

# STILL LIFE



*Paul Skenazy*





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PAUL SKENAZY

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Published by Paper Angel Press  
*paperangelpress.com*

SAMPLE CHAPTER

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

When his wife Edie dies, Will Moran, a high school history teacher, abandons all he used to be, and do, to paint still life canvases of rocks and driftwood on the walls of his house. He avoids friends, gives away his furniture, and wanders the streets of his small coastal town late into the night. He eavesdrops on neighbors, dips into garbage cans, and fills his home with rocks he collects from local beaches.

One night he happens on the home of a former student from decades ago, Nancy, and returns regularly to watch her while she reads and sips wine. Nancy's son, Jess, also once a student of Will's, suddenly appears at Will's side, explaining that he also watches his mother from afar, worried about her. Will and Jess form an unstated compact to walk together, until Jess disappears for a week.



# 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

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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.

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

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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.”

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“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?”

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“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.

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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

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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.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Skenazy grew up in Chicago and studied at the University of Chicago and Stanford University. He taught literature and writing for thirty-five years at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His nonfiction works include a book on James M. Cain, a collection of essays on place in San Francisco literature, and a selection of interviews with Maxine Hong Kingston. He has published more than three hundred reviews of fiction and nonfiction for newspapers and magazines nationwide, and was twice nominated for the National Book Critics Circle award for reviewing. For a dozen years, he was a mystery review columnist for the *Washington Post*.

His short novel *Temper CA* (2019) won the Miami University Press Novella Contest. He revised and edited *La Mollie and the King of Tears* (1996), a posthumous novel by Arturo Islas, and his autobiographical piece on Chicago and Saul Bellow was a “Notable” essay in *The Best American Essays, 2015*. Stories and essays have recently appeared in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in Santa Cruz, California, with his wife, the poet Farnaz Fatemi.



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.

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Author photograph by Shelby Graham