... didn't expect ... It's sad, but still ..." He stood up. "Yes, this will be just fine. Thank you."

Shaking his head, he walked away.

I had no idea what the Blake House guests thought of Abbie's story. I know what my sister thought of it, though.

Early the next Saturday morning I attached Abbie's story to an email that said, *Robin, this is the result of all that research I told you about. What do you think of it?*

That afternoon she phoned me. "I like the story, Sue," she said.

I head a slight hesitation in her voice. "You don't sound convinced."

"Well ..."

Glancing over my shoulder like Abbie might be standing behind me, as if to apologize for making her story less than perfect, I said, "I could do another rewrite."

"No. It's good."

"But?"

I heard Robin take a deep breath. "It should be much longer."

"You mean ... like a novel?"

"Uh-huh."

"But Charlie didn't want a novel," I said. "He just wanted-"

"Yeah. And you gave him what he asked for. Now you could make it the story *you* wanna write."

Considering this, I glanced out my window. I didn't see children playing on the

grassy common behind my condo, though. Through my mind's eyes I saw Niagara-onthe-Lake as it had been: billowed sails of ships out on Lake Ontario, and horse carts on narrow streets that wound down to the shore. As the images became sharper, I heard the same sigh I'd heard that January day in the Blake House. In my house. I jumped back, startled. This time, though, the sound didn't frighten me.

Except for the hours I spent at the office, then rushing through the market to buy prepared meals, during the next three months I spent all of my time turning Abbie's short story into a novel. Weekends found me combing through bookshelves at the library or searching online for people and places—those small details that would bring life to her time and the town in which she lived (foolish as it might sound, Abigail Bender had become entirely real to me). The thin manila folder that held the information I gathered grew fat then fatter, then became two folders, then three. The tableau of Abbie's life filled my computer screen. She was a fisherman's daughter. She had a brother named Brian, who ferried runaway slaves to freedom in Canada. Will Bender worked the Underground Railroad with Brian. I saw—no, I *knew*—the bank of the Niagara River below the town of Lewiston where they gathered the runaways. I saw Abbie walking on the gently sloping town common, saw her meet and fall in love with Will. I saw her lose him to a war ...

A month into this project my sister phoned me.

"Where have you been?" she scolded. "I've been trying to reach you for week."

"I've ... been writing. You know, Robin, turning Abbie's short story into a novel." "All this time?"

I carried the receiver to my computer desk. "You told me to do it. See? I do listen to you sometimes."

"Why haven't you answered your phone?"

"I, uh ... Sorry. I ..." The phone tucked against my neck, I typed while I spoke. "I've gotta get this ..."

"Stop it!" Robin said. "You're obsessed with that story."

I shifted the receiver to my other ear. "I'm not," I said. "I, uh ... I'll call you back after dinner."

I didn't call her back.

The next evening while I sat at my computer struggling to develop the scene in which Will Bender tells Abbie he's going to join a regiment of the Union army, I heard what sounded like pacing in my room. I lived in attached duplex and often heard the children next door running up and down the stairs.

I looked over to the wall. That's what I hear, I thought. Just the kids next door.

But it wasn't. The footsteps went behind my chair from one side of the room to the other.

"C'mon, Abbie, tell me what happened next," I said to the footsteps. I received no answer. I didn't need one. In a moment I knew what the story needed.

I now entered Abbie's story. I met her ghost at the Blake House, and during a long snowy weekend she told me her story. When I scrolled to the beginning and began to reorganize the scenes, the footsteps stopped behind my chair and I heard a sigh. It seemed Abbie approved of what I'd done.

I heard the sighs and footsteps several times over the next few months. I spoke to them. Though whoever was there didn't answer, between writing and speaking I felt as though we were having a conversation, and that conversation led to more sentences that filled my computer screen. Then, at last the novel was written. Abbie's complete story. I phoned Robin.

"It's finished," I told her. "I just emailed it to you. Let me know what you think."

In June the process of tightening the new novel began. Week-after-week I brought chapters to my writers' group. The comments I received were encouraging and the suggestions group members made sent me back to my computer.

When I brought the first two chapters, one group member asked, "What do you call this story?"

"I, um ..." I bit my lip. In the months I'd been writing, I hadn't considered a title.

Another member said, "If you give it a title it'll help you focus your characters and what they're doing."

That night I sat at my computer staring at the screen. Then I stared out my window at children playing in the common area. Leaves on the trees fluttered. Months earlier when I stared through this window I imagined fluttering leaves on the common in Niagara-on-the-Lake the day Abbie met Will.

It was like she showed me her life though this window, I thought.

I heard a sigh so soft I might have imagined it. A moment later I knew what to call the novel. *Abigail's Window*. The group members had been right. With that title in mind I knew Abbie's ghost would be showing me—the narrator—her life in scenes flashing on the panes of the window in her Blake House bedroom.

At a writers' group meeting in August, a member said, "Your story's moving along well, Susan. I like the ghost's voice and the narrator's, but I'm not seeing why they're interacting."

"Yes," another member said. "There has to be a reason the ghost chose to tell your narrator her story."

"And a reason you're telling the story to us," the first member added. "Is there a lesson your characters learn as a result of their interaction?"

Each comment sent me back to my computer to bend scenes so that they inevitably moved toward an ultimate purpose. The story line now arched upward to the crisis.

On a Wednesday afternoon in late September I tried to calm an upset customer on the phone. Charlie opened my door and stood with his hands in his pockets.

When I hung up the phone, Charlie pulled over a chair. He tilted his head. "What I came in here for ... uh, that ghost you wrote that story about ... is it real?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, there *is* a ghost in the Blake House. Freddie keeps hearing it walk around ..." I looked at him. "I ... heard it, too."

His elbows on the arms of his chair, he leaned toward me. "And that person you said the ghost is—Abigail? Is that ghost really her?"

I sat back. "Is there a problem?"

He smiled. "No. Not at all. Our guests liked your story."

"And?" I asked.

"I heard about a ghost walk a group that'll be touring Niagara-on-the-Lake on Halloween is planning. It'd be great if they stop by so Frederica can tell them about a ghost in the Blake House. If your story is true ..." He let the word hang suggestively.

I grinned. "Leave it to me, Charlie."

At home that evening I threw together a tuna sandwich for dinner and carried it to my computer. "Looks like we're not done with your story yet, Abbie," I said.

That evening I worked at breaking *Abigail's Window* down to a new short story, about 3,500 words. On Saturday morning I emailed the Niagara-on-the-Lake ghost tour group the new story. In this version I was a woman who'd just lost my boyfriend. The night I slept at the inn, while I sobbed about my lost love, the ghost appeared near the window. Seeming to sense my broken heart, she must have thought I was a kindred spirit and told me her own story of loss. In my email I swore to the ghost tour group that the story was true. After I pushed the *Send* button, I sat back and laughed.

At that moment a strange thing happened. I felt something bump my chair.

I gasped. "Was that you, Abbie?" I whispered.

Weeks passed into months. In all this time I heard no footsteps or sighs in my room, and felt nothing bump my desk chair. On Tuesday evenings I brought chapters of *Abigail's Window* to my writers' group. On Wednesday evenings I sat at my computer adjusting scenes. In early December I completed the final rewrite of the novel. My writers' group was satisfied; I was satisfied. Apparently, though, the ghost wasn't satisfied. I sensed this after I set the story aside and began to write something new.

On an evening away from my computer, I sat in the overstuffed chair in my living room watching a movie. When I leaned over for handful of popcorn, the channel changed. I groaned and switched back to the proper channel. I placed the remote on the lamp table and the channel again changed.

I groaned. "Is that you doing this, Abbie?" I asked.

In the past months I had become accustomed to speaking to what I believed to be a ghost inhabiting my house. Sometimes I asked it—h*er*—for advice. Though I never received a response, I felt her hovering nearby. The strictly logical portion of my brain called me a fool. Now in my sixties, I sensed death creeping closer, so my belief in the ghost was a prayer that a conscious life would continue past my body's end. I told my logic to shut up. What I had seen and heard could be explained only if I credited that it emanated from a ghost. My ghost. So I continued to speak to her.

Switching back to the channel with the movie, I said, "I know you're here, Abbie.

What do you want?"

I heard footsteps scamper up the stairs and across the hall into my bedroom.

"I'm not done with your story?" I called up to her.

Without knowing why, I knew what she wanted. At the last writers' group meeting we had discussed submitting our novels to literary agents. It seemed that writing Abbie's story wasn't sufficient. She wanted it out in the world where others would read it.

On Saturday I made a trip to the Barnes & Noble bookstore on Niagara Falls Boulevard and purchased a book that had agents' listings and what they required. At home, I emailed query letters to five agents. Within a week I received three responses all rejections. I sent out more emails about *Abigail's Window*, and while I was about it, sent out emails to online literary journals asking them to publish short stories I had written. Same result. Rejections. When after months of this I checked my emails one evening I felt as if rejections were the only messages I received.

Frustrated, I shouted to my bedroom walls, "Enough! I've had it!"

I reached to turn off my computer. When I touched the mouse, my finger twitched and I accidentally clicked on a site. Now, spread across my screen I saw the homepage of *The Writers Journal*. At the top of the page, flashing, was a button for competitions.

I took a deep breath. "Is this what you want me to do, Abbie?" I said.

My hand shaking, I clicked the *Competition* button. Now on my screen I saw a call for submissions of short romance stories. 2,500 to 3,500 words. The short story I had sent to the ghost tour group was the right length and it had elements of romance: a true love found then lost, a lesson for a brokenhearted woman who lived a century later. I submitted "The Blake House Ghost".

Hope again alive in my chest, I waited. A month later I found a notification of the competition winners among my emails. "The Blake House Ghost" had won an honorable mention. It would be my first published story.

In my bedroom I heard a disembodied sigh.

In the ensuing eleven years Abbie has periodically let me know she's still around. Most recently my reading glasses disappeared. I searched for those glasses upstairs and downstairs. I burrowed through the garbage can in my kitchen, thinking maybe I'd dropped them in there without realizing I'd done it—I've reached an age at which I do a number of things I don't recall doing. An hour of hunting through my house produced no result. My glasses were gone. I had spare reading glasses, yet I was annoyed. Certain the ghost had swiped my glasses, I hollered at her. I demanded she give them back. I pleaded with her. At last, I asked her politely to return them. When I came downstairs a week later, I saw my reading glasses in the middle of my kitchen floor.

I still have no idea who the ghost I call Abbie was or anything about her. My only thought is that this was the ghost I first heard walking and sighing in that Niagara-on-the-Lake Bed and Breakfast, and for some reason she adopted me. Periodically I've returned to my research about a ghost that haunted the Blake House. Nothing in the files I've built up has given me a clue. Maybe one day the ghost who now lives in *my* house will tell me. Until then I can only wonder.

The Granny, the Grocer and the Cobbler by Eileen M. Cunniffe

The phone roused me near midnight, and I pulled back the covers and stumbled toward it. I'd hardly managed a hoarse hello when my mother's voice rushed at me from the other side of the Atlantic, wide awake and seemingly oblivious to the five-hour time difference.

I could tell from her voice everything was fine. More than fine, it seemed.

"How's the trip?" I asked as I climbed back into bed and propped a pillow between my back and the knobby brass headboard.

"Great," she yelled. "We're having a grand time. We're in a pub."

Mom was shouting, no doubt because of the noise around her, but also because she was unaccustomed to speaking to me from so far away. Mostly, I think she was yelling because she was—uncharacteristically—a bit tipsy. I pictured her always-pink cheeks flushed a shade deeper. I imagined the comical scene in a dark, smoky pub as she and Dad had figured out how to place an international call.

My parents had been gone for more than a week. I'd been tracing their itinerary on a map on my dining-room table: Shannon to Galway, Mayo to Sligo, and now Derry, in Northern Ireland. They'd been planning this trip for months, dreaming it for years. All their parents were born in Ireland and emigrated to America. Each couple had met in Philadelphia, made their lives in that city, and never once went back to where they were from.

Now in their mid-50s, their parents long gone, my parents had finally made the journey "home." Almost no one from my grandparents' generation was left—just two of Mom's aunts, Ciss and Aggie, and one uncle. But both my parents had cousins scattered across Ireland. Before the trip, they'd swapped countless letters with these cousins, most of whom they'd never met. Each exchange uncovered another connection, another invitation, another branch of the family that couldn't wait to welcome them.

"How was Aunt Ciss?" I asked, knowing they'd seen her in Sligo. Ciss and her sister Ena had visited when I was eight.

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"Oh, she was fine," Mom replied. "I'll tell you about her when we get back. But guess what? The most amazing thing happened today. I met my granny!"

"Your granny?" I asked.

"My granny," she repeated, giggling.

"We went to Magherafelt, and we found Pop-Pop's house," she continued.

She said the name of the town just as her father had, with an audible sigh where the silent *g* and the *h* brush against each other. As a child I'd been fascinated with that strange-sounding word, which my grandfather loved to say.

"Then we met my granny."

Mom's voice wavered on the word "granny," and even from 3,000 miles away I could tell there was an urgency to this call. I knew something about her discovery didn't quite add up. My grandfather left Ireland after his mother died—that much I knew, and little more about his early life. How could my mother have a grandmother who was still alive, a grandmother none of the Irish relatives had mentioned before?

"My cousin Pauline gave me her address. A tiny old lady opened the door. Before I finished introducing myself, she said, 'Yes, of course, Rose Marie. Michael's daughter.' So we went in and she made a pot of tea and we just sat and talked. Imagine—I have a granny," Mom said giddily, for the fourth time.

"But, Mom, how can you have a granny you didn't know about?"

"I guess I skipped that part."

Mom explained that her grandfather, a shoemaker, had remarried after my greatgrandmother died, and his second wife was much younger than him. Which explained how the ninety-year-old granny could still be alive, but did not explain why every relative except Pauline had seen fit to keep her a secret. But our phone call was up, I'd have to wait for the rest of this story.

I am the oldest of seven brothers and sisters, and the most sentimental when it comes to our Irish ancestry. So Mom had made the right call: if anyone was going to share the excitement about her long-lost granny, it was me. I should have wept for joy to learn I had a "new" great-granny.

But I didn't.

Because the little old lady who'd shared a pot of tea with my parents was technically just a step-granny to Mom, and a step-great-granny to me. And this particular "step" seemed contrived: only in theory had Mom's step-granny ever been my grandfather's step-mother; he'd left Ireland long before she'd stepped into the picture.

"Granny" wasn't even a word we used, which made Mom's repetition of it as strange as the news itself. We'd called both of my grandmothers "Nanny." Mom was now a grandmother herself, and she'd chosen the hip moniker "Grandma Rosie."

My parents took only one picture of the granny because the flash bothered her eyes. In the photo, her straight grey hair is parted down the middle. She has a long, thin nose and thick glasses with large, plastic frames. She's squinting up from an armchair, Mom crouched beside her, grinning.

When my parents got home, I heard more about Mrs. Annie Henry. Aunt Aggie hadn't mentioned her step-mother, even though she'd been so excited to meet my parents that she'd dragged them upstairs to see her son, who was laid up with a back injury, and she'd phoned her daughter in England and handed the phone to Mom to say hello.

Aunt Ciss hadn't volunteered information about her step-mother either. But once she learned Pauline had, she felt compelled to add some color commentary. She implied the granny had been pregnant before she married the cobbler and that her father hadn't fathered that child. And she gave Mom the distinct impression that the cobbler's children had not taken kindly to their step-mother.

Three years after their first trip, my parents went back to Ireland, and this time I went along. We visited every relative they'd met the first time, and they showed me each of the four homes where my grandparents were from. Three of these homes were still in our families, although one had been reduced to a crumbling outbuilding behind a newer house. The fourth—the one we reached last—was the house in Magherafelt; my parents had seen it from the outside on their first trip, but the people inside were strangers.

On our way to Magherafelt, we made one other stop. Mom couldn't wait to see her granny again, and she was determined I should meet her, as if this would close

some ancestral circle. But the granny's health was failing and she was in a hospital. Although this visit was important to Mom, I wondered if we had the right to intrude on the old woman's privacy and ask her to entertain her American "relatives" from her sickbed.

When we stepped into her room, I knew I needn't have worried. The lively old lady my parents remembered was now a frail little bird who barely made a bump under the bedclothes. Mom set the flowers she'd brought on a table and pulled a chair close to the bed. When she reached for the blanket that covered the sleeping granny's legs, I excused myself and went to the lobby.

The tears that had failed to fall when I'd first learned about the granny finally arrived. Not because my step-great-granny was dying, but because it never occurred to me until I saw them together that maybe she and Mom had both been missing something until they'd met. Mom had let Annie Henry step into the void where her real grandparents never had been, and I knew she knew this was a stretch, even if she didn't say so. And the granny had her own child and her own grandchildren, so she too must have understood the difference.

After I left the room, the little bird woke up and squeezed Mom's hand. Both my parents felt she remembered them and understood they'd come to see her again.

Because my grandfather lived with us while I was growing up, his was the family home I thought I knew best. I'd always pictured a farmhouse, with enough room for thirteen people, and a big yard. Not that he'd ever described it that way, I suppose. But long ago I'd seen a pastel-tinted photograph of him with his parents and ten brothers and sisters all posed on a lawn, and my mind must have conjured the kind of house I thought belonged with that family.

I held onto my image of the Henry home right up until the day I stood outside it. I'd seen pictures my parents took on their first visit, but my mind had simply refused to reconcile the real house on Church Street with my idea of it until I stood there in front of a grey, pebbledash row home on a narrow street in a busy market town.

It had been fifteen years since Pop-Pop died, and still it was hard to forget how sullen he'd been in his last years, how hard he'd been on Mom. But he'd come alive

anew for us on this trip, especially when we'd visited Aunt Ciss, who still called her brother "Sonny" more than sixty years after he left home. I'd only ever heard him called Michael or Mickey. I'd laughed with her over how he used to tell us he'd once been a little girl, because he wore whatever hand-me-downs fit, even dresses.

Dad stood on the sidewalk opposite the house, camera in hand. Just as he snapped a picture of Mom and me, the wide wooden door swung open and a middleaged man stepped out. We quickly explained why we were photographing his house.

"Please come in," he said warmly. "My father and sister live here, I know they'd love to meet you."

He ushered us past the brass "46" on the chocolate-brown door, through a narrow hall and into a tiny living room, where the elderly father and his daughter sat. We explained our connection to the house, and the old gentleman recognized the Henry surname right away. "Of course, I knew the Henrys," he said. "They were a fine family. Your grandfather," he offered, looking directly at Mom, "was a cobbler, and this room we're in was his workshop."

At first I thought he was just being polite. But then he began to remember names—Jack and Barney were the ones he mentioned first. He was ninety-three, his daughter told us, so my grandfather and his siblings would have been his contemporaries.

"I remember Mickey, he worked at the food co-op," the old man said. Mom was pleased to report Mickey had found similar work in Philadelphia and eventually owned a grocery store. She'd grown up working in that store, and living upstairs. The old man seemed pleased to know this. He asked his daughter to show us through the house, which she gladly did. Upstairs were four tiny bedrooms. How had thirteen people lived there? From a back window I saw a patch of grass, far too small to have been the setting for the photograph I half-remembered. Downstairs was a modest kitchen and the small living area that had doubled as a workshop.

"Show them the hallway," the old man instructed. His son led us back to the passage where we'd come in. "Stand here," he said, then waited as we took turns stepping into a well-worn dip in the floor. "Right here," he said, pressing his hand against the wall, "was a window. Customers would pass shoes back and forth through it.

Over time there was so much traffic it bowed the floor. We closed up the wall, but there's your proof of the cobbler's shop."

The elderly man seemed to have exhausted his memories of the Henrys. Mom hung on every word, hoping for new information that might shed a little light on the scant facts she'd collected on her first visit to Ireland, but none was forthcoming. Our two families parted with warm handshakes all around.

A quarter-century has passed since Mom called to tell me about her great discovery. All that time I've carried around in my head what little bits I'd heard of the cobbler's story. I've turned them over so often—like a snow globe—that what I knew for certain eventually blurred. Unconsciously I'd invented new scenes and extra twists in the plot. I'd forgotten who'd first told Mom Annie was still alive, and who'd implied the rest.

Only lately have I started wondering in earnest about the cobbler and his family, trying to make the picture come clear. I began with what little I knew about my grandfather: He was twenty-three when he sailed for America in 1929 on the *S.S. Albertic.* Before he left, he was a hardworking butter-and-egg man and a decorated Irish football player. In Philadelphia, he built a successful business. He mentioned Magherafelt often, but almost never the names of his people there. He took his family obligations seriously and was a good provider and a generous, though stern, father and grandfather. And I don't remember him ever being happier or more charming than he was that summer and fall when Ciss and Ena came to visit.

Around the same time, I began wondering about his backstory, Mom decided to divvy up our family photographs. I asked if I could see—or even have—the Henry family portrait, which I hadn't seen in decades. The one I mis-remembered as a smiling, relaxed clan in some bucolic setting.

I have that old photograph in my possession now—the original, tinted copy mounted on cardboard that my grandfather must have carried in his suitcase. How many times did he take it out and study those faces? The names are recorded on the back in Mom's neat handwriting. It's a formal pose, with a leafy green backdrop that's clearly fake. Everyone is wearing his or her Sunday best. Two little girls sit on sheepskin rugs in front of two rows of older faces, all with similar features: thick, wavy helmets of unruly hair, some dark, some fair; deep-set eyes and thick brows that all slope downward at the same angle; and thin lips, only a few of which suggest any effort at smiling. The ones whose shoes are visible—including my great-grandfather, right leg crossed jauntily over left, one shiny black boot all but touching the hem of his wife's long dress—seem to be well shod, as one might expect.

There they all are, together: the Henrys of Magherafelt, County Derry, in the late 1920s, as best we can guess. Mom knows Martha was the oldest and Aggie was the youngest, but she doesn't know where the rest of them—Michael (Sonny), Rose (Ciss), Barney, Jack, Mary, Ena, Patsy, Daisy and Kay—fell in terms of birth order. How could I not have known I had a great-aunt named Daisy?



Pauline told Mom their grandmother had all her teeth pulled shortly before the photograph was taken. Her false teeth weren't ready, and she'd wanted to reschedule the portrait. Because the cobbler insisted on having the picture made as planned, my great-grandmother Rose's mouth appears as the merest hint of a line above her chin.

Mom and I recognize a stubborn streak that maybe kept the cobbler from rescheduling. But we might be wrong. Perhaps there was some urgency to having the portrait made, a sense that the little house on Church Street wouldn't contain them all much longer. Martha looks to be wearing a wedding band. Maybe one of the brothers had just booked his passage out of Ireland—Barney to America, or Patsy to Australia. Patsy seems too young to be leaving, but the resolute look on his face and his crossed arms suggest he's ready to bolt. If one of the boys was about to leave, it could explain the solemn faces. Or were they told not to smile? Is that why Aggie looks so cross, or did she not like being made to sit on the floor?

The edges of the image are soft and out of focus, like the bits of family lore the American relations have cobbled together. Ena and Daisy each have one arm that fades into the background. Kay and Aggie are in white, probably their First Communion dresses. Four little girls in all, maybe ranging from seven to twelve years old. My grandfather looks to be about twenty, so it won't be long until he and Barney, Jack, Patsy, and their mother Rose are all gone from the picture, leaving the cobbler with a houseful of young daughters.

Nothing we've heard makes us think Annie helped the cobbler raise his other daughters after their mother died. It seems more likely they'd all left home before the cobbler remarried.

My grandfather would have learned about his father's second marriage through the mail—the only way he ever got news from home, until late in his life, when he or Ciss occasionally splurged on a transatlantic call. Did his father write to him directly, or did one of his siblings tell him about their new step-mother and step-sister? I imagine he was relieved to be on the other side of the ocean. I remember him as proud and proper, mindful of appearances and what the neighbors might think.

His brother Bernard was also in Philadelphia, and I imagine them speaking about their family. But Barney died young, and that subsequent visit with Ciss and Ena when they were all in their late fifties or early sixties was the only other time my grandfather spent with any of his siblings after he left Ireland. Surely, they must have discussed their father.

As a child Mom was vaguely aware that her grandfather had remarried, but she was so far removed from the experience of being anyone's granddaughter that the news didn't mean much. "They always said she was very good to him," Mom remembers hearing (or more likely, overhearing), "but they said it kind of grudgingly." She remembers her father receiving a letter telling him his father had died. After that she never heard another word about her step-granny for almost half a century.

In the nearly thirty years my mother's parents were married, my grandmother always handled correspondence with the Irish relatives—including all those Henry inlaws she'd never even met. She sent photos, money, notes of congratulations and condolence, even a First Communion suit for one of my grandfather's nephews, Mom recalls.

When my grandmother died, Mom inherited the task of corresponding with the Irish relations. Pop-Pop's step-mother never made it onto his Christmas-card list. Yet somehow Annie managed to keep track of him, because even at ninety she'd known who my mother was and how they were connected.

My parents have told me everything they recall about their first meeting with the granny, which was all polite conversation, a visit that lasted as long as a pot of tea. If they talked at all about the cobbler, Mom doesn't recall what was said; and if they had, she almost certainly would.

Still, I keep asking questions. Mom answers by digging up every scrap she can find—prayer cards confirming when my great-grandfather and step-great-granny died, a letter from Church Street saying we were welcome to visit again. She hands over each treasure as if it will answer my questions. I have the frayed white jacket my grandfather wore in his grocery store. I have his passport, and my grandmother's, and their marriage license. I have the journals my parents kept on their trips to Ireland. On that first trip, Mom wrote that they were "completely enchanted" by the granny, and she described their meeting as "the most remarkable event of the trip." She also noted that one of her cousins said their grandfather had been a great cobbler: "He could just about spit nails into the heel of a shoe."

Mom had received a letter from the granny's daughter, Kathleen, after our hospital visit, and we knew my step-great-granny died six days after we saw her. But by the time I started asking questions, this letter had gone missing. Then one day Mom called to say she'd found it. "It's yours, of course," she told me.

Kathleen was responding to a Christmas card from Mom. From the seven-page, hand-written letter we learn (all over again, because of course we both read it when it was new) that we just missed meeting Kathleen at the hospital that day. We re-learn that my step-great-granny had six grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. We calculate that Kathleen was four years older than Mom, Kathleen's oldest child four years older than me.

And thanks to that letter, we now know even less than we thought we did about the cobbler's children, and his second marriage.

"I remember your father's photo which was always on the sideboard of your grandfather's house in Church St. where I lived from the age of 7 until 12 ...," Kathleen wrote. Which begs the question of where she lived before she was seven, and what it might mean that she referred to the cobbler as "your grandfather" and not "my father" (or "step-father").

And then there's this: "... I want you to know something very specially. Would you please let Ciss know that Mammy didn't have her address when she moved and that she asked for it or the phone number on many occasions but it was not forthcoming! Mary and Ciss never forgot her over all the years and she would so much have wanted me to write or call to say so. I do hope you can put that right."

Mom would have done her best to convey this message to ornery Aunt Ciss, knowing, as Kathleen surely did, that it wasn't always easy to put things right with a Henry, or even to know what was wrong in the first place.

All we can do now is read between the lines. From the warm tone of Kathleen's letter, and the cool undertone of everything else Mom heard from other Henrys, it seems reasonable to conclude that the day my middle-aged mother turned up on Annie's doorstep was the first time one of the cobbler's grandchildren had jumped for joy at the chance to call her "granny."

*

The cobbler's house in Magherafelt is gone now—my Uncle Mickey went looking for it and found it had been torn down. Ciss and Aggie died long ago, and our favorite Henry cousin, Pauline, died too. There's no one left to ask about the people in the picture, the missing parts of their stories, or at least no one we know well enough. Public archives could fill in some blanks, but they wouldn't tell us the stories we wish we knew; at best they'd help us cobble together a few more dates or add some branches to the family tree.

I ask Mom what she remembers knowing as a child about her father's parents. "He never talked about them," she says. And although neither one of us says so, we both know this is the real mystery we are still trying to solve.

I've revised the scenes in my snow globe that I'd fictionalized over time. I've written down only what I believe to be true, or can reasonably surmise, about the cobbler, his wives, their children and grandchildren.

With one exception: I have, quite consciously, allowed myself to invent a scene at the end of that long-ago day when my mother met her granny. I imagine that after she kissed my parents goodbye and closed the door behind them, she picked up the phone and dialed her only daughter's number.

"You'll never guess what happened today," she began, then blurted out the news before Kathleen could reply: "I met my granddaughter."

Turkey on the Strip by **Susan Eve Haar**

There are many appeals to Las Vegas aside from my brother—my youngest, at a California college, will not come east; we all have a taste for sleaze; a few of us like to gamble; and we have a super discount suite in the best new hotel in town, courtesy of my kids' pal Dan, a dropout from the Cornell School of Hotel Management. The suite is a triumph, glittery and luxurious, and the price is certainly right.

Everything is spanking new. The side-tables are classics designed by Eames. They look like giant chess pieces, flat-topped pawns or de-crenellated castles. The muted greens of rug and fabric suggest an oasis suspended over the strip that unspools outside the gigantic living room window. There's a bar lined with modern Danish glassware and sparkling light fixtures, suspended circles hung with cut-crystal balls that refract and reflect the light. Bits of rainbow ready for the Cinderella's ball. I desire them. I feel the itch to pilfer. I stand on a chair and reach up, de-looping one of the crystal drops that cluster on the fixture, attached only by a delicate wire. It's easy, really. Like so many illicit acts, I slide right into it. Holding the crystal in my palm, I feel the weight of it. I admire its many facets and its secretive translucence that pretends to show all but refracts into abstraction. Listen, it is a beautiful object. I hop down and carry it into the next room to show my kids, who are lolling on majestic beds.

"Look," I say, holding it out for inspection. It is intrinsically beautiful in its solitary state, smooth and rounded, and they admire it, passing it between them. I wonder aloud if it would be possible to pluck just one from every fixture in the suite and make a chandelier for our new house. My sons are delighted.

I try to limit the number of criminal acts I enact before my children. And really, with the exception of the one or two enacted with a vengeful mind, I believe I had God on my side in the commission of each and every one. Perhaps this is not altogether accurate, but it is the story I tell myself, and here is the story I will tell you:

It was a Thursday afternoon in early autumn and branches started crashing outside. There was a crane operator, swinging loads of drywall into the adjacent building, lopping off tree branches. The trees that hung like naiads over Charles Street,

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that we treasured—our green neighbors. Calls to the company number on the side of the crane reached a machine, as did a call to NYU construction (the crane was working on their job). I even ran to the precinct two blocks away to ask for help. All to no avail and, desperate, I turned to self-help.

My throwing arm is lacking, so I enlisted my agile boys, five and seven. They stood at the top of our stoop, pumped with delight, and pitched old tomatoes and fruit at the windshield of the crane. A soft pear spattered on the windshield, juice dripping down, and they whooped and hooted victory. I was standing at the top of my stoop. The driver was sitting in the cab of the crane; I could see him pretty clearly. We'd already had some pretty harsh words, my manner eroded by his complete disinterest in the damage he was doing. Now he looked interested. A half-rotten banana hit the windshield. He put the crane in park. I kind of thought I had the measure of the guy, an angry man with a big machine. Yet I have to say I was surprised when he opened the door of the crane, hopped down, and started walking fast toward our house.

"Go!" I pushed the boys behind me. They streaked upstairs, yelling, "World war three!" as the driver charged toward me. I stood my ground, albeit briefly.

"You're trespassing," I shouted. And as he paused, weighing his options, I slammed the door shut.

There have been other incidents, I won't deny it. One doesn't want to model behavior that is too compliant with society's requirements. It behooves you to leave a little dirt in the vegetables so your kids develop immunities. But this is not the time for a confession of my crimes; it is only to say that my children have borne witness to my bad acts—indeed, they have even been my accomplices.

Now they are twenty and twenty-two. My younger son stands on the bed; stretching up on toes, he balances and deftly removes a crystal from the light fixture. He sits down on the bed cross-legged, weighing it in his hand, absorbed. I know how good it feels, dense and glittering as a promise.

But is it right to really take it? All right, steal it. Them. By now there are three of them glittering quietly. There is, we reflect, the possibility that the hotel expects to replace them; it's just built into the room price. There might be a vault clogged with crystals waiting their turn to hang in splendor. We consider the possibility that the suite

was designed with the expectation of heavy drinking and orgies, so some damage is to be expected. We sit together and ponder. What would Aquinas say? But, in the end, it looks a lot like thieving, and with regret we pull over chairs and hang them back. I do know the difference between right and wrong sometimes, though it is obscured by experience. And there is something about Las Vegas that invites the illegal. And it's not just the hookers who solicit both my sons, though one of them looks like he's barely out of high school.

Criminality must run in the family, I reflect later. Or at least a deep conviction that the rules don't apply. We are in my brother's club having Thanksgiving dinner. He lives in a gated community in Henderson. They take their security and their landscaping seriously. And there is a clubhouse, more for convenience than conviviality. Membership is obligatory, as is a monthly minimum charged. So, begrudgingly, my brother eats there. In fact, he reports to us he has recently escaped the children's section, to which he was relegated after putting a plastic worm into a salad and then pointing it out to the horrified server.

Today they have given us a large, round table. Around us the room is thronged with families of some stripe or another. The ladies have all had their hair colored, blown out, and shellacked with hairspray; the men wear blue blazers with gold buttons. We are all on seconds. My brother's shaggy toupee is a little askew; it looks like a convivial, napping animal. My cousin has slowed down a little, but he's talking to my older son about puts and calls or some such. He is a money guy, a millionaire and a miser. Two adolescent girls, leggy and sweet-faced, scoot around our table on the way to the buffet. They are wearing skirts so short you fear for them when they bend over, heaping sweet potatoes onto their plates. The view is one of the other glories of Thanksgiving, I suppose, along with roast beef dripping with blood and fat, trays of iced shrimp and oysters, and the inevitable turkey.

"Shrimp!" my brother declares. They are definitely the most expensive of the foods offered on a per-ounce basis, and that is a calculation he has done.

"You guys are wimps," he suggests to my boys; they have faltered after second servings. He's already on his feet, empty plate in hand. He hands it to a passing server and heads for the buffet unhindered. He's a big guy, my brother; bulky, not fat. Thick.

He kind of lumbers but that's more an attitude than a physical necessity. I sit and ruminate, watching my kids joking, and contemplate another run at the salad. Maybe a few more hearts of palm. My brother returns, the new plate piled with oysters and shrimp.

"Do you like oysters?" I ask, surprised.

"Not particularly. Did you bring plastic bags?"

"No."

"Could have fit a lot." He gestures at the purse slung over my chair.

"What d'you do with them? Feed them to the cats?"

"Eat them eventually."

"I can take cookies," I counter. "I can wrap them in napkins." And then I get a sudden memory of my mother slipping dinner rolls into her purse wrapped in a cloth napkin. Now that was theft. No one ever ate them that I remember, but they were always there, just in case.

What is it to steal, what is it to earn? Have we earned, in any way, the bounty that we possess in this moment of our fleeting lives? Of my fleeting life, this momentary bounty. This is how the meal began:

Jed, my youngest, took his brother's hand and my brother's hand—I could see his hesitation, but he let Jed take his paw in his smaller hand. And then he said, "Let's all say what we are thankful for." It's his tradition, not mine, but I wait my turn, listening. There is such a truthfulness and sweetness to what they say, these children of mine. I listen and then I say it—well, most of it, what I am grateful for: my children, my freedom, my health, and great good luck. My brother listens; he doesn't speak but he holds Jed's hand and mine. It's then I realize that I am not a thief after all. I may feel unworthy or undeserving, but there is no way to steal the happiness I feel. It is simply a gift.

Other People's Music by Cynthia Aarons

To the backdrop of Regan's echoing words *Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall*—I took piano lessons. When no one was looking, my favorite thing to play instead of practicing was Animal from *Sesame Street* (if he played piano) and Don Music, the frustrated composer. I dramatized Don Music's cries when he couldn't remember the next note and the screeches of elation when he played like a concert pianist. Or I played "Thunderstorm," every novice's best number. I started with a gentle rain tickling the upper register of the highest octaves, then as "Animal," cascading down into a violent, formidable nightmare of the booming keys, a roar that would be the perfect soundtrack to any mansion murder. It was in these moments that I was a messenger of a distant music that I alone was privileged to hear and transmit. Eighty-eight keys produce a million variations of twelve notes. I could feel the power of the keys stretched out before me, realizing that any melody could be played by any ambidextrous child. The piano teaches children that anything in the world is possible.

Miss V was my piano teacher. She was also the vocal music director of three different grade schools and one junior high. Miss V had no eyebrows. She drew them on with an oily brown make-up pencil, the thick kind that leaves a permanent clown upside down smile over each eye. Her olive tanned forehead was always smeared in a glossy sheen. Her big glasses, the plastic kind the 80s were known for, a direct revolt against the librarian half-glasses of the 1950s and 60s, magnified her eyes and reflected her face in the Coke bottle corners. Miss V had a block tummy, like a book hidden under her shirt, that fell over the waistline with an even roll all the way around. It looked like the door to a dumbwaiter that if open would reveal afternoon treats: Battenberg cakes and cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off and a pot of steaming tea, the tall slender silver kind, spouting upward with the elegance of a giraffe's head. It was not a good look. I noted her odd shape at seven am every other day of the week as I arrived for choir practice. I sat sleepily in the front row of the sopranos, my stomach full of scrambled eggs and toast, and I silently noted, without

fully acknowledging the significance to myself, all the beauty atrocities I would never commit as an adult. I would never become her.

My piano lessons took place at Miss V's house, a 70s yellow brick ranch with a picture window looking out on a yard that didn't get enough sun. The too soft ground seemed always to be covered by wet leaves and hollowed out branches from the one tree in the center of her yard. It, along with the other trees in the neighborhood, created a tunnel over the shady one-lane street. Her tree had a tire swing tied to its sturdiest branch, something I never understood because she had no children. Every time I walked up the path to her front door I wondered about it—an unspoken question in the back of my mind—did the former owners put it there, or did she? And who was it for? Did Miss V look at it from her picture window and dream of children who might one day play on it? Did the neighbors' children use it? Nieces and nephews? Or did it twist in the gentle wind every summer, unoccupied by children or laughter, still full of autumn leaves and April rainwater?

In the summer, Miss V kept the front door open with the screen door closed to let in the cool breezes that the shady trees of her neighborhood created. In the Midwest, the humidity could be eighty percent or higher, which meant 85 felt like 105, and none of us had air conditioning. So the only things that made getting through the summer bearable were screen doors and screen windows at opposite ends of the house that created a cross breeze along with Oster fans—rotating models angled to blow on your face, and large square ones that sat inside windows to suck out the hot air. As I walked up Miss V's path, feeling sweat underneath my clothes and the oppressive heat on my neck, I encountered the most wonderful thing in the world: piano music coming through an open window. At first, I couldn't tell if it was Joe or Miss V. Joe was two years older (and my neighbor) and a lot better at the piano than I was (his Catholic parents made him practice). But soon I could tell the difference. Miss V was extraordinary—the technical precision was unparalleled. Her man-like, calloused fingers, one or more usually wrapped in a Band-aid from playing so much, and her square powerful hands hit every note without a mistake, ever.

Over time, I heard something else during my weekly visits that I couldn't explain at first. By the next summer, I walked up to her screen door with a new sense of dread,

a gnawing, tugging pain in my stomach, and each step closer to her was an involuntary act that I recognized as self-sabotage. Although Miss V's playing was technically accurate, including the crescendos and sudden shifts to *piano legato*—there was absolutely no feeling in her playing. I can't call it music now. Even at that age, my pre-pubescent, still innocent, naive wondering self knew that Miss V's playing was cold, devoid of emotion and color. I vowed never to let my music become like hers. I vowed I would never become like her.

As a family friend, Miss V shared personal information with my mother. I remember the day my mother got off the phone with someone talking about Miss V and "her condition." She hung up the receiver attached to the wall next to the kitchen door, its curly cord that could uncurl and stretch through the dining room to the entrance of the living room or all the way to the stove if necessary, recoiling against the wall as she returned the handset to its home. With a cluck in her throat—the one that meant, "Isn't it a shame?"—Mom said she hoped Miss V would recuperate soon, and she declared she would make a casserole for Miss V.

The casserole: an invention that probably originated in the 1930s but really gained traction in the 1980s: egg noodles from a plastic bag, a glob of Cream of Chicken soup, a glob of Cream of Celery soup, a quarter of a bell pepper, a small onion, and bam you have a meal that can feed 500 people.

Etiquette in small Midwestern towns was rigidly and happily adhered to. Death? A casserole. Bridal shower? A casserole. Baby shower? Potluck? Any party, including major holidays? Casserole! You switched it up with a different canned meat or something festive on top like dried onion rings. You just had to label your pan with a piece of masking tape and a permanent marker. Except for Vera K's casseroles and my mom's, which actually tasted good, the rule for the casserole beneficiary was to store the casseroles in a deep freeze, the one in the cellar shaped like a coffin, packed with ice cream, deer meat, and twenty-five cent plastic Corelle containers of frozen corn waiting for a tornado to take off the roof. After a polite month, the beneficiary was allowed to thaw a casserole, feed it to the dog (or put it on the burn pile for the neighborhood strays), and give back the pan. If you gave back the pan too soon, everyone would know what you did. If you waited longer than six months, it meant you stole their pan. Either way, you would no longer receive casseroles, which you might appreciate but only at the cost of not being liked, which in a small town could be unrecoverable. These and other rules I learned as a child without anyone explaining them to me. I learned that the gift of a casserole accompanied the most serious events of life, especially those we did not talk about in detail in the Midwest, if at all.

Mom seemed particularly troubled as she stood next to the phone. Because Miss V was my piano teacher, I pressed my mother that day, but she wouldn't tell me, a child, what was wrong. I worried Miss V had cancer. I worried someone I knew would die. My mother assured me she wouldn't die, but it was clear the condition was as big as death, perhaps bigger, and I was not allowed to go to the hospital. Days later, I pressed my mother again. In a moment of weakness my mother revealed that Miss V had a "female condition." Amazingly, the tone of voice let me know she was referring to the part of the body that we truly never, ever talked about, something not even vaguely alluded to on TV except in tampon commercials. Many years later, I brought it up again. Mom shared that Miss V had had a hysterectomy, and visiting her at the hospital on the day of the "casserole phone call" was an ex-boyfriend, a well-respected music director from the next town who had jilted Miss V at the altar years before!

This was high drama indeed. And it was death. A death to possibilities, to something I could not put into words until now because it was so horrible and frightening to say out loud. Some people didn't get to have children. Or partners. Or happiness. My mother let me know without saying anything that this was one of the worst things that could happen to a woman. And I took Miss V's hysterectomy to be a stain connected to her singleness, to her not being chosen. It seemed to explain her music, too, the dead, rigid, robotic approach to the keys. Again, I decided I would never become like her.

During piano lessons and choir practice, even though I didn't know exactly what was wrong, I looked for signs of Miss V's "change." But I couldn't see anything wrong with her. She was always upbeat and projected her voice as though performing a solo in Carnegie Hall. Her energy frightened me. She seemed to lunge into life a bit too

enthusiastically, a bit too hyper. I took piano lessons from her for three years. But when I was eleven, she told me I had to trim my fingernails. I wanted to have sexy fingernails, as sexy as an eleven-year-old can have. I knew feminine nails were long and had learned from a teen magazine how to push back the cuticles with a stick and apply a base coat, two color coats, and the final clear coat without getting polish outside the nail. But Miss V said my nails were too long and were "impairing" my ability to play properly. She and I fought over how I held my hands over the keys, and she wanted me to study the 3 B's (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms). At a younger age I loved the Classics, but in my pre-teen years, I wanted to play Billy Joel. I wanted to jump on the keyboard and then onto the couch singing, *This is My Life!* (*Go ahead with your own life—leave me alone!*)

Miss V had dreams of making me her protégé. She wanted to "expand my repertoire" and increase "my range." When I learned of her plan to live vicariously through my life as a professional pianist, or at least as a fourth place winner at State recitals, I panicked. And for one of the few times in my life, I stood up for myself. I told my mother I was quitting piano. I stopped pretending to practice and really started to sound horrible. Miss V and I both knew it was a sham. My mother told me, *You will regret this for the rest of your life.* She urged me to think it over for a couple of months. But after a while she let me quit. I quit the choir also to avoid eye contact, to avoid the fact that Miss V embarrassed me and frightened me, and to avoid admitting to myself that I missed the piano.

I could not take piano lessons from a different teacher because in a small-town Miss V would find out. It would be an insult I would never commit. So I practiced on my own and even improved quite a lot in the next years, but without technical guidance, I peaked early and stayed there. I secretly longed for music. I would play Eric Satie and Debussy with passion, as long as no one else was in the house. I could be the faint heart of someone who had loved and lost or the fiery self-made woman who led a Bohemian life that caused men to fall at her feet. I mourned over Apartheid, humanitarian crises in Somalia, and homelessness. I played with a deep conviction that I could be anything, do anything, and that I could save the world.

Now I have lived in San Francisco for more than ten years. Passionate types are a dime a dozen here, and some actually save the world. I never went to South Africa to end Apartheid, didn't stick with the homeless ministry I joined when I first moved, and now work two jobs, nearly to my own death, and I am, just like Miss V, single and childless. I am probably five years older than Miss V was when she had her hysterectomy, but unlike Miss V, I never had a man value me enough—if even in a moment of reckless abandon—to offer to meet me at the altar. I've contemplated adopting through Foster Care and becoming a single parent, but I have come to accept that at least for now I cannot do it alone, not financially, not logistically, not emotionally.

The world I inherited from Women's Liberation (though I am thankful for it overall) and Steve Jobs is one in which I have more education than my parents and older siblings, with fewer job opportunities—yet, I'm supposed to be successful in a profession and have kids (through IVF) and postpone marriage indefinitely if not forever because if necessary I can do it alone. We're supposed to work all the time wherever we are with all our documents in a cloud, readable on a tablet as thin as a fifty-cent piece ... on a date, in transit, even at the top of small mountains looking out at the vast world below ... the Me Generation turned iPhone turned *a thousand points of light* all converging in my kitchen from all my devices, the lines between work and the personal erased as quickly as a Venmo Smartphone kiss.

When I go home, an empty hallway table greets me where plants once sat until they wilted in shadows, leaving a blank gray wall. I binge watch Netflix and eat slices of cheese pizza for dinner. Is there someone out there with the same ache I have watching the entire oeuvre of *Friends*? Are there others reaching out to the rest of our X generation/Ancient-Millennials, especially those still single, unwilling to use online dating because it's too much like ordering toilet paper on Amazon? Perhaps Netflix will connect us, given that it knows more about our daily lives than eharmony ever could—the unvarnished, raw pain of loneliness recorded on our Watch List cue, the muted shades of TV light dancing on our faces as it changes from scene to scene to blackout.

And what about the dream of saving the world? As a community college instructor, I honestly don't think anything could shock me—I've taught a Lost Boy who witnessed his father being macheted while his village burned down, a twenty-year old

mother I took to a women's shelter, a boy whose stomach was eviscerated by an IED in Iraq, a woman who witnessed her uncle executed in the street during the Cultural Revolution, a woman who escaped her violent husband by jumping off the ledge of a building, and countless students with precarious financial and immigration statuses.

I taught all of them how to use a comma, and I tried to give them hope. But I have not corrected the wrongs done to them and cannot undo the trajectory of trauma and misfortune. In the endless cycle of trying to make enough money to pay the always increasing rent in San Francisco, meet the needs of overcrowded classrooms, and complete ridiculous amounts of committee work, I can't fit saving the world into my Google calendar.

Is there a man out there who is tired of this treadmill, too, whose B12 shots are no longer working?—*Stop the Madness*! Is he unavailable because he is living in a biodome saving icebergs in Antarctica or trekking solo on foot in Nepal, knowing that I am so special he will have to look in the most remote place on earth? Or is all the evidence pointing to the end of a fantasy that kept me alive through the darkest times? Or perhaps the darkest times are yet to come. What is the next delusional hope to pull me through?

In reality, I never could have been a concert pianist. My hands are too small. I can barely reach an octave, and so a lot of the more complex works are just physically too hard. And frankly, I never wanted to be the kind of person who plays other people's music. But my mother's voice is right there, *You will regret this for the rest of your life.* She was right. My heart cries out every day for music. For the past two years, I haven't been able to listen to music of any kind because the melodies make my cold life seem so pathetic in comparison. Today I can listen to the radio occasionally, but I find myself listening to the news and traffic reports more and more often.

Now I see Miss V's empty swing. I can see her at the window, and I feel sure a woman who devoted her life to bringing music to children probably wanted some of her own. Yes, I'm certain she imagined her own children playing on the swing and a husband to watch through the window with her. I'm sure she felt trapped in our little

community—where would she have possibly met eligible men there at her age? (I can't even find one suitable man in this great world-famous city of romance!)

I see myself walking up the path, the inevitable steps to my own tragedy, as she played inside her front living room, pounding the notes, getting them right, doing them justice, that cold, lifeless shell. And now, I finally understand her.

Rhiannon by Kelsie Shaw

She left me on a Tuesday, three years after we met, one year after I realized I loved her. We weren't together, though, not romantically anyway. Still, this felt like a breakup. I sat across from Rhiannon at a table at The Spot Cafe and stared at the small chai latte cooling in my hands while she told me she didn't want to talk to me anymore. I was too needy. I drained her. She needed space. I sobbed louder than I ever have in public, loud enough to catch glimpses of strangers peering at me from behind their laptop screens. She said we'd cross paths again someday, but I haven't seen her since.

We were friends in high school; we tried to remain friends in college. When I think about Rhiannon, I have to remind myself that she was never my lover, that we were never anything beyond two young women who enjoyed each other's company. We were close, emotionally: We could talk about almost anything—my depression, her father's death, our mutual anxiety about our futures. But Rhiannon and I were never close physically, no matter how much I wished we were. Sex, love, and romance were the only topics we would never discuss: If she mentioned a boyfriend, an ex, or merely hinted at a sexual experience, my face would get hot; I'd squirm in my seat. I never found out if she identified as straight, or bi, or something else, not that I could answer that question for myself; I don't think I wanted to know. When she pointed out my awkwardness, I told her that my family never discussed intimacy (which was true), and that I just wasn't as comfortable with sexuality as she was. I could never admit that I wanted her to want those things with me.

Sometimes, when I think back to the afternoon we met in September of 2011, I imagine falling in love at first sight: I tell myself that when I walked into my first day of German class, Rhiannon's voice or laugh or smile seized my attention and propelled me into a state of love-struck bliss. That would make a pretty story, but I know it's not true. I didn't think much of Rhiannon when I met her; although I thought she seemed likeable, friendly enough, she was just another acquaintance. In fact, I found her strange. She didn't talk the way other people I knew did: She thought before she spoke—you could

see her looking inward and choosing her words—and everything she said verged on whimsical. Rhiannon could quote *Winnie-the-Pooh* in one sentence and Shakespeare in the next; she referenced *The Sound of Music* or *The Wizard of Oz* daily; she sang to herself, often her favorite "Que Sera Sera," never caring who heard. On the day we met, I was a new student at our tiny private high school, and the first thing Rhiannon asked me was to describe myself in three words. I don't think anyone had ever taken such an earnest and polite interest in me before, which was enough to make me think she was weird.

I did notice immediately that we looked alike. Same wavy chestnut hair that frizzed in humidity, same slightly curvy build, same chocolate brown eyes, except hers were rimmed with rainbows when the sun hit them just right. But, unlike me, Rhiannon loved her body, and always seemed so comfortable in it; there was an effortless grace about her, from the way she flipped her hair over her shoulder to how she leaned back in a chair, that betrayed an innate strength of self and an awareness of that strength. It was this that first drew me to her: the sight of a girl who could pass as my sister inhabiting her body and her being in a way I had not yet figured out.

I should not have been surprised that the first person I loved was a woman, but I was. I can't remember if there were any indications in my childhood that I wasn't exactly straight: I don't recall ever having a crush on a girl; I have always appeared traditionally feminine, if appearance indicates sexuality; I certainly never "experimented" with anyone, ever. But I do remember learning about sex, the straight kind, and thinking it a strange affair. When asked if I thought a guy was attractive, I'd shrug my shoulders or give a weak "yeah, sure." I know I was captivated by any same-sex relationship I found in literature or history. Most of all, I could never imagine being some man's wife.

I wasn't aware of the word "queer" in its modern usage until my freshman year of college, around the time I was beginning to understand my feelings for Rhiannon. Not long before that, I discovered the Kinsey Scale; the thought that people did not come in only "straight" and "gay" varieties fascinated me. I spent many hours sliding myself up and down the scale, trying to figure out where to land—was I a three, capable of attraction to both men and women? Or was I just a one or a two, a mostly-straight girl with exceptions? I couldn't possibly be a six, could I? I never picked a number. Kinsey's

spectrum was still too limiting. "Queer" seemed more spacious, more open to possibilities. But, being a word lover, "queer" to me meant strange, unsavory, downright peculiar. And although I was confused, and overwhelmed, and slightly scared of being a lesbian, I didn't think there was anything queer about love, in any form. So I couldn't be that, either.

Did it really matter who I was attracted to, though, if I was too nervous to talk to anyone? I told myself it did not. What I remember most from my romantic development is that I tried hard not to have one. While other girls were identifying the classroom heartthrobs and, eventually, dating them, I was studying. I told myself I was above love: I was a thinker, a bright one, and caring about romance would only distract me from my studies, which I would not allow. I realize now that my strict adherence to intellectual life was a disguise that masked my true desire for a relationship. If I was honest with myself, I wanted to be loved more than I wanted to be brilliant, but I feared all nonfamilial love was off-limits to me, though I could not articulate why. I knew I couldn't talk to anyone without my throat tightening around my breaths and my heart racing as if for a trophy. Given my social awkwardness and anxiety, all romantic issues were incomprehensible: How do you even get into such a situation, first finding a potential partner, and then forming a relationship that would involve intimacy, emotional or physical? What are the steps involved, the rules to follow? I still cannot answer those questions. I was sure I was incapable of any kind of intimacy; I could not imagine anyone ever being attracted to anxious, emotional me. So I refused all labels, and love itself. It's easy to say you don't want what you think you can never have.

Not long after we met, I discovered that Rhiannon played classical piano, like I did. Music became the glue that bound us: We played pieces for each other on our school's piano; we spent hours comparing Chopin to Tchaikovsky to Rachmaninoff; we made lists of the pieces we dreamed of playing, including duets to learn together.

Rhiannon and I went to a concert once during senior year. It was my first classical concert, given by a pianist at our town's college. That night, I spent an hour getting ready, assembling an outfit of my favorite cream-colored lace dress, a black shawl, and the glossy black stilettos I wore on only the most special occasions.

Completely overdressed, I told myself that classical performances were more formal than a typical concert, so I must prepare accordingly. But, in retrospect, I think I really wanted to look good for Rhiannon. I had started admiring her style—black and white dresses almost daily, matching cardigan tied up around her waist, signature red paisley scarf, curled hair pinned in faux victory rolls. I found myself looking at her a lot, quick glances here and there when her attention was elsewhere; I thought I just wanted to see how she looked that day, to see if she had deviated from her almost formulaic wardrobe, but there was a deeper motive that I couldn't name, or didn't want to. My heart pounded as my eyes traced her form, following her profile down to the slope of her shoulders and lingering on her strong but slender hands. I had never felt sexual attraction before; I didn't have a clue how to recognize it. So I ignored these impulses, denied them outright. I told myself I was simply appreciating a beautiful person, as if Rhiannon was walking art, an ancient statue of Aphrodite sprung to life. I was comfortable with admitting that much.

I don't remember what Rhiannon wore the night of the concert, though I probably noticed then. All I do remember is that I could have stayed there in the shadowed seat of that concert hall for eternity, basking in the thought that next to me was someone who wanted me with her.

I first heard the Fleetwood Mac song "Rhiannon" when I was three or four, on one of the afternoons when my mother, a long-time Stevie Nicks fan, would slide one of her CDs into our stereo and dance with me around our small, wood-paneled living room. Some days we would twirl in circles to "Bella Donna," and others we would jump around to "Edge of Seventeen;" on particularly special days we would sing "Leather and Lace" with me on Stevie's part, Mom on Don Henley's. Though I don't remember hearing "Rhiannon" specifically, I am sure my mother played it; the music didn't matter to me nearly as much as the fun I had dancing with her.

When I started going to school, I forgot those afternoons in the living room. I didn't think about Stevie Nicks or Fleetwood Mac or "Rhiannon" again until my first semester of college. Driving home one evening in December and listening to the local oldies station, I heard the opening sixteenth-note guitar riff of "Edge of Seventeen" and

was suddenly back in my old living room, bouncing around with my once thirty-five-yearold mother. I went straight to my computer the moment I got home, opened up YouTube, and listened to every Stevie Nicks or Fleetwood Mac song I could find.

And then I found "Rhiannon." I must have listened to it ten times in a row. Stevie's lyrics, crooned over a simple a-minor chord progression, mesmerized me. The song tells of Rhiannon, the Welsh goddess of horses, birds, and the moon; flocks of birds follow her and chirp tunes that ease pain. With a name meaning either "Great Queen" or "White Witch," she appears in the first and third volumes of *The Mabinogion*, a Medieval collection of Welsh stories. According to legend, Rhiannon leaves her spiritual world when she falls in love with a human, but runs away from him when he attempts to return her affections—she'll lose her powers if she marries a mortal. In the end, the two do marry, but Stevie only wrote about the enchanting yet elusive goddess. I didn't know that story until after many months of listening to the song, not that it mattered. To me, "Rhiannon" was, and is, about a woman terrified of getting hurt, of people she loves leaving her. Maybe it's happened before; she wonders what she has to do to make them stay—must she promise them heaven? So she flies away "like a fine skylark," never stopping anywhere, letting herself be "taken by the sky." What she doesn't realize is that someone would "love to love her," if only she let herself get close.

Somehow, I never thought about my own Rhiannon when I listened to the song— I thought only of myself. This song was mine.

The summer after graduation brought on one of my more troubling depressive episodes. I've never handled changes or transitions gracefully. At least Rhiannon and I would be staying in the same town, and that knowledge was enough to keep me from a total breakdown—I had someone to see, someone to talk to. I called her a few times that summer, just to hear her voice. I don't remember what we talked about, if we talked about anything; sometimes I just cried, and she listened. I didn't mind though—even the sound of her breathing told me I wasn't alone.

Many of those phone calls ended with us meeting at a coffee shop or her apartment, on the days my depression was dim enough to accept her invitation. We didn't do much beyond chatting about the music we were learning and the books we

were reading—our relationship was comprised largely of conversations, with the occasional concert thrown in. Still, this was more than I'd ever had. I remember trying, subtly, to make everything we did together last longer: suggest another place to go; start a new conversation; ask her anything I could think of. Every minute with Rhiannon was a minute I was not alone. I think she caught on to my minor manipulations eventually. I wonder, now, how much they pushed her away.

Although I cannot pinpoint a moment when I realized my love for Rhiannon was more than friendly, I know this summer was when things changed—on my end, anyway. Every time we met, I tried to ignore how her eyes brightened when she talked about something she loved, or how pretty she looked no matter what she wore or what she was doing. I began to think everything she said was perfect: Her references to old films I once found odd were now adorable; her singing under her breath became more beautiful than a Liszt melody. You could say I was infatuated, but I didn't think so then. I thought this was the simplest and most honest love there was, a love that was felt and given but did not demand anything in return. I struggle, now, to think it was anything else.

You would have thought she died by how I reacted to Rhiannon's departure. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep; I went to class but couldn't focus. I still managed to get As, if only because studying gave me something else to think about. Otherwise, it was always Rhiannon. When I wasn't in class, I either slept or banged out Chopin nocturnes, the tears in my eyes blending the black and white keyboard into a column of gray.

Rhiannon's ghost followed me wherever I went. Everything reminded me of her: the cafes where we once sat; Rachmaninoff and Ravel; the hand-knit blanket she gave me; my own reflection. I avoided any place we had gone together; I drove miles out of my way so I wouldn't pass by her neighborhood. Even in sleep, I saw her: Nightly I dreamt I was searching for her through tangled woods or congested city streets, and I would come so close, within inches, only for her image to disappear. I'd wake up breathless and weeping, unable to fall back asleep.

I started listening to "Rhiannon" almost daily; I memorized all the lyrics to every version, and they flew around my mind constantly, chirping like the birds that follow the

mythical goddess. If I was alone at home, I would don my most Stevie-esque black embroidered shawl, turn up my laptop's volume, and twirl around in circles to the music.

It didn't hurt to hear her name repeated over and over, although I am still not sure why. Maybe it was because I was not aware of the song for the first two years of knowing my Rhiannon, and when I did hear it, we were still friends—the title was just a coincidence. But really, I think I identified with the mythical, musical version of Rhiannon too strongly to think of anyone but myself. Wasn't I as elusive and mysterious as the goddess, a fellow "cat in the dark"? I've flown away from everyone I've ever cared about like a "bird in flight," except for my own Rhiannon. So who would be my lover? Not her, I knew. But someone would "love to love" me, right? Would I ever win?

"Did something happen between you and Rhiannon? You don't talk about her anymore."

I don't remember what spurred my mother's question. We were eating lunch silently across from each other at our kitchen table, both typing on our laptops. I had never noticed that I talked about Rhiannon, apparently enough for my mother to notice that I stopped. She was right though—I didn't talk about her anymore. "There isn't anything to say." Although we both knew there was more to say, a lot more, the conversation ended there.

A few weeks later, my psychologist asked a similar question: "What exactly went on between you two?" Dr. Sullivan was, at this point, the only person who knew Rhiannon and I were no longer friends, and the only one who'd seen me cry over my loss. But her question was different than my mother's: She wasn't asking me if the friendship ended, but if the friendship was strictly—platonically—a friendship. An inexplicable increase in the tension between us signaled her next question. "Kelsie, this might sound weird, and please correct me if I'm wrong, but ... did you maybe love her ... as more than a friend?"

Shit, she knows. Somehow, I did not expect a psychologist with decades of experience to figure that out. I never answered Dr. Sullivan's question—my immediate bawling was enough to confirm her suspicions.

"Are you ashamed of that, that you loved a woman?"

I gasped for air, but hardly found any. "No." And it was true, I wasn't ashamed that I loved a woman. But I was ashamed of loving *that* woman, whom I knew wasn't interested in me in the same way, whose actual friendship I did value more than the imagined future I wished for. I was ashamed of not knowing better.

What followed my appointment was the most intense panic attack I've ever suffered; it felt how I imagine suffocating feels, except the heart pounding and breathlessness lasted for hours instead of minutes. Although I really wasn't ashamed of my now-confirmed Sapphic tendencies, I told myself the day I knew I loved Rhiannon that I would go to my grave with that knowledge. But now the secret was out, spoken, known by someone other than myself. My body didn't know how to handle that stress. I almost drove myself to the emergency room, but I feared crashing my car on the way, and if I did get there, I sure didn't want to explain the problem.

I pretended to be asleep on the couch when my mother came home from work that night. After she retreated to her and my father's bedroom to watch TV, I padded down the hall, crawled into her bed, and curled up under the covers. The television clicked off when I started crying.

"Kels, what's wrong?"

I turned my face away from her, choosing instead to examine the folds in her taupe linen sheets. "There's something I should probably tell you. I don't really want to, but Dr. Sullivan brought it up in our session today and now I can't stop thinking about it."

A pause. "It's about Rhiannon, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I don't remember what I said next. I must have sputtered out something about how I loved Rhiannon as more than a friend, and that's why I'd been so sad lately, because the loss of her was more painful than it should have been. I know I wrapped my arms around my knees and sobbed; my fingertips tingled, the cells there searching for oxygen.

"I'm sorry, Kels. I'm sorry you hurt so much. I wish I could make you feel better." She patted my arm, stroked my hair. She was crying too.

"I know, Mom. Thanks." I fell asleep right there, my face wet and eyes swollen, next to my mother in her bed. This became a habit for months, lying with my mother on

nights when I was too sad to be alone. We hardly ever spoke; I'd cry, and she'd hug me. Never have I felt more like a child.

I have been told many times, mostly by my family, that I would not know how to love someone. Rather, I would not know how to distinguish love from loneliness—I would love anyone who gave me any attention. Although she did comfort me on the night I told her about Rhiannon, my mother also said I was just "confused." I was "wrong about that." What I really loved, according to her, was having a companion, and not the companion herself. I couldn't help but wonder if she would have said the same thing if I was confessing my love for a man, but it didn't matter in the moment. I was afraid my mother was right, though I didn't want to believe her. I *was* lonely, I *did* long for someone to spend time with and talk to. Did that mean any affection I would ever have for someone would actually be a fear of loneliness, manifesting as love? Or are longing and loneliness two separate but easily conflated things?

Just as I have to remind myself that Rhiannon and I were never in a romantic relationship, I have to remind myself that I did love her. I know I did. I felt most like myself when I was around her; I felt I *could* be myself around her, not only because she was someone like me, but because she liked me. Although I am sure our similarities were what drew me to Rhiannon, I truly loved her for her. I loved her for the ways she was like me, and I loved her for the ways she wasn't. Of course I loved having a companion, but I loved having *her* as my companion; I wouldn't have felt the same way about anyone else.

I was not confused, as my mother believed and still believes. But, she was not entirely wrong: My longing for closeness did propel me toward Rhiannon. But isn't such a longing the basis of all friendships and partnerships and marriages? What are relationships, of any kind, if not remedies for loneliness?

About four months after Rhiannon ended our friendship, I read Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of My Life." *Just what I need*, I thought, looking at the title, *another love story*. But the essay is not a love story, not in the cheesy "rom-com" way I was expecting. Instead, Strayed attempts to cope with her mother's death through bouts of sexual promiscuity and heroin addiction. Meanwhile, an older and more healed Strayed intersperses her memories with critiques of modern attitudes toward grieving—she argues that grief doesn't progress in clearly-defined stages, and that all losses are not equal. But what struck me about the essay, what made me burst into tears the first time I read it, were the repeated lines, "I want my mother. My mother is dead," and "I cannot continue to live." I thought the pain of Strayed's loss resonated with my own; had I written this essay two years ago, I would have written, "I want my friend. My friend left me. How can I continue to live?"

But I hadn't lost anyone, not really. No one died. I could still call Rhiannon's number and expect an answer; I could punch her name into Facebook's search bar and find out what she was doing and where she lived. I would have been one of the people who tells Strayed about their minor losses that they equate with death. Did that mean I had no right to grieve?

I don't think so. But I am aware that there was no narrative for my grief, not when the intensity of grief I felt is reserved for the deaths of family members and real romantic partners. There is no Hallmark card that says, "I'm sorry for the loss of your best friend with whom you were in love even if nothing romantic ever happened between you." No one sent me flowers.

I'm afraid I've written myself as a cold-hearted woman's innocent victim, but Rhiannon did not leave me without cause. I was not just a sometimes sad but otherwise loveable friend, as I often thought of myself. I could be clingy, and desperately so. I know I was, as she told me, needy. If she did not return my text messages within a few hours, I'd text again. I'd panic if she was late to meet me somewhere (resulting in more sent messages). I told her, on at least a few occasions, "I don't know what I'd do without you." That's a lot of pressure to put on one person. I'd need space too.

I was worse after she left, though. I'd call her, and hit voicemail; I'd text to no reply. Eventually, I decided to write her a letter, partly because Dr. Sullivan suggested it, but mostly because I could not imagine anyone rejecting a beautifully-crafted letter of apology, written in my neatest cursive on my best stationary. I don't remember what I wrote, except that I was sorry, and that anxiety made connection hard for me, but depression made loss worse, and that I was a little bit crazy, but I'd be whatever friend she wanted me to be if she'd just come back. I would not admit it, but I believed—I wanted so badly to believe—that if I put the perfect words in the perfect order, in the perfect tone, at the perfect time, she would forgive me, and we could continue on as friends, laughing about the mistake we almost made. I sent out the letter. Nothing.

About six months after sending that letter, I texted Rhiannon in a final effort to win her back. Actually, I don't think I wanted to "win her back" so much as I just wanted to see her, to know how she was doing, to remember she was real. I said I was feeling better, a lot better (an exaggeration). I asked if she wanted to get coffee sometime and catch up. Short and casual— how could she refuse? But she did refuse, and, apparently, had moved away. All I remember of her message is the last line: "Kelsie, you have an incredible future ahead of you." Somehow, reading that was worse than hearing her say goodbye, because I knew she was right. I did have an incredible future ahead of me, maybe even a future with someone who loved me back, but the thought that I would have to live that future without her tore me in two. Could I really be happy in this future? Could I possibly move on? What hurt was that the answer to both of those questions was "yes."

I want to say that I accept Rhiannon's choice; I want to accept that she lives her own life, and is smart enough to know what she doesn't want in it, even if I am one of those things. But I'm not sure I can. Although I forgive her for the pain she caused me and I do forgive her, I forgave her the moment she walked away from me—I wish she knew that I was not myself when I was depressed. I clung to her with all my might because I believed I would die if I lost her—the melancholic mind requires something to live for, and often grabs hold of the nearest person. I wouldn't do that now. Maybe it doesn't matter.

I like to think, if I ever saw Rhiannon again, she would greet me as if it was only yesterday that we went to a concert together or talked about books over coffee. I like to think I would curse her out and saunter off, hips swaying, tables turned. But I know better. I know I would be happy to see her, overjoyed even. I don't think I would fall in love with her again, but I would want her friendship just as much as I did three years ago. Perhaps it is best, then, that we don't meet. I can't watch her leave again.

When my mother would tell me on the nights I wandered into her room that "time heals all wounds," I would scoff at the clichéd truism and ask her when time started practicing medicine. I was positive that some wounds were irreparable, and that this was one of them. Though I still believe that you never fully heal from grief, I admit that thinking of Rhiannon is easier now, almost three years later, than it has ever been. Most of the time, I can recall the joy she brought me without feeling the stab of loss in my heart; I can imagine her out in the world, wherever she is, without yearning for her to return. I can write this essay.

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Despite experiencing what was obviously a "queer" attraction, I am still as ambivalent about sexuality, and my sexuality, as I was when I was younger. I don't identify as anything, not straight, gay, bi, or queer. I can understand the comfort such labels bring so many people, that feeling of "yes, this is me," but every identity sounds like a song I don't know the words to, or a piece I'm playing in the wrong key—there's no harmony. And yet, I find something attractive in defying definition. I guess I'm like the goddess Rhiannon in this respect too—I won't be pinned down.

I still listen to "Rhiannon" frequently, sometimes dancing along, though I don't search for the same cathartic comfort in the lyrics like I used to. I hear hope instead. Maybe she is lonely, this Rhiannon, maybe she does fly away from love to protect herself from loss. But she's strong, too. She can survive on her own. Maybe someday, she'll find someone worth staying for. And someone who'd stay for her.

Alabama for Beginners by Jean Ryan

Receptionists, store clerks, civil servants—many people here call me Miss Jean. Surnames are largely ignored, as if they are only a nuisance, something that gets in the way. They also use "Ma'am" and "Sir" for punctuation, a habit I've already picked up, courtesy being contagious.

The women, old and young, employ all sorts of endearments: Hon, Baby, Sugar, Darlin. The first time I ordered a sandwich at the local Subway, the girl behind the counter buckled my knees with kindness. The fact that she was brutally overweight and not blessed with movie star beauty made her benevolence all the more touching. Courtesy seems reflexive here, a trait bequeathed at birth.

Four months ago, my wife and I moved from Napa Valley to coastal Alabama (we are originally from states in the east and traveled west for more breathing room). Many of our friends worried about how we would fare in a red state, particularly as a couple. I was apprehensive too, having lived forty years in the San Francisco bay area, haven to the LGBT community and epicenter of progressive politics. Hurricanes, humidity—these we knew we could weather. But censure, malice? How could we defend against being unwelcome?

Well, it appears that a pair of gray-haired lesbians is not sufficient cause for alarm, at least not in this neighborhood, a new development poised between rural and suburban. Folks greet us as we greet them, with smiles and handshakes. There could of course be more to it. Maybe my wife has gained standing by way of her new John Deere mower, the Ford Ranger she drives, or the shop she is having built. Maybe they like my plantings, the shutters we put up, the well we had dug. Our neighbors seem to respect these things, practicality being the benchmark of worth in the deep South.

You don't see many Jaguars or BMWs here. You see a lot of trucks, tractors and ATVs. The men driving these vehicles know how to fix them; they know how to fix and build all sorts of things. This is such a DIY kind of place that it can be difficult to locate a handyman for hire (forget about Yelp or Angie's List—folks here express themselves in person).

If you do find someone to hire, understand that the job might take a while. Workers move with deliberation, keeping pace with the temperature, lounging crosslegged through the frequent squalls. When weather is not a factor, scheduling often is, the union of subcontractors, equipment and supplies hinging on equal parts planning and luck. Being okay with delays, with weather, with whatever does or doesn't occur, is a southern artform. Urgency can get no purchase in this soggy, sultry expanse.

This easy-going approach is also evidenced in Alabama's municipal buildings, where matters are considered on a case by case basis, and homeowners are not harassed by punitive deadbolt rubrics. Clerks are merciful and will often bend the rules to accommodate citizens in a bind. If you're a California transplant, and especially one who owned a small business, this clemency when you first encounter it, will undo you.

Bending rules, looking the other way—these tactics are not always useful, particularly in relation to larger issues. Habituated to a part of the country where ecoconcerns dominate the culture, I am stunned by the shrugging disregard encountered here: the mindless distribution of plastic bags, the absence of curbside recycling, the store shelves bulging with herbicides and pesticides. Construction sites are littered with cigarette butts, beverage bottles and fast food cartons that blow far and wide in the wind. This trash accumulates as the building progresses and not until the sod is about to be installed is the property cleared, typically by a single laborer with a tractor. I think of the casual defilement, the builders dropping rubbish as if it is their right, and dismay engulfs me.

Reconciling the south's contradictions—lassitude on the one side, benevolence on the other—is a pointless pursuit and I am learning to dwell on the advantages instead. Most everything, for instance, is cheaper in Alabama—utilities, products, services. Gas is at least a dollar a gallon less than what I'm used to paying and homes prices, compared to Napa, are ridiculously low. I don't know if this is because sellers don't realize they can charge more or if they actually care more about people than profits. There *is* an expectation of fair dealing in the south, a collective innocence that keeps surprising me.

There are plenty of businesses I drive right past, things that don't pertain to me, like churches, gun stores, pawn shops. There is no shortage of enterprise and no

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shame if these ventures fail. People just toss the dice again and hope for a win; maybe a roller- skating rink next time, a snow cone shop. You see a lot of emergency clinics (all the DIYers?) and commodious hospitals, but I have yet to spot a plastic surgery center—I guess the demand is low. Perhaps people are easier on each other here; or maybe beauty, having little use, doesn't have much currency.

Coming from a state where properties crowd each other, where the landscape is chronically imperiled by drought and fire, I am grateful for the abundance of coastal Alabama: the spacious yards, the endless lawns, the tangled woods, the unabating flow of creeks and bayous. Land and water for miles and miles, all you could ever want. Animals too. Creatures nearly mythic in my Vermont memories are popping up everywhere now: cardinals, blue butterflies, yellow-bellied turtles, tree frogs—fireflies! Those floating beacons of my youth. All is not lost, they assure me, each time I see them blinking in the woods.

While this area's human population appears at ease, the flora and fauna are never at rest. Have you ever tried pulling a young saw palmetto out of a lawn? Don't bother. All you can do is snip the savage thing at ground level and acknowledge its imminent return. It has no choice. All it knows is life. Greenbrier is another opportunist in the lawn. While this plant can be yanked out more readily than palmetto, doing so is like playing whack-a-mole. In the time it takes you to prize the long white root from your turf, another upstart appears. I still have a red scar on my ankle from an attack by one of these thorny vines, before I understood that in order to survive in this jungle, one must move slowly and focus on the ground.

Reaching for the hose faucet a few weeks ago, I glimpsed a flash of movement not two feet from me. I gaped, amazed to see a snake so close, and not an innocent garden variety, but something coiled and menacing. I could tell from the triangular head that it was venomous, but not until my spouse came out with the trusty Audubon guide did I learn that it was a young cottonmouth whose bite causes intense pain, bleeding, swelling, nausea and potential amputation.

Yesterday a katydid landed on my back door. I peered through the glass at the leggy green bug, gradually becoming aware that it was missing the lower portion of its body; then I noticed it was also missing one of its hind legs. I don't imagine a katydid

can live for long without these vital parts, and I realized the injuries were fresh, that somewhere in my big green yard there was a frog or toad or snake with half a meal in its mouth.

I am adjusting, wising up to the environment, making room for new hobbies and habits. Bringing my cans and bottles to a recycling center instead of the front curb is not that onerous, and the humidity is manageable now that I've squared off with it. Finding fresh lettuce is a challenge, but the veggie beds we're building should solve that problem. My sister and brother-in-law are close by, which was a big factor in our decision to move here, and their company is a long-awaited comfort. I would of course like to unearth the gay community—there must be one, some brave little enclave waiting for reinforcements. On deeper reflection, maybe there is no enclave here, no separate community at all. Maybe these pockets are going the way of gay bars, no longer needed in this age of sexual fluidity, borders and labels all slipping away—now there's a happy thought.

Which reminds me of a funny story. The day after we moved in, one of our neighbors came over with a welcoming smile and a basket of local jams. We exchanged pleasantries and then she asked if we had found our people. Wow, I thought, admiring her frankness; had we misjudged this place? "The Lillian fellowship is right down the road," she continued, "but Mike and I go to the Presbyterian on 98."

What I like most about the south is the simple, durable goodwill. I can feel it changing me, softening me. Each morning my wife and I have coffee on the back patio and watch the sun come up through the pines. As we often come out before dawn, I sweep a flashlight beam across the cement, making sure we don't step on something that, like us, is not looking for any trouble, just a place to call home. The other day I saw a black wasp fly out of a small hole in the frame of my deck chair, reminding me of the swallows next door that made a nest in the open sewer pipe of the home under construction. You can find at least three wide-eyed frogs perched inside my hose reel box any time you lift the lid. Not for a minute does even the smallest crevice go to waste. There is panic in the air, the hum of a million creatures trying to stay alive.

I am just one of them, hoping my modest savings will last longer in Alabama than in California and that my new home will survive the storms I know are out there.

Contributors

Cynthia Aarons is the author of fiction, poetry, and memoir. She teaches composition and creative writing and has led support groups utilizing memoir writing and art therapy. She is the author of a mystery novel and a collection of personal essays.

Michelle Cacho-Negrete is a retired social worker who lives in Portland, Maine. She has published in numerous magazines. Four of her essays have been cited as most notable of the year, six have been nominated for a Pushcart, one won Best of The Net, she is in five anthologies, and was a runner-up in Brooklyn Literary Arts Contest. Her book *Stealing: Life in America* was published in October. Michelle co-edits for *Solstice Literary Magazine*. She works with students both in-person and on-line.

Eileen Cunniffe's nonfiction has appeared in many literary journals, including *Superstition Review, Hofstra Windmill, Bluestem Magazine* and *The RavensPerch*. Occasionally, her stories present themselves as prose poems. Three of her essays have been recognized with Travelers' Tales Solas Awards and another received the *Emrys Journal* 2013 Linda Julian Creative Nonfiction Award. More about her work may be found at: <u>www.eileencunniffe.com</u>.

Patrick Dobson is a writer, scholar, and college professor living in Kansas City, MO. The University of Nebraska Press published his travel memoirs, *Canoeing the Great Plains: A Missouri River Summer* in 2015 and *Seldom Seen: A Journey into the Great Plains* in 2009. *Canoeing the Great Plains* won the 2016 High Plains Book Award in creative nonfiction and the Thorpe Menn Literary Excellence Award. His essays and poems have been published in *New Letters, daCunha, Kansas City Star, Garo, Wood Coin*, and others. He earned a doctorate in American History and Literature at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2013. Patrick has edited books, taught journalism, and been a union ironworker. He now teaches American History, Modern Latin American History, and Western Civilization at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, KS. **Gary Fincke's** latest collection of personal essays *The Darkness Call* won the 2017 Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose and was published in early 2018 by Pleiades Press. His collections of stories have won the Flannery O'Connor Prize and the Elixir Press Fiction Prize, and earlier nonfiction books were published by Michigan State and Stephen F. Austin.

Marlena Fiol, PhD, is a world-renowned author, scholar, speaker, and a spiritual seeker whose writing explores the depths of who we are and what's possible in our lives. Her most recent essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Summerset Review*, *Under the Sun* and *The Furious Gazelle*, among others. A sampling of her publications on identity and learning are available at <u>marlenafiol.com</u>

Karen Galatz is the author of *Muddling through Middle Age*, which offers a light-hearted look each week at the perils and pleasures of being a woman of a certain age. An award-winning television and print journalist, Karen's national credits include the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* and *The Nightly Business Report*. Now a Berkeley, California resident, she is a columnist for *J*. and a contributing writer for *Humor Outcasts*. Her stories have appeared in numerous other publications.

John Garcia lives in central Florida. A former social worker, he now works as a freelance writer.

Danusha Goska is a recipient of a New Jersey State Council on the Arts Grant, and a Stephen King Haven Grant. Her book *Bieganski: The Brute Polak Stereotype* won the Polish American Historical Association Halecki Award. Her book *Save Send Delete* was inspired by her relationship with prominent atheist Michael Shermer. Her new book *God through Binoculars: A Hitchhiker at a Monastery* will appear in 2018.

Susan Eve Haar is a lawyer and playwright living in New York City. A member of The Actor's Studio, Ensemble Studio Theater and H.B. Playwright's Unit, she explores,

among other topics, the intersection of our neural and lived experience. Her work has been produced at a variety of venues including Primary Stages, The Women's Project, 13th Street Rep, HERE, Chester Theater, Manhattan Rep and The Looking Glass Theater and published by Broadway Publishing and Smith and Krauss.

Clifford Royal Johns grew up on a dairy farm in Southwestern Pennsylvania. He lives in the Chicago area with his wife and his dog where he writes and builds furniture. He is the author of *Walking Shadow,* a science fiction/mystery novel. His short stories have appeared in *Shimmer, Story Station, Crossed Genres,* and many other magazines and anthologies. He recently completed his MFA in creative writing at The University of Southern Maine.

Stephanie Lennon lives, teaches, and writes in Brooklyn, NY. Her work has been featured on UbiquitousBooks.com. She is currently writing a middle grades fantasy novel titled *Miss White's School for Vivacious Voices.*

Jiaqi Li was born and raised in Xiangyang, China. She currently studies at Stony Brook University and majors in civil engineering. Li hopes to eventually become an architect and to continue chronicling her life experiences.

Kelly McDonald is currently a creative writing student at Brigham Young University, returning to the classroom after a long technical career. Before retiring at the end of 2014, he served as the Assistant Vice-President for Information Technology at BYU. In this role, he directed the efforts of the University's Office of Information Technology, with a staff of 250 full-time and 600 part-time employees.

Katie Milligan is a student at Cedarville University pursuing a major in English with a focus on editing, publishing, and creative writing. She lives in Christiansburg, Ohio and enjoys hiking, taking Polaroid photos, and thrift store shopping.

Susan Moldaw works as a chaplain in San Francisco. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Brain, Child Magazine, Broad Street, Lilith, Literary Mama, Narrative, Ruminate,* and others.

Karen O'Neil is a writer and retired English teacher, who lives in Washington D.C. She draws on her experiences with her own large family to explore the gratifications and complexities of multi-generational relationships. Her work has appeared in the online journals, *The Mindful Word* and *Embodied Effigies*.

Joseph S. Pete is an award-winning journalist, an Iraq War veteran, an Indiana University graduate, a book reviewer, and a frequent guest on Lakeshore Public Radio. He is a 2017 Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee who was named the poet laureate of Chicago BaconFest, a feat that Geoffrey Chaucer chump never accomplished. His literary work and photography have appeared or are forthcoming in *Dogzplot, Stoneboat, The High Window, Synesthesia Literary Journal, Steep Street Journal, Beautiful Losers, New Pop Lit, The Grief Diaries, Gravel, The Offbeat, Oddball Magazine, The Perch Magazine, Rising Phoenix Review, Chicago Literati, Bull Men's Fiction, shufPoetry, The Roaring Muse, Prairie Winds, Blue Collar Review, Lumpen, The Rat's Ass Review, The Tipton Poetry Journal, Euphemism, Jenny Magazine, Vending Machine Press,* and elsewhere.

David Raney is a writer and editor living near Atlanta with one wife, two kids, and dogs ranging in size from shoebox to Volkswagen. He generally eschews the Oxford comma but acknowledges that in the previous sentence it prevents us from imagining a shoebox-sized wife. His work has appeared in numerous books, journals and newspapers.

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in Lillian, Alabama. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. Nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published by Ashland Creek Press and short-listed for

a Lambda Literary Award. *Lovers and Loners*, her second story collection, was published in 2017. Her collection of nature essays, *Strange Company,* is available in digital form, paperback and audio.

Carl Schiffman's stories and essays have appeared in *Missouri Review, New England Review, Antioch Review, Southern Review, Transatlantic Review,* and elsewhere since he first began publishing in 1972. A native New Yorker, Carl studied playwriting with Paul Goodman at the Living Theatre and with John Gassner at Yale Drama School. Retired for over twenty years, he made his living—after a shaky start—as a case worker with neglected or delinquent children, as a state and federal civil rights investigator, and finally as a writer for non-profit organizations and fundraising consulting firms, including work for the Legal Defense Fund, Memorial-Sloan Cancer Center, the NAACP, and the New York Public Library.

Kelsie Shaw is a writer from Saratoga Springs, New York. She holds a B.A. in English from Skidmore College, and is currently pursuing an M.A. in English at the University at Albany, SUNY. When not writing or studying, Kelsie teaches classical piano lessons.

Over the past eleven years, **Susan Lynn Solomon's** short stories have regularly been published in online journals and in print. Most recently she has written the Emlyn Goode Mysteries (Solstice Publishing), a series of three novels and four novelettes. Publishing each of her endeavors has been a thrill, but none has compared to learning of the acceptance of her first published piece, a short story called "The Burke House Ghost." "A Story Is Born" describes what led Solomon to write that story. The facts and events related in "A Story Is Born" are true, though historic names have been changed because the bed and breakfast where the story is set has been sold and is now a private residence.

Kelly Garriott Waite writes from Ohio. Her work has appeared in the *Hopper, Allegro Poetry,* and *the Fourth River: Tributaries.*

Christopher Woods (cover art) is a writer, teacher and photographer who lives in Houston and Chappell Hill, Texas. He has published a novel, *The Dream Patch*, a prose collection, *Under a Riverbed Sky*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *Heart Speak*. His work has appeared in *The Southern Review, New England Review, New Orleans Review, Columbia*, and *Glimmer Train*, among others. His photographs can be seen in his gallery: <u>http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/</u>