

bioStories

Summer/Fall 2025

Volume 15, Issue 2





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www.biostories.com

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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.

We strive to publish the kinds of essays that stay with the reader like whispers in the dark. Our objective is to showcase the widest variety of writers, perspectives, and experiences as possible, always looking for excellence and subtlety and with an eye on those ideas and experiences that connect all of us as humans.

We publish new essays weekly and then gather them in digital editions like this one twice a year. We hope you enjoy this eclectic volume of outstanding essays. You can read all the work we publish at www.biostories.com.

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bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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The Scottish Play

by Naomi DeMarinis

The IV line that ran from a bag on a hook to the port in my chest was filled with arsenic trioxide, an inorganic compound originated from the supernova of a dying star fifty times the mass of the sun. My illness, acute promyelocytic leukemia, resulted from the mutation of two of my chromosomes which happens for no known reason to approximately two out of a million people each year. A right-sized star fused itself through the elemental table, and the remnants of its death became my medicine. The translocation of chromosome 17 and chromosome 15 nearly killed me before I knew I had cancer. The relational lattice between me and the star was made of spacetime and a near-perfect vacuum. The relational lattice between me and my disease was made of a lifetime of anticipatory dread and knocking wood against the statistically improbable. Spacetime, vacuum, and dread walked into a beige-painted chemo lounge, and that big dead star and I were in the same room.

Fifty times the mass of the sun, I slumped in my infusion chair and cried, but my doctor said I was fortunate. Another week or two without treatment—without platelets—and my brain would have bled me to death. I had a new appreciation for routine blood tests and the diseases they found when symptoms were still ignorable. I said, “I can’t believe I almost died without knowing it.”

My doctor said, “You could just as easily have been hit by a bus.” The relational lattice between me and my doctor was made of happenstance and unvarnished facts. He said my cancer could’ve been worse. Arsenic isn’t that hard to tolerate. *Look.*

I looked. I have never been so assaulted by my own good luck. Other patients in the chemo lounge—some his, some not—were so sick that light passed right through them, their faces fallen, turned inward, collapsed, elapsed. Stars with masses greater than fifty times that of our sun are likely to become black holes, but not always.

“Thank you for saving my life,” I said.

My doctor said, “You’re welcome.” A slight smile. A small shrug. Aw-shucksing.

Cancer began in February, and I became February, the cold the snow the ice the wind the riptide grey. Anxiety made it hard to breathe, I trembled, and my insides flopped like stranded fish. I had a fuzzy blanket, and I swaddled myself before getting into bed, but there was nothing I could do to feel warm or safe.

By May, I was exhausted, but the world around me changed its mood. Winter lingers, but Earth eventually gives itself to thaw. My dog and I walked along a river trail with a wide-open view of the entire valley. There was a storm in the sky, dark but not storming, a blend of light and darkness and mist running up into the hills, dark green in the distance, light green up close, layers of perception receding and advancing. The nearest of them glowed, and a veil of rain diffused the light, reflecting off the grass so that the grass's green stained the air, scattering in a wavelength of 495–570 nanometers, a knowable measure I could take in. I breathed deep. Green entered my body, and my insides returned to the water.

When my doctor first told me I had leukemia, I asked, “What did I do?” I thought it was my fault, too much aspartame or artificial color.

He said, “Everyone asks that.” But acute promyelocytic leukemia is chaos and butterfly wings. It could have been gamma rays from space. One friend thinks it was microplastics. Another thinks it was a message from the universe. But it might as well have been because I changed my password on my computer to a phrase from the Scottish Play. *Double double toil and trouble*. An actor friend said, “Oh, that’s bad luck.” But luck, good or bad, is hard to register in the moment. I had both, but only in hindsight. After cancer, I bought *Macbeth* and put it on my desk as a memento mori to remind me that a bus ... an unbound planet a rogue wave ... is always bearing down and has, perhaps, already hit.

My dad and I used to stand in the yard and look through binoculars at the night sky as if through looking, the stars, like fate, would come within our grasp—the Backbone of Night, Orion, the Big Dipper—but we were looking back in time, and the stars we saw were not the stars as they really were but bright-eyed witches divining only the past.

I said, “Do you ever feel like you’ll fall in?”

And my dad said, “Yes.”

Then I said, “I feel scared when I look.”

And my dad said, “Me too.”

The cosmos is both contingency and kin, and it’s apocalypse to know that—depending upon perspective—the light we shine is a light we shined and has long since gone.

Birds of a Feather

by Andreia Rodrigues

The classroom walls blurred, shrank, and pressed my head from all sides. The teacher's voice became a rottweiler's bark. The air was sucked out of the room. I gasped, the skin on my face feverish. So humiliating. The sweat, the heavy breathing, the shivers. These stupid, stupid attacks had started months ago and showed no signs of abating. They followed me everywhere, invisible and relentless, like a shadow I couldn't shake.

I held on and trembled through the lecture, my notes forming uneven patterns on a white page. At the first break, I got the hell out of that airless classroom.

Midday found me sobbing in a park near the university. The shame had followed me to a bench covered by the falling leaves of a Tipuana tree. I sat down, brought my backpack close to my chest, and closed my eyes. Tears ran freely down my cheeks. "Can I sit here with you?" A soft voice broke through the curtain of my exasperation. The request came from an old man, a familiar figure in the park, who, according to rumours, had renounced possessions to live voluntarily from charity. He spent most of his days at the park, meditating and talking to those who would converse. Other students I knew said he was crazy, but no one thought he was dangerous.

I wiped away my tears and moved over on the bench.

"I see you're sad." He wore a long, white robe. "Would you mind telling me why?" The serenity of his voice contrasted with the traffic noise of a not-so-distant road.

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because I care."

"I'm tired of life. It's grey and frightening. It just sucks."

"I understand." The man nodded and rubbed his white beard. "But why do you think that?"

"I don't know, really. I think it all started when my father died seven years ago." The man laid a hand on my shoulders, smooth as drops of light rain against a roof. The tenderness contouring his silence encouraged me to continue. "One day my *pai* was

healthy and strong, the next he was gone. He left for work and never came back.” I swallowed. “He was murdered. The victim of a terrible mistake.”

The man lowered his gaze and sadness spread across his face. “I think some wounds never heal,” I said.

“What was his name?” he asked.

“João.”

“Beautiful name.” A wide smile exposed his yellow teeth. “It’s my name too.”

A grin stretched my features.

“I’m sorry for you, dear. I’ve also lost someone I love. I know it’s not easy, but the best we can do for them is to try to keep going.”

“Who have you lost, João?”

“My girlfriend. The only woman I ever loved.”

“Sorry about that.” A mother was shouting to her child from a bench opposite. Traffic moved on the road.

João’s face acquired luminosity. “It’s okay. Luisa remains the best memory of my life.” He paused. “She had a rare disease. At first, she started losing all the melanin on her skin. Her body became spotted like a little leopard, but instead of dark dots, they were white.” João turned away. “Then the disease took over her eyes. She could not stand light. We spent months in complete darkness. Until the disease finally reached her heart. She died in my arms.”

I tapped my chest. “I’m sorry, João.”

“Thanks, dear. What’s your name?”

“Andreia.”

“I’m okay, dear Andreia. I’m glad I had her, and even gladder she had someone with her until the end. In a way, I know we’ll always be together.”

A group of pigeons fought for a bread crumb on the ground. I considered how to construct my words. “I don’t mean to be rude, but what do you mean by that? That you’ll always be together? Me, I don’t know if I believe in the afterlife.”

“Allow me to tell you something.” João bent forward. “You know, I practically live at this park. I spend my days observing nature. The trees, the grass, the birds. Especially the birds. Recently I’ve noticed something special about the birds that visit here.” A noisy,

old motorcycle vroomed around the park. João waited until it passed. “Every morning, at 7:05 a.m. sharp, a group of little black birds comes right here in front of this bench. They eat insects over there.” He pointed to an area of grass surrounded by dandelions. “In the last few weeks, I noticed a new bird had joined the group. This new bird is different from the others. While all the other birds in the group are entirely black, this new one is covered by white dots, all over its feathers...” João fell into a solemn silence before he added, “It’s like it has melanin disease.”

João stared at the patch of grass. He seemed to be far away. Goosebumps covered my arms. “You think this bird...”

“I like to think so, yes. The most interesting thing is that this white-dotted bird is the only one who comes and sits with me every day, right here on this bench. All the others remain on the grass.”

A liquid warmth floated to my chest. “This is the most beautiful story I’ve ever heard.”

We remained silent for a while. I sat breathing in the story. The colours of the world intensified. I watched a boy fly a green and yellow kite. Half of his blue underwear was showing from his falling pants.

“You’re feeling better, Andreia?”

“I think so. Thank you for talking to me and sharing your story.”

“My pleasure. Thanks for listening to me.”

We smiled at each other.

“You know, João, I hear stories like yours, of people who experience contact with their lost ones. From a dream, a coincidence, a synchronicity. It’s beautiful. And I feel sad that I don’t have those experiences.”

“You’re sure you don’t?”

“I think so.”

“See, I’m not so sure. Think about that. You’re having a hard day. You come to a random bench and find someone with the same name as your father. Someone who cares about your tears. Someone who more or less understands your pain.”

I grinned.

“I’m here all the time, Andreia. Any time you need to talk, you can find me. And believe me. You are stronger than you think you are.”

My head collapsed on his shoulder. His arms supported my back. Tears wet the upper part of his robe.

The next day at 7:05, I scanned the park on my way to class. From a distance, I saw a little, white-dotted bird pecking gently at João 's open hand—right there on the bench where, just a day before, I had sat, wept, and begun to rise.

My Grandmother's Secret

by Lee Jeffers Brami

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." — William Faulkner

When I was in my early twenties, my grandmother Annie told me a true story about her childhood that I never forgot. I had read her brief memoir about life as a child in the small Kentucky village where she was born, and I was charmed by it. So was the editor of her town's local paper, which published her story.

But the paper left out one part of that story, published in 1969. The incident they left out happened when she was seven—in 1897. That story has haunted me ever since, just as it haunted her.

My grandmother was a born storyteller. She could transfix me as a child with stories about Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox. She could recite "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" better than anyone. And when I was very young, she sang me lullabies in her rich alto voice, making me feel, as she used to say, quoting Robert Browning, that "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the World."

I can still hear the lilt of her Southern voice, although it's been fifty years since I last heard it, saw her smile, and smelled the delicate scent of her rosewater cologne. Her infectious laugh warmed me, wrapping the two of us together in a conspiracy of close family friendship.

She told me how, on summer evenings, she and her sister gathered fireflies and "watched the home-bound river of blackbirds as they streamed overhead in columns to the cemetery treetops on the horizon." The girls turned somersaults and played Blind Man's Bluff. Every day they waited for the lamplighter to come on horseback down the dirt road. The nearest lamp post was just past the school-room yard, next to their house. "The lamplighter would rein in his horse beneath the lamp," she remembered, "and then insert something into a long-handled hook, lift it with unerring accuracy, and there would be an upsurge of brilliance as the little fan-shaped flame sprang into being. Bugs would

fly in all directions and moths tumble out of sight while the dark sidewalk ... bloomed in a circle of warm light.”

One sunny Autumn afternoon, Annie was invited by the local sheriff's daughter, Theodora, to spend the afternoon at her house after school let out. Annie was not a close friend of Theodora's, nor did she want to be. Theodora's father, the local sheriff, scared her. He was a large man with a bushy black mustache who rode around town on his horse, his two pistols conspicuously hugging his hips, his ample belly sagging over his silver-buckled belt. He always glowered. Annie had never seen him smile.

Theodora had dark brown hair like his, but she wore her long hair in carefully curled ringlets. She was a thin, pale little girl who always seemed somewhat nervous around other children.

Annie would have politely told Theodora that she couldn't visit her, except for one thing: Inside the lovely, large white house with its wide front porch where Theodora lived was a grand piano. Annie could only play “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Her uncle had shown her how to play that one piece on his upright piano. She had loved the feel of the ivory and ebony keys, and the music she could make.

So she said yes to Theodora and they walked together from school to Theodora's house. Once inside, Theodora's mother, a slender blond woman with a soft voice, served them lemonade and homemade sugar cookies.

After they ate, Theodora first let Annie twirl around on the horsehair piano stool, and eventually told her she could play the piano. Annie gently stroked the keys. She played “Mary had a Little Lamb” several times. Theodora showed her how to practice the “C” scale, and she played that several times too, using the right fingering, as Theodora had taught her. Annie could have sat at that piano for hours, exploring the sounds of the different notes, alone and together.

When Theodora grew bored acting as a piano instructor, she whispered to Annie that she had a secret in her bedroom, adding that Annie was the only person she would show it to. Before Annie could see it, Theodora explained, “You first have to promise that you won't ever tell anyone else about my secret, because I would get into lots of trouble if anyone knew.”

Annie crossed her heart and promised. She was a little scared, because Theodora looked so solemn; but she was also curious. They walked up the gracefully curved, beautifully polished wooden stairs and into Theodora's bedroom. Annie recalled that the bed was covered by a lacy white bedspread and trimmed with pink dust ruffles. The window was framed by curtains that matched the bedspread.

Theodora took the chair at the child-sized desk facing the window and moved it over to the closet, then climbed the chair and reached to the top of the closet. She brought out a shoe box.

"Remember, you promised not to tell," Theodora repeated.

Annie promised again, and Theodora slowly opened the box. Before Annie could see what was inside, she smelled something that reminded her of rotten meat. When she looked inside, she saw something dark hidden under some tissue paper. When Theodora first pulled away the tissue paper, Annie couldn't understand what she was looking at. She saw that dried blood had pooled under the dark thing.

After several moments, she realized what it was: a severed hand.

She stepped back quickly, but not so quickly as to realize the color of the hand. It was the same dark coffee color of her friend, who she knew as Uncle Charlie, an elderly Black man with a white beard and a peg leg, who used to carry her on his shoulder when she was younger. He was a kind of handyman who also ran errands for the villagers, and he always smiled at Annie and told her interesting stories about his life as he carried her around, including one about how he lost his leg during the "War Between the States," as most Southerners called it. Annie's father had fought on the same side, and her mother told her how brave her father had been when he was captured by Yankee soldiers and held as a POW in a dank prison in Boston Harbor.

Annie knew it wasn't Uncle Charlie's hand, but it was the same color. It *could* have been his hand

"How ... how did you get this?" she whispered to Theodora, barely able to force the words out.

"I went with Mama and Papa to a lynching a couple of days ago," said Theodora, "and I secretly picked it up after they cut off his hands and feet." Annie recalled that Theodora said this with a certain amount of pride. "I hid it in my coat so Mama and Papa wouldn't

see it.” She had found a shoe box of her Mama’s to keep the hand and stuck the box in a corner of her closet where no one else would find it.

Annie could tell that Theodora thought of the hand as a prized trophy, that she was proud of having brought her secret possession back to her house. And she seemed to expect some sign of admiration for her daring. Instead, Annie felt like throwing up.

“I don’t feel well, Theodora. My tummy feels really bad. I’m sorry, but I need to go home now,” Annie said. She wanted to leave that bedroom and that house as quickly as possible.

Theodora looked disappointed. “Oh. I was hoping you could stay longer.”

“I’m sorry,” said Annie again. “Thank you for inviting me to your house and letting me play your piano.”

She thanked Theodora’s mother for the cookies and lemonade and almost tripped going down the front stairs of the house. Walking home, Annie felt dazed. She had been so excited about playing the piano. And she had loved every minute of stroking those keys. But now, all she could think of was Uncle Charlie and that cut-off hand.

She told no one about the incident until many years later. Not even her mother or sister. She never knew what happened to the hand, and she never asked.

Two years after that visit, Annie moved with her family from their small Kentucky village to Asheville, North Carolina, and she never saw Theodora again.

Long after they moved to Asheville, Annie’s mother—my great-grandmother—told her that as a teacher in the one-room school in their Kentucky village, she regularly received notes from parents requesting permission to excuse their children from school on certain days. Those were the days when they knew a lynching would take place, and they were in the habit of making a picnic day of it, if the weather was good.

The families would pack a lunch and a blanket, lay out their food, and watch “the entertainment” as they ate. My great-grandmother would refuse permission and would mark those children “absent without cause.” It was the one small token of resistance she allowed herself.

I was horrified by my grandmother's story, horrified and spellbound. Because she was such a good storyteller, I found myself drawn into her long-ago world, staring with her at that amputated Black hand.

I asked my grandmother how any human beings could be so cruel, so inhumane. She shook her head.

"Well, honey, that was the culture of the time in this country, at least in some places," she said.

I don't think she meant to scare me or leave me as haunted as she was. She simply wanted to share the story with someone who would understand. Perhaps she wanted to dilute its horror by sharing it with me.

In my own world, "Negros" were now starting to be called Blacks, or Afro-Americans, and the slogan "Black is Beautiful" was becoming popular. The Black Panthers were often in the news, while a year earlier, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated. It was a different world, certainly, filled with chaos and violence, but also filled with hope. I felt that my country was slowly becoming a better place.

Haunted as she was by her childhood experience, my grandmother still held firmly to the belief that human history was "an upward spiral," as she put it. "We might make the same mistakes over and over, and there will always be some human cruelty," she said, "but slowly, surely, we are evolving into better people." I agreed with her completely, and I thought she was very wise to imagine our past and future that way.

I would like to believe now, as I did then, in my grandmother's upward spiral. But the late nineteenth-century world she described, with its horrifying underside, doesn't seem so long ago anymore.

Scaled: What We Gain, and What We Lose

by Deborah Svec-Carstens

Naked, I step on the digital scale and wait for the flashing red zeros to settle on a number. *My* number. After a few seconds, it appears. Two pounds lighter than when I stood here a few days ago.

“Oh, what a lovely surprise,” I say to myself.

I’m not trying to lose weight. Pulling the scale out from under the bathroom sink is no longer a daily ritual. But thirty years after completing treatment for anorexia, I still feel a familiar rush of pleasure as I step off the scale and get dressed.

When did I start measuring my self-worth by a number?

I can learn from the word “scale.” It comes from a noun derivative of the Proto-Germanic word *skæla*, “to split, divide,” and German or Dutch words meaning bowl, dish, cup, or shell. This etymology reflects the use of a split shell as a pan for weighing in the earliest scales, which date back to around 2000 BC in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley. These were used primarily for commerce.

A divided self. One part focuses on a number. The other knows she is more than this.

At one time in my life, there was no division. When my two sisters were six and eight and I was ten, we performed songs from the *Grease* soundtrack for my parents. We styled and sprayed our hair and slipped on one-piece swimsuits. Sang into a vacuum cleaner microphone and danced. The performance ended with the three of us piled on the floor, arms and legs flailing as we sang, “We Go Together.” I wasn’t self-conscious or inhibited. I wasn’t preoccupied with my physical appearance or my weight. I was laughing and having fun with my sisters.

Self-tracking began long before the Fitbit or Apple Watch. In the 16th century, Venetian physician, scientist and professor Santorio Santorio—a friend of the astronomer and

physicist Galileo Galilei—constructed a “weighing chair” to track his and his patients’ weight. For years, Santorio weighed himself—and everything he ate and drank—daily. He measured his urine and feces, too. None of it to measure his self-worth, but rather to observe and gain insights into the human body. He published the first systematic study of basal metabolism. I wonder if Santorio understood that his data, like the data our self-trackers collect today, do not reveal the whole picture of ourselves.

As my body morphed from child to young woman, I regularly pulled the pink scale from the corner of the bathroom I shared with my mom and two younger sisters. I watched the needle bounce around and finally stop.

Images on TV or in the movies and in magazines such as *Seventeen* portrayed what a female body “should” look like. There was Meg Ryan, attractive and sweet; Molly Ringwald, with her red hair and pouty lips; and Madonna, sexy and gorgeous. I dreamt that trading my frizzy hair and freckles to look like one of them would alter my entire life: I would be happy, popular, successful, vivacious, outgoing, confident. Whole and worthy of belonging.

The week of senior prom, I stepped on the scale every morning to assess the results of the previous day’s intake—no breakfast, bran muffin for lunch, and a regular dinner. Mom had sewn an emerald green mermaid dress for me, using a Vogue pattern designed for an ideal 1980s female figure. The dress fit my slender frame snugly and I was determined to look thin in it. By the end of the week, I’d lost a few pounds. On Saturday, with my hair in an updo and makeup carefully applied, I zipped up the dress, fastened the clasp on my gold shell-shaped necklace, and turned to look in the mirror. I felt transformed. Beautiful.

In the early 1940s, Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (“MetLife”) used data collected from five million policyholders in the US and Canada to create an “ideal body weight” chart. MetLife later revised and renamed it a “desirable” height and weight chart. The company had identified obesity as the leading cause of premature death in the US and it wanted its policyholders to live longer and continue paying premiums. The validity of these tables has been criticized because some people were weighed and some were

not, some wore shoes and clothing and some did not, and frame size wasn't consistently measured. Nevertheless, a decade after the charts appeared, doctors began suggesting that their patients strive to fall within their parameters. Thus, a standard was born.

By the mid-1980s, doctors were using body mass index (BMI), which measures body weight in relation to height, as a marker for "normal." Today, BMI calculators are readily available online, although in recent years researchers and health professionals have recognized the flaws in relying on BMI as the sole predictor of "normal." They have suggested including waist circumference and waist-to-hip ratio to health risk screenings.

What is "normal" shifts over time like the changing tides, gradually reshaping the shoreline of our understanding.

There were no scales in my college dorm, so I weighed myself at least weekly in the locker room after water aerobics class. The number slowly ticked up. My runs, swims, and Jane Fonda workouts couldn't compete with easily accessible desserts and generous second helpings. At graduation, I weighed twenty pounds more than I had four years earlier. Graduating summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, I proudly accepted my diploma. But I had failed the one test that mattered more to my twenty-two-year-old self—avoiding the "freshman fifteen."

Along with my cap and gown, I felt like I deserved to wear the pink plastic pig nose that got passed around on college choir tours—an "award" for the person who had eaten the most at the previous evening's pre-concert potluck meal. Rather than feeling accomplished or successful, I only saw myself as fat, even though I wasn't—at least not according to my BMI or my doctor.

Capitalism and our bodies are closely linked. Consider the penny scale, first imported from Germany in the late 19th century. Users put in a penny to find out their weight. Within a few years, American-manufactured penny scales could be found in movie theaters, grocery stores, train stations, or drug stores. They developed into slot machines: drop in a penny, guess your weight, and get your money back if you were exactly right. In 1927, about 40,000 penny scales reaped profits of \$5 million per year.

A few months after college graduation, I moved to Paris to nanny for a French family. The day I arrived, the woman I worked for took me on a tour of the neighborhood. When I stopped to linger over the beautiful mouthwatering tarts, éclairs, petit fours, and mille-feuilles in the window of the *boulangerie*, she told me all her daughter's au pairs had gained weight in Paris. "Too much bread and patisseries," she said. I vowed to myself not to be *that* au pair and started a regular running routine.

During the week, I jogged with a friend at a track near the Eiffel Tower. On the weekends, I ran alone in the Bois de Boulogne, a densely forested park a few minutes from where I lived. I discovered the park after sharing with the woman I worked for that I was a runner. She told me she used to run there before her daughter was born.

She never told me not to run there alone.

On a crisp, cool fall morning two months after my arrival in Paris, I put on my workout clothes, laced up my shoes, and headed to the Bois de Boulogne. As I finished my run, a man grabbed me, shoved me down into nearby bushes, and sat on top of me. Underbrush dug into my skin. I twisted my legs and torso, trying to escape, and called for help. He slapped me across the face, hard. My glasses fell off. He put a filthy hand over my mouth. I gasped for air, the weight of him a boulder on my chest. And then he sexually assaulted me.

Part of me wanted nothing more than to get on the next plane home and let my parents take care of me. Instead, determined to fulfill my commitment to the family I worked for, and unwilling to admit defeat by leaving, I stayed and kept running.

And running.

And running.

I didn't need a scale to tell me that the combination of daily runs, now with a can of mace in hand, and the smaller portion sizes in France were driving my weight down; my loose-fitting clothes gave it away. Although I occasionally sacrificed a few Francs and weighed myself on public scales because the family's scale was tucked away in the couple's bathroom—not a space I frequented. At first, I used paper and pencil to convert the kilograms to pounds and recorded it on the slip of paper the scale spit out at me. Later, I could approximate the conversion in my head. The number kept creeping down, month by month.

Bathroom scales first became available in 1913, propelled by the improved precision of an essential component, spring mechanisms. In a 1925 advertisement, the Health-O-Meter Automatic Bathroom Scale was touted as “the greatest aid in reducing and in keeping slim.” According to the ad, simply knowing your weight was “an easy, simple, scientific method for reducing your weight to the desirable condition where you are normal, healthy, vigorous, and physically lovely.” Even though most Americans didn’t have flush toilets, sales of scales were steady.

When I moved back to the US from Paris, I got a job, rented an apartment, and bought a scale. I kept running—six miles a day, seven days a week—and hardly ate. I weighed myself daily and watched with satisfaction as the number continued to plummet. It was tangible evidence of my ability to control *something*. Proof that I had “gotten over” the assault. I was fine. Strong. Healthy.

Except I wasn’t any of those things.

Within two years, I was in treatment for anorexia nervosa. I stood backwards on a scale every week because my caregivers in the outpatient program wouldn’t let me see the number. I felt like a child being punished for misbehaving. Some weeks I wanted to throw a tantrum and scream, “Just tell me!” But the determination to recover outweighed my desire to know the number.

Through therapy, I learned how to recognize destructive thought patterns and loosen my grip on perfectionism. I began the (never-ending) process of dialing down the voices that loved shouting “facts” about scales and weight and turning up the volume on a more compassionate inner voice.

I came to understand that I wasn’t to blame for the assault. I gave myself permission to eat more—to enjoy food again—and exercise less.

None of it was easy; none of it happened overnight.

Slowly, the fullness of my body returned, inching up from my lowest point—ninety pounds on my five-foot, six-inch frame. Crawling out of the cave I’d entered, I reminded myself over and over it was okay that I needed a new pair of jeans. Again. It was okay to have a belly, butt, and breasts. It was okay to inhabit my body. To be a body.

Today, smart scales connect with our phones or fitness trackers via Wi-Fi or Bluetooth to track weight, BMI, total body fat, water percentage, bone and muscle mass, metabolic rate, and more. Some provide a 3D virtual model of your body's progress over time. There are even scales that talk (a helpful feature for the visually impaired). With the meteoric rise in the use of AI, talking scales of the future may offer real-time encouragement or tailored feedback, telling us what to eat, how much water to drink, or how and when to exercise.

Although these scales calculate much more than weight, they still don't measure what matters most: kindness, compassion, and empathy. Integrity, trust, and respect. A willingness to show up for others. To listen. To love.

Stepping on the scale is no longer the daily ritual it was years ago, before I realized I was anorexic. Before therapy and recovery. But curiosity about my weight—a need to know the number—still gnaws. The eating disordered voice that still exists in my head, years after recovery, grows louder than the self-compassionate one. And I am human, after all, swimming in a society where images of svelte and sculpted bodies portray perfection.

I slip back into measuring my self-worth with the scale when things are hard; when I feel lonely, lost, or untethered. When life seems overwhelmingly chaotic. During those times, I look down at the number and experience a twisted moment of victory when it is one or two pounds less than the last time.

I know my self-worth is not dependent on what my physical body looks like, other people's opinions, or my achievements. But knowing it and truly believing it are two different things. It's easy to revert to comparison, self-judgment, and perfectionism. To forget I have nothing to prove to myself or others.

When the divided self reappears, I have to stop and remind myself it's not real. The number doesn't matter. The scale is a false god. It doesn't reveal anything important about me. Despite hundreds of years of effort and invention, the scale still doesn't measure my worth.

Hello Again

by Alexander Carver

“Mom, if that’s you, I want you to buzz into my right ear. Did you hear me, Mom? My *right* ear.”

I had just filled the gas tank to my rental car, a Ford something or other, and was surprised to find that the same little black-eyed fly that appeared inside the SUV the day of Mom’s funeral had survived the cold November night to pay me another visit. I was driving through the West Chester countryside, about a mile from Wellington, the retirement village where my parents had recently surrendered to senior living. A few moments after I’d spoken to the fly, it lifted from its sunlit perch on the dashboard, zigzagged around the inside of the car, and landed on my stubbly right cheek. I then watched in the rearview mirror in amazement as it took the short hop through the air to grant my wish and buzz into my right ear. At that fifty-mile-an-hour moment, I was fortunate that the white, French Chateau-styled buildings of Wellington appeared in the windshield, preventing my shock and delight from endangering myself and other drivers.

I swerved into the visitor’s parking lot and searched for a space that faced away from the front entrance and any eyes I preferred not to witness my unusual behavior. I parked between two sedans, checked to see if anyone was lounging in either one, and made a second request of the fly...

“Okay, Mom, this one might be a little tougher...if that’s really you, I want you to kiss me right on the mouth,” I said, eyeing my crazed expression in the rearview mirror as I puckered my lips in preparation for a landing. Again, the circling fly chose to alight on the right side of my face. It then strutted a few itchy inches across my salt and pepper whiskers over to my chin. “Come on, Mom. You can do it. Go ahead. Give me a kiss.” I blew air out of my mouth to further attract the fly, and with that it flew off my chin and landed on my bottom lip. Giggling to myself as I continued to observe the minor miracle, I made a kissing sound to complete the act of affection. Startled by the sound, the fly flew off and dropped below the steering wheel to the back of my right hand, where it sat for a moment as if worn out by its mission.

As the fly rested and my heart raced, I scanned the parking lot again. Anyone watching me would think I was talking to myself, and any of the residents at Wellington who knew me would think it was the grief doing all the talking. But, come on! What in the world was going on? What I'd just experienced felt surreal. But it had happened. I was not high or drunk or even overly caffeinated, making requests of a fly and then watching as the fly granted my requests with little delay and athletic-like precision. Even if the fly wasn't my resurrected mother, it was, at the very least, a fly with an extraordinary grasp of the English language.

Concluding that my grieving mind was playing tricks on me, I decided to test the fly a third time. "Hey, Mom? I don't want to get greedy, but can I please have another kiss?" Then I made the same rhythmic puffing sound Mom always made while working around the house and trying to relieve whatever stresses my sister Annie and I had dealt her. The breathing exercise she incorporated was a faster paced version of the one that women use in labor, and maybe Mom had thought, *Well, if it worked for birthing two ungrateful kids, it'll certainly work for everyday household stresses*. On one occasion, when I was a bit moody, I reacted to it by saying, "Mom, you're breathing funny again."

The fly granted my wish a third time and landed on my lips, not once, but several more times, the blowing sensation seeming to give it a little thrill.

"Hello again, Mom. It's good to have you back."

My mother had passed away five days earlier while lying peacefully in her hospital bed as I ran my hand through her hair, Dad held her right hand, and Annie held her left. She had been plagued by unanswered health questions for over a year, including a small stroke that affected her speech for a while, and she wouldn't be diagnosed with T-cell lymphoma until after she was gone. That's how quickly we lost her. T-cell lymphoma is the trojan horse of cancers—difficult to detect until it has taken full command of your body. One of her too many doctors had ushered us into a hideously upholstered sitting room and told us Mom was going to die. It was just like one of those scenes in a movie—only this time Dad, Annie, and I were forced to play the parts of the blindsided and shattered loved ones. As good a team as any family, we went to work fulfilling Mom's wishes of getting her out of bad situation as quickly as we could and asked the doctors to remove

the breathing mask she hated so much...a decision that would dwindle all the years of her wonderful life down to its final hour. During those last precious, gut-wrenching moments, we invited family members to call and say goodbye as I held a cellphone to Mom's ear. The sudden, unrehearsed goodbyes were followed by an impromptu Neil Diamond concert...culminating with Mom going out to an encore of her favorite song, *Hello Again*.

Seated in the parking lot of the last place she called home, desperate to have my mother and best friend back, I began to believe that she had returned to me as a fly to share the secret she had learned that there was indeed life after death. Ironically, Mom was terrified of flying. At the time of her death she had not taken to the skies in over fifty years—since an airplane carrying her home from a vacation to Bermuda had flown into the jaws of a severe thunderstorm. Repeating the story frequently over the years, Mom would tell us that the “stewardesses” were strapped into their seats with faces “white as sheets.” She also said, somewhat less convincingly, that she saw a bolt of lightning streak down the aisle of the plane. A week after returning from the trip, as she was hanging our colorful 1970's fashions on the clothesline in the backyard of our little house in Radnor, tears ran down her face as she watched an airplane fly overhead, and she vowed never to set foot on a plane again. She never did.

And so, it appeared that not only was Mom trying to communicate her love from the other side, but her sense of humor as well. Being reincarnated in winged form was the last thing any of us ever expected from her. But I guess if she wanted to ride around with me and Dad as we travelled from town to town settling her affairs, it made sense that she would need to transform herself into something as subtle as a fly. A bird or a cat suddenly appearing inside the car and refusing to leave would certainly have created a different impact.

My wife Eva, a second daughter to Mom and her favorite late-night dance partner, later reminded me that on Friday afternoon when we drove to the cemetery for Mom's burial near the charming little town of Topton where she grew up, a bee had made a brief buzzing and bouncing appearance against the driver's side window. With our two-year-old daughter Isabella holding court in the backseat, we all panicked a bit before lowering the windows to set the bee and our fear free.

“My guess is that your mom, being new to her powers, had a bit of a test fail as a bee, and then tried it again more successfully as a fly,” Eva said.

We laughed, while simultaneously believing that this was likely what had happened...Mom learning on the fly.

“Or maybe she was mad about what someone said at her memorial service, and she wanted to sting the culprit,” I said, knowing my mother better than she did.

“What would she have been mad about?” Eva asked.

“The joke I made that got the big laugh,” I said.

“Which joke?”

“Remember when the minister said, ‘I’m sure Winnie wasn’t a saint—she must have had *some* flaws...’ and I yelled out: ‘About 60/40!’”

“Oh, yeah, that *was* funny,” Eva said.

“Yeah, well, maybe Mom didn’t think so.”

“I’m sure she thought it was funny. She always loved it when you made fun of her.”

Eva was the first person I confided in about the possibility of Mom’s reappearance. She’s the most spiritual person I know. Spiritual, but not religious, humbly believing that anything was possible in this maddeningly incomprehensible universe, but nothing was known for sure—and to think otherwise and claim to know all the answers was nothing but pure ego. We both belief in the theory that “God didn’t create man in *His* image—man created God in *their* image.” So, I knew Eva would welcome the idea that her mother-in-law was still roaming around our little universe, gleefully creating a bit of mischief to distract us from our pain—her body buried below; her soul soaring above.

“Well, of course the fly is Winnie,” Eva said when I relayed the details to her after Mom’s appearance in the car. “And I think you’re right. She came back with wings to be funny. If she has superior powers, don’t you think she’d have a superior sense of humor, too? I think she wants you to know that all her fears are gone. What’s been happening to you is beautiful, Andy. Your Mom’s sharing the secrets of the universe with you. So, please do us all a favor and keep your eyes wide open.”

“But why does she have to be so subtle about it?” I asked. “Why can’t she just appear in the front seat next to me as herself and tell me everything she knows? Why all the mystery?”

“I don’t know. Maybe God, or the creators, or whoever’s running the show will only allow her to send you these little clues,” Eva said. “I mean, think of it this way, if she came back as Winnie and just blurted everything out, she’d be blowing it for everyone else.”

“Well, I guess that’s a good point,” I conceded. “Okay, I’ll take whatever I can get.”

Obviously, I had confided in the right person. I was worried that if I told Dad and Annie about the “happening,” they might have encouraged me to adopt a less spiritual and holistic approach in favor of a more therapeutic and medicated one.

Before the fly rematerialized that Saturday, I had driven Eva and Izzy to the Philadelphia airport—all of us deciding that they should spend Thanksgiving with Eva’s parents in Tucson as originally planned before Mom’s sudden death. Emotional adults and emotional toddlers don’t mix well, and as much as I needed my girls by my side during the saddest days of my life, Dad needed me by his side more, so I stayed on at Wellington until after Thanksgiving.

On Monday afternoon, Dad and I drove back into the city for a dental appointment he and Mom had been scheduled to endure together. As we traveled the wooded backroads of sun and shade-streaked suburbia, the fly appeared again—this time conveying a fawning preoccupation with the handsome, white-haired gentleman in tortoiseshell glasses riding shotgun. By that point the fly had survived three cold nights in the car, and I decided it was time to reveal my suspicion about its identity to Dad—a complicated introduction I chose to tackle in a comedic, singsong delivery, so as not to upset or offend my grieving father. My reasons for telling him were twofold: firstly, I wanted him to share my optimism that Mom still existed somewhere somehow, and secondly for the more practical reason that I feared he might take a swat at the fly if it landed on him. Because, let’s face it, who would the fly be more inclined to land on than her beloved husband of fifty-four years? As crazy as it sounds, I couldn’t take the thought of losing Mom twice in one week.

“*Well, isn’t that something?*” Dad said with his signature “he-he-he” chuckle of delight, after I told him about the great fly completing my gauntlet of requests. “I was curious if it was the same fly from the other day.”

“Isn’t it wild? I asked it to buzz into my right ear and it did! If it had buzzed into my left ear all bets would be off...”

Stoically seated beside me, Dad had become fixated with the fly, studying it as it moved excitedly back and forth between us. His belief was instantaneous. Mine had taken a while. But, of course, it had taken the fly a while to prove itself.

"It's funny, because I remember your mother standing on the bed one night up on Cape Cod trying to kill a fly on the ceiling," Dad said. "Her reflexes were incredible. She swung a flyswatter like Mike Schmidt swung a bat."

"She hated flies, and she hated flying. That's what makes it such a great practical joke," I said.

"Well, I wouldn't put any of it past her," Dad said with another chuckle.

"Me either. Did you hear that, Mom? We're impressed. We can't wait to see what you have in store for us next," I said to the fly as it danced past my head and into the backseat.

When we parked outside the dentist's office, I decided to test the fly again by purposely leaving the driver's side door wide open as I swung around to help Dad out of the car. I was curious to see if our little hitchhiker would seize the opportunity to escape if given ample time and two exit routes. After Dad was safely situated on the sidewalk with cane in hand, I closed his door and took my time walking back around to the open driver's side door. I then watched for a breathless moment as the fly flew out the door into the open air, hovered over the rooftop, and flew right back inside the car.

"Dad! Dad! The fly flew out of the car, changed its mind, and flew right back inside!"

"She wants to stay with us!" he yelled, pumping his cane skyward.

"Okay, Mom, we'll see you in about an hour. Hey—look on the bright side, at least you got out of going to the dentist."

As the days before Thanksgiving passed and the fly stayed put, we began to address it familiarly as "Mom" and "Winnie" and even "Tinkerbell"—treating it like a passenger of honor inside the rental car. I guarantee that no fly in the history of civilization has ever been afforded more love and respect. Certainly not any that ever flew into Mom's bedroom that's for sure. While out and about, driving to lunch or dinner, or wherever our grief took us, we began to cater to Mom's musical preferences as well. We had played Neil Diamond's *Hello Again* for Mom at the hospital, and Eva performed it on the piano in the little stone church at the funeral, and now I was cranking it up everywhere we went. To us it had become the saddest song ever written. But we didn't mind, we were leaning into

the pain to celebrate Mom's life and loves. We played all her favorite tunes by Neil Diamond, Billy Joel, George Gershwin, Cole Porter—even the one hit wonder she loved from the 1980's, *The Safety Dance*. “*We can dance if we want to, we can leave your friends behind, ‘cause your friends don’t dance, and if they don’t dance, well they’re no friends of mine.*”

Mom's favorite form of expression was dancing, and she loved every song with dance in its title or dance in its theme. *Flash Dance*, *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, *All She Wants to Do is Dance*, *Shut Up and Dance*... Several years ago, I recorded a video of her dancing in a motel room to the song *Viva La Vida* by Coldplay—rubbing up against Dad to try and seduce him out of a trance cast on him by a salacious biography about Meghan and Harry. We had just arrived on her beloved Cape Cod for our favorite week of the year, and Mom was gloriously drunk on margaritas and physical expression. The video reveals a woman in her eighties dancing like a woman in her twenties, using all four corners of the motel room as her dance floor. Watching the footage, it's impossible to think I could've captured her in a freer and happier state of being. In her favorite place, surrounded by her favorite people, drunk from her favorite cocktail, engaged in her favorite activity... A perfect moment. *Viva La Vida*. Long live life.

As my faith in the fly grew, I began to worry about what would happen to it when I had to return the rental car to Hertz and board a plane back to Los Angeles. On Thanksgiving morning at Wellington, the fly appeared again as I was holding the passenger door open for Dad and assisting him as he plopped onto the front seat—the way older people do by letting gravity do all the work. As Dad was coming in for a landing, I watched as the fly suddenly flew underneath him, and instead of shooing the fly away like a sane person, I reacted by pushing Dad out of its path, back out onto the pavement. So, basically what happened was I almost killed Dad to save Mom...in fly form. When I told him what I'd done and why I'd done it, Dad quipped: “Stop playing favorites.”

A moment later, I watched again in frozen silence as the fly flew out of the car, flew back inside...outside again...and inside one more time for good. A neurotic showing of indecisiveness typical of Mom, which made me wonder if she was as baffled as we were about what she was still doing hanging out with us mere mortals inside a rental car in

West Chester, Pennsylvania when she could be anywhere else doing anything else in the vast universe. Soaring over the Cape Cod Bay in upgraded seagull form perhaps. When the fly flew back into the car the second time, I quickly slammed Dad's door shut, then slipped inside the car on the driver's side, leaving only a slim and short pathway for escape. After five days, my desire to have the fly remain with us had become an obsession, and its status had changed from willing passenger to wavering captive.

In Tucson, away from the entomological miracle, Eva had feared I might discover the fly dead on the front seat of the car and suggested that I feed it water and a little snack. I brought it Mom's favorites: a Starbucks mocha Frappuccino and a Martin's pretzel—clicking open the top of the bottle and crushing the pretzel into several more easily consumed pieces and crumbs. I then placed the snack in the twin cupholders between the front seats where I could best monitor any feasting should Mom's tastes in fly form imitate her tastes in human form.

"This will have to serve as Mom's Thanksgiving dinner," I told Dad, keeping him in the (loopy) loop, as we set out to spend the day with my sister and her family in the country.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate the gesture," Dad said, eyeing the open bottle and salty pretzel as if the act of placing them there was the most natural thing in the world. To me it felt like something a grieving child might do, and maybe that's exactly what I had become.

As we drove to Ephrata, there was another interaction with the fly that was perhaps the most remarkable in the miracle of its improbability. While stopped at a stoplight out in the farmlands, close to where our turkey was cooking, the fly touched down on the steering wheel beside my right hand. Then, with my left hand, I slowly reached toward it and gave it several pets with my index finger. It didn't react. It didn't move. It remained right there on the steering wheel. How about that? A fly allowing a human being to touch it repeatedly without flying away? I had known household pets that wouldn't allow you to pet them. But a fly with that kind of poise and patience? That kind of tameness? It was impossible to believe. To me it was the truest test of its divinity. How else can you explain that moment at the stoplight?

That afternoon we had an elaborate Thanksgiving dinner with twenty-seven people in a barn that had once been used for manufacturing cannonballs during the Civil War. The

excitement of all the people we knew and didn't know, and all the exotic food and red wine, was a pleasant diversion for our strong and brave but deeply wounded father. I had booked an eight o'clock flight that night to save money and beat the post-Thanksgiving rush, and the plan was for me to hand Dad off to my sister, so he could stay overnight at her house in Lancaster and put off for one more day his first night alone without his bride. Mom would have loved the homemade crab bisque—so I'll blame her for my eating two bowls of it before starting in on the turkey. But it was during dessert that she made her presence known in the final magical moment we witnessed with the fly. After I gave Dad—looking dashing in a tweed blazer and blue striped tie—a hug goodbye, Annie noticed that the same species of fly that had been inside the rental car all week was now buzzing around Dad's hand as he feasted on slices of pumpkin and pecan pie loaded with whipped cream.

"Oh my God! The fly's here!" Annie yelled, pointing at it. "Look, it's Mom, and she's letting us know that she'll be watching over Dad..."

To the three of us believers, it appeared that the fly had escaped the rental car and found its way across a half-acre of land up to the barn to join us for Thanksgiving dinner. When I returned to the rental car to head to the airport, the fly was nowhere to be found, and I was convinced that Mom had chosen to stay with Dad instead of braving the cross-continental flight in coach with me. A tricky journey even for an angel in disguise.

These days, looking back at that sad week in November, Mom's passing, the fly's presence, and all that I experienced with Dad, I can't help but question what I witnessed, as I weigh the miracles I'd seen against some of the more practical aspects of what had happened. The fly survived five nights inside a car under freezing conditions despite the fact that, according to Google, any temperature below 45 degrees would surely spell its doom.

But... I also must confess that on the day of the funeral, my parents' youngest grandson James brought all of us homemade doughnuts from Lancaster to eat in the car as we traveled from the Presbyterian church to the cemetery. The doughnuts were covered in sugar and the sugar got all over the backseat of the car when little Izzy was treated to a glazed one of her own. So, it is possible that the fly braved five consecutive nights inside the car and chose not to fly away for the love of sugar and not for the love

of a grieving family. And it is also possible that the fly, having never felt the vibrations of love and affection like that—under the misconception that it was my mother—was attracted to our love like it would be to lamplight in the dark.

Regardless of whether it was my mother or just a genius of a fly, there are a couple things I now know for sure...I believe in an afterlife. Wholeheartedly. And I will never kill another fly. And isn't that, alone, extraordinary? My experience with that fly, whether real or simply a remarkable linking of occurrences and coincidences, has changed me and my beliefs, and I have the spirit of my beautiful Mom to thank for it. Long live life. Long live love.



Alexander and Winnie

Not Built for Children

by Garima Chhikara

It's one thing not to want something; another to be denied it. I never wanted children. I find them manipulative, burdensome, and annoyingly loud. And, to be fair, so was I until at least twenty-six. The very parts I despise in them are the same ones I've been trying to prune out of myself. People romanticize childhood innocence and treat kids like gods just because the world hasn't touched them yet. But that's not purity. It's just inexperience.

Still, I felt something like sadness. A loss I couldn't quite understand or accept when the doctor told me my chances of bearing a child were very slim.

I'd gone looking for answers to the painful, erratic periods I'd been having.

Fibroids. An army of them had established their bases in and around my uterus. Worse than parasites, no matter how clean and fit my body was, they would stay put and multiply. "We'll operate if they grow," the doctor said, as if it was no more serious than a headache or a cold. It was quite common: four out of five women had fibroids, or their "siblings," cysts.

Why do I have it? Who knows? Maybe it's a curse of lineage. Maybe it's just bad luck, like getting COVID even though you never stepped foot outside.

It's one of those things where you accept the twisted reality and hope time unspools it into something not just bearable but understandable. No one warns you how unnerving it feels to step into new territories without a map.

I did not want to investigate my compromised fertility by subjecting my poor, twisted ovaries to radiation scans. So, that was that.

I should have been happy, considering how I feel about children. Why would it be any different for my own?

I could be reckless with my boyfriend; we could try anything. No caution or boundaries.

In a way, I was approaching the kind of life I'd wanted. But that glimpse of the future had always been vague, out of focus. Now it was suddenly vivid, close enough to swallow me whole.



I'm pretty sure I didn't even like myself as a child. Not that I remember much. My childhood wasn't interesting, as I keep reminding my therapist. She loves to poke at it anyway. She calls it "repressed memory," around which grief circles like a bee. I treat memory as a ghost, and grief as a feral cat in the yard. But this isn't about grief.

Maybe she's right, memory hides what we can't yet face, waiting for us to be ready to meet it again.

As for memory, I see it as a favor, a dutiful move your subconscious makes on your behalf. It's impressive what the body can do for you, how it frees you from what no longer serves you.

Later, at my aunt's place, I waited for someone to notice anything different about me. But they were too absorbed in chai recipes. A pinch of nutmeg, they said, would make you sleep like a cat. That, apparently, was more urgent.

When I finally managed to grab their attention, I told them what the doctor had said.

"You could have eaten our sister. Your twin. The remains of the fetus become fibroids later on," my sister said, matter-of-fact. It couldn't be genetic. Her periods were painless, like a floating ride in one of those pad commercials.

I asked my aunt if our mother had them. They never talked about that sort of thing—too personal. There were always more pressing topics: evil mothers-in-law, rishtas (marriage proposals) falling apart, or someone getting swindled over a plot of land.

She did offer me something, though: a tea recipe for easing periods. Ginger, fennel, basil. Saffron if you're feeling extravagant.

When I called my boyfriend, he said, "I can finally believe in the power of manifestation." He was thrilled. Congratulatory, even.

It's obvious to everyone that I despise children. Not just my family and friends. It's as if it's written on my face in a constant, disgusted sigh—my sister's words. It's one of those things that ends up defining you. The thing people use against you in pointless arguments, to make fun of you, to introduce you, and so on.

And yet sometimes I hear a girl's laughter, sharp as a crow at dawn, as she rides her cycle with pigtails flying, eyes sparkling. Her father is beside her, arms extended, ready to steady her. I catch myself smiling, then aching. I can't tell if I'm smiling the way one does at a kitten, or if it's the kind of yearning that pricks at old wounds. It's like being a

child again, tapping a wooden scale against my head the way my mother did for headaches, then crying when she caught me doing it, ashamed and confused, torn between pain and shame. Those moments blur in memory, but the feeling lingers, unanswered. They stay, like a want with no end.

Not a single person comforted me that day, not with words, not even with more biscuits. My sister and aunt just got up and resumed their tasks, leaving me alone to wallow in silence.

My sister always insists I'd make a wonderful aunt. "You'd love my kid and guard her with everything. You just wait," she says. She's certain she'll have a daughter—no, more than certain, she demands it. She wouldn't have a boy. Just as our mother had only daughters, and our grandmother, five daughters and one good-for-nothing son. But there's something more to it, I think. You want it a certain way or not at all. Maybe it's like that with me and children.

When I smile and remind her that she already has one troublesome child to manage, why burden herself with another, she only laughs. It's taken me years to move from flat refusals, as if she needed my permission, to a small fantasy: taking her child to a metro station after reading Harry Potter together. Platform 9¾. You get the hint.

To make the day even more ironically perfect, this ten-year-old boy—the child my aunt looks after for a friend—showed up. He is the perfect embodiment of my feelings about children. Every time I see him, my conviction hardens. One time, we were stuck in the lift together. He reached out for the emergency phone on the lift wall and told me to calm down. He assured me the lift would reach the nearest floor shortly. I was calm. Just annoyed my Uber driver had called a dozen times. Know-it-alls who think they're adults are the worst.

Back at my aunt's that afternoon, he was still hanging around when irony decided to double down.

As if on cue, a woman appeared—of course, she had a baby with her. She handed me the baby and rushed to the bathroom. Unacceptable. I held the baby stiffly at arm's length, hands wedged beneath his arms. The baby started wailing at my touch, but I kept steady so as not to drop him.

The ten-year-old boy strode up and plucked the baby from my arms. “What are you doing? This is not how you hold a baby,” he screamed. I resisted yelling back and gladly retreated to a seat far away.

I watched the boy swing the baby and talk to him in some cooing language. He asked me to pass the ball that was lying on my side of the room. I threw the ball and said, “Fetch” to the baby. It just slipped out. I thought it was funny. But the boy glared at me. “You really shouldn’t become a mother,” he said.

The audacity. Can you imagine? The sneaky little minx actually said that to me.

I froze. I couldn’t think of a savage reply. I was lacking, and that’s why I couldn’t be a mother. That hurt more than I was willing to accept.

I spent the whole night thinking of a comeback, but nothing came.

All I could think about was having a child ... just to spite a ten-year-old. And the world.

I kept hoping the memory of his words would soften, fade, bury itself. That I could go back to being someone who never lost anything. But is it even a loss when you never had it? When you never even wanted it?

It didn’t fade. It stayed fresh like a leaf, like a goddamn baby. Like my mind wasn’t just remembering but mocking me.

My therapist suggested I take the radiation scan, so I’d know for sure how I feel about it. So much for not telling me what to do and letting me make my own decisions. She also suggested asking my sister about my childhood. For example, the dream where I stand outside my mother’s bedroom, not going away, and not going inside. Is it because I’m guarding her?

I didn’t tell her I knew the answer already. I didn’t want to hear it or, worse, have it declared false. I do not wish to let go of that image: a child who couldn’t sleep but was too pitiful to bother her mother.

I didn’t want the scan either. What if it changed everything? Who would I be then if my beliefs were that fragile?

“Contradictions are the most human thing about us,” she says.

Maybe so. But I’d rather be something stranger. Like a wicked woman in a gated garden, surrounded by peculiar fruits no child is allowed to touch.

A fortress built from the wild, messy parts of me, guarding against everything uninvited: memories, children, expectations, and the questions I am not ready to answer.

FedEx: When You Absolutely, Positively Need That Third Job

by Patrick D. Hahn

Sparrows Point, Maryland, late summer, mid-afternoon. This area once was the home of Bethlehem Steel, but its glory days as a manufacturing powerhouse are long gone. Now it serves as a hub for the distribution of products made somewhere else.

The sun is shining brilliantly outside. Today would be a perfect day for young lovers to go strolling hand in hand along the beach, through the park, or along the Harborplace, but none of that is in the cards for me. I've just gotten off my *other* job (well, one of my *two* other jobs) as a college lecturer, and now I'm reporting for work at FedEx Ground.

After more than thirty years of teaching undergraduate courses in biology (like most of us doing the actual work of teaching), I still am employed on a part-time, short-term basis, with contracts stipulating I can be gotten rid of at any time, for any reason. (Actually, most of us “part-timers” teach more than the “full-timers,” but never mind that for now.) This is a scam of which the students are almost completely unaware. Sweatshop conditions for the teachers, crushing student loan debt for the students—this has become part of the new normal. And this explains my never-ending search for side jobs that work around my teaching responsibilities.

With two adults at home, both working more than full-time, we have ... enough. This is not how I envisioned myself spending my golden years, but I take cold comfort in knowing that most men my age couldn't do this kind of work. (Most men my age are retired.) We handle packages up to one hundred and fifty pounds. Anything larger than that is managed by FedEx Freight, a different division.

After scanning my badge to gain entrance to the warehouse, I cross the vast expanse of concrete to the other side, which contains dozens of portals, each one about three feet off the warehouse floor, each one with a large truck backed up to it on the parking lot outside. On the inside, each portal is connected to a chute down which the packages slide into the maw of the truck, where someone like me is waiting to stack them.

I scan my badge a second time to clock in, and I'm greeted by Jake, the wisecracking, gravelly-voiced ex-Marine and Gulf War veteran who runs the show. Here's the only other

white guy in this place, and the only one anywhere near my age. He's also the only one here who knows me by name.

"Gate 110," he says, and I report to my assigned station.

I climb into the truck bed and pull up the horizontal flaps that divide the bed vertically into a lower third and an upper two-thirds, and latch them to the wall to get them out of my way. The bed is filthy, as always. A lot of meal prep companies use our services, and sometimes the packages burst, spilling food all over the place. I don't know how frequently they clean out these trucks, but it can't be very often.

I gather the leftover plastic strapping as well as the larger pieces of trash, and tote this armload of grimy rubbish to the nearest waste container. The strapping can be a tripping hazard, and removing the excess trash makes it a little easier to stack the boxes. Besides, this gives me something to do while I'm waiting for the packages to start rolling in.

I sit down on the rear flap and try to let my mind go blank. I learned a long time ago never to look at my watch when doing jobs like this—the more times a day you look at your watch, the slower the day goes—and besides, it wouldn't tell you much here anyway. There's no break here (although they don't mind if you use the bathroom), and no set hours. You stay on the job until the bosses tell you that you are finished. I am no stranger to hard work, but I have to say, one six- or seven- or eight-hour unbroken chunk of monotonous work, alone in some dark, hot, sweaty truck bed with nothing but your own thoughts for company, can be ... disturbing. If you take this job, be prepared to visit some dark and cobwebby corners of your psyche before your shift is over.

The packages start rolling in, one by one at first, and I get to work. We always fill the truck bed in the same order: lower third first, front to back, closing the flaps behind us as we go, then the upper two-thirds, again front to back. Larger and heavier packages on the bottom, smaller and lighter ones on top. Stack same-sized boxes side by side, not on top of one another.

And ... that's about it. This job is not rocket science. When the packages are coming in at a moderate pace, this work could be described as not unpleasant.

Whenever there is a lull in the flow of packages, I jump out of the truck bed and take a swig of ice water from the insulated gallon jug I keep by the gate. This will be my only source of sustenance until I get home.

The only cue I have that the outside world continues to exist is the little sliver of pavement I can see between the truck bed and the outside wall of the warehouse, and the only indication I have that time continues to pass is watching as the brilliant sunshine outside fades to amber and then gray before finally disappearing into blackness as the sun goes down.

I notice one of the packages at the bottom of the stack is starting to buckle under the weight of those above it. It's one of the larger boxes, but it's made of lightweight and flimsy material. I should have set it aside to place on top of the stack, but I'm not about to knock down the whole pile and build it up again. That's not how this job works. You take things as they come, handle them as best as you can, and keep moving.

The packages are coming in faster now, backing up on the chute. I try to grab the one nearest me, but it's stuck fast, held in place by all the ones behind it. I pull with all my might and manage to wrench it free, only to trigger an avalanche of boxes slamming into my ankles. I look up and see the line of packages extending all the way up the chute, as far as I can see.

A woman young enough to be my granddaughter, six feet tall and very thin, attired in spandex booty shorts and matching tank top, leaps into the truck bed unbidden and begins throwing packages on the stacks I have created. I will never get used to seeing spandex on a warehouse floor, but right now I'll take help from any direction it is offered. We're both bending, twisting, hurling, doing all the things they tell us not to do, because that's the only way to get the job done when the packages are coming in hot and heavy. At last, we catch up, and my erstwhile companion departs from the truck bed before I even have the chance to say thank you.

Alone again. Once more I will my mind to go blank, because the alternative is revisiting every misstep I have made in the course of my long life, every act of cowardice or pusillanimity or unkindness I have ever committed. Little by little the stack of packages extends toward the rear of the trailer, until finally I reach the last tier.

I raise the guard that is supposed to hold the boxes in place on the chute, even though I know perfectly well there is no point in my doing so. The latch that is supposed to hold the guard in place has long ago been worn down by the cumulative impact of thousands upon thousands of boxes colliding against it. I've called Jake's attention to this matter, but

so far nothing has been done about it. Each package that comes sliding down bangs into the guard hard enough to knock it back down, often slamming into my beleaguered ankles if I'm not looking. I have to be careful when I get to this point—if I forget where I am momentarily, I could fall out of truck bed onto the concrete floor of the warehouse and hurt myself.

At last, the conveyor is shut off. I stand on my tip-toes to slide the last few packages in place and then step aside as Jake closes the back door, fills out a tag, and affixes it to the latch before turning to me and pronouncing the magic words: "You're good to go."

I grab my water jug (which is now empty) and head for the exit. Some of my colleagues have already gone home; others remain hard at work. No one bids me goodbye as scan my badge to clock out, cross the vast expanse of concrete, scan my badge one more time to gain egress from the facility, and exit the warehouse into the pale moonlight.

Overhead the cicadas are chorusing, singing their song of another summer about to end. I think back to another summer, so many summers ago, and to a girl who let me kiss her goodnight as we stood together on the front porch of her parents' home in the pale moonlight. She'd be a grandmother now, or perhaps in her grave.

Life goes by fast.

If I had to do it over again, I could do it so much better.

Of course, that's not how life works, is it? You take what comes, handle it as best you can, and keep moving.

I get into the car, start the engine, and turn up the air conditioning, savoring the blast of cold air as it plasters my sweat-soaked T-shirt to my skin. Then I begin wending my way home, where someone is waiting for me.

Attempting Fate

by Adam Perry

In Sophocles' *The Oedipus Trilogy*, the blind prophet Tiresias rocks the worlds of powerful men with visions of the future that warn of the dangers of false pride (what the Greeks called "hubris"). Tiresias' cameos in the plays of Sophocles are amongst the first instances where the metaphoric connection between blindness and truth was put to paper and allegorized on stage. That metaphor has been explored so often in literature, theatre, film, art, and any number of bad sketch comedy skits throughout history that it deserves its own emoji. Tiresias is also a transgender pioneer of sorts in Greek mythology after spending a few years being transformed into a woman by the Gods for the dastardly deed of whacking a couple of mating snakes with his ancient Greek mobility cane (otherwise known as a stick). I am sure there are any number of deeply researched academic treatises earnestly penned by genders studies experts that interpret what the heck was up with old blind Tiresias going from man to woman and then back to man again after making amends with the amorous snakes. I will spare you my uninformed perspective on that front. As a dude who is going blind, I am naturally more drawn to pontificate on Tiresias' spot as the "OG" of bad ass blind folks.

In a nutshell, in the trilogy's first play *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus summons Tiresias to prophesize his future. Oedipus is none too happy when Tiresias tells him he will kill his dad, marry his mom, and have children from incest. Ew. Oedipus calls "bullshit" on this unfortunate prediction and flees his home in Corinth for the city of Thebes. Oedipus has no idea that his real dad is Laius, the King of Thebes, who he just so happens to "unalive" in a fit of serious road-rage along the way. After whooping the Sphinx, the mythological beast who is terrorizing the city, Oedipus is kind of a big shot, so he marries the queen, Jocasta, who birthed him when she was married to Laius. They have kids and then, when Oedipus learns the truth, he freaks out again and pokes out his eyes. I have mixed feelings about this decision, which we will get to in a bit.

In the final play of the trilogy, *Antigone*, old blind Tiresias pops-up to advise autocratic King Creon of Thebes (Oedipus' uncle and brother-in-law) to take a chill-pill for his anger

with Oedipus' kid Antigone (also Creon's soon-to-be daughter in-law). She is in hot water with Creon for defying his order not to bury her brother Polynices within the city limits of Thebes. Polyneices fought for the wrong side in the war for the city. Big no-no. This family is clearly dysfunctional. Tiresias, who knows some stuff even though nobody wants to hear it, warns Creon that all hell is going to break loose if he keeps acting like Tony Soprano, including his indirect role in the death of his son Haemon.

I played Haemon in a college production of *Antigone*. The scene when he goes off on his dad for being a pompous law-and-order asshole while pleading for mercy for his fiancé was so damn cathartic, I can barely capture it in words. Creon, just like Oedipus, thinks he is bigger than the game. He banishes Antigone from Thebes and then bears witness to everything Tiresias told him would happen coming to fruition. Yet again, those who have sight are blind to truth. Sense a theme?

Ultimately, Tiresias represents fate, the notion that life events are predetermined and beyond our control. His blindness is ironic because he can "see" truth and what lies ahead. It is also a metaphor for those who are unwilling to accept the truth and, as far as the Greeks were concerned, flip the middle finger to the power of the Gods.

Going slowly blind is a marathon steel-cage match with fate. It begins with revelation. When I was ten years old, I learned my prophecy:

Though you may see right now, you will go blind. It will be gradual and painless. First you will not be able to see in the dark. Then your vision will dissolve from the periphery leaving you with a tiny, shuttered window to remind you of all that you once could see.

I would have much rather preferred something along the lines of:

You are going to play second base for the Cincinnati Reds, have a career batting average of .333, win four World Series and wind up with your face on a plaque in Cooperstown, NY.

But beggars cannot be choosers when it comes to prophecies. The Apostle Mathew tells us, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” I boisterously declared this to enraptured audiences in the Walnut Hills High School auditorium while playing John the Baptist/Judas in *Godspell* circa 1988. Still waiting for that one to happen. Prophecies move at their own speed apparently. Lord knows the prophecy of my blindness has taken its twists and turns. But it is coming to fruition, nonetheless.

Unlike Oedipus and Creon, I respect fate. How could I not? I was born with a silent genetic mutation that determined my path from the first slap on my ass at St. Rita’s Hospital in Lima, OH. Saint Rita is the patron saint of impossible cases. Hmm. I have come to realize that there are plenty of possibilities within the limits of impossibility. That is my response to my prophecy. A lifetime of tempering expectations but doing my best to live to the fullest with knowledge that the darkness is always creeping, always there, has given me a pass on the fatal flaw of hubris.

My prophecy is my companion. It has its own voice inside me. Sometimes it feels counterintuitive. But it always guides me home. My Tiresias sounds like a sotto voce Jeff Bridges synesthetically channeling the color midnight purple. The last time it called, the voice calmly told me to run through the darkness to help someone in distress. With my adrenaline rushing, I took the bait. I lifted my cane and ran down an empty unlit road, completely blind. I managed three or four strides and flipped over a fence. I flew like Superman, crashing wildly into a lawn. When I landed, I heard and felt my upper right arm and shoulder crack and break into a million tiny shards and splinters. I lay on the ground, dizzy, the wind knocked out of my lungs, struggling to breathe, wondering if I was dead. When the shock wore off, the voice of Ferris Bueller cajoling his psychosomatic pal Cameron to get out of bed randomly cut through the fog. *“You’re not dying, you just don’t have anything better to do.”* Gen Xers always pull from the eighties when times get tough. My severely busted wing locked into place against my chest, I eventually realized the rest of me was relatively intact. I carefully rolled to my knees, somehow got to my feet, and walked right into the low fence that had just damn near killed me. No shit. I went down again but, in some sort of basic survival mode, fell on my left side. All I cared about was helping a person in dire distress. I willed myself back to standing, unable to find my cane,

my phone, or flashlight. I slowly found the eerily quiet road, centered myself, and marched like a *Walking Dead* zombie still hoping that there was something I could do for him.

As fate would have it, there was not. The local fire Marshall came upon me as I stumbled up the street. He got me into his Jeep. I wound up at a small hospital receiving treatment for my injuries while the person I wanted to help died in the room next to me. Heavy shit, right? And, what in the fuck was purple Jeff Bridges doing telling me to run? He literally said, "It will be okay." Why did I listen? I trusted the prophet and look at what happened. I was furious with the gods. I was even madder at myself. I had listened to a voice inside my head and ignored the golden rule of going blind: NEVER FORGET THAT YOU ARE BLIND. The millisecond you decide to try and be somebody else generally launches eminent disaster. Break the golden rule and the gods of impossible cases will smack you right in the chops. Hard and with purpose.

In the painful months of recovery that followed this awful night, I searched my soul to find answers. There had to be a reason for the way these events unfolded. I struggled to sleep sitting up with my throbbing arm in a sling. I am not a fan of prescription painkillers. I spent a lot of time alone, awake and lost in PTSD flashbacks. I could not get the sound of my bones breaking out of my ears. Normally, I would pick up my guitar and let my fingers coax me into meditative reflection. That was not an option. So, I reached out to friends and family. I needed their support. Long conversations with lifelong buddies helped me find my way through the haze. I managed to come to terms with some sobering truths that kept me from falling off the cliff.

First, this all happened because my instinct to help another human being was so strong that I was willing to put myself at risk. It did not turn out well, but I am glad to know that my response was pure and selfless. Second, there was nothing I could do to change the course of events even if I had been able to arrive on scene faster and more intact. He was terribly ill and there were medical professionals already tending to him. He died because it was his time to pass. Seeing him from our adjoining hospital rooms, I will never forget the smile he gifted the world as he entered his final rest. It was so peaceful and serene, just like the look on my mom's face in the soft moonlight that called her home. Yet I was still here. I could easily have broken my neck, hit my head, or suffered any

number of fatal complications from my fall. I could heal from sadness, a bruised ego, and a busted arm. Thank you, Saint Rita.

During the initial phases of my recovery, a radiologist noted cause for concern in my x-rays. An orthopedic specialist said that the way my arm had broken was “atypical and consistent with being caused by a tumor.” When the orthopedic used the word “oncologist,” my heart dropped through the floor. My mom had lost a grueling battle with cancer only a few years before.. Yet, and this is where it gets weird, my Tiresias voice whispered that I was fine and that it was not my time. I just knew. After a series of scans and blood tests, my feelings were validated. “No bone marrow intrusion and no evidence of myeloma.”

As it turns out, I had been taking a large daily dosage of Vitamin A for years at the direction of my eye doctors and this, combined with a previously unnoticed Vitamin D deficiency, had severely compromised my bone density. That was all fixable. I wobbled in a haze of anxious uncertainty waiting for test results and analysis. When I got the “all clear,” purple Jeff Bridges put his arm around my shoulder and chortled: “Told you, buddy.” Then he scratched his beard, grabbed a cold one and went fly-fishing. I haven’t heard from him since.

Confronting my own mortality vividly clarified profound existential lessons learned in the wake of my fall. There was a purpose, many purposes, for the events that transpired that fateful summer night. My prophet told me to run. I listened. I ran to help. All that ensued, as challenging as it was, turned out to be a basketful of blessings. I found new appreciation for my relationships with people that I love. I survived. I made peace with the gods of impossible cases. I learned I had a worsening medical condition that may have proven much more disastrous had it not been detected. All of this happened because I broke the golden rule of blindness. I wrestled fate, but I kicked out before it pinned me for the three-count. I found grace in living my prophecy.

The most vexing part of the Oedipus allegory to me is that Oedipus pokes his own eyes out because he cannot handle truth. I mean, Tiresias got it all right. Oedipus willfully ignored him because he did not like what he had to say. Fine. But, choosing blindness as punishment seems a bit redundant or at the very least, misdirected, does it not? I

understand what Sophocles was going for in hammering the metaphor of blindness representing the ignorance of false pride. But the notion that blindness is proper punishment for defying the gods is a bit antiquated for my taste. If Tiresias' prophecy for Oedipus would have been "You will kill your dad, marry your mom, have incest babies AND blind yourself because you can't handle it," that would have been one thing. But having Oedipus blind himself of his own volition like it is a fate worse than death is bunk. I mean, isn't it the blind guy who knows the truth in the first place? Just sayin'.

Retinitis pigmentosa is a prophecy. It is a fateful diagnosis. Fateful. Not fatal. It portends unavoidable consequential change. Most folks with RP learn of their affliction as young adults or older. RP is a clarification of something they already know is happening but do not understand why. A painful truth crashes into their lives. It is a tough pill to swallow when your fate gets an unwanted edit. I was blessed. And yes, I choose that word carefully, for my prophecy was delivered when my brain was just beginning to absorb truth and meaning and my life had yet to truly take shape. The blessing of always knowing my fate is that it allowed me to set about making a life even as my eyes failed. Blindness has never been about denial or ignorance for me. It is the only truth I know. Each chunk of dying photoreceptors narrows the tunnel. I go on living, making my way. The prophecy becomes less ominous in its validation.

I do not curse the gods of impossible cases. I know Saint Rita has watched over me from the day I was born. I am not bummed out because I never played for my beloved Cincinnati Reds or made it to the Baseball Hall of Fame. That was Joe Morgan's fate. He kicked ass at it. I am not Oedipus (that would be gross) or Creon (though I was his kid for a moment). I am not Tiresias. There is only one OG. I am Adam, willing acceptor of his prophecy, tuning out hubris, seeking the truth inside.

Just One

by Doug Canter

Not so long ago, I could toil through a sixty-hour work week, hike the Billy Goat Trail on Saturday, and consume several glasses of Silver Palm at Lia's with my wife on Saturday night. But people decline physically much like an old car wears out. Identifying with precision the moment of change is difficult. For me, the evolution was revealed through a series of reflections: the former neighbor who didn't recognize me walking down the street; the middle-aged woman who called me sir in the grocery store; the Dunkin Donuts cashier who rang me up with the senior discount without asking my age; and, most recently, the students who asked me, gently, when I'm going to retire.

Two Januarys ago, I lay in cubicle 10 at the emergency room of Suburban Hospital, the same space where my father had received medical care eight years ago before his passing. My wife, a doctor, two nurses, and five EMT professionals viewed the monitor behind my left shoulder. A constant and uneven beeping penetrated the room from there. Intravenous tubes extended like small hoses from my forearms. Like an out of synch orchestra, my heart rate had suffered three different kinds of arrhythmias, beating almost four times its normal rate, well over two hundred beats per minute.

Days later, a fresh breeze wafted against my cheeks as the light rhythm of my feet accompanied me up a slight incline on our neighborhood street. The rattle of lurking fears faded under the chilly, light-blue sky, and I realized the blessings of being alive. Yet, deep down, as I walked comfortably in the winter air, some of that old invincibility tried to claw its way back. That got me thinking about my life and my next turn, the one that would bring me solidly into old age. In retrospect, that was only the beginning.

Several months after my hospitalization, after submitting notice of my intended return to my Montgomery County teaching assignment last year, I sipped a cappuccino outside the local Starbucks and listened to the birds sing, watched the morning light creep slowly higher, and pondered whether to return to my high school reunion. Ultimately, I decided to skip my fiftieth, opting instead to visit my elderly mother in Connecticut and have dinner

with a friend and Kent classmate living in the area. But the occasion prompted me to pull out a letter one of my Kent teachers had sent me years ago.

Before he died a quarter century after I graduated from Kent near the end of the Vietnam war, I received a letter from Bill Armstrong with three excerpts: passages of poetry from Leigh Hunt's "Abou Ben Adhem" and William Wadsworth's "Tintern Abbey," and an essay excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's "Walking." For twenty-five years, I kept the now faded letter and enclosures in a box filled with other memorabilia. I often wondered why he had sent them to me and what they meant.

Bill Armstrong, author of the young adult novel *Sunder* and textbook *Study Is Hard Work*, was well known to the Kent students. In the third form—ninth grade—we were consigned to a year in his study skills course, a mixture of Greek history, English, and planning strategies. When a classmate once asked him why he shaved his head, Mr. Armstrong replied that the Greeks did it as a sign of mourning. "Who are you mourning," I asked in a smart aleck tone.

"The human race," he responded gruffly, a knowing smile on his stern, clean-shaven face.

When thinking of Mr. Armstrong, I can't help but see the ox yoke atop his faded wooden desk and the framed quotation from the Greek poet Hesiod that hung on the wall above a window that opened onto a view of the rushing, cold Housatonic River. In law school when the work became oppressive, as a young man when confronting difficult legal cases, as a father when imparting notes of understanding to my children, the words of that Greek poet, which in my mind have become Mr. Armstrong's own, rose in my consciousness: "Before the Gates of Excellence, the high gods have placed sweat." The statement became a mantra, and it hangs in my classroom now.

But I have Hesiod's words posted on a self-made white poster taped on the front cinderblock wall of my classroom. It's a poor cousin to Mr. Armstrong's solid framed version, and I fear that none of my students have ever even read it. That's one of the problems with getting older. Things get diminished by our perception of how others will value them, if at all, when we are gone. I don't think I'm alone in this desire to obtain a legacy that stacks higher than "oldest living white belt," an honor my wife once lovingly bestowed on me years ago during a moment of joking sarcasm. I really hope my family

has something kinder to say at my funeral than “the guy could really pack luggage into a car trunk.”

In his 1996 letter to me, Mr. Armstrong wrote, “[after fifty years of teaching], my voice has given out.” Then, he added the pondering statement: “Years fall away and yesterdays and class periods.... There is a mellow wondering about—hoping their lives have pleased them.” In rereading the letter, I asked myself if Mr. Armstrong’s questioning statement revealed his own internal wondering.

Against that backdrop, the letter created the image of a man in the final years of life, not looking back, not trying to recall the seashells on a beach faded by the washing tides of memory, but rather a man glowing in the setting sun of life. In “Walking,” Thoreau says, “We walked in such a pure and bright a light ... [E]very wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening.” In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth says, “While here I stand, not only with the sense/Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts.”

Now, that’s heavy stuff, and it left me feeling a wee bit inadequate, particularly when I measured their examinations against my own realizations. You see, I’m not bathing in the glow of anything really. I feel almost as uncertain about many things as I did when I was seventeen. Mr. Armstrong cited poetry to describe his glowing path to Elysium while I’m thankful that I engaged in all the horrible experiments I did as a teenager and young adult. On some days I am still trying to figure out who I am, and who I want to be.

After over three and half decades of practicing law, my intellectual accomplishments filled numerous lines of my resume. A stack of thick red timebooks with my billable hours from over thirty-five years of private law practice recorded in quarter-hour increments memorialized these notable professional experiences. But my visceral achievements, those that really seemed to matter, felt negligible. The fake silver memorial coin I received to mark the construction of a natural gas pipeline that I helped navigate through the federal regulatory process felt like a token of something lasting, but it was like a confederate monument. Deep down, I always saw myself as the motorcycle-driving seventeen-year-old with a long black ponytail who cherished nature, not a partially bald corporate lawyer with a white beard who helped energy companies build pipelines through people’s back yards. The small evergreen tree I planted in the frozen ground of

our front yard with my oldest son one January morning decades ago seemed much more important than any professional accomplishment.

To be clear, private practice was good to me. There were enjoyable intellectual challenges, like trying to put a complicated puzzle together, and there was a unique feeling of exuberance when tireless hours helping clients resulted in a fat bonus. In those times of self-indulgence, I'd say to people with a laugh, "God, this is a great country."

Burn out is like a rot that often can't be seen from the outside. Even though I knew it was time to make a change, letting go of a profession I had toiled so hard to grow was difficult. I spoke with financial planners, my wife, and parents. Ultimately, two things happened to convince me to make the jump to a second career. First, I declined a new business referral from another lawyer who had developed a conflict of interest because I didn't want the client to end up losing two lawyers if I left my practice. At that point, I had developed a small footprint as a writer, received a master's in nonfiction writing, and applied to an alternative teacher certification program for career-switchers. Second, my daughter's enthusiastic "no" when I asked her if a career change was crazy. I sat in my window office overlooking the National Press Building two blocks from the White House in the early evening after another soul crushing day when I asked her the question. In an animated tone, she said: "I think giving up your partnership to teach high school kids English literature in Baltimore City would be kick ass, Dad." And that was it. Eight years ago, I took the leap of faith from being a partner in a Washington, D.C. law office to becoming an unemployed teacher-in-training in Baltimore City.

Over last summer, memories of the school year reformulated themselves. With space to reflect, I reread an e-mail from one of my student's parents: "In all honesty, I gave [my daughter] a hard time when she chose to change her schedule and join your writing class. I said to myself, 'two English classes.'" The mother added: "I have to admit that this was ... a great choice. I'm so happy for her. My daughter was inspired and what more can a mother ask for." It was as much a testament to Mr. Armstrong as it was to me, and it provided an affirmation that I and other teachers need. Like planting a young evergreen tree in the frozen January soil days after Christmas, what more can anyone ask for?

The deleterious presence of age crept up on me like a scorpion in the night. I'm not emotionally ready to retire fully. I still enjoy teaching, and I'm still trying to figure things out. There are trade-offs that come with even partial retirement. But at a minimum, I need enough free time to make all my doctors' appointments. So, after a school year filled with a hip replacement, other surgeries typical of the passage to old age, and a couple of emergency hospitalizations, I'm preparing to transition to a new high school with a part-time teaching position. In a strange way, the process of getting older reminds me of trying to chart a path as a high school and college student. But now, many of the people I might ask for guidance are dead. I'm just taking it a year at a time, and I think a lot about the many people who helped me along the way.

The Day We All Fell Down

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

I woke in the early morning of February 20, 2025, with a feeling of dread. Our president had just called Zelensky a dictator and claimed Ukraine started the war with Russia, not the other way around. I tried box breathing and reciting all the US states in alphabetical order. Still, I couldn't get back to sleep, so I finished reading *James* by Percival Everett instead. A harrowing and darkly humorous reimagining of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel reminded me of rascals in our past. Of course, we have scoundrels in the present, too. It's hard to avoid them. I learn about their shenanigans 24/7 on the radio, TV, and the internet.

Eventually, I dropped off and slept fitfully until my alarm woke me to a chill Utah morning. I wasn't feeling too perky. After twenty minutes of stomach cramps, I was heading back to our bed when everything went black. I slumped to the ground. This is only the second time I'd fainted in seventy years. For a while, I lay senseless in my red flannel pajamas next to our collie-poodle, Lizzie. She was coiled like a doughnut on her cushion. When I came to, she nudged me with her wet leather nose, amused that I had joined her on the floor.

My husband shuffled in and asked, "Should I call someone?" His Parkinson's makes it hard for him to sleep, and he'd been up since dawn.

"No, I'll just rest a little longer." It was surprisingly comfortable on the carpet.

When I roused myself, Steven was heading my way. He has a tendency to tilt forward on his toes when pushing his walker as if he is leaning into gale-force winds. He'd tucked an aluminum glass into the zippered pouch under his walker. His kindness, along with a long drink of cold water, revived me. I showed no signs of an infection, suffered no weird allergies, had no changes in medication, was not a victim of irritable bowel syndrome or inflammatory bowel disease. The news was making me sick.

Steven and I watch PBS in the evening. I also get regular updates from the *New York Times* website. When a "Breaking News" alert pops up on my phone, I tentatively tap the

app, wondering what has been broken besides our alliances, our commitment to the truth, and our faith in our government. Is manufactured mistrust an aberration or our new abnormal?

This constant monitoring of the news seems necessary as the country has gone from one bizarre newsflash to another. Anything might happen: a zombie invasion, a cataclysmic natural disaster like 37,000 acres in Los Angeles burning because of "diversity, equity, and inclusion" policies, or our president exchanging a metaphorical friendship bracelet with Vladimir Putin. Only two of the three inconceivable things I've listed actually happened. Corrupted public language, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are eating our brains, so the invasion of the undead may already be underway.

The American free press has always had its own slants, twists, and contortions. Decades ago, differing points of view came from many directions and special interests were numerous enough that the reader and listener had to sift, sort, and verify information to determine what was really happening. Still, in the 1960s and 1970s, Walter Cronkite was almost universally considered the most trusted man in America. Who can we trust now? These days, most of us get our news through echo chambers on politicized social networking websites, and the mainstream media are increasingly cozy with the economic and political powers they are supposed to be watchdogging. So, I panic, I complain, I wake in the middle of the night with stomach cramps, and I donate not nearly enough money in support of our teetering democracy. Recently, the headlines have been so exhausting that I can only tolerate them in comedic form and in small soundbites. Steven and I watch YouTube reruns of Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, and sometimes *Saturday Night Live* over lunch. My sanity is precarious, and I am stepping back from the malicious mayhem coming at me through a firehose.

The second person to fall on February 20 was our thirty-five-year-old autistic son. Andrew lives in the basement apartment of our old Tudor house in Salt Lake City. He is good company, keeps his apartment clean, enjoys decorating, and is better at programming our Roombas than I am. Andrew's office chair lost one of its rolling casters when we moved to the Yalecrest neighborhood in 2021. We relocated to Salt Lake City from Arizona, where my husband taught philosophy, and I worked at an autism research

center. For a year, we were busy remodeling our house and replacing our carport, which was also at risk of falling down. And there were so many other little things that needed doing that Andrew learned to sit on a slant.

He finally used the money he earned as a grocery store courtesy clerk to buy a new chair. It snowed all day so we hauled his broken chair through deep white drifts to the curb. Andrew, sturdy and determined, was walking backward, and just when I said, "Be careful," he slipped and landed on his behind.

"You pushed me," he said.

I was surprised by his accusation. "You fell because of gravity and an icy sidewalk." But in case I'd nudged him just a little, I added, "If I did, that wasn't my intention."

"Well, even manslaughter isn't intentional," He can be dramatic.

That made me laugh. Andrew is unintentionally funny.

Between his part-time job, keeping track of his finances, coordinating his healthcare, paying his taxes, sending the family almost daily reviews of movies and TV shows he recommends, and monitoring our news intake, Andrew is ALMOST independent. His brothers are kind and will always be there for him. But he will need their friendship more than any practical support, and I worry about how everyone will manage the ALMOST bits.

The third person to nearly fall on February 20 was my husband. He sometimes feels and looks like the Tin Woodman from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Steven's heart is just the right size, but his dopamine levels are unreliable, and he often freezes mid-stride, like Nick Chopper did when his oil can was empty. In the past, my husband's vibe, energy, spirit, and aura were a testament to optimism. And he made baldness look like an achievement, something to be perfected. But Parkinson's has stiffened his face and when I look down on the top of his head while I'm shaving a few stray hairs, there are two semicircular scars, like frozen smiles, where burr holes were made to access his brain and insert deep brain stimulation leads.

I stay close by. While watching a *rerun of Bob's Burgers*, Steven stood to stretch his legs and swayed dangerously. I grabbed his arm and pulled him back onto the couch.

This doesn't sound like a nice thing to do, but he thanked me at the time. He says "Thank you" a lot.

The next day, Steven and I visited the wellness gym located in the basement of the University of Utah's dental building. This facility is designed for people with Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, post-stroke, and other mobility challenges. Partners attend at a discount. A student volunteer takes our blood pressure, checks our oxygen level with a pulse oximeter, and always asks the same questions. "How do you feel on a scale of one to ten? Have you fallen? Have you been in the hospital? Have there been any changes in your medications?" I know these questions by heart, so I abbreviate my responses even before she asks: "Nine, no, no, no." Yes, I fainted the day before, but it was no big deal compared to what the guy in the wheelchair wearing a "miles for myelin" t-shirt is dealing with. Once, earlier this year when hurried and distracted, I responded to those questions with, "Nine, one, one, one," and got a lot of unwanted attention. In my subconscious, I knew we were in an existential emergency. We watch three televisions while working out. One is set to CNN, another to Fox News, and the third is usually on a house-flipping show. Everyone is friendly, and we all get along. Regardless of the station we watch, we all need this class.

On Sunday, during the weekly call with our kids and their partners, Steven's voice sounds like it is coming through a radio with finicky controls. Parkinson's has lowered the volume of his voice, so everyone is attentive in their little Zoom boxes. "Two women helped me walk down the hallway at our exercise class. One plays volleyball for the university, and the other is in the army." He takes a deep, steadying breath. "Even when they hold my gait belt, I feel shaky, so I asked the volleyball player. 'Are you sure you can hold me up?' She said, 'Don't worry, we could hold you up even if you were 400 pounds.' Steven smiles, which looks a bit like a grimace because of his dyskinesia. "So, if I fall, they've dropped me on purpose." We all laugh, delighted with this humble witticism, so typical of him.

Zelensky, my husband, and my son have some things in common. They all need a little extra help, but this has been hard to come by. Culpability is implied. Zelensky isn't grateful enough for the military aid we've provided since Russia's invasion in 2022, and

just how much in "raw earth" minerals is he willing to pay for our continued support? "America First" has turned the world into our private Amazon Warehouse.

People with Parkinson's and autism have their own issues. They have been exposed to the wrong things, have the wrong genes, were born at the wrong time, have the wrong insurance, and definitely have the wrong image. Because everything seems so wrong, we fluctuate between empathy and irritation. We can't seem to figure out how to provide adequate services and a meaningful safety net. The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has slashed the budget for the National Institute of Health, including significant cuts in autism and Parkinson's research. I propose a better mission for DOGE: Do Only Good Every Day.

According to the embattled media, there are two Americas. In one, a rogue president divides, demoralizes, dismantles, and exacts retribution on critics, including news outlets, law firms, political adversaries, the judiciary, and universities. In the other America, a gutsy president is doing whatever it takes to Make America Great Again. It is not unlike the television news channels than are omnipresent at our wellness gym, each station focused on its own distortions and excesses. Between these two Americas I worry we have lost something we truly need: our values and humanity, qualities that make this country truly great.

Over the holidays, my middle son and I were cleaning the kitchen. As a scientist, he takes pride in arranging dirty pots and pans in the dishwasher for optimal cleaning. We'd caught up on family gossip, so he asked, "How are YOU doing, Mom?"

"I'm good," I said, then added without hesitating, "I'm going to live forever." This surprised me as much as it did my son, and it made him smile, which I like to do. What I meant to say was, "I need to live forever." I hope to be around for my husband and son as long as they need me. We don't love each other perfectly, but most of the time, we love each other as well as we can. And we're doing okay. Andrew is no longer sitting on a slant, and thanks to our exercise class three times a week, Steven and I are getting stronger. What modest dreamers we have become.

Even our pooch, Lizzie, who reads the news from every bush and tree in our leafy neighborhood, is frail. She is my lovely Velcro dog, but at fourteen, her spine and hips are sharp under her silvering, red coat, and she is missing twenty teeth. So, in addition to everything else, I have an old dog to fuss over. Some days, my shoulders creak, my skeleton shrinks, and my knees buckle. It was inevitable that I ended up on the floor when the weight of our faltering democracy was added to my other caregiving responsibilities. I'm just lucky Steven was there to help me get back up. I'm grateful Andrew helps care for his father, Steven watches out for our son, and Lizzie calms us all down.

History can be an antidote to dogma. It's time we step back and gain some perspective. Lincoln was a contemporary of the fictional, enslaved James, whom I was reading about in the middle of the night on February 20. He knew firsthand how awful we can be. Yet he cultivated hope, perhaps by choice, understanding that it was good politics. In his first Inaugural address, he said, "The mystic chords of memory...will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely, they will be, by the better angels of our nature." Nothing is certain, but if we find our feet, our voices, and our wings, we may yet be able to save, maintain in good repair, and improve what was so marvelously constructed to begin with.

Liberty is an animating cause, and protecting our ailing republic is a shared responsibility. The deterioration of our political culture is alarming, but as long as there is one upright woman, as long as there is one compassionate man, hope, which is the one thing left to us in difficult times, may also be contagious. Some of us will use our imagination to design and build welcoming structures that improve the lives of the people who enter them. There is an attentiveness, a daily goodness, and practical morality in the role of caregiver and good citizen.

The Gymnast

by Mark Lucius

The night was made for boredom, but boredom would not prevail. We three high school seniors, nary a wise man among us, traveled to a neighboring school fifteen miles from our southeastern Wisconsin town—looking to fill an empty Friday night in February 1970.

Another Friday, we might have watched basketball, gone to a party, played a few hours of poker with friends. Something we liked better. But all that February night offered was a wrestling meet away from home. A classmate excelled at the sport, so we went to cheer him on. He won, the meet ended, and we left the brightly lit gymnasium for home.

None of us could have guessed that soon, we'd be gambling with our lives.

We walked out into air stinging like tiny needles. We were a few feet from Tom's father's 1969 Ford sedan when a rough voice commanded that we halt.

"Stop. Hey, stop! I need a ride."

I turned around to see a familiar figure wearing a jacket much too light for winter. His hands were stuffed in the front pockets of his jeans, and even in the shadows I could see that distinctive flat-top two inches high.

The Gymnast.

"Shit," whispered Jim.

I felt the same. The Gymnast was a star all right, and I knew that in a few weeks, he'd contend for the title of best all-around gymnast in Wisconsin. He had won first place in the horizontal bars the previous year. But something about him set my teeth on edge. I understood, feared, his competitive drive that breached all boundaries.

I thought back to a day the previous summer, the four of us listening to music. An argument broke out over the lyrics to the Rolling Stones' "Honky Tonk Woman." Tom, Jim and I agreed Mick Jagger sang, "She blew my nose." The Gymnast insisted, with surprising vehemence, that Jagger lapsed into German. "She blew mein hose. Get it, she blew *mein hose!*" Started dopey, ended bitter, a dispute made for high school.

recalled The Gymnast's tenacity—his need to win at everything—when Tom agreed to give him a ride home.

But The Gymnast wanted more.

"I'll drive," he said and reached for the door handle.

"No," said Tom, and then louder, "*No. It's my dad's car.*"

I can still see their breath mingling in the air.

"You gotta let me. I'm a great, great driver."

"No. God. No."

"I'll be careful."

"Well," said Tom finally, "only a few blocks."

I took the right side of the back seat, Jim to my left. Tom, the would-be driver, sat shotgun.

The country road was lonely, the only light coming from the car's ghostly beams. Icy patches littered the land. We'd traveled maybe a quarter mile on flat road when the Ford arrived at the bottom of a steep hill.

Suddenly—and God it was sudden—the Ford froze like a startled rabbit, then began rocketing with a roar, up, up, up the hill. Now, I froze. Without word or warning, The Gymnast's right foot had stomped the accelerator.

Inside the car, no voices at first. But I saw the speedometer climbing—forty, fifty, sixty miles an hour. Halfway up the hill, the three of us roused and reacted.

"What the hell?"

"Slow down!"

"Stop!"

I stretched forward and saw The Gymnast in profile; a trace of a sneer on his lips, thick arms ramrod straight, right gym shoe glued to the floor.

The car topped the hill going seventy miles per. My heart dropped into my stomach, then bounced up to my throat.

Now, streetlights gave a clear view of what lay before us. My hands squeezed the headrest in front of me. A football field away ... was an intersection ... a stoplight on red ... and a green station wagon.

When the Gymnast braked, I knew it was too late.

Zig! The tires shrieked as he spun the Ford to the right and away from the station wagon ...

Zag! He yanked the steering wheel back left, still braking while threading the car through a cramped space between station wagon and stoplight post ...

Zig! He was *still* braking, tires on extended howl, as he twisted the Ford around the stoplight post in the hardest of right turns.

When we swept past the station wagon, my head bounced off the right rear window, and I looked up to see a middle-aged woman in a blue coat on the passenger side of the green wagon. Her mouth was wide open, as if she was crying out to the male driver.

The Gymnast, acting like we were on a casual country drive, finally slowed the Ford to an idle alongside the road. Tom exploded: "You ... crazy ... fucker!"

I shook off the effects of centrifugal force. Inhaled burnt rubber. Rubbed my aching head.

The green station wagon rolled up behind us. Its driver left the wagon and appeared next to the Ford. Slowly, The Gymnast rolled down the window. A man peered in and thundered away, "If I ever see you in this town again," he raged, "I'll take you to my friend, and he's the Chief of Police." In his bulging eyes, we were all to blame.

Tom drove home. Nobody said a word.

Whatever psychic wound I incurred from the near accident healed quickly. I was a teenager. We almost died. But we didn't. A few weeks later, I watched The Gymnast stand on a center podium at a different school. He had led our high school to its first state gymnastics crown. He grasped a medal for winning the tourney's all-around event. His smile was no sneer. Even I, caught up in the moment, stood and cheered. As sports editor for our school paper, I didn't think it strange when I lauded his greatness in the front-page lead story.

In 1985, I got home from work, fed my cat, and tore open a thick envelope that had arrived in the mail. Inside was a booklet commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of my high school graduation. Classmates had submitted pictures and paragraphs, sketches of their lives. I flipped through the book, and there, amidst accountants, factory workers and real estate agents, I found a familiar face. His summary began:

“This former star athlete is now a stunt man in Hollywood. His most recent film is Kenny Rogers’ *The Gambler Part II*.”

“Jesuuus Christ.”

My reaction was fed more by astonishment than anger. My mind still refused to link The Gymnast with a serious threat to my being—not to mention that of the couple in the station wagon. I read that short summary over and over... and The Gymnast’s audacious behavior seemed to make sense. He was a risktaker, a daredevil, a *stunt man*. He’d dropped us into the jaws of death and pulled us out again. A crazy guy with a crazy story, almost like a movie. A talented but arrogant teenaged athlete risks his life—and others—before finding his true calling in, of all places, Hollywood. The Gymnast really was the star, Tom, Jim, and I mere “extras.”

About a decade ago, I tried writing about the incident. My early drafts focused only on our eerie adventure and my surprise discovery. The drafts had a “gee-whiz” quality, look what happened to us! But I couldn’t think of a decent ending, so I put the story aside.

A few years later, I took another crack. Then I tried to answer lingering questions. Why would such a disciplined athlete, on the cusp of another precious medal, pull such a trick? He was a teenager, sure, but he’d spent years perfecting a craft that brought him as much acclaim as high school can offer. Wasn’t that enough? Was he pissed at us for that goofy argument about “*mein hose?*” But I found no answers, only mental gymnastics. Again, I stalled.

Still, I couldn’t quit writing about the incident, and maybe now I know why.

For one thing, my perspective on that night has shifted dramatically. I better understand what The Gymnast almost took from me. My wife, our daughter, my stepson, our grandchildren. College, grad school, a forty-five-year career. Movies, golf courses, and a lot more music than the Rolling Stones. I haven’t dreamed a dream; I’ve lived a life. Rich. Full. The opposite of boring.

But there’s another reason. Through all my attempts to capture what happened that night, I’ve spent too much time feeling powerless, stuck in the back seat of that 1969 Ford sedan. I’ve squeezed the headrest in front of me until my fingers poked through

vinyl. I've looked down from the top of a hill at a sight I knew would be my end—death by a green station wagon.

I decide to change that scene by writing about it. Acknowledge what happened, but for a moment turn memory into fantasy. Silly, maybe, but no sillier than Mick Jagger singing in German. So, I take my young, skinny self out of that back seat.

Now, I'm a smart, no, a wise eighteen-year-old man who can sense an argument churning out of control. Tom and The Gymnast, I see their breath mingling in the air.

"You gotta let me. I'm a great, great driver."

"No. God. No."

I step forward out of the dark and grab the car keys before Tom gives them away. I'm not afraid of The Gymnast. He doesn't really want a fight; he's got practice in the morning.

"Get in," I say to the three of them, and I take my place behind the wheel.

I turn to The Gymnast in the backseat. Calm but resolute, father to son, I say, "Not tonight, stunt man, not tonight."

If he sneers, I don't see it. I've already turned my back on him.

And I drive us home. All fifteen boring, beautiful miles.

Rocket 88

by Sydney Lea

A few weeks ago, one of our grandsons, nine years old, stepped away from the clamor of a family gathering and walked straight up to me. His preoccupied look told me something was on his mind. I bent to listen, the power of my two hearing aids not a match for the collective chatter. He was asking me a question, but uncertain I'd gotten it right, I told him to repeat it. "Grandpa, what's an Oldsmobile?"

I simply answered that an Oldsmobile was a car that's not produced anymore. I immediately wondered why the question had occurred to the boy in the first place but before I could ask, he rushed back to be with his little brother and cousins. Distracted myself by plenteous, beloved company, I didn't get around to pursuing the matter that afternoon.

Then suddenly everyone was gone.

I'm sometimes grumpy about the technological revolution of our times. I'm a dinosaur, I know, but apart from typing on a computer, my technological limit seems to be watching sports on our quasi-antique television. They're the single thing, in fact, I *do* watch on TV. Whenever I tune in, I'm both astounded and appalled during camera scans of the stadium crowd, by how few on hand are paying attention to the live game as opposed to their cell phones. It's as though nothing could be real if not mediated by a screen.

Well, of course, a television has a screen (our old one, according to our sons and daughters, a laughably small one), but, well, you know.... And true enough, I use my own phone and that grandson uses his—actually his father's—to exchange commentaries on Boston Celtics games. *Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frere!* His text messages can be hilarious, and I enjoy them if anything more than the contests themselves.

My grandson and I, along with his father, have watched quite a few Celtics games since the day I'm recalling. Each time, I've meant to use a half-time break to discover why the boy had asked about an obsolete car at our clan's get-together. The stark truth, though, is that the older I get, the more my mind wanders, and I've consistently forgotten

to do so. I can vow right here to ask at the next opportunity, but right here too I'll admit there are even odds at best that I'll fulfill the vow—not that anyone need care whether I do or don't.

But the main thing on my mind is how our brief exchange set off a reminiscence, not at the family occasion, but today. It has had me thinking of Joey Marsh, a high school senior when I was a freshman. He would appear now and again in his dad's crimson Olds, as if—built like a Periclean statue and movie-star handsome—Joey needed any further edge on the lowly rest of us.

After graduation, he was bound for Princeton, I think, or some other elite university. But he was elite in every other way we could imagine too. So, all I could manage was envy, for example, as he cruised away from Allen's with yet another of seemingly countless pretty girls beside him on the front seat, close as his own skin. Allen's was the drugstore where we lesser beings gathered after team, band, or theater practice, depending on our interests, for awkward flirtation and fountain treats. (I'd bet that no one even ten years younger than I would know today what a lemon phosphate was, or even a soda jerk. I'm fetching up an utterly different era.)

I may have had actual dreams about Joey's Rocket 88. I'm certain I had daytime ones. That flashy paint job! That fearsome V-8 engine! In the hallway one morning, I heard Joey brag to a couple of classmates that from a dead stop beside one telephone pole, he could floor the red Olds's gas pedal and be clipping along at sixty before he reached a third. That may be nothing these days, but it was boasting matter in those.

Last I checked, and granted, it's been quite a while now, there's still the same straightaway on Addison Pike where the kids with hot cars held their drag races. I usually heard second-hand reports of these epic events but on the few blessed occasions when I could watch in person, I ached, yearned, and thrilled as two formidable machines peeled rubber and blew sonorous exhaust through their Glas-Pak dual exhausts. I don't recall ever watching or hearing that Joey's Olds had lost a heat.

Of course, there's no call to share any of these reflections with my grandson, much less to tell him how I resented my father for driving his puny four-cylinder Volkswagen bug. Dad believed in humility and practiced it, which I now see as a genuine virtue. He would, however, occasionally brag about his little car's *gas mileage* of all the stupid things

on earth! I always prayed he wouldn't do so in front of some companion of mine, especially a male one.

I won't suggest to that grandson either that I too would have scored with the attractive girls if I'd driven an Olds like Joey. I don't believe that now and probably didn't then.

Early this morning, a Sunday, my wife left for western Massachusetts. She'll be away all day on a visit to an older sister, one undergoing brutal treatment for cancer. That woman doesn't smoke and never has; she barely drinks; she exercises and has regular mammograms. Sure, it's a cliché, but no less true for that: Life's not fair. I record these thoughts, for instance, at a time when an autocratic and downright criminal American chief executive, eight years older than that good woman, wreaks havoc on America's social and economic fabric. He does this, so far at least with impunity, even as he gulps gallons of sugary soda every day, along with what in his sub-literacy he calls "hamberders" from the fast-food eateries.

My anxiety over the political and ethical state of the nation is unrelenting; further, I've been silently protesting my temporary solitude; further still, I'm concerned for that sister-in-law, whom I love and admire. All this has had me down throughout the morning. I'm a bit ashamed to admit as much. Too old to join or arrange demonstrations anymore (though my state's senior senator, who's even older, keeps doing so in volume, God bless him), still I'm doing what little I can otherwise to resist the deep evils of Trumpism: signing petitions, donating cash to progressive opponents, what have you.

As for my aloneness, it will be short-lived. The very fact that I can miss a wife of forty-three years so dearly even for a few hours is its own indicator of unmerited good fortune.

Finally, although I have an array of old person's ailments, some fairly worrisome, to be sure, for now I remain quite functional physically.

In short, the fact that I've been spending so much of this morning lamenting my own relatively puny discomforts does feel inexcusable. That's because it is.

Spoiled as I am, I've positively been nurturing my genteel *Weltschmerz*, privately whining too about the way a rainy mid-March forenoon nullifies all color outdoors.

As I watched my wife's car, which gets excellent gas mileage, by the way—as I watched it disappear behind the woods on our driveway, my spirits sagged, and the landscape played its part. Everything in it seemed so unrelievedly dreary that I didn't even

bother to look out the window again until a moment past ... when I was stopped in my figurative racks by the plain, unpainted fence, of all things, around our compost pile.

In his unfinished autobiographical poem *The Recluse*, William Wordsworth speaks of the mystical energy residing, if we are open to it, in “the simple produce of the common day.” Those words somehow lodged themselves in my head over sixty years ago, but I can go for long stretches of forgetting their accuracy. I need a metaphorical slap in the face now and again, and I just felt one.

We built that crude fence a while back to ward off marauding bears. We believed the enclosure had no other purpose than, precisely, enclosing: it was strictly functional. Just now, however, its bare planks are emitting an uncannily bright gleam amid the general drabness. I remember watching an eruption from Mt. Etna in Sicily some thirty years ago, and the flare from our fence’s boards, as I behold it now, puts me in mind of the fabled mountain’s volcanic lava.

Struck by the shine of those planks a few moments back, I whispered something incongruous into the empty living room: “They don’t make Oldsmobiles anymore.” The remark came to me altogether involuntarily.

My wife will be home soon, her beauty and humanity if anything more precious to me than when she was in her twenties. My grandson is one of eight grandchildren, each so profound a joy in my life that I could never have predicted it as a young man. Thanks to Bernie Sanders and others of like mettle, backlash against the odious excesses and transgressions of Donald Trump and his cohort of crooks and fools seems to be shaping up. Things may be brightening, after all.

It’s almost seven decades since I witnessed Joey Marsh sliding away from Allen’s Drugstore with a pretty companion or rocketing up Addison Pike with some pretender sucking that Olds’s exhaust, and it’s been only ten minutes or so since I was staggered by the radiance of a backyard fence, of all things. Maybe the huge gap in time accounts for what I’d answer if our grandson asked about an Oldsmobile now. Who knows? In any case, I might wonder aloud why in the world—this suddenly breathtaking world—someone would ever yearn for a Rocket 88, whatever its color.

On Abortion

by Lillian Hogendoorn

There are protesters standing on the northwest corner of Bloor and St. George. They rotate through the intersection throughout the day, big bloody signs on sticks held by the spindly arms of teenage boys and girls with braids in their hair. From where I stand, I can count six of them.

They don't shout, but you can hear them. "Excuse me, what are your thoughts on abortion?" they politely sing in a round backed by idling engines and footsteps and swirling iced coffees. People brush past, waving their hands and diverting their gaze. Some reach into their pockets to turn up their volume on their true crime podcasts. Others scowl and mumble.

I hesitate—wait for the light to change and change again. The young protesters are owed an answer I don't have. I am misaligned, thoughts unformed and feelings raw at the edges.

"What are your thoughts on abortion?" Grateful, I think. For my friends whose lives are shaped by the babies they didn't have. For the doctors who didn't have to worry when they removed an embryo growing where it shouldn't have been, able to focus their concern on saving the woman with childlike fear in her eyes and a pain in her gut. For who that woman was able to become, even with missing pieces.

Six months ago when I peed on a stick between meetings for peace of mind and two pink lines appeared, I walked into my son's room and sat on the floor. Heat coursed from my fingers to my heart. Tears formed but didn't flow. It's okay. I told myself. This is my choice. I thought of the women who I grew up with, women living in states whose options are limited by legislators. I tried to feel grateful. "It's my choice," I said aloud to no one. "It's my choice, it's my choice."

I had needed the peace of mind the drugstore pregnancy test kit had been meant to provide, even if its result caused me confusion. I had an IUD implanted in my cervix at my six-week postpartum checkup. Good for five years and 99.8 percent effective, my

OBGYN promised. As a bonus, my periods could become nearly unnoticeable, save for a bit of cramping every thirty days. A feature, not a bug. Pregnancy with an IUD was an impossibility, reserved for extraordinary women who defied norms regularly. I called my doctor, and she asked me if I'd like to be referred for obstetric care or termination. I could not answer. I finally cried

"I know it's hard," she said, as if reading from a script. She told me to call her back when I was decided.

Now looking at protestors' signs featuring half formed heads and tiny fingers, I think, "Is this what was growing inside me?" Inside my body, but outside of my uterus where they should have been for eleven long weeks, while seasons changed and I drank cocktails on patios and read my son stories in the blue chair I had once rocked him to sleep in. While we swam in the lake and built sandcastles together, and I bought shapewear and a one-piece swimsuit with ruching that promised a tummy tucking effect. While I biked until sweat formed under my fingernails, looking at my body and willing her to shrink. While I counted calories and ate salads and longed for the body I had on my wedding day, the body that my husband fell in love with, that used to come so effortlessly to me. While I did not bleed.

At eight weeks of not knowing I bought a dress in the maternity section. White puffed sleeves with blue flowers. An empire waist skimmed over my taught belly. I imagined the hem grazing my ankles, my neck unadorned. I closed my eyes and saw the pearl earrings my husband bought me for my thirtieth birthday, the lipstick at the bottom of my makeup bag, the two of us sipping wine and holding hands under the table while someone else placed our son gently in his crib. I wanted to hide the midsection I had been painstakingly working to shrink as numbers on the scale just kept creeping up and up. On the subway on my way home, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the closing doors. My hand rested on my lower abdomen, a familiar loving touch. I can take care of you, it said. Someday, maybe.

At three weeks of not knowing I ate burgers and drank beers at a surprise party for the birth of my nephew. In the morning, my breasts hurt when I turned to check the time on my phone. 'Your period may start today,'; my health app warned me. The app offered a useful reminder, though my periods had been irregular since the birth of our son two

years earlier. I packed two Advil and an extra pair of underwear in my purse. Crowded under a tarped pergola with friends of family, the rain poured into the backyard weighing down blue balloons. “When are you going to have another one?” someone asked. We laughed. Not anytime soon, one is good. “Besides,” my husband chimed in, “Have you seen our kid? He’s perfect.” They smiled and agreed, watching him as he tried to eat a blue cupcake nose first. “It’s a shame,” they added, “You make such beautiful babies.”

I never called my doctor back. In the evening we argued in whispers as our two-year-old rode his tricycle up and down the hallway. “He would be such a great brother,” my husband said and I nodded.

“I don’t know if I can do this again” I replied, watching fear and sadness flash across his face. We tried to calculate a due date—date of your last period, negative pregnancy tests taken after the first missed period. An ultrasound would help, we concluded. I thought about the IUD embedded in my cervix. Did it need to be removed? Had it given up on its own?

I asked if he could come with me to my ultrasound, and he pulled up his calendar. We asked our son if he wanted to have a baby in the house. “I am a baby!” he said. “Just my mommy!” I smiled.

“He doesn’t know what that means,” my husband said.

Has anyone ever talked to the kids protesting on the corner about the complexity of motherhood? Of loving being someone’s mom and not wanting to be a mother again? About your soft body becoming a host, violently rejecting foods you used to love, sweat beading on your forehead while people say “You’re glowing!” Your organs squishing against each other until you can’t breathe or see your toes. Your peripheral vision disappearing as you drive alone on the highway, seatbelt below the bump, trying to keep everyone safe and wondering if this is normal. Holding your partner’s hand through pain and pressure as a small and helpless person is pushed from your body and into your arms. Thick blood and sweet tears and he is yours. You feel love in a way you didn’t know you could and darkness in a way you hoped you wouldn’t. None of this you could have imagined even hours earlier when you were bouncing on a ball in a hospital gown eating a popsicle. When he was still just an idea. As unreal as the day you looked down at your

belly in the shower and whispered, “If you’re in there, I promise we’ll take such good care of you.”

As quickly as we had learned about another life growing inside me, a familiar pain shot through my body—the ghost of a contraction. The only decision made was that we could not make a life altering choice on an empty stomach. Walking on the sidewalk to grab a burger, my husband and I each holding one of our son’s hands, my body contracted once again. I braced myself. “One, two, three, wheel!” He squealed. I grimaced. *I need to go to the hospital* I mouthed to my husband. *It can’t wait.*

At the hospital I say the words. “I think I’m having a miscarriage.” They tumble out of my mouth as my spine curls from the pressure in my abdomen. A stranger behind me in line rubs my back, and I tense. “It’s okay,” she says, “I work here.” A bald woman with no pants runs out of the sliding doors into the warm August night. A police officer follows behind her. The clerk sends me to the “yellow zone,” where my name is on a list of a dozen other names on a monitor with an estimated forty-seven-minute wait. I try to listen to a podcast. I check my emails, deleting BOGO promos for sushi restaurants and shoe stores. I text my husband to ask how bedtime went. “Fine. He misses Mommy,” he says. “How are you?” I don’t know the answer.

I go to the bathroom to check for blood, but there is nothing. Maybe I’m okay. I think. I catch myself. Maybe the baby is okay. This isn’t comforting; it rests the decision back in my hands, saddling me with the possibility of lifelong regrets and resentments. Why should I choose? I am a bad mother who didn’t know enough to take care of her unborn child. I am a good mother who is too selfish to want to mother again. I want someone to tell me the answer. I want to be a child, tucked in at the time my mother deemed appropriate and woken by an alarm set by my father, punctuated by the smell of bacon and coffee. I think about the purple and orange striped overalls I had when I was five and wonder what happened to them as I tie the back of my hospital gown and pull up my yoga pants. I can hear a thread snap as they struggle to hold my growing body.

The nurse asks me about the date of my last period. “June 7th” I say, but I quickly explain that I had a negative pregnancy test in July. “That doesn’t matter. Eleven weeks” she says confidently. She takes my blood and leaves. “Usually takes about an hour,” she

says, already out the door to the next patient. I Google “Due Date Calculator.” March 16th. Take away two weeks, when I was induced last time. March 2nd. I flip ahead in my calendar—it’s clear. Great. I wonder if I should put an event in the calendar, but I decide against it.

They say they need to do an ultrasound. An orderly wheels me through the empty halls. He asks me about my last name and I tell him it is Dutch. He says he loves stroopwafel, and I don’t have the heart to tell him that I am not even a little Dutch. That unlike most of my friends I chose to take my husband’s last name against his better judgment so that I could have the same name as our child. In the dark ultrasound room, the technician is silent. I think maybe if I catch a familiar glimpse of a beating heart I will know my answer. I crane my neck to see the screen, but he has it turned. He says we’ll need to do a transvaginal ultrasound and calls a female technician in to supervise. He pushes a probe into me and presses on my stomach and I flinch.

They bring me to a new room. There is a sign on the wall. Pregnancy and Infant Loss Network: We Know It Hurts; We are Here to Help. I take a picture and send it to my husband. “Dark,” I caption it. Very, he agrees. A doctor tells me my HCG levels are too low, the IUD is in place, there was too much blood on my ultrasound to see much. It could be extrauterine, or not. I’m “probably” miscarrying. I ask if there is anything they can do. I have a friend, I say, who had a DNC when her baby’s heartbeat failed her growing body. And another friend whose doctor prescribed Misoprostol and sent her home to speed things along. And I have a family member who had laparoscopic surgery to remove the embryo from a fallopian tube. I would like an abortion, my heart screams. “Is there anything you can do?” I ask.

“No,” she says. Instead, she tells me that I’ll probably start bleeding soon and bleed for weeks. I am to follow up every week until the pregnancy is undetectable in my body. Until then, I will be both pregnant and not.

“How long will it take?” I ask. She doesn’t know. It could be soon or not. She asks me if I have any other questions, and I do. What would we have named the baby? Could I have lived with myself? Would my husband have ever forgiven me? I ask her about pain management. Tylenol and Advil. “Take it easy.” She leaves.

In the waiting room again, a nurse comes over and holds my hand. She has kind eyes like my mother, and she asks if there is anything she can do for me. I ask for Ibuprofen. “Better not,” she says, “You still have a baby in there.” I will cry about this in the car, I think. But I am too numb. Before I go to sleep, I fill the toilet with clotted blood and I know.

“What are your thoughts on abortion?” the protesters chorus. Jealous, I think. Weeks later, a friend will have one. Her baby’s heart will stop beating in her body, as they often do this early. One in three pregnancies, the statistic says. In Idaho or Missouri, a physician could only hold her hand and hope that the body would shed the baby on its own. But her doctor will let her choose. A clean cut. She will know what was there and what isn’t. She will grieve a child she knew she wanted, a love she hasn’t yet gotten to feel. I send her flowers and my heart breaks a little more.

What if my grief could be as focused and even? There one day and gone the next. We compare miscarriages as I’ve learned that women do. We are in the same club and I am somehow still alone. Another friend tells me the same thing happened to her a decade ago—a blister pack of pills and a box of condoms failed her first, her body failed her second. It rocked her trust in her body and mind. In her one-bedroom apartment with sharp corners on the coffee table and candles burning on the windowsill she tells me she is grateful.

“At least we didn’t have to decide,” my husband says. He is grateful too.

The first morning that I am both pregnant and not at the same time, I take my son to the aquarium. It’s a plan we’ve had for months, and I have longed to see my child’s face light up while the fish swim by and see my niece grab his hand. The pure joy of being two and experiencing something you weren’t sure was real and knowing that there is magic around you. His little hands press up against the glass as jellyfish swim by and he gasps. I stuff a pad in my underwear—one in the set I bought for postpartum that I have worn every day since. Life keeps going, even as it is ending.

Spring is coming. I grab my soft belly, I know it is empty and I can’t be sure. I hold my child in my arms and he asks to see pictures of when he was in my tummy. I flip through my phone—old ultrasounds and self-timed photos where I carefully positioned my hands on my growing stomach. There is one photo he particularly likes, snapped of his mother

and father in front of a newly built crib. We are giving each other a quizzical smile, unsure if the picture has been taken or not. Ready or not! 38 weeks in and ? to go I had captioned it. We were not ready—no one can be. He was born days later. “Can I go back in your tummy, Mommy?” he asks. I tell him no, he is too big, but he will always be my baby. Besides, I tell him, babies in their Mommies’ bellies can’t eat ice cream or play soccer or dress up like superheroes. He agrees that being on his own is better. He is so sure that he knows. I hope I can be like him someday.

Contributors

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Doug Canter is a retired lawyer, Maryland-based writer, and high school English teacher. His writing has previously appeared in *Books 'N Pieces Magazine*, *Adelaide Magazine*, *Hedge Apple Magazine*, *Evansville Review*, *Talking Writing*, *20-Something Magazine*, and *Public Utilities Fortnightly*, among others, as well as on *Solstice Magazine's* Features Blog and the websites of the American Bar Association, Discovery Channel Tech, and Danya Institute. In 2011, Doug received a Master of Arts in Non-Fiction Writing from Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C. Doug is currently an online MFA Fiction student at Lindenwood University.

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Naomi DeMarinis writes creative nonfiction and prose poetry from her home in Missoula, Montana. Her most recent publication, "Packing to Leave" appears in *Pithead Chapel* and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Currently, she's at work on a collection of essays and poems about her experience with blood cancer and the altered perceptions of life and memory that flavor survival.

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Mark Lucius worked in corporate communications for forty-five years, which included two decades as speechwriter and counselor to two chief executive officers. He won five Cicero Awards from *Vital Speeches of the Day*. His previous personal work has appeared in *bioStories*, *Great River Review*, *Hippocampus*, *On the Premises* and other publications. His long-form memoir about caddying for pro women's golf pioneer Patty Berg was selected for inclusion in *Best American Sports Writing*. He lives in Milwaukee with his wife, Barbara.

Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in LA and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. She worked as a FNP in autism research and is primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. In 2023, Sharman was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards and has published creative non-fiction in *bioStories* and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle.

Adam Perry spent over twenty-five years crafting a globe-trotting career in the creative sector from Broadway stages to Hollywood film sets and beyond. During his tenure as Vice President for Strategy and Programs at Arts Midwest, he led major cultural engagement initiatives and arts diplomacy programs across six continents and every state in the U.S. He grew up in Cincinnati, OH and resides in Minneapolis, MN. Adam has a BA in Political Science and Theatre from Wittenberg University and an MA in Theatre History, Literature, Theory and Criticism from The Ohio State University. His writing is forthcoming in the January 2026 edition of *Kaleidoscope Magazine* and in *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*. "Attempting Fate" is an excerpt from *The Fuzz Diary*, a

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Andreia Rodrigues is a Brazilian immigrant based in Europe. Alongside autobiographical stories, she has written essays, a memoir, and a romance novel. Her work has appeared in literary collectives such as *The Manifest Station*, *Feminine Collective*, and *Black Scat Books*. Through fiction and autobiographical narratives her writing is dedicated to helping women heal and transcend.

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