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bioStories

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bioStories is conceived in the belief that every life can prove instructive, inspiring, or compelling, that every life holds moments of grace. We believe stories harbor the essential architecture of biography and that slices of a life properly conveyed can help strangers peer briefly within its whole, hold that life momentarily in their eye, and quite possibly see the world anew through that lens.

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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My Mother Did Not Die

by Mary Ittelson

Was I thirteen, or fourteen, the day my father kicked the door in? I was lying in bed reading a book, or maybe doing homework. Probably it was Saturday or Sunday. I remember the way the sun lit the lemon-yellow walls of my room in stripes through the slatted blinds. Quiet except for leaves brushing my windowpane in the breeze, and a faint tussle in the living room of voices low and urgent.

My parents had let me pick that particular yellow myself. Let me mix it to order at the Sherwin Williams store in downtown Dayton where my dad and I got everything I needed to complete the job: cans of paint and primer, brushes, rollers, trays, edging tape, buckets, and a wooden safety ladder with a supply ledge. We loaded it all into the way-back of the station wagon. It must've been the summer before 6th or 7th grade. An age when painting my room myself seemed as likely as flying solo to the moon by flapping my arms.

As a family, we were not particularly handy. My parents were bookish. Though my dad was an engineer, the slide rule was his tool of choice. My mother was capable—a dietician and professor at the university. But she called my dad if something broke in our house. My father would descend the dusty basement stairs to retrieve the tool box. He'd spread stacks of manuals on the living room rug rummaging for just the one, which he would study in quiet contentment before determining it was necessary, this time, to call the repairman.

My mom, anticipating a successful paint job, had already ordered me made-to-measure curtains and a matching twin bedspread from Sears due to arrive in six to eight weeks. We had pored over the catalogue together until we found them—the exact yellow, a daffodil print with magenta pansy accents. The curtains were ruffled and the spread was flounced.

I recall that the work was backbreaking, that I almost quit one wall into the first primer coat, paint splattering my eyes, tears spilling onto the drop cloth. But by the time I was halfway into the first yellow coat, I knew the exact amount of paint to tip into the tray

and the precise pressure to apply to the roller. In the end I was painting as if sunshine emanated from my heart directly onto the walls.

The results were splendid. My room was cheerful and girlish. As was I, on this particular weekend day, lying in my bed reading lazily, paying no attention to the noises from the living room where my parents were having a typical exchange.

I recognized the snarl my mother made when she shook her jowls like a rabid dog. And my father's voice careening between and anger and panic like a slide whistle. Familiar sounds muffled by the distance and my door. I read on.

Most weekday mornings my father and I hurried to get ready while my mom employed various tactics to delay his departure. Once she seized his collar screaming spittle so ferociously that he had to change his mangled shirt and wet tie before throwing on his coat and dashing out. When the front door shut, she would shuffle back to their darkened room across the hall from mine and lie in bed for the remainder of the day. I would let myself out the back door to walk the six blocks to high school, my gear for gymnastics or student council slung on my back. But I recall that on this particular day, the day my father kicked the door in, I was in no hurry to do anything or be anywhere.

She was screaming. He was threatening. Perhaps it was the other way around. That this particular exchange was escalating was also not unusual. I read on, undisturbed, in my room. My mother was ill. My father was brave. I was fine.

The hyena cackle. The guttural groan. Stomps and clomps. One did not speak of "mental illness" in the Midwest at that time. The word was "crazy." Louder and louder. They screamed, they growled. I read on but a phrase drew my attention.

"I'm gonna get Mary," she announced with menacing gusto.

Now this was a novel angle. But I read on.

"You leave her alone," he said, his voice low and grave.

"I'm gonna get Mary," she repeated

"Lois. Stop. Don't you dare."

I heard a ripping sound outside my door.

"You stay away from her. Lois. Stay away." His voice rising to a pinched falsetto. "LOIS!"

Open. In. Shut.

“Don’t you dare lock that door.”

Click.

It was perfectly silent. Until he started pounding. Begging, ordering, commanding. Beseeching her to open the door. To leave me alone. To not touch me. To not dare touch me.

Still in my bed. Holding my book. No longer reading. We looked at one another. Mother. Daughter. Lois. Mary. She was in her nightgown, a tattered grey rag that was once pink and edged with lace. Her wide eyes were set deep in violet oval shadows. Stooped and sad. Her spindly bare legs, the one lame and gutted since childhood. Even with his pounding and the screaming my room felt quiet, just the two of us. One might wonder what all the commotion was about. My father raging as if for his own dear life rather than mine. I was safe with my mom. She would never hurt me; I knew this with certainly. Her rages were as impotent as his attempts to contain them.

My father was neither fit nor athletic. I have no idea how he defeated the solid oak door. A swift kick? A full body check? A running start? The door swung open, whacking the wall behind, the metal strike plate twisted off and dangling from the screws. The door itself, and the hinges, remained intact. But the frame on the knob side had splintered and cracked apart.

My mom turned away from me to face the gaping frame, and then walked out, her feet shuffling, the jagged hem of her night gown unraveling behind.

Did I keep reading? Did I get up to shut the door? I don’t recall.

It remained possible to shut the door, though neither the frame nor the lock were ever repaired. By this time no one came to the house except my father and me, and my mother who rarely left. My much older brothers, in college and graduate school, no longer visited. We did not speak of the door or the incident.

My father did not make me leave until I was sixteen. For my own good. Home was no place for me. As it turned out, prep school wasn’t either. The other kids were rich and their parents were famous. They vacationed in Nantucket or Gstaad. The guys wore wrinkled Lacoste shirts with the collars up. The girls wore fair-isle sweaters and tartan skirts. Everyone’s shoes, even the teachers’, featured tassels. In a bid to fit in, I jammed my belongings in my trunk under the bed of my dorm room and bought all new clothes at

The Village Shoppe. Though I excelled in academics and was cast in plays, I failed to make a single friend. At Fairview High School I had been popular. At Andover I was invisible. There ensued a time of leaving one place I was not wanted to go to another. Mix. Repeat. Mix. Repeat.

Many years later, when I was a young adult, my dad told me that I had been sent to Andover because of my mother's diagnosis. "Her brain will continue to deteriorate," the specialists at Johns Hopkins Medical Center had explained to my father, with my troubled but fully compos mentis mother seated at his side, "along with her ability to control her bodily functions. She will die a vegetable in a year or two. Three at the outside." My parents' trip to Baltimore, a year or so before my father kicked the door in, had been a costly expedition born of desperation to find a cure. Early-onset Alzheimer's was unheard of in the sixties. "They talked right over her head as if she wasn't there," my father said with the only bitterness that ever crossed his lips in relation to his "poor Lois."

Back in Dayton, my mother did not die. She just lived as dead, for nearly forty more years. In bed day after day, sleeping or moaning, "I didn't mean to hurt anybody. I didn't mean to hurt anybody." Her matted hair grew over the years into a rat's nest that hung off the side of her head like a deflated football. Her teeth yellowed until rot dissolved all but a few random molars she used to chew the Stouffer's Lean Cuisines my father microwaved for them night after night. "She refuses to go to out. I can't force her to see a dentist," my father said as if explaining the obvious, though her rages had diminished by that time. There was no point in contradicting my father, telling him that of course he could force her, in fact must force her. But when we had this conversation, her hair and teeth were not yet so bad.

My mother did not die, so what was my problem? Even now I cannot explain it. But during the decade which began when my mother got sick and I was about ten, I never spoke of her to anyone. It was easier to change the subject than try to explain why my mother was no longer my mother. In college I fell into the care of a very nice therapist who gently and patiently asked me simple questions about my mother, to which I was able to respond with matter-of-fact answers. I have benefitted over the years from several nice therapists and am always surprised anew that trained professionals inevitably tear

up when I tell them about my mother while I remain dry eyed. I always forget to ask if they are crying for her or for me.

My mother did not die. She just was dead for me. She died when I recalled a dream during my commute down Lake Shore Drive in the snow when I was twenty-three. My Chevy Citation had not yet been recalled for the anti-lock brakes that failed in such conditions. But I knew to be alert as the temperature dropped because my car had done a 360 the month before, spinning out across all three lanes and coming to rest atop the median strip and narrowly missing a tree. I had never felt so alive as I did then sitting in my warm car, the snow falling gently. I was able to back up, bumping and scaping across the curb, and trace in reverse the arc my tires had made in the snow until I was back on my way. So on this morning, the morning after my dream, as the dream replayed in my mind's eye, I was going slowly and keeping plenty of distance from other cars. My mother appeared before me just as she had done the day my father kicked the door in. She wore the same tattered night gown, the same sad expression. We looked at one another as we had done. But in the dream I spoke, "It would be better if you go." She nodded sadly. Turned. Walked away, the lace hem dragging behind her in my dream, as it had done a decade before. And I was freed as if gravity no longer applied, my hand steady on the wheel as if steering into a skid.

My mother did not die, and so, "You have to meet my mother" was the second thing I said to my future husband after he proposed. I was twenty-eight when we went to Dayton for a visit after our engagement and before our wedding. We returned together twice a few years after the birth of each child to show them to my mother. I expected the kids to be horrified by sight of her, afraid. But they just played with the toys we spread out in front of her wheelchair and sipped the juice boxes we had purchased from the vending machine. By this time my mother was well-tended in a nursing home and wore floral perma-press house coats that snapped up the front with sensible three-quarter sleeves that stayed out of the way. My father in his grey suit, blue tie, and white shirt medium starch—he was from that generation—hovered around "LoLo" as he called her in the baby voice he had assumed when trying to quell her furies and used again while visiting her each day, stroking her hand and talking about what had been eaten for lunch or dinner. My mother was preternaturally calm during this era—whether naturally or chemically was

not my concern. She was clean, she was fed, and my father was nearby in a one-bedroom apartment that was filling up with papers but was not yet unnavigable.

My mother did not die, and in the thirty-five or so years between when my mother became ill and their move to Bethany Village my father was “doing the best I can.” His deterioration was so slow and subtle I did not notice until the home care agency that looked in on my mom when my dad was out of town threatened to alert the state if the family did not take action. The house had filled over the decades with stacks of papers until there was only a narrow path from the bedroom to the bath to the kitchen and to the side door; stacks my father had to hastily shore-up after the occasional avalanche. “Don’t you touch anything, Mary. There are important papers in there. I know where everything is.” In fact, my father did manage to keep the utilities on, though my occasional inspection of the piles when he wasn’t looking unearthed bills, checks, and the occasional stock certificate deep among the junk mail, scientific and engineering periodicals all stratified by time and dating back to the year my mother got sick, the same year as the best-by stamp on the food in the cupboards. My parents ate from a jumbled stash on the kitchen counter that my father replenished on weekly trips to the supermarket. I emptied the expired condiments in the fridge on every visit—it was the least I could do. Dust and spider webs had accumulated. Surely there were mice, but too much stuff along the floor boards didn’t allow me to know for sure.

My mother did not die, and if my father died first, “We are fucked,” I said to my brothers who are seven and ten years older and had not, as far as I could remember, been to Dayton since my mother became ill. Whenever my father traveled on business or to visit me or my brothers, he left frozen dinners and called frequently to be sure my mother was okay. “Lois can take care of herself for a few days,” said my father. Later he arranged for a home health care agency to send someone to check on her daily whenever he was gone. Still, in the years before Bethany, the “situation at home,” as my brothers and I called it, was “hanging by a thread” and our discussions hovered around what we would do when the thread snapped. “I can pay for whatever you need, but I can’t handle anything else,” said my oldest brother, who had his own problems having been hospitalized every decade or so for mania or depression. But by the time of my father’s heart attack this brother had lost his fancy corporate job, his money, and his wife. “I can’t

help with money but I'll help you with everything else," said my other brother. But shortly after my father's heart attack this brother became engaged to a woman in the throes of her own breakdown. "She has to be my priority now," he said holding his future wife's hand when I first met her during what I mistakenly thought was a meeting to discuss how my brother and I would share the load of helping with my mother.

My mother did not die, and so "Don't you dare bite me," was what I hissed in her ear, my hand clamped over her mouth so my mom would not spit at the doctor to whom I had taken her to be evaluated. I hoped the doctor would deem her medically suitable for the lovely skilled nursing facility where I hoped to place her, the one just steps away from the lovely independent living apartments where I hoped to place my dad once he was released from the lovely cardiac facility where he was rehabbing from his heart attack. We all—the doctors, quacks, administrators, regulators, agency workers, and caregivers in our healthcare spider web—understood without needing to say it that "medically suitable" was a euphemism, in my mother's case, for "not violent," which I had assured them she was not unless you count a tendency to spit at, bite, kick or shove outsiders that had included some waitresses, most medical professionals, and my former sister-in-law. "You just lie, Mary, You just lie through your teeth," recommended my childhood friend's mother who minded my two-year-old daughter who I had to bring on my weekly trips to Dayton while juggling a full time job and desperately trying to place my parents together before the home health care agency made good on its threat to seize her from the bosom of her family and make her a ward of the state, which I assumed meant that she would be committed to the Ohio Valley equivalent of Bedlam. "Of course she's not violent," I explained to the admissions team at Bethany Village, who wanted a doctor to opine due to a few well publicized cases wherein frail old biddies had murdered their roommates in similarly lovely facilities. Perhaps all my hard work was for naught—trimming off the mass of matted hair, bandaging her bleeding nail beds, sponging her down, and exchanging her nightgown with the only thing that fit from her closet still brimming with the pretty dresses and aromas I knew from over thirty years before when she had still been my mother. Perhaps I had been imprudent to pre-emptively clamp my hand over my mother's mouth just as the doctor sat down and stage whisper words to the effect that she'd better not sink the rotted stubs of her teeth into my delicate flesh.

My mother did not die, and my father went all King Lear on me after his heart attack, threatening to disown me, screaming from his rehab room that he was perfectly capable of taking care of my mother, that I was a monster to want to tear her from their beautiful home and lock her up while he was too ill to stop me. Their “beautiful home” now featured walls covered with smears of my mother’s feces, along with the dust and the cobwebs, the piles of papers, the expired canned goods, and all of my childhood mementos. I thought of the house as my dapper father’s Dorian Gray portrait. I thought of my mother as Miss Havisham in a disintegrating nightie instead of wedding gown. When pressed about my childhood I leave Shakespeare, Wilde, and Dickens out of it and go full Bronte. “Gothic” I say, “Crazy lady in the attic gothic” which shuts people up.

My mother did not die, and it took an acute kidney stone attack to end my standoff with Bethany Village. My mother, writhing in pain in the middle of the night, was rushed by ambulance to the hospital where they know how to mix just the right cocktail of pharmaceuticals for folks like my mom, meds that remove the part that spits, bites, and shoves, the vestiges of personality and self-agency that made my mother unsuitable for Bethany Village. After several days of “successful hospitalization” Bethany was delighted to welcome my mother poste-haste via direct patient transfer as soon as we wired the chunk of change she had inherited from my grandfather that my parents had been saving for a sojourn in Paris during their golden years.

My mother did not die, and even the harshest critic would not dispute that the time my parents spent at Bethany were happier than any they had spent since my mother became sick. A year or so after they moved in, my father and I were sitting on a bench in the sun on a grassy knoll by the community garden not far from my mother’s room and he said “I was terrible to you. They don’t tell you that depression is a side effect of heart attacks. I’m sorry. I was not myself.” I was sorry too. Later that year, sitting on the same bench, my father said to me, “I’m lucky. So many men here have lost their wives.” Lucky was not the word that came to mind when I thought of my father.

By the time my mother died in her late eighties, my father was the toast of Bethany Village: editor of the monthly newsletter, resident pro bono tech consultant and computer repairman, coveted dinner tablemate, raconteur of amusing anecdotes, and revered as a

“model of love and Christian charity for your selfless devotion to your wife” according to the Director and CEO of Bethany (who never minded that my parents were Jewish) in a condolence note to my father.

My father died in his early nineties, a few years after my mother. As I packed for Dayton to tend to his final affairs I pondered, yet again, my father’s devotion to my mother and the myriad ways he had failed her over the decades, and the ways he had failed me as a child, when all I had in the world was him. “At least he didn’t just run off and play golf,” said my husband who was on his way to play a round and would never, even in our darkest hours, pat my hand in a baby voice and say “poor Mare Mare.” Are you a bad person if doing all you can is not good enough? This question troubled me then and troubles me still. But who am I to judge?

I have precious few memories of my mother before she became ill and most all of them are happy. I remember giggling over jokes and cuddling before bedtime. At home I’d sit beside my mother as she graded papers for the classes she taught, or while she devised menu guidelines for the city prison and the “poorhouse” as they called the homeless shelter in those days. “See!” she’d command, gesturing to a grainy black and white photo of a forlorn bow-legged figure in a textbook. “Scurvy! That’s what you’ll get if you don’t drink your orange juice in the morning.” If I asked for a third helping of her homemade brownies or freshly baked cherry pie she’d warn, “You’ll get sugar diabetes!” or “Your teeth will rot out of your head!” while giving me just one more slice.

My mother appeared every few months on the original “Phil Donahue Show” espousing food that was low fat and made-from-scratch before the terms “cholesterol” and “unprocessed” were used by anyone outside the field. Once I joined her on the show to prove that even little kids can make their own healthy snacks. “Delicious and nutritious!” she exclaimed while we added raisins to grated carrots and smeared a mix of honey and peanut butter into celery stalks, just like we did at home, except not in our best clothes.

“She was so brave,” my dad said when describing how he fell in love. He was referring to her leg as much as her accomplishments. People like her were called “crippled” back then even though she hid her limp and gutted leg so cleverly and could run circles around the men who employed her at the Department of Public Health and the

University. “He was tall and handsome,” said my mom about their courtship. “And a Harvard man.” My mom had gone to Smith, a self-described “ugly duckling.” My dad checked all the boxes on her road to swan. I was their caboose, the “love child” as my mom said with a wink I was too young to understand. But her plans for me were clear: I was to have lots of boyfriends, go to Radcliffe, win the Miss America contest, and work at least two years before I got married.

My memories of my dad back then are happy too. On weekends he drove me to the classes my mom signed me up to take: tap, ballet, and hula at Miss Dickens’ Dance Studio; astronomy at the Natural History Museum; painting at the Art Institute. He’d wait for me to finish, passing the time by calculating in his head the digits of pi after the decimal point and entering them in neat rows on the index cards he kept in his breast pocket.

My father designed radios as a civilian engineer at the Air Force Base, and when I’d ask what he did at work he’d say, “That’s classified.” But he was happy to talk about anything else. He’d prowl the public library researching nautical knots, or Genghis Kahn, or Ada Lovelace, or animal migration in sub-Saharan Africa, or killer bees. He’d exclaim “Yo ho” when he came across an amusing fact and read it aloud to me whether or not I was interested.

He learned to sail from a book and bought a Sunfish to use on the muddy bottom man-made lake where our family vacationed for a week each August. I was first mate. “Prepare to jibe!” he’d yell and I’d duck beneath the boom and scramble to the other side of the boat lest we capsize into the drink.

My kids would love my dad—he passed away when they were still quite young. He would love them too. And Google. He’d love Google. He’d burrow with them in Wikipedia to retrieve the historical and scientific arcana they so love and text to me whether or not I am interested. I miss my dad. I don’t know what to do with my mom.

Shortly after my father died, I turned fifty and did not go mad as my mother had done at that age. I have not gone mad since, nor am I likely to, despite the aptness of the birthday card I received this year from my niece picturing a rampaging stallion and captioned, “Crazy does not just run in our family, it gallops!” In addition to those on the bipolar spectrum, we have had a paranoid psychotic, a narcissistic sociopath, and god

only knows what my mother and father were. We are an eccentric but lovable lot—quirky, prone to excessive enthusiasms and funks even among the sane ones of whom I count myself, my children, my nieces and nephews, and often even my brothers. “Am I the crazy one here or are they” I must ask myself in any significant interaction with my kin. I have come to understand that the line between sanity and insanity is permeable as I cling to the blessed side I inhabit even on my most neurotic days. Still, I consider each sane year after fifty to be a bonus.

I don’t believe the past is prologue. I do believe in the neuroplasticity of the brain and the ability of the traumatized to heal and flourish. But mental illness is a family disease affecting even the unafflicted. I ended up with a husband (now my ex) who was in fact off playing golf during all of the difficult days of a twenty-seven-year marriage that had few difficult days, and even those few were unimportant; no serious illness or disability, no premature deaths, no poverty or disgrace, just a few health scares and the usual bumps on the road of child-rearing. Lacking role models, I turned to books on parenting and sacrificed more than was necessary of my career and leisure to be sure that I was there for my kids no matter what, that I kept my problems on my side of the ledger, and that if the best I could do was not good enough I did more. Despite all that they turned out okay.

“I was raised by wolves,” I sometimes say when people ask about my childhood. Sometimes I think of myself as a mental health miracle. Usually, I think of myself as just another schmo. A part of me is still afraid I will end up as the crazy women in the attic. But my affairs are in good order and my darling children know there will be ample funds to lock me up in someplace nice if need be. I have my health, my family, my friends, and my work. I would like to find love again, to marry even. Wary of smothering and accustomed to neglect, simple kindnesses move me to tears.

“You’re making fun of me,” my mother said to me one day when I was maybe six and had stiffened my right leg to take few limping steps. But I wasn’t making fun. I wanted to feel what it felt like to be her. “Your legs are perfect, just like a grownup’s legs,” my mother said while touching my calf one day when I was maybe seven. Did she want to feel what it felt like to be me?

I'd like to hear my mother's voice, to see her face. Periodically I query archives on the whereabouts of the recordings of pre-syndication "Phil Donahue Show" episodes. I am certain these tapes exist somewhere in an obsolete format on a dusty shelf.

My mother has not appeared in my dreams since that snowy night over forty years ago. If ever she does, her hair will be curled, she will be wearing a pretty dress, and both her legs will be perfect.

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Wearing the Skin of Dreams

by Jack Phillips

Seldom do I remember my dreams and only fragments when I do, and for all the surreal juxtapositions commonly the stuff of dreams, mine are oddly ordinary. Even as a child, my dreams felt like a typical summer day, governed by local geography and populated by wild creatures of my waking acquaintance. So I was surprised at the reemergence when our nature-writing workshop leader jarred loose a dream-fragment that never would have survived for nearly sixty years if not for the morning event that followed. She bid us to write about an experience wherein nature and not-nature collided, wildness having broken into our domestic lives.

In a summer dream when I was around six or seven, a box turtle appeared in our driveway. This would have been only slightly out of the ordinary, as *Terrapene carolina* was occasional in my neighborhood woods. I was compelled upon waking—wearing pajamas and the film of a dream—to bolt out of the house to see if it were true. To my astonishment, in the very spot where my dream-turtle had appeared, was not a turtle, but an oversized toad. I fed her a cricket.

Early in life I came to believe in something true and wild beyond the schoolyard and the regularly-mowed lawn. I could find it boundlessly in nature to which dreams and other freedoms belong. Yet those dreams took me to places more familiar than exotic, beyond the outfield fence but not too far, with wild creatures not too strange, wandering the woods just on the other side of the creek. A dream could be a new path into those woods. I held this belief until I reached the age of knowing better, which I suspect has yet to arrive.

My mother always insisted that her children bathe before bed after a day of dirty adventures, which was almost every day. But there are some souvenirs that soap will not scrub away, like bug bites, berry stains, pokes and prickles, and the residual smell of pond. The adhesive properties of amphibious slime endured for days. Under clean pajamas, the skin of freedom became the skin of my dreams.

Such was the case with daydreams as well. Even after school started, the skin of free afternoons and weekend safaris retained the smell of frogs and fish. With chin on fist or face in hands, the faintly-scented patina of semi-permanent slime helped me endure my classroom captivity. Thoreau wrote of the “slime and film of habitual life” as the obstacle to reconnecting with nature. But that depends on your habits and where you get your slime. The wildness within us, nourished by dreams and daydreams and dreamy summer days, is only and ever skin deep.

The morning after the workshop, I went to work wearing my habitual bug bites and carrying a notebook. My ecologist colleagues and I entered a steamy wood under the sentry of barking tree frogs. It smelled of young earth. Leopard frogs, hard to classify even when still, rocketed to escape our nightmarish advance. Slender chorus frogs, invisible at rest and even in flight, made mere dashes against the dewy green. With each step, the earth twitched with toadlets, barely more than yesterday’s tadpoles. A seldom-seen plains spadefoot (*Spea bombifrons*), with the skin of a frog and the body of a toad and the eyes of a cat—a local chimera—appeared. Secret spadefoots emerge on warm and rainy nights, and like a childhood dream, slip into the morning after.

Jack Phillips is a naturalist, poet, nature writer and founder of The Naturalist School, a nonprofit organization devoted to connecting with nature more deeply through the consilience of creativity and ecology. He is author of *The Bur Oak Manifesto: Seeking Nature and Planting Trees in the Great Plains* and co-editor of *Treasures of the Great Plains: an Ecological Perspective.* His poetry has appeared in *Hymn and Howl*, *Wild Roof, Flora Fiction, EcoTheo, Canary: a Literary Journal of the Environmental Crisis, The Good Life Review,* and THE POET. He lives in the Missouri River watershed of eastern Nebraska and teaches ecopsychology at Creighton University School of Medicine.

Ghosts

by Rhiannon Koehler

My grandfather was a local celebrity. He owned a popular restaurant in Chicago on North Avenue and Wells Street. For all my growing-up years, he was seated at the bar, with watered-down whiskey in his hand, talking to regulars. Or at table 20, the one right by the door, in front of the antipasto table, with Mark Angler, the television lawyer, and AJ Timmel, the judge. They'd sit and drink and talk about nothing.

The memory of my grandfather that rises to the top, though, is one that makes me mad. When I went to the restaurant with my mother as a child, the waiters would greet us with a basket of fresh Italian bread. I could never get enough of it. The only available bread in my parents' house was spelt, which is a closer cousin to sandpaper than sourdough. So, at the restaurant, I'd reach for the bread. And then another piece. And at my third reach my grandfather would say, "Stop with the bread. You don't want to get fat. Leave room for your pasta." And then he'd turn to my mom: "You gotta put her on a diet."

He was right. I was chubby. I knew I was the only one in a size large tutu in ballet class. I didn't need him to tell me that. But what was one extra piece of bread? Especially since my cousin Sophia—slender, gorgeous, and perfect—was never, ever denied one. It rankled.

But as soon as that memory hit, another thought came, almost as strong as a whisper in my ear. "Is that *really* what you want to remember?"

And the answer was: no.

I remember my grandfather taking me in his Mercedes to an audition for my first short film, and how proud he was when I booked it.

"I took her, you know," he told Mark and AJ for months after. "I was the one who took her. And I got her right in the head, you know."

I didn't know about *that*. I do remember him pulling up outside the studio, stopping me as I opened the door, and saying, "You good?" I nodded, uncharacteristically unable to speak. He nodded back. "You got this. Okay?" I nodded again, and went in.

Maybe it was all I needed.

And I remember him waiting in the hallway for me after it was done. “Well? How do you think it went?” He asked anxiously, wanting details.

“Well—they had me in twice,” I said. “Which I think is a good thing.” He nodded in affirmation.

“I think you got a good shot. There weren’t too many brunettes there. They needed one. Plus, you’re funny.” My brown hair might not have got me the gig, but the producers agreed with him on the second piece—they told him later that I nailed the humor.

My grandfather might not have talked about it with me at the time, but he knew what it was like to want a taste of the show.

From the regulars at the restaurant to his business acquaintances, things around my grandfather tended to err on the side of flamboyant. One prominent and notable regular, for example, had a Ron Jeremy-style mustache, wore ostentatious jewelry, and had a reputation—unbeknownst to my grandfather—for partaking in all kinds of partying in the kitchen after hours (and before hours. And during most of the hours, if we’re honest). The hotrod hostesses at the restaurant always had candy-colored acrylic fingernails and lipstick to match, their perms fit for a *Dirty Dancing* revival.

It came out a little more gently in my grandfather, who dressed impeccably, always volunteered the restaurant for Chicago-based film shoots and was a ballroom-dancing extra in *Return to Me*, the David Duchovny movie starring Minnie Driver. But dig a little deeper and he’d tell you about his near-Olympic soccer career that was felled by a bad knee and the time he professionally recorded a love song he had written for my grandmother back in the ‘50s.

The proud part of me, the public-facing part of me, the *loud* part of me—maybe I got it from him.

I didn’t know all sides of my grandfather—I’d wager I didn’t know *most* of the sides of my grandfather. But the pieces I knew, I liked. He would do this thing where he’d privately tell each of the grandkids they were his favorite. I knew this because we compared notes.

But when it came to me, I also secretly suspected that I actually *was* his favorite. First of all, he’d always proudly present me to patrons at the restaurant as the oldest (I wasn’t). Second, for gifts, he’d often give me things of his own rather than go out and buy

something (and he could always afford good stuff too). While my cousins got Tamagotchis one Christmas, I got his old telescope. I wasn't into astronomy, and he wasn't into long-winded pep talks, but I knew he was telling me to dream big.

The next year, it was Furbies. I got one, like everyone else, and it terrorized us the whole afternoon until someone had the good sense to throw a towel over its head to shut off the light sensor. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach that year, like maybe I wasn't special anymore. But then my grandfather pulled me aside.

"Come outside so the others don't see," he whispered, ushering me towards his car. I stood outside, freezing in the Wood Dale winter, until he pulled something out of the backseat of his new Mercedes (on a business lease, as always). It was a keyboard. Very expensive. Very fancy. Lots of buttons. Used to stand in his living room.

"Your mom told me you weren't into classical music anymore." I had a flash of my Suzuki piano teacher, Mary Elizabeth, with the blunt-cut bob and bangs who always wore the same high-waisted pleated black dress pants, black belt, white ribbed turtleneck, and gold herringbone necklace. She had the flattest, whitest, fingertips I'd ever seen, as if all the blood had gone from her hands, and she constantly seemed like she was one missed b-flat away from a total breakdown.

"Yeah," I replied, eyeing the keyboard. The thing was bigger than me.

"Well, *this*," he said, walking towards my parents' green and tan Volvo 840 station wagon and wrenching open the back door, "is not for classical music. This is for *real* music. Like Sinatra." My image of Mary Elizabeth was replaced by a shadowed man in a fedora. I couldn't help it. I broke into a grin.

"Thanks, grandpa," I said. He wrestled the keyboard into the backseat and locked the car, puffing from exertion.

"Make sure you play it now," he said, clapping me on the shoulder in his signature style, walking me back towards the house.

The day brightened; I knew I was still special to him.

Eight years later, I was working as a hostess at the restaurant. By now, the hotrod hostesses of my childhood had been replaced by a Moody Bible Institute trio who had their own names tattooed on their feet. My grandfather only sort of half approved of my

working at Topos. On one hand, if I was there, he could show me off to all the regulars. On the other hand, I had none of the brassy tenaciousness of my colleagues at the host stand.

The author and her grandfather c. 1992

"You sure you can manage this?" He asked, giving me a menu. "Take that to table 7." Table 7 was a high-top in the window, wedged between the bar and the back wall. I edged over there and gave the menu to the businessman with his Blackberry. The man smiled and thanked me. I squeezed myself back to the host stand.

"Not bad," my grandfather nodded.

He was always physically there but was mentally absent a lot in those days. My uncles were starting to take over running the business. My grandfather knew it was time to make a change, but he was obviously a little bit uncomfortable in the transition.

I don't remember much from this period, but I do remember my grandfather's weariness. And the details of his past that came out, usually while we were drinking espressos and eating chocolate mousse cake at the bar.

Details like:

My grandfather didn't start his restaurant until he was fifty-five, after three other ventures had failed. And the last one, another restaurant called Augustinos, for which he had sacrificed his savings and even his marriage, had been leveled by a fire. When my grandfather tried to collect on the fire insurance, the insurer declared bankruptcy. "After that I had money in shoeboxes under my bed," my grandfather told me, shuddering. "A bad time."

Although not as bad a time as when he was selling minor-brand liquor to restaurants in the late 1940s and his business contacts would pick him up by his

suspenders and physically throw him out of their establishments. Nobody wanted to deal with Italians back then.

"Didn't it bother you?" I asked. "What did you do?"

"Picked myself up and went back every week until they agreed to meet with me." My mouth gaped. "But at the end of the day," my grandfather continued, "their money was in my pocket."

I learned that you just have to keep going. "What other choice did I have?" My grandfather asked.

I remember his certainty, too. Certainty that better times would come and that success would follow if only you didn't give up. He believed so much in himself—even in the kinds of unreliable memories that can sink quickly into myth.

My favorite of those memories that he shared with me, as I recall it:

It was about 1939, and I was at my dad's tavern, you know, the Blind Pig. I got paid one way. We had spittoons at the bar, and at the beginning of the evening my dad—your great-grandpa Sam—would put a half-dollar in the bottom of the spittoon and I'd have to clean it out at the end of the night to get the money.

One time I'd had some friends over to the tavern after-hours and I hadn't finished cleaning up the night before. So, I goes down to the tavern early. You know how it's underground, just the one entrance. I have my mop and my bucket, and I turn on the lights. And I see a guy sitting at the end of the bar, back by the bathrooms, in some beat up suit and a hat drinking a whiskey!

I say, "You can't be here, we're closed." And the guy just stares at me and slides the glass all the way down the bar. And I see it's going to break if I don't catch it, so I drop the mop and dive for the glass. And the guy gets up and turns around and runs into the bathroom.

I steady the glass, and head back there—there's nowhere to go, there's no windows in those bathrooms, and I get to the men's and the door is swinging—but there's nobody there.

I think I'm losing my mind, right, and I go back out to the tavern and sure enough—the glass is still there. There was no way that guy coulda got past me. But he was gone. I never saw him again.

"A ghost," I whispered to my grandfather, the first time I heard the story. He shrugged and nodded as if I shouldn't be surprised, as if ghosts were real.

Back in my present but in a time when people still had landlines and I still lived at home, the phone rang. It was Armand, the head waiter, the only waiter given manger's card privileges. He had been working at the restaurant since before I was born.

Armand didn't introduce himself when I picked up, but then he didn't need to. I could hear the restaurant in the background. "Put your mama on the phone," he said.

"MAAAAA! PHONE FOR YOU!" She came downstairs, grabbed the receiver of the putty-colored antique rotary phone that lived on our kitchen wall, and disappeared into the dining room. I could hear only parts of what came next:

"Uh huh. How long?...You drove him?...Observation?...Coming right away."

After hanging up she nearly threw the receiver at me, didn't say anything, grabbed her coat, and ran out the door.

Later, it felt like an eon later, she returned.

"He had a stroke. Armand noticed and got him to the hospital right away. He'll need rehab."

I nodded, not knowing what any of it meant. I know now, though, that that stroke was a dividing line between this plane of existence and another, and that from this point forward he lived in a liminal space between two worlds. It was as though a secret and mysterious force had wrapped its tentacles around my grandfather, reducing his walk to a shuffle, keeping his hands at his sides, forcing him into a position of supplication not fit for someone who fought as hard as he did and sacrificed as much as had to claw out a respectable path for himself and his family in an unforgiving world.

I know, to him, his body felt like a prison. That he dreamed of freedom.

"My car," he told my mom from his hospital bed at the rehab center. "I need a new car."

“Okay, Dad,” my mom said, humoring him. But my grandfather was not to be humored.

“*A CAR*.” He said it again, like maybe she didn’t get it. “I need a new one.”

There was no reasoning with him, so everyone just agreed that yes, he needed a new car, and we’d get to it soon.

I remember the last time I saw him. He was sitting up in a wheelchair at rehab, impossibly thin. He was wearing compression bandages on his arms and legs. I could hear the gurgling in his chest from four feet away.

“I need a car if I’m ever going to leave this place,” he said.

He passed away the next day.

Almost ten years later, I had a dream that wasn’t like other dreams. It was like I was still in my body, but that body was simply somewhere else.

In this case, I was at the restaurant, if the restaurant was in a black box theatre, and all the tables were two-top café tables.

I was sitting along one wall, alone, with a menu in my hand. My youngest uncle was floor-managing, standing and observing all the other couples seated in the theater—on the floor and on the stage.

And then he walked in. My grandfather. Pre-stroke but gray-haired, in a suit. He sat down at the table in front of mine, facing me. I looked up and he smiled at me a little sheepishly.

“Maybe next time they’ll seat us at the same table, huh?” He asked. I smiled back and shrugged a little as if to say, “Yeah, maybe.”

He gave me a nod and stood up. He walked over to my uncle, whispered something in his ear, gave him a clap on the shoulder, and walked out behind the curtain.

I woke up, shaken and sweating. “What’s wrong?” My boyfriend asked. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I replied, shaking my head to clear it. “Ghosts.”

“Go back to sleep,” he said. “It was just a dream. Ghosts aren’t real.”

But maybe they are.

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Inheritance

by James Seawel

I come from a long line of po' folks. Understand, I am not a Yellow Dog Democrat running for office in 1980s rural Arkansas, so I am under no cultural obligation to parade my forbearers' poverty around like a prized mule. But the truth is that my parents, not just my grandparents, remember living in homes without running water or electricity. Ah, my southern roots.

Roy Clark, of *Hee Haw* fame, can still be heard on the airwaves of my old Ozarks stomping grounds. The country crooner's vivid lyrics about gut busting field work mostly fall on nostalgic ears these days, but for many of my parents' generation, the words carry them back to a real place and tougher times.

In John Grisham's *A Painted House*, it was the Spruills, not the Seawels, who ventured down from the Ozarks to the flatland as seasonal sharecroppers. My foothills kin who have read the novel report that the Jonesboro native nailed it.

My father well remembers riding the cotton sack that my Granny Vival tugged all over the hot, mosquito-infested Missouri boot heel and the humid, cottonmouth-riddled delta of eastern Arkansas. From his earliest years, his life goal—and one she encouraged—was never to pick cotton.

Southern, rural poverty was a fact of life when my grandparents were born in the rural Ozark foothills. The one quasi-exception in my lineage would be my paternal grandfather, whose family owned fertile river bottom land along the Eleven Point. Still, he knew hard work and being cash-strapped as well as his neighbors. My mother dubbed her father's childhood as "a sort of genteel poverty." My other grandparents' hardships carried no such modifier.

All of my grandparents came from what is known locally, and with a fair amount of pride, as being from "the old families." They were southern enough to know good blood meant something, but too penniless to have anything to show for it. They relied on their character and reputation to speak for them. Southern pride in their day didn't mean waving the flag of a defeated army (a more recent Civil-Rights Era practice of bigoted resistance

they found appalling) but of having self-respect even if they, as my granny once said, “didn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.”

My ancestors made their way to what is now Northeast Arkansas long before the Civil War, which qualifies us as an “old family.” One branch arrived before the Louisiana Purchase, many others shortly thereafter. Both sets of grandparents, Great Depression survivors of the rural south, lived close to the land. Although they hoped history would not repeat, they deep down knew they would land on their feet if the economy ever went “snake belly up” again. They longed for the solidarity of spirit their people embodied during the lean years, but they refused to romanticize the humbling era of widespread destitution.

“Good old days my foot,” Granny V, who eschewed antiques as much as she did rooms without central heat and air, often declared when some forgetful old soul waxed nostalgic about the days of yore. She still cooked, dressed, and spoke like an old hill woman, but she did so in a modern, if basic, kitchen.

My familial and cultural backdrop forms the way I think. (Seriously, my Grandmother Shirley insisted we reduce, reuse, and recycle ages before it became trendy, and I still think of her when I save a dog a bone.) Over the recent Christmas break I made it home for a few days. LaToya, my 2008 Tacoma, apparently felt it time to act a fool. She’s fourteen years old, which in car years qualifies her for Medicare. The old gal sports just shy of 300 thousand miles many of which were logged on washboard-rough dirt roads and logging roads in the Ozark and Mark Twain National Forests. I should probably show some grace for the most faithful female companion I’ve ever known, but her need for a thousand bucks worth of repairs got me to fretting about finances, nonetheless.

Full disclosure: I can afford a new car, but à la Grandma Shirley I’m partial to my payments-free lifestyle even if my radio switches to AM static when I make a sharp left. In light of the mechanic’s dire warning about the updates my four-wheeled friend required, I began to reminisce about my grandparents and their siblings. One of the many stars my mother will have earned in her heavenly crown is that she made sure my brother and I got to know all of our relatives. We spent time not only with immediate family, but with extended family on both sides of the tree. (Well, we avoided one old goat who had a

proclivity for shit-stirring. Otherwise, we knew all of my great aunts and uncles who lived in or near or regularly visited Randolph County, Arkansas.)

There was no shortage of floral clad old ladies to fuss over us, kiss our cheeks, hug our necks, and bless our hearts and as just many old men in plaid flannel to play the obligatory “got your nose” trick on us, insist on firm handshakes, and inquire as to the wellbeing of our beagles.

By the time I came along, the dwindling Condict-Elkins clan, my Grandmother Vival’s people, met frequently at her home or at my Uncle Raymond’s. They told stories of the old days and cooked and consumed great quantities of simple, but delicious down home “vittles” prepared by my grandmother, Aunt Gladys, and Aunt Ruby. Fried Fourche River catfish, fried quail (back before cattle farmers’ non-native fescue grass made the foothills fowl scarce), biscuits and gravy, loads of garden veggies cooked down with pork fat, and cobblers, cakes, and pies aplenty among many other delectable dishes may have been served on any given weather-permitting Sunday afternoon.

The old-timers had survived childhood poverty, world wars, the Great Depression, and stillborn babies. None of them had ever lived on Easy Street. Even when things grew better and the nation experienced boom times, my people didn’t live high on the hog. Instead, they passed their golden years in modest homes on fixed incomes. But for the life of me, I cannot remember a single time they didn’t have just a big ol’ time laughing and carrying on.

Long before country group Alabama memorialized the sentiment, my relatives (and scores of poor, working class southerners) regaled my age group with Depression-Era stories of survival.

> Well, somebody told us Wall Street fell
> But we were so poor that we couldn't tell.

The aptly designated Greatest Generation in my family and community were wont to remind us, blessed (or *spoiled*, depending on perspective) young’uns, that when city folks, politicians, and newspapers started talking about The Depression, the dire straits they described didn’t sound like news in the Arkansas backcountry—it simply sounded

like life. But it was newsworthy that folks with regular wages and enough money to set aside had been affected enough by whatever was going on to notice.

When I was a child in the 80s and 90s, the ten Seawel siblings of my Grandpa's era were in their 80s and 90s and all but one of the surviving siblings lived in or around my hometown. All of them belonged to the same little country church and wouldn't have missed Sunday services for all the gold in California.

My Great Uncle Clifford's next-door neighbor, Miss Juanita Kerley, was a revered, retired "old maid schoolmarm." The designation is not PC today, but not even the Democrats in Maynard cared back then (and they were legion). No one would ever have disrespected Miss Kerley, leastways not to her face. Legend held she could reduce a "full-growed man" to a sniveling little boy with a single withering gaze.

Miss Kerley (reserved, astute, and a staunch Baptist) took to raising her windows ever so slightly when the Seawel siblings gathered under the shade of the maples next door. After the last of that generation had gone to glory, she sent word to me of the pleasure she had derived from being entertained and serenaded by the singing, storytelling Seawels.

The message went something like this. "It was with such joy that I listened to those old Campbellites fellowship." (She would not have used the pejorative term for members of the Church of Christ had she and I not been on a friendly sparring basis.) "They'd tell the funniest stories and when those played out, they'd sing familiar hymns long into the afternoon. They bantered back and forth as siblings will do, but I never heard a quarrel. It was evident how much they loved life, the Lord, and each other. They were truly rich."

Miss Kerley pegged them. What she didn't have to report, because we all knew it, was that these old-timers were as poor as Job's turkey and as broke as the Ten Commandments. Save whatever pensions a few of them collected as a result of having once been temporarily displaced hillbillies working factory jobs in Yankee cities, most of them had to scratch and claw their way through life on fish and game and produce from their own gardens. And, a few of them received a hand up from Uncle Sam by way of commodity beans and "gubmint" cheese.

An observant boy in love with my little hometown, I asked a lot of questions about why things were as they were. For instance, some weekends the café in downtown

Maynard was emptier than a banker's heart. On others, old jalopies and pickup trucks were stacked so thick you couldn't swing a cat.

"Well, son, the old folks get their Social Security checks on the third of each month. They're celebrating," my dad explained. The pattern held throughout my child and teen years—every first weekend of the month.

All of my paternal great aunts and uncles by blood and marriage have gone on now. When they passed, there was nothing much to inherit except maybe a family bible, some sepia-toned family photos, the odd shotgun, or a leaky old jon boat hanging on for dear life by the power of J-B Weld and prayer. Family goodwill was too precious and the memory of the deceased too sacred to quibble over who got what.

Nowadays, when worry comes and fear tries to take root, I think back to my elders. I raise the windows in my mind, and hear old folks laughing, singing their favorite hymns, and thanking the Lord for whatever food they had.

My Grandma Vival made me multiple quilts before she passed and left me her "chicken and dumplins" bowl (amber colored with a chip in it), and a plate featuring a songbird. The latter was a part of a set she'd won from hawking something like a half-a-million gallons of Avon's Skin-So-Soft in her retirement to widow women, working women, and Weight Watchers from Warm Springs to Walnut Ridge.

Before my Grandpa Quimby passed on his 100th birthday, he bequeathed me some old fishing lures, a two-man saw, and a stack of old bible commentaries as full of silverfish as they were of King James English.

I cherish each item, not so much for what they are, but for whose they were. My primary inheritance, though, is not the former belongings of my grandparents, but the abundance of memories I will forever hold dear.

Memories of the meals my grandmothers cooked and the blessings my grandfathers offered over them. Memories of the daily devotion to blood they modeled, come hell or high water. Memories of their shared faith in a heavenly Father, who they hoped would someday reunite us When the Roll is Called Up Yonder in a land devoid of sickness, sadness, or pain.

Whether I spring for a new truck or run the wheels off this one, when I reflect upon my life, one thing is clear. I am already rich.

James Seawel's essays have been featured in *Arkana*, *The Bitter Southerner*, and *Tales from the South*. He was nominated by *Arkana* for Best of the Net in 2021, and his editorials frequently appear in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Currently he travels with the U.S. Military as a civilian counselor. James grew up in the Ozark foothills, absorbing the stories of his family and community.

No Time to Say Hello, Goodbye—

by Alden S. Blodget

On the Friday night before my father's memorial service, our family gathered for a dinner that felt surprisingly normal. We sat around the old dining room table, eating quietly, without my father—pretty much as we always had, but with a more profound silence that magnified the occasional clink of knife or fork striking china, like a bell invoking a shadow's shadow. My father was always more an absence than a presence in my life. He was a businessman who worked long hours. He departed early in the morning, traveled a lot, missed many dinners.

When he came home in the evenings or on weekends, he often disappeared into his den to conduct more business on the phone. For hours his laughter rumbled through the house. His work seemed to be the source of great friendships and hilarity. My mother said he constantly approached strangers—in railroad stations, airports, restaurants—to introduce himself and leave his business card. "He wants lots of people at his funeral," she told us, laughing. He and my mother enjoyed a social life with these friends on the few weekends when he wasn't traveling, so even when he was home, he wasn't home. He was the personification of the work ethic. He was my role model.

Yet the role he modeled wasn't the source of much joy. I longed to spend more time with him. We never really talked about anything or did much together. The exhilaration of the one touch-football game he and I played with some other families when I was about nine left me ravenous for more.

And his work had an additional dimension: We were always moving to another town, another state. Every time he was promoted, we packed up, and in the chaos of movers and boxes, I always discovered my losses as we unpacked in a new house—a coin collection, a stack of envelopes with first-date-of-issue stamps, my friends. Our time in any one place was two to four years, and then it was off to another school and the challenge of making new friends. My childhood memories are tinged with loneliness and sadness, but I realize today that, even as a child, I somehow learned to distance myself from these feelings. I worked at not feeling them, at shutting them off. I also stopped

collecting coins and stamps and getting close to people in order, I suppose, to ease the pain of inevitable loss. I must have come to accept the importance of my father's work, of making money, and the unimportance of my unhappiness.

It didn't take long for me to follow him into the world of work and money. As far back as I can remember, in the small coastal town where we lived during summers, I spent many solitary hours at low tide happily scavenging the marshes for scores of discarded soda bottles that I could redeem for a couple of cents each. When I was 1ten or eleven, my father got me a job delivering newspapers. At fourteen, I was employed in the office of a local yacht club preparing monthly bills for members. Later, at the same club, I worked in the snack bar cooking hamburgers, hotdogs, and fries and serving ice cream. Eventually, I worked there as a bartender and dishwasher. During these summer jobs, I worked hard, didn't miss days, strove for perfection. I felt like Happy Loman, Willie's attention-starved younger son in *Death of a Salesman*: I'm making money, you notice, Pop?

And then I became my dad. I married and embarked on a career as a high school teacher and administrator, arriving at the office between 6:30 and 7:00 each morning and often not returning home until 10 or 11 at night, though I always tried to have a quick dinner with my family. I worked weekends. During the final two decades of my career, I put in regular eighty-hour weeks. Most of my friends were my co-workers, my colleagues. We talked about work; we joked about work; we argued about work—we laughed a lot, though for the most part, we rarely got close. By the time I returned home, I was exhausted and didn't have much else to say.

I had no clue about how to develop relationships with people outside of work—how to be a different kind of father or husband or friend. I followed my perception of my father's lead. Just as I imagined that he must have followed the lead of his father.

When I was very young, I visited his father a couple of times. My mother put me on a plane, asked a flight attendant to watch me and to make sure my grandfather met me at the gate in New York (no security screening back then). On each visit, I spent the three weekend nights with him. He was a stern, formidable man—an angular face seemingly carved from stone, a steely mustache. He spoke in a rasping hoarse whisper, the result of the partial removal of cancerous vocal cords, and he had a wooden leg. He

was prone to fits of rage when things didn't go as he expected, especially when frustrated that his impaired voice failed to attract the attention he wanted. Once, in a restaurant when he couldn't summon the waiter who had brought him a small, unopened bottle of soda water for his whiskey, he smashed the bottle over his wooden leg, stunning everyone at the surrounding tables.

During the days, I was alone, roaming the woods around his house, playing with his dogs, who lived outdoors and who, regardless of weather, never entered the house. We had an appointment to meet at 5 PM each day in his den, where I assumed he had been working. We would sit and labor through some fitful conversation and then have dinner together, mostly in silence. It was a glimpse into my father's life—the solitude of the free-range parenting of the time. In the working orchard of our family, the apples seemed to fall very close to the trees.

My father and I learned from our fathers how to make a living but not much about living. We learned the importance and skills of hard work, independence, discipline, stoicism, thrift, ambition, camaraderie, banter. First into the office, last to leave, take on tasks that no one else wants. We didn't learn how to talk to a child, how to listen to a child, how to play with a child or like a child, how to spend time with a family. Yet, ironically, as children, both of us probably longed for family—without any capacity for understanding that longing. And so, we became ingrained with the habit of work, not the habit of family. Work we understood; it felt familiar, safe, filled with activity and noise. Family was an alien, barren planet where silence reigned. Home frightened me a bit, stirred an uneasiness I always felt when trying to perform activities that I wasn't very good at.

The morning Dad died, I was in my office, sitting at my desk cluttered with textbooks, student essays, schedules, files of teacher candidates. My wife came to tell me. The news hit like a torpedo, blasting a hole in the hull below the waterline, but, by then, I had learned the drill: Slam the bulkheads shut and screw the doors tight against the flood of emotions. I nodded. "Okay," I said, "Okay." And I went upstairs to teach my class.

I was a good worker and, though I tried to be more accessible than my father, a terrible father and husband: distant, absent, silent unless talking about work. My daughter said it all when she asked me, "Why have dinner together? We never talk about anything."

I remembered saying those same words to my father. How sharper than a serpent's tooth is truth.

Workaholism takes a toll, so I suppose I should have anticipated that my health would suffer. I developed Alzheimer-like cognitive symptoms. A few times, as I drove somewhere, I suddenly had no idea where I was or where I was going. I couldn't recall things that people told me I had said during conversations that I didn't remember. I realized I'd have to retire much sooner than I intended. My father died quite suddenly, accidentally, before he could retire, though I could never imagine him in retirement. He'd have been as miserable as Tennyson's Ulysses, unable to rest from work, to settle by a still hearth.

I didn't want to retire. My job was my identity. I have no hobbies, no other interests, few friends—and fraying neural networks that produce mostly static, though the most alarming of the Alzheimer symptoms dissipated with the stress reduction during the first year of retirement. I miss my office and the absorption of tapping at my computer, solving problems for others, so I still continue to disappear into my den for hours and sit at my computer, writing lachrymose essays or dyspeptic screeds or just playing *Free Cell*—a sort of methadone treatment for my addiction to work: the illusion of work.

At my father's memorial service, the church was filled with people--he got his wish—mostly the legions with whom he had worked during his three score years and ten. At the reception, people regaled me with stories of my dad—great guy, great sense of humor. And incredibly kind. I discovered how involved he'd been in so many lives in so many different ways. And I kept marveling at this stranger whom they had known—these people who had been his family.

I'm not sure what I'll do now—volunteer work, look for part-time jobs. I miss working. I am what I am. Although you can smash the pot, you can't deglaze and unfire it after it's been shaped and baked in the kiln of experience. Comfortable familiarity makes habits tenacious. Or … I wonder: Now that I no longer stagger about in the armor of a job, perhaps I could work to become a better father, husband, friend--grandfather.

What a terrifying idea.

Alden Blodget is a mostly retired high school teacher and administrator who now tutors, pro bono, students who want but can't afford a tutor. He has published many essays over the past forty years, mostly but not exclusively about education. He was lead author for *Neuroscience & the Classroom: Making Connections* for the Annenberg Foundation website, and he published a collection of speeches he gave to students during his years as assistant head of school: *Dead Man Talking*. He was co-founder and producing director for the Gloucester Stage Company (MA) and for eight years volunteered as a guardian ad litem in the Rutland County (VT) family and criminal courts, working with abused and delinquent children and with adults declared incompetent. His wife puts up with him in their home in Essex, MA.

The Museum of Odd Inheritance by Daughters from Mothers

by Liza Wieland

In her last year, my mother asked me to gather up all her jewelry and hide it from the cleaning lady (who was completely honest and devoted to my mother). And then my mother forgot all about it. And then she died. So I am in possession of the whole lot: the pearls real and fake, the gold, plate and solid.

When my sister came to visit our mother in the hospital, the nurses asked her to take off our mother's wedding ring. Steroids were causing her fingers to swell, and so the idea was better do that now than, you now, after…. Our mother protested mightily, but eventually the ring came off, and I presume my sister still has it.

I call these accidental leavings, different from inheritance.

My mother accidentally left us these things.

My mother accidentally left us.

My father tried once to leave on purpose, but that's another story.

Accidentally then, she left me her travel diary from the summer of 1951, her grand tour with college "pals," from London through twenty-two cities and home to Chicago from Rotterdam. She spent the most time in Paris and describes her time there in detailed, complete sentences and greater fondness. I read that she found a quiet place in every city and sat for a couple of hours sketching the buildings and the people. I discovered that she drank great quantities of beer and was often hung over in the mornings, and had several charming euphemisms for the late-night congress with men on the part of her girlfriends. I have deduced that somewhere there is a companion diary of sketches. This has probably been lost, which fills me with despair: my mother's eyes and hands describing the great capitals of Europe, vanished forever. I do have her last watercolor notebooks as consolation. I have noticed that, probably to save paper, she made half-page paintings, four and a half inches by six inches. Or, it occurs to me now, all these watercolors have a horizon that cuts midway through the page. Most are landscapes or water views, so sky above, land or water below. I look at them, and then they break my

heart with their loveliness, and I have to close up the pages for a couple of weeks. Sometimes my handwriting causes the word *loveliness* to look like *loneliness*. In this context, it doesn't matter which you see, because I think of her alone, too, setting up the paint box, filling a cup with water, standing at the sink. For almost sixty years she was never alone and then….

One of these half-sheets looks like she began with a sunset—but I can't be sure. There's too much yellow. The palette is Kandinsky: pink and deep green and salmon. The sunset became, at some point in her view, abstract. In fact, the sky is green, so I'm not even sure where I got the idea of sunset. But then, with charcoal, she drew three sets of lines from top to bottom, gathered in the middle like sheaves of burnt wheat or the letter K, or a splayed-leg tomato cage. I can't tell if she was trying for trees or angrily dismissing the picture.

This sums up my mother. The mysteries of her. I cannot comment further.

What we children inherited in the strictest sense came from our father: money. But this money had to pass first through the fortress of our mother's body, once that body became dust and ash. She was the Bureau d'Échange, exchanging currency. She was the ATM on the Champs Elysée, transforming money in the beautiful, foreign ether.

Doesn't every daughter live in a museum of odd inheritance? Because your mother painted her dining room red, so did you. Because your mother hung a mirror beside the front door, so did you. Your mother made her and your father's bed every morning first thing; you do this too. or else you feel unsettled. A certain high-end brand of enamel cookware from France, tomatoes ripening in the kitchen window, cloth napkins instead of paper. Family pictures arranged in neat semicircle on a low table, according not to chronology but to shape and height of the frames.

A goddamn chalkboard in the kitchen.

For a while, in the 90's, before my father died and my mother left that house—her next to last—for good, many of the pictures hanging on the walls and the decorative pieces on the mantel and the side tables were marked for future ownership by my siblings. Color-coded post-it notes, or dots, all of them blank, usually on the back or the underside, but sometimes visible, on the glass in the lower right-hand corner, on the arm of the

reclining 18th century porcelain woman like a neon nicotine patch. This apportionment happened while I was working far away, on the other side of the country. I thought of yard sales in upscale neighborhoods, where an actual sticker with an actual amount would have been considered crass, where the women who lived there had more than once been handed the menu on which the prices were not printed.

And I—devil child!—what did I do? One afternoon during the Christmas break when my father was napping in front of a golf match, and my mother was in the kitchen, I switched them, as many as I could find, in no particular order. I did not really even know who was blue and who was green and who was pink. I could guess, but it didn't really matter. Even the dots in plain sight I moved. Then I walked into the kitchen and sat at the white Parsons table and chatted with my mother, about what I can't remember.

And by the time my father died a few years later, all the colored dots had disappeared, fallen off, lost their power to stick. And my mother said, just take it somebody, anybody, just get it out of here, I don't give a damn.

Liza Wieland has published five novels, *Paris, 7 A.M. Land of Enchantment, A Watch of Nightingales*, *Bombshell,* and *The Names of the Lost*, and three collections of short fiction, *Quickening*, *You Can Sleep While I Drive*, and *Discovering America*, as well as a book of poems, *Near Alcatraz*. She has won two Pushcart Prizes and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has recently retired from teaching and lives in eastern North Carolina.

From The Inside

by Joseph O'Day

"I'm surprised you applied, Joe. I thought you were happy where you are. People who work with me know I'm blunt. I tell it like it is. You're no spring chicken."

For the past eighteen years I'd been Director of Pharmacy at a community teaching hospital in Boston. I met Pete (not his real name), a thirty-something, about a year ago when he arrived from out of state. We see each other regularly at our pharmacy directors' meetings.

His comment shocks me. I react by laughing.

"I may be no spring chicken, but I have a ton of experience and I'm a hard worker and an excellent problem solver." This is a first interview with Pete, pharmacy director of a large academic medical center. I'm applying for the associate director's position, a step down in title for me but a step up in scope of responsibility.

"And I *work young*," I tell him, adapting a phrase I'd heard about a diminutive high-school basketball star who "*plays big*."

I'm uncomfortable defending my age, trying to convince him I'm not a typical "oldy." I feel like a sell-out—separating myself from a group, in essence saying, "I may look like them, but I'm really different." As if being like them is shameful.

"I don't want to hire somebody who'll be gone in a couple of years," Pete says. "Do you even understand the job's enormous responsibility?"

I want to shout, "Of *course* I understand the job's responsibility. I've been in pharmacy for more than thirty-five years—progressing from intern to pharmacist to supervisor to assistant director to director, at large and small, teaching and non-teaching hospitals."

I respond politely: "I have no intention of leaving in a few years."

"Glad to hear," he says.

Pete's ruled me out. Not for lack of skills. How would he even know? He's asked nothing of my background. If I continue with the interview process, perhaps I could change his mind. But experience has taught me the importance of having a supportive, caring

boss, especially in a high stress position like this. He's not that kind of boss, I decide. I don't want to work for him. A few days later I withdraw. "It's not in the cards," I say.

"Thanks for your interest," he replies.

I'm angry. His mention of age was so contrary to what I've learned about non-discriminatory hiring practices.

I thought back to a remark he'd made at a directors' meeting. Noticing my sweater, he smirked and said, "You old guys are always cold." The comment struck me as funny but odd. When I returned to my hospital later that morning, I told a colleague, a few years my senior. She gasped, saying he sounded ageist.

I'd always taken such comments lightly, probably because I never felt old—even when I complained about my body's stiffness, or kidded with my barber about darkening my hair, or heard the crackling of my knees when descending stairs. When my sub seven-minute mile road races regressed to sub eleven-minute mile races, I lamented my slowing pace but knew it didn't translate to a less efficiently run hospital pharmacy service.

I pondered the dissonance between what I verbalized about aging and what I believed. Despite stiffness, crackling knees, and slower strides, I essentially looked at life as if I were a thirty-year-old. I still got the high of exercise—the pump in my triceps and lats, the tightening in my abdominals, the lightness in my strides. When I fell out of shape I'd think, *If I didn't have to spend so much time at work, if I could put together a consistent string of workouts, I'd be my strong, supple self.*

I just turned sixty, didn't feel old, and never felt discriminated against. Until that interview.

I started wondering how my own staff viewed me. Many were in their twenties and thirties. Did they see someone nearing the end of a career, having out-of-date, old-fashioned ways? If I had difficulty learning our new computer system, or trouble coming up with a word, or had a short attention span, did they think it was due to my age or just a trait of my personality?

Shortly after withdrawing my application, I interviewed a pharmacist for a position at my hospital. I asked him about his professional goals.

"Unlike you," he said, "I have many years and career options left."

"Hey, my career isn't over," I said.

“I just mean… You know what I mean. Unlike you, I have at least twenty years left.” His facial expression asked, “Isn’t it obvious, man?”

I thought about older colleagues from my past. Lenny, a pharmacist in his sixties, whom I’d hired despite spending the bulk of his career in drug stores. He had no hospital experience, but through his unmatched enthusiasm and dedication, he became our lead chemotherapy pharmacist. I remember him once telling me he felt the same as he did in college. During the 1980s, an era of complex chemo regimens, he tirelessly and peerlessly served our most ill patients with safe, effective, intravenous chemotherapy mixtures.

Another pharmacist, Harold, in his mid-sixties, worked for me during a turbulent time in our hospital’s history, a period of high personnel turnover rates and endlessly overflowing patient censuses. Harold worked his regular evening shifts and took on extra days and weekends and added duties, without complaint, at times singlehandedly keeping the pharmacy running safely. He outworked everyone. The only criticism I ever heard was that he kept his head down and was always busy.

I recalled something New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, in his late thirties, once said. “I think for me, I always feel like I’m the same guy. I feel like I’m still the kid from Portola Drive. I know probably from the outside in it’s different, but from the inside out, it’s the same.”

That’s the way I felt. From the inside, I was still that young, vigorous guy, fighting the good fight for our patients.

I considered prejudice, and how it can live underground, behind humor, behind consciousness. Had I ever unknowingly discriminated, leaving someone feeling as powerless and diminished as I’d felt during that interview with Pete? Had I ever judged another by age? Or appearance, or hair color, or clothes, or accent, or manner, or size? Rather than by what’s inside, by what value they might bring to the workplace?

I thought about the meanings of words like young and old, optimism and pessimism, enthusiasm and apathy, hopefulness, despair. Young people, especially the very young (like my two-year-old granddaughter), are so excited by life and discovery, the endless opportunities offered in the world. They’re full of possibility: optimism, enthusiasm, hopefulness. I’ve seen those same traits in elderly people too—my parents

and my wife's parents, my colleagues. These traits aren't only for the young or to be found in the young. They're a pathway of being, regardless of age.

Joseph O'Day's writing focuses on family relationships and life transitions. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spry Literary Journal, The Critical Flame: A Journal of Literature and Culture, bioStories*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine, Molecule: A Tiny Lit Mag, The Salem News*, *The American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, and *Focus on Faulkner*. He received his MA in English (Creative Writing) from Salem State University and served as Nonfiction Editor of *Soundings East*, Salem State's literary journal. He was the Director of Pharmacy at Brigham and Woman's Faulkner Hospital for many years until his retirement.

Bor

by Alisa Vereshchagin

On a humid and overcast fall day in Austin, Texas, I hike on a trail not far from my house. Reaching a small creek, I sit on a rock at its edge and take in the moment. Crickets chirp softly and the water gurgles. A child laughs in the distance. Then, the hiss of a truck just outside the park spoils the pleasant scene. Its annoyance is brief, however, for the sound of that truck cutting through nature's hum has a warm familiarity. It carries me back to a place with little semblance to this one: a tiny Russian village nearly 10,000 kilometers away.

In this village, there were more dogs than people. Free to roam the land, the dogs knew the meadows, valleys, and forests better than anyone. Once a week, on Sundays, the dogs howled in unison when a food truck rattled down the village's single gravel road. Somewhere in the middle, the old Soviet truck stopped, and the village residents, like the dogs, heard the commotion and came running. Because there was no grocery store, this was the villagers' only chance to buy what they needed for the next week. That truck stirred up enough dust to disguise itself and obscure its immediate surroundings, but in the few minutes that the driver stopped, shut off the engine, and disbursed his goods, the haze settled to reveal the silhouettes of dozens of ill-fed dogs.

The village felt worlds away from civilization. It had no electricity and no running water. In the absence of streetlights, I came to know darkness intimately. On a clear moonless night, I could see countless stars in the sky, but I could not see my own feet walking to the outhouse to relieve myself.

There was a light pink wooden cottage in the village. It had brown shutters and a crooked, slightly caved-in roof. It was ugly, yet somehow heavenly; dilapidated, with peeling paint, but surrounded by trees, flowers, and overgrown weeds. In summer, the yard smelled of lilacs.

In front of the cottage, there was a small sand pit. As a child, I'd dig in that pit until I hit earth. Then I'd dig into the soil, looking for worms. I kept those worms in a rusted

aluminum can and in the heat of the afternoon sun I would walk west of the village to a river, where they wiggled from a small hook that hung from a homemade fishing rod.

The soil there was fertile. Untouched by industrialization, it had only been farmed by hand. No pesticides or chemicals touched it until 1986, when the Chernobyl power plant in Pripyat, Ukraine exploded and scattered toxic radiation across Eastern Europe. Thousands of kilometers from Pripyat, a research station in Finland detected airborne radiation only hours after the accident. The village was closer to Pripyat than Finland, yet we ran around barefoot. We bathed in the river, rolled in the meadows, and dug into the earth with our bare hands. It was dangerous, but this was Russia in the early 90s, and danger was commonplace.

I was a child during the “reckless” 90s in Russia; a time marked by a coup, the collapse of the Soviet Union, an explosive growth in organized crime, and two wars in Chechnya. People escaped reality with any number of vices, and many left the former Soviet Bloc, dispersing all over the world to begin anew. Those who stayed and lived through the tumultuous decade never forgot it.

While it was far from the chaos of Moscow, the village had its own problems. There were fewer than fifty residents at the time, and about half of them, like my family, lived there for only part of the year. People stole from each other when neighbors were away, but the offenses were never grave. With nothing of value in people’s homes, the thieves targeted root cellars to fill their empty stomachs. And they were transparent about their infractions. More than once we heard stories of neighbors coming forward, openly confessing, *it was me. I was hungry.*

Behind closed doors, the villagers drowned their sorrows with alcohol. Life had dealt them a poor hand and they didn’t know how to cope with their sadness. So, they drank. While the dogs scavenged for food. And the stunning Russian landscape cradled this equally beautiful and barbarous place in its embrace. The name of this village was as simple as the existence unfolding within it. Its name was Bor.

♦

My father bought the pink wooden cottage for my grandmother—my babulya. It was a summer home known in Russian as a dacha.

Babulya grew her own food in a plot behind the cottage. The plot was so huge that I wondered how she managed to care for it herself. We rarely helped her, but she always praised us when we did. She liked to tell the story of how I once weeded her entire strawberry patch by myself. Moving at a steady pace through dozens of rows of berry plants, I did not miss a single weed. I was five years old. “It was your dogged stubbornness,” Babulya would say when telling the story—“no, *perseverance*”—she’d correct herself every time.

The strawberries from Babulya’s garden often went into her delicious pies and pastries. For baking, she used the cottage’s centerpiece item: a huge clay stove that took up almost half of the main room. The stove had a ladder to the top where up to three people could sleep comfortably. We curled up there on wintry nights, warming our bodies against the stove’s clay exterior, the wooden ceiling just inches from our faces.

A ten-minute walk south of my babulya’s cottage brought me to a woods abundant with berries and mushrooms. It is the only place where I have ever seen hedgehogs in the wild. Sensing the earth tremble from our footsteps, dozens of them would scatter across the forest floor in search of refuge. Those woods smelled of pine and rain unless it was late spring when lily of the valley blanketed the forest floor. Trapped by the dense foliage overhead, the intoxicating jasmine-like aroma of the flower lasted for the entirety of its month-long bloom. The birds of the woods sang ceaselessly, while the wind, like in

Pushkin's poems, spoke and breathed and bargained with the sun. It was heaven on earth.

My babulya was entirely at home in Bor, its wildness and bucolic nature fitting for her personality despite her polished professional background and adventurous work experiences. Babulya was a distinguished radiologist. She was brilliant, but her heart was more in nature than in books. Babulya loved animals, especially dogs. And the dogs of Bor loved her. They had a daily habit of circling the cottage until Babulya came outside. Then they followed her, sometimes for hours, waiting for her to pet them or to reward them with a small piece of sausage or fish.

She came to Bor every spring, traveling by train for more than twelve hours from Murmansk, a city near Russia's border with Finland, and then taking a bus to a small town where she would find a taxi driver to bring her the rest of the way. Babulya remained in the village for the entire summer and oftentimes into fall. As much as the Soviet system admired work, it also recognized the value of rest. Time off was copious, and when she finally retired from her work in the hospital, Babulya spent most of her time in Bor.

Babulya had been married, but my grandfather left her not long after my father was born. Maybe it was some divine will, but shortly after he left, he had a heart attack and died. Babulya would outlive him by over forty years. When I asked her about my grandfather many years ago, Babulya didn't avoid the conversation. "He did what made him happy," she told me, "and believe me, I am happy, too."

I like to think that his absence was a good thing, because after he left, Babulya did many brave things. She moved to Siberia to work as the only radiologist in a small town. After that, she grew fearless and more adventurous. She enlisted as a doctor in the navy, working on ships for months at a time. I now know that this was the life that suited her best: a life of self-reliance, adventure, and close connection to nature. Babulya's confidence and intelligence were only surpassed by her absolute certainty of who she was; she didn't need anyone to change her life because she had tailored it perfectly to herself. She was an admirable woman and I wanted to be just like her.

♦

My parents brought me and my twin brother Alex to Bor every summer for a break from our modern lives and to spend time with our beloved grandmother. We spent the winter months in Murmansk, in a large apartment building that housed hundreds of families in small on and two-bedroom apartments. Alex and I loved coming to this place where the rules of nature governed. The most important adult-imposed rule was simple: play where you please, but be home before sunset.

There was only one other family in Bor with a child at that time. The matriarch of this family was a woman around the age of sixty. She was a friend of Babulya's. Her daughter Sveta came to Bor with her son in the summers. The boy's name was Dmitri, but to me he was simply Dima.

Dima's father was never around. Sveta cared about her son, but he was, by all accounts, wild. The strictest disciplinarian could not have kept him from sneaking out after dark, starting fires, or climbing trees. And while Bor would not tame him, Dima could safely run free with little to no supervision because there was nowhere else to go. Beyond Bor, the Russian plain rolled out like an endless carpet into thousands of kilometers of some of the most sparsely inhabited land on Earth.

In the summers we spent together, Alex and I became friends with Dima. Like a pack of wild wolves, we roamed every corner of the village. One summer, we built a fort under a birch tree and hid there to see who—or what—passed by. Nothing did, but we were proud of ourselves regardless. At the river, we tested our strength by throwing sticks to the other side. I threw hundreds of sticks, but they always fell short of the bank. And while I never gave up trying, I eventually made myself more useful by collecting sticks for the boys.

Keeping up with Dima and Alex was a test of endurance and ingenuity. Both were bigger and stronger than I was. They could run through the meadows and wheatfields with their eyes above the sea of golden-brown, but I was not tall enough. They scaled fences and trees with ease. I, however, resorted to looking for holes in the fences and for trees with low limbs. In every race, in every test of strength, I was always last. This was an understood part of our friendship. As long as I was around, neither Alex nor Dima had to humbly accept the title of loser. They focused on competing against each other and counted on my failure as a fail-safe protection for their pride.

During the last summer that I ever spent in Bor, Dima and I became close. Alex was more reluctant to tag along now; I think he had grown bored with the same games. But Dima and I continued to have our own adventures. I was taken with Dima's inventiveness and with how important he made me feel by letting me into his life. It was a blissful gift of childhood, to love and to admire someone outside the borders of my defined family for the first time.

Early in the summer, Dima and I found a hole underneath a neighbor's porch. In it, a cat had given birth to six kittens. Dima wanted to tell the neighbor about the kittens, but I forbade it. Cats in Bor were considered pests, and we knew of several villagers who would toss the kittens in the river or bury them to get rid of the nuisance.

The morning after our discovery, Babulya gave me a cup of warm cow's milk to drink. I feigned drinking it and instead brought the milk to that hole in the porch, where I poured it into a saucer for the kittens. The next time Dima and I went to see them, the saucer had been flipped over and the mother cat and the kittens were gone. I later learned that kittens don't drink cow's milk and that the smell of the milk had probably lured a fox or a sable into the mother cat's hideout. I searched for those kittens every day for the next week, but I never saw them again. Bor had a way of doing this, of teaching lessons through happenstance. From those kittens I learned that sometimes things that seem helpless fare far better when left alone. Nature can take care of herself.

Dima also taught me how to ride a bike. I was a little late to this landmark childhood moment, and I had to learn on an old adult-sized bicycle that weighed more than I did. Because the bike was too big for me, I couldn't reach the pedals while sitting in the saddle. So, I resorted to standing on the pedals. I had no problem once I got my balance, but the incompatibility in size made getting on and off the bicycle extremely difficult. Dima had to hold the bike every time I wanted to get on.

Dima never complained about me riding the bike more than him. In fact, he often ran next to me with his fishing pole in hand, the tackle tangling up around itself as it bounced as I biked down Bor's gravel road. I loved Dima for his enduring sense of patience, but I never thanked him for it. Now, so many years later, I wish I had.

As the summer wore on, Dima and I came very close to not making it home by sunset on multiple occasions and thereby violating our one firm rule. Finally, on a late

August day, we did not. North of the village, we found a combine harvester. After exploring the contraption, we played on it like a jungle gym, hanging on the frame of the operator's door and walking on the bar in front of the combine like a balance beam. We started the trek home shortly before sunset, but it soon became clear that we were lost. We walked in what we thought was the direction home, second guessing ourselves with every step. In the meantime, my parents, who were beside themselves with anger, asked the only person in the village with a car to drive them down the three kilometer stretch of gravel road to see if they could find us with the car's headlights. We saw the headlights in the distance and sprinted toward them. I don't think my parents ever scolded me as much as they did on that night. After they got in their last words and I went to bed, I heard Babulya talking to my father. She told him that Dima was trouble, but that I was the antidote to his recklessness. She ended the conversation by saying she believed that I would never make the same mistake again, and I took it upon myself to make sure I never did.

That summer I was not yet ten, and Dima was perhaps twelve. When I look at photos of Dima, I see he was a good-looking kid with blond hair, a round face, and characteristically high Slavic cheekbones, but I never noticed this at the time. All I cared about was our next adventure, of making the most of each day before summer ended. I was enamored with Dima, with his adventurous spirit and his boundless energy. I believe Dima cared for me, too. He once lent me his jacket. I know this because in one old photograph of us, I am sitting on a stump in Babulya's garden wearing his way-too-big-for-me red nylon jacket. In the photograph, my pants are covered in dirt, my chin is turned down, but my eyes are looking up at the photographer. Dima is on the left, gazing at me.

♦

Time distorts memories. In a year, the memory of today will be covered in a fine dust, less fresh, less palpable. In five years, the dust will thicken. Decades will pass and the memory will become as opaque as mud. Eventually, it will become something else entirely. Nothing lies quite like memory.

I've made it to middle age with a generous collection of memories, many good, many bad. The pain of the bad has faded. The joy of the good has faded some, too. But

there is a memory from Bor that does not seem to fade, or maybe I won't let it. I can close my eyes and replay it exactly.

One cloudy afternoon later that same summer I was inside Babulya's cottage when I glimpsed a figure passing by the kitchen window in my peripheral vision. It looked like Dima and he was walking toward the woodshed behind the house. *Strange*, I thought. There was no need to go into the woodshed. It wasn't cold. We weren't baking. There was nothing in there but wood.

I followed him, pacing quickly across the main room of the cottage toward the back door. This door was heavy and unfailingly noisy. Loyal to itself, it screamed loudly as I pushed it open. Dima had to have heard the noise, but when I looked outside, I saw that he had already made his way out of the woodshed. I walked toward the fence that separated the back garden from the front yard, and through a crack between two posts, I glimpsed Dima walking down the gravel road in the river's direction.

I didn't follow him, and instead walked toward the woodshed. It was small, probably somewhere around six meters in width and length. I walked the outside perimeter and then the inside, sticking my hand between logs and old milled pieces of wood yet finding nothing. Finally, inside the shed, I looked toward the very top of the woodpile that was stacked against the wall across from the entrance. A few of the wood pieces looked messy, like they had been disturbed or climbed upon. Directly above these pieces, the beam that held up the shed roof joined with the wall and the ceiling.

With no idea of what I was looking for, I began to slowly scale the woodpile. At the top, in the space where that roof beam met the wall and the ceiling, I saw that a piece of

wood had been haphazardly affixed with several nails to make a small, hidden shelf. On the shelf, there was a bottle of clear liquid without a label. I took the bottle, opened it, and held it to my nose. The smell was horrific. It must have been vodka or *samogon*—I had no idea which because I had never tasted either—but it was undoubtedly alcohol.

While I had been careful in my ascent, I now desperately felt that I needed to be anywhere else. A fear something like what I had felt while lost in the dark tugged at me, only this time I did not have my friend for comfort. I put the bottle back and hurriedly climbed down from the woodpile to the floor. As I did, a nail lodged in one of the scrap pieces of wood lacerated the inside of my left calf. The cut was deep and bled profusely. I ran into the cottage with blood running down my leg, only to be caught by my mother, who washed and bandaged the wound. The scar remains to this day, a backwards "s" shape that has long been my daily companion for tasks like getting dressed and bathing, a different kind of reminder of Bor. When my mother, who was used to me coming home with scrapes and bruises, asked how I got the cut, I was honest in the simplest way possible. "Climbing," I said. "Of course," she replied. I don't remember crying much that summer, but I did cry after the ordeal was over. The initial pain had passed, yet I sobbed for a long time into the warmth of my mother's embrace. "Sshhhh," she calmed me as she stroked my head softly. Between gasps of air I spat out a broken chain of the same words: "It hurts, it really hurts."

I spent the rest of the summer wondering who to tell, or whether to bring it up with Dima, but I said nothing. One evening, not long after the incident, my family was in Babulya's kitchen and Dima was there. My father removed a bottle of vodka from the cabinet and poured himself a shot, which he took with a bite of *salo,* cured pig fat. He put the bottle on the table where we were all sitting. Dima's eyes darted to the bottle, then to me, and then back to the bottle. He said nothing, and in my mind I fabricated a new truth: the bottle in the woodshed was his and he knew I knew. Like him, I remained silent, out of fear of losing him.

♦

The following spring, my family left Russia for good. My parents had had enough; enough of poverty, crime, and instability. We were immigrating to a place I had never heard of before. After initially landing in New York City, we settled in Cleveland, Ohio. Everything was new, and everything was terrifying. Babulya stayed behind in Russia and when I grasped the reality that she and Dima were now very, very far away, I felt the most alone I had ever felt in the entirety of my then relatively brief life.

In the States, things were more rigid, and rules governed everything I did. I had no equivalent to a place like Bor in my life, and the distance between that place and the people I loved there felt insurmountable. I found new people to emulate, but so many of them grounded their identities in achievement, not in happiness. Not knowing any better, I did the same. Years went by and I became who I suppose I was meant to be. I did all the things a good kid should do. I earned good grades and passed important tests and went to college. There, I studied biology because I wanted to understand the natural world, and I studied linguistics because I wanted to understand people.

Living in the US with immigrant parents, I became this strange bicultural and bilingual person who did not fit seamlessly into either culture but could, when needed, navigate both, much as I could pilot my Russian home city and the wild countryside of Bor. I realized early on that I was different, and after some challenging bouts of not *wanting* to be different, my adult self convinced my child self to let that complex go. I am now, at the very least, content with myself, including my naturally guileless, gullible self.

In many ways I am still that girl in dirt covered pants posing in the photograph with Dima. I dislike pretension and have a strong aversion to crowded places. I could live out the rest of my life in a city, but I'd rather be somewhere rural with plenty of room to roam. If I ever have children, I hope that they, too, will have somewhere to run free.

♦

Nearly twenty years after we left Russia, my father finally brought Babulya to to live with us. I guess the word *brought* might not be as appropriate as *dragged*. Babulya did not want to leave and liked to remind us that she wept when the plane took off from Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg.

The next seven years passed quickly, and Babulya aged at what seemed like an accelerated rate because she vehemently refused help in any form. She passed away after surgery to repair her femur, broken in a fall.

When she was in the hospital, I grieved the loss of Babulya's independence as if it were my own. That independence permeated every bit of her character, and it had made me want to be just like her. When I thought of her helplessness, waves of sadness washed over me until I felt my body shutting down. I struggled to eat, sleep, laugh. Babulya was dying, and as she died, I felt like a part of me was dying, too. I thought of Bor, of how integral Babulya was to that tiny village, and how if I ever returned there, it would never again be as it was.

After Babulya's passing, my father flew to Russia in the middle of a pandemic. Once there, he made the long trek to Bor, where he spread Babulya's ashes. It was consolation to my grief, knowing that she was home and that I could return there someday and feel her presence.

♦

Dima's mother Sveta had also moved to the States. She settled in New York. She left her son behind in Russia, where he was raised by his grandmother. This isn't unusual. In Russia, there's an unspoken understanding that grandparents have parental rights and many children are raised by grandparents. Dima eventually came to the US, but he was already a teenager by then.

In 2004, my family was in New York and we paid Sveta and Dima a visit. They lived in a tiny apartment on a narrow street crowded with old cars. When we arrived, Sveta told us that Dima was not home, but she never elaborated as to why. We later learned from a friend that he had been arrested for selling drugs. He was not even twenty years old. I never saw Sveta again. She did not return my parents' calls, and shortly after our visit, we heard that her mother in Bor passed away.

I sometimes search for Dima online. I know that the result will be no different than the last time I searched, but I do it anyway. The truth is, I don't know where Dima is or what became of him. Maybe it is better not to know. At times, my imagination takes me

places I don't dare to explore. My thoughts spiral out of control like a wild horse running at full force to nowhere, creating in me a deep fear of the truth about where he could be. When that happens, I force myself to imagine a beautiful and happy life for him, a life I believe he deserves.

Every time I look at my left leg I see that decades-old scar and I am reminded of Bor, the summers I spent there, and the boy whose life path crossed mine for a brief moment. I now know that it was just that—a brief moment—but to my child self it was an enormous chunk of life. That scar carries with it an unshakeable guilt mixed with grief, nostalgia and love, a feeling too complicated to explain. Dima endures in my memory as the person who taught me that love is simple. You can love someone who is flawed and you can forgive someone without ever receiving an apology. Love begets forgiveness.

There is a Russian proverb: *У кого что болит, тот про то и говорит* (One talks about what hurts him.) In essence, people talk about the things they want—or need—to get off their chest. I've shared very little of Bor with the people to whom I am closest, even though the memory of it has ached for a long time. It wanted to be told. Perhaps this is the beginning of my telling. Of a special place. Of two people who mean very much to me, and that still, in their absence, guide my life and my musings on who I truly am and how I became *me*. I know that I can never recreate the time I spent in Bor; those years are lost forever. But they are with me, stamped permanently in the timeline of my life.

Back in Austin, I'm still on the hiking trail, thinking. I have outgrown that girl who runs through the wheatfields and vast plains of the Russian countryside in my memories,

but I still see those memories through her eyes. It is a simple and happy truth: life has carried me very far from the place that girl came from and the life she once lived, but I am her and she is me.

Alisa Vereshchagin is a linguist and education consultant living in Austin, Texas. Currently she works for a nonprofit training teachers of refugees and internally displaced people in Eastern Europe with specific focus on Ukraine. Alisa was born in Murmansk, Russia—the biggest city in the Arctic Circle—months before the collapse of the Soviet Union. She credits her brave and ambitious parents, who fled the USSR for the United States when she was a child, for her adventurous spirit. An exploration of identity and grief, “Bor” was born of a creative writing class that Alisa was enrolled in when Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022. A lover of travel, Alisa has always been fascinated with rural, remote and hard-to-reach places. In addition to travel and writing, Alisa enjoys learning languages, poetry, running, swimming, and taking care of her dogs and chickens.

**The photos of Bor were taken in 2021. Babulya’s pink cottage has long been remodeled. The village now has electricity, but the road remains unpaved. There is still a lilac tree in the front yard of the cottage and my father told me that when he was there it still smelled like it did almost thirty years ago.

Confabulating

by Jane Frances Hacking

“I have news,” our father said and gestured for the three of us to gather round. He’d agreed to be transferred to his wheelchair and so instead of standing around his bed, we perched on the assortment of uncomfortable chairs that populate his retirement home living room.

“I’m engaged to Rachel.”

“To me?” my sister Rachel asked.

“No, no. Rachel Evans.”

It was possible to trace this marital development back to earlier in the day when he’d reminisced about this girlfriend from the distant past. We, of course, had never known her since she predated our mother. We did know that she was somehow related to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, and that our grandmother could never quite forgive him for not walking down the aisle with her. We played along.

“When?” Daniel asked.

“Two Wednesdays after Easter.” Oddly precise.

“Where?”

“Canterbury Cathedral. The archbishop will marry us, I’ve had an email from him.”

He radiated happiness and declared, “We should have a toast. Champagne, I think.” Daniel was dispatched to the liquor store.

But of course, he isn’t getting married. He is confabulating. *Confabulation*. Another term added to the arsenal of aging associated vocabulary we are getting used to. I’ve been reading up on it. It can co-occur with dementia but doesn’t have to. Our father is sharp as a tack, except when he’s confabulating. Sometimes people call it “honest lying” to capture the fact that the confabulator’s creation of false memories carries no intent to deceive. I like that term.

He's been confabulating for a while now.

“I’m headed north.” His voice was clear down the phone line. Here we go, I think. He rarely telephones and increasingly when he does, it is to tell one of his children an honest lie.

“They think they have power over me, but I am walking out of here.” Given that he hasn’t left his bed for weeks, this seems unlikely, but why be churlish.

“Where are you going?”

“Kearney. Do you know it?” I did not but knew this lapse in my geographical knowledge would soon by corrected.

“Well,” he continued. “In the days when you bought match books, they were all made in Kearney. I’ve bought the factory for a small sum. Disused now. And the house that goes with it. The house needs a lot of work.”

“That’s probably good,” I said. “It’ll be a project for you when you get there. Something to do.”

Later I googled Kearney, which does exist although there does not seem ever to have been a match factory there. His confabulations often involve Northern Ontario.

“It may look to you like I am doing nothing,” he announced from his bed the first time I’d been able to visit since the start of the pandemic. He was indeed doing nothing, but I didn’t say this. Just made a non-committal noise and waited to see what he’d say next. “I’m writing a series of detective novels.”

“In your head?”

“Well, I think them up in my head, but I have to write them out for my editor.” I could tell by his tone he thought I was the crazy one, which wasn’t really fair, because he hasn’t held a pen for years.

“What are they about?”

“I’ve got a detective chap who goes from town to town up north and in each town, he has to solve a crime. My editor is extremely pleased. The first one’s been selling very well so they want more. A whole series.”

What do you say to that? I went with: What’s it called? The one that’s out and selling well? He didn’t miss a beat. *The Spyglass of the North*.

Great title. There should be a book called that. Later when I recounted this to my siblings, Rachel asked if I’d googled it. “Maybe he has actually written it.”

There are two kinds of confabulation: provoked and spontaneous. Provoked confabulations are when someone makes something up in response to a question they can't answer. Spontaneous confabulations are less common, have no obvious motivation, and are "more fantastic and grandiose in nature." They can be the result of long-term alcoholism. Our father opts for the fantastic, grandiose, and rarer form of the condition. It's been going on for quite some time. Although not as long as his drinking.

It feels unseemly, almost voyeuristic, to see him this way. His confabulations are chinks in his armour. Each one reveals a psychological preoccupation, an unmet need, an emotional vulnerability. Clinicians speculate that confabulation helps people make sense of themselves, feel relevant. Our catastrophically widowed father, who can no longer walk and whose last book was published in 2014, is setting things to right. He's got wedding plans, a revived writing career, and he's walking north to remodel an old match factory.

"Do you try to tell him what he's saying isn't true?" a friend asked. I don't. None of us do. We step onto the stage of his imagination and back into our childhood roles.

When we were little, his enthusiasms had purchase in the real world. "Faster, daddy, faster!" we shrieked as elephants charged after our Peugeot in Uganda. "Shall we walk to the ocean from our backdoor?" he wondered when we were teenagers. And we did. Toasting his engagement or enquiring about the conditions of the disused match factory perpetuates a lifelong arrangement. He needs us. To play along. As he always has. Our larger-than-life father conducts an orchestra with three musicians.

Jane Frances Hacking is Professor of Russian and Linguistics at the University of Utah and a lifelong lover of words. She is working on a memoir titled *Half Life*, an early draft of which was shortlisted for the 2020 Mslexia memoir prize.

My Granny's Handbag of Algorithms

by Basundhara Mitra

I love toothless smiles—in chubby and wrinkled faces alike. The endearing lack of bite inevitably evokes in me an emotional resonance of the tenderest intent. So, transitioning my personal priorities, I went ahead and invited my ninety-year-old grand-aunt to stay with me on my much-awaited month-long vacation. Not surprisingly, my friends thought I had whimsically forsaken sanity. "You'll end up being a babysitter," they warned. "You're wasting your holiday and risking your peace of mind."

It is worth it, I thought. The dazzle of the midday sun has a longer tenure. Those parties, music, and hikes would wait for me, but the soft twilight rays receded too fast. If I didn't embrace the delicate beam now, if I didn't savor and celebrate the light, I would let something beautiful pass by. I had thought a blast with the past would energize my present.

Instead, I got the future.

♦

"Stop! Wait for me!" I called after her. I had stopped for a moment to buy a bottle of water at the airport, and as I turned, I saw my grand-aunt, or *Dida* as I called her, had scuttled far ahead, clutching onto her gigantic handbag. With unbridled enthusiasm, much like a toddler clinging to a toy, she was moving forward—fast, unsteady—driven by her spirit more than balance. I knew I had to keep up. What I didn't know was the direction it would take.

I got an inkling soon enough. Once we reached my home and erased the exhaustion of the long journey by ziplining down memory lane, I asked Dida about her entertainment preferences. Having already subscribed to several streaming platforms, and upgraded to YouTube Premium, I had envisioned us kicking up our heels, exchanging notes on early twentieth century classics versus latest twenty-first century pop.

Reservations to exotic seaside locations lay in my drawer promising to deliver timeless moments.

She replied sweetly, “Is there a computer center close by?”

“Computer center? You mean, you want to print something? You can do that from home, you know,” I assured her.

“No, not print, I want to learn computers.”

“Learn computers! Why?” That was the last thing I expected to hear. I harbored the unjustified assumption that seniors were apprehensive of advanced technology.

“Oh, I don’t have much time, that’s why,” she replied solemnly.

“I’ll need a longer brief than that!” I smiled.

“You see, I’ve heard that you all, young computer-savvy people, do something called computer coding to solve problems. I have a project, too—a step-by-step idea—to overcome distance and get closer to people who matter. I want to meet everyone I know, even if I can’t see them.”

“You mean you want to connect with family and friends? But I can install several apps on your phone, open a Facebook account. You can exchange daily chatter and photos on WhatsApp. Social media is your genie, Dida. Command and voilà, your wish will have a face!”

Looking at her tiny but shiny relic phone, I said, “I could also get you an iPhone and you could Facetime.”

“I don’t want to just connect, I need to reach people. And because my time is limited, I need to do it through computers.”

I was amused at how she used the word ‘computers’ as an umbrella—to mean software, apps, programs, and even the Internet.

To decode her game plan, Dida went and got her handbag and took out a wad of notes. She waggled them at me. “For a laptop,” she grinned.

“Will this be enough?” she then asked, a little anxiously.

“Depends on the complexity of your project,” I teased her.

She emptied out her bag slowly. Instead of the old-world necessities like tissues, keys, hankies, and medicines, she had a spiral-bound telephone book with email addresses of two-thirds of the world, a pen-drive, sheaves of notes, photographs, a list of

all the software programs she wanted to learn. The unearthing continued—beginner's guides, earphones, even a USB microphone! I finally spotted a predictable element in the hopeful array embodying her audacious dream—blue light blocking reader glasses. Her focus was clearly set.

"If I manage to learn the basics of computers, then I can learn some document-making skills, or else I will just enjoy social media and online banking," Dida said.

"Goodness!" I thought, "She is already talking algorithmically. If-then-else—like conditionals in a program."

Her passion was shining in her earnest eyes, and in her handbag. Technology was the flame of the youth. Or so I had always thought. But this ode to the digital world, this hunger to rein in a new-age force to redefine reality and sensibility moved me.

"I can teach you all of these," I told her.

She immediately cut me short, "No, dear, I am literally leaping into outer space. I am excited and also scared, as I do not want to fall flat on my face. I will go very slowly…why should you waste your time? You go do new and fun things, too."

So much for babysitting! I thought.

I was aware of her chin-up independence—a spinster by choice, she had been the principal of an all-girls' school and the kindest feminist I ever knew. She had not only paid for uniforms, books, and tuition of several of first-generation female students but also hosted them when they came from villages and had no place to stay. Now she sought to be the student and I knew I must comply.

Next evening, we went to the nearest tech-learning center to enroll. The instructor innocently asked, "Which student have you come to pick up?"

I pointed at Dida, "She's the one!"

I explained Dida's need to learn. The gentleman was impressed but unsure. Even if he wanted to sign her up, he said, he couldn't do so as it would take up a seat in a limited class, not to mention distract the children as well.

The proposition of Granny as a student would be a hard convince. I put on my negotiating shoes.

“How about you give her one-on-one lessons?” I asked. “It would be financially beneficial for you, and you would be doing business and social outreach simultaneously. It could become an inspiring story, publicity for your work.”

I waited, knowing he couldn’t refuse. He didn’t.

“Only one thing,” Granny piped in, her eyes twinkling, “it will not be home-tutoring. I will come to your office. I have to walk that extra mile, you see.”

The lessons began and Granny jumped into her cyber-space mission with the gusto of a college freshman, starry-eyed and hell-bent. Weeks of hilarious assertions followed—“I am not sure if I’m working or playing with my laptop!”

I had to resolve questions both charming—“Can the virus on my laptop infect yours if I email you?” and insightful—"Shouldn’t voice-recognition programs have an accent-based research done first?”

Like a contestant in a MasterChef pantry, she worked according to a well-defined strategy and picked up more and more ingredients along the way for her recipe.

While I was left behind. I had indulged her whims, but as a result, found my own plans of celebrating her stay helplessly waiting in line. My mind chewed itself up silently. This wasn’t what I had signed up for! My thoughtfully crafted vacation was losing its higher purpose. How was it slipping away into a déjà vu routine of dropping, picking up, and helping with homework? I had wanted Dida to be happy, not busy! My dreams of airing out her old-age community living and spritzing in spicy moments were fast dissipating into my unspoken groans—into what I called “Must we!” days. I was all heart when I had started out on this journey and now, I was all hurt. I hid my little personal devil well, but it wouldn’t stop its nagging, “She is thinking only of her own objectives, not mine.” I completely missed the irony in my thinking.

Contending with my simmering disappointment, at times I felt like blurting out my conflicting feelings…after all, she was my grandma! My respect and love for her kept me from confessing my feelings. Also, my better self had to admit that we shared a good amount of time chatting, exchanging ideas and stories; it was just that I failed to comprehend the logic behind the singularity of her goal. The urge to do good was growing in me, yet often I fell into selfish remorse.

The vacation came to an end and I was left pouting, “What Dida, you did nothing but study all through the holidays!”

She gave me the tenderest look.

We did not meet again for a couple of years, though I received detailed emails with comprehensive news about the branches, leaves, and fruits of the family tree. She was elated that she was now on intimate terms with people who, earlier, did not have time to pick up the phone and talk.

Dida passed away last year at ninety-three. She left behind, for her entire family, unexpected treasures saved in the cloud—in Google Drive.

There were personal essays on rebellion composed in the 1940s, poems on love, family stories, priceless photographs. There was a whole book, a memoir in PDF format, entitled *Whose Light is It Anyway*?

I found several audio files dedicated to me. It contained narrated anecdotes about my parents, gone too soon. It began with the words, “I have so much more to tell you than I did.” There were clips of my mother singing as a bride, my father’s monologue in a theater group, his accountancy lectures to college students—gems she had managed to dig out from relatives who I did not even know existed.

What I had thought was intellectual yearning, was in reality a precise processing of love. She had managed to preserve her love beyond time.

This was not engraving names in heart bubbles on public property to immortalize love. This was what technologists believe they create technology for: the recognition that technology is an ally in our ability to care. Dida had left a chunk of her warmth behind.

And I had thought I was taking care of her.

Basundhara Mitra is a freelance writer and poet whose essays and articles have been published in journals and newspapers in India like *The Statesman, Deccan Herald, Femina, The Asian Age*, among others. Her poems have been awarded and published in India and the US in anthologies like *Mosaic, Journey Between Stars*, and many more. Having enjoyed living in both countries in equal measure, she finds inspiration for her writing from intercultural observations and shared narratives.

The Send

by Dan Keeble

I am standing in Hopes' East London grocers, ten years tall. Two cawing crow trees, in 1950s black utility coats down to their ankles, tower over me like gothic cathedrals. They conceal paisley patterned wrap-over pinafores. Their trunks reach up to ash-grey canopies topped with war-poster head scarves. The dull-to-depression fluorescent shop light doesn't reach down to a sapling with a jute shopping bag and a *send* note from Ma.

Through nasal gossiping they are slandering the neighbourhood. *Doreen Prosser was at it again in the alleyway last night.* I heard it wasn't *kissing.* What *It* was was concealed in a snorted mumble and a nodding glance to Mrs. Hope. She silently nudged them on while turning the handle of the Avery slicer. Today it is ham. Floppy pieces fall from the spinning blade without stopping. She collects every fourth slice in her other palm, folds it twice and stuffs it into her mouth. Her eyes are barely visible, buried behind shiny flushed cheeks. I am mesmerised by her dexterity and how her greasy lips resemble the animal she slices. Munching noisily on a mouthful of the pink gunge doesn't stop her talking. I think about Ma. *We don't have much, but we've got manners.* Mrs. Hope's attentive ear urges on the character assassinations. *Mrs. Dawson has new net curtains.* I've no idea why that's, *Hmm,* or why they all sniffed on the intake hearing, *Jenny Bartlett has a new lodger.*

They ignore my presence. Patience stretches into a long wait if Joe isn't serving. Joe Hope has no time for tittle-tattle. Fearful, I stand rigid and motionless, and I want to pee. It is getting desperate. The smell of lavender talcum powder is nauseating. I tighten my grip on the note and coins. A few locals peer through the door glass, checking to see if Joe is serving before daring to enter. Only the regular muck spreaders and kids on a *send* would chance it otherwise.

Joe enters from the back room. I feel rescued, as any kid would. A funny quip. His trick with a coin. The way he side-steps Mrs. Hope's demeaning remarks with a joke and a grin. Nobody knows if Mrs. Hope has a name. But they all know it was she who wrote *no tick* on the clock.

Joe has a strange look about him. His face and shoulders are drooping.

'The king has died,' he says. 'It was on the wireless.'

The harridans gasp. They sniffle unnoticeable tears into white handkerchiefs fumbled from the pit depths of coal black pockets. Unperturbed, Mrs. Hope carries on turning the handle. Another fourth slice is folded into her mouth.

I search everyone’s faces, terrified. I don't know how I am supposed to react. So I cry too. Only half my tears come from the release of tension after standing for twenty minutes and needing a pee.

All adult noise stops. Four faces peer down at me in bewilderment. I flee from the shop. My pants are wet. I run past the Odeon cinema poster outside advertising *Quo Vadis* starring Peter Ustinov, wondering if it will now have to be cancelled.

Dan Keeble hails from the furthest point East in the UK. He has enjoyed many successes with online and print publications of poetry, short stories, humour, and more serious articles. He writes a monthly column for a county magazine, and has appeared in *Fiction on the Web, Everyday Fiction, Turnpike Magazine, Scribble, Flash Fiction Magazine, Agape Review,* and many others, on a sixty year writing journey to a stubby pencil.

Chicken Salad

by Alan Caldwell

They had great chicken salad, just the right mix of shredded breast, nuts, red grapes, mayonnaise, celery, and Dijon mustard. I'm not sure how such a culinary artist ended up making chicken salad for the mentally ill, but I'm glad she did.

We were roughly divided into two groups: those allowed to have shoelaces and those who weren't. I had shoelaces. My bevy of therapists discussed my self-harm status each morning and granted me the daily privilege. I was always proud of that status. I saw it as an achievement. I worked hard for it and felt justified in my pride.

Maggie and Mike didn't have laces, but they were my best friends anyway. When lunch was over, and we broke into groups for coloring therapy, they were always my partners. We shared the colored pencils amicably and praised each other's work in subdued but sincere tones. I later learned that the other patients actually voted for "the most fucked-up" patient. I heard that I had finished third in the balloting. Institutionalized people can be so tribal and judgmental, almost as much as those on the outside.

Mike polled second, not based on the things he shared in group, because he shared nothing there, but on the palpable, visible tension in his thick neck and broad shoulders. Even the addled addicts could see that tension. He was a soldier, and I suspect he was a good one. I think the cliché about our inner demons is a tired one, but I always pictured Mike and his demon staring nose to nose in some bleak mindscape, each afraid to blink. Mike rarely blinked. Mike was a soldier, until he drove his truck over an improvised explosive device in some searing sandy undeclared desert conflict. He was unhurt, but he wore much of his best friend's flesh on his face and clothes. He tried to pick up the larger pieces and stick them back together. That's how his captain found him, trying to hold his friend together. I think that's why he flexed constantly: he was still trying. He told his story just once and then went back to face his unblinking demon and complete his coloring sheet.

Maggie had a dog, maybe that's why she finished first. We couldn't see Maggie's dog, but we could see her petting him as if trying to keep him quiet. She would awake from Haloperidol dreams and tell her tale, one sickening vignette at a time. Her father lost

her mother and then himself. His friends would share his liquor and then they would share Maggie. If they lost track of her, she would hide, but they always found her, in the closet, under the bed, behind the washing machine. Her crying always gave her away. But Maggie had a dog, a puppy. She found him hiding in a culvert. He followed her home. Maggie tried to keep him quiet but her father eventually found her puppy. His crying gave him away. Maggie's father stomped the puppy with his thick work boots. Then Maggie's father died, and the state found her a safer place to sleep, but they didn't allow pets. Then she made herself anew: an education, a husband, a daughter, a career, a real home. She soon forgot the father, his friends, her hiding places, and her dog. She forgot them for a long time, and then she remembered them again, and forgot the person she had made anew. The husband, and the daughter and the career, and the home were not real, and she never recognized them again. But at least she had a dog, and chicken salad.

Alan Caldwell has taught for twenty-six years and spends much of his free time outdoors or reading. He has been married to his lovely wife, Brandi, for thirty-three years. He has one son, Caleb, who is a firefighter, a daughter-in-law, Chelsee, who is an emergency room nurse, and a brand-new grandson, Asher. Alan has been collecting stories, mostly about his family, for over forty years, but has just begun writing them down. He lives in Carroll County, Georgia.

The Casual Cruelty of Schoolgirls

by Elizabeth Bird

As the teacher turns to the board, I see the note moving from desk to desk, winding its way toward me in the back left corner. Surreptitious notes are nothing new, but never to me. I veer between anticipation and fear.

Our English teacher continues her impassioned, solo "discussion" of the Brontes, while I manage to unfold the perilous scrap of paper:

"You know you're the most unpopular girl in our year, don't you? By far!!"

I feel the heat rush to my face, with nowhere to look but down at my desk, willing the bell to ring. Does everyone know what I've just read? Glancing up, I catch the grin on Angela's face, looking at me from the opposite corner. A slight lift of the eyebrows and a conspiratorial giggle toward her neighbor's desk. They know …

"Unlike male bullies, female bullies are usually attractive, popular, and successful in school. They do not use their physical strength or size, rely on their social influence. Subtle manipulation is a trademark of the female bully. Backhanded compliments, guilt tripping, and cruel tricks are all common methods." —"Characteristics of a Female Bully," Elle Hanson, Our Everyday Life[1]

By lunchtime, Angela and her friends have moved on, chattering in a gaggle of smugness, savoring the victories that put them at the top of the heap. Girls like them are comfortable in their skins—confident of their place in the natural order. They should be. They manage to look good even in the shapeless brown "gym slips" that are required uniform at our 1960s girls' day school. In these pleated one-pieces sashed at the waist, the average girl looked "like a sack of potatoes," as I had been informed more than once. Top tier girls mysteriously transcended this, their nubile style evoking that distinctive British genre known as "gymslip porn." Really.

[1] https://oureverydaylife.com/characteristics-female-bully-8466459.html

I doubt I was truly the most unpopular; I'm sure others felt that rush of blood when the Alpha gaze casually turned toward them and unleashed an arrow of humiliation. No one ever called it "bullying;" that happened among boys or uncouth children at "rough" schools. And physical intimidation was almost unheard of; there was no slapping or hair-pulling. They would jostle us on their way to something more important, but mostly they were just indifferent to girls like me. Those were good days. And then suddenly another arrow would fly:

Jillian finds herself unaccountably next to me at lunch: "You know your hair is such a lovely color." (I was secretly rather proud of my then-chestnut locks). Long pause; I have no idea what to say, but I'm venturing a smile.

"Such a pity it's wasted on someone like you." Gales of laughter from across the table, and the familiar rush of blood.

There are certain traits that mark the target. Girls who appear submissive, passive, and anxious. Lack of assertiveness might serve as a cue that they are the 'perfect victim.'
"What You Need to Know About Victims of Bullying," —Sherri Gordon, Very Well Family[2]

And so it went. It wasn't always obvious which of us would end up as targets, but various undesirable features chalked up points. Glasses? Check. Surplus flesh? Check. Awkwardness and lack of agility? Check and check. Of course no one shared such experiences, which would only add to the humiliation. And no one tattled to teachers or parents; helicopter moms were yet to be invented.

In my case, crippling shyness started the process. From an early age, my worst nightmare was a demand to speak in class.

"Come on, girls, who knows the answer to this one?"

I do, I do! But my hand stayed down, and my mouth stayed shut. English classes often involved taking turns reading assigned novels or poetry: "With feeling, girls, please! When my turn came, I would gabble through the lines and end up out of breath, to the usual tittering, before subsiding with relief.

[2] https://www.verywellfamily.com/characteristics-of-a-typical-victim-of-bullying-3288501

Then there was gym class—another arena where it was impossible to hide. Scaling the pommel horse, or even worse, rope climbing! No matter how I tried, I could never move one inch up a rope. But we all were required to take our turn. I grabbed hold and managed to get my feet in place, where I hung motionless, spinning in a slow circle. Hilarity ensued and the teacher—athletic in shorts and a gym shirt—sighed: “Alright, get down. Barbara, show us how it’s done.” Which of course she did, scooting up the rope with incomprehensible agility, to the admiring approval of all.

Little wonder that when it came to team sports such as netball, I effortlessly embodied the oldest schoolyard cliché of them all. Not always the last to be picked, but firmly among the “dregs.” That was their casual name for us, as they negotiated the final picks to do least damage to their teams:

“Okay, I’ll take that one, but that means I don’t get her as well.”

My parents were oblivious; how could they not be, since shame kept me silent? My mother was left exasperated by parent-teacher meetings and critical report cards:

“We know how bright you are, and they say your written work is good. But why won’t you speak? I can’t help if I don’t know what the problem is!”

At her girls’ boarding school in the 1930s, my mother was definitely top tier. Head girl, captain of cricket, lead actor in plays. Photos show her confidently striding the stage as HMS Pinafore’s Ralph Rackstraw, “the smartest lad in the fleet.”

She loved me dearly, but my behavior perplexed her. My sister, two years younger, was an outgoing, comfortable girl with a circle of friends and the admiration of teachers. I could not explain. What was there to say? “If I speak, I will turn bright red. Then everyone will laugh and whisper, and then I won’t be able to say the words.” Best to avoid that inevitability.

This amusingly predictable behavior was a gift to the tormenters, presenting no risk of a snappy comeback or cutting remark. Throw in the glasses and enough pudginess to draw a comment on my annual school medical exam: “Healthy, but on the plump side.” A soft target, in more ways than one.

Targeted girls are less likely to have a wide circle of friends. Negative peer response typically emerges long before, with girls experiencing peer rejection and being left out of social situations. —"Understanding Bullying: The Victim"[3]

So there I stayed for thirteen years. "Junior School," starting at age five, was bearable; shyness left me unapproachable, but among little girls everyone is more or less tolerated. I was never popular, only occasionally getting the chance to don the special dress so lovingly sewn by my mother to be worn at birthday parties. Blue taffeta with embossed velvet roses, it was completed with the "stiff petticoat," white ankle socks, and patent leather shoes. Best of all, she made a royal blue, velvet cape with a hood. While it took me to pitifully few parties, it was perfect for posing dramatically around my bedroom, fairytale fantasies swirling through my head. The dress was soon passed on to my sister, but I held on to that magical cape as long as possible—my vision of who I should have been.

"Senior School," starting at age eleven, was when certain girls learned to sharpen their arrows, perfecting their techniques over the next few years. Not all were "mean girls," of course. But as hierarchies formed and friendships cemented around me, I watched silently, hoping to be left alone.

By then, class presentations and other vocal demands were multiplying, causing me increasing anguish. I plotted occasional respites with cunning medical solutions—a tricky option, since both my parents were doctors. The gold standard was a "temperature," defined as anything above ninety-nine degrees. It could be surreptitiously achieved but required negotiation.

My father, never the disciplinarian, would equivocate: "Well, she has a temperature, and she looks a bit flushed. Maybe we should keep her home for a day."

My mother, made of sterner stuff, would typically demur: "No cough, no runny nose; I don't think there's much wrong with her."

I would try to look pathetic: "I have a headache, and my neck's a bit stiff …" Signs of "swollen glands" in the neck were often a winner.

[3] https://www.universalclass.com/articles/psychology/understanding-bullying-the-victim.htm

If all went to plan, even my mother would eventually err on the side of caution: "I suppose we don't want her infecting the whole school. We'll see how she feels tomorrow." And just like that—a good day!

But victories were rare, and most days I trudged off to school without resistance. It was just a matter of getting through the day.

"We suggest that individual close friendships are an important potential protective mechanism…at least one close friendship helps adolescents craft meaning and strength amid substantial adversity…" —"Best Friends and Better Coping," Rhiannon Turner and Anna Madill, British Journal of Psychology.[4]

Getting through was possible because I had a secret life-line—a weapon that deployed outside the school gates. A friend. Not even an imaginary friend, but a flesh and blood girl, who truly liked me, to my eternal astonishment. We met in the second year of Junior School, which for reasons lost in time was officially called Transition (followed by Preparatory, for equally obscure reasons). I had been moved up a grade, arriving in the new class mid-year. A shy six-year-old, I was thrilled when she decided we would be friends. She was outgoing and popular, and had other friends, even though she struggled with asthma, eczema, and a painful inability to spell. Today, she has a doctorate and writes books on teaching dyslexic students.

We were officially Best Friends. All through Junior School, we were inseparable—out of school. At age eight, we were placed in separate "forms," and never again had classes together. Her writing problems, completely misunderstood in that era, labeled her "non-academic," which in Senior School streamed her into Domestic Science and me into Latin. There we each fought parallel battles—she to prove she had an academic future beyond high school, and I to get through the day without hiding in the bathroom.

But our friendship did not change; we met at the bus stop for the trip into school, and again to catch the bus home. My silence would burst like a pent-up wave, and we talked incessantly all the way. We haunted each other's houses after school and at

[4] https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjop.12135

weekends. We had a club, with its own badges, motto, and an exclusive membership of two.

My friend's generous nature and fearlessness made her popular. She went to birthday parties, got coveted parts in plays, and was a reliable pick for netball. Yet unaccountably, she liked me best. And as I moved through the worst and settled into later teen years, she was the bridge that finally nudged me into broader circles. Buoyed by the confidence of contact lenses at fifteen, I cautiously embraced social opportunities, even scoring the occasional date with a boy.

School, while never embraceable, became tolerable, and I began to enjoy forays into history and literature. I even found a way to subversively (if absurdly) make my mark. Over the course of a term, I carved my full name into my desk, lovingly deepening every stroke with a compass point, then carefully filling it in with ink. I added the date with a flourish. My artwork was inevitably discovered, and I was called to the Head Mistress's office. She was baffled, and I could only shrug. Yes, Miss Russell—it was wrong. No, Miss—I don't know why I did it. My punishment? To appear in her office every week for a month, bearing a token sum of reparation, in cash. Sixpence in pre-decimal British currency, as I recall. It was worth every penny.

When school was finally over, I cautiously began my journey of reinvention. Cracks in the chrysalis appeared, as I tried out unfamiliar wings in an effort to transcend the place that had baked in my identity for so long. While my friend headed for college immediately—defying the skepticism of her teachers—I heeded my parents' advice and took a "gap year." It brought me travels in Europe, friends from around the world, narrow escapes, and a growing sense of self. Finally, at a university just miles from home, I realized that nobody knew (or cared) who I was once was, and I could take flight at last. My journey gave me a life of teaching, writing, friends—and the three loves of my life. It took me across the Atlantic into an academic career that would have once seemed impossible. And to my abiding amazement, I even spent two glorious years on an Iowa state championship soccer team. My British accent may have sneaked me a place on the team, but my first goal ignited a physical confidence and exhilaration that had so long sat dormant.

Two continents apart, my friend and I rarely see each other in person. But we mark every birthday and chat online, sharing news of our children and natal families. Unlike me, she has stayed in touch with some of our schoolmates and has even attended reunions. I enjoy her news of girls I have never wished to see again. Someone once asked if we would have become friends if we'd met at sixty instead of six. It's really an irrelevant question.

"A grievous example is the suicide of Rachel, a 12-year-old Florida girl. Two of her female classmates, ages 12 and 14, were charged with felony stalking. The older girl recruited Rachel's friend to turn against her; the online torment included written messages: 'You should die' and 'Why don't you go kill yourself?'" —"Socially Adept Female Bullies: Know How to Spot the Traits," Jill P. Weber Ph.D., Psychology Today[5]

Twenty years into this new century, and a lifetime from my school days, a news photo shows a pretty, smiling girl, who one day decided life wasn't worth living. The exact circumstances aren't clear, but immediately resonate. Something signaled weakness; blood was in the water, and the sharks gathered. The perpetrators typically express shock. "We had no idea she would take it like that." "We didn't mean any harm …"

During those faraway years in a distant land, drastic action never crossed my mind. School was mostly miserable, and many days I had to steel myself to walk into the classroom. But I had a loving family, books, and my Best Friend. They insulated me, ensuring there was life outside school and quietly asserting my worth.

Nevertheless, the torment left a mark. I was rarely comfortable in my own skin, convinced of my irredeemable unsightliness—a reflex that never quite left. As I peruse an article about the long-term effects of bullying, I sadly recognize both sides of the common coin: A compulsive need to be liked, coupled with a ferocious determination to "prove them wrong."

I ponder the little girl who will never get that chance, and I fear for the others who endure in silence. Had I ever had daughters, I would have feared for them too and

[5] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/having-sex-wanting-intimacy/201311/socially-adept-female-bullies

watched over them incessantly. Because in a terrifyingly new world, the context of cruelty is different today—ramped up several notches from my long-ago schooldays. In person, it takes a little effort to write notes, pass withering remarks, and generally indulge one's cruel streak. No one ever told me to die. And once out of the door and heading home with my friend, I could put it behind me until the next day.

But today, cruelty follows you home. Social media makes sure of that. Insults, mockery, private photos—all are shared with abandon. The arrows come from all directions, amplified one by the other and never letting up. I have read an expert's bleak warning: Cyberbullies love Snapchat, the app that automatically deletes images and messages after they're viewed, leaving only the humiliation behind. The consequences emerge in the headlines—but only in the cases where something unimaginable happens. Those sitting it out in silence are invisible. I never told a soul about the note that left me devastated—not my parents, not my teacher, not even my friend. Becoming a target was a shameful secret.

As I write, we are moving out of the pandemic that has upended lives and redefined schooling for our children. For many, the loss of daily contact with friends has been excruciating. But perhaps for some it has been a blessed relief: It's hardly a sacrifice to trade daily harassment for the haven of home. Yet even there, digital tentacles slither through the cracks; spotting today's casual cruelty requires a level of attention that my parents' generation could never imagine.

Who we are as children does not define us forever, as my fulfilling life has proved to me. But for a thirteen-year-old trapped in daily misery, the promise of the future rings hollow. Today, the note that once wound its way around the classroom has become a cold blast of shame, visible to anyone with an Internet connection. Cruelty may pass, but while it lasts it feels indeed like forever.

And it casts a long shadow.

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Sixty Days in Shanghai's Covid Lockdown

by Iris Chen

"Tired," grandmother says when I ask. Just the one word. She has not slept in four days because of pain in her arm. Four days of sitting melt her like a Dali clock against the plush of the sofa and her feet have begun to swell. Two years ago, she came up to my shoulder. Soft eyelids fold over her open eyes. "Pain," she says when she calls me. My mother tells me that she blinks in slow motion.

It is April 2022 in Shanghai, China. Unborn babies drown in the womb while mothers bleed to death around them. Dogs die in apartments. Grandmothers hang themselves. In lieu of seeing my family go through something similar, my mother riffles through her contacts for a doctor. She gives my grandma two nerve pills per day. During the brief interlude when my grandma sleeps, my mother looks out a window. But the old body on the couch, it is still there. It breathes. With each breath her body crests upwards to nudge the waking world.

♦

The Chinese phrase for lockdown means to literally seal the city shut: *fen cheng*. It also means this: that no one leaves their apartment building. Hospitals shut down. Supermarkets stay empty and twenty-six million starve.

But on the eve of lockdown, the 28th of March, people still have faith in the Shanghai government. *They're so cosmopolitan*, my mother would say. And when barricades clamp off roads leading out of Pudong into the other half of the city, residents jokingly compare it to a yin-yang hotpot: the Huangpu River dividing Pudong from Puxi, keeping spicy COVID broth away from clean bone soup. Puxi would seal off four days later. They are told: just for five days.

♦

Day one comes and leaves in an idyllic languor. Two days in, someone feeds the dog milk left out on the kitchen table and Ginger begins to vomit in twenty-minute intervals. A day later, grandma discovers the strip of blisters growing on her arm, lies down on the sofa, and begins to moan. And all the while, grandpa is in the hospital, awaiting the chemotherapy that he came to Shanghai to receive. As their stay prolongs indefinitely, their village home stays empty. My mother's apartment in the city holds them like pieces of furniture.

I phone her on the third day of lockdown. By then she tells me, she has already begun to "go crazy."

On one of these mornings when the smell of dog sick has wafted into pillow threads and hair grease, indeed, into the very water they drink, my mother pulls out a store-bought hazmat suit. Ginger wags her little tail. Though this is not the ritual she is used to, she tastes the premonitions of a walk.

That day my mother and Ginger leave the house three times. The police call later that evening. My mother takes some time to explain the situation to him: that the dog is sick, the house holds her smell. But when the policeman refuses to change his tactics, she threatens to report him to the U.S. consulate. "I am an American!" she screams. It hurts her to say this; she was born in China and she is Chinese after all. She still sees Shanghai the way she first did twenty years ago when the *wutong* trees arched into each other above French-flaked storefronts. Light rain always seemed to be falling—she'd been in love. But that was then. She returns to Shanghai from her time abroad thirteen years later to find newer buildings, newer streets. The hand that washes away a country's history does not pause to spare a girl her nostalgia.

"Once the policeman knew I was American," my mother says, "he told me not to overreact. And just to threaten him, I said, 'Don't you know that people in Shanghai have jumped off their balconies? I can do that too!' He got scared. He didn't want news about an American committing suicide. But to him, if Chinese people jump, that's fine."

After hanging up, the policeman snuck into my mother's building and left a bag of medication on her doormat.

It was our next-door neighbors whom I have known since childhood, the only other family living on our floor, who tipped him off. Our two families once split Costco croissant

orders. At night, through the wall between our living rooms, we could hear each other practicing the piano.

“I was really, really sad,” mother says. But still, she continues with her walks. At six in the morning and late at night she slips into the elevator and waits for its closing doors to muffle the spattering sound of paws on marble from Ginger’s excited scuffling. The police call again and threaten her with fifteen days of jail. She finally relents.

♦

By now, more than five days of lockdown have passed. Still, it does not end. People begin to run out of food and scream out from their apartment windows forty floors up, down to an emptiness below. The government eventually acquiesces. “We begin to see one, maybe two trucks on the road every day,” my mother explains. After the food has been delivered, truckers peruse the city under the dark hand of night; pay them well, and they’ll get you out. My mother gives Ginger a quick pat on the head before sending her to a farm in PuDong.

Now she’s living in a hotel every day. Having a better life than us!” In the videos they send over from the farm her tail is up, her tongue drips out the side of her mouth. She and other golden retrievers disappear behind stalks of white wildflowers. It is an Eden in Shanghai that most will never get to see.

♦

Meanwhile, my grandpa is at the hospital receiving his final round of chemotherapy. He has grown thin, but at least he is being treated. When a single contact-trace can close entire hospital divisions for days, Shanghai’s patients become victims to nothing less than the very susurrations of fate. Many others fall sick at home.

Over the next week, as chemotherapy drips into my grandpa’s blood, the family sets up rotating calls to keep him company. They see the empty beds in his room, his meals wrapped with antiseptic plastic, wet with beadlets of steam. He takes rhythmic

bites. The entire city is locked down now. All the streets are empty. As his treatment ends, my mother calls the municipal government, desperate to find a way to get him home.

"They said, 'We don't know what to do.'"

She then calls the police officer who threatened to lock her up. After some thought, he tells her to have grandpa go and stand on the street in violation of lockdown. The police will come, he says, and have grandpa ask them to send him to the border of their district. She can go and pick him up there.

"I thought 'Are you crazy?'"

At this point, my mother really begins to worry. Grandpa is alone, she thinks. Outside, the same empty roads steamroll the city gray and smooth all the way from her window to his. She places her hand on the window, feeling grandpa's hand on the other side. When she decides to drive to the hospital herself and pick him up that way, she is already mentally there with him. Once again, she puts on her hazmat suit. At the compound gate, she bribes the guards with a box of N95 masks, fish, and meat; they happily let her go but with a warning—don't leave the district!

And so she drives: a single red car drifting down Shanghai's empty roads. As she ascends the highway, there is a checkpoint flanked by police barricades. "I think, damnit, they're going to make me go back down," she recalls. But they just give her a little wave, smile, and let her go.

"I was wearing a whole hazmat suit, you know? They must have thought I was an emergency personnel. And they respected me! So I took advantage and *fled*." Each time a new barricade came up, the same thing would happen. "They'd wave. And I'd wave. And all the while, my heart would explode."

She eventually makes it to the hospital where grandpa is waiting. He is no longer alone: an old friend has joined him, another cancer patient. Quietly, his friend asks grandpa if my mother can drive him home too. But three bodies in a car on an empty highway begs questions. And so my mother places the words carefully when she responds. "I feel really bad, uncle."

Guilt, like fear, has a silence of its own. My mother and grandpa drive home. They are stopped three times but at each checkpoint they are let go. The city center is quiet

and the buildings loom up against uninterrupted, street-lit stillness. “It is so weird and so sad. But I feel fine. My dad is with me,” she tells me.

Eventually, they get back home. No one has cooked dinner and grandma still lies on the sofa, softly moaning. It is the night of Tomb Sweeping day. Ghosts walk on the streets, and all-around Shanghai there is a deep, asphyxiated silence: an honoring of the freedom that is now a privilege for the dead.

“It is not the ghosts that scare me,” she tells me later, recalling the night. “If the ghosts are real, they’ll know how much I’ve suffered. They will want to help me. I’m really afraid of the human beings.”

Later that night, she locks herself in the bathroom and cries several times.

♦

The second week of lockdown arrives. They begin to run out of food. Once fed by throngs of moped-riding delivery drivers, the mouths of Shanghai now await sporadic truck deliveries from online shopping sprees. Meanwhile, like all chemo patients who adhere to Chinese traditional medicine, my grandpa abstains from seafood. And my grandma with her blisters is told by doctors to avoid any meats save for pork and pigeon.

In the meantime, the government ships everyone in Shanghai some milk, soybeans, and a small bottle of oil. “I laughed when I got these things,” my mom says. What am I supposed to do with soybeans? Plant them?”

Because food comes into the city on large freight trucks, it is cheaper and more efficient to buy in bulk, so their apartment complex begins placing large orders. Once they arrive, individual items are portioned off to lucky residents who can claim them in time. “In my phone I have seven to ten chat groups,’ my mother tells me. “There are only around fifty packages released into each group, but there are some five hundred members. You have to rush to sign up! Some release their orders at nine. Some at ten. Some release them randomly. So all you can do is spend as much time on your phone as you can, checking those groups like a crazy person!”

My aunts and uncles from outside of Shanghai join in, throwing whatever they can into their online baskets. One day everyone has been successful! And later, fifteen huge packages of asparagus make their way to my mother's front door.

But my mother needs pork. Senselessly, expensively, she claims whatever packages emerge in her group chats before she can read their contents. Winter vegetables fill up their fridge.

"I start making every variety of squash. Squash soup, beef with squash, fried squash. Grilled asparagus, boiled asparagus." On some days only salt-water duck is available and every person across their three-thousand-person compound has it for lunch and dinner and they send their photos into a group chat. My mother takes note of interesting cutlery, the beautiful plates.

And sometimes, they get lucky. One day, my mother snags forty-eight boxes of blueberries. For a week, bowls of blueberries replace bowls of rice. My frugal grandparents obediently demolish everything.

♦

But in the meantime, my mother has lost her appetite. Sometimes, she still thinks about grandpa's sick friend in the hospital. She wonders if he is still alone. And on many of these days as my mother drives across the city and calls the police and fights to obtain food, I called her about my struggles in New York, my lost friends. Under the pretense of jobs and midterms, I give her five, maybe ten minutes of my day.

On this side of the ocean, a call is all I can give. Sorry is all I can say. I think about my mother when this is all over, about Shanghai when things open back up. How many bodies will they pull out of apartment doors? How will neighbors remain neighbors? When my mother comes to California later this year, what will we talk about? The oceanic distance between us has changed.

Because in a month she will be here. We will drive down the coastline together. Along both sides of the car, guardrails will outline the static sea. And the windowpanes will try to hold us in. The road, eclipsed by mountains, will push into a vista that for us does not yet exist.

At some point I will turn to her. Her lips press into each other on her strange face, like a phone sealed back into its handle. Behind them, a quiet city still moves. She does not speak. The silence is a kindness, one that allows her to live.

And when a voice finally does come, it sings.

Growing up in California, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, **Iris Chen** has since resigned her search for a singular ‘home’. She now lives in New York and studies English at Columbia University. She writes for her campus magazine *The Blue and White.*

Living through Lockdown with Anna

by Melanie McCabe

Two women I have not seen since we were girls scaled the dusty metal side of a dumpster and waded into what had been tossed there. They braved the grime and mold and dangerous edges to salvage what they were seeking, what had been promised to them and then withheld. Sifting through the linens deemed too shabby to donate, the dishes and glassware with their jagged memories of usefulness, they excavated the photographs that years before had been entrusted to Margaret.

Margaret was my aunt, my father's only sister, and when she died in 1986, she left dozens of family photos in her home with her now-widowed husband Harold who—I am told—hated all of us. Referred to us, sneeringly, as "you McCabes" as though this were a damning epithet and forced her to sneak and lie whenever she made visits to her family.

The two women were my cousins. Their oldest sister told me the tale of that eleventh-hour reclamation that had occurred decades before—and then sent me a disc that contained all of the images. She had begged Harold for years to send the photos, but—spiteful or lazy—he had not complied. A Christmas card she sent to him in 1990 was returned, stamped "Deceased"—the only word received that he had died. The estate lawyer also refused to turn over the photos and so my cousins had swooped in before the priceless archive of "those McCabes" could be sent to the dump or burned.

I clicked through image after image of family members I knew almost nothing about. Was it chance or luck that this treasure came into my possession on the eve of a pandemic that would shut down my world and cut me off from normal contact with all of the living members of my family?

One image called to me more than the others. It was a fading photograph of my great-great-grandmother, Anna Patterson McCabe. Black curls frame a pale face, tipped slightly as though awaiting the answer to a question, and the eyes that fix on mine are plaintive. Sad.

Abruptly, on March 13, 2020, I found myself with no one with whom to spend my days, and so I spent them instead looking for Anna.

That March night as I retreated upstairs for a fitful sleep and strange dreams, I didn't yet understand how utterly alone I was. The school where I taught was closing until after spring break. I didn't know then that in only ten days, it would be shuttered for the remainder of the academic year.

My two daughters lived far away. As lockdowns were announced, everyone began to cobble for themselves a new way of living. On social media, I scrolled through post after post of families concocting new recipes, housemates huddled over board games, couples cuddling together to watch Netflix. Of course, there were also posts about the virus, about sudden illnesses and horrifying deaths. But all those recipe-followers, game players, and sofa cuddlers had one up on me as they processed the daily onslaught of Covid news: they didn't have to face it alone.

Anna surely must have felt alone when she left her home in Ireland and traveled first to London and then, in 1856, to the United States. She was leaving behind everything she knew—her home in County Monaghan, her parents, her brothers. She made a decision when she was fifteen that would alter the course of her life. At that age, I was kissed for the first time by a boy named James. I was green and untried and foolishly besotted and would have followed him anywhere had he truly wanted me. What a disaster that would have been. Was Anna at fifteen any different than I?

She was a girl when she married my great-great-grandfather William. He was twice her age. What parents today would consent to their teenage daughter taking up with a man in his thirties? By 1852, William had spirited her away from her family to London, where she gave birth to my great-grandfather Cyrus in 1853. She was seventeen years old.

I was twenty-eight when my first child was born. I was surrounded and supported by my husband, my family, and my friends. How lonely it must have been to give birth, far from the home you knew, with only your husband to lean on.

As she grew closer to her due date, less able to move about in a world that expected pregnant women to be invisible, the four walls surrounding her must have felt more like a prison than a home. Cyrus was born at the end of January, so likely the

bitterness of the London winter pinned her inside as much as did her pregnancy. Did she sit at a rain-spattered, wind-buffeted window and miss the past? Did she wonder what lay before her? Her husband dreamed of fleeing to America—even farther from her family than she already was.

As her son kicked inside the tightening confines of her womb, ready to escape what held him in, did she wish for escape herself?

Or am I projecting my own longings and loneliness on this woman whose story I can only tell through the lens of my own?

Several weeks into lockdown, I started to see articles about how much human beings need physical touch to be fully healthy—and how stressful it can be to live without it. Most people I knew still had their daily ration of hugs and hand-holding, but those of us living alone had to make do with phone calls and Zoom. Would I become like those pitiful orphanage babies I had read about who failed to thrive because they were seldom picked up, cradled, held?

In the past I had depended on regular physical exercise to keep anxiety at bay. Now my aerobics classes were canceled. I needed an endorphin rush and so I began dancing. Alone. In the privacy of my locked-down house. I'd click on an oldies station, finding escape and solace in songs I remembered from my younger years. Most days, it helped. But music comes with risks. Not every tune is upbeat, not every oldie brings happy memories.

Listening to a song that makes you cry is a harmless catharsis when you're living a normal life. But I wasn't living anything close to a normal life. And so I danced. But vigilantly. And at night, when I couldn't sleep, I hunted for clues that would help me to understand Anna. My own life was in suspended animation. The future was uncertain and only the past seemed real.

When Anna boarded the President Fillmore in 1856 bound for New York, she was far along in her third pregnancy. Another son, Thomas, had been born in London, swiftly following her firstborn, Cyrus, and now she was pregnant for the third time in four years.

Perhaps she thought there would be time to get to America before the baby was born. But the ship manifest indicates that James was born on ship, two months old by the time they arrived at Castle Garden. Anna endured childbirth in what were surely cramped and unpleasant conditions, and then began a new life with three young sons, one just an infant.

They settled in Winona, Minnesota with the intention of farming. They owned one cow, three working oxen, and two pigs. Was Anna happy with her lot? I have no way of knowing.

But the census of 1857 reveals something intriguing. In the house next to theirs lived a married man named Clinton Hodge, listed as a house painter. Some twenty years later, Mr. Hodge would become Anna's second husband—he would lie to her, steal from her, and break her heart. I know more than a little about men like that.

If I had long ago written a life plan for myself, surely my predictions for the year 2020-2021 would look nothing like they turned out to be. I should have had beside me a husband of several decades. We should be planning overseas trips, perhaps entertaining grandchildren on overnight visits.

I didn't count on living alone. And I surely didn't count on being afraid of venturing out into the world. Everyone has his or her own threshold of risk tolerance. I know many people have one far higher than my own. I see their unmasked party photos. I pass them as they drink and laugh in crowded outdoor cafes. Each time I feel the whipsaw of conflicted feelings: my disapproval of the chances they are taking—and my envy at their carefree abandon, the fear that I have let Covid make me a prisoner.

After my vaccines took full effect in March, I had begun to emerge into the world again.

And then came Delta, bringing my hopeful forays to a grinding halt. I was once again locked down inside my four walls. But this lockdown was self-imposed. This time I didn't feel a part of a wide-sweeping community effort to limit viral spread. I felt like the only one who couldn't move on.

The Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861. Two more sons were born, but Willie, the youngest, died at age seven in 1869 and then, in the winter of 1875, Anna's husband also died, leaving her a widow at the age of thirty-nine. By today's standards, she was still a young woman. Surely she must have been unwilling to resign herself to widowhood and old age.

The farm and their livestock were sold off to settle debts and she and her four remaining sons moved to Rochester, Minnesota, where the three oldest boys started a house-painting business.

What gave them the idea to go into this line of work? Was Anna still in contact with her neighbor from 1857, Mr. Hodge, who had worked as a house painter? Did he send word that he could help the boys begin a business? Given what I know now, it seems likely.

My grandfather had recorded that Anna had married a Mr. Hodge in 1878 and then divorced him. No first name was provided. I had searched for years to find evidence of the marriage. Then one night I stumbled on a marriage record for an Annie McCabe in Buffalo County, Wisconsin in 1879. The groom was not listed, but I took a chance and ordered it anyway. My gamble paid off. I had found Clinton Hodge.

Immediately, I searched Minnesota's historical newspaper site and the two hits that came up were shockers. It turns out he was never *legally* Anna's husband. The splashy headline in *The Rochester Post* of August 15, 1879, was eye-catching: "BIGAMIST AND DEADBEAT. Clinton Hodge Deserts His First Wife and Children—Marries Again—Dabbles in Real Estate in Rochester, and Then Robs and Deserts His Second Wife."

On the pretext of traveling to Wisconsin to sell some property, Clinton persuaded Anna to dispose of her watch and chain as well as a great deal of her furniture, to fund his trip. He told her that he owned a furnished hotel in Chippewa Falls and would replace the furniture with some a great deal better. Off he went, just a couple of months after their wedding—and never returned. For a short while, he was believed to have drowned, but then an investigation turned up the truth. Hodge owned no property of any kind, but he did have a wife and children he had deserted, still living in Eau Claire.

The pain and anger that Anna surely felt upon learning that she had been betrayed must have been overwhelming. On top of that, she also had to grapple with the shame of

having that betrayal so publicly aired in the newspaper—of knowing that her neighbors were whispering about her behind their hands. There is a jagged kind of shame that comes with being played for a fool. I know what that is like.

If my ambition was to write twangy country songs of heartbreak, my life would provide ample material. If no one had been privy to those heartaches but me, I might have nursed my wounds in solitude and moved on. But there were always onlookers. Neighbors. Colleagues. The parents of my daughters' friends. There was nowhere to hide. Or rather there was nowhere to hide the outward truths, the broken relationships, that all the world could see. What remained hidden were the reasons why. The truths that absolved me, that I couldn't share.

Anna made a terrible decision in choosing to marry Clinton. No doubt she was lonely and struggling financially. At first I thought that he must have misled her with his charm or good looks or efforts to help her sons. Perhaps he seemed—on the surface—like a good catch.

I researched the wife he had abandoned in Eau Claire and made an intriguing discovery. She had remarried! How could that be if she was still married to Clinton? Had there been a divorce? And if there had, didn't that mean that Clinton was not a bigamist, as the article claimed?

I pursued more facts and uncovered an information gold mine. Clinton's wife Nancy filed for and was granted a divorce in the summer of 1870, claiming he verbally abused her with "harsh, indecent, obscene and vile names and epithets…in the presence of their children and neighbors" and "repeatedly threatened" to take her life, to kick her out of doors, to beat and flog her. This, she maintained, was true of their entire seventeen-year marriage.

Anna lived next door to this pair in 1857. If this sort of abuse was ongoing in the Hodge marriage, it seems likely that she might have occasionally overheard some ugly words or witnessed some angry scenes. Yet Anna married him when he asked her in 1879. Either she was ignorant of his past misdeeds or he had somehow coerced her into overlooking them.

As I mull over these tantalizing facts and speculations about people who lived some 150 years ago, it occurs to me to wonder what someone 150 years from today might make of my own life. Looking only at the records that remain, I can imagine that future researcher making some assumptions that would be spectacularly off the mark.

When I discovered the Hodge divorce case, I thought that I had cleared Clinton of the charge of bigamy. But I was wrong about that. I hadn't yet found out about Almeda.

I discovered a legal summons published in a Wisconsin newspaper in 1882. A woman named Almeda Hodge was listed as the plaintiff and the defendant was none other than Anna's heartbreaker, Clinton. He was summoned to appear in court in Chippewa Falls, and so I again went prospecting for information.

Clinton married Almeda in February of 1871—only five months after his divorce from Nancy in Eau Claire. One of Clinton's co-workers had depicted him as both a drunk and a frequenter of brothels. How did this lowlife continue to reel in women willing to marry him?

Clinton deserted Almeda in January of 1878—in time for him to return to Minnesota and court Anna. Had he somehow gotten word that her husband had died? Did he have any special interest in Anna—or was she just in the wrong place at the wrong time, one of any number of women he could have chosen to take advantage of?

After Clinton deserted her, Almeda received a letter from "a woman residing in Rochester, Minnesota," claiming he had married and deserted her, as well. Clearly, Anna had heard about the summons and wrote to share what she knew. One forsaken woman to another—victims of the same man. What I wouldn't give to obtain a copy of the letter Anna wrote or the one that Almeda wrote in response.

I have my own share of regrets. I regret that I did not try harder to hang on to my first marriage to the father of my daughters. That was a mistake—and every subsequent failed relationship was a new exclamation point on that first wrong turn. And so I have empathy for Anna. Her choice of Clinton was spectacularly worse than any choice I ever

made, but we both suffered through the humiliation of having our failures play out in front of prying eyes.

She didn't give up on finding happiness, however. Her next marriage was to a seemingly good and decent man, but this marriage, too, would end abruptly. And when it did, the rest of her life would be a downward spiral, ending in a way that shocked me when I discovered it.

Anna married George Townsend in June of 1884, five years after the summer of shame she endured when Clinton abandoned her. It seems she could not have found a finer fellow. According to an account in *The Rochester Post*, George was "an honorable and upright man, quiet, retiring and confiding in disposition, charitable and benevolent …" He was a widowed farmer, seventy-four years old—old enough to be her father, but surely a welcome change from Clinton.

More bad luck was in store for Anna, though. The two were married less than a year when George suffered a terrible accident, fracturing several ribs and sustaining internal injuries. He died soon after.

Because George died intestate, Anna was left with nothing and by 1895, she was living with her sons Thomas and Robert who had both married and had six small children between them. It must have been very crowded quarters. Perhaps Anna's new daughters-in-law were not pleased with the living arrangements. Perhaps tempers began to fray.

I knew from my grandfather's records that Anna had died in November of 1910 at the age of seventy-five. When I found her listed in the 1910 census, I expected to see her still living with her sons. So I was shocked to find her listed among names I had never seen before—each of them described as "inmates." Anna was a patient at the Rochester State Hospital, an institution for the care of the insane. She had been sent there from the Olmsted County Poor Farm—a place for the destitute and forsaken, many of them elderly. How she ended up there when she still had three healthy, working sons was something I needed to understand.

I had heard stories from my cousin about various mental conditions in the family history. Anna's son, Cyrus, my great-grandfather, was referred to as a melancholic, with

a history of moodiness. In a memoir, my father described Cyrus as “a man of dour visage” and added, “I do not recall his ever laughing and seldom did he smile.” Cyrus’s son, my grandfather, by all accounts was a lively, fun-loving man until a painful and debilitating condition stole the pleasure from his life. He became addicted to painkilling medication and at one point, ended up hospitalized because of the behavioral changes this addiction had caused.

Given the family history, I was unsettled to learn that Anna had been diagnosed as insane. I know that this term was used widely in the 19th century, and was applied not only to people with mental conditions, but to women whose behavior was viewed as being outside the bounds of acceptable feminine decorum.

Sequestered in my house during the lonely months of lockdown, I made a conscious effort to stay in touch with family and friends, via phone and Zoom, to ward off any tendency in me to go off the rails due to excessive solitude. My overactive imagination conjured melodramatic images of myself wandering the house late at night, wringing my hands and babbling to the walls. I decided that I needed to find out as much as I could about why Anna’s life had ended as tragically as it did.

I paid a Minnesota historian to find records of Anna’s stay at the Rochester State Hospital. I didn’t have high hopes that any documents still existed and so was elated to have a multi-page file turn up that answered some questions and raised still more.

Anna was admitted to the hospital in 1906 and so she spent her final four years, locked up, apart from her family. Most likely, today she would have been diagnosed with dementia, but then it seems one was either normal or a raging lunatic. In late 1905, she began experiencing delusions and speaking incoherently, though these episodes were intermittent and she still had periods where she was entirely rational. She was called “obdurate, unreasonably ungovernable.” The admitting form indicated that she had “always been of irritable, uncontrolled temper.”

Was this so? This verdict was made by a county employee who surely had not known Anna when she was young. How had she managed to marry three husbands if she was such an unpleasant person? And yet, at some point her sons must have decided she was more than they could handle.

I appreciate how hard it might be to live with and care for someone who is delusional and angry. But I can't help wondering what led all of her sons to throw up their hands and shirk their duty to the woman who raised them. Had my great-grandfather, Cyrus, felt guilty at abandoning her to such an end? Did anyone visit her while she was in the hospital or did she live out her last days alone?

Was Anna truly as disturbed as the records claim—or was she simply angry about the way that her life had turned out? I could understand that feeling. Underneath my quiet acceptance of lockdown life, I was angry, too.

My eyebrows lifted when I first read the term "ungovernable." Who was it that wanted to govern her? What had been expected of her that she was unwilling or unable to deliver?

Anna was inconvenient, and so she was locked away.

Maybe that is why her story haunts me, especially now.

These days, I, too, sometimes feel invisible.

The pandemic prompted me to retire from my teaching career two years earlier than I had planned. Though I don't miss the countless hours spent grading papers, I do miss my students, the hallway chats with colleagues, the occasional joy of feeling like I had succeeded with a stubborn student. I miss the feeling that my life had purpose and worth.

Now I spend most days alone and though I keep busy with my writing, I feel untethered from the Melanie that I used to be. I'm not entirely sure who this new version of me is. Sometimes I worry what will become of her.

I wonder if Anna felt something similar. Was she aware enough to know that her life had taken a dramatically unfortunate turn? Did she lie awake in her bed and miss happier days when her children were young—or earlier days still when she was an unencumbered girl in County Monaghan?

I spent last Thanksgiving and Christmas with my family. I dare to hope that there is light on the horizon, despite the day-to-day unpredictability of this pandemic. But I am acutely aware that this experience has changed me, has altered the future I move toward, has sometimes filled me with anxiety, rage, and despair.

Through the hardships she encountered throughout her life and in the last years when she was locked away from any life at all, Anna must have felt all those emotions, as well. Time and circumstances have silenced her, though I have been listening hard for whatever she wanted to say.

I have a voice that wants to share what has become of my life. Once, so did Anna. With these words, I am trying to lift both of them.

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Imposter Family

by Trevy Thomas

Everything important to me had to fit inside the trunk of my MG Midget. That included a framed photograph I'd recently bought on the street where I worked in D.C. It was a pink ballerina-slippered foot poised atop an egg. It was the most beautiful picture I'd seen in my nineteen years, and I hoped it mirrored my identity. So, even though it was large and covered in glass, I allowed it about half the trunk.

We drove for two days to reach Florida. My sister, Helen, sat in the passenger seat. She'd rightfully counseled me not to make this trip alone. It was my first move out of state, and even though she couldn't drive a standard shift, she was good moral support. We made one overnight stop in a hotel, but the rest of the time was solid driving with the car's top down. I arrived in Florida with one of the worst sunburns of my life. After our arrival, layers of skin peeled off my face like the shell of the egg in my trunk.

Helen left after a few days, and I found the tenement house where my friend, Iris, was living in West Palm Beach. She'd moved there with her boyfriend and convinced me to join her through calls to my dreaded job. "You'll love it. We're so close to the beach. Just quit and find work down here." My mother had given me some cash to get me through until I found employment, but not until I'd worn down her worries with pronouncements of my independence. Back and forth we batted until I finally triumphed with the ultimate teenager's rebellion: "I'm over eighteen. You can't stop me." Only then did she offer cash. Memories like this one make me glad I never had children of my own.

By the time I'd arrived at the house, Iris had dumped her boyfriend and was sleeping with the tenement's homeowner in his bedroom. The other tenants and I could hear them having sex at night. I lay on the air mattress she provided in one of the rooms, peeling skin off my face and keeping an eye out for Palmetto bugs on the floor. The owner, Troy, made extra money selling weed out of the house. Whenever he was home from his construction job, he sat in their room doing bong hits. I'd never heard someone speak in such a monotone drone. He blew his sentences out in one long stream like a bong exhale. The smoke seemed to strangle his vocal cords, so he only had the one note left. "That

sunburn isn't gonna do you any favors in a job interview. People down here can spot a snowbird pretty fast. If they don't think you're gonna stay, you won't get hired."

A big guy came in the bedroom and greeted Troy, who took him out to the bedroom porch where he kept his stash, sandwich bags, and professional-grade scale. He was proud of his perfectly-measured ounces. He was also industrious for a stoner. Between the room rentals of his family's former home, his construction day job, and dealing weed, he should have been in good financial shape, but I suspect his habit cut into some of the profits.

Troy turned out to be right about my sunburn because I was struggling to get hired. One job I really wanted was at Soetheby's in Palm Beach. Iris and Troy had to counsel me several times on how to say the name. "Suth-a-bees." It sounded exotic and worldly to me, the kind of place where my real grownup life could properly begin. It was one of the oldest, most esteemed art auction houses in the world. Big money. Old wealth. Impressive art. I put on my best dress and went to the interview. The perfectly-coiffed woman who met me stared in open disgust at the layers of skin flaking off my face. Undeterred, I chatted about how I'd just moved to Florida but loved it and planned to stay permanently. It was a brief interview.

Back in the thick of marijuana smoke, I told Troy and Iris it didn't go well. Water bubbled in the bong while he held a lighter expertly to the weed. "You should show them a picture of all those boxes you had shipped here. That should prove your commitment." Helen had instructed me to ship any belongings that would fit in a box by UPS. She'd moved a lot and assured me this was the cheapest way to go. Together we packed up my small Maryland kitchen with every plate, glass, and pan I owned for a home I didn't yet have in Florida. I shipped all of it to Iris's tenement. Troy wasn't thrilled to have it in his living room, but it didn't look like I'd be moving out anytime soon, at least not before my sunburn had left me with whatever new face might warrant permanent employment.

I was still sleeping on the air mattress when Thanksgiving came around. Iris and Troy left to have dinner with some of his family nearby, as did every other tenant in the house, and I was alone for the first time on a major holiday. Just me and the palmetto bugs, my dwindling cash supply, and a burnt face now salty with tears. I missed my mother's Thanksgiving table, my sisters' laughter, and the place in that home that

belonged to me. But I'd come to Florida to prove my independence, so there was no running back. I drove around looking for food and discovered that the drive-through at McDonald's was one of the few places open on Thanksgiving Day. The girl at the window handed me a greasy brown bag with a look of pitiful camaraderie.

A secretarial job finally came through at a law firm, and I moved into a one-bedroom apartment barely a block from the beach in a little town called Singer Island. Singer, as in the sewing machine family. I loved the name of it almost as much as my new home. Troy was glad enough to see the boxes leave his living room that he agreed to load them in his van and move me. The apartment owners—a family with a daughter my age—lived in one of the buildings on the first floor. The mother knocked at my door a few times and scolded me until I turned the music down. Weekends were spent at the beach, where I started Saturday morning with a pale face. By Monday, I entered the law firm with a new sunburn. Every week. The ladies in the office teased me, and I worry now whenever I see a suspicious mark on my skin.

One weekend, I lay on my towel watching a guy navigate expertly on a windsurfer. He was a little older than me and very fit. He saw me watching so he came over and invited me to dinner. At the restaurant, I noticed something was off about him. He told me he was really into Scientology. "What's Scientology?" I asked. As I said it, a woman at a nearby table gave me a look of warning. He frowned and struggled to explain. He was at once angry and superior. I didn't go out with him again but every morning for the next month my phone rang, waking me earlier than I needed to get up, and there was a strange male voice either breathing heavily or making crude comments.

I developed a routine. Monday through Friday at the office; evening walks and weekends on the beach. Once in a while, Iris came to visit me, but her boyfriend wasn't crazy about that, so I spent a lot of time alone. A coworker and I sometimes went to lunch. She told me about a nearby restaurant that served blue cheese salads. "It's Gorgonzola cheese but it's basically blue. They're delicious." It sounded weird but I craved the companionship. She told me about a friend who'd just broken up with his girlfriend. I agreed to meet him. She looked at my long-painted fingernails and said, "He's going to love me for introducing you to him."

Jim was a high school teacher with white-blonde hair. He drove a sporty old Porsche. We went out once a week for a while but never had much to say to each other. He invited me to a schoolteacher's party one weekend. There were chips and drinks on the kitchen table and people packed in every room. As we walked through the living room, a group of teachers was laughing at the television. All of them were watching porn together. I whispered to him that I had a surprise for him. He smiled and we rushed out of the party. I don't know why I said it because I couldn't come up with any surprise, but it got me out of there.

After three months at my apartment, the owner knocked at my door again. "In six weeks, your rent increases to $1,400. Either pay the new rent or get out by then." At that time, I was paying $300, which was just about all I could afford, and I didn't have a lease. "I can't pay that. Why is it so much?" She showed little sympathy. Except for work, I stayed in skimpy dresses or bikinis, always played loud jazz, and had an occasional beach bum friend over whenever he had weed to share. But I did pay my rent on time. She tried not to roll her eyes. "Because we can get it. It's tourist season and we can rent it out every week for a lot more than your summer rent." I saw she meant it and I started to panic. "But what if I signed a lease, agreed to stay for years? You'd have secure rent coming in." She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head no. "Six weeks. Up to you." She started down the steps but turned back once more. "And turn the music down."

My beach bum friend painted houses for a living and drove a long white station wagon with plenty of room for paint cans and ladders. It was also roomy enough for my UPS boxes. For the second time in a few months, I moved. The beach bum was not exactly a boyfriend, so this move was pushing the limits of his generosity towards me, but I couldn't ask Troy to lend me his van again. Iris's relationship with him had grown complicated, and she'd rented an apartment of her own. Then she escaped the entirety of Florida while he was at work one day and needed someone to sublet the apartment she'd signed on.

I made an appointment with the realty company to view it, though I really had no other options. This apartment was in Palm Beach, and I was reluctant to leave my beloved Singer Island, landlady notwithstanding. Palm Beach was for rich people, but you could

find dive apartments thanks to their need to house the support staff they didn't want living with them. It was one room with a half-sized kitchen, no oven, and a tiny fridge. The shower was narrow even for my teenaged frame. The apartment was right at street level, so the only window had to remain covered. One good thing was the building's owner also had a furniture store and I was allowed to choose from two furniture styles for the chair and dining table that would fit into my one-room home. I signed the lease.

"I'll be there at 7 a.m.," the beach bum informed me. "Have everything boxed and by the door. I'm not packing your stuff." When he arrived and saw that I'd done what he said, he looked surprised. We loaded his station wagon and drove to Palm Beach. He helped me unload then left. "I have a house to paint." It didn't take long to unpack. I was in a hurry to get out and explore my new walk to the beach. Nothing was as good here. Iris, my only real friend in this place, was moving away. I'd changed jobs and was starting over in an architectural office. Even the beach bum was now far away and not inclined to visit. On weekends, I spread my lone towel out on the beach and lay out to burn. One day I noticed a group of people about my age all together on the beach. They laughed and talked about their plans for the night. I wondered how they managed to find each other. They were a whole family of people. Maybe they'd grown up here, towels touching for a lifetime of beach parties. Maybe they'd see me alone and invite me. Maybe I'd just go home and boil pasta with canned clams again.

The following weekend, I drove to my beloved Singer Island beach. By the end of the afternoon, I put a tee shirt over my damp bikini and drove the MG back towards Palm Beach. As I turned a corner onto Route 1, the car just completely stopped functioning. No warning. Just rolled to a dead stop right in front of a pornographic theater. I was blocking a lane of travel and had to act fast. I stepped onto the street in my wet tee shirt as a carload of young men pulled around from the back of the theater. The passenger smiled. "Need help?" They looked at the wet fabric pasted against my bikini, the tee shirt barely covering my bottom. They were cruddy looking, like they hadn't bathed. The driver was missing most of his teeth. I was in a spot though, so I nodded yes. "We'll be right back with some rope." As they drove off, I ran across the street to a convenience store. A safer-looking guy asked if I needed help and I said yes. We pushed my car into the store's lot and he gave me a ride home, long before my wannabe kidnappers returned.

I woke in the middle of the night in my studio bed that pushed under an alcove into a couch during the day. Above the alcove was a stream of roaches climbing the wall. Not even the Florida Palmetto kind, just ordinary roaches. Needing to get out, I pulled on clothes and fished in a jar that had coins in the bottom. There was never much left after paying bills. I walked a few blocks away from the beach, grateful that at least I was living in a place that was safe for a young woman to be out in the middle of the night alone. I reached the soda machine and dropped in enough coins for a Coke. I felt the splash of sweet cold in my mouth and looked around at the foreign buildings I passed on the way back. Hotels and restaurants and investments offices. I didn't see a person or car or even hear a dog bark.

A letter arrived from my father. He pointed out the spelling mistakes I'd made in my last letter to him and asked if I was just staring at the four walls of my apartment. I'd complained of my loneliness but also my compulsion to stick it out. Now the four walls felt like my fault somehow.

At Christmas, my mother sent me a plane ticket for the holiday break. My sister picked me up at the airport, happy to see me. It was dark by the time we reached the house and I could smell my mother's percolator coffee as soon as I walked in. There was a fire burning and Christmas music playing. My mother gave me a big hug. Here in the cold northern winter, my heart melted a little. But because I had to defend my move, I didn't admit to how lonely I was. In a few days when my sister dropped me back at the airport, I couldn't hide my tears at the gate.

After my return, I started leaving my apartment door open to the building's hallway. The roaches were getting to me. One night, I pulled a knife out of its wooden block and a roach scrambled off the blade. I scrubbed it hard before mincing garlic. Donald lived across the hall, and he began leaving his door open too. We commiserated about the roaches. Sometimes I sat on the floor of his apartment while we played card games. He was an artist who used a style of painting I'd never heard of called pointillism where tiny dots make up realistic images. He had a girlfriend named Roberta, apparently the first girlfriend of his life. She was pretty and his father and brother couldn't understand what she wanted with him.

Donald and I moved together to an apartment closer to the beach. This time I left everything, except my clothes, behind. Especially the knife block. I could fit it all in my little car and move by myself. No weed-selling van or painter's station wagon necessary. The new place was in the top floor of a house and the owner, Letitia, also a painter, lived below. She'd painted trompe l'oeil murals over both floors of the house. A silver fern grew out of the shower wall to greet me. Pink flowers trailed green branches from the kitchen into the living room.

She watched me walk from my car to the back entrance one evening a few months after I had moved in and stopped me. "I have some clothes you can have that would be good for work. Surely you don't want to spend all your money on office clothes." I looked at her, trying to gauge the intent. Until now, she hadn't shown much kindness toward me. Was she trying to be motherly? Was it pity? She'd made some remarks about all the men I had upstairs. Donald's brother was practically living with us, his father was a frequent visitor, and by now I had a boyfriend. I could see beneath a wrinkled bitterness that she'd been beautiful before life took her by surprise. Divorced, more than twice my age, but somehow moneyed. The house in Palm Beach, albeit partially rented out, and the return trips to the Hamptons for months at a time were telling. Given my comparative struggle, and the goggles of youth, it was hard to fathom her bitterness.

Despite all the men Letitia thought were living in my apartment, it was just Donald and I paying the bills and we were doing it on small incomes. I accepted her offer of clothes. Then I helped myself to something from her that still makes me feel guilty. When she was gone on one of her Hampton trips, I walked down the steps from my apartment and opened the door into hers. It was unlocked. I guess she trusted us. I tiptoed through her apartment until I located the phone. Sitting on the bed, I picked up the phone and dialed my mother. Calls home were a rare occurrence because we had no telephone upstairs. My mother didn't seem to understand the importance of the call and the risk I'd taken to make it. "What are you doing down there?" I looked around this stranger's bedroom and tried to answer. "When are you coming home? You don't belong in Florida." She couldn't know that I wasn't supposed to be in my landlord's apartment, making a long-distance call on her phone, probably soon to be tossed out on the streets when the

Maryland number showed on her bill. I'd wanted home that badly, but it was a home that didn't really exist.

I hung up and tiptoed back up the stairs to my imposter home instead. There in the kitchen was my roommate, Donald, trying to perfect his recipe for bagel chips, his latest get-rich-quick scheme. On the couch were his girlfriend, father, and brother. My imposter family. In a few hours when he finished work, my new boyfriend was coming over. If I squinted, I could still see loneliness, but this façade would keep me going for a little while longer.

Trevy Thomas's work has appeared in *The Coachella Review, Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review, Forge Journal, Sliver of Stone, Drunk Monkeys, Five on the Fifth, Visitant*, the *River Tides* anthology, and *Woodwork* magazine. Trevy lives in Virginia with her husband and two dogs.

Bittersweet Freedom

by Gina Disipio

A vibration wakes me from a deep sleep. I think something is moving around in my bed. My eyes snap open, confused by the darkness. I brush curls out of my face and feel around for the source of the vibration. My hand finds the square object that is my cell phone, and I sigh in relief that it's not a mouse I'm clutching. No one calls me in the middle of the night. It is 2:00 a.m. Suddenly I am wide awake. Something is wrong.

I hold the phone close to my face, because I don't have my glasses. Squinting, the blue light hurts and with one eye open I read the caller ID: "Lily W." The name alone tells me everything I need to know.

"Hello?" She does not recognize my horse, half-asleep voice, which sounds more like a croak than a greeting. I hear stifled sobs. She doesn't need to tell me what I already know: he's dead.

I wait for her to choke out the words. "He's dead, Gina. Sam is dead. He overdosed. I just wanted you to know." Click

The full weight of my head drops back onto my pillow as I exhale all the air out from my lungs.

I slither to the floor, bedsheets trailing behind me. I drop to my knees and place my forehead on the cool wood. It's December and despite the baseboard heat in my studio apartment, the air is cold. I close my eyes and soundlessly recite a prayer into the floorboards while my mind flashes memories on the backs of my eyelids like a movie projector. The film rewinds three years.

"You're gonna have to wait in line with him, Honey. Come as early as you can," the receptionist says in a thick Spanish accent. She says "honey" like a mother would. I hear her tongue move the gum she is chewing from one side of her mouth to the other. I had called ten different places out of the phonebook for an emergency appointment for Sam.

I close my prepaid flip phone from Walmart with a snap. My gaze shifts from the dark, worn floorboards to Sam's dirty black Converse, to his black ripped skinny jeans,

up to his black band t-shirt, to the chain around his neck that I got him for his birthday, and then up to his face. He is sitting on the bed we share at his mother's house. I am standing beside him, leaning against the wall.

Before speaking, I take in his face. Acne scars and blemishes line his cheeks like constellations. A five o'clock shadow. Dirty blonde hair. Ears with black gauges. He is so thin his Adam's apple protrudes from his throat, and each tendon is visible. When he smiles, which is rarely these days, rotting teeth, brown and black around the gums, make up his wide grin.

Sam looks back at me but his eyes are not filled with the love, or the lust, I regularly saw in them two years ago when I was seventeen and he was eighteen. Now, they are an even lighter blue, like crystal, like an untouched body of water at the foot of a mountain. The specks could be fish. His eyes look through me more than at me and they are glossy, as if tears might escape them at any moment.

We decide to go to the clinic and wait in line because it is our best shot at getting Sam in front of a doctor.

We park outside the Reading Psychiatric Clinic at 5:00 a.m. and take our place in line on the sidewalk. They unlock the doors at 5:30. It's December in Pennsylvania, so Sam and I have on winter coats, hats, and gloves, mine, pink knitted mittens and his, black and fingerless. More like scraps of fabric than gloves, they are ripped and mangled at the ends, small threads hanging from each of the ten holes that hold his fingers. I don't understand the point of them because they're not keeping his hands warm.

By the time we get inside, it's 5:45 a.m. At the front desk is a wall of plexiglass that separates us from the receptionist. She taps the glass, pointing at a sign-in sheet. We place Sam's name on the list. At least twenty people are in front of him.

The click clack of the computer keyboard echoes in the dimly lit office, and I wonder what she could possibly be typing so early in the morning. Without looking up, she points her finger featuring a long acrylic nail with pink polish and gemstones at the end, to the wall behind us where people are sitting in chairs and talking in whispers. Her words are muffled through a circle of small holes in the plexiglass. I wonder if she thinks we're dangerous.

“Have a seat.”

We find one open chair, wooden with stains on the blue fabric. After wiping off the crumbs of what appear to be animal crackers, I sit down. So many hands have brushed the armrests there are divots from fingernails among carved initials. Sam is standing next to me, staring at the floor.

I glance around the room. The walls are white, more like chalk, with smudges where dirty fingers have left impressions. A print of a sunrise hangs crooked on the wall in front of me and beneath it printed in bold letters is the phrase: “*GRATITUDE: Be grateful every day for the people who drive us toward success.”* There are two windows, shrouded by yellowed blinds. An inch of dust on each panel, they are cracked slightly to let in the winter sun. The light is bleak but bright enough to make shadows of parallel lines on the wall in front of me. I count the lines silently.

A family marches in, shaking the snow from their boots. They sign in at the desk. Two adults with four small children trailing behind them, coats half off, dirty mouths. Peanut butter and jelly maybe. I wonder how we landed here, in this room, waiting for Sam’s name to be called. Sam has one hand in the pocket of his jeans, the other is fiddling with the chain, then he moves his thumb to his mouth and chews on the skin surrounding the nail.

A few days earlier, he sat me down on our bed, the brown and blue striped comforter from Wal-Mart brushing my thighs, I hate the feeling of the cheap silky fabric. “I have to tell you something.” I waited. He took a deep breath.

“I’ve been seeing things. And hearing things,” he said.

“What?” My mind raced, trying to make sense of his words. “Seeing what?”

“Things that aren’t there.” His head hung so low it was almost in his lap.

I felt my eyes widen as he said this. Any words of comfort got stuck in my throat, my heart rattling around in my chest. My sister is schizophrenic, so my mind started to catalogue all possible solutions, listing them off one by one.

Hospital, doctors, medication, halfway house, doctors, groups, therapy. In the thirty seconds it took for my mind to recite all possible solutions, Sam spoke again.

“But you can’t tell anyone.”

With those five words, all my ideas went up in smoke. He went on to describe the most recent hallucination. “I just got out of the shower and was drying off. I looked at myself in the mirror and I was holding like a long hunting knife. Uh,” he paused, trying to read my face. “I held the knife up to my throat and started cutting. Blood started pouring everywhere, all down my chest. I kept cutting but when I looked down nothing was there. I’m fucking scared, Gina, it was fucking scary, okay?” He buried his face in his hands.

I spent the next thirty minutes convincing him to let me call a doctor and finally, he gives in.

In the waiting room, three hours after writing his name on the list, we hear the nurse call, “SAM WINTERS!” With a wave of her hand, she is motioning for him to follow her.

He looks at me, not needing to ask, I know he wants me to go back there with him. In single file we walk down a dimly lit hallway, I am wringing my hands and chewing on my bottom lip. When Sam looks back, I smile and give him a thumbs up.

We met on Myspace when I was seventeen years old, sharing music and our favorite poetry. When we finally decided to meet in person, we sat in the parking lot of the mall in his beat-up purple Ford Focus, an anarchist bumper sticker on the back window, for four hours. When I saw lip piercings, fingerless gloves, a band t-shirt, and a black beanie with dirty-blond curls peeking out, I knew I was in love. I would follow this kid to the end of the earth.

The nurse ushers us into a small room, closing the door behind us. The doctor turns around in a black swivel chair and puts his hand out, “Mr. and Mrs. Winters, I’m Dr. Chaundry, pleasure to meet you.” We don’t correct him for saying “Mrs.”

“What brings you in today?” Sam looks at me. I lift my shoulders and make a waving motion with my hand, urging him to speak. Just fucking say it, I think.

“Uh well, I have been having a lot of anxiety lately,” he said. ANXIETY? YOU’RE CALLING HALLUCINATIONS FUCKING ANXIETY NOW? My head is screaming, but I say nothing. I stare at the floor.

The doctor, the light of the computer screen reflecting off his glasses, is tapping away at the keyboard. Then he starts asking a series of questions.

“Any suicidal thoughts?”

“No.”

“Are you having trouble taking care of your hygiene? Showering? Brushing your teeth?”

“No.”

He asks about a job, his medical history, about drug and alcohol use. And finally: “Have you ever had, or are you currently experiencing, any auditory or visual hallucinations?”

I hold my breath.

“No.”

Oh, fuck.

My heart sinks from my throat to my stomach and I feel like I am going to throw up. A half hour later a script for Valium sits on the dashboard, staring at me, and we are silent the entire car ride home.

I stayed for three months after that, joining a roller coaster of daily drug use and lies, while Sam suffered through more hallucinations, doctors, and medications. I escaped via rehab and while there, cut Sam off completely.

I spent the last three years in the basements of churches, drinking coffee out of Styrofoam cups with grounds at the bottom and starting my sentences with: “Hi I’m Gina, I’m an addict.”

I moved to another county several hours away from Sam and ignored the messages from him on Facebook that he posted every month or so:

“Hey, how are you?”

“You look like you’re doing well, I’m happy for you.”

I answered occasionally, asking how he was doing. I received paragraphs about how he just got out of the psych hospital for the fourth time this year, recently kicked meth but was still snorting Percocet on a regular basis.

When the messages started coming every day, I let him know that I couldn’t respond anymore and to stop checking in with me. “I’m trying to save my life, Sam. If I use again, I’ll die,” I wrote. He said he understood and would stop sending messages. I said I was sorry.

“It’s okay, take care.”

The last four words I read in a daze, never imagining they would be the last four words I ever received from him.

For months after the phone call from his sister informing me of his death, Sam is in my dreams almost every night. He is unrecognizable to the Sam I left to get clean years ago. He is smiling and laughing, telling me not to worry. He isn’t so skinny, his teeth are gleaming white and intact, and his eyes are full of life.

I collect these images from my dreams and store them in my memory as permission to abolish my guilt. For not rescuing him when things got worse, for running away when he needed me, for saving my own life and not being able to save his. In my dreams, his eyes are blue again. I run a hand through his clean, dirty-blonde curls and know I am forgiven. Sam didn’t achieve the freedom he was searching for on this earth, in this life, but in my dreams, he is everything he ever wanted to be.

Gina Disipio was born and raised in Pennsylvania and currently lives in Lancaster with her husband and two dogs. She holds an MPA from West Chester University. Gina is in long-term recovery, celebrating eleven years of sobriety in January. She has spent the last decade dedicating her passion, education, and expertise in combating the stigma of addiction and being an advocate of the voiceless and marginalized populations often outcast by society. She works to ensure recovery is accessible to everyone. This is her first published essay.

Parenthood: A Journey Between Bicycles

by Ben Adelman

Our son's first bicycle was a little red BMX-style bike with knobby tires and coaster brakes. I found it on Craigslist and went after work to check it out. The lady selling it said her child had outgrown it, and she was glad to know that the bike would live on to make another little boy happy. She didn't charge me much—maybe twenty bucks.

The bike was tiny, but the feeling was momentous. Buying our son, Abe, his first bicycle was a milestone. I was a fairly new dad at the time, but I sensed the step I had just taken was one of many that would lead to new experiences and more independence for our boy. I envisioned the journey he might take, learning to pedal and brake, learning to steer, and—someday—learning to balance without training wheels. After that, there would be no stopping him.

When I got home, I set about making the bike just right for the little guy. It needed a good wipe down, and there were rips in the vinyl saddle. A little black electrical tape would remedy that. I set the seat as low as it would go so he would feel safe and confident. When Abe went to bed, I put it in the hall outside his room so his new bike would be the first thing he would see when he woke up. I looked forward to sharing that moment with him, to seeing the wonderment on his face when he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and slowly registered that the little red bicycle belonged to him.

Many years, rides, and bicycles later, we were preparing to send our son off to college. He is eighteen now, six feet-six inches, and he outgrew his most recent bike a few years ago. These days he doesn't have much interest in riding. Driving is far more fun. He wouldn't have a car on campus, though, so in my mind, at least, a bike would really benefit his quality of life.

For much of the summer I kept an eye out for the right one. My criteria were simple: His new bike needed to be cheap so if it were rained on or stolen, we wouldn't be too upset; and it needed to be big enough to fit his gangly frame. A mountain bike, as opposed to a road bike, would be a bonus, since there are lots of great trails around Burlington, VT, where he would be attending college.

So I couldn't believe my good fortune when I went to the recycling center one Saturday and spotted a hardtail 29er in the metal recycling bin. It was a GT Backwoods, and red, to boot. The back wheel was off, and it was missing a saddle and seat post, but otherwise it was in decent shape. The attendant let me take it.

When I got home, I immediately got to work. The back brake needed service, a quick-release skewer was missing, and the drivetrain needed tuning—all easy, cheap fixes. I dove headlong into my new project. I tweaked, cleaned, and adjusted. I zipped out on test rides, tools bouncing in the pocket of my cargo shorts, feeling small way up there in my son's new saddle.

At some point I stopped to take stock. I have a tendency to go all in when I tackle a project, but I realized in this case I was particularly invested. I felt an exuberance and an urge to make this bike just right. It wasn't as if there weren't plenty of other, more important jobs to do, but this one took on a singular focus that bordered on obsession. I wondered why—it was, after all, just a crappy old bike I found at the dump.

Searching myself, I realized the answer was quite simple: With this project, I was giving my boy his last bike. Sure, there will be bicycle purchases in his future, but I won't be the one making them. This ride represents a final milestone, a sendoff. Providing your child with a bicycle is an act that is elemental to parenthood. The journey starts with that special first bike, followed by that wobbly first ride without training wheels, you jogging alongside shouting encouragement—and wondering if you let go too soon.

Abe has outgrown five bikes in his years. I remember each one clearly, where we got it, watching him ride. Sometimes we rode together. Other times he ventured out alone or with friends. Maybe I taught him some things along the way. Maybe I helped him feel safe and confident. No doubt in many ways I let him down. Now, that journey is coming to an end.

The window for raising children is finite. Parenthood is a ride that has a beginning and an end. Of course, I will always be there for Abe, but he's a man now, headed out on his own. I no longer fit into his life the way I did when he was a child, and that's as it should be. These days, I am envisioning him venturing out on his tall dump bike, trusting the brakes I fixed for him as he coasts the big hills of Burlington, and downshifting his dialed-in drivetrain to reach new heights that will be his experiences, and his alone.

Ben Adelman is a middle school English teacher and a former newspaper editor. He has published essays in *The Prodigal's Chair* and *The Salem News* (MA). He lives in a small town north of Boston with his wife and two teenage children. When he's not writing or teaching, he enjoys a nice bike ride in the woods.

Ink and Memory

by David Raney

Let us treat men and women well; treat them as if they were real; perhaps they are.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

"What is the point of collecting autographs?" asks a 2008 article in Britain's *Guardian*. The author's answer is clear from the follow-up: "What are you going to do with the damn thing when you've got it? Frame it? Sell it? Eat it?" In five paragraphs he disparages collectors, sellers who milk "celebrity cash cows," famous people who sign, famous people who don't.

This is mildly amusing, if a tad overwrought. I'm no celebrity sycophant—I don't know many of the luminaries staring at me in checkout lines—but I have lots of autographs, and I like having them. Is wanting the signature of someone you admire *really* the same as "the need to smoke Kurt Cobain's remains," as the author suggests?

That seems…strong. And I think it's motivated by a more complicated attitude toward celebrity than the author lets on. Why else translate Ringo Starr's announcement that after a half century he's through signing as an instruction to fans to "Curl up and die"? Why scorn someone who "once asked me for mine simply because I'd been standing near a musician they adored"? Maybe the really painful part is not being asked.

I'm in education, not show business, so no one asks me for *my* autograph, and all my celebrity meetings have been happy accidents. I literally bumped into John Houseman one evening crossing a dark street in Washington, blurting "Excuse me" and receiving a sonorous "Not at all" in *that voice*. I stepped into an elevator in New Orleans and found myself sharing it with John Goodman. I wasn't changed by those moments, and you wouldn't see me differently because of them. You don't know me, any more than I know Goodman or Houseman.

Still, while those were random, brief encounters, there was nevertheless a small electric thrill in "meeting" someone granted celebrity status, and for me it's the same with autographs. When I was young, twelve or thirteen, I wrote to many people I admired—musicians, politicians, athletes—and sometimes that resulted in my tearing open an

envelope at the mailbox to find a personal note from a famous stranger. It happened again recently. The note was from Lin Manuel Miranda, to whom I'd written an appreciative letter without expecting a reply, much less a handwritten one. I'm a bit past thirteen but still recognized the buzz. We were in the driveway, and my son said "Dad, you okay? Your face looks funny." By weird chance I had invoked Miranda seconds before while pulling on the parking brake.

It got me thinking about autographs for the first time in a long while, and curious what other people think. So I asked the Internet. Within minutes, of course, I was wishing I hadn't.

The consensus was that if I collect autographs it's to pretend I'm every celebrity's BFF when I'm just a schlub living in Mom's basement. (To be fair, I did have my own room as a teen.) One post starts off reasonably enough: "I don't know really, I guess it's a lovely memento of when you met someone of note … proof that we once met that person whom we admire." This at least has *lovely* and *admire*, though it doesn't address why I'd want a signature from someone I know I won't ever meet. Just about everyone else committing themselves to digital immortality held a darker view.

Autographs are about "awe…homage…worship," one declared. Another invoked the woman in Luke 8:43 who's "magically healed by kissing the hem of Jesus's cloak"—except "200 pounds of bodyguard stands between your lips and the hem of Mick Jagger's jacket." Some mused that autographs are "manna" or "steal a little piece of the person's soul" or represent "a slightly tragic symptom of the belief that celebrities are from Mars." That seems a little out there. When I went to Mets and Yankees games with my dad and leaned over the railing for a signature during warmups, I wasn't looking to be anyone's teammate, drinking buddy, or surrogate son. And if the players thought I was stealing a ballpoint's worth of their soul, they didn't act like it.

You may know celebrities, but I doubt you consider them godlike, their touch sacred—probably less so the better you know them. But even that would be inside the orbit of the writer who claimed autograph "hunters" need "to own the celebrity they accost…. An extreme way of doing this would be to kill the celebrity." Here's someone who, I'm pretty sure, never met anyone famous he admires. Or if he did, it didn't go well.

It seems to me that *meeting* requires more than standing in the same spot—rubbing elbows, a handshake, polite words. I once got to ask legendary sportswriter Frank DeFord a question at a conference, which was fun, and I briefly spoke by phone long distance to Vitas Gerulaitis, a hero from when I played tennis, about a boring matter unrelated to sports. I doubt either of them told their families about it at dinner. At what point does connection attenuate to zero, and when does it become real?

All my signed records, movie scripts, books, and photos are images of *me* at a certain age, not of the person signing, much less a sliver of their soul. They're reminders of what I was reading, watching, and listening to, the sports I was playing, what it was like to be me. Each is a reminder, too, of a small kindness—a link, however tenuous, to another human.

And what if you admire that human less than his or her work? Modernist aesthetic theory says that makes no difference—a statue has little to do with the sculptor, a short story with its author. I tried to take that on board when I studied literature, not wanting to be the silly grad student who cared whether a novel I liked came from the pen of an arrogant narcissist, a nasty drunk, someone rotten to their family. But as with other artists whose singing, acting, or painting I admired, it did make a difference. Pete Rose will sign and sells anything that moves, but no degree of scarcity would make me seek out his autograph, whereas I treasure Sandy Koufax's—not because it's rare but because I admire him as much as I did when I was twelve. I was thrilled to get OJ's in the mail as a kid, but now it seems as fake as Richard Nixon's autopen signature.

How can you not put yourself into your work? To a hardcore modernist, Frank Sinatra's *Wee Small Hours* isn't about breaking up with Ava Gardner. It can't be. The album is all covers, he didn't even write them. But it is. Lawrence Tibbetts, who performed everything from Pagliacci to Peter Pan, sang "Last Night When We Were Young" for years. When someone played him Sinatra's version, he said "Oh I see."

One of several differences between Meryl Streep and me is that Meryl has a real Nixon autograph. At age twelve she was watching a parade Nixon was in and, running alongside, got his autograph on a Milky Way wrapper. I have no idea if she still has that

or feels the same about it—I would guess not—but it got me wondering whether stars themselves ever get starstruck.

"People ask me if I'm ever starstruck," Stephen Colbert said in a recent interview, "and I say No, not really—except for musicians. That seems like magic to me." Emma Stone says she regresses to babbling teen around the Spice Girls, and in case you're interested, *People* magazine recently listed "27 Celebs Who Have Gotten Starstruck by Meeting Their Favorite Celebs." I didn't know around half of those listed, which makes me not callous or jaded, just over thirty.

Benedict Cumberbatch had a nuanced response to the same question. "Every time I've met someone famous who I've been in the audience of, I have the same butterflies and inability to be cool…. To meet people who thrilled me with their work for my entire life in such a concentrated manner as has happened over the last few years has been mind-blowing.

"I approach them as a fellow member of the human race, as the next person in their audience does."

Another actor was equally excited to meet *him*. Asked to share "the weirdest encounter you've had with a fan," Cumberbatch said without hesitation "Ted Danson at a pre-Oscar party, screaming across a floor of people like Leonardo DiCaprio, Ray Liotta, Kristen Stewart, pushing past them and knocking their drinks, saying 'Oh my God! It's f***ing Sherlock Holmes!'"

Danson, for his part, was asked how he handles that transaction from the other side. "Guy comes up," Conan O'Brien asked, "wants a picture, you're a nice guy but how do you preserve your sense of self? How do you handle that?" Danson's response is as generous as you could wish, and it's another reason I like him—and Cumberbatch, and Yo-Yo Ma, who's just as thoughtful about fame and fandom—even if we won't all be having beers soon:

> A big percentage of the time I enjoy it. Because people are smiling, they're remembering something I was a part of that made them laugh —oh hey, funny moment guy. …

> I also believe that my job is to host people's impression of me even though I know it's not me. And be gracious about that and match their energy so that I'm not leaving them feeling like they're an ass for doing this. I think that's kind of a contract.

Moving the clock back, Faulkner once followed Joyce around Paris for days, unable to get up the nerve to speak to him. To me that doesn't make him a loser or stalker just because he hadn't yet written *As I Lay Dying*, hadn't become himself. FDR collected autographs long before he was FDR. William Dean Howells, a substantial figure in American letters, wrote a campaign biography of his hero Abraham Lincoln and "was expected to interview the candidate," Rachel Cohen writes in *Chance Meeting*, "but he didn't feel up to the task and instead asked a law student of his acquaintance to go." Howells thus missed, he wrote, "the greatest chance in my life of its kind, though I am not sure I was wholly wrong, for I might not have been equal to that chance." Howells was later appointed consul to Venice, specifically for the biography, but when he happened to see Lincoln in a White House hallway he once again didn't go over, introduce himself, shake his hand.

I don't think I'm particularly awed by fame, although if Springsteen were to walk into a coffee shop and ask to share my table, maybe I'd be struck dumb. It's never come up. And perhaps I'm protesting too much, but is it really so awful to have heroes? Diffidence like Faulkner's or Howells's may be mostly personal shyness, but it also evinces a sense of history, of art. The times I've held back it's been out of respect for personal space and time as much as legacy.

I looked up once to see Alison Krauss, a musician I admire, at an outdoor table before a show in Atlanta. I'm sure she would have been gracious if I'd strolled over and asked, but she was eating, not performing, and in an odd way the encounter is more memorable for not asking. John Goodman was staring at his shoes in that elevator, clearly trying to make it to the lobby without one more person asking for his signature, and I'm glad I decided not to. It isn't any connection at all if you don't care how *they* feel about it.

The desire not to be That Guy almost cost me my Oscar Robertson moment. I'd locked myself out of my car and was waiting for a bus when a cab pulled up at the curb, the passenger calling out "Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the Miller-Ward House?" Relieved it was a place I actually knew how to find, I began naming streets before realizing I was talking to the Big O, who had rolled down the rear window. As his driver turned around, I thought, *When will I have this chance again?* and, flagging him down, said "I'm going there myself—give me a ride and I'll show you." Keeping "I know you" out of my face, I climbed in, and a few minutes later was riding up in the elevator to Robertson's speaking engagement. I said, "I expect you're going to be doing a lot of handshaking, so I'll warm you up. My name's Dave." "Hi Dave," he said, "I'm Oscar."

Years later a friend offered me her ticket to the charity premiere of *The Pirates of Penzance* when she fell ill the day of the event, and as I'd recently seen *Sophie's Choice* and thought Kevin Kline was astounding, I donned my blue blazer, shined my shoes and headed to the Kennedy Center.

Picture Kline surrounded by friends (or colleagues, handlers, who knew) and me sipping champagne and snatching caviar off passing trays, feeling like the pretender I was. I hesitated as a string trio played and tuxes and gowns glided past, but finally I thought *what the hell* and went over. Kline could easily have brushed me off, his 400th stranger of the day, but he could not have been nicer. He asked my name, twice, and told me he was pleased to hear *Sophie's Choice* had struck a chord since, "We watch our movies in a screening room with ten other people. I'm not seeing the reaction out in the theaters. So that's really good to hear." I didn't ask for an autograph—I don't think it crossed my mind—but I'll probably see every movie he ever makes.

Around the same time I found myself lost in Boston. In those pre-cell phone days I'd stopped on a dark street to use a pay phone, and as I walked back to my car I saw a group of four or five crossing from the corner, a man in front raising his hand to get my attention. He asked if I knew where a certain restaurant was, and when I laughed and said, "Boy have you got the wrong guy," explaining my circumstances, he laughed too and the group turned to cross again. That would have been it, except I noticed a tall man in back who seemed to be trying hard not to be noticed, keeping his face from the

streetlight. Refocusing, I realized it was Christopher Reeves, in town for a play (I learned later) and headed to dinner with friends or fellow actors.

Though this too was no real meeting, I find it as memorable as the elbow-rubbing ones. I smiled slightly and nodded, letting him know I wouldn't be asking for a Superman tattoo or a night on the town, and his relieved, grateful smile, whole body untensing, is something I can still see. Just a few seconds long, it felt truer than two hours onscreen. Autographs are another version of this, they just arrive from a greater distance. Someone who's touched me in some way—artistically, athletically, intellectually—has also touched a page and a pen, representing themselves with a scrawl or doodle or flourish, something we've all been doing since elementary school. It isn't intimate, but it's about as personal, as individual, as it gets. With a signature you write yourself.

I couldn't have articulated this at age twelve, but it's what I wanted when I sent small notebook pages to big people to sign. I found their addresses at the library in a *Who's Who* the size of a family Bible and sent along handwritten notes. Written slowly, tongue between teeth, I'm sure these looked as homely as you'd expect, something Opie Taylor might have sent. Maybe that's why so many responded. Or maybe it was just a more trusting time, before autographs became big business. (Or obsolete—Taylor Swift recently said, "I haven't been asked for an autograph since the invention of the iPhone with a front-facing camera.")

Either way, I got a lot of mail.

Each piece was a pleasure, and I'd often examine the handwriting to see if it seemed appropriate. Sometimes it was, like Jack Klugman's unreadable scrawl or Harry Belafonte's graceful swirling capitals. I didn't expect to be added to Bing Crosby's Christmas list or to Arnold Palmer's next foursome, but when both returned my little loose-leaf, one signed in blue ink, the other in black, it brought a thrill I can still recall. It was gratifying that a person I admired for something I couldn't do—still can't, as you'd know if you saw my golf swing or heard me in the shower—had taken a few seconds at office desk or kitchen table to scribble their name. If they also wrote "All good wishes" like Leonard Bernstein, or "Peace" (Arthur Ashe), or "God Bless You" (Johnny and June Carter Cash), or "To David—a pleasure" above a drawing of Jimmy Durante in a hat at his piano, all the better.

It isn’t about celebs dragged down to mere mortals, or me lifted toward the gifted gods. Those aren’t the only choices. The impulse is to connect, certainly. But more than that it’s to feel alive. And to remember.

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Ben Adelman is a middle school English teacher and a former newspaper editor. He has published essays in *The Prodigal's Chair* and *The Salem News* (MA). He lives in a small town north of Boston with his wife and two teenage children. When he's not writing or teaching, he enjoys a nice bike ride in the woods.

Born and raised in the UK, **Elizabeth Bird** is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the University of South Florida. The author of seven academic books (most recently, *Surviving Biafra: A Nigerwife's Story*), she now focuses on creative non-fiction. Her work has been accepted or appeared in *Under the Sun (*Readers' Choice Award, 2022), *Streetlight*, *Tangled Locks*, *Streetlight, The Guardian*, *Skeptic Magazine,* and elsewhere. She lives in Tampa, FL.

Alden Blodget is a mostly retired high school teacher and administrator who now tutors, pro bono, students who want but can't afford a tutor. He has published many essays over the past forty years, mostly but not exclusively about education. He was lead author for *Neuroscience & the Classroom: Making Connections* for the Annenberg Foundation website, and he published a collection of speeches he gave to students during his years as assistant head of school: *Dead Man Talking*. He was co-founder and producing director for the Gloucester Stage Company (MA) and for eight years volunteered as a guardian ad litem in the Rutland County (VT) family and criminal courts, working with abused and delinquent children and with adults declared incompetent. His wife puts up with him in their home in Essex, MA.

Alan Caldwell has taught for twenty-six years and spends much of his free time outdoors or reading. He has been married to his lovely wife, Brandi, for thirty-three years. He has one son, Caleb, who is a firefighter, a daughter-in-law, Chelsee, who is an emergency room nurse, and a brand-new grandson, Asher. Alan has been collecting stories, mostly about his family, for over forty years, but has just begun writing them down. He lives in Carroll County, Georgia.

Growing up in California, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, **Iris Chen** has since resigned her search for a singular 'home'. She now lives in New York and studies English at Columbia University. She writes for her campus magazine *The Blue and White.*

Gina Disipio was born and raised in Pennsylvania and currently lives in Lancaster with her husband and two dogs. She holds an MPA from West Chester University. Gina is in long-term recovery, celebrating eleven years of sobriety in January. She has spent the

last decade dedicating her passion, education, and expertise in combating the stigma of addiction and being an advocate of the voiceless and marginalized populations often outcast by society. She works to ensure recovery is accessible to everyone. This is her first published essay.

Jane Frances Hacking is Professor of Russian and Linguistics at the University of Utah and a lifelong lover of words. She is working on a memoir titled *Half Life*, an early draft of which was shortlisted for the 2020 Mslexia memoir prize.

Mary Ittelson divides her time between writing and arts advocacy. She is a professor of strategy and entrepreneurship whose work on not-for-profit arts leadership has been published by *Harvard Business Publishing, Pacific Standard Magazine,* and *Chicago Booth Magazine*. A former professional choreographer, she dances a gigue when her creative writing is accepted for publication.

Dan Keeble hails from the furthest point East in the UK. He has enjoyed many successes with online and print publications of poetry, short stories, humour, and more serious articles. He writes a monthly column for a county magazine, and has appeared in *Fiction on the Web, Everyday Fiction, Turnpike Magazine, Scribble, Flash Fiction Magazine, Agape Review,* and many others, on a sixty year writing journey to a stubby pencil.

Rhiannon Koehler is a Chicago-based writer, actor, and storyteller. She holds a Ph.D. from UCLA and has had her work featured in print with *Literate Ape, the Journal of Arizona History, American Indian Quarterly,* and *American Indian Culture and Research Journal,* as well as live in Chicago with *10x9, This Much is True, Fillet of Solo, and Pour One Out*. Her first book was (Johns Hopkins University Press) *Comics and Conquest: Political Cartoons and a Radical Retelling of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute*.

Melanie McCabe is the author of a memoir, *His Other Life: Searching for My Father, His First Wife, and Tennessee Williams*, which won the 2016 University of New Orleans Publishing Prize, as well as three collections of poetry: *The Night Divers* from Terrapin Books (2022); *What the Neighbors Know,* (FutureCycle Press, 2014), and *History of the Body* (David Robert Books, 2012.) Her essays and poems have appeared widely, including in *The Washington Post, Reader's Digest, The Georgia Review, The Massachusetts Review,* and *Shenandoah.*

Basundhara Mitra is a freelance writer and poet whose essays and articles have been published in journals and newspapers in India like *The Statesman, Deccan Herald, Femina, The Asian Age*, among others. Her poems have been awarded and published in

India and the US in anthologies like *Mosaic, Journey Between Stars*, and many more. Having enjoyed living in both countries in equal measure, she finds inspiration for her writing from intercultural observations and shared narratives.

Joseph O'Day's writing focuses on family relationships and life transitions. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spry Literary Journal, The Critical Flame: A Journal of Literature and Culture, bioStories*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine, Molecule: A Tiny Lit Mag, The Salem News*, *The American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, and *Focus on Faulkner*. He received his MA in English (Creative Writing) from Salem State University and served as Nonfiction Editor of *Soundings East*, Salem State's literary journal. He was the Director of Pharmacy at Brigham and Woman's Faulkner Hospital for many years until his retirement.

David Raney is a writer and editor for an education non-profit in Atlanta. His work has appeared in a couple of dozen journals and been listed in *Best American Essays* three times.

Jack Phillips is a naturalist, poet, nature writer and founder of The Naturalist School, a nonprofit organization devoted to connecting with nature more deeply through the consilience of creativity and ecology. He is author of *The Bur Oak Manifesto: Seeking Nature and Planting Trees in the Great Plains* and co-editor of *Treasures of the Great Plains: an Ecological Perspective.* His poetry has appeared in *Hymn and Howl*, *Wild Roof, Flora Fiction, EcoTheo, Canary: a Literary Journal of the Environmental Crisis, The Good Life Review,* and THE POET. He lives in the Missouri River watershed of eastern Nebraska and teaches ecopsychology at Creighton University School of Medicine.

James Seawel's essays have been featured in *Arkana*, *The Bitter Southerner*, and *Tales from the South*. He was nominated by *Arkana* for Best of the Net in 2021, and his editorials frequently appear in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Currently he travels with the U.S. Military as a civilian counselor. James grew up in the Ozark foothills, absorbing the stories of his family and community.

Trevy Thomas's work has appeared in *The Coachella Review, Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review, Forge Journal, Sliver of Stone, Drunk Monkeys, Five on the Fifth, Visitant*, the *River Tides* anthology, and *Woodwork* magazine. Trevy lives in Virginia with her husband and two dogs.

Alisa Vereshchagin is a linguist and education consultant living in Austin, Texas. Currently she works for a nonprofit training teachers of refugees and internally displaced people in Eastern Europe with specific focus on Ukraine. Alisa was born in Murmansk,

Russia—the biggest city in the Arctic Circle—months before the collapse of the Soviet Union. She credits her brave and ambitious parents, who fled the USSR for the United States when she was a child, for her adventurous spirit. A lover of travel, Alisa has always been fascinated with rural, remote and hard-to-reach places. In addition to travel and writing, Alisa enjoys learning languages, poetry, running, swimming, and taking care of her dogs and chickens.

Liza Wieland has published five novels, *Paris, 7 A.M. Land of Enchantment, A Watch of Nightingales*, *Bombshell,* and *The Names of the Lost*, and three collections of short fiction, *Quickening*, *You Can Sleep While I Drive*, and *Discovering America*, as well as a book of poems, *Near Alcatraz*. She has won two Pushcart Prizes and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has recently retired from teaching and lives in eastern North Carolina.