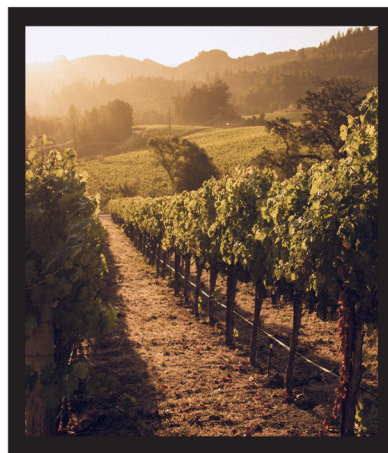
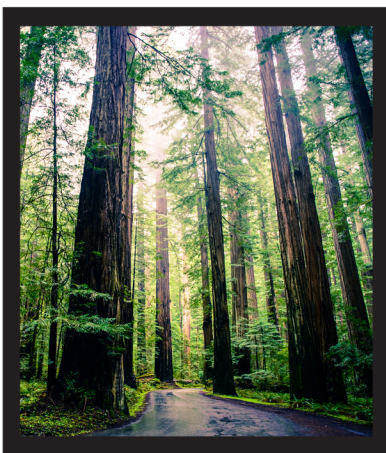


# The 2018 California Writers Club LITERARY REVIEW

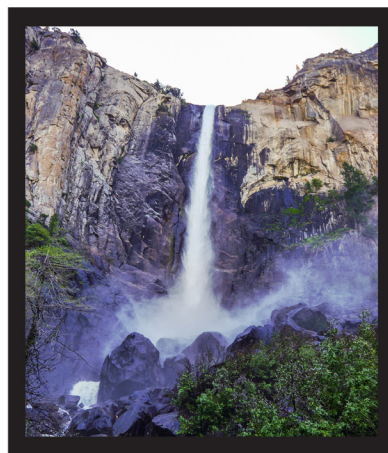
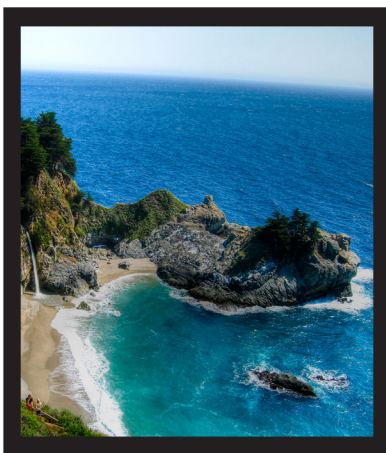
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This 2018  
Literary Review  
features the selected  
works of our CWC  
membership.



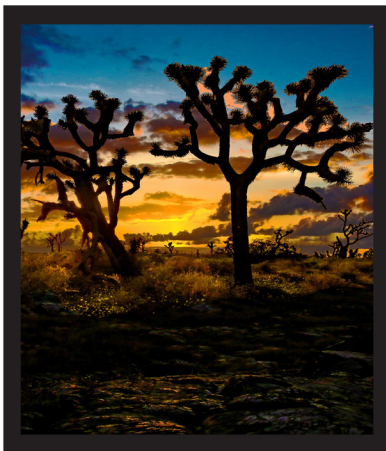
A curated  
collection of fiction,  
non-fiction, memoir,  
poetry and essays  
from our talented  
writers.

Each was chosen  
from submissions  
open to members of  
our twenty-two  
branches.



From the towering  
redwood forests, the  
vast Central Valley  
and the Bay Areas  
to the glittering  
Southland and  
beyond.

North to south.



We are rich in  
writers. Turn the  
page and enjoy.



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## Notes from the Editor:

First, honors to Bob Garfinkle who inaugurated the *Literary Review* in 2012 and to Dave LaRoche who carried it on for six years before handing on the baton. For me this has been a bumpy, sometimes panicky, four-plus months. The *Literary Review* would not happen without excellent CWC volunteers.

David George did a great job as Submissions Manager, ensuring all 176 members who submitted included all the necessary info with their submissions. He populated an invaluable spreadsheet and forwarded the submissions to me.

I developed a new spreadsheet with only the submission number (key), the title, genre and branch associated with each submission. I added the key to each submission, checked that the genre was indicated and that there were no author names visible.

The Acquisitions Editors did yeoman's work to ensure all 275 submissions were read by at least three people. They graded the pieces and wrote comments, both of which I logged. Reading may be fun but commenting is real WORK. Based on the grades, I developed a list of the best 40 to 50 submissions. I want to especially thank Smoky Zeidel of High Desert who came on board in early February and read well over 100 submissions in one month. Smoky is a former English teacher who put a lot of care into her comments. I then edited the submissions.

Rusty LaGrange, who does such an excellent job with *The Bulletin*, agreed to do the layout this year.

Bob Isbill checks with branches to see if extra copies should be ordered. He is also our Advertising Director.

Again, this *CWC Literary Review* cannot happen without volunteers. Consider helping with next year's issue.

~~ Elisabeth Tuck

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## The Arrangement

by Charles Furey

*Writers of Mendocino*

“Marry me,” he says.

But she will not. “I don’t believe in marriage,” she says. “Look at my poor mother. And all us kids. And our father. Where was he all those years?”

“I would never be like that,” he says. “Not ever. Come on. Marry me. I want to be with you. I want to wake every morning and find you waking beside me.”

She is silent. Her demeanor serious as a teacher, and he a dull student who does not understand. “And I want to be with you. And sleep with you. And love you. But I won’t marry you.”

He hears only that she will sleep with him. Then that she loves him, though she has never told him that, straight out, before. “Okay then,” he says. “Let’s do it. Let’s do it now.”

“All right,” she says at last. “You find a place. Find us a decent place. And I’ll take care of the rest.”

The ‘rest’ turns out to be a sofa bed she has talked Mr. Brown, the owner of Brown’s Home Furnishings Store on Fifth Street, into selling to her on credit. And sheets and blankets and pillows and pillow cases and wash cloths and towels. And a frying pan. And cups and saucers and knives and forks and spoons. And a can opener and a coffee pot. And a table lamp. If Mr. Brown sold bread and milk and butter and eggs, he could have stocked their refrigerator as well.

He is waiting in front of the two-story apartment house on Delancey Street when Brown’s delivery van arrives. The driver and his helper lift the sofa bed onto the ground without much difficulty. But it is too heavy, and too wide, to maneuver up the narrow stairway so they dismantle it on the sidewalk—to the considerable interest of pedestrians passing by. And then carry it, piece by piece, up to the empty apartment and reassemble it there on the bare wood floor.

The small brass lamp encloses them in a cocoon of light while they eat their first meal together, seated side by side on the pale blue sofa with an apple box table set before them. When they finish eating, and pull out the bed and turn off the lamp, the tall bare windows welcome light from the park below.

Toward dawn, they wake in a welter of blankets, sweetly touching, entranced by the sycamore shadows that limb their walls, bemused by the sounds of the city beyond their open windows.

“Marry me,” he whispers against her pulsing throat.

She smiles. And runs her fingers through his hair. And says, “I might.”



## Sheet Music

by Bill Baynes

*San Francisco Peninsula*

the bay blanks with mist  
and a classical melody  
leads down the pier  
and the birds that are notes  
rearrange

a new phrase  
unfurls on the phone wires  
a concerto for wings  
to the gentle rhythm of waves  
the music that is afternoon

the movement of water  
the fishing and calm  
play on  
into a deepening  
that is evening



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## A Farewell to Hemingway

by Pam Heck

*Redwood Writers*

I was nineteen and a junior in college when Hemingway seduced me. My weakness for bad boys made Modern Novel 101 a schoolgirl’s dream — D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald. So romantic! So bohemian! But, ultimately, Hemingway was the one I wanted, and *The Sun Also Rises* was the book I longed to relive. Oh, to be Lady Brett in Pamplona! The bulls! The passion! The lovers! That is why I picked Spain.

The summer of 1969 was the Woodstock Summer, the summer Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon, the summer of my great adventure—Europe on Five Dollars a Day. We were a threesome, my roommates and I. Barbara, whose last name was Grimm, picked Germany. No surprise. Being second generation Italian-American, Bobbie picked Italy.

Memory is a funny thing. If the three of us were asked to recall that summer, our stories would be significantly different. The things we remember and disremember vary, but we all remember Pamplona and the accident that followed.

continued

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It was a six-week trip. Our plans were made ... a week in each of the three selected countries, with the remaining time divided between Amsterdam (our point of entry and departure), Austria, France and England. Bobbie and Barbara wanted to explore their roots. I wanted a Hemingway adventure. Years later, when I came to regard Hemingway as a clinically depressed, alcoholic misanthrope with a spelling problem, I realized that was exactly what I got.

We arrived in Europe jet lagged, hung over and vibrating with adrenalin and enthusiasm. Our introduction to Amsterdam lasted less than twenty-four hours, a blip on the way to the train station. No time to waste. Paris called with a brand-new Simca hot off the assembly line. Amsterdam would have to wait.

At an office in Paris, we filled out the rental papers and were taken to the auto factory itself. After throwing all the luggage into the car, we managed to find our way out of the city and into the French countryside. Mon Dieu, such traffic! However, there was no time to dawdle. We were on our way to Spain; the festival of the bulls was about to start. Our whole itinerary had been carefully crafted so as not to miss the big event.

Pamplona was a swirl of crowds and colors and drunks. No wonder Hemingway felt at home there. Despite the chaos, a parking place was found and a room to rent for the night. After purchasing the mandatory red scarves and waistbands, we headed to our first ... and last ... bullfight. Appalled by the bull's blood pouring onto the sand, our little group fled into the endless stream of humanity that clogged the streets and spilled out of the raucous bars. Everything seemed red. Red scarves. Red blood. Red Spanish wine.

I thought the Spanish men would go wild for tall, blonde Barbara but she intimidated them. They found Bobbie's dark, good looks strangely exotic and called her *El Morrac*. Me, they found more familiar.

It was night. We were headed back to our room when I was surrounded by men, cut off from my friends like a calf from the herd. Their hands groped my body, grabbing me, fondling my breasts. I slapped the man attached to my breasts, hard. He raised a hand to hit me back, and no one seemed to care. I was just a silly American girl who had wandered onto the streets of Pamplona without a chaperone.

It was then that the old man intervened. I don't know what he said. Whatever it was, it was enough. The men grudgingly melted back into the crowd. I thanked the old man; at least I hope I did. What I remember most is racing

back to our room and locking the door. In the morning, we would watch the bulls run, and then we would leave.

What a relief to be on the road again. The Spanish countryside was beautiful, the sun was shining, and Barcelona was our anticipated destination. Bobbie drove. I sat "shotgun." Barbara relaxed in the backseat as vineyards and whitewashed houses drifted past. No cars ahead, just a young man on his bicycle.

We saw him. He was peddling fast, his legs a whirl of motion. Bobbie wasn't speeding but she slowed down just to be safe. One minute he was on our right; seconds later the windshield exploded as his body hit the dashboard. The impact threw him back out and over the car to land screaming in the road behind us. More blood.

My first thought was, "We have killed him. When the screams stop, he will be dead." My second thought was, "We are all going to end up in a Spanish jail!" Franco was still in power and we were about to be his next political prisoners ... three careless American women who had slain a Spanish national.

My dire prediction appeared to be coming true all too soon. An army jeep materialized as if out of nowhere. Its driver boasted an official-looking uniform and a military bearing. He quickly took charge and turned out to be not only efficient, but also kind. Instead of arresting us, he drove us to the local hospital. Ahead of us, the wounded bicyclist traveled by antique ambulance to the same location.

In spite of the fact that all three of us had been showered with glass, only I was injured. Nothing serious, but my arm was bleeding. Instinctively, it had flown up to shield my face when the windshield shattered.

The accident occurred outside a Spanish village named Barbastro. It was a small town with an equally small hospital housed on the second floor of a three-story apartment building. Upon arriving, the bicyclist was quickly wheeled down the hall for treatment. Medical treatment for my arm consisted of scrubbing out any remaining glass shards with a stiff brush over what looked like a utility sink.

I was wounded. Barbara was stoic. Bobbie was hysterical. That turned out to be a very good thing since it generated a great deal of local sympathy. Hospital staff and visitors surrounded Bobbie, trying to comfort her. Their attempts were hampered by the fact that none of them spoke English, and none of us spoke Spanish. Despite that rather significant problem, they somehow managed to convey the idea that the boy was not going to die. Bobbie's tears continued unabated.

continued



One of the visitors in the waiting room remembered a girl from the village who went to university and spoke French.

“¿Habla francés?” they asked.

We did, a little.

The young woman was located in record time and seemed pleased to be of assistance. Her name was Francesca.

Francesca went with us to the police station. We told our story as best we could to the chief of police and his assistant. Switching from Spanish to French to English and back again proved arduous. The chief did all the questioning while his assistant typed away on a battered typewriter at furious speed. I thought briefly of the Keystone Cops as a constant exchange of cigarettes turned the interview into a ridiculous fiasco. Barbara, Bobbie and I, all smokers back then, had packed plenty of Winstons for the trip. Our police friends offered us a steady stream of Nacionales, a harsher version of American Camels. Etiquette demanded that we reciprocate each time with a Winston. It was obviously an unequal exchange. They were robbing us of our infinitely superior cigarettes under the guise of good manners!

With Francesca’s help, we finally managed to get the facts across and the necessary paperwork completed. What happened was not our fault. However, in the case of an accident between an automobile and a pedestrian, the driver’s insurance was liable for damages. Did we have insurance? “Sí.” We did.

Getting through to the insurance company in Madrid took at least an hour. When I finally got an agent on the phone, I explained the circumstances of the accident. Thank God, she spoke English. When I explained that we had hit a boy on a bicycle, she only had one question, “Does he want a new bicycle?” I assured her he did.

Despite our presumed innocence, we still had to speak to a judge in the morning. And, of course, our car needed repairs. We’d be spending the night in Barbastro. Luckily, the family of Francesca’s best friend owned a restaurant/hotel. We reserved a room and took our trusty translator to dinner. It was the least we could do.

When morning arrived, we presented ourselves in the judge’s chamber. Francesca translated. I attempted, through much arm waving and striding about the room, to reenact the accident. It took just ten minutes for the judge to announce his decision. We were blameless. The boy had evidently hit a rock and been thrown into our car. Bad luck. We were free to go.

Francesca informed us that good manners required a visit to the hospital. A gift would be appreciated. Candy was always nice. We delivered a box of chocolate chews to the pitiful looking young man who suffered from, among other things, a broken jaw. I hope his family enjoyed the candy.

Having met our obligations, my companions and I headed to the local garage where the police chief waited. He informed us that, for our own safety, we could not be allowed to drive a car with no windshield. Unfortunately, our Simca was a deluxe model and no replacement windshield was in stock. One would have to be ordered from Barcelona. It would take three days.

Our schedule lay in ruins! We begged. We pleaded. We showered him with Winstons. Faced with three desperate women, he reluctantly agreed to let us leave if we promised not to drive at night. Barcelona was not far. We promised.

It became very clear, very quickly, that windshields are designed to keep out more than just wind. Without one, we were inundated with insects. An angry wasp stung Bobbie. Barbara swallowed a bug of indeterminate type. I sat in the backseat, holding a paper bag in front of my face, listening to the dull “thud, thud” of winged creatures hitting my makeshift barrier.

A car with no windshield attracts unwanted attention. On several occasions, flirtatious policemen stopped us. Their village garage could fix our car immediately; of that they were sure. No such luck! Each time, after much courteous trading of cigarettes, we were allowed to continue on our journey.

Due to the unscheduled delays, we did not reach our destination until the evening rush hour. An ancient bus ahead of us spewed out a cloud of gray smoke and noxious fumes that poured into our little Simca. Sweet smell of success ... we had made it to Barcelona!

Maybe I was still in shock from the accident, but I have few vivid memories of the city. It was beautiful. I remember that much. I also remember taking the car to a garage for repairs and the mechanics who refused to return it until we agreed to a dinner date. They weren’t being nice, just inappropriately amorous. We got a lot of that in Spain.

Once when we were lost, we asked a Spanish man for directions. “I will give you directions for a kiss,” he said.

We thought he was kidding, but he wasn’t. And since he got no kisses, we got no directions.

In the end, we left Spain several days ahead of schedule. Those days could be better spent elsewhere, perhaps in sunny Italy, the next stop on our agenda. We never regretted that decision.

My affair with Hemingway ended in Spain. Years later, I read *The Old Man and the Sea*, but it didn’t hold my interest. There was no romance; just an unlucky old man in a fishing boat. I’ve never cared much for fishing. So I don’t read Hemingway any more. I had enough of him in Pamplona.





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# The Intervening

by David George  
*Mt. Diablo*

You seek to disappear,  
Your burden too heavy,  
The pain too intense.  
I know what you'd like,  
To be gone.

Your childhood stained by abuse,  
An incident in the bath.  
One snippet in time  
But enough to lay you to waste.

Pills, wrists, starvation,  
The way out.

You'd like to slip away  
Down the hall, through the window  
To a world with no pain.

You seek to disappear  
But I won't let you.  
Do you not understand?

Sensitive, brilliant star of mine!  
You are more than half of us,  
A complex equation summed to more than one.

No, I can't let you leave  
Now or ever.

So, stay a while and let me love you.

◇

# In Memoriam Sandy Hook

by Paula Diggs  
*San Fernando Valley*

A sharp gale struck ice into our hearts  
Smoke scatters light  
Candles flicker, die.  
In a corner a dog snores  
Blue shadows fill the room  
Rain slices sleet-caked windows  
Trees weep.

My hands are cold, pressed together.  
Somewhere a furnace heats an empty room  
Ice forms around the puddle left by yesterday's rain  
A bulb goes out on the Christmas tree  
Its branches darken as the faint bells ring

Three times.

*Dies irae*

The job of the dead is to comfort the living.  
The job of the living is to live.

◇

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## Return of the Warrior: Homefront

by Leslie Liberty, *San Joaquin Valley*

When my Uncle Morton Rexford Thigpen returned from the Philippines after World War II, he was a little off. Not that any of his relations really noticed; our whole family is a little off if you ask me. I call us "Southern Fried Addamses" which makes my Dad growl at me. When he does that, I roll my eyes, so we're even.

It was while Uncle Rex was creeping through the Philippine jungle that a Japanese soldier started shooting up at him from inside of a hollow log. When that "log" started shooting at him, Rex was unnerved, as well as wounded. Wounded where he wasn't ever going to make any Thigpens ever after, though he ended up being married five times.

Uncle Rex was in the VA hospital for quite a while, being patched up as best they could patch him. They gave him pills for his body and pills for his head. He dumped

them all in a big jar and dosed himself by color, depending on how he was feeling that day. Blue ones for a blue day, and so on. He was not one for the blues really, except of course Delta blues, but as squirrely as he was before he was sent to shed his blood on foreign soil, war did not do him any favors.

Rex rode the rails as a hobo after the war, saw a lot of America, and worked as a fry cook and bluesman, but couldn't keep a steady job. His parents and eleven brothers and sisters all fought, or did their part for the war effort, but because of what they used to call combat fatigue, or combat stress reaction, now known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Rex would have good days and bad.

continued

Finally, a down-to-earth, mental-health worker suggested, "If you can't work full time, what if you become an independent cab driver? Then you could work on your good days and take it easy on your bad days." That statement remains one of the most brilliant things I have ever heard coming from the mouth of a helping professional. Cabbie was the perfect fit for Uncle Rex! He did well enough that he was eventually able to buy a small apartment building with the help of his brothers and sisters.

Even a bad day as a Washington, DC cabbie became a good story: One dark night Uncle Rex picked up a fare who gave him a suspect address. It turned out to be an abandoned warehouse. The fare pulled out a handgun,

pointed it over the back of the front seat at Rex, and said, "This is a stickup." Rex sighed, reached into his glove box and pulled out his service revolver. He pointed it back over the front seat at the erstwhile robber. "No, this is a stickup, you son-of-a-bitch." Rex robbed the robber and threw him out of his cab.

For all his missteps and misadventures, Uncle Rex was a loving soul, and no matter what he did, he was kind hearted and well meaning. This is proven by the fact that when he died, all his living wives and most of his remaining girlfriends showed up at his funeral. And not just to make sure that he was dead.



# Firewalk!

by Jennifer Grainger

*San Joaquin Valley*

A firewalk! A couple of my students from my "Expanding Your Awareness" class showed up wearing T-shirts that said, "I walk on fire, I can do anything I choose." I was impressed, and I have to admit I wanted to astound and impress my friends in the same way. I asked Dave, my husband of sixteen years, if he wanted to go on a firewalk with me. "No way!" he said. "You're not really going to do a firewalk, are you?" Aha! I had my first astounded and impressed person.

It was fun asking people to join me on the firewalk.

"You're going to walk on hot coals in your bare feet?"

"Of course," I'd say, smiling radiantly, enjoying their awe. A few weeks later I again asked Dave if he wanted to join me. He surprised me by saying, "Yes."

Leaving town on the morning of the firewalk, clouds began to shadow the sun, and I felt my first feelings of apprehension. Farther out of town sprinkles became a torrential downpour, and Dave said, "Looks like we're going to be rained out." Did I notice a tinge of satisfaction in his voice, or was it just me, having second thoughts? Calling ahead we were told, "The firewalk will take place as scheduled."

Arriving in town with less than an hour to eat and find the firewalk location, we pulled off the freeway, parked, and made our way across the Lyon's parking lot, sharing an umbrella and dodging puddles. I skimmed the menu, deciding on steamed vegetables and rice. Dave leisurely perused his menu. "We have plenty of time," he said. My sensory system went on alert; my shoulders tensed. Dave is fanatically punctual. I commented on his lack of anxiety about being late. He replied that this was his normal behavior. Sixteen years of experience told me he didn't want to do this, and if we were "accidentally" too late, that would

suit him fine. A thick fog of tension rolled in.

We finished dinner at 6:05 p.m. Dave directed while I drove, and he followed the map. There was no letup of the torrential rain, and I wondered how they could do a firewalk in a downpour. I turned into the eucalyptus-lined driveway of the former convent and found a parking place near the entrance. Silently we gathered our belongings and followed the signs to registration.

The first paragraph of the two-page waiver spelled out that what we were about to do is dangerous and my safety and well-being are my responsibility. Dave muttered, "No shit, Sherlock," as he signed the waiver. I signed without reading any further.

We joined the group of people waiting to be "smudged." Smudging is a Native American purification ritual to prepare for a ceremonial event. Dave stepped aside. "Asthma," he said, clearing his throat and emitting a few raspy coughs. Funny how smoking a cigar doesn't trigger his asthma. I began thinking the firewalk was a really bad idea and was wondering what I was doing there.

His name tag said Bob. Using an eagle feather, he fanned smoke from the smoldering sage in wisps around me, disintegrating the web of subtle energy holding my anxiety in check. With nothing to hold them back, tears puddled in my eyes. Smiling a gentle smile, Bob said, "Ah, an open heart."

My voice quavered. "This is beginning to feel like a very bad idea."

"Oh, no," said Bob, "it is no accident that you are here today." I looked away, hoping the break in eye contact would let the fragile remains of the emotional dam stay intact.

My mind shifted back thirty years, when as a young wife

continued



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and mother of four, I suffered from agoraphobia, the fear of leaving my home. How terrifying it was to walk to the corner mailbox; how difficult to go shopping, how I'd become an Avon lady to "do the thing I feared to do," and joined Toastmasters to overcome my fear of public speaking. The firewalk had become another challenge to overcome fear.

The smudging over, I returned to Dave, and silently we gathered our stuff and took it to our room, a "cell" with two twin beds and a sink, men's room down the hall, women's bathroom one level below.

It was past seven when Jon started the program. He told us the usual procedure would not take place because of the rain, but we would go ahead and "make adjustments" as needed. My stomach tightened as I wondered what "make adjustments" meant.

We started by standing up, saying our names, and stating our intentions for the firewalk. "My name is Jennifer and I am here to prove that I create my own reality." Applause. That was true, but secondary to my real intention of getting a firewalk T-shirt and wowing my friends, but I was not about to admit that to the whole room!

Dave said he was there out of curiosity. Applause. We were told to pick a partner, someone we didn't know, and share our fears. Dave turned to me and said, "I hate this crap."

I replied, "You don't have to do this," and turned to a man to my left. When I turned back, Dave was gone.

Jon encouraged us to overcome limiting beliefs and fears that kept us from realizing our potential. He told of indigenous peoples who danced on fire and held hot coals in their mouths. They were able to do it because they raised their energy to a level that was as hot as the fire.

I believed the principles, but had grave doubts about my ability to raise my energy to match a twelve hundred degree, twelve foot long bed of red hot coals!

After an hour or so, Dave reappeared. Heavy rain clouds formed a barrier to the moonlight, drowning us in darkness as we headed outside to light the fire. We began climbing a steep, rain-soaked trail. Slip, slide, slip, slide, in the mucky mud. Dave and I moved off the trail and traded slippery mud for tall, wet grass that made our socks squishy-cold inside our shoes.

In about fifteen minutes, we arrived at a clearing surrounded by big trees. A flashlight shone on the big pile of oak chunks in the center of the clearing. Dave said, "This can't be too good for these trees, having a big fire here." I sighed, feeling my jaw tighten against his typical negativity.

The group formed a circle, and I took some newspaper offered us, crumpled it and stuck it among spaces in the woodpile. Dave declined. Feeling alone and guilty, I joined in the chanting as kerosene was generously poured on the woodpile and set ablaze. It was an awesome sight.

We began the descent on the treacherous mud and slippery grass back to the meeting room. In a few hours, when the fire had burned to coals, we would return.

Back at the center Dave took my muddy shoes, saying he would take care of them, motioning me on to the meeting room. He didn't rejoin me.

Jon continued pumping us with inspiring stories and more fast-paced loud music, encouraging us to dance at a frenzied pace to raise our energy.

"Are you ready for a firewalk?" Jon shouted.

The crowd shouted, "Yes!"

I shouted, "No!"

Jon had us state our intention to walk safely to the other side, to visualize ourselves walking safely to the other side, and to experience the feeling now that we would have when we had walked to the other side. I visualized two angels holding me by my elbows, lifting me, gliding safely above the coals.

Although many hours had passed, it seemed too soon when Jon announced it was time to face the fire. I thought, "I'm not ready—I am not in an altered state—not in a heightened state of excitement. I feel just as dull as when I came in here."

Dave reappeared and joined me on the dark and mud-slimy trail to the blazing fire. The staff raked the coals into a bed about eight feet across and about twelve feet long, frequently stepping away from the heat. I moved forward into the intense radiating heat and threw onto the coals an index card on which I had written all the things I wanted to release from my life and watched it burst into flames, then die into ashes.

The crowd moved in a circle, chanting, shaking rattles and beating drums. Dave stood rooted to a spot outside the circle. I pushed down thoughts of how miserable he must be feeling—probably wishing he wasn't married to me and wishing he had a normal, conventional wife like I was when we were married—before my spiritual growth became my number one priority.

Soon people were walking the fire, letting out yells of joy and satisfaction as they came off the end of the coal bed. I said to Dave, "Well, at least I am going to take off my shoes." I felt his fear for me, his desire that I not firewalk. I didn't want him to be uncomfortable, but I didn't want to let his fear keep me from meeting this challenge. Despite my guilt, I told him I was going to move into the cluster of people who were firewalking, turned my back on him, and slowly moved into the crowd.

Many people were holding hands with others as they crossed. I searched for Bob, but did not see him. I saw a man who had walked many times encouraging his young daughter to go and offering his hand to her. I thought, "Maybe he will go with me." A woman at my side was

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encouraging the little girl. She shouted, "Go, you won't feel a thing."

I turned and asked, "Have you walked?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes shining, "I've been four times." She looked directly into my eyes and said, "Go . . . you won't feel anything!" There was something about the way she said it that I knew I could believe her. "Do you want me to go with you?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. Smiling hugely she grabbed my hand and pulled me to the edge of the coals, hesitated only a moment, squeezed my hand, said, "Energy, energy," and we ran across the coals. It felt like stomping on warm popcorn. We hugged, and sobs erupted from deep inside my belly as a big ball of fear was released.

I saw Dave coming toward me, his face radiant, with no trace of his former grumpiness. He said he was so relieved I hadn't been hurt. I looked around the circle and spotted my friend. I made my way through the crowd. She smiled and said, "Want to go again?" Before I knew it we were across. I asked her name. "Rosa" she said. "And yours?"

"Jennifer. Rosa, if you are not a teacher, you should be because you have the power to make people believe in themselves."

She thanked me and said, "One more time?"

I was surprised and caught off guard and, although I said, "Yes," for just an instant I let myself become doubtful. As she pulled me along, I felt the heat as I stepped onto the coals. Five long steps and we were on the other side. I was grateful for the cold, wet mud and remembered what Jon said about "fire kisses," to not place any attention on them and to let my intention to cross safely do whatever healing might be necessary.

Jon called the event to an end and we lined up to wash the mud from our feet. Although I realized I had just done something seemingly impossible, I also realized that what I had done was really nothing. I cared very little whether anyone knew that I had walked on fire. And the T-shirt didn't matter. I had done something extraordinary for the wrong reason and benefitted tremendously for it.

Back at the center Dave went to our room while I rejoined the group for a victory dance. My feet were hot, like a bad sunburn. I visualized them being perfectly fine when I quietly got into my bed, imagining my feet resting on a block of ice, hoping not to disturb Dave who was already asleep. It was 2:00 a.m.

I awoke at 8:15 a.m. with the sunlight filling our cell. My feet felt fine. I moved from my bed to Dave's and scrunched in next to him, snuggling my head on his chest, all the tension of the previous evening dissipated. He held me tight and told me he was so proud of me. Soon our rumbling stomachs signaled time to get up and get on the road.

Dave offered to drive, for which I was grateful. I felt tired, but satisfied. He shared with me the fears he'd had:

that I might trip and fall and be horribly burned, that he felt duty bound to take care of me, yet without the right to try to stop me. What a conflict! No wonder he was so irritable!

A few days later, while enjoying a romantic dinner out, Dave looked at me, his eyes intense and his brow knit in three vertical lines above the bridge of his nose—his "serious look" when he is about to say something from his heart. "I love you so much. And I wish I had walked too," he said. "I just felt foolish for bolting from the room and didn't know how to reconnect."

His admission touched me deeply and made me realize I don't always know what he is thinking.

Eight months later, on New Year's Eve, we again attended a firewalk. Dave and I shared the evening, dancing, shaking rattles and beating drums. At midnight we were circled around the raked coal bed, chanting. As I questioned myself about my readiness to walk the fire, I saw Dave stroll across the coals like he was taking a Sunday walk. I went to him and hugged him hard. It was our best New Year's ever.



## Waiting for the Fishermen

by Constance Hanstedt, *Tri-Valley*

The just-before-supper sun flickers  
through a dusty basement window  
as I sit alone on cool concrete  
between cases of soda pop  
and Pabst Blue Ribbon.  
While the old washer thumps,  
stubby bottles of grape  
and my coveted cherry march  
gingerly in cardboard squares.  
Their taller counterparts rattle  
violently, until I fear explosions  
onto Mom's laundry, hanging  
stiff-sleeved and bleached  
above me.

Only a pine table breaks ranks,  
shoved from a corner to the center  
and newspapered for fish gutting.  
I imagine the raucous scene—  
my uncle chopping one-eyed heads,  
Dad slicing bloated bellies.  
This time, I'll escape the slaughter,  
race up the steps where Mom  
quietly flours pink slabs and lays  
them in a buttered skillet.  
At the table I'll pretend we've said  
grace, ask Dad to pick out the bones,  
place a piece on my tongue  
like communion.



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# The Two Elenas

by M. J. Lovgren, *Long Beach*

Her name was Elena Granada Pine and she looked like a Mayan sculpture. My husband thought she was one of the ugliest women he had ever seen. His taste ran to white-bread, blue-eyed blondes. I was an art student and lover of the Mexican muralists, so I found her exotic. Her dark, glossy hair fell to her shoulders or was put up into a fashionable French twist. Her eyes were small and dark, but expertly made up. Most of all, I loved her nose. It was broad and hooked like in a Diego Rivera painting, framed by amazing Indian cheekbones.

Our husbands were business partners in a coffeehouse. It was 1959, the era of beatniks and cool jazz. Coffeehouses were the showcases for the music scene. Our foray into this world was the brainchild of my husband, Stan, and Elena's husband, James. They worked together as bank tellers, and I was an entry level clerk at a real estate office. The three of us were also going to night school to become teachers. On the weekends we ran the coffeehouse. Amazing what you can do when you're young!

Elena, unlike the rest of us, actually had talent. She was an animator for Walt Disney studios. Whip thin, with an impeccable clothes sense, I envied her taste and panache. Even her feet were elegant. Long, thin and narrow with a high arch, she showed them off in beautiful shoes. I have wide, short feet. Only recently had I realized penny loafers were not a fashion statement.

The four of us were constantly together. Several years younger than everyone else and a transplant to California, I was unsophisticated and self-conscious. I found Elena intimidating with her glamorous clothes and glamorous job. And, oh, those incredible shoes. Never the same pair twice. She walked on three or four inch heels as if she were dancing.

Elena had a dazzling smile, full lipped and broad, framing strong, white teeth. It turned down a little, as if she had an ironic secret that only she knew. I wanted to like her, and I wanted her to like me. But she didn't. Her disdain wasn't overt, but sly and nasty. Yet generally humorous. It was no fun being the butt of Elena's jokes or offhand remarks, but they did make our husbands laugh. I had no idea how to stop it; I was out of my depth. Pretty soon I dreaded going to the coffeehouse and our social outings. James and Elena were always with us.

I tried telling Stan how I felt, but he told me I was being thin-skinned. It was just her way, he said. It's her sense of humor. Nothing really to do with you. That certainly didn't make me feel any better. Work and school were my refuge. I found myself retreating and growing more silent when the four of us were together. I knew she disliked me, no matter what my husband said. I just didn't know why.

One evening we got together at the Pines' apartment for dessert and coffee. The coffee was cappuccino and we were experimenting with new ways to serve it. We included our coffeehouse hot chocolate in the taste test. Our other task was to come up with different names for these drinks than those at other coffeehouses. For once I felt we were having fun. Some of the names we came up with were so ridiculous we found ourselves laughing uproariously. The usual tension wasn't there that night.

The hot chocolate we served was amazing. Dark and rich, it was topped with a mountain of real whipped cream. James had come up with the idea to add almond extract to differentiate it. A few sips convinced us he was on to something. Now we needed a distinctive name. Several ideas were advanced. It reminded me of the wonderful hot chocolate you could get in Ensenada.

"How about Mexican chocolate," I suggested.

"Not unusual enough."

"OK, Chocolate Mexicana."

"Still not very interesting."

I searched for something different. We were all feeling silly, and tossing out names with abandon.

Caught up in the unusual camaraderie, I shouted out, "Cholo Chocolate."

Everyone was stunned. I realized what I had done. I hadn't meant any harm, just trying too hard to be clever. Elena looked at me with fury in her eyes.

"Get out of my house."

"Elena, I ..."

"Get out. Don't come back here." She looked like a furious Mayan deity.

My husband and I gathered our things and went home. Elena stopped coming to the coffeehouse. Stan and James still got together, but there were no more foursomes. In a way, I was glad, but I felt ashamed. There didn't seem to be any way I could fix things. Apologies were out of the question. Elena refused to see me.

After a while, the coffeehouse and jazz craze became pizzas and Dixieland. Stan and James sold the coffeehouse to a friend who took advantage of the new trend. Things were changing, as all things do. I got pregnant, we had a little boy, and our new friends were young families with children. It was five years before we saw Stan and Elena again.

Our husbands had run into each other and suggested we go to dinner at a well-known steakhouse in Santa Monica. We dressed up for dinner in those days, and I spent extra time on my clothes and makeup. I bought a new pair of shoes. They had three-and-a-half inch heels and were quite expensive.

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James and Elena were already at the table. Elena looked fabulous in a cream-colored sheath with beaded detail. It set off her ivory skin and dark hair perfectly. To my surprise, she rose from her chair to hug me. I hugged her back. Things were going well for all of us. Elena had moved to Hanna-Barbera where she was a head artist. James, a natural salesman, was an insurance broker. Stan was with the same bank, but as a regional manager. I was a high school teacher, a job I loved. The evening was a great success, reminiscing about our coffeehouse and student days. Elena and Stan had no children, but seemed very happy. There was no hint of what was to come.

Stan called me at work about a month later. He sounded odd.

"It's about Elena," he said, his voice quivering. There was a pause.

"What's happened?"

"Elena's been murdered."

I was stunned. "How? What happened?"

"A carjacking."

We knew how Elena loved her car, a classic Porsche. She'd apparently put up a fight and been killed. That's what Elena would have done. No one was going to take that car from her. The police found it a week later on a side street in a dangerous part of town. There was no damage. Looked like some kids joyriding, they said.

Stan and I went to the funeral. It was awful. James was near collapse and had to be helped from the church. I vowed that was the last funeral I would go to. Stan called him a few days later and asked if he wanted company. He did.

We pulled up to their newly acquired house in the Los Feliz area of Los Angeles. It was a lovely old Spanish place set back from the road. James answered the door. He looked terrible. We all went into the living room. It was beautifully furnished, reflecting Elena's unerring taste. The house seemed too quiet. I missed Elena's raucous laugh.

There was silence at first, but then James began to talk.

"She was jealous of you, you know."

"Of me?" I was incredulous.

"You had everything she wanted. Your family had a nice house. You all went to college. She envied the way you looked. 'Very East Coast,' she said."

"I can't believe she felt that way, James. Especially since I wanted to be like her—sophisticated, fashionable, worldly."

"That worldliness came at a price," he said. "Picking cotton."

Once started, he couldn't stop telling us about Elena. Tears streaming down his face, he just talked and talked. About the little girl whose Mexican parents had slipped

over the border before she was born. How she and her brother worked in the fields of the Central Valley picking cotton. How Elena vowed she would do better. Her parents died still picking cotton and her brother had vanished long ago. Yet the church had been full at the funeral. I realized how little I knew about her.

"Why didn't she ever tell us?" I asked.

James said, "She was ashamed."

"Of what?" I asked. "Being poor? That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know. But like so many migrant workers, she didn't want to talk about it."

He went on, "The one thing she really remembered was that she had no shoes. Her family couldn't afford them."

"No shoes?"

"Not until she was old enough for school. And then only one pair each year, hand-me-downs from the local charities."

I tried to make this information fit the Elena I knew. James was still talking, but I didn't really hear him. After a while I left the two men to wander through the house. All the rooms were exquisite, with some antiques scattered about. There was a galleria running along the two-story living room where the men sat talking. A staircase against a far wall led to it.

Two bedrooms and a bath were accessible from the galleria. The master bedroom and bath were at the end. I wandered in to find a gracious area flooded with sunlight. Elena had restored the original tiles and fixtures in the bathroom. The only change to the original bedroom was a large walk-in closet. I opened the door. What I saw told me everything about the two Elenas: the one I knew, and the little girl who grew up picking cotton.

On a rack built into one wall were at least a hundred pair of shoes. For the woman with the elegant feet who walked on three and four inch heels as if she were dancing. For the little girl who grew up in the fields, and vowed she would never go barefoot again



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# Water Lilies

by Catherine Bramkamp, *Redwood Writers*

When we discuss art  
Like painting the sky reflected  
In this pond

November is  
not included  
As if for six months  
There is nothing to paint  
Little to write  
Letters peter out  
Despair takes the guest chair

Rain, Cold, Fog  
Even the snow the effects of which  
Once drew us outdoors  
Cursed instead—our bones made brittle  
By frost

pink and blue harden on a pallet.  
Share coal  
Send wine  
Wire cash  
the Mistral rages like hunger  
I am here at the bar

Shivering, complaining  
Wasting these short days.  
With sad stories of the death of kings  
join me in this dark

a familiar lament  
Coined by Demeter  
Repeated into the rhythms of songs  
Perhaps shadow purple  
Is as necessary as daffodil gold.



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## A Psalm for Leona at Old Faithful

by Mary Langer Thompson

*High Desert*

I've traveled a long way to sit before you,  
to witness your faithfulness  
near Heart Lake on the map.  
I passed fawns frolicking at roadside,  
crossed rumble strips and saw  
"No Services" Sunday signs.

Lately, my God is not predictable,  
and like with you, I can't get close.  
so today I need you to be my American Lourdes.

How can this happen to a child? We are gobsmacked.  
My tears have been building up. I need release.  
So, you Old Geyser, shoot your burning liquid.  
Scald God to get his attention.  
Make Him drink and God-smack her with healing.

Do your waterworks, Old Faithful.  
Make even the stones cry out her name



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## Miss Tish and the Okree Ladies

by Tish Davidson

*Fremont Area Writers*

Humid air wrapped me in its clammy embrace, leaving a  
glaze of sweat on my forehead, even though it was  
only 7:00 a.m. on this August morning in 1978. The air  
stank of rotting vegetation. Randolph Trappey, a short,  
graying, jowly man, reached out his hand to escort me  
across the rush of water from an overflowing potato peeler.  
The rattle of empty cans and the grumble of heavy  
equipment made conversation impossible.

The B. F. Trappey's Sons cannery in Lafayette,  
Louisiana, had been founded in 1893 by Randolph's  
grandfather. Randolph, called Mr. Randolph by everyone  
from the janitor to the plant foreman, still lived in a house  
about a hundred yards from the factory. Although half a

dozen family members were active in the company, he was  
the driving force behind the family business.

I had arrived in Lafayette three months earlier, a new  
bride with a husband in graduate school. I needed a job, any  
job. After several interviews, Mr. Randolph, under extreme  
pressure from his plant foreman to fill the job, reluctantly  
made me an offer to head the quality control department.  
He told me straight out that he'd rather hire a man, but that  
he was desperate for a college graduate to take the job.

Moving along the corridor to an unmarked door, Mr.  
Randolph held it open for me. A blast of gloriously cool air  
hit us as we entered the quality control lab that would be my  
domain for the next two years.

"Ladies," said Mr. Randolph. "This is Mrs. Davidson,  
your new boss."

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Before me, their work interrupted, stood the elite of the women cannery workers, the quality control morning shift—Lizzie Trahan, Marie Richard, Vivian Bourque, Mary Broussard, and Marlene Hebert. Soon I would meet the rest of the lab ladies, as they called themselves—fourteen women in all. Most were old enough to be my mother, a few old enough to be my grandmother. Starting that day, they were all working under the supervision of a twenty-five-year-old stranger with a newly minted Ivy League degree and zero experience in management.

Once Mr. Randolph left the lab, it became apparent that I was an alien invader. Not only had I dropped in from Planet Nawth, I spoke a foreign language—English. In the years before Paul Prudhomme put Cajun spices in cupboards across America, Cajun culture existed in an inbred, tightly circumscribed triangle in southwest Louisiana. Well into the 1960s it remained protected from outsiders by bayous swarming with alligators, nutria, mosquitoes, and a distinct lack of anything the outside world could covet. Every woman over thirty-five in the Trappey lab grew up speaking Cajun French at home, school, and church, and still conducted her daily affairs with Cajun French as her first, and often her only, fluent language.

The first few weeks on the job staggered by in a blur of noise and headaches. Although I had youth and education on my side, from the start it was clear that I couldn't tell a Number 10 can from a 303. Two shifts were canning okra, universally called okree, and sweet potatoes, universally called yams. Fortunately, the lab ladies, although they were almost all high school dropouts, knew the routine. They gently ignored me and did what needed to be done, no matter how often I got in their way.

Occasionally someone would approach me, diffidently calling me Miss Tish, and tell me things that I was supposed to know. This was the Trappey version of on-the-job training. But mostly the lab ladies kept busy, sampling, measuring, counting, timing, weighing, and chatting endlessly in a guttural French that sounded so unlike my university-learned version that I was not sure it was the same language. The lab ladies were never impolite, insubordinate, angry, or difficult, but try as I might, I couldn't get more than a polite nod or a deferential, "Yes, Miss Tish" out of any of them before they continued their endless rounds of work and conversation.

One day, after about three weeks on the job, heavy, lumbering Lizzie Trahan opened the first crack in the communication wall. Looking up from weighing a No. 10 can of yams, and apropos of nothing, she said to me, in English. "Do you make your rice sticky or plain?"

Sticky or plain? I hardly ever made any kind of rice, coming from a Pennsylvania Dutch family of devoted potato eaters. Sticky or plain? Was this some kind of initiation? Fortunately, Lizzie gave me a clue. "When my husband was in the service, we lived in Hawaii next to a Japanese family. They made their rice sticky. Do you make yours sticky or plain?"

"Plain," I answered gratefully.

"Do you fry your okree or smother it?"

"Um...I've never had okra, I mean okree."

All movement in the lab stopped.

"Never had okree. Child!" Lizzie looked as appalled as if I had just told her that I stewed baby brains and ate them for lunch.

By the time the shift whistle blew at 4:00 p.m., half the factory, the female half, knew that Tish Davidson, Quality Control Director, had never eaten okree.

The next morning during a break, Lizzie waddled over to me with a plastic container. "Here," she puffed, "made you some smothered okree last night. Taste it."

"Great." I tasted the mixture of okra, tomatoes, and onions. "Yum." It really was good. "How did you make this, Lizzie?"

Mary Broussard bustled in. "Miss Tish," she said, "we had smothered okree last night. I brought you some."

"Yum, great."

A little while later rigid, angular Marie Richard appeared and shyly held out a container and a fork.

"Everyone should know how to make smothered okree," she said.

Before the day was over half a dozen versions of smothered okree had passed my lips, and I had made a solemn vow to each of the cooks that I would go home and make smothered okree for my Jewish, New York City-bred husband. "You got to learn cook, if you don't want dat boy leavin' you," said Blanche Thibodeaux, the line supervisor.

A few days later Lizzie appeared with another container. "Gumbo," she said. "Sausage and chicken."

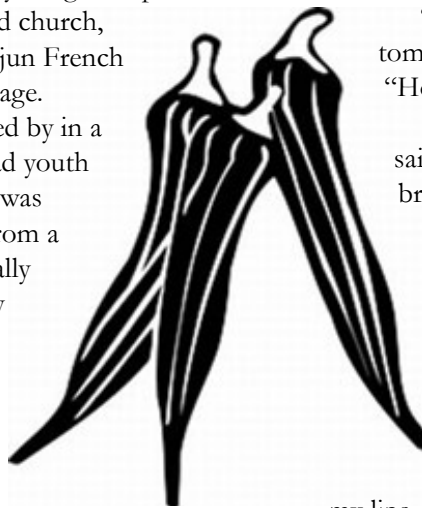
"Better with duck," said Judy Duplechain, the water quality girl who happened to be passing through the lab.

"Crawfish," said tiny Lynne Leger.

"Squirrel gumbo got more flavor," insisted Marie Richard.

The next day samples appeared, fortunately none with squirrel.

During the following weeks, I was given careful instructions on how to make a dark roux without burning it, how to pick the fat out of the heads of crawfish for





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etouffee, how to butcher a turtle, how to skin a frog. The women in my lab were genuinely concerned that I had been allowed to enter the state of holy wedlock without learning these things. The fact that I could make the dishes of my grandmothers—snitz and knepp, apple fritters, shoo fly pie, and chow chow—didn't count as being able to cook. They fretted that my husband, "dat boy" they always called him, would leave me for a girl who knew her jambalaya.

One day Mary, the most articulate of the group, asked me what food from "up Nawth" I got hungry for. "Pig stomach," I said picking the most outlandish Pennsylvania Dutch dish I could think of.

As I described the dish to Mary, a pig stomach, cleaned and stuffed with potatoes, sausage, and onions, then roasted to a crispy brown, she started to smile. "Chaudette," she said. "Dat's what we Cajuns call it. Only we put rice in, instead of Irish potatoes. You fix chaudette for dat boy of yours, you gonna be okay. Maybe you Yankees don't be so dumb after all."



## The Red Sandals 紅涼鞋

by Jing Li, Berkeley

As a small child growing up with my paternal grandparents in central northern China's deep pine forest mountains, I was forever curious about my grandmother's tiny crooked feet. Every time she sat on the small wooden stool facing the sod wall in the corner of our one-room house to soak her feet in the big iron washbasin full of steamy water, I'd rush over to get an eyeful.

My grandmother's three-inch bound feet looked like a pair of pale, naked, dead birds made out of wheat flour dough. Her big toe stood alone, pointing forward, while her four small toes were crush-bent underneath her sole. The back of her feet arched up like a smooth, round steamed bun with the sole a hollow cleft after the front of the feet and heel were crunch-pushed toward each other.

"Get out of here, you nosy creature!" Grandmother would yell, panicked by my prying eyes, hurriedly stretching out her big, knobby field hands over her feet. "What's there to look at? Nothing but these two ugly things! Ouch, so hurting ..." her eyes squeezed shut, her toothless mouth gasping, every wrinkle in her sun-browned face of high cheek bones carved in pain.

"Damn my parents!" Grandmother would say between her gasps. "Yes, I dare to speak unfavorable words against my revered father and mother, even though they have passed. Look how they hurt me ..."

Born in 1912, Grandmother was the last crop of victims of the barbaric Chinese foot-binding. For one thousand years, all little girls between ages three and five,

rich or poor, had to have their tender little feet maimed into a pair of three-inch "golden lilies." Chinese men were said to relish as erotic their women's tiny pointed feet, the original flesh-and-blood version of today's Western stilettos.

Grandmother was five years old when, one day, her mother soaked her feet in special fragrant herbal water. As Grandmother screamed in flooding tears of pain, her mother crushed, bent and force-wrapped her feet into two iron-tight pointed stubs with *guo-jiao-bu* 裹腳布, a ten-foot-long strip of black cotton cloth, as her own mother did to hers when she was a child. The cloth was not to be loosened for months at a time, and then only to let the rotting pus out before they were wrapped back up, tighter.

"It's for your own good, my daughter," her mother sobbed. "So a good man will want to marry you."

All the while, her father reminded her to behave like a demure lady.

Grandmother's feet felt like they were on fire, slowly roasting. The excruciating pain kept her awake all night. She dared not cry out loud, but only whimper and sob quietly for fear of her father scolding her.

"They didn't have to harm me like this." Tears ran down Grandmother's cheeks, as she rubbed her arched-up-like-a-cat's-back, deformed feet.

The flesh-rotting, bone-crushing custom was abolished in 1911, one year before Grandmother was born, when the Republic of China overthrew the Manchu Dynasty. The new government would send out special inspectors to the remote mountain villages to catch and punish people who still bound their young daughters' feet.

"Other girls my age in my village were spared by their parents, but no, not that knuckle-headed stubborn father of mine. He insisted on sticking to the damn old tradition. Every time the inspectors came to the village to catch the illegal foot-binding, he'd carry me up to the attic, hide me under stacks of hay, and tell me not to make a sound. Damn that fool!

"Why didn't they find me a rich husband instead of this useless weakling peasant grandfather of yours?" Grandmother lifted the front of her faded black cotton shirt to wipe her tears. "Oh, how I suffered, working alongside him like a beast in the cornfields."

Grandmother gave birth to eight babies—my father her first-born during the fourteen-year span (1931-45) of the brutal Japanese invasion of China during WWII. On her painful stubby feet, Grandmother would lead her small children at midnight running for their lives in hushed silence into the deep mountain caves.

Throughout her eighty-six years of life, Grandmother cried tears of pain over her "golden lily" feet.

As her first grandchild, born a girl instead of a gold-valued boy, I was a disappointment to Grandmother. My

continued



earliest memory is of her eyeing me hard, sideways: “Those tiny slit eyes and that pig-snout mouth look just like that bad-omen, ugly mother of yours.”

But there was one thing Grandmother made me feel good about myself.

My feet.

“Oh, just look at these darling feet.” Grandmother would reach out to caress my child’s feet, a look of great envy and rare affection in her now-soft eyes. “They are gorgeous ... so flat ... so free to grow. Lucky child, born in good times. Your feet don’t have to suffer. Oh, look, they are meaty, big, plump feet just like mine. You would have suffered terrible pain just like I did. Girls with skinny, smaller feet didn’t suffer as badly.”

On the morning of June 1, 1962, International Children’s Day, I woke up smiling and giggling, my six-year-old heart leaping for joy. Today was going to be a very special day because Grandmother’s promise was to make my dream come true. I was finally allowed to wear the beautiful red sandals my parents sent from the city.

I’d been waiting for this moment like a restless ant on a hot stove. Grandmother had kept my red sandals locked, alongside my beautiful doll, in her scrap bundle inside the big, black floor chest. Every time I saw her reach down into the chest for her treasured bundle, I’d hurry over for a glimpse of my red sandals. The bright color was just like the bright red wild berries Grandpa picked for me on his way down the mountains after toiling all day in the commune’s cornfields. Like the comforting glow of the fire in our brick stove on a cold winter’s day, it warmed my heart.

But Grandmother wouldn’t allow me to try the shoes on. She said they were too pretty and too brand-new for my dirty feet. She kept saying that my feet were not big enough. I’d have to wait till the next June 1.

Today was finally the day! My face couldn’t stop smiling. I couldn’t wait to put on the special red sandals and show off to my first-grade classmates. This was the first time I felt good that my parents lived in the faraway-city with my two younger brothers.

I clapped, cheered, and jumped in joy as Grandmother set the sandals in front of me. Sitting down on the wooden floor stool, I kicked off my homemade cloth shoes and carefully placed my feet on top of my old shoes to avoid touching the dusty, earthen floor. Gingerly, I began to inch my feet into the cool, smooth and soft-like-rubber but magically see-through red sandals.

Oh, no! Why were my heels still hanging out, but the shoes were already full? Well, no matter. I should just push hard. Grandmother had said the shoes were ready for my feet today. They HAD to fit. But as I finally stuffed my heels inside, my big toes were crunched up tight and stiff, butting heads like the thick long stick Grandpa used to hold against the door at night. They were hurting badly.

I couldn’t understand it — Grandmother had said this year was the right time when the red sandals would fit. Why did my feet feel too big for them? Today, my first grade class was going to parade through the village to celebrate Children’s Day. I had to wear them. I stood up but could only walk unsteadily, like Grandmother on her painful, tiny, stubby, three-inch bound feet.

I limped around the floor, hoping and wishing for my red sandals to become bigger. But they didn’t. I sucked in the pain and hobbled out to join my classmates. But the pain became worse, and finally unbearable. Halfway through the parade, I took off my red sandals and held them in my hands, walking barefoot on the village’s rocky, dirt street.

Once home, I quietly handed over my dream red sandals to Grandmother.

“Why?” Grandmother merely asked. “Don’t you want to wear them?”

In tears, I shook my head, not knowing what to say, startled that she didn’t look surprised.

Sitting down on the stool, I inspected my feet. Blood was seeping out quietly from under my big toenails. The right toenail was broken in half vertically with a bulging ridge.

I never saw my beautiful red sandals again.



## Satin Slippers

by Constance Hanstedt, *Tri-Valley*

On the June morning of Grandpa’s funeral  
I climbed the wide stairs to his bedroom,  
grasping the mahogany bannister  
like a beetle on a tomato vine.  
In his bed was Grandma, eyes closed,  
pin curls white against even whiter sheets.  
I wondered if she’d forgotten the day’s events.

Downstairs cousins dressed in pale florals  
chattered in dusty book-lined rooms.  
Uncles silently smoked cigarettes  
while aunts blew into lace handkerchiefs.  
I watched Grandma’s chest rise and fall  
then spotted satin slippers tucked under  
the bed, two the shade of just-picked  
apricots, two shimmering like fancy  
save-for-company mints. I quietly sat  
in the doorway waiting for her to wake,  
waiting for her raspy voice to call  
her husband’s name.



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# Squeakers

by Roger Lubeck, *Redwood Writers*

The yellow pavement dividers, still wet with morning mist, are an iridescent ribbon guiding you through the winding redwoods. You love these early-morning drives. Some days you go as far as the coast. On the beach, you wear binoculars and pretend to watch for whales. Other times, like now, you find a secluded spot in the forest with space for two or three cars. A beat-up Subaru parked just off the road is a magnet for tourists visiting the big trees. The empty parked car suggests there is something for others to stop and see.

You choose a turnout with room for three cars. From the back seat, you pick up a small digital camera, binoculars, and a Giants baseball cap. Useful props. You check the buck knife on your belt. From under the front seat, you find the Colt 1911 your father brought back from France. The forty-five has real stopping power, and you like the weight and feel of the older weapon. You chamber a round and make sure the safety is on before putting the pistol behind your back and under your jacket.

Walking to the highway, you stand at the edge of the pavement and glance both ways. There's nothing in either direction. It is too early for tourists. Your only worry is a nosy sheriff. One look in the trunk and your hunting days would be over. You step back from the highway. The big trees dominate the smaller pines and ferns. It is cool in the shade of the redwoods. You feel like you are one with the big trees; their deep roots hunger for moisture as their leafy tops search for the sun. You find comfort in their strength and longevity. You believe your secret will be safe with these silent guardians.

There is a path leading deeper into the forest. You walk to the path. The dark, green forest beckons you. The smell of wet redwood and eucalyptus invades your senses. You should find a good place where you can be undisturbed. *Maybe later*, you think. Now, you need a place to sit. There are tree stumps and boulders everywhere. You sit on a rock. Let the game begin.

The first beams of sunlight break through the forest canopy and warm your face. You listen to the trucks and

cars racing past. People going nowhere in a hurry. You wonder what it is like to live such ordinary lives.

A German sedan pulls in and parks to the left of the Subaru. A woman alone. You slip behind the rock to watch. You can't be sure of her age. She is smoking a cigarette—a strike against her. The window on the passenger side rolls down. The open window frames her face. Short blond hair and bright red lips. She is older than you like, but not too old. Her eyes dart back and forth. She is cautious.

A station wagon with fake wood panels on the sides pulls in beside the Subaru. An older man and woman get out, followed by two boys. The woman has a cane. The kids appear to be under ten years of age. One of the boys runs to a redwood, pulls down his pants, and pees. The woman yells at him. The sedan backs out and leaves. The man walks to a different tree and he pees, too. When he is finished, they all climb back into the station wagon and leave. The woman in the German car seemed possible. Now she is gone. Your dislike of families has moved up a notch.

A VW van pulls off the highway and parks next to your car. There is a surfboard on the roof of the van. A man in his early twenties gets out of the car. Dressed like a hippie, he's wearing jeans shorts and a tie-dyed shirt. He has a camera like yours. He looks in the Subaru and then around the forest until he sees you.

"Hello," the hippie calls out.

He waves and you wave back. He crosses the distance between the cars and you. He has a red bandana on his head; his long blond hair is tied in a ponytail. Close up, he seems younger than twenty.

"Bird watching?" he asks.

"Hoping to see a white deer?"

"Are you a hunter?"

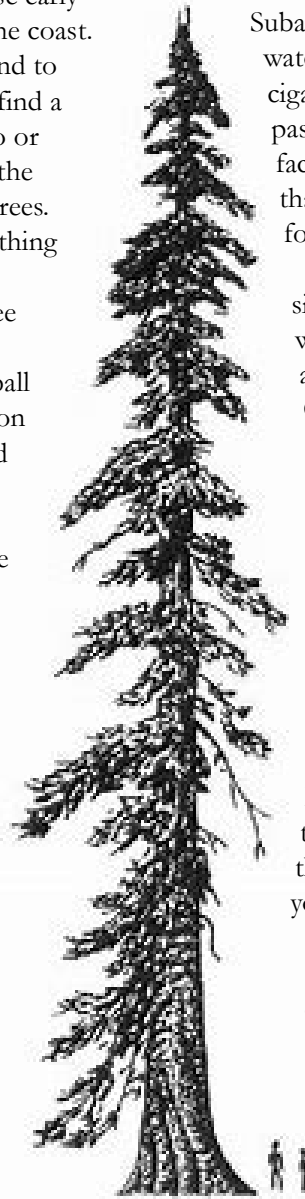
"Out of season." You show him your camera. "You must not be local?"

"I'm up from Los Angeles. Headed for Stinson Beach. Gonna try your northern waves."

"This time of year, the whales are bringing their calves north. There will be great whites in the water. You might want to try farther south."

"Where's the adventure in that?"

"Are you looking for danger?" you ask.



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The hippie takes a moment to consider the question and the questioner. You give him your hard look. He needs to leave.

"I'm looking for that perfect wave and a little peace, brother." He smiles and gives you the peace sign. "I best be going." He turns and walks toward the van.

"Enjoy your life," you offer.

Standing by the van, he takes several pictures of the big trees. The front license plate of the Subaru should be visible in one of the pictures. He steps away from the van and takes a picture of you. You touch your cap in a salute. He's smart. You like that. He waves as he drives off and you wave back. "A squeaker," you say to yourself.

You lie back on the rock letting the morning light warm your face. No amount of heat will melt the cold hatred in your heart or quell the voices in your head. You wonder, when you are famous, will the hippie show your picture to his friends and talk about the day he met a serial killer and managed to squeak by?



## THE TRUTH ABOUT STEPHEN

by Janis Brams, *High Desert*

Books clattered to the floor and I turned from the group I'd been helping to see what happened. Stephen stood toe-to-toe with Jackson, his face red, lips snarled, and arms folded at his waist. Backed against a desk, Jackson's eyes were wide and his hands, clenched in fists, swung at his side. "What did you call my mother?" Stephen snapped.

"Hey man, I don't know your mother. Why would I call her anything?"

My heart beat faster as I leaned toward a student seated nearby. "Please get Mr. Ford," I said and then rose, stepping toward my two fifth graders. "Boys," I murmured, "move away from one another. We can resolve this problem, but you need to separate."

"Ain't no one calling my mom a bitch," Stephen spat.

"I didn't, but what do you care anyway? She dumped you in one of those homes. I saw you in their van."

The other students were still. Unraveling his arms, Stephen leaned back, like a rattler preparing to strike. "You're gonna eat those words, Jackson," he hissed.

"Stephen," I said, raising my voice just a bit above his. "Don't do this." I could feel his heat as I touched his shoulder. He shrugged me off, and raising one hand, pushed Jackson back. Stepping between them, I turned to face Stephen. "You have too much at stake," I said, staring into

his eyes, but two hard blue marbles stared back. Behind Stephen, I saw Ford enter, but shook my head. He stood ready at the door.

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It had been four long months since the phone rang in my classroom. Looking up from my plan book, I shook my head. I knew no good came from calls at the end of a school day, but I sighed and rose from my chair.

"Hey Jan," my principal, Carleen, said. "Glad I caught you." I smiled. It was a joke between us, the hour I left school at night. "Can you stop in the office on your way out?" I stayed quiet, waiting for her to say more, but no explanation followed.

Finally, I took a deep breath. "Sure. Is there a problem?"

"We need to talk," Carleen said. "I'd rather you just come by."

I stared out the window at the sky turning dark. "OK," I said and hung up the phone.

Reaching for my coat, I slid a stack of ungraded papers into my canvas sack and then crossed the courtyard toward her office. "What's up?" I asked, moving into a chair opposite her desk.

"We have a new student," she said, while tapping a thick manila folder. "His name is Stephen, and I'm planning to place him in your room."

"All right." I nodded my head. "Is there something more I need to know about Stephen?"

"He's living in a group home," she said.

I sat up, surprised. "But Carleen, group homes don't house kids as young as ten or eleven."

She thumbed through pages in his file. "Yes, well the courts have run out of options for this boy. He's been in a number of foster placements, and social services described his behavior as incorrigible. There's no family left to take him. He needs a stable force in his life, and I'm thinking you can provide that." Carleen organized the papers into a neat bundle and pushed the folder toward me. "OK?"

I ran my hand along the cover. Another angry child. I thought about the years behind me and pictured them: different names, different situations, but the same kinds of problems. I wondered how we would fare, this new boy, Stephen, and I, but "Sure," was the word that fell out of my mouth.

The first day Carleen brought him to my classroom, Stephen surprised me. He was charming. "Welcome," I said, and a grin slid across his face. "Kids, this is Stephen. He's new to our school, so please go out of your way to show him around. Raymond, Eugene, will you be his buddies?"

Steven lifted his hand in a small wave. "Thanks," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

He was a tall boy with freckles and sandy hair that spilled onto his forehead. I motioned him toward a desk.

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"Please have a seat," I said, and he folded his lanky body into the chair. While I gave the group instructions, he studied the classroom, flipped through texts stacked on his table, and rummaged through pencils, notebooks, and crayons. Once I got the others working, I knelt beside him. "I'm glad you're here," I said. Then, placing my hand on his arm, I lowered my voice and leaned in closer. "And, Stephen, please come to me if you have problems. I'd like to help you work them out."

Looking down, he studied his fingers. "Yeh. OK," he responded.

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In the beginning, I watched my newest student on the playground. He stood back, observing. I walked toward him and stood by his side. "How's it going?" I asked. "Thinking about basketball or dodge ball?"

With his eyes on the blacktop, he shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe." Sometimes he got angry, and I'd watch his fury grow like a rogue wave moving toward shore.

Stephen was bright. He knew how to win kids over and had little trouble with academics despite the holes in his school life. He made his classmates laugh and was a natural athlete. But the young boy's wounds cut deep. Sometimes he got angry and I'd watch his fury grow like a rogue wave moving toward shore.

At the end of each day, he walked to the office and waited there for a van from the group home to carry him off. He began to lag behind, sometimes with homework questions, sometimes to organize his papers and books. "What's up?" I asked one day. "I'm wondering if there's a reason you've been slow getting ready for your ride."

Stephen kept his head buried in his desk as if searching for a paper. When he didn't respond, I took a seat next to his. "Did something happen?"

He shifted in his chair. "Nothing much. A few of the kids, like Jackson, saw me take off in the van one day and said something about it." His eyes narrowed, and he looked at me as if trying to decide if I understood. "You know," he continued, "the name of the group home is on the door. I just don't want them hassling me, so if I leave later, they're already gone on the bus."

I nodded, pleased that he felt safe enough to share something painful. "Do you want me to speak to the boys involved?"

His head shot up. "No way, Mrs. B. I already took care of it."

"OK," I responded. "But next time talk to me. We don't want things to escalate."

After that, I let him hang back in our classroom until the buses pulled out, and the office called to say his ride was waiting.

For a short time, we seemed to be on a positive path, but I knew that conditions at the group home were tough. Stephen didn't say much, but we heard he'd had trouble with a few of the older boys and was involved in several fights. Carleen tried to learn more, but we weren't permitted much say in the home's interventions.

As months passed Stephen grew restless and, at times, aggressive. He'd circle the playground during recess looking for someone to trip or bump into, whispering threats. When I asked him what he was doing, he refused to look my way. "Nothing," he'd say, kicking at the gravel, wearing his tough-boy face.

When Carleen and I tried to explain that the rules were meant to keep students safe, including him, Stephen shook his head. His voice was low, edged in sarcasm. "Yeh, like at the group home." He raised his chin. "No one messes with me and gets away with it."

I looked at this boy, an eleven-year-old child, and envisioned his life, what he'd been through, where he was now. "Stephen, you're smart," I said. "If you stay in this school, we can support you. We can talk to people who may be able to help."

For a moment, his shoulders softened. "Come here when it gets too hard," Carleen said. "Come to the office. Take a moment. Cool down."

He looked at us, from one to the other, and I knew how much he wanted to believe his life could change. "You'd let me do that?" he asked. Biting his lip, he tilted his head toward the ceiling and rocked on his heels. Then he jammed his hands in his pockets. "When I'm mad, I can come here? I don't need special permission?"

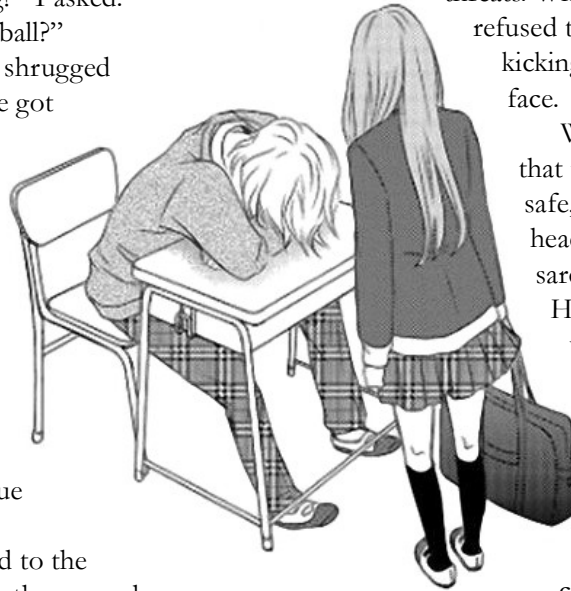
"Yes," Carleen said, "you can come to the office, have a seat and cool off. Then we can talk. But, Stephen, if you get in big trouble, it's out of our hands. If police get involved, the court will move you."

"OK," he said, and as he left the room, I heard him whisper, "Thanks."

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Now, standing opposite one another with our eyes locked, I struggled to diffuse the boys' confrontation. I tried to talk Stephen down, show him a path out of the mire that

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threatened to pull him under. "Please, Stephen, come with me to the office. We'll talk things through. We want to help."

His arms fell to his side. "But you can't," he yelled and stalked out of the room.

Mr. Ford stayed with my class while I followed Stephen. Outside my door was a chain link fence and on the other side was the parking lot where parents waited in cars to pick up their children. He started climbing, scrambling toward the top rail, screaming across the asphalt, "I don't need anybody. I want out of this fucking place."

I stood at the bottom. "Come down," I said. "This isn't the way. Don't make the situation impossible."

He stared at me and I held his gaze. His eyes were wet and his face streaked where his dirty hands had wiped away tears. One foot and then the other, he left his perch. While parents watched, we walked together and I told us both we'd find a way to make this better.

We sat in a circle, Stephen, Carleen and me. "Tell me," the principal said, "what's going on, is something happening at the group home?"

His head bent, Stephen banged his fists together and refused to talk. I touched his hand. "Stephen, you and I know how smart you are, know that you like to learn. Talk to us. Give us something to take to your social worker and the court."

He raised his chin toward the ceiling while shouting, "Be a snitch. Do you know what happens to kids who

snitch?" And I saw he was trapped like a coyote caught in a snare, chewing at its own leg.

When the van came to take Stephen to his group home, he pushed open a door at a red light and ran. The police came and searched for hours along with school personnel. Much later, he appeared at our principal's door. His eyes were red and swollen. "I want to stay," he said.

Later, Carleen told me Stephen asked to talk with me and begged her to let him go back to the classroom. "Stephen," she said, "the police are involved now. The court will have to decide what happens next."

He was quiet for a minute and then stood up straight. "I get it," he said. "It's OK. Too many wimps around here anyway."

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Two weeks later, I heard he was pulled from the group home. His mom, who'd been in and out of his life, had come for him once more, and despite her history of drug and alcohol abuse the court returned him to her. Some days, I think about Stephen, an eleven-year-old with a thick manila folder who slipped through my fingers like dust in the sunlight, and I wonder if I ever believed I could help him. I wonder too if this streetwise kid had seen enough and was savvy enough to know from the start that even adults who want to tell the truth can't help but lie.



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## Franz Kafka

by Ruth Schuler, *Marin*

From your well of loneliness, you portrayed potential evil  
lurking in the cavernous depths of man.  
Prejudicial chaos was etched in as children's voices,  
droning of little animals and hums on *The Castle's* phone.  
From inner phantasmal dreams, you isolated and pulled forth truths  
from a hidden labyrinth in which Europeans  
wandered in anemic confusion.  
You foresaw the coming holocaust,  
recorded it before it ever happened,  
warriors in black, marching in thunder,  
the torture machine of *In The Penal Colony* carving death  
on the backs of the innocent, a *Trial* that judged  
upon the basis of birth certificates.  
Christian chords of turbulence built into a crescendo  
that exploded into the slaughter of millions of Jews,  
but from their ashes rose the rebirth of Israel,  
and your dark somber eyes smile from beyond,  
knowing that it is written in the stars  
that purification and change often come  
with both a tragic cost and a loss. ♦

***"I am still in Egyptian bondage.  
I have not yet crossed the Red Sea."  
~~ Franz Kafka***

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# The Potato Caper

by Evelyn LaTorre, *Fremont Area Writers*

The morning of March 25, 1965, dawned dry and warm in the town of Abancay, altitude, 7,000 feet, where I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer. The moisture that fell during the night had been unexpected because the rainy season in the Andean mountain area of Peru usually ended by February. The cloudless day meant my clothes would dry if I washed them. So I snatched the galvanized steel bucket from the porch and headed to fill it from the nearby faucet in the big water basin.

"After laundry duty," my roommate Marie shouted from inside our 12x15-foot cinderblock home, "let's hike up the side of one of the mountains."

"Good idea," I said, turning on the faucet. "We can pack some cheese sandwiches, apples and cookies and have a picnic."

I filled the bucket with water, still frigid from its origins—the melting snows of the 16,000-foot Mt. Ampay that towered above Abancay. Cold liquid sloshed on my skirt as I carried the pail to our open-air, side-room, cooking area. I lit one of the kerosene Primus burners and set the container of water on top of the flame.

When the water was warm, I dumped it into the plastic tub that sat on the knee-high adobe wall surrounding our small front yard. ACE soap granules rained down from the packet in my hand to form bubbles in the water. I grabbed the scrub board and began washing gray mud out of my reversible brown skirt.

I was plunging the skirt in and out of the sudsy wash water when Regional Education Director, Señor Chavez, and Ken, a fellow Peace Corps volunteer, came through the Education Department offices below and up the stairs to our yard. The roly-poly director with thinning black hair looked official in the gray suit he always wore. Chavez's girth dwarfed my blond colleague. Ken's jeans hung loose on his thin frame. He'd tightened his belt another notch after his latest bout of dysentery.

Señor Chavez looked quizzically at me, the *gringa* washerwoman. I figured he must hire a little indigenous *mamacita* to wash his family's clothes in the river. He probably wondered why I hadn't done the same.

"Hey," Ken said, "Are you still planning to go to the *campesino* meeting with the local farm workers?"

"No one told me anything about an Indian gathering," I said, thinking someone may have invited me in Spanish and I'd not understood.

"We're leaving in half an hour," Señor Chavez said, turning to go. Ken followed.

"Oh, we'll be ready," Marie shouted to their backs.

I hurried to rinse and hang up my wet clothes. Then we went downstairs outside our front door expecting to see Señor Chavez's green Chevy drive up along our sidewalk. An hour passed. I hated the way locals treated time—like we had plenty of it to waste.

Around noon, a pickup came bouncing down the street and stopped in front of us. Inside sat a man whom we'd seen but didn't know. He had a big grin on his face and mischievous brown eyes.

"Hop in," the man said in Spanish through the open window, "I'm Señor Aguilar, a lawyer friend of Señor Chavez." He leaned over to open the passenger door. "He asked me to come by and get you. A bunch of us officials are going to see what trouble the *campesinos*, farmers, are stirring up."

I was surprised the director would send a stranger to transport us. I hoped he knew the way to the site and would tell us more about the meeting's agenda. Marie got into the pickup first.

"Thanks for giving us a ride," she said. I got in beside her and closed the door. Our new acquaintance bent his lean body across both our laps as he locked our door.

"The official meeting is thirty-six kilometers down the road," he said. He slid his non-driving arm along the seat behind Marie. "But we could find somewhere more secluded for just the three of us to go."

Maybe I'd misunderstood his flirtatious statement in Spanish. Marie looked over at me and rolled her eyes. I hadn't misinterpreted his intentions. Here was another Peruvian man who saw us as a couple of females to be conquered. I felt happy not to be the one sitting close to this aggressive guy.

We settled in for the uncomfortable twenty-two mile ride—and not just because of the potholes. We'd have to endure whatever Señor Aguilar chose to dish out during the hour-long drive. Neither of us liked the lawyer's innuendos, though we were used to suggestive remarks from Peruvian men. Their off-color comments made us feel like sex objects. They often acted the same way when local young women accompanied us but then seemed less vocal and insistent and were easier to ignore. Maybe they thought we had less family protection so were easier game.

"We usually take a bus or walk where we need to go," I said, ignoring Señor Aguilar's invitation. I had no attraction to this guy in the way he seemed to want.

"How about we park in those trees and enjoy the scenery?" the driver said, trying another approach.

Marie scooted closer to me. She disliked forward-acting men as much as I did. I hugged the door. Time to change the topic.

"What's the *campesino* meeting about?" I said.

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"There was some incident at a hacienda," Señor Aguilar said. His leer changed to concern. I relaxed. "A group of indigenous people, who work for the woman landowner, had trouble with her and asked the town officials to intercede."

After another forty-five minutes of chitchat, the truck slowed down. We saw several men stopped by the side of the road. Apparently, we'd arrived at the meeting place. The lawyer parked his pickup on the road next to a cornfield that ran up the side of a hill. People had gathered in two groups—the city officials in a huddle on the road and the indigenous residents sitting and standing on the hillside in front of the corn.

The heads of many of the local organizations had come. Those we knew were the chief of the Food for Peace Program, two directors of the Regional Education Office, Agrarian Reform officials, Ken, a couple of lawyers and the Guardia Civil regional police. I counted more than twenty-five armed, uniformed police officers. So much armament made me nervous.

Most of the city men wore their khaki Sunday best. The education department officials, as always, sported suits and ties. The seventy or so indigenous residents all wore hats. The men's fedoras ranged from faded gray to faded black. Round, black or beige felt hats topped the long black braids of the indigenous women. The ever-present headgear shaded their skin from the sun's damaging rays at the 10,000 to 16,000-foot altitudes where they lived and farmed. I relished this time out in nature in glorious weather—but not the sunburn we'd probably get because Marie and I had neglected to bring hats.

The women's hat colors contrasted with their bright, ankle-length, hand-woven, red wool skirts, with bands of white trim along the hems. On their feet, a few of the men sported dusty leather oxfords while others wore the familiar sandals made from old tires. But most of the men and women walked on the thick field grass and gravel in bare feet. I could see why we treated so many foot wounds at the hospital where Marie and I worked.

Señor Aguilar left the pickup and approached the group of officials, the police heads, and Ken. After conferring with the others, the lawyer gathered together a small group of indigenous men. He seemed in charge of getting the details. To do that, the men had to climb through a cornfield up to a potato field at the top of the hill. Marie and I weren't invited. None of the red-skirted women went either. Apparently, females couldn't be included when examining potato fields.

The Indian women glanced at us as they scurried back and forth between the houses across the road. They set a table with white enamel plates, cups and food. We'd learned the Quechua language greeting of the indigenous people, "Allillanchu," and used it. The women smiled back. A pack of scruffy-looking dogs sniffed around the food. I ducked inside the pickup whenever a dog growled near me. I'd been afraid of all canines—except my dog Teddy—since childhood. In my youth in Ismay, Montana, dogs had snarled at me, and a German Shepard almost ate me alive when I was in high school. Dogs seemed to sense my fear of them.

The men returned after half an hour and Señor Aguilar told us what he'd learned. The indigenous farmers who lived near the hacienda had gotten permission

from the owner to plant some potatoes for themselves in the field up the hill. When the potatoes matured, the woman owner of the hacienda, the *dueña*, changed her mind and decided she wanted not just the agreed-upon portion, but all the potatoes, for herself.

The *dueña*, had armed herself the previous day and gone to the potato patch where the Indians were working. Then she forced the workers to dig up "her" potatoes—at gunpoint. When she stuck a shotgun in the stomach of one

worker, the man's wife grabbed the firearm away and other Indians wrested a second gun away from her. The *dueña* turned to run back to her house and fell. No one pursued her as she picked herself up and ran across the field to her house.

The Indians had strapped the guns they'd confiscated to a fence post at the edge of the nearby field. I hadn't noticed the arms before, but now I could see a long rifle and a smaller firearm on a nearby post. This excursion had become exciting, not quite the sightseeing outing I had expected.

The officials, prepared for trouble, must have arranged for the high number of guards. When the sentries weren't lounging in the Indians' cornfields, they swaggered around threatening the people with their pistols by raising their firearms if someone didn't clear a path for them. The show of force, meant to intimidate the Indians, made me angry. The number of armed guards present seemed uncalled for.

Around three in the afternoon, the Indian women served us what they had cooked in their nearby mud-and-stick huts on kerosene gas burners and in nearby adobe ovens. We had a choice of pork, chicken or the local delicacy, herbed guinea pig called *cuy*. Side dishes included potatoes and corn, and the drink was lots of *aguardiente*—the homemade fermented and distilled sugar cane liquor. I

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downed a polite thimbleful of the alcohol. It burned my throat.

The tiny eyes of the herbed, roasted *cuy* looked up at me from my plate. It smelled of oregano and cumin. I sank my teeth into the middle rib area of the small animal, careful to not make eye contact with my food. The spicy flavors surprised me. When we finished our meal, the women took the dishes and leftover food back to their homes. This Peruvian food tasted delicious. People were always feeding us, no matter how little they had for themselves.

The meeting finally got underway at four, with less than one-third of the original hundred *campesinos*. Most of the natives, who had waited to participate since nine a.m., had given up and returned home.

Everyone spoke in Quechua. I didn't understand much of the conversation, so couldn't tell if the hour-long gathering ended with an agreement. Our lawyer friend gave us his analysis on the drive back to Abancay. His more serious demeanor made him more tolerable.

"Although three hundred indigenous families live in the area," he said, "they have no schools. They're supposed to get paid six soles, or twenty-five cents, a day but often get nothing."

"So that's one reason they can barely survive," I said. "And without education, they can't influence the government, if they even know they have a government."

"Yes," Señor Aguilar said. "Too bad they are all spread out and not organized."

I liked our lawyer friend better when he explained current events and stopped coming on to us. Seeing some of the problems that these people faced motivated me to work in rural community development after finishing my training in the hospital. I had a new understanding of the plight of indigenous Peruvians. But so far that day I had eaten a *cuy*, gotten sunburned, and managed to avoid any dog bites. Not great accomplishments. And I'd begun to lose hope that the potato issue would be solved anytime soon—like so many things in Peru.

To work with these Incan descendants I needed to learn their language. Not likely. Fluency in Spanish continued to be my goal. I had made progress speaking that language in the six months since I'd arrived. But what could I accomplish in the year I had left?

When I arrived at the hospital the next morning, I noticed a portly woman waiting for Doctor Delgado. I greeted the woman and her husband when I walked past them and went into the cloakroom to put on my white medical coat. Inside, Marie and a nurse friend, Elsa, discussed yesterday's adventure.

"The lady, the *dueña* owner of the hacienda," Elsa said in a hushed tone, "is the woman sitting out in the waiting room."

"What's she here for?" I asked, astonished at the coincidence.

"She said she'd gone up to a field on her hacienda to see how the potato digging was going," Elsa said. "The Indians had called her by a name of endearment, *mamacita*—and then attacked her. She said they must have been planning it all along."

"That's not what the *campesinos* said yesterday," Marie said. I, too, doubted the woman's story from what I knew of the incident.

"It turns out the woman is expecting a baby," Elsa said sympathetically, "and as the result of her fall, she may lose it."

I found it difficult to feel sorry for the *dueña*. The Indians seemed more sincere and honest, with less to gain. The unfairness of situations like this potato caper demonstrated how the gap between rich and poor created injustices that no one seemed able to bridge, least of all me. But, I'd keep looking for ways to have a meaningful impact in this mysterious and wonderful country.



## Sweet Rain

by Corlene Van Sluizer  
*Redwood Writers*

Sweet Rain  
What is your water message  
Is it an anointing  
in the temple's bowl  
of suffering and loss

A place to dip our heads  
To feel your crystal liquid  
as blessing  
as cleansing  
as an antidote  
to the black and grey  
ashes of loss?

Sweet Rain  
I stand naked  
in your presence  
wash over me  
and all of my  
brothers and sisters.



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# One Last Time ...

by Jenifer Rowe, *Sacramento*

Mama left the house to her and left me as her caretaker. She had it all worked out and I never even thought to complain, nor would I. They always did fawn over her, Ma and Pap both. "Oh, that Astrid, ain't she pretty, and no one so good at the games. Why, poor Jean is just plain lucky to be her sister," they said, and I reckoned I was.

I still remember the day she was born, in the back bedroom with the windows all closed up against the heat. Aunt Hilda was there to help and she sent me off to the kitchen. Ma had been crying out, but then she stopped and it got real quiet. I was watching a fly crawl toward my hand on the kitchen table and I hoped to smite it when it got close enough, just like the Hand of God they talked about at Sunday school. But you had to be real quiet and still in order to catch a fly, so when the baby cried out and made me jump, it flew away. I was peeved, but only for a minute. I ran to the bedroom door, asking could I come in and see the baby. Aunt Hilda jerked up my arm and pulled me away. "You need to mind yourself from now on," she hissed at me.

After that Ma was puny all the time and took lots of naps. Pap said, "She'll get over it," but she just stayed that way forever, it seemed. Some days she was almost her old self, but other times she stayed in bed with the shades drawn. I learned how to cook by running back and forth from Ma's bedroom to the stove, following her directions one step at a time until the meal was done. As the eldest, I was in charge.

Astrid grew up more athletic than I ever was, and she always brought the ribbons she won at school straight in to show Mama, proud as she could be. Such a fuss our Ma made over those ribbons! "Reminds me of my own school days," she'd say. My papers never caused so much stir, no matter how good the grade. Pap seemed pleased with my exams, but he didn't say much. He didn't like to even appear as though he disagreed with Ma.

Of course, we each had our own friends in those early days. Never mind that it seemed Astrid was invited to every party; I was happier to stay home and help with things. I like to feel that I was appreciated for my contributions. Pap certainly seemed to be grateful for my efforts. He had all he could do in the fields, what with how hard it was to keep hired men on. He came in through the woodshed door at the end of each day looking like Adam molded from clay, with just his eyes showing white out of the dust that coated him.

So I kept to myself a lot, though one boy did catch my eye at last. Oh! Frankie Sorenson. I was top grade in my class, but he was right behind me; anyone could see how clever he was. Not slow and stumbling like the rest of the

farm boys. We were always the last two standing in the history face-offs. I was sure he admired me for my talent, though he never said so.

Astrid was taken with horses; it was all she talked about. She got a job mucking out the stables at that fancy Greenwald place every day after school. They didn't pay her much, but they allowed her to ride her favorite horse, Cyclone. She would practice jumping with him every chance she got. She should have been home helping with our own animals, is what I thought, not leaving it all for poor Pap. But he never complained, not once.

Life went on well enough until the serious dry years came, when no matter how hard a person worked, it seemed nothing would grow and the cows wouldn't give. Pap couldn't keep a man on board, and so we girls had to help in the fields. By that time, Astrid and I had had all the schooling we were going to get. We still had hopes of finding husbands, though, and so did not like working in the hot sun all day, which browned our skin and roughened our hands. Astrid would duck inside whenever she could get away with it, claiming that Ma needed her. That's how it came to be that I was the only one out in the fields with Pap that day he collapsed. I can't see how Ma always blamed me, saying I didn't do enough to help him. He was gone by the time I got to him.

Anyway, after that Ma seemed to grow worse, not coming out of her room at all some days. One day she wouldn't even sit up and she just waved away whatever food or drink we brought her. Only Astrid could get her to open her eyes and smile a bit. When I came to her with a damp cloth for her forehead, she just turned her head and sighed. That was surely a bad time, but I took care of her as best I could from then on.

On the day that Astrid fell, she'd been outside showing off, just like she always did when there was a young man around. I was busy sponging Ma when I heard my sister tell Frankie Sorenson (yes, he and none other), "Watch me, Frankie, I'm gonna jump the fence."

I glanced out the bedroom window to catch sight of him, as it had been so long. Well, he looked at her so admiring it made me want to spit. Off she took astride our mare Nella, rounding the paddock twice before coming up on the fence. The horse didn't clear it, of course. I could have told her that old nag didn't have the legs for it. But she didn't ask me, and she wouldn't have listened anyways. Not to me, no sir.

The house was filled up for a while afterwards, with Dr. Torvald coming and going, and all the church ladies bringing every kind of covered dish. To this day the smell of cooked cabbage makes me sick. When the doctor said Astrid wouldn't walk again, Ma let out a scream like a rabbit caught in a snare. I was the one had to shoot the horse.

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I tried to be understanding, but my sister brought it on herself, and I feel bad saying so, but there it is. I took care of the both of them until Ma finally died. We'd rented out the fields and sold the cows soon after Pap died, and Ma had some money in a trust from her father, so the little bit that we had coming in did for us.

And so it's just been Astrid and me for such a long time. Each morning I get her up, see to her washing and dressing, and sit her comfy in her wheelchair. I push her to the breakfast table in silence (for whatever is there to say, after so many days the same?) and watch as her face falls at the sight of the stewed prunes and oatmeal I have laid out for her yet again. "Oh Jean," she said yesterday, "wouldn't it be nice for us to share an apple strudel some morning?" I didn't even answer. I have enough to do day in and day out, I don't need to add baking to the list.

So this morning she looks at me and asks, "Can we go into town to play bingo at the church tonight?" Well, you know, I would love to get out some myself, and at first that strikes me as a fine idea. Then after I think on it for a while, I see that it wouldn't be so smart to stir her blood up like that. Why, she might get overexcited, and then I'd just have my hands full putting her to bed again. It wouldn't be good for her, anyone can see that. And of course, I owe it to Mama to do what is right for my sister. I'm the one she left to be in charge.

When I explain to Astrid that an evening of bingo simply is not possible, she stares straight at me with a queer expression. I don't know what to make of that look, I surely do not. Don't I always wish the best for her? Haven't I spent my whole adult life doing everything only for her? I wheel her to the front window in the morning; I wheel her to the back porch when the afternoon sun is too strong. I cover her lap with a robe when the evening chill sets in. What more could she want of me?

Well, today she tells me. "Take me upstairs," she says, "and set me in my chair there."

"Astrid," says I, "you're asking me to carry you in my arms up a full flight of stairs?" She just nods once with her mouth set tight. I think it is rather much of her to ask, but I have never denied my sister anything, you can just ask anyone. So I settle her on the divan and up I go with the chair first, awkward as it is, and then I come back and gather her in my arms as soft and careful as holding ripe peaches.

"Jean," she says, "I haven't been upstairs since I was fifteen years old." I trudge up the stairs with her, and at the top I settle her in her wheelchair and turn to go. I swear that's how it all happened. As God is my witness, I never thought what she would do next.



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## *The Case of the Nicotine Aspirin*

by Marjorie Johnson, *South Bay*

The flag is up on our rural mailbox. It's come at last, a plain brown envelope from Underground Press, addressed to me, Betsy Mills. I slip *The Poisoner's Handbook* into my apron pocket and head back to the house: two rooms, tarpaper roof, red clay yard. I hurry past my husband Wayne: blond, twice my weight, six years older. He has the old Chevy in pieces again, the hood leaning against a pine tree. He pounds on something with an oversized wrench, throws the carburetor across the driveway.

In the doorway I spot an aspirin bottle, pick it up. I pull out my box of treasures from under the bed and add two small seed cones, just right to make a porcupine for my critters-in-a-bottle collection: Wilbur W. Worm, Al E. Cat, Lady R. Bug. I build them using tweezers in empty, glass aspirin bottles, all saved after Wayne empties them.

Wayne takes too much aspirin. They make your stomach bleed, I tell him, but he says no way, besides his shoulder hurts all night. He tells me I'm too young to know much. Not that he got that much out of high school, except a ruined shoulder from playing football. Anyhoo, I'm plumb tuckered out, what with him not sleeping at night.

I hide my new book beneath my underwear in the dresser drawer. Wayne stomps in, shakes out some aspirin, his jeans covered with oil and red dirt. "Mail's here," I say.

"Win any contests yet?" he says, moseys back outside.

"Sweepstakes," I say to the back of his head.

That night Wayne listens to the radio in the dark, water glass on the dresser beside the radio, aspirin bottles lined up. The radio does a fade-out, like most nights in the mountains. He fusses with the bottle cap, can't get it off. Having a tizzy, Wayne throws the aspirin bottle across the room, cusses, and slaps at the radio as usual, only this time he hits the water glass. Breaking glass. Radio crashing. I turn on the bare-bulb ceiling light. Blood spurts. I wrap a white dishtowel around his wrist. The bleeding doesn't stop.

The car isn't running. I pull on pants and a shirt and run to the neighbor's house, a quarter mile down the road.

"Hey, it's midnight, what's going on?" the neighbor says. He gives me a ride back in his pickup truck, oak wood in the truck bed, window stuck open. I help Wayne and my best dishtowel pile in. I clean up the mess.

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Come four o'clock I hear the truck rattle and bang on down, wood bouncing in its bed. Wayne says, "Thank you for the lift. Much obliged," slams the door. Wayne kicks off his shoes and comes to bed. I play dead.

Wayne sleeps 'til lunchtime. When he finally goes to work on the road crew, I read my new book. I want to know about poisons like in those murder mystery stories, but this book from Underground Press tells how to poison people, how to inject poison into a piece of fruit like the witch in *Snow White*. Something about nicotine catches my eye: one drop of pure nicotine in the ear canal kills a person. The murderer on tiptoe, holding out a medicine dropper ... It might work with gophers.

Early next morning while I tend the garden, I light up the burn pile. I save Wayne's cigarette butts and roll the tobacco fibers for him to smoke later — makes my fingers stink. I'm thinking I'll make some nicotine like in the book. I put some fibers and a little water in an empty tomato juice can over the coals and let it simmer. I don't breathe the fumes. It makes nasty brown goo.

I catch a gopher out behind the carrots. I lift the trap and the ugly critter dangles down. I keep away from those yellow teeth, dab a little tobacco paste on his nose with a stick. Sure enough, in a few minutes he's dead. I dig a hole in the garden and cover the dead gopher. I don't know if he will turn to fertilizer or if he will poison my plants.

I need to dry out the nicotine concentrate and divide it into small doses. I try dipping aspirin tablets into the goo. When the brown coating dries, I push the capsules into an empty aspirin bottle—I use a stick, don't touch the stuff. I hide them under my underwear next to the book on poisons.

Next afternoon Wayne works on the car again. I go to my garden, admire the tomatoes, water the plants. I hear a big commotion, Wayne yelling. He smashes the car roof with a big rock and throws a greasy car part across the driveway.

I pick the first red ripe tomato and start dinner. I make a salad with fresh greens and boil up some spaghetti. I put his noodles in the middle of the yellow plastic plate. Wayne takes his time coming, like usual. I say, "Spaghetti's getting cold."

Wayne sits at the table, pushes the salad away. He puts some spaghetti in his mouth and spits it out. "You trying to poison me, woman?" he says, flings his dinner plate across the room. It smashes against the wall. The plate bounces and rolls. Paints a splotchy red trail, clatters to a stop. Spaghetti drools down, down, sliding slowly, piling up in a red-sauce puddle.

"I make you something nice for dinner, and look what you do. It's not my fault it's cold." I cross my arms over my chest and frown.

"What was that stuff, anyway?" He sits there, knife in one hand, fork in the other.

"An onion and tomato sauce. And cinnamon. You always say, put in spice."

"That's crazy, woman. Nobody puts cinnamon in spaghetti sauce."

"Spaghetti's still there. You gonna clean it up?"

"You don't tell me what to do, woman," he says. He shoves me hard, makes a fist.

"My name is Betsy," I say and shove him back. We yell and scream, bump one another around, have a terrible fight.

I duck and move farther away and start to cry.

"I wish you were dead," I say.

He sits down on the bed, folds his arms across his chest and crosses one leg over, big frown on his face. He massages his shoulder, clenches and unclenches his jaw. I clean up the mess. I wash down the walls and scrub the floors. Same old thing, come bedtime, he listens to the radio in the dark. "I need some aspirin, woman," he says.

I get the tobacco aspirin from my dresser drawer and put them next to him, within easy reach. Now we'll see, Roger Q. Rat, I think. I hook my leg over the edge of the mattress so I won't roll downhill to the center. Wayne starts to snore. I'm thinking like, you can't just kill somebody, even if you want to wring his neck. What if that bedspring breaks through again, wakes him up? First thing, he'll grab those pills. No, I'll hear him for sure, trade bottles then or in the morning.

I edge myself back over the uphill mattress and go to sleep.

Middle of the night, he sits up, pulls off all the covers. "Help me," he moans. "I just threw up."

I turn on the light. I see blood, a lot of blood. I wipe him off with a damp towel. "Car isn't running, and us with no phone. Just stay right here," I say. I run for help.

"You again? Are you crazy?" the neighbor says, leaning out of the upstairs window in his underwear. I use his phone.

I run back home. "Ambulance a-coming," I say. Wayne doesn't answer. He doesn't move. I throw the aspirin bottle from his nightstand in with my underwear. Wouldn't want him to take one by mistake.

It takes a long time for help to come. Wayne just lies there, white against the blood-red sheets. I hear the siren, see the whirling red lights coming down the drive.



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The ambulance driver rushes to the door. "Where is he, ma'am?"

"Right here," I say, "too small a house to lose him."

The helper rolls in a stretcher. They both wear white uniforms and white shoes. They try to make him breathe. Sure enough, he's dead. The sheriff's here before Wayne leaves in the ambulance, red clay dust boiling up, like a cloud of nicotine gas.

"What happened, ma'am?" the sheriff asks. He has a pistol in a black holster.

"I don't know, I just don't know."

The sheriff picks up an aspirin bottle from the floor. "Is this what he's been taking?" he asks. "You have to come in tomorrow." He drives out, his taillights aglow in the dust.

After the sheriff leaves, I change the bed. I throw the sheets and the bloody pillow on top of the burn pile. That aspirin bottle, did he swallow half a bottle all at once, there in the dark? I look for the nicotine-flavored ones, right there with my underwear. Only six tablets, I thought there were a dozen. *Oh-my-god. I must have killed him!*

I cannot sleep.

Come morning, I catch a ride into town with the neighbor. This time I'm the one in the pickup, kind of cold with that window stuck down, lots of rattles. Rough ride, too; his springs are shot. He drops me by the sheriff's office, half a dozen posters on the wall, mostly wanted for murder.

*Murder!* I shudder and swallow spit. The sheriff comes in.

"You say he took lots of aspirin." The sheriff writes that down. "Wait for the coroner's report, don't go anywhere." Then, friendly-like, he says, "There's coffee and donuts in the waiting room."

I wait. The donuts are stale. Coffee doesn't help my guilty conscience. They'll find nicotine—he smoked by the carton.

Time passes slowly. Finally the sheriff's helper comes, says the coroner wants to see me. "How much aspirin did you say your husband took, Mrs. Mills?"

"Way too much. He took it by the bottle."

"Wonder it didn't kill him sooner, with that bleeding ulcer," the coroner says. He has a bushy mustache. "What do you want to do with his body?"

"His body? I have to do something with his body?"

"Well, are you having a funeral or something? What would he want done?"

"No sense having a funeral. No family to speak of."

"Okay. The county will cremate him and mail his remains to you. Just fill out these forms here." He asks if there is anything else he can do for me.

"Sure could use a ride home," I say.

Next morning early, I light the burn pile, put the book right on top of the bloody sheets. While I'm at it, I throw in the nicotine aspirin. Right next to the beets, that's where I'll plant his ashes. Make him eat his vegetables after all.



## CARE

by Julaina Kliet-Corwin, *Tri-Valley*

The midday summer sun filtered through the Sierra's forest when I drove from the San Francisco Bay Area to the new home of my student, Jeremy. The Nissan's tires made a crunching sound on the gravel driveway until I parked. The house was far from the upgrade I had expected. It needed repairs and paint. Straggly overgrown bushes clawed at the walls and the lawn had turned into lumps of dirt.

Stiff from the four-hour drive, my back begged for movement. I would have to return home in a couple of hours. Nevertheless, I could not explain why I hesitated before turning off the engine. In slow motion, I left the driver's seat, stretched, and touched my toes. I wasn't on a normal teaching assignment. I had come for a visit because I missed that ten-year-old. I had not seen him since he and his dad moved from Concord five months ago. In spite of not being able to speak, walk, or move anything but his facial muscles, Jeremy was a charmer. His broad smile made teaching a rewarding job.

The walk to the front door in the heat felt as if I were trapped in a cauldron filled with dust and ashes, yet I shivered. Something didn't feel right. It was too quiet, no birds, no planes, no dogs barking, only the hum of cicadas that welcomed the high temperature.

I rang the doorbell. No one answered. I rang it again and wondered if anyone was home. Jeremy's father, Nate, had agreed to my visit even if I wouldn't be able to see him. His mother had had another attack and he'd planned to visit her in the hospital after work. The new nurse would be at the house with Jeremy. However, Nate warned me not to compare her to Karen who had been Jeremy's nurse for most of his life.

Nate had sounded annoyed. "You know why we can't compare. I told you before we left. Satisfactory medical help in this small community is hard to find." The click in the receiver signaled his disconnection. I excused his impatience. It had been a difficult decision to yank Jeremy away from

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the excellent medical care he had in the Bay Area. Nate insisted he couldn't choose between his mother and his son. He had to care for both of them in one place. Jeremy's grandmother owned this little part of the Sierra and free housing made financial sense. Nate's income as a handyman wasn't enough for basic support, let alone his family's rising medical bills. Good reasons to make the move except it might put Jeremy in jeopardy.

I rang the bell several times. The smell of pine needles roasting in the sun caused me to glance to the tops of the trees bordering the property. They reached for rain from a cloudless sky.

I heard a *Sesame Street* song playing inside and followed it to the side of the house where a shade-covered window was open about an inch. When I tapped on the window, long white fingers moved the shade aside and a sliver of a woman's face peered at me. I raised my voice. "I'm Jeremy's former teacher. Did his father tell you I was coming?" The shade slid back into place. I returned to the front door, which now stood ajar. Strange welcome, but I went inside and passed familiar furniture in a gloomy living room. Kermit the Frog drew me to the end of the hall and another open door.

When my eyes adjusted to the darkness lit by the TV screen, I gasped. Jeremy's bed was unmade and a pile of tubes, bottles, trays, and meds lay on top of a shelf. The disarray was noticeably different compared to Karen's sterilized organization. A whiff of urine greeted me.

Jeremy sat in his wheelchair with his back to me. A tall, dark-haired woman leaned against a wall near the window that I had tapped. She wore black jeans, blouse, and cowboy boots. Where was her uniform? Maybe she wasn't the nurse. Maybe she was Jeremy's mother, who had left the family when he was born, unable to deal with her baby's medical condition. No, Nate would have told me if she were back.

"You must be Lila, Jeremy's nurse?" I hoped not, but no one else was around.

The woman nodded, picked up a magazine, and plopped into a chair. Nate didn't want me to compare nurses, but I knew a disaster when I saw one. My heart raced with worry about Jeremy's welfare. The thin hair on his large head was uncombed and his shirt had a silver dollar-sized stain. The feeding tube must have spilled. Karen would have changed his shirt. I put my bag down and came closer to his side. "Hi pal, how are you doing?"

He focused on the TV without a glance at me.

I patted his arm, "Hey, dude. I've come to visit." He gazed at me, but without recognition in his expression. I had dreaded the thought that he might forget me like other students did after they had moved on.

"I'm your teacher, remember?" My throat tightened, and tears surged in my eyes. I didn't know how I could be cheerful with an apathetic nurse in charge of his care. His

smile had helped me through months of raw grief when my son passed away. Jeremy had brightened my life, and I found it hard to do the same for him.

I picked up the beach ball that had survived the move and placed it in his lap. Then I moved his hands over the mound as we had done many times at his old house. Jeremy's eyebrows furrowed as if he were trying to remember something then he seemed to give up, and stared at the TV again. His cheeks lacked color and his body had a weak-looking slump.

"Has Nate taken him to the doctor recently?" I asked Lila.

"Yeah, couple days ago. Or maybe it was a couple of weeks."

It was her job to know exactly when. I stroked Jeremy's soft hand. "Remember how we'd pretend this ball is like planet earth? I've missed you more than all the planets and the Milky Way put together."

Jeremy smiled. The words relating to astronomy, his favorite topic, must have jogged a memory. Maybe he would recall the fun we had had in the past.

I turned off the TV and stood in front of the lounging nurse. "*The Swiss Family Robinson* used to be his favorite. Does he still watch it?"

"I don't know. He has so many movies. I just grab one," Lila said without a glance in my direction.

"We always let him choose. Do you know how he says 'yes' by clicking his tongue and 'no' by scowling? You can hold up two video covers and ask him which one he wants and he will look at the one he prefers. It helps him feel like he has some control in his life."

"Yeah, I guess." Lila's answer indicated Nate must have told her, but she didn't care.

I swallowed a few times so I wouldn't reprimand her and then I walked back to Jeremy.

"Are you mad at me for turning off the TV?"

He didn't respond.

"Has he clicked his tongue for you?" I asked Lila.

"Ah, I don't know. I guess not. Maybe a couple times when I first started."

To discontinue repetition of what he had accomplished destroyed three years of successful work with Jeremy. The room stifled me. My head throbbed into dizziness. I looked around for Jeremy's fan to circulate the air and found it in the corner with a twisted bed sheet thrown on top of it. Lazy Lila.

I removed the sheet, plugged in the fan, and stood for a minute in front of it. The cool air helped me breathe, but a hurricane was imminent. I could do nothing about the forces approaching Jeremy's welfare. I lived too far away. Besides, Nate wouldn't let me question or interfere in any way. I had to yield to his pride many times over lesser issues than this one.

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I hoped the fan refreshed Jeremy. In the Bay Area, he would raise his brows and use his eyes to flirt when I entered his room. I looked forward to those greetings. He always clicked 'yes' to play with the ball. He had watched with interest when I showed him comparative sizes with other objects like an orange and a plum. Then I would point to the planets' placements in relationship to each other on a large poster I had drawn. It probably disappeared in the move.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not motivate him with our symbolic planet. His zest had disappeared. When it was time to leave, I didn't want to go. I made direct eye contact with him, kissed his little hands, and said, "Bye, Jeremy. I love you."

I knew I wouldn't make the trip again. I had to let him go. I had happy memories of our fun times together and his smile would remain in my heart always.

Two months after my visit, Jeremy passed away from pneumonia caused by a bacterial infection. Of course, I blamed Lazy Lila. Six weeks later, his grandmother had a fatal heart attack. Thoughts of Nate alone in the Sierra house surrounded by the tall pines without the two people he loved the most added to my sadness. It wasn't a surprise that he didn't return my calls. He probably thought I would berate him. So, I sent a card with my condolences and a letter in which I told him that as parents we do the best we can, often under difficult circumstances.

The tides of time flow in and out as two decades pass and I often gaze at the night sky, visualizing Jeremy moving with freedom, playing with real stars, and telling stories about the planets to his grandmother.



## Solstice

by Smoky Zeidel, *High Desert*

All is silent this solstice morning.  
All is as it should be.  
The desert feels holy;  
the mountains emerge from  
the dark like muses from the Ether.  
Can you hear the silence?  
Can you feel the sacredness of the earth  
surround you like a grandmother's arms?

They've bombed Aleppo.  
All is not as it should be.  
Nothing is holy in this holy war.  
Children pulled dead from the rubble;  
this is not collateral damage.  
Can you hear the rain in the desert?  
Can you feel the heartbreak of the earth  
drench you with a grandmother's tears?

There's snow in the mountains  
glowing beneath the waning crescent moon.  
All is what it will be.  
Existence is holy.  
Hear the tintinnabulation of ice crystals  
as the muses return to the Ether to await  
the coming light.  
Feel earth's gentle promise  
cloak you with a grandmother's hope.



## Survivor's Guilt

by Cristina Goulart, *Redwood Writers*

Ten days after the fires began,  
I unload my car of  
Clothes, mementos, supplies.

My evacuated guests have returned  
to their homes,  
Leaving behind an aura of stillness.

The lock on my fear unhinges.  
A foul wind of memories  
Bellows from a dragon's jaw.

Hysteria etched on a friend's voice,  
Expressions of fear her mantra;

Cinders wind-blown for three miles,  
Fallen a foot from my garage;

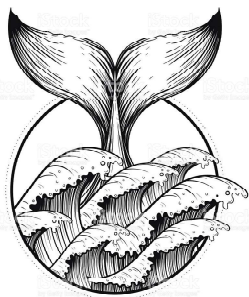
The flimsy feel of a garden hose,  
Handed to a roof-bound neighbor.

Ten days after the fires began,  
I think of the bodies consumed by  
flames,  
Their ashes now resting in my lungs.

Hoarse sobs scorch my throat,  
As I kneel on my unsinged rug.







# Whale Story

by John Blossom  
Central Coast

“Hey Lydian. Do you want to go kayaking this morning before we go to the beach?” I asked.

“Sure, Dad. That sounds great!”

“Okay. I’ve got just the place in mind.” I was happy she was game—I much prefer active play to lounging in the sand. It tends to build better memories. Don’t get me wrong—people who can lounge without guilt are admirable—I just can’t do it ... too anxious, I guess, unless my nose is captured by a really good book.

We headed to the waters just north of Kawahae Harbor where there is a deep channel that runs close to the shore. It is a favorite fishing spot for sport fishermen because fish and mammals, which are normally far out in the deeper water, are close in there and more easily observed. If the winter swell is not too severe, it is a great place to see dolphins year-round and the humpbacks that come every winter to give birth and nurse their calves in the relatively calm waters on the leeward side of the island.

We dropped my wife, Kate, off at Wailea Beach—a place she worships—and promised to meet her back there after our adventure. She was happy with the latest Anne Tyler novel tucked in the pocket of her beach chair.

“Don’t drown our daughter,” she said.

I laughed. “Okay. See you in a few hours.” And we headed back up the few miles of highway to the harbor.

Parking at the harbor can be a chore, but we were lucky that day and found a spot close to the ramp. It was easy then to take the heavy kayak off the roof of the Subaru and carry it down to the water, especially now that Lydian had grown into a strong young woman. There were no worries about paddling several miles out and back. The wind was calm, as was the surf. *Perfect day for this.* We locked the car, loaded water and cans of guava juice into the kayak, cinched down our hats and paddled off.

The first goal was easy—paddling from the calm harbor water into the open sea. Sometimes the waves there are huge. In fact, the break off that part of the island was one of King Kamehameha’s favorite surfing spots. But today the water was nearly smooth, and the view up and down the coast as we emerged from the harbor was clear and spectacular. The ocean smelled fresh and the sun was glittering on the water. We kept heading north into the deep channel. On our right was Kohala Mountain, the only mountain in the world that is a rainforest at its top and a desert at its foot. We passed a deep canyon cut into its side

as we paddled our way north and heard goats bleating and echoing off its walls. “They sound like babies,” Lydian said. We were about a quarter mile out from the shoreline—an easy swim if we ran into trouble. There are almost no beaches on this part of the island, though, just rocky cliffs and beautiful views. I wasn’t worried. The waves were tiny. This was a textbook, chamber-of-commerce, tourist-approved day.

We paddled on. The sun was hot, but an occasional splash of water on the face from the paddles was enough to keep us cool. The salt water dried sticky on our arms and necks. Sunlight danced and flickered across the lightly variegated surface of the ocean.

“Dad, what’s that way ahead?”

I pulled my hat down to shade my eyes better and looked to where Lydian was pointing from the bow. Far off in the distance, many hundreds of yards, there was a splashing in the water. There was not much to see, just an area of disturbance off the next point of land.

“I don’t know, Lydian. Maybe dolphins. Let’s keep going and see,” I said. “We’ll probably want to turn around after that, though. It’s a few miles back to the car, and the breeze is against us going back.”

“Okay, Dad,” she said, dipping her paddle back into the water. Nice thing about my daughter is she loves nature and doesn’t feel compelled to fill every moment with conversation.

A period of quiet paddling ensued. I kept looking ahead for the dolphins, but the ocean stayed calm. I mildly wondered where they might have gone, but dolphins are hard to track, appearing and disappearing like magicians of speed in the ocean.

All of a sudden I heard Lydian scream, “Dad!”

At first I had no clue what was wrong, but then it was terrifyingly obvious. A whale was surfacing right next to our kayak.

“Dad, what do we do?” shouted Lydian. She clutched the sides of the kayak with both hands as the huge body rose beside us and completely blocked our view of the ocean. Our kayak rocked on the turbulence like a rubber ducky. *Is this thing going to run into us?*

“Dad?” Lydian said.

“Just take it in, Lydian. There’s nothing we can do. Oh my God. Oh my God!”

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The mother whale kept arching its way out of the water until her bulk was like a New York building right next to us. We could see cuts and barnacles on her shiny black skin.

"Watch out for the tail!" I said, but it only skimmed the surface and followed her enormous body back under the water. We were spared.

Before we could even breathe, the next massive thing to rise up from the ocean was the calf. Its comparatively smaller head and eye emerged just behind momma's tail, and it arched its way back into the water exactly the way she had a moment earlier.

"Look! A baby! It's a baby whale!" said Lydian, but the momma and the baby didn't rise again.

"Oh my God, Lydian. That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We are so lucky we didn't get crushed!" I said. We looked back at where the mom and her calf had disappeared.

Right as my head was turned, the father whale emerged in similar fashion. He rose a few yards farther away from us than the mom, but what he lacked in dangerously close proximity he made up for in majesty and height. His body seemed to never stop rising. It truly felt like a massive building was shooting up out of the water. He arched upward and splashed back down with the force of a glacier calving in Alaska. Foamy white water careened off his back and fins. A giant eye looked right at us for a moment before the ocean swallowed him up again with a loud whoosh. Waves hit the kayak hard, but again we miraculously stayed upright. We watched his tail rise and disappear after him, and the bubbly foam dissolved into peaceful glitters again.

"We're alive," I said.

"Wow, Dad," said Lydian. "Whales! A whole family of them!"

"Yeah, wow. I'm so glad they didn't hit us because there was nothing we could have done about it. *My God*. Maybe it's time to go meet your mother at the beach, what do you say? Enough adventure for one day?" The kayak all of a sudden felt very unsteady beneath me. My skin was crawling with relief.

I don't remember much about the trip back to the harbor other than we were paddling hard and looking over our shoulders for whales the whole time. Even as we did so, I knew that the chance of another close encounter was improbable, but still I couldn't relax the tension in my shoulders until we reentered the shallow and guaranteed whale-less breakwater. Lydian and I had violated that humpback family's nursery, and I was very grateful that the parents had chosen to spare our lives. One little flipper slap from any one of them could have pummeled us to our watery grave. We were very lucky.

After some research that night, we learned that we had been in the most danger from the calf who, unlike her savvy parents, might have decided to play with the little yellow floating toy that was our kayak. I'm glad she didn't, and I often wonder if the parents somehow delivered that message to her as the family passed by. Could the father's wise glance at us have been one of warning, or perhaps reassurance? I will never know, but I feel like the very soul of the ocean visited us that day.



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# White Rice

by John Philipp, *Marin*

Evening offshore winds swept the fog from the California coast and toasted the air with ocean salt and pungent kelp. On a cliff high above the rumblings of the surf, surrounded by bent cypress trees, an old Spanish mission guarded the land. The wide mahogany doorway of the church framed a man and a woman in their mid-thirties, both dressed in white, hand-in-hand. They stood atop the mission's adobe stairs and looked down on friends and relatives milling in the courtyard in themed 1930s garb—the women in long chiffon dresses and lace shawls, the men in blue blazers and straw boater hats circled with wide crimson bands. Opening scents of night-blooming jasmine infused the air. From the bell tower, a red and white flag wigwagged at the becalmed ocean. The earlier prism of the sea's surface had shrunk to a small semicircle mirroring the sun's image as it slipped under the horizon, leaving behind—its wont on warm summer days—no sign of departure, no enlargement,

no wind, no color, hint nor hue, erased like a forgotten childhood memory.

Two black bow-tied waiters in white shirts and slacks distributed small silk rice bags tied with red velvet ribbons to the waiting guests. Tables of edibles, tented and unattended, loitered in silent submission, ready to be pillaged. Cadres of flying insects filled rosemary border hedges. They hummed to themselves, hovering for their turn at the food.

Night cloaked the rice paddies, reducing men to madness, raising cicadas to kings. An overcast sky masked the moon. Darkness was Tran Hgo's ally, absorbing his black clothes, improving the choiceless chance he was about to undertake. His hand felt its way along the rough-timbered outside wall of the guard barracks. A symphony of snores

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from inside evidenced all was as he had hoped. He headed for the fields he'd left not three hours before.

Minh Ah opened her eyes as soon as Tran departed. She had not slept far from the edge of awake since the Viet Cong raided her village eight years before. An internal tear trickled across her heart. She worried for her husband and their children. She knew what he must do and the knowledge did nothing to lessen her dread. She slipped from her cot. Kneeling before a small ivory figure on a woven basket, she mouthed a silent prayer.

Calf deep in slimy, black water, trapped in the musty, sulphuric scent, Tran worked by feel, light unnecessary for the habitual task. Cut, grab, slide the precious grain off its stalk and into the large muslin bag slung over his shoulder. Cut, grab, slide, cut, grab, slide, and again and again and again — smooth sweeps with the ani-ani knife.

Embedded in his harvesting rhythm, Tran remembered the day his father was taken, the rough, black-sashed soldiers who shot the first and only protestor. He remembered when the Cong returned to the village years later and carried him and the other young men away, and heard again his mother's wailing voice as he was led into the forest. His two sons had never known village life. They were born in this camp. They would die here.

Hours later Tran paused. Months of minimal food and sleep had weakened him. He removed two leeches from his leg with the ani-ani then hefted the bag, judged its weight, and returned to his labors, slogging through the paddies that felt thicker since he'd broken his rhythm. With each meter trudged the sack became heavier, harder to swing away from the blade stroke. Soon the bag would be full and he could rest, knowing the labor would feed and clothe his family until spring. That thought fought the night chill.

As the overcast curdled into clouds, Tran noticed the man perched on the bank, watching him harvest. Thinking the man a guard, Tran froze. But guards were an impatient lot. A guard would be barking orders — and Tran didn't see a gun glint in the shaft of moonlight that winked through the clouds.

He harvested a rice row in the man's direction. When close enough, Tran turned and bowed. He spoke softly. "A beautiful night."

The man looked around as if gathering evidence to evaluate Tran's statement. "For some things," the man answered in a low, steady voice. Tran couldn't place the accent.

The silence hung longer than comfortable. "Are you from here?" he asked.

The stranger stood. Tran now realized he was an elder, stooped at the shoulders and dressed in ivory cloth. The man slid his feet into the paddy water. Arms outstretched, palms open, he inched forward in small, cautious steps and placed one hand on Tran's shoulder.

"I am here for you."

The man's dark, deep-set eyes drew Tran as if his soul wanted to separate from his body and join the stranger's.

"You must leave here at the first hint of dawn. Not a moment later. They will be up early this morning." The stranger turned and walked away.

"Wait," whispered Tran. "Who are you?"

Still walking, the stranger answered, "I'm the one who stands on the basket." And he was gone, swallowed by the darkness.

Tran faced the eastern horizon. Fewer stars signaled the coming dawn. Yet, there was room left in the sack. Room for extra rice he could barter. He returned to his task, handling the ani-ani roughly, pausing after each downward stroke, summoning the strength to lift his arm for the next swing. Sweat stung his eyes, hampered his vision. Still he swung his blade down with the

same force. He slipped in the mud. The knife sliced into the calf of his left leg. He screamed silently as bright red blood mingled with the murky, insect-infested water.

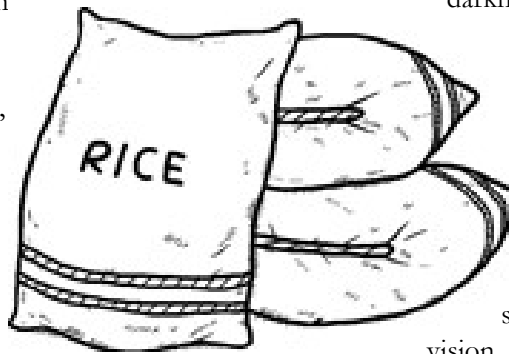
Tran dropped the ani-ani and gripped the top of the harvest bag with both hands. He tore off a piece of fabric. Balancing on his good leg, he lifted the slashed limb from the water and supported it on the bag. As he wrapped the wound, blood dripped unnoticed into the harvested grain. He knew he should leave the field, wash the wound in a clear stream, return to his bed and sleep. Instead he stepped back into the filthy muck and resumed his work. He balanced on his right leg as he slid the white treasure into the sack. Inch by inch he wrestled the sustenance from the paddy's grip.

At the first whisper of morning light, Tran hefted the bag. Time to stop. In the disappearing darkness he dragged his damaged leg and his prize back to the straw hut.

Tran leaned the sack inside the door and looked over the compound to check that all was still.

The sun that had lightened the sky moments before was still not visible, hidden behind the fog rising off the warm rice paddies, tinted red, as the solar heat nibbled away the fog's flimsy substance. For a moment, Tran's whole world adopted a rosy aspect. Then it was gone.

He stumbled forward and collapsed on a cot. Freed from tasks, the waiting fever blossomed and consumed his body. Thoughts slid into the dark well of his mind. His leg



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throbbed, his sweat-wet body shivered, the wound's ripening smell rose.

At the sound of her husband's collapse, Minh Ah sat up and wakened in a single motion. Her glance took in the full shoulder bag, rice spilling out the open top, the festering wound, blood staining the floor, Tran Hgo's feverish head, his sweat soaking the bedding.

Outside, a gong sounded, harsh and intrusive. Work call. Five minutes to assemble in front of the cabins. Minh Ah held Tran's hand and prayed, repetitive, almost inaudible sounds directed at a small ivory figure atop a woven basket.

Tran opened his eyes at the sound of the gong but could not muster the energy to turn his head. He stared at the thatched ceiling as his wife continued to entreat their god. His lips moved.

"Hide the rice." His utterance was soft; the sounds ran together and entered the room unheard. Minh Ah dunked a rag in the water bowl and gently cleansed his wound.

He pushed her hand away. "Hide the rice," he repeated. His wife's hand tightened on his. She had heard but not

understood. He lifted his arm to indicate the harvest bag. Instead his arm dropped off the cot, a pointing finger landed on the dirt floor.

Tran summoned the remaining energy in his body to his throat.

*"Hide the rice!"*

Loud banging at the door covered his words.

The newly wedded couple started down the adobe stairs under an engorged moon rising in the east. Scarlet-hued as it peeked over the coastal mountains, the moon slid along the color scale as it ascended toward ivory—its final destination. Rice flew into the air, lifting, swirling, sailing, the last light of day catching intermittent red facets in the grain. The celebratory spray tumbled, twirled, and floated downward. Champagne flowed as a white shower sprinkled the sidewalk with kernels like drops of moonlight to wash away into the sea with the next rain.



## The Ceremony

by Skye Blaine

Redwood Writers

December, 1980

I plodded slowly down the hall toward my six-year-old son Thom's hospital room. I dreaded going back to face his piteous crying, and my inability to ease his spasming Achilles tendon. But then I saw a halo of blond curls coming toward me, and I recognized my closest friend—a sister, really—Susan. I dashed forward, and we wrapped our arms around each other. I could soak up her courage, wisdom, and understanding.

Although I had sighed when I stood at the hospital door and watched my ex-husband, Ray, head for home, opposite feelings collided—resentment that he could leave, and vast relief that he had. I had spent the past nine hours vigilant to every nuance of his mood. When he had bellowed at Thom's main nurse, "Fuck! Can't you stop this misery?" I placated everyone so that Thom had the best chance for a positive outcome. Knowing that Susan had answered my SOS—as sister and confidant—felt like balm spread on festering sores.

She pulled away to get a look at me. "You seem wiped. I'm here for *you*, remember?"

I leaned into her.

We sat with Thom until nightfall. Finally, from morphine and exhaustion, he dozed. After leaving my

number at the nursing desk, Susan and I trudged toward the Ronald McDonald House. Clouds rolled in, obscuring the stars that I longed to see. I opened the door to my room and staggered inside, grateful for the dirt-cheap, clean accommodations. I desperately needed time out.

I had brought precious objects from home—prayer beads and a sage stick. At the last minute, I had added a tiny, carved box to my suitcase. The contents of this box plagued me. I had turned my bedside table here into a makeshift altar and placed these items on it for safekeeping. Reaching over to touch my prayer beads, to run my fingers over their buttery, olive-wood surface, I picked up the box instead.

"What's in that?" Susan asked.

I closed my eyes for a moment. This was embarrassing. "My wedding ring from my marriage with Ray," I said.

"Really!" She leaned over and smoothed her finger on the box's carved surface. "Why are you holding on to it?" she asked. "And why did you bring it here?"

I opened the box. "I can't just throw it away—that doesn't feel right, or honoring. My son's about to walk on his own for the first time in his life. Five years late." I rubbed at the nagging, chronic pain in my low back, the result of carrying him. "It's past time that I'm my own person, too." I unfolded the forest-green velvet and touched the ring. "I loved this man; this ring symbolized our caring and commitment, even if it didn't last."

She tilted her head and frowned at me, clearly mystified. "Why, I've seen Ray act downright mean to you. Hanging on to his ring is beyond strange, Skye."

I had to agree with her. I had been clinging to misery.

"It seems really important that you finish with this."

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"But how?" I asked, puzzled.

She pondered my question, and we were silent for a while. "A water ceremony?" she suggested. Curious, I stared at her. Her gaze held a wicked quality that I've come to recognize and love.

"Come on," she said. "We'll tidy the bathroom first, and burn the sage to purify the space. Then we'll sit on the floor and create a ceremony."

I nodded, slowly.

The bathroom already looked clean, but it needed to be *my* clean. I found Comet, a rough scrubby, and even rubber gloves under the sink. Susan and I worked on every surface, inside and out. I vented my frustration at Ray on that toilet bowl and scrubbed until I had emptied the day's rage out of me. Then I lit the sage; the scent dissipated the acrid stench of both the cleanser and my bitterness. We settled ourselves on the tile, on either side of the sparkling toilet.

I opened the little box, and fingered the pounded silver band. My chest went tight. I could still hear the tap-tap-tap of his jeweler's ball-peen hammer. My sense of dread, knowing that Ray's impotence and fury had penetrated each hammered mark, still felt fresh. "It feels awful to flush something that he made."

"Could you give it away, or sell it?" she asked.

"Not in good conscience; passing along unhappiness feels like really bad juju." I turned the ring and looked at it closely in the light. I could see a shadow of myself in its surface. He was still hammering on me today.

"What have you learned from Ray?" she asked.

"I saw his potential." My tone soured. "I learned a hard lesson—you'd better love your mate exactly the way he is, with no expectation of change."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "What did he take from you?"

I turned the ring slowly. "My confidence that I know how to pick a loving partner."

We sat for a while in silence so quiet, I could hear the loud tick of my Little Ben alarm clock in the other room.

"What did he give you?"

"He gave too much," I said. "He gave himself away, and then hated himself—and me—because nothing was left." I held the ring and offered prayers for Ray, that he would find his own way, that peace would enter his spirit.

"You ready?" she asked.

I nodded, dropped the ring into the bowl, and watched it settle to the bottom. Then I pulled down the handle. The water swirled and flushed. Susan and I both rocked forward and stared into the bowl. The ring had not budged. I flushed again. The ring sat stubbornly on the bottom, its hammered surface reflecting the round ceiling light above.

I pressed my fist against my mouth to stifle a nervous giggle. I whispered, "Now what do I do?"

Susan met my gaze, her eyes wide. Then a titter bubbled

out of her. Soon we were both laughing uncontrollably, hysterically. Tears poured down our cheeks. I gasped for air. I wasn't laughing at the ceremony; we both understood the seriousness of that. The anxiety of the day had simply erupted. That kind of pressure requires venting.

It took ten minutes for us to regain control. My sides ached, and the muscles between my mouth and my ears were rigid from laughing. I unrolled some toilet paper and mopped my eyes.

She peered through the water at the ring again. "I hope it's not an omen."

"Omen?" I asked.

"Omen of how present he will be in your life. Like he won't go away."

"He isn't supposed to go away; he's Thom's dad." I said. "But I dread his self-centeredness, and most of all, that temper."

"What's under that?" she asked. "Even deeper down."

I nodded, and closed my eyes. Resistance still clogged my heart. "I have a responsibility to set boundaries, for both Thom and me."

With that, I pushed up my sleeve, plunged my hand into the bowl, and grabbed the ring. It felt different now, not so sacred after its sojourn in the toilet. Admitting my weakness, hearing it spoken out loud, had girded me. "This sucker has to go," I said. "Now." I wrapped it neatly in toilet paper, set it lightly on the water's surface, and flushed again. I held my breath. The water swirled, whirled, and down it went—ring, paper, and all.

Gone.




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## A Long December

by Kymberlie Ingalls

*Napa Valley*

When I think of how many Decembers have come and gone that left me with a hole in my chest, I can't help now but feel the irony in the blood that I have lost. I mean, here I am walking around with an actual hole in my chest and everyone is still demanding that I be cheerful because of the season.

I've been sick. Not just the sniffles or a slight ache, but the kind of sick that they had to carve out of me with a scalpel. Well wishes have flooded my inbox, arrived by text and decorate my social media. The things that usually keep me down at the holidays took less priority this year, as I went through November with no sleep that was fueled by

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the terror of what loomed ahead. Something had invaded my body and left me weak, afraid, and vulnerable; an infection in my breast that had reached abnormal proportion and grew defiantly in size as the days passed.

As December came around, I couldn't hide from it any longer. I had exhausted all treatment options, and stubbornness couldn't bail me out this time. The pain was agonizing and my flesh was being devoured at a rapid rate. My husband wasn't going to let me die because of an uninsured medical bill we couldn't afford, but he still hadn't been able to convince me to fight. I only wanted to sleep – for good. Once I finally broke the news of my state of illness, everyone insisted that my life was more important than money. Easy for others to say, not easy at all for me to live with.

But if I didn't get to a hospital, I was going to die. My RN met each of our stares with gravity.

Instead I tried to flee from it and found myself staring in a dingy motel mirror. As I lay in a bed that wasn't my own, I knew I very well might not wake in the morning, and I would be alone. The night went on, blacker than any I could remember.

I believe strongly in Karma and I kept wondering which of my evil deeds brought this on, but somewhere in my mind lingered the thought that it's the sum of my existence more than any one part. We were supposed to begin our December with a road trip to the Midwest, and instead we spent it in a hospital room, me being jabbed with needles and spoken to by doctors who spent money we didn't have just by standing there, Roger sleeping restlessly in a boxy, awkward lounge chair that the nurses brought to him. A road trip that had taken us years to save for and months to plan.

I needed to believe in a bigger reason why our world was so completely upended.

Every year like so many others, I allowed the calendar to demand reflection. We need endings to justify starting over. According to Einstein, time is a stubbornly persistent illusion. Sometimes we need a stop in our journey. We need a roadblock because warning signs aren't enough. 'December' is an oft-used stop sign. January affords us a new direction to correct the wrong turns in our lives. I'm quite guilty of blazing down unknown roads without any attention to where I'm going.

It took a hole in my chest to halt me in my path. Perhaps it was to diffuse the temperament between my husband and me at home as holiday tensions mounted. It could even have been the universe's way of changing my

direction. Maybe it was nothing more than a reminder of the good in people. That's why we need bad things to happen – we are entirely too capable of taking good for granted.

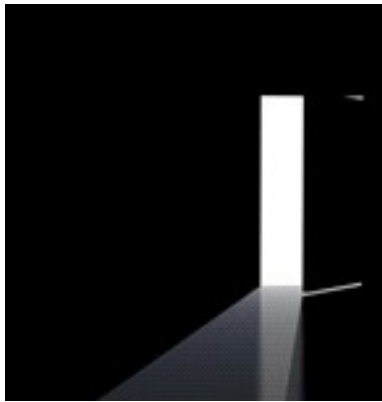
As we lived in that hospital room for five days and nights, I watched Roger age many more years. I saw things in his eyes and heard tones in his voice that I never had before. The most frightening thing I have ever said in my life occurred as they wheeled me to surgery, and he had to let go of my hand: "I'm not ready for my life with you to be over." It didn't mean that I'd left things unsaid or done, it meant that I couldn't comprehend the notion of a life or a death without him.

For a month now, every morning and every evening as the doctors instructed him, Roger examines the ugliness and dresses it for healing. As he pulls out the bloody bandages from inside my breast, I try to read his thoughts, knowing that he is methodical and focused. I wonder what lies beyond that and if he will ever share the truth of it. Over and over he whispers "Deep breaths" to break through the pain of being hurt with a cotton swab and soft gauze by someone I love.

I finally looked in the mirror. He told me not to, but knew that I would anyway before I was ready. Staying in one place for any length of time is a luxury I've never had. I felt a wallop of revulsion at my mangled breast. That moment was followed by another day and another week ... another month. There were all kinds of new regimens and tasks of recovery to distract me, but never quite enough. More things to fail at, more to be afraid of. Too many questions and not enough answers to fill the sleepless, starry voids. The unknown is my enemy, and I will never know precisely the cause of this monstrosity.

It is said that death gives time all of its value. Death is anything but an illusion and in fact is one of the few certainties that we have. If I thought that I was fucked up in the head before, it's time to brace myself for a whole new reality. The hole will seal itself eventually, the scar may be as minimal as the surgeon promised, and one day at a time I will wean myself away from pain medications and ease back into a false positive way of life. The unknown will continue to haunt me, making me question every element that could have caused this and every bit of my future—wondering if I'm about to run into another stop sign. It wakes me at 3:00 a.m. and again at 4:00 and 5:00, but at least I'm not alone when it does.

Deep breaths.





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# Sex in the '60s

by Kathi Hiatt, North State Writers

“No way!” I said, louder than I intended. “You and Frank went all the way?” My sixteen-year-old best friend, Nancy, had just admitted to having first-time sex with her boyfriend.

“Shhh,” she said, closing her bedroom door.

“What was it like?” I whispered, too stunned to wait for confirmation.

It was 1965. Sex talk was whispered only to close girlfriends and, even then, only when there were no adults within earshot. The *dirty deed*, as one friend called it, was a forbidden act reserved for married couples only—unless you were male, then the boys-will-be-boys rule applied.

Growing up in the gender-specific ‘50s and ‘60s defined my father as head of the household and the breadwinner who disappeared into the workforce Monday through Friday. My apron-wearing mother wiped noses, cleaned house, cooked meals, polished our shoes, and shared with me her hard-earned words of wisdom, including, “You just let men think they’re the boss, honey.” My brothers rode bikes with playing cards attached to the spokes, owned BB guns, played Little League, and gathered on the school playground during recess for a game of marbles. My sisters and I cut out paper dolls, ironed my father’s handkerchiefs, watched our brothers play Little League, and wore dresses to school. Girls wearing jeans or any other form of long pants was against the rules, no matter how cold it might be. I knew to address my friends’ parents as Mr. or Mrs. and if I accidentally let a bad (curse) word slip out, I got a finger-thump to the mouth from my mother.

My expected teen role during this era was to earn an A in home economics (I got a C), wear a panty girdle (a ‘60s version of a chastity belt), and to slap boys if they got “fresh.” All of which played an important role in establishing one’s reputation as a *good girl*. For my teenage brothers, it was auto shop, bullying bookworms (nerds), and getting a girl to “first base” (breast fondling). These conquests earned them admiration and locker-room bragging rights as a *bad boy*.

My sex education came via my mother (sorta) when I was thirteen. She lay soaking under the bubbles in the bathtub while I sat on the closed lid of the toilet. Privacy was hard to come by when you lived in a house with five children, your parents, and one bathroom.

“Do you know how women get pregnant?” my mother asked.

“Yes,” I responded, avoiding eye contact by pretending to admire my freshly painted toenails.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked, putting me in the position of having to decide whether or not I could say words like penis, sexual intercourse, and vagina and not get a lip-thump.

“No,” I said, thankful my older brother (when we were eleven and ten) had already explained what *going all the way* meant ... sorta.

“You know how Aunt Norma got pregnant?” my brother had asked, smug over his knowing and my not knowing. “Uncle Harold put his *you know what* in Aunt Norma’s *po-po*. So if you want one baby, you do *it* once; if you want twins you do *it* twice.” I now knew this explanation wasn’t exactly right-on, but for the moment it was close enough.

After a long silence, my mother put a strong emphasis on the word “free” when she said, “Why buy the cow when the milk’s free?” I assured her I understood with a silent nod and made my exit. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

The *True Romance* magazines my mother kept hidden under her bed took my sex education to the next level, and later it was my friend Nancy who, as I mentioned at the start, had first-hand experience. Nancy’s response to my “What was it like?” had been, “Awful. It hurt.” I was mortified. In all of my mother’s romance magazines, there had been vivid descriptions of bliss and dizzying ecstasy.

I made a silent vow to join a convent.

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“I’m never going to *go all the way*,” I told my mother after sharing Nancy’s experience with her.

“It’s only awful if you’re *doing it* in the back seat of a car,”

she said, but I didn’t change my mind about becoming a nun until she followed it up with, “and it doesn’t hurt if you’re married.” I was so relieved!

Because the subject matter was considered taboo, sex education for most of my friends was limited to each other and school rumors. French kissing or occupying a toilet seat after a boy (if it was still warm) was thought to be a pregnancy risk while drinking a can of Mountain Dew before partaking in the “dirty deed” was a sure-fire means of birth control.

Pregnant teens were considered a bad influence on the other girls so until they gave birth, home-schooling was their only educational choice. When the once popular Nancy left her newborn in the care of her parents and returned to school, she was snubbed by the same girls she had been friends with for years. They feared boys would see them as an easy target if they maintained their friendship with a *bad girl*. Sadly, they were correct. High school mindset was that any girl who went *all the way* would thereafter always be *ready*,

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*willing, and able* with anyone, anytime, any place, and so would her friends. When I questioned my mother about the injustice of this ostracism she said, "The only difference between Nancy and the rest of those girls is she got caught and they didn't. If you're truly her friend, you'll stand by her."

When Nancy attempted to re-enroll in her favorite basketball class, she was informed she wouldn't be able to participate in physical education (PE) because she'd had a baby.

"It's too dangerous physically," Coach said.

In spite of her love for the sport, she pretended she didn't care and worked hard to complete the rest of her required coursework. When graduation day came, I put on my cap and gown and went to ceremonies without her. The school principal had called and informed her parents she was a half unit short of meeting graduation requirements. The missing half unit was for PE.

Years later I convinced Nancy to return to the high school to find out what she needed to do in order to get her diploma. Without it, her finding much-needed employment was next to impossible. When the new principal reviewed her file and saw she was lacking a half unit for a PE class, he signed off on her coursework and handed her the diploma. Her *bad girl* status had no doubt been the underlying reason she was barred from graduation ceremonies.

"Not fair," I said to my mother. I was furious. Hiring an attorney and suing for discrimination wasn't an option back then, and even if it had been, it wouldn't have undone what was already done. Mother's hard-earned words of wisdom were limited to: "No one said life is fair."

By the time I entered my twenties, men's hair grew longer and women's skirts grew shorter. Then communes popped up and free love challenged the earlier and stricter codes of sexual behavior—the sexual revolution had begun.

Though my sex education in the early '60s had been limited to romance magazines, my best friend's perils, and my mother's cultural witticisms, I will forever be thankful for all three. Without them not only would I have missed an important lesson on friendship being only a word until you give it meaning, but I would have had to totally rely on my older brother's lack of sexual knowledge and the tittle-tattle of my high school friends to find out how women get pregnant ... OMG!

Years later I counted the months between my oldest sibling's birthday and my parent's anniversary and came up short. Mother never shared with me her own *bad girl* story, but I'm sure "Sex in the 40s" is another story yet to be told.



# Listen to Me

by Bill Baynes

San Francisco Peninsula

listen to me

I have lived so long

and I am lonely

a man undemanded

a creature only doctors honor

I tremble on their metal tables

remember the old woman

the old woolen upholstery

how warm it was

how the room would shine

I belonged there

it was mine

here the antiseptic textures

the corridors, the lines

leaning together

there is never weather

day is never done

even my bowels are cold

let me tell you

I have no control

no hand telling time

that is mine

no one counts

the old man's hours

all I have to say

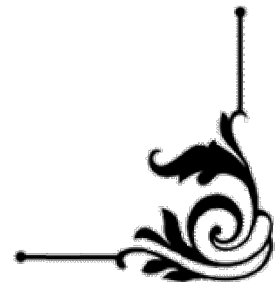
is small, practical

but no one hears

I am shamed

let me tell you

I tremble



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# Even Jesus Dies

by Thomas Crockett  
*San Francisco Peninsula*

Lenny's forgetful about most things that matter. The other day he went to a pre-pay gas station and paid the attendant ten dollars. Then he got in his car and left without pumping the gas. It wasn't until he ran out the next day, on the Belt Parkway, that he'd realized what he'd done. His forgetfulness causes him problems. He forgets doctors' appointments; he forgets to sign his name on checks; he forgets anniversaries and birthdays; he forgets to say hello and goodbye and good morning and good night; he forgets to tell me he loves me, unless, of course, he doesn't.

Lenny likes his forgetfulness because there's a lot he wants to forget. There's a lot I'd like to forget, too, only I'm not as forgetful as him. I remember everything. Even after all these years, I remember every detail. He doesn't want to, and, thus, he doesn't, but I don't believe he's forgotten everything, like he pretends he has. There's no way he could, especially this time of the year, the Christmas holiday, not after what happened. It would be impossible. After all, he didn't have a lobotomy, and he doesn't have Alzheimer's.

It'll be seven years this Christmas day when he discovered a hollow in his heart, and since that discovery he's never been the same. Seven years of shutting down, shutting out, and forgetting; seven years of living in the hollow of his heart, which is not like living at all. Seven years of taking out his playing cards, sitting at the kitchen table, flipping cards, and playing solitaire, no sound escaping his lips, only the silent sucking in and out of breath.

One time I asked him, to strike up conversation, if he ever won at solitaire. He looked at me and said, "I don't play to win. I play to pass the time."

I didn't think he could get any worse than he was seven years ago, beginning on that Christmas morning, but he has. He doesn't even eat, and that's the biggest shame of all. A man should enjoy his food, even if he hates his life. I expect one of these days he'll just disappear, evaporate, like steam from a kettle.

In the meantime, he receives a disability check. He forgets that it comes once a month. He'll ask, "Has the check come today?" And I'll tell him "No, it comes the first of the month." The check isn't much. We can barely pay the bills and buy groceries. But he likes it, anyway, because if there's one thing he hasn't forgotten, it's that he once worked for a living.

I hear a car pull up. I go to the window and look out. It's not Lenny's car. It's dark now, and the streets are icy cold, everything outside frozen, motionless. Even the train on the El track isn't moving. I want to reach out and push it, the way a child pushes a toy train forward on an electric track. I notice the tree in front of our building. It's so old and strong. The other day the winds blew furiously, testing

the tree's endurance. I remember thinking it would be a heart-wrenching sight to see the tree become unrooted and fall in front of my eyes, especially during the Christmas holiday. I needed to know that some things, like that tree, never fall.

I wonder what Lenny's doing out there in the icy, cold world of Brooklyn. He once knew the streets well, when he worked as a mailman. He knew the names and addresses of nearly every house, backwards and forwards. But that was in another time, in another life. He doesn't walk anymore. He only drives. I hope he's not driving on the Verrazano Bridge. He could drive right off the bridge in a state of forgetfulness. He might even do it purposefully. I've thought of it a hundred times, and so has he, I'm sure. He hasn't done it, though. I like to believe it's a sign he wants to live. He just doesn't know how to live. I'm not great at it, either, but I do my best to live, taking my cue from the tree outside the building, holding my roots firm and steady, taking the blows from nature or God, keeping my balance.

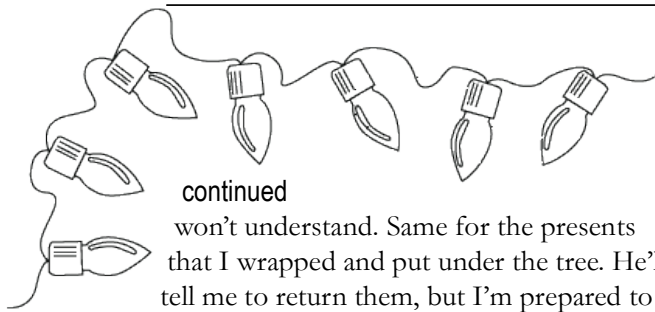
I fix my eyes on the many house decorations outside. I enjoy the blinking lights and candles, the many Santa faces, the reindeer, and the angels blowing trumpets to the glory that is God and heaven. I watch the lights blink: green, red, blue and yellow. I'm suddenly nervous because for the first time in seven years I've decided to celebrate Christmas. I've been busy since the morning, since Lenny left, putting up the tree, which I bought and carried home from a nearby lot. It's a small tree, no more than four feet high and skinny, but I've made it look nice. I dug lights and ornaments out of a closet. I played Christmas music while I hung them on the tree. I also put a string of lights on the banister in the hallway and a wreath on the front door. Under the tree I placed Nativity figurines, the same ones I had had as a child.

I'm nervous because Lenny doesn't know anything about what I've done. He won't like it. He'll say it's a cruel thing to do, and maybe it is, but I'm starved for it. I want the bells, the songs, the lights. I want what other people have. I want what we used to have. I want to remember, and I want to celebrate birth.

I crouch and lift the Jesus figurine from the manger. It feels small and fragile in my hand. I want to cradle it and never let go. Like it or not, Lenny—I've been preparing to say to him when he gets home—Jesus was born on Christmas day, in a stable in Bethlehem, and people all over the world celebrate his birth, and we should as well. It's time, Lenny.

I won't tell him everything. Some things I'll keep to myself, like how I went out earlier and said hello to a Santa in the store. Imagine me talking to a Santa, at my age! He

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won't understand. Same for the presents that I wrapped and put under the tree. He'll tell me to return them, but I'm prepared to tell him, No, I'm not returning them.

The radio plays Christmas carols. I hear "Joy to the World." I make the radio louder. I hear a car outside. I know it's his. I know well the sound the engine makes when it shuts off. It's the same sound Lenny makes when he breathes in bed at night, or when he sits and stares at his food. I hear the car door shut, and I laugh because I'm nervous, and I'm also sure he did something forgetful. Either he's left the keys in the ignition or the headlights on, or if he bought something, like a tool (he's forgotten he hasn't fixed anything in years), he probably won't bring it inside. It will sit in his car for days until he sits on it by accident.

When he opens the door and I hear it shut, that's when I stop laughing. I no longer hear the music. I hear only the creak of the stairs under Lenny's weight. A moment later I hear his voice. He curses, soft at first, then louder. He's ripping the string of lights from the banister. I'm sure he's already ripped the front door wreath to pieces, branch by branch, leaf by leaf. At least he's expressing himself. He's remembering. He knows, with certainty, that it's Christmas.

The doorknob turns, but he doesn't come inside. He rushes back down the stairs, cursing, until the front door opens and slams shut. Now I'm afraid. I hear his car engine start, and I move to the window. The pane is frosted with the winter cold, but my hand is warm. I'm still holding the Jesus figurine.

He pulls out and drives into the darkness. I don't notice the Christmas decorations, only the stillness of the street and the empty El track. I take a drink of Scotch. I haven't had one in two years, but I bought a bottle today, along with the tree and the lights and the wreath. I've worked hard to rehabilitate, but I couldn't help myself. It's the Christmas holiday, I kept telling myself in the store. I want to experience it like I had years ago, when I drank moderately, before I started to drink immoderately, for five years. But that won't happen to me again. I'm planning to have just one drink, I tell myself. Just one for the holiday.

After one sip, I realize I'm going to finish the whole bottle. One sip, and it's already running through my veins like heat waves. I'm on fire. I'm burning. I know I won't stop till I'm fried to a crisp. I like its honesty, its directness. There's no waiting for results. Already it's throwing a blanket of comfort over me. You can't stop something like that.

I turn the radio up even louder. *O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord.* The tree outside is firm and steady, unlike me at the moment, swaying as I am. But I'm alive, and part of being alive is remembering, even if what you're remembering is not good, even if it's the kind of memory that makes your heart bleed so much that you're hardly breathing anymore.

I remember the ringing bell, my hand pressing the buzzer, my hand shaking, my heart beating fast like it is now, because a mother knows; we don't bleed for nothing. We know when the world we worked hard to create is about to be destroyed.

I remember the footsteps on the stairs; many of them, deliberate, and the church bells telling the world it was Christmas, eight o'clock to be exact. Jesus had already been born. The bells tolled, and the people on the stairs walked in time with them, only they weren't coming to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The priest appeared first, then the policeman. Their eyes black with dread, their faces old and fearful. I'm not sure who spoke first. I'm not sure anyone spoke. No one said Merry Christmas or good morning or how are you. No one said anything. Just silence, except for the radio playing behind me.

*Silent Night, Holy Night*

I heard the sweet voices of angels, just like now as the radio plays and I drink another drink, only it's a different Christmas song, and there's no priest or policeman, and no Lenny, just me, alone, as I have been for seven years, except for this friend and companion in my hand, the liquor moving down my throat.

*I sing, O, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.*

And I keep remembering.

The priest opened his mouth. I heard a voice, but it wasn't his. It was Jesus. Not the baby Jesus in the manger who had just been born. The grownup Jesus hanging from the priest's beads; the sad-faced Jesus with the crucified eyes and bleeding temple, talking to me as one who understood the essence of his words.

*Even Jesus dies.*

Then, sound, as if a crash of cymbals:

Lenny behind me, screaming, "Our baby boy, our son!"

He fell to the floor, from which he's never gotten up.

He rocked backwards and forwards, repeating two words.

"Why, God? Why, God?"

I stand near the window again, staring at the blinking lights, sipping yet another drink, and I'm thinking about Lenny. All alone, driving around, somewhere in that cold, dead world, feeling the way he's feeling. I start praying, not for myself. I never pray for myself. I know I'm like the tree. I won't become unrooted. I'm praying for Lenny. I'm wondering where he is and what he's doing, whether he's even alive.

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Wherever he is, he's trying to forget. He doesn't understand why I put up the decorations, and he's probably circling the neighborhood, waiting for me to take everything down, to remove Christmas from the house, as if it will ever remove Christmas from our memories. But I won't do it.

Lenny comes home, more than two hours after he left. He doesn't open the door with a key. He knocks, as if he's a stranger. I hear him moaning on the other side of the door. I open it, and he falls into my arms. Like a baby, he just collapses, sobbing; the way he sobbed on Christmas morning seven years ago; the way he sobbed before he shut down, inside the hollow of his heart, and began practicing forgetfulness. He smells of scotch, as I know I do, and once again, like he did seven years ago, he's repeating "Why, God?"

He says his name for the first time in years. "Jimmy ... our boy ... our life."

He wants to know if he's ever coming home. I tell him he's not; he's lost to us forever, taken from us on Christmas morning, found dead on those icy, cold streets.

"Only sixteen years old," he cries.

"Yes," I say, "only sixteen years old."

We eat food and drink coffee, and afterwards he helps me unwrap a string of white lights. Together we string them on the tree. Then we take pictures out of a box in a closet. The pictures have dust on them. We clean them and cry as we do. The pictures show the three of us, the life we shared as a family for sixteen years. I'm grateful that we had at least that. We're not left empty-handed. Lenny's tears are everywhere, falling on his hands, on the pictures, and on the carpet. I'm proud of those tears.

"Jimmy," he says.

"Yes, I know," I say, "our boy ... our life."

We listen to the radio. "Silent Night" plays.

It's midnight, and Jesus is about to be born. We know his story well. He was born in Bethlehem. We know what happens to him. He grows up into the world.

We kiss, for the first time in years.

Lenny closes his eyes and lays his head on my shoulder.

"Even Jesus dies," I whisper, as the white lights fall like snow from heaven.



## At Second Glance

by Judith Ingram, *Mt. Diablo*

A man is approaching my table so directly, I fear he means to join me. A huff of indignation curls in my throat as I look up from my book, prepared to glare him away.

One good look, however, is enough to melt the glare and puncture the huff into a long sigh of pure appreciation. He sets down his coffee on the table next to mine, and when he bends over to deposit his flight bag on the floor, I take full advantage of the view.

Somewhere in his early thirties like me, he is long and lean, with narrow hips suggesting the reason why Levi Strauss manufactures tight-fitting jeans. On the other end, his dark hair crimps around small, neat ears, and his profile is uncomplicated: straight nose, firm mouth, decisive chin. Sun-darkened skin suggests intimate knowledge of the outdoors.

The man looks around suddenly and catches my stare. Our gazes lock for a moment too long because I cannot look away. His eyes are a blue so deep, I wonder if he's wearing colored contacts. But a man who wears his jeans like that and a chambray shirt opened casually at the throat and rolled back to his elbows wouldn't bother with pretense. Everything about this stranger is unaffected and disturbingly male.

I force my gaze back to my book as heat climbs my neck. The man seats himself but turns to look at me once more before he pulls out his cell phone and picks up his coffee. A glance at my watch tells me I have forty minutes to kill before I can board my plane for the flight home.

I stare fixedly at my book but keep watch with my peripheral vision. I wonder if the stranger is booked on my flight to San Francisco. I wonder how long he plans to sit in this coffee bar. I wonder how he smells up close.

I wonder if the hot patches in my cheeks will be permanent.

I absently touch my hair and encounter the unfamiliar fluff that is more Lynette's style than mine. How she would be laughing at me now: "Oh, Annie, you're such a prude! If the man turns you on, just trap him in the bathroom and find out what's inside those interesting jeans!"

Lynette always talks like the characters in her torrid novels, one of which currently tops the bestsellers list. I hate to think I'm jealous of my younger sister's success. But envy must have played a part in why I agreed to this ridiculous makeover.

Born eleven months apart, we were so alike as children that we shared the same clothes, and in some ways the same identity, until Lynette hit puberty. I was in seventh grade when people stopped mistaking us for twins and boys started tripping over their feet around her. From then on, it seemed as if Lynette and I shared a finite space in the world—as her life expanded, mine contracted. The more

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popular she became, the more invisible I felt. When Lynette found her wings and flew, I walked closer to the ground.

Visiting her in New York these past two weeks seemed to shrink my world even further. Caught in her whirlwind of TV spots and publicity parties, my sensible life at home shriveled into a pallid stereotype not unlike the pathetic spinsters in Lynette's stories. When she offered to glamorize me as a lark, I shamelessly said yes. By the end of my visit, my transformation was so complete, I could have posed for Lynette's photo on the back of her forthcoming bodice-ripper.

The man at the next table has finished his coffee. He stands and reaches for his flight bag. With eyes still trained on my book, I calculate the moment when I can safely look up and watch him go. A little sigh of regret is already gathering in my chest.

"Excuse me." He steps closer to my table and leans forward. "Sorry to bother you, but aren't you Annie Cullen?"

The voice is deep, a man's voice. I look up into those blue eyes and bronzed face, unable to place him.

And then he smiles.

I am sitting on one of those long steel benches that fold out from the wall to convert our multipurpose room into a cafeteria. The room echoes with young voices and smells like old milk cartons, overripe bananas, and playground sweat.

From my comfortable knot of fifth-grade girlfriends, I keep glancing at the far corner of the room, at a boy who sits alone, huddled inside an old camouflage jacket everyone knows came from the Salvation Army store. Kevin Mainfield is one of "those" kids. He lives with his father in a rental house at the end of Bordeaux Street, where decent kids aren't allowed to play.

No one seems to notice that Kevin never eats lunch. He brings a lunch box like everyone else, but instead of a sandwich, he pulls out action figures and stages his own little war while kids around him laugh and throw food behind the teacher's back.

For some reason, today the sight of Kevin's too-big camouflage jacket takes away my appetite. I stare at his bent, dark head and suddenly realize what I must do.

Pulling on my coat, I ask permission to go to the girls' bathroom. That way, I can slip out one door and reenter by the door closest to Kevin without my friends noticing.

Kevin is tromping one soldier to death with another when I slip onto the bench next to him and start pulling my lunch from my coat pockets: a cheese sandwich, a cluster of green grapes, a chocolate chip cookie, a stick of Juicy Fruit

gum. Kevin shrinks into his jacket a little and stares suspiciously at my offerings.

"What're you doing?"

I toss my head and say in my mother's voice, "You need some meat on your bones."

His eyes are the deepest blue I've ever seen. "I don't need your lunch. I ate a big breakfast."

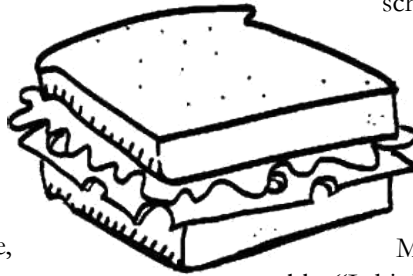
Even I know it's a lie. "Oh? Well, my mom went to a lot of trouble making this sandwich, but I think I have the flu or something, so you'd be doing me a huge favor if you ... if you could ... just—" He's studying me with an intensity that pulls out a different string of words: "Please take it. Please ... Kevin."

I've never called him by his name before. The word feels soft on my lips and as intimate as a kiss. His blue eyes widen a little, as if he's thinking the same thing.

I break away from his stare and swallow. "I have to go." I scoot off the bench and duck out the door.

Two days later, I'm walking with my friends. We turn a corner, and there's Kevin. We give him the usual wide berth, but he catches my eye, tilts his head like a bird, and smiles. I look away, pretending I don't see his smile, and hurry to keep step with my friends.

The following week, I'm told that Kevin has left school and moved away.



Twenty-year-old shame stokes a fire that sets my cheeks flaming and immobilizes my tongue. I stare up at this grown man in helpless silence. His smile slips a little.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm Kevin

Mainfield." He extends his hand across the table. "I think you must be Lynette Cullen. Am I right? I was a year ahead of you in school, in your sister's class."

I take his hand and feel calluses across his palm. I notice his fingernails are trim and clean; his grip is sure.

*Say something, you idiot!* Lynette's voice shrills in my head.

"Kevin. Of course. How are you?"

"I'm good."

*I'll bet you are, honey.* Lynette's voice won't stop.

"Okay if I sit?" He pulls out a chair and I nod my assent, whisking away my coffee cup, shoving aside my book. He smiles at me again, and my heart stutters. It's okay, I tell myself. You look good. You look like Lynette.

"So, Kevin." My voice is bright. "What brings you to New York?"

"Business. I'm on my way to Austin."

"Is that where you live?"

He shakes his head. "Still in California. I own a construction company." He rubs his jaw and pins me with a direct look. "But enough about me. I understand you're famous, Lynette."

I take a moment and answer carefully. "Lynette Cullen books are selling well."

"I saw you on TV. Is it true, they're making your book into a movie?"

I laugh Lynette's effervescent laugh. "Seems so. Have you read it?"

"Nah. I still have trouble sounding out the big words."

I pull a face. "I wouldn't worry. Readers don't buy Lynette Cullen books to improve their minds." Kevin dips an eyebrow, and I chatter on. "It's all about the scenes. You know, the ones you dog-eared as a kid and hoped your mother wouldn't find."

He grins and folds his hands across his stomach, regarding me. "Is that so?" he says. "I guess I'll have to buy a Lynette Cullen book and see what all the fuss is about."

*Well, come on up to New York, honey. You can help me do some research.* Lynette's voice is teasing me again.

Stop it, Lynette.

*Your turn, Annie. Say it to him.*

Yeah, in your dreams.

*You've got nothing to lose. Go on, Annie. Say it.*

I can't. Lynette—

*Say it!*

I glance at Kevin and clear my throat. "If you ever get back up to New York, Kevin ..." I trail off. Kevin waits. "It might be fun ... that is, you could, maybe, help me research my next book."

Heat floods my face. Kevin looks puzzled, and then he blinks. I look away, curling my toes inside my shoes until they ache. No one speaks for a moment.

"Well, Lynette," Kevin says at last. "That's a nice offer."

I can't answer him but silently vow to murder Lynette the next time I see her.

Kevin regards me in silence. I squirm a little on my chair and glance around at the other customers.

At length, Kevin nods toward the boarding pass protruding from my book. "San Francisco," he says. "Does your sister still live out there?" He rests his gaze on my face and says softly, "Is she married, with a family?"

My heart beats faster. "No, never married. Our mother had a stroke two years ago, and she needed full-time care. And there was all that nurse's training."

"Annie trained as a nurse?" I nod, and Kevin nods back. "That fits. She always had a generous heart." He looks away from me, across the coffee bar. "She probably never told anyone, but once she gave me her lunch. We were just kids, and she risked a lot by even talking to me."

For a moment, I stop breathing, not wanting to miss a word.

"That was just before they sent my old man to prison and put me in foster care." He acknowledges my look with a shrug. "It turned out okay. They were nice folks." He traces

the edge of the table with his finger. "I used to think about looking her up and buying her a steak dinner. To tell her I was grateful. Kindness didn't come my way very often in those days."

He looks up at me with solemn blue eyes. We regard each other for a long moment, and my heart stretches with the silence. I swallow and clear my throat, trying to break the spell before I cry.

Kevin checks his phone and immediately pushes back his chair. "I didn't realize the time," he says. "I've got barely ten minutes to buy some gum and get myself to the gate." He adds, "I always chew gum to keep my ears open during takeoff. Juicy Fruit."

"Me too." I sweep my permed hair off my forehead and try for a light laugh. "Juicy Fruit."

"Well, that's one more thing we have in common."

He tilts his head like a bird and smiles at me. I smile back.

"Listen," he says as he takes a business card from his pocket. "Next time you're in the Bay Area on a book tour or whatever, give me a call." He's writing on the back of the card. With his head so close, I can see gray threads mingling with his dark curls. He smells like soap and peppermint. I close my eyes, making the moment into a memory.

"Here," he says at last. He lays the card on the table in front of me and stands up. "I've written my personal cell number on the back."

Once again, he extends his hand. "It's been a pleasure."

*Tell him, you idiot!* This time it's my voice, not Lynette's. *Right now, before it's too late!*

I take his hand and smile, but my jaw trembles.

"Goodbye," Kevin says. He pauses, his gaze lingering on my face for a moment, his blue eyes searching. He frowns slightly and furrows his brow. Then he shrugs and releases my hand. He picks up his flight bag and taps the table beside his business card. "Give me a call," he says.

With a friendly nod, he turns and walks away. I watch him until the crowd swallows him, but he doesn't look back.

Silken threads of sweetness and regret twist together in my chest. I pull my gaze from the spot where his chambray shirt became indistinguishable from the other colors and look down at the business card lying before me on the table. Mainfield Construction. His company's address is less than fifty miles from our hometown.

Strange to think of him living and working so close to me all these years. To think we might have crossed paths without giving each other a second glance.

I turn the card over. Beneath his cell phone number, he has written a note. I blink away the mist in my eyes so I can read it: *You've got my number. Give me a call when you're ready. I still owe you a steak dinner. Kevin.*



# My Hapless Husband

by Brenda Hill, *Inland Empire*

Two years after my husband retired, I staggered out of bed, eyed him sitting at the kitchen table, and decided to kill him.

"Good morning," he almost sang, looking up from his paperback with his usual smile.

Sloshing coffee into my cup, I didn't answer, didn't even glance at his smiling face. I was afraid I'd throw the hot coffee at him.

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## A Trail of Papa Crackers on the Beach

by Judy Taylor, *Fremont Area Writers*



"Dig here," Papa said.  
Shovels scraped deep  
into pebbly sand,  
dirty scalloped nuggets  
filled buckets;  
we dreamt  
of steaming shells  
and hot pools of butter.



Fat berries snatched  
from vine-laced nests,  
sugar-iced on melting scoops:  
Papa's favorite dessert.



Early morning fog  
weeps across the beach,  
water's lacy edge  
dabs at the sand  
wiping away its tears,  
bleached oyster shells  
lay agape on gravel graveyards,  
as moldering air smothers  
sweet blackberries' bouquet.

Onto this landscape  
so unfamiliar, yet the same,  
the tide's edge  
rushes up to console me  
as I pour Papa's ashes  
into the sound.



How could anyone be so bright and cheerful at six in the morning?

And why didn't he sleep late at least one time? Any sane person who didn't have to get up would be snuggled in a warm bed with the covers pulled up to their chin. If I didn't have to meet a printing deadline for our town's newspaper, I'd certainly be in bed.

When we were married twenty-four years ago, I'd adored him. As a systems analyst for large companies in the Midwest, Nick traveled several days each month, and when he returned home, we played like newlyweds. I'd never been so happy.

"Want some breakfast?" he asked, rummaging in the fridge for eggs, and bread to toast. "I'll scramble an extra egg if you want," he added. "I know you're going to have a long day."

Not ready to talk and certainly not able to stomach food so early, I shook my head and managed a grunt.

"You should think about getting to bed a little earlier," he said, breaking eggs into a bowl and whipping them with a fork. "Those late night writing sessions take their toll."

I couldn't take it any longer, so, sitting at the table with my coffee, I planned his demise.

How could I do him in? I eyed his sturdy physique as he moved around the kitchen, popping bread into the toaster and dropping a pat of butter in the skillet. At almost six and a half feet, he could trace his lineage nearly to the Vikings. Plopping on his favorite Western hat and donning his leather vest and gloves, he loved to roam the woods surrounding our northern Minnesota property, building fences to keep the deer out of the garden and chopping wood for our fireplace. Even at fifty-eight, he could outwork anyone, including my younger Southern cousins.

So what could I do? I wasn't handy with guns, and with all the forensic technology, I wouldn't dare try poison. Perhaps I could climb a tree and jump him as he strolled below me. But then what? I didn't like all the blood and gore from knives, so I couldn't stab him.

When we were first married, we'd made a deal: I loved fresh fish, but when Nick caught a mess of crappies or perch from the lake, he'd clean them and I'd gladly cook them any way he wished. The same deal applied when he went hunting for game. Raised in Atlanta, I believed meat should come in nice little packages, prettily wrapped in cellophane. But Nick handed me fresh raw venison and expected me to cook it. Even though I had to quickly disguise it by rolling it in flour, I got the job done, and now I'm considered one of the best cooks in the county.

continued



"You have that look in your eye," Nick said, sitting down with his full plate, his hazel eyes full of laughter. "What foul deeds are you planning now? Thinking of dumping the printing press into the lake?"

I wanted to slug him. Years ago, not long after we'd settled into the house on the outskirts of Nick's small hometown, we decided that I wouldn't work full time. That was fine with me—I wanted the freedom to be home when he had some time off. To help the days pass while he was away, I'd tried gardening, but raised in an urban condominium, I pulled the vegetables as well as the weeds. Next was sewing, and several of my new friends tried to help me, but I hopelessly tangled every strand of thread I touched. Thinking it would help, Nick even bought a new sewing machine, but I stitched his fly to his back pocket. After several more failed attempts, I waited until two in the morning, then, guided by the full moon, loaded the machine in the back of the Blazer and dumped it into the lake.

When I realized that our town, population 735, didn't have its own newspaper, relying instead on the one from the county seat almost thirty miles away, I started one. At first, there wasn't much to report, but, determined to find something, I started interviewing local residents about their lives. I was surprised to learn that we had a retired school music director as a neighbor, so after I badgered him for a couple of years, he finally gave in and held auditions for a local band. Now, thanks to the local carpenters, we have a bandstand by the lake, and once a week in the summer, our town, as well as our neighbors, are treated to some good, old-fashioned concerts. The irregular lot of musicians, ranging from seniors to middle school children, may not be ready for the New York Philharmonic Symphony, but when they strike up "The Stars and Stripes Forever" in honor of our armed forces, they bring everyone to their feet in pride.

After two more cups of coffee, I felt I could face my makeshift newsroom in the garage. Just as I stood, Nick, who had finished his breakfast and was back to reading his paperback, grabbed my arm and pulled me onto his lap. Just to hang on, of course, I slipped my arms around his neck. He gave me a nice kiss, but I was in no mood to dally. Not before dawn even cracked and I had several pages of print to turn into a newspaper.

"I don't have time to play this morning."

"I happened to know you coerced my sister and several neighbors into helping," he said. "The threat of no more home-baked peach pies is mighty powerful around here.

Perhaps I could get by  
with poison after all. . .  
I'd have to do some  
research.

Besides, it's our anniversary and I have something to show you."

Thank God it was summer, because he pulled me out the back door and down the graveled lane toward the lake.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." I anxiously peered through the dark woods for black bear. Would they be out this early? Probably not. Any sane living thing would still be sleeping.

"Where are we going?" I asked, picking my way over the gravel. I eyed my husband, forging on ahead. The inconsideration of that man was beyond belief. Maybe I could get by with poison after all. Perhaps some vile potion smeared on his toothbrush. I'd have to do some research.

As we neared the lake, I could smell the water, a slight fishy smell mixed with the scent of moist earth and rotting vegetation. Frogs bellowed in the pinking dawn.

When moving to the area, I wasn't sure I'd like living so close to nature. A lake instead of a shopping mall? And where were the fast-food restaurants? But, I grew to love the water, adored spending a lazy afternoon in our motorboat, drifting along with my line cast for fish. I'd even learned to bait my own hook. I'd had to, because my boorish husband told me very early that if I wanted to fish, I had to learn to do everything by myself. Grudgingly, I did so, and now I could hold my own with the best fisherman.

The only problem was my porcelain skin. Even underneath a wide-brimmed hat and long sleeves, my skin burned and peeled. While I loved our fourteen-foot motorboat, I drooled over the big pontoons, the flat-bottom boats that floated on the water like royal yachts. Each time one drifted regally by, I lusted after the canopy-shaded deck. Some of the floating palaces even included iceboxes and gas grills. Oh, what an extravagance, but one I'd happily indulge. If my husband had any regard for my skin, he'd make sure we had one. He was just worried that I'd go more often and catch more fish. Then he, the big game hunter, would wither in shame.

"Just a few more feet," Nick said, picking up the pace. I almost stumbled trying to keep up with him. A knife. That's what I'd use. I'd watched him dress fresh deer, and the first thing he did was hang it from a tree. That's what I could do. I'd set a trap and laugh as he swung upside down.

We rounded the bend and arrived at the boat launch, the single lamppost burning through the morning fog. But my eyes were drawn to a beautiful twenty-five-foot pontoon, a big, silky red bow tied to one of the canopy's supporting beams, floating on the water next to our motorboat. Strung across the deck was a sign that said, "Happy Anniversary!"

Before climbing aboard, I threw my arms around my grinning husband and gave him a big kiss.

He wasn't so hapless after all. He'd live another day.



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# The Pink Porcelain Jar

by Kathi Hiatt, North State Writers

*Love and to cherish, after death does its part...*

The scraped skin on her knuckles throbbed. The brass latch on the window suffered from decades of use and was refusing to free itself from its rusty enclosure. Not willing to accept defeat, she ignored the pain and pressed harder. Her persistence paid off—the latch snapped open. She gave the wooden encasement a slight push. Warm rays of sunshine surged through the open shutters and shimmered across the wooden slats, covering the floor. Ignoring her wounded fingers, she settled into the comfort of her oak rocking chair and laid the worn book she'd been reading across her lap. She inhaled. The thick fragrance of the fresh apricots hanging from a nearby tree curled into her nostrils. She exhaled slowly yielding to the aroma as it slid down the back of her throat.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the violet afghan hanging on the back of her rocker. Her thoughts wandering away from the storyline of the now-closed book. The bride and sailor dolls on top of the vanity still lay in the intimate position he had placed them in. A pile of tiny clothing lay next to them. *He's so deliciously male* she ruminated, smiling inwardly as she recalled her feeble attempt to scold him for his mischief. Her struggle to smother the giggle hidden behind the tips of her fingers had failed miserably and once again she fell victim to the twinkle in his eyes. Relieved he was forgiven, he tucked a strand of her long dark hair behind her ear and placed an apologetic kiss on her cheek. "I'll fix us some tea," he said and escaped through the bedroom door.

Prior to their first encounter, she had not believed in love at first sight. She remembered how time was nipping at her heels after her boss made it clear his noon deadline was not negotiable. Pounding away on the keys of the manual typewriter, she couldn't afford the time it took to look up when her office door swung open.

He had stood silent for several seconds before finding his way to the front of her desk then waited for several more seconds before attempting to get her attention with an exaggerated throat clearing. She continued typing. When he cleared his throat a second time, and it too failed to divert her from her task, he plopped down into the client's chair next to her desk—uninvited. Irritated at his arrogant and continued attempts to interrupt her, she pretended the *click, click* of the typewriter's keys were drowning out his deliberate noises. But, persistent in his refusal to be ignored, he leaned forward and stretched his long body across one corner of her desk. "Please don't think I'm trying to impress

you," he said in a loud whisper and feigning secrecy, "but I'm really Superman."

Her shoulders stiffened and the heat of a deep blush tiptoed up her cheeks. Indignant over his having made her face change color, she was even more determined to not let him impede the rhythm of her keystrokes. Over the click of the keys and mirroring his feigned secrecy, she had whispered back, "So why are you still sitting there? Go save Lois!"

Proud of her smug retort and relieved the next keystroke was the final keystroke, she swiveled her chair around, readying herself for a confrontation. The corners of his mouth quivered, then broke into the titanic smile he was so desperately trying to hide. Thick lashes blinked back a mischievous glimmer, and she couldn't help but notice the tiny scar disrupting one of his otherwise perfect eyebrows. Faded remnants of a few freckles dotted the bridge of his nose, accenting the ruddy undertones of a tropical complexion. She'd often heard it said, *It's the uniform that makes the man*. In this case, however, she found the reverse to be true. The moments that followed had seemed almost surreal. They both laughed as his hand reached out to touch hers in the introduction. Their fingers tightened around each other in a firm grasp. Her eyes met his and an exhilarating shock penetrated her. Flushed and shaken, she knew she had just found her soul mate.

Her reminiscent thoughts filled her with affection. She smiled remembering the night before and his attempt to sing her an old Irish lullaby when she was unable to fall asleep. "Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral," she sang to the empty bedroom, mimicking his pitch-poor lyrics. She didn't try to suppress the giggle that followed. "Every day I fall deeper in love with you," she said. Her words echoed off the bedroom walls, making her sudden outburst seem silly, but she knew in her heart-of-hearts God was thinking of her when he created him.

Ignoring the sullied dolls, she focused in admiration on their Victorian bedroom. The four-poster bed hosted a satin quilt with an intricately laced canopy. A treasure trove of childhood memories and the many gifts they exchanged filled the room. A collection of shot glasses from their worldwide travels, an assortment of seashells, and an inscribed silver jewelry box were displayed on a shelf tucked in one corner. A confederate sword she had restored for him for his birthday hung on the wall over his dresser. Next to it, a framed portrait of her in a black lacy negligée.

continued

She paused for a second to reflect on the pink porcelain jar sitting on the small cherrywood table next to her oak rocker. The jar had been part of an inheritance, bequeathed to her by a wealthy great-aunt who had played an intricate part in her upbringing. She closed her eyes, remembering the sweet fragrance of the spices her great-aunt had stored in the porcelain container. She touched the side of her nose lightly and invited the memory of the warm kitchen to fill her senses with the sugary aroma of tea with honey and slices of bread, fresh from the oven and spread with peach butter. She now used the jar as a secret holding place for a not-so-discreet picture she had taken of him while he slept and a paper cigar band he had once placed on her finger as a promise for the years to come. She knew her great-aunt would not have approved and would most likely have thought of her as ridiculous and wicked. But she, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, was not averse to temptation.

The vision of her great-aunt faded with the smell of hot tea and the soft pad of his bare feet coming down the carpeted hallway. She marveled at how his presence still made her heart swell. Her cheeks flushed a bright red as she envisioned her long slender fingers running down the backside of his strong, delectable physique. He used one shoulder to nudge the door open. She felt the familiar dampness of her palms and the lack of breath his presence so often stole from her.

"Evening ma'am. It's time for your meds," he announced as he entered the room.

Startled, she stared in stunned silence at the stranger standing before her. A green short-sleeve tunic top with matching drawstring pants covered his lanky body. Ink pens protruded from a breast pocket, and a plastic card was attached to a cord hanging around his neck. "Who keeps opening that dang window?" he asked, speaking more to himself than to her.

He laid the plastic tray he was carrying on the chrome table sitting next to her wheelchair. Dizzy with confusion, her panic-stricken eyes darted around a room which just moments earlier had been filled with all of the things she had held dear to her since childhood. Everything had somehow changed, and her confusion moved to fear as she searched for something familiar in the sterile and sparsely furnished room. In place of her lace-covered canopy bed was a clean but colorless spread neatly draped over a mattress hoisted on top of a shiny metal frame. Her lap where her worn book had lain was now empty. She stared at the chrome table which just moments earlier had been cherrywood. It now held the plastic tray littered with blue and white pills instead of her much loved pink porcelain jar.

"Can't have you freezing your buns off," he teased with an exaggerated shiver. He leaned out and into the frigid night air, brushed the falling snow off the ledge and pulled

the window shut. With a quick snap, he locked it into place, then looked down at her with a sad smile. "I'd be willing to bet you were a real babe in your younger days," he said, eyeing her curiously as she sat unresponsive and motionless. Her head leaned against the back of the wheelchair as if the neck supporting it was too frail to hold it upright. Loose strands of her thinning silver hair hung around sunken cheeks, and deep creases ran across her forehead and down the sides of her face. Tiny lines defined her pale lips and dozens more burst from the corners of the vacant blue eyes that remained transfixed on the now-closed window. He was sure she was oblivious to his presence.

With his index finger and thumb, he gently pried her thin lips open before placing two blue pills on her tongue. He tilted her head back, and she swallowed with the water he held to her lips. He patted her on the shoulder, then picked up the plastic tray, glancing back one last time before closing the door behind him.

With the click of the shut door, she wrapped her fingers around the arms of her wheelchair and pushed herself upward. An agonizing pain shot through her back and down both legs, but she took no notice of her body's yearning to cry out. She closed her eyes for a moment and waited for the room to stop spinning then shuffled to the closed window. After a brief struggle, the brass latch snapped open and she gave the wooden encasement a slight push. Warm rays of sunshine surged through the open shutters and shimmered across the pink porcelain jar sitting on the cherrywood table.

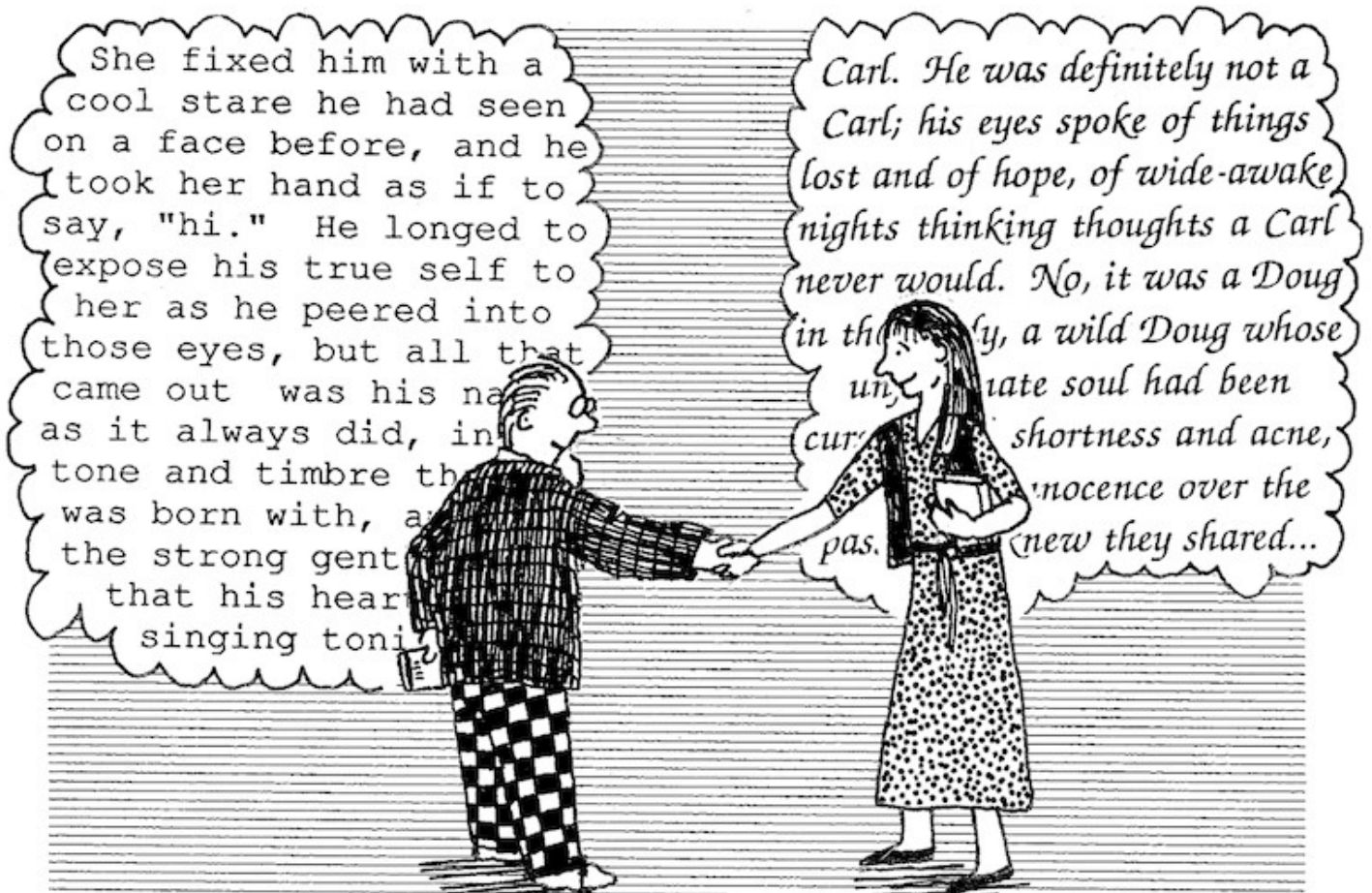
She reclaimed the comfort of her oak rocker and opened her worn book, stealing a glance at the closed door before turning the page. *He'll more than likely forget I take two sugars in my tea, not one.* She smiled and tucked a loose strand of her dark hair behind one ear. Happy in her thoughts, she used the tips of her toes to push the rocker back each time it rolled forward. An old Irish lullaby found its way into her head and she began to sing "Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral"....



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# When Writers Meet

by Kristen Caven, Berkeley



## You've Reached The End—Now What?

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