

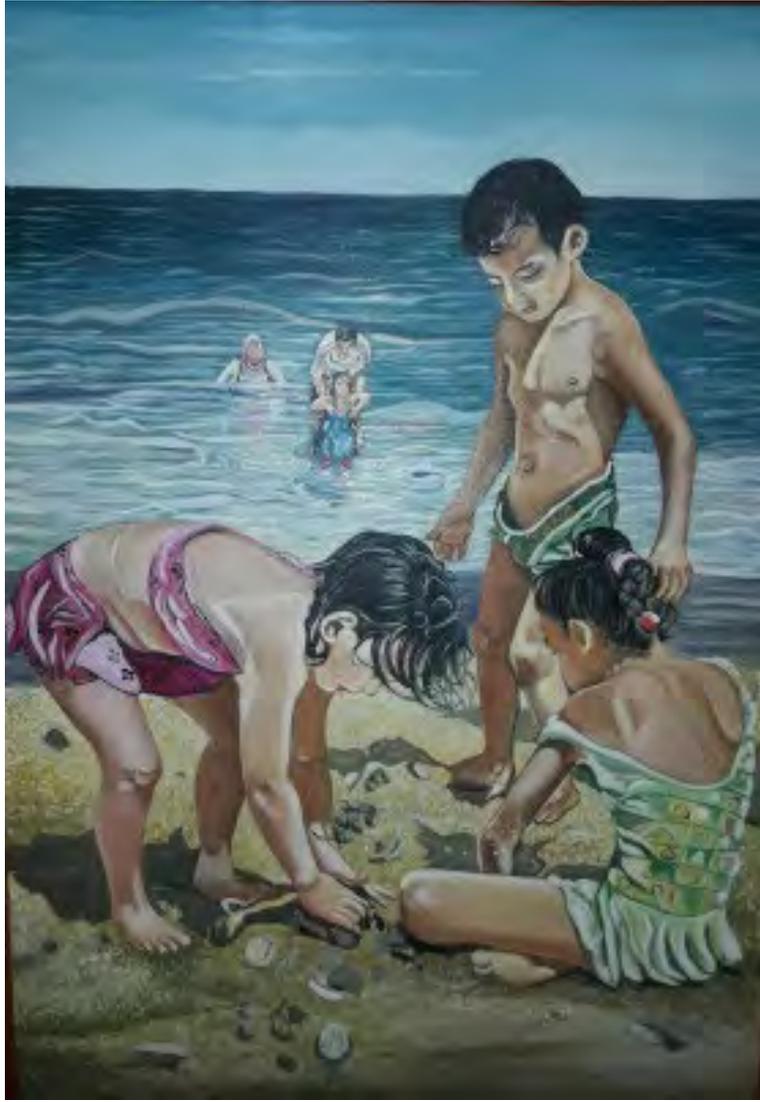
bioStories

Volume 11, Issue 2



2021

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Cover Art: "At the Beach" by Osama el-Laithy

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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At Ease

by Tim Bascom

I have a vague memory of curling up in the carpeted footwell of a car when I was only three or four, back in the days before seat belt laws. I think I fell asleep down there with the warm purr of the engine, oblivious to the problems of the outer world, problems that were for adults to resolve, not me. And later, when I was on family vacations as a ten- or eleven-year old, I clearly remember getting tired of sitting between my two sweaty brothers then throwing my chubby pre-pubescent body over the back seat into the luggage area of our Rambler station wagon, where I sprawled across the duffle bag that held our canvas tent and across the flannel sleeping bags. The Rambler swayed and rumbled. I could see out the rear window to the stars, which glittered in the immense sky, flickering as we passed under silhouetted trees. And I dozed off without thought or worry. Limbs loose. Free of pain. Hair whirling in the breeze from an open window. Without a care.

I was about to say that, back then, I assumed security was a sort of birthright, but no, that would be a lie. To be honest, I already knew a good measure of insecurity. As a seven- and eight-year old, I had been sent to boarding school, which was a terrifying experience of helplessness. So . . . no, I did not grow up feeling entitled to safety. In fact,

after those boarding school years if my parents would go on a date and leave me with my brothers, I could not sleep until I heard the light rattle of the front door and the whump that signaled they were back inside. My parents had to reclaim me, re-establishing their protection, before I was able to rest without worry. Only then could I become child-like again. Only then could I give worry back to “bigger people,” abandoning myself to the journey—to the swaying vehicle and the waxy canvas and the earthy softness of the sleeping bags.

Our cat Miles is funny in an entirely un-self-conscious feline way. He leaps into any container that becomes available—grocery bag, cupboard, ice chest—then falls asleep. I have photos of him dozing in cardboard boxes and wicker baskets, even a plastic cake cover from the grocery store. And we love to watch him sleep like that—so at peace. We joke that he is posing for us, aware of how trusting he appears. But of course he is not aware, which is exactly why we find him so charming. Symbolic of the way we once were ourselves. Like babes in our mother’s arms.

It’s a jump, but ancient Julian of Norwich declared in the fourteenth century, having survived a near-fatal illness, “All will be well, and all manner of things shall be well,” and people have been quoting her ever since. For isn’t that what we all long for more than anything—the innocent belief that we do not need to worry because someone more powerful will attend to all our cares?

In the case of Julian, who was somehow able to keep seeing like a child even in her pain, worry was the property of God. And now that I look back, I see that I, as a child at boarding school, went to God for the same solace. When I lay down under the sheer weight of my worries—at night in the dark dorm room with the other seven-year-olds in their bunks—then I would talk to God silently, turning over those fears one by one: whether my parents were still alive or whether they would show up when the holidays came or what to do with the surge of sorrow that threatened to swallow me. In those early years, before I became an adult and felt the need to take more command, God was in the firmament, winking quietly from the stars, and though I worried I could be overlooked, I kept putting my faith in that watchful presence. All would be well because all *had* to be well.



One day not long ago, our beloved Miles went missing, and though we scoured the neighborhood shaking a bag of his food and calling, he did not emerge. We searched down alleys in the dark. We asked a dozen passers-by if they had seen a rotund tabby cat. We posted a photo on our neighborhood list-serve and another on Facebook. We even put his litter box outside so that he could smell it and make his way home.

For four days, we struggled to fall asleep because, paradoxically, we were the ones overwhelmed with concern. Then, finally, a neighbor called. She had heard a meow in her basement. She wondered if, when her husband was gardening and left the outer basement door open, our cat had become curious and gone down there.

That explanation seemed as plausible as any, given Miles's predilection for leaping into unknown hiding places. Sure enough, as soon as I called into their basement, he appeared from behind a stack of boxes, whimpering. I picked him up, overjoyed, and carried him to freedom. I felt that, indeed, All was well and all manner of things would be well. . . until he leaped from my arms, desperate to be away from the jail cell into which he had so naively ventured.

Anxious in the sudden vastness of the out-of-doors, Miles ran nervously up and down the walk beside our house—to the back door then the front, then hesitating between. Would he be safer inside or out? Who knew? Now that it was imperative for him to be aware and find his own safety, he was completely unsure of himself.

Unless you become like one of these, Jesus said, pointing to a child in the crowd, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. And I “get it” now—now that I am an adult with the adult worries that automatically accompany “independence”: the unappreciative boss, the medical bills, the hesitating engine, the votes to cast. I am nothing like our pre-loss cat, who could leap into a washing machine and fall asleep, if given the opportunity.

These days I am my own worst enemy, even if I try to sit cross-legged and breathe in, breathe out, concentrating on being present in my own animal body, trying to be mindful in the Buddhist sense, which is to let go of my ego and the attachments that

accompany it. Without a care? No. There are definitely cares now. Cares that swoop through the perpetual dusk of my mind, random and unpredictable as bats after bugs.

When I finally gathered Miles up again and carried him into our house, he ate ravenously—as if the food might disappear. Then he surprised me. He went straight to the back door—to the pane of glass which displayed the sunlit outer world—and he cried and cried.

I didn't want to let him out, for obvious reasons, but at last I reluctantly opened the door. How wistful I felt, as I watched him slink under the bushes, turning to scan the yard from his chosen hiding place. I stepped out with a book, to be more present, but as soon as I sat down, he came sprinting to me, mewing. He ventured away, but when I looked up from my book, he came dashing back.

Would he ever be the same carefree cat? Would he ever leap into unknown spaces like he used to? Would he settle down to rest if I closed the cupboard door behind him?

I thought I knew the answer. I feared I did. For once we have begun the journey into self-awareness, how can we go back to who we once were?

On the other hand, though, aren't we all still un-self-conscious children at some level? Underneath all the adult bluster and the props that go with it—the hard-earned house and the clothes and the bank accounts that we have built up as a sort of fortress—aren't we all still quite small, therefore not truly in control? And even if we cannot fall back into our young, elastic bodies and sleep with that same animal abandon, isn't there some way in which we might go forward instead, into a new mysterious place where we become “like” children again? Adults but completely at ease?

Analogies have their limits, I know. However, I am happy to report that a few days ago my wife called me into the bathroom, where I found Miles fast asleep in the sink, curled into a perfect oval of resting fur.

Tim Bascom's newest book, *Climbing Lessons*, is a collection of forty brief personal narratives about fathers and sons in his Midwestern American clan. Bascom is also the author of a novel, a collection of essays, and two prize-winning memoirs. His fiction has appeared in *Fiction Southeast*, *Mainstreet Rag*, and *Lalitamba*. His essays have won

prizes at *The Missouri Review* and *Florida Review*, being selected for the anthologies *Best Creative Nonfiction* and *Best American Travel Writing*.

Wisdom from the Alligator Purse

by Emma Berndt

Once upon a time I sat in a miniature chair in a parent-tot class and became smitten with ‘the lady with the alligator purse.’ Remember her from the playground rhyme “Ms. Lucy had a baby” that children sing while playing hand clapping games? If not then here’s a refresher. A baby by the name of Tiny Tim drinks all the bathwater and then tries to swallow the tub itself. Understandably he doesn’t feel so great afterward. Ms. Lucy calls the doctor, who calls the nurse, who calls the lady with the alligator purse. The doctor looks at Tiny Tim and declares he’s sick with measles and the nurse says it’s the mumps. But, in the version read at parent-tot that day, the lady with the alligator purse declares the doctor’s and nurse’s assessment of the situation nonsense. She says there is nothing wrong with Tiny Tim and then she orders pizza for everyone. That’s the end. And, listening to the story that day I was struck with the feeling that I’d spent time as a mom to first one and then two small children desperately needing more of her wisdom. Could I get her number?

After my second son was born, I left the workforce with no immediate plans to return. At the time, I had trained myself over nearly two decades of climbing the ranks in the working world to spend a large portion of my day in a state that I now refer to in my head as “robot.” In “robot” mode, every email that popped into my inbox would cause my heart rate to speed up and a small surge of adrenaline to course through my body. I prided myself on how quickly I could dispatch various tasks and the sheer volume of work I could process. I wanted to excel in my job, and like many people I know, a lot of my very identity was wrapped up in my work.

And so it’s not surprising that slowly, in a way that was fairly imperceptible to me at the time, I adopted the values of the organizations that I worked for as my own. These weren’t necessarily bad values, but they tended to be limited with a focus on efficiency and always being available. In too large a dose, they impeded my ability to be patient, slow down and sometimes take a deep breath and order a pizza. The exact skills it turned out I needed most the moment I had young children.

There is something about learning the ways of little kids that is hard to absorb except experientially. Mastering the tone of voice; learning how to ‘narrate’ actions in a way that doesn’t feel absurd; gently yet firmly guiding a young child to follow routines and schedules without getting locked in a power struggle; these are things that I have only been able to learn through trial and painful error. And, most importantly, through watching others.

This more experiential way of learning has been frustrating for me because my instincts all tell me that the way to learn is to sit down with a book. And, while there are some wonderful books out there, not only was it hard for me to absorb their lessons as a new parent, many also operated with the assumption that there was some slack in my life. That the tantrum my child had just thrown at Target hadn’t already thrown off a packed schedule. And so the time that was now recommended I take to abandon a full shopping cart mid-aisle in order to take my child home mid-tantrum, then wait for him to calm down and re-connect with him only to later attempt the shopping all over again wasn’t pushing me from late to missing an obligation—or string of them—entirely. And this assumption about slack was the *polar opposite* of the assumptions embedded in my working life which revered being busy, packing schedules, and having “too much on my plate.” I struggled to toggle between the two extremes and competing world views. No book I consulted really addressed both. And so, with my “robot” mode ascendent, instead of absorbing the lessons of the books, I scoured them hoping to find one or two easy-ish “tricks” to implement. I didn’t have room in my mind or my life for the inherent messiness, both literal and emotional, of raising children. I had unknowingly sent the lady with the alligator purse packing.

When I decided to step out of the working world, I came to the decision slowly as a thought that originally seemed like a faraway daydream started to grow more immediate in my mind. I wanted to spend my time on things that mattered to me and I was ashamed to realize that I’d thought of raising children full time—what is often called ‘staying at home’ although I dislike the term since it is comically non-descriptive and entirely defined in opposition to having a paid job instead of by the work itself—as outside of what I believed success looked like. Success was an impressive title, good salary, and great looking business wardrobe, right? Success was power. I’d swallowed narratives of

success that were focused almost entirely on individual achievement in the paid (most likely male-dominated) labor market. How nurturing small humans fit into my ideas of success was fuzzy and undeveloped.

I was also well aware that it's the moms who usually step out of paid labor to care for children and I felt a certain amount of unarticulated amorphous dread that this decision might now reduce me to an anachronistic gender stereotype. It took me a while to realize that the very notion that women need to enter what has traditionally been the men's arena to be considered accomplished and have prestige was itself dated and one-sided and of course depends on the age-old practice of devaluing traditionally feminine roles. And so, with a little planning and some hard conversations, I walked away.

That's how I found myself sitting in a parent-tot class determined to learn more about the lady with the alligator purse. I was surprised and at first disappointed to discover that many of the early variants of rhymes in which she appears do not have her prevailing with her calm and cool assessment of the situation but instead actually agreeing with the doctor and nurse. Who was this lady?

Then I came across the groundbreaking book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* which documents the schoolyard rhymes of 5,000 children in the United Kingdom in the 1950s. And, right there in the introduction was something that was both obvious and that floored me. Schoolyard rhymes are part of an oral tradition that children have passed *to each other* over generations. They endure—sometimes for centuries—largely apart from adult meddling. I was shocked to see a version of a rhyme I sang as a child in Massachusetts in the 1980's that started "not last night, but the night before..." as being sung by children in England in the early 1900s.

That's when I realized, it doesn't matter who the lady with the alligator purse is—she's most likely a Rorschach test anyway, reflecting back what we want to see. I now know *why* I had found her so appealing. Like the rhymes themselves, I had seen her as the embodiment of the kind of wisdom that is passed through generations. And, I loved how the version of the story we read in parent-tot seemed to value this kind of slower more patiently accumulated knowledge. As I was embarking on carving out a new role for myself defined primarily by caregiving, I found it reassuring that this lady had somehow become a respected voice helping children and families outside of any known power

structure. And I admired her strength in the face of uncertainty. I mean, she could live with the unanswered question of *why* Tiny Tim tried to eat the bathtub. And, rather than rush to slap an easy-to-understand label on things (measles!), she was confident enough to contradict the doctor and the nurse, sit with the weirdness of the situation and move on to dinner as we all sometimes have to do.

Power in caring. Strength in uncertainty. Confidence to carve out our own roles. Those are all things we could use more of right now. And so I say, whoever she is, long live the lady with the alligator purse.

Emma Berndt was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts and now makes her home in Chicago with her husband and two young sons. She holds a A.B. in history from Harvard College and a MSc in Regional and Urban Planning studies from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Emma spent over a decade working in the fields of urban and environmental policy. In 2018 she left her role as the Executive Director of the Energy and Environment Lab at the University of Chicago to focus on raising her children. This is her first published essay.

The Reporter and the Reporter's Mother

by J. Malcolm Garcia

The reporter sat in the living room and waited for the coroner to arrive and pick up his mother's body. A hospice nurse had checked her blood pressure and listened to her heart just forty-eight hours earlier and had told him she was fine. One-twenty over eighty, the nurse had said. She then asked his mother if she knew the day's date. His mother stared across the room at the pink clay tiles of the patio, upended by burrowing chipmunks and now barely discernible in the overcast evening, and the look on her face reminded the reporter of a moment in sixth grade when he had not done his math homework and his teacher, Miss Fowler, asked him questions he could not answer and gave him an F. After a long silence, his mother replied, February 19, 1917, her birthday. I'm ninety-eight, old, old, old, she said. No, the nurse replied, it's November 24, 2015. The reporter's mother said nothing. Do you know where you are? The street you live on? Home, his mother answered, I'm home, her voice flat and distant, a fearful look in her eyes as if she knew this, too, was incorrect.

This morning, just two days after the nurse's visit, the reporter's mother had felt nauseated and a home healthcare assistant, Cathy, helped her into a wheelchair and took her to the bathroom. Once there, she said she'd like to lie down and Cathy helped her to her room. She got into bed and fell instantly to sleep. Her breathing became labored and Cathy called the reporter, who had been reading in another room. He hurried in and Cathy suggested he call the nurse and when he got off the phone he saw his mother had stopped breathing. He swallowed and the noise in his throat sounded very loud and he just stared at her and called her name three times and Cathy started crying. When the nurse arrived, the reporter told her his mother was gone and she followed him to the bedroom with its flowered wallpaper and faded photographs of New York and Puerto Rico and pressed a stethoscope against her chest. Tree branches clattered against a window by a rocking chair. She's gone, the nurse said as if the reporter had not told her. Folding the stethoscope, she dropped it in the pocket of her white jacket and shook her head. Her vitals were fine when I was here the other day, she said. She must have experienced

some kind of event. The reporter almost asked what she meant by that but didn't. It no longer mattered. His mother had grown slower in recent weeks, like a clock winding down. She had slept increasingly throughout the day. I'll call the coroner for you, the nurse said. There's no need for an ambulance unless you want one. No, he said. This is what happens, Cathy said, no longer crying. All of a sudden they're gone. Every elderly client of mine. Just like that. He listened to her speak, a middle-aged Irishwoman with a thick brogue, the rhythms of her speech something his mother had loved. He couldn't move. Rooted to the floor, he felt vacant and heavy and stared at his mother curled on her side, eyes closed, seemingly asleep. The nurse rolled her on her back and her eyes popped open like someone surprised and the look upset him and he reached over and closed them with the palm of his right hand. Muscles relax when a person dies, the nurse said. She may emit gas. You should leave the room when the coroner arrives, she continued. He'll put her in a body bag. It would be very disturbing, I would think, to see that. There may be fluids. The reporter nodded, annoyed that his mother had been reduced to an explanation of how a body begins to decompose. He walked the nurse and Cathy to the front door hoping they'd leave without saying another word. Cathy hugged him and the nurse said, I'm sorry for your loss, and then they left and he shut the door behind them, leaning into it because it was a heavy wood door, and the noise of closing it passed through the hall like a wave flattening into quiet and he returned to his mother's room and stood by her bed unsure of what he should do other than wait. He thought to call his cousins but he didn't feel like talking. My mother's dead, he whispered to himself, my mother's dead. He said it several times, his voice catching, and he realized he would break down if he told anyone so he decided to wait. She was three months shy of her ninety-ninth birthday and had outlived her older sister, brother and friends. The reporter felt hollow. The abrupt silence of the house rushed through him. In some ways, he had said goodbye to her when he came home to care for her five years ago, the role of child and parent reversed, but he had never prepared himself for her being completely gone. Fifty-eight years of having a mother, done.

His father's father had died before the reporter was born but he remembered when his paternal grandmother died in her home in Tampa. His father's sister Jo called with the news. When his father hung up, he said matter-of-factly, Your granny's dead, and then

he walked into the dining room and closed the door behind him. The reporter's mother arrived home minutes later from the supermarket and after he helped her with the grocery bags the reporter said, Aunt Jo called. Granny died. His mother hurried from the kitchen and called his father's name. Chuck! Chuck! The reporter presumed she found him in their bedroom, maybe sitting on the edge of his bed, crying, although it was hard to imagine his father crying. Eyes brimmed with tears, perhaps, but not crying. He was not someone to show emotion unless he was angry. Then he threw things and shouted. The reporter wondered how comforting his mother had been to him. She had never liked his mother but the reporter felt sure she would have put aside her animosity at that moment. Years later, his mother's sister, Aunt Elvira, told him that his grandmother had often visited his father and mother for months at a time in the first years of their marriage and tried, as Elvira put it, to rule the roost. The reporter's father was the youngest of four and perhaps she had a hard time letting him go. Whatever her reasons, she irritated the reporter's mother, who eventually had enough. It's your mother or me, she told his father, and she left and spent the summer in New Jersey with friends and did not return for twelve weeks. His grandmother visited only rarely after that. The day after his father died, the reporter's mother removed a photograph of her mother-in-law from his father's night table and tossed it in the trash.

The reporter walked upstairs, the green shag carpet beneath his feet more than thirty years old but in remarkably good condition, and he entered his parent's bedroom and sat on his father's side of the bed and tried to think of his father and mother with him now but he felt nothing other than himself alone in the darkness of their room, photos of his maternal grandparents, aunt and uncle on his mother's chest of drawers, and he went back downstairs to the dining room and sat at the table, and his dog came to him and rested his head in his lap, and he patted the dog and fingered a bowl of tangerines. His mother always had a tangerine with her breakfast. Two pieces of wheat toast, no butter, and a tangerine. Eggs on Saturday and Sunday. She used to say breakfast was the most important meal of the day. I eat better than you, she scolded when he moved back home. I'm better looking than you, he replied. They both laughed. He called this their vaudeville skit, a routine they engaged in at least once a week as they learned to live together again.



The reporter's mother had just turned ninety-two when his ninety-four-year-old father died in 2009. He drove until the end. The last time he got behind the wheel was on a February afternoon. He drove to Mariano's Supermarket in Northfield, Illinois, near the reporter's old high school. Clutching a shopping bag after he made his purchases, he slipped in the parking lot, fell, and broke his right hip. Someone called an ambulance and medics arrived in a wail of sirens and lifted him onto a gurney. As they pushed him past his car, his father said, You can let me off here.

This would be the most expensive cab ride you ever took, one of the medics told him.

His father's hip healed remarkably well for a man his age but he caught an infection while he was in rehab and died two months later.

Three days after he returned home, the reporter sat with his mother on the couch in the living room. He got up for a glass of water and asked if she wanted anything. No, honey, she said. When he left for the kitchen, she forgot what he had asked and where he had gone. She was only aware of his sudden absence. Chuck, she said, calling the reporter's father. Chuck, I don't know where anybody is. I lay awake at night listening to you, listening to you breathe. Your breath rattles. I wonder if you'll wake up. I wonder if I'll wake up after I fall back to sleep. We're so old, Chuck, and I don't know where anyone is. Can you hear me where you are, Chuck? Are you there?

Mom!

Her head jerked, eyes wide.

Who's that? she asked.

Mom! the reporter said again walking into the room. He hated to shout but she could no longer hear and refused to wear hearing aids because she found them a nuisance.

Oh, honey! She laughed. I didn't see you.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. I was in the kitchen. I thought I heard you.

No, I didn't say anything, she said. I'm fine.



During the reporter's first few months home his mother would listen to Rush Limbaugh because, she said, Rush told the truth. That was something his father would have said, the reporter thought. He assumed he had listened to Limbaugh and now his mother listened to him seeking security in his father's habits. They had married in 1947 and remained together for more than sixty years. What would that be like? The reporter couldn't imagine. In the 1990s, he lived with a woman, Jean, for eight years in San Francisco and had assumed it would last forever but it didn't. She had wanted children, wanted him to get a job that would support a family. He didn't know how he'd find a job that paid that much and wasn't sure he wanted to be encumbered with a family. In fact, he knew he didn't. His father had done that, worked in sales his entire life, provided for his family but hated his work and dreamed of owning a ranch, a wish that got no further than requesting property listings from Colorado rural real estate agents. The reporter had ambitions to work overseas and did not want his father's life of unfulfilled desires. Children, he knew, didn't figure into his future, and when Jean understood this she left him on a Wednesday evening in April 1995 when the weather that day felt more like summer than spring. They were in Sonoma, California, forty minutes outside San Francisco and had stopped at a Mexican restaurant for dinner and drinks. A waitress brought them taco chips and hot sauce and they ordered burritos. What about us? Jean had asked him as they waited for their food. She just said it. Nothing led into it. What about us? I think about us, he said but he knew what she was getting at. I don't want kids, he said. He had told her this many times before but there was a finality in his voice, or perhaps a finality in the moment, a shift in emphasis that had not existed before. He was willing to accept the consequences, had anticipated this moment, he realized, without knowing it until now. Jean began crying. They finished their drinks and walked outside without waiting for their meal. Do you want to separate? he asked. I guess so, she answered in a shaky voice. He stayed at a friend's house that night. To this day, he wished he had never asked, Do you want to separate? He wished he had remained with her and put up with her anger until he got her to see things his way but that probably never would have happened. His first Christmas without Jean, the reporter called his parents. His mother asked, Who will you get together with today? I don't know, Mom, he said and broke down and hung up. He was thirty-eight and cried so hard his eyes swelled and after

he regained control he swore he'd never allow himself to be so vulnerable again. He worked for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Kansas City Star*. After 9/11, he left the *Star* and reported from Afghanistan and Pakistan as a freelance writer. On a whim, after he moved in with his mother, he looked up Jean on Facebook and sent her a message. She responded and after exchanging a few messages he called her. She was married and had a daughter.

I'm caring for my mother, he told her.

Twice a week the reporter drove his mother to the supermarket and doctor appointments. She had macular degeneration that required injections into her eyes, curvature of the spine, high blood pressure and a host of other ailments. He hated shopping with her and felt bad for hating it. Because of her back she leaned heavily on the shopping cart and walked up and down each aisle horribly slowly, driving him to distraction. She became obsessed with bread and bottled water and bought large quantities of both. When they returned home, he saw her to the living room and then brought the bags in from the car, unpacked them and put most of the bread in a basement freezer and kept the cases of water in the garage. He made her lunch, a half turkey sandwich with lettuce and cheese, no tomato and half of an avocado on the side. He remembered coming home from school and she'd sit him down in the breakfast nook and make a snack. He had collected bugs in jars, especially inchworms, and they lined the window sill. Except for the fact that he was the one preparing meals and the bugs were long gone everything felt as it did then. The house had never been upgraded. The bathroom appliances, the tiled floors, the wallpaper, all of it untouched from the day it was built in 1957, the year of his birth, in Winnetka, Illinois, a fashionable North Shore suburb of Chicago. Worn and scuffed but standing.

When he was a boy, his street consisted mostly of Irish families in sprawling, two-story homes like his parent's on an acre or more of land. Private security patrolled the streets and there were no Black or Brown people other than those who held jobs as domestic workers or landscapers. Jews lived in nearby neighborhoods and were known to be politically liberal and therefore spoken of with derision by those who were more well-off, mostly Protestant or Catholic, Republican and not Jewish.

During the week, his mother shopped at Jewel Foods in Hubbard Woods, a small town about a ten-minute drive from their house, and she would take him with her after he got home from school. He remained outside collecting shopping carts scattered around the parking lot and pushed them to the front of the store. An elderly Black man in a white apron worked outside loading groceries into cars. Every time the reporter brought in a cart, the man would thank him and smile. Years later, the reporter would wonder what the man thought watching him, a well-off White child, treating his job as a game.

When the reporter returned home, the two Black movers who transported his furniture and bookshelves and clothes and dishes and scores of other things he had been carting around since God knew when and then left in boxes in a closet, stood in his driveway and stared open-mouthed at the size of his parents' house and the homes around them.

This is paradise, one of the movers, said.

Did you watch "Good Times?" asked the second mover, referring to a 1970s Black sitcom that took place in an unnamed Chicago housing project.

The reporter had never watched it but he knew not to admit that. He did not live like his parents, did not have his father's income but he understood none of that would matter to the mover. He had experienced privileges this man could not imagine.

Of course I watched it, he lied.

What did you think when you saw how the people in the show lived?

I thought it was a good TV, he replied.

He knew that was not the answer the mover was looking for but that was all he could give him.

The reporter was ten in the spring of 1968 when he and his parents flew to Tampa to visit his father's mother and his older brother, Manuel, his sister Jo and her husband, Clyde. The reporter remembered Jo as very thin but with thick brunette hair cut short. She made wonderful cakes and pastries. Clyde was a big, jolly man who entertained the reporter by teaching him card games.

The reporter's grandmother lived in a house more than one hundred years old on Delaware Street. An RCA radio from the 1930s stood in the front room across from bay

windows that opened to a wide porch with rattan rocking chairs shaded by palm trees. Stray cats rubbed against wood pillars and sparrows carried twigs into the narrow spaces between the pillars and the roof for nests. At night, the reporter's parents asked him to keep his grandmother company as she watched "The Lawrence Welk Show." She would tap a foot to the music and the living room light reflected off her dome of white hair.

One night, the reporter and his family watched Martin Luther King Jr. give his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech on television the night before his assassination. When King stopped talking, Aunt Jo muttered, nigras. The reporter's parents did not comment on the speech or object to Jo's slur. The next day, when news of King's assassination spread, the reporter's father and his family agreed that he had been asking to get shot. They expressed no regret he had been killed. Neither did his mother. After he moved home, the reporter reminded her of that trip to Florida one night after dinner.

I don't know, I just didn't like him, his mother said of King. I didn't like his marches. It bothered me to see all those people being attacked like that by the police and not fighting back. It was wrong. King should have done things differently.

The reporter didn't argue. If civil rights protestors had resorted to violence his mother could have dismissed them as thugs. He assumed their peaceful demonstrations had raised questions about her own privilege that she chose to reject rather than confront. Instead she criticized King. The reporter doubted he could convince her to reconsider, not at her age. As her son, he had experienced similar advantages. Better, he thought, to examine his own values than to criticize her.

The reporter took his mother to Mass every morning and picked her up thirty minutes later. One morning she didn't wait for him and decided to walk home, about a mile. He found her on the street, arms outstretched to either side for balance, stooped forward and all but stumbling, exhausted. His distress amused her. It was as if she had to prove something, he thought later, and assert herself against the losses in her life. It animated her and she talked about the shocked look on his face when he found her for weeks, laughing and turning her head toward where his father had always sat on the sofa as if she was sharing the moment with him.

Sometimes after church, as the reporter and his mother ate breakfast together, she would recall her childhood in New York. A girl named Ruth was her closest friend. One afternoon, they sat on the roof of the apartment building where Ruth lived on East 76th Street. The clear day carried the noise of traffic below them. Ruth produced a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. The reporter's mother looked at it. He imagined her ruffled by a breeze. He imagined her brown hair down to her shoulders, the shape of her nose, the mischief in her face. Neither she nor Ruth had smoked before.

Let's do it, his mother said.

She laughed recounting that moment.

I miss your father, she said. I miss Ruth. I miss all my friends.

Three weeks after he returned home, the reporter hired a home healthcare giver named Alma, a Mexican woman. He told her his mother had some physical disabilities and would need help around the house. In addition, Alma would cook and drive her to doctor appointments. His mother could be difficult, the reporter cautioned. She did not believe she needed assistance and did not want to be treated as if she did. Never offer to help her unless she asks, he told Alma. Be subtle. If she walks into the kitchen, follow her but pretend you need something from your purse or whatever. Don't feel you have to talk to her all day. Let her start the conversations. Give her space.

On her first day, Alma walked into the living room, hugged the reporter's mother and kissed her on both cheeks. His mother, raised in New York but born in Puerto Rico, chuckled. She's greeting me like a Latin, she said, pleased. Alma, however, didn't last. The reporter's mother grew to dislike her with the intensity of a thunderstorm. It wasn't Alma's behavior that bothered her but her life. She lived on the South Side, in what his mother believed to be a crime-infested neighborhood because it was mostly Black and poor. She had two children from different fathers. The reporter's mother suspected she had never married. She never asked, and Alma never offered details. Her son had dropped out of high school, and, Alma worried, was involved with gangs. She lived in a world that his mother could not fathom, a world in her mind that existed without order or values, a world she had begun to fear as far back as 1945 when her Upper East Side New York apartment, paid for by her lawyer father, was burglarized. She returned home

from an outing with Ruth to find it in upheaval, kitchen cabinet doors flung open, plates broken, furniture overturned, the bedroom ransacked. Her universe had been breached, and Alma's stories about her life and children and their absent fathers were another breach. She didn't understand how people like Alma turned out as they did. How could they have children outside of marriage? How could they allow their children to quit school? How could they live where they lived? How could their lives descend into such chaos? She became increasingly agitated with Alma, and perhaps, the reporter would think later, even afraid. I don't want her here, she told him one night. When he objected, she shouted, I don't want her here!

He fired Alma on a Friday morning. I'm not surprised, she told him. I could tell your mother didn't like me. Then she embraced him, kissed him on both cheeks and wished him and his mother well. He walked her to her car and said he was sorry. That's all right, Alma replied. The morning had opened up and the sun shined through a canopy of elms whose low-slung branches shielded the house from the road and the sound of Alma's car as she turned right out of the driveway and drove to Lake Street and I-94 east to Chicago.

The reporter hired Cathy a few months later. She worked half-days and then the reporter brought on two more caregivers, all of their hours increasing over time as his mother's infirmities became more pronounced. Like Cathy, the other two women were White and Irish. His mother liked them. Between their shifts, when it was just the reporter and his mother in the living room, a newspaper open on her lap, he would notice her staring straight ahead not focused on anything in particular, adrift in thoughts he knew had nothing to do with him or the day, immersed, he assumed, in memories of people no longer alive like Ruth. And then something would interrupt her, a breeze through an open window rustling the newspaper, and she would look down at the headlines and then across at him, a surprised look on her face. Did you say something? she would ask. No, he said, nothing, and she would shift, tug at her sweater and look around as if she'd lost something. What were you thinking? he asked her.

Nothing, she answered.

Just a moment ago, he persisted. She shook her head. I don't know, she said finally. Whatever it was, it's gone. Honey, you don't have to watch me. Do your work. I'm fine.

Mom, I'm just reading.

I don't need to be watched over.

I'm not watching over you.

I'm not helpless, you know.

I know.

Then she stopped talking and resumed staring again.

The reporter's work at times required him to travel abroad to Afghanistan and cover the war. He told his mother he would be visiting friends for a few weeks and caregivers arranged their schedules so that one of them would always be with her. He'd call and make up stories about being on a beach in Florida or skiing in Colorado. If he forgot to call, Cathy would send him frantic emails to get in touch. Your mother's asking where you are, she scolded.

Three months before his mother died, he reported from Kabul. Toward the end of the trip, he met with a mullah whose son had recently died. The reporter and a translator went to the mullah's mud-brick house and sat on red carpets and drank green tea. Through a window he saw chickens scurry behind the house on the hard clay ground and a breeze blew burqas drying on a line. The mullah's son, a police officer, had been traveling to Kabul on a bus with civilians when a NATO plane bombed the bus, killing the mullah's son and seventeen other passengers. The mullah asked the reporter if he had a family. No, the reporter said. There was a woman once but not now. I live with my mother. My father died and I care for her. The mullah reached over and touched him on the shoulder and commended him.

But you should marry and have children and carry on your family's good name.

His mother greeted him full of enthusiasm when he got back. Did you have a good time? she'd ask, and he told her stories about body surfing in Miami. The caregivers did not seem interested in his trips, or if they were, they never asked about them, perhaps, he thought, because they were fearful his mother might overhear. He spoke to friends but they all thought he was crazy to work in Afghanistan so he said nothing to them, either. He felt detached from everyone his first weeks home. Nothing made him feel whole until

he traveled again and became consumed in the frantic movement of airports, too preoccupied to dwell on his solitude and the lies he would tell his mother.

Resettled at home, he resumed cooking for her and after dinner he would sit beside her as he always did. A reading lamp would cast a soft light across a magazine she had open on her lap and that she glanced at but mostly treated as a prop. She would ask him the time and he would tell her and she would say, Well, I won't retire before ten. That's when your poppy and I always went to bed. More often than not, however, she fell asleep long before ten. He'd wake her and lie about the time so she'd go to her room.

When his work slowed the reporter took whatever jobs he could find. He lived with his mother during the Great Recession when many publications weren't hiring freelancers. One spring, he accepted a temporary job as a groundskeeper at the Park Ridge Country Club, twenty minutes from his mother's house. He worked from five in the morning to two in the afternoon five days a week. He and his nine coworkers, all of them Mexican, were responsible for maintaining the club's golf course. The Mexicans called him güero, or pale. Their supervisor, Joel, and his assistants, Kyle and Bill, were also White and spoke little Spanish.

One afternoon while he was trimming bushes, the reporter overheard a club member complain to Joel that few of the maintenance crew spoke English.

Well, if the board would allow us to pay more than minimum wage we'd be able to hire more than Mexicans, Joel told him.

Every morning the reporter and the Mexicans gathered in what had been the family room of a house built sometime in the 1940s while Joel, Bill, and Kyle sat in another room and discussed what work had to be done that day. The aging wood floors buckled underfoot and bees collected in warped paneling.

Buenos días, Joel said walking out of the office one morning a few minutes after five.

Buenos días, the reporter and the Mexicans responded together, reminding the reporter of a classroom of children greeting their teacher.

Kyle had recently graduated from college. He wore glasses and didn't smile, giving the impression he was trying to assume the look of what he thought someone with

authority should have. He rattled off the day's assignments: Miguel, Antonio, and Anarbal, rope off dead patches of grass. Santos and Miguel, pick up fallen tree branches. Jose, Raul, Ramon, and Nacho, lay sod. The reporter, tee service.

Any questions?

Silence. Then Kyle said that the club mechanic, Oscar, was missing some tools. If you need something, ask, don't steal, Kyle, said facing the Mexicans. He asked one of them, Raul, who spoke English, to translate. When Raul finished, Kyle said, I'm not saying you did steal, I'm just saying don't steal.

Raul translated again. The Mexicans said nothing. They got up and went outside to begin work. Out of earshot of Joel, Bill, and Kyle, they expressed their anger at being accused of stealing. The reporter stood among them but said nothing. Kyle had not directed his comments at him although he knew if he fit the stereotype people have of someone with the last name of Garcia—brown skin, black hair, English spoken with an accent—Kyle would have looked at him, too. And his first name, Malcolm, defied the stereotype even further. It made him angry at Kyle and at himself for not saying anything.

The reporter got in a cart and drove to the first tee to begin tee service. He had to fill divots on all eighteen tees with a mixture of grass seed and sand and rotate the tee markers, fill ball washers and wipe down benches before the club opened. The morning grew lighter, the sky brightening to a pale blue. Squirrels loped across the rough, their erect tails like periscopes poking through parting mist. He watched the clubhouse staff park in the lot by the practice tee. Two teenage boys put out baskets filled with yellow balls by wooden stands for golf bags.

Using a plastic cup, the reporter began shaking the seed and sand mixture into divots. He moved tee markers so the grass beneath them would not die. He noticed a few divots he missed and filled those with seed. He hated himself for the satisfaction he took filling divots but he took pride in being thorough. Joel told him he took better care of the tees than anyone else. That made him feel good. Am I that desperate? he wondered. He thought of older people he had seen working at McDonald's and other fast-food joints. Guys his age. What's their story? The same as his? He should interview them, he thought. He walked past the ball washer, paused and then knocked it over. It clanged against the

redbrick walk. He picked it up. Well, hell, that felt good anyway, he thought. He didn't bother refilling it with water. Joel never checked the ball washers.

The reporter drove to the second tee. Sunlight glazed the sky a searing white and the reporter felt the heat and the weight of his cotton shirt as he began to sweat. He saw the Mexicans sweeping the edges of sand bunkers with weed whackers. The reporter wiped dew off a bench and emptied trash. He moved tee markers and filled divots before he got back in his cart and steered it to the third tee. He noticed Kyle coming toward him.

When you're done with tees, Kyle said, Joel wants you to clean sprinkler heads.

Okay.

Kyle turned to leave. The reporter called him back.

What? Kyle said.

It was wrong of you to accuse us of stealing.

I didn't accuse you, Kyle said.

Why not me?

I didn't accuse anyone. I said don't steal.

The reporter watched him drive off, listened to the barely audible sound of his cart's electric motor until he no longer heard it. He had confronted Kyle and accomplished nothing. He was a young man unaware of his biases and bigotry. The reporter lived with his mother. His freelance work would pick up again, he was sure, and he would leave here and the Mexicans would not and there was nothing he could do about that or Kyle either. His mind emptied. He drove to one tee and then the next until two hours had elapsed and he heard someone shout his name and saw one of the Mexicans waving his arms signaling it was nine o'clock and time for their fifteen-minute morning break.

The reporter parked his cart and walked to the old house where they had met that morning and poured himself a cup of coffee. Kyle walked out of Joel's office. Oscar, he announced, found his tools. They had fallen behind a shelf.

The reporter's mother often wondered why she had lived so long. I often wonder the same thing myself, he would tease, and she laughed and then stopped laughing, the question lingering between them, the mysteries of life and death beyond their understanding.

Why me? she mused.

Her mother died at thirty-nine in the 1929 influenza epidemic. She was twelve at the time and at school. Her father sent a nanny to bring her home and the reporter's mother saw a flame moving beside her and she knew without being told that her mother had died.

Your father sent a nanny?

That's just how things were done in those days.

It didn't bother you that he didn't come himself?

No.

Really?

Yes, really, she insisted.

How did you feel when the nanny told you?

I felt like anyone would feel being told their mother had died.

What was that?

Honey, I just went home.

What did you think?

Stop! she snapped. I'm not one of your interviews.

He leaned back in his chair. His mother reached for a magazine and they didn't speak of it again. In the silence that stretched between them, the reporter recalled when his father was hospitalized. A few days before he died, it became clear he would not recover. The empty look in his eyes and his refusal to eat told the reporter that he was done fighting the infection that was killing him. The reporter's mother would stand outside his room in the ICU and refuse to go in, determined, she told him later, not to cry in front of her husband and the doctors and nurses. After he died, she maintained a poised reserve. Every night when she was ready for bed, the reporter would follow her up the stairs to her room and she would enter it in the dark and the reporter would switch on his father's night table light and she would stop at her bed and look at him from a distance. Good night, honey, she would say, have a good sleep, and he would nod and respond, Good night, and then he would shut the door and walk back downstairs.

Honey, are you having lunch?

I will but not now. Why? You're hungry?

I'd like my usual.

Okay.

But when you're ready. Do your work. I don't need it immediately. I'll make it. Or I'll ask Cathy.

I'll do it.

I'll do it. Lord, you would think I couldn't do anything. And a glass of water, too, please, she called after him.

Nine months before she died, the reporter's mother began hallucinating and was admitted to Highland Park Hospital. She thought she was in a hotel and the nurses were waiters and she saw cheese everywhere and wondered why no one picked it off the floor. The reporter visited her every day. One afternoon, a doctor walked into her room and said he had five minutes and then proceeded to talk with the speed of an auctioneer about how he wasn't sure what was going on with her, perhaps she had experienced a series of mini-strokes but brain surgery made no sense at her age and so let's hope a combination of medications will help her and if you don't have any questions I'll tell the floor nurse to get the prescriptions ready, and he left before the reporter could respond.

His mother spent one week in the hospital. She appeared much frailer to him as he drove her home with a bag full of medications. At home, her back hurt every time she stood and she could no longer walk upstairs to her room. He arranged for her to sleep in a spare room on the first floor, and he bought a wheelchair and put a ramp over the steps that led from the living room into the front hall. A black grandfather clock that had belonged to her mother stood sentry across from the stairs, its chimes long since silenced. He would help her into the chair and make a joke of it—I'm your chauffeur, madam. Where to, miss?—although he knew she hated it. They still sat together at night but she talked less and less. When he woke her to take her to bed she would stare at him confused and then she would fall asleep and he would gently rouse her again.

Now as he waited for the coroner, the reporter marveled at all that had happened in the space of a day. He could see himself looking at her just eight hours earlier, holding her breakfast tray. She told him she wasn't hungry. I won't keep looking better than you if you don't keep eating better than me, he said. She did not laugh and he leaned forward and

said, Mom, you all right? but she said nothing. He assumed she'd not slept well. He wished he had stayed with her instead of leaving her to Cathy while he read a book, and he wondered if her heart was slowing from the moment he woke her, winding down throughout the morning and afternoon until Cathy helped her into bed and it stopped beating.

A noise in the driveway interrupted his thoughts. He looked out a window and saw a white van and knew it was the coroner and he got up and walked to the front door, opened it and waited as a man in a white shirt and black suit approached pushing a stretcher. I'm sorry for your loss, he said without inflection as if he had repeated this one sentence a dozen times already that day. He asked to be shown the body. The reporter walked him to the bedroom down the dim hall. He paused, looking at his mother for what he knew would be the last time, her pale face and closed eyes. She wore a white turtleneck and blue wool sweater and a pair of blue jeans, and he touched the back of his right hand to her forehead and was surprised at how cold she had become. He pulled off her wedding ring. The coroner unzipped a black body bag. Whenever you're ready, he said. The reporter returned to the dining room. The coroner closed the door.

He emerged a few minutes later pushing the stretcher, the body bag strapped to it. The reporter got up to let him out. They both said good night at the same time. I'm sorry for your loss, the coroner said, and the reporter nodded and stood in the open door and listened to the wheels of the stretcher rattle on the brick walk. Closing the door, he went into the living room and thought again of calling someone. He had not planned for this day. Stupid, he thought. He contemplated sending Jean a Facebook message but didn't move. He needed to arrange a memorial Mass. He could do that tomorrow or the next day. There was no urgency. His sorrow, distant and indefinable, buried so deep he didn't know how to reach it, left him lethargic to the point of paralysis. He faced the spot on the sofa where his mother had sat each night, but no flame rose before him and he lingered in her absence, the emptiness of the house becoming a kind of companion, its swarm of memories and ghosts, and he got up and checked the lock on the front door as she would have wanted, and he returned to the living room and sat back down and he waited until ten o'clock before he shut off the lights and went to bed.

As a social worker, **J. Malcolm Garcia** worked with homeless people in San Francisco for fourteen years before he made the jump into journalism. He is a recipient of the Studs Terkel Prize for writing about the working classes and the Sigma Delta Chi Award for excellence in journalism.

If The Chanel Suit Doesn't Fit...

by Jill Dalton

I had promised myself I'd never do extra work again. Unfortunately, my unemployment claim is running out, and I have no new job prospects on the horizon. So when extra casting calls—"Hi, Jill, we'd love to book you on the movie *Trainwreck*, written by and starring Amy Schumer. You'll be a lady who lunches"—chirps the woman on the phone. I'm left confronting my promises. Trying to entice me, the woman from casting continues, "You'll have two very long days (meaning I'll make money) at the Plaza Hotel (meaning I'll be inside)." Against my better judgment, like a battered wife returning to her abusive husband, I blurt out, "Yes. I'm available."

Only two days; how bad can it be?

I show up at my wardrobe fitting with my mother-of-the-bride lavender silk suit along with a simple, black sheath dress. The wardrobe mistress isn't impressed. She appraises my clothing choices, scrunches up her nose in disdain, scurries away like a squirrel searching for nuts, and returns with a cream-colored Chanel skirt suit.

"Put this on," she demands, thrusting the suit at me.

"Um—this is a size six. On a good day, I'm an eight."

"Put it on," she demands again.

I was raised in the military, so I do as I'm told.

"This is extremely snug," I say, sucking in my belly to pull up the zipper on the straight skirt. "I can barely breathe."

"Jacket," she says, dismissing me.

I cram myself into and button up the jacket.

"Shoes?"

I pull my sensible black pumps out of my bag.

"Those won't do," she scoffs. "What size?"

"Ten."

Again, she rushes out of the dressing room and returns with four-inch, cream-colored stilettos—size 9 1/2. I wear a size ten.

“Put these on,” she commands.

They’re beautiful, but I have to squeeze my feet into these contraptions like one of the wicked stepsisters in *Cinderella*.

“I can’t possibly walk in these,” I say. “I broke my foot a couple of years ago.”

“Marvelous,” she coos, oblivious to my distress and misery. “Let’s take your photo.”

I smile, suck it in, and pose.

Only two days; how bad can it be?

The following morning, I arrive at the Plaza Hotel but, unlike Eloise, enter through the side entrance because extras aren’t allowed to use the front entry on Fifth Avenue. Once inside, I follow the signs to holding that lead me to an enormous room filled to overflowing with extras, hair and makeup stations, changing rooms, and a production assistant screaming at the top of his lungs, “SIGN IN. SIGN IN. GO DIRECTLY TO HAIR AND MAKEUP. GO DIRECTLY TO HAIR AND MAKEUP.” I sign in, claim a seat, and line up behind an endless string of extras. Once in the chair, the woman blows my hair bone-straight with enough heat to start a forest fire. Then I’m ordered to stand in yet another long line and wait. Eventually, I reach the next torture chair. The overworked, frazzled makeup woman slaps foundation on my face as she berates me, “Your eyelashes are too thin. What kind of mascara are you using?”

“Um—I’m not sure. I—”

“Whatever it is—it’s crap. Don’t use that junk again. Buy some eyelash-thickening serum.”

I want to say, *Really, lady? For your information, I’ve been cast alongside Academy Award-winning actors, and all you see are my sparse eyelashes!*

Humiliated, I slink back to my tiny chair in a massive room filled to overflowing with long rows of these childlike chairs. When I sit, the skirt of my Chanel suit hikes up, the waistband pinches my skin, and the jacket pulls tight against my chest like I’m an overgrown Alice.

Digging through my bag, I pull out my copy of *The Death of the Liberal Class: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. I try to distract myself by reading but find the material too difficult to focus on in this environment. The book argues that the American people have been deceived by liberals, and the institutions put into place to

serve and protect us have been replaced by corporations and the ruling oligarchs. The only thing more depressing than sitting in a child's chair while in a too-tight suit for a poverty wage is reading this book, so I stuff it back into my bag.

The expansive room crammed full of extras fills me with dread. I close my eyes. Not long ago, I was working with William Hurt on *Too Big to Fail*. He liked me, respected me, and hired me to assist him on several other projects. Now I'm a pathetic nobody surrounded by nobodies. The din in the room hums like a soft roar. *Relax*, I tell myself. *You're lying on the beach. The sun caresses your face. The waves softly lap at your feet. Imagine—*

I'm startled back to reality by the person behind me vigorously tapping me on the shoulder. "Jill! They called your name."

"Thanks," I say, pulling down my too-tight skirt and too-snug jacket. I grab my too-small, cream stilettos and head to the front door to be inspected by yet another wardrobe fanatic as the production assistant screams, "LINE UP! LINE UP! IF YOUR NAME WAS CALLED, LINE UP!" I join the other extras also waiting to be approved. The disgruntled wardrobe mistress goes down the line. "Um-hm. Um-hm. Um-hm." Until she gets to me. "Put those shoes on!" she scolds me like I'm in grammar school.

Holding on to the arm of the gentleman standing next to me, I cram my feet into the shoes, which shrink each time I put them on. Finally, the scowling wardrobe lady, who obviously missed her calling as a correction officer at Rikers, gives us one final once-over before begrudgingly nodding her disdainful approval.

The production assistant leads us out into the wide hallway with me limping behind the gaggle of extras until we finally reach set. Massive, white double doors open to reveal a vast, elegant dining room with enormous crystal chandeliers dripping from the ceiling and archways with columns lining the perimeter of the room. This opulent space is otherwise known as the Grand Ballroom. This is old-world New York glamour at its best. Truman Capote held his famous Black and White Ball in this room.

Another production assistant motions for me to sit at a table with three other "ladies who lunch." We exchange pleasantries. The table is covered with a white tablecloth that hangs almost to the floor. Relieved, I slip my toes out of those 9 1/2s, but I'm immediately reprimanded by another wardrobe Nazi who appears out of nowhere and snaps, "Put zie

shoes on. Mach schnell!”

“The tablecloth covers my feet,” I say, trying to reason with her.

“MACH SCHNELL!”

I squish my feet back inside these instruments of torture like a masochist with a shoe fetish. *Where do they find these sadists?*

At some point after lunch, I notice my friend Susan has disappeared. I ask around and find out from a mutual friend—she couldn’t take the abuse, so she made up an excuse and left. *What? You mean you can do that?* As an army brat, I’d never dream of going AWOL. I’m tempted to join her, but I need the money. So I soldier on, and after fifteen hours, the production assistant screams, “THAT’S A WRAP.”

One day down. One more to go. How bad can it be?

The following morning, I report to set. Nothing has changed. The production assistant screams like a recording on a continuous loop, “SIGN IN. GO DIRECTLY TO HAIR AND MAKEUP. GET DRESSED NOW! LINE UP! LINE UP!” Only today, instead of sitting, we’re walking back and forth, back and forth, down a long, expansive hallway. I’m walking the best I can, trying to look like a normal person in these agonizing shoes, when my back seizes up.

“Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, shit,” I whisper. Pain shoots down my legs as my back muscles go into agonizing spasms. Unable to straighten up, let alone walk up and down an airline hangar of a hallway, I somehow manage to limp over and commandeer the production assistant in charge of us and eke out, “Hi, I’m so sorry to bother you—my back went out. I can’t walk. These shoes—they’re too small. I’m in horrible pain. Please, can you help me?”

I’m old enough to be his mother. He’s young—not jaded yet, so he takes pity on me.

“Take your shoes off. Hide them under here,” the production assistant whispers like we’re spies working behind enemy lines. “Stand in back of this table, next to the wall.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I remove my too-tight contraptions, stash them underneath one of the tables, lean against the wall, close my eyes, and breathe into the pain. *You’ll be fine, Jill*, I say, comforting myself. *The day’s almost over. You can do it. Think of the enormous paycheck.*

If clothes make the woman, the Chanel suit no longer fits. I can't do this work anymore. All the signs are here. The universe has been trying to commandeer my attention for a few years now. I was once hospitalized with a brain syncope because I was left outside in the boiling sun while working on a commercial. Not too long after that, I broke my foot when stepping off the #10 bus coming home from a long day of working on the TV show *Criminal Intent*. Did I listen? Now, finding myself unable to walk and in excruciating pain, it's evident beyond any shadow of any doubt, I can't do this anymore.

After another fifteen-hour day, I am beyond grateful when the production assistant screams, "THAT'S A WRAP!". I limp back to holding, peel myself out of that corset they call a Chanel suit and place it back on its designated hanger. *Auf Nimmerwiedersehen, amigo!* I say to the dreaded suit and stilettos as I toss them into the garment bag. Then, I fall in line behind the rest of the extras, eager to return their clothes to wardrobe because when you wear their clothes, they hold your payment voucher as ransom.

Ten days later, the check arrives in the mail. I rip open the envelope and scan the check. The gross amount is a little over seven hundred dollars. *Not bad*. I run my finger down to find the net amount. Three-hundred and fifty dollars? *Wait? What?* There must be some mistake. Three-hundred and fifty dollars? *Are you kidding me?* They took out almost fifty percent, and I claimed nine dependents. I storm around my living room, muttering to no one in particular. *This is outrageous. How dare they? Fifty percent! This pittance for two days of torture? I am so beyond over this.*

I open my computer, purchase a shredder off eBay. As soon as it arrives, I begin shredding fifteen years of movie call sheets and pay vouchers. The shredder jams regularly. I clean all the debris out of the blades using pliers and tweezers and let it sit for several hours before continuing. God may have created the heavens and the earth in six days, but it takes me seven to complete this mammoth task. I make several trips to haul twelve plastic Fairway bags filled with the shredded remains of my former life down to the basement so the super can dispose of them.

I open my packed-to-overflowing bedroom closet. It is stuffed with clothes collected over the years for background work that I wouldn't be caught dead wearing in my real life. I begin pulling out business suits: brown, camel, olive, gray silk, eggplant, navy, two black. I pull out all the jackets and blazers: the navy wool, beige linen, houndstooth, and glen

plaid. Next, I gather all those Perry Ellis high heels (navy, taupe, black, black suede, dove gray) I paid a fortune for that pinch and bind my feet like I'm a geisha in training. I stuff them into garbage bags along with all the confining, nondescript, uptight clothes, all the detective outfits I wore to solve all those fake cases, all the upscale party clothes I wore to pretend galas with my faux husbands in tow. Finally, I call the Salvation Army to come pick them up. My heart races. I'm exhilarated and free but nauseous like...like I've been released from prison with no money, no job, and no place to go.

At first, this commitment to my dignity, like severing any abusive relationship, is hard. My phone rings, and I jump. "No, I can't do extra work. Stop calling me. Lose my number." My ego, like the Wicked Witch of the West, rages: *You need the money. You're gonna be homeless. Your unemployment won't last forever.* I think of what my 300-pound, chain-smoking therapist said to me in her raspy, New York accent, "You know, Jill, if you'll eat shit, why would anyone bother to feed you steak? (That'll be ninety-five dollars.)" Despite the panic accompanying each ring of the phone, I stop, close my eyes, and ask myself, "Will this bring me joy?" The answer always comes back, "Hell, no!"

The truth is today, I'm fine. I have everything I need. My job is to trust, remain open to new possibilities, and allow the universe to provide. Looking back, I realize that when my dance card was filled with extra jobs, nothing else could come in. It took a while, but eventually, I began booking principal acting jobs.

True to my promise, I never did extra work again.

Jill Dalton is an award-winning playwright whose plays *Whistle-blower* (2015) and *Collateral Damage* (2014) were both semi-finalists in the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. Her book *My Life in the Trenches of Show Business: Escape to New York - Act 1* is available on Amazon, and Act 2 is coming soon. She has also been published in *Auntie Bellum Magazine*, *Delmarva Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pine Hills Review*, and *Progressive Activists Voice*. Jill is an accomplished actress and has performed on television, in film, and both on and off Broadway. Her acting credits include *Saturday Night Live*, *Law & Order*, and Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*. She enjoys walking in Central Park and taking care of her bossy cat, Magpie.

Snip

by Gabriella Brand

I cut them off with a pair of nail scissors. It was not easy work. First the left. Then the right. And I placed them carefully in a shoebox lined with shiny silver paper from *Baraccini Chocolates*. I thought the two braids looked almost edible. They were the color of licorice, glossy and smooth, each about ten inches long.

All year my teacher, Mr. Anders, had been tugging on the neatly plaited braids, which dangled below my shoulders. He was always telling me that he wanted one. “For my collection,” he’d say.

I felt like the teacher’s pet that year, but I think Mr. Anders had a way of making each of us feel special. Giving us nicknames or remembering something personal about us or our families. Who had a Golden Retriever. Whose grandparents had taken them to Radio City Music Hall. Who had memorized Mickey Mantle’s RBI.

Right from the first day of class I had fallen for Mr. Anders’s charms. I was petite, so I sat in the front row, right in front of the teacher’s desk, very well placed to flash a smile at my first male teacher ever. Mr. Anders was young. He had an accent I had never heard before. “I’m from North Carolina,” he told us on the first day, “The Tar Heel State.”

I had no idea what a tar heel was. All I knew was that Mr. Anders had a laugh that could melt sugar. What a contrast to my teacher from the previous year, an old biddy with a downturned mouth and a scary way of sucking in air between her teeth before she went into a rage. She had once told the class that she disliked children, but her other career choice had been nursing. “And I like the sight of blood even less than I like the sight of you,” she confessed.

Mr. Anders adored kids. Plus, he never sucked air between his perfectly shaped white incisors and he never went into a rage, even when we spilled rubber cement on the desks or failed to come in from recess on time. On my first report card, Mr. A. wrote that I was a “delight”. In fact, he said, that I pretty much represented his “ideal” student, except maybe in math, but that was a mere detail. He was sure I would make extraordinary

progress this year. He talked about how much he appreciated my study skills, my good manners, my sense of humor, and my active class leadership.

Although he didn't mention how much he appreciated my braids, I knew, somewhere, deep inside me, that my braids were the glue that kept Mr. Anderson attached to me.

And the rest of the class knew it too. The banter between Mr. A and me over my braids became part of class culture, just like the games of *Stormy Weather* that we played on the playground or the way we all looked forward to Friday afternoons when Mr. Anders would bring in store-bought cookies, sometimes coconut macaroons, and read us *White Fang* or *Black Beauty*, letting us rest our heads on our desks at the end of a long and tiring week.

"I could use one of your braids as an eraser," Mr. Anders would say. "Or I could keep a braid in a cage and teach it tricks."

Everyone would laugh because Mr. Anders was the kind of guy whose jokes were silly, but tender. He didn't try too hard to make anybody laugh. He'd just lope around the classroom with his size twelve shoes, his dazzling smile, his wrinkled blue suit that he had told us was a gift from his Mama, on the occasion of his college graduation.

"But then she cried when I took a job here," he confessed. "So far away from the Tar Heel State."

Sometimes he read us letters that his Mama wrote to him. *How cold is it up North? Are the people friendly? When are you getting married?* At the word married, some of the boys whistled and cat called, but I held my breath. I felt myself blushing. I secretly hoped he didn't already have a girlfriend and that marriage was not in his immediate future.

At Christmastime, I gave him a necktie and a card that I had made out of construction paper. He wrote me a thank-you note, on monogrammed stationary...Herbert Anders, Wills Farm, North Carolina. He loved the necktie, he said, and told me he wore it for Christmas dinner with his family, and his Mama admired the tie too. I tried to picture him showing off his new tie.

Yet somehow, I felt that he was disappointed in such a common gift.

I knew what he really wanted from me.

The year seemed to fly by. I did a report on Scottish tartans, which Mr. Anders called “fascinating.” I learned the names of the emperors of Rome and the difference between butterflies and moths. In the spring we all made lamps out of cypress knees as a class project. Mr. Anders had brought the wood back from a trip to North Carolina. Eighteen knees, hollowed out, so we could each thread one with wire and a socket.

“They’ll make great Mother’s Day presents,” said Mr. Anders.

I think my own mother thought the lamp was an eyesore because she relegated it to the game room in our basement, but I liked to smell the varnish and admire the smooth wood. A piece of North Carolina right there in my house. A piece of Mr. Anders.

By the time the school year came to a close, I had made up my mind what I would give him as a farewell present.

I waited until the day after “promotion day.” I didn’t want anyone else to be around when I presented such a private gift. I knew that all the teachers would be alone in the building, cleaning up, writing reports. Mr. Anders had told us that it would take him until the end of the week to get everything back in order, and then he was returning to Mama and the other Tar heels.

Somehow, I had the sense to wrap the top end of each braid with rubber bands before I cut, so the loose hair wouldn’t come undone. Then I took the nail scissors, held my breath and snipped away. Each braid stayed intact, like a mummy, preserved in plaited form.

I prepared the braid mausoleum ahead of time, folding a pink scarf on the bottom of the box. Then I placed ribbons on the ends of each braid, covering the ugly plain elastics which held the hair together. The silver paper added some sparkle. I had cut my hair at home, in the bathroom upstairs, and I didn’t even look in the mirror after I was done. I just wanted to rush over to the school and give my present to Mr. Anders. I knew I could sneak down the stairs and get on my bike without anyone seeing me. I tucked the shoebox into the wire basket on my bike and pedaled away.

Mr. Anders’ classroom was in end-of-year disarray, with chairs resting on the tops of desks. Papers and chalk dust covered the floor. Mr. Anders was wearing a white t-shirt and khaki pants. He was bent over a cabinet.

“Here,” I said, creeping up behind him and thrusting out the shoebox.

“Oh, oh my, oh my goodness,” drawled Mr. Anders after opening the present. He glanced from the box of braids to my recently shorn hair, lopsided on one side, jagged and coarse on the other.

I smiled at him.

“Sit down, Little Miss G,” he said, clearing a few papers and turning over one of the desk chairs.

I sat down. Perhaps he was going to talk to me about our future lives together.

“I can’t accept your braids,” said Mr. Anders. “You need to keep them.”

“But they’re for you, you...you...always said you wanted them.”

Mr. Anders looked at me. A twinge of sorrow seemed to cross his face.

“I’ll never forget you, Miss G. I don’t need your braids to remember you by. But I want you to keep them. And when you are grown up, please show them to your own children...they’ll be a great souvenir...a way to remember this school year, and...and me.”

I could feel myself on the verge of tears. I don’t remember if I said anything or not.

Mr. Anders handed me back the shoebox. I stuffed it into my bike basket and rode home.

My mother took one look at me and made an appointment for a proper haircut at Diane Coiffures on Nassau Street.

I kept those cut braids and I have them still, carefully preserved in the decorated shoe box. And, eventually, I did show them to my children, who shrugged their shoulders, completely unimpressed.

But for years when I worked as a school head, I’d bring the shoebox to the first faculty meeting in September. I’d open the box ceremoniously. Then I’d pass it around and tell the story of Mr. Anders. I’d talk about the vulnerability of children and how a teacher’s words have weight. Some of the teachers would laugh, but the good ones



understood my message. They'd handle the shoebox respectfully and tenderly, aware that a little girl's feelings were still inside.

Gabriella Brand's creative non-fiction, poetry, and short stories have appeared in over fifty literary publications. Her travel essays can be found in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Globe and Mail* and in several anthologies. Her most recent work appears in *Herontree*, *Adventures in Ideas*, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee. A hiker and a kayaker, Gabriella lives near New Haven, Connecticut. She teaches languages and writing in the OLLI program at the University of Connecticut.

Familiar

by Terri Sutton

I had forgotten what it was like. To be Black and applying for something ... a job, a loan, an apartment. It had been almost ten years since I bought my condo and three times that since I'd interviewed for a job.

I forgot, that is, until this summer when I was relocating from Wisconsin to Ohio and planned to rent for a year before deciding what to do next. The smiling rental agent assured me the approval process was a snap. She managed three properties, including this suburban complex of newly built villas. Of course, she knew what was needed. Just take a screen shot of my savings balance and income deposits and the place would be mine. I, too, was confident of a quick approval. Having sold a house and receiving an adequate pension resulted in a healthy saving account and a monthly income that exceeded what was needed to rent the place. So as she looked on, I did as she instructed. Because of a combination of her assurances and my memory loss, I returned to Wisconsin confident that soon I would be arranging furniture in my new place.

Days later when I didn't get an email confirming my approval, a niggling of worry crept through me.

"I planned to call you," she said after I finally called her. This phrase, I've noticed, is rarely followed by good news.

"The office wouldn't accept your screen shots."

"Why not?" I asked.

She offered no plausible explanation but told me the office ... *they (not her)* wanted a copy of my bank statement showing my name and account number.

"What!" I said and knew immediately that I wouldn't give any *they* my bank account number. "What happened before when people gave you screen shots?"

She paused a beat or two, and when she spoke again I heard the scrape of meanness in her voice. "*They* want to be sure the financial information from your screen shot was actually yours."



Later I chided myself for forgetting the ease with which things can slide from routine to difficult. Thinking about it, reminded me of when I bought my first house thirty years ago. A friend and I were both going through the approval process. We taught at the same college; made approximately the same salary; were both single. But she's White and I'm Black. Her mortgage approval was a snap. Mine was not. The bank asked for more and more information, the specifics of which I don't remember, but I do remember their final demand that the property be upgraded from fuses to circuit breakers before they'd approve the loan. Granted, circuit breakers would have been preferred but not essential and not, in this case, identified as a safety issue during the home inspection. Frustrated, I called the Black loan officer who had taken my application at a neighborhood branch. I had chosen this particular bank because it was Milwaukee based and had recently launched an aggressive campaign encouraging Blacks to apply for mortgages. Huge billboards were plastered throughout the community showing smiling White bankers shaking the hands of smiling Black customers. The loan officer wasn't surprised when I told her what was happening; instead in a whispered voice she told me the name of someone to call at the corporate office. "Tell him what's going on," she said.

I phoned him and as soon as he was on the line I quickly explained who had told me to call.

"Yes . . ." he said. His tone was reserved, non-committal, and I could tell he was White.

"I'm Black," I began, "and I'm applying for a mortgage." I summarized the details of my stalled approval and after I finished, he said, "Thank you for calling."

Shortly after that call, my mortgage was approved without the requirement of circuit breakers.

Now thirty years later I was having another "circuit breakers" moment. Eventually my rental application was approved though I didn't give *them* my bank account

number. In the end this experience joined the others—familiar reminders of who I am, where I am, and how things are.

Terri Sutton lives in Toledo, Ohio. Her work has been published in the anthology *Age Ain't Nothin But a Number*, *The Best of Milwaukee Writer's Circle*, *Under the Sun*, *HowWeAre*, and *Solstice Literary Magazine*.

Big League

by Joe Dworetzky

“This is Jim Fitzgerald,” my voice mail said. “I’m looking for a Joe ‘Doorsky’. If you are him, please give me a call. It’s about Kensico Little League.”

Kensico Little League?

Kensico was where I played baseball as a boy. My family moved away more than thirty years ago. I had never heard of Jim Fitzgerald.

I called him back and gave my name.

“Are you the one?”

“Which one?” I asked.

“The one who played Little League in Valhalla, New York.”

“Yes, I’m that one.”

“Great!” he said. “I’ll go to the other phone”.

When he reached the other phone, he was breathless. “We’re having a parade on April 17 to commemorate the 35th anniversary of your Little League All-Star team winning the Tri-County Championship. We want you to come! I am sorry for the late notice but it’s been hard to track down the team after all these years.”

“You’re having a parade to commemorate our Little League team winning the Tri-County Championship?” I was incredulous. I wondered how much this was going to cost me.

“Yes!” he said. “We have some type of celebration every year on opening day. When I realized this was the 35th anniversary, it seemed perfect. Some people didn’t even know!”

Didn’t know that thirty-five years ago a team of eleven- and twelve -year-olds won the Tri-County Championship? Hard to believe that anyone could be so out of touch.

“We found eight so far, counting you. Say,” he said, “have you kept up with any of the guys?”

I had to shake my head. I was standing in the kitchen of my house in Philadelphia

three dozen years from the last time I saw any of my Little Leagues colleagues.

“No, actually I haven’t.”

“Well, do you think you can come? We’d like you to throw out the first ball and if you have a son or daughter who is Little League age, we’d like them to catch it.”

I tried to imagine my kids driving to New York with me to celebrate my Little League team’s triumph in the Tri-County Championship game. Lydia, the fourteen-year-old, was hopeless, but if I pitched it properly, maybe Eli, my seven-year-old son, would let himself be dragged along. Particularly if I didn’t tell him how far New York was.

“I’ll try to swing it.” I waited for him to ask me for a contribution to the Little League stadium fund or the grounds project or the mother’s snack bar but he didn’t. I was still trying to figure out his angle when he rang off.

I went outside to find Eli. He was in the back yard by himself. We had purchased a new sprinkler, the sort with the sprayer that shot water in a circle as the head turned around. There was a knob to adjust the force of the spray and he had twisted it down so that the water zoomed out in a hard, tight spray. He was wearing a pair of over-large bathing trunks that his mother, my ex-wife, bought him. Tommy Hilfinger was emblazoned on his butt and they hung down below his knees like oversized Bermuda’s.

He was walking around the stalk just faster than the circling of the nozzle so that he stayed dry, though only barely so. Then he shot ahead so he was half a circle—180 degrees—ahead of the spray. He made his stand. He faced the center of the turning spray. He bent both legs and lowered himself into a crouch. He spread his knees far out to the sides of his body and extended both arms in front of him, palms up. That got me, the way he put his palms up. He opened and closed his hands and began to talk trash to the spinning faucet: “Come on, waterman, come and get some if you want some. You want me? You got me. Come on.” He said it derisively out there all alone in the front yard, him and the sprinkler having it out.

In the midst of the tough talk, the spray reached him and sprayed with all of its focused force directly into his crotch. His eyes bugged and he leapt back holding himself

in one hand still talking, “Oh man, you got the jewels. You got the family jewels....”

I waited until he came back to the house.

“Dad, am I at your house tonight?” Eli’s mother and I split up when he was two and since then I had remarried. My ex-wife moved across the street from us, and Eli lived half of the time at my house and half at his mother’s. He did not seem to find it strange to live in two houses on the same street but he had trouble keeping the schedule straight.

I said he was. Then I explained about Kensico and the parade.

“So,” I said feigning casualness, “do you want to go to this Little League thing with me?”

“Are you going to be in the parade, Dad?”

“That’s what they said.”

“And you’re going to throw out the first ball?”

“That’s what they said.”

“Then I’m going to be there.”

I was a catcher on the Kensico Little League All-Star Team. There were fourteen of us, drawn from the six teams in the league. It was a big deal. We had our own uniforms and we got to walk with a swagger. We were the best of the best, cocky twelve-year-old boys who lived for baseball.

I was a catcher because I was tall and slow. My Dad thought it was a great position for me because the catcher was the field marshal of the team. A catcher not only had to be tough and gritty, he had to be smart. Not intelligent, *smart*. The catcher was the one who told the pitcher what pitches to throw. You’d never let a pitcher with their constitutional flightiness and vanity decide what sort of pitch to throw. I mean, can you imagine a pitcher *studying* a batter’s stance to know whether to pitch him low and outside or to jam him up in the hope that his handcuffed wrists would lash involuntarily as he bailed out backwards, squibbing the ball mound-wards in lame embarrassment?

No way could you expect a pitcher to *understand* the game. And no way could you expect the right fielder to appreciate that when Murray Hertzberg was zipping them in the

early innings, none of the hitters were going to get around on the ball and therefore the action in the outfield was going to be down the right field line and so it would be useless and foolish and, again, *lame*, to be playing the batter to pull.

It was the catcher who won the close games and the best part about it was that only those rare few who really knew baseball would know. When I went to a game, I didn't concern myself with the latest media stars, I watched the catcher. I got seats so you see what the catcher was doing down there in his crouch, pulling the strings that made all the intricate wheels of the defense turn so effortlessly, made those double plays snap and sparkle, made those line drives so relentlessly seek the mitts of the brain damaged outfielders. It was the catcher who made everything work. It was the catcher who was in *control*.

And then of course there were the special skills of those who lived behind the plate, the skills that came out at crunch time. Who but the catcher, mask ripped off and face tightened into its own grim mask, would plant himself in front of the plate, immovable, while the throw would gun in from the outfield heading at the cutoff man's head? The catcher gauging the hurtling speed bearing down on him from third and the other runner streaking towards second and that little pill on a trajectory never quite right and the catcher, in the split part of a split second, making that decision that no one else could ever hope to make, much less make correctly time and again, and then—just then—the catcher bellowing to let it come through, and the cutoff man would step out of the way, and the ball and the runner would arrive at once and there was no way that the catcher was going to yield an inch no matter where the ball was going, and then the grab and the dust and the ball and the glove and the bare hand all slamming down like pounding a spike and the runner sliding at that last instant because he understood that it would be the same as running into an oak if he stayed up to challenge this magnificent creature, this catcher.

That glory would be all the crowd would see, but down in some deep unfathomable region of the human spirit that only catchers can enter, the catcher would know that there was another runner out there, another runner who had circled second with the certainty

that there'd be a collision at the plate and a dropped ball and who was now vulnerable and naked and didn't even realize what was happening as the cannon exploded from behind the catcher's right ear. And then that ball was rocketing down to second and the hapless runner just then realized that he should never have taken liberties with a *catcher*, but by then it was way too late and even a desperate headfirst slide couldn't get the runner back to the base and he must suffer the final humiliation of finding that at the end of his slide, his momentum spent, he was still two feet from the bag and lying in the dirt exposed while the joking second baseman took a step over and stooped down to languidly tag him on his head or his butt and then the inning was over and the catcher walked that bowlegged strut over to the bench scowling at his shoes all the way and spitting for good measure...

There wasn't anyone in sport who could eat at the same table with a catcher.

Lydia, Eli's older sister said, "Eli has a confidence problem."

"He has what?"

"He has a confidence problem. Did you hear what he wants to be?"

"Oh. That." For years, Eli had refused to answer when he was asked what he wanted to be. The question gets asked with surprising frequency to small boys and they are supposed to have some sort of answer. We expect them to want to be firefighters or pro athletes. But Eli would ignore the question or change the subject. Now, however, after years of ducking, he finally answered. He said that he wanted to be "one of those guys who work at the cash register at the grocery." He wouldn't give much of an explanation for his thinking other than to say that they did not need to read or do reports.

Lydia was disappointed with his lack of ambition. She wanted to know whether I was going put up with it. In her view, I was unsatisfactorily tranquil about the matter. She was exasperated with both of us; him for lack of ambition; me for failing to treat the issue with the seriousness it warranted.

For his part, Eli seemed content with his choice of career. He asked me whether the checkout guy needed to add up each item after it went through the scanner. He was

pleased with the thought that the cash register did all the adding.

The teammate I remembered best was George Hayes. George was a nervous boy and a nervous pitcher. He chewed the knuckle of his forefinger on his right hand relentlessly; it was always red and puffy with the skin broken and partially scabbed over. When it got really raw, he moved on to the knuckle next to it and so on down the back of his hand. He couldn't sit still. He'd gnaw his knuckle and jiggle his knees relentlessly as he waited, and as a pitcher he did a lot of waiting. He'd pitch an inning and come in and sit on the bench and chew his knuckle and wait for us to get some hits because no matter how good a pitcher he was, he couldn't win without hits. He had a pair of white Converse All-Stars. On the left toe, tattooed with the ink of a blue Bic pen, it said, "STAY" and on the right toe it said, "CALM!"

The little town where I came from, Valhalla, was in those days a remote suburb of New York. When they moved there, my parents believed that they had come a long way from Manhattan both geographically and otherwise. I remember that when my Grandparents would come to visit, they would pack as if they were on a safari, so far were they from Gristedes and Nedick's.

In our town there was the Grand Union for groceries and a pharmacy called Slotnick's that we called Snotlicks. Little League was big business at Snotlicks cause after your game you *had* to stop there and get a milkshake or an ice cream and there were games almost every night for one team or another and so it was standard to find yourself unable to fit in the door at eight o'clock because of all the kids and lapping on cones as they hooted about this hit and that error. About the time that Johnny Domenico lost a fly ball in the sun and it came down right on the crown of his head and popped into his glove just as if that was the plan from the start.

George Barnabec was on our All-Star team. He lived down the street from me. Big, soft-spoken, and powerful, George was an asset as far as Little League baseball went. He

could hit the ball and, when he hit it, that ball would travel. He was left-handed and somewhat awkward insofar as fielding was concerned, but he had a powerful arm and he made a big target at first base.

I remember one time I came dragging home to my house after having had the shit beat out of me by a high school kid named Don Platz. My nose was bloody, my face streaked from tears and dried snot. As I passed by George's house, he came out and asked me what had happened. Chokingly, I told him. He said, let's go back and find Platz. We turned around against my better judgment and went back to the place where Don Platz had bloodied me up.

Platz was an oily kind of guy. He wore sharkskin pants and black beetle boots. He had just started to drive and he had a jacked-up Chevy Nova of which he was extremely proud. He called me "Jack" though he knew my name because he liked to make the same tired joke whenever he saw me: "Hey Jack, you late?"

Platz didn't have any particular animus for me, which made my thumping all the worse. He was one of those high school guys who occasionally, at random, decided to beat the shit out of a ten-, or eleven- or twelve-year-old for the sheer joy of it.

We found him lounging in his driveway by the side of his blue Nova. He was smoking a cigarette and snickering with two other high school guys.

"George" I hissed, "This is a really bad idea." But there was no stopping George Barnabec. Before I even had time to understand the plan, he pushed me by the shoulders and said, "Let's go!" He galloped forward, fast and hard, straight at Platz. I had no desire to be smacked around again by Don Platz and his friends, but I could not let George fight my battles on his own. I took a deep breath and plunged after him like I was jumping from a plane.

Platz turned as we were running towards him. His face registered a stupefied amusement. He held that look up until the very moment that George Barnabec's right shoulder crashed into his chest and my dogged arms closed around his knees. He went right over on his back. His friends had no idea what to make of it, but they showed no interest in participating. They backed away if we might get their sweater vests dirty.

George sat on Platz's chest and I sat on Platz's feet. George wailed on his face. It was exhilarating. It was frightening. It was like we were sitting on a thrashing crocodile. I could not imagine the retribution that was going to befall me, but while it lasted, it was the greatest feeling of all time.

We left Platz lying on the ground in roughly the condition that George had found me. His face was bloody and he was choking back tears and anger. Best of all, his friends were snickering at the sight of him. George and I walked away. It took all my self-control to walk no faster than George.

Our town was not wealthy but Little League baseball was serious business. There were separate uniforms for the All-Stars for post-season play. My pants were made for a boy taller than me and so they flapped at the knees when I wore them the way that we thought was clearly the coolest—showing a lot of sock, both that outside sock of the most ruby red and that inside sock of brilliant white. Both socks gracefully emerged from those black spikes, which even though rubber on the bottom were still *spikes* with everything that name implied. We thought of them no different than spikes of gleaming metal, knife sharp, filed into weapons for the blazing feet of Ty or Honus. When we relived a game—and in those summers that was just about all we ever we did—one of us, my brother or I, would fly into second, spikes blazing, the hapless ground-bound second baseman twisting to rise above those razor deadly spikes, ever in our replays unsuccessful.

It wasn't obvious at first that I could be much of a catcher. In that first year of Little League, when nine-year-olds played with grown men of eleven and twelve, baseball was cruel beyond measure. I had a cheap catcher's glove that had appealed to me because of its nimble flexibility. I had not yet learned that when a pitch hits the ground a foot in front of you and you have to jam your hand, fingers down, into the dirt to prevent a passed ball (how I hate that name even now: a catcher whirling up from the crouch with the runners streaking down the bases, hyenas of merriment, mask flung off, wild-eyed searching for the ball caroming off the pinball backstop) and if your glove wasn't hard-spined and rigid along the back, your fingers would *jam*, and no matter how proud you

were, you couldn't help but cry.

I did a lot of crying that first season, for once I'd jammed that miserable long middle finger and suffered with the ice packs and the blue red bruises that would start on the palm side of my hand and then work their way round to the other side, I'd find that I couldn't really get the damn thing to heal, and even though it felt like I was okay and indeed I was okay playing catch in the backyard with my brother, when it came to game time there'd be another low bouncing pitch and it'd happen again just exactly the same way as before. And again, I would cry. Which was its own misery because if there was one thing no catcher ever did, it was *cry*.

By the time I was ten I had a new mitt and my perpetually jammed fingers had gotten better and I had become more resistant to the urge to cry and besides, I was ten, a man compared to the baby nine-year old's whose parents forced us to let them on the team. And in that year of being ten there came a feeling that for the first time in my life, I was someone who had to be *confronted*. That feeling was a powerful intoxicant to a boy who only a year before had been a mewling pup. And if all I really had was an occasional feeling of confidence, I rode that hard and by the time I was twelve I was an All-Star.

John Saldi had a beard. They said he shaved twice a day. He was six-foot-tall with huge hairy arms. Arms made to tattoo. He pitched for the Cubs and I remember standing at the plate listening to the sound that his fastball made when it popped into the glove of the catcher behind me. I heard the sound before I saw the ball leave his hand.

The first time I faced him I was terrified. I knee-knocked to the plate with a size twenty-eight bat: the smallest size you could use in the Little League, a twig. My only hope to get a hit off him was to get my bat around quick. But his heart-wailing fastball popped the catcher's glove behind me before I could move the bat off my shoulder. I wasn't thinking of a hit. I was hoping for a walk but if I could not have that, I prayed that I would not to go down with the bat on my shoulder. That was the one thing you could control after all; you couldn't force him to pitch outside the strike zone and you definitely couldn't count on hitting one of his pitches, but you could swing the bat when there were two

strikes. And even though there was a heavy racing sound in the back of my head like a freight hoist had somehow been secretly installed in my brain, when the count was 0 and 2 and he reared back to fire another one of those blinders, I swung. I actually swung. And though I swung before he even threw the ball, by the time my bat came around the ball was right there, right over the plate, right where my weenie bat had reached. And then, miracle of miracles, there was an explosion. An explosion so powerful that I was dazed for a moment. I saw the fantastic truth. I had hit the ball. I had hit a Saldi fastball. While it was a little dribbler down the first base line, foul to boot, I had actually hit a Saldi fastball.

“Tell me a joke,” Eli said.

We were in the car driving north to Valhalla. I said, “I am all out of jokes.”

“Come on Dad. Tell me a joke.”

I said, “How many surrealists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

“Dad, how many?”

I said, “to get to the other side.”

His look was fleetingly quizzical but quickly dismissive. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, “now tell me a good one.”

I remembered one that was a little complicated but I decided to try it anyway.

I told him about a guy who buys a brass statue of a rat in an antique store. When he leaves the store, he is startled to find that he is followed down the street by a rat. Soon there are tens, then hundreds, and finally thousands, of rats following him. He avoids being stampeded only by racing to the edge of an ocean pier and throwing the brass statue into the surf. In a frenzy, all the rats leap to follow and drown. The punch line comes when the guy goes back to the antique store and asks if they have any brass lawyers.

I looked over and he was asleep.

The drive from Philly to Valhalla was only two and a half hours. For all the years that had passed, I had only moved 120 miles from where I lived that long-ago season, but it was as if I was travelling backwards in time. The invitation was so implausible that all sorts of

other hopelessly implausible possibilities occurred to me. Perhaps my father (then two years dead) would be there. Maybe I would see Don Platz and his Chevy Nova. Perhaps, somehow, I would be asked to don a catcher's mask and the other gear and crouch once again behind the plate.

But when we arrived, I came back to reality.

There was a parking lot filled with little knots of people: boys in uniform, mothers and fathers sipping coffee from Dunkin Donuts, cars slowly threading through the crowd. No one was in charge. We walked into the center of the parking lot and stopped. Eli and I formed our own little family knot. I looked around trying to figure where I was supposed to go. Eli assumed that I would know what we were doing, where we were going, but I was just a Little Leaguer again, waiting for the grown-ups to get the game organized.

As I looked around the crowd, there wasn't a single person who looked like the twelve-year-old kids who I had hung with thirty-five years ago. I didn't see a person who even vaguely looked familiar. Then a short and very fat twenty-five-year-old with a John Deere cap and a clipboard walked through the milling crowd. He called out, "All-Stars. Any Kensico All-Stars?"

"I guess that's me," I said.

He looked up from under the bill of his hat. "Which one are you?"

"I'm Dworetzky, Joe Dworetzky."

"Oh, wow from Pennsylvania! I'm Jim Fitzgerald. You've come a long way! Great to have you! Did you bring any kids?"

I put my arm around Eli and pulled him forward. "Here's Eli."

"Well, this is just great," he said. "We're going to start out over there. Just a few minutes. Let me go find the rest of the guys."

We walked over to an area by a tree and milled around as affairs slowly organized. Out of the chaos a parade was formed and soon I found myself marching down the main street of the little town where I had grown up. There were several other men of my vintage and they had similar looks of sheepish confusion. None of them looked familiar and the

haphazardness of the organization made it quite unclear whether they were my former teammates or parents of this year's crop of Little Leaguers. I felt like I ought to have a better idea of what was going on, but Eli seemed to like the whole idea and so I gave up trying to figure out who was who and just marched along.

There was a high school band that made discordant marching music and maybe 150 kids in uniform who followed along behind our cluster. There were parents on the sidelines but the notional demarcation between the parade and the sidelines did not last long. Soon we were a throng, all moving from the main street across the train tracks and onto that little road that took us down to the Little League field.

It was a great looking field. The parents had paid for an electronic scoreboard and there was a fence and a tower where the PA announcer could see introduce the batters when they came to the plate. There were stands on either side of home plate and a hot dog vending establishment underneath. Very nice digs for Little League. Much better than in my day, for sure. In centerfield there was a construction tarpaulin over part of the fence. That was a shame, I thought. Too bad they couldn't get the field fully ready for opening day.

The parade spilled onto the apron of the field and then the stands filled and the players raced around grabbing each other's hats and butts and shrieking with laughter. A group of us were herded over to the dugout. Eli stayed with me.

I felt a big hand on my shoulder and turned around: George Barnabec. There could be no doubt. He was still a couple inches taller than me and wider, bigger and clearly stronger. His hand felt like a saddle resting on my shoulder.

"You're Joey," he said.

I hadn't heard the name Joey applied to me in so many years that I thought he was talking to someone else.

"George? How are you, man?"

He said he was fine and introduced me to his kids.

Then some of the other men came up and introduced themselves and pretty soon I was shaking hands and patting the backs of a bunch of beefy fellows that I wouldn't

have recognized on the street but when you looked at them for a while and you started to think of them with half the weight and twice the hair you could start to see that this one was Cliffy Hendricks and that one was Murray Hertzberg. With some of the others I couldn't find any landmark to remember, but we all made a good show of camaraderie.

I didn't feel bad that I didn't remember some of the players. We had played on different teams during the season and it was only for a couple week period at the end of the year that we played together as a team, but I could tell that Jim Fitzgerald was disappointed. Somehow in conceiving of this event he had developed an idea that thirty-five years ago the Kensico All-Stars were a tight band of fighting fellows who scrapped their way to the Tri-County Championship relying on the smarts and support of their gritty teammates. Of course, they stayed bonded together for life; they were brothers in arms.

We lined up by the home team dugout. A number of the dads had a boy or girl of Little League age with them and then the announcer on the PA system—surprise! it was Jim Fitzgerald!—began to introduce us. He called our names and we walked out to the mound one at a time and formed a line. The idea was that as each of us came to the mound we'd throw a "first" pitch to our son or daughter who would stand at the plate and catch.

Eli had no idea this was coming. He was just short of eight years old and baseball was only vaguely in his field of vision. He was happy to come to New York and march in a parade but he didn't realize he would have to stand in front of a lot of people and catch a pitch thrown from the mound. He looked at me in the endearing way that he had. He was saying, "Whoa, what's this about? Can you get me out of this?"

I looked back at him in a way I am sure he did not find endearing, "Not a chance."

He walked to home plate resignedly as I stepped to the mound. Maybe this was not a good idea. But the die was cast. I was sure of only one thing. I did not want to bounce the ball on the way to home plate. I hadn't played a lot of baseball in recent years but I played squash and ran around a lot. I saw no reason to think I couldn't throw the ball to home plate if I gave it a little oomph. But now I had another consideration. I didn't want to fire it in there and have it hit Eli in the head, or even hit his glove and pop right out. No,

I had to throw it hard enough to get to home plate but soft enough that he could make a good try for it.

I stepped onto the rubber. I decided that I had to have some kind of windup. I would look like a dweeb if I didn't have a wind up throwing out the first pitch. But no high kick. I would definitely look like a dweeb if I did a high kick windup. I stood sideways on the rubber, looked at the plate, reached back and threw a nice soft toss right over the plate. It was smooth as could be. Eli opened the mitt and snagged the ball like a natural. Then he passed the mitt to the next kid, kept the ball for posterity and walked off to the sideline. I caught up to him and gave him a little punch on the shoulder. He was glowing. He liked having caught that ball under pressure. I liked it too.

I figured we were about done when the eight of us finished throwing our eight first pitches into home plate. But it turned out there was more. Jim was still up in the announcing booth and now he launched into a description of the triumphs of our team, including our glorious victory in the game that won the Tri-County Championship.

Then he told the next part of the story. I hadn't heard it in a long time but it still sounded good. We played a team from Staten Island and unfortunately a couple of days before the game our star pitcher, Murray Hertzberg, got his finger caught in the door of his mom's Country Squire and it had swelled to the size of an Oscar Mayer. The local paper reported, "When the finger ballooned Thursday night, the whole town of Valhalla began to get concerned." And when "the finger didn't respond to treatment" overnight, Hertzberg was out.

Moreover, our other star pitcher, George Hayes, had pitched a full game a few days before (the very game that won the Tri-County Championship) and under the rules that prevailed in those days he wasn't allowed to pitch again. So we had to face the Staten Island team with our ace reliever, Bobby Klatzkin, as the starter.

Klatzkin could pitch. He's had a couple of high-pressure saves in the run-up to this game. Only one problem, he was a relief pitcher, used to pitching one or two innings. No way was he going all the way. And after Klatzkin, all we had was our second baseman, Cliff Hendricks.

All these years later I can see Cliff Hendricks clear as day. He had one of those buzz cuts where the barber leaves the front a little long and he had it butch-waxed up, not straight but with a slight slant so his whole head looked lop-sided. His hair was blonde, so blonde you could see through to his scalp. He had a slightly triangular face with glasses and one side of his lip was higher than the other.

Glasses were not common among Little Leaguers in those days and those glasses and his Alvin the Chipmunk face made it powerfully clear that he could not throw the heat. But he did have other talents. He could move the ball around. He had great control. We weren't allowed to throw curve balls or anything with action on it, but that didn't mean that you couldn't take some speed on or off the ball. Cliff specialized in that junky kind of pitch. All in all, Cliff was not a bad pitcher. He wasn't the caliber of our big guns but he was what we had and of course we supported him. The only problem was our chatter. What did you say? "Let's go Cliffy?" "Let's go Clifford?" "Let's go Cliff?" There were no good choices.

Klatzkin was solid when the game opened. But after four innings, the score tied 1-1, they found his number. He was done and Cliff took the mound. Cliff couldn't hold them off. The paper described the end this way: "Blasting 11 hits good for 11 runs in the last two stanzas, Staten Islanders turned the close contest into a rout as, for the first time, the Valhallans lost their poise and began to play like 12-year old's."

We lost the game 12-1.

We were bummed out about it for a while, particularly because we thought that if Murray had been able to pitch, we would have made a game out of it. We had gotten a run, we were tied after four innings, we weren't hopeless. With some pitching ...? But we were done. It was a good run; it was a great run. We settled into the rest of our summer.

Valhalla was a suburb of New York and we got the New York papers. I remember how unsatisfactory the *New York Times* sports coverage of little league was even when it was a hometown team moving deep in post-season play. But my dad and a bunch of the other dads started picking up the Staten Island paper in town and bringing it home after work. We could read about that Staten Island team as they marched forward in tournament play. We studied the reports of their games, we saw pictures of the boys that

we had played against, and we rooted for them as hard as we could.

I can't remember how many games it took, but they actually won the New York state championship and got into the Eastern Regionals where they also won, earning them a trip to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Williamsport was, of course, the Mecca of Little League. That's where the world champion was decided. Not just the United States champion, the *world* champion. If you had a fantasy as a twelve-year old Little Leaguer in Valhalla, New York, it was to play in Williamsport in the Little League World Series. You could not dream bigger than this. And if our dream had been dashed, we had been on the same field with those guys who were now playing in the Little League World Series! It was unimaginable. As if you knew a kid who had selected to ride in a space capsule.

There are quite a number of games in Williamsport before the actual championship game and we rooted for the Staten Islanders with all our hearts. Our rooting worked. That team from Staten Island made the finals and they actually got to play for the World Championship.

The game was broadcast on radio and some of us got together to listen to it. The Staten Islanders played a team from Mexico. If you go on the Internet and look up the statistics for the Little League World Series, you will see that in 1964, when I was twelve years old, the team from Staten Island beat Obispado Little League from Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico and won the Little League World Series. Amazing.

In the public address booth, Jim finished his description of our glory days. I figured it was time to head for the stands, but there was one more surprise. Jim asked everyone to turn their eyes to centerfield and two kids in uniform ran out from the infield and grabbed either side of the construction tarpaulin draped on the centerfield fence. They gave it a yank. And there, built into the centerfield fence, was a black and white photograph the size of a billboard. It showed our Little League team, the Kensico All-Stars from 1964, in all our glory.

We watched a little bit of the game and we talked among ourselves. I learned that

Murray Hertzberg lived within fifteen miles of Valhalla and had his own business. I asked everybody what ever happened to George Hayes but no one knew. I loved to think of him all grown up. Maybe he was a lawyer like me, just as anxious as he had been when he pitched, with the words STAY and CALM on his wingtips as he walked into court, his knuckles bleeding on the handle of his litigation bag.

I talked at most length with George Barnabec who lived in New Jersey and had an office supply business. I told his daughters the story of the time he had avenged my beating by Don Platz and I could tell they thought it was exactly the kind of thing their father would do.

But mostly I paid attention to Eli. Eli would be old enough to enter Little League in two years and I suspected that his heart wasn't really in it. I wondered whether this trip would make it worse. He might wonder what kind of game it is that after thirty-five years they were still talking about who struck out in the fifth inning of the game against Ossining? I am pretty sure Eli did not want to be standing up to the plate with the idea that a strikeout would be remembered for the rest of his natural life. But he seemed pretty cheerful and afterwards there was a party in the VFW where they had those three-liter bottles of Coke that he wasn't allowed to get near at home. And even better they gave him a "bottomless cup". He poured himself glass after plastic glass and soon was buzzing around the gym like a wind-up toy.

I lost track of him for a while and when I went to find him, he was having a long conversation with one of George Barnabec's girls. I moved closer so I could hear what he was saying.

"... and then," Eli said, "he takes the big rat and throws it in the ocean and all the rats that are there jump right in too."

"They do?"

"And then the man goes on back to the store and asks the man if they have any brass lawyers."

"He does?"

"Do you get it? Brass lawyers?"

The girl nodded her head tentatively, clearly mystified.

“See,” Eli said sagely, “he can go throw it in the ocean and that way he can get rid of all the brass lawyers ...”

The girl smiled hopefully at Eli.

You could see that Eli was trying to figure out whether she got it. I guess he concluded that she did not, because he went on, patiently, “You see, when he walks down the street, all the brass lawyers will follow him ...”

I could see it was time to go. We said our goodbyes, promised to stay in touch, and began the drive back to Philadelphia. Eli—despite the caffeine—was sound asleep before we reached the George Washington Bridge.

I drove back to Philadelphia on the Turnpike accompanied only by my thoughts. I wondered what Little League would be like for Eli if he chose to play baseball. I hoped he would enjoy it. I looked forward to watching him play. Most of all I hoped that he would find in Little League—or in something else—a game that was so absorbing that if he got a call about it thirty-five years in the future, it would bring the memories of summers when he was still turning into who he would turn out to be.

After spending thirty-five years practicing law in Philadelphia, **Joe Dworetzky** launched a second career as writer and journalist. In 2019, he was an intern at the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2020, he graduated from Stanford University with a Master’s degree in journalism. He is currently a reporter at *Bay City News* in Berkeley, California. More than two dozen of Joe’s stories and essays have been published in online and print journals, including *Narrative Magazine*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Gargoyle*, and *December*. Joe’s first novel, *Nine Digits*, was published in 2014 by Second Wind Publishing.

Pauline

by Inez Hollander

He attaches herself to his body as a tick does to a cow.

~ Henry Miller, *Moloch* (1992)

I had passed out on the bed, but the penetrating smell of alcohol, uterine blood and sweat of contractions made me come to. I remembered instantly.

“How’s the baby?” I heard myself muttering in a voice I barely recognized.

I had done this once before—given birth to a baby by myself. I was convinced I could do it again, even though it had been a long time ago. George had been felled like a tree in his bed from some vile clandestine booze and could not be woken up. So when the cramps started, I dragged myself to the outhouse and gave birth to George Jr.

It was a full moon that lit up the entire shed, mixing the bluish light of the night with the bloodied baby, a purple mass and mess of baby limbs, umbilical cord and everything else that came pulsating out of my vagina. But the joy of seeing and holding that little boy ... it was all worth it. When we become mothers, we learn that pain can produce miracles.

This time though, I was not quite alone. When I felt the cramping, I was only seven months, so the neighbor helped me up the stairs. I had been hanging on the railing like a passenger with dizzying sea sickness. The neighbor had called the doctor. I was not sure if he was a real doctor, but at least I wasn’t by myself. Henry was missing in action. I pushed the baby out, and there was no cry, no sound, just a deafening stillness, so I feared the worst. I passed out and fell into a deep sleep.

Henry didn’t want a baby—as soon as he found out I was pregnant, there grew an icy wall between us. He called the baby a bastard under my belt, and the 3-month, 4-month, 5-month, 6-month and 7-month-old “toothache.”

I tried to get rid of it with pills and potions, tea I bought from an old Chinaman, herbs I got from a gypsy woman—nothing worked. didn’t have the money to pay for an

abortion. So the baby grew like a tumor, my belly turned into a shiny water melon, and I felt the vibrations of first life.

Henry would have nothing of it. But then he was George Jr.'s age and almost half my age. He had his whole life still ahead of him and mine? It was going nowhere. What does a nearly middle-aged pregnant woman do with a young lover and a son who's dying of consumption? Not that I had anyone to blame. We make our own lives and destiny.

Secretly, I wanted the child. This was probably my last chance of having a little one, and I knew I could raise it by myself. I had done so with George Jr. I guess that's what attracted Henry to me. I was not a complainer or nagger, like his mother. And I wouldn't ask him things he didn't want to do.

Although clearly he wasn't looking for a lover. He was looking for the mother he never had. Being older played into that—it gave me a certain sway over him and I think he felt comforted, in an odd sort of way.

She was my mistress, my mother, my teacher, my nurse, my companion, everything rolled into one.

~ Henry Miller, "Pauline", *Henry Miller's Book of Friends*(1976)

Henry was still living with his parents when I met him. But his mother was making his life hell, so he escaped to my place whenever he could. I hadn't had a man in a long time, and Henry was athletic and tall and masculine. And he smelled so good—his youth came through his pores. A smell similar to freshly cut grass. The kind of grass on a summer day when the temperatures haven't soared yet and the freshness of Spring still lingers in the air.

He was very inexperienced in love. And I? I had forgotten what it was like to be with a man, but Henry burst onto the scene and blew away the cobwebs with which my body was covered due to years of celibacy. It was like an awakening of the senses. It made me feel young and alive again.

We were both hungry for it. We fucked our heads off.

~ Henry Miller, "Pauline", *Henry Miller's Book of Friends* (1976)

We did it in bed, in the kitchen, in the hallway, the bathroom, the park I was obsessed. And as soon as Henry was distracted, playing the piano or reading all of those silly books that he carried everywhere, I would undress in front of him and he was all mine. He made me feel like a human being again. I had forgotten what that felt like. To have a young man like Henry felt like picking a plum that had just begun to ripen—still sturdy and strong on the outside but with a lovely hint of sweetness and promise on the inside.

I think he kept coming back to me because he could be himself with me. I didn't ask him where he had been, how much money he had made that day, or where he was going upon leaving. I wasn't jealous either. I left him alone. Like I said, we all create our own happiness or misery, and I didn't need a man to do that for me. I was content the way I was and led my own life, staying in my own lane.

But I knew Henry wouldn't last. The pregnancy, the botched delivery, dying George—it wore on him and wore him out. I think his mother may have told him that getting pregnant was a sure way to blackmail any man and when Henry had half-heartedly suggested he'd have to marry me (the boy was such a romantic, really—always his head in the clouds!), his mother grabbed the biggest butcher knife she could find in her kitchen drawer and threatened him. Or that's what he told me. He liked to embellish. The best literature contained the most grotesque lies, he said.

His mother's threat wasn't necessary because, in the end, I knew he would leave me anyway. He had bigger fish to fry. He had no clue who he was. Wanted to write but couldn't put pen to paper. Read like a monk and dreamed like a love-sick girl. He was conflicted. There was pressure from the family. They were immigrant stock, hard workers ... tailoring was their trade ... for generations. Every time he cracked a book at home, or tried to write, it was a betrayal of them and their roots.

So I think his family seriously blocked him. And he couldn't unburden himself until he left New York City. Reading his books—oh no, I never dared contact him, not after all those years, not after what happened ... I felt that his hatred of New York and America was merely a hatred aimed at the place and his family that hadn't set him free, hadn't allowed him to be the person he wanted to be.