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# THE PAIN THAT UNITES US ALL

*VARIOUS AUTHORS*

2017

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Dear Reader,

Before you is a collection of work that takes its inspiration from the deep fissures in our collective psyche, the physical and emotional suffering we know exists in each of us, and it makes something greater than experience alone. In crafting these pieces, these writers invite you to share in the joys and the pitfalls that make life a wealth of lessons constantly learned and just as easily forgotten. Narratives of pain, from the mundane to the cataclysmic, have been passed down to us in stories, myths, and poetry through thousands of years of human existence, and still, the experience and recasting of pain into creative work is vital to our connection and growth as a civilization. Some writers do not even begin to know their characters until the character's pain reveals itself on the page. No art can exist without some notion of suffering.

This anthology compiles work created in the University of Iowa's latest massive open online course, entitled *The Power of the Pen: Writing Identities and Social Issues in Fiction and Nonfiction*. It is a tapestry of voices from all points of the known world. Its power stems from a collective aspiration to live the best life possible, to learn the lessons granted to us by our disparate, joyful lives, and to rise above the pitfalls in order to breathe a wiser breath than the last. Not only are these writers brave for putting pen to paper, words to screen, but they are brave for having gotten through to the other side.

The great mythologist, Joseph Campbell wrote many wise things about how the human experience was inspired by, and indeed, built upon stories by men and women like these. We could all take inspiration by his words,

Find a place inside where there's joy, and the joy will burn out the pain.

---

Pain, when written about, has power, and this power can be channeled into pure energy on the page. From this crafting comes wisdom, and perhaps, peace. It seems fitting, then, to say that these writers, in gathering their work and offering it as a reflection of lived, and often agonizing life are not only courageous, but also joyful. For they have found that writing and art have the capacity to burn out the pain. I agree with them. May it comfort you to know that in your grief and your frustration, in your struggle to live, you are not alone.

Monica Bergers

July 2017

Dear Readers, Writers, Grabbers, and Likers,

This is a free autonomous published work which brings multiple voices and texts addressing Pain - **The pain that unite us all.**

The gathering and compilation of this work was once more inspired by the Course held at University of Iowa – International Writing Department, similar to the ones we published in 2016: **Whitmanthology** - on Loss and Grief and **Womanthology** – writings on women worldwide. In 2017, the new online course brought into discussion *The Power of the Pen* - Identities and Social Issues in Fiction, Non-fiction, Poetry and Plays.

The major topic Pain was used as a major thread bringing a plurality of voices from all over the world and showing us how dense this subject is. Unfortunately, we live in a world of constant pain – pain that comes through physical, psychological, emotional and social ways; pain that comes due to a multiplicity of causes; pain that arrives in unpredictable ways; pain that kills people and also kills the ones alive. Pain.

The ability to connect with another person’s pain and try all sorts of means to ease that is called compassion.

### **com·pas·sion**

*noun*

1. sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.

"the victims should be treated with compassion"

*synony* pity, sympathy, empathy, fellow

*ms:* feeling, care, concern, solicitude, sensitivity, warmth, love, tenderness, mercy, leniency, tolerance, kindness, humanity, charity

"have you no compassion for a fellow human being?"

This work both highlights pain and compassion, the written world and the silenced voices, our cries and shouts. The power of the written world has never before been available like this in society, and there lies our responsibility.

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In a world where there are still around 800 million people who are illiterate, many more without any means to reach global mass communication and medias; there are lots of work waiting ahead.

Here, we just bring a small tiny piece of how we can share our narratives, stories, poems, and points of views, and by doing, we hope to bring a little more understanding and compassion around. *The Power of the Pen* is very clear: words can kill - words can heal.

Hope this diversity creates a kaleidoscopic light shining ahead of us – enjoy!

Sincerely,

Mônica Mastrantonio

/Margareth Stewart



**ANONYMOUS**

**Prayer**

**18**

**ANGELA OSCARIO**

**The Innocence of Guilt**

**21**

**ASURU MEREDITH CHIWENKPE**

**Reunited**

**33**

**CHERYL A. HUNTER**

**Grandma's Kitchen**

**42**

**CHRISTOS VICTOR**

**Privilege**

**47**

**DIANE O'NEILL**

**Reconciliation**

**54**

**ELSA OROZCO**

**Classical Searing Pain**

---

60

**HOLLY YORK**

**Words with Friends**

69

**JENNY ROMERO LLAGUNO**

**The Pain that Unites Us All**

73

**J. L. WRIGHT**

**Distress**

80

**JO BELL**

**Two Pairs Of Shoes**

82

**LYN CRAMER**

**The Thanksgiving Highway**

88

**MERCEDES WEBB-PULLMAN**

**Family dogs**

97

**MÔNICA MASTRANTONIO**

**Good-bye Alan and Galip!**

---

**107**

**NAANA KYEREBOAH**

**Bound**

**110**

**OKE AKOMBI**

**A Heartless Grandson**

**115**

**OLUKEMI LAWANI**

**Between our here and there**

**121**

**REENA KANDOTH**

**Loss of Time**

**123**

**ROSEMARY WILDBLOOD**

**Lament**

**Meditation**

**Confronting the surreal**

**133**

**SARA ARBEL**

**Passengers**

**137**

**SERGIO FALCHI****Once There Were Apricots****147****SHEILLA MWAKIO****Of Perennial Friendships Among Other Things****153****SONNI QUICK****The Diary of a Transplant Patient****162****SOUSSAN TIZVAR****Bees' Genuine Social Intelligence****176****SYLVIA REGNIER****Dorothy****182****TATJANA MIRKOV-POPOVICKI****Shaq Attack****190****VICTORIA BATYALIWAWE J.A****Been there, done that****194**

**LEROY SKALSTAD**

**Bio**

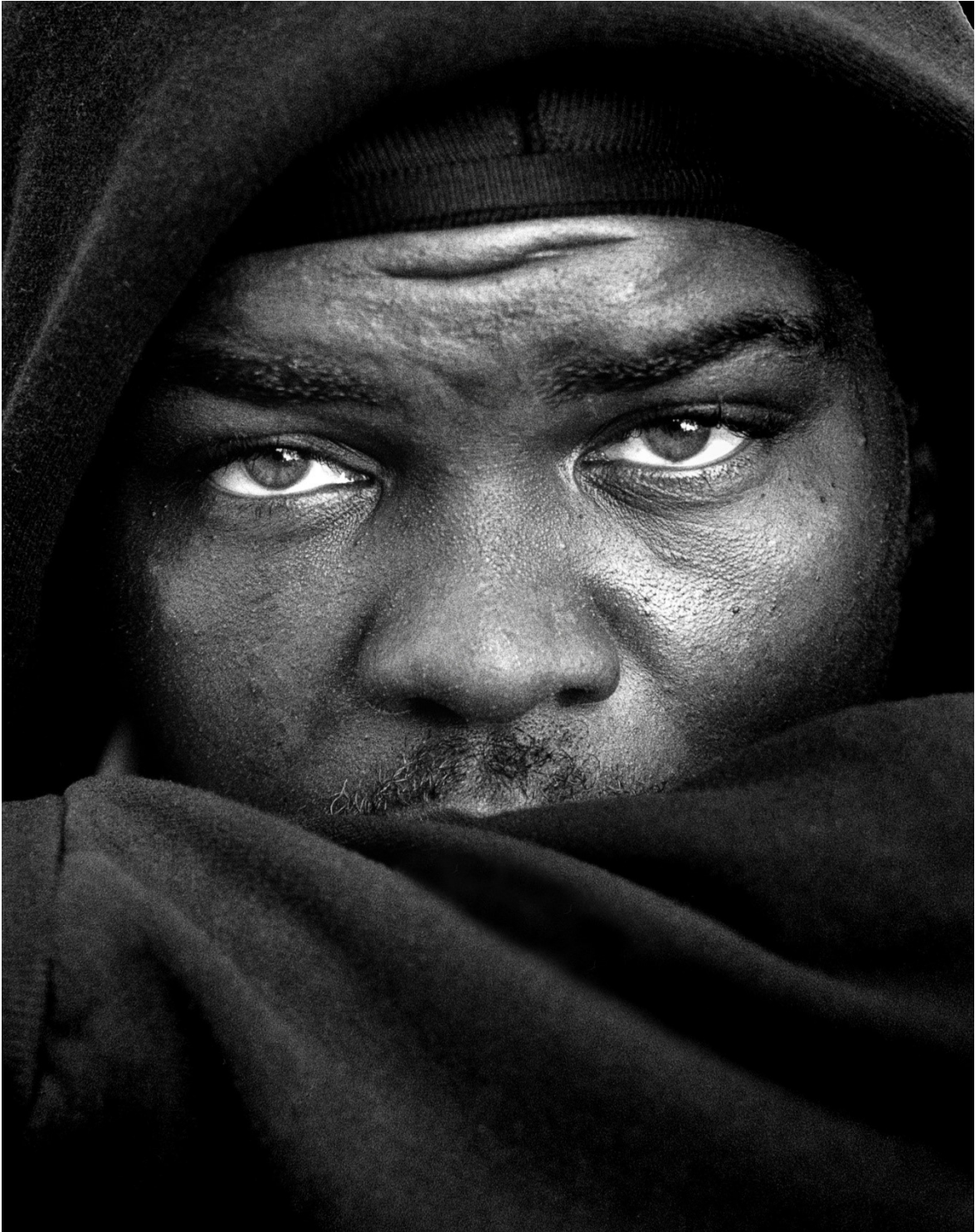
**210**











**ANONYMOUS****Prayer**

Dear Lord

Let my prayers never be mine

— I will, I will, my Lord,

I know I will — but

let my prayers be for others, beings

seen and unseen

near and far

even as I sink my teeth into their meat

Let the blood of the world

pierce my breast

If you have a higher power

nail me to it

May every blessing

be a wound

May I be the *femme blessée*

May I fully inhabit this lesser body

of the female

and die in it to live and die

again and again

---

Let me never escape it

— Lord, I fear this prayer  
and I pray it not sincerely —

May the suffering of us  
drop deep into my deepest meditation

Dear Lord, I beg, never fulfill  
my craven hope  
for philosophic bliss

If I should close my eyes  
let me dream the world

May I see it all

May I hear it all

Confess to me, my all!

Let the cries of the world reach straight into me  
and pull my heart out through my mouth

May I never summarize

May my tranquility ever be disrupted

May I hate

May I rage

May I lift my hand  
and bring it with the other  
palm to palm

Let gentleness and mercy abide

Let joy come bearing courage

Love, be my dear Lord.

---

**BIO/**

**ANONYMOUS** / Thank you for reading this Prayer

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**ANGELA OSCARIO****The Innocence of Guilt**

Manda didn't have any courage to pray anymore. She didn't believe enough if he could completely recover. But she also didn't have any gut to listen to her inner voice and pray for her father's death.

--

*Dear Danny,*

*I love you, you know that. I laughed every time I remembered you were often embarrassed because I said it to you in public places. For me, you're always my little boy. Whatever happened in your life, don't you ever forget that.*

*I'm sorry I broke our promise. I didn't tell you about my condition because I didn't want you throwing away your dream, and mostly, I didn't want you to have the same regret, or worse, the same guilty feeling as I did.*

*Good-bye, son. I know you will live your life well.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

---

Danny stood up nervously in the waiting room in the airport. A minute felt like an hour. This waiting tortured him because he knew one minute late could make a difference. He might not see his mother for the last time.

“7 hours 30 minutes of flight from Sidney to Jakarta. God please help my mom. I want to be on her side. You don’t need her, but I do,” prayed Danny silently.

Everything was so blurred. Danny didn’t really remember the moment when he was reading the email from Auntie Mega, his mother’s best friend. He was in the middle of his programming class. Colon cancer, stadium 4. How could his mother never told him before? Immediately he left his class to the airport without bringing any luggage. Thank God he got the ticket.

He read his mother’s letter on his phone over and over again. The letter, which was entrusted to Auntie Mega, should be given to him after her death. But Auntie Mega didn’t have the heart to let her best friend died alone without her beloved son.

*Your mother was in ICU right now. The doctor didn’t know how long she would survive.*  
Auntie Mega emailed him.

“Why?” Danny asked to himself.

Why did his mother keep a secret from him? Since the death of Danny’s father, she was the one who made him promised not to keep any secret between both of them. He was the one who laughed at it, but she was very persistent to make him promised.

*Why did my mom do this to me?*

Danny opened his phone and sent an email to auntie Mega.

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Manda was only 18 years old. She should have fun with her college friends, found her true self, and chased her bright future through her study at the university. But the news destroyed all of those dreams. Her father had esophagus cancer, stadium 4. The doctor said even if the treatment went well, his father only had 5 years more to live.

The beautiful bubble she lived had burst. When she was a little, she watched many features movies about this deadly disease. Manda was always afraid if she or her family had it. The nightmares even haunted her for days. She often freaked out to cry but didn't want to tell the silly reason behind her crying to her parent. So when she heard the news, it felt like her childhood nightmares chased her and finally came true. Blurred. Suddenly everything was so blurred.

“God, please help my father. Heal him.” Manda could only look for help from God.

Every hour, every minute she said that in her heart like a comforting mantra.

--

“Because of the bad weather, the flight would be delayed for the unknown time.”

The announcement made Danny mad. He was mad to the flight, to the weather, to his mother and he was mad to himself. Did he not pay enough attention to his mother so he didn't see any sign of her sickness? Why didn't he come home at Christmas? He chose to work to get some experience and collect some money. His scholarship was more than

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enough to pay for his tuition fee and living cost. But he wanted to save more money. She said it's okay, but deep inside he knew she surely hoped he would come home. Oh God, he would go crazy if they kept delaying his flight.

His phone beeped. Email from Auntie Mega.

*Here's a story I had written but never published it. It's based on true story, your mom's story when her age was the same as yours. Hopefully this would enlighten you and made you forgive your mom. She loves you so much; you know that.*

--

Manda's mother, who had quitted her job since she was born, looked for any jobs she could do. Her mother called her family, neighbors and old friends to ask for a job. Her father had insurance from his office but it only covered a little. Sad, the government didn't have any insurance program for their citizens. Manda hardly met her because her mother was so busy.

Once in two days Manda accompanied her father to the radiation treatment. The doctor said her father didn't need a chemotherapy treatment, only radiation treatment. It seemed good news for her because based on the movie she had watched she knew the effect of chemotherapy treatment was so evil to the patient's body. But it turned out that the effect of the radiation treatment was as bad as chemotherapy. It got worse because her father couldn't eat. The food made the cancer in esophagus worse. They put an eating hose trough his nose and infusion through blood vessel in hand. But he kept throwing up. He got weak and weaker. They even bought an oxygen tube to their home because her father was often hard to breath. The doctor injected so many medicines so there're a lot of bruises in his hands. Manda could not bear to stare at his father. She tried to look strong for her father, but in reality she didn't. She often cried silently in car, her room, bathroom, anywhere, anytime. Her life was getting blurred and blurred.

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“God, please. Do what You think is the best for us.”

Manda didn't realize that the words in her prayer had changed. She was no longer asked for his recovery because inside her heart she started to doubt it. She just asked God to do the best for them, whatever it was.

--

Danny didn't understand why Auntie Mega sent this story to him. He had already known that his grandfather died because of esophagus cancer when his mother's age was the same as his now. What's the relation between this story and his mother kept her disease as a secret to him? There's nothing he could do, but kept reading it. So he read it anyway. The damn weather still made him waiting.

“God please, please. Help my mother.” Danny said it over and over again inside his heart like a comforting mantra.

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Month after month passed without any certainty. One day her father's condition was improved, another day was worsening. Sometimes for a couple of days or a week her father had to be hospitalized. They had spent a great amount of money for the treatments.

Her mother's face look tired and more tired. Day and night she worked her ass from becoming a motorcycle taxi driver to a sewer. She borrowed money from family, friends and neighbors. Manda often saw her mother cried silently, just like her. But she didn't want to interrupt her. She knew it's better for them to cry alone because it would make them easier to act strong in front of each other and especially in front of their beloved one. Manda admired her mother because she could still smile in front of her father. She tried her best to imitate her. A fake smile, she should be able to do that.

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Manda hid her emotion well until her mother told her the bitter truth. They didn't have enough money to pay for her college tuition fee. Deep inside her heart, Manda knew one day this would happen. Soon or later she must take a break from her study for she didn't know how long. Manda could not hold her cry. She held her mother tight. Her mother stroked her hair softly to ease her pain.

“Oh God, is it the best for us, for me?”

--

Finally they announced the boarding time. Five more minutes. Thank God, the weather listened to his wish and played nicely. Danny took that time to message Auntie Mega asking for his mother condition.

*She's still in the ICU. The doctor put a breathing ventilator on her.* Auntie Mega answered it quickly.

His heart beat fast. He prayed so hard he didn't late to see her.

“Please, please, God.”

--

“We found tumor in your father's head.”

Manda felt lightning struck her in the middle of the day. Were all of their efforts meaningless? What for did she take a break from her study? What for did her mother work so hard from morning to night? Were all of these useless?

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“Maybe it’s better for him to die soon. He wouldn’t feel pain anymore. I and mom didn’t need to live through this hell anymore,” whispered her inner voice.

Oh my God, how could she think something like that? Manda was so startled. It was very mean and selfish. She didn’t mean to think about it, but her inner voice said it clearly. She hated herself for that.

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Danny’s phone beeped again. Another email from Auntie Mega.

*Have you found the answer you looked for?*

*I almost read all of it. But I still don’t get it,* replied Danny.

Three more minutes before boarding time.

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They didn’t tell him about the brain tumor. Manda and her mother didn’t want to burden him with the bad news. Days by days he felt a pain in his head without knowing the real reason. It was so hard for him; it was also very hard for Manda and her mother. The only thing the doctor could do was giving a pain reliever medicine.

It was supposed to be his last radiation treatment. But his condition was worsened. His blood pressure and blood sugar was so low. The doctor asked him to be hospitalized again. He spent a week in the hospital. Not for a minute Manda or her mother left his side. He couldn’t sleep, because when he closed his eyes, he saw his own death. He was so afraid if he wouldn’t wake up anymore. A psychologist was assigned to calm him. But there’s nothing the psychologist could do except giving him sleeping pills. Because of his

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condition, they couldn't continue the radiation treatment. It's a very bad news for all of them because he had to restart the treatment again.

“I couldn't live this hell any longer. Maybe it's better if God take him soon,” her inner voice took over her heart and her mind again.

Manda hated herself so much. How could she thought about that over and over again? Oh my God. She turned into an evil.

--

Danny walked into the boarding queue. He thought hard, looked for the answer in that story. He didn't really get it. He opened his mother's letter one more time, and read it quickly.

*She said she didn't want me to throw away my scholarship. Yes, if I know she was ill, I would certainly stay. But I don't buy it. She knew my scholarship could wait. She didn't make any sense. What guilt did she talk about?* Danny quickly texted Auntie Mega.

Danny had already walked through the gate to the airplane. He held his phone tightly, hoped it would beep soon. He wanted to get the answer before he should turn off his phone. And his wish was granted.

*Oh my God, why didn't you get it? She doesn't want you to have the same experience as her. All of her life she still feels guilty for secretly wishing for her father to die soon. She doesn't want you to go through the same hell and be haunted by the same guilt.*

He read that email while entering the plane.

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“Sir, you must turn your phone off in the plane,” asked the stewardess nicely.

Danny didn’t answer. He just stared at her blankly.

1ABC, 2ABC, 3ABC... He passed the row of seats with a chaotic mind.

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Manda couldn’t stop crying the day her father died. No one expected it. It was happened so fast. At the afternoon, at home, her father’s condition was still stable. But at noon gradually her father was hard to catch his breath. His breath got hard and harder, so they run him to the hospital. A couple of hours her father struggled inside the ICU. Manda was so nervous but she still couldn’t pray. She didn’t know what to say to God. The doctor called her and her mother to come inside the ICU because his condition was so bad. Manda saw her mother put her head closed to her father’s ears. She said it without any voice but Manda knew what had she said.

“If you can’t stand the pain anymore, just go. Both of us will be okay. I love you.  
Both of us love you.”

She saw her mother cried silently. A couple of minutes after that, her father exhaled his last breath. Manda couldn’t hold her cry. She cried so hard. She felt a deep guilt inside her heart.

“Oh God, was it my fault? Do You took my father because I said I wanted him to die soon?”

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Why did she think he couldn't handle it? Or maybe it's true that he couldn't? Maybe like her mother at some point he would also hope for her death? If that's really happened could he handle that kind of guilt that had haunted his mother all of her life? He didn't know the answer. Maybe he would not know it because his mother had saved him.

He kept walking until the back of the plane. 20 C. He had passed his seat. A stewardess offered a little help and walked him to his seat.

The plane captain had announced their flight information. Danny hadn't turned his phone off yet. At his seat, he stared at his email closely. A couple of time he typed a few words but erased it.

“Sir, you must turn your phone off. It would danger the flight. Sir...” The stewardess said it strictly.

It successfully took Danny out from his chaotic mind.

“Sorry,” he mumbled while turning his phone off.

7 hours 30 minutes. The plane landed safely in Jakarta. What's happened next was very blurred for Danny. The immigration, the taxi he took, the walk in the hospital hallway, the hug auntie Mega gave him. He only remembered wearing the hospital clothes, which the nurse gave him, and walking in a hurry into the ICU.

“Her critical period is not over yet,” said the nurse.

There she was. Lying in hospital bed with a breath regulator in her mouth. Her eyes were closed. She was so skinny and pale. There's so many equipment that was attached to her body. Her hair was so thin, almost bald. So this was the reason her mother didn't want to do a video call with him lately. She said that her phone was broken; she used the old phone that couldn't do a video call.

Danny grabbed her hand. It was so cold. Danny held her hand tightly, didn't want to let her go. More than 7 hours and 30 minutes, he had thought about his mother's fear about him feeling the same guilt as her. But now he knew surely about one thing. Danny put his head close to her ear, and whispered to her gently.

“Mom, thank you for all of your protection, but I will still be haunted by a guilt. Not because of the same reason as you, but because I wasn't here while you're facing your pain. So please hang on. Let me be here to take care of you.”

Every day Danny sat quietly beside her mother. The doctor had pulled out her breath ventilator. He held her hand, whispered to her ear a prayer.

“God, please help my mother. Heal her. Whatever it takes, I will accompany her to go through all the pains.”

Manda hadn't awaked yet. Her eyes still closed but her lips slightly smiled. If she should die, she'll die peacefully because she knew her beloved son wouldn't be haunted by any guilt as she did.

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**BIO/**

**ANGELA OSCARIO** was born and lives in Indonesia. She is a graphic design lecturer who loves to write and also a writer who loves to design. She loves to tell stories through pictures and words.



## ASURU MEREDITH CHIWENKPE

### Reunited

There is this orange-skinned man who sits on a wooden bench in front of my inheritance – Markel’s children park – on Friday mornings. He always wears a sprinter’s gear. A charcoal-skinned woman also sits there but on Thursday evenings. She wears a beautiful white gown embroidered with tiny gold shillings, like a bridegroom awaiting her missing groom, and sips dramatically from a plastic lucozade boast bottle. When it is time for her to leave, she would always walk towards Sixth Avenue only to reverse and go back the way she came. She did this every time like an amnesia patient who always forgot her path.

As a boy, when oddity hadn’t greeted the park, I would sit on that bench with my dad, and adore the magnificent buildings in the neighborhood while listening to his tales – bewildering tales my doubting self never believed – not until I ran a check of its authenticity with my mum. Then, it was a fanciful red bench adorned with pictures of Tom and Jerry, and every child loved it. Like neighbors and passersby, this man and woman probably sits on this bench because of the cool breeze that flows interminably towards it at sunrise like a pin attracted by magnet or because of the sweet melodious sounds of chirping birds that resonates from flaming trees in the park. But ever since he showed up a third time, I’ve never seen anyone sit on the now old forgettable bench except the lady I once said “hello lady Thursday” to.

One cool Friday morning, I sat on the bench to calm my racing heart, breaking a new tradition of this unknown man and woman's ownership. I’d ran six miles from St. Christopher’s lane where my park is located, through sixth avenue where houses separated by well trimmed lawns frowned at each others’ opaque resemblance, Adenuga’s lane where ladies wore bikinis all day long like they were having a beach party, Bank road, Market

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road and back to the park. I was sweaty, and my heart lurched vigorously as if wanting to escape from its cage. When he stopped to seat, I quickly repositioned and continued my zippy breathing.

“Good morning, I’m Markel,” I said, immediately after he’d settled in, leaving out Jnr., because my neighbor named his ugly dog junior.

“Good morning. I’ve known Markel’s Park for so long. Shouldn’t you be older? Anyway, I’m Prof. Tolu.” He said brittlely. “You’re sweaty, how many miles did you do?”

“Six miles...”

“Six miles?” he asked, in disbelief.

“Yes, I do six miles every Friday,” I said smugly.

“Why don’t we do it together next Friday,” he said in a buddy-buddy manner. “There is nothing I would love more than a challenge.”

He was chubby and I inherently classified him as someone who would rather walk six miles than jog it.

As the vitamin-D enriched rays of sunrise struggled to break through the mist of the cold morning, before I could accept his hail-fellow-well-meet proposal, he quietly crept into a somnolent state. He was lost in his sun-breeding trance, even whilst he tried to entwine the lace of his already laced foot wear. He stared unwaveringly to the left as though someone of importance had passed without my knowing. So many thoughts ran through my mind: he could be insane; he could be the reason no-one sits here anymore; run for your life. But I was an ABD of psychology trying to perfect a thesis on emotional psychology. So I sat there like a scared whimpering dog, and gazed at him in utter silence rounding out his round face, furrowed lower lip, grayish-brown eyes, and a patch of gray hair around his left occiput.

“Please! Please! Please!” he said bitterly. “Why won’t you return? I miss you so much. I’m incomplete without you. The house is empty, and all I hear is the unending chatter of the parrot and the meowing of your pet; the fat bellied grimalkin. I’ve, tried with Simisola the lady my mum continually pushed me to marry before I met you. Please Amaka come back.” He said all this smoothly, like it was a memorized line. Tears trickled down his eyes as he spoke, like a fountain ready to go dry.

“Who is Amaka” I asked thrice, my legs easily set to zoom off if he tried to attack.

When sunrise finally broke the mist, he was jolted back to reality.

“Oh, you are still here,” he said harmlessly like a child, “Hope you aren’t scared?”

Engrossed in sadness, he stood up, bid me farewell and sauntered off. “Don’t forget next Friday,” he said in a mumble as he left. I felt pity for him, and even as I tried to take my laser eyes off him I couldn’t until he disappeared six blocks away from the park.

The next Friday, as early as four o’clock, I was sitting on the bench, waiting for him to show up. I got up early, not only because I loved to jog but because I also loved to study and wanted to study a man hunted by hallucinations that eluded me. When I saw a six foot foggy figure in the grayness of the cold morning walking towards my position, I knew it was him. So I redressed my thoughtful look so as not to raise any suspicion. When he reached my position, we exchanged greetings, and he sat to tighten his lace. His timer beeped at 4:30 A.M., we clapped twice and set off.

“That is my abode,” he said gesturing at a duplex six blocks away.

“Oh! You mean the commissioners residence,”

“No, I meant Prof. Tolu’s residence Mr. Thomas,” he humored. “Why don’t we have dinner tomorrow?”

Growing up at St. Christopher’s, I’d always thought the duplex was owned by a politician. The francophone magnificence, the spacious and flower-decorated compound, and the expensive gold painting tinted with brown wasn’t worthy of a non-politician. Once in a lifetime, every growing child along St. Christopher’s called it heaven.

We elapsed five miles as easily as we would count ABCDE. And for every mile we went by, I tried to initiate a conversation, but he never responded, even though he talked to himself as we jogged. I recall hearing him say he wouldn't get married to anyone if she didn't show up. When we reached the sixth mile he increased his pace. It was indeed a contest; a contest of no victor or vanquish. At the park, he squinted at his timer, voiced the time, sat down, and burst into laughter.

"You must be surprised. I know am fat, but, I have been doing this since I was a teenager," he said.

"Indeed, you were unpredictable," I said in wonder. "Before it skips me, why were you calling that name; Amaka, the other day?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't go into another trance.

"S...he is m...y," he sputtered, before the pale brightness of sunrise landed a gentle stroke on our position and threw him into another trance.

He performed same ritual of lacing, laced footwear, focusing unwaveringly to the left, and reciting same words. At the end, he shamefully and sorrowfully left without saying a word. Later that night, he returned to the park. He paced up and down the open compound, yelling Markel, like he owned the name in a bid to remind me, of his inconsequential dinner.

I hated dinners. The last time I had one was with my dad, Dr. Temitope and Stephen; Dr. Temitope's twelve years old loquacious son, at Dr. Temitope's residence. As we swallowed molds of *eba* dipped in melon soup, and drank wine, Stephen soaked in the innocence of a child revealed how my mum visited them often, and how she was always cackling in his dad's room. We were best friends and even though we once agreed never to hold secrets he should have been wise enough to have told me that secret in private at least that would have saved us from the adult drama that chaperoned the revelation; the rising of my dad's high voice, the dishing out of blows, and a lanky doctor's sorrowful plea. Maybe that was why

my dad willed everything to me instead of Timothy my older brother who looked just like Dr. Temitope; dusty skin, light brown eyes and a heavy head, as the custom demands.

The night of that Friday, I was lost in thought of whether to honor his invite or not. I was restless, even sleep evaded my eyes. But I really wanted to understand what was going on in his life so I had just one option; honor his dinner.

“Who dey there? You no see bell for the gate?” the gateman’s voice erupted from a speaker of a telephone-like device after I’d hit the gate with a gentle knock at the scheduled dinner time “Use the phone jare. Wetin be your name and who you dey find?”

“It's Markel. I'm here to see the Prof.”

“Saturday, I done finish, nah oga Markel I dey ginger oh” I could hear his pidgin sheathed muscular mouth voice through the speaker.

He hurriedly opened the gate, smiling unnecessarily as if wanting to undo his harsh gate welcome gestures. “Oga dey expect you.” Before I could reach the door, Prof. Tolu was there. He welcomed me and we walked down a hallway that led into his superbly furnished living room. It was here we sat and talked until a beautiful ebony skinned lady informed us that dinner was ready. That must be his wife. Her tone is way too polished to be a maid; I had thought. As we walked to the dinning, I was careful with every step I took so the glittering mirror tiles that had my reflection didn’t sweep me off the floor. “Good evening Mrs. Temitope,” I greeted. She smiled a wishful smile, served dinner and left the table. “She isn’t the Mrs.” It was then that I cross-examined the picture of a bride lying at the suited Professor’s feet that I saw hanging in the dinner.

“Why is she lying on the floor?” I asked

“She isn’t lying.”

“Then what’s Amaka doing?”

“That’s Oluwatosin; my second bride. She died before she even had the opportunity to say I do. The first stole my briefcase and disappeared into thin air.” He said, remorselessly.

I was having a bite of chicken, when the gateman dashed into the dining spitting “Oga! Oga! Madam don come back.” I have never seen a gateman who asked permission to open the gate for those called madam. I’d thought I was finally going to meet Mrs. Tolu. But instead a woman in her early Sixties came in with a lady whom for a moment, I couldn’t get my eyes off. They both stood six feet tall. She tossed her bag on the sofa and came directly to the dining table. “Bisi! Bisi!” she called out authoritatively, take those bags inside and serve me immediately.

“Tolu this is Simi,” she said.

“Please mama, don’t start,” he sputtered angrily. “The last two you ...”

“Don’t you dare say that in front of strangers” She interrupted. “I thought Professors are wise people.”

I and Simi were placed totally out of context like the strangers we were. I could tell Simi too was as dumbfounded as I was, from the way her round face was turning oblong, and from the straightness of her eyebrows.

“Dear Simi, it’s nice meeting you. You are an exceptional beauty. I don’t know what my mum must have told you, but I’m not marrying you.”

“Markel, can you imagine?” Prof. Tolu asked furiously. “My mum keeps telling me to marry a Yoruba girl. I believe she is the reason Amaka disappeared on our wedding day. She hated her so much.”

I was surprised when I heard my name, didn't want to be entangled in any family matter, so I just nodded, can't even remember in which manner I did. I held my tongue closed in my mouth so it didn't rattle any word.

'I suggest you come to terms with your mum,' I said, as I was washing my hands at the sink. 'I would be taking my leave now, see you on Friday.'

I walked down the hallway slowly. As I walked, I could hear the shattering of plates and glasses. Sorrow filled me to the brim. I wondered why a professor of all people would take his mother's advice on the matter of wife taking; maybe he was trained to over-obey, a thought escaped my mind.

The Friday that followed, I waited for him and when it was 4:30 A.M., and he didn't show up, I jogged six miles alone. It was on the sixth Friday after the dinner that he showed up. He was out as early as I would be; like it was his turn to study me.

'Morning Markel, Hope you kept the six miles record?' he said.

'Yes I did, but it was tiring doing it alone.'

'About that, I'd to iron out something with my .... She is always asking me to marry a girl from my tribe.'

His timer beeped, we clapped twice as usual and set off. I thought our growing friendship will yield a conversational jog. But it didn't. He was mute until we arrived at the park and sat on the bench to calm our brutal beating vessels. We talked a little, but it wasn't anything meaningful and just as the long awaited sunrise pushed through the foggy cloud, I placed my soft palms on his sweaty thigh and edged closer to him.

'She is gone, you can't continue like this' I said subtly. 'I can help you. But that's if you let me.'

'Please! Please! Please!' he started his memorized lines. 'We jogged this path together,' he continued.

But that was a different wording from the past. I readjusted, stared at him to check if his insanity had doubled. Confusion rocked my brain like an electronic rocking chair tuned to its highest speed. Why would he change the wordings? I questioned my troubled mind.

“Are you talking to me?” I asked.

“Yes I am talking to you” he said, in an unusual dim voice.

“Oka....y,” I said surprisingly.

“I was resting here when I met her. It was 6:30A.M., and she was walking towards Adenuga’s lane” He said, his expression greased with pain. “I never knew I could be easily carried away.”

“Tell me more.”

“Trust me Markel. You can't resist her charming eyes, her dimpled smile and her perfect African anatomy.” He said, a broken smile creasing his face. “She wears a long, glistening dark hair.”

As he spoke, I remembered saying hello to the lady who sits on the bench every Thursday. I remembered how her cheeks dimpled as she fortified her answer with a smile. I too was attracted by her anatomy even while she sat. She also wears a long lustrous hair that reached her seventh cervical. His description matched that of the lady from Thursday my heart beamed.

“I think I've met her before,” I said. You should see the brightness that emanated from his face. It was like the brightness of the sunrise that always threw him into a trance.

“Where did you meet her?” he asked. Hope of finding his lost bride resurrected.

“I don’t know if she is actually the person,” I muttered quietly as if I was talking to myself. “But a lady who wears a gold embroidered white wedding gown sits here every Thursday evening.”



He wept like a child, and all I heard him mutter was “she still wears her wedding gown, it must be her” If I remember correctly, that Friday, I too wept like I was now espoused to Prof. Tolu's feelings.

Hesitation overwhelmed him; he visited me regularly until it was Thursday. And even though he masked his original feelings, I could tell from the way his eyes always stared at the bench. That Thursday, we talked and laughed over our childhood days and the men we have now become. It was also on Thursday that I understood his pain. His Thursdays are restless; he would always sit and ponder at home wearing a suit. He had been suspended by the university management for behaving insanely while teaching. And the echoing sound of his mother’s voice saying I need a grandchild, like he had a factory to make children and didn’t make any for her. I didn’t find out all this, he told me. Three minutes before it was time for lady Thursday’s visit, we walked out of the compound, stood at a corner and waited for his maybe bride.

“If it’s her I see today, then my sleepless nights and worries would be over,”

Goosebumps engulfed his skin and his legs shivered as he saw her walking towards the bench from a distance. When she got to the bench, he hurriedly walked towards it. He spent time there with her. I watched as they both cried on each others’ shoulders, after which I went inside, and added a final detail to my thesis. Before I finally submitted my thesis, I understood emotional psychology, and I realized that love sometimes hurt even though it comes back to heal you.

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## **BIO/**

**ASURU MEREDITH CHIWENKPE** grew up in Emohua, Nigeria. He is a graduate of Human Anatomy who has taken numerous courses on creative writing. His short stories; paradise of kings, Degbam Soldier, and dear A-J is forthcoming. E-mail: meredithasuru@gmail.com

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**CHERYL A. HUNTER**

## **Grandma's Kitchen**

The wind blows through the open windows gently moving the tiered curtains. The sun casts streaks of light over the floor and table around which family and friends gathered for many meals. Today, instead of bowls of macaroni and platters of meatballs and sausage, the table holds an assortment of plates, glassware, bowls, and cups. I pick up a plate and look it over carefully. It is a plate commemorating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our town. The town I grew up in, and the only town my grandmother ever lived in after she immigrated with her family from Italy at the age of six.

In 1921, almost 7-year-old Vincenza, a small-frightened child clung to her mother as they slowly walked up the gangplank to the large ship anchored in Napoli harbor. Vincenza, her mother, Antonia, and her two older sisters, Elena and Giovanna, were heading to America, the land of wealth and promise. They would be four of the approximately 14.5 million people who entered the U.S. through Ellis Island, New York between 1900 – 1920. However, Vincenza, affectionately known as Vinny, was leaving the only home she ever knew to travel many, many miles away to a new country and a father whom she had never seen. She could not envision the opportunities, challenges, and life that lay ahead of her.

The small child grew into a tall, strong woman who learned to read and write in English, and became an American citizen. She led a life filled with friends, a husband, children and grandchildren, joy and sorrow, and hard work. Growing up, I listened to many stories of my grandmother's life. Grandma was the youngest and felt it was her obligation to care for her aging parents. Her sisters married and moved to a town about 40 miles away, but Vinny lived in her father's house even after getting married and having children of her own. I lived a few blocks away in the house she and my grandfather purchased, but never lived in, so I visited often.

When I was very young, I often accompanied her to the lot. She didn't speak fondly of the hours she worked farming the lot across the street from her house where the family grew fruits and vegetables including, tomatoes, lettuce, squash, beans, broccoli, eggplant, and potatoes. They also had a pear tree, an apple tree, a plum tree and the all-important fig tree which every Italian family had in their garden. They ate vegetables and fruits fresh out of the garden in the summer, and canned or dried the rest to sustain them through the winter. It was hard work, but it also helped them survive hard economic times. However, Grandma was terribly afraid of snakes and often ran back to the house at the sight of a snake. While she didn't enjoy working the lots, she was great at cooking up the bounty. No matter how many hours she worked, she always prepared Sunday dinner for the family, and she baked for every birthday, wedding and holiday.

She also didn't enjoy the years she worked in the mills. At fourteen, like all her friends who were also immigrant girls, she left school and went to work in the shirt factory, down along the river about two miles from her house. Because she walked, she needed to leave the house by 4:30 am. She worked long hours in the hot and steamy factory, and she was paid little. "Do good in school," she always told me, "get an education." Grandma did not finish school but she read the newspaper every day. She knew what was going on in her town, state, and the world, she was vocal in letting people know her opinions, and she voted in every election.

She loved her town and her country. Originally an Indian trading post named Paugasset, Derby, was first settled in 1642. In 1675, the small community where two rivers meet was named after Derby, England. This Derby was a metropolis compared to Salento, the town where my grandmother was born, and she had no desire to live anywhere else.

I take a deep breath and wrap the commemorative plate in a thick pack of newspaper to keep it safe and place it in the box on the floor. Next to me, my friend from high school is doing the same thing. We don't make eye contact, but we are in sync. We pick an item from the pile on the table, wrap it, and place it in the box. This room that has

rarely known silence is quiet except for the sound of crinkling newspaper as we wrap each item.

We finish packing the items on the table, close the box, and slide it across the floor toward the pile of boxes sitting where the washing machine once stood.

“Would you like a bottle of water?” I ask my friend who has come to help me pack up my grandmother’s belongings. She nods yes, and I hand her one from the plastic bag on the floor.

There is still much to do, but we sit down on the kitchen chairs to rest and drink some water. I take the cold-water bottle and press it against my red face. My friend wipes her brow with a napkin, opens her water bottle, and takes a long drink.

We have known each other since high school when she moved to Derby. We became close friends very quickly. She called my mother “mother Connie”, and she visited my grandmother with me often.

I look over at the old gas kitchen stove, and tears begin to fall silently from my eyes. “We’ve spent so much time in this kitchen” I mumble softly.

“She always cooked us fried dough.” Her voice cracks as she speaks. “I loved her fried dough.”

I nod yes, “I can see her standing there flipping the dough in the fry pan.”

A flood of memories comes to my mind. Holidays, birthdays, my bridal shower, my husband and my first wedding anniversary party, our daughter’s christening party, hundreds of meals eaten around her kitchen table. After I moved away, my friends visited me in this kitchen when I came back to town. I picture her hunched over the old, battered, white stove dressed in her shift style dress and cardigan, with one of the aprons I made her tied around her waist. No matter the weather, she wore a sweater. She stood next to the stove with a spatula in her hand smiling and listening to the conversation as she watched the pizza dough frying in the aged black pan. We sat around the table talking and laughing, anxiously awaiting the piping hot dough which was cooked to golden brown perfection.

“Don’t wait, eat,” she always said as she placed a platter of dough, a bowl of homemade tomato sauce, and a container of freshly grated Pecorino Romano cheese in the middle of the table.

Even after hard work, arthritis, and osteoporosis whittled down her body to a humped, fragile shell, the woman who once walked everywhere and could barely make it around a grocery store, continued to cook for her family. Grandma never followed a written recipe. However, she encouraged everyone in the family to learn how to cook the foods she made before, as she put it, she was “pushing up daisies”.

When I was in my early twenties, I helped her mix up dough for anginettes and other cookies. As we worked together to mix the dough, I measured each ingredient and later wrote down the recipes. I learned how to make tomato sauce, homemade pasta, and how to mix meatballs and then fry them until they are crunchy on the outside and soft and tender on the inside. One afternoon, while Grandma and I were preparing Thanksgiving dinner, my then 10-year-old daughter sat watching us cook.

“Can I help too?” she asked her great grandmother.

“Of course, honey.” Grandma replied. She took an apron out of the drawer and tied in around her granddaughter’s body.

My daughter got up on the step stool and watched while Grandma took a cleaned mushroom cap and filled it with a mixture of breadcrumbs, garlic, onion, grated cheese, and spices. “Now you try.”

She picked up a mushroom, filled it, and placed it on the baking sheet.

“Good.” Grandma smiled.

I dry my eyes and look over at my friend. She is crying too. “Thanks for helping me today.”

“Any time.” She wipes her eyes. “What’s next?”

“We should pack up the glassware in the hutch.”

She nods and we get up to head into the other room. I stop and look at the stove. Between the burners, sits a green egg dish with chicken and rooster salt and pepper shakers. Slowly, I walk over to the stove and pick up the rooster pepper shaker. It has never been used, but it has been there as long as I can remember. I may never use it either, but I gently wrap it in paper, and begin packing up another box.

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### **BIO/**

**CHERYL A. HUNTER** is from the United States and is an adjunct professor of English and Humanities. She is the author of *Myths and Archetypes in The Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter*. She is also a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow. Email at: [cherylahunter@yahoo.com](mailto:cherylahunter@yahoo.com)

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**CHRISTOS VICTOR****Privilege**

Did you choose  
the time of your conception,  
talents, sex and pigmentation?

Study history-  
every tribe and nation at one age or another  
conquered and enslaved its neighbors

Some folks recently emancipated  
require reparations for lives stolen.  
How many millennia do we redress?

Hitler blitzkriegs pacific, weaker neighbors.

The famine winter 1944,  
a daughter just 16 starves  
eating tulip bulbs  
five miles away a young man hides  
to escape German factory slavery.

Descended from serfs and rabble  
poor lawful immigrants

meet, marry and procreate  
mangling new languages,  
discarding old customs,  
a community too small to count,  
none hears their complaint.

*Yet the Father's provision is complete.*

*My privilege is  
to serve my neighbors.*

We see refugees fleeing terror-  
a child's body washing up on a beach.

Mexican model acquires a career;  
but her visa is confiscated;  
she's pressed into prostitution.

Thai fisherman shrimping in chains,  
conscripted Congo orphans mining cobalt.

Now, where is your protest?

Renamed human trafficking  
modern slavery mounts  
toppling old records,  
did you take up their plight?

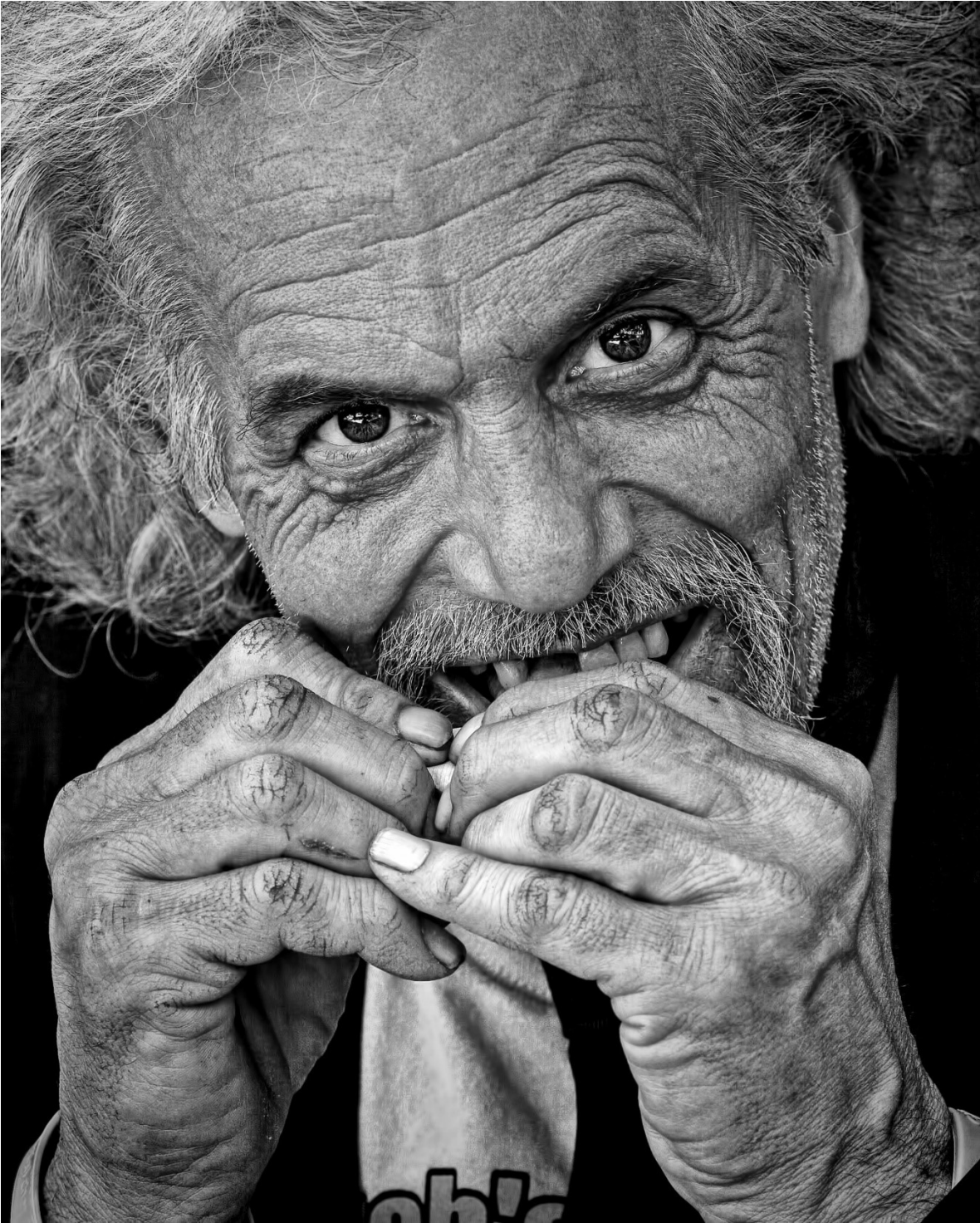


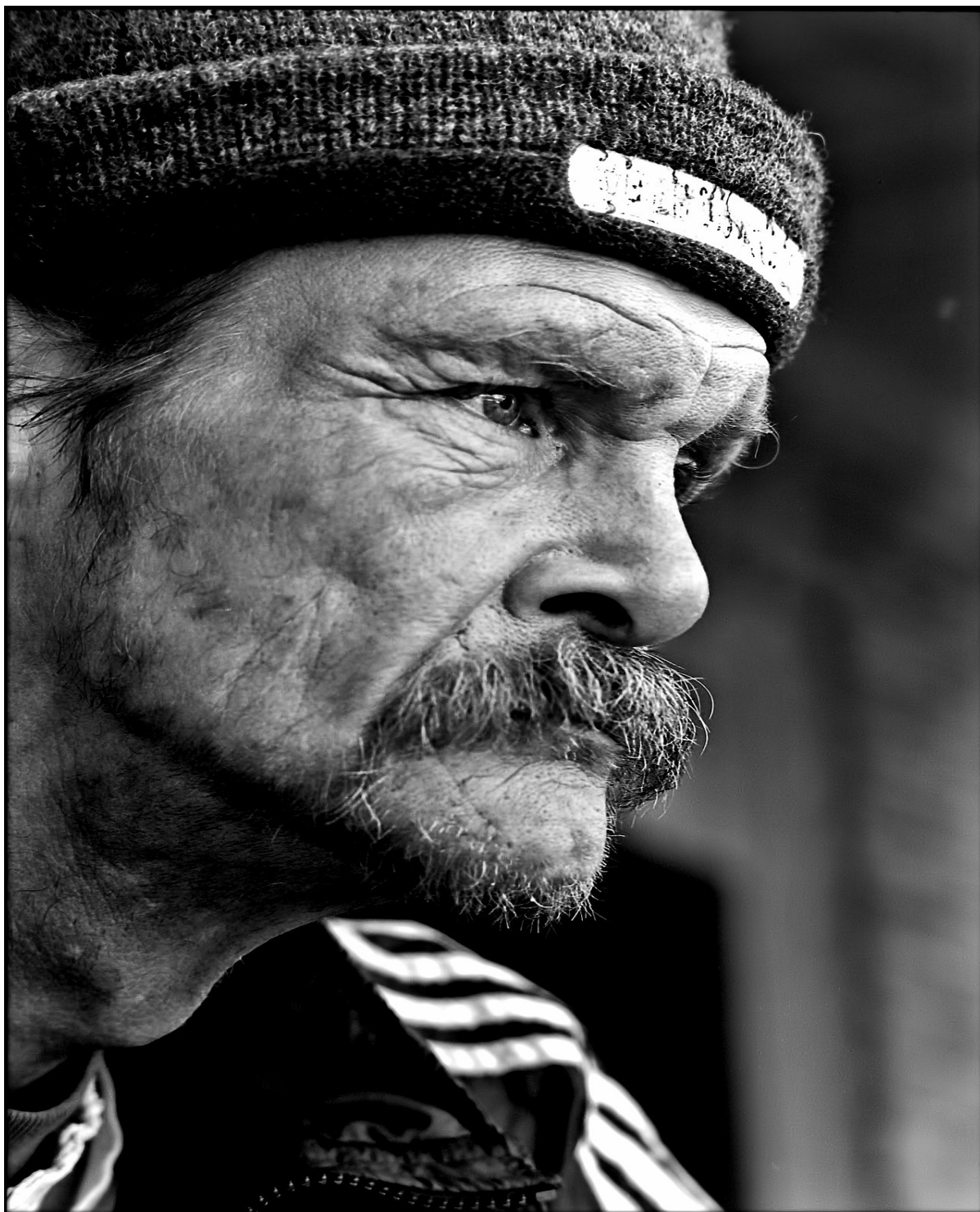
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**BIO/**

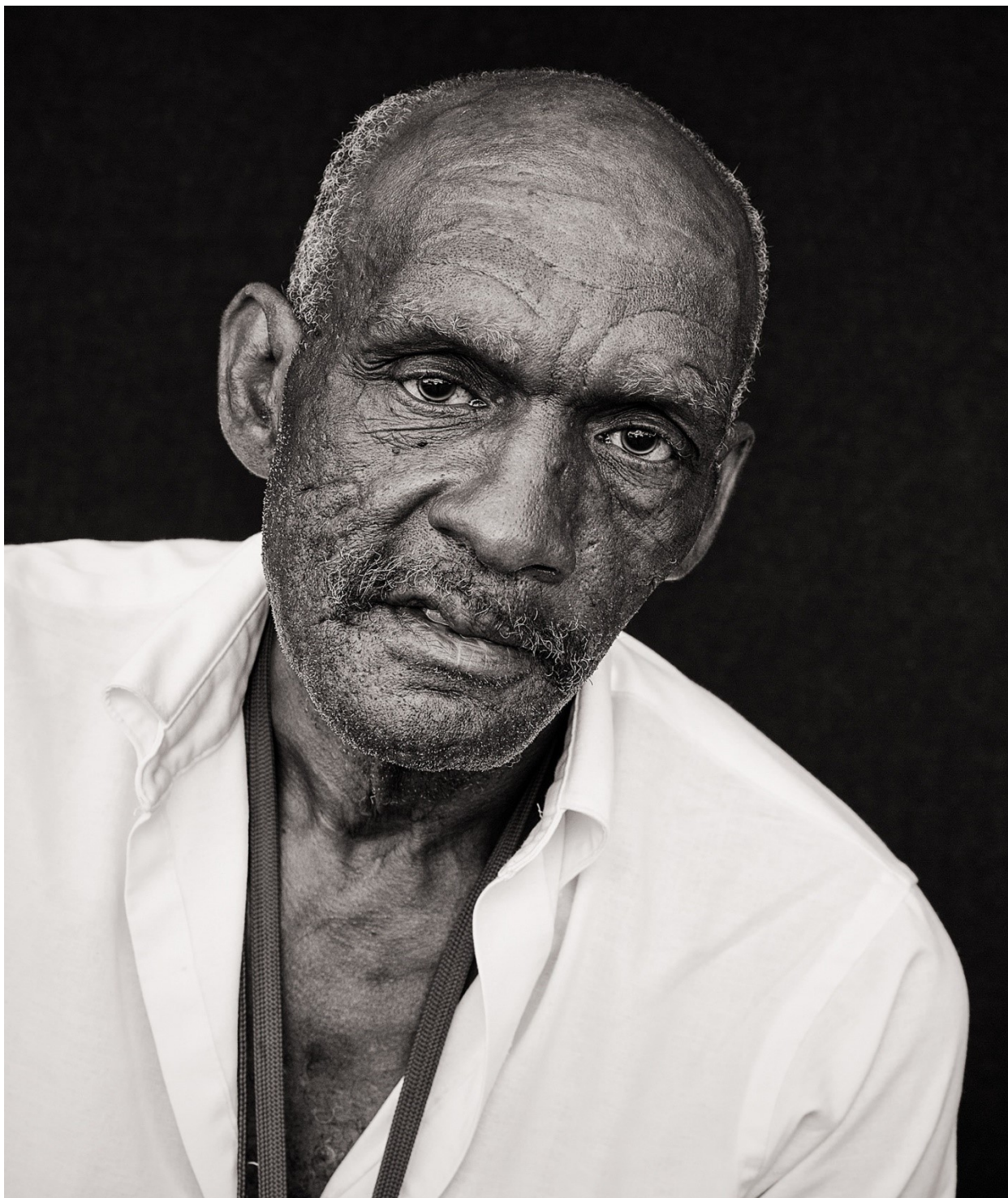
**CHRISTOS VICTOR** writes meditations ranging from poetic to prose and paints in many media. His focus is on Jesus Christ's atoning work for humanity and hopeful relevance for us today. His name means "Christ's victory revealed in me" from the United States of America.

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**DIANE O'NEILL****Reconciliation**

I think he held me  
a blanketed baby  
but not sure  
if any black-and-white  
crumple-edged photos  
survive  
though combing through albums  
found one of little me  
old-fashioned carriage  
grinning, big eyes  
    and on the photo's back  
    a blue-ink scrawled note  
    my mother's hand:  
    "She looks  
    just like you--a little girl  
    should know  
    her daddy--"  
    maybe thinking of her own daddy  
    drowned, Belmont Harbor docks

when she was three--

a zigzag of father-daughter years  
many years blank  
his first surprise visit  
I was seven  
he a stranger in a suit  
needing formal "This is your father"  
introduction

then he'd drop in  
maybe every other year  
usually around Easter  
holding pre-assembled  
cellophane-wrapped basket

but really, for childhood me  
not having a dad no different  
than not being able to sprout wings  
and fly above Chicago roofs  
    only in adulthood anger  
    desertion pain

only learned I had half-siblings

---

when their mother died--

I was nineteen--

adult years

awkward telephone silence

he only asking

how my husband was

then

how my son was

never

"How are you?"

How did things change?

Half siblings reached out in love...

one half brother looked me up, discovered me

knocked on my door, unannounced

one January night

we talked hours

and in time

met all four half brothers

and my half sister

in time

they became

plain old brothers and sister

---



one brother held Space Jam  
Oreo cookie pajama parties  
with my toddler son  
another brother asked me  
to be his children's  
godmother

and maybe that's how my father  
and I reconciled  
my ex tried to stop me  
and my son  
from traveling out of state  
to my niece's  
baptism  
shouting: "Custody violation!"  
hanging up the phone, how I cried  
    maybe my tears  
    reached someplace  
    frozen  
    in my dad  
    maybe melting  
    long-buried guilt

he began to visit

bringing blankets and a sleeping bag  
and a good coffee pot  
once he and a brother  
brought a little inflatable pool  
for my son  
put it up in our apartment's backyard  
laughter and mud from kitchen sink hose  
he spent one Thanksgiving with us  
buying whatever treats he thought I might want  
insisted on helping with dishes  
showed up for "Grandparents Day" celebrations  
at my son's school

when my dad died  
my son cried harder  
than anybody

on the last of my birthdays  
when my dad was alive  
he called me  
we talked an hour  
maybe more  
but you know what the most wonderful, wonderful thing was?  
He forgot to say "Happy Birthday!"  
Called the next day

---

apologizing, calling himself

stupid

but no.

*That* was the gift

a father-daughter conversation

just for the heck of it

no pre-ordained holiday

but for no reason at all--

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#### **BIO/**

**DIANE O'NEILL** holds an MFA in Creative Writing with distinction from National University and has become a University of Iowa MOOC groupie: Since completing "How Writer's Write Poetry 2015," six of her poems have been published, including one in *Journal of Modern Poetry 19: The Poetry Writer's Guide to the Galaxy*. Email: dianemary3@live.com

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**ELSA OROZCO**

### **Classical Searing Pain**

My mother had asked me if I wanted to go to New York from Mexico City. I was surprised. Of course I said yes. I was seventeen. I needed to ask permission from school. She said we would be gone for three months. I enquired from my teacher. She sent me to the principal and as I was a model student, she said agreed that I could time away from school and to get homework from your teachers. I did.

I never asked why we were going. I was a shy girl. Not very pretty but comfortable to look at. My mother was always humorous so I probably learnt from her, to quip rapidly, and I was sharp-witted. People always wanted to laugh and I loved to laugh at everything. Had a brisk laugh. Good-natured. Physically at ease, and loved sports. I was very good at sports and boys loved me. That's probably why the girls didn't like me so much, but I got along with all.

When my mother was ready to go, my father took us to the train station. He worked in the railroad so we had a Pullman up to San Antonio, Texas, where we changed trains. I don't remember the trip to New York, but the elation stayed with me. We were travelling, and I loved to travel.

We stayed with my mother's brother who had been in the United States since the '20s. Both brothers, Michael and Luis had been kicked out of the house because they were not working and they adventured to New York where they stayed their whole lives. One of them married a Puerto Rican girl and the other a German émigré. We stayed with Luis and his wife Esperanza who we learned to adore. There were two girls, Stella and Diana. Stella was a darling who had a fabulous laughter and Diana soon who soon became my friend. I was very jealous of her Shirley Temple curls. I had known them before when they travelled to Mexico City to visit us and then when I spent a year in New York when I was six.

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We soon danced to Esperanza's tune. She nurtured vitality into us. We sang, danced, and had fun.

Two weeks later I saw my mother almost faint when she received a telegram in New York from her 85-year-old father who was in Mexico City. I did not know what the circumstances would be as this would change my life forever. The telegram said, "What are you waiting for? Your husband is very sick."

We packed hastily to return. She, who was a great talker, with great humor, hardly spoke.

When we arrived my father was home already after a stay in the hospital. He had had appendicitis with complications. My mother attended to him night and day. My aunts came in and out.

I was back in school again with the usual homework. My days were normal again. There was a girlfriend who called constantly. She was four years older than I was and she wanted me to go out with her with "some friends." I finally agreed.

She picked me up as agreed. An older guy was driving, and there was another guy with him. I was wary. I didn't like the set up, but didn't say anything. María Eugenia was jittery, I could tell. She was talking a hundred words a minute, and laughing at everything that was said. I kept quiet, even the man sitting next to me didn't say much.

We reached a club by the highway. I knew that it had a bad reputation: they said that girls could get in trouble if they came here. We went in. Found a table, and the guy asked me to dance. He wasn't very good so I sat down after two dances. Meanwhile, there were drinks on the table. I don't remember what hard liquor it was, but we drank.

I was bored. Didn't show it. I laughed at their stupid jokes, preferred to listen to the music, with my foot tapping on the floor. The guy tried to kiss me and I shunned away from him. María Eugenia was really making out with her guy. The evening was interminable. I was so happy when "my" guy said let's go home, as he wasn't getting anything out of the date. I immediately jumped and said, "I need to go. It's late, already."

María Eugenia was drunk, I could tell. She giggled all the way back to my house. I jumped out as soon as they stopped the car.

As the car left, a man in a dark suit caught my arm and pulled me to him. I almost slapped out. He was too fast, he straightened his arm so that my own force unbalanced me. He said, "You're drunk!" I replied, "No, I'm not." I smelled of alcohol, to be sure, but I was not drunk. "I am your uncle!" he shouted to certify that he had power over me.

He grabbed my hand and took me to the corner where there was a café. He plied me with coffee. I couldn't understand why he was there. I hadn't seen this uncle for years, maybe five years. We almost never visited him, and here he was, demanding that I get sober.

I sobered up immediately. *What was the matter?*

"You have to be strong." His voice went on and on. I tuned out. I sat there in a disturbed sensibility.

It was a shock to my sense of security. My feelings did not respond. My heart pounded as a bird in a cage that wants to flee. *What is he saying to me?* I wanted to bolt, to leave this strange man, to hide him from my view, to confine him in a little ball so I could throw him out. I wanted to be isolated. I wondered if I could disappear inconspicuously, to silence him with a wave of my hand.

He motioned to the waitress and we left. He hand my hand. I didn't need hand-holding from anybody. When we got home all the lights were on. I wanted my brother, Lalo. I walked in. I was surprised to see unexpected persons. Where was Lalo, why didn't he come to me? I shouted his name and nobody paid attention to me. My uncle said, "Here she is," as if he had produced a miracle.

I slowly went up the stairs. My bedroom was lit. *Why were they in my bedroom?* My aunt Anita came out and she hugged me, "Pobrecita. Pobrecita." I unclasped her arms and circled her. I went into my bedroom. My mother was in continuous tears kneeling next to my father who was laid out on my bed. I reached out to her and touched her shoulders. She didn't even know I was there. She pronounced his name over and over again.

Where was Lalo? Did he grok about the painful situation?

I can't remember when they took my father out of my room. I can't record what happened during the next day. They (who?) took him to a chapel. I know that we mourned my father all night long because that is the tradition and next day when we were in the chapel at a funeral home, we were all standing up, surrounding the casket when my mother's best friend comes running in, without any constraint, and covers the casket with her half of her body. The people looked askance. My mother had uttered her name, "Ena." When she realized that Ena was embracing the casket, she turned around in angst. In an afflictive stare towards her sisters, she begged for help.

"José, José, José, no me dejes," the woman cried.

My aunts restrained my mother. They did not let her get close to the woman.

My grandfather went to the crying woman and with firm strokes led her out of the room while she continued shouting, "Don't leave me! I cannot be without you!"

Pandemonium erupted. *Who was she? Wasn't that Ena, one of my mother's best friends? What was she doing? Did she actually laid her body on the casket? How long was she in contact with my father? Does that mean that he loved her and not my mother? Is that the reason we went to New York without my father? How long has this been going on? Did my mother know about the affair?*

Confusion ensued. Conflicting accounts were being discussed.

My life was changed forever. My mother's life was changed forever. My brothers' lives were changed forever. A maelstrom ensued in our lives. The chaos is caused cannot be described. My mother's degradation was immense. My self-assurance was slivered by the fact that I loved and trusted my father absolutely. My consummated and imperfect trust for my father had been shattered.

*The story is ruined by the bathos of its ridiculous ending, as we are witnessing classical, bone-chilling, mercilessly searing pain by two women who were left behind: spouse and mistress.*

### Mercilessly Seering Pain

My mother had asked me if I wanted to go to New York from Mexico City. I was surprised. Of course I said yes. I was seventeen. I needed to ask permission from school. She said we would be gone for three months. I enquired from my teacher. She sent me to the principal and as I was a model student, she said yes, get homework from your teachers. I did.

I never asked why we were going. I was a shy girl. Not very pretty but comfortable to look at. My mother was always humorous so I probably learnt from her, to quip rapidly, and was sharp-witted. People always wanted to laugh and I loved to laugh at everything. Had a brisk laugh. Good-natured. Physically at ease, and loved sports. I was very good at sports and boys loved me. That's probably why the girls didn't like me so much, but I got along with all.

When my mother was ready to go, my father took us to the train station. He worked in the railroad so we had a Pullman up to San Antonio, Texas, where we changed trains. I don't remember the trip to New York, but the elation stayed with me. We were travelling, and I loved to travel.

We stayed with my mother's brother who had been in the United States since the '20s. Both brothers, Michael and Luis had been kicked out of the house because they were not working and they adventured to New York where they stayed their whole lives. One of them married a Puerto Rican girl and the other a German émigré. We stayed with Luis and his wife Esperanza who we learned to adore. There were two girls, Stella and Diana. Stella was a darling who had a fabulous laughter and Diana soon who soon became my friend. I was very jealous of her Shirley Temple curls. I had known them before when they travelled to Mexico City to visit us and then when I spent a year in New York when I was six.

We soon danced to Esperanza's tune. She nurtured vitality into us. We sang, danced, and had fun. Until two weeks later I saw my mother almost faint when she received a telegram



in New York from her 85-year-old father who was in Mexico City. I did not know what the circumstances would be as this would change my life forever.

We packed hastily to return. The telegram said, "What are you waiting for? Your husband is very sick."

On the way home we hardly spoke. She, who was a great talker, with great humour.

When we arrived my father was home already after a stay in the hospital. He had had appendicitis with complications. My mother attended to him night and day. My aunts came in and out.

I was back in school again with the usual homework. My days were normal again. There was a girlfriend who called constantly. She was four years older than I was and she wanted me to go out with her with "some friends." I finally agreed and she picked me up. An older guy was driving, and there was another guy with him. I was wary. I didn't like the set up, but didn't say anything. María Eugenia was jittery, I could tell. She was talking a hundred words a minute, and laughing at everything that was said. I kept quiet, even the man sitting next to me didn't say much.

We reached a club by the highway. I knew that it had a bad reputation: they said that girls could get in trouble if they came here. We went in. Found a table, and the guy asked me to dance. He wasn't very good so I sat down after two dances. Meanwhile, there were drinks on the table. I don't remember what hard liquor it was, but we drank.

I was bored. Didn't show it. I laughed at their stupid jokes, preferred to listen to the music, with my foot tapping on the floor. The guy tried to kiss me and I shunned away from him. María Eugenia was really making out with her guy. The evening was interminable. I was so happy when "my" guy said let's go home, as he wasn't getting anything out of the date. I immediately jumped and said, "I need to go. It's late, already."

María Eugenia was drunk, I could tell. She giggled all the way back to my house. I jumped out as soon as they stopped the car. As the car left, a man in a dark suit caught my arm and pulled me to him. I almost slapped out. He was too fast, he straightened his arm so that my own force unbalanced me. He said, "You're drunk!" I replied, "No, I'm not." I

smelled of alcohol, to be sure, but I was not drunk. "I am your uncle!" he shouted to certify that he had power over me.

He grabbed my hand and took me to the corner where there was a café. He plied me with coffee. I couldn't understand why he was there. I hadn't seen this uncle for years, maybe five years. We almost never visited him, and here he was, demanding that I get sober.

I sobered up immediately. What was the matter?

"You have to be strong." His voice went on and on. I tuned out. I sat there in a disturbed sensibility.

It was a shock to my sense of security. My feelings did not respond. My heart pounded as a bird in a cage that wants to flee. *What is he saying to me?* I wanted to bolt, to leave this strange man, to hide him from my view, to confine him in a little ball so I could throw him out. I wanted to be isolated. I wondered if I could disappear inconspicuously, to silence him with a wave of my hand.

He motioned to the waitress and we left. He hand my hand. I didn't need hand-holding from anybody. When we got home all the lights were on. I wanted my brother, Lalo. I walked in. I was surprised to see unexpected persons. Where was Lalo, why didn't he come to me? I shouted his name and nobody paid attention to me. My uncle said, "Here she is," as if he had produced a miracle.

I slowly went up the stairs. My bedroom was lit. *Why were they in my bedroom?* My aunt Anita came out and she hugged me, "Pobrecita. Pobrecita." I unclasped her arms and circled her. I went into my bedroom. My mother was in continuous tears kneeling next to my father who was laid out on my bed. I reached out to her and touched her shoulders. She didn't even know I was there. She pronounced his name over and over again.

Where was Lalo? Did he grok about the painful situation?

I can't remember when they took my father out of my room. I can't record what happened during the next day. They (who?) took him to a chapel. I know that we mourned my father

all night long because that is the tradition and next day when we were in the chapel at a funeral home, we were all standing up, surrounding the casket when my mother's best friend comes running in, without any constraint, and covers the casket with her half of her body. The people looked askance. My mother had uttered her name, "Ena." When she realized that Ena was embracing the casket, she turned around in angst. In an afflictive stare towards her sisters, she begged for help.

"José, José, José, no me dejes," the woman cried.

My aunts restrained my mother. They did not let her get close to the woman.

My grandfather went to the crying woman and with firm strokes led her out of the room while she continued shouting, "Don't leave me! I cannot be without you!"

Pandemonium erupted. *Who was she? Wasn't that Ena, one of my mother's best friends? What was she doing? Did she actually laid her body on the casket? How long was she in contact with my father? Does that mean that he loved her and not my mother? Is that the reason we went to New York without my father? How long has this been going on? Did my mother know about the affair?*

Confusion ensued. Conflicting accounts were being discussed.

My life was changed forever. My mother's life was changed forever. My brothers' lives were changed forever. A maelstrom ensued in our lives. The chaos is caused cannot be described. My mother's degradation was immense. My self-assurance was slivered by the fact that I loved and trusted my father absolutely. My consummated and imperfect trust for my father had been shattered.

*The story is ruined by the bathos of its ridiculous ending, as we are witnessing classical, bone-chilling, mercilessly searing pain by two women who were left behind: spouse and mistress.*

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**BIO/**

**ELSA OROZCO** holds a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Masters in Spanish Literature, Masters in Education, Certified in Fine Arts and in Translation Studies from San Diego State University, CA.

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**HOLLY YORK****Words with Friends**

The brilliant jagged shards of Hawaiian sunset reminded Key that it was time to go see her sister. This was the hour they had suggested that she see Hannah, who would be rested and in less pain following an afternoon nap. Strange to have travelled all this way from Atlanta and have to ration her visits, staying at the Holiday Inn Express and playing Kona tourist the rest of the time. But Hannah's small house could barely accommodate her hospital bed and the home office where she and her live-in partner Roy ran their respective businesses: she a bookkeeper and he a car technician.

Key had not told Hannah she was coming because her sister would have objected that it would be silly, too much trouble. Because of the distance, they hadn't seen much of each other during their adult lives. Four years separation in sibling time is like a generation. Their childhood in Michigan had been filled with family vacations to Florida on spring break and laughter around the dinner table at home as they looked out the window at the great inland sea that was Lake Huron. Land barely visible to the south was the Canadian shore, as it narrowed into the Saint Clair River that divided the two countries.

But when Hannah began high school, Key was off to college and their worlds no longer coincided.

"I hope you are as good a student as your sister!" Miss Meehan had growled upon seeing Hannah's name on the roster the first day in high school math class. This happened in another class that day, and numerous times sophomore year. Then it stopped, because she wasn't. When she had a choice, she took courses Key had not taken, which is why she did

Spanish and went on to major in it in college. Key had majored in French and graduated Magna cum Laude. Key had been a cheerleader. Hannah had tried out. Key had appeared in Mademoiselle magazine and Hannah hadn't. Key was hired as an international stewardess for Pan Am. Hannah had applied.

Key married a doctor, to the delight of their father, a surgeon, and mother, a nurse. Key and her husband moved to Atlanta, where she went to grad school while raising their two children. The parents were less enthusiastic about Hannah's choices. She moved to Hawaii and lived with her employer, a swimming pool contractor. They eventually married, had three children, and divorced. Shortly afterward, Hannah had met Roy, who had been a friend when she needed one.

The sisters met back in Port Huron twice, once at the death of each parent. Reconnection was easy. They were a good team in these final goodbyes, Hannah doing all the paperwork and Key taking care of the social aspects. Reunions other than these were rare. The geographical distance was so long and arrangements to leave home were complicated with kids and work. Years passed between visits. They took to communicating online through chat on Words with Friends. Once a day each would spell a word on the board, then use it in a clever sentence and add some brief family news.

One day Key, just home from Paris where she had directed her college's Summer Study Abroad program, logged on and was astonished to see that Hannah had not added her word. "Hmmm...guess she got busy." Still no response the next day and she sent Hannah a nudge, as suggested in the game. She began to worry. Hannah had been diagnosed with lung cancer three years before but after chemotherapy had experienced an astonishing remission. Time to worry? She resorted to a phone call, tricky to time from six zones away.

“Are you OK?” she pleaded into the voice mail. Two more days passed. Searching through her contacts, she finally found the number of Hannah’s daughter Linda (what was her married name?) in Fresno. Again, voice mail.

Finally, an answer from Linda. “I’m in Honolulu, where Mama has been airlifted. The cancer has gone to her back and she’s immobilized by pain. She should be back in Kona in about two days.”

“So, she’s getting better?”

“Um...” There were tears in Linda’s voice. “The doctor says it would be a good idea to come. Soon.”

The sunset began to soften now, the sharp peaks of cloud turning to molten gold and purple. It reminded Key of the sunrises she had always loved over the water, over Lake Huron, over the Atlantic with Hannah and parents on Florida vacations, over the Pacific during her Pan Am days. Sitting in the pre-dawn dark, a tiny breath of chill in the air, even in summer, to announce the sun’s arrival. It made her feel that the day was hers, nothing written on it yet, open to all possibilities.

But this was sunset. Not a beginning but an end. Not enough time to fill in all the words that should have been found during the shortened day that was a life. She grabbed her keys and made her way to the rental car waiting in the Holiday Inn parking lot.

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**BIO/**

**HOLLY YORK** has for many years translated and taught French to college students in Atlanta Georgia, USA, where she lives with husband Martin and two Doberman Pinschers. Her poems have appeared in *Whit anthology*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, and *Word Bohemia*. Email: [Holly.york@me.com](mailto:Holly.york@me.com)



**JENNY ROMERO LLAGUNO****The Pain that Unites Us All**

For me, rejection is the pain that unites all of us. Rejection is discrimination. Rejection is exclusion. Rejection is marginalization. Rejection is not being accepted by a social group.

As a racial issue, it is easy to see and feel rejected when a putative superior race, by dint of color or facial features expresses its regulations against what it rejects as composite of an inferior race. For instance, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) had a long history of discriminatory practices against blacks, whether Africans, South Americans, Mexicans or South Asians; against Asians, whether Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos or Burmese; against peoples from the Middle East, whether Muslims, Semites, Farsi or Armenians.

Rejection appears in many types of exclusions based on some, but not limited, to these causes, such as class, age, education, gender, occupation or profession, capabilities in many activities and others too numerous to name and elaborate on.

One of the most hurting of rejections is by being marginalized arising from multiple reasons that cast you out into the margins or borders of mainstream social life such as poverty, physical disability, illiteracy, homeliness, inappropriate behavior, victimization of all sorts and many more. These multiple reasons cut across categories of groups indicted by rejection. Thus, not to be accepted by a particular group to which you wish to belong may be due to biases and prejudices, tacit injustices by certain cliques that wish to be exclusive or misogyny especially of an acute sort that compromises democratic principles.

My first vague sensitivity to discrimination occurred in grade school when my favorite boy classmate was not allowed to march on stage during the graduation rites at the

elementary level of schooling. He was prevented by the fact that he had no shoes on; instead he came to the graduation program with a white shirt, khaki shorts—the prescribed attire—and wooden shoes as footwear. The teacher said the clunky open dragging of the clogs would make noise that will attract unnecessary attention. I saw the sadness on his face mixed with the good-natured acceptance of his fate to be left out. He was alone; he had neither parent nor sibling nor relative with him. Was Herbert an orphan? I asked myself. He just sat there among the audience. I felt his pain; I was uneasy about what I felt because, at the age of twelve, I couldn't account for what must have been compassion on my part. I imagined everybody else to have been nonchalant about the peculiar situation, that it was nothing to fuss about, that it was just one of those things. But I was hurt; it left its mark on me.

It was in High School when I felt rejected by the school for not being able to buy the prescribed number of tickets for the annual *velada* or stage presentation. I was dropped out of the circle of dancers for the dance number which was the highlight of the show. My parents told me to return the tickets costing 500 pesos each because, my Mom said, we couldn't afford them. At first, I did not understand the implication of returning the tickets so I still went to the dress rehearsal. But the school principal, a nun, had called up my mother about the change in the line-up of dancers. Thus, what my mother did after coming home from work was fetch me; she dragged me out of the dress rehearsal. The nuns cleverly covered up for their injustice by downgrading my role in the *velada* into the role of one of the peasant women who were used as props for the rustic forest scene. We just stood on stage in our colorful peasant clothes to lend local color to the background. After this episode in my life, I became more aware of social status, and learned from the pain it caused me to be cautious of the power of money in dealing with situations of friendships, relationships and attachments.

I rejoined a church fellowship, when I got older, in my fifties, after having been an agnostic and a lapsed Catholic during my student days in the University, and throughout most of my married life. As a believer, I experienced rejection again, on account of my age. Being an elderly, I was patronized and excluded from social activities with due respect, as they say, to my age. Someone would assist me in going up and down staircases,

getting in and out of vehicles, or cut me out from long walks in order not to wear me down. These were well-meaning younger people from church. They were just insensitive to how I felt being treated like an ancient grandmother—too young to be ancient, too old to be handled like a sturdy piece of furniture. I felt deeply that I was not one of them; it hurt me to be almost ignored, unless I needed help. I didn't feel I was being treated as an equal, and therefore rejected by the prevailing cultural practice. I was never invited to any of the weddings of my churchmates.

My final anecdote of personal rejection happened when my first-ever manuscript for a book was returned to me with marginal advice that it should be thoroughly edited for lapses in grammar, awkward use of idioms and typographical errors. This was the rejection that crashed me. I felt that I had given it to the wrong publisher, that I had been misread, that I had no chance of becoming a writer. I concluded that I was being excluded by a group of established literati who would not give an old wannabe the chance to be read. I reacted positively. I asked a competent editor who was also a friend to give it a once-over because the reason I may not be able to see my errors was that I was too close to the material. I accepted the need for another pair of eyes; my collection of short stories had to be seen through a different lens from mine.

Rejection pains me. As a manifestation of discrimination, it must be a source of pain to those who are discriminated against: blacks, Asians, Muslims, Semites. I am from Asia, from the Philippines. When apartheid was practiced in South Africa, we were classified as colored peoples. Even if Americans and Europeans accept me, I feel the pain of the black peoples when the white South Africans segregated the colored from the white peoples.

Rejection pains me. When I am excluded from participation because I am old, colored or uneducated, I feel the rejection as do others who are not included for these reasons. Gated mansions exclude entrance into their homes unless you are a friend, a colleague or a relative. Picket fences do less exclusion; club houses do more. Property is sacred ground not to be trespassed. Who owns property is on sacred ground. The homeless cannot occupy sacred ground despite the space that it offers. It does not really offer itself. It is forbidden territory for those who do not own it. It becomes exclusive.

Rejection pains me. When it is because I am poor that I can easily be shooed away, it hurts me. It already hurts me when I am hungry, but it hurts me more when food is not shared with me. When I am disabled and taken advantage of in queues, or in crowded places; when some people make fun of my limp or nastily lead me astray because I am blind; my pain multiplies into inexplicable aches inside of me. What about those who had been denied learning to read or write? Can you imagine how they feel in a world of words and letters? They can feel lonely, or ashamed of themselves. Their shame can make them turn violent when all they have is the strength to use against their aggressors. They must feel helpless. Such helplessness carries with it the burden of pain.

All forms of biases and prejudices produce victims. Rape violates a woman's dignity. To be considered ugly and make it the bases for prejudice is unfair. To be denied access to a public place by being a homosexual is a bias against the right to choose one's sexual orientation. Patriarchy is the most common violation of gender equality. Social class as elaborated by Karl Marx has produced categories of peoples on the basis of wealth, labor, and education. There are now many groups whose alliances are compromised by their capacities or abilities to work, by the professions they have entered by dint of their education, by their business acumen to become entrepreneurs, by their investment in capital to build factories, or by their lack of opportunities to engage in wage work and thus remain poor.

It is a complex and complicated world. The way it has developed practically divides us. Will a common pain connect us to each other? How will that happen? How will rejection and everything it is associated with unite us? For me it is easy to feel the pain of someone who has been rejected? Easy to embrace and take in my arms this person. I am not, however, sure that it will be the same for one and all. I will have to prove this assumption. For it is a statement of assumption. Even if I believe it to be true. Even if I have faith in it.

I want to begin proving my point by saying that it will take having certain positive traits to understand the problem. What are these positive traits? Being an open person is one of them; open to differences and diversities; open to the new and the untried; open to risks and discomforts. I know this last point is a very difficult thing to accept. It is only

reasonable to prefer safety and comfort. But at a deep level of understanding the human condition, selflessness and heroism can touch the core of our beings to behave outside the bounds of the norm.

Other positive traits are the resistance to bigotry, authentic respect for human dignity, nurturing a passion for fairness and justice, empathy and compassion for the suffering of others, and, most important of all, the willingness to fight for and defend those who are in pain to the best of their resources and abilities.

Negro culture is different; so is Chinese. Muslims behave, even dress, in a particular way. The poor may not have acceptable table manners; farmers have diverse household practices. Factory workers are often rough; young people speak as though they do not care. Intellectuals are snobs; businessmen step on other people's toes nonchalantly.

How do we then put all these stereotypes in a huge bowl together and share a common pain? To begin with, will they ever admit to having felt pain? I am sure pain is common to all of humanity. But there will be those who will deny it. There will be those who will say that his/her pain is different from mine. There will be those who will shrug off their pain; there will be those who will claim they have overcome it. All these points will be valid. What I want to happen is the admission that there had been pain and to be able to relate to others because of this pain.

Are we going to have a brave new world? Or are we on the verge of losing paradise? I am not giving up. I will continue to hope for a better world. I will dare to approach the edge of paradise.

Let us then imagine a world without pain. If the slave trade hadn't flourished, there would not be such a disdain for the dark color of skin. If Asians have neither been identified for having chinky eyes nor accused of being tricky traders, we can easily perceive them as a race of another description whom we can welcome to the community. If Christians can accept Muslims as beholden to Allah instead of Jesus Christ, then they can take it for granted that they worship differently and not give it another thought.

Inequality is at the root of our common pain. If, in the past, in the Agricultural Age, land had been evenly distributed for people to till, instead of having access to it either

through conquest, by acquisition or through ownership, then many consequences could have been avoided that eventually led to so much pain. If, in the present age, modern and post-modern, wealth could be redistributed to peoples according to their basic needs, instead of the continuous acquisition of wealth through profit by the so-called captains of industry, then there would not exist so much deprivation among those who suffer from extreme poverty and hunger.

If man, when he decided to separate from the clan and form a family, had not declared superiority over his female partner out of his desire to protect her and her children since he is the stronger person based on his judgment, then we will perhaps not see patriarchy still at work today. If hierarchies did not come about since the days of kingdoms and royalties, and continued till the dawn of capitalism, then most would be equal in status, and much pain avoided.

As it is, we have to be united by what has been brought out as the worse in our tormentors. We are brought together by a common pain, we have been collectively hurt through an unnecessary cruelty with a long history of brutality and violence. Slavery, wars, rapes, genocides, poverty and other atrocities of varying degrees that violate human dignity: these have, at one point or another, hurt us.

When we are drawn together feeling each other's pain, we find relief in not being alone, in the compassion that abounds, in the justified rage with others, in the desire to change the situation. We see allies among the underserved, the marginalized, the abused, the victimized. We find our stifled voices as we join each other in speaking up about our misgivings. We want to change the course of this world. We want to be the agents of change. We know that the established order cannot go on.

Our pain unites us in knowing what we want. We want to be treated as equals, regardless of race, age, gender, disability, social status, sexual orientation, lack of education, and all forms of discrimination based on these, among others. We want a just world, a caring world, a sharing world. We don't want to be ever rejected again because we do not belong to a world not of our making.

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**BIO/**

**JENNY ROMERO LLAGUNO** has a PhD in English Studies (Creative Writing Program) from the University of the Philippines (UP). She hopes to debut as a writer with her first collection of short stories titled *A Woman with Money and Other Stories* late this year. She lived in Rome for 12 years when her late husband worked with UN FAO. Upon return, she took her MA in Women and Development Studies from UP. She co-edited the *Review of Women's Studies* produced by the UP Center for Women's Studies for 10 years.

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**J. L. WRIGHT****Distress**

There is

always

someone

suffering

more than I.

Someone

with unending

pain.

Does that

lighten my load

or make me

feel shame?

I want

to know

that MY burden

is the heaviest,

the saddest.

But even,

in the moment

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I know,  
It is not.

I cannot  
understand  
your pain,  
your burden,  
your loss.

We  
both suffer  
together  
alone.

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#### **BIO/**

**J. L. WRIGHT** is a fulltime RVer enjoying learning about the United States by exploring it. J. L. wishes to start conversations about current issues through an artistic voice in poetry, photography, and graphic art. Recent publications include The Wire's Dream Magazine, GNU Journal, Whatcom Watch, Solstice Magazine, and Peace Poets Anthology, chapbook, and Recently Unadoptable Joy: A memoir in poetry and prose. More about the experience can be found at [A Reason, A Season, A Lifetime: Quitting our jobs, selling everything, and hitting the road.](#)

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**JO BELL**

## **Two Pairs Of Shoes**

I wonder what you are thinking. Shoes and pain perhaps, you'd have a point of course. I could be thinking of stiletto heels and pointed toes, but I'm not! Those who wear such things, know that pain is part of so called glamour and so too are aching backs and, if the offending shoes are worn long enough and often enough then damaged backs. I suspect that all stiletto heel wearers are united in their pain, and no doubt often sympathise with each other. Not a path I wish to pursue.

I'm thinking of something much more significant. It can be easier to say what I am not thinking about, like headaches, toothache, indigestion, broken ankle and so many more physical pains, often, though not always, unavoidable; just part of everyday living. I want to explore something more profound and to question if anyone, from the most unpleasant to the most delightful, can avoid this kind of pain. By now you may have guessed that I am thinking about psychic or emotional pain. But what about the shoes?

Shoes, in themselves, tell us quite a lot about the owner; and owners know and remember a lot about themselves. A friend told me the other day she had thrown her wedding shoes away. When I asked her why (as though I hadn't already guessed!) she said 'because I hate him for having an affair, I just want a divorce and never see him again!' I shan't record what else she said. I hope throwing her shoes away helped with her emotional pain, somehow I doubt it.

Long ago I was a sociologist and as a consequence I have always spent time watching people, in airports, on trains, in restaurants anywhere in fact. I also talk to anybody, which seems to bother my daughter! I always notice people's shoes. Recently I sat with a woman on a bench outside M&S in Stratford. She was tired, probably lonely and seemed to want to tell me about herself. She was wearing old trainers and having a quick rest as she had a twenty minute walk home. Her sister and her friend were both ill and both needed her, and

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she felt too tired. We chatted for a few minutes more and then my daughter and I walked on to our hotel. She asked me what we had talked about. 'She didn't look your type.' I pointed out that everyone is my type and asked had she noticed the woman's shoes. She looked at me in astonishment and replied 'Of course not!' But I have lived where many people are barefoot very largely because they are too poor to buy footwear. Some of them make shoes from truck tyres and they looked comfortable. That was fifty years ago but sadly, many all over the world still walk barefoot. Perhaps that is why something as simple as shoes interests me.

Now to talk about the two pairs of shoes that particularly concern me. They belong to two very different men. The first pair are old black slippers, they need replacing. I know a great deal about the owner, he has been my husband for forty years! The slippers live in the kitchen when they are not on his feet. If they are not by his chair I know he is somewhere in the house, if they are there I know he is in his greenhouse or tunnel or just wandering around outside. They are a useful signalling system. I can't call to Tom, my husband, as he is extremely deaf. The other pair of shoes don't actually exist, but they probably exist more profoundly than if they did. I'll talk about them and their second owner later.

Tom and I have both been married twice and that carries loads of psychic pain and often as a result physical pain like an ulcer and worse. We met in our forties; Tom, I think, was looking for a partner, I was not. Tom seemed to just fall into my life. I had met a number of men after my divorce and they were not of any interest to me at all. But we two were married six weeks after we first met! Tom and his daughter moved into my home. A new beginning for all of us but, and it is has been a big but, Tom's teenage daughter didn't like the new set up. She and Tom had been living in a rented flat in London. She had had a carefree existence due, I would say, to not quite enough control, perhaps because of the family break up. After we had been married a few weeks she left us and returned to her mother. Tom went to court to try to get her back, but the judge decreed otherwise. Tom was devastated. He wept and was inconsolable. He had had a mental breakdown after leaving his first marriage and he was still recovering when I met him. Losing his daughter made us both, I suppose in some sense feel very guilty. We drank more as we tried to come to terms with what had happened. After a few months Tom was very ill with an abscess

and had to have surgery. While he was in hospital his first wife rang to say she couldn't cope with Lucy, their daughter, and she would have to come back to us. I tried to explain that it was not possible as Tom was very ill but she got very angry, told me I was lying and put down the phone. I guess that told me something about why their marriage ended. Tom came out of hospital still quite ill but eventually went back to work. We didn't see Lucy for a long time and after a lot of chat and thinking we decided we would try to see if we could rebuild the relationship. We did visit her; at seventeen she had had a baby. There was great sadness on seeing her; life messed up so early. She didn't seem to want us, just some money. In a strange way, the asking for money was quite healing and helped reduce the guilt and pain. What was so clear was the profound emotional pain she and her father were both suffering. To add to Lucy's pain her mother had remarried. The new husband was quite old and Lucy did not get on with him. I could sense her pain, but was not able to talk to her let alone help her. I knew I was part of the problem.

Tom and I both got new jobs and moved house. Of course the deep pain, not really apparent day to day was always there, and of course it would surface unexpectedly. Birthdays, perhaps a TV programme about relationships, even someone who looked familiar brought things to the surface now and again. A few years later Tom had another breakdown and we eventually decided he should take early retirement from a very demanding job and I would carry on working. Psychic pain is not easily healed, the wound remains; the scar is for life. I think what I have experienced with Tom must apply to many men who lose contact with their children. I feel sure Tom has been seen as a father who walked out, but things are never that simple. Now and again I have asked Tom if he would like to try again to contact Lucy. His reply has always been very negative, the hurt too deep to risk bringing it to the surface again. I no longer ask him.

Can we be mended? Can we mend ourselves? Can we mend each other? I think at a certain level we cannot, but we can try to repair ourselves and each other so life can be very worthwhile. Tom learnt to drive in his fifties, and passed the test first time, he took on voluntary work where we lived. He took two degrees. He had swimming lessons, but that failed. He gave up smoking and that was a success.

Tom had a tough life from the beginning. He grew up on a farm in Devon and from an early age had to do tasks on the farm and by the time he went to grammar school he was up at five each morning to help with the milking before he left for school and again he had to help in the evening when he got back. There was no lack of love in Tom's childhood, but it was the tough kind. Does a tough childhood help us cope with what life throws at us later on? We both have lots of psychic pain collected as we have moved through life. Now? We live in rural Kerry in western Ireland. There is great beauty and tranquillity, we can spend a week and see nobody, not hear a car nor see a plane. I mentioned Tom's extreme deafness earlier and I want to go back to it for a moment. For me it is a matter of profound psychic pain that is at times almost unbearable and when I find it very painful I think of all those, worldwide, dealing with the same difficult issue, and I know our deafness problem is very small by comparison with others. I think of all the deaf children with their whole lives ahead, and the poor across the world with no access to hearing aids.

Now, if you are still with me, let me tell you about the other pair of shoes that are in fact boots. One boot is somewhat bent over from the back, the other stands more erect. They are well worn, the laces are in a state of abandon, just resting. The colours of the boots and the surroundings are muted so that the boots seem almost part of the background. It is tonal painting, a technique based on light and dark variations of the same colour, in this instance blue-green. You may have guessed; I am talking about Van Gogh's world famous picture '*Shoes*'. I have a copy which hangs just inside the kitchen in my Irish farmhouse. I see it many times every day. Quite often I think about the messages hidden in the boots. I bought the print on a visit to the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. I have loved Van Gogh's pictures for many years so my trip on a quiet day was a special, personal treat. I went alone. There were not a lot of visitors that day. I had read a lot about Van Gogh, and seen programmes on TV and visited Arles where he lived in the south of France. But this was something else. In an inexplicable way he seemed to be there, pervading the quiet space. His pictures are like messages left behind for us all. They have a special place in my psyche partly because they are beautiful, influenced by post- impressionism and realism, but also something much more than that; '*Shoes*,' 'talks to me' about the artist's tortured yet remarkable life.

The boots were bought by Van Gogh towards the end of 1886 in a flea market in Paris. As I looked at the original I could sense the market, his need for boots and his poor circumstances. They are very lived-in boots, storing vestiges of Van Gogh's life within their souls – each boot has its own soul. I bought the print on my way out and it has been with me for many years and has travelled with me to Spain and later to North America where I lived in Vermont and later in Canada. I have several other Van Gogh prints but for some reason the '*Shoes*' has a special resonance.

Van Gogh was never settled but lived in various places, sometimes just moving on, sometimes chased away and once incarcerated. In 1882, while living in the Hague he wrote to his brother Theo. 'Sometimes I long so much to do landscapes [...] to refresh [my] self in all of nature, in trees for instance, [ which] I see as an expression and a soul, as it were.'

In 1886 he left Paris and went to live in Arles, searching for light and peace. He craved self-confidence and to be happy, cheerful and lively. He decided this was more likely in the country. Sadly for Van Gogh it didn't work and he cut off his ear and in 1889 was incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital in St-Remy- de-Provence. He was allowed to paint in the grounds and later was allowed to go out short distances. While there he wrote to his sister to say 'everything [in the country] speaks more clearly, everything holds more fun, everything explains itself [...]'

In May 1890 he left the hospital and went to live in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris. There, during his final months, he painted sweeping landscapes, an ode to the countryside he loved so much; he often painted them with turbulent skies. These last pictures are filled with his emotions sad and joyful, resolved and unresolved. It seems he was never able to come to terms with himself or life. As with all human beings Van Gogh was psychically hurt by life itself. Life's journey always involves some mental torment and suffering. Some of us suffer psychically much more than others. For Van Gogh nature and art were inseparably linked. It was where he found inspiration, and what a legacy he left us all. Nature did not in the end give him the solace and peace he so craved. He committed suicide in July that year.

There are so many moments of psychic pain that can be seen and heard by us all in our hyper connected world with its social media. Just a few thoughts before I end. Yesterday (17/7/17) was the Men's final at Wimbledon, both the finalists had a weep, for quite different reasons, but their emotions were shared by millions, at Wimbledon and around the world; most I think felt compassion. Today (18/7/17) an American doctor is to see the very sick English baby who is on the news each day. The coverage has caused thousands of people to contribute to a fund to help the family. It seems the American will make at least a tentative decision about the tiny boy, and help decide what should be done for him. So much psychic pain, the parents, the judge, the Pope, the doctor, even President Trump and all the millions who have been following the case. And the cause of all this psychic pain, the tiny boy, knows nothing.

Even if we cannot control things that happen in our lives, we do have a great deal of control over their meaning for us. We can all have self-compassion. Analysing, or in modern speak deconstructing the influences and happenings in our lives should enable us to be ready to rebuild, heal ourselves and carry on, with scars of course. Some find that easier than others. At best personal healing enables us to move from the personal to the social to perhaps the universal. Mother Teresa told us all to '*do small things with great love,*' to help others when we can and to understand and know that there is a little bit of all of us in each of us. That, I believe, is the pain that unites us all.

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#### **BIO/**

**JO BELL** lives in Kerry ROI. Retired and revelling in it! Reads a lot, currently the history of the Middle East and what lies ahead for our planet. Meditates, reflects, and has periods of solitude. Keen on theatre especially Stratford. Email: bestbells@gmail.com

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**LYN CRAMER**

## **The Thanksgiving Highway**

Each late fall until I graduated high school my parents and I visited the town of my birth. It is a sweet little southern Minnesota prairie town, the kind you drive through, slowing only for the few minutes required before you can drive fast again. If you look, though, you will see shopkeepers on sidewalks talking to each other, and neighbors out to run an errand just to pass the time. The time doesn't pass here much; it sits just above puddles after a soft rain and moves on with the last small gust of wind before the sky begins to turn the deep rose that welcomes the night to come.

I was born in the town's first hospital, just after it was built, when my mom lived with my dad's parents and sister as World War II raged on across the Atlantic. When dad returned from serving in France and Germany I was three. He'd been a combat medic in the army; then did some important job after the war was over. Something about setting people free from prison camps. Grandpa said they were death camps. I don't think I understood about these camps that first Thanksgiving when dad had returned to town, rehabilitating himself, he said; maybe that's what he and his buddies called it, or maybe the army called it that. Drinking with his buddies grandma called it. Mom didn't say much and spent most of her time taking care of me.

When most of the men home from the war moved out of town because there weren't any jobs, my dad decided to leave himself. He drove mom -- his get married before the war and have a child on the way in case you die bride -- and I northeast sixty miles or so to another town where grandpa, having sold his dad's farmstead, had bought an optometric practice for my dad. Grandpa, a druggist, knew the challenges and rewards of having his own business and believed his son would also grow through having responsibility. The idea

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made sense. Yet, does a business that is given to you ever belong to you? My dad never acted like it did. His lack of commitment let the new town pretty far down.

We must have begun the Thanksgiving Highway tradition in 1948, after we had moved. We traveled south to spend the holiday at grandma and grandpa's. I was four. I remember dad talking about death camps at that dinner. I have memories of the camps in my body and images in my mind but no words from that time. Doesn't matter that I don't remember the words. Dad kept drinking and repeating the stories of death camps for at least the next fifteen years.

I felt imprisoned along with the people in the camps. I felt guilty and ashamed that they were in prison and not me. We were all innocent, I later figured out, but they died and I did not.

All those years we drove in one beat up station wagon after another. They got beat up when dad smashed them into a tree or a road sign or a building. Never hit a car or a person as far as I know. Never went to jail. Often got a restricted driver's license that allowed him to only drive to and from work. Still he drove any place he wanted. Years later I told a friend from high school about his driving all over on a restricted license. My friend said "Veteran's Status. You kill enough and get shot at enough and drink enough with your buddies and you're entitled." I was too stunned at the time to say anything. Now I understand that these walking wounded veterans, haunted by memories and flashbacks in reaction to known and unknown triggers, or reminders, knew enough to stick together and protect each other. Reconnection. Acceptance. Support. That's what heals, if anything can. Sometimes protection. I don't know how much protection healed my dad compared to how much it hurt him.

Grandma kept a picture, under her dressing table glass, of dad and his dad standing side by side in the same apartment my mom and I would later live in with dad's sister and my grandma and grandpa when dad was overseas. They stood between the dining room table and the living room sofa. This picture was taken before I arrived on the scene. The scene is however exactly the same: the maroon drapes, the swirled silver vines on an even deeper maroon background carpet, the grey boucle davenport and chair that scratched when you sat on them. The same wallpaper: stripes and vines in shades of green upon a faded cream.

Dad is the taller of the two. He wears a sloppy grin. Grandpa has a welcoming smile and stands upright and steady. Don't know grandpa's rank or anything about his service, except that dad said he did not see combat and made fun of him for that. Called him a sissy. Grandpa didn't seem to be much interested or involved in his time as a soldier. War conversations and bragging sessions belonged exclusively to my dad. I take it back; there weren't really any war conversations. There were war speeches from him. About who was right and who was wrong. I didn't find out much about what had happened till I went to history classes and read the books about war in high school and college.

My father often gloated about the bayonet, knives, rifle, swords and helmet that he brought home from the war. He would get out the German weapons and helmet that he had taken from dead bodies in the fields. He said they were made so much better than American weapons. He rhapsodized how the Germans, led by Hitler, really knew how to fight a war. Really knew engineering. Really knew strategy. I remember him moving his arms around wildly, talking louder and louder about Hitler and his expertise. I do not mean he talked with fear or anger. None of that. Rather a sick kind of admiration. Like he was high. A wild excitement. I could imagine him in a wartime crowd, standing ramrod straight, saluting, shouting "Heil Hitler" and teaching me and my two younger brothers to do the same. Maybe we all played a saluting game. Maybe just them. I don't know. It was hard to stay listening to him. Was hard not to run away. Was terribly difficult to look like I was admiring the weapons and helmet. My stomach and throat wanted to retch. I did not dare

retch. What does it do to a person and a person's body to hold back vomit? I think of all the people around the world vomiting or having to hold it back to not get killed themselves, just for caring, just for being human. I think of dad's getting an ulcer and not me. What depth of rejection was his body expressing that his mind could not? On the way home my body finally gave in and I threw up on the side of the highway.

Dad's talk of memories of the war and that picture of my dad and grandpa in uniform haunted my Thanksgivings. I think my dad's worship of Hitler must have sickened the rest of the family as it did me. I saw revulsion, horror, shame, anger and embarrassment on the faces around the table as he talked. I know I felt somehow responsible for his being caught up in the ugliness of war and not being able to see it as tragic and sad even if he believed it necessary, as most people seemed to about World War II. In the picture father and son soldiers stand six feet away from the dining room table where we ate every formal meal. Every Thanksgiving dinner. I felt them keeping the war there every time we all sat down.

On the way home from Thanksgiving dinner we drove past a sign that read: "Bypass Amboy". For a few years after I learned to read I tried to visualize what a bypass town might be. A town all along one side of a road that everyone passed, where no houses faced each other? Where every family was rich and so all should see how they lived? Later I heard of bypass pruners and wondered if the town were dangerous or in danger in some way. I was at least eleven years old before I asked my stepmom once, when she was driving and dad was asleep in the passenger seat, why it was called Bypass Amboy. She said "Because we bypass Amboy, pass it by, rather than go into it."

Huh, I thought. Bypass. We do that all the time. Pass on by rather than go into. We never talk about a thing. From then on I knew I had a choice and could make my own roadmap. I would use it to drive into unknown towns and know them and let none be hidden.

For me, the years when my dad was gone to war were the most peaceful I ever lived. I used to feel guilty that I had felt the best, felt peace, when he was in battlefields overseas, fighting to make our country safe. Fighting so I and other people could live. Fighting with his life at stake. But there were reasons I did not feel good when he returned.

He brought the war home with him. Every night. All night until he passed out. Probably he drank to try to forget the war. To forget what he had seen and done. Grandma told me he also drank before the war. My stepmom told me she didn't know him then but he just kept drinking at parties after the war. In later years whenever she talked to him about how much he drank, he said he liked drinking too much to stop. My mom said yes, he drank when she met him before the war when they were both in professional school in Memphis, but not all that much.

His war went on and on. Especially on Thanksgiving. He snuck into the bathroom to drink from a flask he hid in the toilet tank. We all knew. The drunker he got, the louder the ceramic tank top clanged when he put it back on. My stepmom drove us back home afterwards, after grandpa wrestled with dad and gave her the car keys. Sometimes my druggist grandpa gave his son some pills to keep him quiet. Phenobarbital I'm guessing, as that is what dad used to keep us kids quiet at times.

Thank God for creamed onions. I knew Grandma made them in a white sauce with some kind of cheese. I wanted to make them for Thanksgiving once when she was too tired to cook. Couldn't find the old recipe no matter where I looked. They were to die for. Maybe lots of soldiers were willing to die for their mother's cooking, for their mother to have peace enough to cook a holiday or Sunday dinner with fresh ingredients, to work hard in the kitchen and emerge with pride in a job well done. And savor the compliments. Then clean up along with any women available while the men played cards, smoked, talked, and in some homes drank. Grandpa was a teetotaler and an excellent card player. Dad was neither.

I was haunted in another way after we moved to the new town and the house by the train tracks. At 10:30 each night I became again the little blond-haired girl who no longer had a mom who loved to brush her hair and say how beautiful the waves were. No one was left who even realized my hair was wavy and not straight like my dad's. I lay with my face pushed up against the bedroom window. The train was almost always on time. It traveled from the west to where I lay at the foot of the bed and then south through Chicago to Jackson, Mississippi. It went from Jackson all the way to New Orleans, but I only thought of Jackson. That was where my mom was. I missed her. I cried every night when I heard the train. It was the same whistle that I heard the night my mom left. I could see the depot from my bedroom window. Why would a mother leave her little girl? Grandma said there were things children do not understand. I knew that might be true but it was not a reason a mom would leave.

Was I so bad my mom did not want me? I felt my mom loving me. I knew this feeling was real. It did not make sense my mom left. Once when I was tired of being confused, I talked to my Sunday School teacher Mrs. Fischer. She and my mom were good friends. She told me that they write to each other.

“Why doesn't she write me?” I ask.

“She does write you.”

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“I don't get any letters.”

“Ask your dad and stepmom then.”

I freeze. I will not ask. I do not know why.

“Your mom loves you very much.” Mrs. Fischer puts her arm around my shoulder. “You will see her again. She will help you understand why she had to leave. She didn’t want to. Your mom loves you and always will.”

Still I cried as the train whistle moaned that night and every night. The train was so close to my window that I often thought about jumping and landing on the top of it. I knew I wouldn’t quite make it to the train that way. I thought of running over to the depot and waiting for the train the next time it came, if I could get on and go see my mom. But I knew that wouldn’t work either. I had run away with clothes and sandwiches wrapped in a kerchief and tied to a stick, the way you are supposed to, and each of the three times a man from town, a different man each time, brought me back to my dad, I got a talking to every time. It was a mean lecture and made me cry. I was so scared when my father lectured that I couldn’t remember what he said. I still see his long right hand pointer finger, covered with hair, jabbing at me. I see the finger stabbing into my head and ruining me forever.

My dad and stepmother took turns driving all night to a motel in the middle of the country to meet my mom for her yearly visit with me. We all stayed at a roadside motel for a weekend. Didn’t work out to do this every year. A couple times my grandma took me to meet my mom and we visited rock shops and museums. When I was older and began to have children, mom flew up every other year or so for a visit and took my children and I traveling all around the state. She loved geology and rocks and we stayed in state park cabins. We all loved these trips, and collected rocks, shells, fossils and agates..Mom had a great camera and took many pictures.

Later, after finishing college and having a career and children of my own, I did travel with my children to see their grandma, feel the warmth of the south, listen to dixieland and savor

long lunches. We tied pork fat onto strings, pulled the strings along the bayou and pulled in enough crayfish to feed us and my cousin and her family. She served black-eyed peas and grits and finished with the best pecan pie we had ever eaten.

When I began to ask my questions, mom told us, as she had me the other times I asked over the years, that she put the answers in a big box and put it way up high on a dusty shelf in the basement storeroom of her mom's crumbling old house in Jackson. I said I was prepared to go to that storeroom and get down that box. My children laughed and asked what was in the box. To my surprise, mom answered. She told us about my dad's divorcing her and lying to her that it was a separation to give them a break and time to recover. But what he really did was go to what was called a divorce mill and obtain a divorce without her involvement. She went back to Mississippi for the break as they agreed, and to see her family. I stayed here with grandma.

In the state my dad lived in, the divorce was legal. Mom couldn't get child custody. She kept on fighting to get visitation rights and so we some years had those required visits. Mom told us she later found out from talking to other women whose husbands divorced them soon after the war that a full quarter of marriages that took place just before WW II ended in divorce.

On the last day of our visit, mom gave me the letters she had written to me over the years, kept in a large hatbox, each letter stamped "delivery refused." She gave me pictures of her holding me when I was a baby. These had been mailed to her. She guessed that grandma mailed the pictures after dad threw them out. She gave me half of her special agates, ones we had found on our trips to the best agate hunting sites around the state. It's amazing how close you can feel to someone when you're hunting agates together.

My children had found answers for me. She was the mom that loved me all along, as I had known. We all talked like long lost relatives from a loving family, which we realized we were.

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**BIO/**

**LYN CRAMER**, United States, has worked as a warehouse person, postal clerk, child care parent, magazine writer, editor, and social worker. She spends as much time as she can in nature and concentrates now on writing poetry and fiction. You can reach her at: [Lynjcramer@gmail.com](mailto:Lynjcramer@gmail.com).

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**MERCEDES WEBB-PULLMAN****Family dogs**

A southerly front hits as I cross the road. Rain bursts and sleet briefly hide the ferry terminal buildings. I stagger with the wind, turn back-on to catch my breath. Cook Strait will be rough tonight.

Head down I join the group at the main gangplank waiting to board. This is Maori, brother ferry to Wahine. Wahine will sail north from the South Island port of Lyttleton tonight as Maori heads south from Wellington. Somewhere off the West Coast our paths will cross, and each will dock where the other departed, at 6am tomorrow. Rain drives sideways, bitterly cold. Maybe this sailing will be cancelled? A policeman approaches and arrests me.

My father is concerned for my safety. He thinks I may be suicidal, and a warrant for my arrest under The Mental Health Act has been issued. That's all it takes. Storm batters at the police car, air-borne debris hurtles past, water crashes over us. It's peaceful, warmer, safer, past the entrance in the thick stone walls into the central lockup.

I'll be held here overnight then taken back to Napier, where a magistrate will decide my life. Reports pour in of more storm damage - trees uprooted, roofs blown off, minor flooding, road slips.

They bring blankets. I read graffiti scratched into the wall. Lights out in an hour. I ask for a container for my contact lenses - a matchbox will do. Because of the Mental Health Act

warrant I strain to seem normal. A normal seventeen-year-old girl in jail, storm raging outside, talking to a policeman about the pros and cons of hard contact lenses.

5.50 a.m. 10 April. Captain H. G. Robertson decides to enter Wellington Harbour. Wind gusts at over 50 knots. As the Wahine reaches the narrow harbour entrance the wind speed increases to 100 knots.

6 a.m. The Wahine's radar system fails. A huge wave slams into the ship, throwing many off their feet. Side on to the waves, the vessel is pushed towards Barrett Reef on the western side of the harbour entrance.

A new shift of police. They bring me tea and toast at 6am.

6.35 a.m. The captain orders full astern. At 6.40 a.m. the vessel reverses onto Barrett Reef. Many of the passengers are unaware, due to the ferocious battering from the storm.

I'm taken at 7.30 a.m. to catch the 8 a.m. train. The storm still rages.

Captain Robertson orders all watertight doors closed and both anchors dropped. Passengers are informed that the ferry has run aground. The signal station at Beacon Hill is notified as crew prepare life-saving equipment. Flooding on the vehicle deck raises serious concerns about stability.

We wait for the train in the shelter of the station building. A woman walks out past the protection of the wall. Wind picks her up, turns her somersaulting over and over along the granite rocks ballasting the track. As the wind dies she falls and lies crumpled. A porter rushes to her. Our train pulls in. We board at 7.55 and the heavy carriage rocks in the wind; the whole world feels dangerous, treacherous.

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A radio plays weather; the storm heading north has run into tropical cyclone Giselle, moving south. Winds gust through Wellington at 100 miles per hour. Small boat alert. Heavy seas alert. High winds alert. Flash flooding alert. Emergency services stretched as roofs blow away. Trees fallen on power lines. Phone and electricity cut. Buses, suburban trains, harbour ferries cancelled. Airport closed. Something about a ferry fades as we move out, along the harbour and into the first tunnel. Thick tatters of rain and sleet billow over the harbour, the city already invisible behind us.

The Wahine drags its anchors and drifts up the harbour past Point Dorset. The weather makes it impossible for rescuers to reach the ship from land.

Our train crawls north, buffeted by winds, stopping often. We're blasted each time a carriage door opens. Broken trees litter the roads, debris from building sites dance freely over a hillside near Johnsonville, lines of cars sit stranded in flood water. No people to be seen anywhere. The train arrives at Porirua station at 10 and sits there for an hour.

11.00 a.m. The tug Tapuhi reaches the Wahine. By 11.50 the tug secures a line to tow the ferry to safety, but the line gives way. Other attempts fail. Shortly after noon the deputy harbourmaster, Captain Galloway, boards the Wahine from the pilot launch, which has also reached the scene.

The roof of the new Porirua Tavern peels off slowly like so much silver paper, climbs into the air, flexing and dipping like a wing, like a sail, and billows away.

1.15 p.m. The Wahine lists heavily to starboard. There is a patch of water sheltered from wind and waves on the lower starboard side.

Since I was arrested I've been in a state of shock. The world looks surreal and flimsy.

1.30 p.m. The order is given to abandon ship.

Captain Robertson feels it is safer for the passengers to remain on board, to avoid panic. Passengers are confused and frightened. People slide across the sloping deck, trying to make their way to lifeboats. Some have removed their life jackets and are using them as pillows. Others do not know which side is starboard and make their way to the high side, from which it is impossible to launch lifeboats.

Only the four starboard lifeboats can be launched, as many people as possible in each. One lifeboat is swamped and its occupants tossed into the sea. (Two of the other lifeboats reach Seatoun; the third lands at Eastbourne). Other passengers jump into the cold, churning sea. Some cling to inflatable life rafts but a number of these are punctured by wreckage or flipped over by heavy seas.

Cups of milky railway tea and ham sandwiches on white bread during the 1.30 stop at Palmerston North. Then more rain, muddy tree-tossed rivers close to the bridge decks as we creep across, dead sheep caught here and there, once a dead dog, creamy foam like ocean spume curdling on the water, no sky, just swirling grey clouds.

2.30 p.m. The now-abandoned Wahine capsizes in 11.6 metres of water just east of Steeple Rock Light and crashes to the seabed. By this time the first survivors have reached shore at Seatoun.

The Wahine sinks within sight of land and other vessels, which stand by to pick up survivors. Many are blown towards Eastbourne Beach. Rescue teams find the road to Eastbourne blocked by slips. 200 survivors struggle to safety here; 51 fatalities occur. People reach shore alive, do not receive medical attention quickly enough and die from exposure. Others drown or are crushed against rocks.

Robertson and Galloway are last to abandon ship. They spend an hour in the water near the wreck before being rescued.

Imagine if the magistrate thinks I am incompetent. I'm not suicidal. My father didn't want me to leave. He didn't mean to kill my dog, it was an accident, but I couldn't stay. If he can persuade the magistrate I am a danger to myself, I can be locked up, and treated, until I'm no longer a danger. Existentially, aren't we always a danger to ourselves?

Rescuers stand helplessly on the beach at Seatoun as the Wahine succumbs to one of the worst storms in New Zealand history. So many lives lost so close to shore. The main cause of the accident is weather; errors of judgment have been made on the ferry and on shore. How can a large, modern vessel founder within sight of New Zealand's capital city?

Silently through the long late afternoon, while the track is checked, we wait for flash flooding to recede, for small slips to be cleared, or stop to gauge the safety of a bridge. Plenty of time to think.

As children we had pets; kittens, budgies, goldfish, but my father would not allow a dog. They were like farm machinery to him; necessary for work, but they had no place in a city.

Yet a dog had saved his life when he was a child. Playing with an empty cream can, he'd tumbled into it, rolled down the slope and into the creek. The new farm dog had raced to my grandfather, pulled him by the hand to the creek where air bubbles were still rising.

I'd been living in my own home in the South Island for a year. One of my first gestures of independence had been to get a dog. Petey was a lop-eared bitzer with a lot of terrier in him, short-coated and sassy. I'd brought him home with me this trip. He stayed outside on a chain, and howled with more than loneliness; he was in pain. We'd been travelling for days, and he was constipated. Dad treated him as he'd treated farm dogs - mineral oil, through a hose into his stomach. The next day Petey died.

I accused my father of killing him deliberately. The vet said his lungs were full of oil - the tube had gone into lungs instead of stomach. Dad just looked at me, turned and went to work. My mother tried to help; she told me how Dad's father had died.

I knew he'd gone into the stall of a heifer who'd just had her first calf, to rescue his favourite dog bailed up in a corner, and how the heifer had lunged, and pinned my grandfather to the timber rails. He'd managed to free himself and rescue the dog before he collapsed. Lungs pierced by broken ribs, he died at home in bed, slowly and painfully.

My father, at 13, had to leave school to help his mother with the milking. He hated dogs from then on. The old dog my grandfather rescued, the dog that killed him, was the same dog that had saved my father's life ten years before.

I cried; for my dead Petey and his ears that would never prick up again, for my father's loss, for his life-long guilt that had now increased. I understood, but I couldn't face him again. Not yet. I left before he came home from work. In the face of this three-generation link of dogs and death, he asked the police to find me and bring me back.

Napier 7pm. The court has long been adjourned but the police advise the magistrate I've arrived. He comes to the police station, tells them to find me a hot meal, and appoints a psychiatrist to conduct a sanity check on me, bewildered, bedraggled but fed.

The psychiatrist arrives within an hour. A long chat, thumbs up; the magistrate dismisses the application, I am free to go.

The sinking of the Lyttelton–Wellington ferry Wahine on 10 April 1968 is New Zealand's worst modern maritime disaster. Fifty-one people lose their lives, another dies several weeks later and a 53rd victim dies in 1990 from injuries sustained in the wreck. The Wahine's demise marks a coming of age for television news broadcasting in New Zealand. Images of the disaster beam into the nation's living rooms, are later screened around the world as international media focuses attention on Wellington.

The rain has eased when I leave the police station. Giselle is relenting, retreating. In the guest lounge of the Majestic Hotel I watch TV. The Wahine sinks, again and again. The disaster that happened today while I sat on a train. Images of people stagger from heavy surf and fall to the beach at Eastbourne, dragged back by the next wave, relentlessly.

I decide to return to Wellington in the morning, and catch the night ferry to Lyttleton. If the service is running again by then. Nowhere is ever really safe. I can't go home, and I don't know where else to go, yet.

Passages in italics found in <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/wahine-disaster/timeline>

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**BIO/**

**Mercedes Webb-Pullman:** IIML Victoria MA in Creative Writing 2011. Work has been published world-wide, in Turbine, 4th Floor, Swamp, Scum, Reconfigurations, Otoliths, and Main Street Rag, among others, and in her books. She lives on the Kapiti coast, New Zealand. Email at: [mercedeswebbpullman@gmail.com](mailto:mercedeswebbpullman@gmail.com)







**MÔNICA MASTRANTONIO****Good-bye Alan and Galip!**

Good-bye; Alan and Galip,

Though we've never knew you at all,

The whole world feels close to you now,

So close that it could even spare a "we",

But it has never been a "we",

Unfortunately.

No irony.

Actually, we are "ages" from any ideal "we".

We still worry too much about building borders and walls, getting all the money we possibly can for us (and us only), training soldiers to protect what we call our land and thinking we are always so helpful to humanitarian causes. What lies!

I am sorry for all that. We are still crawling in making things amend and so rarely say: "sorry."

"I'm very sorry."

I am sorry for not being able to make this world a better and safer place for all mankind. A world we so much desire and deserve.

It is small world after all, but no friendly-like - "Oh, by no means, no."

And, I'm very sorry it is not a very good place for kids either.

We are still battling against everything and everyone: violence, disgrace, famine, lack of education, sex rape, to mention a few. We do not know our enemies.

Problems are everywhere, and I am sorry to think that we can't even figure out what is going on. Deeply sorry.

We do worry too much about ourselves, our kids lunch menu, our school books, our next vacation, our children's latest fashion clothes and all this weird stuff. Meanwhile, we don't quite notice the world is falling to pieces and people are getting drowned everywhere. Down to the dumps.

If we wake up, I am not sure we will, I'm even afraid not, we might even save the next drowning boat.

We are usually late for the most urgent issues and that is another point to be sorry.

Everything has become so superficial nowadays and we are all somehow always a little bit lost, rushing around too busy with deadlines of some sort of project that won't make the hell of a difference.

We are quite lost, Alan and Galip! We have sunk a long time ago and we barely see it. I am really sorry for all of us. Sometimes, we don't even know where we are going to and neither what for.

You? You were never lost. You knew exactly where you were going to and what you were looking for. You were almost there. I am sorry we were unable to get you where you belong to.

And I am also sorry for building a world where good dreams do not always come true while nightmares pretty often do.

I am sorry for being in a world where my kids won't be able to play with you, guys! You would have had so much fun.

I am sorry for being in a world where your poor dad won't pass a day without questioning himself: "why not me?"

I am sorry for all the countries and borders and all these things called immigration, passports, and governments. They are so dump.

It should have been high being time we all have already learned how to handle things out and came up with new possibilities, new horizons, and concrete solutions.

A whole new world. Drowned proofed.

I am so sorry for not getting any improvement in the old battlefield called egoism.

My great-grandparents were immigrants and they did exactly what you did: “pack and go.”  
No mobiles, guys, nothing!

No matter if it was a long time ago or just now. It is always a disaster to have dreams being taken so early.

Somehow, we are all children of immigration. We are all refugees in this place called Earth.

Just reminding us that "...was not given to us by our parents, but it was loaned to us by our children" (Ancient Indian Proverb).

And now, I am sorry for being so sorry instead of doing more to have you here.

Always, Mônica.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>

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## **BIO/**

**MÔNICA MASTRANTONIO** holds a PhD. in Social Psychology, writer, lecturer, researcher, zen-mom of 3 bambini, loves jogging, reading, and traveling. Passionate about life, environmental projects and her tattoos.

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**NAANA KYEREBOAH****Bound**

They sat there in silence for a moment as each held the yellow phone to an ear on each side of the sturdy glass that separated them. One in shock, absorbing the reality of seeing her brother in orange having lost his roundness. She had not seen him since his arrest. The other in sadness having come to terms with his reality. Anowa broke the silence, “So, how are you?”

“As good as can be.” Kwamina answered, knowing there was not much to say. “Could you please send me some money to add to my account here? He went on to ask his sister. He turned to glance at the clock since the visitation time was limited. He had to talk fast.

“Why do you always need money?” Anowa asked

“I need money for some snacks and toiletries. The food is not enough here,” he replied. He knew if he mentioned a radio, he would be told it was not necessary, but he really needed one.

“Try to make do with what is here. We can’t keep sending money,” Anowa said, although she knew her brother loved to eat.

“How is Mama?” Kwamina asked. If there was one person he was constantly concerned about, it was his mother, who was very ill now. She had always warned him

about the consequences of not taking his medication regularly to keep from being manic. If only he had listened, but no one knew how he truly felt. He sometimes got tired of having to take all that medication to keep him from depression, but he still heard voices. These thoughts whirled through his mind as he tried to finish his conversation gleaning a bit of closeness with family even if separated by glass.

“Mama is a bit better,” Anowa responded, even though she knew Mama’s pain due to her son’s latest situation. The pain that transcended her own illness. “I have to go so Nyamekye can come in before visitation is over. Take care of yourself. We all pray for you daily. Love you.” She touched the glass where he had put up his hand and it was as if their pain was unified through the heavy glass

“Love you,” he replied and they both hang up the phone. She left with a lump in her throat as she saw him being led out of the room, limping as the orange suit hang on him. She stepped out into the chill November air as the guard closed the heavy door behind her, trying to make sense of all that had happened to her brother and the pain they all held. She got to the car and Nyamekye handed her the keys. As Nyamekye headed towards the heavy door, she looked up at the barbed wires, tears welling up in her eyes. She thought how her brother could have ended up here.

Nyamekye picked up the yellow phone as Kwamina picked up his. She had made this five-hour drive to see him twice since his arrest. She had even come the day of his hearing. She was the one who communicated with his lawyer. He knew better than to ask her about money since she had told him twice to not plough through what he was sent. His letters always ended with a request.

“How are you?” Nyamekye asked.

“Okay,” Kwamina responded. “I will get a shorter sentence if I take a plea bargain,” he added.

“Are you going to?” Nyamekye asked.

“I can’t. I didn’t do anything. But then I will have to go on trial, and if I lose then I will have a longer sentence, the lawyer said. I have to let him know by Monday.”

“So what are you going to do?” She asked

The announcement for the end of visitation was made. Kwamina held his hand to the glass. “I am afraid. I can’t stay here for a long time. Love you,” Nyamekye held up her hand to the glass too. The look in his eyes reflected her pain too.

“Please, please take your medications. Love you,” she replied and hang up the phone. As he limped away, she headed outside her heart as heavy as the door that was shut. She knew what his decision was. The heaviness of the door holding in their brother and his demons. The demons which had led him from aspiring healthcare profession to an inmate.

That night he lay in his cell unable to sleep his pain intensified by the thought of letting himself and his family down. He had been taking his prescribed medications three times a day, as he was supervised by the infirmary. He thought of his sisters who came to visit or wrote to him. Those times eased his pain. He thought of his mother even more, now that she was sick with cancer. He was saddened of the times when he was manic and could not contain himself and said mean things to her, or did things in the community that brought her shame. She had been there for him all forty years of his life, even more when he was diagnosed as bipolar. He would take the plea bargain when his lawyer came on



Monday. It meant him admitting guilt. He was not guilty! Yet the idea of a prolonged sentence would kill his soul. He would be walking dead. A shorter sentence would give him a chance to see his family again and live near them and touch them, not seeing them through a glass and channel conversation through phone lines.

He thought back to the days before his arrest. The voices he heard, his mind racing like a horse at a derby. It was as if the voices demanded and gave him a bad taste of his medications, that he did not want to take them. He was tired at times of taking them. How long since his diagnoses, fifteen years of taking medications, of flipping back and forth being manic or being calm. Either way he could not win. The medication made him constantly hungry, eating everything in sight. When he was manic, he ruined family gatherings snapping at everyone and saying things he had no business saying, that the nieces and nephews had to be ushered out of the room. His mother knew his rapid speech always spelled trouble. He spent money faster than the prodigal son, going on shopping sprees buying up the whole town of Bellwood. Even buying for strangers. When he was calm, he was so lethargic and slept most of the day. He just felt trapped in his body.

Then the fire he was blamed of setting. He did not. All he remembered of it were the flames and then the smoke that filled the apartment and the police banging on the door. He yelled back to them and the voices told him to jump out the window instead of opening the door. He could not think over the voices, so he jumped, three floors down, breaking a leg. The police got him then, beating him, and accusing him of setting the fire and trying to escape. Even under armed guard at the hospital and medication the voices raged on. He wished he had gone head first, taking the voices along with him to his grave, so his torment would be over. He sobbed himself to sleep as he would many a night behind bars.

He woke up no better still struggling with his decision. Feeling lonelier than the day before. One more day to talk to the lawyer. Perhaps, there could be an alternative way. His feeling of not wanting to take his medication returned. If he could think a bit clearer, he could decide what he wanted. The voices raged on one side and his desire for a shorter sentence to be able to see his mother tugged on the other, his body in a tug of war. He

managed his morning pill under his tongue till he got to his cell and spit it out. He could skip all medications today and keep to himself, which he did.

On Monday, he talked to the lawyer and found out there was no other way so he took the plea, speaking rapidly. The rage of not being guilty still went on. He kept to himself. Managing one day of pills under tongue turned into two; an adventure. But on Tuesday, a question from a guard coaxed out the incredible hulk. He kept yelling at him and would not apologize. He was confined to his cell to calm him down. Little did anyone know that Kwamina had crossed over to manic. All over Block C he could be heard quoting scriptures. It was determined he had not taken his medications. He had to open wide and swallow it in front of a guard. It would take a few more days for the medications to calm him down. For being insubordinate to the guard and disturbing other inmates, he was assigned to the hole for forty-eight hours. He remembered being told by the inmates who had been there to be careful never to end up there, because those days served as missed days and were added on to one's release date.

In the hole, Kwamina was alone except for the times he was handed his medication through the opening in the door. No one to talk to or see, he slept. He was not given any food the first twenty-four hours. He lost track of time. When his medication calmed him down, he realized he would have to accept his decision. He still had a court date coming up to hear his sentence. He would do everything to stay out of this dark hole. He was afraid and even more isolated.

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#### **BIO/**

**NAANA KYEREBOAH** is originally from Ghana. She is a children's author, teacher, and speaker. She enjoys writing and travelling. Email at: [nabinarva@gmail.com](mailto:nabinarva@gmail.com)  
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### A Heartless Grandson

Dad had died many years earlier leaving behind a broken heart, which belonged to my mother. Her name was Grace Ebaisi. Very few people knew that name. The name they knew and were fond of was Mami Grace. Even we, her children knew her only by the maternal title *Mami*. Because her heart had been broken, we her children grew up wondering at what happened, causing all the misery around us. We were still very young, the eldest was fourteen. He had just dropped out of primary school. There was no way he could think of secondary education so he opted to be an artist. He had shown a lot of interest in the art and so he could easily draw our mother in her different moods and the way she looked when a rare smile popped in. Mother usually looked at the drawing indifferently. This did not discourage Banyi, our eldest brother. He could draw even in the sand. Later, he took fancy in the shapes of human heads, especially the way hair grew on them. This made him develop an interest in haircuts. With only a pair of scissors and a packet of razor blades he became the family barber as he produced interesting haircuts on our heads (his younger brothers). The development of this talent did not go unnoticed in Mbaliko. Shortly, other kids would come for a haircut and he realized that he was spending so much time making children look good for free. One day, in a discussion with other young people who had crowded around our house to enjoy Banyi's art, someone said, "time is money".

"How's time money?" Banyi asked.

"One uses time to make money, or when you use your time wisely, you make money" the boy answered.

This intrigued Banyi and he thought he could start charging the young people who came to him for haircut. When he tried it out, he quickly realized, he had started making some steady money out of his art. The little money he earned enabled him to buy two pairs of

clippers, two other pairs of scissors and five packets of razor blades. This made his barbing very professional and the adults not only brought their children for haircuts, but they themselves had their hair cut and their beards shaved by Banyi. He easily became the community's professional barber. This achievement started to bring back a regular smile on Mami Grace's face. Her son Banyi had not only become useful to the community but could also provide food on the table. He easily established a barbing salon in a conspicuous part of the community. It was called BBS – Banyi Barbing Salon. A year after opening the salon, he was able to rent a two-bedroom apartment and moved in. It was a big sigh of relief for the rest of us his siblings. We had been used to being crammed in a single room with our mother for as long as I became conscious of human dignity and need for space and privacy. There was an external kitchen shared by eleven other tenants and also an external latrine cum bathroom. So our brother's move to a modern flat was like moving from darkness to light. We decided that Hans the last child of the family should remain with our mum and four of us moved into our brother's flat. He occupied one of the rooms and the rest of us the other. We shared a bunk bed. Two slept up and two slept down.

Brother Banyi did very well in his business, especially because he was very passionate about it. Every customer left the salon very satisfied. At seventeen, brother Banyi became embroiled in a scandal. He was accused of having impregnated a thirteen year old who was supposed to be under aged. He was to go to prison if the matter had ended up in court. The two families interestingly arrived at the consensus that brother Banyi would ensure that the girl give birth safely and also pay a sum of two hundred thousand francs to the family for the damage he had caused. When the girl gave birth, it was a little boy who was named after our late father, Ta Nyuoh Ekong. Six months after Junior Nyuoh Ekong was born, he was handed over to his grandmother, Mami Grace. She was very happy with the gesture as it reminded her of the niceties of bringing up a baby. Moreover the child had been named after her late husband and so she invariably called him my husband. Mami Grace's sad disposition was gradually giving way to a joyful one. My older brother's artistic imagination was tremendous and so he moved from having one barbing salon to three in the community. When news about HIV transmission through wounds inflicted by blades, scissors and other shaving instruments spread in Mbaliko, he quickly made his customers

know that he always sterilized his instruments by passing them through a flame or putting them in chemical sterilizers. His business boomed and he was able to assist me and my younger brothers in secondary school. However, he was maturing very fast. He decided to get married. Before he did he was able to build his own house which had four bedrooms. He decided that our mother and us would move to the house, while he and his family would continue to live in the rented apartment. So at twenty-one he was married and firmly settled on his own. His son Junior Nyuoh Ekong continued to live with Mami Grace.

Meanwhile I had managed to go through secondary school and was at University. In my third year, I was invited to sit in as an interpreter during a global conference. I did so well that I was given a job instantly. So by the end of the year, when I had my degree, I did not go round looking for a job. I was able to assist Mami Grace and her smile broadened as life read out a better meaning to her. Hans had left her to go to a boarding school and so her only company at home was Junior Nyuoh Ekong. He had grown up to be very slippery, as slippery as snake. Mami Grace, thanks to her industrious children had turned out to be relatively rich. Her house in Mbaliko had been improved upon. It had two WCs inside, a shower, and a sink in the kitchen. She was lucky to have stayed alive to graduate from the use of latrines and external kitchens shared with other tenants. Junior Nyuoh Ekong was invariably enjoying this new found comfort with her. He slept in the same room with his grandmother and knew all the corners of the room. She identified where Mami kept her money. So from time to time he went there and helped himself. Each time Mami Grace noticed a shortage of her money; she would reflect over it and conclude that there might have been some mistake in her calculations. She would hardly think that her grandson would steal from her. Nyuoh therefore grew up feeling at ease with money and having great need for it. Mami Grace was once a beneficiary of '*njangi*' an organized contribution of money by several persons for the benefit of one person in turns. Mami Grace's group was made up of twenty women. Each contributed ten thousand francs. So her take home was two hundred thousand francs. She intended to open an account with it at the Local Cooperative Credit Union, the following day. She tied up a hundred thousand francs at one end of her loincloth and the other one hundred at the other end. She got home, entered her room and found her grandson sleeping peacefully. She folded the loincloth carefully and

put it in her box of clothes. In the morning when she went for the money the ends of the cloth had been loosed and the money was gone. Mami Grace stood on the spot and sweated profusely. Later, she cried out for Nyuoh Ekong, who ran in panting.

“Mami what’s it again?”

“Somebody has killed me!” she said breathing heavily.

“killed you? But you’re still standing alive and even talking”

“I mean killed me morally, emotionally and spiritually, you brat”

“How’s that grand ma?”

“Someone has taken away everything I have called money.”

“Your money then, grandma! So you can have money?” asked Nyuoh Ekong

“Yes I can. My children give me money. I saved some of it in a Njangi which I benefitted yesterday. Now some devil has taken all of it.”

“Grandma , *ashia*, what a pity for your misfortune” Nyuoh Ekong said and walked away.

Mami Grace called me the following day and told the story. I promised her, I would replace the money after a thorough investigation of the theft. When it was carried out, Nyuoh Ekong was the culprit. He had got up from sleep while grandma was fast asleep, searched everywhere and eventually stumbled on the folded loincloth. The money could not be retrieved as he had squandered it with his friends. His father, my brother Banyi decided to withdraw him from grandma and bring him up himself. But Grandma had become so used to him that she refused to let go. So Nyuoh Ekong continued to live with his grandmother.

One day, my phone rang and it was Nyuoh Ekong on the line.

“Uncle, grandma is very ill,” he said solemnly.

“Take her to hospital then and make sure you meet Dr. Egbe, whom I had introduced you to,” I instructed.

“Well, I’ve taken her to a private clinic and she is already receiving treatment there.”

“So why didn’t you take her to Dr Egbe?”

“Theirs is a public hospital and they don’t pay enough attention to patients who don’t count.”

“That’s why I requested you to meet Dr. Egbe who works there. In any case what has she been diagnosed of?”

“Tuberculosis.”

“Tuberculosis? And your private clinic can handle that?”

“Yes, Uncle and they are requesting for five hundred thousand francs for the treatment,” he said bluntly.

“What?” I shouted and dropped the phone.

I took five full minutes to turn the matter in my head, wondering why the young man had not taken my Mum to Dr. Egbe. If I asked him to immediately take her there, it would be that I didn’t want to sacrifice money for my mother’s health. So, I decided to send the money. Two days after, there was another request for more money, two hundred thousand. Since the milking had begun, it had to continue, so once again I sent the money to the reckless teenager. The following weekend I went to Mbakilo to see things for myself. It was only thirty minutes after I had settled down that Mami Grace walked in gracefully.

“What Mami, have you been discharged?” I asked.

“Discharged? No, I realized, that hospital only wants to make money out of me. There isn’t any serious treatment going on,” mami Grace said shaking her head sadly.

“In that case, I’ll take you straight away to Dr. Egbe.”

The revelations made by Dr. Egbe were alarming. There were only five hospitals in the country which were qualified to diagnose and treat tuberculosis. That clinic was not one of them. The diagnosis was fake and so Mami had been put on inappropriate drugs which had almost destroyed her internal organs. Only a miracle would keep her alive. It was that miracle that Dr. Egbe was trying out. Three days after, mami Grace died in excruciating pains.

“Nyuh Ekong, why did you do this to us?” I asked my nephew pensively.

“I’m awfully sorry, Uncle, I didn’t know it would amount to this.”

“How could you have known, with a heart such as the one you have there. By the way where have you kept all the money you swindled from me?”

“I shared it with the doctor, Uncle and my share is all gone, squandered,” Nyuh Ekong said shamefully.

“I see, for want of money, you’ve caused this pain to me, the family and the community. We shall all share it, including your doctor friend. Tell him what his love for money has caused a family. However, assure him that we shall not pursue any legal action for it won’t bring back the breath that has left Mami Gace. Your grandmother, our mother shall tomorrow, be returned to where she had come from. The witnesses at her graveside will be you, me, your father, in fact, all of us, including, I hope, your doctor friend,” I said fighting back the salty tears on their way out.

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## **BIO/**

**OKE AKOMBI** is a Cameroonian writer, born in 1958, in Tinto, Southwest Region. He is currently the Director of the Regional Linguistic Centre in Buea, Cameroon and also teaches English at the Catholic University of Central Africa ( UCAC ) Yaounde. He started writing since 1985 after he had won the first prize at the Black Young Writers Awards of the London-based Afro-Caribbean Educational Resource Project. He was on the IWP 2004 session at University of Iowa. Currently coordinates Anglophone Cameroon Writers Association ( ACWA ) Southwest and Littoral Regions.

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**OLUKEMI LAWANI****Between our here and there**

The only thing we have going for us is our humanity.

And the true death is not the death of self but the death of this, our humanity. We begin to devolve when we stop to care about the people who are without from us. It is this simple, this basic. This is truly how we die.

Human life is powerful and fragile, all in one. The only thing truly capable of conquering mankind is not the elements or wild animals, man has conquered even space. A man is simply vulnerable as another man makes him. And that again is that.

Hovering between the last world war and the potential for a next, the earth orbits not round the sun but round the decisions of mankind. Sadly a lot of these decisions are promoted by greed, nepotism, and the other callosities that encase our souls. We are becoming a people unable to comprehend love, in its basic and elemental forms.

The safety of one is the collective good. Any system which falls short of this objective must understand that there can be no assurance of the safety of the elite if the common man is not methodically cared for, protected and preserved. It is simply enlightened self-interest, this. Not altruism.

You may argue that false altruism is base. I offer the counter argument, if false altruism- I wonder if there is even such a term; if false altruism is to be decried, what would we say of indifference. Is indifference not the worst of the plagues. Find me a man of great passion

who may choose evil today, and perhaps with some persuasion align himself to the good tomorrow.

Give my world to such a man of great and enduring passion. Give his passion to a soul. Give his soul to great learning. Learn him without fear or favour, only truth. And what is truth? The absence of falsehood, perhaps? Truth is the form of portrait of every one of our moments. Truth is the absolute against which the relativity of our constraints will be measured. And truth is judged by none but by itself.

And so today I choose a simple voice describing not how 'we can'. I choose to heave: ' we will'.

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#### **BIO/**

**OLUKEMI LAWANI** is certain words can save the world. A medic by training, she finds the poetry in every day. Her thoughts appear seasonally on various social media.

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**REENA KANDOTH****Loss of Time**

Bryan was eager to start volunteering. His job was to help out with the community garden at his neighbourhood's residents' committee. Located at the ground floor of his block of flats, it was protected behind a green wire fence. Every morning retirees would busy themselves weeding, pruning, digging, all creating a buzz of activity.

Bryan did not mind the heat of the sun beating down on his tall, skinny frame, because he thought of his reward, a laptop in exchange for fifty hours of community service sponsored by the Children's Society for low income families. He studied at the local polytechnic and as a first-year student he was finding it almost impossible to complete assignments without his own personal laptop. Using the computer labs was his only option but he needed the device during lectures too. At seventeen years old, this was the last year he qualified as a minor and he was determined to get one.

While hauling packets of fertilizer from the storeroom to the garden on his first day, someone said, "oy, Bryan! You cannot dress like that. I know it's hot, but shorts and slippers will not do. Wear pants and shoes next time please!" It was Mr Tan, who had been volunteering for two years.

"Mr Tan, don't worry. I can handle it. Like that is better." Bryan said. He looked at Mr Tan, a tall, thin man in his sixties, all wrapped up in a long-sleeved white cotton t-shirt, long black pants, gardening gloves and sneakers. He must be burning up inside thought Bryan. But this was not the only time Bryan had been told to change his attire that first day.

"Yes, Bryan. You'll regret it dressed like that. Who knows what insects will bite you. You might be allergic to the soil or worse." These sage words came from an elderly woman, Mdm Wee earlier that morning. She was older than Mr Tan with a kind, wrinkled face.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.” Bryan said. After the community service was up he would head on to Vietnam for his internship in two months. With that in mind, he found he could dig and weed the ground faster in the scorching heat despite his burning skin.

“Shoo! Get out of here!” Bryan’s head jerked up when he heard the voice. Mr Tan was using a garden hoe to chase away a brown and white coloured cat.

“Bryan,” Mr Tan said, “you must chase away the cats. Even with fencing, they still find their way into our garden. Sometimes they make a mess and I mean a real mess, treating our soil like their litter box. It’s disgusting!”

“Oh gross! That’s awful. I’ll definitely look out for that!” Bryan said. He kept his eye peeled the rest of the day, deciding to adhere to the dress code after all. The thought of cat poop between his toes made him shudder.

After a week of daily gardening, he was used to the routine but one task rubbed him the wrong way which was the fertilizer bag. It smelled awful.

“Mdm Wee, what’s in the fertilizer?” Bryan asked.

“Well, it’s Mr Tan’s secret recipe.” She said in a lower voice. “He prepares his own compost as he believes it is cheaper and better for the garden. He read about how to do this online and refuses to tell us his formula.”

“Oh, I see. But it really stinks.” Bryan said.

“Nevermind, it’s good for the plants. If it’s too much for you, just leave the bag there. Mr Tan will apply it himself.” Mdm Wee said much to Bryan’s delight.

“Hey, thanks Mdm Wee!”

Weeding became his main job. The smell of course did not go away, but at least Bryan would not have to touch the bag which contained the object of offense.

Just as he begun to warm up to the folk he gardened with, did the two months pass. The day he completed his fifty hours of community service, he rushed to the Children’s Society office to redeem his laptop. The next day, he flew off to Vietnam to begin his internship.

No sooner had he arrived in Vietnam that he fell ill. Even after one week his temperature was high, he had chills and his stomach hurt. He lay in bed in the small two bedroom house of his host family, staring at the electric fan above him. Sweat poured from his face and body like condensation on the glass of an iced drink. He picked up the phone and dialled Mr Singam's number. His supervisor at the polytechnic in Singapore answered on the third ring.

"Hello," Mr Singam's accent was welcome in this area with strangers in their unfamiliar tongue.

"Mr Singam, this is Bryan speaking from the Vietnamese internship programme," Bryan managed to squeeze the words past his dry lips.

"Yes, Bryan. How are things there? You should be getting the hang of things by now?" Mr Singam's voice had a touch of surprise as he uttered the words to Bryan.

"I'm not feeling well. It's been like this for about a week. I have not gone to work since my second day. How many days can I miss before I have to retake this internship?"

"Oh dear. You should fulfil 8 weeks. But your health is more important. You could always retake the internship during the holidays," Mr Singam's concerned voiced rang in Bryan's ears and his heartbeat slowed a few paces knowing he still had the chance to recover and return to complete the internship.

"That's what my mum says. We have no money to pay the doctors in Vietnam. In Singapore, I can use insurance. My parents will get help. I'll return to Singapore Mr Singam. Thank you."

"Yes, that's good Bryan, the company will keep your position for you. Just complete 8 weeks in the next five months. There's still time. Hope you feel better soon."

"Thank you, sir." Bryan tapped his mobile phone and looked at the ceiling. His heart and head ached with stress. But he needed the medical help to recover. He left his bed, struggled out to the common area and told his host family his plans. Arrangements were made and he returned to Singapore the following day.

Now, one week since returning to Singapore, Bryan found himself alone, trapped with a wall behind him and two curtains to his sides, his new bedroom was a bed in the second storey of a six-bedder hospital ward.

Though the chimes of hope still rang in his disappointed heart, bitter fear tasted palpable in his mouth. Where was he going to get the money to buy another ticket to fly back? Mum worked as a part-time cleaner. His dad was retired. There was no way he could scrape together enough for return tickets to Ho Chi Minh City. The first trip plus expenses had wiped out his bank account.

“Hi Bryan,” the now familiar voice of Staff nurse Tan cheerily greeted him, breaking his self-pity reverie. “How is my handsomest patient doing today?”

“Fine. Just fine. I’ve no money to fly back to Vietnam for work. I’ve wasted one semester of poly, lost all my school fees, plus the hospital bills to pay. Things are just perfect!” Bryan almost balked as he swallowed the pills she gave him.

“Awwww. Are you sure all is lost? Surely your school can help? Anyway, the doctor says you are making progress. The fever is gone. That’s good news.”

“The sooner the better. Look where I am. Hot. Sticky. Dirty.” Bryan looked up at her morosely as she fussed over him with her big eyes and lips turned up in a gentle curve. This was the first person who spoke to him today.

“You may be feeling down now, but just rest a little more and focus on getting better. Don’t over worry, dear. I’ll see you later,” she said and left to continue her tasks.

As the nights progressed, raspy coughs were the lullabies that accompanied his nightly slumber. Some throaty, some hacking, keeping him awake. The curtains did nothing to keep out the smells of urine, sweat, vomit all under the tang of potent disinfectant. The feeling of death and humidity clawed at Bryan day in and day out. He longed for his own bedroom.

The doctor had deduced that a bacterial infection was the cause of his debilitating state. How did he get ill anyway? Why was he not strong enough to fight the illness in the first

place? He was cursing his ill-fortune. The feeling of dread engulfed him like silk on hot, sticky skin.

The next morning, Bryan stared at the ceiling, his eyes opening and shutting idly.

Mr Wong, from the bed to the left of Bryan's, was breathing with a loud wheeze through his mouth and nose. Bryan reached for his mobile phone on the left counter but as his hand grasped the phone, his wrist hit over the glass of water that was next to it.

At that awkward angle, Bryan was unable to catch the glass and it fell to the ground with a deafening crash, glass splintering in the quiet ward.

The clapping sound of flats pattered across the floor.

"Bryan! Is everything alright? What happened?" Nurse Tan came over and pushed the curtains away from around Bryan's bed.

"Sorry, the glass dropped. Really sorry." The words came out softly. Bryan's face felt flushed, he propped himself up onto his elbows to survey the damage.

"No problem, I'll get the attendant to clear. You just stay in bed till the glass is gone." She stared down eyeing the pieces that were strewn across the floor like jagged rocks on a beach. "Just call if you need help."

The next thing he knew, there was a cry from the next bed.

"Nurse, nurse. Come here, come here." In a choked, low voice, Mr Wong from the neighbouring bed was calling out.

She rushed to Mr Wong's side and Bryan heard her gentle tones warning him to not leave the bed either.

He looked down at his left hand which still had his mobile phone secure in his hand and looked up his friends' Facebook page. Though living vicariously through their posts made him feel pangs of jealousy, it also gave him the will to fight his illness. He sent a message to his good friend, Joash, asking if there was anyway he could ask the school for more money to finish his internship and waited.

To Bryan's surprise Joash replied within seconds. Bryan's stomach clenched and his heart dropped as he read the words, "You could give it a try. Sell your laptop? It's new right?"

Those were definitely not the words he wanted to see. The thought did cross his mind, but he had brushed it aside, refusing to linger on this possibility. He replied to Joash's message. "Are you crazy? I need it!" Joash did not reply. No, he thought, there had to be another way. Perhaps he could ask for a small loan from his relatives and friends still in Singapore. Beggars cannot be proud he thought. They knew he would pay them back. He grasped at this sliver of hope.

Mr Tang, the attendant came over with a broom and dustpan, shovelling the pieces up.

"Sorry I dropped the glass Mr Tang. Thanks for cleaning," Bryan said. His spirits lifted somewhat to see this elderly man in his early sixties who was cleaning the mess. He always had a few words of encouragement and joviality.

"No worries, young man!" Mr Tang's voice answered in his loud sing-song tone, "Safety first."

"Yeah. Hey, Mr Tang, do you know how to get some money quick. I need to buy a return air-ticket for my internship," Bryan said.

"Do you think I'd be here if I knew the answer? I only know what not to do. No loan sharks!" His eyes peered up at Bryan and his face cocked to the side as he almost bellowed the last few words at Bryan.

Bryan said, "Yeah, I know. That's why I'm wrecking my brains out now."

"I know money is tight. You know Mr Wong in the next bed?" His voice had lowered and he bent closer to Bryan's side. Bryan nodded his head riveted. Mr Tang seemed to know all the gossip about this new world that Bryan was forced to inhabit.

"Mr Wong had to sell his flat to pay for his son's cancer treatment. And it was not enough. His poor son still died and Mr Wong and his wife had to move in to live with his daughter-in-law and two grandchildren."

"Oh, that's so sad. No wonder you speak to him everyday." Bryan answered with wide opened eyes.



“Money is not the only thing in this world. It cannot buy everything you need. But still, we work, work, work,” Mr Tang lamented.

Bryan was not sure what Mr Tang hoped to achieve with this pep talk, but he had a better understanding of his temporary neighbour.

“If I cannot buy a ticket to fly back, I will need to repeat my industrial attachment in Singapore.”

“Yes, I pray for a miracle,” Mr Tang replied, he resumed his sweeping and walked off. Bryan sighed not sure if Mr Tang understood how he felt.

Just before lunch that morning, during visiting hours, his curtain ruffled and Nurse Tan’s head peered across the opening.

“Bryan, you have some visitors,” she said. Expecting his mum and dad, he was surprised to see Mr Tan and Mdm Wee from the Gardening Club. Mr Tan in a simple short sleeved button-down shirt with jeans and Mdm Wee in a flowery, sleeveless long dress.

“Oh, hi Mr Tan. Hi Mdm Wee,” Bryan said. He wondered what was going on.

“Hi Bryan, sorry we did not visit you earlier,” Mr Tan said.

He looked at them and did his best to make his voice sound cordial. His fingers combed through his dark hair as he waited for them to speak.

“Well Bryan, we wanted to give you a surprise and your mum told us where you were warded,” Mdm Wee said. “Everyone was keen to help and contribute.”

“Oh, what do you mean?” Bryan asked. His mind was racing. Contribution? He did not dare to hope for too much.

“Everyone? You mean the Gardening Club?” He asked in confusion.

Your mum told us everything. How you had to give up the internship if you did not recover in time. And that you could not afford the plane tickets to fly back to Vietnam,” Mr Tan said.

Bryan looked at them, his eyes studied their lined faces, scanning for clues. Could it be true?

“Well, here. Enough money for a return trip. You can fly back once you’re fine,” Mr Tan said this beaming at Bryan with Mdm Wee mirroring his delight.

Bryan reached out and took the envelope from Mr Tan. He opened the envelope eagerly; he could not wait to confirm that his wildest dreams had come true. He saw a wad of fifty dollar notes. His worry and agony disappeared like smoke.

“Thanks. I don’t know how to repay you. You shouldn’t have come all the way. Thank you. Thank you.” Bryan repeated. “This is the best news!” The tears threatening to fall had given way to a large smile that made his cheeks ache.

“We’re glad you are well. We hope you heal fully soon,” Mr Tan said.

“Yeah, rest well. Take care. Finish your studies boy. Everyone misses you!” Mdm Wee explained. “We also realise that we have to rethink how we run our garden since you got sick,” Mdm Wee said.

“Oh, what do you mean? I thought your garden is the pride and joy of the Residents’ Committee,” Bryan answered.

“Well, when we found out you had contracted an infection, we were worried it was connected to the gardens.” As Mr Tan said this his eyes looked at the side of the bed and his hand grasped the bed rails. His voice had also lowered. Bryan looked at him his mind whirling in circles. Could it be?

“You mean, something in the garden made me sick?” Bryan asked searching their faces for the truth, his voice up a few decibels. The tears of gratitude were now tears of rage, his hands shaking. The rush of different emotions was a shock.

“We are not absolutely sure. But just to be safe, the RC manager has asked us to close the garden while she tries to investigate. She’s calling in some experts to find out if it is linked,” Mr Tan answered, his tone contrite.

Mdm Wee said, “but it had to be done. We don’t want another person falling sick and to land in hospital.”

“I see,” Bryan said. Looking at her sorrowful eyes, his heart softened. He thought of the fun they all had every morning and all their eager anticipation waiting for the plants to grow.

Who knew such innocent joy could hide a sinister threat. One thing Bryan knew for sure, he would never ever return to gardening.

“It’s too bad. But I hope the problem is solved soon,” Bryan said. His words charitable as they did lose a precious part of their lives too he thought.

Silence followed their admission. He looked down at the envelope of money in his hands and took a deep breath, letting out a sigh which melted the gnawing tension in his head.

“Thank you for telling me and giving me this money. I really appreciate it,” Bryan nodded his head. “I’ll pay you all back when I earn enough.”

“No need, Bryan. You volunteered your time but fell sick. You just do well in school and say hi to us when you’re around,” Mr Tan said as he shook his head from side to side.

They said their goodbyes wishing him luck and went off.

“Hey Bryan,” Mr Wong called over from the next bed, “now the mystery is solved.”

“Huh! What mystery?” Bryan answered.

“How you got sick,” Mr Wong answered.

“I cannot believe it,” Bryan answered.

“Glad things are working out for you,” Mr Wong said, a wistful tone in his weak voice.

Bryan remembered the pain and shattering hardships Mr Wong went through and felt grateful for what he had.

“Hope you feel better soon Mr Wong,” Bryan answered.

Three weeks later, Bryan was discharged. He thanked Nurse Tan and said his goodbyes to Mr Wong who would also be going home the next day. The weather outside was a scorching thirty-four degrees Celsius, his back was drenched in sweat within minutes of walking out the hospital door. But at least the warmth in his heart was hopeful, things were looking up and his dreams were still burning bright.

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**BIO/**

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**ROSEMARY WILDBLOOD****Lament**

My mother felled by a single stroke  
lies beached on her final shore –  
this stretch of taut linen – her eyes,  
past pools of turbulence now hidden  
by their twin translucent shells.

How marooned she looks,  
how bereft of defining features –  
the fiery curls leached to sand  
with pearl scalp glowing through –  
her arms, mere casing over inert bone.

This passive creature was once  
the stormy siren of my youth –  
whose lightning rage could ignite fear,  
whose warmth could make the world  
revert to feeling safe again –

and yes, she has the power,

still, to shatter my heart – until  
my father comes to sit beside me  
stroke her hand and murmur  
how beautiful she is...

## **Meditation**

So many times I walk along the beach  
to watch the waves encroach upon  
the sand – whooshing up and sighing  
back again – like the slow breathing

of a giant lung. I need the solace  
of this quiet roar – with wind-flecked  
spume and grit upon my face –  
until I see the turning tide retreat,

to carry off the acrid-salty taste  
of errors and omissions – leaving  
in its place only the hollow  
question: What is left of love?

## Confronting the surreal

The news on screen's a mix of mayhem –  
suicide bombers – crazed gunmen – even  
a priest murdered in his own quiet church  
before petrified parishioners – scores of  
reports of the few holding the many  
to a ransom of intolerance and fear.

I apply my trigger finger  
to the off button, rise and go outside  
into the dying light...

The cabbage tree in silhouette  
against a darkening sky  
barred with molten beams  
stands sentinel to the heron's flight  
to freedom across the foreground.

Over there, a large cloud like  
an elephant on stilts, morphs into  
a voluptuous woman lolling  
in the firmament – fingers splayed  
spooking the pinpoints of light

that grow and harden into diamonds

I am witness to this ever-changing  
tapestry – it transports me along  
my line of vision – swallows me  
whole – folds me into its transience -

I am merely a visitor here –  
gone – lost – forever  
journeying through time...

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**Bio/**

**ROSEMARY WILDBLOOD** is a New Zealand writer who has published, fiction, poetry and non-fiction in literary journals and anthologies and two novels – *Joybird* (2003) and *Pentimento* (2012) with NZ Publishers. Both novels are also available as e-books on Amazon. she is currently working on a third novel and a collection of poems. Email at: rowil@slingshot.co.nz

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**SARA ARBEL**

## **Passengers**

I have never seen a person that lost his mind.

I couldn't recognize one if I had seen one. The worst I have seen was a drunk, a man that was walking the street in a very funny way, talking to himself, waving his hands as if trying to demonstrate something.

But this time it was different.

It was a very hot summer day, the evening didn't ease the heat and the air conditioners were humming their summer songs all day long.

He was wearing a black long wool coat, a long scarf and a black wool hat covering his face.

He was standing there in a crowd of perspiring people with shorts and short sleeved shirts, babies with their mothers heading towards the beach. The hot sun slowed their motion while crossing the street.

I looked at him and knew that this is a man that is not connected to the reality, to the environment and to the world around him.

He walked straight, not like a drunk, he looked around him. He kept looking back as if checking if he is not being followed.

When I caught his eyes, they looked wide open and very scary. He seemed to be scared as if running away from someone. Hiding in a very outstanding way.

I was heading at the same direction, watching him, and watching the people watching him.

He stopped for a moment, lit a cigarette, I could see his hands shake.

We walked passing the huge door to the Mall, he stopped for a moment, inhaling the cool air-conditioned wind that blew out of the door while someone stepped out.

The doorman saw him getting near and stepped out to stop him from entering.

He got the message and moved on.

We are still walking along the street.

He noticed me.

He slowed down to catch up with my pace, looked at me as if he was assessing my capability to hurt him. He seemed to be content with the analysis.

"Did they sent you to talk to me?"

"No" I replied

"Did they tell you that it is dangerous to get in touch with me?"

"No" I replied

"Do you know who I am?"

"No" I replied

"So why are you following me?"

"I am not following you, I am walking in the same direction"

"Don't look to the side! See? The side walk across the street?! But if you look you will recognize the chief of the CIA and above us there is an FBI spy helicopter. They are all watching me, they are afraid I will disclose the military top secrets"

I walked along with him, knowing that this story is a reality to him as the hot summer is the reality for me.

I felt sorry for him, but afraid at the same time.

"So why are you dressed for a cold winter, on such a sunny hot day?"

"Well, this is my disguise, I don't want them to discover me"

"I see" I replied.

"Do you have a cigarette?"

"You have one in your mouth"

"Yes, but it's the last one, I need more"

"I don't smoke"

"You look like a good old lady"

"I do my best"

"Where are you heading?"

At this moment I felt afraid, I didn't want to get any more involved than I was.

"It's a hot day, I am heading towards the beach"

"Can I come with you?"

He sounded like a little boy, lost, looking for his mummy. His voice was squeaky and almost babyish.

He was very tall, and the winter coat made him look huge. I am a very small short and tiny old lady. He felt comfortable with me, knowing that I cannot do him any harm.

"You know, I don't know you, your name and your destination" I replied

"My name is Ronald, and I am heading as far away as I can from those who are watching me"

"Why don't you take off this heavy coat and scarf and hat?"

"What if they recognize me?"

He suddenly sounded like a four year old playing hide and seek. His eyes softened and his voice sounded obedient.

He stopped near the next shop, took his hat off. A beautiful face came out of the hat. Blue eyes and blond hair, neglected and curled. A rich blond bird with strikes of white and the eyes, the eyes looked saturated with pain and fear, and softness of a little boy.

He looked at me as if he gave himself away, a prisoner to my orders, completely succumbed to my wishes.

He took the coat and the scarf off as well. He was wet of sweat.

He wore many layers of clothes that didn't fit him. He took them off till the last layer of shorts and a light blouse.

Ronald, took the whole bundle of clothes and dumped them in the nearest garbage pan.

"Why are you throwing all this away, won't you need them for some other time? Why don't you take them home and keep them till winter?"

He looked at me and burst in laughter. He kept laughing and tapping me on my back as if we were two buddies in a bar having a good time.

"I don't have a home, I don't have a place of my own, and I was thrown out of all places!"

"So, where do you live?"

"On the beach during the summer and in old abundant cars when it rains and it's cold"

I suddenly felt a shiver in my spine. One of my greatest fears was a vision I had of myself, losing my job, not able to pay rent, being evicted from my apartment, becoming a homeless. That was a nightmare that appeared every time I got my panic attack when I was sitting on my bills and insurance policies.

I hated to do my accounts, checking my bank and savings, insurance policies and credit cards. It always left me drained of energies and sleepless night, continuing counting and rechecking the numbers in my mind.

Whenever I have seen a homeless person, I could see myself there in the near future if I don't take care for my pension, insurances and all credit cards.

I felt as if it could happen to me from one point of reality to the other, on the split of a moment. That was my greatest fear.

"You know" he kept talking" I had a lot of money and buildings that my father took away from me. He gave everything to my sister, she is married, has children and is my father's favorite. I was his pride once"

"So what happened? Why did he desert you?"

I felt that being nice to him will be my insurance policy against this curse of 'homelessness'. I gave him my full attention. If I will be a good person, God will have pity on me, I thought.

"I was my father's pride when I was in the army, fought in Iraq, got one medal after the other, medals of bravery!' YOU ARE MY HERO' he used to write to me. I was very proud of myself and did all I could to keep him feel the same for me. But from the minute the army decided to get the CIA on my tail, and then the FBI got into the picture, even the RED CROSS wanted to capture me. The army sent me back home in a special airplane. During the flight they sedated me and kept me under strict watch. We landed in Washington, my father waited for me there, at the bottom of the stairs, as I walked off the plain. He walked over me and shook my hand. He didn't hug me, he didn't kiss me, and he extended his hand to me, took my hand and shook it. I didn't even hand it to him"

"When was that?"

"Just after I came home, I was only 26, away from home, in Iraq for 4 years.

Upon my return, the army doctor was waiting for me in my parents' house, my mother was crying, she hugged me and I can still feel her wet tears on my chick. After few minutes with her, we headed straight to the army clinic.

The army psychiatrist was trying to be nice and welcoming, but I knew that he is planning to sedate me to get secrets out of me"

I was so fascinated by the man, I passed my left turn after we crossed another street and I just decided to go along with him and his need to share.

My handicapped father was waiting for me at his apartment to cook for him his dinner, it was Wednesday and that was my turn to take care of his dinner and cook some more dishes for him for the next three days. The grocer has already delivered all the groceries needed for my cooking plan, but I am still here joining this talkative man who I cannot leave in the middle of his share. I felt as if it was his outburst of sharing and telling that which was

waiting to be said for a long time, I felt as if I was the chosen one that he trusted to bring his feelings and his story out loud.

"Did you ever tell your story to someone?"

"No, I just told you, I fled from the psychiatrist and I don't trust those that want to abuse my story, tell it to the enemy and use it for some political leverage."

"You sound so clear and intelligent, I must say that I am fascinated by you and by your story"

"I know, I know that you are a good person, I know that you are not on their side, I know that you will never sell me to the enemy"

"How do you know that?"

"You have black hair and blue eyes and you are an old lady, those are my signs that I follow for truthful people. You also wear a watch that is a secret message from the sacred people on earth"

I couldn't make any sense of this talk of his. For one moment he sounded completely rational, I could follow his story, and then all of a sudden he would talk crazy. I felt as if I was on some kind of a roller-coaster, as if I could be his friend, the one he was looking for in his lonely journey and at the same time be afraid of him.

"You see this car that is following us?"

"No"

"It's the one with the open hood, the one that is driven by a blond hair man and a red hair lady sitting by him. I bet you that these are imposters, they are following us, they don't want us to be friends, they want me to be alone, and they always want me to be alone!"

It was as if he read my mind, I was silent, couldn't explain his brain picking, which was a bit frightening. At the same time I was relieved, because he demonstrated human loneliness and human need for a friend.

"They just passed us, they moved on and got on the route to highway, you see, they didn't follow us, nobody is following us"

It is the pain, the pain of loneliness that brought us together. His pain of living in a hostile inner world and me living in a suffocating outside world.

I felt as if there was a rich colorful world opening its gates to me and I didn't want to close them, I didn't want him to stop sharing his world me, I wanted to be invited into it, like a tourist on the moon.

His face was sweating and I could see the shivering of his hands when he just recognized another possible spy following him.

"There, you see, there, the red car, he is replacing the one that drove to the highway!"

I could feel the pain and the fear he lived in, the misery and the suffering he must have been experiencing every moment of his life. Those imaginary spies and followers, drained every inch of his living energy, every breath of his life. His eyes were wide open as if he is seeing something. I looked at that direction, but there was nothing outstanding. The street was as it used to be, passing cars, people crossing at the green light and that building, that old building that was covered with a green leaved wall. Children walking back from school, mothers with their children, holding hands and talking, some students on bicycles and further on, I could see the green well nurtured and closely trimmed grass of the golf course. My feet started to hurt, it's been long since I had such a long walk without any rest. He was walking quiet fast and each step of his demanded two steps of mine.

I didn't complain, but suddenly he slowed down, he touched my shoulder and looked me straight to my eyes. His eyes were soft and compassionate, this scary look was not there at that moment, his sensitivity was fully showing, his vulnerability was screaming out of his companionate look.

He slowed down and I felt his sensing my wish to slow down.

A rush of motherhood streamed over my veins, I wanted to protect him.

"What is your name lady?" He asked suddenly.

"My name is Sabina" I replied.

"Why are you walking with me Sabina?"

"I don't know, I just am"

"Can you feel my pain, Sabina?"

"I feel it, it starts here" I pointed to my heart" and it continues all over my body"

"That is nothing compared to the pain of the soul, the pain of the spirit and the pain of the mind!" He raised his voice. "No one can feel my pain, my fear, my horror, my suffering, even not my father, the BIG HEROE!" Suddenly he raised his voice and looked at the lamp post in front of him. He sounded as if he was talking to an imaginary person.

He started hitting his chest, harder and harder as if trying to get something out of there.

"You are hurting yourself" I said trying to remove his fists off his chest.

His fist flew straight to my face. It was so sudden that I couldn't anticipate it and block it ahead of time.

The pain in my left cheek was unbearable and a stream of salty liquid filled my mouth. I spat it out, it was red, blood I thought, moved my tongue in my mouth looking for a broken tooth, but all was there.

An old man ran towards us with intention to help. He came over to me and stood there looking at Ronald. "Should I call the police?" He asked me.

"No, please don't, I am fine, it was an accident, it was an accident!"

Ronald stood there shocked, moving his hands in the air as if he was hitting a virtual enemy, screaming at him and cursing.

"I wish you were dead Dad, I wish you were dead!"

"See what you made me do, see what you make me do!" He screamed.

People started to gather around us and one of them said "He is a lunatic, he is crazy, he is a soldier and he is a veteran of our stupid wars!"

The man came forward and touched Ronald's shoulder.

Ronald snapped, his scary look returned to his eyes. He grabbed my hand and started running. I couldn't follow. He dropped my hand off his and continued running.



He disappeared into the first ally and haven't seen him since.

The crowd was still there, one of the men was telling about his brother a veteran that returned from Iraq with a posttraumatic paranoia. A young student was telling with pain how she visits her father at the hospital where he is staying for treatments of his post war unseen wounds, the wounds to his soul and spirit.

"When I visit him, he is very aggressive, sometimes he doesn't trust me or blames me for not getting him out of the institute for the insane where he doesn't belong. I always get out of there crying, feeling guilty and missing my father from before the war"

A lady came over her and hugged her.

I stood there wondering, why is it that they send healthy strong men to the war, and don't take care of them when they come back broken and weak?

"You know, it is very difficult to take care of people that don't trust people"

One lady stated.

"I am not sure that to put them in an institute is the best treatment for them. I believe they need to be among a healthy community! It is the community that needs to be educated how to live amongst them, it is the community that needs to accept their wounded souls and be educated how to communicate with them and not intimidate them. They need love, compassion and the most they need is to restore their trust in the world and the people in it!"

We all stood there silent.

The lady looked around at the crowd that surrounded her. They could feel her passion when she said what she said, they could feel the broken voice and the choked throat just before the tears came streaming.

I looked around and could recognize that this crowd was not accidentally attracted to this incident, I could recognize that each and every one of them was touched in one way or another by insanity, by the horror of losing your mind, by the greatest loss of all, the loss of yourself.

The lady couldn't stop crying, one of the man, handed her a small package of tissue, she took one out and touched her face to dry it from the tears.

"You see" She said while wiping her nose "I lost a child that he was rejected by the healthy society. I lost a child, because I as his mother, I couldn't accept his insanity, I, his mother didn't know how to provide for him the love, compassion and trust he needed. His suicide is my guilt and pain"

We all moved to different directions, and I just stood there, feeling his touch on my shoulder, and seeing the compassion in his eyes when he looked at me.

His pain was there, it will stay with him forever, unless it will become so unbearable that death will become the only solution to take it away.

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#### **BIO/**

**SARA ARBEL** lives in the dynamic Seaside City - Tel –Aviv, having made Israel her home 35 years ago. Her working life started In Canada where she was the owner of an Art Gallery in Montreal. Her love to art brought her to choose the written word as the artists' palette to express her view of life. She writes about people and their needs to be loved and accepted. She celebrates diversity. [www.saraarbel.com](http://www.saraarbel.com)

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**SERGIO FALCHI****Once There Were Apricots**

Once there were apricots, limes, grapes, oranges on the tablecloth in Lynn's living room. The salmon wallpaper with its thin, golden vertical stripes. The family pictures inside the wooden frame above the purple baroque lamp behind the light red main door. The mockingbirds with wide wings on the silk kitchen curtains. Her TV had always been free from dust.

Now, since the day the pressure cooker exploded and her back broke from crashing onto the kitchen floor, the walls in the room were half pale green and half white, and the tablecloth on her blue tray was white; just made of paper, they said.

Apricots were only smoothies, grapes not allowed for possible choking, and limes too exotic. No personal frames or anything to hang up on the walls - "What if everyone decided to furnish own room?" they said. "No birds on curtains and certainly no TV, but the same attention must be paid to dust," they said.

They said everything, and she could only listen.

When the nurse came into the room with her lunch or dinner her words were always the same. "How are you today Mrs. Hutchins?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she usually replied.

The only chance for a talk was on Sunday evenings when Jeanne always arrived with her persistent vanilla-scented appeal; the touch of her bag on the mattress, high heels like steel drums on the wooden floor, and as always the rhythmical round of the wheelchair as they took in the fresh air in the clinic park with mockingbirds all around.

Their dialogues were not very meaningful apart from talk of the incoming spring weather, meals and sometimes info about Dan and Megan; now both at college in Florida State.

"Mum, I think you could sell the house, don't you?" she said.

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The leaves were cracking under the wheels and her voice seemed metallic. "We're on bad terms with the bank and so I think that, now that you're settled here, it would be a big help... also for you."

"I'll think about it. What about an ice cream?"

"Mum, I'm talking seriously."

"Me too my dear, I don't think selling my house is worth it."

"But you won't be able to stay at home any more mum, so it makes no sense. How could you?"

Lynn sensed Jeanne's muscles becoming rigid towards the back handle of the wheelchair.

"Don't worry Jeanne, it's just a matter of time".

She really needed her apricots and grapes, as well as the salmon wallpaper and her pictures; even if now she couldn't see them.

One day in August she felt that the train was going to leave soon. A One way ticket, she knew it.

The nurse had told her that Jeanne had phoned while she was sleeping.

"Is she going to be here this Sunday? I want to go back home, just for a while."

"She just said she's really busy, but maybe you could ask her."

"Could I ask you to take me home after your shift tomorrow? It's just thirty-five miles away."

"I need the permit Mrs. Hutchins, you know."

"I will sign it myself, I am still able to, and it's just a little trip." Lynn listened to the smooth scratch of the sheets that were being fixed by the nurse.

"Please, just an hour, I'll pay you \$200."

"OK Mrs. Hutchins, but I will have to inform Jeanne about it."

"\$400."

The morning after the night shift, at ten a.m., the eighty-seven year old lady was put into the nurse's car with her wheelchair, the signed permit left on the reception desk.

When they arrived in Savannah, it was almost midday. Lynn felt the warm air rising from the ground, the bicycles shooting by on the sidewalk next to the car. They were in front of her home.

"Please get me inside and then leave me alone for a while, OK? Just a little while."

The nurse wasn't interested in any questions; \$400 was worth it. She pushed Lynn's wheelchair through the open yard, and then up to the grand porch.

The sound of the wheels on the wooden floor lifted her heart. She touched the balustrade while passing by, the fresh sensation of the iron in her palm. Jeanne used to love twisting around it before walking to school with Amy each morning when they were eight, maybe ten.

"I need the key Mrs. Hutchins."

"I'll do it by myself." Lynn brought out a long key from her yellow day gown and touched it to the lock; heard its familiar click as it opened.

The smooth clang of Martin at eight p.m.; his shoes on the entry carpet, his voice carrying along the hallway, his law firm overnight bag resting on the low shelf, and the scent of his cologne when his beard touches her neck...

When the door opened the cool air embraced her. It was almost midday in late August, and school's just started. It's Jeanne again; tiptoeing up and down and to the kitchen, her loud melodic voice when at the piano, and then Dan and Megan drawing on the red and brown carpet her wheelchair is now trembling on.

"Please, to the right, in the living room." The nurse pushed the wheelchair forward, passing by a grand arch that led to the double living room.

"It's OK there?" She was chewing gum with no interest, glancing at her mobile.

"That's perfect, please open the windows and leave me alone for half an hour."

"I am going outside on the bench in the porch, if you any problems please push the 'call me' button you have around your neck Mrs. Hutchins."

She left the room and Lynn heard the door lightly closing at the end of the hallway.

Her hands embraced the wheels and with a strong effort she moved to the left, immediately reaching the table with the apricots, limes and grapes. The texture was the same on the tablecloth; the raised embroidery a warm reminder of the many gifts her mother had given her to celebrate her marriage with Martin.

Her soft, tender arms and the lullaby she'd sing when the dark frightened Lynn. The strawberry cake they'd eat together with grandma, and her silky lips on her cheeks after their dog Buck's death. Mum.

Lynn slowly followed the blurry shapes, searching with her hands and feeling immense relief to feel the wallpaper's thin golden stripes. The winter of 1963; the first Christmas with Jeanne, the last with Dad. The salmon wallpaper was Martin's idea, but not the golden lines. Dad was already ill and when he had suggested that color, they had decided to go for it. She'd replaced it all three times, always the same; it had meant home and still does.

Lynn eventually got into the kitchen and heard the mockingbirds warbling in the backyard. Did the nurse open all the windows? It was a kind idea of theirs to buy those silk curtains when they went to Japan a couple of years ago, for her 80th birthday. Dan and Megan were there; the last happy time with them before their childhood ended - except for the Christmas she had given them an envelope with some double zero banknotes.

She breathed deeply and a tear drop ran down her cheek. She could smell the fresh key lime pie they'd so often eaten in that kitchen. The peach tree just over the service door in the garden, too; the marmalade she'd made with Jeanne, and who could forget the stolen kisses around the stove? Martin again.

"Mrs. Hutchins, why are you in here? What if you fall down? Oh Gosh... How... Well, are you OK? We have to go; you need to be back for the therapy at four."

The wheelchair proceeded easily to the main door. Lynn could feel the different shape of the floorboards leaving the kitchen, feeling for the wire of the baroque lamp under the wheel. The family pictures in the wooden frame made by her should be just above it!

"Please could you give me the wooden frame with the pictures?"

"Pictures? Where Mrs. Hutchins?"

"Inside the wooden frame, it should be just above the lamp to the right side of the door".

"I'm sorry, there aren't any there".

"Are you sure? Three photos; one black and white with my parents, my dog and me, the other with my husband Martin and Jeanne, and the last with her and my two nephews and my ex son-in-law".

"No pictures Mrs. Hutchins... Now, we really have to go."

Jeanne had phoned in the morning and the clinic reception's clerk had explained about the visit. When Jeanne asked about it, Lynn didn't mention the pictures.

Two weeks later her breathing became more labored every day. Doctor Roberts said it was just common flu, but it wasn't, and she was fully aware of it. After three days she felt even worse.

That Sunday she went to the clinic. Jeanne was sitting in the chair just beside her bed when she woke up, Dan and Megan on the opposite side. "Mum, we're here."

She barely heard her voice, but certainly recognized her. "Thank you for being here."

"Mum, we have a present for you." Jeanne put it just under Lynn's hands. Her fingers and palms slowly followed the shape of a frame; the wooden one she had wondered about that day at home.

"I thought that you could have it here at the clinic, just until you can come home. I changed the glass and got the frame refurbished, but the photos are the same," she whispered, almost in tears.

Lynn whispered, tightening her hand around Jeanne's.

Her one way ticket train left that Friday night.

The house is still there after ten years; a new toddler walking around, a fourth picture inside the wooden frame which is back in its place, and a key lime pie embroidered by Grandma Jeanne beside the apricots, limes and grapes.

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### **BIO/**

**SERGIO FALCHI** was born in Sardinia (Italy) 34 years ago. He is now preparing to write and direct his second short film based upon one of his short stories. Feel free to get in touch for opinions and more at [sergiofalchi@yahoo.it](mailto:sergiofalchi@yahoo.it), or *Eccomi"Flamingos"* - *The short film* on Facebook . You can find Sergio in between Sardinia, UK, Europe, Canada...You name it! No journey is too far to achieve his goals.

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**SHEILLA MWAKIO****Of Perennial Friendships Among Other Things**

I have always hated Thursdays.

I do not know how I started hating Thursdays.

Perhaps it might have began in highschool. Having that darn double chemistry class with that one teacher who hated the sole existence of my being, hence making my high school life unbearable. Maybe...Maybe that is where my sudden unliking for Thursdays came about.

I guess, fate knew my unbearable relationship with this day, because on this particular Thursday, I was lying on my sofa, terribly weeping. My tears had already soaked the cushion, but I could care less. I ran out of tears, so I laid on the sofa, sobbing tearlessly but quietly. It had been a bad day. The funny thing about it all, is that a month ago ,I had foreseen this breakdown. I probably thought I would shed a few tears. I must have terribly miscalculated. And as I quietly sobbed on my sofa, she walked in.

Mbala walked in.

My relationship with Mbala, is what you could term as a long friendship that turned out to be a beautiful journey of sisterhood.

A beautiful journey of twenty three years. We had known each other from when we were eight years. And as she walked into my living room, not bothering to knock. I knew she felt my pain. She had been calling my phone, without getting a reply, so in a telepathic kind of way, Mbala knew where to find me(or maybe not, she just figured on her own that I would be crying all alone in my house.)And that is why she was there.

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Without uttering a word, she came and sat next to where my head was laying. She scooted, and gently lifted my head, and placed it on her lap, as she lulled me.

"Shhhhhhh...." She would gently whisper continuously to me.

"It is not okay, but it will be okay..." She said, as she gently soothed me.

I sighed, as a tear dropped on her lap. I could not believe she remembered those exact words.

Remember I said that we had known each other from when we were eight years old. Well, how we got to talking as kids was not those good old chatty pretend tea with the dolls kind of a thing. No.

Actually, it was one of the saddest days in her life.

Twenty three years ago.

I was reading the beauty and the beast ladybird book on that fateful day. It was re-reading actually, for the umpteenth time. I used to like the story. As I sat next to my bedroom window, imagining how Belle would dance with the beast, I glanced outside my window. The kay apple fence was just a meter high, so I could see what was going on in the adjacent compound.

Mbala and her family were new to the neighbourhood. They were barely a month old, hence were still painting their house. In the comforts of my bedroom, I watched as this man snatch something from Mbala's hands. I did not see what it was, but he took it, and went straight to a can of fresh paint. At that point in time, Mbala had started crying. So I became curious and I watched the drama unfolding.

In a saddistic kind of a way, he released that which he had snatched from her, and started baiting her with it. That is when I noticed, it was a handkerchief. He would dangle it in front of her, and let her try to catch it. Clearly, she was no match for him. All this went on as she would cry, somehow pleading with him to stop. Two minutes into this bad game(I

did not verify the time, but it was not that long) he walked towards a can of fresh paint, and shoved that handkerchief inside that canal through this horrible incident, Mbala had been crying, but once he dipped the handkerchief in the can of paint. She let out a loud cry that propelled something in me.

Till date I do not know how I ended up right next to her, or how I managed to hurdle over the kay apple fence.

But one thing I know, it was as if time stood still, and in a jiffy, I was by her side comforting her

She was sobbing uncontrollably, so I just held her as the man walked away from us and left the homestead.

I knew what he had done was wrong, but I could not fathom why she was wailing.

"Shhhhhhhh...." I whispered to her.

"I will buy you another hanky" I re-assured her.

"But it will not be my mum's" She replied in between sobs.

"I will tell your mum to buy you another. I promise"

"But my mum is dead"

My puny childish mind did not understand a lot of things, when I was a child, but when Mbala said those five words, I seemed to have adulated. And that is when I said :

"Shhhhhh....it is not okay, but it will be okay"

And that is how we became friends. From such a sad situation.

Turns out the hanky, was one of those few things her mother left her, before she passed on, which she treasured. The man who caused her all that pain, was her uncle. A brother to Mbala's mother who was helping with the painting of their new house.

As I grew up, I came to understand family relationships can be very complicated. We never

knew why he decided to hurt her like that, but from then on, as expected their relationship was always estranged.

I can not say I was shocked when she neither cried nor attended his funeral when he finally died.

So when she sat on my sofa, lulling me, using the exact same words on me that I used on her. I knew she felt my pain.

I was coming to terms with the loss of my marriage. I just did not know that I would cry that much over i.e. loved my husband ,but loving him was not enough for his family since they did not find me good enough for his son. He was the perfect man for me. But as Mbala would always tell me, there is no such thing as a perfect man. You just have to find the right match for you. True.

I used to think he was the right match for me, even when the doctor told me the sad news of my infertility. He was, but his family could not accept a woman that bears no child of their own blood. They wanted an heir from his loins, and I was not able to give him that. We lived in the twenty first century, but some traditions remained immutable.

How about that?

I guess giving him my love could never be enough for him. He left me feeling inadequate.

So I rested my head on Mbala's laps, and wept for the loss of my marriage and my perfect man.

Why was it my fault that he left me?

That was the question that kept ringing in my head.

“Ssshhhhh...it is not okay, but it will be okay.”

My weeping must have reminded her of her pain, and as fate would have it, in a twisted kind of a way, our pain united us more.

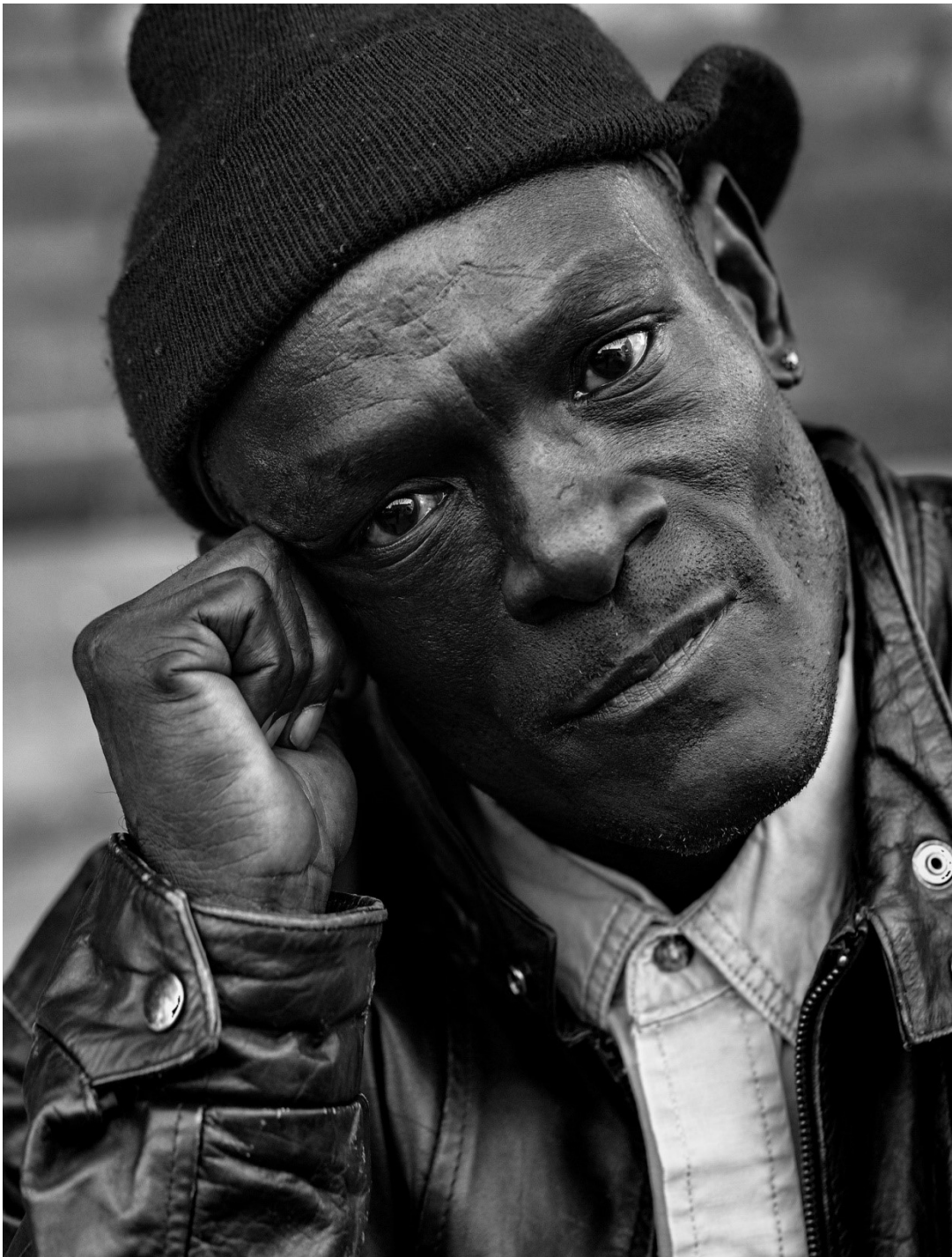
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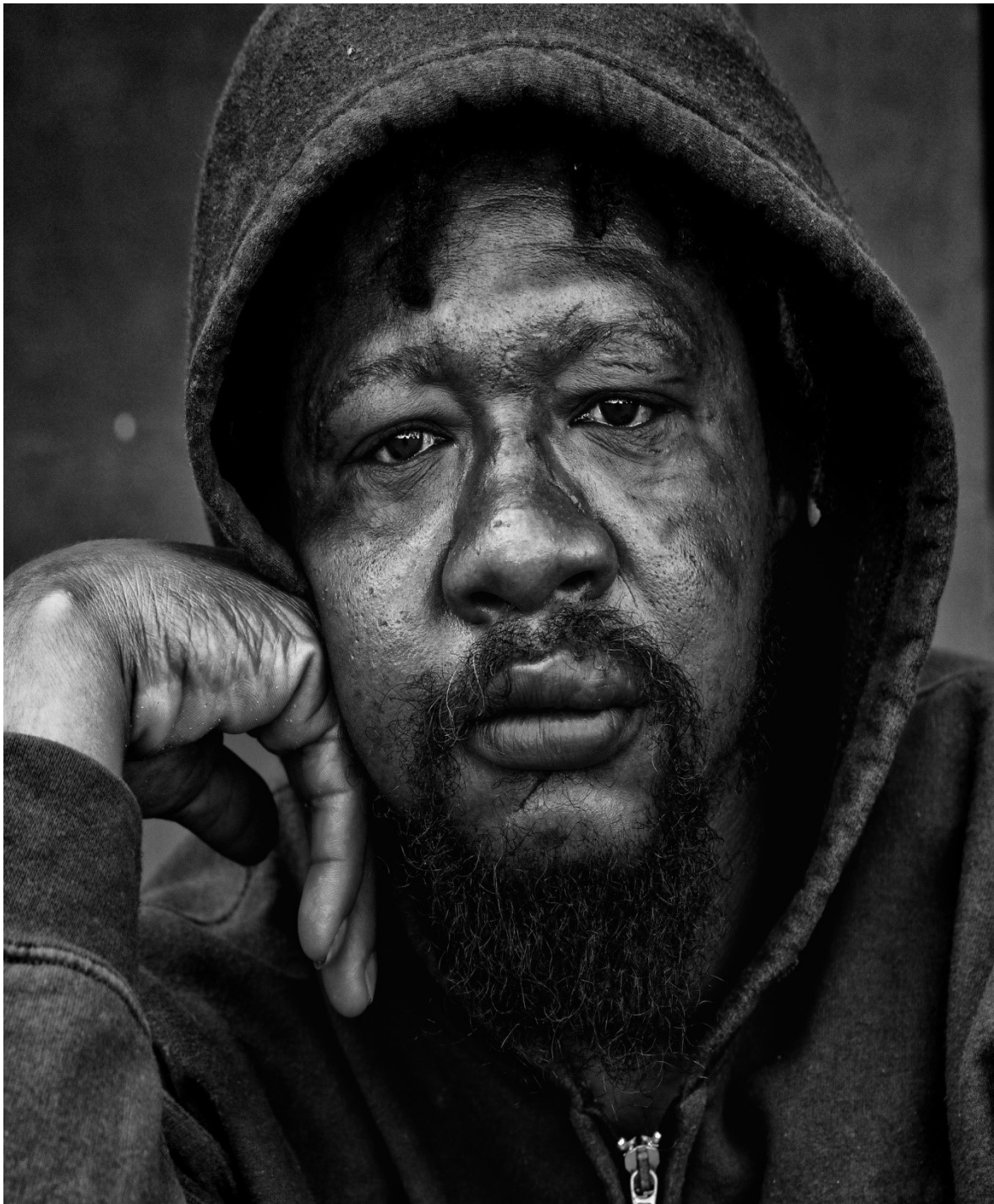
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**BIO/**

**SHELLA MWAKIO** is a young journalist, specialized in production of television and radio programs. A certified international trade scholar who loves fiction. She hails from Taita-Taveta county in Kenya.











**SONNI QUICK****The Diary of a Transplant Patient**

I had an IV in my wrist. I'm a hard stick because my veins are so small. The vein wasn't big enough so they removed it in the OR and put it in my neck. A plastic cap was on my head but it was pointless because my tailbone length hair had already fallen out, the remaining small clumps of hair shaved off. A little had grown back but my scalp looked more like a dog's rear end with mange than a head of hair. Oh well, if all turned out okay it would grow back one day.

I was riding on a gurney being wheeled to the OR, my eyes watching the lights on the ceiling pass by, listening to the sounds of the hospital going about it's normal routine. My husband walked beside me as far as they would let him accompany me. I waved a cheerful goodbye. I knew there would be no one, absolutely no one to help him through the long hours of waiting to know if I'd be okay. Damn my family.

He would be scared, hiding outside, chain smoking, even though it wasn't allowed. No one to talk to and pretending he was okay. He's a pacer; can't be still. He would walk and walk, up and down halls trying to make other people smile while he waits through the middle of the night for news about me.

It's not as though I didn't have a lot of close family members who lived nearby. Sisters, husbands and their families, nieces and nephews. Mother. People I'd known through fifty-seven years of living. I was no longer important enough to them to disrupt their plans of packing for a yearly family vacation at the beach to which I wouldn't be invited to, even if I was well. I was kicked out of the "inner circle" long before this, when I moved home two years before to get on the transplant list. Too many lies and gossip had been spread. They felt justified treating me as though I had leprosy. The only thing they had the chance of catching from me was the ability to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

No gossip. No innuendos. No made up story add-ons.

Who cares? Not them. Faulty negative gossip is so much more fun to spread than actually taking time to find out the other side of the story so the truth could be understood.

"Guess what I heard?" That was my mother's favorite line. Not maliciously. It was her need for attention and insatiable desire to tell everyone everything. If I had to be sacrificed because of it, so be it.

She wasn't willing to go back and repair her damage. It takes a lot, even now to set that aside because my mother is getting old. I know, even though she wasn't here for me, she still loves me. She expects me to repair the damage done to my relationships with the people I grew up with and I can't do that for her. I try to not let it matter anymore, but it does. I'm supposed to forget about it but i keep tripping over the elephant in the room.

The rest of the family - their willingness to think it was possible a mistake could have been made, wasn't going to happen. Because then the words, "I'm sorry" might need to be spoken. That wasn't going to happen, good Christians they believed themselves to be. I hope God slaps them silly from the Pearly Gates to Hell. I don't believe in a God - but if they truly do, this thought should scare the hell out of them - (pun intended)

Not one phone call. Not one get well card. No one asked what was going on in my head. Was I afraid I was going to die? No one gave a damn how I felt. Another week or so and it wouldn't have mattered. Then they could gather and weep because I died. Say how much they will miss me. Relieve themselves from any guilt. No one will know what they did - except themselves and their own payback. They never thought about the law of cause and effect. You get back what you give. You reap what you sow. That is why you're supposed to treat people the way you want to be treated. The Bible doesn't tell you what happens when you don't remember to do that.

My liver was failing. No, my liver had failed. Medications were trying to do the work my liver couldn't do. I had Hep C for thirty-five years. An old virus impossible to treat. I tried. It's my own fault. I did stupid things when I was young. Remember what I just said? What goes around comes around? There are effects for every cause we make. There is no way

around it. You can ask for all the forgiveness you want, and be forgiven - but you're still going to pay the price for your actions.

I could forgive them for how they treated me. Do you think that will make any difference when it's time for paybacks? Do you think if I had asked for forgiveness for doing drugs, my Hep C would have mysteriously disappeared because God works in mysterious ways? If that were the case, every Christian could pray their way out of every illness they have, and that doesn't happen. And when it doesn't the next line would read, "It was the Lord's will. It was his plan." Really?

When I finally got a diagnosis after years of going to doctors to find out why I was sick, I learned in 1998 I had Hepatitis C . "What's that?" I asked. For years doctors told me my liver numbers were high and asked me if I ever had hepatitis and I said no.

For the next ten years I took the best care of myself I could, but one day the denial of my mortality fell off a cliff. Ascities, the filling up of fluid in the abdomen that made me look seven months pregnant happened quickly. I also now had liver cancer. My mother begged me to move home so the family could help me. My husband and I moved into her apartment into her second bedroom, a small space of 10' by 10'. My entire life in a little room with everything in storage. A good transplant hospital was only an hour away. I lost everything. My home and life as I knew it living in Key West, Florida. I also lost my retail store where right outside my doors, cruise ships docked.

One problem, according to my younger sister, my husband hadn't been "invited" to move there with me. Invited? That was the word she used. What was I to do with my husband, throw him off the seven mile bridge just before Marathan, a key ( island halfway between Key West and the mainland? Did i know I was I supposed to ask permission? This was the main reason my mother threw me under the bus - there was a MAN living in her home and she didn't like him, until much later because he was the only one who took care of me. She told me I would have had to go to a nursing home because she couldn't have done it - wouldn't have done it.

Key West was too far from a good hospital. It took two and half hours to drive to the top of

the Keys. Driving to Jackson Memorial Hospital was another two. Then drive home again many multiples of times? Losing my store meant I lost my income. I couldn't work. My body swelled up with an extra sixty pounds of fluid. I couldn't ride my bike, my main transportation, around the 1 1/2 x 3 1/2 mile island. I couldn't lift my leg over the bar to sit on the seat.

Our lifestyle didn't match my mothers but we had to fit ourselves inside hers. I shut myself into our room in her home that I paid rent for, and curled into a fetal position waiting for the next doctor appointment between a mountain of medical tests to qualify for the transplant list. Not fun. The medication I had to take was severe. The disease was affecting my brain and the medications were trying to keep me from slipping into a coma. I was very disoriented. When the liver shuts down everything starts to go.

My family didn't care. Mom said they did, but I think she only thought they should care. They never showed it to me. I decided if I died they would be barred from any memorial service. Evicted. Physically kicked out. They could go f\*\*k themselves. They justified their actions by telling each other I was hurting our mother with my very presence in her life. How I was supposed to do that in my condition was beyond me. I wonder why they thought that? Was it worth a phone call? Apparently not. They thought they KNEW the truth - but really, they only assumed the knew the truth.

My mother complained a lot. She said she was going to have a mental breakdown and that breakdown was more important than how deathly sick I was. They came to her rescue and I was told, "I'm going to get rid of you if it is the last thing I do." That wish was almost granted. Instead, we moved a block from my mother, on disability, medicare, medicaid and section 8 housing to help pay rent. We were stone cold broke, driving a car on it's last legs.

I was on my own. No family. My own children lived too far away. They each came to see me but they had their own children to take care of. Why did I move back home? I foolishly thought I'd have support from people I mistakenly believed cared about me. When did they become such bitter, spiteful people? Granted, I didn't see them often. Holidays. Visits home. I was the only one who left home and lived a life I chose to live in different parts of the country while raising my family. I was a musician. I traveled.

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Do people stop loving each other just because they don't live close by? I choose to not live a life being judgmental about other people's choices. I guess they missed that lesson. I also think when someone is miserable they enjoy trying to make other people feel as bad as they do.

The man they disliked, my third husband, a long haired old Dead Head who built computers, loved science and the stars, didn't fit into their small town, closed minds. He took care of me like a baby for a year before the surgery and a year after because I lost the ability to take care of myself. I couldn't walk by myself. I couldn't hold a pen and write my name. He counted out my medications and spoon fed me if I refused to eat. He bathed and dried me. He helped me dress. I couldn't even wipe my own rear end. He did everything. I would not have survived without his love.

All I could do was press the play button on my little DVD player, watching the same movies over and over. I could slowly type emails with one finger. For two years I slept sitting up, leaning on the bedroom wall behind me because the bottom of one lung was covered in fluid. I couldn't breathe lying down. I was in and out of the hospital for infections and surgery procedures more times than I can remember. My husband never left the hospital. My family never came.

Not once did anyone ask, "Can I help in any way? Wash a load of laundry? Bring a meal?" Not once did I call my husband's name and he not come. He never begrudged me waking him. I didn't sleep more than fifteen minutes for two years until the hospital finally knocked me out because I was hallucinating. Sometimes I would slide down the left side of the wall. If it was the middle of the night I stayed like that. I couldn't pull myself back up so I waited until my husband woke.

My first call to go to the hospital for a possible liver fell through. It was too damaged. The person had been an addict. Then I received my second call to go. I was the back up. The head of the transplant surgical team had to fly out of state to pick up a liver from a young man who died unexpectedly. I was running out of time. I arrived late in the afternoon and nervously waited. The next day I slowly walked with the help of a walker, taking short walks up and down the hall. Muscles atrophy. By now I knew all the staff on the fifth floor,

the transplant unit because I had been there so many times. I even knew the people who served food. "Back again," I'd tell them.

I moved quickly up the transplant list because I had two cancerous tumors in my liver. If the cancer got outside the liver there would be no transplant. If I developed another tumor I'd be taken off the list as well. Twice they painfully shot massive doses of chemo up my femoral artery at the top of my leg, through a narrow tube winding around my organs, directly into the tumors to shrink them.

When I woke they had to hold me down because in my mind I was leaving. I had had enough. I was in so much pain I couldn't think. They placed weights on my body to keep me from moving. The nurses held me down while I screamed until they could knock me out again. I have an extremely high tolerance to pain medication and they were afraid of stopping my heart. I had been on pain medications for many years because Hep C destroyed my nerves, especially in my legs and feet. Sometimes wearing clothing and walking was painful when it flared, which was often. Even today, five years later, it's still bad and probably always will be.

The transplant list is not first come first serve. There is a scoring system called a meld score. There are tests that determines your need. It is why people die waiting on transplant lists. Their score doesn't push them up the list fast enough. They could wait ten - twelve years. By then their body is too broken to survive a transplant or one isn't available when they are ready. Liver cancer moved me up the list quickly. I waited only fifteen months. Had I not received one when I did I would have been dead in a week, with no goodbyes. My doctor later told me, "You came as close as possible to death without dying." I guessed my number wasn't up yet.

I was always the ever-optimistic one, determined it wasn't my time to leave planet earth. I had too much unfinished life. I wanted to see my grandkids grow up. I never let my fear show. I refused to see myself dying. There are those who think they can and those who think they can't - and they are both right.

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Being wheeled down that hallway to the OR might be the last time I could think about things. I wasn't going to waste anymore time feeling sorry for myself about my family. My grown kids couldn't be there for the surgery. The call to come to the hospital gave them no time. Traveling with young children is expensive.

My son came for one earlier surgery when they found grapefruit sized cysts growing on my ovaries a few months before which had to be removed along with my ovaries and tubes. I didn't need them anymore

.I don't think I realized I how physically bad I looked. I'm sure it scared my son but he didn't say anything. Fluid was draining from sores on my legs because my liver wasn't working and still he carefully rubbed a special cream onto my legs. I still have scars to remind me. My legs and feet swelled so much I couldn't slip my feet into the widest pair of slippers I owned.

The only clothing I could only wear was a big nightgown or a pair of loose, bright yellow, size XL, light weight stretchy cotton pants with a big smiley face on the front, and my husband's XL tee shirts to go over my tummy. To some that might not seem very big, but I was a small-boned woman who wore a size small. Going from being 5'6" and 115 lbs to 5' 3" and 180 lbs in a short period of time, while looking 9 months pregnant with a distended stomach, and also hairless was shocking. Yes, my height decreased. Cirrhosis of the liver sucks calcium out of my bones and caused severe osteoporosis. My spine was compressing

While waiting at the hospital, not knowing if I was going to get the liver, I wanted to visit the man who was first on the list. I wanted to encourage him. He was at least as sick as I was. They wouldn't tell me who it was. Hipaa law demands privacy. I bet he would have wanted to talk to me. I was the only one who understood what he was going through. I know it's important to have people who understand because I knew I was short in that department.

I called my mother from the hospital, so I know she called my family. She asked, "What should I do?" She shouldn't have to ask me that. I know what I would have done if it was my daughter sitting in a hospital nervously waiting to find out if I was getting a new liver. I



wasn't going to tell her what to do, so I told her I was fine. That gave her an out and she took it. She didn't come.

How could anyone waiting to see if they were going to get a cadaver liver from a young man who had just died, who I had a grieving family, and then wait to be wheeled down to the operating room - be - fine?

If it was MY daughter, wild horses would not have kept me away. When my mother found out a couple years before, my mother heard the unexpected news after a colonoscopy that she colon cancer. She needed surgery the next day, I immediately dropped what I was doing and booked a flight to California to be there to take care of her. No one else in my family did that. i did. She was my goddam mother! Of course I would be there for her. What kind of daughter would I be if I didn't? Of course, she feels bad about all of this now, but what does it change? She has to live with her own choices, too. My forgiving her doesn't change the fact you reap what you sow. the law of cause and effect is very strict whether you believe in it or not.

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The doctor and team burst through my hospital room door. "The liver is yours." It was too big for the tiny Asian man, first in line. I was disappointed for him. Everything moved fast. They put my gown and cap on, stuck an IV in me and whisked me out the door. I found out later, another liver became available and the Asian man had his surgery two days later. I hope he survived. I'd still like to know who he was. Not everyone does. Those who do, the five year survival rate is five years. I just passed that mark.

As the anesthesiologist started to press the plunger of knockout drugs into my veins I told him, "If I make it through this I owe you a p.i..z..z...a. . ."

The experience on the operating table was very strange. Sometime in the last hour or so I woke up. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't move. I tried. I even tried to my closed eyes so they would know I could hear. I heard everything they said. They talked about going to find my husband. It was frustrating. I wanted to tell them I was awake. I didn't like the feeling of being paralysed. Finally, I heard the words, "You can wake her up now."

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I went SWOOSH down this long tube like a water slide at a park. When I landed with a big KERPLUNK at the bottom, my eyes opened.

I still had enough anesthesia in me to not feel pain but that soon ended. I couldn't see what I looked like until my husband took pictures with his phone a few days later and showed me. I looked scary. I had tubes coming out of everywhere - several in my neck, up my nose, out my throat, and several out holes in my torso that weren't holes before.

For three days, every time I closed eyes for more than two seconds, I saw my entire life flash by in old time black and white photographs. The ones with the white wavy borders that came in booklets. The kind where you could tear out the pictures. I've seen many pictures of my childhood, but I had never seen these. It was fascinating.

I also knew things - understood things about life. Everything made sense. I had studied life and human nature for 24 years by then. Over time I gradually lost the deepest of the understanding, but I knew there was more to living than most people ever had the chance to understand. I remembered reading years ago the same thing about babies when they are born. The knowledge of who they have always been slowly fades away. It was a profound experience.

All life goes through a cycle. Birth, aging, sickness and death. Then the cycle repeats. Nowhere in this cycle does a heaven exist. That is something humans seem to need when they fear death or miss loved ones. The essence of who we are repeats. This is why, for me, the life philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism makes sense. There is no fantasy involved. Only common sense.

After the surgery I was in for a long hard ride. If I could have willed myself to die I would have. I had a problem that no one, not even the hospital's pain management team picked knew, but they should have. I blame my pain on that lack of knowledge. I didn't understand it myself until I went looking for answers after my last surgery late 2016 when I had to have most of my left upper arm bone replaced with hardware along with encasing my elbow in metal because I crushed it like a roll of Ritz Crackers by falling on it. My bones are like dried up Swiss cheese from the osteoporosis I developed.

I'm impervious to pain medication other than methadone. No amount of Oxycodone or Dilaudid was going to have any effect at all even shot right into my IV. Because of Hep C Problems, I've been on pain medications for twenty-seven years. Not street drugs. Not massive amounts of anything. Just enough to cut the edge. The last ten -twelve years I've been on methadone. Not liquid methadone junkies drink every day to keep withdraw away. Two 10mgs tablets twice a day. That is a low dose. You don't get high on methadone unless you take a lot. But if it is in your system no other pain medication works. A junkie taking can't shoot up heroin and get high if he's on methadone. It's pointless. It allows for a normal life because you aren't nodding off. You also don't build a tolerance. I've been on the same dosage for ten years.

I'm not a junkie, never was, but taking 10 mgs twice a day meant no extra pain med the hospital prescribed for the surgery was going to work. In addition, because they gave me other meds, the doctor cut my methadone dose in half and put me in withdraw. The problem is other narcotics can't get through the molecule in methadone that covers the pain receptors. Normal narcotics have NO effect. Might as well not take it. So here I was, cut from stem to stern, filleted like a fish and in mind blowing pain. The only thing that would have helped was giving me more methadone, not less. I wanted to die. I couldn't deal with it. I should not have to teach that to the pain management team after the last surgery. All they did was stand by my bed and looked sorrowfully at me as I kicked my bed, not knowing what to do.

In the ICU, after the transplant I ripped a needle out of my arm to get their attention and blood splattered the walls and floor like a hose. I had been crying and screaming loudly in my head but I had tubes down my throat and no one heard me. My vitals going haywire got their attention. I had a sadistic male nurse who handled me very rough and chastised me because I didn't have control of my urine and told me I was a baby. it didn't matter to him that my insides had just been rearranged; detached and reattached. He was fired within 24 hours.

Two or three days after the surgery, my mother showed up in the ICU, packed for her week of family fun in the sun at the beach. She again asked, "What should I do?" Don't look to

me for that answer. She obviously wanted to go. She was packed. I said, "Go." Feeling bad later, she said she would have stayed if I wanted her to. It wasn't up to me to make her feel good about her choice. She did what she wanted to do. Two days later my sister's son died, drunk, running his truck into a tree. She had the entire family to help her through her crisis.

At least someone had support. My mother called Mike and told him two days after it happened. It was at least a month before she came home. My sister needed her. I guess I didn't need her enough. She could have driven to the hospital in one and a half hours. It never occurred to her. After all, I did have my husband. Everyone was too wrapped up in my sister's pain to be concerned about mine. That's a fact. Not an assumption. I never received even one phone call from them.

After eleven days they sent me home, and I went back, home and back, home and back with every infection known to man. No one understood my level of pain, and they were my doctors. I went through having to heal on a half dose which wouldn't have been enough for the pain I had before the surgery. It took six weeks for enough healing to take place for me to stop wanting to die. The pain began to slowly diminish. That was when my back fractured, and over a few months, seven ribs. No additional methadone for that, either. Tylenol was all I could ask for. Now I couldn't stand up, turn around, and sit on the bedside commode without struggling into a back brace.

I believe in the law of cause and effect - you reap what you sow - what goes around comes around. There is a reason for everything, whether we like it or not. I'm responsible for my life and my health problems, caused by shooting up drugs in my twenties. I stopped, but the damage was done. My mother is responsible for her choices. My family is responsible for theirs.

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Over the past few years I asked my mother many times, "Please, please would you tell them I never did anything to hurt you."

The answer was always ambiguous. "When the timing is right."

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Sometimes she said, "I don't have the courage. I don't know what to say." She had complained. Took everything I tried to do to help her as criticism. She had a hard time with me and my husband living there. The family came to her rescue. No one cared about my hard time, or if what my mother told them was even true.

Bottom line - it was easier for her to do nothing. but she told ME to never give up. I was to find a way to fix the family dysfunction. The effect of that now? Most of the family barely tolerates each other. Conversations are shallow. Plastic. Meaningless. I think that is normal of many families. I wanted a family. A real one. It took a long time for it to sink in, it wasn't going to happen. Maybe if I knew why I could understand and let go. I only know I'm sorry I came home.

As soon as I'm able, I'm leaving. Go back to the Keys. Resume my life. Finish the book I'm writing no one in my family cares about any more than they care to hear the music I write. That's a shame. Music keeps my blood flowing and no one wanted to hear it.

I play piano improvisation. I recorded a piece of music and gave it to my niece as a gift when she graduated nursing school. Not only could she not say thank you, she didn't even listen to it. After not hearing from her in a month I asked why. She called me names. A forty-year-old woman called me names. You can listen to it. Go to: [soundcloud.com/sonni-quick/graduation-day](https://soundcloud.com/sonni-quick/graduation-day) What a slap in the face.

I need to spend time with my own family. Play with my grandkids. Go back to blue water, palm trees and no snow. Spend time with my daughter and her family in Texas before they're all grown. I doubt I'll even tell anyone when I leave. They didn't want me in their lives and they never took the time to find out why. So why should I care? What's the point. If no one cared about learning who I was while I was here, why would they care if I left? I don't know exactly what my mother told them to turn them against me so harshly except they felt they had to protect her from me. She is diabetic and I threw away her marshmallows. I fed her well. She lost ten pounds. They accused me of starving her. She has since had a diabetic stroke and is in a wheelchair. What is she had listened to me instead of complained about me? Maybe the stroke would have been avoided/ For ten years I tried to teach her about the effect of food on her illness and she wouldn't listen.

"Never met a sweet I didn't want to eat." was her line, said laughing. I don't think she is laughing now.

If family can't be there for you when you need them; if they can believe one opinion of one person is the complete truth, without realizing there is always another side to the story, and they use that to hurt you, why would you tell them when you leave? They wouldn't care if I left. I find that very sad. We get back what we give in life. That is the entire meaning of "You reap what you sow." If good Christians can't understand this very basic point, nothing I say can change that. Why do we learn the Golden Rule when we are kids? Why are we to treat people the way we want to be treated? Is the finger we point at others never pointed at ourselves?

We pay for the mistakes we make, to ourselves and to others. If your vocabulary doesn't include the words, I'm sorry and thank you, there will come a time you will want to hear them and no one will be there to say them.

I no longer care if my family gets upset and calls me names again because I told the truth. There is nothing anyone can say that could hurt me anymore than it already has. They can take pride in this fact if they want to.

A couple years ago I told my sister how much she hurt me. I even told her I wanted my sister in my life. I wanted her to understand - to want me to be part of her life. Feel regret at losing her sister. I wanted her to say she loved me. But the only thing I ever heard - her only words, after crossing her arms over her chest and lifting her chin in the air in a cocky way was, sarcastically, "I have nothing to be sorry about."

That hurt and I lashed out in anger. I got kicked out of her house. No one was listening to the words I was saying, "You are a lousy sister," over and over. Of course, it was all my fault. She had done nothing wrong. "All my friends love me," was all she said. I guess that was enough for her. My love didn't matter.

I moved home because I was sick and needed the support of my family because I needed a liver transplant, and all I got was a lousy t-shirt that said Penn State Hershey Hospital in white letters on maroon colored t-shirt material, and a maroon colored pillow in the shape

of a liver I cuddle with at night.

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### **BIO/**

**SONNI QUICK** lived all over the US often traveling as a musician. In these days, she has two projects: writing and recording piano music. The album is called "Stories Without Words". You can listen to the tracks at <http://soundcloud.com/sonni-quick> and <http://reverbnation.com/sonniquick>. I also write a blog <http://mynameisjamie.net> on the life of a man in prison, a newsletter called INFO NEWS on the issues of prison and a book. Life is great.

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**SOUSSAN TIZVAR****Bees' Genuine Social Intelligence**

Sky screams the silence; Sun shines her generous rays deep into the room through the small antique wood-frame window. A soft breeze flees amidst the white lace curtain and caresses Rosie's pale face. She stretches her body contour while her eyes riveted on a bee that flying around the ceiling's light buzzing. It seems as if she has mistaken flowery ornament with a natural amaryllis, Rosie is thinking out! She takes a quick bath to freshen up. This way, she won't feel sweaty and viscous while outside. Apparently, it seems today will be a determinative day! She eats a brief breakfast with her parents Mr. and Mrs. Daneshi, kiss them on the cheek and say goodbye and leave them astonished.

While her sorrow resonances in her voice Mrs. Daneshi says, please be careful, Rosie!

I am, Mom.

She walks out and heads on the street where she will end in the city center. It appears unusually muted and creepy. Strange feeling trembles her tender heart. This sensation fades a bit only when Rosie meets her music teacher on the intersection of Ferdowsi Street and Golzar both carrying green ribbons on their wrists, a sign of their solidarity with the green movement.

Hi Master, how are you? I thought you wouldn't probably come.

Why wouldn't I? Everybody is anywhere but in school. Stores are all shut down and none of my family members are in town. By the way, I am so glad to see you here, Master. Since morning I am filled with an unknown awe. What do you anticipate to happen today? How many people you think would participate, Master? Rosie murmured with erratic voice.

I am not sure about the number of crowds, but just be hopeful that nothing appalling will happen. Let's look at this rally from the positive point, Rosie. The Master was trying to empathize with her. Though, he was himself deeply adhering to the belief that this rally will



end nasty.

Everyone's destination is Shahyad Square the most capacious location in the city, where contains hundreds of thousands of people at the same time. Rosie and the Master are still in the middle of Enghelab Street where they abruptly stop and watch their surroundings. Can you guess how many people are here now, Rosie? The Master asked and continued. There is no way we can go further.

When did these entire folks come here? Rosie is amazed by these overwhelming crowds!

It seems there are many, who are smarter and more earnest than we are! Master says with a charming smile. Rosie giggles and her heart beats up feeling fervent. It is around noon; the lightweight armored vehicles and a regiment of the military prevailed upon streets. The atmosphere felt heavy, weighing on everyone's thorax. Protestors try to lift the weight by shouting the slogans.

Yet, the rally's leaders are addressing from far distance. A massive amount of people are regrouped in a very civilized style. Everyone is calm and determined. The crowd is not chanting simultaneously because words are hushed in the air amid hundreds of thousands who are singing impromptu but harmonized lyric.

Rosie's eyes sparkled when she saw small children with green headband sitting on their fathers' shoulders, repeating slogans and not knowing what they meant. At this moment she conveniently strived to fill her lungs with fresh air which embellished with the hope making her inhalation and exhilaration easier.

Listen, Rosie listen! Can you hear that? Yes, Master, is it gunfire? I think so, but it doesn't sound like air fire. It sounds actual shooting by firearms.

Chaos and turmoil rise everywhere. People are pushed; there is no room to move. Rapidly, a warm gloomy wind blows to the weary furious faces of women, men, young and old. Gunshots echoed in the air successively; darkness suffused throughout the sky, a congress of shrieking birds flying.

Rosie's gaze follows the bees soaring all over her head buzzing. Their hum filled the atmosphere mirroring the turmoil of a reality show's aftermath! The bees congregate in

groups whispering and summoning for some news. Who knows, perhaps, they are the ones spreading the words. They chant!

Hey Buddies, what is going on in here, who is she? Lila is a petite size sensational bee, who asks questions frequently.

Dario, one of the wise bees that don't act hastily said. "I don't know everything happened so quickly. There was no time to think and react"

Sam whizzing furtively, "I saw them closely. They were bludgeoned to death, beaten with a baton, pushed in patrol cars, and taken to nowhere, all frightened. Only God can help them!"

How many are arrested? I mean how many men and women. Dario asked.

I couldn't count them, but there were many women as well. Sam's voice irritated, "they flicked those people cheekily. It looked as if they are not humans but a herd of sheep!"

What they will probably do with them? Lila's question left the bees in the siege.

Not sure, perhaps, they are all detained for long years or executed, even tortured, I even cannot imagine! Sam said distressfully.

Really, do you think they will be executed just because of their instant reaction to the course of injustice? Dario asked with maddening voice.

"They certainly will! These brave people will be reprimanded because they have endangered government's power and what they plundered." Lila said with tearful eyes.

Whatever they do to them, is not pleasant! An unknown bee among hundreds of his fellows said with woeful voice.

Lila: Dear comrades, I believe sitting here and arguing don't help anyone. In fact, it is a waste of time. We, definitely have the responsibility to disseminate the news. Favorably, unlike humans, we own a fair and well-organized society. Our swarm has pre-specified duties. We are assisted by advanced networking systems and are able to form a self-regulated community to challenge ourselves and unveil all these immoral acts.

Sam: I am afraid of consequences this approach will create for our members. Probably this

act brings our characteristics under scrutiny. Moreover, we have to be cautious in selecting our affiliates who want to collaborate increasing bipartisan and decreasing immediate approval of implementation.

Lila: You, Sam, don't start to develop your theories again! At this moment, you should not follow your premises you should follow your judgment. It is not the time to whining or discouraging. It is the time of standing strong and doing something unforgettable.

Sam: We are strong only when we trust each other, Lila.

Dario: I think enough is enough, I agree with you, Lila. We have to be the voice of all those people who were the subject of unfairness, fraud, greed, and cupidity. Their families will never find about them unless we spread the news to uncover the places their beloved ones dispersed or handed over.

Lila: Then, it sounds all of you agree to take action now. I am certain you know your duties and there is no need to remind. The only thing I should add is to remain courageous and determined. Don't be afraid of what hinders you from your obligations; think only about how to overcome them.

Dario: Yes, my peers, we have to dismantle the foundation of this brutality. Where do you think we have to start, Lila?

Lila: Networking through digital media is one of the methods that can help those righteous people to become known in the most ultimate extent. Then, we will develop multiple message systems, prototype and put them on the action. If they don't operate properly we will expand our data, analyze, and find resolutions. Finally, we smear them all over the world. We must uncover the ugly face of this cruelty.

Sam: I am still hesitant. There are bees in here that don't say much. I can't trust them.

Sam's notion vanished in bees' commotions, no one hears him!

I am sorry, but I have forgotten what I need to do. May I ask you all to clarify my duty a bit? Erwin a bee, who hastily arrived from the front row, asked.

Lila: Of course Erwin, but you were at the very front, tell us what was happening there.

Erwin: What I saw is beyond our belief! I am stunned how the army casually drove their machines into the crowds to break up them. Motorists threw tear gas. Many are wounded, vomited, fainted, apprehended, and beaten.

Dario: We all are together in this. We must help each other to do our responsibilities in every step in the best possible way.

Lila: As I remember, Dario was a member of source providers. You should search and discover how this cruel act managed and who the major folks behind it are.

Sam: Yes, Lila, it is correct and you as a member of performance management team will collect those data from source providers and set them into the implementation process.

Dario: Absolutely, Sam, Lila, and I will supervise everything from the start to the end of the implementation phase. We will investigate any deflection which causes a serious problem and will inform all of you for reconsidering your options.

Erwin: Folks, please tell me what my duty was.

Lila: Erwin, you have always been our informant. Did you forget for what reason you are sent in front row?

Erwin: Oh yes, you are right. He fled back anxiously to where he depicted in his mind as war zone!

And so was when every Bee proposed their ideas except one of them. She was sad and wandering around, not sure what to do and where to go, and whom to talk. She was puzzled.

There is no need to say that the result of the experiments was fortuitous. Source finders, workers, supervisors, and communicators established their best offerings using their natural and genuine social intelligence. They buzzed aggressively and broadcasted the news globally. They spread images, documents, videos, and all other facts and data to all the humankind.

Bees' social interconnection and movement were significantly efficient. The world reacted instantaneously. Evidence spread quickly. People astonishingly were looking for their unanswered questions. Social media and digital networking systems delivered their

responsibility in the most delicate demeanor. Ultimately, the digitally information transmission method became the effective communication tool in the modern world.

Bees' military extended and found new and more controllable devices. They started to inform everyone in a widespread reportage regarding election fraud. All substantiations reviewed and scrutinized from the onset. In the meantime, bees found new shocking reveal that answered all those questions about unknowns.

The sky turns blue again. Everybody sobs, yells, while the uproar appears infinite, the Master calls out painfully, Rosie, Rosie, please get up. Please don't go...

In a moment, all breathe imprisoned in the chest. There is no buzz just lull. There is no fear just tear.

The despondent bee that was acting passively in the whole activists' argument was Rosie's bee!

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## **BIO/**

**SOUSSAN TIZVAR** was born and raised in Iran, she is living in Canada-Vancouver one of the most beautiful and peaceful places in the world. She is critically against two flaws, arrogance, and laziness. When she is passionate about what she is doing or set to achieve something, she will never stop until to succeed. Email at: [soutiz@shaw.ca](mailto:soutiz@shaw.ca)

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**SYLVIA REGNIER****Dorothy**

Susan sighed, “Mommy, thank you for the birthday party.” Her soft hand touched my cheek.

Smoothing her brown hair I whispered, “Seven years old already. Daddy and I love you very much.”

“Good night.”

I felt faint when my memory yanked me back thirty-three years. I thought I had effectively erased my pathetic past by immersing myself into university courses, caring for a fine family, enjoying a community of friends and teaching in Edmonton. My daughter’s seventh birthday triggered frightening flashbacks.

\*

I was seven when mother married her new husband. “It will be a grand adventure.” She promised. I was relieved when she didn’t ask me to call him ‘father.’ The second time he visited us, Ed slapped by friend for refusing to eat onions. I wanted to die.

I wondered if mom married Ed so that she could quit her retail job. When I asked about my real father mother shouted, “He abandoned us.” My grandparents travelled by train to attend the brief civil ceremony. The next day my grandfather and I went for a walk. He earnestly listened to my naive questions, hugged me, wiped my tears with encouragement, “ you are strong,” and gave me a leather backpack full of books, “You will grow up to become a fine person. Don’t ever forget that you are a good girl.” Tears rolled down his cheeks, “I will always think of you.”

The next day mother and I moved to Berlin. Tiptoeing into a third floor apartment, I discovered that we had to share a toilet with three other apartment tenants. When I returned from the dingy bathroom, Ed left with a brisk, “See you later.” From a tiny balcony I

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watched a street crowded with cars, cyclists, motorbikes and pedestrians. My ears strained to hear the cooing doves perched on gray windowsills.

“I am hungry.” I pleaded.

Mother lifted my chin, “Darling, tomorrow I will register at school.”

“I am hungry.”

“We have to wait for Ed to get back. I don’t know my way around.” She turned away, sat down on the sofa and closed her eyes.

“Can I go for a walk?”

When there was no response, I pushed down a bulky brass handle to open the heavy door, “I am going to explore.”

When I skipped down a dingy staircase, at the second landing a gray-haired lady with a cane intercepted me. “Dear child. You must not bang your feet so loudly on the stairs.”

“I’m sorry.” She reminded me of my grandfather. “I won’t make noise again.” At the bottom of the staircase, I maneuvered my way along the gloomy hallway with parked bicycles and carts and heaved my body against the heavy door to open it. Once on the street I walked past a bakery. Wafts of caramel mingled with buttery aroma made me salivate. I ran past a vegetable stand, a shoemaker’s shop, and hair salon. I was searching for a park to get away from engines and squealing brakes. I yearned for the solitude of our small town flat at the edge of a forest. After a curve in the road, I saw motorcycles and emergency vehicles in front of a police station. Dodging a blue Volkswagen, I ran across the street for a closer look at a broken structure with heaps of rubble and cracked walls so low I could peer over the edges.

I scrambled through an opening, around broken bricks steadying myself on rough recesses of partial walls and wandered through a maze of former rooms. Searching the gray sky, I noticed a bird resting on a jagged edge jutting from the highest wall, “Did you have to leave the forest too? How did you end up in this wrecked place?”

A blond girl in a grey tunic and white shirt appeared. “Hi.” She said.

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“Hello.” I smiled. “What are you doing here?”

She laughed. “I am playing house.” She pointed to a wooden plank balanced on two piles of bricks. “My pretend kitchen. Do you like it?”

“I think so.”

“Where do you live?”

“I just moved to Ring Street today.” I held out my hand. “My name is Dorothy and I am seven.”

“Nice to meet you.” She shook my hand. “My name is Ilse. I live on Ring Street too, about ten buildings away. I am also seven.”

“This is a strange playground.” I felt the lumps of concrete under my feet.

“My mom doesn’t like me to play in the ruins, but she knows she can’t stop me. She cries when she shows me pictures of our street before the war.”

“It’s dusty in here.” I said quietly. “But quieter.”

“The whole city is full of dusty ruins.” Ilse said. “But they are rebuilding.”

“I am so lucky I met you.”

“Me too. Let’s be friends.”

“I can’t have friends over.” I stared at my torn shoes.

“You can come to our flat any time.” Her captivating smile quelled my fear.

“Can I show you around?” She led me out of the ruins, along another tenement, to three gleaming white apartment buildings surrounding a large playground with sandboxes, climbing structures and plants.

Chattering children, a young woman singing to her baby and toddler’s digging sand amazed me, *I have never seen anything like it*. We joined children climbing, running and laughing. “How wonderful.” I said.

Ilse nodded, “Mother wishes we could afford to live in these new developments.” She explained that her mother sews and repairs clothes for a tailor who delivers the



garments to their flat and picks them up in a small van. Her older sister is a bank teller and has an American boyfriend. “My father never came back from the war. No one knows if he is dead. I was born after they made him join the army.”

I wanted to tell her how lucky she was not to have a dad. Instead I told her I better get back to my mother, yet wishing I could stay longer.

She asked, “Do you want to meet in the ruins tomorrow right after school?”

“I can’t wait.”

Back at the apartment, Ed yanked the door open, “How dare you stay away so long.” He slapped me.

My face burned, “I got lost.” I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Liar! If you were lost how did you get back?”

With my sleeve I wiped blood from my nose and waited for my mother’s reaction.

She said. “Look at what you have done. Wash it off.”

While I rubbed the blood from the fabric she scolded. “You ungrateful brat.” Shaking her head she added, “We have been waiting. Ed is hungry after working all day. He brought us smoked eel.” I gagged on every bite, obediently chewed on cold fish and slimy potato salad.

When I cleaned my dish mom boiled water to fill a cauldron. “There is no bathtub.” She explained. On the living room sofa I read Hansel and Gretel while mother and Ed washed and changed. When I stepped into the basin, the water was tepid, and Ed’s creepy stares frightened me.

In the bedroom a strange smell made me vomit. “Dam you!” Ed yanked my ponytail. “Clean this mess.”

“With what?” my lips quivered.

He brought a pail, soap and rags. Leaning against the doorframe with his muscular fists wedged into his waist, Ed smirked at my clumsy efforts to swish, wipe and wring the

cloths. Tears and snot rolled down my chin. Systematically replacing the wall-to-wall stink with a soapy smell became a game to quell my disappointment.

On Friday evening Ed's noisy stomping, tripping and cursing woke me up, "Laura! You lazy slob. The sink is full of dirty dishes. I work all day and you can't even clean up?" Sounds of smashing glass, and mother's sobbing were followed by loud pounding on the wall and a deep, "Shut-up!" Silence.

The next morning mom swept up the glass and I washed the dishes. Struggling to look at her swollen cheek I desperately wanted her to say something. Maybe she was too scared to talk. "Go visit your friend." She suggested.

At Ilse's flat, I watched Mrs. Bergeman lean over her sewing machine, humming while hemming. Her enthusiastic "Good morning, Dorothy!" and a warm strudel was heavenly. Ilse and I walked to the airport to watch planes land and take off. Based on our grade two lessons about the Americans saving Berlin from starvation during the 1948 blockade, we made up stories of flying to visit the Statue of Liberty.

One night a calloused hand pressed down on my face while the other hand aggressively rubbed my vagina. A sickly sour breath hovered near my nose. My stomach lurched. I barfed, bit, scratched, kicked and screamed until banging on the wall ended the assault.

When I told my mom about the night, she shook her head, "You and your wild imagination. You had a nightmare." She briskly buttered a bun. "You read too many books."

The next night I read about Aladdin. As long as I had the light on, approaching footsteps retreated. *I am afraid all the time.* I whispered to myself.

The school lunch program provided milk, buns and apples. I drank three glasses of milk to feel full and put bun and apple into my leather satchel. If Ilse didn't invite me for supper I napped and ate in the ruins. Most days Ilse and I did homework together. If we had no homework we drew and colored. Ilse's mother genuinely listened to us the way my grandfather did. One day she sewed me a new dress with leftover fabric. The soft cotton

against my skin made me feel as safe as my teachers encouragement. “I am proud of your math tests and your beautiful writing.” Mrs. Fischer told me. At home no one asked me about homework or my new clothes.

When I saw Ed outside the school I frantically fled back to my class and ripped a scab from my knee. Mrs. Fischer brought a first-aid kit, cleaned my wound and told me to rest. Later I walked to Ring Street cautiously meandered in and out of doorways. My head hurt from looking over my shoulders. At Ilse’s house Mrs. Bergeman gave me a long hug. “Dear child. Your heart is beating so fast.”

The next time Ed lurked near my school, I raced to the playground to mingle with parents and children. Ed disappeared. Every day I searched for new detours.

When mom went to the hair salon, Ed’s unexpected painful grip from behind made cry out. He let go to undo his pants, giving me time to race down the stairs. I heard the old woman’s cane trip Ed. “Slow down, man,” she scolded. Perspiration burned my eyes, when I reached the ruins. Crouching against the farthest wall, I heard Ed shouting, “Dorothy.” Moments later Ed talked, “Did you see a kid go in there?”

“Heck no.” A voice shouted. “Read the sign, Pal. Off-limits.” Then he yelled. “Buddy! I told you not to go in there! They haven’t checked the place for bombs.”

I crept to a narrow crack in the corner, wiggling and wriggling to the other side. After crawling along the wall in shadows of adjacent building, I finally reached the playground. People all around me ducked or bolted when a deafening boom followed by roaring rumbles and billowing brown clouds of smoke filled the sky. Soon blaring sirens, tooting horns, screeching tires and screams enveloped the neighborhood.

Ilse’s hug woke me from my stupor. “Oh, Lord. I went looking for you.” She wiped my sweaty face. “Thank God you’re safe.” She inhaled. “I thought you were in the ruins.” My teeth shattered. She brushed dust off my skirt and walked me to her flat. Ilse’s mother ladled lentil soup explaining, “There has been an explosion.” She caressed my dusty hair. “It scared everyone.” She guided me to a chair. “You are safe here.” I could not talk. “I know dear. After you eat something warm, you can take a bath.”

After I gratefully dressed in fresh clothes, I thanked her and whispered, “I had better get home.”

Outside emergency vehicles and flashing lights blocked the street. A man in uniform asked, “Little girl. What are you doing?”

“Going over there.” I pointed. “I live there.”

“I will walk you past the barricades.”

“Are you from New York?” I asked on the way up the stairs.

“No. I am from a farm in Montana.” He smiled.

When she opened the apartment door, mother gasped. “What have you done?”

“She hasn’t done anything. I simply helped her get past the barriers. A bomb exploded in the ruins beyond the precinct.”

“A bomb?”

“Some World War bombs didn’t explode. Expert have already diffused over twenty-five this year.” He removed his cap. “Some died trying.” He lowered his head. “War leaves a lot of junk behind.”

Two police officers appeared. “Mrs. Schulz?”

“Yes.”

“May we come in?” When she nodded they asked her to sit down. The young officer asked, “What about the child?”

The taller man nodded, “She may as well hear this.”

As soon as Mother pulled me onto her lap, The officer handed her a wallet. “We believe that your husband was killed in the explosion.”

“Impossible.” She looked at the wallet. “Someone probably stole it from him in the pub.”

“Madam. Tomorrow we need you to come to the station to...” His voice trailed off.

“Why?”

“We are very sorry for you loss.”

“Ed is dead?” she groaned.

“Try to rest. Can you take something to calm you?”

With a hellish gurgle mother jumped up, knocking me to the floor, “Who is going to support us?” She screamed. “I am all alone!”

Thoughts, questions, guilt mingled in my brain. *Did I do this? Did I kill him? Why didn't I set off the bomb when I played there?* I recoiled. *No I am only a child. I am a good girl.* But.... the questions lingered like the sounds of cooing doves.

I heard the police officers ask, “Do you think she is in a state to look after the child?”

Mother shook her head. “No. I’m too broken. She has a friend. Dorothy always wears her friend’s clothes. See!” She touched my dress. “Take her there, to her friend’s place.” She said haltingly. “I am so sorry honey. I am not strong like you.” She pinched my cheek. “I will come for you when I am better.”

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## **BIO/**

**SYLVIA REGNIER** is a retired special education teacher and teacher librarian, who has lived in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada since 1960.

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**TATJANA MIRKOV-POPOVICKI****Shaq Attack**

Sam asks Lila to watch a Shaq documentary with him. “It’s not really about basketball. You’ll see,” he says, so she curls up on the sofa next to him. A sunny winter day fades outside, a hummingbird drinking from the feeder, which Sam faithfully keeps stocked with nectar. The last glimmer of sunshine reflects off the bird’s tiny feathers.

On the TV screen, Shaq’s big zoomed face switches to a still photo of a reedy boy, a military kid. His father is a stern figure in a dark uniform. Shaq tells us how lonely he felt as a teenager, how insecure and hungry to learn basketball. Everything changed when he met a coach who would become his lifelong best friend. We see the aged coach and Shaq walking together, embracing, looking tenderly at each other. Sam wipes his eyes. “I don’t know why this makes me emotional.”

Lila knows why and she rushes to say the first thing that comes to mind, trying to divert Sam’s feelings, willing him to stay in the comfy zone with her. “It’s easy to be a friend with someone like Shaq,” she blurts. “He is a winner. Everybody loves a winner.”

Sam’s father was an absentee alcoholic parent when Sam was little and a self-righteous tyrant after he quit drinking. Sam and his brother excelled in athletics but their father never attended a meet, never witnessed his boys receiving their many medals, never congratulated them. Instead, he criticized their few flaws. Receiving less than a top mark at school was a major failure, a broken bike was a disgrace, a forgotten chore was a shameful lack of character. Nothing his boys did was ever worthy of his approval.

Lila takes Sam's hand and wishes she could erase his hurtful memories and the stupid thing she said. For her, Sam and their marriage are all the winners she needs.

She remembers watching basketball games with her father and grandfather when she was a child. Lila's father played teenage basketball in the fifties. There is a black and white photo of him on the court, skinny boys dressed in droopy tank tops and shorts, their hair cropped short. Their lanky bodies are frozen in a caricature of masterly postures; they must have been aware of the camera. When he watched basketball on TV, he was completely consumed with the game. If Lila talked to him or asked questions, she was ignored. He didn't appear to see or hear anything but the TV, occasionally shouting angry words at the players and referees. Lila had thought that he knew everything about basketball and she was mystified when grandpa belittled him.

"I've never seen my son play," grandpa liked to say with a grin. "I went to the game once. Got there five minutes late only to find him on the bench, disqualified, with two technical fouls. Always a show-off. No grace at all." He chuckled, revealing to Lila something about men she couldn't understand as a child, something she still doesn't understand. Do all men see one another as winners or losers, or is that just a father-son thing?

When Shaq gets to the point of the story where he left college for NBA a year early, against his father's wishes but with a full support of his coach, he says: "I knew then that this was a good man. He didn't care about circumstances. He cared about people."

Lila's father gave up basketball when he was eighteen and never played again. Not even for pleasure. He told Lila how he suffered an injury to his foot which rendered his right big toe inflexible. Lila remembers Father's bare feet nicely shaped with smooth skin and black hairs on the toes and bridge. They looked pristine, without a trace of disfigurement. He'd pull onto his big toe with his index finger, demonstrating how little it could move.

Father taught Lila how to properly throw a basketball. Balance the ball carefully in her right hand, level with her eyes. Support it slightly with her left hand. Then spring her whole body in sync with the arm, and eject the ball precisely and with flair. She practiced, wanting to look as elegant as he did, the ball arching beautifully toward the hoop, rarely hitting the mark. She often did it without flexing her big toe.

Grandpa taught her to kick a soccer ball. As a young man, he played soccer in the provincial league. There are several sepia colored photos of men in striped jerseys lined up in two rows, one player crouching in the front with a honeycomb soccer ball beside him. Grandpa was a center-forward position player, which, he explained, required both the skills and smarts. "It's all about elegance," he used to say. "You can't play soccer with big flat feet like your dad's. Just watch Pele. He is like a ballerina. A natural talent."

He took Lila to a grassy patch at the end of their dusty little street where he gently threw a ball to her, instructing her to aim at it with the top of her toes, not with the tip like amateurs do. She was to lift and bend her foot like a dancer, and adjust its force to the speed of the ball, slice it flat, with just the right energy.

Sometimes all three of them went to the grassy field, Father teaching Lila how to shoot a ball, Grandpa how to kick it. She wasn't very good at either, which was okay because she was just a girl.

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**BIO/**

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**TATJANA MIRKOV-POPOVICKI** is a writer, visual artist, and electrical engineer living in Canada, where she immigrated from Serbia in 1994. Her story *Snow Angels* earned a Honorable Mention in the Glimmer Train's 2016 Very Short Fiction contest, and will be published in 2017 American Short Fiction by The New Rivers Press. Email at: [tatjanamp@gmail.com](mailto:tatjanamp@gmail.com) <http://writer-tatjana-mirkov-popovicki.blogspot.ca/>

**VICTORIA BATYALIWAWWE J.A****Been there, done that**

Beige walls. Brown wood, built-in-cabinets. A balcony overlooking the neighboring apartment blocks. This is our kitchen. We live on the top floor of a two-storied flat in Najjera, a Kampala suburb. Naguru hill is picturesque at night when I stand on the balcony; all glittering and beckoning. Najjera is a fast-growing residential area, absorbing the urban percentage of Uganda's bursting population. It is common to find Congolese, South Sudanese, Somalis and Ethiopians here – well off African refugees who find Uganda very ideal. Najjera is a melting pot; whoever has the money can live their Ugandan dream here.

You can see down into the parking lot of the neighbors. A 16-year old boy is washing a green Toyota Ipsum. My brother Maurice throws cigarette butts down there once in a while. The middle-aged lady of the house knows it is him. His bedroom is on this side.

“Tell that boy to stop dirtying my compound,” she commanded one morning as she swept them irritably onto a dustpan. I could tell from her voice that she could barely contain her contempt. Maurice is 30 years old, unemployed, and living in his Mum's house. I was not proud to be “that boy's” sister at that moment.

“I will tell him so”, I promised.

This Sunday mid-morning, I am leaning against the black quartz counter top chopping onions, tomatoes, and green peppers to put in the red-bean stew we are going to have for lunch. The tapping of the knife on the chopping board with every strike is a faraway sound. Dull in my ears. I do not feel well but I have to do this. It is my turn to cook and there is no way out of it. The dizziness intensifies but I am sipping a glass of water at my side. There is a stool nearby on which I plop whenever I feel the darkness closing in. As I am about to move to the stove and put my ingredients into the pot of beans, the darkness comes on stronger than ever. I don't think I will make it. I grab on to the LG fridge behind me in a

last attempt to hold on but I lose the battle. The darkness envelopes me. I start to fall. I do not know where I am or where I am headed.

“Vicky, Vicky. My daughter...!”, I half-consciously hear Mum frantically call out my name. Glad to know she will miss me when I die. I am floating. I feel like I am in the kitchen and at the same time in a black, shapeless world.

I come to. Maurice and Dan, my 36-year old eldest brother who is visiting, are holding me up and taking me to the living room. I could have fainted into the pot of beans. They held the fridge back before it could crush me. The eggs and juice in the fridge did not survive though. I feel their wetness on my skirt. “I should have had a glass of mango juice. Sugar would have helped”, I tell myself.

Mum caught me just as I descended to the floor - with the big fridge, the eggs on top of it and the food inside it following me in slow motion. My brothers rushed in to find out what the matter was when they heard her frantic call. I wonder what would have happened if they were not close by. I am on my period and earlier on I was feeling light-headed. Menstrual cramps always leave me very lethargic and anemic.

Dysmenorrhea -painful periods with cramps. Menorrhagia - heavy bleeding. These are medical terms the gynecologists have thrown at me to explain this hell I go through every month. Actually some months are better than others. This one was out to get me.

“Drink this”, Mum hands me the glass of lukewarm mango juice I was thinking about earlier. I feel better after gulping it down. When it is just the two of us, I tell her it is the period madness again. She kind of understands. She does not go through this; she breezes right through that time of month.

“You must have done something to yourself”, Maurice says with conviction when he comes to check on me in my room. I cannot start talking about losing too much blood at once, clots and cramps during my period. So I just look at him and shrug. He takes over the cooking and we have lunch.

As we eat potatoes, vegetable rice and beans, I am sad. If I had asked Maurice or Dan to cook because I wasn't feeling okay, they would have thought I was avoiding chores. They

would have watched TV, done anything else apart from cooking until Mum stepped in. She would blame us all for starving her as she cooked. “Selfish, ungrateful children”, she would curse. I had to faint for someone else to cook. A woman’s period is part of life. Part of body functions just like sneezing, and belching. How could I have said: “My uterus is waging war, feeling weak and dizzy, please take over lunch”? I soldiered on but still did not make it. I feel alone in a crowd.

“Had you finished feeding the data I left you yesterday into the system?” Flora, my boss at RECO, a Records and Documentation company I work for asks when I call her to say I cannot come in to work tomorrow, which is a Monday. We have a contract to set up an electronic archive for DFCU bank. I almost left this world, wouldn’t even be talking to her and all she is thinking about is her deadlines.

“Yes I did”, I say resignedly.

“I was told by my doctor not to eat red meat. That helps. Try it”, she tries to be empathetic and then hungs up. I love my red meat. Besides, it is rich in iron.

Austin Lutalo is back in my life. He has been romantically interested in me since we met at Makerere University during the third and final year of my Bachelor’s course in Library and Information Science three years ago.

I walked into the lecture room at the East African School of Library and Information Science late for the Website Management class. Everyone was seated and the lecture was about to begin. He stared. I was used to being stared at by men. I looked at this youthful Assistant lecturer and realized Professor Joy Bukirwa was not coming.

“Come and sit here”, he said in a friendly way, tapping the chair in front of him. I self-consciously walked to the front seats that everyone had left empty.

I met him one day in the corridors of our Faculty block.

“You have not been coming to class, what happened? I had missed two classes the week before.

“I was unwell”, I replied, wanting to walk away. I was not interested in chatting with a Lecturer in the middle of the Faculty. It was a small community. People would talk. Besides, I did not want to encourage him.

“I hope you are fine now”, he said, lingering.

“Yes I am. Thanks Sir”, I said politely as I finally walked away, heading to the Library. The longing gaze he gave me as I went away was not lost on me. He still wanted to talk. I did not want this romantic interest from a Lecturer. Why me?

The Marketing Lecturer said there was a library internship opening at Infectious Diseases Institute in Mulago, the largest government hospital in Uganda. Whoever was interested should go to his office. Two students, including me went. We registered and got ready for the interviews.

I was surprised to discover that Austin was the Librarian and was going to interview me together with Mrs. Kuteesa, the Human Resource Manager. His eyes were glued to me during the internship interview at the IDI offices that December morning. He hung on my words and kept nodding and smiling. I could tell I had him in my favor.

Back then, he was the head of the Information Services department. When I realized he wanted us to date, I was offended and very angry. I told him I would talk to the HR about him sexually harassing me. What was a mature, 30 year-old, experienced guy like him looking for in a 23-year old intern like me? I concluded that he wanted to toy with me.

“I will defend myself. Having feelings for a woman is normal. People who work together marry each other all the time”, he countered. So he wanted to marry me. Well, I was attracted to him though my instinct said it would not work. We belong to different tribes; he is a Jopadhola from the east while I am a Muganda from central Uganda. I don't have anything in common with him.

He is seven years older. I think he is too old for me and I don't do office romance. Relationships with colleagues, bosses are unappealing. What will happen if it does not work out? How would I stay professional?

I went out on a date with him when he pleaded.

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“Vicky, just one date. I just want to spend some time with you outside the office”, he cajoled. We had Sunday lunch together. We went in a taxi to Trudy’s, an exclusive restaurant in the middle of Kampala. I did not bother dressing up. This date was inconsequential. I wore the black and white striped dress I usually wore to work, and black sandals. I was irritated that he had no car to drive us. He wore a gray T-shirt and dark blue jeans that were a little too long for him. They were frayed at the hem and dirty from grazing the dusty ground. If there was any chance of changing my mind then it was quashed. We did not have much to talk about.

“How many siblings do you have?” Austin asked intimately. He had this intense look that bore into me. He was always intense.

“Four”, I said in a non-committal tone, looking into my plate, preferring to savor my vegetable rice and chicken stir fry. He had a disarming smile though. I considered opening up but decided to keep my walls up.

“How old are you by the way?”, he asked as if it was the most natural question in the world.

“You will check my records. How old *are you?*”, I countered. I felt that he was trying to bully me.

We finished our lunch, which he actually paid for and I went back home thinking the mission to get him off my back was accomplished. I turned him down completely and thought he would forget about me. He did not.

When my contract ended at IDI he tried to convince me to date him again. When I visited the library to say farewell, he had other ideas. That afternoon, it was just the two of us, no library patrons.

“Vicky, I love you. I know your love for me will grow. And as you can see we are not going to be working together any more. I feel like when you leave I will lose you forever”.

“What exactly do you love about me?” I asked curiously. I just didn’t understand. At 23, I had never had a boyfriend. He did not know me, how could he love me after just six months of working together?

“There are many, things. You are unique and the way you dress, carry yourself is unlike any woman. I especially like your scent. You do not wear any perfume but your natural body odor is unforgettable. I can tell when you are around”, he said. I was very unnerved. My scent... so all along he was ‘smelling’ me when he pretended to be showing me something on my computer, up-close.

At this point he stood up from his chair, walked towards me and put his hands on either side of the wall I was leaning against. I was trapped. I knew he wanted to kiss me and that is when I felt the chemistry. Looking into his eyes and having him that close made me realize I was attracted to him too. If he kissed me I would not resist. I would be lost. He saw what was in my eyes and pulled back with satisfaction. He was older and still unsuitable. My maximum age difference was five years. I still declined to accept him as my man.

“Ok, if you ever change your mind, give me a call. You know where to find me”, he said tearfully. I had never seen a man reduced to tears because of a woman. I thought he was over reacting and could not wait to get out of there. What if he got out of control and raped me? When I left, I changed my number. Nevertheless, he sent three Sonique songs to my email. He knew I loved music. One was called “I put a spell on you”. These lines were disturbing and I deleted it:

*I put a spell on you coz you`re mine, you better stop the things you do*

*Oh I aint lying, no I`m not lying*

*You`re putting me down, you know I can`t stand it*

*You`re running around, you know better daddy*

*I don`t care if you don`t want me, I am yours, right now*

Part of me thought he was obsessed with me. Infatuated, and the feelings would go. The other part wanted this ‘love’. I wanted the attention. I liked the fact that I had this effect on him.

The second Sonique song was called “Can`t make up my mind” I deleted it too. I got a glimpse into his conflicted mind:

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*Feelings deep inside of me, I know it's there and it wants to be free*

*But I am not sure*

*These emotions, I have a little fear, but I'll find strength in my ideas*

*I don't know who is wrong but I will just sing this song*

*I cannot make up my mind, should I be good or bad, should I go with the flow, or will I take control?*

*It can't be up to me, it must be up to you*

*I don't know what to do, maybe I'll follow you*

*I feel as light as a feather*

*My heart is broken*

*Should I move on? I'm not sure (you make it all seem so real)*

The last Sonique song was my favorite. The lyrics were positive and I did not delete this one:

*I feel it deep, deep inside of me*

*Our bodies one telepathy*

*Collide strong as we get involved*

*Fantasy now reality*

*I'm breaking free from all these chains*

*I feel the rhythm running through my veins*

*Alone with you at night*

*It's a feeling I don't wanna fight*

*Now I'm alive-touch me, need me*

*Show me the meaning*

*I'm alive-now I'm believing*



*I'm complete, so complete, I'm alive*

One year later, my contract with RECO has ended and I need a job. So I call him. I kept his number even though I changed mine.

“Of course I remember you,” he says when I introduce myself. Listening to his husky voice proves to me that he still has feelings for me. I naively want mentorship and professional contacts from him. I think we can pretend we are nothing to each other and be professional.

When I meet him outside Malaria Consortium in Kampala where he works, he is different. He has a nice haircut, is wearing a well-fitting, short sleeved, sky blue shirt and dark blue khakis. Best of all he is standing next to a green Land Rover Discovery, 2004 model. Its engine has this low, powerful rumbling sound. I love SUVs. I am sure it did not come cheap.

When we get into the car to head to his place, it smells fresh and crisp. There is a car air freshner on the dashboard. Austin`s cologne is also tantalizing my senses. The beige seats are sturdy, clean and very comfortable. What draws me to him even more is the music. He is playing ‘Butterfly dance’ by Yanni in his car! I am impressed. I do not know anyone else who listens to Yanni`s new age, instrumental music. This kind of instrumental music deals in emotions only. ‘Butterfly dance’ from the album ‘Optymistique’ evokes excitement, joy and hope in me.

He does try to be professional. He edits my CV, then asks me out again. My resistance is wearing down. He has been interested in me for a long time and tells me the same thing over and over. That he loves me. Now this is proof that he is consistent and means it. Besides, I am lonely. I want to forget about the stress at home and get lost in this new life I have. I can finally get a job, leave home and be independent. Maybe get married to Austin and be adored by him forever.

Austin gives me some numbers to call for a job but they lead nowhere. He tells me when he was leaving IDI, he wanted me to replace him as Librarian but he could not reach me. So

he recommended someone else. I wonder why he did not email me. Just like he emailed those nerve- wracking songs by Sonique.

I finally accept him and forget about mentorship. I have decided to give him a chance and see where it goes but I am scared he might hurt me. My Dad left my Mum. He said he loved me but abandoned me.

We go out for dinner to a posh, secluded restaurant in upscale Naguru. He drives me back to Mum`s house. Before I get out of the car, he takes my glasses off and kisses me deeply. I am caught off- guard and try to push him away but he holds my face in place and deepens the kiss. I am not ready and feel taken advantage of. I brush it off as being inexperienced and uptight.

“I knew you would be sweet”, he says triumphantly and lets go of me. I can tell he has been longing to kiss me. He looks like a thirsty man who just found an oasis in the desert. I did not enjoy that stolen kiss.

We listen to rock, instrumental and reggae music together. He tries to teach me how to play golf but it just isn`t my game. We eat, dance, laugh and enjoy each other. I meet his younger brother Francis. Austin is fun to be with, humorous, hardworking, and I think I love him. He coerces me into sex.

“Vicky I love you. I really feel like doing this. I have wanted to make love to you for a long time. I promise, I will be gentle. Besides, couples are doing this”. At this stage I trust him and think he is going to be my husband. With those words I lose my virginity. We did not even have any tests done before getting intimate and I kind of panic. Who has he been with?

I have suspected since I was in high school that I might be a Sickle cell carrier. Mum is a carrier and so are my aunts and uncles. The blood disorder is in my Mum`s side of the family. I tend to have low hemoglobin levels and get tired quickly. So I suggest to Austin that we take HIV and electrophoresis/Sickle cell tests. Unknown to him, I want to see how deep his love goes if I am a Sickle cell Carrier. Will he stand by me? He agrees to do the tests.

One week later, I am walking from a hair salon. My hair has just been conditioned and styled. I look and feel great but the feeling does not last.

“Vicky, where are you? I need to see you now”, Austin says gravelly on the phone. I know something is wrong.

“I am in Ntinda. Just had my hair done. Come to Tusky’s Mall”, I tell him.

Within a short time, I hear the familiar powerful rumble of his car. I get in and he is holding a manila envelope. He is not smiling and does not look directly at me. When he is faced with a challenge, he puts his hands behind his head. It is mourning body language.

“The results came out”, he says and hands me the envelope. Deep down I know I am a carrier and he is going to dump me. I read through them and indeed I am a Sickle cell carrier. He is not.

“Let me take you home”, he says and drives me to Mum’s house. I thought we would spend time together but he wants to be alone. It is quiet in the car; no conversation. No laughter. No music. He does not hold my hand like he usually does. I kiss him bye and he does not respond.

My heart is heavy. I know what is coming and I dread it.

“I can’t marry you. May be someone else will. Our children will suffer. They will be sick”, he tells me the next evening in his living room.

“I don’t have money to spend on endless hospital bills. Besides, I saw how my cousin Derrick suffered. He was a sickler and even taking a bath was a problem”, he says. To him, I am the embodiment of doom and I don’t want to be with someone who treats me that way. At the same time, my soul is tied to Austin. Sex does that to me. If I had not been intimate with him, this break up would be easier.

I want to cry. He is pulling away from me and taking my heart with him. After conquering me. I wish I hadn’t given in. He is hurting me just like I feared. I blame myself for letting him in. Giving him my heart and body,

“You can hit me if you want”, he says as if that will help. I turn away and shed heart - wrenching tears. I feel like an idiot. Very cheap and used. How can he imply I am not good enough after his spirited pursuit?

“I don’t want you to lose your self-esteem”, he tries to make amends when I calm down. “I will not marry someone else. And I am not breaking up with you”, he rambles on. He does not make sense.

We drag the relationship on. He claims he might change his mind about ‘my situation’.

“You said you loved me. That I was the love of your life”, I question him, trying to understand.

“I guess I did not love you that much”, he says brutally. I wonder if he feels the impact.

Even after hurting me, he still wants to sleep with me. One night, I start crying in the middle of making love.

“Did I hurt you?” he stops and asks.

“No. I am just sad”, I reply. I know I am broken. I need to save myself.

I cut off communication. I move on and burry myself in job searching. I give my family more time. I finally get a job as Assistant Librarian and wonder if my male boss will also harass me for a relationship. Turns out he is happily married and very respectful.

Two years later, I still need closure so I call Austin.

“Are you married, is he good to you?” he asks. I say no I am not married.

“Well, I am married”, he says as if to keep himself off limits. As if I would want him back. I wonder what she is like and what he told her about me.

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**BIO/**

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**VICTORIA BATYALIWAVE J.A** grew up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She graduated with degrees in Law and Journalism and since then has lived with her husband in the Caucasus, China, USA, and the Middle East. Victoria Evangelina has published more than 200 interviews and essays in Russian and English languages worldwide. I believe we are all storytellers by nature. I enjoy a good story and look for it in books, movies and people`s lives.











**LEROY\_SKALSTAD**

Photographer Leroy grew up on a small farm west of Holy Hill, Wisconsin. His mother was an avid photographer. In 1956, at 8 years old, he asked her to buy him a camera because, for him, the concept of “freezing time” was the most incredible thing. However, she said he’d have to make the money to buy one himself so that he’d appreciate it more. So he found a greeting card selling contest in one of his comic books that had a camera as one of the prizes. One day, a delivery truck dropped off a dozen boxes of cards, much to the chagrin of his parents. But Leroy persisted and, stocking-capped and squeaky-voiced, went door to door. Alas, he didn’t sell many cards—mom had to bail him out. Leroy thinks of his mother, who passed away twelve years ago, every time he takes a photograph because she is the one who lit his passion for photography. He began experimenting with 35mm photography while serving in Vietnam. His homecoming and reintegration proved difficult, however, and eventually Leroy found himself living on the streets—where he honed his photographic mindset and perspective. Himself a subject of many non-homeless photographers, Leroy discovered that many of the well-meaning photographers were actually quite impersonal, and he told himself that if he ever got off the streets that he would return to photograph and create relationships with his subjects. He knew that he would focus on people’s faces, especially their eyes, which, when “frozen in time,” are evocative and supremely human. Now known affectionately as “Cameraman” by those experiencing homelessness, Leroy has worked on the St. Ben’s Community Meal Program annual calendar for the past 21 years and works each year for Help-Portrait Milwaukee, which offers free photo shoots for underprivileged families in December. To be known as “Cameraman,” Leroy says, is both humbling and rewarding. He says that his life as a photographer has been an incredible 61-year-old journey.

More of his work can be found at:

[https://pixabay.com/pt/users/Leroy\\_Skalstad-1202818/?tab=latest](https://pixabay.com/pt/users/Leroy_Skalstad-1202818/?tab=latest)

**~The End~**

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