Outside In

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We couldn't be more proud to report that, in our first year, we have had visitors from all of the following countries: Afghanistan, Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Aruba, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, France, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guatemala, Guernsey, Haiti, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Isle of Man, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Libya, Luxembourg, Macedonia, the Former Yugoslav Republic, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Moldova, Monaco, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Netherlands, Netherlands Antilles, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Réunion, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Syrian Arab Republic, Taiwan, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United Republic of Tanzania, United States, Uruguay, Venezuela, Viet Nam, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

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Editor's Note

Take Issue With Issue Eleven

(Really, you can now download our collection and take it all around!)

I have been going through a phase lately that involves a lot of sitting on my couch looking at old photos of myself on foreign trains, watching films I made of my fellow Greyhound bus passengers, and wondering how someone so outgoing just a year ago could suddenly be satisfied with the weekly social interaction that comes from visiting Burger 101 for Bacon Wednesday.

The answer, I think, is that life comes in phases, and that we seek substitutions when the situations we find ourselves in alter their offerings. Sometimes, we have the energy and opportunity to chat up the guy, sitting greasily beside us on a cross-country Greyhound, who just got out of prison and now works in a circus. Sometimes, we're good with a smile from the burger guy. Each kind of being can serve us differently, but for now, I'd like to focus on some of the benefits of unabashed openness.

My current substitute for social curiosity, I suppose, is that the editors of *Outside In* and I ask for stories in a formal way; this month, we have received a remarkable collection of global stories from Colombia, Germany, Japan, China, New Guinea, Greece, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Laos, India, Argentina, and from multiple locations within the United States. Having taken in the thirty-two different experiences shared within the pages of Issue Eleven, I am enriched. From looking at each story alone, and from my own understanding of the narrative of the collection as a whole, I am able to unravel just a bit more in my attempt to get this whole humanity thing sorted.

It is my sincere hope that the stories we share here can offer you an insight or two (or thirty-two) into the ways in which we all connect, but more than that, I hope it will inspire you to act on the inner nudge it might take to ask someone you come upon about him/herself in a more casual way, or to share a bit of your own tale.

Even if you're not running into the sort of folks who are obviously intriguing, is there not something to be learned from each kind of character we come across? Add a new friend to your routine; no matter how ordinary your life might seem, wouldn't it be nice to understand a bit more about the girl who makes your daily latte, the bus driver who delivers you on your daily routes, or the guy who brings you Bacon Wednesdays?

Get out there, tigers. Know people.

With Gratitude,
Brandi Dawn Henderson
Editor-in-Chief

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Nonfiction

Editor Brandi Dawn Henderson

Autumn's Daisy Bell

Corinna Cook

Autumn where I live in Alaska comes early and summer where my grandfather is dying in the midwest stays late. The dark air of the morning is cold on my neck when I walk away from my dog, my work, and the hills' turning colors. I leave these in favor of an airplane idling on a paved corner of the valley below.

In the minutes before takeoff the land grows streaked with stretched shadows of spruce trees. It is that first light of morning, light that shoots from the horizon along the flat earth like a stone skipping on water. Numbing my forehead against the window of row nineteen, I watch this light. The flatness of the valley leaves space for dawn's momentum.

Some drop hefty obligations midstride to board airplanes like this one but the truth is my dog doesn't really need me. My work doesn't either. Still, I am hopeful that the forest's leaves will cease their turning when I leave, that without me the world will lose its purchase on autumn. I imagine my absence being dire to the birch trees, that their shift toward nakedness depends on my view of them from the porch. Leaves are always tumbling in feather pillow bursts these days. It is my practice to sit with the dog while leaves alight first here, then there. We watch the pockets of yellow flurries breathe like so many autumnal snowglobes, and I don't know about the dog but I am always willing myself into that globe, carol book in hand. Do those soft blizzards continue to swirl in globes without carolers?

You know, there are green pools sitting high in the mountains. There is snow all around them and they flame in the sun. Some of the highest mountains on earth bellow in the distance between the place where I live and the place where my grandfather is dying. But airplanes fly over them every day, at all hours.

I am on one such plane, watching the North American continent pass below. There is a lot of snow, and later on, there isn't any more. South.

What my grandfather does and does not understand becomes tangible with the shifting landscape: midday over the continent the mountains smooth to plains. Roads multiply, compartmentalize. I remember when he stopped understanding that I do not play music any more, that I've nestled in with tidelands and forests rather than chamber ensembles. My grandfather is not senile. But he is urban, from the generation that invented diet soft drinks, Barbie, and the hydrogen bomb. There is a prim decency to this land's patchwork and what does not make sense within it does not make sense to my grandfather.

When my grandfather stopped understanding that I listen but no longer play, I started lying about it. It's okay. Now if I tell him something about a Brahms sonata — and he knows when I mean the one in F minor for clarinet — he probably understands something of the isolation and clarity and exhilaration I have in mind. Even if they come from the edge of a subarctic sea somewhere, I may well have learned them first from Brahms. I don't know. So I'll mention the sonata and my career-oriented midwestern urban grandpa will nod, eyes closed, accessing what he can of puffins on barnacled rocks at precisely the pace that they begin to elude me.

The continent passes below and all day I watch the distance. It occurs to me that if I have traded music for space early on then he has done the opposite, and it also occurs to me that it is too facile a progression by which to chart this life, either mine or his.

Eventually the front exit of the airplane opens under orange outdoor lights and runway blinkers. The seatbelt signal has yet to ding but already steamed air hits. It hits hard, like a wet throw rug. It is night on the shores of Lake Michigan, ninety degrees, and my grandfather doesn't need me any more than autumn did.

This essay is the latest installment in my asking my grandfather to die. I have been asking as much for ten years.

Two memories: first, the pinecone I bring him from Madera Canyon that I hand him in his chair and which he sets down on the table next to his chair and which stays there on that table next to the chair. This chair is where he sits and that table is where he sets things. Once a year I come to him at his snowbird home in the Sonoran Desert and sit on the floor before him, shouting into his deafness and petting his little knees when he falls asleep sitting. The years pass. He is always here in this chair when I come to him, sheltered from the sun or the wind or the heat or the cold or whatever it is about the desert that ought to stay outside. Books on America's founding fathers move on and off the table by this chair where he sits, cycling in and out around the pinecone. The chair is leather, dark red.

And this one: the year he gives me his clarinet, saying that my tone is better than his, that his hands shake too much, that he won't play it any more. He clicks open the case on the guest room bed. Whether conscious of it or not, we inhale the minty smell of cork grease just once, but deeply, before handling the instrument. Then we scrutinize the sections one at a time, letting the desert light slant beneath each keypad and tapping the keys to test their tiny springs, noting the adjustments I must ask for at the shop.

The day he passes his instrument on to me, he draws a clear line between mortality and

immortality. Music will continue. He will not. I don't want to take his clarinet, I don't want to learn the feel of a different instrument, and I don't want ghosts to trouble my own playing. But the symbolism of his gift restores my hope: he is carving out a crescent of space between him and his life. He was never sent to fight the war he wanted to fight and has been unhappy with the life he took up since. A widening distance between him and this life of his — this is what I want for him. I want a buoyancy to find him as he draws nearer to death; I want his white-knuckled grip on the world to loosen.

I find a promise of freshness on this day, a shedding, an exfoliation, a preparation for the journey. But it will still be another seven or eight plodding years until he starts to die, and even then, it will just be a start.

The stairs are rigged with alarms. I take the elevator. Black ladies lounging around in their busily patterned scrubs greet me with stunning accents on the fourth floor of the building in which my grandfather is supposed to die. We know who *you* are!, they sing out to me. We know who *you* are, he's *waiting* for you, he *said* you were coming! No one stands up; they just point. Everyone is awash in grins and sweat from the humid night. *Right* down there, end of the hall honey, mm-hm!

Four days ago I insisted that the telephone be handed to my grandfather. Four days ago I insisted on trying to talk with him. Four days ago the nurse insisted that due to his deafness he could not use a telephone but propped it into his pillow anyway. Four days ago his little brittle voice fell through the phone lines and satellite dishes into my sodden heart: Is it you? I shouted that it was. Then I shouted to him that I was coming to him and he said What and I told him again I was coming to him and he said I can't hear so well anymore. He said I miss you. That was where I slipped. He asked if I could come to him and my sodden heart fell out of my chest into the dirt at my feet and I shouted Yes—just one word for him to try to make out, uncluttered with other syllables, one word, I shouted to him Yes and his little voice croaked What? He said I can't hear so well anymore. The air moved, a flurry of golden leaves lifted off the birch branches, and I shouted something else, a last resort, the three words of final necessity. He said What and my tears were hot and got in the way of my voice and I kicked my stupid sodden heart laying there in the dirt and shouted again into the telephone while leaves papered the ground. Then, I love you, too, he answered.

I walk everywhere here. The sidewalks are lined on both sides by identical bars of clipped grass and huge, evenly spaced deciduous trees whose leaves won't turn as the birches' at home for perhaps another month or two. I walk everywhere sort of hating it and sort of in awe. Some large churches and homes are made of brick, not logs, and they are not flanked by mounds of homesteading or construction junk; instead, ivy climbs certain walls

with a civilized, intellectual cachet. Where do such people stack their old tires?

As I walk from my grandfather's house where he isn't to the care facility where he is, I yank flowers out of people's flowerbeds. The goal: a sweaty fistful of stems. A bouquet. I yank people's flowers up and follow young professionals down impeccably landscaped suburban sidewalks. Off to work. The men are very clean shaven and their bottoms are flat. Fresh newspapers protrude from shoulderbags; this generation has forsaken the briefcase. Elderly women in nightgowns stand on front lawns in their slippers holding the leashes of lapdogs more elderly than they. When their backs are turned I yank their flowers, which I will put into glasses of water, and line up neatly for use as a barricade against the blank black screen of the television sitting before my grandfather's bed in the room on the fourth floor of the building in which he is supposed to die. I walk everywhere here where it is too hot and humid for young professionals to wear suitcoats. I walk with yanked flowers thinking of the room on the fourth floor, stepping aside as a grandmother in curlers stoops to pick up the dropped end of her pug's leash.

He lets me read to him and he joins in at moments because he knows these words inside out and later his eyes close and I keep reading and later still his eyes open and I hear the melody of my performance and for a while, he does again too. He smiles at all the moments in which he has always smiled, and when it is finished he says to me There is a genius in that writing.

He is right. We are reading *The House at Pooh Corner*.

Who is E.H. Shepherd, he prompts. It is not a question.

I could cry. But I swallow that thing I call my sodden heart and hold to our script. He did the decorations, I answer.

We have many such choreographed conversations and exchanges. It is a patterned sparring, with space for improvisation but always fixing us on common ground. Members of my family meet up with verbal repetition, with established stories.

Decorations by E.H. Shepherd. The recognition creases my grandfather's face and pulls the thread from the seam of me. Already it is gone, but I witnessed his half instant of relaxation. His brush with peace.

Sometimes ritual means, what we have always done is what is dearest.

It is important that we do what we have always done.

Un-hinged. Dis-tracted. Be-wildered. This hot morning, yanked flowers in hand, getting lost on Maple Street which turns where it oughtn't, the hot wind blowing in my yellow dress, playing my skirt more vigorously than is strictly decent, how strongly compelled I feel to keep smoothing it down despite having my hands full of flowers, and finally resolving just to trust the yellow dress to be clothing and to clothe me, seeing as that I can't manage the flowers properly and mind my modesty and the former being so much more dear. I will arrive on the fourth floor flustered, and change into pants. Humid heat be damned.

No one visits him on the shores of Lake Michigan in the summer when they could visit him in the Sonoran Desert during the winter, but now he will not be returning to the desert. I have seen him in the Sonoran Desert nine years in a row, the most recent ones ringing with the sound of the bassoon, stereo turned to full volume out of objection to his encroaching deafness. In the end, after seventy-odd years of clarinet playing, my grandfather was spellbound by quintets and concertos that featured a more droning sound, a more viscous timbre, edges almost imperceptibly dulled next to the crispness of his own instrument. I would marvel at the utterly un-Alaskan ocotillo and barrel cactus through the window, my grandfather would drift in and out of his catnaps, and we would pepper the seconds of silence between blasting bassoon pieces with murmurs of musical commentary.

But I did not go to the Sonoran Desert last year and now I have had to come to him on the shores of Lake Michigan. There are no roadrunners here. No shrieking quail or sandcolored bunnies. Just as many tanned men in white visors, though.

Having avoided the midwest since my childhood, I have only fractured memories of this place near the lake. His house. The music stand, listening to him play clarinet in the basement, my urge to crawl into his lap while he played, the Barbie clothes my grandmother sewed. The sting in my spirit when he didn't want me in his lap near the clarinet. Is the sewing machine memory from the basement, too? Now that I'm here, the sewing room is obviously upstairs. I remember the music was surprisingly loud and clear. I had never, never seen myself as a hindrance, an encumbrance, an annoyance, until just then in the basement when he shrugged me away from his lap. My own redundancy was a sudden piece of self-knowledge that came with the same clarity and volume of his performance. Turning slowly on the carpet, trying to steady the placement of that day in my mind, I can't get the memory of those handmade barbie clothes out of the basement.

But I also can't separate them from the sewing machine.

My grandfather stares at the menu dropped into his hands. He reads it, I think. There are always two choices here: two choices for a starter. Two choices for an entrée. Two choices for dessert. The choices are printed up on a hard-back orange-trimmed menu every day of the week.

Marmite, he finally says, excruciating American accent unveiled. *Marmite*. What is that.

He may be joking. Hard to tell. Poker-faced bilingual humor is common currency with us, but he's not exactly at the top of his game.

Either way it's my turn, so, *Marmite*! Uh—pot, soup pot! Cauldron, throw it in and stir it up. Like witches, *les sorcières autours de la marmite*, you know? I keep making cupping motions with my hands, hoping he'll wink or something.

No recognition. He doesn't speak French anyway. I do. The game is that he prompts me and then takes pride in my fluency, but today he looks blank. What is *marmite*, he says again.

A nurse overhears and interjects. She explains that it is like a soup pot. He understands it better from her.

The last year I make a pilgrimage to my grandfather in the Sonoran Desert he is sitting on the metallic mesh of an outdoor chair. We occupy one end of a banquet-inspired picnic table in a tent filled with patio furniture. The space is busy but slow, thick with the seared smell of burgers. Noise echoes too jovially for my grandfather to hear through it. He cannot participate. He labors over each bite of hamburger anyway.

Then someone in a crowded group adjacent to us rises and plucks an empty chair from the unoccupied, far end of our table. He turns it a simple one hundred eighty degrees, from our table to his, perhaps making space for another of his brood to join in the banter.

A self-righteous, chauvinistic sense of decorum takes its loathsome place in my grandfather's expression. He wipes his wooden mouth. He grasps the metal arms of his chair and manages to rise from his seat. The skin of his hands is only a residual sheen on those white knuckles. It takes an eternity for him to shuffle down the length of the table but

an eternity passes and he takes back the chair. The effort astounds. He can barely walk, hasn't the vigor to converse, but sheer will coupled with the malevolent strength of his grip on the chair suffices for the task.

It is lucky that he is too weak to address the group, lucky he hasn't the force to spit his damning words and gestures. He shuffles the ten-mile stretch back to his seat, plunks down, and exhales.

Part of growing up in this family means learning to apologize for my grandfather's behavior. Part of growing up means rising from the table to follow this evening's shaking waitress. Part of growing up means learning to express a respectful sympathy to the visitor my grandfather has just driven into a state of hiccoughing sobs. And so, flushed not from the Sonoran Desert sun but from humiliation, I move to apologize. My brow is wadded like a discarded tissue and I open my mouth but the man who had taken the chair is already interrupting me, already laughing off my grandfather's behavior, already ushering me back toward my own burger, already off to find a different chair for his growing circle.

My spirit is limp. My disbelief, palpable. Someone has interpreted my grandfather's behavior as senility. Finally. He is so frail that someone waved him off as batty.

While I know my grandfather was sincerely hostile, for he always has been, the unknown man's utterly misguided understanding breaks a dam in me. Such is the force of relief. Through it, I catch sight of the fragility nesting in my grandfather.

My clearest memories involving my grandfather are ones like this, ones in which I am overtaken with relief. The surge strips me to my rawest; in these moments I realize the extent of my clenching, my bracing against the condescension, the disdain, the isolation, the grief, the pity.

On the fourth floor I am rooting around for water glasses, smiling broadly to the nurses who direct me to the cafeteria, putting clumps of flowers into three glasses of water and then setting them one by one on the shelf in front of the television screen and him saying again and again Beautiful flowers while he is dressed.

I am fussing over the flowers listing in water glasses and the nurse is fussing over her patient who is distracted by the flowers. She is pretending I am not there and I am pretending the same of her, but it is not out of antagonism. A tall Liberian woman dressing

my grandfather gently and surely, like a doll: this is not real. She knows.

Then, when she is ready to leave us: Would you like your shoes on, Mr. Cook.

Yes, he says.

A pause while she loosens the laces. Then he points at one set of toes. That one goes on this foot, he tells her.

And the nurse laughs, she actually laughs. This frail old man so slow to die in the heat of summer on the shores of Lake Michigan makes the nurse guffaw.

She places the shoes on feet that no longer walk and ties white bows.

Would you like to lay down or stay sitting, Mr. Cook?

I'm good at laying down.

It is my work to radiate. It is my work to radiate, and it is his work to know that a few flowers tilting in glasses of water are beautiful. He is doing his work better than I am doing mine.

His hand on his forehead, a difficult frowning: I wish he would sleep. He persists in frowning, one shaky hand cupping his forehead, eyes fixed on something that is not in this room. I try to read while his hand shakes through its grip on his forehead but can't and finally lean in to ask what I know he will not hear. How does your head feel? He turns his face toward me with the mild confusion of broken concentration and says What and I ask him again. He straightens his head on the pillow. He blinks slowly, but has lost sight of whatever it was he had been watching a moment before.

It feels like it needs me to hold it, he finally answers.

As of this writing, my grandfather is still on the fourth floor of the building in which he is supposed to die. His strength is all but gone. What remains of it churns solely in his hands, in that grip.

Destitute, lost at sea: stepping in the gate and standing still for a moment with the planters in the courtyard. The smallness of outdoor music. Over past the picnic tables there is a pony-tailed girl playing a violin. A woman in blue strums a guitar. There is a music stand for the girl. But she either knows the songs or she is reading off the binder on the table because the music stand is empty. The three-part throb collapses the space in my ribcage before the words find me, but when they do, I hear a bicycle built for two and I am shipwrecked.

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do

I'm half crazy all for the love of you

They play for a crooked shell of a woman who's bundled in a blanket despite the heat of the day and has been wheeled outside in a reclining bed. A curved airline pillow keeps her head somewhat propped up and someone has placed her huge glasses onto her face. She is all forehead.

It won't be a stylish marriage

I can't afford a carriage

A white-haired man in a polo shirt is there too. He is hard to see at first because he sits next to the contorted woman in the reclining bed, one arm around her shoulders and leaning in as closely as can be, singing right into her eyes. The trio's performance is fully for her, fully expressive of what overflows between humans. The man's voice doesn't even shake: he pours himself out. Into her. I listen, nearing the eventual end of my own dogged, misfiring efforts to achieve half as much with my grandfather.

But you'd look sweet

Upon the seat

Of a bicycle built for two

Sometimes the trio stops to talk about what song comes next. Sometimes the man gives the other two directions; You come in here, you change chords there. Then they do another. And another. My grandfather is alone in a room on the fourth floor where he is

supposed to die and outside in the courtyard small waltzes are offered, and disappear, over and over into the foliage overhead. At one point, the man in the polo shirt conducts Home On the Range with his free arm, milking the fermatas. “Milk the fermata” — that is something you hear in rehearsal; all conductors say it. It means don’t just hold the note, nurse it.

Corinna Cook holds a B.A. from Pomona College and an M.A. in Northern Studies from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her nonfiction appears in Flyway *and is forthcoming in* Alaska Quarterly Review.

How to Get Back to the John Muir Trail

Chris Tarry

I'm sitting in my bathroom fully clothed, toilet seat down, staring at the wall. I've managed to escape the whirlwind of activity in the kitchen; my eighteen-month-old daughter is throwing her food at the cat and I can hear my wife pleading with her to stop. I've had my daughter all day – I'm the stay-at-home dad, the guy who mashes the peas and slices the strawberries into bite sized chunks. I can change a diaper in two seconds flat. I am a Sippy Cup master. There's a picture of my friend Jon and me on the bathroom wall. We're standing on a snow-covered rock; he's got one hiking pole raised triumphantly in the air, and I'm doing the same with a mitten-clad fist. Clouds leak out behind us, and we're holding each other so we don't fall. We're both smiling, but you can sense the cold. Jon has his jacket open and the wind is taking the edges of it and exposing the other three layers he has on underneath. I've got on a down jacket that looks like the kind of thing worn on Everest. My face is barely visible under a toque, snow goggles, and synched-up hood. I look at this picture every day. It could be on the cover of *Outside* magazine.

I fancied myself quite the outdoorsman for a while there, before the baby, and the diapers, and the sleepless nights. And when I look at this picture I see a guy I barely recognize: fifteen pounds lighter, muscles on muscles, a well-oiled machine.

Three years ago, loaded down with the best hiking gear money could buy, Jon and I caught a red-eye from New York to Fresno with a connection in Denver. In our backpacks were titanium pots, ultralight tents, carbon fiber hiking poles, foldable Sporks, bear canisters, and toilet paper that dissolved in the woods. We'd weighed everything with a digital scale. Both of our packs weighed a lean thirty-one pounds. We'd had packing conversations like this:

Me: One pair of underwear or two?

Jon: How much does underwear weigh?

Me: .3 ounces.

Jon: One pair should be enough.

We were off to hike the John Muir Trail in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, one of the most

technically challenging hikes in North America. The trail runs from the Yosemite Valley in northern California, to the summit of Mt. Whitney (at 14,505 ft. the tallest peak in the lower forty-eight) in the south. The JMT is two hundred and twenty-one miles, end-to-end. I'd been working out every day for eight months because I knew what was coming. We'd attempted the trail once before, and were returning to finish the job.

A record-setting pace for completing the JMT is about seven days. On our first attempt, we tried for eleven. After cranking out seventy miles in two days, we were already behind schedule when my ankle gave out. I was forced limping from the bush and, Jon, never one to leave his hiking partner behind, decided to see me to safety. We shook hands and promised we'd be back the following year.

And so here we were, a year later, spending the night at a Holiday Inn Express in Fresno. We planned on catching a ride the next morning into the backcountry from a guy named Ricky, a college friend of my wife's. When I'd called him from New York to arrange the ride, Ricky spent an hour on the phone telling me about his fear of cellphones. We offered him $200 for the lift.

Ricky over the phone: Dude! I would totally have done it for free. I might even come with you!

Me, not sure what to say: Um, okay.

Jon and I were a perfectly matched hiking team. We weren't particularly close friends; he was the husband of a friend of my wife's, the type of acquaintance that comes pre-packaged with marriage. We'd become hiking buddies through necessity, two lonely outdoor enthusiasts surrounded by New York City concrete, not a place that bred hikers naturally. Over the course of three summers, we'd summited nearly every peak in the Catskills and completed large sections of the Appalachian Trail, the Long Trail, and all two hundred miles of New York City's closest state park, Harriman.

Jon worked on Wall Street and I worked as a professional musician. We weren't what you'd call financial equals. Jon made in a week what I made in two years. He was a nine-to-five man. I was too, but on the PM side. We shouldn't have worked, but we did. At our peak, we could crank out thirty-five miles of hiking in a single day.

What we lacked in closeness, we made up for in well-matched skill sets. Jon could practically make a spreadsheet predict the future, handy when calculating calorie intakes, gear weight, and precision scheduling. I had years of experience booking tours with

disorganized musicians; logistics were second nature to me. I could land a resupply bucket in the middle of a national park with freighting precision.

Jon and I were taking bets on whether Ricky would show, and if he did, whether he'd have a vehicle capable of driving us into Vermillion Valley Resort, the deepest backcountry resort accessible by car in North America. It was where we'd left the trail the year before.

For nearly its entire length the John Muir trail rarely dips below 8,000 feet. At Vermillion Valley Resort, the closest the trail comes to civilization, it pushes 10,000. The road in is a notorious mix of half road and half washed-out cliff faces. Ricky assured me over the phone that his car could make it, and when he pulled up two hours late, we were happy to see it was a Subaru, most likely four-wheel drive. The windows were open and the Grateful Dead was blasting from the car stereo.

Ricky: Hey, Dudes! Wanna grab some nosh before hitting the road?

Jon: How about we stop somewhere along the way?

Ricky: Groovy!

Jon handed Ricky the spreadsheet he'd prepared with our schedule. Ricky looked at it, rolled it around in his hands, turned it over and checked the other side as if searching for the key that might help him decipher it.

Ricky: Are these dates and times?

We wanted to get to Vermillion Valley as early as possible, so we could catch the ferry service (provided by the resort) across Edison Lake. Once there, it was a three-mile grind to the trail junction with the JMT, where we would set up camp and get an early start the next morning.

Ricky: Toss your gear in the back next to mine.

I collected our packs and pulled opened the hatchback. Inside was a burlap rucksack that looked like it had seen action in Nam. Our backpacks looked like Space Shuttle supplies

next to Ricky's.

Me to Ricky: You still planning on coming?

Ricky: Gonna decide when we get up there, Dude. I'm not much of a planner.

If you counted our first attempt, Jon and I had been preparing for this hike for two years, and Ricky was going to decide that day. I had the Parks Service on speed dial, Ricky didn't own a phone. Jon and I packed personal GPS locators, titanium multi-tools, and a rented satellite phone. During our original conversation, Ricky had told me that titanium made him nervous.

Me to Jon while Ricky walks away and lights up a joint: Who hikes the JMT with no preparation?

Jon: Maybe he'll smoke enough pot on the way up that he'll forget he wanted to come.

We stopped for Mexican food outside Shaver Lake, about halfway to Vermillion Valley Resort. During lunch, Ricky filled us in on his life as a water treatment specialist, something Jon and I were surprised sounded so legitimate.

Ricky: I've been all through these mountains. I know more about the water ecosystems in this area than just about anyone. This is some good Mexican, you guys buying?

When we had abandoned our attempt at the JMT the previous year, we'd waited three days for a ride from the Vermillion Valley Resort. We knew the rarity of a guy like Ricky, someone with the lifestyle that could accommodate an eight-hour round trip into the backcountry just because. We paid for lunch, filled up his car, and pushed on. We were only halfway up the mountain and we had already dropped two hundred dollars on Ricky's ride, lunch, and gas.

After another forty miles the road became a mix of single lane gravel and tree roots. Bears darted out in front of the car as Ricky navigated the sliver-thin road. He unrolled the windows and cranked Van Halen.

Ricky: I bet the bears love this!

Me: Are we going the right way?

Jon: Maybe we should check the map.

A delivery truck lumbered down the road toward us, we had to pull over so it could get by. Ricky slid the car to the side of the road and the three of us got out and admired the view.

Jon to all of us: Check out how close the car is to the edge!

Ricky: Whoa, baby. That *is* close.

Ricky's wheel was three inches from a vertical drop of a few thousand feet.

Me: A guardrail would be nice.

Ricky: Amen to that, Brother.

When Jon and I had taken this road the year before, it had been early in the morning, before the sun had come out. We'd caught a ride from the resort's chain-smoking cook, and slept, cramped in the back of a smoke-filled jeep. We had missed the depth of the beauty that was now staring back at us.

Ricky on the beauty: This is why we're here!

Me: Here now? Or as in alive?

Ricky: Both!

We got back in the car, cranked Van Halen and Ricky leaned on the horn.

Ricky: This is part of the trip you're going to remember, trust me!

We pulled into the parking lot of the VVR. The trail of dust that had followed us up the mountain swept over the car as we parked. Ricky got out and slapped the hood.

Ricky to the Subaru: Good job, Betsy.

It felt as if we'd been there yesterday. The smell of dry pine needles was everywhere; I could taste them in the back of my throat. It had been a bad year for rain at the VVR. It felt like you could stare at a tree, think the word *Fire!*, and the whole place would go up. There were groups of hikers sitting at picnic tables, a few of them drinking the one free beer the VVR promised to anyone leaving the trail. Franny and Gibson, two camp dogs I recognized from the year before, were sleeping under a dusty pine tree.

Jon to me: I feel like a VVR veteran.

Me: Those dogs haven't moved in a year.

Injured hikers had written their names on a chalkboard nailed to the resorts screen door. There were fifteen people waiting for a ride off the mountain. We could see Ricky's financial wheels turning as he surveyed the list. He placed his name on the "ride" side and hadn't put down the chalk when ten people hobbled up offering him $200 each for a lift into Fresno.

Ricky to the crowd, hands in the air like Jesus: I'm still not sure I'm going back to town, everyone. I might join my bros here for a few days on the trail. I'll let you know.

Me to Jon: Dig Ricky negotiating options.

The crowd dispersed and Jon and I went to buy ferry tickets. The next boat across the lake was in an hour, so the three of us bought beers and joined the hikers at the picnic tables.

Trish from Baton Rouge was taking a few days rest at the VVR, investing in a hot shower and a good meal before continuing down the JMT. She had planned on twenty-six days but worried she was already behind schedule. David from Vegas had his leg up on a stump next to the picnic table. He had pulled something coming down Donohue Pass and was eyeing Ricky over the top of his beer. Shelly and Francine were two attractive college girls from Boston, they were hiking the trail as a graduation gift to themselves. Francine

had twisted her ankle walking through Red's Meadow and the two of them had been at the VVR for three days waiting for a ride.

Me to Shelly and Francine: Same thing happened to me last year. You could be stuck in worse places.

Shelly to me: You got that right, this is amazing.

We all sat around and nursed our beers. Jon pulled out a map and started memorizing our route to the trailhead.

Me to Ricky: So, you coming?

Ricky: I think so. Maybe.

He polished off his beer and told the table he was going down to look at the lake, Shelly and Francine stood up and followed him. Jon and I got busy doing a last check of our gear. We hung our packs on a rusty hook attached to a scale and weighed them.

Jon: I wonder if we need rain pants?

Me: Probably not.

We dug into our packs, pulled out .5 ounces worth of rain pants, and dropped them in the Hiker Donation Box.

When the ferry pulled in, there was no sign of Ricky. More injured hikers got off and made their way up the hill toward the resort. Jon and I loaded our gear into the boat and waited. Eventually, I looked toward the lakeshore and spotted Ricky. He was sitting in the sand with Shelly and Francine, all three had beers, and the girls were leaning in real close passing a joint. Ricky spotted us and gave a wave.

Ricky yelling to us: I think I'm gonna stay, Dudes!

Jon to me: Looks like someone found their ride.

We smiled, waved, and hopped into the boat. Four other hikers got in behind us and the ferry pushed off. I looked toward the beach as we pulled away, Ricky was dancing in the sand and singing Van Halen; the girls were clapping along.

When we reached the other side of the lake, Jon and I suited up. The packs were the heaviest they'd be for the entire trip. It would be six days until we reached our next resupply; I'd arranged to have it carried in on horseback. We hiked the three miles to the trail junction and set up camp.

Jon next to the fire: What do you think Ricky's up to?

Me: Living moment to moment.

The next day, we pushed on. Over Bear Ridge, up Muir pass and beyond, slower this time. It took us thirteen days to finish, if you include the two days from the previous year.

I know I was there. I have the pictures to prove it: Jon and me on the top of Mt. Whitney; my wife, Michelle, hugging me as we walked from the woods reeking like animals; eating burgers and drinking a victory beer in Whitney Portal, the closest town to the end of the trail.

I remember Ricky. I remember the summit of Whitney and climbing into the car Michelle and her parents had driven up from L.A. But I don't remember much of the hundreds of miles in between. Those memories feel locked in the picture that hangs in my bathroom.

Sometimes I sneak in there even when I don't have to go. A few minutes to myself from the hectic family life that has all but ended my hiking career. I'll close the door, sit on the toilet, and stare at the picture. I try to pull memories from the looks on our faces, but what I get are only glimpses. What comes back is Ricky, that feeling of what it might be like to shed responsibility. This is how I get back to the John Muir Trail now, three minutes alone in the bathroom. But that *is* me standing on top of that mountain. *I* did that. I found the strength to finish. And then somewhere I'm needed, there's work to be done, responsibility seeps in under the bathroom door in the form of a two-year-old's laugh. I stand up, grab hold of the door handle, and fling myself boldly back into the world. Daddy rejuvenated.

Daddy stronger than ever.

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Back to the Stone Age
C.B. Heinemann

As we sped past the black smear of industrial cities along Autobahn Two, the former German Democratic Republic seemed little more than a string of concrete eyesores drenched in a leak nobody ever bothered to repair. Gargantuan Stalin-era housing projects, with a tangle of corroding power lines and antennae over and around everything, stretched over the horizons. Badly maintained roads shambled in four directions where the tiny, dilapidated cars of eastern Europe chugged along through the rain, coughing out streams of smoke.

On tour with my musical partner Ian after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I felt like my guts had been shredded all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. The night before we left my wife told me that if I left she would start divorce proceedings before my plane left the runway. Pride, rage, and a long-cherished desire to jumpstart my music career hardened my resolve, and as I climbed into a cab trying to ignore her threats, her face was implacable as granite. I regretted leaving as soon as the plane left the ground, and couldn't focus because my mind was imprisoned at home. A thousand electrical shorts popped and burned inside my heart every moment.

As we drew closer to the Polish border, the countryside opened up and the cities fell behind us. Our rental car rattled along on a cobblestone section of highway that hadn't been repaired since Hitler was in charge, rousing my simmering headache to a boil. We had entered the sweeping Oberlausitz region, a land where the intense clarity of light combined with the rust and scarlet October leaves to present beautiful visual music to our senses. I could see the tops of a few spires peeking over the horizon. Then a city rose sedately into view. Towers and turrets sprang from walls perched on a bluff while sheer cliffs dropped to the Spree River where it wound around the base of the town on its journey across eastern Saxony. I roused myself from my brooding. "It looks like a fairytale city."

"Nobody back home has even heard of it, but I got the names of some people we'll be dealing with there. Keep an eye out for the Irish Green Island. Should be right in the center of town."

The Irish Green Island was indeed green, with the outside walls painted a bright olive green while the interior walls, ceiling, and carpet were a deep Kelly green. Brass railings and burnished walnut tables were arranged inside with geometric precision, while young women wearing black Guinness T-shirts rushed about, bringing trays of beer to the morning customers. We walked straight to the bar, which was festooned with a vast

collection of whiskeys displayed in glass cases. A short, plump young woman with curly blond hair, startling blue eyes, and a toothy smile greeted us. "*Ich heisse Anja*," she said as she reached over the bar and squeezed our hands.

Ian took some German in school and was thus our rather lame translator. After straining to understand Anja, he turned to me. "She wants to know what we want to eat and drink. It's free for us, since we're the band."

"But we don't play until tonight."

Anja helped us out in English. "Oh yes, for you Soren, the owner, says all free. Breakfast, coffee, beer, what you like."

"I was just wondering how people who supposedly have no money can afford to hang out here," said Ian as Anja rushed off with our order. "For that matter, with these gigs of ours, where does all that money come from?"

"That's a good question." I said. "Makes you wonder, eh? From all I've been able to gather, there's one obvious answer."

"What's that?"

"Stasi. Sure, these people look normal enough. Point is, they are. Half the people in East Germany were Stasi informers who got paid off before the Wall came down. And after, too. That's what I've heard, anyway. And this town was the center of the Stasi empire."

After breakfast we walked down the main street leading from the square to our hotel. The air was sharp and breezy as people strode along the cobbled streets--young people strolling in groups, older people carrying shopping bags, workers in blue overalls hurrying to wherever they were going with stubby cigarettes hanging from their lips. Pollution caked the facades of the buildings, and the soaring profile of towers gave Bautzen an air of abandoned elegance.

We checked in at the desk at our hotel, *Weisses Ross,* with a burly man who kept a squawking parakeet in a cage on the chair beside him, and wound through a labyrinth of gloomy hallways to our room. It had two beds covered with yellow bedspreads, a purple carpet so thin that shards of flooring showed through, and a table next to a smeary

window overlooking the street. The walls were cracked and patchy, and the ceiling--framed by pipes coated with layers of aged paint--had one bare lightbulb screwed into the center. The corners gaped with even larger cracks, and the center of the ceiling bulged ominously. Ian tapped at the plaster. “I wonder if this place still has listening devices.”

Later that afternoon, refreshed by sleep and hot showers, we returned to the square to set up the sound system. No wind disturbed the air, which was laced with that signature East German stink of sulphur. As we approached the Irish Green Island we could hear music and shouting explode from the windows. Inside, the blast of heat, cigarette smoke, and noise shoved me backwards. Ian laughed. “Not even four o’clock and the place is packed!”

A seething mass of grinning, laughing people had jammed themselves around the bar. Anja, washing glasses behind the far end of the bar, looked up and waved to us with her toothy smile. Another young woman, with short dark hair and a trim athletic figure, worked the beer taps.

I watched her movements with fascination. As she poured beer after beer from the variety of taps--putting aside some to settle, topping off others, slipping paper doilies around the stems, then lifting several full glasses at a time and placing them swiftly onto waiting trays--she kept up a running debate with the people clustered around the bar and had them laughing at her apparently droll comments. With sly, humorous eyes and a half-smile, she handled her customers with ease. Her skin was smooth as cream, and a sprig of hair fell over one eye when she leaned over to get a glass from under the bar.

At last she handed out the various beers and ales and hurried over to us with the half-smile still nudging her lips. I noticed a spray of freckles over her nose and cheekbones.

“*Zwei Guinness, bitte,*” said Ian, holding up his thumb and forefinger. “We’re the band for tonight.”

Ruth offered her hand and shook mine warmly. Her dark eyes abandoned their mocking expression and she pushed back the errant sprig of hair from her face as her smile softened. I felt severely aware of my thinning hair. As she returned to her taps, she turned and smiled again before getting back to work.

Ian lit a cigarette. “She likes you. This may be your chance to start a new life.”

“I’m a middle-aged Yank, and in case you’ve forgotten, I’m married.”

“In any case,” he said, blowing out a stream of smoke and raising his eyebrows, “there was so much chemistry between you that I nearly had to jump out of the way.”

“She was being polite.”

“Ah, see? Methinks you protest overmuch. Even now you can’t take your eyes off her, can you?”

I turned to him, embarrassed because he was right. “Don’t try to get me into any more trouble.”

Ruth appeared with two large mugs of Guinness, which she placed on coasters before us. After we thanked her, she blinked at us, then watched as I took my first sip. “*Schmeckt gut?* Is good?”

“*Ja, ja,”* I answered, stumbling over the simple German word.

She blinked at me twice with a smile, then ran back to her station.

Ian let out a low hum. “She does seem to be looking after her new American friend, doesn’t she? She gave you the special double blink. Somebody told me it’s a thing they do here in eastern Germany. It’s like saying ‘I like you, let’s be friends,’ something like that. But she gave you an extra one. She wants you, man.”

“I don’t know why you’re set on wrecking my life.” I had to admit to myself that I felt agitated by her attention. It wasn’t merely flattering; she was attractive and I found the subtle flirtation exciting. “You’re just trying to wind me up. When should we talk to this Soren guy, anyway? We still don’t know what time we play.”

We squirmed through the crowd toward the stage, which was set into one corner of a densely packed room separate from the bar area, and set up our speakers and plugged everything in. About twenty young people partied around us. Several cavorted drunkenly around a table, two couples lay half prone on a bench conducting oral examinations of one another’s tonsils, a few others shouted to friends, and all seemed intent on emptying as

many bottles of champagne as humanly possible.

One young woman with blond hair down to her waist stood up and revealed that beneath her, a man in his late thirties slouched in his outfit with a drunken grin. He had coarse dark hair, thick eyebrows, and was slender but powerfully built. His pale eyes surveyed the room. When his eye caught mine he jumped up with a shout, holding a champagne bottle aloft with one hand. With the other, he pinched the woman who had just rolled off his knee, then curled an arm around her waist and kissed her on the mouth before staggering over to us. He dropped an arm around Ian. “Hello Americans, my friends! I am Soren! You are the band! Eat, eat! Drink, drink!” He clutched my arm and looked into my face with pleading eyes. The hot scent of perspiration and wine radiated from his body. “You too! Eat, eat! Drink, drink!”

We left Soren to his friends, where he leapt onto a chair with a frothing bottle of champagne, howled, then guzzled from the bottle. Most of the champagne spurted onto his cheeks while his friends roared with laughter.

“If this is what it’s like in the afternoon,” Ian said, shaking his head, “you’ve got to wonder what it’ll be like tonight.”

Ruth appeared, wincing as she dodged the flailing limbs of her patrons, and presented us with two more beers. She squeezed my arm, and then ducked back into the crowd with her empty tray.

Ian leaned over my shoulder with a grin. “She’s got the hots for you, and when these East German girls get the hots for you, you’d better play ball.”

Many in the crowd began to dance to the taped music, including Soren, who grabbed another of his girlfriends, this one a shapely dark-haired girl in a shimmering white miniskirt. They danced together gingerly at first, then, as the music grew louder and more rhythmic, their movements became exaggerated. Soren thrust his hips aggressively in time to the music. Soon everyone was watching Soren and his friend, but the two were oblivious to everything around them. Soren closed his lips around hers and they remained that way, dancing and thrusting in a strange, lewd ballet.

Ian chuckled and glanced at his watch. “We’d better go to the hotel and get some dinner. Looks like it’ll be a long night.”

Soren lurched through the mass of people to the bar, returning triumphantly with another armload of orange-labeled Veuve Clicquot. As the music gained momentum, Soren leapt and clapped his hands. Moments later, in a moment of exuberant inebriation, he unzipped his fly and reached into the resulting gap to express his enthusiasm. His friends leapt up to coax him into pulling his zipper back up.

"That Soren is quite a specimen. He must have been some bigwig with the Stasi who got paid off big time after the Wall fell. Ruth isn't too happy with his antics."

I looked over to where Ian gestured and saw Ruth glaring at Soren. Soren spotted her too, and turned away.

Ruth wouldn't leave my thoughts for the rest of the day, and when we returned that evening for the gig, I saw her through the tangle of people. A thrill rippled through my body. She stood at the end of the bar and her eyes glowed like full harvest moons reaching out to envelope me in their light. Her skin was flushed and pink, and her chest heaved slightly when I caught her eye. A deep green silk blouse floated over her slender body, and a very short black skirt hugged her hips. Golden earrings flashed just above her shoulders, and her hair was radiant and full. She lowered her face and smiled at me. Conversation around us fell to a murmur. People between us parted for her. I was aware that they were watching, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from hers.

She moved close and smiled up into my face. Her emerald green eyes seemed enormous and surrounded me with warmth. A hint of oriental blossoms suffused the air as her body heat released the fragrance.

"Hello." Her face was expectant. Those nearby nudged each other. Ian hadn't been the only one to notice our mutual attraction, and gossip would fly through the town like a virus.

"Hello, Ruth. You look nice tonight. Really nice."

Her smile grew wider as she placed one hand on my arm. "I've been looking for you. Tonight, you play music, yes? I want to hear you. I'm not working this time." I could feel her breath on my throat.

Soren grabbed me from behind. "Come, play your music for the people!"

I pried my eyes from Ruth's with a mix of regret and relief and staggered through the crowd, my mind as disordered as my steps.

Ian handed me a beer from the stage. "Focus on one thing at a time and you'll get your grip. Just think about the song--*First Snow*. Key of D. Starts in waltz time, goes to four-four, then switches to A minor."

He started the first song, squeezing the pipes until they sang through the sound system. I stroked the pick over my first chord and flowed into the feeling of the music. It was so easy and instant that I laughed in spite of myself. The music became a time machine, and I recalled the feelings that first inspired the song. I plunged into the heart of the piece while the years dropped away like dried mud.

As I stand here in my life

I see my past cut as by a knife away from me

Now a memory

It's true that with every day

I think more about yesterday and not today

Or even tomorrow

As we ended I was stunned by the applause. We lashed into our second song, and this time Ian and I sang together. It was a song of defiance and I threw myself into it completely, belting out the words and moving my body to the beat.

Visions from the mind of greed

Choke the land and crush the seed

Who are the ones who sign us over to them?

An exuberant froth of joy rose within me. During my solo in the middle of the song, notes

soared from my fingers without any effort on my part. When the solo ended, the crowd erupted into cheers. I could hardly believe what was happening.

When we stopped to take a break, a group of young people in a booth near the stage waved us over. We crammed ourselves into their booth while they chattered at us in German, hoping eventually we'd catch on. Ruth appeared, her face aglow. "You were *fantastisch*," she gushed. "I can hardly believe. I think--thought, yes--you good before, but now I hear and, oh, it is very, *very* good!"

The people at our booth squeezed together and Ruth slid in beside me, half-sitting on my lap. The room throbbed with noise and body heat, cigarette smoke drifted into my face, and I couldn't understand a word of the conversation. In spite of that our hosts smiled and nodded at me, as frustrated as I that we couldn't communicate directly.

Ruth spoke with them then turned to me. "They would like to buy some, oh, I don't know what you call it. Little bottles."

"Little bottles? Of what?"

"It's like a game. You see."

Another waitress brought us a tray covered with tiny bottles of amber liquid. Ruth handed them around our table, and at her signal, we all beat the tops of the bottles on the tabletop.

"I've seen this before," said Ian. "It's a drinking game they play here. We're in for it now."

Ruth gave a shout and we all stopped. "*Fertig, los* . . ."

Everyone unscrewed their caps, then waited. Ruth said "*Ja,*" and we all put the top of the bottle between our teeth. At last, she raised her hand, and we threw back our heads and drained the sweet liquor. When we were done, Ruth arranged the empty bottles in the middle of the table.

"Good?" she asked with a sideways smile.

Ian poked my side. “I hope you think it’s good, because by the end of the night we’ll have these bottles stacked halfway up to the ceiling. Not much of a game, but they take their partying seriously.”

Ruth and the others fell into a discussion. I was happy enough to listen to the unfamiliar tongue, sip at my Guinness, and contemplate Ruth’s closeness. The sides of our thighs pressed together under the table and our shoulders touched. Neither of us moved to make more room for ourselves. I had always thought of German as a guttural language, but it had a mesmerizing lilt when spoken by a beautiful young woman. Her voice was as clear as a softly tapped bell.

Another round of little bottles arrived, and another, and we repeated the ritual.

Ruth slid lower on the bench and rested her head on my shoulder. Emboldened by drink, I stretched my arm over the back of the bench behind her and she snuggled closer. The warmth of her body calmed and excited me simultaneously. However, roiling beneath that erotic prickle was a sick feeling of guilt. Instead of letting Ruth know that I was married, I was lying to her by omission. It was wrong, and unfair to her, but I told myself that I was far from home and hadn’t yet crossed a line of no return.

As the night wore on alcohol tightened its grip. Ruth was deep in conversation with her friends while a smirking Ian argued with a young man glaring from behind a full beard and tweed suit. Ian winked at me. “This guy’s a nutcase. Wants to bring back Marxism. Thinks this pub is decadent. Of course he’s here anyway, drinking and hanging out.”

One of the other waitresses whispered to Ruth and she turned to me with a sharp intake of breath. “Anja had to leave so I must work. I’m sorry.” She blinked twice, squeezed my arm, and got up to hurry to the bar.

At last Ian and I stumbled out of the booth while the crowd encouraged us with loud cheers. Ian sang with eyes closed, his face a blazing red. I slammed into the chords and he responded with solos that nearly careened out of control. From that song we went directly into a Celtic boogie and the place was jumping. I alternated between pounding away at the guitar and barking out harmonies and was having a ball. When I looked over the crowd at Ruth, her face was radiant.

After our night was finished, I felt exhausted and exhilarated. I was doing what I loved most in the world, doing it in Europe, and the appreciation from people I had never met before gave me a high more heady than any drug could offer. For a few moments I forgot that my

marriage was hemorrhaging and allowed myself to wallow in that feeling. Warm and loose after so many beers, I followed Ruth to say goodnight. What really directed my steps was a desire to say something more, though I didn't have any idea what that might be. I allowed myself to be drawn to her when I knew I shouldn't. She was taking orders from a tableful of large men in dirty overalls, and turned to me. "You come tomorrow, for *Fruhstuck,* for breakfast?"

I hadn't thought about tomorrow. "We have to go to our next gigs. Do you work tomorrow, too?"

She groaned. *"Ja. Immer.* Always. So you will come back soon to Bautzen?"

"In about a week and a half."

"I look forward to seeing you again." Her eyes softened.

I felt a jolt of uncertainty. "I look forward to seeing you. I really do."

She blinked three times, shrugged, then gave me a huge smile as she rushed back to the bar.

We traveled the length and breadth of what was once the ultra-secretive German Democratic Republic, from the dry, red brick towns of the Mecklenburg plain, north to the free-spirited and windy Baltic ports, down through the soot-encrusted cities of Sachsen Anhalt, and into the dark forests of Thuringia, where tales of witches and goblins still whispered through remote valleys and half-timbered villages. The corpse of communism sprawled across the landscape in various forms; abandoned factories still stinking of chemical pollution, neglected roads, depressing hamlets so run down that they seemed about to crumble and return to dust. But even as the approach of winter stripped the world of color, the people we met dispersed any gloomy impressions. I couldn't understand how, during the Cold War, many in America could speak so glibly of "bombing them back to the stone age."

When at last we drove back to Bautzen for our last gig, Ian kidded me about Ruth. "Hey, if you want to, you know, get together with Ruth, I won't tell your wife. That'll be our secret. It's pretty obvious, you know, the chemistry between you two. Go for it, man. We can get

gigs over here for years. We can just live here if we want to. I'm up for it if you are."

I felt vaguely insulted. What made it worse were my emotions as we approached those towers on the bluffs of the Spree River. My adrenalin was crackling. It had been a long time since I felt that intense excitement of new romance, and I felt that way again. I told myself that I was merely flattered that a beautiful young woman found me attractive, but I found her attractive, too. But another part of me yearned for a new beginning with a beautiful young woman like Ruth. I could live in Germany and work at the pub. All the ugliness I left at home would stay there. I could have a new life, a new love. Maybe we'd have kids. Mentally, I was constructing a future for myself in a world that was grappling with a future that nobody expected.

We drove to the hotel and checked into our old room. As the time for our gig grew closer I became more nervous. I knew Ruth would be there. One way or another the matter would be resolved. By the time we walked into the pub, I was hyperventilating.

Sure enough, she was behind the bar, and her face was transformed. She could have powered the whole town with the light that glowed around her. Her hair glistened, and she wore eyeliner and a dash of pink lipstick. The other bartenders, the waitresses, and even the patrons clustered around the taps, turned and stared at me. I felt a falling sensation in the bottom of my stomach. In that moment, I realized that somehow, in some way, I had actually fallen in love with her.

I walked to the bar carrying my guitar case, and she waited with a smile. "Hello, and welcome home! It is so good to see you."

At that moment, the door flew open with a rush of chilly air. Several English guest workers in orange overalls tumbled in, laughing and cursing together, and pressed themselves to the bar. "Here, love, keep the pints coming and we'll keep paying. We're getting pissed as rats tonight."

Ruth had to get back to work and I had to set up. For the rest of the evening my heart pounded and I lurked near the stage between sets drinking Guinness and smiling at her through the crowd. She kept up her usual banter at the bar, but when I caught her eye, her face was confused.

As we started breaking down our equipment, I knew I couldn't leave without saying something to her. Maybe I'd just flat out tell her I was married. Or maybe I wouldn't--I'd ask her out to dinner or for a walk. Maybe I'd ask if I could meet with her after she got off

work. I wasn't sure what I'd do, but after my instruments were packed I sat at the bar near her taps and lit a cigarette, wondering if I'd lost my mind.

She smiled at me while pouring a beer. "So your tour was good?"

"Yes, it was great. I learned a lot, too."

By the way her eyebrows tightened I could see that she was thinking. "I've been feeling very good, too. Very good."

I felt a sting. "I'm glad you're feeling good, Ruth. I've been feeling a lot of things lately. Things I haven't felt in a long time."

"What are these things?"

"Oh, well, all kinds of things."

I didn't want to disrupt her rhythm while she was in her element—the place where she was in charge and at home. An idea of what I might say trickled into my mind and I inhaled the breath that would come out and change both our lives.

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "I see you are feeling upset or something. You must tell me what is wrong."

I paused.

"But I will tell you that I am very excited because I'm going to see my boyfriend tomorrow. He is in Cologne."

The world slammed to a halt. "Your boyfriend? In Cologne?"

"Oh yes, I met him a few months ago, and I can hardly wait to see him." Her eyes had become twin sparklers.

“That’s great.”

“So why are you not feeling well?”

I could not move or speak.

“What is wrong?”

I paused. “It’s just a cold. I got to get some rest because we’re leaving in a couple of days. Thanks for everything, Ruth. It’s been great to know you. Have fun in Cologne.”

“But wait, don’t you want to stay and maybe talk? I wish my boyfriend could meet you. He loves your kind of music. And you remind me a little of one of my uncles. He is like you, so nice, so talented.”

I took one of her hands while she looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Thanks a lot, Ruth. You’re a lovely girl.”

A light rain sprayed down from low black clouds as I walked alone below the town and stared up at the ancient towers of Bautzen for the last time. I was inundated by a yearning so deep and so inexpressively painful that it couldn’t be compared to anything I had ever felt in my life. It was more than regret about Ruth, or even sadness over leaving Bautzen. I didn’t know what it was or where it came from, but that feeling was so overwhelming that at last I had to sit down. Before I realized what was happening, tears gushed from my eyes and a sob welled up in my chest. People walking their dogs passed by and glanced at me. The rain began to pound harder, so I lit a cigarette and walked back into town trying to calm myself.

By the time we finally left Bautzen, Ruth was already in Cologne with her boyfriend. I left a message for my wife that I would be home in a few days. I had no idea whether she’d be happy to hear from me or had already started the paperwork for divorce proceedings. What I did know was that my life was never going to be the same as it had been a few weeks earlier.

As we rolled westward down Autobahn Two, I became distressingly aware that I had entered a phase of my life that I didn’t know how to navigate. To others, I wasn’t the same person I had always thought of as myself. The old ideas and familiar habits would no

longer work and, like the people in former East Germany, I would have to re-think myself and my place in the world. My mortality was no longer a distant abstraction. The illusion of separation between past and future had evaporated. The Wall was gone.

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Families on the Fringe: Complexities of the Ie

Jen Cullerton Johnson

When late July arrives with a heat wave and nearly constant blue skies, every man, woman and child in Asahi Mura heads down to the seashore. Waiting for them, open for business, are the local branch members of the *yakuza*, what is sometimes referred to in the Western media as the "Japanese mafia". In Tokyo and other large cities the *yakuza* does, I suppose, carry itself with something like the wise-guy swagger and intimidation of American gangsters. Here in Asahi Mura, where the local *yakuza* run the *yakisoba* houses, beer gardens and raft rental stands, they have more the look of small time wannabes, or gangster pledges having to go through a not-so-trying hazing ritual in an idyllic seaside resort. The lowest *yakuza* on the totem pole seem to be the guys pushing *kakikori* carts, selling shaved-ice with flavored syrup like snowcones sold at baseball games back in the States.

I would not have noticed the *yakuza* presence if it were not for the music that they play over the loudspeakers by the coast. It is only about a 20-minute bike ride from our apartment to the beach. I head that way for a little fresh air during the week when the beaches are not so crowded. One day, as I approach the beachfront buildings which house changing rooms, lifeguard offices, and green tea vending machines, I almost fall off my bike when I hear some Japanese punk start to blare out from the speakers. I wouldn't be opposed to it at any time or in every situation, but in this dreamy setting, I feel like an angst-ridden teenager has cranked up some *Twisted Sister* while his parents stand and contemplate the Grand Canyon.

Looking around, I see that the music is grating on the nerves of the other weekday afternoon beachgoers as well. Sitting on a bench near the path I am biking along, an *obasan*—grandmother—cringes, and a *shufu*—housewife—grits her teeth in even more disguised annoyance.

"Every summer they come," says the *obasan,* dressed for sun protection in long pants, a long sleeve shirt, and a wide brimmed hat.

"It would be all right if they could play more relaxing music," the *shufu* mumbles and then stands, rolling up her pants legs and going to retrieve a child who has wandered past ankle high water. When she comes back, she looks over the beach and sits down. From inside the small office that controls the beachfront audio system, designed for the serious job of announcing tsunami warnings, two young guys emerge wearing tank-tops that reveal some impressive shoulder tattoos. As the word *yakuza* flashes in my mind and my jaw hangs open in fascination, the edges of the *shufu*'s lips curl up in a grimace that could

be mistaken for a reaction to a bad smell.

"They are all over," she continues, and if it were not for her child floating out farther into the deep, I might have heard more.

Nevertheless, I wonder how much more she would have been willing to say. This is Japan after all, and discontent tends to be subtle. Complaints are highly coded in a way that I am still new at unraveling. Direct criticism seems to embarrass people on both the giving and receiving end. Moreover, coming from Chicago and having a perception of criminal organizations shaped by oceans of movie representations of the Godfather Parts I, II, and III, and few drops of personal experience, I think that people are always tight-lipped about gangsters. Now that I know where to find an outpost of the Japanese secret society, one of my guide books says "always" stays hidden to foreigners—and in my little out-of-the-way town of coastal Japan no less, I know I will be back to investigate.

On my next bike ride, I notice that, besides the music, what really gets the sunbathers' dander up are the announcements that interrupt the dreadful music. The *yakuza* guys love to get on the horn, and for the more serious-minded Japanese "civilians" at the beach, for whom community responsibility is a paramount value, hearing the municipal loudspeakers used for juvenile ball-breaking is like nails on a chalkboard. On a Wednesday afternoon, for example, the loudspeaker squeals with the announcement: "Hiko-san, get up here and fix the toilet."

While pretending not to, everyone on the beach scans the area to find the negligent toilet cleaner. He turns out to be the guy floating ten meters out in the surf on a pink raft with his girlfriend, who is now laughing her head off. Hiko jumps quickly off the raft, landing his girlfriend in the water, and runs up to the pavilion. The girlfriend has stopped laughing now, and takes the raft back to the rental station. By the time she has settled down with a towel to lay on the beach, Hiko returns to find her in a less jovial mood. Until the announcement comes, "Hiko-san, you forgot to wash under your fingernails! Return for proper hygiene."

On the weekends when there are more people around, there is tighter control and a lot less tomfoolery. The hotels around the beach place a subtle pressure on theses hooligans. The *yakuza* may rule the summer weekdays, but summer weekends are when the hotels net their gains in a region where winter tourism at the inland mountains dominates. These eight weeks of sandy beaches and sunny skies keep hotels, like Dream Hotel and Senami Spa, afloat before the snow renders their guest rooms vacant. To sweeten the attraction for the *yakuza* staff, some hotels offer free, private *onsens*, or thermal baths, since the *yakuza*'s tattoos prohibit them from entering most communal baths. Some struggling hotels go so far as offering blocks of rooms to *yakuza* bosses to then dole out to younger

apprentices who will then work the menial summer jobs. In exchange, the resort owners want a little light music on weekends, soft, *genki* melodies like the ones the families hum.

A regular beachgoer or hotel owner never talks to or argues with the *yakuza*, even the minor ding-a-lings who rule the loud speakers and the food court. Understanding this severe ostracization of the *yakuza*, at first, is the key that I am missing in trying to understand how the Japanese deal with their criminal class. The unwillingness to talk to, or even openly look at the *yakuza*, is not so much a product of intimidation and fear, as I initially expect it to be. Maybe these scare tactics play a part of bullying with some of the big shots in Tokyo, but with these scrawny noodle sellers, flip-flop purveyors and provincial DJs, intimidation isn't their strong suit. People avert their eyes not in the hopes that they will go unnoticed and not be singled out for confrontation by the *yakuza*; rather, they look away in order to stress the alienation of those who flaunt Japan's generally rigidly observed social conventions. "Regular" families accept that these two-bit gangsters are part of the scenery, like broken glass in a parking lot; they simply choose to ignore them.

Although the respectable Japanese public is estranged from the *yakuza,* the *yakuza* plays an important role in the nation's wider society. The NHK, national news station, and *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper are always reporting some money laundering scheme or sweetheart real estate deal betraying nefarious connections between government, corporations, and *yakuza.* While it is not the bozo on the loudspeaker at the beach masterminding these transactions, the presence of young cut-ups does explain something about society's ambivalence toward the *yakuza.*

In Japan, the juvenile justice system is a fraction of that which exists in the U.S., and in the absence of large juvenile halls, the *yakuza* are seen to fulfill an important function. Let the adult gangsters deal with the juvenile troublemakers. If theses punks are going to do nothing productive, at least let them learn some manners from a segment of the older generation no matter how corrupt, even if they are slicing off fingers Omerta style. Thus, the deal seems to be that the *yakuza* get a certain amount of space to train their lieutenants, with the caveat that summer weekends at the beach, when families want to float on neon colored rafts, eat *yakisoba* and down ice-cold Asahi Super Dry beers, are inviolable.

Still, every time I come to the beach, just for fun I try my best to pick out the shot-callers. At first, my task seems simple enough. Working from what I remember of the Michael Douglas movie *Black Rain*, which finds two New York cops going to Tokyo to battle the *yakuza*, and from renting old Japanese detective movies at the *Jusco*, I think I should spot the real McCoy decked out in a black zoot suit. His body should be inked in tattoos, one of his fingers sliced off for disappointing the boss, and he should grunt instead of talk. He will

have slicked back hair, a stare that is mean as hell, and of course be handy with a *tantō,* the sharp dagger, which *yakuza* are known to brandish.

Disappointingly, my stereotype is not very much in evidence at the beach. Of course, I realize that I would never troll northern New Jersey looking for the *Sopranos* cast, or expect to find John Wayne-style cowboys populating the plains. Still, now that I realize that there are *yakuza* in these hills, I want them to be a little more stylized than these yo-yo's with peroxide blonde mullets or mohawks and sometimes severe acne.

However, in my quest to spot the *yakuza*, I instead get a first row seat to observe the normal Japanese families that their recruits are cast out from. Until the U.S. occupation of Japan at the end of World War II, Japanese law did not recognize individuals as individuals, but rather as members of a hierarchical family unit, called an *Ie.* In theory, the *Ie* consists of all family members harmoniously fulfilling their duties. The *ojiisan,* grandfather (or eldest male at least), carts the umbrellas, the towels, and the coolers. The *obaasaan,* grandmother (or ranking female), carries the picnic baskets, and the two *kodomos* or children drag all beach junk that they sell in a store along the promenade.

These Japanese families enjoy regimented days at the beach, arriving early and staying for several hours, but never the whole day, unlike *yakuza* teenagers who have shirked family responsibility and, therefore, enjoy greater freedom—but at a price.

So when I meet the first bona fide *Yakuza*, I don't see it coming. In fact, seeing is part of the problem. I don't see the cigarette he throws on the sidewalk, and he doesn't see me coming until I step on it with my barefoot and shout.

"Jesus Christ," I bellow and hop on one foot. "What the…" My face contorts in pain. My eyes bulge. My tongue lags.

The man who threw the cigarette at first does nothing but watch me. His brows knot together with worry, but then he must realize my burn is nothing serious and starts to laugh. I guess he is laughing at my oversized gestures, ones I have done before to teach second graders *fear, shock,* and *pain.* His laugh grows and becomes so loud that I stop jumping and begin to laugh myself. The situation isn't funny, and my foot still hurts but, either way, both of us are laughing together now. This is no "normal" Japanese family man, I realize. A regular Japanese would be bowing and *suimemasen*-ing profusely. A "normal" Japanese person would not laugh until tears stream out of his eyes. Maybe he is *Yakuza*, I think.

My first clue comes when he shows me where I can ice my burn behind his *yakisoba* hut. Handing me a bucket of ice he says, "You're not the first *gaijin* I've met." He has known many, and many of them have been women, he tells me with a grin, checking out my bathing suit. But I am not his type, and we both know it. I've got a body that has not quite bounced back after a baby. Plus, I wear no ankle bracelets and I'm married. To him I am a curiosity, a diversion of the day, an *eigo no sensei*, an English teacher. For me, talking with him might prove my guidebook wrong. Plus, I fantasize for a moment, it never hurts to have a *yakuza* to call upon if needed, no matter if he is just a *yakisoba* grill master pretending to be in the big time.

"Call me Mister Red," he says over his shoulder and brings me inside his place of operation. He uses the English translation for his name.

Mister Red starts to grill another batch of *yakisoba.* When it is ready, he hands me a bowl free of charge, then serves two families who have plunked themselves down in his flimsy beach shack-restaurant. The restaurant is like Mister Red, seasonal and well worn. His fellow workers and he have made the place unique with an open view of the sea but protected from the wind and shaded from the sun. The noodle hut can fit a few large families or several intimate couples. Customers must remove the sand before they come inside, a task Mister Red has made possible by setting up a water hose by the entrance. On the floor, to my surprise, are *tatame* mats. Everything looks legit, despite the beach being the fourth wall and Mister Red running it.

"How did you get that name, *Mister Red*?" I ask him, then suck up some of the noodles he serves me. They taste delicious with just the right amount of soy sauce seasoning and grilling, tender green peppers mixed with onions and sliced carrots and a few morsels of meat.

"Long story," he says and nods his head in the direction of the families eating. "I'll tell you later."

"Hey Mister Red, when do you close down?" I ask, also glancing at the families around us. He gets the message.

"We close at sunset. You'll hear us on the loud speaker," he says, grinning a little.

Getting to know Mister Red during the daytime when all these restaurant-goers are famished from the sun and the water is not going to work. Mister Red is all business, and his customers are all eyes. I notice they slurp their noodles quickly, then when they ask for

more and the second plate comes, they watch for the clue that Mister Red might be *yakuza*: his tattoos. Ornate and plentiful, they peek out from his white long sleeved shirt he has buttoned half way up. Although I cannot get a full glimpse of them, I can make out dolphins leaping through waves, a sea lion nuzzling her calf, and waves crashing into rocks. On his right arm are *kanji* characters I do not recognize. Near his neck is a mountain and *sakura.* Tattoos are considered a sign of the *yakuza*, and from the number of tattoos on Mister Red, it is clear he does not mind the association. He only goes through the motions of hiding his tattoos, wearing clothes that could conceal them if they were stiffly worn as they might be at a more formal restaurant. He knows that his customers are eager to catch a glimpse of this taboo artwork, and he is clearly not embarrassed by it. I would be proud of it, too. Mister Red looks like a hipster tourism brochure, not *Shinto* temple, but a more modern emblem of the country.

"See you at sunset then," I say and get up and walk over to my shoes.

Leaving the beach, I see families float in the water and laze under umbrellas. In the distance, I can make out the edges of Sado island, an island that hundreds of years ago the government used as a penitentiary during Samurai times, but now has a whole village of fishermen watching cable television on squid boats. When I turn away from the sea, the mountains loom in the background. I can make out the town's radio tower next to the old ruins of Asahi Mura Castle.

Before I get on my bike, I look back at Mister Red. Another cigarette dangles out of his mouth, and he is flipping more *yakisoba.* Within minutes, a whole new herd of hungry people has crammed into a low table. What makes Mister Red so interesting, I think, is how he seems to straddle two worlds, the old and the new. He lives on the outskirts of Japanese society, accepted but shunned. Exactly how he lives, I am unsure; maybe the noodle job is a front, like some of the Chicago mobsters I have read about back home who work day jobs in delis or bakeries. Pedaling back to my apartment, the sea breeze hits my face. I inhale and think, tonight when the loudspeakers shut down, I'll know.

Later that night, in the beach parking lot there are a hardly any automobiles, except a tiny K-car and one of the especially small Japanese minivans. On the promenade, a few store lights flicker. When I look at the beach, a distant bonfire glows, and a few kids spin lighted sparklers around in the dark. Out on the sea, the squid boats shine bright lights over the waters. Asahi Mura Beach is mostly deserted.

I walk over to Mister Red's *yakisoba* hut, which is boarded up with the signs and umbrellas taken inside. Only the glow and hum of the vending machine flash alive. Then out of the shadows as in the B-grade, Japanese detective movies I've been watching, Mister Red

appears, the glow from his cigarette appearing before the outline of his face. In his hand, he holds an Asahi Super Dry beer. After some small talk, Mister Red and I take a seat on a stone bench in front of the sea. He dives right into a conversation I never dreamed I would have with a Japanese person, let alone a man with *yakuza* connections, responsible for crimes as big as my imagination and as small as the burn blister on my foot.

"There are so many types of people in Japan," he begins and twists his hands together, as if wringing out a wet towel. "All of us fit together and stand on this land. Some of us know each other and some of us don't," Mister Red says.

The white long-sleeved shirt he wore during the day that covered up some of his tattoos is off. In its place he wears a jogging suit jacket and a pair of clean shorts. From the faint light of the lamppost, I see his eyes are bloodshot after a hard day's work.

"Where are you then?" I ask and take a swig of the beer he has offered me, a large can of Asahi Super Dry. "Where do you stand?"

All joking aside, I see he wants to get into a serious conversation with me, and I don't know why. I guess that maybe, deep down, he is like all Japanese and wants to show the good side of his country. Perhaps it is because I am an English teacher and he wants to practice conversation skills with me. Then, I realize that we are similar at least in one respect: we are both outsiders to the mainstream *Ie*-centered Japanese culture that surrounds us. He may not have a lot of people to actually speak with him much. I decide to stay with the frank conversation. Maybe we will learn from each other. Who knows maybe this exchange will help us later.

"What's your background?" I ask offering him cigarette.

He takes the cigarette and smells the tobacco.

"American?"

I nod my head. He lights the cigarette and lets it hang from his lower lip. Then he takes a long drag. I can see his face working out an answer suitable for *gaijin* to understand.

"Background means background. It means doing work to keep order. Not like the cops but different. You know set up in a place, work it, and leave. Background means moving

places. It means, I don't know," he says and lets out a sigh.

"Do you like your work?" I ask, lighting up a cigarette for myself. I think maybe the questions are too personal and may overstep, but I'd like to get some juicy information. Mister Red does not seem to mind. He seems like this is his chance to share with a stranger he will never see again, though it is difficult for him to pull his answers together in a conversation of blended English and Japanese.

"Loved it at first. Who wouldn't? I was kid who ran wild. Got some structure. Got to play. Got to see something besides Kobe."

"*Asoka, ne*? – No regrets?" I ask and try to cajole Mister Red into revealing some adventure.

"Well, things change," he says and then blows a smoke ring.

"Wow, what kind of change?" I ask shifting my weight on the stone bench, so I can see him clearly. For a few seconds I imagine Mister Red's change had to do with him being a head honcho in the *yakuza.* A rising star wheeling and dealing with other gangsters and gamblers, he got caught up in the mix, hit a bad turn, and was punished by being sent to grill up *yakisoba* and be a camp counselor for young *yakuza* in an out of the way beach town, all his glamour and guns stripped away to barbeque tongs and flip-flops.

Instead he says, "I had a kid. She's twelve years old. She's going to be in high school soon, and, well, you know how it is."

I cough beer out of my nose. Fatherhood changed this wannabe thug? No deals in the back alley, just late night diapers! I couldn't have asked for a better cliché if I wanted one. "Wow. Really? *Honto ne*?"

"*Honto ne.* My daughter set me straight. You know how it is with kids. They don't care about what you give them, just that you're there. Do you have any kids?"

"Yeah, I've got a toddler son who is learning Japanese words faster than English ones."

He nods. “They’re smart, aren’t they?”

“Real cute,” I say thinking of how to swing this back to his fatherhood moment. “Do you take care of your daughter?”

“No. My mother raises her since her mom’s gone. Took off and followed the white line, *ne*,” he says and makes a snorting nose.

“Natsui-chan is all mine,” he continues. “Most of the time she lives with my mother. At least in the summer she can come down for a week to be at the beach with me and her grandmother. The Sea Dream Hotel gives us a deal, so we all stay there. It would be hard if I raised her, but I guess you have already figured that one since you live here. You know how it is for people like us.”

I do know how it is for children who have marginalized parents, like Fernando and me. Children do suffer because Japanese society shuns their moms and dads, and in doing so separates the children, too. Some of the parents I know work at jobs “normal” Japanese refuse. Take for instance, Otaki-chan’s father. He is a Nikkei, a Japanese citizen who was born and raised in the largest Japanese ex-pat community in the world, in Brazil, but returned to Japan for economic reasons. He works at the bon-bon factory, the only place that would hire him when he came back. They gave him the nightshift, too. There are the Philippine women Marta and Lucia, students with me in our Japanese language class. They are here on work visas and run a roadside snack shops by the highway, a job most Japanese believe is synonymous with prostitution. Now before me is a small time, noodle grilling *yakuza* father. Each parent, including me, is an example of an outsider. In a way, we all live on the fringes, the margins of life eking by with our limited roles and our limited interactions with the rest of the population. They teeter on both sides, no side totally accepting them as their own. As for me, I am just an outsider looking in for a few years.

Still, I know how Mister Red feels when he says people here are group people, and those outside of the group are lost. In a way, I know what it is like to be shunned by the Japanese. I’ve experienced the sting of isolation. Sometimes at the beach mothers pull their children away from my son. Once at a public pool, I slid down a slide with my son in my lap and when we reached, the bottom, all of the families vanished for another pool. Knowing I am always on the outside is lonely. It feels like I am under a microscope, trapped between two slides. Yet, I can’t imagine being Japanese and rejected by my own people and what it does to a person to be constantly ignored.

“This work is seasonal,” he says, interrupting my train of thought. “In a month I will be

down south in Kyushu, doing something else. Natsui-chan will go back to my mother in Kobe. There is where Natsui-chan can grow. Ever been there? Before the earthquake, it was beautiful. It is where I'd like to settle down, but settling down is difficult."

On the water the bright lights twinkle from the squid boasts. A few teenagers drift by us, arms and hands linked together.

"What do you know about home-stays outside Japan?" Mister Red says, breaking the silence between us.

"A good exchange. You get a glimpse of a different culture. I don't know. It depends on which country your daughter chooses for her home visit," I offer.

"I want my kid on one of those when she is older. English can get her a good job, right?" he asks me. His voice is void of the tough guy Mister Red routine. He is just a father, and like all fathers he wants the best for his child, better than what he has for himself.

"Yeah, sure," I say. "She can begin in a few years. I think they start as young as 16. If you give me your address in Kobe, I can send you information. Does it matter which country?" I ask.

"America," he says then stretches his arm above his head and yawns.

"Really? Not British?"

"Yankee doodle dandy American. You're more open than the others," he says.

"Not sure about that one, Mister Red," I say thinking of all the groups who are excluded and marginalized in the United States.

"*Arrigato gozaimasu*," he says with new formality and pulls out of his pocket, a wallet takes out a *meshi*, a business card. Then he writes his address *romaji* and adds his mother's name.

"Here is the address," he says, and he stands up and bows. Our conversation has ended.

“Wait,” I say, “you never told me why they call you Mister Red.”

But he doesn’t seem ready to tell me the story. Maybe being called Mister Red became part of the attitude, the mask he reveals to the public, not this private side he showed me. Mister Red is not who he really is and whatever the real story is that gave him the name no longer matters.

“Just send the stuff if you remember,” he mumbles and gives another quick bow and disappears into the night.

Jen Cullerton Johnson lives and teaches in Chicago. She has published fiction and creative nonfiction in literary journals and magazines. Her books include Seeds of Change *(Lee & Low 2010),* Kiss Me Goodnight *(Syren 2004) and a forthcoming textbook called* Green Literacy: Fueling the Conversation Between Young People and the Environment. *She holds a MFA in Non-Fiction, a MEd in Curriculum and Development.*

Growing Up Into You

Gabriel Sistare

My shadow was elongated across the quiet, residential street perpendicular to Route 70. I was walking back to the room my sister, Heidi, was subletting for the summer. She was a few hundred yards behind me; I have trouble walking at another person's pace. Because I arrived at the apartment first, I sat on the wooden stairwell painted an iron-rich red.

Heidi walked through the short driveway of ornamental stones and hesitated before going up the stairs.

"You looked a lot like Dad when you were walking," she said.

I was 20, and the fact that my sister said this spurred a sequence of thoughts all related to one thing which I wanted for a long time: I was, or was starting to be considered, an adult—more than that, my father.

The moment after she shared her observation, I fired-out questions asking her what she meant. How did I look like him? I have blond hair. He doesn't have blond hair. I'm taller. He's broader, more muscular. What do you mean?

There are photos showing my father in boarding school at St. George's in Middletown, Rhode Island. There's one where he's dressed in a cream-white turtleneck sweater and dark brown slacks. He sits on his dormitory bed, the hypothenar muscles of his hand resting on the inside of his thigh. My father is staring right into the camera with a smile which is still his own: suspiciously happy. In this picture, my father is 16 or 17; his hair is bright blond, now brown and graying in the front, and cut halfway between his shoulders and the bottom of his occipital lobe. I wore my hair longer when I was this age.

This picture, and the active images of my father as he now lives, is how I think of my him and the range of his life—boyish and blond, mature and darkly colored. This is the one photo, though, where the resemblance between me and my father is overlapping.

Now, I look towards my father, watch him, communicate with him more, model myself. My father is an icon.

To me, he is well-contained, empathetic, and thoughtful: a character set after which many

men should model themselves.

Except for the last three years of my life, I was either scared of or disturbed by my father. Sometimes I thought he was pathetic, continuing to inflict guilt on himself from an incident around which my family's story whirled. He issued apologies for the most banal accidents.

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My mother was in the drivers seat of our box-shaped, dark green Plymouth Voyager. Heidi was in the front passenger's seat, I in the middle bench.

We were stationary, outside of our house on the campus of Westminster School, in Simsbury, Connecticut, where my father teaches and where we still live.

My father walked hastily out of the door. By this time, I was familiar with the look on his face: a mix of shame, exhaustion, and frustration. He was wearing tan chinos, a deep blue button-down, and a dark red tie with an asterisk-like pattern.

He swept around one of the shrubs lining our small yard, approached the car, and grabbed onto the part of the window where the glass comes out. Both his hands were curled, knuckles white, and he looked at my mother who was startled and reluctant.

"Paula," he said to my mother, "I'm sorry."

"Okay Bill," she replied, upset in a protective way because my sister looked away from them. I tried to plunge into the crack in the seat where pens and Cheerios are lost.

This was at the beginning of a period in my family's life which was endlessly turbulent. Weeks, months, or maybe a year before, I'm not sure of the chronology, my father admitted to my mother, the day after Christmas, that he had an affair.

When my father told us, I was fourteen and sympathetic, or at least didn't hate him. My sister was furious—my mother confused and hurt in a way with which no one could disagree.

Memories of my moments as an adolescent, and through the emotionally vacant years of

High School, pivot around this incident. There are whole years which I cannot remember from my earlier childhood, even blank years of my first days at college. I do remember my father's confession with vivid clarity.

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"I'm sorry Gabriel," my father says. "I fucked up."

I'm sitting next to him on a futon mattress resting on a wooden frame which shifts between a bed and a couch. He has his arm on my shoulder. I do not flinch or dismiss him. I am aware of everything in the room: every person, every face, every texture. I see the floor of parquet tiles fitted together by my father. For some reason I see the dark green adhesive beneath them. I see that one is askew—neglected by the glue which bound it.

And, I do not see anything.

"I knew it," Heidi says. She is sobbing, thrusting her extremities at my father but not assaulting him.

You cannot deprive my mother of the anger which she feels.

My father sits with a posture of surrender. I sit with a sad condition. We look similar in this moment.

-

Although my father had the affair, and it was upsetting (we almost capsized), on reflection I don't think it was something which motivated a lot of the family dissonance which followed. It was a symptom of something larger, more dormant within the four of us, which no member could identify. We were all mad at each other and probably bored—decades with the same orientation of people becomes tedious. Maybe my father's infidelity was an admission which the rest of us were too uncomfortable to concede. "Something needs to be reorganized," the action testified. "This family is complacent."

We adapted. We noticed disturbances in how we used to communicate. We noticed what lacked, and we imagined and built what we needed. We couldn't improve when we

weren't aware of what needed to be cultivated.

Maybe my father's disruption was instructive.

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We are molded by our parents, shaped from experience and heritage. While sons resemble our fathers, we expand on the imperfect foundation they provided, elaborating on their strengths and muting their deficiencies—improving that foundation, which will, in turn, be renewed by our own namesakes.

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I noticed a shift in how I viewed my dad after Gampy (my grandfather) died in 2009.

During Winter Break of my Sophomore year in college, I flew into Bradley International Airport and my father picked me up in our cardinal-red Dodge Caravan, more streamlined than the Plymouth. From Windsor Locks, Connecticut, my father and I drove to Brunswick, Maine, where Gampy was in the hospital after the cancer which afflicted him for years tackled him.

My father and I walked through the glass doors of the medical center and towards the wing, and room, where my grandfather was—a hulk of skin hollowed out expect for a few incoherent words every couple of hours.

Gampy, was lying on his back. He was jaundice. His muscle was without tone, his skin without elasticity.

I sought to preoccupy my grandmother, Bapa, while I was in the hospital room. I read an issue of *Time* with her. We attempted a crossword puzzle.

Eventually, my father asked me to hold Gampy's hand. My grandfather was shifting and groaning while we were in the room.

I held his palm like a weak handshake. My father started to speak to his father.

“Dad,” he said. “Gabriel’s here. Dad, Gabriel’s here.”

Gampy moved as I assume a large whale would on land: slow; heavy; desperate; aware.

“What,” he asked, a slur after the last consonant in the word like his lips and tongue were the weight of his whole self.

“Gabriel’s here,” each breath sucking in and reluctantly letting out. “This is wonderful.”

My father stayed in the hospital room that night. I drove my grandmother home. The next night, my father stayed with Gampy, again. They were together; the two of them. Gampy died looking up that night. My father was asleep in a chair lower than the hospital bed looking up, too.

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My father and I are sitting on the rear bumper of our flat-white Subaru in the parking lot of the academic building at Westminster. The Subaru was my grandparents’. It is May and I am home from my Junior year of college. We’re here tonight because there is a dance in the building and my father is patrolling the parking lot to make sure no couples sneak away from the crowd to make-out in their cars or the woods. My father is responsible for these students while their parents enjoy the distance they have between their children.

It’s dark, clear. We see stars.

I ask my father about the universe, and I listen to what he says.

Taller, I hunch to look up at him.

Gabriel Sistare is a writer and thinker most comfortable steaming vegetables or sitting in the public library. He prefers to sit next to the oversized Phaidon Atlas of World Architecture and write about his philosophical opposition to the automobile.

In Bogota

Jay Duret

Joan Didion once published an essay called "In Bogota" and years later, in a hotel in Italy, I came upon it and discovered that she had written about Bogota when I was living there. In fact, the hovel of a residencia where I holed up was only a few blocks from her magnificent Hotel Tequendama. They were a long few blocks, however. From the Tequendama, Ms. Didion saw a Bogota with fresh roses in the bathrooms, a Bogota with hot water whenever you wanted it, a Bogota of gold and emeralds and parties with film makers from New York.

I was quite sure she had no idea what Bogota was about.

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The day I arrived in Bogota its biggest building burned. It was a fifty or sixty-story glass box, the only one of its kind in Bogota in 1973, sky scraping over the city with miles of dark glass and chrome and the look of LA or Tokyo or Manhattan. The first thin sizzles of smoke appeared at the sides of the tower at ten in the morning. The 10th or 13th or 20th floor had caught fire, far above the range of Bogota's fire department, and all day from everywhere in the city you could follow the fire rising in the building, breaking out the windows floor by floor, licking higher up the black glass, loosing clouds of gray black smoke into the Andes. Only time before the building was consumed. All day long I walked the streets and found Bogotanos in tears. Tears not for the people who leapt from 30 stories up like angels; tears not for those who did not even reach a window for a rush of freedom between the smoke and the end. The tears were for the tower, for the chrome and dark glass, for Bogota that had lost its tallest building.

I arrived in Bogota after weeks in Santa Marta in the North. Dog years on the Barracuda Coast where the driving heat lost all hint of pleasure. I was robbed three times in the same week and I began to dream about going home. But I took a train trip instead, an astounding 30 hour train trip through the hot marshes of Central Columbia. A trip where the train had to back up for two and a half hours, for Christ's sake, to let another train coming the other way pass. The inside of the train got so hot that I burned a one inch square on my forearm when I laid it on the metal marker on the armrest of my seat.

Coming into Bogota after a lifetime on the train was like one of those moments swimming in a sun drenched lake when you come upon a cold pocket and your bare legs below the surface are surrounded by the chill and your balls shrink to marbles in an instant and the color of the sky seems to change. At 8,000 feet in the Andes, Bogota was *cold*. It made

me lightheaded to say the word. It was as if the change of temperature was a loosing of restraints. As if in the mountains you could really feel free.

Bogota was filled with gamines. Mock families of little kids living together in cardboard boxes and alleys, sleeping in warm brown batches in doorways, racing in packs into restaurants along Calle de los Hippies, and before the harried waiters could catch them, shoveling their mouths full of rice from the plates of departing patrons. I remember mornings opening the door of Hotel ABC and finding two black haired, black-eyed boys no older than six sleeping wrapped around each other in the threshold. They moved in their sleep like boys in the morning but they would not wake even as I stepped over them and out into the cold Bogota morning.

In Bogota in 1973, you could buy a pack of oval "Pielroja" cigarettes for four cents. The black tobacco and licorice paper stained my fingers like creosote and after smoking a few packs, my gums began to bleed. Beer cost eight cents, but they charged another eight cents as a deposit on the bottle. I remember movies sitting in a crowd on wooden benches in the back of the theater for a dime trying to see over the barbed wire strung to keep us from sneaking forward into the expensive, thirty-five cent seats up front.

I remember mornings in Bogota with the streets full of men in heavy brown suits with bulging pockets and boys selling newspapers shouting "BOGOTANO, BOGOTANO, EL BO-GO-TAN-O" over and over until I heard them in my dreams. I would walk down to the American Express office to see about mail and stop for a shot of tinto neat at a stand up coffee bar along the street; the roasting smell of Columbian coffee so rich you carried it in your clothes for miles. Cold mornings in Bogota. Mornings that made it hard to get out of the cot I had at Hotel ABC, a cot too short so my feet hung over the end and no matter what I did I could never keep them covered and in the mornings I'd swear that I would move down the street to Residencia Tuesquilla where they had real beds. But Tuesquilla was thirty pesos a night, nearly double ABC, and after I'd warmed up with a tinto, I couldn't convince myself to spend the extra sixty cents.

Hotel ABC was a beaverboard hotel. Its high ceilinged rooms were divided into cubicles by partitions that did not quite reach to the arching ceilings. There was no hot water and no showerhead and it would be days at a time before I could get myself prepared for the experience of showering under the pipe. My room had a single overhead bulb hanging from the fifteen-foot ceiling on a twisted wire. I remember reading Dostoyevsky in the bad light and trying not to listen to the sounds behind the walls.

I finally moved from ABC to Residencia Teusquilla in September after the lodger in the next room began to cough in hard rattling sort of way like he had nuts in his throat, and I

worried that whatever he had would come after me over the wall.

The Teusquilla was not really the family style residencia I had thought. The Senor and Senora who owned the house had assembled an extended under-family of servants and freeloaders to take care of the day-to-day operations. The chief executive officer of this eight room enterprise was named Berta. She had long black frizzy hair and a smile you could take a nap in. One of her legs was shorter than the other. She had a dour three year old son named Cessa.

Cessa was a fat pouty boy who spoke bad Spanish and was given to standing in my doorway staring at me in silence for minutes until his dark sulky stare lay on my shoulders like a wet towel, and I would get up from my chair and close the door. I could feel him outside the door staring in through the crack and when I'd open the door -- it could be hours later -- he'd still be there. It was like being haunted.

Other times, Cessa would come into the living room of the residencia when I was reading and climb onto a small coffee table across the room from me. He'd fish his wang the size of a hose from his little boy sailor pants and loose a rope thick stream of yellow urine into the potted palm by the table. He'd look at me the whole time, never smiling, only that dour stare and his black eyes. Then he'd climb down from the table with that serious expression he always wore and run off to find Berta, his wang still flopping. I never saw him laugh the whole time I lived there. And by the time I left, the potted palm had begun what was to be, I was sure, a bitter lingering death.

The staff of the residencia took an unhealthy interest in my life. A page from my journal:

I went to see Cancha. Met her at ten. We walked and drank and ate. She had the grippe and came back to the hotel to give it to me. Bed no good for two. I couldn't sleep. Cancha had never seen a condom before -- she wanted to know who was supposed to use it, me or her. She didn't like the idea. In the morning I sent her home in a taxi. I was anxious to work on my story but I just couldn't. I slept all afternoon. Berta came to the door once. I shouted I was sleeping, told her to come later or call but not to bother me.

Bela and Belen had stiff necks all the next day from listening through my door. Berta tried to charge me an extra thirty pesos for Cancha's use of the room. I refused to pay. Much wailing and screaming and threats of calling the Senora. Finally, Berta hammered a compromise out of me. I had to take the whole sad crew, including the beast Cessa, to the movies on Sunday and then to the park and they made me waste a half a role of pictures

on Cessa riding some sad-ass burro that Berta found limping through the square.

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I spent days in Bogota trying to buy a pair of sneakers, but my size 13 gringo feet were size 48 by the Colombian measure and nothing, simply nothing, could be made to fit. I finally had a pair of shoes made specially for me. When I returned to the store a week later to pick them up, I found my shoes in the store window all alone the way an impossibly large clown's shoe will be displayed at a shoe store in the states for a laugh.

I remember walking home one night with Maria, a Colombian girl I was seeing, and finding the street lined with riot police for a hundred yards. Long grim rows of Colombian men in visors and heavy green uniforms standing in the shadows shoulder to shoulder the length of the street. They carried plexiglass shields and in the streetlight they looked as if they had come for some urgent reason. Maria wouldn't walk past them the first time, but they were there every night - purposeful, stolid, anonymous, rippling like a massive forearm - and it got so we wouldn't even notice them. They were always gone in the morning, and I never learned why they were there.

I remember men in furtive suits and cheap hats that would slip up to me outside the American Express office with an armful of watches for sale. I remember Colombian hippies that gathered in the evening along the Calle de los Hippies hissing in rotten English that they had "grasssssss" to sell. I remember the gamines with torn sweaters and pants in shreds that would crowd around me with their runny noses and wide black South American eyes when I sat on the park bench near Hotel ABC because they knew I had a marvelous leather soccer ball and I remember playing wild futbol in the streets with armies of shrieking gamines and one time kicking the bloody ball in a big footed blundering American way and, literally, knocking down the door of someone's house on a back street in poor Bogota and going in to apologize with a horde of torn gamines quiet behind me and finding a kitchen filled with babies and smoke and a sixteen or sixty year old cooking soup on a wood burning range who wouldn't look me in the face and who took some money for the door in a sorry sodden sort of way as if money could never repair the door or her life, her wonderful life in Bogota.

I remember Bogota on census day. On census day no one was permitted to leave his or her dwelling. The streets were to be totally empty except for the military to enforce the edict and students to go from door to door in this city without street plans. Door to door counting every nino and *indio* and gamine and hippie and businessman and *borrachero*

and smuggler, door to door counting every Bogotano.

Viajeros, as I called myself in those days, travelers, were not exempt from the edict but I snuck out from the Tuesaquilla over the desperate pleadings of Berta and the warning I'd be shot on sight by the policia. I slipped out on census day because I couldn't believe that teeming, seething Bogota could be tethered for even an hour. And before I was stopped and my troubles really began, I saw Bogota bare and shivering in the cold Andean daylight; I saw Bogota naked. Running for miles in every direction, Bogota with dirty streets and ramshackle shops and peeling posters on every wall announcing a circus or prizefight or a *baile* on some long gone Sunday. Bogota sprawling and seedy; Bogota jerrybuilt; Bogota with streets sad and silent and empty, really *empty*. So that is how it looks, I thought to myself, and for years after I told myself I'd seen Bogota to the quick, I'd really seen Bogota.

But I was not right about that. I was not right about that any more than I was right about Ms. Didion and the Bogota she described. I never saw her Bogota but it does not surprise me that she carries it with her today. We come to Bogota on whatever road we happen to be traveling. We come to Bogota in the mountains and never know where we will be going next but when we leave, Bogota follows after us like the smell of rich coffee or the shouting of gamines running in a pack down some dead street in pursuit of a soccer ball that has gone forever astray.

Jay Duret is a San Francisco based writer and traveler. He welcomes feedback at jayduret@yahoo.com.

Kindness and Adventure in New Mexico

Danielle Thompson

In the balmy summer between middle school and high school, at midnight on Independence Day, my mom and I began our journey west in her old, beloved, red Buick regal. Even though she adored that car, she hated driving in traffic, so we set out with only the stars for company.

We had an Uncle Bob who lived north of us in Bloomington, Indiana. He'd always asked us to move in and Mom always said no. As a kid, I wanted to move because there was a nice basement apartment with its own entrance and a really nice yard; it helped that Uncle Bob had always been a pretty great guy. I couldn't understand why she didn't want to. Once I became an adult, she told me my grandpa, Uncle Bob's baby brother, didn't trust him alone with Mom and her two sisters. Grandpa was afraid he would try something because he said Uncle Bob was such a pervert and a womanizer. No one knows if he knew something about Uncle Bob or if he was just protecting his daughter, but Grandpa had been adamant that we not move to Bloomington. By the time we set out that summer, Mom felt it was okay because he'd moved to New Mexico to be near his girlfriend's family, and Grandpa wasn't around to say no. She said the move to New Mexico would be good for us. She thought she could get a better job to support us, and that I could go to a new school where I wouldn't be bullied anymore. We'd also been told it would be cheaper if I decided to go to college in California, which is what I wanted at the time.

I navigated us to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where our small town bones were dying for a stretch. We'd just gotten a kitten, and we'd brought him with us. He still didn't have a name.

At a truck stop, we saw some buffalo. For us, this constituted an exotic animal. The two of us talked to an old rancher while I held our kitten. I was a distracted kid, though, and he hopped out of my arms and headed straight for the buffalo pen.

"You'll never see your cat again," the white-haired rancher said around his toothpick.

I cried after Mom chastised me for my irresponsibility, but to our surprise, the little gray kitten ran right back to my arms. He wasn't hurt by the bigger animals and, now, he had a name – Buffalo.

The next afternoon we arrived in New Mexico, ready for a new start. Uncle Bob was his

usual jolly self; he was a little balder where his white hair thinned, and his belly was bigger, but he still wore his white wife beater muscle shirt. He was joking and laughing; it was a happy reunion.

His girlfriend Ellen had the same gray hair, stiff on the top of her head, and wore a perpetual grimace on her face. She showed us around the city that would now be our home.

Hobbs was a beautiful and bustling—everything Vincennes wasn't. The biggest differences were the stoplights. We were used to vertical hanging stoplights and in Hobbs they hung horizontally. All the pawn shops were high-end compared to the Piggy-Banc back home.

Of course, Ellen took us to every small town's mecca: Wal-Mart. It was much bigger and more intimidating than our tiny one. I remember Mom buying me the Backstreet Boys' first single. Then we went home to Uncle Bob.

At first everything was fine. Mom says we were only at Uncle Bob's a few days; I believe it was longer. All I remember is watching the Jenny McCarthy show with guest stars Hanson. I also remember Uncle Bob growling for his drink, Seagram's Seven and Seven-Up. I was his full-time bartender.

Uncle Bob had always been a drinker and could hold his liquor. The man I had memories of, and therefore expected, was a fun guy with a belly that reminded me of Santa Claus. But the reality was more like an episode of *The Real World*. Suppers with him had always been a warm, conversation-filled feast, but now they were quiet and quick: he'd turned surly and mean. He started looking at me like I was freeloading, never with a smile on his face. After a few drinks, he was even worse. There was no one moment when it got bad: it was just never good.

Buffalo had to stay in the hot shed and wasn't allowed out for any reason, while their dog came and went as she pleased. It was over 100 degrees by day and uncomfortably cold at night. There was a small window, but we couldn't open because we didn't want to risk Buffalo getting out.

I missed the great relationship I'd had with Uncle Bob. He was the cool uncle I couldn't wait to see ride up on his black motorcycle. Only now he'd sold the Harley and didn't like me anymore.

“He’s getting older,” Mom would say. “People change.”

Then, one day, I overheard Mom and Uncle Bob talking in the kitchen. It was hard not to, since the kitchen opened into the living room and tiny hallway.

“Why’d you bring Danielle?”

“What was I supposed to do? Leave her with Mom?”

“That’s exactly what you should have done.”

Mom has since explained to me that Uncle Bob had wanted her to come out, immediately get a job, and do everything else while he and Ellen drank the day away. I was just a hindrance, an inconvenience.

“Never would’ve happened,” Mom still says.

The final straw came early one morning when I was in Uncle Bob’s way and didn’t move fast enough. He picked up a TV box—one of the old kind, before flat screens—and threw it at me with real force.

“That’s it,” Mom said angrily. I knew she was beyond angry because she didn’t yell or scream. She just spoke in a tone that told me to shut up and do as she said.

She yanked me down the tiny hallway and into the room we shared. She had us packed up and out of there, and had grabbed the cat from the shed, before I could say a thing.

We spent the whole day at a park Mom found. It was a pretty green with lots of trees. I was reading a *Seventeen* magazine, one of the reader pieces, and I thought I could one day write about all of this. That night, it turned cold and we slept in our car, thankful we’d brought blankets from home. Mom parked in front of Uncle Bob’s trailer and we never saw him nor Ellen.

“He knew we were out there,” Mom said.

In the morning, Mom found a grocery store with a pay phone and looked through a

phonebook for Welfare's number. She called and got directions from the grocery store, then we headed to the office and waited about thirty minutes before we saw someone.

Mom laid it out for the black woman behind the counter, who was short and heavyset, with a Mexican accent we weren't used to. She had a certain style: she looked nice, and she acted nice. The place was crowded and I sat in a hard plastic chair while Mom talked. I love people watching, and there were all types mulling about.

The woman gave us emergency food stamps, more than we'd ever received in Vincennes. We still had nowhere to sleep that night, however, and no way home. We drove back to the grocery store, where I'm sure we got something to eat, but all I remember is Mom calling Grandma, tears streaming down her face.

"I need you," she said.

They talked and Grandma agreed to send us the money to come home. She just needed an address. Back to Welfare we went.

It was the end of the workday so the building was now almost empty. Mom spoke to the same woman and, this time, I stood beside her. The woman knew of a homeless shelter, but it was closed. When she called someone and told them our story, they opened it just for us.

"Now you can't tell anyone but your mom the address," the woman behind the counter said. "Don't take pictures either. Do you understand?"

"Why?" I asked. Mom always said that was my favorite word.

"A doctor donated the house but he doesn't want any publicity, so we keep it hush-hush."

We agreed, of course. With the directions in hand, we couldn't help but wonder where our adventure would lead next.

When we arrived at the shelter house, we couldn't believe our eyes. It was a mansion with a nice gated yard, a guest house, and more rooms than I'd ever seen. A house manager that looked like a walking twig draped in jean shorts and a shirt appeared. She had long, dirty blond hair that obscured her face as she showed us the rooms we could use. She

was the only other person staying there. The room was bare, but Buffalo would be all right if he stayed in our room. At least he was allowed inside this time. I didn't see the house manager again.

Mom called Grandma and gave her the address for the shelter, explaining that it was secret. Afterwards, we went grocery shopping at the same grocery store again.

"What do you think of spending whatever's left on the shelter and stocking their kitchen?" Mom asked.

It sounded good to me. I was just glad to be going home.

Back at the shelter, I was in for a culture shock. There was no TV. The living room, or common room, had a bookcase full of books. Our family loves to read, but I hadn't picked up a book in years. For entertainment, I read Danielle Steel. I liked her. We had the same name, so I sat by the large fireplace and read.

We stayed at the shelter for about a week until Grandma's check for around $300 came in the mail. As soon as it did, we went back to Welfare to see the same nice woman. She helped Mom cash the check, and before long, we were heading home. But first we spent the couple hundred left in food stamps, bought food that wouldn't go bad too soon, and filled the shelter's storage cabinet.

We drove straight through to Tulsa. Then, when we arrived at our motel and I went to get Buffalo out his cat carrier, he wasn't moving and felt stiff.

"Mom!" I cried.

She immediately understood the situation. "Go up to the room."

I took the key and went upstairs. I figured Mom would be right behind me, after fixing Buffalo. When she didn't appear, I tried to find her out the windows, but we were too high up. When she returned, Buffalo wasn't with her.

"I buried him. He liked it here. It was only right."

“He wasn’t sick, was he?” I asked her as the tears fell down my cheeks.

“Not that I’m aware of, but the trip was hard on him. First the drive out, and you know he hated the cat carrier, and then to stay in that hot shed just to be put back in his cage. He was only a baby.”

The rest of the way home, Mom and I talked about Buffalo, Uncle Bob, and the shelter. I came to understand that people change and things aren’t always what they seem. I was hurt by Uncle Bob and I was angry about Buffalo. When we reached the Indiana state line, we wanted to get out and kiss the ground. We were home.

We drove straight to Grandma’s and ended up living with my Uncle Robert, my mom’s baby brother. Uncle Robert, Mom, and I have been homeless at times since then, but never have we received the sort of kindness and help like that we found in Hobbs, New Mexico.

When I was 15 and selfish, all I understood was my pain. Now I look back and see so much more. I cherish the adventure and the valuable lessons I learned. I learned you can’t always trust family. I also learned to believe in the kindness of strangers.

It does exist.

Danielle Thompson grew up in southern Indiana and worked in various fast food establishments before finishing the Long Ridge Writer’s Course. She still lives in Indiana with her daughter (the wannabe fireman), her parents, and a cat who thinks he’s a dog. She writes fiction and blogs at http://daniellethompsonwriter.blogspot.com.

My English Journey

Krishnamoorthy Aithal

I still remember the sense of joy and achievement when I learnt to spell out my name *Krishnamoorthy* in English when I was a primary school student in a small village in India in the middle of the last century. I thought I mastered another language, added another arrow in my quiver. It was my belief that all I had to do was to transliterate the words and sentences of Kannada, my first language, in the letters of the English alphabet. It was, I thought, as simple as writing "*Nanu huduga*" for "I am a boy." According to my knowledge at the time, it was all there was to it to my new language.

It was not long after this I came to know that I had to travel farther beyond the letters of the alphabet; I had to acquire a whole new set of words for persons, things, and ideas, and put the new words according to a new set of rules, and learn much else. *Huduga* had another word "boy" in the new language, and *nanu* had to be substituted with "I." It did not certainly feel as sweet to call *huduga* or *nanu* by any other name. The new words lacked the full range of meaning of the Kannada originals. The English word "father," for example, excited no fear or reverence, and "mother" brought no cooling thought of a fountain of love and warmth. Even people in the new language had different names—Jack, Jill, Mary, and so on—different from the names of my friends—Rama, Sita, Laxman, Hanuman, etc. As you can imagine, my joy of English mastery was short-lived.

Despite the disappointment and obstacles, there was no going back so I soldiered on. Every day I learnt new words for family members, flowers, fruits, vegetables, animals, cutlery,--knives being the only cutlery we possessed,-- etc, with their spellings and pronunciation, the latter whose approximation to the Queen's English left completely to chance. Things were not as simple as it might sound. For example, I had no experience of the fragrance of roses—lotus, jasmine and *parijata* were the flowers I was familiar with--or the taste of apples so the original sin; dogs and cats roamed the streets and were a common sight, but they were, in spite of all the love and kindness towards the poor, helpless creatures who lacked linguistic abilities, as defined by Noam Chomsky and others, to assert their basic animal rights, not welcome inside the house and any slight physical contact with them required purification rituals; and the use of cutlery took the taste off food.

In my own language, I wrote as I spoke, but spellings of words in English were erratic. My vocabulary grew quickly in size, but the speed at which I could put the words together in the proper sequence to make meaningful sentences was slow in comparison. Learning the odd way of conjugating verbs "to be," "have," and "do" for Person and Tense and

reconciling myself to the anomalous use of the inflectional ending “s” to make nouns plural but verbs singular to agree with the Third Person were exasperating. Helping verbs coming in between the subject and the main verb was annoying in the extreme; Kannada did all its work neatly by inflectional variations of the verbs. I wondered how I learnt many more letters of the Kannada alphabet and a complicated set of inflectional endings at a much younger age sitting on my mother’s lap without feeling any of the strain. Everything appeared to have happened in the case of literacy in Kannada, naturally, like the growing of my teeth. If I had teething troubles, I don’t remember. In fact, I have no memory of my first language acquisition, just as I don’t remember how I switched over from crawling to walking, strange as it may seem, considering the enormous amount of effort that must have gone into the skill required to balance my body on two tiny, slender legs.

Slowly, I built a new world with its own flora and fauna, and switched back and forth between the ordinary world I lived in and the strange world I created. A great deal of effort went into the building of the new fantasy land. I had to do everything over again from the start, a process long, tedious, and painful. It was like toilette training redux. If I woke up in the morning to the crowing of the cock in one world, I got up from bed to the sound of an alarm clock in the other. Actually, I slept on the floor, and on a mat made of dried grass, if the luxury of a mat was available. I slept soundly. I had to find a bed to lie on in the other world. If I remember correctly, the bed, elevated from the ground, made me feel initially nervous and insecure. I feared falling off the bed. I would prefer to lie on the solid floor even today, after so many years of experience of the bed, if I could have my preference. My actual breakfast consisted of a plateful of *congi* in those days, but my counterpart had orange juice, cereals, bread toast and milk or coffee—I couldn’t include bacon and eggs, no matter what. During meals at home, my family ate silently, as speaking was forbidden during meals, chewing every mouthful of food thirty-two times to enjoy the full taste and value of it, but I could talk on all kinds of issues from family to politics and have heated debates as if food was secondary and it little mattered how it tasted. Sometimes, the debates became so heated that they transitioned from verbal to physical and plates went flying all around. I spoke mostly to meet my primary needs in Kannada, but I had to learn to say “Good morning!” and other forms of greetings, depending on the time of the day, and say “Sorry” and “Thank you!” at every turn. It made no sense to me to ask the question “How do you do?” and get an identical question “How do you do?” in answer to the question. I could hardly bring myself up to say routinely “Very well, thank you” even when I was confused by all the new exercise, hurting, hungry and tired. In the new world, I had to announce who I was by name at the start of the conversation and remember to ask the name of the person I addressed, something impolite in the world in which I lived where propriety required I announce the name of the village from where I came from and which proud father’s son I was.

I went to a school where the medium of instruction was Kannada. I did pretty well in all subjects, including English. I had one hour of English, six days a week, and for about nine

years. Time to time, the methods of instruction changed according to the statements of my teachers after they returned from a short refresher course, but I hardly noticed any changes. Similarities were more striking: whatever the methods, there were periodic tests and daily home assignments. I learnt to identify parts of speech, change a simple sentence into a complex or compound sentence, rewrite a sentence from the active voice into the passive, turn direct speech into the indirect, fill in the blanks with appropriate conjunctions and prepositions, make sentences using given phrases and idioms so as to bring out their meanings, and translate passages from Kannada into English and *vice versa*. I passed English with high scores.

When I went to college where the medium of instruction was English, I did not follow the lectures in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics, yet the only subject in which I scored good marks was English, as I was well-versed in grammar and vocabulary. My ambition to become a medical doctor or an engineer crushed, I joined an undergraduate program in English to become an English teacher. The popular notion at the time was that really bright students chose English for study so it didn't hurt my pride to accept the second or third choice of a major subject which became available to me. This was when patriotic Indians were shouting *Angrezi hatao,* throw English out; and when in some parts of India people were committing self-immolation against imposition of Hindi as an official language of the country, as Hindi looked as foreign to them as English. It was a time when the mother tongue reigned supreme. English learning/ teaching, however, did not become subversive underground activities. In fact, English enjoyed a prestige difficult to explain in the alien land.

I received an excellent training in literature, British, American and the Commonwealth. I studied all the great authors as if they were my own and the several movements and eras in literature and criticism. I had teachers who could recite *The Paradise Lost* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. I did one better: I committed to memory a good part of Chaucer's *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English. It was believed that a strong dose of literature automatically produced proficiency in the use of language so the program did not include teaching of English language *per se*. I could not say for sure that this happened, although the long study of literature from *Beowulf* to *The Waste Land* shifted the grounds under my feet. I had only the words of the poets to believe in the sweetness of Nightingale's song and the beauty of the daffodils; the power of their words left me in no doubt of their veracity. Still the bird and the flowers were alien and it strained my imagination to give reality to the objects. I wished I had Aladdin's lamp. Finally, I comforted myself with the words "Heard melodies are sweet and those unheard are sweeter."

The power of words did give me entry to the desires and disappointments of the human heart and the complex workings of the species' mind. I had the words, phrases, and lines

of scores of authors to fit for recitation on various occasions, but I lacked the skills to express my thoughts and feelings in English fully. I strung words together and constructed sentences after considerable thought, but the sentences did not seem to breathe life, despite the care taken to construct them making sure that one thing agreed with another. They were dead on arrival, asphyxiated. After graduation, I became a college teacher of English still shaky in the language of the literature I taught.

Luckily, I got a Fulbright scholarship to do graduate study in the United States. Four years at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, Indiana, and living in a country where English was spoken helped me stand firmly on the ground. It took me many more years of reading, writing, and teaching to gain a comfortable degree of proficiency in English. In fact, I learnt most of what I know today from teaching Freshman English classes in college: I had to learn in order to be able to teach. Gradually, I gained a good degree of communicative competence to deserve the title of an English teacher. No longer did I have to resort to the common habit of airing contrary opinions and theories in an assertive manner to demonstrate that I had a thinking mind.

I must acknowledge that my linguistic competence is limited mostly to the field of critical analysis of literature and writing skills. I do keep well-informed about Washington politics and can talk about it with greater ease and forthrightness than many of my neighbors in Washington, where I currently live. How many people have, for example, watched the entire impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton, as I have, and with pain? I can offer my opinions on the opinions of the US Supreme Court on a host of issues. But I would come out hungry if I strayed into a high class restaurant to eat. I would fumble if I enter into a conversation about market trends, the rising and falling of share prices, and the goings- on in Wall Street. I don't date, dance or drink so these areas are off limits. I keep mum during the American football season. I have no ear for music, rap or country. I refrain from talking about the latest car makes and models. I lead a simple life, drive an old car discarded by my daughter, buy mostly used stuff, believe in the theory "don't fix what ain't broken," and pay all my bills before they are forwarded to collection companies. I would guess experience of individuals everywhere remains limited to certain spheres of life so I don't feel handicapped in any serious way. Besides expert critical analysis of novels, poems and plays, I do occasionally write short stories in English and have earned a name among friends as a passable writer.

Instead of asking students to forswear the mother tongue in EFL/ ESL classes, it is likely to help them learn a foreign language by giving them an idea that they can use their mother tongue to learn the target language. After all they speak in different ways in their own language depending on to whom they speak at home and at school. If they approach a foreign language as one other way, albeit different from anything they have known, of using language to negotiate with the world, they are likely to acquire the foreign language with

fewer tears. In their own language they know how to state, for example, two or more ideas equal in importance in a certain context, or one more important than others, similar or different, and then how these distinctions could be shown using different sentence structures; similarly how ideas could be developed, unity and coherence among ideas established, and transitions handled; how clarity is the main aim of communication; and how one could use the words to paint, sing, and dance. These concepts are transferable from language to language. The goal is to build on the student's experience of the first language acquisition rather than in contrast, and in addition to the first language, leaving his/her food habits and others intact. Learning a second language should be like taking a second spouse, rather having a lover, while still remaining married, under the full protection of the constitution, whatever a country's marriage laws are.

I enjoy a kind of peculiar freedom in writing in English which leaves me often in doubt whether I could/ would speak the same thoughts in my mother tongue. Writing/ speaking in English seems to have become a kind of play. I combine words and ideas from different worlds and produce a strange concoction. I don't know if it is to the taste of readers who have their favorite drink in Coke or Seven Up or plain bottled water.

Today I use English for all practical and impractical purposes. Rarely do I speak or write in my mother tongue. At home my wife speaks Hindi and so does my daughter, as Kannada is Greek and Latin to them; both shush me if I try Hindi. I worked in different places in India away from home, and the only language I could use in these places for communication was English. I didn't have time to learn the local languages because before I settled in one place I saw a greener pasture and moved there. Probably, my tongue may loosen up to speak in Kannada, if I find someone to talk to in the language in Washington, DC. I am sure that there are people here from Bangalore, but I have not sought them out.

Years of study of English language and literature and a significant period of stay in the US have not been without an impact on my values, beliefs, and outlook. I do, of course, still see the world as *maya* and all my suffering as a fruit of my *karma*. I like to be quickly cremated when I die. (I am warned that if I die in my present place of residence, I would have to wait at least four days in a morgue to get my papers completed for having left the world for good.) I would love to die in Benares or Hardwar, but that seems most unlikely to happen.

Other than these core values, I have learned that there are other ways of looking at life. For example, I don't believe in heaven and I don't wish to take rebirth, which might seem to contradict my core values. I do not, however, deny the great social value of such beliefs and would enthusiastically support institutions which propagate them, if this helps remove somewhat the contradictory impression. Left to myself, I would make no attempt to

reconcile all my contradictory views and positions. I would recommend to others not to try to smoothen all the wrinkles of my personality to make me a consistent character Emerson has warned against: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” To continue where I left, I believe that I am just a bundle of molecules, and nothing would be left of me except the sixty or so chemicals like carbon that make up my body. I could not say things of this kind in my own mother tongue, however hard I might try. I wouldn’t find words to say it, hindered probably by the fear that my well-wishers might think that I have gone insane and dispatch urgent messages to Lord Yama to take me out. All this makes my vision of life quite colorful. I see life as Shelley saw it “a dome of many-coloured glass.”

If English made me feel toothless and clawless for a while, I have finally been able to make the language serve me in my pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

Krishnamoorthy Aithal’s short stories have appeared in Critical Quarterly, Short Story International, Unlikely Stories, Long Story Short *(where his “*Enter, Search, Select, Click*” appeared as the STORY OF THE MONTH for February 2012),* Journal of Postcolonial Societies and cultures, Indian Literature, New Quest*, and* Contemporary Literary Review*. Manuscripts of two volumes of his short stories* One in Many and Many in One *are making the rounds of publishing houses. Besides creative writing, he has published articles on a wide range of authors and books in scholarly international journals. Currently, he teaches English at Potomac College, Washington, DC, and National College, Falls Church, VA.*

Chinese Holiday: Part One

Colleen MacDonald

Over the Chinese New Year holiday, many awkward events can transpire when several foreign adults set out on a mission to experience as many of the extremes they can tackle (and that China can offer) in a six week period. Here, I offer a few examples.

It started, as things usually do in the far north of China, in Har'bin (or Chinese Siberia, as I call it). The temperature reached a daily average of -30 F and would drop down to a cool -37 at night. Once in five days did we remark that, "Oh, it has warmed a bit", only to realize there wasn't much warmth in -20f. Our vacation having been characterized by spending thirty minutes to layer on appropriate clothing to leave our dull hostel, frocking through the streets like blind zombie sumo wrestlers, and drinking beer that cooled more once it left the freezer, arriving back in Hangzhou in 30 F and rain made us kiss the ground – figuratively, not literally, of course – anyone who's been to China knows the ground is not kissable.

Having survived China's coldest and coming out on top, we decided rock climbing was next. Not content to reach our climbing destination of Yangshou directly, we chose instead the back-ass-wards way of a flight, bus ride, river ferry, and half a dozen halted conversations in Chinglish. Arriving in Yangshou revealed the promised land of climbing: Karst peaks abounded, teasing with promises of virgin rock, little know crags, and world-renowned routes. Appropriately losing ourselves in all things rock climbing, we surfaced on regular intervals to consume overpriced beer, disappointing two-foot-long ice cream cones, and to marvel at a painfully tacky life-size replica of Mothra somehow attached to the side of a karst mountain. We concluded the Chinese like such things, as the cave through the mountain Muthra was perched upon seemed to be doing a brisk business of relieving locals of their holiday cash.

With the taste of Yangshou rock still in our chalk grubby hands, it was time to take on Yunnan. We landed in Kunming, no thanks to the wind and pilot, who together seemed to have conspired to make the three hour trip more jolly by performing all manner of altitude drops, sudden turns, and wing wobbles. It was the first flight where we did not take our seat belts off the entire time. The feeling of fear may have been mutually shared amongst all passengers – the bathroom stampede once disembarking was African Savanna worthy.

Kunming disappointed us, so we contorted ourselves into tiny mini-bus seats and took off for Dali. Somehow dodging the horde of visors, straw hats, and ear pieces of a tour, we were able to tear our eyes away from tasty delicacies of corn and pea ice cream being sold in push carts in order to take in The Three Pagodas. Having survived the Cultural

Revolution mess, 1000 years of earthquakes, and several other acts of God/nature, the Three Pagodas takes a high spot of the list of ancient, badass, stubborn architecture that provides enviable holiday photos.

There may have been more leg room on the bus to LeJiang; we hardly noticed as we were focused on contemplating proper beer from the night before, the distinct smell of pickled chicken bits, and the probability of me being able to sit on a Yak. LeJiang cleaned up smart and put on a twelve-hour show of fireworks, had masses going everywhere/ nowhere, and served stale street food. We hardly noticed the street food, as ten o' clock in the evening found us shambling drunkenly about after a serious 'Ganbei!' session in which we took pulls of homemade Biju from a gas canister. The Biju, the group of five Naxi men told us, was special and would not give a head or stomachache. This seemed as good a reason as any to empty a few glasses (or in this case, fifteen) and to partake in Chinese New Year festivities.

Once recovered from the Biju – which, due to gleefully imbibing far, far more than the recommend amount – had not delivered in the 'no headache' department, we once again contorted ourselves into ridiculously twisted shapes in a silly-small vehicle and headed toward the trailhead of Tiger Leaping Gorge. After a few minutes, our journey came to a halt once we realized our luggage had freed itself from the back trunk and hurled itself onto the pavement at 40 KPH. After some time, the trailhead was reached without remarkable further incident (the packs having been relocated to our laps, obstructing any view out the windows), since by this time in our holiday Chinglish conversations, getting lost at least twice and stepping in large piles of stray animal feces no longer counted as remarkable.

Situating ourselves behind two regularly pissing/eating donkeys and five Chinese on holiday, we started the trek up Tiger Leaping Gorge. Six hours later, after being offered "weed" by an old lady, climbing 1,000 vertical feet, and drooling over snow-capped mountains, we finally made it to the conveniently named "Half-Way Hostel". There, as we'd heard claimed, the view of the gorge from the squat toilets is worth the price of the room. This proved to be true, with the view being really quite pleasant, especially if one likes ones natures served with the sounds of hikers suffering from Mao's revenge…

Part Two to appear in Issue Twelve...

The hidden, derelict and marginalized attract her; with a desire for adrenaline rushes and a love of heights, Colleen has photographed everything from abandoned highrises in Detroit

to Particle Colliders in Russia. With an eye for portraits, a belief that everyone has a story, and a love of drains, she has been wandering through foreign countries since 2007. Accused of being a spy, a prostitute, and a missionary; having repelled down elevator shafts, been caught up in political protests and nearly arrested, she has developed a fearless approch to photography seeking out the moments both violent and peaceful that give life meaning. http://www.mcmacdonald.net

Not Another Literary Reference to Key West

Jake Kaida

The last time I hung out in Key West my friend Steve and I stopped at a liquor store and bought a bottle of dark rum, some orange juice, and a lime from a small market, drove over to the more Caribbean-influenced part of town, parked on a dim side street where some of the local denizens were hanging out, took the various ingredients from the shopping bag and mixed a kind of poor man's *Planter's Punch* that we each took turns swigging from the clear plastic orange juice container.

An old black woman wearing a purple nightgown and a fake pearl necklace rode over to us on a child's size pink Huffy bicycle and asked us, "If I go to my house and get a container will you pour me some of that concoction you got into it?" I said "Sure," and she pedaled away. About ten minutes later she was back with what looked like a jelly jar that she had just rinsed out but still had some jam clinging to the sides: from the dark ruby color and light seeds I surmised it must have been raspberry. I poured some of our impromptu mixture into her jar and she thanked me graciously.

Then she asked, "What's your name?"

"Jake," I answered. "And this is my friend Steve."

"Nice to meet you fellas. I'm Esther," the woman replied shaking both of our hands at the same time, while she skillfully held onto the jelly jar with the few teeth that she had left. Once she relinquished our hands she took the jar in her right hand and tilted it to her lips, taking a deep relaxed pull from its smooth wide mouth.

As she talked to us I understood that she was drunk. Not bad drunk, but local chatty drunk. We spent a good amount of time with Esther as she told us some of the history of her neighborhood and how she was going to a party later tonight at her favorite club. "Well, it's not really a club, more like a house that's been turned into a speakeasy, a place for the local drunks who can't afford to drink in the tourist bars on Duval St. or any of the other trendy waterin' holes poking up in good ole' Key West." She told us how the Jamaicans and Haitians were being run out of the city to make room for more "Yuppy-type housin'."

Then she went on, "We ain't used to seeing a couple of white boys standing on the corner

drinking in our neighborhood. If the cops pass they're going to hassle you, think you're trying to buy drugs from one of us."

Looking around the street it was obvious that there were drug deals going on every ten minutes or so down the block, as cars would pull up, and then the person in the car would hand the person in the street who had just handed them the plastic bag some paper money, and alas drive away to get high somewhere else besides this dingy yet very orderly and quiet neighborhood.

While Steve and I watched the night's events unfold around us, everyone that walked by our unusual trio smiled and said hello to Esther. All of the neighborhood locals were of a darker skin tone than us, and many of them spoke with sharp, broken rhythmic island accents, yet we felt absolutely no hostility or anger directed towards us.

However, a couple of minutes later a group of clean-cut white college age guys wearing their fraternity letters on baseball caps and sporting khaki shorts and polo shirts, went carousing loudly through the neighborhood, bottles of imported beer in their hands, yelling and cursing at each other and anybody else within earshot, and then breaking their empties on the ground. Esther looked at them and then back at us saying, "There, those people are gonna be the ones buyin' up our neighborhoods in the future and moving us out because we're the ones who they say drive the real estate down. Well, I may be an old drunk but at least I gots enough common sense to keep my misgivings to myself. I ain't messin' with nobody's sleep."

We drank with Esther for a while longer and then she gave us each a soulful hug goodbye and told us to stop by her neighborhood anytime we wanted. "You boys are always welcome on these here streets," she said. "I'll spread the word and let everyone know. That's how it is here. Everyone's seen ya'll here with me tonight, so if they see ya'll again they'll give you the nod. That nod means its all gooood."

Later that night while Steve and I were walking down Duval Street, among a seething sea of drunk and stoned white bodies with patches of scintillating red sunburn decorating their swerving frames like rust on an old junker, we didn't get one hello from anybody: there were thousands of people out partying but not one random hello or even a return of a friendly nod. Eventually we ran into an older couple who were for some strange reason inquiring of a group of rather loud drunk men, if there was any place to go in Key West that had more of a local's vibe to it. To this question, the trusty leader of this group of intoxicated middle-aged men responded, "Duval Street is where it's at. There's beer and

liquor and tits everywhere. Why would you want to go anywhere else?"

After another fifteen minutes of wandering Steve and I bumped into two cops. Steve asked them where the Cuban section of town was or if there was on older more relaxed part of Key West that we could explore. The younger of the two white cops was eager to give us his response, "There isn't a Cuban section, just a couple of restaurants. As for an older part of town, you boys should do your best to stay away from the poorer neighborhoods. Those parts got a bad element hanging around. It's not safe for a couple of guys like yourselves, if you know what I mean."

Once the young cop was done talking Steve walked away in disgust. I followed him. Neither one of us thanked the cop for his opinion. I knew where Steve was going and glided happily behind his racehorse pace. He walked straight back to where we had met Esther earlier. She wasn't there, so we took the ingredients out of my backpack and mixed up some more of our poor man's *Planter's Punch* and stood contently on the corner sipping our drinks and letting the cool midnight Florida Key breeze filter through our psyches. We must have stood there drinking for well over an hour, saying hello to the various locals after they gave us the aforementioned nod, before Esther eventually found us. She was drunker than when we had met her before. And so were we. She asked me to pour some more "Of that smooth concoction" into her jar, which I deftly obliged.

As the three of us stood there together under the crystal clear light of the three quarter full moon, Esther introduced us to everyone from her neighborhood that walked by: drug dealers, crack heads, players, slick young ballers, prostitutes, shopkeepers, her niece Mary, it didn't matter who, she knew them all. Esther was proud of her place in the community. Sure she might have been a drinker, but she was honest. Those frat boys, and cops out on Duval Street, they were the real drunks, drunk on power, a sense of entitlement, and self-absorbed whiteness.

Esther was like the mayor, the communicator of a part of town that the tourists didn't know existed and the city council and real estate planners wanted to tear down to make room for expensive condos and fashionable bars and eateries. She was a link to the past, to a time when people lived in Key West for the characters, and the overall intoxication of the place itself: a simpler time when Disney World was still just in Orlando.

But it's like that in America. We want to get rid of any sense of place that doesn't lure the tourists, or make the upper middle class want to move there. It's easy to knock down a section of town that the so-called well-heeled people and ruling bodies declare an eyesore. Then, after it's gone, educated fanciful white writers, who had never actually spent time with the people and their place back in the day, can make up great literary stories about

what that location used to be like.

But I've been to Key West, many times. I've breathed it in with my own lungs and seen it with my own two eyes. I have sipped dark rum and shook even darker hands along the shady back streets. I found those hands worn and welcoming, and a little shaky at times. I liked those hands and the hearts and souls attached to them. Maybe at this point of their existence one could say they were a little down on their luck, but luck is a thing that is very hard to define or understand merely by appearances. Luck runs deeper than that, like the distilled sugarcane intoxicates our bloodstream unbeknownst to the sophisticated world passing by us.

Jake Kaida, author of the forthcoming Blue Collar Nomad*, is a nomadic chef, writer and farmworker. He has been a feature writer for the international club-culture magazine* Revolution*, and was the editor of the alternative media publication* Phage*. His books of poetry and creative nonfiction have been published by independent and radical presses in the United States and Canada, including Ghost Dog Press and Gutter Press. He is originally from North Jersey.*

The Orchid Garden and the Paradise Birds

Carla Charleston

Joseph, our local guide, beckons us up a slippery clay path toward the remote Rondon Ridge, in the rainforest of Papua, New Guinea on our quest to see a Superb Bird of Paradise, a most unusual bird. Chilling mist filters through trees congested with ferns and vines. Fog diamonds dance through beams of sunlight in air heavy with forest aromas.

"Highland morning is cool, here on de equator," Joseph tells us in a shy melodious lilt that hints at Pidgin English, or Tok Pisin, one of the island's official languages. He seems relaxed, affable, his smile contagious. Dressed in jeans, dark t-shirt and windbreaker, with a white baseball cap to shade his creased, ebony face, Joseph moves agilely up the muddy trail in thonged sandals. "We got a late start. Maybe we find a Superb," he whispers, motioning us forward. "Maybe not."

Earlier, on a YouTube video, we watched a black Superb cavort like an exotic dancer attracting a mate—wings spread to reveal a double-swoosh of iridescent turquoise chest-feathers beneath two brilliant blue dots—a unique happy face design.

"Dat his favorite spot." Joseph points to a branch overhead.

Squint-eyed, we strain to track leaf-shrouded flutters and faint chirps like the YouTube clip, confirmation the Superb is nearby, probably in the trees above us. Condensation drips in our eyes and down our cheeks. The search for a black bird in backlit foliage grows tedious.

"You like to hike up to de bowerbird nest," Joseph suggests, gesturing to the path.

We agree and move on. Soon we reach a boundary fence where a stile with a posted sign informs us the land is a local village's private territory and requires permission to enter. Fortunately, Joseph, a village elder, invites us to enter. We press on. Through a break in the trees, we gaze down at the lush valley and distant Mount Hagen, an eroded volcano.

Continuing upward, Joseph points out scattered bits of white fluffy moss, clues a bowerbird is making a nest, but not the one he wants to show us. In dappled light, we struggle over thick root laces to a circular clearing about two feet wide, its outer edge defined by white moss tufts, the inside lined with dried grass. "De bowerbird nest," Joseph

announces with pride. “Here he dance and sing for de ladies. Dis de courtship arena,” he says with a grin.

We admire the artful work of a solitary beak and a pair of claws.

Joseph makes a wide gesture with his hands. “Dis land cleared, twenty year ago. All big tree taken. De tree you see are young and little,” he says with a sigh. “Dey no hold big bird. Up high, where de truck no go, you can see many big bird.”

We contemplate the possibility of extending the hike, and then, with our own collective sigh, turn and head back down the trail. We have no time for a longer hike today.

The sun is strong; the mist gone. Sweat pours down our faces. Quickly, we shed our jackets. Joseph invites us to cool off in his orchid garden, a large tree-filled expanse enclosed in a wooden fence with a thatched gable shelter at the entrance. “New construction take many tree, home to wild orchid,” he explains. He offers botanical and local plant names as he shows us colorful bell-shaped orchids like dainty earrings and strands of tiny balls that sway in dangling chains. Little fans, pinchers, and spiders appear in profusions of red, pink, yellow, purple, and white, all carefully grafted on shade trees. Higher up, we see the yellow and purple blossoms of prize cattleya orchids.

Water gurgles not far away. Joseph shows us the waterfalls, retention ponds, and drainage canals he built to provide moisture for his babies during dry periods and to carry it away in the rainy season. “Papua, New Guinea have about 460 different wild highland orchid,” he says. “So far, 133 here, in my garden. I want dem all. When I no work, I walk in de mountains to look for dem. I watch how de orchid grow and make dey new home in my garden so dey like it here.”

Joseph is not young, yet he never seems to rest, as a guide and a gardener creating a home for endangered orchids. His monumental labor echoes the bowerbird’s work on a grander scale, not to entice the opposite sex, but to preserve the flora and wildfowl.

Early the next morning, we meet Joseph to continue our quest to find the Superb Bird of Paradise. This time he takes us to an embankment and shows us how to use banana leaves to slide down, not quite to the bottom. Silently, we follow his lead. All of us perch on the hillside together, studying Joseph and a branch he points to not far away. A familiar song reverberates through the forest as a black bird lands on that branch and flings open his wings. On his chest an iridescent turquoise smile, two dots above a double-swoosh, blends to lavender in the early morning light. This moment has been worth the wait. Truly

Superb.

Carla Charleston is a freelance writer from Jacksonville, Florida. Dr. Charleston has been a professor and research scientist in the field of communication sciences at the University of Florida and the University of Miami. She has published six books and over fifty refereed articles in her field. Her essay, Alachua Autumn, was accepted for publication in bioStories *(http://www.biostories.com/) in January, 2013. She is currently marketing her novel,* Partenope's Secrets*, the story of Americans during the Cold War and the rebuilding Naples, Italy, after World War II.*

The Little Corners of the World

Mark Rigney

October, 2012:

My friend Mikhalis informs me that in the most recent elections, the Greek fascist party carried seven percent of the popular vote, up from less than one percent in the previous election cycle. In a nation of ten million, Mikhalis claims that one million are now out of work, and that his own job is sufficiently insecure that he has begun plans to decamp to either England or the U.S. In this, Mikhalis is lucky; he holds dual citizenship. Most Greeks will never have such a luxury.

The last time I saw Mikhalis, in a shabby Athens alleyway, he had just introduced me to a former political prisoner who'd spent some ten years in a Greek jail for reasons that I'm sure were never fully recorded. I shook hands with this leather-clad stranger—he'd just rumbled into the alley on a Harley—and he looked me over as if I could not possibly be worth knowing. Nevertheless, he shook my hand because of my connection to Mikhalis, with whom I attended graduate school. He said, in Greek (translated by Mikhalis), that he hoped I would like Athens, and his country.

I did, as did my family. We spent a month there in 2007. Our youngest, Evan, was two-and-a-half, and his stroller had gone missing on our flight from Paris. Our older boy, Corey, was six, and carried our entire diaper supply in a cunning little red backpack. We had very little money and one goal: to see the country as best we could until we ran out of funds. This, then, is Greece as we encountered it, in slightly better times.

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May, 2007:

Across the street from our two-star Athenian hotel, the young Communists of Athens (the KKE) are having yet another series of organizational parties. Since they seem to occupy an entire building, Athens must have many, many communists, all of them under the age of thirty (most under twenty-five). Not one of them has an iota of aesthetic sense; flags and posters have been taped up at all angles, with weird gaps left between. On balance, they're an attractive lot physically; the men look earnest and gesticulate a lot, while the women chain smoke (so do the men) and finger the straps of their camisoles. They bend over tables a lot and wave pencils. One girl, improbably, is blonde; another, eschewing the

fabled Great Leap Forward, blithely sports a Gap t-shirt.

Below, pedestrians are busy ceding their sidewalk space to motorcycles. Not merely parked, these cycles, but gunning their engines and sidling through crowds. Ten years ago, before Greece joined the EU, Athens had perhaps three hundred thousand cars. Now, the streets swarm with some two and a half million autos, and who knows how many motorcycles and scooters. What caused the deluge? Fixed low interest rates (a first for Greece, so people can suddenly borrow as they never did before) and the EU's insistence that Greece abandon the many tariffs formerly placed on automobile purchases. Yes, Athenians are downright proud of their growing metro system (the accent gets placed on the "o," not the Francophile's "e"), and the pride shows in people's obeyance of certain rules: it is forbidden to eat or drink on the trains or in the stations, and nobody does. Indeed, the metro, trains and tunnels and all, is the cleanest place in all of Athens.

Athens has several nice parks and gardens, but the locals don't seem to care. I make this judgment based on the fact that they don't use or frequent these quiet green places. We have entire playgrounds—indeed, whole forests of skinny-trunked pines absolutely laden with cones—to ourselves. Evan and Corey are delighted (though not so much as I) to discover that if you look sharp amongst the ruins and dry grasses, you can scare up roaming tortoises.

As a language, Greek has trouble translating the word "Disposal." The welcoming sign on our hotel bureau says in bold print that the staff will always be "At Our Disposition." And the website for our upcoming Nafplio apartment claims that, "A/C and TV are disposed in all the rooms."

Having finally spotted an unattractive Communist across the way, I am reminded of the beauty captured by the ancient sculptors, both Greek and Roman, who once worked these lands. What's shocking to me is that for nearly a thousand years after the Hellenistic period, artists forgot the precepts of art, as if a candle had been blown out and not one of the remaining inhabitants knew where to find the matches. Even with this historical arc as an obvious local object lesson, 21st century Greece does not teach art in its public schools. They claim, says Mikhalis, that "the museums are doing a good job already." Yes, places like the small but thorough Benaki Museum host school groups, but it doesn't take much to see that Athens today is a mess partly because art and aesthetics have been ignored, and virtually all the art that is celebrated is between 2,500 and 1,500 years old.

Most of that legacy survives in the form of ruins, and Greece—Athens included—has so many ruins that they hardly know what to do with them. Half-hearted earthworks abound. All along the above-ground portions of the metro lines lie ancient columns and blocks,

pilasters and crowns, all sufficiently common as to be essentially unremarkable, not in any way worth making a fuss over. A photo I walked away from but now wish I'd taken was of two larger than life-size statues standing at attention on either side of a service entrance into a basement beneath the massive (rebuilt) Roman Agora. Had these two monolithic guardians hailed from some more newly settled nation, they would have been prized, fawned over, and displayed indoors, with plaques and signage. Here, they're surplus junk, barely worth setting on their shattered legs.

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Having decamped for the Peleponnesian peninsula, we have managed to lose our Greek phrasebook. This is a disaster. We are now Strangers in a Strange Land, our command of the language relying now upon faulty memory and a memorized string of questions to which I cannot understand the answers.

Greek topography resembles almost exactly that of Southern California, combined with the half-built and sometimes un-built flat-roofed housing of Central and South America. Rebar, skeletal and twiggy, sticks up everywhere. Empty buildings pile alongside the well-off and inhabited, and everywhere you look are scrubby, low-growing trees resembling Californian chaparral. Olive and citrus groves dominate, each done in neat, spacious rows. Greek women favor big, seventies-style sunglasses and long hair. Nobody wears shorts, but skin-tight jeans seem to be socially acceptable, and young women like tops that don't cover their belly buttons. The men are harder to classify quickly, but I know I stand out in every crowd: my nose slopes the wrong direction.

Our first touristy destination became Ancient Korinthos, the ruined Roman town just a few miles outside today's eponymous city. The bus dropped us off in the middle of nowhere, a three-way intersection dominated by rusted advertisements. As we puzzled out which way to go, a very wrinkled old Greek woman arrived, dressed in traditional black with a cross 'round her neck. She puttered right over, made motorcycle noises, and pretended to shift handle-grip gears, smiling all the while and chatting away in lively Eleneeka (Greek).

It turns out she was warning us to keep the kids away from the interior corner of the roadway, where motorcycles come speeding along with the apparently express purpose of giving this very nice woman something to warn lost tourists about. In attempting to communicate, we smiled a lot, made respondent motorcycle noises, and said "thank you" in at least three languages, partly because the only thing we could translate from our new guide was "merci beaucoup," a phrase she knew how to say but not, so far as we could discern, how to apply. She did finally point us in the right direction, and just when we were thinking we'd really gone wrong and landed in some kind of dirt-street mining town, we

saw imposing Corinthian columns rising in the distance, and knew we'd found our way.

Ancient Korinthos features a demolished theater, practically embalmed by the local hillside, and the site itself is only just beginning to "go touristy." The dirt road we encountered is dirt because it's just about to be repaved, and the walkways through the silent, stony city have sidewalks, probably for the first time ever. For lunch, we found a miniscule "super market," where I finally learned which funny white containers hold yogurt. I opted not to purchase any of the twenty-plus turkey-sized frozen squid, their tentacles tied back over their bodies and the entire package done up in shrink-wrap. The squid outnumbered the frozen chickens ten to one.

Two days later, Evan had a messy diaper while wandering the ruins of the Epidauro's Temple of Asklepios, a structure dedicated to a centaur-taught healer and very much in decay. Given a lack of appropriate facilities, I accomplished the diaper change with Evan resting atop a two thousand-year-old column base, which might well have been designed for this express purpose.

Later, after trekking up and down the Epidaurean theater and making all sorts of noises to test its vaunted acoustics, we treated ourselves to an actual restaurant meal. An item we did not sample from the translated menu was "Roast of Lamp." Perhaps tomorrow, if we stay?

We also acquired a new but consistently sub-par phrase book. This one suggests we ask for a "kilo of barm," which seems very far-fetched; why would we embark on making sourdough bread (or hard liquor) while roaming a foreign land? The section on the post office avoids giving the word for "postcard," but it does tell you how to say, "The house is near the woods and sometimes we've seen foxes and deer." In the section on "relationships," it goes from describing how to ask another person's name to the single word, perhaps a command, "Stroke."

Nafplio, says Mikhalis, is one of the three loveliest towns in mainland Greece. He does not exaggerate. High above it looms its ridge-riding seventeenth-century castle, the Palamidi, floodlit at night, and below lies the tranquil harbor from which Jason and the Argonauts supposedly sailed to search out the Golden Fleece. Palms and Byzantine walls, fishing boats and oil tankers, boutiques and Italianate street cafes: irresistible in combination.

The Palamidi, in part because it rises nearly a thousand meters above the town, demands to be visited, or climbed, even, by means of its seventeenth-century staircase. Corey managed it under his own six-year-old steam, but Evan required carrying much of the way.

The time to ascend is morning, while the staircase lies in blessed shade. Above, in gleaming sunshine, the ruin sprawls out in all directions, though “ruin” is perhaps not quite the word. “Abandoned” might do better. The Palamidi was a working fortress, and remains surprisingly intact. The prison wing is especially well preserved, with rooms and doorways and windows, some of which retain the original gratings and bars. At least two dungeon passages descended down stairs into unknown depths. Even with Corey’s sharp eyes and my camera flash, we have no idea how far onward those tunnels led.

The views, too, both of the town and the Gulf of Argos, are to die for, perhaps literally; the cliffs, like the staircase that winds up them, are precipitous.

On the way down, Corey raced ahead to talk to two men, fellow explorers and complete strangers, who turned out to be teachers. They treated him to a lesson about the symbolism of the Greek flag: the cross in the corner stands for its Orthodox Christian tradition; the blue is for the sky, while the white is for the crests of the waves in the sea; the nine stripes come from the revolutionary slogan, “Freedom or Death,” used during the War of Independence against the Turks in 1821. Although Corey started his own explanation of the U.S. flag, these teachers assured him they knew all about the stars and stripes and then, with a flurry of apologies, dashed down the hill to catch up with their students.

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To correctly pronounce Zakynthos, southernmost of the Ionian island chain, put the stress at the beginning: ZA-kihn-thos. Other stressors on the island are hidden, slow to discover; this is surely the only one required at the outset.

Once away from the cramped harbor town, one hears everywhere the constant chiming of goat-bells as the local goats wander along. Each goat has a bell with a different tone. The resultant gentle clamor, a pastoral carillon, sounds very much like ambulatory wind chimes. Evan noticed them right away: “Mama, come listen. I hear bells.”

While on Zakynthos, we based ourselves outside the village of Vasilikos, on a working olive farm with four purpose-built guest cabins, the Lithies Houses. Ours bears the name Villa Zoie. They are small, functional, and each has a delightful verandah.

The owners are Dionysius and Fotini. He speaks very little English, but she speaks enough to enjoy both her mistakes and ours. On our first day, Fotini watched us unpack our groceries and raised an eyebrow at our small bottle of store-bought olive oil. She said something to the effect of, “Here, you do not need olive oil. I bring.” The next day, she

asked, “How much do you need? Half litre?” I tried to make her understand that for this adventure, we are carrying everything on our backs. Later, when she returned with a small glass bottle full of (delicious) oil, she stepped outside and remarked, to herself as much as to us, “I love this verandah. What we have here is peace.”

Peaceful it most certainly is. Early in the season like this, we have no neighbors; the Lithies Houses taverna is shuttered until the first week of June. After dark, the local variant of the whippoorwill swoops closer and yips in my ear. The goats settle, the chimes cease. The stars peek out. I wonder, where are the rebels here? The radicals? The KKE of Athens? Nowhere to be found, I’m sure. What’s to rebel against here, except solitude and rural charm? Revolutions don’t find their birthing in places like Vasilikos. For that, you need the noise and clatter of Athens and its urban ilk. The novelists and philosophers retreat to the country, looking for a spot to clear their heads. In the chaos of Athens or Patra, there’s too much input, it’s a sensory flood. Supposedly, those tightly packed conditions are where commerce thrives, but I wonder at what cost (no pun intended) to efficiency. Crowds are crowds are crowds; the antidote is here, with the bees packing in their honey and the lemons swelling on the trees.

The nearest beach is St. Nikolas, the sort of place where one finds jet skis and long rows of beachside sunshades. We headed instead, on foot, to Gerakas (pronounce YEHR-ah-kas), the island’s most famous sea turtle reserve. Not a turtle in sight, but we did find a fair number of dead or dying jellyfish. They resemble cupcake wrappers when floating, but once trapped in our beach shovels and buckets, they take on the visceral aspects of science fiction horror come to life. Their bodies, if that’s even the correct term, are astoundingly clear, but are no more attractive for that.

Gerakas, owing to its being favored by loggerhead sea turtles, is night-and-day different from Saint Nikolas. There’s no development whatsoever, and both after dark and before sunrise it’s completely off-limits. I note that no one is attempting to protect the languishing jellyfish population, but in a world of cuddly giant pandas and slimy bloodsucking leeches, one must, I suppose, make choices.

Gerakas’s most infamous resident is Yannis Vardakastanis, whom I unearthed around sunset at the taverna that he, years ago, hauled back up off the Gerakas beach as part of his nascent efforts to give the place back to the turtles. Yannis claims to have been sent to the hospital four times and shot more than once for his pains. Who would do this? His family. They didn’t want to move their money-making tavernas and beach chairs. Yannis, with no backing from the law, forced them. Needless to say, family relations aren’t good. As Yannis put it, “I’ve lost everything. But I still have my little corner of the world.”

Most people visiting this end of Zakynthos see some version of Paradise. Yannis sees Hell. Born in 1964, he remembers the place before roads, before farms and olive trees, before any concept of packaged touring. He claims the hatchling sea turtles used to blacken the beaches. Not any more.

On the way home later that night, I passed a gaggle of teens on motor-scooters, all sitting under the glare of a lonely streetlight and clearly asking each other, “Is this streetlight really all there is to life?” Yannis could answer this, but the real reason I was struck by the scene is that in the instant that I passed this group, a young man on a motorcycle rode by and nearly clipped one of the kids with the enormous overhanging hay bale he’d strapped to the back seat of his bike. The road hazards of Athens are markedly different.

On the main road, the occasional highway sign (hand-painted) boasts that Company So-And-So can show you “The Real Zakynthos.” So far as I can see, the “real” Zakynthos is divided into the beaches with their attendant tourist-oriented shops, and the interior farms and forests. The farms are well-kept, earnest endeavors, dominated by olives. The forests are literally awash in litter and hunter’s blinds. What’s to hunt on this mid-size island? Turtle doves. Shotgun shells carpet the forest floor almost as thickly as the pine needles. That the local population can cause such havoc in their limited arbors is beyond me. I expect tourists to litter: after all, they have no sense of ownership. But the actual residents? It’s appalling. And, sadly, all too “real.”

Even if you’re not a dove, to live in paradise is fraught with peril. Consider: Zakynthos was first settled, in recorded history at least, by the Kingdom of Ulysses (allied with Troy). Since then, it’s been invaded and conquered by the Athenians, the Spartans, the Macedonians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Saracens, the Normans, and the Orsinis of Italy. That takes us to 1204 and the fall of Constantinople, at which point the Venetians took control, sort of, lost it to the Turks, got it back again, and then lost it to Napoleon and the French. One year later, in came the Russians. Two years later, back came the French. (Lord Byron visited somewhere along in here, but probably left little behind besides unwanted pregnancies and a slew of equally unwanted venereal diseases.) Back to more traditional invasions: Welcome the British! And then, the Greeks, unified as of 1864, took it until WW I, at which point the Italians returned, then the Germans, and finally Greece again. As if that weren’t enough, the Old Gods hit the island with an earthquake in 1953, leveling 90% of the buildings.

The animal kingdom soldiers on largely unaware. Greece’s most successful immigrant, Zakynthos included, is the (so-called) English sparrow. They’re everywhere, the de facto national bird. Local lizards are small, swift, and tend to have greenish backs the color of sunlit moss. Local dogs bark a lot. Local roosters never shut up. The five local goats

continue to ring their every move, but only four have bells. The littlest kid, frosty black, goes about sans cloche. I observed their owner herding them away last evening for some obscure goatish purpose; he greeted his flock by bleating at them.

We crossed paths with another goatherd this morning. The big nanny goat in the lead had teats that all but dragged on the pavement. Eventually (again by bleating), the goatherd rounded up all five of his unwilling goats, stopped traffic in both directions, and corralled his flock under a tree. When I came back the same way twenty minutes later, the goats had become hopelessly entangled, a sort of living goat-knot connected hoof to horn and tether to teat. Where the goatherd went, I have no idea, and I can only surmise that the purpose of leaving the five bleating, struggling goats in such a mess was to inflict some manner of Goat Punishment. Perhaps they'd been naughty in some way; I'll never know.

As for Zakynthos Town itself, the sidewalks are, if possible, worse than Athens. Thankfully, it's much prettier, something like Nafplio and definitely Italian. Even the people on Zakynthos look Italian (which, given the history, makes sense). The town's great drawback is the unacceptably small space devoted to the bus station. The crowd there might well have become a mob had our bus been any more full, or the signage any more disorienting. It seems that every possible Zakynthian bus line leaves simultaneously at 2:30 pm, with much honking, shouting, queuing, and waving of arms.

On the way back to Villa Zoie, I ducked into the area's one real "super" market in order to pick up our supper of psari, the generic word for fish, in this case red snapper. The woman at the market proudly opened the package (she'd ordered the fish the night before at my request, and gotten it freshly caught that morning), then said, "I asked them to clean it for you. I hope that's all right."

Inside the bag, four gutted but otherwise intact psari stared at me with a faintly accusing mien. "Is this what you expected?" they seemed to be asking, "and is your kitchen up to the challenge?"

Before leaving, I asked the proprietor if she knew Yannis (from the sea turtle beach, Gerakas). I suspected there might be a connection, since he and the crowded little market shop shared a surname, Vardakastanis. "Cousins," she replied, and explained they only see each other once or twice a year.

In a bald effort to draw her out, I said, "He has very strong ideas."

"Ne," she agreed, "that's why we only see each other once a year."

Later, it occurred to me that Yannis hadn't been around during our farewell Gerakas visit. Unremarkable, except with a man like Yannis. Given his situation, it was entirely possible that he'd been gunned down since last we spoke.

Psari and disputed sea turtle beaches notwithstanding, every Paradise must eventually be abandoned. The mid-sized blue-and-white ferry back to Killini and the mainland boasted two escalators, one up, one down, leading from the gangway to the passenger decks. As if to offer final proof that Greek and English will never coexist with perfect equanimity, an adjacent sign read, "It is your responsibility to use the escalator. If you desire assistance, crew your personnel."

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Fiction

Editor Miriam Vaswani

A Room That Has Lizzy In It

Michele Herman

In September even the birthday parties stopped. Now they're starting back up again, but quietly. They're mostly at home after school instead of the usual Saturday extravaganzas at the Chelsea Piers bowling alley. No one's even hiring magicians to do the old disappearing-underpants trick; we have no stomach for vanishings.

Today -- a warm, particularly acrid-smelling Thursday in October, 2001 -- happens to be Benny Spiegel's ninth birthday, and I'm on my way to the middle-income West Village Houses to pick up my two sons at his party. Call me perverse, but I can't think of any place I would rather be than Benny the Terrible's birthday party. Somehow I have landed in a generation of strivers, but I don't ask much as I stroll down workaday Washington Street breathing through my mouth. I walk this street every day: to the Grove Street School to pick up my boys, to the post office to kiss my slides good luck as I send them off to galleries, to the library to hunt for a Friday night video. How at home I feel with cobblestones under my shoes, the Hudson River by my side. Even the dog pee that leaves a sticky sheen on the lampposts belongs to pets who know my scent.

The West Village Houses couldn't be stingier on the outside, clad in small maroon-washed concrete blocks trying their hardest to look like brick. But inside they are a little society of helping professionals -- social workers, guidance counselors, even a bonafide nurse or two. I open the metal door and, like the neighborhood dogs, take a whiff. I detect vanilla and butter and cane sugar, and though I am four floors away I know instantly this is the smell of Benny Spiegel's birthday cake made by Janeen, the baking babysitter from Jamaica. I rush up the institutional stairs toward my children and our friends and the solace of buttercream. When I push the button marked Spiegel a harsh buzzer sounds, welcoming me in its unceremonious way into the last bastion of Manhattan nurturers.

Mara, Benny's mom, lets me in.

"My landsmen," I say, stretching my arms wide to include all the moms and kids and Janeen in the galley kitchen. Mara herself, I should point out, is not a nurturer, but a nurturer's spouse. Her husband Barry is a clinical psychologist, but she works for the board of ed, which gives her insider knowledge, which is one reason we sometimes call her Queen.

"Spiderman," she says with some regret by way of greeting, showing me her living room, where the kids are gathered on her impractical off-white carpet around Benny's impressive Lego collection and the moms are madly chatting the way moms will. The room is strung

halfheartedly with plastic spiders and fake spider webs.

"He had to have Spiderman, Brooke," says Mara. "Thank heaven it's almost Halloween." We're all feeling funny about Spiderman these days. The movie is due out soon, and it stars Tobey Maguire, who's adorable, but on the down side, the posters have all been pulled because they showed Spiderman scaling the twin towers. In the middle of all the spiders, a yellow cartoon-character pinata hangs from the ceiling fan.

"Pikachu," I say with a fondness I didn't know I felt for the squeaky pansexual Pokemon. Mara apologizes for mixing her birthday-party metaphors. But I don't mind this relic from a benign ancient civilization.

Eventually we hug, and stare into each other's eyes. We all do this these days, with new license. I notice that Mara has not plucked her eyebrows. They are growing in dark and choppy, as if they've fallen out of their v-formation, and I fear this is brash old Mara's only way to cry for help. I scan her up and down for signs of additional neglect, and sure enough her toenails have just the tiniest circle of red polish left, and her toes look as if they've been squashed together too long, like old garlic cloves. "You okay?" I ask, and she waves me away with the kind of half-answer we all trade in lately: "Yeah, yeah, peachy."

I keep an eye on all the moms, on Shlomit our kibbutznik and Desi our dance therapist and Arlene the mother of twins and Lizzy, especially Lizzy. When I go to sleep I don't see the towers fall and rise and fall again a mile away from my bed; what I see in the dark is a tiny collage of crosshatches, formed of the worry lines around my friends' eyes.

I scan the room for Glen and Danny, my boys, and find them with Jinsong, a new Chinese boy in Glen's class who shares Glen's belief that life is one great physics experiment. They are attempting to saw their slippery Spiderman plates in half with plastic knives while little brother Danny cheers them on. I kiss the sweaty tops of their heads and get the day's news. I ask Jinsong whether his mom is coming to pick him up because, speaking of peachy, Jinsong has a new baby brother I'm in love with; I want to have my party pleasures all lined up.

Finally, I scan for Lizzy. I always feel better in a room that has Lizzy in it. I find her leaning over the kitchen counter, deep in conversation.

Hungrily I make my way toward her.

Mara puts a hand on my forearm, and I jump. “I wouldn’t go over there if I were you,” she says. “Mara,” I say. “I’ve been sitting at home alone all day, listening to public radio. They just did a segment on the plague, and they weren’t talking about the Middle Ages. I think I can handle the conversation over there.”

Lizzy and I met nine years ago on a bench at Bleecker Street playground. It was November, and our babies were packed into their strollers, and it started to drizzle. The other mothers briskly packed up those yellow little Cheerios dispensers they had and slid them into their diaper bags with the Provencal patterns. They left in pairs or trios, as they always did, with their shirts tucked in. I was new to the neighborhood then, and new at this job, with an asthmatic baby, a career as an illustrator slipping from my fingers, and a husband working long lawyer hours but not making partner. It was not clear any of us was going to be okay.

At exactly the same moment, this woman and I turned toward each other. I went first. “Do you ever feel like you’re going to lose your mind?”

“I was going to say ‘fucking mind,’” she answered, smiling.

She pointed to a building across the street. “See that pile of laundry about to fall off the windowsill? That’s my apartment,” she said. “Race you.”

We got to her dim hall laughing and out of breath. We shook the rain out of our hair and left shoes and strollers and puddles all over the tiled floor.

She had the same dining chairs from Workbench as ours. Glen was crying in that starved, enervated way that could crank up to an attack. Or maybe it was another ear infection. I sat down at my chair, pulled up my shirt and nursed him.

When her baby was successfully transferred to his crib, she held out a hand for shaking and introduced herself. Then she told me I looked like a hot meal would do me good.

She fed me leftover spaghetti with pesto warmed in the microwave, on a Winnie-the-Pooh plate.

“This is the best meal I’ve ever had in my entire life,” I told this stranger named Lizzy, “and I don’t even like pesto.” I asked for seconds, and thirds, and somewhere in the middle of

the helpings I began to cry. Lizzy looked around for a Kleenex and when she couldn't find one she shrugged and handed me a Pamper. With my mouth full and a strand of spaghetti not quite sucked in, I added "never touch the stuff," and my crying resolved itself into laughter. We laughed like lab partners at the delight of trying to fill me up faster than Glen could empty me. I blew my nose into the diaper, and we laughed some more.

At home later that night, as I lowered Glen to his crib trying not to set off a screaming fit, I noticed something foreign in his fine brown hair. I fished out a fragrant green spaghetti strand and clutched it like Scarlett O'Hara with her radish and thought that maybe I wouldn't lose my mind after all.

Now I look among the gang, my gang, to see if everyone is here, but my eye lands instead on a familiar red-and-white paper on the kitchen counter. It's a Metro-North schedule, opened like an alterpiece triptych to the page headed "Leave New York." Oh, no, I think. Please no. She's loud and annoying and has garlic toes, but please don't let Mara leave.

But I have walked straight into what I've begun to think of as "the conversation." Here in Manhattan it drones on in the background all the time. It starts furtively, like preteens discussing sex. It used to be easy to ignore. The first snatch I hear is this: "I say, if you're going to move, really move. Go to Camden, Maine."

And now they begin the list. They are talking about benign things, wonderful things like backyards and the rolling hills of the Taconic Parkway. I like these things as much as anyone.

"So what do you guys think about Nyack?" asks Arlene. She's never quite gotten over having twins, and needs our blessing on every decision she makes.

The group decides Nyack is a viable option. They move on to highways. I listen patiently while they approve of the Palisades and the Merritt. Mara is measuring out miles in the air between her thumb and forefinger.

I look over at Lizzy but I can't get her eye. She and I always say, when our time comes, reserve us a room at the Village Nursing Home, and then scatter our ashes from Pier 40. We've picked out the bench in Abingdon Square where the late-morning sun shines and where we'll feed the pigeons just to annoy the yuppies.

When Arlene says Nyack for a second time, rolling it around on her tongue like this year's

beaujolais nouveau, I take a swat.

“Cute,” I say, “but wrong side of the river. No trains. You’ll need two cars.”

Moms begin firing out towns, and as quick as they say the names I shoot them down. I hardly ever leave the city limits, but somehow I have stores of intelligence on every burgh they mention.

“Cold Spring,” says Shlomit, who was in the Israeli Army and can be very commanding. As if on cue, we hear the military sound of a low-flying helicopter, a sound as common these days as Mister Softee’s jingle. We know the drill: we freeze, look toward the ceiling, and then, when it stops, release all our hot breath into Mara’s living room and try to pick up where we left off.

Cold Spring is easy: “Way too many antique stores and three incredibly overpriced restaurants, the kind where the menu actually says ‘fine dining.’”

Desi says Katonah. “Great art museum, but racist.” I tell them about friend of a friend who was racial-profiled there. “Not once, but twice,” I say.

I dismiss Larchmont’s highly reputed school system, tell them Irvington is the boonies, Montclair not half as integrated as they make it look. Meanwhile I look around the room to see who’s serious, to see whom I stand to lose. But it’s no use – I can’t stand to lose any of them.

Finally I can’t take it. “The West Village!” I scream and they all look up at me as if I’ve started voguing across the off-white rug. “Why not consider that? Especially seeing as how you’ve all already made lives here and your children attend school here and you have jobs here and own apartments here and have made very good friends here.”

Lizzy has been uncharacteristically quiet, so I walk over and sling an arm around her. “Looks like it’s you and me, my dear.” I note, with alarm, a faint smell of cigarettes on her. She quit smoking before Sam was born. I know it’s the fall trend, falling back into conquered bad habits. But Lizzy isn’t trendy. Lizzy can’t start smoking again. Her mother died of lung cancer.

“Brooke,” she says. “Nip it.”

I protest; I am just warming up. I tell them, with the satisfaction of a really well-placed cliché, that you can run but you can’t hide, even though I suspect it’s entirely possible to spend a lifetime hiding in Irvington, Westport, Easthampton. Janeen calls from the kitchen with a two-minute warning on the birthday cake. I try a different tack.

“I’ll tell you about life outside the city,” I say, and from my arsenal I recount for them the scariest, most spiteful suburban story I can think of. They’re all in a tight circle around me now. .

“It’s Wednesday,” I say, “and you take your kids out to eat at Chuck E. Cheese because – I look around the room and name husbands -- Avi…Roger…Barry… James just called to say he’ll be late again. At first you don’t want to take them to Chuck E. Cheese and you’re sure you’ll never be that kind of suburban mother.”

Lizzy is tightening her jaw and neck tendons in a way that says shush up now if you know what’s good for you. I know she’s trying to save me. But they made me listen to them and now I’m going to give it right back to them.

“In fact you hold out for a long time, but all of your kids’ friends go there and talk about it at school until it starts to seem as normal as wearing running shoes all day. And you pass it in the s.u.v. on the way home from soccer or Hebrew school or guitar or ikeido or the orthodontist, and your kids beg, and you know that they’re at the developmental stage where it’s important not to be too different, so you put on the blinker and you turn into the parking lot.

“What a lovely parable, Brooke,” Arlene interrupts. “A novel way to tell us you have a little problem with the suburbs.”

“And Chuck E. Cheese surprises you” I continue, “because they serve a bowl of strawberry applesauce, beautiful pink applesauce.” Like a geisha, I cup my hands toward the circle of moms in a beautiful-bowl-of-applesauce gesture. “It’s right there on the table without you even having to order it. The kids love it and you love Chuck E. Cheese for being so attuned to your desire to get some good healthy food into them and not pander to their worst tastes. And because everyone’s so happy and having their needs met, you make Chuck E. Cheese a regular stop on Wednesday nights, when the afterschool

schedule is especially nuts.

The kids are getting restless. A fight is breaking out over the Bionicles, but I am not ceding the floor.

“And then one Wednesday night you go --” I pause dramatically – “but there’s no bowl of beautiful pink applesauce. There’s a new menu and you hunt and hunt but there’s no applesauce anywhere on it, only a lot of gooey greasy foods with….” And here I waggle my fingers while sliding my hands back and forth, a gesture that in another story might be raindrops or piano playing, but here can mean only one thing: “a big slab of jack cheese on top, sweating from the microwave.”

“You ask the waiter about the applesauce and he doesn’t know so he calls over the manager and he says, oh, the kids weren’t eating the applesauce so it didn’t pay. And there you are at Chuck E. Cheese in your running shoes, in your fat jeans, on the molded plastic seat.” I have no idea what kind of seats Chuck E. Cheese has; I’ve never been to one.

“But all this is okay,” I conclude, “because suddenly you remember the time back in college when you thought you might make a good political speechwriter someday, and you decide to send an e-mail to the executives of Chuck E. Cheese or whatever corporation owns it, getting them to reinstate the applesauce policy, and maybe you’ll start an e-mail campaign among your friends. And you feel like a real activist –”

Just as I’m finishing up my speech, the door pushes slowly open. We all stop and stare as Jinsong’s mom’s small dark head pokes in. She is holding the peachy baby, the first baby born in the neighborhood since September 11th. She never lets this baby out of her sight. He is tightly wrapped, as always, in his white blanket, and she clutches him to her chest like a poultice. Somehow she has managed to take off her shoes. She nods hello, several times, with more downward motion than up, as if apologizing for her presence, and then stands in the doorway next to the Razor scooters, looking terribly far from home. Even the littlest of the neighborhood kids know that if you dig deep enough in the Bleecker Street sandbox you eventually reach China, the far side of the world. It hits me suddenly that I am asking far too much. I am asking more than my friends or my city or my world has to offer.

Lizzy walks toward me and grips the fleshiest part of my upper arm. She says my name and leads me forcibly into Mara and Barry’s bedroom, where I realize I’ve never been. The off-white carpet continues in here. Everything else is pastel and frilly. The dresser is

covered with photos. “Look,” I say, pointing to a wedding picture. “Barry has hair.”

“Brooke,” says Lizzy again.

“Stop saying my name, would you?” I say. I know what she’s going to tell me. I realize now I’ve known for days, but I averted my eyes and my ears each time she got too close

“I wasn’t ready to go public yet, but after that…” She points to the living room and hunts for a word to describe my little performance. I fixate on a photo of the kids in their Four’s class play, “Caps for Sale.” How I remember that day. There’s Noam, Shlomit’s son, still blond, with a stack of caps on his head. There’s one of the twins with her chicken-pox newly crusted over. And, as always, two monkeys side by side: my Glen and Lizzy’s Sam. In the back you can just make out an exhausted-looking Lizzy and me on little nursery-school chairs, each with a nursing baby in our lap.

“Where?” I ask, but I realize I already know that too. Her favorite brother lives there. They always vacation there.

She squinches up her face like a student knowing that whatever answer she gives will be wrong. We say it in unison: “Brattleborough.” Somehow my “Brattleborough” is spoken with conviction, hers with a question mark, as if we’re rehearsing each other’s parts.

We’re silent for a minute.

“That’s off Perry Street, right?” I finally say. “Right in the Grove Street School catchment zone.”

We laugh. But then she gets down to business, rattling off practical reasons, the thin outer layer of reasons, for the move. Most of them revolve around her brainy husband James and the internet and his portable business.

I look her in the eye. “Don’t go. Tell him you changed your mind. Tell him you lost your fucking mind.”

She lets out a sigh. “It’s not just James. I’m not as brave as you are, Brooke. You make it

hard."

I feel tired suddenly and sit down on Mara's bed. Lizzy leans on the blond dresser. I wonder why married people's bedrooms are so weirdly virginal. I wonder how we all misread so many signs.

I am not brave. I'm afraid that without Lizzy I'm just a woman on a Manhattan bench who doesn't have the sense to come in out of the storm.

"What about all our plans?" I say, panic rising as I think of how my many of my days are predicated on Lizzy, and Glen's on Sam. "What about baseball camp?" I skip to the last page: "What about scattering our ashes from Pier 40?"

"I'm so sorry, Brooke. I had to make other plans." Her voice is shaking but the message is firm.

"Listen." She puts her hands on my upper arms to steady me and delivers a pep talk about a house they just saw online. "There's a whole guest cottage. You'll come and stay. There's a horse farm right down the road where they give lessons practically free." She bounces up and down, mimicking Danny as a horse-besotted toddler: "Hawssie! hawssie!"

"I don't want horses. I want you, here." I point to the firmament of Mara's silly pale carpet. We hug, something we rarely do, and I feel the fleshy sensation of her breasts up against mine. I remember us after Danny and Sylvie, our second babies, were born three weeks apart, in our big nursing bras with the clever snaps, always riding up in the back from what felt then like an enormous motherly weight we were carrying. I look into Lizzy's familiar face, her limp hair, her crooked nose, the crease where her dimple hides. On the news there has been talk of sacrifices to come, lots of talk. What a fool I have been to think I could gather my loved ones around me and pull the drawstring tight.

In the living room, I hear Janeen and Mara shushing the kids. The room goes dark as someone pulls the blinds. I've been away from my boys for too long.

"I guess it's time," I say, and Lizzy and I go back to the living room. We find a spot on the side near Benny. Mara, looking like a proper queen, carries the cake with its nine candles

and one to grow on.

“By the way,” Lizzy whispers. “There are no Chuck E. Cheeses in Vermont. There’s a clause in the state constitution.”

“They send them all over the border,” I whisper back. “New Hampshire takes them in like orphans.”

“You know the New Hampshire state motto, right?” she adds. “Chuckie Cheese or die.”

“Don’t go,” I say one more time, as if I have a say.

The kids tell Benny the Terrible he belongs in the zoo, and, true to form, he bops the two nearest ones on the head. His round baby cheeks are lit by the birthday candles, and he’s beautiful. They’re all beautiful. All I want is to stand here with the moms and watch the kids grow. I want to watch Jinsong’s baby brother grow big and goofy like Jinsong, and break the big kids’ Legos and beg for treats from Mister Softee. I haven’t made other plans. I haven’t even stocked up on bottled water. I don’t see the point. All I want is to grow old with these people.

I look at Lizzy, but there’s no light on her. She looks drawn and pasty. She’s in a car that James is driving up the New York Thruway to the New England Thruway. She’s growing staticky like WNYC, and I’m losing her.

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Walking back home with the boys down the narrow sidewalk on a block shrouded with eternal scaffolding, I let the tears come. In each of my sweaty, shaking hands I am gripping a Spiderman goody bag. Under my arm I carry two pairs of blue jeans that Benny Spiegel, raised on Janeen’s pork stew and coconut patties, has outgrown. Mara thrust them at me on my way out and though we didn’t particularly need them I took them without a word. The little buildings along Washington Street mock me now that Lizzy won’t be here to cast her crooked silhouette on their bricks. The blues bar on the corner, Roy Lichtenstein’s studio, the just-renovated townhouses all filled with pregnant supermodels – right now I hate them all. A woman in heels on her way home from work comes toward us and I have to push my oblivious boys aside to make room for her to pass. I feel like taking the whole maroon hulk of the West Village Houses and its do-gooders and shoving it out of my way. Now look what you’ve done, I want to say to the world at large; you’ve driven Lizzy away.

Tears and snot are dripping onto my shirt. Glen is eyeing me fearfully, not having a clue what's wrong. I don't have a Kleenex. I wasn't prepared for this. So I grab the wad of Benny Spiegel's freshly laundered hand-me-downs and blow my nose.

Michele Herman is a longtime writer of fiction and nonfiction, with short stories published in The Sun, ACM, Columbia: A Journal of Literature & Art, Proof*, and* The Worcester Review*. Her personal essays have appeared in* The Sun, The New York Times, Lilith *and other publications. She has a column in* The Villager*, the award-winning Greenwich Village weekly paper, and teaches fiction at The Writers Studio in New York.*

The Granada-Bound Train

Patty Somlo

If anyone asked, I could say I was on the Granada-bound train for the ride, and for the smell of rain coming into the windowless car. I might mention the bright green banana leaves and peasants waving along the tracks, or the sellers of *nacatamales* and guayaba juice who boarded at every stop. I could add I was going to Granada to bathe in the sultry saltwater lake or to take a boat to one of the islands, to sleep in a thatched-roof hut and listen to the monkeys cry. Perhaps I could pretend I wanted to go back to the *hospedaje* where I first stayed, to sit in a rocking chair in the courtyard and listen to Doña Alicia gossip and complain.

The truth is that I was on the Granada-bound train to see Alfredo, only one week after I'd left him for the last time. I sat next to the open door and let the rain dampen my face, just as I had done the first time, when Alfredo took my face in his hands and said, "You look so beautiful."

"You must see Granada," the owner of my hotel said on my first day in this country. "And you must go there on the train."

Granada, he explained, was a replica of its Spanish namesake, a jewel of a city set in a special spot between black volcanic hills and a vast blue-green lake that stretched further than the eye could contemplate. The water in the lake, he went on, was salty, the same as the sea, warm and filled with sharks. Throughout the lake were pristine islands, like emeralds spit into water. Parrots and palm trees, even monkeys, populated the islands, and local artists painted the landscape in colorful, minute detail, not missing a single chicken or banana tree or bright blue bird.

Moments after the train left the capitol, I could see why I had been told to travel this way. The landscape we slowly moved through burst with color. The sky was dark, nearly purple in places, and the darkness helped saturate the land the richest shades. Banana and coffee leaves throbbed a vibrant green. After the rain stopped, the leaves shone. Purple and reddish-pink bougainvillea spilled over fences like bright tongues. Smoke rose in wide circles from the chimneys of small red-tile roofed houses. Even in the rain, people came out. Men with dark faces wearing wide straw hats smiled and waved as we went by.

In the damp air, I imagined Alfredo's face as I saw it that first day, peeking out under a green rain poncho. His dark eyes. The curls stuck to his forehead from rain blowing in the

open door.

“You are so beautiful,” he said.

Tiny beads of water clung to Alfredo’s black moustache. A few fragile crystals hung onto his eyebrows.

I smiled and turned away from him, not wanting to miss a minute of the breathtaking landscape rolling past.

When the train stopped to let on more passengers, Alfredo jogged away from my side. I thought he had gotten off and was a little disappointed but also relieved. While I was no longer surprised at how men here could suddenly become enamored with me – a light-skinned, green-eyed blond – I hadn’t gotten used to this at all.

The next thing I heard was the jittery sound of metal scraping against metal that signaled the train’s departure. Then I felt fingers lightly tapping my shoulder.

“You are beautiful, like the bougainvillea,” Alfredo said, handing me a slender stem with purple petals glittering from the rain.

The car was crowded with men and women, kids and woven coffee sacks, colored straw baskets overflowing with folded shirts and crisp bread and orange-skinned mangoes. The only place left to breathe was next to the open door. How many times had I sat in this spot on my way to see Alfredo? How many times had I told myself the trip would be my last?

Alfredo was kind enough that first day to take me to Doña Alicia’s *hospedaje*, a two-block walk from the lake. He rented a royal blue motorboat and we sailed to one of the small islands, where we ate fresh-caught fish under a canopy of palm trees on a wooden porch. He told me that he traveled to the different islands to paint, sleeping in the simple huts, getting to know the peasants who lived there, and living off the fish and fruits and vegetables from the small plots of land they cultivated.

“I went all the way to Paris to study art,” Alfredo said. “Now, I have come back home to find that the peasants of these islands have more to teach me about art than all the world-renowned teachers in France.”

When I awoke with Alfredo in the small square room I had rented from Doña Alicia, sunlight sliding through the narrow bamboo window slats fell in lines across our skin. Alfredo traced the light on my legs, his fingers moving up to my neck, and then my forehead.

"What I love about this country is the light," he said, kissing me and twisting his fingers in my hair. "The light is so thick and sad. It is impossible not to fall deeply in love here, because of the light."

Riding the Granada-bound train, I couldn't stop wondering how Alfredo would paint the passing scene. I felt sure he would want to capture all the details. The skinny dark-skinned boy wearing red shorts, with a scrawny gray and brown dog running behind him. White chickens pecking and scratching in a brown dirt yard. A woman wearing a bright green dress and pink apron, smiling and waving from the doorway of a turquoise stone house.

As the train moved along the tracks, I thought about that evening in the capitol when I saw Alfredo's paintings for the first time. It was raining and just getting dark, as I shook water from my umbrella and stepped inside. Glancing around the gallery, what struck me was the color. Small squares saturated with turquoise, red and a lush, lush green hung a careful distance apart on the clean white walls. People stood in their colorful clothes, talking and sipping wine in the center of the room. Others, alone in front of the canvases, leaned in close to see the tiny birds and curled bananas hanging from the wide-leafed trees.

I looked for Alfredo and when I found him, I quickly looked away. I felt his eyes on me as I turned and headed for the door, the quick thunderclap of my thin heels assaulting the floor beneath the steady hum of conversation.

On the porch, I stopped to open my umbrella. Raindrops landed with a smack on the thin curled metal roof.

"You are leaving before you have even seen the paintings," Alfredo said, when he came up behind me, so close, I could hear him breathe. "I wanted to introduce you to some people. Why are you going?"

"I can't see you with her," I said, not turning around to face Alfredo, but continuing to watch the rain. "I'll see the paintings another time."

As I started to open my umbrella, Alfredo turned me around to face him.

“It is only a show,” he said. “What is real is what everyone does not see.”

“How can it be real if no one sees it? How can *I* know it’s real?”

“It cannot be controlled. Doesn’t that make it real?”

He reached his hand out from under the porch roof and cupped his palm.

“If I catch the rain in a barrel, it is no longer rain. Rain must fall. That is the essence of rain. What you think you saw tonight was not love. It is as much like love as water in the barrel is like rain. She is my wife, the mother of my children. You are the woman I love.”

The mist in front of my eyes now was brought on by the memories of Alfredo that rose up whenever I rode the Granada-bound train. The sound of the rain hitting the metal car and the fertile smell of the dark dirt reminded me of an afternoon when I was swimming in the warm salty lake with him and the rain started falling. We watched the rain hit the water from a dark protected spot close to a nearly deserted island. The only sound interrupting the steady beat of rain against the leaves was the song of one lone bird.

Alfredo kissed my wet lips and pulled my bathing suit off in the water and dropped it on the high bank. With the rain wetting my already damp hair, Alfredo made love to me, as both of us listened to the insistent song of that one invisible bird.

“Would you mind if I sit here?” the voice said, almost in a whisper.

I looked up to see a dark face. Perfect drops of rain were clinging to the beige hood of the man’s thin plastic poncho.

“No,” I said and turned back toward the open door.

“It is a beautiful ride,” the man said, after he was seated. “Even in the rain.”

“Yes. I think the rain makes everything more beautiful.”

“I think you are right,” the man said. “I never thought of it that way.”

We sat in silence, staring at the landscape, as the train moved slowly south. I felt a light tap on my arm and turned to see the man holding out a long loaf of bread.

“Would you like some?” he asked.

“No. Thank you for asking. I will be having lunch in Granada."

“So, you are going to Granada.”

“Yes.”

“Is this your first visit?”

“No, I have been there before.”

“Oh, that is good,” he said. “Granada is a very special place.”

“I think so,” I said. “But why do you think it is special?”

“It is a wild place. But it is also protected. The volcanoes are silent now, but we never know when they will burst with fire again. The lake is beautiful and warm but filled with sharks. They say that people have been lost on the islands in the lake, never to be heard from again.

“Once you have been to Granada, you must keep returning. I know. I have left dozens of times, yet I always find myself coming back.”

I sat in silence and thought about what this stranger had just said.

“It’s funny,” I said. “I thought it was just me. Even when I tell myself I am through with the

place, I keep coming back. Now, you are saying it happens to others."

"Oh, yes," he said and laughed. "I have gone to many beautiful places in the world. I could practically live anywhere. But I keep coming back to Granada."

I thought about the last time I was on the Granada-bound train, silently telling myself that the trip would be my last. As I walked away from the train to where Alfredo stood waiting near the tracks, I told myself to remember the feeling of Alfredo leaving in the night to go back home to his wife.

"I have missed you," Alfredo said, holding me so close I could barely breathe. "I am glad you have come."

That night I couldn't eat, stirring the metal spoon slowly, around and around the thick red broth of my seafood soup.

"You are not eating. Do you feel all right?" Alfredo asked.

"No. I don't feel all right."

"What is the matter?"

"I can't keep doing this, Alfredo. I can't. This visit will be my last."

Alfredo made love to me that night like a desperate man.

"It is so good with you," Alfredo said, kissing me between his words. "Being with you is like painting to me. Something comes over me in your presence and I lose myself. This is what happens when I am with you. Don't you see that we must be together?"

"If you feel that way, Alfredo, why can't you leave your wife?"

"What you and I have is wild. Something free. If we tried to capture it, it would be the same as putting the lion in a cage. He looks the same but his spirit is out there somewhere,

running free. If I left my wife and married you, my spirit would be out there, running free."

The soft voice of the man in the beige poncho suddenly broke through my thoughts.

"Are you in love with someone in Granada?" he asked.

My face grew warm and red beneath the humid dampness.

"Oh, forgive me," the man said. "It is not my business. Please excuse me.

"I always ask too much," he went on. "It is impolite, I know. I have a curiosity, so I ask."

"Yes, I am," I said, after leaning my face out the door to let the wind and rain cool me.

"That is what I thought," the man said, smiling. "Why else would a beautiful woman be on the Granada-bound train, alone, again and again? I wonder, though, why he doesn't ask you to stay with him in Granada."

I waited in silence for the man to take back his question.

"Oh, I am going too far again," the man said, almost as if he were talking to himself. "I know that. It is not a lack of manners that makes me ask too much. My mother and father raised me well. It is a game in a way. Like a puzzle really. What else is there to do on a long train ride but put the pieces together?"

I turned to the man and took several quick breaths, trying to calm myself before speaking.

"So, you use people's lives and emotions to amuse yourself. Is that it? And afterwards, what happens then? Do you sit with your friends drinking beer, telling them about the silly woman you met on the train, who goes to Granada again and again, to be with a man who will never leave his wife for her?"

"It is not like that all. You think I see this conversation as something trivial, something unimportant. That is not so. This conversation is everything. I could sit here in silence next to you, walk off the train and be hit by car. My life over, just like that! If I don't live this

moment, there is no point in going on. For this moment is all I have."

"That's a pretty morbid way of looking at things."

"In one sense, yes. In another sense, no. Isn't it sadder to think about living forever in silence? Isn't it sadder to think I could ride all the way to Granada next to a beautiful woman and not know a thing about her? Isn't it sadder to see all the pieces but never try to put them together?"

"You think about life in a way I never do," I said. "I'm always planning for what's going to happen next or brooding about the past. That's what I've been doing this whole ride. It never occurred to me to ask you anything about yourself. I don't even know your name."

"Mario Pravia," he said, holding out his right hand. "I am pleased to meet you."

I shook his hand and looked at him, without telling him my name.

"Okay, then. Let me ask you a question. If you were in love with a married woman who said she was deeply in love with you and not in love with her husband but wouldn't leave him to marry you, would you keep seeing her?"

"I am not one to ask such questions," Mario said and laughed. "I have ideas. Big ideas. But I am the last man in the world who can take these ideas and put them into my life. No, I am not someone to ask for advice."

"From what you said, the future is irrelevant. Why should we plan for the future if it might never come?"

"Yes, I suppose I did say that. I don't know what any of this means when it comes to love. Love is like the volcano. Completely unpredictable."

"Are you in love with someone, Mario?"

"I am always in love," he said and smiled again. "For instance, right now, I am in love with you."

I looked at Mario and when my face grew warm again, I turned away.

“This is what I am saying. I am not a good person to ask for advice about love. But you see how easy it is for two people to get all tangled up. Here, I have only known you a short time and look what has happened to us.”

Mario reached under his poncho into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, holding it out to me. I slid a cigarette from the pack, even though I hadn’t smoked for nearly seven years. With his thumb and first finger, Mario pinched a cigarette between his lips, struck a match and cupped it near my mouth, then moved it close to his.

Smoke swirled between us as we sat, inhaling and exhaling in silence. For the first time, I noticed the small straw bag set next to Mario, filled with books. I noticed the way his black hair was flecked with several strands of silver. I noticed the way his thick dark fingers curled around the slender cigarette, a breath from the filter.

“It is the same, you see,” he said.

“What is the same?”

“A man can make love to a woman with his body,” he said, twirling his cigarette in the air, making ever-smaller circles of smoke. “Or he can make love to a woman with his mind.”

I took a long, slow drag and let the heat of the cigarette burn the back of my throat.

“Look,” I said, pointing in the direction the train was headed. “We’re almost there. I know when we pass this farm, we only have a few minutes left.”

“Only a few minutes left?” Mario asked. “What can I say to you with only a few minutes left?”

“I don’t know,” I said, flicking the hair on top of my head with my fingers as I checked my reflection in a small mirror. “What is it that you want to say?”

“Only that I wish you were coming to Granada to see me.”

I gestured with my head as rain fell lightly on Mario's poncho.

"There's Alfredo," I said. "I have enjoyed talking with you. I won't forget what you said."

As I turned away, Mario slid a small slip of white paper into my hand.

"Here is my address. I have no phone."

Mario looked over to where Alfredo was standing, just inside the covered waiting area, out of the rain.

"If you decide not to visit Alfredo anymore but you want to come back to Granada, you will find me there."

I stared at Mario while the rain soaked my hair and face. He smiled and with his free right hand wiped the water from his chin.

"I have so many pieces to put together now," I said.

Mario glanced over again to where Alfredo was waiting, staying dry out of the rain.

"All I know is that this piece is beautiful," he said, and I watched him as the rain poured down and he stepped away from the train.

Patty Somlo has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times, was a finalist in the Tom Howard Short Story Contest and is the author of From Here to There and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in numerous journals including the* Los Angeles Review, the Santa Clara Review, the Jackson Hole Review, WomenArts Quarterly, The Flagler Review, Guernica, and Switchback, *and in seven anthologies, including,* Solace in So Many Words*, winner of the Next Generation Indie Book Award, and the just-released* Puzzles of Faith and Patterns of Doubt. *She has work forthcoming in the anthology,* The California Prose Directory: New Writing From the Golden State.

From NYC to HKG

Sophie Monatte

I blame it on Facebook. Did Scott think about me and search for my name? Or was it a passive people-you-may-know coincidence? It does matter. In any case, he came across my profile picture taken four years ago in New York—fake aviator sunglasses, army cap, unimpressed smirk—and realized, "Wait a second, if that isn't my old fuck buddy Joanna".

Technically though, we never really did it. Fingers don't count.

"Aren't you going home tonight?" It's my colleague Chen's daily joke. He is sitting next to me, a waist-high fake-glass dividing wall between our desks. The open space's illusion of privacy. Nothing kinkier than intimacy in a public place.

I offer a throaty grunt and an exasperated headshake in reply, the signal for busyness. I keep staring at my computer screen as if the resume I'm pretending to read is the answer to world peace. Meanwhile, touching myself might be the only way to relieve all the sexual tension that's been accumulating inside me all day since Scott granted me his virtual friendship, along with memories of unfinished fantasies and moist panties. Wild parties, insane seduction games, decadent sex with strangers. No commitment, no feelings, and no regrets. Memories of a New York version of me much more attractive that the actual Hong Kong one. Reality check.

Raising my left eyebrow, I lean closer to the computer, insensitively suffocating the keyboard with my breast while realizing I've been staring at a CV in Chinese characters for the past ten minutes. I glance at my colleague's profile on my right, but he does not notice the deception, busy as he is fiddling with the tip of his chin, his usual impulsive attempt to hide what looks like a horse muzzle. A Chinese Jay Leno.

In a second I drift from peeping to staring obsessively. Chen is a *guy*. For the past three years, since I settled down in Hong Kong with Bryan, I have been blind to every single male around me because: I'm in a relationship. The ease with which my colleague spins a pencil around his thumb is oddly arousing. Is Chen fuckable? Agility can make the difference between an unremarkable and a memorable fuck. I feel my New York version violently creeping back. Staring any longer would make for an awkward situation. I start shuffling papers on my desk and opening random Word documents, killing time to stay late in the office. One might say to avoid going home. Bryan and Joanna. Jo and Bryan. Relationship. Home. Scott's warm breath on my neck in the back of a New York cab. Chen

taking me savagely on my Hong Kong desk.

I move my head slowly from side to side to release muscular tension and shake away kinky thoughts. Squinting through my glasses I observe Chen, trying to figure out if he might be at least average looking. Even if he were likely to win Mr. Hong Kong, the issue of his teeth being like a daily 3D menu of his lunch would still remain. Ah, stringy vegetables today. Seaweed-something yesterday. I don't want to end up with his half chewed pak choy inside of me.

Text message from Bryan, my boyfriend of almost four years: "Jo, I'm leaving the office now. You want me to pick you up on my way?" I hadn't thought about the do-I-love-him issue since we wrote down our names next to each other on a lease agreement. Until this morning.

I rub my eyes and send him a lie: "No, I'm waiting for a candidate". That was true until an hour ago. In the business food chain, headhunters come last, especially after seven o'clock.

Bryan replies faster than it takes my phone to acknowledge that my message has been sent. "Get rid of him fast, I miss you! Thai or Viet?"

I shake my head. Until this morning, predictability was attractive.

I write: "I don't give a fuck. You bore me to death". I don't hit send because Bryan might actually jump from the sixty-second floor of our Pokfulam apartment, in our building for grown-ups, with top-notch facilities no one ever uses, fake grass on which we are not allowed to step, fake orchids we are not allowed to pluck, hand sanitizers in every corner we are kindly encouraged to use, a three-story clubhouse and what looks like hundreds of playgrounds for spoiled ungrateful kids whose nationalities you cannot even guess. Our sterilized bubble of perfection. Is about to burst.

I investigate the Facebook profile of my almost-fuck-buddy Scott for the seventy-eighth time today. Apart from the growing goatee, he looks just the same, so freaking hot in a bad boy way that I can barely look at his profile picture for more than two seconds. I might lick my computer screen. Going mad. He befriended me this morning and fucked up my life. He has never even been my friend but The Bobs' buddy, my roommates in New York who happen to share the same first name. We spent our nights not being friends but hunting each other in an insane silent mind game of lust. He still makes me wet. Oh, yes, I *am* wet right now. I squirm on my office chair inconspicuously, slowly rolling my hips back and

forth, for once appreciating the tightness around the crotch of my pants.

Twenty minutes later I'm still going through his pictures online. Scott backpacking in Burma, scuba diving in Antarctica, clubbing in Russia, gangbanging in Brazil—can you see who looks at your pictures? Online stalker. Seen by Joanna. Seen by Joanna. Seen by Joanna. Re-seen by Joanna. Seen 13 times by Joanna. Joanna is looking at your picture right now. Joanna is pathetically drooling on your picture and why did you come back in her life exactly?

I click on my own profile, making sure for the third time today that I have deleted all proofs of my life in Asia. Company dinners, hiking in Sai Kung, quarterly workshops, vacations in secluded romantic Palawan with Bryan—acknowledgements of a lamely normal life, an inflated picture face, professional-looking semi rimless glasses frames and a body two sizes bigger.

Let Scott mentally revive the past with the Joanna from New York's pictures. I still can't believe how good I looked. During two glorious years, a daily diet of greasy junk food, whisky, vodka, rum, tequila, cheap champagne, weed and ecstasy—yet the longer I lived there, the thinner I became. I could have starred in a commercial: "Do you want to look like me? Forget about Special-K, start your day with a glass of rum and a healthy bong!" With puckered lips, swaying hips and a BIBA face. Where do you even get weed in Hong Kong? I remember the last joint I rolled, in the back of a cab heading for JFK destination Hong Kong to find a job and start *a sane and stable yet enjoyable life*—Bryan's words, not mine. He was upset because I was breaking my promise not to smoke so much or drink so much or party so much. Not to live so much. The only sin I could still indulge in was sex, but only with him. Unless you believe unconditionally in the saying that opposites attract, it's a struggle to picture us together. The Bobs gave us three weeks top. It's been almost four years. What can I say, *I* don't know what happened; we met and had sex one day and then the day after and then the day after. Just another addiction.

I refresh Scott's profile page. One last time. I feel the blood rushing through my ears when I discover his new status update. "Heading for Hong Kong in two weeks! Anyone around to party?" Now everything makes sense.

All day I've been composing messages in my head, until I find the perfect one to send him. "Hey Scott, nice to hear from you." No, please. Too headhunter style. "Hey there, fuck buddy, surprised to find you here." He found me, not the other way around. I'm not in need. Am I? "Hey, handsome." I shake my head, blow my cheeks and exhale loudly. Lame, lame, lame. Perhaps I should just like his status update. Just to say, "I hear you Scott, I got

it. We have unfinished business, right?"

"What was that?" Chen asks me, his pen rolling endlessly on his fingers.

I guess I was talking aloud. "I said—do you have a girlfriend?"

The pen slips from his hand. Getting flustered, Chen? He finds his *I love tea* mug on his desk and takes a few noisy sips. "Huh, no," he finally replies, his eyes focused on the cup cover he's holding in his right hand. "You?"

"Oh you know, it's—complicated." I answer emotionlessly, waving the complication away, my gaze fixed on his elongated fingers.

He takes a resume from the stack piling up on his desk and pretends to read, still holding his cup. When I ask him if he has any idea how to score pot in Hong Kong, he chokes on his tea. If we were starring in one of these supposedly hilarious feel-good Hong Kong movies, the whole drink would blow out his nose. I remain stoic, because we are both almost thirty and surely it's acceptable to talk about such things.

"Huh, no," he finally answers after an unpleasantly long cough fit. He pats his chin nervously then starts typing on his keyboard with the agility of a pianist, his eyes glued to the computer screen, not once glancing at the square letters. Or in my direction. I worry he might staple his eyes shut to avoid looking at me ever again.

I stand up, discreetly running a finger over the butt seam of my pants. It's hanging in there but threatening to burst open any time. I leave my desk in an after-hurricane state, not even bothering to put my computer to sleep.

I'm about to wave goodbye when Chen asks me if I'm coming tomorrow night; there's a karaoke party to celebrate Penny's birthday, who quit a year ago but whom I will remember for the rest of my life as being the only person on earth who has never heard of Britney Spears. I haven't been to a club or a party for the past three years. I was busy finding a job, and then I was busy being an exemplary employee, making a living, paying my rent, spending quiet time with Bryan, becoming someone I used to spit on.

Instead of blurting out the I-have-other-plans routine lie I accept the invitation. Time to get

back on track, warm up before Scott comes to Hong Kong.

In the 5X bus taking me home, two bleach blonde toothpicks remind me of a party at Marquee in Chelsea. Just another typical snobbish New York club crowded with yuppies and pseudo-models, with all the usual drama at the door and a half-hour queue to change a tampon. My roommates' favorite. Scott was leaving New York in two weeks, which gave me a deadline. After months of flirting and groping we had to finally have sex, for real. For closure I guess. We never talked about it. Actually I don't think we ever talked, but it was an obvious tacit agreement. Because I was stoned with blowbacks in a place I despised, I kept throwing empty glasses on the floor, spilling full ones on suits and elbowing bimbos in high heels. I have been told that the security bulldogs kicked us out at some point, which was really too bad since Paris Hilton herself was on her way to the club. Scott managed to hide inside until everyone forgot about him. There went my closure.

I get off the bus in front of our building, ignoring the cheesy Japanese garden and the smiley doorman who still cannot pronounce my name correctly after three years, keeping my eyes on my iPhone, my thumb on the screen mechanically refreshing my Facebook news feed. I exhale loudly once before opening the door of our apartment. The colorful Thai food take-away bags from New Bangkok Restaurant fit just so perfectly on our bright green table it looks like an advertising campaign for Ikea. Fucking bright green. Bryan hugs me tight and tries to kiss my neck. Goosebumps all over my body. Not the romantic kind though. A thunderstorm in my mind.

"Did you order mango sticky rice?" I ask him, controlling myself not to bang his adorable Prince Charming head really hard on the fucking bright green table.

After a reasonable half hour of Pad Thai digestion, I'm miserably trying my hand at spinning a cuticle pusher around my thumb, cross-legged on the living room floor, when I feel Bryan roaming around me. Our beast-like signal for sex. As long as we don't have to kiss and get all cuddly, it's actually right on time if I want to manage to fall asleep at some point tonight. Insomniac people surely have no sex life. I head to the bedroom first to avoid holding hands. Once there, I get on my knees to limit foreplay at its minimum required. The privilege of intimacy. Guys read too many feminine magazines. Watch out, spoiler: sometimes all you need is a quick good fuck, yes, even girls. Oh, shocker. I pull off his boxers and swallow his wimpy penis with no further ado, just to get the satisfaction of feeling it growing inside my mouth, all the while trying to remember what Scott tasted like.

I blew him in the back of a cab when we were heading for a party but the driver gave us hell before Scott could come in my mouth. I don't mind the taste; it's just a few seconds, really, like when you visit an old lady who proudly insists you take a sip of her hand-made

wormwood whose recipe has been secretly passed from one generation to another. And so you hold your breath, swallow and smile, even though you're vomiting a little in your mouth. I don't mind the taste and I don't feel offended by the idea either. I find it arousing. Inside the club, Scott kept roaming around me just like Bryan a few minutes ago, attempting to lure me into a manwich on the dance floor like the kind dumb, shapeless, faker-sluts enjoy. I punished Scott for daring to compare me with them by grabbing the guy next to me, a Romanian or something, and we did it in a cubicle in the men's restroom. I have no memory of the sex. Scott punished me by grabbing one of these girls and spending the night with her, as if trying to prove that they are not all *faker*-sluts.

Bryan's breathing tells me he is about to come. I stand up, remove my panties and crouch on all fours on the edge of the bed. He attempts to fight the dryness of my vagina by pushing his wet finger inside me, to no avail. In a state of exasperation and growing frustration I take a lubricant out of the bedside table to make myself artificially available. I look at our reflection in the tinted glass of the wardrobe's sliding door but all I can see are my floppy tits and a roll of belly fat wobbling rhythmically with Bryan's body, like a dog's nipples so swollen with milk for her puppies that they almost touch the floor. I hear the splash of cellulite when my butt smashes with his thighs. It's too slow; I can still think. To avoid staring at my body I look around the room. A 2,000 pieces National Geographic jigsaw puzzle of lion cubs is eagerly waiting for us on the windowsill; we're halfway through. I extend my right arm behind me and squeeze Bryan's ass, taking charge, making him go faster, harder and deeper. It's over within a few seconds.

Unsatisfied and frustrated, I pull away from him, fighting the impulse to hurt him. I once broke up with a guy while we were having sex in a bathtub; while he was pushing himself inside me, I decided we were done and the sight of our interlocked bodies was so repulsive I did not wait to break the news. He did not come. Relationships are just as doleful as a birthday balloon deflating. I can't fake love, I'm afraid.

"I'm gonna take a bath," I tell Bryan, disappearing inside the master bathroom, sparing him the vision of unreasonable hatred in my eyes.

Not waiting for the water to cover my whole body, I sprawl as best I can in the ridiculously tiny bathtub and spread my legs. The pommel feels all right between my thighs but it might be too ambitious for instantaneous countless orgasms. I don't know why in movies delicate women always pleasure themselves in a bathtub. They make it look so easy. I imagine tiny viscous trickles of sperm disappearing down the drain, a crowd of hungry spermatozoon swimming along the sewer pipes, trying to hold on to something, anything. All your life you've been told you would end up in a soft and cozy ovary but guess what, shit happens, every body's disappointed tonight. Okay, orgasm in the bathtub, *not*

happening. Reaching new levels of irrational anger, I shower in two seconds and snatch up Bryan's bathrobe.

Hearing the TV in the living room, I close our bedroom door without making a sound, sit in front of the windowsill on the shaky old chair left behind by the former tenant, and look out over Mount Davis. I can always pretend to be working on my lion cubs if Bryan interrupts me. He likes to watch, as a matter of fact, but I'm not in the mood. I move the chair backwards against the edge of our bed and put my feet in a stirrup position on the window ledge. I find the aggressiveness of a woman gynecologist handling a speculum unjustified. Scrutinizing other women's vaginas all day long might change you into a misogynist.

I open the bathrobe and touch my clitoris. Discontentment is the only thing growing inside me until I remember this Latino knockout I kissed during an ecstasy-filled rave party at Crobar to make Scott want me even more. I imagine him watching us make out on the dance floor in the middle of the unconcerned crowd. Her fingers skillfully disappear inside my pants; suddenly four hands dedicated to my pleasure are all over my body. I come fast and in silence. An even stronger feeling of disappointment and bitterness resurfaces faster than it takes for the sensation to be over. It's a constant slap-in-the-face reminder it still seems natural to ignore over and over. The moment you come is never as good as the expectation of it. I stare at the unimpressed and stoic lion cubs in front of me, and like a consolation prize, I suddenly find the tip of a paw, the damn piece I had been looking for yesterday.

A few minutes later, I'm sitting in bed dressed in men's boxers and an over-sized sleeveless shirt, holding a book I might have started reading a year ago. I look at the title on the cover. *It's All Right Now*. How unfitting. I hear Bryan in the living room Skyping his mother. I understand that Uncle Jim made a fool of himself during the last family reunion. Something about inappropriate jokes after a few too many drinks. At least this time he didn't grope anyone. As usual she nags at the old guy about anything and everything while Bryan finds him excuses, his bad hip, his dead wife, his pollen allergy. There's something about loving and protecting people, you just want to use them as a baseball bat to smack the head of those who always criticize everything with a smile. What kind of guy talks to his mother every day? I cannot even remember the last time I talked to mine.

Running my fingers over my bikini line, I realize I should shave tomorrow morning, just in case the evening goes unpredictably well. I spot an ingrown hair and struggle with it for a minute until I manage to slip it out of my skin. The virtual conversation is fading away in the living room—there's only so much you can say about Uncle Jim. I like Uncle Jim. He does not pretend to be perfect. If I had been to the family reunion, I would have made a fool of

myself too, out of solidarity—or boredom.

I switch off the light and lie down in bed, trying one more time to come up with something cool and witty to show Scott I'm still game. "When are you coming to see me in HK? I miss your cock." Or perhaps "How's Sydney? Did you find another fuck buddy?" No. "I need a good fuck."

Bryan steps into the room, interrupting my deep literary thoughts. I pretend to be sleeping on my side, facing Mount David and my lion cubs. Deaf. Dead. He spoons me and I hold my breath. I jerk my left leg backwards abruptly, hitting him hard in the shinbone with the heel of my feet.

"Wow, what's going on?" he asks, slightly pulling away from me.

"What, oh sorry, I was sleeping." Quite the professional liar today. "Can you move a little? It's so hot," I add, pushing him away with my hand. "I'm sweating already." Thank god he doesn't observe that I stopped sweating since I quit smoking three years ago.

I'm craving a cigarette.

Like every morning Bryan naturally wakes up a few minutes before six o'clock. I have been awake for a long time, talking to Scott in my mind, but I keep still, my face buried in the cushion, hiding from impromptu kisses. He showers in the guest bathroom, gets dressed in the living room and doesn't open the fridge because the door squeals a little. He is so good at not making any sound so as not to wake me up that it makes me unreasonably angry. Wake me up for fuck sake, push me around, slap me, fight me, please, just make me feel alive. I'm hoping he will come back in the bedroom so I can tear him apart. When I realize he's gone, I start wrestling with the bed sheets, throwing away the cushions, tearing up the stupid home decoration magazines on the bedside tables, kicking the mattress with my fists like a child throwing a tantrum.

For the next ten minutes I tsunami the second bedroom turned storage room until I unearth a dusty Converse shoebox full of souvenirs from the US. When I remove the cover a fat and dazed silver fish starts running away in all directions. After a second of confusion —how did it get so obese, what has it been feeding on trapped inside the box for so long? —I find a dirty old Kleenex on the floor and squash the shiny overweight insect against the side of the box, then throw the tissue back on the yellowish parquet. I ignore the old baseball game tickets, casino chips from Vegas, hip-hop party flyers and all the crap inside, I take out a pile of pictures, mostly The Bobs, Bryan and I since he kept

gatecrashing our depraved life after bewitching me. He spent evenings taking pictures of us, using the lens of his camera as a shield against our excesses.

He fell in love with me because I was like a wild, unpredictable, and defective toy, which kept breaking down and needed to be fixed over and over. He felt it his duty to protect me from myself every night, slowly injecting tiny drops of perfection inside me.

I guess I fell for him because I was doing so much of everything that it didn't feel good anymore. Every day I had to indulge in larger quantities of drugs and alcohol—a tiny bong to wake up peacefully, a glass of vodka to fight morning crowd anxiety, a snack time ecstasy—I did all I could to bring the happy-happy amateur feeling back but somehow once it's gone, there's not much you can do to experience it again. Still, you keep going, because what else are you supposed to do? Bryan offered me an excuse to stop trying by blackmailing me, "No more sex when you're wasted". It didn't even look like a sacrifice because he is the kind of person who makes you feel good about yourself even sober. With him, it was ok to be dumb or weak or tired. And I had found my sexual soul mate. The first time he followed me in the bathroom I thought he was a weirdo, but for him it was just intimacy. "So what?" he said, palms up. Everything was so simple with him, I felt like I was on vacations, away from myself. He followed me in the bathroom because he wanted to watch me pee. The intimacy and simplicity of it all. He kissed my armpits, waxed my legs, clipped my toenails and spent hours between my thighs, taking mental pictures of my sex, "I just like to look at it, it's beautiful". He knew everything about me yet he still fell in love with me.

Among all the pictures there's only one with Scott, before he left for Sydney, right before I met Bryan. I have no idea who took the photo, but I remember this New Year Eve's party. The Bobs, Fuck-Buddy and I were supposed to meet friends in Soho. Since we couldn't get a cab, we walked all the way from our apartment in Hell's Kitchen. From the street we heard music inside a building and decided to investigate, the door of this loft was open so we entered, stole a bottle of champagne on a table. We spent the night smoking and drinking in an empty bedroom. Scott wanted me so bad, he kept moving around the room, walking behind me, slightly touching my lower back or the lace of my string, unsuspected, which is exactly what he was doing when the picture was taken.

The clothes in this picture make me smile. Not looking fashionable when we were going out to all the trendy clubs and hip bars my friends fancied so much was my obsession. They threatened not to drag me around anymore, they argued that the bouncers would never let us in but they always did, because it's all in the attitude, not the clothes you wear. I took pride in feeling arrogantly untrendy. This 80's long-sleeve vintage t-shirt from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association is still hidden somewhere in my wardrobe. I

chuckle, remembering the face of my roommates. “You mean you’re wearing *that* tonight? At *Marquee*? Did someone really wear this before? What’s that smell?”

I leave the shoebox on the floor and open the wardrobe in my bedroom. Behind piles of soulless Zara and Club Monaco office-appropriate clothes I find the tee shirt and a pair of hipster pants so long they dragged the floor. This is what I will wear tonight.

Or not. They don’t fit. Yet another reality check. Every part of my upper body is too large for the shirt, my boobs, and my upper arms, even my neck. The seam lines are threatening to come apart. My belly is sticking out as if trying to escape from my body but the elastic waist of the pants is lifting the whole thing up, making my tummy look like a human jelly, flabby buoy.

I don’t remember the last time I cried but I know if I just let go for a second I will drown, buoy or not. I find a pair of washed-out Levi’s jeans one size bigger and an old Nirvana Tee-Shirt greyer than black from too many washes. I manage to fit in even though I can hardly breathe and I will end up with a stomachache and every single stitch tattooed on my skin after wearing it for a few hours. I refrain from checking my butt in the mirror. I smell like old clothes, not even mothball, just plain old, but it’s all right, old clothes smell like nostalgia. I find my favorite pair of black retro Adidas shoes under the bed, the ones Bryan suggested I get rid of because the sole is so thin my feet might get wet on a rainy day.

I throw the clothes in a bag for this evening and borrow Bryan’s bathrobe while talking to Scott by telepathy. “Seeing your picture brings back sexy memories.” I look inside the souvenir box for the old lonely Marlboro Light I noticed earlier, its paper patchy yellow, as if it was left there to dry after it had been soaked. Probably one of my roommates, I would never buy lights, pretending I might somehow limit the damage on my lungs. I use the gas stove since lighters have long been banned from the apartment to help my brain forget faster how insanely good it is to poison my body. My first Hong Kong smoke, though it’s been there with me all these years, in my box, witnessing my weak decline into a coma, a silent companion patiently waiting for me to awaken. Surely there’s no expiry date on cigarettes. I need a coffee, but *we* drink tea now.

I take a dirty glass on the dining table and rename it ashtray, sit on the sofa and take a small shy puff. A storm of wooziness hits me like a hammer on the back of my neck, the predictability of it making me snigger. The divine fragrance of poison makes up for the repulsive taste. I hold the cig below my nose and inhale the blue smoke. I’m so dizzy it feels like I’m sinking inside the sofa and I wonder how long it will take for my legs to get their strength back. But I’m tough and keep smoking, small drag after small drag. As if to teach me a lesson for abandoning it in an old box with a silverfish, the Marlboro turns out

to be rebellious. When I take a larger hit, the smoke heads straight for my eyes, my glasses useless as a protection against the sting. I jerk my head backwards but my eyes are already teary. Occupational hazard.

To lure the cigarette back into friendship I attempt to impress it with my natural dexterity. My lower lip slightly hanging out, I let the smoke flow out slowly and inhale it right back through the nose. A virtuous circle. Feeling cocky, I try my luck at blowing bluish rings but it turns out much more difficult than I remembered. My mouth dries up and my taste buds remain disappointingly unimpressed throughout the whole ten minutes it takes to reach the filter. On the last draw I keep the smoke in my mouth longer, ultimately exhaling sideways a thin grey wisp. I lick the surface of my gums as if making sure the dark tar is penetrating deep inside me. I keep expecting the relieving side effect to hit my brain. Anyway I will still buy a pack within an hour. No more weed, fine; no more alcohol, fine; no more sex with strangers, fine. But I need one last addiction to keep me from going insane.

How about “Scott, I’m thinking we should meet next time you’re in HK, revive the past”? How odd that someone whose voice I cannot remember could have such an effect on my mind and my body. I shave in the bathtub, dress up in the same Massimo Dutti suit I was wearing the day before and head to work.

After lunch I find myself with a gigantic cup of bitter black coffee and a pack of Marlboro Reds in the outdoor smoking area of my office building. While looking for my brand new lighter inside my bag, I compose yet another message in my head: “Scott, do you remember our last party together?”

It was meant to happen on his last night in New York. I made sure it was a great before party at home with tons of weed and alcohol before hopping from one club to the other until dawn. Scott and I spent the evening flirting, brushing past each other, staring defiantly at each other, and making each other jealous. As usual we made our tottering way back home with The Bobs for the after-party and a DVD. One block from the apartment Scott pushed me inside a parking lot while the others kept walking. I ended up with my back against a wall and his body rubbing against mine. I tried to kiss him but he kept pulling away at the last second. We never kissed. I don’t think fuck buddies are meant to. The security guard kicked us out. Back home, while I was rolling a spliff—for no reason I was always elected the official roller—Scott started undressing me in the middle of the living room so I pushed him inside my bedroom. His fingers nervously disappeared inside me, my underwear still hanging around my left ankle. It was happening, the end of the game. But this fucker suddenly froze, pulled away from me and left the room without a word or a glance at me. He didn’t even pick up his sweater, and by the time I was dressed and in the living room, he was gone. My roommates were passed out on the sofa; I sat cross-legged

on the floor, smoked a joint and watched *Zoolander*. Expecting him to open the door any moment—perhaps he went to buy condoms, perhaps he was sick—I kept myself mentally available, ready to start where we left it.

I woke up the next morning on the living room floor. I went to the deli next door for a coffee, came back home, lit a few dozen Marlboros, debated with my inner devil the necessity of a morning bong, lost the argument, then patiently waited for The Bobs to rise from the dead and switch on their brain. When I finally got their attention I asked for their male's perspective. I could hardly believe their lack of surprise, they guessed that Scott was too wasted and he got a hard-on for so long that at some point he went soft. I could act and think like a guy but somehow this never crossed my mind. "Hey Scottie, I still have your sweater. Do you want it back? Come and get it."

Back to the reality of the smoking area, I throw away my empty cup of coffee and light a cigarette, hiding behind an exotic potted plant higher than me. To my boss, nicotine addicts are just a bunch of smelly weak people who cannot face problems. Some bullshit like that.

This fag still tastes rotten but the good news is that I'm only dizzy for the first few hits. My eyes meet my reflection in the steel-structure of the wall and I wonder if I'm looking at a fat image of myself in one of these distorting carnival mirrors. To stop thinking I call Bryan.

"I have to go out tonight with my team. Freaking karaoke." I blow the smoke in the direction of a woman walking by who's covering her nose with her hand. Just ensuring she doesn't do it for nothing. As if cigarette really was the ultimate source of pollution in Hong Kong. Seriously. I've never seen a guy do that.

"Karaoke? Really? That's too bad. I was thinking Indian food from Bombay Dreams. Quiet evening, you know?" *Oh, how I know.* "I'm so hammered. Wait—are you smoking?"

Well I'm *trying* really hard.

"Why?" He chuckles nervously and I can imagine him at his desk with his palms up, exasperated by the ridiculous revelation that his girlfriend is a sinner who doesn't even try to lie about it.

“Well, why *not*?” That is the right question, I believe.

“You quit for what? Three years? Do you remember how you struggled, the weight gain, the stress, and now, you’re fine, right? So—I don’t know, I don’t get it.”

“Come on, give the fucking perfect nun a break.” I laugh sarcastically. “You’ve got to allow me a smoke once in a while.”

“Yes, right, *once in a while*. You don’t know how to do things *once in a while*,” he murmurs. I’m sure he’s looking around, making sure no one can hear him. “I’m just surprised. I thought we talked about it, you know, trying to have a baby. I don’t get it, why suddenly you start smoking again.”

We talked about it? There’s no *we*. I will never be a *we*. I don’t want kids. I never said I wanted kids. If I had been keeping a lame diary, it would be written on every damn page. Not every girl is meant to be a mother. There are good mothers, and—well, the others.

“It’s just one ciggy, ok?” I don’t want to discuss it.

He sighs. “So where is it tonight anyway? What time do you want to meet?

“No, no, you cannot come. It’s a company thing between colleagues.” No need to beat around the bush.

I hear a distant voice calling his name. “Hold on, I’m late for a meeting. I’ll call you back.”

“Just don’t wait for me tonight, ok?” I hang up hastily and throw the cell phone inside my bag as if it was a bomb about to explode. I’m crushing the cigarette butt with the tip of my shoe when I realize there’s a suit looking at my feet. Oh yes, right, littering is a terrorist crime punishable by execution in beautiful eco-friendly Hong Kong. This city is just like me, pretending to be perfect. “Are you still in Sydney, Scott? I’m coming.”

I pick up what remains of the cigarette butt, throw it in the direction of the ashtray, glance at the guy and walk away. He incidentally has the same superior gaze as Scott.

“You missed,” the suit calls after me. The motherfucker. Just my type of guy. Three years

ago I would just give him the finger, craving to meet him again a few hours later for another heated confrontation. He might be a candidate or a potential client so I walk back coolly, pick it up, again, and dramatically put it in the smelly ashtray, on the top of the pile.

After work, we're all lingering in the office, waiting for the party of the year to start. Chen will join us later since he's meeting university friends at The Whiskey Priest first. I keep hearing about this bar from my candidates. I receive a text from Bryan: "Let me know if you want me to join you. Karaoke might be fun!!" I despise exclamation marks.

Half an hour later, while I find myself trapped in a surreal yet enlightening conversation about my colleague Gloria's severe diarrhea issues, I refresh my Facebook page and almost scream at the sight of a new message.

"Are you coming Joanna?" someone asks me.

"I'll see you guys over there. I have to reach a candidate." Get the fuck out of my face.

It's not from Scott but from one of my roommates who now lives in London. I only kissed him once during a party to help him make out with this Canadian girl he fancied. We tequila-shot-kissed to show her that it was no big deal even though he was kind of theoretically involved with her best friend. She still couldn't warm up to the idea so I volunteered to kiss her. "See? It's really no big deal. Maybe one more time?" I can't remember her name but I am still obsessed with her body, short and tiny with beautiful and disproportionately plump breasts I really felt like touching. "See? It's really no big deal." Anyway it worked. Always here for my friends.

"What the fuck?" I mumble as the first few words of his special announcement start to make sense in my mind. I read it again: "We are pregnant." Isn't it the lamest thing any guy could say? He's serious. "What the fuck?" I repeat. Just the sight of these three words on my screen makes me angry. I refuse to read more. Traitor. The cleaning lady, bored to death, is vacuuming with one hand as if trying to throw a bowling ball. I can feel her glaring at me. She always waits for me to leave so she can use our company phone unnoticed and reach her family on the Mainland. I switch off my computer and head for the restroom to get changed.

Once outside the building, I start walking, officially looking for a taxi, unofficially giving my pair of jeans a chance to stretch a little; they're so tight it's like a blood clots VIP party in my legs. Within a few minutes, I arrive in Lan Kwai Fong, Hong Kong Island's party district, a perfect square of tiny streets filled with a dozen bars and clubs. It's so small that you are

bound to know every one after a few weeks. It occurs to me that I don't have a single friend in Hong Kong.

Well, karaoke can wait. I'd rather join my colleagues with a beer or two in my stomach; at least I won't feel so self-conscious with a mike. I head towards The Whiskey Priest. Inside, a few groups of suits are scattered around the place. I order a Heineken and sit on a stool at the counter, using the mirror in front of me to people watch. I spot Chen's chin with five other Asian guys.

A few minutes later, my beer is gone. I was thirsty. Side effects are immediate, heavy shoulders and blow on the back of the head. The first glass always does this to me. However the numbness in my arms and legs usually comes much later. Amateur drinkers are pathetic. Waiting for a rum and coke I stuff myself with peanuts and keep discreetly eye-harassing Chen and his friends. He finally looks up. He seems to be hesitating between coming over and pretending not to see me. Too late, I'm waving. He fakes surprise with a twist of the chin, stands up and walks towards me. I awkwardly extend my arms, giving him no other choice but to hug me. I can't think of anything to say, alcohol having a wimpy steam bath effect on my brain. I take a long swallow and push the empty glass in front of me. I invite Chen to join me and order drinks for both of us.

We bitch about a candidate who refused an offer and fucked-up our relationship with the client. I order more drinks. He shares some office gossip about the last karaoke party and our uptight colleague from Administration who got drunk and ended up mixing with a group of triad-looking guys.

This fourth drink hits home perfectly. I notice I'm slightly rolling on my stool; it's all right as long as I don't fall backwards. The bar is getting crowded and peoples' elbows keep pushing us closer to each other. I am very tempted to lick the sweat off the tip of his chin. We keep talking about our colleagues and who is dating who, and somehow one word leading to another, I find myself trapped in a monologue while Chen gradually lowers his gaze.

"I tell you what man, love for life is a fucking illusion, a fairy tale people still insist on hanging on to. I just don't get it, you see. I mean, please, a lifetime sexual desire for one single person? Please! Why do marriages fail? I don't know one single settled couple that still has regular passionate sex. Apart from swingers perhaps. And you know what, that might just be the solution. Anyway, look at my parents, my friends' parents, Uncle Jim, just about everyone. If you're not looking for happiness, I'm talking about the real one, not the reasonable one obviously, if you are content enough being miserable and frustrated and angry all your life. Then great. Cheating is human nature, man. Look at Maslow's hierarchy

of needs, sex is right there at the bottom, it's true, you just check it out, Wikipedia, you'll see. It's just a freaking basic need. Just like water, it's right there at the bottom of the pyramid. Have you ever seen this documentary about swingers? They are so happy you just want to throw a rock at your TV screen. So why? You tell me. Well I'll tell you. Because they are honest people. They accept it. The fact that one body for the rest of your life is not enough. Take Bryan for example. Wait, did I say Bryan? No, no, I meant Scott. Take Scott for example, he's nothing to me. I don't even remember his voice. It's weird, right? He's just meat, a body, a desire, a kind of fantasy unfulfilled, could be him, could be you, could be anyone, really. I mean, the guy's IQ is like, I don't really know what's a low IQ, but you see what I mean right?" I shut up to catch my breath and realize I might have been spitting in his face while I was throwing up these words. This all makes so much sense though, my mind is so much clearer now. I feel as if tiny dwarfs have been cleaning up my brain with a Kärcher. Chen remains silent. "Anyway do you want to go meet the others for karaoke? Or we could spend some more time together." I wink instinctively. He swallows loudly.

"Huh, well—" Chen awkwardly shifts on his stool. "My friends are waiting for me." He looks in their direction as if mentally begging them to come rescue him from the lunatic in front of him. If he had been listening, he would realize it all makes sense. The thing with alcohol, people don't listen, they assume you're talking bullshit.

"Oh, okay, great. What are you guys planning?"

He pretends not to hear me. "Actually I'm gonna go, they are waiting for me." Perhaps it did not occur to him that I could join him and meet his friends. I'm about to state the obvious when he stands up abruptly and I realize the obvious, his plans do not include me any more. No goodbye hugs this time. Chin-Chin disappears.

I order one more drink, hoping someone might accidentally flirt with me. I check my phone, three missed calls from Bryan, nothing new on the Facebook side. "Tell me Scott, why did you leave the apartment like that on your last night? Why don't you finish what you started?"

For the next five minutes, no one even glances in my direction. I hold my glass almost full, inform the waiter who doesn't even look up that I need a smoke and I'll be right back. Heading outside, I almost bump into a hugely pregnant woman coming in. What the fuck is she doing in a bar, isn't she supposed to lay down with her feet on a cushion and memorize stupid *What to Expect When You're Expecting* books? God, she is so big, there might just be 4 to 5 cubs inside her. Pregnant women are obscene, there should be a law forbidding them to leave their houses. She steps away from me, a hand on her inflated stomach like a shield, as if she can read my mind and knows I really want to poke her belly

with a needle, just to see her blow up and fly around the room.

Outside the bar, I look around, tapping a Marlboro on the pack and wondering which way to go next. Lan Kwai Fong looks more and more like my kind of paradise now, a planet with all types of men everywhere and me. Girls are busy getting ready for the night, faking prettiness, hiding imperfections to lure men. I picture them in their bedrooms, applying layer after layer of thick make-up, checking their butts in the mirror, trying out different outfits, searching for hole-free stockings, the perfect pair of shoes. I lean against a wall and make sure I'm not lighting the wrong end of my cigarette. A glass in one hand, a smoke in the other, this might just be the height of happiness. I wonder if I'm allowed to drink in public and it occurs to me that *me* not knowing is surreal. I gesture to the taxi driver waiting for a customer. Before climbing inside the car, I take a sip of rum and one last drag before throwing the butt in the street—hereby possibly committing a double infraction. The excitement of life.

The driver doesn't reply when I greet him in English, doesn't nod to acknowledge my presence; he just puts away his newspaper when I give him my address.

"Huh?"

"The Belcher's. Bo Cho Yuen," I articulate loudly, using my best Cantonese accent. There's no way I can join my colleagues now, I might just end up trying to make out with the uptight Admin girl.

"Huh?" We do that a few more times until he gets it. I suspect he understood right away and is just messing with me. *Fucker*. I realize I really don't want to go home.

"No, sorry, I changed my mind. We have to go back. Lan Kwai Fong."

"Aii-yiah, *gweipo* blah blah blah—" He might just be insulting me in Chinese.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I ask him. It gives me a strange thrill to insult people. "Don't give me your *gweipo* bullshit, ok?"

Looking at me through the rear-view mirror, he burps. Once. Twice. Does he expect me to blush or something? The guy has seven different cell phones hooked all over the dashboard. I'm feeling sorry for him. Not a single one is ringing. He burps for the third time,

a smirk on his face, still looking at me. I've been living around guys long enough not to be shocked by anything. But then he doesn't know that. He laughs after each belch. He's getting on my nerves. I lean closer, in between the front seats. I'm so close to his face I could lick the inside of his left hairy ear. It's my time to burp. Alcohol fumes. A long and loud belch coming straight from the heart. Courtesy of New York Jo. I stay right there, much longer than necessary, then slowly move back to my seat. No more laughing in the car. Asshole. I glance at the glass of rum I'm still holding in my hand, almost full. I spill the content on the floor.

"Oops." Just being informative.

The driver ignores me and starts to drive faster. He drops me off in front of Lan Kwai Fong. I hand him the money for the drive, wave the change away and get out. He doesn't wait for another passenger.

The streets are filling up fast now, even more suits than twenty minutes ago, and women. British 30-something chubby spinsters attempting to compete with Asian lolitas in ridiculously short skirts and dangerously high heels, struggling to keep their cool sexiness while handling the uneven pavement. I step inside a crowded bar, order a rum and coke and lean against the counter, checking out the crowd standing on what might become a dance floor later on. Gangs of guys in hunting mode trying to get the attention of smaller groups of girls who alternate between finger combing their hair, giggling, and sipping funky-looking cocktails with little umbrellas and colorful straws. The guy waiting for his drink next to me stares reproachfully when I take out a cigarette from the pack and from the corner of my eyes I see a bouncer approaching. Ah, yes, of course, in Hong Kong, one diligently respects the law. Amen.

Holding my drink, I leave the bar and head outside in the pedestrian street where the party is growing big. Everybody seems to know each other; sweaty handshakes, backs amicably slapped and bodies tightly hugged. I walk around, smoking and stumbling slightly, overwhelmed by people bumping into me. Keeping my drink inside the glass is a struggle so I finish it in one long swallow, wincing slightly. I never liked the taste of coke. I check my contacts in my iPhone, trying to think of someone to call but really, just to give me something to do. So many names, no less than three Sarah Chan, candidates whose faces I cannot place. A list full of Chiu, Chung, Lee—so many names yet no one to talk to. I can't remember why I was looking at my contacts in the first place and put away the phone in my back pocket, even though Bryan—whose missed calls I keep ignoring—always complains that it's not feminine.

The laughter and loud chatter are overwhelming. I follow a group of pathetic fat guys,

stains of sweat in their back, shirts too tight and pants being slowly swallowed by their butt cheeks. They stare at every girl wearing a skirt, every one but me. One of them attempts to approach an Asian hottie walking by, the kind of cold beauty all too aware of her perfect body, all too blasé, who, unperturbed, passes on, waving without a smile at someone behind me. The big guy says something that I don't get, his friends are laughing so hard that they have to hold on to each other. I have a better view of them now, there's not a single one fuckable. It occurs to me that I might also be judged this way. The Asian girl walks past me, ignoring my presence, like I'm one of the Frat Pack boys, not deserving her glance.

I follow the group inside a bar whose theme might be exotic grotesque, with fake palm trees, beach parasols and waiters in Hawaiian shirts. It's so lame I want to puke on the bar and rub my vomit all over these girls whose cleavage is as deep as their naiveté. Coming here week after week, praying to come upon the man of their dreams, a good looking and big hearted banker with an unlimited bank account who will tell them: "Baby, don't go back to work, just wait for me all day long so we can make sweet love and cuddle in the evening." I order another rum and coke, knowing I've almost reached my limit and feeling sorry for myself for being drunk so easily. I take out my iPhone and look at Scott's Facebook page, then mine. Why couldn't I be the Joanna from my profile picture all my life? Partying, getting drunk, taking drugs, having sex? Why do people want to settle down after a while? Was my roommate Bob a fake back in NY? Is the expectant dad the real one or the liar? Once you have a kid, you can't get back to the real you, can you?

The waiter hands me my glass and leans over to talk to me. I'm already smiling, ready to flirt, ready to make him hard with words and the anticipation of great sex.

"You can't smoke in here," he says coldly.

What? I didn't realize I was smoking. Staring at him, I take a long drag, blow the smoke in his face and toss the fag using my thumb and middle finger. It lands on the chest of a toothpick who's trying to dance sexy even though she has absolutely no rhythm in her steep body. I almost feel bad for her because I see it in her eyes; she knows. She knows that a girl who can't dance cannot be a good lay. I can always tell from the way people wriggle on a dance floor. She starts screaming like a dumb bitch when the cigarette hits her skin.

Her boyfriend shouts at me, "Come on! Watch out! What are you doing?"

Instead of backing away, I approach the couple, smiling like a psycho.

He pushes me away and the girl looks at me with hatred in her eyes for ruining her perfect little doll image. She's nothing, I could break her neck; she can barely keep her balance with her high heels and two tons of foundation on her face. Does she hide from her boyfriend until she's make-up ready in the morning? Looking the suit in the eyes, I inform him that I'm a good lay. "Really good," I add.

"Please leave us alone. You're drunk." He looks away and leaves, holding his girlfriend's hand.

I laugh bitterly, look around. So many eyes on me. I finish my drink, throw the empty glass on the dance floor and walk towards the exit while lighting another Marlboro and giving the finger to the waiter.

I wander aimlessly in the streets of Lan Kwai Fong. I step inside a bar, gazing at strangers, searching for nothing, pushing suits around, oblivious to their insults. Then I leave the place and step inside the next one, and do it again, and do it again, my mind as blank as my eyes. Music, laughter, conversations, high-pitched cries of joy, the sounds around me are too loud yet oddly inaudible. I freeze in the middle of the street, transparent, while groups of people brush past me, their elbows on my ribs feeling almost like a relief. When someone puts a hand on my shoulder I turn around, not even surprised to meet Bryan's smile, which turns into a laugh.

He murmurs, "Look at you," before hugging me. He says something else but I can't quite get it, something like "I won't let you go so easily." I don't ask him how he found me. Where else could I be?

He hails a cab but I pull him away and we disappear towards the quiet and undisturbed streets of Sheung Wan. We walk side by side, without touching each other, without a word. I cry. Hard. And I laugh just as hysterically and I'm not sure which one feels better. He doesn't console me, we walk in silence for perhaps an hour and I realize we're almost home. When I reach for a cigarette, he takes one too.

He's strolling a few steps ahead of me when he suddenly turns around. "You know, I've been thinking. I'd love to watch you have sex with another girl." He smiles and turns his eyes to the sky, like he's picturing the scene in his mind then resumes strolling, hands in

his pockets.

After a few more minutes, I stop in the middle of the street, holding my phone, while Bryan keeps walking, slightly more slowly though, as if waiting for me to catch up when I'm done. Unfriending Scott. Letting go.

Sophie Monatte has lived and written in France, New York and Hong Kong.

She's earning her MFA in Fiction at City University of Hong Kong and writing her first short-story collection in English.

She's a compulsive backgammon player. She's afraid of exclamation points.

Roads

Simon Speakman Cordall

It was hot. Exhaust fumes, dust, and sound clogged the air, forming a thick impenetrable film over every inch of Lam's exposed skin. He urged the moped on, further through the congested, near static anarchy of the highway. Lam had been on the road for barely an hour; time that had seen him struggle to get more than a few kilometres out of Ho Chi Minh's centre and into the sprawling never ending mass of the industrialised suburbia that spread out from the city like ink stains on cotton. It hadn't rained for weeks and the dust and mosquitoes were taking every advantage of the break, forming into swirling clouds that followed the heavy trucks and buses like airborne shadows.

Lam could feel the heat from the moped's engine already beginning to soak through the thin polyester of his trousers. It didn't matter. It was still three hundred kilometres to Da Lat and his parents' home. It would get worse long before it got better. Ngoc had told him to take the bus, but he hated the noise and the crowds. He hated being cooped up for hours on end, packed in with those he didn't know and didn't want to know. Going by bike was slower, but Lam had been secretly relishing the freedom the trip would afford him for weeks. He sensed Ngoc had guessed as much that morning, as she prepared his breakfast in the kitchen they shared with the other families on their floor. She didn't resent him taking the trip, he knew that, but his absence was going to be hard on her. It would have been nice to make the journey as a family, but, with business as it was, impossible. With Lam away, Ngoc would have to make his traditional 3am ride to Binh Dien Market to buy the fish for that day's market, as well as staff the stall all day on her own. Lam didn't worry about the business. Ngoc was as good as any at judging the quality of the fish, as well as an adept haggler. She could always be relied upon to pay the least for the most, but, still, it was going to be hard. At least Quang and Han were old enough to look after themselves now. That was something.

The open fronts of the houses lining the highway offered passersby everything from toothbrushes to tobacco. The bright red and yellow Tet lanterns and New Year decorations thrust onto the pavement outside jarred rudely against the dark interiors of families' front rooms and the grey dust and fume drenched background of the houses themselves.

It was already 10am and the sun beat off the top of his helmet, nurturing the headache that had been coming for the last few kilometres. Sweat patches formed between his legs and in the wind's lee on his back. Another set of lights and another wait approached. Robbed of motion, the heat and air seemed to coagulate around him, suffocating him within its rank embrace. The heat of a hundred motorbike engines pressed against his legs, forcing the hair to retreat and the skin on his feet to gasp for relief from between the

gaps in his sandals. The trucks and buses, conscious of their place in the road's food chain, spilled out of their lanes and into that reserved for motorcyclists, forcing the heaving mass of mopeds onto the sandy run offs and pavements that skirted the highway and causing the pedestrians to seek what shelter they could.

With motion regained, Lam tried to force his way to the relative safety at the left hand of the lane. Distance from the roadside would give him time to react to the riders pulling out and the pedestrians stepping out into the road. Let someone else have a bad day today.

Residential gave way to industrial and Lam began to gain some speed. He'd had the already aged moped for five years now and it had always provided good service. However, the children were getting older and they, Quang particularly, were beginning to be embarrassed by his Father's old Honda Dream. It didn't matter much, he supposed, there was no way they could afford to replace it. However, he was sorry Quang was embarrassed by his old bike. It was just his age, he supposed. Teenagers could be like that. Maybe, when he was older, they could save up and get Quang something a little nicer.

But the Dream was reliable and that was everything. In the evenings, already tired from a long day at the market, Lam would hang around Bui Vien, shuttling the backpackers who drank and shouted there between tourist bars. Always they would argue, their beer soaked breath washing over him as they accused him of taking advantage of them, of charging too much, of trying to rob them. Weary and tired to his bones, Lam would as often as not agree to their prices, ferrying them to the next bar to watch them spend double on their first beer.

The moped rattled and shook beneath him as another tarmac patch on a patchwork road passed below. To his right, a market spilled out onto the highway, causing the motorbikes to casually skirt the huge marble Buddhas that towered benignly over smaller statues of dogs, stone furniture, and the occasional pedestrian, holding anything they could lay their hands on above them as a shield against the midday sun. Girls, probably only a few years older than Han, passed him on their brightly coloured new scooters. Despite the heat, every inch of their skin had been covered by jeans, gloves, and hoods, their faces concealed behind dust masks and sunglasses. Lam wondered at it all. Ngoc's skin had been dark when they met, and was darker still now. Lam had always considered her beautiful. His skin was dark too. It was already obvious that Han would go the same way. He hoped this didn't cause her to be self conscious. He didn't want to be the cause of that, no matter how little control he had over it.

Soon, the endless stream of brightly coloured buses and trucks ground to a halt, forming

an endless queue, which Lam passed by knowing the Da Lat turning must be near.

With the highway behind him, the traffic began to clear to the same degree as the road began to deteriorate, causing the Dream to rattle worryingly under every assault the road launched at it. Lam ached. He'd been riding for three hours and his body was beginning to rebel. The pain in his backside worried and nagged at him like toothache of the bone. With every mile, riding the moped came closer to sitting in acid and, try as he might, his attention would not and could not shift from the pain.

Between the houses and the factories, paddy fields and fish ponds passed Lam by. Spotting some shade, Lam took the opportunity to pull over, rest, and eat the lunch Ngoc had prepared for him. The relief was immediate: muscle and sinew gasped with their release from the Dream's grip. Introspection vanished and his body seized the chance to move and stretch after hours of its de facto imprisonment. Squatting on his haunches, Lam greedily devoured the ban my Ngoc had tied to the Dream's white plastic fairing. In front of him, the never changing, never ending procession of trucks, buses, and motorbikes passed by, each leaving Lam a small legacy of the dust and smoke that marked their passage. He didn't care. It was good to be out of the sun and off the bike. He'd be on his way before long. For now, it was enough to eat the ban my and savour the break.

Lam knew the Da Lat road well. He had come this way many times, making the long commute between his job and home in Ho Chi Minh City and that of his family in Da Lat. He wondered how many times each pot hole had rattled him, how many hours had been spent in the pitiless sun, or how many of the fierce storms that raked this country during the rainy season he'd endured.

Another of the small industrial towns that pock marked the route approached and, with it, another crossroads to be passed through. However, for reasons he couldn't even explain to himself, Lam took the turn. He passed by the houses of the townspeople, none radically different from those of the city, and on, into the foothills of the Central Highlands. The land, lush and green, rose in front of him, climbing skywards in near conical mounds through which the narrow road wound its way; rising, falling and contracting upon itself like the death throes of a tarmac snake. Pulling back on the throttle, Lam lowered his body into the moped, making a small refuge from the wind behind the Dream's fairing. As a young man, Lam had enjoyed the exhilaration of speed. He had relished the adrenalin rush of pushing both himself and his mopeds as far and as fast as he could. However, time and responsibility had lessened the attraction of danger and now, unexpectedly, there was this. Something new. Something different. As he pushed the battered old bike into each corner, dipping his shoulder in and accelerating out even faster, he felt a kind of peace envelop

him. Everything was as it should be. Both he and the tired old motorbike knew each other and knew what this twisted road demanded. There was no fear. Neither was there the transient thrill of exhilaration. His mind cleared. His only thought that of the next corner and his only sensation that of the straining bike below him. He pulled the throttle back further.

Lam grinned.

Simon Speakman Cordall, b. 1972, is a freelance journalist working in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Poetry

Editor Kelly Jacobson

Y

Changming Yuan

yes, yes, with your
yellowish skin, you enjoy
meditating within the shape of
a wishbone, inside the broken wing
of an oriental bird strayed, or
in a larger sense, you look like
the surfacing tail of a pacific whale
who yells low, but whose voice reaches afar
far beyond a whole continent, to a remote village
near the yellow river, where you used to sunbathe
rice stems, reed leaves, cotton skeletons
with a fork made of a single horn-shaped twig
when you were a barefooted country boy
on the other side of this new world

is this the reason for your obsession
with the letter?

Changming Yuan, 4-time Pushcart nominee and author of Allen Qing Yuan*, holds a PhD in English, teaches privately and edits* Poetry Pacific *in Vancouver. Yuan's poetry appears in 639 literary publications across 25 countries, including* Barrow Street*,* Best Canadian Poetry *(2009, 2012),* BestNewPoemsOnline*,* Exquisite Corpse *and* London Magazine*. Poetry submissions welcome at yuans@shaw.ca.*

What We Already Are

Shenan Prestwich

After Rilke

I crossed the grass slowly
with the sagging garbage and thought
that maybe this is praying.
Maybe prayer is not
entreaties for action, reaction,
or answer, not a call and response
with comforts we've written in the skies,
or the words of what we want, and want known,
but the breath of our questions, formless,
passed like a note to no one, and thus free
for a moment, for us to hold
in our lungs, and out, beating
against the roof and swooping back into us,
take long, stinging drags off it, watch it
as it leaves us, dissipating and filling
the unoccupied space between things,
not clamber to name the unknown
colors painting our veins, but let them run
in rivulets through us,
see how the light changes them,
and changes us into what, hardly sensing it,
we already are in the mid-winter sun, filtered
by a brightness and a cold.
How else would we know how it feels to live
with the ache and astonishment we call breath?

Shenan Prestwich is a Washington, DC-based poet and graduate of the Johns Hopkins University MA in Writing program. Her work has appeared in such publications as Slow Trains*,* Pigeon Bike*,* Dirtflask*,* Dr. Hurley's Snake Oil Cure*,* The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*,* Orion headless*,* The Camel Saloon*,* Seltzer*, and* The Baltimore Review*. Additionally, Shenan edits* Magic Lantern Review*, a journal of writing and film. In addition to writing, reading, hearing, watching, and sometimes tasting poetry, the wide array of things that make her happy include cognitive research, bluegrass, long drives, the great outdoors, good people, and bad karaoke.*

Death Valley

Arah McManamna

Did you ever think
You'd drown in the desert?

An artist's palette
Paints the Valley of Death
With vibrant, verdant
Sediment.

A living boulder
Guided in the night
By an unseen shepherd
Pauses-
Having carved us a racetrack

Walking on salt flats with eggshell feet.
So neither will crack
Like a smile, like the corner of your mouth
Chapped against my wasteland face.

Trapped in a basin of Badwater
We look up from the parched space
Below sea level
And give a raw laugh

For if the water rolled in
We'd drown.

Arah McManamna is a recent graduate from UCLA pursuing a career as a grant writer. She has been previously published in Student Voices *and* Cactus Heart Press.

Cemetery of the Caimans
Paul Brooke

During the 1970s, it is estimated
one million caimans were killed by
coureiros every year.

Retrace poachers' campfires,
kick the charred wood,
the disintegrating drying
racks. They slaughtered masses,
hundreds of thousands
of caiman here. Kneeling,
seek forgiveness for wanton
waste, shoes and handbags,
belts and wallets, skins stretched
taut then rolled tight. Out
scattered in the forest are skulls
and bones, pits and crypts
of the long dead, never honored.
On the river, the night's sky
is a black vestment. The moon
is a new-faced saint. Eyes pulse
the dark margins, hundreds
of thousands of live caiman
rise miraculously from the depths.

Paul Brooke's work has appeared in The Antioch Review, North American Review*, and other publications. He is the author of* Light and Matter: Poems and Photographs of Iowa, Meditations on Egrets: Poems and Photographs of Sanibel Island *(Florida), and* Strings: Two Yakama Indian Women.

His photographs have been exhibited in Ames, Iowa; Des Moines, Iowa; Iowa City, Iowa; and Sanibel, Florida.

My India

Margaux Delotte-Bennett

my India is filled with the unique and familiar
unthought-of shapes and realities
colours still to be created
thrust upon backs and ‘round hips

my India tastes of every part of the coconut
water, young flesh, mature flesh, oil and husk
it is the faint smell of jackfruit cleaned with the morning’s newspaper
dosas wrapped in the afternoon times
medicines packed in envelopes made from discarded magazine leaves
there is no waste here
things just turn to dust
after they have been used and reused
before the garbage pickers recycle them one last time
into rupees to feed their flock

my India is of the south
where things are darker
faces and arms
the rich earth
the streets at night
the trains by day

my India is of the south
where things are rounder
faces, bellies, bosoms and butts
traffic circles
2, 3, 4 and more wheeled vehicles
that turn and stop
turn and stop
while circuitously touring ‘round the city
which has no centre

my India, indeed
I claim her as my own
not because she can be possessed
but because I see me in her and her in me
as I sway with the rhythm of the bus
sway with the turn of the auto driver’s wheel
sway with the smoke rising from the dhaba’s grill

my India feeds my body and my soul
clothes me in rainbows and dust
chills me with sights while I sweat
and welcomes me home
as it becomes clearer each day
that I will never
ever
blend in

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margaux delotte-bennett is a Washington, DC based poet, songwriter and performer. As an active member of The Saartjie Project theater company and a Board member of the Young Women's Drumming Empowerment Project, margaux links her art with community engagement and activism. Her poetry has been featured in the anthologies Liberated Muse Volume 1*:* How I Freed my Soul *and* 2011 NaPoWriMo Poetry Anthology *as well as the magazines* Divided City *and* Success & Ability*. In 2009 margaux premiered her one-woman show* Black & Kinky Amongst Brown Waves *that included the poem "girl child" which won second place in the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities' 27th Annual Larry Neal Writers' Award.* Black & Kinky *went on to have 2 successful runs at the 2010 Capital Fringe Festival in Washington, DC and at WOW Cafe Theater in New York City. margaux also has a self published poetry chapbook for sale entitled "*living*,* learning *,* loving*" and a blog at kinkywaves.wordpress.com on which she posts a new poem each week.*

Tunica, MS

Matt Jones

I took up a handful of sand and ate it.
We rode, talking about the smoothness of the ride,
and I waited for my insides to turn into clay
and gum up into cake and gritty batter.
The sun through the side of the window
dressed my arm like loose flesh, asleep
and breathing shallow breaths with warm air.
The suspension is good, I thought. Nothing ever
looked so good when paired with nothing.
The ground cracked underneath the gaze of the sky that
stretched like it had nowhere to go but everything to see.
"This is what Australia must be like," you said.
This is nothing like that. That expanse ends and dies wet.
It trickles and sinks with the pit inside me to the floor
littered with lobster bisque and volcanic jets and pre-evolution
hot with the heat that gave it time. Everything
ends up,
up and never ends.
The suspension is good,
I thought, the way we feel closer but never get that way.
I'm doing kegels right now, while you're driving.
"I'm doing kegels right now, while I'm driving," you said.
My head is sweaty and the air is so warm, "from all the exercise,"
you said.
I'm holding my stomach from falling out and under
the rubber and the sizzle of the mid-afternoon sun.
Tripe for the beaks that tear my insides apart.
There isn't a rest stop for another hundred miles.
And I'm holding it.

Matt Jones is in the process of obtaining his MFA in Creative Writing from The University of Alabama. He has published works of fiction in Paper Darts*,* Hoot Review*, and* Zenfri's Warpaint Anthology*. Though he loves writing, he has always found himself devoting more than enough time to the idea of wildland firefighting.*

Vacation Pictures from a Friend

Nels Hanson

They're simply great! You say that tall noble regal
bird's a tiger heron? How delicate the back's black-
striped mottling, yellow under dagger beak and rosy
tan all down the breast. In the second shot its profile

looks like a flicker's. The scary insect on the tree trunk?
Those large sharp claws appear a lobster's. Gorgeous
dining room, happy faces of handsome women at ease
without men. The blue-black bird resembles grackles

I saw years ago in Oaxaca, enormous blackbirds or
small crows, but with tails long and tipped, vertically,
not flat. Baby hawk or something falcon-sized as
California sparrow hawks? That oscillated turkey

is the most amazing colored huge bird, counting blue-
green peacocks I fed corn once at the zoo. (A dim
memory of the fearsome Australian cassowary that's
extra cruel, not gentle, but doesn't hold a candle: see

link below). The shelved sheets of jade or turquoise,
lapis lazuli, black silver and especially the russet gold
shine and glimmer, beat paper thin, fantastic metals
made of secret jewels saved from Montezuma's lost

treasure house. Mexicans since Mayan, Toltec and Aztec
days love turkey and Sunday serve strong mole with
chocolate sauce both sweet and bitter, like much of life,
but not the feast your green eyes found in Yucatan.

Nels Hanson has worked as a farmer, teacher, and contract writer/editor. He graduated from UC Santa Cruz and the University of Montana and his fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award. His stories have appeared in Antioch Review, Texas Review, Black Warrior Review, Southeast Review, Montreal Review*, and other journals.* "Now the River's in You*,"* *which appeared in* Ruminate Magazine*, was nominated for a 2010 Pushcart Prize, and* "No One Can Find Us*,"* *in* Ray's Road Review*, has been nominated for the 2012 Pushcart Prizes. Poems have appeared in* Poetry Porch, Atticus Review, Red Booth Review, Meadowlands Review, Emerge Literary Review, Jellyfish Whispers*, and other magazines.*

Postcards from Athens

Thomas Zimmerman

King George Palace

1
We shopped the Plaka after lunch, bought cheese
and apples, watched the other tourists: Turks,
Italians, Germans, and Australians.
I bought a Greek-made T-shirt saying “All
I know is that I don’t know anything.”
Pop Socrates, but lovely still. Tonight,
a friend recited verse from memory:
a rhyming piece he said he’d written in
his youth. Yes, this was after jugs of wine,
before the farewell hugs. All poetry.

2
It’s 85 degrees at 10 a.m.,
and breakfast on the roof: white omelettes, juice,
and Nescafé. Below, Syntagma Square’s
ablaze. There’s haze on distant mountains, haze
beyond the baked Acropolis, and haze
between my ears. Champagne and wine last night.
Hotel-room stemware roseate with dregs.
I think of Delphi, and my spirit starts
to rise. I think of all the ruins that
we’ve seen, and dream that I can age with grace.

Thomas Zimmerman teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits two literary magazines at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, MI. Poems of his have appeared recently in The Wayfarer *and* Leaves of Ink*. His chapbook* In Stereo *appeared from The Camel Saloon Books on Blog in 2012.*

Microjourneys

Editor Ope Olum'degun

On The Way To Luang Nam Tha

Megan O'Leary

It was bad when we hit the buffalo; how the bus careened, and jarred awake those who had been sleeping. I was surprised the bus didn't topple, that the little Lao girl who had sat herself on my lap stayed put. We ran to the window and beheld the raw, ugly thing staring at us: a white buffalo that the drivers and shepherd had to pull out. She was halfway down the bus – that's how long it took to stop – and when they yanked her out the red dirt road got even redder. Her mouth dripped with blood, and she mewed in enough miserable octaves to break your heart. One leg was gone, the other was hanging, and that's when the mother took the little girl from me. That's when we went outside to sit by the river, and piss in the electric green grass, and wait until they figured out what to do, on our way to Luang Nam Tha.

Venture

Judi Zienchuk

Ven·ture [vencher] verb (a) to take the risk of; to brave the dangers of: “she ventured down the side of the volcano at 50km/h in a toboggan”. (b) to do something or go somewhere that may be dangerous: “she ventured into the airplane, only to jump out at 10,000ft”. (c) to undertake to express; to be bold enough: “she ventured telling him she loved him”. (d) the best means for one to live life: “she ventured on fearlessly”

She Remembers

Shelby Settles Harper

I craved a cigarette and a glass of wine, red and full-bodied, with legs that clung to the glass. There it was again, an elbow from the inside, a reminder. Three pregnancies in six years, a husband stationed at embassies in two different countries, and I was tired.

I opened the patio door, smelled the rain. My thumb struck the lighter just as the neighbor waved through a kitchen window. I quickly stepped out of her view.

No place secluded but the small patch of side yard where we kept trashcans. The stench of dirty diapers, rotten eggs and soggy garlic almost gagged me. Finally alone, I inhaled the lit cigarette. I exhaled public service announcements and enjoyed the lovely rush of nicotine. The cabernet felt buttery on my tongue, warmed my insides.

I thought about Paul, working late again. Of long ago, meeting after work at a London pub, huddled so close I could smell the soap from his morning shower. Of trading stories after a long day at work, unable to make it past the living room of our flat with clothes intact. I tilted my wineglass upwards, towards the rain, and remembered.

Dreamtime

Denise Schiavone

Outside Amoonguna, my guide pointed to the dogs loose—running, barking among pantless, dusty children who wove between mattresses lain in yards and pots hung over campfire pits. Inside the gates, little ones ran to tug on our trouser legs. At my hip, a small ebony face crusted with dried snot, teeth glinting in the midday sun as I pressed two pieces of butterscotch into his palm.

We strolled past trash piles and over blankets rumpled in the dirt. My camera captured two toddlers; cheeks stretched wide by a pair of grins, bobbing in an inner tube—their pool, a rusty bathtub sunk into the scorched earth. A moon-faced woman squatted over a low smoky fire. Needle in hand, she burned holes through gum nuts, seared designs into red beans, and threaded beads onto string. All for a fraction of the profit from the jewelry sale in town.

Nearby I came upon my artist, a weary woman on a cement porch, wailing baby in her lap. She signed her Dreamtime depiction. My cost: a third of the gallery price. I peeled the bills from my satchel without the haggling my guide advised. Painting in hand, I peered through the wire fence to the desert beyond: slashes of red sierra, sparse clumps of green brush, parched brown horizon, stretching for miles.

Three Guanacos

Nathan Cornelius

Everything was a golden brown. Everything. Small rolling hills like scoops of ice cream melting into a vast expanse of sun-baked clay. Where the golden brown ended, blue began, arching overhead, turning us where we stood. Disappearing into that crease of blue and golden brown, the road halved by faded white lines, bearing everything mechanical that came this way. We, three raccoon masks of white skin contrasted against burnt cheeks and stubbled jaws, stood, the four-door Toyota truck idling on the gravel edge until Rex reached in through the open window, rolling the key backward, leaving the last sounds to roll and tumble along the bristled terrain, to be grabbed and pulled to nothingness by coarse tendrils of grass, like wind-hurried sea foam disintegrating with sand's coarse caress. In that long held breath of time, three *guanacos* stood, their shimmering visages of boundless surroundings looking back on our looking forward, motionless in their curiosity.

Good Friday
Ope Olum'degun

There were no taxis or buses plying the route because it was Good Friday. He gazed bemusedly at his only option out the dusty village, scrutinizing the contraption and its driver as he had done with the food they served him on seedy plastic plates for three days. It might work, he murmured, shading his face from the scorching Sahel sun with the vehicle's frame. Through ninety miles of highway ahead, it just might.

There were five others waiting. Six, if you counted the goat one of the women cradled in her arms, which he did, seeing as there was barely enough room for the humans. Another woman stood by with two kids – each looked to be around ten. The third woman was rather attractive. He'd been there three days and never saw her? Ah, well…

They finally boarded the rickshaw. But only half his ass fit in the seat beside the driver, what with one of the kids stuffed between them. The women and the other child squeezed together in the back and, as if on cue, began yammering in that language he never got the hang of. The goat soon joined in, its bleats awfully reminiscent of a crying baby. The rickshaw shook on both sides as the driver started the engine, and then meandered out of the dirt road onto the highway.

Photostories

Editor Vicki Valosik

The Mundane Fantastic

Diallo Jones-Brown

I picked up a camera again for the first time a bit over a year ago. Doing so has helped me remember how I used to see the world. A bit of fantastic in the mundane. A touch of beauty in the everyday. Right now, I am getting to know NY for the first time, and through new eyes.

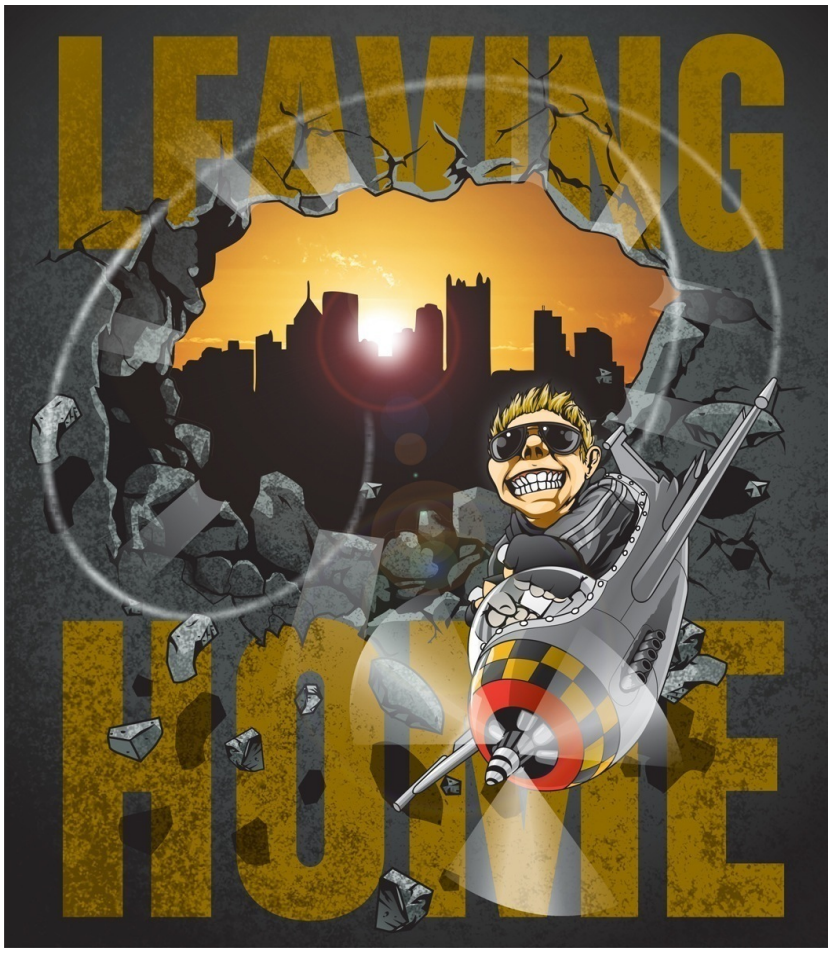

EXIT


40 St-Lowery St


STOP
TOST
CAFE
www.tostcafe.com

Diallo Jones-Brown.
Professional number cruncher, and amateur photographer.
DC Native, Sunnyside Queens, NY Resident.
Only child, big brother and twin.

Leaving Home
Chris Gebrosky



"Leaving Home" is a piece that illustrates the moment in time I left the city of Pittsburgh and opened myself up to the world. A moment which made me realize that everyone's life is a journey. Breaking out of my home town really set the gears in motion for this to happen. So, in a sense, this was my first big step into the real world. It was the path to future adventures, understandings and experiences; therefore the key for me was leaving home.

Chris Gebrosky is a talented artist/illustrator at Excel Sportswear, Trafford PA. He received his multimedia degree from the Pittsburgh Technical Institute and has been actively in pursuit of his dreams ever since. Skilled in various forms of art media, Chris' work has been featured in local galleries in and around Pittsburgh and Washington DC. In his earlier years he worked for two years as an illustrator for an online comic strip called Our Bad Idea, donated artwork to charity, and worked as a freelance artist. Currently, alongside his full time position, he is creating a smart phone game application with people in California, Germany and Pittsburgh. Chris can be contacted at chrisgebrosky@gmail.com.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Editor-in-Chief | Nonfiction Editor editor@outsideinmagazine.com

Brandi Dawn Henderson is a traveling writer, on regular journeys that prove truths to be no strangers to fictions. She holds an MA in Creative Nonfiction from Johns Hopkins University, has been an Indophile since 2007, and has spent the past few years bouncing between winters in India and summers in Alaska. Some of her favorite things include puns, peaches, freckles in the shapes of things, and Susanna Wickes. She wrote a relatively successful expat column and an utterly unsuccessful advice column for a year in New Delhi, and has had work published in *Mason's Road Literary Journal, JMWW, Three-Quarter Review, 20 Something Magazine, Lost Literary Magazine, Time Out Delhi, Urbanite Magazine, Dillinet Magazine, First City Magazine*, and (of course), *Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine*. She now resides on the Oregon Coast with her boyfriend, dogs, and a pretty consistent mouthful of Dungeness Crab.

Senior Editor Emeritus

Susanna Wickes is a writer, photographer, teacher and Bollywood addict from Scotland. She lived in Delhi for two years where, amongst other things, she studied Hindi and cultivated a dangerous chai habit. Now she teaches English at a university in Inner Mongolia and continues to make semi-insightful observations on life overseas at http://lifeafterdelhi.wordpress.com/.

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Miriam Vaswani writes for publications in Scotland, India, Canada, England and the US. She's worked in 3rd sector housing in Scotland, and as a teacher and editor in Russia. She's from Atlantic Canada, and has spent much of her adult life in Glasgow, apart from two years in Moscow. She's traveled extensively in Asia, particularly her ancestral India. Miriam is interested in original, subversive narratives that fuel discourse, and her weird collection of vintage knickers. She lives in Germany and blogs at http://miriam-littlebones.blogspot.com/

Microjourneys Editor | microjourneys@outsideinmagazine.com

Between getting knocked down by a ram at seven and a car at sixteen, **Ope Olum'degun** claims to have gained all the experience and insight possible into the tragedy of humanity, and there is no shortage of such pretension in his writing. He was born in Nigeria but currently lives in Washington DC, where he spends most of his free time engaged in culinary alchemy in his basement apartment. Watch out for his short story, "The Bar Beach Show" in Ursula Hegi's "Second Voices" anthology (release date TBA).

Photostories Editor | photostories@outsideinmagazine.com

Vicki Valosik is a writer, photographer, and synchronized swimmer. She hails from the landlocked state of Tennessee, but fancies herself a traveling aquaphile, seeing the world one pond, billabong, and blue hole at a time. When on dry land, she works at an international nonprofit in Washington DC and hangs out with such terrestrials as her husband and cats, but keeps a swimsuit ready just

in case. Find out more at http://vickivalosik.net/.

Poetry Editor | poetry@outsideinmagazine.com

Kelly Ann Jacobson spends most of her free time writing poetry, nonfiction, or novels about crotchety old men with whom she identifies strongly. She received her undergraduate degree summa cum laude from GW in Women's Studies, and is currently pursuing her graduate degree from Johns Hopkins University in Fiction. Along the way she has had many part time and volunteer jobs to pay the bills, including ballet teacher to hyper three and four year olds, writer and editor of a prisoner rehabilitation newsletter, and assistant to an elderly political activist who spent a good amount of time on craigslist searching for partners. She currently lives with her boyfriend and crested gecko in Northern Virginia in an old house with a zen garden and too much furniture. Her work can be found at kellyannjacobson.com.

Submit: www.outsideinmagazine.com/submissions

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