bioStories

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bioStories

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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Editor: Mark Leichliter

Cover image: Rick Doble

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Stay of Execution

by Victoria Fann

I owe my life to an illegal abortionist in Newport, Kentucky. Inside my mother's womb I was with her on that January day in 1959, her shivering, me warm and safe, while she waited for Roger to pick her up on Vine Street in Cincinnati. Roger was not my father. He was a Sigma Chi frat brother who needed the $50 my father put out to some guys over beers the night before. Roger didn't have a car so my father loaned him his—a blue '57 Chevy. Little comfort it offered my mother when it pulled to the curb that morning.

The night I was conceived was enmeshed in my father's magnetic charm. His fire melted my mother's resistance. His electricity ignited my soul into existence. His charm disarmed her from the start. She fell in love with his charisma and his ability to take control of any situation. But in the end, those qualities worked against her. According to her, he drove to her parent's house one night and let her know how much he wanted her. She said no. He drove around the block and came back and pleaded with her to change her mind. Again, she refused. He did this a few more times until finally, *finally,* she let him in, and they tiptoed quietly into her parent’s guest bedroom. They never made it to the bed. It began and ended quickly. Then he left her on the floor shivering and ashamed, partially dressed, her dancer’s legs spread open.

When Roger pulled to the curb and saw my mother, he acted like a scared puppy. Head down, avoiding her eyes, he jumped out of the car to open the door. His crew cut and the smell of his fresh after-shave made her wince with sadness that instead of a date, he was performing a duty. "Please," she said, and held up her trembling hand to stop him. "Sorry," he mumbled, slumping back to the driver's seat.

Those were the only words spoken between them. My mother was too busy thinking she was going to die. A philosophy major in love with the Greeks, the symbolism of crossing the Ohio River from Cincinnati was not lost on her. It may as well have been a trip over the River Styx accompanied by Charon. She'd sinned and now she was descending into Hades. She'd given in to my father's advances and the gods were punishing her. For the hour drive, she protected herself by going numb and wrapping herself in a cocoon of despair so tight, nothing could penetrate it.

Roger pulled into the parking lot of a nightclub. The neighborhood was rough, with boarded up windows, abandoned cars, and front porches covered with junk. The nightclub was overgrown with vines and badly in need of a paint job. Broken glass littered the parking lot. My mother stepped out, heart pounding, and walked around to the back door as instructed. It was Sunday, so the nightclub wasn't open for business.

My mother knocked on the door. There was no response, so she knocked again. She was about to

leave when she heard a voice say, “All right, already, I’m coming.”

A middle-aged woman threw open the door. “Come on in.”

“I’m ... I’m here to ...”

“I know why you’re here, hon,” she said, a cigarette sticking to her bright pink bottom lip. She had on a tight yellow sweater with a safety pin instead of a top button. "Follow me." My mother followed her down a hallway painted gunmetal gray. Both women's shoes clicked on the worn wooden floor. Bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling. It smelled of stale booze and cigarette smoke. A man dressed in black carrying an instrument passed them. He didn't look at up, but his shoulder brushed her jacket. They passed an open door that led into the club. She could see a small stage and dance floor and a wooden bar that covered the length of one wall. The club was empty and lifeless and dark, hung over with the previous night's activities.

"In here." The pink-lipped women led her into a stark room with two metal chairs and a plaid sofa. “Take a seat over there.”

She sat down quickly on the well-worn sofa. It sank under her weight. “Your name?”

“Ruth.” Her mother’s name slipped from her lips.

Any medical conditions, you know of, other than ...?” The woman’s voice drifted off. She was standing in the doorway, staring at her nails.

“Uh ... no. Nothing. I mean I’m fine,” my mother answered and the woman disappeared, the sound of her shoes clicking down the hallway.

Minutes ticked by like a slow leak from a faucet. Drip, drip, drip. There was no sound except for the drone of a television somewhere. The room filled with the sharp, acrid scent of my mother’s fear. Her body shook uncontrollably as she tried to catch her breath while her thoughts turned to women she'd heard about who'd died from abortions. A spectrum of emotion washed over her. Shame, guilt, horror, and finally shock that my father would have expected her to go through with this alone. What kind of man …? When had she felt fear like this …? Her father would do this. Her father had made her this afraid.

"Ruth?" a loud voice interrupted her revere.

"What? Hm? Oh … is it time?" she asked, as though waking from a dream.

"Through that door, hon," said the woman appearing again and pointing to a door next to where she was sitting. Smoke eddies whirled around her head as she puffed on a newly lit cigarette. "Strip down and put on that blue gown opened in the front. The doctor will be right in."

The door squeaked loudly as my mother jostled the handle. The room smelled of mildew and pine cleaner and a sour mixture of bodily fluids. Images of babies swimming in blood filled her mind. Her stomach churned. Thinking she might be sick, she ran over to

the wastebasket, and gagged, but nothing came up. She realized that she had eaten nothing since yesterday. Sweat beaded along her upper lip and forehead. Feeling thirsty, she looked for a sink, but there was none. Instead she sat down on the badly scuffed linoleum floor. She was too dizzy to stand up or undress. A florescent light hummed above her. She closed her eyes to shut out the light.

"Excuse me … miss?"

My mother opened her eyes and saw a man wearing a grayish white coat with gentle brown eyes and very dark skin bending over her.

"Are you all right?"

“Yes, um no … I mean, I just felt a little dizzy," she replied, smoothing her skirt.

"Why don't you come up here on the table so that we can talk for a minute?" His hand was under her arm gently guiding her to the table.

Once seated he pulled up a small stool next to her. "That's better. Now do you want to talk about 'your little problem'?"

"Can I have some water, please?" she asked.

The doctor wheeled the stool over, pulled open the door, and shouted, "Sally, bring me a cup of water."

Sally appeared holding a small paper cup. When she saw that my mother wasn't undressed, she glared at her, and said, "Doctor, that woman from Louisville will be here soon."

"Not to worry, I'll be finished soon." The doctor smiled at my mother until the door was closed, then his look turned serious.

"How far along are you?"

"About ten weeks, I think."

“Are you from around here?" He began to unfold the gown as he spoke.

"No, I live in the city." She finished the water, wishing there were more.

"Why don't you get undressed so that I can examine you and we can begin?" He stood up and was preparing to leave. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"Doctor, I'm frightened. What if …" her voice trailed off.

“Not to worry, I do this operation every day. I know you've heard the horror stories, but I can't tell you how many women think I'm a gift from God. Now there's no time to waste, I've got a busy day ahead. We must get moving."

"What if my parents find out?" she asked, feeling frantic, tears spilling from her eyes. She wasn't ready. It was all happening too fast.

"Your parents will have no way of knowing anything's amiss. You have arranged for a place to stay for a couple of days, so that you can recover?"

"No … I haven't. Henry, I mean, my boyfriend didn't tell me. My parents will worry. They'll know something's wrong."

"Young lady, why do want to waste my time here today? You must leave. I cannot help you; it's too risky. My advice to you is to go home and tell your parents about your predicament. Beg for their mercy. Get married. But don't come back here again and don't ever tell anyone you were here."

The door slammed shut and the doctor was gone. My mother's one chance to change her future rested in his hands. Strangely, she felt relieved. Now there was no choice. She hadn't even considered having to recover. In fact, she wasn't thinking about much of anything other than the fact that her whole life was ruined. Her years of dancing, wasted. Money for three and a half years of college, wasted. Her reputation, stained. Plans for the future, crushed. She had to accept her fate, and that meant having this child, whether Henry liked it or not. Surely, her mother would help her.

Standing up, my mother checked her face in the mirror. She combed her hair and applied fresh lipstick. Moistening a handkerchief with saliva, she dabbed at the streaks of mascara.

When she entered the waiting area, she saw two other women sitting on the plaid couch. Neither looked directly at her. One woman, older than she, was quite pregnant looking. Her face had the deep wrinkles of someone who labored outside. A farm wife

with too many children. My mother imagined her coming here at the last moment desperate for a way out. The other woman looked to be her own age, very blond and pretty. Her pregnancy didn't show at all. My mother wanted to grab her and tell her not to do it. She imagined her parents somewhere getting a phone call telling them their beautiful daughter was dead. Dead from trying to do the right thing. Dead from trying to protect them. Dead because she was alone.

The ride home was agonizing. Roger, probably clueless, simply looked up when she opened the car door, unaware that nothing had happened. My mother then had over an hour to imagine my father's fury and her mother's anguish. It made her heart race with fear and dread. But then, she was relieved to be alive.

My father didn't get his way. Once my grandmother found out my mother was pregnant, the abortion was out of the question. Not that my grandmother welcomed the news with open arms. Of course, she was excited about a new baby—she loved babies. But the circumstances made it a moral dilemma.

"How could you do this to me?" she cried when my mother told her. As if my mother had meant to hurt her. Eventually, my grandmother was my greatest ally; she became my second mother, for who can resist a baby?

Soon, all the rest of the grandparents rallied. My father agreed to marry my mother. They eloped quietly to Sevierville, Tennessee. Only months away from her graduation, however, my father punished my mother by insisting she quit school and work. His commitment to her was tenuous and thin as if he were doing her a grand favor, as if she'd made some awful mistake and he was helping her get through it. Not a great entrance into fatherhood.

Instead of the celebrated welcome an infant usually receives, my arrival brought dread and misgiving. It was not the beginning of something, but rather the end. The end of freedom, the end of my mother's love of dance, the end of innocence. Perhaps that's why my father was in the arms of another woman on the night of my birth. Perhaps that's why I screamed with colic for the first four months of life. Perhaps that's why for years afterward, my mother wished she were dead.

My mother said she had to nurse me on a hard wooden chair in the kitchen so that she wouldn't wake my father's sleep. Our ability to bond was doomed from the start. If my father thought everything about parenting was so awful, is it any wonder that my mother began to feel that way too? She had nothing. No friends, no school, no work, no life. Just days of being on her own, unequipped to care for an infant.

This pattern of rejection from my father lasted until I was in school, and then he only began to come around because there were three of us. Liz came two

years after me and Susan four years after that. It became harder for my father to deny he had a family.

Years later, my mother told my sisters and me stories of how she used to dance in toe shoes until her feet bled, how a close dancing friend of hers had gone on to star in the New York City Ballet, and how once she'd turned down an invitation to move to New York and work with Martha Graham. Clearly, she was dedicated to her art. Pregnancy changed all that. Her dancer's body was no longer being used for art but to sustain life. The flesh and muscles she had sculpted and tortured into submission, had, in the end, betrayed her.

I didn't learn I was an unplanned arrival into my parents' lives until I was seventeen. The story was painful because I saw myself as someone who had destroyed my mother's career and interrupted her education. Not that there was anything I could do about it, but I felt guilty nonetheless.

My mother didn't have an easy time raising my sisters and me. Young motherhood was an intense struggle. Often, she barely had the will to endure. But as we matured and started families of our own, my mother has discovered that the many threads of her life, the joys, the sorrows, the fears, the triumphs have blended together over the years into a beautiful, richly-colored tapestry.

My father never really aligned himself with his role as a parent. Immersed in his obsessive pursuit of fame and fortune as a jingle writer, he moved from the suburbs of New Jersey, where we'd lived for years, into his own apartment in Manhattan. We rarely saw him after that since his life revolved around work, women, and drugs. In 1980, he died alone in a car accident on a lonely Pennsylvania road in the wee hours of the morning. He'd been performing in a bar with the late-in-life rock band he'd formed in a last ditch attempt to live his dream of being a real musician. He was forty-three.

My parents were two different people moving along two divergent roads—the trajectory of their lives colliding due to the catalytic event of sudden parenthood resulting in a mostly discordant union. In spite of my rocky start and painful evolution, the wisdom gifted to me from my parents created the ideal compass for my own journey. I explored the realms of marriage and parenting on quite different terms, making my own messes, but embracing the challenges without the extremes of either narcissism or martyrdom.

On any given day, I can remind myself that I almost didn't make it—a bittersweet medicine that I've ingested and digested until it's coming out my pores. Shifting from not being wanted into wanting to be here ultimately became the modus operandi of my soul's evolution, except that now, in mid-life, it has a mellower, gentler edge than it used to. For that I'm

grateful, and for the newly present sense that all is strangely, mysteriously unfolding as it should.

The Last Seltzer Man

by **Shayla Love**

A Dodge Man with a Mercedes Grill

Pia Lindstrom had a great pair of legs, but that wasn't what Walter Backerman remembers about her.

After an interview with Walter's father, Al, she looked into the Channel 4 WCBC-TV camera and said, "It's a shame that after 55 years of continuous service, that Mr. Backerman senior will be the last seltzer man in the family. His young son Walter is enrolled to start law school in the fall." She flashed a smile. "It's a shame. There are too many lawyers out there and too few good seltzer men."

That was 40 years ago. Turns out, the world was spared another lawyer.

I met Walter on the corner of 7th Avenue and 22nd street after he dropped off his son, Joey, at school a couple blocks away. His seltzer truck is an advertisement, photo album and scrapbook, all at the same time. The sliding doors are printed with images of seltzer bottles from television, 19th century France, and recycling bins.

Like other aspects of his life, this truck started one way and became another. This is a 1995 Dodge Sprinter, but you'd never know it, since Walter fixed a Mercedes grill to the front. Walter is good at adding a

little glamour to everyday things. Like a Dodge, or a blue collar delivery service job.

The front seat of his truck is filthy. It looks like a space where coffee has been spilled and a lot of life has been lived. The wall behind the driver's seat is covered with pictures of celebrities. There are autographed head shots and faded news clippings. Like all good photos, they carry a thousand words per picture, per star, of where and when Walter met them, and how they became his friend. A poster from "The View," is signed by the whole cast.

"Barbara Walters is like a faucet," Walter said, as he stirred sugar into his coffee. "You know what the faucet does? It runs hot and cold, you follow me? My wife said to me, let's be real. This woman could pick up the phone and call the president. How important is Walter the Seltzer Man in the scheme of things?"

Pretty important. Walter might be the most connected man this side of Hudson Street. His stories jump from news anchors, to movie stars, to investment bankers, to that time he tried to give Mayor Bloomberg an antique seltzer bottle—the kind he delivers everyday—and almost got arrested. When detectives showed up at his Queens home later that day he said, "You guys came all the way from city hall, you're lookin' for a big story and all you found was Walter the Seltzer Man. Are you relieved or disappointed?"

He gave bottles to Whoopi Goldberg and to Alec Baldwin. He knows where any movie star lives in

Manhattan because he's been inside their homes. He's enamored by the stars, and pins their names on his stories like award ribbons. We were driving south on 6th Avenue, past the old Air America station, when Walter blurted, "Rachel Maddow, I'm mad at her. I still like her, but I'm mad at her."

After *Air America* went out of business and Maddow moved to MSNBC, Walter never got his bottles back from her. This is one of the few things you can do to get on his bad side.

Walter is protective over his bottles. They are his livelihood, his passion and his personal collectibles. Most of them are as old as he his, 60. Some are older. Still, he doesn't charge deposits; he operates on trust. When a bottle comes into your home, it's a loan of faith directly from the seltzer man, to you. This big man with big stories, has a big heart.

"From time to time, a bottle breaks," Walter said. "I got a kid, last stop on 23rd. One time, he took all my bottles and threw them down the incinerator. A case of blue bottles. He said it was fun. I told the old guy who takes care of him, 30 dollars,"—when the real value was hundreds. "I did it because I felt for the guy."

Walter's green eyes are tired from fatigue, but they light up a little each time he begins a new anecdote. I ask him about other difficult clients he's had, partly because I'm curious, partly because I see how much joy it brings him. Walter tells me he delivered to Calvin Klein's mother.

“At the beginning, Flo Klein was nasty,” Walter said. “I turned her on a dime.” Soon she was giving him a bottle of cologne for every holiday, be it birthday, Christmas or Chanukah. It isn’t his style, but he valued the gesture. Mostly, he thinks it’s important to be able to make a friend out of an enemy.

We reached our first stop; Peter Cooper village on 1st Avenue and 20th street.

“What’s up baby? I’m delivering seltzer.”

A guard walked out of a gatehouse. “To who?”

“What do you mean to who? I’m the seltzer man, you never heard of me?”

Walter had been to Peter Cooper Village that morning. But he was coming back for an older woman.

“She’s a nice old lady, she wanted to sleep,” Walter said. We had come from the west side, and Walter had made an unnecessary loop in morning rush hour to return.

We parked on a service road. Walter pushed down on the tops of the bottles in short jabs, to test the pressure. He was listening and looking for the spurts of seltzer that come out and the sounds of the hiss. He won’t give out a bottle he isn’t happy with.

Walter delivers in a modern vehicle that runs on gasoline. His radio plays top 40 hits and he had a coffee that morning from 7/11. But when he slides

open that door and puts that wooden crate on his shoulder, he may as well be climbing out of a horse and buggy. There's something beautiful about an anachronism walking down 1st Avenue; he takes the whole street along with him.

The Fountain's Head

A seltzer delivery man used to be as common as a milk delivery man. Each seltzer man had his own route that he inherited from a father or an uncle. They got their seltzer from seltzer fillers in Brooklyn, Long Island, or the Bronx. There used to be hundreds of fillers, and even more seltzer men. Now, the number of seltzer men can be counted on one hand. Only one finger is needed for the fillers. Gomberg Seltzer, run by Kenny Gomberg, third-generation seltzer man, is the only place to fill an old, pressurized bottle in New York City.

It's hard to imagine a time when these antiquated bottles were as present in every home as a stick of butter or a frying pan. Soda water was invented in 1802 in Dublin, and made its way into restaurants and businesses, eventually being mixed with syrups and liquor. The individual "soda siphon," a version of which Walter sells today, brought seltzer into personal residences. A Harper's magazine article from 1872 recommends that the summer seltzer drinker enjoy it ice cold, and speaks favorably of adding lemon. Hot seltzer, usually chocolate or coffee flavored, was not as popular, and has not stood the taste test of time.

The production of bottled sparkling water, busier professional lifestyles, and large soda corporations caused this business to lose its fizz over the last 50 years. I asked Kenny what his grandfather would think, if he knew that he was the last seltzer filler. Kenny couldn't come up with an answer, it was that unfathomable. Like Walter and Al, his is a family affair. His son, Alex, just joined the legacy.

Compared to the loud trucks and bustle of the city, the nondescript factory building is a kind of oasis. The bottles are filled with New York City tap water and carbon dioxide. The valve is sealed immediately, so that no pressure leaks out. A bottle can retain it's carbonation for years. But these are active bottles, and they all visit the Gombergs on a weekly basis. It's a cycle that's been happening at Gomberg Seltzer since 1953.

After another hiss and the spray of overflowing carbonation, a hard working bottle gets a little rest before it's sent out again with Walter.

We left Peter Cooper and drove west, along 9th street and stopped in front of a brownstone right before 3rd Avenue. Walter and I walked into a beautiful townhouse with a Japanese style garden in the back. An elderly woman came to the door.

"I'm glad you're here, glad you're in town," Walter said. "Where are the kids? School?"

“No, they’re at a museum today,” she said.

“That’s nice. You got beautiful grandkids, both of them.” Walter put the seltzer down and admired renovations that had been done in the kitchen. “Myles is getting real handsome. It’s nice that they’ve got you to come visit. I’m real glad you’re here today, don’t worry about paying. I’ll catch up, I always catch up.”

“Don’t work too hard!”

We left. He didn’t get paid for that delivery. He said he’s not worried.

“The seltzer man always gets paid.”

Kryptonite

“In the South Bronx in the 1980s, a black man fired a shot gun into the air.”

I am riveted, and so is the deli man making our sandwiches. Walter continues his story.

“I is Sweet George,” the man yelled, in front of a seltzer filling factory. “Now I runs this shop!” This show of power would help protect Sweet George’s property, money and delivery men. One of those men was a young Walter Backerman. They had to fill at odd hours to have enough time to make all their stops. Walter, and his assistant Frankie, would carry two loaded guns with them at all times to ward off thugs and robbers.

When Walter made his route in tough neighborhoods, he would call a meeting of all his helpers. He said, “Anybody comes to stick you up, just call my name. I’ll shoot em in the back, I’ll flip ‘em over to make it legal, and I’ll pull my money outta there.”

It’s hard for me to believe these stories, as I watch Walter chat at the register and tell the cashier to have a nice day. He’s never hurt anyone in his life. He told every old lady we’d seen on the route how nice they looked. He will buy anyone a coffee. When his assistant, Frankie, got old and senile, Walter couldn’t bear to fire him. Frankie was so run-down that when he stood on the corner holding a coffee cup, a passerby threw a quarter in, thinking he was homeless.

“You don’t understand, I didn’t want him,” Walter said. “I pay him good money. I just can’t cut him loose. When someone gives you that devotion, I can’t cut ‘em loose.”

Walter showed me a stack of wooden crates an 80 year old customer used to make, six a week. At that time, Walter didn’t need them. But he kept buying them because he didn’t want to discourage an old man who needed the money.

“I’d rather give the guy 30 dollars for the boxes and keep him working,” he said. “Cause I want someone to keep me working.”

That's what it comes down to these days. Kenny, Alex and Walter just keep going. And by doing so, they support each other.

"Looks like I'm not working today, cause I'm just bullshitting with you," he said. We were parked in the West Village and had delivered to two more apartments and a restaurant. "I'm tired. Some days you get up and you're all perky, and some, the week just gets to you."

We ate our sandwiches and Walter took the opportunity to show me around the memorabilia-laden truck. He pointed to a photo of a young man with long curly hair and white bell bottoms.

"That's me when I was my son's age." Walter said. "I was there helping my father. I was going to start law school, going to go that summer. Then, my father got emphysema and he almost died. So I started helping him. I was supposed to help for six months. Take a leave, go back. It just was never the time."

When Walter talks about his father, all the celebrities and name-dropping disappears. Al Backerman becomes the only famous man in the world. I wondered earlier how a young man could give up law school and the promise of a comfortable life. It was for the chance to be with the biggest star of all. Al died in 1998 from lung cancer.

I picked up a bottle at random. It was heavy and the glass was thick all around. The top said, "Al Backerman 1952."

“That’s the most beautiful bottle in my whole route,” Walter boomed. “Al Backerman, that’s my father. And the date, 1952. You know what’s important about that bottle? That’s when I was born. So I was in diapers and that bottle was making money for the family.”

I’m starting to realize that the seltzer route, at every stage, is an homage to heritage. An homage to the past, from the present. To fathers, from their sons. The reusing of the bottles, and the repetition of the route, echoes its respect to tradition.

We drove up to our last delivery, in Alphabet City. It was my last stop too.

Walter gives me some things to take with me, before I go. He gives me a worn tour guide of Manhattan based on film shoots and celebrity homes, an open invitation to knock anytime on the door of his truck, and a photo of him and an old woman wearing a Superman shirt. It’s his favorite celebrity he’s met.

“That’s Noel Neil,” he said. “In the original adventures of Superman that I used to watch when I came home from school, she was Lois Lane. She’s 92 years old. And I still like her.”

I looked at the photo, which was carefully labelled with a name and date in blue ink.

Noel Neil is not the superhero in this photo, I thought.

Walter has no cape, no a body suit. He is a just man with trouble paying the bills, two kids and wife on disability. He is a man who has an injured shoulder, a

long delivery route, 70 pound crates of seltzer to carry up three floor walk ups, and no heir to his throne. You could say that he has super strength.

Walter has no regrets about giving up law school to work with his dad. He didn't lose much, he only gained. He became tied to a lineage that goes back to his grandfather, who drove a horse-driven seltzer buggy in 1919. It's a place for men to teach lessons, and Walter received a full share of them.

"They used to say if bullshit was electricity, Al Backerman would put Con Edison out of business," Walter said.

Our sandwiches were eaten, the seltzer was delivered, and all that was left was for Walter to teach me one of his father's lessons. "People don't always need hear the truth. When my Aunt Stella at 65 was dying of stomach cancer, my father went down, took a week off from the routes and he went down to say goodbye to his sister. At the end, she was frail, falling apart, nothing to her, she put lipstick on. She had a couple days more to live and my father said, 'You know Stella, I have a crazy feeling you're gonna get better cause you look great.' And she said, 'Oh Al, I just put some lipstick on. But do you think? Maybe you're right. Oh, thank you.' And that's the last time my father saw his sister. She died right after that.

"In 1998, my son Jonathan was three months old and Joey was a year and four months old. My father had lung cancer. I remember looking out the window of the hospital and knowing that my father was never

going to make it down to the street. So I took my sons, Jonathan in my hand and Joey in my arms. And I wanted—even though they would never remember—I wanted them to see their grandfather.

“My father had a morphine drip, but for some reason he got up. He took the mask off and he saw the kids and he said, ‘Walter, what are you crazy? What are you bringing kids to a hospital for? All they got here is sick people, you’re crazy, you shouldn’t have brought them here.’ And I said, ‘You know Al, I think you’re getting your energy back. I think you’re gonna be perfect, and you’re gonna be all right, and I miss you on the route. I want you outta here.’ My father looked at me and he said, ‘All I do is dream about the route. I wish I could rest already.’”

I hopped out of Walter the Seltzer Man’s truck, looking up at him from the sidewalk. I wonder if he will ever get to rest. Walter took my hand in his and couldn’t resist giving me one more piece of advice. “The most important thing is just being a human being, and saying the right thing for a person who needs it at the time. And *that* is my last story for today.”

The Hill

by **Jay Solomon**

Myers Heights is perched atop a hill overlooking the southern mouth of Cayuga Lake in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. With its grassy acres and sweeping views of the bucolic countryside and placid waters, the tiny hamlet would be considered prime real estate in today's market. "Scrape Off-Opportunity with Hundred Acre Wood" a listing might read.

Much has changed in the past sixty years. At the last mid-century mark Myers was a patchy settlement of dirt driveways, car ports, and factory houses built for Arab immigrants who labored deep beneath the lake bed mining rock salt. Neighbors burned their trash in fifty-five gallon drums and tossed their leftover meals over the side of the embankment. The half-composted food scraps germinated into a jungle of wild garlic, tomatoes, and mint interwoven with cattail, poison ivy, pricker bushes, and water-logged baseballs.

At the stern of the hill was a small orthodox A-frame church. It made for a natural gathering place, but the front doors only opened for Easter and Christmas. The side door to the basement, on the other hand, was rarely locked. That's where a congregation of men took refuge and played pinochle and poker, smoked cigars, studied the horse paper, and commiserated.

The hill was a tight-knit but combustible community. Second cousins married each other, sets of brothers married sets of sisters, and relatives fought and reconciled and fought some more. You needed a chalkboard to keep track of old grudges and new alliances and who was speaking or not speaking to each other. Names were just as confusing; there was Abraham George and George Abraham, Johnny Mike and William John, three or four Catherines and at least one George George. Family trees were so gnarled that everyone gave up and just called each other “cousin.”

Whoever planned the housing settlement on the hill didn’t believe in switchbacks or swooping s-curves; the road down to the bottom was steeper than a bobsled run. You were met at the end of the quarter mile chute by a hairpin turn onto a one lane bridge over Salmon Creek. If you were on a banana bike you crossed yourself at the top and sailed down like a bullet train, furiously pumping the brakes and praying you didn’t miss the turn and plunge over the side of the bridge and into the drink.

The nearest traffic light was ten miles away in Ithaca, a bustling college town of hippies and expatriate city slickers. Grandmothers and young mothers caught rides to Ithaca and loaded up with groceries and got their hair done while men passed the time over coffee at a Greek diner. With their olive complexion, dark hair, and heavy eye brows, the Arab men felt a kinship with their Mediterranean brethren. It helped

that the Greeks also liked to gamble. If you wanted to place a bet on football or had a horse racing tip (the race track was seventy miles away), Nick the Greek (or Pete or Jimmy) would take your bet.

It wasn't easy being an Arab in small town America. The Italians had Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra, the Greeks had Telly Savalas and the Olympics, the Irish had the Kennedys, and the Jews had Hollywood. Who did the Arabs have? Danny Thomas? Only a trivia buff knew he was Lebanese. The poet Khalil Gibran was too esoteric for Arabs to boast about. Arab-Americans weren't on the big screen or in big games—they'd have to wait fifty years before Salma Hayek and Tony Shalub arrived. This wasn't a function of ability—there just weren't enough of them. Italian-Americans outnumbered Arabs by a thousand to one. The Irish had a fifty year head start. The odds were not stacked in their favor.

No matter. My father's generation—Otsie, Dickie, Clay, Margie and the rest—went off to college and left the salt mines behind. They traveled widely, married, and honeymooned in Niagara Falls. The hill grew older and more removed from the modern world, but when it came time to raise a family, the descendants drifted back. Not to live on the hill—that would be too close. The second wave moved to newer houses five miles up the road, homes built with mud rooms, paved driveways, decks on the back, and best of all, municipal water (the hill's well water stunk of rotten eggs).

The family tree grew bigger and a multitude of grandkids—now two generations removed from the Abrahams and Georges—were no longer hyphenated Americans. This generation knew the Pledge of Allegiance by heart, excelled in school and played every sport imaginable. They hung out at the Ithaca mall, hitch-hiked to the movies, and spent summers skipping stones on the lake and fishing for blue gills and sunfish. My older cousins rooted for the Yankees, idolized Joe Namath, rocked to Led Zeppelin, and ogled at bra models in the JC Penney catalogue. Assimilation was fait accompli.

That is, assimilation was complete for all except one. There was still one Arab left on the hill. His name was Riad Mahar. My cousin Riad (pronounced like Riyaud, the capital of Saudi Arabia) grew up in my grandmother's house (Tayta Badia Solomon). His mother, Margaret, graduated from a state college near Buffalo and took a bank job in Ithaca. Somewhere along the line Margie grew a wild streak, and while the other Arab-American women settled down and learned to cook stuffed grape leaves and cabbage rolls, she was booking cruises to the Middle East and Europe, escaping to Broadway shows and vacationing in Haiti.

Around the time of JFK's presidency, Margie fell in love with an admiral from Egypt. The two married, or possibly they eloped—I've never seen wedding pictures—and cousin Riad was born shortly afterwards. From there the details get murky. At some

point it was determined that an Egyptian sailor was not moving to America much less Myers. Margie and Riad (about three at the time) retreated to Myers to live with Tayta Badia. Riad's father visited less and less frequently until finally he wasn't heard from again.

Undaunted, Margie started over as a single mother, founded a temp agency in Ithaca, and continued to embark on excursions around the world. On the hill Riad was in the good hands of his grandmother as well as a village of elders. Riad's extended clan treated him like a boy prince. At Christmastime he needed a spare bedroom to store all of his gifts. His trove of chocolate bunnies at Easter far exceeded everyone else's bunnies combined—it was impossible for him to eat it all. There were whispers that Riad's globetrotting mom had taken him to audition for a modeling agency in New York.

While Riad was enthroned on the hill, I was growing up in a ranch-style house in a neighborhood of rectangular lots separated by long rows of burly hedges. Like so many affordable homes built in the 1970's, our house was functional, economical, and soul crushing. The walls were made of half-inch dry wall; if you pushed hard enough, your hand went right through it. The builders must have skimped on the insulation, and in the winter you could feel cold drafts blowing through the window sills and door jambs.

This slice of modern Americana was foreign to my father—he had grown up with fireplaces, unlocked doors and back yards without borders. Myers continued to be intimate and surreal—some of the elder Arabs still walked down a dirt path to the lake with a bar of soap and wash cloth draped over their shoulder. Compared to life on the hill, our existence seemed monochromatic and artificial. We barely knew our neighbors, wanly waving to them at the mail box and garbage pick-up.

Then there was my situation. When I was about ten, the assimilation train was leaving the depot without me. My idea of fun was curating the comic strips found on the back of Bazooka bubble gum wrappers. I collected the world's most worthless junk: the plastic toys hidden inside cereal boxes. Thumbing through our Encyclopedia Britannica library was how I spent a rainy day. My eyesight was 20/400 and glasses helped my vision but didn't help my image.

In my defense, there weren't many kids my age nearby—the closet friend lived miles away. There wasn't anyone around to play catch or to go hunting for salamanders or to make a tree hut. It was a life devoid of drama and adventure.

My parents were stupefied. The Arabs could overcome hard scrabble beginnings, they could deal with cold showers and outhouses and water that smelled of sulfur—but raising a weird kid? That was out of their comfort zone.

They decided to send me to the hill. The summer before fifth grade my father dropped me off for days at a time with hopes that I'd get some old world Arab sense instilled in me. Maybe I'd learn how to whittle a stick or kill a snake or build a fire. My cousin Riad was there and though a smidge younger than me, maybe he'd be a good influence.

Trouble was, Riad was no boy scout. If my world was imitation vanilla ice cream topped with candy corn, his was a Friendly's banana split drowning in hot fudge and whipped cream. What's more, the young prince of Myers with the treasure chest full of stuffed animals was getting restless with all the attention and preferential treatment lavished on him.

I soon realized that I was not going to charm school. On my first visit we were gently encouraged by our grandmother to eat our peas so we would grow up to be big and strong and possibly become president. I dutifully cleaned my plate. Riad blew his nose into a slice of Wonder bread, rolled it into a ball and shoved it in his mouth. That set the tone for our summer—he was yin and I was yang.

The next day we set out on bikes to go fishing in the creek that ran beneath the bridge. The road downhill to the lake wasn't steep enough for Riad—he wanted to take a shortcut over the cliff behind the church. We searched for a dry gully that offered a negotiable landing of sand and pebble. Riad got a running start and launched his bike over the edge, pulling a wheelie in mid-air and landing ass over tin cup. My heart stammered but I had no choice but to follow

suit. Like a little Evil Knievel I sailed my bike over the edge and into space, leaving behind reticence and caution, half-sliding and half-rolling to the bottom. I got up giddy with adrenaline.

I brought a donated fishing pole with a worm hook; Riad brought a stash of cherry bombs and fishing net. Walking along the creek we spotted a school of rainbow trout swimming upstream in shallow water. Before I had chance to drop a line, Riad lit a match to a cherry bomb and tossed it into the water as it exploded. We covered our ears and squealed with laughter, the burst of fireworks sent shards of fish and seaweed everywhere and showered us in an acrid and disgusting mess. That was different.

The waters now muddied, we slogged downstream to the trestle. Viewed with a mixture of anxiety and trepidation, the train trestle loomed large over the creek. In the nineteen-thirties a great flood had washed out the trestle and three boys from Myers had drowned. Snakes could be seen basking in the sun on the rails. Snakes—I hated snakes. And there was always the dark fear of getting my foot wedged between railroad ties as a train approached.

I mentioned the thing about the snakes but Riad paid no attention and scrambled up the side of the embankment and onto the tracks. I followed and gingerly tiptoed over the ties to the middle of the span, pausing to look for shadows of fish below. No fish. We waited. Still no fish. We sat down on the

tracks and I dropped a fishing line into the water. We waited some more.

While our legs dangled over the side, we talked about girls in school who were getting boobs and boys who had balls the size of a moose. We compared grape leaves to cousa, the Mets to the Yankees and debated whether Mountain Dew tasted like piss. Mostly we talked about everything and nothing.

On the northern horizon my private nightmare was coming to life in the form of a distant train approaching. I pulled my line out of the water and hustled to get up. Riad was not of the same mind. “We’re jumping” he said as he stood up.

“No we’re not.”

“Yes we are.”

“I’m afraid of snakes”, I confessed again.

“No shit. Every Arab on the hill is afraid of snakes.”

“Well, I can’t swim."

He looked at me incredulously. “You can doggie–paddle to the banks.”

The water’s depth was about five feet—deep enough for a jump, but too deep for wading. The train grew larger and more ominous.

“Geronimo!” Riad screeched as he cannonballed over the side and let loose a splash. He paddled over to the boulders on the creek’s shore. “You can touch bottom,” he yelled.

I glumly looked down at the stream below. “I can’t see bottom.”

“Jump you sonuvabitch, jump!” he called back.

“I TOLD YOU I CAN’T SWIM!” The train was approaching the final bend and coming down the stretch. I was losing my chance to scramble off the trestle like a normal kid from the suburbs. Riad grabbed a piece of drift wood and stuck it out. “Grab this. Now jump!”

“Oh, for crissakes!” I pinched my nose and plunged into the stream. I touched bottom and bobbed up to the surface. Squirming and splashing, I groped my way toward the drift wood. Just as I reached out, Riad let it go and it floated downstream away from my grasp. He waded further in and grabbed my flailing arm.

“C’mon, don’t be a pussy! Look down—you can see your feet.” He pulled me towards the shore and I felt the reassurance of river stones beneath me. As the train rumbled overhead, we sat silently on the boulders of the embankment. Although the trip from panic zone to safe haven took less than ten seconds, my neat and tidy life of watching cartoons, collecting stickers, and perusing encyclopedias floated away from me like another piece of driftwood. I needed more of this—more splashing in the muck, more bobbing in the water, more snickering about girls and boners and titty-twisters.

After the train's caboose finally rolled over the trestle, I stood up.

"Let's go," I said.

"You wanna go home?" Riad asked.

"No. Let's do it again!"

Up the banks we went, plunging into the creek again and again, each splash bigger and louder than the one before.

Soon it was getting close to lunchtime. Soaking wet and smelling of seaweed and brine, we pushed our bikes back up the hill. It didn't occur to me until years later that assimilation was a choice, not a necessity. For some, assimilation equaled conformity, and conformity can be boring. I had learned that there's more than one way to get down a hill, to catch a fish, or to dodge a train. Perhaps assimilation had a wiser, younger cousin called ingenuity.

Tayta Badia had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a bowl of hummus waiting for us. Riad's sandwich already had the crust removed. It was a perfect lunch.

On Digging Holes

by **Jakob Guanzon**

They dubbed themselves the Toothless Poets. A pack of five vivacious, working-class youths, each one of them mutually assured of the collective destiny awaiting them once the ink had dried on the page, once the vomit and blood had crusted on the cuffs of their coat sleeves. They were bound to hammer their names into the literary canon, the lot of them undoubtedly the millennial answer to the Beatniks and the Lost Generation. However, the cruel grace of retrospect reveals the Toothless Poets were little more than five teenage meth-heads with a penchant for haikus and self-destruction. More beat-up than Beatnik, they passed their time on the muddy, beer can-strewn banks of the upper Mississippi rather than the Seine. No matter how they thumped their chests, their howls went unheard down the mighty brown currents of that loveless river.

Of this violent crew's surviving members, their ringleader would later serve to be the closest thing I ever had to a role model in my life. While the others had either been swallowed by addiction, trembling in the corners of dim trailers or wordless and still under the earth, or merely whittled down to complacency after fifty-hour work weeks, the true poet among them was the man who guided my hand as I carved the jagged line between adolescence and young

manhood. From him I learned many things. He helped me form my voice as a writer. He taught me the humble merit of creation without recognition. From him, I learned how to swing an 8-pound sledgehammer with surgical precision.

I met him when I was sixteen. It was my first day on a landscaping job, a job I had acquired thanks to a shot transmission and a white lie.

My best friend, Tony, needed a ride. Beside me in my purple, rusty-rimmed ´96 Ranger, I listened as he spoke to the owner of the company over the phone, asking if I could work for the day in exchange for giving him a lift.

Tony's eyes darted toward me, my body. He turned away and shrugged.

"Sure," he said into the phone. "I mean, yes. Totally. Okay." He hung up.

"What'd she ask?"

"If you could lift heavy shit."

We exchanged shrugs and I shifted the truck into first. And so my apprenticeship started.

That first summer working alongside the foreman of our eight man crew, this man to whom I had suddenly apprenticed myself, we learned we had much in common, from similar taste in music and film, radical political views, to unspoken delusions of grandeur. We even shared a first name, except that he went by Jake. Nonetheless, it was our differences that defined

our friendship, lying largely in two identifiable distinctions.

Our most noticeable difference was a matter of sheer machismo, for lack of a better word. Me, I'm about as intimidating as a flatulent koala. The first time I saw Jake was from a distance. He was shirtless, marching down the middle of a suburban street dragging an entire birch tree behind him with one hand, a grumbling chainsaw in the other. The man was big, strong. A hairless Paul Bunyan slathered in regrettable tattoos, the stains, scars, or maybe just souvenirs the Toothless Poets had left on him years prior. His entire left arm was tattooed solid. A black, upturned American flag hung on his neck. The satanic symbol for confusion, a brooding hook, was seared onto his chest and the word EVIL printed bold and blaring across his back. When I first shook his hand, coarse with callouses and caked with dirt, I didn't ask what had happened to his two front teeth. Tony later told me that they were lodged in the skin of some poor fellow's forehead after head-butting Jake in a bar

(photo credit: Karl Kloos)

fight. The following year, Jake would be on and off jobsites, having to run to court sessions and meetings with his lawyer after putting a man in a two-week coma with a head-butt of his own. Save the Eskimo-kisses for the ones you love is the lesson of that one.

The second difference that marked our experience was a matter of opportunity. I went to college. Jake did not. Never was the privilege granted me by my opportunity to go to university as evident as it was with Jake.

Throughout college I arranged my course schedule so I could work at least two days a week, earning in two days of landscaping what I would have made putting in forty-hours behind a cash register. When not digging holes, stacking 60-pound blocks, or running wheelbarrows of sand and limestone, Jake and I sat cross-legged next to our lunch coolers in the manicured backyards of the rich, hunched over textbooks from my philosophy, sociology, and literature courses. More often than not our conversations under the shade of a tree, over bologna sandwiches and bruised bananas, were far more enlightening than the classroom discussions sinking me into a sinful amount of student debt. Upon opening the books the subsequent morning in class, dirt and brick dust fell to the surface of my desk. I'd sweep it clean with the back of my hand, then admire the yellow crust of callouses forming on the ridges of my palm.

Behind Jake's inked and calloused façade, which was nothing short of barbaric, lay a curiosity and

pensiveness I have yet to find matched. Certainly I've come across others who are curious yet hampered by naïveté, others certainly pensive, yet unbearable for their pretentiousness. Jake was a man curious, thoughtful, talented, and guided by a work ethic both on and off the jobsite that bordered on manic. He was a gifted painter, and by 22 he had self-published a novel about his days with the Toothless Poets, which he sold alongside Lake Calhoun on the weekends. But above all his humility was the most important component of his character, forged by his keen sense of self-awareness. He bore the burden of knowing his shortcomings in each steel-toe stride: his capacity for cruelty, the limitations of his social class, and ultimately, his insignificance, this last being perhaps the hardest of life's truths to swallow. I watched as he eased himself into this one, and an ugly transformation it was, acquainting himself with the hopeless lot of being a working-class romantic.

Then I graduated. The world of white-collar opportunity awaited me. With this diploma I was granted the dream of never sweating for a dollar ever again.

At a bar in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, the old stomping grounds of the Toothless Poets, I joked about this. Jake didn't laugh.

It was our final night together before I left for a job across the Atlantic. As we drank Miller Lite, we didn't talk about Kafka or Foucault. No Nietzsche, nor the plight of the Lakota people. We drank. We reminisced

about fishing trips in Wisconsin, old projects, obnoxious customers. Other drunken nights. Women.

Then one approached Jake. She teetered atop her plastic heels, swaying beneath the weight of her Diet Coke Bacardi and Jake's gun-barrel presence. She steadied herself against the bar. To Jake she said, "So what do you do?"

"I," Jake said. "Pardon, we. We dig holes."

Toby Keith crooned above us. She wrinkled her nose. "Huh?" she said. "Why?"

"To fill them up," he said. Her eyes rolled and she walked away.

That was nearly three years ago.

I haven't seen nor spoken to Jake since. Every once in a while I'll ask myself and the unfortunate lot in my vicinity the same tired questions I had juggled with Jake on jobsites years ago, shovels in hand and our backs to the sun. I have yet to encounter answers of comparable merit to Jake's blunt, sledgehammer wisdom. Still, I keep digging. The hole deepens, and the square of light above my shoulders grows ever more distant. The pit of my doubts has no practical end. Nevertheless, the hope of beginning to fill it one of these days, with money or meaning or perhaps just the company of a kind woman remains elusive, but most certainly not impossible. The one thing I do know is that since then, the palms of my hands have softened.

Questioning

by **Paige Towers**

Let's say that your sister is a born-again Evangelical Christian. And let's say that she got married and had four kids. Let's say that it's also possible you feel that she's replaced you with so many others: a constant group of like-minded followers who host each other for dinners, baby-sit on weekends, and pray with their arms raised high. You do not belong.

Let's say your sister lives in the suburbs in Iowa, and you secretly judge her for that, because you left and lived all over. Shall we say that you felt the need to leave in order to understand the world better? That you crave new experiences. Total acceptance of something higher is naïve, even dangerous: this is what you've come to believe. (By the way, that judgment that you hold is no secret. She always knew.)

In all those places you have traveled, whenever there was a face that caught your eye on the street, it was almost always because it looked like hers. Small face, thin lips and pretty eyes—those features were everywhere. Which is to say that your sister is everywhere, but that's just you being a writer.

Or maybe a fool, if you can point out the difference.

The distance between the two of you serves only as a stubborn reminder that you aren't about to accept that she accepts any of this. You'll come back when she comes down. But until then, her image is shadowing you, popping up on every continent.

I read an essay once in a writer's workshop on my peer's experience of accepting Christ. The writer was sixteen at the time and was staring at a patch of blue carpet, hands and knees on the sanctuary floor, waiting, hoping, praying, that she would have some sort of breakthrough and finally join the unquestioning minds around her. She was a "late bloomer," according to the Evangelical church's pastor.

And when the moment came, she said the feeling was incredibly warm and euphoric. It was like being cuddled in a blanket, but a blanket that was the size of the universe. She at last felt, or knew, what everyone else felt, or knew.

That is until she began to question this experience. Once she did that, it faded away and all that was left was her ability to scrutinize and write about it.

I can only relate her experience to my experience of getting high.

But my experience is stunted, because this is what I know about getting *really, mind-altering* high (as opposed to just, you know, *regular* high)—it requires a total acceptance on the part of the consumer. This is something that I've never been able to do. I can trace the steps for you, which already signals that during these times I'm still conscious of reality and in-control.

First: There's that drop in your stomach that occurs right when the acid seriously kicks in.

Then: It's like your blood has gone cold and your body is weightless.

Last: Everything begins to tingle so hard that it hurts. It feels like you're frozen in that exact moment of when the rollercoaster starts to tip over the edge of the top of a steep incline.

Then what comes next, in my experience, is a choice. You can choose to fall into the pain and let your mind go. This often occurs while being in a mass of moving people, loud music, and colorful lights. You join into the universal high that exists in that moment in some club in Berlin, or Amsterdam, or New York City, or wherever you may be. The feeling is apparently exquisite.

Or, you can choose to fight it, swallow the pain down, and get off the rollercoaster to nervously watch everyone else ride the ride. With masochistic determination, you can closely monitor the rapidly firing synapses in your paranoid mind and question the effects that this drug is having on your body and everyone else around you, which is what I've always done so as to avoid landing on the floor, or in someone else's bed, or in a cab that I can no longer direct the way—

Home.

But where is home? Well, this one city block, at least until the next leasing year. And I'll admit it. It becomes exhausting to play the part of the lone foot soldier. What's even more exhausting is when you try to see everything with your eyes wide open, skeptically examining every person and thing you meet along the way. A stranger is always reason to suspect. An overly passionate piece of advice gives you reason to doubt. A place where everyone is content and in agreement is dubious. You often use words such as "misgivings," "evidence," and "caution."

You even told the peer in workshop to take out the paragraph at the end, the one where she mourned the loss of blissful acceptance and debated whether she really knew anything at all. You were satisfied with the narrator having successfully eluded such hallucinations: the end.

Yet, spotting the face of that person you love in a busy crowd in a foreign place like Bangkok or La Paz or Tokyo does not raise a red flag. You are certain, in that moment, as much as a person can be, that it is your sister. And you're truly elated to see her.

What if you could have that moment of overwhelming joy last past its initial two-second rush? If that rush enveloped you, would you need to keep searching, or would you be content to stay?

Let's say you love your sister, yet you won't accept her and her beliefs, and you can't figure out why and thus keep questioning. Let's say that she closed her

eyes once and suddenly lived everywhere, but that you kept walking, and couldn’t find a damn thing.

The Possibility of Rain

by **Marlene Olin**

The sign on the trailer reads *Sales Office.* Inside, a platter of crudité sits on a shelf.

"A condo to beat all condos," says the realtor. "Picture white sofas. Rivers and Rauschenberg. Glass walls that kiss the ceiling and hug the floor."

When he inches closer, I inch back. Brandishing a brochure, the man points towards the water. Three hundred yards away the ocean slaps against a newly dredged beach.

"You'll stand out on your balcony and see straight to Key Biscayne," he says. "A million dollar view."

Again he inches forward. I inch back. I smell his aftershave and see the wet spots under his arms. Forwards. Backwards. It's like a dance. When I dig for my car keys and head towards the door, he sidesteps in front of me. The A/C must be set to seventy yet sweat beads on his upper lip. His hand slips like a fish into mine. "They're going fast," he says. "Better get in your deposit. Cash is best."

Suddenly his fingers grip my shoulder. "Make a left to find the expressway," he tells me. "Be sure you take a left."

Instead I head east. Two blocks later the manicured hedges and courtly palm trees disappear. Instead the

ground is littered with old newspapers and stray cats. A battered sign says *Welcome to Historic____."* The rest is graffitied.

I'm an intruder in a truly strange land. I pass a cemetery of concrete caskets. Wooden churches are streaked white, listing. Small houses look like bunkers with grills on the windows and bullet holes in the walls.

Then there they are. While I'm looking to my right and gazing to my left they pass in front on me. One second they're on the curb--the next moment they're negotiating the pavement. It's a small bike, fit really for a kid, but the old man pumps it like a piston. One foot is missing. Instead an empty pant leg is rolled up like a sleeve. A little boy holds onto a handlebar, running, trying to keep up.

At first I think the child is steering, his brown knuckles clutching the handlebar so hard the white shows through. I suck in air when he trips over a rusted can, his knee skimming the asphalt. But the old man doesn't flinch. Instead he plants his one good leg and glances at me. Two, three seconds pass and the man refuses to look away. The glance sticks.

The air is thick with humidity—I can swear I hear lightening crack—so I flip switches. The wipers swoop like eyelashes. I've pushed the washer button for good measure and crane my neck to watch them through the mist. Together they head toward the sidewalk. Five feet. Three feet.

I want to linger. I imagine their path weaving in and out of the street, picture a wave of onlookers watching their wake. Perhaps a dog will follow. Maybe a woman with an apron and a batch of freshly baked cookies sits by the kitchen clock and waits.

Instead I floor the gas.

The Bestest Mommy

by **Hazel Smith**

I'm the mommy and so I am the smartest bestest mostest good cook in the world and my beautiful little boys tell me so and I am better than Laura and better than Mrs. Dyck and certainly better than the soccer coach and the violin teacher who are not the bestest at all.

And I make Peppy Pancakes with healthy ingredients, and, since there are healthy ingredients in the pancakes, we smother them with butter and syrup and we get sticky and we always burn the last batch because we forget to take them off the griddle.

And I'm the mommy and Jennifer is pretty and Mrs. Roelfsma is smart and the band teacher is a favorite, but I am still the one they greet after school with a hug.

And I make Peppy Pancakes with healthy ingredients and one kid likes Aunt Jemima syrup and one kid likes corn syrup and we get sticky and I hear tales about school … sometimes.

And I'm the mommy and Patti is awesome and college is GREAT and kayaking is the new pastime, but I am still the one waiting at the door on weekends and we ALWAYS make Peppy Pancakes and we don't burn the last batch because the two man-boys

eat them all up but now I am lactose intolerant so we don't use butter and the man-boys stick up their noses at margarine and they have a new affinity for maple syrup.

And I make Peppy Pancakes because Son #1 is bringing home Whatshername. I don't bother learning their names anymore because none of them seem to grab his heart and stick around for long. We sit at the dining room table on our best behavior and I explain to her that there are only healthy ingredients in these pancakes so it is OK to smother them with syrup and when they are all eaten, my son says, "Thanks Mom. Great meal!" and I am once again the smartest bestest mostest good cook in the world … until he deflates my balloon with the words that ensure that I will no longer be a necessary part of his pancake life. "Could you please email me the recipe?"

And my face changes. I don't want him to have the recipe. I don't want him to cook Peppy Pancakes and maybe make changes to the recipe, maybe make them even better than I do. I want him to come home and enjoy my pancakes. "What's the matter?" he queries.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all." I manage a smile. Bestest mommies can do that. They know how to smile when inside they are sad. He looks at me quizzically, aware he has said something that is bothering me, but he can't figure out what that could be. I smile bigger. "I'll scan in the recipe and send it to you. No problem."

And I do. And I have a little cry all by myself and a few tears fall down onto the scanner and maybe make their way into the recipe and through cyber space and stay with the recipe when it reaches my son, although I think it really only arrives with lots of love and good wishes.

And I do learn the newest one's name! She is called Claire and she is very pretty and she comes with attachments. She has a small son and a smaller daughter. They are too young to remember their parents' divorce, but I can tell that she has done a good job in raising them. They are polite and they are gentle with the cat. I watch my son interact with them and I realize that he must be modeling himself after someone because he is kind but firm and I can tell they like him and he likes them. And he has brought them all for Peppy Pancakes, and I start to tell Claire about how they are only made with healthy ingredients so it is OK to put lots of syrup on them, and she says, "I know. I've heard all about them. And I've heard nobody in the world can make them like you do!"

And I take out my electric griddle and assemble the ingredients and it is very hard to do because my feet are not touching the floor and I am floating around the kitchen in a haze of love and with the realization that my son has done something beautiful for me and that indeed I am the bestest mostest wonderfullest mommy in the world. And that makes me very happy indeed.

Fur Hat

by **Barbara Harroun**

My father made me the fur hat in late 1984 or early 1985. I was ten. My body was beginning to betray me: puberty.

The hat was hand stitched, made from the gray fox collar of a woman's coat culled from a Salvation Army. The fur, fine and soft, wrapped around the circumference of my head, with a skull cap of the softest doe skin, dyed a deep brown. Later I'd find out my father had boiled the hide in walnut hulls to achieve the chocolate hue. Inside, the hat was quilted satin, a glossy tan.

Originally, the hat also had soft strips of leather that tied beneath my chin. One snapped off when Matt Brenner took my hat in a game of keep away. He spun the hat around, out of my reach, and the lace snapped and the hat went flying. He was as shocked as I was, more so when I punched him in the stomach. His breath came out in a soft, "Oof."

Strangers reached out and skimmed their hands along the hat, no matter that it was on my head. I remember the kids in my class asking where I'd gotten it, and I explained my father made it. It was the only one of its kind. One girl asked if he'd make her one. "No," I said. It is quite possible I narrowed my eyes as I answered.

I was better at kick ball in that hat. A faster runner. A better story teller. More myself.

I wore my hat until it fell apart. I slept with the remaining segment of fox fur, pressed my face to it at night. It took me through sixth grade, rode with me until the body I had was no longer new and terrifying.

My father can wear a hat. From him, I learned that you wear a hat as if a simple extension of yourself, keeping your head warm with panache. My Grandpa Ryan was also a natural. He wore hats that accented his dancer's posture, and complimented his crisp white pants, his brightly checkered summer shirts, ironed so thoroughly each sleeve had an equator. When he died, my auntie asked if there was anything of his I wanted. In one closet, on the third floor of his South Boston home, there was a fur hat with earflaps that called up for me the hat my father made. My grandfather, I was told, wore this hat skiing. In the winter, now a woman edging toward forty, I put it on and I am warmed by it. Even now, I am still partly that ten year-old girl, terrified of growing up and astounded by a father's extraordinary gift.

My own daughter is now ten. She adores my grandfather's fur hat. She wears and delights in it. I want to give her the same kind of gift my father gave me. Something that warms her, shields her from the cold, and empowers her. Something tangible to aid her in becoming who she is. It was a hat my father

made me, but truly it was a bridge to who I'd become, a compass, a talisman, and an abiding comfort when my own body was an uncomfortable, seemingly dangerous terrain to inhabit. This winter, I'll give my daughter the hat and I'll tell her the story. Once I was scared, deeply uncertain, and my father made me a fur hat.

Wedding Bells

by **Paul Pekin**

There was a blonde in our newspaper office who was supposed to be making nice with the boss. I'm not sure I believed this, but I disliked her enough to believe anything. I worked in the shop, washing presses, sweeping up, occasionally running small jobs on the Kluge Press, and she was billed as a reporter, something I could have been if only I'd gone to college.

I'd been working for the paper since I was sixteen. It was my first job and it was fine for what I'd been hired to do, but I was never going to be promoted. Work at this print shop holds its own tales, but what I really want to tell here is the story of my wedding which took place in the summer of 1950, and very nearly didn't happen.

The plan was to be married in July, a bad time of the year in those days before universal air-conditioning, but for a few weeks or so there seemed to be a good reason to get on with it. Then there wasn't, but the plan remained.

At least until we broke up. Mary Virginia, who was to be my wife for the next forty-five years, had a romantic attachment to breaking up. She'd broken up with her high school steady shortly before she started with me, and she must have liked the feeling because

she was always talking of breaking up, as if it was something sad that a girl had to do, sad but also quite stimulating.

I blame it on religion. After eight years of parochial school, I "lost my faith" as the nuns liked to put it, and having lost it, had no desire to find it again. But Mary Virginia had not lost her faith, at least not yet. She wanted a church wedding complete with white wedding dress, bridesmaids, Dad in a tux, Mom in a gown, and flowers for all. This meant Mass, Holy Communion, and Confession, and no other possibility would do.

Naturally, we broke up.

There was a touching scene on her parents' porch when we said goodbye. For her, breaking up was almost as good as a wedding. We stood close and whispered our sad farewells. As we whispered she kept twisting a little leather loop that was attached to the zipper of my jacket. When it came off, she gently slid it on her finger and said:

"I guess this will have to be my ring."

Stuff like that kept me married to her till death did us part.

It would be nice if I could remember exactly how, after a sad lonely week, I found myself sitting next to that blonde at a bar. I hardly think I went out and picked her up, or asked her out, or anything like that. She was a plump little thing who strutted around the office, secure in her position, the boss wrapped around her

finger, as my mother would have said, and I knew she looked down on me.

But we were together, and we were drinking, and we were both alone. I was a kid, merely 21, but a decent looking kid, even if I didn't know it. How was I to know it? My father always said, "That's Paul, he's tall, that's all." Wouldn't my own father know?

Whatever this blonde and I had to say to each other in this bar, I have no hope of remembering, no matter how interesting it might have been. For God's sake, it was sixty two years ago! But she did start looking and sounding like someone I could be friends with. Didn't I need a friend?

If not her, someone like her—such a thought must have crossed my mind. And with that thought, it became clear that there were worse things in life than taking Holy Communion. What the hell was I thinking? Breaking up with Mary Virginia! Maybe she thought it was glamourous and dramatic to collect these sad, but delicious, failed romances, but here I was, looking at another reality. Very politely, I told the blonde, "I have to go now." I'm sure she soon found another gentleman to sit by her side. I'm very sure she liked him better than she ever could have liked me. I'm even sure those stories about her and the boss were never once true.

And so, the wedding was back on. Arggh, the confession.

"Bless me father for I have sinned. My last confession was . . ."

The priest must have heard this kind of stuff before.

Why was I returning to the church, he asked in a dry, priestly tone. Because, I honestly confessed, I wanted to get married.

And would I now be a devout Catholic, the mechanical voice of the hidden priest continued.

Oh, yes, Father, the writhing atheist replied.

My penance, I think, was to say the Lord's Prayer three times, and the same for the Hail Mary. It was a wonder bolts of heavenly lightning did not strike us both on the spot.

But in any contest between love and faith, between love and almost anything else, love always wins. Don't quarrel with me, I know it is so, at least for me. I can't say I was pleased, being put through this process, but, darn it, somebody had to be the adult here and, of all people on earth, an atheist should be able to lie to a priest—or why be an atheist at all?

There was more to come. The reception. Her father, an honest railroad worker, joined the Blue Island Elks Club solely that he might host his only child's wedding reception in the Elk's Hall. Did he not know that my father worked for the Elks, was in fact a lowly janitor, called a "steward," who would have to clean up this very hall the next day? Yes, he knew, but he could not imagine why a little thing like that should trouble me.

Old Fred Klemmer was going to be quite a father-in-law. It was going to take at least ten years for me to learn to love him. He liked his Jim Beam and Dutch Master cigars, and he had regular fights with his wife that I thought were almost comical compared with the battles my own parents had. These people had pretensions. She belonged to every woman's club that would have her, and that seemed to include them all, and he was the same way, trying to run the Order of Railroad Conductors, and the Knights of Columbus, although they never exactly let him do it. You might say he wasn't quite educated. Neither then was my father, but at least my father read books and knew how to play the piano. Never mind, Mary Virginia loved old Klemmer so much everybody wound up calling her "Klem" to the last day of her life. That's how we have it on her tombstone. Mary Virginia "Klem" Pekin. Now that I've told you that, I will stop speaking of her as Mary Virginia which was only some name her mother picked out of the society pages.

The wedding was set for July 15. My mother-in-law to be wanted to set it back into the fall when the weather was more clement. But it was too late. The wheels were rolling.

Much of this stuff is hard to remember. The wedding party, for instance. I'm not sure if my little sister Nancy was the maid of honor, or the second in line to the maid of honor. I know the best man was a friend of mine named Bill, not so much a best friend as a friend

who was Catholic, for that was the rule. My real best friend, who did not seem to have a religion at all, could only be an usher. After the wedding Bill and Nancy "dated" a few times, which I thought was wrong of him because she was barely sixteen and he was over twenty and should have been pursuing girls his own age. Never mind, she soon disposed of him, and as she grew older, found much worse choices than good honest Bill. There is really no sense in worrying about the boyfriends your sisters choose. Neither of my sisters ever asked my advice, or had any problem doing without it.

I remember my mother wore a dress that made her look larger than she was. This was usually the case, and no doubt my father did not overlook the opportunity to say as much. My mother and father, that was a sight to see, the two of them dressed up for my wedding, standing side by side, just as if they didn't fight like cats and dogs every chance they got, and were only biding their time before they started again. This is what love does to a young man, convinces him that at least in his case, life will turn out differently.

Because I couldn't drive a car in those days, my friend Archie provided the wheels. This was my true best friend, who just died last summer at the age of 84. He had tried to teach me how to drive, several times, but couldn't do it. I kept turning the wheel in the wrong direction, and that made him nervous. So he drove, and my friends from work tied a bunch of empty ink

cans to the back of his car while the ceremony was going on.

The ceremony itself was a full scale Catholic Mass, and the way it was done in those days, with bells and incense and altar boys, was meant to remind you that Mass was more important than your wedding. For some curious reason, before the wedding actually began, the male members of the party were kept out of sight in a little room behind the altar which I believe was called the sacristy. How long we sat there is something that never got fixed in my memory. What I clearly do recall is an open door that looked out on the schoolyard and beyond, all the way down to the east side of town where many green trees gave an illusion of endless freedom to anyone who had courage enough to flee toward them. My last chance, I thought, and then I went where I was supposed to go and got married.

We drove around afterward, and Archie stopped and took the ink cans off his bumper as soon as possible. He was very particular about his car, and feared one might bounce up and scratch the paint. We stopped in my favorite tavern and had a beer with my favorite bartender, who, like every other male friend I ever had, instantly fell in love with Klem. She had a way with men, I tell you. Before we were married my pals would serenade her by singing "Oh, my Darling Clementine." On nights when she stayed home to wash her hair, I would call from the bar, hold out the phone, and they would sing it for her.

Wedding receptions, in Blue Island, were great occasions for people to get drunk. I'd never left one sober before, but this time I made a point to. That old railroad man, Fred Klemmer, made up for me by disgracing himself, or so I heard. He and my mother-in-law had such a row that night they didn't speak to each other for days. My own mother, who always loved a good party, may have become a bit jolly too, and my sister's husband, one of the finest men I have ever known, went down for the count.

In those days, what you were supposed to do after the reception was to slip off to some hotel and consummate the marriage in a fancy room before leaving for your honeymoon. But Klem and I already had an apartment waiting on Grove Street, and we had Archie, sworn to secrecy, drive us there. We would start our honeymoon Monday, and we hadn't the slightest idea where we would go. Serendipity was the thing. We went straight to bed, woke up the next morning and, instead of going to Sunday Mass, consummated our marriage for all we were worth. Then we walked the seven or so blocks it took to get to her parents' home where the old railroad man and his seething wife were sitting in silence on the front porch, thinking we were on our way to some faraway honeymoon place. Suddenly, here we were, as if nothing had happened at all, and there was nothing else they could do but invite us in for lunch.

So, we may have saved their marriage, or at least got them to speaking to each other again. Good old Fred Klemmer. Someday I'll write about the trip we took to

Pittsburgh to see his relatives, just the two of us, and how we rode the famous Monongahela Incline.

That was my wedding. Monday morning we went downtown and took the first train out of Chicago which happened to be the train to Detroit. And that was our honeymoon. On the train I ate in a dining car for the first and only time in my life. In Detroit we found a room in a hotel that had seen its best years long ago and had no hope of ever seeing them again. Across the river in Windsor, I was thrilled to find myself in

another country. My bride was a much more sophisticated traveler. She'd been all the way to California in a Pullman car when she was only 17, all by herself, playing gin rummy in the club car with a gentleman twice her age. Canada, I feared, might be small potatoes to her, but she eagerly scooped them up all the same. One afternoon in a little pub that had a separate room where women were supposed to sit (and where she most certainly did not sit) we made the acquaintance of a ruddy-faced man who told her

he had been, in days gone by, the middle weight boxing champion of Canada. He and his ruddy-faced friends insisted upon buying one round after another of strong Canadian beer until at last everybody was very very drowsy. From Detroit to Canada and back, we had a happy week, as good as, we thought, any tropical isle. On our final visit to Windsor, we bought a bottle of Bushmills Irish Whiskey, and carried it back to our little apartment on Grove Street where it sat in our pantry for quite a long time, almost too precious to drink.

Oddly enough, I have no idea whatever became of that blonde.

More Than One Soul Mate

by **Ruth M. Hunt**

My fingers dig into the faux-leather steering wheel as I point my right foot to the ground and the engine roars with exertion. One thought goes through my mind, “What the heck am I going to do with this kid?!” The windshield wipers’ squeaky objection snaps me out of my trance and I slap my hand up quickly, turning the wipers off. The rain has finally stopped. The word, “rain,” gives more credit than this annoying drizzle has earned. We moved to Washington from Texas three months ago and the constant mist is as annoying as gnats in your face when you’re trying to enjoy a picnic. At least in the dry Texas heat my hair didn’t frizz. Of course, I haven’t had my hair down much here where it *can* frizz. I’ve been working long hours preparing for this deployment and being in the uniform means my hair is up in a tight, strict bun.

Again I’m jarred out of my ranging thoughts as I make a quick right turn and my truck fish-tails into the empty left lane. “Oh, crap,” escapes my lips as I’m barely able to keep from spinning out. I release my foot from the accelerator. I remind myself I still need to learn how to drive on these slick roads. I try to calm my anger and anxiety and take slow, deep breaths. The full scent of the lush greenery is calming in its backwoods way. The beauty of this unfamiliar state is

undeniable as I admire the silent giants lining each side of the road the whole way home.

I make the last turn into my neighborhood and take time to back slowly into my driveway. This is a last ditch effort to provide time to calm down. I walk to the door and hesitate at the lock. I have my key out, but if it's unlocked, then that means my theory was right and he's inside.

A slow turn of the handle, and yes, the door opens easily. All the calming efforts from the drive are left outside with the persistent mist. I stomp my boots loudly on the new welcome mat and slam the door behind me.

I yell into the dark, open space, "Jaden! I know you're here! You better not make me look for you!"

His reluctant steps are magnified in the silent house as he trudges slowly down the stairs. Our little dog trails silently behind him as if she's in trouble too. I stand in the entry-way, jaw grinding, and watch as he slides his hand down the rail and takes the last step onto the wood floor in front of me.

In a whisper accompanied by a fluttering glance, he looks up at me and says, "Hi, Mommy."

I quickly switch into drill sergeant mode. "Don't you 'Hi, Mommy' me! Why are you not at school? Why is your principal calling me again? We just talked about this last week! This is the third time this month! What is going on with you?!"

He stares at the floor and shrugs. He's still wearing his school uniform and he pulls his collared, baby blue shirt down in a nervous motion. His khaki pants have a doodle drawn on the left knee in pen that I think will take me forever to wash out.

I sigh and tell him to go sit on the couch. I take my uniform top off and hook it over the stair railing. With my dog tags clinking under my tan t-shirt, I follow behind him and sit on the couch.

"Jaden, you have to tell me what's going on," I say as patiently as I can manage.

He sits all the way back on the couch, his white-socked feet barely touching the ground as he slouches and folds his arms over his chest.

He shrugs again and whispers, "Nothing."

I feel the irritation rising with the growl in my throat.

I lash out, "Jaden, there *has* to be something going on!"

When I yell at him his head jerks up as if I've slapped him and his dirty-blond hair bounces off his forehead.

His soft-brown eyes are wide as he stares at me and says, "I'm sorry. It's nothing. I just didn't want to be at school today so when the bell rang after lunch I just walked out and came home."

I press forward with the interrogation. "Are you having problems with another kid? Are you skipping to meet

up with some other kids? Are you having problems with one of your classes? What is it?"

Again, he says it's nothing. He apologizes and says it won't happen again.

Suddenly I'm exhausted and I rub my hands over my face as if I can just wipe away the fatigue.

With my eyes closed and covered by my fingertips, I mutter through my palms, "Just go start working on your chores and we'll talk about this when Daddy comes home."

He walks off slowly and I head upstairs to my room.

As I sit on the padded, wooden bench at the end of my bed, I call the principal to let him know Jaden is home. I apologize and thank him for informing me of his absence. I sigh as I hang up the phone and start untying my boots. Leaned over, fingers tugging on laces, I notice a shadow cross slowly in front of me. I sit up and Jaden is standing silently in the doorway.

His shoulders are hanging heavy and his head is down. He looks up slowly and his eyes are full of unshed tears. He looks so weighed down with a burden he hasn't shared with me that I'm immediately concerned.

I gently prod, "What's wrong?"

It's like a wave crashing over him as he releases his held sob and the tears flow freely down his lightly freckled cheeks.

His voice breaks and he says, “I don’t want you to go.”

This one sentence, spoken from this eleven year old boy, hits me so hard I feel my heart shattering under the pressure.

Jaden was exactly one year old when I met him. He was sitting on his grandmother’s kitchen table in Kentucky, playing with his aunt and grandmother when I walked into the house with his dad that first time.

I walked in slowly, just to the edge of the table, and shyly said, “Hi.”

This was the first time meeting my boyfriend’s family and I didn’t have much experience with kids. I barely liked them from a distance.

Jaden was an adorable butterball wearing just a diaper and a small, blue onesie. His eyes fixed in wonder at this new person in his home and he turned back to his grandmother for guidance.

In a peppy, excited voice, his grandmother asked him, “Hey, Jaybird, who’s that?”

Jaden turned to me with a huge, unabashed smile. Then, to my horror, he launched himself into a sprinted-crawl and, giggling wildly as if at a joke only he heard, crawled as fast as his fat fists and knees could carry him towards the end of the table; right

where I stood. Without any warning or hesitation, he threw himself into my arms. I was truly terrified. I was twenty years old and had no idea what to do with a kid. Now I had one literally throwing himself at me!

I thought of what could've happened if I hadn't gone on instinct and just caught him. He's put his life in my hands more than once. Ever since I caught him that first day, I've never let him go.

When I married his father, Jaden was eighteen months old. He was adorable in his little tuxedo as he walked unsteadily down the aisle, carrying our wedding bands on a tiny pillow.

When he was four he was bitten by a Brown Recluse spider in our home in Oklahoma. I stood in that emergency room, bawling my eyes out and yet trying to sooth him. Trapped in a memory I wish I could forget, I remember looking into his terrified, confused eyes and holding him down while he screamed so the nurses could clean out the wound.

When he was six his biological mother stopped visiting him and after two years without even a phone call, he asked me why she didn't love him. I fought back tears to reassure him that she loved him and she was just dealing with other things in her life right now. He's never received another phone call and he's never asked about her since.

When he was eight my entire family threw him a birthday party at Peter Piper Pizza. His wish that year was, "I wish I could keep this family forever." It's horrible to think that at eight he was still expecting the

rug to be pulled out from underneath him, as he wondered if this family was temporary.

One day he came to me and asked if I would adopt him. I told him, “Of course!” We finalized the adoption when he was ten and we celebrate his adoption day annually like another birthday. He doesn’t get presents, but he gets to choose where we eat dinner and, of course, gets dessert.

I never thought I wanted kids. When I met Jaden, he changed all that.

Now I look at him standing before me. He’s already gone through so much in his short life. It seems so unfair that now he is standing here, in the shadow of the doorway, looking so defeated, carrying a burden no child should really ever have to carry as he says, “I don’t want you to go,” and I feel the familiar burn in my eyes as tears immediately rush in.

I stretch my arms out and, like he did that first time, he folds his whole self into me, and just trusts.

He’s much taller now. His baby fat long since stretched to fit his lean build. His feet easily touch the ground as he sits in my lap and I hold him close and rock him.

The salt of his tears taste of raw truth as I kiss his cheeks and tell him, “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

He cries, “But what if something happens to you?”

I tell him I'll be fine. I remind him of how fiery I get and I can take care of myself. He says that sometimes stuff can happen anyway. I remind him that even if something does happen I'll be fine.

"Why will I be fine no matter what?" I ask him.

He whimpers, "Because God is taking care of you." I tell him he's exactly right. I tell him even if God says it's time for me to go, I'll still be fine.

The tears continue to roll and he says, "But I will miss you."

"I will miss you too. You are a part of me," I whisper against his hair. My body still rocks him instinctively.

He quietly mutters, "Really? I'm a part of you?"

I tell him, "Yes, Jaden. Of course you are a part of me. I think people have more than one soul mate. You have many pieces of your heart that are spread out all over the world and you know when you find one of those people who were meant to be a part of you. *You* are a part of me. I will always love you and watch over you."

He sniffles and looks up at me.

"Now you're crying," he says with a slight lift in his voice.

I poke him in the belly and jokingly say, "It's your fault, you made me do it."

He laughs and says, "I'm sorry."

He pauses for a few minutes and then continues, “I feel better now.”

“Why, because now I’m crying instead of you,” I laugh past the tears.

He gives me a big hug as my tears are rolling freely now. He gets up off my lap and stares down at me. I wipe my tears away with my hands as he does the same.

Now I see a sly smile spread across his face.

“I’m one of your soul mates,” he says, as if teasing a girl he’s just found out has a crush on him.

“Yes, you are,” I reassure him.

He stands there, looking at me like he has more to say.

His smile slowly shrinks away and he says, “I didn’t want to cry at school. That’s why I left. I won’t do it again.”

All the anger is long gone now and I have to force my voice to be firm when I tell him, “You better not.”

He hugs me again and bounces out of the room, no longer carrying the weight of his burden.

I sit and think about this child who entered my life so unexpectedly. This child who has taught me so much about myself. I sit alone and let it sink in that every word I said to him was true and realize he needed to hear it as much as I needed to say it.

Just Interesting

by **Jonathan Mack**

Tokyo, 2013

It sounds odd to call Taro my student since he was eighty-seven when he died and already over eighty when he started attending my English class. He was old enough to have been a soldier in World War Two—a very young, near-sighted, and perhaps slightly eccentric one.

I can report that although Taro's English was slow and halting, he didn't make many mistakes and he could say what he wanted to say. He did not, however, participate in discussions. While the other students related their ailments, holidays and grandchildren, Taro sat still as a statue, without seeming to move even his eyes, so becalmed you could be excused for thinking that he'd maybe gone a little soft in the head.

Each week, when the discussion had slowed a little, or when I saw that class would soon be over, I'd turn to Taro and ask, "So, Taro, any news?"

If it sounds like I wasn't a very good English teacher, that's the truth. I was lazy. I was too tired and too busy, like everyone else in the city of Tokyo. On the plus side, I was not very important in the lives of my students. A focused and energetic English lesson would only have gotten in the way. I was just an

excuse. I was an excuse and I knew it. Just as the English language was an excuse.

Tokyo is the number one loneliest city in the world: I will arm-wrestle anyone who says otherwise. But these old people, sitting in a community center beside Akagi Shrine in the elegant district of Kagurazaka, were not lonely. They were having a good time and, if their grown grandchildren sometimes laughed because grandma was taking English lessons, and maybe had been taking English lessons since the Occupation though her English never improved much and she continued to say “I go to shopping” despite being corrected three times every Wednesday, still, I’m telling you, these old people were clever: they knew a thing or two about living.

Just because some people remain immune to wisdom all their lives does not mean that wisdom can be ruled out. Some people *do* become wise in their old age and some of those people, it turns out, go to English class, even when they are eighty-five years old.

Whenever I called on Taro, his magnified eyes would blink behind the heavy lenses of his glasses and he would rub his lips together to moisten them. Then he would open his spiral notebook and cough to clear his throat. Using his notes to assist him—there were always a few words he’d needed to look up—he would tell the class a story.

In my life so far, Taro is my favorite storyteller. If I tell you one of his stories, you will be disappointed and

you will think that I am not a good writer. That is the truth—but I know, too, that I am not important and knowing such counts as a skill nowadays.

Taro's stories proceeded as slow as tortoises. A sentence was a creative endeavor and, as such, deserved its full allotment of time and space. Each sentence ought to be allotted its own page, as in the storybook of a young child.

For example, when Taro traveled to Paris with his wife. They went to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

"Wonderful, Taro! How romantic! What did you and your wife do in Paris?"

Taro explained that it was raining in Paris. They did not feel energetic. The chambermaid was a single mother raising two children on her own. She taught Taro and his wife to count to ten in French.

"That's great, Taro! And what did you do in Paris!"

At that point Taro nodded to the other students. They all smiled broadly to each other. I think it actually pleased them that their American teacher understood nothing whatsoever about life.

It was a long time before I understood that . . . nothing special needed to happen. Taro and his wife went to Paris to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary. It was raining and they didn't feel well. They stayed in the hotel and the friendly chambermaid taught them to count to ten in French. That was it. And that was enough.

Or the time Taro found a dead cat on his roof. A cat corpse saturated in cooking oil. Taro's wife thought she smelled something. Taro got on his ladder and, sure enough, there was a large dead. oil-soaked cat on the roof. There were a lot of restaurants around where he lived. They poured used cooking oil into a barrel, but they didn't always put a lid over it. The cat must have been lured by the smell and fallen in, then been overwhelmed when it tried to clean itself.

"Oh, Taro! I am so sorry! That's terrible! That's disgusting!"

For that matter, what the hell was an eighty-five year old man doing on a ladder?

Again, Taro looked to his classmates. Again, the knowing smiles and nods. Like I said, I think they really appreciated the fact that I could be relied upon to be dumb and insensitive.

The point was not that the cat was disgusting—it was all just *interesting*. Whether it was a dead cat on the roof or learning to count to ten in French, here was reality, and Taro attended to it.

Nothing bad ever happened to Taro. I was his teacher for years and I can attest to the fact. Nothing good happened either. Everything was just interesting. Whatever it was, he took care of it and wrote an account in his notebook, always with a few new words which he forgot almost as soon as he looked up from the page.

What a very interesting world it was. For example, it was interesting that he was constantly being arrested by the police. As a young man he'd never been arrested, not even once. Now he got arrested all the time.

This was because of his bicycle. He liked his bicycle very much, although it was just the ordinary heavy kind of bicycle which the Japanese use to get back and forth from the grocery store. He had built it himself, from the parts of many different discarded bicycles, and it was several different colors.

In Tokyo, when something breaks, you get a new one. Even if just one small part is broken, you get a new one. It is not usual to fix something, much less to make something from what others have discarded.

The police took one look at Taro's multi-colored bicycle and assumed that he had stolen it, part by part. They put him in the squad car, drove him to the station, and accused him of being a bicycle thief. It took him a long time to convince him that he was just a person who liked to fix things.

This happened multiple times. It happened so often that the police chief, the moment he saw Taro, would rush over and start apologizing. The chief would apologize profusely, then lay into the patrol cop for having nothing better to do than accuse an octogenarian of stealing a bicycle.

The truth was Taro didn't mind. He didn't mind being arrested any more than he minded finding a dead cat on the roof or traveling to Paris. He was not at all

displeased. He was not neutral either and certainly he was not unfeeling.

Taro lived to be 87. He was a painter and a teacher of art. For half a century he participated in annual exhibitions. His canvases were abstract and enormous and people who saw them invariably said that they seemed like the work of a much younger man.

As often happens in Japan, his final illness was hardly discussed. He retired from English class, then returned to it. Death, he said, would come when it was time -- it was not necessary to wait for it at home.

Taro lived several years longer than the doctors expected. Despite long friendship, no one in the English class was told he when he took turn for a worse, nor was anyone notified when he died. Someone heard of his death from a neighbor, a few weeks or a month later. This was neither unexpected nor rude—it is how death is done in Tokyo. It is considered polite to just slip out and not make such a fuss about it.

If there was a memorial service, none of us heard about it. It is not known, either, what has become of his paintings: they were so sprawling and ambitious that almost nowhere in Tokyo could a space be found to display them.

Hacker

by **Paul Perilli**

“You take a job you become the job,” Wizard said in Martin Scorcese’s cult classic *Taxi Driver*.

I felt much like Wizard the summer I was twenty and drove a taxi for Red Cab, a Waltham, MA company owned by my older cousin, Joey. Joey was a wise-cracking, street smart, tough guy, who at the same time was incredibly generous and also ambitious. At an early age he turned an interest in cars and a job as a gas station grease monkey into a business that would grow from owning a few cabs to having a fleet of them and eventually include school buses as well as vans for people with special needs and senior citizens, making make him millions of dollars.

Of course, I made a bit less than that working for him those months, an amount that fluctuated depending on how many hours I was willing to put in. And that was a lot. I was hired to drive weekdays but if there was a no-show or someone was late or quit, and that happened often enough, I’d volunteer to stay on. I could drive long hours, 12 or 16 of them with only a few breaks: a to-go breakfast from Wilson’s Diner, a couple of takeout slices from Piece o’ Pizza, a large afternoon coffee from Tony’s Spa. I liked the money and it was there to make if I wanted it, and there were times I’d be home with my family or shooting hoop with friends thinking I could, and probably should, be

on the road making some cash instead. I took the job. I became the job.

It wasn't more than a few days after I started that my friends began calling me Hacker, as in "Hey, Hacker, you coming out with us tonight?" It was a moniker I couldn't dissuade them from using. The identifier, I was sure, would turn off the girls we ran into at parties or bars or the beach and would doom me to a long dry summer. But, to my surprise, it actually turned out to be a good conversation starter, and I recall more than a few wide-eyed female faces exclaim, "Wow, are you really doing that?" My answer in the affirmative would lead to the usual follow-up questions. "Is it interesting?" "It can be." "Are the people weird?" "Mostly." "Do they give you great tips?" "Not especially."

In truth, I picked up the whole gamut of local humanity and folks passing through Waltham for whatever reason. I transported executives to and from the technology companies out on Fourth Ave, Bear Hill Road, and Winter Street to the airport. I took bossy old ladies who gave me ten cent tips to Super Market to do their grocery shopping. An hour later I might pick them up again and for another ten cents carry half a dozen bags to their door and maybe even respond to a command issued with the authority of a drill sergeant: "Don't just leave them there, take them inside." I drove men to their jobs in the morning and picked up others outside bars in the evening and at night, and who, shitfaced and disoriented, might be

overcome with a swell of generosity that could yield a 50 percent tip I'd have no problem pocketing. I took people of all ages to Waltham Hospital for tests or admission or to visit an ill spouse or child. Some would go into great detail about their plight, and the fear I heard resonating in their voices might depress me until my next pickup occupied the back seat and a new conversation started up. There were times, once a day maybe, when I'd turn the meter off early to keep the fare low for an elderly person I thought might be down to his or her last few dollars. In a few instances one of them might look so sad and destitute I'd open the back door and say the ride was on me and end up eating the cost myself for a few kind words in return.

My car was a Checker, one of those big, extra-roomy four door vehicles manufactured in Michigan. The model that, three years later, Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle was seen driving in *Taxi Driver*. Not long after the movie came out I sat in an old, worn seat in Harvard Square Cinema awed at the skill and imagination of Bickle's creator. He, Scorcese, was talking to me and I assumed lots of other buzzed-up drivers spending long, lonely nights taking strange folks to places they might not feel comfortable being in very long. To this day I still feel an unreasonable identification with Bickle ("You make the move. It's your move.") and wonder whatever happened to the draft of the story about a cab driver titled "Time and Distance" I'd written around then?

Time and distance. Those were the two settings on the old meters with the iron flag that was dropped at

the start of each new fare: set to distance it ticked off the ten or so cents for each eighth mile traveled; set to time it ticked off a similar amount for each minute that went by as you were stalled in traffic or waiting for your fare to run an errand. Setting the meter to time and distance while the taxi was moving was illegal, though unscrupulous drivers might take advantage of unsuspecting riders. I admit I did it often as I could, though never to someone I was sure was on a fixed income or that I knew or knew of. I did have a penchant to stiff demanding out-of-town businessmen I assumed were on company expense accounts and in a hurry to get to the commuter rail station or back to their hotel up along Route 128 or in downtown Boston. I did it to others whom I decided deserved it or I just didn't like. Only a few times did someone mention they knew I was overcharging them. Only once did someone call the office to report me to Chuck, the dispatcher.

Presumably because I was the owner's cousin, a cousin he liked and favored, you would think that might have guaranteed me one or two extra better paying fares a day. Nah uh. Not while Chuck was taking the calls and doling them out.

A grouchy ex high school offensive lineman, Chuck had worked for Joey for years, maybe even from the start, and no way he was going to give the summer help, not even Joey's blood relative, special treatment. Not when there were men riding the streets with families to support (and at that time all of Red

Cab's drivers were men). Not when Big Mike, a feared and uncommunicative man who'd been driving a taxi since he was old enough to have a license, might be out there waiting for his number to be called.

Big Mike was on the streets twelve hours a day six days a week. I don't know what kind of life he had outside of that, and it's likely I never let my imagination wander too deeply into it, but his stature at Red Cab was such that he wasn't afraid to key the mic and snap something at Chuck if he felt he was getting slighted in the distribution of good-paying fares. Big Mike always looked like he was getting slighted and that made him a little scary to be around. I don't think I had a single conversation with him. In fact, I don't think we ever exchanged any words at all, not even hellos at the garage where we picked up and dropped off our cabs.

The taxi business attracted a lot of those types, loners, social misfits, those in transition from job to job or place to place or life to life, people like me who needed some quick money, or those others who, for whatever reasons, thought spending a good chunk of the day alone in a car and sitting in stalled traffic and waiting for lights to change would be an all right job. ("All my life needed was a sense of someplace to go," was how Bickle put it.) While the seeming freedom of being your own boss and making your own hours, as many or few as you wanted, of hearing the meter click and imagining a steady flow of greenbacks coming your way, might be seductive, its reality was anything but freedom and riches. The constant hustle to make

decent cash, the meager tips, whiney people and empty, frustrating downtime, wasn't for everyone. Joey had a core group of steady drivers, but otherwise the turnover rate was quite high, and he was constantly looking for people he thought might stay with him a while.

84 was my handle, the number Chuck used to communicate with me over the two-way radio, as in "84 there's a pickup waiting on the corner of Crescent and Moody." Everyone had a number (Big Mike's was 1) but Chuck never used it to address them as he did me when I was in the office or on those occasions I went out with them for beers and some pool playing. It was as if I didn't have a first or last name or that we'd entered a time when the use of birth names was unnecessary. Truth was, I think he was intimidated by a college kid. Sports and women were the two dominant topics among the drivers, and ones I wasn't averse to delving into great detail about, but books, academic knowledge, those were for the Brandesians, as we townies referred to the Brandeis University students who lived up on the hill on South Street and had long hair and went to protests and who also, we were certain, screwed each other like bunnies on amphetamines. Chuck knew I read books during those dead zones in the mid-mornings and mid-afternoons when business was slow. I'd locate a shady spot to park my Checker and take out the volume I'd brought along, and when Chuck was in a joking mood, or a frustrated one, and there were plenty more of those, he might tell me to put it down

and head to such and such a number on Upland Road or Weston Street or over to the main entrance of Polaroid: “I hate to interrupt study period 84, but you need to get right on that.” I’d finish the paragraph I was on and key the mic and repeat the address for him. In the office at end of one day I remember Chuck looking at the big, thick book in my hand and wondering just why the fuck would I (I as 84) want to read something that was titled *Cancer Ward*?

I still don’t think it’s an unreasonable question.

The Guy and the Doll

by **Donald Dewey**

Louie Sad was born in Lebanon as the Maronite Christian Elias Saad. Brought to Brooklyn Heights as a child, he was transformed by neighbors and school companions (and later by others who had once gone to school) into the Syrian Moslem Louie Sad who must have had an ethnic in with Ali Baba, Omar Sharif, and the swarthy brothers who supplied the beer kegs for the annual Arab street festival on Atlantic Avenue. Louie seldom disabused people of their preconceptions and misconceptions. A shy man waiting to hear something funny and with a raspy, hyena-like laugh at the ready to reward it, he often conveyed a sense of being on *their* territory, with their ignorance about nationalities and religions part of a small but necessary admission tax. Even on the corruption of his name, he smiled to me once and for good that “Elias sounds Greek and I’m no Greek.”

Which was one of the few things Louie wasn’t at one time or another. When he wasn’t whatever burnoused camel driver lived in the minds of others, he was qualifying for all the jobs listed in the *Daily News* want ads. There were several years in a ticket office where he came to appreciate which theatrical producers had discovered the magic formula for a hit and which ones left him trying to hustle twofers before the final curtain dropped. There was another period when he did

something on Wall Street, though he always kept it vague about whether he was running Merrill Lynch or an elevator car in the Merrill Lynch building. What stood out for me was his job in a factory that made those big wheel pretzels that eliminated the need for any other meal on the day. Louie's task at the plant was monitoring the infinitesimal dosage of lye dropped into every pretzel for preservation purposes. His tales of other monitors who got into distracting arguments about a previous night's ballgame and had to be switched to other responsibilities because they had allowed too much salted acid to proceed down conveyor belts and out to street carts always provoked hilarity—and resolutions to stick to hot dogs from sidewalk peddlers.

When he wasn't working or looking for work, Louie was satisfying his addiction to show business. There was the show business of the downtown Brooklyn movies he checked out as rigorously as the theater bookers, the show business of the television programs he asterisked in *TV Guide* for appointments, and the show business of the Broadway producers whose tickets he sold and (when it was twofer time) whose productions he personally reviewed in the spirit of attending a wake for someone he hadn't known in life. But as much as in the celebrities he watched from a distance or read about when they were marrying, divorcing, or slugging photographers, he was also immersed in the closer show business of some neighborhood actor who had just played a corpse in a New York movie or of an electrician who was working backstage on the latest

Shubert Alley musical. For Louie these tenants across the hall or fellow bar patrons were equal to famous actors and singers in their place in the glittery commotion he savored as a daily high. He could be as gratified by gossip about E.G. Marshall as about Barbra Streisand, and behaved as circumspectly as a CIA agent when he passed it along to another party.

Well into his fifties, Louie squeaked one of his hyena laughs at the idea of a show business career of his own, never having hatched grandiose ambitions from selling his theater tickets or from singing along late at night in piano bars. That too was *their* turf. But then Lorna came along. Lorna was a tall, stately brunette 15 years younger than Louie and with thick makeup bent on making it look 25. She might not have been royalty, but she never sat down without fanning her skirt to mark a wide boundary from her subjects, the way the queens played by Deborah Kerr in MGM movies once did. During the day Lorna worked as a secretary in the rectory of a Catholic church; afterwards and on weekends she took the voice lessons she had been taking since a teenager, clinging to the thought of being discovered one day by an agent or producer who would launch her professional career. Her only conspicuous public performing over the years had been with her church choir on Sundays, when parishioners never had to raise their eyes to know Lorna was in the loft. Once she released her educated soprano, not only the other choir members, but the priest on the altar knew better than to intrude upon a star turn. The rituals

could be observed any time; as the filled pews (and substantial basket collections) demonstrated every week, Lorna reduced the sermons to a bill filler. Mahalia Jackson would have understood.

Having all but converted to Roman Catholicism to hear Lorna, Louie needed little incentive to talk up her talents with anyone who had ever ridden in the same subway car with an agent or producer. Since I had been in a couple of those subway cars, my wife and I were invited fairly regularly to go out with Louie and keep up Lorna's spirits about eventually finding the maestro who would take her career in hand. In fact, Lorna didn't need me or anyone else to keep up her spirits. She had already completed a thorough analysis of her hopes and requirements, concluding that she still had reason to get out of bed every morning with bigger dreams than alerting a priest to a telephone plea for the last rites.

In the hope category, there was Lorna's endless list of singers, actors, composers, comedians, painters, and sculptors who hadn't achieved their breakthrough until they were older than Louie. Anyone who had met Lorna and didn't come away knowing that Giuseppe Verdi had composed *Falstaff* when he was 79 or that Richard Strauss had waited until his 80s to write his most beautiful *Lieder* hadn't been paying attention. What did any of that have to do with the actual singing of Verdi or Strauss? Lorna was amazed you had to ask. What she was even more baffled by, though, was questioning the one and only restriction she had put on her eventual stardom—that she could not stay

away from Brooklyn Heights for any length of time, leaving her widowed mother to fend for herself. When had her father died? Twenty years ago. Was her mother ill? No, she smoked too much but was in the best of health and still worked for Con Edison. So what was the problem? See, that was why the question puzzled her. The *problem* should have been obvious.

Louie tried his best to pretend it was, too—and then to move on to the less obvious as fast as he could. If Lorna had a warehouse of stories about artists breaking through at 75, he had another deposit of them about mothers who blunted the yearnings of their children, mothers who had always wanted their children to succeed in show business, and mothers who didn't like being used as excuses for the behavior of their children. He was particularly careful holding forth on this last group, of course, voicing his own bewilderment when Lorna suspected he was referring to her. Nothing of the kind, he reassured her, then went on to entangle himself in a Louie Sad Rule about the map miles that would amount to abandoning a parent and the distance that fell short of that crime. More than once, this prompted debates about whether, say, a one-week engagement in Philadelphia was practically farther from Brooklyn than, say, a two-night stand in St. Louis. Mostly, these discussions wound down to two important points of agreement: that it depended on whether a train, plane, or automobile was moving Lorna back and forth and that it wasn't worth getting upset about

anyway until she received an invitation to go to either place.

Off by himself, however, Louie *was* getting upset with these futile calculations, and confided to me that he had taken a step toward acting as Lorna's agent. Instead of grabbing a sandwich on his lunch hours at the pretzel factory, he began canvassing nearby community halls and theaters to see what it would cost to mount an evening of Lorna and her songs. The numbers that came back to him were not encouraging, they were certainly nothing he could afford, and that was without even approaching a performing palace like BAM to get an estimate. "There's more involved than the rental of the space," he moaned. "You'd have to pay at least a piano player. Then there's the lighting guy and the sound guy and probably a couple of ushers. And you can't do a thing like this without a program. You know how much these printers want for just a single piece of paper? It doesn't have to be colored paper, either. Just the plain white."

There was good and bad in Lorna finding out about Louie's lunch hour soundings. The good was in their relationship, which advanced to her hanging on to his arm and pecking his cheek in public, announcing that she believed in him as much as he did in her, whatever the calendar or her makeup said. The bad was in her nudges about why he hadn't tried this or that place for her recital—an admission she had been going through the Yellow Pages on her own and a veiled accusation of negligence he sought to correct

as soon as another lunch hour bell rang. Somewhere in the middle was the reluctant decision to look for a hall further afield than Brooklyn Heights, all the way out to Park Slope and Sunset Park, if necessary. And when you came right down to it, wasn't even Bay Ridge at the far end of Brooklyn closer than *both* Philadelphia and St. Louis?

Louie soldiered on in his search until it seemed everyone in Brooklyn knew that finding a recital hall for Lorna had become as improbable as talking the Dodgers back from Los Angeles. Then one evening, while waiting at a restaurant bar for Lorna, he ran into an actor who had been hired as a ringer for one of the Lighthouse for the Blind's occasional presentations of popular musicals. Although the Lighthouse prided itself on giving leads to blind actors, singers, and dancers (the *raison d'etre* for the undertaking), it also dropped in a sighted ringer or two—usually as members of the chorus or walk-ons who had some barking dialogue moment—to serve as guides for intricate stage movements. But in the case of the *Guys and Dolls* then in rehearsal, the actor informed Louie, the whole production was in jeopardy because the blind singer cast for the role of Adelaide had been forced to quit and no replacement could be found. Against Lighthouse intentions, the director was desperate enough to take on a singer-actress who could see.

Louie told the actor not to worry and to alert the director his new Adelaide would be giving him a call in

the morning. He had a harder time persuading Lorna not to worry. Yes, she was familiar with the *Guys and Dolls* score, and yes, she considered herself capable of learning dance steps, and God knew, she had memorized enough opera roles to handle lines. But she had never planned on performing with a cast of blind people. To Louie's objection that few people ever had, Lorna retreated to the more worn excuses of her schedule at the rectory, the awkwardness of replacing somebody in the middle of rehearsals, and her preference for *bel canto* to popular musicals. As Louie would insist later, it was Lorna's own acute ear that finally heard all these evasive notes and led her to agreeing to see the director.

Lorna's reverberating audition rendition of "Adelaide's Lament" swept away any lingering reservations by the director about taking on a sighted person. As soon as that was settled, the elated Louie started rounding up more commitments for attendance than he ever had for Rogers and Hammerstein from his ticket office. His joke was that he was twisting more arms at his factory than his co-workers were twisting pretzels. As for Lorna, she developed new worries—not about performing with blind co-stars, but about what she detected as the waning strength of her voice during rehearsals because of trying to keep up with the firm baritone of the actor playing Nathan Detroit. It took a concerted effort by Louie and growingly irritated parish priests to convince her she would worry a lot less if she didn't spend just about every minute of every day—at home, at work, in restaurants—singing

“Adelaide’s Lament” to whatever walls were around her.

There might have been bigger opening nights for a Lighthouse show, but nobody remembered when. When Louie wasn’t glowing over the numerous familiar faces he greeted at the entrance, he was beaming over the scores of arrivals who hadn’t required his personal urging to spend their evening with Lorna. His enthusiasm dipped only when Bessie, Lorna’s mother, swaggered up. Most of Bessie’s long, straight gray hair draped down to cover her face; the rest of it made for a façade of bangs copied from beauty parlor photos; all of it was endangered by her tic of constantly tugging at the ends with a Lucky Strike between her yellowed fingers. Bessie might not have actually sipped anything stronger than tea for decades, but she carried herself as if shaking off a leg cramp after rising from a bar stool. “This your idea?” She greeted Louie with a Lucky Strike voice that made his rasp sound like a trill. “You break my Lorna’s heart, I’ll break something of yours.”

Louie tried to think that was funny, and kept his eyes on her as she negotiated the front door with a final siss at having to toss away her half-smoked cigarette. “She doesn’t like me much,” he said.

By the time the imposing-sized orchestra from local schools went into the overture, a couple of hundred people had filled the folding chairs rowed before a high stage. The fact that most of them were relatives and friends of the performers didn’t dilute the

objectivity of their attention so much as strengthen the formality of what was being presented to them from the elaborate sets. Whatever the professional or physical limitations of the players, the traditional gulf between entertainers and audience was quickly in place. Halfway into the first scene, there was little patronizing of the blind in the air. The songs and dances were succeeding or failing only on their execution, and the script didn't call for any pratfalls.

Bessie didn't hear any of the sour notes or flubbed lines because she had made sure to plant herself on an aisle seat from which she could get outside for a cigarette break whenever Lorna went offstage. She seemed to have committed the score to memory as scrupulously as any cast member because she timed her returns perfectly to Lorna's entrances. When a house manager standing in the back suggested she stop coming and going and disturbing the rest of the audience, Bessie separated herself from the play's Salvation Army characters with her gravelly roar to "go screw yourself."

But the main reason Bessie didn't hear any of the sour notes was that Lorna, for one, didn't hit any. Just as in the choir loft every Sunday, she swooped down on the golden oldies and shook them with such vibrant force that they didn't dare not gleam again. When she told Nathan Detroit to "Take Back Your Mink," he had to be forgiven for thinking it was an order to reanimate the animals that had gone into the coat. The one juncture at which the peculiar sponsor of the evening came to the fore was during a dance

when Lorna was outfitted in more beads than solid cloth and she flaunted long legs that had no need of makeup. Behind the smile that had been on his face since her opening number, Louie cast suspicious glances around to reassure himself much of the audience couldn't see what he wasn't all that eager about anyone besides himself seeing. He might have been more certain of it if her drum-aided bumps and wiggles didn't bring loud, hoarse laughter from Bessie at the end of his row.

The repeated surges of applause at the end of the show only confirmed what had been evident for a couple of hours: Nobody had missed anything by not spending the evening across the river in some Times Square theater. Back to his shepherding role, Louie led more than a dozen people to a restaurant where he had reserved three tables. The one touch too much was in having transparently indifferent but rehearsed waiters clap as Lorna entered, but it didn't bother her and she immediately kissed her agent-producer for his part in her triumph. Only Bessie blew smoke on the moment as she peered out from her hair in wonder that she hadn't been brought to a better place.

The food and wine went on for hours. Lorna volunteered a couple of choruses for nearby diners who wanted to know what was being celebrated, Bessie volunteered a couple of hacking coughs when the pretzel salter next to her asked if she was related to Lorna. Louie didn't have to wait for somebody to

say something funny to laugh since just about everyone did. And then, over the sixth or seventh toast, Lorna stood up to thank everyone for being part of “the happiest night I’ll ever have singing.” Louie jumped up to top her, to predict there would be many more such evenings, but she cut him off with a long kiss, this time on the lips. He didn’t know if he was more flummoxed by the kiss or the tears in her eyes. “Sit down, Louie,” Bessie croaked from across the table. “You’re rockin’ the boat.”

Bessie liked herself for the reference to another of the show’s tunes, and several people at the table laughed with her. Louie turned pale as Lorna sat down away from him. He knew he was rocking the boat, too. It still wasn’t his turf.

Down the Aisle with Henry James

by **Renée Tursi**

In his 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James put his heroine Isabel Archer's marriage at the story's midpoint. Before then, nuptials had always dwelt at a tale's end. Following Isabel's ill-considered decision to wed the pernicious Gilbert Osmond, James kept the cameras rolling, giving his readers unnerving access to a very unhappy ever-after.

Having recently entered the marriage plot for the first time in my early fifties, I am thrown off by the return of the fairytale arc in my life. My ever-after, a copiously joyful one so far, has fallen a considerable distance from Isabel's youthful start of the tale, and presumably well past the middle. Crunching the numbers, I see I could conceivably escape any marital strife just by where my husband and I fall in the actuarial tables. "Before the charm wears off, we'll be dead" was how the last boyfriend had spun our dating circumstance. He missed the mark for that romance. But he may be spot on about my marriage.

Yet, while it turned out not to be too late for me to be married, I wonder if it might be too late for me to *feel* married.

Mrs. Osmond strikes me as someone who, to James's astute and life-long unmarried observer's mind, would have a particular quality that differed from a woman who wed for the first time later in life. It goes deeper than her regret at having married the wrong man—and beyond the fact that, as James notes, "It may seem to the reader that Mrs. Osmond had grown of a sudden strangely cynical."

I cannot name the quality, nor would I presume to try. And that's my dilemma.

Of course I know that marriage in this country today, at least on paper, allows for both partners to remain fully realized individuals. When I talk about feeling married, what I'm referring to is what otherwise strongly autonomous women, ones who had wed at an "expected" age, will often say to me. That long after becoming single again, they still carry a married orientation. They confess to entering rooms as an "I" with ever-so-slight a hesitation, an inner pause registering only on their own finely tuned gauge.

Being unmarried turned out to be nowhere near the "dreadful existence" my 16-year-old self, despite its nonconformist spirit, had imagined such a life. Freedom has been mine in every sense: I made my way through graduate school to an academic career. I went from my own apartment to buying my own house. I had long-term relationships, albeit always fraught ones. I never cooked. And the only diapers I changed were those of my sisters' children. When one of my nieces was asked once what her aunt does for a living, she replied: "She gives me books."

But I wasn't content. I wanted a forever partnership.

That said, the dating advice to "get out there" doing the things you love so as to meet like-minded people landed on my doorstep with a thud. When what one loves most is to curl up at home with Henry James, potential mates tend to remain fictional.

Plot lines, however, do not. Those tragic miscommunications, tortured ruminations, excruciating choices, and unrelenting disappointments James visits upon his characters were the very storylines I seemed fated to pursue. His heroines and I took on narcissists like lint.

After too many decades and very little effort from me, my future husband, in a stroke of impossible irony, just showed up at my door and rang the bell.

The day before, I had put down my book and gone for coffee at my neighbor's, whom he was visiting. He was magnificent. His three children, too. Within a year, he and I wed, surrounded by the people we love and a Vermont downpour.

When friends ask me "did the marriage take?" the answer is easy. Happy sped by in a blur. Now I'm in some sort of incandescent bliss. My husband is loving, kind, brilliant, funny, patient, generous, charming, tall, and handsome. Really. When someone talks to him in front of me, I'm so relieved; it's proof I've not made him up.

Astonished to have found each other “at this point in our lives,” we feel so temperamentally enmeshed that he and I are as much a “we” as I imagine two beings can be. As my stepson watches his father and me eat breakfast with our oatmeal bowls touching, he just shakes his head.

But the first time I was asked whether I was planning to change my name to my husband’s, I admitted the thought hadn’t occurred to me. Honestly, at my age, the question felt even a bit embarrassing. Like my trying to pull off a navel piercing. And now when I’m asked what being married feels like, the truth is, beyond my absolute happiness, I don’t know. I think I may have a permanently unmarried state of mind.

So here’s what I tell people: I feel like a single person who’s married.

Everything and nothing prepared me for this impasse. During the feminist-turbulent years of my childhood, the fact that my mother had forfeited a dance career because my father deemed it unfitting for a university faculty wife to be seen in a leotard made no small impression on me.

“Never count solely on a man” she told my sisters and me within earshot of the spouse upon whom she could count for everything, except recognition as a sound decision-maker.

She loved my father and she loved us. But it was clear that her life had left her in service. I came away with few convincing arguments for becoming a wife and having children myself. Virginia Woolf said what

we all know: “we think back through our mothers if we are women.”

My mother spent the last dozen years of her life a widow. As much as she changed remarkably during that period—traveling, building a house, and tramping the Vermont woods with chainsaw in hand—she would never have been mistaken for a life-long unmarried woman. Mistaken for me. Something about the tilt of her head, as though still listening to my father’s voice.

She would also never come to like James. A perceptive reader, she found the way he loitered about in a discontented mind unsettling.

In high school, no one had asked me to the prom; the day after, however, a boy came up to me to say that he had *thought* about asking me. This utterance, astounding for its Jamesian conflux of misdirection, bewildered me as nothing had before.

I could understand his deciding not to ask me. It was his *telling* me that was impenetrable.

I turned to novels. There I was sure that such unfathomable discourse would be explained. I started to *really* read and I started to date. But the two experiences seemed to conspire to make the possibility of fruitful pairing mere fantasy.

Had I been able to identify more with another author’s heroines, Jane Austen’s, say, maybe my decisions would have sent me down the marriage path, for

better or worse, at a younger age. What I ended up taking to, instead, was James's sensibility. There is such a profound inwardness to it all. An aching aloneness and yearning that surges through his careful studies of human behavior. I ate it up.

If only he had chosen, just for me, to keep going his short story "The Jolly Corner." It ends with the promise of a mature kindling of an earlier friendship. Having waited, on reserve as it were, for Spencer Brydon's return to New York after thirty-three years abroad, Alice Staverton had been getting on with her life. She "sallied forth and did battle." In appraising her after all these years, Brydon thinks her appearance "defied you to say if she were a fair young woman who looked older through trouble, or a fine smooth older one who looked young through successful indifference."

I would like to read about the married Staverton a decade down the road. Just to know whether or not James would leave her unmarried habits of mind intact.

Perhaps only someone as never-married as James, someone to whom women often confided quite deeply, could suggest so enigmatically the transformation that the young Isabel Archer undergoes in becoming Mrs. Osmond. When a few years into the marriage James has her become absorbed into thought about her husband's irregular conduct, he seems to imply that she is feeling emotionally alone. But not exactly solitary.

Since I've been married, my interiority has withstood any breach upon my feeling solitary. This despite the absence of lonesomeness. Despite a husband who, with such sweetness, has somehow come to read my mind and to protect my every vulnerability. Nevertheless, on forms, I still search for a hybrid term somewhere between "single" and "married."

My life has been a rich yield from feminists before me. They gave me choice, income, and innumerable rooms of my own. Unlike Mrs. Osmond, who "sometimes felt a sort of passion of tenderness for memories which had no other merit than that they belonged to her unmarried life," I suffer no need for nostalgia. As my husband works at his desk near mine, his presence offers neither rescue nor suffocation. He is there simply as a pure good, added to my singleness.

James's world denied the author the comfortable possibility of a satisfying union for himself. Maybe he is suspect, then, for presuming to write the inner life of women. But his prescribed singleness may explain why his outlook has given me insightful companionship equal to that of any female author.

At key moments in her life, Isabel Archer has just been reading. She lays down the book and stares ahead while her intricate Jamesian contemplations take shape. It's terrible how, after all that, she so misreads Gilbert Osmond before marrying him.

I had the benefit of reading much longer than she did before marriage. As it turns out, a deferred ever-after has its advantages. Even if it means my state-of-mind never catches up.

The Woman Who Is Not My Mother

by **Marsha Roberts**

I can hear her walking toward the front door, her sensible shoes shuffling closer and closer. But the door doesn't open yet. She is standing there, just on the other side. She's making the sign of the cross and asking the Blessed Virgin for courage. I know this because I have seen it many times from the other side.

"Who is it?" she says, her voice the size of a doll's.

Before I can answer, she says it again, this time pleading. "Who is it?" She's imagining the worst … no, not imagining—remembering. It is wartime and they've come to take her and her family away. The words tremble through the door again. "Please, who is it?"

I try to sound as cheery as I can. "Your daughter!"

"Who?" Mercifully, confusion spills over the terror, blunting it.

"Your daughter… remember me?" One day, maybe soon, she won't.

The door finally opens just a slice and she blinks in surprise. "Oh, I didn't know you were coming."

The sight of her takes me aback, too. It always does. Even if I've just seen her the day before, the first glimpse is always a shock. The woman at the door isn't my mother. My mother would be appalled at the sight of this woman. "Why doesn't she comb her hair, or put on some lipstick, or wear a clean blouse, for god's sake?" my mother would say.

"Why don't you comb your hair, or put on some lipstick, or wear a clean blouse?" Some days I actually say it before I can get ahold of myself. On those days, she fires right back. The anger that used to be folded neatly under her lets loose with full force. "What does it matter? I am old. Nobody sees me."

"We're going out now, Mom. People will see you."

"If I embarrass you, then I'll just stay home."

We go out. She's wearing the same thing she's worn for the last three days. A kelly-green t-shirt, topped with a turquoise cardigan—colors clearly unhappy with each other. At the grocery store, I get the usual looks from other middle-aged women. *How can you let her go out like this? Why don't you take care of her like she took care of you?*

And then it gets worse. We get to the checkout counter and she takes three candy bars from the stand and slips them onto the belt. I scoop them up and put them back. She grabs them again. I put them back. Her eyes well up and she starts crying—really crying. She says for all to hear that I won't let her have any candy and that I'm mean and why can't she have candy because after all, she doesn't have

anything else—candy is her only happiness and I won't let her have it. By now our audience has turned into a jury. And they're disgusted with me.

"Diabetes," I want to explain.

On the way home, I tell her about the senior center dance tomorrow. Would she like to go? I look over and do a double take. It's my mother. Her eyes are bright blue and her old smile is right there where it always was.

"Oh, yes," she says, she would love to go. And then, with a giggle, "Maybe I'll find a boyfriend!" Her cheeks are flushed like she's already whirling around the floor.

She isn't my mother, but sometimes she reminds me so much of her.

Cells

by **Marcia Butler**

One day in the early 1970s, a friend and I played hooky from conservatory classes at The Mannes College of Music. Diligent, disciplined and hopeful about our future careers in music—mid-semester blues had nonetheless descended upon us. We'd had just about enough of music theory and solfeggio classes for the morning. So on a lark, we left the comfort of the upper-east-side and ventured down to the vast construction site where the Twin Towers were being erected. Somehow we were able to slip into an elevator in the South Tower, punch a very high number and ride up to one of the top floors still under construction. A few workmen were milling about, but no one stopped us or paid any attention to our wide-eyed shenanigans. The site was surprisingly deserted, at least on the floor we happened upon.

Walking out into the yet-to-be-constructed offices, we felt simultaneously inside and outside. The wind was whipping through the open space, because the windows, all stacked up against those now famous thick interior columns, had not yet been installed. Curious and brave, we walked towards those huge gaping cavities, and for a moment we really did feel on top of the world. Hand in hand, we ventured right to the brim, without fear or hard hats. We felt giddy as the building swayed, and we gripped each other more tightly.

The Trade Towers had been controversial, considered potential eyesores in the Wall Street area. No one wanted the towers to be built, just as years later, no one wanted the Time Warner towers to be built at Columbus Circle. But these behemoths ultimately *do* get built, and eventually everyone gets used to them. We forget about the resistance and drama surrounding new construction in our city and the worries of how it will impact our beloved skyline, which is always changing like cumulus clouds. The New York City skyline is imbedded in our consciousness and yet, it slowly undulates with the gradual and inevitable new construction that is the hallmark of progress.

Through the years, I developed a curious sense of personal ownership of the towers, remembering them as the enormous lumbering babies I met when I snuck into that elevator and walked to the very hilt, looking out onto my vast city. I saw a view that few had yet seen. That view was just for my friend, the construction guys and me. As we looked out of the wide-open holes in the walls, we were inured to the height and the expanse and the potential danger of the tower's verticality.

Out and about in the city, I found myself looking southward often, and feeling comforted; there they were, just as they should be, a solid visual homing beacon. At times, thick moisture laden clouds obscured the tops, and I imaged them as chunky steel legs connected to a robot-like body overlooking the

city—protecting its territory. The skies always cleared to reveal spires soaring upward to points unknown.

The Twin Towers were *my* towers. I loved them so. No matter the weather or my particular day's coordinates, they grounded me. They were just *there*, looming over the Woolworth Building and 40 Wall Street, dwarfing those eschewed edifices of the past by dozens of floors.

On the day they fell, imploding a bit too perfectly into themselves, I hunkered down in front of the tube, feeling ghoulish and selfish, watching the horror unfold less than a mile away from my house in Sunnyside Gardens, Queens. I'd endured a yearlong battle with dive-bombing personal terrorists in the form of cancer cells, and was furious that the balm of normalcy through music and those ever-present towers had been ruptured. I had just begun jogging again. My skull was sprouting what would become a fantastic plume of gray hair. The demand of upcoming concert schedules had returned to my life. But with a white hot prick of awareness and then the dulled iron clad concession to fate, all hope of a normal day of rehearsals for upcoming concerts evaporated. All I wanted to do that day was play the oboe—play music.

I'd lobbed a few grenades of my own just a few months before. The target: my oncologist—in charge of pouring toxic chemicals into my body under the guise of saving my life. The treatment felt nonsensical, uncalled for and surely sadistic. Railing into him during one office visit, he took my attack with a grim, knowing smile. He'd heard this rant of "re-

transition" before. The next week I sheepishly apologized and accepted the red chemo like a soldier suffering from battle fatigue but willing to follow orders for my greater good.

Anger and grief, for the city and myself, folded onto each other like cake batter and I was once again brought to my knees for my off-target emotions. A grim and selfish thought began to surface at the edge of my chemo-brain. On 9/11/01, what was *really* on my mind was the appointment scheduled at my radiologist's office for 9/12/01. At 9 AM I was scheduled to have my brand new baseline x-rays, which would tell the new story of my now non-cancerous breasts. My rehearsals never transpired; all concerts were called off. What if my appointment was cancelled due to the Twin Towers collapsing?

Of course, no one was in the doctor's office to answer my repeated calls. The phone service all over New York City was sketchy at best. I felt sheepish and embarrassed to even bother with this detail in my small life. My gigantic baby towers were gone and my breasts needed to be photographed. The Towers and The Breasts: like the title of a bad soap opera, just cancelled by the networks.

As the wind shifted into the evening, my house began to fill with the smell of smoke and minute detritus of God knows what. I went to bed that night with the windows closed, trying to ward off that odor of death and pulverized computers, the particles of vaporized documents and other ephemera of life that made up

the Trade Towers and everything and everyone trapped inside. The very concrete that I may have stepped on as I emerged from the elevator that day over 40 years ago might have been crossing the East River and seeping into my house in Queens on the night of 9/11/01. As I tried to sleep, I inhaled my baby towers—an odor that I imagined contained my own young and ancient footsteps.

On the morning of the 12th at 6:30 AM, the call came from my doctor: they would see a few patients who needed crucial scans and I was one. "Come on in, if you can."

Walking to the subway, I sensed a tentative calm in the air, not yet to be trusted. The streets and stores were empty, save for a few stalwart Korean delis. Most people had undoubtedly been glued to the TV all night and were still watching, or were drifting off to sleep into an unwanted day off. Miraculously, the 7 trains were running and I boarded the Manhattan-bound subway with a few others, our eyes meeting, but mostly behaving as if we were going into work as usual.

I sat on the side of the train that faced north. As the elevated subway went into its big turn just after the Queensboro Plaza station, it suddenly occurred to me to turn around and look south. The gesture was an instinct. My southward view had just cleared the Citigroup Building. With this building in the foreground, the Twin Towers *would* have emerged. But they were gone. What appeared in their stead was the most beautifully sculpted double billow of

thick smoke imaginable. They were solidly planted where the towers had been, almost as if they were new structures, and not going anywhere. Casper-like billows: ghostly. Monumental bulbous balloons of grey steely smoke, the wind unable to dissipate their sheer density. The towers had been rearranged into a softer effect; not the huge phallic-like structures that everyone griped about in the 70's when I was a music student. No, these might be kind and gentle and forgiving towers, because they were now not only made of concrete and steel, but also of lives lost. Mixed up in the chaos of these gentle smoke stacks were countless bodies, pulverized into a massive, vertical sandy compost heap. *Is that what I inhaled the night before?* This thought roiled in my guts and I bent down to retch onto the floor of the train. My fellow commuters looked away.

The radiologist's office was on Madison Avenue, a building of solid steel, concrete, granite and glass. The elevator let me out into an intact hallway. Doors to the offices were wide open; a few bald comrades sat, waiting. Angels disguised as doctors in white coats had flocked to this solid building to quell my fears and complete my treatment, taking the pictures that would become my breast's new baby pictures, to gaze at and refer to in subsequent years.

9/12/01 was the end of my cancer journey. On that day, I began my final stage of healing. I heard the somber music of death knells throughout the city. The

killing of my cancer was complete, and my beloved baby Twin Towers had died too.

A Bipolar Christmas

by **Martin Achatz**

My daughter was born at the end of an early December snowstorm. I remember the wind that night while my wife was in labor, the kind of wind that shakes parked cars. It tore up the darkness, as if it was mad at the sun for disappearing to the other side of the planet. At some point during that long, midnight vigil, I joked to my wife, Beth, “Keep it down. I can’t hear the wind.”

She didn’t laugh.

At 7:29 the following morning, our daughter was born, screaming and healthy.

The storm had blown itself out like a birthday candle by the time Beth gave the final push that brought our baby into the world. Outside, everything was blinding white and calm, a scene from Currier & Ives. Inside, I stood by my wife’s bed and stared at her and my newborn daughter, felt myself opening up, unfolding like some rare orchid in the moment. So serene. So perfect.

I’d like to end with that Madonna and child moment, tell you that later in the morning, three kings showed up and showered us with presents and food and free camel rides. But that isn’t quite what happened.

Before she became pregnant, my wife had been battling crippling bouts of depression. She’d been to counselors and therapists, talked about her mother’s

death, started taking Prozac. Nothing worked. The depressions kept getting deeper and longer, as if she were on some endless donkey ride through the Grand Canyon at night during a full lunar eclipse. These lows were always followed by periods of respite, chrysalis times when my wife broke free, became all wing and sun and light.

Then Beth got pregnant. For those nine months, the darkness simply vanished. At first, we kept watch, waiting for the nose of an iceberg to appear on the horizon. After a few months of clear seas, however, we relaxed, began planning our future with something like hope. My wife seemed to be waking up after a long fallow season. Our life became a series of doctor's visits and firsts. First hearing of our daughter's heartbeat. First ultrasound. First time our daughter moved.

When we painted the nursery walls that autumn, my wife's depressions were like shadows in the corners of a well-lit room. I was in graduate school, writing poems about mosquitoes and moons. Beth only had one bout of morning sickness her entire pregnancy. Approaching her due date and the upcoming holidays, we never heard the chains of the Ghost of Mental Illness Yet to Come rattling at our front door.

It took only a couple days after our daughter was born for the honeymoon to end. Beth woke up one morning and said to me, "I have a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach." These nervous feelings were omens that something dark was about to descend, and I could see it in my wife's eyes. She had the look of a

rabbit being chased by a screech owl, ready to bolt down the nearest burrow.

Her ob-gyn seemed concerned but not panicked. She gave Beth estrogen patches and told her it was the post-partum blues. We liked this doctor a lot, and both of us clung to the belief that these little round stickers of hormone would steer the UPS truck to our house to deliver a glowing package of joy to our front porch.

As the winter solstice approached, however, I would come home from work night after night to find Beth still in bed, our daughter on the pillows beside her. The bedroom was a cave filled with the smell of sour breast milk. I'd climb into bed with them and hold Beth while she wept. As a writer, I don't often use the word "wept." It's too melodramatic a verb, summoning up Heathcliff and Jane Eyre on the moors. But there's no other word for how my wife clung to my shirt and sobbed, her body convulsed with a grief so profound it made her seem unstitched, as if her bones and muscles and skin couldn't contain it. Sadness seeped out of her pores like thick, black sap.

Pain is a part of most Christmas narratives. Mary is a pregnant teen, shunned and rejected. As a boy, Scrooge is abandoned by his father. George Bailey is suicidal. Rudolph is bullied. And then there's Nestor, a little donkey with ears as long as elephant trunks. In this Rankin/Bass holiday special, Nestor is teased for his anatomical anomaly and eventually gets kicked out of the barn during a blizzard on the winter solstice, a night, according to legend, when animals are given

the gift of speech. Nestor's mother follows him and ends up lying on top of him to keep him warm. She saves Nestor but loses her life in the process.

Despair accumulates like heavy snow in all these stories. Yet, there are also Garcia Marquez moments of magic. Ghosts. Wingless angels. Blazing comets. The long December nights always end with warm hay and church bells and sunrises.

The druids and Celts understood this dual nature of the winter solstice time, this battle between death and life, darkness and light. I think early Christians understood it, as well. That's why they chose to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ around December 21. They saw it as a time when human beings reached through the black and cold of winter toward the warmth and rebirth of spring, the very planet tilting from sorrow to hope.

On Christmas Eve, Beth was having a good spell. For a few days, she'd been able to get out of bed, play with our daughter, and wrap presents. During the day on December 24, we made sugar cookies and fudge, watched one of the multiple broadcasts of *It's A Wonderful Life* on TV.

Outside, the clouds were the color of a dirty gum eraser, smudged with the promise of snow. The lilac bushes along our property line were capped with white. Their branches rattled in the wind like startled deer hoofs on ice or stone. A storm was coming. The weatherman was forecasting several inches by Christmas morning.

At church that night, Beth and I sat with family. Our daughter slept in the crook of my arm the entire service, her velvet dress the color of evergreen. As we lit candles and sang “Silent Night,” my wife slipped her fingers into my open palm and looked at me, a thin smile on her face. She wasn’t doing well, I could tell. It wasn’t anything physical in her appearance. It was the pressure of her body against mine as we stood, as if she wanted to climb inside my skin, disappear into me.

We drove home in silence, her hand holding mine so tight my fingers ached. I thought of the new ornament hanging in the branches of the tree in our living room. It was an angel sleeping on a cloud, and on the cloud were the words “Baby’s First Christmas.” It should have been that simple, that peaceful.

As we walked to the front steps of our house, Beth leaned into me. The moon pressed through the clouds above, shedding a dim silver on the snow banks along the sidewalk, like a failing flashlight. Familiar shapes, shovels and garbage cans and bushes, became looming shadows. My arms ached, as if they were holding up not just my wife and baby, but the heavens, as well. All of the talk of light and hope and joy from the church seemed as distant as Orion or Antares.

Then I saw something move in the night. A small, hunched shape on the apex of a snow pile. I stopped and stared at it. For a few moments, it remained frozen, and I started to believe it was simply a chunk

of ice, that my mind was playing tricks on me. But it eventually stretched upward, like a crocus blooming in time-lapse, until it stood half in darkness, half in moonlight.

It was a rabbit, brown and tall. Its ears twitched back and forth, testing the night for danger. I could see the Christmas lights from our front porch reflected in the black marbles of its eyes. Its body was taut, like the band of a slingshot. It stayed balanced on its hind feet, regarding me. I suddenly thought of the legend of the talking animals, of Nestor crying for his mother in the night. The rabbit looked as if it was going to speak, to impart some ancient lepus wisdom of how to avoid pain and sorrow.

I waited on that Christmas Eve, that night of turning from darkness to light, for some kind of miracle to happen. I wanted to believe that a rabbit could tell me how to help my wife, that God could become human, that happiness could overcome the black of winter.

My daughter cried out in my arms, and the rabbit bolted. I watched it scramble out of the moonlight into the pitch of the lilac bushes. Then, silence and snow and dark. We began moving toward our front door. For some reason, the distance seemed unusually hard, as if we were struggling through water or against a strong wind. It would be half a year before Beth was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Those six months were filled with more deep depressions, followed by flights of sleepless energy. Some days, Beth would carve hieroglyphs into her arms with razors or knives. Other days, she would book airfare

to Florida and Walt Disney World. I kept waiting for the long night to end. For a ghost bear to materialize and groan a healing incantation. Or a flock of angel starlings to gather in our maple tree and sing a lullaby. Something soft that would quiet my wife's unquiet mind.

That Christmas Eve, as we walked to our home, I thought of the magi, struggling through desert and mountain. I thought of the sand in their teeth and hair. Their tired camels and mules. Their muscles and bones aching for water and rest. Their long journey, following a star, through the darkness toward the promise of light.

Contributors

A Bipolar Christmas

Martin Achatz's work has appeared in *Kennesaw Review*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Dunes Review*, among others. His collection of poems, *The Mysteries of the Rosary*, was published by Mayapple Press, and his contribution to the anthology *The Way North* was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He teaches at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan, where he is the Poetry Editor of *Passages North*.

Cells

Marcia Butler's life has been driven by creativity. For 25 years she performed throughout the world as a professional oboist. She was hailed by the New York Times as "a first rate artist" and performed with such luminaries as pianist Andre Watts, soprano Dawn Upshaw and jazz great Keith Jarrett. In 2002 Marcia switched careers and began her interior design firm, Marcia Butler Interior Design. She has served well over 100 clients in twelve years and her design work has been published in shelter magazines. She resigned from the music business in 2008. The personal essay "Cells" is part of a memoir Marcia is currently writing, whose working title is *My Isolde.* She lives in Sunnyside Gardens, Queens.

The Guy and the Doll

Donald Dewey has published 37 books of fiction, nonfiction, and drama for such houses as Little, Brown, HarperCollins, and St. Martin's Press. His latest books,

both published in 2014, are the biography *Lee J. Cobb: Characters of an Actor* and the novel *The Bolivian Sailor*.

Stay of Execution

Victoria Fann has been writing essays, short stories, plays and screenplays as well as non-fiction books for over four decades. Her writing has been published in magazines, newspapers and numerous online publications. Since Jan. 1, 2013, Victoria has lived and worked as a digital nomad with no permanent address, and she can usually be found with her laptop writing and sipping lattes at cafes throughout the U.S. and hopefully soon, the rest of the world.

On Digging Holes

Jakob Guanzon lives in Madrid, Spain where he teaches and writes. His work has previously appeared in *From the Depths* and *Five Thôt*.

Fur Hat

Barbara Harroun is an Assistant Professor of English at Western Illinois University where she teaches creative writing and composition. Her work has appeared in the *Sycamore Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine, Buffalo Carp, Friends Journal, In Quire, Bird's Thumb, Prairie Gold: An Anthology of the American Heartland, Requited Journal, Festival Writer*, and *Red Wolf Journal*. It is forthcoming in *i70 Review, Sugared Water, Per Contra, The Riveter Review, Catch and Release, Pea River Journal, Hermeneutic*

Chaos Literary Journal, and *Mud Season Review.* She lives with her favorite creative endeavors, Annaleigh and Jack, and her awesome husband, Bill.

More Than One Soul Mate

Ruth M. Hunt is a Veterinary Technician and a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer in the U.S. Army. She is pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in English through UMUC. After retirement from the military, she plans to focus on building her next career as a writer. She credits her unabashed dreams to the reassurances and encouragement received from her parents, Rudy and Rosemarie Martinez. She also receives endless support from her siblings, Mercy, Rebecca, and Rudy Martinez as well as constant inspiration from her husband, James, and her children, Jaden and Tori. "More Than One Soul Mate" is her first publication.

The Last Seltzer Man

Shayla Love is a journalist and storyteller living in New York. She is a reporter for the *Norwood News* and has been published at *BKLYNR.com, Gothamist,* and *iMediaEthics*.

Just Interesting

Jonathan Mack was raised on a family farm in New Hampshire, but has spent most of his adult life in India and Japan. Stories and essays have appeared in *Green Mountains Review, Quarter After Eight, Eleven Eleven, Gargoyle, Epiphany, Zymbol, Hippocampus, Mary, Jonathan, Quick Fiction, The Tokyo Advocate, Japanzine* and elsewhere. His blog is Guttersnipe Das.

The Possibility of Rain

Marlene Olin was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. She recently completed her first novel. Her stories have been published in *Vine Leaves, The Saturday Evening Post, Upstreet Magazine,* and *Emrys Journal*. She will be featured in *Poetica* and *The Edge* in the coming months.

Wedding Bells

Born in 1928, **Paul Pekin** currently draws a pension from the Cook Count Forest Preserve Police, the last of a succession of jobs that included teaching Fiction Writing at Columbia College of Chicago, English Composition at the School of the Art Institute, owning a little mom and pop store on Diversey Avenue, and working as a letterpress printer back in the days when there was such a thing.

Hacker

Paul Perilli's writing has appeared in *The European*, *Baltimore Magazine*, *New Observations Magazine*, *Poets & Writers Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and others. "Hacker" is from a group of non-fiction pieces titled *Tracking Back*.

The Woman Who Is Not My Mother

Marsha Roberts lives in Mill Valley, California. Her short stories and humorous pieces have appeared in *Gravel, Loud Zoo, Hospital Drive*, *The Marin Independent Journal, America's Funniest Humor Showcase* and soon in *Thrice Fiction.* Some of her comedy skits have been performed by a San Francisco troupe. She just finished her first novel, *The Agent*,

about an elegant con game. She has visualized Paramount buying the film rights to her stories and novel, so it will happen any day now.

The Bestest Mommy

Hazel Smith is the bestest mommy, but now that her sons are in their 30's, she no longer can fix problems with a kiss and a cookie. Newly retired, she has returned to an earlier love of writing. When her kids were younger, she was published regularly, but somehow got out of the habit of scratching down her thoughts and sending them off to editors. A recent article about her grandfather's pioneering days in Western Canada, published in an anthology of women's writing, has changed that. She lives with her husband and their cat; the husband is quite self-sufficient; the cat requires constant snuggles.

The Hill

Jay Solomon is a playwright, essayist and cookbook author. Jay's writing career started in Ithaca, New York in the early 1990's where he wrote a popular local food column that rolled into a dozen cookbooks. Jay moved to Denver in 1998 to open a café, one of two he currently owns, and for several years found success in the kitchen while his first love, writing, was all but forgotten. Since returning to writing in 2010, many of his essays have since been featured in the Denver Post's weekly "Your Hub" section and his first play "Café Americana" received a staged reading at the Bruka Theater in Reno and at the Denver Center Theater Academy. Jay has four children with his wife Emily.

Questioning

Paige Towers earned her MFA from Emerson College and her BA from The University of Iowa. She taught Creative Writing and Composition at Emerson, but currently lives and writes in New York City. Her work can be found in *McSweeney's, Honesty For Breakfast, Spry Literary Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *So To Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art.*

Down the Aisle with Henry James

Renée Tursi is an associate professor of English at Quinnipiac University, where she teaches (mostly) American literature. Her academic work has appeared in the aesthetics journal *Style*, the *Henry James Review*, and *Studies in the Novel*. Her book reviews have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post Book World*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. With her submission to *bioStories*, she takes her first steps with a new genre.