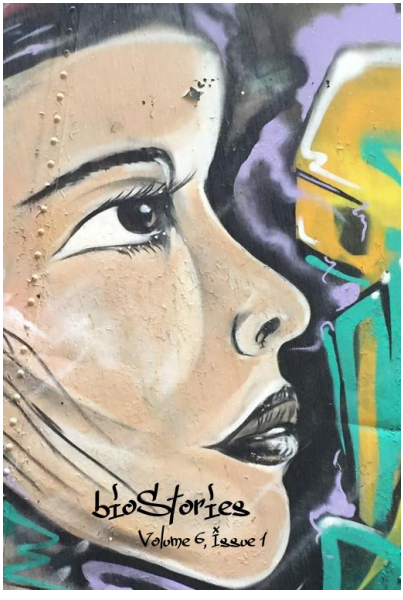
bioStories

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives



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

We feature new work weekly on our website, gather materials twice a year in issues like the one you are now reading, and offer thematic anthologies cultivated from work featured on the website.

(Cover Photo by Mark Leichliter)

Contents

Sisters

Bari Benjamin

She smiles when she sees me and her skin stretches tightly over her mouth and chin. Her cheekbones and collar bones jut out, sharp and pointy. I sit by her hospital bed, trying to understand what has happened to my seventy-two-year older sister. Just three weeks ago, we spoke on the phone. She asked about my daughter. “You’ve done everything possible for this child.” And I knew she meant it.

She was twelve and I was five, an annoying younger sister who adored her. One day she taught me to ride my big girl bike. We inched down the cobblestone road when zoom—she let go of the seat and I sped off. My hair flew in my face; my hands clenched the

handle bars, my knuckles big and white. My eyes stared wide open.

But the next day she hated me. Often she scared me; she looked like a witch, skinny with long fingernails and straggly, thin hair. We played outside one day, when she hid behind the side of our house. “Boo,” she yelled as she wrapped her gnarled fingers around my neck and squeezed. Hard. She tortured me. “Eat, eat more. Eat for me,” she said, as she pushed food in my face. It didn’t matter what—candy, bread, doughnuts, fruit, whatever was in the fridge.

I became the focus of her rage. Not only did she desperately control what she put in her mouth, she controlled my diet as well. And so it went, I struggled with my sister’s intense emotions, and my mother struggled to keep peace. Her illness divided my parents: My mother protected my sister and my father defended me. “Mommy, please, “I cried, “I don’t want any more to eat. I’m stuffed. I don’t wanna throw up. Help me.”

“Leave her alone,” my father yelled, again and again.

Madeline and Bari

Soon my sister’s condition became critical (she was five feet seven inches and weighed sixty-five pounds) and she was hospitalized for many months. (I believe she had the distinctive honor of being the first patient with this kind of eating disorder in Pittsburgh.) I was promptly sent to live with my grandmother in Florida for a solid year. I begged, “Mommy, please don’t make me go, I’ll be good I’ll be good I’ll be good.”

A year away from my family at the age of five fractured my vulnerable sense of security. But my sister got better. She stopped starving herself and stopped scaring me. There was peace in our home but we remained distant, and it wasn't until our adult years that we gradually grew closer. Our daughters provided a bond, a safe island upon which to connect. She embraced the role of big sister, advised and comforted me when my daughter's troubles emerged. Did she have a special understanding of how wounded a child can be when they feel utterly helpless? When they have so little control over their lives?

At six months old, my daughter had been left in a carriage in a train station in Moscow. Sometimes I imagine her crying and crying, her baby face scrunched up with rage, her terror at not seeing her mama's familiar face. Police rescued her and placed her in one of the city's twenty-five orphanages. And then at age two, she was flown halfway across the

world with another unfamiliar face. My sister, the experienced parent, helped me navigate those early years.

“She won’t make eye contact with me. That’s not normal. What should I do?”

“Don’t worry,” she soothed me. “It’s a temporary delay. Sit with her, rock her, hold her.”

But then, adolescence exploded like a series of firecrackers. I bore the brunt of her rage. “I hate you, you bitch,” she’d scream, as she stormed out the door.

My sister didn’t experience that kind of trauma, but did she feel abandoned when our father, (who was in the Navy during her early years) came home and showered her younger baby sister with affection and attention? Did she cry, “What about me?”

I climbed up on my father's lap and rested my head on his shoulder. "Daddy, why are you so mean to Maddy? Please be nice to her."

He grabbed me and set me down hard. "You don't know what you're talking about," he growled.

"She's taken off again. What should I do?" The police won't do anything. I'm scared."

"She'll be back. Try to stay calm, "she said.

Then: "Should I place her in a treatment program? They say they can help her. But I hate to send her away." I worried, was I repeating history?

"I understand but you have to keep her safe. This is her chance."

Finally: "She's coming home. And she's better."

"Thank God. You did the right thing."

We never spoke of her illness.

I left the hospital that day, haunted by my childhood memories. My sister, who had become my friend and my advisor, spent the next four months in the hospital, in and out of intensive care. There was pneumonia, and then heart failure. She recovered from both but then she simply could not swallow. No one knew why.

My sister had just turned seventy-two when she died. She never made it out of the hospital, unlike her first hospitalization at age twelve. I found myself almost stoic at her funeral, detached and cold. Shock? Denial? Survivor's guilt? I just know I couldn't find my tears.

Then two weeks after her death, I drove to Zumba class one rainy Sunday morning, my daughter's favorite rock radio station blaring. I recalled her dancing to the music just the other night, her large,

dark brown eyes sparkling, and my heart swelled with that special love that parents have for their children. And then it hit me: I can't ever call my sister again to talk about our daughters. She isn't home.

My sobs stunned me. My body shook. I pulled over. I finally surrendered to them and when I finished, a sense of peace enveloped me. I drove on.

Patriarch

Susan Moldaw

My father was proud to be the patriarch of our family of four—my mother, my sister, and myself. When he was eighty and his cancer was diagnosed, it was a surprise, though I knew he would beat it.

I sometimes drove him to the cancer center for treatments. He always walked in, unlike other patients, who came by wheelchair.

One day, nine months after his diagnosis, my father finally requested a wheelchair when we got to the hospital. That morning, he asked his radiation oncologist how much longer he would live. “Five years?” he asked. Reluctantly, the oncologist said that his cancer was fatal, and would probably kill him within the year. My father’s face fell. I felt my heart drop, seeing his disappointment. Besides—my father was invincible. He couldn’t die. The oncologist

didn't say what the primary cancer doctor gently told me, later, in the brightly lit hallway outside the examining room—that my father had only a few months. Her compassion let loose my fear and sadness. My eyes widened; tears pooled. She gave me a heartfelt hug.

The author and her father

My father and I slowly drove home. Neither of us spoke. He winced with every bump in the road. After I helped him out of the car and we walked what felt like an interminable distance to the front door, he put his arm around my shoulder. I felt his arm's weight and the welcome burden of his need as I helped him navigate the threshold, cross the hall, and get into bed. That was the first time, and the last, that he ever leaned on me.

When I was young—and older too—I'd leaned on him, and wept—at times—into his kind, capacious chest.

Fragile Landscapes

Gillian Haines

"The war made us all sick fucks." Wulf rubbed his shaven head and revealed a shrapnel wound that skipped and puckered along the pale underside of his right arm. "I'm glad it's starting to come out. You should check out the articles I've been reading. One in *Men's Health* describes this soldier in Iraq. He zeros in on this kid just as the kid takes aim to kill him." Wulf's freckled hands grasped a phantom M16 and he mimed looking through the sights. "The soldier doesn't miss, the kid dies, and the soldier ejaculates. He's horrified. Ashamed. But later, he can't climax without that image."

Wulf dropped his voice to a tired whisper. "It's not just that. There's two things going on. *National Geographic* says soldiers are brain-damaged by their training even before they get to war. Every time

something goes off, you lose something. You can feel it!" he said, placing his hands on his ribs. "Those I.E.D. blasts! After every battle, blood comes out your ears, nose, and throat. How can we not be fucked up?"

He looked at me without blinking for a long time, and I nodded. He'd been issued prison coveralls too small for his bulging thighs.

"I'll read them," I promised.

Eight years ago, when I first volunteered to visit four inmates, I wasn't sure why I felt such a tremendous pull toward confined men when I was already giving too much to a husband who was trapped in a different type of ruin. I didn't think it was because I grew up in a country founded by convicts, or even because the government had hung my great uncle for setting fire to a hayrick. Only now can I admit that suffering had isolated me and I thought I could understand the loneliness of prison.

I sighed. I hated that plain white, windowless visiting room. Above us, a florescent light buzzed and flickered. Those lights that cast no shadows seemed to undress us. “I’m so sorry. I understand your disgust for people who don’t want to know about what soldiers have to do.”

He nodded.

“You say were a good soldier and you were promoted to Sergeant. What made you good?”

“The ability to keep calm in chaos—the worse it gets, the more focused I become. I kept my team together and did the job, whatever the goals.”

“That steadiness in a storm, I’m like that, too. When my husband was in the ER, the family in the room next door shrieked hysterically. They carried on so much, the doctor threw them out. In that instant, I knew the icy calmness I felt was essential.”

John, my husband of twenty years, had lost a fifth of his brain to a stroke on the day we moved to Tucson, ten years prior. He'd been a genius. He still scored in the ninety-ninth percentile for some cognitive tasks but he scored in the first for quite a few others. His fertile mind had been excavated and I was still seeking him in jagged crevices. Peering into sinkholes. Truth be told, I was looking for myself in those same places. I left Australia to follow him and in America, I gave up a job to look after him. I'd been the wife of a charming professor but suddenly I'd not been able to leave his side. Even after he'd shrugged off paralysis and returned to academia, his disasters consumed my life: dousing bonfires he lit in the fireplace, turning off our stove's hissing gas jets, racing across town to deliver anti-seizure meds that he'd forgotten to swallow, and shrieking as he readied to throw our daughter into the air and into the whirring blades of a ceiling fan.

Early on, I sometimes had to drag myself to prison, wrung out and depressed. But then I'd started to look forward to going. I wanted to know how the men were doing. I'd become used to bearing the weight of their conversations. At some level, I knew they made me stronger. I listened with my ear and my heart and I forgot myself. The prisoners' complications made mine simpler. By making space in my mind for their voices, I re-set my attention away from the hurried world where I lived—a world that judged before a thought had been completed—to a place of receptivity and openness, where two people paced their breath and pulse.

I gazed at Wulf, relaxing in his seat while I perched on the edge of mine, despite an ache in my lower spine. There were no tables. Just four mandated feet of space between our knees. Although Wulf took his ease against the backrest, I had no doubt of his complete attention. He ignored the many distractions across the aisle—shapely ankles in strappy red shoes,

lustrous brown hair pinned with a yellow flower, bright swirls on a floral dress—distractions he must have hungered for. Such intense focus was rare, even on the outside.

“Keeping your men together must’ve been a challenge. Some must have been terrified.”

“They watch. They take their cues from you. You have to tell them it’s all right, even if it’s not.”

I nodded. When my husband’s body had first writhed as though captured by an invisible predator intent on breaking his neck, I’d squeezed my eight-year-old daughter’s hand. John’s rehab hospital had trained me for that moment so I was able to say, “It’s a seizure. Don’t worry, sweetheart. It’ll just be a few minutes and Dad will be okay.” She had stared at me, wide-eyed and unblinking.

“Were you scared?” I asked Wulf.

“No. I trained for it all my life.”

“But at first. You couldn’t have imagined what it was really like. Surely, then.”

“Maybe. But your training takes over.” He laughed. “It doesn’t prepare you for the stench. Dead people stink! Everyone releases liquid shit when they die.”

Across the aisle, a baby wailed and a prisoner placed it over his broad shoulder. It quieted immediately, hanging like a limp comma in a pale blue onesie.

Wulf snorted. “The Hajjis stink when they’re alive. Urgh! Sweat and piss, they don’t wash much.”

I didn’t react when he bad-mouthed his enemy. It was probably essential if you were going to kill someone. And I didn’t want to silence him.

“When you survive a battle, every cell feels alive. It’s a rush! Sexual arousal is common.” His eyes never left my face, gauging my reaction.

I nodded soberly.

“Rape happens every day. It’s not the rare thing the news makes out. Rape and killing. The Hajjis hate us and we hate them. You get to a stage where killing means nothing.”

With all my heart, I hoped this man I cared for was a soldier who had never raped. Maybe I was a coward but I never asked. In prison, the fortress of boundaries, I drew a line I never crossed: only ask when you can deal with the answer.

But without realizing, I crossed that line. I asked Wulf why he was sent to *that* prison, a facility that specialized in sex-offenders, snitches, ex-gang members and the chronically ill. I thought his war wounds had been the ticket.

His handsome face went wooden. Wulf always looks me in the eye but for a long moment he couldn’t. Someone thumped the vending machine. The microwave pinged and the smell of bacon disturbed

the layered flavors in the air: a woman's floral scent and the reek of a full diaper.

Wulf looked back at me and raised his chin. "Conspiracy to transport a minor over state lines for unlawful sexual purposes."

I felt like I'd trodden on a landmine. His forty-five-year sentence was so long I'd wrongly assumed he'd done something traitorous. In all the years I'd known him, he never flinched at my probing questions and was prepared to show himself in unflattering ways. We'd talked about sex and lovers using anatomical terminology, not interested in salacious details but curious about the rules of intimacy, the accommodations and the friction. I never detected an unhealthy interest. When he said his cellie was a gunner, a prisoner who masturbates in public, Wulf was so indignant. He said he wouldn't live with a guy who jerked off where people could see and he forced the guy to stop. I'd believed that meant Wulf wasn't a sex-offender.

I don't know how I replied to Wulf's tense recital of his crime. Somehow I continued the conversation but afterward, I didn't remember a single thing. I kept my appointments to visit other inmates but was ensnared by a numbing fog. I know I laughed with them but the only thing I remember is that the Kung Fu shoes had gone. Prisoners now wore pale grey Crocs. I drove home troubled, feeling slightly nauseous.

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. *I'm naïve.* I went over all my interactions with Wulf but found nothing creepy. Quite the opposite. We had different values and disagreed about everything but he never got angry. He'd crossed boundaries I couldn't imagine: from idealist to cynic, patriot to mercenary, protector to killer. I thought violence was a sickness and he thought it was the only way. But he protected mentally feeble inmates from prison bullies. He gave welcome packages of shower shoes, soap and deodorant to new men in his block and he told them

how to survive. He gave prisoners ideas on setting up businesses and had shown the newest one how to iron tortillas to make burritos.

I shook my head. What sex crime could be so horrendous that just planning it got him forty-five years? What troubled me most were my feelings. I still cared for him, the worst kind of sex-offender: one who had hurt a child.

Home life with a man who'd become like an autistic person had prepped me for prison. I got better at relationships with men I couldn't fathom. And over the years, I'd already worked hard to understand rather than condemn Wulf. When I learned that he didn't believe women belonged in the army, I was surprised. His blue eyes had shone. "I'm reading this real good book on the differences between the sexes. It supports what I've always thought: a division of labor makes sense. Women can't carry the weight in

my pack and every woman in the army has mental issues."

When I challenged him, he listened good-naturedly and let me tease him about outdated attitudes. This willingness to banter made it easy to accept his sexism. But when he absorbed the racist prison code, I was dismayed.

"I'm not ignorant," he'd said. "I've met two blacks in my life that I liked. I understand what you're saying about pre-judging." The freckled pink skin on his bald head shone as he turned to the right and then to the left. "You say this. But now I live with them, I see that. They're noisy, they steal, and they don't raise themselves up."

Oh, yeah? And I guess Obama raised himself too high. But I tried to imagine what would happen to me if I were locked up in a place where fear forces you to form alliances based on color. When your life shrinks to the size of a prison bunk, it's not just your

joints that knot. Your thoughts become contorted, too.

“You give me so much trouble,” I’d said. “I keep leaving here thinking, how can I care for you? You’re sexist. You’re racist. You’re suspicious of altruism. And you believe in eugenics, for goodness sake!”

An amused expression had animated his face. “I keep telling you, you haven’t had the experiences I have.”

“You know, that’s a bit…” I’d paused and then went for it, laughing. “It’s arrogant. I will go to my death bed believing in kindness!”

Wulf had looked at me with such a glint in his blue eyes that I thought he wanted to scratch me behind my ears. “Look, I’m glad there are people like you. It makes everything I’ve done worthwhile.” In his mind, war was worth it to protect goodness, a worn and faulty rationale for violence, but I didn’t say so.

At some unknown point, we'd shared so much of ourselves, we became friends. "You're it," he'd said. "I need you. I need to talk to you about what's going on because you're all I have. You have no idea what you do for me." Like most prisoners' families, Wulf's abandoned him when he needed them the most.

Ours was a strange friendship. A friendship that would never have had a chance if we'd met outside prison. But Wulf allowed me to witness his struggle to make sense of a thwarted life, even as I fought to love a husband diminished, a man whose needs thwarted my own once-cherished hopes. Wulf helped me inhabit more of the person I wanted to become.

One day, he had exhaled loudly and looked away. "I miss fighting."

My smile disappeared. He knew I was a peacenik. "How can you miss war? The fear, the danger? The killing?"

“If I was out today, I’d sign up in a minute! For anyone.”

“As a mercenary?”

“Yep.”

“But you have sons! How could you kill other people’s children for a cause you don’t believe in or understand?”

“You think government-sanctioned killing is more legitimate than killing for money?”

My spit had evaporated. I slumped backwards and remained there while he watched me. “With wars fought over oil, you’re right.”

He nodded quietly.

“But that doesn’t make it okay! It’s not good for your soul.”

“It happens all over the world. Right now. And I’m good at it. Look,” he regarded me intently. “I don’t

take pleasure in killing. I'm not a sadist. It's a job. And I miss it. The intensity. It's not fear. When you know you might die today, everything becomes crystal clear. It's powerful to be with men who are good at what they do and who have accepted death."

Shocked and at the same time, riveted, I tried to understand. "War must heighten everything. You live in the moment. And when comrades share that profound clarity, when they share the danger, and you trust them to watch your back, it must seem like a special brotherhood. Is that what you mean?"

I watched his eyelids open very gradually until blue eyes locked onto mine. To call it a blink would describe the action but not the duration. At the same pace, he recaptured my own eyes and held them, nodding silently.

I understood that shared adversity unites. John's stroke had been mine, too.

But I'd always imagined that soldiers overcame a reluctance to kill for duty and patriotism. Despite knowing that career soldiers existed, it never occurred to me that combat could exhilarate.

We lionize historical warriors like Patton and Lee, although both admitted to loving war, but it's not acceptable for contemporary soldiers to speak unashamedly about their passion for combat. While I didn't support the war Wulf fought in, I believe we are all responsible for the roots of conflict. And we set up young soldiers for isolation. After we train them to kill and they have achieved their purpose, their experience makes them social pariahs. I decided to deal with my discomfort at Wulf's disclosures.

"It's rare to talk like this," I'd said, uneasy and fascinated. "Our values are so different and you must think I'm naïve but neither of us gets angry. I get to understand you because I'm not busy defending myself."

I drove away from prison that day past desiccated creosote and wrinkled cholla, still green but wearied by drought. Mesquites thirsted for a rain that wouldn't come, their canopies strung on branches like limp dishrags.

At the coffee shop, I sat beside my friend, Jim. "Now I know Wulf was going to hurt a child, I'm surprised my affection hasn't disappeared. I feel like a bad person by association."

Jim was detective-handsome with epaulet shoulders. Wavy grey hair added gravitas but it was an infectious, good-natured smile that made my women friends swoon. Now retired, he'd once specialized in sex-crimes but today worked as a private investigator. Although he loved crime novels focused on the dark milieu of world-weary gumshoes, his own demeanor was up-beat and compassionate. In my mind, viewing others with

compassion after twenty-five years on the force made him due for a medal.

We never scheduled our meetings but had hung out on a nearly daily basis at Starbucks for a decade. We hugged only on birthdays but felt comfortable enough to lapse into silence or ignore the other while we typed or texted at our shared table. We were lonely. Jim was single and looking for a partner. I shared a marriage bed with a man whose brain injury made him forget how to love me.

“What you do in prison is a good thing,” Jim said. “You won’t stop seeing Wulf?

“No. I signed up to support men who’ve done terrible things because no one is beyond redemption, no matter how long it takes. No one deserves decades behind bars without a soul to visit. I won’t stop going but it’s hard.” I shot my hands in the air. “I don’t know what Wulf was planning to do to that kid. The title of his crime rocked me but now I’ve had time to

think, he could have run away with an underage girl he loved. Wrongly! Stupidly! Illegally! That would be the best scenario. But I can't help imagining others that are lots worse. I have to find his case somehow."

"What if you find something that changes how you see him?"

"I know. But I'm already upset. I have to know the details and then I'll settle it in my mind." I sighed. "It's stupid, really. I knew about this possibility from day one."

"You'll be all right."

But I wasn't. I couldn't sleep. I'd cracked Pandora's Box and burned to peer inside. Disgusted, I told myself that my job was to support Wulf while he

endured prison, not to satisfy voyeuristic curiosity. But for peace of mind, I wanted to know the worst.

On my next visit, Wulf walked toward me with an easy grace born of fitness, holding his sculpted, bald head at a proud tilt, allowing his indigoed arms to swing loosely.

Before he even sat down, I blurted, “I can’t stop thinking about your crime. It’s messing with me. What happened?”

“I was back from Iraq doing this woman. She was fucking with her kid.”

“Abusing? Sex?”

Wulf nodded, pressing his lips together until they whitened.

“Why would you want a relationship with someone who did that?”

“I was fucked up. I knew I wasn’t coping and had signed up for another tour. I didn’t belong here anymore. War was the only thing I understood.” He looked away. “I knew the woman was doing it. Their interactions were off. But it was none of my business.”

My stomach plummeted.

The skin on his face stretched tight over chiseled bones, as taut as I felt he was stretching our friendship. “Anyway, she didn’t have a car and asked for a ride. I dropped her and the kid off someplace.”

“Across state lines?”

“I lived five minutes from the border.”

“She made the trip to hurt her boy?”

“I didn’t know. Didn’t care, either.”

My mind went round and round. *He’s a dad. How could he ignore an abused kid?* I ached for that

trapped child. It hurt to imagine a woman so damaged that she would inflict such pain. And I thought war had loosened Wulf's grip on his soul.

As soon as I got home, I turned on my computer. The online documents I found said Wulf urged the woman to have intercourse and oral sex with her ten-year-old son while Wulf took photos. I slammed my computer shut and cried.

The tears dried but left behind an ache in my chest that made me want to run. I didn't want to know more but I couldn't not know, either. With my hand still over my mouth, I re-opened my laptop. I wanted to read the case transcript but could only find a decision denying Wulf's appeal: a brief summary of the case. But I did learn that soldiers returning from combat in Iraq commit more violent and sexual crimes than their civilian counterparts. After the slaughter of war, I could imagine a heightened tendency to explode, to slash, and to screw. I could understand attempts to replicate combat's adrenaline high when life at home

seemed pedestrian and trivial. But the quiet perversion required to photograph a mother opening her legs for her boy's virginity was something else entirely.

I dreaded my next prison visit. But when I got there, Wulf talked about his boys and I was able to cope.

"I call every night but they haven't answered for six months." Relaxing, he stretched his feet forward. He'd been issued a torn Croc shoe. "It used to amaze me how much Cliff remembered. He was only six when I fell. But if I was home, he was with me." He smiled. "If I worked on the car, he was beside me. If I hung out with my guys, he was there."

Tenderness washed his face. "When I came home injured from Iraq, I still had the bloody field splint on. I was helicoptered to the Green Zone and then to Germany but decided to come Stateside for surgery. I came through the airport doors leaning on crutches, and his little face fell. I threw my crutches down and

called him over. I picked him up and he pressed his face in my shoulder." Wulf's arms moved to cradle the memory of his son and he laughed. "It hurt so bad! I was biting my lip so he couldn't hear me crying. My dad came over and I had to lean on him. But I kept saying to Cliff, 'It's okay. '"

For six years, Wulf wore a beard that kinked its way to his chest, looking like it had been steeped in blood. But one day, he entered the visiting room with a neatly trimmed goatee. There was stubble on his head, too. He'd ditched that menacing prison style: bald and bearded.

"I like it."

"It's a very pretty red," he ran his hands over his hair.

The color was beautiful but I stared, checking my laughter, searching for a hint of self-ridicule.

Surprisingly, there was none and I chuckled. “Even if you say so yourself!”

The room was full and noisy. Groups of loud visitors sat on either side of us and I jerked the row of connected seats forward. Two seconds later, an officer leaned over me. “Move it back!”

Wulf caught my eyes, twisting his lips together, as if saying, *Welcome to my world.* Then his handsome freckled face abruptly lost its vigor and his chest heaved. “I don’t feel like I’ve got much to offer. Life doesn’t change in here. I was listening to this guy tell his story; I’ve heard it at least six times before and I started thinking, ‘Do I bore her?’”

“No! We talk about so many things. Those conversations we always come back to are contentious and fascinating. You’ve helped me learn things that are important to me.” I shrugged, embarrassed. “I only knew it in theory before but friendship can flourish even when values don’t

coincide. I've learned to suspend judgment in favor of curiosity and wonder." I shrugged, embarrassed again.

But he nodded thoughtfully. "I don't feel like I'm an asset anymore."

"You are to me. You're a window to worlds I don't know. War, the military, prison, your peccadilloes. I don't know anyone else who can disagree so adamantly without getting angry."

He raised his eyes and sat straighter. "It's true, contention is interesting. I like hearing different views in case there's something I haven't considered."

He held my gaze for a long time. Then he whispered, "I just paid fifteen hundred dollars to a lawyer to review my case."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't do it."

Connected by his silent stare, I regarded him closely. Strung about his neck, in place of a crucifix, hung a miniature axe. He was the most fascinating man I visited but he challenged me constantly. His laughter, his tenderness and his roving intelligence had not lulled and blinded me to the cut of his blade.

"Why didn't you ever say?"

"Ambiguity matters. Character shows."

I liked that he'd never tried to persuade me, that instead, he thought I'd work it out.

"You took a plea bargain. You pled guilty."

"I did *transport* the kid. But no one took photos. If there were photos, they would have charged me with that. They charged me with conspiracy because there was no evidence. His mother made it up to get me involved and to bargain for a lower sentence for herself."

"Did you witness the acts?"

“No. But I knew something was up.”

I put both hands on my forehead. “My head’s reeling. I can’t process it, yet. You’re innocent! God, to go from the intensity of war to a cell, you must have been climbing the walls.”

“No. I was in shock. It was so far out in left field, I was stunned.”

I believe him. Oh, you’re so naïve. Why would you believe a felon? All you have is his word.

Almost as soon as those thoughts arrived, I didn’t believe them. In all our time together Wulf had displayed startling honesty and the courage to show himself even when he knew I might not approve. My decision to accept his innocence wasn’t necessary to avoid internal discomfort. When I thought him guilty, I learned to accept it and feel comfortable that I cared for him, still.

Eighteen months later, his lawyer said that Wulf had been imprisoned illegally and that he would fight for Wulf's release. But such legal battles take time and Wulf and I will continue our conversations in prison for many years.

Conversations forge a path to those in-between places, like marshes that are neither sea nor land. Oozing, slimy places where missteps are fraught. Those fragile landscapes are disappearing because we want to drain them and fill them with rubble. But marshes are rich with tasseled reeds and the dense Belgian lace of interwoven roots. Wulf was not my guide when we explored there, nor I his, but you can't go there alone.

Keisha, Urban Warrior

Desirée Magney

The familiar Marimba African rhythms chimed and I glanced at my iPhone to see who was calling. "Blocked Call." It could have been a solicitation or a wrong number, but I knew it might be a defendant in one of my cases or, more importantly, one of the children.

It was the children who were my clients, but that didn't stop the parents or guardians from calling me. Any time of the day or night, any day of the week, these calls came in. Of late, I had been working a particularly difficult case. Seeing the disintegration of this family was akin to watching a train wreck in slow motion and I was at a loss to know how to stop it. The local evening news had reported another drive-by teen shooting in Anacostia. My stomach

clenched. *Was it my boy?* I worried about these kids I represented as if they were my own.

"Hello," I answered tentatively. It was Keisha, the defendant mother in one of my custody cases.

"Miss Desirée, will you please come to mental health court with me tomorrow?"

Keisha was the biological mom in one of my cases. I was the lead attorney and was assigned a "shadow" attorney who would assist me. My shadow, Joan, and I hadn't known each other previously but we became fast friends over the many hours spent pouring over case files, researching criminal background records at DC Superior Court, and talking over the unusual facts of this case. Joan would travel from Manassas, Virginia, catching the Metro train from Vienna to Judiciary Square, a good hour plus commute. We met at the DC Superior Court, Joan with a baguette always in hand, to begin our long hours playing detective, tracking down the facts, and requesting

related case files. We bonded over lunches at the courthouse café, discussing Keisha's children as well as our own, early on discovering we had daughters born on the same day, same year. We called them our twins. I asked her why she always carried a baguette. She explained it was for the long trip to and from the city. Thin and athletic, she admitted she didn't act out of hunger; rather, she had a theory if she ate enough bread it would soak up any liquids in her system and she wouldn't need to pee during the long commute. We laughed, a great diversion from delving into the heady, complicated lives of the parties in our case. As a fellow woman of a certain age, I understood what Joan meant. In that instant, we bonded.

A few years ago, I became a child advocacy lawyer with a non-profit organization. I was there at its inception at the invitation of a longtime acquaintance. She and I, like many others women lawyers we knew, had suspended our practice of law when we had children. Now that our children were

getting older, there was a feeling that it was time to use our legal training *pro bono* to give back to the community. I served as a court-appointed guardian *ad litem*, representing disadvantaged children in often harrowing child custody cases.

Keisha was the biological mother of a number of children, two of whom we now represented. She wisely had given up custody of all of them. Having suffered for many years with drug addiction, she admitted to using crack cocaine throughout her pregnancies. Impoverished, she often found herself homeless and prostituting for drugs and money. She had been diagnosed as bi-polar and had been in and out of drug treatment centers and psychiatric hospitals. With no way to support herself, let alone her children, she had the good sense to know they would be better off elsewhere.

She gave two of her children to a neighbor woman, Kim, who couldn't have any children of her own. Tamika and Samuel had lived with Kim since their birth and were now teenagers. They knew Kim wasn't their biological mom, but she was their real mom in their minds, although they regularly talked to Keisha and saw her on occasion. Kim finally had decided to legalize her custodial arrangement over the children. Joan and I were baffled as to why, after all these years, Kim would choose this point in time to come to court to seek an order of custody. But Kim had been recently disabled and unable to work and it eventually became clear that she needed a formal custody order to be able to obtain more benefits. Meanwhile, Keisha never disputed custody and the man listed as the defendant biological dad, Jimmy, didn't dispute it either. At times, the entire group seemed like one big happy family. Joan and I weren't sure why the court even felt the need to appoint a guardian *ad litem* in this case, given that none of the parties contested the best placement for these

children. But obviously, the court had questions and as time went on, we understood why.

For years the case dragged on, the court and Joan and I reluctant to relinquish oversight of these children, wanting to keep an eye on their progress, as I recommended in my status reports and relayed in court hearings held every few months. As the kids became older teens, Kim was less able to exert any control over them. They rarely went to school. Kim would call me at 6:45 in the morning, even when I was on vacation, and ask me to talk Samuel into going to school that day. Tamika regularly got into fights, shoplifted, and was on probation. She lashed out on the streets, at school, and at home, once even throwing cleaning solution at a relative.

Joan and I got to know Keisha, Kim and her boyfriends, Jimmy and his latest woman friend, and most importantly, Tamika, and Samuel, as well as their great grandmother, aunts, and uncles. We had visits to Kim's homes and the children's great

grandmother's home. We talked on the phone to school and to community counselors, principals, and teachers. We attended numerous meetings at the children's High School, met with the children's education attorneys, the police, and Tamika's probation officer. We tracked down allegations of physical and sexual abuse. Joan and I sought counseling for the kids and got them placed in Sasha Bruce, an organization offering services for at-risk children. We were more social workers than lawyers. Desperate for this family to survive, to thrive, we spent countless hours on the phone discussing their circumstances and what else we could do for them.

Meanwhile, tensions had been rising between two Anacostia neighborhoods. Tamika, hotheaded and ready to battle at any perceived slight, got into a fight at school one day defending her brother. Samuel, soft spoken and sweet natured, with beautiful, long dreadlocks, had been accosted in school by a group from another neighborhood. Tamika defended him in

the hallway. Security guards broke it up and the police were called. Joan and I went to the local police precinct to discuss what appeared to be rival neighborhood gangs and the impact it was having on our clients. The police officers said the groups weren't gangs, just feuding neighborhoods. It seemed to be a distinction without a difference.

A few days after the incident at the school, shots rang out at the Anacostia Metro station. Samuel was targeted. The shooters were cruising, looking for the "kid with the dreads" but found his cousin instead. The shooters missed and continued their search for Samuel. He began receiving threatening Facebook messages. At that point, I was no longer willing to visit the family in their home, not wanting to risk becoming a drive-by shooting victim, a very real possibility even if accompanied by security personnel provided by the legal non-profit. Kim had a car, so I asked the family to meet at our offices

instead. Kim and Samuel arrived, his once lovely dreads freshly shorn. Kim was upset.

"Can you believe he cut his dreads? My boy cut his dreads! He shaved his head!"

I cocked my head and furrowed my brow at her. Sometimes the kids had more sense than she did. How could she be so oblivious? At least he knew what he needed to do to survive on the streets.

Meanwhile, Keisha was dealing with her own demons. During the pendency of the case, she was in and out of drug treatment programs, often homeless, and was arrested once again for prostitution. But she came to court for each custody hearing—unless she was in rehab or jail—and supported her children the best way she knew how by staying in contact with them and buying them things whenever she had money. The kids stayed in touch with Keisha's family—their biological grandmother and aunts and

uncle. Keisha seemed sincere in her attempts to "right her wrongs." She would ask Joan and I to pray for her. She always thanked us for the job we were doing helping her children. It was clear to me she loved them. In my mind that was evident by the fact that she gave them up. But she struggled to get her life in any order to take them back.

She was enthused when a halfway house program taught her some computer skills and tried to help her prepare for her GED. But I still needed to sit with her outside the courtroom before each hearing and quietly read aloud my findings in the status report I had written for the judge. We sat shoulder to shoulder on a bench outside the Family Courtroom as I read to her in hushed tones. It broke my heart to have to read the truth I had written about her, the truth I had to tell the judge. But Keisha listened attentively, shook her head in acknowledgment, and slowly ate a piece of Joan's baguette as I read—baguettes that Joan now

brought as much for Keisha, as for herself. We never knew when Keisha had last eaten.

As she quietly listened to me reading the sometimes brutal truths of her transgressions outlined in those court filings, somehow we became closer, and I realized Keisha's inner strength, her realization of who she was, and her determination to try to change. Although, she could have easily resented the candid nature of my reports, she knew I was only doing what I had to, by virtue of my position upholding her children's best interests under the law. She accepted these truths for what they were even though she fought against what seemed to everyone else to be her fate.

"Oh, that Keisha. She'll be back on the streets in no time," Kim would say to me when I told her that I had heard Keisha was back in rehab. "She'll never get better. You wait and see, Desirée." But I had faith.

So when I got that call from Keisha asking me to meet her in mental health court, I agreed, gently reminding her that I was not her attorney but that I would be glad to be there for moral support. She assured me she already had a court-appointed attorney for these hearings. If she could get through the mental health court diversion program, her record would be expunged, but it entailed her staying in rehab, going for drug urine tests, and not getting re-arrested.

I met her outside the courtroom the next day. We waited for her attorney to arrive so that he could enter her name on the already lengthy, post-lunchtime docket. It was going to be a long afternoon. When the judge returned from lunch, the courtroom doors were opened. Keisha and I found seats a few rows from the defendant's table and waited for her attorney to arrive and her name to be called. Keisha relayed the latest about all her children, showed me photos of her new grandbaby, told me of her newest drug treatment

program. She was excited to be given yet another chance. She looked good. Her hair was set in small plaits around her head. Her skin had a healthy glow. She was smiling.

We did this three times. At what would have been her fourth and final hearing—the one at which the judge would have presented her with a rose and a certificate of completion—she arrived at the courthouse looking disheveled—her hair was dyed pink in places, and her skin was blotchy. My chest tightened. I knew these were bad signs. She sat down and proceeded to tell me that she had gone off her psych meds, had been arrested again, and her urine tests weren't clean. I knew it was likely the US Attorney's office would recommend jail time. I placed my hand atop hers and told her how sorry I was. I also told her that I had faith in her and that ultimately, I knew she could do it. I reminded her how often she had picked herself up and that I was certain, she would again. She smiled weakly and squeezed my hand.

Shortly after that day, Kim moved herself and the kids out of DC into Maryland. As a result, the custody case in which I had been the guardian *ad litem* was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction. I lost touch with the kids. Even though they had my phone number, technically I wasn't to contact them.

A month later, my iPhone rang. The caller ID gave no name or number. Keisha couldn't afford her own cell phone any more but she had good news to report. She was back in rehab, doing well. She had picked herself up once again, was soldiering on. I couldn't help but smile and feel hopeful she could do it this time, against all odds.

She told me she wasn't happy about the further distance between her and the kids but she no longer felt she had a say in the matter. I had assumed Kim's move was prompted by the annoyance of having the court and I oversee her life with a fine-tooth comb. Keisha confirmed this without my asking. Keisha updated me on the kids and her continuing concerns

about them. She confided in me that Kim had yet to enroll them in school, even though weeks had passed since the move. She thanked me once again for all that Joan and I had done to help the kids and all the support we had given her. She told me to say 'hi' to Joan and to thank her for all those baguettes. This was sounding like her final goodbye to me. I didn't want it to be. I wanted to know what lay in her future. Then, just as I told her to stay in touch and we were about to hang-up, she said, "I love you, Miss Desirée."

In the split second following her words of gratitude, I imagined what other lawyers would say in response. The ethical lines of professional responsibility can get blurred sometimes. As lawyers, we are supposed to maintain a professional distance between the parties to a case and ourselves. I had admittedly already crossed this line by sending food baskets to the kids on Christmas and their birthdays, filled with edible treats I knew they

wouldn't be able to afford, a sports book for Samuel, and a journal for Tamika to write in whenever she felt she was about to lose control. Each time we met outside the courtroom, everyone hugged, not something most lawyers do. So, it didn't take me but a millisecond to respond to this kind and gentle woman, who needed all the support she could get.

"I love you too, Keisha."

*The names of all the parties to the case have been changed to protect their identities.

Counter Winds and Cross-eyed Casters

Julie Whitlow

Mosul, Tikrit, Fallujah, Baghdad, Ramadi—the names roll off of my tongue for no other reason than these were flashpoints of the second Iraq war—an ongoing conflict based on centuries of the banging drums of distrust beating out war marches against enemies, perhaps imagined, perhaps real. Soldiers draped in the flag of my country had officially been killing or being killed by Iraqis for eleven years when eight scholars from the warzone arrived at my university in Salem, Massachusetts, a town chastised for its long-ago intolerance and famed for reversing course. The scholars were on a mission of understanding and shared learning, and my small role was as volunteer mentor to one of the female scholars whom I will call Jameela. Because we were not allowed to take their pictures or publish their names

due to potential threats against their lives by those who saw their trip to the US as traitorous, she needs to remain anonymous. When a story and photo about the group published in our neighboring town's paper—the *Marblehead Reporter*—prompted a call from the State Department, it was clear that the fear of repercussion was real.

Jameela and I had weekly conversations about language and writing in Arabic and English. The scholars spent weekends on cultural excursions and experienced Boston's Freedom Trail, the Museum of Fine Arts, and MIT. They seemed eager and at ease, despite devastating news from home about beheadings by ISIS and bombings in Baghdad. As time went on, the distrust within the group became visible, an offshoot of the ancient tribal factions that each represented: Sunni, Shia, Arab, Kurd, male, female. Reasons that lead to persecution, violence, and human discord became reduced to small, sobering distinctions and the awareness that, despite

everything that makes us similar, it is the atomic alignment of culture and history that grow into deep insurmountable divisions. Via my encounters with Jameela, frustrating distinctions seemed obvious only through mundane interactions.

Toward the end of her stay, I decided that a good host should invite Jameela over, perhaps for a meal, a breaking of bread between new friends as an idealistic handshake of peace. However, my doubts about the likelihood of being able to prepare a meal that would meet the *halal* code that dictates the foods permissible for Muslims impair my ability to cook. Jameela had expressed an interest in having some local fish and I mentioned lobster as an interesting regional delicacy. Jameela agreed and reasoned that since lobsters had shells they were probably an acceptable meal. The night before our luncheon, though, Jameela emailed that she actually couldn't eat a lobster because of the chance that it wouldn't be killed humanely. Jameela assured me that fish

would be okay, depending on its size, scales, and spine. It became clear that a restaurant lunch would be more prudent than a meal at home.

I guessed that a restaurant called *Finz* would likely serve enough varieties of fish options for Jameela to eat. In order to get in the home visit, I would then bring her over for coffee. So, I picked her up at the campus residence hall and we proceed to *Finz*.

I was used to most of the female scholars wearing a *hijab*, the fabric folded over the head, fastened under the chin, and covered by a longer scarf. This day was particularly warm and humid but, as our outing was not routine, Jameela wore additional beautiful brocaded layers of over-garments woven with golden thread and extending almost to the floor. I was touched that she thought of our outing as so special but felt bad that she was sweltering in the summer heat. As we walked from the parking area, droplets

lined her smooth forehead and upper lip and she revealed her shock over the girls on the street in shorts and tank tops. *How can they walk around with no clothes?*

At *Finz,* I cringed as we were shown through the bar to reach our table near the water. I tried to ignore the barstools and glistening bottles of liquor packing the shelves, wondering if Jameela realized that we were surrounded by alcohol, another taboo of Islam. When the water that we requested arrived, Jameela wiped the rim of her glass with her napkin and removed the ice. I attempted to explain the menu and its variety of fish that could be ordered grilled, fried, or baked: salmon, sole, haddock, scrod. Jameela wanted assurance that the fish wouldn't be fried in a beer batter like it was at a restaurant they went to in Rhode Island. *It was such a shame that we went hungry that day.* She produced her iPhone to determine which of the fish had the acceptable number of scales and a demonstrable spine.

Together we perused pictures of various fish before and after scale removal on the tiny screen of her phone and Jameela finally decided on the salmon. When her plate arrived, she seemed surprised that the spine and scales had, in fact, been removed and discarded. I ate my haddock taco while most of Jameela's fish went back to the kitchen. When we finished, we headed over to my house for tea.

Our conversation resumed around issues related to her studies and teaching. I learned that her husband is also a professor. She has two sons, thirteen and nine, who are rarely allowed to leave home except to go to school: *We can't let them out. We would worry too much. The older one is angry. He thinks we are too protective. He just studies and looks at his iPad. He wants only to go around with other boys… But they are fine. They are happy.*

Jameela knew that I have two daughters but I began to dread questions about my family. How could I possibly tell this elegant and lovely woman who frets

over the kinds of scales her lunch once had that I am married to a woman, that I have a *wife*. I started preparing the tea (necessary to digest fish, I learn) while avoiding having to explain that my children have two mothers. I steered Jameela away from the family photos displayed around the house and was relieved when my children started distracting our delighted guest with a book on Chinglish, that funny blend of Chinese and English.

When I arrived with the tea and handmade multicolored macaroons from the nearby French bakery, we talked a bit more about life in Baghdad. Jameela took a sip or two of the Earl Grey. I got a sense that she didn't really like it and she didn't try the cookies, even the one cut to look like a seagull with wings painted in gray and white sugar.

The girls and I ate the cookies and I offered a walk around my neighborhood. Built as a summer community in the late 19th century, rows of former summer "cottages" line the streets. Architectural

traits range from Victorian to New England eclectic. Some have signs tacked above the door that have probably labeled these houses for decades: The Anchorage, Edgewater, Rendezvous, Fidder's Green. *Why does a house need a name?* I took a guess that the original owners probably had another "real" house and this was a kind of getaway, a summer house. Or, it may be tradition, like naming a boat, I said. Jameela looked at me quizzically. *Do you think we are crazy?* As the one attempting to explain why my neighbors' houses have funny names, I assured her: no.

We walked past a pale blue house with a stack of lobster traps in the yard. It has a fishing rod mounted over the door that is nailed above two oars and a sign that reads "Cross-Eyed Casters." *What does that mean?* I pantomimed the cast of a fishing rod, and explained that being cross-eyed means that your eyes don't line up right, that the nerves and the brain aren't communicating with the eye muscles. *Oh, yes,*

we have that word in Arabic. Cross-eyes are like crossed minds. They can't see the world around them clearly. I focused on the literal, agreeing that being cross-eyed probably makes fishing difficult. I left out the part that the cross-eyed reference may very possibly have something to do with this particular fisherman often being intoxicated. It seemed imprudent to explain that part.

We continued our walk down the street to see the ocean. We met a grey-haired male neighbor who shrugged in dismay when Jameela refused his handshake. She started to complain of the heat in the late summer sun. I apologized for the walk as her heavy clothes began to smell after weeks of wear and lack of laundering.

We got home and I prepared to drive Jameela back to campus. As I gathered my keys, Jameela presented me with a fancy gold and silver ring in a velvet box that I accepted graciously but inwardly cringed at its opulence. I drove her back to the residence halls and

Jameela seemed genuinely happy: *Why didn't we do this sooner?* My own frustrations with the day were, thankfully, not obvious, but, I was glad that the day had ended and I could return to the comfort of the familiar.

A week or so later, before the scholars were set to leave, I decided to assemble a little package for Jameela to take back to her sons. She had mentioned that they liked to read in English, so I went to Harrison's, famed purveyors of comic books and pop culture, to see if I could find some appropriate reading material for two boys forbidden to go outside of their home for fear of getting hit by an explosive device. I started down the rows of shelves, trying to gauge how the overwhelming number of comics could be narrowed for the interests of two Iraqi boys whom I would never meet. *Scissor Sisters* seemed inappropriate just given the title. Would the swords and sabers of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* be offensive? Surely, the cleavage of the new Betty and

Veronica would be in violation of some kind of rules related to nudity. *Wonder Woman* is even worse—all cleavage and thighs. *The Simpsons* cover showed the children hitting adults on the head with bats and *Garbage Pail Kids* displayed kids with their rear ends exposed. They all seemed to model taboos that I perceive a foundation of Iraqi aesthetics.

I continued down the aisles, mentally deconstructing both the bedrocks and counter-culture of America via the comic books on the shelves, trying to look at them with the eyes of the mother of the Iraqi pre-teens that I envisioned: Japanese anime punks, *Sound of the Devil*, and *Southern Bastards* were beyond my experiences but clearly in the realm of the offensive. Did Archie and Betty have pre-marital sex? Could Batman and Robin be seen as gay? My insecurities mounting, I was about to abandon the plan.

As I was about to walk away from this gesture of cross-cultural generosity, I re-examined the row of classics. *Popeye* and *Peanuts* would have to do.

Popeye was on the cover with an open can of spinach, exclaiming, “I yam what I yam.” It seemed innocent enough, a sailor with a good diet would certainly charm Jameela’s sons. And how could I go wrong with Peanuts: the meek and nervous Charlie Brown navigating life’s lessons through his side-kicks, the bossy Lucy, loyal Linus with his security blanket, the endearing slob, Pigpen, and the ever-supportive Peppermint Patty. The boys could learn so much about the actual insecurities of Americans and practice their English at the same time.

At an arranged time on the Friday before the scholars were leaving, I packed the books along with some archetypal favorite candies of my own kids--Sour Patch Kids and Nerds—and went to the dorms where Jameela was staying. She had also asked me for ten signed letters of recommendation about her efforts as a scholar while in the U.S. that she could present to her superiors at the university in Baghdad, and I had complied with gracious exaggeration of what we had

been able to accomplish together. I went to the reception area, called her room, texted her, all to no avail. Finally, one of her Iraqi colleagues, Noora, came down and told me that Jameela had gone to the mosque in a nearby town with some of the others—for one last round of prayer. Was it a prayer for her kids? For a safe journey? For war to end? I would never understand, wrapped in my cloak of the secular and rational. Annoyed, I gave the package to Noora who promised to pass it on.

I never saw Jameela again, but she sent along a note with a leather wallet embossed with the hanging gardens of Babylon, wonder of the ancient world, and a blue glass pendant of the evil eye, a talisman used to ward against evil by numerous factions across the Middle East who are in the throes of hurling missiles at each other. I took it as an honor that Jameela wished me safe from harm, but felt more aware than ever of the discrepancies of human behavior—the kindness of individuals and the killing

by tribes. There was a short note in the wallet: *Thank you for your time and teaching and for the gifts. I really like Popeye and Peanuts. Popeye the sailor man is strong and smart. And Peanuts shows us the American mind. I will take them all to Baghdad and teach my boys America. I would love to stay longer but winds blow counter to what the ship wants.*

When Jameela returned to Baghdad, she posted pictures on Facebook of black smoke billowing in the direction that she had come from. I wondered about those boys. Were they finally able to go outside and play? Or would they become part of the conflict, careening blindly through the haze, holding on to their protective charms, hoping that the evil eye would not blind them?

Almost

by **Annie Dawid**

By that time, I'd broken almost every rule I would break. The smart girl from the "good" family," I'd slept with men of every race, creed, and color. Most every drug had entered my lungs, my nose—though not my veins. I'd attempted suicide—"unsuccessfully"—more than once, and I'd learned the art of trichotillomania, though I had no name at that time for such transgressions of the body. "You use yourself as an experiment," said my psychiatrist, years later. But he didn't know the depth of the experimentation undertaken preceding my arrival in his office.

Almost. In my twenties, grad student by night, with a boring day job to pay the bills, the damage I had yet to do remained unfathomed. So when Victoria said, "Want to try heroin," at first I thought she was

kidding, because all I'd ever known her to do was drink. A sister-student in my Shakespeare class, we partied together on weekends, our entertainment consisting of binge drinking at bars, sometimes followed by crazy eating if we found ourselves without men by night's end. More than once, we concluded the party at Clown Alley at two in the morning, scarfing tuna melts with fries, smearing them into our hungry, gaping maws, so drunk and messy the owner threatened to kick us out.

Victoria was heavy, buxom, blond, innately savvy about how to catch and hold men's attention. She wore short black dresses with black heels, her shapely legs exposed. At the same time, she remained phenomenally insecure: born into a family of drunks, both terrified and certain she was heading the same way. By the time we met, she'd had three or four abortions, all of which she agonized over profoundly, all originating in drunken one-nighters with strangers, hoping for connection, love,

affection—everything every one of us needs. Guilt over abortion drove her to the bottle, and the pattern continued.

I possessed my own coping mechanisms, coming from a family of crazy people. We are crazy all on our own, without recourse to any genre of mind-altering substance, legal or otherwise. We're Jews, not known for drinking as a culture, though of course Jewish drunks exist, including my sister, though I did not know of her drinking then. Though I drank, fish-like, with Victoria, I remembered reading in the poet John Berryman's unfinished memoir, *Recovery* (unfinished because he threw himself off a bridge in the frozen heart of a Minneapolis winter while composing it), "Jews don't drink." He hoped to make lots of Jewish friends in the asylum because he believed they never became alcoholics; perhaps he thought they were genetically incapable of it. I must have believed it too. In my family, my mother, my brother, myself—all of us managed to get ourselves

committed to psych wards—voluntarily or otherwise—without benefit of any substance at all. Even pot propelled my brain to scary precipices of heightened realities: the congenial park down the street metamorphosed midday into a labyrinthine forest, the two blocks between my best friend's house and mine transformed themselves into a terrorizing odyssey, rapists waiting under every tree. I always told people, when they asked me to share a joint or drop acid, "My mind is a scary enough place all by itself, but thanks anyway."

"Heroin can't be compared to any other drug," Victoria insisted. We'd just snort it—nothing more. In fact, she said the high was softer and gentler than any drug I had experienced. A bit like the best drunk, only it didn't make you want to eat. In fact, you didn't think about food on heroin. For heavy women, this aspect held much appeal.

The night she introduced the idea of heroin to me, Victoria brought along her ex-boyfriend,

conveniently accompanied by a friend for me as well, so there were four of us, neatly coupled. Her ex, Bill, now just a friend, had become a dealer, too deep in his habit to be sexual.

It made sense that Victoria would be attracted to heroin, alone among other drugs, for it shed an otherworldly light, associated in her mind with literati in London's fin-de-siecle opium dens, formally dressed for their dreamy reach into oblivion. I, too, was drawn by that vision, summoned by *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we'd read in class together. Did I say no? I did not. I was curious. If she had suggested using needles, my refusal would have been automatic. But snorting? What harm could that do?

Bill brought the heroin along to our meeting at the Savoy Café in North Beach. Each of us paid him twenty dollars. Stan, his friend, was broke after our first glass of wine, so I ended up paying for "my date" and I to drink several rounds.

Victoria had snorted heroin before, though Bill had advanced to the needle. After hours at the Savoy, drinking red wine, Bill said we should go out back. The rain had cleared, and we could see stars in the San Francisco sky, not a common occurrence, these shivers of unexpected light. I sat on a damp curb, waiting passively for the event to unfold, a spectator at my own life.

Stan unfolded a rectangle of aluminum foil, Bill provided the heroin and the lighter, and we began. The longer we sat there, the brighter the constellations glowed. Doubtless my ass was damp and stiff from the wet cement, but I remember none of those details. Apparently, it never crossed my mind that we could get caught, sitting on the curb snorting heroin. I remember laughing, though, delighted by whatever delights one in a state beyond drunkenness, Victoria and I all over giggles, while the men remained quiet.

I only managed a few snorts before I said I'd had enough. "More for me," said Stan. He was bland, a man whose sole outstanding descriptor was his position as a gardener at a golf course, which meant he had to be on the greens at six a.m. the next day. I didn't care about him. Would I spend the night with him? I didn't think about it. The moments there on the curb, observing the stars where they didn't usually exist, constituted an isolated envelope of bliss. At once, I understood the allure of the drug: the idea that one needed nothing else in the world.

Victoria never told me how sick I would get.

A purposeful evasion, a convenient elision of truth? That night, in the gardener's basement apartment, I woke in the darkness and needed to vomit, but I didn't know where I was or who he was or where a bathroom might be. He was yelling some sort of direction to a toilet, but I couldn't understand his words. I threw up on the floor, the carpet, and finally in the kitchen sink. Stan was furious. At five, when

the alarm went off, he told me I had to leave; a key was required to lock the apartment door, and he had no extra. Somehow, I called for a taxi, still dry heaving, my brain now recoiling from what I had done to it.

The cab driver surveyed me, assessed the damage, and said nothing all the way to my apartment, me with my head out the window in case I got sick again. The sun shone, and I saw people waiting for buses on corners, though the sight of life going on hurt my eyes. It took days to recover, my head ringing with pain, whoever I was more disordered and directionless than ever before.

Was that night the nadir of my existence? Drunk, stoned on heroin, in bed with a stranger and puking all over the floor? How deeply I descended in that man's apartment, my body beyond my control, my soul atomized into particles. I had sunk, evidently, to my intended destination.

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” wrote Eliot in “The Wasteland.” I remembered the Hebrew injunction: “Tikkun olam,” to heal and restore the world by finding the pieces of holiness god had dispersed all over the world. Slowly, I gathered my fragments, harvesting bits of self scattered like shards of light everywhere.

(Un)fortunate Sons

Sheila Luna

The Vietnam Wall rises out of the ground, a big wave of polished black granite with 58,267 names glittering in the sun. I weave through the Memorial Day crowd—bandana-wearing bikers, tattooed sailors, kids wielding ice cream cones, selfie-snapping couples, and World War II vets that are in Washington D.C. to commemorate the 70th anniversary of that war's end, some in wheelchairs, some pulling oxygen tanks. Visitors touch the Wall in reverence. Some shake their heads in disbelief. Others offer white roses and handmade cards. I notice how we are, all of us, reflected in the Wall behind the etched names—past and present moving within the thousands of Vietnam vets who died or are still missing. The engraved names seem to come alive as they pick up the reflections of clouds and sun-dappled beech trees.

“It symbolizes a wound that is closed and healing,” someone says, pointing to the apex. Starting at eight inches on either side, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is actually two walls, each 247 feet long that rise to ten feet. Necks cock to get a glimpse.

“It reminds me of a sinking ship,” says another.

Adjacent to the Wall, Medal of Honor recipients gather to dedicate a set of postage stamps that honor their service. One says Memorial Day is a day of mourning for him. Even though he is hailed as a hero, he remembers the day when nine of his fellow soldiers were killed.

“The tears are always here,” he says pointing to his eye.

A lone bugler plays “Taps” and now I have tears. Haunting tones vibrate and linger in the air. These twenty-four melancholy notes still somehow echo rest and peace. I think of my father. They played

"Taps" at his funeral. I remember how they folded the flag and handed it to my mother.

Being in D.C. this weekend puts the holiday in perspective. No longer just poolside margaritas and a day off from work, Memorial Day is a reflection of history, of America, and a reminder that, regardless of our stance on U.S. policy in Vietnam or any war, we should grieve for and thank veterans who were willing to die for our freedoms.

As the Wall gets taller with more names, it represents a buildup of emotions that coincided with escalation of the Vietnam War. The names, inscribed in order of the date of casualty, show the war as a series of individual human sacrifices. I touch the Wall and wonder what happened to each one. How they died. Who they left behind. Running my fingers over the etched names, I remember my connection to a soldier in Vietnam.

Ushered into adolescence with mood rings, marijuana, and the My Lai Massacre, I wore waist-long hair parted down the middle, tie-dyed shirts, and a beaded band around my forehead. Even though I wasn't old enough, I wanted to be a hippie. The words "peace" and "freedom" were sewn into my clothing and etched on my school supplies.

"Thought it was a nightmare, but it's all so true," I sang with the radio, wiggling my skinny, bell-bottomed torso. The black light in my bedroom illuminated posters of Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Mary Tyler Moore. "They told me don't go walking slow, devil's on the loose."

"Turn that down," my mom said, banging on the door. "Come and eat."

"Better run through the jungle," I belted out. "Don't look back to see." I returned to earth when she barged into my pseudo-psychedelic world.

"Ever heard of knocking?" I yelled.

"I did. You are going to destroy your eardrums, young lady."

"I'm not hungry," I said, huffing. "I have a lot of studying to do."

"I can see that," she said, scanning my bedroom floor bedecked with album covers. Stepping between the Rolling Stones and the Partridge Family, as if cautiously wading through the Mekong River, she extended her arm, "Come and eat. Now."

My siblings and I gathered around the table every evening because my parents said it was important that we eat together to remain a close family. That evening, my brothers were pretending to be Spock and Kirk, while my little sister was nonchalantly feeding our three-legged terrier under the table. During the waning years of the Vietnam War, Walter Cronkite would join us for dinner via a 12-inch black and white TV situated among a display of copper Jell-O molds of fruit and fish. He shocked the country

with the number of dead and wounded and subjected us to images of children in faraway lands who had been crippled and burned and killed by bombs. Our bombs.

"Why do they force men to go to war?" I asked, interrupting a "Twilight Zone" argument between Kirk and Spock.

"It's called the draft," said my father, as he scraped the rest of his macaroni and cheese onto his Wonder Bread.

"Isn't that kind of like slavery?" I asked. "Do you believe in the draft?"

"I don't think we should be in Vietnam," he responded. "It's a pointless war."

This surprised me because he loved to tell war stories about when he was on a frigate in the Pacific during World War II. He was a sailor, like Popeye, and I was proud of him. And he was always proud of his

country. I had heard that some anti-war protesters were spitting on returning soldiers and throwing rocks and garbage at them. I could tell it made my father very sad.

As my mom served the chocolate pudding, Mr. Cronkite disrupted our conversation with befuddling statistics. He said that the average infantryman in the South Pacific during World War II saw about 40 days of combat in four years. Due to the mobility of the helicopter, soldiers in Vietnam endured combat about 240 days in one year.

"Poor kids," said my dad shaking his head. "But you need to finish your dinner and do your homework and take off that goofy headband. You look like one of those Charlie Manson creepos."

I knew all the Creedence Clearwater Revival songs by heart, but didn't understand what they meant. I had no idea that fortunate sons were boys who escaped the draft because they were rich. Later I

would realize that the song “Fortunate Son” was about the frustration of Americans forced overseas to fight, while sons of politicians dodged the draft. I knew there was a war going on, but I could not visualize men running for their lives through the dense jungles of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Like any good hippie, I donned peace signs and love beads. I was against the war. But it didn’t consume me. My brothers were too young to be drafted, fortunately, and I was too young to care. My priorities were learning how to play “Here Comes the Sun” on the guitar and obtaining a driver’s permit.

Until a revolution bombed my juvenile reality.

I often walked home from school with my friend Kate. Her mother made the best coconut cream pie and sang like Peggy Lee. Sometimes we would stick pencils in her mom’s robin’s nest of a hairdo, piled high atop her already elongated head. That day, her mom wasn’t singing and there was no pie. She told

Kate that her Uncle Jack from Wisconsin had been shot down in Vietnam. “He’s MIA,” she said, a tear trolling down her long face. I’d heard that term before, but never knew what it meant. “Missing in action,” she clarified. Uncle Jack’s friend was badly wounded and got to come home, but he wasn’t talking to anybody. I met Uncle Jack once at a Christmas party. He was funny. Now he was dead. The war had infiltrated my world, like troops behind enemy lines.

Kate’s mom became involved in a grassroots movement called Voices in Vital America (VIVA), which distributed Prisoner of War bracelets to raise awareness. Each nickel-plated bracelet was embossed with the name of a POW or MIA and the date he was taken prisoner or declared missing. They came with little stickers that indicated either POW (white star in a blue circle) or MIA (blue star in a white circle). The bracelet’s owner pledged to wear it at all times until the war was over and all prisoners

released. I gave her $2.50 and she ordered one for me.

When my bracelet arrived, I was surprised to find that my POW bore my last name. I immediately felt a connection. My bracelet said *Lieutenant Commander Dennis A. Moore 10/27/65*. A Navy man, like my dad, he had already been in prison for six years. The letter that accompanied it said that Dennis Moore, the pilot of an F8E single-engine aircraft on a combat mission over North Vietnam, was shot down near a city called Hoa Binh and captured. A wave of foreboding engulfed me. I applied the appropriate sticker and slid the bracelet on my arm. Like a promise ring, I wore it faithfully.

"What's that on your arm?" my boyfriend asked as he searched for a baggie in his glove compartment. Clyde was two years older and said that we would elope someday. When he looked at me, my eyes rolled around in their sockets. I was in love. Or so I thought.

Having just picked me up for school, he took a slight detour and pulled into the dry riverbed to smoke a doobie. I never understood the attraction of getting stoned, but I went along with it because I thought he was cute and cool and I wanted a ride to school. I also felt older with him, and rebellious, like a hippie. If my parents only knew the real Clyde, they would have grounded me for a month, and maybe even banned television.

"I'm doing my part for the POWs," I said, proudly, displaying my bracelet. A few weeks ago, "pow" was just a word in the comics. Now I had a cause. "We're putting pressure on the government to do something."

"Are we now?" He sucked on the sloppily rolled joint, held his breath and squinted as if he couldn't decide whether to enjoy the drag or laugh at me.

"There's a war going on. Guys a little older than you are being tortured and killed."

“They are baby killers,” he said, exhaling the smoke in my face.

“That was an isolated incident. The soldiers are under a lot of pressure, and probably under the influence, like you.”

He turned up the radio and the Grateful Dead blasted through the desert air. I could tell where his priorities were and for the first time since I started high school, I felt as if I had risen above the stoner mentality. Drinking Southern Comfort underneath the bleachers at football games suddenly felt trivial compared to what my Dennis might be going through at that moment. He could be in a cage or a hole-in-the-wall prison. What if he was starving or tied up with iron chains?

“It’s a pointless war,” I added. “Don’t you get it?”

“And that little armband is going to help?” He passed me the spit-laden joint and I pretended to inhale.

"I'm late for my poetry class," I said. "Can we go?"

"Whatever you say." He revved the engine and we sped away, leaving the strains of Jerry Garcia in a cloud of dust.

In no time, more kids at school wore POW bracelets and so did thousands across the country, regardless of their views of the War, as a testament that POWs should not be forgotten. By the War's end, VIVA had distributed five million bracelets. For me it was more than just a symbolic gesture. I felt close to Dennis and I felt responsible. I'd lay in bed at night and run my fingers over the indentation that spelled *Lt. Com. Dennis A. Moore 10/27/65.* It felt like Braille. It felt like a prayer. Sometimes he would haunt my dreams—beady-eyed Viet Cong burning him with cigarettes or whipping him like in the movie *Spartacus.*

In February 1973, the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam. Troops returned home and the first planeload of

POWs left Hanoi. I remember watching the broadcast of "Operation Homecoming," hoping that one of the weary prisoners stepping off the plane was Dennis. I was happy for the soldiers who were finally able to reunite with their families. Older and a little wiser, I also knew that the troop withdrawal was not a cause for rejoicing. The war suddenly felt very sad and futile. So many lives lost. So much destruction. Infused with whiffs of global awareness, instead of marijuana, I began to ponder the fragility of life.

Several weeks later, I saw his name in the paper followed by *Status: Released POW.* He was safe. It felt as if a relative had just survived a risky heart transplant. I took off my bracelet and broke it in half, as directed by the instructions. The options were to send it to the released prisoner or keep it. I kept it. In my mind, I wanted to keep him close, and to save a piece of our history.

Those who wore MIA bracelets could not take them off until the missing soldiers (or bodies) were

located. There are still 1500 MIAs unaccounted for, grieved for by their families, their names etched in the cool granite of the Vietnam Wall. And there are POWs who are still held captive, which disturbs many returned prisoners because they abided by a code that none would return until all were released.

I spot a seventyish man on bended knee in front of the Wall, crying, whispering something to his dead buddy. He places a photo against the Wall of a smiling young man in a crisp white uniform. I can only imagine his grief and I realize that the grieving process is never really over, no matter if it's for a friend killed in war or the death of a beloved parent. The wave of sadness rises and falls, reflected in the teary eyes of friends and in the shiny granite of monuments.

Now returned from D.C., I open my childhood jewelry box, and there's my POW bracelet, like a long lost friend. I run my index finger over the name. My POW was one of the unfortunate sons who

experienced the atrocities of the Vietnam War; but he was fortunate that he survived. When I was in high school, I couldn't fathom how people could kill, torture, and annihilate entire populations because of religion or oil or a line in the sand. I still can't. I like to "imagine all the people living life in peace," as John Lennon once dreamed. But as long as there is evil in the world, there will be war. And, as long as there is war, we will depend on people like Lieutenant Commander Dennis A. Moore.

Pictures

by Jean Berrett

The walls had always hung heavy with pictures, gilt-framed, dark and dimming, holding fiercely onto what was already lost. Old pictures of Baltimore, the streets of cobblestone and white scrubbed concrete steps in front of the row houses like nuns waiting for supper.

In some of the photos, the people stood tall in front of cardboard cutouts of mountains and lakes, infinite shades of gray. The women in corsets that propped their bosoms high up under their collarbones and the men in wide lapels with hats tipped at a devil-may-care angle. The photographed children looked unhappy, smiles forced over frowns or whimpers, little girls in dresses flounced and laced, row upon row, and little boys standing straight as infantry.

In one of the largest frames was a drawing of a stone cathedral, medieval-style: two massive, ornately sculpted towers, a huge rose window in the columned belfry and three high arches that pointed to God, each topped with its bleeding stone crucified Christ above the three stone entranceways.

Her husband had left her for another woman twenty-five years younger than both of them. In the long year following divorce, those pictures still hung from the rosy wall-papered walls, gray and gilded and moldering green. One day I remarked that her house still looked like a parsonage (the husband had been a minister). Two days later, when I stopped by, the walls were almost bare. Where the pictures had been, pale squares and rectangles on the faded clustering roses marked their absences.

All the pictures were gone but one, a two foot by three foot lithograph in a carved oak frame, which surrounded an inner frame of tarnished metal crosshatched in gold and black. Under the aged glass

of the frame was Uncle Joe, half-bald with a thick but neatly-trimmed mustache curling over his upper lip and around the corners of his unsmiling mouth. Everything, even his white man's face, had faded to shades of tepid brown. He too wore a wide lapelled suit and a stiff white shirt with the collar pressed down around a small triangular cravat. The look on his face not sad but intent, as if he studied the scene before him and seemed to be saying to all who looked, "You whose hearts still beat, whose blood pumps into your brains and behind your eyes so that you can see what I cannot, you, who believe somehow that I watch your strange, strange lives from behind these ink-print eyes. I am bones at most by now, my dear. But you know, I lived. My blood too pumped through muscles and brain and limbs as my own inconceivably magic heart did its inexplicable dance for a while." Almost a kindness in Uncle Joe's eyes. His picture remained alone on the walls.

The following week, new pictures hung across from Uncle Joe. Pictures which she herself had painted during those long years of marriage. Pictures selected from those kept hidden behind an ancient wood desk, canvases unframed and stuffed in a narrow slot against that wall where bookshelves filled with heavy books hung above and all the way down on both sides.

A painting of a turtle's face peeking out from under a yellow and orange and green-streaked shell. Black eyes, one almost round and open, the other one angular, half-closed. Two small dark holes at the snout on a face where soft-blended reds and blues and violets made a mixing of sundown above the animal's two front claws. The fine-brushed outline of those claws was filled with tiny trapezoids of brown and orange and yellow and white. Most amazing was the turtle's mouth, a line crossing the face from side to side. At the center, the line lifted slightly and wavered—a warily hopeful smile.

Above the turtle were two other canvases, both of them paintings of luminous crabs. Viewed from the top, the shells on their backs were shaded and stroked with dark and light greens and dark and light blues. The eyes protruded bright, bright red under an arc of red and blue and lavender claws balanced on the other side of the shell with orange and green and lavender flippers. The sand behind stunned to pink and orange by the sunlight that must have fallen that day on the moon-loving tides of the Chesapeake.

Hung on a diagonal from Uncle Joe was a close-up painting, a side view of the large blue head of a blue-eyed bird, its orange beak open as if in song. It was thick with feathers that seemed to have burst that very moment from neck and head, and the white ring around the bright blue eye grew a luxurious circle of lashes. Out of the top of the feathery head poked three small heads of hungry nestlings with wide open mouths that had to be fed.

Three full-grown children came that night to have dinner with their mother.

Unhitching

Jason Bruner

It isn't that faith doesn't exist for me now; it's just that most of it was left behind in the places I tried to take it.

By age ten, my select cadre of heroes was decidedly masculine and eclectic: Ponch and Jon from "CHiPs", Luke Skywalker and Han Solo from *Star Wars*, Dale Murphy of the Atlanta Braves, and Jim Elliot, an American missionary who was killed in a South American rain forest. I was so struck by the story of Jim Elliot that I wrote a fifth grade book report on a devotional account of his short life. I opened my report with a quotation evocative enough to lodge itself firmly in my young psyche: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." I admired, even envied, his clarity and conviction.

Jim Elliot, a Wheaton graduate with the distinctive wholesomeness of mid-century Americana, traveled to the Ecuadorian jungle in the mid-1950s, along with four other young white evangelical missionaries. One of them, a prodigious pilot, managed to land a plane on the sandy bank of a meandering river in an attempt to reach the "Auca Indians" (most modern anthropologists refer to them as the Huaorani). Shortly after landing, they were stabbed with spears, making Elliot in particular a household name among American evangelicals. Not technically a saint, Elliot came as close as we had to sainthood and was welcomed into the pantheon of White Missionary Heroes.

The White Missionary Hero had to forego the comforts of Western civilization and brave the forces of darkness in order to bring dark-skinned people the Word of God. This was the duty of the *true* Christian—the one who was really "on fire": to sacrifice his life to bring light to the darkness. This

was a faith and a masculinity defined by atonement, measured by sacrifice. Dating, sports, and "secular" music were steps along the way to being speared in a jungle.

I could be that bold. Or, at least, I should. I would give it a shot.

Gabi was 7 and lived in a Mexican border town. She was smart and somehow quietly effusive and, as I was soon to discover, creative. I'd come with a church group to bring the Good News to Mexico, but I'd run out of things to say, and my silence reflected just how little I knew of her world.

Gabi was frequently by my side for the few days we were there, even when we had nothing to talk about. We sat on a rough pew that wobbled on an uneven concrete floor. To break the uncomfortable silence, I asked Gabi about her favorite Bible story. We were

leading a Vacation Bible School program at the church in her *barrio*, after all.

She paused for a few seconds and then launched into an animated telling of her favorite parable: "*Habia una vez*…" (Once upon a time…)

She had different voices ready for each of the characters, which changed with her posture as the drama unfolded. I got a little lost, more because of my limited horizons than the storyteller's skill.

As a teenager, I had a pretty encyclical knowledge of the Bible, but I was having trouble placing this one. She was talking a lot about animals. Noah and the flood? I kept hearing *tortuga*. And *conejo*. They were … racing? And the *conejo* was … having lunch with a friend?

To this day, Gabi gave what is easily the best telling of the tortoise and the hare that I've ever heard.

Well, she is probably from a Catholic family, I thought at the time. *I bet they don't even read the Bible.*

A few years later, I sat on the makeshift second deck of a motorized canoe, floating in the middle of the Milky Way. The Amazon was so wide and still that the white heavenly dust stopped only briefly at the thin forest horizon before circling back underneath us to be churned up by the outboard motor. This ring lit our way hour after hour after hour.

We were a few days' travel from electricity, and our tiny engine was determined to push us through the humid darkness that kept everything else in its place. As missionaries, we came to tell these people how to get out of the darkness—from the things that held them there—and move into the light.

We had no idea where we were.

Back in Georgia, our mission had been clear. We felt a calling to be missionaries, a calling to the Amazon. We were placed with a team and sent through training where we learned trust falls and how to walk through obstacle courses when muddy. One of the leaders, a preacher, with his impassioned face clay-red, went hoarse yelling about how, as Christians, we needed to be like "a big Nalgene water bottle that splashed water on everyone when it was shaken." The love of Jesus sprinkled upon the heathens.

They said that the Amazon would be an adventure in testing our faith. An adventure in bringing light to a dark place.

Or, maybe, just an adventure.

The thin canopy of the horizon grew thicker as the black Amazonian lake slowly narrowed itself into a serpentine tributary, the jungle increasingly interrupting the starry ring.

“Get your bags together. We’re almost there,” called a voice near the motor. We brought a lot of stuff.

I looked up as we came around a final bend in the river and saw a new light, then another, then a whole line of lights, flickering along the river. Not the clear white of the Milky Way but the soft dancing yellow of candles in glassless windows, moving with the silent current, welcoming the *Americanos*.

As I watched the candlelit shore, I drank from my Nalgene bottle, filled with iodine-infused river water. What did I really have to “shake out” onto these people—the Uraina? I had nothing to bring. Light was already here, reflected in the quiet, eternal darkness of their own water.

I realized they didn’t need a white missionary hero. The sacrifices I’d made—adopting a new diet, enduring the heat, braving the piranhas—only measured my faith; they didn’t impart it. So I went home to Georgia.

I stood at the northwest corner of the city square in Matamoros, Mexico on Wednesday afternoon, August 4th, 2004. There was a single trashcan and a couple of benches, and that's exactly where I left it behind: the wooden popsicle stick from the ice cream bar I had just finished, along with faith, evangelicalism, whatever else that I'd been tentatively hanging on to. But I had known this was coming.

Six weeks prior, I arrived at a mission camp in northern Mexico, a base for American evangelical youth groups to have week-long mission trips.

My first morning in Mexico, I stood at the back of the short worship and prayer service with some of the adult chaperones. The worship leader asked everyone to pair up and pray for the other person. Next to me stood a pastor from one of the church groups. We introduced ourselves and began our

generic intercessions. The worship leader called for everyone's attention, but my prayer partner had something he needed to tell me: "This hasn't really ever happened before, but I had a vision while we were praying."

"Oh?"

"You were in a tractor, out in a big field. You were doing work, driving the tractor through crops. But it was like there was just a wagon attached to the tractor. It was the wrong thing. So nothing was happening. You were working but with the wrong tools. I don't know you. I don't know what it means, but I thought I should tell you."

I puzzled over the prophetic riddle as I watched the sunburnt Christian soldiers load into worn fifteen-passenger vans, which then funneled into a clunky convoy that dispatched them to their ministry sites: orphanages, churches, soccer fields. My prophet and his group left the next day. This schedule would

become my rhythm for the six weeks that followed, minus additional personal prophecies.

The Mexican border town—its poverty, heat, dust, hope, and desperation—had made him want to be more like Jesus. And that was the problem.

I watched as mud dripped off her face and onto her shirt—stains of a misguided act of faith. Her: the Mexican woman who had trouble seeing. Cataracts, probably. Her need inspired him to act. Him: an American youth pastor.

Because one time Jesus saw a blind man and made mud and smeared it on the blind man's eyes and he could see. It was a divinely-proven formula, scientific in a way. Of course, he didn't have the saliva of the God-Man, which was an ingredient in the biblical precedent. We mumbled prayers as he made do with a decent substitute: the purified water in his bottle. He prayed and smeared the mud over

her blurred vision. He prayed again. Rinsed it off—only the mud, not the cataracts. The mud dripped onto her white blouse. We watched disappointment wash over them both, though for different reasons. His miracle was deferred; her laundry wouldn't be.

The poverty, the desperation, the heat—they make it hard to think straight. The youth minister was bewildered. He really had expected a different outcome, and he was now left with the task of locating where the formula broke down. Was it his insufficient faith? Hers?

I don't know if he ever considered that the problem was the premise of the encounter itself—the certainty of our goodness, of our helpfulness, of our beneficence.

By the end of my time in Mexico, the square in Matamoros was one of my favorite places to visit. It had abundant shade that beckoned folks to relax and

rest, making it an ideal target for visiting evangelicals looking to share the Good News.

Our small group of adults broke into pairs, each with a translator, and planned to reconvene at the northwest corner of the square in ninety minutes. I went to the ice cream shop on the west side of the square, then struck up a conversation with a man whose perceptive critiques of American religion and foreign policy eventually surpassed my ability to keep up. Both of us were frustrated: me for reaching the limits of my linguistic capabilities, him for the obstinacy of yet another *gringo* who was defending things he didn't understand.

The pairs of *gringos* returned to the corner. I asked one man what he'd done. With the confident calculus of an evangelical abroad, he responded: "We got five and it looks like that group's working on three. How many did y'all get?"

"Zero," I responded, and realized I was proud of it.

So I unhitched my wagon on the northwest corner of the Matamoros city square and went home.

I never told Gabi that her story wasn't from the Bible. Maybe she knew and was testing me—the guy who thought he knew enough to spend a week parsing right from wrong in a Mexican border town he couldn't even find on a map. Maybe she just had a more inclusive canon.

So I sat there, not knowing how to respond to the tale of the tortoise and the hare. Thankfully, she simply returned the question I had originally asked her. I couldn't think of the Spanish word for "prodigal," so I just went straight into the story, which my mediocre Spanish only allowed me to tell in a faltering present tense: "There is a father who has two sons. One son says to his father, 'I want my all money.' The father it gives to him and son leaves. The son goes to a country really far and now has no money and is very

poor. He thinks about his house and his father. He says, 'I go to my father because there I have food.' The father sees his son and says, 'This is my son. We have a party.'"

All of the characters had the same voice in my version—a distinctly American voice. Gabi was intrigued and confused, but certainly not entertained, much less transformed. So I tried to drive home the point: "God is the father and we leave and do sins. But God loves us." She preferred her story, perhaps realizing that I had told mine more for my sake than hers.

Jim Elliot had gone to a far country. I imagine his father thought of his son's missionary career in Ecuador as a sacrifice, even before he was killed. It was too far off for his father to see him again—at least for a long time. But there would be no return. His son's blood was spilled into a remote Ecuadorian

river not so different than the thin Amazonian tributary I puttered up in a motorized canoe many decades later.

But after floating in that same beautiful darkness, mine isn't the heroic line of the sacrifice. Mine is the defeated arc of the prodigal. Somewhere between northern Mexican border towns and the Peruvian Amazon lie the certainty and clarity that propelled me to the far country in the first place. Sometimes, the better news is that the tortoise wins. Sometimes, our water only gets other people dirty. Sometimes, the darkness is more beautiful than the lights we carried. Because, you see, the prodigal loses it all—the things he brought, perhaps even his faith—but he holds onto his life. That's the difference between sacrifices and prodigals: prodigals come home.

Violations

Jenn Gilgan

When atrocities of ISIS destroying priceless ruins became news last March, I felt incensed. On the heels of brutal murders, the terrorist group obliterated their culture's past. Their excuse: destroying idols that were false gods. They justified their actions through their faith—Mohammed is the only prophet to the only God, Allah. They manipulated the beautiful words of their prophet into ugly acts of brutality and greed. The antiquities were pre-Islam, and so, in their view, unholy.

Each video clip of a sledge hammer smashing carved stone to dust felt like a blow to my head, shaking loose memories of a trip my parents and I took to Iraq in Spring 1978, our second year of living in Beirut, Lebanon. Truthfully, I do not remember much from that trip; I was only twelve. My brain repressed what

should have been the interesting parts: the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, mosques with golden domes. I vaguely recall these sites; photographs and the awful scenes on the news help to pry loose my memories.

One detail of that fated trip I vividly recall is my dad's severe case of Montezuma's Revenge. Not because he was so sick, but because of events I could not escape as he commandeered the back of the taxi, our primary mode of transportation. Iraq was not the hubbub of tourism, even pre-Gulf War, so bus tours were nonexistent. Mom sat in the back with Dad, attempting to provide some comfort from the heat, the nausea, the bumpy roads, a nasty combination for my ailing dad.

Even more vividly, in my visceral memory, I recall sitting up front with the Iraqi taxi driver and a Lebanese gentleman, Sami, an important client of my father's employer, an international bank. He had volunteered to accompany us as a translator since we

did not speak Arabic beyond the basic pleasantries. This man had wealth and prestige. He had a handsome face, light brown hair and bright blue eyes. He was tall and athletic, a descendent of the fair Phoenicians. He also had, as I was to discover, an eye and a roaming hand for young girls.

I was not raped, but over our week-long trip, I was violated multiple times in the front of the taxi. He found ways to grope the training-bra sized bumps on my chest or to massage between my upper thighs. He deftly hid these acts by unfolding the over-sized paper map across our legs. Not knowing how else to behave, I sat still, frozen like an ancient statue. Internally, though, a chaotic battle raged: my mind screamed NO, STOP, but my hormones were curious, tempting me to let go and enjoy the scary, strange, thrilling sensations. At night I promised myself I would refuse his next attempt; each day I fell mute, cowering to his position of power—both over me and over my dad's career. My unconscious

must have understood the adult dynamics and politics.

Over three decades later, I have wondered why I couldn't get past these memories. Why have they haunted me? Why must I remember that my first sexual contact was uninvited and confusing? While I felt ashamed that my twelve-year old body craved learning more of the strange internal warmth that flooded my body, my adult brain could intelligently articulate that he was at fault. That he was the creep. That underneath his handsome visage, he must have had a serious flaw in his psyche to prey on a twelve-year old who had hardly begun to blossom.

After years of journaling, counseling, and eventually confessing to my mom about Sami's pedophilia, I thought I had moved past the rage and disgust of those memories. Until recently. Watching the antiquities long associated with the vacation of violation smash to the ground in plumes of dust released an unexpected rage in me.

Many of the antiquities that ISIS has destroyed are those that my twelve-year-old self visited. I was hardly impressed by history or ruins when I was a kid. The trip was my parents' idea. I had wanted to see the pyramids in Egypt, but since that was the time of Camp David, Egypt would not have been a safe destination for

The Author and her mother, 1978

American tourists. Instead, we went to Iraq, not yet a danger zone for Americans. As a typical twelve-year-old, I rolled my eyes at yet another tour of crumbling ruins (in my mind the Sphinx or pyramids or the land of Cleopatra were not crumbling, and so much cooler to explore). My parents had a history of taking my brother and me on educational trips: the Parthenon, Athena's Temple, a Grecian Olympic stadium. We

had visited Byblos or Baalbeck or both in the mountains and fertile valleys of Lebanon. Before living overseas, my parents took us to what counted as American ruins: Mystic Seaport, Washington Irving's home in Sleepy Hollow, the Newport mansions, and the Hudson River Valley robber baron castles. In 1978, I considered this trip just another educational tour my parents imposed on me.

So, if I didn't care then about the immensity of the history before me, why suddenly did I want to rip out the throats of those thoughtless, careless scalawags on the news? Because I had more than just seen the ruins. My cellular memory had never let go of the sights, the sounds, the sands of Iraq. The ruins were me, and I the ruins. Now, via the sights and sounds of technology, I saw the terrorist attacks against their own history as akin to the personal affront I experienced.

On the surface, the antiquities are ruined beyond repair. No master archeologist will be able to repair

the pieces to their previous state. On a deeper, longer-lasting level, I'm reminded of the classroom lesson about bullying: have students take a clean sheet of paper and then crumple it into a ball. No matter how they try, students cannot "fix" the paper back to its original pristine smoothness. Harsh words and actions make the same lasting impression on people as the creases in the paper. I had been bullied in one of the worst ways, and so were the impressive statues of Tikrit and Mosul. No amount of counseling, confessions, or apologies could smooth the scars inflicted on me or the stone statues. My scars were emotional. The statues' scars historical.

More universally, those statues and my childhood innocence represent a higher state of understanding than either my personal terrorist or the ISIS terrorists can appreciate. Terrorism on any level is not an act of intelligence. That is not to say that the perpetrator in my story or the ISIS men are not intelligent. I know for a fact that my molester was incredibly

intelligent. But, his actions were selfish and uncaring and lacked wisdom. The same holds true for the recent actions of ISIS: There is no sense, no caring, no wisdom in destroying priceless artifacts.

I have a photograph of my mother and me in front of one of the statues that guarded a town. It towered over us, its face kind and gentle. The face and beard of a man, the body of a horse, wings of an eagle, and cloven feet of a goat. In Tikrit maybe. I don't remember. That is what I have repressed. That is the knowledge I have lost forever because something frightening and unexplainable took precedence in my memory. I hate that man for all that he robbed from me: my innocence, a chance not to fear intimacy, and my chance to remember extraordinary history on an extraordinary trip. I hate the terrorists for what they are robbing from the world: the foundation of great civilizations and creativity and genius and tolerance. So few have had the opportunity to visit those sacred lands because of the constant upheaval in the Middle

East, and now, many of the reasons to visit any of the historic sites—Babylon, Bybolos, Jerusalem, Petra, Palmyra, Cairo—have either been smashed beyond recognition or have become too perilous to visit. The world should not allow anyone or anything terrifying to obliterate our collective memory of our beginnings. Whether you connect to the Middle East through genetics, religion—this includes Christianity and Judaism—or not at all, those ruins once governed fertile and prosperous lands. Trade routes from east and west crossed the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Your genealogical tree likely has someone who once walked that fertile valley. This is not a land to fear. It is a land to rejoice and celebrate.

Today, Iraq may seem like a wasteland to many. Desert sands. Bombed out. Citizens turned refugees. At its heart, though, is a vibrant, caring, god-fearing culture, whether that god be God or Allah, or even Yahweh, Buddha, or Vishnu. Yet, hate and prejudice prevail despite each religion's teaching to love and

tolerate our brothers and sisters of every land. We are all human. Shakespeare's Shylock cries out, "If you prick me, do I not bleed?" We all bleed. We all laugh. We all cry. We all need safety and protection and love. If we do not unite to protect that which needs protecting—our heritage, our children, our future—then we risk a chasm in the web of humanity.

The terrorism occurring across the Middle East parallels my personal turmoil. My story is one of many, and the religious terrorists are only one story of mass hatred. The ISIS terrorists hide under the beauty of Islam's Koran. The words meant to inspire the beauty of compassion, faith, loyalty, and love have been misused to justify hate crimes and murder. They are a larger, scarier rendition of the handsome man who abused the trust of a young girl.

Defining Childhood

Jeanne Powell

A motherly looking woman shuffled slowly along the hall ahead of me, herding five children of varying ages towards the school registration office. The sound of her walk was a “slide, slide” rather than the “clunk clunk” of most moms at school. She didn’t seem to know or care that her pink striped top was strikingly mismatched to her yellow floral skirt. Seeing her, I instinctively knew which style of shoes she wore even before I saw them poking out from her long hem. Our whole school called them “Cambo shoes”, so I did too.

Puzzling words were a constant part of my everyday life as a kid. Teachers gave weekly vocabulary assignments with instructions to define each word and then use it in a sentence. When new words

appeared in life, just like in school, my young brain set out to define and assimilate them.

Cambo shoes: Simple rubber sandals with a V-shaped strap at the top. *The new students and their families wear Cambo shoes even when it's cold outside.*

Stockton, California was a typical suburban city, sprawling with new development in the early '80s. The Southeast Asians who took refuge in Stockton were just another group to assimilate and bring novel concepts into my world. There were many cultures and races around me, but given that had always been my experience, I never saw it as anything but normal. I believed that surely every town was as colorful as mine.

Southeast Asian: A way to sum up all the people who came from Cambodia, Laos and other faraway places that I've never heard of. *The*

Southeast Asian kids at my school are super good at art.

My parents did not speak racist words, nor did they bring it to my attention that other people did. People looked and acted differently than I, but I understood they were mostly like me in every other way. Growing up, I don't remember being aware that I should consider anything about a person besides whether or not they were kind.

And so, in 5th grade, when the disheveled, quiet, dark-eyed students with unusual names started filling our classrooms, I saw it as a promising opportunity to make some new friends. They arrived in groups, enrolling all at once. "Refugees" was the word my teacher used. I deduced its meaning and other new words that arose from their arrival from the context of my experience living among them.

Refugees: Children from Southeast Asia who don't speak English, have scars and old clothes,

and are shy but nice. *The refugees left our classroom every afternoon for ESL class.*

ESL class: The pretty room with the really friendly teacher where new students go to learn English. *Helpful schools have ESL class for students who just came from another country.*

Although there were many races at my school, differences besides coloring were hard to spot in kids I'd been with since kindergarten. Most of the student body spoke English and dressed similarly. The new kids wore their clothes many times before washing them and were often sent home for having head lice. I understood the troubling scars on their bodies to have a backstory, but my realm of experience could not grasp how or why. All I comprehended came from news' snippets about Cambodia, Pol Pot, and the Khmer Rouge, overheard as I set the dinner table.

Pol Pot: A certain type of pole and pot which a bad king uses to hurt people in Cambodia. *The mean fighters hit people with a Pol Pot.*

The images I glimpsed on the six o'clock news became more real to me as I got to know the refugees. Those being hurt on TV looked like my friends. I sat, eyes glued, awareness expanding, purposely listening to Peter Jennings for the first time in my life. I began to pray for the Southeast Asians every night as I lay in bed, wondering why anyone would want to kill good people.

Correction: **Pol Pot: The name of a terrible man who leads soldiers called "Come Here Rouge" to kill people in Cambodia and make the whole country communist**. *The terrible fighters hurt people because Pol Pot made them.*

Communist: A kingdom where everyone listens to the king. *Pol Pot will be glad if Cambodia goes communist and he is the king.*

Certain “old” students, who weren’t well-received themselves, made jokes about our new students. They were mean to the refugees the same way they were mean to everybody else, pointing out anything which was unusual.

It was true that the Cambodian kids behaved differently than the rest of us. They sometimes squatted in an odd sitting position as they talked and didn’t look adults in the eye. They forgot to add an “s” onto words to form plurals, received a “free lunch” ticket in the morning and got to ride the bus to some far-off place called “Government Housing” after school. The important thing to me was that they wanted to be friends.

Government Housing: Big, fancy houses where government officials used to live. *The refugees needed a place to live, so Congress said they could have their Government Housing.*

The Cambodian girls shared their favorite game called “Chinese Jump Rope”. It quickly became very popular with all the girls. Set was one of the best Chinese jump-ropers, outgoing and confident in her expertise. I was lucky that our teacher placed her desk right next to mine. As it turned out, we were a good team. I assisted her in class and she helped me advance my skill on the playground. We became fast friends, getting by mostly without words.

I memorized the songs full of foreign words which were to be chanted as precise jumps and turns were taken. I didn’t even try to understand the meaning of those words. They were just fun.

The new girls skillfully showed us how to weave rubber bands together to make the rope. Come recess, the blacktop, which had once been filled with Four-Square games, now had classmates standing in groups with a rubber band rope stretched around ankles, knees, and hips to create differing heights. The Cambodian girls were inarguably the best at it,

but we American girls were having a ball trying to improve.

Chinese Jump Rope: The best game in the world!
I would like to play Chinese Jump Rope all day!

Many Southeast Asian boys proved to be great, agile athletes, spending recesses on the basketball courts with the other boys, engaged in "Americans" verses "Asians" game. It was a quick way to pick fair teams. No one seemed to mind the politically incorrect team names because each group was proud of its nationality.

My mom said she was pleased that I had made friends with the refugees. I noticed that her smile was always a sad one, lips closed and eyebrows furrowed in sympathy, when we spoke of the new students.

"I'd really like to meet Set someday," she said. So I knew that when I asked Set to come to my house, Mom wouldn't mind.

Set asked permission, but the next day she returned with news that her mother wasn't sure. I didn't understand. At home that night, my mom explained to me that Set's mother must be very nervous to send her daughter, with strangers, to a home she'd never seen. Mom reasoned "It's hard to trust people with your precious children when you come from a place of cruelty and war."

I should "give it time because they just got here," she said, but I was still perplexed.

War: Good guys fighting and killing bad guys in another country. Also, a card game to play with Grandma. *People will be happy when the war is over*.

Set begged her mom for several weeks until she finally gave the excuse that there was a logistics problem. "My mom no car," Set told me one day.

I offered that she could walk home with me, and then my mom could drive her home later. There was no

communication between our mothers because neither could understand the other's language. We girls planned everything.

Set and I couldn't stop smiling as we walked to my house. The path home was lively as always, with dozens of kids on either side of the street. Many went out of their way to say hello to Set. She responded kindly to each. I felt honored that she was going to my house. We joyously sang Chinese jump rope songs with a literal hop in our steps as we passed manicured lawns and freshly painted tract homes.

We were mid-song when a sixth grade boy, who always walked alone, yelled at us from behind, "Go back to where you came from, Chink!"

Suddenly concerned, I walked faster, unsure of what to do. Set matched my speed.

We were rescued by a group of boys walking on the other side of the street who played "Asian verses Americans" basketball. They, stopped and faced us

as one shouted back at the bully from across the street, “Shut up and leave her alone!”

I knew we were safe because the insulting boy was far outnumbered by peers with integrity. Set looked at me. I rolled my eyes and shook my head so she’d understand to ignore him. I hoped Set hadn’t understood his rude words. I didn’t even comprehend that last part myself. We started singing again as we rounded the corner to my street.

Chink: A word someone with no friends calls a person who does have friends, when they want them to leave. *The strong boy punched him for yelling “Chink” at the nice girl.*

I pointed to my house and together we ran up the lawn to our porch. Set stopped at our front door to remove her Cambo shoes. “You can leave your shoes on,” I assured her.

Panic and confusion crossed her face as she quickly shook her head no. “Ok, that’s fine,” I shrugged as

she slipped them off and placed them neatly on our step.

Mom was waiting with new pack of rubber bands and cookies as a treat. “Hello, Set! It’s so nice to finally meet you!” she said with her usual cheery tone to my barefoot friend.

Set lowered her eyes and gave a slight, unsure smile as she put her hands in front of her like she was praying. Mom smiled back, “Thank you.”

I gobbled three cookies while Set nibbled one half as we sat, cross legged on the floor of my bedroom, adding an extension to our current rope. “I like you house,” Set told me.

“Thanks,” I responded without considering hers might be different.

“I like you bedroom,” she added.

“Thanks,” I said again as I looped rubber bands.

“I like you mom.”

I looked up, beaming, “Thanks. I’m really glad you came over.”

With our rope long enough, we headed out to start our game. Outside, we easily gathered up some neighborhood girls and my sisters. Time flew. Set wowed us all with her expert moves until the sky dimmed and neighborhood dads began to pull into their driveways. I reluctantly gathered up the rope as our playmates said goodbye.

Mom drove us to the other side of town, where Set lived. It was a run-down apartment complex, situated in a series of apartment complexes. As we pulled up, I was shocked by the number of people packed into the small area. Grown men were squatting with their rears almost touching the ground, engaged in animated conversations. Very young kids were running on sidewalks and patchy-brown grass and dirt areas. It seemed that no one was watching them.

Some people were napping right there on the sidewalk. Everyone was disturbingly thin.

Correction: **Government Housing: A crowded place where hungry people live in small apartments that look old.** *I'm glad I don't live in Government Housing.*

Set beamed as we pulled up. Suddenly I wasn't so sure. Mom put the car in park, took a deep breath, and smiled back at us. "We're here," She said, more sing-songy than usual.

I took Mom's lead and reluctantly got out of the car for my friend's sake. The men's foreign, loud conversations sounded like yelling and were high-pitched for male voices. Their words were like noises from the backs of their throats. Mom stood with her shoulders back, smile fixed, as her eyes darted around. "You girls walk ahead of me." Her happy tone sounded more relaxed than she looked.

We followed Set as she wound around the unkempt building, through groups of men, who occasionally paused to stare. We climbed up dirty, outdoor, concrete stairs. I saw a few boys I recognized from school and felt more at ease. We passed dozens of Cambo shoes lined up next to doors. I marveled that every pair of shoes represented a displaced resident of that apartment. They were tiny and large, wide and narrow, all well-worn and precisely placed. Set stopped next to the row of her family's shoes, slid off her own, situated them neatly, and opened the door.

A woman gasped with excitement before she appeared right in front of us, obvious relief on her face. She gathered Set up in her arms and held tight. Set gently broke her mother's hug and introduced us, in Cambodian. Her mother smiled slightly, lowered her eyes and prayed with her hands like Set had done at our house. Mom returned the gesture, so I did too. Set turned to us and said, "You meet my family," and ran inside.

I started to follow her in, but Mom's hand stopped me. I looked up as Mom nodded her head to the side towards the shoes and motioned towards my feet. She slipped off her own shoes. I stepped out of my penny loafers and placed them neatly next to Mom's.

Stepping inside, I was shocked at the mass of people in the small space. There were no chairs or table or couch or TV. Many people, even elderly women, were sitting on the floor. A make-shift additional kitchen of electric skillets was set up, sizzling with food which didn't look like nearly enough for that big group. The scent of overpowering spice and fish was like a punch in the face. It took all I had to maintain my polite smile.

Set proudly pointed to her cousins, siblings, and grandparents as she said their names. Each prayed their hands at us, and we returned the greeting. Sleeping mats were strewn about the floor. Set proudly pointed to hers, "This my bed."

Mom and I both commented on how nice it was. It was obvious by the way Set's face lit up that she was so pleased we were meeting her family. And, it was more obvious, by the awkward silence, that all the adults in the room were uncomfortable with us inside their home.

After a few uneasy moments of staring at each other without speaking, Mom said we needed to leave to "go get dinner started." We put our shoes on and said our goodbyes. Mom held my hand tightly and maintained a polite smile as we walked quickly back through the dozens of grown men chatting loudly in their squat position circles.

Sleeping mat: A thin, hard blanket to use like a bed. *My dad would not want to sleep on a sleeping mat.*

I had so many questions for my mom on the way home that evening, but mostly I worried that my good friend lived in such spare conditions. Mom

explained that Set's family came from an even worse situation, and it was a good thing that they got to live there. She told me that even though it wasn't perfect, they were safe and they had family.

"Didn't you notice how happy Set was?" Mom asked. I told her I had. But things seemed so unfair.

Correction: **War: Fighting which makes people have to live in another country with almost nothing except their clothes and hopefully all of their family.** *I pray there is never a war in America.*

The plight of those caught in war was no longer about names in a newspaper but about people whose homes I could enter. They were friends of mine who had shown courage and kindness at school, trying hard to learn lessons in a language they barely understood. My friends were in the midst of a lifelong struggle. The group of people in my circle, the "us", I was accustomed to, expanded. Set was in my "us", and since she loved her family, now they were too. My

innocence cracked as I struggled to process the distressing reality.

Set stopped coming to school suddenly, and a few days later our teacher told us that her family had moved. I had no warning, and I'm pretty sure Set didn't either.

Decades later, I recognize the unintentional imprint she left on me, and I am grateful. Diversity comes in so many forms, shifting perspectives and linking people in big and small ways, changing the strange to the familiar.

It's hard to believe I once called those sandals "Cambo shoes." I wear flip flops almost every day now, too.

My Precious Stuff

by Joesph O'Day

Inside a bureau drawer in my parents' dining room, there's a grayed envelope filled with old pictures. I take it in hand and wonder if I should do a quick flip-through, a close inspection, or store it for later. Maybe I should just throw it out, since I'm already overloaded with photos.

I've taken this August week off from work to clear my mother's house and prepare it for sale. Since Dad's death twenty years ago, Mom has lived alone in this large two-family, until the need for permanent nursing home care forced her to leave. At this moment, this first day of cleanout, the house's sole occupants are seven decades' worth of stuff, a testament to my family's distaste for letting things go.

I inspect the envelope. Hidden beneath familiar prints are five 2 x 3 color photos, a family series—my mother and father, and Dad's mother, father, sister and brother. They're dressed formally, perhaps having been to church or a wedding.

The day is sunny and dry, the background, the Salem Willows. My favorite is of Dad and Mom together. Dad's in suit and tie, his arm around her waist. Mom's in high heels and yellow dress, nestled into his side. They smile broadly. The date stamped on back is 1946. A year prior, my father had completed

his World War II tour as an Army Medic. They'll marry in three years, have my sister and me in eight. Mom told me how shy my father was when they dated. He was exactly what she wanted, a gentleman, quiet and mild-mannered, not savvy with women, physically strong and courageous. And a non-drinker; she'd witnessed enough alcoholism in her young life to want alcohol out completely. It's a beautiful photo, something I'll always treasure.

Realizing how close I came to trashing these pictures, I resolve to take the time necessary to scrutinize everything, even if it means making a clearinghouse of my own home. I begin packaging items using any containers I can find, including old wooden boxes having the musty smell of dust and grime.

On the second night, I wake up at two am in a panic, wondering if I'd discarded my little wooden bank, the one Mom gave me in grammar school. I rarely used it and forgot it existed until I touched it

yesterday. But now I want it not to be gone, want it in place until I decide its fate. When I search the dumpster the next morning to no avail, I know it's gone for good.

I discover the palm-size stainless steel transistor radio I used to listen to Boston Celtics games in the era of John Havlicek, Bill Russell, Sam Jones. I'd hide under my bed covers late at night so my parents wouldn't know I was awake, our home team's victories causing announcer Johnny Most's sandpaper voice, and my joy, to rise to the stratosphere.

The ceramics. For years I witnessed my mother's pride arriving home from ceramics class each week, carrying creations that would accompany us the next forty years. The beige French poodles, the small black dog, the big white cat. The basketball-size green turtle and frog, set on their respective parlor end tables. I'd sit between them having intimate conversations with my father about problems and

sports and colleges and career choices. My mother would listen from the kitchen, preparing supper, shouting out perspectives and advice.

Day three arrives and my wife Kris comments on my expanding take-home list, saying she "*hates* clutter."

A friend tells me there's a term for my style of house clearing. "Hoarding," she says. "It's called *hoarding*."

A cousin stops by offering to sell items at the flea market. When I mention I'll keep the old kitchen set, he looks at Kris and says, "He's *bad*!"

A month after the house is cleared, we're walking with a friend on a sandy street towards his Hampton Beach cottage. Kris discloses objects I've brought to our house, underscoring how movers let slip my mother's "sixty-year-old" couch, causing it to tumble down her staircase, tear off four balusters, and make her cry.

His advice, gathered from experience with his own parents' house, is to "Throw *everything* into a dumpster."

"But I want to preserve memories."

"That's what pictures are for."

The pictures. Thumbing through my parents' wedding album, I find several that I've seen for decades displayed throughout the house. I find others, less familiar, that seem more candid, more

real. A young woman readies herself for marriage with friends, sharing her last moments of singlehood. Mom's sister holds open a limousine door to help her exit, both of them so young, so happy, so hopeful. Dad and Mom kneel at the altar, expressions solemn, focused on the Priest's instructions, making sure they're getting things right. Mom laughs at a man's comments in the reception line while Dad, standing next to her, wipes his lower lip. These do more than preserve memories. They broaden the picture of my parents' lives, allowing me to view them in new ways, making me want to keep *every* photo, not just the flawless ones.

Day five. I can't believe the pain I feel going through my parents' belongings. I find letters from my father to Mom from overseas during the war, saying she certainly is not a pest, writing so much. I find items they especially valued in her cedar chest: my mother's wedding garter, her wedding crown, the top of their wedding cake. When I show the top of the

cake to Kris, she says it's nothing special. I know she means it isn't a special one; probably inexpensive, unremarkable. But to me, it *is* special. It's the top of the cake that celebrated their joining. How can I eliminate something that was such an important part of their lives? Where is the utensil Dad used to bang the pipe to wake me early weekend mornings so I'd work with him at the carwash? Can I save it and somehow bring him back, just for a moment, just for the time it takes to tell him how much I love him, to hug him and not let go?

In a tender moment last night, after a tiring day, Kris told me that I have my memories and carry my parents inside. To take a few things of theirs and call it a day. "Filling up our house doesn't bring them back."

In the end, although I keep many of their possessions, including the turtle and frog, I relinquish countless others. I donate the kitchen set to the Vietnam

Veterans of America, pieces of furniture to the Salvation Army, unsalvageables to the dumpster.

On the seventh day, except for a few remnants (refrigerators, electric stoves, leftover furnishings), the house is empty—old white paneled walls and ceiling lights with burned out bulbs and worn rugs with holes.

I do multiple final walkthroughs, stepping into each room, recalling scenes past. I'm in the cathedral ceiling attic and see my father as a boy, living in one of two unheated bedrooms, leaving a closet door open on winter nights, stealing warmth from the heated floor below. I see him years later, arriving home late one night, unannounced, on army leave, not wanting to disturb his family, sneaking up the back stairs to his attic room, getting discovered by his English Setter, Buddy's frenetic barking causing his mother, father, and sister to wake, to join in on the dog's jumping and kissing and welcoming home.

I take the back stairs to the cellar, see my father in retirement puttering with plumbing and wiring and furnaces, wearing coveralls that were his uniform for twenty-five years at his car wash. I see him on his last day of life, interrupted by my three-year-old daughter's request to come outside through the bulkhead and witness her rope jumping prowess… one jump, stop… one jump, stop, her brown curly hair bouncing up and down, my wife telling me how he laughed his wonderful, blissful laugh.

The house will be sold "as is" on a Friday in October. The Sunday before closing, I check it one last time. Garages, attic, cellar, first floor—all clear. Second floor—clear, except for a lone paper scrap on a kitchen shelf. I lift and turn it over, discover it's my grandfather John J. O'Day's funeral mass card. He died on August 11, 1955, a year after I was born. He'd known me for a year but I would never know him, except in stories my father told, and in

memorabilia I've recovered: his gold pocket watch; his winter police coat with its brass Salem Police buttons; his policeman's badge; the silver Mayor's Cup he won in 1916 for being the force's best marksman; photos of him directing traffic, of him sitting comfortably in a yard chair outside the house he purchased in the early 1900s and would pass on to my father. I place his mass card inside my shirt breast pocket. I want to protect it until I can get home and add it to my valuables.

Swim Away, Little Ghost

by Dawn Corrigan

I know as little about the nature of romantic love as I knew when I was eighteen, but I do know about the deep pleasure of continuing interest, the excitement of wanting to know what somebody else thinks, will do, will not do, the tricks played and unplayed, the short cord that the years make into rope …
—Lillian Hellman on Dashiel Hammett

Sundin Richards, a Utah poet, committed suicide on June 19, 2015. He was forty-two years old.

I knew a different Sundin than everyone else did. I know how that sounds, but I persist in believing it's true.

When Sundin was around other people—even at his most sober and self-deprecating and charming—there was always some discomfort and anxiety that, more often than not, manifested as hostility. Even in

those lucky moments when it was only a trickle, the hostility remained.

When we were alone, though, he was different. Oh, not always. Sometimes, when he wasn't feeling well, I got the same sardonic jerk everyone else did. But when he was relaxed and comfortable, it was a different story.

That's why I was able to be patient with friends and family when, in the aftermath of our breakup, they would say things like, "I never really *got* you and Sundin."

After Sundin asked me to move out, people let me know what they thought of him by telling me I'd find somebody else, which ultimately turned out to be true, of course, but at the time I found it jarring. "Maybe you'll meet somebody else, who knows?" my grandmother said, a startling betrayal, since she'd always professed to like Sundin and in fact had

carried out an outrageous phone flirtation with him throughout the four years we lived together.

Dawn Corrigan and Sundin Richards

Relationships always involve a private component and a public one. For some of us, the public component is more important; for others the private is paramount.

I have no interest in a public life. Or maybe what I mean is, I'm perfectly fine carrying out my public life on my own. When it comes to relationships, I care about what happens at home.

Sundin knew how to spackle.

When, near the end of our time together, I bought a 1968 Chrysler New Yorker—my early mid-life-crisis car—and on the third day it rained and I

couldn't get it started, and I went inside and cried, Sundin went out to the car and started it right up.

When Sundin and I met in 1998, he'd been devastated by life. Frequently, in those early days, after a bunch of beers he'd become weepy. He'd cover his head with the thin white blanket I kept on the bed, so he looked like a Halloween ghost.

"Little Ghost," I'd say, "why don't you come out and tell me about it."

When we slept, he'd wrap his limbs around me and cling like a drowning man. I'd never had anyone hold me so tightly. It was easy to envision that he really was drowning, and I was swimming him to shore.

I have to admit, I liked it. I liked being needed so much. But of course my goal, right at the outset, was to make Sundin stronger, so that later, when he was,

when he swam away, what right did I have to complain?

Eulogy for the Bomb

by Paul Perilli

The appearance of an email in my Inbox on the morning of January 9th brought news of the death of Thomas M, a.k.a. The Bomb. Reading it, the flood of images of him playing hoop on the asphalt court in our eastern Massachusetts hometown was immediate. I smiled at the thought of the five-ten floppy-haired Bomb dribbling in a kind of sideways crouch, his butt leading the way and his torso protecting the ball from hands that might desire it for themselves. I felt the heat of a blazing July sun and saw The Bomb lift off the ground in his white Cons with the pumpkin cocked over his right shoulder in a demonstration of perfect athletic balance and control. I silently applauded the quick flick of the wrist, the high arc, and the ho-hum look in The Bomb's steely eyes after another sweet sfooshing snap of the net.

Then I remembered something The Bomb said one sultry summer afternoon when a few thousand games

later it seemed we blinked our eyes to discover we were twenty-one. I have no idea what had preceded it, or if it was extemporaneous input, but he sent it out there and it stuck: “You’re only allowed so many baskets in a lifetime.”

It was a prescient and profound declarative statement and I wondered about The Bomb’s last basket. If it came during a winter league game when he was forty-one or forty-two and long past his best days. The Bomb now relegated to one of those hack leagues we used to ridicule, leagues with bad refs played in ratty junior high school gyms; a strained shot he just managed to get off over a younger defender that clunked the front of the rim and barely had enough forward spin on it to roll over the iron and fall through. Maybe those were his only points of the game and later, changing into his civvies in a locker room that stank of stale sweat, he decided his time might be better spent on the Treadmill or Stairmaster.

I saw him raise his eyes and give his head a little shake at the almost unbearable memory of the magic ease he used to pop in five or six baskets in a row just a few years earlier, long jumpers from deep in the corner or out beyond the top of the key, soft little hooks down low over taller defenders. Free throws were a reach for the coffee cup. Packing his sneakers and shorts into his gym bag that night I believe he knew there was no avoiding it. In The Bomb's view of the world, even he was only allowed so many baskets, and after them that was it, he was all done.

Back in those early days The Bomb was known for having certain idiosyncrasies. He'd never play a game on a hoop without a net. He'd never be a skin in a game of shirts against skins. He also had an aversion for formal leagues. The Bomb never played for our high school. He understood his game was incompatible with the control-freak program implemented by the coach, who never warmed up to The Bomb's hectic, run-and-gun style. The hours and

hours of drills that were intended to set up a "good" shot in a game situation were a huge snore to The Bomb. When he had the ball he'd look to shoot, and it went in plenty often. And The Bomb knew as well as the rest of us that when it came time to pick sides out on the blacktop you wouldn't choose the lettered boys over him. And if you did, The Bomb would pay you back with a succession of facials while at the same time illuminating the severity of your sin in a mocking voice.

But was that the real Bomb who would try to break you by draining basket after basket while uttering a string of personal insults? I swear that was a contradiction in him because off the court he was quiet. He never bragged, he never offended, he didn't act like a tough guy. He was a kid from a poor family. He was a bad student with a limited vocabulary and range of knowledge. He had an inferiority complex that made him feel out of place in most social activities. But on the court, with the rock in his

hands, some substitute personality came off the bench and overtook him. A rush of blood that induced an almost unstoppable onslaught and had him pounding the ball on the asphalt as if he feared it might stick to it and deny him a move to the basket.

I was a teammate on the one organized team The Bomb played on for the Boys Club. We were fourteen and fifteen traveling once or twice a week to Worcester, New Bedford, Lowell, Boston, and other places. Our coach, a twenty-five-year-old grad student who also drove the team van, named me captain, but in the games I deferred to The Bomb, and he applied his dazzling freestyle playground skills with an inexhaustible drive to score points. The result was an average of twenty-plus per in games that might end up 51 to 42 or 44 to 38. If assists had been kept, I've no doubt I would have led the league on The Bomb's production alone.

I recall one game, a home game in the small gym on Exchange Street, when he filled it up for forty-three

points. It was one of the few times I didn't give a second thought to dish and deal the pill to The Bomb on almost every offensive set and suppress my own desire to score. I watched with awe as, without the slightest change of demeanor, The Bomb bobbed and spun and bumped and sprung in a delirious frenzy that overwhelmed the skinny white boys trying to defend him. Forty-three points seemed like a million to us in those days, a performance worthy of a mention on Sports Center. But at that time there was no Sports Center. Not even a headline to be read on the sports page of *The News Tribune* that might have raved THE BOMB GOES FOR FORTY-THREE, BOYS CLUB ROMPS. After the game, in the locker room that smelled of chlorine, The Bomb was cool about it. We slapped him on the back, impressed and giddy by what we'd witnessed. He smiled, but not a word came out of him that might be described as conceit. It was as if he too was surprised by his effort even though we all knew better. He'd had a good night. He'd have others.

And yet in all of that in all those years I don't ever remember dialing The Bomb's number to find out how he was and what he might want to do that night. Off the court I didn't hang out with him much, if ever. When we were eighteen I went to college and The Bomb went to work lumping rubbish barrels for the Department of Public Works. It was a job, I understood without condescension, that suited The Bomb, that he didn't mind going to nor being seen around town hanging off the back of a scarred-gray packer.

One of the last times I saw The Bomb remains quite clear in my memory. I was home for summer vacation before my senior year and went to the court that first afternoon. Sure as the round-ball's a sphere, The Bomb was there with a questioning look in his eyes that wondered if this was the time I'd come back with a self-important air that would exclude him and compel a defensive response. It wasn't. The hoops had nets on them and there were still some games to

play together. Not a lot, but some, before I moved on from South Street for good. But by then The Bomb was a legend and I wasn't and when I thought of him again I was struck frozen by his prophetic words, "You're only allowed so many baskets in a lifetime," knowing all of mine, like his, were already in the past.

Almost

by Annie Dawid

By that time, I'd broken almost every rule I would break. The smart girl from the "good" family," I'd slept with men of every race, creed, and color. Most every drug had entered my lungs, my nose—though not my veins. I'd attempted suicide—"unsuccessfully"—more than once, and I'd learned the art of trichotillomania, though I had no name at that time for such transgressions of the body. "You use yourself as an experiment," said my psychiatrist, years later. But he didn't know the depth of the experimentation undertaken preceding my arrival in his office.

Almost. In my twenties, grad student by night, with a boring day job to pay the bills, the damage I had yet to do remained unfathomed. So when Victoria said, "Want to try heroin," at first I thought she was kidding, because all I'd ever known her to do was drink. A sister-student in my Shakespeare class, we

partied together on weekends, our entertainment consisting of binge drinking at bars, sometimes followed by crazy eating if we found ourselves without men by night's end. More than once, we concluded the party at Clown Alley at two in the morning, scarfing tuna melts with fries, smearing them into our hungry, gaping maws, so drunk and messy the owner threatened to kick us out.

Victoria was heavy, buxom, blond, innately savvy about how to catch and hold men's attention. She wore short black dresses with black heels, her shapely legs exposed. At the same time, she remained phenomenally insecure: born into a family of drunks, both terrified and certain she was heading the same way. By the time we met, she'd had three or four abortions, all of which she agonized over profoundly, all originating in drunken one-nighters with strangers, hoping for connection, love, affection—everything every one of us needs. Guilt

over abortion drove her to the bottle, and the pattern continued.

I possessed my own coping mechanisms, coming from a family of crazy people. We are crazy all on our own, without recourse to any genre of mind-altering substance, legal or otherwise. We're Jews, not known for drinking as a culture, though of course Jewish drunks exist, including my sister, though I did not know of her drinking then. Though I drank, fish-like, with Victoria, I remembered reading in the poet John Berryman's unfinished memoir, *Recovery* (unfinished because he threw himself off a bridge in the frozen heart of a Minneapolis winter while composing it), "Jews don't drink." He hoped to make lots of Jewish friends in the asylum because he believed they never became alcoholics; perhaps he thought they were genetically incapable of it. I must have believed it too. In my family, my mother, my brother, myself—all of us managed to get ourselves committed to psych wards—voluntarily or

otherwise—without benefit of any substance at all. Even pot propelled my brain to scary precipices of heightened realities: the congenial park down the street metamorphosed midday into a labyrinthine forest, the two blocks between my best friend's house and mine transformed themselves into a terrorizing odyssey, rapists waiting under every tree. I always told people, when they asked me to share a joint or drop acid, "My mind is a scary enough place all by itself, but thanks anyway."

"Heroin can't be compared to any other drug," Victoria insisted. We'd just snort it—nothing more. In fact, she said the high was softer and gentler than any drug I had experienced. A bit like the best drunk, only it didn't make you want to eat. In fact, you didn't think about food on heroin. For heavy women, this aspect held much appeal.

The night she introduced the idea of heroin to me, Victoria brought along her ex-boyfriend, conveniently accompanied by a friend for me as well,

so there were four of us, neatly coupled. Her ex, Bill, now just a friend, had become a dealer, too deep in his habit to be sexual.

It made sense that Victoria would be attracted to heroin, alone among other drugs, for it shed an otherworldly light, associated in her mind with literati in London's fin-de-siecle opium dens, formally dressed for their dreamy reach into oblivion. I, too, was drawn by that vision, summoned by *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we'd read in class together. Did I say no? I did not. I was curious. If she had suggested using needles, my refusal would have been automatic. But snorting? What harm could that do?

Bill brought the heroin along to our meeting at the Savoy Café in North Beach. Each of us paid him twenty dollars. Stan, his friend, was broke after our first glass of wine, so I ended up paying for "my date" and I to drink several rounds.

Victoria had snorted heroin before, though Bill had advanced to the needle. After hours at the Savoy, drinking red wine, Bill said we should go out back. The rain had cleared, and we could see stars in the San Francisco sky, not a common occurrence, these shivers of unexpected light. I sat on a damp curb, waiting passively for the event to unfold, a spectator at my own life.

Stan unfolded a rectangle of aluminum foil, Bill provided the heroin and the lighter, and we began. The longer we sat there, the brighter the constellations glowed. Doubtless my ass was damp and stiff from the wet cement, but I remember none of those details. Apparently, it never crossed my mind that we could get caught, sitting on the curb snorting heroin. I remember laughing, though, delighted by whatever delights one in a state beyond drunkenness, Victoria and I all over giggles, while the men remained quiet.

I only managed a few snorts before I said I'd had enough. "More for me," said Stan. He was bland, a man whose sole outstanding descriptor was his position as a gardener at a golf course, which meant he had to be on the greens at six a.m. the next day. I didn't care about him. Would I spend the night with him? I didn't think about it. The moments there on the curb, observing the stars where they didn't usually exist, constituted an isolated envelope of bliss. At once, I understood the allure of the drug: the idea that one needed nothing else in the world.

Victoria never told me how sick I would get.

A purposeful evasion, a convenient elision of truth? That night, in the gardener's basement apartment, I woke in the darkness and needed to vomit, but I didn't know where I was or who he was or where a bathroom might be. He was yelling some sort of direction to a toilet, but I couldn't understand his words. I threw up on the floor, the carpet, and finally in the kitchen sink. Stan was furious. At five, when

the alarm went off, he told me I had to leave; a key was required to lock the apartment door, and he had no extra. Somehow, I called for a taxi, still dry heaving, my brain now recoiling from what I had done to it.

The cab driver surveyed me, assessed the damage, and said nothing all the way to my apartment, me with my head out the window in case I got sick again. The sun shone, and I saw people waiting for buses on corners, though the sight of life going on hurt my eyes. It took days to recover, my head ringing with pain, whoever I was more disordered and directionless than ever before.

Was that night the nadir of my existence? Drunk, stoned on heroin, in bed with a stranger and puking all over the floor? How deeply I descended in that man's apartment, my body beyond my control, my soul atomized into particles. I had sunk, evidently, to my intended destination.

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” wrote Eliot in “The Wasteland.” I remembered the Hebrew injunction: “Tikkun olam,” to heal and restore the world by finding the pieces of holiness god had dispersed all over the world. Slowly, I gathered my fragments, harvesting bits of self scattered like shards of light everywhere.

Wannabe Widows

by Susan Bonetto

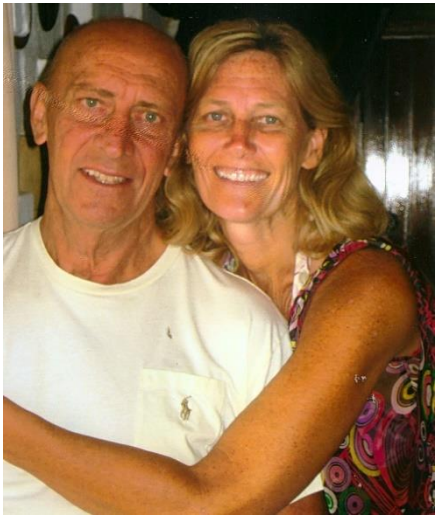
I have had the great fortune of having four BFFs who have watched over and applauded my alternative life choices: Marrying a good-crazy, foreign born man eighteen years my senior, leaping off a professional career ladder in my early thirties to move to a Fijian island the size of a shopping mall, having our child when that staggering man, Oscar, was in his fifties and we lived simply in the 'islands', and moving internationally five times when Oscar's whim or compass bearing changed course every few years.

These women followed more customary paths. Beth married young and never left our old northeast Milwaukee suburbs. She and Steve have had a solid caring relationship. Stacy moved to Chicago and then on to California for her husband, Jack's, medical studies. Later, they settled in Madison. Heather, my best college friend, recently celebrated thirty-five sweet years married to Mark, moving up and down

the West Coast, as his Finance jobs require. And finally there's Anna who, like me, married a man many years older, but, unlike me, lives the American dream with Ben and their two young children in New York.

No matter where I went or what I did these past many years these four faithful souls and I kept in close touch via letters, e-mails, calls, and visits. Best friends provide love and support throughout a lifetime but never did I realize the depths of their backing until Oscar was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a big, bewildering word for terminal cancer. Each buttressed me in distinct ways during the three-and-a-half-years that he was ill—more frequent calls, surprise visits, cards, unnecessary offers of money, and guidance for me when I pretended to be a single parent to a developing teenage boy while his father's presence faded.

When Oscar died they each threw out longer lifelines. Beth and her family met Alejandro and me



at the Milwaukee airport when we travelled 'home' for a visit one-month post-death. They took us bowling and filled us with comfort foods and ice cream. During that same visit Stacy took time off from work to sit with me and let me cry while Jack whisked Alejandro off to the University of Wisconsin basketball finals. Some months later Heather accompanied me to Fiji so that I could have grieving time in the place where our son was born and magnificent memories live. Anna took us in for two months when life dealt another blow and my lovely son needed brain surgery.

A year of intense pain passed. I moved with and through it. I existed with no plans and a limited life. I focused on my son's rehabilitation, bits of work and walks to my favorite café in the company of my Boxer pup. Within the open wound, strangers, as well as men whom Oscar and I counted as friends, sometimes threw salt, asking me out without reading the signs that I was completely uninterested. But, a new dawn crept up and, after months of aloneness, one or two days appeared when I inadvertently found myself checking out a passing guy or returning a glance. My body pushed my mind towards something I'd had with my husband and always enjoyed—connections with men. And, so I gradually came to interact lightly with those delightful creatures again.

As this transition ensued I, of course, shared, my novel and odd thoughts and events with my friends. They knew everything—initially, how continually pissed off I was with most men who tried to engage

me in conversations. Much later, long before I admitted or accepted it, they registered the days when seedlings sprouted under the snow, and my mind opened up to the warmth of an approaching new season. I related when I had a lengthy chat with someone at my sports club, shared a coffee, the time when I visited with the kind spirit seated next to me on a plane who then invited me to the VIP lounge during our joint layover, and the first evening when I went out for dinner with 'just a friend'. They questioned me about how I felt before, during, and after, what I wore, what we discussed, if there was any glimmer of romance, and, most of all, if I was all right. For several months I kept them apprised of my feelings, sometimes wailing for what Oscar's disappearance had caused, once pissed off at having wasted an evening with a jerk, occasionally hopeful of seeing someone again who appeared warm and thoughtful.

Though I felt tinges of enjoyment in my brief outings, my girlfriends oftentimes acted more eager for fuller experiences than I desired.

“How’s it going? Is he a keeper?” Stacy texted, in the midst of my second coffee with Mike. To me, it was just a coffee visit with a pleasant guy.

Anna called as I left for a dinner out with the ‘just a friend’ and teasingly asked, ‘Do you have on your pretty, matching Victoria Secret bra and panties? Be sure to call me on your way home, regardless of the time!” I assured her it was ‘just dinner’ and I didn’t seek anything more.

Whenever I expressed doubt, confusion, or more anger at my new, undesired status, each friend encouraged me onward. Heather offered the adage “Live in the moment and just try to have fun.”

Beth listened to my fury one day and turned the conversation on its heels. “Listen to me, Susie! Oscar would want you to continue living life to its fullest.”

Anna continually encouraged “Just focus on some sexual adventures. You’ve said you would like some sex but nothing else. Go for it!”

At times I regretted allowing them access to the tiny advances my heart was taking as they were running faster than me. I felt like the teenage girl who matures more slowly than her best friend and the friend keeps encouraging her to go to second or third base with boys before she is prepared.

My friends apparently now wish they were me. They’ve moved beyond vicarious titillations. They discuss their lives and relationships monochromatically but then, when we move on to my life they light up, like it’s Christmas morning. I’m the starring role in their favorite romantic movie. Their eyes sparkle; their lips let out small explosive breaths as I speak about the man I am now seeing, Jose, and our beginning moments.

Beth asked with a coy smile, “Do you feel like you’re cheating on Oscar? You are so lucky in a way that you can have these experiences.”

Stacy shyly murmured, “How I wish for some ‘first-times’ again! First glance, first touch, first date. It must be mind-blowing!”

Anna wanted as many sexual details as I was willing to proffer: “Did you really stay up all night? And, was the first time great or were you nervous? Were the second and third times better?” Ben, who later heard the details from Anna, uttered “Wow! We need a night like that again. Or two!”

I adore these women. They are goddesses to me. But their notions leave me troubled and empty. Their spouses and partners are alive and healthy yet they mourn an existence they can still possess. My forever love suffered terribly for years and left our teenage son and me flailing. Have they forgotten that Oscar and I were still handholding devotees when he died?

Don't they remember how he adored me? That he was it for me? What's happening at their hearths? Why aren't they buoyantly living with their one and onlys? Why aren't they celebrating the gift of extra time? They chose these men and have elected to stay in these partnerships. Are they letting things slide? Why aren't they gushing with appreciation, if not rapture? I want them to understand that new romances and relationships do not replace a solid foundation laid twenty or more years back.

I do continue on. That's what one does when there is no alternative. But, I live with a hollowness inside that no one will fill and I will mourn for Oscar for the remainder of my days. He died more than two years ago and, yet, my tears run as I write this story. Grief doesn't end; it only changes into an ebb and flow. In one of those ebb tides happiness recently rediscovered me. It caught me unawares in my habitual cafe. Jose is another regular who, like me, is never without a book. Like all coffee shop regulars,

we'd nodded our hellos for years. Recently he passed by and softly said that he bought my coffee that morning. And, I let him sit down. Anna, Heather, Stacy or Beth can tell you the rest. In great detail. Along with oohs and aahs.

I get that it makes them feel better to think of me coming round, maybe finding new love. They can worry less about their best friend now. But, they shouldn't want to be me. To feel that I am fortunate? Wishing for widowhood? Thinking how special it would be to have my prospect at second chances?

Widowhood was not a choice and is not an opportunity. I don't, but I want to advise them, "Be careful what you wannabe."

Drunks and Fools

by Alice Lowe

He's Rocky,
Raddled,
Rich,
Religious,
Lost his Rudder,
Ragged,
Rais'd,
Been too free with Sir Richard
Like a Rat in Trouble.
"A Man is Drunk" - Benjamin Franklin

Matty and I became close friends over the several years we lived next door to each other. We confided in one another about jobs, homes, families and friends during walks and over coffee. Matty was married and loved to hear about my ventures and misadventures as a thirty-something returned to the singles scene. She was apologetic about having only her marital woes to offer in return. Her son, Jaime, was a little younger than my daughter and liked to

hang out at our house; he trailed Jennifer around like a pesky but adoring little brother. The holidays can fall a little flat for an only child with a single mother—turkey for two doesn't spark joy—so we were happy to join Matty's family for Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve dinners. Jennifer enjoyed the more festive familial atmosphere and Jaime's companionship, while Matty's pumpkin cheesecake and her mother's cannoli are etched in my memory along with their kindness.

Matty's husband, Frank, was a heavy drinker. I didn't like him much even sober—he had that smug, know-it-all bravado that often masks insecurity and disillusionment. He would be on his best behavior at those holiday gatherings until later in the day or evening when the steady drinking brought out his worst. He was one of those mealy-mouthed drunks who get sappy and over-solicitous while thinking they're being illuminating or entertaining.

I have an aversion to that syrupy manner—I've seen it in others too—it reminds me of my father. My dad was a solitary, secretive boozer. He never drank at home, so I would only see the after-effects. He used to put away any number of shots in the back room of his TV repair shop after closing up—"liquid courage" to help him face his family, or maybe himself. If he made it home for dinner, his attentions would be cloying, contrite like a dog that's been rolling in shit: "How's my sweet girl…." When he stumbled in late, I'd hear my mother yelling at him from behind my closed bedroom door: "If it wasn't for the kids I wouldn't put up with this…." He never raised his voice, never got ugly; he muttered feebly in response or withdrew into sullen silence. She was all talk—she would never leave him, and he knew it. His drinking tapered off some over the years, and they loped along together through her chronic illnesses until her death at sixty. He outlived her by thirty years and found a young second wife who doted on him and matched him drink for drink.

Unlike my dad, Matty's husband would transition from silly or brooding to mean—critical, sarcastic, aiming for the jugular—as the evening wore on and his alcoholic intake kept pace. That's when I would go home and play music or turn on the TV to avoid overhearing the shouting matches next door. Matty's harangues were similar to those I heard from my bedroom as a child, but Frank wasn't quiet or penitent; he got loud and belligerent. He often blamed his stepson and would lash out at him too, with little provocation. Jaime told Jennifer that Frank sometimes knocked him around when he was drunk. Matty and Frank fought about the boy, about money and who knows what else, but it usually came back to his drinking, and finally Matty said she'd had enough. She booted Frank out and told him he couldn't come home until he sobered up, got into AA, and stayed on the wagon. Matty had gone through the worst of her pain and angst during the long buildup; once Frank was gone his absence didn't leave much of a void. She and Jaime seemed

happier on their own, at peace with life and each other.

They didn't call them alcoholics when I was growing up, the workaday boozers who maintained jobs and relatively normal lives like my dad and Frank. Alcoholics were the dysfunctional, out-of-control drunks in "Days of Wine & Roses" and "Lost Weekend." They were the derelicts on the street, drinking rotgut liquor sheathed in paper bags. We shook our heads and scurried past them, taking comfort in the adage that god protects or loves or suffers drunks and fools. When in my forties I saw a therapist about some emotional issues, she attributed the problems to my being an "ACA," an adult child of an alcoholic. I didn't find similarities to my situation in the literature she foisted on me, and I dismissed the simplistic (and trendy at the time) label. Hindsight doesn't clarify whether my dad was

an alcoholic or just an unhappy man, blotting out his despair with bourbon.

I started drinking in my early teens. A much-too-old boyfriend—nineteen to my fourteen—took me to drive-in movies, where we drank beer and made out. I exercised self-restraint and remained sufficiently sober and virginal throughout our brief summer fling; then he broke my heart by going back to a former girlfriend his own age. I hid my pain and found solace, or at least diversion, with a rowdy crowd of older kids. I drank to fit in, to be cool, to have fun. I retain murky booze-soaked memories of weekends that ran together in a swirl of parties, powering down too many rum and cokes, necking with too many guys, puking in bathrooms and back yards and out of car windows, driving home in a fog and living to tell about it through sheer luck, or maybe that divine protection extended to the

undeserving (drunks and fools, perhaps one and the same).

After high school I moved into an apartment with friends, where the party life continued unabated, and I drank myself silly on weekends. I worked as a secretary at a fast-paced brokerage firm in La Jolla, back in the days of multi-martini lunches. For my twenty-first birthday some of the staff took me to the elite Whaling Bar at the La Valencia Hotel and told the bartender to bring me a martini—Beefeaters on the rocks with a twist—for my first legal drink. I'd been drinking there for the past three years, and we laughed in complicity as the bartender blanched.

"You're just twenty-one *today*?" he asked.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm legal now."

My husband and I met at a party. He wasn't a big drinker, and I slowed down. We rarely drank at home after we married, but I invariably overindulged when we went out socially. I liked the feeling of being

buzzed; I liked myself better and was less self-conscious, more outgoing. I wouldn't dance when I was sober—too stiff and awkward—but after a few drinks I loosened up. One New Year's Eve I got loaded and woke up with a miserable hangover the next day. Alcohol and cigarettes tasted wretched. I couldn't face either for the next few weeks. It seemed like an excessive reaction, and I started to worry until the explanation dawned on me—I was pregnant. The risks of smoking and drinking during pregnancy weren't on the public radar at the time, but my body was giving me a message. I stopped smoking and rarely drank from that time on.

I always saw myself as a social drinker, just having a good time. I never made a connection between my drinking and my father's, never worried that I'd inherited his weakness or inclinations. The hereditary nature of alcoholism and addictive personality types weren't talked-about issues then. I believe there's a continuum of possible responses to

each aspect of our upbringing, and we can land anywhere on it. We can adopt our parents' behaviors out of habit, rebel and discard them, or do some of each. My mother had ulcers and cooked bland food—I might have followed suit, but I embraced spicy fare and creative seasoning when I started cooking for myself. I could have avoided liquor completely after observing my father's drinking or I could have followed suit and become a serious boozer—I rejected both extremes. A liberal, artsy, pot-smoking friend once told me she worried that her daughter, needing something parental to rebel against, would become a right-wing religious businesswoman (she didn't).

My husband was neither a drunk nor a fool, so the blanket of protection—the one that got me safely home in my teens—didn't cover him. He didn't drink much, and he couldn't handle it when he did, a fact he refused to acknowledge (okay, just a bit of a fool).

Once, coming home from a party he turned into a lane of oncoming traffic. I threatened to jump from the moving car if he didn't pull over immediately and let me drive. There was no one close enough to get him in trouble that time, but a few years later, driving alone late at night, he careened head-on into a pickup truck, killing himself and a young woman driving the other vehicle. The tragic irony is that he'd been drinking with my dad that night—an amateur trying to keep up with the pro.

Addiction is a bona fide illness now, whether to alcohol or drugs, overeating, gambling, or sex, and we're implored to have compassion for the afflicted. That stumbling drunk isn't really an obnoxious or abusive beast—it's the drink that makes him act that way. The devil is no longer responsible and nor is she; her addiction made her do it. Well, maybe, but I don't accept that every lush is an alcoholic. And while I do understand the power of addiction, I'm inclined to believe it's possible to rise above it, to

battle and overcome the demons. I can cite examples, alcoholics who have been sober for years and years—they did it. I've been told that's too simplistic a response to such a complicated issue. Well, maybe, but I'll stick by my views.

My dad was a tippler to the end of his ninety years, always a little soppy when I saw him. I'd find him sipping watered-down vodka whatever the time of day, while his wife kept pace with Schaefer beer over ice, one after another. An unhappy, taciturn, benign old sot—a steady infusion of drink seemed to be what got him through the days.

Frank was jolted into action when he realized what he stood to lose. He got sober, joined AA, went through a twelve-step program. After several months Matty let him move back home, but drunk or sober the damage was irreparable. Their marriage couldn't be restored.

I'm zealous about health and fitness as I get older, so I limit myself to a glass of wine a night, two on the weekend ... a shared bottle of wine on special occasions … an infrequent margarita or Bloody Mary when I'm out. More is tempting—I still like the way liquor makes me feel—but I'm past any urge or risk of overindulging. I've seen the collateral damage.

Contributors

Jean Berrett has been publishing poetry since 1973, after she took the first graduate Creative Writing-Poetry course to be offered by University of Wisconsin-Madison. The instructor told her that he thought she was the best poet in the class and encouraged her to begin submitting her poems or stories to magazines. She obtained her MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University and taught English at College of Menomonee Nation in Wisconsin. Since she first started sharing her work professionally, she has published ninety-two poems. Other publications include translations from Virgil and Lucretius and stories and book reviews. She has two sons and seven grandchildren.

Bari Benjamin, LCSW, BCD, is a former English teacher turned psychotherapist with a private practice in Pittsburgh, PA. Her essays have been published in *Adoption Today* and *StepMom* magazines, as well as *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books and several anthologies.

Susan Bonetto grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin before moving to California where she met and

married an extraordinary man, Oscar, who encouraged her to live abroad (with him) and travel as far and wide as possible. While living in Fiji, their now twenty-two-year old, son, Alejandro, was born. Susan has been fortunate to have lived in the U.S., Fiji, The Philippines, and Argentina and travelled to more than thirty countries. Now widowed, she continues to work as a global Human Resources Consultant. One of her Fiji stories, "Before We Lived Barefoot" won 2nd place in TransitionsAbroad.com's 2014 Narrative Travel Writing Essay Contest, another was published here in 2014 and this year she was a finalist in the 40th New Millennium Writings Non-Fiction Literary contest.

Jason Bruner is an assistant professor on the religious studies faculty at Arizona State University in Tempe, where he lives with his wife, daughter, and cat. He has published scholarly articles on Christian missions, British imperialism, and the history of Christianity in East Africa. His writing has also appeared in *Religion & Politics*, *Marginalia Review of Books*, *Religion Dispatches*, and *Notches: (Re)marks on the History of Sexuality*.

Dawn Corrigan has published poems and prose in a number of print and online journals. Her debut novel, *Mitigating Circumstances*, an environmental

mystery, was published by Five Star/Cengage in January 2014. Currently, she's working on a family saga set in southern Italy, Hell's Kitchen, and South Jersey. She lives in Gulf Breeze, FL.

Annie Dawid teaches creative writing at Arapahoe Community College in Denver. She has taught workshops at the Taos Summer Writers Conference and at the Castle Rock Writers Conference. She retired as Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Lewis & Clark College. Recent awards include the Orlando Flash Fiction Prize, the Dana Award in the Essay, the Northern Colorado Award in Creative Non-Fiction and the New Rocky Mountain Voices Award in Drama. She has published three books of fiction: *York Ferry: A Novel, Lily in the Desert: Stories, And Darkness Was Under His Feet: Stories of a Family.*

Jenn Gilgan aspires to inspire. She lives in Tampa, FL where she teaches high school English. Her writing draws on her experiences from when she lived in Beirut, Lebanon as a child and London, England as an adult. When not inundated with teaching and grading, she enjoys exploring the world through her cameras and researching ideas for both lesson plans and novels. “Violations” is her first published piece; she is currently drafting and re-

drafting a YA novel influenced equally by her love of Celtic mythology and her life in Lebanon.

Gillian Haines lives in Tucson's desert where she loves hummingbirds and saguaros. For the past eight years, she has volunteered to visit four men in maximum-security prison because they only know the desert's thirst. Her work has been published or accepted for upcoming publication in *The Ilanot Review*, *Gravel Literary Magazine*, *Rain Shadow Review*, *Stories from the Other Side 6th edition*, and an as yet untitled Punctum anthology. She is writing a memoir about her prison experiences.

Mark Leichliter (cover photo) is the editor of *bioStories*. This image is of a graffiti painting of "Soak", a singer/songwriter from Northern Ireland; it is painted on the remains of a train car abandoned in place after an accident in 1956 near Whistler, British Columbia, Canada.

Alice Lowe reads and writes about life and literature, food and family. Her personal essays have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Crab Creek Review*, *The Millions*, *Permafrost*, *Upstreet*, *The Tishman Review*, *1966*, *Hippocampus*, and *Lunch Ticket*. She was a national award winner at *City Works Journal* and winner of an essay contest

at *Writing It Real.* Alice is the author of numerous essays and reviews on Virginia Woolf's life and work, including two monographs published by Cecil Woolf Publishers in London. Alice lives in San Diego, California

Sheila Luna holds a Master of Liberal Studies, with a concentration in creative nonfiction writing, from Arizona State University. Her personal essays and poetry have recently been published in *Spry Literary Journal*, *Pilgrim. Sotto Voce Magazine,* and *Every Day Poems.* She is currently working on a memoir about her experience living in the wilderness of northwestern Montana with a mountain man, where she battled the elements, struggled with a chronic disease, and ultimately discovered her own identity through the solitude of nature and the healing power of art. She now lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she enjoys the luxuries of running water and electricity.

Desirée Magney is a writer and attorney. She writes both nonfiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Bethesda Magazine*, *Washingtonian Magazine, The Washington Post Magazine*, *The Writer's Center—Art Begins with a Story,* and *Jellyfish Whispers.* She was honored with a "Best in Workshop" reading at The Writer's Center in

Bethesda, Maryland. She is a Board member for the literary journal, *Little Patuxent Review*, contributes to their blog, and has been one of their fiction readers. She has two adult children, Daniel and Nicole, and lives in Chevy Chase, Maryland with her husband, John, and their dog, Tucker.

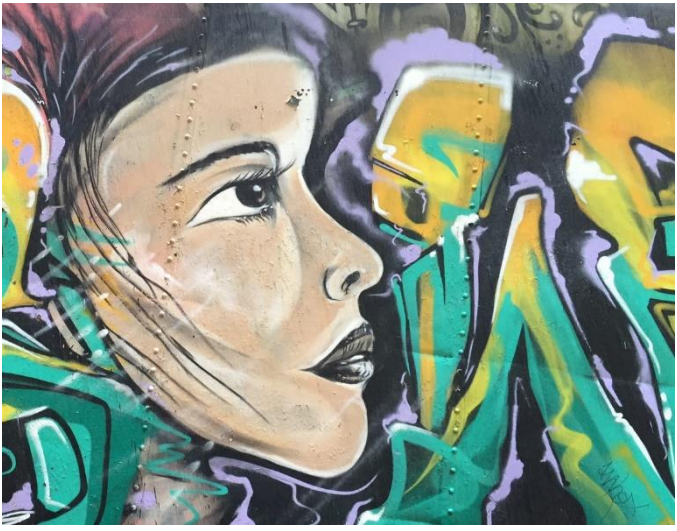
Susan Moldaw works as a chaplain in San Francisco. Her writing has appeared in *Brain, Child Magazine, Lilith, Literary Mama, Narrative*, and other publications.

Joseph O'Day obtained his BA and MBA from Salem State University and BS from Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. He has served as the Director of Pharmacy at Brigham and Women's Faulkner Hospital since 1998. He has taken several graduate writing courses and is a long-standing member of Salem Writers' Group. His writing focuses on the personal essay form, exploring family relationships and life transitions. Besides pharmacy and writing, he enjoys athletics and spending time with his family.

Paul Perilli's words of the day appear in Volume 3 of *The Transnational* and *The Satirist*. "Trumped!" is forthcoming in *The Transnational*.

Jeanne Powell is a rookie writer who, at forty-three, is finally finding time to finish the book that has been building momentum in her head for decades. She has written various essays over the years, which are now being dusted off and polished. Jeanne lives in the beautiful Texas Hill Country with her husband Randy, teen kids AJ and Amber, two dogs, and abundant wildlife all around. A former elementary school teacher, Jeanne's degree is in Child Development. She is also a certified Reiki Master and Life Coach. "Defining Childhood" is her first publication.

Julie Whitlow teaches in the English Department at Salem State University and coordinates the graduate programs in teaching English to speakers of other languages. She has been a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco and a Fulbright scholar in Nicaragua, experiences that made her realize mutual human understanding is elusive and worthy of exploration.



These images, like that (from above) used on the cover, are graffiti paintings from railcars abandoned after a 1956 accident near Whistler, British Columbia.

Photos by Mark Leichliter.

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