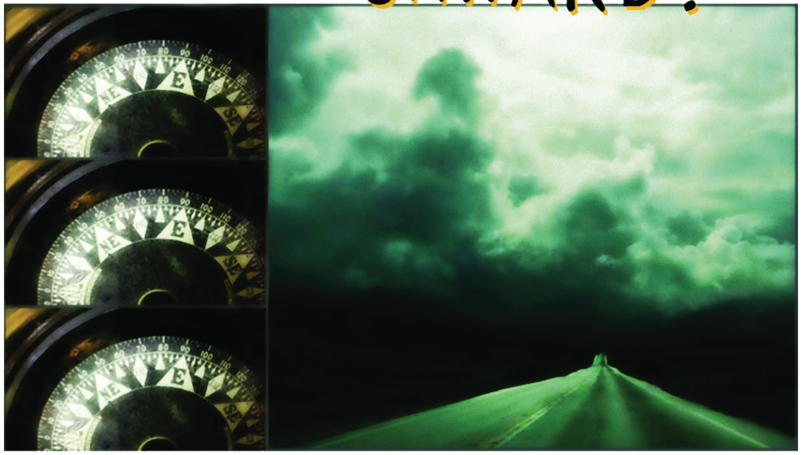
ONWARD!



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Celebrating Wordrunner eChapbook's
Tenth Anniversary: *Onward!*
Into the Next Decade

ONWARD! Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology
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Gently Used

Cathy Cruise

It was her daughter who'd begged for a guinea pig. For Christmas, from Santa. And since it wasn't an overly expensive request (although at the time Claire had no idea how costly it would prove to be), she'd said maybe. Because her daughter still believed, and because Claire figured Hannah's faith wouldn't last long if she didn't get a guinea pig when she'd painstakingly scrawled it at the top of her Christmas list, after looking up how to spell guinea.

She'd been sure Paul would say no. But sometimes she forgot how helpless Hannah could make him, and he'd unexpectedly agreed. So, even though Claire sneezed and saw red welts appear on her wrists whenever she touched the animals in those glass kiosks at pet stores, she searched Craigslist in mid-December for a guinea pig.

She often bought "gently used" items from Craigslist—barstools, a TV stand, a giant Barbie playhouse when Hannah was little, a couch so old and worn they called it The Maneater because you had to grab onto an arm to yank yourself out of it. That one she should have turned down, but she had a bad habit of feeling pressured to buy once she was face-to-face with a seller.

On Craigslist, someone was selling a guinea pig, cage, food, water bottle, and pigloo (whatever that was) for fifty dollars. She emailed the seller, who lived in Washington, DC, and asked if they could meet halfway. Ten minutes later, the response read: "Petco in Tysons? You'll need more supplies anyway. Friday at 7?"

It was an oddly warm night for December, so balmy Claire rolled her window down on her way to Tysons Corner, weaving past strip malls and plazas mobbed with Christmas shoppers. The seller had told her to look for a blue SUV with DC plates, but Claire didn't see a car like that when she pulled into the Petco lot.

Idling in her parking spot, watching traffic on Route 7 crawl past, brake lights indistinguishable from the flashing Christmas bulbs stippling the road, it dawned on her she had no idea who she'd be meeting—man, woman, serial killer, saint. She decided to head inside the store, and straight to the Cavy Cove section.

Hay, food pellets, orchard grass, berry nibblers, and cedar chips lined the shelves. Just looking at the array exhausted her. But lately everything required effort. You'd think by the time her daughter reached ten , well beyond the years of needing Claire so fiercely, she'd feel rested. But the fact that Hannah managed just fine without her now only seemed to sap the last of her strength.

"She's growing up." Paul would shrug, when she'd mention it. "What did you expect?"

Not this, she thought, picking up a Super Comfy Pet Harness and Leash (a leash, for a guinea pig?). She hadn't expected this drained, inadequate sensation. As if, now that everything was winding down, something else desperately needed to start.

"Excuse me?"

Claire turned toward a faded black t-shirt, leather jacket, and the most piercing blue eyes she'd ever seen on a human. The word "human" actually occurred to her, because the eyes bore a real similarity to her neighbor's Husky dog and its frosty stare.

"You Claire?" the man asked.

"I…yes. Hi." She stuck out her hand.

"Nick," he said. "Figured you'd be in here. Sorry I'm late. I don't really know my way around here."

His dark hair was on the longer side, and his eyes darted restlessly about the store as he squeezed her fingers.

"I was just…" Claire slid her hand away and swept her palm toward the shelves. "There's so much to choose from."

"Ah, you don't need most of this crap. Here." He reached past her to grab a suitcase-sized bag of hay, which he tossed into the air, caught, and tucked under his arm.

"Buy in bulk and you won't have to run to the store so much. I brought you a bag of pellets. That's their diet—hay and pellets

every day. And fresh veggies. That was the hardest to keep up with—I mean, I usually have lettuce around, but they can't eat iceberg. Seemed like I was always running out for cilantro or parsley. Course, you're probably a real cook. Keep a fully stocked fridge?"

Claire nodded, not to answer, but to stall while deciding what was happening. Was he hitting on her? Ridiculous. All he'd asked was what was in her refrigerator, so really, where was this coming from? It was the way he asked it, she decided, with one blue eye winking…was it winking? She couldn't see the other side of his face, so maybe it was only a blink.

"Doesn't your wife cook?" she asked.

He grunted. "That's why I have the pigs. Divorced. Overindulging my daughter. Said she misses the cat too much when she's at my place, so—"He shrugged. "But she lost interest in them."

"Them?"

"Oh. Yeah!" He chuckled. His laugh was throaty, infectious. "I was going to let her keep one, but after you answered the ad she said she didn't want to split them up. She's right. They need a partner or they go ape shit or something. Get so lonely they could croak. So yeah, two. No extra charge."

Claire swallowed. Paul would love this news.

"You'll need this too," he said, lifting a bag of cedar bedding, nearly as large as the first one.

"Oh," Claire said, "I was reading about that online. How paper bedding is best? More absorbent or..."

"Nah. Look, this is only eight bucks. Paper's twelve."

He walked toward the register, and even though Claire had planned to pick up a few more things, he continued talking to her over his shoulder, so she followed.

"You said in your email they're for you daughter, right? She's going to love them. Mine did. At least for a few months. If she'd learn to clean a cage I wouldn't be here."

Claire nodded, although he couldn't see her, since she was behind him.

He dropped the bags on the counter and stood watching while Claire paid. Something about the look on his face made her remember she had to pay him too. She fished in her purse for the fifty dollars she'd withdrawn at the bank on the way and handed it to him.

He thanked her, folded the bills and stuffed them in his back pocket. Then he picked up her bags again, moved to the exit, and held the door open.

Claire walked past him, suddenly worried she might trip or forget how to walk properly. "That's my car there," she said, pointing to her dented red minivan, parked beside what she assumed was his Jeep Cherokee. She opened the back of the van and moved some things out of the way to make room: an umbrella, a pink pool noodle, an old towel, a set of stray earbuds.

Beside her, he opened the back of the SUV and slid out a large, white cage. Two furry creatures sat inside, completely still except for their noses, which nervously twitched in the fresh air. One was a smooth white and brown, the other a mottled black.

"They're cute," she said. But really, she was startled by their size. They looked like small loaves of bread. "The ones in the pet store were tiny."

"Pet stores sell babies. These guys are two years old. That black one's Henry. The white is Theodore. Course you'll probably change the names."

"Yes," she said sadly, because how could she tell Hannah Santa had already named them? It was a shame though. Henry and Theodore seemed just right.

He placed the cage in the back of her car. Wadding up the towel, he stuck it on one side, then bent the pool noodle in half and wedged it on the other. "There," he said. "They won't slide around now."

"Thank you." She closed the hatch and turned toward him. A breeze lifted her hair, light and mild as spring.

"Crazy, huh?" he said. "This weather?"

"Really strange."

They both turned toward the main road, looking out at the thick line of cars curving into the distance, barely moving. "Looks worse than when I got here," he said. "Sorry. I guess meeting near the mall was stupid. Forgot about the Christmas shoppers." He checked his watch. "If I hit the road now I'll be starved before I get home. Any place we could grab a bite?"

Hearing the "we" made her think he must have someone in his car. Claire glanced inside, but saw it was empty.

"Pigs'll be okay. Even if it was cold, they'd be fine. Some people keep them outdoors." He grinned. "See? Have dinner with me and I'll tell you more about guineas than you ever wanted to know."

Claire looked about, shoving her hands in her coat pockets. "Well…there's a Mexican place around the corner. Did you want—"

"Yeah, I see it. Meet you there." He ducked inside his car and started the engine.

For a moment she stood watching his taillights glow in the darkness. Then she got inside her van and drove to Fiesta Grill.

She parked in front of the restaurant, checked her makeup in the mirror, and dialed Paul. Traffic's at a standstill, she would say. Might as well do some shopping.

But he answered in that gruff, annoyed tone. "Hello? Hang on. Hannah, I'll be right there!" Then to Claire, "Holy crap, she's a diva tonight. Okay, what's wrong?"

She drew a breath. "I'm having dinner with the man we bought the pigs from. He's going to give me all the details about them."

For a moment he was silent, and she felt a trickle of satisfaction.

"Them?" Paul asked. "What do you mean them?"

"Oh. Yeah. Well, he gave us another—for free."

"What?"

"He says they have to have a partner or they go ape shit. They could die."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Claire." Another pause. "So what am I supposed to feed her?"

A minute later she was inside the restaurant, walking across the stained wooden floors, past the scuffed table tops. The bar area was packed, but Nick sat in a booth along the far wall. He was on the phone too, and when she sat down she heard him say, "And that's why I never walk into a meeting with that thought in mind." He belted out a throaty laugh, said goodbye, then hung up. "Sorry," he said. "Work."

"What do you do?"

"Bartender."

Claire looked over her menu while she absorbed this idea. What kind of meetings did bartenders have?

"I sort of organize this community contest," he said. "World's Fastest Bartender? Ever heard of it?"

She shook her head.

The waiter came for their orders. Nick asked for a margarita and chili rellenos. Claire closed her menu and said she'd have the same.

When the waiter left, Nick slid off his jacket and spread his arms across the back of the booth. "So," he said, "thanks for joining me. Eating alone's not really my thing."

"I'll bet," she said, startling herself.

He grinned. "What's that supposed to mean?" A deep buzz sounded from under the table. He took his phone from his jacket pocket but didn't answer it. "Girlfriend. Likes to check up on me." He put the phone away. "It gets tiresome. I mean, she's great. But I don't need a babysitter, you know? She doesn't need to be a babysitter. Why waste all that energy on suspicion? Why not put a little faith into someone instead?"

His eyes, a muted gray under the dim lights, were still oddly intense.

"What about you?" he asked. "Married? He like guinea pigs?"

The waiter appeared with their drinks, set them on napkins, and was gone again.

Claire lifted her glass, licked salt from the edge and took a sip. It was tangy and sweet. Perfect.

The door opened, and two young women headed toward the bar.

"Someday I'm going to meet the love of my life," Nick said, watching the women walk past. "When I'm old and gray, I guess. Hell, I'm nearly there. I'm ready to make a connection. Just not with someone who's trying too hard."

At the bar, one of the women held up a bill, waving it like a flag.

"See? Like that," he said. "When I'm working bar and you want a drink? Wave money at me, snap your fingers, whistle—I'm gonna ignore you. But stand and wait. Smile." He grinned. "I'm already on my way."

Claire took another sip, then set her drink down. "You're charming."

He nodded. "It's a defect."

"Not necessarily."

"No?" He winked. A definite wink. "Maybe you're easily charmed."

She met his gaze. "They don't bite, do they?"

"What?"

"The pigs. That's the main thing. They can't bite my daughter. My husband would freak."

"Nah. They're good boys."

"What else?"

He rubbed his chin, holding his fingers like a gun. "They love carrots. Apples. But they shouldn't have too many treats."

"What else?"

He drained his glass and set it down. "What else do you want?"

"Excuse me." The waiter was beside them now, setting Claire's plate on the table. "This is hot. Please be careful." He set Nick's plate down and walked away.

Neither of them moved.

"You're pretty," Nick said.

Eyes darker now. Had the lights dimmed?

"Look," he said, "You're probably not … you don't seem the type. But hell, it's late. We're kinda stuck here." He chuckled. "And you can't blame a guy for trying."

Claire gazed over his head to a clock on the wall. Nearly nine. If she were home she'd be getting Hannah ready for bed, getting herself ready just after, maybe watching TV or reading a bit before nodding off. But here, now, she wasn't tired. In fact, she felt a stirring—something groggy, unsteady, but slowly coming to life.

She looked down at her chili relleno, red and white, bubbling in sauce. She'd never had one before. Claire picked up her fork, thinking, there's always a first time.

Back home, nearly midnight, Claire set the cage by the front door. In the morning, before Hannah woke, she would take it to a neighbor who'd agreed to pig sit until Christmas Eve.

Upstairs, she checked on her daughter, who lay sideways in her top bunk, covers off, a dozen stuffed animals scattered about the blankets. Claire moved to her own room next, expecting to find Paul asleep already. But he wasn't there. She went back downstairs, and at the landing, noticed a soft glow from the den. The Christmas tree, left to burn, no doubt, unless she shut it off. But this light flickered and waved, and she noticed a smoky smell.

At the fireplace, Paul was stoking the flames, and turned when he heard her come in. "This thing is a monster," he said.

For a minute, she thought he meant the fire. But then she saw the white guinea pig, cradled in his arm like a baby.

"That's Theodore," she said.

"Theodore? Seriously?" Paul put the poker back in its stand and reached up to the mantle. He handed her a glass of wine. "Thought we'd have a fire tonight."

Now she could hear Christmas music, playing softly on Paul's ancient stereo, the one she'd been pleading with him to replace with an iHome. She could find one on Craigslist, no problem.

Claire took the glass from him. "What's all this?"

He sat down in the leather chair by the fireplace and put a pillow on the floor.

She settled into the spot, and he placed the pig on her lap. Claire stroked the animal, looking closely at it for the first time. Theodore's fur was sleek, with reddish brown patches. He closed his eyes contentedly as she rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Paul's hands squeezed her shoulders, thumbs tracing circles, pressing at all the right spots. "Should I be worried?" he asked.

"About what?"

"You. Out to dinner with some guy. Getting home so late."

She stared into the fire, at the flames impossibly lit with orange, yellow, blue. On the mantle above sat photos of Hannah, first as a baby, then in jeans and bare feet, the sweet, goofy smile of adolescence slanted across her face.

"Traffic was at a standstill," she said.

She rubbed her cheek against her shoulder, over the spot where Nick had kissed her. After he'd apologized, after she'd declined his offer to go to the Hyatt down the road, after he'd made her take her fifty dollars back. I'm an asshole, he'd said. And then, again, You can't blame a guy for trying.

She stroked the guinea pig beneath his chin. Someday I'm going to meet the love of my life, she thought. Theodore sank his teeth into her thumb.

Claire snatched her hand away.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

There was no blood. Not even a mark. "Nothing," she said.

"Hey," he said. "Tired? Time for bed?"

It was. But the fire was pretty, the wine soothing, Paul's touch sure and steady. She wanted to hold on to all of it, to let this night sink into her bones.

"Not yet," she said. She stroked Theodore's nose again, which he seemed to prefer. He closed his eyes. "I guess we should have bought them at the pet store after all. They have babies there. Little ones."

"Nah," he said. "We did good."

Claire's finger still smarted from the bite. But really, what would she have done if Nick had told her the truth, with the pigs already in her car, Christmas days away? She might always wonder, as people tend to do, what she could have done differently, what other choices she could have made. But just think how much more it could have cost her.

The Magic Ball

Sam Gridley

"Mom, do you know whose this is?"

"No," said Joan. "Where did you find it?"

"Down there buried in a box against the wall with my old soccer trophies and some of Lainie's kiddie ceramics."

Joan noticed dust on Andrea's arm as she held out a small, purple velour, drawstring pouch. Seated on the family-room sofa, Joan took the thing reluctantly. She wanted her daughters to clean their stuff out of her basement without stirring up unnecessary muck or memories.

"You need to have that wall parged again," Andrea commented, brushing herself off. "It's crumbling."

"Don't get dirt on my carpet, please," Joan snapped. "Step out back."

Andrea responded by shaking all over like a golden retriever after a swim, and grinning. Joan's distinguished career as a jurist hadn't produced the least extra reverence from her daughters.

Opening the little bag, Joan drew out the baseball signed and dated by Jason Bermudez, the magic ball she hadn't thought of in, what, 25 or 30 years?

"So," Andrea pressed, "who belongs to that?"

"Oh … it's mine. My autographed baseball. I forgot where it was."

"*You* have an autographed ball? But you don't care about sports."

"I did when I was young, same as you."

"Huh! O-kay. But who, then, is …" (Andrea craned her neck) "Jason Berman?"

"Bermudez. He was a big-time player, once upon a time."

"Really?" Andrea's voice was skeptical. "I've never heard of him."

"You wouldn't have."

Joan returned the ball to the pouch, set it firmly on the end table and just as firmly changed the subject. "Will you be able to finish today?"

"I don't know, there's lots of boxes still. What's your hurry?"

"I want everything ready when I have to leave this house."

"That's nuts, you won't have to leave anytime soon, Mom. You shouldn't think that way."

Joan wedged her lower lip under the upper. It was a bit much to be told how to think. In response, Andrea also tried to look severe, her forehead crinkling.

Joan studied her daughter's face. At 32, though slim and blonde like her mother, Andrea was starting to show her age. She worked 50 hours a week as a paralegal, her two boys were often difficult, and Joan could tell her marriage was far from perfect. On the other hand, Lainie, the younger sister, had a four-year-old, no spouse in the offing, a crummy apartment in a neighborhood half a step removed from a slum, and a lagging career as a ceramicist/sculptor specializing in found objects. Who said that grown daughters were a mother's treasure? One good thing: fretting about them distracted Joan from her own situation.

After the exchange of mother-daughter frowns, Andrea offered the kind of semi-smile that implied she had made her point. "Back to the treasure hunt," she joked, and returned to the basement.

Despite her comfortable modern furnishings, heavy on warm reds and browns and casually mismatched throw pillows, Joan hadn't been able to relax all day. Now, staring sideways at the purple velour housing her one-time treasure, she felt flustered, short of breath. Of course she no longer believed in the ball's magic, and it represented one more object to be disposed of. Still, its discovery got her blood and brain moving faster, before she clamped down and her mouth tightened again.

At this stage she was convinced they all lied to her. Her daughters, her friends and former colleagues, most of all her doctors. Joan had always possessed a remarkable ability to detect lies, like an extra nasal sense, and it was fine-tuned by two decades on the bench. A smidgen of bogus language smelled as rank to her as the bucket of stink bait her father had used for catfish. Many attorneys had maneuvered to avoid her courtroom because she treated their deceptions with the disgust they deserved.

Thus, when her cancer returned this May—on the same side, amazingly, where the original breast had been removed and reconstructed four years earlier—and specks of metastasis showed up elsewhere, the oncologist's optimistic remarks and detailed treatment options couldn't fool her. Oh, she would go along with the therapy all right. She would fight, she'd always been a fighter. Whatever it took, she was in for the whole game. But she wouldn't harbor illusions about winning. Both her parents had succumbed to cancer in their early sixties, and one of her brothers, Charlie, had died young as well. Empirical data.

Most of the time, she was considerate enough not to act gloomy around others. In fact, when she broke the news to her daughters—at brunch in a crowded restaurant where they wouldn't make a scene—she pretended faith in the doctor's assurances. Lainie, the dark-haired artist with tattoos on both forearms above enormous bracelets, put on a fiercely zealous look, saying, "Mom, you're gonna kick butt like you always do." Andrea, the older one, spent several seconds flicking imaginary toast crumbs off her blouse before adding in a tone that strove for mature wisdom, "Your doctor's really up on the latest treatments, Mom. I'm sure this'll work out. And you know we'll be with you every step of the way."

"Mm-hmm," Joan agreed, "I know." She found her daughters' words close to meaningless, but if faking confidence was good for them, she would do it.

That was one rule of the game, as Joan saw it, and in some ways it was the hardest part. During the new round of chemo begun in June, she'd accepted the hair loss, exhaustion, swollen feet and painful fingernails. Plus the so-called nausea, which was actually a sensation like her inner self was about to boil out. Plus the "chemo brain," the mental dullness that made even an ordinary conversation difficult to follow. What was worse, in a way, was the constant encouragement from others, friends and family both—the cheery words that concealed their secret thoughts and hidden assumptions about her future. But she couldn't shout at people to shut up and wipe off their insipid supportive grins; no, she had to play along. And if they did manage to *believe* some of what they said, well, that was a palliative she wouldn't deny them. The last thing she wanted was to hurt these people who tried so hard to reassure her, especially Andrea and Lainie.

Luckily, this time around, Joan needn't struggle to keep working through the treatment. Last year, at 57, on her 20th anniversary as a magistrate, nine of those years on the state appellate level, she'd called it quits. The one-time girl wonder, weary of the political infighting surrounding the courts, would stop judging others' affairs and concentrate on her own. It was high time to start afresh and renew a spirit numbed by seeing the worst of people for so long. There were grandchildren to get to know better. There were trips to take—Egypt, Morocco, other exotic places to visit before she got too old. There was, perhaps, a memoir to write, in which she'd expose the sleaziness of the legal old-boy network and the corrupt smugness of the judicial system. She was still debating how to approach that project when the routine MRI brought its nasty surprise.

Now, with no profession to occupy her, she could focus on getting her affairs in order. From the bench she had issued that advice many times to white-collar offenders she was whisking off to prison: "You will surrender yourself to the sheriff's office on September 27th to begin your sentence. I would strongly advise that you employ the intervening two weeks to put your affairs in order." She herself had been given no specific date to surrender to death or decrepitude, and there was always the possibility that the event might be postponed for years, but this was no excuse for avoiding the task.

It helped that the house wasn't large—a modest semidetached in an inner suburb—and the divorce five years ago had reduced

the accumulation. The divorce had been sudden. In an almost accidental way, she had fallen into her first-ever extramarital affair—a spontaneous attraction at a state corrections conference, lubricated by three glasses of wine for a person who normally stopped at one. Within two weeks she realized she didn't want to be the sort of wife who committed adultery, and it turned out that, with the children long grown and out on their own, Thad also welcomed an escape from a commitment made in their early twenties. It was labeled a friendly, no-fault divorce, and therefore got nastier than expected, which distressed Lainie and Andrea. Joan regretted the pain for her daughters, but the split did simplify her life. She got rid of not only Thad's personal belongings but also, after the last big argument, any furniture she associated with him. The man from her fling was soon gone as well. At that point, with her mature good looks—wavy blond hair (the color still somewhat natural), long legs, taut butt—she knew she *might* please others but she *need* please no one but herself. Her life felt clean and honest again, as (in her old-fashioned view) a judge's should be. Even her daughters noticed her new perkiness. She was able to enjoy this state briefly until her first bout with cancer.

When the disease returned, she saw there was more to clean up and clear out, and she began sorting through file cabinets and shelves. Old utility bills, plumber's invoices, check records, and all but a few years of income tax returns went into the shredder and then the recycling bin. No one needed to see that crap. For some reason she had saved letters Thad wrote her early in their relationship—many of them love notes, she supposed. Without opening the envelopes she disposed of them, not by burning, which seemed too melodramatic, but by cramming them into the shredder with the utility bills. Seeing her past life sliced into tiny strips felt almost like an out-of-body experience. But after all, she would never read those letters again—what a useless pain to muse on long-dead romance!—and it disturbed her to think of Andrea and Lainie dealing with things like that when she was gone. Besides being an unfair chore to place on them, it'd amount to an invasion of her privacy, almost as if they stood behind her in the morning in the bathroom when she confronted her bare chest.

As part of the purge, she called the girls to come remove their leftover childhood clutter, without their own children to distract them. She made the order sound urgent. Who knew how soon she'd be moving to assisted care? Overall, what remained here should represent a tidy, successful life that could be summed up on her already existing Wikipedia page: "Following law school, Joan Sigismund clerked for Judge Albert P. Smoot, then of the United States District Court. After practicing privately with Goldman and Kelly, she was appointed to …"

Yet with her stamina ruined by the so-called therapy, the clearing-out process troubled her more than she wanted to admit. In fact, imagining her daughters bereaved—the two of them discussing who would take the worn Turkish kilim in the living room or the honorary plaques from the little study or the roll-top desk passed down from their great-grandmother—pushed Joan to the verge of tears. Whether she was mourning for them or for herself, she didn't know, but she wasn't used to crying and didn't want to give in to such weakness.

When she looked back over the past few years—affair, divorce, cancer diagnosis, surgery, therapy, retirement, cancer again, more therapy—it seemed that her life had sped up so much she couldn't catch her breath.

In this state, anything that required special attention or extra emotion, like the magic ball, upset her.

At age 13 Joan had fallen briefly in love with baseball, especially with her city's major league team. In the months leading up to spring break, she begged so hard to visit the training camp in Florida that her parents obliged with a family vacation. With other kids she hovered near the railings before each preseason game, hoping for an autograph or even a nod. Her favorite player, surprisingly, was not the rookie heartthrob shortstop but a grizzled veteran slugger, Jason Bermudez, who had played for the team more than a decade. He sported a black droopy mustache, bulging biceps, a sizable belly and a swagger that he used to full effect every time he smashed a ball over the fence. After days of yearning and reaching out with her autograph book, she collected his signature and a warm smile besides. She nearly wet herself with excitement.

In late May that year she fell sick with bacterial meningitis, potentially fatal, and even after days in the hospital she was kept out of school to recuperate at home, pampered not only by her mother but by her 17-year-old brother Rob. When the excruciating headaches came on, Rob yelled at others to keep the noise down—not realizing that his scream hurt her head worse than Charlie's squeaky clarinet. If she showed any hint of an appetite, Rob brought her treats from a bakery. He also helped by finishing an essay the school had agreed to accept as her completion of 8th grade. Soon she was calling him "Mommy Two," to his mortification and their mother's delight.

One weekend, a friend of Rob's got tickets to a ballgame, and little brother Charlie, then eight, went along with the older boys. Her head was too sore for her to watch the game on TV that afternoon, but when the brothers got home, they rushed into her room that smelled of too long a time in bed.

"Sis, you won't believe it, you won't believe it!" they shouted, then muted their voices as she winced.

"He hit his 323rd," Rob whispered.

"Who?"

"Your boy Jason. That makes him the team's all-time leader in homers."

"Really?" During her illness she hadn't followed her hero's exploits as closely as usual.

"And there's more," Rob said.

"Something really, really cool," Charlie added.

"We were in the left-field stands when he hit it and there was, like, this crazy scramble and people shoving and wrestling each other and guess what?"

"Why were they shoving and wrestling?"

"To get the ball! But it squirted away and I was right there and I kicked it over to Charlie!"

The story became intricate and confusing: a security guard leading them to a team official who offered to trade them various goodies for the historic ball; their refusal because they wanted to take the souvenir to their sick sister; a trip down in an elevator to a passage that led to the locker room, etc., etc.—all this ending in a flourish when Charlie whipped a baseball from behind his back and dropped it in Joan's lap. It was dated and signed by Jason Bermudez himself, with the same bold script as in her autograph book.

"He was really nice," Rob explained. "He said this ball means more to you than to him, and you should get better soon because he wants to see you at a game this summer."

Even at that age Joan was not a teary sort, but right then she cried over the kindness of her hero and the incredible sweetness of her brothers. For the rest of the day and well into the night, she traced each stitch of the ball with a tender fingertip and examined every zig in the signature. She had the sort of fantasies about a relationship with Jason Bermudez that only a 13-year-old girl can appreciate. She felt happier and more excited in her sickbed than she ever had while healthy.

The next morning, her headaches were gone. The flashes of fever and nausea disappeared. She was instantly well again, and she knew why.

Unfortunately, her Jason tore a hamstring soon after, and in the offseason he was traded, so she never saw him play again. The fascination with baseball faded. But the autographed ball brought its magic to other crises through her adolescence, helping her survive her first romantic breakup, her best friend's sudden coldness, her first-ever "C" on an exam, her biggest fights with her parents. She would ease the ball out of the velour pouch her mother had bought for it, turn it round and round in her palms, run one index finger and then the other slowly along its seams, paying closest attention to the points where the two curves approached each other but never touched. After several minutes of this, she would kiss both ends of the flamboyant "J" in her hero's signature. In every case, within a few days, the magic ball either made the problem go away or guided her to a solution.

In college, as a pre-law major, she had no room in her belief system for magic, but the ball remained a cherished part of her past. At some point in her marriage and child-rearing, though, it disappeared into storage.

After the long clean-out day with her daughters, Joan felt enervated, though she'd hardly lifted a finger herself except to make lunch. Less than 50 percent of the basement had been cleared into trash bags, recycling bins or her daughters' cars, and the remainder weighed on her lungs.

Two days later she endured the next chemo treatment. As usual, a friend went with her, one of three female buddies who took turns accompanying her to therapy. She had never offered this role to her daughters: it seemed too sordid a task to impose on them—sitting with her in an antiseptic room while poison dripped into her veins—and in an odd way an affront to her dignity. Likewise, when the girls phoned during her day in bed afterward, she minimized her complaints and tried to shift the conversation to the grandchildren.

With this combination of emotional and physical downers, a week passed before Joan picked up the baseball again. When it emerged from its pouch, she thought it vibrated slightly, and automatically she fell into her old tracing-stitches routine. After a couple of minutes she broke off, confused, and laughed at herself. She plunked the ball down hard on a table, blaming the incident on her chemo brain. *Impossible* for this ball—this totally *useless* object—to cure what ailed her now.

In a hard mood, she decided, too, that whatever sentimental value the ball held for her would be lost on her children—they'd never heard of Jason Bermudez!—so she might as well get rid of it. It ought to have some worth on the baseball memorabilia market, she figured, and she checked websites for comparable items. Jason Bermudez had never made the Hall of Fame, and she learned that his franchise record had now been eclipsed. Still, one site offered an autographed ball used in the game in which he hit his 300th big-league home run, and it was going for hundreds of dollars. Not the actual ball he hit, not a record number—so by comparison her ball must be worth thousands. Since her years of public office had left her comfortable but with only a modest estate to pass on to her daughters, a few thousands were nothing to sneeze at.

Would she truly sell her childhood treasure? The next visit with her oncologist removed any doubt. It was six weeks now since the treatment had begun, and all her "numbers," including the tumor markers, were "holding steady," the doctor said with an upbeat voice. As usual she saw through the deception. Holding steady meant the cancer, so far, was proving immune to the poisons that had stolen her hair and turned her nails into throbbing hotspots. Her eyeballs might pop out and her arms and legs fall off before this fucking disease gave up.

In court, when confronted by inveterate liars, she had deployed a severe glare that made seasoned attorneys sweat under their three-piece suits. Now she directed the same look at the doctor's wavy toupee, which was as obviously fake as his tone. Though she'd been his patient for years now, he grew nervous and began talking about medications for her side-effects. Her lips twitched as she smiled inwardly, convinced she was playing the game on her own terms.

At home she sent an edgy email to her daughters, reminding them of the remaining junk in the basement. Lainie called soon after. "Mom, you sound weirded out. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Everything," she said, which pretty much summed it up. She then felt guilty for complaining, but also annoyed at Lainie's almost-deliberate naiveté.

Crossword puzzles, reading, concerts of baroque music, visits to art galleries, lunch with her friends—her usual pastimes had grown wearisome for her body or too demanding for her blasted brain. Much as she loved them, her grandchildren also tired her, and writing her memoir was out of the question when she felt so lousy. The one activity that eased her was watering her garden—because the plants didn't lie. The healthy ones thrived in the summer heat, the sick astilbe withered and died. Empirical facts.

One day in late July when her energy level was sufficient, she tied a dressy silk scarf around her bare dome and drove to a town near the interstate that boasted several sports collectibles shops. The easiest to find was a cluttered small store in an aging strip mall. Another customer was chatting with the owner, who was not the paunchy bald man she expected in such a place. Middle-aged, tall and brawny, with a full head of swept-back gray hair, a bristly gray beard and a huge eagle tattoo on his left arm, he looked like a refugee from a motorcycle gang.

When her turn came, she took the baseball from her purse, explained its provenance, asked for an estimate of its value. He glanced at her eyes, at her violet head scarf, at her bosom—what a jerk!—back to her eyes and took the ball with little comment. Moving over to a computer on the counter, he typed awhile.

"I've checked online myself," she said. "I haven't seen anything exactly comparable, not for Jason Bermudez."

"I have," he said. "He was popular here, and a lot of people still collect his stuff."

From time to time as he studied the screen and clicked on this or that, he glanced over at her. She pretended to be interested in the John Smoltz rookie card marked $119.99 in the glass case.

At last the man nodded to himself, pushed himself up and brought the ball back to her, holding it between his thumb and middle finger as if it were slightly contaminated. He set it on the counter and cleared his throat. "The 323rd-homer ball," he said, "came on the market first time around twenty years ago, probably 'cause Bermudez needed cash. They say he's made some crummy business deals. It sold a couple times, and it's now in a private collection in Ocean City, New Jersey."

"What?" Joan mumbled, staring at the eagle's fierce orange beak poking downward from the sleeve of his T-shirt. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said. The real one's in Jersey. This one here's a fake."

She was stunned into silence.

He looked her up and down again, an unpleasant experience, and his expression softened. "Look, honey, this ball's not even scuffed, anyone can see it was never used in a game. It's not authenticated in any way. The signature looks genuine and the date's in the same handwriting, so I'll give you it's a ball Bermudez signed on that day, which is the actual date he broke the record. He might've signed 20, 30 before the game, who knows? So it's worth something, but not if you pretend it's something it ain't."

Being called "honey" snapped her from her stupefaction, and she glared at his beard. "I know," she said icily, "what my brothers told me."

He shrugged. "I ain't calling your brothers liars. Maybe somebody conned 'em. They were kids, right?"

Indignant, she jammed the ball in her purse and left the shop. "You want a quote on it?" he called after her. "I'll give you a quote. Best prices in town."

She drove straight home.

An angry week went by. The ball, which now carried an aura of corruption, hid behind rain hats on the top shelf of a closet.

She didn't believe her brothers had been conned. In their long and elaborate story, they had never once let go of the souvenir except while Bermudez signed it. She also couldn't suppose that her nose for falsehood had failed her. Charlie, her younger brother, had been such a poor liar that she could sense his evasiveness before he opened his mouth. He'd hold his hands a certain way, he'd give off a faint odor of anxiety.

Now, however, she couldn't interrogate Charlie because he'd been dead for seven years. The one remaining witness was older brother Rob, who had recently taken early retirement from a managerial job with General Electric. He and his third wife lived on a small farm 72 miles away by car and complained about being isolated. Though she hesitated to confront him, her judicial spirit took hold: no way should he get away with a lie to an impressionable young girl!

Rob knew about her re-diagnosis, but they hadn't spoken in a while. When she called to set a date to visit the farm, he asked, "Is anything wrong?" and she denied it, wondering if her lies were as transparent as everyone else's. "How are you feeling?" he went on. "You'll stay for dinner, right?"

On the morning of her visit, an August Sunday, the temperature headed toward the mid-90s. Although she'd liked her courtroom chilly, she hated air conditioning in a car, so she drove with the windows open and sweat tickling her arms, past fields of shaggy cornstalks rimmed with goldenrod and thistle. The colors of sky and hills and farmland seemed intense and diminished at the same time, as if they were burning down the same way she was. The air smelled of manure and mown hay.

Rob and Marie made a perfectly mismatched pair, he wide and round and slow-moving, she as small and flitty-chirpy as a finch. Self-conscious about her own appearance, Joan watched their reactions for pity or horror, but if they felt such emotions they hid them well.

"What a lovely scarf!" Marie hopped up to Joan for a hug. "Is it silk?"

"Boutique cancer chic," Joan replied, a quip that made Rob grimace as he leaned in for his own embrace.

The lunch they served was excellent, watermelon gazpacho with crunchy bruschetta. After an hour of chat about children and grandchildren and neighbors and miscellaneous news, Marie excused herself for some brief errands while Joan and Rob walked to the pond hidden behind an old orchard. It was a secret shady place, overhung by willow and swamp chestnut oak, brimming with pickerel frogs, bluegills, dragonflies, crayfish. Since the little farm had been idle for a generation, the loudest noise came from cicadas buzzing in an oak.

They sat on a rock outcropping over the water. "I've tried to get your girls out here," Rob said. "Their kids would love it. But they're always too busy, it seems like." Rob and Marie's own children were scattered as far as Montreal and Tokyo and showed up only for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

"They're busy," Joan agreed. "Distracted. By work, kids, what have you. I had to fight to get them to work on my basement."

"Work on it?"

"Clear out their old belongings. I'm getting the place ready to sell in case this, you know"—a tiny gesture toward her head scarf—"gets the better of me."

"I thought it was going well … the treatment. You said in your last email …"

"The doctor's happy enough. That's the main point of it, you know, keep the medical personnel satisfied."

"Oh Joanie, come on. That is not the point."

Quiet descended for a time. The cicadas ramped up and then faded.

"Listen," Joan said, "I have a bone to pick with you."

"Yeah?"

"You remember that baseball you and Charlie brought me when I had meningitis, the one signed by Jason Bermudez?"

"Yeah! It was a record homer, I forget the number. A blast!"

Quickly, in a neutral tone, she related the story of the ball's retrieval from the basement and dismissal by the memorabilia dealer.

"That guy doesn't know shit! What store was this? Hey, I'll get it appraised for you, but why do you wanta sell it now? Don't give me that crap about cleaning out the house."

"He's an expert. He checked online. Admit it, Rob, you guys concocted a fib. Were Mom and Dad in on it?"

"No! It was how I always told you." He then repeated the story of the ball's origin just the way she recalled it, with details about the dirt on Bermudez's jersey, what he said to the brothers, how he got a pen from his locker to sign it.

From across the rock, she was casting her stern judicial eye and invoking her sixth sense for deception. Amazingly he passed the scrutiny. "I don't believe you," she said anyway.

He lifted his hands as if to say, "What else can I do?" A creature plopped in the water, a fish or frog.

Remembering Rob's role as Mommy Two, she allowed herself to smile at him, skeptical and sad and fond. He reached over with one arm and hugged her shoulder.

"You know," she said slowly, "for years I kind of thought the ball had magic in it. Because of the way my symptoms disappeared the next day. And some things that happened after."

"After? Like what?"

"Well, ah … I guess I'll tell you one. What the hell. I've never told this to anybody before, but it doesn't matter now." She hesitated before going on. "My senior year in high school, you were—oh, you were about to graduate from college. It must've been in early spring. I'd already been accepted to Princeton."

"My brilliant sister," he grinned.

"Your brilliant slave-to-her-books sister," she clarified. "And I already knew I was pre-law, I had it mapped out."

"My ambitious super-serious sister."

"Right, that one. Well, that sister had a pregnancy scare. Worse than a scare, I was terrified. All those expectations—my own, sure, but Mom and Dad as well, my teachers, and here I was going to ruin them all. And I honestly didn't know if I could go through with an abortion, it seemed so disgusting to me. So I pictured myself getting a job at a hamburger joint and raising my kid alone—kind of what Lainie's doing now, except she's an artist, which may be worse. The guy wasn't anyone I saw myself staying with." In fact the boy in question had been the younger brother of one of Rob's best friends, but she wouldn't afflict him with that information.

Rob was scanning the ground on the far side of the rock outcropping. He had become suddenly interested in finding pebbles and tossing them into the water.

"Then," she went on, "I remembered my magic ball. I took it out and did my, you know, a kind of ritual I had with it. I even pulled up my shirt and rubbed it on my stomach. Up, down, across."

A pebble splooshed.

"And the next day, the very next day, I got my period. Crisis over! Law school, here I come, and I knew everything would turn out fine. All because of the magic Jason Bermudez baseball. Of course I didn't *really* think the ball had that power, but still …"

Rob was poised to lob another pebble, but his hand dropped to his lap and his embarrassment at her story vanished. He guffawed.

"What? What's so funny?"

"What're you doing," he chortled, "taking our ball to a dealer? We gotta get on TV with this! An infomercial. Miracle cure for pregnancy! Meningitis too! Arthritis! Warts! Maybe we can sell pieces of it like holy relics!"

And she was laughing with him, letting go so much that she slid down the rock into a patch of mud.

When the giggles ended, Rob declared, with the pat-on-the-head tone of an older brother, "See, you shouldn't doubt Jason's power. That ball *is* magic. If nothing else, because it made you believe."

"You're right, Mommy Two. It's magic if it makes me believe *you*. Claiming it was the home run ball, sheesh. Were you and Charlie even the ones he signed it for, or did you buy it from somebody else?"

"Uh-uh-uh-uh-uh," he wagged an admonitory finger at her. "Have faith, little one."

"You are so full of shit."

Loosely arm in arm they walked back to the house, where Marie helped Joan clean the mud off her jeans.

The next weekend, her daughters returned for another day in the basement. This time, Joan requested they bring the grandchildren, and she set out toys, books, peanut-butter snacks and juice to keep the kids occupied.

At one point Joan and the three children sprawled on the carpet for a board game called The Magic Tooth Fairy, in which anyone who lost a tooth could have it transformed by the fairy into a gold coin. The youngest, Lainie's four-year-old Sarah, sat on Grandma's lap to play against Andrea's two boys, eight and six.

In the midst of the game, Lainie came from the kitchen with a new roll of paper towels for the basement work. "Mom," she demanded, "why's that old baseball in the pouch wedged into your spice rack?"

"I can't tolerate spices anymore, it's more a catchall shelf."

"But why're you keeping the ball there? I couldn't help noticing, it's right at eye level."

"Now that it's been found, I like it where I can see it. I look at it every morning."

This was only a partial truth. She'd been doing more with the ball than look—she'd begun to practice her ritual again, even to the point of kissing the tips of the "J." Not that she expected any help with cancer, no more than she believed in the Tooth Fairy, but the routine gave her a boost. It called up an earlier, more promising version of herself.

Lainie pursed her lips. "Andrea thinks there's some big story behind the thing."

"Maybe."

"So are you gonna tell us?"

"Not now," Joan said, "it's too complicated."

"It's your move," one of the boys prodded.

Lainie arched her plucked brows as if she had some of the famous sixth sense, enough to penetrate her mother's evasion, but then she nodded and headed for the basement stairs. "Anytime you don't want it," she called over her shoulder, "lemme know. I could use it in a sculpture. Even if nobody remembers who that Jason

Benitez was. I've been working with this theme, y'know, found objects that were basically useless even before they got tossed. I mean, what better angle on Western culture, right? We collect all this junk—"

"*Useless?*" Joan muttered. "Who gets to decide—"

She broke off when Lainie disappeared.

After a moment she said to Sarah on her lap, "All right, it's our turn, honey. Spin the pointer thingie."

Then she added, "Come on, baby, let's *win* this game."

Farewell to Easter Weekend

Ashley Jeffalone

When she told the story, Marlena would always start with the same line: "There were two places I felt at home. At least until my sister disappeared."

The first was the renthouse, which had three bedrooms: one where Lily slept, one for that quiet, uncomfortable roommate, and one empty, offering only a futon and a nightstand. On weekends, Marlena liked to come and jimmy a window or two, climb inside and settle down on the futon. On weekends, she could pretend to be five years older. A housemate that lived minimally and took no shit. But tonight, every room, every horizontal surface, was occupied with dancing, drinking, sex, other things maybe—Marlena's makeshift bed, she knew, was engaged with some Friday evening business. And so she came through the front door instead, a rare occurrence: no reason to sneak around when there was a boy lying motionless in the front lawn and a throng of girls filming their night on the porch with shaky hands. Marlena pushed past them all and wedged herself through the door frame, scanning faces of the partygoers for her older sister, Lily. Among the dancers who swayed and sloshed beer froth onto their clothes, she recognized coworkers of Lily's, some ex-girlfriends, and childhood companions, and even an old teacher. Marlena knew the characters of her sister's story better than she did her own. Some turned to wave at her, press drunken kisses atop her head, and with a false grimace on her mouth, she leaned in. Of course she did.

"Where's Lily?" The question came out gently, soft in her throat though she'd meant it to be forceful. An annoyance was growing within her, one that demanded her sister and her clean futon, one that despised how the frequency of these parties took those comforts away. And it was a special Friday, too. Good Friday, meant for fasting and abstinence and sisterly bonding over terrible parents. But no. The few friends before her—three old co-workers, all in Lily's good graces—peered at Marlena first with glassy eyes, then with recognition. They shrugged at each other in a circle. Mirrors, all the same.

"Lily? Shit, I don't know, do you know?"

"Haven't seen her in the living room, and I've been standing here for a while."

"Lily, Lily, where could you be?" The girl sang this and laughed, resting her hand on one of the boy's shoulders. The other boy looked pained. And with that, Marlena knew the conversation was over. She straightened her backpack and said her thanks. Beyond them, in the depths of the living room, were a mix of college students and older people who teemed around the tiny couch and television. There were partiers as old as their parents there, but with sagging faces and yellowing teeth. Marlena could hardly see the opposite wall where the household painting of *The Last Supper* hung, and the kitchen counter was obscured by plastic cups and beer cans. Trying to maneuver between everyone, all at least a head taller, seemed pointless. Trying to squeeze back into the hall to the bedrooms would be even worse. Marlena pictured it, from previous experience, as lined with couples consuming one another, hands and tongues everywhere. She exhaled and inched away, further into the mass of drinkers and smokers. Perhaps closer, somehow, to her sister.

Marlena didn't come to these parties often, not with school and her parents bogging her down. Nonetheless, she earned very few stares in her schoolwear and short-limbed, boyish frame. This was Lily's house, and she was Lily's sister, so it didn't matter that she was fifteen and looked it. She could drink, if she wanted. She smoked when it was offered to her, pale cigarettes the length of her finger and the taste of raisins. The college kids sometimes filmed the parties and would aim their cameras down, zooming right in to Marlena's scowling face (a phony frown, really, because she loved being seen). And even on days like these, when Marlena wanted to be alone with Lily, these parties were okay because she belonged.

A tug on her backpack strap. Honeyed breath down her cheek. Marlena turned, anticipating her sister, but looked up at a pale face.

"Lily isn't here," said the boy. Well, not a boy, like many of the others. A man. She couldn't remember this one. She couldn't place his wide eyes and intensity, and she felt a shiver of disgust in lieu of recollection. Ex-boyfriend maybe? Her eyes dipped to his shirt, a familiar emblem of a nineties band emblazoned upon it, and she knew: the roommate. It wasn't disgust she felt then, but anxiety. Seeing him was unusual, but his appearances scared her shitless. Once, when she was sneaking into the renthouse late—a fight with her mother, hair torn out in clumps—he moved in the darkness of the backyard and touched her shoulder. *We ought to give you a housekey,* he whispered. *I thought you were a thief.* His palm, down to her elbow. In his other hand, a pocketknife glinting in the light of her upraised phone. She couldn't remember his face or his name, but she never forgot that.

"Where'd she go then? Isn't this her party?" Marlena said, shifting away. She gave a little tug at her hair. He smiled at her, and it was friendly enough. His arm dropped to his side, and he wrung his hands, somehow nothing like that memory.

"I think she went to get more ice or something. Gas station beer, maybe? I—I just saw you standing in all these people, and I felt bad to see you alone. Can I get you something?"

"No," she said, "that's okay. Maybe I'll wait for her in her room."

"I wouldn't suggest it," he laughed. The coldness between them thawed, and he leaned down, smelling both sickly sweet and of cleaning fluid. "I can clear out my room, if you have to do homework or something."

"No," she said, "that's okay. It's like midnight. I can wait."

He smiled again, gestured weakly at the hordes of people around them. And then he turned, almost mechanically, and pushed through the crowd, though it seemed to give way at his touch. The college kids moved. The roommate was gone.

Marlena stood for a quiet five minutes before eyeing a can of beer, feeling that familiar desire to be seen. She swiped the can from its owner, who looked shocked, flatteringly surprised, and the people around them laughed. Marlena the showman tipped her head back and swallowed the poison whole, backpack still securely behind her like a good high schooler—the college kids filmed her, whooping, and Marlena heard them chatter about Lily, wondering where she was to see the spectacle. Crushing the can beneath her foot, she glanced around for another; and soon, a girl that looked just like her but with thick, spidery eyelashes squeezed through from the front door. Marlena turned to her and felt relief—or was it just the beer?—wash down her body, but she wasn't much for moving in that sardine tin of a living room. Lily was almost empty-handed, only a small pipe raised triumphantly in the air, but Marlena heard her own name hissed from the crowd, like a warning. The pipe disappeared. Her sister stood on her tiptoes and found Marlena's eyes.

"Baby!" she shouted, but as they watched each other, Marlena felt anger bubble inside her. She felt stupid in her backpack, stupid mashed up against all of Lily's closest friends. Stupid as she thought about the roommate and his breath on her, stupid as the beer fizzed down her throat.

"The hell, Lily"—her voice was small and gross, even as she yelled over the din—"I needed you tonight. I texted you."

"Baby!" Lily shouted again, and she swam through the crowd. "Honey, I know, I was out getting party favors. I didn't think you'd come so quick."

Marlena glowered up at her, dramatic as she spat on the floor at her feet. She shifted her backpack against her: a fighting gesture. "I had a bad day, and I needed you," she repeated. "Why throw a party tonight?"

Lily fumbled at her pockets, elbowing people as she did, then reached for Marlena. "I know, I know. Sacrilege and all. Let's get you to bed."

Wet sounds, slurping sounds, came from the door of the "empty" bedroom, and Lily barged into the room and withdrew a half-dressed couple. "In you go," she said to Marlena, who scraped at the futon with her nails as if to drag the germs away. She lay upon

it, couch-style, lifting a blanket from the floor. Twenty minutes passed before the bedroom door reopened; Marlena couldn't sleep, wouldn't sleep, and the sound of her sister shocked her. Lily fell through the doorway with some stranger's clothes draped loosely across her frame, a weird outfit she would never wear, something inherited through sex. Marlena had hardly a moment to squint at her. The futon upright didn't deter Lily—she fell onto Marlena, nuzzled her shoulder with a sweaty forehead. Her clothing flattened against Marlena like an added blanket, the buttons of the shirt digging into her.

"Don't be mad, don't be mad." Lily said it twice, thrice, a fourth muffled time.

"I'm not—where were—"

"I know you are, honey, it's okay. I know you wanted to talk about shitty shit, and we still can, we can right now, right?"

Marlena didn't answer, tense underneath her sister. Lily smelled rancid, and her body was fidgety. Her hand came up, pulled into the air by a puppeteer, and tapped against the head of the couch. "Let me make it a bed."

But with the futon laid flat, Lily squirmed restlessly and hardly spoke. In moments she muttered an apology and was out into the party again. Marlena curled up, defeated, and raised a hand to the smallest of bald patches on the top of her head. A yank at her hair. She was sore with disappointment.

When she'd tell this story later, she'd talk about how uncomfortable she was in the living room, how much she wanted to talk to Lily about their mother, and she would focus on that unease. Lily, so elusive and so present, would sweep dramatically into the story, but those mentions of her would be short in the retelling. She'd tuck Marlena in, and make her breakfast the next morning, but Marlena would never see her sister again after she'd ducked through the back window, away from the smells and sounds of ham and pancakes, away from talking about the night before. And Marlena would tell her listeners that, as she passed through the driveway, the roommate sat in the bed of his truck, smoking a cigarette. He'd offered her one, which she'd irritably declined. None of it was dramatic, no. These moments weren't "moments," outlined in red by hysterics or excitement, worth remembering at all. They just *were*.

The second place that Marlena felt at home was a five-minute walk from her parents' house: out her window (she could've used the front door here too, but clambering through windows just felt more like something in a movie), a left turn down their street, then a right turn into a cul-de-sac headed by a grassless path running into the woods. The trail led to a river where Lily used to take her when things weren't great at home. Marlena's friends liked to fish there sometimes, and she'd watch with glazed eyes. Thinking. Waiting for the moment they'd look up at her instead. In the middle of a clearing cut in half by whooshing water, lined by trees bent inward like bowing gentlemen, was Marlena's second haven. Marked with cardinal flowers and stray six pack rings, it was a back-up for the futon when Lily's selfishness drove her away, which it often did these days. This was the place that Marlena would end her weekend.

It was Sunday now. The morning was spent tight-lipped in church with no sign of her sister. Marlena thought that the least Lily could do was come to mass on Easter and stabilize their parents with her rare presence, but she knew she shouldn't have ever been so hopeful. When Lily went off to college (and dropped out of college), sightings of her became more infrequent—and if those sightings were nourishment, her family was starved. Lily herself began to look famished too, the glow of her warm skin paling and her cheekbones jutting. Scabs speckled her face, a face she wouldn't show in their childhood church, Marlena knew.

After mass came the drive home, her mother hunched over the steering wheel and her father quiet with folded hands. Maybe he was still praying. They parked in their driveway, and Marlena stepped out and walked down the street, Easter dress and all. Behind her, her mother slammed the car door and thrust her hands in her hair, and her father protested weakly—something about togetherness on the Lord's day and lunch—but Marlena continued down. A left turn, a right turn into a cul-de-sac, then the path into woods where her friends would be fishing and she would watch. Thank God. Her dress flounced against her thighs, and the dirt ground beneath her ballet flats. She clenched her jaw and followed the river to her favorite clearing, where Daniela and Albert sat against rocks with their fishing poles. Where tranquility came to her in waves.

"Happy Easter," she called, and her friends turned, gave half-smiles.

"Happy Easter," said Daniela, getting to her feet. She reached for Marlena, clasped her closely, briefly, and turned back to the river. "Missed you yesterday."

"I was trying to lay low, kinda. My mama and I aren't getting along so great, and she didn't like that I went to Lily's on Friday." She paused. "Lily didn't even come to church today."

"How is she?"

"Fucked up." The three were quiet, save for the reeling of Albert's fishline. He pulled it in, cast it out again, and Marlena sat back into the dirt. Lily was a tired subject, but she could think of nothing else she wanted to say.

Daniela glanced at her helplessly, then reached for her own pole. "I haven't heard…good things lately. My brother was at the party too."

Marlena inhaled softly. Fiddled with her hands. She tried to sound casual. "What do you mean?"

"The usual stuff." Albert answered this time. So they'd already gossiped without her. He put his pole down, his foot resting atop it. "You guys want to go for a walk down the river? It's a holiday, let's just chill out. We talk about this all the time." It was true. They did.

Daniela pulled her fishing pole from the water and held a hand out to Marlena, who was reluctant. But the trio stood and followed the water. They talked of other things. None of them had done their American History homework. All of them had spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about the new boy at school, and they conjectured about the number of freckles on his face. They spoke about their parents, mourned the close of their weekend. So far from the spectacles of home and the neglect of her sister, Marlena softened as she talked to her friends. As her happiness grew, so did her theatrics; she shouted and gestured wildly and laughed with them. When they came to a log blocking the water, they crossed to the other side—Marlena, so full of excitement, got her shoes wet—and made their way back toward their meeting spot. She was feeling much better.

Albert squinted into the distance and then ran ahead, returning with a billowy button-up and wide-legged pants. "Someone's out here doing dirty shit. *Naked*."

"That's so ugly, give it here." Daniela laughed, snatching the shirt from him and brandishing it across her torso. Marlena could smell it, sweaty and sour, and she leaned away gagging.

"Stop," she said, but Daniela waggled it underneath her nose, so she took off sprinting down the river. Peals of laughter echoed behind her, a soft sound of crumpling as they dropped the clothes to the ground. Marlena ran to a place where stones rose to the surface of the water and bounded across them, stagey as she waved and blew kisses at her friends so far behind. But the two didn't run to catch up with her; they fell into a slow walk together, and Marlena felt a pang of exclusion. A longing to see her sister. She fingered the smoothness at the top of her head.

Here is where Marlena would pause in her retelling of these events, widening her eyes at her listeners. She would consider that she was being theatrical, disrespectful to the memory of her sister, but in the intensity of the moment, Marlena would brush off the shame. Instead, here is where she would remind them that she would never see Lily again. Someone might ask, "But what does all this mean? Why is hanging out with Albert and Daniela important to the story?" And Marlena would lower her voice to something like a whisper and say, "Think about the clothes."

The clothes, she hypothesized, were the ones Lily wore on Friday night, the ill-fitting threads that clung to her sweat and clung to Marlena. Marlena didn't know that at the time; she pieced it together like a detective far after she left the cul-de-sac. As she went away from that river, her sanctuary, her second home, she heard a truck start. She saw a flash of a pale face in the driver's seat, but she thought nothing of it. In that instant, there was nothing more normal than someone driving in a neighborhood, glancing at passersby.

Lily's roommate would tell everyone who asked that she left on Easter morning, said Lily was on meth, headed out to get more and never returned. And everyone would nod their heads knowingly. And Marlena's parents would close their eyes, tight-lipped. *That's so like her. We wouldn't expect any less*. But Marlena felt that she knew better. Felt it in her bones, in her marrow. She measured the truth in all those moments that weren't quite "moments."

She wouldn't feel at home, anywhere, for years. She couldn't go back to that renthouse, but Lily's absence bore down on her everywhere she went anyway. No texts. No calls. No letters. And months after that Easter Sunday, she went and sat in the place by the river where they'd found those strange clothes, wishing they were still there so she could know for sure. She replayed that party in her head, over and over. She'd recount these scenes to anyone who would listen.

A Wake

John P. Loonam

Ruth was a sophisticated woman who had very little use for children. She was always in suits or little dresses that seemed to restrict her movements — more to be looked at than played with. Her friend, Maggie was easier: louder, looser. Maggie was round and pliable where Ruth was straight and narrow. Dressed in her soft men's suits, Maggie was just a little too butch to be an aunt, but she enjoyed the role. Ruth hated being an aunt — when she came out to Lynbrook for family events, a little late and a little overdressed — there was a reluctance clinging to her like the red scarf she wore with her black dress. And she didn't like me much. I demanded too much attention, always insisting on playing the drums for everyone before dinner, making them stand around the cold basement while I practiced paradiddles and triplets. Ruth told my mother I was self-involved. I never took it personally.

Or, if I did, I had forgiven her by the time I left Amherst and moved to the city, crashing on that convertible couch in her living room. "A few nights" lasted until Ruth lent me the security deposit so I could move out. This was just after she came to the club, Red Fish Blue Fish, to hear my band. The place was cavernously empty and after the first set Ruth pointed out the job notice near the bar. So I gave up drumming to run the sound board for bands that actually drew listeners and began to tell people the real money was in production. Then Ruth completed my shove into adulthood by advancing me the money for an apartment.

Ruth had a lot of friends, so it was no surprise that the funeral parlor was crowded. Maggie was playing the role of chief mourner — sitting on that tiny couch under The Last Supper telling stories, gesturing with her cane, getting all the attention. That left me to deal with logistics and I was a little overwhelmed — talking to

the manager, greeting people I barely knew. I had bought a suit and tie and shoes the week before, when we knew, and it was all a little stiff. The shoes cut a line across the bridge of my toes and my neck was on fire from the combination of shaving and a tie. I was shaking hands and hugging people and wincing up on tip-toes — craning my neck to answer the steady stream of questions — Is Evelyn here? Is that Rose Macher? Have you talked to Stella Simmons yet? I was already counting the minutes when I saw Jenny hesitating by the door, scanning the crowd for familiar faces before turning to sign the guest book.

Of course, it was not just her presence that made me nervous — she had loved Ruth and I had been expecting her — it was that she looked 25 again in that little black dress, her hands folded in front of her, clutching that tiny red purse Ruth had given her for her birthday the year before we fell apart.

The last time I had seen her she had been 9½ months pregnant with Julian… no, Madison. It had been a sun-filled day in Central Park. She was wearing men's overalls and an extra-large sweatshirt, both probably Stillman's, both stretched tight across her enormous belly. I remember the weary glow of sweat on her face, as if she had come in from a misty rain. She was smiling even though just standing up appeared to be a challenge.

Stillman stood like his name promised, a little behind her and off to the right, one hand rubbing a spot between her shoulder blades — equal parts supportive and possessive, handsome and smug. I disliked him mostly because I thought I should, but his dislike of me seemed more specific and that struck me as unfair.

Jenny and I had chatted only briefly that day — seeing her with both hands resting on her belly made me want to make excuses and keep walking before I started to cry, but she had remembered to ask — calling back to me as we separated, the profile of that belly and the little triangle of exposed flesh at the hip of the overalls and that perfect nose all making me slightly dizzy — how Ruth was.

"She's great," I said. "Slowing down a little."

"Ruth? Slowing?" She looked at me as if aging were my fault. "You take care of her."

I nodded.

"Tell her —"

"I will," I said, waving my way out of there.

In fact, I had been cutting through the park towards Mt. Sinai where Ruth was in for the first round of the chemotherapy no one thought would work. Maggie was refusing to leave her bedside and I had agreed to come for visiting hours to convince Maggie to go home, take a shower, get the mail or something. Give the nurses a break. I had been up late at the club and was running late, a little hung over, impatient, anxious. I felt guilty not telling Jenny any of that, but I had an intimation that I would only discover that Stillman was not just silent but strong, able to take charge, ask all those questions I had been afraid to ask and then call some friend at Sloan Kettering who specialized in just this sort of thing. Jenny had never tried to offer anyone's suffering anything but a little sorrow of her own and much as I craved that connection, I didn't want to deal with this new, capable partner.

Now, I maneuvered my way through the crowd to Jenny as she stood against the wall under the funeral parlor's 9-11 memorial: a picture of the wreckage, a letter from the fire station and a scrap of American Flag in a plain black frame.

"You look great," I tried to make my hug quick and platonic though the smell of her neck made it hard to conceal how much I meant it.

"You look like shit."

"Yeah, well…"

She reached out and squeezed my arm, just above the elbow — contact full of feeling, but not the feeling I wanted.

"How's Stillman?"

"Fine. He wanted to come but Madison …"

"Nice of him. To do that. Babysit, I mean."

"Ohh, they're bff's the two of them."

"And the baby — Madison? Beautiful and charming as we'd expect?"

"Maybe more than I expected. She's kind of perfect." I could tell Jenny was trying to tone down her smile, keep her joy in check to allow for my sorrow. Neither of us mentioned that I had not met Madison and it occurred to me that I no longer had chemotherapy or hospice or funeral arrangements as an excuse. I would need a new one.

"Was it hard … at the end?"

I thought about the angry grimace on Ruth's face that whole last month, Maggie sleeping on my old couch and calling me every time Ruth's expression changed, the way the stiffness, the tension, suddenly eased just before Ruth licked her lips, smiled one last time, and died.

"Only in that it was the end," I said, my voice cracking slightly.

We were silent a second, Jenny still holding my arm. She stared at the floor a little in front of her and I stared too —at a thick carpet with ugly pink roses woven into dark blue. After a moment, Jenny shook her head quickly, snapping out of some reverie.

"Where's Maggie?"

I gestured with my head, reluctant to move my arm. "Holding court over in the corner. She seems to be telling all her best Ruth stories. In chronological order."

"Well, her Ruth stories are the best Ruth stories."

"If you want, I'm sure I can squeeze you in there. She'd love to see you."

"In a minute." She looked around the room, now noticing the crowd near the coffin. "I guess I should go pay my respects."

"Ruth would wish you wouldn't."

"Why," Jenny smiled. "Is she not wearing makeup?"

"No, she is. Her instructions were very specific: closed coffin but still full make-up. She just wouldn't want to think of you kneeling at a coffin."

"Even her own?"

"Especially her own," I said. "She'd hate all this."

“She would.”

A high-pitched, excited voice came to me from behind, “Josh!” And suddenly I was spun around and being hugged by Bit Feldman, one of Maggie and Ruth’s old friends. He took my shoulders in each hand, his grip a little shaky with age, and held me back to study me. He looked older than I remembered, his face a pasty wreck of wrinkles between incongruously dark hair and polished white teeth. “Let me look at you. You look awful.”

“So I’ve been told.”

He turned to Jenny. “Jenny dear, you have to take care of this young man. He’s suffered a terrible loss.”

Jenny smiled stiffly and looked down at the floor.

“I’m okay, Bit,” I said.

“No, I’m serious. I can see the strain. She needs to — oh my god,” and he pulled me close again, breathlessly whispering into my ear, “I’m so sorry, I forgot you two …”. Then he thrust me away from him and brushed off the front of his suit. “I must go pay my respects, I’ll find you dears later.” And he stepped quickly and stiffly towards the line of people waiting to kneel at the coffin.

There was another moment of strained silence. Jenny looked down at the blurry roses. I looked at the American flag on the 9-11 memorial, at the carefully preserved stains of soot and ash.

“How are you, anyway?” she finally asked, looking up, pushing a note of casual curiosity into her voice, “I mean beside all this?”

“I’m okay. Basically.”

Jenny just raised that one eyebrow that had always been her bullshit detector.

“I’m between relationships, if that’s what you mean.”

“Between?”

“Well, I’m optimistic anyway.”

She smiled just to the edge of laughter, shaking her head and I wondered how we had gotten to this place of teasing about my sex life. “Maybe somebody will think you’re with the band,” she mumbled — an old joke — and I was sorry to think that I could still make her laugh even though I could no longer make her cry.

I had gone back to stay with Ruth when Jenny threw me out. Asked me to leave. It was really pretty polite — more sorrow and disappointment than anger, though I guess she had run through anger on her way to sorrow. Anyway, Ruth saved me again: seven years in and I was back on that couch. It was only a few weeks this time — nineteen days — before Ruth woke up at four in the morning to find me leaning over the sink in her narrow little kitchen, my jeans scraping up against the counter on the opposite side, stuffing a Big Mac into my mouth and sipping from a pint of Bacardi. She told me to leave the next day — just said, “Don’t be here when I get home from work,” and went back to bed.

It was good though, just the prodding I needed. I found a room with two other guys on Avenue C and I was free to do late gigs at the club, hang out with the bands and the groupies. Plus, I had someplace to put my clothes and CDs and the other junk Jenny had been holding for me. I took my time getting it all, and in the end had to get a box from her the week of the wedding, which I was not invited to.

Ruth told me a little about it later. As much as I could stand. She said she and Maggie had each danced with Jenny. It sounded sweet — like they were messengers sending a blessing. I had tried to be happy for them all but mostly wished I was dancing with her myself.

We both looked over at Maggie — large and round in a black man-tailored suit, her gray hair gathered at the top of her head. She had her silver-handled cane and was gesturing with it as she told some story. Jenny made a sound in her throat, like a choked sob.

“She’s going to miss Ruth.”

“They were friends a long time.”

Jenny turned and looked at me, a flash of anger in her eyes.

“Friends?”

“Well, lovers? Whatever.” Jenny shook her head, silently scolding me. “I always wondered… Why they never just… like lived together.”

Jenny turned away from me now — she was watching Maggie poke the rug with her cane to emphasize some point in her story.

"They were scared, I think. Then, when it was more acceptable, they were already set in their ways. Plus, rent control."

I thought about that for a moment, watching the side of Jenny's face as she spoke. The Garrisons, friends from the neighborhood, were at the door behind her, bent over the guest book. All four of them stepping up to sign, one at a time.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Ruth told me."

"She told you?"

"I asked."

I looked back at Maggie, gesturing with the cane to make room for Misty Garrison, gawky and awkward in her adolescence, coming through the crowd to give her a card.

"You asked." I said it more to myself than anyone. It struck me as an incredible piece of information. We were silent a moment, then Jenny stepped in front of me, turning away from Maggie to the line of people in front of the coffin, a giant grey metal affair with Ruth's Barnard graduation photo in a silver frame balanced on top.

"I'll miss her, too," Jenny said. "I already miss her."

"She missed you," I said. "After."

Then, in a soft, far away voice, Jenny said, "She was the one who told me to throw you out."

"Ruth?"

"After the … fights. When the tension felt permanent. One night I left work kind of dreading going home and I just went to 20th Street instead. Rang the bell and started crying when she opened the door. I was there for hours."

"Where was I?"

"I never knew where you were. I told you later I had been with Lindsey."

"Oh. That night."

"I lied. Sorry."

"I may owe Lindsey an apology."

She shook her head, slowly, as if my voice were just some background noise in the way of what she was really listening to — the hum of voices all around us, the way they formed a kind of noisy silence, the words in her head.

"I just started telling Ruth what it was like. Our marriage. Living with you. The suspicions. The lies." I could barely hear her, as if she was talking to someone else or else wanted me to lean in to listen. "Ruth never hesitated. I said you needed to grow up. She said you wouldn't."

I turned myself to follow Jenny's eyes; we were standing side by side staring at Ruth's coffin. I craned my neck around Jordan Herbert's shoulder to make eye contact with Ruth's picture. My protector. I remembered the way she would tap her cigarette against the ashtray while she talked, always so definite, always right.

"I wondered for a while, even after I met Keith, whether I had acted too quickly." She paused, as if wondering again. "Remember you said that we should have a baby? That would help settle us?" She turned to me, a strange smile of sympathy, maybe pity, on her face, as if she were remembering some silly thing I had said as a child. "I wondered about that. Wondered if you were right." She turned away again, looking around the crowd. "Then I had a baby. So now I know. That would not have worked."

I was having a little trouble breathing — the tie felt much tighter all of a sudden. I wanted to walk away, but Jenny was still talking in that low, dangerous tone.

"Remember the night I asked you to leave? I said — what was it — that you would go through life trying to convince people you were a member of the band?"

"Not easy to forget that night." I thought I was speaking normally, but felt that same soft whisper in my mouth.

"I'm sorry I said that."

"You were angry. It happens. And maybe I deserved it, a little."

"It was Ruth's line."

"What?"

"She said it about you. The night we talked."

She said something else, maybe about the baby, needing to get home. Maybe something more emotional, but her voice had faded out of my hearing completely. To tell the truth the room was spinning slightly and I was suddenly very warm, sweating a bit. Then Jenny was touching my arm in some sort of goodbye gesture and moving away. Maggie had spotted her and was waving her over, using the cane to part the crowd, let Jenny through. I couldn't bear to watch: I knew Jenny would bend down to kiss Maggie on the forehead and then they would sit together on that little couch — Maggie holding Jenny's hand in both of her own.

I moved through the crowd and — cutting in front of Mrs. Munro from the laundromat — knelt in front of that gray coffin. I knew she was in there somewhere: Ruth, my favorite aunt. I pressed my hand flat against the gray metal, about where Ruth's chest, her heart might be. I pressed down, but the metal would not give. Then I made a fist and pounded on the coffin with the soft flesh at the side of my palm and listened to it bellow, a little like a drum, then did it again, and again, until I got a rhythm.

Kicker

Loren Sundlee

On his way in from the barn after chores Howard Hawkinson stopped to peer at the charcoal sky and retraced all the things he should have and may have done. The day hit its high temperature at five that morning; since then had been dropping—something he didn't need a thermometer to know. He had milked early and turned the cows out into the barnyard where they would be fine unless it got real bad. They had enjoyed a long Indian summer, and the sudden cold had caught the cattle without their winter coats. The heifers might have to tough it out. Most of the machinery was in the shed. It rankled him that the hayrack was out in the field beyond the grove where his boys had overloaded it and busted the axle. If he didn't get that in soon the neighbors would start talking—if they weren't already. The storm windows were on, and he had filled the tank with fuel oil. The car and tractors had antifreeze. He wondered what more he could do. Looking at that sky, he felt like he had been making out his will, taking care of everything except the funeral. But they had survived big storms before, he and Gladis and the boys. Pulling together into the kitchen, the warmest room, listening to weather reports on the radio, playing Monopoly. When exhaustion set in they would drag off to the bedrooms and crawl under piles of homemade quilts heavy as sod.

It was only four, but it felt like dark had already settled. Walking up to the house, he could feel the ground frozen beneath his step. Mikan, their rangy mutt, trotted ahead, probably hoping for a night in the mudroom. Before going in, Howard glanced up at the sky where flakes had begun to drift down, and there against the dark of the grove, as he had watched it for more than fifty years. He felt that he knew every inch of earth and tree, some of which had been saplings his father had planted before Howard was born and which had grown up with him. At times he had mocked his own lack of adventure, staying his whole life—except for a hitch in the navy—in the place where he had been born and raised. He and Gladis used to talk about someday retiring and doing some of those things they had put off, like traveling. Now it seemed doubtful that it would ever happen.

Inside he took off the old coat and cap and hung them on a ten-penny nail in the wall. Then he bent over and unsnapped the buckles of his overshoes and pulled them off from his work shoes. His toes ached with cold, so he took off the shoes, too, and kneaded his toes through the woolen socks. Mikan strolled over to a corner and lay down as if to escape notice. A second door opened into the kitchen, where Gladis limped from the counter to the table with their supper.

Just as well eat early, she said, in case we lose power.

Gladis pushed her glasses back into place. Her hair was graying and pulled back on one side, held with a bobby pin. An old brown sweater, missing a couple of buttons, hung from her squared shoulders; her blue, flannel dress fell below her knees, where her right leg was wrapped to her ankle. She brought her plate to the table and sat down across from Howard.

See the doctor today?

She nodded.

What did he say?

Said I shouldn't have had so many kids. Howard looked at his plate. The meat loaf had too much bread in it. No point in bringing that up again.

Did he have any suggestions for what you *should* do?

Gave me some new pills. Said to stay off my feet as much as possible.

They ate quietly for a while. The wind was picking up, blowing the tunes they had grown accustomed to over the decades: the loose eave on the south side, the power line slapping against the siding, the howl in the poplars.

Charlene would have been in second grade this year, she said staring at the window. Flakes flew by at an angle in the light that stretched from the kitchen a few tentative inches into the deepening blackness.

Charlene was the daughter they had all wished for after two boys. Born prematurely and small, she cried every few hours to fill her tiny stomach. Howard helped out with a bottle to give Gladis more rest, but having to get up early for chores drained him, too. After three months the house was laggard, exhausted.

One night Howard and Gladis made love for the first time in months, which worked like a sedative. Waking at dawn, rested, refreshed, Gladis eased into blissful consciousness. Then she leapt from the bed and ran naked into the nursery. Her scream drilled into the memories of Howard and the boys. It was as if Lyndon lived in fear of ever hearing it again, guiding his life away from trouble and danger. Howie, the younger, would later write that the anguished wail tore away a piece of their lives never quite stitched together again.

The doctor called it crib death and tried to assure them that Charlene had died early that night and never uttered a cry. But Gladis was convinced that they were besotted by their lust and refused to waken and check on her. She insisted that theyreplace their big bed with twins. She developed thrombosis in her leg, which the doctor called "milk leg"—probably as a result of her pregnancy. For Gladis, that became her punishment that lingered on now for seven years apparently without cure. To her, sexual abstinence was penance.

When it became clear that Gladis was not coming out of her grief, their minister tried to counsel her about the mystery of God's ways and her obligations to her family (he never learned about their lack of a love life). She promised to try, but nothing changed. The boys would look back upon Charlene's death punctuated by that unearthly scream as the knife that cut their lives in two: the first part to be recalled as innocent and hopeful; the second shadowed by grief and guilt.

Lyndon called, she said. Wanted to know if we needed any help getting ready for the storm.

Now that he's a town boy, he doesn't have to worry about things like that.

He'll find enough to worry about, she said, not looking up.

After they finished, Gladis scraped the leftovers onto a plate and took them out to Mikan in the mudroom. Howard turned on the radio that sat on top of the refrigerator, getting only static. He looked out the window and could see that it was snowing and blowing harder. It seemed to be coming from the west or northwest, which was good. The cows would be sheltered, huddling together on the south side of the barn. They stayed in the kitchen, drank coffee; Howard tried to concentrate on the newspaper, though his thoughts were mostly on the wind.

I'm going up, Gladis said in that way that meant come up or stay down here. Suit yourself. He rose, turned out the light in the kitchen and followed her down the hall to the stairway where she climbed one step at a time pulling along her milk leg. They undressed on opposite sides of the room, each by their own bed, crawled beneath the heavy homemade quilts and shuddered until their bodies warmed the covers.

Howard remembered years ago when such times would drive them together to leech warmth from each other's bodies and then to passion and such heat that they would kick off the quilts and cool down until they could pull them back up again and slip into deep, sated slumber.

The wind woke him. He lay in the warmth for a while, trying to decide if he should get up. A little later he did, wrapping himself in his old, woolen bathrobe heavy as a saddle. He closed the bedroom door behind him so he could turn on the stairway light without waking Gladis. In the living room he turned on the light above the front porch and gazed out at the storm. The snow was up to the first step and drifting higher. At first he didn't think much of it except that there would be a lot of it by morning. Not fully awake, he just watched the snow for a few drowsy minutes. Then he was wide awake, taking the stairs two steps at a time. This time he left the door open and grabbed his pants, shirt and socks.

What's the matter? Gladis asked.

It's a south wind, he said. Before she could ask another question he hustled down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the mudroom. Mikan yawned but showed no interest in moving. A rime of white had blown under the outside door. Howard bundled up, switched on the back porch light and the yard light and stepped into the storm. Immediately he could feel that it was colder than last night—a lot colder. Snowflakes became pellets in the wind. He stomped through the soft snow toward the barn, slid the door open against the drift, squeezed inside and found the light switch. A series of naked bulbs made a chain of illuminations in the milking room, where he had worked countless times since he was a kid doing chores before dawn. Now it seemed cave-like, carved out of the rock of the storm. He walked to the far end of the hall to the back door. On the wall above the door hung the tack for the draft horses his dad had used until about thirty years ago when he bought his first tractor. The harnesses, headstalls, bits, reins and collars pulled ages of dust and cobwebs. Harold wondered if they would be worth anything more than memories these days.

He opened the back door to the cow yard and found the herd huddled together, snow to their hocks. They turned to look his way and then maneuvered their collective bulk toward him. As usual, Molly, the oldest and largest cow, led the way, her back blanketed white. He would brush that off when they got inside. Normally, they plodded in their stolid way, found their usual stall and set to work on the hay in the manger. This time they were more urgent, running into each other, swinging their big heads and scrambling over the gutters. In his hurry to get them inside, Howard had neglected to set out the hay. Finding the manger empty, some of the cows swung their heads and bodies in disappointment. Howard had a choice of first locking them in their stanchions or feeding them the hay. Knowing they would calm down to eat, he walked through the separator room to the manger on one side and the pen beyond, where the bales were stacked. True to their kind, the cows concentrated on eating. Meanwhile, those on the other side grew restive. One young cow, still a little wild, lashed out with a kick at her neighbor setting off a cacophony of bellows that might have entertained Howard were it not that he had to get them back in their places. He yelled at the rebel and slapped his gloved hands together to herd her back into position. When he milked her he used hobbles—what he called kickers—to keep her from trashing the teat cups. He stepped around to close the metal stanchion to lock her in place when her leg flicked out quick as a snake and connected with the outside of his knee. He fell as if he had been shot.

His curse chastened the cow for the moment as he fell onto the concrete floor nauseated with pain. The pale glow of the light bulbs and smell of the beasts now made this familiar place surreal. He raised himself to one elbow and tried to think, but his knee demanded full attention. For several minutes he rocked his upper body in agony. As the pain subsided, Howard realized that he must move or risk being trampled by whatever chaos the cows might make. With his hands and his good leg he inched toward the front door, stopping every few feet to let the pain diminish.

When he was near the door he tried to make a plan. He could never make it through the snow to the house. Even dressed as he was, he wondered if he could last the night sitting on the frigid floor. With her bad leg, Gladis wouldn't try to come out and look for him, and even if she was awake to realize that he was still out there, the most she could do was call someone—one of the neighbors or Lyndon in town. Who would be fool enough to drive in a storm like this? The wind kept up a low drone, only broken when a gust tore into the barn and amplified loose shingles, worn joints and the pulley above the big door to the hayloft as it slammed against the soffits.

Then he was shaking, his teeth chattering. Shock he had heard of but didn't know much about it except that it could be worse than the injury itself. There might be some matches in the separator room. He would have to be able to stand to look for them. What would he burn? Probably himself and the whole barn. No way to get attention. No way to treat the cows—even the kicker. When he was in his teens they had an old dog. Like most farm dogs, he lived outdoors year round. They didn't have a proper doghouse for him, so he slept under the front porch. The temperature had gone below -20 for several nights in a row. One morning they found him under the porch frozen. His folks tried to persuade him that Rex was just old and it was his time. But Howard knew the dog wasn't that old and that he had been healthy. They just hadn't taken proper care of him. They hadn't cared enough. He tucked his gloved hands under his armpits and tried to control his shuddering. One of the cows bellowed for hay. Then they were quiet, their bulky forms casting deep shadows under them as if they stood in black water.

Howard saw the justice in this—that he should be here in the place where he had labored much of his life. Labored as if hard work were an unchallenged virtue greater than all others, in spite of the skimpy return on his efforts. Here and in the machinery shed and the fields he had taken over when his dad no longer could farm. It was understood from a young age that he would follow those fenced footsteps, bury himself in the farm's demands with very little questioning of the sense in it. So he, too, had assumed that one of his boys would succeed him, that he could hand over the deed with pride, carry on the tradition. But after the harvest Lyndon got a job in town and made it clear that he wasn't planning to be a farmer. And Howie, where was he last time they heard? Mexico?

So he had enslaved himself to the land, animals and capricious weather, had hardly taken more than a few days away from their demands in the last thirty years—even when neighbors found time to go to California or Florida. Now it seemed fair and just that he should freeze here in the place where he had been frozen for his entire adulthood. Gladis could sell the place, move into town as a comfortable widow, never to endure farm life again. So be it.

He heard the door move behind him, being pulled open a few inches at a time. Mikan pushed his nose through, then his head and the rest of him. Behind came Gladis, all but her eyes covered by clothes and snow. For a second she was startled to see him sitting on the floor.

Kicked, he said. I think it's broken. Mikan tried to lick his face until Gladis pulled him away.

Can you get up?

I don't know, but I don't think I can make it to the house. How did you get out here on your leg?

It will look like I've been dragging a log in the snow, but I made it. You're shivering. We've got to get you off the floor.

He pushed himself over to the open door of the separator room, reached up and grabbed both knobs, and with Gladis lifting under his arms they raised him until he could get up on his good leg. He winced as the damaged leg moved. His face was sweating. Once he was upright, he shook his head and stayed still, waiting for the pain to subside.

She looked around for a few moments then said, The hay mow.

Most of the hay was upstairs where an elevator lifted it from the hayrack. Every couple of weeks Howard would drop some bales through an open hatch and restack them in one of the pens behind the milking hall. He and Gladis arranged themselves so that both of them could use their one good leg to best advantage as they shambled through the narrow separator room. On their right a window showed the strafing snow. To their left, beside the cream separator three aluminum cans sat on the floor, one mostly full of skim milk, another partly full of cream, the third empty. Above them on a shelf sat the milking machine and its tank, and over that on the wall hung the hoses and teat cups washed and disinfected, ready for the morning milking. Howard and Gladis had to bend their outside shoulders inward to pass through the room, looking as if they were coming in for a landing.

If we fall, he said, I want you to shoot me right away and put me out of misery.

Well, there's no gun here, so I'll have to use a bale hook. Or stick your head in the separator. Howard laughed and they nearly toppled. His laugh switched to a grunt of pain. He leaned on her and hopped while she hobbled beside him.

We almost have two good legs between us, she said.

Some of the bales were pushed together. She let him down, set a flake of hay for a pillow and helped him lift the bad leg. Mikan, she ordered and pointed to Howard. The dog hopped up onto the bales and lay down beside his master. She gathered up arms full of loose hay and covered his legs.

Whose pants you got on? he asked.

Your old wool ones. Don't fit so good.

They were Dad's. Never fit me either. Nor him. Come to think of it, I don't believe those pants ever fit anybody.

Maybe we should try ‘em on a cow.

Howard broke off a chuckle. The heifers! he said.

What about ‘em?

They'll freeze out there. Another gust roared over them as the old barn creaked and the pulley banged against the roof.

Could you open the side door? She limped around the bales to a gate to the other pen. Howard could hear the door creak open.

Come on, girls, Gladis called. Come on. Howard could feel the wind whip through the barn. They don't seem interested, she yelled. Shall I leave the door open?

The heifers weren't used to being inside, and Howard knew they would have to be herded. Dumb beasts, he thought. Don't know what's good for them. Like me—out here in the middle of a storm like I'm immortal. Lord, forgive us beasts.

No. Close it, he yelled.

She came back and stood over him. Got any room in that bed? She found the knife and cut the twine from a new bale and set it next to them. Then she lay down beside him and piled the flakes over them as best she could.

Who's gonna milk these cows in the morning?

Neighbors, she said. When Ellis and Norman hear what happened to you, one of them will be over. Or Lyndon if he can get here.

And when will that be? he asked. She didn't answer, just wrapped her arm around him, and they lay there, the three of them, making thrift of what little warmth they had. It was too cold for sleeping. About all they could do was to transfer their shivers to one another as if they were electricity. They lay on the edge of the light, the joists barely visible above them.

How's your leg? she asked.

Be dancing soon.

That'd be a miracle. You never danced.

Never slept with you in the hay either, he said. They were quiet for a while. Except for some cows munching hay, only the wind spoke.

Did you hear that? he asked.

Hear what?

No pigeons. Howie must have done a good job mending the cupola. No pigeons to shit on the hay.

He looked so small up there, she said. I was scared to death he was going to fall.

I guess they'll be OK, the boys. It only makes sense to think so. For several minutes they lay still, buried in hay, trying to live off each other's heat.

I didn't sleep, she said. When you went out, I didn't sleep.

But sleeping was how Lyndon found them in the morning thaw.

Northern County, Here We Come

Lazar Trubman

In the city's downtown restaurant sat a little old man with a bald neat head, tidy, quiet, wearing freshly ironed pants and a long-sleeved brown cotton shirt. Sat there and looked thoughtfully out the window — while waiting for his dinner.

"May I, father?" someone's mighty voice resounded behind his back.

The little old man shivered, raised his head and said, "Please, I'd like the company."

A tall, wide-shouldered fellow in a large polyester suit sunk heavily into the chair and placed his huge hands on the table. The little old man stared into the young fellow's eyes — for some reason it felt nice to look into them, they seemed awfully trusting.

"How about a drink, father?"

The little old man smiled politely. "I don't drink, you know."

"Why is that?"

"Years… My sleigh is headed downhill, son."

The waitress came to their table and stopped, also carried away by the sight of the big fellow.

"A bottle of Moscowskaya and something to bite," he ordered. "Got shish-kebabs?"

"I can only do one hundred grams of vodka."

"Come again?" said the big fella.

"It's the policy: only one hundred grams per person."

"Are you blind? That's a drop for me!"

The little old man, unable to bear it any longer, looked at the big fellow and laughed quietly. "How about this," he said, "I am also allowed one hundred grams, right? Bring him two hundred!"

"Against the policy, too… So, shish-kebab. What else?"

The big fellow looked helplessly at the little old man.

"What is this? Inquisition of some kind?"

The little old man became serious, appealed to the waitress, "I understand your situation, but there is no rule without an exception… Look at his size: one hundred grams for him is like a mosquito bite…"

"Not allowed!" interrupted the waitress. "What else?"

The big fellow felt offended, said angrily, "A hundred bottles of beer then!"

"Call me when you know," said the waitress slamming her notepad and left.

"That's what you call getting drunk, huh?" said the big fellow looking after her.

"Bureaucracy, you know, does not corrode institutions and establishments only," the little old man said sympathetically. "Right here," he banged on the white tablecloth with his little white finger, "it reveals itself in a most ugly form. If some governmental entity…"

"What are we going to do?" interrupted the big fellow.

"Get a bottle of cognac — there is no restriction on cognac."

The big fellow called the waitress and said:

"Change of mind: a bottle of cognac and a couple of…father, would you have a shish-kebab?"

"Thank you, but I already ordered my dinner."

"I see… A couple of shish-kebabs, a cabbage salad and a grilled chicken."

The waitress wrote everything down and left.

The big fellow shook his head reproachfully.

"Really, bureaucrats! Cognac is much stronger — don't they know that?"

"It's also more expensive — that's the thing," explained the little old man. "You're obviously visiting, aren't you?"

"I sure am. From the Northern County?"

"I drove through it once: beautiful place, but always cold as hell!"

"Still is, father."

Now the band began to play. A young woman in a tight red dress walked to the microphone. The big fellow quietly turned away — her

appearance didn't attract him. A minute later the young woman began to sing, and in such a low, deep voice that he looked at her again. She sang about a good man that she hasn't met yet. Wonderfully sang: as if telling a story. And her hips swayed in time with the music. Now he couldn't take his eyes off of her. She made him feel nice and cozy. He glanced at the little old man who sat with his back to the stage, his head sunk into his shoulders, his mouth half-open, lower lip sagging.

"She's back," the old fellow said. "Makes my day every time! You like her, don't you?"

"I sure do!"

"And if you paid attention — she's just a child. Despite all the mascara, and lipstick…just a child! More than once I was shedding a tear — believe it or not…"

The server brought the big fellow's order and the rice pudding for the little old man.

"Would you like a shot of cognac, father?" asked the big fellow.

The little old man looked at the bottle, thought for a moment and said:

"Go ahead, about twenty-five grams."

The big fellow cracked a smile, filled a tiny blue shot glass for the little man and a huge faceted one for himself, and at once, without a moment's thought, emptied it.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed the little old man. "Well done! I'm jealous of you… What's your profession?"

"Foreman. I'm a woodcutter."

"I'm jealous of you, goddammit! You're flying into this town like an eagle, from some unknown big life, and it feels too tight for you here, too crowded…too, damn, crowded!"

The big fellow ate his shish-kebab in silence, then said, "Have another twenty-five grams, father."

The little old man had another shot of cognac, wheezed and began eating his pudding hurriedly. "I haven't had a drink in a long time, you know," he said. "I'd say three years."

"You live alone, don't you?"

"I sure do."

"Not good."

"It's alright…" The little old man nodded at the young woman on the stage. "Sometimes I imagine that she's my daughter, and I'm worried about her fate, believe it or not."

"Does she know you?"

"No…from where would she?"

"She sings well," said the big fellow. "I hate it when they scream."

"Yes, yes, well said," agreed the little old man. "People like you are the proprietors of this earth… I wanted to be like that… didn't know how to, I guess…" he admitted sorrowfully.

The band came on the stage and began tuning their instruments.

"Here she is again!" said the big fellow lighting up a cigarette.

The little old man turned around and looked cursorily at the young woman.

"I can't see…and I hate to look at her through my glasses. Just hate it!"

"Let's have another one, father!" said the big fellow, filling up both glasses.

The little old man drank his cognac obediently, then turned his head and asked:

"What's going to happen to her now?"

"Nothing," assured the big fellow. "I pity her, too: sings to all these drunken mugs…"

"Listen," interrupted the little old man, "marry her! Take her away to the Northern County. You certainly can — just look at you!"

"First of all, I am married," objected the big fella. "And secondly: why do you think she'll go there? Didn't you say it's cold as hell?"

"With you — she'll go!"

"Doubt it."

The little old man looked noticeably worn out. He wiped his mouth, threw the crumpled napkin on the table, and began talking hot and instructively: "Never reason like that: won't go — will go. If you see a woman needs help badly — help her. Don't ask. Especially as God has given you plenty of natural ability. You're strong, son!"

"I'm married!" the big fellow objected again. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's not about that. It's about the tendency. Splash me some more — I feel awfully great today."

The big fellow filled both glasses again.

"You reminded me about a good man I knew once," said the little old man. "Can you roar at the top of your lungs? Come on now, roar!"

"Why?"

"I want to hear it. Come on now."

"They'll throw us out!"

"I don't give a damn. Roar like a bear, I'm begging you!"

The big fellow placed his faceted glass in the middle of the table, inhaled a full chest of air — and roared. The dancing pairs stopped; the thunderous roar attracted the attention of everyone in the restaurant. The little old man looked tenderly at the big fellow and said:

"Great! So, I had a friend, an art teacher, too. Was even taller than you… He roared like an angry Siberian bear! Later he became a tiger catcher: he shouted at them, they stood on their rear feet…"

The young woman came out again and began singing a new song.

"Let's take her away, huh?" said the big fellow, placing his huge hand on the little old man's shoulder. "She can sing in a restaurant over there."

"Let's do, Kolya," agreed the little old man. "My soul will feel better."

"Name's Semyon."

"It doesn't matter. Let's save a woman, son!"

"Alright…but you're going with me, too, father."

"I? Why not!" the little old man tapped on the table with his dry little fist. "We'll make a great singer out of her, world-class — I know a thing or two about singing!"

The waitress came to their table.

“What’s going on over here?” asked. “Some shouting… This is not a forest, you know.”

“Quiet!” said the big fellow. “We understand.”

“Are you going to pay now?” she asked the little old man.

“Quiet!” he shouted, too. “Keep going about your business!”

Surprised and suddenly out of words, the waitress left.

“All my life I wanted to be strong and help people, but just couldn’t do it,” said the little old man. “Don’t know why though…”

“It’s alright,” said the big fellow. “See these?” he showed his huge fists. “With me, you’re like behind the China Wall!”

The little old man squeezed out a weak smile.

“Ah, how indistinguishably I lived, Kolya. Pity! I didn’t even love — was afraid to…”

“Name’s Semyon, father… Why?”

But the little old man ignored his question, kept talking.

“There was a woman, like that one on the stage, she sang, too… sang badly! But I was coming every evening to listen to her unimaginably bad singing. She also needed to be saved… It was a long time ago… Hell!” he shook his head. “I should’ve made mistakes, should’ve been drinking — would’ve been braver probably…I never made a mistake in my whole life, Kolya, never played a trick, never told a joke — would you believe that?”

“Don’t know…” the big fellow really didn’t. “What’s so bad about it?”

“Not even one misdeed or tiny misdemeanor — that’s disgusting! Terrible! When someone felt sorry for me — I thought they loved me; when I loved someone — I was debating, looking for a reason, and was scared to death.”

“I think you drank too much, father,” said the big fellow. “Have some food.”

“You don’t understand — and that’s good. You’re better off not understanding these things.”

“So, you’re going with me to the Northern County, right?”

“I am! May I finish the cognac?”

“Go ahead.”

The little old man drank up the rest of the cognac, threw the blue shot glass against the floor, laid his chest on the table and began crying. A few moments later, the waitress, accompanied by a security guard, appeared in front of them. The big fellow grinned loudly, but kept quiet. He was ready to defend the little old man.

“Is there a problem?” asked the security guard.

“Maybe,” the big fellow responded threateningly. “We’re just listening to some great singing…”

“This is third-rate singing, Kolya!” the little old man interrupted through tears. “It’s awful, as a matter of fact! You’re roaring better. More talented. She can’t sing, but that’s not the point… not the point at all…”

“Who’s going to pay?” interrupted the waitress.

“I am,” said the big fellow, looking at the little old man with frank amazement. “For everything!”

While he was counting out the cash, the little old man cried quietly, his polished head resting in his tiny hands.

“Ah, Kolya, Kolya, my dear animal… What a roar! An eagle! Yes, we’re flying away together! Northern County, here we come!”

“Who is this old man, do you know?” asked the waitress.

“This one?” the big fellow fell into thought. “A well-known intellectual. Retired of course.”

“He comes here often,” said the waitress glancing at the little old man pitifully, “but never had even one drink. Something happened to him today obviously… Don’t leave him alone — he won’t make it home on his own.”

The big fellow lifted the little old man onto his shoulder and went out. The little old man didn’t resist, asked only, “Where are you taking me, Kolya?”

“To my hotel room. And tomorrow — we’re flying off to the Northern County.”

The front desk woman on duty became stubborn suddenly.

“I can’t let this drunk sleep in your room,” she said, nodding squeamishly at the little old man. “It’s against the rules and he might create some unwanted disturbances…”

"Shut your mouth and get my wallet out of the left pocket," interrupted the big fellow. "Take as much money as you need and disappear!"

The front desk woman, deeply indignant, took the money and warned, "Tomorrow morning, before the manager shows up, I want both of you out!"

At the door of his room the big fellow stopped and glanced around the long hallway.

"Northern County, Kolya! At least I'll die like a man!" the little old man muttered drunkenly. "You know, don't use the key — kick down that door," he said, trying desperately to look at the big fellow. "I beg you, kick it down with your foot — we'll pay them later."

"Quiet!" ordered the big fellow. "You're too brave suddenly. I break it — and we'll both end up in jail."

"Don't be afraid!" the little old man tried again. "I was always afraid, but you…"

"Shut it!" said the big fellow. He unlocked the door and carefully lowered the little old man on the bed. "Sleep now."

He turned off the lights and lay down on the couch.

"Northern County, son!" the little old man mumbled, half asleep already. "Heh, what a life!"

In the morning the big fella found a note on the desk:

"I can't do it, Kolya…again… Thanks for everything though. Good-bye."

He was nowhere to be found. The receptionist at the front desk said that he left early and was crying.

I Remember Snow

Michelle Lerner

I remember snow
it was
sand made of cotton
it was
mirrored dust
parachuting from the blue
it was
a sharp intake of breath at 3
a snowman at 10
naked angels
on the golf course
in college at 19.
I remember snow
clogging treads between the tires
building up like heels
on the sides of my shoes.
I remember peering from
the window of my room
the whistling of the radiator
the bending of the trees
ground buried for months
under banks up to my shoulders
the feeling it would never thaw, the sense that
it would never end.

Tupelo

Michelle Lerner

Do you know why we came here
heavy-coated in thick black jackets
with hoods and balaclavas
only to find warm puddles in the parking lot
outside a 7-11, flies everywhere? Do you know why
we walked five miles over train tracks
jacket arms tied around our waists
sipping coke slushies out of thick round straws? Do you know why
it's 8 o'clock at night and we haven't heard a human voice
all day, sweltering in our jackets
outside your mother's trailer, waiting for her to return?
It may be a dream, we may not be here at all,
we may be sweating in our bed, under plaid and flowered covers—
do you know why
I would dream of Mississippi?
Rewind it all—every step—so that we crawl backwards
over railroad ties, jackets on our heads
lay down in the puddles, vomit our drinks
and never take this godforsaken train ride
away from Jersey snow drifts, ice cracking under our feet.

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As if Songs Were a Part of the Ruined World

Robert Clinton

I need to join my long-term loan from Writers' Bank with my other debts to people who have unknowingly given me ideas and dance steps. Every month a letter is beaked or pawed into my hand where I sit on a northern rock, letter carried over the couple of land bridges where the Baltic pours into the Black. The letter starts, Dear Mr. So-and-So, or with a date, which is helpful, June 4, 2114, Dear So-and-So, How does this letter find you? Excellent! Please eyeball the below-affixed Statement and determine if it accords with your notions. Follows a scroll of invoices — Frost Holdings, The Tennyson Syndicate, HD LLC, etc. etc. with pages detailing thefts and frauds. What would be a realistic payment plan? In fact I've borrowed from the oldest and newest old songs, purloined images to put in spaces I'd left helplessly blank, couldn't fill, even on drugs. Such songs carry a scent not my own, though they are my own. My transfigurations have no standing in the Courts of Verse, but I keep being able, as if songs were a part of the ruined world. I keep being able. I hold the summons above the water that's inside and under this rock's wide quartz-lined crack. Pages disappear. My debts to genius are thousands of strings tied to my fingers, covering the world, reaching all the way to the stars, where the great poets live in their teacup houses and their inspired and legendary gardens. I'm going right away to the sterilized deserts where there's nearly no one to talk to.

My kayak's still safe and the arrows uneffaced I scratched on a stone, after studying the sky at night so I can know, if I can know, where is a possible person or cat or smoke in a chimney, any of that. It will be years of months, after I quit this naked arctic mesa (and with two of everything following, floating and flying above me and standing in pairs on kayak's frail skin, stern and bow), it will be years of days of paddling the sea before I unpaddle at last in Great Slave Lake, the far western bay of Lake Canada. Lake Canada! Then south, in kayak and on feet, with my ceremonial animal accompaniment — Alberta, Montana, Idaho, and then the edge of the rich crystalline desert — Great Basin, Mohave-Sonora and unmeasurable Chihuahua: an exposed backbone: more backbone more exposed than the Cascades and Sierras. I may find a homestead, smart people with tiny tech, who'll tell about the fallen thousands of rusted and twisted wind turbines, south somewhere. I'll promise to follow their trails, these earnest rancheros, but I'll go opposite cheerfully: I know it will bring me instantly into my mother the desert: neither sky there nor ground, nothing near nothing far: to see another moving human figure far away would be a shock like a rain storm. By the desert's active and radiant sands my animals might be in some ways physically forwarded — the winged fox, Mohave orioles, flies like blintzes. And me simply in fairest heat and silkiest sand, pulling poems from under inches of cave ash. A confusion and a babble, I know, also a ticket and a gate.

Now in present ice I carry my kayak to the beach. I'm two days looking for kayak's right gold western channel. From the beach I look up at my rock: a tall black rock and the sea all around it is hollowing out the base so it looks like a mushroom: soon it will topple. There's a dizzying stair, and a meadow on top, no trees taller than a three-foot-tall man. *Days exploring what I think is an outbound avenue have given me the whatever-it-is by which I hope we can proceed,* I tell the corps. We'll do it early tomorrow. I can already hear the desert wind, dry-washing a ghost of mesquite. The animals stand in a semi-circle and me with my back to the sea. As if songs are a part of the ruined world, we all sing. We sing the seahorses to sleep.

Pretty Boy

Lisbeth Davidow

A blue and yellow-feathered parakeet as tall as our salt-shaker scampered across our kitchen table, his tiny feet making a light percussive score on the yellow formica. Pretty Boy stayed with us every February while his owners, my mother's Uncle Velvel and Aunt Lottie, found refuge from the Massachusetts winter in Miami Beach. Lottie sent weekly letters in which she asked after Pretty Boy as though he were a child dropped off at summer camp, and complained about their shabby, studio apartment with a hot plate on which they heated canned food because Velvel refused to waste money on restaurants.

I extended my forefinger to Pretty Boy. He lifted himself off the table and landed lightly on it as though it were a branch. "I loff you. Geef me a kees on you," he said in the Yiddish accent Lottie and Velvel had brought with them from Poland.

Lottie, tall and creamy-skinned, had emigrated to America in the early part of the twentieth century. She had been beautiful when she was young, a model even, she'd told us many times, before she developed a mysterious skin condition that lasted for years until she and her father traveled back to Europe where they found a doctor who cured her. A chronic depressive, she recounted the tale of her skin malady and recovery as if she'd survived a sadistic Nazi experiment.

Velvel, on the other hand, had hidden from the Nazis in a hole in the ground for two years, but seemed content, if not thrilled, with life itself. Average in height, handsome and broad-chested with deep set eyes and a wide smile, he delivered a booming, cheerful greeting every time he came to our house. If I was anywhere near him, he'd reach two knuckles towards my face and pinch my cheek so enthusiastically it took minutes for the pain to subside.

I was ten when I heard that Velvel had spent two years in a hole in the ground. Never asking why he'd been alone in the hole, I pictured him huddling like a groundhog beneath a backyard like ours, a medium-sized patch of grass bordered by trees. The details of his physical and emotional agony were both too threatening and remote for me to grasp. When I complained to my mother that Velvel's pinch hurt my cheek, she said I reminded him of the daughter he'd lost. I had known moments of terror during shopping trips to Cherry's department store when I'd lose sight of my mother after absent-mindedly wandering away, but being without her forever was a nightmare beyond my imagination. Far easier for me to absorb was this colorful parakeet whose ability to mimic the speech of immigrants seemed miraculous even though, of course, it was far easier for a parakeet to say "I loff you" than it was for Velvel to have escaped the Nazis.

"Say shut up, Uncle Velvel," my father yelled to Pretty Boy from across the table, as though, rather than months of patient repetition that Velvel and Lottie must have endured to teach the parakeet phrases of love, my father could utter an insult once or twice, and Pretty Boy would repeat it. My father was a kidder, but I sensed he found Uncle Velvel, with his stout, coarse body, tiny pet and tight fist, an easy character to ridicule even with his financial success. In the ten years he'd been in America, Velvel had bought several tenements. While he and Lottie were in Florida, my brother Tommy, four years older than I, bicycled weekly to a scruffy neighborhood on the edge of ours to collect envelopes of cash from Velvel's tenants which he handed dutifully to my father who gave them to Velvel upon his return.

* * *

Velvel was born in Torchin, Poland in 1889, the younger brother of my grandfather Julius who emigrated from Poland with his wife, Shprintze, and their five children after World War I to New Bedford, where Shprintze's parents were already living. Velvel stayed in Torchin either because he lacked the money to leave or had become a successful trader or shopkeeper, or, like so many European Jews, couldn't have imagined what the future held.

The Germans occupied Torchin in 1941. Six months later, they forced the town's Jews into a ghetto. Eight months after that, they liquidated the ghetto and, except for Jews like Velvel and his family who were hiding in the houses of sympathetic gentiles, took the inhabitants to the Jewish cemetery, shot them and tossed them into a mass grave.

Velvel and his brother, Chaim, while searching for their next hiding place, heard that the Nazis knew where their wives and children were. Chaim turned back to be with his family. Velvel kept going.

I was an adult with a husband and daughter of my own when I heard about Velvel's choice to save himself rather than return to his family. In an effort to comprehend such a decision, I forced myself to imagine the moment: Surrounded by a stand of birch trees, the two brothers hear the bad news. Chaim's heart immediately sends him back to his family even if it means dying with them, which it does. Velvel's heart doesn't have a chance to speak. Neither does his mind. Only his feet do: They propel him immediately through the woods before him and keep him running as long as his lungs and heart allow, like an animal in the cross hairs of a hunter's gun.

Eventually, a Polish farmer hid Velvel beneath the floorboards of his house and fed him in exchange for pieces of silver flatware Velvel was carrying. While he hid, the Nazi's killed his wife and daughter. They also killed his son, who was hiding in his non-Jewish girlfriend's house until a neighbor told on him for a reward. The Nazis came to the house, saw a burning cigarette and asked if anyone smoked. Everyone said no. Figuring someone must have been smoking, the Nazis searched the house until they found Velvel's son, took him and his girlfriend and her family into the street and shot them all.

An older cousin of mine remembers sitting around my grandparent's kitchen table with our aunts and uncles reading a letter from a relative, listing which family members had been killed in Torchin. Over and over they cried, "Him, too? Oh, no. Her, too?"

After the war, Velvel went to France, then to Canada, where he met Lottie, and brought her to New Bedford to live near Julius and his family. He still had pieces of silver flatware with him. Perhaps he'd held onto it for the same reason he'd later be so tight with money: He never knew when he might need it to bribe another *goy* to save his life.

If guilt plagued Velvel because his need to survive had been stronger than the urge to be with his family, I never saw him express it. If, while he hid beneath the Polish farmer's house, or, years later, while he prospered in our provincial New England town, the image of his wife and children captured, lined up and shot by the side of a house haunted him, I never heard about it. If he woke up screaming from a nightmare or was morose in the privacy of his own home, to my knowledge, Lottie never spoke of it.

Velvel died in his 70s while I was in college. Lottie inherited his money and, despite her resentment at how tightly he had held onto a dollar, she adopted his miserliness as her own. Unhappy and lonely until the end, she'd habitually threaten to remove any relative from her will who didn't show her sufficient respect. But she loved my mother, who, whenever I came home for a visit, would insist I call Aunt Lottie to ask how she was. Her voice soft and breathless, as though it took great effort to speak, Lottie would say, "Oh, I'm okay, dear. Thank you for calling." When she died at 96, she left my mother, also a widow by then, $50,000, enough for relatives to nickname her, "The Heiress."

I can only assume Velvel would have approved of Lottie's bequest. My mother always welcomed him in our house. The last time I saw him, he was standing in our doorway, wearing a cashmere coat my father had given him from his men's clothing store. "*Guta nacht. Zay gezunt*," ("Good night. Be well") he announced loudly, his farewell as exuberant as his hello had been a few hours earlier.

I picture Velvel back in his apartment a few blocks from our house, reading the paper in the living room while Lottie prepares *flanken* and mashed potatoes for dinner. Velvel looks up at Pretty Boy's cage and makes a kissing sound.

Pretty Boy tilts his head from side to side like a metronome. "Geef me a kees on you. I loff you."

Velvel laughs as though Pretty Boy is not just mimicking random syllables, but expressing genuine feelings. He gets up from his chair and opens the birdcage. Pretty Boy flutters out to freedom, takes a spin around the living room and lands on Velvel's shoulder. Then he nuzzles his head in Velvel's neck as though the two creatures, one in captivity, the other having narrowly escaped extinction, both forever separated from their flocks, draw comfort from each other.

"Did you hear that, Lottie? He loves me, *taka* (for real)."

I imagine Lottie, too old to have children by the time she met Velvel, suffused with maternal warmth after hearing Pretty Boy's affectionate expression. Even so, she considers it foolish to think the bird knows what he's saying. "I heard him," she says. "Come eat. Your food will get cold."

Velvel guides Pretty Boy from his shoulder onto his forefinger and walks towards the bird's cage to place him on his perch inside. Just before he does, he lifts his finger toward the ceiling until Pretty Boy takes off and swoops once more around the room.

Snow After Fire

Kandi Maxwell

Fast

I wasn't always tired or ill. For sixty years, I led a furious-fast-paced life and knew, with certainty, that there was something wrong with other people. Why did they move so damn slow? What I hated most were the high school hallways where I had taught English classes. Anytime students spilled into the halls, there were traffic jams. Some students shuffled sluggishly tucked into their sweatshirt hoods, while others stopped smack in the center of the hall to chat with friends, completely oblivious to others (me) who tried to pass them. And this was a school with a population of maybe 200. Light traffic compared to city schools.

I was often shocked at how little work others completed in a day. Work ten hours? No problem. Stop for groceries after work, go to a two-hour practice with my women's drum group, walk the dogs, cook dinner, clean up, grade essays. I'd cram it all in. And if someone in my family needed help, I'd up my frantic spin to meet their needs.

Until I couldn't.

After six months in bed and a long hiatus from work, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, and worse, I had lost my vibrant mania, lost the lightening-fast creature whom friends had nicknamed Taz, a reference to the Tasmania Devil in the Looney Toon cartoons. Although my mind still flashed in swift succession and I retained my rapid speech, my tornado powers had vanished. Occasionally, I could muster up a small dust-devil and held onto the illusion: mental toughness, perseverance and fierce loyalty were my super powers.

I was still a badass.

Life in the Maybe

One day, new symptoms emerged: left-side abdominal pain, low blood sugar, spurts of high blood pressure, dizziness. My husband, Lloyd, drove me to the nearest hospital, a forty-five-minute ride down long, windy roads. We made it to the emergency room where I was admitted to the hospital for an overnight stay for CT scans and lab work. For Lloyd and me, the drive to the emergency room was a déjà vu. We had made the same trip a year earlier when I showed similar symptoms. That visit resulted in a four day hospital stay due to a mini-stroke. The memory heightened my anxiety. Lloyd tried to reassure me with words. "Take a deep breath. We're almost there," he said. Lloyd focused on the drive, but there was tension in his body and voice.

The test results came back as a host of *maybes*. Once I was released from the hospital, my doctor, Tammy, ordered more tests. As I waited for the results, I tried to create some type of routine, but I had lost my drive. Brain fog kept me from writing, fatigue kept me hidden in the house. Pain, like liquid fire, burned through my muscles and joints, confined me to bed.

When my test results finally arrived, I went to see Tammy. She walked into the room dressed as a fairy. A fluttery, lime-green tutu flared over dark-green tights. Sparkling whimsical wings were attached to her back. A Robin Hood woodsmen's cap made her look taller than her six-foot frame. Tammy's festive Halloween outfit conflicted with her business-like manner. After three months, three CT scans and an MRI, the results were hardly encouraging. "You have an adrenal tumor with mottled enhancement. The findings aren't typical of a benign tumor and this is worrisome for possible malignancy."

"Don't get worried by the maybes or all the dire information on the internet," Tammy advised. "We'll order a biopsy to determine definite results."

But I'd already read the dire information.

Hope from the 1960s

My *maybe* diagnosis was hard on my adult children. My sons, Jess and Jake, called more frequently, but both had difficulty articulating emotion. My daughter Karen's fears were more evident. I could hear the worry in her silent response to my updates on the possible cancer. We needed a distraction and Karen had the perfect antidote — tickets to see Joan Baez in a small theater at Chico State University. Joan's ballads of peaceful activism, social justice and hope offered a much-needed light. The concert was scheduled for November 2nd. That afternoon, I drove north to Chico for the concert and an overnight stay with Karen. I had dressed up: flowered bell bottoms, brown shirt, sandals, and my signature makeup-free face and long frizzy hair. Karen was in sweats when I arrived, but in ten minutes, she looked tastefully sassy in her brightly colored Frieda Kahlo T-shirt, an olive-green corduroy jacket and jeans. Karen looked great in anything.

The night was warm. Star-shaped lights were strung across the brick patio in front of the auditorium. In no time, we were following an usher to our seats, just six rows from the stage. Joan came out with her acoustic guitar, dressed in jeans, boots and a dark shirt. Her gray hair was cut short. At 77, she was still hippie-cool.

Joan sang songs I used to play and sing to my children: "Baby Blue," "Forever Young," "Blowin' in the Wind," "Diamonds and Rust." As Joan sang, Karen rested her head on my shoulder, held my hand. After the concert, Karen told me how she had felt like a child again. Joan's clear, strong voice had transported Karen and me to another time where youth, love and song could change the world. We were ecstatic. Optimistic.

Critical Fire Weather

After the concert, I drove home to our mountain cabin in the Sierra Foothills to wait for the biopsy. We also waited for rain, but the sun blazed hot in a crisp blue sky. Dry pine needles littered the ground. Not a drop of rain since spring. Spot fires had hopped around our mountain cabin all summer. A few months earlier, our neighbor's house had burned down. The memory of shooting flames and intense heat set me on edge. The occasional sound of planes or helicopters overhead brought teeth-grinding, heart-pumping panic. Lloyd raked leaves, cleaned the gutters, the roof.

PG&E sent out calls. Critical fire weather. Our power could be turned off in the coming days due to dry conditions and strong winds. That evening, Lloyd readied the camper in case we needed the propane-fueled stove and refrigerator. I set out battery lamps. We were prepared, but the power shutoff was never activated.

Evacuation

I was awakened by ringing, stumbled to the living room, picked up the phone.

"I just want you to know we're OK. We're on our way to Chico." I knew my oldest son, Jess, was on the line, and the *we* most likely included his brother, Jake.

"What do you mean?" I said, blurry-brained and confused. Jess told me there was a fire in Paradise; they were told to evacuate. "I'll call you when we get to Chico," he said.

Jess hung up, and I set down the phone, dazed. I fumbled around the room, searched for my iPad, found it, then checked the local news. At first, it seemed routine: "8:04 AM. EVACUATION ORDER: Due to a fire in the area, an evacuation order has been issued for all of Pentz road in Paradise East to Highway 70." My sons lived on a small dead-end road off Pentz.

I read how the 1,000-acre fire had exploded to 5,000 acres. An hour had passed. Chico was a quick 20-minute drive from Paradise. I sat on the couch in my tattered flannels, stunned and shaken. My ponytail a mess of tangle. I was a fidgety, fist-clinching basket case. I jumped when Jake called from Barnes and Noble. "We made it to Chico," he said. Jake told me his ex, Heidi, and my granddaughters, who also lived in Paradise, were on their way to Chico, too. “The fire is moving fast,” I said. “You’d better get a motel room as soon as possible.”

Now I was frantic, my hands gripped the iPad as I read with horror the news of the growing mass of flames. By 10:00 am, travel out of Paradise had become dangerous. Heavy smoke and fire chased vehicles as the entire community fled. The news was more heart-wrenching by the hour: people were trapped in vehicles; others ran on foot clutching animals and babies. My granddaughters, ages five and eight, were on that road. Later, Heidi told me, “Heat melted the plastic parts on my car. The fire engulfed both sides of the road and the air inside the car was suffocating.” They made it out, but night-terrors and fears trailed like smoke.

Too Much Missing

It wasn’t long before we found out the inevitable. Jess and Jake had lost their home, so they came to stay with my husband and me. My granddaughters, Annie and Marie, and their mother, had lost their home as well. Since there was no longer a school, my granddaughters stayed with us a few days a week to relieve the stress of living in motels.

Annie ran through our combo living room-dining room. Our black and white Pit-bull mutt, Jackson, scratched Annie’s leg as she flew by. She burst into tears. I held Annie in my arms. We sat on the couch together as she gulped in sobs. The scratch was tiny, barely visible, but it was the excuse Annie needed to release the sadness of her loss.

“I miss my pony collection,” she said, referring to her My Little Pony toys. “I miss Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle.” Her favorites. “We’ll get new ones,” I said. Useless words. Too much loss: her tiny grocery store toy collection of Shopkins, her Monster High dolls, her cherished blanket.

I held Annie, let her cry till she slipped into sleep.

The Cost of Caring

Karen was living her own personal hell. She was a teacher in Oroville, in the same district as Paradise. Due to the fire, school was canceled. She left work, traveled towards Chico, usually a thirty-minute drive. As the fire blasted west towards the highway, a long detour and traffic extended Karen’s commute to a grueling three-and-a-half-hour ride.

When Karen pulled into her driveway, her father, my ex-husband, Craig, sat waiting on a bench on her front porch. He wore his Army Special Forces cap, a T-shirt and faded jeans. Next to him were his two dogs, a chihuahua and his new lab puppy. These would be the only possessions he saved from the fire. But that wasn’t known at the time. What was known was the conflict Karen’s dad would bring into her home and marriage. Craig was an unreliable alcoholic. A hoarder, who had a twenty-five-year collection of recyclables and junk; glass bottles, old car parts, rusty weights, an old television and broken chairs littered his yard. Wearily, she let him into her house.

A week later, Karen called. “I can’t do this. He’s ruining my marriage. We have to find another place for him to live.” She was crying. Like me, Karen filled the role of caregiver. And not with just family. When Karen was a little girl, we lived in Oregon surrounded by forest. One day we drove past a clear cut. Karen broke into tears. There was no way to stop her hiccupped cries. I was of no help, as I felt like Karen. Our empathy was deep. We were sad for the trees.

Even now, as I’m writing, a puppy across the street is howling. He’s tied to a tether, and he’s stuck. The cable has wrapped round and round a tree. No one is home. I keep walking across the street to try to untangle him, but the neighbors also have a loose pit bull. He’s not happy and playful like our dog, Jackson. He’s aggressive and won’t let me near the younger pup. I can’t stop worrying about the puppy. I worry, listen, write, worry, listen, write. Then I look out the window, but there are no lights along our street. Only darkness and a scared puppy.

Letting Go

The summer before the fire, Karen had learned she could not have children. There was now emptiness instead of babies. Mothering was Karen's MO. She had worked with children since a young teen as a volunteer for The Boys and Girls Club. She worked as a teaching assistant in college and had been a teacher for over a decade.

Karen and I were on a walk. We stopped on a hilltop, watched as the sun fell between the trees below. "I have to let this go," Karen told me. *This* was two years of trying to get pregnant. "The monthly disappointment is too much." I wrapped my arms around Karen as her shoulders shook with sadness. I had no words of comfort. For months, Karen had been working through the stages of grief. The fire hindered her progress.

Instead of having her own child, Karen had become the reluctant parent to Craig. She paid to get his car fixed, took him to the Veteran's Center to sign up for services. When FEMA arrived, she was the first to sign up via email. She drove her father to look for places to stay: motel rooms, old migrant-worker barracks, trailer parks. Craig was in no hurry to find a home for himself and his two dogs. He could have easily slipped himself into Karen's home and stayed.

But there were problems. Like me, Karen and her husband were neurotically tidy. Craig was the opposite. Dinner plates, coffee mugs, and drinking glasses sat on the counter. When he used the bathroom, water spilled across the sink. In the bedroom, where Craig slept with his dogs, all of Karen's books on the bottom shelf were shredded.

"I'm giving him two weeks," Karen told me over the phone. "I have to return to work, and I need to take care of myself." Karen told me she had talked to a counselor. With help, she was able to confront her dad. "I told him he was on his own."

Karen didn't really leave him alone. With monetary help from her aunts, Craig's sisters, Karen bought Craig a trailer and helped him move out. It was a start.

Welcome Distractions

My home filled with family. They were a welcomed distraction from my maybe cancer. I could focus on the tangible. We drove to the Disaster Center in Chico. The center was inside an old Sears building, recently cleaned, and the scent of antiseptic lingered. Tall ceilings and vast floors made talking difficult; voices echoed from every direction. Services were set up at long tables. One side of the building was for FEMA: staff stood ready to help individuals sign up for housing or reimbursement for contents lost in their homes. Another side of the building had tables for postal services, the DMV, unemployment assistance. People gathered around large boxes of donations placed throughout the store: blankets, sheets, coats, shoes, and pantry foods were handed out freely. Addresses and DMV records were changed. We collected donations of toothbrushes, razors, socks and soaps.

Later, there was shopping to be done. An activity I typically found grueling, now got me out of bed. There were clothes to buy. Plastic tubs for storage. Toys for the girls. Shopping was my new one-day-a-week profession, something I could commit to even in my weakened state. I still believed the false narrative: somehow, I could smooth the road ahead.

Wiped-out Warrior

The long days were taking their toll: my energy waned. I started spending more mornings in bed. I didn't have the stamina to make coffee, and if I got up, I would have to put the kettle on. Then, I would have to feed the dog, or make the bed. Instead, I fluffed my pillows, picked up my iPad from the bedside and read or wrote. Lloyd fed the dog and stoked the stove and the world didn't fall apart.

Before my illness, I was the tenacious warrior, capable and strong, determined to sacrifice self to save others. What a stupid delusion. I have decided to desert my post.

Paradise Lost

I drove to Paradise with my son, Jess. The drive up the ridge was bittersweet. The valley fog opened to blue skies and expansive landscapes. The morning sun gave the hillsides a soft orange glow, and the world looked spring-clean as bright green grasses rose out of the blackened soil. Earthy shades of brown, rust, and tan covered the land. The scorched earth produced a pleasant aroma: a sweet, after-the-rain-campfire scent.

As we ascended, the scenery changed. Utility workers cleared fallen trees and charred brush. Burnt-out cars littered the roadside. Houses had vanished. In their place were thick layers of ash, melted glass, twisted wire, maybe a chimney. We turned onto the street where the boys' house once stood but were disoriented. We had to get out of the car to hunt for the stone driveway. The two-story, A-frame house had shifted into a stretch of ghostly-grey soot. The patch of powdered remains looked small surrounded by the wide-open space. I felt sadness for the loss of the house, but the irreplaceable items were harder to grasp. Jess and Jake were artists. Their paintings, drawings, and sculptures were gone.

"Maybe we'll find something if we dig up the soot," I said. Jess and I shoveled through the ash, found bits of pottery, but when cradled in our hands, the clay crumbled to dust. "Look what I found," Jess said, holding up a small, wire dragonfly. His only treasure.

Later, I looked at photos of that day. Jess stands, gazing at the rubble. He wears a green sweatshirt; a grey beanie covers his short, brown hair. His shoulders slump. He's holding the cardboard box we had hoped to fill with items spared in the fire. The box is empty.

Anxiety pressed on my chest. I put the photos away, pushed my thumbs into my temples hoping to relieve the throbbing in my head. I wondered how much more I could endure.

The Biopsy

Lloyd and I left in a dark-morning fog and rain, headed towards Roseville, a two-hour drive. The ride was peaceful until we hit the valley. Once we arrived in city territory, I did my usual raving lunatic routine: pressing my foot on an invisible brake and providing Lloyd with a barrage of unwanted advice — *watch out, slow down, you 're going too fast, stop!* Lloyd sat quietly. That does not mean he was calm. I imagined smoke billowing out of his ears.

Lloyd and I lived in a land of no cell service, so instead of a GPS, I scoured maps. I had detailed a notecard with explicit directions. I even noted landmarks, but as soon as we left the highway, we were lost. Large buildings and traffic obscured street signs. One-way streets caused confusion. Frustrations surged, but we eventually found the facility.

From there, things went smoothly. I began the intake process by answering about one million questions, dressed myself in a size XXXX paper gown and a hair net. A nurse hooked me up to an IV, and my body calmed. After I was settled and wheeled into surgery, Lloyd left to search for the cafeteria and a much-needed breakfast.

It wasn't long before the surgeon inserted needles into five spots on the tumor. In less than ten minutes, the procedure was completed. I was sent to the *spa* to recover, a small room with a bed surrounded by a light-blue curtain. After an hour's wait, Lloyd and I were sent off with well-wishes.

We drove back through the traffic mess, got turned around again, but eventually found Hwy 65, our ticket home. "This environment is horrible. It's so loud, too many cars and shops. How can people live in this chaos?" I said to Lloyd. He suggested I quiet down and go to sleep, which I eventually did thanks to the lingering effects of the anesthesia.

What's Wrong with Me?

I was at the local clinic where I had an appointment for a consultation with my doctor, Tammy, to review the biopsy results. I had checked in and settled into the patient room when a nurse asked, "We're you expecting to get your results back today?" When I told her, "yes," she said, "I'm sorry, but our computers have been down all day. Do you want to reschedule?" *Hell no. It's Friday. I won't get the biopsy results until next week.* I had no wait-time left in me. I tried to sound polite, controlled. "I would still like to talk with Tammy." As I waited in the office, time ticked by. It was 4:45 pm. *Shit. Tammy will have to call the Roseville Clinic.* I knew the clinic closed at 5:00 pm. My head pounded. I slumped over my legs, rested my head in my hands.

Tammy came in five minutes later. "Did you see the results on your online health program?" she asked.

"Nothing's been posted yet," I said.

"I've been looking for the results all week," Tammy said. "I'll call Roseville and see if we can get the latest news." She walked out and left me alone, cringing in my chair.

I could hear her voice in the other room, but no distinct words. Finally, Tammy returned, all smiles. "No cancer," she announced gleefully. "They biopsied five spots on the tumor, all were negative."

"That's great news," I said. "Such a relief." It was a lie. For four months, I had prepared for cancer, was ready for the bad news, and now, my not-cancer diagnosis left me in despair. *What's wrong with me?*

"Because the tumor is 3.6 cm, Dr. Kim will wait on surgery. We'll get another CT in three months to see if the tumor has grown," Tammy said. She made an appointment with an endocrinologist to determine why my adrenaline levels were abnormally low. Another appointment with a rheumatologist simmered on the backburner. I wanted it to be over, wanted something definitive.

I wanted a fucking diagnosis.

Slid'n Away

I was in the freezer section of the grocery store. A foreign territory. Large, glass cases held rows and rows of foods. There were frozen meals, frozen fruits and vegetables, meats, baked goods and even a Paleo and organic food selection. My former self would have been appalled.

In winter, I loved shopping in the produce section of a natural foods store, choosing only the freshest, organic vegetables. In summer, Lloyd, a garden enthusiast, worked tirelessly tending vegetable beds and saving heirloom seeds for the following year's planting. I was the primary harvester, the one who put-up food for winter; dried fruits and fruit leathers, frozen vegetables and canned foods filled our kitchen. Lloyd had built an outdoor, wood-fired oven for baking breads and pizzas. I baked round loaves of artisan bread, made pizzas with garden tomatoes and fresh basil. Now, standing in the grocery store, I felt my organic-hippie-self slip off my skin.

I searched the frozen food section carefully, reading the ingredients on each package. I chose an organic lasagna, a bag of mixed veggies, tamales. Seeing that these were not the standard TV dinners of my youth, gave me a bit of relief.

The following week, I bought my first microwave. I feared radiation would zap nutrition from foods, create carcinogens. *This is for the boys. They can take it with them when they find housing.* I told myself this to relieve the guilt of the purchase.

I struggled to hold onto the person I believed myself to be. Lloyd and I shared a passion for living simply. We were back-to-the-landers, had lived off-grid. Raised cattle, goats, chickens, horses. We were used to hard, physical work: stacking hay, splitting and stacking wood, chopping ice in water troughs on freezing mornings, trudging through snow, digging hard ground. My amplified illness and my family's dislocation from the fire forced changes in both of us.

New Normal

A cold morning. The ground wet from atmospheric river rains. The sun shone brightly, the world washed clean. I had an appointment with my primary care doctor for my *whatever* diagnosis.

I sat in the small waiting room at the local medical clinic. Photos of three young hippie men hung on the wall. One man had shoulder-length brown hair, a bushy David Crosby mustache. The other two men were wavy-haired, tall and lean. They wore cowboy hats, faded jeans and fringed leather jackets. These were the original clinic doctors, now in their 70s. After a brief wait, the nurse called my name and lead me into another room where, Tammy, my doctor, waited.

Tammy and I reviewed my symptoms. The tumor on my left adrenal gland remained, producing an annoying pain, like I had swallowed a crumpled ball of tin foil. My adrenal hormones were abnormally low. I was worn out, weary, drained, and drowsy.

"You're going to have to create a new-normal," Tammy said. "Plan on adding activities back into your life slowly over the next six months. You will feel better if you can get out more."

I told Tammy about the sharp pains beneath my ribs, my inflamed joints and the ache deep inside my bones. How it took an enormous effort to get out of bed.

"Is your family still with you?" she asked.

"My sons are living with us. My granddaughters have moved for the fifth time. They're in a motel right now, so they come here often."

With 30,000 people dislocated from the fire, finding homes seemed impossible, and FEMA trailers wouldn't be available for months. We were at a breaking point. The day before my appointment, Heidi, my granddaughters' mother told me, "I just want one good night's sleep. I don't know how long I can keep this up."

"That must be stressful," Tammy said. "I'm sure that has an influence on your energy level."

Tammy was right. I needed to accomplish at least one thing each day. To come to terms with my limitations and life in this in-between place where pushing forward was excruciatingly slow.

Dreams

In daydreams, I had planned to backpack the Pacific Crest Trail after retirement. That was out, so I looked for what was in. More reading, writing, and, of course, more family time. And there was sitting in the sun with Lloyd on cool, winter days. Because we live in forest land, we moved our chairs around the yard, followed the sun's warmth. I sipped coffee while Lloyd smoked his herb, and the sunlight did its healing magic. We talked about moving higher up the mountain, getting more land, living off-grid again.

Was this delusional thinking? I shared my thoughts in an email with a dear friend who lived in the high country. "No one ever said there were limit lines to dreams," he wrote. His words sunk in, and my lips involuntarily turned up, and I felt something like hope.

It's been four months since the fire, seven months since my visit to the ER; not much has changed. Except the snow is falling. Tiny cotton bits lightly drop onto the ground. I can't stop watching it, the way it descends so light and sleepy, how it quiets the house and my mind, how it makes the world look unblemished and new.

Memory Is Jasmine-Scented

Eileen Obser

We renewed our friendship on a bitter cold, bleak day in February of 1964. It had been six months since we had seen each other, since Atiya returned to journalism school at the University of Missouri.

Much had been happening in the news since Atiya and I were apart.

The civil rights movement was in full swing. Martin Luther King had been to the top of the mountain and had delivered his momentous, never-to-be forgotten "I Have a Dream" speech. The women's lib movement was in its embryo stage with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* a year before, which Atiya and I were to confess, neither of us had taken time yet to read. The Beatles arrived in New York on February 7, their historic first U.S. visit, not along before Atiya herself came back to the city.

The most shocking occurrence during those months was, of course, the assassination of President Kennedy in November. Atiya and I had talked on the telephone then, and we had written to each other, out of a need to share our deep sorrow for a world where this terrible thing could have happened.

As I rushed toward the Eighth Street café, in Greenwich Village, where we had met the last time she was in New York City, I tried to reconstruct my mental picture of her, the image I had kept with me all during the fall and winter months while she was gone.

Not quite five feet tall, her thin brown body wrapped in saris of gaily patterned cottons or silks, Atiya had seemed to me an exotic flower, a bird of paradise amidst weeds that sprouted through the jagged pavement of the ugly city. With her jet-black hair, almond-shaped eyes and long, tangled mass of blue-black hair, Atiya exuded intelligence and conveyed a strong sense of mysticism.

"It's the poet in me," she would say, laughing. She was twenty-three years old to my twenty-two.

"You are my sister," she had said to me shortly after we met.

"Your sister from Queens," I replied with a laugh. "We're definitely not fraternal. No one would guess I'm your sister."

I was an ordinary looking American, I felt, of German-Irish extraction, with my reddish-blonde hair, blue eyes and freckles. In Hyderabad, India, where Atiya was born and raised in a Muslim family, I might be the exotic flower that she was here in New York City.

"You take too many things that I say literally," Atiya had said to me, gently chastising, but apparently amused.

"I've missed you so much! You look wonderful," I said now as we hugged tightly, and then kissed each other on both cheeks. In truth, I was sad to see that she had abandoned Indian dress for western clothes, nothing of which fit her.

She looked me in the eye, searching for the truth behind my too-obviously insincere remark about her appearance. Her smile was broad and unrestrained, and her dark eyes sparkled behind her brown-rimmed glasses. "I have missed you too, my friend. I have appreciated your letters."

"I've never seen you dressed in western clothes," I said after a mutual pause.

And I saw on her face that look of recognition: so *that* is why Eileen has been looking at me so strangely.

A beige, spring-weight jacket, dirty, and at least four sizes too big, was pulled tight around her thin body. With this she wore a black cotton skirt that she had obviously altered and that was much too tight, with a nondescript bulky, black pullover sweater. Oversized black leather heels, with no nylons, topped off her outfit. A dormant flower now of winter, hidden from view, she exuded no beauty, no trace of blossom, no fragrance whatsoever.

"You must be cold. It's about thirty degrees." From inside the warm shelter of my dark wool pea coat, I was distressed about her lack of adequate clothing.

"No, Eileen, I'm not cold. I am quite okay. Thank you for your concern."

The clothes were hand-me-downs, obviously, thrift-shop or church bazaar. And it was possibly the only coat she owned.

“Clothing is not terribly important to me.” She smiled at me.

“And how have you been?” I asked, linking my arm with hers, walking into the tavern where the wood-burning fireplace in one corner created welcome and cozy warmth after the stinging winter air of the street. We sat at a table near the fireplace, rubbing at our hands and faces to regain comfort, smiling at each other, both filled with so much to say.

“I’ve been all right. Things have been well.”

But the expression on her face told me differently. There was sorrow written there. There was pain. I was reminded of lines from one of her poems:

> Words of a dumb language
> Clamor in my sleep
> Making my own the horizon’s eternal confusion
> I am thrown between two worlds,
> Bored with one and
> Despairing of another.*

We went through the usual pleasantries that friends exchange when meeting after a long while. I was okay; she was okay. My family in Queens was fine; her family in India was probably fine. New York City did not seem to change very much; Columbia, Missouri, ditto.

The cafe was quiet; we had liked it before for that reason. We could think as we spoke; the distractions were minimal. She had an herbal tea. I had a hot chocolate.

“I have completed my work,” she told me. “My thesis was well-received.”

As of the past week, she had her Masters in Journalism from the University of Missouri. A time for celebration, but she was obviously not in a mood to do so. I knew what a strain the last two years had been on her. It cost her family a great deal, financially and emotionally, to send their eldest child twelve thousand miles away to further her education. She was a poet and a scholar, and all their hopes were invested in her. Atiya *had* to make good to justify their trust.

“I know how hard you worked on the thesis. Congratulations.”

“And thanks to you, Eileen, for your help with my research.”

The thesis was the reason that we met, in July of the past year. I was working for *The New York Times* Information Bureau where Atiya had come to assess the *Times’* treatment of India in its editorials. She did her research every day for several weeks, and I helped her locate editorials with the index and microfilm. We became friendly and soon were meeting at the end of the day, exchanging experiences and backgrounds, our hopes and fears and goals.

“It’s very difficult,” Atiya said to me now, in the comfortable Greenwich Village cafe. “I must make some decisions. I have been procrastinating, as you know.”

“There’s always Paris,” I said to her with a smile.

Both writers, we had often shared anecdotes about our favorite authors. We envied those who chose Paris for a home and daydreamed aloud about traveling there together, about living and writing there, about *being* there.

“But what would you do about Fred?” she said to me. We shared lemon and honey pastries that the waitress brought to our table. “Do you love him?

“I don’t know.” I had been asked the question before. You were supposed to know if you loved someone to whom you were engaged. But we had set no date. I wore a diamond ring that he gave me, but what did it mean? What were we doing together?

Love. Earlier in the year, in my diary, I wrote over and over in various ways: How can I marry him? I feel that he doesn’t accept me as I am. I want to be free to live my life as I choose. Yet, I would not want him to be hurt. Is this love? Shouldn’t we wait and not marry? It could be a disaster.” This was interspersed with other thoughts, when I would write, paradoxically: Oh, I do love him, I do, I do. He’s wonderful, he’s patient, he’s kind . . .

Did I really believe that what I felt for Fred was love? Was I trying not to face the truth? Was I afraid to break loose, go it alone and test myself in an unknown world, away from family and territory that was familiar and “safe”?

Atiya seemed to measure my period of silence, instinctively knowing when I had enough time to mull over the question. "My family would like me to return to India," she said finally, "but I truly don't want to do that yet."

"I'm sure they miss you after two whole years."

"Exactly. It's a dilemma. I have been educated here for two years and have been exposed to a whole new world, to an entire new possibility for my life. But my family, as educated as they are, expect me to come home, marry the man they select for me, and then continue on with my life there — or here in America — or wherever else. Whatever I do, you see, cannot truly be my own choice. A very large and important part of my life must be lived on their terms."

We ordered another beverage.

"I've been sending out my resume," Atiya told me. "I'm hoping someone will want to hire a brand new journalist, one with an *exotic* difference."

We laughed over that.

Last summer she had lamented about this exoticness in regard to the various men who passed through her life since she came to the United States. A bauble from the East to those young men who admired her, she was displayed at the parties to which they took her as a reader of palms, a dancer of the primitive dances of India, a bejeweled and lovely goddess of the temple.

"Several of these fellows," she had told me, "treated me like some kind of mother-figure deity. They acted like I must be all knowing, filled with compassion and tenderness." She became quite agitated. "I ask you — what was wrong with their own mothers? Why do we women fall into these roles when we aren't even intending to?"

"My diary is filled with those kinds of thoughts." I sighed. "It's one reason why I'm afraid to marry Fred. I'll wind up being a mother to him and to his kids and nothing else. I want more than that for myself."

She nodded and sighed.

We talked of other, more practical matters. She had very little money and, in fact, owed several hundred dollars to a friend. She was living, temporarily, in a loft in Soho; it was becoming an intolerable situation.

"I'm disturbed about so many things, Eileen. And I don't think this is neurotic."

"No," I agreed. "You're not a neurotic."

"I have had no mail from India in many months. I don't know why no one is in touch with me. Perhaps my family is in trouble and cannot bear to tell me. I have no decent place to live, no money, and I've become so very confused about love and morality."

"Will you do me one favor?" I asked her.

"Of course, Eileen. Just ask."

"I know how proud and independent you are, but will you please come and live with me in my apartment in Queens? I mean, just until you can get better established?"

We had discussed this before, last summer and on the telephone and in our letters during the fall. To my surprise and relief, Atiya agreed. "But only for a short while," she said. "I will soon find a job and an apartment of my own."

On Saturday afternoon, I recruited Fred to help, and we drove into Manhattan to move Atiya out of the loft where her writer-artist friend, Sonia, whom she had met in graduate school, was living, for free, with a rabid-looking artist named Lew. Today, lofts in Soho have become highly desirable places to live, glamorous and expensive and photographed for *Better Homes and Gardens, The New York Times,* and so on. But in February 1964 there were many depressingly ugly lofts downtown that were nasty holes in the wall and nothing more.

As she gathered together some worn down satchels and cartons that had traveled from India to New York to Columbia, Missouri, and back to New York and that contained her clothing, books and cherished possessions, I tried to appear blasé about the visual attack that the loft presented to me. I didn't dare look at Fred; I felt his disapproval every minute. I had cautioned him that the place might be a total bohemian mess; he couldn't say I didn't warn him.

Sonia and Lew pretty much ignored us. Bits of food — cheeses and meats and breads — littered the countertop of their filthy kitchenette. Two straggly cats roamed the countertop, but the food was apparently not appetizing enough for them to eat. "Health food" reposed on a large, metal tray on the dining room table: bean sprouts and various limp greens, chunks of tomato, and some other unsavory looking items I didn't recognize. The place smelled of tuna fish, the oily kind. Lunch, obviously, and the empty cans, three of them, were scattered on the filthy floor where the cats were occasionally inspired to lick at them.

The loft was a large open space, non-partitioned, light and airy (read: damp and cold). To get to it, you opened the door at street level and climbed up a sheer, rickety, wooden staircase of at least one hundred steps (or four stories). Halfway up was a door to the left leading to another loft-abode, which we did not have the pleasure of seeing. Moving Atiya out meant three trips up and down those incredible stairs.

On my first trip downward, I had to kick a dead, mangled mouse out of my way. And I prayed that rodents and cockroaches were not going to make the trip to Queens with us.

Sonia was from a "good home," Atiya had told me. Lew was just the latest in a long series of brief loves in her life. She said hello, but after giving Atiya a quick hug and "bye", she bounded down the stairs.

She was a very beautiful young woman, and very aloof. Lew did not want any roommate other than Sonia, so Atiya's presence had caused a rift among the lovebirds. As I tried to step over their "bed" — a large mattress in the middle of the floor covered with a grayish white sheet — I reached for a colorful item of clothing that looked Indian.

"Is this yours?" I asked Atiya.

"Thank you, no," she said. "It was, actually, but I gave it to Lew for a gift." She gestured toward Lew, who was at the far front of the loft, painting onto a huge canvas and totally ignoring us.

Ah. Treasures from the East as peace offerings had not worked.

In Queens, I had my own separate apartment above my parents' apartment, that I had moved into last year after living alone elsewhere, and which allowed me some measure of freedom. Atiya was accepted easily enough, as if she was some kind of exchange student. She was pleasant and very likeable and talked about India and her own family to my parents.

"It makes me homesick, Eileen. Your mother makes me miss my home and my own mother."

* * *

She traveled into the city with me on Monday morning to go job-hunting. She looked okay, with a tailored suit she owned that we cleaned and pressed out, and a coat of mine that she borrowed. "The western-looking Eastern journalist," I teased.

She laughed easily. While I spent my workday at *The New York Times*, she went on interviews. We met up after five o'clock and made the train, then bus journey back to Queens.

> Home, to complain to the silent phone
> To face the clock on the wall
> Ticking black drops into
> My empty cup of day.

She had written the words earlier, but now, in February, they had immediate impact. No letters from home or from friends scattered in various cities of the U.S. or the world. For more than a month — nothing. No one seemed concerned that she had completed her studies and graduated. No one knew her address here in Queens or, of course, her telephone number.

"I am inaccessible," she told me. "I am detached from everyone I know, from everyone I have ever known."

"You have me," I said to her, trying to elicit a laugh. What I got was a quick, fleeting frown.

"My poetry is in Missouri, in the care of a friend who may or who may not care for it adequately. So I am detached, too, from my lifework, from the very reason for my being."

The weather was bitter cold. She was always cold, always sniffling, even at home in my apartment. It was often difficult to cheer her up. I knew she felt that she was sponging off someone else again — me. Disjointed, disconnected, discouraged, dismayed.

Our evenings were spent in conversation. It was exhilarating, almost exhaustingly so, having her with me all the time. We each had so much to say, and we hammered out thoughts and ideas at a non-stop pace. Later in life, I would realize that Atiya filled a special need in my life for intellectual stimulation, for a kind of closeness and sharing of hearts and minds that I wasn't aware I was lacking. We had a mutual understanding that was uncanny, even completing each others' sentences and thoughts at times.

"Ye shall only know this when ye shall know God."

I had interpreted this tenet of Catholic teaching to mean there was no such thing as an intimate heart-to-heart, soul-to-soul relationship here on earth. It could only be found in Heaven, with God himself. I further understood and accepted that I must be a very good girl so that I would eventually wind up in Heaven, happy forevermore. Much later, I would read these lines of Atiya's:

> We are of the cruel and sinful of this earth
> There is no God but the One but the One, the One
> Have heard it echoed in the sea's confessions,
> The sea shell's rosary and the fervent waves.

All the men in my life, from my father through the boys I cared about and loved in my childhood and adolescence, had thus far disappointed me, and were continuing to disappoint me. I had not yet forged a satisfying, loving union with a man, not even with Fred, and I was beginning to think I never would.

The relationship with Atiya, while not the least physical, affected me on the deepest, most spiritual level. It was as if she could read my soul, that she knew me to the farthest corners of my being. I was shocked when I realized this. I had enjoyed many close friendships during my childhood and adolescence, but never as close as this one.

Give me something real besides pain;
I thought I had lived, I would not know
if it were not for the tired beat of the pulse,
each day, each hour, in a ritual to pain.

After less than two weeks, Atiya moved out. Queens was not the place for her. She wanted the convenience of a Manhattan address; in her case, Greenwich Village, on the west side near the subway and buses.

"You are very dear to me, Eileen," she said. "but I have found a place in the city through an acquaintance from Missouri and I want to move there."

"I understand." And I did. We both realized that living together was putting a strain on our friendship. We were very different, and from different cultures. Each of us needed time and privacy for our thoughts, for our creativity. Much as we could communicate so wonderfully, the realities of daily life might soon undo our fine relationship.

Fred helped us pack up the satchels and cartons and, once again, we drove into Manhattan.

"Don't you worry," Atiya told me when I saw her new home. "I won't be here long. As soon as I find something better that I can afford, I'll make still another move."

She was to share a four-room flat with an artist who was there only when he was painting; he lived elsewhere. His paintings, wall-size, Jackson Pollack-looking abstracts, were everywhere. He had cleared space in one of the rooms for Atiya, who seemed delighted that she would now have a room of her own, and with more privacy than she had had since coming from Missouri.

Her "home" was on the fourth floor of a walk-up tenement in a row of tenements that clearly should have been renovated, if not razed. It was a dump.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" It wasn't as bad as the Soho loft, to my eyes, but it certainly wasn't much better. The halls were dark, the stairs old and creaky; the other tenants were fearsome-looking, and the room she rented reeked of paint and chemicals. It contained one gruesome-looking single bed-cot and a small, filthy chest of drawers. "You're allowed to change your mind, Atiya. We can go back to Queens right now."

But, no, she stayed. And this was the last time I was ever to speak to her again.

Oh my dear, then what happened?
Your feet were retracing in fear
Your arms, receding, recoiling . . .
Your laugh in the rain was frozen
The thunder commanded 'Control'
I had paid the price of sanity.

There it was, all the news that fit, coming through the Associated Press teletype machine at *The New York Times.*

". . . Three persons killed, four others in serious condition with extensive burns . . . trapped in a stairwell as they tried to open the door leading to the roof."

It had been exactly three days since she moved out of my apartment. I would give her time to get settled. I would not call or try to mother her.

"Hurry, please," I told the taxi driver, but he was helplessly tangled in traffic. We seemed to hit every red light from West Forty-Third Street to St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village.

"There's nothing you can do, dear," a nurse told me. "There's really nothing anyone can do at this time. Can you tell us how to contact her family?"

A doctor spoke to me outside the door to her room. I nodded as he spoke but I was unable to speak or to move into that room. She was covered in gauze from head to toe. "Unconscious . . . eighty percent burned . . . great loss of body fluids . . . the worst of the critical victims. Terminal."

My friend. My friend. I broke down right there in the hallway.

Fred came. I had managed to call him and say a few words, but then I had to hang up. I was as useless to the world as my poor, dying friend. I could make no decisions. I could not function.

"In their fright, the victims apparently did not think of the fire escape," the news article said. "They ran, instead, into the hall and up the short flight of stairs that led to the roof. But the door was jammed; they could not force it open. They were trapped. By the time firemen broke down the door from outside, three persons were dead. Names are being withheld pending notification of families. . ."

"I've called the Indian Consulate, Eileen." Fred said. "Do you remember her uncle's name, the one who lives down south?"

"No." I don't think she had ever told me. I couldn't think. It occurred to us both at the same time: the Consulate should contact the University of Missouri. Fred made the necessary call, leaving me again in the hall of the wounded, the maimed, and the dying. I sat hunched on a wooden bench, as good as dead; inside, within my soul, all was certainly dead.

"Would you like to see her, dear?"

A navy blue-clad nun stood before me, compassion in her eyes.

"I'll go inside with you if you'd like."

I shook my head. "Not yet."

I saw Atiya's thin little brown body wrapped in flames, a look of terror in her eyes. I felt her wounds as the fire seared her skin. Then I saw her black out, finally, in blessed unconsciousness, and I watched others trample over her in their panic to get to safety.

I saw the fireman gently lift her in his arms and carry her down the ladder — six flights down to the street. I saw the ambulance light flashing in the darkness and heard the piercing wail of the siren as they rushed her through the night to the hospital.

Death is utterly mistaken, I'm not hers.

I went away long before it came.

Was this a bit of self-prophecy in her lines?

"Ah-tee'-ya," she told me when we first met. "That's Arabic for `gift from God, or Allah.'" And now He would take away His gift to the world, this exalted Indian giver.

This was no ordinary mortal who was dying, I told myself. I told Fred as well.

"There, there," he said. "I know how you feel."

A poet was dying in that room. A super-dimensional being, with a mind and soul inordinately alert and creatively productive. Speeches — speeches should be made. We are gathered here in the presence of the Lord Who is the One the One the One. Music; there should be music. Dirges first, plenty of dirges, from every land and religion, then hymns and hallelujahs and marches, then a real New Orleans send-off. A sitar or two somewhere for the proper effect. Indian dancers performing the dances of her native country like she herself had spoken about months earlier on Oscar Brand's radio show, arranged by a college acquaintance who knew Oscar Brand.

"You are the only one of my friends who heard me on that program, Eileen."

She told me this in February, in the cafe.

"You sounded wonderful. You should get a copy of the tape and send it to your family."

"Yes, I must do that, Eileen. You are right. Just as soon as I get settled, that is something I will attend to."

Her uncle arrived and, as he told me later, Atiya bolted upright in the hospital bed. She was still bandaged from head to toe and she couldn't speak, but he felt it meant a lot to her to know that he was there.

Unweave
the dreams worn threadbare, burn
the old talismans
throw the charms away
accoutrements of a play in which we acted.
Draw the curtain on the forbidden dream
dim the lights of memory
let the lingering notes of the swan never return.

The funeral home was one of New York City's most prestigious. Atiya's uncle, a man of good taste and wealth, had made the necessary arrangements. Her body had been cleansed, and then wrapped in clean white cloth by two Muslim women. The brown metal casket was closed. Seven Muslim men, her uncle plus six strangers from the New York mosque, prayed to Allah on the carpet near the bier in their stockinged feet. The words were Arabic, and the chanting and motions of feet and hands were strange and disturbing to me. I was the only outsider except for a Hindu gentleman from the Indian Consulate, and the only female in the room. I stood awkwardly at the door, bundled in boots and raincoat, surprised that I should be allowed to witness the service. My thoughts were a confusion of grief, compassion and pity. Pity for her and pity for me. She was beyond pity, of course, but I was not.

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams? . . .

Why indeed.

In the limousine, on the way to the cemetery on Staten Island where there was a section just for Muslims, I thought of the words to many of her poems, including that one.

The raindrops that splattered the windows were the tears I had not been able to shed since her death. The fog and bleakness of the cold March day were my mood. After a long, silent ride through Manhattan, we rode the ferry through the storm and made our way through hilly streets to the cemetery. It was a rundown, ill-paved, gateless burial ground. This was where Atiya was to rest. No time to ship her body home to India. Muslim law decreed she was to be buried quickly. We sloshed through mud and red earth and watched the impatient caretaker lower the crank, lower the casket into the earth. Then we turned and left in silence.

Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

* * *

I soon made up my mind to do the very thing that Atiya and I spoke of and dreamed of: I would travel to France. I would live there and work there. I could do this now; not to do what seemed so utterly important would be to cheat myself and to cheat Atiya. Divinity might live within me, although recent events had torn at my spirit and at my belief in a just God. If Divinity lived within me, it would see me through a transition; it would see me change my life so that I used my abilities to their fullest potential.

I considered this a gift to me from Atiya — the impetus to do what I feared doing till now: leaving Fred, leaving my job and friends and home for the challenge of another country, of learning and writing and growing. And it would be my gift to her. Just knowing what I was about to do broke the spell of my shock, of my grief.

Memory is jasmine-scented . . .
(Of) divali lights necklacing the lake,
Mirroring a thousand hopes o
Of a myriad people.
Songs fading on lips
Reproach memory...

Atiya's poetry and her spirit have remained in my memory and continue to sustain and inspire me.

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* All poetry from collection, *Gautama Wept,* by Atiya Effendi, 1964, in public domain.

Rocky and the Rebel Punk

Guinotte Wise

There were several people in the suburban Kansas City living room. My maternal grandfather and grandmother. My mother, a martini in one hand, cigarette in the other. My stepfather mixing a drink at the wet bar. My sister. The usual drop-in Sunday drinker or two.

My grandfather snapped the *Kansas City Star* he was reading and made the pronouncement. No one disagreed. The declaration, practically a Papal Bull coming from a man who had once been the Kansas City District Attorney (appointed by Harding, but that's another story) was this: "I'd say this boy is well on his way to being a criminal." "This boy" was me at sixteen. My grandmother pursed her lips and frowned into an old-fashioned.

I had been picked up at a juvenile detention center in downtown Kansas City and delivered to the house by my uncle Pete. Reno Pete. Pete was no stranger to police blotters himself, and that may be why he had been designated to spring me. My crime? I was in a carload of contemporaries which had stopped along the way to add to a growing cache of hubcaps, a form of currency back in the fifties. A couple of the guys had hopped out, jimmied four hubcaps from a new Oldsmobile with large blade screwdrivers and hopped back in with the precision of an Indy pit crew. We were also drinking beer. When the siren sounded, the driver weighed running for it against the possibility that he may have been speeding and the trunk full of chrome wouldn't be discovered. He pulled over.

A flashlight search produced hubcaps under the front seats, some underfoot on the back floor clanking against empty beer cans. The trunk was a mother lode. I can still hear the driver's voice in my head. "Hubcaps? Officer, I *have* hubcaps. Why would I need more?" We were all charged with theft and underage drinking, deposited at the downtown Kansas City police station, then transferred to a juvenile center. Cops were not hamstrung by any PC mores back then. I spied a phone while sitting and waiting, got up to make my one call that I'd seen on *Dragnet*. A detective said, "What the fuck?" and smacked me with an open hand upside the head as they say. The message was clear. No phone call. "Sit the fuck down," he requested.

When phone calls *were* allowed, the other guys' parents got them out that night. I was left in for that night and the next. My stepfather was a law and order type who occasionally quoted John Wayne.

I recall trying to sleep on a sprung cot the first night in a communal barracks type room. Suddenly a shadowy form loomed over me. I thought *Oh God, here it comes, I will fight to the death.* The form lifted my thin mattress at the foot of the cot, retrieved a pack of cigarettes hidden there, retreated into the darkness. I don't think I slept that night. The next morning dawned gray and we were herded to a dining area with those long tables they have in church basements. I sat between two large delinquents who jostled me, then took things from my tray. "You want that toast?" Toast gone like hubcaps in the night. I wasn't hungry anyway. You eat fast in these places or you don't eat.

My name was called mid-day the next day and I was led through barred doors to a waiting area. The jailer looked at a clipboard and chuckled. "Says here that your old man said throw away the key." He handed me an envelope with my billfold and a few items in it. I'd changed into what I'd worn the night we were apprehended.

Uncle Pete was smoking and talking to a cop he apparently knew. As he walked toward me he said, over his shoulder, to the cop, "Optimist in the third." Then he turned to me. "Well if it ain't Vito Genovese. You kill anyone in there, jailbird?" Then he mugged a boxing move at me.

We walked away from the grimy halls of detention in the sunshine to The Yellow Peril as Pete called his flashy Packard convertible. On the drive home, he stopped at Union Station for a Racing Form. He pointed at a phone booth, said, "Bet you didn't know your granddad was at the Union Station Massacre. He was making a phone call, missed the action when the lead started flying—he dropped to the floor of the phone booth. Stayed there." He chuckled. "Smart man, the D.A."

Well the D.A. hadn't liked me since I'd told him he looked just like Harry Truman, which he did. I thought it was a compliment. I knew they were friends. Truman used to sit at the piano at the old house in Independence with my mom as a toddler on his lap and play The Missouri Waltz. Pete told me that and my grandmother verified it. She was great friends with Bess Truman.

Anyway, I survived the homecoming, and as far as I can remember there were no charges and the incident went away. My stepfather was convinced I was scared straight by my extra time in the slam, whereas the other guys would recidivate having been let out within hours.

"Guess you learned a lesson, right Butch?" I nodded. "Sure did, sir." He poured another bourbon and lit a cigarette with a practiced move of his Zippo.

But what really made an impression on me was a wild night that the tough-love parents would never even know about. I look back on Rocky and the rebel punk, as it came to be known in my mind, and I see the whole unfolding saga as if was a week ago. It was actually 65 years ago. I was sixteen, and driving a 1949 Ford, a car my parents disliked immensely. It was lowered, primered flat black, with speed equipment and loud pipes that could be heard blocks away. I believe to this day that they called the cops on me and, for a while, I was made to install legal mufflers on the Butchmobile. But only for a while. The thing was a cop attractant muffled or not. What was I to do? James Dean had just starred in *Rebel Without a Cause;* I couldn't be seen in a stock automobile. Or unheard.

On the night in question, I had two passengers, friends Mike and Maury, and the three of us cruised the drive-ins, and a high school haunt called Teepee Town which was a supervised teen meeting place near Southwest High School where dances and other activities occurred. Our school mascot was an Indian, hence Teepee

Town, which, come to think of it, didn't sound odd or dorky to us back then. It was just a place on Wornall Road where some action might be found, albeit supervised.

We'd pulled up in front, rough idling and pipes rumbling, three of us in the front seat, posturing as only insecure teens do, devoid of expression, unblinking, cool. About that time a carload of four guys pulled up next to us. They wore leather jackets and looked like hoods, but the car was a new Buick, not a rod at all. The front seat passenger said, "That old piece a shit is gonna shake its parts off."

Obviously they didn't know that a three-quarter cam made the flathead V8 lope a little. Plus the dual carburetors needed adjustment. But the gauntlet was thrown.

"It'll beat grandma's go-to-church sedan," I said.

"On three," said the passenger. He held his hand up, slammed the roof on each number he yelled. On three, I laid rubber all the way to the stoplight, which changed to red as we screamed through it. The Buick pulled ahead and edged us over, then we chased them.

My passengers, Mike and Maury, were cheering as we gained on the Buick. Then Mike said, "What if we catch them?" Noting his wisdom, I slowed and slid a right hand turn. Then I noticed the red light and heard the siren. Maury said, "It's only six blocks to State Line."

State Line Road is the actual state line between Missouri and Kansas. The myth we laid to rest that night was that if you crossed State Line Road to Kansas, the Missouri cops could not pursue you. We all knew that. It was pretty much gospel in high school. I was headed west; all I had to do was floor it and we were home free in Kansas. Then I would take careful rights and lefts, staying on the Kansas side until we reached The Keyhole, a beer joint that served 3.2% beer to anyone over eighteen. It was 5% in Missouri and you had to be twenty-one. We had passed before, so we'd just go to The Keyhole for a congratulatory beer. One problem was my license plate. It was Missouri yellow on Black 448888. Well, maybe we were far enough ahead the cop couldn't see it. I accelerated.

So did the cop. State Line was in sight. I ran the stop sign after slowing enough to see it was clear, then, when across, I began to drive the speed limit. So did the cop. That's when I saw the two Kansas police cars nose to nose, blocking the street.

"They can't do this," said Mike.

"And that guy crossed State Line," said Maury. "You can sue. I think."

I pulled over. Swirling red lights washed the neighborhood. I wouldn't just spend the night in juvey for this. I would probably go to federal prison. Leavenworth was in Kansas.

"You two, sit on the curb," said the Missouri cop. "Now." Mike and Maury complied.

"You. Get out." I complied.

The Kansas cops conferred with the Missouri cop, laughed, then they left. One cop was now going to deal with us. One cop, three criminals. Mike got up from the curb to stretch and our lone, young cop snapped at him to sit the fuck down or get cuffed to the street sign. Mike sat. Mike's father was a judge. Maury's grandfather had occupied the same position as my grandfather, District Attorney. All our families were involved in politics, with a long past history of senators, judges, mayors of adjacent cities. My first name was the last name of a Democrat judge who'd been elected 37 years in a row and had a street named after him in the West Bottoms. I don't know if any of that had anything to do with what followed or not. We all knew better than to think it would make a difference in situations like this. It was just history.

The cop had a ticket book out. I waited. He said, "I don't think I have enough tickets in this book for all your violations. Ran two lights, a stop sign, speeding, reckless driving, failure to yield, failure to pull over when lit up...Jesus, punk, what have you got to say for yourself?"

I looked at the ground.

"Well, punk?"

"Just do what you're going to do," I said, defeated, thinking about jail, loss of car, reporting to a parole officer for life, loss of any and all privileges, loss of girl friend due to loss of car, all compounded by the monetary cost of a stack of tickets. I'd gotten tickets before and just one was expensive. This would be crazy expensive. I'd be working for nothing for months at my part time job. How would I even *get* to my job? These things raced through my mind and I was barely listening to the cop who was punctuating what he was saying with "punk," liberally. Mike and Maury were sitting on the curb watching us, mouths open.

"...too much damn paperwork here," he was saying. "So, punk, I'm just gonna let you go."

My mouth was open now. Mike and Maury were looking at each other.

"But, you're gonna see me a lot in the future. My name is Rocky, punk. I'm gonna stop you for any and all infractions and just for being behind the wheel. Your license plate is a poker hand, easy to remember. Your car, man, you might as well have a sign on it, primered, loud pipes—arrest me! Arrest me! Dumbass punk."

But I was overjoyed. He was letting me go! I was filled with gratitude. A cop was doing me huge favors. Would a hug be inappropriate?

"What?" was all I could say.

"Take your punk friends, punk, and get back in that jalopy and drive the speed limit out of here. Go home, go to bed. I *will* see you later and often. Rocky is the name. We are gonna get to know each other. Punk."

"Thank you. Rocky. *Mister* Rocky. Sir."

He patted the ticket book against his leg and looked at me for an uncomfortable thirty seconds or so. Then he smiled. Shook his head. And he was gone.

True to his word, I was to see him often. Each time, I was addressed as "punk," to my chagrin because usually I had passengers or was with my girl friend. Once at a stoplight on 75th Street, I had one arm around my girl and one hand on the wheel.

"Two hands for beginners, punk!" This from Rocky as he pulled up next to me. Both hands on the wheel, I drove sedately away. My girl friend asked if I knew that cop. Later she was to discover I did.

We were parked in an alley behind Southwest High School at night. A flashlight tapped against the window. Once we recovered from the shock I rolled the window down.

"You like high school, punk?" It was Rocky, of course.

"Not that much, sir."

"Law against parking here, punk. I suggest you move it."

"Yes sir."

"See you, punk." Big grin.

Once on Meyer Boulevard near Brookside the now familiar burst of siren sounded behind me. This time I had a carload of boys and girls. We were on the way to a drive-in for cokes and burgers. It was a Friday. In the rearview mirror I saw Rocky sauntering up, smiling.

"Everybody out," he said. We all stood on the grass near the curb. My passengers were blasé, They'd been with me during these searches by Officer Rocky before. Cars slowed down to see what was happening. "Hey there, punk. Open the trunk." I did. He looked around . Then he looked under the front seats, in the back, in the glove box, taking his time. The red lights on his car whirled and advertised a major bust of some kind.

"Okay punk. Get this heap outa here." And Rocky was gone. Forever. Maybe he got transferred. Maybe he quit or moved. I hope he was never injured in the line of duty or otherwise. After a month or so of not seeing him, I wasn't looking in my rearview mirror quite so often. I drove more carefully—the habit stuck. That last day, the last time Rocky stopped me, one of the kids said, "He can't do that. That's harassment."

"Yeah, he can," I said. Mike and Maury agreed.

Maybe Reno Pete had given him a good horse tip. Maybe he just hadn't wanted to do the paperwork. I'll never know, but I remember him almost fondly. Almost.

About the Authors

Robert Clinton

Robert Clinton's poems and stories have appeared in the *Wisconsin Review, Plume, Prairie Schooner, Hanging Loose, Main Street Rag, Antioch Review, The New Guard, and DecomP.* A book of his poems, *Taking Eden*, was published by Sarabande Books. He was born and raised in upstate New York, attended Union College and has an MFA from Goddard College. He has twice been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony.

Cathy Cruise

Cathy Cruise's stories have appeared in journals such as *American Fiction, Appalachian Heritage, Blue Mesa Review, New Virginia Review, Phoebe, Michigan Quarterly Review,* and others. Her first novel, *A Hundred Weddings,* was a finalist for a Next Generation Indie Book Award and a ScreenCraft Cinematic Book prize. She's also received an American Fiction prize and a Washington Independent Writers Award, as well as a Pushcart nomination. She has an MFA from George Mason University and works as an editor in Virginia.

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Lisbeth Davidow has been a finalist in *Event Magazine's* nonfiction contest, *Alligator Juniper's* National Creative Nonfiction Contest, *The Southeast Review's* Narrative Nonfiction Contest, *Iron Horse Literary Review's* Nonfiction Trifecta and was nominated to be included in *Best of Creative Nonfiction. Volume II*. Her writing has appeared in *Alligator Juniper, Blue Lyra Review, Helix, Lunch Ticket, Mandala, Marco Polo, Pilgrimage, Prime Mincer, Revolution House, Spank the Carp, Spittoon, Sliver of Stone, The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review,* and *The Tishman Review*. She lives in Malibu, California with her husband.

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Sam Gridley is the author of the novels *The Shame of What We Are* and *The Big Happiness*. His fiction and satire have appeared in more than sixty magazines and anthologies. He has received two fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and neurotic dog and hangs out at the website *Gridleyville.blog*.

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Ashley Jeffalone is a writer living in Austin, Texas. She received her Master's degree in Literary and Cultural Studies with a creative writing focus from the University of Oklahoma. She currently works in interactive narrative. Her work is forthcoming in *Third Point Press*. "Farewell to Easter Weekend" is Ashley's first publication.

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Michelle Lerner received an MFA in Poetry from The New School. Her full-length manuscript "in the absence of roofs" was a semifinalist for the 2018 Pamet River Prize at Yes Yes Books. Her poems have been individually published by numerous journals including *Virginia Quarterly Review, Harvard Women's Law Journal, Paterson Literary Review, Lips, Adanna,* and others, as well as several anthologies including *The American Voice in Poetry: the Legacy of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg* and *The Poetry of Place: North Jersey In Poetry.* She is a legal aid lawyer currently on disability while recovering from late stage lyme disease, living with her family in northwestern New Jersey.

John P. Loonam

John P. Loonam has published fiction in various anthologies and journals, most recently *Lock and Load,* an anthology of gun-related fiction with work by Annie Proulx, John Edgar Wideman, Bonnie Campbell and others. His short plays have been featured by the Mottola Theater Project. He has work forthcoming in descant. John is married and the father of two sons; the four have lived in Brooklyn since long before it was cool. He taught English in New York City public schools for over 35 years.

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Kandi Maxwell is a creative nonfiction writer who lives off-grid in the Sierra Foothills of Northern California. She has been an English teacher, a backcountry and rock-climbing guide, a musician, a recreation therapist and a client to several psychotherapists. She is a wife, a mother and a grandmother. Her stories have been published in *Hippocampus Magazine, KYSO Flash, The Door is Ajar, The Offbeat, The Raven's Perch* and in many other literary journals and print anthologies.

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Eileen Obser's articles and personal essays have appeared in numerous publications including *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Newsday, Ms., The Village Voice, The East Hampton Star, Proteus* and The Southampton Review literary magazines, and in many anthologies. She is a longtime teacher of creative writing. A second edition of her memoir *Only You* was published by Sunbury Press in 2019. She lives in East Hampton, Long Island, NY. More details on her background plus some of her published work are at: *www.eileenobser.com*.

Loren Sundlee

Loren Sundlee has published a dozen short stories in various literary magazines in the U.S. and overseas. He taught English in Australia, Japan, Pakistan, Denmark and the U.S. His first novel is with publishers, and he is working on the second. Raised in Western Minnesota, he now lives with his family in Central Washington.

Lazar Trubman

Lazar Trubman is a college professor from the former USSR, who immigrated to the United States in 1990. He was assigned to Arizona, where he taught the Theory of Literature and Romance Languages for twenty-three years. In 2017 he retired from teaching to devote time to writing. Since then, his prose has appeared in literary publications across the United States, Canada and the UK, among them, *Forge, Lit Mag, The Threepenny Review, The Vestal Review, Selcouth Station Press* and others.

Guinotte Wise

Guinotte Wise writes and welds steel sculpture on a farm in Resume Speed, Kansas. His short story collection (*Night Train, Cold Beer*) won publication by a university press and enough money to fix the soffits. Five more books since. A five-time Pushcart nominee, his fiction and poetry have been published in numerous literary journals including *Atticus, The MacGuffin, Southern Humanities Review, Rattle* and *The American Journal of Poetry*. His wife has an honest job in the city and drives 100 miles a day to keep it (until the stay-at-home order). Some work is at *www.wisesculpture.com*