

# The New Orphic Review

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We at *The New Orphic Review* are happy to announce that “Piano Boy” by M.A. Fox (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2013) and “Seal-skin” by Tyler Keevil (Vol. 16, No. 2, 2013) have been selected for inclusion in *Journey Prize Stories 26*.

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[www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen](http://www3.telus.net/neworphicpublishers-hekkanen)

ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 46 books. The most recent are *I'm Not You*, *Heretic Hill*, *Flesh and Spirit: The Rasputin*, *Meditations*, *All Night Gas Bar*, *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow*, *Of a Fire Beyond the Hills*, *Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G. Hekkanen* is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* and *Contemporary Authors* in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*.

## When Lit Happens

### Ernest Hekkanen

IN THE 2014 spring issue of *The New Orphic Review*, I published an editorial entitled “e-Hobbyists in the Land of e-Literature,” an article that was later reprinted on Alan Twigg's online platform, *BC BookLook*. My editorial included some disparaging remarks about e-publishing. Soon afterward, although this might be mere coincidence, websites began to spring up offering downloadable e-versions of my books, without so much as asking my permission. During the same week, Anita Chong contacted me by email to say that M.A. Fox's “Piano Boy” and Tyler Keevil's “Sealskin” had been selected for *Journey Prize Stories 26*. All of this occurred in late April, a few days before Margrith and I were scheduled to fly to Switzerland.

Travel is supposed to refresh one. One is supposed to return home with an expanded view of the world, and while it was a nice trip, and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, I couldn't seem to shake the resulting jet lag upon returning to Nelson. Although I did resume editing a book of mine, I found it so difficult to concentrate I ended up distracting myself with yard work and getting in shape to re-roof our garage. By now, it was late May. A friend of ours, Jane Merks, asked Margrith and I if we'd consider letting her use our yard for an art project during International Yarn Bombing Week. Because we advertise our home as the New Orphic Gallery, we considered it a good fit, at the time.

On June 3rd, at 9:30 in the morning, Jane and her husband, Peter Bartl, arrived at our house, and the yard bombing began. I became a little too zealous with my assistance. I ascended a five-foot-tall stepladder, the better to attach a long garland of doilies to the limb of a cedar tree in the corner of our front yard; the stepladder tipped, I grabbed a nearby branch, the branch swung me gracefully down and slammed my back against the trunk of the tree. At first, I thought the blow had merely knocked the

wind out of my lungs. After five minutes spent trying to catch my breath, and in a great deal of pain, I let Peter drive me to the hospital.

I arrived in character, bent severely to the right, as though trying to prevent my guts from spilling out of my side, hardly able to suck air down into my lungs. The benefits derived from arriving in character were immediate. I was ushered in through the automatic sliding doors to the triage nurse's station, and forthwith sent to a bed. However, I was unable to lie or sit down, because I couldn't breathe in either of those positions. After a healthy dose of intravenous morphine, my ribs began to relax enough for me to breathe in a somewhat normal fashion. On the chart on the wall, I became known as "Hekkanen: Chest Trauma." Further examination disclosed that I had broken some ribs and sustained a small puncture to my right lung. I spent the next eight nights sleeping upright in a chair, and a further week sleeping split shift on my back. Even now, six weeks later, I find it difficult to lie on either side; I get the feeling my ribcage might collapse. But I have started jogging again. I restrict myself to distances no greater than three kilometers, because that's about all the jostling I can endure, for the time being.

Needless to say, I have yet to re-roof the garage, and although I have spent some time working on a couple of short stories, I've wasted more time than I've made good use of, and maybe that's why I allowed myself to become so annoyed by the websites offering downloadable e-versions of my books. The websites made me feel as though I had become deceased, as though I had entered the public domain before my rightful time. I emailed Access Copyright to find out what to do about these sites. I was told to click on their DMCA tabs and to issue "take-down" notices to the effect that the sites were infringing on my copyright material. Some of the anonymous individuals hosting these sites complied with my request, but others didn't. Some suggested that third parties were responsible for offering the downloads and, therefore, they couldn't act upon my request, even though the sites invariably led to the same major offender, Download Genius, which contends it is offering a service mechanism, and nothing more.

I'm not a well-known, sought-after writer. Very few bookstores carry my books. Libraries seem to be increasingly hesitant to stock them, as well. However, collecting libraries such as Harvard and Yale have purchased just about everything I've written. I surmise that my books are being scanned by such libraries, and are then being converted into downloadable e-books. I suspect this is being done under the rubric of "fair use". The interpretation of "fair use" has been made so broad by government and the courts, universities now assume they can infringe on an author's copyright in any manner they deem desirable, without paying a fee, let alone a fine. The information age has become the age of legalized piracy, it would seem.

## *The New Orphic Review*

Enough grumpiness! People continue to butcher people all around the world, and trifling matters that have to do with copyright infringement must be viewed in the greater context of what is going on around the globe. Given the violent flux that now grips the Ukraine, the Middle East and Africa, it's amazing that writers carry on with the rather inconsequential act of concocting fiction. Why do we engage in this activity? Are we simply attempting to distract ourselves? Is it our way of making sense of chaos? Is it an act of defiance? Is it a form of nostalgia? Perhaps some of the enclosed stories will point to possible answers.

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## All the Ruins at Leptis Magna

Yasser El-Sayed

SAMMY HAD HEARD the commotion. “It’s Uncle Aiman,” he shouted as he bolted down the stairs from his room. He was still half-dressed in his third-grade soccer league outfit, one shoe absent, the other with laces dangling. He threw himself at Aiman and wrapped his arms and legs around him. His usual shyness evaporated in the excitement of his uncle’s surprise visit.

“My little man,” murmured Aiman, pressing his face against Sammy’s. For a moment the two of them were locked together rocking back and forth.

Soraya rushed down the front steps, the cotton dress she was wearing tugging against her hips in a sudden breeze. Aiman carried Sammy right up to her, and the three of them hugged and laughed in a tight huddle.

“I’ll be right down,” I called from where I stood on the second floor balcony. But I didn’t move. It was twilight and the sun had set like a hemorrhage on the water. Aiman waved up at me, his face beaming. My one and only brother, finally home again.

\*\*\*

Soraya left Aiman out in the driveway with our boy. She rushed indoors, the heels of her shoes a rapid staccato on the marble floors. “Draw back the curtains, Maher,” she said when I appeared in the dining room.

I pulled the tasselled cord, revealing the familiar span of French windows, and beyond that the low-flung Tripoli skyline of limestone and minarets, fading into the dusk.

“Aiman,” Soraya said as he walked into the house. “What do you think? Do you still love it?”

“I have missed it,” said Aiman, dropping his suitcase in the adjoining hall, standing with arms akimbo as he admired the view from across the room. “Your mother’s vision lives on.” He looked relaxed, trim in pleated black slacks and a starched white shirt, sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. I walked up to him and we hugged for a long time. Sammy stayed close, gazing up at his uncle.

Soraya nodded slowly. The house was my wife’s inheritance. Its vaulted ceilings, guest bedrooms and sweeping verandah facing the coastline had

been conceived by her late mother for an expatriate social life, which had ceased to exist. Francelina chose its location overlooking the city's Mediterranean coastline, and convinced Soraya's father (like mine, an Arab from Tripoli) to import the marble from her native Italy. Cool in the summer, the chill and damp of even the mildest winters made the house and its marbled halls feel like an ice palace.

Wistfully, Soraya said, "Both our mothers may have been stuck in this desert, but Milan, San Francisco, those cities were in their blood." She held herself close, and her body framed in the darkening glass seemed a world away from me.

"They are all gone now, Soraya," Aiman said softly.

Our mother was American. The two families had been close since we were children. "My mother was happy here," I said abruptly.

I changed the subject and suggested we eat as usual in the kitchen. Its compactness and lingering fragrance of cumin and coriander were a comfort, also a reminder of the smaller house my brother and I grew up in, and which we had sold long since to help keep our company afloat.

"Oh, Maher," Soraya said. "We haven't seen Aiman in over a year. Let's do something special for once."

"Yeah, Maher. One nice thing for your brother!" said Aiman, with mock grievance.

Soraya called out to Sammy to clean up for dinner.

"Dad, please, let's keep Mom happy tonight!" Sammy exclaimed, tugging on my sleeve.

Aiman laughed and put an arm around Sammy. "I better go wash too, Sammy, before your mother disowns all of us."

\*\*\*

In the kitchen I sliced the crude local version of French bread from the bakery down the road, as Soraya moved briskly between the kitchen and dining room. She laid out our best silver platter with the simple roasted chicken we had planned to eat. It was still steaming from the oven, and surprisingly regal on its bed of parsley potatoes. Also tabouleh and hummus spooned into her mother's finest china, and a ceramic bowl brimming over with an olive oil soaked concoction—cucumbers, onions, olives, and crumbled goat cheese and a sprinkling of capers.

"Like old times," I said, the aromas of the food she had prepared saturating my senses. I followed Soraya into the dining room and tried to visualize a seating arrangement which didn't involve me alone at the head of the oversized dining table presiding over an expanse of teak.

"Old times," Soraya muttered. She took the plates from my hand and arranged all of them in a cluster at the far end of the table nearest the window, perfect solution. "He said he was checking on the distribution center in Waddan and decided to stop by, which doesn't make a lot of sense."



“None at all.” The desert village of Waddan was nowhere near us, and could hardly qualify as stopping by.

Soraya shook her head. “Well, whatever the reason, I’m sure he’ll be gone as suddenly as he showed up.”

“He should stay,” I said. “He should stay right here, in Tripoli. He should stay with us. Haven’t I told him more than once he didn’t need to move halfway across the country for the business?”

Soraya shrugged. She lit a few candles in the center of the table.

“Don’t you miss him, Soraya?” I asked. “The three of us, here together? The slow summer evenings on the balcony? The hours of backgammon?”

“I never liked the backgammon,” Soraya said. “But, it’s good for Sammy to see his uncle.”

I could hear the two of them racing down the hall, Aiman chasing Sammy into the dining room.

\*\*\*

At the dinner table, Aiman pulled Sammy’s chair right up against his own. Sammy was a beautiful boy, and Soraya claimed credit for his sandy brown hair and green eyes, saying it was the Italian in him. Of course, I always felt that it was the Scots-Irish genes of my American mother playing out in his features. Those traits had bypassed me entirely, but Aiman retained more than a trace of them in his hazel eyes and paler skin. His hair was golden like Sammy’s, thick and straight, near shoulder length.

“Uncle Aiman,” Sammy said. “Do you know how many goals I scored today?”

“How many?”

Sammy ducked his head a little and held up two fingers.

“Liar!” Aiman declared incredulously. “Impossible! I’ll bet you don’t even play.”

“Two, it was two!” shouted Sammy excitedly and looked at his mother and me for support.

“No, really, it was two goals,” Soraya said, playing along.

“He’s really good, Aiman,” I said, skirting the part about his missed penalty shot the game before, which had Sammy in tears for a day.

Sammy gave me an anxious smile, and I winked conspiratorially at him. He looked relieved and beamed up at Aiman.

“Well, I wasn’t too bad either!” said Aiman. “But scoring like that in one game. Never!”

“He inherited my talent,” I said half-jokingly.

Aiman threw back his head and laughed. “Sure, Sammy. Your dad was great. They would get him off the sidelines five minutes before the game ended and have him run around a little. Just kept him in long enough to keep dad from complaining he was on the bench for being half native!”

The American school, long closed and shuttered, had been the center of our lives as children. We had Little League on the weekends, with

hamburger and hot dog barbecues, also Prom Nights and Valentine's Day Dances. The Italians used to be everywhere in Tripoli. So were the Canadians and Maltese, even the Hungarians. The Andalous neighborhood where we grew up was especially a mishmash of European and American families employed by the oil companies. It's not like we fit in seamlessly, it was more that we were less alone. The times changed, and the community slowly dwindled. But Aiman and I had my father's business and we persevered.

Soraya said, "We've got a big trip planned for tomorrow, and Sammy needs to get to bed early." She rose and started to clear the table.

"Really?" asked Aiman, "what trip?" He made a move to help Soraya, but she waved him down, as surely he knew she would. His eyes followed her out of the room, waited for her return.

Sammy exclaimed, "Leptis Magna! Out in the countryside! To see the ruins."

"I haven't been there in years," said Aiman. "That was your grandmother's favorite place. Did you know that? Your grandfather showed her pictures of the ruins and it convinced her to leave America and come back with him."

"I remember her saying that," I said. "She loved it. Felt it was part of her past, too."

Aiman leaned towards Soraya, and whispered, "Made living with the old man seem more romantic."

"Sammy's learning about it at school, so we figured we'd take him to see it," I said.

"Studying, huh? Okay, then. Who built it?" asked Aiman.

"The Roman Emperor Lucius Severus," Sammy answered quickly.

"Where was he born and what was his nickname?"

"He was born right here in Libya and he was called the Grim African!"

Aiman nodded, impressed. "And what are some famous things to see there?"

"There is a huge arch and old Roman baths and a giant stadium!" Sammy said, counting off each site with his fingers.

"A stadium? Was the emperor any good at soccer?"

Sammy gave Soraya a panicked look.

"Enough. Time for bed!" Soraya declared. "Tomorrow, we find out about all that."

"Will you come with us, uncle?" Sammy asked.

"Of course, I will," Aiman said and hugged Sammy close. He pulled away suddenly. "Off you go," he said with a quick laugh and a feigned punch to Sammy's shoulder.

\*\*\*

I could hear the tap water running in Sammy's bathroom, upstairs, and then his and Soraya's footsteps along the hallway to the bedroom. Aiman

got up from the table and walked to the windows. The city beyond was in darkness, a sliver of moonlight failing to illuminate. Aiman shoved his hands into his pockets, laid his forehead against the glass pane. He looked overcome by exhaustion, defeated.

“What’s going on?” I said.

Aiman straightened up and shook his head. “Just a long day,” he said with a muted laugh. “Nothing that some forbidden elixir won’t cure. Johnnie Walker. Black Label. Smuggled in from Cyprus,” he added with forced joviality.

“We can’t take risks like that. We’ve only got each other,” I said disapprovingly, a childhood memory overtaking me—he, ill and listless in his bed, distilled sunlight percolating through the closed shutters, and me watching, fearful I would lose him. “I don’t need to be visiting you in prison.”

Aiman shrugged. “The poor fool at customs probably wouldn’t know what it was even if he did catch me. I would tell him it was cologne. Something to freshen up with, in the evening.” He smiled broadly, mimicked holding a bottle and sprinkling the contents on the face of some invisible interrogator.

I gave him a short laugh, then a longer one. For Aiman, the fact that alcohol was illegal only made the challenge of its procurement more enticing.

“A risk worth taking,” he said.

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On the balcony later, Aiman brought out the Black Label with a flourish, and Soraya served it in a set of inherited crystal tumblers. In the sea breeze, the smell of jasmine floated up from the creepers along the back of the house. A few lights flickered along the darkened coastline. We leaned on the railing, breathed in the fragrant air, Soraya between my brother and me. She cradled her glass in both hands.

“I didn’t expect to be here,” said Aiman. I could make out his profile in the darkness. He stretched luxuriously and took a sip of his scotch.

Soraya shifted her position slightly and for a moment her shoulder brushed against mine.

“I decided on a surprise visit to that useless crew in Waddan,” Aiman continued. Of course, there was a whole week of delivery schedules missing. That son of a bitch office manager Hamid kept breathing over my shoulder. Such a slippery bastard. He could tell I was upset, so he brought up Dad. How great a man. How kind. How much he was missed now that he had passed. All the time he was stomping around the office pretending to look for the missing paperwork, yelling at people for the damn schedules like it was everyone else’s problem but his own.”

I smiled as I remembered Hamid, his bad teeth and bad breath, the baggy pants he always wore, which Aiman called ten-day shitters. He

drove his three corpulent wives around Waddan in the back of his dusty white Peugeot, the women wrapped up in full body gowns with only their hennaed hands and feet showing. Soraya managed our books and had long wanted him fired, but he was an old-timer with us, ever since my father had stumbled on the idea of a soft-drink business.

“It was a long day and I got in the car with every intention of driving back to Benghazi. I had in mind a bath, a drink, a smoke by an open window, watching the people in the street. That’s how I spend my evenings now. It’s a ground floor apartment, and the sitting room looks right onto this narrow, dusty road, people walking by all the time so that you feel right there in the middle of everyone else’s life. I’m really not sure what happened. But the next thing I know I was driving through the desert, in the opposite direction, back to Tripoli, like some damn homing pigeon.”

Soraya asked for a cigarette and Aiman pulled a pack out of his pocket. He struck a match and cupped the flame in his hand to protect it from a ripple of wind off the coastline. She lowered her face into the flickering light.

“Perhaps you belong here,” she said. She stepped back from the wrought-iron railing, exhaled a thin stream of smoke upwards between my brother and me.

I could hear the sound of cars racing along the coast road up ahead. Somewhere in the darkened neighborhood behind us a car horn blared out a fragment of a melody.

“We’ve driven these routes for years together,” I said. “Since we were teenagers, and even before that with Dad. Every summer and winter break, it was always about the business. You and I in that damn company Fiat. Morning and night. Your instincts took over.”

“You came home,” Soraya said.

Aiman nodded quietly. He reached for the bottle of scotch. “Will my nervous brother permit us another shot out here in the wide, dangerous open?” he said teasingly.

“I’m good. Help yourself, of course.”

“Don’t worry about Maher. He’s always so vigilant. Fending off the apocalypse. Our self-appointed watchman,” said Soraya with irritation.

“It’s true what you said about those desert roads, Maher,” Aiman said, his tone deferential, perhaps compensating for Soraya’s. “Our lives carved right into them.”

There was a time we had considered a permanent move to California, an option our mother had come to support as our good fortune dwindled. Aiman, more restless than me, spent a few months waiting tables near San Francisco. But then he returned, and after one of our business trips through the open desert, watching the sky clear from bruised purple to a luminescent blue, he seemed to abandon all thoughts of departure.

Soraya shook her head and said vehemently, “That’s not the life I

want for Sammy. That may be the life you both chose, but it is not for him.”

She handed Aiman her cigarette, and turned back to the house. “I’m going to sleep,” she said.

\*\*\*

The sun was straight overhead, and although it was fall and a faint chill hovered in the air, I had to squint against the glare. I drove Soraya’s silver Alfa Romeo out of the Andalous neighborhood, past the pink mosque and the marketplace of small, cavernous shops, shuttered early in preparation for the Friday noon prayer. The dusty square was largely deserted. A row of huge banners of the “brother leader” in self-styled African garb striking various poses fluttered from poles at the end of the square. An obscenity foisted upon us had been our father’s judgment of the man years ago.

Aiman rolled down his window to a smell of frying garlic and onions. “I love this time of day. Everything at a standstill,” he said. “It’s as if we own the whole city.”

Soraya was seated next to me. She leaned back and looked at Aiman and laughed. “You’re so welcome to all of it,” she said.

“I hate that smell,” quipped Sammy.

At Omar al-Mukhtar Street, near the city center, we ran into traffic and got stuck behind two open-bed trucks with migrant workers from central Africa crammed in the back. A man driving a donkey cart pulled up to the left of us. He flicked a whip at the emaciated-looking animal and tried to maneuver between us and the trucks. One of the trucks pulled forward suddenly, and the men in the truck bed fell backwards jostling up against each other.

“People shouldn’t live like this,” said Soraya.

It’s a nearly two-hour drive east out of Tripoli to the ruins at Leptis Magna, and by the time we made it out of the city, Sammy had fallen asleep, his head rocking against the car window. I took the coast road through Bab Ben Ghashir, past the spread of whitewashed villas, and the beaches at Thelathin and Tajura. Near the farmlands outside Qasr Garabulli with their olive and almond plantations, Sammy stirred and woke up.

Soraya leaned back and blew Sammy a kiss. “Tell us what you’re learning about Leptis Magna,” she said.

Sammy shrugged and slouched in his seat.

“C’mon Sammy,” I said. “You brought your book with you to teach us!”

In the mirror I saw Aiman make a face for Sammy and ruffle his hair. “The Grim African,” my brother said.

Sammy liked that. He opened his textbook: “The ruins of Leptis Magna stand on rocky ground along the coastline,” he read, half mumbling,

stumbling over the words. “The entrance to the ancient city is . . . through . . . the Arch of Lucius Severus. Founded around the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, for a while Leptis was the Roman Empire’s pearl on the ...” Sammy looked up at his uncle for help.

“Me-di-ter-ran-e-an,” said Aiman.

“. . . and a hub of cross . . . basin . . . trade. Over the cen-tur-ies it was in-va-ded by the armies of the Vandals and Berbers, was sacked and built and sacked again. And finally. . . de-ser-ted . . . and left in ruins.”

“Good job,” I said. “I mean good reading.”

Compliments were always a mistake. He slammed the book shut. “I’m getting carsick,” he said.

Aiman said, “It’s boring, anyway. But I have a real story about the place. Do you want to hear it?”

Sammy nodded and sat up attentively in his seat. “Is it scary?”

“Hmm. That depends. Are you brave?”

Sammy nodded again and looked quickly at his mother.

“Aiman,” Soraya said gently. “He’s a little boy.”

“The people of Leptis had built a great city. They were happy. They thought they had everything in the world they could ever need. They had built the best roads and schools, giant pavilions and huge amphitheatres. You following me?”

Sammy nodded enthusiastically.

“On weekends there would be festivals, free food, music, shows, dancing. But they were surrounded by desert and sea. And as news of their good life spread, they were always under attack by murderous tribes swarming around them in the desert. So what do you think they did?”

“They got in bed with the reigning world superpower and spent all their money on arms contracts,” I said with a laugh.

“No politics, Maher,” said Soraya. That had been our rule around Sammy.

“They built secret tunnels underground,” continued Aiman, ignoring us. “That’s where the defenders of Leptis would hide, and when they were attacked, they would burst out of these tunnels, into the bright sunshine, in full armor, swords drawn, and surprise the invaders! It worked every time.” His voice, which had reached a crescendo, became suddenly hushed and foreboding. “And then one time it didn’t work, anymore.”

“Why not!” exclaimed Sammy. He was in rapt attention.

“Treachery. Betrayal. Someone they trusted and who turned on them. He gave away the location of the secret tunnels, and the city was destroyed and left in ruins.”

“But what happened to all the people?”

“They were *killed*,” said Aiman.

“Aiman!” Soraya cried, turning around to look at him, wagging a disapproving finger.

“Well, not all of them,” said Aiman quickly. “Some did get away. There was a tunnel that opened up onto the shore, and one family managed to escape there. They knew they had to stay hidden to survive. So they crouched in that tunnel for as long as they could. Then one day they made a decision to risk it all, and ran out of the tunnel onto the beach and into the sea, and swam and swam and swam as far away from Leptis as they could get. OK. See. A happy ending, after all.”

Soraya shook her head and settled back into her seat. “No such story,” she said.

We drove along a stretch of highway bordered on one side by swathes of empty white sand beaches drifting into the shimmering expanse of blue and turquoise water. On the other side of us lay the desert, and a streamlined horizon broken only by clusters of brightly painted Bedouin homes.

“There *was* a tunnel,” I said slowly. “Your uncle found it. And he made me go in there. It was very dark. We called it the tunnel at the end of the world. I remember Mom calling out to us. She was so worried. Frantic.”

“I don’t like picturing her like that,” said Soraya. “She was a strong woman.”

Aiman laughed and said that as strong as she was, she was also a lost soul in a foreign land.

Soraya shrugged. “Once she found my mother, they didn’t need anyone else,” she said. “They were so beautiful, the two of them. Elegant despite everything. Defiant even as old ladies strolling arm in arm by the sea in Andalous. Dressed up for the evening in diamonds, and in the winter, fur coats. Like they were on an outing at the Riviera. Not surrounded by dirt roads and donkey carts and limestone shacks. They couldn’t live without each other.”

“Well, in the end they didn’t,” said Aiman. “Mom survived less than a year after Francelina passed.”

“If it wasn’t for them we would have never known each other,” I added for Sammy’s benefit. “And I got to be the chaperone for Mom and Uncle Aiman.”

“What’s a chaperone?” said Sammy.

“It’s someone who makes sure people behave,” I said with a laugh. “I used to follow them around everywhere.”

“That’s enough, Maher,” said Soraya.

“And one day your Uncle Aiman looks at me and says—are you falling in love with Soraya. And I said yes. Yes, I am.”

Aiman half smiled. He put an arm around Sammy’s shoulders and pulled him close. He gazed pensively out the window as we passed the sudden disfiguring sprawl of army barracks between the towns of Khums and Wadi Lebda.

“It’s the last leg of the trip,” I declared loudly to no one in particular. “We’re very nearly there.”

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I pulled off the vaporous blacktop and crept along a dirt road to the entrance of the ruins, and parked the car in a mostly vacant dirt lot. I could hear the sound of waves in the distance as we walked past an unmanned security kiosk. There was warmth to the day now, and the wind was full of the smell of the sea, and also the scent of eucalyptus and jasmine floating in the sudden space left between each gust.

We followed Soraya and Sammy beneath the massive Arch of the Emperor Lucius Severus, the sculpted stone gleaming like alabaster in the sunlight, and into Leptis. From there the land sloped up gently. On either side of the slab-stone road stood sandy embankments covered with scrub grass and vegetation. Then the earth leveled off, and clustered amidst the empty spaces reclaimed by desert, the ruins stretched out before us in a crescentic expanse of towering columns and Medusa-head arches. Windswept Roman roads snaked along the faded foundations of crumbling temples and pavilions. I thought of our trips here as children, the way my mother was mesmerized by the drift of history the ruins represented, their stubborn refusal to disappear, and all so close to home. But it was always the wind and sky that captured me. The way the sun soaked everything. The way everything was revealed in the bright light.

Soraya held onto Sammy’s hand, and Aiman and I trailed behind through the maze of stone walkways and retention walls, and past the ancient raised marketplace, its circular stalls facing outward to the city. On a whim Aiman dropped the folding chairs he had been carrying, and climbed over two huge limestone blocks into the courtyard of the marketplace. He stood behind one of the stone stalls and waved to Sammy to join him. I lowered the icebox I had been carrying to the ground and watched Soraya say something to Sammy and smile, and then Sammy was scrambling up over the stone blocks to his uncle.

Aiman stood with his arms folded and said, “Yes, Mr. Gladiator, what would you like to eat, today?”

Sammy played along and said, “I’d like spaghetti and meatballs and a Coca-Cola, please.”

Aiman made a face and frowned, “I’m sorry, Mr. Gladiator, in case you have failed to notice, this is a Roman marketplace!”

“Well then, what do you have?”

“I have the very best sheep eyeballs anywhere in North Africa, delicious roasted intestine of two-hump camel and fine young goat tongue marinated in a lovely broth of chicken blood.”

“Yuck!” said Sammy.

“What! Mr. Gladiator! You don’t like my fine food!” said Aiman. He rushed around the stall, and to peels of laughter from Sammy, lifted him



up and pretended to toss him over the edge into the road.

“Let’s do that again, Uncle Aiman,” said Sammy.

“Later,” I said. “We have a little more walking to do.”

Soraya, a bulging beach bag slung over one shoulder, stayed ahead of us down the pillar-lined Via Colonnata, every so often tugging Sammy away from his ongoing attempt to clamber atop the stone ruins. We passed a small group of French tourists and a local youth improvising as a tour guide. He said something in fractured English about this path being very, very old indeed, to which he received polite murmurs of assent from his assembled entourage. Aiman chuckled and shook his head.

As we approached the sprawling remains of the Hadrianic baths, its faded mosaics and sunken pool, I could finally see the ocean. Soraya looked back at Aiman and me and said, “We need to find the right spot near the beach.”

The icebox was growing heavy in my arms, and I suggested that the right spot could be right here, in the shade by the baths. If Soraya heard me she didn’t let on; she veered off the main road and down a dirt path towards the ancient harbor. We ended up at a gravel plateau at the edge of a sandy cliff overlooking the beach 20 feet or so below. A half-built limestone wall framed the rear of the plateau and offered up some shade.

“Here!” Soraya said definitively.

To the east the beach turned narrow and rocky. A haphazard structure of limestone atop a tongue-like projection into the water was all that remained of the harbor lighthouse. A few men loitered there, and when they saw Soraya they waved and whistled.

“We can find another place,” I said.

“Or perhaps I can go have a chat with them,” Aiman said, manly.

“Bored locals,” said Soraya. “Ignore them.”

Sammy stood beside me. His hair was a sheen of gold in the sunlight. Down a gravel incline behind us, partially hidden by a dense cluster of columns, I pointed out the sunken remnants of the Severan Forum and Basilica. And beyond that, hollowed out and tiers crumbling, the Gladiator’s arena. Sammy nodded, but seemed unimpressed by the sprawling ruins, and I imagined that the skeletal remains were a far cry from the vivid picture he had built up in his mind.

Soraya spread our picnic blanket on the ground. The free end billowed out, and she laughed as Aiman collected limestone bricks and weighted it. He set up a chair in the shade of the wall and reached for the whiskey buried deep in the beach bag. I looked around again quickly as Aiman poured himself a tall glass, lit a cigarette, settled into his seat. He hadn’t shaved this morning and the stubble gave his face a haggard appearance, the travel finally taking its toll. I pulled up a couple of seats next to him and called out to Soraya to join us. But Sammy was restless and so Soraya brought out the soccer ball from the beach bag. Expertly, she dropped the

ball on the ground and dribbled past Sammy. I laughed at the way his skinny legs scampered after hers as she effortlessly evaded him. Soraya's legs were lovely, trim in her blue jeans. She had tied the bottom of her shirt in a knot, the inward curving of her hips bare. I thought I heard another whistle and looked quickly over at the lighthouse but saw no one. The sunlight poured onto her and Sammy. Her hair fell freely over her face, and when she impatiently brushed it away, I could see the faint freckles, passed onto Sammy, on the bridge of her nose. I caught her eye and waved. She kicked the ball hard past Sammy so that it rolled off the plateau and down the incline towards the ruins.

"C'mon, Sammy, there's more space down below," she called, jogging backwards past him, and blowing me and Aiman a kiss. "And we better find the ball before it disappears into one of your uncle's famous tunnels."

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Alone with my brother, I reached for a plastic cup, poured myself a drink. Aiman pointed to his own glass. "Go easy," I said, but poured him a shot.

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He breathed in sharply. "This helps me with the 'go easy' thing," he said.

After a moment he opened his eyes and gazed at his glass in silence.

I said, "What's been up with you? You used to visit more often, at least."

Aiman shrugged. "It's a long trip, brother."

"Soraya was wondering if there was someone—in Benghazi. A woman, you know."

Aiman gave a short laugh. "Somehow I don't hear Soraya asking that."

"Well, it was me, actually. Let me be serious. I never understood why you moved halfway across the country."

"Like you always say, Maher: 'Aiman, it's all about the business. It's all we've got. We're nothing without it. It's just the three of us; you, me and Soraya. The business fails, we have nowhere to go. We're misfits in this place.'" He turned and looked at me, eyes narrowed. "So I did it for the business. That's the answer," he said.

"Sammy misses you. He asks after you all the time. Soraya is different when you are here. Happier. And you—you've got to be happier, too. You should move back," I said. "You're welcome to move back."

Aiman said nothing.

I said, "There was a time before Sammy was born, when I would drive back up to the house at the end of the day, Aiman. And the front windows would be wide open, music spilling out. I could hear your voice. You always made Soraya laugh. And sometimes I would turn off the engine and sit in the car in the settling dust, and just listen."

Aiman took a long drag on his cigarette and stared past me at the ocean. The waves were choppy and I could make out whitecaps far in the distance. But the sky was a translucent blue. Aiman passed a hand over a

stubbly jaw. Dark circles ringed his eyes. This morning I walked in on a conversation he was having with Soraya. Soraya was up early to prepare breakfast and food for the picnic, my offer to help turned down in the interest of resting for the drive. I lay in bed, traced the creases on the sheets left by her body, breathed in the sweet smell of her hair on the pillow. When I finally made my way downstairs, I could hear voices coming from the kitchen. “A dead end,” she said just before I walked in. She was sitting at the kitchen table, arms folded, Aiman by the sink, facing her.

Now, peering out at the limestone clusters of the coastal towns, Khums and Wadi Lebda, formless in the sun and haze, I said to Aiman, “I know the job can get old, and this place feels like its been forgotten by the world. But the country can’t stay like this forever. Something is happening. Hidden. Under the surface. I can feel it.”

Aiman crossed his legs in front of him, brushed some dust off his pants, nodded his head.

“Two years ago Soraya left me,” I said.

Aiman turned and regarded me.

“It was when she took Sammy to Milan to see his relatives. She wrote me a letter from Italy. Said it was useless trying to explain the unfathomable or something like that. I wrote back that I was coming for my son.”

“She came back,” Aiman said. “In the end, that’s all that should matter.” He stood up abruptly and walked to the edge of the plateau. He flicked his cigarette stub off into the sky.

“I called you once to tell you. Maybe more than once.”

Aiman shrugged. “I don’t know, Maher. Sometimes I leave the phone unplugged.” Aiman kicked a stone over the edge of the embankment to the beach below. “I’m out of options, Maher,” he said quietly.

There was a shout and I saw Soraya and Sammy emerge from between the pillars on the northern edge of the Basilica. Sammy was running with the ball in his arms and Soraya was chasing him up the hill towards us.

Aiman’s face lit up. He let out a burst of laughter and rushed down the dirt incline towards them. Sammy was excited, looking back over his shoulder at Soraya. When he saw his uncle running towards him, he screamed in pleasure and swerved sharply trying to get away. He slipped and went skidding face down on the ground. He rolled up next to the ball, holding his knee.

“Sammy!” I called, but Soraya and Aiman had already reached him, and kneeled by his side.

Nothing serious, despite the tears. I could tell that from where I stood. I started to walk towards them, but then for some reason felt the need to switch to a jog.

“You alright, son?” I said.

“He’s perfect,” said Aiman. “Just a graze. Nothing that would keep a

gladiator down.”

Sammy tried to laugh, but he was startled and holding back tears.

“Can you get up?” I said.

“Maher,” said Soraya. “He’s fine.”

“Great,” I said. “Then he can get up and walk with me.”

Sammy got up, clutching his knee. “I’ll go with Dad,” he mumbled. And I felt a surge of something like vindication sweep over me.

Sammy stayed close to me as we followed the winding dirt path to the shore. The smell of eucalyptus was heavy in the air. I draped my arm around him and kissed his golden crown.

“You OK, son?” I asked.

He nodded and wiped his face against my shirt, then skittered off ahead of me. Halfway down the embankment, the path turned sharply, followed by a steep decline to a broad stretch of white sand.

Sammy said, “Dad, this is where the ships must have landed. And then the people would walk up to the city.”

“Perhaps,” I said.

“Were there any kids around?” he asked.

And I said that yes, of course, there were kids and mothers and fathers too. And there were schools and sports. Everything.

We took off our shoes and socks and stepped onto the cool sand. Sammy trailed a few steps behind me exactly tracking my footsteps with his own. A stone’s throw ahead, a group of teenage boys had gathered around to watch a man building a fortress in the sand. I guided Sammy over; he held back, angling for a way to get closer without being noticed.

“It’s alright,” I said. “Just squeeze in.” He looked at me anxiously and tucked his chin into his T-shirt. He was shy around everyone except us. Soraya found it endearing, but it always took me back to the first few moments of his birth; how frail he looked when they lifted him out of her, pale and floppy. An emergency caesarean. I was sure he was dead. And Aiman had called shortly after the surgery, had started to sob on the phone, asked if he could hear Soraya’s voice, wanted to know the name we had finally chosen.

The fortress was huge, with ramps and turrets and a moat filled with sea water, and Sammy sidled tentatively up to another boy and eased in. I lost sight of Sammy for a moment. But when he emerged his face was beaming.

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We sat on the blanket and ate the sandwiches Soraya had prepared earlier that morning, among them my and Aiman’s favorite—tuna on a thick bed of red hot chili pepper paste. There was potato salad on the side and oranges and apples. Soraya sat next to Sammy and handed him his Nutella and marmalade sandwich.

“That’ll keep you on a high until tomorrow,” Aiman said as Sammy

took a big bite of his sandwich.

"He'll be fine," said Soraya. "He needs the energy. And honestly, anything is better than that ulcer-producing local chili paste you two eat."

"It purifies the soul," I said.

"Not if you saw the filthy factory that makes it," said Soraya, shaking her head. She scooped potato salad onto a paper plate for herself.

I caught Aiman looking at Soraya. "Not one good thing about this place. It's her prison," I said and for a moment regretted telling Aiman about Milan.

From a stainless steel thermos I poured hot, sweet tea into small styrofoam cups. Aiman took a few bites, then set his sandwich aside and lay back, eyes closed and face to the sun. For a while I thought he had dozed off to the steady crescendo of waves. But then he opened his eyes, reached for another cigarette and blew smoke rings for Sammy's entertainment.

I gathered the dishes, and Soraya and I brought them to a sandy patch behind the wall. We rinsed the plastic containers with a jug of water. She had pulled her hair up in a bun, and I could see the paler skin along the nape of her neck. I pressed up against her, caught the lingering fragrance of perfume, but also a mustiness of sweat and dust, and I wanted to nestle my face against her pale breasts, breathe her in, taste the saltiness on her sun-warmed skin.

"Not all bad," I whispered.

Soraya stroked my face with her hand and I leaned into her. In the distance came the crackling of static from a loudspeaker, and then the call to prayer from a local mosque echoed across the landscape. The voice of the muezzin was rich and somber, and seemed to hang in the air then dissipate into the atmosphere like a plume of smoke.

She turned her head in the direction of the prayer call.

"Raised between religions," I said.

"The call to prayer? Five times a day? It's the one thing I will miss if we ever move away," she said.

"Not all bad," I repeated.

"Dad!" Sammy called. And then he was with us.

Soraya backed away from our embrace.

"Uncle Aiman says he'll take me to see the tunnel. The one at the end of the world. He's going to take me. He'll take me there! Can I go?"

Aiman sauntered close, said, "It's right past the Basilica. Who wants to come?"

Of course, Sammy did. "Me, me!" he shouted, waving his arms.

"You go with them," I said to Soraya. "I've been. And anyway, I'm fine here. I'll watch our things. I'll finish cleaning up."

Aiman led the way. He seemed to me deep in thought, detached, shoulders stooped. I stood to follow their progress as they passed between

the columns. A low wall separated the columns from the remains of the Basilica. Aiman was the first over the wall, followed by Sammy. Aiman reached out his hand to help Soraya across. She hesitated for a moment before taking it, and then the three of them disappeared from view.

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I stashed our belongings in the shade against the limestone wall, and poured myself a drink from what remained of the Scotch. A yacht had set sail in the waters just past Wadi Lebda, and I followed its trajectory across the whitecaps and then into clear blue sea along the horizon. The late afternoon sun had burned off any lingering haze along the coastline, and the coastal towns now appeared iridescent in the light, white stone shimmering. I sipped the Scotch, tried to keep the raw edges at bay. We had nearly kissed.

The wind had picked up in the few minutes since the end of the prayer, and I felt a chill pass through me. In the distance, the yacht was now nothing more than a black speck falling off the top of North Africa. I stared out at the expanse of sea we so rarely traversed, and remembered how at eighteen, Soraya made her first attempt to get away. Her father tracked her down a month later in Valletta with a Maltese boy she met at the American School. There were rumors of an abortion, cancelled wedding plans, but just rumors, and she finally came back to her parents' home, halfway through a rainy winter. I waited a few gray weeks before calling, asking permission to visit her. Then a few days more, gathering my courage. We sat across from each other in the oversized marble reception area at the front of the house, not yet mine. She looked older, more fragile than I remembered. Their ancient maid came in with two tiny cups of thick Turkish coffee, set the tray down on the brass table between us. You could practically smell her disapproval. Soraya lit a cigarette and it dangled between the fingers of her pale hands.

She said, "So you've come to see the town prostitute. The fallen woman."

"I want to marry you," I said, and for some reason stood up.

She emitted a short laugh, shook her head, bemused. "Of course, it would come to this," she said finally, looking up at me.

"Like a bird of prey," Aiman said when I told him.

Years later she would leave again, to Milan, our son in tow. And again return, on a last wave of affection. But she rarely looked at me during lovemaking, preferring to lie facedown with me taking her from behind, her face cradled in her hands. My roughness became her penance. Sometimes she would turn her head sideways and stare off into the distance, her face vacant, now and then a grimace, as I took her as hard as I could, as deep as I could. It was a look I became familiar with, as was the shame that flooded me when I rolled off her.

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It was getting late and over in the direction of the Basilica, the columns stood like a stone forest in shadows. The wind whistled across the crumbling tiers of Gladiator's Arena, which loomed just beyond. I looked down at the shore, and then behind me at the rambling landscape of the ruins. Other than for a small tourist group walking down the Via Colonnata back towards the parking area, Leptis was deserted.

There was no sign of Aiman or Soraya, and I forced back a surge of anxiety over the thought of Sammy in the tunnel. In my memory, the strip of beach into which the tunnel opened had been quite narrow, and I imagined it could flood easily. I followed the path the three of them had taken, climbed over the retention wall at the remains of the Basilica. The late afternoon light danced along the stone arches and pillars, and the beauty allayed my fear. I crossed the Basilica, past a row of Medusa-head arches and into the adjacent Severan Forum. From there, a cobblestone path curved off to the right and stopped abruptly becoming a dirt track into the scrubland.

Halfway up the track, in a random patch of sand and untended vegetation, I saw the two limestone walls. I recognized them immediately from my childhood memory. Their abrupt appearance, apart from any other ruins, was a gateway into the underworld. I called out. Nothing.

Between the narrowly separated walls were the stone steps into the tunnel, the gray light fading as I descended. I guided myself down with one hand against a cool, damp wall. The column of air was thick and amphibious, as if the cauldron of centuries had extracted every last vestige of oxygen, a sulfurous miasma assaulting my lungs. At the base of the steps, pitch black. But a few feet beyond that the tunnel curved up gently, and a weak light filtered through.

At first, all I could make out were the faded frescoes on the wall nearest me, and all I could hear was the sound the waves carried in the tunnel, the cooing of pigeons by the surf. Then, the end of the tunnel and the strip of beach beyond came abruptly into view. The two of them were in the shadows, her face raised in open supplication, his hands buried deep in a cascade of her hair, their bodies merging. I watched my brother and Soraya slowly part and cross the gaping mouth of the tunnel. Sammy ran up to them, and Aiman dropped to his knees. He seemed almost hesitant in the bright light as he reached out to Sammy, held his head in his hands, pulled him close against his chest. They were all three together on the white sand, as it must have always been, as it could only be. A moment later they were gone, and I, voiceless in that long, airless passage, the shore and the sea suddenly empty again before me, pressed myself against the damp walls, held myself against the ruins.

LINDA CROSFIELD's poems have appeared in *The Minnesota Review*, *The Antigoniish Review* and *Room*, and in several anthologies, including *Rogue Stimulus*. In 2012 she was the featured poet in *The New Orphic Review*. In 2013 she read at Nelson's Elephant Mountain Literary Festival; one of her poems became a miniature accordion book by UpDown Press & Bindery in Baltimore and another was published as a Leaf Press leaflet. Since 2007 she's participated in an annual August postcard poem exchange. The poems in this issue are a result of that exercise in 2013. She blogs at [purplemountainpoems.blogspot.com](http://purplemountainpoems.blogspot.com) in Ootischenia, B.C.

## Five Poems / Linda Crosfield

### Considering Distance

Sometimes  
when the hours move  
too slowly  
we take a breath,  
close a book,  
a chapter, a window,  
follow metaphoric dots  
across the wide field  
the mind is,  
that shortest distance  
from me to you.

### Nothing But Everything

A lifting of the chin  
a glance, a little smile  
—eye contact.  
So we drop deeper  
into trust.  
So begins the wonder  
of a sip, a slip, a shudder,  
till it's gone, we look away,  
and nothing's changed  
but everything.



## My Mother, Plotting

Out in his shop my husband  
turns an urn for my mother  
who is not dead, nor even  
planning to be immediately  
though at 93 it's less of  
an impossibility of the imagination  
than it used to be.

The other day she went for a swim  
in the glacier-fed lake.

She says when she's ready  
she'll drink a gin and tonic,  
swim straight out,  
resist all efforts of assistance.

## Understanding Cold

Almost a full moon. August, the  
caddis flies still sneaking in  
to get at the lights, the days shorter.  
A friend tells of her trip to Labrador,  
of children and laughter and icebergs,  
the children curious creatures,  
ice as cold as a missed meeting.  
Imagine a piece of it calving,  
floating out to sea,  
the sea a giant cocktail  
complete with ice.  
Imagine an endless August.  
Thirst slaked.  
Children going on forever.

## Swoop

There  
is no  
barrier  
so great  
we cannot  
pass through,  
laughing at time's  
inconsequential digs  
and yes, sometimes its anger.  
We are alone, yet not,  
shouting in silence.

ASTA SCHEIB has won several literary awards. She is a well-known German author, screenwriter and former magazine editor. Chapter 34 of her novel, *Das Schönste, was ich sah* (2009), was translated by Margrith Schraner and appears by permission of the original publisher, Hoffmann and Campe Verlag, Hamburg.

MARGRITH SCHRANER was born in Switzerland. She came to Canada in 1969, and is the author of the short story, “Blue Skies Over Savognin” (NOR, 2002) and *To Travel the Distance*, a novel in progress. Both were inspired by Giovanni Segantini (1858-1899) and the Swiss villages of Savognin and Maloja, where the painter resided until his premature death at the age of 41.

## A Beauty to Behold

Asta Scheib

(Translated by Margrith Schraner)

### Chapter 34

“MY HEAD IS chock-full of good ideas. I know exactly what I want to do for Paris,” Giovanni told Bice. “I promise you, once I reach my goal, I’ll be world-famous and we will no longer have money problems. We’ll be traveling together and visit all the countries where my paintings will be hanging on museum walls. These journeys shall be my gift to you, a reward for everything you have done for me.”

Bice responded by giving him a kiss, but she couldn’t really imagine that her life with Segante would ever amount to anything more than the roller coaster ride it had been. Granted, she believed in her Segante, and that as an artist, he was capable of actualizing the ideas he had been carrying around in his head for quite some time, now. He had plenty of energy. And the necessary support of the Engadin and the general public was evidently forthcoming. Over the past year, readers of the international press had repeatedly been informed that Switzerland’s contribution to the upcoming World Exhibition in Paris would be a monumental panorama of the Engadin, created by Giovanni Segantini.

And now, the time had arrived. On October 14, 1897, Giovanni would be invited to the Hotel Bernina in Samedan, where he would present his project to a committee consisting of money lenders, namely the hotelier, J.F. Walther of the Hotel Palace in Maloja, as well as Rudolf Bavier, a banker who owned the Bavier Hotel in St. Moritz. The founder of the *Engadiner Bank* and head of the municipal council of Samedan, Gian Töndury-Zehnder, would also be present.

Never before had Giovanni thrown himself into a project with such

frenzy. Soon, every table top in the house was laden with his drawings and sketches. Bits of charcoal, sticks of black chalk and Conté pastels lay scattered everywhere, and Giovanni selfishly expected all his friends and visitors to be swept up by his feverish pace and to assist him in carrying out the preparatory work. Preliminary models needed to be constructed, and photographic studies were to be undertaken in the mountains. All Bice could do, at times, was to take a deep breath as she watched Giovanni, his thick locks matted and unruly, run through the house, up the stairs and down again, seeming to burst with zest. He was willing to talk to anyone about his plans. He began by drawing a sketch of the Pavilion, a rotunda complete with turrets and a lavishly decorated entrance, of which he ordered a mock-up to be constructed, employing Uffer, the carpenter. Uffer was the only one he could rely on to actualize his sketches with the necessary precision.

Bice caught herself envying Segante. He was creating something new on a daily basis. So many paintings of his had already traveled to other parts of the world!

And what about Bice, herself? Where did her energy and imagination find their expression? Besides reading and occasionally translating newspaper articles for Giovanni, her work consisted for the most part of setting up their ever-changing accommodations, and of making them more comfortable. Or else, of dealing with the authorities. Or of keeping impatient creditors at bay. And, of course, of occupying herself with the troublesome laundry, which was so hard to keep clean. It was important to her that all of her four children, including Bianca who was at the Institute in Maroggia, were dressed in clean clothes. Indeed, Bice spent a great deal of time looking after her children. She also wanted to relieve *Professore* Boldoni of some of his duties. The scholar's sorrowful demeanor and drooping mustache at times seemed to suggest that he was in need of help. Bice took the children along to visit friends in Sils Maria, her favorite place. She also took them whenever she went to St. Moritz. Bice did not want them to live a life of isolation in Maloja, but rather for them to become familiar with the surrounding area and get to know the friends who were living there.

All in all, Bice's days were pretty full. And yet, she would have given much to have a profession, a vocation of her own, much like Segante, whose painting career not only brought in revenue, but was increasingly being recognized. Bice's vocation was looking after her children, of course. And yet, it was as though the task of braving the storms of everyday life was gradually diminishing her stores of mental energy. And that her hunger for personal freedom increased with each passing day.

Visitors were constantly invading the house. They were coming to see Segante. Sometimes Bice thought that he was taking too much upon himself. But he was resilient. Health concerns were foreign to him, whereas

she and the children were much more susceptible to illness. Recently, Segante had returned from seeing the tailor, where he had gone to complain about a suit, whose sleeves had turned out much too short. The tailor, who had made the suit by relying on conventional measurements, had checked his client's measurements once again, and Segante learned that not only had there been a broadening of his shoulders, which had resulted in the shorter sleeves, but that his overall weight had increased considerably.

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It was a sunny morning and Bice was enjoying the solitary silence at the chalet. The children had gone off on an excursion with the *Professore* and would not be back until later in the afternoon. Bice had hastily tidied the rooms and picked up the clothes and socks that lay strewn about, leaving them to soak in the tub at the washhouse. She had prepared a grocery list in consultation with Mea, the cook, who had gone off to the market in Sils Baselgia. Bice was busy with tending her flowers at the windowsill, when she caught sight of two young men in the street. They seemed to be looking around uncertainly before heading straight for the house. What did they want? One of them had reddish hair that gleamed in the sunshine, whereas his companion, whose round hat was cocked against the back of his head, had an air of youthful good cheer. Bice opened the door for them, delighted that the sun was finally breaking through after an entire day of fog, and happy to be receiving visitors. The two gentlemen came across as rather shy. They politely inquired whether they could speak with Segantini, the painter. They were painters themselves and had looked closely at his painting, *Alpine Pastures*. "A masterpiece," the one with the red hair proclaimed.

Bice's initial reticence had vanished at once. The young man with the red hair was of narrow build. He had a small face and very dark, intelligent eyes. Perhaps they only appeared to be dark in contrast to the vibrancy of his hair. He introduced himself as Giovanni Giacometti, and looked to be around thirty years of age. His friend, whose name was Cuno Amiet, seemed even younger. In any case, he looked rather like a boy, what with his smooth-looking facial skin, brown hair, dark eyes and the hat he wore, cocked against the back of his head. But when they started to discuss *Alpine Pastures*, it became immediately apparent that both of them were extremely knowledgeable about painting, particularly the work of Giovanni Segantini.

"He has discovered a pictorial language and painting technique that are suited perfectly for the depiction of the Alps. His method of capturing the landscape and rendering it on canvas is pure wizardry. It has never been accomplished by anyone else before him. Even though he may be classified as one of the Divisionists, his works are entirely unique in their expression. It is my sincere desire to study with him," Giovanni Giacometti

concluded. “Do you think there is a chance for me to be accepted as a pupil of his?”

“If one were to choose the most propitious moment for such an enterprise, now would be the perfect time,” Bice replied. “Segantini is in the process of getting his project ready for the Paris World Exhibition. I have no idea how he is going to accomplish it all on his own. You’ve timed your arrival perfectly.”

When Giovanni returned, he was somewhat surprised and not entirely delighted. Neither Bice nor her visitors had taken note of his arrival. They were engrossed in conversation and had obviously been indulging in a glass or two, since they appeared to be in excellent spirits. Particularly Bice. Already while still standing in the foyer, he had become aware of her carefree laughter. A child’s laughter—that was how he had always thought of it. Bice’s laughter was as lighthearted and unselfconscious as a child’s. Giovanni noticed the twinkle in her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, and he felt an immediate rush of jealousy. Bice’s laughter should belong to him and the children alone, and to no one else. That was how he perceived it, and that was the reason why, initially, he came across as unsociable. He refrained from greeting her with a kiss. It was only after finding out more from Giacometti and Amiet, and not until he had recognized the fortuitous circumstance of their meeting as colleagues, that the conversation of the three painters became more animated and engaged. Cuno Amiet related that after examining *Alpine Pastures* more closely, Giacometti had decided to write him a letter. He searched briefly through his briefcase and produced the letter:

*The painting as a whole evokes in you a sensation similar to the ones you experience while roaming through a valley. Yet the mountains you encounter are not the same as the ones you find in the painting, and neither are the meadows the same. Nevertheless, Segantini has painted them from nature. Just the same, what Segantini creates is not a photograph, but rather, he renders nature as he perceives it with his artist’s eye and experiences it in his poet’s heart!*

Giovanni was deeply moved. These two young men before him, who were not only learned but had obviously enjoyed an excellent education, had acknowledged his innermost aspirations and were extending their admiration to him.

“You are the first Swiss painters I’ve made the acquaintance of, personally,” Giovanni told them, attempting to hide his emotion. “The fact that you are dedicating yourself to the study of my work leaves me much obliged.”

“Giacometti has been entertaining the wish to become a pupil of yours,”

Bice now informed Giovanni. Giovanni gave her a perplexed look. Then he turned serious.

“Now, at this very moment—is that your actual intent? You can’t possibly know how much I have been wishing for a colleague. Not to mention a pupil.” Giovanni extended his hand and Giacometti shook it, delighted.

Cuno Amiet explained that his friend, Giacometti, was already a recognized painter, having studied in Munich for two years, followed by another two years in Paris. “He is so talented,” Cuno said. “He’s bound to be famous, some day.”

“As famous as you,” Giacometti countered, having been made to feel slightly embarrassed by the compliment.

Bice had already made inquiries in the kitchen whether the meal would be large enough to include two guests. There was plenty of food for everyone. Mea had miscalculated the quantities of a recipe, and they had ended up with a heap of bacon dumplings. Bice was more than welcome to invite the two guests. After refusing in the customary, polite manner, the two young men accepted graciously and shared in the midday meal of aromatic dumplings with cabbage and salad, served by Mea, along with a pitcher of beer that was also procured.

Later on, it was decided that Giacometti, whose residence was in Stampa in the Bergell region, was to move into the Segantinis’ chalet for the period of time needed to carry out the initial preparations. It was Giovanni who had suggested it, and Giacometti agreed immediately, since it would save considerable time and prove less cumbersome. Giacometti could hardly believe his great fortune at being invited to live with the revered master. Already, Segantini was treating both him and Cuno as friends. Before the end of the week, Giovanni decided, he would climb up to the Schaffberg above Pontresina, and Giacometti would be the one to accompany him.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, the time had arrived. Giovanni prepared to travel to the Hotel Bernina in Samedan, where he would present his proposal. Bice insisted on brushing his unruly locks, which had not been trimmed for some time. Segantini refused, of course, but Bice complained that he looked like a savage from Australia’s outback. “It may be acceptable for you to look like that while clambering up Piz Lunghin, but if you want to attend a meeting of dignitaries, hoping to secure a commission of such magnitude, you must look more cultivated.”

Giovanni had acquiesced to her wishes, had taken a bath, washed his hair and put on a fresh shirt. He hardly noticed that the sole black suit he owned, the one with silk ribbons on the lapel, had been brushed and pressed by Baba the evening before. He just put it on with a sigh. His leather boots, too, had been meticulously brushed and polished up with

grease. Giovanni gave them a probing look, pausing briefly before putting them on.

Upon his arrival at the Hotel Bernina he was glad to have heeded Bice's advice. The gentlemen without exception wore black or dark grey suits. Giovanni noticed the exquisite watch chains and buttoned-up vests, the silk bows tucked under snow-white shirt collars, the gleam of cufflinks against starched shirt cuffs. Champagne was served, and also appetizers. After tasting three of the canapés, he began to feel ravenous, but nonetheless, he would first have to present the speech he had composed with Bice's help.

As he walked toward the lectern that was draped with heavy velour and adorned with golden tassels, he had the sudden impression that the one approaching the podium was not he, but rather the neglected orphan boy; not he, but the destitute delinquent, the forever starving student who had been invited, by means of his art, to be the representative of the incomparable beauty of the Engadin. Giovanni was aware of the absurdity of the situation, yet he faced it serenely and with poise. He was, after all, forty years of age. And yet, it was as if he was a man without a past, as if he had reached adulthood without ever having been affected by past events and experiences. He also forbade himself to set his hopes too high—that way, nothing could go wrong.

"Dear citizens of the Engadin," he began. The auditorium was filled to capacity. He caught sight of Director Walther in the first row. Also sitting up front were Rudolf Bavier, the banker; Gian Töndury-Zehnder; Alphons Badrutt, the well-known hotelier; and Peter Perini, also hotelier. Camille Hoffmann, the pastor, was among them, a fact he found tremendously encouraging. And many other people of high rank whom he hadn't met before. Even so, he found it difficult to focus on any one of them; their shapes were blurred and indistinct. But no matter, he had wanted it that way, he was proud to be standing before them now. He cleared his throat and went on: "The world knows me as a painter of high mountains. My gift as an artist has its origins in the time of my youth. It was further developed at the Brera Fine Arts Academy, in the Brianza, and in Savognin. But it was not until I came face to face with the stern majesty of these mountains that my artistic expression was elevated to a higher plane. My ancestors were mountain dwellers. The spirit of the Alps spoke to my soul, which apprehended it and rendered it on canvas. The men who are knowledgeable about art recognized this soulful, new dimension in my work. They understood it and were convinced, for the subject of our work is the spirit and matter of nature, both. I merely act as its faithful translator. In brief, I have come to offer you a work that has been inspired by the beauty of the mountains. They are the ones that have helped me attain the position I occupy in the world of art, today."

Giovanni went on to explain in simplified fashion what his monumental



project would entail. What he envisioned was a pavilion of sorts, a circular, wrought-iron structure that would cover an area of 3850 square meters in total and would be representative of the landscape of the Engadin, including the atmosphere and ambience of life in the Swiss Alps. It would not only appeal to the visitors' visual sense, but moreover engage their olfactory and auditory faculties. Giovanni Segantini intended it to far surpass the experience of witnessing a theater performance. The stage scenery—a gigantic, revolving canvas—would depict a stretch of 20 kilometers of alpine terrain: the mountain peaks, the glaciers and the valleys. Centrally placed would be the foothills, measuring 75 meters in radius and 16 meters in height. And finally, the mountain itself, complete with firs and Swiss stone pines, precipitous slopes and crevices, boulders overgrown with mosses and lichens, small bridges, waterfalls, Alpine roses and fragrant herbs.

“In short, it will include virtually everything we encounter while walking along our mountain trails,” Giovanni told them. “Our spectators, dear gentlemen of the Engadin, will be allowed to wander through the exhibit and, thanks to the use of many sophisticated methods, will have the experience of finding themselves surrounded by actual cows and the sweet scent of our indigenous flora.”

Giovanni also mentioned that it was his intention to emphasize the prominent glacier groups in the Engadin, primarily the Bernina massif, Piz Palü, Piz Roseg and the Morteratsch glacier, among others. Of course, the major locations of the valley, such as St. Moritz, Samedan, Pontresina and Maloja, reaching all the way to Silvaplana, Celerina and Sils, including their many lakes and hotels, would also be featured.

“The Panorama will become the focal point of attraction at the Paris World Exhibition, and the reputation and renown our beloved Engadin will garner as a result will increase enormously. Once the exhibition comes to a close, our panorama will tour the great cities of the world. We can count on a minimum of fifteen years of ongoing exhibitions and advertising for our valley, which so richly deserves promotion. The Engadin will be seen in the wealthiest capital cities of Europe and America. I want to take this opportunity to thank you.”

A round of strong applause ensued, followed by several cheers. Most of the guests, who had been shaking Giovanni's hand to express their admiration and to congratulate him, had withdrawn to further discuss the matter in groups. “You are fast becoming the principal publicist of the Engadin,” said Doctor Oskar Bernhard, approaching Giovanni.

Giovanni thanked Bernhard for the interest he had shown in his paintings, and for having purchased some of them, even. “And moreover, you so frequently look after my wife and children, whenever they fall ill.”

“It is my profession, after all,” Bernhard said lightly. “Your family

generally enjoys good health. Only infrequently am I called upon to improve matters. But I must admit, I'm concerned about your wife's eyes. The specialist in Milano hasn't been entirely successful, as I understand."

"Quite so. Bice has traveled twice to Milano for a consultation, and twice he prescribed some drops for her, but nothing has helped, so far. I would give my life, if only I were able to relieve her suffering," Giovanni added with a sigh. Bernhard interrupted him with a smile.

"Your wish indicates to me that you are an honorable man, Segantini, but the medical establishment will not allow for such acts of kindness. And besides, it would entail a bitter loss for the world of art. I was told again only recently that you've become a protégé of the Austrian emperor, and that the Secessionists in Vienna now regard you as one of theirs."

In the meantime, Camille Hoffmann, the pastor, had come over to join their conversation, but Doctor Bernhard regretfully had to take his leave in order to return to the clinic. He would have enjoyed speaking further with Hoffmann and Segantini.

"A worthwhile, but difficult task lies ahead of you," Camille Hoffmann told Giovanni. "But—is it absolutely necessary for live animals to be involved? Would it not border on animal abuse?"

"To tell you the truth, I hardly know, myself," Giovanni said, somewhat piqued. "Hopefully, I won't be the only one working on the project. I'm sure we'll find a way."

"I certainly hope so," Hoffmann said obligingly. "From what I have seen of your work so far, it distinguishes itself by being straightforward. It comes across as innovative and full of vitality. If you are able to transpose those qualities to your Panorama, nothing can go wrong." Giovanni and Hoffmann separated on amiable terms and agreed that Camille Hoffmann would visit Giovanni in one of his painting locations, at his earliest convenience.

\* \* \*

Giovanni's proposal was reprinted in its entirety and appeared in several of the local newspapers, including the *Engadiner Post*, dated October 20, 1897. After Bice had read parts of it to him, he reckoned that he could ask for a sum of 50,000 Swiss francs. Not as an advance, but to cover the cost of the drawings and sketches, plus incidental expenditures.

"Just imagine: My share of the profits will be twenty-five percent of the net profits, up to a half a million. If the profits turn out to be higher, I'll get as much as fifty percent."

Bice hesitated, but preferred to remain silent. The endeavor as a whole struck her as ludicrous and in bad taste. What did any of it have to do with art, if mail coaches from the Engadin valley rattled and rolled along a rickety, make-believe road inside some Panorama, while at the same time, not far away, cows and sheep were moving about as the original inhabitants, so to speak? Such ideas could only have been conceived by

men whose playful urges must have been frustrated. Bice felt the need to tell Giovanni outright about how utterly ridiculous his plans really were. But then, she changed her mind, thinking of the many specialists, namely architects, master-builders and bankers who had inspected the blueprints and models. Perhaps the men were on the right track, after all. And besides, Bice had other concerns. Once again, the budget for her household was fast approaching the zero point. Perhaps she would have to make a phone call to Milano. Or money might be coming in from Grubicy, or from some rich manufacturer. Heaven only knew. But Bice was certain of only one thing: She'd had enough.

Giovanni in his exuberance seemed unaware of Bice's misgivings. Already, a list was being circulated, he explained, in order to secure the starting capital of 20,000 Swiss francs.

"Two gentlemen, namely Töndury and Zambail, are applying to the government, asking them to secure the space that will be required for the Swiss project in Paris. As you can see, everything is proceeding as it should. Seriously, quite seriously."

Giovanni hardly noticed how pale and agitated Bice had become. That she had been crying. He believed that it was her eyes again that were giving her trouble. He made inquiries, but Bice felt that deep down he was only interested in his project. Giovanni refrained from pressing the matter further. At least, there was hope for Bice that the new drops from Milano would prove helpful. Her eyes seemed less reddened; already, the floaters had started to diminish. She was glad that she wasn't in need of anyone's compassion. Least of all Giovanni's.

Since Giovanni's project had been publicized in all the newspapers, he received a great deal of mail, ten letters a day, and sometimes even more. One of these letters arrived from Milano. It was from Alberto Grubicy.

*Dear Giovanni. Do what you want. But stay away from this Panorama of the Engadin. It horrifies me. Yours, Alberto.*

For an instant, Giovanni felt as if paralyzed. His heart beat quickly and his mouth was parched. Then it occurred to him that Alberto must be annoyed, since Giovanni intended to sell his own paintings and would therefore no longer be turning the rights to his paintings over to the Grubicy gallery. He was convinced that Alberto begrudged him the immense project he had secured, because he himself would not be deriving any profits from it whatsoever. Alberto's rancor bothered Giovanni. He sat down at his desk, intending to write him an indignant letter at once, but then thought otherwise.

To distract himself, he would first reply to the letter of a colleague who had kindly asked for his feedback.

*Dear Mr. Orsi,*

*I have read your writing which, among the many commentaries I have received, strikes me as the most intriguing one. But the sections where you describe my approach to painting and the reasons that inform my technique are not entirely accurate. The way I paint is pure and simple. To create anything more simple and straightforward is impossible. For the past ten years I have been relying exclusively on the paints, thinners and varnishes manufactured by Lefranc in Paris.*

*Initially, I tried various kinds of paints, because I was always interested in the latest innovations. But since I work predominantly in the outdoors, under a sunny sky, at an altitude of more than 2,000 meters where the air is crystal-clear, I noticed that some of the colors were fading, while others became increasingly dark and dull. I asked for advice in Paris and after investigating further, I took all the glorious, radiant colors that had intrigued me, packed them into a case and sent them back to Lefranc to be exchanged, keeping only the ones of superior quality, the permanent and non-fading ones.*

*I prepare the canvas with French chalk and oil. I stretch the canvas onto a frame and then, with a soft brush, I apply a particularly vibrant shade of Terra rossa, because the whiteness of the canvas bothers my eyes. Once that process is complete, I start to outline, on canvas, the basic idea I happen to be occupied with, at the time, and which I aim to finalize by refining it in more and more detail. If the idea which I intend to actualize in the painting is inspired by nature, I will first produce a drawing that corresponds to the emotional response it evoked in me initially, and then transfer those lines to the prepared canvas. If, on the other hand, the idea originated from within, I will seek out the corresponding lines in nature. Once the lines that I put down on canvas have been firmly established and represent what I aspire to, intellectually, I proceed by carrying out the so-called generalized coloration as a way of completing the preparatory stage, adhering as closely as possible to the original conception. To do this, I use narrow brushes with the longest bristles available and settle down to do the actual work on canvas, applying the undiluted oil color with very thin and impasto brushstrokes, while leaving empty spaces between the individual brushstrokes, which I then proceed to fill in with a complementary color, taking care to do so while the principal color is still wet, to create an optical meld of the colors in the*

*painting. The mixing of pigments on the palette tends to result in somber tones; the purer the colors are that are applied to the canvas, the more we will help our painting approach a feeling of radiance, of atmosphere, of verity. This fact is being recognized by all judicious painters, these days, but precious few of them – almost none – can truly appreciate the vast difference that exists between the mixing of colors on the palette and the direct application of pure color to the canvas.*

Giovanni put down his feather pen. He listened. Looked at his watch. It was almost two o'clock in the morning. Now, he could hear someone walking around in the kitchen; the opening and closing of cupboards, a stifled outcry, full of rage—that must be Bice. Giovanni jumped up, trying in haste to place his feather pen back in its ink-well and, missing it, ran cursing to the kitchen, where he came upon Bice seated on a footstool. Her pallid, porcelain face was imbued with utter despair. Something permeated the air in the kitchen. He wasn't sure what it was, but it surged through him like a sensation of imminent danger. He asked her, frightened, whether she had been unable to sleep. Bice refrained from answering, turned away from him. He heard her say, quietly, that he had uprooted her, snatched her away from her previous life. "I thought I was inviolable because you were by my side. All these years, I thought I possessed equanimity, only to find out it was false. And now, I can't go on, anymore."

Bice jumped up, hastily opened drawers and cupboard doors, shouted at Giovanni that all the stocks were depleted. Once again. "No bread, no flour—not even a drop of oil or milk, anywhere? Nothing at all that I might be able to feed the children in the morning?"

"But wait—it was only yesterday that Gustav Klimt was our guest, wasn't it? He was full of praise for your meal—I remember it well," Giovanni stammered helplessly. But Bice shook her head. Remained silent. For Giovanni, each second of her silence turned to icy horror.

"The only thing we had to offer was some left-over barley soup and a glass of wine," Bice began sarcastically. "But the marvelous Klimt, who probably dines regularly with the nobles in Vienna, he ate that simple soup as though it were something special, after Gottardo told him it was our favorite dish, in the Grisons."

Bice leaned against the kitchen table, fatigued. "You were the one who invited Klimt. After all, he's famous; he received the Emperor's prize, recently. What an elegant, handsome man he is. And all we had to offer him was barley soup."

"But, Bice—Klimt came here because he wanted to see me. It was because he's a member of the Vienna Secessionist group. That was the reason he came to see me. He takes an interest in me because of my painting. He most certainly isn't interested in what food we may have to

offer him.”

He wasn't certain Bice had been listening. She was wiping away tears.

“I feel so ashamed in front of our children. Frequently, I don't have much to offer them in the way of a proper meal—and here you are, sitting at your desk for hours, poring over your newspaper articles and your letters instead of attending to your painting! The rent is yet to be paid, we're in need of more wood and, most importantly, I need money so Baba and Mea can go shopping at the market! Last week, they advanced some of their own money, and I want to repay them. With interest! And what do you do? You spend day in, day out, fantasizing about a project that is completely silly. Pure megalomania, if you ask me!”

“But I have written to Alberto. Four letters, so far! He won't respond. I think he is annoyed with me, because of my massive Engadin project.”

“In that case, you will have to travel to Milano and personally light a fire under him! Your paintings are exhibited in many different places, after all. You are an official participant in practically every major group exhibition, be it in Amsterdam, Paris, Milano, Turin, Venice or St. Petersburg. And also in the prominent places of the avant-garde—the Munich Secession and the Vienna Secession, as well as in Dresden and at the Ernst Arnold gallery. Your paintings are sold world-wide. I've lost count of the places they've all traveled to. Or from whence they have returned, because you want to further work on them.”

Bice's exasperation had brought a blush to her cheeks. Her hair was loosened and wavy, which gave her a youthful and impassioned look. Giovanni would have loved to embrace her, but written on her full lips was nothing but bitter disdain, and now she was starting up again with her accusations.

“If I didn't know how successful you are, I wouldn't even think of complaining. So many paintings of yours have already won gold medals—five gold medals, in total! Then, not long ago, you received the Prize of the Italian State—I can't even begin to list them all. With the present state of affairs, it is always the others who tend to get rich. Why don't we try selling those blasted gold medals of yours? It's high time you put your affairs in order!”

Bice ran outside, and Giovanni stood wiping his brow with the back of his hand. He had the feeling that years of idyllic joy were now a thing of the past, and that within seconds his life had become the very image of sorrow, of injustice. He looked around the kitchen, at the cupboard doors that had been flung open, which seemed a perfect match for his own state of mind—no sign of stability or hope, anywhere. Ultimately, Bice was right. Considering the success of his paintings, they should be enjoying greater prosperity by now. Giovanni could understand why Bice's nerves were frayed. She had been forced to endure the triviality of everyday life, all the bothersome household tasks such as procuring the groceries and

providing clothing for the children and the domestic servants. Doctors' visits were costly. So were the regular trips to Milano. Bice's temperamental outburst had helped him recognize that whereas his painting provided the means to support his family, it was Bice who had had to endure the mind-numbing, worrisome duties related to the upkeep of the family. He resolved to find a way to remedy the situation. Grubicy had indicated some time ago that the *Neue Pinakothek* in Munich had shown an interest in acquiring *The Ploughing*. He had been especially pleased with Munich for wanting it, whereas Berlin had irked him. Not necessarily because they had rejected *The Punishment of Lust*. It had been the condescending tone of their dealings with him that had set his teeth on edge. Giovanni's triumph had been all the greater when a museum in England had decided to snap it up.

And now, Munich had decided to own a work by Segantini! How wonderful! So far, Giovanni had refrained from mentioning it to Bice, in case the deal failed to close. If enquiries had been made more frequently, the painting might have been sold by now. It was all Alberto's fault. But now, Giovanni would change all that! He was now going to be in charge of selling his own paintings.

Giovanni went back to his desk and started working on the letter he had wanted to write to Alberto Grubicy earlier that morning.

*Dear Alberto,*

*I understand that my big commission does not fit into your plans, since of course the Paris World Exhibition will be taking up all my available time from here on forward. This only in reply to your letter. But you can't imagine my predicament of late. I can't go on like this. Each day, I'm forced to endure some humiliation or other, and for nearly a month I haven't had as much as ten Centisimi in the house. It is pure agony. There is no gold to be mined from the surrounding mountains, and one spends more time waiting for money and fearing misery than dedicating oneself to art. Even if you were to send me my monthly installment, what good would it do, since we already have the following month to worry about, so please give some thought as to what you can do, and let me know as soon as possible.*

*Yours, Segantini.*

He added a postscript:

*Now you have pushed matters so far that I have incurred Bice's wrath! I've always enjoyed seeing her when she's a little bit angry with me, but her revolt today was more than*

*mere playfulness on her part. Bice has the ability to hurt me quite easily and today, she wounded me. I feel like I'm in slavery, whereas only yesterday I felt well-situated in Klimt's company. He told me that I would most likely be awarded a gold medal for my large-format painting, The Two Mothers. Klimt also said that they were crossing themselves at the Academy because of the painting. The professors among the jury were apparently in an uproar about it. But they weren't the ones who were going to be asked for their input, said Klimt. The Secession was made up of young people, and they were the ones who would be awarding me the prize. And that I was a Secession in my own right, that was Klimt's considered opinion of me.*

*Ciao. Segantini.*

Bice stood in front of the mirror and cooled her eyes with a wet cloth. Soon, it would be coming back, again. The headache. That was all it got her. A headache, every time she cried, which was ample reason to avoid it. Why did she have to make a scene in front of Segante? Wasn't it at least partly her fault that Segante, as soon as he had paid off the most pressing of debts with his newly-earned money, would start spreading it among the people? At home with her parents Bice had learned that while on all accounts they weren't considered poor, one's wealth was not something to be exhibited. Her mother received gifts of flowers, of course. But only on her birthday, and never more than five roses. Whenever guests were expected, the table would be decorated with flowers, but at no other times.

If, on the other hand, Giovanni came into some money, he made sure that Bice was immediately presented with an offering of a hundred roses. Or lilies. Or tulips. What seemed to matter was that his arms were laden with flowers, and that some of them would be dropped on the way from the front door to the drawing room, so that Bice would have to go through the house in search of pitchers and vases to accommodate all that blessed bounty. Had she not felt joyful on every one of these occasions? Had she not been enchanted that Segante had thought of her first, before anyone else? Normally, he didn't occupy himself with the procurement of groceries for the household, but the fruit deliveries to the kitchen, whenever he had plenty of money in his pocket, were utter luxury. Fruits of every kind, nuts, chestnuts and grapes were dragged into the house in great quantities, and the entire family, including Baba, Mea and the *Professore* were obligated to consume them at mealtimes so that nothing would go to waste. Giovanni also purchased venison, quail and hare directly from the local hunters. The quantities were always in excess. Fortunately, Baba had obtained instructions from her mother on how to



conserve fruit as well as meat, so that Segante's buying sprees could be managed and stores could be laid in for the hard times that were sure to return to the household with predictable regularity. Bice would have liked to implement a more dependable rhythm based on income received from the regular sale of paintings, but both Giovanni and Grubicy seemed to be standing in the way of achieving that, and she was left with the uneasy feeling that she might never acquire the necessary knack for managing her household affairs.

Born in Trinidad and raised in India, Greece, the USA and Israel, BARBARA CURRY MULCAHY lived in Northern Alberta for most of her adult life. She moved to the Kootenays in 2012. Her book of poetry, *The Man with the Dancing Monkey*, was shortlisted for the Pat Lowther and Gerald Lampert awards. The poems published here are from a series called “Cocktail Party”. An earlier version of the series was broadcast on CBC’s Alberta Anthology.

## Seven Poems / Barbara Curry Mulcahy

### The Mathematician

The mathematician  
doesn’t tie his shoes.  
He has come early.

While we wait  
he talks about time,  
tells me he likes  
subtleties.

I wonder  
whether shoe-tying  
is a subtlety  
he would like to learn.

### The Monk

The monk would prefer  
to be in his room  
with his breviary.

He doesn’t understand  
that the crackers’ pimento-  
and-olive-topped spread  
is there to save him  
from himself.

“No, thank you,” he says.

## The General

One glance,  
the scene delineated:  
who to use,  
who to avoid,  
how to achieve his purposes.

At the same time,  
he eyes the battlefield  
for a battle  
he would like to lose.

The enemy tilts her head,  
smiles. "You look hot, *mon général*;  
can I get you a drink?"

Her dress low-cut, soft.  
She herself armed  
with bracelets and dangling earrings.  
The tinkle, strangely enough,  
reminding him  
of a tank's treads  
as it climbs  
a rough and stony field.

Already he plans  
how far to let her pursue him  
before he turns  
and engages the full force  
of her attention.

## The Cook

In the kitchen, the cook slices  
another sheet of dough  
into little ribbons that she will wrap  
around the last of the wee  
cocktail sausages.

The timer rings and I pull a tray of sausages  
out of the oven. The ribbons,  
now, perfect padded jackets,  
and the sausages,  
plump with the heat,  
and the smell,  
oh, the smell, the smell.

A big woman, diabetic, with aching legs,  
the cook sits on her stool,  
as I lift each little sausage onto a platter.  
She talks about the guests  
as if they were chickens.

“Oh, they’re hungry tonight!  
You watch how they gobble them up!  
You won’t be able to get to the end of the room before —  
peck! peck! peck! — and the tray is empty.  
And the next tray, you’ll have to take in through the other door —  
or else the same people will grab all the treats  
and in the other room — they won’t get any!  
Just taste one, and see what I mean!”

## The Spy's Wife

The spy's wife  
watches him work the crowd.

She stands in a corner and wonders what happens  
when a spy retires.

Does he stop gliding?

What shape does a shape-changer take  
when he no longer needs  
to change shape? Will he permanently  
take a shape to fit hers?

On the other hand, if things don't last,  
what happens to a spy's ex-wife?

Can she erase these years,  
settle down with a mechanic,  
someone who — when things break — doesn't  
slide away, but stops. And fixes them.

## The Ambassador

The Ambassador's retinue filter the crowd, bringing him morsels of humanity. The Ambassador enjoys the hors d'oeuvres and the

Courvoisier;

he listens to each delectable, each scintillating remark, and nods noncommittally. When he speaks, what he says is more like bait, than conversation.

And yet what really interests him is food—and music—things that explaining won't explain.

## The Candidate

The candidate agrees with everybody.  
And he memorizes names.

His grip so firm,  
with his eyes right on you  
as he repeats your name—  
both incantation  
and laying-on of hands.

Yet, somehow he smiles  
and disengages, ratcheting himself  
from vote to vote.

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## Think You Can Stop 'Melo?

Court Walsh

MY CELL RINGS in the locker room, right after we'd blown out Madrid by 40. It's Norm, my agent in the States. Lamont, he says, your dream's come true. Jeffrey Taylor is out for the season.

"Who's Jeffrey Taylor?" I say.

"Backup forward for the Charlotte Bobcats," Norm says.

"The Bobcats? Man, they the worst."

It's the NBA, Norm reminds me, like he's told me a hundred times before. He says he's got other people if I'm not interested. "You been in frigging Spain for over a year. You want to spend the rest of your career there?" He's not telling me this is a golden opportunity like he did two years ago when I was high-scorer for Missouri State. Back then, he said I'd get picked in the draft, second round at least. When that never happened, he said what would I think of playing in the European League? Big frog in a small pond, shit like that. He ran off a list of guys playing for Madrid or wherever who made it back to the Show. But now, he's like take it or leave it, Lamont, and I'm feeling my star ain't on the rise anymore.

So, I say, "Sure man, when we talking about, next month?"

"Next month?" he says. "Get a sense of reality. The NBA will be in the middle of the playoffs next month."

"Not much chance for Charlotte to be in the playoffs," I say.

When he doesn't answer, I ask him if this is one of them fifteen day deals. That's what they do in the NBA: If you're lucky, you get to come off the bench for a game or two. If you're real lucky, they extend your contract. If not, hasta luego, hombre.

"Twelve days," he says. "Your flight leaves Barcelona at 1:37. That's tomorrow morning." I look at my watch. "You mean tonight. That's less than three hours from now. How am I going to get some sleep?"

"Sleep on the plane," he says.

“Man, I just scored fifty-two points.”

“I haven’t got all day, Lamont. Yes or no?”

“Shit,” I say.

“Is that a yes?”

“I suppose.”

“Look for some flunky holding up a sign with your name on it. And don’t say I never did anything for you.” Norm is gone and “call ended” blinks on my cell phone screen.

All I got in my locker is what clothes I wore to the game, not even a toothbrush. No time to go back to my apartment, so I call a taxi. Time I get to Charlotte, the sun has finally caught up with me, but then we go down in a dirty gray fog and then we’re on a runway slick with rain puddles. It’s early morning, so there aren’t too many people out with signs yet. My guy is holding up a cardboard sign with “Lamonte” scrawled on it in big letters.

“I’m Lamont,” I say and point to the sign. “Without the ‘e’.”

Dude is white, wearing a hoodie, jeans and low-budget sneakers. “I know how to spell your name,” he says. Even before he takes off his sunglasses, I recognize him, though I’m not happy about it. “Bobby,” I say.

Bobby St. Claire was a year ahead of me in high school, but it was his younger sister I knew better. “What you doing here?” I ask.

“Man’s got to eat,” he says. “You think I’d be picking you up if they weren’t paying me?” He frowns. “You going to ask about Debby?”

“How is she?” I say.

Bobby looks me up and down, shakes his head. “You’re the father of twins.”

“Twins? Get out of town.” Then, “What makes you think they’re mine?”

“Look at your ears, man.”

“A lot of people have pointed ears.”

“Not a lot of negroes I’ve run across,” he says.

“So what?” I’m thinking this is racist shit Bobby’s talking. My mother used to tell me she experienced that when she was young. Prejudice they called it back then. Fact is, I never felt much of it, growing up in suburban Baltimore.

“It’s my sister we’re talking about here. If it were up to me, I would have had her get a paternity suit on your ass.”

“Nobody told me,” I say.

“You know how independent she is.” Then he says she didn’t want to have anything more to do with me: Wanted to raise the kids herself; set it up so she could live with mom and dad while she commuted to John Hopkins.

“She was always smart,” I say.



Bobby looks disgusted. "Come on, I got to take you to practice."

In the car, when I tell him I need a night's sleep, he says, "Take that up with the coach." He's burning rubber as we go down the airport road. Then, he starts weaving in and out of traffic like I go to the hoop, except I don't honk before I jam. "What's your rush?" I say. He tells me I got a whole new system to learn and fumbles in the glove compartment. I tell him he better keep his eyes on the road. He hands me a pile of papers. "Your contract," he says.

"Shit, man, I left my reading glasses back in Barcelona."

"Just sign the last page," he says, handing me a Bic pen.

I look over at him, not having written in my last name yet. "How bad are they?" I say.

He tells me the Bobcats got six games left. They don't win at least one of those, they'll have the all-time worst record in the NBA. I ask if he thinks I'll get some playing time, and he says Coach will do anything these days.

I get my full name on the contract and look at it. Teachers all used to tell me I had good penmanship. "Well, it's the Show," I say. "I suppose I ought to be happy." We're pulling into the parking lot of the Arena, a big round house right in the middle of downtown. Behind it are two skyscrapers. One of them is smothered in all this fake art deco shit. When I say it looks like a Gaudi wannabe, Bobby asks, Who the hell is Gaudi? "Man, where is your cultural reach?" I say. I tell him about all those buildings I used to look at in my free time in Barcelona.

He cuts me off. "Playing the Knicks tomorrow night," he says. "You think you can stop 'Melo?" He means Carmelo Antony, the Knicks' superstar.

"Put me on the motherfucker. I'll shut him right down."

"We'll see what Coach thinks about that," Bobby says.

Not much, it turned out, even though I worked my ass off for five hours in practice and had a monster game, at least a triple-double, but it was a scrimmage and nobody counts stats in a scrimmage. I had my game back and I knew it, though they didn't say nothing. It got me so hyped I couldn't get but two hours sleep that night and had a hard time staying awake when I was stuck on the bench the next night against the Knicks.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I feel is somebody shaking me by the shoulder. What the fuck?

This huge frigging orange creature stuffed in a Bobcat's uniform, number six, is right in my face, saying he's Rufus, and do I want to be part of the half-time show or what? I look around me. I'm the only one left on the bench.

I'd seen him first half, riding a tiny tricycle down the sidelines on the other side of the court, but it didn't register. Now it does, for sure. Guy is as tall as I am but the furry orange arms and legs of his clown suit make

him twice as thick as me. And on his big cat-head he's got sunglasses that reflect the light right back at you.

"Rufus?" I say. "That some kind of slave name?"

"Nothing racial about it," he says. "'Rufus Lynx' is Latin for bobcat."

I get up, trying to wipe the tired from my eyes. When I ask how he's spelling that, he does a little dance while he spells R-U-F-U-S. Then he asks if I ever heard of Benny the Bull. Who's that? I say. Chicago Bulls' mascot he says, making like he's got horns. How about Hugo Hornet? Then he looks like he's trying to sting me, and I think New Orleans' team. Rufus spreads his arms like he's trying to fly. "What about Harry the Hawk?"

I can't help laughing. "Atlanta?"

"You're a genius," he says. There's something about this cat I like. "But I do believe they're expecting you in the locker room."

As I'm heading to the tunnel I look up, and there's Bobby pointing me out to this guy in a suit and tie. Both of them are laughing. I nod to Bobby, hoping I don't have to see his face again.

Second half starts and in the middle of the last quarter, Coach calls me to go in the game. You're guarding Antony, he says. Antony's been getting a rest after scoring twenty-five, but the Knicks' coach has just put him back in the game after we've eaten up eight of their thirteen-point lead. It's our possession, and when I run the screen to free a man on the inbounds pass, Antony is right on my back, trash-talking. "Lamont? That don't sound like no Spanish name. Who your mother?"

Ref's got his eye on the ball, so I give Antony a little bit of elbow right in the ribs before I get in the high post Coach wants for his spacing to work. Ball comes to me, and I can feel him breathing down my neck. I fake a pass to the corner, then go to the hoop to jam, which I can't because 'Melo undercuts me. But I do get off a little underhanded scoop to the glass, just before I make friends with the hardwood.

"And one!" the ref yells, and I know, without even looking, that my shot went in. And then Antony is all over the ref, who's telling him if he doesn't cut it out, he'll be ejected. It's our mascot Rufus who helps me up, asking if I'm okay. Fine, I tell him, and on the way to the foul line, I nod at 'Melo. Honk, honk, I say under my breath.

The shot goes in. Honk honk goes Rufus, trailing Antony as he trots down court on the sideline. I'm running just ahead of Antony, thinking how he must be pissed to be beat by some loser from the European League. Sure enough, Antony calls for an isolation play just to show me up. I make a show of flapping my arms all around him. I squawk and kick my feet. But when he drives on me, I raise my hands in the air and let him run into me. Then, I flop with my mouth open as if I were shocked at such unsportsmanlike behavior. Ref calls an offensive foul, and I don't have to do anything except stand up and pretend I'm not laughing as Antony

gets himself ejected for dissing the ref again. Rufus is going batshit on the sidelines, pointing his furry paw toward the locker room and yelling Bye, bye 'Melo. People on our side stand up, pointing their fingers and chanting Bye, bye, as the guy on the organ plays Good Night, Irene.

Back in the game, I start hitting threes. We end up beating the Knicks by five.

The owner, none other than Michael Jordan, who was sitting right behind me all the time, pats me on the back when I get up to go to the locker room. "Nice of you to wake up," he says. Coach Silas tells me I must be Rip Van Winkle, and I repeat this to Antony as we happen to walk down the tunnel together, saying come to Spain some time, I'll be happy to show you around.

When I come out of the locker room, there is Debby, holding the hands of two little boys who've got my pointed ears all right and these little notches right in the center of their chins like I do. I feel like I'm looking in a mirror and there are two of me, only a couple shades lighter of course.

For once, I don't know what to say.

"Apparently, you're coming up in the world," Debby says.

"Don't know about that," I say. Debby still has that little girl face I used to love, and though I can tell she's older, she's got her a set of pigtails which makes her look young again. She's also got some pudge on her she didn't have before. I look from one boy to the other. "What their names?"

"Plato and Aristotle," she says.

"Say what?"

She points her finger at me and gives me the same look she used to after I'd tell her I was out with my friends when I was really fucking some cheerleader. Okay, okay, I say, putting my hands up like I surrender. I had to do that with her too many times, till I just wanted out. I wouldn't look at her when she came up to me in the halls. I wouldn't return her calls. I remember one time when I was strolling along between classes, my arm around some girl and Debby comes charging up out of nowhere like the frigging wicked witch of the west and starts screaming and pounding me on the chest. I had to hold her by the wrists and say calm down, woman, calm down, till a teacher come along and told her to stop it. That was the spring we all graduated, and I left Pikesville High for Missouri State.

The boy on my right interrupts my thoughts. "Deborah says you're our dad."

"Yeah," says the other one.

"Copycat," the first one says to the second.

"How old are you?" I look from one to the other.

"Five," they both say at once.

This one is William, Debby says, holding up the first one's hand like he just won a boxing championship. And this is James, she says, doing the same with the other.

I'm thinking like this is too much, this is way too much. I wish I were back guarding 'Melo again. That was something I could focus on. All I can think of to say is, "They got cheeseburgers somewhere around here?"

When Debby says she's tried to teach them not to eat junk food, I throw up my hands with the same look I gave the ref after I flopped on the hardwood. "Either of you ever had a cheeseburger?" I say. I go on about how on a good cheeseburger you get a quarter pound of top-grade ground beef, and I cup my hands and pat, like I'm forming the perfect beef patty. And then Swiss cheese, I say, you know the kind that looks like it's been shot by a machine gun. I slice the cheese and lay it gently on the burger. I tell them, I forgot the bun and I slap the buns on both sides of the burger. Now for toppings, I say, raise your hand if you like onions. James raises his hand. Both of them are smiling. What about ketchup? I say, turning an imaginary bottle upside down and shaking it on my imaginary burger. I get them all eager like my dog Roadkill used to be whenever I'd say puppy biscuit. But these two ain't dogs. They're sons—my sons.

We pile into Debby's van and take Route 74 going out of town. She tells me her English degree from Hopkins didn't do her a hell of a lot of good, and that she did substitute teaching before she got a job last year as a clerk in some big law firm. Good for you, I say, yawning as I watch the old American four-lane go by: McDonalds and Applebees and Home Depot, pawnbrokers, a strip joint: neon and more neon. Now she's asking me if I remember high school? The prom? Mr. Thomas' class? And I'm going uh huh, uh huh, and hoping she isn't going to get all weepy on me. I try to change the subject, eyeing my sons in the back seat. "So how's your social life?" I say.

"You mean am I seeing anyone?" She looks at the boys through the rear-view mirror. "The answer is yes."

"Her boyfriend, Jimmy," one of the boys says.

"Jimmy a good boyfriend?" I say to the back seat.

"He's okay," the other one says, sounding like I would if someone asked me how I liked vanilla yogurt.

Debby puts a hand on my arm. "That doesn't mean the boys don't need a father."

Don't know what to say about that. We're just passing the Motel Six where the Charlotte Bobcats have so kindly put me up. "My digs," I say.

She pulls into an all-night diner, shiny stainless steel with bright blue and red neon lights. "Look at that art deco," I say.

"What's art deco?" It's dark in the back so I don't know which one said it.

I tell the boys that art deco is one kickass architectural style. We get out of the van, and I'm going on about the 1920s and all the art deco buildings in New York City. We find an empty table, and William and James get in a fight about who's going to sit next to me. I settle it by telling them to sit across the table from me and Debby. This way, I can keep an eye on them and maybe figure out which one is William and which one is James. One of them has a couple missing front teeth. That's James, I figure. Checking out the menus, the boys have forgot about art deco, but Debby hasn't. You used to be in all those AP classes, she says, good to see you're still using your mind. I tell her she was smarter than I was, that's why I went to Missouri State and she got into Hopkins.

"No, I wasn't," she says. "You just never applied yourself."

"Maybe," I say, then I tell her all about the Gaudi buildings in Barcelona. I don't realize I been making these little shapes with my hands till my sons get in a contest trying to copy me.

"Like this," William says, doing what I did but letting his hand flutter like a big-ass bird that's been ruffled.

"No, no," James says, like this, and he looks more like Rufus the mascot than like his daddy.

The food comes, three whopping cheeseburgers and a salad for Debby. Why you like that rabbit food? I ask her. Rabbit food, James says, nudging his brother in the ribs. Rabbit food, William says, trying to make rabbit ears with his hands.

"Stop that," Debby says.

"Best food in the world," James says. Cheeseburger's got half his face covered.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Debby says.

The boys look at each other, then at me for support.

"Do like your mother says," I tell them.

She wants to pay, but I pick up the check.

\* \* \*

Next morning, I'm in the middle of the first good sleep I've had in days when I hear someone trying to beat down the door to my motel room. "Lamont," Bobby yells. "You in there?"

I throw on my clothes while Bobby says his sister wants me to come for breakfast—brunch this late—and hurry up because his ass is in a sling if he don't get me to practice in time afterwards. In the car, he don't say anything about the game I had—not that I'd ever expect Bobby to give me a compliment. I'm sure the invitation to Debby's house was her idea. I ask him who was the white dude with the suit sitting next to him?

"Deb's new boyfriend," he says.

"She serious about him?"

"You're damned right she is." Now he starts driving worse than yesterday, shooting into the parking lane, slamming on the breaks, and

making a sharp turn against traffic. People honk at him and he sticks his arm out the window and gives them the finger.

“I’m not after your sister,” I say.

He doesn’t answer, and I’m thinking the guy has had it in for me since I was in frigging high school. All I can think of to say is, “I liked the two boys.”

“That’s white of you.”

“Fuck off, Bobby. Just fuck off.”

We go the rest of the way in silence, me thinking yeah, I liked the twins well enough, though they don’t quite feel like family yet. Never hurts to be nice to people though. Too bad Bobby doesn’t feel that way, but there’s nothing I can do about that.

He turns onto this street that looks like Hometown, USA. Quiet neighborhood, everyone’s got their own yard. Reminds me of where Debby grew up in Baltimore, except the houses here are brick.

One of the twins opens the front door. “Hey,” I say. “You’re William, right?”

He nods, tries to give me a high-five. “You in time for lunch,” he says. It don’t sound natural but I guess he’s trying to imitate the way I talk. I put my arm right next to his and he seems to be studying it. “How come you’re blacker than us?”

I don’t get a chance to answer because there’s James. I give him a bow. He’s got a big grin on his face that makes the gap between his teeth look wide enough to drive through. Debby’s right behind him asking how I slept. Pretty good I say. “James could use some dentures.” She says she’s saving up for them and takes me into the kitchen which is like something in the copies of *Better Homes and Gardens* my mother would leave lying around our house: lots of space, white walls, stainless steel fridge and oven, big butcher block table right in the center. I try to make small talk with the boys, while Bobby complains about having to get me to practice at eleven. It’s after ten already and why didn’t she let him know earlier? All the while he’s talking, he’s glancing my way as if I was going to make off with the family silverware.

Finally, Debby says hold on for a second, she’ll make me a tahini wrap.

“Let me take a rain check on that,” I say, making a funny face to my sons. Both of them laugh at once.

\* \* \*

After that, we got a week on the road. Lakers blow us out of the Forum, and I don’t do so well trying to shut down Kobe Bryant who gets twenty-one points before Coach pulls me out. Jack Nicholson is in his usual seat in the front row, and you can also see him on the jumbotron, under the scoreboard, a huge video screen the size of one of those international shipping containers. I’m thinking is Nicholson putting a hex on me? Did

he tell Coach Silas to give me only four minutes playing time and a grand total of one point next night when we lose to the Spurs? Last game of the trip, against the Sacramento Kings who are almost as bad as we are, I watch from the bench. Seems like my only friend the whole time out west is our mascot Rufus. "Keep the faith, Lamont," he tells me as we file out after the game.

Rufus isn't really Rufus but a white dude named Bud Abbot, who's 6'9", even taller than me. We're sitting together on the flight back East where we got back-to-back games against the Celtics and then the Knicks again. I ask him is that the Rockies down there? I got the window seat, but you can't see for shit at night. "Probably," he says. I ask him who he played for? He tells me he never played beyond high school. At Bowling Green, he got into gymnastics and won an NCAA title on the horse and the rings. That explains why he's such an acrobat, I think. I ask him where he learned to dunk.

"Watching videos of you," he says.

Rest of the flight, we talk more about ourselves. I ask if being a mascot gets him more pussy? Oh no, he says, he's married, got a family. Family? I say, "I think I got a family." I start to tell him about my two sons. "I know," he says, "William and James are two of my favorite fans." During games, he goes up in the stands with the home crowd. Sometimes he sits in Debby's lap.

What does Bobby think about that? I say. "Bobby knows it's me. Bobby's been with the 'Cats for almost two years now, trying to work his way up from gopher." I laugh. "He sure don't go for me." Then, "Don't you think Bobby's a little bit racist?" Bud shrugs his shoulders, says Bobby's a good worker. "Nobody's perfect. He's just protective of his little sister." I ask Bud about Debby's new boyfriend. He's a lawyer, Bud says. She met him at work. "He's friends with Bobby."

When the wheels bounce on the runway, it comes to me: Today's the last day of my contract.

I tell that to Bud, and he says the Bobcats are not looking for another backup forward this late in the season. You sure about that? I say. He tells me he talked with Coach Silas.

"Shit man, you did that for me?"

"Keep the faith, Lamont."

I'm really hoping I get in the game against the Celtics. Bud knows I been practicing. Every game, I'm on the court before the rest of the team.

\* \* \*

Halftime comes at the TD Bank Garden in Boston, and I'm still on the bench, looking at that parquet floor I've always wanted to play on. As I get up to go to the locker room, I see Rufus beginning his antics. He pats one of the cheerleaders on the ass and then covers his mouth as if he just made a terrible mistake. The fans boo and hiss but half of them are

laughing. Then, it's time for his patented slam dunk. He steals the ball right out a ref's hands and goes for the hoop. Shit, he does it better than I do, taking a giant step from the foul line, going airborne and slam bam thank you, ma'am. Only this time, his paw snags on the rim and he bangs on the floor. He's making like he can't get up, shaking his furry head and all. But I've seen him enough times to wonder if he's just fucking around or has he really hurt himself? I stand there for a minute gawking as the rest of our team goes through the tunnel. Hey Rufus, I yell. He's still making like he's okay but when he gives me this come here motion with his finger, I know he's not.

I saunter out on the court, real casual like it's all part of the half-time show. "S'up?" I say, bending over him.

"You got to help me," he says.

"Ooooooh," I say, squinching up my face like I used to when I was in high school plays. I get him on his feet, get his arm over my shoulder, and we go off the court together, Rufus waving at the fans as he hobbles on one leg. Easy, dude, I tell him, smiling up a storm at the audience. He's hurting so much I can feel the pain. Doctor looks at Ben's leg for a minute, says it's a compound fracture and calls an ambulance on his cell phone.

In the locker room, Coach Silas is jabbing at the blackboard, yelling at us about defense. Pierce has 21 already, he yells. I'm thinking if I stopped 'Melo, I can stop Paul Pierce who's slowing down as he gets older.

If I can just get in the game.

I try to catch Coach's eye but he don't look at me. Until the buzzer sounds and everybody stands up. "Lamont," he says, "Stick around for a second," and he leaves the room. Fuck, I'm thinking, game over. I won't even get to sit on the bench. But then, he comes back carrying Rufus' entire outfit: number six jersey, oversized bobcat head, orange furry top and bottoms.

It was Michael's idea, he says, and when I tell him I didn't see Jordan in the stands, he says Jordan just called him and said I could get them back in the game better from the sidelines. "MJ thinks you're a natural," he says. Then, he goes on about how if I do the mascot gig well I get a contract for the rest of this year and all of next. What about Bud? I say. Coach says Bud is out for the rest of the season, and maybe part of next. If I do a good job, and if Bud comes back, they could have two mascots.

"Will I ever get to play again?" I say.

"Time will tell," he says. "Right now, this is your role."

"Shit, I don't know, Coach."

"Bud says you're the one," he says, handing me the Rufus head. "Get dressed. It's showtime."

This is not me, I'm thinking.

Frigging top is heavy. Baggy pants and feet are all one piece and the soles don't have half the traction of my Adidas. I'm breaking out in a



sweat by the time I get the Cat head on, and with the sunglasses it's like trying to see the Rockies from the plane last night. Finally, my eyes adjust. I look at myself in the mirror and do a half-hearted jump, waving my paws, trying to remember what I saw Bud do all those times.

Not me, not me, I'm thinking as I go through the tunnel and then stumble along the sidelines to the team bench. I take a bow before Coach, and squeeze in on the bench between Kembla Walker and Brian Mullens, our backup center. There's my tricycle in the far corner. And there is the ramp for my half-time Jam. How am I ever going to dunk without breaking my own leg?

When Kevin Garnett goes to the foul line for two shots, Coach nudges me, and I run down the sidelines till I'm there right next to the basket support, yelling "Over the hill, KG. You are over the hill." I pull out a folding chair and stand on it, flailing my arms. "Go Cats, go Cats." I yell myself hoarse, holding up a big sign to the fans that says "NOISE!" And in the last few seconds, when Paul Pierce is going to the line to shoot two, I run on the court, grab the ball out of his hands and go in for the Rufus slam. I'm surprised I could do it, but the ref is pissed. He gets right in my face, telling me I got no right on the court when time is running. I make a face, covering my mouth with both paws, and slinking away. The ref makes the T with his hands, and over the loudspeaker the announcer says Technical foul on Charlotte. When I take a bow from center court, there are more laughs than boos. I'm thinking probably I'll be on that plane to Barcelona any minute now. Pierce misses the T and one of the two shots he gets after that. Down by one, we get the ball. Kembla brings it up court, rolls off the pick and sinks a jumper with .08 on the clock. I run to the huddle, my big arms around my teammates, while Coach calls the defensive set. No fouls, he says, and then says to me, as if I were his dog, "Rufus, sit!" But he's laughing too. And I never seen him laugh before. I take Kembla's place on the bench, cross my fat furry legs and rest my big Cat head on my front paw. The inbounds goes to Pierce at half court who throws up a prayer that God doesn't answer, and we win.

Two days later, Bud is out of the hospital on crutches. Coach has fixed it up so we get a gym, some junior high school in the Bronx so I can learn the new system, the Rufus system, that is.

Rule number one, Bud says, do not be on the court when the clock is running. You do not goose the gal while she's singing the national anthem. You do not smash pies in fans' faces like Houston's mascot did. Benny the Bull ran his tricycle into a police officer on the sidelines. You do not do that. And remember, to little kids, you look like the creature of doom. That hairy Squatch of the Sonics used to scare the bejesus out of kids. So does Go the Gorilla, Phoenix's mascot.

"The twins aren't scared of you," I say.

"That's because they know me." If I'm going to be a good mascot, he

says, I have to like *all* little kids, on and off the court. He goes on about how I can be of service to the community. He says he was scheduled to go on Oprah, and I would have to take his place. The salary is a little under a hundred grand a year, plus all those endorsements. I'll even get the chance to go to Beijing next year. "Picture yourself sitting on the Great Wall of China. Wouldn't you rather do that than sit on the Charlotte bench?" He tells me about Larry, the Celtic's mascot who got fired because he wouldn't go to charity events. "You have to be a goodwill ambassador." He stops so it sinks in. "This is a full-time job, Lamont."

"Work ain't no stranger to me."

"Good," he says. "You can start with your sons. They never had a father."

"What about Debby's new boyfriend?"

"Jimmy?" Bud makes this pfffft sound like Jimmy was a mosquito he was swatting away. "I could be a better father than Jimmy."

"Not with my boys," I say.

"Your boys?"

"Yeah."

"Then be a father to them." He's looking me right in the eye. "Or else stay away so you don't break their hearts."

"That's my business," I say. "What else have I got to learn?"

"When we get done here," Bud says, "you can watch my videos. No, you can study my videos."

I scratch my head. "You teaching yourself out of a job, Bud. How come?"

"You've got a ways to go before you get to my level," Bud says. When I ask what level is that? he says he's Number eight in the current mascot standings. Behind Benny the Bull for Chicago, Detroit's Harry the Horse, the Orlando Magic Dragon, to say nothing of the teams that don't have a mascot, except for their all-star fans like the Lakers' Jack Nicholson. I didn't see Nicholson do nothing except sit on the bench, I say, and Bud says Nicholson doesn't have to do anything except sit on the bench. "Just like Spike Lee who you will have to deal with tonight."

"So I'm looking to get a report card? 'Plays well with other mascots?'"

"Exactly," he says.

"Did you really watch my videos?"

He did, he says, along with videos of twenty million other guys who have a propensity for dunking.

\* \* \*

Game time comes all too soon. Rules of the Garden say I can't come on till the players finish their shoot-around. When I was playing, I'd be out there long before this. I got half a mind to be warming up with the team, but I'd probably never get the chance to get out of the warm-up suit. The suit I'm in now is making me itch to practice what I just been learning,

maybe bring out my inner Rufus.

There's the horn, and there's the walk-on music. Instead of a mascot, the Knicks have cheerleaders, nine of them, every one a fox in her shiny royal blue satin pants and a red-striped bikini top. While they're doing their routine, I sneak up behind them, pretending I'm a beauty judge, writing on my official pad and nodding. I stop at the prettiest cheerleader, my big paws over her, lumbering like I'm FrankenRufus. "Umh umh," I say. She spins around, screams and almost trips up. The Knick fans are laughing. "What you doing after the game?" I yell. It's for the fans, not for real. Somehow, I'm not wanting to chase everything in skirts the way I used to. And maybe it's time I got my own act together before I be in a relationship. Fact is, I never had one of those. Gal I hung around with in Spain was the closest. But when she saw I wasn't really interested in learning Spanish, it was Adios, Señor.

I stand by the refs while both teams are introduced, looking up at the stands. The Charlotte section is not even half full. There's Debby with my two boys. I wave. William nudges James and both wave back at me. I beat my chest like Tarzan. One of the refs tells me if he sees me out on the court when the clock is running, it's not only a Technical against the Bobcats, but I am suspended for two games. Plus I'll get probably 50 hours of community service. "Capiche, Mr. Cat?"

I don't mind the community service part at all; I need to do more of that. But since the refs don't like my rep so far, and this is the same ref who threw 'Melo out in our last game against the Knicks, all I say is I'm a good little Bobcat, wouldn't dream of doing anything against the rules. But at the same time I'm thinking how to get 'Melo hot enough to get ejected before the Knicks build a lead we'll never get to.

First half gets going, and when Gerald Henderson, our starting forward, is leading a fast break, 'Melo gets in front of him and takes the hit, falling on his back, banging his hands on the hardwood as if he's in mortal agony or some shit. It's all an act—I ought to know. So I flop too, flailing my arms and legs. Boos come from the stands, even before 'Melo gets called for the offensive foul. I trail him down the sidelines, yelling "Flop again, Antony. I love it when you flop." I'm getting his goat, I can tell by the look in his eyes. When he gets the ball, I yell Honk Honk like I did when I was playing against him, and this discombobulates the mother just long enough for Kembla to pick him like a chicken and go all the way to the other end for the slam.

Knicks' coach calls a time out. Spike Lee is sitting in his usual front-row seat, so I take the opportunity to run over and make motions like I'm filming him with a movie camera. "Who got game now?" I say.

We're up by five at halftime, and before it's my turn to do my dunk trick, I go up in the stands where the Charlotte fans are and there are plenty of open seats. Now, I sit in Debby's lap, like Bud told me he used

to do, and put my arms around my two boys.

“Where’s my daddy?” William says, eyebrows all knit up.

I shrug my shoulders like I don’t know what he’s talking about. Little girl in the next row down takes one look at me and starts to cry. I pat her on the head, say “Meow,” and start to purr.

“Yeah,” says James. He looks even sadder than his brother. “Why ain’t our daddy playing?” The camera must have followed me up here ’cause there we are on the jumbo screen hanging over center court.

“Don’t use ‘ain’t,’” my son’s mother says. To me, she says, “You’re heavy, Bud.”

I got to get my sons on the screen too. “William and James,” I say in my natural voice, shaking my furry finger at the image on the big screen.

Debby on the screen has a look of shock on her face. “Lamont?”

“Daddy?” William gets it out first, but James is so close behind it sounds like an echo. I stand up and hold their hands high for all the world to see. We’re champions, me and my two sons.

“Gotcha,” I say, springing up and vaulting over the row of empty seats in front of them. “Cat’s got to prow!” I hop to the end of the row, look back: “Tell that little girl all about Rufus.”

This time, I do my dunk, elevating from a special ramp they’ve put on the foul line, twisting in the air till I’m facing away from the hoop and slam it in backwards. Just before the second half starts, I get in the huddle like I used to when I was playing. Back then, I never said anything, but now I tell them the Knicks are more likely to fall apart when they’re losing. Coach is still coach, so I say, “Right, Coach?”

“Yeah,” he says, looking like he’s wondering what sort of monster he made out of this new mascot.

“Go at ’Melo,” I tell them. “He’s ready to blow if you keep the pressure up.”

Which is exactly what happens with 3:57 to go in the third. Every time Antony fucks up, I exaggerate it, another flop, holding out my paws like I been robbed after Kembla makes another steal on him, and then when Henderson swats the ball into the third row of the stands as ’Melo’s going to the hoop. While the ref’s getting another ball, Henderson steps out of bounds with me and I put my arm around his shoulders, both of us squinting with our hands over our eyes as if to say, where’d that ball go, outer space? Each time, the boos get louder, till you can’t tell whether they’re for me or for ’Melo. He doesn’t know either, he don’t know anything except he’s had enough. “You ain’t got but one life, Cat!” he yells at me.

Bingo.

I tail him down the sideline where he’s trying to get loose so he can nail a three-pointer, and I say the first thing that pops into my head: “Tell your sister I’m back in town.” I didn’t know if he has a sister or not, but

guess that probably I was right when he starts swinging. One punch connects and I try to turn my stagger into a dance as all three refs blow their whistles at once. And before he knows what hit him, Antony is OUT OF THERE!

Thing I wasn't counting on is the Knicks' bench. They're old but they have pride, and late in the fourth, they're up by ten again. And then the clock runs out.

A little later when the place is almost empty, I'm sitting where Coach Silas sat, one son on either side of me.

"How come you're Rufus now?" William says.

I don't know if I'm ready to answer that. "Where's your mother?"

James says he asked her to go check on Bud, and he says Bud was thankful I rescued him the other night. Bud couldn't have got off the court by himself, I say. James has eyes that seem to ask: Is there anything I can do to ease your pain? This son could be a doctor some day. I'm thinking I got to find a place of my own so I can get to know my boys better. But all I say is, "Thank you," and give both of them a big squeeze.

"You going to play again?" William says.

"Right now, I am the official Rufus Lynx."

Wheels are spinning in William's brain, like he's asking himself, okay, what good is this Rufus Lynx? It's one thing to have a Bud Rufus, quite another to have one who's your daddy. William has a way of looking at you with his eyes all narrowed. It makes you squirm, like he's seeing right through to your inner soul. "You going to be a lawyer when you grow up?" I say.

"Maybe."

"Rufus is good with little kids," James tells his brother.

"Yeah," I say. "He visits sick kids in the hospital." I remember what Bud told me. "He goes all the way to China to visit little kids."

"He go to Spain?" William says.

"Short visit, maybe. My contract's going to run out soon. Think I'll be hunkering down right here in Charlotte."

"Then you're going to be our daddy," William says.

"Uh huh." I take off my mascot head. My cell rings from my Rufus pants pocket. I ignore it.

"You got a black eye," James says.

"Must have been my friend, 'Melo."

The cell rings again and I pull it out. "Rufus here."

It's my agent, Norm. "Rufus?" he says. "I was calling Lamont. Got an unbelievable break for him. Sacramento has an open spot at forward."

"I don't know that Lamont," I say, and hang up.

CAROL HAMILTON has published work in numerous magazines, such as *Atlanta Review*, *Lilliput*, *Storm Cellar*, *Bluestem*, *New Laurel Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Birmingham Arts Journal* and *Main Street Rag*. She has published 16 books of children's novels, legends and poetry. Her most recent poetry books are *Master of Theater: Peter the Great* and *Legerdemain*. She is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize five times.

## Three Poems / Carol Hamilton

### Henry Ford's First Car Had No Brakes

Exhilaration at 20 m.p.h.,  
a canopy of oaks overhead,  
brambles of raspberry and blackberry  
astounded, untouched  
along the way, early summer air  
etching shape of cheeks  
all reddened, flushed.  
Who would wish to stop, anyway,  
when fantasy suddenly  
wears bicycle wheels and gears  
and June sweeps by like a dream?

## Backing Everything Up

With two new flash drives,  
the most gigabytes I could afford,  
I copied everything  
from my two long-used ones.  
The old sticks seemed  
comfortable enough  
with the breadth of my compulsion,  
yet knowing nothing, I feared  
they were scant and I needy.  
Then I noticed 1 GB  
stamped on each old stick  
as they still gulped down  
my abundant words.  
My poor progeny will be  
overwhelmed simply trying  
to toss all this out.  
(Just think of those scrapbooks  
with bulging spines up in the closet,  
their sere brown gardenia corsages,  
the ticket stubs from high school events).  
Commodious attics are a thing  
of the past, but just like the antique  
and amputeed elm in my backyard,  
I am still broadcasting seeds  
to the four winds with a belief  
in a welcoming and saving soil  
somewhere.

## The Birth of Photography

“I have seized the light.  
I have arrested its flight.”  
Louis Daguerre

To stop time! Box it!  
Think! He could  
lay down an image  
in 15 minutes,  
and sitting,  
so hard!  
Impossible!  
Some man,  
just any man,  
stooped  
to tie his shoe.  
The box captured  
him, the first human  
snapped back  
from his passing.  
His soul escaped  
on down the street  
or around the corner...  
we think.  
We tell ourselves  
time did not start  
to unwind at such  
affront. So we tell  
ourselves. We say  
there is nothing  
here to fear.  
So we say.



RAYMOND J. BARRY's latest acting role is in a TV series called *The Hundred*, shot in Vancouver, B.C. He has had stories published in *Cairn*, *St. Andrews Review* and *Straylight Magazine*. Chicago Plays, a branch of Act One Book Stores, has published two collections of his plays, *Mother's Son and Other Plays* and *Once In Doubt*. His play, *Awake in a World That Encourages Sleep*, was performed in New York City to outstanding reviews. *Once in Doubt* received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award and four Dramalogue Awards. He lives in Los Angeles.

## Walnut Logs, Storefront, 1964-1967

Raymond J. Barry

I HAD A WAY about me then, often sitting idly to fill the time in a rented Tenth Street storefront with the low murmur of cars beyond its bay window. Thank God I was capable of thought. Some mechanism within that dome of mine functioned well enough to think. I certainly had leisure time to think. It was not as if I had to work. There was little requirement on that front. My needs were simple—a mattress on the floor to sleep upon, a small sink for washing; a toilet in the back that I used liberally whenever the urge came upon me. Food was available often enough without planning in this rich country of ours. Thought was the commodity valued and not food. 'Thinking' was the activity held in such high esteem, not the filling of my stomach. The cutting of logs was part of the daily routine, large ones that weighed half a ton.

Carving wood was a religious ritual. That storefront studio was an altar upon which I said my prayers every day. Woodchips covered its floor. Chopping one ton walnut logs for the life of me, my back was to the wall. I wasn't timid about chopping those huge chunks of wood that symbolized the largeness of my ache. Or was it my heart? Something was larger in me, some bigness that needed to be expressed; my desire to impress perhaps. That was big, my need to cry out for people to notice me. Yes, that was big. There was no reservation when it came to throwing my soul out in front of people. I wasn't shy about that, not at all shy about that. If it came to large chunks of wood or small chunks of wood, I would choose large. My heart was in it, to chop away at those huge hunks of walnut. Their hugeness balanced the smallness of my self-image, the humble impression of me that could never be guessed by appearances. Everything I represented appeared big; my sculpture, my shoulders and thickened hands, not to overlook the intensity of my persona that pierced through space, as I stared confusedly at the busy world outside. Big was

everything to me. Size was the standard, and weight, much heavy weight. Those were my criteria of worth.

Glancing outside my studio at people passing by, they seemed busy, walking with such purpose, hustling about like ants. It was not in the cards that I should be one of them, scurrying along the street. I was an unpaid log-cutter by trade and that was a solitary activity suited only to those who could handle mallet and chisel, an endeavor that was not for the faint of heart, carving logs into shapes that suited my sensibility. At night I carried on with part-time jobs, waiting on tables, longshoreman, busboy, plumber, dishwasher, bouncer at a bar to name a few; anything that required the most rudimentary training and simultaneously paid the rent. Depression was part of the experience, a deep one that lasted too long and took me on a ride I shall never forget. I am not one to complain. It was all a learning experience. I would take whatever goodness came of my situation and forget the rest—willingly too, almost stupidly.

Part-time jobs taught important lessons about people and me. I washed dishes in a Mexican restaurant with an open kitchen, wearing rubber gloves and making seven bucks an hour. One night a familiar voice called in back of me, “Ray?” I turned around and found my old school chum, Frank Monahan, a fellow student from Brown University, puzzled at the image of me washing dishes. Not that he said anything. He merely looked at me pitifully, as if I had fallen to the depths of despair. I did not explain myself, as I removed my rubber glove to shake his hand. Frank was dressed in a power suit with a power tie and looked like a million dollars, obviously making big money on the stock market. An economics major, having studied the subtleties of finance at Brown, my old friend was doing very well. Contrarily, I had been a philosophy major, an alleged “thinker,” well versed in the writings of Aristotle and Plato, and who earned a living by washing dishes, which provided ample time for deep thought. Our stations in life had taken radically different turns, a fact clearly registered in his bewildered expression, a cross between wonderment and shock, although he did not express his dismay at my lowly station in life. On the contrary, Frank offered a warm, albeit uncomfortable handshake with lots of “How ya doing? You look great!” His highly visible disbelief was awkwardly ignored with lively small talk and undercurrents of a man lost without a future, an anomaly for a Brown graduate, a dishwasher, no less, at the age of twenty-six.

I played along as if nothing were unusual. Washing dishes was dignified work, after all, like childbirth. It cannot be explained, unless an artist lives it. My dishwashing work provided enough income to pay my storefront rent and ample time for chopping walnut logs. Nothing could be simpler. I was a sculptor and that was all there was to it. A sculptor survives in whatever way possible, even if it means washing dishes for a living. Few understood a grown man burrowing holes into the bark surface

of logs. I certainly was not interested in their opinion, hard enough on myself as I was. Criticism abounded at every turn, no matter what my thoughts. Every log I carved represented another passage of time, but little changed internally. I was anxious about something invisible and saw fear when I looked into a mirror; the deepened lines on my face, the flushed complexion, ears that stuck out too far; everything put together awkwardly with little consideration for the person inside. Sculpture was a secondary result to what really was going on. I hadn't the energy to pay attention to a career. Oh, yes, there were gallery shows occasionally and a few pieces sold, but doing well never entered my mind. That meant thinking of the future, which I never did. Everything good in my life was a side effect.

One day an acquaintance informed me of a workshop of actors that met to experiment in the ways of theater. Experimentation usually implied that one did not necessarily have to be skillful. That certainly appealed to me. Various failed attempts at reading my bumbled poetry within the confines of my lonely storefront confirmed that I knew nothing about acting per se. According to the women, the group needed men and, since I looked like one, they might welcome me if I did not take up too much space. As I say, I was busy sculpting walnut logs at the time, but the solitary stand I had taken was weighing heavily on me. Plainly spoken, I was lonely. Relationships were few. I could not handle them. Something had snapped, making the notion of sharing a life impossible when partners buried me with affection. My feelings were tender, beneath the hardness; that veneer so impenetrable, so rigid, so cemented into the fabric of my life and so very frightened of people. Brittleness would be the term used, hard and brittle and so liable to break, so easily smashed into unrecognizable pieces, out of control in a state of control. It was not possible, I thought, to change.

Contact with people had been held to a minimum with the exception of a beautiful German woman, who had walked by chance into my studio and seemed to show mercy for my humble circumstance. She shared the mattress I laid upon that storefront floor more than once. That was enough to bond us for a brief interlude, if only for her bravery, until firmer commitments could be made by her; a dear person, she. Most partners were passing fancies I loved briefly and then who knows where they went? Some married and that was the end of it. Others just moved away. One moved down south and opened a dress shop. She was a sensitive girl but a bit cruel. We are all a bit cruel when things are not working well.

Be that as it may, regardless of the hours needed to bore holes into the aforementioned logs, I took a night off and showed up at the workshop, seeking human company to help bear the burden of another lonely week with my walnut logs.

The group as a whole seemed a benign bunch, all of whom, without exception, were aspiring actors, while I was unable to present an occupational definition that might deem satisfactory in their eyes. Categories that described any suitable profession escaped me. "Porter" was my title at the time, or, better described, a combined dishwasher/janitor, the man who cleaned the dirty crockery, took the garbage out and washed the floors when the bar closed. Plainly I was not an actor as my colleagues were; they had studied the craft and, in some cases, actually earned their living by doing theater or television or whatever actors did for pay. I was a voyeur in that setting of professionals who, at their young ages, were searching for the "truth." Those people mentioned that "truth" word repeatedly and seemed earnestly involved in seeking it out, while I sought little more than friendly company for a few hours to forget the tediousness of carving walnut logs.

I wished very much to hide at the time, feeling, as I did, not to be part of humanity's plan, which worked so well for those allied with the system. Taking my exit from that workshop was a constant subtext, back to the storefront with its mattress on the floor and tiny wash basin. God knows what kept me from retreating to that dark hole. Vanity, I suppose. The prospect of sleeping in a real bed had not crept into my consciousness yet. The actors, on the other hand, all had beds. I was sure of it from their generally scrubbed look, not to mention a subtle fragrance in the air, a saccharine aroma that suggested access not only to regular baths but also to a fresh supply of cologne every day. In my way of looking at things, that luxury alone was something worth the hours spent with the group. Their smell brought me back to civilization, if only to draw into my lungs the odor of their abundance. I had been cleaning unmentionable orifices with the assistance of my little storefront sink, so I passed muster mingling among them, I suspect. At least nothing unsavory was mentioned. Thank God for running water and other small pleasures. I was grateful for my luck.

Our leader was a lovely human being who, I sensed, had her own set of problems, as I did mine. Problems abounded in that room, in fact. I was sure of that, not to make too much of it. I did not see it as a time for problems. No, there was fun to be had on those workshop nights. But getting back to our leader: Lee was her name, such a kind woman; she, so very alert to the needs of the group. Actors tend to be a mean bunch, sort of ravenous, considering their overwhelming need to gain favor from strangers. At the time I certainly needed attention as well, or I would not have been there. As I say, my need to mingle with humanity served to balance the lonely days.

The one night each week I spent in that workshop was little more than a social event for me, a time to hold hands and talk; not to mention the touchy-feely exercises that were the best. I did not talk much but that did

not matter. Politeness and obedience got me by in a pinch. When it came to doing the exercises suggested by Lee, these could be executed by anyone really, guaranteeing that my lack of skill would not be discovered. I was a charlatan, could not act to save myself, but I could easily move with the others and make odd guttural sounds that resembled the utterances one might hear in some faraway jungle, various “uggs” and “oohs” and “ahhs” that anyone with the barest of training could execute with a minimum of talent.

As far as movement was concerned, I did what the others did. I am a good follower, never a leader as one might expect with my oversized body and full head of hair. In fact, following was always my proclivity, down any path that met Lee’s fancy; sometimes extending our arms like human airplanes and gliding through space, until we gently collided with a wall and crumpled to the ground. I followed their repertoire when they insouciantly leaped or pranced like horses, as if they were little children. Something liberating about the exercise calmed me. There was always a suggestion of the beast within our behavior, whether in the realm of the sounds we made or our movements. A child again, I played freely with the other children and was not particularly interested in the meaning of it all. I never quite comprehended their message with the bizarre behavior they demonstrated, but that did not bother me. Really, it didn’t. The girls were pretty and no one asked me what I was doing there. Information about me was never proffered either, which secured my position among them. For what little they knew, I was an actor. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Meanwhile, the work seemed designed for some higher purpose that our leader Lee had in mind. In contrast to me, the others seemed to be aware of that purpose. The vocal gymnastics, otherwise known as grunting, was not communication in the true sense of the word. We had been reduced to the level of primordial beings devoid of social grace of any kind, let alone communicating. If we had been on the street we surely would have been arrested and the proverbial key thrown away, but thoughts of imprisonment did not bother me then. I was not a criminal, having lacked the courage to harm anyone, or to steal anything. There was nothing I wanted and therefore nothing to steal and no one I wished to injure in any way; that is, aside from myself at random moments and always without realizing it. I was generally a benevolent fellow but lacked the resources necessary to do anyone much good.

Storytelling was usually the last part of each workshop. With their colleagues serving as audience, the actors recreated the personal experiences of their lives. Upon being given a chance to perform, their formidable skills flourished. Highly imaginative verbal accounts of hair-raising events were often embellished with vocal sounds to heighten dramatic moments. Those accompanying sounds were somewhat artificial

and definitely avant-garde, I would say, but their skill was extraordinary, their grace exemplary as they passionately related secret memories of their pasts. Some even cried. No, I could never do that.

Meanwhile, no skill was involved on my account. No one asked me for anything by way of thespian craft. It was a victory merely to breathe in a world so complex, let alone act on stage where people would be watching my every move. No, I was not meant to be watched. Thinking clearly in front of a group was beyond the capability of my overwrought condition; a tenuous cross between high ambition with one foot in the loony bin, so racked was I with self-doubt and fear of forgetting my lines. It could have been fear of anything, really. 'Lines' were merely a convenient tool with which to prevent myself from accomplishing God knows what. Fame or fortune were somewhere in the mix, but they did not comprise the entire picture. But getting back to forgetting lines, I could just as easily have forgotten to wear my pants due to some phobia about buttoning my fly.

For me, telling a story was impossible, although I must admit, there were numerous lurid tales I could have related to a very close friend, but not to a group and definitely not to a group of strangers. Audiences at large frightened me. I've always been afraid of being a laughingstock in the public eye. Still, I admit that a story based upon a personal event, even though embellished, cannot be challenged for its accuracy. My story would be my story, improvised by its owner for public view. What could be simpler? There would be no words to memorize and no threat of forgetting. My life could not be forgotten after all, and better if it were, considering the numerous travesties I had brought upon myself; my storefront living quarters for one, among others in a series of mishaps that through sheer perseverance had summed up to a questionable whole, without the slightest notion of where it was all heading.

To fill a void in my life was the reason I was there, not telling secrets that would raise hairs on backs. As I say, I was a voyeur and not so much a participant; that is, aside from the few noises I'd offered to the group during ensemble exercises, merely to accommodate and nothing more. Voyeurism suited me just fine too, to sit back and listen to my comrades reveal their darkest secrets, and always with the hope that they would become better actors. I carved walnut logs in my storefront to fill my time and washed dishes for a living. That was enough to satisfy me. Acting was not my ambition, and yet, I must admit, my retreat from the limelight was a performance unto itself, well aware, as I was, of my colleagues watching me closely while I lingered in the shadows of the back row.

Besides, I was too dumb to speak to an audience. There was nothing of merit I might have revealed. Not that I wasn't interested. I was, but that interest was overridden by the amount of effort it would take to move my rump from the back of the room if asked to join. Of course, fear was

a factor, too. The actors' willingness to put themselves through a maze of personal tribulation for Lee's approval was both impressive and frightening for a layman such as myself. It took a certain degree of courage I didn't have. My mind did not fully grasp the purpose of it, either. As one can well imagine, I would have jumped through hoops for our teacher, but the threat of performing boggled my mind and ruined my digestion. Every Wednesday night, I was a mess after an hour of sitting helplessly in the rear, separate from the rest.

As the weeks passed, I listened to elaborate accounts of their private lives and all was hunky-dory, but one evening I attempted to ease myself out of the workshop before the inevitable might happen. I sensed my time was approaching. But it was too late. When I moved toward the door, Lee stopped me in my tracks and asked me to tell a story like the others had done.

Predictably, I was mortified at the prospect.

What story to tell? Something from my childhood, possibly an anecdote, having to do with sucking my mother's breast at a tender age? No, that wouldn't do. There might be something in the area of politics. Vietnam was raging at the time, but I was unconnected to the brutality of that war, except for Mai Lai. That horrific massacre affected me deeply. On the other hand, such subjects were risky. I have been known to come to tears at awkward moments and would not risk such vulnerability in front of that group of professionals. Imagine, a grown man. It would be better to relate something nice, but nothing seemed particularly nice. My general state of disappointment could be a suitable subject, dealt as penance for my sins and derived from the wrath of, let us say, some long forgotten Assyrian God. My original perfect state at birth never went beyond the first moment. Yes, that first moment of life was the best of it, after which I was forced to duck and writhe from the deluge of compromises that followed. "We are not who we wished to be in the beginning" could be the theme. No, I never wished to be anything. They would know I was lying.

Lee asked everyone to be quiet. This was to be my first story, she explained. Some of the real actors, while sincerely working on their craft, had skillfully related three or four stories by then, as opposed to me, who had sat on his bum with a pleasant countenance, to be sure. I was there, after all, to spend time with people and then go back to carving my walnut logs and working at my part-time jobs. And yet, I wished to excel. That was a definite flaw in my character, wishing to win a contest that was not clearly defined, having to do with applause perhaps, or being the most imaginative in the group. My thoughts were running away with me. I wanted so very much to beat everyone else at storytelling; an odd pursuit if there ever was one and surely headed for disaster.

Greatness was irrelevant in that setting. I faced them, about to tell a

personal story. Living through this story would be enough. Forget greatness. My entire being embraced a fresh condition of alertness. Poignant stage fright forced heightened perception. I was open to impressions, unguarded, insurmountably vulnerable. Innocence came with helplessness that I hid from the real actors. I looked in wonderment at my audience, as a child does when he hasn't learned to comprehend the logic behind events. Cause and effect no longer made sense. I connected intuitively. Struggling to maintain equilibrium in a haunting world of performing took priority. Most of all, people must not discover what I was experiencing. I would be strong. I would boldly tell my story. I reminded myself not to try too diligently to please my numerous judges. Henceforth, I began to speak with a new sense of purpose.

My mouth had trouble forming the words at first, starting with the pronoun, "I. . ." and then, "I was nervous," confessing to my condition as if it were in the past, as if being unable to speak were a pathological state. That part of my story was true, having made it a rule not to speak during my youth. At that point I paused again, feeling the fool in front of them and quite unsure of myself, but there seemed no alternative but to get on with it. Besides, I was trapped like the proverbial rat. The group seemed riveted to something on stage. It could not possibly be me, although their eyes were staring in my direction.

I managed to articulate words from a body that was separate from me, describing the most remarkable image of an unkempt, somewhat scruffy-looking boy. Another pause ensued. I sneaked a glimpse to see if they were still there. They were, and waiting for more. Someone mumbled something under his breath. God knows how I appeared to them—a failed actor or simply an overwrought, writhing fool? Or was I simply one of them, doing my best to express myself? There had to be something brilliant inside, I reasoned, if only I could locate its whereabouts. My throat, too, contracted in the throes of my efforts, leaving a rasping tone that echoed through the room, like a wounded beast not in harmony with itself. The tension in its delivery, the labored pronunciation of each word surely left my colleagues in a state of wonder as to what I was trying to say. That, of course, was not clear to me.

Stage fright was the worst of it. Terror gripped my body to such a degree that I was barely able to whisper the words. The audience inched forward if only to hear. My clumsy delivery did nothing to enhance the message of my vapid prose. Again, I paused for breath. Some of the real actors interjected a few, kindly intended "Yeahs" to show they were genuinely interested. Oh, yes, I admit a few were drifting off, but only a few. I could not please everyone, I reasoned. Besides, I was encouraged by their few utterances of support. Or was it pity? Hard to tell, and I could not dwell on the question since the moment had passed. Again, I spoke softly, my rhythm hastening, partially out of breath.



My tongue seemed too large for my mouth when I spoke, causing my delivery to stumble forth at times, but the words continued despite my embarrassment. My voice cracked more than once. The truth is I almost shed a tear in front of them. Imagine I, a grown man! Compensation for gripping fear propelled me onward, as if oration were my only recourse. In fact, I was terrified, but I plunged forward, into the abyss, my tongue operating in full gear by then. God help me. Why did I dare reveal such a memory? Was that my voice? Surely that was not me, those words, describing a boy's softness, his affectionate tendencies, and the sensitivity of feelings. What on earth had I dared to expose about myself? Couldn't I have presented a more manly stance? But my words had arrived of their own accord. I could not be blamed. Furthermore, they described the truth; that is, my proclivity toward anything fluffy, soft or flowery. All of it was true and in violation of the masculine pose I had feigned for weeks. On that informal stage, I imposed on my captive audience the bruised fruits of my labors, much to the dismay of all who were forced to watch such a spectacle.

For minutes, I carried on like this. The story was not nice and it was not planned and it wasn't even the best story told. What I described was not a story at all, but rather a paroxysm, the subject of which had bound me within its grip for years to the point where sleeping on a mattress on a storefront floor seemed my natural fate. All beds had been taken by professionals who had studied their craft. I was no doctor of medicine. There was no expertise available that might untie my knotted head. For years, only sleep had soothed my mind and at times food to fill the belly, but I was a prisoner of feelings relentlessly assigned to my keep.

Feeling the fool, I almost fled but did not; I ended my story and said, "Thank you," before sitting down in the back row, hoping to evaporate or to die. Lee complimented me, and I left the workshop for my storefront, convinced I was better adapted to being a sculptor, like Brancusi had been in his day.

Once on the street, the syrupy sky enveloped me that night with its thick coat of black. I strode to my destination, my storefront studio, where I would at last be alone—a place to think, a place to listen to the city's percussive symphony with its bombastic blare of car horns and shrill shouts of children playing in the streets. The city sky turned cobalt blue at dusk, familiar urban blanket of azure when shadow replaces light and the yellow glare from store windows spills glowing shafts onto the cement sidewalks. Spanish bodegas gave Avenue C a cool webbing of criss-crossed neon beams, as if an aerial light show were entertaining each passerby. The city roared with expectancy, screamed in defiance, wailed a night sound. Anything could happen. It was Friday after dusk and the locals would dress up, gather in crowds, flaunt their sexuality and sleep with each other through the early morning hours. Overlooking the festering

Tompkins Square Park, the velvet night breathed sympathetically, emitting faint clouds of steam, as I shivered in the brisk, early evening cold.

All was in harmony. I passed crowds of street people who hovered between lamp posts in their ghetto jungle, murmuring in deep, throaty tones, broken by an occasional piercing scream as if from a herd of primordial, furry, horned species, which raised the hairs on my arms; the cornered, the trapped, and I one of them, loping from street to avenue, from coffee house to bar until my studio was found at last.

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Somewhere in the mix of it all, an overwhelming desire to be public came upon me. Carving logs was so hidden from view, in the confines of the little storefront where I lived and labored. That was the nature of the space, hidden, privately set aside from the public, shielded from the blaring sirens outside. After spending a brief stint in the limelight of that workshop, what seemed to nourish me was unequivocal approval from strangers. I needn't explain. I won't embark upon tangents. My wretched state during the bungled birth of an unlikely acting career is enough to mention without explaining the reasons for it. Therefore I shall avoid the question of "why" at all cost. An analysis of my motivation would surely be a shade indulgent, anyway. Never mind. I shall move forward, simply sticking to the facts. Let it be said that the likes of Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando are mythological figures in the American landscape. Naturally, in my state of hubris, I assumed at the age of twenty-six that I could be one of them.

A magnetic force pulled me toward the invisible "them." Audiences attracted me. Applause represented public approval that I could hear more clearly than the sound of chopping wooden logs. Approval was more important than art. Swaggering and posing in front of crowds was more attractive than carving sculpture that was so very lonely compared to the adrenaline burst that one feels in front of an audience. That drug seduced me away from chopping wood into living forms. I was a whore at heart and turned away from sculpture for the sake of love generated from audiences. It was a fickle love, really, an unrequited love, an addiction to public approval that has become a blessed albatross around my neck; 'blessed' only because the theater has provided, in its odd fashion, the desired privacy that was so much a part of my existence in the beginning. Audiences took my privacy from me; but, no, not really. Something in me insisted upon privacy; my struggle to be my own man—to be different by avoiding the commercial, by avoiding the tawdry. I almost managed it, but not quite.

Anything that was different from the 'real me' seemed attractive at the time. That may be true today. A personality that was plainly not my own became my trademark. Presenting an 'interesting' presence became my obsession. An unbearable, brooding stance with puckered lips that

loosely dangled a cigarette at all times became my favorite rebellious pose. The character I assumed wore a costume that featured heavy motorcycle boots with tight Levis, and walked with an unmitigated swagger. A slightly English lilt in my speech finished the picture. Women's clothing was another favorite of mine. I'm not sure why, aside from the theatricality they offered, as well as their association with my mother. "She wore dresses. Why shouldn't I?" was the logic there.

A few parts came and went along the way, mostly soldiers in plays that expressed anti-war sentiments and needed background people in military uniforms to hold guns. Bertolt Brecht's *Man Is Man* was one of those plays. The part demanded that I stand with my gun in hand and appear mean, as any soldier would. The 'meanness' I performed well, being blessed with a face malleable enough to squeeze my cheeks and twist my lips into a furious frown, but often, while daydreaming on stage, my weighty gun, made of hard wood and steel, would drop upon my big toe. A piercing cry would follow the thud of the gun, much to the dismay of my fellow thespians. Limping in the aftermath was the best of it, gimping about the stage with a sore big toe for the remaining two hours of performance. Of course, audiences were very concerned about a poor lad with a swollen toe, applauding vigorously in my direction at the final curtain. It was clear I was their unsung hero for the night, so brave a thespian to endure the pain of a weighty gun upon a hapless big toe.

Once I caught wind of the audience's reaction to my injured toe, the heavy weapon was dropped quite often, close enough to the toe so that it seemed authentically painful. Being basically a coward, I wasn't about to hurt myself again after the original blow did its damage. Once I understood the concept of an oversized gun falling on a toe, I imitated it with great skill, night after night. Cleverness marked my scheming mind at the time, originally acquired years before in the dark corners of my crib, where I'd beaten my rattle for the attention it brought from my unsuspecting mother. Alas, she believed I was helpless. Little did she know of my need for an audience, but getting back to my career in the theater, at last I was receiving the applause I'd missed during my earlier exploits. My acting career was finally on its way.

Occasionally I even had a few lines. "There's the train," was my line in the Brecht play. Thank God the playwright had been dead for a decade. The man probably rolled over in his grave every time I said, "There's the train," at the top of my lungs. One line was certainly enough to test my mettle. Two lines would have been the end, not only of the production, but of my career at large. Perhaps that would have been best. Anyone could say the line as ineffectively as I did, and never did I pick up my cue, which angered the cast immeasurably. They tired of waiting in silence for me to say, "There's the train," so the play could finally continue. Every night I earnestly refused to deliver the line on cue, until it was

clear that I actually heard the train. I was so very responsive to the idea of the so-called 'reality.' Everything had to be real. Unfortunately, I could be louder in my delivery, but not more real.

I considered myself a devotee of the 'Method' approach without really knowing what that meant. How could I know? I could barely be taught anything, so impervious was I to suggestion of any sort, and so overcome was I with ambition to succeed. Any learning in the face of my thick-headedness was impossible. The simple task of storytelling was roundly defeated by this 'Method' approach and not atypical of my tendency to make things more complicated than they should have been. In truth, I didn't have a clue. Everything was too important then, the art of acting, the craft of it and so-called 'honesty,' a term I'd heard so often in acting class. Any trace of sensitivity to events on stage was beyond me.

The 'Method' technique I rigidly espoused was responsible for the long pause I took before saying, "There's the train." In my misguided understanding, 'The Method' meant 'feeling it' before I spoke. The length of silence before I said, "There's the train," sometimes lasted as much as a half-minute in a vacuum of nothingness, before I actually 'felt' the train was present. With each performance, "There's the train" took longer to say and sounded more wooden than the night before. The cast hated my indulgence, I'm sure, even though they seldom showed it, except once, when a portly performer named Cliff directed a comment about "insufferably long pauses" pointedly at me. As he spoke, I stared off innocently into space, pretending to be deaf, wearing my "mean-soldier" expression to protect myself from bodily assault.

My alleged acting career seemed to be meeting a natural death.

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God knows how I managed it, but in the year 1967, at age twenty-seven, I landed a job at McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey. Two small roles were offered in a production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that mercifully required only a few moments on stage. Thank God the playwright was dead, although Shakespeare probably suffered posthumous humiliation from the inadequacy of my newborn thespian skills. He would surely have removed me with the proverbial 'hook' had he witnessed the strain of my efforts. My acting talent wasn't the reason they hired me. Perhaps my full head of hair had something to do with it, or my physique that resembled a cross between a ballet dancer and a weightlifter. Or possibly my alleged triumph could be attributed to the affected speech patterns that characterized my audition. I performed the "Henry the Fifth" prologue for our director, properly butchering it with a sufficient number of rolled 'rrrs' to leave the impression I was classically trained. For whatever reason, the job was given me.

The challenge of Shakespeare was a worthy adventure. Since I had spent the greater part of my young life in a state of willful silence, my

tongue felt awkward and stiff. The slightest chance of rehabilitation seemed impossible. The best solution, I surmised, was to place a thermos cork in my mouth for an hour each day and recite passages of Shakespeare to train my fleshy tongue to move with dexterity. That began my first involvement with Shakespeare, the daily drudgery of enunciating his words with a cork in my mouth. The exercise was a sight to behold; mouth stretched wide, tongue laboring to articulate against the obstacle imposed on it, resulting in vocal utterances that were barely human. Nonetheless, it was only by sheer determination ‘to learn how to do it,’ that I dared walk upon the stage, as if a single solution would allow me to speak like the ‘others’ did. Alas, more than a cork would be necessary for mastering Shakespeare. The will to communicate would have helped, but that took another ten to twenty years. Unfortunately, I did not have the luxury of time. I was in a hurry. A steady diet of ‘cork work’ would have to suffice.

Every night I made my entrance as a Roman plebeian, dressed in a leopard skin designed by a costume designer who no doubt had a fetish for taut male thighs. My oversized muscles were neatly exposed and were, I might add, the crux of what I had to offer on stage. The entire package gave the impression I was a left-behind Cro-Magnon wandering through the streets of Rome. I had been pegged as “the body” of the company that the designer could exhibit in whatever outfit might please his aesthetic taste. Leopard skin seemed best for the show, and since it was my second professional job, being passed off as a physical specimen was the least of my worries. I was sincerely determined to learn the craft of acting, not to overlook my refusal to work at a normal job.

Forget the joy of creativity. My approach was extremely rigid, dutifully memorizing Shakespeare’s words and killing the freedom required for spontaneity. The notion of ‘effort’ came first, thereby limiting any possibility of discovery. Plugging away at Shakespeare’s verse became more the point than the performance itself. Why effort alone meant so very much to me I shall never quite comprehend, aside from the fact that it served as an earnest substitute for the pleasure of creativity, about which I hadn’t a clue. “See how hard I am working,” seemed the whole of my performance. The rest left little to brag about. Youth and naïveté did not discern the difference.

Nonetheless, the show must go on. In my state of youthful earnestness, I swaggered across the boards nightly, dressed in my leopard skin without realizing something was amiss, especially when, on one fateful night, my false beard fell halfway off during Mark Anthony’s “Friends, Romans, countrymen . . .” speech. My clumsy pratfall while running across the stage towards Anthony during the aforementioned speech, tripping over a flat and falling on my face demonstrated the futile hours I had spent in ballet class. The concussion of my weight on the wooden stage partially

tore my false beard off without my knowing. I stood then, dutifully listening to Mark Anthony with a pathetic-looking piece of facial hair hanging by a few strands from my chin, which, together with the designer leopard-skin outfit, caused both the cast and the audience to titter at the ungainly sight. Holding a fixed, earnest expression on my face, as if I believed my own impression of myself, I quickly surmised that appearing concerned would compensate for my clumsiness. Indeed, I took myself very seriously after my stumble, unaware that my beard was hanging awry. The cast was understandably doubled over with convulsions of laughter during Mark Anthony's speech. The sixty-five-year-old actor playing twenty-year-old Mark Anthony was furious at me for weeks afterward for ruining his alleged "brilliant performance." In his defense, I was his understudy. Thanks to the goodness of the Gods he never took sick. Had I played the part, it surely would have been the end of my career.

But not to dwell too long on a minor incident! I mustn't neglect my portrayal of Titinius, whose single monologue eulogized Cassius after the latter's death. Before making my entrance every night, when my interpretation of the leopard-skinned plebeian was satisfactorily purged, I climbed the stairs to the fifth floor of a tower adjacent to the main stage. There, I presented Titinius' speech to a blank brick wall with a colorful array of vocal effects that included intermittent inflections of fake crying. Only one monologue was required, thank God. The audience could not endure more than that. Neither could the blank brick wall that was beginning to show signs of cracking from my nightly purge. This wall was thick enough to block the volume of my histrionics. At least I thought as much. One never knows. Such was the depth of my naïveté at the tender age of twenty-seven.

Sufficiently convinced that repetition was the proper ingredient for a thespian's preparation, every night in the belfry of that tower I recited the speech five times with what I thought to be full emotion. In fact, I was merely loud. How I came to the number five, I have no idea. I was always a bit of a pedant. Nonetheless, the audience would have loved my earnestness in that tower, yelling Shakespeare's words to my heart's content at a blank brick wall. My leopard skin, of course, had been replaced by a Roman tunic suitable for Titinius' military stature. I was quite full of myself, really, strutting about in that tower with my cardboard sword and tunic and bared, hairy, knock-kneed legs. This was my warm-up, I reasoned, for what would follow on stage. After this private ritual, the strategy was to descend to the stage and imitate each sound and gesture exactly as I had performed them to that blank wall. I was an optimistic young fellow, then.

Titinius commits suicide by plunging a cardboard sword into his breast after finding his beloved general, Cassius, dead. I stabbed myself nightly

with that flimsy prop and died convincingly, I would say. Unfortunately, the aforementioned monologue had to be delivered first, and that I plainly mangled in an overwrought fashion with raging gesticulations and passionately false vocal tones. Once in front of an audience, tension impeded my delivery, as well as fear of being myself, a persona that was cloudy at best. No matter how simple the requirements of the part, my tendency was to raise the decibel level of Shakespeare's words to convince both myself and the audience of goodness knows what. The prospect of simply communicating was foreign to me. No, that was never enough—to be normal. I was compelled to impress the invisible 'them' with a variety of phony accents, exaggerated posturing and cascades of voluminous vocal effects in order to achieve something more. More 'what' was the question? I had not the vaguest notion of what 'more' meant. Everything I presented on stage was geared toward proving 'more' to the world. 'More' was all I would accept of myself, in lieu of simply speaking the words. It never dawned on me that it was enough to quietly communicate, as one might talk to a friend.

Placing a worried expression on my face convinced the sea of faces in front of me that I meant every word, or so I thought. I could barely comprehend Shakespeare's verse, much less know the character's intention. My concern had more to do with how I was coming across than any experience I might have had on stage. Any gimmick to win an audience's favor I used amply. Trembling my lower lip, as if about to cry, was one of my favorites. Looking back on it, trembling lips and raised volume were never useful, but I did not know better at the time. In those early days 'loudness' combined with an array of sincere grimaces, ranging from happy to sad, were synonymous with 'feeling it.' As the weeks passed, my performances became increasingly strident.

A fine actor named Gwillum Evens played Cassius. Unlike myself, he was both extremely talented, and bald. He served the bard well, this man. Mr. Evens would not have a chance at movie stardom without hair, I reasoned. I imagined such glory, then. A thick mane of brown hair on my head assured that I was destined for Hollywood, while Gwillem did not stand a chance with his bald pate. My logic was a meager attempt to compensate for the man's formidable acting skills, which dwarfed my own. Before I made my entrance every night, while changing from my leopard skin into my Roman tunic, Gwillem Evens and Lawrence Luckenbill, another fine actor who played Brutus, brilliantly performed the scene between Brutus and Cassius in the tent, thereby shaking my confidence. My full head of hair did little to assuage my doubt. Vanity seldom did much in a pinch.

Exactly what made an artist was still a mystery to me. Hair was only part of it, I suspected. But I was not sure. Hair might have been all of it, for all I knew. The question left me in the dark, aside from my suspicion

that artistry was something mysteriously projected from the likes of Lawrence Luckenbill and Gwillem Evens. They were plainly gifted artists. I had not the vaguest hint of what blessing had been bestowed upon them that allowed their skill to shine night after night, although I did notice that they enjoyed themselves fully as they worked. Could this possibly be the ingredient that would enhance relaxation on stage? Perhaps so, but enjoyment of one's own work was an unattainable concept for a young man obsessed with results to the point of blindness.

On one fateful night, as Gwillem Evens who was, as I say, playing Cassius, lay dead on the floor, my oversized foot mistakenly stepped on his finger. The gifted actor grimaced in pain, but were I to remove my large foot from his finger I was convinced I'd forget my lines. I stood, inept, unerringly stupefied before Cassius' body, like a walnut log, really, unable to speak, vaguely aware of what Cassius' death meant to me; my lover, my friend, my general. I wished I could stab myself with a real knife, but the cardboard number would have to do. Whoever heard of a man committing suicide with a cardboard sword?

Needless to say, I became increasingly paralyzed in that unrehearsed situation. After all, I hadn't practiced stepping upon Gwillem's finger during my warm-up in the tower. How could I possibly handle such an unexpected event? The guilty foot remained steadfastly planted on the poor fellow's finger. Predictably, I went blank. Silence in the theater was deafening, the audience aware that something was awry. Silence crushed me. I fell to the floor, as if I were wounded, to disguise that I had forgotten my lines, as if an invisible spear aimed from the wings had found its mark in my flank. George Reinhold, another gifted actor, helped me escape to the theater's lonely basement where Titinius' shame could be negotiated in privacy.

At the risk of boasting, I suspect Titinius' exit convinced the audience that a wounded Roman soldier was being carried off, perhaps to one of their famous Roman baths where he might heal his wounds. At very least the audience's sympathy accompanied his exit. Of that I am sure. Five decades have passed since then, and in my subsequent assessment of the situation, during which time, being a somewhat supercilious fellow, I have surmised that forgetting my lines was the single most interesting event of the evening, much more so than the four and one-half hours of Shakespeare's play, which in spite of its wonderfully rich characters is a bit lengthy and much too predictable. At very least, I inadvertently added a note of spontaneity to the evening for which the audience might have been most grateful.

Today, I hope that to be the case.

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Twenty years later, I received a phone call from Frank Monahan, the fellow who had last seen me washing dishes. After inviting me to a Brown



University Varsity Football reunion, he promptly delivered a list of films in which I had played roles. My work in John Grissom's *The Chamber* apparently had impressed him, as did Oliver Stone's *Born On the Fourth of July*. He also mentioned Tim Robbin's *Dead Man Walking* and Neil Burger's *Interview With the Assassin*. My film visibility apparently justified the aforementioned dishwashing excursion during my twenties. He even asked how much money I'd been paid for my work in film. Unsure of what to say, I threw out a number. "One hundred and fifty grand," I proudly quoted, which was the amount I had been paid for the *The Chamber*. The sum of money seemed adequate enough, judging from his reaction. He ended that line of questioning, satisfied.

Years later, when we were both seventy-two years of age, I appeared in a play which I had written, the title of which is *Awake In a World That Encourages Sleep*. He inadvertently heard about the production through a mutual friend and had purchased tickets. Frank offered a warm greeting afterwards. God knows what he thought of the play's anti-war, anti-corporate theme, but that wasn't the point for either of us. By then, we were old men. My life-long tenacity pursuing a career for which I was barely suited balanced equally his hard-earned fortune. Lives are best not judged. Fair enough, I say. I am fond of my old friend and cherish his surprise appearances at various stages of my life.

At the age of seventy-four, after my inauspicious beginnings, I feel blessed to have had a rich and rewarding career that has spanned five decades, having performed in approximately seventy New York Broadway and Off- Broadway productions and some fifty films, recently highlighted by a rewarding four years on FX Cable's TV series, *Justified*, playing the role of Arlo, the drug-dealing father of the series lead.

At the risk of boasting, my mattress on a woodchip-covered storefront floor has been replaced by a comfortable, king-sized bed.

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## No Harm Done

Charlotte Beck

NELLY DARTED THROUGH the house calling for Harlan. She was sure he was home, but where was he? He was usually easy to find. He was loud. He walked like a wildebeest, or a herd of wildebeest. Not that Nelly had ever seen or heard a wildebeest, or a herd of them. But you could always hear Harlan coming and going. He made noises. He coughed and burped and farted on a regular basis. And that was if he wasn't talking to himself.

Nelly carried a list in her hand, a "honeydo" list, as Harlan called it. Now that Harlan was retired, they had agreed that he would spend his Saturday mornings accomplishing odd jobs around the house. It was especially important in spring time when the yard was such a mess. There were sticks scattered about and dead leaves and thatch in the lawn. And the garage had to be cleaned out. When that was done, the driveway had to be swept. The eavestroughs needed to be hosed, too, and the porch furniture carried up from the basement and brought outside. Nelly clutched the banister and fanned herself with the list. How would everything get done?

Her doctor had told her that deep breathing was a good exercise to do whenever she felt overwhelmed. She practiced now. But she worried she might hyperventilate. She had heard about people hyperventilating. They had to breathe into brown paper bags, like the lunch bags she had used when she was a girl. What if she breathed too deeply and started to hyperventilate and didn't have a paper bag handy?

The breathing helped. She told herself to listen; it was the best way to find Harlan. She heard banging outside. One of the neighbours must be making repairs or building something. She heard voices too—not in her head—she laughed to herself, but there were definitely voices. She scurried to the kitchen window and leaned over the sink to peer out. She heard a distinctive cough. Harlan. She took the few stairs down to the

side door off the kitchen and stepped outside.

The breeze was chilly and there was the damp smell of soggy leaves and shallow puddles. How she loved spring—aside from all the jobs that needed doing. She raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun and discovered that Harlan was at the top of a ladder—high up under the roof overhang of Carter and Edna’s house.

“What are you doing up there?” she shrieked.

She realized too late that she shouldn’t have yelled. With his bad balance and unreliable ankles Harlan could easily lean too far one way. He could fall to his death while she stood by helpless. Oh, what had she done? Why couldn’t she ever keep quiet?

“Just taking in the view, Nelly,” he said, in that infuriatingly calm voice he sometimes used.

There was a hammer in his hand and his voice sounded muffled on account of the nails he had clamped between his teeth. He waved and he wasn’t holding on at all. Nelly grabbed the door frame for support. Then she hurried over to the base of the ladder. It was behind the cedar hedge that marked the boundary between their property and the neighbours’. She was relieved to find Carter holding the ladder.

“Oh, Carter, thank goodness. What is he doing up there?”

“Now don’t get all frantic, Nelly. There’s been a coon in the attic and Harlan knows how much I hate coons, and what with my bad leg and all.” Carter dropped one hand from the ladder to rub his leg.

Nelly nodded. Carter’s fear of the loathsome animals was legendary. It had something to do with an encounter he’d had as a child, but Nelly could hardly be expected to remember the details with Harlan up on a ladder like that.

“Harlan Parks, get down from that ladder this instant, coons or no coons,” said Nelly, wishing her voice sounded commanding instead of shrill.

Harlan took the nails out from between his teeth and swept his arm in front of him, making Nelly flinch. “I can see the whole neighbourhood from up here, Nell. Why don’t you climb up and join me?” He sounded positively pleased with himself.

Carter snickered but stopped abruptly when she glared at him. How could Harlan tease her at a time like this? Did he not see how worried she was? He knew perfectly well she would never climb the ladder.

“Humph.” Nelly turned on her heel and slipped back inside. She almost slammed the door behind her but caught herself in time.

There was nothing she could do to change Harlan’s mind when he was being stubborn. He would stay up there as long as it took to do the job, maybe longer, just to annoy her. She flopped down on a kitchen chair and practiced her breathing. Coons, of all things. The dirty animals were taking over the city. Eating garbage and anything else they could

get their grubby paws on. Harlan had been covering a gap under the eaves. It was amazing, the spaces coons could get into. What if they had started a family up there? Poor Edna, she'd be worried about the raccoon babies. If Edna hadn't been out mall-walking, Nelly would have rushed right over there to make her feel better.

Nelly couldn't hear what Harlan and Carter were saying outside, but as long as they were talking, she was satisfied that Harlan hadn't fallen off the ladder. She pulled her list from the pocket of her apron and smoothed it out on the table. She must have scrunched it up in her worry about Harlan. When he saw it he would realize how upset she'd been. She got up and busied herself cleaning out the kitchen drawers. It wasn't on her list, but it kept her close to the voices and it was a job that always needed doing. She emptied a drawer on the counter and proceeded to replace the contents, starting with the twist ties. Black ones on the right, then green, then white, all in an orderly fashion. Of course, they would stay tidy only until Harlan needed one.

The screen door squeaked and there he was.

"Good, you're safe on the ground," she said, even before the door had closed behind him.

She hadn't meant for the words to come out so angry. In truth she was relieved to see him there, with all limbs intact. He frowned slightly and she wondered if he had hoped she wouldn't be in the kitchen waiting for him. She struggled to stay quiet, but it was no use.

"You know a man your age shouldn't be on a ladder, don't you?"

"I'm in my prime, Nelly. Haven't you noticed?" His frown disappeared and he grinned at her.

She considered his red cheeks and the tufts of white hair that escaped from under his ball cap. He needed a haircut, but aside from that she could hardly argue with him. She realized he was trying to distract her. It almost worked.

"No 60-year-old should be up on a ladder," she said.

Harlan scanned the kitchen, taking in the open drawer and the smoothed-out list on the table. He sighed, as if realizing his efforts were wasted. "I'm 59. You're the one who's 60, remember?"

Nelly pressed her lips together. Harlan knew she didn't like to be reminded that she was older than he was.

"And that's why I wasn't up on the ladder." She was pleased with how quickly she recovered.

She crossed her bony arms over her chest, conscious of the fact that her breasts no longer occupied the space they once did. Harlan might very well be in his prime, but she wasn't so sure about herself.

"Why wasn't Carter up on the ladder?"

"You know he's afraid of coons." Harlan's tone was patient enough.

"What's to be afraid of? Coons never hurt anyone." Nelly wasn't sure

she believed that, but sometimes she couldn't help arguing with Harlan.

"Tell Carter that. And he's always the first one to help us when we need something."

Nelly couldn't argue with that either. She was irritated that Harlan's logic was getting the better of their argument.

"How do you know the coons weren't inside the attic when you boarded it up?" she said.

Harlan was silent.

"You didn't think of that, did you?" She put her hands on her hips.

"I'm sure all the banging I did up there would have sent them running." His words were more drawn out. He would only humour her for so long, but she couldn't let it go.

"What if the mother had young ones in there? It will break Edna's heart if they don't have a mother to look after them. You know how sensitive she is about animals."

"It's too early in the year for them to have given birth. False spring, remember?" Harlan's words were measured, as if he was explaining something to a child. "Besides," he said, "the hole is covered up. I didn't fall. No harm done."

"Just like you to oversimplify everything. It drives me crazy." Nelly raised her arms and dropped them in exasperation.

She felt defeated and sat down again. All she wanted was for Harlan to promise that he would never climb another ladder and that he wouldn't do anything else that might put him in danger. Was that so much to ask? Her fingernails dug at a scar in the table top. Nathan had made that scar years ago when he was working on a geography project. He'd looked so upset that she hadn't had the heart to punish him.

Harlan pulled out a chair and sat down beside her. He sighed heavily. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something, Nelly."

He didn't sound angry anymore. He sounded determined, as if what he was about to say was important, or unpleasant, or both. Nelly's fingernails ceased their scratching.

"I know this isn't the right time, but there never seems to be a right time."

This was it. Harlan had finally had enough of her bickering and nagging. Giving him grief about being on the ladder was the last straw. She wished she could leave him be now and then, but she worried about him so. He didn't look after himself. He took risks. This morning's antics proved it. All their years of marriage she had dreaded that it might one day come to this. Harlan was leaving her. As soon as she thought it, she was sure of it.

She shot out of her chair and turned her back to him. She opened the cutlery drawer and removed all the knives and forks and spoons and dropped them on the counter. They made a tremendous clanking sound.

Maybe if she made enough noise, Harlan wouldn't be able to get on with what he was saying. She didn't hear him get up, but suddenly he was behind her. His large, warm hands encircled her forearms to still her movements. The kitchen became quiet. He leaned into her back, but not so much that she lost her balance. He was taller than she was and outweighed her by almost a hundred pounds.

"Relax, Nell," he said. "Breathe."

Nelly tried, but she felt as if dozens of butterflies were fluttering inside her head. They rose and fell and swirled. Not one of them settled or made any sense. Harlan's thumbs stroked the insides of her forearms. He was trying to soothe her so he could tell her the news. Her fingers tightened around the dishrag. Drops of water fell into the sink and splattered.

"Why don't we move to the country?" he said.

Had she heard him right? Move to the country? He'd said "we," so he meant both of them. For a moment she was so overjoyed that she was at a loss for words. He wasn't going to leave her after all. But he'd said "move." How could they move? They'd lived in this house since they were married. They'd raised three good boys here. Moving was unthinkable.

"I saw a place outside of town on my way home from the golf course, last week. It was a bungalow, but big enough for us."

Nelly shook her head, almost wildly, but Harlan didn't seem to notice.

"The boys will still visit. It's no farther away for them." He rested his chin on top of her head. "We're not getting any younger, Nell."

What did he mean by that? Did he think she was getting old? It was true she hadn't had her hair set in a while or bought a new outfit, lately. But she did her best to look after herself. Maybe that wasn't enough for Harlan anymore?

"This house is too big for us," he said. "The basement leaks. The windows need to be replaced. Pretty soon we'll have critters taking up residence in our attic."

Harlan was smiling. She could tell. He'd forgiven her for yelling at him on the ladder. She loved that about him; that he was quick to forgive. He was fed up with the house, not her. It had been silly of her to assume the worst. She should know better.

"There won't be so much to look after with a smaller house. You won't have to chase me around to get things done."

"What about Carter and Edna?" Nelly choked out their names as if they'd already left their friends behind.

"Who knows? They may not live here forever, either."

Nelly stiffened. "What do you mean? What has Carter told you?"

Harlan was still leaning into her back, still had his hands on her arms, but loosened his hold.

"Nothing, really. Carter just complains about winter more than he

used to.”

“You don’t think?” Nelly couldn’t finish the sentence. She could feel her face stretched out of proportion, her mouth wide open in disbelief. She had to get a hold of herself. It seemed like every year another couple they knew moved south, at least for the winter. Not Carter and Edna, too? It was too gloomy to imagine.

“I don’t know what their plans are, but I think a change might be good for us,” said Harlan.

“I don’t think so.” Nelly did her best to make her words sound final.

Harlan’s hands dropped. “I’m just saying it’s something we should think about. It’s almost spring. It might be a good time to put the house on the market.”

The dishrag was a tight ball in Nelly’s hand. She tried to think of something to say, but before she could come up with all the reasons why they couldn’t move, Harlan stepped away from her. She felt rather than heard him leave the kitchen. It wasn’t often he was so quiet. Nelly stared out the window after he was gone. The shadow of the ladder fell across the driveway, lowering as if on its own, clattering at every rung. She pictured Carter behind the hedge struggling to get his balance on his good leg. She wondered where the raccoon was. Was there more than one? Where would they live? Even raccoons needed a place to live. But they didn’t belong in a house. Certainly not Edna’s house. It would be best if they left the neighbourhood altogether.

She heard Harlan’s car start in the driveway. He was off to the golf course again. Somehow he’d managed to get out of the house without doing a single one of the jobs on her list. She exhaled loudly. There was nothing she could do about that. Better to focus on the task at hand. She placed the cutlery back in the drawer, piece by piece, before she moved onto the next one.

\* \* \*

When Nelly finished with the kitchen drawers it was almost lunch time. Edna would be home soon. How could she tell Edna what Harlan had said? How could she not? Maybe Edna already knew? Was Edna keeping secrets from her? Either way, lunch with Edna was not something to look forward to, today. And it was her turn to make sandwiches. It was all too much. She stepped into the living room and sat down on the ottoman to collect her thoughts. But the room didn’t give her any comfort. She couldn’t look at it the same way now that Harlan had suggested moving. The couches were worn from years of the boys clambering over them, and there was a cloud-shaped smudge on the brick above the fireplace from all the times Harlan forgot to open the flue. She hated to admit it, but the room had seen finer days.

It wouldn’t be hard to spruce it up, though. She could start with new throw cushions. She’d make a list of the things she needed. She felt better

already. The house wasn't nearly as bad as Harlan made out. The corner of the furnace room had been damp after the last storm, but that was after a record rainfall. And she could clean the windows. That way they wouldn't look as if they needed to be replaced. The radio announcer had called for three days of clear skies. She could start right now!

She hopped up from the ottoman and fetched the pail and a squeegee from under the kitchen sink. She mixed together vinegar and water and added a drop of Palmolive. Then she went upstairs. The windows were dirty; there was no denying that, but they didn't need to be replaced. There was a bloom of mold in one corner. She would spray that with bleach. When she opened the window she noticed that vines had burrowed into the wooden trim on the outside. She tried to work them free with her fingernails. She was so lost in her job that she didn't hear the side door to the kitchen open.

"Nelly? Where are you?"

She had completely forgotten about Edna. She dropped the squeegee into the pail and suds splattered onto the floor.

"Be right there."

She hurried downstairs.

Edna was looking curiously around the kitchen. As usual, Edna's hair sprung out at odd angles. And her blouse wasn't buttoned quite right or tucked in, as if she had dressed in a hurry. Despite her unkempt appearance, Nelly envied how calm Edna always seemed.

"Where's lunch?"

"Oh." Nelly's hands flew to her face. "I got so busy doing windows I lost track of time."

Edna leaned against the kitchen counter and raised her eyebrows. "Little early for windows, don't you think?"

"I know. I know. I can't help it. Harlan said the windows need to be replaced and I thought maybe he wouldn't worry about them if they were clean."

"Don't you want new windows?"

Nelly wasn't prepared to tell Edna about Harlan's idea. She didn't even want to think about it.

"It's not that. It's just with him retiring early we need to be more careful with money."

"You two have always been careful with money."

Edna was right and Nelly didn't know what to say. She busied herself with lunch instead. She got the Havarti and marmalade out of the fridge. Then she plugged in the kettle.

Edna opened the breadbox and extracted a bag. "Croissants, today?" she said.

Nelly nodded and they sat down across from each other at the kitchen table.



“Nelly, there’s something I need to tell you,” said Edna, after taking a bite of her croissant.

Nelly stopped eating and looked at her plate. She and Edna always used this set when they ate lunch here. It was an old one from her great aunt’s house. There was a lily of the valley motif around the perimeter, but it was so faded with use it was hard to tell.

“Nelly, look at me.”

When Nelly looked up, Edna said, “You’re breathing, right?”

Nelly inhaled audibly to prove it. Breathing seemed to be of the utmost importance today.

“Carter and I are thinking about spending some time in Florida next winter.”

Exactly what Nelly had been afraid of! First Harlan wanted to move and now Edna and Carter were leaving.

Edna reached across the table and laid her hand across Nelly’s forearm. Like Harlan, Edna was always warm.

“Now don’t get frazzled. It’s only for a month. One of the fellas at the club knows of a condo that’s available. It might be good for Carter’s leg. Oh, Nelly, if I even thought we could persuade you and Harlan to join us.” Edna sat back in her chair. “But of course you wouldn’t do that. I know how you feel about snowbirds.” Edna looked more amused than annoyed. “Anyway, I wanted to let you know early, so you have time to get used to the idea.”

Nelly traced the pattern on her plate. She wished everyone didn’t feel as if they had to be careful around her. They thought she was fragile, but she was stronger than anyone gave her credit for. She’d proven it. She was the one who had taken charge when Edna’s youngest had croup and had to be rushed to the hospital. She was the one who ran for help when a limb fell from the maple tree and pinned Carter underneath. Carter had been fine, but he’d never lost the limp. And she was the one who’d adjusted better to the boys leaving home than Harlan had. Until he took up golf, Harlan had wandered around the house not knowing what to do with himself.

Nelly overreacted to news—she knew that—but she was just as strong as the rest of them. She summoned that strength now and pushed aside the thought of a month without Carter and Edna. And to be honest, a month wasn’t nearly as frightening as a whole season, or them moving away for good. She imagined them walking along the beach in the relentless sunshine, wearing knee socks and Bermuda shorts and Tilley hats. It would be comical if it wasn’t so upsetting. But if Edna and Carter had decided to spend a month in Florida, that was their business. It wouldn’t do to make a fuss.

She sat up straight in her chair. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy Florida. I hear it’s nice.”

Edna looked pleased and surprised at the same time. "Thank you," she said. She sipped her tea. "Did you hear about the raccoon in the attic?"

Nelly nodded, thankful for the change of subject. She wasn't sure if she could discuss Florida in a reasonable manner, at least not yet. She was proud that she had wished Edna well, but the effort had all but exhausted her.

As soon as Edna finished her croissant, Nelly whisked her plate away and rinsed it in the sink. Edna got up and stood beside her to look out the window towards her own house for a moment. She put her hand on Nelly's bony shoulder and gave it a squeeze before she went down the steps and out the kitchen door. Nelly watched her cross the driveway and disappear behind the hedge.

\* \* \*

Nelly headed back upstairs. Before lunch she'd been working in Nathan's old bedroom. It was cluttered with books and records and posters, still a boy's room, not a man's. Nathan had been frail, built like her, but he'd been strong of mind. He'd bested his brothers in school if not in sports. He was an accountant now. Nelly was so proud of all her boys, even though she missed them terribly.

A scratching noise somewhere above and to the right of her interrupted her thoughts. There were often branches that rubbed against the house in the wind, but through the window she could see that the morning breeze had died and that no branches were moving. The scratching came again, more insistent this time, followed by a thump. Then footsteps. Not people steps, *animal* steps. Nelly stared at the ceiling and followed the steps as they traversed from the peak of the roof to the opposite wall, above the door.

She dropped her rag and took hold of Nathan's wooden desk chair. She dragged it into the closet and looked up at the panel that led to the attic. It wasn't that long ago she'd cleaned in there and she was satisfied that no spiders had taken up residence since. She climbed onto the chair and stood on her tiptoes and gently pressed the panel in the ceiling. It shifted under her fingers and bits of dust and wood shavings fell into her hair and eyes. She wasn't tall enough to see into the attic, even with the chair. She dropped the panel into place.

There were several milk crates full of record albums in the corner of the room. Nelly hopped down from the chair and moved it out of the way. Then she dragged two crates over to the closet, one at a time, straining against their weight. She set the chair on the crates and climbed up. All the while she heard scratching noises and thumps above her. Taller this time, she hunched under the ceiling. She pushed on the panel and moved it sideways, setting it down beside the opening on the floor of the attic. She straightened up to her full height.

A triangular vent under the peak of the roof let in a dim beam of daylight and it took some moments for her eyes to discern shapes. There, backed up against the farthest wall, was a raccoon. Nelly had suspected as much, but she was still frightened by the sight of it. She teetered on the chair and it shifted on the uneven surface of the milk crate. She gripped the sides of the opening and regained her balance.

She made eye contact with the coon. “Shoo!” she said, as severely as she could.

The raccoon didn’t move.

“Get out of here.”

The raccoon’s back was raised, like a cat’s.

“This is my house, not yours.”

The raccoon’s fur was extended, as if it was trying to look bigger. But despite this display of bravado, the raccoon didn’t seem fierce or threatening. It looked vulnerable and out of place. The raccoon still didn’t move and Nelly’s grip on the sides of the opening relaxed.

“You’re not nearly as vicious as people say, are you?”

Nelly contemplated the raccoon, having never been in close proximity to such a creature before. She imagined it sneaking into Carter and Edna’s attic in search of a home for its family, then scurrying away, terrified by Harlan’s hammering. Only to crawl in here, looking for another safe place.

“If it were up to me, I might let you stay. If you promised not to be noisy or make a mess. But Harlan won’t have it. It just won’t do.”

Nelly was quiet for a few moments.

“What are you doing up there?”

It was Harlan. With her head in the attic Nelly hadn’t heard him come in. She was so startled she knocked the chair sideways. The raccoon scuttled out of sight as Harlan’s arms wrapped around her torso awkwardly, but with strength, and he caught her before she completely lost her balance. The chair clattered to the floor. Harlan brought her down to his level and looked searchingly into her face.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

Harlan laughed and set her feet lightly on the floor but kept his arms around her.

“You’re all over me for being on a ladder and I come home to find you like this.” He gestured to the fallen chair and the milk crates.

“Why aren’t you golfing?” she said, hoping to change the subject.

“The fairways are too wet. Now tell me, what were you doing up there?”

Nelly hung her head. If Harlan found out about the raccoon, there would be no stopping him. He would drag the ladder out of the garage and lean it up against the house so he could get to the vent. He’d fall to his death, or at least to some sort of irreparable maiming. She had

convinced herself that she was strong—and she was—but she couldn't fathom a future for herself without Harlan. She worked so hard to keep him safe. Bad enough that Carter and Edna were leaving—maybe not for a long time, maybe not for good—but they were leaving. She couldn't lose Harlan, too. And she wasn't entirely sure she wanted Harlan to get rid of the raccoon. Somewhere above her it was cowering in a corner, desperately afraid.

Harlan was waiting for an answer.

"I was cleaning." She was pleased that she had a secret to keep for once.

"In the closet?"

"People do that, clean closets, you know?" she said defensively. Harlan shouldn't be surprised at anything she cleaned. "Besides," she paused. She was flustered and excited by what she was about to say. "It's important to have all spaces clean if people are looking in them." It didn't feel altogether awful saying it. She didn't feel nearly as disoriented as she thought she might.

Harlan held her away from him, a hand on each shoulder. "Really?" He brushed a few wood shavings out of her hair.

Nelly nodded and Harlan pulled her towards him until her thin body was pressed against his belly and chest. She hoped the raccoon would have the good sense to stay silent until she and Harlan went downstairs.

She leaned back and looked up at him. "I mean I'll think about it, at least."

It would be enough to satisfy him for now, and it would give her some time to get used to the idea. That was all she needed. He couldn't expect her to start packing this instant, could he? After all, moving was a big job. One of the biggest. Where would she even begin? She and Harlan had accumulated so much over the years. It couldn't possibly fit into a house like the one Harlan had described. But she couldn't think about that now. It would be better to think about Harlan. He was here and he was safe and he had plans for their future. And he was right. This house was too big for the two of them. It needed a family. It needed children's voices and the slap of bare feet on the stairs. Maybe it was time for someone else to leave their fingerprints on the windows and their scratches on the woodwork. Let someone else move in and deal with all the squeaks and creaks and leaks of this old house. The more she thought about it, the more certain she felt. She was almost sure she could let it go.

PAUL G. CHAMBERLAIN is a writer intrigued by magic realism, and “Homo Ludens” was inspired by his reverence for Kafka, a master of the game. He has published on a variety of subjects, including optics in William Shakespeare, mystic places, and architectural history; his most successful book to date is *Victoria’s Castles: A Brief History of Lovers, Madmen, Millionaries and Ghosts on Canada’s Imperial Margins*. He has a Ph.D. in literary geography and lives in a haunted house in Victoria, B.C..

## Homo Ludens

Paul G. Chamberlain

*Happy the man who has been able to know the  
causes of things.* Virgil

WHO DOES NOT know the haunting tale of Land Surveyor K, that forlorn figure summoned to a castle in Bohemia only to be rejected by a voice that never speaks? Let us begin where Kafka’s curious story ends, and imagine K trudging back through the snow to his room in the inn, only to resume his quest the next day, like Sisyphus of old...

*Before we continue, I must warn the reader that she has no way of knowing if the events about to be described really happened. All the reader needs to know is that K did wake up, but the world in which he awoke was not the world in which he fell asleep. What follows is a recollection of events based on the records of the Castellan, a person whose very existence is as problematic as the story that is about to unfold. But, as the reader will soon learn, in the castle all things are possible.*

\* \* \*

K stepped out into the street early the next morning with a renewed sense of urgency. Seeing the tracks of a horse-drawn sledge inscribed in the snow, he followed them into the dark forest, the trees sagging under the heavy burden of freshly fallen snowflakes.

The path was deserted as he stumbled ever higher up the mountain, a mountain that until now had always been shrouded in an opaque veil of mist, making K wonder if the castle really existed at all. His footsteps were silent, but he could hear the faint sound of a woodcutter deep in the forest as if it was coming from another man’s dream. He stumbled on. Presently, K fell upon a clearing, and it was here that he caught his first glimpse of the castle, its lofty turret thrusting majestically upwards into the sky like a finger pointing towards heaven. Sensing he was near the end of his journey, K clambered excitedly over the icy rocks until he finally stood before the great walls, where he banged loudly on a heavy

wooden door, shouting: "I am the land surveyor! I have been summoned by the Castellan! Let me in!"

His desperate plea for admittance was met only with an ominous silence. As joy turned to sadness, the land surveyor fell to his knees in the snow and began to cry. Someone must have sensed his anguish, because his disappointment was suddenly interrupted by a noise that sounded like bone scraping on broken glass. To his relief, the heavy door swung open, and K found himself staring at the wet cobblestones of an empty courtyard. The land surveyor began to laugh. It was a plaintive noise that echoed back at K as if the castle was mocking him. He quickly recovered his composure, got off his knees, and stumbled awkwardly up the nearby flight of slippery stone steps like a man about to enter the Celestial City.

Inside the small room at the top of the stairs, K was overwhelmed by a feeling of warmth: a fire crackled in a granite hearth, and in front of it sat two red, wingbacked leather chairs. K fell into one with a feeling of relief and, tilting his head back, he closed his eyes and let the fire dry his wet boots.

K wasn't sure how long he had been sitting in the chair, but when he opened his eyes he discovered an elderly man sitting next to him. He wore a brown woolen cassock with a pointed hood that covered his balding pate; he had thin lips and an aquiline nose. The old man was staring silently into the fire, quite indifferent to the presence of the land surveyor.

"I have an appointment with the Castellan," K announced in a formal tone.

After a long silence the old man spoke: "Many are summoned," he whispered, "but few are chosen."

"Who are you?" K demanded impatiently.

"I am the Gatekeeper."

"Where is the Castellan?" K insisted, turning in his chair to get a closer look at the man whose eyes stared blankly out of his deep sockets into the flames.

"Some say he lives in the tower," the Gatekeeper replied softly; "others claim that he walks the passages at night when the moon is at its zenith; some even claim to have heard his footsteps, but no one has ever seen him. The Castellan is like a circle: his circumference everywhere, and his centre nowhere." Then a smile crept over the Gatekeeper's tight lips as he turned his head for the first time: "Perhaps the Castellan is silent because he is an atheist—hmm?"

"I am the land surveyor!" K exclaimed angrily, trying to emphasize his importance.

"I know who you are," the Gatekeeper replied curtly, cutting him off with a sharp thrust of his long finger. "You see," he added softly, bending towards him as if to emphasize his next point; "we have been expecting you."

“But WHY?” K asked in a tone that suddenly changed from anger to a note of desperation.

The Gatekeeper did not answer. All that could be heard was the fire crackling menacingly in the hearth, as if it knew a great secret.

“You are asking the wrong question,” the Gatekeeper replied at length, the fire reflecting eerily off the tight, pale skin of his face. “To know why you have been summoned to the castle you need to ask yourself if you came here today by fate, or if you came by your own free will.”

“I am here because I was summoned!”

The Gatekeeper’s smile broadened. “Let me try to explain,” he began. “Free will is an illusion that blinds us to causality; fate, on the other hand, leaves no room for chance. Today as you walked up through the forest to the castle you were alone, yes? But that is only because you cannot see your circumstances clearly. Let us suppose the Castellan does exist, and let us suppose he was watching you from the tower; could he not perhaps have seen a man following you along the path from his high vantage point—the same man that you think does not exist? Nothing happens by chance, K, even though events are seldom perceptible to you, there is a plan; there is a reason for everything, because unlike you, who sees everything successively in time, a man like the Castellan sees things eternally.”

“So...the Castellan does exist!” K interjected, still hopeful that he might learn the purpose for his visit.

“Before I can answer that question you need to know a little more about the castle,” the Gatekeeper sighed. “According to the original records—records long ago lost—a certain Castellan is alleged to have built the castle for his amusement; the records further alleged that he wanted to observe a world beyond his home, a world that would be governed purposively, so he created a nearby village. Far back in time, before there was even a word for time, it might have appeared to the villagers that history was cyclical, an endless pattern of day and night, summer and winter, and life and death, but it was the Castellan’s genius that dictated that time should unravel according to a predetermined plan, so that history would one day be explained by all forces as inevitable. If these lost records are true, then I am sure you will agree, K, it was an extraordinary idea.”

“So I did not come here by chance?”

“No,” the Gatekeeper replied, pausing again to choose his words carefully. “But at some point in time, according to the original records (records, the reader will recall, nobody has ever actually seen), the Castellan found his little tryst rather boring. After all, if his will was the cause of everything that happened in the village, then he knew the end before the beginning; so the Castellan began to flirt with a new idea. He wanted to see what would happen if events were allowed to develop from

the villagers' own individual sense of freedom, a world that would evolve out of their own creative minds, as it were. To this end he introduced an element of choice into the experiment. It was a bold step in a very grand design.

“From that moment on some things were done necessarily, while others were done contingently so that although the ultimate destiny of the villagers was going to be the same, the path that each was to follow would be infinitely more circuitous. Our Castellan had quite a sense of humor, no? Unfortunately, the whole project quickly became a rather egregious idea in the minds of the villagers, and soon they didn't believe in purposiveness at all. It appears that they were a lot cleverer than the Castellan supposed. The villagers could simply not believe that an effect was necessarily determined by a cause, and a cause necessarily produced certain effects; the very idea that free will was not the driving force behind activities in the village soon became anathema. You see, although no one has ever actually seen the original records, it appears that the Castellan was trying to reconcile providence with free will. Unfortunately, while some of the villagers intuitively accepted the existence of the Castellan, arguing that there had to be an architect who brought the entire project into being in the first place, there were others who argued that the project had no beginning because time stretched back to infinity: the Castellan, they argued, did not exist at all, and so they were free to choose their own destiny—to make their own project, as it were.”

Land Surveyor K was impressed with the Gatekeeper's ingenious narrative, but he really didn't see what this had to do with him. He had been summoned to the castle to fulfill a task. Before he could interrupt, however, the old man began to speak again.

“What I want to tell you, K, is that the whole project went badly wrong. It appears that there were (as the reader can by now well imagine) fundamental disagreements among the villagers, and entire families were broken apart by the most fractious arguments along the lines that I have tried to illustrate. People left the village: some went down the valley; some settled along the coast; and others migrated overseas. The Castellan might well have thought that such an exodus would remedy the problem because as time progressed, people began to speak many different languages, further confusing the issue; unfortunately, things only got worse. The result of these divisive disputes was that some began to see themselves not just as products of the Castellan's genius, but imagined that they had been created in his own image—some even wrote books to support these ideas (many books were written, some in quite arcane languages); others thought this complete nonsense, and a few actually tried to take the place of the Castellan, even though many adamantly insisted that such a person could not possibly exist. The absence of evidence, however, is not the same as no evidence, and the nagging fear



that some of the descendants of the village might aspire to usurp the position of the Castellan, believing that if such a person did not exist they would have to create him, only complicated the project further.

“But, as I have already said, the records of these events are unclear. Some have speculated that it was the Castellan who tore up the original papers in a desperate attempt to conceal what he had done—if there is no evidence, there can be no crime—although I am not suggesting that the Castellan is a criminal. Sensing by now that events were spiraling out of control, the Castellan created one last twist in the project: it was a mechanism designed to introduce random and quite chaotic events into the cosmic equation. In short, from this moment on nobody would be in complete control because this mechanism guaranteed that neither the villagers, nor their descendants, could ever hope to gain the upper hand. If you want proof of its existence, ask yourself this, K: why does one man’s heart stop beating at a precise moment in time and another man’s keeps ticking; ask yourself why a storm suddenly comes out of nowhere and destroys an armada, changing the course of history at that precise moment and no other; and ask yourself why a volcano on a nameless island in a distant ocean erupts when it does and causes the moon to turn blue halfway around the world? Ask yourself how this can be.”

“Chance!” K shouted, throwing up his hands impatiently; “rare events happen quite unpredictably, by chance!”

“Unpredictably, yes—but not so rare, K; events like these happen thousands of times every day in the village and far beyond, but ask yourself: what makes such events happen?”

In the face of such an extraordinary question K fell silent. He was just a land surveyor. Still no closer to learning why he had been summoned to the castle, K proposed a much simpler solution to his dilemma: “I want to go back to the village.”

“Ah, free will!” the Gatekeeper cried, raising his eyebrows as if to display a hint of indignation; “unfortunately, the architect of our meeting today has already anticipated this possibility. It is my sad duty to inform you, K, that should you indeed decide to leave by the door you came in, you will remember nothing of our conversation; fate will inevitably bring you back to this room: and our meeting will simply repeat itself as if it had never happened. But—” the old man hesitated, pointing to another door in the room, “if you choose *that* door you will discover why you have been summoned.”

K stared into the fire, the flames licking greedily upwards as if trying to taste a sliver of apricot wood in a fire temple. It felt like he was about to be sacrificed—but to which god? Finally, K stood up like the prince in a Shakespearean tragedy: “I will go through *that* door!”

“A wise choice,” whispered the Gatekeeper, getting up from the wingbacked chair to retrieve his staff from the corner of the room.

In due course the door opened.

“Behold the miracle!” the old man cried, as he raised his staff above his head like Moses parting the River Danube.

K stepped into the light.

Squinting painfully, the land surveyor found himself standing on a parapet overlooking a great amphitheatre. It was an immense space whose perimeter extended to infinity along each of its cardinal compass points. What he saw next astonished him. On the floor far below he could make out people seated at small tables, moving tiny black objects. Yes—millions of players, at millions of tables, moving millions of tiny chess pieces.

“And every move is transmitted into the cosmos to create an infinite number of random events.”

“But it’s not possible!” K gasped.

“In the castle all things are possible,” the Gatekeeper assured him, silently motioning for the land surveyor to take his place in the Great Game.

As K stepped down the stairs, he glanced up and noticed the tower pointing towards the sky: for a brief moment he wondered if perhaps one day he, too, might glimpse the Castellan’s passing shadow in the moonlight. K was suddenly seized by a feeling of panic. He turned abruptly on the narrow steps and looked back at the Gatekeeper with an expression of horror. “But I don’t know how to play the game!”

The Gatekeeper raised his arms, as if to still the waters, and replied casually: “Neither does anybody else...”

\* \* \*

*Here the records come to an end; perhaps the Castellan really did wish to conceal what he had done. Curiously, there is a legend that the Castellan was once asked which of the world’s great religions he admired most; after reflecting upon the question thoughtfully, he replied: “To be quite honest I’m not terribly interested in religion.” But one last detail needs to be provided to the reader:*

The fire in the room at the top of the stairs above the tavern in the village had long since burned out. A man in a long frock coat opened a black leather bag, removed an instrument and leaned over the bed. The innkeeper’s wife toyed with her apron strings in the doorway, her head leaning forwards, as if trying to comprehend the mystery about to unfold. The tall man in the long coat finally stood up. He put his instrument back into his black leather bag, snapped it closed, and turned to the innkeeper’s wife: “The land surveyor is dead.”

SANDRA HARTLINE resides in Nelson, B.C. She is a past contributor to British Columbia newspapers as well as to arts, literary and general interest community newspapers and magazines. Her work can be found in *Celebrating Canadian Women*, *Border Crossings* and previous issues of *The New Orphic Review*.

## A Dinner in Edmonton

Sandra Hartline

SO THE QUESTION this year, as in all other years, is, where do we go for the holidays?

I don't mean Tahiti, or Paris, or London, or Kathmandu, although I suppose any of those places might be fun. I mean, whose house do we go to for Christmas dinner?

Aunt Cathy is always willing, bless her, although her house is cold and drafty and it always seems kinda bleak with her husband gone. Ray and Kitty are fine but they've got those damn Siamese cats, and everybody always gets stuck in their driveway. Sally and Sam have a tiny apartment and like to have everything catered, which is great when you consider all the bad cooks we've got in our family, except that it gets so hot in their apartment that all you want to do is strip down to your bikini, put on your tacky fur coat and maybe go for a walk in the snow.

Carol and Bruce used to be okay except this year Carol's too sick for company and might not make it to anyone else's house. Tobias is a misanthrope who smokes incessantly, and Aunt Daphne's Little Blue Heeler actually bites, and is truly scary.

Me? I live in a one-room hovel and am too busy recovering from life to host anything substantial.

"Bethany," says Randy, my cousin and Aunt Cathy's oldest. "Why don't you just paint your entire place black?"

"Why?"

"It would suit your mood."

"Ha, ha," I say. "Coffin-black."

"Coffins aren't black anymore, asshole."

"Maybe I'll just make it a deep, peaceful blue."

"Have you seen Ben recently?"

"I forget."

"Tell you what," says Randy. "I'll bring you some soup and bagels."

"Don't bother," I tell him. "There's lots of food here. I've got enough canned salmon and crackers for the entire winter."

Randy, who is a doctor, lives in Mississauga with his third wife, Rhea. A nice man and a genial host, except they're a long way from Edmonton and nobody likes Rhea very much. You might say Randy is a link to the past—we grew up together, practically, and he often calls me when he's in town.

"I've got news," he says. "Mom is going to Jamaica next week."

"Really?"

"Yep. She'll be there for Christmas."

"So where will *you* be?"

"I dunno," he says. "We might stay home this year. Also, I was thinking Sally and Sam."

"Sally and Sam!"

"Sure," he says. "Who wants to cook for this crowd? They did a great job last year."

"I could hardly breathe, it was so hot."

"Beth, you were probably just having a panic attack."

"You are so cruel."

"Whatever. I'm coming over. I'm taking you to lunch."

"I'm naked and I have nothing to wear."

"I'm bringing you a dress."

So I put on a skirt and sweater, and we go out for sushi.

\* \* \*

About ten years ago, my mother died of a brain tumour. My father disappeared well before then, so I was basically raised by my Aunt Cathy and Uncle Fred, who wanted to adopt me, except then my uncle was killed by a Greyhound bus while trying to cross the highway outside St. Albert. At the funeral, Aunt Daphne got roaring drunk and her brother Tobias told Aunt Cathy she would be better off without old Fred. That's the kind of family I'm stuck with.

\* \* \*

"I'm getting these people mixed up," Ben tells me. "Just who is related to who?"

Ben is my shrink, in case you haven't guessed.

"And," he says, "Why is it all so important to you, I wonder?"

But even Ben knows the answer.

\* \* \*

The restaurant is nice, lots of dark wood, wonton and avocado. I kind of sink into my seat and sip tea. Randy is in town for some meeting or other.

"Remember Eddie Carlyle?" he asks.

"No."

"Eddie Carlyle. He used to play piano for our house parties."

"What about him?"

"He's taking Mom to Jamaica next week."

I'm remembering a short guy, idiotic grin—a contractor or something.

“How nice,” I tell Randy.

“I guess she can’t be a widow forever. Do you like him?”

“No.”

“Neither do I.”

\* \* \*

We go for a walk along the ravine, and I tell him about this guy I used to like, Frazier Rohn, who also played the piano. We didn’t really have anything in common except we were in this grief group and both of our mothers were dead. Nevertheless, he was very sweet and we actually dated a few times.

“Really,” Randy says. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened. I still see him once in a while.”

“So when do I get to meet him?”

“Randy,” I say, “Frazier is gay.”

\* \* \*

My mother’s headaches began the second time she was hospitalized for schizophrenia. She was in for hearing little voices, but actually her brain was going out from the tumour. I was doing a lot of undone laundry that week, and then I was living with Aunt Cathy and Uncle Fred in their big house in Glenora.

They took me to see my mother. Mom was sitting by herself and staring at the wall. She took my hand and whispered, “Goodbye. I’m going to *die*. You won’t see me again.”

“Really,” said Aunt Cathy, who had overheard. “She had no right to upset you like that.”

But the next thing we knew, Mom *was* dead, as she herself had predicted. Overnight, I had gone from being the child of a single parent to being a virtual orphan, because nobody had seen my father for years.

My cousins were okay. They took me skiing and tobogganing, and out to the shows that came to town. Randy, who was in medical school at the University of Alberta, got me in to see Rufus Wainwright, although I was very underage for the bar scene. I had a boyfriend named Alex, but he moved to Halifax sometime before Uncle Fred got killed by the Greyhound bus.

Long story short, I’m supposed to be in grad school at the U of A but I had some sort of breakdown and am on semi-permanent leave.

\* \* \*

A phone call from Tobias, who is not really related, not by blood, but is in on family gatherings and such because Aunt Daphne is his sister and he usually tags along.

“Hi, Beth, I wonder whether you’d like to go out for dinner.”

“Thanks, I’ve already eaten.”

“Ha-ha. How are you keeping these days?”

“Swimmingly.”

“Well, I’ll see you at Christmas then.”

“Yep. I hear it’s Sally and Sam again this year.”

“Daphne wonders if you’ll walk Little Blue Heeler for a couple of days.”

“I’ll have to wear rubber boots, so she doesn’t bite my ankles.”

“I’ll tell Daphne to call you.”

I walk the dog along the river, and we actually get along pretty well.

\* \* \*

Mid-December, I run into Frazier at Vitality Health Foods in the herb section, buying veggie capsules.

“Hey,” he says. “Where are you going for Christmas?”

“Big family dinner,” I tell him. “I always go.”

“Can I come?”

I give him a look. “You haven’t got a date?”

“No, really,” he says. “I’m free.”

“You still playing piano?”

“Of course I play the piano.”

“Okay, it’s going to be in this really small apartment, they cater everything, they have a nice 1939 Steinway piano but nobody in the family can actually play it. “

“Wonderful,” says Frazier.

\* \* \*

So I show up for Christmas dinner in my smartest little black dress, all ruffles and lycra, with Frazier as my escort. There are a number of chattering cousins already present, and a niece or nephew or two passing around the hors d’oeuvres. Randy is there, sitting next to Rhea. He calls out, “Hey, Beth! Introduce us!” So I do, telling everyone Frazier is a friend from school, pretending that I’m still working on an M.A. in art history.

We find Sally and Sam in the kitchen mixing drinks, and we each have a glass of wine. In the living room there is a long table set in a festive manner, two card tables for the kids, but the caterers haven’t arrived yet with the turkey and fixings. We finish our wine, and Frazier begins a Scriabin prelude on the Steinway.

It’s brilliant. Even Tobias is attentive, coming in from the balcony, where he has been smoking and basking in the freezing cold.

It’s all quite stunning and wonderful, and I wish with all my heart it could be real.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief at *The New Orphic Review*. “Little Ears” comes from a short story collection he is working on, titled *False Memories and Other Stories*. For more information, refer to page 4.

## Little Ears

Ernest Hekkanen

AFTER SO MANY decades, the mind tends to rearrange things, but this much I know for certain: the dirt road fronting my parents’ wooded property in 1954 was known as Snake Road and the address painted on the mailbox at the foot of our driveway was RR 2, 175b. The details surrounding the double-murder are somewhat more jumbled, because, after all, I was seven years old at the time and children of such tender age are supposed to be kept at a distance from the salacious and the sordid. I do remember that the double-murder resulted in the big chicken farm a quarter mile to the north of us shutting down in an awful hurry, and the Norwegian rats from that farm migrating down to where we lived on our rather small chicken farm (one henhouse and an enclosed run), with the result that my father had to trap and poison them—without cease, it seemed—for at least a month, maybe more.

“It was like a war,” my older sister Patty confirmed. “They kept attacking, and Dad kept killing them.”

The big chicken farm was truly quite large. At least four acres of wire cages sitting on four-foot-tall metal legs. There were aisles between the rows of cages, wide enough to accommodate a tractor that pulled a wagon equipped with a water tank. The old chicken farmer was at least sixty years old, when I first glimpsed him up close in the summer of 1953, at Ed’s Market in Lynnwood, beside Highway 99. His wife was broad-hipped and walked with an arthritic gait, using a cane, swinging her legs in quarter circles. “What’s wrong with that woman?” I asked my mother.

“Arthritis,” she said. “Don’t stare. It’s not polite.”

Mothers have this way of scooping children out of the way by applying hand-pressure to the head, and this is what my mother did to me, so I wouldn’t become an obstacle in the path of the old chicken farmer’s wife.

“Well, if it isn’t Mrs. Hekkanen from down the road,” the old woman said, smiling. “I guess you’re pretty pleased about the new Elementary that’s going to be built, huh?”

“We are, and how is everything with you, Mrs. Tercault?”

“Clucking. Everything’s clucking right along.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Later, in the privacy of our ’41 Plymouth, I asked my mother, “What did that old woman mean when she said everything was clucking right along?”

“Those are the folks who own the big chicken farm up the road from us. It was her way of speaking, that’s all.”

“She had all kinds of stringy hairs growing out of her chin.”

“You weren’t supposed to notice that, Mike.”

Mother was always telling me not to notice this or that. It was her way of telling me to mind my own business. Back then, I was called by the diminutive of my middle name, Michael. Indeed, I don’t believe I was aware that I had a first name, or that it was Ernest.

In the early 1950s, my parents’ wooded property was surrounded by forest on every side. Snake Road, which later became Olympic View Drive, after it was paved, happened to be the border between Lynnwood and Edmonds, as far as addresses went, anyway. Snake Road didn’t offer a view of the Olympic Mountain Range, and never would, except in some street planner’s mind. It wound along a little valley where a railroad line had once existed, back when loggers had relieved the Northwest of its first-growth timber in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The railroad line swung back and forth across what was now Snake Road, and remnants of it could still be found in the forest: not actual rails, but old rotten ties. This is an important detail, because of a well, hidden in some salal bushes not twenty feet away from the former railway line. Locomotives had once stopped there to draw water, apparently. Local historians maintain that a tower had stood above it and, as evidence, they point to some faded sepia photographs archived in the Edmonds museum.

One Saturday morning, as I was collecting dead and dying rats with my father, I came across a fairly small one, caught by its front paw in a leg-hold trap, staring up at me with what seemed a frightened but pleading look. “Dad, can I put this one in a cage and keep it as a pet?”

“You don’t keep rats as pets,” was Dad’s reply, “you kill them,” and then he slammed the rat with the backside of a shovel, twice, because the first blow hadn’t quite done the job. As far as not keeping rats in cages, I knew that was a convenient lie, because, for show and tell, a boy in my second-grade class at Alderwood Manor Elementary had brought a white rat to school. He’d let it crawl up and down his arm, as well as the arm of anyone else who wanted to “try Herbie out.” I had lined up to “try Herbie out.”

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My father, T. Ernest Hekkanen, was only a part-time chicken farmer. His real work was down in Seattle, at Pier 54, with the Army Corps of Engineers. During times of peace, the Army Engineers spent their working hours damming up the Columbia River and building airstrips that could



sustain ever larger planes landing on them. Boom times were now enriching the Pacific Northwest, because of military contracts pouring into Boeing and Todd Shipyards. My old man also specialized in designing missile silos, in case we ever had to lob nuclear warheads at the USSR. On the world stage, we were exiting the Stalin era and entering the Khrushchev era, and here in the U.S. of A. Eisenhower ruled with an even hand while Senator McCarthy beat the nation's bedclothes in hopes of driving out Communists.

I was too young to be aware of any of this, of course. Our battles were closer to home and had to do with the onslaught of Norwegian rats. Being a kid, I failed to understand that the loss of a plentiful supply of food (i.e. grain that fell on the ground below the wire cages on the Tercault farm) could result in rats searching far and wide for new digs.

"We've been plagued by them, too," Mrs. Delaney told my mother, "ever since you know what happened on the Tercault farm."

"So what became of all the chickens?"

"Gone. Trucks drove onto the property last week and emptied all the cages, just like that. There was a police car there, too. Two of them, in fact."

By this time, the new Tradewell had been built in Lynnwood, and that's where a healthy trade in gossip now took place, in aisles flanked by canned vegetables and boxed cereal. Tom Delaney and I attended Alderwood Manor Elementary, but next year we'd be attending Maple Park Elementary, a low, one-story, concrete building painted pink (later dubbed *The Pink Elephant*). The forested landscape between Seattle and Everett was now giving way to suburbs. Indeed, the forested property between my parents' farm and a cherry orchard to the north of us had recently been leveled, to make way for a subdivision soon to be called the *Cherry Hill Housing Park*.

That day, after shopping at the Tradewell, my mother couldn't get our '41 Plymouth to start. As you may or may not know, cars of that vintage were started by turning an ignition key while simultaneously stepping on a starter knob on the floor. For some reason, my mother couldn't get the damn starter to work. Mrs. Delaney, noticing that we were in automotive distress, gave us a ride home, along with our groceries, in her much newer Ford. We had a somewhat newish 1950 Dodge, but my dad drove it to work each day. Back in 1954, it was a fairly grueling ascent up to the level area beside the prefab house my father and some friends had erected in 1948. The house looked out upon the lower part of our acreage, covered with hemlocks and Douglas fir. A circular driveway went through the woods below the house, and back out to Snake Road. This is the route that the milkman took every few days. He'd leave bottles of milk in a wooden box affixed to a tree, a service that would soon be retired, due to the proliferation of supermarkets.

Mrs. Delaney parked her car below the house. Because my mother had purchased several paper bags full of assorted groceries, Mrs. Delaney offered to help her carry them up the long series of steps to the door, and then, of course, to be neighborly, my mother invited her in for coffee and pie. My sister, two years older than me, got to stay in the house, but Tom and I were told to take our “boyish energy” out into the yard. What else was there to do but check the leg-hold traps to see if we’d caught any Norwegian rats below the chicken house or in the lean-to garage beside it. We had caught one—a very large, brown one. Tom and I took turns bashing it with a shovel. I gave it three whacks and he gave it three whacks, and finally the rat succumbed to the blows.

“We just poison them at our house, which isn’t all that much fun,” Tom told me. “This is way funner.”

“So what happened on the big chicken farm?” I asked him.

“The farmhand who was working there shot the old chicken farmer and his wife.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. For something to do, I guess.”

The leg-hold trap was equipped with a chain that had a stake driven through a ring at the end of it. We pulled the stake out of the ground after bashing it around with a hammer the same way I’d seen Dad do, then we marched back over to the house to proudly show off our catch. A covered porch ran along the north side of the prefab, where the dining room windows offered a view of the yard. We walked right up to the windows and knocked on them, and finally Mom opened one. I held up the dead rat, and Tom held up the bloodied shovel blade.

“Look at this one,” I said. “Isn’t he a beauty?”

Mrs. Delaney raised her eyebrow. “Looks rather dead to me.”

“We beat him with the shovel,” Tom announced. “This one right here. It’s way funner than poisoning them, Mom.”

“What are you going to do with him now?” Tom’s mother asked me.

“Bury him. In our rat cemetery. Come on, Tom. I’ll show you where it is.”

We had buried one of our cats there, too; it had died from eating a poisoned mouse.

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I don’t know why, but I keep forgetting that Patty and I had a baby brother whom we were often expected to keep amused. We’d put Little Stevie in a metal stroller contraption that he could push around with his infant legs, tie a rope to it and whip him around in circles before letting go of the rope, mainly to hear him scream—either with delight or sheer terror, I’m not sure which. Sometimes we’d put him on a tree stump and tell him to wag his ears like Dumbo, before getting him to jump off and tumble down a knoll. Sometimes, he’d start crying. When he did that, we

threatened to drag him into the chicken yard and let the Rhode Island Reds peck out his eyes. Nowadays, my sister and I like to assert, with some pride, that our childish torments spurred him on to attain a doctorate in psychology. His specialty: false memory.

For some reason, I don't recall my brother riding around in the old '41 Plymouth with us, but he must have, due to the Dumbo reference I just made. We knew of Dumbo's existence because Dad had purchased a television and stuck an antenna up on the roof of the prefab to pull down the reception. In those early days, the image was rather fuzzy, but viewable. We watched programs like the Howdy Doody Show and Disneyland, which had just come on the air, in late October of 1954. That's how we had come to learn about the flying cartoon elephant, Dumbo.

During dinner, Dad liked to watch the six o'clock news from over at the dining table. Little Stevie sat beside Mom in his high chair, making a mess of his face because he wasn't very adept at feeding himself, yet. It was the television news hour that gave us our first real glimpse into what had happened on the chicken farm. Komo news ran some footage of a policeman pointing at the Tercault house. The news reporter said that a state-wide search was underway for the farmhand who had worked for the Tercaults. Also missing were the Tercaults' grandchildren, Martha and Matthew, fraternal twins, apparently.

"I didn't know the Tercaults had any grandchildren," my mother said.

"That's news to me, too," my dad put in. "I wonder where they've been hiding them all these years."

The news reporter on the scene of the double-murder soon explained that to us. "In the basement, the police discovered what can only be described as a jail cell—with two cots in it."

At this point, Mom spoke up. "Please turn the TV off, Ernie. Little pictures with big ears don't need to know about such things."

Dad turned off the television.

"Why was there a jail cell in the basement of the Tercaults' house?" my sister inquired. "They're not the police. All they are is chicken farmers."

"That's just something that the reporter decided to say," my mother told her. "It doesn't mean it's true."

\*\*\*

Flash forward three years—to 1957. The Cherry Hill Housing Park is now occupied by families seeking a middle-class life in the burbs. Some of the men, predictably enough, work for Boeing. My father has had a new house built for us beside the old prefab, which is now occupied by a renter. Our chicken house is a thing of the past, now turned into a storage shed. We enter our property off of 180<sup>th</sup> Street South West rather than by the long, curving driveway off of Snake Road. Our new house has been designed by an architect and reflects my father's growing prosperity. It

features tall cathedral windows in the living room that look out on the hemlock and fir trees below. We're in the middle of Walt Disney's Davy Crockett era. In fourth grade, for show and tell, I take a mountain beaver to school, in a five-gallon metal bucket, an animal I have caught in a leg-hold trap. I tell my classmates how I'm going to kill and skin it. After my presentation, I'm told to take the metal bucket to the principal's office.

"So how did you manage to catch this creature?" the principal asks me, peering at the mountain beaver in the bottom of the bucket. A mountain beaver has long claws that it uses to dig in the ground, and he was scratching them on the metal bottom.

"My dad taught me how to do it. He used to trap animals down in Wyoming. He'd sell the pelts to the government. That's how he made his spending money."

"I see."

My mother arrives by car to haul away my exhibit. The following week, my fourth-grade teacher directs me to go to the library, where I'm supposed to talk to someone. The librarian will tell me where to meet him. At the library I'm told to sit at a round table off to one side, near the front where the big dictionary lies open on a wooden stand. This is all quite mysterious to me. Intimidating and yet exciting, too. I keep my gaze fastened on the library's door. I know instantly, beyond the slightest doubt, who I'm going to be talking to, the moment he enters the library. In a suit and eyeglasses, toting a briefcase, he heads over to the check-out counter, where the librarian nods in my direction.

"Hello," the guy says, "I'm Mr. Anderson, and I've come to play a little game with you."

"What sort of game?"

"I'll explain that in just a minute. May I sit down?"

"It's a free country, isn't it?"

Right away, I'm suspicious of this guy. He smells—pretty. In our community, only women smell pretty. They get that way by spraying stuff on themselves. Mr. Anderson opens his briefcase and pulls out a manila folder full of papers. He begins by telling me that he wants to make certain he's dealing with the right person: Ernest M. Hekkanen.

"Why are you here?" I ask him. "You don't even know my right name."

"I work for the school district." He smiles a patently false smile. "Sometimes I'm asked to assess students, when there's been a disturbing incident at school."

The only disturbing incident I can think of since starting 4<sup>th</sup> grade is my show-and-tell project. A couple of the girls in my class reacted with expressions of disgust and little screams of horror, when I lifted the mountain beaver up out of the bucket, by the leg-hold trap.

"So what name do you normally go by, if 'Ernest' isn't it?"

"Everybody I know calls me Mike."

“Mike. That must be your middle name. Is that right?”

“What is it you want?” I ask him, straight out. “Why am I supposed to talk to you?”

“I’m here to play a little game with you.”

“What kind of game?”

“A free association game.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’ll show you.”

He opens the manila folder. There’s this smeared-around mess of various-colored inks on a piece of paper, all of them on the dark end of the spectrum. “This is an ink blot,” he says.

“Any dodo can see that,” I tell him.

“Yes, but this is a game unlike any game you’ve ever played before. Here are the rules. When I show you one of these pictures, I want you to tell me the first thing that enters your mind. For instance, when I look at this ink blot I might think: *clouds passing by*.”

“Clouds don’t look anything like the mess that’s on that piece of paper. Haven’t you ever looked at them, up in the sky?”

“Admittedly, they aren’t clouds, nor do they look like clouds. I’m just trying to show you how inventive you can be when you look at these ink blots. Just say anything that comes into your mind.”

I figured I knew what this game was all about, and I also figured I could play it a lot better than him—and win!

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, show me an ink blot.”

The second ink blot is another mess just like the first one. He smiles at me, encouragingly.

“Gopher guts,” I say.

“Interesting, and this one?”

The third one is another mess of inky swirls. “More gopher guts,” I say, smiling at him so all my teeth are showing.

“I don’t think you quite understand the game,” he says. He’s mistaken: I understand perfectly. “Not every one of these pictures is going to remind you of gopher guts. Some will remind you of other things. You’re supposed to say the first thing that comes into your head. The very first thing.”

“I think I know what you mean,” I tell him.

“Good. What does this one look like?” he says, revealing yet another ink blot.

“Butterfly,” I say.

“Good. Now you’ve got the idea. And this one?” he says, turning over another page.

“Gopher guts.”

Mr. Anderson gives me this really annoyed look, closes the manila folder, sticks it in his briefcase and leaves the library without so much as

a farewell. Five minutes later, the librarian comes over to ask me if Mr. Anderson and I have finished talking to each other. I offer her a big shrug. “All I know is that we were playing this game. Ink blots, or something like that. I won, and he slunked off like a sore loser.”

This isn't the only exciting thing that will happen to me on this particular day. I was so irrepressibly triumphant after winning the ink-blot contest, and against a much bigger opponent, too, I was pretty full of myself for the rest of the school day. That is, I was difficult for my 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher to handle. Back then, being ‘difficult to handle’ could mean being able to see two sides to a story; that day it had to do with George Washington chopping down his sainted cherry tree, and later fessing up to it.

“Have you ever tried chopping down a cherry tree, Mrs. Burton? You can't do it in a minute or two. You have to use a really sharp ax, and even with a really sharp ax it'd take more than a minute or two for a boy to chop one down. Someone must've seen George doing it. That's my feeling. He couldn't have done it on the sly. No way.”

“What exactly are you driving at, Mike?”

“I'm saying that cherry-tree story is nothing but a lie. But people are always telling lies they expect other people to believe. Aren't they, Mrs. Burton?”

I was a bit pissed off with Mrs. Burton for sending me to the library to see Mr. Anderson, another big liar, as far I was concerned.

After school, I was still feeling pretty full of myself. Back in 1957, 180<sup>th</sup> South West was what you'd call a discontinuous street. At the intersection where it met the school's playground, it became a dirt road that traveled west past what we referred to as the Wingbat House. All five kids in that house were retarded. They'd stand on the other side of the picket fence and watch us school kids go by, the same way the cows in the Rabbit Lady's pasture had once done, before her property was sold and had houses plunked down on it. My dad told me that the couple who gave birth to all the retarded kids did so because of their religion.

“Why did their religion tell them to do that?” I asked him.

“I'm sure they don't know why themselves,” he told me.

The reason 180<sup>th</sup> Street wasn't paved between the schoolyard and Snake Road had to do with a steep hill where the street became a rutted trail flanked by alder trees—saplings, for the most part. At this point, 180<sup>th</sup> was little more than an access road used by the power company to maintain cables and poles. We walked that route every day to and from elementary school. Oftentimes we would climb the alder trees and swing from one to another going down the hill, just like Tarzan. It was a little bit like playing Russian roulette, because, inevitably, one of the tree trunks would snap and drop you to the ground, which was a big part of the fun, really.

That day we decided to play Tarzan the Ape Man. In one part of the alder grove, an illegal dump had sprung up where people threw unwanted household goods, despite all the No Dumping signs posted there. That day, when one of the alders snapped and plunged me to the ground, I discovered some mint green bags that said Bank of America on them. There were six of them, just lying on the ground, along with a kind of strongbox. The Bank of America bags were perfect for marble bags, so I gathered them up and took them home. Before getting all the way home, I passed two of the bags off to friends. One of those friends was Ed DeLong. He lived in the Cherry Hill Housing Park, and his dad worked in a bank, as a loans officer, I think.

That evening, after supper, a police car pulled into my parents' driveway. By then my friends and I had invented a new game. We had filled the Bank of America bags with sand and were hurling them at each other, pretending they were live grenades. We had killed each other over twenty times, by then. The policemen asked to see the bags. Apparently there'd been a bank hold-up in Lynnwood and the robbers had made off with a bunch of cash in the bags. Ed DeLong's dad had brought his son's bag to the attention of the police, and now the police wanted me to point out the spot where I'd found the bags.

The long and the short of it is that Dad and I got a ride in the cop's cruiser, up to where 180<sup>th</sup> Street became the steep, rutted dirt road. I explained to the policeman how my friends and I had been walking home from Maple Park Elementary and how we'd decided to play Tarzan the Ape Man, and then I more or less traced the route I'd taken swinging from tree to tree, until one of the saplings had snapped off and dumped me on the ground.

"You're lucky you didn't spear yourself on the trunk of that tree," the policeman observed. The trunk had broken off so it resembled a sharp spear.

He put a glove on his right hand, picked up the broken strongbox and walked it back to the cruiser, and that was that, until about two weeks later, when my neighborhood friend, Andy, hit a hardball across Snake Road and we all trooped over to the big chicken farm to look for it in the tall grass grown up around the wire cages. Actually, there wasn't just tall grass. There was plenty of burdock and Japanese knotweed, as well. Eventually my dog, Rip, found the hardball. We were so far onto the property of the old chicken farm by that time, we decided to conduct a reconnaissance mission right up to where the house sat on the side of the hill, to see if we could get inside. We thought we'd like to take a look at the jail cell purportedly located in the basement and, after all, we were boys. Boys did what boys had to do.

The place was locked up tight, even the windows. The only door that seemed to give just a little bit led from the side deck into the kitchen. It

seemed to me as though somebody had stuck his foot behind it. We looked in through the windows and there, on the kitchen table, was some Wonder bread. Also, a plate with a stick of butter on it. There was something odd about the butter. It wasn't the least bit moldy, after so many years of sitting in an empty house.

"I thought nobody was living on the old chicken farm, anymore," I mentioned to my mom, when I got home for dinner.

"No one is," she said.

"Yeah, but there's some butter on the kitchen table, and it isn't even moldy. There's a knife with some butter on it, too. And a jar of jam, with the lid off."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, Scout's honor."

Back then, every mother in our neighborhood was part of the telephone rumor mill, including my mom. Soon it got around that somebody was squatting in the house on the old chicken farm, and soon after that somebody spotted a man over there, but, no, it wasn't the farmhand or one of the purported grandkids, the police soon discovered. It was some guy with a bad case of shell shock, a veteran of the Second World War. The police put the squeeze on him. According to the six o'clock TV news, he'd led them to a mine uphill from the house, and there the police had discovered the rifle used to kill the old chicken farmer and his wife, as well as a shallow grave where Martha and Matthew's mom had been buried.

On the TV screen, the left side of the guy's face kept twitching. "I didn't kill her, though. My uncle did that. A long time ago. He was nothing but a pervert, anyway. He deserved what he got from me. So did my aunt."

"I can't imagine what anybody would've been mining for, up behind that house," my dad said. "All they'd get is sand and gravel."

Indeed, there was a sand and gravel pit down the road from us—a big one, between our place and Perrinville to the south.

"Maybe it was a bomb shelter," I offered, because there was a lot of talk of bomb shelters at this time, in case of nuclear war.

"More than likely, it was a cold storage where someone put preserves," my mother put in. "Now can we stop talking about this? You know what Little Ears are like. They're always painting pictures that are way too big for them to understand."

By this time, nearly every boy I knew in our neighborhood had a BB rifle. We'd go out on safaris together. For the most part that meant tramping up and down the old railroad line, and shooting as many birds as we possibly could. A couple of us had Davy Crockett coonskin caps; they were really prized items, back then. Ted Bundy had an especially good-looking one. He had helped me skin a mountain beaver that we'd made a



real sordid mess of. Later on, Ted became a famous serial killer. But that's another story.

On the day I'm going to describe to you now, five of us were out hunting together, mainly for birds. Late into our hunt, Ed DeLong shot the eye out of a squirrel. The squirrel scampered back along the branch it'd been sitting on—before falling to the ground. Ed went running through the salal bushes in hopes of finishing the squirrel off once and for good. But, all of a sudden, he dropped out of sight with a loud yell that continued for a second or two. The rest of us approached the spot more cautiously, and that's how we discovered the well hidden some twenty feet away from the former railroad line.

"Ed, are you down there?" we yelled into the dark. "Huh, are you down there?"

Ed didn't yell back.

We ran home to tell our mothers what had become of Ed, and within fifteen to twenty minutes, a fire truck and two police cars were on the scene, and we were telling them how Ed DeLong had dropped out of sight, into the well.

"How can a well be left standing open like this?" one of the Cherry Hill mothers proclaimed. Obviously she didn't know anything about the former history of our little valley.

One of the firemen rappelled down a rope into the well, with a high-powered lamp affixed to his helmet and another one hanging from a utility belt. Later on he came back up to report that there was water in the well, and that it would have to be sucked out to complete the recovery. Sucking out the water took well into the afternoon of the following day. When the firemen went down a second time, they not only recovered Ed's body, they also recovered three skulls and a bunch of bones, according to Komo TV news. The skulls belonged to the farmhand and the old chicken farmer's grandkids—based on dental records, the coroner advised the viewing public.

"Alice told me that the farmhand was once married to the old chicken farmer's daughter," I overheard my mother telling someone on the phone. "Do you think that's true?"

Mom noticed me out of the corner of her eye, and motioned for me to leave the kitchen.

Later, when she was making dinner, I said: "Well, was it true?"

"Was what true?"

"Was the farmhand married to the old chicken farmer's daughter?"

"That's the rumor," she said. "Doesn't it make you glad you weren't born into that family?"

"Sure does," I told her. "I wouldn't have known what to do with all those chickens. Or the rats."

The bank robbers were never caught, by the way.

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