

bioStories

2020

Volume 10, Issue 2



bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

2020

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Click Here to Chat with an Online Therapist

by Shellie Richards

Concerned about your test score? [Click here](#) to chat with an online therapist.

My immediate concern was not my test score, but that an intrusive dialogue box would appear in the lower right-hand corner. Hello! How can I help you today? Only I wasn't trying to return a pair of ill-fitting sandals or a T-shirt that ran small. I had just finished the test for the Asperger's Quotient, and my score had me deep in Asperger's territory. I was in the thick of it. But I was not concerned. I was not even surprised.

In true Asperger's fashion, I did not want to chat online. I don't prefer to *chat*. I prefer to talk about why I am even here to begin with. I want to know about the human condition, if suffering makes us who we are, whether we are alone. I want to know the why of things. *Why* is why I took the test. Curiosity. Suspicion. And so I answered fifty questions about my imagination, about counting things, about comfort.

I texted my results to my sister, a therapist, who, assuming I'd share, told my parents. I hadn't planned on sharing. My family members denied my Asperger's test result the way some deny climate change. But I kept thinking about my imagination, about counting things, about comfort.

In the gospel of Mary Magdalene, she has a vision; her spirit is floating above her lifeless body, and her mind speaks—*You are leaving? I never saw you come.* Her soul replies, *I served you as a garment, and you did not know me.* I think my imagination serves me as a garment. I do not know it, but it is a protective cloak.

For years—eighteen—I rocked. In my bed at night, I'd get on all fours, plant my head in my pillow, and rock until my long, curly hair was matted, or until I collapsed on my side, too sleepy to continue. I found this greatly comforting, but to visitors who could see from the sofa, it was disturbing.

What is wrong with her?

They asked out of curiosity or concern or neither.

I also rocked in my dad's recliner. I would sway back and forth, taking deep breaths, meditating or unthinking. According to pediatricians, rocking is a self-comfort activity. Sometimes self-comfort is the only kind. So I would sit, firmly planted in the gold and brown tweed recliner, my naked toes barely touching the ground but enough to wear the shag carpet as thin as tissue. My mother moved the recliner around, but no matter. I made more spots while I listened to the scratch of the stereo, the diamond needle dragging across the black vinyl over the dust motes to the music. My choices included Dylan, The Beatles, or The Rolling Stones. I

liked *Paint It Black* or *Sympathy for the Devil*. *Sympathy* sounded nice.

My dad doesn't remember the bare spots in the carpet. Only the rocking.

I waited until I was eleven years old to speak at school. Until then, it was only "Present," "Please," and "Amen, Alleluia."

"You can be far inside, or you can be far outside," Jon Arno Lawson writes. I was both. I walked to the beat of a different drummer. At least, that's what my mother told me. I listened for the drumbeats for the longest time after that. Dylan. McCartney. Jagger. I never heard them. Perhaps because I was in lockstep with the drumming.

Yes, I count things. Ceiling tiles at the dentist. Slats on blinds at the home store. Windowpanes at work. Pictures on a wall at a restaurant. Or maybe the empty tables and chairs, the number of waitstaff as they scramble with pitchers of water, or the number of cooks tossing pizza dough in the air. Cars at stoplights, people in lines, noodles on my plate. Always, I count.

In my early twenties I landed a job at a local university. On my first day, my boss—the only person I was obliged to talk to—was out. I sat at my desk, mostly silent, across from the departmental mailboxes—all seventy-five of them. It was

a hub of major activity; people checking mailboxes, opening letters and interdepartmental envelopes, inquiring about each other, meetings, students, and of course, introducing themselves. Beyond hello and my name, no words came out of my mouth. Only the quiet flurry of thoughts and ideas that constantly crowded my brain. After a few weeks, my coworker, who was both sweet and wise, turned to me and said, *You're gonna have to start talking. If you don't speak up, these people will run you over.* In my life, no one had ever suggested I talk or that speaking was a means of self-defense. The idea that not speaking somehow exposed me was enough to frighten me out of my comfort zone. I began speaking, and speaking led to talking, to arguing when necessary, to speaking truth to power, to calling people out when needed—to a transparency that has been nothing short of freeing. If I'm being honest, it's a switch that I turn off and on as needed—my default setting is still wallflower. But thanks to my coworker, I have a choice that never existed before.

I recently attended a luncheon that included students, their families, and faculty. I volunteered to stand outside and direct guests to the room where the celebration was being held. I was alone and without obligation to engage in conversation with strangers. It was glorious until I realized that I was counting the people in the hallway and taking inventory

of brisket and turkey club sandwiches at the luncheon. (Though consciously recognizing that I was counting did nothing to assuage my frustration over counting sandwiches that were constantly taken by guests and immediately replenished by the caterer.) A colleague, realizing I felt trapped by my social hobgoblins, came over with a student to talk about her job prospects. And though I was nervous, my burden felt lighter, less evident, and I was grateful for the instincts of my fellow human.

Sometimes the weight of silence is a lovely blanket, sometimes it is crushing, but it is always invisible.

Tonight, I will attend a large wedding reception and I will likely listen to gregarious people toasting and wishing the newlyweds well, and though I wish them all the happiness in the world, I prefer to raise my champagne in silence. It is who I am. I prefer to observe—even though at age fifty-one, I feel as though I've pushed through my inclination to disappear into the wall, to watch while others talk, to “unspeak.” I speak when it is important, and sometimes because I am nervous. But I speak. I have verve I didn't have before, and even though I don't always give voice to it, it is there, unrelenting.

People with lots of letters behind their name assure me that the Asperger's Quotient test is the gold standard for a

gateway screening. I'm not sure whether I passed or failed. I suppose it depends on whether I prefer in blending or standing out. The quiz asked a lot of questions that seemed to me spurious. What did it mean, these questions about things so natural to me? I am an introvert with a vivid imagination who likes to count things. Where was this going?

There are bigger things, it seems to me. Are we alone? Does suffering make us who we are? What is the why?

I wonder.

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technical writing at Vanderbilt University. Her writing has appeared in *Cream City Review*, *Oatmeal Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Bartleby Snopes* (where it was awarded Story of the Month), *The Chaffey Review*, among others, and the

Coachella Review. Richards holds an M.A. in English from Belmont University and will complete her MFA in 2020. She lives in Nashville with her family and three scruffy dogs.

My First Real Job

by Pam Munter

At twenty-one, few of us fully understand who we are yet, and that inevitable identity struggle was in full flower in 1964 in Boston. Surviving college was easy compared to juggling the existential weight of making the next big decision. It seemed so important, as if that first post-college job would set the course for the rest of my life. I was wrong about that. My first real job lasted all of four months.

I had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in journalism a few months earlier and applied for a job as a “copykid” with the *Christian Science Monitor* in Boston. My tenuous religious attachment arose from my adolescent worship of film star Doris Day, who was everything I wanted to be. She was also a Christian Scientist, so I—lacking an informed belief system—started attending our local church in Pacific Palisades, California when I was fifteen. I liked its intellectualism, the lack of ritual and pretension, and the handy book (*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*) to which I could refer for life’s answers. The bond was reinforced by a warm reception from the church community. College jarred that loose a bit but after graduation, with no other plans, I leaped at the opportunity to

work for what was then one of the top newspapers in the country. Late that summer, I received the letter offering me the job at \$54 a week. I'd start a month later.

A family from the church had fortuitously made a recent move to Boston and invited me to stay with them until I could find a place of my own. I had babysat for the Bowersocks' three children for a couple of years and liked them very much. Mr. Bowersock picked me up at Logan Airport after the long flight and drove me to their spacious suburban home in Lexington. My "room" was the living room couch, which was fine with me. I loved the New England ambience, the historic little town, and the genial family.

Other than the sheltered freedom I had experienced in college, this was my first time on my own, a daunting change under most any circumstances. My mother, a controlled and controlling woman, had passed on her anxiety to me. It seemed I was always trying to push the envelope in an effort to outrun it. The move to Boston was the most dramatic risk I had taken but, to my disappointment, I found the jitters had followed me across the country.

The Bowersocks found me a place to live, a small studio apartment right across from the Publishing Society where I would be working. It would be temporary housing; I'd have to find another option quickly. But it was quiet, neat and

clean, the short walk convenient because my workday began at 6 a.m.

The first day, a pleasant woman gave me a chatty tour of the formidable, white marble building. The Christian Science Publishing Society was at its peak in revenue and outreach, fully staffed and busy. I expected the newsroom, our last stop, to be a beehive, just like in the movies. Guys would be yelling across the room at each other; there would be a supercharged buzz in the air. Instead it was more like a library, eerily hushed. I was shown to a cubicle where the three of us copykids would sit and wait for the ringing of a directory bell attached to a post at the entrance. Each time it abruptly fractured the silence, one of us would jump up and hurry to the summoning editor to pick up copy or run some errand. In addition, we delivered each of the four daily editions to the editors. The first papers off the press would go to the managing editor and the editorial board, housed in a glass-enclosed office, segregated from the rest of the newsroom. The rest of the papers were distributed alphabetically by the editor's last name. When it was time for the press run, I made it a point to move through the insulated double doors into the print room. When the printing presses started, the intense aroma of the inked newsprint and the deafening roar of the

rapidly rolling drums sent my adrenaline into overdrive. I never got tired of that experience.

The other two copykids were older than I and were locals. Jennifer was more than a little detached and gave the impression she considered this role to be beneath her. She seldom spoke to either of us and was rarely in the cubicle. Steve was friendlier and had a goofy sense of humor.

When I delivered the papers, I'd chat up the editors, hoping to earn a chance at an actual writing assignment, remote as I knew that possibility would be. Steve and Jennifer had been there more than a year without being extended any kind of opportunity. I was told when I was hired that being a copykid would likely give me a chance to write but it would take a long time. I should be patient, not my most notable quality.

A few weeks into my tenure, I found an apartment with a roommate, a woman who also worked for the Society in a different department. I didn't meet her until the day I moved in. It was a small one-bedroom apartment on the fourth floor in the tree-shaded Fenway. Debbie seemed young, immature, and undereducated. Lacking any discernible conversational skill, her main interest was going out with her various boyfriends. Almost nightly, the buzzer from downstairs would ring and out she'd go.

As a result, I spent most of my nights alone. I had grown up in the suburbs and had never lived in a city. The apartment overlooked the courtyard, facing many other apartments. My mind wandered into “Rear Window” territory from time to time, while I observed people in various stages of undress doing things that would cause most of us to close the curtains.

Running my own life was both exciting but sometimes overwhelming, with all the new responsibilities. I had to feed myself, do laundry, pay bills and get to work on time. The latter was no small task, because the distance to work from The Fenway entailed a 25-minute walk, in the dark through deserted streets. I stopped each morning at a donut shop for “breakfast,” including what I learned to call a “regular” cup of coffee, laden with cream and sugar. Coffee was frowned upon by Christian Scientists but I justified it due to the early hour. Once, I was followed by a group of men cruising me in an old beater. When the car slowed and pulled closer, one guy called out, “Hey, cutie. Do you know what time it is?” I didn’t respond but quickened my walk, along with my pulse.

One way to tamp down my generalized anxiety was by learning how to navigate the city. Some days after work, I’d board the subway. Everywhere I turned in this new city seemed to release a new adventure. My first stop was

Cambridge. While I was proud of having graduated from Cal, Harvard was an unreachable academic rung. I was curious.

I've always been able to sense the pulsating convergence of history wherever I am. I can imagine scenes, people, events that transpired years or even generations before. Walking around Cambridge, I could easily picture Presidents, Supreme Court Justices and other luminaries striding purposefully around the same Harvard Yard in which I had planted myself, agog at even being there. I explored other parts of the city, too, but none with the thrill of Harvard.

It was fall in New England and I was often moved to tears when the subway zoomed past the dazzling, multi-colored stands of trees. The intense emotional response surprised me and took me to an unfamiliar place in my head. Having grown up in Los Angeles, I had never seen nature quite like this, so reminiscent of Emerson's essays and Thoreau's life at Walden Pond.

Meanwhile in that other new terrain labeled work, I was called into the city editor's office. He knew I had majored in political science. In a thick Boston accent, he said that Justice William O. Douglas was scheduled to speak at a community center in Scituate. Would I like to cover it? Me? Interview a Supreme Court Justice? Wow. I had read many of his opinions in my Constitutional Law class and contemplated what I'd ask

him. As I was pondering this, the editor mentioned the topic would be effluence, sewage treatment. Huh? Well, Okay. And, oh yeah. Did I have a way to get to Scituate?

I had been invited to the Bowersocks for dinner that night and mentioned my dilemma. Since there was no public transportation to Scituate, a beach community about an hour away, they said I could borrow their second car, a VW beetle. I was all set to go on my first professional newspaper assignment.

The small community hall was nearly filled when Douglas was introduced. After all these years, I can't remember what he said, but I did timidly ask a clarifying question about effluent, which still makes me laugh. I was disappointed I couldn't raise a topic of more interest, but then that wasn't my job.

Driving home that evening, the article came together in my head. I quietly closed the bedroom door so as not to awaken Debbie, set up the portable typewriter in the kitchen, and beat out the story. The next morning, I could hardly wait for the editor to get to his desk so I could turn it in. To my surprise, he liked it and ran it in the afternoon edition without changes. It was exciting to see it, even though it was just a few inches and the byline read "By Staff."

Having tasted success earlier than I had expected, I was impatient for more. I mistakenly thought that after I was published, other editors would be eager for me to write for them. My first stop was the sports department, a small office situated near the press room. I had long been a huge baseball fan and Boston was the home of the Red Sox, after all. The four male sportswriters were seated at their own small desks, clacking away at their typewriters, a teletype machine in the corner. I approached Ed, the sports editor, and asked if there was a chance I could cover some baseball games. I had no idea how outrageous this was until he and the others laughed. I felt my face flush.

“Sweetie, women don’t write about sports. Check with Dottie.”

Dottie was the editor for “Day”, aka, the women’s section. That was the last place I wanted to be. It was akin to being chained to a kitchen sink. I slunk out of the sports office and returned to the copykids’ cubicle, chided for my chutzpah.

With this road blocked, I began to question what it was I really wanted to do there. I didn’t know what was possible or, more to the point, impossible. Except for one rather snooty woman on the elite editorial board, all the journalists in that newsroom were men.

Along my newspaper delivery route, I had befriended a couple of the editors. Jim wrote about Latin America. Though I had a political science background, I knew nothing about that region and had no interest, but Jim was a comer. He looked to be in his 40s, already wizened. He had worked for many years in the newsroom at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch in the days when writers had flasks in their desks. Sadly, he was away on assignment most of the time so I didn't get to see him much. Christian Scientists neither smoked nor drank and were not fond of other milder stimulants like coffee or tea, either. I watched Jim lug his big cup of java to his desk every morning and knew this was a person I wanted to know better. He told me *sotto voce* stories about the wild times in St. Louis and we shared laughs about how restrictive this newsroom and religion were. I wished he had been there more often.

The other editor I pursued was Fred, the arts editor. I had been a film and TV reviewer for both the high school and college newspapers so we had a natural kinship. Fred was quiet and soft-spoken, as introverted as I was. We'd chat briefly about movies and plays. No conversation went on for long in the newsroom. I had the impression management frowned on this and I didn't want to rattle any cages. Not yet, anyway.

A week or so after my story about Douglas came out, Fred assigned me to write a review of “Ireland on Parade,” a traditional festive event held at Boston Garden. More than half of Boston seemed to be of Irish descent, so it was an important story. Fred gave me two tickets so I asked Steve, my copykid compatriot, if he wanted to go with me. We were not a romantic duo by any means, just casual friends. But we had spent time together, having gone to a Harvard football game together and he had taken me to a Neil Diamond concert. I had met his parents in Wellesley one Sunday afternoon for a picnic.

I took notes throughout the mediocre but spirited performance, aware the review needed to skew positive, lacking my customary snark, given the audience for which I was writing. As with the Douglas story, it came together in my head as Steve was driving me home. When I turned in the review the next morning, Fred declared this would be my first byline. Wow. I had been there just three weeks.

When I knew the first presses would start up for the local edition, I hurried to the noisy room to watch my first byline roll off the drums. It was thrilling. But when I subsequently read the review, someone on the copy desk had carelessly reversed a few of the clauses in the lede, making it nonsensical and difficult to read. I was disappointed and

embarrassed. Now, when I'd tell someone about it, I had to preface it with an apology and an explanation.

Still seeking engagement, I read in the paper that Ted Kennedy's campaign was looking for volunteers. Kennedy had been sidelined in a near-fatal plane crash and was running for another term in the Senate, as expected. The man on the other end of the phone asked how I might be able to contribute. I told him I was a writer for the Monitor and would be happy to work on a newsletter. He said we should discuss it over dinner. Jack was tall, dark and slick, far more sophisticated than anyone I had ever dated. I knew right off where he expected this to go. I warded him off that evening and informed him we'd best do business on the phone. Though it wasn't my first experience with lechery, I wondered if it would be possible to have a working relationship with a man without a quid pro quo. I did write a story or two but never got to meet Kennedy.

By now, I was well into the second month of my tenure in Boston. I still wandered every weekend and contemplated how I might get to a Red Sox game just across the Charles River. The season was drawing to a close. If I turned off the TV at night, I could hear the noise of the crowds. I was getting bored with Steve. We had little in common and had apparently

exhausted his conversational repertoire. I didn't want to take the relationship any further and I thought perhaps he did.

After the Boston Garden review was published, Fred asked if I would like to go for a drive the following Sunday. I had told him I wanted to see Hyannis and the Kennedy Compound. We headed off in the morning rain and parked as close as we could get. There was a children's playground just off the stately compound on the beach. We walked around almost in silence. There was a reverence to this place so dominated by tragedy and history. After lunch, Fred said he wanted to stop off at his place to pick something up for the coming week's work.

I wasn't attracted to Fred, though I enjoyed his company. I also knew he was married and that his wife was out of town. He was easily twice my age. When we got to his apartment, he turned to me and said,

"Aren't you worried I'll try to seduce you?"

Fred was such an asexual, neuter guy, I almost laughed. An unlikely candidate, I thought, and no threat. I wanted to be kind.

"I know you wouldn't do that," I responded.

"Why do you say that?" He looked hurt.

"Because you're a better man than that. You're married and a good Christian Scientist." I didn't know how Mrs. Eddy

felt about adultery, since she had been married three times herself, but I figured this might be a tactful way out of a potentially uncomfortable situation. After that afternoon, he didn't ask to spend time with me again.

Back in the newsroom, I approached Mel, the book reviewer. He agreed to let me have a go and handed me a book about John Howard Lawson, a Hollywood writer who had been blacklisted during the McCarthy Era. I hadn't written a book review since high school English classes, but I was eager to try anything to get experience. It was a ponderous work, a real slog, at least for me. I wrote the review and waited as several days passed. When Mel called me into his office, he had the review in front of him.

"I'm afraid this can't go. You've missed the whole point."

I was confused and embarrassed. How could that happen? I waited for him to continue.

"Sorry. Just can't use it."

"Okay. Can you tell me more? What can I do to make it better? What did I do wrong?"

"You just don't understand what you're writing about."

He turned away without further elaboration. I was too flummoxed to pursue it. I felt shamed, like I had failed but I didn't know why. Where had I missed "the point" and what was

it? I walked away, knowing I'd never get another chance with him. It was a major disappointment. Given my years as a film and TV reviewer for the college newspaper, I thought I'd be good at this. Reviewing would certainly have been a more exciting option than covering basic news stores, with a byline as a bonus. Now what?

I was still doing the Christian Science thing, going to church every Sunday and often to the Wednesday night testimonial meetings. The Mother Church was adjacent to the Publishing Society, a stunning architectural gem erected when the founder, Mary Baker Eddy, reigned over the kingdom. It was easy to get lost in that magnificent, cavernous sanctuary and I seldom saw anyone I knew. The Bowersocks had me over to dinner now and again but I hardly ever saw Debbie. I was trying so hard to fit in somewhere, with a church I found less than satisfying, with a job that was moving too slowly for my expectations, and even with a roommate with whom I had nothing in common. So much of my life had been gleaned from the movies and books, with all the juxtaposed cliches that would guarantee success. I was starting to question those rules and wondered if it might be possible to navigate a life outside them.

By now, I was into my third month and getting restless. I started picking up a can of beer at the local market on the way home to accompany my frozen dinner, and feeling increasingly out of synch with religious demands. I had hoped to find another iconoclast, someone with whom I could share my frustrations and observations, but there had been a dearth of significant interactions. I had questioned the Christian Science religion for several years prior to coming to Boston; these misgivings weren't new. I had long ago strayed from its prohibitions, even while continuing to associate myself with its overall comforting themes.

My experiences while at Cal had been intellectually and socially challenging, and I expected the course of my life would continue along that path. In Boston, though, I was frustrated by my inability to connect anywhere and contemplated resigning from the church. Its simplistic approach to solving problems no longer fit the unsettled person I was becoming.

During several weeks of contemplation, I corresponded with a close friend, an ex-boyfriend—and even with my mother. Her unhelpful, unsolicited advice was to “try and get along.” That wasn't the issue. I liked these people and I thought they liked me. This just wasn't a good fit. I wasn't

managing either the complexity of my situation or my anxiety about it.

I made a life-changing decision and submitted my resignation letter to the clerk of the church. I made it clear in my note that I wasn't quitting my job at the Monitor, just the church. I hoped I would be able to slog through the pedestrian assignments and over time find a more creative role there. A few days later, I was called into the clerk's office in the Publishing Society building. He looked grandfatherly, like a Norman Rockwell painting, perched behind an oversized desk likely constructed the same year he was born.

"Is it true you're resigning from the church?"

"Yes, it is."

"I can't believe this, young lady. May I ask why? Are you doing this of your own free will?"

I thought that was an odd question.

"I'm finding I have some major disagreements with some of the church's principles. And, yes, I made this decision myself."

"You're up-and-coming on the paper, I'm told. You know that, don't you?"

I was feeling nervous, sensing a stern lecture might be imminent. My mind flashed back to being sent to the principal's office in the fourth grade for shoving a classmate.

“You’re being very foolish. This has never happened. Do you understand that we require that all our employees be Christian Scientists?”

I hadn’t known that, and was genuinely shocked, as much by his patronizing words as by my naivete. The civil libertarian in me was immediately offended. The clerk paused, as if trying to figure out how to solve this unprecedented conundrum. It hadn’t occurred to me that my belief system (or lack of one) would affect my success as a writer. I assumed the only demand was that I be good.

“Well.” He pushed his chair back. “I’m going to meet with Mr. Canham and we’ll see what will be done.”

I had met legendary editor Erwin D. Canham only briefly the first day on the job. After that, I had seen him once or twice in the hall. So they were going to talk to each other to decide what to do with me, huh? I was beginning to feel like a problem child. A rebellious one.

By the time Canham summoned me late the next day, I was boiling. By then, I knew I would leave the newspaper, regardless of his decision. It seemed to me that the church had imperiously tied those two institutions together, leaving me with little choice. I was in high dudgeon, insulted without understanding all the reasons for it. How dare he? How dare they? What possible difference could it make if I were a church

member if I'm a good writer? Was this even legal? The unfairness of it rankled my youthful idealism. I knew I needed to make this decision myself, without waiting for this apparently troublesome verdict to be rendered. I had to make it okay with myself somehow. I walked into his enclosed office and sat down, trembling slightly. This man was a journalistic legend, after all, one about whom I had read in my journalism classes. I never imagined I'd be saying these words to him.

"Mr. Canham, I'm here to resign."

"I understand, Pam, but I wish you'd reconsider. You're a talented writer. You could have a career here. You're off to such a good start."

"Thanks for saying that. To be honest, Mr. Canham, the religious dues are too high. It's not about the paper. I very much appreciate the opportunities I've had here." He stood, shook my hand, smiled and wished me well.

I walked out of his office, feeling simultaneously triumphant and defeated. I knew I had blown perhaps my only opportunity to write for a major newspaper, something I thought I wanted. At the same time, it was the first time I had stood up for myself on principle but it wouldn't be the last. It took several more abbreviated jobs over the next few years before I figured out who I was and what mattered. It wasn't lost on me that this crisis had been controlled and manipulated

by men, either. Such was the way of the world, it seemed. This was only one of the simmering issues inside my brain that would take years to ferment into who I became. Finding the right professional fit for this iconoclast would prove to be a lengthy search, consuming much of the next decade.

The four months in Boston were dense and eventful, a bumpy ride on a steep learning curve. It seemed I was on a path toward journalistic success but I tripped over my own scruples. Confusion, loneliness and impatience likely informed my decision to leave but what I found was much more central to my identity than my occupational choice. Among other insights, I realized I wasn't comfortable with formal religion or dogma of any kind. I knew it was essential to develop ways to transcend a male-dominated society somehow. While I learned that life as a newspaper writer wasn't what I wanted, I had no idea of what would come next. At the time, there was no way to understand that those four months would be merely a rough draft of my emerging identity. Most importantly, I discovered that listening to my inner voice would always have to transcend the external trappings of success. It was a lot to digest at twenty-one.



Pam Munter has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram*, *Almost Famous*, *As Alone As I Want To Be*, and *Fading Fame: Women of a Certain Age in Hollywood*. She's a former clinical psychologist, performer, and film historian. Her essays, book reviews, and short stories have appeared in more than

150 publications. Her play, "Life Without" was nominated for Outstanding Original Writing by the Desert Theatre League and she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Pam has an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts, her sixth college degree.

Blood on the Stoop—Four Tales

by Evelyn Martinez

I

Fat maroon spatters cascaded from the second-story entrance of the Victorian house where I lived on 15th Street to the sidewalk, coalescing into a splashy blob at the front curb, almost dry and shockingly vivid against the grungy cement.

We lived one block from Notre Dame Grammar School. My guardian, Antonia, did not trust me to travel to and from school on my own. Class dismissed at 2:45 p.m., and I'd shoot out the door, out the gate, and into the beige 1953 Mercury double-parked out front. While the other girls sauntered out in chatty clumps, I'd be tripping over Antonia's sharp knees to slither into the back seat behind a grumpy Arturo Hill, her current husband. They were old. I was ashamed of them and of myself.

On that afternoon I skidded to a stop outside the school entrance, confused. Where were they?

I waited and waited. Something was wrong and I had no clue how to respond. Daring to walk home was risking Antonia's rage.

3:30 p.m. The last straggling student had rounded the

corner. What should I do? Home was just a block away. I took off running. Running like Antonia's friend Satan was after me. Panicked, almost sobbing, I arrived home to the maroon stain at the curb, more stains on the sidewalk, on the front steps, on the doorknob ... there was blood everywhere. The house silent, forbidding, desolate, I banged on the door. I cried. I yelled, "Mama! Arturo!"

I rang the first-floor tenants. No answer. I shuddered on the bloody stoop sensing a brutal assault, a death, my abandonment. I was thirteen years old, but I had lived a regimented life Antonia controlled and had no decision-making skills. Who could help me?

Sister Catherine Dolores, our principal—she'd know what to do. I ran back to school, tore into her office, and blurted out my frantic story. She took my hand and listened. Alarm flickered in her gray eyes.

My emergency contact list contained one name, Dr. Jorge Arguelles, a dentist in San Francisco. Antonia claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of a prominent Nicaraguan politician, the father of Dr. Arguelles. She called Jorge her brother. "Not true," he had once whispered to me. "Antonia is mistaken." Nevertheless he "went along" with her story.

Dr. Arguelles and his wife appeared within the hour. We swung by the house—empty, its bloodstains blurred by

darkness. They took me to their fancy home in Forest Hill and fed me a snack.

I had experienced their generosity previously, their gifts of beautiful books and art materials. On this evening they conversed quietly but nervously in the kitchen. I cringed under their curious pitying stare.

We knew what Antonia was capable of. I envisioned Arturo slashed to pieces in a knife attack and Antonia behind bars. The Arguelles' first call was to SFPD. They tracked her to SF General Emergency where she had been treated for severe cuts to the hands. She'd lost considerable blood but refused admission. Once they'd stitched her up, she'd ordered her husband to take her home.

We got back to the old Victorian just as Arturo was easing a wobbly, shrunken Antonia out of the Mercury. His face was pinched and sad. His hands shook. The tale that emerged was grisly, but true to Antonia form. The two had been battling. As usual she grabbed her always-handly butcher knife and went after him. Fleeing Antonia's crazed fury Arturo stumbled down the narrow stairwell to the front stoop. She caught him and attacked, jabbing at his face and chest—a scenario I was familiar with. But then he did something astonishing—he snatched the big knife out of her hand. Outraged, reckless, she seized it back with both hands,

blade up. Antonia and Arturo grappled. She would not surrender her knife even as it sliced deep into both upper palms, nearly severing the fingers. Arturo let go, horrified as blood spurted over the two of them.

From that day on Antonia and Arturo shared a quiet truce. He nursed her with a tenderness that astounded me and made me jealous. Antonia never regained full arrogant control of the household.

Her hands lost the strength to grasp a knife. Her desire to clutch me tight slipped away and she even allowed me to walk to and from school by myself.

II

Two years prior it had been my blood splattering the front stoop, my ride to the ER. Once I was past docile childhood and capable of both talking back and running fast, the fights between Antonia and me turned vicious, loud, and physical. That evening Antonia locked everyone in for the night. As usual, Arturo was confined to his tiny room, while she and I were secured within the front rooms of the flat. Our area consisted of a living room and bedroom separated by French-style glass doors.

The fight was a typical exchange of threats and demeaning insults. She'd yelled something about my being "la hija de la puta mas grande" and "una maldita, una ingrata." Storming out of the bedroom, she threw open the multi-paned door. I was at her heel cussing furiously back when she slammed it. Caught in the threshold I reared back, my left arm shielding my face. My arm shattered a glass pane and was slashed to the bone from wrist to mid forearm. I swooned at the gaping cut, the geyser of blood. Antonia grabbed a towel, wrapped my arm, and roused Arturo out of bed.

The closest ER was at Mary's Help Hospital a few blocks away.

Terrified, in shock, I barely heard Antonia concoct a story of innocent youthful rambunctiousness on my part. I did not contradict.

The stitching would be done under local anesthetic. As the masked and gowned surgeon approached, I started thrashing and yowling. Angrily he called out, "Hold her down!" They tried and I fought them. Then, gentle hands on my shoulders, a soft soothing male voice. It was a young doctor—an angel, I thought. He cradled my head and stroked my greasy hair. My body stilled and the testy surgeon finished his job. I spent the night at Mary's Help. It was nice to be in a clean gown in a clean bed in a peaceful place.

III

Knife fights were routine occurrences during my grammar school years. Antonia kept a rough assortment of men in the house—generally either on their way to prison or just released. I confess the distinction of having visited every state prison in California by the age of nine.

Antonia's men hung around the rear of the house drinking and smoking. They carried weapons, as did Antonia. She had a stash of knives, hatchets, lead pipes and at least one gun. She shared her arsenal with her male associates. The cops were frequent callers to our home—generally stomping through the front door while one or two of her friends climbed over the back fence and escaped via the neighbors' yard.

16th Street in the Mission—especially the blocks between Guerrero and South Van Ness were notorious drug- and alcohol-fueled sites of gang and personal warfare amidst a string of sleazy bars and liquor stores. Families and decent folks stayed away after sunset.

We once had a young guy staying at the house—late teens, early twenties. He'd scandalously become involved with the mother of the downstairs tenant. The tenant and his

wife were professionals working long hours and the tenant's grandmother had come to help with their kids. But she spent more time canoodling in Antonia's kitchen with our young guest—was she in her forties, fifties? One night this young guy succumbed to the temptations of 16th Street, left the house and Grandmother's arms.

Late that night piercing cries for help from the sidewalk yanked us out of our sleep.

Antonia and I ran to the front window. The boy was crawling up the stoop, one hand pressed to his left side, a stream of blood in his wake. Antonia flung our door open. I crept down the steps and found Grandmother in her nightgown kneeling on the cement, embracing the boy. Perhaps she had tried to drag him up the stairs. I crouched alongside not offering much help.

Meanwhile, Antonia flap-flapped down to the street in her ratty "chanclas" and surveyed it right and left. Assured that no one had followed the boy, she dashed back up to call an ambulance. She forgot about me. I watched, fascinated as Grandmother/lover tried to comfort the whimpering boy.

Something thick and ropy slid out of a jagged hole under his ribs. Grandmother squealed, "Que es eso?" Que te metieron?" She pulled on what looked like puffy rolled cotton trimmed in bright red, and he screamed. Peering closer,

“Hay—tus intestinos, mijo!” She quickly started shoving it back in.

Finally, the distant wail of a siren. Then a chorus of sirens. As the ambulance screeched around the corner, she kissed and soothed the boy now passed out in her arms. Antonia tromped downstairs briskly pushing men out her door, grabbed me by the arm, hauled me inside, and turned the bolt.

Stealing one last glance, I saw Grandmother clutching at the boy while her son pulled her towards their flat.

Cops were everywhere. The son—his English clear, precise: “We know nothing, officers. I have seen the young man in the neighborhood on occasion. Never talked to him.”

Antonia in broken, but highly indignant English: “Just a boy I helped out one time. He said his name was Juan. No, he doesn’t live here.”

He was taken to SF General Emergency. Grandmother visited him in the hospital. We heard he survived and was deported. Grandmother’s son sent her back to Nicaragua. The tenants divorced and moved out after a series of nasty scenes. I watched their two small kids being packed off somewhere. They looked lost and miserable, a feeling I knew too well.

IV

The bland faced Victorian on 15th Street thrived as a gang-related war bunker while Antonia lived and maintained health and cash. We who survived there were all battle-scarred, without mercy in our hearts. The most notorious incident—earning a shocking front page headline along with mention of our address—occurred on a Friday night in winter, on my ninth birthday.

Antonia and Arturo picked me up after school and we headed for Victoria Bakery in North Beach to buy my “special” birthday cake (actually Antonia’s favorite), rum with thick white icing. Pink green swirls and pastel rosettes wished me, “Happy Birthday, Abelina.”

Then we rushed home to tidy up the living room. Antonia had invited some of the neighborhood kids and their moms. I was dreading the whole thing and the crinkly too-big dress she’d bought me for the party.

The house, as always, was full of her men friends drinking and carousing in the kitchen and on the back porch. She ordered them to settle down and shut the kitchen door. Then she locked Arturo in his room. The party was a mild disaster. The few invited kids and I stared at one another. Nobody enjoyed the cake except Antonia. Loud rude laughter burst out of the kitchen. The parents looked at one another

and hustled their kids home.

There we sat with most of a melting lopsided cake. I wrestled out of the hated dress and jumped under the covers with a book, grateful to be alone and confined to the front rooms. Antonia joined her men in the kitchen in the back of the house. I must have fallen asleep. Sirens wove through my dreams—an odd but familiar lullaby. My lullaby got wildly insistent and I jarred awake. The strident wails were converging on our street. Yet again, cops bashing open the front door. Followed by yelling, stomping up the stairs, the back porch door slamming open and shut. More thumping down the back stairs. Heavy boots running down the hall and out the back.

“Stop, you are under arrest. Stop or we’ll shoot.” I heard a crash in the backyard. Peeping out the side bedroom window overlooking the neighbors’ yard, I saw a man straddling the fence. He was quickly dragged down by half a dozen uniformed cops with drawn guns. The walls shook as they wrestled him down the hall, down the stairs, and out the entryway. I ran to the front window and recognized one of Antonia’s men, handcuffed and flung into the back seat of a squad car. Other cops stuck around talking to Antonia. There was no sign of the other men. Her English was extra poor that night, her voice deferential. “I know nothing.” “No se nada.”

She shook her head. She shrugged dramatically.

It made the headlines on all three newspapers—Chronicle, Examiner, and Call-Bulletin. “Man Shoots and Kills Wife in Front of Six Children.” And the crime-scene photo—shocking, lurid. A small flat on Capp Street. A bleak, narrow, untidy room, a door framing tunnel-like darkness beyond. Two tousled beds on each side of the room. Five or six dark-haired children caught by the camera lens—a wide-eyed toddler in draggy diapers, small half-dressed bodies huddling on the cots, clinging to the walls. By the far door a girl about my age pressed against the threshold, eyes downward. On the linoleum floor, from behind the right bed frame sprawled two bare legs, one foot in a “chancla.” The edge of a flowered skirt peeked out. The rest vanished into the shadows.

The body on the floor was the mother of the children, shot to death by her estranged husband who gave his current address as our flat. After a night of drinking he had decided to “have a talk” with his wife, stopping to pick up a gun along the way. The wife became “unreasonable.” Enraged, he shot her to death in front of their children and fled back to our house. Back to 15th Street where he and Antonia were working out a plan when the cops showed up.

I was mortified—and still stunned—at school on Monday. The nuns were extra kind and patient with me that

week. Antonia admitted without remorse that she had lent him her revolver: “Didn’t think he would do something crazy. But that wife of his was a whore, and probably had it coming to her. Too bad about the kids.” That’s all she had to say.

Arturo, for once, expressed concerns about how his pension funds were being spent. Antonia may have listened. Fewer men came round the house. The murderer was sent to San Quentin. Antonia and I went to see him once or twice. He was released after a few years and headed to our house, but didn’t stick around. I don’t know what became of those orphaned children.

The rest of the blood stains on the plain-faced 15th Street Victorian—a victim in its own right—fell in drabs, dribbles, and smears. The house witnessed suffering—bludgeoned mice, impaled canaries, tortured chameleons, neglected dogs, cats, bunnies and turtles, aborted fetuses, abused humans. Much of it simply categorized as collateral damage in the ongoing war that was Antonia.

I have been drawn back to the house periodically. One day I encountered a young woman coming down the front stairs as I gaped at the dingy shingled facade. I blurted, “I grew up in that house” and joked about it being haunted. Neither of us laughed. She lived on the second floor—where the worst mayhem was enacted. Certain rooms felt

oppressive, indeed haunted, she said. People refused to share the flat for more than a few months. She and her new roommate were trying to exorcise these brooding restless spirits, but they were tenacious. The young woman invited me up. I had last been inside that house thirty-three years previously. It could not hurt me. My body grew heavy and my gut twisted as she led me up those familiar grim stairs into the old bedroom, and to the closet that opens up into the attic. Malevolence and its unleashed anguish slammed into me. I knew that what the young women sensed was real. But I was useless to help and wished them luck as I fled down the steps and into the sun-washed street.

Epilogue

The house I grew up in was a two-story dour Victorian with faded tan shingles in San Francisco's Mission District. My current home is a Hollywood-style bungalow painted a delectable orange sherbet with raspberry trim. It is a half a block from Ocean Beach in San Francisco. I was a helpless prisoner within the walls of my childhood house. I am a free individual within my home. I leave and return as I please.

The Victorian on 15th Street had seven rooms—high-ceilinged, narrow, with stained enamel walls. Its dusty,

cluttered rooms had sharp, shadowy corners and lined a bleak hallway. The door to each room had two locks—a latch and a deadbolt. Doors remained shut and locked at all times.

Shabby nylon curtains drooped over the few tall, dirt-streaked windows. Delightfully, the back porch boasted the one large west-facing window in the house. I savored rare moments on that porch soaking in late afternoon sun and sky. My childhood house was bordered by cement cracked, chipped, and devoid of the tiniest green weed.

My home by the ocean is one wide, flowing, light-infused space with no staircases. The only locked doors lead to the outside world, to be opened at my discretion. My back wall is no wall but a series of windows that gaze upon and open into my garden. My front and back yards are lush with blooming succulents and flowering bushes.

Wood, shingles, and plaster do not utter words, but they remember. And if walls could talk? Might not the battered old Victorian groan and splinter into shivery fragments of misdeed and sorrow? My home by the ocean speaks softly, openly of peaceful things.



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Eye of the Beholder

by David Raney

Call me male-ish. According to cultural assumptions, men are supposed to like guns, but I'm not really a gun guy. As a boy I wheedled a BB gun for Christmas with the solemn vow not to shoot birds, which I did at the first opportunity. "You'll shoot your eye out" runs the refrain from the movie *Christmas Story*, and at least I didn't do that. But I shot out a bird's. Stalking the wild sparrow in our back yard, I missed innumerable times before chance brought down a luckless thing from our birch tree, a bead of blood vividly welling where its eye had been. I stood over it dumbfounded until a rap at the picture window startled me and I saw my brother pointing in the dramatic full-body pose we now refer to as *J'Accuse!* before running off to find my mother and bring down justice. It didn't surprise me when I later read that the last wild passenger pigeon, out of billions darkening pre-1900 American skies, was killed in Ohio by a boy with a BB gun.

Men are fascinated by cars, too, I'm told, and football and fixing things, and we're competitive sexbots, comparing conquests and notching headboards. I don't really qualify as "manly" on those counts either, though I can be adolescently competitive in the sports I care about. But testosterone levels

aside, here's my question: Is it possible to connect with people first as humans, and only afterward as men and women? Unless we've taken monastic vows, we interact with each other all day, at work and play and school, shopping, dating. But sometimes it seems less interacting than circling: shy, cocky, avid, wary, desperate for attention, wishing we were invisible.

I've been interested in this *terra incognita* for the better part of my life, as we all have, but lately I've been thinking about a certain backwater of the territory that used to be called wolf whistling or catcalling, and now in our less poetic times is referred to as "street harassment." Consigned by cliché to certain neighborhoods, particularly to wharves and construction sites, it's been treated for generations as a behavioral imperative issued with the sailor suit and hardhat.

Is it a behavioral imperative though? Whether sexual attitudes and behavior owe more to biology or culture, a debate that's far from over, this isn't 1965 after all. Surely gross misogyny is on the wane, like smoking, if only from the pressure of broad social disapproval. Even the word "catcalling" sounds like a *Mad Men* plot point. But it hasn't gone away, of course, as half-open eyes and ears will tell you.

I react to women, and if I were homosexual, I'd react to men. That's a biological imperative, not a behavioral one. No

one, I think, wants us to stop noticing each other. I just don't react like the wolf in *Red Hot Riding Hood*. I've never offered a public assessment of a woman's body or suggested to a stranger what a fool she'd be not to avail herself of my outsized charms. This makes me a paragon of nothing, as I don't imagine my friends do it either. I know my father didn't. In any case, who does it is less interesting to me than why, and what it feels like. So I started asking women.

The problem was how to approach someone at a bus stop or coffee shop without sounding like the saddest pickup artist ever. ("Scuse me, just wondering, do guys hit on you all the time?") But I wanted to hear from more than friends or the internet — where, as you'd expect, treatments range from intellectual to comic to incendiary — so at the risk of being slapped or simply ignored, I ask.

What works best, after establishing that I'm a writer, is to ask women if they've lived somewhere else and noticed any differences in catcalling. I realize this begs the question, but no one has ever corrected me. Precisely zero women said they'd never been whistled at or otherwise harassed in public. My unscientific survey suggests it happens nearly everywhere, to pretty much all women, regardless of age, attire or weather.

Researchers have done some work in this field, though I was surprised to find how little of that research occurred until recently. The CDC reported in 2010 that worldwide seventy to ninety-nine percent of women experienced “non-contact unwanted sexual experiences.” In a 2008 study by StopStreetHarassment.com, nearly ninety percent of women said they’d experienced harassment by age nineteen, almost a quarter by age twelve. *Twelve*. Americans, incidentally, have no special claim on this ugly street theater: in one study more than eighty percent of women in both Egypt and Canada reported harassment, and in Yemen, where women typically go about modestly dressed or veiled, the figure is over ninety percent.

The women who have been kind enough to talk to me about their own experiences confirm these findings, as well as the appalling range of misbehavior that can accompany the hooting, whistling, and verbal vivisection. One woman was biking along a country road between grocery store and home when a man pulled up next to her, masturbating, then turned around and drove past again, clearly enjoying her fear. The women with whom I’ve spoken say this sort of thing started when they were eleven, twelve, fourteen, describing plenty of “Hey babys” and all manner of unwanted advances. One woman wrote, “It’s hard to explain how invasive it feels. I’ve

had my entire house robbed twice, and it doesn't even approach that hit-and-run feeling. It makes you wary; you shut down."

Men, none of this will be news to your friend, girlfriend, daughter, sister, wife. But it was to me, and the more I listened, the more troubling it got. "Strangely enough," one woman told me, "The college towns I grew up in were the worst, whereas during five years in Philadelphia, I can only recall one stray comment yelled from a car." Others spoke differently of Philly, Atlanta, Chicago and every other city I heard about, with two women saying the opposite about college towns.

I've spent a good part of my life in university settings, and I think the reason I haven't seen much of the cat or wolf isn't that everyone's so proper; I just haven't seen it. I'm not the recipient, for one thing, but apparently, I'm also oblivious. As I spoke with women, I was shocked at how ubiquitous such harassment is on campuses where I've worked. One woman told me she was repeatedly harassed by a university security guard; another filed a report on campus workers for leering at undergraduates. And it isn't only nineteen-year-olds in shorts; a middle-aged woman told me she'd been catcalled near the school while walking in the rain in a bulky raincoat, oversized hat, and umbrella: "I might as well have been wearing a tent."

And then there's frat-boy behavior, an example being the section of Brown's campus that a woman told me she avoided because it was known for rows of guys holding score cards, like Olympic judges, as women walked by.

I'm not alone in my density. The discussion "How common is catcalling?" on the site Democratic Underground begins with a woman's six-month diary of strangers leering, making passes, and offering offensive comments regardless of weather or dress. A sympathetic reader commented, "Being male, this is not in the realm of my experience—neither as a receiver or a perp. Though I have witnessed catcalling of women on the street, it's not all that common in my neighborhood." Possibly, but I'm willing to bet it's more common than his experience would suggest.

What we dismiss in our density is the recognition that such behavior fosters fear in women. Not only are catcalls demeaning, reducing the individual and complete woman to a fraction of herself as a sexual object, when men leer and make suggestive comments, they see women only through male eyes. Few men have experienced how frequently unwanted advances escalate. Women are rightfully afraid of being pawed, stalked, or attacked, however innocuous men might find the leer or whistle. "Almost all women have a defensive strategy for walking alone," writes Jamie Golden in "Why Just

Telling Men No Doesn't Necessarily Work," but "almost no men do." This seems to be true across cultures. "A young woman likes to feel attractive," one woman told me, "but I think women of all ages feel that implicit threat of physical peril, always."

Many men, I'm sure, would regard the fear induced by unwanted advances as ludicrous. Most women, I'm equally sure, would find it commonplace. Two women in a single week of October 2015 were murdered after refusing to talk or give their phone number to a man. One was in Detroit, at a funeral of all things, the other on a street in Queens. Margaret Atwood writes that she once asked a male friend why men feel threatened by women. He told her, "They're afraid women will laugh at them." She asked a group of women the same question and they said, "We're afraid of being killed."

The wolf's defense is typically to claim that a whistle or call is a compliment. Deep down women like it; why the fuss? Innumerable articles and blog posts argue against this, their titles sufficient: "No, Dudes, It's Not Flattering"; "Your Catcalls Are Not a Compliment. *Ever*." Even *Playboy* weighed in with a flowchart called "Dudes, It's Not Flattering", which concludes that precisely two circumstances make catcalling acceptable: "1) You've consensually agreed to

shout sexually suggestive comments to each other in public;
2) She is literally a cat.”

Yet in 2014 *New York Post* writer Doree Lewak caused a stir with an article titled “Hey ladies! Catcalls are flattering! Deal with it” in which she maintains that she loves all the attention from construction crews: “I’ll never forget my first time... I was over the moon.... The mystique and machismo of manly construction workers have always made my heart beat a little faster—and made my sashay a little saucier. It’s as primal as it gets.”

Never mind that, as Lauren Bans noted in *GQ*, Lewak’s editorial “reads like a drunk Carrie Bradshaw after a partial lobotomy.” The point Lewak chooses to ignore is that she’s decided to be pleased by a situation that might turn to violence, and frequently does. It’s not everyone’s option to disregard that fact, nor her place to instruct them how to feel.

This is why when male celebrities complain of being objectified (Robert Redford: “People have been so busy relating to how I look, it’s a miracle I didn’t become a self-conscious blob of protoplasm”), it’s possible to think they’re sincere without accepting that they really know what they’re talking about. Any fear they associate with the experience involves being professionally trivialized, not made to hate half of humanity for the rest of your life.

It's why I'll never really know what I'm talking about, either. In my only example of trading perspectives, I was biking one day and stopped for a water break. A van of teenagers rolled by, and one girl leaned out the window and whooped something about my butt in bike shorts, pretending to be enthused for the benefit of the guy driving and, I'm sure, for her own amusement. It wasn't about me—any male fifteen to fifty would have served—and there was no physical threat. But it didn't feel great, because that's what objectification is: being rendered interchangeable, a category.

The other reflexive defense of this behavior is that it's timeless, ineradicable, it's in our DNA. You hear this from men interviewed in the street, including one who let this drop (along with my jaw) in a video: "I understand, you know—I have five sisters. But it's just, like, a societal thing. It's the way things roll." To appeal to someone's mother or sister might seem a foolproof way to humanize the encounter. (Would you want someone to talk to your *daughter* that way?) But isn't that also objectifying, to say a woman is worthy of respect because she's somebody's something?

The behavior is certainly old, so I guess the excuses have to be. References to whistling at women date to at least 200 B.C., when the Roman playwright Plautus mentions a young woman who, "when she passes through the streets, all

the men would look at her, leer, nod and wink and whistle." He has a father say this to his son, creepily enough, about a slave girl they both covet. But old isn't the same as natural—and what does that matter anyway? We tamp down or prohibit all kinds of things that are arguably natural. Evolutionarily speaking, indiscriminate rape is an efficient way to spread one's genes. Civilized people don't practice it. And there's the slippery slope problem: assaults and rape are worse than whistling, but are they categorically different or just on a continuum? If whistling is hard-wired, as some would have it, and thus a cousin of "real" violence, wouldn't rape be just as hard to eradicate, just as exempt from the attempt?

I hope not, because I enjoy connecting with people, not objects or opposites. Maybe I'm fooling myself and a sexual agenda lurks under all our veneers. But maybe not. I like giving directions to strangers, though I'm awful at it, and I even like seeing other people do it—both looking the same direction, arms outstretched like an invitation to dance. And I like eyes. While I can't look at the world through someone else's, I can look into them, and what I see there often saddens me.

Girls are taught early not to talk to strange men, not to make eye contact. That's what I see in women's eyes when they're alone. Asked what she does to protect herself from

street harassment, a woman in Jessica Williams's *Late Show* segment on catcalling replies, "My normal response is to put on my bitch face." The other women nod. I pass them on the sidewalk, morning and evening, walking and running, in suits and dresses and gym clothes. Their eyes say *I've heard it before, asshole, or Go ahead and look—I'm not even here.*

Those expressions aren't haughty, just defensive or middle-distance vacant, born of long practice deflecting all the muttered invitations and "Damn, girls." Instead of thinking about the spring air or a project at work or a drink with friends, she's spending mental energy sorting men into a box (guys, jerks) like the one she's been in since middle school (tits, ass). Wouldn't it be nice to imagine a brighter world to breathe in, one where our fleeting chance of connection didn't come so freighted with fear?

I'll never know exactly what another person thinks or feels. I'm not even sure how well I understand myself. But half a life later, I know what that sparrow saw.



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Flotsam

by Fabrizia Faustinella

The sky was darkening, crowded by black, ominous clouds blown by a forceful wind. Dust and leaves swirled in the air, waiting for the rain to ground them again. I could feel and smell the humidity from the Gulf. I almost could smell the sea. I certainly could hear the loud shrieks of the seagulls and saw several picking up trash in the desolated parking lot of the grocery store. The horizon was a brilliant crimson, spectacular and eerie. Was the sun setting in a large pool of blood? *Why do I think such stupid things? Vivid imagination or cognitive distortion? Forget it. I'd better hurry up.* The storm was coming.

I loaded the groceries in the trunk of the car and I drove away. Traffic was light. It felt strange to see the entire road ahead of me, almost deserted. I didn't want to be the only one out there when the storm hit and I tried to speed up a little. Nobody was waiting for me at home, and I wanted to get back before dark. I forgot to leave the lights on when I left, and I didn't look forward to the darkness of the driveway and backyard.

I had to stop at a red light. As the lid of a garbage container blew away in the wind, plastic bags, paper cups,

empty cans, and all kind of debris were sent flying and skittering across the ground. Farther ahead, on the sidewalk, I saw a man in a wheelchair, alone. He struggled to move forward. He was one of the many homeless people who roam the streets of our city. It's hard enough to be homeless, but to be homeless and stuck in a wheelchair, how much harder can that get?

The traffic light turned green. I drove ahead and past him. The man was hunched over, face down, trying to negotiate the uneven sidewalk. The wheelchair was loaded with plastic bags overflowing with what were clearly all his worldly possessions.

I kept on driving while asking myself, *You are not going to leave this man stuck on the sidewalk with a big storm approaching, are you? Of course not.* So I drove ahead until I found a place where I could safely turn around. I went back and found him in the same spot, not having progressed one inch I parked, got out of the car, and approached him. "Hi, sir, can I help you? Where are you trying to go?" There wasn't much around, a hamburger joint, a gas station, a bus stop, and ...

"To that Luby's Cafeteria, up there," he said. "Could you find someone to push me?"

"Well, I'm here, sir. Nobody else is around. I don't mind

doing that.” The cafeteria was located on the top of a small hill. My city is totally flat and floods all the time. Maybe that’s why they built the cafeteria on an artificial hill. But now, what a challenge it would be to push a man in a wheelchair up there.

He was older, most likely mid-seventies, with curly, unkempt hair and a large black-and-gray beard. He wore paper scrubs, most likely given to him at the time of discharge from a local hospital. They were totally worn out, and the original blue color had faded away under layers of dirt and stains. He wore half-gloves, his fingers sticking out, revealing long, broken yellow nails. He had a strong smell of urine and old sweat. A roll of toilet paper had fallen out of one of the plastic bags, and I picked it up. The bags were on their last leg too, full of holes, ready to burst open at any time, their contents in serious jeopardy. Old food containers, boxes of crackers, diapers, bottles of water and soda, leaking and half empty, cups, plastic forks, pieces of paper with unreadable notes, and God only knows what else all crammed together and stuck to one another.

“I cannot believe I am in this situation and that I have to be pushed by a woman. I’m sorry, ma’am. This is not easy,” the man said as I was struggling to keep a straight path on the crooked sidewalk, which was littered with small branches

fallen from the oak trees during the previous storm mixed with paper and plastic debris, some floating in puddles of water.

The wind didn't help. It was adding weight and resistance to the wheelchair. I was concerned about engaging the uphill driveway of the cafeteria. *What if I couldn't push his weight uphill and lost control of the wheelchair? What if it crashed and injured this poor man?* I started thinking of all sorts of disastrous scenarios. When I got there, I pushed so very hard, summoning all my strength, my body at a forty-five-degree angle on the slope. Amidst some puffing and grunting, I finally got to the top. I guess all the gym visits and weight lifting had paid off. I seemed stronger than what I thought.

"I can't go inside, ma'am. My personal hygiene is very poor. I wouldn't dare go into a restaurant like this."

"I can go in. What would you like to eat?"

"I have a Luby's card, ma'am. Let me look for it."

"Don't worry about it. Save the card, sir. I can go in and get you something," I said with a slight urgency in my voice, as it was getting late.

"Don't rush me, please. You see, people are impatient. Don't rush me. I'll find the card." He pulled out three different wallets from various pockets of a black jacket. The wallets were bursting with receipts, business cards, pieces of paper meticulously folded, stickers, remnants of a life of struggles.

As he sorted through them, uttering words of dismay at not being able to find his precious Luby's card, he and became increasingly frustrated. I waited, suspended, wondering how long this would take, thinking of what to do, until I said in a calm, soothing voice, "Well, while you look for the card, why don't I go inside? Please, just tell me what you would like to eat and I'll be glad to get it for you."

"Rice and gravy, lima beans, and three cornbread muffins."

"What about some meat or fish?"

"No, that'll be enough. Rice and gravy, lima beans, and three cornbread muffins."

I insisted on getting something else as well, and he eventually asked for meat loaf, most likely one of the few meat preparations his poor dentition would have allowed him to eat, and a cup of ice.

I went inside. No line at the counter. I ordered the food. No meat loaf was available. I decided to get chicken. I hoped it was okay with him. I got the cup of ice, paid, and stepped outside.

"Here is the food, sir, but they didn't have meat loaf, so I got you chicken."

"That's okay, thank you. I'm sorry I was impatient with you. You're the only one who has helped me. We get so

frustrated by our predicament that we end up taking our frustration out on the people who are there for us. I also apologize to you for smelling so bad. I apologize for being in your presence in such a state of disrepair,” he said with shame in his voice, shaking his head, barely looking up at me. We heard laughter coming from inside the cafeteria.

“You see, people laugh, and they move on with their lives. They laugh and they’re busy and have no compassion. That’s why I stopped going to church a long time ago. I realized that people go to church and say they believe in God, but then they have no compassion. So what good does it do, going to church like that and having no compassion?”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Jimmy. My name is Jimmy.”

“Jimmy, how did you get in this situation?”

“I don’t want to talk about that now,” he said with pain and a hint of resentment in his voice, “but I ask the Lord: what have I done to deserve this? I have robbed no banks, I haven’t used no drugs, I haven’t stolen from people, I haven’t killed anybody, and here I am. Why am I being punished like this, Lord? Lord, help me! I’ve been a good man, help me!” He lowered his head even more, saliva drooling out of his mouth, dripping on the paper scrubs.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I’m sorry...”

“No need to be, sir. I am sorry for you. This is a terrible situation.”

“It sure is terrible, ma’am.”

I patted him on his shoulder. “Should I push you there?” I pointed at a sheltered place on the side of the cafeteria where he could eat and maybe spend the night.

“No,” he answered, “I’d like to stay here a little longer.”

“But, sir, how did you even get on that sidewalk?” I blurted out, bewildered that anybody could get around in his condition and manage to survive. “I mean, where are you coming from? Where were you before? I’ve never seen you on this side of town. Who are you?”

“Don’t worry about it. I am ... flotsam ... just flotsam.”

Flotsam? What did that mean? I’d never heard that word before. I didn’t know the meaning of it, but I didn’t dare ask.

It was definitely late now and dark, streetlamps casting an uncertain yellow light on the street. It was starting to rain. I said, “I’m going now. I’ll be thinking of you, Jimmy. I wish I could do more for you.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” he said.

I headed back to the car, my hair scrambled by the wind, raindrops falling on my face. I drove home. As expected, my backyard was very dark, but not as dark as my thoughts

and my heart. I opened the door, stepped inside, and felt guilt at the comfort of my home. I decided to burn a candle for Jimmy, but what good was that going to do? I did it anyway, still hoping the prayer would somehow help. Maybe it would help me more than Jimmy. It would help me to accept the intrinsic and inescapable unfairness of life, which no thought process has ever been able to reconcile in my mind.

Then I sat at the computer to search for the meaning of “flotsam.” This is what I found: 1. floating wreckage of a ship or its cargo; floating debris washed up by the tide; 2. a floating population as of emigrants or castaways; 3. miscellaneous or unimportant material.

Human flotsam. That’s what he thought of himself. The wreckage of a life, the product of a broken existence, fallen into pieces that could not be glued together any longer and made whole again.



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I Drive, Therefore I Am

by Dennis Vannatta

1.

I mustered out of the Army in Ft. Dix, New Jersey, in May of 1971 after spending thirteen months in what was then known as West Germany. I took a cab along with three other soldiers to the airport in Philadelphia. At a stoplight, the driver beside us revved his engine and when the light turned green peeled rubber for thirty feet. We GI's cheered. We knew we were back in America.

No, it wasn't the wide front lawns, the blue jeans and sneakers, not even the McDonald's and Dairy Queens that told us we were in America, it was the sound of that engine exploding next to us, the tires squealing like a live thing afire that nearly brought tears to our eyes. It was a sound we never heard in Europe.

I don't claim that other countries don't have their car cultures. In racing terms (except for the monotonous left-hand-turn version favored in the U.S.) Americans aren't the best drivers. That would be Europeans and South Americans. We don't make the best cars, either. That would be the Italians. But if we don't have the best drivers and the best cars, we certainly have the most drivers and the most cars. That's

because for us having a car is simply a part of existing; not having one—except in certain urban enclaves like Manhattan, if that qualifies as America—is virtually inconceivable. Many of the more liberal-minded of us shake our heads at those “You can take my gun when you pull it from my cold, dead fingers” signs, but change the “gun” to “car,” and we’d enthusiastically agree.

My father-in-law lived into his mid-nineties. In the last years of his life he suffered so from arthritis that he walked bent over at the waist at nearly a ninety-degree angle, yet he still insisted on driving. So too did my mother-in-law, with two bad knees and early-onset Alzheimer’s. Only after Hurricane Sandy destroyed their car did their son work up the courage to refuse to buy them a new one or let them drive his. They were outraged, bitter. For years afterward, when my wife called to chat, they’d inevitably rage at being carless. Even today my mother-in-law, unable to remember that she has grandchildren, does remember that she’s not allowed to drive and is still outraged, bitter.

My son has been telling me for years, “Pop, when you stop being safe behind the wheel, I’m taking the keys away.” He’ll say it jokingly, and I’ll laugh. Still, I understand that he’s preparing the ground for the inevitable. When that happens, I’ll be outraged, bitter. There may be life after driving, but I’m

not sure I want any part of it.

One of my earliest memories is of a nightmare involving a car. I must have been three or four. While my parents worked, I was babysat by Mrs. Pierce, a woman in the little town where we lived. In the dream my mother or father has come to pick me up. Our gray car rolls slowly up the gravel driveway toward the house. Just past a huge tree, it suddenly turns over. I run out and peer through the jutting frame stripped of fenders and sides, at my parent, dead.

Decades later, my mother, in her seventies by then, finally retired from her job as a bookkeeper. She was reminiscing about her very first job away from home, as my father's secretary in the school system where he was superintendent. She'd always felt a little guilty, she told me, because she'd stayed home to raise my two older sisters, but when I was little my father talked her into going to work "just long enough to help buy a new car," a 1950 Chevrolet. She never did like that car, a boring gray.

I didn't tell her that she needn't feel guilty, that I'd had my revenge: I'd killed her off in my dream. In fact, though, I'm not certain which parent I killed off because my memory doesn't furnish the identity of the driver lying dead in the car. The only thing I can see clearly in the dream is that brand-new

car reduced to ripped upholstery and steel bars and posts jutting this way and that. What a waste of a perfectly good automobile.

With that start I should have hated cars, I suppose, but the opposite was the case. Of actual cars in my early years, I have only good memories.

One was of standing beside my father on the bench-seat as he drove. No car seats then, no seatbelts. Dangerous? You bet. Did I enjoy it? You bet. I can almost feel my skinny little three-year-old body pressed up against his massive shoulder as he gripped the wheel.

When I was not much older than that, he'd occasionally let me sit in his lap and pretend to steer. Then came steering for real. Dangerous? I didn't worry about it. He was my father. I was immune to all dangers.

My mother drove, too, but most of my childhood car memories involve my father. He wasn't much of an outdoorsman, but once a year or so he'd take me hunting or fishing. Hunting for us was loading the .22 Browning and driving down country roads trying to scare up jackrabbits. When one would come up out of a ditch and run down the road in front of us, I'd lean out of the driver's side window and blaze away with the .22. I never hit one, but who cares? What

a thrill. And what a ride!

Fishing with my dad was an even greater joy because we'd "camp out." At the end of a day's fishing, we'd crawl in the car—I in the back seat and he somehow squeezed in around the steering wheel in front, all 6'1" and 230 pounds of him—and sleep the sleep of the just. Well, at least I slept.

Our cars got a real workout because my father had a wanderlust—mostly, I suspect, to escape the stress of his job. It didn't make much difference where we went as long as we went somewhere. It was a rare Sunday that we didn't drive a half hour or more to visit my aunt and uncle in Windsor or my grandmother and aunt in Clinton or two sets of aunts and uncles out in the boondocks down a dirt road so narrow I'd reach out the back window and strip leaves from bushes and low-hanging limbs.

On the rare occasions when there was no one to visit, we'd take drives out into the countryside or down to Springfield for dinner at Grace's or up to Kansas City to eat at The Forum. One Sunday my dad announced, "I've never set my feet on Iowa soil." And off we went. From our home in central Missouri, Iowa would have been at least a three-hour drive. We set out driving north, ate lunch in Chillicothe, got back in the car and drove on until we saw the WELCOME TO IOWA sign. My father drove just far enough past the sign to

find a safe place to pull off the road. He shut the engine off; he and I got out and walked around the car once and got back in and headed home. We had set our feet on Iowa soil.

The Iowa trek wasn't anything unusual for us. On the spur of the moment, we'd jump in the car on a Friday afternoon and drive to Lawton, Oklahoma, to visit my sister or to Chicago to visit my other sister or to Hot Springs, Arkansas, just for the fun of it.

And it was fun. I'd gaze out the window daydreaming of some grand adventure, look at the cars (at night I could identify all makes of cars just by their taillights), and when I got tired, lie down in the back seat and sleep.

Yes, my childhood was spent rollin' down the road.

2.

The passage from childhood to something approaching maturity involves many rites, but for a boy of my generation (I wouldn't presume to speak for girls), more important than shaving for the first time or drinking your first beer, more important even than initiation into the sexual mysteries was getting your driver's license.

Like many rites of passage, it could be painful. I don't recall much about actually learning to drive other than my father teaching me, but I do vividly remember taking the

driver's test. Unless you were lucky enough to turn sixteen in the summer, you had to check out of school and go down to the courthouse for the written test (a breeze) and then driving portion of the test. The latter was administered by a scowling, teenage-boy-hating, brute of a highway patrolman. My hands were shaking so badly I could hardly grip the steering wheel. I approached the first intersection. The view was unobstructed both ways. No cars were coming. I slowed just slightly and then proceeded on across. The trooper let out a screech like he'd been stabbed in the back with an icepick and seemed to be trying to climb out the window. "Didn't you see that yield sign!?" he bellowed. The only thing that saved me from total annihilation was being smart enough not to defend my miserable self. "Sorry, sir, sorry," I said, hanging my head. The parallel parking portion of the test went equally well. After I failed to park in the allotted space on the first attempt, he said with withering scorn, "Forget it."

When we got back to the starting point, he sat scowling down at his notes and shaking his head. Finally, he handed me my test score: 70, the lowest passing mark. Lowest be damned, I'd passed! All was right with the world. (Failure would have meant something much worse than merely having to take the test again. I would have had to return to school, check back in, walk into class with all eyes on me, my so-

called friends desperately hoping I'd failed so they could laugh themselves silly and make my life miserable from that day forward. I would have had to move to a different state.)

Then came the fun part: driving.

Of course, it helped to have a car. In those days only well-to-do parents bought their children cars, and neither I nor any of my friends were lucky in that regard. We had to make do with borrowing the family car (none of us came from two-car families), and that didn't happen as often as we wanted, not by a hell of a long shot. Consequently, when the keys were (very reluctantly) given to us, driving was a real thrill. Whoever was fortunate enough to get the car would pick the rest of the guys up, and off we'd go. There wasn't much for teenagers to do in my hometown, so unless there happened to be a sporting event at the high school or a movie we really wanted to see, all we'd do was drive around and around and around. "Taking the drag," we called it. I can still drive every block of it in my mind's eye: from our homes on the east side of town, we'd first drive downtown, up and around and back down the main street, on out west to Limit, then generally a stop at Dog 'n Suds for a root beer and fries and some ogling of the girls, then back downtown and around and do it all again. And again. And again. It was our Stations of the Cross, and in its

own way sacred.

Ron was the first of my friends to earn enough money at his after-school job to buy a car, a '54 Mercury convertible. In reality it was a piece of junk, but he thought it was great, and in fact so did I. It was in that car that I first “parked” with a girl. If we steamed the windows up, it was less from anything erotic than from the three teenage couples crammed together. Six hormone-stoked teenagers put out a lot of heat. Still, I’d had my arm around a girl. I’d kissed her. That was a very big deal, and it was all thanks to Ron’s car.

We friends were scholars and athletes, not Romeo’s. Parking with girls was a rare event for us. What we did far more frequently was “birddogging”—driving down country roads at night looking for couples parking so we could flash our lights, honk, and holler helpful instructions as we passed by. Hey hey, we were cool!

Another thing we liked to do was drag race on some lonely stretch of road outside of town or, even more frequently, take off driving faster and faster, see what the “top end” of our car was—and what the top end of our courage was. My courage wasn’t that great. I wasn’t brave enough to admit that it scared the hell out of me when the speedometer passed 100 on a narrow, dark, curvy blacktop. It was my best friend, Bill,

who one night had enough and demanded that the driver pull over and let him out. He'd walk home. Bill always had more sense than the rest of us.

We eventually matured enough to realize that cars weren't for our amusement only but could be useful in other ways.

My choice of which college to attend was determined by a car. My parents told me they'd pay for the higher tuition, plus room and board, at the University of Missouri, or they'd buy me a new car in which I'd commute to nearby Central Missouri State College. I was a huge Missouri fan ("Bully for old Mizzou, rah rah rah!"), but come on, you kidding me? I became a CMSC Fighting Mule and the proud owner of an emerald green '64 Volkswagen.

My father died midway through my sophomore year, and after that I paid my way through college working at the local newspaper, driving a pickup and delivering paper bundles to the carriers. On Sunday mornings I'd go to work at 2:30 a.m., deliver bundles and do other odd jobs, and then at 9:00 clock out or, more often, take papers to some carrier in one of the nearby towns who'd gotten short-changed on his normal delivery. By 9:00 o'clock, all I wanted was bed. I've never been one of those drivers who can drive all night without

worrying about falling asleep at the wheel. If I get sleepy, I fall asleep. I tried various stratagems to stay awake driving. Turning the radio up all the way and singing along wasn't much help. Rolling the window down and sticking my head out was better, but only for a time. The best method was steering with my knees, the concentration required keeping me awake. Did I slow down while doing it? Nope. That would be cheating. Was I a danger to myself and others on the road? Of course! But I was safer driving with my knees than driving asleep. (I'm still pretty good at it.)

I survived those Sunday morning treks but did have other mishaps. The very first time I parked the pickup in the company garage, I took off the mirror on the right side. Another time, backing down the alley toward the chute out of which the paper bundles came, I knocked down the custodian and made the 6:00 o'clock news. Slow news day, obviously. The police came looking for me again after I threw free advertising circulars to houses in Warrensburg. The object of this task, from my point of view, was to finish as quickly as possible so that I could put my feet up on some gas station parking lot and drink a Coke and eat a candy bar on the company clock. To this end I'd drive down the middle of the street, steering with my right hand and with my other flinging circulars to houses on the left and over the cab to houses on

the right. On this particular day I must have failed to take the wind drift into consideration because half the circulars wound up in the middle of the street. The Warrensburg fuzz were not amused. Neither were my bosses at the newspaper, who paid my fine for littering. My pals thought it was pretty funny, though. In fact, so did I. Still do.

I was drafted in 1969 and spent two years as an MP in the Army, first at West Point (glorified campus cop), then West Germany (tower guard at a weapons depot). Although I was in my early twenties, I consider the military essentially an extension of my youth. Basic training resembled nothing so much as the hell of football two-a-days, and permanent duty was like college in that lots of really boring stuff was involved, but weekends with the guys could be a lot of fun.

I was very popular at West Point because I was one of the few guys there with a car.¹ I was well taken care of. At a really cool place called The Creamery (a dairy barn converted into a nightspot) outside Poughkeepsie, I got memorably

¹ Cadets were forbidden to have cars until the last semester of their senior years. It was a special delight for us MPs to lie in wait for a Cadet driving even one mile an hour over the speed limit, for which transgression we'd ticket the miscreant, and he'd have his driving privileges revoked for the remainder of the year. We also liked to patrol in areas where Cadets were wont to park with their girls. We'd shine flashlights on the couples and bang on the windows, an exercise in nostalgia for me, a "birddogger" from way back.

drunk and passed out, woke up back at the barracks embracing the porcelain. My friends had taken my keys, laid me gently in the back seat, and chauffeured me home. Alas, they drew the line at cleaning up the puke I spewed all over the back seat of the car. See, just like college.

I did make one huge mistake at West Point. All new personnel of my low rank had to take a test to get a license to drive a truck. I passed with the highest mark of anyone taking it. Was I proud? Nope, I was *stupid*. All it meant was that during my off hours I'd be called upon to drive work details in a deuce-and-a-half, a busload to the theater to watch some asinine training film, what have you.

The same situation arose after I was transferred to Germany. But I'd wised up. This time I didn't even pass the written portion of the test.

Indeed, Germany is significant in my driving life largely in negatives: that is, for thirteen months I was never behind the wheel of a vehicle. The only time I was in a car was when we hitchhiked, which was rarely. Mostly, we traveled by train. Positively un-American.²

² It's interesting to compare the German autobahn and the American interstate highway system. Both were constructed for the purpose of quickly transporting troops in time of war. Today, the autobahn is just one of several ways to get from one place to another. Public transportation (buses and trains) are a convenient and affordable way to travel there and throughout much of Europe.

3.

I mustered out of the Army in May, 1971, and the following fall began grad school at the University of Missouri—yes, the school I'd spurned out of high school in favor of CMSC and a new car.

I shared an apartment with Ron, my buddy from the neighborhood, he of the Mercury convertible. He was entering law school. It was the first time either of us had had his own place. I'd lived at home and then had Uncle Sam in loco parentis (and I don't mean that facetiously). Ron had commuted with me to CMSC until a traffic accident his junior year. Coming back at night from an American Legion game, his friend took what was intended to be a shortcut through a construction zone and went off an embankment. The other three in the car had scratches and bruises. Ron, riding shotgun, had a broken back. He's spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. The U. of Missouri at that time was the most completely wheelchair-accessible school in the country, so Ron transferred there and stayed in the dorm for handicapped students—until, that is, we two wild and crazy guys agreed to share an apartment.

Not so in the U.S. where the interstate system soon metastasized until it effectively killed off public transportation in all but a few, mostly eastern and urban, locales.

Our first official act was, of course, to throw a party. We had the booze, we had plenty of male friends, we did not have the women. Ron's sister, an entering freshman, was browbeaten into inviting girls from her dorm. One, a tall blond from New York City, didn't have a ride. I drove over to pick her up. We walked from her dorm to the parking lot. "It's the little blue car," I said. She took off toward a dynamite TR-6. "No, it's the Karman Ghia. The one with the dents all over it." For some reason we both thought that was funny. We were married two years later.

I'd never tell Ron that I'm grateful for his car wreck, but the likelihood is that I would never have met my future wife without it. Wife, children, grandchildren. I would have had a life anyway, true, but it would have been a different life, and I wouldn't trade mine for any other.

I've had car-related highlights in this second half of my life, as I think of my maturity: teaching my children to drive; surprising them with their first cars; the unforecast snowstorm that trapped my wife at work, my son and I driving up and down impossibly slick streets to bring her home, the normally twenty-minute trip taking over three hours; The King of All Lemons Chevy Celebrity in the shop twelve times the first year we owned it; on and on. All pretty ho-hum, just part of the

normal routine of life.

That's exactly my point, though. Throughout my life, driving has been not just something that I occasionally do but something I am. I'm a driver; I can hardly think of myself as living without it. An old man now, I can understand my mother- and father-in-law, their rage at having their car keys taken away. But I can also understand their son taking them. They had no business behind the wheel of a car.

I can't kid myself. Physically, I'm not as good a driver as I once was. My reflexes aren't as good. I don't see as well at night. I can't park straight in a parking space anymore. What I think is straight I'll see when I get out of the car is absurdly off parallel. What's up with that? A brain tumor or something? I mentioned it to a couple of my old-man friends, and they both confessed that they had the same problem.

I tell myself that my acknowledging my physical deficiencies has made me a better, more careful driver, but I'm not as certain of this as I'd like to be. I am more careful, true, but only when I think about it. One of the things that begins to go as you get older is your powers of concentration.

I'd like to think I've got some good years left behind the wheel.³ Ten would be nice. I'd settle for ten. That would put

³ I've written, revised, and typed this memoir entirely while sitting in my car on a Burger King parking lot. My friends and family think it's funny that I do most

me in my mid-eighties. Everybody runs and hides when they see an eighty-year-old driving—or should.

It's been years since my son told me he was going to take the keys away from me if he saw me becoming a danger to myself or others. But you can bet he's keeping an eye on me.

When my time comes, I hope I can take it graciously. You can't live forever, after all. I'll do my best to go with dignity. I just won't go driving.



Dennis Vannatta has published creative nonfiction in *Shadowbox*, *Antioch Review*, *River Oak Review*, and elsewhere and fiction in *Boulevard*, *River Styxx*, *Pushcart XV*, and many other journals and anthologies.

of my writing at Burger King or, for a change of pace, McDonald's. Buy a Diet Coke and sit there for a couple of hours working. The noise doesn't bother me; indeed, I think I feed off being "out in the world," so to speak. Best is in the spring or fall when mild temperatures allow me to sit in my car. I enjoy the fresh air. I've been working on this particular piece during the coronavirus pandemic. Burger King is closed except for the drive-through lane. No problem. I bring a bottle of Diet Coke from home and sip and write, do a little reading if the inspiration fails me. It's the most relaxing time of day, here in my car.

Gardening with Mary: Rebirth of a Northside Garden

by Carolyn Bastick

*Dedicated to my beloved sons, Adam and
Harry*

Mary was the previous owner of my new Minneapolis home. I learned she had died that autumn, only sixty-nine, taken quickly by cancer. She was a gardener. An Army photographer. Her photograph filing cases (disappointingly empty) were to be left in the basement, too heavy to move. I was happy to allow them to remain in my keeping.

My move to this new home in 2017 was not planned. I was not supposed to be in Minnesota. The daughter of a British Army officer accustomed to the upheaval of military life, back in 1981 I had barely given a thought to the consequences of marrying an American and moving to the Twin Cities. Yet for over thirty-five years, I held England close to my heart, waiting for the day I could return.

And finally, it was time. As I prepared for this long-awaited repatriation, the father of my children assured me he approved of my departure. His doctor had declared him to be a veritable poster child for chemotherapy, surely, the ultimate positive prognosis. “Go to England, I’m fine!” he told me.

So, I went. With his perceived blessing. I did not understand then that his words were the hubris of a dying man. I had trusted him in this weighty matter because I had no choice. For to doubt him would be to accept the unacceptable—that my children would be left fatherless. That I would no longer simply be a divorced mother, but a single parent, with sole proprietorship of our boys as they stood poised on the brink of adulthood. Even after the divorce, we had raised our children collaboratively, equally involved in their lives. I could not imagine taking on this great responsibility alone.

Now, less than twenty-four months later, his death had brought me back to Minnesota in a rush. Even with my training, two transatlantic moves in as many years was brutal. A decision that had been in the making for over three decades was undone in a heartbeat. I deserted my partner and my English family to be close to my grieving sons. Insecure and isolated in this unfamiliar single parent role, I would need to create yet another American home. I would have one more northern garden to nurture.

My first foray into gardening came decades before after we bought a very special bungalow in Minneapolis in which to raise our family; a neglected 1917 Sear's kit house charmingly

called *The Ashmore*. Learning about its history and attempting to restore some of its grandeur rapidly became an obsession.

The Ashmore was built in the Craftsman style. It possessed an organic nature. Brown hues, low to the ground, a chimney and garage constructed of field stone. It sat nestled in its urban lot begging to be surrounded by beauty. I believe it was the blandness of *The Ashmore's* landscaping that spurred me on to take the plunge. Move that hosta. Dig out the soulless rows of shrubs, eradicate the plastic edging and weed control mesh. Make inroads into the lawn. I never looked back.

Americans, in my experience, hold this charming belief that if you are English and you create a garden that is pleasing to the eye, it is due solely to your heritage that it grows as it does. As if gardening is in the English DNA. I wish it were so!

Everything I know about gardening I have learned in Minnesota. Through trial and error and an unhesitating approach to moving plants. During my brief tenure in England, finally in a climate where I could grow year-round, I struggled in every respect. The garden centers, replete with their expansive gift shops and tea rooms, displayed rows and rows of sumptuously eye-watering plants and shrubs. I recognized virtually none of them. The English universally use botanical

plant names. Common names, when applied, are frequently entirely different than those used in the States.

It took me months to understand that there was a reason why local retailers only offered a few varieties of daylily (my favorite plant.) I discovered to my horror that without being able to depend upon extended periods of hot weather, they were unreliable bloomers. One of my greatest joys starting in early summer is to rise at first light and see which of my lovelies have opened overnight. I greet them like old friends, exclaim at their beauty, then deadhead their spent compadres. Extraordinarily therapeutic, I could hardly bear the idea that this ritual was not going to be available to me in my long-awaited English garden.

And while hosta love the English climate, so do slugs and snails. They would decimate complete plants overnight. Eventually, I just gave up on another of my once-dependable garden companions.

The old adage "the grass is always greener on the other side" could not have been more apt!

So, on a bitterly cold January day when I found myself viewing what was to become my next home, the garden not at all apparent under the snow and ice, my heavy heart was lifted by a single thought: I can once again garden like a Minnesotan!

Mine was the sole offer despite a strong seller's market, the discounted asking price, and that the property sat directly across from Folwell Park. Observed from the right angle, you could believe the park was an extension of the garden. I found this irresistible. It was as if this place had been waiting just for me. Because I desperately needed somewhere to call my own. Because I could see beyond the aching sad shabbiness of this 1925 bungalow. Because I am a gardener.

My new home was located in north Minneapolis. When I first moved to the Twin Cities, I learned to navigate this foreign land thusly: North was bad. *Always*. South was good. *Always*. West was affluent suburbia where I could ride horses. East was the direction of travel required to get to our twin, St. Paul.

I bucked the system early and moved into neighborhoods that alarmed everyone within my newly-acquired social circle. I made money every time I sold a house. Gentrification was my friend. You will hear gunshots every night said a young cop I consulted prior to making my latest home-buying decision. I went ahead with the purchase anyway; gunfire was no match for my track record.

He was right. Calling 911 has become integral to my lifestyle. In the beginning, I called often out of sheer disbelief

at the crimes and various wrongs unfolding in front of my white privileged eyes. Now, I am more likely to call out of anger and outrage. I have developed a set of 911-worthy standards. If drug dealers are selling to adults, moving on quickly, I am inclined to give them a pass. But the guy terrifyingly tearing down the street on the illegal 4-wheeler turns me into a crazy woman, and on principle I pick up my phone.

I confess that, sometimes, I have left it to others to react when gunshots stutter out in the middle of the night. I worry that I will fall prey to the complacency and cynicism that infects many of my neighbors. Fear and distrust of local law enforcement is deeply rooted here on the Northside. I am almost relieved when another event triggers the now-familiar heady cocktail of fear, fury, and desire to right a wrong and I reach for that phone.

It was a wimpy winter by Minnesota standards. The snow was gone by March and the thaw revealed the true extent of the neglect that I had inherited. Like the Sear's kit house, it was clear I was going to have to engage in a little digging and destruction to rejuvenate Mary's little house. Yards and yards of odd little retaining walls, now tipping over in all directions, had to be removed. As did the business end of an ancient washing line that was serving as

a bird feeder rack. A non-functioning Narnia light was randomly placed where I could envision a flower bed.

Then I waited.

Spring stampedes into Minnesota—a wonder to behold if you have lived through one of these winters. Even after gardening here for over two decades, I am amazed that anything survives the depth of the deep freeze. Yet once all danger of snow has passed, in a matter of weeks everything is covered in a haze of green. You become adept at identifying plants (and weeds) from the barest tuft of growth, the blessed relief and thrill when your beloved bits and pieces show signs of life.

But even as you are welcoming the return of your garden, Mother Nature is whispering in your ear ... *Hurry, hurry! Waste not a minute. Come November, the snow will fly.* All you hope to achieve must be accomplished in Minnesota's short-lived growing season. Gardening in the Upper Midwest is an intense experience. For me, a powerful driving force.

That first spring, I confess I was especially excited as I waited to see Mary's garden. Mary was a gardener. Everyone told me so. In the meantime, I found some of her treasures scattered throughout the beds, stored in the garage and basement, many of them not to my taste. In the past, I would

have rehoused these items. Yet now I did not. A pink Dollar Store kneeler has proved to be invaluable. A cracked garbage can is perfect for weeding as it tips neatly inside the requisite paper lawn bags. And buried deep under layers of decaying leaves I came across a stepping stone, orange and black koi swimming around its edges. It lives next to a newly-dug pond, much safer than the real thing who would almost certainly become midnight snacks for marauding raccoons.

This was the start of a fresh approach to making a garden. There were budgeting constraints. What could I recycle, re-purpose? To re-use Mary's leftovers in unexpected ways seemed both practical and respectful. It gave me permission to be more relaxed as I set about building something livable and lovely. My world had been turned upside down, the perfect time to break through those self-imposed creative barriers.

By May, I had a better feel for the garden itself. Frankly, I was disappointed.

There was much evidence that no-one had been picking up the litter that is endemic to the north side of Minneapolis. The primary bed was not full of whimsical plantings as the jaunty brick edging might suggest. Just some very ordinary hosta and phlox, a wire Easter egg basket thrown in for good measure. And a carpet of weeds and

saplings from the street maples. The allium, though plentiful and most welcome in the spring, were jammed up against the back wall, their early-season impact lost in the shadow of the building. The "nice hedge" (so described by the uninspired Realtor selling the house) was pruned to within an inch of its life. In contrast, the one mature tree, a messy ash, was gasping for a trim, more dead than alive.

In front, a lonely hydrangea was parked in full sun on the edge of the inexplicably lumpy lawn, where it would attract the attention of local dogs and be bumped and bruised by pedestrians rounding the corner. I didn't understand how it could still be alive given its harsh positioning.

I tend to focus my attention on my more private backyard. But it was here, at the intersection of two less-than-desirable streets in North Minneapolis, that I unearthed where Mary had created her *pièce de résistance*. A single bed. A bed that would accumulate snow, salt and sand delivered by the city plows. That would suffer the most from accidental foot traffic. That would collect the worst of Folwell's trash. That would from time to time be driven over by cars under the influence of their reckless or impaired owners.

Nothing made sense. I could see the love that Mary had put into this one bed, but I struggled at first to comprehend why she might have selected this particular space for what

appeared to be her primary gardening effort. Where was the work of the great gardener?

But then I reminded myself that Mary was sick. Perhaps she was too tired to tend to more than this small plot. Could this also have been a mark of defiance on her part? To demonstrate that you can create and sustain beauty anywhere? Even at a crossroad that far too often bears witness to human drama and chaos. Frequently loud. Occasionally violent.

Did she choose to cultivate here because, near the end, it took her out into the world and provided an opportunity to greet her neighbors? Have a natter. Observe the action on the street, good and bad. And hear how passersby appreciated her endeavors. "*I love your flowers!*" A beep of the horn, a smile and thumbs up from a total stranger. Because, I've learned, this is what happens when you are tending Mary's garden.

I have come to view this garden as a miracle of sorts. It has yielded many beautiful surprises and helped me become deeply connected with this sometime challenging neighborhood. Has sustained me through another difficult adjustment as an expat. It is our curse to forever be leaving precious people. This part never gets any easier. My gardens

have always eased the pain. Have enabled me to create a sense of place when I was starting again.

It has been while tending Mary's flower bed that I have experienced the most uplifting of encounters. The most humbling, like the freely-given hugs from the little girls that catch the bus on my corner or the young boy who has blessed me with his inquisitive friendship, somehow rising above the mayhem of his cramped and noisy household where a man was shot and killed shortly before I arrived. For months, I naively assumed the deflated balloons hanging sadly from the tree on the curb were left over from a kid's birthday celebration. Another neighbor unexpectedly pulled up his shirt to show me the tattooed landscape of his back: tigers, eagles, and flowers. Another nature lover. Our mutual love of the natural world couldn't stop the jolt I felt when I spied the .44 Magnum tucked into his waist band. I marvel at the way a flower or visiting butterfly ensnares complete strangers in conversation about the wonders of our planet.

Something that seems unique to Northside living is how on the bleakest of days, when life on this street seems unutterably hard, someone will express gratitude for the beauty of my garden, and instantly the world is put to rights.

There is much need in this community, and I have been graced with many random opportunities to give to others. I

have developed a reputation. I have scoured the ground for spent shells outside my window in the wake of gun-wielding truant teenagers fleeing from an unidentified assailant. I bullied the City into installing a four-way stop sign at my corner and shamed the Park Board into giving our neglected park the love it had so long deserved. This place has provided me with a job when I thought I had none.

I had been absolutely determined to transplant the poorly-placed hydrangea that first year, quite prepared to take the risk that it wouldn't live through such a move. But thankfully I ran out of time and energy. Because it is a stunner. Starting to bloom in June, it goes on and on, the blossoms spectacular and deliciously fragrant.

The hardy hydrangea is not alone in thriving where it should not. Hosta have been treated likewise, planted in full sun in thin soil, and in their resilience, they have spread through chinks in the brick edging, lending a delightfully haphazard effect to the planting.

I have never had a garden that attracts so many birds. The garden grows, seemingly, unbidden. Even the hosta self-seed. The allium planted under the overhangs of the roof get virtually no moisture. Yet when I dig them up, they reappear. A mystery rose has popped up in the same barren spot.

Diminutive balloon flowers appear hither and thither in a stone-dry bed where I was sure nothing could flourish. It was here also that I found what I at first believed to be some sickly daylilies of the '*Stella de Oro*' variety. I am not a fan of the color or the ever-blooming concept and dumped them unceremoniously in Mary's boulevard. This daylily is in fact a gorgeous creamy yellow. And tiny. Like the balloon flowers. Another near miss!

Mary's planting decisions seemed to defy gardening logic. There can be no other explanation: these plants bloom for Mary.

I have of course put my own stamp on the most recent of my northern gardens. I have planted many trees, some donated by public schemes seeking to reforest North Minneapolis following the devastation of the 2011 tornado. I have switched things up and further developed Mary's riotous color scheme, just as I have made use of many of Mary's curiosities.

I gladly accept donations from friends and neighbors with which to fill my growing garden and am thankful for these living gifts. This is a marked departure from my former strict gardening self that would have turned down the likes of the previously-scorned *Stella de Oro* and the near-neon orange lillium, beautifully brash, that now brighten Mary's bed. These

were a contribution from the .44 Magnum owner. These plants are tough, easy keepers, perfect for that dangerous boulevard.

As I dig and change, I have uncovered 20th century trash: Broken bottles, china shards, hardware, a tiny Cinderella slipper. I cherish this glimpse into the generations that called this corner home before my time. Before Mary's time. I save the best pieces and wonder about their owners. And when the day comes that I must leave here, they will accompany me on my travels. In memoriam.

I continue to hear that Mary was quite the gardener. She was very kind, generous, trusting. Maybe too trusting it has been suggested. Sometimes Mary was a little, well, eccentric: compulsively mowing the lumpy lawn, trimming that hedge. I am always grateful for these insights into the woman whose passing made my Northside life possible. And very often those who knew her ask the question: where is Mary now? I have to explain that Mary is gone. This has been an altogether unexpected responsibility. I observe their faces, see the shock and sadness, the little expressions of discomfort that they should have known. Mary was their neighbor.

How can this happen? Because this is Minnesota. The first frost drives us into a frenzy of preparation for the long cold months ahead. Then we hunker down for the winter. Children are conceived. People marry. Move away. Get sick. And die. In the spring, we venture outside and catch up. Quickly. For in just a few short months, the snow will fly.

Afterword

I have recently looked up Mary's obituary. I had resisted taking this step for fear that I would learn something that wouldn't mesh with how I understood her. Instead, I discovered a deeper connection. Mary was the sister of a man that I had worked alongside for a number of years. My former co-workers had attended Mary's funeral.

Importantly, I learned that my sense of Mary was not misplaced. She was a volunteer teacher's assistant, loved children, was passionate about the arts. She was pretty.

I have come to feel an affinity and an affection for Mary. There is much we have shared beyond the plants that survived her. Ours is a story of two gardeners. And their Northside garden.

"There is something magical in sophisticating the elements into something livable, something human. It is as if you are building your own heart."—Harry Jensen, December 2018



Carolyn Bastick, British by birth and a naturalized American, was born in Hong Kong into a British Army generational family, survived the eccentricities and lack-luster education provided by the English boarding school system (a memoir she fully intends to write one day), and spent much of her adult life as an expat living in the States, raising a family, and working in the compliance world. She is a lapsed horsewoman and passionate self-taught gardener and has recently re-patriated to England, where she is happily self-isolating with her fiancé in their large and unruly garden—finally learning how to be an English gardener.

Leaving

by Judy Lev

I have been making mud bricks with tourists six times a week. The tourists—Jews, Christians and Hindus, young and old, believers and atheists—dirty their hands in a batter of straw, water and mud, while imagining, with my encouragement, Egyptian slavery. After Brick-building 101 I lead each group to a shaded overlook with a table covered with branches of hyssop. From there, the tourists see the modest gray-green hyssop bushes hugging the gray limestone rocks of Neot Kedumim, The Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel. “Take a sprig of hyssop,” I say, quoting Moses in chapter twelve, verse twenty-two of the *Book of Exodus*, “and dip it in the blood that is in the basin.”

Each tourist picks up a sprig of hyssop and dips it in the plastic cup on the table filled with red food coloring.

“Take the hyssop and touch the lintel and the two side posts of your door,” I continue, and ask them to paint with the hyssop, its fuzzy little absorbent gray-green leaves as paintbrush, the wooden beam of the overlook. Thus, hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors at Neot Kedumim relive the night God, dressed as the Angel of Death, passed over the houses of the Children of Israel during His mission to

smite only the Egyptians. I enjoy this hands-on activity that makes the experience of leaving Egyptian slavery come to life. Doing it six times a week lifts my self-esteem from the gutter.

On the night of deliverance, 1998, my family is celebrating Passover at home with close friends. The smell of homemade chicken soup fills the house with memories of my Hungarian grandmother and her hard *kneidlach*. My *kneidlach* are soft, made from an Osem mix. Miriam helped me make the *charoset* yesterday, using my mother's recipe. Just as the apple, walnut and sweet wine concoction symbolizes the mortar that bound the bricks made by the Israelite slaves, so 3,200 years later our *charoset* binds one generation to the next.

My husband leads the Seder. He commands from one end of the oblong folding table and I sit opposite him, close to the kitchen. His Kiddush, sung in a strong voice as usual, does not disappoint. After the Kiddush, my husband tells everyone to stand up and place one hand on the Seder Plate. At the count of three, eleven Jews raise the Seder plate over the middle of the table as though it were a large parchment. While elevating it so, it elevates us into the realm of mythic meal. Together we sing *Ha Lachma*, Behold the Matza. "This is the

bread our ancestors ate as slaves in Egypt. In the past we were slaves, next year we will be free.”

My husband tells us to lower the plate and sit down. He instructs us all to sing The Four Questions, since the youngest child present is fifteen. The Four Questions are actually one with four answers: *Why is this night different from all other nights?* By the end of the fourth answer, despite my love for some of the people around the table and my delight that we as a family are hosting a Seder, another question intrudes: Why do I stay with my in-house Pharaoh?

For years I have been writing a story in my head called “Pine.” In the story my husband and I get into the family car, he commanding the driver’s seat and me passively travelling in the passenger’s seat. We are going for a hike in the woods. After thirty minutes of driving in silence he turns off the motor, stopping the car before we reach the trail. *Get out*, he says, and I do. Then he gets out and starts walking towards the trail. I follow him. He turns around and asks me why I am following him. *I thought we were taking a walk together*, I say. *Suit yourself*, he says, and continues walking ahead of me. We walk on the trail for ten minutes in silence until we come to a clearing and he says, *Stand against that pine tree, your back to the tree*. I do as I’m told, believing that one day he will love

me if I obey. He walks away, then turns around to face me. This is the beginning of the story I have been afraid to transcribe.

After The Four Questions my husband invites everyone to read a part of the Haggadah. I am relieved he is being inclusive. One recurring phrase from the text derails my focus from the rest. Over and over we are told that God took the Children of Israel out of Egypt *with a strong hand and an outstretched arm*.

The first time we went on a date, my future husband walked to the driver's seat of my VW bug and stretched his arm over the car, his meaty cupped hand facing heaven. I loved this gesture. After his putting his hand on my head during *Bonnie and Clyde*, this second gesture cinched my decision to marry him. I needed someone to take control, because I was twenty-four and afraid I might sleep with hordes of men for the rest of my life and never have children, a family, Friday night dinners with candles, Kiddush, challah, the works. This man was perfect for me: handsome like an idealized 1950's kibbutznik, emotionally withdrawn and controlling with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. We

shared the same immigrant status and spoke English. He could save me from myself, or so I thought in 1970.

It's time for the meal now. I serve the gefilte fish, kneidlach soup, roast chicken, tzimmes, green beans and salad. Before dessert we whiz through the second part of the Haggadah. Our goal is to get to the songs before everyone's too tired to sing. After "Next Year in Jerusalem," I serve an almond cake made with twelve egg whites and suggest a change. "Let's sing 'Chad Gadya' first." This is the last song in the Haggadah, a playful Aramaic song about killing. Israeli singer Chava Alberstein has turned the song into a political protest with dark insistent beats. I especially like her last verse:

I changed myself this year.
Once I was a lamb and a quiet kid.
Today I am an insatiable wolf.
I have been a dove and a gazelle.
Today I don't know who I am.

She asks, "How long will the circle of hate/terror continue?"

My husband's eyes fill with yellow wrath when I suggest a change. *He* is in charge of the Seder. How dare I interfere and make a request. Who are you, he glares? A disobedient dog? A naughty two-year-old? "Who asked you?"

Everyone at the table looks at each other with embarrassed silence.

By now, in the late 1990s, I have become familiar with several sayings from the Talmud that deal with *malbin panim*, a concept that literally means making a person turn white. These aphorisms address the issue of insulting or belittling a person in public. One is: "He who insults or belittles a person in public, it is as if he has shed that person's blood." Since shedding blood is a euphemism for killing, insulting a person in public is placed on the same level as murder. Another saying goes: "Better a man throw himself into a blazing furnace than insult a friend in public."

After my husband's attack, I feel small and ashamed. These are familiar feelings, for this is not the first time he has attacked me in public. But something on this night *is* different from all other nights. As I survey the stunned faces of my friends and family around the table, I understand what is different: This is the last time I will be insulted.

I am leaving Egypt.

In the story that unwinds in my head, after I'm standing with my back against the tree, my husband takes out his small black gun from the back of his jeans, near his right hip. He points it at me; I hold my breath. *Please don't shoot*, I plead. He shoots—click—aiming at my head. Nothing comes out but a limp plastic sound. He shoots again—click—aiming at my chest. He continues shooting, aiming at my waist—click—my pelvis—click—knees and feet. Click. Click. Click. When he finishes playing this game, he puts the gun back into his pants, turns around and strolls to the car. I exhale a sigh of relief that the marital terror is not lethal, walk away from the pine and slide into the passenger's seat. As we drive home in silence, I know I must unfasten my grip on inane hope, as well as its twin—fear of separation.

Tonight, when my husband insults me in front of our family and friends, I do not throw Elijah's full cup of wine in his face or flip the table over. I do not shout at him to leave the house, to get out of my life, to leave me alone, to leave, leave, leave. I am not a demonstrative woman and I avoid making scenes, other than those with Rachel and Ya'akov at the cistern. Rather, I let my own emotional pain simmer inside. I knead it and intellectualize it until the kneading and

intellectualizing make me crazy and helpless. Alone, I cry on my pillow and then write a poem.

Tonight, though, I do not writhe in emotional pain. The part of me that for so many years needed to feel abused and abandoned, emotionally ignored as I had been as a child, that part which I once thought was all of me, but was not, that part which was still a slave to longing for some romantic unconditional mother love, withered. After twenty-six years of marriage, it is dead.

My husband can continue shooting words and glances at me like bullets, but he can no longer paralyze me from acting. Like the Children of Israel, I am free to leave. I am no longer guilty of being a survivor, no longer a slave to my old ways.

Tonight, I see options. I can walk away from pining. I can take myself out of this cruel, debilitating, belittling game. My choice is to let go or suffocate. All this I realize as our guests sing *Adir Hu, God of Might, God of Right, who will build His house soon and quickly, soon and in our own day.*

Three days after the Seder, I announce to my husband that I am leaving. He protests. Let him. He refuses to leave, so I will take the step. He thinks I am still locked into our silent sick pact of not abandoning each other, but I am free. He calls

me at work and makes promises, agrees to mediation, to even move his beloved TV to the back room so it won't dominate our lives, but I have made up my mind. I recall the woman I met in the corner grocery store who I hadn't seen in years. She was sixty-five and looked younger and chipper than ever. When I asked her what had happened that made her so happy and youthful—Diet? Exercise? Love?—she said, “I left my husband.”

In June I find a three-room rental apartment a three-minute walk from our home. It will be available August first. I am not leaving my children, I tell myself in order to act. I am just moving across the street. There I will find *sheket nafshi*, peace of mind. After twenty-six years of living in my husband's long shadow I am emotionally spent. The children can live with me if they want. They are over sixteen and can decide for themselves.

I tell my husband this is not a divorce. The family will still meet at the family home for Friday night dinners, I announce, insistent and deluded. (Years later, Miriam will tell me, “You might as well have moved to Tennessee. You left your children.”)

On August first, in a suffocating dry heat, I move into the apartment across the street, taking only my clothes and a

paper cut my mother gave my husband and me for our first anniversary. Around the perimeter of the paper cut of an old man looking to heaven is a translation from Psalm 137: *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*

From my apartment across the street from my children, reading these words as I lie alone on my Simmons Hide-A-Bed, I think about the punishment for forgetting my past: The writing hand decaying, the tongue stuck, unable to form speech. A lockdown of communication.

I will not let that happen to me. I will not forget my past, but I *will* re-envision it. I will take control and not allow it to control me forever. For, even after only three days of peace of mind, every bone in my body understands that the Angel of Death can be the cruel messenger for a new life.

Judy Lev, originally from Cleveland, OH, lives and writes in Haifa, Israel. After earning a BA from the University of Michigan in 1967, she moved to Jerusalem. Her writing has appeared in *Consequence Magazine*, *Kenyon Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Creative Nonfiction* and *Michigan Quarterly Review*, among other journals and college textbooks. *Brain, Child* nominated her for a Pushcart Prize in 2013. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Goucher College and an MA in fiction from The Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in

Creative Writing at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. “Leaving” is a chapter from her unpublished memoir, *Our Names Do Not Appear*.

Stone City

by Kymberli Hagelberg

A pack of young cousins crowded into the back of the yellow brick chapel. We were hovering behind the last pew near the stained-glass doors, all of us itching to move on to something more interesting. Indoor services take longer, but I was grateful not to have to stand outside. A cold drizzle that bounced off acres of tombstones beyond the chapel doors would have spotted the suede coat I loved to show off and flattened my carefully blow-dried hair.

That's what I recall about the service for Uncle Bob, my mother's eldest brother: my teenage vanity, the green pears on the buffet table at the wake afterwards, and the bottle of gin a cousin commandeered for us when one of the aunties looked away.

Most of my family end up in the lush sections of Maple Grove, a centuries old graveyard that is among the earliest established public places in the Western Reserve. What remains of us lies along funerary roads landmarked by ponds and weeping angels among housewives, factory workers, a freed slave couple we learned about in Ohio History class, and a Gilded Age songbird.

For me, it's more than the place of history and loss. Family business and family duty run together on these streets. Maple Grove is where I saw my father work, scrubbing granite markers with acid that left his knuckles raw. He checked newly poured concrete slabs to make sure the bubble on his level fell just so while I sat swinging my feet on the flip-down gate of our Rambler station wagon.

Installing foundations and getting markers set upon them before families bring flowers to the cemetery for Memorial Day is the tombstone business version of the Christmas Rush. People often begin with flush markers that rest so snugly in the ground you might not see them at all if the grass is high. Sometimes they come with a little hole in the middle for a bouquet. My dad used to sell these to people who didn't have much money, sand blasting off the old names of families who went bigger later on.

People do. They move up from flush to slant to the big, two-part monuments with the granite bases like the one my parents have, one side carved with just the family name. Monuments have to be set on concrete so they don't go crooked with time and weather. The big ones call for substantial planting—sunny marigolds, jewel-toned coleus

that spread to fill the empty spaces when blooming perennials are spent and trailing vinca that carry on through first frost.

As my father worked to prepare graves for grieving families, my mother remembered our dead. Before my fingers were long enough to wrap around a hand trowel, I would plant family graves with my mother, her sisters and my older sister. Sorting through the bedding plants, I heard bawdy jokes and betrayed family secrets. We dug memories back to life and then left them to bloom in the dirt. The reward was a girls' lunch at the end of the afternoon where they sipped Tom Collinses. My mother always gave me a straw half filled with her cocktail and the cherry.

My father, my mother, her parents, one of her children, a peck of aunts and cousins and three of seven siblings were eventually scattered across the tree-lined streets of the stone city at the edge of my hometown.

Gravesites are anchors in our world of grief, graveside services the buoys of obligation to which pain is tethered until it finally washes out, leaving memories worthy of flowers and stories. That day in the chapel without a grave to harbor our loss cursed me to wander the Maple Grove without resolution for most of my mid-20s.

I had lost Uncle Bob.

He was somewhere in the ragged new section of mostly unmarked plots. I hunted for him in the floodplain where slimy mud splattered my calves and pulled my heels out of threadbare sneakers. I searched through overgrown arborvitae and rhododendron at the fence line.

It seems like it rained every year.

I pictured him hiding and laughing.

I've missed only a handful of the annual visits in decades. The year after my dad died my mother couldn't face the tombstone she watched him design. Instead we planted green onions and daffodils in a long line next to the walkway on the side of our house. I was nine. When they started to grow, she took me upstairs to show me that she could look down from their bedroom window to see the yellow flowers and green shoots popping up, but she never slept there again.

Numb from the loss of her when I was nineteen, my self-exile lasted a season. My sister went out to plant with my aunts and shamed me.

"They're not getting younger, either," she said. "You'll want this time back."

*

The nine years that separated my sister and I made her equally my Hector, my idol, and my obstacle, but we grew into grown women friends during those plantings. Then she, who always had a grand way of driving home a point, died before her fiftieth birthday. I overspend for her—plantain lilies, coral bells and a swanky black mulch border. I scrub her pink granite heart the way I was taught.

I bought Uncle Bob's marker right before I turned thirty, finally locating his unmarked grave in historical society records. The marker was made by one of my dad's old competitors. A sample model, but no previous owner, just wide enough for his full name and the dates of his birth and death. I planted blue petunias and silver ragwort at one of the corners a week before Memorial Day, still mindful of the deadline.

My uncle was a neat, small man who wore a bow tie with his striped uniform shirt every day that he pumped gas at the Standard Oil across the street from my house. Uncle Bob appeared for lunch most days that I was in elementary school along with his sister, my Aunt Tootie, who worked as a secretary at an auto parts store uptown. We all ate whatever my mother cooked and drank small glass bottles of fizzing

Sprite and Coke he brought from the gas station vending machine.

Robert preferred his full name. Aunt Tootie, maker of his favorite green pears, hated her full name, Ethel Mariah. She was the oldest girl, the one we had to be especially well-behaved around. I remember her giving me sticks of Doublemint gum after lunch, but only if I didn't ask for the treat.

At our table, the three of them seemed like giddy survivors. Six of the seven brothers and sisters were born in a tiny house on Chestnut Street with an outhouse in the back and chickens in the front. My aunt worked full time at a rubber factory and turned over almost every dime to my grandparents. By the time she was a teenager, the money she kept for herself was just enough for a carton of cigarettes and a new tube of lipstick. Chesterfields with bright red rings around the unfiltered ends piled in an ashtray were lifelong proof that Aunt Tootie had been around. When they all still lived together, my grandmother would send Uncle Bob to pick out a chicken and hack off its head for dinner. From the day he was old enough to work outside the house, my mother said he wore a starched collared shirt, no matter the job, never again to be mistaken for someone dressed for chicken killing.

Aunt Tootie planted the graves with my mother for as long as she lived. She's buried at a cemetery across town with

her husband—our version of a sacrilege, a place where there are no granite markers. A family story goes she had the plots long before my dad died, but kept quiet about it out of respect for him.

I visit the rest of the family almost every year in order now, working my way back to the main road. Uncle Jimmy, who always told me he had a glass eye (he didn't) and wore a Viva Las Vegas pompadour well into his dotage is closest to the tall trees that mark the north border of the cemetery. Uncle Bob is off to the right, in those new sections that are filling out now.

At the edge of my parents' section is a classmate's tall gray marker the size of early loss. He smiles down from a faded photo embossed on porcelain, ever a handsome sophomore. The mother and father of the second boy I had sex with are buried next to my parents. I sometimes split what's left over to plant in front of each one.

Grandma Ruth is nearly hidden by overgrown lilacs—to find her, you have to count plots over from the corner where the largest weeping angel kneels. Her grave is planted with the deep red geraniums, despite my mother's complaint that they "smell like a dog in the rain."

My grandfather has a gray unpolished slant two drives down. John Ross was an orphan who danced in long floppy

tap shoes on the Loews vaudeville circuit—and was a known laggard once his time in the spotlight was over. Ants marching in and out of the crevices of the carved letters of his name always look to me like the brush and strike of a shuffle step.

More family lore is that my dad offered to move my grandparents together when a double plot was found open near my parents. My mother was emphatic: My grandmother would not want to move.

When I found Uncle Bob, we also gained the location of the grave of my grandfather's—news to us—first wife. Maybe my mother always knew why distance would suit my grandparents.

She often told of the lavender smell of my grandmother's snow-white hair. But I also remember her telling me about the panic that gripped my grandmother when she knew her death was near. "Her arms were around my neck and she kept saying, 'Betty, don't let me die'."

I think I blocked out that story for years until it returned in a nightmare as I cared for my own mother. On her deathbed, Mom was also panicked, but too tired from the eternity of a battle with cancer to scream and clutch my neck. She pretended not to notice the schefflera plant on the back porch with marijuana climbing through it that I clipped into the box brownies I baked for her on Fridays. At the end it was the

only thing that gave her an appetite for pizza and movie night with her youngest sister. I'd come home after midnight from running with my friends to hear them laughing.

Graves multiply. Families grow and wane like flowers and their memories live in stone. Even in the isolation of a global pandemic their voices call to me most clearly in the planting, and there is never enough time.

I last set foot in the yellow brick chapel for my sister.

Months later I planted her grave when the pink granite heart was already in place and the sun was shining. She's near a shade tree and her neighbors' names are all familiar.

I stood a while to mark its spot then walked a dozen yards east to Uncle Bob.



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Kisses Don't Lie

by Tony Hozeny

It was one of those muggy August days when you're so bored you wish school would start again. Of course, you'd never say that. My friend Carl and I lay on the grass near the Chicago and Northwestern railroad tracks, chewing on wild chives and throwing stones into Wingra Creek. Carl was a year older, tougher and stronger than I was. We wore old tee shirts and beat-up jeans.

"You want to check out Franklin Field? Maybe some guys are playing baseball."

"Nah," Carl said. "Too hot. I'm so Goddamn bored. You got any money? I'm thirsty."

I shook my head and fired a stone into the creek. "Look, man, I hit a lily pad."

"Hey," Carl said. "Let's walk down to the Badger Road Bridge and then climb up that rock wall to the top. And then we'll visit Ted Sanderson. He'll give us something to drink. His parents own that restaurant, Sanderson's Steak House."

"I don't like him," I said. "He's a prick."

Carl gave me a look. "Ted's pretty cool. He's wild."

"You're not going to stick me with Mona, are you?"

Ted's sister was a year older than the rest of us in our sixth-

grade class because she'd missed a year of school traveling around the country. She was a nice girl. But still.

Carl shrugged. "You can go home if you want to."

The sun burst through the clouds. We were sweating now. I walked the rail for a few steps, but it was so hot it was burning through my sneakers. The railroad men had laid fresh creosote on the ties. It smelled sweet and looked like black candy, like you could eat it. We walked along, throwing rocks ahead of us. I felt the cross ties vibrate and looked behind me.

"Train," I shouted. "Really coming up fast."

We scrambled down the embankment and waited for the green-and-yellow diesels and passenger cars to flash by.

"Wow, man," I said, when we reached the bridge. "That's really tall." The bridge was held by two limestone columns flush with the hills on either side.

"Yeah, it's pretty tall," Carl said, in that matter-of-fact way he had of minimizing problems, "It's probably a couple stories high."

I folded my arms. "Our apartment is two stories. This is way taller."

Carl ran his hand over the rock wall. It was a little slick. "See, look, just like Ted told me. He says he climbs it all the time. It's limestone, so there are little creases in the rock where you can grab on and pull yourself up and brace your

feet. Do you want to try it?"

I knew he really wanted to make this climb, but he needed me to go along, maybe to keep up his nerve. "All right," I said.

"Let's try to go up side by side."

He found two handholds and pulled himself up right away. It took me a few tries to get started, but then I moved from hold to hold as quickly as he did. This is easy, I thought. When I was about twenty feet up, I looked down to check my progress and felt the whole world turn on its side, my stomach churning, my throat tight, and my head spinning.

"Oh, God," I said. "I'm scared."

"Don't ever look down," Carl said. "Goddamn it, that's my fault. I should've told you that before we started. Come on."

"I can't." My legs and arms were turning to water.

"You've got to. You can't jump, it's too high, and you'll never make it down backwards."

"You mean I'm stuck here?" The rock seemed to crumble under my fingers. Any minute now, I'd crash to the ground and break every bone in my body.

"Maybe I'd better keep climbing and get help," he muttered. I watched him go, hand over hand. I had to follow him. Hand over hand, step by step, I clambered slowly up the

limestone column, slipping once, but only once.

Near the bottom support of the bridge, the limestone jutted out frighteningly, hanging me out over what I'd already climbed. Don't look down, I told myself. I pulled up onto the sidewalk. My legs and arms were so shaky that I fell down on my knees. My palms and fingers were raw. I lay on my stomach, my head spinning. Carl came running over.

"You made it," he shouted. "Good going."

"I ain't doing that again," I said. The ground was whirling around my head. I closed my eyes for a moment, opened them, and everything cleared. There across Badger Road was the restaurant.

"Hey, look at that, man! A brand new '58 Continental convertible!"

We had to check that out. The car was a block long, pink with a white top. I looked down into the interior.

"Cool! The gear selector is a prism. You have to look at it just right or you can't read the gears."

A big guy came out of the restaurant. He yelled, "Hey, you kids, get the hell away from my car!"

We ran around to the back, where the Sandersons had their living quarters. Two pine trees shaded the porch. I could hear the radio, some twangy music. Ted was smoking a cigarette and sitting at a card table. He had greasy black hair

and rings of dirt in his fat neck. There was a deck of cards on the table. When Carl sat down, Ted leaned toward him and whispered something. Carl and Ted laughed loudly, both slapping their thighs, a gesture I had never seen Carl use.

"Mona," Ted shouted, "get your ass out here with something to drink."

Mona came out with lemonade and poured four glasses. She sat down next to me. Her red-brown hair was tied in a ponytail with a black ribbon. She wore a sleeveless pink blouse with the tails out over her black shorts. Her lips were light red, like from lipstick, and I could see the outline of a bra under her shirt. Our eyes met, and I looked away. I felt funny and awkward.

She'd grown up, and I hadn't. She'd sat in front of me all through sixth grade, and yet today I couldn't think of a single thing to say to her. Ted took a final drag on his cigarette and tossed it away.

"Hey, let's play strip poker," he said. "If Mona loses, she'll have to take her shirt off. Then we'll see if she's really got anything to put in that new little training bra she got yesterday."

"Shut up, Ted." Her brown eyes flashed, her thin face turned hard, and her mouth was a tight line. "You're the one who's going to lose. Then we can all look at your fat butt."

"Fuck you," he said coldly. "Come on, Carl, I got something to show you in my room." I started to get up. "Not you. You're too little. You stay here with my little sister."

Carl and I exchanged glances. "Oh, come on, Ted, let him come along."

"No," Ted said. Mona and I watched them go.

"Good lemonade," I said.

Mona crossed her legs and fiddled with the strap of her bra. "You ain't missing much," she said. "Ted's got some girlie magazines, that's all."

I made a face. "You mean, like *Good Housekeeping*? Why's he looking at a magazine for girls?"

Mona did a double take. "Don't you know what I mean? A magazine with naked girls in it, like *Playboy*."

"Oh," I said.

She smiled and touched my wrist. I felt a sudden tremor run from my neck all the way down. "You've never looked at one, have you?"

"No. But one day Don Maly brought in these playing cards he stole from his old man that have naked people doing things to each other." I leaned forward. "He showed them to everybody in the boys' john. Even Dennis Beyler. Dennis said, 'Why are they doing that?' We all just laughed at him." I shrugged, trying to seem cool and mature, but I hadn't known

what they were doing, either. I just had enough sense not to ask. "They were lousy photographs. You couldn't really see much. One picture had a horse in it."

Mona giggled. "We have a couple of them decks under the bar. You can just about tell that they're screwing. You want to see one?"

I said, "No, that's okay." But I felt young and stupid because none of this fazed Mona at all. Maly had said that girls didn't know anything about screwing and stuff like that. How you do it is, you get them drunk or something and then screw them before they even figure out what's going on, he'd said.

"What the hell was the horse doing?" She had this grin like she was about to tell a secret.

"Just standing there. Some girl was underneath him, sucking on his, his . . ." I felt my face turn hot red. Then I burst out laughing. Mona did, too. We stopped.

"Jesus. A horse," she said. That set us off again.

When I stopped laughing, I said, "So what's the big deal with the magazines?"

"All the girls have really big boobs."

"Oh." I sipped my lemonade. She sipped hers. I tried to think of something to say. Mona looked away, singing softly along with the radio:

This can't go on, you'll have to choose the way
You'll have to go or stay
Stop running wild

"Hey, is that a new Everly Brothers song?"

Mona shook her head. "No, that's the Louvin Brothers. This song was out last fall. It plays on our jukebox all the time."

"It's a pretty song."

"Yeah, I like it. And you're right, it kind of sounds like the Everly Brothers." Mona rummaged in her purse and pulled out a crumpled pack of Salems and matches.

"You smoke?"

"Sure," she said, her eyes cool, watching me. "Don't you?" She lit one and exhaled a stream of smoke.

"I stole a couple from my old man once." I felt myself turn red—two drags and I'd thrown up over the back fence.

"You want to try one?"

What if I said no, and she told everyone I was chicken?

"Yeah," I said, watching her. Wow. A girl who smoked. She blew out a stream of smoke, then leaned so close I could smell her flowery perfume. I felt a hard thump in my stomach, like going down in a fast elevator. She slipped the filter tip between my lips. I took a small drag and let the smoke slowly

leak out. Even so, I coughed and coughed. The smoke drifted up under my glasses, and my eyes turned hot and itchy. I had to take my glasses off and rub my eyes.

"You almost got it," Mona said, "Just don't inhale. That's the secret."

"What does that mean?"

"People who really smoke take these big drags and open their lungs so they get the taste. I can't do that yet. But when they exhale, it comes out in a thin stream. You want to make it look like that. Just take a little smoke in your mouth, and then blow it out hard. See?" She blew the smoke out again. She looked cool, like a movie star.

I tried again. It was pretty easy. I could taste the sweet menthol on my tongue and lips. We sat and smoked. She gave me that grin again. I felt grown up, no longer a scrawny little kid everyone picked on. I couldn't wait to tell Carl. But the smoke made me a little woozy.

"Can we take a walk?"

She nodded. We walked out behind the restaurant and into the trailer park beyond it. My head cleared. We passed a cigarette back and forth. I wasn't bothered now when I dragged on it. When I wasn't dragging on it, I cupped it in my hand, as I'd seen teenagers do at the bus stop, but Mona said, "You don't have to worry about getting caught. I don't even

know most of these people, and the ones we know wouldn't bother telling my parents." She flicked ashes off the end of the cigarette. "Me and Ted are alone a lot."

Her soft, scratchy voice sounded sad. She crushed out the Salem under her sandal, and we walked toward the Badger Road Bridge, the backs of our hands brushing a few times. I really liked that tremor. We sat on the sidewalk, looking down on the tracks.

"I climbed up here when we came to see you," I told her.

She slugged my arm. "Liar, liar, pants on fire."

My palms were still red. "See? From the limestone."

"Wow." She looked right into my eyes and gave me that grin again. "Even Ted can't do that. Now I suppose you think you're really hot shit."

I shook my head. "It was dumb, Mona. I could've killed myself."

Mona touched my hand. I almost touched hers back. "I'll show you another way down."

"It must be cool to have a restaurant," I said.

Her jaw dropped. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, you must get all the pop and ice cream you want."

She snorted. "You get to clean up after a lot of damn

drunks, too. You should see some of these people from Saint Raphael's, they act so holy on Sunday morning, you should see what they're like on Saturday night. Telling dirty jokes and feeling each other up. Bunch of jerks. One of them old guys tried to put his hands on me. I slugged him right in the nuts. All the priests come out here, too. They're mostly okay. They just drink and watch the ballgame. But Monsignor Kelso's really bad, and he starts ordering everybody around and acting like a big shot."

"He's an asshole, first, last and all the time."

"Aren't you afraid you'll go to hell, calling a priest an asshole?" She punched my arm lightly, and I punched her back the same way. I felt that tremor again. "Aren't you afraid you'll go to *hell*?"

"Not for that," I said.

"Are you *sure* you're not afraid?" she teased, grinning at me.

I grinned back, wanting to touch her hand, her shoulder, something. "Hell, no," I said, firing a rock down at the railroad tracks. "He *is* an asshole. Even God knows that."

She kicked off her sandals and pushed the soft dirt around with her toes. "I never knew you were such a bad boy," she said huskily. "But nice, too." I grinned goofily, staring into her warm brown eyes, unable to say anything. We heard a

diesel horn, and we watched a long freight go by. Her face looked drawn, her mouth tight.

"Are you sad about something, Mona?"

She adjusted her bra strap. "Just I've got to work the bar tonight."

"Do you get paid?"

She snorted. "That'll be the day." She stared down at the tracks. "I'm glad you came out to visit."

"Me, too."

I saw Carl come walking quickly out the front of the restaurant.

"We've got to go right now," he said.

"Mona knows another way down," I said. We followed her to the trailer park and then down an overgrown path. A garter snake slithered across the path in front of Mona. Carl and I both jumped, but she didn't even blink. At the tracks, she turned in profile, stuck her hands in the pockets of her shorts, and said, "See you some time," and headed back up the path.

"What were you and Ted doing?"

Carl made a face. "He *is* a prick."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Well, Mona told me he's never climbed up to the bridge."

“Lying sack of shit.”

Carl wouldn't want to come out here again. And I could just imagine trying it alone. Ted would dog us the whole time. I felt drawn to Mona in a way I couldn't understand. For the first time ever, I wanted to go to church, hoping she'd be there, but no luck. So right after Sunday lunch, I looked up her phone number and picked up the phone to call her. Dad asked whom I was calling.

“A girl in my class.”

He shook his head no, glaring at me. “Hang up. You're too damned young to be calling girls. You're supposed to be washing the dishes, so get on the stick.”

By the time I was done with the dishes, I'd worked out a plan. I pocketed my Boy Scout knife and the thirty cents I'd earned cutting the neighbor's grass. I said I was going for a bike ride. My little sister Cathy wanted to come along. I'd taught her to ride a month ago, and now she wanted to come along all the time. I told her we could ride later.

There was a payphone about three blocks away in front of Bongey's drug store. I went into the store and bought two small bottles of Coke. Then I called. Mona answered right away.

“Sanderson's Steak House.”

I froze.

“Who *is* this?”

I took a deep breath, choked, choked out “This is me.”

“Oh. *Big* help. Come on, I ain’t got all day.”

I blurted out my name and that I wanted to see her today. We decided to meet in a half hour on the tracks at the Wingra Creek trestle. She’d bring cupcakes and cigarettes. I hid the Cokes in the backyard, hustled inside and grabbed my baseball glove.

“Now where are you going?” Mom said. “Honest to Pete.” But she was smiling.

“To play ball with my friend Gene.” I knew she’d ask, so I said, “He lives down the tracks just past the creek. On Fisher Street.”

Dad set the paper aside. “Be back by three. I want that grass cut today.”

It seemed like I’d been waiting a long time. I wondered if she’d forgotten or changed her mind. Then I saw her, way off in the distance, walking fast.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. Today, she wore a pink ribbon in her ponytail, a sleeveless blue shirt tied at her waist, and jeans. Same flowery perfume. “At the last minute, my mom made me fill the little paper cups with Cole Slaw and then wrap the tops and put them in the refrigerator,” she said. As she talked, her eyes flashed, and she kept opening and

closing her hands. “I hate that damned job. Takes forever. Plus, one of the waitresses called in sick today, so guess who has to work? And that one, oh, sure, she’s *sick*, all right. Probably just hungover. Damnit, I forgot the cupcakes. Plus, Ted doesn’t have to do nothing but take out the garbage. He’s off someplace playing ball or whatever he does. Oh, well, no sense complaining. Don’t do no good anyway.” She stared at me, raising her eyebrows. “What’s wrong with you? Cat got your tongue?”

“You talk a *lot*, Mona.”

She did a double take. “I guess I do.” We started laughing.

“Hey, what’s this?” She picked up the glove. “You brought me out here to play baseball? I don’t want to play baseball.”

“Not even girls’ baseball? You know, first base kissing, second base—”

She slugged my arm. “You *are* a bad boy.”

We sat down on the rail. I explained the glove was my ticket out of the house. She grinned her secret grin. I reached in the bag, used my knife bottle opener to pop the tops of the Cokes, and handed her one.

“So how about a cigarette?” she said.

I guided her hand to light my cigarette. Her hand was

warm and soft. That tremor was strong now, more like a spasm, and it didn't go away. We inched closer, our shoulders and hips touching.

"Jeez, school's only two weeks away," Mona said, adjusting her bra strap. "So have you heard which nun we're going to get?"

"Yeah, big Josie. You weren't here then, but I had her in fifth grade. She's going to work us to death. But she's fair. No teacher's pets. She's *tough*. Me and Maly were fighting on the playground, and when we didn't stop right away, she smacked us both upside of the head with a ruler. That hurt! But don't worry. She doesn't hit girls."

"This is really nice," she said. "There's a little breeze, so it's not too hot. You can see the water rippling down there." She threw a rock down into the ripples. "Nobody here to bug us or tell us what to do." She exhaled, and I watched her smoke.

"You still got that down better than I do. I guess it just takes practice."

We smoked quietly for a few minutes. I picked up a handful of rocks and threw them in the creek.

"It'll be good to see the other kids again." Mona snickered. "See who else is growing boobs."

I didn't know what to say to that. She looked down,

seeming to draw into herself. I tried flipping my cigarette away with my thumb and middle finger, like the teenagers at the bus stop. It looked cool. Mona stubbed out her cigarette. I got an idea.

“I can still taste that menthol on my lips. Can you taste yours?”

Our eyes met. She shook her head no.

“Want to taste mine?”

She giggled. “How we going to do that?”

I moved toward her, and we kissed, our teeth knocking together. We kissed, and kissed again, then more times than I could count. Just like in the movies, I pulled her close, and she rested her head on my chest. Suddenly, nothing on earth mattered but this girl. I’d never felt so safe and happy and peaceful. And *strong*. I believed I could probably pick up a house.

She moved a little apart. “This is nice,” she whispered. “But I got to go.”

“I’ll walk you.”

“You don’t have to do that. Besides, I’m going to have to run all the way.”

“Then I’ll have to run with you.”

“You just want to kiss me again.”

“How did you figure that out?”

When we'd almost reached the path, we walked, holding hands. Then I pulled her close and kissed her. It was a long kiss. We ended up gasping because we forgot to breathe.

"Call me again some time."

"I will."

I watched while she picked her way up the steep, sandy path. She blew me a kiss, and then she was gone. I had so much energy I didn't know what to do with it all. I ran and yelled and jumped and threw rocks all the way back down the tracks.



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The Opening Tip

(or How I Flew Too Near the Sun and My Wax Wings Fell Off)

by Richard Ault

The moment is frozen in the amber of my mind: I am caught, still hanging, held aloft by the updraft of the crowd's roar, dropping the ball in the basket. In that waking dream, I never come down. To this day, even in my eighties, this is a highlight not just of my high school basketball career but of my life.

In reality, though, from that height, my senior season came down with a crash, and all too often even now when I wake up at two or three in the morning, I still try to figure out why.

My first basketball memory is of shooting baskets on our garage backboard with friends when my mother came out of the backdoor to tell us that President Roosevelt had died. I was nine. The following year as I entered fifth grade, I got into organized ball in the YMCA league. I played other sports too, especially baseball and softball, but basketball was the game about which I was the most passionate and most skilled.

I was the best player and leading scorer on my teams at every level through my junior year of high school when I led our Saginaw Arthur Hill JV team in scoring and set a single-game scoring record against our cross-town rivals, Saginaw High. I

had always had success against many of those same players in junior high and it continued into high school.

I began my senior season with high hopes but got off to a bad start. In the opening road game in Lansing, I was lost in some sort of haze and stunk up the place. The second game in Ann Arbor, I played a bit better but made some bad offensive mistakes. At half-time, Coach Fowler singled me out: “Ault, you’re killing us on offense.” I distinctly remember missing a key free throw near the end of the game. On the way home on the bus, a teammate who had been on the bench at the time told me that, when I missed, Fowler muttered “No guts.” That comment stays with me to this day.

The third game was finally at home against Saginaw High, my favorite opponent. All of my childhood basketball heroes had played in that rivalry, always the big game of the year. It was hard to believe that it was my turn now, that I would even be on that same floor as my larger-than-life idols. I had always worked hard and had success as I came up, but I now felt like an imposter.

The opening tip went back to Chummy Weinberg who spotted me breaking toward the basket and hit me with a pass. I was all alone. I took two dribbles and rose into the air. My Chuck Taylor All-Stars game shoes lifted me as if I were

floating in slow motion until I rolled the ball off my fingertips into the basket, my frozen-in-amber memory.

In the early going after that shot in that game, I was feeling pretty comfortable and made three quick baskets. I also quickly made two bad passes, got pulled from the game, and never got back in. I started one more game that season and played pretty well for a change, *except* for the fact that I couldn't find the basket. I missed layups, and free throws that looked like they were going in but just spun out. I don't remember making a single point.

That was the beginning of the end.

I didn't start a game or play much from then on. Later in the season, I did get in near the end of the first half of a game in Flint and played well. Coach sent me out to start the second half. However, when the team was clasping hands in the huddle before the horn sounded to begin play, I glanced at the bench and Fowler was staring at me. He grimaced and ordered me back to the bench without another word. I have no idea what he thought he saw— maybe “no guts”—but I didn't get back in another game for the rest of the season.

The final insult came at playoff time. The travel squad roster was posted for the first game and my name was not on it. I didn't even get to go on the team bus. Sophomores and juniors made the bus. Guys who had been cut from my junior

high team made the bus. I had been playing and practicing from the fourth grade on and even before. Now guys who never even played organized ball before high school made the bus, one of whom even started the game. Ernie Dijak, who was a great football player but in basketball was only good for pounding me in the back during practice—Ernie Dijak made the bus.

I went to the locker room that night to meet my friends on the team when they returned from their first-round loss. Before they arrived, I removed all my equipment from my locker, tacked my jockstrap to the cork bulletin board, and left a note: “Ault hangs it up.”

So many times since—way too many times for a grown man—in the middle of the night, I go over that whole season and try to figure out what went wrong. I find many things and people to blame. Coach Fowler, who never seemed to believe in me, who said I had “no guts.” Peanuts Murphy, my former JV coach, who publicly complained about my “changed attitude.” Ernie Dijak, the big mean tackle on the football team who always guarded me in half-court practices and pounded my kidneys relentlessly with his fist. I never told anyone, afraid of looking like a cowardly tattler, and scared of what Ernie might do to me. I even wanted to blame Mary, my girlfriend.

We were on the verge of going steady and committed as I was to that end, she took up all of my after-practice practice time.

But each time when I get to the end of such a recap, I come to a very mundane conclusion about the problem. After all, I had another steady girlfriend the year before, Dee, who was now in college. In that case, however, I still found time to go to the YMCA



Richard Ault, Senior Year, # 43

most nights after dinner and all day on Saturdays to shoot around with my friend Dick Drinnan, who was the star of the Catholic high school team. Back in junior high, I would come home from daily practice at school and immediately go to my friend Ernie Richmond's driveway on the corner to shoot by myself while he and his family were inside having dinner. But, in the year in question, I never practiced after practice. The summer leading into that season I had been too busy with girls, a summer job, and baseball, and almost didn't touch a basketball.

The mundane lesson I learned was that I didn't work hard enough. I didn't practice shooting in Ernie Richmond's

driveway between school practice and dinner. I didn't go to the Y at all.

I just didn't work hard enough.



Richard Ault in 8th Grade, # 20

That lesson has motivated me ever since—in my educational life, in my work life, in my family life, and even with my golf addiction back when I was so committed to getting better that whenever I wasn't playing, I was practicing. I play less often now and never practice.

Now I write every day and try to get better each day. I've wanted to be a writer since I was eight-years-old, even before my first basketball memory. My third-grade teacher, Mrs. Ferguson, praised my story about the hardships of a pioneer family in a wagon train headed west. She told the class it was a "grown-up story," and that was it: I was hooked. I still have the original in my file cabinet, and I am still writing stories about people taking risks.

Writing, however, was not my career until I retired from many years as a private consultant on organizational change. Before that, I was in public education as a teacher, principal, and college professor.

Now I write every day and wish my words would catch an updraft so that they might not only be uplifted but uplifting. I wish they could rise and soar, but experience, time, and age have taught me to be more realistic. The law of gravity keeps my feet on the ground and my butt in the chair as I try to write better tomorrow than I did today.

Richard Ault lives in the Philadelphia area.

The Animal Lover at Seven and Thirty-Seven

by Hannah Melin

When Avery grows up, she will be an “animal rescuer, just like her Mom!” Every adult in Avery’s life is assigned an animal: a kangaroo for her father, a vulture for her mother. For the first week as her babysitter, I am watched cautiously from behind a stuffed lion. After a week of careful consideration, I am labeled a zebra.

No jokes are made about Erin’s title as a vulture. Erin grins and swings Avery around in a hug when she correctly recites a fact on the wingspan of an African Condor or the lifecycle of a Common Turkey Vulture. Above their television set, framed photos of Avery in diapers are mixed in with fuzz-headed owlets, fledgling eagles, and newly hatched vultures. Foot-long, sleek black feathers are tucked between well-worn romance novels and dog-training guides.

Avery’s hands are always ready to grip, touch, and pet. She pinches her crayons tightly between her fingers, drawing savannas with thick, heavy lines. The skin that stretches across her palms is porcelain pale, interrupted only by light freckles. Erin’s hands grip lightly. Arthritis, she says, from zoo work. The skin is paper-thin and as pale as her daughter’s. Scratch marks and scars cover her thin hands, running up

past her wrist and onto her forearm. The razor-width cuts seem to track decades of self-harm, a conclusion dismissed only by the photograph of a younger Erin holding up her forearm for a massive Horned Owl to perch.

Avery sinks into the comfy couch, immersed in a Disney movie while Erin leans against the kitchen counter, staring into her coffee mug while I sip from mine. She talks about the latest tragedy at Animal Kingdom: an aggressive male Grant's Zebra broke out of his holding pen in the night and into the pen of a resting mother and her three-month-old foal. It trampled the foal to death and ripped off the mother's right ear. She tears up, covering her mouth as she tells me how the mother whinnied and bayed for hours. She's furious that the locks weren't strong enough, but she never blames the male. It's a survival mechanism, she says, to ensure their genetic line survives. A female won't mate with a male if she has a foal. The male will kill the foal to confirm his own lineage. She's glad no keepers tried to intervene during his rampage; she's certain they'd have been trampled. The attack never makes the newspapers and I try not to wince when Avery gives me a crayon drawing of my animal avatar.

Avery knows to ask owners if she can pet their dogs before approaching. She assures me that she knows lions, leopards, and tigers are all deeply dangerous creatures. She

scoops up Rosie, a Chilean Rose-Haired Tarantula the size of my fist, without hesitation. She giggles as the fanged spider walks across her hands. She asks me if I want to hold her. I decline, but I do let Valentine, a six-inch Corn Snake, wrap around my wrist. Once I'm preoccupied with the small warmth making its way to my fingertips, Avery plops Mr. Bojangles, a six-pound Bearded Dragon, on my shoulder. It scrambles on my t-shirt and falls asleep, staining my sleeve with raspberry juice. Raspberries are its second favorite snack, after live crickets.

Avery's best friends are carried around with her at all times. A balding stuffed zebra, a lion Beanie Baby, and a dull yellow dog. If she moves from the room, she scoops them up in her forearms and lines them up in their new position. She engages in a constant dialogue with them. If I ask one of the stuffed animals a question, she responds in a squeaking character voice, but her personal conversations with them are one-sided. She speaks to them, pauses, and continues on with a new talking point. She doesn't see the point in giving them voice when she already knows what they would say. Erin thinks she'll grow out of it any day now.

Erin attended a parent-teacher meeting last month, where one of Avery's teachers was concerned by Avery's introversion. She's the same as Erin was at that age, Erin

recalls. Erin seems proud to tell me that Avery prefers animals to people.

Three months later, Snowball, their twelve-year-old house cat, drops dead in front of her food bowl. Erin sobs into her pillow. It's too much, she says. Such reactions adds to her belief that her husband will leave her. She thinks her ex-boyfriend has been stalking her ("Make sure you lock the doors," she tells me, "but I don't think he'd hurt you"). She's convinced Avery will spend the rest of her life talking to stuffed animals. She thinks she's going to lose her job because of her arthritis. To not work with animals, she says, that would be worse than death for me.

I tell my mother what Erin said on the car ride home. My mother has to pick me up when I watch Avery into the evenings. I'm not allowed to drive at night until I'm old enough to get my Class D.

Avery chases their Pitbull mix around the yard, whooping and giggling. The sun glints off her hair, turning it into a writhing, glimmering halo. She stretches open her arms, inviting the dog to jump onto her and knock her into the grass. The dog does not bite, but he plays rough. Pink ridges rise across her upper arms where his dewclaw scrapes, not quite deep enough to draw blood. He shoves into her side, hard, but she tackles him back, squealing.

At age seven, the animal lover knows no fear. She does not bother to adjust for the rest of us. She spends recess hunting for garter snakes and doesn't bother with the comments made about her on the swing set. She lets every creature, ant and elephant alike, crawl into her heart.

At age thirty-seven, the animal lover learns the weight of these creatures. She lets every one of them into her heart and onto her skin. They leave more scars than she can count.

(The names in this essay have been changed to protect the identities of those featured.)



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The Exact Truth

by Gary Fincke

Sunday

“You awake?” I heard my younger son’s voice just before the tapping on the bedroom door registered. The clock radio read six-thirty a.m.

“Why so early?” I managed, checking to see if my wife Liz was awake, whether she was preparing, like I was, for bad news on a mid-January Sunday morning.

For nearly five months, my son had been a Food Dude delivery boy and a guitarist in a rock band. The band had an occasional show, but nearly all of his evenings he drove a variety of dinners to customers in houses and apartments within a fifteen-mile radius of the company’s home base, which operated out of a nearby KFC: omelets and muffins from Perkins, roast turkey dinners from a local diner, even steak and shrimp from a high-end restaurant, risking the purchaser’s unhappiness with the quality of a fifteen minute-old steak and baked potato delivered like an upscale Meals-on-Wheels.

“I waited for a while,” Aaron said. “Until it started to get a little bit light out. I’ve been up all night.”

He took one step into the nearly-dark room, stopped, and then he swept the walls with his eyes as if he were memorizing for a recall-the-objects test. “I went out after work. Eleven’s not late. I ate something at Perkins, and I was driving back past the store, and it was full of police. Arlene, the manager, got robbed last night right after I left. She was closing up when I walked out the back door. She was maybe two minutes behind me.”

“Arlene Hart?” my wife said. “And you found this out from the police?”

“Stories spread, Mom. Somebody shot her. Whoever it was didn’t say a word. Just shot her in the head and took the money.”

My wife gripped my arm and squeezed. I shuffled through phrases, finding only obscenities and inadequacies. “Shot in the head and she’s talking?” I finally said.

“Not now. Randy, the KFC owner, sent all of us an email. The doctors put her in a coma on purpose. Whatever she said, she said to the police before she blacked out, but she never saw the shooter.”

“It has to be somebody from somewhere else,” I said.

“Why?” Aaron said at once, and I scrambled for evidence.

“We don’t even lock our doors.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, Dad. Why would anybody lock their house? Thieves don’t try the doorknob.”

It was nearly full light outside by now. For the twelfth day in a row there wasn’t any snow on the ground and no sign of it in the forecast. The three of us went downstairs to watch the early morning news, but Aaron had already reported more than what was revealed. Even at noon, the report hadn’t been updated aside from the station declaring it was withholding the name of the victim and the hospital where she was being treated. “To protect her,” I said. “So the shooter doesn’t finish the job.”

“Well, he’s the only one who doesn’t know where she is then,” Aaron said.

“Could you be in danger?” Liz said. “You were the last person to see her. You might have walked right by whoever it was that was waiting in those bushes back there where you always park. Maybe that somebody thinks you’re remembering something.”

The police would surely interview Aaron, I thought. The shift-schedule was clearly posted on the inside of the employees’ exit door. I’d seen it there when Aaron had taken me into the kitchen in order to introduce Arlene Hart during the first week he’d worked for Food Dude. She would have checked it by habit as she opened the door to leave,

reminding herself who was expected to open the KFC Sunday morning.

“I didn’t see anything.”

“The shooter doesn’t know that,” I said.

“Both of us are going to school in the morning. You’ll be by yourself nearly the whole day,” Liz said.

Aaron switched to another channel where, a few moments later, a picture of Arlene Hart was posted to the side of the anchor man. “I’ll lock the doors,” he said, “if that makes you feel better.”

Monday

I walked in the cold between my morning classes. I didn’t want to see students, especially the one or two who believed, on the first day of the new semester, that having a class before ten a.m. was a crisis they expected me to mitigate. I ate lunch with the office door closed. By early afternoon, though, I wanted to see a stream of students with drop/add issues, their complaints a distraction.

Arriving home just before five o’clock, when Liz stood quickly to greet me, I felt a flush of heat race through my chest. “They caught the guy,” she said.

“Already?” My voice cracked on the edge between fear and relief.

“He told his friends. One of them called the police. His name is Victor Deaver. He’s nineteen, the same as Aaron.”

Victor is a thug’s name, I thought. “So where’s this Victor Deaver kid from then?”

“See for yourself. He went to the high school.” I noticed the yearbook on the kitchen table. “I don’t know if he graduated, but there’s his senior picture. He’s right there in among all the normal people.”

I studied the picture, comparing the hair, eyes, and expression to seventeen other seniors in the class of 1995 pictured on the two facing pages, and I didn’t notice one thing threatening about Victor Deaver or any of the others.

I heard Aaron on the stairs. “He was bragging, Dad,” he said at once. “He said ‘I capped the bitch’.”

“He’s been watching too many movies,” I said, but I looked back at the yearbook, examining the faces of the eleven girls to decide which of them Victor Deaver would cap if she had her back turned and a thousand dollars in her purse.

“‘I capped the bitch.’ What the hell?”

“You know any of these guys? The ones who turned him in?”

“Sure. You met one a few days ago.” I saw Liz glance my way and stiffen. I closed the yearbook as if that would

make him disappear. “At the mall,” Aaron said at last. “Brent Healey. He rang up our CDs last week.”

“That guy talked to you like you hung out with him.”

“Hang out is a stretch. I’ve been places where he’s been at the same time.”

I imagined Brent Healey turning off the exit alarm and standing with his head turned at the FYE store while Victor Deaver loaded a backpack with CDs and tossed it over the exit scanner to split between them later. To break the spell, I said, “And how about the shooter?”

“Likewise.”

“I’ve never heard either of these names before. How’s that possible?”

“Because we’re not friends. The shooter’s a jackass. He’s a pumping iron dude. Arlene fired him last week.”

In less than two weeks, Aaron was driving to Florida to begin studying music technology. My wife and I would be alone in the house where we’d raised three children, and though the youngest of them was still standing in our kitchen, it felt as if it were possible I might never see any of them again.

Tuesday

The police didn’t contact Aaron. The news broadcasts featured pictures of Victor Deaver and cautious medical

reports about Arlene Hart. Downstairs by the television it was cold just after five o'clock because our heating system was calibrated to run on off-peak electricity, meaning it shut off at eight in the morning and didn't come on until six. On cloudy days, our large, passive solar windows, facing south, didn't absorb additional heat from the low winter sun. "I'm chilled," Liz said, gathering the blanket she kept on the basement couch around her and climbing the stairs.

I shivered and told myself it was because I was thinking of Victor Deaver and his swollen biceps starting a mosh pit in front of the stage while my son's rock band churned out some furious song. When somebody's elbow hits Deaver in the mouth, he pulls out his gun and caps the fucker.

"Tell me something else about Victor Deaver," I said. "Be exact."

Aaron threw his hands up and open, but he didn't turn and leave. "Okay," he said. "He was always late."

"That's not unusual." I felt my teeth clenching. I needed Victor Deaver to be transparently evil, but all Aaron seemed to remember about him was he was lazy and angry at being fired.

"How about stealing? Did he take stuff before he got fired?"

“Chicken? Nobody cares about somebody carting off some extra crispy.”

“Somebody might think all those little thefts add up.” I looked out the back window toward where the row of forsythia that bordered the edge of our lot loomed like a thick and tangled hiding place, but Aaron didn’t move. “I used to take change from the drawer where my mother kept it—nickels and dimes.”

“Not much of a thief,” Aaron said from behind me.

“I wouldn’t take any quarters because it seemed like that would make it stealing. That I had self-control. That the amount was so small I wasn’t really a thief at all.”

“Fifteen cents is no different than fifteen dollars, Dad.”

“You sound like my father. I’m just trying to get the details right.” I wanted to tell the exact truth, something without embellishment.

“That’s not the same as knowing the truth,” Aaron said.

“Really, I thought not taking quarters made it okay because nobody would miss it,” I said, but I began to count the times I’d gone back to that drawer, how I’d taken more nickels after a while. More dimes.

I went upstairs. I put on a coat and walked outside. I skirted the forsythia and headed down the hill below the house, crossed the adjoining field, and strode past the foundation of the new intermediate school, trying to decide

whether my nervousness would take me between the rows of nearby poplars or back into the street.

I slowed, gnawing at the end of my thumb. I had never been able to bite off fragments of nail like my wife routinely did, but I felt the nail of my index finger begin to tear, and I dropped my hand to my side. I'd been in this field a hundred times, but I felt myself begin to panic. When a car approached on the nearby road, I had to force myself not to duck as its headlights swept past. I thought about being seen, what a man alone in winter's dark by a construction site would be taken for.

I walked to the soda machine that had stood near the site for months and examined the selections for cold drinks in January. It had to be empty, I thought, but I wished I had coins in my pocket. I put my hand next to the coin slot, then to the button for root beer, and then bent to the tray and reached as if a can had tumbled down. Something skittered from under the machine, and I jerked back a step. I tilted my head to simulate drinking and watched my breath blow white and disappear. After I counted to ten, I walked toward the house, hearing nothing but my breathing.

"You haven't seen this yet," Liz said after I took off my coat, sliding the newspaper across the kitchen table. She was

still wrapped in the blanket. There was a picture of Victor Deaver on the first page of the second section.

“He has tattoos,” I said. “What is that—rope?”

“Pythons,” Aaron said. Neither my wife nor I had said a word to Aaron about the tattoo he’d had inked into his shoulder a month ago. “Everybody does tattoos now.”

“No, they don’t.”

“You just can’t see them.”

“There’s a problem with thinking kids who go to local rock shows are a cross section of the world.”

Aaron folded the other sections of the newspaper as if he were going to toss them onto a porch from a moving bicycle. “You’re wrong. I never see anybody like me when I’m playing at a show.”

What I remembered now was that Aaron had told me how, when he and the singer in his band had tried to get into a bar underage, the bouncer had refused them and said to the singer, ‘You look like the kind of kid who takes a gun to school.’

I’d smiled at that profiling in the summer when it didn’t make me see Victor Deaver eyeballing his former boss as she left the KFC. “What did Matt say to that?” I’d asked.

“You look like the guy I’d shoot first.”

Wednesday

For lunch, I drove to the KFC and sat by myself. Within seconds, I felt ashamed, paying for admission with the \$3.89 it cost, in 1996, for a three-piece chicken dinner, original recipe, and the soda to wash it all down.

I ate the skin off three pieces of chicken, savoring the salt and pepper and fat. I drank half my Coke and watched the other customers to see which ones dropped their change into the glass jar labeled: AID FOR ARLENE that sat beside the cash register.

Less than half of them. Even then, I could see, sitting so close, that it was mostly nickels and dimes and pennies. A woman at the table closest to me sorted through her change before she handed pennies and nickels to her two small children to drop into the jar. I dumped my trash into a container and stuffed a five-dollar bill through the slot.

After I left, carrying the half-filled Coke cup, I walked around back to the employee's entrance. I stepped behind the bushes and crouched. It was so tight the junipers scratched my face and neck no matter how I arranged myself.

I was about to leave when the register girl stepped outside to smoke. I hunched down tighter. Caught where no explanation would serve me, I watched her inhale and exhale for five minutes. Somebody just out of high school, I thought,

concentrating on keeping still. Somebody who can ring up chicken orders and think sunshine is a bodyguard. As soon as she went back inside, I stepped out, lifted my hand, and flung the Coke cup against the back wall before I hurried, head down, to my car.

Thursday

The next night Liz served a roast turkey dinner. The turkey was small, able to be cooked by seven. Aaron ate huge portions of meat and potatoes. He hacked out another piece of pumpkin pie and lifted it to his mouth with one hand. "I'll miss this when I leave," he said.

"I know how much you like it," Liz said.

"I'm okay, Mom. Really." He brightened. "Arlene can see," he said. "She's opened her eyes and has focus or something close to it even though she's not really awake."

"What?" I said.

"That's what I said when I heard, but that's the story I got from Randy," Aaron said. "Getting shot where she did usually means damage to vision and balance, so she's half way out of trouble."

"Halfway isn't far enough," I said. "She'll be different now."

“She’ll be alive, Dad,” Aaron said, his voice turning angry. He stood up, but then his shoulders sagged a bit. “I’m going out in a little while, ok? It’s my only night off this week. Randy’s filling in for Arlene until he hires somebody new. By then, I’ll be in Florida.”

“In the middle of the week? Your friends don’t work? They don’t go to school?”

“I’m going to school, Dad.” A distance seemed to have formed between us. “My friends are in college. This party is something to keep me busy.”

Two hours later I opened the left-behind yearbooks of my older children and found the pictures of the would-be killer when he was in seventh grade, then sixth, then fifth, reduced, by then, to a skinny boy in a floppy, tie-dyed t-shirt who looked as if he’d be among the crowd Aaron had skateboarded with in middle school, rolling up and back the half-pipe one boy’s father had built for his son, believing it would help him become a professional skateboarder.

Friday

I heaved out of a deep sleep for the second time in one week, hearing “Wake up” tunneling through the ear not buried in my pillow.

“Huh?” I squinted at the clock radio: 2:13.

“Don’t talk. Just listen,” Liz said. “That’s what I’ve been doing. There’s somebody outside trying to get in. I heard the knob being tried, and when someone taps on the side door where there’s no light, we have a problem.”

“Where’s Aaron?”

“He’s staying over at a friend’s house, remember? He didn’t want to drive.”

“Why would the bad guys knock?”

“To see if the house is empty. To see if they need to work in order to get everything we own.”

I heard the front door being tried, the loose knob rattling. “Where are your golf clubs?” she said. “We can’t just lay here and take it.”

I was starting to agree with her, listening intently enough to believe all of the inanimate things in the dark were whispering their resale value. And just as I sat up, my head snagging in the drapes, a tapping started on the window.

I pulled the drapes back, and Aaron’s face was so close, I jerked back instinctively. The face disappeared at once, headed, I was sure, to the front door. “For God’s sake,” Liz said. “You deal with it unless he says he’s hurt.”

I opened the door. “I decided to come home with a girl who was designated,” Aaron explained. “It was boring with

everybody drunk and me not into it, and then the house is locked for once. Plus, Brent Healy was there.”

“Who?”

“Brent Healy, the CD guy you met who pulled the plug on Victor Deaver. He wouldn’t shut up.”

“Who leaves their house key at home?” Liz shouted from the bedroom. “Who wouldn’t have it on a key ring?”

“It’s ok,” I said, stepping into the doorway, and when she didn’t say anything, I added another “It’s ok” before I shut the door and walked across the living room to draw Aaron farther away from her.

“Jesus, I’m cold,” Aaron said. “I didn’t take a coat because it’s a pain to deal with. It’s the middle of the night, so where’s the heat?”

“We have the thermostats set low because it hasn’t been that cold. Wear some sensible clothes for one more week.”

“It’s January. It’s like twenty degrees out. Jesus, Dad, it was cold like this last Saturday, too. How long do you think Victor hid in those bushes?”

“I don’t know. Ten minutes, fifteen—not much more than that.”

“It would seem like a long time, wouldn’t it? What’s the longest you ever hid in one place?”

“A minute?” I guessed at once, thinking of hide-and-go-seek. “I haven’t done much hiding. Why would I?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Aaron said, sounding so suddenly sad I thought I was going to have to relay another story to my wife. “You know what I heard at the party? Somebody stole the jar full of money from the KFC today.”

“The one for Arlene?”

“During the dinner rush. Inside their coat or something. What the hell, Dad?”

“There’s no end to it,” I said, and he started drumming on the window with the fingers of one hand, leaning so heavily on the other I listened for the first creak of collapse. He pushed off, his fingers closing into fists. If he unclenched them, I thought, they would tremble, and I looked back outside to keep my eyes off them. “Can you tell that’s a Coke machine from here?” I asked.

“What? Sure,” Aaron said at once. “You don’t have to see every detail to know what it is.” I nodded and laid my cheek against the chilled surface of the window and tried to control my breathing.

“I’ve never even held a gun in my hands,” Aaron said. “Have you?”

I stood up straight and looked at him. “A pistol?” I said. “Once. I was fifteen. A friend of my father showed me how to fire it. I didn’t hit anything but the ground and the sky.”

“How did it feel?”

“I was nervous, but I wanted to act like I was cool with it, so I tried to imagine this kid I hated. I thought I’d like shooting the gun better if I thought I was shooting him instead of trying to hit a few tin cans, but all that did was make me more afraid.”

Aaron pressed his hands against the window, but he didn’t lean his weight into them. “Like if that kid was there he would take the gun away and shoot you?” he said.

“Like I could actually do it. Shoot him and feel good about it.”

“While you were holding it?”

“You’d have to know this kid. He was such an asshole.”

“I guess,” Aaron said, and we went on looking outside for another minute before he offered, “I’m beat,” laying one hand on my shoulder before he turned away and we both retreated to our rooms. My wife had fallen back asleep. I stared through the open window, paying attention, for the first time, to the floodlights the neighbors across the street had on both corners of their house, the reason my wife had installed the heavy drapes, keeping their home-protecting artificial daylight at bay so we could sleep.



Gary Fincke's latest collection of essays, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose (Pleiades Press, 2018). A new essay, "After the Three-Moon Era," has been selected to appear in Best American Essays 2020.

The Wall

by Eszter Szentirmai

“It was our chance to get out. We had everything lined up, the car that was supposed to pick us up, the driver ... Our bags were packed with the essentials. We knew exactly what we had to do, how to hide, how we were going to make it across the border into Austria. It was risky, but it was possibly the least risky time to go. So many people were leaving then. And the Communists were much more preoccupied with squashing the revolution and didn’t have the manpower or the time to pay attention to the mass exodus. We had only a tiny sliver of time before they would organize and bring in more people, so we knew that if we were to leave, it had to be fast. This was in 1956, ten years before your father was even born ...”

I had been spending entire summers in Hungary with my grandparents since I could remember. But it was at sixteen years old that I first heard this story. We were in Salzburg, Austria on a weekend trip, sitting on the patio of our pension hotel at a wooden table. Every windowsill held potted geraniums in red and white. Our table had been recently cleared of tableware, including dinner plates that just an hour ago had held *wiener schnitzels* larger than the plates

themselves, garnished with twisted slices of lemon and sprigs of parsley. My sister had taken off to our room because she didn't like to get into heated arguments with my grandfather, which is usually how these after-dinner conversations ended. The man in front of me had aged considerably, but he was still formidable. Tall and broad in stature, my grandfather also had a remarkable face: big bushy black eyebrows, now mixed with gray, that extended from the corner of one dark brown eye to the corner of another; an imposing nose; and smooth skin that liked to hold onto a tan. He had a booming voice that commanded everyone's attention when he told his stories or bad jokes. He was intelligent, proud, chauvinistic. He and I were similar in many ways, but separated as we were by gender and generation, we got into not infrequent spats. I could absolutely imagine this man meticulously arranging an escape from Communist Hungary. He had the cunning to grasp an opportunity when it arose, the bravery and arrogance to take on a calculated risk and assume it would succeed, and the sangfroid to see it through. But I knew the ending to this story, and I wondered at what point the plan had been foiled.

“So, Pista Papa, what happened? Why did you end up staying?”

“Ah well, the night before we were going to leave, your grandmother just could not stop crying. She didn’t want to leave her family, see? She couldn’t communicate with them that we were going to go so it would seem like we had just disappeared. And even if we were able to let them know we were okay once we were on the other side, we knew we could never go back while the country was Communist. She might never get to see her family again. She was begging to stay. So, well, then we stayed.”

I looked to my grandmother for confirmation of this story. My grandfather was known to exaggerate.

“That’s how it happened,” she said matter-of-factly.

My grandmother was also tall but with slender bones and a knack of tripping over her own two feet. She had a round face with arched eyebrows and thin lips that were almost always stretched in a grin that gave her a look of semi-permanent amusement. She was even-tempered and unperturbed by most of what was thrown her way. She would try anything once, and easily saw the bright side in things. As believable as it was that my grandfather masterminded an escape plot, it was difficult to accept that this was how it ended. For one, I couldn’t imagine my grandmother breaking down and begging my grandfather to stay. My grandmother was up for *anything*. She navigated international airports by

herself knowing only Hungarian, she went down water slides in her seventies, she even tried sushi. She was devoted to her family, but she was a career woman and her own mother did much of the raising of her children. But even more than that, I couldn't imagine my grandfather yielding so easily to my grandmother's will. He was the one who dictated what happened in their family, the head of the household in every way. I would periodically get angry at him for the way he bossed her around, expecting her to indulge his every whim and demand. And to let her make the biggest decision of their lives? It seemed out of character for the both of them. I decided for once not to ignite a fight by remarking on this.

"But you know, your dad would have never been born if we had left, nor your uncle. We might have had different children, or none at all," my grandmother said, referencing her difficulties getting pregnant, "and once we had them, we couldn't leave anymore. We couldn't take young children across a dangerous border." She shrugged.

"That's why I really encouraged your father and uncle to go wherever they found the best opportunity. I helped set up your dad's internal medicine residency in Cleveland, Ohio where some friends of mine from university lived. I pushed your uncle to go to Canada," my grandfather continued.

I couldn't believe I had never heard this story before. I couldn't believe that my grandfather, the big talker, the big performer, had kept this secret to himself for sixteen summers of my life. And even in telling the story, he didn't linger on it, telling it in ten minutes and following up with an hour and a half of the role he had in my own father leaving Hungary (albeit after the Berlin Wall fell). But later that night, as I was reflecting on this new information, I heard an undertone to the conversation, a wistful unasked question underlying every sentence, every explanation: *Should we have left?*



The evils of Communism were instilled in me during those summers. I heard about how, in a Communist attempt to equalize people and overturn social strata, students who came from educated families were at a disadvantage when applying for higher education. This meant my grandfather couldn't pursue his dream of going to medical school. Instead, he became a civil engineer, earning a PhD and learning English to work for years designing roads in Nigeria to bolster his family's small income. When he visited us in the United States, he would marvel at the interstate system, how at the juncture of the highways, the roads blossomed out in loops and curlicues. He bemoaned that such sophistication was beyond what was available to him. While this wasn't a source of fresh rage for him by the time I knew him, the dull ache of it ate its way into many of our conversations. I sympathized with him, as he had the makings of a man who could have been great. My grandmother, although more accepting of her situation in life, also lamented that her love of language and literature didn't translate to a career teaching Hungarian to high school students. Her family was also upper class and owned quite a bit of land (seized by the Communists); she would have been a threat teaching such values to schoolchildren. So instead she became an accountant and her passion was relegated to a hobby. "You couldn't write

what you wanted to write, you couldn't say what you wanted to say, you couldn't be who you wanted to be," they would tell me.

We learned about my grandparents in this way—in snippets gathered from after dinner conversations, in overheard phone calls, in late nights spent talking that always seemed to be most pressing right before our flight home the next day. Growing up, the distance between us seemed to pull us together because of the necessity that we spend all of our time together at once every year. Instead of quick weekend sojourns, we had a six week block with each set of them, enough time for our stays to surpass the rush of vacation and settle into the quotidian feeling of a second home. They knew me in the way that my parents did: they knew that I wrote in journals for hours every day, was bullied at school, that I ate ice cream out of the container wrapping around the corners first to get the parts that had started to melt. And I, in turn, knew the newspaper my grandfather would read every morning and that he rode a motorcycle and the exact location of the scars of his two lobectomies that cured him of lung cancer. I knew my grandmother was a hesitant driver—and not a particularly good one—who honked her horn around curves so people would know she was coming. I knew she had a love of animals (especially dogs and excluding,

peculiarly, swans) to which she would talk as if to a child. It always amazed me when I met people who lived so close to their grandparents and didn't know them at all, but perhaps it was because my grandparents lived so far away that I was able to truly appreciate them. During the school year, we would talk intermittently on the phone, but these phone conversations were superficial compared to the time we spent physically together.

The summer after my high school graduation was the last that I spent entirely in Hungary. I gave a speech at my graduation, which my dad proudly printed out, laminated, and distributed to my grandparents. My grandfather read it aloud in English in his commanding tone, much more dramatically than I actually delivered it at the ceremony. Then, he translated it into Hungarian for my grandmother and performed it again. They *oohed* and *aahed* over it like grandparents do. "You're a great writer. And you spend so much of your time writing," they said, alluding to the hours of time I spent journaling over the years, "Never give that up. We had to give up so much in our lives. Don't give up what you love." I probably rolled my eyes at the time: "I told you guys," I said, "I'm going to go to medical school. That's what I love." "There are plenty of doctors who also write," they said.

The next year, my grandfather was diagnosed with metastatic colon cancer. I went back to Hungary that summer to celebrate his 80th birthday and to spend time with him before he died. True to his nature, he had two birthday celebrations planned for himself, both at the same restaurant: one for friends in June and one for family in July. The menu was carefully curated, the guest list was set, and the invitations were sent. I couldn't make the get-together in July because I was doing research in a basic science lab, so I joined the celebration with his friends in June. My grandfather experienced the party in a bittersweet way, laughing along with his friends through most of it but also giving an uncharacteristically tearful speech near the end in which he said goodbye. When it was my turn to say goodbye a week later, I was less outwardly emotional—I have always struggled with how to show emotion appropriately and default to not doing so at all most of the time. I hugged both my grandparents. "I'll call," I said, but instead of doing so, I wove my grief into words in my journal, as if writing in private would comfort my dying grandfather or console my grandmother as she held his hand through the experience. Still, like the last bite of an exquisite dish that you hold in your mouth a little longer than the others to allow the flavor to saturate every taste bud and be embedded permanently in your brain before

it's gone, I treasured that last summer with my grandfather and I know that he treasured it as well. He passed away in August of that year.

As I continued through college, medical school, and residency, getting married and having my own children along the way, I didn't have time anymore to make the trip to Hungary. Five thousand miles went from being traversable and even at times advantageous to being an insurmountable distance. Unlike my grandparents, I was in a situation where I could build my life around my dream, but doing so cruelly took away the time to share it with them. I spoke to my grandmother on the phone infrequently and awkwardly, giving her the quick run-down of what had happened in my life in the months since we last talked. And then a toddler would scream in the background or I would arrive at work or I had to check out at the grocery store. "Sorry," I would tell her, cutting the conversation too short, "I really have to go now." I promised myself that I would spend months with her in seven years when I finished training ... in six years when I finished training ... in five years when I finished training ... in four years when I finished training ...

We found out my grandmother had Alzheimer's disease when she came and visited us one Christmas, making the transatlantic flight by herself as she was wont to do. She

fell and bumped her head on the tile floor of the Washington Dulles airport. She had no idea where she was and frantically called her sister (who was still in Hungary) and asked her to come pick her up. Once successfully transported to my parents' house, my mom told me over the phone that my grandmother wandered away from the house at all hours of the day and night, so my parents hired a sitter while they were at work. By the time I drove up from Nashville, she had regained her wits and the only vestiges of the misadventure were a large goose egg on the back of her head and a note left on the kitchen counter: "Klári, you are in the United States visiting your son and his family. You are OK. We are making sure that you go where you need to go. If you need our help, call..." She showed me the note when I got in. "Did you hear what happened to me?" "I heard, Klári Mama," I said, but beyond that, I didn't know what to say. I was in residency at the time, so I knew that she was exhibiting symptoms of dementia, but like a dutiful family member, I denied to myself that she was really that unwell. Even so, it was the last time she would come visit us in the United States. But I would see her again, I thought, in four years when I finished training...

Phone conversations became more difficult. She would initially ask me the same questions over and over again, but then progressed to calling me back frantically after we hung

up the phone because she didn't remember saying goodbye, and then finally to not remembering I called at all. Pretty soon, I stopped calling. My parents, nearing the end of their careers, had more flexibility in their schedules and more vacation time so they went to visit her multiple times a year. She was quickly deteriorating, they told me, so they had three week-long vacations planned in early 2020 that they wanted to spend with her.

In March 2020, the global pandemic associated with COVID-19 erected a Berlin Wall of its own, right in the middle of my family, temporary but seemingly as impenetrable. The travel restrictions necessitated that my parents cancel those planned week-long trips. My grandmother wasn't doing well, barely conscious of her surroundings. She had difficulty swallowing and was bed-bound. COVID-19 upended the lives of so many people: to some, it meant unemployment; to some, it meant a fleeting inconvenience; to some, it meant the loss of life. To my family, it meant a painful amount of certainty that we would never see my grandmother again.

One sunny Saturday in May, I spent the morning running around with my children at their grandmother's, my mother-in-law's, house in the Smoky Mountains, chasing swarms of red-spotted purple butterflies. "Hi, Beautiful," I said to a particularly large one that had landed on the gravel road,

slowly batting its wings as if in flirtation. “Don’t touch them,” I cautioned the boys, “Remember they are living creatures, be kind to them.” When I got back to the house and regained my phone reception, I saw that I had two missed calls from my mom. I called her back. “I wanted to call you to let you know that Klári Mama died this morning. You know how poorly she was. We are sad, but she is in a better place. She was never in any pain. It is better for her this way,” my mom began. “We don’t know if your dad is even going to be able to go to the funeral since they’ve shut the border down. We are trying to prolong the time until the funeral as much as possible.” My dad had a video chat with her for the last time a week before. It was two years until I would finish my training.

I always assumed that my grandmother had made a wrong decision sixty-four years earlier. How much better their lives would have been had they not lived forty years under the yoke of Communism! I wondered if she and my grandfather would have made a different choice if they had had the chance, if they would have liked to rewrite their lives, if they would have turned to a different page of the choose-your-own-adventure story if they had had more information, more courage, more time. Surely, her family would have understood the decision. Surely, they would have urged her, even begged her to leave, just as she urged, even begged her own children.

My life is just about as close to ideal as I imagine a life can be. I have two beautiful children, am building a career that I am immensely proud of, and live in an adopted country that has embraced me and engraved itself in my heart. Every once in a while, I even have the time to write. How could I not assume that my grandmother made the wrong decision to give this up? But as I heard of Klári Mama dying without us, the miles between the United States and Hungary unnavigable, a wistful unwelcome question flitted into my thoughts: *Should we have stayed?* I batted it away like an irritating fly, over and over again as it returned to torment me, until finally it disappeared.



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When the Sun Rises Without You

by Barbara Joyce-Hawryluk

Her chest rises and falls, hitching a little as her eyes track the second hand of the clock until it reaches twelve. In twenty-nine minutes, she'll be dead.

A question aches inside Julie Silke, a grim tear bleeding down a sallow cheek. *How do you close your eyes for the last time? Let the lids fall, little by little, as the person in front of you, the one you loved from the second you felt her kick inside your womb, slowly vanishes from sight. Forever.*

She doesn't want to leave her only child. She doesn't want to die.

Julie, her mind still in reasonable working order, had cut through the squabble of hope and despair and made a choice. *You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.* It was her favourite Maya Angelou quotation, and it had supplied fuel during a two-year stand-off with her neurologist, Dr. Sand, and with her daughter, Rae, over Medical Assistance in Dying. She wanted MAiD. They didn't.

Rae was an idealist, offering an optimistic flurry of Dr. Google advice, but it was Julie, not Rae, being buried alive inside a coffin of skin and bone from Relapsing-Remitting

Multiple Sclerosis. RRMS had been stealth in its attack ten years earlier—lazy foot nicking the edge of a scatter rug, cups and plates slipping from her hands. The insidious assault had escalated to roaring debilitation—total dependency, visual perversions, and over the last two years, a tenacious fog infiltrating her brain, leaving her forgetful and at times confused. Scrambled thinking triggered panic, which led to the first, second, and then final MAiD application, the first two rejected because of the neurologist's report.

“Who owns my life anyway?!” The desperate cry stuttered between gulps of saliva and air, foam bubbling from her lips as she sat, wheelchair-bound, in Dr. Sand's office for the third time, Rae dabbing sticky white paste from the corner of Julie's mouth.

A question with no clear or simple answer. Not when the law permitting death with medical assistance was new and rules and requirements were still being sorted. Not when the diagnosis and prognosis didn't tuck neatly into the criteria. Not when human beings were being human.

Dr. Sand, a study in practiced authority and clinical efficiency, didn't see it the way Julie did. From the inside. He wasn't hostage to the inevitable devolution, piece by piece, of body and mind—communication lost, thinking disordered, ventilator wheezing into withering lungs, tubes force-feeding

wasting cells, bags and machines encrusted like barnacles on a sinking ship. All to keep the horror show running, for how long, no one could predict for certain, not even a seasoned neurologist.

“You know the criteria for acceptance,” he said, ticking the points off with his fingers. “A medical condition that’s considered grievous and irremediable, incurable and in an advanced state of decline. Intolerable physical or psychological suffering that can’t be relieved under conditions considered by you as acceptable. *And*,” he added, widening his eyes over the top of his glasses, “natural death is presumed to be reasonably foreseeable in the next two years, or thereabouts.”

He’d paused and she knew why. He was waiting for the words, third time delivered, to take hold, as if repetition would shake her resolve.

Her unyielding stare returned his.

“Ms. Silke,” he’d sighed. “You’re only fifty-eight years old. I can’t, in good conscience, answer the MAiD doctor’s question the way you want me to.” He read the question aloud as if she hadn’t heard it before. “Would you be surprised if Julie Silke dies of natural causes in the next two years?” He removed his glasses. “My answer is still yes, because it’s the

truth. With your particular diagnosis, you could be alive two years from now, maybe even much longer.”

Once again, Julie knew that Dr. Sand’s prognosis would be the single factor denying her the right to assisted dying.

A contorted claw of knotted fingers trembled helplessly in her lap as panic raged inside. *I’ll be incompetent soon! MAiD won’t even consider me then! You know this!* Her lips quivered in fury and then flattened. She had neither the strength nor endurance for the same tired argument.

Silence filled the space between mother and daughter as Rae drove back from Dr. Sand’s office to Julie’s assisted living suite, until Rae pulled into a side street, collapsed against the steering wheel, and began to sob. “Can’t you delay? Just for a while. Please!” Rae wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “I’m pregnant, Mom. Your first grandchild.”

Julie’s heart soared and collapsed in the same moment. *Can I wait a little longer?*

The summer passed, MAiD application put on hold as her medical condition declined, forcing three emergency admissions to hospital for pneumonia, lungs wheezing ragged bursts of breath while drowning in mucus and despair. Answering her question.

Boxes on the MAiD application were once again ticked and answer blocks completed. How long had Julie considered MAiD? What were the details of her physical and psychological suffering? Why MAiD versus palliative care or natural death? Why now? If MAiD wasn't an option, what then? Was there anything that would change her mind? Was she aware of other options—withholding or withdrawing life sustaining treatments, or palliative care? Was she of sound mind? Depressed? Were there any contraindications in the file forwarded from her family doctor? Were the important people in her life aware of her decision and did they support it?

As expected, the final part of the assessment, the one requiring input from the neurologist, remained unchanged. In Dr. Sand's professional opinion, natural death may not occur in the foreseeable future.

"Begging you," Julie wept. "Can't do this ... Please ... Another neurologist?" The words came in desperate punches after the MAiD physician, Dr. Walker, delivered the news.

"Getting a second opinion will take a lot of time and there are no guarantees. Before I make a referral, I want to explore one other option," the MAiD doctor said.

Dr. Walker scoured all three-volumes of Julie's medical files and reviewed the medical literature. What she discovered

was a point of possible dispute. Julie's EDS score, a measure of disability and progression, had jumped from level 7 to 9 since her last application a year earlier. She was one point from level 10, death from MS. With three pneumonias in less than two months, the recalculated trajectory of decline deserved consideration, not just the nature of RRMS, because it meant that Julie might well experience natural death within two years.

"Living is tough ... dying harder," Julie managed to spit out after hearing that the third application was reviewed and accepted.

"It's not quite over yet," Dr. Walker cautioned. The lawyers agree that you meet the criteria but a second MAID team is required to make an independent assessment.

Fire flashed in Julie's eyes.

"I'm sorry, I can only imagine how exhausting and frustrating this is for you. We're not trying to make this any more difficult than it already is, but we have a protocol to follow, especially since your situation isn't as clear as others. Another set of eyes will ensure the right decision is made."

Findings from the second team concurred. Natural death was imminent, probably measured in months, not years.

Julie finally had agency over her dying body. No more pneumococcal waterboarding, pharmaceutical straightjacketing, bedsores, infections, and freefalling into the hands of caregivers, some who coupled care with giving, some who didn't.

Her eyes shift in the direction of a curio cabinet—a gift from her long-deceased husband—where the clock sits, along with a swath of medical aids and supplies. Fifteen more minutes. The nurse inserts the first and then backup IV cannula.

“How you do this?” she whisper-stutters.

“Like I said before, the first medicine is a sedative. It'll make you sleepy and relaxed. Before I administer it, I'll ask you again if you're sure.”

A switchblade look cuts across to the doctor.

“I know. If you hear—‘Are you sure?’—one more time, you'll ... well ... I can't imagine what you'd do to me if you could.” Smiles circle the group, the widest one breaking through Julie's shrunken features, brightening her cheeks with a flush of colour.

“The second medication will put you into a coma, a deep sleep. You won't feel a thing by the time the drug from the last syringe goes in. It's a neuromuscular blocker and it

stops your lungs from breathing and your heart from pumping blood. There's no gasping or shaking. It's a peaceful transition."

"Not what I mean." Julie works hard between bursts of hacking and gagging to make her tongue fold around the words and push them out. "Your job."

"Ah, I see what you're asking." Dr. Walker crimps her lips and gathers her thoughts. "Not easily and not lightly. I think about how I want to be treated when it's my time. What would I want if I had a condition like ALS, terminal cancer, or MS?" Her thoughtful eyes rest on Julie. "The answer's always the same. I'd want to be heard and respected."

A gentle purr vibrates in Julie's throat. Appreciation.

"And so," the doctor continues, "I do my best to listen and try to be respectful, reminding myself always that this is about you, Julie, not me. Really, it doesn't feel like a job, not for any of us. I know it sounds cliché, but it feels more like a calling. Hard, very hard. But right, very right. If that makes sense."

Another purr.

The social worker pulls a book from her bag. "We helped your mom make this for you, Rae. It's a Legacy Book and it comes as part of the MAID program."

Rae dabs her eyes with a soggy tissue and opens the memoir, fifty pages abbreviating fifty-eight years of living—the exquisite and the ordinary, highlights and lowlights. She reads the first page; a poem Julie wrote during the dark days following her diagnosis:

Life moves the years through you
Crafting a story
Until one morning
The sun rises without you
And in the seconds before it breaks dawn
You look at who you were
And who you are
And wonder if your story
Made any difference at all

At the bottom of the page, there's a note in unfamiliar cursive.

"Your mom asked me to write that for her," the social worker explains.

You, my precious girl, have been my story, my purpose. I hope I've made even half the difference in your life as you've made in mine. My story might be ending here but yours is being crafted with the gift of new life. Please tell my grandchild that I knew. I had the joy of knowing that he or she was coming as I was leaving.

Julie's nystagmus stalls and permits her eyes to stop shifting and circling for a brief moment, to rest inside her daughter's tearful gaze. Mother and daughter living and dying together *in a lullaby for suffering with a paradox to blame*, as Leonard Cohen once said.

Briny tears pool in the nape of Julie's neck as Rae whispers in her ear. "Good-bye, Mom. I love you forever."

"Love ... you ... too," Julie gasps, weary but peaceful regard drifting to Dr. Walker with an answer to the question she knows the doctor is obliged to ask: "Are you sure?"

Her head jerks a nod and Dr. Walker releases the first plunger.

"Thank you," she whispers, as eyelids, little by little, drift to a gentle close.



Barbara Joyce-Hawryluk shifted gears from academic writing as a social worker to crime fiction in 2013. *Wounded*, her first book in the Scarlet Force series, won bronze in The Independent Publisher Book Awards for Best Western Canadian Fiction, and finalist in the High Plains Book Awards for Best First Novel and Best Woman Writer. The second book, *Bad Elf*, will be released in 2020. Inspired by real events and people, the series features Royal Canadian Mounted Police Constable Debrah Thomas and her husband, Major Crimes

Investigator Liam Thomas. Barbara is a member of Crime Writers of Canada and Sisters in Crime. When she's not writing, she's reading, running, and enjoying her grandkids.

The Wrong Side of the Tracks

by Claire Alexander-Joly

As far as I knew, the world of my childhood was defined and divided by class, and as far as I was concerned, I did not live on the right side of the tracks. From 1963, when I was born, to 1986 when I left for the United States at the age of twenty-three, I lived in a big rectangular block of concrete in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, right outside the Périphérique, the freeway that contours the city and separates it from the banlieues. The building where I and my family lived sat on a hilltop, and from there overlooked not the beautiful sights for which Paris is known but its far less attractive working-class neighborhoods.

Paris and its environs are divided by the Seine. The river runs through the city from the southeast to the southwest curving upward toward the middle. L'Île de la Cité—the site of the Notre Dame Cathedral—is the official center of the capital. South of the Seine lies the so-called “Left Bank” or “Rive Gauche,” historically the place of artists and intellectuals; to the north lies the “Right Bank” or “Rive Droite.” The terms are a bit misleading, suggesting an east/west division rather than a north/south one.

When I was growing up, only the Rive Gauche seemed to matter. That's where the rich lived. In 1971, Yves Saint

Laurent launched his famous women's perfume— Rive Gauche—named after his boutique in Saint-Germain-des-Prés on the south side of the river. Ever since, brands the world over have borne the same name to denote luxury: Rive Gauche Shoes, handcrafted shoes and leather products by an Italian designer in Florence; Rive Gauche—London, interior design “for a discerning clientele”; Rive Gauche Jewelry from the heart of New York's diamond district. In contrast, few products have ever been named after the Rive Droite, and those that have usually give off a “casual-but-nice” air, catering to a more middle-of-the-road clientele. The Rive Gauche was a powerful status symbol. Unfortunately, my world was clearly on the Rive Droite, if even that, more to the right of the right side—outside of the city's periphery.

In the United States, people often ask me where I come from. Paris, I tell them, because it is a short and convenient answer. You're from Paris! My reply never fails to elicit an enthusiastic response that no exclamation mark or other form of emphasis can convey. Yes, Paris, I confirm, at which point the interlocuter will inevitably launch into old or recent memories of trips to the city. I may be in the middle of getting a tooth pulled, undergoing an X-ray, or speaking with the bank teller, it does not matter. My personal business is suddenly tossed aside—teeth and all—and the wondrous tales of Paris

start to flow. I might as well have said, I'm from the moon. But I'm not from the moon, and in fact, I never really lived in Paris proper. The real answer to the "where are you from" question is that I come from a place called Le Pré Saint-Gervais that in all likelihood people have never heard of because tourists just don't go there. At best, a visitor driving on the Périphérique might zoom by without knowing the place even exists. Nothing would draw their attention to it. From the freeway, the landscape on that side of town is studded with modern gray tenements, a view that does not jive well with most people's image of Paris and its surroundings. So, I stick to my generic answer: I'm from Paris.

The building where my family and I lived was the product of 1950s urban development in response to the need for more affordable housing outside the city. We knew it as "The Little Waffle"—"La Gaufrette"—a nickname that somehow got attached to it when it was first built. The inside and outside balconies did make the concrete structure look a bit like a waffle. Perhaps the name was meant to make it sound like "Home, Sweet Home," but the place did not instill tender feelings in me. It was unattractive, I thought, and with the windows open, noisy. The balconies were blue, yellow, and red—cheap left-over paint for which no one had better use. Low-income housing.

My parents had moved in as a young couple. My mother worked from home as a typist for a dating agency (a precursor of online dating services), while my father worked on car parts in various factories. Neither made much money. Le Pré (as we called it for short) was a good fit: La Gaufrette was brand new, close to the metro, right outside Paris, and affordable. The freeway was built soon after they moved in and opened to traffic in the early 1970s. What more could a family on a small income hope for? First, my parents moved into a studio where they still lived when I was born three years later; then into a two-bedroom apartment where we still lived when my brother was born eight years after me; and then finally into a three-bedroom apartment on the eleventh floor of the building where I spent the rest of my childhood and where my parents remained until they retired in the late 1980s. We were a working-class family aspiring to be middle class, and both Le Pré Saint-Gervais and La Gaufrette were key to our social mobility.

But from the balcony of our eleventh-floor apartment, there was little to inspire the imagination of a young person. The endless stream of cars from the freeway down below smelled up the place. Women—always women, it seemed—labored up the hill with their market carts and their baguettes. Buses too labored up the hill. Men, leaning against old walls,

lingered around smoking cigarettes or tinkered with their motorbikes, while stray cats meandered around looking for prey. By far the happiest sight was that of children coming in and out of school down the hill, the school that I attended through the eighth grade.

Le Pré felt more like an intersection than a destination; La Gaufrette, like an island without a true sense of place, adults and children alike crossing paths mostly in silence and anonymity. Only the pigeons gathered on the anemic patches of green that lined the street, thanks to the old woman who came out every day to feed them with bread crumbs.

What I could not see at the time, from my limited perspective, was that right around me were people much worse off than me whose lives told of a world and a French experience far less privileged than mine.

In the 1960s, Le Pré Saint-Gervais not only attracted people like my parents, it also drew recent and not-so-recent immigrants—mainly from North Africa. The neighbors right below us on the tenth floor were Jews from Tunisia (a former French protectorate that gained its independence in 1956) and below them on the ninth floor was a Muslim family, also from Tunisia. The two families, perhaps because of their religious backgrounds, did not get along, and we especially

did not get along with the family on the ninth floor, the Muslim family. Trouble usually erupted at night over apparent trivialities. Someone was making too much noise somewhere. A TV was too loud. “Bang! Bang! Bang!” Across all three floors, we took turns at hitting the steel radiators, easy targets for anyone wishing to vent their frustrations on others loudly. My mother retaliated with the handle of a sturdy spatula wrapped in a kitchen towel to keep the radiator from chipping. My father had painted it after all.

My parents often lay the blame on the Muslim woman from the ninth floor for “starting it.” Who had started what and why, I will never know, but what I do know now is that these fights were symptoms of deeper problems that remained unaddressed. Our ninth-floor neighbor often sarcastically called my mother “la Chrétienne” (the “good” Christian) as a way of saying that my mother thought she was superior; to which my mother retorted, without missing a beat, that she was Christian and proud of it. Truth be told, my mother hardly ever went to church, never carried a Bible, and never prayed, but in that moment she wasn’t about to relinquish her pedigree, and I suspect that she did feel a little superior, more civilized than the woman she always called by her last name instead of the more common and more polite “Madame,” which she used for the other women around her. Our ninth-

floor neighbor was also keen on reminding my mother and my father that she was as French as they. Whatever prompted such reminders, it is clear to me now that these were borne out of a sense that she did not belong in the way my parents did. How many times did I hear my mother say, “Mais ces gens-là, ils ne veulent pas s’intégrer!” But those people, they don’t want to integrate! Ces gens-là. Those people. Short for those who don’t belong and whose fault it is if they don’t. “If they want to live here, they have to do it the French way!” The TV, the kids running across the floor a little too loudly, were only the surface manifestation of a difficult social reality: Our families embodied different social experiences, different histories that for some created a sense of inequality not shared by others.

My parents, like many of their contemporaries, held “Arabs” in contempt, especially Muslims whose religion was distrusted. The name itself, “les arabes,” was used to cast aspersions on that population. Arabs, the argument went, wanted it both ways—they wanted to be independent from France, but, when in France, they also wanted to live as if they were still at home—à la casbah! The word “casbah” is still commonly used to refer to a very loud and chaotic place. Arabs, the argument went on, should either adjust to the French way of life or go home. “Moi, si je pouvais, je les

enverrais tous chez eux.” I’d send them all back home if I could. The disdain was palpable. No one ever asked, how would I feel if my country had been colonized? What would I do if my country was impoverished as a result? Would I stay home? Would it be easy for me to adjust?

But I too inherited some of my parents’ prejudices. I didn’t like Arabs either. They had names I couldn’t pronounce, languages I couldn’t understand, clothes that looked foreign. At least some did. Some of the women wore henna tattoos on their faces and henna in their hair, which—I am loathe to say—I thought was unbecoming. Some of the women and men wore long white garbs that harkened back to a distant land that felt very different from mine. These were not the sights or sounds of home.

Early in my life, an unconscious association between whiteness, Europeanness and Frenchness had taken shape in my mind. Our neighbors had been in France for some years, and their children had grown up in France; yet I did not see them as French—to me, they too were foreigners, outsiders. My neighbors did not look white or European the way I did. My family, on the other hand, was all white European.

The insidiousness of these associations is especially evident now when I consider how I responded to the ethnic

diversity of my family on my mother's side versus how I responded to our neighbors'. My mother's family is French born but has deep Germanic roots. My maternal grandmother, her siblings, and most of their children are from the Alsace region, a part of France steeped in German culture as a result of repeated periods of Germanic rule. I spent a few summers at my grandmother's house. Most of the year, she lived in Paris where my mother was born and grew up, but in the summer, she returned to her birthplace. Everyone there, my grandmother included, spoke Alsatian rather than French. Alsatian is an Alemannic German dialect related to Swiss German. It is similar to the dialect spoken by the Swiss Amish. The children I met in Alsace spoke Alsatian before they spoke French, even in school! I could not play with them because I couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand me despite the fact that Alsace is very much a part of France. Alsatian and standard German were default languages everywhere—in stores and restaurants; on trains and buses; on television and the radio. No one spoke French as their main language except in the larger cities like Strasbourg. My grandmother's village was forty miles away from that city, the region's capital. My father often said that Alsace felt like a foreign country. It did. Yet, somehow, I never questioned the Frenchness of Alsatians. Despite everything, I knew they

were French in the same way that I was. Part of it was probably the fact that they lived within our national boundaries. But, by that token, I should have considered young Algerians born in France who clearly spoke French to be French. Yet I did not. To be French meant that you looked like me. They did not.

Our ninth- and tenth-floor neighbors had children, but the only children with whom my brother and I spoke or mingled were the ones who lived upstairs. Like us, they and their families were culturally Christian, white, European—and not immigrants. We went to school together, which is how our parents knew each other. The school system in my town was clearly divided between the private Catholic school that I attended and the secular public ones which were said by those around me to be underfunded and not as good. The children downstairs went to public school. Class, religion, and ethnic origin created a social divide. There were virtually no students of North or Sub-Saharan African origin in my school. Likewise, with the teachers. In all the years that I was in school, from the start of kindergarten in 1966 when I was just three years old to the end of my graduate student years at the Sorbonne in 1986 at the age of twenty-three, I never once had a teacher who was something else than white European.

French history lessons did not help bridge the divide between my world and the world of my neighbors (or that of other North Africans around me). We did not learn about French colonialism. We did not learn about Algeria. I never heard of the work of Frantz Fanon until I was in the United States. When Fanon's critique of French colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, first came out in France in 1961, it was banned. When the war in Algeria ended in 1962, the French textbook approach to French colonialism "evolved" from the blatant extolling of French colonizers to a somewhat less biased interpretation; one, however, that still failed to include the perspectives of the colonized.

In literature classes, I read the famous works of Albert Camus, *The Plague* and *The Stranger*, both of which are set in Algeria. But Camus was what the French call "un pied-noir," a French person of European origin who lived in French-occupied Algeria before 1962. Camus's Algeria, in real life as in fiction, was that of colonial France. It's no surprise that the people described in his novels—who are also "pieds-noirs"—did not strike me as being much different from Parisians.

More revealing would have been William Gardner Smith's novel, *The Stone Face*, published the year I was born. Smith, a black man from Philadelphia, had settled in France in 1951 after serving in Germany during World War II. His

main character, Simeon Brown, is also black from Philadelphia and has moved to France because he feels that something terrible will happen to him if he stays in the United States. In Paris, he starts to feel like a man again but sees Algerians being targeted by the French police. One day, he gets into a scuffle with an Algerian man, ironically thinking that he's is white. The two are arrested. He, who is black but from America, is let off the hook, while the Algerian is thrown in jail, though innocent. Much to Simeon's dismay, another Algerian man who witnessed the incident later confronts him and says: "How does it feel to be a white man?" "We're the niggers here!" the man exclaims. Simeon is stunned but comes to understand that, while France is a haven to him, a foreigner who does not represent a threat to French interests, it is not safe for those who live under the yoke of French imperialism. In France, William Gardner Smith became a serious critic of French colonialism and a staunch supporter of Algeria's National Liberation Front.

I was born one year after the war in Algeria ended. The only war-related story I have is of my father choosing to "miss the train" when his time to serve came because so many of those who'd already left had either died or suffered severe wounds. For those who served, the bitter defeat in Algeria was nothing to brag about. Algeria gained its independence. The

era of French colonialism came to an end. And we, the colonizers, went home. Unlike the dead of World War I and World War II who were widely commemorated, those of the Algerian war were not. One author has aptly called it “the impossible commemoration.” There was no shortage of films about the two world wars when I was growing up, so many that even now I tire of the idea of watching any other, but how many films were there about the war in Algeria?

Algerians lived on the periphery of my world. “L’Algérien” was what we called the man who owned a small grocery store in the center of our suburban municipality. The only times we shopped there was when all other stores were closed. We knew most merchants by name, Madame this, Monsieur that, but the Algerian was just that—“l’Algérien.” Recently, I was thumbing through letters that my brother sent me after I’d left for the United States. In one of them from 1989, I was intrigued to read that he and my parents had gone to a new Algerian restaurant on the occasion of his birthday. The restaurant, he wrote, located in the center of our town, had just opened and the couscous was delicious. Maybe we’d all go there the next time I was home? Try hard as I may, I cannot picture my family—my parents especially—sitting in this Algerian restaurant, which, it turns out, was not new. Le Royal Couscous, I later discovered, had first opened in

another part of town in 1980 (six years before I left), then closed, then relocated in 1989. I'd never known that the restaurant was there, and I could only imagine that it was my brother's idea to try this "new place."

Perhaps most striking, as I look back, is how little I knew of how the vast majority of Algerians around me lived. In 1965, about 40,000 resided in shantytowns around Paris. These settlements were called "bidonvilles." "Bidonville" literally means "can shaped town," referring to the half-can shape of dwellings that characterized some of these makeshift settlements. Most dwellings looked more like shacks or tents. Whatever the shape, none had running water, electricity, or a toilet. These camps were just far away from Paris and its immediate suburbs (mine included) to be hidden from view. The one closest to where I lived was about ten miles away, far enough for me to not know that it was there. Had I caught even a glimpse of the "bidonvilles," I, who thought I was living on the wrong side of the tracks, would have felt that I lived in the lap of luxury. La Gaufrette was a huge step up from such poverty. A tenement building like ours was where many Algerians dreamed of living.

On a recent visit to my hometown, I returned to the streets of my childhood for the first time in over thirty years.

La Gaufrette still stands by the freeway. I recognized the roads easily. As I approached the back side of the building, I could see that it looked different: Some of the balconies had been enclosed and a new red brick surface replaced the old paint. I made my way down the hill and round the street to the front of the building and looked up to where we used to live on the eleventh floor. There was the kitchen window from which my mother used to wave goodbye when I left for school in the morning. There was my bedroom balcony from which I contemplated what life might have in store for me. I lingered a while, then started to make my way farther down the hill to see what had happened to my school. Right then, a man about my age who'd seen me looking asked if I needed something. "No, thank you," I said and explained that this was where I'd grown up. I was visiting. It turns out that he too had grown up in the neighborhood—but he'd never left. He got very animated and told me all about the new construction. "You won't recognize the place!" he exclaimed. I was glad to chat with him. But while he talked, pointing this way and that, I looked mainly at him. He was North African, and in that moment, it struck me that he and I who had lived in such close physical proximity had existed in completely separate worlds. I thanked him for his help and went on my way, wishing that I could say more, wishing we had more memories to share.



Claire Alexander-Joly is a humanities professor, originally from France, with an academic background in African American Studies. For over thirty years, she has lived in the United States where she had to come to terms with what it means to be white in America. She is now at work on a

memoir entitled, *'You're White Now': A Tale of Immigration, Adulthood, and Race in America*. "The Wrong Side of the Tracks" is based on the first chapter of her book.

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Carolyn Bastick, British by birth and a naturalized American, was born in Hong Kong into a British Army generational family, survived the eccentricities and lack-luster education provided by the English boarding school system (a memoir she fully intends to write one day), and spent much of her adult life as an ex pat living in the States, raising a family, and working in the compliance world. She is a lapsed horsewoman and passionate self-taught gardener and has recently repatriated to England, where she is happily self-isolating with her fiancé in their large and unruly garden—finally learning how to be an English gardener.

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Barbara Joyce-Hawryluk shifted gears from academic writing as a social worker to crime fiction in 2013. *Wounded*, her first book in the Scarlet Force series, won bronze in The Independent Publisher Book Awards for Best Western Canadian Fiction, and finalist in the High Plains Book Awards for Best First Novel and Best Woman Writer. The second book, *Bad Elf*, will be released in 2020. Inspired by real events and people, the series features Royal Canadian Mounted

Police Constable Debrah Thomas and her husband, Major Crimes Investigator Liam Thomas. Barbara is a member of Crime Writers of Canada and Sisters in Crime. When she's not writing, she's reading, running, and enjoying her grandkids.

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Judy Lev, originally from Cleveland, OH, lives and writes in Haifa, Israel. After earning a BA from the University of Michigan in 1967, she moved to Jerusalem. Her writing has appeared in *Consequence Magazine*, *Kenyon Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Creative Nonfiction* and *Michigan Quarterly Review*, among other journals and college textbooks. *Brain, Child* nominated her for a Pushcart Prize in 2013. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Goucher College and an MA in fiction from The Shaindy Rudoff Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. "Leaving" is a chapter from her unpublished memoir, *Our Names Do Not Appear*.

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Cover Art: photograph (Mark Leichter) of street graffiti in Bologna, Italy.