

PAPER ANGEL PRESS



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2022 EDITION

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DIGITAL EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

STORYTELLING IS AN ACT OF COURAGE AND OF FAITH. Every author will tell you how difficult the writing process can be. Stringing the words into sentences, the sentences into paragraphs, and the paragraphs into chapters is, most writers might tell you, the easiest part of the process. It's what happens afterward that is the most challenging.

Submitting a story for publication feels like setting a child free. Stories (in a not-at-all-inaccurate analogy) are a writer's progeny. Release those stories out into the universe is anxiety-inducing and angst-provoking: How will the story be perceived? Will readers like it? What will a reader think after reading my story? What does it reveal about me, the writer?

No matter whether its characters are fictional or real, its settings pure invention or rooted in reality, a story can lay bare a writer's heart. As a reader, you may be able to peek into a writer's soul and psyche, gaining glimpses into their dreams and disappointments.

Introduction

This volume contains bits of tales from authors who were brave enough to trust us with their literary offspring to bring their stories to appreciative audiences. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did in bringing them to you.

BACK TO THE LAND
IN SILICON VALLEY

MARLENE ANNE BUMGARNER

“We all worked together. Ate together. Sang together. Learned together. We had a good life. After living close to the natural cycles of the earth year after year, good and not good, we grew stronger and more resilient, learned to manage our occasional conflicts with tolerance and love.”

When Marlene Bumgarner and her husband moved to a rural plot of land in 1973, she thought of herself as simply a young mother seeking an affordable and safe place in which to raise her child.

By the time she left the land nearly a decade later, she had written two books and a weekly newspaper column, served as contributing editor to a national magazine, a college instructor, and a sought-after public speaker. Her natural food store, The Morgan Hill Trading Post, was the first one in her community.

Follow Marlene and her friends as they live on the land, coping with the challenges of rural life as Silicon Valley evolves into the high-tech center it is today, and the world in which they live transforms itself culturally, economically, and politically.

*Visit our website for more information about
“Back to the Land in Silicon Valley”.*

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A HIKE AND DINNER WITH THE ADAMSES

SATURDAY MORNING, John and I drove south to Morgan Hill. It took nearly two hours. The freeways that cut across San Jose today hadn't been built yet. The first ten miles, down Mount Hamilton Road to Grant Ranch, had many hair-pin turns, making conversation difficult, but the eastern foothills, with their lush hills, rushing streams, and coyote bush kept my attention. In spring, these hills were covered in wildflowers, yellow buttercups, California poppies, and monkey flowers, orange columbine and lavender larkspur and clarksia. Today the hills wore their autumn colors. Long brown grass, orange leaves and thick stands of shrubby oaks lined the road.

This route had been cleared in 1875 to accommodate horse-drawn wagons transporting material to build Lick Observatory. John enjoyed pointing out where drovers stopped along the way to change horses.

Back to the Land in Silicon Valley

Once we made it to Quimby Road, we began talking about the advantages of moving to an undeveloped piece of land. Getting away from the 70s political turmoil. The chance to build a homestead from scratch. Living simply. Room for a large garden. Animals for Doña to care for. Peace and quiet.

“We have to keep our minds open, John,” I said at last. “Please, let’s not make any decisions today.”

His eyes on the road, John agreed. “You’re right. I’m excited about the possibilities, but I agree. No decisions today.” I squeezed his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

John and I had a history of spontaneous decisions. Five years earlier, while we were sitting on the roof of our Pinto watching a lunar eclipse, John decided to transfer from studying physics at San Jose State to astronomy at San Diego State. I was having trouble getting into classes in my major due to the returning veterans, so I assented. A month later, we sold our house and drove south with three cats: no jobs, no home, and no college acceptance.

Fortunately, because San Diego was booming, we both landed good jobs and found a sweet little house to rent. This time, though, I wanted us to take more time to think before deciding.

We had left Mount Hamilton early that chilly morning. As the sun rose over the foothills, it warmed the air. By the time we reached Highway 101 — just a two-lane road in those days — our car windows were open and the cool breeze buffeted our cheeks. In spite of our best efforts to stay calm, we were both excited as we approached the property. Once again, we reminded ourselves: we didn’t need to decide that day.

We met Dorrie and Quincy on the edge of town, followed them west along a winding wooded road to Chesbro Lake Drive. With a grand name like that I had expected a paved road, but the asphalt ended a few car-lengths in, and we were soon on a sharp uphill slope covered in slippery gravel. By the time we got to Hawkins Lane, we were driving on dirt and swerving to avoid ruts and potholes. Our surefooted VW bus had a low clearance, and we bottomed out a couple of times as John negotiated the bumpy road.

We parked at a gate with a tilted and faded For Sale sign and two large pumpkins marking the rutted dirt road heading up the hill. We walked along the eastern boundary of the parcel as well as we could determine it from the plot map Dorrie's friend had provided. Fortunately, it had been a dry November, and hadn't rained for several weeks. The soil was dry and firm, easy to walk on.

As we walked, Dorrie and I took turns carrying Doña in our well-travelled yellow corduroy Snugli baby carrier. The men carried the rolled-up plans and a clipboard each, and stopped periodically to confer or write on their notepads. It was clear by the easy banter that they had much in common. Even though John was six years older than Quincy, they had a good rapport. The Adams' two dogs, King and Crosby, romped happily beside us. Our spirits were high. To look at us, we might have been out for a day hike in a regional park.

The land was heavily wooded. Several horse paths and fire trails allowed access to most of the ten acres, so we meandered a bit, exploring as much of the land as we could. At first, we walked along a narrow dirt road, but after we reached the top of the hill we went cross-country. The thick blanket of fallen leaves lay rotting and melting into the soil, and we laughed as we slipped and slid down the slope. I noted where we were — the rotting leaves would make great compost. As I sat on a pile of leaves at one point, I breathed in the rich loamy fragrance of mulch all around. It seemed unlikely, but after an hour we ended up, as we intended, back at the gate. We had explored most of the parcel.

Both over six-feet tall and fit, John and Quincy were a matched set that day. Quincy had fastened his medium-length red hair into a kind of bun at the back of his neck; John's long brown locks hung around his face. They had started the day in jeans and plaid Pendleton shirts, but, as the unseasonably warm day progressed, they shed their plaids for t-shirts. John borrowed my hair tie to fasten his locks into a ponytail.

Dorrie wore practical denim pants and a long-sleeved shirt. Her short brown hair looked comfortable, and she walked briskly, confidently. I wore shorts and a tank top. I soon learned that wasn't such a great idea. Between wild berry vines, poison oak and the

always-present possibility of snakes, long pants and long sleeves would have been far more suitable. John had persuaded me to wear hiking boots, so at least I wouldn't sprain an ankle.

Dorrie narrated animatedly as we walked. "Look ... those two trees would be perfect for a hammock," and "This moist spot where the road has been cut into the side of the hill might hide a spring." and "That level area would be a good place to put a milking shed. We could fence in the side of that rise for the goat pen."

Her enthusiasm was contagious. Dorrie seemed smart and warm and friendly. As we talked, I learned she had grown up on a farm in San Luis Obispo. Her parents were both teachers. She had five younger sisters and brothers — all of whom worked on the farm after school and on weekends. She and Quincy had met at the nearby California Polytechnic College (Cal Poly), where they were both members of a Methodist student group. They had been married three years, and were anxious to stop paying rent and buy a house. Although older than Dorrie, I felt far less prepared to embark on a rural life. I had grown up in San Francisco apartments and suburban houses. *Would she believe I could do this?* I felt as if I were interviewing for a job.

With no particular tasks to accomplish on our walk, and actually not being too sure what to look for, I eventually fell behind the others, taking in the beauty of the oaks, manzanitas, sage, and tall grasses. I stopped occasionally and stood still, breathing in the sweet-smelling air and enjoying the silence. This little ten-acre parcel was surrounded by hundreds of acres of undeveloped chaparral. As we walked, we heard no human voices but our own. It took my breath away.

As we came to a wide swale, I remembered a pastime of my childhood. "This would be a great slope to slide down on a sheet of cardboard." I called to the others.

"I was imagining an archery course," answered John, wistfully.

"This grass will need to be mowed at least twice a year to reduce the fire danger," Quincy warned. "The lower clearing looks like the best bet for you guys and, if you decide to build there, you could put your septic tank lines down this hill."

Dorrie turned to John. “The swale would make a great place to put a garden, and you could have an archery course too.”

Dorrie and Quincy planned to live in a school bus until they could afford to purchase a house in the valley. Since we wanted to build, and they just wanted to save money, they had quickly waived any claim to the lower half of the parcel, which had a large area already cleared of trees.

Eventually, the seller, William Carter, showed up in a beat-up old Ford pickup truck. He confirmed that shared water rights were indeed part of “the deal,” as well as access to Chesbro Reservoir, the large body of water we had passed on the way up. That was good. Otherwise we would have had to sink our own well. A tall, wiry man of about sixty, with a craggy face and thick grey hair, Carter bragged about his influence with local government officials as we walked. “Just call Sig Sanchez,” he said, naming a county supervisor. “He’ll take care of any problems you have getting planning approval. Tell him you’re a friend of mine, and he’ll fix you up.” He swaggered a little as he said this, his back bent forward, unruly hair falling over his eyes, reminding me of a villain in a children’s story.

Mr. Carter pointed out the well housing and pump on his side of the property line, and the large storage building on the other side. Because of its semi-circular shape and sheet metal construction he called it a Quonset hut and so, forever, did we. He said we could keep tools and equipment there, and access his electricity if we needed to. We then followed him back down Hawkins Lane and Chesbro Lake Drive to a narrow path that led to the beach. On the way he pointed out an empty mobile home on his side of the property line.

“I usually rent that out,” he said, “but I’m thinking of moving in myself.” My heart sank. I wasn’t looking forward to having this rather creepy man as a next-door neighbor.

“This is a great place to cool off after working all day,” Carter remarked when we reached the beach. “And your daughter will love it when she gets older. Just always remember to shut this gate because the beach is not open to the public.” We didn’t know it then, but shutting gates would soon become a regular part of our lives.

Back to the Land in Silicon Valley

Before he left, Bill Carter went over the plans with us again, and verified the boundaries of the parcel. Among other things — such as the names of our nearest neighbors and the location of the communal garbage dump — he told us that he had “taken care of” the rattlesnake problem several years earlier, by poisoning all the rodents.

“You’ll never see a snake on this piece of land,” he said proudly, I suppose thinking to reassure us.

We exchanged horrified looks. The idea of poisoned rodents did not reassure us. What had that done to the native fauna on the property? What would it do to our cats and dogs? To the owls and the hawks?

But no one said anything.

After Carter left, we ate lunch beneath a large oak tree with low horizontal branches that Doña would soon be able to climb. Meanwhile, she devoured her sandwich and began to explore the outer boundary of the blanket I had laid on the grass. Her light brown hair framed her chubby face, and we laughed as she tasted a piece of clover and made a sour face. As she explored, the four of us discussed the logistics of getting a trailer and other vehicles up the road, and when it might be feasible to do so.

“I’d like to move our school bus up here next month if Carter will let us,” said Dorrie, looking inquiringly at Quincy.

He nodded his head.

I asked if she had any concerns about Carter. “Janet’s dad? No — I’ve known him for years. He’s a bit weird, but he’s ok.”

Thus reassured, I put my concerns aside. Pleasantly tired from the efforts of the morning and sleepy from lunch, we rested in the shade. I pulled Doña into my lap. She settled sleepily into my arms, and I let my thoughts wander.

This wasn’t the first time John and I had considered living in the country. In the 1960s, he had read Robert Heinlein’s serialized blueprint for surviving a nuclear attack and taken it to heart. *Farnham’s Freehold* depicted a group of friends who survived the atomic bomb by retreating to a fallout shelter under Hugh Farnham’s

home, then living a pioneer life. John had been heavily influenced by the story, which he read about the time of the Cuban missile crisis, when for a few days we all thought we might die. He talked longingly of building a “freehold” for our little family.

When we were undergraduates, we had almost moved to a commune east of San Diego. John had planned to dig an underground turf-covered bomb shelter there. It didn’t work out. Since then he had been following the work of Buckminster Fuller. Inspired by Bucky’s ergonomic and efficient designs, John had been developing plans for a two-story geodesic house. His copies of *Handmade Houses*, *The Owner-Built Home*, and *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* were dog-eared with use. I liked his new direction. I especially liked the idea that our new home would be above ground and not covered with dirt.

While we drove cross-country the previous summer, John and I had visited three communes: *Twin Oaks* in Louisa, Virginia, *The Farm* in Summertown, Tennessee, and a *Lama Foundation* settlement near San Cristobal, New Mexico. A high school friend of John’s, Annie, had lived there since 1966. We named our daughter Doña Ana — Lady Anne — after New Mexico and Annie.

Annie introduced us to Helen and Scott Nearing’s new manifesto, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*. The Nearings preached the benefits of homesteading communally, and we wanted to see if we could embrace this lifestyle.

We appreciated and enjoyed the bonds that people developed on these communes, and the gentle leisurely pace of life. But we were uncomfortable with the group decision-making that we saw practiced there. We wanted to plan our own destiny. To do that, we needed our own piece of land. Having neighbors nearby seemed important, especially for sharing the work of major projects, such as putting in gardens and building fences and other large structures. But we wanted our independence.

Living on the land seemed as natural to us as any other life choice in the 70s. Young people and old were moving to the land in droves. One issue of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, a fixture on most of

our friends' coffee tables, featured Scott and Helen Nearing's book. Their ideas of subsistence farming and healthy living fueled the dreams of thousands of people. Even couples who had recently signed mortgages began selling their homes and moving to the land.

I had also been influenced by the written word, although not of the survivalist variety. Starting with *Little House in the Big Woods*, which I found at a church rummage sale in junior high, I had read all the books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder. In them, she depicted the travels of her pioneer family as they crossed the prairies in covered wagons and built farms from scratch. I had re-read the books while pregnant with Doña. Autobiographical but fictionalized, Wilder's stories fueled my fantasies of living in the country, raising our family simply, away from the clamor and conflicts of modern life. It was a seductive chimera.

Our spot under the big oak tree was pleasant. While Dorrie and Quincy tramped back up the hill to scout out where they might park their school bus, John and I lounged beside Doña, now asleep. Soon birds began calling to one another, the tall grass rustled in the breeze, and what might have been goats bleated in the distance.

"This could work for us, honey," John said, gently caressing our daughter as she lay between us. I rolled onto my back and looked up at the trees and the sky. I also felt that I could grow to love this land.

Flushed with optimism and bursting with ideas, we drove to the Adams' home in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The sun was setting as we drove up their private road. On the brick entryway sat a dozen terra cotta pots filled with herbs, flowers, and winter vegetables. Dorrie explained that this was a portable garden — it could move with her to the property. I suddenly decided to start some seedlings in Bea's kitchen window.

We spread our plans and notes on a large wooden table while I pulled Doña into my lap to nurse. As Dorrie took out wine, and Quincy roasted garlic and toasted French bread, I looked around in admiration. We might have been in a rural European home. Above the large gas stove, a variety of pots and pans hung from hooks on a metal rack. Open rafters were strung with braids of onions and garlic, drying herbs, and large bunches of lavender. Beside the handsome stone fireplace in the adjacent living room stood a pile of freshly split

firewood, a basket of kindling, and two large cushions on which the resident dogs relaxed. The Adams' home smelled like a cross between a candle shop and a barn. I wanted to live there.

While Doña, sated, crawled over our feet in pursuit of the Adams' cats, we ate and drank and sketched our ideas onto the plot map. We imagined a water tank feeding a communal vegetable garden, various animal pens, and a pond. John suggested building a communal barn where we could store animal feed and house animals during the rainy season. He and I could live in it while we obtained a permit to build a dome house.

We discussed renting a bulldozer to smooth the road for our arrival, possible moving dates, and inviting friends for a work party. We hadn't seen any deer, but Dorrie assured us they were there, and would eat anything we planted if we didn't build very high fences. "They're a real menace at my dad's farm," she told us.

One bottle emptied, we opened another, and began to talk about money. John's and my funds were in a Certificate of Deposit, but we would be able to access them at the end of December. Carter was selling an undivided ten-acre parcel and would carry a note.

The Adamses agreed to front the down payment he required, and we would pay them back when our CD matured. The men both planned to keep their jobs at ESL; Dorrie and I would continue to attend college. Each couple would pay half the monthly payment — less than the cost of an apartment in Sunnyvale — and split the cost of feed for the animals. That left a little money each month to save for the costs of a land division. Dorrie and her family would provide the animals and in exchange for learning to care for them, John and I would help feed them and share in all the other chores around the farm. Once we each had five acres in our own names, John and I could begin construction.

"How long before we can build the barn?" I remember asking, totally forgetting our decision to "take time to think this over." Clearly the Adams' were ready to sign a contract.

"By next year this time we will be breaking ground," John assured me.

Back to the Land in Silicon Valley

Dorrie and Quincy exchanged looks. I wondered what they were thinking, but didn't want to break the spell and ask. It may have been the wine we drank on Saturday night, or perhaps the euphoria of our dreams being fueled by our first exciting visit to the land. The peaceful ambience of Quincy and Dorrie's home didn't hurt either. I imagined our geodesic dome interior looking just like their kitchen. Whatever it was, by Sunday morning we all believed we could make this happen.

CARNIVAL FARM

LISA JACOB

When a local veterinarian decides to take over a traveling carnival's petting zoo, she doesn't realize the insanity behind the scenes.

Seagn Conway is tired of her veterinary practice — the same entitled pet parents, the same dogs and cats, maybe the occasional lizard or snake, now bore her to pieces.

When a traveling carnival with a farm animal petting zoo comes to town, she discovers all the animals are depressed, malnourished, and neglected.

Seagn knows she can do a better job of taking care of them than anyone else there, so she purchases the animals, their cages, and their transportation with the purpose of following the carnival around, presenting the animals in their natural habitat.

Was it the right decision, she wonders, to give up everything she had for this ragtag collection of failing farm animals?

*Visit our website for more information about
"Carnival Farm".*

1

SEAGN CONWAY GAZED INTO THE SAD BROWN EYES of the cow leaning heavily against the iron gate in front of her. She scratched the cow under its chin. The cow tried to lick her hand.

Seagn sighed, looked out at the twenty assorted farm animals in the pen. Crowded under a single ten-foot long tent, with one rusted barrel of water between shared between them all, it was no wonder everyone went straight into the carnival and didn't even bother to stop to see the farm animals. They looked worn, sick, or old.

Seeing them like this broke her heart.

Seagn caught the eye of the nearest person wearing a "Rockwell Carnival" t-shirt. "You know who owns these animals?"

"Fatsy?" The man gave her a grin, revealing three missing teeth and the remainder were all black. "He's with Webby."

"Where?"

The man pointed with a wavering cigarette. "The RV over there."

At the edge of the carnival, parked between a couple of trailers, sat an RV. Three people sat at a table under the shade of its awning.

Carnival Farm

In a fury, she pushed through and dodged groups of people to get to the RV. It was only five years after the Pandemic, and people were still leery of her pushing them around, coming within a six-foot distance.

Two large men and an equally large woman sat precariously on large folding chairs, each drinking cans of Coors Lite.

“Who’s Fatsy?” she demanded.

“Who’re you?” the larger of the two large men snapped at her in the same tone.

“I’m Dr. Shaun Conway. I’m a vet.”

“Fuck,” Fatsy set down his beer. “They all got their rabies shots.”

Seagn put her hand on her hip, a sure sign that a tirade was coming soon. “Those animals yours?”

“Yeah.”

“I want to examine them.”

“You can see ’em through the fence, can’t you?”

“They’re under duress.”

“They’re under the tent.”

“Fatsy,” said the woman. “Don’t give the doctor a hard time.” She smiled, although it was forced, at Seagn. “We have all the necessary papers to display these farm animals.”

“They’re sick. Depressed.”

Fatsy snorted.

“What do you suggest? We send the clowns over to entertain them?” This from the other large man, obviously “Webby”.

“As a matter of fact, I do have a few suggestions,” she said, going to lean on the precarious table, then stepping back when it jostled the cans of beer. “How much to buy the animals from you?”

Fatsy and Webby blinked.

“They’re not for sale,” said the woman.

“Now, hold on —” began Webby.

“No,” said Seagn. “*You* hold on. I want control of those animals, and I’ll bring them up to snuff. Healthy, and even give pony rides on that little Shetland you have there. I’ll give people a reason to come to your carnival, to see beautiful specimens of farm life in the middle of the city. Sell them to me.”

“Eight thousand dollars.”

The woman glared at Webby.

Seagn rocked. It was a hefty amount. “Including the trailer and tent, all the trappings it has.”

“Agreed,” said Webby. “If you can do what you say, then it’ll be worth it. You gotta buy your own feed, though.”

Now it was her turn to blink. That was going to cost a lot, especially the healthy kind of feed she had in mind. “I accept that. Draw up a contract.” She looked to Fatsy. “Got any problems with that?”

Fatsy struggled out of the chair, as if it had molded itself around him. It came up when he stood and he had to push the arms of the chair off his hips to get clear. “Where’m I gonna go? All my crap’s in the truck.”

“I don’t care,” Seagn said. “You didn’t care about the animals, why should I care about you?”

Fatsy looked as Webby went into the RV. Fatsy then looked at Seagn. Her fury eased somewhat at seeing Fatsy’s helpless face, but this man abused these animals. She knew it, and she wasn’t about to let him get off scot-free. He seemed the type to have a Plan B for himself, anyway.

She wasn’t worried about the eight grand. She had more than enough saved up from the sale of her parents’ house a few years ago when she started her job at the Central Avenue Vet. Five years later, she was bored to tears with dogs and cats and the every-once-in-a-while rabbit. Farm animals were not her specialty, but she had the Internet.

The carnival advertised that it was going to be in town for the weekend, so she had a lot of work to do. Clean up the apartment, settle her debts, and first: quit her job.

She smiled. Hailey was going to love that.

• • •

“No notice?”

Seagn packed her few personal belongings from their shared desk. She checked the computer, but nothing personal was on it. Maybe some pictures, but not much.

Hailey yanked on the end of her own ponytail.

Carnival Farm

“You’re — You’re just ... leaving?”

“Yes. You’ll be fine. In fact, you can hire that guy who worked here this winter.”

Hailey exhaled. Seagn tried not to grin. Hailey, younger than Seagn by three years, never let her forget who the owner and boss of the place was. Since the owners changed hands last year and Hailey was in charge, it had been a crappy job. Seagn had been looking for a way out.

God (or Whoever) had seen fit to present her with this opportunity: to do what she loved with a whole new set of exotic-to-her animals.

Seagn straightened with the box full of her stuff. “So there it is.”

Hailey again tugged her pony tail.

“Goodbye,” Seagn said, while she finally grinned.

She used her hip to push open the half-door leading out of the doctors’ office. The rest of the staff craned their necks to see where she was going. Some rose from their chairs to watch her walk out. Seagn said nothing to the receptionists or the patients in the waiting room.

She put her items in her ancient yellow VW’s “trunk”, which was the front of the car. After slamming down the hood, she glanced back at the clinic’s windows. No one had gathered to see her off.

Seagn frowned. If they didn’t need her, she didn’t need them. She got into her car and drove to the animal shelter on the outskirts of the town of Salem.

Decorated throughout the year with black cats and pumpkins, the Town of Salem’s shelter was adorned in perpetual Halloween mode. But then, that was the town for most of the year. After all, Salem had a reputation to keep up.

The dogs were out in the spring weather, and the parking lot had only a few cars in it. There were hardly any adopted dogs from the shelter this past year, but most of the ones that passed through her clinic were for the basics of spay/neuter, heartworm, and some with broken bones. Kristen White, one of the Animal Control Officers of Salem, usually presented Seagn with the complicated cases.

“Doc Shaun,” called the receptionist with a wave and a smile.

“Hiya. Is Kristen here?”

“In the back. She just got a new bully, and you know how she is with getting them acclimated.”

Treats and cuddles, Seagn thought. Unless they were stressed, then it was treats tossed to those fighting-breed dogs from a distance.

She walked past the receptionist’s area through to the back office and found Kristen with a ragged bully dog that looked like he had seen better days. He wagged his tail at her approach, though.

Kristen noticed her. “Hey, Doc.”

“Hiya. Who’s this?”

“Don’t know. He was abandoned in the dog park. Probably a fighter.”

Seagn could tell by the scars on the dog’s haunches that Kristen’s guess was probably right. But he was still wagging his tail and bumping up against Seagn to be pet.

“You got him calmed down.”

“Nothing a little trust can’t do. Speaking of which, what are you doing here?”

“I’m leaving the practice.”

Kristen sighed. “It took you long enough. Are you going into your own clinic?”

“No, I’m joining the circus.”

Kristen stopped playing with the dog and gave her a sidelong glance. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead serious. Have you seen the animals in the pens over at the carnival nearby? They’re in horrible condition.”

“You’re going to save them?”

“Every one of them, and turn it into a functioning petting zoo.”

Kristen looked forlorn.

“Hey, the city still has an agreement with the practice,” Seagn reassured her.

“For how long? We come in with the complicated cases and you take care of them for free or near free. Hailey isn’t going to do that for long.”

Seagn shook her head. “The animals need me more than Hailey does.”

Carnival Farm

Kristen absently stroked the new bully, who seemed to sense the sadness in the room.

“I’ll probably be back in the winter, unless they go south.”

“You don’t know?”

Seagn shrugged. “It was an impulse thing.”

Kristen laughed. “You always do that.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she mused. “You know how I hate to see animals suffering.”

“It’s part of your charm.”

Kristen fished out a treat from her pocket and gave it to Seagn. The dog watched attentively. Seagn tossed it to the dog, who caught it on the fly.

“Thanks for letting me know.” Kristen got up and hugged Seagn. “Good luck and be careful.”

Seagn returned the hug. “I will. And thanks.”

Seagn had tears in her eyes as she left the shelter probably for the last time for many months.

DAILY FRESH

JORY POST

In the summer of 2020, the final summer of his life, Jory Post gave himself an assignment: He would write one essay a day, inspired by whatever caught his eye and imagination.

The seventy essays that emerged — personal and idiosyncratic, contemplative and fierce — range in subject from the writing life, extinct birds, and the origins of words to the "three 'C's" (cancer, chemo, and Covid) and his love for his wife and friends.

As he faced his last days, Jory Post measured the world around him and threw the full reach of his emotions and literary skills into these pages.

*Visit our website for more information about
"Daily Fresh".*

It Was in a Dream

IT WAS IN A DREAM EARLY THIS MORNING, during that time where it doesn't feel like a dream, but more as if I'm sitting there with these two guys in this office where it feels like I'm supposed to help with ideas, with completing copy for a newspaper, writing stories, thinking about story lines, writing notes in a very old notebook that seems rare and antique, and I don't understand why we're using it to write on now, and eventually one of the guys says, "Why are you writing on this?" to which I say, "Yeah. It looks pretty valuable." And he proceeds to thumb through the pages, showing us a series of very detailed characters for cartoon images, images I fall in love with quickly. This sequence was connected to a number of other pieces which aren't bubbling up to the surface right now, but it seems like there was some mayhem in the streets, maybe fire, maybe Molotov cocktails and police wearing armor, and we had to get into this office and get to work because the work was important to get out to the people to change the mood, to redirect their anger and disgust in a way that provided solutions, looked at ways out of what appeared to be a dead end.

Loose Threads

USUALLY ON SOCKS, sometimes on a pair of pants or a t-shirt. The proper solution is to find my way to a pair of scissors and snip it clean back to the cloth. But the immediate response is to grab the thread between fingers and twist and pull until it either breaks away from the fabric or uncovers an even longer thread that just makes it worse. The same loose threads that appear in writing and thinking are ones that I enjoy, that I take advantage of by spending time looking at their construction, if they are frayed, if I think they can be extracted or not, if there are improvements I can make, rabbit holes that might be fun to bury myself in for a while.

Like this one. Came from nowhere I can think of. Just jumped to the top as a title and gave me an inkling of an idea of how to proceed. Sometimes I like to think of my mom, nimbly playing with embroidery threads to weave a project of beauty. I wonder how her brain operates. How she decides to pursue a project. If it is always pattern-driven or if she ever just starts from scratch, lets herself go wherever the moment and fingers and threads take her. I know that's not her usual style. But

I do have one quilt hanging on the wall, of branches with white leaves, and one of the leaves has fallen to the bottom, outside the frame, and I love it, because it is so different than everything else she's done. What I don't know is if the pattern called for the fallen leaf, or if it was innovation. Not that it matters, but my curiosity grabs it and runs with it, and I crawl inside her brain and try to discover how the idea moved through her head. I'll jump on a blood cell, ride it like a bronco, discover whether or not I'll get tossed off simply because I tried to discover the answer, or because I shouldn't be jumping into people's circulatory systems trying to discover secrets available only to scientists and surgeons.

A loose thread that appears today has to do with all those that dangle from the whiteboard in the foot-of-the-bed writing studio, all of the unfinished projects that are beginning to breathe, that show me their hearts flexing, wanting to surge to life, wanting my attention, each of them dangling with threads to be pulled, clipped, frayed, tied to other threads, shortened, lengthened, ignored, incorporated, isolated, split into smaller pieces, wound around fingers and slipped between moist lips. They beckon, some louder than others, those that have gained personality over the years, those that have remained dormant and not complained, knowing that I would eventually return, find my way back to the core thread that made me begin thinking and writing about an idea in the first place. With some of them I want to grow them, twist them, make a head full of dreadlocks that I love looking at even though to think and write about it could be construed by some as cultural appropriation because I will never have dreadlocks, have no friends with dreadlocks, have never held a dreadlock in my hand, have only observed them from distances, usually through a TV screen of someone who might live 5,000 or 10,000 miles away. And the threads of dreads are anything but loose. They are twisted tightly, organized, orderly; merged with colors and metals, they reflect off the teeth of those who wear them, they attract others, they want more for themselves and the person who grew them and that person's children and grandchildren. They want to grow old and watch the grey slowly infiltrate and evolve into another level of beauty.

That the world is comprised of billions of threads that are unrecognizable to many, or are ignored by most, makes them that

Daily Fresh

much more enticing to me. Undiscovered worlds, words, stories, and characters that link together in a body of work whose origins began as loose threads and move forward into a more cohesive existence where they are no longer loose but eventually grow connected, to the soil, to the trees, to the axons and dendrites in my head and others' heads, that they grow into something unimaginable, something they or I never knew could be possible and achievable.

Give me more. Loosen me up. Strengthen me.

What's Next?

I TRY NOT TO SPEND TOO MUCH ENERGY thinking or worrying about what's next. Mainly because me worrying about the future will usually have zero effect on changing that future. The more likely effect is contracting an ulcer or increasing my blood pressure, neither of which I need to add to an already full plate of medical conditions. It is true that some forethought about some of what might come next could result in preparations that alter the effects of what comes next. But is it really worth the energy to imagine all of the possible "next" events that could alter one's life simply to gain an iota of control?

I think not. Let the chips fall where they may. However, to backtrack and recall a series of events that has affected one's life, that has brought one to the lively present place in which they live and breathe, that's another question altogether. I'm not able to ignore the journey back to help me understand where I currently am and how I got here, and if that also happens to touch on where I might be next, I'll accept that, though not dwell on it.

Let's drift back. How far to go for the first question? Do I roll back to when I was five and was left in the hospital to have my adenoids and tonsils removed? Do I flash forward to my dad's hospitalization and track the one hundred pounds he lost in nine months? Do I share my viral-meningitis story when I was a senior in high school? Do I showcase my marriage and divorce to my first wife? Or how long I smoked pot and when I decided to quit? No. None of that. Those were not earth-shattering or life-changing events for the most part. This is not a memoir that becomes novel length and tells the A-Z story of me. Instead, this is a series of dominoes about a specific period in a slice of life that leads to the obvious next question—What's next?

We'll use the beginning point of having stomach cramps and diarrhea that led to an appointment with my primary doctor, who scheduled a series of blood, urine, and stool tests followed by a CT scan. To shorten this piece and make it less memoir-like, I'll cut to the 7:15 a.m. phone call following the CT scan, where the doctor said, "I hate to drop this nuclear bomb on you," which is when I hear of the malignant tumor crowding the breathing room out of my pancreas.

Now is an appropriate time for the first What's-next question. It's a biopsy conducted by the GI-doc down at the corner office, where they stick a needle into my pancreas and send a piece of me to Stanford for analysis. As expected, the results come back as adenocarcinoma.

Okay. Next?

This part of the story is way too long to tell and keep interesting, though it does have embedded in it a series of What's Nexts. But simply put, fifteen months of chemotherapy and Cyberknife radiation treatments, with a CT scan by Stanford that shows metastatic movement into my liver as two lesions. I'm given months to live by the radiologist.

Right. Next? Well, to be blunt, *live* those months as fully as possible. Which I do. But my oncologist is not happy with that diagnosis, and puts me back on chemo again, which I begin in February 2020, while I am busy writing, finishing a novel, short stories, plays, thinking about forming a literary estate for my unfinished work to possibly see some light posthumously.

Next? Covid-19. What the fuck is that? It's a deadly virus that primarily attacks elderly folks and those with weakened immune systems. It's airborne and has traveled across the planet to every country and is killing tens of thousands of people. Our leadership downplays it, calls it a hoax, but it isn't.

Next? Masks. We wear masks to prevent the spread of germs. We shelter in place to reduce the incidence of exposure. We stay out of gyms, sporting events, the beach, any place where crowds gather. The governor closes down the state in mid-March, and I am seriously having withdrawal symptoms from not being able to attend literary events and readings at Bookshop Santa Cruz and other venues, so I begin an online reading series with local authors called *Zoom Forward!*

What's next? A *Zoom Forward* every Friday night that attract from 70 to 200 participants. It becomes a part-time voluntary job. I bring my granddaughter Hannah on board as codirector. I continue to take Folfirinox for six hours on Wednesday and carry a pump home with me for the next 46 hours. I write feverishly. Life is fairly good.

Next? Mother's Day, May 9. I decide to break the shelter-in-place restriction and take dinner to my mom's house along with my wife and sister. As we leave, Mom falls on the stairs and causes a compound fracture to her left wrist. A hurried trip to Urgent Care, where she's told it will require ER treatment. Another hurried trip to ER, where my sister has to let my mom go at the check-in desk due to Covid restrictions. She stays in the hospital for five days of misery for all of us, mostly her. They diagnose her with Parkinson's and put her on a new med. The new med is devastating to her system, so when she gets home, she stops taking it.

What's next? We are told by Dominican staff that Mom needs 24/7 care. My sister moves in full-time. Lots of discussions about the future. Mom falls. We get calls in the middle of the night to come down and help. Luckily she's only a mile away. VNA gets involved. Neurologists get involved. Everybody gets involved. Except Mom. She mostly sleeps. Isn't too interested in food or drink. Shelly is extremely attentive and does everything possible to make Mom's life as comfortable as possible.

Next? My friend Kathy wants me to put on three of my short plays on September 14. She will produce. She puts up money. We

start figuring out how to present two-hander, two-actor, plays through Zoom, because we certainly can't do them in front of a live audience. It becomes a monumental task trying to solve the technical issues. Not unlike Sisyphus pushing that stone up the mountain and watching it fall down the other side. Over and over. Mom has more falls, more fallouts. Karen relieves Shelly when she can. Shelly decides to leave her thirty-year apartment at our house and move everything out, which serendipitously leaves it available for our granddaughter Georgia and her boyfriend AJ.

What's next? Some excellent news! My novel *Pious Rebel* will be published by Paper Angel Press and will be launched by November 1. I cry when I hear the news. I am thrilled. It negates many of the negative What's Nexts that I've been dealing with.

Another next? A CT scan in early August 2020. (What a year!) The oncologist uses the word failure too many times when we discuss it. Result is two weeks off, then starting a different flavor of chemo, and having a biopsy to see if we can match my condition with any other trials or treatments. Definitely a bit of a downturn, knowing that the shortened time frame gets shorter, but also knowing that I need to crank on my writing to get as many finished pieces out into the world as soon as possible. Motivation. Inspiration. Even if the push is guided by mortality.

Next? An unbelievable dry lightning storm that lasts through the night and into the morning. The kind of storm I have only seen in the deserts of Arizona. The streaks of lightning start thousands of fires.

What's next? A heat wave that puts us into the hundreds and is debilitating to me, and which, along with my continual nausea, puts me horizontal more often than I like.

And next? The fires. The River Fire in Carmel. The Salinas Valley fire. The three fires just north of Santa Cruz. The call at 2:30 in the morning from Karen's sister, who lives in Bonny Doon, evacuating, headed our way in the morning. Karen's niece and family, evacuated, heading our way, with all their pets.

Next? We order tons of breakfast items from Silver Spur's take-out menu and have it ready when they appear—two kids, four adults, two dogs, one cat. They bring their own pet food.

What's next? Who the fuck knows? An asteroid? An earthquake? My mother dies? Aliens invade Earth? Or maybe I'll win the National Book Award! I won't put much forethought into it. I have too much work to do. That's what's next. Fingers on keyboard.

DEAR GOLDIE HAWN,
DEAR LEONARD COHEN

CLAUDIA STERNBACH

After suffering a devastating loss, Claudia writes letters to family and friends, the famous and the infamous, as a means to explore the events in her own life and find meaning in human connections.

In this third memoir by Claudia Sternbach, she once again knits together fragments — this time using letters written to the likes of Goldie Hawn, Leonard Cohen, Vermeer, the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, and more — to shape a story of a woman attempting to make sense of the life she is living and those who have been a part of it — knowingly or not.

Her letters show us that we are all connected even by the thinnest of threads, that exploring those connections helps give shape and understanding to our past, and shines a light on what the future may hold.

In a time where emails are thought of as too time-consuming, and text messages seem to be our main way of communicating, Sternbach reminds us that the art of letter writing should not be tossed aside so quickly.

*Visit our website for more information about
“Dear Goldie Hawn, Dear Leonard Cohen”.*

Dear Emily Dickinson,

In reading your poetry and searching out information about you, I have never read anywhere that you ever spent time exploring the East Village in New York City. But, for my 60th birthday, I took you there. In spirit at least.

The East Village can be a bit gritty, but nothing like it once was. These days there are tourists, hipsters, cafes with coffee served in as many ways as one could possibly imagine, vintage shops, bars, some dive, but mostly not, and tattoo parlors. Ink has become very, very popular. And this, Miss Emily, is what brought me to the colorful neighborhood on a Tuesday evening a few summers ago. My daughter was with me. She, who has lots of experience when it comes to ink, was there to cheer me on. I was about to get body art. My first, if piercing doesn't count. I mean who, these days, doesn't have their ears pierced, other than my friend Christy.

Although I was a tattoo virgin, it was not my first time in a parlor. The day my daughter turned 18, a day I had imagined taking her to high tea at the Plaza Hotel, she had other ideas in mind.

"I'm getting a tattoo today because I can," she declared first thing in the morning. She also stated that she would be purchasing porn and cigarettes, again because she could. She desperately wished there was an election taking place, so she might cast her ballot. I had two choices, neither of which would dissuade her. I could be a part of her birthday celebration or let her go on her own.

Oh, Emily, you, never having had children, may think I did in fact have another option. I could stop her. Tell her just how un-ladylike tramp stamps are and lecture her on the fact that her taste would surely change and she would regret this early-morning decision for the rest of her life.

I could take away her cell phone. Disconnect the internet. Ban “The Real Housewives” from our television. Oh, my dear, how the world has changed since you sent poems down by basket to those waiting beneath your window.

Well, Miss Em, parenting is filled with challenges. Battles to be fought and won and fought and lost and I chose not to pull rank on her. I instead chose to join her on her adventure. I held her hand as she stretched out on a table face down and had a sun/moon drama mask inked onto her lower back.

Now, here we were, years later making an appointment with a tattoo artist so that each of us could acquire new ink. I have lost count of how many decorations my daughter has, but for me, this would be my first.

Our wait was short, and we both knew exactly what we wanted and where. My daughter, who is far from warm and fuzzy, more prickly pear, surprised me by her sentimentality. When she was a small child, she was shy. “Uppie me,” she would beg if she was feeling timid. And I would hoist her up and set her on my hip where she felt safe.

This is what she wanted written forever on her body. “Uppie Me.” On her hip. In my handwriting. I didn’t tell her how touched I was. She undoubtedly would have changed her mind.

Then it was my turn.

My artist was a bearded chap with colorful designs covering most of his dermis. He also had what looked like black rubber discs embedded in his earlobes. (It’s a style these days, Em. Again, a lot has changed.)

He asked if I had been drinking. I told him not yet. Good, he replied.

He had a rule about never tattooing anyone who had been imbibing. There could be excessive bleeding. Or excessive feelings of

regret the next day, and why should he have to deal with a bloody, hungover, angry customer?

He asked me where I wanted the tattoo. I believe he may have held his breath as he waited for my answer. I mean, at 60, there are only so many places on my being which should be seen by men I don't even know. Even professionals.

I pointed to my wrist.

His shoulders dropped ever so slightly as he let out his breath and relaxed. He then asked me what I wanted.

When I told him, he was unfamiliar with the quote.

It was then that I introduced him to you, Emily Dickinson. He had heard of you, but did not know you.

He practiced on paper before piercing my skin. His cursive was lovely. I was surprised. These days it is no longer taught in school. That, Miss Emily, hurts my heart. I can't imagine what you would say were you to visit us here in this century and discover that most of those lovely swirls and dips and circles you used to write your poetry in would be foreign to young students today.

I digress.

I was enjoying my time in this environment. There was a large gentleman in the booth next to me lying on a table having work done on his chest. Part of his design included a massive set of wings which I thought would look better on his back, as it seems as if that is where you might find wings was kind of a coincidence, as wings figured into my plan for my own tattoo, and his torso was in grave danger of looking as busy as the wallpaper my auntie Di once had in her dining room if he continued to go under the needle.

I approved the design I was shown by Eric (I felt I should know his name as this was feeling a bit intimate), and placed my arm on the wide, flat arm of the chair.

Soon I developed a great admiration for the gentleman next to me. How the fuck (pardon my language, but we are in a tattoo parlor), was he able to take it?

Thirty minutes later, we were finished. We paid up and trotted across the street to the nearest establishment serving tequila. My wrist was wrapped in gauze bandages.

Dear Goldie Hawn, Dear Leonard Cohen

Later, after dropping off my daughter, my taxi pulled up in front of the apartment and our doorman Jose released me from my yellow cab and then opened the door to the lobby. The lights seemed extra bright. In the glare, he noticed my wrapped wrist. Then noticed my wobbly stance.

“You didn’t ...” he began.

“I did!” I replied.

“What does it say?” he asked.

Carefully, I unwrapped the bandage and held up my wrist to be examined.

“Hope is the Thing”, it read. With a cerulean blue feather drawn delicately beneath the cursive writing.

He gave me a gentle high five.

In the years since, I have introduced you to many others. A bartender at Phil’s Fish Market in Moss Landing, California. A sales clerk at Filene’s Basement before they went out of business, a punky looking gentleman on the 6 train, a woman seated at the next table in Manuel’s Mexican restaurant in Aptos, California, and my grandson, who, at only 4 years of age, is restricted to stick-on tattoos for now.

So, I thank you, Emily. I have carried the words in my heart and relied on them often. Now I wear them, not on my sleeve, but on my person. My daughter and I were not alone downtown on those once-gritty streets. You, in your virginal white, were with us for inspiration.

I’d love to know what you thought of it all!

Fondly,

Claudia

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830 and died in 1886. (I thought everyone knew her, but since tating myself with words I always attribute to her, I have learned differently. What is being taught in school these days?)

As a young woman, she studied at the Amherst Academy for seven years. She then dipped her toe in the world of Mount Holyoke Seminary, but quickly returned to the family home in Amherst.

Neighbors thought she was a bit off. Dressed in all white most of the time, she spent her days writing poetry — much of which was never published while she was alive.

She was known to stay hidden away in her room and apparently avoided people like the plague.

She never witnessed her own success. But she became so very popular that one woman even had a small piece of her poetry tattooed on her wrist more than a century after her passing!

DUE DATE

A SHELBY MCDOUGALL MYSTERY

NANCY WOOD

Surrogate mother Shelby McDougall just fell for the biggest con of all — a scam that risks her life ... and the lives of her unborn twins.

Twenty-three-year-old Shelby McDougall is facing a mountain of student debt and a memory she'd just as soon forget. An ad in Rolling Stone for a surrogate mother offers her a way to erase the loans and right her karmic place in the cosmos. Within a month, she's signed a contract, relocated to Santa Cruz, California, and started fertility treatments.

But intended parents Jackson and Diane Entwistle have their own agenda — one that has nothing to do with diapers and lullabies. With her due date looming, and the clues piling up, Shelby must save herself and her twins.

As she uses her wits to survive, Shelby learns the real meaning of the word "family".

Visit our website for more information about the “Shelby McDougall Mysteries” series.

1

THE BEEMER DRIVER, RIGHT ON OUR TAIL, tapped his horn a few times, and sat on it. My brother Dexter swerved the SUV toward the dented guard rail separating the gravel shoulder from a steep drop into the Santa Cruz mountain valley below. But the BMW driver didn't take the hint. He just edged closer, veering in and out of the lane, still trying to pass.

"What the ...?" shouted Dexter as the Beemer's right front fender hooked our left rear with an explosive crunch.

Suddenly we were sliding out of control, skidding across the narrow road as if it were black ice. Dexter fought the wheel and pumped the brakes, but the pedal plunged to the floor. Yelling "Hold on," he yanked the parking brake.

Metal screeched and our CRV fishtailed to the right, jerking to a halt inches from the cliff. Dexter turned the ignition off and there was welcome silence.

He whacked the steering wheel with the palm of his hand.

“I am so dead,” he groaned. “Jessica is going to kill me.”

He reached over to unclip my seatbelt then looked at me, horrified. “Shelby, we need to get you to a doctor.”

“I’m fine,” I said, cradling my substantial belly with both hands. “Thank God the airbag didn’t go off.”

“If I ever catch that idiot ...” Dexter tried to start the car, but the engine just whirred, clicked, and died. He swore, wiggled his phone out of his pocket, pressed the on button, and swore again. He shook it, as if that would help. “Can I try yours?”

“If you can find it,” I said. I gestured behind me, where my entire life was crammed into boxes, suitcases, and duffel bags.

“Don’t have that much time. Gotta get you and those babies to a doctor.” He opened the car door. “I’ll be back in a half hour, tops,” he said. “Don’t go anywhere.”

He grinned at me. We both knew I wouldn’t.

I watched his bright red t-shirt disappear through the redwood grove up the twisting road, under the blue California sky. He’d be at least an hour. Dexter never could tell time.

I angled the seat back and was rewarded with the familiar poke of a baby foot between my lower ribs, then another on my left side. See? I wanted to tell Dexter, we’re all fine. All three of us. And just because you’re my big brother, you can’t always tell me what to do.

I reserved that privilege for Jackson and Diane Entwistle — the intended parents of my unborn twins. Although we didn’t know each other that well yet, Diane insisted on taking me in now that Jessica, Dexter’s pushy wife, had kicked me out. So instead of being shoehorned into an all-purpose office-guest-craft room, I’d have my own cottage. Six hundred square feet all to myself on their expansive Santa Cruz mountain ridge top estate. Even though the arrangement would only last a few months, until the babies were born, I was looking forward to quiet country living.

I locked the doors, twisted around in the seat for my purse, and busied myself in a fit of organization. I excavated gum wrappers, used movie tickets, wadded up tissues, balls of hair from my brush, bits of broken shells I’d collected on my morning beach walks, keys to Dexter’s house that I wouldn’t be needing anymore, and a dangly

red and white African beaded earring I'd assumed was long lost. The trash went in one pile, the earring in my coin purse, and I stashed the keys to my former life in the glove box.

I'd just have to remember to tell Dexter they were there.

• • •

Forty-five minutes later, I was flipping through the *Sunset* magazine I'd found under the passenger seat when I smelled smoke.

Campfires weren't unusual up here in the hills, where there were at least three state parks, and at first the tendrils of what looked like mist winding through the upper redwood canopy didn't worry me. I was reading about kitchen makeovers, something I couldn't yet imagine at twenty-three, but maybe someday, after the babies were born, after I finished graduate school, after I found that perfect guy.

Then I started coughing. And I looked up again. The smoke was as dense as beach fog on a summer morning. This was no campfire.

I felt a sudden surge in my throat: on the side of the road, near the hairpin curve where Dexter had disappeared, licks of red and orange flame were traveling lazily up the trunk of a spindly shrub. I jumped as it ignited with a crack, sparking in fiery traces like a welding torch.

As quickly as I could, I unlocked the door and eased out, trying not to look down at the slope as steep as a ski jump that dropped off beneath my feet. Only an inch of slippery gravel lay between the toes of my flip-flops and the lip. I baby-stepped around the car, taking peeks up the hill, hoping I'd see Dexter running toward me, arms outspread in a victory lap.

If you wanted something enough, the universe would provide, right? But only a backdrop of flames glowed through the swirling smoke.

Now whole trees were hissing in the distance as they burned. A power line sparked in a deafening pop. I looked around for my best escape route. I couldn't follow Dexter. No one could navigate that path, not even a fully-suited firefighter with an oxygen tank. I knew Dexter was somewhere safe by now. Probably as worried about me as I was.

Due Date

I waddled fast downhill, and ten minutes later, I was in almost-clear air again, the blaze just a memory clinging in sooty, sweaty rivulets to my hair and clothes. My eyes still burned, and my tongue felt singed, but a familiar blue sky arched above, and the feathery ash only floated down occasionally, gentle as mist.

I knew it would be just a matter of time before the fire caught up to me, though, and I couldn't walk forever.

As if my prayer had been answered, the faint whine of an engine broke the still afternoon. Gears ground as the vehicle labored up the grade. I hurried off the road and crouched behind a tree. Maybe it was the hormones, but paranoia had been a constant companion since I signed my surrogacy papers. Nobody liked surrogates, I'd learned, especially once they realized the amounts of money involved.

But I needed a lift. Shaking off my worries, I straightened up, ready to flag down the vehicle. "Shelby Emma Stearns McDougall," I said. "Get a grip."

Above me, a pair of crows squawked, raspy and piercing. I adjusted my huge belly, leaned back against the tree trunk, and waited.

2

THE APPROACHING VEHICLE SOUNDED LIKE AN EARTH-MOVER, gears biting as the driver shifted around the tight turns. Something red moved through the trees and for an instant I thought it was Dexter, waving his t-shirt to catch my attention. Instead, a full-sized fire truck rumbled into view, driver and passenger invisible behind glinting glass.

Gold embossed lettering on the paint read: “Felton Fire. Paramedic Unit.”

“Hey,” I yelled, “over here.”

I lumbered into the road, waving my arms, but I was too late. The fire engine careened around the next curve and disappeared.

I knew the fire engine would stop, eventually. Even if the fire had burned itself out, surely the driver would notice the abandoned CRV and start looking for someone. I turned to walk back up the road.

It was steep going. The smoke was much thicker now, and I started to cough in a persistent sharp bark, like I’d been a smoker for thirty years. Soon, I saw the fire engine, its doors hanging open,

parked by Dexter's car. Surprisingly, the fire had not consumed the SUV. Instead, it had jumped the road, burning across the hillside, leaving a calling card of skeletal bushes and scorched tree trunks. The place looked like a Biblical hell, the charred ground smoking, shafts of soot hanging in the air like dust motes. Blackened, twisted branches littered the road and the air stank like campfire coals chased by a kerosene back.

A figure, the silhouette as fuzzy and blurry as if I were looking under water, emerged from that devastation. I rubbed my eyes then leaned over to put my hands on my knees, suddenly dizzy.

"Shel-by! Shel-by?"

A woman was calling my name over and over, and she sure sounded like Diane Entwistle. Diane was the only person I knew who said my name that way, with the emphasis on the second syllable, not the first. As if she were British. Besides, who else would know I'd been in that SUV?

But that was wishful thinking. Diane had appointments in San Jose all day.

The voice ricocheted through the burned-out vegetation as clear as a loud parent on a softball field. I tried to yell back, but my own voice failed me, leaking out in small frog-like croaks. And my legs were so tired. Carrying all those babies was hard work. I chose a less sooty spot and sank to the ground, closing my eyes. Just for a minute.

I only wanted a tiny nap, but the person frantically jiggling my shoulder and tapping my cheeks disagreed. Again, that "Shel-by!" But this time, followed by a plea, and then, an order: "Shelby, please wake up! Wake up! Wake up. Now."

I forced my eyes open and saw Diane's face, inches from mine. A wave of relief washed over me. Everything would be fine. Diane was here and I was saved.

When I tried to sit, a hand as big and bulky as a catcher's mitt pinned me to the ground. Diane inched to the left and the face belonging to the owner of that hand loomed above.

"Miss, don't move," a man's voice snapped.

I heard a click. A sharp beam of light traveled across my line of sight.

“Follow the light with your eyes,” the man ordered. “Don’t move your head.”

He waved the flashlight from left to right, then up and down. Without warning, meaty fingers spread open my eyelid and the white beam shone directly into my pupil, igniting a fiery pain. I moaned and tried to push his hand away, but he swatted me off as if I were as insubstantial as a mosquito.

“One more second,” he said, keeping the flashlight focused against my eye. By the time he was done, a small white circle of heat was seared into my retina, stabbing my skull like a spear.

“I need to look in your other eye.” His thumb flattened my cheek and his index finger pressed against my eyelid. “This will only take a second.”

That white heat grew closer and closer, obliterating the smoky sky above, then the pink flesh of his face. My brain was going to explode. I had to save myself.

I curled my right hand into a fist and tensed my arm, from fingertips to shoulder.

And I swung.

The punch landed on the corner of his jaw with a satisfying crunch, like the sound of a wooden bat on a ball.

Thankfully, the light disappeared. I slumped back into restful oblivion.

3

PREGNANT WOMEN HAVE A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP with bathrooms. Way too soon, the familiar call of nature woke me. Blankets cocooned me burrito-style. I was in a clean hospital room, connected to an IV drip by a tube that snaked from the back of my hand.

I scooted to the side of the bed, unwrapping myself, and dragged the IV — pole, bag, and all — to the john. No easy feat.

Settling back into bed was even harder. Somehow I managed to tangle the tube around my midsection, as if it were a ball of yarn.

A smothered giggle interrupted my battle. Dexter?

My brother was sitting in a chair at the end of the bed, tucked in shadow.

“I was about to call in the cavalry.”

“I’m stuck,” I muttered.

“Just lift the tube over your head and slide in under it.”

His cell phone chirped a cheery digital rendition of the *Sesame Street* jingle — Ashley’s favorite show. Dexter flipped the phone open.

“Thirty minutes,” he promised. “I know it’s late, but Shelby just woke up. I need to talk to her.” He listened, scowling. “I’ll meet you out front in thirty.”

Dexter snapped the phone shut and shook his head. “Sorry. She’s tired.”

I shrugged. Three-year-old Ashley I loved, but there was no love lost between Jessica and me.

Dexter leaned forward, placing his phone on the edge of the bed. Dark smudges circled his eyes and his right cheek looked bruised. His short hair was matted down, pressed against his skull like hat hair. But Dexter never wore a hat. Ever.

“You look worse than I do,” I said.

“I should have run down the hill, not up,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “I ran right into the fire. I didn’t notice it until it was almost too late.”

I remembered Dexter sprinting up the hill, holding his phone in front of him, watching the bars like the guy in the TV advertisement.

“Then these trees around me started to explode in flames. This falling branch missed me by inches.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah. And you won’t believe what saved me. Remember earlier in the summer when I took that class in local geology?”

I shook my head. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“The field part of the class was up there, right where we got hit,” Dexter explained. “Remember I told you about the springs and the caves?”

This sparked a memory. Dexter had returned from that class, all excited, saying how much fun it would be to take Ashley caving. But Jessica nixed that with a curt and abrupt, “Take her into a cave, with spiders? I don’t think so.”

“I just happened to find the entrance to one of the biggest caves we’d been to. I was so lucky.” He shivered and his voice trailed off. “I had a front-row seat to a pretty scary show. The fire moved so fast, obliterating everything ... I don’t want to think about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t found that cave.”

I didn’t either. “Are you okay now?” I asked. “Did they check you out?”

“Just some burns.”

His left foot, resting on the bed rail, was bound in white gauze up to his ankle. I sucked in my breath.

“Dexter, what happened?”

“The bottom of my shoe melted. Lucky for me I was wearing my wool socks, so the rubber didn’t stick to my skin. A second degree burn instead of a third.” He grinned, faintly proud.

“Do they know how the fire started?”

“Diane heard it was a Beemer ... a black convertible that pulled off the road and left its engine on. The catalytic converter caught the grass on fire.” He shook his head. “The guy must’ve seen the fire start and took off anyway.”

I looked at Dexter, who nodded.

“Had to have been the same guy who clipped us. He must have stopped to look at the damage without turning off his engine.”

“That jerk,” I growled. “Stupid tourists don’t know anything about the hills and fire danger. If we ever catch that guy ...”

Dexter interrupted, “We won’t. There’s no trace of him. And nothing remarkable either: the guy was wearing an olive baseball cap, sunglasses, and a black t-shirt. Same outfit as everyone else in Santa Cruz.”

We sat in silence for a minute.

I looked around the tiny room. “How long am I here for?”

Suddenly, I noticed the enormous bouquet of flowers on the small table. “What’s that?” I asked, pointing.

“Diane got those for you. I take back all the bad stuff I said.”

I looked at Dexter in surprise. He nodded.

“Diane’s an all-star. She talked to the doctors, handled your insurance, made sure I was OK, and took care of the car. Plus, she got all your stuff out of the backseat before it got towed.”

I smiled. “Don’t want to say I told you so ...”

“I know.” He smiled in return. “Car’s going to be totaled, by the way. Jessica is so pissed. Didn’t even have five hundred miles on it.”

He rubbed his hands against his thighs and stared at his pants.

“There’s something else,” he said, glancing up at me. “I called Mom and Dad.”

If I hadn't been flat on my back in bed, I would have smacked my brother.

He saw my glare. "I had to. You're in the hospital. They need to know."

I stared at the ceiling.

"Right?" he persisted.

"You promised," I said flatly. "What about that?"

"I didn't tell them anything specific. I just said we were out for a drive."

"You promised," I said again.

"I did."

We didn't say anything else. There wasn't much to say.

After a few minutes, Dexter pushed himself up. "I better go. It's going to take me at least fifteen minutes to hobble to the lobby. Don't want to keep my princess waiting."

He grabbed a pair of crutches that were propped against the wall by my hospital bed. "I can't lean over and give you a hug. I'd fall down."

I was just as glad.

He waved one of the crutches toward me, an oversized bug waving an antenna. "I'll come see you as soon as I can drive. Call me when you get settled in.

"I'm really glad you're okay, Shel," he said, staring down at me.

"Me too," I said.

I watched my brother slowly hobble off.

THE STORK

A SHELBY MCDOUGALL MYSTERY

NANCY WOOD

Shelby McDougall's past is behind her. Almost.

It's been five and a half years since Shelby put her infant twins up for adoption, and she's finally on track. Back in Santa Cruz, California, she's sharing an apartment with her brother, Dexter, and in her second year of criminal justice studies. She's landed her dream job as an intern to local P.I. Kathleen Bennett. And her stone-cold love life is heating up.

Then a late-night phone call puts Shelby's perfectly ordered life into a tailspin.

One of the twins has been kidnapped, snatched from home in the middle of the night. There are no witnesses — no clues, no trails to follow. After meeting the family, Shelby knows something is off. The adoptive parents tell her the children don't sleep, they eat constantly, and their IQs are off the charts. Against her better judgment, Shelby agrees to help.

By the time she realizes she's up against something powerful, something evil, it's almost too late. As Shelby fights for her life, and that of the kidnapped child, she discovers shocking truths about herself and the children.

*Visit our website for more information about
the "Shelby McDougall Mysteries" series.*

1

THE CALL CAME AT TWO IN THE MORNING, the shrill ring startling me from a deep sleep. I bolted upright, grabbed the cell off the bedside table, and flipped it open.

A woman's voice, high-pitched, insistent, and on the edge of hysteria blasted from the speaker, cutting off my greeting mid-sentence.

"Hello? Hello? Is this the P.I. agency? I need to leave a message for Shelby. For Shelby McDougall."

I replied cautiously, "This is Shelby."

The woman drew a long, shaky breath and started to cry. "You answered," she said. "You're there." Another breath. "You have to help me. You're the only one who can. Please, help me." Her voice cracked in anguished, ragged sobs, and she breathed heavily, as if trying to get a grip. As if steeling herself so she could continue.

The Stork

She started and stopped, started and stopped again. Then, in a low almost inaudible moan, she said, “My baby. He’s gone. Someone took him. He’s been kidnapped.”

Blood roared in my ears. Sweat dotted my forehead and fear, as bright and sharp as the honed edge of a razor, parked itself low in my belly.

“Who is this?” I asked as I swung my legs to the floor and fumbled for the light, trying to catch my breath, trying to remember how to breathe.

The woman’s moans ratcheted to a shrill, inhuman wail.

“Who is this?” I repeated; my voice now loud, sharp, demanding.

“L ... L ... L ...,” the woman managed, before dissolving into frantic weeping.

“Please,” I said, trying to soften my tone. “Talk to me. Who are you? Where are you?”

But her sobs grew distant, as if she’d put down the phone, and a cascade of notes signaled the end of the call. I listened to empty air, imagining a woman in a darkened room, curled in a fetal position, weeping for her lost child. I’d received calls like this before, but it had been years. Calls from grief-stricken women teetering on the edge of sanity, hoping I could help. Thinking that because I’d tricked fate, because I’d been able to save my babies, I’d magically be able to do the same for theirs.

I never could.

The number was local, from the 831 area code. That didn’t help — 831 covered three counties. The woman could be anywhere, from right next door, here in Santa Cruz, California, to Gorda, on the Big Sur coast at the southern edge of Monterey County. I called back, but the phone on the other end rang and rang, the sound tinkling into emptiness. No greeting, no voicemail.

I dropped the cell on the bed and massaged my temples where the headache lurked, wishing I hadn’t had those beers earlier in the evening. I picked up the phone and redialed. Again, no answer.

I hopped out of bed, rifled through the clothes piled on the floor, found the sweatshirt I’d peeled off a few hours earlier, and pulled it over my head. Two Advil and a glass of water later, I was back in my room.

Calling, letting it ring ten times, disconnecting, calling again. Turning the small flip phone over and over in my hands, willing it to ring.

The Amber Alert system was enabled on the phone, but nothing had come across in the last few days. If I was in the office, I could use the scanner to listen in on the police frequencies. At the very least, I should be able to find the address through reverse lookup.

But the cell rang before I could get started.

“Shelby?” This time, a man spoke; his voice a low and gravelly rumble.

“Who are you?” I asked in return.

A slight pause, followed by: “Ryan Boyd.”

Boyd? Ryan Boyd? I felt like the air had been knocked out of me. I doubled over, muffling the gasp that threatened to spill out, giving me away.

But he wasn’t fooled. “You okay?” he asked.

I slowly sat back up, feeling the headache now. The Advil hadn’t touched it; it felt like a six-inch-wide steel band was wrapped around my skull radiating a pulsing, punishing pain.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I asked a question in return, my voice small and disbelieving. “One of the twins was taken?”

Taken. Why had I used that particular word? Not kidnapped or abducted or snatched, but taken. As if something had been taken from me. As if the twins I’d given up for adoption five and a half years ago were still cleaved to me, still part of my life.

“Yes,” Ryan replied. “Justin was kidnapped.”

Justin. My son.

“It happened sometime Saturday night. Lisa checks on the kids every morning when she gets up around six. Justin’s bed was empty. He wasn’t in the house. His sister had no idea he was even gone.” Lisa, I knew, was Ryan’s wife. The twins’ real mother.

Ryan’s voice caught and he blew out his breath in a sigh, a sorrowful rattle that made me shiver. “Lisa’s hysterical. Beside herself.”

Completely understandable, I thought, and then asked, “What are the police doing?”

“They were here all day Sunday. All day yesterday. And will come back today. Interviewing me, Lisa, the neighbors, Justine.”

Justine. My daughter.

After a beat, I asked, "Is she safe?"

"Yes," Ryan replied. "I just checked on her. She's fine."

"Why didn't I see this in the paper?"

"The police wanted to wait. To see if we'd get a ransom call." He paused. "We haven't."

"How come there was no Amber Alert?" I persisted.

"There was no information to post," Ryan replied. "We don't have anything to look for."

"But why call me?" I asked.

"Lisa thinks the world of you. She showed me the article that ran in the paper last month, about you taking down the baby trafficking ring and what you've been doing since then.

"She was so proud, she wanted to cut it out and put it on the fridge. Then, when this happened, we decided to contact you."

My jaw dropped in surprise and I snapped it shut, feeling like it'd been opened and closed by some external force. As if I were the dummy and the universe was the ventriloquist.

Ryan's voice dropped a register as he added, "We thought we'd be calling an answering service or a machine, and you'd get the message in the morning. I'm sorry to have woken you."

"It's okay. I have the backup work phone this week," I said. "I'm the answering service.

"But why me?" I repeated. "What can I do that the police can't?"

"Please," he replied, his voice pleading. "Lisa insists that you're the only one who can help us."

One of Grandpa Stearns' sayings popped into my head and I could hear his measured voice: "No good will come of this, Shelby. No good."

A warning? Or just the jumbled thoughts of someone yanked from sleep in the middle of the night?

But, unable to refuse, I said, "I can come in the morning. Early, before work, say, around seven-thirty?"

"Thank you," Ryan replied. "Thank you."

2

LONG AFTER WE'D HUNG UP, I stared at the flip phone, the after-hours backup for the P.I. firm where I was working. I was thinking about how easy it had been for them to find me.

As an aspiring P.I., I was hired to find people. And once I found someone, it was my job to discover everything there was to know. I knew how to tunnel into a life and excavate details, the daily routine that cascaded into a full-blown existence — family and friends, jobs, income, addresses, cell numbers, social media accounts, vehicles, credit score, purchasing preferences, workout schedules, eating habits, medical history. To dig even deeper and ferret out the intangibles that created an inner life — the joys and sorrows, loves and lovers, disappointments and dreams.

I'd done some research when I'd moved back to Santa Cruz, California three years ago; wanting to find out as much as possible about the couple who'd adopted my twins. But once I'd unearthed the basics — names, ages, employment history, income, and address — I'd stopped.

The Stork

Much more would be stalking. So I'd written it all down and had forced myself to forget. Though I hadn't been one hundred percent successful. Right away, when Ryan Boyd had said his name, I'd known who he was.

I used to think about the babies all the time. At one time, I even considered them my babies. Even though I wasn't the one waking up in the middle of the night to feed them or change their diapers. I wasn't the one wrestling them into car seats and taking them to play dates and doctor appointments. I wasn't reading to them or restricting their screen time.

In the last year, the twins had finally fallen from my consciousness, pushed to the back of my mind by more immediate concerns. School, work, friends, family. It was as if that chapter in my life no longer belonged to me. As if it had happened to someone I'd read about in the paper. Or in a book. But not to me.

It had happened to me, though. A younger me. A much more naïve me. A much more trusting me. The phone call brought it all back — a roaring, thundering mess of fear and panic, mingled with still-fresh disbelief and a small nut of pride.

Too jittery to sleep, I grabbed my laptop off the desk and opened it as I sank into bed. I studied the ad that had caught my attention earlier in the evening, the one I'd found on a message board called *Surrogate Moms Classifieds*.

The ad read:

Gestational surrogate wanted. First time moms encouraged.

You will be well rewarded.

I'd seen this exact phrase just once before, years ago.

The sum of it held an implicit promise. If you answered this ad, something besides money waited for you. Something exceptional. Life-changing, even. I'd fallen for it — hook, line, and sinker. And my life had changed, in more ways than I could have possibly imagined. Not all of those changes were good. Most of them were downright terrifying, plunging me into a world of evil I'd only seen in the movies or on TV.

I angled the screen back and read it again:

Gestational surrogate wanted. First time moms encouraged.
You will be well rewarded.

You: Willing to relocate. Have a healthy BMI. Don't use
drugs, meds, alcohol. Don't smoke.

Us: A happily married traditional couple living in northern
California.

All expenses associated with the pregnancy and delivery will
be covered. You will be well compensated for your time and
efforts. Please email. We'd love to hear from you.

Gestational surrogate. Such a clinical, sterile term. I'd been a
straight-up surrogate mom. My eggs were used, making me both the
biological mother and the birth mother. A gestational surrogate was
a step further down the technological path. Eggs were taken from
either the intended mother or another woman and fertilized in a lab.
Embryos were then inserted into the uterus of the gestational
surrogate, the woman who would carry the babies to term. The
surrogate had no biological link with the fetus. She was just the
incubator. The carrier.

No fee was given in this listing. Often, payment for services was
announced first thing: twenty-eight thousand, thirty thousand, forty
thousand. The most I'd seen was a cool fifty grand. Don't let anyone
say money wasn't a factor. It was. It always was. The typical couple,
usually in their mid-to-late thirties or early forties, were lawyers,
doctors, engineers, executives. Couples who'd married late, focused
on their careers, and had forgotten what later became their urgent
biological imperative.

The surrogates, of course, were always younger. Often broke.
Surrogacy offered a year's salary or a down payment on a house. In
my case, I was looking for a quick fix to crushing college debt.

I read the ad again, chilled by the phrase, First time moms
encouraged. This was unusual. With the wisdom of hindsight, I
could see why agencies and legitimate intended parents wanted a
surrogate with a previous full-term pregnancy. The woman would

The Stork

know what she was getting into. There would be no messy emotional ties. Less chance the surrogate would balk. After I'd uncovered what was planned for my babies, I'd briefly flirted with raising the twins. Even though I had no money, no job, and no place to live, I'd wanted them. I'd yearned for them, ached for them with every cell of my being.

But I'd done what was right for me.

I copied the data from the ad and pasted it into my Stork spreadsheet, my private and obsessive catalog of the hundreds of ads for surrogate moms I'd discovered since my babies were born. I still believed that the intended parents I'd contracted with, Jackson and Diane Entwistle, along with their delivery man, Frankie Browning, hadn't acted alone. In my gut, I knew there was someone else. A mastermind. A boss. A mythical Mafia-like overlord, who I'd nicknamed The Stork. The person who orchestrated baby trafficking in central and northern California.

The Stork theory held traction, at first. Diane had insisted that The Stork existed, but claimed she'd never met him or her. She'd maintained that all communication was by old-fashioned letters, delivered to a PO box and burned after reading. The investigators had pegged Frankie for a time, but that never panned out. As the leads thinned and the investigation stalled, the detectives had concluded that Jackson, Diane, and Frankie were operating completely on their own. My brother, Dexter, agreed with this theory; as did my best friend, Megan Fitzgerald; my parents; the district attorney; and my lawyer. But I'd never given up. I was sure The Stork was still at work. An ad for a surrogate mom might take me to a set of intended parents just like Jackson and Diane — intended parents who had no intention of keeping the baby. Intended parents who were frauds, driven by greed. Intended parents who would adopt a baby in a closed adoption, send the birth mother on her way, and deliver the baby elsewhere. All details arranged by The Stork.

Just like I always did, I shot off an email from the bogus email account I'd created just for this purpose.

Nancy Wood

Long after I shut down the laptop, I lay in bed, awake.
Remembering —

*The gun. The bite of the rope against my ankles and wrists.
The duct tape covering my mouth. And the infant squalling:
a relentless, frantic mewling.*

THE FOUND CHILD

A SHELBY MCDOUGALL MYSTERY

NANCY WOOD

Private Investigator Shelby McDougall is out for revenge.

Repeated miscarriages have caused Shelby's marriage to disintegrate. Financial ruin lies ahead. A cheek swab sent to an online ancestry service turns up a surprise child: Shelby's genetic offspring — found in the misty ether of the internet.

The only way Shelby can hang on to her shredding sanity is to take things into her own hands and, once and for all, locate and apprehend Helen Brannon — the woman responsible for hijacking her fertility ... and her future.

As Shelby closes in on her target, the stakes get higher and higher. But when Shelby finds Helen Brannon ... how far will she go?

*Visit our website for more information about
the “Shelby McDougall Mysteries” series.*

1

THE PUNCHING BAG FLEW AT MY FACE. I swung, but not in time. It grazed the top of my head, throwing me off balance. By some miracle, I was able to catch my footing, bounce up, and smash the bag on the rebound, pummeling the teardrop sphere with quick jabs. My shoulders and arms burned. Sweat leaked into my eyes and I grunted each time my glove connected with the target. If I hadn't been wearing a mouth guard, I would have howled instead. My therapist promised it would help.

What helped even more was imagining that the punching bag was Dr. Helen Brannon; the woman who'd ruined my life, the woman I blamed for everything. She was responsible for my multiple miscarriages. The miscarriages that, in turn, had caused my marriage to disintegrate and my financial future to veer off into a chasm.

A piercing whistle signaled the end of the session. I took two more jabs, a right followed by a left, with each swing seeing the

The Found Child

woman's arrogant expression and smug smile crumple into a jumble of blood and broken teeth.

Better than therapy any day.

"Take a seat," yelled Tatiana, the instructor. She pointed to the rickety metal bench opposite the boxing ring. "Remember, keep your distance."

I jogged over, wishing I could wipe my face on a towel, but my hands, trapped in the heavily padded boxing gloves, were useless. I found an open spot six feet away from anyone else, leaned over, and rubbed my face on the hem of my baggy shorts. Then I sprawled back against the wall with my legs straight out in front of me. As Tatiana demonstrated the intricacies of a right uppercut followed by a left, exhaustion overcame me and I closed my eyes. Last night's phone call instantly started replaying in my mind. Once again, I'd called my ex. Once again, he'd been polite, but distant. My separation from Cody was going on seven months now. I wanted to get back together. He didn't. My pleading wasn't helping anyone, but I couldn't stop myself.

We'd separated just before the semi-draconian, but absolutely necessary, shelter-in-place order forced all non-essential workers to stay at home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. With that edict, I lost half my business, all of my already limited social life, my gym outings, and my coffee shop pick-me-ups. Casual friendships tanked and Netflix binge-watching became my new best friend. It had been a long spring and summer, and now, in mid-September of 2020, the nation was still figuring out how to adjust.

Santa Cruz County, where I lived, teetered on and off California's coronavirus watch list. Masks were mandatory. School remained online. Restaurants and cafes were limited to takeout orders or widely spaced outdoor seating. Grocery stores regulated the number of people allowed inside at a time, while retail businesses could conduct only limited service. When on the watchlist, the county's places of worship, movie theaters, bars, wineries, hair and nail salons, and gyms were shuttered. Now that the county's numbers were trending down, all those non-essential, but absolutely necessary services, like my boxing gym, could open again.

My pandemic normal was lonelier than before. And each time Cody brushed me off, like last night, my rage against Helen Brannon intensified. But for her I'd be pregnant. But for her, Cody and I would be living in our sweet home, refinishing it room by room, starting with the baby's room. But for her, I'd still be with Cody, the love of my life.

Back in the locker room, after Tatiana untied my gloves, I unwound the tape from my hands and assessed the damage. Reddened knuckles. Bruising on my right index finger. A purple shadow on my left thumb. Nothing that a bit of CBD oil wouldn't fix.

"Hey, Shelby, how's it going?" asked Bailey, an occasional sparring partner, as she sat on the bench opposite me, wrapped in a towel.

"I used to think I was in shape," I smiled. "I thought I was fit." My daily workouts hadn't prepared me at all for this class. I shook my head. "This is punishing."

Bailey laughed. As she stood to head to the shower, she said, "Julie and I are going over to The Buttery to get a cup of coffee and gawk at the pastries. Want to join us?"

Visions of the tastiest croissants and muffins in Santa Cruz danced through my mind, but I shook my head. "I'd love to, but I have to get to work."

"Too bad. Maybe next time?" Bailey's smile was bright. She was at least ten years younger than me, enthusiastic, optimistic, guileless.

I returned her smile with one of my own. Even though I craved social contact, work always came first. As a sole proprietor and small business owner, there were never enough hours in the day. Between the mountains of paperwork, client meetings, phone calls, court appearances, reports, surveillance, and required continuing education, I always felt pressed for time. Private investigations never stopped. Not even for the coronavirus. Luckily, during the shelter-in-place order, I was able to keep working because my business, Shelby McDougall Investigations, was considered an essential service related to "legally mandated activities." My bread-and-butter contract for background checks for a local tech company continued. Warrants, surveillance for two separate slip-and-fall cases, as well as a worker's comp case, barely

The Found Child

kept me above water. In July, an insurance fraud case had occupied most of my time.

I stripped out of my sweaty clothes and left them on the floor as I swaddled myself in a towel. I wasn't shy, but at age thirty-six, with most of the other women in the class in their twenties, I felt a tiny bit self-conscious. Even though I was too thin, gravity was not my friend. My stomach pooched. No matter how many crunches I did, I couldn't get rid of the roll. My hips looked like I wore permanent jodhpurs. Worst of all, the pandemic had shuttered my hairdresser and my recent cut at the local one-size-fits-all salon made my hair resemble a steel wool scouring pad.

After showering and changing, I shoved my soaking clothes into my gym bag, along with my gear. I walked through the quiet, darkened gym and paused at the office to say goodbye. Outside, squinting in the bright light, I extracted my key fob from the side pocket of my gym bag and clicked open my five-year-old silver Prius. Deep in my bag, my phone chimed. The ringtone, the signature theme from the Harry Potter movies, served as my hopeful reminder of magic, possibility, and miracles. I dug out the phone and glanced at the screen, happy to see that Dexter, my brother, was calling. Dexter and his family had been my lifeline last winter as Cody and I yo-yoed about whether to stay together, separate, keep the house and rent it, or sell it and move on.

And last March, just before the pandemic ravaged our world, when Cody and I decided to split up for good, I parked myself at Dexter's, imposing on him, his wife Megan, and their children. I'd crammed myself into a small utility room on a makeshift cot, trying not to remember how I'd lived with Dexter and his first wife thirteen years earlier; another period in my life when I'd been lost. This time, I had the good sense not to overstay my welcome, moving out after less than a month.

The third time Dexter had rescued me was four weeks ago, in the middle of August, when I had to evacuate because of the CZU Lightning Complex fire that chewed through more than eighty-five thousand acres of Santa Cruz County and neighboring San Mateo County. My neighborhood in the Santa Cruz mountains had suffered

multiple structural losses, but where I lived remained standing. Somehow, during the evacuation order, I managed to work, even though I was spending at least six hours a day on Twitter, tracking the fire and the response; staying in touch with my housemate, Erica; and keeping abreast of the neighborhood through our shared email list. Our evacuation order had been lifted only a few weeks ago. The smoky smell still lingered; the meadow and surrounding forest were covered in grainy, black soot; and every morning my car was dusted with ash.

“Hey, Dexter,” I said, stabbing the speaker icon and holding up the phone, “how’s it going?”

“Good,” he replied. “Busy, as usual. School started. Finally. What with the delay because of the fire, we were starting to wonder.” I mentally kicked myself. Between the pandemic, the fire, and my own personal problems, I’d forgotten to call.

“Annie’s in seventh grade, and Ashley is a sophomore?” I asked. Annie, Megan’s daughter, was now twelve, and had been born long before Dexter and Megan had met. Ashley, Dexter’s daughter from his previous marriage, was fifteen going on twenty-five.

“Yup. Back to school night is in a couple of weeks, so we’ll find out everything. All on Zoom.”

“How’s Max?”

“As fun as ever. He gets to go to preschool. We’re all happy about that.” Max, Dexter and Megan’s son, was an energetic four-year-old. Dexter laughed and continued. “We have a tutor-slash-nanny who comes at noon and works with Annie for two hours after her Zoom classes are over for the day. Then, she picks up Max. Ashley is on her own.”

I was so wrapped up in my own world that I hadn’t considered the logistics of school life with COVID. Sounded complicated.

“So, what are you up to today?” Dexter continued.

I hesitated, surprised. Dexter never asked me what I was up to on a workday. When we met for lunch, his schedule was always the one that needed working around. He’d been the Director of the Santa Cruz Parks & Recreation Department for two years now. His job was a desk job, with hours of daily meetings.

“Why, what’s going on?” I asked.

The Found Child

“Something’s come up and I need to talk to you.” His voice was quiet.

“Is Megan okay? Mom?”

“Yes, they’re fine,” he said, but something in his voice made it sound like nothing was fine. “Are you free for lunch?” he continued.

“Yes. I’m in the office all day.”

“Great, I’ll pick up some sandwiches. I’ll be over around noon.”

“What’s going on, Dexter?” I asked again.

“I’ll tell you when I see you. Not over the phone.”

As I slipped my phone in my bag, I wondered what was up with Dexter. He was never so secretive.

FRUIT
OF THE
DEVIL

MARY FLODIN

Ms. Aurora Bourne would do anything to protect her students from harm ... even if that means going up against the most powerful corporation on the planet.

While getting her fourth grade classroom ready for Fall, Aurora begins to feel sick, and it's more than back-to-school blues. Outside her windows next to the playground, strawberry fields have just been fumigated and pesticides are drifting into the classrooms, causing serious health issues for children and adults.

When the teenage sister of a migrant student goes missing from the strawberry fields, it becomes clear that pesticide poisoning isn't the only thing threatening the children's safety, and Aurora begins to understand why farmworkers call strawberries Fruta del Diablo — the Fruit of the Devil.

Aurora starts asking questions and gets caught in a web of gangs, drugs, trafficking, and high-level corporate crime. When a Catholic priest comes to her aid, she falls in love with him, complicating her life further. She has no idea he's actually an ancient nature god out of Pacific Coast indigenous legends.

*Visit our website for more information about
"The Fruit of the Devil".*

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1998 (LABOR DAY)
Annual Beach Clean-Up
Pelican Dunes, Byrd River Watershed
South Santa Cruz County, Central Monterey Bay Coast

“**H**EADS UP, MS. B!”
Aurora was walking along the sand at Pelican Dunes Beach, looking for trash. The fog had already cleared and the morning was beginning to warm.

Teams of Prudenciana students and family members combed the beach, each team with an official trash bag, a bag for recyclables, and a pencil and data card for the California Coastal Commission’s annual Adopt-a-Beach event.

On Aurora’s team were Rico, River, Paloma, Caleb, and Melody Escobar. They wanted to carry all the stuff, so Aurora walked empty-handed.

Fruit of the Devil

“Heads up, Ms. B!” Rico’s voice got through to Aurora, and she turned around just as he let fly a Frisbee.

The disk came whizzing toward her. She reached up, but it was a little too high. She ran backwards to catch it. Stretching. It was going to be close.

The back of her head smacked into someone as hard as a rock wall. Fireworks exploded behind her eyelids.

A strong red-brown arm reached above her, caught the Frisbee, and threw it back to its sender. At the same time, a matching arm clamped around her waist.

“Smooth, Ms. B!” Rico called.

Two large hands gently turned her and held her by the shoulders at arm’s length, as if there were concern that she might not be able to keep her balance.

She stared at the man holding her, the man built like a rock wall. Recognition seared through her core.

His eyes. As blue-green as the sea. She held her breath, a mouse under the spell of a hawk.

She forced herself to look away, down at the sand between their feet. Could he tell how her body reacted to him? He was a Catholic priest. He probably didn’t understand such things.

She met his waiting eyes. *He knows.*

“Are you alright?” He lifted his hands off her shoulders tentatively.

“Yes.” Aurora rubbed the back of her head. “Sorry to bump into you like that. Are you okay?”

“Didn’t feel a thing.” The priest’s eyes twinkled. He picked up Aurora’s baseball cap, dusted off the sand, and handed it to her. “I remember you from Cosmic John’s waterfall hike. Aurora, right? I’m Father Francis. Frank Hilman. From Our Lady of Help in Valle Verde.”

“I remember you, too.” *As if I could possibly ever forget.* “Thank you again for helping me when I fell in the creek. Don’t know why I keep acting like such a klutz. I usually have pretty good balance.” She replaced her hat, trying to control her chaotic feelings.

“Looks like you’ve recovered from your injury. I — we — were worried. No broken bones, I take it?”

“No, but I did need stitches. All better now.” She pulled up the hem of her shorts and rubbed the raised scar on her thigh.

He inclined his head to inspect the scar. His eyes narrowed and he swallowed.

She blushed. *Why did I do that? My thighs are too fat. I’m an imbecile. He probably thinks I’m disgusting.* Her throat was dry. *Say something.*

“I went to the funeral for Salvador Luna at your church,” Aurora stammered. “I — I saw you then. Salvador was a student of mine.”

“We hate to bury children, especially victims of violence,” said Father Francis. “Thank you for being at the funeral. It meant a lot to Salvador’s family to see all the people there who loved him, from so many walks of life. It helped heal the wounds in the community, too, I think.”

“I’m afraid the community’s going to need a lot more work to heal its wounds.” Aurora recalled the black-hooded hoodlums who’d threatened Father Francis during the funeral.

Just then, the very same hoodlums appeared.

“Yo, Padre. My dog an’ me gonna hang wid our homies up ahead. You wanna take our stuff?”

Father Francis accepted the nearly empty trash bag and data card. “So you two are going to team up with Victor’s group?”

“You got it, *vato*. We’ll let’cha know if we fin’ any buried treasure. Later, Padre.” The young men sprinted away down the beach.

“Aren’t those the angry young men from the funeral who ...”

“Salvador’s relatives. Yes. They craved revenge at first. They were poisoned with grief and rage. It’s taken time to help them find peace.” Father Francis shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “Looks like they just left me holding the bag.”

“My team’s gone off without me, too.” Aurora pointed toward her team far down the beach, recognizable by the dot of red that had to be Rico’s baseball cap.

Fruit of the Devil

Father Francis' eyes caught flecks of sunlight glinting off the waves. "We've got a bag here. Shall we?"

Aurora's first impulse was to make an excuse and run. But that would be childish ... and rude.

They walked in silence.

"I don't think there are as many cigarette butts as last year," Aurora said after a while. "The Coastal Commission's educational campaign must be working."

"You do this every year?"

"I've been the beach captain for my school for a few years. I think it's really important for my students to get involved."

"This is my first time. I brought the basketball team I coach, plus a few of the other, ah, black sheep in my flock. I wanted to show them how great it feels to make a positive difference in the world." The priest picked up a scrap of red plastic that had once been part of a disposable lighter and dropped it in the bag. "I hope today's experience will give them a way to connect with their community that's more socially constructive than tagging." He watched the boys running toward the rivermouth. "They seem to be enjoying themselves."

"I noticed the tattoos. Are they gang members?"

"Some are," answered the priest.

"I've got a student — a little guy who wears a red baseball cap," said Aurora. "I think he's interested in — what's the gang that wears red?"

"That would be the Norteños. You think he's at risk? I'd be happy to meet him."

"His grandma's raising him. She's at the tables back at the beach entrance with a few of my other parents, preparing a picnic. If we get a chance, I'll introduce you to her and Rico."

A pod of dolphins offshore kept pace with them as they walked. Like a swimmer caught in a rip tide, Aurora felt swept up in the priest's power.

"What's this?" She reached down and tugged at a piece of frayed plastic rope. Sand fell away as she pulled.

“Here, let me help.” Father Francis took hold and they leaned their weight against the buried line. A fishing net began to emerge from the sand. They tugged again. It was heavy. Aurora fought the urge to fall into the man’s arms.

A few of Father Francis’ basketball players ran up to help. Several of Aurora’s students and some parents joined in. It turned into a game of tug of war between the sand and the humans.

“Puulll!” yelled a burly tattooed basketball player.

Suddenly, the whole net came loose and everyone tumbled into a pile on the sand, shouting and laughing.

Father Francis had gracefully sidestepped the pile. He looked serious as he gathered the net into a big bundle. “Miles of this kind of netting are adrift in the ocean, killing senselessly. Well done, everyone.”

The net pullers scattered like sandpipers, but one young man stayed back. He had a coal dusting of mustache, a sweet face, gang tattoos on neck and hands, a crystal earring, and a gold crucifix around his neck. *In memory of Salvador Luna* scrolled in white cursive letters across his black hoodie. One of his arms rested protectively across the shoulders of Paloma. His other hand grasped the shoulder of an angry-looking boy about fifteen wearing a red baseball cap.

“Ms. Bourne? I met you when Father Francis brought me an’ my friend and my little brother Johnny, here, to the hike at the waterfall,” said the young man. “Do you remember me? I’m Victor Lopez.”

“Of course I remember you, Victor. It’s good to see you again.”

“I just wan’ed to say hello ’cause you’re my little sister’s teacher and our parents are — well, I’m kinda like the father for my little brother and sister. So, I just wan’ed to say hi, and thank you.” Victor shuffled his feet in the sand. “Paloma likes you, a lot, Ms. Bourne. I was sorry when you got hurt on the hike. I saw what that *puto* did. He ran into you and pushed you down, and didn’t even say sorry. I’m glad you’re okay, and I’m glad you’re my little sister’s teacher.”

“Thank you, Victor. I’m really happy that Paloma’s in my class. She’s a wonderful student. I look forward to working with both of you.”

Fruit of the Devil

Paloma broke free from Victor and wrapped her arms around Aurora. Johnny, the younger boy with a red hat like Rico's, shook his brother's hand off his shoulder, kicked the sand, and stomped away.

Victor turned to Father Francis. "Hey, Padre. I'll take the net up by the cans where they gonna collect all that *basura*."

He hefted the heavy net onto his shoulder and set off across the sand. Paloma limped down the beach to join her classmates.

Aurora turned to Father Francis. "So, Victor's raising his brother and sister?"

"The grandfather is legal guardian, but he speaks very little English, and doesn't read or write." Father Francis answered. "Victor is the one who's kept the family together. He's been the younger children's liaison with their teachers and the schools for years."

"May I ask where the parents are?"

"Their father is in Soledad for life. Heavy duty Norteño. Mom OD'd a year and a half ago. Victor was determined to keep his brother and sister together, out of foster care. He was just sixteen. Got off drugs, out of gang banging, got himself back in school. Even though he's been working full time, he's still managed to continue his education."

"That's a huge burden for a person his age."

"He's doing a great job. He'll be graduating from Oceanview Continuation High School this June and has a full scholarship to UCSC's Agroecology Program. He's been tapped by ALBA to join their Small Farmer Education Program. And he's already made connections with California Farm Link."

"Farm Link?"

"A new non-profit that provides farmers with the tools they need to lease and purchase land, access capital, and grow their business. I'm confident Victor will have his own organic, fair-labor farm one day."

Aurora wondered how much of Victor's success had to do with the priest's influence. "His little brother seems to be struggling," she said.

"Juanito is in a dark place."

Aurora nodded. It wasn't hard to recognize the signs of an at-risk adolescent. "Why does Paloma limp?"

“Birth defect.”

In the blue-on-blue distance a gull flew toward Byrd River, an eerie cry trailing in its wake. They started walking again.

“Our school hasn’t issued the annual confidential health reports yet, but it seems to me the rate of birth defects and other health issues in our district is rising,” said Aurora.

“Any theories about what’s going on?” The priest dropped a plastic bottle into his recycle bag.

“Lately, we’ve been wondering about the effects of pesticide exposure.” Aurora told Father Francis about the events of the past weeks at Prudenciana: the CalGreen assembly, and the teachers’ conversation in the lunchroom afterward. “Just about every teacher in the lunchroom confessed to be struggling with some sort of illness. Katie Cooper has made us aware of the fumigations going on in the strawberry fields around the school. It seems far-fetched, and I can’t imagine how you could prove it, but we’re starting to wonder if all the seemingly unrelated health issues at Prudenciana could be connected to pesticide exposure.”

“I’m concerned about the pesticides too, Aurora. Not only their direct effect on human health, but also on the water quality in our creeks and rivers — in our watershed and on the fish.”

Aurora met Father Francis’ eyes. Something ancient looked back at her with a light both terrifying in its power and at the same time so pure, kind, and gentle it made her want to weep.

Whitewater from the incoming tide surged toward them. Aurora and the priest both abruptly sidestepped, and bumped into each other. He held her for a moment, lines creasing the corners of his eyes. His T-shirt smelled of fresh laundry and the ocean. The stark white of his shirtsleeves stretched tight around red-brown biceps, encircled by tattooed bands of swimming fish. Aurora’s heart rocked to the pulse of the waves beating against the shore.

“Sorry,” said Father Francis, releasing her and taking a step back.

“No, it was my fault. I’m truly not usually this clumsy.”

They laughed and walked on, combing the beach in silence. A line of pelicans flew low over the water.

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Father Francis stopped to pull a short length of yellow plastic rope out of the sand. “This should be useful for something.” He coiled the rope and stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans.

“One less thing destined for the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” said Aurora.

Father Francis shook his head. “Floating islands of plastic the size of Texas polluting our oceans.”

“I’ve heard that some of it’s decomposing into clouds of micro beads that fish are mistaking for edible plankton. They’re calling the plastic plankton ‘mermaids’ tears.’”

“The human race needs to confront its plastic problem, soon,” said Father Francis. “But I think it could be a great opportunity for innovation — an economic bonanza for whoever figures out how to reclaim all that material and remanufacture it into products we need.”

They approached a group of Aurora’s students, gathered around three dead seabirds tangled in a pile of seaweed.

“Ms. B! Why do you think they died?” Rico kicked at one of the birds. “Should we put it in the trash bag?”

“Remember what we talked about in class, Rico? Many of the things we find on the beach are natural. Natural things we respect, and leave alone, right?”

“Yeah, but maybe it ate a piece of plastic and got poisoned, or got covered with oil. It’s all black.”

“Black is the actual color of their feathers,” said the priest. “These are Sooty Shearwaters. They died of natural causes. Death is as natural as life. It’s all part of the journey.”

Rico eyed the priest with suspicion.

“Rico, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine,” said Aurora. “This is Father Francis. He’s a priest at Our Lady of Help Church.”

“You don’ look like no priest.”

“Well, Rico, things are not always as they appear to be,” Father Francis winked.

“My teacher says that too.” Rico glanced sideways at Ms. Bourne, then back at the priest.

Father Francis offered Rico his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Rico.”

Rico sized up the priest a moment longer, then thrust out his hand and shook.

“So,” Rico said, “how come these birds died, then?”

“Every year in late summer, the Shearwaters arrive in the Monterey Bay in enormous flocks,” said Father Francis. “They’re on a spectacular long-distance migration. They’re flying from their breeding colony near New Zealand north to the Aleutian Islands, and they get very hungry. When they encounter the huge schools of anchovies in the bay, they go into a feeding frenzy. Some break their necks and drown.”

Rico wrinkled his brow and studied the dead birds. “I hope I never get that hungry.”

“Race you to the river,” Melody shouted.

The children ran down the beach, Paloma limping behind the others.

Aurora and Father Francis caught up with the children at a rope fence cordoning off a wildlife closure area in the dunes.

“Stop! Stop!” A woman in uniform waved her hands.

Aurora recognized the warden, Kelli Cavanaugh, from the waterfall hike. Warden Cavanaugh stood in front of the wide-eyed children, her arms crossed over of her chest and a very stern look on her face.

“River, Melody, Paloma, Caleb, Rico. Did you forget what we learned in class?” asked Aurora.

“Oh,” said River. “The Plovers?”

“Exactly,” said Warden Cavanaugh. “Endangered Western Snowy Plovers. Hi, Aurora. Father Francis. Nice to see you both again.” She turned to the children and pointed at the sand, sprinkled with bits of shells, dried seaweed, and pieces of driftwood. “Look there.”

“Oh my gosh,” River whispered. “It’s so beautiful.”

A tiny, fluffy bird the color of the sand — variegated white, tans, browns, and black — nested in a slight depression in the dune. The mother bird had pulled a few shells close, and camouflaged her nest with dried seaweed and bits of wood. Bird, nest, and eggs were nearly invisible, astonishingly beautiful, and fragile. As Aurora stared at the sand, several other nesting plovers came into focus the way stars first appear in the twilight. Some of Father Francis’ young warriors,

including Paloma's older brother, Victor, joined the group. They all hovered in awe before the tiny birds.

One of the plovers left her eggs and darted around, one wing dipping in the sand as if it were broken. "She's trying to lead us away from her nest," Kelli explained. "If we don't move away from the area now, she might keep doing this until she dies of exhaustion and her eggs get too cold to hatch."

Father Francis led the group out of the dunes. Aurora turned to follow, but Kelli stopped her. "Aurora, how are you doing? That was a bad fall you had at the creek."

"Thanks for asking. I mended pretty well."

Kelli nodded.

"Thank you so much for helping me that day, and also for being here," said Aurora. "Will the plovers be alright? I hope we didn't disturb them too badly."

"Sadly, these little birds are on the brink of extinction. This is one of the last viable plover nesting habitats on the coast. We have the closure ropes and signs up all summer, but on a high-use weekend like this, we need a warden on site, to explain the dune closure to people face-to-face. Thanks for helping raise awareness by bringing your students today."

Leaving Kelli at her station to defend the nesting plovers, Aurora hurried to catch up with her group.

The group had almost reached the river when they discovered a truck tire partly buried in the sand.

"Let's dig it out!"

While Aurora was watching the tire excavation, a slight movement in the dunes farther down the beach near the rivermouth caught her attention. Like a teacher on playground duty, she marched off to investigate.

She walked along the wet sand, then turned up into the dunes that insulated the exclusive gated Pelican Dunes Estates community above the dunes from the public beach below. She threaded her way through maze-like clefts between hills of sand that loomed over her head, until she was no longer able to see the ocean or her group.

Around the next bend, the narrow trail opened onto an illegal campsite. Aurora was shocked by the presence of three swarthy men squatting by a fire. They turned toward her in surprise.

Yellow bloodshot eyes with dilated pupils took her in. Rotten-toothed grins spread across the leathery, predatory faces. Aurora felt something slimy flow over her body.

The men's foul odor overwhelmed the wild fragrance of sea spray and coastal sage.

One of the men slowly stood. He gripped his cooking knife. His hands were black with dirt.

"Hola, Chica," he leered. *"Venga aquí. Quiero comer tu panocha."*

Another of the men made kissing sounds. A smear of grease glistened on his lips and chin. *"Quiero follarte,"* he sneered.

The third man pulled a stained blue cap down to shade his eyes and slowly rose to his feet. He put his hand on his crotch. *"Venga conmigo, coño. Quiero hacerte."*

The men hissed and grunted in mocking laughter.

Blue Cap rubbed his hand up and down his fly. His lizard tongue darted in and out through dry lips.

Aurora froze, skin tingling, pulse racing.

She didn't know what to do. If she screamed, she doubted anyone would hear her beyond the dunes, over the roar of the surf. If she ran, these men would surely catch her.

Time stood still as she stared at the three men, hyper-aware of a yellow crust lining the corners of Greasy Lip's mouth. She felt weirdly immobilized.

Suddenly, he lunged toward her. On pure instinct she turned to run. Greasy Lips grabbed her by the hair, dragged her toward him, and caught her in a strangling rear headlock. She gasped for breath and tried to pry his arm away from her neck. The man in the blue hat clawed and tore at her shorts, forcing them down below her hips.

She struggled, screamed, and kicked. Suddenly she landed a hard knee between Blue Hat's legs. He doubled over. She twisted in Greasy Lips headlock, tucking her chin into the crook of his elbow and grabbing his arm. He cursed at her in Spanish and tightened his

hold. She worked her fingers into the space between his arm and her chin and gained some breathing room.

Blue Hat seemed to be reviving. She didn't have much time before he was on her again. She bent her knees, dropped her weight, and swung her foot back behind Greasy Lip's calf. He lost his balance, releasing his hold. She ran.

The man with the cooking knife rushed at her.

She scrambled backward, stumbled and fell, her hand coming down hard just inches from three plover eggs.

Seeming to appear out of nowhere, Victor Lopez loomed like a bear between her and her assailants. Victor had thrown off his baggy black sweatshirt. His sleeveless tank revealed the musculature of a body builder.

"*Ya basta. No chingues, putos. (That's enough. Don't mess with her.)*" Victor's clear male voice boomed over the dunes. He clenched a knife in his white-knuckled fist.

Aurora sprawled on the sand, hypnotized by the confrontation.

"*Y Qué? (What are you going to do about it?)*" The man with the blue hat taunted.

"Send you home to your mother, *paisa*. So you can fuck her again." Victor hefted his knife.

"*Rifamos, pinche cabrón. Bailamos.*" Blue Hat flicked open a switchblade. Aurora heard the click of the blade as if it were inside her head.

Someone was helping her up — Victor's angry little brother, Johnny.

A shadow like a large wild cat brushed by her. *Father Francis*.

She blinked. The man who'd been holding the cooking knife was on the ground, empty-handed, unconscious. Blood ran from his nose and mouth.

Victor and Blue Cap circled each other, knives carving the air in slow motion.

A high-pitched screech crazed the dome of sky. Aurora turned toward the sound. Mask-like and disembodied, a leathery face hung in the air, greasy lips twisted in a soul-piercing wail. An ornate broadsword fiercely stabbed up into the heavens, then arced down,

slicing across the priest's chest. The priest pulled back like a Flamenco dancer, spun, and kicked the weapon out of Greasy Lip's hand.

In one smooth motion, Father Francis caught the blade as it rolled in the air, and hurled it into a distant dune. The steel sheathed up to its hilt in sand and Father Francis grabbed Greasy Lip's arm, twisting it hard behind the man's back.

Greasy Lips howled again — a haunting sound, barely human.

Father Francis forced him face down in the sand. With a knee in the attacker's back, he bound hands and feet with the yellow rope from his back pocket.

Victor held his side, doubled over and panting. Blood soaked through his shirt. A man lay on the dune at Victor's feet, unmoving. Partially buried in the sand next to the unconscious body was a bloody blue cap.

"Johnny!" Father Francis commanded. A ragged slash split open the priest's white T-shirt. Bright blood arced across his chest and ran down his torso.

"Go get Ms. Cavanaugh, the game warden, *mi'ijo!* Tell her to radio dispatch for backup. Have them send a squad car and an ambulance around the back way, through the Pelican Dunes Estates. Be quick, and don't make a fuss about it. Take Ms. Bourne with you. Go!"

THE IRON
AND
THE LOOM
A Novel of Italy

FLAVIA IDÀ

How many times, she wondered, had she woven together cloth that his sword had then torn apart along with the flesh underneath?

The year is 1136, the place Tropèa, a walled sea town in Southern Italy during the Norman domination.

Kallyna d'Àrgira, a master of the arts of the loom who can turn the world into silk thread, is pledged in marriage by her father to Raimo Trani, a man she hates. After a sudden tragedy leaves her at Raimo's mercy, into her life comes Dàlibor d'Hancourt, the Norman knight sent by King Roger of Hauteville to be the new governor of Tropèa, a man who, like her, is burdened by a life he did not choose.

Their opposite stations — Kallyna the daughter of a fisherman, Dàlibor the son of a foreign lord — pit them at first against each other. When Kallyna's talent attracts the unwelcome attention of the heir to Roger's throne, who can destroy them both, the common threat will draw them together, with a bond that defies all distinctions, into the time of iron that saw the founding of the greatest kingdom in Italy.

*Visit our website for more information about
“The Iron and The Loom”.*

I

IN ROMAN TIMES, when heroes passed among men like comets, the town had been called Hercules' Harbor. In the year of Our Lord 1136 it was named Tropea, "*She who puts her enemies to flight.*"

It rises high atop a spur of grey granite jutting into the Mediterranean along the rugged coast of Calabria, almost halfway between Palermo and Naples. Above the steep face of the cliff the walls came sheer out of the rock, rounding up in their hold a cluster of red tiled roofs that broke only at the two gates. From the Portammare, the Sea Gate, a long curving stairway cut into the stone led to the Marina, where the fishing boats were kept and ships cast anchor beyond two little islands of white sandstone molded by the wind; from the Porta Vaticana started the road toward the watchtowers of the coast and the farms of the inland.

To remind the people of Tropea that yet another foreign race had fallen in love with their land and was now their master, there was the tallest and newest building in town, the Castro. There the Norman governor sent from Palermo by King Roger d'Hauteville

kept his soldiers and meted out justice. Only the lords could look at that massive castle without fear, for they were the only ones who entered it or left it of their own will.

Safe in the shadow of the Castro and of the Norman Crown, Tropea gathered along its narrow streets its narrow houses, those of the local noblemen side by side with those of fishermen and artisans, yet kept solidly apart by invisible walls thicker than brick. The true heart of the town was Piazza Portècole, opening bright and unexpected between the marketplace on one side and the church of the Black Madonna on the other. From a house in Piazza Portècole one could watch the world unroll its endless tapestry woven of days and nights.

The house of Vasili d'Àrgira looked onto Piazza Portercole. Two stories high, it had been cut from a single block of granite. The two small round balconies with their black wrought-iron bars looked like two spiders that had stopped their climb to bask in the warmth of the stone. Each window had its fringe of swallows' nests under the sill, and each had its bunches of herbs hung to dry. Behind it was a garden bursting with fruit trees, while a lone palm shaded the roof; and by the steps of the front door rested two crossed oars, painted green and black.

If a fisherman's family could have a coat of arms, those two green-and-black oars would have been chosen for the d'Àrgiras of Tropea, to whom from time beyond memory the sea had been home, road, and often grave. Their name was Greek, meaning 'silver'. Not that any of them had ever been wealthy enough to deserve it; the pure sparkle it brought to mind spoke not of their pockets, but of their souls.

In an age when a man could only accept injustice as he would have accepted drought and disease, Vasili d'Àrgira had been born with the hallmark of an undying hatred of everything unfair. He wouldn't just sigh and pray to God every time the armed servants of the Byzantine lords went down to the beach and took away in the span of a moment the best of an entire fishing season. First he had grumbled, then he had tugged at his basket of fish; finally one day he

had openly refused. The scars left on his back by the whip had become his most precious possession.

For ten years since that day he had gathered around him the men whose trade was the lifeblood of Tropea. He had argued and he had fought, and the hangman's noose had often dangled closely before him. When the Norman rulers had replaced their Byzantine predecessors, with different titles but with the same arrogance, they had found him at the head of a guild of fishermen so strong that they had been forced to accept it along with every other long-established institution of the town.

Two generations of Falizza, the local breed of aristocrats, had wanted him dead. But to lay hands on the "most just man in Tropea" meant to face the anger of nearly every other man and woman in town; not to mention the frown of the Norman governor, who delegated to Vasili the task of peacemaker in litigations, and who that peace was very much interested in maintaining.

Yet no enemy Vasili d'Àrgira might have made ever afflicted him like a private nemesis all his own: his daughter Kallyna, whom he felt that God had given him as he would have given him a thorn in the side, to remind him day and night of his many other blessings.

Even the lack of a son had been remedied years before, when fate had sent to his house Michele and Arni, the two orphaned sons of his best friend. Michele had been pledged to Vasili's youngest daughter Sila since the two were children; to Michele he would hand over the leadership of the fishermen's guild, and both young men were as dear to him as true sons. But Kallyna seemed bent on defying Vasili's every plan for a peaceful old age. For years now she had refused to marry the man he had chosen for her, causing unending trouble within his home; until he had been forced to allow his youngest daughter to marry first, against every proper custom he knew.

It was now the middle of July. Summer dried up the hills and smoothed the sea into long days of blue sleep. For many months Vasili and his men had hunted the swordfish in the manner practiced along the coast of Calabria for thousands of years. Now it was time to

The Iron and The Loom

end the hunting season and to think of the wedding, to celebrate with man's brief rituals the enduring ones of nature.



“God willing, wife, this is the last day.”

“God willing indeed. A supper table where only women sit is bad luck.”

In the new light of dawn Vasili got up from bed, put on his shirt and his black vest, and reached for his cap.

He was one of those men who don't need to be tall to command respect. Everything in his spare frame had a quiet dignity about it. In his handsome face the eyes were of a strikingly clear blue, which stood out from his many wrinkles like the sea from beyond furrows of brown earth. His wife Neia only came up to his shoulders. She was a small, thin woman who even in her appearance knew how to keep her place, one step below her husband.

“Here is your lunch, eat it in good health,” Neia said like every morning. That morning, however, she let a smile wander on her sunburned face. “Michele and Arni are down in the cellar grinding the spears,” she added.

Vasili took from her hands the cloth bundle still warm with loaves of bread that had just come out of the oven. “Michele won't kill a single fish today,” he grinned. “Not the day before his wedding.” He stepped out on the landing, opened the door of the room next to his and glanced in.

The room was still almost in the dark; the thick shutters still held out against the first daylight. His gaze ran on the loom made of olive wood and tall enough to almost touch the ceiling, with the small icon of the Black Madonna nailed to the uppermost bar and the shuttle carved in the shape of a boat. The blanket Kallyna was weaving was almost finished. Bedsheets and linens were neatly piled on top of the walnut chest; Sila's wedding gown lay across a chair.

The embroideries seemed to gleam in the dimness, bursting into a rainbow of colors: baskets of fruit, ships and waves, birds, flowers and trees. Only Kallyna could turn the world into silk thread, Vasili

thought with a pleased smile; and in what little space was left by the loom, the bed in which his daughters slept seemed to him only a little larger than their cradles of years before.

Sila slept peacefully, wise even in her rest; Kallyna lay instead wrapped in her long black hair, her hands gripping the sheets and a frown on her face. Suddenly she stirred in her sleep, shaking her head.

“No ... no!” she whispered frantically.

Vasili eyed her for a moment, until she went back to sleep. Then he drew a long sigh and closed the door.

“Had you ever noticed that Kallyna talks in her sleep?” he asked Neia on his way downstairs.

“Yes,” Neia nodded, “and it’s not a good sign at all. Perhaps if we spoke to Padre Costantino, if he could finally give her some peace ...”

Vasili went on down the creaking stairs. “She’s young. Give her time. Once she’ll have a little one crying for hunger at her breast she’ll be all sweet,” and his voice was sweet already at the thought.

Neia shrugged doubtfully, then followed him into the kitchen that gleamed dimly with the large copper pans hung above the hearth. “Let’s hope so. Now that Sila is all settled down, Kallyna can marry Raimo Trani any day she wants.”

Vasili turned around, looming over his wife’s fragile figure. “You know she won’t even hear Raimo’s name anymore. By now I myself am not so sure I did the right thing when I promised her to him. Why, I think she spurns him even in her sleep!” he blurted out, remembering Kallyna’s panicked whisper.

Neia approached him cautiously. “But she’s been pledged to him for all these years,” she reminded him softly. “You can’t take back your promise now... or can you?”

Vasili didn’t answer, annoyed. He slipped a slice of bread into his shirt, grabbed a chunk of cheese from a plate, and finally moved away from his wife’s outstretched hands. “Michele, Arni, it’s time to go!”

Neia’s hands fell against her sides.

The two brothers stepped out of the cellar’s door. Arni must have been teasing Michele, and was still smiling mischievously.

The Iron and The Loom

“Father,” he said, “look how sharp the spear is this morning. Michele woke up to grind it earlier than he ever did in all his life.”

Michele kept winding around his elbow the rope tied to the end of the double-pronged spear. Once more he pretended not to have heard anything. He pointed at the front door. “Go get the oars, huh?”

Arni kissed Neia goodbye and went out. In the hour before dawn the square was quiet and empty.

Resigned now to brooding alone over Kallyna’s troubles, Neia stood patiently on the threshold to watch the three men leave. But first Michele cast a look at the window of Sila’s room, and Vasili didn’t miss that look. He grinned to himself, then spoke his gruff farewell to his wife.

“Come on, boys, come on. Like the proverb says, men do and women talk.” Then under his breath he added, “And if women didn’t talk, we’d all live like dumb beasts.”

On the smooth cobblestones of Piazza Portercole their footsteps sounded so familiar, like drops of water from a fountain.



Sila pushed the shutters open, letting in the early morning light to prance around all over the room. Kallyna screened her eyes, moaning, and Sila laughed.

“I wonder whether you’ll be so sleepy the day before *your* wedding,” Sila teased. She sounded light-headed with happiness; and she had every reason to be, Kallyna thought with envy. Sila had always belonged to the adults’ circle, and of her own choice. She stood like a rock; Kallyna had no rest, like the tide.

Neia came in, always so quiet and always so worried, announcing the exhausting array of chores that awaited them.

“You certainly picked the right day for oversleeping, daughters. We have the trousseau to set, the water to draw, the bread to bake... and Aunt Tresa is going to be here any minute, God help us if the oven’s still empty by the time she walks through that door.”

Her eyes stubbornly shut against the light, Kallyna kicked away the sheets, grumbling.

“All this fuss... as if Sila were leaving for France or some other place at the end of the world.”

She sat up, and as she shook her hair the sunlight made it look blue instead of black, like the wings of a crow.

Neia kept puttering around the room. “Sila *is* leaving, in a way,” she said. “And you too have long been ripe for the same journey.” Then she left, carrying an armful of tablecloths.

Kallyna didn’t speak.

“Let’s go now,” Sila prodded her. A moment later she had already disappeared, leaving Kallyna behind. Kallyna always seemed to be left behind.

What a dreary night that had been, she thought. Always the same bad dreams... At last she left the bed. Through the open window came a scent of salty air and jasmine. She stretched out, making herself as tall as she could, as though she wanted to take flight and vanish; but all the supple strength of her body reminded her painfully that she was still on the ground.

She had never had a mirror; still Raimo kept telling her, in his own dark way, that she was lovely. Her sad, proud black eyes were large and lustrous under the shady mass of her hair that the braids had molded into light ripples. Her face had the shape of an almond, and her skin the soft glow of copper. Her very name, that Vasili had fashioned from the Greek word for ‘beautiful,’ reminded her constantly of a gift in which everybody seemed more interested than she was.

Voices rose from downstairs — excited, admiring women’s voices. She imagined them, friends and neighbors, crowding around Sila’s trousseau, feeling the fine linen cloth. And cries of wonder, laughter. All the things she could not share.

It was time to go. At least the preparations for the wedding would keep her away from Raimo. But all that sunlight made her eyes ache.



The Iron and The Loom

It was daybreak again, and the fishing flotilla of Mastro Vasili d'Àrgira had already scattered to every corner of the sea. Five *ontri*, as the boats were called with the ancient word, were headed south. Their prows were decorated with painted eyes, to see the dangers of the deep, and with wooden figureheads of Saint Peter, protector of fishermen. A flock of gulls chased them, flying around like white banners.

Vasili's boat pointed the way. From its center rose the mast, three times as tall as the *ontre* was long, and scored by short pegs that led to the top. There, in a tiny cage at the top, Arni stood raking the water with his gaze.

It took the tireless attention of sharp young eyes to keep the long watch on that dizzying stand. Arni had been trained to be a lookout ever since he was barely ten. Now it was a joy to watch him climb the mast with all the nimbleness of his strong, slim body, every muscle taut under the brown skin. Fishermen's sons grow up fast, and indeed there was nothing childish left in Arni; yet one child-like smile could still dispel his many man-like sorrows. Arni had the deep and easy gentleness of a lamb, for which he was named.

Clutching the spear and following the wake of his brother's gaze, Michele stood poised on the long catwalk that thrust out from astern. The double tips of black iron bobbed up and down with the pitching of the boat. At his feet was the second spear that would be used if the first one was lost; but Michele had never lost a spear. He held the shaft with the powerful grace of the Archangel Michael battling the Evil One with his sword of fire. He was the living hope of the d'Àrgiras for the years to come. So many expectations rested on his broad shoulders; but carried confidently, lightly.

Vasili manned the rudder, riding or cutting the currents that he knew as he knew the lines in the palm of his hand. In his mind he thanked God for such a fine morning, and for so many others like this one.

Beneath the changing, oil-smooth water something stirred. Arni screened his eyes against the glare of the sun and leant over from his tall perch. Michele started to loosen the thick rope at the end of the spear, while the oarsmen rested, looking up in expectation.

Then Arni suddenly pointed ahead and uttered the sighting cry whose meaning had been eaten away by the sea wind in ten centuries of use.

“*Fa aleuu!*” There was the swordfish, its silvery back plowing the sea in long arching strokes.

The men bent on the oars and began to row toward their prey. Their breath merged on the same rhythm with the dip of the blades and the creaking of the wood against the rowlocks.

“*Eia*, come on, my friends!” Vasili urged them. But the fifteen-foot-long monster had seen the shadow of the boat above him. It turned sharply toward the open sea, his glassy eye staring in terror. The boat lurched after him. Michele’s hand tightened around the polished ash wood of the spear’s shaft.

Vasili’s eyes narrowed with excitement. “Don’t let him go. Lord, how fat he is!”

The fish knew he was doomed. He veered left, then right, then left again, wildly. Sweat glistened down the rowers’ backs.

“We’re on him... *Eia* now, *eia!*”

Leaping on the water, the ontre rushed so closely onto the swordfish that the hull resounded with the knock of his back. All eyes turned to Michele, leaning tensely from the catwalk. Frozen in the ancient stance of Grecian javelin-throwers, he weighed the spear in his hand once, twice, then tossed it with a master’s thrust. The spear cut a deadly trail through air and water, then plunged into the sea and into the thick body below. The rope snapped taut between the boat and the fish, now tied inexorably together. Michele started tugging, helped by Gheorghe di Nico. At every tug the wound gaped larger under the water.

With a few last jerks the fish wriggled in the pale floating cloud of his own blood. Then Michele shouted, “Heave!” and the huge prey left forever the sea. Its long fearsome blade tossed crazily among the fishermen’s bare feet. Then it finally rested on the bottom of the boat, lifeless.

Michele pressed his foot against the creature’s side and pulled out the spear. “I tell you, this must have been the grandfather of all swordfish,” he beamed.

The Iron and The Loom

Vasili grinned, rolling up the rope. "It will pay for the musicians at the wedding. And for the priest, and for the deacons, too."

The four oarsmen laughed, wiping their foreheads. Gheorghe di Nico slapped Michele on the shoulder. "But do leave the biggest portion for the groom, Mastro Vasili," he said. "He will need it, the morning after the wedding."

Michele shoved him down. "Fool."

Vasili hid his smile and handed Michele the rope. "Beautiful kill, son." Then he called Arni to come down the mast. It was almost noontime, they would row to the nearest beach and eat.

Arni had already his feet on the lower pegs when something glittered again underwater. He climbed back to the top, scanned the sea carefully.

"There's another one!" he shouted. "Right behind us!"

Hastily Michele took up the spear he had left on the bottom and bent down, searching the water. Then he looked at Vasili. "Father, it's the female... and she's full of eggs."

Vasili turned and observed for a while the smaller fish swimming around the *ontre*, utterly heedless of the danger in her frantic search. He smiled affectionately.

"She's looking for her mate. Look how close she comes, you could catch her with your bare hands."

Michele was waiting, the spear raised.

"Let her go," Vasili said.



It was well past midday. The town had fallen asleep in the sultry afternoon. The thick dark shutters were closed like eyes closed against the sun, the houses hunched together to escape its might. Only the cicadas, the noisiest insects in God's creation, kept chanting their song from under the olive trees.

The oven was finally cooling off, a gaping mouth black with ashes and smelling of bread and cake. Aunt Tresa snored, with her head on her arm on the kitchen table. Neia and Sila were sewing, in the shade by the door.

Kallyna was sitting under the lemon tree. It was her favorite corner, the farthest one in the garden. Small green fruits were budding among the leaves of the tree; the hot motionless air was all scented with their bitter tang. On the trunk, endless lines of ants scurried up and down, always so busy. She watched them dully, thinking again and always about Raimo and about herself who hated Raimo and who would soon become his property for life.

There were lucky women who, like her mother, were given to a man they could learn to love in time; others, the Almighty's own pets, married someone they had chosen, like Sila. But Kallyna d'Àrgira was among the outcasts. Everything that was alive in her soul would forever be dead in Raimo's.

The cicadas stopped briefly, only to resume their tune with greater frenzy. It was all so quiet that she could almost hear her own blood running through her veins, carrying its swell of pain.

For two years Raimo had touched her like hot iron. All she knew about love were his thick hands searching her all over, and the taunts with which he tried to make her like it. He would not spare her one proud detail of his exploits in every whorehouse of the county; in utter good faith, to prove to her that he would make a good husband. And of course, like a good husband, he made a point of persecuting her with a jealousy bordering on obsession.

She nestled against the tree trunk. She wondered whether Michele had ever treated Sila that way; whether Arni would ever dream of making her feel what Raimo made her feel. Before Raimo she had been a happy, trusting girl. Now she had become "the moody one." She had gone through every one of the humiliating rituals of rebellious daughters: the endless arguments, the hysterical tantrums, the forced fastings. Nothing had helped, and in the process she had only bought a little time to ward off the inevitable. The worst thing was when she exasperated Vasili so much that he locked her up for days. Knowing that she alone could drive a man as mild as her father to such anger gave her the greatest pain and the greatest shame.

The grey cat must be skulking through the fuzzy leaves of the fig tree; wary, invisible. Neia's chair creaked.

The Iron and The Loom

Certainly after a while Raimo would grow tired of her and start chasing other women. Maybe then he would finally leave her alone. He would leave her alone and she would stay home to wait for him, with yet another brat of his growing in her belly. She hugged her knees and hid her face against them, as if to become a lump of stone that nothing could pierce.

Tonight again she would go talk to her father. By now she truly had nothing more to lose.



In the last of the sunlight the town high on its rock looked like a crown of pink gold. Out on the far horizon the sun that night was setting directly behind the dark triangle of the Stròmboli volcano; the legend said it was a good omen.

The seven men in the *ontre* rowed slowly, tired. The catch had been good. Two swordfish rocked gently in the air, tied to the base of the mast as was the custom, so that those ashore could see right away that the day's work had been fruitful. The hunting season was over. Now the sea could finally grant rest.

The men's minds arrived home much faster than the boats. Michele sat by himself, his hands under his chin. He watched the wake left by the *ontre* and he thought that tomorrow night Sila would undo her long braids for him.

Arni pulled in the oars and jumped first onto the sand, while the others untied the heavy catch. The stairway from the Portammare became alive with the skirts of women and the bare feet of children coming down to welcome back the boats. It was also Arni who first noticed Kallyna in that crowd, and when Vasili ordered to pull the boat he missed his grip to look at her.

She smiled to all in a hurry, as though she had already something to be forgiven for.

"I'm happy to see you, Father. What a big one you caught! Supper's ready, are you hungry?"

From the way she sounded, so out of breath, everyone knew immediately why she had come. Arni wanted to say something; but

he was not supposed to speak before Vasili, and Vasili delayed his answer. So Kallyna kept out of the men's way while they slid soapy planks under the prow, pulled the boat, tossed the planks again and pulled the boat again until it was on dry land.

"Of course we're hungry," Vasili said then quietly. "We've been working all day." He gathered up the planks and laid them on the bottom of the boat. Finally he looked up at her, but he didn't like what he saw: when Kallyna began twisting her hands together, it meant that she was hunting for words. "We're done with the preparations for tomorrow, Father," she began. "All we have left to do is set the tables in the kitchen."

Vasili drew himself up. "In the kitchen? No, no. We'll set the tables outside, in front of the main door. To my daughter's wedding all Tropea is invited," he said without haughtiness.

Michele looked at him in surprise. "Even the lords?" he asked.

Vasili unrolled the burlap sheet and spread it over the boat. "If they wish to come," he nodded. "All those who have nothing to hide can be my guests. I want the day to be remembered."

Michele's face lit up with admiration and joy. He shouldered boldly the oars and elbowed Arni to come along.

But Arni wanted to stay. If Kallyna had something to say, he wanted to take her side as he always did, with his silent and savage devotion. He turned to Vasili. "Father, do you want me to take a look at that crack in the hull? I can give you a hand with the caulking, too."

Vasili shook his head. "No, son, it's just a scratch. You go ahead."

Arni still wouldn't move; and while Vasili wasn't looking, Kallyna motioned him to go. Arni turned around. It hurt him so to imagine what was about to happen, and to see how impatient she was to try one more time, against all hope. He wrapped into his shirt the big shell he had found for her and then sadly followed Michele homeward.

After a while Kallyna gathered all her breath in. "Father, may I speak to you? About Raimo?"

Vasili tied the burlap sheet to the rowlocks and didn't look at her. "All I care to know is whether he's set the day and the month," he said simply.

Her hands clutched the gunwale. Perhaps it was better to end the conversation right there and then.

The Iron and The Loom

Gheorghe di Nico stopped by. “The catch is on its way, Mastro Vasili. We sold all of it already, and Manuele is minding your share, as always.”

“Thank you, Gheorghe. Come to the wedding tomorrow, with your mother.”

Gheorghe smiled. “We wouldn’t miss it for the world, Mastro Vasili.” Then he glanced at Kallyna; and Kallyna knew that Gheorghe had lived that day for nothing but that glance. The look of love in the young man’s gentle eyes filled her with sorrow. Both knew she could not afford even to acknowledge it. She could only pretend, again, that she hadn’t noticed it.

Gheorghe hung his head, with a smile of resignation. “Then good night, Mastro Vasili.” “A good night to you, too,” Vasili answered, and as Gheorghe walked away Kallyna had to bite her lips so she wouldn’t start crying, not now.

Vasili pulled at the flaps of the burlap sheet to tighten it. “What’s for supper?” he asked.

Kallyna couldn’t remember. “I don’t really know. Mother did the cooking today, I helped Sila with the trousseau.”

Vasili hunkered down to look at the small crack in the keel of the boat.

“Father, please listen to me.”

“I’ve been listening to you for two years. The neighbors, too, have been listening. What you want to tell me is as old as the rocks. You want to hear my answer again?”

Kallyna shut her eyes. He spoke with an even, patient voice, the voice of a man who knows in his heart that he’s right.

“You were promised to Raimo Trani two years and three months ago. He would have married you then, had you not taken ill the week before the wedding and had you not opposed him ever since, God knows for what reason. That is all there is to the matter, and that is all there will ever be.”

She looked away. Her words came out wooden, cracked. “I was not taken ill, Father. I had just found out that every night after he called on me he went to Bruna’s house and ...” She stopped abruptly, and couldn’t go on.

Vasili rapped the keel of the boat, listening to the sound it made.

“Bruna is not the sort of girl a man would want for his wife,” he said flatly. “She is what she is, and everybody knows it. As for Raimo, at his age he certainly cannot live like a monk.” He searched the sand, looking for a sharp pebble. “What counts is that he loves you. He has said so and he has proven so, first of all with the bride price he paid for you, one that nobody else —”

Kallyna started to shout. “If he had seen a clay jar in the market that he happened to like more than the others, he would have done just the same, Father!”

Vasili stepped quickly in front of her, to hide her outburst from the eyes of the people crowding the beach. Startled, she raised her arm to protect her face from the slap. But he didn’t hit her; Vasili had never hit anybody. He looked at her sternly, then let his hand drop. She breathed in hard, staring at the sand. Vasili squatted down again to scrape the edges of the crack with the sharp pebble. His voice sounded strangely hollow, like a sunken bell.

“I have held my own against the lords of Tropea for ten years, but I cannot get my own daughter to obey me.” He glanced up at her; her face now wet with tears made him avert his eyes.

“I want nothing but that, to obey you,” she whispered. “But you make it so hard! Anybody else... Gheorghè di Nico ...”

“Put him out of your head,” Vasili snapped. “Him and anybody else. Trani would drag me before the law for breach of promise, and Cosimo Falizza will not miss the smallest opportunity to have me hanged from the beam of my own front door. Is that what you want?”

She stooped toward him without shame. “Then I will not marry at all, ever. Tell Raimo that I want to become a nun, so he won’t dare say that you cheated him or—”

Vasili’s eyes sparkled with furious amazement. “In the name of all the saints! What could ever be so hateful about a man to make you say a thing like that?”

She backed away, shaking. She wondered how two people could live so close for so many years and still have to shout at one another as though they were standing on the opposite banks of a river.

The Iron and The Loom

Then Vasili quieted down. He threw away the pebble and headed for the stairway.

“Enough of this. We go home.”

Kallyna wiped her eyes and started to walk after him, stumbling with her bare feet on the first stone step. She knew it was over for good, this time. Vasili would not talk about it anymore, or tolerate further arguments from her; and that same night, when Raimo would come as he did every night, he would set the date of the wedding himself.

A burst of outrage flared up inside her. At least she could speak out, the way prisoners did on the scaffold. She fixed her gaze upon the black figure climbing the stairs, turning his back to her.

“They call you the most just man in Tropea,” she said slowly, each word sinking like a stone in the void between them. “How could you have become so deaf and blind? Raimo is not one of us, and you know it. His place is with the lords, because of his arrogance, of his love of money, of every other thing you’ve flung into the lords’ faces for years. How can you be so unjust with *me*, with your own flesh and blood?”

On the step above, Vasili wheeled around, stunned. He stared at her as if she had just put a knife in his back. There was no anger of his that could put out the fire in her eyes. He looked frightened, defeated.

“Daughter,” he said, “before God I swear that I have never done anything to harm you. Your mother broke her back on the hills for twenty years, picking broomflower for the weavers for five *scudi* a day. My daughters have been luckier. The Lord has seen fit that I should be able to give them a house, a craft, and good husbands who will spare them that life of humiliation and toil. No matter what you say to me, I have not a single regret to carry before my Maker when my time comes.”

He looked all around him, sweeping with his clear eyes the setting sun, the coast and the sea, as if calling them all witnesses to his words. Then he shook his head.

“Still you’re not happy. Still you keep flying about like a caged bird, with only one thought in mind — to escape, to bite the wind

that nobody can bite. Ten more years of fighting all the Falizzas of the world will not wear me out like you did.”

Inside Kallyna’s throat words rolled like waves. She stepped up briskly, to lessen the terrible distance between herself and him, to wipe from his face that look of aching resignation. But Vasili had already resumed his climb, and now he walked bent, like an old man.



Shortly before the curfew, when the soldiers sounded the horn from the turret and locked both gates, Vasili rose from his supper and went to sit on the front steps with Michele and Arni.

The sky peeked in from the half-opened door, already white with stars. Neia shook the crumbs off the tablecloth into the hearth. During the day she did that in the garden, but never at night, when the particles of food would draw the hungry souls of the dead to her door. Then she called Kallyna to help her make the bed in the room upstairs that up to a month ago had been empty and now was all done up, ready for the bride and groom.

Kallyna took the sheets and spread them with slow, heavy hands, lost in her own thoughts. Noises would drift from this room to hers, those sweet little noises she feared. Tomorrow night she would sleep alone, until the time would come when she would have to sleep with—

“Tuck the sheets in properly at the sides, Kallyna,” Neia warned her.

She looked up with an air of sarcasm. “What for? They’ll all be crumpled up anyway, the day after tomorrow.”

Neia stopped, looking sternly at her from behind the pillow she was fluffing up. But Kallyna did tuck the sheets in as dutifully as if they were altar cloths.

The men’s voices rose louder from below through the open balcony, together with a sound of steps approaching on the cobbled way.

“Have a good night, Mastro Vasili. Forgive me for coming so late tonight. I was up at the Castro.”

The Iron and The Loom

Kallyna had waited in dread for that voice all night. Neia leaned out to see. "It's Raimo." Kallyna slipped another pillow into the pillowcase and said nothing.

He talked loudly, battering the quiet night like a hammer. Every word was mouthed heavily, to impress those who listened.

"And a good night to you, Mastro Raimo," Vasili was heard answering. "Please sit here with us."

He was the only person Vasili had ever addressed as "Mastro," that is as his own peer. Kallyna never missed the bitter irony of that word. In his clever way of courting Vasili, of flattering him and ingratiating himself, Raimo was truly her father's only master.

"May I go to bed now, Mother?" she asked, closing the shutters.

After a long and hard day finally left behind, Neia was too exhausted to start an argument. She would excuse Kallyna with Raimo for not showing up.

"All right," she surrendered. She kissed her daughter's forehead. "Sleep well, and say your prayers so you won't have bad dreams," she added with a sad smile.

Kallyna smiled back wanly; then she took shelter in her room. The room was dark except for the window's square full of sky. But she wasn't safe from the voices of the men below.

"Today I was given the plans for the new cathedral," Raimo was saying. "The bishop has finally gotten through his head that it must be built in a different spot, like I told him so many times, or else at the next earthquake it will end up just like the old one. I'm sure he's good at other things, but when it comes to building he ought to leave it to those who know how, am I right? Now I'll start looking for masons and stonecutters all over the county. We'll begin in September at the latest."

Vasili must be really impressed by Raimo's words not to notice that Raimo was talking about nothing except himself. "This is good news, Mastro Trani. Before that time, though, we must settle a family matter that you know well. With the help of the Lord, what do you say about the last day of August?"

Up in her room, Kallyna could just see the grin spreading on Raimo's face.

Flavia Idà

“I am your servant, Mastro Vasili. If you say the last day of August, the last day of August it will be.”

That would be all, she thought. They had disposed of her life as they would have done with the purchase and sale of a head of cattle.

She buried her face in her pillow. So be it then. Now it would only be quicker, like the last stroke of a Norman sword.

THE LIP READER

MICHAEL THAL

“It’s not what you get in life, it’s what you give back that truly defines you.”

Set in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s, and later in Los Angeles, California, Zhila Shirazi tells her story firsthand. She reveals the real-life struggle of being a deaf woman who refuses to allow adversity to stop her from reaching her dreams of living a normal and fulfilling life.

In 1985, disgusted with the treatment of Jews by the new Islamic government, Zhila immigrates to the United States in pursuit of better circumstances and a chance to receive a cochlear implant to improve her hearing. However, it isn’t until she is forty-nine, when she meets her soulmate, Mickey Daniels, that she begins to feel her life truly complete.

A decade later, after they have fallen deeply in love, Zhila learns that she is suffering from an aggressive form of cancer. In the months that follow, Mickey becomes Zhila’s primary caretaker, and the two grow ever closer as they fight the disease together.

Right up to the end, Zhila shows her caring nature, innate intelligence, and will power to overcome almost any challenge. Her courage and the beauty of her memory is certain to inspire all who venture to follow her on their quest for a truly meaningful life.

*Visit our website for more information about
“The Lip Reader”.*

1

WHEN I WAS NINE, I read an article in the *Ettela'at*, our newspaper, about an audiologist fitting a deaf child with hearing aids. The caption in Farsi under the photo of the little girl with tears rolling down her face read: "Oh my! I can hear my voice!"

That was the moment I decided I must have hearing aids, too. I lobbied my mother, showing her the article, but she just smiled and nodded. Report card day bolstered my case, showing poor progress in math. My parents wanted to hire a tutor, but I suggested they invest in hearing aids instead. I said, "If I could hear the teacher, I would do a lot better in class. I would rather have hearing aids."

I kept nagging them over months, never missing an opportunity to make my case. I pounced one evening while they were relaxed and least expected it, as Papa sat in his leather lounge smoking and Maamaan crocheted a blanket. Taking a stance on the Persian rug between them, I clapped my hands to secure their attention and announced, "I cannot hear my voice and I do not have the slightest idea what your voices sound like. My grades in school suffer because

when the teacher turns her back, I miss everything!” I crossed my arms stubbornly and stared intently at them. “I want hearing aids!”

Maamaan never looked up and continued crocheting “Go to bed. It is late. Your father and I will discuss it.”

I understood why my parents wanted to turn a blind eye to the problem. In our culture it was not safe to be different. Being Jewish in a Muslim country was difficult enough, but if your child had a disability, you kept that fact very private. People with disabilities in mid-twentieth century Iran were considered tragic and pitiful. Those afflicted were seen as unfit or feeble-minded and incapable of contributing to society. Their worth was only valued as entertainment in a circus sideshow or as objects of scorn. Many disabled individuals were forced to undergo sterilization so as not to pass disabling genes to their offspring.

I could appreciate that my parents wanted my deafness to remain a secret; hearing aids would be stark evidence of my inferiority. They feared ridicule from the community for their inability to sire healthy, normal children. It was safer and much less complicated to pretend all was well, until the consequences began to force the issue.

I arrived home from school, bleeding, crying, and dripping wet.

“My God, Zhila! What happened?” Maamaan dropped her duster on the living room table and rushed to my side.

I kicked off my boots near the front door and ran to my room.

“Nothing!” I slammed the door behind me. Maamaan waited a few minutes, and then knocked softly on my bedroom door.

“Go away!”

5

As she worked, Maamaan asked, “Who did this to you?”

“My teacher!” I broke down and cried in her arms.

When the shaking and sobs subsided, Maamaan gently moved me to arm’s length, “Tell me what happened.”

“We were working on a math problem and Mrs. Saidi’s back was to the class, writing on the board as she spoke to us. I had no idea that she had called on me to come up to solve the problem.

“She turned around, her face beet red, looking at me with fire in her eyes. ‘Miss Shirazi, when I speak to you, I expect a response!’ She

turned back to the board and put up another problem. In her fury, even I could hear the scraping chalk echo in the room.

“Mrs. Saidi turned around again her face even redder and screamed at me so hard stray spittle took flight and landed in my hair.”

Maamaan put a Band-Aid on the side of my temple and closed the first aid kit. “What happened next?”

“She ordered me to stand by the door and then said something with her back to me and a few students laughed and then she asked why I was still standing there. I did not know what she was talking about, and I was so embarrassed standing there completely confused. Mrs. Saidi grabbed the pencil from behind her ear, lunged at me and gouged it into my head and said, ‘That should wake you up, you stupid Jew, now get out of my class and don’t come back until you learn respect.’

“So, I stood outside under an awning with the wind and rain blowing in my face waiting.”

I sneezed and Maamaan ordered me to get out of my damp clothes and take a shower.

As I undressed, I said, “If I had hearing aids, this would not have happened.”

Maamaan got off the bed and held me in her arms. Then she pulled away and said, “For your twelfth birthday, we will see an audiologist.”

That was three years away, but I had a delightful shower.

2

I NEVER LOOKED FORWARD TO A BIRTHDAY with more excitement than my twelfth. I had waited three long years and now it was Operation Hearing Aids!

As usual, I walked to school with cousin Parry, Aunt Sabra's daughter. This school year was so much better than Mrs. Saidi's class, not only because Parry was in my room, but Miss Avedisian, our teacher, was really kind. She believed in teaching using the philosophy of the school's Christian founder — a righteous woman who wanted to educate young girls, no matter what their background or religion.

Miss Avedisian was aware of my deafness because Parry told her. On the first day of class, Parry stopped at our teacher's desk while I stood waiting at the door. She whispered something to her and Miss Avedisian looked over at me and smiled.

That was all it took. Thanks to Parry, Miss Avedisian never spoke with her back to me. When she asked me a question, she looked directly at me and spoke slowly enough to make sure I understood. My grades skyrocketed and finally I was happy.

School had been dismissed early that Wednesday afternoon as I ran home with Parry in my wake. At a busy intersection, my cousin caught up to me and asked, “What is the big rush?”

As the noisy traffic sped by, I said, “I told you already. Maamaan promised me hearing aids. We get them today!”

As the light changed, I dashed off knowing I was being terribly rude, but I was so exhilarated I had no time for manners, and left Parry at the corner shaking her head.

I burst through the front door, sweaty with a blue scarf tangled haphazardly around my neck. Maamaan scowled, “Go take a shower, change clothes and we will go.”

“But we will be late,” I whined.

Maamaan stood with her hands on her hips, her apron concealing her pregnant belly. “We have an hour, plenty of time, now go.”

Supergirl could not have showered and dressed faster.

I walked quickly ahead of Maamaan and kept turning to face her, urging her to walk faster. She waddled contentedly behind me, making no attempt at all to satisfy my coaxing. From Darband Street, near Sa’dabad Palace, home to the Shah, we headed east on Tajik, and entered a medical center at the end of the block. Maamaan filled out the requisite forms, handing them to the receptionist, who puffed at her bangs to get them out of her eyes.

“Dr. Mohammadi will be with you shortly.”

I was too excited to sit. Soon I would be able to hear! I imagined all the sounds I would hear: music, my teacher’s voice, the new baby crying ... the possibilities were endless. While we waited, I studied a framed drawing of an ear on the wall, labeled with the *Ear Canal*, *Middle Ear*, *Inner Ear*, and *Eustachian Tube*. The receptionist interrupted my scrutiny and I helped Maamaan struggle to her feet.

Dr. Mohammadi had bushy eyebrows, and a kind face with a chipped front tooth that distracted from his bright smile. “Welcome, young lady,” he said offering his hand.

I shook it enthusiastically and blurted out, “I need hearing aids!”

He offered my mother a seat near his desk. “For that we will need to do some tests.” He spoke slowly and distinctly, just like Miss Avedisian. He escorted me to the soundproof booth. “First we will do

The Lip Reader

a Pure Tone test. You sit on that chair and place those headphones over your ears. If you hear a sound, raise your left hand. Okay?”

I nodded and eagerly entered the booth. Once the headphones were in place, a loud beep assaulted my right ear and my hand enthusiastically shot up. Another beep, up went my hand, then fewer, then nothing. I did better with the left ear although most sounds were faint as if from far away, but still I was encouraged. I kept the headphones on for the next test where he instructed me to repeat the word that I heard. Again, my right ear failed completely and words made little sense in the left.

He performed a few more tests, sticking instruments in my ears then looking at his gadgets and meters and charts, then jotted down notes. When he finished analyzing the results, he informed us that I had a profound loss in my right ear, and in my better ear on the left, I had a severe loss. We quizzed him about the significance of that and what was the next step.

The technical explanation went over my head and I almost lost all hope when he told us there was no remedy for my right ear; no hearing aid could help. I perked up again when he said that with an aid on my left, I might understand some speech.

“The meningitis you had as a child destroyed the hair-like structures in your ears, necessary for the complicated process of hearing and understanding sound.

You can hear sounds on the order of a fire engine siren or a school bell, but cannot comprehend human speech. But I see that you have compensated by learning to read lips. I rarely see anyone with your level of hearing loss to be so skilled at that; it is very impressive. It was helpful that you were born with hearing so your brain was able to process language for a time before the meningitis destroyed it.”

“When can I get the hearing aid for my left ear?”

“The hearing aid you need is only made by an American company.” He went over to a cabinet and pulled out a box showing me what it looked like and how it worked.

“Can I try it?”

“Sorry, this device will not work for you. It is not powerful enough.”

Maamaan asked, "What is the price of the one she would need?"

I was so excited about getting a hearing aid that cost never occurred to me. I held my breath afraid of his answer.

Dr. Mohammadi turned his head away from me and spoke to my mother.

Maamaan gasped, stood up thanking the doctor for his time and briskly exited his office signaling me to follow. She walked stone-faced, down Tajik Road heading home.

I ran ahead of her and then turned walking backward facing her. "Can I get the hearing aid?"

"No, it's too expensive."

"I will get a job! I will help pay for it."

Maamaan found the energy to walk vigorously past me.

I screamed, "Maamaan, I want a hearing aid!"

She did not respond; she just walked faster.

"Please, Maamaan!"

She crossed the street straight for home, the bottom corners of her long winter coat flapping in the cold wind. I caught up with her and screamed, "Maamaan! I want to hear music and laughter. I hate being so different! You do not want people to know! You are afraid they will gossip that your daughter is defective! God forbid they see a hearing aid and realize I am deaf!"

Pedestrians stared and people stuck their heads out of windows to see what the commotion was about. Maamaan halted in mid-stride, shaking, her face flushed with anger. She turned toward me and I felt the bitter sting of her open hand against my face.

"NEVER speak of this again."

My mother had never struck me, and I had never seen her so angry. I realized this subject must run much deeper than I realized. I had touched a tender nerve creating this dramatic response from this person that I no longer recognized.

I trailed behind her covering my face with my hands sobbing in bitter disillusionment.

THE
NAMES
OF
HEAVEN

FLAVIA IDÀ

One man. An extraordinary choice.

In 1511, a Spanish ship en route from the island of Hispaniola sank off the coast of Yucatan near the town of Tulum. The survivors were captured by the Maya; these were the first white men ever to set foot on the mainland of the American continent, and the first white men the Maya had ever seen.

Among the castaways was Gonzalo Guerrero, a sailor from Palos. After he was captured, he lived among the Maya as a slave for three years. He then escaped from his master and sought the protection of Lord Nachancan, ruler of Chetumal in Belize, who made him a free man. Gifted with a fine military mind, Gonzalo quickly rose to become Nachancan's war captain; he married Nachancan's sister and had three children with her. This was the first European-American family; it was the founding of the Mestizo race, and it changed the face of the New World.

In 1517, the conquistador Hernando Cortez came to bring Gonzalo back to the Spaniards, offering him a position of high power among his countrymen. The decision Gonzalo took then was the only one ever taken by a white man in the conquest of the Americas, and it made him a hero.

*Visit our website for more information about
"The Names of Heaven".*

ONE

APRIL 1511

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT the reef had waited for them, and now it had them.

There was a sudden crack of planks splitting in half, the noise of the rock biting into the ship, then the wind rushing in through the broken ribs. The rigging snapped, chain links ground apart. The mainmast doubled up on itself and came down smashing onto the deck. Canvas ripped from one end to the other, and the topsail flew away in the night. The prow reared up, shook, stuck in the grip of the stone. The sea flooded into the hull.

They all heard them, the sounds that meant no hope. Crawling, pushing, wrestling the ropes and barrels that trapped them, the men reached out toward the only lifeboat left whole. They fought to be first.

Captain Valdivia's voice raged against the gale. "We can still float her, you bastards. I say we can!" He called the first mate. "Santiago, cut the mast loose. Send Felipe and two more below deck." But they all ignored him, as though their names didn't belong to them anymore.

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Santiago Alvarado crossed himself, holding onto a spar. “No, Señor Don Capitán. We couldn’t float her if she grew wings.” He looked over his shoulders. “The boat, Señor Don Capitán!”

Captain Valdivia cursed, his hand welded to the wheel. “Stay back, damn you. Mind your places!”

The men heard only their own fear. They put their hands to the capstan and struggled against the rope to lower the boat. “Mother of God, deliver us from evil. Queen of the Sea, save our lives.” But the sea had no ears and no heart, the sea had only a mouth.

The boat hit the water. The men held onto the rope until their hands bled. The keel cracked, timbers fell apart. Muskets and crossbows slid down the half-sunken deck. Like yellow hail the twenty thousand gold coins of King Ferdinand of Spain pelted the waves. Off plunged the fine steel breastplates, the letters and reports to His Honor the Governor of Hispaniola, and Juan de Córdoba with his good sword on, and Diego García with the name of his woman slurring in his mouth.

The ship groaned out loud beneath them. At last Captain Valdivia let go of the wheel and tumbled toward the gunwale.

“Find me the lookout,” he begged. “Get the son of a whore into my hands.” But the lookout lay crushed under the mast and had paid already for looking the other way when out of the water the Víboras had lashed out, true to their name of Viper Rocks.

The men fell, jumped, slipped into the boat — without sail, without oars and without food or water. The wounded screamed in pain, trampled.

Someone was crying out from the twisted shadows of the ship. “Don’t leave me behind. For the love of God, help me!”

Gonzalo Guerrero reached out with both hands and felt the wet, desperate grip of Jerónimo de Aguilar. He pulled Jerónimo down, as their weight sank the boat further and the others fought and shoved to keep their places. Aguilar crouched in his sliver of space. In a frenzy he kissed the prayer book he’d salvaged from his hammock. The keel came apart. The night sounded like wood and iron.

The fallen sails had covered the stern, a shroud for the burial. Captain Valdivia looked up at the wheel that was spinning as if under

a ghost's crazed hand. The pride and sweat of his whole life, his pretty *Esperanza* with the gilded figurehead was shuddering her last in the waves.

Slowly the laden boat drifted into the black nothing. It pitched and it scratched along the edges of the reef. The men threw out their hands blindly, feeling for the hard stone blades. Then the sea pulled them into its void.

Gonzalo Guerrero crossed his arms, his fingers clawing with cold and with fear at his sodden shirt; and like all his nineteen companions he thought, That's all I'm left with now, my life and my shirt.



Five days. The sea was smooth now and the wind was gentle, that tropical wind smelling of spice that drove them toward a point it alone knew. Five days they'd lived like steers packed in a slaughterhouse, close enough to hear the next man's thoughts knocking against one's skull. They'd laid the wounded on the bottom, on the others' feet. They wailed and begged continuously. The bilge water had turned brown with blood and vomit. During the night the wind froze them, during the day the sun scorched them. Those who could sleep woke up screaming, maddened by the endless rocking of the boat, their tongues cracked with thirst and their stomachs shrunk with hunger.

Once in a while someone started to rave and tried to walk out of the boat. "I'm going to Prudencio's tavern for some wine. Who wants to come with me?" Captain Valdivia raised his voice and quieted the man down. He could still keep some order among his men, who were no longer his men but the sea's. He'd threatened to throw overboard the next man who started a brawl: they all needed the extra room.

Most of the time they lay coiled against the sun, in attitudes of orphans helping one another to sleep. Then someone would burst into fevered talk, about how beautiful Castile looked at harvest time, about how they were all going to live and to remember. They would start trying to catch fish with their hands.

The Names of Heaven

“Let’s hope the currents take us eastward, into the sight of baptized eyes,” Leon Sandoval kept saying.

Santiago Alvarado the first mate cursed him. He was a big, quarrelsome man with a thick beard.

“Damn your soul, boy, can’t you even recognize the cardinal points anymore? We’re drifting to the west, away from known land.”

“And what is to the west, in God’s sweet name,” Leon broke out with a fit of cough. “The stars at night make no sense. No one’s had time to name them yet.”

Captain Valdivia was holding in his lap the head of the dying helmsman. He looked at nothing.

“Maya,” he said through swollen lips. “I spoke to Don Cristóbal Colón seven years ago, when he returned from his fourth voyage.” He seemed to smile. “He told so many lies he made me want to have a ship... To the west of Cuba, he said, is a land called Maya.”

Leon lay back and moaned in his teeth. “Maya” was just a name, a single outcrop of syllables against an entire breadth of dread. They still belonged to the unknown.

Felipe del Castillo grumbled something to himself, his forehead matted with blood. “That old madman, talking about Paradise as though he’d seen with his own two eyes Adam and Eve running about naked!” His face twisted. “Lord God, we’re here on account of a fool, we die because of an old man’s delusions!”

Captain Valdivia forced him to go back to his corner. The sun pressed down on the bare heads, on the parched mouths. The boat stank like an open coffin.

“Paradise,” Felipe murmured. “He called it Paradise.”

Gonzalo Guerrero looked at the black fin that had been following them for two days and nights. He was a tall, well-proportioned young man with a handsome broad face and hair the color of dark copper. He’d always been content with his looks. Work had made him strong, and women found him pleasant. He watched the sea around him.

At the other end of that sea wide as the breath of God there was Palos de Moguer, where he was born and from where, when Gonzalo was barely five, Christopher Columbus had sailed to search for the

Indies. By now his uncle would be pulling the nets in by the cove. His sister would be sewing, with supper ready. By now his parents' grave would again be growing with poppies.

It was a tough sea, stingy old cheat. It called him in the nights; it told him to come, to come. He had listened for hours to the same tale, told and retold in Palos, the tale of the mad Italian who had nagged three ships from the sovereigns of Castile and had gone off to find another world.

The strange animals, the strange people old Don Cristóbal had brought back from that other world. The fever, the dreams he'd stirred. They had haunted Gonzalo's childhood, then his adolescence, then his manhood. He pulled in fish and he thought endlessly of, "some day, some day." He went to bed hungry and in his sleep the Queen of Cathay wanted to marry him.

In 1502, when the Admiral had set out on his fourth voyage, Gonzalo had begged his father to let him go with him. He was sixteen, and for his last expedition Don Cristóbal had enlisted boys, some as young as twelve. His father had refused. Gonzalo, mingled to the crowd that watched the Admiral walk down the pier for the last time, had thought of jumping after the ship.

Then his father had died, leaving him with nothing to keep him in Palos anymore. He had strained long enough at the bit, yearning to escape that hencoop of oppression and toil. Finally the day he'd turned twenty, old enough for the law, he'd gone out of the house, bought a second-hand breastplate and signed up for the next caravel due to sail for the Caribe. His sister had cried while she sewed the image of the Virgin of Seville in his good coat. His uncle hadn't said anything, except that he wanted him back by next year's Easter, to help out with the herrings; and Gonzalo had promised.

So he had endured the four months at sea that it took to reach that other world. Four months of nightmares on a filthy hammock, of cockroaches and lashings and womanless misery, always with the vision of Eldorado burning the sense from his mind: to be fed gold in bowls at breakfast and supper, to be awash in gold like the sunset!

Not that he knew where this gold was to be found. No one knew. He thought of streams where he would pan under the natives'

benign eyes, or of marketplaces where they would trade cloth and axes for the precious metal. He imagined the day he would return home with a hatful of nuggets the size of duck's eggs. "Uncle, buy a new boat. Sister, no more scrubbing laundry in the river for the Countess Moncada." He had stepped off the gangplank walking like a prince.

Then had come the brutal awakening. There was no gold in the Caribe, certainly not enough for a hatful. The bright yellow light had gone out for him as it had for countless others, beginning with Don Cristóbal himself. For three years he had followed ship after ship to island after island: to Hispaniola, to Darién, to Jamaica, to Cuba. There was no gold anywhere, no silver and no gems, no palaces of the Queen of Cathay. There was nothing but mosquitoes, alligators and snakes — green hell.

The sole property that could be acquired was the islanders, a people as simple as the air that was their only clothing. They laughed and wondered at the newcomers, they brought them food and drink and women; and they could be driven to abject terror by the mere noise of the guns, by the mere sight of the horses. It had been the islanders who'd paid in full for everything that wasn't there.

What Gonzalo had seen in the Caribe had been enough to sadden him for the rest of his life. He'd always thought the Spaniards went to Mass every Sunday and paid their taxes to the king. Here, where there were no churches and the king was many thousand of miles away, the Spaniards did something else. They hunted the natives down, burned them alive, tortured them to make them say where they'd hidden the gold they didn't have; they raped little girls and they hanged old women.

On Hispaniola an adventurer named Hernando Cortez rounded up men and women with his dogs and worked them to death by the hundreds in his estates. Because the population of the islands had been almost wiped out in less than ten years since the New World had been found, black slaves now had to be shipped in from Africa, to be worked to death in their turn.

Left on their own, the petty governors sent from Spain with nothing more than a title on a piece of paper passed the time making

war on one another, while the gallows kept sprouting everywhere now for this, now for this other “traitor to the Crown,” rows of black gallows all along the coral shores of Paradise.

Gonzalo had felt caught in a trap, betrayed by everything he had ever held dear. He knew he didn’t want to go home empty-handed; but he knew even more that he was sick at heart of having to bear daily witness to the nightmare that the New World had become. It seemed that every evil from which he had tried to escape had been carried to the islands in the hold of the ships and was now flourishing tenfold.

Not knowing what to do, he’d kept risking his life on land and sea for nothing more than his sailor’s pay, a pound of salt pork every week, and an allowance of hopes gone insane. When yet another war had broken out, this time between Diego Nicuesa and Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, he’d signed his name on Captain Valdivia’s roll only because Captain Valdivia paid a few *maravedí* more than other captains. All he wanted was to get away long enough to decide once and for all. Now he was drifting to his death, having found nothing, not even an answer.

He turned his head away from his companions. The sea was so close, and waiting with its terrifying smile.



Ten days. The ship’s cook, whose ribs had been broken by a falling spar, was dead. They waited for the sharks to lag behind, then cast him overboard. During the night two more men died, simply gave up. There was more room now, but the empty places meant it all would soon be an empty place. Wounds festered. Their skin had begun to wrinkle and crack like that of old men.

Captain Valdivia had stopped shouting. He was a hard, graying man who now cursed himself under his breath for wanting to cry. But Leon Sandoval used his good eyesight to scan the endless water for signs of land. Once a cormorant flew over, making him cry out that the coast must be near. He was a boy of fifteen.

Hallucinations taunted their minds. On the ninth day the bosun flung himself into the sea, claiming he’d seen a vineyard full of ripe

Málaga grapes. Before they could pull him back in, the sharks found him in an instant. But that day it rained, and they gathered the rain in their hands, in their boots, in anything they could get, sobbing at the wet bliss in their throats. They held up their faces with their mouths open, drinking until they retched.

Jerónimo de Aguilar spent his every waking minute reading from his prayer book and praying for the salvation of his soul. Gonzalo could hear him whisper Latin in his teeth, hurrying to repent.

Jerónimo was a thin but not delicate man, with soft hands and the skittish manners of a schoolboy. To his parents, who kept a butcher shop in Écija, his religious vocation had come at first like a catastrophe, for he was the son who must follow in their footsteps. When he had made his decision to sail for the Indies, they knew he lusted not merely for gold but also for heathen souls to convert to Christ. However, they had reasoned in giving him their blessing, if there was gold in the heathens' lands, a rich priest would be even better than a rich merchant.

So far, for Jerónimo the rewards of both profit and proselytizing had been slim. He had spent whatever money he had in preparing a lawsuit against a man who wanted to cheat him out of a piece of land on Hispaniola. The lawsuit was the reason for his voyage aboard the *Esperanza*. The documents he was bringing with him for this purpose had now been lost in the wreck.

As for the spreading of the Gospel that was so dear to his heart, all the islanders of the Caribe had already been converted, more often than not at sword point, and they now flocked to Mass, though some of the friars said it was only to get some respite from their labor. Even so, now that the Lord was calling him to His presence, Jerónimo had at least one good deed to bring before His judgment. With eloquent pleas he'd been able to persuade an old cacique to accept confession, before the man was burned at the stake for arguing that Mary could not be both a Virgin and the Mother of God.

Against the glare of the sun, Gonzalo eyed him closely. He'd never been fond of Jerónimo. There had been many times during their voyage when his piety had galled him. It had an answer for

everything; it made Gonzalo wonder what was it that made some people so vulnerable to that sort of unblinking faith. Fear, certainly; of the elements, of illness, of all that could not be explained. Of all these things Gonzalo too was afraid, like all men. But he also loved whatever justice could be done on earth and now instead of somewhere else and later. For the sake of justice he could become fearless. Once he had protested the punishment of a shipmate whom everyone knew was innocent, and he had ended up sharing the man's appointed lashes.

After his father's death he had saved up what little money his uncle gave him and he had spent it to have a priest teach him to read and write. He had seen how easily those who handled a quill cheated those who didn't. If he could even the odds, it was worth going without bread and wine and everything else.

It was taking too long to die, he thought. Once God makes up His mind, He should at least be quick. A sound like a sob came from him. Jerónimo looked at him with a haunted look.

"Brother Guerrero," he said. "I pray for you too. Take heart, for soon we will all be in the glory of the Saints."



Thirteen days, and Christ's own passion had lasted only one. By now some were so dry they could not weep or urinate. One of the officers burned out in a single night. The helmsman and Luís Gallego lingered on, dwindling like candles.

During his last hours Luís begged Jerónimo to confess him and absolve him of his sins. Jerónimo looked terribly sad.

"I'm not a priest yet, brother Luís. I took holy orders when I was a boy, but I have not the power to absolve you." He helped Luís join his hands. "Confess to God and to Jesus. In His mercy He will hear you."

Luís' lips quivered. His eyes stared out with a grief beyond words. With that grief that no one could soothe, he went.

They didn't throw the three bodies overboard because the sharks were all around. They had to leave them where they lay, their faces covered with their shirts, horrible to feel at night when the flesh

The Names of Heaven

of the living turned as cold as the flesh of the dead. Death had become their only deity. Hurry up, they prayed, hurry up you old whore. And when the coast smiled, they felt almost as though they'd been cheated.

It was Leon the boy who sighted it. His mouth was too dry for him to shout. He started waving his arms with inarticulate sounds. From the water it looked truly like the piece of Paradise in old don Cristobal's tales: green and wild, tangled with trees and brush, skirted in pink beaches and humming with herons.

Captain Valdivia crossed himself. "O Blessed Mother of God, we thank Thee."

As if welcoming them, flamingos rose high, long red wings flapping. Gently then the current nudged the boat into the lagoon.

Gonzalo could not take his eyes off the shore. Relief as fierce as pain gripped him. He crawled over the gunwale and let himself fall into the water. It was clear as new glass and warm as milk. He floated, arms outstretched, his blunted senses savoring the rebirth.

They tumbled out of the boat and onto the sand. A few of the men had to be carried and put in the shade. Jerónimo sank to his knees and kissed the ground. Others joined him in whispered prayers to God's infinite and infinitely incomprehensible mercy. For a long time they just sat, pressing their hands on the comforting firmness of the earth. Then the well-known endeavors of survival flooded back into their minds, sent trickles of forgotten energy through their limbs.

Captain Valdivia began dividing the men to their tasks. "Felipe and Leon, you two seem strong enough to go searching for fresh water. I need others to make a grave for the dead. The rest of those who can walk will look for food."

Gonzalo reached into his boot, pulled out his good knife. "Who else has daggers?" he asked. "We can tie them to branches, use them as spears. If the savages can survive, by God so shall we."

"We'll build a raft, sail back to Hispaniola," said Ponce Noriega the gunner.

"Yes, but where are we?" wondered Pedro Mendez.

Captain Valdivia took off his soiled shirt. "That we will find out later. To your tasks, now. Stay within earshot if you can."

Up in the palm trees the brown jays chattered like gossips, curious about the strangers. The air was hot in the long afternoon of the Caribe. The men worked slowly. Each movement was painfully tiring, but they were held now by their new hope. They dug a shallow pit in the sand, placed the three dead bodies in it and covered them with more sand. With twigs and dry seaweed Jerónimo fashioned a cross and planted it on the grave.

In the shallows there were sea urchins, abalone and crabs; on the beach, turtle eggs and a dead bird. The men wobbled, fell, crawled back up, maddened by their hunger and their clumsiness. Then they gathered around with whatever they'd been able to find and started to scrape, cut, break and divide the food, their mouths open in anticipation.

"We look like old women making supper," Gonzalo said. "Old gypsy women in Granada."

Before sundown Felipe and Leon were back with the news of fresh water they'd found not too far away. The water was a bit brackish, but clear. They had gathered some in large waxy leaves, and the others fell onto it. Like a nurse Jerónimo fed small pieces of mussels to Alonso Carrera, who was too weak to sit up. They ate the turtle eggs with the soft shells and all. The seaweed provided the salt they all craved.

Then Rodrigo Gutierrez told the others to watch, for he was going to piss. They clapped their hands at the feat and bet on who'd be next. Life, wayward and drunken, had resumed its place among them.

The night came slowly, spreading long layers of blue over the ocean and raising clouds that looked like tall baroque ceilings. They lay down on the sand next to each other, and sleep took them quickly. Now they could speak again the word that helps a man's heart to beat: *mañana*, tomorrow.

PIOUS REBEL

JORY POST

After her partner dies suddenly, Lisa Hardrock realizes how little she knows about the life she's been living — and starts exploring her questions in a blog that unexpectedly goes viral.

Following the sudden death of her domineering partner, Lisa Hardrock begins to discover how little she really knows about the life she's been living for the last seven years — and the man she was living it with.

As she confronts the secrets and unpaid debts her partner left behind, Lisa also begins to investigate the mysteries of her own life by beginning to write. Begun as a journal for her daily thoughts, her blog ends up going viral.

Along the way, Lisa discovers the truths and lies about those she has considered friends, learns more about Central Valley motorcycle gangs than she ever thought she needed to know, and unexpectedly ends up with a pantry full of sockeye salmon for her cat, Eloise.

*Visit our website for more information about
“[Pious Rebel](#)”.*

2

FRIDAY *11-15-19*

PUSHPINS AND POWER STRIP IN HAND, Lisa arrived downtown the next morning after stopping at McDonald's for two sausage burritos and a large orange juice. The parking spot just outside her window she had looked forward to capturing was not available at 7:57. She breathed deeply, not a big deal, there were others. The deep breathing was not new, but had been long forgotten these past few years. Disappointment had chiseled its way into her life, had successfully disengaged the breathing, the quiet depth it had once helped her achieve. While she was now hunting for something new, she was also hoping to retrieve some of the old, some of the way-back stuff that had helped to create her power, establish her presence.

Inside the office, music was already disrupting her need for silence, lyrics working their way into one ear, melody the other. She stuck pages onto the walls, varied the color of pushpin depending on the content of the pages. After plugging in her laptop and phone, she

slipped the Bose headphones over her ears. The chatter was still loud. She switched to the Beats Solo. A little better, but not much. The check she had written yesterday for \$618.35 covered the prorated rent for the rest of November and her obligation through December 31. Her savings account would handle rent for a couple months, long enough to help her focus, figure some things out, a fresh place with life and traffic and orchids walking by. But disappointment was creeping in, finding an entrance when she took a bite of the sausage burrito. She had never eaten anything from McDonald's, not even an offered French fry. At least forty-five more days in this office, this place she was hoping would be the catapult to spring her forward into a new life.

The journal she had purchased online from the handmade-book artist she found in Chicago was sitting on the desk. It was laced with literary quotations throughout. She had trusted the book artist to use her own judgment, include ideas she thought might inspire her. Lisa hadn't opened it yet, hadn't read any of the quotations, authors' names, looked at any of the books mentioned. She didn't know the woman whose image graced the cover. She flipped it open, read the dedication on the inside:

*For Murasaki Shikibu, who opened a door for women
authors over one thousand years ago.*

From a zippered flap of her pack, she removed an Ohto Graphic Liner pen with pigment ink, removed the cap and touched the nib to the Somerset Book paper the book artist had used to make the journal. She didn't move her wrist into a cursive flow, wasn't ready yet, instead watched as what started as a small mark spread into a pea-sized circle, soaked through the page to the back side. She attached eight legs, grew it into a spider, and finally touched fingers to keyboard:

This black widow from nowhere appears simply because it chooses to, takes its form from accident, from a resistance to move forward, from an expanding disappointment that began at birth and continues through the creation of these sentences, having nothing of value to say, to think about, to

share with anything except a one-dimensional spider that won't even expose her deadly red dot.

She noticed as she typed, in the silence after periods and commas, that a jackhammer had been pounding at concrete somewhere up the street. She hadn't heard it when it was pen on paper, had allowed the noises of the city to inhabit their natural space, had let go of the me-first behavior that had had its claws at her throat for so long. Her ears hurt, like a boxer who had sparred for days in a row. She removed the headphones, the jackhammer blasted louder, the volume of the music bounced off walls, the conversations amped up. She looked at her reflection in the mirror on the back of her door, ears puffy and red. But the rest of her looked relatively good. Her whole life folks had told her she looked younger than her age. It was still true at thirty-seven. The auburn waves of hair flowing over her back and shoulders. The long sinewy body, strong cheekbones, not inherited from her five-foot-one mother. The coaches at Piedmont High had recruited her to play volleyball, hounded her for the better part of her sophomore year. But she was a reader. Didn't have time for the serious practice required to become a star. They told her it didn't matter. She was a natural. But she had been in the middle of *War and Peace*, had just started with *Infinite Jest*, had a dozen other thousand-page tomes lined up for her spare time.

Lisa took her hand off the keyboard, held it in front of her eyes, rolled it from the back to the palm. She remembered holding it up to her mother's hand as a young girl, her twelve-year-old fingers dwarfing those of her mom. Alice had never given her information about the other half of her DNA, simply said her father could have been any one of five friends who had helped her out. She didn't give her the full turkey baster explanation until she was older. Alice had taken Lisa and her adopted sister, Cody, to see the world premiere of Sam Shephard's *The Late Henry Moss* at the Theater on the Square in San Francisco in November 2000. For two seventeen-year-old girls, seeing Nick Nolte, Woody Harrelson, Cheech Marin, and Sean Penn on the same stage would have been enough to satisfy them for months. But for Lisa, the added attraction occurred when Sam Shephard

entered the theater from the stage, waved at the cheering audience, walked up the stairs, and sat in the empty seat next to her. For two hours, Lisa was not able to look at the stage, her eyes trained on Sam's hands, hands that were identical to hers. Could her mother have hooked up with Sam Shephard eighteen years ago? He was a mainstay at the Magic Theater back in the '80s, and her mom was a theater groupie.

It was on the trip home over the Bay Bridge when Lisa said, "I think Sam Shephard's my father," that her surrogate sister Cody had laughed uncontrollably, that Alice had smiled and said, "Five of my male friends came over one night and filled a turkey baster for me. They are all long gone. You will never know your father." Lisa ignored them. She had seen Sam's hands.

• • •

The content of the dialogue in the outer office pounded into her head over the open ceiling.

"Hey. This is Bianca over at the property management office. Did you find a bag of wet clothes at 108 Pine?"

Lisa heard the other voice on speaker phone, didn't know who was talking.

"I did," the male voice rang in.

"Yeah. We got a call about it. The former tenant left it in the washer. Hasn't been seen in days."

"I'll pick it up when I go back. What should I do with it? Toss it?"

"No. We'd probably be liable. Let me get back to you."

Under her spider picture and words Lisa drew a line down the middle of the page. She labeled the left side "Disappointments," the right side "Accomplishments." Under Disappointments she wrote "Making too quick a decision about this office." Across from it under Accomplishments she wrote "Finding this office." Another Disappointment was "Eating at McDonald's." She added, "Remember to eat something at home for breakfast." Another

Disappointment: “The loudness of the office noise.” Its counterpart was “Learning something about property management.” This activity reminded her that her whole life had been lived out in a series of paired beliefs that opposed each other, sitting on the middle of a fence, “Yes, but” as a constant mantra.

SMITH:
AN UNAUTHORIZED
FICTOGRAPHY

JORY POST

In this kaleidoscopic, episodic joy ride, Jory Post treats us to thirty interviews that may or may not be real, with an array of “ordinary” people who turn out to be anything but, all of them in conversation with an interviewer who is herself a mystery.

As one encounter follows another, we realize that “Smith” is a convenient alias for a range of voices, including: a traveling nurse from Saipan, a Vietnam-war vet who lives in his truck, a woman who can only tell her own story through fairy tales, a young man more comfortable talking to animals than people, an army brat, a poker prodigy, a pool shark. Some of these Smiths offer themselves openly to the interviewer, while others reveal as much in their resistance as they do in their narratives.

Through it all, the stories, distinct and musical as jazz solos, give voice to what we want, what thrills us, what we’ve been most hurt or touched by, and what we will never forget — secrets any one of us might spill if only someone would listen. Jory Post has.

*Visit our website for more information about
“Smith: An Unauthorized Fictography”.*

6

INTERVIEW WITH TALESMTIH

“**I** READ THE BRIEF PARAGRAPH YOU SENT along with your request for this interview. I have it here with me. Do you mind ... if I read it out loud, while the recorder is going?”

The interviewer had no problem with that and nodded her assent. The subject had her eyes down on the piece of paper in front of her, made no eye contact with her.

“Okay. ‘You’ve been recommended by a friend, acquaintance, colleague, boss, or someone else in your life who thought you might be a good choice as a participant in my study. The study is funded by a private foundation that wishes to remain anonymous. I’m able to pay you an honorarium of one hundred dollars to be a participant. I can’t tell you much about the study, other than I will record what you say, and that I want you not to use your real name, but rather a fictitious name, and because Smith is the most prevalent name in the U.S.,

England, and Australia, I would like you to pick a name that has Smith in it. That's really all I can say, but I hope you'll find the opportunity enjoyable and tell me about you."

Silence. Fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, more. The interviewer watched the subject, whose eyes were still down, even though the paper had been removed from the table and put back in her purse.

"Okay. Am I to believe that you'd like me to come up with a make-believe name?"

The interviewer nodded.

"Then this whole thing could be made up for all you know. Every word out of my mouth could be a fairy tale."

The interviewer nodded.

"Okay. Let's call me FairySmith. For now. Maybe I'll change it later. Maybe I'll change it a few times. Then you want me to tell you about me. I can't really do that. I forget most about me, have lost me along the way, so what if I just make up a fairy tale, that may or may not be about me and people I have known?"

The interviewer nodded. The woman's eyes were still facing downward at a forty-five-degree angle directed at the middle of the round table where the digital record sat.

"Do I start with 'Once upon a time'? Isn't that how most fairy tales begin? Some generic sense of time so you don't know whether it happened yesterday or seven hundred years ago? Well, I'll try to make it clear in my tale when it began. John F. Kennedy was president, so that gives you a range of years to begin with. He died in Dallas on the day this tale began. About the time the bullets were sprayed from the window of the repository or the grassy knoll or any one of a hundred other possible locations, a woman in the woods was screaming for her life. With a husband out chopping wood in a forest behind a small cabin with a fire and a kettle of steaming hot water, the woman squirted out a little baby, red and crying and covered in goo. They named that baby ... hmm ... what shall her name be ... let's just call her Smith, plain old Smith, because she was just a plain old baby like all the other babies born to families on that auspicious day, and pretty much every other day. Is this what you wanted from me? Does this work for you? Me telling a fairy tale instead of talking about me?"

The interviewer nodded, jotted down a few notes in her journal, kept her eyes looking at the woman, who still hadn't made eye contact with her.

"Good. Because I like fairy tales. The little girl who was born in the woods the day a president was assassinated also liked fairy tales, mostly told to her by her mother because the father was never around, always out cutting down the forest to make a pathway to town so at some point one or more of them could escape, because God knows there was need for escape. Just like Lee Harvey Oswald tried to escape. Just like Jackie tried to escape out of the backseat when she saw what was happening. Or so the little girl was told by her mother later, because she was too young to know then what was happening the day she was born. The mother taught her much about the world, the world away from their small little cabin hidden away in the woods, and she always told them with a little more light than the girl imagined existed in the real world, always told everything in fairy tale form, so there was a swaying lilt to her voice, an injection of happiness just to be telling the story even if the stories didn't have happy endings, even if the stories scared the little girl somewhat. But the mother would always end every fairy tale with a smile on her face even if it seemed inappropriate to do so ...

"I could tell you the parts about big bad wolves in the woods at Grandmother's house, of which there were many, even if there was no grandmother. And I could tell you about being locked away, in towers, or dungeons, when the girl's hair grew so long and tangled she tripped over it with every step. Or about the giant bean plants outside the window before the entrance to the forest, with what the girl liked to pretend were magic beans that could take her to golden lands. Or maybe about the unhappy girl who tried to plant a garden.

"But I won't bother you with those chapters of this girl's fairy tale, because there are more chapters, like the one about the father who was supposedly chopping down trees to make a pathway for someone's escape, which turned out to be another tall tale, as the mother told the girl after she went searching for the entry point, and discovered that the father was never blazing a trail through those woods, but instead was chopping down those trees, making planks

out of them, crisscrossing the planks together in a very high fence that would keep the mother and girl locked inside the father's little slice of the forest and little mess of a cabin probably forever, or at least for the rest of their lives.

"That's when the mother lost the lilt in her stories, forgot to put in the happy parts, and it seemed to the girl, who was five or seven by this point in the story, that the mother was no longer telling the stories to the little girl, but instead was telling them to herself, or some other person who wasn't in the room, who didn't seem to be listening, because the mother never looked at her anymore, was almost afraid to look in the little girl's eyes, it seemed to the little girl, and that's when the little girl began avoiding her mother's eyes as well, for fear of what she might see there, or what might not be there. It was about this time the little girl knew her mother was not going to find the pathway out of the forest that would lead them to safety in town.

"And that she was now on her own. It would be her task to save them both, to relocate in a big city like Dallas, no, not that one, never that one, bad things happen there, even worse things than happen in her father's part of the forest behind tall fences. So she went out to pick the beans to help make the father's dinner, because the mother just sat staring most days and nights out the windows, and when the father grumbled, 'What do you think you're doing?' the girl smiled, even though she was frowning inside, and told him the fairy tale about the giant and the beans and the gold and how she was going to find them fame and fortune in those beans. And the father snarled and said, 'Just cook the damn beans, in a big pot, with a glob of bacon grease and goose meat.' And she did, and she delivered it to him in a big bowl at the table and took a smaller bowl over to the seat by the window and tried to spoon feed the mother who spit the beans on the floor and mumbled about light and bullets and pathways to heaven.

"It was on the forays to the ever-growing bean plants that she was able to explore, to search for possibilities, now that the father approved of her ventures, because he truly loved her bean stew with bacon grease and goose. She would walk all along the tall fence that

enclosed the whole area, circular, with no gate, because the father was big enough and strong enough to climb the fence and leap over when he needed out. And it was along these walks that she discovered the berries she knew not to eat because of the fairy tales with the poison berries her mother used to tell her when she was still able to recite and make eye contact. I feel like I'm just rambling on here, but I'm getting to the good part now, so is it okay if I just keep on talking?"

The interviewer nodded her head emphatically at the top of the woman's downward-looking head.

"So the little girl put a second towel down in her bean-collecting basket, beneath the towel that caught the beans, where she would pluck the poison berries, careful not to lick her hands and to wash carefully when she returned to the cabin. By spring, she had gathered almost a gallon of the berries that she hid underneath her bed wrapped up in the towel. Finally one day, she discovered a family of gophers behind some bean plants and berry bushes that had figured out how to move from outside the fence to inside the fence. They had dug a small hole under the fence, and her eyes got big. She looked around for the father and heard him in the distance chopping down more trees, so she got down on her knees, skin to dirt, and thrust her nails into the loose dirt and widened the hole. But it was getting dark and she had to get back to fix his supper.

"When he sat down at the table, she noticed that he noticed something different in the stew. So she said, 'Because it's your birthday today I thought I'd make you a special stew with the raspberries from the plants down by the spring.' And he nodded, not quite smiled, but looked like he appreciated the new flavor, and took big bites, and finally lifted the bowl and drank the whole thing until the last drop slid onto his tongue. Within minutes he was holding his stomach, vomiting on the floor, falling to the ground in pain, until he stopped breathing."

She stopped, raised her eyes to meet the interviewer. "Is this what you had in mind?"

The interviewer nodded.

"Okay. Let's call me TaleSmith. I can tell these stories all night long."

STILL LIFE

PAUL SKENAZY

When his wife, Edie, dies, Will Moran abandons all he used to be, and do, to paint still life canvases of rocks and driftwood on the walls of his house.

He's never painted before, recognizes that his paintings are awkward and ugly, but returns each day to his struggles with light and shadow, color and object, boundary and perspective. He eavesdrops on neighbors, dips into garbage cans, and fills his home with rocks he collects from local beaches.

Through it all, he clings to his still lifes, each another attempt to represent the simplest elements of his world — rocks, wood, and grief.

*Visit our website for more information about
“Still Life”.*

4

IT WAS FOUR IN THE MORNING when Will returned from his nightly walk. As he trudged up the wooden steps to the back deck, he felt broken glass through the soles of his shoes. He saw more glass at the edge of the French doors that led to the kitchen. Two panes alongside the door handle were empty; small shards still stuck in the wooden muntin. He crept inside carefully, less worried about confronting someone than curious what anyone might steal. There was a gap along the wall where two Masonite panels—two of Will’s paintings that hung among a dozen others on the wires strung horizontally along the wall—were missing. A folded piece of paper hung in their place.

Sorry I’ve disappeared on you. But I suppose I don’t need to apologize for secrecy to you, do I? I’m leaving town tonight. I’m pretty sure my stepdad knows about Mom. He’s been trying to get stuff out of me. He hits her, I think, but she says no. That’s why I watch, even though watching doesn’t do any good. But since you watch her too, watch her for me. And please help her.

Still Life

Sorry about the window. I took three of the bottles I remember from when we hunted together. And two paintings. I'll keep them safe.

I liked our walks. You know how to be quiet and I don't know anyone but Mom and me who does.

Jess

Then two short postscripts:

Your house is weird for a teacher. For anyone.

I'll write when I can.

The letter in one hand, Will stared at the empty space on the wall. He walked into his living room and looked at the bottles and other pieces of glass and plastic piled haphazardly alongside the windows. He could imagine they had been disturbed. Maybe. Except for the note, the absent windowpanes, and the space along the wall, nothing else had changed. But he felt like he'd just lived through an earthquake. Jess Arnold had broken in and brought something new into his life. Or taken something away. His ex-student Jess—someone who walked alongside him for hours, or used to; a boy as unabrasive as a worn dish towel—stole two paintings and two worthless bottles. And gave Will the job of watching over his mother.

Will cut a piece of cardboard and taped it over the hole in the doorway, then circled his rooms for the next two hours. He made a pot of coffee and ate some tasteless cereal. He climbed up to his roof, where he hadn't been for weeks, but that brought no relief.

When midnight came, Will took off as he always did on his round of walking. He forced himself to maintain his routine, moving aimlessly from street to street. Three or four hours of wandering brought him to the park outside Nancy's windows. She sat in her living room as usual, though she seemed restless to his newly informed, if confused, eye. She'd sit, pick up a magazine, stare at it for a few minutes, then take up another. She picked up a book, but just let it lay in her lap while she stared up from the pages. Her cat

jumped up alongside her on the couch, but she pushed it onto the floor every time it tried to sit on her lap. She stood up, sat down, stood up again. She walked to the large glass window at the front of the house, turned around, then turned back, as if looking for something she couldn't find. Standing at his spot in the park across the way, under the diffuse light from stars and moon, Will remembered how often he stood just like Nancy at his own front window during the last weeks Edie was alive and the first days after she died, inattentive, frozen in place.

When Will returned to his vantage point the next night, and the one after that, Nancy was gone. The house was dark. Two cars were parked in the driveway, but without Nancy at her nightly station—wine glass on the side table, cat alongside—there was nothing to see. Swearing to himself, Will headed home.

By the third day after Jess's break-in, Will was back at work. Questions kept gnawing at him, but he fought them off, determined not to let the boy's disappearance alter the pattern of his life, while knowing full well that it already had. He dug into fewer garbage cans than usual on his walks and spent less time staring into the houses that he passed. His walks inevitably led him back to the park and to Nancy's house, but there was nothing to see. The house seemed tranquil, quiet, hidden, a world unto itself.

He struggled with his frustrations in his notebook:

Life getting cluttered with people spoiling the view. Didn't feel empty before but stuffed now. Constipated. I need prunes or a more unpopulated diet. Or I need to control my own need to taste the minds of others.

What is it about isolation that makes people want to enter and so end it? Is it like punching a hole in a vacuum, letting in air, to escape the emptiness? Are painting and collecting bottles and cans and bowls ways of restoring air to the vacuum, or maintaining this insulation I claim as mine? If they are my way to claim independence, why and how have I drawn other people into my solitary habits?

• • •

Nancy appeared at Will's front door eight days after Jess's break-in. She announced herself with a soft, persistent knocking late in the morning. Will had just finished breakfast and was moving to his easel. He peeked out at Nancy, her body turned sideways away from the house, one hand extended to the door while the other clutched a cardigan around her thin frame. Her shoulders were sloped inward, as if protecting herself from something. She looked tentative, worried, thin-lipped; her hand in a fist holding clumps of the thick sweater. A piece of paper stuck out of her left hand. When he opened the door, he thought he sensed some pleading in her. Later he realized that their whole conversation took place while the two of them barely moved from their positions: she standing on the small porch, the sweater clutched around her; he a step above, at the edge of the threshold. The morning fog had not yet lifted, and the smell of ocean, mist, and something a little rank still hung in the morning air.

"I'm looking for Jess."

"He's not here."

"I guessed he wasn't. He told me to come here. Emailed me."

"I don't know where he is."

"But you know something."

Will wasn't sure what he knew.

"He was here, about a week ago. I didn't see him. He broke in."

She looked alarmed.

"He took some things. Nothing important. Not to me anyway."

He paused.

"He left me a note. It said he was leaving town."

"That's all?"

Will paused again.

"He said he thought he was in trouble. That you were in trouble."

"What's that to you?"

She didn't deny the trouble, Will noticed.

"Jess's email said you know everything. What do you know?"

Will was thrown back on his ignorance.

“Jess said he was scared. Talked about your husband.”

“They don’t get along.”

“I used to walk around town late at night with Jess. We’d wander from one street to another.”

“He’s always been like that,” she said, with what Will thought was pride.

Nancy stared down at the note in her hand, and again asked: “What do you know?”

Will decided he owed Nancy something for all his nights of staring at her.

“Jess and I used to watch you. From the park in front of your house.”

He saw that the information startled her. She turned to face him more directly—confrontational, but still slope-shouldered, still holding Jess’s email crumpled in her hand.

“Watching what?”

“Nothing really. We would sit in the park. You were in your house. We watched you sip wine, read, pet your cat. What you do late at night. Nothing special.”

She paused, turning away from him, taking in this information like it was something new she was learning about herself.

“How long?”

“I don’t know how long for Jess. A few weeks? He’s worried about you.”

“And you? Are you worried too?” she asked.

“Yes. No. Not at first. I walk at night, like Jess. I have since Edie died. I can’t sleep. I walk.”

She didn’t say anything.

“You looked so quiet. I didn’t think I was hurting anyone.”

“You had no right.”

“No. I had no right. I’m sorry. You looked peaceful. I didn’t see anything. Really. Just you sitting and reading.” He paused for a moment, then added, “I’m also discreet.”

At that she started to cry and shake, further crumpling the piece of paper in her hand. He thought to hold her, thought to leave her and

find some Kleenex, thought to say something. But instead he just stood where he was.

“You had no right, Mr. Moran. No right. No right. I’m sorry for your loss. Your wife. She was a good person. You were too. Are. Helped me that year ... were one of the ones who didn’t ... look down on me.”

He nodded.

“I’m sorry you’re lonely. But I’m not a show.”

“I know.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Jess told me to come to you for help. But you can’t help. No one can.” She looked up at him then. “You’re not my teacher anymore.” She paused. “I need to find Jess.”

With that, Nancy turned away and walked slowly down the steps, her upper body folded forward at the waist as she struggled to hold herself upright.

Will closed the door and went to his front window, with its white tarp acting as curtain. He pulled aside a slit and stared at Nancy while she crossed the street to the Mercedes that he’d seen parked in her driveway night after night. She closed the car door, then sat crying for a good two minutes more before she started the engine and drove off, never once looking back at Will’s house.

Which left Will to examine his prowling habits in his notebook:

The tortures of living, absence, worry, love. Peeking at neighbors: old bras, tired bodies. Everyday rock and roll. So much attention to so little—kids, depression, tomato plants, what to wear to work. Was life with Edie anything else? But the melodrama, Nancy with her tears, me with nothing to offer but news that she’d been spied on by a Peeping Tom and her son. Absent son. All so banal. Shared at how many front doors today? Sad as garbage cans. Or old men who dig in them.

Will was ashamed—ashamed of his peeks into Nancy’s life, into windows all over town, into garbage. He realized he hadn’t actually talked to Nancy since she came up to him to offer condolences at

Edie's funeral last June. And in the two or more years before that, their talks were only about the business of food delivery: a call from her the last Sunday of every month to reassure him that there would be dinners waiting on the front porch. He thanked her, she dismissed his thanks, he thanked her again, they hung up. Every so often he and Edie would send her a gift—he remembered placemats, a fancy bell-pull Edie bought on a trip to France that sat in its original packing for years. In all that time, when worry touched most things he said, Nancy's voice remained upbeat, confident, in a way he never remembered her being as a teenager, or in his parent-teacher conferences when he taught her twin boys. Her voice now, at his front door, haunted Will for days afterwards, the strain and ache of it like a piece of wayward chalk on a blackboard.

AFTERWORD

WE CREATED PAPER ANGEL PRESS AS AN ACT OF REBELLION. Rebellion against generic rejection letters that provide no useful explanation as why a story was rejected. Rebellion against publishing schedules that more often than not make authors wait months — if not *years* — before they see their book in available for sale. Rebellion against author royalties paid in single-digit percentages.

As authors ourselves, we frequently find ourselves frustrated and dismayed at the callous disregard with which the major publishers treat aspiring writers.

“Publishing is a *business*,” they remind us. We understand that, and we believe that many writers understand that. It is, however, a small comfort to an author who wants to understand why their manuscript was rejected or, if their manuscript is accepted, why they will only earn barely more than a dime — and often far less than a quarter — for each copy sold of a paperback edition that sells for \$7.99.

Paper Angel Press is our solution to those problems. We view our authors as collaborators in the creative and promotional process

Afterword

that culminates in the publication of their work. Should we reject a manuscript, we will let the author know the reasons why. Once an author has delivered their final manuscript to us, our goal is to have their book available for sale within two months. We involve the author with — and expect them to participate in — the development of the promotional activities that support the release of their book. We pay our authors based a royalty scale that reflects this partnership.

We also understand that many authors are not full-time writers. They must balance their writing time with the demands of their jobs, families, and other commitments. They might also not have the talent (or time) to become experts in marketing and promotion. We are here to provide them with support in those areas.

In our mission statement, we commit to our authors:

TO BRING NEW WORKS OF FICTION AND ART TO LIGHT.

TO GIVE PEOPLE A CHANCE TO REALIZE THEIR DREAMS.

Within these pages you will find samples from our collaborations with our authors. They have created new worlds for all of us to explore and enjoy. When these brief excursions into their worlds capture your imagination, check out their complete tales and experience the entire adventure they offer.

If you have worlds inside you waiting to be shared, send us your stories. Let us help you bring them to life for others to experience.

PUBLISHING WITH PAPER ANGEL PRESS

WE ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR NEW STORIES TO TELL. Let us help you bring yours out into the world for others to enjoy.

Here are some basic guidelines that will help make all our lives easier.

MANUSCRIPT FORMATS

- Send us your complete, finished manuscripts in digital format. It makes the whole process faster and less expensive if we don't have to mail copies of your manuscript back and forth.
- Please use a standard book manuscript format when you submit your book to us. If you're not sure what one is, there's a good source for one linked from our website and you can also find them many other places online.
- Please submit the complete manuscript in .DOCX, .RTF, or .ODT format to *submissions@paperangelpress.com*.

If you want bonus points, also attach a .MOBI file (that will help our editorial team be able to read it faster).

- Include the following in your cover letter/email:
 - Title of your book
 - Your real name
 - Your physical mail address
 - Your email address
 - Genre
 - Approximate word count
 - Synopsis

NON-FICTION SUBMISSIONS

Due to the different requirements around non-fiction books, we would prefer to see a proposal before you send us your final manuscript. If you need a template to work from, we have some sample proposals available on our website you can use.

SUBMISSION DEADLINES

We generally accept submissions January through October. We will usually try to acknowledge receipt of your manuscript within 72 hours. We'll also try to let you know whether or not we're interested in working with you to publish your book within 90 days after that. Both of these periods may vary, though, depending on the number of manuscripts we've received during that time.

WHAT KIND OF BOOKS DO YOU ACCEPT?

We're pretty much open to everything and anything. We're not about pushing any particular social or political agendas. We're here to help you get your book published. That said, we are most interested in:

- general or literary fiction
- mysteries
- historical fiction

Publishing with Paper Angel Press

If your submission is:

- science fiction or fantasy: please submit your story to our *Water Dragon Publishing* imprint.
- non-fiction or poetry: please submit your work to our *Unruly Voices* imprint.

If you have a story that doesn't fit into one of these categories, and believe that there's a market for it, let's see if it's something that we might be able to get excited about as well.

CONTACTING US

For more information, and additional submission guidelines, please visit the Submissions page on our website at paperangelpress.com/submissions or send us an email at submissions@paperangelpress.com.

