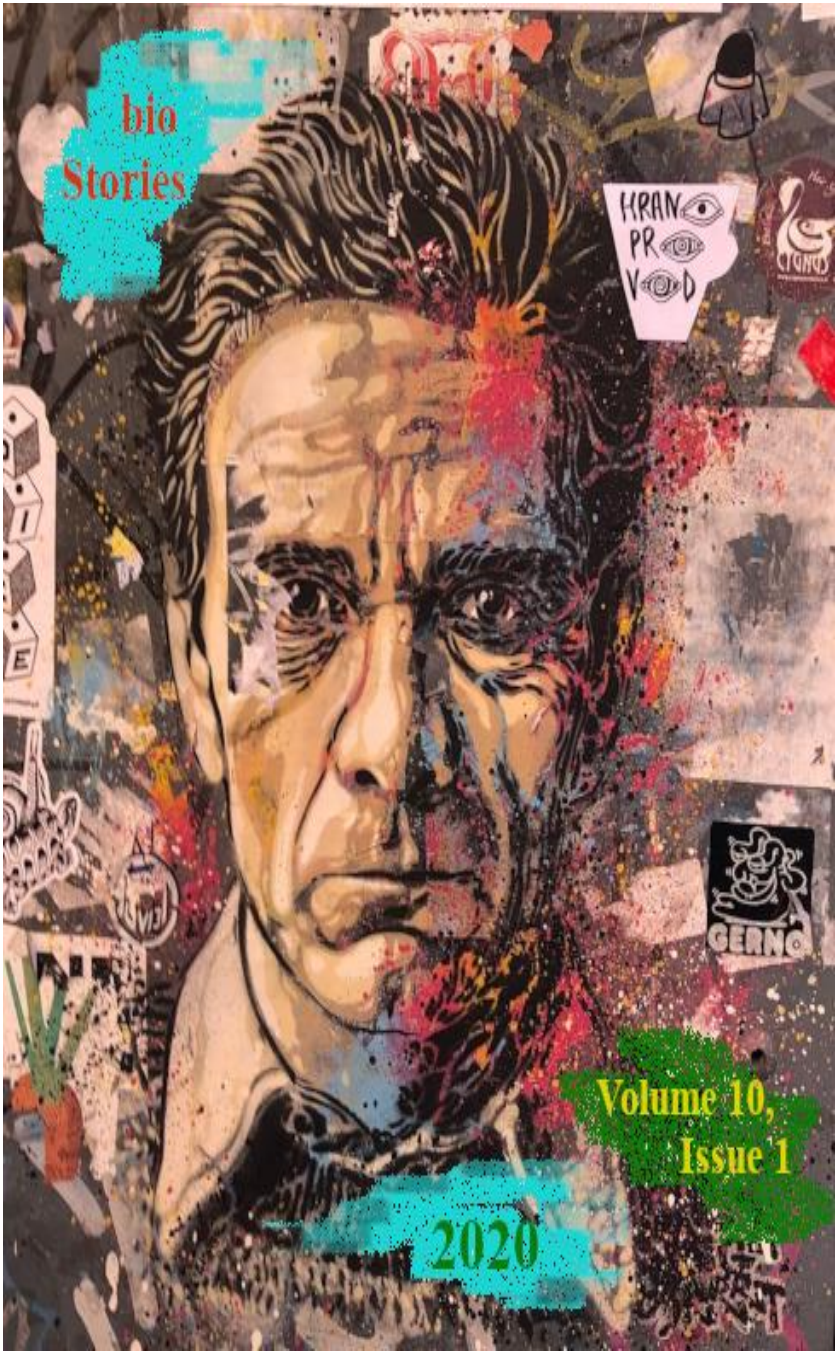
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bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

2020

Volume 10, Issue 1

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A Life in Five Buicks

by Linda Boroff

Roadmaster

Summertime, Hopkins, Minnesota: I toddle from the back door of the Elmo Park Apartments, skinny in suspendered blue corduroy pants. My dark, water-slicked hair is caught just above the right ear by a bobbypin.

Suddenly, I stop short. Looming before me in the driveway is my father's new, two-tone Buick Roadmaster, massively at rest on its tumescent whitewalls. The car, jade and loden green, fills my vision like a whale; as if its mighty grille of chrome baleen could suck up the road. Four incredible tunnels in its side, leading to God-knows-where, attest to its pedigree.

The neighbors have flooded out to gawk, as amazed as if dad had taxied up in the B-24 Liberator he had flown in the South Pacific. The women, pregnant in cotton housedresses with bright scarves wound around their pincurls, stroke the monster's bulging flanks. The men, beer bottles in hand, wear pleated pants into which white undershirts are tucked. They stride up and spank the Buick commandingly, nod at the engine statistics, call it "she."

At my appearance, all turn with tolerant amusement to savor my response. I am gaping at the giant intruder, eyes

smoky with suspicion. Attempts to pull me near for an introduction fail. To everyone's delight, my confusion soon resolves itself into a drawn-out wail.

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Now it is evening, the air fragrant with the warm raspberries that grow wild behind the project where we live, and also with the faint, fetid odor of the swamp beyond, which will not to be drained until a toddler drowns in it later this summer.

I stand outside the back door, gazing into the kitchen, where my father sits at a gray Formica dinette with an old Army Air Corps buddy. They are holding beer bottles and laughing as they celebrate new cars, peace, youth.

The screen before me sags in its frame; insects aggregate on it, awaiting a chance to invade. Their brethren have struck up a summertime concert out beyond the Buick, poised on its concrete slab like some brooding god of highway thunder.

Riviera

It reigns from the driveway of our new ranch-style home: a Buick Riviera, its blue as rich and deep as the stained glass of Chartres. Ensconced in its pale plush upholstery, I

feel like Cinderella in her pumpkin chariot. Shiny windows reflect my outsize new teeth grinning from the passenger side.

My father's remodeling business is booming, and he often invites me to "tag along" as he pitches attics and basements door-to-door. The housewives usually ask us in when they spot me on my hobbyhorse, Pal, a high-spirited thoroughbred of rich brown leatherette, with flaring crimson nostrils and a lush mane of white yarn. "Hi there, cowgirl, that's a mighty fine horse you got there, you betcha." And before they know it, they are talking knotty pine and dormers and linoleum.

He is tall and handsome, my dad, with curly brown hair and a wicked sense of humor. I spend hours trying to emulate his jaunty pilot's swagger. He has built us a beautiful corner house in a tony neighborhood near Lake Calhoun and given my mother a generous allowance to decorate: blond oak, raw silk, rose brocade, and a thick, cocoa brown carpet to roll around on. The house sits on three lots with one of them dedicated to a sandbox, a swing set, and a huge bountiful garden. People slow their cars to appreciate the landscaping.

C'mon," my father says mischievously one afternoon. "Let's go blow out the carbon." I know that under the hood of the Riviera chugs a magical nest of dark coils and shiny pans.

Superheated and unimaginably powerful, they create and tame the explosions that propel us.

I imagine the car's chrome innards clogged with soot, which we must now expel at ninety miles per hour in a tamponade of black smoke and red flames bursting from the tailpipe. The highway uncoils before us like a whip; farms are a green blur. I watch the speedometer quiver at ninety and then inch toward 100 as the Buick enters the realm of pure motion.

Just outside Red Wing, he guides us back down to fifty, which will forever after feel like a standstill. Then, as if anything were needed to make the afternoon more perfect, he buys my eternal discretion with a salted nut roll on our way home.

Roadmaster Again

It isn't much of a recession, but, as Mercutio declares of his fatal wound, "marry, 'tis enough." My father's business has dried up into a pile of debts; our brief, feverish glow of prosperity only a memory; our future dreams a mocking, retreating mirage that we will never reach.

The bill collectors call around dinnertime, and my mother rises to answer, swallowing her food quickly: He just

stepped out. A payment is on the way. Fights over money have become the white noise of my childhood.

My father's latest Roadmaster is greeted by my mother not with delight, but with fury. Burnished bronze, this unwelcome intruder sits alone in falling snow, like a grounded eagle.

"We can't afford this. What's the matter with you?" My father tries to look wise, as if he knows something she doesn't, but her disillusionment is impenetrable, and she glares back coldly. Her eyes have narrowed, and a crease divides them now, even when she isn't angry, which is seldom. How can she blame him for his business failure, I wonder, when it is the customers' fault that they are now remodeling their own attics. "Do It Yourself" is the chant that accompanies our march to poverty.

Our home goes on the market just after my 12th birthday, bringing long, melancholy weekends filled with officious realtors and skeptical strangers who poke around in our kitchen and assay the carpeting, eyes narrow with arithmetic. Their children stare wordlessly at me and my younger sister. Nobody wants our house, and there is a lot more eking and borrowing before the foreclosure finally arrives, almost a relief.

Homeless now, we drift to Los Angeles, where my father has family. Relatives grudgingly pony up small sums after collect calls from a phone booth. We rent a motel room with kitchenette in East Hollywood, the walls green and weary, veterans of a thousand familial disintegrations.

Daily, my parents look for work; by night, fights erupt, roaring and gusting like wildfires. We are warned by the motel management about the noise. Sometimes we go for swims in the stagnant pool. A thick orange moon hangs above us. We float like corpses in the tepid water.

My mother finally finds work in a nearby children's store, sweltering in outdated designer suits. My sister and I start school. My father lies on a black Naugahyde sofa all day, reading the want ads, sipping gin and devising dubious schemes to recoup his finances. Deals "fall through" he says—evoking for me an image of something hurtling earthward through a dense forest, hitting branches, landing broken and dying. His creditors soon find him again where he huddles; first one—and then many in a rush, persistent and abusive.

One night, his suitcase clatters suddenly into the living room, and my mother stands above it, eyes dark with fury. He had borrowed five hundred dollars from a loan shark.

“When I got off work, some little man threatened me,” she shouts. “I gave him my paycheck. How will we live? She grabs my sister and sinks her nails into the squirming girl’s shoulder. “What in the hell did you do with five hundred dollars while we were starving?”

My father follows the suitcase, arms dripping with neckties. “I didn’t know he’d come to you.” He shakes his fist and the ties sway. “For eighteen years I worked for you. I broke my heart.”

“He threatened me!”

“I’ve got to get out of here. I’m dying.” My sister and I begin to cry, although we have been expecting this for a long time.

“Let him go,” screams my mother. “Him and his goddamn pills and his goddamn booze. There’s always money for that, isn’t there?”

Outside, my father sits, jowly and misunderstood at the wheel of a rented Ford, curtained with suits and shirts. The car hums to life, coughs loose its emergency brake, and backs hesitantly out of the driveway. A quick shift and it is away. The night rings with sudden silence.

Camaro

The mighty arches of the San Francisco Bay Bridge pass over my head like the ribs of a dinosaur. I think about those people unable to cross the bridge without counting them.

“Tell me about your father,” says Cliff.

“All I know is he called this afternoon wanting to get together. Apparently he traveled out here with some woman, and things fell apart and she took off in his car.”

“When did you last see him?”

“I have not seen my father,” I reply, “in eight years. I don’t know what he’ll be like.”

“Well, you met *my* father,” Cliff says. His parents had visited from Bakersfield two weeks earlier, and his father had, as promised, displayed the physique and mentality of an Alabama State Trooper guarding a speed trap circa 1954. Packed tightly into a booth at the pancake house, he had polished off a platter of pork chops, cornbread and easy-over eggs while declaiming loudly on hippie treason. Cliff’s mother, smelling strongly of mint, sat wordless, eating nothing, observing her husband with reddened blue eyes of pure Southron hatred. Cliff told me later that she had found and drunk about half a bottle of tequila while he and his father were out buying a lug wrench.

Cliff's blue eyes are flecked with amber; his thick brown hair brushes his collar. At twenty-one he is already a master of the amused deadpan, and he is a good bet to hurt me deeply one of these days. His parents have gifted him a new Camaro for graduation, and riding beside him makes me feel shiny, new, and well-maintained too.

My father is staying in one of those hotels that appear at first hopeful glance to be only a little seedy, but is really extremely seedy. I spot him at once in the lobby, swaying slightly beneath the fluorescent lighting, arms stretched toward me. He is pudgier than I remember, his skin grayish and loose around the mouth. He shakes hands solemnly with Cliff, and shoots me a wondering glance.

We have dinner and embark on a spree through San Francisco. At one bar, a drunk sits alone looking morose, and we invent a history for him, a reason he drinks.

"He tried hard all his life," says my father about the drunk. "The bastards just wouldn't let him live."

"He can't do anything right," comments Cliff. "He found himself alone...."

"He done her wrong," I say.

The pavement in front of my father's hotel is slick now from the foggy drizzle that had begun around midnight. He climbs stiffly from the car.

“I’ll walk him in,” I tell Cliff. The lobby is not as deserted as it should be at 3 a.m. People are wandering about sleepless, smoking, unwilling to be alone in their rooms.

“Goodbye Linny,” says my father.

I hug him and say “Goodnight, Daddy.” As I return to the car, I realize that Cliff and I have grown so close tonight that we will probably get married. He looks at me pensively, having figured that out himself. When I turn back, my father is still gazing after me from the lobby, hands hanging limp at his sides, head slightly cocked.

Century

I am an advertising copywriter working in Palo Alto, divorced, with a nine-year-old daughter who looks like Cliff. I drive a 1986 Buick Century Custom, an impulsive purchase after my father died years before of a heart attack. Somehow, driving a Buick keeps him a little closer in spirit.

So I leave my office on a warm, sunny October afternoon for the commute south to Santa Cruz over Highway 17, a sinuous black python notorious for head-ons. I grip the steering wheel of my Buick, intent on survival, eyes darting about with primal alertness evolved over millions of years, called on now to dodge not leopard or lion, but Audi; not charging aurochs but careening Range Rover.

When the traffic stalls—as it often does—I look beyond the asphalt to the young redwoods, fernlike and primeval, and to the yellow poppies and blue lupine bobbing gamely in the hydrocarbon exhaust. Sometimes I murmur little prayers for the road kills, tarry, feathered clumps and featureless gray fur patties scattered on the shoulder.

As I approach the summit, hemmed in by other commuters, the Buick begins to jerk and shudder. *Dammit a flat,* drifts into my mind seconds before the asphalt ahead rears up and rips asunder like a bar of licorice. I slam on my brakes at the lip of a widening gash as the side of the mountain to my right trembles like Jell-O and falls away with a roar, sliding and tumbling onto my car. Trees, their moorings scaled away, drop, still upright, straight down the mountain.

The air turns white with dust, and the car shudders at the boulder that finally breaches its back door. Dirt pours in across the seat. I glimpse myself in the rearview mirror, perhaps for the last time, looking rather puzzled and nondescript.

Then, as abruptly as it had started, the earth quiets and settles, though something keeps cracking like pistol shots. The dust clears, and I see to my left, the very top of the concrete center divider barely visible above the dirt. Covering

the road now is everything that, seconds ago, had been a hundred feet above us.

It is October 17, 1989, 5:17 p.m. They call it the Loma Prieta Earthquake, and I have nearly been buried alive. My only thought now is to get to Santa Cruz, but the road ahead has ceased to exist. Boulders are still bouncing down the mountainside like ping pong balls.

A couple of truckers make their way through the trembling debris to my driver's side window: "You alive?" They wrench open my door and I clamber out with no dignity, my pencil-skirted business suit caked with dust. "Whole mountain's gonna go inna minute," one of them says, and I say, "Didn't it go already?" But no, there is still plenty of geologic time poised above us. I consider running, but to where?

"See if she'll start." A trucker climbs into the driver's seat and turns the key, eliciting only a feeble cough. He tries again, and suddenly the Buick rises from the dead with the sound of a hundred lions competing for mating rights.

Six men rock it loose from its crumbled matrix, which opens a car-sized hole in the debris. I get in, push on the gas with a shaking foot, and the Buick miraculously begins to limp forward, yawing like a drunk on its broken suspension. One by one, we creep down the mountainside, over the buckled,

rock-strewn pavement. The roots of upended trees oddly resemble the configuration of a lightning flash, I note, and also the heart's circulatory system illuminated by echocardiogram: fractals? I keep my foot on the accelerator, and the car keeps rolling, around the tree trunks, through the sand and the dirt. Somehow, it finds a way.

Nearing Scotts Valley, we come down off the hill at last, and the highway re-emerges. I nurse the Buick past people who stop their stunned wandering to point at me and shake their heads. There must be sirens, but I am in a state of deaf, numb panic that recedes only when my daughter dashes toward me from the yard of her now lopsided school.

Days later, an insurance adjuster lifts the Buick's hood and gasps. The engine is buried under rocks and dirt. "I can't believe this thing actually ran, he says, shaking his head.

"Ran pretty well," I say, channeling my father. I open the trunk and get out the jumper cables and a notebook of ideas for a novel that I have been carrying around for several years. I take them to where my friend is waiting.

Century Again

There are as many roads to penury as there are paupers to follow them. Today, I'm on my way to sign over the pink slip on "Moby Dick," my white 2000 Buick Century, as

security on a loan, so that I can pay my rent, three weeks late and counting in the wake of a layoff. My destination is a storefront in a bleak San Jose strip mall between a liquor mart and a shoe repair shop. A fuchsia neon sign beckons: “Fast Cash! Paycheck Advance! Auto Title Loans!” There, my signed pink slip will net me $1900, which I pledge to repay at an interest rate of about ninety-six percent.

I back out of my carport, find a jazz station playing rueful sax, and hit the road. The rain that threatened all morning arrives now in earnest, and the mist on my windshield quickly turns to tears, as if to make up for the ones I’m holding back. Somehow, my whole life seems prologue to this ordeal. It could be worse, I console myself, which only reminds me that it may indeed grow worse. The wipers begin beating time to the scold in my head: why didn’t you, why did you, why didn’t you, why did you?

“It’ll be okay, mom,” says my daughter, guessing the reason for my silence. She sits beside me now, as she always has, and in a way nothing has changed—although her once downy head has grown into an avalanche of blonde-streaked waves, and the rattles and sippy cups have given way to a plastic box of eye shadow that she dabs on in the passenger mirror. I understand, without taking it personally, that to not follow in my footsteps is for her almost a career goal in itself.

Financial turmoil has shaped her life since her father left us when she was three years old.

I merge onto Highway 280 south; the road nearly empty on this Saturday morning. As the miles unreel, I cannot resist backtracking mentally over my own highway of choices that delivered me to this pass. How many wrong turns? How many dead ends, detours, directions unheeded? Or is the problem deeper still? The map is wrong. The destination does not exist.

Perhaps, as my father's daughter, I am just genetically wired to be broke. My inborn character quirks always seemed to have veto power over good intentions and resolutions. By age seven, I was already displaying the traits that have cleft my life like a fault line: impatience with saving, impulsive overgenerosity, dislike of routine. Reading Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ants, I quickly identified with my gangly orthopteral soul mate, shivering out in the cold with his inedible fiddle.

South we hurtle from Palo Alto, where I had presumed to live so that my daughter could attend its top-ranked high school. And was that another wrong turn, I wonder, hearing her reel off anecdotes of snobbery, anorexia, and grade grubbing?

After years of battling a commute so brutal it inspired articles in foreign magazines and enduring a manager who gnawed at me like a polar bear at a whale carcass, I have decided to work freelance.

Fiction was calling me: story plots scratched on the message pad on my bedstand or scribbled on the back of parking stubs or the flap of an envelope as I drove. These potential novels existed now only as wads of lint at the bottom of my purse.

And what makes you so special, my roadside Greek chorus now chants. Do you think yours is the only quiet desperation, the only stifled ambition? You are a bundle of plastic twine floating on your daughter's ocean, lying in wait as years pass to wrap yourself around her wings with your poverty, neediness, and irrational ambition. You… *writer*!

Last week, I had dusted off my interview suit and explained to a succession of loan officers that I was a "freelance technology writer" and needed only a little "bridge loan" to see me through to the next big project.

What else could I have said? That I'm a perennially aspiring novelist whose short stories are probably read solely by other hopefuls? That I have spent the last eight years trying to shoehorn myself into Hollywood's clenched consideration, resulting in one low-budget feature and four options

simmering in a perpetual broth of revision? As a borrower, I am about as appealing as a glass of silicon wastewater.

I walked out of the last bank and stand in the parking lot feeling sorry for myself. Then I looked at my Buick as if seeing it for the first time. Finally paid off after eight years, it has been through a lot. In 2005, it was repossessed in the rain at 3 a.m. by a couple of husky young men, who had it up on the tow truck by the time I emerged in a ratty bathrobe, holding my Lhasa Apso. “Put some shoes on,” one of them said.

The Buick looked forlorn and reproachful and a little silly, its capacious rump elevated by a chain, its grille tipped into a puddle. When a copywriting windfall enabled me to redeem it a few days later from a dusty San Jose repo-yard, a friend said admiringly, “You always land on your feet.” But her metaphor was wrong. I had not yet landed. Today looks and feels more like a landing. And not on my feet.

It takes two or three passes around the block in what is now a freezing deluge to find the auto loan storefront. We park, and my daughter, impatient with my umbrella, leaps out and makes a dash for the door which looks close, but is actually far enough away for her to get thoroughly soaked. I come up behind her, and she grins sheepishly, the rain bedewing her face and lashes, the damp tendrils of hair pasted to her fresh, unconquered skin. “Young Girl Caught in

a Downpour," I mentally title the artwork. We wrestle open the door, and a line of people turns at the cold, wet draft, one or two actually smiling in commiseration. They are mostly poor and minorities: young mothers with children hanging from every limb; gray-headed veterans in bill hats with numbers on the front.

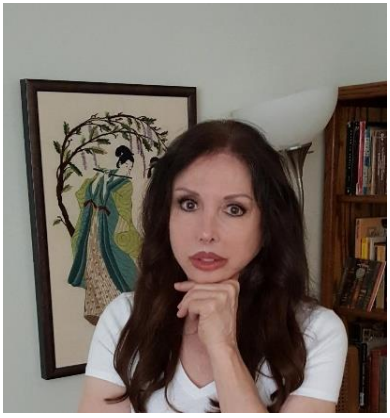
The young woman at the window smiles too, although the line is long, the paperwork complex, and her computer capricious. She hands us a battered camera to photograph the Buick's VIN number and its odometer. My daughter waves me to a chair and ducks outside—again without the umbrella—although the rain is now coming down in sheets from a truly biblical sky, occasionally riven by trees of lightning so close you could almost grab their molten trunks. Seconds later, massive thunderclaps trigger little screams from the women. The veterans flinch, their jaw muscles working.

When my daughter re-enters, I pull off her soaked outer sweater as though she is a kindergartner and help her on with my own.

"Thanks, Mom." The people in line titter. I catch the eye of an elderly lady, and she beams at me, a universal smile of motherhood. And all at once, everything is all right. It's more than all right. Why, the Buick is merely fulfilling another of the

roles it was intended for. Like reindeer to the Inuit, it is both transportation and sustenance.

So we all watch the rain subside and a cold blue sky emerge amid turbulent clouds, a fresh wind whipping the treetops. The line slowly shortens, and at last, I am presented with a bale of papers on which I provide my signature in about forty places. The clerk counts out my money in small, used bills, and feeling far from dissatisfied—even a little rich—we get back into the Buick.



Linda Boroff graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in English and currently lives and works in Silicon Valley. Her suspense novel *The Remnant* has recently been accepted for publication. Her fiction and nonfiction appear in *McSweeney's, The Write Launch, All the Sins, Epoch, Cimarron Review, Parhelion, Crack the Spine, Writing Disorder, The Piltdown Review, Eclectica, 5:21 Magazine, Thoughtful Dog, The Satirist,* and other publications.

Encounter with the Future

by Jarmila K. Sullivan

In a shabby one-room school, a scrawny little boy walked slowly toward the teacher's desk, hoping to delay the inevitable punishment. The teacher stood in front of his desk and in his right hand held a long, thin piece of wood, which made a swish in the air just before it hit its target. He was tapping it softly on his left palm, as if to test its agility. He eyed the boy and said in a cruel, cold voice:

"You are getting two extra whips for walking slow."

The boy shivered and sped up. As he was taught, he offered his hand, fingers gathered together like a rose bud, exposing the soft, unprotected tip of his fingers to the cruelty of the wooden whip. He was not sure whether it was harder to withstand the pain or to suppress the tears. Letting the tears appear in front of the teacher meant further punishment.

The teacher was dressed in the latest "hussar" fashion. His trousers were tucked in his boots, which were polished to perfection. His hair, glistening with pomade, looked dark against the white collar that peaked out of his tight jacket. The jacket was held even tighter at the waist with a wide belt, a belt he was not shy to use. Many children had the scars to

attest to it. His mustache was twisted upwards at the ends and the boy could see his lips curled in an ugly smile.

“This will help you walk faster,” the teacher hit the boy two times.

“This will help you remember that you are Hungarian and to speak Hungarian instead of local gibberish.” He raised the whip and hit the boy’s fingers hard three times.

The boy managed to control his tears, but when he sat on the hard, wooden bench, he could feel that his pants were wet.

Jan with his parents and siblings

The year was 1910, the place was a little village called Myjava, which belonged to the Hungarian part of the Austro-

Hungarian Empire. The punishment for speaking Slovak was swift and certain. The little boy's name was Jan and he did learn to speak Hungarian, but when Slovakia became part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia in 1918, he vowed never to speak it again.

Sixty years later, Jan sat on another hard, wooden bench. The place was Victoria Station in London. Fear, less ominous but equally imminent, was descending on his bent, tired shoulders.

He had traveled from Czechoslovakia to see his daughter who lived in London. Excited to see her, Jan was one of the first to get off the train. A crowd gathered behind the gate as people waited for their loved ones to appear. A few times, Jan thought that he spotted his daughter but it turned out to be someone else's child. He watched as the people started to thin out.

He found a bench not too far from where his train had arrived, in case his daughter came a bit late. He sat down and checked his pockets again to see if he could find the paper with his daughter's address, which his wife told him to "guard with his life." He gave up figuring out where and how he may have lost it. It was gone.

The big clock in the middle of the station said 7:00 pm, and the crowd from the train was gone. He had to face the possibility that his daughter did not receive the last letter with his arrival time. He knew that, if she had, she would have come.

Jan watched as people hurried toward their destinations. He did not speak English so the voices in the train station were just noise to him. As he pondered what to do, he noticed a tall young man walking towards him. Next to him walked a person who looked like an older version of the teacher that had made him wet his pants sixty years ago. His fingers tingled in memory. He was mesmerized by a vision of so long ago.

As he watched the young man walking next to his “old nemesis” Jan felt very alone and could not help feeling a bit of envy at what he assumed was their reunion. When they drew close to his bench, audible despite the hum of the station, he clearly recognized the words, “Are you thirsty papa?” spoken in Hungarian. Jan jumped off his bench and interrupted father and son.

“Please can you help me? My daughter and I missed each other and I don’t know how to find a train to get to her.” He had not spoken Hungarian in decades and was surprised how much he still remembered. The young man stopped,

looked at his father and told him to sit on the bench the stranger had sat just vacated.

“Don’t move papa” the young man said to his father, “I don’t want to lose you.”

Then he turned to the stranger and asked, “Where does your daughter live?”

“Ipswich,” said Jan, thinking there was no point telling the stranger the whole story about the lost address.

The young man frowned. “That is a long way from London. Are you sure she is not here?”

“I don’t know, but I do know how to get to her in Ipswich,” Jan said with a tired look.

“All right.” The young man realized that the man before him had probably endured the same long train journey across Europe that his own father had made.

“Do you have money for the train to Ipswich?” he asked kindly.

“Yes.” Jan reached into his breast pocket and gave the young man a white envelope with English money.

When they reached the ticket window, the young man counted the money and realized that the stranger was short by a few shillings. He bought Jan the ticket, making up the difference with his own money. Then he put Jan on the train, which stood not far from where he had left his own father. Jan

thanked the young man in his best Hungarian and they shook hands.

It was the first time he had willingly shaken hands with a Hungarian, let alone with genuine gratitude. Jan was still waving to the young man from the window of the train when the older man joined his son on the platform. Jan watched them walking away when, suddenly, the older man turned around and hurried toward Jan's window. Jan could hear his heart pound in what he knew to be an irrational fear but he continued to stand up. The older man handed him a small travel bag through the window.

"My son said you have a long way to go," he said, as he handed Jan a small parcel. "Take this. My wife always packs too much."

"Thank you very much," said Jan. He watched father and son talking and gesticulating as people who have not seen each other for a long time tend to do. He understood. How ironic, he thought, that the language that was literally "beat into him" would help him so many years later.

He let the tears roll freely on his wrinkled cheeks. He closed his eyes as if to bar the painful image of the past out of his memory. He took a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and dried his eyes.

“Today I got food,” he said aloud and opened the bag that the Hungarian had handed him just moments before. “Ah, a salami sandwich, green paprika and small bottle of red wine.” He smiled and bit into the sandwich with gusto.

As the train pulled out of the Victoria train station, night fell on London but Jan felt lightness in his heart, beyond the satisfaction of his stomach. *

The young woman stood by the gate marked “Trains from Dover.” She strained to see her father. Her lips were still smiling as she anticipated greeting her father, but her eyes started to fill with tears and her heart beat loud in fear. Is he going to be the last off the train, she wondered, more in hope than annoyance. The last passenger had passed her and the train pulled out of the station.

Suddenly, a terrible idea crossed her mind. What if my father fell asleep and the train goes … where? She ran to the information booth but was reassured by two separate employees that the conductor walks through the train more than once before the train is allowed to leave the station. They told her to speak to the station’s police.

“There is no passenger list. miss,” said the police officer.

“Can you call the border and see if my father arrived in England?” she pleaded, her voice laden with sobs.

“No miss, there are hundreds of people working at the border. How can I know whom to call? No, there is no central list.”

The senior policeman, a former bobby, felt sorry for the distraught young woman.

“Are you sure you have the right date miss?” He asked kindly. “Do you have your father’s letter with you?”

She did not, but the idea that she had made a mistake and that it was the wrong day for her father’s arrival gave her hope. Sitting on the tube on the way home, it was this hope that kept her from descending into panic.

Decades passed before I was able to smile at this memory. My father came to London so that he could be there for my twenty-first birthday. Today was my father’s birthday. He would have been 105 years old. I moved across the pond to New York City long ago and I still miss him. As I was remembering my worry all those years ago in London, my cell phone rang. It was my daughter. We were planning our mother-daughter lunch, so she called to make sure that I had the right place and time. I put the phone close to my heart and held it tight, still remembering.

After a frantic night, my father and I did connect the next morning. He may have lost my London address, but he

was able to find the house where I used to live in Ipswich. He was there with me on that fatal day on August 23, 1968 when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Not surprisingly, the place stayed etched in my father's memory. Brian, who still lived in the house and with whom I kept in touch, drove my father to London. I thanked my friend profusely, but was sad that I could not thank the two kind men who helped my father at the railway station.

"Every time you help a stranger," my father reassured me, "you will thank them."

I let that guide my life.

What had happened? At the time, trains coming from the "Continent" arrived at a separate part of the train station. At the border, all passengers had to disembark and go through border control and customs inspection, carrying their suitcases. My father went to get a drink of water and found himself at the domestic side of *the train station at Dover, where he had crossed*

into England. It did not occur to him that it would matter which train he took as long as the sign said it was going to London's Victoria station. By the time the policeman and I checked the domestic side "just in case," it was 8:00 pm and my father was on his way to Ipswich.

For my father the episode had a far-reaching consequence. The kindness of complete strangers undermined my father's resentment and erased the old pain he had carried with him from youth. His decision to leave the painful history in the past both healed and liberated him. "Sometimes memory is our enemy," he said to me. "It can teach people not to trust each other. Even worse, seek revenge."

I often wondered, if there were a scale to show how much evil we have learned to avoid from history, as opposed to how much anger and distrust and revenge we carry forward from it, which way would the scale tip?

Jan Kocvarova

I was the first to arrive for the lunch with my daughter. I asked for a table next to the window. One of the best things about New York City is people watching. There is a story inside each person who walks by. Watching strangers makes me feel as if I am in a library full of books in progress.

I could see my daughter walking toward the restaurant. Tall, athletic, she walked with a confidence of a young woman who knew who she was, what she wanted, and was willing to work to achieve it.

“Hello mum, I have something to tell you.” That’s my daughter. She gets to the point. “I met a boy, a while ago actually, and I really like him”. I waited because I knew her well enough to know that she was not finished. “I think he might be a keeper.”

“Well,” I said non-committal, “I look forward to meeting him.”

“You will like him,” she said with certainty. “His father is Hungarian. I know that you will have a lot in common.”

For a brief moment I thought about getting back the money I paid for her education but I smiled instead and said, “You are right, we were neighbors in Europe.”

No history. My father would be pleased.

Jarmila K. Sullivan was born Jarmila Kocvarova in Czechoslovakia. A one-year stay in London turned her into a refugee when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, writing a bloody end to the Prague Spring. In London she went from sleeping in a telephone booth at the Victoria railway station to the lights of the fashion runway. She went on to appear in television commercials and movies under the more pronounceable moniker of Anika Pavel. After immigrating to the United States, she transitioned into fundraising where she wrote articles for newspapers celebrating milestones in the fight against cancer. Prior to dedicating her time fully to writing, she worked as the Lifestyle Editor for BOHO Magazine. Jarmila divides her time between New York City and Cape Cod, MA.

The Getaway

by Michelle Cacho-Negrete

The Getaway – Part One

When my mother left my stepfather, she travelled 3,000 miles away to California—a trip made mythic by distance, by time, by intimacy with yet another stranger in our lives, a woman named Beattie. Children, my brother and I were swept away with her on this seemingly mythical journey. Fleeing seemed a central theme in our lives, perhaps a vestigial gene not weeded out by the passage of time, elegant in its continuing usefulness for flight from pre-historic saber-toothed tigers to the more recent pogroms in Russia and Concentration Camps in Eastern Europe, culminating in flight from a bad marriage. Limited funds had previously made for limited destinations: Mystic Connecticut, Freehold New Jersey, anywhere Long Island. We had become accustomed to arrivals in such destinations culminating in same-day departures to return home, but this getaway was different, New York would be left too far behind for a day trip.

Perhaps that vestigial gene for flight originated in our mother in her Jewish childhood, which reached a crescendo in a dark-of-the-night flight from Russia, where caution and mistrust paradoxically mingled with the need to rely on

strangers. Indeed, caution and mistrust were the lingering residue of our mother's childhood, so much so that sometimes my mother seemed a stranger, a woman who, aside from everyday dealings, shared little. It may be small wonder that she became a woman who would confuse secrecy with staying alive. Yet despite her mistrust, the need to rely on strangers remained a part of her core nature too, and our lives were filled with strangers embraced by my mother as old friends like Beattie. Perhaps they were; my mother regarded her past as her own business exempt from even the simple question of where and when she met her friends. These long fingers of mistrust, secrecy, flight were all part of the mother I understood so poorly. Looking back, my vision of her is as confusing and cluttered as the swiftness of our relocation to California.

My memories of the getaway are suspect, as are all memories of the long ago; an uncertainty about days and nights and weeks and events. I was nine, my brother four. This trip harbors the essence of something fragile and broken, my mother piling things into a few cartons, my hurried packing of books into a shopping bag, bouncing it down the tenement stoop to a waiting car that would transport us somewhere my mother proclaimed golden: California.

“California,” my mother repeated with a strange reverence. She hurried us from our apartment to the street as though any delay would make us late. "Movie stars, sunshine, opportunities. Our lives will be different, better, golden." Her face was haggard with determination, eyes bloodied with a messianic mission, her voice capturing the timbre of a revivalist. Although a child I understood that she was deeply wounded and desperate.

“Into the car,” she ordered while we stared at the large stranger in the front seat, perspiring in the punishing August heat.

"This is Beattie, an old friend," she said, noticing our hesitation.

Beattie turned to acknowledge us then faced forward and stared out the windshield, the set of her shoulders, rigid and unyielding, the heaviness of her hands on the steering wheel suggesting her body had rusted into this position. It seemed likely I’d never see her after this trip, that her time as our old friend would be brief, rushing by like the road and time itself, but just then she was the most important person in my mother’s life. It was nothing new; all we ever expected were strangers spinning through the revolving door of my mother’s welcomes and dismissals, her love and her fury. We knew better than to become attached.

It was hot the way New York is hot; unrelenting, invasive, smothering as if to demand attention. I wore shorts, sandals, a halter, a cling of clothes with unraveling hems that trailed threads down my damp skin. My brother wore shorts and a faded tee-shirt with a superman so indistinct it appeared he'd given up. My four-foot, ten-inch mother wore red shorts that she believed made her legs look longer, red lipstick, gold hoops.

She was impatient with our hesitation, pushed us into the back seat, slammed the door, loaded cartons into the trunk while Beattie looked straight ahead as though unaware of the commotion. The vinyl seat sizzled beneath me, a searing indictment of the New York summer. I pressed my bag of books to my chest. My brother was silent, his eyes half-closed as if to veil out the future.

My mother slid into the front seat, slammed the car door and mumbled under her breath, "Let's go, go, go."

As if in response, the car growled and shot forward in little spurts until achieving a smooth momentum.

"We're going to my old friends in California to decide if we want to live there," my mother told us, but we weren't listening. As the car left our street behind, I began to dread what would come next; my mother's face, her voice, the way she lit up the cigarette, shook the match out like a cat shaking

a captured mouse, and Beattie silent beside her. My brother, who never napped, slept. I already had a book in my hand.

“Your father knows this leaving is a test,” my mother said. “If he can stop gambling, can come home nights, maybe we’ll come home too.”

But I saw in her eyes, her bags always packed in front of one door or another, that home was just some abstraction.

We crossed the Williamsburg Bridge. Above us the elevated train shook the beams and rattled a lullaby of regret. The Lower East Side opened like a book in front of us: cheap clothing fronting discount stores, kosher restaurants, a spill of people that, like us, were going somewhere in a hurry. The car was drenched in New York, opened windows inviting it in. We were drowning in noise, loud voices, the ubiquitous sirens of fire engines, police cars, ambulances, honking demands of buses and cars, zoom of a plane overhead, the vanishing roar of the train. The car reeked with the scent of Delancey Street, that specific staleness composed of car exhaust, sour pickles, sweat, bread and something peculiar to this car, the scent of madness coming from the front seat, from these two fleeing women, although what Beattie was fleeing from, I never learned.

Like stars of a Western movie, we four were fugitives.

The Escape Route

The city vanished behind us. Large maps were unfolded: red and blue and green and yellow dotted lines and straight lines, route numbers, names of bridges and bodies of water and cities and towns and states all reeling across the map in my mother's hand. She had a cigarette in her mouth, eyes squinting against the smoke, her short auburn hair darkened with perspiration. She examined the map, following lines with the tip of her finger, making decisions. "Beattie can't read a map," she confided.

We crawled along the Garden State Parkway, an indication of what America was becoming: warehouses, factories, polluted bodies of water, too many cars, truck-stop diners whose signs offered bathrooms and lunch specials. The air was a shroud of greasy black. The women conferred softly. I heard my mother's voice, but not Beattie's; it was as if she spoke below the range of human hearing. Sweat poured off them.

This was a getaway that seemed to take forever but is barely memorable in its monotony. There was a hotel room with two beds. My mother slept with my brother. I slept with Beattie. Her body swallowed the bed. She was dripping wet. She was loud: tossing, snoring, bleating. I crossed over in the dark of night to lie beside my brother. I took up as little room

as possible. My mother's eyes opened in the dark, silently noting me with the concentration of a wild animal.

"This is Akron, Ohio," my mother said as we passed some city line. She inhaled deeply on her cigarette. "When we got off the boat after my parents fled the Old Country and came here, it took two buses, I don't know why. We stayed at a house with other Jews. That first morning we woke up, there was a cross burning outside our window and men in white sheets like ghosts. '*Mein Gott*' my mother said to my father. 'We need to go to New York.' We packed our few belongings and fled again like gypsies."

Beattie hummed. My mother smoked. I looked out the window for men in sheets and burning crosses but saw only ordinary-looking people crossing the street. I went back to my book.

We three were in a hotel room somewhere outside St. Louis, Beattie in one of her own. Bugs sizzled on the light bulbs like widows who immolate themselves on funeral pyres; the helpless trapped by the inescapable. The tub was ringed with black. Hair clogged the drain. We were beside a highway, loud music from passing cars a broken conversation. Beams of fleeting light slashed our faces and the stained walls like spotlights in a prison.

We woke to coffee, toast, milk and cold cereal. Beattie and my mother examined maps growing ragged, creases

ripping apart, edges stained with sweat. Cigarette smoke circled my mother's head like a curving road to nowhere.

"Back in the car," she ordered, crushing her cigarette in coffee dregs.

Then Kansas.

"Look," my mother said, leaning over the seat to shake my arm. "Look out the window. Kansas, like in the Wizard of Oz."

I put down my book and looked out the window. Ahead of us the blacktop ran into a lowered sky. We were all alone in an unwinding frame of flat green without feature or distinction, a tedious stretch of sameness without the character of tenements or skyscrapers to enliven it. The sky overhead was equally flat, a stale blue and, monotonous in the absence of clouds.

My brother and I lost ourselves in books though sometimes he slept. My mother smoked and charted the miles and the hours, the distance between morning and evening and New York and California; we fled west, contemporary pioneers in search of something better.

"Cowboys," my mother yelled. She had taken the long way to see Texas. It added time, but this was her road trip, her chance to see America.

My brother and I stared. Men in boots and cowboy hats filled the streets; no horses, guitars, Gene Autry or Roy Rogers singing songs about the range.

“Cowboys,” my mother said more quietly at our lack of enthusiasm. My brother and I smiled at her, feeling we owed her that.

New Mexico was a flood of stars in the darkest night I’d ever witnessed. The car light was on, the windows shut tight.

“We have a full tank,” my mother told Beattie. “We'll find our way out of the desert in the morning, but at least we’re on a highway going somewhere.”

My brother and I wanted to pee outside, to see the stars without a glass barrier. My mother shook her head. “There are coyotes, rattlesnakes, who knows what else.” These were city women, the desert a page in the encyclopedia.

Outside the windows was the first magical thing I’d seen this trip: a moon dwarfing the one above the tenements, stars that arched to split the skin of sky, a silence too vast to comprehend. I opened the door and my brother and I leaped out, met by a rush of air dense with mesquite and sage, names I would learn years later with my second husband. We heard the howl of animals rejoicing in the glorious night, the

perfumed air, the moon-drenched, eerie rock monuments that burst from the desert floor in a deep exhaled breath.

“Listen to that,” my mother screamed as her door flew open. She pulled us back inside. “That’s coyotes and you’re their dinner. You see a coyote, you run!”

The next morning her eyes were black with sleeplessness. She examined the map, twisting it this way and that as though it was a compass, then pointed the way forward.

The Arrival

California was dry and brown, the air a vibrating whine of wires and traffic and earth-moving machinery. Beattie deposited us and our cartons outside a low-roofed home on a block bustling with cars and vanished without a good-bye. She was replaced by two new old friends I’ll call Jane and Jim. They stepped outside to greet us, the open front door an invitation. My mother and Jane hugged, the tentative embrace of women who haven’t seen each other for a long time.

My mother shuffled us forward; “My children.”

We were examined, our sweat-soaked clothes, our exhaustion, our shyness, as though we were exotic; humanoid, but not quite human. Jane sighed disappointedly. Jim nodded. My brother and I looked at them silently. He was

big, broad-boned, balding and going to fat, his smile Cheshire Cat wide and toothy. She was small and fast-moving with sharp features, a fluttering bird evidencing a low-level distress.

"Your mother and I, we grew up together, on the Lower East side," Jane said. The face she turned to my mother was sly, secretive.

My mother nodded, then a shift in their bodies, their eyes meeting briefly, a turning away from the sun-soaked day suggested sadness, resignation, an inability to come to terms with something.

The three adults each lifted a carton. My brother and I following them through the open door.

“The house is beautiful,” my mother said, putting her carton down.

The house was white, white like a hospital room, white like the sheets on the men in Akron of my mom’s memory, white like an avalanche burying us. I was assaulted by white, doors, furniture, rugs, only the windows distinct, big square cut-outs ushering in blinding light. We stood revealed and waiting for what would come next. I knew we had crossed some sharply delineated border, the world outside, the world inside.

“Take off your shoes and leave them outside,” Jane commanded us.

We did, immediately.

“The white rug gets stained very easily,” she warned. “We are very careful.”

I knew for certain then what I'd suspected, there were no children in this house.

“My kids are really careful,” my mother said.

“Now,” my mother said, turning to us and kneeling. “Tomorrow morning, early, I am going to leave you here in this beautiful house with Jim and Jane for a little while and go home to deal with Daddy to decide what we are going to do. Beattie will drive me. I'll miss you, but it won't be long.”

I looked at her, but fleeing had taken over, I saw it in her eyes. We'd come all this way just for her to run somewhere else—Brooklyn, California, anywhere, just a destination to leave from, the real destination motion itself.

“Do what Jane tells you, behave yourselves. I’ll be back before school starts,” she said. “You're going to have fun here.”

I thought of barely-remembered stranger-friends who had come and gone, people whose vanishing had left behind no huge hole in her life; they were there and then they weren't.

“Take us home with you,” I pleaded. My fingers clenched white around the handle of my book-filled shopping bag. Like an animal I'd caught the scent of danger. I grabbed her hand. "We'll be quiet, we'll be good, we'll stay in our rooms."

She shook her head and cupping my hands around her face I leaned forward to whisper, "Don't leave us here."

“I’ll call you every Saturday,” she promised as though she hadn't heard the pleading in my voice and hadn't smelled the danger apparent to me.

"I'll be back so soon it will be like I never left."

My brother put his thumb in his mouth.

“He still sucks his thumb?” Jane said. “We’ll break him of that soon enough.”

It seemed a warning my mother appeared to have missed, but then, when you're on the run you ignore things that might slow you up.

My mother stood and faced her. “No, he doesn’t really suck his thumb, only when meeting strangers.”

I wanted to say, no, he sucks his thumb when he's scared, but remained absolutely silent, practicing how to vanish.

“What’s in the bag?” Jane asked, turning to me.

“Her books,” my mother answered.

“I see,” she said. “We’ll have to get a look at them.”

"They're just her books," my mother said.

The three adults stared at the bag then lit cigarettes, contributing to a swamp of humid, eye-stinging, low-lying smoke. Every Bakelite-white table owned a pack of cigarettes, a cigarette lighter, and an ashtray. Every painted-white room was dingy with smoke that had no escape hatch. Every meal my brother and I would eat in the white-tiled kitchen would taste like tobacco.

My mother would sleep on the couch that night, making for an easy departure. My brother and I were ushered into a white bedroom with twin beds and end tables with white-shaded lamps. The gauzy curtains were white. So were the blankets. So were the sheets and pillowcases. I was afraid to lie down on so much white even after I had taken a shower. The grown-ups spoke quietly in the living room, my mother's indistinguishable words a hum of abandonment. The next morning, she was gone, the white couch immaculate with her absence. I rested my head in the outline of hers on the pillow; she was now somewhere in the outside world that was fading into white for us.

Jane, over breakfast, looked at my brother's picture books and deemed them acceptable, then pulled all of mine from the shopping bag and placed them on the kitchen table.

“These are science fiction.” she shook her head sorrowfully. “Your mother lets you read this garbage? This stuff will rot your brain. It’s no better than comic books. You can’t read this in my house.”

She shoved them back in the bag. “I'll get you books from the library.”

She dumped them into a trash bag that she closed tightly, placed it out the side door, then opened a sliding glass door to her yard, pushed us outside, closed it.

The door was a portal between safety and danger.

My brother grabbed my hand and put his thumb in his mouth. The sun was blinding. There were two trees in the yard and only a ball to play with. We were boxed in by tall hedges. We looked around in silence then finally played tag; I chased my brother around the yard then he chased me. We played ball for a few minutes. There were suddenly sharp stinging flashes through our legs, an assault, specks of red like the tips of lit matches marring our legs, we screamed, ran to the door, banged on it. Jane came to the door, serenely watched us crying, then opened it.

“Fire ants,” she said complacently. She brushed them off with a cloth that appeared out of nowhere, took us inside, put our legs in cold water in the bathtub, put MercuroChrome on a Q-Tip, and dabbed the swelling, red blotches.

“Go outside again and play,” she said as she ushered out the door. “Watch out for fire ants.”

We stepped out cautiously, then ran to the bigger of two trees. I pulled my brother up beside me. We looked out at the street and I planned our getaway. I'd fled before: from a street-gang, from a sarcastic teacher, from our mother's anger, but never with such a feeling of desperation and with the growing knowledge that this tree might be as far as we could actually flee. We stayed in the tree until Jane called us in for lunch. While we were outside, she'd gone to the library, returning with bland books on the level of a first grader. Both of us were beyond that. Nevertheless, I read them to my brother in the tree until mid-afternoon when we were allowed to come in, shower, then sit on the white couch and watch television until dinner.

"Have a nice first day?" Jim asked over a dish of spaghetti.

We looked at Jane and nodded silently.

I couldn't sleep that night. I listened to my brother’s muted breathing, his tossing and turning, the whoosh of thumb sucking, then stealthily made my way through the kitchen, opened the back door and, miraculously, my bag of books was still there. Despite the hum of the air conditioner, I was afraid dragging the bag would make too much noise. I

reached into it, carried a few books at a time into the closet in our bedroom. Over the next few days, I smuggled them into the yard, and wedged them in the hedges. By the time we left, the pages were rotting, words faded, spines broken and sad, but they had sustained us. I filled the bag with crumpled newspaper and hoped for the best; my audacity paid off. Jane threw the garbage bag on the sidewalk beside her trash bags next morning and it vanished into the teeth of the dump truck.

Over the next week, although sometimes we stayed quietly in our room, we were happiest outside where we had the illusion of freedom. We climbed the tree where I read aloud. The world had been divided into threes: the normal world, seen in glimpses from the top of the tree or on television with its perfect families and safe streets which could be watched but not entered. There was the grass, a green slash of color, deceptively innocent, a mine field from tree to house, crossed as swiftly and carefully as possible. Then there was the house and Jane, the most dangerous place we'd ever been.

The grass was the neutral zone between the other two, though it had its own pleasures and its own dangers. One afternoon we did experience a temporary halt in the danger. Jim put out a water sprinkler on the grass after leaving work early and we ran through, water instantaneously drying on our

skin in the blazing heat. More often it was merely a place to be crossed. We weren't always successful in avoiding fire ants during our run across the lawn. That second time I brushed them off us as quickly as possible, opened the door and we slipped inside then stood without moving away from it.

Jane came running in from her bedroom at the sound of the door closing. “Are you stupid?" she said exasperated. "You’d better learn because I’m not going to put up with this.”

We silently followed her to the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub. As she applied MercuroChrome to my brother’s leg it jerked nervously, hit her hand and the bottle tipping, a thin red stream marking the white tiled floor like blood. Her face was expressionless as she looked from him to that thin red flow and then, without warning, she slapped him across the face with such force his head reeled backward against the wall. He shrieked in pain.

“Silence," she hissed and leaned up close to him. "I warned you about being careful! Silence. How else will you learn your lesson.” She shook her head sadly.

This was the first of many lessons.

He was slapped every time she saw him suck his thumb, said he missed my mother, or asked for a glass of water. He learned to be always silent.

He began to wet the bed and was slapped for each wet sheet, sometimes placed in a closet because the slapping wasn't working.

He woke up with a nightmare and was slapped for waking everyone else. I began to share his bed, sleeplessly aware of his restlessness, prepared to wake him at any sound he made. All this before the first week had ended.

And then there was me—my lessons.

Jane smoked silently at the table watching us eat lunch: a grilled cheese sandwich, pickle, glass of water, a raw carrot. We ate quickly, eager to flee to the ant-infested safety of the yard and up the tree and into the imaginary worlds that kept us sane.

In my haste I dropped my glass of water and it rolled slowly across the table, water pooling, dripping in a slow liquid fall to the floor. Jane watched it roll without comment, then carefully put her cigarette in the ashtray, stood, walked around the table. I looked out the window, listened to her breathing, held my breath. She grasped my hair then and yanked my head back forcefully. My teeth rammed together, my vision lost in a screen of white. I screamed in astonishment and pain.

“Silence,” she said and smiled tightly. “Remember to be careful.”

I did.

By the end of the second week, the number of times we had not “been careful” ran into each other; one long interval during which more and more things to be careful about appeared. I developed a constant headache from my hair being pulled. Jane slapped my brother in places not easily viewed. I grew more and more distant from everything, diminishing in size like Alice after drinking the bottle she found down the rabbit hole. We seemed to lose form and substance, ghostly indistinct presences that only assumed corporeality in the tree. It seemed to me that I couldn't always see my brother, although we were always together.

Of note; we were never “taught lessons” after Jim came home from work. Now, as an adult, I can't imagine that he didn't know what was going on and feel that never addressing the subject with him probably saved us from much worse. However, we were never hungry; there was always as much food as we wanted, although our appetites shrunk in proportion of the number of weeks we remained there.

Time was so fluid, so without meaning, that it seemed years until my mother's first phone call, only ten days after she left. Jane cornered us in the kitchen. “Don't tell your mother about your lessons,” she said. “It's a surprise for her. She'll be very grateful to get such well-behaved children back.”

Her eyes glittered with menace and something more, something I didn't understand then, but would remember thirty-five years later when I ran batterer education groups in Maine for violent men on probation.

We nodded. We were...silent.

My mother called every Saturday after that. Jane stood over us listening to our conversation. Despite what was happening to us, my mother's call was comforting. We had not become stranger-friends, we had remained her children. Every Saturday we told our mother we were having fun. Every Saturday Jane told her all the fun things we had done.

"Move here," she insisted. "I can watch them while you get a job."

Some nights, lying in bed beside my brother, I wondered how my mother knew Jane, how she could know so little about her, how much she actually missed us. I gave her, and still give her, the benefit of the doubt. She was desperate, but she was not cruel.

The weeks melted into each other like one continuous day, nothing golden, the pain constant enough to be commonplace, until the last week, when my mother told us she was giving my stepfather a second chance.

“I bought plane tickets for the two of you to fly home. Won’t it be fun,” she said excitedly. “Your first time on an airplane and all by yourselves.”

Jane argued with her over the telephone. She’d warned us to insist on staying, to say we loved California, loved her, didn't want to go back to New York.

We hesitantly said what she demanded we say.

My mother heard something in our voices, a trembling plea that refuted our words.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I was silent.

“You’ll be home in two days,” she said.

The Souvenir

I hung up and felt as though I was waking from a dream and trickling back into myself. It was hard, scary, but time to grow solid. I began to see my brother in his corporeality rather than some vague shape. Relief asserted itself with the cool pleasure of water. We hugged and despite Jane watching us, her mouth tight with anger, spun in a circle. Jim stood beside her smiling and we felt safe. We would be gone before he returned to work on Monday.

We all went out into the yard and for the first time a butterfly lit on my arm. I stood motionless holding my breath, my brother and I watching its black-tipped wings slowly open and close like a book. Suddenly, Jim grabbed the butterfly by its wings, its body twisting in an effort to escape.

“Isn’t it beautiful,” he said.

We nodded.

“Want to take it home,” he asked. “A souvenir of your time in California?”

I didn't want a souvenir. I wanted to forget my time in California, but I had an image then of it drifting, from flower to flower on my mother's fire escape garden, an emblem of freedom.

I nodded.

“Follow me,” he said.

Jim had a small workshop, filled with neatly-lined shelves of tools, nails, a small table and chair. He pulled a jar from his shelf and beckoned us to come closer. He held the butterfly carefully up, pulled a long thick needle from the jar, then quickly inserted it into the butterfly’s head and slowly pushed it down through the body which twisted in horrendous convulsion. At that moment, every punishment, every moment, every fear vanished in a wash of terror so profound

that my vision faded. Bile rose to my throat, and I dropped to the floor.

I didn’t know it then, but this moment of observing pain inflicted on something so helpless and beautiful would haunt my nightmares, offer me deepening insight into our month in California, into the casual, thoughtless quality that could be part of cruelty, into each client I worked with as a psychotherapist thirty years later. It remained one of the seminal moments of my life, and when so much else faded, the memory remains in such stunning detail, that each time I remember it, I am once again that child.

We left the butterfly there.

The Getaway – Last Chapter

We took home only the clothes on our backs, everything else having vanished overnight and the hidden books deliquescing in the hedges. Jane was silent, her fury manifested by her welcomed decision to ignore us. Jim, as he drove to the airport, was talkative. He warned us about our ears clogging, gave us chewing gum, told us that stewardesses would give us soda and sandwiches and watch out for us. He told us to visit again soon, that he was sorry we weren't going to school in California, and that he was surprised we didn’t take the butterfly.

At the airport, Jane wandered off. Jim leaned over to kiss us good-bye, looked around for her, said, "I thought she'd want a last good-by kiss," then nodded to the stewardess who took each of our hands. We turned our backs and didn't look back. We clung to this woman who helped us flee up metal stairs, through a door and belted us into the first row. She sat beside another stewardess and both winked at us as the engines begin to roar. We rolled down the tarmac, a lengthening scroll of departure. The propellers turned. At that moment, I swore to myself that when I grew up and had children, I would never leave them with anyone I didn't know intimately and had daily contact with, a vow I've kept. With a stomach wrenching burst of power, the plane slanted up higher and higher into safety. California fell beneath us, a shawl of green, brown, gold, a long blue splash of ocean, snow-capped mountains, then an unexpected tunnel of white as we flew into a cloud.

When we were through it, California had vanished.

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. She is the author of *Stealing: Life in America*. Michelle co-edits for Solstice Literary Magazine. She works with students both in-person and on-line.

Just Another Fucking Day in Afghanistan

by J. Malcolm Garcia

I'm sitting next to this guy on a flight from Kabul to Dubai when he says he likes my pants, all the pockets.

--LL Bean brand?

--No, Columbia.

--You are?

--A journalist.

I'm on my way home from an embed with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division in Kandahar. Three months earlier, I had flown into Kabul from Dubai and my Afghan colleague, Aziz, met me at the airport. We stopped at a restaurant before Aziz would drop me off at the American military base in Bagram Village. From there I'd catch an Army transport plane to Kandahar.

In the restaurant, customers watched Aziz and I sit on a rug and order Kabuli pulao. Just a month before my arrival, leaflets distributed around the neighborhood where Aziz lived urged people to kill the Western invaders. He showed me one, a dirt-smeared piece of paper filled with words I didn't understand. Many of us would die, Aziz said, reading from it, but we would at least get some of them. Outside the open restaurant door, I watched men hose down the street to settle

dust. Water splashed against a dove of peace painted across a blast wall. Aziz folded the leaflet and put it in his pocket. Everyone continued to watch us. I did not feel threatened so much as I felt their resentment as if I was not allowing them even this small amount of time alone from the presence of foreigners. We waited a long while to be served.

On our way to Bagram, Aziz told me he had canceled the engagement of his oldest daughter to a young man who planned to move to Holland where his father owned a jewelry store. She agreed to leave but Aziz told her it was not her decision to make; he would not tolerate one of his children resettling in a non-Islamic country. He had arranged the marriage and he would end it and find her another husband, and I realized that Aziz, like the men in the restaurant, saw the West as a threat, too, an intrusive entity that would take his daughter and turn her into someone else, someone in violation of his beliefs, and at a certain level I and others like me made tangible that something, made us the faces of the threat by virtue of who we were. I liked Aziz and trusted him to arrange interviews and provide translations, and I believed he liked me, but this was not about how we felt toward each other. This went deeper, beyond our working relationship and beyond my understanding. I knew he would not want me harmed but I also accepted that we were not friends.

When I arrived in Kandahar that evening, public relations officer Corporal Keith Klue met me at the tarmac. I was his charge. In the coming days, I learned that no matter how I greeted him, Good morning, or, How're you doing, no matter the day or the time, he'd always respond, It's just another fucking day in Afghanistan. The other thing I picked up on was that Klue and all the other soldiers I met said fuck about every other word until its constant use achieved a kind of absurd, repetitious, syncopated beat that soon became part of my vocabulary, too.

A cop from Florida, Klue believed in the war, was very gung-ho. He had drunk the Kool-Aid and spoke in the cliched syntax of a bumper sticker. His favorite expression: power comes through a gun. That's what made America the biggest kid on the block in Afghanistan. He joined the Army reserves out of old-fashioned values. Honor and service. He believed in the U.S. and what it stood for. There's a fear factor, he admitted, when he went out on an operation because he never knew what would happen. So far nothing had. From Klue's perspective, that sucked. Like blue balls. All hyped up and nothing happens. What good was he if he wasn't killing the enemy? He explained, The Army had intel but nothing's perfect. The fucking hajis keep getting away. Every time he was deployed, as he got closer to the start of an operation, he

felt less and less for his wife and family and more for his fellow soldiers, all of them bound together by their desire to use their weapons and kill the enemy.

--And what were you doing in Kandahar? the guy beside me on the plane admiring the number of pockets in my pants asks.

--Writing about American soldiers.

--Ah, yes, American soldiers.

He's Afghan, the man tells me. He was born in Kabul but moved to the States as a kid. Lives on Long Island, married to a woman from Uzbekistan. Both of them speak about nine languages. They have two children. Everything was fine until the 2007 recession hit and he was forced to shut down the convenience store he operated. A short time later, he signed with the U.S. Army as a translator and now earns about two hundred thousand dollars a year. Gets three weeks off every six months and returns to Long Island to see his wife and children. Now he's leaving Afghanistan after another six-month stint.

--Where will you stay in Dubai? he asks

--Majestic Hotel.

He suggests I try another hotel where Russian women will sit on your lap in the bar until you arrange something more

intimate. Book a room first. It's cheaper than asking for a room without a reservation.

He considers me for a moment and then asks if I used protective military gear.

--No, I tell him.

He shakes his head, says he wears a Kevlar vest when he's on the Army base near Pul-e-Charkhi, not far from Kabul, where young Afghan men train to be soldiers. American soldiers and their Afghan translators get very nervous when the trainees load their weapons. Snipers peer down ready to take out anyone who has a sudden urge for jihad. When he leaves the base, the translator never tells the trainees where he's going.

My handler, Klue, was also surprised I didn't carry a weapon. Can't as a journalist, I explained. Not part of my job description. Fuck that, he told me. One morning, he and I hooked up with an LT in charge of a medical mission. His instructions to his squad were brief: They were to escort the medics to some village he couldn't pronounce. Stay fifty meters apart so the fucking enemy can't take out a bunch of us at once; in case of an ambush, lay down repressive fire and start a fucking flanking maneuver; if we hit a fucking mine, an armored security vehicle would push the damaged vehicle the fuck out. If they experienced fucking sniper fire and they didn't

know where it came from, they were to get out of the goddamn line of fire without lighting up the fucking countryside; and finally, if there was fucking enemy contact in the village, the medics would be removed first and then the rest of them would pull the fuck out.

--Return fire and aim fucking well, the LT added before he walked off to consult with his CO. We shot the shit and waited.

--Hurry up and wait. The Army way.

--Where's the fucking caterer? Klue asked.

--I don't know, a private said. I told them I wanted a fucking king-size bed, not a queen. And an Asian chick, not some round-eyed bitch.

--I just want to go to a fucking Outback and get me a raw, raw steak and those mashed potatoes with skin, another private said.

--I just want to kill, another private said.

--I want a fucking ice-cold Slurpee from 7-Eleven, Klue said.

--You figure there's a fucking method to this madness?

--I don't think there fucking is one.

--Hide and go fucking seek?

--Yep.

An hour later, the LT reappeared. Move out, he said. We piled into Humvees and put on goggles to protect our eyes from dust storms. The flat barrenness of the sand-covered land pocked by thorny scrub consumed time and dimension and I had no idea how long we'd been driving before I saw the mud huts of the unpronounceable village and panicked women covering their faces and fleeing our arrival, and barefoot children chasing after them. Sullen men waited as the LT approached and he explained through an interpreter the purpose of our visit. The mens' expressions did not change. They offered green tea the medics declined but the men insisted on giving it to them and a boy brought a tray with glass cups and tea and a thermos of hot water and a sugar bowl. The medics thanked them and ignored the boy as he poured the tea and the villagers watched the medics unfold a long, collapsible table and then they formed a line, the expression on the faces unchanged, and they accepted what help the medics offered, eye drops, Band-Aids and tablets of Advil mostly, without hope of anything more.

American soldiers no older than twenty-five took up positions, their weapons pointed at the line of men waiting to be seen and they assumed the hard pose of what they thought men ready to kill would look like until the line dwindled to the last patient and the medics packed up while the male villagers

stood staring at us, and their wives, mothers and daughters peered through windows and doors.

--Ya think any of these guys are fucking bad guys?

--Farmer by day, Taliban at night, dude.

--That means I can fucking kill them?

Laughter.

--I had trouble getting the fuck up this morning.

--I fucking worked out.

--I just didn't want to get the fuck up.

--How late were you playing fucking cards?

--Not that fucking late.

--Where the fuck're we going next?

--Other side of the fucking wadi.

--To do fucking what?

--Find fucking bad guys.

--There's no fucking end. We could spend another fucking month down here, easy, and not find anybody.

--They won't be bad when we find them. Everyone's a fucking farmer when we find them. They don't know fucking nothing. Then you look under a fucking wood pile and find fucking weapons.

--I thought this was just a fucking medical mission.

--Fucking other duties as assigned, man.

A thirty-year-old private, Michael Quinnones, told me he'd be glad to return to base without incident. Boring was good. Quinnones had a wife and two young children. He knew some of the guys wanted shit to go down. They weren't into this hearts-and-minds-medical mission bullshit but he wasn't in any hurry to get fucking shot. Go into villages, looking for ammo, open doors, hope nobody's fucking armed. That fucking shit wore him down. He wasn't sure what he was doing in Afghanistan. Weren't we supposed to be catching Osama bin Laden? he said. Whatever. Quinnones would do what he was fucking ordered.

The next morning at 0700, Klue and I sat beside Specialist Scott Eberlein in a Chinook bound for Helmand Province to flush out Taliban fighters.

--All that sound, Klue shouted at me above the noise of Chinook's rotating blades, tells the Taliban we're coming to fucking kill them!

Eberlein's face notably paled at Klue's warrior pose. He told me he had been an actor and had bit parts in the television shows "X-Files," "Nash Bridges" and "Martial Law." He joined the Army the day after 9/11. His acting friends thought he was fucking crazy.

He was scared, he admitted, but when the Chinook landed, he'd focus on his memories of the Twin Towers falling.

He then shook my hand and wished us both luck and then he said goodbye in case he didn't make it. For the first time, I thought I might die, too. I didn't feel fear so much as loneliness surrounded by young men with guns, strangers, without my family or anyone I knew. I couldn't fathom getting shot, however, it didn't feel real although of course I knew it could happen. My inability to comprehend getting shot or blown up or whatever else might kill me eased my fear but the loneliness lingered.

The Chinook landed and we all ran down a ramp and dove on the ground. Nothing happened. We had no contact with the enemy. Not a shot fired. Helmand was a bust.

--They climb mountains like fucking goats and we can't fucking catch them, Klue bitched. Fucking Chinooks, they heard us a mile away.

That night back in Kandahar, Eberlein talked about X-Files. He played a hit man who kidnapped a psychic. The psychic led him to an alien and the alien threw him against a wall and killed him. All of the guys thought it was pretty cool he'd been on TV although they'd rather have talked about all the bad guys they'd shot to hell in Helmand but that didn't happen, and they were still all hyped up. Just hours earlier they thought they'd take enemy fire, they thought they might die in the vague sort of way that something like that can be

imagined but vivid enough that their hearts raced and the palms of their hands got clammy but still death, the permanent darkness of endless sleep, was impossible to comprehend. Restless, they made their way to “the wack room,” a latrine stuffed with Playboy magazines, and jerked off. After they took care of business, the soldiers came back and asked Eberlein what it was like to be on Nash Bridges.

I glance out the plane window at the mountains spread out below us and imagine trying to find anyone in the nooks and crannies of those bare peaks. Small square patches of land mark where farmers till soil in narrow valleys at the base of the mountains. The translator looks out the window, too.

--Did you meet Afghan soldiers? he asks me.

--No.

--They don’t like discipline. They don’t remember what they’ve been taught and quit at a moment’s notice. The Army will spend a year and a half training one guy and then he goes home for a month and by the time he returns to base he has forgotten everything.

He blames this on their lack of education.

--Most Afghans can’t read or write their own language. They are only doing it for the money.

--Unlike you.

The translator smiles.

--You are very clever.

The plane carries us over a military base in the foothills of some of the mountains. The translator points at a group of square brown buildings.

--There, that's where I was, he says.

He hiked around the mountains for five hours just the day before. Afterward, he caught a ride into Kabul and stayed at the Inter-Continental Hotel. Great barbecue. He recommends I try it the next time I come out.

--You'll think you're back home.

--I doubt that, I say.

--Will you be back?

--I don't know.

--It's not close to being over, you know. The Taliban have belief. You can't beat belief.

--I didn't see any Taliban.

--You don't see belief, my friend, the translator said.

My days in Kandahar revealed nothing but flat deserts and poor families eking a subsistence living off the parched land. They seemed oblivious of the war, oblivious of what we considered to be their impoverished state as they had lived simply like this for generations, undisturbed it seemed despite the Soviet invasion, the civil war that followed the Russian

retreat, the rise of the Taliban, 9/11 and the American-led invasion, but Klue would have none of it. He shook a finger in my face and warned me of the deceitful nature of Afghans. We could be here ten fucking years and never find all the fucking weapon caches. He didn't know what he'd fucking say back home if someone asked, What was it like? He hadn't used his weapon, just handed out food and medicine to the enemy, that's what it was like. That would always be between them, what he hadn't done and what they'd assumed he'd done. He wished he could tell them something profound. What was it like? He'd repeat the question and then answer, Just another day in Afghanistan.

The translator and I don't speak again for the rest of the hour-and-a half flight. When we land at Dubai, I get out of my seat and step back in the aisle to give him room to stand. He hefts a large backpack out of the luggage hold above our heads. We shake hands and I follow him off the plane and search for a place to buy coffee. I have a twelve-hour wait before my flight to D.C. At home, I assume that with jet lag I won't sleep. I'll lie awake and think of an empty, morose expanse, its weighty silence and unsettling monotony. I'll wonder if Aziz found another husband for his daughter. Fucking Afghanistan, I hear Klue curse.

After a few days, I'll be OK.

J. Malcolm Garcia is a freelance writer. His most recent books are *Riding Through Katrina with the Red Baron's Ghost* (Skyhorse) and *The Fruit of All My Grief: Lives in the Shadows of the American Dream* (Seven Stories Press 2019).

Dinner Stories: The Emergency Room

by W. Scott Olsen

Prologue

Here is a truth that crosses every border. Dinner is a time for stories.

There is something magical about the meal. Or, to be more precise, there is something magical about the occasion. We don't often tell breakfast stories. We have to get going. The stories we tell over lunch are brief, summaries at best. But dinner stories can be long. They hold drama and nuance. They hold backstory and foreshadowing. They have an arc that reveals something deeper than just what happened.

Gather a group of friends at an evening table and we share stories that nourish the soul as well as the spleen.

The Chef

My friend Eric Watson is a chef. Talented, imaginative and creative, he owns a restaurant in Moorhead, Minnesota, called Rustica. What if, I asked Eric, we gathered just one person, someone with an interesting job, and asked them to tell stories? Could you come up with a menu to provoke those stories? Could you come up with a menu that was based on or inspired by the work they do?

Eric paused, but only for a moment. “Yes” he said. “I think I could.”

The Guest

Warren Hintz. Emergency Room Physician. Sanford Hospital. Fargo, North Dakota.

The Menu

Wood Roasted Manilla Clams

Preserved Meyer Lemon, Garlic, Basil, Caper, Olive & Sweet Tomato

Ginger Miso Glazed Cauliflower

Edamame, Tofu, Sweet Potato & Sticky Black Rice

Scallop Crudo with Toasted Coriander

Fresh Orange, Shaved Fennel & Asparagus

Flash Seared Beef Tenderloin Medallion

Cumin Scented Quinoa, Black Beans, & Carrot Tahini Puree

Caramelized Pear

Coconut Milk, Ginger & Almond

Eric and I sit at the bar at Rustica, going over the menu he wants to serve.

Is there a connection between food and profession?

“That’s what I’m shooting for,” Eric says. “We have an Emergency Room doctor. So I am trying to keep it healthy. A lot of the ingredients on here—I just feel like certain ingredients hit my stomach and make my stomach feel better. Healing food. So like miso, or things that are umami driven, really savory. When I eat salmon roe for example, it makes my body feel better. It’s personal to me. Everything on here seems, to me, fresh, vibrant, healing. Something that’s good for the body.

“I tried to create a menu based around things that are going to cook really quick,” he says. “When I think of the emergency room I think fast, speed, so I wanted things that were quick. Like the beef medallions, for example. We can flash sear them really quick and they’re done. The caramelized pear requires very little cooking time. Everything on here requires very little, if any cooking time.

“I start light and work toward things that are heavier. The clams are super light, super clean. Manilla clams are petite and tender. The cauliflower—I just wanted to keep it healthy, so anything kind of along the vegan lines, health

conscious, plant-based. The pear? Just wanted to keep it as free of animal fats as I could."

I smile, looking at the piece of paper that holds his notes, imagining the evening.

"Should we tell him?" I ask.

"This is the Emergency Room," he says. "I think it's kind of fun to let him be surprised."

Dinner Stories

Dinner is at 5:00 p.m. on a warm clear April evening. Warren and I arrive at nearly the same time. Grey hair and a closely trimmed grey beard, the man radiates calm. He moves quietly. His voice is soft.

Eric has reserved the best seat in the house, a table in the front window overlooking the intersection of Main Avenue and 4th Street South. Cars and trucks, the occasional motorcycle, people out for a stroll go by. Walkers peer in the restaurant windows as they pass, all of them looking at the food on the tables more than the faces of the diners. A happy, curious young woman named Madi appears at our table and pours water, then takes our order for drinks. She knows this is an occasion. Be right back, she promises.

Warren and I smile, then start with beginnings.

“I was working for an engineering consulting company in Bismarck,” he says.

“Remember those aptitude tests we all used to take? They said I would be good at engineering, so that’s what I went into. With nothing else to do I thought ok, they’re smart, I’ll do that.

“Anyway, I was sitting in my office three years into it, after graduation, and I happened to look across the hallway to my bosses’ offices. They were both behind their desks. I realized at that moment, even though there was probably a little wanderlust happening before then, that these guys were forty-two years old and I was twenty-six. I was doing the exact same thing they were doing. And I said, do I really want to do this when I’m forty-two? Do I want to do this when I’m forty-five? The answer turned out to be no.

“So then it was a matter of what are you going to do if you’re not going to do this? I toyed with going into law school for a little while but there was a movie that came out in the late 70s called *And Justice for All*. Al Pacino. It was a great movie. It was really a spectacular movie. But it was horrible in the message it was offering. The message, and one of the lines I remember, was Al Pacino saying ‘There is no truth. Truth in law is only what you can get people to believe.’ I realized I

don’t believe that. I couldn’t do that. So I started processing other things.”

Warren takes a sip of his water and begins a smile.

“I had a recollection of a girl I was dating during college and she had mentioned I should go to medical school,” he says.

Then he waits.

“Because?” I ask.

“She thought I’d look good in white.”

We laugh.

“Why not interrupt my whole life and my career path and everything else in the world I had at that moment because I would look good in white?”

Madi shows up with red wine for me, a gin and tonic for Warren. Her timing, I think, is perfect. Warren and I take that first sip of our drinks and survey the room. Other people are arriving and the room is filling with laughter. One couple, at a table a bit distant from our own, is clearly on a date. Perhaps a first date. Obvious, awkward eagerness.

“To be serious,” Warren says, “it was during this same time that I would ride my bicycle all over North Dakota and I was out riding one evening after dark. I was right down by the Holiday Inn in Bismarck, just about to go underneath the Memorial Bridge, and I heard this horrible screeching and

scratching and crash. A car crash. This was obviously before cell phones. I ran up to the middle of the bridge. There was this car with four young girls in it. High school age. And then the other car, the notorious drunk driver. And these young girls kept saying, ‘Help me. Help me. Help us. Help us.’ There wasn’t anything I could do. I didn’t know anything. There wasn’t a thing I could do other than just try and reassure them, encourage them to stay calm. At least I knew enough that they shouldn’t move around too much. Another person came up after that, backed up, went somewhere and made the phone call to 9-1-1. I was able to stay there with them. And it was that evening, night, next morning that I said I would never be in a position where I don’t know what to do. So within two weeks I signed up for an EMS course. Joined an ambulance squad. Went to medical school.

“I am firm believer that everyone has a calling at some time in their life, he says. And we always look at things we like to do and might want to do. That night I found mine.”

Starters

Madi shows up again. Right behind her, Eric appears, deep plates in each hand. He sets them in front of us.

“Oh, my heavens,” I say, then make introductions.

“We’re starting out with a wood-fired, roasted clam,” Eric says, “with a sweet tomato broth, olives, capers, basil, a little garlic, chicken stock, a touch of butter and olive oil.”

I understand plating as an art form, I think to myself, but I am always amazed by the beauty of well-presented food on a plate.

“This came to be,” Eric says, “with the idea of trying to pair it with an ER doctor, at least the best I can. Just fast. Things that are flash cooked. I was just thinking speed. I picture an ER doctor moving quick. Or at least thinking fast. Nutritious. Good for the soul. Not a lot of saturated fat. But a lot of color. A lot of vibrancy. That’s where I was starting and where I was heading.”

“This smells grand,” Warren says.

Warren smiles at me after he takes his first bite. Behind us, the sounds have changed to forks and spoons and knives put to work. A dozen variations on the way to say “hmm” that means “this is really good.”

“I will confess,” I say, “I am afraid every time I get a meal like this. Shells and such. Do I really know how to eat this? But I’m also old enough to know I really don’t care.”

“Indeed,” Warren says.

I take my own first bite. Oh lord, I think.

“You’ve seen a lot of water under the bridge,” I say. I already know he is the second most senior physician in the ER. More than thirty years waiting for disaster.

“It’s remarkably changed,” he says.

“The technology has changed,” I say. “Has practice changed?”

“Skills,” he says. “Skills relative to procedures that you do to either save lives or make things more comfortable for people. Whether it’s lines, IV lines, or intubating, or something else, the skills have certainly followed the technology. Better equipment. Better techniques. Procedures have changed. Patient population has changed too, to some degree. Initially the patient population was truly emergency medicine people. Then it started falling into urgent care, walk-in clinic types of things. Now it’s all of that, plus. The only thing we don’t do is preventative care. And only because the setting isn’t right for preventative care. But whether it’s psychiatry, whether it’s chronic medical care, whether it’s urgent care, whether it’s emergent care, it’s kind of the full gamut of everything.”

“I had not thought of emergency psychiatry coming to your room,” I say. “Other places, yes. But not the ER.”

“Most of that, unfortunately,” he says, then pauses, “is despair. It’s an incredible social, cultural type of issue. Despair issues run the gamut of suicidal, whether it’s just thinking

about it or actual attempts, to alcohol and drug related issues, overdose issues, intentional or otherwise. And just some health issues. Certainly we know that physiologically and medically people get sick from their stress. They get sick when they are in despair. Even if they are not using things. Even if they are not suicidal. Just physiologically they would get sick."

Warren and I sit quietly for a moment, take bites of our meal. I'm coming to understand his pauses are a consideration of options. His life is based on getting it right.

"It's curious," he says, "that you ask what would bring people to the emergency department for even routine things, like a cold, or a child who has a fever, when there are walk-in clinics available. I used to ask myself that a lot. But then I learned.

"I think it's been—I'm just going to guess on the timing of this—ten years ago? It was in the middle of the night. About 2:30 in the morning. Even ten years ago we weren't overly busy overnight. Ten people, maybe twelve. Maybe even five? From 10:00 p.m. until about 6:00 a.m. it was not a grand crowd. This one particular morning, I was in our sleeping room, study room, whatever, and I got a call there was a patient to see me. I came out to see him and here's this eighty-seven-year-old little guy, nicely dressed, looking healthy, and

his primary complaint was fatigue. At 2:30 in the morning. And I wondered, I wondered what he was thinking.

“So, fatigue. I went through the whole gamut of what could cause a little old man to have fatigue. He hadn’t fallen or been dizzy or anything. As I was interviewing him, and then examining him, I was asking him—what do you mean by fatigue? Tell me what you’re experiencing. What has changed recently?

“He had more energy than I did! He was telling me that twice a week he would go down to the Eagles club and dance until they closed at midnight. He was telling me stories about little old ladies. ‘They just won’t let me alone,’ he says. ‘There’re more old women than there are old men there, so I don’t have to worry about not being able to dance,’ he said. ‘In fact, sometimes I just wish I could just sit and chat for a little while.’

“And I thought, so you dance all night, once or twice a week, and he says yes, I do. And then he said he hikes miles a day! So I ask—has anything changed? He said, not really. So I’m still processing, how does a little eighty-seven year old man, nicely dressed, 2:30 in the morning, come into my department saying he’s fatigued? I did some diabetes checks, some anemia checks, whatever else I could come up with for fatigue. And I came back half an hour later and I said you

know, everything looks good. I don't have an explanation for what you're experiencing. He said, it's okay. I'm not necessarily fatigued. I'm just sad.

"And I said, what are you sad about? He said, 'Well, in the middle of the dance night tonight, I got a phone call that my last best friend died. And I just wanted somebody to talk to.'

"Since then, I realized that everybody comes to see me, comes to see us, for a reason. And whether that reason is something I understand, whether that reason is something I agree with, whether it's a reasonable reason or they just needed somebody to talk to, at 2:30 in the morning, I'm there. I'm serving a function. And so I kind of vowed that I will never ask again, in my mind let alone out loud, if they should be there. Sometimes I do ask *What are you here for?* because I just don't understand their whole process, and that does clarify a lot of things. Sometimes it still just doesn't make sense, but at least most of the time it clears things up. But at least I vowed I would never be angry or frustrated with somebody who's there that I don't think needs to be there."

"Have you been able to keep that vow," I ask?

"I think for the most part yeah," he says. "I have. I was so impressed with that little old man."

Second Course

Madi arrives, smiling. “Can I take this first course out of the way?”

“It was wonderful,” I say.

“I think I devastated it,” Warren says. “Thank you.”

Eric arrives right behind her.

“So what do we have?” he says. “This is a pan seared cauliflower medallion with a ginger miso glaze. We got a little tofu, a marinated tofu with a little splash of tamari. Same thing with the edamame —it’s got a little splash of tamari as well. And a sweet potato puree and a black sticky Tai rice.”

“Oh my, Eric,” I say. “Where did this idea come from?”

“You give me too much credit for ideas,” he says, laughing. “No, it’s just I like the color scheme, I like the textures and flavors together, so yeah, that’s really where it’s born from. Just kind of going all vegetarian, vegan on this dish actually, so again just trying to keep it clean, healthy, small portions.”

We invite him to linger but Eric says he cannot. Other customers. Other patients.

Warren starts to talk about diagnostics and protocols. He tells me about ABC—airways, breathing, circulation. But then he takes a bite, stops and points at his plate, at the presentation of the food. All he says is “mmmm.”

“I wish I had Eric’s imagination,” I say.

“That sweet potato puree is just absolutely breathtaking,” Warren says.

We are suddenly in that comfortable silence of good food. A shared, atmospheric joy. Something shared even before language. Something ancient.

“I marvel at creative people,” Warren says.

“Don’t let anyone know,” I say, “but I actually like the tofu.”

“I’m there with you, too,” Warren laughs.

“I’m always amazed when people can bring out a flavor in cauliflower,” he says. “Something that is so”—he pauses, then just smiles.

We pay attention to the food, sip our drinks.

“Tell me about diagnostics,” I say. “It seems to me, from the outsider’s perspective, that you, your department, has to have the fastest diagnostic skills in the world. The range of things you could be presented with is everything.”

“I think that’s accurate,” he says. “You have to have at least a pretty clear picture of what the possibilities are. We use the term differential diagnosis relative to whatever complaint they have. So you came in with belly pain—what are the possibilities? You came in with chest pain—what are

the possibilities? You came in unresponsive—what are the possibilities?"

"What information do you have before you see a patient?" I ask.

"It certainly varies," he says. "A critical patient is really the only type of patient I hear about before I generally go in to see them. For the most part, all of the patients we see have a chief complaint or a primary complaint. And maybe a little bit of details from the nursing staff."

"So usually you're just looking at the chart hanging on the door as you go in?"

"Right. Whereas critical patients, the staff are exceptional in letting us know there's somebody critical coming in in ten minutes, fifteen minutes, and this is what we know. Sometimes it's we know they're not breathing well, some of it is blood pressure is low, some of it's that they're unresponsive. And some of it they're not doing well. I hesitate to use the term routine patients, but their vital signs may not be there when I walk into the room. But anyone that has something that's pretty dramatic, we'll know."

"So you're already thinking as you walk down the hall," I say.

"Correct. And probably the first thing I think about is 'is this person sick or is this person ok?'"

“How do you…” I ask, then retreat. “Wait. Is a broken arm sick? Is that what you mean?” I ask.

“No. Sick meaning are they, unless I do something quick, going to deteriorate? Or are they already deteriorating? And that’s a relatively quick assessment. You get just this general gestalt of what you’re seeing. Pale. Sweaty. Heartrate of 230. Minimally responsive. Those things you can just boom. You can have a big picture. Or at least a focused picture. And that’s where the ABC comes in.

“And when I say okay,” he continues, “when they look okay, or they look ill but their vital signs are okay, and everything else is working okay, at least I have a little bit of time to process. I don’t have to do anything immediately to manage something that’s life threatening.”

“How essential is the interview?” I ask. “You have the machines to tell you what the body’s doing. How essential is the talk to you?”

“It’s vital. Mostly because it gives you a clearer picture of what direction to go. By the time you’re done with the interview and an examination, things should be narrowed down pretty close to two or three potential items. And then it’s just a matter of the process of doing the investigation work that helps support those two or three items you’re thinking about.

“Things are not so much different here than they are anywhere else in the country,” he says, “in Boston, in inner-city New York. The quantity of trauma, quantity of violent trauma, is certainly different. But the general flow, the general what you do, the patient population, all of those things are pretty uniform all across the country. Right, wrong or otherwise, medicine has evolved into a clinic practice that is maintenance of things which have already been identified as problems. Walk-in clinics, urgent care clinics, and emergency departments are *I have something new*. Or, something old is now broken. My blood pressure is now, suddenly, too high. It’s difficult the way medicine is setup now. You can’t call up your doctor and say your blood pressure is now 210, you have a little bit of a headache, you’re having some problems with vision, and expect that he will drop two other patients in the next half hour to see you and try to manage that. So we see you. We have all the tools to manage that. And especially if it ends up getting worse.”

“Tell me about a particularly difficult diagnosis,” I say. “Is there a patient or whatever that particularly confounded you? Or one that you just nailed?”

Third Course

We are interrupted when Eric arrives again.

“Eric,” I say, “these are all beautiful dishes. Oh, that smells so good.”

“Probably one of my favorite ones,” he says. “We have a little scallop crudo, just keeping it raw and fresh. Quickly marinated and served immediately. That way the citrus doesn’t start to cook it. In this case, a nice, fresh, sea scallop. Came in fresh. We drizzled a mixture of orange juice and fresh lemon juice over the top. We got toasted ground coriander seed sprinkled over there, we got fennel, shaved fennel, red onion on the bottom with some shaved asparagus. That’s it. And fresh orange on top.”

We all look at each other, and I suddenly wonder if chefs and physicians don’t often get the same looks. Gratitude for the ineffable. We stop talking. Eating is its own pleasure.

“I think the most memorable patients,” Warren begins, finally, then pauses again. “It’s interesting because when you think of the world memorable you think of something that touched your heart, that maybe has a bright spot in the back or in the forefront of your mind. These are memorable in the opposite direction. They certainly have impacted my heart. They certainly have impacted my perception of life. But I’m not fond of remembering them. Those are abused children.”

We pause.

“It always amazes me,” he says, then pauses again.

“As an aside,” he says, “this is exceptional. Holy Moly! I just had my first bite and I go Oh Man… This has touched me. This is exceptional. Man, I like fennel, but I am not sure I’ve ever had fennel that’s this good.”

We pause again. Talking about pain in the midst of joy. The restaurant crowd. Laughter and love at the other tables. The happy noises. Somehow good food gives permission.

“The thing about child abuse,” he says. “I’m always amazed. I can certainly come up with sad. Anger. But every time I would see a child that’s been abused, either physically or sexually, and thank goodness it’s not often, I’m always amazed anybody could do that to a child.

“The other thing I’m always amazed at is the demeanor of the assailant.”

“Do you see them?” I ask, amazed. “Is it the parents who bring them in?”

“Sometimes the parents,” he says. “Sometimes the boyfriend of the mom. Sometimes a relative. Most of the time it’s somebody they know. And all the time I’ve experienced it, it is somebody they know.”

“And that somebody is standing in the room with you as you’re…,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Have you punched anybody?” I ask.

“No,” he says, “You can almost always tell who the perpetrator is,” he says. “Because they’re removed. They seem concerned…”

“Concerned about evidence of their own guilt?” I interrupt. “Or concerned about the child?”

“Concerned about the child, he says. At least you get that impression. But there’s almost a sense of *laisse faire* intermixed among some of the other things. This is serious, and initially you think they don’t understand the seriousness, the seriousness of the injury, the seriousness of whatever is going on. And even if they’re engaged enough, that disconnect always comes through someplace.”

“How often does the child point a finger at someone and say that’s where my injury came from?” I ask. “Ever?”

Warren looks at his plate for what seems like a very long time.

“I’ve had very few abused children who are in a position to point the finger. The ones I see are toddlers, at best.”

“What about trauma,” I ask. “Not just car wreck trauma. But knives, bullets, beat-ups? Do you see a fair amount of that? I saw something today about an increase in the homicide rate.”

“I think there was a three percent increase in the homicide rate,” he says. “No, he says, it was a thirty percent increase. Which means we’ve had six.”

“So we’re not a violent town, in terms of your office,” I ask.

“No, we are,” he says. “There’s no question. But we’re still the knife club. Not the knife and gun club. Lots of stabbings. Lots of knife violence.”

Madi shows up again, to check on our drinks. I can tell she wants to know what’s going on.

“How does this look from your perspective?” I ask her. “Is any of this on the menu?”

“No,” she says. “I don’t even know what any of it is. I don’t even know what Chef is bringing out because he’s been preparing it all. I haven’t got a clue. But I heard that you guys are writing a book?”

“Yes,” I say.”

“And the courses are meant to go along with the story?”

“He’s an emergency room doctor,” I say, pointing at Warren. “Eric has to come up with a menu to match his profession.”

“Oh boy, that’s a tough one,” Madi says, then continues. “I’m going to be studying nursing.”

“That’s good for you,” Warren says, genuinely.

“I’m excited to get into it,” she says. “I’m going to start this fall.”

“Is medicine still attractive to eighteen-year-olds?” I ask when she walks away.

“It seems like it,” he says.

I look around the restaurant. Every seat is filled. Food arrives and conversation stops to allow eyes and noses their own vocabulary. The first date couple is gone, their seats replaced by two middle aged couples. I silently wish them all well.

We go back to knife and gun club talk.

“We do have firearm injuries,” he says. “But the majority of those are self-inflicted.”

“What about somebody just beating up somebody else?” I ask.

“We see a lot of that. It’s been that way for a while. Ten, fifteen years.”

“Stupid bar fights?” I ask.

“Stupid bar fights. Domestics. For the last ten years, twelve years, I work strictly days. I gave up shift work.”

“The benefits of age,” I say.

“Or the agonies of age,” he says. “I couldn’t do shift work anymore. So I don’t see as much of the violence as

people who work the evenings and especially the overnights. Nothing good happens after midnight."

"What's the most common complaint during the day shift," I ask.

"Chest pain," he says.

"How many of them are ER necessary?" I ask.

He pauses, takes a bite and says "I go back, he says, to everybody who comes to see me believes it's necessary in some way or another."

The evening light outside our window has shifted into the golden hour. There is saxophone jazz in the background. Crowd noise.

"I have a strong—that's a reasonable adjective—concept of the value of life," he says. "The last twenty, twenty-five years, I've gotten even more understanding of the value of anybody and everybody, whether they're a chronic drunk or whether they're a psychotic on stimulants, whether they're somebody who comes to see us too often. Whether it's somebody who has chest pain that is obviously not life threatening. I think the simple answer is that I truly just appreciate the value of every living being."

"Did that come from you're your time in ER" I ask. "Before medicine? From family? I ask. Religion?"

“Certainly it is family,” he says. “My mom and dad had a strong influence on me. They had an intense sense of the worth of people. They came from little or nothing, but gave to people who needed it. I’m also the product of a World War II veteran and they have a tendency of touching people’s hearts. My dad was in the infantry in the South Pacific. I don’t have stories that he would share—about anything. Except being sick with malaria and yellow fever. His platoon was devastated, twice, and he survived. A man I admired all my life. He certainly had his struggles with depression, though fortunately not substance abuse. He was in a psychiatric ward a couple times in his life. And it certainly gave me an incredible understanding of those people who are struggling. And most people are. Whether they’re coming in for a heart attack, belly pain, or a bad headache. At that moment they’re struggling with life.”

Fourth Course

Eric presents the next dish.

That last one, we say, has to go on the menu.

“It might go on a special,” he says, smiling.

We stopped the conversation for that one, we say. It was terrific.

“So here we go,” he says. “Fourth course, I believe. Flash seared beef tenderloin medallion on top of a carrot tahini puree. Some brown rice quinoa with black beans. A little dust of toasted ground cumin seed. And then just the natural pan sauce drizzled over that.

“I started with the carrot and tahini,” he says. “I’ve liked that flavor for a while. Then things fall into line with that. The black beans. The quinoa and then the cumin. Beef tenderloin. Small cut. Low fat.”

Here, I think, is the center of the meal. At least for me. It looks so pretty on the plate that we hesitate to cut. But then we do.

“Tell me a story,” I ask Warren. “Walk me through a typical case?”

“This one wasn’t a difficult diagnosis,” he says. “It was a difficult situation. And I hesitate just a little bit because it’s to some degree well-known.

“Emotionally it was difficult,” he says. “Mechanically it was difficult, too. I was the physician for a woman who was in an auto accident. And one of my partners was the physician for her child. Her child died. And so, mechanically the difficulty was how do I do what I needed to do, to make sure that this woman is okay? And how do I provide whatever she might

need from a trauma standpoint, and still allow the time for her to hold and grieve for her child?"

He continues talking, but seems to wait between every phrase.

"And…so, from a process standpoint, I chose to…. She was doing okay, and I was watching certain parameters…so even though with trauma patients we like to have things in order, ready to go for whatever investigating things we need to have done, within the first ten or fifteen minutes of them arriving…it took me an hour to identify the things I definitely needed to do, and in order to get them done…I chose to take that time."

I want to know more, I think. But I also do not want to open a wound.

"Do you ever learn to give bad news?" I ask.

"I think so," he says. "Early in my career," he says, "and I have no idea why I thought this, but I thought I had to give an explanation of the process. And then give the bad news. Fortunately, that didn't last very long, a year or two, maybe three years. But I began to realize they really don't care about the process. It's nice for them to hear the process before you give them the bad news because then they know. Once you give them the bad news it doesn't make any difference what

the process was and what actually happened. Some people ask, but very rarely."

"So any more," he says. "Obviously I introduce myself, I find out who are family members and who are friends, and who is the person I direct my comments to. And I usually just say I'm sorry, there wasn't anything we could do."

"How many times a week do you do that?" I ask.

"Every other week, maybe," he says.

I would have thought it would be more often. Aging population and then add motorcycles.

"The ninety-year-old," he says, "is more difficult. You have to know, in a relatively brief amount of time, their whole medical history. You need to know what they've dragged along with them on this particular day. So even if they are not on death's door, but they have something that's potentially life-threatening, the information if vital. Fifty-year olds, sixty-year-olds, seventy-year-olds, even maybe eighty-year-olds, with a heart attack, there is no question about what you do. Call a cardiologist. They go to the Cath Lab. They get stents. Whatever else they do. But a ninety-five-year-old with dementia, diabetes, kidneys that aren't working perfectly well. They come in with a heart attack. Now what do you do? The angiogram even by itself can damage the kidneys even more. Would the person really understand what's going on?"

Dessert

Madi clears our plates and sets new silverware for dessert.

“How many different sets of silverware did we go through,” I ask.

“You guys are getting special treatment,” she says.

“My wife really likes these,” Warren says, “so I’ve been storing them in my pocket.”

“Oh, I know,” she says. “We’ve been counting.”

When she walks away, Warren continues. “We see a fair amount of people who…There’s a husband/wife team in Princeton who coined this term Deaths of Despair. They’re looking at demographics. Profound increases in suicide. Certain groups in that category. Late teens to early twenties. And the other group that’s really increased in incidence is the middle-aged white male. So, suicide. Drug overdose. And indirect deaths due to substances. Alcohol or drugs or whatever the case may be.”

“Not Corvettes and motorcycles,” I say.

“Not Corvettes and motorcycles.”

“That was the category they looked at,” he continues. “And in my mind the term Deaths of Despair is an incredible term. And it speaks specifically to what we see day in and day out.”

Eric arrives. Caramelized pears, sliced standing upright on the plate. A balancing act to carry across the restaurant.

“So final course here,” he says. “Ohh!” A pear tips, but he recovers.

“Caramelized pear,” he says. “With a little sugar in the raw to help it caramelize. We got natural pan drippings around the outside and a sauce in the middle. We got coconut milk and almonds over the top.”

“Any reason why you chose this as the finish?” I ask.

“Because I love pears,” he laughs.

“Honestly,” he says, “I just love the presentation. I like the way they slice and present. It just seemed like a nice grand finale.”

He has a meeting at 7 p.m., he says. We all shake hands, say thank you, try to express admiration and astonishment, and then he dashes off.

The pears are very good.

“If I get annoyed at anything,” Warren says, after a moment, “it’s chaos.”

“How so?” I ask.

“Chaos is out of control,” he says.

“But when the ambulance pulls up and the door goes up, that’s what you’ve got,” I say. “That’s who you are. You’re the emergency room.”

“But it doesn’t need to be,” he says, “if everybody who’s there does what they’re supposed to do. That’s where training comes in. That’s where protocols come in. Even in the most dramatic cases, it doesn’t need to be chaos.”

I ask about mass casualty drills. Airplane crashes. Train derailments. Chemical explosions in town. Suddenly hundreds of people heading for the emergency room. The hospital does participate with the police and fire department in regular training. But in-hospital care, he says, is much different than pre-hospital care. “The EMTs,” he says, “they have a whole specific role they need to do and they’re very good at it.”

“Is there a most chaos-filled, most dramatic story?”

He pauses for a long time.

“This particular instance was a young lady, early thirties probably, and she came in without the ability to breathe. Because of something that was going on in her throat.

“Fortunately, this doesn’t happen very often,” he says. “Most of the time airway management is reasonably routine.

You might have a hiccup or two, but even with the hiccup you're usually successful."

"There was already a tube in?" I ask.

"No," he says.

"Ok," I say. "She brought herself in?"

"She came by ambulance," he says. "But as she was doing somewhat okay, the paramedics are usually pretty judicial. I mean if they need to, they do. But if they don't need to within the next ten minutes, they wait for us. It's just that much easier. Because you're in, to some degree, a controlled environment. You have everything you need and all the people around you. The respiratory therapists, everybody else that's there. For the paramedics, you're in somebody's home. The light's not good. Or they're in the ambulance, bouncing down the road. So if they can wait for a better, more controlled environment, they usually do. And she was holding her own for a while. But it was obvious that wasn't going to last for very long.

"And this was one of those airway managements that was more than a hiccup. Multiple tries by myself, even with anesthesia, even by our ear/nose/throat doctors, were unsuccessful. We were able to ventilate her a little bit, without the airway, but obviously that wasn't going to last for very long. So we wound up doing a surgical airway in the operating

room. And even that was more difficult than usual. It turned out that she had the airway about the size of a child. Maybe a ten-year old's. Maybe eight."

"Just a condition?" I ask.

"Exactly."

"And it was not only the size," he says, "but it was floppy. So instead of this hose that stays open, when she was not breathing it would collapse. Multiple tries but we finally got enough of a temporary air way she could be moved to the operating room for a definitive airway."

"And nothing in her history," I say.

"No."

"You could have done some real damage if you continued to try to stuff an adult sized tube down her throat," I say.

"Some of it was, you couldn't even see," he says. "Just the anatomy she had in her hypopharynx you couldn't see enough even to attempt. Multiple attempts by multiple people. You just couldn't see. Even fiber optic scopes were unsuccessful."

Warren takes a bite of his dessert. "That was probably the most harrowing and chaotic thing I ever did."

Madi clears the plates. So much more to ask and say.

Behind us, the restaurant has grown quieter. Many people have left, heading out to other rooms, other places, for deeper comfort or rest. Some people linger over their knives and glasses, this place what they need.

But the evening is not late. Madi and the other servers ready the tables for new customers. Eric is gone, but another chef readies the kitchen for whatever orders may come.

Warren surveys the room. “Remarkable,” he says, quietly.

W. Scott Olsen is a writer, photographer, and professor of English at Concordia College. The author of eleven books, editor of several anthologies, and formerly the long-time editor of the national literary magazine, *Ascent*, Olsen has published essays, articles, and stories in numerous literary publications including *Alaska Quarterly Review, Huffington Post, Kansas Quarterly, Kenyon Review, Mid-American Review, North American Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Northwest Review, River Teeth, South Dakota Review, Tampa Review, Third Coast, Willow Springs* as well as commercial publications in magazines such as *The Forum, Flying Magazine, AOPA Pilot*, *Flight Training*. His most recent book is, *A Moment with Strangers*.

Never Turn Away

by Christine Holmstrom

“Come here, Marilyn, let’s look in this window.” Wedged between an untrimmed bush and the home’s front wall, I’d motioned to my friend, inviting her to join me. Pressing my face against the glass, I peered inside.

Drat. It was the kitchen.

From what I’d read in the *LA Herald Examiner* a few days ago, a man had murdered his wife, then his four children as they slept, right here in our placid suburban enclave. Afterwards, he’d killed himself.

“What’s there?” Marilyn whispered, glancing backwards to see if any of the neighbors had noticed us.

“Just a messy table.” It sat in the middle of the kitchen, a butter dish near the edge, the contents slumping onto scuffed wood, victim of the valley’s summer heat.

No blood here.

We’d have to find the bedrooms where the kids were stabbed.

Marilyn and I were both twelve. Curious. Or maybe it was mostly me. Did I believe that viewing the crime scene would answer the unspoken question—why? The question had taunted me from when I could first read newspaper stories

about strangled starlets, missing children, and trussed bodies found in steamer trunks.

Horrible as these neighborhood murders were, they provided the most excitement we'd known in quiet Canoga Park. If we'd thought to examine our motives, Marilyn and I likely would've recalled how drivers slow and stare, braking to look across the highway at smashed vehicles, the corpses—covered in blankets—lying on a sloping hillside.

"The bedrooms must be in the back." Freeing myself from the clasp of the unruly shrub, I'd surveyed our surroundings. A tall wood fence encircled the sides and back of the home—a locked gate the only access.

"Wait, what's that?" Marilyn pointed to the large rust-red stain that blossomed over the asphalt driveway leading to the two-car garage.

Could it be blood? I stopped, transfixed. Was this where the father committed suicide?

I always wanted to know more. Maybe that curiosity is part of the reason that I'd ended up as a correctional officer—a prison guard—at San Quentin decades later.

After walking through the heavy iron gates into the prison yard, I witnessed things that can never be erased from memory. There is no turning away.

As a "fish cop"—a new correctional officer—I was

frightened yet mesmerized by stories of staff murders. During new officer orientation, Sgt. “Flip” Fernandez recounted how he’d been the first to find the body of Officer Richard Ochoa in the prison laundry back in ’76. “You couldn’t even recognize him. He didn’t have no face—it was hamburger.”

“So why would someone kill him?” I wanted to know.

“Not sure. Ochoa was well liked.”

“What happened?”

“Well, my guess is that Ochoa stumbled onto a drug deal.” Fernandez frowned. “The convicts must’ve panicked. Grabbed a weightlifting bar and…”

I held my breath, trying not to imagine a man without a face, the torn and battered flesh, the splintered nose, bits of pink tissue splattering his khaki uniform shirt, the pooling blood…

It could be any of us; could be me. Being a good cop wouldn’t save you.

During my first years at San Quentin, the prison was a war zone. Alarms screeching, whistles blaring daily. Shouts of “shots on the yard” as gun rail officers fired warning rounds or tried to stop a knife-wielding assailant with a bullet. Then the piercing wail of an ambulance racing down Sir Francis Drake Blvd to deliver the wounded and dying to Marin General.

Once, stepping out of the housing unit to respond to the blare of whistles, I'd flattened myself against the wall as four officers ran past, a badly injured prisoner on their gurney—his forehead split open, brain matter exposed.

Try as I might, I cannot erase certain scenes. Like this one: It was late morning—a cold day. There'd been another stabbing. I needed to ID the victim and sign the Warden's Check-out Order prior to transport. The inmate lay naked, except for his boxer shorts, in the prison's battered old ambulance. His pale belly heaved; his breath labored. Thin crimson stripes pierced his abdomen—the marks left by repeated stab wounds. Unaware of me, his eyes remained fixed on the vehicle's gray metal ceiling. He was my age, handsome—no tattoos or gang symbols on his bare skin. Except for his longish hair, he reminded me of a man I'd once dated. I examined the ID photo that the gate officer had handed me, verified the match. Would the prisoner ever need it again?

There are many ways to die in prison besides assault—accidental deaths from bad "pruno" laced with wood alcohol or a suicide gesture gone wrong.

Or miscalculation. Like the two inmates in Badger Section.

Walking through the sally port—the prison's double-gated entry—I'd nearly bumped into a lieutenant from the Investigations Unit. In his hand he'd held a few eight by ten photos. The bright colors drew my eyes.

"What are those?" Curious, I'd pointed.

"Evidence." He fanned the glossies like playing cards. "Remember the cell fire last week?"

I'd heard about it. Late one night two prisoners had set fire to a blanket tied on the bars of their shared cell. Nothing especially unusual, although most convicts simply pushed a pile of burning garbage onto the tier. Inmates started tier fires when they were angry or drunk or just for the hell of it. The gun rail officer yelled at them to put out the fire. They'd ignored him. By the time another cop got to the cell with a fire extinguisher, the flames had spread. Their TV, also attached to the bars, ignited, exploding in a shower of sparks shooting across the cell. Decades of paint began to burn, the walls a flaming oven. By then the convicts were screaming, hurling water at the conflagration, plunging their heads into the toilet bowl. Some cops unfurled the unit fire hose from its red painted box and lugged it up two flights of stairs then dragged it down the tier towards the cell. It proved too short. Other cops were already on the tier, aiming fire extinguishers at the blaze without success. Intense heat had expanded the cell door,

jamming it shut.

"No way could we unlock the door," one of the cops later said. "It was the frickin' *Towering Inferno*."

I held out my hand for the photos. At first, I thought I was looking at an enlarged shot of two overcooked hot dogs—the pink skin splitting sideways—tattooed with charcoal bits. Then I noticed the blackened bunk bed and realized what I was seeing.

There was no pleasure in these sights—only a slight salve for the curiosity that had been itching since my childhood.

Friends sometimes asked why I kept working at the prison. Many reasons—the adrenaline high, the glory and notoriety of being a female correctional officer, the pay, promotional opportunities…

Although I could never erase what I witnessed during my time at San Quentin, I'd chosen not to turn away either.

There was too much to see.

Christine Holmstrom's work has been published in Bernie Siegel's book, *Faith, Hope, and Healing*. Her nonfiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Dime Show Review, Gulf Stream, The Gravel, Jet Fuel Review, The MacGuffin, The Penmen Review, Rougarou, Streetlight Magazine, Switchback, Stonecoast Review, Summerset Review, Two Cities Review,* and others. After surviving riots, an armed escape and a death threat while working at San Quentin prison, she finally had the good sense to retire. Christine is now working on a memoir about her prison years.

Why We Didn’t Tell

by Barbara Desman

When women began speaking out about sexual abuse by powerful men, particularly with the high-profile allegations against men like Bret Kavanaugh, Larry Nassar, and Harvey Weinstein, it led to many a discussion around my kitchen table and among my Facebook friends. To my friends who grew up in the fifties and worked throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties, reports of such abuse came as no surprise. The real surprise was that the women accusing such men felt empowered enough to speak publicly about it and to seek justice. We all had our stories to tell each other about the many shades of sexual harassment we endured. But when the measurement of whether these women were telling the truth became how long ago the abuse happened and why they hadn’t reported it, I decided I had to get up from my kitchen table and away from Facebook and share my own ancient history.

It was nineteen-fifty-four and I was fourteen. He was the second chiropractor I was seeing for painful back pain and the decided limp the injury had caused, the result of an attack by a bully in gym class. Back then, bullying was overlooked.

Just suck it up, we were told. It happens to everyone. But this attack had badly sprained my back. Three doctors and two weeks in the hospital in traction hadn't helped.

Thankfully, this new chiropractor's treatments seemed to be helping. I was nervous but hopeful I might again be a normal teenager, free of nightly hot compresses for the pain, free of the ugly lift they placed on my shoe, free of knowing they called me "that little crippled girl" behind my back. I wanted to dance "The Twist" in my socks on the same gym floor where the attack had occurred.

The day my belief in this new chiropractor changed was the first day I went to my appointment by myself so mom wouldn't have to take off work. It was also the first day the nurse left me alone with him to go to lunch.

I lay face down on the table as he pushed on my pelvis above my newly formed full buttocks.

"Turn over on your back." He pressed his hand on my pubic bone through my pants. He hadn't touched me this way before. It felt oddly pleasurable and then it didn't.

"What're you doing?" I asked, lifting my head off the table to look at him.

"Just adjusting you, he said, lie back down."

When his hand moved down, pressing between my legs, I knew it wasn't right. I struggled to sit up.

“What’s the matter? Lie back down.”

“I, I have to go,” I stammered, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. Jumping off the table, I grabbed my purse and ran out through the empty waiting room.

“Mom, he touched me,” I cried into the pay phone, “the doctor touched me.”

“What? What are you talking about? Of course, he touched you; he was giving you a treatment.”

“No, Mom, it was different. It didn’t feel right,” I sobbed, hardly able to hold the phone.

“Okay, honey, calm down,” She whispered into the phone. “I’ll be home in an hour. We’ll talk about it then. Are you okay to ride the bus home?”

When I told mom what happened, she folded me in her arms and tried to console me. “Don’t worry, honey, you’re not going back to him.”

Why didn’t my mother report him? Mom was raised with an abusive father. She watched her mother being beaten. But she was taught to believe that it was shameful if the neighbors knew what was happening inside the family. The lesson in those times was that the woman must have done something to deserve it. Sadly, we hear that same message in a much more covert way today. What was she wearing? Was she drinking? Why didn’t she tell anyone?

We didn't talk about sex back then. Although my mother never made me feel I had done anything wrong, I understood it was not to be spoken of again.

When Mom was in her eighties, she told me she called that doctor and warned him if he ever tried something like that again, she would call his wife and then the police. He probably knew it was an empty threat. I wonder how many young girls came before and after me?

I don't remember the date. I don't remember the address of the office. I don't even remember the doctor's name.

I probably shouldn't bring it up since it was almost sixty-five years ago; how can a young girl's memory be trusted?

In December of 1953, Hugh Hefner gave men a big Christmas present in the form of *Playboy Magazine*. The first issue featured Marilyn Monroe as the centerfold. What could the publication possibly have to do with me?

Two years later I turned fifteen I was always home alone after school until mom got off work. We lived in a two-story house that had been converted into three apartments. The stairs up to our porch extended past the entrance under the bathroom window to another flight of stairs leading to the backyard. One afternoon, I was doing homework when there

was a rattling and then a knock on our screen door. When I opened the door, the porch was empty but something was stuck in the handle of the door. When I unrolled it, I saw a pretty young woman lying on her stomach on a white fur rug, her bare breasts dipped into the fur, her back arched, her red high heels hovered above her round naked buttocks. Scrawled across her hips in black marker were the words “DO THIS FOR ME.” Shaking, I slammed the screen door, quickly locking the front door. Closing the drapes, I sat on the sofa, jumping at any unusual sound for what seemed like hours until Mom arrived home.

“So, you didn’t see anyone? Is there anyone at school who might have done this?”

“No, Mom,” I assured her. “I don’t know anyone this creepy.”

Since I was home alone every day after school, Mom decided to report the incident to the police.

“I’ll fill out a report but it probably won’t happen again,” the policeman who responded said. “Don’t worry. It’s probably just some boy from school who likes you,” the officer said, smiling at me. “Be sure to lock the door when you get home from school and let us know if you think of anyone at school who might have done this.”

The next day, it happened again, except this time mom arrived home a few minutes later trembling and out of breath.

“That boy was here. He left this,” I said, my hand shaking as I handed her another *Playboy* page.

“I know. I was watching from the backyard. I saw him come up on the porch, and when I went around the garage, I ran into him face to face,” she exclaimed, dialing the police.

At school, I became hyper aware of every boy around me. *Was he smiling or smirking? Did he mean to jostle me in the hallway?*

I became aware of behavior that might have escaped my attention before. Our Art teacher was young and pretty. The boys would ask her for help so she would bend over their desk exposing her ample cleavage. A few days later, a policeman knocked on our door, a teenaged boy in tow.

“Is this the boy you saw?” he asked Mom.

“I don’t know. I can’t say for sure. I’d hate to have you arrest the wrong boy if I’m not absolutely sure.”

The policeman didn’t tell us why he had chosen this particular boy to bring to Mom. Maybe it was because he matched her sketchy description or maybe he had been caught doing the same thing to another teenage girl. I told the policeman I didn’t recognize him from school or even from the

neighborhood. I was grateful for that. We never knew if they arrested him. As I think back, it was a terrible thing for the policeman to bring that boy to our house and ask mom to identify him. We breathed a sigh when the visits stopped.

Then one balmy Saturday in summer, Mom was cleaning the bathtub. A large window over the tub was open to the summer heat. When Mom straightened up, she came face to face with the boy. He was leaning into the window up to his waist above her. Mom screamed. He screamed. By the time Mom got to the door, he was sprinting across the back yard to the alley.

“He probably thought you were taking a bath and he was going to get a thrill,” the policeman said, suppressing a smile. The attitude of the police officer and the fact that we never spoke about it again taught me that women were simply supposed to put up with such licentious behavior. As men are fond of saying, “Boys will be boys”.

I don’t remember the address of our apartment and I only know the year.

I probably shouldn’t bring it up since it was almost sixty-three years ago; how can a young girl’s memory be trusted?

*

I carried that lesson of my youth into the workplace so, at the age of twenty-one, when my boss made flirtatious remarks or stood a little too close, I acted as though I didn't know what he was trying to do. It was just something women had to put up with. It was just he and I in the small regional office. Who would believe me? I needed my job.

One day, he walked up behind me while I was typing and kissed me on the back of my neck. I spun around and shocked myself by saying, "If you ever do that again, three people will know about it, you, me, and your wife."

I don't know where I found such courage but he backed away and told me I must have mistaken his actions. Not long after, we received a visit from the President of the company based in Phoenix, who offered me the opportunity to transfer to Arizona to be his secretary. I didn't connect the two events until recently.

I don't remember the address of the office and can only estimate the date. I don't remember my boss's name.

I probably shouldn't bring it up since it was fifty-seven years ago; how can a young woman's memory be trusted?

Later in my career, whenever I earned a promotion, I was upset but not surprised to hear rumors that I must be sleeping with my boss to have achieved success in the

company. After all, my mother heard the same rumors about her success during the forties and fifties. You were expected to act like you didn't hear the dirty joke. You smiled at a flirtatious remark and walked away. Who would take your side? You needed your job. So when women began to come forward with allegations against media moguls, athletic coaches, bosses, and celebrities, I cheered. It was only when I began to hear people questioning their claims because it took them so long to speak up, that I took it personally. Would we ever learn what psychologists have tried to teach us, that victims sometimes need decades to admit to themselves that what happened to them was abuse, let alone to muster the courage to file a report about such traumatic physical and psychological betrayal? I knew why.

Barbara Desman has always been a storyteller; just ask her family and friends. She is now enjoying committing her stories to the page. Her thirty-nine-year career in the airline industry afforded her the opportunity to explore and observe the culture, people, and sights of many international destinations. Barbara is currently working on a novella about human trafficking in Thailand. Her stated intention for this chapter of her life is to become the Grandma Moses of prose. Barbara writes from Scottsdale, Arizona with her Toy Fox Terrier, Bubbles, at her feet.

The Truth or Something Like It

by Tommy Vollman

I met Joe Nuxhall a few weeks after my fifteenth birthday. His hands were gnarled, and he spoke as though his mouth was half full of marbles, but he was sharp and funny as hell. I was only a few months younger than he was when he made his Major League debut.

At just fifteen, Joe Nuxhall climbed on the hill at Crosley Field in the top of the ninth against the would-be World Champion St. Louis Cardinals. Manager Bill McKechnie called on Nuxhall with his Cincinnati Reds on the short end of a 13-0 deficit. Nuxhall's debut was essentially mop-up duty at Niagara Falls.

Still, the Ole' Lefthander managed to retire two of the first three batters he faced before all hell broke loose. Nuxhall never finished that half-inning; he never found a third out. In fact, following his debut, it would take him eight years to get back to the Major Leagues.

When I met Nuxhall, he was half of the radio broadcast team for the Cincinnati Reds. I shook his hand and asked him to sign a baseball card my uncle gave me years before. The card was a 1963 Topps. On the front, Nuxhall was framed in mid wind-up, his arms stretched high over his head, his

throwing hand hidden inside a chocolate-brown mitt. The back of the card was jammed with stats. When I first received the card, I wondered if the 67.50 ERA listed for 1944—his rookie campaign—was a misprint.

I was enamored with that statistic. The pitchers I knew of in the bigs had ERAs in the 3s; the really good ones were in the 2s or below. For a long time, I was sure my Nuxhall card was a simply a misprint. No pitcher, anywhere, at any time could possibly, I thought, have had a 67.50 earned run average.

But Joe Nuxhall did.

67.50 was no misprint.

Nuxhall was a legend. He was a good pitcher—great, even—a Cincinnati Reds Hall-of-Famer who won 135 games in his sixteen-season Big League career. His lifetime ERA—3.90—was a far cry from the ultra-inflated number of 1944.

While he was signing my card, I asked him what it was like to face the St. Louis Cardinals at fifteen.

He stopped his Sharpie mid-signature and stared at me. The room we were in—a large, partitioned conference room at the downtown Westin on Fountain Square—seemed to go silent. A wide smile cracked across his face, and all the air came back into the room. He adjusted the thick, wire-

framed, aviator-style glasses that perched on the bridge of his nose and leaned back in his chair.

“You know,” he said, “I was so goddamned nervous when I got the call, I tripped and fell on the way out of the dugout.”

He leaned forward, his elbows on the white, cotton tablecloth. His eyes grew clearer, even more focused. He seemed to stare not at me but through me.

“I was used to throwing to good hitters, even some really good ones,” he added. “But,” he continued, “there’s a difference between a good hitter and a Major League hitter. I got two of three, then gave up a walk.”

He shook his head and smiled.

“I was there, up on the hill, and I look over and see Stan Musial in the on-deck circle. Next thing I know, he’s up at the plate.”

He leaned back again in his chair and stretched his hands over his head in nearly the same way he had in the photo on my baseball card.

“Then,” he chuckled, “they scored some runs. Lotsa runs.”

His smile was so real, so sincere, I’d have believed anything and everything he said.

“It wasn’t that bad,” I replied. “Only five.”

Even to this day, I'm not sure why I said what I did. I'm not sure what I was thinking. At the time, when I heard those words tumble out of my mouth, I could hardly believe I'd said them. I thought Joe Nuxhall might punch me in the face.

But he didn't.

Joe Nuxhall was too much of a class act for that sort of thing. In fact, what he did left me as awestruck as anything has since that time.

Joe Nuxhall leaned toward me, his hands flat, fingers spread, and said, "Son, they could've scored as many runs on me that day as they wanted."

He handed my card back to me, his signature split in two segments, and nodded to the person behind me.

As I stepped away, Nuxhall spoke again.

"Hey kid," he said. "Thanks for that."

I smiled and nodded, puzzled as to why in the world Joe Nuxhall would thank me for reminding him of his horrendous Major League debut.

As I got older, I think I grew to understand why Joe Nuxhall might have thanked me. Now, I'm almost sure of it. He thanked me because I gave him a chance to be honest when it would have been so easy to be dishonest.

I wouldn't have been honest as Nuxhall.

I couldn't have been; I care too much about what other people think of me. More accurately, I care far too much about what I think other people think of me.

Which often puts me in quite a bind relative to the truth.

It shouldn't, but it does.

Now that I have kids, I'm more conscious (or at least I try to be) of my issues with truth. But old habits die hard, and it's still far too easy for a lie to slide off my tongue.

Joe Nuxhall didn't give up a homer that day; his earned runs came solely from walks and base hits. My lies aren't mammoth—they're not home runs. I tell myself they're tiny—base hits or walks—irrelevant, seemingly. They're lies to cover up forgotten phone calls, neglected garbage carts, and overdue library books. They're lies about missed emails, late arrivals, and vitamins. But they all hide (or attempt to hide) the same thing: a sense of not quite being good enough, of not measuring up, as if telling the truth could expose a version of me that no one could possibly love or respect. I'm not perfect, and I can't ever expect to be, but I'm scared to death of being seen for what I am: someone who forgets, who loses track, who sometimes can't keep up or just doesn't want to. I'm terrified that my shortcomings might be exploited or worse, define me. I'm desperate to try to maintain something fundamentally unsustainable. I'm desperate to stay in control,

to not be seen as less-than, as a fraud. I understand, of course, the awful irony. I lie to others to maintain the perpetual lie I tell myself.

The truth, of course, is that none of my lies are harmless; all of them are aimed at deception. All of them evoke pain and erode trust. All of them—every single one of them—are destructive, cancerous, corrosive.

Which is exactly the opposite of what I tell myself.

I wonder what Joe Nuxhall told himself. I wonder how it could have been so different from what I tell myself. I wonder if Joe Nuxhall ever considered anything but that truthful, face-up story about his Big-League debut. I wonder if Joe Nuxhall ever offered any excuses, ever messed around with the size or shape or structure of things.

I'm sure he did.

Or at least I'm sure that he considered it.

But I think he figured everyone knew the truth already. And even if they didn't, he did, so what difference did it really make? What happened, happened, and Nuxhall's honesty may just have freed some space for other things, things not destructive, corrosive, and cancerous. Nuxhall's honesty helped him get back to even. And eventually, he got ahead.

I want to free some space. I want to get back to even. I dream about getting ahead.

Lies are heavy, clumsy, and awkward. Lies are unruly; they're contradictions. Lies are a misguided effort to reconfigure the space-time continuum. They're an attempt to overwrite history, to highjack experience, to gaslight and usurp. Lies are an essential impossibility, yet I try to execute them day after day after day. Some days, I even manage to convince myself I've successfully executed them. Of course, that's a lie, too.

I'm not really sure when or why I started lying. I know it had something to do with power. Control, too. My lies offered me a mechanism for getting what I wanted, what I thought I needed: respect, recognition, control. I only wanted to be seen, to be enough. I never wanted to be the best; I only wanted to be good enough. My lies gave me agency, and as inauthentic as that agency was, it sure as hell felt good, so the lies grew.

I think I finally understand why it was so easy for Joe Nuxhall to be honest. Being honest is really the only possible—the only sustainable—outcome.

It took Joe Nuxhall eight years to get back to the Big Leagues after those five earned runs in two-thirds of an inning. Eight years. And the weight of those five runs is nothing compared to the weight of the lies I've told.

The weight of those five runs cost Joe Nuxhall eight years; it took him that long to get back to even. I wonder how long it'll take me. I wonder if it's even possible.

Tommy Vollman is a writer, musician, and painter. He has written a number of things, published a bit, recorded a few records, and toured a lot. Tommy's work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the "Best of the Net" anthology. His stories and nonfiction have appeared (or will appear) in issues of *The Southwest Review, Two Cities Review, The Southeast Review, Palaver,* and *Per Contra*. He has some black-ink tattoos on both of his arms. Tommy really likes A. Moonlight Graham, Kurt Vonnegut, Two Cow Garage, Tillie Olsen, Willy Vlautin, and Albert Camus. He's working on a novel entitled *Tyne Darling* and has a new record, "Youth or Something Beautiful", which was released in April 2019. He currently teaches English at Milwaukee Area Technical College and prefers to write with pens poached from hotel room cleaning carts.

The Texture of Scars

by Karen J. Weyant

At seven, I already had scars.

The comma-shaped scrape near my left eye was from Chicken Pox. It was a small notch, but deep enough that I could feel the tiny fold of skin with my fingers. A fine white slash on my cheek was from a cut on a barbed wire fence. This smooth scar was nearly invisible, but sometimes, when my fair skin burned and freckled from the sun, the line appeared brighter, a thin white string etched across my cheek.

Outside of listening to the origin stories of these blemishes, I didn't know much about scars, but somehow I realized that they were undesirable. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was because they never really went away, unlike the other scratches, bumps and bruises I obtained from riding my bike or playing at the local playground.

So that was why the summer before I started second grade, I listened to Nate White, who offered a helpful strategy on avoiding one kind of scar: the alleged mark left over from a mosquito bite that was scratched too much. Nate, who was one year younger than I was, but seemingly far wiser about the world, deemed himself an expert when it came to killing mosquitos.

According to Nate, you waited until a mosquito landed and slid its long needle into your skin. While the mosquito sucked your blood, you pulled your skin tight around the insect. Nate's theory was that the needle would get stuck, and unable to withdraw, the mosquito would feed until it eventually burst.

This idea fascinated me. Mosquitos caused me great misery, so this tactic sounded like the perfect revenge. During the mugginess of summer, I seemed the food source for every mosquito in the neighborhood. They bit my ankles, my legs, my arms, even my face. I would find mosquito bites in the most unlikely of places, including the skin between my fingers or the space between my shoulders. Once, a mosquito got stuck underneath my shirt, and when, in a fit of shirt pulling and swatting, I was finally able to slap it away, I found a line of bites, red angry and inflamed like a constellation of bumpy stars, sprinkled across my stomach.

My mother covered me with smelly bug spray, but I guess mosquitos in rural Pennsylvania are extra sturdy because they bit through the spray. Then, my mother dabbed my bites with Campho Phenique crème, an over-the-counter medication that smelled worse than the spray. When I complained, she tried homemade remedies made with baking soda. No matter what she did, the bites still itched.

And I was not supposed to scratch them.

“You will break them open and cause scars,” she said.

Scars were something I didn’t want, so I tried Nate’s advice. I waited until a mosquito landed on my arm, and I pulled the skin around the insect taut. And then I waited a bit longer.

I don’t remember exactly what happened, except that the mosquito didn’t explode. Maybe it was so hungry it didn’t mind staying for extra food. Maybe I didn’t pull my skin tight enough. All I remember is that the result of this experiment was one of the worst, most inflamed bites I ever had.

I didn’t listen to my mother’s warnings. I scratched that bite raw, until it broke open, leaving spots of blood smeared on my skin.

But it didn’t leave a scar.

As a teenager, I learned to wear foundation to cover the thin line on my cheek. My textured bangs covered the chicken pox scar. Still, I earned other scars along the way. I have a thin scratch on the back of my hand from a broken mirror and an oval scar just below my knee from running into a shopping cart in a parking lot.

“Interesting scars tells interesting stories,” a friend once told me, but until I was thirty-five, I didn’t think that any of my scars’ stories were that intriguing.

Then came my diagnosis of thyroid cancer, and two surgeries that left a line of pinched skin on my neck from the removal of suspicious nodules.

At the time of diagnosis, I wasn't worried about the scar. I just wanted the cancer out of me. But when I got home from the hospital, I stared at myself in the mirror, where black stitches were sewn across my neck. I fingered the string, marveling at how something that looked like it could come out of a sewing kit could help piece me together.

It was there at the bathroom mirror I realized that while the stitches would be removed, a scar would remain. I could disguise my other scars, but this one would be visible to the world. The only way I could hide it was with a turtleneck sweater.

At the time, I received a lot of advice about how to make the scar less noticeable. "Mederma", my doctor said, while my friends advised using cocoa butter or Vitamin E. Nothing really worked, however, as the skin pulled and tugged, finally settling in place.

For the first year or so, I worried more about the cancer than the scar. I worried that my regular scans would pick up a bulging lymph node, one that could suggest that the cancer had resurfaced and spread. I worried that blood tests would find something abnormal. I worried that I would have to

undergo surgery again and perhaps undergo more drastic treatments.

But test after test came back clear, and I started to be more concerned about my scar—a scar that had faded from an angry, red thick line to a thin patch of white skin. I found myself explaining my surgery to complete strangers, such as a waitress who told me that her twin sister had a similar type of surgery to a young neighbor who worried that her little boy had to have neck surgery and she was concerned about the side effects and the pain.

I found myself reassuring my little neice who touched my neck.

“Boo-boo?” she asked, her whole face twisted into a worried frown.

“Yes,” I explained, reassuring her that “It was all better now.”

Now, over ten years later, I barely notice it, even when I look in the bathroom mirror every morning. This scar is now as part of me as my brown eyes or pale skin.

Still, there are days when I remember it’s there. Often, when I meet new people, I feel as if their eyes wander down from my face to the puckered skin. I’m a college professor, so when I know I am going to face a new class of students or when I give a public presentation, I search for creative ways

to mask this blemish through turtlenecks, scarves, or beaded chokers.

But I know the pinched scar is there trying to peek through my disguises. It has joined my other scars, with perhaps a more interesting story to tell.

Still, in spite of my mother's warnings etched in my memories, I don't believe that I have a single scar from a mosquito bite.

It's as if the body itself decides what it wants to mark, and we, even as wearers of our own skin, have little to say in the matter.

Karen J. Weyant's essays have been published in *Barren Magazine, Carbon Culture Review, Coal Hill Review, the cream city review, Lake Effect, Punctuate, Solidago Review,* and *Stoneboat*. She is an Associate Professor of English at Jamestown Community College in Jamestown, New York.

Wildflowers

by Theresa Malphrus Welford

In the fall of 2017, I did something I never envisioned myself doing: I walked into a tattoo parlor. Sitting on a bench out front was Ross Craven, the owner of Ivory Tower Tattoo Studio, who sported ear gauges, a ZZ Topp/Duck Dynasty beard, and larger-than-life tattoos of Lucille Ball and Jed Clampett and other 1950s and1960s sitcom icons.

When I asked Ross about his tattoos, he said, “Oh, I’m full-body.” Then, when I described my own plans, he said, “Yep, the backs of the legs are going to be painful, especially the ditches. The ditches always hurt.”

The ditches.

I was on a quest to rebrand myself, and at that moment, it became clear that I’d be learning all kinds of things along the way.

Inside the tattoo parlor, black leather couches hug the walls. On the flat-screen TV, adults pull juvenile pranks, then snicker like Beavis and Butthead. In one small room, Jack Torrance from *The Shining* pushes his leering face through a hole that he’s supposedly chopped through the door with an axe. *Here’s Johnny!* Orange and black flames adorn the bathroom walls, along with a painting of a big-breasted

woman sporting horns and fangs. She's faded to shades of pink and blue, like bad art from the 1980s. A muscular demon who could be the twin brother of Urizen, from William Blake's painting *The Ancient of Days*, squats above the doorframe, pointing down at something that I can't see. He's wearing a loincloth and sporting a ZZ Topp/Duck Dynasty beard of his own, along with a WWJD tattoo. Next to the sink, there's a sign specifying which items—including unwanted Christmas gifts and annoying children—should not be flushed down the toilet.

Based on recommendations from several colleagues, I chose Ryan Bray as the artist who would help me rebrand myself. In the room where Ryan works his magic, the walls are decorated with Bettie Page pinups from the 1950s and skulls and superheroes and a Redneck Brand Tattoo Kit consisting of several permanent markers and a birthday card sending monster-sized hugs to the world's best daddy. Hardbound comic books, Lego vampires, and neatly organized bottles of tattoo ink cover the shelves and tables. Ryan keeps a spray bottle filled with cool water and a supply of soft paper towels ready so that he can periodically dab the stinging tattoos-in-progress. The playlist on the purple iPod consists of Blondie, The Carolina Chocolate Drops, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Monkees, Pearl Jam, Johnny Cash, a

death-metal rendition of “Ride of the Valkyries,” a sarcastic rendition of “Afternoon Delight,” and a serious rendition of “Avé Maria.” A black vinyl bed/couch takes up much of the space.

On my first visit, that place was entirely unfamiliar to me. Here I was, a gray-haired academic—albeit with purple highlights—immersing myself in a new world, surrounded by tattooed and pierced people decades younger than I was. I cringed when Ryan told me to go ahead and change into shorts while he got his studio ready. For more than thirty years, I was ashamed of my legs. Now, after ten sessions in Ryan’s studio, those legs are covered with glorious bouquets: sunflowers, daisies, poppies, morning glories, hollyhocks, honeysuckle, coreopsis, Indian blanket, and lantana.

Finally, at sixty-two years old, I have rebranded myself.

I chose wildflowers because of what they are and what they represent to me. They can be cultivated, but they also grow completely on their own in nature. They add color to the roadside. They sprout up in abandoned fields. They push their way through concrete and asphalt and rock. In Ecuador, lantanas are so common that people use them as fencing.

For many people, wildflowers are nothing but weeds, but to me they represent beauty, determination, self-sufficiency. They felt right for my new brand: I may not be

beautiful, but I am determined (aka stubborn), and I strive to be self-sufficient.

Paradoxically, my glorious wildflowers also represent shame. Living with it. Being held back by it. Hiding because of it. And, ultimately, figuring out a creative way to vanquish it.

In Rome a few years ago, I was wearing a red and white polka-dotted dress with white capri-length leggings. The summer day was so hot that I went into a café bathroom, stripped off the leggings, and stuffed them into my purse. Then, minutes later, I walked back downstairs, locked myself in the bathroom, and put the sweaty leggings back on. I couldn't talk myself into going out in public without them.

Why?

Because I was the Woman with Purple Veins Spiderwebbing Her Pasty White Legs, and I hated her.

Look at that man: a varicose vein as thick as a garter snake threatens to burst from his lower leg, but he's wearing shorts. Look at that young woman: she has cellulite dimples from her ankles to her thighs, but she's wearing a sassy striped minidress. Look at that old fellow: he looks nine months pregnant, but he's happily strolling the beach in his black swim trunks.

They are wearing what they enjoy. They are comfortable. They are brave.

I've heard the arguments: "Get over yourself. No one is looking at you."

I know. I know. No one cares about my legs. My husband loves me exactly as I am. Other people have worse problems. But my self-consciousness is (was) like the tattoos adorning the owner of Ivory Tower: larger than life.

I was always so embarrassed by my legs that I don't have any "before" photos without tattoos to contrast with my "after" photos. But I do have this one, taken after my first session at Ivory Tower: As the photo shows, my rebranding

process had a long way to go, but it was already starting to have the desired results.

After I'd gone to a couple of sessions at Ivory Tower, a colleague stopped me on my way to the water fountain at work and complimented me on the "fancy tights" I was wearing.

I *was* wearing tights that day, but I pointed out that the pattern she was seeing was, in fact, tattoos.

"Oh, my word!" she said, in her posh British accent. "They're beautiful!"

When I explained that they were there to cover "uglies" on my legs, she said, "What a clever idea!"

At one marathon-length session (four hours!!), Ryan said that working on my legs had been gratifying because it reminded him of why he went into tattooing in the first place. I was happy to learn that my quest was helping him remember his own brand: The Talented Guy Who Covers the Canvas of Someone's Skin with Art.

Several hours into that long session, a second tattoo guy popped in to say good night. He checked out the work-in-progress and said, "Whoa. Back of the leg! She's tough."

"Indeed she is," Ryan said.

So, in addition to embellishing my legs with beautiful art, covering my veins, helping me overcome my shame, and encouraging me to come out of hiding, my tattoos also reveal that I am, at long last, a bit of a badass: The Woman Who Pushes Through Pain.

My mom was a life-long, hard-core, hellfire-and-brimstone, fundamentalist, evangelical Southern Baptist, and I figured she'd be appalled if she ever saw my tattoos. She often wondered why I didn't share her views about most things, and in recent years she often said, "I just don't understand how you turned out to be so different from me and your daddy." Back in the 1980s, when she was unhappy about my choice to become a vegetarian, she told me, in a sanctimonious tone, that Jesus ate meat, as if that tidbit would instantly make me change my mind. I was twenty-nine years old at the time.

In the 1990s, she was shocked when I got a second hole in my left earlobe. "*Terry*," she said, italicizing my name with her voice, as disapproving parents do when their prepubescent offspring do something naughty. I was thirty-five.

When I stopped going to church in 1995, she branded me as the Daughter Who Kept Her Awake All Night Because

She Couldn't Help Envisioning Me in Hell. To make matters worse, she told me a few years ago that my father and my grandmother would be disappointed in me because I didn't go to church. Although I found that remark deeply hurtful, I also found it absurd: they've been dead for more than two decades, and they're *still* disappointed in me?

My tattoos would have pushed her over the edge, I thought, making her pull out her Bible and flip furiously to the verse in Leviticus that says tattoos are an abomination unto the Lord. It's right there with the verses that prohibit homosexual behavior and mixed fabrics and bowl-shaped haircuts. (Insert eye-rolling emoticon.)

Tattoos, I have learned, penetrate the epidermis and lodge permanently in the dermis. Ironically, they last a long time because the body thinks they're invaders. In an effort to rid the body of the dye, immune-system cells called macrophages eat up as much dye as they can. Then the macrophages and the dye bond with each other and hang out together, just below the surface of the skin.

As for my relationship with my mom, I'm sad to say that the issues went much deeper than a tattoo needle. She loved

me, and she told me so. Still, it would have been nice if she'd *accepted* me.

The thought of having to deal with my mom's disapproval didn't make me hesitate to get the tattoos, but it did make me do my best to conceal them from her.

Update #1: When visiting my mom at her home last spring, I wore sweatpants to cover my tattoos. However, while trying to deal with a sudden itch, I absentmindedly pulled up one sweatpants leg, revealing a couple of poppy blossoms. Her only comment was, "Is that a tattoo?" When I explained the purpose—to hide spider veins—she seemed satisfied. I was, and still am, officially gobsmacked.

Update #2: In early October, I flew back home to visit my mom in the hospital. Although she was unconscious by the time I got there, I made sure my tattoos were covered.

Update #3: I covered my tattoos for her funeral.

Ryan, the guy who helped me rebrand myself, is an artist and an expert: he has been tattooing for nearly twenty years, and he came highly recommended.

He wanted my ideas, but he knew which ones would work, which ones would not, and why. I initially went to him with an image of a colorful stack of books, thinking they'd be perfect for me.

"Won't work," he said. "What else do you like?"

If I wanted coverage, he said, I needed images with lots of details, like fish or flowers or birds. I eventually understood that I also needed images that could wrap around my legs like vines and extend to all the places marred by spider veins. For the reasons that I described earlier, I went with wildflowers.

At one session, I told him I'd thought about getting spiderweb tattoos to cover my spider veins.

"That would have been *awesome*," he said.

Yeah. It would have. Spiderwebs and skulls and Shakespeare quotes, maybe. “Though she be but little, she is fierce”: I seriously considered that one, because I am little and because I am occasionally fierce.

In my quest to rebrand myself, I became a bit of an expert, too. I’m an expert on taking forever to rise above my self-consciousness, and I’m an expert on finally mustering the moxie to push through fear and pain.

I also became an expert on tattoos. Not on giving them, of course. But I learned that tattooing has its own lingo (“ditch,” “linework,” “leg sleeve,” “cadaver,” “closer,” “Michelangelo,” “blowout”). I learned that certain parts of my legs are far more sensitive than others. I learned that pain in the crease behind my knee (“the ditch”) could radiate all the way up to my lower back, much like a mild electrical shock. I learned that lying on my belly and propping myself on my elbows for hours hurt almost as much as having ink injected into my legs. I learned that it’s possible to think of things to talk about even when both the tattoo artist and the client are nerdy introverts (superheroes, horror movies, memes, music, the criminal justice system, dysfunctional families). I learned that walking backward with hands extended is an effective way, more or less, to keep an enthusiastic dog from jumping on freshly tattooed legs (RIP, sweet Murphy). I learned how to get

through the healing process: when the itching woke me up at 2:00 a.m., icepacks and antihistamines were a big help.

Of all the things I learned, this one is the best: once I made up my mind, it was surprisingly easy to start fresh and to overcome decades of shame. I still have quite a few spider veins, especially around my ankles, but they have lost their power to humiliate me. My wildflower tattoos have yanked them off the stage and out of the spotlight.

One afternoon, as I waited at the checkout counter in a grocery store in Statesboro, Georgia, a young man tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Excuse me, ma’am. I just wanted to tell you that your artwork is beautiful.” A man who was probably about my age called out across the local mall parking lot, “I like your tattoos!” In 2018, I taught in a Study Abroad program in Lucca, Italy. When I tried on dresses in a clothing shop there, several young salesclerks gathered around to look at my legs and said, “*Wow! Bella! Bella!*”

Sure, some people stare, like the woman in Lucca who nearly tripped and fell because she was glaring at me rather than watching where she was going. But I’d rather have a disapproving look than a pitying one, which is what I always expected when I was the Woman with Purple Veins Spiderwebbing Her Pasty White Legs.

In a sort of tattooed facsimile of nature, sunflowers, poppies, morning glories, honeysuckle, and coreopsis spread wildly over my left leg, winding vinelike around it and covering a surprising amount of terrain. Hollyhocks, lantana, daisies, and Indian blanket do much the same on the right.

Other people probably don't pick up on the nonconformist attitude that this deliberate asymmetry represents to me, but it's definitely there in my mind. Also, on a practical level, the asymmetry is an inevitable result of my main goal in rebranding myself: to cover the veins that I've hated for thirty-plus years. Ryan purposely hunted down as many "uglies" as he could and tattooed over them, wherever they happened to be, all while creating cohesive and beautiful patterns.

My tattoos also represent my way of thumbing my nose at aging. I don't mind getting older, but I do mind the expectations that are often placed on us as we age. We're supposed to vote a certain way, get sensible haircuts, dress in conservative clothing, drive fuddy-duddy vehicles, and fade into the background.

Nah.

Very few people expect someone of my age to get inked. *I* never expected to do such a crazy thing. But I did, and I'm rather pleased with myself.

Hell, one morning last spring, I got fitted for hearing aids, and that evening I went back to Ivory Tower to get the linework for my coreopsis and Indian blanket tattoos.

Shortly after I embarked on this quest, the yeah-I'm-getting-older-so-what attitude underlying my tattoos made an appearance at a doctor's appointment. My podiatrist admired my new artwork, then asked if I'd have to have the colors touched up at some point. (Because I spaced out my tattoo sessions to coincide with my monthly paychecks, and because I skipped some months, the tattooing process took quite a long time. I was nearly sixty-two by the time the tattoos were finished.)

I said, "Well, I'm sixty years old, so I don't foresee needing many touchups."

"That's pretty morbid," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

We both laughed.

Then I told him what my in-laws have always said when they spend money on something expensive like a fridge or a car or an array of solar panels for their house: "It'll see us out."

I like that way of putting it: My tattoos will see me out. This short little sentence captures the spirit I was looking for when I started this whole rebranding process: confident, irreverent, and no longer apologetic about myself.

So. This is the new me. I am no longer the Woman Who Hates Her Legs. I am the Woman with Wildflower Tattoos.

Theresa Malphrus Welford, who grew up in a small working-class town near Savannah, Georgia, has published poetry, creative nonfiction, book chapters, and scholarly articles, as well as three books: *The Paradelle*, *The Cento* (Red Hen Press), and *Transatlantic Connections: The Movement and New Formalism* (Story Line Press). She and her husband, Mark Welford, happily share their home with countless rescued animals (cats and dogs.)

Cleveland City Blues

by Joe Kowalski

In the autumn of 2016, my car was double-booted because I had forged a single-day parking pass, and so I had to take the RTA Blue Line transit to Tower City in order to walk from there to Cleveland State University. Along the way, I stopped at the corner store formerly known as For Goodness Jake's. There was an older man inside, beard peppered and scattershot against his pale skin. His clothes looked like they had been found outside of Goodwill. The dude bought a candy bar and struck up an energetic conversation with another man sitting outside on a bike.

The shabby man was speaking intensely, so I stopped to make sure that he wasn't harassing the poor cyclist. He was clearly drunk, but the cyclist didn't seem threatened by him. The conversation turned to politics. Eventually the man turned to me, his pupils swirling a bit before focusing.

"Your name?"

"Joe."

"You're voting for Trump, right?"

"Not a chance," I said.

"I was a steelyard worker for years. Trump is for the workers."

“As far as I can tell, Trump is only for himself.”

Although class would begin shortly, the man and I continued our lively conversation on my way to campus. He was homeless, he said, mostly because he couldn’t afford to pay off any more DUIs and had become estranged from his daughter. He was bothered that I hated Trump, but he liked that I was in school because “It’s important to learn how to think, and at least you’re thinking. There’s not enough of that these days.”

We passed another homeless man. They knew each other and struck up a conversation. My walking companion gave him a generous five-dollar bill and ended up giving away the candy bar he had bought too, saying, “I don’t need the sugar anyway.” He also joked around for a minute with a construction worker. I made sure we stayed on the busy sidewalks of Euclid Avenue, so that there was little chance that anything dangerous could happen.

The further we walked, the more I interpreted him as lonely rather than hostile, although I imagine a big factor in my subsiding fear came from the unearned privilege of my being a white guy. I was subjected to stories about his time in jail. How he had been “reformed.” He said that he changed because of a “little book called The Bible” and with the help of

a well-known individual...I thought I knew where this was headed.

“You ever heard of Jack Kerouac?” he slurred, taking me by surprise.

“The writer? Yeah.” We crossed the street.

“Thought you might. He was a mastermind of words. You got an address? I’ll mail you something *amazing*.”

“I’d prefer not to tell you that. Sorry, man.”

“I think maybe you deserve it. No one ever talks to me like this. Plus, you’re a smart kid.”

“What is it?”

He scratched his beard. “When I was in jail, I read his poetry daily. Jack’s. Memorized it. It said a lot to me. Made me rethink everything. Made me see how we’re all connected. Genius. Taught me how you didn’t need a whole lot of words to *say* a lot. ‘I’m merely exploring souls and cities,’ etc. etc. See, Jack Kerouac used to write on this weird, long paper stock. Almost like a scroll. His notebooks were wild. You’d never believe it, but I found one of his original manuscripts in a crate at a flea market.” He looked at me expectantly, arms raised upward.

“...Huh.”

The man nodded vigorously, smile growing. “I don’t think they understood what it was. But I read those words a

million times in prison and had to have it. Since then, I've had this thing at every important moment of my life. It's back at the shelter as we speak. Kid, I want *you* to have it now." He clapped me on the back.

"I appreciate that," I said. "But I don't feel comfortable giving you my address." We were rapidly approaching the school.

The man blinked for a minute and then pointed at the trash can outside of the Law Building, all while attempting the feat of standing steady. "Hm... see that right there, Jim? It was Jim, right?"

"Joe."

"Okay. I'm going to leave the manuscript in there tomorrow. That way you can have your life changed too. Look for it there tomorrow after 10 a.m."

"What if the trash gets emptied?"

"Okay, okay…" He swung around, still off-kilter. The next target was the sparse foliage that lined the grey brick of the building. "There then. Right in those bushes. 10 a.m. Priceless manuscript."

"I'll check for sure." We shook hands and he was off, singing a song I didn't know.

I know it was stupid, but I had to check the next day. Wouldn't you? I felt a bit silly combing among the mulch, but I

had to be thorough. It was the time of year when the temperatures were starting to dip and people scurried by, ignoring me just to get inside. I wondered if they weren't attempting to ignore me in a similar manner that people ignored my drunk acquaintance the day before.

Nope. Nothing. Of course. Although, it's quite possible that maybe I didn't look hard enough. Maybe you should check the shrubs outside the Cleveland State University Law Building when you are in town in case I missed it years ago and it's still there, water damaged and concealed in mulch, just waiting to change your life.

Joe Kowalski's films and online videos have allowed him to work with the likes of Henry Winkler (*Barry*), Jonathan Demme (*The Silence of the Lambs*), John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*), and Mara Wilson (*Matilda*). His short film adaptation of *I Am the Doorway* was given the blessing of Stephen King. He lives in Cleveland.

Side Effects

by Susan Nash

In our family we don't get cancer. We get drunk. We take drugs. We smoke. We have a wide variety of personality disorders. We fall down and break bones and have very high cholesterol, but we don't get cancer.

That's what I used to think anyway. But I was wrong. I now know that my dad has had prostate cancer, although he claimed at the time that he was just having his appendix out. I've had multiple basal cell carcinomas removed, even if those don't really count. And then my sister got a rare and aggressive lymphoma that irrevocably and unalterably confirmed that Cancer is part of our family.

Still, when I went in for my annual mammogram just over a year ago, I wasn't worried, and not just because of the decades of clear scans. Besides, life was going well. I had moved to Palo Alto from Los Angeles to attend a mid-career program at Stanford. I was busy. Focused. Taking care of things. I was building a new community, looking forward to the next phase of my life. I flew back and forth to Seattle often, helping my sister and her family. At some level I think I believed that my busy life immunized me from getting any "real" cancer myself.

Then the doctor called with the news that (i) I definitely needed a second mammogram, (ii) there was an eighty percent chance I'd need a biopsy after that, and (iii) there was a forty to fifty percent chance that the biopsy would show that the weird spots lighting up the first mammogram were cancerous.

A long-forgotten math competency in my brain insistently spat back the result: a thirty-two to forty percent chance that the weird spots were some form of cancer.

My immediate response was: No, I don't think I'll do this right now.

It reminded me of when I went into labor with my second son: This hurts a lot and I won't be having a baby today, thank you very much.

So, I decided, I would not do anything about any biopsies or additional mammograms. I would just get on with my life. Perhaps I would blow my entire nest egg in the next five years and have a whopping good time. Fuck the consequences. Seen chemo, would rather see Rio.

But, of course, reason prevailed, and I had the second mammogram, and then the biopsy, and the odds fell on the short side. The Monday after Thanksgiving the doctor called again, with the diagnosis that one of the spots was a Ductal Carcinoma In Situ. DCIS, as it's commonly known.

A DCIS spot is not invasive or life-threatening, at least not unless and until it leaves the “site” where it starts, which it may never do. But the standard treatment is to remove such spots surgically, to eliminate any potential spread.

As breast cancer goes, DCIS is the best kind to have, referred to as “Stage 0,” whatever that means. There’s a debate in the medical community over whether DCIS should even be called cancer.

Rebellion over, I dutifully called the Stanford Women’s Cancer Clinic to make an appointment—a moment that, from a patient’s standpoint, makes any debate over whether DCIS is a form of “cancer” seem pretty academic.

In the days leading up to the SWCC visit, I tried not to think too much.

Then I got mad.

Blindingly mad.

Mad about having to be resilient and a good sport.

Mad about being sixty-three years old and single and having to address even the remote possibility, raised in one of the initial telephone consults, of losing, or voluntarily giving up, my left breast. It’s hard enough to get a date at this age even with two breasts.

Mad that it wasn’t fair to make me deal with this, not right now, not by myself.

Mad that this had happened to me, someone who clearly did not deserve it. Yes, I actually had that thought—while looking down to see if the ground would open up and suck me straight into hell.

This phase was not a good time to cross me. When a leak developed behind the bathroom wall in my apartment, it was not a good idea to tell me, as the tenant and a retired lawyer, to get someone out to fix it. This is not my problem," I told the landlord. This is your building, not mine. You get someone out here."

I'm pretty sure I was right on the substantive legal obligations of landlords and tenants, but perhaps a little over the top in explaining my position.

Next, I moved into bargaining mode. Whatever happened, I would not turn into one of those people who wear long skirts and Birkenstocks and do juice cleanses and sport pink ribbons. I would survive but I would not be a "Designated Survivor." I would have the surgery but it would have to be done quickly. One and done.

Oh God, I thought, they're going to tell me to give up wine. I'll give up one, red or white, whichever. Not both.

I told my sister and a couple of friends. To my sister, after what she's been through, the idea of having a lumpectomy probably sounded like going in for a flu shot.

My friends were sympathetic, if tentative. I was bristly. “I need help,” I wanted to say. “I’m fine,” is what usually came out.

Sitting in the line of cars at the cancer clinic, it took me a while to label what I was feeling. Pain. Shortness of breath. Tears behind my eyes.

This was actually happening.

I was terrified.

The physician’s assistant was endlessly patient, unfazed by my crossness. She ordered an MRI to see what further mysteries my breast might yield. She prescribed Ativan to take before the procedure.

She looked up at me.

“Maybe I should add a few extra?”

“Yes,” I said.

In my family, our bodies are not temples.

We didn’t settle on a plan but we made an outline, a plan to have a plan. After the MRI, there would be a consultation about the surgery—how extensive and for what, exactly, were not clear. I felt a breath of something for a minute, as we finished up. I remembered a recent lecture by Roshi Joan Halifax, talking about hope living with uncertainty. For a moment, I thought I understood what she meant.

I picked up the car and managed to thank the attendant, politely.

I opted to have the surgery in Los Angeles, where my older son lives. The day after New Year's he drove me to the hospital, around the same time that his younger brother was boarding a plane in New York to fly out. This was the first time in their adult lives that I asked my sons to show up for me. Both leapt to the occasion.

The surgeon had me on the table for four hours as she removed what were eventually determined to be two DCIS spots in the left breast, connected by an unseen line of more Stage 0 (almost-cancer?) material. Then she took a bit of tissue out of the right breast, just to even things up.

Both sons came to see me when it was over.

The upshot of the surgery was a pair of scarred but perkier breasts, a result that women all over the westside of L.A. pay thousands of dollars for out of their own pockets, without any kind of diagnosis at all.

I flew back to Palo Alto as soon as I was cleared in the post-op, ready to put the episode behind me. But it turned out that the margins were not quite what the DCIS protocol requires, even though the chances that anything left in the area would turn into an invasive cancer were slim. Also, the

chunk taken out of the right breast included a teeny tiny bit of a different kind of breast cancer, or potential breast cancer, that might never have shown up but for the standard technique of testing all tissue removed during any breast surgery.

I tried not to think about the fact that the new spot on the right side was not detected in any of the mammograms.

After another series of appointments and discussions, I returned to LA for an outpatient version of the surgery, just on the left side, to get that last bit of margin. As for the different and impossibly tiny amount of almost-cancer tissue extracted from the right breast, the doctors left it to me to decide whether to take the five years of pills that might, or might not, cause hair loss, weight gain, brain fog, loss of libido, headaches, fatigue and/or nausea. For better or worse, I opted not to go down a medication path that treats against a possible but unlikely recurrence of a possible but unlikely invasive breast cancer that would not have been found but for the evening-things-out surgery.

And then I was done, both breasts reasonably intact, the fortunate beneficiary of state-of-the-art treatment and a deeply researched part of Western medicine.

There was still the small matter of a month of radiation back in Palo Alto to round out the protocol, but I was assured

that this would not affect my life, except for the likely need to take naps. Both breasts would be radiated, just in case. Ironically, given the too-little-too-late protective measures I now take against the sun, I was told to expect a sunburn in one of the few places where my skin is lily white.

The building housing the radiation oncology clinic is quiet. It is not unpleasant but it is a serious place. None of the clientele wants to be there. Everyone is respectful of everyone else. A volunteer piano player often serenades the lobby. Sometimes I sat there for a few minutes before going downstairs to check in.

Each day the man with the big eyes and one of his helpers would set me up just so, adjusting the positions, calling out fractions to each other. During this process the man's eyes were inches from my breasts. He was nice and so very kind, but I couldn't help thinking that he should buy me a drink first. I felt disappointed on the days he was not there.

I was left alone during the actual radiation, lying motionless, holding my breath and exhaling on command from a voice miked into the room. The machines moved around me like the robot doctors in *Star Wars*, whirring and clicking in a language of their own. I kept my eyes firmly shut.

At the end of the first day, I made myself a Cosmo. It tasted so much better than the bitterness of my usual white wine. By the end of the week, I had a burning desire for a chocolate cupcake, a craving that I would eventually indulge.

Cosmos and cupcakes almost certainly contribute to cancer.

Occasionally I was annoyed by the new routine, carving out an hour every weekday at 4:00 p.m. or so. Most of the time I remained deeply grateful for having this event occur in the 21st century and not a minute before.

After twenty sessions of radiation, the team gave me a graduation certificate and a blue dot pin. Blue dot pins are the radiation equivalent of pink ribbons. The man with the big eyes and everyone else in the room offered their hearty congratulations and genuine wishes for good luck. I choked up. The odds that I will never have to deal with this again are resoundingly in my favor.

On my way out I found myself wishing that the man I had a drink with two days earlier, a man I last saw forty-two years ago in college, was waiting outside for me. I wanted arms, male arms, surrounding me.

I shook it off and got into the car. Back at home, I pinned the blue dots to my baseball cap.

A few days later it is Sunday, and I walk over to the All-Saint's Church to listen to chamber music. The quartet will play Haydn, Mozart, and Brahms, exploring the B-flat note that begins the Hunter's call in a fox hunt. My breasts itch. I have heard from the man from college again, and we will hike in two days' time.

The building is stark in its lack of ornamentation, and the pews are hard, as if the Episcopalians need a constant reminder that this is a Church. There are no snarling gargoyles or cherubic angels looking down from above. The floors are concrete, unadorned by any covering. And yet it is clear that this is a holy place, or a place, at least, where something holy might happen. A gold cloth drapes over the altar; fragments of a cross float in the open space above.

Four chairs and four music stands sit in a semi-circle—black, steel, simple. Here, at last, is a small rug, possibly to absorb the sound or cushion the players' feet. Only thirty people have turned out for the concert, in ones, twos and fours, leaving all of us with room to ourselves.

The musicians enter and take a bow. They take a seat and tune their instruments, then wait until the room fills with silence. They lift their bows and play the long first note.

There are many moments during those two hours of music when I am completely, abundantly, at peace.

Susan Nash is a former lawyer who has traded years of writing briefs in favor of chronicling the experiences of older women in our culture. Her work appears on Punctuate, *Considerable.com*, and multiple websites at Stanford University.

The Jagged Edge of Her Heart

by Barbara G. Caceres

All I ever knew of my grandmother was her name, a southern, old-fashioned name that was once used in a rap song. Ola Mae had four children by the time she was twenty, two boys and two girls. The youngest was my mom, Maggie. In 1931 when Ola Mae was just fifteen, she married Sherman Taylor, a good-looking, hard-working young man with soldier straight posture. At five feet four Ola Mae stood two inches taller than her husband. Their children inherited her thick, coal black hair, high cheekbones, and piercing blue eyes.

They lived in McNairy County, a rural farming community in West Tennessee but moved to Peoria, Illinois when the children were no longer babies. Sherman went to work in the construction trades as a welder and Ola Mae went to work planning her eventual escape. I don't know if the plan to leave was born of a sudden catalytic event or if it slowly worked its way into her thoughts a little each day. When Ola Mae left, she took nothing with her, leaving behind little parts of herself in each room of the house. Her embroidered cheesecloth and ruffled apron still hung near the kitchen sink, a canister of lilac scented powder remained on a narrow shelf above the toilet, and a dozen photos of Ola Mae with Sherman

and the kids at different ages sat collecting dust on the old oak side table in the living room. Ola Mae shed the skin of her old life, her old self, emerging as a whole new person, someone unburdened by family responsibilities, free to come and go when and wherever she wanted.

She ended up in San Diego, California where she told everyone she met that she was single and twenty-eight even though she was married, close to forty and the mother of four children. I never judged Ola Mae or felt any ill will toward her and my mom never said an unkind word about her. Even now she is just a name and nothing more. A blurry image in a black and white photo; an empty page, blank slate, a void, a mystery, a whole book of unanswered questions. But to my mom and her siblings, Ola Mae was a pebble thrown onto a lake. disappearing quietly from the surface of their lives but remaining lodged and unseen in the mud and crevices of each child's broken heart.

Sherman took his teenaged children back to West Tennessee. If anyone asked about Ola Mae, he'd say without hesitation, "I'll kill the bitch if I ever see her." Sherman needed the warm comfort of the small town where he was born and raised, where family and friends provided a soft place to land, an emotional safety net. But my mother, Maggie, saw Ola Mae in this every shadow the town cast. Constantly confronted with

her mother's absence, she began to nurture a bitter hatred for her birthplace, believing it was the driving force in her mother's departure and that leaving Tennessee for Illinois was only a baby step in the giant leap her mother had sought. If Maggie could feel the same unsettled, festering desires that Ola Mae had felt, would she then understand why her mother left?

My mother wanted out of Tennessee and when my father came along, she saw exit signs. Paul Johns was a cook in the Navy. He grew up on the Wilson Plantation in Arkansas. The son of day workers, he was uneducated and lacking ambition. My father's greatest asset was his sense of humor and a job that would take him places—places far, far away from West Tennessee. Paul married Maggie in 1957. A month later they were hoisting suitcases into the back of dad's '57 Chevy. As they drove along Highway 22, dad would tell stories of his first deployment overseas and mom would listen and laugh, her mind sometimes wandering far away from the conversation, distracted by curiosity about the people and cities they passed through. Smoking and listening to the radio, they'd sing along with Elvis and Hank Williams, stopping in dry dusty towns to eat a burger and share a beer. Headed for California in 1959 my mom was as happy and as beautiful as she'd ever be. A new bride in a pink summer dress, her black hair held in place with a floral scarf and her thoughts full of

anticipation. She'd reach for her white vinyl purse, opening the silver button clasp to check the contents—cigarettes, lipstick, a few loose coins, and a post card from Ola Mae—in San Diego.

Ola Mae had been in California for a few years. My dad was scheduled to report for a two-year post at the Naval base in San Diego. Mom and my grandmother would end up working at the same bar, serving cold beer to tired Navy men, filling empty bowls with red pistachio nuts and emptying ashtrays. They behaved more like sisters than mother and daughter. Of course, that fit the role that Ola Mae was creating for herself as a woman ten years younger than she actually was. Ola Mae had met a man named Larry who worked for the Boeing Company. She got pregnant and they were married. Mom was pregnant with me at the same time. Ola Mae gave birth to a boy in January 1961 and I was born a month later on February 23. My mother and grandmother would spend time together, taking care of their new babies, and perhaps growing closer, or so I liked to imagine.

But in reality, Ola Mae had no interest in me, her new grandchild or in her daughter. In a year she would relocate with her husband and son to Seattle where the baby she named Alan would be raised as an only child, never knowing he had a half-sister named Maggie and three other siblings in

Tennessee. My mom and dad moved to Norfolk, Virginia where I would become a big sister to two brothers, learn to ride a bike and start first grade. At age six I knew nothing of my grandmother and would not even learn her name until four years later. I would know nothing of Alan for another six years.

In 1969 my parents divorced. Because I had asthma, the doctor suggested to my mother that living in the Pacific Northwest would be beneficial. Moving to Washington State also presented an opportunity for mom to once again plant herself in the same city where Ola Mae was living.

We arrived in Seattle on a cold January night with rain drizzling enough to dampen the spirits but not actually get anyone wet. Mom reached out to Ola Mae via a late-night phone call from a seedy hotel on the airport strip. My grandmother refused to provide any assistance, and mom would not attempt to make contact with Ola Mae again—until tragedy struck. My brother, Jimmy, was hit by a car and killed in 1971. A few months after the funeral we were sitting in Ola Mae's small living room on a sofa facing a coffee table full of magazines with Ola Mae standing on the other side, looking helplessly at us as if we were refugees from another country. I don't remember any conversation or even the offer of a drink of water. We were there only minutes. As we rose to leave, I

saw a shadowy figure in the nearby hallway, a boy my own age with dark hair. He paused to look briefly in our direction before continuing down the hall. That boy was Alan. It would be another thirty-seven years before Alan would learn of his family in Tennessee, of his siblings and nieces and nephews and the growing multitude of Taylors, the descendants of Ola Mae and Sherman.

Mom grew sullen and distant after the death of my brother. She drank frequently and lashed out at me. I avoided her, felt sorry for her but mostly feared her. I learned to recognize subtle differences in her pupils and facial expression and could tell if she had even one drink. When I got pregnant mom stopped drinking for an entire year and we focused on preparing for the arrival of my child. We had a common goal and enjoyed each other's company but by the time my son was four years old mom fell back into her old pattern of drinking and attacking. I moved away and she had only my phone number.

In November of 2008 I knew mom was dying. She suffered from COPD and had at least one hospitalization every year for the past three or four years. Sometimes I'd rush to her side with a small vase of flowers, but other times I wouldn't go and Leif, mom's boyfriend, would call in the

evening with an update on her condition. I felt nothing. Even the image my mind conjured up, with her looking scared and shrunken in the hospital bed, her belly swollen with a big liver from years of drinking, did not sway me to leave the comfort of my life and cross that threshold into hers—even temporarily. But when Leif called the next day speaking slowly into the phone, his words bore a sadness that caught me off guard. In his voice I heard a palpable remorse and I knew he was shouldering the burden of my mother's regret. I'd endured her drunken rages for years but when I decided to take a trip to Tennessee to visit my father, a trip she learned about after the fact, she was furious and began a campaign of telephone harassment, harassment that included my son, Michael, her only grandson. This harassment lasted for days, creating the final fracture in an already broken and fragile relationship.

"She didn't mean it," Leif struggled to say. "I couldn't stop her or she'd turn on me."

He seemed anxious and spoke quickly as if I might hang up before he finished speaking. I listened, taking a deep breath and breathing out quietly.

"The doctor says she only has half a heart left. How can anyone live with half a heart?"

Leif was my mother's common law husband. An Alaskan Native and alcoholic, who for the past twenty years

provided mother with a partner in co-dependency but more recently as mom's COPD progressed, a companion and caregiver, Leif's voice cracked as he told me that mom had suffered a minor heart attack during this most recent exacerbation of her illness.

Leif's pain and need of compassion left me wilted. By nine that night I was on my way to the hospital. My mother was at Harborview Medical Center in ICU holding. It was simply a big room in the basement where the sickest patients waited for someone even sicker upstairs—in the regular ICU—to die. A dozen beds filled the room, six on the left side and six on the right. They were lined up against the wall with the foot of each bed facing another. Each bed had a thin curtain hanging from a metal track in the ceiling, but only momma's curtain was closed. The people occupying the other beds had tubes taped to their faces, making it impossible to tell which patients were male or female, young or old. I was told to wait while a team of nurses tried to tap mom's femoral artery for blood. Because of her severe diabetes, the veins in her arms were impossible to access. An East Indian nurse ducked through the curtain, smiling sadly at me and speaking softly, "We sedate her. She is very combative and not allowing us to draw blood."

I nodded, thinking maybe mom's combativeness was a good sign. If she could fight with a nurse under these circumstances, then maybe she'd fight to get better. When the medical team finished, the curtain was slowly pulled back and I saw my mom for the first time in nearly a year. She had a breathing tube in her mouth and her whole body shook as a machine forced air into her lungs. A faded bandanna sat high on her forehead revealing a receding hairline. Somehow her hair loss made me sadder than the big box-like machine that was keeping her alive. I leaned in close to her ear and shouted, "I'm here, momma. It's me, Barbara. Momma, I'm right here!"

The nurse scooted a metal chair in my direction and I sat close to the bed looking at my mother's face. The skin around her eyes was sagging and swollen and her once beautiful eyebrows were sparse and faded. I had a sudden memory of her applying make-up. She called it, 'fixing her face', and as a young girl I was fascinated watching her spit on a cake of Maybelline mascara to wet it, using a small wand to transform her eyebrows into beautiful black arches. Mom was often told she looked like Elizabeth Taylor and even had a mole on the side of her face that she'd darken with the same waxy substance. I didn't know what to say except "I'm here, I'm here momma …"

The next day after work I met Leif in the hospital lobby. His posture relaxed and he smiled and took my hand. With each step he seemed to unload a bit of pain and I could almost see it falling from his shoulders, like potatoes dropping from a bag and rolling off in every direction. Leif and momma sometimes maintained long stretches of sobriety as they took care of each other, mom doing the cooking and cleaning and Leif keeping track of her doctor appointments and giving her insulin shots. They both loved reading and shopping at thrift stores and their small apartment was filled with stacks of books and eclectic pictures and knickknacks. Momma received disability from the state and Leif an occasional dividend check from the Native Alaskan tribe of his ancestors. As mom got older and her condition worsened, she and Leif settled into an apartment in Columbia City, just south of downtown Seattle and they seemed content.

Leif said he couldn't sleep and had arrived at the hospital early. He'd gained a lot of weight since I'd last seen him and his black hair was cut with bangs straight across his forehead like one of the Three Stooges. I followed him across the lobby floor and into an empty elevator. I noticed his poorly hemmed khaki pants sat too high above his black socks and the canvas of his navy boat shoes was faded and pulling away from the worn rubber soles.

“How’s she doing?” I asked.

Leif smiled nervously and scratched his head, “Oh, she’s much better since they moved her up from the basement. She seems real peaceful.”

I learned that mom was receiving a paralytic agent, medicine that would keep her still and in a medically induced coma of sorts. She still had the breathing tube but her body was not jerking like before and she did look peaceful. After about an hour Leif needed a cigarette and I walked outside with him. Harborview Medical Center sits on a hill above downtown Seattle. The buildings in Pioneer Square below were lit up and sparkling against the dark of a cold November night. We stood across the street near the parking garage entrance and leaned against a cold metal guardrail. Staring off in the distance and lost in our own thoughts, we inhaled the salty air that wafted up from the Puget Sound. A few seagulls cried overhead and below the guardrail we saw cars on Interstate Five with workers speeding home to loved ones and to ordinary evenings of homework and dinner. I watched the smoke from Leif’s cigarette swirl and break apart in the night sky. I looked at his profile and wondered what he must be thinking, “You took real good care of her, Leif.”

I wanted him to know I appreciated all that he did and that I was grateful for his being in mom’s life when I could not.

He nodded, staring straight ahead, his chin trembling a bit. Leif squished the butt of his cigarette against the railing and wiped the black residue off with his hand, “Well, I loved her you know.”

And I knew he did. He was furious when the State approved payment for her oxygen but then took it away if she got even a little bit better. He went on to tell me how the same thing happened when a wheelchair was approved. “Poo just laughed when the truck came to take the chair back, ‘There go my legs!’ she said.” Leif’s small hand folded into a fist and he pounded it on the railing, “Fuckin’ Welfare system!”

I spent the next day at mom’s bedside, arriving early and walking down the wide and quiet hallway of the ICU floor. The machines at her bedside displayed numbers and graphs of lines that meant nothing to me, marking each minute of her heart and lung function on display in a digital language only nurses and doctors could understand. I sat at the edge of her bed noticing that her feet were once again sticking out from under the flannel hospital sheet. I bought her a pair of fuzzy pink socks and carefully put them on. The nurse said I should talk to her, that she could hear me, and so I did. I told her about the beautiful tree just outside her bedside window that still had its leaves. I told her how blue the sky was and how

nice the fall air felt and how she didn't need to worry about Leif because I would help him. I kept talking until another nurse came in, one I hadn't seen before, and hung a plastic bag of something that looked like pureed chicken on the pole above momma's head. The nurse called it nutrition and I knew mom needed it but it made me sad. Like she'd turned a corner and was taking the exit marked, *leaving forever*, instead of the one that said, *slowly coming back.*

Sometimes I just sat in the chair beside her bed without talking and I'd glance up at the clock that hung high on the wall as it ticked away the minutes in military time. I tried not to think of why a clock like that hung behind every bed in the ICU, but I knew it was to mark the time of death. I kept a solitary vigil at momma's bedside. Her grandson would not come to squeeze her hand or kiss her cheek. They were estranged by years of family events and celebrations that mom new nothing about. Just as I did not know my own grandmother, Ola Mae. I found myself wondering about her as I looked at mom's face. Did they look alike? What was Ola Mae doing today? Would she want to know about mom? My mother's family tree had a bad case of root rot and it had toppled years ago leaving the branches broken and scattered.

The next morning, I awoke suddenly after hearing a knocking at the window. *One- two-three- four.* I sat up wide -

awake and looked to where the sound had come from. *One-two-three-four- I-am-O.K.* The curtains were closed and I could tell it was still dark outside. *One, two, three, four. Please-let-me-go.* The clock on the nightstand read 4:19 and I was convinced that momma had passed away. I called the hospital and although momma was still alive, her conditioned had worsened and she was retaining fluid. I walked to the window, pulled the curtains back and pressed my forehead against the cold glass. I rapped with my knuckles four times: *one-two-three-four-I-am-so-sorry…*

The sight of momma in her hospital bed frightened me, and I could tell by the soft outline of her flesh under the white sheet that her body, so full of fluid, had nearly doubled in size. The fuzzy pink slippers I'd placed on her feet were gone but I understood why as I watched the nurses checking the pulse at her ankles every half hour. I sat silently at momma's bedside that day, too sad and overwhelmed to say a word. The hospital staff filed in on a regular basis to check the machine settings, adjust this button or that, replacing IV bags or putting drops of liquid in her eyes to keep them moist. "She has very pretty blue eyes," a nurse commented, wiping the excess liquid that spilled onto momma's cheeks like tears.

The next day my husband and I drove to Columbia City to pick up Leif, parking the car across the street from the

apartment building where he and momma lived. The front doors to the building were large and made of glass and although the lobby was dimly lit, I could see the murky green water of a neglected swimming pool inside. In 1970 the apartments were high-end rentals but over the years the place had fallen into disrepair with the owners finally selling it to the city as low-income housing. After years of paying slumlords outrageous amounts for studios without a fridge or decent plumbing mom and Leif now had an apartment with a kitchen, bedroom, bath, and a living room area that opened to a small concrete patio. And they paid only a third of their income toward rent. Leif appeared in the lobby, hesitated a moment, then pushed through the doors shifting the weight of the backpack he carried from one shoulder to the other. His facial muscles seemed to collapse and pull the skin of his cheeks and eyes and mouth downward. I knew he'd been drinking.

"I-I had some beer." He announced it like an apology as he hoisted his body into the back seat of the Yukon. Closing his eyes as his mouth tried to form the words his brain searched for, he spoke slow and deliberate, "I-it was just squeezin' my heart so hard!"

We were going to let her go. Mom had been on life support for a week and her lungs were ravaged by disease. We entered her room in the ICU and Leif moved close to

Barbara as an infant with her mother

momma's bedside. I glanced away, focusing on the window and the tree outside that, even in November, stubbornly displayed a canopy of green leaves. Mom was stubborn too, and proud and unafraid and she'd know it was the end of the season, time to let go. I looked at my mother's exposed feet and the perfect little toenails. Leif had to buy baby clippers to cut them with. He said they were as soft as white tissue paper. The respiratory therapist appeared and quietly explained what would happen as the tube was removed. Nurses came to disconnect the heart monitor and take down the IV bags, and the chaplain arrived to say a prayer. Leif moved in closer and kissed momma on the cheek. The breathing tube was slowly pulled from mom's lungs, and I watched as the therapist withdrew it, dabbing at spittle that gathered on her lower lip. Mom gasped but seemed unable to exhale and in just a few minutes she was gone. I rushed to her side and shouted, "I love you momma, I do! I do love you!"I wanted her to know I was there, to hear my voice as her soul drifted away but I felt panic that

she was leaving, that we had not said all that needed saying. Leif was still at momma's side. He was so calm and intent on gathering the details to be stored in memory as he focused on her mouth, her hair, and her closed eyelids. His hands began to motion in the air and I watched him, feeling embarrassed that he was drunk. He began to sing something about a fisherman and a little girl and then about a red rose bush. He worked his hands like he was pulling in fishing nets and I stood and watched, deciding not to care what anyone might think. His voice rose and I knew it would make momma happy, '*all colors bleed to red, asleep on the ocean's bed, drifting in empty seas, for all my days remaining…'*

The weight of it surprised me. I always thought ashes were light and airy, but the average weight of cremated remains is about seven pounds. I held the box on my lap, balancing it on my legs as we drove to Alki Beach. Mom would leave this world weighing no more than she did when coming into it. She loved Alki and I think it represented all that she was back then: full of potential, untamed, and beautiful. We visited the beach frequently in the first few years after moving to Seattle. Alki had been very different in 1969. Lined with ramshackle bungalows, broken concrete breakaway, and trails bordered by blackberry and scotch brush, the Beach

was raw and sculptured only by nature. We found a viewpoint at the north end and walked out onto a pier. It was cold, grey, and windy but as we stood looking out at the water, holding the box with mom's ashes, a wonderful thing happened. The sky opened up allowing a bit of sunshine on the water and a patch of blue sky appeared. Glancing across the street to where a tall glass condo stood, I noticed a figure standing in the window and I wondered if this stranger knew what we were about to do. Leif and I carefully opened the box and untied the metal clasp. Together we gently shook the plastic bag and watched as the powdery remains fell into the Puget Sound. With a soft splash, mom's ashes hit the dark water. Immediately a beautiful pale green plume formed just beneath the water's surface. It was translucent and captivating and seemed to be filled with light. We leaned over the pier and watched as the shape responded to the gentle motion of waves, expanding and undulating like some exotic underwater flower. Leif's body shook hard as he tried but failed not to cry. I put my arms around his shoulders and squeezed, crying with him.

After momma's death, I could not stop thinking of my grandmother. I learned from Leif that he and mom had actually gone to see Ola Mae five years ago. With the help of a skilled

librarian and a quick public record search they easily found her address in Renton, Washington. Ola Mae opened the door and moved them toward the sidewalk where they stood in a circle looking at each other and where Leif said Ola Mae looked at her daughter and asked, ‘Why does she look so puny?’

Leif said he smiled and shrugged his shoulders looking down at Ola Mae’s feet. It was then that he noticed she was wearing a beautiful gold ankle bracelet. My mom at only four feet, eleven inches had not seen her mother in more than twenty years. Mom said nothing but smiled up at Ola Mae like a little girl. Five minutes later Leif and mom were walking back towards the bus stop. Leif said it was a strange visit but it seemed to make momma happy and for several days after that she’d talk about the visit, saying how good it was to have seen her mother.

At some point Ola Mae had moved to Enumclaw. I read the information from an Internet search and scribbled her address on a scrap of paper. I tried to put it out of my mind but by the end of the workday I knew I’d have to go see her. I kept thinking of my mom, dead and gone forever and of Ola Mae standing in front of her neat little house wearing a gold ankle bracelet—and not even inviting mom inside! My husband found the house easily, a small yellow rambler on Semanski

Street. I felt a flutter of nerves in my stomach. I lifted the metal door-knocker and rapped three times. Hearing movement on the other side I took a deep breath, bracing myself but the door remained closed. The sound came nearer, a dragging, shuffling sound that suddenly stopped. When the door opened a tall, burly man stood before me with dark longish hair and full beard. Although he was big, he was not intimating and he said hello cautiously and waited for me to respond.

“Is Ola Mae here?” I asked, clasping my hands together nervously.

It was barely a shadow, a second of longing and grief remembered. It passed from his eyes and over his face and caused him to steady himself and hold a little tighter to the cane that helped support his weight. I noticed his foot in a soft cast of sorts and he inched a little closer and said slowly, “She died almost a year and a half ago.”

I sighed and looked down, my eyes settling on his injured foot. I felt as if I needed a cane at that moment to support the burden of my own weight. My husband stepped closer, steadying me with his arm around my shoulder and saying quietly, “This is her granddaughter.”

“Are you Alan?” I asked.

He looked perplexed but nodded and waited for me to explain.

“I just wanted to let Ola Mae know that her daughter, Maggie, has died.” I said, keeping my eyes on his, anxious to see his reaction. He looked at me but said nothing. I could see the confusion and surprise.

“You had no idea, did you? I’m so sorry. You didn’t know?”

Alan shook his head slowly. “I knew about a sister in Tennessee but after mom died, I couldn’t find a phone number or address.”

I smiled and quickly told Alan he had two half–brothers and two sisters and he had at least six or seven nieces and nephews. Alan stepped aside and asked if we’d like to come in. We stood in the shadows of Ola Mae’s small living room listening to her son talk about his mother’s bout with Shingles and how she never quite recovered, falling sicker and passing away shortly after. His dad was now in a nursing home with dementia. Alan sighed and shrugged his shoulders. The house and everything in it would have to be sold. I looked around the tiny living room, wanting some clue to the kind of woman Ola Mae was. I saw a bookcase full of knickknacks and noticed a pair of hoot owls made from tiny seashells. I glanced over Alan’s shoulders to the kitchen. A dull yellow light barely illuminated a small table. I imagined me and Ola Mae having coffee there, her patting my hand with her own,

leaning in to tell me something about her daughter, *'Maggie never gave me a moment's peace. She was feisty, a real spitfire!'* But I'd come too late and Alan couldn't answer any of my questions. He'd grown up thinking he was an only child. Ola Mae was dead. She'd lived without acknowledging her grandchildren and without restoring any semblance of normalcy in the relationship with her children from her first marriage. Ola Mae took every secret she held to her grave.

We drove away from the small house. I felt burdened and confused. The sky grew dark and the long country road was black and lit only by the occasional headlights of passing cars. The farmlands that were lush and green earlier in the day were now just shadowy voids, sad and depressing in their emptiness.

I called Alan a few weeks later. I asked if Ola Mae liked living in Enumclaw, and he told me she hated it. I knew it looked too much like Tennessee but kept those thoughts to myself. I sent Alan pictures of the brothers and sisters he had never been told about and included all the names, addresses, and phone numbers of his nieces and nephews. I wrote that if he needed anything or wanted to talk, I'd be happy to answer whatever questions I could.

My mother's relationship with her own mother would remain a mystery. Without a defining moment or precipitating

event, Ola Mae had disappeared. She was the pebble thrown on a somber lake that still rippled from her actions so many years ago. Those ripples were felt not only by her children, but by the grandchildren she never knew or cared to know. It wasn't so much that she'd left … a lot of spouses leave … it was the emotional abandonment that hurt, the lack of contact and disregard. I felt my mother's pain most profoundly one evening while washing dishes. The knowledge came to me as I stood with hands submerged in warm soapy water. My shoulders shook as I began to sob. I felt a deep wail pass my lips as my husband rushed to my side. "She didn't know how!" I cried. "She didn't know how!"

My husband held me tight as I yelled into his shoulder.

"Mom didn't know how—she didn't know how to love me!"

My heart would be at low tide for the longest time, all the rough edges exposed and vulnerable. Eventually I'd let the days and weeks roll away, out from under the weight of my sorrow. I'd learn to shake loose the pebbles in my shoes and brush away the gravel on my pillow that kept me awake at night and forever drop the stones that I thought had permanently lodged themselves under my breastbone. On a spring day one year later, I drove to the beach where momma's ashes had been scattered. The water under the pier

lapped hypnotically like a giant dog at its bowl. I stood still, languid and relaxed, mesmerized by the sun's dance on water and the promise of long, warm days. I stood there until dusk. When the lights of the city across the Puget Sound began to glow, I sighed and took a deep breath. The air was rich with the smell of salt and seaweed. I thought about Alan and wondered why I hadn't heard from him. I dialed his cell number and listened as the phone rang at least a dozen times. When I thought I'd hear his voice mail message I heard instead, *I'm sorry, the number you've reached has been disconnected.*

Barbara G. Caceres completed a non-fiction writing program at the University of Washington and has published poetry in several small online journals and a personal essay in *Dreamers Magazine*. She works in the healthcare field and lives in Federal Way, WA with her husband and two dogs.

My Name Could Be Toby Gardner

by Ann S. Epstein

I lost my name. Perhaps the name was never mine to begin with. In which case, will I ever own one? Or, if the name was once in my possession, can I get it back?

People on intimate terms with their names stir envy in me. When I hear mine, no inner voice says “Me”. The roots of this dissociation sprout in a family soil that teems with multiple, secret, and lost names. Such history is common among immigrants who changed their names to assimilate. For me, not being my name also stems from my family’s particular pathology.

My late mother, for example, Kate Alsofrom Savishinsky, could be called Gussie Shirley Savage. Like many Eastern Europeans who came to the United States at the turn of the last century, names on both sides of my family were Anglicized or phoneticized. Thus, my father’s Polish surname “Czauczinski” became “Savishinsky” at Ellis Island. When my mother married him, she shortened it to “Savage” at work, which was also the name we put on the waiting list at the Chinese restaurant where, like other New York Jews, we often ate supper on Sunday nights.

The story behind “Gussie” is explained in this letter I

submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with my mother's Medicaid application:

> The enclosed 1911 birth certificate erroneously lists my mother's first name as Gussie rather than Kate. Her aunt, who was interviewed at the lying-in hospital, had limited English, and thought the official was asking for *her* name (which was Gussie) instead of the baby's name. My mother's Austrian maiden name, spelled "Alzufrumm" on her birth certificate, was later Anglicized to "Alsofrom". I am also faxing a copy of *my* 1946 birth certificate, which lists my mother's name correctly as Kate Savishinsky and her birthplace as the United States. I trust that with both documents, her citizenship will be established for Medicaid purposes.

"Shirley" was yet another twist in the Medicaid application, which also required a copy of my mother's Social Security card. I found one issued in her work name, Kate Savage, but needed a card under her legal name, Kate Savishinsky. She'd owned one when I'd moved her into assisted living a few years earlier, but had soon lost it, along with her purse, and her mind.

Since my mother was a packrat, I asked my brother

Steve (whose first name is Joel, but Joel is what we called an older cousin) to check for a Social Security card in the possessions he'd stored when we cleaned out her apartment. He discovered a card, but it identified her as Kate Shirley Savage. We'd never heard the name "Shirley" and assumed it was an error. But after phoning my mother's sister Fae (called Fannie or Feigele as a child), I emailed my brother:

> Dear JSS: [Note: He and I avoid the first-name problem by using our initials]
> Shirley (surely) you won't believe this. Mom's real middle name *is* Shirley! When I shared my tale of woe with Aunt Fae, we had the following conversation:
>
> Me: I know Mom used "Savage" in business, but who knows where "Shirley" comes from.
> Fae: Shirley is your mother's middle name.
> Me: I thought it was Sheba, from her Jewish name, Kayla Shayva.
> Fae: No, it's Shirley, although she'd call me a liar for saying so. She wanted it to be Sheba.
> Me: Huh? Mom hated that name on account of the Shirley Booth movie "Come Back Little Sheba." Sheba was a runaway dog.

Fae: No, your mother always liked the name Sheba.

Me: Did my father know my mother's real middle name was Shirley?

Fae: I have no idea what your father knew about your mother.

Love,

ASE

As my maternal grandmother Mindel (who was registered as Minnie at Ellis Island) used to say, "I'm glad I didn't die yesterday or I wouldn't have known that." I was fifty-nine when I discovered my mother's real middle name. She was too far gone by then for me to ask her why she claimed it was "Sheba," but even if she'd been cogent, I doubt she would have told me the truth. In her typical long-winded fashion, she would have narrated a convoluted story in which she was the aggrieved party or the heroine. And, as my straight-talking Aunt Fae said, my mother would have called her sister a liar.

If learning my mother's identity meant sorting truth from fiction in her nonstop chatter, figuring out my father's entailed filling in gaps of silence. He was not just taciturn, like many men of his generation. When I was a graduate student in

psychology, I recognized in him the classic symptoms of a schizoid personality, someone incapable of relating to others. As a child, however, I knew only that his muteness made me ashamed to invite friends to our apartment.

Despite his lack of connection to others, or perhaps because he lived inside himself, my father seems to have had a strong sense of who he was. Except for passively allowing my mother to use Savage at the office and Jade Garden, he refused to simplify his last name. On the other hand, in elementary school, he'd dropped his first name in favor of his middle one. He stuck with this choice, even when it was later ignored by virtually everyone, who called him by a nickname.

My father was born Layzeh Dovid in the shtetl of Yadow, and called Louis David when he arrived in America as a boy. For untold reasons, he hated the name Louis and answered only to David. In his teens, friends nicknamed him "Cal" after President Calvin Coolidge, a man stingy with words, who the press had dubbed "Silent Cal." The president's reticence may have been a political choice. No one was aware, or admitted, that my father's was a handicap.

As young adults, my parents met at a summer resort on the Jersey shore, where they'd each rented cabins with their friends. Urged by her bunkmate to check out a guy named Cal, my mother approached the man she hoped would

be him, but was told by that man, “I’m not Cal. He’s the bum over there.” Redirected, she paired off with the guy who was Cal for the summer. Back in the Bronx that fall, my father phoned her to resume their courtship:

He: Hello, this is David.
She: David who?
He (annoyed): You know, David.
She: I don’t know anyone named David.
He: We’ve been dating for two months!
She: You mean Cal?

Friends and family never called my father anything but Cal after the nickname was bestowed in the 1920s. Yet he steadfastly thought of himself as David until his death in 1997. What they intended as a playful moniker was to him a painful reminder of his isolation. I never heard my father protest—he was incapable of direct confrontation—but “David” was how he always introduced himself and the name he signed on his anniversary cards to my mother.

My father was equally reticent about his own parents. He never spoke of his father, who died when I was a toddler. The story as reported by my mother—or invented by her; one could never be sure, especially about tales that cast my father's family in a bad light — is that her father-in-law was an alcoholic who disappeared for long stretches of time when my father was growing up. As the oldest child, my father was pressured by his demanding mother to become "the man of the house," a worldly role for which he was ill-suited, and his shame and bitterness muted him for life. So total was his silence that my brother and I did not know our paternal grandfather's name until we were in our 40s. We were gathered for the bar mitzvah of my brother's younger son, Jacob, when my brother and I asked our father the name of his father. His reply: "Jacob. I

Gussie, Cal, Steve, and Toby
a.k.a. Kate, David, Joel, and Ann

assumed my grandson was named for him." I don't know which of us was more surprised at the other's not knowing.

The true name of our father's mother was revealed even later, ten years after our father's death. My brother, cousins, and I had called her Grandma Lillie, which we assumed was short for Lillian. But on my 61st birthday, my father's sister told me that their mother was born Ruchel (Rachel) Leah. She reinvented herself in America, dropping her first name and applying the initial of the second to one that may have sounded less Jewish or more elevated than her peasant upbringing. My aunt, and the rest of my father's family, assumed that my daughter, Rebecca, was named for her, this time repurposing the "R." I informed my aunt otherwise, but perhaps I should have let the misconception survive. A lineage buried in silence deserves to create its own stories.

My full name is Ann Toby Savishinsky Epstein. When I married my first husband, few women kept their maiden names. Since I was not enamored of mine, and was years shy of understanding and loving my father, I took my spouse's last name, which was Epstein. To preserve part of my identity, however, I began using Savishinsky as a middle name. Eight years later, when he and I divorced, I kept Epstein to maintain

continuity for my young daughter and because I'd published under that name. I still sometimes think of myself as a Savishinsky, though. Whenever a group is split alphabetically into A-M and N-Z, my instinct is to head for the one that includes "S."

Twenty-five years later, when I remarried, I continued to use Epstein. My daughter was grown, and my career was well established by then, as was the practice of women not changing their names. However, my second marriage raised the possibility of yet another name for me.

I was called by my middle name, Toby, until kindergarten, when I insisted on using my first name, Ann. I happily shed Toby because it was an easy mark for alliterative teasing. I was called "Toothless Toby" after a fall knocked out my baby teeth years before the permanent ones grew in. "Tubby Toby" didn't fit the skinny kid I was, but amused my tormenters. Toby could also be a boy's name (*Toby Tyler and the* Circus was a popular children's book at the time). The final humiliation was a television show about an elephant named Toby. When I switched to Ann, teasing rhymes like A", Ann, frying pan" sounded too impersonal to bother me. Perhaps it was also an early indication that I didn't think of the name "Ann" as really belonging to me.

Despite my becoming Ann at school, to my family I remained Toby. So, when I married my second husband forty-five years later, my Aunt Honey, whose real name is Anita, sent us a check made out to “Gerald and Toby Gardner.” Our joint account was under Gerald Gardner and Ann Epstein. He endorsed the check and I went to the bank to explain the situation to the teller:

> Me: My aunt thinks I took my new husband’s last name, which is “Gardner.” (As further proof that I wasn’t faking a family relationship, I pointed out that the middle name on my driver’s license, Savishinsky, was also my aunt’s last name.)
> Teller: No problem, I understand. (Long pause …) Who’s Toby?

The teller’s perplexity mirrors mine. None of my names: Ann or Toby, Savishinsky or Epstein, feels like me.

Funny as name anecdotes can be, it is also tragic when ancestral names are lost. But in addition to this universal phenomenon, my personal disconnection is the legacy of my odd family history. I question whether I am alone in having a nameless self, or if others share my experience. Even people

who dislike their names don't necessarily question that they belong to them. And what of those who are adopted or assume a different name for fame, fortune, or fraud? Did Norma Jean think of herself as Marilyn? Did James Gatz fully inhabit the person of Jay Gatsby? Did Anna Anderson believe herself to be Princess Anastasia? Or did they coexist with a stranger who posed as them?

Now in my mid-seventies (and single again), I occasionally braid my hair in the style I wore as a little girl. I wonder if I am not just attempting to recapture my youth but to become Toby again. Up until age five, I had only one name. I may have been haunted by an unhappiness I was too young to name—my father's silence, my mother's lies—but I knew who I was. Rejecting that name may have been a child's way of rejecting that family. Decades later, with more wisdom and empathy, perhaps I am ready to reclaim as mine the family that made me.

One solution to my self-alienation is to think of myself as the name I like best. Each has something to recommend it. Toby is uncommon and cute. I value creativity and I'm small, so the name fits. Ann, Hebrew for grace, is reassuring in the face of aging and death. My signature initials also appeal. ASE is the suffix for enzyme or catalyst, and I like to see myself as an agent of change. Yet, there's no satisfying click

when I drop any of these names into the slot labeled “me.” I’m still unwilling to give up the hope that someday I will find, and know, my name, but I fear it is too late. Either our names become us when we are young or they are forever lost.

Ann S. Epstein writes novels, short stories, memoir, craft articles, and book reviews. Her awards include a Pushcart Prize nomination for creative nonfiction, the Walter Sullivan prize in fiction, and an Editors’ Choice selection by *Historical Novel Review*. Her novels are *On the Shore, Tazia and Gemma*, and *A Brain. A Heart. The Nerve*. Her stories and nonfiction work appear in *Sewanee Review, PRISM International, Ascent, The Long Story, Saranac Review, The Madison Review, The Minnesota Review, Passages North, Summerset Review, Red Rock Review, William and Mary Review, Tahoma Literary Review*, and many other literary journals. In addition to writing, she has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and a M.F.A. in textiles.

Contributors

Linda Boroff graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in English and currently lives and works in Silicon Valley. Her suspense novel *The Remnant* has recently been accepted for publication. Her fiction and nonfiction appear in *McSweeney's, The Write Launch, All the Sins, Epoch, Cimarron Review, Parhelion, Crack the Spine, Writing Disorder, The Piltdown Review, Eclectica, 5:21 Magazine, Thoughtful Dog, The Satirist,* and other publications.

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. She is the author of *Stealing: Life in America*. Michelle co-edits for Solstice Literary Magazine. She works with students both in-person and on-line.

Barbara Desman has always been a storyteller; just ask her family and friends. She is now enjoying committing her stories to the page. Her thirty-nine-year career in the airline industry afforded her the opportunity to explore and observe the culture, people, and sights of many international destinations. Barbara is currently working on a novella about human trafficking in Thailand. Her stated intention for this chapter of her life is to become the Grandma Moses of prose. Barbara writes from Scottsdale, Arizona with her Toy Fox Terrier, Bubbles, at her feet.

Ann S. Epstein writes novels, short stories, memoir, craft articles, and book reviews. Her awards include a Pushcart Prize nomination for creative nonfiction, the Walter Sullivan prize in fiction, and an Editors' Choice selection by *Historical Novel Review*. Her novels are *On the Shore, Tazia and Gemma*, and *A Brain. A Heart. The Nerve*. Her stories and nonfiction work appear in *Sewanee Review, PRISM International, Ascent, The Long Story, Saranac Review, The Madison Review, The Minnesota Review, Passages North, Summerset Review, Red Rock Review, William and Mary Review, Tahoma Literary Review*, and many other literary journals. In addition to writing, she has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and a M.F.A. in textiles.

J. Malcolm Garcia is a freelance writer. His most recent books are *Riding Through Katrina with the Red Baron's Ghost* (Skyhorse) and *The Fruit of All My Grief: Lives in the Shadows of the American Dream* (Seven Stories Press 2019).

Christine Holmstrom's work has been published in Bernie Siegel's book, *Faith, Hope, and Healing*. Her nonfiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Dime Show Review, Gulf Stream, The Gravel, Jet Fuel Review, The MacGuffin, The Penmen Review, Rougarou, Streetlight Magazine, Switchback, Stonecoast Review, Summerset Review, Two Cities Review,* and others. After surviving riots, an armed escape and a death threat while working at San Quentin prison, she finally had the good sense to retire. Christine is now working on a memoir about her prison years.

Joe Kowalski's films and online videos have allowed him to work with the likes of Henry Winkler (*Barry*), Jonathan Demme (*The Silence of the Lambs*), John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*), and Mara Wilson (*Matilda*). His short film adaptation of *I Am the Doorway* was given the blessing of Stephen King. He lives in Cleveland.

Susan Nash is a former lawyer who has traded years of writing briefs in favor of chronicling the experiences of older women in our culture. Her work appears on Punctuate, *Considerable.com*, and multiple websites at Stanford University.

W. Scott Olsen is a writer, photographer, and professor of English at Concordia College. The author of eleven books, editor of several anthologies, and formerly the long-time editor of the national literary magazine, *Ascent*, Olsen has published essays, articles, and stories in numerous literary publications including *Alaska Quarterly Review, Huffington Post, Kansas Quarterly, Kenyon Review, Mid-American Review, North American Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Northwest Review, River Teeth, South Dakota Review, Tampa Review, Third Coast, Willow Springs* as well as commercial publications in magazines such as *The Forum, Flying Magazine, AOPA Pilot*, *Flight Training*. His most recent book is, *A Moment with Strangers*.

Jarmila K. Sullivan was born Jarmila Kocvarova in Czechoslovakia. A one-year stay in London turned her into a refugee when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, writing a bloody end to the Prague Spring. In London she went

from sleeping in a telephone booth at the Victoria railway station to the lights of the fashion runway. She went on to appear in television commercials and movies under the more pronounceable moniker of Anika Pavel. After immigrating to the United States, she transitioned into fundraising where she wrote articles for newspapers celebrating milestones in the fight against cancer. Prior to dedicating her time fully to writing, she worked as the Lifestyle Editor for BOHO Magazine. Jarmila divides her time between New York City and Cape Cod, MA.

Tommy Vollman is a writer, musician, and painter. He has written a number of things, published a bit, recorded a few records, and toured a lot. Tommy's work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the "Best of the Net" anthology. His stories and nonfiction have appeared (or will appear) in issues of *The Southwest Review, Two Cities Review, The Southeast Review, Palaver,* and *Per Contra*. He has some black-ink tattoos on both of his arms. Tommy really likes A. Moonlight Graham, Kurt Vonnegut, Two Cow Garage, Tillie Olsen, Willy Vlautin, and Albert Camus. He's working on a novel entitled *Tyne Darling* and has a new record, "Youth or Something Beautiful", which was released in April 2019. He currently teaches English at Milwaukee Area Technical College and prefers to write with pens poached from hotel room cleaning carts.

Theresa Malphrus Welford, who grew up in a small working-class town near Savannah, Georgia, has published poetry, creative nonfiction, book chapters, and scholarly articles, as well as three books: *The Paradelle*, *The Cento* (Red Hen

Press), and *Transatlantic Connections: The Movement and New Formalism* (Story Line Press). She and her husband, Mark Welford, happily share their home with countless rescued animals (cats and dogs).

Karen J. Weyant's essays have been published in *Barren Magazine, Carbon Culture Review, Coal Hill Review, the cream city review, Lake Effect, Punctuate, Solidago Review,* and *Stoneboat*. She is an Associate Professor of English at Jamestown Community College in Jamestown, New York.

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