

BioStories

Vol. 2

2012



bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

bio**Stories 2012**

2012, Volume 2

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Mexicali Mamas by Jenean McBrearty

There's a cool, dark cantina, one of hundreds in Mexicali, where the women's room has tiny toilets, and cockroaches swagger across the bar. The decor isn't as eclectic as Natty's in Brawley where a roll of toilet paper graces the altar of a large picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the left of the beer box, but it's as visually stimulating. The red ceiling lamp is surrounded by a mirror shade that reveals the owner's strategic attempt to hide a hole in it with a Band-Aid, and there are plenty of hand-painted signs. One lists the price of a beer as 7000 pesos, 10,000 pesos for a beer and female company.

"The women work in the bar and keep the men company while they drink, splitting the fee with the owner," my friend, Lupe, explained as the bartender brought us another round. "But they're not prostitutes."

"More like geisha girls," I said. He bobbed his head in assent. "How much is beer if a woman has a man keep her company while she drinks?"

He translated the question to the bartender who froze in confusion. Was my friend Lupe gay? Was I

suggesting that a man would sell his time to listen to a woman, or that it was proper for a woman to buy it? In Macho-cali the only answer he could manage was a laugh at the gringa's joke, as Lupe pointed to me to reassure the man he was not pendejo.

"Think I could get a job here?" I asked Lupe.

"No."

"Too old?"

"You don't speak Spanish."

"That's okay, the men won't notice."

"Oh no?"

"Men talk. Women listen, and do their "look" thing."

"What look thing?"

I sighed. "If a man cries, a woman looks sympathetic," I explained, lowering my eyes, shaking my head, and putting my hand over my heart. "If he gets angry, a woman looks awed." I opened my eyes wide and stared at him admiringly, my hand moving down to cup my breast and lift it in homage. "It's all the language any woman has to know." The bartender casually wiped a bug off the bar with the same towel he'd used to wipe off water spots on the glasses.

We need music," Lupe declared and lumbered across the old Parquet dance floor. I followed ten steps behind. I felt my pocket to make sure he'd given me the car keys. "Get them from Lupe before he gets drunk or you may never make it home," Lupe's wife, Sandra, had told me. She didn't mind him taking the 40-something editor of the Brawley Tribune to Mexicali thirty-five miles to the South to learn about Mexican heritage. Experiential research is my forte. It was my first trip past the tunnel that connected Mexicali with Calexico—whether these hybrid names were the founders' idea of creativity or just happenstance I never learned—where the farmacias sold cheap medicines to the gringos.

It was easy to see where the profits of the cantina went—a jukebox with state-of-the-art, compact discs offering single songs or whole albums complete with miniature album covers pictured on the side of the lists for the drunk or the illiterate. We both found something we liked. For me it was banda music, a blend of nortena and Tex-Mex, a polka beat with a wider range of lyrics. More bounce, less migrant misery. "You like it because it's just like German music only without the yodeling," my friend, Trina, told me on one of my gott'a-get-out-of-the-heat visits. She still couldn't believe I'd left San Diego for the Imperial

Valley where it often topped 115 degrees in the summer, or that I spent money on Mexican CD's. I reminded her music was a quick and dirty research tool, but she didn't buy my sociology even when I tried to explain:

The cover photographer of Banda Machos, my favorite banda group, faces quite a challenge. There are 12 members of the group, some rather portly, whose faces are lost in the black haired crowd, and all wearing cowboy hats, matching boots, and matching suits with fringed seams. Fans and family members know which one of them plays brass, including a sousaphone, and which ones sing. I don't. But I had it on good authority—Danny from Lou Lang's Music Bar—that they were one of the most popular norteno grupos around. I didn't know that when I bought Los Machos Tambien Lloran —The Strong Men Also Weep—at Wal-Mart. I just saw the picture of these guys standing around in suits that reminded me of the mod suits the Beatles wore in the early 1960s, which reminds me of uniforms, which... it's complicated.

I got Danny to translate the titles for me. Tu Abandando - You're leaving me; La Calles Di Mi Pueblo - The Streets of My Town; and, my favorite, Cumbio Torero - The Dance with the Bull. It's a racy tune, not unlike a fast tango with castanets and

rousing oles! that conjures up images of lithe Andalusian beauties in ruffled dresses being dominated by men in black leather boots and tight pants—thrilling to me ever since I saw Jose Greco stomp and click his heels in *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

But the flamenco heritage of the song sounded different in the ambience of poverty, dirty red wallpaper, and cracked vinyl bar stools. I gazed at our reflections in the mirrored wall; Lupe and I looked out of place. A man approached us, furtively reconnoitered, and showed Lupe pictures he had in a faded manila folder. "No!" Lupe said. The bartenders spat out a few words and motioned the man to leave.

"What was he selling?" I said.

"Pornography."

"Anything I haven't seen?"

"Probably. It was pure filth."

"That's an oxymoron, you know" I said.

"You can buy anything in Mexicali, didn't you know that? An oxymoron, a necklace—remember the guy with the necklace? Stolen. He's fencing it to buy drugs." Lupe's voice was brittle.

"You don't know he was going to buy drugs," I said

"Yes I do."

I knew better than to argue with a man swilling his sixth brew. The awkward moment was saved by the throaty, on-the-verge-of-a-sob voice of Anna Gabriel. We listened, staring at our bottles of Bud Lite. "It's too bad you don't understand Spanish," Lupe said. "Listen to the words she saying—that only her man can touch her this way, kiss her this way, nobody else makes her feel this way."

"She can really belt out a tune," I agreed. I decided to make her La Cascavel—The Rattlesnake—my theme song. Like Lupe's beer-soaked voice, it had an intense, throbbing insistence to it.

He was clenching his beer bottle like a life raft. "This is our therapy. Cervesa. Less expensive, less time-consuming than a psychiatrist. We come here to be with our people and get away from the stress of America. To be Mexican again."

He was as poignant as Gabriel who had a lot in common with Axl Rose and Bonnie Tyler—like Total Eclipse of the Heart. Gabriel forces the sound from her throat as if straining every vocal cord to say words instead of screaming help. Passionate, but

suppressed. I could picture her tied to a granite pillar in an Aztec temple while half-clad warriors in feathered headdresses menaced her with maracas and whips.

"That bitch makes me come," Lupe whispered, and sucked out the last drops of beer in the bottle.

"I guess you do like her," I said, wondering if Gabriel would be sympathetic or awed by his graphic endorsement. I wondered if Gabriel ever smoked too. My sister sounds a lot like her, and she's a chain smoker.

"She begs for it," he continued, massaging his groin. He didn't have to explain what "it" meant. Some unexpected cascavel awaited Sandra tonight.

Three women came in and sat down off to my right.

"They're starting to work now," Lupe said as he sat up straight, trying to pull himself together. "They'll be here till six in the morning. I have a lot of respect for them. They help support their families." I wondered if the women understood English because they were close enough to hear him.

They all appeared to be at least 35, all of them heavyset and wearing tight black skirts, neon satin blouses, and bright red lipstick. Their nails were long

and polished, and they all wore dangling bronze filigree earrings. They sat close together, and talked quietly while the music played. I could see them looking at us, trying not to stare, but curious.

Lupe and I were dressed alike too, in faded jeans, turtleneck T-shirts, and tailored jackets with rolled up sleeves. Our gold digital wristwatches both read ten o'clock. I thought about Lupe's new Silver Thunderbird parked outside, and watched the women wait for a man who would pay her to listen to him. Who listens to the women? Los machos tambien lloran. Strong men also cry. Was it suffering that made them weep, or the guilt from not suffering enough?

I thought about Tom Flores, at six feet one of the tallest Mexicans in Brawley, who worked for the city's Public Works. He was raising his stepdaughter because his wife abandoned them when the fourteen-year-old got pregnant. The granddaughter was born with a large red floret on her upper lip, a birth defect that the doctors said they would not remove until the child was four years old. It was rumored Tom's wife left to return to the husband she'd left behind in Mexico out of guilt, believing the birth defect was God's revenge for her coming to America. Other people gossiped that the baby was really Tom's child,

and that his wife left out of guilt, believing the birth defect was God's revenge for her coming to America. Most gossip in the Valley ended with guilt and God's revenge.

"No one liked Tom's wife," Sandra confided to me. "She was too dark. Too wild. She went to church too much. " The contradiction went unnoticed when tongues wagged about one of Brawley's sexiest employed unattached men. Tom had universally acknowledged suffering creds, but he never cried. At least not to me.

I remember the long conversations I had with him on Sunday mornings when I'd bring coffee and we'd read the newspaper in his office near the water treatment plant. He was a wealth of information about the city, its plumbing problems, and the hated city manager. One of my favorite stories concerned old Jesus Cardoza, who had worked for the city for over forty years. When the city decided to hire a certified college graduate to run the streets and roads division, it "retired" Jesus sans pension. Maybe there had been rumors that the La Raza god was pissed off that Jesus had come to America, but Jesus didn't exhibit any guilt over it, or return to his pueblo like Tom's wife.

He bided his time till the plagues came: the crickets that descended on the city like volcanic ash, the gas leak at the chlorine plant that sent hundreds to the make-shift hospital in the school gym, the arrival of Wal-Mart, and the flash flood. When the storm drains were unable to handle the runoff, the water pressure dropped, and it was clear a main water pipe had broken—somewhere. A review of the city's storm drain system map proved useless. Jesus was the only one who knew how the pipes were actually laid out and where the break could have occurred. Jesus may not have been familiar with the term “poetic justice” but he certainly got a super-sized portion. His response to the city's request for his help was an unprintable series of expletives that summed up to a definite no.

Had Jesus ridden with Zapata or Pancho Villa? Was he, perhaps, inspiration for one of Villa's horsemen depicted in the mural on the weight-bearing wall of the Mexican-American Club? Tom was too young to remember anything about Jesus' origins when I asked him about the leathery old man, but he remembered stories and told me city secrets—it was the kind of information that made being a reporter interesting, interesting enough to keep me hanging out with dark men desperately trying to hang on to their culture

though they worked for the city, had pensions, and married women named Sandra.

The cantina was filling up with dark men who had no jobs, whose wives worked at other cantinas while they idled in this one. The women stopped talking to one another, and exchanged words with the men who came to the bar to order. By ten thirty, none of the men had hired any of the women—not drunk enough, not sad enough yet, I supposed. But Lupe’s tears were visible now, flowing freely as Gabriel began another tortured song. “White men don’t know what it’s like,” he groaned. He was wrong, but I lowered my eyes, shook my head yes, and put my hand over my heart. I could still see the women in the mirror, watching me. I caught their eyes, and they smiled approvingly.

Blood Sisters by Clementine Till

Amelia had an earthy, impish face and a mysterious smattering of warts on both of her knees. Her scraggly brown hair was so long it occasionally tucked into the back of her pants. She was born in Ireland but moved to the States by the time she was two. When she was four her dad died in a car crash and at six her mom married Greg, my kindergarten teacher.

It took us a single conversation (one that meandered over warts, guinea pigs, and her mother's impending marriage) to discover that we were soul mates. When Greg and her mom left for their honeymoon, Amelia stayed at my house where we consummated our bond, alone in my basement, with a blood-sister ritual. Smearing blood between our palms we gasped at the realization that our hands were exactly the same size.

The school that Amelia and I attended, and where her step-dad taught, was a small Montessori elementary school. For the most part Amelia and I were symbiotic. She was the leader, I was the follower, and we didn't need anyone else. However, this didn't stop Amelia from commanding a significant audience when she felt the inclination.

It was relatively common at recess for Amelia to give spontaneous performances of Shel Silverstein's poetry. She had committed an astounding number of his works to memory and she was particularly known for her interpretation of the classic epics: Peanut Butter Sandwich, The Crocodile's Toothache and Sick. She employed suspenseful pauses, whispered for dramatic effect, and held nothing back in terms of sound effects. At the end of her chosen arrangement she accepted requests. Rarely did anyone shout out a poem she couldn't execute on the spot.

At home I poured through my Shel Silverstein collection, rehearsing for hours before delivering a mediocre rendition of There's a Polar Bear in my Frigidaire in front of my mom and brother. But my recitals were only hazy replicas, certainly nothing to flaunt on the playground.

I don't recall often feeling jealous of Amelia. When I sat with my schoolmates to witness her stunning presentations, my dominate feeling was pride. Amelia was my best friend and everyone knew it. We were a couple.

On occasion, Amelia struggled with teachers or staff who didn't understand her. They dismissed her sensitivity and raw emotion as mere dramatic flair but

I, her best friend, knew that drama had nothing to do with it. Amelia was authentic. Her sadness, her compassion, her sense of humor, the entire gamut was spawned from true life and I wanted nothing more than to feel things as fully as she did. She was born with a high range antenna, a satellite dish tuned to emotion. I was a black and white TV with bunny ears made of tin foil.

One Friday afternoon in September I heard her sobs before even opening the door to her room. I stepped in to find her sitting cross legged on the bed fashioning a cross with two twigs and a rubber band.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Another goldfish died!”

Just the preceding Saturday Amelia and I each acquired about a dozen goldfish at the fair our school organized as a fund raiser. The most popular event was the goldfish toss where rows of fish bowls containing red, blue, or green water were arranged on a large table. Inside each bowl a single fish swam resolute circles occasionally disrupted by the splish of a ping-pong-ball. It cost a dollar for five tosses.

Behind the booth there were large boxes bubbling over with plastic bags, like depraved water balloons, each containing a despondent fish. Upon Amelia's insistence she and I spent about three solid hours and every dollar of our parent-allotted money at the goldfish toss.

Teachers and parents who witnessed our fervor spoke gently to us with furrowed brows. They warned us that the goldfish would probably die within the week. Doubtlessly a premonition involving Amelia and all this sobbing was unfolding for them like a tragic movie. But what could be done? We were already hooked.

When the grown-ups told Amelia about the goldfish and their fragile constitutions, her toss of the ping-pong ball became even more purposeful. It was her valiant objective to rescue every single fish from the noxious waters of their meager existence.

Here it was, only Friday, and her mission had all but failed. "This is my Eighth... Dead... Fish," she intoned. Even in grief her timing was gripping. She motioned with her head toward the back yard, "soon I'll have an entire graveyard out there!" and she fell into a revived wave of anguish.

I didn't know what to do besides put my arm around her. Most of my goldfish had died too. I hadn't fashioned any crosses or dug any graves. I'd flushed them unceremoniously down the toilet.

I perceived our varied responses to life's tragedies as a blatant indication that she was far wiser than I. Adults faced tragedies head on, while children remained innocent and unaware. Amelia had a relationship with grief, ecstasy, and humor that I wasn't sure I'd ever develop. She was living and I was fumbling dumbly like a mannequin. The truth of her maturity was further magnified one Saturday afternoon just after she turned nine.

Both of our households participated in the "if it's yellow let it mellow" philosophy so it was common knowledge that Amelia's mother's pee consistently maintained a bright golden hue. Amelia was certain that this was a symbol of adulthood and I believed her because... Amelia just knew these things. We both waited for the day that our own pee would attain the saffron tinge of maturity.

I vividly remember the afternoon she shouted ecstatically for me to join her in the bathroom. My heart sank. I knew without even looking that her pee would be yellow. I peered into the toilet with a

counterfeit smile and a nod of faux nonchalance as she assured me that I, too, would have yellow pee... eventually.

Truth be told, I was terrified of adulthood, but I was even more terrified of being left behind, so I began to study Amelia. I watched every movie she loved, repeatedly, and I read every book on her shelf...including her diary. That's how I learned that she wanted to kiss Frank Walker: a bit of information that shook the foundation of my nine-year-old reality. What? Kids kissed?

Later that year it was decided on the playground that Amelia and Frank actually were going to kiss. It was common for decisions of this nature to be made in playground forums. In most cases the "should's" or "should-not's" were hashed out in the absence of the designated kissers. Usually their feelings and opinions were communicated by representatives who spoke with an elevated sense of authority and who dismissed themselves, frequently and importantly, to consult with the "kissers."

I did not participate in these forums. I was embarrassed by them. Besides, there was an understood contract that anyone involved could, potentially, become the next targeted kisser.

Once the decision was made and the time announced, word spread like wildfire. I was notified only four minutes in advance by a completely unassociated minion of the rumor mill. I had no idea how to react.

I was hurt that my opinion hadn't been included or even vaguely solicited. I'd been aware for some time of Amelia's evolving sexuality, but I was dumfounded by a sudden recognition that our best-friend status was ambiguous...at best. On top of that, I had four minutes to determine my next move. My desire to boycott the event was conflicting utterly with my reluctance to further ostracize myself from the momentous occasion of Amelia's first kiss.

In the end I plodded over to the woods (a six-foot-wide strip of trees on the edge of the playground) where the event was scheduled to take place. I stood at the back of the crowd where I refused to stretch on my tip-toes or otherwise display any sign of curiosity for the proceedings. Therefore, I saw nothing.

Fortunately, there was an announcer. I'm pretty sure it was Emily Weinstein. She was in possession of a stop watch and she counted the seconds loudly and with mounting fervor. By the fifth second the rest of the crowd had joined the count. This is probably what

drew the attention of the playground monitors... if they hadn't already noticed the sudden pilgrimage of half the school to the far-back corner of the woods. I think Emily Weinstein had reached twelve seconds by the time the monitors broke us up.

Following our sixth grade graduation Amelia and I attended different middle schools, though distance was not our ultimate dissolving factor. Amelia started having sex and experimenting with drugs. I was too naïve and timid for such antics, but far from ill-judging her choices, I was held rapt by her self-reliance, her charisma, and her seductive allure. I desperately hoped she would eventually grieve our separation the way I did and that she'd solicit my company on just one of her brazen debaucheries. It never happened

Suddenly I understood about suffering. After a lifetime of rehearsing Amelia's emotions as though they were Shel Silverstein poems, she was, at long last, gifting me with the real deal and it sucked. For years the very sound of her name made my insides crumble, so I kept a calculated distance from anyone else who knew her. It wasn't easy. Amelia could stir things up in a way that even defied school district boundaries.

Once I inadvertently sat across a cafeteria table from a girl named Carrie. Over her bagel slathered in pink cream cheese and my salad drenched in government issued ranch, we correlated that Amelia's new favorite confidant, Stacia, was Carrie's estranged, childhood best friend. I had zero interest in bonding with Carrie over our mutual "rejected best friend" status so I kept her at a distance.

Nearly a year later she called me at 11:50p.m., on a Tuesday night.

"What's going on?" I asked, wondering if she was drunk.

"I just heard something...weird. I thought I should tell you." Carrie sounded nervous.

"What is it?" I braced myself, knowing it had to be about Amelia.

"Stacia called me today. We haven't talked for a long time."

"Yeah?" I hoped I sounded detached.

Carrie spoke quickly, "Stacia said that Amelia woke up in the middle of the night and that Greg was sitting on the edge of her bed with his hand down her shirt."

“What?” Greg? My preschool teacher? The most significant man in my life besides my dad?

“And she said it’s happened more than once...” Carrie was going on. I was having a hard time listening.

“Well, Stacia is lying” I interjected. “She doesn’t even know Greg. She’s spreading stupid rumors!”

“I think this is the first time Amelia’s ever talked about it...” Carrie went on, ignoring my accusations.

It was too much. I told Carrie I had to get off the phone. It was midnight and I was ten years old again, learning from a stranger that Amelia was going to kiss Frank Walker in four minutes. I knew that I was probably supposed to do something... tell my mom? Call the police? Call Amelia?

In the end I did nothing.

Over the next decade, Amelia and I both moved frequently. Once she sent me a very concise, and rather vague, poetic letter. It was accompanied by a striking black and white headshot of her looking wise and gorgeous... Athena-like, the way I always imagined her. I saved the picture in a shoebox and lifted the lid a few times a year when I wanted to feel romantically dejected. Her mother and Greg drove 1,500 miles to attend my wedding.

We eventually settled in adjacent towns where we both studied herbal medicine and avoided each other until Amelia's school scheduled a field trip to the farm where I interned. After the tour Amelia stayed behind. We made egg-rolls and edamame in the outdoor kitchen and then wandered the gardens where we talked about everything except our past.

A few weeks later we met at a café. As I stirred way-too-many packets of artificial, dehydrated creamer into my coffee, I told her about the phone call.

"I need to know if she was telling the truth." In that brief statement my cadence switched gracelessly, like the vacillating tones of a pubescent boy, from a demand, to a plea, to an apology.

Her response was an understated, "Yup."

I wanted to respect the fact that this was her story... to tell or to keep to herself. But after agonizing for a solid decade, I felt that some piece of the story must belong to me too.

I wanted to say, "How long was he doing that? Was he doing it when we were seven? Did he do anything... worse?" But I settled with, "Did you tell your mom?"

“I’ve talked to Greg about it,” she said. “He apologized.”

“Do you hate him?” I asked. But what I really meant was, “Should I hate him?”

She shrugged. “He takes care of my mom.”

Somewhere along the line Amelia’s mom was diagnosed with M.S. and it was true, Greg cared for her pristinely.

I nodded. Then Amelia made one of her trademark eye gestures insinuating that the conversation was over and barreled full force into an elaborate account of a 2:00 a.m. Echinacea poaching caper.

So much for the speech I’d been rehearsing for weeks in front of the mirror. The one entitled: I sort-of-get-it-now but it was really hard when you randomly chucked me out of your life for no apparent reason.

Now she lives on one coast, I live on another, and we talk about three times a year. I ask about her boyfriend and nursing school. She asks about my kids. The space between our words is raw and swollen with the disparity of two people who know each other too well and simultaneously not at all.

I often remember the simplicity of our first conversation: warts, guinea pigs, and a life on the verge of change. There weren't any subtexts that day. I pray that there is still a place for that youthful candor somewhere amidst the haggard mistrust of our adulthood. The persistence of our tentative phone calls reassures me that we're both striving to reclaim that sincerity.

We both have a memory of two little girls standing in a cold cement basement, palms pressed together in a promise of sisterhood. I hope that someday, in honor of those children, we'll again share our lives with the frankness of six-year-olds.

Slide by Kathleen Patton

The view to the west was always my favorite; a softly dimpled blanket of green during the summer that faded into the purple and blue haze of Rip Van Winkle country. Sitting on that side of Slide Mountain, it's easy to imagine falling asleep for years, wrapped in the warmth of the sun and the cool touch of the mountain breeze. There is a nook that is carved from a boulder placed right before the mountain heaves up cliff-like and finishes its journey at the peak of the range. I liked to stop there and sit in the perfectly shaped indentation and look out across the emerald colored foliage below. Everything breathed easier there.

Growing up, I could see Slide Mountain from my gable bedroom during the months when the maple and apple trees just outside stood leafless and dead. It rose up starkly from the softly sloping and rolling mountains and held its notched peak thousands of feet above the others. When I was old enough for the long hikes to its crest, my dad would bring me to the massive base and we would make our way to the top, choosing the trail that had the marker I fancied that particular day—some days the more modern wooden ones, other days the old, worn down stone ones that

were so weathered we could barely read them. It was on one of these excursions that I discovered the boulder that has found me coiled in its arms many times over the years.

I was always at peace there. I would sit, cradled above the world, listening to the orchestra of birds, and breathe. The air was filled with a glacier-like chill, but carried the smells and sounds of summer—dew-soaked ferns, leaves from past autumns deteriorating under more recent layers, water gurgling up from underground, squirrels rampaging through the treetops. During the colder months, the smell of wood smoke mixed with the scents and, sometimes, a single spiral of gray, heated air rose through the woods around it.

The last time I trudged to my rock was almost four years ago. It was May, just after graduation. The leaves at the base of the mountain were still young—adolescent-looking, just as I was. I took the stone-marked trail that day.

Curtis

&

Olmsbee

Trail to Slide



1800

Someone named A. Ford had scratched in an illegible message underneath the neatly engraved directions. I smiled at the familiar graffiti and placed a pebble on top of the marker, letting it teeter on top of the pile of similar stones before whistling to my dog and heading to the winding “trail” up the mountain.

“C’mon, Black Jack. Quit chasing the squirrels.”

Something that sounded like a herd of bison resonated as my two-year-old, gangly-legged lab mix tumbled up the trail, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. He knew where we were going. I had started taking him on hikes after he turned a year old, and this one was our favorite. He darted up the trail ahead of me, knowing the turns and twists of the mountain. I brought a map and a compass, but buried them at the bottom of my pack, knowing I wouldn’t need either.

I was going up to celebrate—my own private party that consisted of Black Jack and the mountain I had watched through my window. When I reached it, I sat quietly in my niche and looked out over the trees. I smiled triumphantly.

The pack I had brought for my day trip was light, containing only a light lunch, three bottles of water to replenish the canteen on my belt, a flashlight, a collapsible water bowl for Black Jack, matches, and, under the map, an official looking letter that I had held on to for two years. I pulled it out, along with the matches.

My parents started homeschooling me in third grade due to my health. When I was well enough to go back to school, I decided not to. I felt that I was learning faster at home. When I was sixteen, I wrote the superintendent of the local high school a letter, requesting her to go over the transcripts that we had been required to send to her over the years, and grant me a letter of equivalency to take the place of a high school diploma. Several weeks later, I received a short, curt letter back from her. She refused, stating that it was impossible for a sixteen-year-old, homeschooled student to have the same level of education as one of her seniors.

Sitting at in my alcove, I unfolded the letter and lit a match. A week before, I had graduated with an Associate's Degree and high honors from S.U.N.Y. Sullivan, as well as received my G.E.D. through earning more than twenty-four credit hours. I was eighteen.

I smiled smugly as I watched the paper burn.

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington had accepted my application, and I was leaving in two months. There were, in my mind, big things ahead in the glamorous city of Wilmington, North Carolina.

At the time, I could not see beyond the years that I would spend earning my Bachelor's Degree and privately thumbing my nose at the people who said I couldn't. Graduation found me quickly, and life after college enveloped me in the discovery—and rediscovery—of real life, with its darker bits, but especially its bright ones. I still remember that day on my favorite mountain, but not as the day I stuck it to the system. I remember it as the day I shifted into the next phase of my life, and watched the last one drift away with the paper ashes.

Unnecessary Lessons by Kirsti Sandy

In a scene from one of my favorite movies, *The Jerk*, the nouveau-riche Steve Martin urges his wife, Bernadette Peters, to “take unnecessary lessons.” Her choice: knife throwing, and she’s not all that great at it. When my parents moved from Lowell, Massachusetts, to Andover, when I was twelve, I finally got the joke. Although it was a fifteen-minute drive from our old house, everything had changed, including how we spent our weekends. People in Andover did not sit in front of the TV on Saturday afternoons, watching candlepin bowling, boxing matches, and Solid Gold while referring to the dancers as “sock crotch” or “tomato bum.” They did not linger near neighbors’ houses in a bathing suit on hot days in the hopes that they might, by chance, be invited for a dip in the pool. They did not stretch out on the kitchen floor and moan about having nothing to do while their mothers stepped over them to dry the dishes. At least, this is what my mother told my father, my brother, and me. And then she signed us up for lessons.

I wanted to learn the cello but compromised and went with violin. My brother wanted karate but settled for Cub Scouts. What my parents chose surprised both of

us: disco dancing. Now, I could see myself as a violinist, in a white shirt and velvet skirt, looking regal and serious as I concentrated on moving the bow across the strings. I could easily picture my brother in the blue scout uniform, gold scarf on his collar, ready to earn his badges. Yet the idea of my parents as disco dancers was all wrong. While they both loved disco music, family lore had it that my father was so averse to dancing that he danced only the first song at their wedding. Plus, disco hardly seemed like the kind of pastime our lawyer neighbors next door, the ones with the purebred Irish setter and the twin maroon BMWs, had in mind when they had suggested community education at the local high school.

It was only a matter of time before one of us quit our lessons, but I was the first. I could not understand how the sound that emerged from my violin squeaked and whined so, when I was pulling the bow across the strings just like everyone else. That and I had become distracted by the act of rosinning the bow; the sticky rosin felt had the appearance and texture of butterscotch candy and it was soothing to move the bow across it, back and forth, as though spreading it with crystallized pine pitch. My parents did not put up much of a fight, especially after listening to me

practice, so the violin went back in the velvet case for good.

Next to quit was my brother, but even this did not deter my parents. Their disco lessons had a new purpose: to prepare them to take the floor with their actor friend Tom at Studio 54. They prepared in secrecy, as though not to jinx their chances. Although we saw them walk to the car and return from their dance lesson, we never actually saw them dance, not once, even though they practiced at home a few times a week. They made sure that we were out of the house before they danced in the living room, and I suspect they drew the shades, turned on the “Disco Hits of 1980” compilation I was always taking out of the sleeve to play in my room, and got down to business.

Studio 54 was for them, as I’m sure it was for many, a disappointment. My mother, bless her justice-loving heart, returned with this complaint: “We waited in line and they just kept letting other people in!” If you ask her now, she will tell you that of course she knew they weren’t getting in, but I remember that she was upset about it. My father seemed more relieved than angry, describing the men in high-heeled sneakers carrying balloons who stepped right from limo to door, the people they met in line “from all over—you wouldn’t

believe it! China, Mexico, even California!”—the doorman who looked exactly like the actor on Taxi, the food they ate before and after and in between: “real New York bagels, Kirsti! You should have tried them—like hot pretzels!”

Bagels aside, I could not fathom waiting in line for two hours while someone else got to sail through the door with no delay at all. It went against everything I had been taught—even the seventh graders at my school had a code of “no cuts, no butts” that was strictly followed by even the most popular kids. It seemed to me that this gave the people in charge tremendous power, power that intrigued and appealed to me, so I set about creating my own version of Studio 54, but not with dancing—I was in remedial gym, after all—with something I was good at, even without lessons: roller skating.

My parents were great sports about it; they let me string up the Christmas lights in the basement and play records on the wood-paneled stereo. I would be the DJ and the bouncer, and also the hostess. Kids in the neighborhood would wait in line to come to my skating rink. Never mind that there was a big skating rink in nearby Lawrence, called “Roll on America” which, despite the fact that it sounded like a deodorant, was very popular. Mine would be free, with

no strict rules about skating backward or doing tricks and none of those “skate bouncers” in mesh shirts who thought they were so big and liked to blow the “get off the rink” whistle at the younger kids. It struck me that I could also reject anyone who was a better skater than I was, or who was thinner, or who had better hair.

On opening night, I set out some warm Polar Ginger Ale (I had wanted name brand soda, which my mother nixed immediately) and a plate of E.L. Fudge cookies. After attempting to bribe my little brother to plug and unplug the lights while we skated to produce a strobe effect, I ran upstairs to answer the door: Leslie and Kelly, skates in hand, talking faster than they could listen, then the boys from down the street, then my cousins. One of the neighbor boys had removed the knob from the front of his skates, the one that served as a brake “to make them more aerodynamic.” We watched as he demonstrated, whipping forward and using a support pole to keep from crashing into the wall. Kelly wore the ribbon barrettes from the movie Xanadu, so I put on that record first, the opening chords of “You Have to Believe in Magic” filling the room as we spun and twirled across the floor.

It wasn’t until the evening was almost over when I realized that I had not turned a single person away. At

some point during the night, they had all stopped skating and started joking around, climbing the furniture, and turning cartwheels. I had lost them. As Leslie and Kelly left, Kelly (likely coached by her mother) thanked my mother “for the roller skating party.” That should have been my first hint that my friends would never view my basement as a real roller rink—it was a basement, and we were all pretending, especially me. If my friends were going to get a ride somewhere on a Saturday night, it was going to be to a real skating rink, which had boys from different schools and where they could play Ms. Pac Man and eat French fries. I could not compete.

The roller rink turned into a makeshift haunted house the next October and finally served as a temporary apartment for my dad’s down-on-his-luck friend from California. Like the real Studio 54, my roller rink had been overtaken by a coked-out weirdo, but I had already moved on to classier pursuits: English riding lessons. Elocution. Baton twirling.

“Toss the baton in the air the way Mary Tyler Moore throws her hat,” the baton teacher shouted, making the motion with his hand. He was fed up with our lackluster tosses, our deflated twirls. Not a beauty queen in the bunch—acne-marked, greasy-haired, brace-faced, four-eyes we were, all of us, yet we held

on to thin hope that lessons might transform us,
because wasn't that, after all, what lessons were for?

"Throw that hat!" he demonstrated, with a vigorous
toss and a satisfied smile. "The world is yours! You
are Mary Tyler Moore!" And in the instant the baton
made a perfect spiral in the air before crashing back
down on my head, I almost believed it.

You Have to Eat Lunch by Linda C Wisniewski

The empty house echoes as I work. Here in my parents' postwar version of the American Dream, women's voices come back to me.

Women who worked at home and in factories, raised me, my sister and my cousins, read *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*, and always had a fresh cake or a plate of cookies ready for whoever might drop in. They are the kind of women you can count on, the ones who show up unannounced before you even think of asking.

Ceil is short and bouncing with energy, her face sprinkled with light brown freckles, her sandy hair cut short as if any other style would take too much time. She married my Uncle Edwin in Amsterdam, New York soon after World War II and poured her energy into her home and family. Ceil loved to sew and made beautiful smocked dresses for their daughter, Peggy, who now lives in Florida. She loved to dress up and go ballroom dancing with Uncle Ed at the Century Club, a white pillared building on Guy Park Avenue, the grandest street in town.

One of five sisters, Ceil is often on the phone. I would not be surprised if she was the first person who signed up for “call waiting.”

“Just a minute,” she says when I phone her, “My sister is on the other line.” True to her word, she is back with me in a minute or less because her sisters all live in the same town and she talks to at least one of them every day, but I am calling “long distance.”

I remember her most at my parents’ kitchen table, sitting before a creamy cup of coffee, her bright red lipstick print on the rim, a smoldering cigarette in a glass ashtray. She was the very picture of sophistication, frequently dropping the names of women’s and children’s stores—Gabay’s, Holzheimer and Shaul, the Chatterbox—as if she went there every day.

One afternoon when I was in high school, we ran into each other at Woolworth’s. She bought me a Coke at the counter and asked about my life as if it was important. Like most girls, I needed that kind of validation. As I matured, I pushed back against my mother’s example, but my aunts were a step apart. They carried no judgment or emotional baggage and I knew I could count on them to be my personal cheerleaders.

Ceil worked in retail herself now and then, at a fabric store and a card-and-gift shop but her real talent was homemaking. I treasure her handwritten recipes for banana bread, stuffed cabbage, and potato chip cookies. I may never use them, but they are sweet reminders of the long, slow days when women baked from scratch.

When I was growing up in the Fifties, a great deal of time and effort went into so-called women's work, but as a young woman in the Seventies, I believed that time would have been better spent on careers outside the home. My mother and her friends worked in factories, and felt lucky simply to have jobs and to own their homes, but we, their daughters came of age during feminism's Second Wave. We had more opportunities than our mothers ever dreamed of.

Still, we lost something when we denigrated the skills of homemakers. Hillary Clinton famously stated during her husband's Presidential campaign, "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies" and her words became code for "strong women don't bake," though she never intended it that way. I'm sure she meant women should have many choices: homemaking, careers or both. But some of us, myself included, didn't want to talk about cookies at all. On

the way to equal rights, we stepped right over the enjoyable parts of creating a comfortable home.

Years after I baked a few cookies myself, I read an essay by Gloria Steinem. After many years working for women's rights, she noticed that her home had no personal touches. Her apartment was more like an office, filled with papers and books, basic furniture, and nothing personal.

My Aunt Ceil never had that problem. Her home is full of knickknacks from her daughter's travels. She herself has been to Europe and up and down the East Coast and filled her home with found treasures. A sparkling glass bluebird perches on a windowsill. Hummel figurines are on display in a dust-free glass cabinet and beribboned blue towels invite my touch in the small bathroom.

My other aunt, Willette, married Edwin's brother John. Descended from Irish immigrants, she taught herself to with my grandfather a Merry Christmas in Polish. Her once brown hair is pure white and her face opens in a wide smile. One afternoon, she gave me a ride home from high school. Feeling sick, I walked to her house, knowing she, like many women, would be home in the middle of the day. As she drove, she asked me about

the upcoming prom and graduation, and like Ceil, made me feel she was really listening.

Willette and John raised two sons who are now grown but still live with their families nearby. She worked for a while as a telephone operator and became the link between Mom's sister in California and the rest of the family in New York State.

"Willette gets free long distance," my mother said, explaining why she never called her sister. Even when rates fell to a nickel a minute, our family still counted on Willette to relay news from the West Coast.

One weekday afternoon when I was small, my mother and I dropped in on her, as people did back then, and found her praying the rosary. Mom apologized. "You'll have to start all over again."

"Yes, I will," she answered cheerfully. Then she went to the kitchen, put out slices of homemade cake and poured coffee for Mom, a glass of milk for me.

After I married and had children of my own, these impromptu visits were rare. Everyone was busy, it seemed, and lived far away from family. I became what Mom called a “career woman.”

Now, on this early spring day, the sky is painted periwinkle blue, as only an Adirondack sky can be. Hundreds of tiny green leaves wave like flags on gnarled trees in the backyard of my mother’s house. Inside, I clean out the last of her belongings. My father has been gone a year, and Mom is in a nursing home. Ceil and Willette held a garage sale on the sidewalk in front last week. On this day, I have driven north from my Pennsylvania home with my ten-year-old son to clean out what remains, the things no one will buy. Threadbare bath towels, a plastic clothes hamper, costume jewelry in a dirty pink box. Used dress patterns, spools of thread, dust rags. Two framed Easter cards on the wall.

The empty house echoes as I work. My son’s Game Boy chirps from the living room as I finger the worn remnants of my mother’s hard life. I work alone, Mom’s voice in my ear: “Linda’s the independent one.”

Outside in the driveway, a car engine stops and doors slam. The back doorbell rings and before I can

answer it, my mother's kitchen door swings open. The aunts walk in laughing, arms laden with brown paper bags. On the old Formica table, Ceil and Willette unpack lunchmeat wrapped in white butcher paper, small jars of mayonnaise and mustard, fresh tomatoes, and a package of rolls.

"We knew you were here," they say, smiling. "You have to eat lunch."

Grace and the Process of Letting Go by Vanessa Jo King

Grace was my 16th birthday present. It sounds ridiculous to realize that I was raised in a family where horses were birthday presents (on my 18th birthday, I actually received a Mini Cooper, but I don't think that enforces any misconceptions of normalcy). She was hand-selected by me after months of searching for the eventual replacement for my gelding, Ace. He was wonderful and beautiful, just not mine in that complete way that a horse can seem to be perfect for one person alone. Grace was different. I knew the first time I sat on her that she was mine. She was almost four. She was simple and honest.

For the last ten years, Grace went everywhere with me. Her dark, steel grey coat slowly lightened to a slightly freckled, almost white. We did amazing things in amazing places. We chased clouds on sweltering Boulder summer days. We won the blue ribbon in Greenfield, Massachusetts at her first show. We spent a summer in Longmont, Colorado, where I tried to convince her to swim and she not-so-politely declined to put even one hoof in water. We conquered hills at

full speed and explored during thunderstorms in Erda, Utah. She gathered a harem of geldings in North Salt Lake, and eventually she moved high into the Wasatch Mountains to Heber, where we played games and briefly reconnected with each other.

As I approached my 26th year, I hadn't ridden consistently since my late teens. The horse-crazy passion that consumed me for most of my youth seemed to have faded. Why did I keep her, this extravagant beast, this endless drain of money? I suppose I can answer that with another question: how can a girl willingly part ways with an animal that more closely resembles a best friend than a horse? There were times when I was in a new place and I had no one but Grace. Sometimes I wrapped the familiarity of her around me like a blanket. The more terrifying reason for keeping her was the fiasco of letting Vixen, my first horse, go. After searching for the perfect home with the perfect people, I was devastated to learn that she had been starved. I refused to let that happen again. The tragic story of Vixen made me swear I would keep Grace until the day she died. There was a certain comfort in knowing that the only person I could trust with an animal I cared about so profoundly was me.

Mere semesters away from graduating from my seven year college adventure, something changed. Faced with the inevitable entrance back into the real world—a world where ideally I would receive a paycheck, and not depend solely on the assistance of my father—I became painfully aware of how difficult owning a horse would be. A horse would tie me to certain places, limit my ability to be courageous, and add a significant amount of worry to my everyday life. I wanted to find a job I loved. I wanted that job to pay me enough to be comfortable. But I had no guarantees that either of those things would happen. Adding my Grace worries to the mix made me feel like a single mother to a 1200 pound animal that had a proclivity for injuring herself on a bimonthly basis.

The more compelling issue was one that was much harder to voice. At what point did I let go of who I was? For over a decade some of the primary words associated with my identity were "rider" and "horses". Regardless of the reasons, that had changed. What used to bring me an incredible amount of peace and joy now brought me a sense of guilt when I tried to recall the last time I visited Grace, or analyzed how much I "should" have been riding, or thought about the increasing amount of money she cost as she aged. I never, ever thought it would happen, but I had

outgrown horses. Thirteen year old Vanessa raged petulantly inside me every time I acknowledged that reality.

After years of my best friend harassing me to let her have my horse for her riding lesson program, I conceded in January of 2010. The day I put Grace on the trailer to go to Colorado was one of the toughest of my life. It seemed that the universe was testing the strength of my decision in every way possible. The horse movers were two weeks late and I waited for them at the barn for well over eight hours. Grace had a large wound on her leg and I worried that she would injure it more on her way to her new home. Grace refused to get on the trailer. When Grace finally loaded on the trailer, I crumpled in the dirt driveway of the barn, beyond caring about the mud or the people watching me cry like a child. I felt like firmly affixing a sign to her side, maybe attached with duct tape wrapped 12 times around her large, warm belly that read, "Please, take this creature gently: she has a part of my heart." But that sounded dramatic even to me.

The situation has worked out as well as I could ever have hoped. Grace arrived safely, and the wound on her leg healed within days. Aside from a recently developed aversion to being tied up, Grace has

behaved herself very well at her new home. She is one of the favorite horses in the lesson program, consistently showered with attention, treats, and a regular fitness regime that has slowly whittled away that massive belly that used to trick strangers into thinking she was due to birth triplets within the hour. Everything has worked out. Perhaps the most profound lesson I learned from the experience was that I am not going to be the same person for the rest of my life. What drives me now, might not drive me in ten years, and the ability to let go of who I was in the past frees me up to be who I am right now. The relief I feel when I travel home to Colorado and I'm able to physically check on Grace, is tangible. She's safe. I'm not guilty of anything except growing up a little.

Everything I Know I Learned from Shoplifting by Tammy Dietz

We were poor. We were Mormon. My mother was clinically depressed, occasionally suicidal, and my father was a hoarder who only changed his clothes on Sundays and whose crackpot “engineering” projects lay in unfinished piles throughout our home like sacred cows. What else is there to say? Under such tyranny, who wouldn't become a shoplifter?

If you saw me now, you'd never guess I was once a criminal. A marginally frazzled mother of three, I work at one of the largest corporations on the planet. I also write and teach on the side. I'm hard-working, serious, and honest to a fault. Former shoplifter? I think not.

But if you saw me then, you'd never guess I was a criminal either. Little girly-girl, properly quiet in contrast with my mouthy brother, but secretly kick-the-dog mean to my even more quiet sister. I was both gifted and trained in the art of passive aggression, which lent magnificently to competency as a thief.

I was caught only twice—first when I was seven and again when I was twenty—but there were more

shoplifting sprees in between than I could fit lipsticks into an oversized handbag. It didn't start with lipstick, however. My criminal career started with something I didn't even want. This story of life's lessons through shoplifting began with a walnut, and the first thing I learned was this: sometimes curiosity makes the cat more curious.

1975 Gemco Department Store, San Francisco Suburbs

Round, hard, smooth with subtle ridges and bumps. I rolled the nut around in my palm.

I had wandered to the bins of Brach's candies and raw nuts by the pound, drawn especially to the walnuts. What was inside? My seven-year old brain fixated. Outer shell, something rattling around within. That the walnut was ugly served only to generate greater allure. I had to know. But how? The idea to steal it arrived swiftly and was followed just as quickly by an even more provocative thought. Could I really take something without paying for it?

I peeked around the bins and saw my mother reaching to tear a plastic bag from a roll hanging above trays of apples—red, pink, yellow and also

green like my corduroy coat with its deep, square pockets. In went the walnut and my hand, and there they both stayed as I casually fell back in step with my mother.

I couldn't believe it. I had something in my pocket and my mother hadn't seen. No one had seen.

I stayed by the cart, obsessing with the walnut until it became slick with sweat. I could think of nothing but that walnut and the exit and—oh, I'd forgotten—the guard. A long, wide store aisle led from grocery directly to the exit where I saw the guard's cap looming in the distance.

I squeezed the walnut as hard as I could and stared at the hat as though taking aim of a target. The shopping cart rattled. My 4-year old sister babbled, her chubby toddler legs dangling from the child's seat. The walnut beat against my grip like a tiny little heart, brought to life by the prospect of adventure, of leaving its herd for a solitary journey to someplace unknown.

Everything slowed as we approached. Slower and slower until, as if under water, we lurched toward the doors. I scanned from the guard's hat to his eyes. His mouth opened and stretched into a broad smile, his hand rose to the tip of his cap, and then he nodded like a mechanical mall Santa at Christmastime. His

eyes met mine, and then ever so slowly one lid dropped into a lingering wink and before I knew it, the morning sun was shining on the top of my head. I was out and I still had the walnut.

All the way home in our rusted Valiant with its torn vinyl seats, I clutched that burning walnut. KFRC played through the speakers, tinny and flat. What do you get when you fall in love, it crackled. But novice that I was, I smirked all through the long drive home. I couldn't help myself. I couldn't wipe that smile away even when Dad held my arm by the door, nor when he squatted to make eye contact. I grew serious only when our eyes met.

"What is your hand doing in your pocket, Tamara?"

Tamara. Uh oh.

"Show me what you have in your hand."

My eyes burned as I peeled open damp fingers revealing the walnut.

Dad marched me back to the store to return my prize and apologize to the red-haired store manager, which was obviously not quite as painful to me as Dad hoped because on the second ride back home, I positively tingled with energy while replaying the events in my mind—the exhilaration of near success,

the thrill of exposure, the possibility that I might have gotten away with it. And most exciting of all, what else could I attempt to steal?

Suddenly my small, quiet world (mother in her bedroom, father tinkering, radio playing church music and somber speeches by solemn-sounding old men) opened to the size and intrigue of an enormous department store.

In the years that followed, I perfected my game. I learned to look casual and innocent by keeping my hands where people could see them and by stealing things that were small and flat. At first, I stole candy and treats, snacks, too, for there wasn't always enough to eat at home. I stole small toys and electronics, and finally cosmetics, shoes and clothes. I learned how to look indifferent by making small purchases with babysitting money, things that suggested urgency and discretion, like tampons, so that the cashier paid no mind to a bulging purse and pockets full of Maybelline eye shadow, Bonne Bell lip gloss, and Great Lash mascara. I'd wear an old pair of shoes in and a new pair out. I learned that many trips to different stores delivered the best plunder and wearing layers allowed for adding to the layers

without much change in appearance. I learned how to steal many things and often. I learned how to take what I felt I deserved every bit as much as children whose parents had means to provide. Why did the stores have so much when I had so little? I saw the retail industry the same way I'd been taught to see nature: there for the taking by the brave.

But hold it a minute, so far I've been focused on curiosity leading to more curiosity. What of the lessons I learned by way of the result? There were many.

I learned that people really did value a girl who dressed and groomed well. Teachers paid more attention to me when I wore clean, new clothes. Popular kids invited me to join their groups. My brother and sister did not fit in as well; I could see it. They weren't as popular because they had to wear floods with holes in the knees and faded jackets and unstylish shoes that wore out well before they were thrown out. Even church people complimented and praised my appearance. No one seemed concerned about how I managed to dress in stylish new clothes when the rest of my family did not. By looking pretty and respectable, I was doing my part representing my family and mainstream Mormonism favorably. No one even asked questions when I'd gained such skill and

confidence shoplifting that I began to steal things to give to others. I was the best gift-giver in the family. I gave my brother a Walkman the year they were released and said I'd used babysitting and paper route money to pay for it.

It's easy to see how my behavior might have been overlooked. Mom had long since taken to her room and our home was on a slow path toward burial by debris and junk. Dad's electronics lay all about the house along with mountainous piles of papers and church books creeping up the walls like vines. But in my bedroom, gleaming stolen booty sparkled amidst the chaos like half-hidden gems in the walls of a dark cave. My parents had their hoard and buried deep within, I had mine.

Eventually, however, I learned another critical life lesson: that every dog has its day of reckoning.

I was twenty and living alone in a studio apartment downtown. I had a dreadful job as an office clerk for an accounting firm in Palo Alto where I spent my days 10-keying SKUs onto long strips of receipt tape for some purpose I could not imagine nor did I care to. I could barely afford rent and my cheap, twenty-year old VW Bug broke down constantly. But I still looked like a socialite because I'd discovered that Nordstrom

was an excellent place to shoplift. Nordstrom had no security tags on their merchandise, the dressing rooms were dimly lit, and the trusting staff seemed to presume we shoppers were all as high-brow as we appeared. Never mind that I began to forget an earlier lesson: to visit different stores and take just a little from each.

1987 Nordstrom

A typical spree. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, just business attire so that I'd look professional at my job while still making the rent.

I layered myself with items in the fitting room, not even bothering to remove the tags and stuff them into pockets of clothes I left lying on the floor, a technique I'd refined at Nordstrom. I had grown careless, especially there. A few things fit in my bag as well. I topped it all off with a black wool jacket, slimming and warm, a coat I would end up keeping for many years to come. I did remove its three-digit price tag and stuffed it into a pair of jeans that didn't fit. I admired myself in the mirror. Very nice, I thought. I would return to my humble apartment with a thrilling bounty of attire. I fished car keys out of my purse and dropped them in the pocket of my new coat, took one

more look around, unlatched the door and headed out.

As I left the changing rooms, I noticed a man with a shopping bag leaning against a post, arms folded. He winked at me and tipped the brow of his baseball cap as I passed. So familiar.

I fiddled with the keys as I rode the escalator down towards the exit, my car, and escape. Descending below the second floor, I saw the pianist—a gray-haired man in a tuxedo—playing an elaborate Liberace-style rendition of I'll Never Fall in Love Again and I thought, what is familiar here? The keys in my pocket that I fondled neurotically, the man in the cap, the wink. Déjà vu? I remembered the face, the slow motion way we passed. I smiled and nodded. Yes. I had been here before. You can't make this shit up, I thought recklessly and laughed out loud as the exit grew larger and closer. I started to sing along with the piano quietly while eyeing my little black car through the glass doors. Don't.... tell me what it's all about. Cuz I been there and I'm glad I'm out. Out of those chains, those chains that bind you. That is why... I'm here to remind you...

Just then, my elbows were clutched simultaneously and I was yanked to a stop. To my right, I saw a

young brunette woman wearing dark glasses. I looked left and there he was, the man with the shopping bag and baseball cap. He removed my handbag from my shoulder and handed it to the young woman, then took both of my arms and twisted them behind my back in a secure grasp, human handcuffs. As he turned me around and steered me back through the store, he calmly advised that I would need to come with them to return the merchandise for which I did not pay and that I would be placed under arrest for shoplifting. He said he had the authority to read me my rights, which he would do discreetly once we were in a private place.

Nordstrom. You had to hand it to them. They even knew how to arrest people with class, though this is not what I thought at the time. At the time, I was stunned. It couldn't be. I couldn't be caught. I hadn't been caught since I was seven years old. It just couldn't be. We walked, the three of us, through the scarves and hats, the cosmetics, and finally the fine jewelry department until we reached a well-hidden door that required Mr. Baseball Cap to enter a security code on a panel.

This had to be correctable, I thought. Had to be.

“So, that’s eight hundred forty-three dollars and ninety-eight cents.”

In a tiny backroom, he tapped the end of his pencil against a metal desk.

“Another couple hundred bucks and it goes from misdemeanor to felony,” he said.

I tried to look calm and neutral.

“Where did you get your jacket?” he asked.

My jacket. Shit.

“I’ve had this for years. It belonged to my mother. God rest her soul,” I added, attempting unsuccessfully to produce a tear. I recalled the red-haired manager at Gemco, how he’d accepted my meek confession and looked at my father with approval.

Mr. Baseball Cap watched me while lifting the receiver of a black, rotary telephone. He dialed, cranking each number with a deliberate forefinger, then returned to pencil tapping. And watching.

“Yeah, Susan, get me Women’s Outerwear, will you?”

He grinned above the phone receiver, as cool and controlled as a butler, as though he were retrieving something for me, providing a high-end service. I

assumed the air of a woman on the receiving end: expectant and gracious. He was doing his job, I was doing mine. He held the authority of a black telephone and I struggled to hold my head high.

Lucky me, they didn't find the tags for that beautiful black coat and the total amounted to just shy of \$1,000—a misdemeanor, but more meaningful to me at the time, no trip “downtown.” Mr. Baseball Cap had the authority to place me under arrest and release me on my own recognizance. I would be notified to appear in court by mail.

Brunette with Glasses sat in a side chair most of the time, silent. She was obviously the assistant thief-catcher, and once the crime was determined and she had witnessed me receiving my rights, he nodded to her and then the door. She left and he started tapping that damn pencil again.

“Who was the lingerie for?” he asked.

Convinced I might yet get myself out of this, I told him it wasn't for anyone in particular, why did he want to know.

“It's nice,” he said.

I shrugged and smiled at him. I don't know what I was thinking would happen.

“You know,” he said, “you’re not a very good thief.”

I nodded, quietly running through the zillions of things I’d stolen over the years. In fact, I’d been a very good thief for a very long time. But recently I’d become cocky and foolish, lazy, really. My closet may have looked like it belonged to Ivanka Trump but I still had an uninspiring job and poor prospects for the future. Popularity had lost its import. The balloon of power I felt by stealing had sprung a leak.

“You probably shouldn’t try this again,” he said.

I shook my head that no, I would not try it again.

“But you are pretty,” he said. “That’s why you caught my notice to begin with. It wasn’t that you looked suspicious. It was those legs of yours.”

I crossed them, one over the other, playing with fire now and hoping for a spark that would free me from this trap.

A rap at the door straightened Mr. Baseball Cap up, and Brunette with Glasses returned to her place in the side chair, looking from him to me and then from me back to him.

“She’s ready to go,” he said.

“I’ll walk her out,” she said.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said, and our eyes locked. “She won’t be causing any trouble.”

“Have you advised her of the Nordstrom No-Return policy?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“You can never return to this or any Bay Area Nordstrom again,” she said. “Not to shoplift, not to shop, not to browse, not to pass through to get to your car. You are not welcome here. Understood?”

My cheeks flushed and I nodded.

Later that night, Mr. Baseball Cap called my apartment to see if I was “all right,” he said. And to ask me out.

“Look,” I said, leaning against the doorframe separating the kitchen from the closet in my tiny-ass apartment. “Thanks for your interest and everything, but...I only flirted with you because I thought you might let me off. You seem nice and all, but I already have a boyfriend. I just didn’t want to get arrested.”

He harrumphed.

“Well you’re better at flirting than you are at shoplifting, that’s for sure.”

“Good to know,” I said as I thumbed a few garments in my closet that overflowed with clothing and shoes I could not afford. “I never did have any brains.”

“Who needs brains when you look like you do?”

An insult masquerading as a compliment, and not something I hadn’t heard before. The truth is, his proposal and praise flattered me. Back then, I measured my worth by the amount of attention I received, particularly from men. My appearance helped me get away with things, win people over, look the part of the good Mormon girl. But my looks had not helped me escape arrest. And three weeks later, I would have to face a judge. Would he care how I appeared? Could I flirt with him and receive a lighter sentence? Would the judge even be a he?

1987 San Mateo County Courthouse

“Case number 290477, Tammy Mayson, please rise,” the bailiff called. I looked at the slip in my hand. That was me. Shoplifting, First Offense. Dressed in a business suit, I rose and squared myself, head high, arms at sides, slip of paper clutched tightly between forefinger and thumb.

A man who looked homeless lay on his back on the bench in front of me, eyes open, silver beard bristling around his mouth where he heaved great sour-smelling sighs. Two rows up, a thin woman with blonde hair loosely crimped in a purple claw clip sat next to a boy around ten years old. The boy leaned toward the woman; she leaned away. I wondered which one was required to be there and why. There were others in the courtroom as well. Dirty, tired, desperate people.

The judge scanned his documents running his forefinger across the data before raising his head to take me in.

“Shoplifting,” he looked to his papers again. “No prior record,” he said, and then peered over the top of his glasses, slowly raising his chin, sizing me up.

“Are you prepared for sentencing, Ms. Mayson?” he asked with a booming voice, looking down his nose beneath the rim of his glasses.

“Yes, your honor,” I said, too quick, too perfect, too planned. Your honor. What was I doing in this place?

“Why did you steal, Ms. Mayson?” he asked.

I shrugged and licked my lips, fiddled with the slip of paper.

“I, um, I don’t know, I just wanted to see what it was like I guess.” I half-smiled, raised my eyebrows as innocent-looking as I could muster and squeezed my shoulders as though a giant set of tweezers were holding me in place in the back of this courtroom.

The judge set his papers down and clasped his hands together.

“We both know this wasn’t your first time, Ms. Mayson. Or do we need to discuss this further?”

My shoulders slumped, the paper slipped to the ground, I dropped my hands and my face went flat.

“No. This wasn’t my first time.”

“Why, then, Ms. Mayson, would a nice young woman take things that don’t belong to her and make the rest of the community pay for her indulgences?”

I’d never thought of it that way before.

“I don’t—I mean—didn’t steal from people, Judge. I... I...well, I just took things from stores,” I said, feeling ridiculous as the words escaped my lips.

A few people turned to look at me. Faces withered, eyes bulging, mustaches and glasses and the little boy with his mother. The judge waited.

“I stole things because I felt that I deserved them. I don’t know why it should be fair that some people can have nice clothes and some people can’t. I stole things to make things fair.”

I swallowed a dry lump that had formed in my throat.

“For justice,” I said.

“And justice you shall receive, Ms. Mayson.”

I looked down and swallowed another larger lump. His papers rustled and he cleared his throat.

“Ms. Mayson, your sentence is going to be harsh. You can pay it in community service or fines, but I have determined that it will be the maximum. Which would you prefer?”

I wanted him to know about my used car that broke down and couldn’t get me to work. My crappy job. The church that had issued its judgment rejecting me for being a sexually active unmarried woman. My incompetent mother and overbearing father who only wanted to talk to me about going back to church to pray for forgiveness. But I knew, right then and there, that none of these things were excuses and that my days of shoplifting had ended. I was powerless again.

“What do you mean, which do I prefer? I’d prefer less harsh if that’s what you mean.”

“That is not what I mean. Fines or community service. Those are your choices. Harsh... has already been determined.”

We haggled back and forth for a few minutes more. Community service sounded humiliating, and a quick calculation of the rate per hour of service led to the conclusion it would be wiser to accept financial penalty.

“Fines it is,” he banged his gavel. “Three-thousand, two-hundred fifty dollars. You can make payment arrangements at the clerk’s office down the hall.”

Three-thousand dollars was three times what I paid for my car, and I had borrowed that. More than three months of pay. Three-thousand dollars was money I didn’t have.

Before leaving the courtroom, the judge said one more thing to me.

“Ms. Mayson, go back to school.” His voice lingered on a high note with the word, school, and it rung in my ear all the way home.

A few weeks later, I drove to the local community college for a catalog and an application. I’d been such a terrible high school student, preferring all things social over anything intellectual, that I almost couldn’t believe I was there. Until then, I considered education more of a nuisance than an opportunity. But the jig was up for me. I was not a popular and wealthy teenager with money to burn on attire—never had been, and I was not a good little Mormon virgin either. The fake was over.

College wouldn’t be easy. I would have to attend night classes. I had no idea how I would manage the homework while also working full-time. All I knew how to do well was pretend. I half-expected I’d end up dropping out.

But I didn’t. I went to college and discovered I had a brain. And that is how everything I know I learned from shoplifting.

How I Met My Husband by Jane Hertenstein

Every couple has their own story, but certain stories are stranger than fiction. That's our story.

It was 1985, a time buried in the armpit of disco and the Euro New Wave. By the mid-80s I knew that the decade would go down as a footnote. Seemingly all the real history was behind us and we were stuck with Reagan and mediocrity. I think I was entering my cynical years, post-college, and just realizing that the world had nothing to offer me—especially a career. We were in a recession, nothing new—except that this one peaked right when I was graduating and needed a job. When nothing came fast enough I panicked and took a bus for Chicago where I ended up doing volunteer work. In exchange for room and board I worked at a city mission where I was promised a chance to use my educational background tutoring underprivileged kids.

Instead I ended up sorting through donations.

In retrospect I can see how my classes in psychology were helpful. I developed a character profile on who

donates old clothes caked with feces to charity. After ripping open a bag that smelled like cat pee I insisted on wearing latex gloves. Who actually thinks: There's still wear left in holey underwear? Who donates ONE shoe? It was enough to confirm my low opinion of mankind. Cynicism was a coping mechanism, not just an attitude.

For every fifty gross bags there was maybe one containing something fantastic—like a vintage gown or a black-dyed lamb's skin fur coat with oversized buttons. Once I found \$20 in an old purse. Each day I was greeted by a mountain of black garbage bags. I'd pull a few out, but the pile never went down because the mission was always getting calls from people wanting to donate. That's the worst part—our brothers went out in a snub-nosed old mail truck and picked this stuff up for free when the owners should have been taking it to a dump.

Let me back up and explain. The mission operated a Freestore. On assigned days we opened to our clients to let them "shop" for the things they needed. We had regulars. One came so frequently that I struck up a conversation with her. What do you do with all the clothes you get? I asked. Miriam had about five kids. I say about because she also kept her friend's children and had a revolving door policy of hospitality, so she

was constantly on the lookout for sizes anywhere from 0 to 13 juniors. One of the older daughters also had a baby, I think. Miriam seemed embarrassed at my question. I assured her that this was why we were here, to help people like her.

She finally confessed, “We get new stuff when the other’n get too dirty. But don’t worry, we give it all back.”

Well, that took care of my profile. I simply didn’t have that category in mind. The person who gives because they hate doing laundry.

I was set up in an annex, a building that was in a perpetual state of repair and, because the work was being done in-house, the renovation was going slow. Like whenever there was money, which wasn’t too often. During my entire Freestore tenure the abandoned annex was one brick away from collapsing. At one point the walls had been demo-ed down to the lath, the wooden slats beneath plaster, awaiting drywall. If I needed to use the bathroom I had to walk an obstacle course, through walls and around pipes and hanging electrical wires, to the opposite end where there was a stall without a door but those clinking beads that you see in the Mediterranean where it seems climate appropriate

and not a side effect of poverty. It was like a Cohan movie or a Beckett play where life is cruel and somewhat absurd. Along the way I passed through an “office” where a guy sat tapping on a typewriter.

What are you working on? I asked one time.

I’m working on a story.

He had clunky glasses, sturdy, and always dressed neatly in casual office Friday attire. Like the stuff I pulled out of the sacks stacked up to the ceiling three rooms over.

I explained I was looking for the bathroom and he continued typing, while sitting in architectural chaos. One day he asked me if there were any new book donations. I said, yes, in fact there had been. He followed me back to the Freestore where I’d set up a display rack in what used to be a shower. Watch out, I warned, pointing to the hole in the floor where the toilet used to be.

He helped me sort out the books. What do you do with the totally lame stuff? He wanted to know.

I knew what he meant. Mass paperbacks. Thrillers, romance, Christian prophet and Christian profit titles. How to live like a King’s Kid. I throw it down the hole, I said.

We tossed in some John Grisham and Tom Clancy.

We opened a banana box of books on childrearing. *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, etc. Mike attempted to put a book down the toilet hole. Wait! I halted him. What are you doing?

He was embarrassed.

Breast feeding is important. A lot of women have questions about it. I put them over here.

There was a baby swing, the kind used to soothe a child into slumber, I had six or seven books stacked in the seat along with a handful of breast pumps, the cheap models that resembled torture devices.

We continued sorting and I was grateful for his help. It got a little creepy working in the Freestore alone. Once I found a guy sleeping in the bathtub I used for the one-of shoes (I kept them just in case, a totally hopeless situation.) He'd wandered in off the street drunk and had no idea where he was. He'd been looking for a bathroom. After a brother escorted him out I peered down the hole. There was *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey at the bottom pelted with piss.

On really slow days I tried on clothes and modeled in front of a bleary mirror. There were some really funky

styles. I don't know why I wasn't freaked out about bedbugs or head lice. On really cold days, the days when frost collected on the inside of the windows (none of the radiators worked; they'd all been disconnected when the pipes burst), I wore layers of coats and rag-picked wearing fingerless gloves like a character out of *Our Mutual Friend*.

Yet I always had reading material. Whole libraries were donated. I could easily guess the former owners and their preferences, likes and dislikes. I acquired what was left of the estate of a university professor. His specialty was antiquities. The books were all hardback, the pages brittle and liver-spotted, and smelled of basement, as if they were in fact artifacts, stolen from a sarcophagus or pried from the hands of a mummy. It was sad. A couple divorces and liquidates their combined library. The kids are grown and their old books given away. I randomly collected Newbery Award winners, most inscribed by a literary auntie or uncle to their favorite niece or nephew: "Christmas 1962" or "To a Special Boy on His 12th Birthday".

Mike got into the habit of stopping by to help me organize. Of course he took home whatever struck his fancy. We got to know each other and found we had a

lot in common, not the least books and writing. One day he asked me out.

So when people ask how we met, my mind wanders back to those cold days leaning over crates of books, my breath a noir-ish fog, the wind rattling the loose frost-glazed glass in the window panes, bundled beneath layers of dead people's coats. Mike, he just tells people, I found her at the Freestore.

Yellow Raincoats by Michelle Valois

We called them slickers. Mine was hard, yellow plastic, with a tear under one arm that we tried to tape but the tape came off in the rain. We had different names for things back then.

My father called films moving pictures. We called his mother, our grandmother, Mémay. I once called my father a mold maker, but my mother explained that my father was a tool and die maker. I asked the difference, and she told me that a tool and die maker was a man with a trade. We called that sweet, carbonated beverage soda and then grew up to laugh at words like tonic and pop and soft drink. I always wondered about soft drink and also hard liquor. My father called those tiny bottles of whiskey and rum nips or sometimes toots. He'd take them fishing. They fit in his tackle box.

My other grandmother, not the French one, we called her Grandma, but my mother called her Mary. She called the woman who gave her life her real mother and the woman who raised her Mary. My mother's real mother died when my mother was nine.

Mary, some might call her step-mother, sewed and cleaned and cooked and made sure the children went to Sunday mass—though she herself was not Catholic—and kept the family together during the height of the Great Depression and stayed with the children’s father, my grandfather, who beat and belittled her. Today she might be called an abused woman, the situation domestic violence.

My grandparents are gone now, my father, too. It is a very different world that I inhabit, in some ways. I have three children, but by some accounts, I am not their real mother. I did not give them life or carry them inside my body or nurse them with my milk. They call me Ma. It was one of the first sounds the first child made so I claimed it for myself to feel chosen, to feel real, and because my father called his mother Ma. The children call my partner, their other mother—real, by some accounts—Mommy, though just the other day the eldest declared that she might start calling her Mom.

My mother, whom I also call Mom, is not legally blind but can only see out of one eye. She has had to give up knitting and driving and working, her independence, her once full life. The other night she told me about spool knitting, which she did as a child.

It was winter and my grandmother, Mary, herself barely twenty, had ordered the younger children outside. It was a hard, biting cold, so my mother and her sisters took their play into the landlord's barn. There they found a box of yarn. To keep them amused or to get them out of her hair, Mary had taught them how to use a knitting spool, which my grandfather made by hammering three nails, equal distance from each other, on the top of an empty spool. Using a crochet hook, some yarn, and a lot of patience, the children could actually knit things—doilies, pot holders, baby blankets—each piece unraveled after completion since the box of yarn from the landlord's barn was the only yarn they had.

Before my next visit, I stop at a craft store to buy my mother a spool knitter. The young man at the store has never heard of such a thing. Later, I learn all the different names for my mother's childhood toy: knitting nancy, bizzzy lizzy, corker, peg knitter, bobbin doll, bobbin knitter, French knitter, doll knitter, punniken, patdocket, strick spiel, corking doll, knitting knobby, knitting mushroom, knitting bobbin. Finally, I discover something called a wonder knitter.

My mother tears open the package. The bright colors of the wonder knitter make it easy for her to distinguish the parts from the whole: the pegs from

the spool from the green yarn, the only skein left from a lifetime of filling and emptying baskets of yarn in every color, texture, and fiber content.

She is awkward at first. Her blue-veined hands and crooked fingers fumble with the green yarn. Every part of her is trying to remember how the spool works. She doesn't read the directions; she relies on instinct and memory. It's been nearly seventy-five years since she has held such a tool in her hand.

I watch her fingers hold the bright yellow hook that came in the package. All things are illuminated under the stark light of her magnifying reading lamp. She is patient. Within a half hour, she has knitted six inches of braided wool. She wants to get one for my daughter. Imagine, she tells me, how proud Grandma would be, her great-grand daughter learning to use a spool knitter.

Yesterday, in an early morning drizzle, I walked the children to the bus stop. Up ahead I saw a gathering of yellow raincoats. My old one, I remember, had a hole in the pocket. One morning, I put my favorite matchbox car in the pocket and walked to school. Along the way, it fell through the hole and was lost forever.

People called me a tomboy, a name I wore like a badge of honor. Today, I suppose I am called middle aged.

As we near the bus stop, I can make out three separate yellow-coated children huddled together. I wonder if I can find a yellow slicker in my size and what I would call it if I did—and what would fall through the pocket and what would be lost forever.

The Razored Truth: My Journey from Rape into Survival

by Janna Vought

I was raped. Yes, rape, that dirty four letter word that makes people cringe with discomfort. Yes, rape, the one crime that perpetuates itself throughout the generations, victimizing women over and over again. Yes, rape, the ultimate act of savage domination. Rape. I joined the ranks of hundreds of thousands of women around the world who are swallowed into the bowels of the beast the moment another forces their way into their sacred heart, uninvited—unwanted.

Every two minutes a woman in the United States is raped. My two minutes came when I was fifteen, vulnerable and naive to the reality women face: the constant presence of the threat of victimization. One hundred and twenty seconds reshaped my destiny. One thirtieth of an hour destroys. Two minutes—an eternity. In those brief moments, the time it takes to brush your teeth, call a friend, savor a slice of cake, read three pages in a Stephen King book, watch the sun set over the Rocky Mountains, swim a lazy circle in a tranquil pool, my world collapsed. Two minutes—

a drop of rain in midnight pools glistening on the sidewalk after the storm—nothing.

A number holds no meaning. The occurrence of even one sexual assault is one too many. Statistics do nothing more than sterilize the personal element of crime, the stories of the people suffered, a face to place with a position on a chart, a news report, or a regurgitation of fact. Two minutes begat my journey into Hell.

I knew about rape. As a teenager in the late eighties, I believed sexual assault only happened to older women who lived alone or naive little girls. There was no sex offender registry, no understanding of preventative concepts like never allowing your drink out of your sight at parties or holding your keys out as a weapon against a possible attack. I watched films in health class depicting a stranger lurking in the shadows, waiting as a frail and defenseless adolescent walks down the street, her nose buried in a library book, travelling from some unknown location where people loved and cherished her. He stepped out from the bushes, or car, or whatever other camouflage prop he chose to use, offering her candy, a toy, or her picture in a magazine. I knew the stories: don't talk to strangers, never get in a vehicle with someone you don't know, yell "fire!" if someone tries

to grab you on the street, never let yourself be taken to a second location. It was a mantra repeated endlessly to classrooms filled with adolescent girls—fear the stranger, he desires vile deeds—but I felt immune to the advances of sexual pariahs that roamed the streets. Rapes happened in dark alleys, abandoned cars, or in bedrooms on quiet streets that hid families' secret shame, not to me.

Never once, ever, did any health teacher or gym instructor, or even our mothers mention the danger hiding among us, the bright-eyed young misses who dreamed of finding their prince charming in the halls of their high school, unaware of the danger looming—acquaintance rape. I, too, held onto those fantasies of love found in the lunchroom across the pizza buffet, or at the Sadie Hawkins dance, when I, the beautiful and daring girl approached the mysterious dark-eyed boy standing across the dimly lit gymnasium festooned with balloons and cascades of crepe paper and asked him to dance. I was no different than the rest. I engaged in the rebellious, yet typical behaviors for a young woman my age: I thwarted the attempts of my overtly strict parents who sought to keep me chained to my innocence, I drank at parties, I skipped a class now and again to drive to a neighboring school to watch the varsity football team practice,

played volleyball in the park, or stayed out past my curfew. I bolted through my adolescence without pause, embracing each new experience with vigor. How was I to know that a friend would exploit such innocence?

There is nothing unique or special about my assault. I was not grabbed off the street, taken to a hidden location and molested. An intruder did not break into my parents' house and rape me. My attacker was someone I saw in the halls of my school every day. I talked to him, laughed at his boyish pranks, cheered for him at soccer games. I made the mistake of assuming that no harm comes from those we know—trust.

I learned my harsh reality at a party on Valentine's Day. I made all the mistakes of the "classic" rape victim: I allowed myself to become separated from my group, I drank alcohol that inhibited my thinking skills and ability to react to danger in a timely fashion, I wore clothing that revealed the right amount of my blossoming form. Phil was there. Phil was a junior at my school, a popular soccer player whose dark shock of hair and olive eyes made him most popular among the female population. My heart skipped as he flashed me a smile embedded in a mass of metal, braces covering his perfect teeth. My infatuation with him

permeated the marijuana-stained air. He detected my scent: drunk, isolated, yearning for his company. He wove his way through the sea of gyrating figures rubbing against each other to the pounding music searing through the small stereo, straight to me: "Hi, Janna, what's up?"

"I'm just looking for my friends. Have you seen them?"

"Nope. Do you want me to help you find them?"

"Sure," I said, a shy smile stealing across my face. I tried to maintain my composure, but my stomach swelled with surging anxiety. All the alcohol I had consumed clouded my mind, mixed with the intoxicating smoke wafting about the room. My head paddled through the fog trying to grasp the situation unfolding around me.

Phil pressed his hand against the small of my back, guiding me toward a group of boys crouched around a keg, trying to run the tap. Next to them, a table held rows of cups filled with beer. Phil grabbed two off of the table and handed me one. I tilted my head back and opened my throat and let the tepid liquid flow. I handed him the empty cup and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "Impressive," he said, grinning at me with his metallic smile. He set the cups down and grabbed my hand, leading me away.

My eyes blurred the images before me. Vague shadows faded in and out of my gaze, each figure unrecognizable to me. I felt a dense pressure in the back of my head. Between the alcohol I shared with my friends in the car, and all of the cups of beer at the party, I lost track of my consumption. I tried to form my mouth around words, but my lips suffered from paralysis. All I could muster was a string of incoherent mumbles. I felt Phil beside me, but my eyes could not focus on his face, his olive eyes. I noticed the pressure of his hand on my back increasing, pressing me forward with urgency. "Where are we going?" I asked, stumbling over feet shuffling around the floor to the latest song raging through the speakers. No answer, or at least, none that I recognized. His other hand gripped my shoulder, steering me towards a door at the back of the room. As we reached the threshold, I made out the silhouette of my friend Deann on the couch, smoking a joint with a group of people. "It's Deann!" I slurred. I tried to wave, but Phil grabbed my hand, pushing it down to my side. He reached in front of me and opened the door. I peered into the darkness, unable to see anything. The hand at my back pushed me in—swallowed up in the pitch.

The only sound in the room was the click of the lock on the doorknob and my labored breathing. I tried to

gather my thoughts, assess the situation, but I had no time. The dark bore two hands that shoved me down onto a bed. The combination of the alcohol and second hand marijuana smoke rendered me defenseless, my synapses firing a split second too late. As if in a dream, I hovered outside of my body, watching the horror unfold. He shoved my pants down around my calves, pulling at the hose I wore underneath. He fell on top of my motionless frame, a suffocating pressure on my chest. I tried to scream, but my voice fled the scene, escaping into the night for self-preservation. He covered my mouth with his, flicking his tongue in and out as a viper samples the air for its prey. He tasted like beer and cigarettes. I gagged from the wretched combination. With a heave and thrust, pain exploded from within, a fire burning so hot and deep it robbed me of my breath. No sound escaped me, the only noise coming from the black was a low guttural moan—the devil inside me.

When he finished, he pushed himself off the bed, releasing my constricted lungs. I took a deep breath; I searched for virgin air. He switched on the overhead light in the room and exposed my devastation. "Get up," he said, a smug smile on his face, his eyes cold and dead. I rose off the bed and pulled on my clothes, humiliated as he stood and watched me. As I

buttoned up my shirt, the one selected with such care earlier in the night, he swung open the door and beckoned to one of his friends standing outside the door. He walked in, glancing at me and then the rumpled bed, a small red stain among the floral print revealed Phil's conquest, "All right! You popped her!" his friend Scotty whooped, slapping Phil on the back. Phil looked at me with indifference, rubbish now worn and used, and walked out the door. Nothing special or unique, just an average rape.

Rape fleshes itself with the souls entombed within. It feeds off their vulnerability, guilt, fear—disgrace. It pulsates with energy spent hiding truths and concealing names. My rape was a fully functioning entity. It had a belly engorged with my life, a hearty meal that it ingested that night. Its arms reached forth from the darkness to encircle me in a stifled embrace. Its head burst with my memories. It followed me. It taunted me. It tucked me into bed every night. I gave it life, supplied it breath with each tortured exhalation. I kept it beside me at all times. I never left home without it. It was the only thing that understood my pain—my sole companion.

The Photo Finish by Sheila Morris

In 1965 when I was a freshman in college my parents bought their first home ever in Rosenberg, Texas, after almost twenty years of marriage. My dad was the assistant superintendent of the local school district and my mother taught second grade in one of the elementary schools in the district. Since I wasn't living with them, I'm not sure how the decision was made to hire someone to help with cleaning the bigger new house, but when I was home for spring break, my mom introduced me to Viola, who was hired for that purpose. When I returned to stay the summer with my folks, Viola was gone.

I never knew what happened to Viola but was so self-absorbed I didn't really care. Early in the summer Mom informed me we would have a new woman who was coming to work for us and encouraged me to keep the stereo at a lower volume on the lady's first visit. I was in a Diana Ross and the Supremes phase and preferred the speakers to vibrate as I sang along but I obligingly lowered the level for our potential new household addition.

I needn't have bothered. Willie Meta Flora stepped into our house and lives and rocked all of us for more

than forty-five years. She became my mother's truest friend and supported her through the deaths of her mother, brother and two husbands. She nursed my grandmother and my dad and uncle during their respective battles with mental illness, colon cancer and cerebral palsy. She watched over and protected and loved and cared for my family as she did her own, which included five daughters and two sons and an absentee husband. In many ways, we became her second family and she chose to keep us.

Willie and my mom shared a compulsion for honesty and directness that somehow worked to keep them close through the good times and the hard times in both of their lives. They were stubborn strong women and butted heads occasionally, but most of all, they laughed together. Willie's sense of humor and quick wit kept Mom on her toes and at the top of her game in their talks. They also shared a deep love for the same man, my dad. In her own way, Willie loved my dad as much as Mom did, and my father loved her and loved being with her right back. His death broke both their hearts.

Although Willie kept her own apartment, she and Mom basically lived together in the years following the death of Mom's second husband. Mom planned her days around the time near dusk when Willie would be

there to spend the night with her. Willie became her lifeline to maintaining her independence, and the two of them grew older and crankier as time passed. Willie and I talked on the phone frequently, and she began to tell me she was worried about Mom's safety and getting lost when she drove around town in her old brown Buick LeSabre. I dismissed her fears and ignored the signs of dementia until Mom's 80th birthday when it became apparent she had major problems in everyday living.

Not long afterwards, I was forced to make a decision about my mother's long term care needs and opted to move her to a Memory Care Unit in a facility in Houston which was a thousand miles from my home in South Carolina. Why not move her closer to me? A good question with a complicated answer that included my trying to keep her available to Willie and her family who could drive Willie to see Mom. If my mother could choose between visiting with me or seeing Willie, there was no contest. I would always come in second.

Mom will be 85 next month and struggles with the ongoing physical and mental battles associated with Alzheimer's in her ultimate race towards death. This past fall I moved her again to a different residence that is still in Texas but much closer to my second

home which is also now in Texas. Alas, she's two hours farther from Willie, and Willie has only been able to visit her once since her move.

Willie will be 81 next month. She and Mom have the same birthday month, and now they have the same disease. We don't talk on the phone now because she can't form words I can understand. When I visited her yesterday, she didn't recognize me and was uncomfortable with getting up out of her bed, just as Mom is sometimes when I go to see her. Willie's five daughters and three of her granddaughters are coping with the same problems I've faced with Mom—trying to keep her comfortable in a safe environment. They have the additional complications of differences of opinion about Willie's care and what the environment should be. I decided being an only child has a few advantages.

When I consider the strength of these two women and their determination to rise above their inauspicious beginnings in an era when women weren't valued for their strong wills, I feel a sense of admiration and respect and gratitude for the examples they've been for me and for Willie's daughters, too. We are the children of our mothers and we reflect their strengths and weaknesses in black and white. Theirs was a mysterious bond that we may never fully understand,

but the similarity of their physical and mental conditions in these last days is surreal and takes irony to a new dimension. Leora, one of Willie's daughters, told me recently she thought Mom and Willie just might end their race toward death in a tie. I think it will be a photo finish.

A sad but apropos postscript: Wille M. Flora died April 14, 2012. Selma L. Meadows died Wednesday April 25, 2012.

Sleep Baby, Sleep by Amy Herting

The words reach out through the years to touch the heart of every parent in any age. The grave is weathered, ornate and stands out in stark contrast to the precise military markers that surround it. It catches my eye and I am compelled to pull over and take a look. Marjorie Graves sleeps forever in the company of soldiers at Ft. Logan National Cemetery. She lived from 1892-1894, the daughter of William S. and Katherine Graves. On her left lies her brother in a grave simply marked “Infant 1891”. The loss is so enormous that I can feel the echo of grief calling across a century. Not able to think of him as “Infant”, I decide to call him Billy—in honor of his father while also remembering mine.

I have come on this crisp fall day to visit my dad, Robert J. Cooper, who has been resting at Ft. Logan since July of 2005. He died a peaceful, premature death in his sleep at 63. As I drive past Marjorie and the endless white rows of heroes, I’m thankful that Dad is joined with them in the still beauty of this place. His military service had a profound effect upon his life and—as seems fitting—his death. After a raucous youth, my father found purpose in the special brotherhood of the US Marine Corps. At 17, he was

introduced to an exciting new life that was worlds away from the concrete existence of his Chicago upbringing. He served as a guard at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, was a Marine escort for John Glenn's 1962 Homecoming Parade and stood watch at the fence of Guantanamo Bay on the brinkmanship of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He went to Vietnam in the early days of that conflict and was wounded in the line of duty—all before the age of 25. He received a medal for that service but never felt it was necessary for “just doing his job.” He eventually left the Corps, started a career and fell in love. He led a full life but never lost the pride of being a Marine. My childhood was filled with Chesty Puller, “The D.I.”, and the amazing feats of the brave Devil Dogs who are always the first to arrive on the field of battle. At first it seemed a shame that his only child was a girl, but he loved me with the fierce intensity that was his nature.

Fathers and daughters hold a special bond. I wonder about William S. Graves and his Marjorie. Did he cherish her all the more for having lost his son the year before? Did they delight in her first wobbly steps on the frontier military outpost that was Colorado? What claimed the life of little Marjorie, beloved baby eternally sleeping? I think of the faces of my own two daughters and the blue eyes of my precious baby

boy. I remember my dad and how I still miss him every day. I drive away from Marjorie and Billy, but I cannot forget them. They haunt my dreams, and I must try to find out who they were. Maybe I can also find a salve for my grief in the process.

I learn that Major General William Sidney Graves had quite a distinguished career in the US Army. Starting out as a teacher, he later decided to attend West Point Academy in 1884. Recognized for his leadership potential, he was posted to Ft. Logan in 1891 where he met his wife, Katherine Boyd, and had four children. He served in many capacities throughout his career, always steadily rising in rank. He was promoted to Captain of Infantry in 1899 and was cited for gallantry fighting insurgents in the Philippine Island battle of Caloocan in 1901. He helped with relief efforts after the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Later on he would become secretary of the General Staff in Washington as well as Assistant Chief of Staff of the Army. At the onset of war, he was chosen by President Woodrow Wilson for a covert European mission that would pave the way for our involvement in World War I. By then, Brigadier General Graves became Major General Graves as he took over the command of the 8th Infantry Division in 1917. President Wilson, under pressure from the

Allies, decided to send troops to Russia in order to open up an “Eastern Front” that would serve to divert the Germans from the main front in Europe. He sent Major General Graves to Siberia to guard the Trans-Siberian Railway and serve US interests with all the different factions there. It was a difficult post requiring diplomatic skills and restraint. Later on he would write a book about his experiences and concerns about the mission there called America’s Siberian Adventure 1918-1920. He would retire from his final post as commander of the Panama Canal Zone in 1928. He died in 1940 at 74. Katherine would join him at Arlington National Cemetery in 1957. He died on the eve of our entrance into World War II while my Dad would be born at its fiery beginning in 1941. Two men who served their country in very different times, bonded together through their valor. So much is owed to all those brave souls in a thousand Arlingtons and Ft. Logans, who laid down their lives or lived to tell the tales as old veterans. All the William S. Graves and Robert J. Coopers down through the centuries of America’s bold experiment will live on through their bravery and service—we must never forget them.

There is no mention in any of the biographies on William S. Graves of his lost children. I know that death was very common then—especially on the

Colorado frontier of the 1890's. His obituary listed his survivors as his wife and two children, a daughter, Dorothy Orton (wife of Colonel William R. Orton) and a son, Sidney C. Graves. I find a picture of his grave at Arlington and wonder about his children who lived. What did they grow up to become? How many grandchildren did they give him? Did they hear stories of their brother and sister still at Ft. Logan? I know that what happened to Marjorie has probably been lost forever in the mists of time. She and Billy would have been in the original Ft. Logan cemetery and moved to their present location years ago. What I do know as sure as anything, is the love of her parents found in the simple plea to "Sleep Baby, Sleep". It's enough for me to share that timeless love with my own children and also recognize it in the inscription added by my mom to dad's headstone: "My Life, My Love". We are all linked together in the human experience by that love that transcends death and in a way, conquers it. I bring flowers to Marjorie and Billy every time now when I visit dad. I look down the long, clean rows of graves and am filled with admiration for them. For all of us who are their families, for America. I leave a single pink rose at the grave of my father and say "Goodnight Chesty, wherever you are."

Black and White and Red All Over by Kristin Troyer

The tour was meant to deter us grade-schoolers, I guess, from slipping checkout-aisle candy bars in our pockets or from letting our friends drive drunk or from doing something truly terrible like joining the Mafia. Or maybe it was just to instill in us that cooperative attitude known to teachers as “appreciation” for our local law enforcement. A policeman (maybe his actual role was different, but I remember a uniform) let us peer through the unbreakable glass to the small colorless cement room with a toilet where arrestees stayed initially. Maybe there was a cot or a board in the wall for a bed, or maybe my memory is confusing the school tour with pictures I’ve seen of torture chambers.

No one is in the cell now, but my memory has juxtaposed this dull chamber with an image of my brother that I have never seen—bruised, stumbling, confused, belligerent, ratty t-shirt, ripped jeans slung low on his pelvis, laughing, arguing, shoulder-length curls matted together in a rubber band—a lot of detail for a scene conjured from imagination. I must imagine because no one ever told me, and I need the details. I wondered whether he was still unable to see straight

when they shoved him in here to wait out the first night, or if the impact had shaken some of the alcohol from his brain. Did anyone watch behind the wide window as he stumbled up against the naked toilet and there vomited (or maybe it was already out of his system by that point)? What a terrible place for a hangover, with the gray cement converging on an already spinning head.

Funny how gray is a mixture of black and white, and yet its monotony bears no witness to the harsh contrast between light and dark. If white is all colors and black, the absence of color, then is gray a color? It can't be. Colors spark and bite and whisper and mew and protest. Gray simply drones on in endless blah.

On days that my shirt is black or white or gray I usually add a colorful headband or a flower in my hair. Somehow a touch of red makes me feel more alive.

All Mom and Dad told us was that we had to pick up Stevan's truck in town. I thought then that I hadn't seen him in several days, but that was hardly unusual since he was often out late. My six-year-old sister and I rode along to the courthouse, curious as to our mission but sensing the need for silence with a childish intuition. Like any courthouse, ours has

imposing stone steps and carved letters with U's that look like V's, imprinting on my mind words such as eqvvs, eqvitas, and vnitas, probably none of which were actually etched in stone marquee around the basilica that held my brother.

Dad got out of the van, and when I thought Mom's forehead crease had lightened, I quietly asked why we were picking up Stevan's truck. I took her answer in stride, as I've taken most news since then, because I could think of no other response. "Oh. Okay. Is he okay?" Since we were uptown, we probably ate at Kewpee for lunch, the squashed greasy burgers and thick salty chili that had been the forerunner to Wendy's sloshing indigestibly in disillusioned stomachs.

I vacillated between which of my brothers was my favorite. Brent, nine years older than me, was closest to my age and let me play with his Micro Machines and would swing me by my arms through dizzying circles. Stevan and Seth were twins twelve years my elder. Stevan was funnier, but Seth taught me wrestling moves. Both let me play their Nintendo on occasion.

The truck, if I remember correctly, was peeling navy, with a band of skinny multi-colored stripes, dilapidated

to begin with and completely mutilated after its rendezvous with an oak tree.

Everyone knows the old joke that goes, “What is black and white and red all over?” Children are quite young when they first hear it, and when they confess their ignorance, the time has come for the wiser child or capricious adult to crow, “A newspaper! Get it? It’s read all over!” And the child blushes and wonders how she has missed such an obvious answer, secretly considering it unfair that the joke must be heard rather than seen. In ink the solution presents itself plainly, with stamped-out letters. Out loud, anyone could have made the same mistake.

In time I would learn to associate black-white-red with pleasanter things, like music. The ebony and ivory of piano keys, the crimson roses or carnations from my family, the satin sheen of concert black, the warmth of faces under hot stage lights: cool elegance and sharp contrast to stimulate the eye as well as the ear. The black and white are sensible, the red, exotic. For my high school senior recital, my outfit was red and white, and my sister left some of my curls in dark ringlets

around my face. It was my time, my show, and I was beautiful. My brothers, of course, wouldn't notice.

Stevan's six months were marked for us by "pay to stay" bills from the jail, white envelopes with cobalt writing that I handed to Dad without comment. This is the only incarceration I remember, though I have since gathered that he was in and out of jail for DUIs and drug possession for several years. My older sister mentions this casually, as if our brother's record is common knowledge. It is not. Sometimes at family dinners I can hear Seth or Brent toss out a suggestion of past trouble from the other end of the twelve-foot table, but a glower from Stevan usually terminates the sentiment. My sister's nonchalance sends a crawling, wormy sensation into my stomach.

I don't remember any doors clanging behind us, like in the movies, but there was a small waiting room with black padded chairs, where we bounced until the guards finally escorted us through even though my sister and I were technically too young. Aren't jumpsuits orange? Maybe Stevan actually wore orange when he appeared at the window booth, his sandy hair tangled into a snarling tight ponytail, but I remember stripes. Black and white. Good and bad. But now just bad. No crisp, clean distinction between

colors, just dirty smudges where white faded into black and back into light again, over and over, numbing in its repetition.

Recently Stevan asked if I remembered coming to visit him in jail. “Of course.” He was really mad at Dad, he said, for bringing his kid sisters to see him in jail. If the goal was to shame him, it worked. I was eight, I think, and Megan was six, and it was summer because I told Stevan over the echoing phone about my birthday. Between awkward pauses we made polite conversation, ignoring the black plastic wood of the cubicle and the muffled metallic clink of voices across the phone and the cigarette smoke wafting from the visitors flanking us, the families of actual criminals. The phone was black. The walls were white. My pale arms glowed against the dark cubicle. The stripes on his suit went black-white-whack-blite, like a straight-line version of those spiraling optical illusions. Strawberries. I had just turned eight. Was it a strawberry pie I had for my birthday, or chocolate cake with strawberries?

Strawberries were my favorite fruit and they seemed safe to talk about. Sun-burnt skins, miniscule hairy seeds that lodged in your molars, their oozing sugary juice would have contrasted richly against the white of the pie crust or the almost-black of chocolate cake,

redeeming the bland non-colors into rich vibrant taste. Stevan said my birthday dessert sounded delicious, and I envisioned myself rolling the pin over the wax paper and dough, lifting the round into its shallow dish and crimping the edges, stirring the mashed berries and cornstarch over medium heat until the mixture was clear, at last sliding the glowing pastry into the fridge to cool. One glance at its ruddy radiance and the grumpy officers would wave it on through in dazed silence, mindless of any opiates it may contain. My pie's presence would vivify this entire dingy institution, and return my family to normal.

Little Drops of Mutual Recognition by Jono Walker

I read *Gilead* a number of years ago, which means I've forgotten most of it, but it is, nonetheless, a book that bubbles into my conscious thoughts from time to time. It's written as a letter from an old Methodist Minister to his very young son. He lives in a forgotten little town in rural Kansas called Gilead, and he wants to write this letter because he realizes he won't live long enough to see his son grow up. I don't contemplate my life in precisely the same terms as this minister does, but as I read the book I found myself treading with him on plenty of common ground.

Mostly what I think about though when I think about *Gilead* is my Dad. From where I'm typing I can glance up and see its narrow spine wedged between some larger books, and what I see is Dad disappearing into the blueberry bushes along the fairway of the golf course in Maine searching for one of his errant drives. Another time when I look up I might catch a glimpse of him standing in the distance in front of a backstop on some muddy baseball field, tossing up a baseball and hitting me fly balls.

When Dad was alive we fought like crazy. He talked too much, which irritated me, and I was often dismissive towards him, which no doubt caused him no end of grief. The Vietnam years were especially stormy. We got into some real knock-down drag-outs in those days—on one occasion quite literally so, with a black eye and damaged furniture to show for it. We partook in no long conversations at any point in our lives. The only safe topics we could talk about tended to revolve around our mutual love of sports—how the Yankees were doing or if the Giants would ever get their act together again. I never remember him giving me fatherly advice. Actually, that's not true. What I remember is him giving me advice about one thing or another while I sat blocking it out.

Here's a bit from *Gilead* that I underlined:

“A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.”

I like that quotation. Though I'd alter it by adding the word “recognition.” I don't think it's contradictory for a father or a son to experience both mutual incomprehension and chances to share at least some occasional flashes of mutual recognition. Maybe if the old man in *Gilead* had been lucky enough to see his

son grow just a little older—or luckier still, see his son grow into a man and have a son of his own, maybe then he'd know what I am talking about.

One of the last memories I have of Dad is when he was elderly and walking with a cane. He and Mom were down on a visit, and I walked the old centerfielder over the long stretch of uneven grass to a seat on the bleachers where he could watch my son, Ben, play baseball. It was a blustery early April afternoon with a biting wind that made Dad's eyes get oozy, but not oozy enough to dampen their sparkle as he sat there leaning on the handle of his cane taking in the action and hearing baseballs cracking into gloves. At one of Ben's at bats he hit a screaming line drive over the second baseman's head that bounded out between the right and center fielders. As Ben got midway to second base, he looked over his shoulder, and when he saw that the right fielder bobbled the ball, he made his commitment to try and stretch his hit into a triple. We all knew that Ben was a fast runner, but when he put his head down and rounded second he notched it into a higher gear than I had ever seen before and was moving way faster than you would expect such an ungainly knobby-kneed 14 year old could run. I saw Dad lift himself up just slightly from his seat and heard a little sound catch in his throat

and I knew as Ben was streaking towards third, the wind rushing over Ben's face was blowing across Dad's face too, and that the crunchy feel of infield dirt being swallowed up by feathery baseball spikes was just then pressing up against the soles of his brittle old man's feet. Even though there wasn't a close play at the base, Ben slid anyway, but too hard, and awkwardly, so that he rolled over the bag and had to reach back to it with his hand.

When I sat back down and the excited chatter from the smattering of parents in the stands had quieted, Dad and I sat there side by side with our eyes fixed on Ben as he dusted off his uniform. When Dad spoke, he didn't offer any words of praise. Nothing like that. All he said was, and just loud enough so that only I could hear, "When are ya gonna teach that kid how to slide?"

Some people, especially daughters and moms might not understand this, but I'm telling you that these little drops of mutual recognition—which may only have materialized from time to time—raised the river of my father's and my mutual incomprehension just high enough to keep us from wrecking on the rocks. Moments like these kept us floating together in the sometimes swirling currents in what turned out to

be—astoundingly enough—the same general direction.

Indeed, whenever I come up gulping and look around for a place of safe purchase, I can see Dad...just there, riding the currents with me still.

My Mother's Marbles by Jono Walker

My mother Joy was a fearless body surfer and taught me to be one too. There wasn't a wave we would hesitate to swim out to in any weather short of hurricane force winds at any point along the two miles of beach at Biddeford Pool. Stretching out in the clear hollow of a towering breaker and seeing your shadow appear for a split second on the sandy bottom just before everything crashes down in a pandemonium of sound and foam is such a rush. We'd fight through the icy undertows looking for the next great ride until our feet could no longer feel the sand and our lips were blue as crabs. But Joy wasn't just about daring and speed. She had a contemplative side and was an inveterate explorer of tidal pools with a life-long collection of blue and green sea glass that will never be surpassed in terms of color and opaque purity. No raw edges in her collection. Nothing see-through. Every piece different. Each one perfect.

Her grandfather was an Episcopal Minister who built the church that now stands on the golf course in what was just a sleepy fishing village before President Taft decided to make Biddeford Pool the location of his summer White House. This turned the place into a

kind of secluded resort for extremely wealthy people from Ohio...and us. When my mom and her brother and sisters were small and August rolled around they'd all pile into the car in Westport at the crack of dawn for the trip up the old Post Road to Biddeford. Driving to Maine was a grueling ordeal back then. There were traffic lights and an endless succession of small town Main Streets to get through so that by the time they got past the city of Biddeford and were pointed out the Shore Road, the sun would be getting ready to set and they'd be ready to kill one another. But once they made the hairpin turn at Fortune's Rocks and managed to get the windows rolled down, that first wonderful whiff of sea air would fill the car and wash away all the road grit and any lingering thoughts of fratricide. Off they'd trundle down the Stretch Road with the Pool on their left and the ocean dunes on their right. At the end of the isthmus, just up the hill and around the corner from Crowley's lobster pound and Goldswaithe's general store, they'd pile out of the car stamping the numbness from their legs on the painted wooden porch where their grandparents would welcome them to the Rectory, a modest clapboard house wedged between grand summer homes out on Bay View Avenue.

In those days the big three-story hotel maintained a boardwalk that carved a mile-long loop around the point, which was where the Reverend took his morning constitutionals with grandchildren in tow. The first side of the loop took them through canyons of scruffy pines and bayberry bushes offering bright blue glimpses of the little islands dotting the bay of Maine. When the pathway spilled them into an open field, the ocean was spread before them on all three sides, walking now straight towards the spot Mom used to call “The End of the World”. On good days the pounding surf on the ocean side of the point sent up rainbow mists that hazed upon their hair and onto the shoulders of their sweaters. As they began their return to the Rectory, the sun would be just high enough to ripple the air above the slats of the boardwalk. Tracing through the tall grass, breezes from the sea bowed the shafts of Goldenrod and sent Queen Anne’s Lace genuflecting to their feet.

When I was a kid some things began to change, but Maine was still Maine. The hotel was converted into a Catholic retreat (locals dubbed it “The Nunnery”) and the boardwalk around the point was left to rot except for a few splintery sections that remained half buried in the clumps of sea grass along the inside arch of Little Beach. Gardeners working for the people living

in the enormous mansions that were eventually built out on the point started dumping grass clippings and kitchen scraps onto mulch piles that were strategically placed where the boardwalk used to be on the far edges of the long sweeping lawns. It was a deliberate attempt to discourage recalcitrant point walkers like us, but that didn't put an end to our ritual. We just skirted around the steaming piles of debris determined to keep the public right-of-way open until years later when my kids were small and the mulch piles had finally grown too big and the bayberry and the scratchy beach plum bushes around them had become completely impenetrable, forcing us, at last, onto the beach for our morning strolls.

I was around ten and my sister Mary Paul was seven and my older sister Joanie was fifteen when we all took a break from the beach one afternoon and drove out as a family to Fortunes Rocks. We wanted to do some sleuthing around a big abandoned stone mansion that was about to be bulldozed to make way for the dozens of seaside homes you see there today. When we got to the long driveway of the old estate there was a chain with a NO TRESPASSING sign blocking our way. We got out of the car and peered down the drive. Dad wouldn't go any further, of course, but he knew there'd be no talking Mom out of

it so after some weak protestations, he simply threw up his hands and drove himself back to the beach.

That left the four of us free to jump the chain and creep towards the run-down house. Nobody had mowed all summer so the sun-warmed grass directly around the place was up to our knees and tickly. Joy suspected the house was headquarters to a Russian spy ring, and sure enough, when we stepped onto the porch and pressed our faces up against the dusty windows something moved from behind the pieces of furniture covered in bed sheets. Or maybe we heard something, but whatever it was it scared the beach sand right out of our bathing suits and sent us scampering to the safety of the rocks out on the point.

The red seaweed made the going slippery but we managed to get to a place where we were hidden from the sniper hiding behind the curtain in the attic window. Taking cover among the heaves of sun-bleached granite we looked out across the long arc in the shoreline and could just make out the Biddeford Pool beach through the summer haze in the distance. The row of cottages nestled in the dunes along the Stretch looked like little pieces of ribbon tied to the tail of a kite trailing towards the grey, box-shaped Nunnery taking flight over the last thin shimmering line of white sand. Beyond the Nunnery the tree line

sloped to the old Coast Guard Station tower where the rocks at the end of Fletcher's Neck pointed like a ghost blue finger out into the ghost blue sea.

Meanwhile, we had a job to do. The seagulls stirred into flight by our earlier shrieks were settled back on the water riding the gentle swells along with the bright confetti of the lobster buoys, while somewhere just below we knew a Russian sub was silently circling. The sun was hot on our backs as we formulated a plan. It was my little sister Mary Paul who found the piece of sea glass that just might do the trick. Early that morning, when we were walking on the beach we passed a nun. We often saw nuns taking their morning strolls, but there was something a little different about this particular one. Maybe her habit was a bit askew, or maybe she winked at us, but in any event she looked like someone who could be relied upon, and sure enough when Joanie flashed our signal, the earnest sister with the tortoise shell glasses was at her post on the roof of the nunnery far across the water. She signaled back a message with her trusty compact mirror: "Coast Guard Alerted."

Mom lived the last of her days sitting in a chair in a place called Maplewoods. It was nice there and for a while a remote part of her brain could be summoned upon to belt out Sinatra tunes at the Snowflake Teas,

but the old girl—who cheerfully admitted in a rare moment of cognitive clarity that she had lost just about all her marbles—was soon running on nothing but the microdots of distant memories. Her eyes grew good and dulled by a life well spent. One time, even though she couldn't have told me what she ate ten minutes ago for lunch or name any of her grandchildren in the photos hanging on her wall or even remotely comprehend the fact she now had four great grandchildren, I caught her looking over at her mason jar of sea glass sitting on the windowsill and could see something bright and clear flickering across her eyes. Some faint synapses deep inside her clouded brain were letting in gentle breezes from summers long since passed. She was walking again through tidal pools. Suddenly, an icy wave came sluicing between the rocks and splashed white and foamy around her ankles making them ache for a second before sucking back out to sea over a chattering bed of small glittery stones. Maybe that was what I saw and remembered too.

“No,” she said to Mary Paul who had proudly snatched up the piece of glass left behind by the retreated wave, “the edges on this one aren't smooth enough yet. Don't you see? It will work fine for our signal but we'll need to throw it back.”

Let some other little girl come and find it later, when
it's good and ready...

Fortune Cookies by Rebecca Marks

I have never considered myself to be an overly sentimental person. While I pin old Playbills from my favorite Broadway shows to my bulletin board, I have never been a scrapbook keeper or a superb memory preserver. The movie ticket stub from my first date is nothing but a fond memory, and my camera generally lies untouched and forgotten in a desk drawer. Of the half a dozen diary entries I actually committed to paper in my youth, the most exciting one reads, "Dear Diary, I felt sort of barfy (sic) today. Mommy gave me some Saltines. I hope tomorrow is fun. Love, Rebecca Gayle Marks." My elaborate calligraphic signature takes up nearly as much space on the page as the scintillating entry itself. I do, however, maintain one sentimental practice: the preservation of years' worth of fortunes from fortune cookies.

I have always loved fortune cookies. In truth, I have yet to meet a cookie that I did not adore; complex carbohydrates and I share a deep, enduring bond of love and commitment. Fortune cookies, however, have always been a favorite of mine. From the rare opportunity to play with my food to the sweet, buttery

taste melting on my tongue, these confections are truly excellent from start to finish.

For someone who has always lived with major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, fortune cookies have taken on a particularly meaningful role. These multifaceted desserts are my unscratched lottery tickets, magically holding the promise of wealth and prosperity. When cracking open the cookie's sugary shell to uncover the clairvoyant slip of paper within, I become the treasure hunter about to unearth an elusive chest overflowing with riches. When your life is largely characterized by sadness, the fortune cookie's ability to deliver the promise of a better tomorrow becomes an incomparable treasure. Dozens of these small slips of paper float about my room, resting in the bottom of forgotten wallets and nestling in the deep recesses of unused drawers. My favorites assume a place of honor, featured prominently above my desk where I can view them daily. Of the hundreds of fortunes that I have encountered in my lifetime, three have played an especially prominent role.

The first came to me while celebrating my younger sister's ninth birthday at a local Chinese restaurant. Due to my life-threatening peanut allergy, I must be hyper-vigilant at Chinese

restaurants as several traditional dishes contain nuts. I was dining on an innocuous bowl of chicken lo mein when the restaurant staff brought a tantalizing chocolate birthday cake to our table. The glowing candles atop the sugary confection emphasized the rich frosting and chocolate chips sprinkled across the top. Our waiter delivered the cake sans singing or general merriment, as my sister has been known to run from the table crying hysterically if anyone sings “Happy Birthday” to her. All birthday photos of Shana up until the age of six display red-rimmed, swollen eyes and a tentative half-smile. As my sister blew out her candles, my father inquired to our waiter whether the cake contained nuts.

“Why, yes,” the waiter replied eagerly. “Our chocolate fudge black-out cake is filled with a hazelnut crème ganache.”

While the waiter’s eyes twinkled, basking in the glow of this gourmet display, three other sets of eyes shifted nervously to me. Their owners knew that I would now face the daunting task of watching my mother, father and sister dine on a scrumptious looking cake without being able to touch it. Not a simple feat for an eleven-year-old lover of all things sweet. I couldn’t very well demand that my nine-year-old sister send back her birthday cake (though I

considered it), so I dejectedly poked at my leftover noodles with a splintered chopstick while my family enjoyed their mouthwatering dessert. I was confident that if I didn't complain and played my cards right, I'd be treated to fruit sorbet upon our arrival home.

After the torturous treat was consumed, our waiter brought the check and a pile of fortune cookies to our table. Finally, I thought to myself, a smile broadening across my face. Here was a dessert in which I too could take part. As I eagerly tore open the plastic wrapper and split the cookie in two, my fortune fluttered to the table.

"What does your fortune say, Becca?" inquired my mother.

Unraveling the slip of paper reverently, I read aloud, dumbfounded, "You can have your cake and eat it, too."

After a few moments of silent uncertainty, my family and I burst into laughter. The juxtaposition of an eleven-year-old having to watch other people eat a beautiful, undoubtedly delectable chocolate cake to which she was allergic and a fortune reading "You can have your cake and eat it, too" was utterly hilarious. While it was my sister who was celebrating a birthday and enjoying rich deliciousness, I was the

one who walked away with the true gift that night. I learned firsthand that laughter truly is the best medicine. I didn't know it then, but this prescription would prove invaluable later down the line.

Fast forward to my sophomore year of college. My sorority was celebrating welcoming a new member class into our organization. After an exhausting day of bubbly name games and bouncing on trampolines in matching, neon sweatshirts, we were all thrilled when dinner arrived. The new member coordinator had ordered half a dozen varieties of noodles, several of which contained nuts. The members of my sorority were all well aware of my nut allergy, so I was permitted to jump to the front of the line and serve myself first. Avoiding a line of a hundred ravenous sorority girls and tearing into the macaroni and cheese first is definitely one of the few benefits of having allergies. After heaping a generous portion of al dente pasta and creamy cheddar cheese onto my paper plate, I took my first warm, salty bite. Immediately, my teeth bit down on something crunchily out of place and reminiscent of Asian cuisine. I knew that the restaurant had sent us several orders of pad Thai as well, so I was immediately terrified that I had unknowingly ingested a cross-contaminated peanut. My eyes wide and my face

stricken with obvious panic, my friend Katie worriedly asked me what was wrong. After violently spitting out the bite in question, I pointed to the chewed up food and shouted, “I think I just ate a peanut!” Without blinking an eye, Katie plucked the regurgitated noodle from my napkin and popped it into her mouth. Her brow furrowed in deep concentration, she eventually announced, “Not peanut, bean sprout.” This impressive display of unconditional friendship would not mark the last time that Katie would swoop in as my knight in shining yoga pants.

At the end of the school year, I reluctantly drove Katie to the airport so she could return home to Chicago for the summer. After a tearful embrace at passenger drop-off, I returned home and settled down at my desk for some last minute studying for final exams. Sitting on top of my computer was a pale yellow post-it note inscribed with the words “Love you - Miss you” in Katie’s neat handwriting. Taped to the post-it note was a fortune with the word “bean sprout” typed in Arial 12 on the “Learn Chinese” side of the paper. Laughing warmly to myself, I smiled and pinned the note to my bulletin board where it has remained ever since. Whenever I look at it, I think of the friend who was miraculously brought into my life, just as

serendipitously as she stumbled across a fortune cookie containing the word “bean sprout”.

The following year, my mental health took a dangerous turn for the worse. I remember the day distinctly—February 6, 2012. The impetus for my almost lethal overflow of emotions is essentially irrelevant; the combination of my chronic depression, overwhelming anxiety, a dash of obsessive-compulsive disorder and complete lack of medication meant that hitting rock bottom was completely and tragically inevitable.

As tears streamed down my face like turbulent floodwater spewing forth from a fractured dam, I fell deeper into the dark and dangerous depths of hopelessness. I became increasingly certain that the situation would never improve and utterly positive that I would never truly know happiness. Feeling wholly defeated and desperate, I did not think that I had the strength to continue living and fighting.

I paced back and forth across my small room, feeling my nervous energy churning throughout my body with absolutely no outlet. As I continued to wear lines in the dated carpet, my eyes settled on a bottle of pills. The ordinarily harmless ibuprofen that I often mindlessly swallowed to combat headaches and body

cramps suddenly become a horrifyingly tempting deadly weapon. While I had experienced thoughts of suicide regularly for the past several years, this situation was unprecedented. For the first time, I felt there was a scarily real possibility that my life would end that night at my own hand. In this damaged state, I decided that this was my destiny, so I may as well get it over with before accumulating more hurt and sadness. As terrifying thoughts of overdose and impossible letters to friends and family menacingly swirled through my head, a life-saving *deus ex machina* in the form of my best friend intervened.

Stopping by my room to see if I'd like to study together, Katie immediately took note of my condition and stepped in. "I am not leaving your side. Period." As Katie took control of the situation, I felt relief wash over my body. The tiny white off-brand analgesic drugs instantly transformed from a lethal device back into harmless pain reliever. I was immensely thankful that my life had been saved, but angry and confused that I had been the one about to destroy it.

Two hours and one emergency phone call later, Katie dropped me off at my home thirty minutes away into the open arms of my mother. Armed only with a pillow and a haphazardly packed suitcase, I saw my world turn upside down. I had gone from the well-

accomplished college student at the top of my class to a mental patient living at home. In that moment, I felt that I was no longer the successful, independent woman of whom my family was so proud. I was the daughter, the sister, the granddaughter, the cousin, the niece and the friend who had almost taken her own life. I was the girl who was almost gone. While I was still miserably unhappy, I was determined to get my illnesses in order and above all, continue living.

One exhaustingly long month of waiting later, and I was admitted into a partial-hospitalization intensive therapy program. Every Monday through Friday, I spent seven hours in a hospital to develop stress management and coping skills and an effective medication regimen.

The first morning of the program felt completely surreal. Who was this person bringing a sack lunch and emergency anti-anxiety pills to a mental hospital? When I looked in the mirror of the hospital bathroom that didn't even lock, I didn't recognize my own reflection.

After going far too long without cracking a smile or emitting so much as a giggle, I discovered that my therapist for the program sat on an enormous bouncy ball rather than a desk chair. As I tearfully described

what brought me to this low point in my life, Cindy nodded earnestly and continued to ricochet back and forth on her bright red alternative-seating device. I quickly discovered that the words “suicide attempt” sound substantially less frightening when punctuated by constant squeaks. Little by little, bouncy squeak by bouncy squeak, I felt the glorious soreness from smiling too widely return to my cheeks. As I wiped tears of laughter from my eyes while recounting the nonsensical tale to my family, I realized that this moment of much needed humor constituted the best medicine I had ever received. For the first time since that heartbreakingly dark sixth of February, I felt the tiniest beam of sunlight fight its way through the clouds and reach my skin.

Later that week, my mother and I were eating at a Chinese restaurant. As I licked remnants of sweet and sour sauce from my lips, I split my fortune cookie in half to reveal the following prediction: “Your eyes will soon be opened to a world of beauty, charm and adventure.” The only thing to which my eyes were open was the prickling of hot tears. This slip of paper became a divine message telling me that my life was worth living, that my simple goal of happiness was not beyond reach. I have never subscribed to the superstitious school of thought that ascribes cosmic

significance to a moment, but I know that this fortune was ordained to be mine. This moment and this tiny slip of paper was my sign that my world was turning around for the better.

A little over a month prior to the almost tragic sixth of February, I was at a friend's apartment celebrating New Year's Eve. "Enjoy the last New Year's ever!" shrieked exuberant party guests, referring to the Ancient Mayan belief that the world would be brought to a catastrophic end in the year 2012. While cheery partygoers surrounded me toasting with cheap champagne and exchanging friendly kisses, I closed my eyes in silent prayer. I prayed fiercely that 2012 would be my year—the year that I would be freed of the shackles of depression, finally able to embrace life and all it has to offer. In the most unexpected way possible, my prayer was answered.

On February 6, 2012, the Mayans' prediction came true for me. My world burned in a fiery conflagration of pain and sorrow. When I almost took my own life but didn't, my world changed. On that night when my illness almost killed me, I miraculously regained control of my life. The years of hurt and countless tears were destroyed, leaving behind the glowing embers of potential and determination. I was left

standing in the ashes, but the flames did not destroy me. I was a phoenix, reborn amidst the blaze.

Just as fortune cookies splinter into tiny shards of baked flour and sugar, I too fell apart when I almost committed suicide. But rather than disintegrating into forgotten crumbs swept swiftly into a garbage can, I became the smooth slip of paper, filled with the promise of a better tomorrow. I discovered a new, stronger person within. A person who can and will laugh even when she can't have her cake or eat it, too. A person who can fully realize and appreciate her amazing friends and family. A person whose eyes will indeed be open to a world full of beauty, charm and adventure. And above all, a person who has many, many years of fortune cookies ahead of her.

Uncle Ralph by Donald Dewey

I never came close to climbing into the ring as a contender and my brother never ended up hanging from a meat hook in an alley, but the two of us have always identified strongly with “On the Waterfront”. The link isn’t the Malloy brothers played by Marlon Brando and Rod Steiger, but their mobster patron in the 1954 Elia Kazan movie, Lee J. Cobb’s “Johnny Friendly.” Our uncle Ralph Johnsen might not have controlled the docks, but he was so physically similar to Cobb, down to his heavy jowls, deep, bleating eyes, and quiet growl of a voice that we found it easy to imagine him controlling just about everything in Brooklyn that Johnny Friendly didn’t. Supporting that fanciful impression was his “money game.” But we’ll get to that later.

Like all those of his generation, Uncle Ralph was a man of hats and cigarettes. You can see him whenever you turn on the Turner Classic Movie channel—black-and-white characters going brim to brim and butt to butt, working small miracles every time they move away from one another without putting out an eye with either of their everyday weapons. But even more noticeable than his brown fedoras and Old Golds in my Irish Catholic family was

the particular that Uncle Ralph was a Norwegian Lutheran who had seduced my Aunt Mary into marriage with his smorgasbord charms. For those who grew up within the steeples of central Brooklyn, the Scandinavians who inhabited the borough's southwest area around Lapskaus Boulevard and Fort Hamilton Parkway were at best domesticated Vikings with a secret nostalgia for their pagan rituals. No question that Bay Ridge restaurants relied on their trade for survival, especially on hung-over Sunday afternoons, but what were all those bellicose drakkar pins and logos promoted by the Sons of Norway? Just homage to Leif Ericson's fabled discovery of America or the tip-off that professional pillagers always had one more invasion in them? Wasn't the peace-loving cross of the Knights of Columbus good enough for them?

Give Uncle Ralph credit for trying to bridge the cultural gap. At times this meant painfully diplomatic interest in the latest Catholic gossip from another of my aunts: what ballplayers should be rooted for because they were of the right religion, what movies should be avoided because they offended one commandment or another, what priests had just dropped dead before Uncle Ralph and his heathen ways had gotten to know them. Others confronted by

these parochial assaults either suddenly remembered phone calls they had to make or refrigerators that had to be defrosted, but the family Lutheran was usually left with only one defense—his habit of nodding attentively as he slowly circled a room and shook all the change he kept in both pants pockets until my aunt’s pious recital had gained something of a musical score. (My mother once cracked that “Ralph keeps his hands in his pockets more than some of those guys in the subway,” but then her opinion hardly counted since she was always the first to go running outside to unplug the refrigerator when my aunt got started with her bulletins from the Vatican.)

Politeness wasn’t Uncle Ralph’s only tactic in trying to ingratiate himself with his wife’s family; he also did his best to inform those on the other side of the barrier why he was proud of his own background. Sometimes this produced only blank stares, as in his peppery bulletin one day that Norway maples were the most common tree in New York City—this to people whose sole interest in trees was how much they cost around Christmas. Other times it approached the dubious, as in his boast that Jimmy Cagney was Norwegian—an ethnic fact not unlike the claims of Hollywood publicists that their latest he-man star is one-eighth Cherokee. He was on more solid ground when he

carped at a once-popular beer commercial built around the ethnic diversity of New York City. If Madison Avenue could point out that there were more Puerto Ricans in New York than in San Juan and more Jews in the five boroughs than in Tel Aviv, he complained, why couldn't they also mention that Brooklyn had the largest Norwegian population outside Norway?

He never received an answer to that one, but he labored on with his instruction. Our cat heard more about the Atlantic voyage of the Restauration than Cleng Peerson's descendants. One weekday afternoon (when it wasn't morally compromising) he conducted a tour of his sparsely furnished Lutheran church to show his in-laws that there were no traces of a baby's blood on the altar. He was also emphatic that nobody in the family make other plans for Norway's Constitution Day in May—a social obligation I still associate with a lot of O's, for Oslo the capital, Olaf the king, and Ole the neighborhood drunk who annually stood another round for "Ralph and his Catholics." And maybe most personal of all, he made sure every piece of his ulcerated stomach extricated over the years was dispatched at the Norwegian Hospital, thus giving relatives the chance to see that

the place could handle more than frostbite and reindeer poisoning.

Probably inevitable for anyone feeling tested in a social setting, Uncle Ralph had a compulsion to perform, in his case by telling jokes. Even more inevitable, many of the jokes had self-deprecating Scandinavian themes, if with more cultural subtleties than I was able to appreciate at the time. One that has stuck after decades appeared clearly aimed against the Swedes. As Ralph told it, one holiday before he was encouraged to drink more and talk less, two Norwegians and a Swede found themselves near an ice cube death at the North Pole. Suddenly they discovered a magic lantern in the tundra, and the standard genie emerged to grant them three wishes. The first Norwegian said he just wanted to get warm, so the genie transported him to a nice fireplace in Oslo. The second Norwegian said he wanted the same thing, so off he went as well to the fireplace. Asked what he wanted, the Swede replied that he was suddenly feeling very lonely and wanted his companions back. I don't remember this or any of the other stories bringing howls from my parents or other aunts and uncles, but Uncle Ralph always seemed to show an extra layer of pleasure in arriving at his

punch lines, as though he had just evened some generational score in Stockholm.

To say Uncle Ralph worked as an insurance agent was much like saying Johnny Friendly worked as a labor union agent, at least to the impressionable who knew him mainly in his leisure hours. In fact, there were few occasions when I didn't know him in the far more romantic light of gambling. Cards, horses, pool tables, ballgames—Ralph seemed to dedicate his every free hour to policies Prudential would never underwrite. Other members of the family had their living rooms dominated by sprawling couches, mantle pieces, or television sets; the most conspicuous objects in the Johnsen living room were stacks of playing cards and burnished mahogany chip wheels. Looking for a pencil in a drawer usually meant having to dig under a Jack of Diamonds that hadn't been thrown away with the rest of an old deck. I don't recall how much I knew about poker beforehand, but I do know that after spending a weekend with Uncle Ralph and Aunt Mary, I never again had any doubts about the hierarchical order of straights, flushes, and full houses.

Visiting them produced other epiphanies, as well. For instance, there was the Nordiske Tidende, the first foreign-language newspaper I had ever seen outside

a candy store or newsstand. It wasn't that Ralph read the paper or was even fluent in Norwegian; as he put it when I asked him, "I can understand the headlines." Forget that this is the answer I would give if somebody spotted me holding the newspaper of Laotian tribesmen. More to the point was that he was open to the extortions of a sister, an activist in Brooklyn Scandinavian circles, who pressed a subscription to Nordiske Tidende on him as his tie to a homeland neither of them had ever seen. For her part, Aunt Mary didn't seem to mind collecting the newspaper every morning and sticking it, usually unread, in the garbage every evening: "We get a lot of rubber bands," she said. On the other hand, there was no sacrifice for either of them in shopping at a local Scandinavian bakery. The meticulously baked glue of Silvercup, Taystee, and Wonder Bread never had a chance against fyrstekake, or even the Danish helenesnitter—at least until I asked for these discoveries when I returned home and my mother suggested I go take a swim in my favorite fjord.

Exposed as we were to it from an early age, Ralph's gambling might have seemed like an easy source of corruption. Nobody was more aware of this than he was, leading to a solemn—and morally bracing—ritual when the family teenagers reached their 18th

birthday. As his special gift to me, as to my sister and various cousins before me and to my brother and various other cousins after me, he rented a limousine to go to Belmont for an afternoon. On the drive out to the track, he delivered a little homily about the responsibilities of reaching 18 and how these new burdens included knowing how to spend the envelopes of money we had all received for such a signal birthday. In other words, he made it clear, he would be there for advice if needed but any money wagered would be our own. From this experience, he warned, we would get a clear idea of the pitfalls of gambling.

Truth to tell, his little lecture lent a dour Protestant air to what was supposed to be an afternoon of fun; in other words, I had been counting on him to bankroll a few races. But thanks to my sister and the cousins who had preceded me, I had learned enough about racing forms to keep my questions to Ralph to a minimum and remembered enough about arithmetic to keep my bets to five dollars. Also like my sister and cousins before me (and my brother and other cousins after me), I left the track that day with a nice profit, while Uncle Ralph and Aunt Mary bickered in the limo all the way home about whose moronic idea it had been to put down so much on Crazy After All These

Years. Needless to say, no one who celebrated an 18th birthday with Uncle Ralph's help developed a phobia about racetracks.

Another time, Ralph's desire to impart positive moral lessons led him into the perilous territory of what he presumed Catholic kids should be hearing. The occasion was what he assumed was going to be an innocuous Robert Mitchum war movie, "Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison". He was right about its being innocuous—except that he decided as we went home that the film's central situation of a soldier and a nun being stranded together in a cave on a Japanese-held island required further explication. So he explained and explained and explained, along the lines of "Deborah Kerr isn't a real nun, just an actress" and "Soldiers don't think of nuns as real women, they think of them as female altar boys with a job to do." By the time I arrived home I was resolved to return to the movie house the following weekend to see what I had missed. (Many years later, I told this story to John Huston, the director of "Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison", and his response was: "Lad, the thought of anyone sitting through that twice is terrifying. You would've been better off listening to your uncle.")

Although he never delivered on a cushy job in the loft as Johnny Friendly did for Terry Malloy in "On the

Waterfront”, Uncle Ralph did have a fondness for folding bills (singles) into the shirt pockets of his nephews after we had entertained him around the pool table at his Scandinavian social club. “Go buy yourself a soda and let the old man play with the other old men” was his version of a kiss-off. But nowhere did his benevolence come off as self-satisfied power more starkly than with the money game.

The money game belonged to our family holidays as much as Santa Claus did to Christmas and the Easter Rabbit to Easter. The first ingredient was Uncle Ralph shaking all the change in his pants pockets whenever he was called upon to move from Point A to Point B. The second ingredient was a pack of nagging kids begging him to play the money game—a chorus of charming innocence that, as the hours went on and Ralph pleaded for four or five more beers first, reached lynch mob timbre. Finally, with the other adults present also entreating him to get it over with, he gathered all the kids in one of the bedrooms and explained the rules. The most important of these was that anyone who threw a punch or gouged an eye would be immediately expelled from the bedroom.

As soon as that was on the record, he reached into both pants pockets and came out with more nickels, dimes, and quarters than all the parking meters in the

neighborhood could accommodate. Up they all went into the air, over beds and bureaus and nephews, and the scramble was on. The chaos might not have had the same religious significance as when the Greeks dove off the Sheepshead Bay piers every year for an Orthodox cross, but the theological principle was the same—grab first. And through it all Uncle Johnny Friendly stood with a beatific smile, watching out for any foul blows but mostly handicapping the winner to himself.

We talked about the money game the last time we saw each other. I was about to leave on a trip to Europe and he was in bed with little more stomach to surrender and few days remaining on his calendar. He joked that the game had been his opportunity really to do what Aunt Mary said he had always been expert at doing—throwing his money away. But forget about that; did I think I would get to Norway while I was in Europe? I told him I didn't think so, but at least I was crossing the Atlantic to France on a Norwegian freighter. He tried to look like that was close enough. I decided it wasn't. So I took the freighter to Bergen.

Love like Saltwater by LeeAnn Olivier

As I study my genealogy chart, I love to say the languid names of my Cajun ancestors, names like Jean Baptiste Olivier and Marie Magdelaine Monpierre, liquid names that curl in the mouth like minnows, then unfurl and swim off of the tongue. I come from a family of fishermen. My immigrant relatives made their living catching silver fins and tiger prawns in the murky coastal netherworld of Bayou Black, the swamp singing in their veins, as lush as mellifluous green rivers.

On a still, sweltering Sunday afternoon in August of 1856, before hurricanes had female names, a violent storm ravaged Terrebonne Parish where my ancestors lived on the Louisiana coast, killing over two hundred people. The hurricane destroyed the hotel and gambling houses at nearby Isle Derniere, the island left bereft, void of vegetation and split in half, the once bustling seaside resort transformed into a feral haven for brown pelicans and black-backed herons, royal terns and laughing gulls. Rains flooded the Mermentau River and destroyed crops along the bottom lands. Saltwater soaked rice fields in Bayou Black, stripping fruit from orange trees, smearing the air with fragrant swirls of tangy brine and sweet citrus.

Survivors clung to bales of cotton and washed ashore as the storm subsided. My great-great grandmother Delphine, whose name is a French-Greek hybrid of “dolphin,” would have been fifteen when the hurricane hit.

I imagine Delphine. I imagine Saturday night before the great storm, Delphine—thin as an egret wading through a tangle of bible-black vines—crept to the lip of the pier, dipped her net, and waited for crawfish. I imagine on Sunday morning after dawn, the sun turned the moor to loam, and a violet sheen skimmed the gulf. I imagine Delphine sprawled on the front porch, watching the veined sky glower and sink and watching the vultures wheel and dive like black angels. I imagine that my great-great grandmother, like me, was a Catholic girl who harbored a secret pagan heart. On Sunday afternoon, the storm loomed. Delphine’s limbs aquiver, she whirled and danced like a dervish while the sea swelled. She was Hurricane Delphine, deciding whom to love when she saw what could crawl from the shambles unscathed, who could cling to a bale of cotton and sweep ashore, his swamp-green eyes singed with salt, his blue-black hair braided with seaweed—her own personal Poseidon. This is how she would choose her mate. I

like to pretend this is how she met Pierre Zephirin Olivier, my great-great grandfather.

A century and a half later, their ghosts dance on my ribs, their maritime blood brewing inside me, imbuing me with a hunger for salt and brine and sun. Perhaps this is why I swam as soon as I could walk, staying under the water until my flesh puckered and my green eyes burned, flicking my imaginary fins, twirling like a drunken ballerina. A timid child too scared to climb trees or ride bicycles, I was always the first to dive, fetching pennies that glimmered like buried treasure at the bottom of the pool. Once I even swam with dolphins off the Mexican coast of Isla Mujeres, my hands gliding easily over their satin spines as they keened and twittered, their lithe, powerful bodies coiling around me, weaving human and dolphin skin into one skein. It felt like home.

Shortly after I learned to swim, in order to make myself useful to my father, I figured out how to mix his martinis—gin rather than vodka, shaken instead of stirred, laden with green olives and poured over ice. I remember the heady, acrid smell of the liquor, the clink of ice against the tumbler. I remember how he chilled the olives in champagne until they were smooth as emeralds bobbing in frothy bubbles. I used

to dive for the olives submerged at the bottom of his rocks glass, and I would suck the juice out of them, rolling them around on my tongue, loving their briny, gin-and-champagne-soaked taste. They tasted like the ocean, like the swamp where my father's people lived, like fishermen, like olive skin and sea-green eyes and ink-dark hair...like my father himself.

While most of the girls I knew received cars and college educations from their fathers, the Olivier genealogy chart is the only thing my father ever provided for me after I turned eighteen and he no longer had to pay child support. My father and I never knew each other very well, and all we shared was the same saltwater in our veins. A born seaman, he served as a lieutenant commander in the Navy and was often stationed overseas at exotic-sounding places like Guam, and Bahrain, and Okinawa. When I was in elementary school, he lived in Japan for two years, so I became obsessed with that seafaring country—their painted Kyoto dolls, their sushi rolls and squid salad, their modular beds as compact as cupboard drawers. When my father would return to my mother and me in Shreveport, he didn't have much use for me outside of my bartending skills. He found me too fey, too fanciful, too peculiar. He called

me a “bleeding heart liberal.” He called me “an egg about to crack.” Then he left us for good.

My father never really knew his father either—Alcide Olivier, nicknamed “Frenchie”—because he died when my father was a little boy. In the only photograph I have ever seen of my grandfather, he stands, haggard and swarthy, next to my elegant grandmother, his shock of sable hair mussed and oily, a hand-rolled cigarette dangling from his mouth. Working as a roughneck on a Gulf Coast oil rig, Frenchie traded in a life of fishing for a life of drilling. He swapped the salt air for sulphuric acid, and his blackened, sea-starved lungs couldn’t take it. So I suppose it isn’t my father’s fault that no one ever showed him how to be a dad.

In the French folktale, “Love Like Salt,” a king asks his daughter how much she loves him. She replies, “I love you as much as fresh meat loves salt.” The king is so perplexed by his daughter’s unusual answer that he disowns her and banishes her from the palace. Years later the banished daughter marries a prince from a neighboring kingdom and invites her father to the wedding. Still desperate to please her father, she requests that the food for the wedding feast be prepared without any salt. But the king spits the food from his mouth, declaring it “tasteless.” The

king then embraces his daughter, admitting he was wrong to misinterpret her words. For the rest of the wedding banquet, the king relishes plump shrimp curled in crimson sauce, fat scallops soaked in butter, and brine-drenched oysters dipped in sea salt, affirming they are the best foods he has ever tasted.

Unlike the mythical French king, I doubt my estranged father will ever appreciate my odd way of looking at the world or will ever forgive me for being who I am. But I can try to forgive him. After all, his blood is the salt that flavors my food. He gave me more than a genealogy chart, more than a lilting list of French names printed in black font on twenty pages of white paper. He gave me a rich history from which I can weave stories, spinning them around in my mind like dolphins spiraling up from the bottom of the sea. He gave me sea gods washing ashore after great storms. He gave me Delphine fishing under the feverish flambeau of the bayou, luminous as a selkie drying her silken skin in the sun. He gave me the water.

No Gut, No Glory: My Adventure into the Underworld of Competitive Bodybuilding by Todd Outcalt

Picture a guy just turned forty years of age, a guy who's been working out in the gym for two decades—straining under tons of black weight, force-feeding his body with creatine, vitamins, and massive containers of protein supplement—a guy who's built a frame of muscle hidden under a thick layer of fat. That's me. Or, more accurately, that was me.

For years I'd been telling my wife that I was going to compete in a bodybuilding contest some day when I got "big enough." But every time I'd grow out of another pair of blue jeans or a five hundred dollar suit, I'd assure her that I'd soon settle down, get serious, and really work on getting into peak condition. I used the line for years and it worked well . . . until I turned forty.

And then my wife began insisting that I compete in something. "Get this out of your system," she told me. "If you're going to compete, do it! You need to lose

that gut.” Having been a life-long, drug-free bodybuilder, I knew what I had to do.

There were hundreds of bodybuilding competitions each year. These ranged from the Mr. Olympia weekend—the pinnacle of the IFBB (International Federation of Body Building) professional bodybuilding competitions staged under Joe Weider’s moniker—to lesser-known amateur competitions sponsored by universities, regional and city athletic associations, or smaller federations devoted to a drug-free lifestyle. Unlike some sports, where athletes work together as a team, bodybuilding is exclusively a solitary pursuit, with most athletes overseeing their own training, diet, and competition preparation (such as tanning, posing, and artistic presentation). And while some of the top professional athletes might inject their fair share of steroids and growth hormones just to stay gigantic and hard, natural bodybuilders like myself, while not as muscular, had to focus on effective training and diet to get big and defined.

Soon after Christmas (and my usual increased consumption of pecan pie and peanut butter fudge) I riffled through some of the natural bodybuilding magazines at the newsstand, located a contest, and sent in my registration fees. There! I was committed. Now I had to get into shape.

At six-one and two hundred forty pounds, I knew I was talking about a serious transformation in my physique. I found myself training and dieting with a new intensity and dedication. I started weaning my body on chicken breasts, egg whites, and fresh fruits and vegetables instead of eating spaghetti and meatballs. I counted carbohydrate calories and lost ten pounds the first month. That initial boost, coupled with diet aids, gave me a jumpstart toward getting into the best shape of my life.

But the work got tougher.

Unlike most mediums in which an artist or sculptor might work, I discovered that the human body—or more particularly, my body—resisted change. I'd been lifting weights for years, putting on muscle, paying little attention to particulars such as definition, vascularity, and muscle separation and clarity—the real trademarks of a bodybuilder's appearance. But when I started trying to chisel these details into my forty-year-old body—well, I came up against one formidable foe.

In particular, my gut was going to be a problem. I'd never had washboard abs at any time in my life—not even as a skinny adolescent—and my wife was

always kidding me about my waistline. But I was determined to find a six-pack inside me somewhere!

A couple of months before the contest, I upped the intensity of my abdominal training and took my diet to another level. In a few weeks, I actually started seeing six distinct abdominal muscles stacked atop my waist. I kept at it, and a month before the show, I had a firm six pack.

By now I was down to 215 pounds. But I still had a long way to go. The last month, I knew, would be torturous.

I started working out twice a day, increased my aerobic activity to burn 500-600 calories at a pop, and kept hoisting the weights. But as I lost weight I was getting weaker. Where I had been leg pressing 1000 pounds, I could now only do 700 pounds for reps, and my bench press had fallen from 300 to 235. But I was feeling great.

However, as my weight and strength faded even further, my emotions were on a trip wire. I had all the symptoms of my wife's PMS. Without carbs, I felt mean all the time. My children avoided me. I kept to myself. If I'd had a dog, I'd have kicked it in the balls.

Relief arrived three days before the contest, when I consumed my first carbohydrate meal in four days.

The day before the contest I weighed in at 203 pounds. I'd shed nearly 40 pounds of fat, kept most of my muscle mass, and lost my libido (a side-effect of competitive bodybuilding no man likes to talk about). All in all it was a nice trade off. I didn't have to worry about performing in bed, and my wife loved the new slimmed down version of my gut. Now all I had to do was show up at the competition and pose in front of a live audience. How difficult could that be?

The day before the competition I found myself sitting in a cold dormitory room hooked up to a polygraph machine. A police officer administered the test on behalf of the bodybuilding federation, and I was asked a series of questions regarding my use of banned substances. Some initial questions were asked to establish a line of truth and determine my reactions to the procedure itself: "Do people call you Todd?" "Do you live in Indianapolis?" "Do you realize how stupid you look hooked up to this machine?"

Then the officer turned his attention to the list of banned substances: anabolic steroids, growth hormones, anabolic enhancers (such as the popular

androstenedione), diuretics, and a litany of other substances I wouldn't attempt to pronounce, much less ingest into my body. I answered "no" to all of the questions and given a "drug-free" thumbs-up.

I gathered with the other competitors the next morning—thirty in all—inside the auditorium where we would soon be strutting our stuff. The field of competitors was a study in humanity. One guy showed up wearing nothing but a butcher's smock. There were fair-skinned teenagers competing in their division who were built more like bicyclists than bodybuilders. One of the women competitors was a sixty-one year old grandmother who was so deeply tanned that her skin had taken on the texture of an alligator handbag.

I had no idea how I was going to fare until all of the competitors were ushered backstage and we began stripping down and pumping up for the prejudging (the first and most crucial stage of a contest when the judges compare the competitors side-by-side by putting them through a series of "compulsory" poses). Right away I could tell that I had missed the mark. Compared to the other guys I did not have the quality the judges would be looking for. I was humbled.

In addition to competing in the “masters division”—reserved for those over forty years of age—I had chosen to also compete in the “open”—that is, for the overall title. Although I was the youngest and the biggest of the masters competitors, I was clearly out of the running. Even the old men I was competing against had rock-hard bodies. And as for the open competitors, I had twenty years on most of them, and their youthfulness and muscularity was clearly superior.

One guy, a fellow named Willie Joe, looked like the man to beat. He was the only competitor taller or larger than me, and we found ourselves sitting next to each other in the locker room swapping insights. “You look good,” he told me at one point.

“The best shape of my life,” I told him proudly. “But I’m not in your caliber.”

He smiled and flexed his pecs while his personal trainer lathered his back with posing oil. Nearby, two guys were coating each other with PAM cooking spray—an inexpensive way to prepare the muscles to reflect the glare of the stage lights and bring out maximum definition. They were completely naked, and didn’t even flinch when a couple of wives and girlfriends walked into the men’s room to oil up their

husbands and boyfriends. Modestly, I slid behind a locker, not wanting the ladies to see me oiled up in my tiny bikini briefs. But no one was interested in looking at an old guy like me anyway.

“How many times have you competed?” I asked Willie Joe.

Willie Joe’s trainer, a giant man who looked like a professional wrestler, answered, “Hell, we’ve been all over ain’t we? We’ve done shows in California, Texas, Florida. This is Willie’s fourth show this year.”

“This is my first,” I said sheepishly. “I lost forty pounds getting ready for this one.”

“No shit?!” Willie’s friend allowed his eyes to graze over the length and breadth of my body. “I’d hate to see what you’d look like if you’d had a couple more weeks of dieting. You got size, man. Great symmetry.”

I followed Willie Joe out of the men’s locker room into the pump room, where most of the competitors were busy sweating and lifting.

In one corner, a couple of the women were getting ready to go on stage, flexing and staring at their reflections in the mirror, their bronzed bodies hard and cut. A few of the men were pumping up early, and

every ten minutes or so, one of the show's organizers would poke his head into the pump room and call for the next batch of competitors. Each announcement was followed by more furious pumping and flexing, and yet the atmosphere was very asexual, each competitor interested only in his or her own appearance.

Finally the call came for the men's masters division. We entered stage left to a rousing round of applause and stood before the judges. The seven judges—including two women—sat directly in front of us behind the lights, staring at each body as if inspecting a side of beef for marbling and any glaring irregularities that might relegate a grade-A prime cut to hamburger. The head judge barked his commands and we obliged with our well-rehearsed poses.

Although we were only on stage five to seven minutes, we were sweating bullets in no time. Like a Miss America contestant, I wondered if I had chosen the wrong color posing trunks, or should have dyed some of the gray out of my temples. Had I shaved my armpits well enough? What would it take to get the attention of the judges? I wondered.

As we exited the stage I wondered why I had made such an insane commitment.

The evening show was not a packed house, but close. And the audience was one of the liveliest I'd ever heard. For the show, each competitor was allowed to do a sixty-second posing routine set to music. I'd practiced my routine only sparingly in the weeks leading up the competition, selecting The Steve Miller band's "Keep on Rockin' Me Baby" as my opus.

When my turn came, I stepped onto the stage, managed to run through my dozen poses without falling down, and exited quickly. Leave them wanting more, I thought. When I looked up into the crowd, I noted that my wife was smiling at me as I walked off the stage.

The rest of the show went as I'd expected. Willie Joe finished on top of the men's tall class, but was beaten by a smaller bodybuilder for the overall title. The old men showed up ripped and ready in the master's division. And me? Well, I took third place (out of four) in the masters and got dead last in the open. But hey, I beat somebody! Must have been my aftershave lotion.

As soon as the show was over, however, I started anticipating my reward. I hadn't eaten dessert in months and I was craving something sweet. I had to find some chocolate . . . and fast.

But as my wife and I were walking across the parking lot after the show, one of the judges approached, pulled me aside, and complemented me on my physique. "I think you were the biggest guy here," he told me. "Guys of your stature aren't usually able to build enough mass to look symmetrical. But you've got a nice build. If only you'd come in a bit sharper, I think you'd have placed very high."

There was that word again: sharper.

"You think I could do better?" I asked.

"Oh yeah!" he shot back. "Don't give up. You should compete again."

At that moment, of course, I wasn't thinking about competing at anything except eating. I'd had my heart set on a chocolate dessert for months.

I thanked the judge for his comments and then my wife and I drove out to a local restaurant at eleven p.m. to celebrate my efforts and the beginning of a week-long vacation with the kids in Florida. (A vacation where, lying sedentary on the beach and

dining every evening on fried seafood and hot buttered rolls, I would gain back fifteen pounds in one week and lose my muscular definition in two days.

At the restaurant, my wife ordered a glass of water. I ordered a Brownie Double Fudge Delight and a glass of whole milk.

“Don’t get sick,” my wife reminded me. “You’ve not had any sugars or fats for months.”

I consumed five or six bites anyway, and immediately felt a queasiness that had me teetering on the edge of vomiting. Somehow I managed to keep it all down.

“So . . . are you going to do this again?” my wife asked while I gulped my milk.

I thought about the compliments I’d received, the improvements I could make, a better dieting plan. Then I considered how many Brownie Double Fudge Delights and boxes of Krispy Kreme donuts I’d have to give up in order to get sharp. “I don’t think so,” I said. “Too much time, effort, and sacrifice. I’ve got too many other goals in my life.”

My wife smiled her alluring smile and stared at my two hundred pound frame of solid muscle and bone. I could tell she wanted me. I hadn’t seen that look in

her eyes since our honeymoon. “You should compete again,” she said seductively.

“Why?”

“You look good this way, all tanned and smooth and ripped,” she told me, winking. “Really hot.”

I gazed into my wife’s eyes, considered all of the things we could do together in bed, but hadn’t done in weeks because I had been consumed by training, dieting, and tanning. I looked down at my big brownie smothered in fudge.

“I might compete again,” I told her, lusting in my heart, eager to fulfill my wildest culinary desires. “But not tonight . . . I have a headache. And right now, I just want to finish my dessert.”

Mothers and Other Creatures by Charles Bergman

In my mind, travel and forgetting have always been linked. I've lived much of my life as if I could outrun memory, or, if I got good and lost, erase the past. Though I never ran away as a teen-ager, I've sometimes thought of myself as an adult run-away. The farther away, the more remote, the better. Never mind that I know rationally I can't really leave anything behind. It hasn't stopped me from trying. It's a core illusion, a mistaken belief that's been hard to eradicate. Maybe I'm typical of many Americans in this way, in love with cars and frequent flyer miles and the open road.

That's why I was startled when my sister called me in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I had only just arrived earlier that morning, and was standing in line at a money exchange, travel-weary and jet-lagged. The last thing I had expected was a call from home, much less from the past.

"Mom died last night," Carole said, getting right to the point. "A stroke."

Jolting news, but no real surprise. Our mom was well into her eighties, trailing a long medical history. She wore a pacemaker for her heart and had long seemed frail and failing. But she also had a wide streak of the hypochondriac, in all honestly, and loved the attention of doctors. And that made it hard to know exactly what was going on with her medical condition. Plus, she had a huge lexicon of medical terms—from her long career as a medical stenographer—which made her an expert at stoking all her worries about her health.

Recently, though, she had found a renewed zest for life. We had moved her out of her subsidized apartment in Seattle, where she had lived alone, and into an “assisted-living” home. It was low-income, nothing fancy. But she loved it, with all the people and a whole new social life. She even took up watercolor painting. Carole and I began to think she might have several more years.

Her declining and ambiguous health had given us lots of time to prepare in practical ways for this moment, arranging cremation and paperwork. What surprised me though was how emotionally unprepared I was for this moment.

I considered returning home, but quickly decided that that wasn't really possible or necessary. Buenos Aires was just a stop-over on our way much farther south—to Tierra del Fuego and, beyond that, Antarctica. My wife, Susan, and I were traveling with twenty undergraduate students for the month of January. Without me, the students couldn't go on. Plus, Carole and I decided we could easily schedule our mom's memorial service for a time right after I got back.

I asked our local guide to take the class on a tour of Buenos Aires, while Susan and I headed back to the hotel to talk—to remember. Memories and scenes I'd worked hard to put behind me quickly came back. My mom's adoration of doctors had escalated during my childhood to an addiction to prescription drugs. She had several bouts of electroshock therapy, which was confusing and disturbing to me as a boy. Terrible fights with my father, loud and bordering on violence, exploded into an ugly divorce by my early teenage years. Once single, mom was gone every weekend, hanging out in cocktail lounges, becoming an alcoholic.

My sister and I? Left at home on our own. I hated imagining what our mom was doing in bars and

lounges, and grew increasingly angry. These memories are still painful, even as I write this.

When I left for college, I didn't just go off to school. I tried to leave my mom and my childhood behind—my first attempt at leaving and forgetting. Not only did I think I could reinvent myself, I tried to become mother to myself. At key times in my life, when things got tough, I hit the road. I grew expert at leaving.

Much later, when I tried to talk to my mom about those chaotic years, she would grow defensive. Every conversation became about her and how hard it had been for her. Whatever I wanted from her, she couldn't give. The only solution I could see was an emotional compromise. On one hand, I learned to be polite and dutiful toward her, a good son. On the other hand, I quit trusting her with deeper feelings, nothing vulnerable.

You don't have to travel to create emotional distance. Mom felt the "it" between us, but I don't know if she understood it. I do know it hurt her in her later years.

As Susan and I talked in the hotel, deeper memories and lost images also began to surface. I had forgotten how much, as a small boy, I adored my mother. She was full of life and had a great sense of humor. Her oldest child and only son, I loved to make her laugh,

to entertain her. Embarrassing to admit, I did routines for her—even singing for her— and she affectionately called me her “little clown.” I remembered a blue and green dress she had. When she wore it, I thought she was the most beautiful woman ever. Once, in seventh grade, I faked being sick to stay home from school and try to bake a birthday cake for her. It was a disaster, but mom doted on me for the effort, which was all I really wanted.

In a darkened hotel room, I found myself revisiting some of the darker corners of my life. That early love for my mom was a casualty of my later anger toward her. And it explained why her nights in cocktail lounges when I was a young teen hurt so much, felt like a betrayal. It was sad, but it also felt strangely satisfying to feel that early love for my mom again, before it proved dangerous and painful.

Next morning, we left for Tierra del Fuego with the class. The students had heard the news and were gracious and sweet. I thought I'd done some good emotional work and was ready move on, leaving mom behind once more. But she was waiting for me in the far south.

If the Andes Mountains are the spine of South America, then Tierra del Fuego is the continent's tailbone. Ushuaia calls itself the southernmost city in the world, "fin del mundo," the end of the world. Of course, there's a lot more world south of Ushuaia, but the idea captures the frontier scruffiness the place—gaping holes in the sidewalks, rusting buildings, relentless gray skies.

Landing in the plane here can be its own minor adventure, dropping through snowy peaks and skidding to a stop at the end of a runway that sticks far out into the windy Beagle Channel. We emerged from the small airport to find our guide, Marcelo de la Cruz, waiting for us.

"It's terrible about your mother," he said immediately, wrapping me in a huge, sympathetic hug. The news had traveled ahead of us south.

Marcelo is like Ushuaia, disheveled and full of rough simpatico. His curly dark hair is never combed, his

shirt-tails always un-tucked, and his coat rarely zipped up, even in the rain.

Marcelo is also a recognized expert on the birds of Tierra del Fuego. People come from around the world to find the region's unique species with him.

"I got something special for you," he said in heavily-accented Fuegian Spanish. "Tomorrow night we'll find an owl."

"The owl will help you," he continued, referring to the loss of my mom. "You must let yourself be brushed by the wings of the owl. You must be wrapped in the wings of the owl. The owl will take care of you in this moment."

Marcelo knows I love owls. We've birded many times together in Tierra del Fuego, and with him I've seen many of the great birds of the far south—Magellanic penguins, Magellanic woodpeckers, Austral pygmy owls, and more. This time he wanted to show me a rufous-legged owl, or "la lechuza," a handsome, strictly-nocturnal, and hard-to-find "specialty" of the region.

My traveling is not only about forgetting, of course. It's also a search, and often the object of the search is a

pretext for something I don't fully understand until I encounter it. I very much wanted to see this owl.

The next night Marcelo and I raced down dirt roads through Tierra del Fuego National Park in his small Renault. He drives as he speaks, fast and sometimes careening toward recklessness. We stopped several times, listening intently for owls in the dark forest. Nothing. Then, about 2 a.m., Marcelo heard something and plunged down a trail.

By the time I caught up with him, about 300 meters into the forest, Marcelo was standing in a small clearing beside a huge beech tree.

"Shhhhh," he whispered. "It's here."

Marcelo pointed his flashlight at the fork in the tree, perhaps ten feet away. A little owl stared unblinking into the beam. A quick glimpse, maybe ten seconds, and it flew.

"It's still here," Marcelo said. "Above us."

Directly overhead, the owl peered from a thick branch. I strained my neck backward to look up at it. About a foot tall and heavily streaked, it peered left and right. I squeaked like a small mouse. The owl spun its round head, stared at me, and clacked its beak. It was aloof but sharply curious, sweet-face and big-eyed.

Owls are irresistibly anthropomorphic, with their human faces and upright posture. They have ancient associations with darkness and graveyards and death. And also with wisdom, perhaps from their ability to see in the darkness, which is why I love them so much.

“How did you know that the owl was there?” I asked Marcelo later, as we clattered back to Ushuaia, rocks clanging off the undercarriage. I was impressed that he had heard it from the road. I’m experienced with owls, have found them all over the world, including all nineteen species of North American owls. But I hadn’t heard this owl at all.

“I will tell you how I find the owl.” Marcelo waved his arms passionately as he spoke. “I penetrate into the life of the bird. I feel the owl in order to see it and hear it. You must feel the bird in order to find it.”

“Maybe I’m crazy,” Marcelo laughed, by now almost yelling. “But people do not know what’s possible in nature anymore. Now you have been embraced by the wings of the owl.”

I loved the quasi-mystical connection he asserted with the owl. He was not being metaphorical. Marcelo is a hard-headed ornithologist. He keeps careful, scientific records of all the birds in Tierra del Fuego. But the

owl is not just a biological being to him, known intellectually by data and statistics and maps. It's also a presence that he knows in his gut, by feeling it. Still, for all my sympathy for Marcelo's views, it was not until I returned home a month later that I felt the owl's embrace.

When I got back from Antarctica and Argentina, my sister and I organized a memorial service for our mom at the assisted-living home where she had lived her final two years. A big, impressive crowd showed up to remember her.

Every relationship consists of a unique mixture of remembering and forgetting, and sitting on the fold-out chairs in the chapel in the home, I found myself thinking that death gives us our most intense, perhaps the ultimate, experience of both.

The chaplain at the home called my mom by her nickname, Ellie. He talked of her life in the home, focusing on one story from her painting class. I knew she loved the painting class because she had shown me several of her paintings. But this was the first time I heard this particular story.

He said that my mom had wanted to paint a picture of a photograph from one of my books, a photo I had

taken. Her idea was to paint the image and give it to me. According to the chaplain, she tried over and over again to paint the photograph, but she was never happy with her images. She never showed me anything.

“It was a photograph of an owl,” the chaplain said.

At those words, I almost wept, bending forward with my face in my hands. I knew exactly which photograph, which owl, she had tried to paint. Immediately I remembered the owl that appeared to Marcelo and me in Tierra del Fuego, just after my mom’s death.

Susan, my wife, was sitting next to me at the service. She leaned toward me and said quietly, “The owl in Tierra del Fuego was your mom.”

Susan has no doubt about it. In that moment in the memorial service, I believed it too with an overwhelming clarity of feeling.

All my traveling, and there she was at the far end of the world.

Now, over a year later, I love to recall that moment in the chapel. I’ve told others the story of my mom and the owl, and many believe that my mom was that owl. But I no longer feel that clear and immediate faith. I’m

less certain about what happened. Who or what was that owl?

Without doubt, the chaplain's story added meaning to the owl and other experiences in Tierra del Fuego, but I can't pin it down. Often in Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica, I felt animals were speaking to me, offering consolations in languages that I don't know, but which, like music, moved me irresistibly. A pod of humpbacked whales, for example, was feeding amid a wilderness of surreally-shaped icebergs along the Antarctic Peninsula, surfacing over and over again within feet of our Zodiacs. They breathed in vaporous whooshes and their breath drifted over us in misted murmurs from other worlds.

Now though I'm left feeling mostly two things about that owl. The first is awe—an overwhelming sense that something powerful and indeterminate was given to me by the owl. And it reduces me to the state that comes before knowledge and faith and even words, which we call awe and wonder. It's the feeling that lurks behind all the big questions that give shape and meaning to our lives.

The other feeling is gratitude. To Marcelo, who showed me the owl and insisted that I be wrapped in its wings. To the owl. When a wild creature presents

itself, reveals itself, it's like a gift that nature makes to whatever longing we carry with us inside. The owl in the forest is now completely tangled up with my memory of my mother. And finally to my mom. One of the best things she ever gave me is this last, ungiven gift.

Good Dance Music by Christina Holzhauser

Patsy Cline's songs came at me from all directions during my childhood, especially from the direction of my neighbor, a voluptuous woman with too-big glasses who was deemed "the best singer" in my town of 85. She sang Crazy at all karaoke nights at the one bar we had. She sang I Fall to Pieces, with only a tractor's chug to accompany her, on those fall hayrides. She sang both of them out at Green Acres, the bar ten miles down the highway, while her rocking hips strained the seams of her denim mini-skirt against those thighs. I'm sure, though, that Patsy's voice was on the radio up at Grandma and Grandpa's house and on old, black and white episodes of television shows I watched on our satellite dish.

I knew Grandpa loved her. So, one day when I was about twelve, I told him of my interest in Patsy. Within days I had a whole album on a cassette tape that he had copied from his scratchy vinyl. Using the belt clip feature of my pink and red Walkman, I clipped it to the gear wires of my Wal-Mart ten speed and pedaled up and down the trail by the Missouri river until I'd listened to the entire tape, belting out those sultry tunes. I did this so often that I could flip the tape

without stopping, without losing pace, without, even, having to look away from the canopy of trees over the trail or the bugs dancing through the air over undercurrents near the banks.

When I was seventeen, Ska bands went Swing and the alternative radio stations pumped out brass noise; a generation who had previously been head-nodders became sweaty, goofy-smiling dancers. Having grown up singing and dancing in musicals, the obnoxious melodrama of swing was an easy transition. As a gymnast and athlete, I learned the Lindy Hop in seconds. But instead of wearing a cute dress with Mary Janes, I wore black and white wing-tips and collared, button down shirts. Boys wanted to dance with me though; I was one of the only girls at the clubs who didn't mind being thrown in and around the air, my strong arms allowing me to be upside down on male shoulders, my chain wallet clinking as I kicked my legs.

I confessed my love of the music to Grandpa, a man who'd been around when the whole thing started. Soon after, he made me mix tapes and wrote, in his scratchy, boxy handwriting, "Good Dance Music." He put them in a tiny cedar box and handed them to me and said, "So you can remember me. I won't always be around." I laughed and shook my head. The things

older people say. I put one in my boom-box expecting to hear "In the Mood," or another old classic I'd learned recently. I pictured my grandpa throwing Grandma around in the air, her dress billowing, their feet bullets machine-gunning a 40's dance floor. Instead, the first song sounded like country, like the whiny, twangy country I'd grown to associate with small towns and small-minded people. There were no trumpets or trombones, just fiddles and steel guitars. I was sad that grandpa didn't understand what swing music was.

When he died a few weeks later, I took those tapes and shoved them in my cargo pockets and set out for the trail. I was surprised to hear Marty Robins, someone Grandpa loved, someone whose song about El Paso I'd grown to love, too, even as the chain wallet became a permanent fixture of my wardrobe and my hair grew shorter and more colorful. I listened to a song about a rose in Texas, something about sixteen tons, and again, I heard Patsy. I pumped my legs hard, leaned forward, tried to sing as tears dried cold on my face. With every song I turned up the volume until the world was a place only of ear-splitting fiddle solos and wobbly steel guitars. Until finally, I couldn't hear myself.

Bearings by Barbara Strauss

“**M**y eyeglasses,” Zayda said in broken English, tearing through the kitchen utensil drawer, but he’d never worn glasses. “My sheitel.” He patted his head, and Bubbeh translated “wig” for me as I took Zayda’s brittle elbow and led him aimlessly around the house. I was home on spring break. I meant to appease him, lifting couch cushions, opening the lid on a jewelry box on my mother’s vanity table that played the theme from Dr. Zhivago. “No sheitel in there,” I said, but Zayda had his own purple silver hair, never a toupee, he was ninety and nowhere even close to bald.

“Don’t help him.” Bubbeh followed us as we returned downstairs, hunched and exhausted and shorter than the last time I saw her. “Shlemiel!” She slapped Zayda with a Yiddish newspaper whose subscription was re-routed from their Florida address. They were done with Florida. They needed my parents’ help now.

My father, pouring shredded wheat in a bowl and spreading Circuit City ads over the table, told me if I didn’t give up, I might be touring my Zayda around all day.

“What am I supposed to do? Let him roam?”

“Yes,” my mother said. Zayda was only her stepfather. She paid bills at the counter. It was Saturday morning, the kitchen radio tuned to a crackly AM gardening show my father liked. My mother tried to lower the volume, and my father protested, slapping the table with his ads. Her response was to tune it even louder than he’d had it originally. All the women in my family were like that, pouting passive-aggressively, and I vowed never to lose my patience that way. “Zayda’s been totally out of sorts since they moved in,” my mother told me. She peered over her glasses. “We took him to three specialists. The decline is quick from here.”

“I’ll shoot him,” Bubbeh said, moving through the kitchen in her floral robe. When she passed Zayda, he pinched her behind, and she slapped his hand crying, “Oy, gevalt!”

“You’re like Kevorkian,” I said, leading Zayda out before I could catch my parents snickering at the drama. But it wasn’t drama to me. This trip home I’d brought him a string of painted wooden birds from my semester abroad in the Netherlands, and my first night here, he’d handled them one at a time, staring blankly at the little beaks and painted wings; he’d lost interest quickly and pushed them back in my direction. Next I’d taken puzzles down from my closet,

which he loved—the easy ones, fifty pieces—and Zayda would have none of them. He just gazed sadly out the patio door.

“He’s insulted,” I’d said, examining the picture of a kitten on the box. “It’s too easy.”

Now he pulled from my grip to approach Bubbeh, who’d gone to rest in the living room. He mumbled at her in Yiddish, and next thing I knew, she was heaving a pillow, screaming that he gave her such shpilkes, and hobbling up to the guest room where the pullout sofa remained permanently open.

The next morning, waking groggy and more stir-crazy than the day before, I found Zayda wandering through my bedroom in only a pajama top. I peeled my sweaty cheek from the pillow, let my eyes adjust to the light, and there before me hung a gray and shriveled penis, hairless and small as an infant’s.

“My television?” he mumbled in English.

I hid under the covers and cried for my mom.

The conversation turned to nursing homes. Reluctantly, I climbed into the back of the station wagon the next Saturday to search for places we might ditch him. There were plenty of things I could have been doing—writing a Walden

paper for my class on the American Transcendentalists, or watching music videos in a blessedly quiet home, a bowl of cereal in my lap and my pajamas on. I hadn't worn pajamas around the house all week, since Zayda had revealed himself.

I came along though, because I couldn't bear the thought of Zayda cowering in the background, jingling the change in his pockets while my parents and Bubbeh informed the nurses that sometimes he soiled his pants. As we bumped down side roads potholed still from snowplows, I reached over the seat and rested my hand on Zayda's head, as though steadying him, his hair soft beneath my fingers. He turned and asked Bubbeh, "Voss is ehr numen?"

"What is her name?' he asks. Barbara," she said, sucking her gums. "You remember nothing."

Evelyn Gardens: six floors of catatonics, televisions tuned loud for hearing impaired patients who slept before mid-morning talk shows. Social time, the nurse with a Haitian accent, who took us on a tour, called the meeting at the end of the hall. Wheelchair bound patients were lined against the wall, tongues out of mouths, the ladies lightly bearded, and nobody spoke to anyone else. An aide padded around, patting each patient on the shoulder.

“And when we leave, she steals their money,” my father bent to whisper to my mom.

“It smells like pish.” Bubbeh plugged her nose and held tightly to her vinyl purse.

“Every nursing home smells,” my mother said. “The only decent place would be assisted living, and he’s too far gone for that.”

“You could get a nurse to come to the house,” I suggested.

My mother glared at me. “Who’s paying?”

Our tour guide was paged and pointed us back to the lobby. She’d be down in just a moment to get us paperwork and an appointment with the intake facilitator.

“I can’t put him here,” Bubbeh said. “It’s full of mishuganahs. A crazy house.”

“Oh, he be fine.” The nurse clipped her beeper to her waistband. She gripped Zayda’s elbow, and he smiled up into her face. “He be fine on the fifth floor—we start ‘em there.” She excused herself and hurried to the elevator.

After ten minutes on hard-backed lobby chairs, Zayda asking Bubbeh twelve times where we were, my

mother said, "I'm sick of waiting. I'll call for an appointment," and took a brochure on the way out.

"How ya doing?" I asked, taking Zayda's hand in the car. He gazed at me, his lips curved over, hiding his teeth. I leaned up front and snatched the brochure from my mother. "We're not settling on Evelyn Gardens," I said, stuffing the pamphlet down the seat pocket. "There have to be a dozen better homes in the area."

"We are not settling for anything," my father corrected. He combed fingers through my mother's perm until she pulled from him.

"I can't leave him in a place like that," Bubbeh said.

My mother grabbed a clump of her own hair and tugged. She told my father to drive home.

"You're going to make that shit hole our only stop?" I said.

But my father looked for a place to turn, and we found ourselves in the driveway of my former elementary school. The word "diarea," misspelled, was spray painted on one of the school's brick walls, and because it was Saturday the lot was empty except for a man walking a golden retriever. The driveway

formed a long loop, in the center of which stood a thicket of pines.

“Zayda’s nothing like the patients in that nursing home,” I went on, in part to aggravate my mother. She was so impatient. She would pay. I cooed at Zayda, “You can walk and talk and feed yourself.”

He cupped my face and said, “Shayna maidelah.” Pretty girl.

As we rounded the area of the driveway where the forest spread widest, we came under cover of a lush canopy that blocked the sun except for the thinnest rays.

Zayda reached over Bubbeh, rapping his knuckles on the glass. “Gaistu tsum der vasser?” he said.

“Stop the car, Dad. Zayda made a sentence.”

Bubbeh pushed him off her lap, but he climbed over her again. “Gaistu tsum der vasser tsu vashen mein hoisen? Vu is Frau Beniewicz?”

“What does that mean, Ma?” my mother asked, twisting in her seat.

“He thinks we are in Poland,” Bubbeh said. “He asks for the Beniewicz family—the ones who hid him in the war. Du bist nisht a kind!” she shouted into Zayda’s

hairy ear. “You are not a child!” But he clung to her knee like a kid about to be spanked.

“Malka?” he asked suddenly. He looked up at Bubbeh, his chin quivering.

My mother sighed.

“What?” my father asked.

“Malka was his sister.”

Bubbeh whined. “Ich bin nisht Malka. I’m Pola. Your wife!”

“Where is Malka?” Zayda asked. His English was strangely clear.

“Auschwitz.” Bubbeh got in his face. “Malka died in Auschwitz!” she screamed.

And then he punched her.

It wasn’t a sock—his knuckles only grazed her cheek. Her skin turned purple, though. He’d broken blood vessels, and Bubbeh clutched her face, revealing the full circle of a bruise only when my mother ordered, “Show me” and reached over the console, wrenching Bubbeh’s hand away.

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” I said. Zayda squinted at the splotch on Bubbeh’s cheek and made no move to help her. My father sped home to get ice.

Her belt unbuckled, her body splayed over the console, my mother took Bubbeh by the chin, displayed her tear-stained face to me and said, “You think I’m a monster, sending him away. But do you see what happens when a person doesn’t know what he’s doing?”

And then I understood, really, how lost my Zayda was.

My mother, usually unsentimental, wanted to see a slideshow that night. Everyone had settled by now, Bubbeh iced and the swelling went down, and we’d already eaten dinner. My mother wanted slides from 1969, long before Zayda was around. She wanted slides of her wedding, photos of Benjamin, her real father, who died of a heart attack in ’76.

My father did as told and took the projector down from the attic. I blew dust off the machine and set the individual slides in the slots while he pulled the screen up and called everyone into the living room. My father shut the lights, and we viewed a tray of photos taken during my parents’ wedding, my actual grandfather,

heftier and more serious looking than Zayda, walking my mother down the aisle. She and Bubbeh sniffled behind me on the sofa, and Zayda asked, “Who’s this?” waving at Benjamin, who held Bubbeh’s hand beneath the chuppah. Bubbeh wouldn’t answer, and we braced for a violent attack. So my father changed the tray.

They were ancient slides of my father’s parents, both of whom had died when I was in high school. In the photos my father was a kid, graduating from something, Hebrew school he thought. He stood far away on a lit stage. My grandma had him young, so when my grandpa turned the camera on her, seated beside him in the auditorium, the photo that came out was astonishing in its youth. My grandma was smirking, her mouth crooked as she’d always complained it was when someone told her to smile. She wasn’t wearing lipstick, where I was so accustomed to the heavy maroon she painted on in her later years. Her nose was long, like mine, almost touching her lip.

“Barbara,” Zayda said. He tapped my knee and pointed at the screen. “Miss America,” he joked, his English poor but coherent.

“That’s Molly,” Bubbeh corrected. She gestured at my father. “Max’s mother. Not Barbara.”

Zayda stared at the screen with his mouth open.

But he wasn’t far off. It was always said that I resembled my grandma more than anyone in the family. Encouraging Zayda, or to validate him, I jumped from my chair and turned on the light. I stood beside the photograph onscreen, which was hard to make out beneath the overhead bulbs, but Zayda continued to point between the two of us. I posed with my hands on my hips.

“Miss America,” he said again. I laughed, and he laughed too.

We ate sugar-free ice cream for dessert, and when it was time for Zayda to go to bed, I pushed back zealously from the table, scraping the chair legs over the tile. No one else moved to help him, and they didn’t want me to, either.

“He’ll take ten years to get up there. Finish your ice cream before it melts,” my mother said.

I slid the dish away but found myself just sitting there.

I watched anxiously as Zayda paced, shuffling past the stairs to his room, forgetting where he wanted to

go. My parents spoke with Bubbeh about money—bonds, stocks, and the fees for a nursing home, Evelyn Gardens or maybe another one they planned to visit later in the week. I watched Zayda, my slippers planted firmly on the ground, my hands flat on the table. He was wandering five minutes when I decided I'd had enough and started to get up to help.

And then suddenly he turned into the foyer, where he needed to be. He tilted back his head. He surveyed the long staircase, and he started climbing.

The Ouija Board by Dorothy M. Place

The spring of the year World War II ended my mother began to fantasize that our family would move to a farm. She was inspired by my grandfather's stories about farming in the "old country" and by the radio programs that featured celebrities who were moving to places like Bucks County, Pennsylvania or Darien, Connecticut, purchasing farm houses that dated back to the revolutionary war, and turning them into modern getaways from their hectic urban lives. That dream became an honest-to-goodness decision in the most uncommon way. My mother heard about Musa Jean's Ouija Board and latched onto the notion that the board could foretell if a farm was in our family's future.

"Dorothy," my mother called out the window one afternoon. She had a voice like a bull horn, perfected over the years of trying to get my father to listen to her. "Go across the street and ask Musa Jean to bring her Ouija board over after dinner."

She didn't have to ask twice. Musa Jean, several years older, was my only source of information about what life would be like when I became a teenager. I was the oldest child. What could I learn from my

younger sister and brother? I already knew more about life than the two of them put together. But Musa Jean. That was different. She had a room of her own, a collection of pictures cut from movie magazines, and a vanity table with a mirror made in three sections so she could see the front and the back of her hair at the same time.

I crossed Lafayette Avenue and raced up the hill toward Musa Jean's house, careful not to step on any cracks. Mrs. Principio, a tiny, elderly woman clothed entirely in black was coming down the hill toward me. Her swollen ankles bowed over the side of her shoes, the outside part where the heels had worn down almost to the sole. The black veil that hung over her face waved in and out in time with her shallow, hasty breaths. Rosary beads wound round and round her fingers like the chain wound around the sprocket on my bicycle, each bead helping to propel her forward in the same way the chain drove my bicycle. I stepped back into the weedy patch of green that filled the space between the curb and the sidewalk.

Grasshoppers bounced on and off my legs like ping pong balls tossed at the wall. A yellow dandelion flower snuggled in its spiky nest of leaves, waiting to spring upward into a long-stemmed ball of cotton. Junior Shamsey's dog, Prince, out for his late

afternoon stroll, stopped and lifted his leg on the fence post. Slowly, Mrs. Principio passed.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Principio,” I said respectfully.

She neither turned her head nor said anything, just leaned into her uneven walk. Once, I asked my mother why Mrs. Principio always wore black.

“Somebody died,” my mother she said shortly. “Go set the table for supper.”

“But she always wears black,” I persisted.

“Someone is always dying. Now stop asking questions and do as I told you.”

There was no reason to pursue the topic. My mother was interested in cooking, cleaning, sewing, and raising children, the emphasis always on good for all of the above- mentioned. Good children meant being seen and not heard, especially the not-heard part.

I rang the doorbell at Musa Jean’s house, hopping up and down on one foot as I waited for someone to answer. One hundred and fifty-two times was my record. A brown moth struggled to escape its imprisonment in the spider web that stretched from the light fixture to the door jam. A spring burst of leaves as green as mint-flavored chewing gum

covered the elm tree in the front yard. From somewhere in the house, I could hear a radio playing. Mrs. Stocking finally opened the door and motioned up the stairs before I could ask if Musa Jean was home.

I shouted as I took the stairs two at a time toward the attic bedroom, “Ma wants you to bring over your Ouija board after supper.”

The door was closed; I entered without knocking. Like dancers on stage, little bits of dust shuffled in and out of the spotlight that entered the room through a small dormer window near the roof. The pungent smells of perfume and nail polish tickled my nose and made me want to sneeze a good one. The vanity table wrapped in a pink organdy skirt looked like the midsection of a ballerina, and the black and white pictures of movie stars covered the walls right up to the peak of the slanted roof.

Musa Jean was sitting on the edge of the bed, one leg tucked under her body, the other leg hung over the side, her bare foot swinging back and forth as she leafed through a movie magazine. Her hair was combed in a style similar to the one Joan Crawford wore in her latest film: pompadour on the top and sides, long and straight down her back. Musa Jean’s

jaws moved slowly and everyone once-in-awhile, a bubbled swelled out of her mouth and exploded with a satisfying pop. Her finger and toe nails were polished and her playsuit was cinched tightly at the waist, making her breasts look round and large.

At the time, I was not sure about breasts. Whether I wanted them or not, I mean. It seemed to me like they'd get in your way when I ran. But they looked good on Musa Jean and she told me the boys liked them. She was like that. Told me important information that my parents never thought to tell me. If it wasn't for Musa Jean, I could have grown all the way up without knowing that stuff about breasts.

I flopped down on the bed next to her and looked up at the photographs of Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Tyrone Power, and Clark Gable. I couldn't put pictures on the wall of my bedroom because my mother said the tape left black marks that were impossible to get off. We never had scotch tape in the house anyway, so it wasn't worth arguing about. But if we ever did get some scotch tape, I would give a go at arguing. It would have been nice to have a picture or two on the walls. The only picture we had in the bedroom my sister and I shared was a sweet-faced woman with long hair softly falling about her shoulders, sitting on a chair, and holding a baby

draped in blankets. The woman was real pretty and looked at the baby like it was a little Jesus. I was pretty sure she never said shit like my mother did when she was mad.

“I like Clark Gable best,” I told Musa Jean. “When I’m old enough to have a boyfriend, how old will he be?”

“Too old for you,” she said handing me a movie magazine opened to a page showing Sterling Hayden standing by the mast of a sailing sloop anchored off some island in the tropics. His white shirt was unbuttoned to his waist, his pants rolled mid-calf, and his blonde hair was lifted slightly by an unseen ocean breeze. He was a long way from my home where a concrete world snuggled up to the rotting ferry piers on the Hudson River. I wondered if I’d ever see a place like the one in the picture. There had to be a real honest-to-goodness place in the world like that, right? Or how could they get that picture?

“He’s going into the Navy,” Musa Jean said matter-of-factly. She knew everything about movie star stuff. “We won’t be seeing him in the movies until the war is over.” She fell backward on the bed, holding the magazine high over her head. “I think I’ll put his picture on the ceiling right over my pillow so he’s the last thing I see before I turn out the light.”

After supper, Musa Jean arrived with her Ouija board under her arm. She laid it out on the kitchen table, and she and my mother sat across from each other, gingerly placing their fingers on the pointer. Musa Jean reminded my mother that it was important to keep her touch light.

“Let the pointer do the work,” she instructed.

“Otherwise, we’ll never know the truth.”

I stood behind my mother, leaning on her shoulder and rocking back and forth. I was what you called fidgety when I was young. My mother always said that I was the kind of kid that got on people’s nerves. “Dorothy,” she’d yell, “you’re getting on my goat.” Whatever that was. As far as I knew, she didn’t have a goat. Maybe goat was a secret code word for one of her body parts. I edged up as close to the board as I thought was safe.

Musa Jean leaned slightly backwards in her chair and half closed her eyes. She began with what she called “the warm up questions.”

“Will Sterling Hayden come back from the war safely?”

The board responded affirmatively, without giving the question much thought, making it appear to be a pretty sure thing. Musa Jean winked and gave me that “I told you so look.” She returned her attention to the board.

“Will the Japanese bomb Jersey City?”

The pointer hesitated, started off the board and then careened toward the word “no.” We breathed a sigh of relief. Jersey City was pretty close to where we lived and right where my father worked in the shipyards.

Confident that the board had warmed up sufficiently and noting my mother’s growing impatience, Musa Jean asked the question of the evening. “Will the Mullers move to a farm?”

We held our breath as the pointer slid to and then past the word “no”, skated across the letters of the alphabet without hesitation and lightly played with the tops of the numbers zero through nine. At first, it looked as though the board didn’t know the answer

but, as if suddenly coming upon our future, the pointer boldly headed for “yes” and stopped.

We were jubilant. In her most dramatic voice, Musa Jean announced, “The Mullers are moving to the country.”

I jumped off the chair, clapped my hands, let out a couple of howls, and danced about the kitchen. My grandmother’s china cereal set on the shelf above the refrigerator rattled. Our dog Bubbles came into the kitchen to see what was going on and joined in with a few prancing steps of her own. My sister came out of my Grandfather’s room to see what was going on.

“Bill, we’re moving to the country,” my mother called to my father who was in the living room, smoking his pipe, and listening to the latest war news on the radio.

“Hah?” my father responded.

“Quiet down Dorothy.” My mother grabbed my arm and made me sit on the chair. “Your father can’t hear me with you making all that noise.” She raised her voice and yelled, “We’re moving to the country.”

My father mumbled and turned the radio louder.

“He never listens to me,” my mother said to no one in particular. “All he cares about is that damn pipe of his.”

Musa Jean folded the Ouija board carefully, as though it was a living thing, and returned it to its box. She rose to go.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Muller,” she said to my mother. “It looks like you’re going to be a farmer.”

“Can I have a pig?” I asked. I really wanted a horse but knew that wasn’t possible. My grandfather said that horses ate too much and you couldn’t eat them. A pig seemed a surer bet.

There was no answer. My mother was too busy grumbling about my father’s inattention. I walked Musa Jean out the front door and sat on the front steps as I watched her go through the gate.

“Will you have time to polish my nails tomorrow?” I called after her. She hurried across the street without answering.

Stars had popped out in the sky and it wasn’t even dark. No moon that I could see. Soon school would be out and it would be time for us to go down to the meadows and collect punkies to light so we could smoke off the plague of mosquitoes that came with

the summer heat. I was tempted to swing on the gate but didn't. My mother said I could poke one of my eyes out on the iron pickets and I didn't want to spoil my chances of moving to a farm by losing my eyesight. I wondered if there were any ripe mulberries hidden under the weeping branches of the trees next to the steps. Tomorrow morning I'd search for some for my breakfast cereal.

I looked at my chewed-off finger nails, speculating whether or not there was enough left to polish. I wondered if the Japanese would ever get as far as New Jersey and when we moved, if they could find our new home in the country and bomb the farm animals as well as us. Pig guts would be all over the place. I knew what pig guts looked like. Vedder Metzner, the butcher piled them into a grinder and made sausages, but only for his best customers. He said it was too much work to sell them to just anybody. I went inside.

My mother and father were in the living room. She was trying to convince him that a move to the country was imminent and he was trying to listen to the radio over her strident and insistent voice. My mother was getting all worked up and I figured it was best to stay out of the way so I went to the bedroom I shared with

my sister, hoping that Musa Jean would come over the next day and polish my nails.

Two Seasons in Paradise with Joe Hollis by Jesika Feather

Joe moves with the light gait of a man who's spent his life wrangling brief footing from loose stones. He has a slight frame, glasses, and a cloud of gray hair that puffs out beneath his signature black beanie. His hand movements depict a lifetime spent pressing roots into soil, extracting seeds from their husks, and subtly shifting this leaf or that stalk to investigate peculiarities.

Joe's name is generally spoken concurrently with that of his life-project: Mountain Gardens. Mountain Gardens is a wonderland, a four-acre paradise, and an archetype of the existence we self-proclaimed revolutionaries strive for. The property lies at the base of Mount Mitchell, just outside of Burnsville, North Carolina. Joe bought the land raw in 1972 and has spent the last 40 years nourishing the soil, erecting artistic infrastructure, and influencing hundreds of apprentices.

My husband and I interned at Mountain Gardens for two seasons (2004 - 2005). I was attracted to the internship because I wanted to live simply and to gain more practical skills. Because I was taking a break

from teaching, I anticipated some mindless, emotionless, nature-based busywork. I imagined (pre-arrival) that weeding might be the ideal task for me. I fantasized about the black and white finality of a job well done: a bed of lettuce or a row of Echinacea starkly contrasted against the uninterrupted, dark, richness of cleared soil. It was exactly the sort of unquestionable triumph that my mind had begun to crave; like coloring inside the lines, or two plus two equals four.

But Joe's style of gardening is not cut and dry. It's an intuitive science; a 50/50 blend of intellect and instinct (sort of like teaching). At Mountain Gardens the line between "weed" and "not-a-weed" is a vast gray area. There are very few, if any, plants that Joe actually eradicates from his garden. Though he may ask you to weed the Agrimony from the Angelica he will, later, suggest that you collect its leaves from the odd, sporadic patches where its presence is acceptable. Agrimony (also called Soldier's Herb) is commonly used in a poultice due to its ability to slow and stop bleeding. Until you become familiar with the ever transforming appearance of each plant and its varied healing or nutritional properties, weeding is one of the more daunting assignments at Mountain Gardens.

Joe doesn't grow or process any individual plant in mass. He is dedicated to variety and he specializes in Chinese as well as Native medicinal plants. On his four acres Joe has developed a veining, flowering, photosynthesizing Materia Medica... a living library of plant medicine.

Each year Joe harvests seed from the hardiest specimens within his horticultural throng. He scrupulously organizes his yield into film canisters that are labeled and dated. These canisters are arranged 'A' to 'Z' in snug-fitting holes drilled into shelves that line his custom-built 6'x4' seed cabinet. As new seeds come in, the outdated leftovers are hodgepodged into a single envelope. In the springtime this geriatric seed medley is scattered throughout the garden (another incentive to pour over those plant identification flashcards)

After my reluctant realization that this internship would actually require me to learn things and make decisions, it seemed natural to invest two years into this apprenticeship. We wanted to reap the full benefits of Joe's teachings. Joe was a refreshing anomaly for both of us. We could have spent decades learning solely from his lifestyle.

Joe maintains a lenient attitude about... pretty much everything. He eats meat which, to many intern's chagrin, is not always hormone free or organic. It would not even be unprecedented to discover... ghasp... the tell-tale foil wrapper of a fast food hamburger in his truck.

Even as Joe approaches his 70th birthday, he doesn't strive for more amenities, comforts, or conveniences. He plods simply and doggedly into his 40th year as proprietor of Mountain Gardens, influencing his interns with the same, humble, lead-by-example teaching style. He presents himself as a problem-solving equal, never flaunting his mastery of the avant garde techniques that have become his daily routines.

Joe is a catalyst of the Permaculture movement, from before the term 'Permaculture' was coined. However, due to his unpretentious, almost Taoist nature, his writings and gardening practices have mostly provided flashes of insight and inspirational whispers in the ears of more prominent writers and activists.

One of Joe's initial hurdles in 1972, before any of the infrastructure or gardening could ensue, was to pry innumerable stones from his virgin mountain property. Mountain Gardens crawls up the base of Mt. Mitchell at, quite literally, a 45 degree slant. In accordance

with Joe's use-what's-readily-available philosophy, he incorporated nearly every one of these stones in the winding retaining walls that embrace each of his garden beds. His rock walls extend about two and a half feet high, supporting garden plots that roll approximately three and half feet back before butting into the subsequent terrace.

Joe doesn't use mortar, though on occasion I've watched him press soil and the roots of rambling plants into weak segments, allowing maturing root systems to cinch the stones together. Because these forty-year-old walls are in a perpetual state of deterioration and re-construction, no intern resides long at Mountain Gardens without an extensive tutorial in the art of rock wall formation.

Each structure on Joe's property is assembled with a similar piece-by-piece, meticulous regard for beauty, sound construction, and amalgamation with the natural environment. In 1984 Joe, with help from friends, hand cut every shingle for the roof of the pavilion: a spacious community structure that incorporates an extensive library and herb shop and whose roof extends further to provide coverage for a large, communal outdoor kitchen. Upon completion of the pavilion, the leftover shingles were used to cover

the roof and exterior walls of an exceptionally quaint outhouse.

Even for those accustomed to “alternative spaces,” an initial glance at the pavilion will probably result in the universal first impression: “is this for real?” This space was not created to look like a wizard’s lair, but for all intents and purposes, it actually is one.

Upon scanning the table where Joe prepares Chinese tonic prescriptions for the patients of a local acupuncturist, you will notice the coffee mug containing a few pens, an herb-dusted spoon, and several dried gecko heads on wooden skewers. Like everything else in his mystical apothecary, these disconcerting leftovers are not for show. Many ancient Chinese recipes do indeed call for há jiè (dried gecko): just one reason why most of his tea consumers prefer their tea un-translated.

With the exception of the slow winter months, Joe rarely leaves Mountain Gardens. Dancing is one of the only activities, besides sustainable wildcrafting, that lures him from his property. Nearly two weeks into my internship, as I watched Joe crouched on his haunches—tending a fire, a strange familiarity in his utilitarian grace snagged a two-year-old memory to the forefront.

Long before I'd ever heard of Joe or Mountain Gardens I was at a music venue in Asheville. Though the musicians were giving us their wholehearted-all, the audience was utterly unenthused. The band made animated comments into the microphone and intensified its musical fervor. Still... the audience remained unmoved.

The lively man with gray hair was immediately conspicuous. Aside from tipping the age demographic by a good forty five years, he was clearly unaffected by the surrounding apathy. He danced with abandon. Soon enough, the band gave up on our stodgy crowd and began playing just for him.

I watched as the musicians and their nimble enthusiast transported themselves to cloud-nine. They channeled a full-on shamanic boogie while the rest of us, we humdrum leftovers, remained to fend for ourselves.

As an intern I looked forward to every drum circle, full-moon party, or spontaneous shin-dig that evoked Joe's crazy imp jive. There were plenty of these opportunities because Joe is a virtuoso at whoopin'-it-up in the woods.

Over the years, Mountain Gardens has inspired the construction of many inventive party enhancements

including a wood fired hot tub, a cob pizza oven, and a large deck that bounces under the force of ecstatic dancing.

The revelries generally commence as the hot tub achieves a reasonable temperature. As the night progresses the fire is stoked with increased zeal until only the most hard-core or the most inebriated can dip more than a toe in the celebratory broth. Joe waits until the very end, until everyone else has gone home, passed out, or sustains a healthy intimidation of the smoking hot tub. He is known for his assertion, “I don’t get naked for anything under 108.”

Perhaps it’s this propensity for scalding water that perks Joe’s vitality. Or maybe it’s his proclivity for bushwhacking up sharp inclines on regular wildcrafting expeditions. On each of these off-trail plant missions, Joe easily outpaces his interns. Seemingly unaware that his near-sprint up the mountain puts the rest of us 20-somethings to shame, he scampers along at a solid, inexhaustible clip... rather like he’s darting up a household staircase. There is nothing for us to do but pick up the pace and pray he will discover an oddly colored trillium or an unfamiliar patch of bloodroot... anything that might waylay him while we regain our breath.

Joe also puts a lot of stock in his daily intake of Gynostemma tea. Gynostemma (Jiaogulan) is a Chinese veining plant that Joe has adopted as one of his specialty herbs. It is a longevity booster with very similar chemistry to the Ginseng root. Gynostemma's medicinal properties can be extracted from the vine and leaves and, therefore, it can be harvested far more sustainably than Ginseng which is currently verging on extinction in our native forestland.

During the 16 months that I interned at Mountain Gardens, I retained very little knowledge concerning plant medicine or gardening. Instead I was inexorably influenced by my daily interactions with a man wholly committed to his life-mission. His dedication is not based in an intellectual ideal or a nine-to-five obligation. Whether he is teaching, dancing, gardening, or re-directing a compulsive intern, Joe is wholeheartedly contributing to a positive outcome in the cosmic plot line.

In an addendum that he attached to his well-known essay, *Paradise Gardening* Joe wrote:

... I still hold firmly to the belief that the best way to address global warming, diversity loss and other planetary problems, the best way to address war, injustice and other social

problems, and the best way for humans to live on the planet to realize our full physical, mental and spiritual potential are the same ‘way.’ Mountain Gardens is an effort to act out this theory – We are actors in a piece of ‘visionary ecological theater.’

When I think of Joe I imagine him accompanied by his ubiquitous mug of Gynostemma tea, sifting through piles of gardening literature at a table dusted in potting soil and residual root tendrils. Or I imagine him meandering through the day’s projects... repotting, seed saving, weatherizing... the seemingly minute alterations which, over time, have built his Utopia.

In a world mesmerized by quick progress and instant gratification, Joe holds a space for methodical, meaningful, real-time change. At Mountain Gardens the tedious cycles of growth, decay, and reconstruction are understood, simply, as the Earth’s stalwart style of instruction. Joe nurtures his own property with a similar relentless, unassuming nature. He is a true “Earth-style” instructor whose very life demonstrates his fundamental belief: that humans can interact courteously with the rest of this planet.

She Leaves Me, She Leaves Me Not by Samina Najmi

Yesterday we drove the three hours to San Francisco airport together. Twenty-six hours later, you've called to tell me that you made it safely across North America, the Atlantic Ocean, Europe, and the Middle East—back to Karachi, our megapolis on Pakistan's southern coast. Sajeda, your housekeeper of fifteen years, has made you a cup of strong, black tea sweetened with honey. Once again your day unfolds thirteen hours ahead of Pacific Standard Time.

I did not permit you any goodbyes in Fresno. As we loaded your bags into the blue minivan, your bottle of water, your string cheese and banana for the journey, and as your face betrayed the weight of the parting, I told you gruffly that this was no time for self-indulgence, we had a plane to catch. I snapped instructions—use the bathroom, put on your jackets—at my son and daughter, your eldest grandchildren, the ones who have learned from you the right-to-left Urdu alphabet, learned to share your taste for the sweet corn kernels, buttered and peppered, that you'd sauté for them when they came home from school,

ravenous. At the steering wheel, I saw without turning my head toward the passenger seat how you looked at the garage door closing down on our two months of togetherness, how, as we pulled out of the driveway, your gaze lingered on the bountiful oranges peeping out from the backyard, the tips of the tall cypress trees tickling our blue Fresno skies in early February.

Your son, my brother, met us at the International Terminal with a copy of your just-published book, your Urdu translation of a Harvard psychologist's work on unwanted thoughts and our human attempts to suppress them. My brother and his wife, your daughter-in-law, brought a chocolate cake and three candles so you could be part of your younger granddaughter's birthday; their San Francisco home with its steep stairs a world beyond your reach. When we sang happy birthday, two gray-haired women looked up from their sandwiches and joined in. They were passengers like you, their eyes soft with recognition at your attempts to hold on to the flesh of your flesh even as the plane prepared to carry you eight thousand miles away. The three children who began leaving you thirty years ago, for their undergraduate degrees, their master's, their doctorates; for their careers in the academy, in the Silicon Valley, in clinical psychology; for their

marriages to Americans, black, white, and Korean; for their children growing up without thoughts of Karachi. And you have done your best to shrink space and time, to partake of the graduations, weddings, divorces, and births. Except for the five years after 9/11 when the world came between us. In those five years you buried your sister, my aunt, only a year older than you, and your brother-in-law, my uncle, friend of forty years. In those five years, while shingles torched half your face (and burns you still), rheumatoid arthritis pounced on shoulder and wrist, gnarled your toes, and gnashed at your knees—the searing pain, the contorted limb—a mock rigor mortis, alive and afire. You let go of your school, the one you began in our living room thirty-seven years ago for your four-year-old daughter, my younger sister. You relinquished the love of four hundred children. That daughter, my sister, sponsored your Green Card so you would never again be denied entry into our lives. And you sliced your years down the middle, six months here and six months there, the wholeness of hearts bridging the fracture.

But this time Karachi kept you the whole year. This time you arrived at San Francisco airport thinking, Let me see them in their American lives one last time. This time you arrived in a wheelchair. This time I was

glad not to greet you at the airport. I waited for my brother, your son, to bring you to me in Fresno, where you will stay, for the first time unable to visit your other children and your nephew and niece, my cousins. So they will drive to Fresno, a familial Mecca, for hurricane visits from points north and south, including your toddler grandson, my nephew, from San Diego, who will tell you that his knee hurts too. You will look in wonder at the lights on our five-foot Christmas tree, the one we've held on to year after year, though my children, your grandchildren, are catching up to it in height. With your one good hand—the other shriveled up since your crawling days when you dipped it into steaming chai water—you will touch the ornaments they made in preschool, kindergarten, fourth grade, and marvel at them with your elementary schoolteacher's eye. Right before Christmas Eve we will whisk you away from landlocked Fresno for just one night because your son-in-law, my husband, will want you to see the Pacific Ocean again, from the wharf at Avila Beach when the horizon has turned the color of fresh peaches to the west, lavender ribbons flung east.

At four or five o'clock in the morning, while I press keys on my laptop in the family room, I will hear the hallway door creak open, the sound of your slipped

feet scraping their labored way to the kitchen on our hard Mexican tiles. You will not say, and I will not ask, what it took to position your feet on the guestroom floor this morning, how much courage, how much faith that your legs, warped into semi-circles like the necks of guitars left out in the humid Karachi sun, will carry you one more day. When you pass through the family room, I will get up to kiss your cheek, and you will look into my face the way my grandmother, your mother, used to—wistful and wondering, as though I'm a pleasant surprise. I will go back to my laptop and try to measure this morning's pain by the time it takes you to reach for the milk in the refrigerator, unfold the wax paper in the cereal box, eat just enough so you can swallow the painkillers that your stomach will mutiny against all day. When daylight spreads in our backyard, you will raise the shades of the family room, your left hand coaxing the reluctant right arm upward by the elbow, your eyes eager for the sight of our untamed sago palms and our pool shaped by the memory of a lake in Armenia, an exile's imagining of home. You'll make your slow, seesawing way toward the pool's blueness, wrapped in your bunny-pink robe, with cat food for Tub-Tub, the black and white stray who answers your Urdu call as brightly as your grandchildren do. The pain will relent a little in the course of the day, and you will

come with me in the blue minivan to see those two grandchildren, my children, on and off the yellow school bus, always vigilant with the remote control so you can relieve me of the task of closing the garage door behind us.

Between the school bus hours, we will savor my sabbatical, have little meals of hardboiled eggs and steamed edamame together, and you will make me cardamom tea because you know it is a taste of Karachi I'm unable to replicate. We will do our separate readings and writings until late afternoon when the winter sun shines half-heartedly through your window. Then we'll prop ourselves up in your bed, and you will read aloud from the two-volume memoir that your mother, my grandmother, left us so many years ago. The memoir she wrote in her colloquial Urdu over the course of twenty years, which your journalist friend devoured all in one night—a vivid social history of Bihar!—she raved, of that patch of India my grandmother still yearned for five decades after Partition. The memoir that was never published in her lifetime. You will read to me for two hours at a time, and we will wonder how she could bear to remember so much, the details as fine as her grape-leaf embroidery on the placemats she made for my table one summer. We will puzzle over the

conventions of her time and place, laugh like unruly schoolgirls at her comic sketches. We will read her heartbreaks between the lines. Know ourselves a little better.

And when the day draws to an end, when your grandchildren and I have kissed you goodnight, my husband, your son-in-law, will pop his head through your accordion doors and ask if you'd like a new movie to watch. You'll insert the DVD into the player in your bedroom, and Victorian men and women in large hats and flowing garments will flit across the screen all night, a hum barely audible, but companionship enough as you lie on the guest-bed, adrift between waking and sleeping. Then it's five o'clock in the morning again, and you know I'm in the family room, on your way to the kitchen, pressing keys on my laptop....

Already a memory—our two months together, living as though I never left Karachi, you never grew older, space and time just tricks of our idle imaginations. You leave, as you have left so many times before, but this time you leave me a template for my tomorrows, of grace and tenderness, whatever the pain—Because if I live long enough, the remaining blessings will disappear, too—the mind curious, heart eager, eyes singing small beauties. I muffle my goodbyes at

San Francisco's International Terminal, as your son, my brother, the one who chose business class to soften what your legs must suffer—Because when my time comes, how will I spend on my comfort if I never spent on hers?—as that son, that brother, waves to the wheelchair attendant, who checks your name off his list with one brusque stroke, and, before I can believe the sight of you in a wheelchair—my dancing mother!—he has whisked you off toward the gate beyond our reach, your grandson, my son the soccer player, running and running on strong, sturdy legs, determined to catch up with you, long after I have let you go.

Contributors

Charles Bergman teaches English at Pacific Lutheran University. He's the author of three books, including *Wild Echoes: Encounters with the Most Endangered Animals in North America*. He's written extensively on wildlife and animals, including the 2009 cover story in *Smithsonian* magazine on wildlife trafficking in Latin America. He has a weak spot for the Southern Hemisphere, has completed two Fulbright Fellowships in Latin America, and has led four classes on study tours of Antarctica.

Donald Dewey has published 31 books of fiction, nonfiction, and drama, including widely translated biographies of James Stewart and Marcello Mastroianni, and a history of American political cartooning, *The Art of Ill Will*. His two latest books were published in June—a biography of the trainer Ray Atcel (*Ray Arcel—A Boxing Biography*) and the novel *Wake Up and Smell the Bees*.

Tammy Dietz is a writer, instructor, instructional designer, and editor. Her work has appeared in various anthologies and literary journals including *Bringing Light to Twilight*, a critical examination of the *Twilight* book series, and *The Legendary Online Journal*. She is the nonfiction editor of *Silk Road Literary Review* and lives with her husband and children near Seattle.

Jesika Feather is a mother, teacher, writer, and community organizer who lives in Eugene, Oregon. She enjoys living closely with brilliant, zany individuals and then writing about the ensuing rigmarole.

Jane Hertenstein is a blogger, memoirist, tightrope walker, and blender of blended genres. She is not to be trusted. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Hunger Mountain*, *Rosebud*, *Word Riot*, *Flashquake*, *Steam Ticket*, *The Write Room*,

Frostwriting, Cantaraville, Fiction Fix, Six Minute Magazine, and Tonopah Review. She is the author of the books Beyond Paradise, Orphan Girl, and Home Is Where We Live.

Amy Herting is a busy mom of three from Colorado who loves to write stories, copywriting, and show scripts in her spare time. When not chasing kids around and writing, she also sings/performs in a ladies barbershop chorus of 150 and a quartet called Déjà vu.

Christina Holzhauser was raised in a town of 85 along the Missouri river. She's worked as a ranch hand, a pee collector at a nuclear plant, a histology technician, an archaeologist, and an expert hiking boot fitter. While living in a cabin with no running water in Fairbanks, Alaska, she earned her MFA in nonfiction as well as the right to say she's put on her coat to use the outhouse, seen the northern lights, and watched the sun never set. Currently, she lives in Columbia, Missouri with her wife and son. She teaches English and Creative Writing at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.

Vanessa Jo King grew up in Oakland, California and Boulder, Colorado, and currently lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. She (finally) received her bachelor's

degree from Westminster College in 2010, and has yet to use it in any practical way (aside from planning some pretty awesome weddings). She has a herd of obnoxious animals including a lovable dog named Cricket and two very destructive cats. In her spare time, Vanessa likes to set her hula hoop on fire and read books. Sometimes concurrently.

Rebecca Marks' qualifications include a wicked under-bite that yielded a pronounced lisp, a laundry list of allergies that necessitated years of shots and an addiction to antihistamine, a Jewish heritage that provides a boisterous family and an overflow of neuroses and sarcasm, and most expensively, a nearly completed Bachelor's degree in English. Her work will be appearing in an upcoming issue of *The Inconsequential* and has been featured in *The Portland Review*.

A graduate of San Diego State University, **Jenean McBrearty** was raised in Southern California where she taught sociology and political science for military education programs and wrote for newspapers in the Imperial Valley. She was a social science/history book reviewer for *Choice Magazine*; a columnist for the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, and has been published in *Teaching for Success*, *Static Movement*, *Wherever It Pleases*, and the *Main Street Rag 2011 Anthology*,

Altered States. She won Eastern Kentucky University's English Department Award for Graduate Non-fiction in 2011, and is an MFA Creative Writing candidate.

Sheila Morris was born and raised in rural Grimes County, Texas and describes herself as an essayist with humorist tendencies. She is the author of two memoirs, *Deep in the Heart – A Memoir of Love and Longing* and *Not Quite the Same*. She and her partner Teresa live with their four dogs in South Carolina and Texas.

Samina Najmi teaches multiethnic U.S. literature at California State University, Fresno. She has written scholarly articles on race, gender, and war in American literature and edited or coedited three books. A late bloomer, she discovered the rewards of more personal kinds of writing in 2011 when she stumbled into a CSU Summer Arts course that taught her to see. Samina was raised in Pakistan and England, and now lives with her husband and two children in the San Joaquin Valley, eight thousand miles away from her mother.

LeeAnn Olivier is a poet and essayist whose work has recently appeared in *Stone Highway Review*, *damselfly press*, *Sojourn*, *SWAMP*, *Jelly Bucket*, and

Illya's Honey. A Ph.D. student at the University of Texas at Dallas, she is currently working on her creative dissertation—a collection of poems exploring myth, magic, and a Louisiana childhood. Olivier teaches English full-time at Tarrant County College and lives in Fort Worth with her partner John and their canine children: Eddie, Oscar, and Bijou. “Love Like Saltwater” originally appeared in *damselfly press*.

Todd Outcalt is the author of twenty-five books in six languages including *Before You Say "I Do"*, *Candles in the Dark*, and *The Best Things in Life Are Free*. His short work (fiction and non) has graced the pages of publications such as *American Fitness*, *Newsweek*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Cure*, *Brides*, and *For the Bride* (where he also wrote a column for grooms). Two of his articles on breast cancer have won prizes. In addition to writing Todd enjoys kayaking, hiking, and lifting weights--but he no longer competes in bodybuilding competitions! He lives in Brownsburg, Indiana with his wife and is hard at work—always!—on his next book and essay.

Kathleen Patton grew up in rural New York nestled in the heart of the Catskill Mountains. She earned her BFA in Creative Writing at UNC Wilmington, and currently lives in Florida. Kathleen draws her inspirations from the mountains she grew up in and

her experiences as a military dependent and sister during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Dorothy M. Place lives in Davis, California where she tends her bonsai trees and writes. She has published three short stories, one of which won first prize in the Mendocino Coast Writers short story contest as well as the Estelle Frank Fellowship.

Kirsti Sandy is an English professor at Keene State College in Keene, New Hampshire, a town that once held the world record for having the most lit jack-o-lanterns in one place. She has published essays in the online journal *of Freerange Nonfiction*, *Freshly Hatched*, and in several academic journals and books. She recently purchased a pair of "Roller Derby" brand skates for her two-year-old daughter.

Barbara Strauss lives and writes outside Boston. Her work has received Honorable Mention in the Glimmer Train Short Story Award for New Writers, and was published in the inaugural issue of *technicolor Magazine*. She also has a story forthcoming in *The Mustard Seed Risk*. She veered from fiction to write "Bearings," about her actual grandparents. In addition to writing, she's big into yoga.

Clementine Till spends the majority of her life at very particular table in a very particular café where they

begin brewing Earl Grey the second she walks in the door. She counteracts this substantial caffeine intake by consuming equal amounts of water and, consequently, borrows the bathroom key so often that they've begun nodding her admittance to the "employees only" area where she retrieves the key herself.

Kristin Troyer is an undergraduate student at Cedarville University, pursuing interests in music, theatre, and writing. Whether you call her a bookworm or a nerd, listening to and telling stories have been an important part of her life since she was small. This is her first publication.

Michelle Valois teaches writing and humanities at a community college in central Massachusetts. She lives in Florence (Mass, not Italy, alas) with her partner and their three children. Her writing has appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Moon Milk Review*, *Florida Review*, *Pank*, *Brevity*, *Fourth Genre*, *North American Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, among others.

Janna Vought is an MFA graduate student at Lindenwood University in Saint Charles, MO. She attends school online from her home in Colorado Springs, CO where she lives with her husband, two daughters, and two dogs. Her nonfiction has

appeared in *Imperfect Parent Magazine*. She also has poetry featured in *The Rusty Nail* and *The Eagle Literary Journal*, and fiction published in *Ideagems Tough Lit V* and *Tough Lit VI*.

Jono Walker is a writer and book review blogger who moonlights as an advertising executive and marketing consultant. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife Julia, their big weedy garden, a couple of poorly behaved dogs and his trusty fly rod.

Linda C. Wisniewski shares an empty nest with her retired scientist husband in Bucks County, PA. A former librarian, she teaches memoir workshops and speaks on the healing power of writing. Her credits include the *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Rose & Thorn*, *Mindprints*, and other literary magazines as well as several anthologies. Linda's memoir, *Off Kilter*, was published in 2008 by Pearlsong Press and she has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.