The Biannual Literary Journal of the Maryland Writers’ Association

January 2021

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
(Gandharva raja)
This issue is dedicated to long-time MWA member Janet Ruck who died in September 2020. She served as MWA Vice President and later as Grants Writer and member of the Conference Committee. She was also a frequent contributor to *Pen in Hand*. Her energy, humor, and indomitable spirit are sorely missed.
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Pen In Hand is the official literary publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association. It is published biannually in January and July.

Submission deadline for the next issue of Pen In Hand is May 30, 2021. MWA members and young writers are encouraged to submit poetry, sci-fi, flash fiction, short stories, drama, mystery, memoirs, creative non-fiction, personal essays. Photographs/Art must relate to submitted articles. Submit to peninhand@marylandwriters.org or tkbasu@verizon.net

Please follow the following submission guidelines:

- Use black type only
- Submit only in Times New Roman font
- Use font size 12 for the manuscript
- Leave 1 inch margin on top, bottom, left and right
- Place title of ‘story’ two double spaces below top of page.
- Center title
- One space below your title place your name: center name
- Indent first line of each paragraph 1/2” inch
- Single space between period and next sentence
- In general, dialog should be double spaced and in quotation marks
• Insert approximate word count at the end of your manuscript (except poetry): flash fiction 500-1000 words; short story word count 2000 to 3000 words
• One double space below the end of your manuscript, include a brief Bio with Chapter affiliation. The Bio should be limited to your literary works and interest, publications and awards.
• Art/photograph (Minimum 300 DPI) must be original. If not, permission to reprint must be obtained by submitter.

For further guideline details refer to Maryland Writers' Association website.
I sit in my library and lament the devastation, the endless pain suffered by men and women in Baltimore, in New York, America and the world. The RNA virus spike protein invades the human cell, RdRp RNA polymerase facilitates viral replication, and proteases assemble the new virions within the human cell. A submicroscopic virus of 100 nanometers (almost hundred times smaller than a human red blood cell) has stunned an unprepared world. The COVID pandemic has separated families, ruined economies, and caused countless deaths. It has defied doctors, scientists and governments.

Yet, the indomitable human spirit finds hope. Soon, one day families will gather together and celebrate birthdays and marriage ceremonies. They will travel by car, train and plane to reach out across the world.

There is HOPE; there is POETRY.

_The falling flower_
_I saw drift back to the branch_
_Was a butterfly. (Arakida Moritake)_

_In spite of war, in spite of death,_
_In spite of all man's sufferings,_
Something within me laughs and sings  
And I must praise with all my breath. (Angela Morgan)

Regenerate, in the manner of new trees  
That are renewed with a new foliage,

Pure and disposed to mount unto the stars. (Dante Alighieri)

The free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind (Maya Angelou)

Nobel Laureate William Faulkner contended that a novelist is a failed short-story writer, and a short-story writer is a failed poet. A great poem demands structural artistry and emotions expressed with few best words — the whisper of thunder. Among Maryland Writers’ Association members I find a great love of poetry. Our members strive to that end. To all I say, sing with me; I sing of HOPE. Together we will leap on the back of the wind.

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu  
Editor, Pen In Hand
This issue of *Pen in Hand* comes at the end of a difficult year for many, but 2021 holds a spark of light for the future. Writing is an adventure that often begins in solitude, yet ends in a crowd. Our words fill the world with ideas, images, and characters. Never stop searching for your dream.

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

“There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*

Amy Kaplan
President
Poetry is defined in many ways and I am sure you have a favorite one.

Wm. Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful words"

Doesn't clarify much does it? A politician's rambling could fit that definition.

The 'beat generation' poet Lawrence Ferlinghetty wrote in his famous poem “Pity the nation.”

_Pity the nation whose people are sheep and whose shepherds mislead them_

He had a more colorful definition:

_Poetry is the shadow cast by our streetlight imagination._

I think Robert Frost clinched it: _Poetry is the kind of things poets write._

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, famous for “Rhyme of The Ancient Mariner,” defined poetry thus: _putting the best words in the best order._

As an example of his artistry, I quote the first 5 lines of his poem “Kubla Khan” which he wrote in 1797. Xanadu was the summer capital of Kubla Khan's thirteenth century
Mongolian Empire. The poem is Coleridge’s vision in a dream.

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*
*A stately pleasure-dome decree:*
*Where Alph the sacred river, ran*
*through caverns measureless to man*
*Down to a sunless sea.*

He placed the best words in the best order. Fluidity: The words flow like the waters of the sacred river, Alph.

Seamus Heaney who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995, said in *Redress of Poetry*:

*The taste of an apple lies in the contact of the fruit and the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way poetry lies in the meeting of poet and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on pages of a book.*

*In Death of a Naturalist* Seamus tells the reader why he wrote poetry:

*I rhyme to see myself to set the darkness echoing.*

In writing he discovers himself, an experience MWA poets will readily relate to.

Baudelaire the 19th century French poet remarked: *Imagination is the most scientific of the faculties, because it alone understands the universal analogy.* Surely that is a poet speaking not a physicist.
Seamus has satisfied both Coleridge and Baudelaire.

US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky wrote "poems...embody the qualities of physical grace, lively social texture and inward revelation." (Poetry and the World)

William Carlos Williams goes further in assigning critical value to poetry: "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably everyday for lack of what is found there."

The ultimate gift of poetry?

Of whose beauty it was sung
She shall make the old man young.

(POETRY READING at MWA: Join the monthly mike; it is a grand experience...)

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
POETRY
Pandemic Sonnet

By Lynne Viti

We rise earlier than usual, forgo coffee in bed, read what news we can bear to absorb. We make sandwiches, pack them in plastic bags. You don protective gear—mask, disposable gloves. By now you’ve stopped by the church to pick up grocery bags of more sandwiches, in the narthex where we used to gather in fellowship on Sundays. That space will be empty and dark this morning. I imagine you lifting the bags of sandwiches, depositing them in the back of your car. By now you’re making your way on the turnpike to deliver this meal to those who live on the streets, who bravely sleep on the library grates, who meet the virus on the road.

Beat Poem: About Those Wooden Nickels...

By Roderick Deacey

I have told all my secrets to the wooden Native American –
he always seems so empathetic, you know?

I’ve had him with me for years,
from back when he was merely a cigar-store Indian,
standing quietly on Main Street.
I have trundled him from apartment to house,
from house to apartment to apartment,
lashed with bungee cords onto my heavy-duty hand truck
which is designed to carry up to 400 pounds.

Seven feet tall, carved from a single trunk
of some unidentified tropical hardwood,
I don’t think he weighs as much as 400 pounds,
maybe 250 pounds is closer to the mark.
Even so, when changing residences,
I’m usually forced to bribe several friends
with a barbecue and many beers
to help me carry him inside
and sometimes upstairs.

I always face him
towards a window looking onto the street –
he likes to be aware of what’s going on out there.
He stares, unblinking, into the middle distance,
one hand resting on the wooden knife in his belt,
like an old soldier back from some unnecessary foreign war
he doesn’t much want to talk about.

He doesn’t say a lot anyway, but I always get the feeling
that he is a deep thinker.
Ever since I told him all my secrets,
I’m just a little uneasy around him...

– perhaps he is judging me
– perhaps he finds me wanting
“Don't make me leave you, Grasshopper,” he whispered in my head today. “You are the best student I have ever had, but I still have much to teach you.”

“Oh, I wouldn't dream of it,” I told him, “you are easily my oldest friend, I can't imagine what my life would be like without your calming and persistent presence. After all, there are no secrets between us.”

“That's right,” his voice echoed in my inner ear, “except for my own private story which I won't be sharing. Also, I can hardly reveal any of your strange, dark and potentially embarrassing secrets if I am still here with you... Right, Kemosabe?”

He's such a longtime companion, I think I may as well keep him around – at least, for the time being – you know?

---

Roderick Deacey is a performing poet based in Frederick, MD. He is a member of the Frederick chapter. In normal, non-viral times, he regularly performs with his drummer and bass-player, presenting “neo-beat” poems inspired by the Beat Poets’ poetry and jazz forays of the nineteen-fifties. Deacey was awarded the 2019 Frederick Arts Council Carl R. Butler Award for Literature.
Heart
By Lois Perch Villemaire

1

Not an unusual day at my desk,
Regular flow of work happening around me,
Co-workers, meetings, appointments.
A call from your doctor
Cracked the mirror of my consciousness.
Words, words, and then
“Meet him at the hospital”
You hadn’t felt right for a few days.
Between the many words
I heard “heart attack.”

2

At the hospital in minutes,
That’s how it is in a small town.
I asked for you and was told
“Have a seat”
My face felt hot, my hands, icy cold.
My name was called,
I followed to where you were lying
In an open room
Surrounded by medical scrubs.
One came forward and said
“He’ll be taking a helicopter to DC”

3

And magically I found myself there,
Sitting and waiting
For direction,
For test results,
For peace of mind.
Surgery was set to rescue your heart,
To reroute those arteries,
Not doing their jobs.

4

There was much to be thankful for.
You woke up afterwards
With a nurse on guard,
Assigned to only you.
Trying not to be overwhelmed by the tubes
And medical apparatus,
I focused on you,
Your eyes half-closed,
Your heart beating, pumping,
Throbbing, thumping,
Like it was brand new.

The Cook Asleep

By J. D. Brayton

I burned the chicken.
that'll teach her to allow me near the new pan.
I'm a distracted poet, damn it, I forget about stuff that actually exists.
And like magic, the dog is driven mad by the imaginary ether.
The poor thing, endlessly hungry for something, anything else
Runs mimpering and quaffing
Begging me to either make it stop or roll on the floor with her
So that we can both share in the
Incomprehensible entelechy
Of post butchery and
Pungent Incompetence
Laying in the fibers, underneath the smoking oven, we look at one another
And dream of the freedom of take-out pizza

———

J.D. Brayton is a member of the Montgomery County Chapter. He has published several eBooks: *The Clabber Grrrl's Retreat*, *Thrip*, and *The Light horse*. 
Comfort
By Jack Slocomb

Must be that turn of year,
days more dimly drawn,
nib of freeze in the tighter
twines of air,
for those fat black polished
crickets to be in high gear
in their frenzied
lofty springing in and out
of the weave of
drooping grasses
along the loose gravel lane
when I scuff too near

Must be the last burst
of the fiery spirits of summer
before the
dropping,
dropping,
dropping,
dropping
of leaves

My leaning is to
find the revelation
in such recurring liturgies as these,
of the way they aver
one another,
the way they
befall in the same embrace of time,
yet I can only ask and ask,
all the while tasting
in the breezes that such fathoming
cannot ever be mine

And that is the abiding
comfort

Jack Slocomb is a nature essayist and poet of the Allegheny Mountains of Western Maryland and West Virginia. His poem recently won second prize in a national poetry contest of Passager Magazine. His poetry collection, Native Tongue was published by Akinoga Press, Baltimore. He has published poetry and essays in Maryland Poetry Review, A Different Drummer, The Laurel Review, Ginseng, Allegany Magazine, The Highlands Voice, The Backbone Mountain Review, and The Cumberland Times-News. He is a member of the Maryland Writers' Association, Cumberland Chapter.
Bing Cherry Wine
By Karen Laugel

Smitten on the train to Omaha
my grandmother pretty enough to be sandwiched between
her parents said to the dapper tea salesman looking for
board
‘We have a room to let’
and two years later they were married.

Two generations on, I am a child pouting
over my cereal bowl at my grandfather’s pocked linoleum
table.
‘Drink the milk,’ he said, ‘we don’t waste anything.’
Rubber bands and lengths of string accumulate like base-
balls,
worn pajamas quilted with tiny regimented stitches by my
grandmother’s never idle hands.

‘Don’t climb that tree,’ my grandfather said
and my brother and I drop to the ground, pockets of guilty
cherries spilling out as we run away from the gruff voice,
the calloused hand, the fierce scowl.
I saw him play once, a silent game of checkers
my brother hunched over the board opposite my grandfa-
ther’s frightening frown.

In the Depression my grandfather lost his job as Benson
High custodian and made doughnuts in his basement to
sell to local diners. My grandmother canned tomatoes and
peppers and jam. A wringer washer and sheets hung on a
clothesline to dry.
A chalk mark on their cement stoop, an invitation to any
homeless man looking for work, ‘there’s a warm meal for
you here.’
'Go to your room,’ he said to my mother just a girl then tears spilling over a cracked tea set. She had a roof over her head, a flour sac dress, a tangerine in the toe of her Christmas stocking she wasn’t allowed to cry. She’d learned a desperate dazzling grin, her passport to love to family to society and when she died an old woman everyone said she had a brilliant smile.

I still have the secret family doughnut recipe and one photograph of my grandfather smiling as he leans with an elbow on a keg of homemade cherry wine. Our visit over, we pile into the family station wagon no seatbelts then my brother and I on an old mattress in the back and a paper bag of bing cherries thrust through the window by my grandfather’s rough hand.

Karen Laugelis a practicing pediatrician for nearly four decades. She has written two mystery novels featuring a pediatrician as amateur sleuth. She writes short stories and poems. She is a member of MWA.
My Friend
By Patricia Crews

A cup of cappuccino in her hand
My friend implements her daily plan
A burst of cream in the piled high brew
Gives her the needed strength to renew

Shoulder pain daunting today
Strong will eases the pain away
Moving like a well-oiled machine
Shining her tables rainwater clean

Brown hands stiff, cracked, and spry
The bleach of time ticked them dry
Hands that barely grip as told
trinkets of glass she use to hold

Floors waxed and buffed by hand
Arthritic knees challenged to stand
Yet still she shines the entire floor
Like spit-shined shoes she never wore

Bathroom tidied with a bristle brush
Blue waters flow with a porcelain flush
Swirling swiftly like rapids in a river
Ebbing and flowing into a gentle quiver

Laundry washed Britta clean
And tossed with a detergent fling
Underwear sorted and neatly rolled
Placed in a drawer sturdy and old
Scented cachets of lilac in Bloom
Spills its fragrance throughout the room
Coveting ancient smells rooted in place
Delicate florals now occupies its space

One more chore to be done
Minutes fading into none
Resistant feet can stand no more
Hold on for her final chore

Her last chore done for the day
She puts the cleaning solvents away
Grateful the day has come to an end
She awakens and does it over again

Patricia Crews is a member of the Prince George’s County Chapter. A poet and playwright, her plays have been performed at Studio Theater, Washington D.C. and others. She published her first novel *The Taming of Mama* in 2019.
To Katy

By Lewis F. McIntyre

It wasn’t supposed to be this way -
You dying before me.
There is graduation, college, that first real job,
Your special love, my grandchildren
Swelling in your belly.
But now you lay white on white sheets,
With scarcely a mark to show
What’s been done to you.

And the relentless oscilloscope, like Circe,
measures out the thread of your young life,
    One heartbeat at a time,
And you lie suspended by tubes
In between the lands of life and death.

We didn’t like each other much,
You, so sure you knew it all,
Me, always more the commander than the dad;
You, who always hated my jokes,
    And I more gruff than caring.
Joe holds one hand, your mother the other.
There’s none for me.
So I read you poetry.

And watch the relentless oscilloscope
Measure out the thread of your young life,
    One heartbeat at a time.
And somewhere to the right
Lies the end of that dancing yellow line.
I know how to turn time into distance,
    By multiplying by the speed of light.
And if that yellow thread extends
As far as Jupiter: Too short!
That’s only a few hours. I would prefer
Arcturus, maybe Rigel. If I could take
Twenty light years of my thread,
And tie it to yours, I would. I can’t.

I just watch that relentless oscilloscope
Measure out the thread of your young life,
Like a system under test;
Hoping I won’t see the severed end
Slip through the hawsepipe into the sea,
To disappear without a splash.

Lewis F. McIntyre wrote this poem on the occasion of his daughter’s hospitalization. He is presently VP of the Charles County chapter of MWA.
I was taught about Racism in History class, as if no one was still living it today. I was taught about the Founding Fathers, but not the Enslaved Mothers that those Founding Fathers had found themselves entitled to take.

They taught me about King’s dream, but never Till’s nightmare and the gasoline that my tears can pour on a fire.
They didn’t teach me that just before I’d been born, it had been unlawful for Lovings to love. Or how many states wouldn’t change their laws when they no longer could stop future Lovings from loving.
I was taught that the Southerners had owned the slaves, but not that the slaves had made Northerners rich.

I believed the Mason-Dixon Line was real.--That only if you crossed it would you find burning crosses. I knew Route 66 ran through Tulsa, Oklahoma--

but not that blood and ash had run through there first.
A guide book gave tips to my folks so we could enjoy our destination in peace;
I didn’t know a Green book was the only book that kept some folks from Resting in Peace.
If you’d asked me what a Sundown Town was, I would’ve thought, a nice place to watch the sun go down; not a place where some folks had to race Sundown to make it out of that Town alive.
No one told me about the sworn duty that some men had to hang a man who was Dark after dark.
--Or that the reason the man would hang in the night was that he’d dared to be Dark
in the Light.
I was told Any-one could be Any-thing, Any-where that they wanted to be. I didn’t know how many These-ones didn’t want Those-ones
to be.
I knew about German Shepherds, leashed to help guide those who could not see;
but not that German Shepherds were un-leashed on those that the system did not want to see.
I learned that “you is” was not standard--that I should not stand for that language;
I didn’t know who got to decide whose language was understandable and which language could stand on its own.
I knew about people who said the N* word,
but not that I was living in a system that whispers it.

I didn’t know how little America had moved forward,
from the Movement I’d been taught had already moved us.
I thought people moved out of The City to escape the noise and the crowds.
I didn’t know whose noise and which crowds’ people were trying to escape.
I didn’t know I’d been standing in The Suburbs in The System
In The Way.
I was taught about Racism in History class, as if no one was still living it today.

Kari A. Martindale is the President of Maryland Writers’ Association, Frederick County Chapter.
My West African Grandmother

By Patti Ross

I hope to go to Senegal
To see Lac Rose
A pink piscine of salt
Sun beaten and gummy.

I linger shoreside and watch
My guide Ahmed rub Shea butter
Over his full body, gliding into the sticky mere.
The everyday work of the poor.
Salt catchers!

I am reminded how mama sifted
boiled dough into a small pot of butter
in preparation for the salty bean broth.

I should go to Goree Island.
Visit the Maison des Esclaves and
See the white sand beaches, the palm trees
Contrasting the echo of screams
From a door swinging solely one way.

I must go to Bargny and watch
Mother Fatou
Smoke the fish in small concrete tombs
Filled with fire and ash daily,
The air heavy and grave on her lungs.

They are replacing the tombs now
Furnaces, modern not aged
No smoke, no ash, no tumeur maligne.
Will the Thieboudienne taste the same?
Jollof rice and fish with no tang of smoke?

I want to meet my grandmother,
Who has aged and is dying,
Her salty bean broth,
the smell of smoked fish
a family heirloom.
I hope to go to Senegal

______

Patti Ross, host of the MWA First Fridays open mic series, graduated from The Duke Ellington School for the Performing Arts and The American University. Her journalistic work has appeared in Washington Times and Rural America. Her debut chapbook, St. Paul Street Provocations, will be published in 2021. Ross shares her voice as a spoken word artist, “little pi” (www.littlepisuniverse.com).
Dreams About Grocery Stores
By Terri Simon

Now, more of my dreams take place around grocery stores.

I’m on the hunt for something elusive and vital.
I don’t remember what it is but I’ll know it when I see it.

One dream was all about shopping carts and how the parking lot was filled with them and how tightly we all held on when we found the right one.

In another, I kept running into people I knew as I went up and down the aisles.
Each person felt like relief because it meant they were healthy enough to go out shopping and each person felt like danger
because I wanted to hug them all
but was afraid.

I categorize
these dreams
alongside the apocalyptic ones
of being chased
or having to hide,
but those nightmares now
feel like later chapters
in the same book.

I wish I dreamed
of wine and chocolate.

Terri Simon’s poetry chapbook, *Ghosts of My Own Choosing* was published by Flutter Press (2017). Her chapbook, *Ringing the Bell* is forthcoming from Clare Songbirds Publishing House. Her work have appeared in *The Avenue, Third Wednesday, Poetry Quarterly, Ariel Chart* and *2019 Bay to Ocean Anthology*. She is a member of MWA, Howard County Chapter.
Katrina, Aftermath
By Mariko Hewer

This is a song of the earth,
terrible and sweet,
we sing not from our mouths, but from our blood.

This is a song of broken body parts, clay and dust, wrack and ruin.
I saw the dog tethered to the porch, bloated and strangled, robbed of even the smallest chance to escape.
Who leaves an animal to suffer,
its body straining to break free
as the tide beats a path to the door it has defended all its life?

This is a song of the Vick’s VapoRub
we smear beneath our noses
to keep at bay the mildew and the stench;
the million tiny deaths of toys and toothbrushes and tissue paper.
Houses, too, die, their frameworks crumbling like brittle bones,
the eyes of their fractured windows blank and clear as a death stare.

This is a song of breathing and inhaling:
not air, but water.

This is a song of water moccasins and raccoons, subsisting on what little there is left. I reach gloved hands into pots, waiting for a bite that never comes. In the wet heat,
it seems we are all 
waiting.

This is a song of who remains, who is left. 
They come to the edges of their driveways, 
hovering, gathering as though it were we, not they, 
who occupied these dwellings. 
They thank us for saving 
a teddy bear, a photograph, a drawer of knickknacks.

Such small salvation.

———

Mariko Hewer is a freelance editor and writer. Mariko belongs 
to the Montgomery Chapter of MWA.
MEMOIR & PERSONAL ESSAYS
The emotional connection between my father and me was tenuous, like a thin thread that would break if I pulled too hard. To describe him as withdrawn would be like saying that the winters in Alaska are a little cool. I rarely knew what he was thinking or feeling and I never felt that I could ask him for advice. Emotional issues were always out-of-bounds. In many ways, he was a negative role model that I still fight against even at the age of 78, some eighteen years after he died.

When Mom told me that he was dying of cancer, I tried to reach out to him. This would be my last chance. I had read Tuesdays with Morrie, a best-selling memoir about the relationship between a dying college professor and one of his former students, and thought it would be wonderful if I could get even a little bit of contact. Maybe he would open up, just a little. Maybe I could make his dying process a little easier.

On a trip to Los Angeles for my 40th high school reunion, I stayed with Dad and Mom for a few days. His five-foot, nine-inch, 160 pound frame had shriveled up due to the cancer. His shoulder blades protruded and the tumor bulged around his waist. His grey mustache and balding head looked wilted.

To facilitate connectedness, I first tried the oral history route with an audio tape recorder. Dad was a communist who had survived the McCarthy period during the 1950s. His father, also a communist, had fled the Russian czar at the turn of the 20th Century and had landed in New York City to become active in left-wing politics. I had gotten bits and pieces of this story but I knew there was more to tell.

When I asked about his parents, he couldn’t or wouldn’t
remember much. Mom, of course, filled in some of the blanks and ended up talking more than he did. The same thing happened when I asked about his childhood. “Pulling teeth” comes to mind. Soon I realized that I was making Dad very uncomfortable and that he didn't want to talk about himself.

Since I didn’t want to make things harder for him, I changed tactics and tried something less personal: “Do you have any thoughts about some of the big political changes that had taken place over your eighty-six years?”

“Yes,” he said, to my great delight.

“Great. Could you give me an example?”

“So much money is being made in the computer industry these days and computers didn’t even exist when I was a teenager. In spite of all this money,” he continued, “there’s so little being spent on social services.”

“That’s really interesting,” I said, thinking I was on a roll. “Any other examples?”

“Some other time,” he replied. The oral history was over and I turned off the tape recorder. Another failed attempt at communication.

I achieved one minor success with easing the dying process. Dad had trouble taking a Vitamin C pill which got stuck in his throat. Sitting at the table while he struggled to swallow, Mom kept encouraging him to take the pill.

“Dad,” I said, “why don’t you stop taking Vitamin C.” He looked at me, puzzled, and Mom looked at me, horrified.

“But he needs to take Vitamin C to stay healthy,” she replied.

“Why? He’s dying,” I said. “He’s in home hospice. Why should he have to struggle with a damn vitamin pill?” Mom protested and Dad remained silent, as usual, but he stopped taking Vitamin C. I always wondered if that made his last few weeks a little easier.
We also took several walks around their condo community, but I always had to initiate the discussion, even about mundane, everyday issues. Except once.

We were sitting on a bench, looking at one of the beautifully landscaped areas separating his building from the next. We both quietly took in that little patch of nature. He suddenly blurted out a sound, somewhere between the bleat of a sheep and the cry of a child. I think he said something like, “I don't know what's going to happen,” but I'm not sure. I sat there for a few seconds, stunned. By the time I turned my head, he had re-composed himself and said “Let’s go in.” I was so shocked that I said, “Ok,” and never mentioned it again. I was afraid to ask, fearing that the tenuous string would break. I missed my one chance. Maybe if I would have said something, he might have responded. I'll never know.

The last morning of my visit, I thought I might try again but Dad wanted to watch a football game on TV. We sat next to one another on the couch, watching a game that neither of us cared much about. At least we were together.

When I was ready to leave for the airport, Dad and Mom were sitting at the dining room table counting out their pills for the week. I wanted to say something that was loving or profound or meaningful. But what should it be? Finally, I hugged him and said something like, “Be strong.”

“I'll make a note of that,” he replied.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I'll make a note of that,” he repeated, and that was it.

As I walked out the door, a few tears welled up in my eyes as I floated between anger and sadness. I never expected him to actually say the words, “I love you,” but he couldn’t even say “Thank you” or “Me too.” I was more sad than angry. Exactly what did “I'll make a note of that” mean? Was it some back-handed way of him saying that he loved me too?
I wished I could adopt my sister Laurie’s view that he gave us what he could, given who he was. I’ll always be profoundly disappointed that Dad couldn’t give me more emotional support over the course of my life and that he didn’t try harder to overcome the emotional coldness that seemed to run in his family. My grandfather was even more withdrawn than my father.

In the weeks before he died, I daydreamed about writing a eulogy for the memorial service. I so much wanted to say all the great things that I hear other people say about their fathers – “I could always depend on him.” “He was my hero.” “I want to be just like him.” None of that was true.

Although he often let Mom make important decisions for him, Dad took control over the last weeks of his life. He accepted the reality of dying from cancer and refused chemotherapy after experiencing severe side-effects. I suppose he prepared himself for death at the same time as immersing himself in non-stop mystery novels. He was ready to go.

When Laurie called to say that the end was near, my wife Natalie, my son Josh and I jumped on an early morning plane to be able to say good-bye. Unfortunately, he died in his sleep and the crematorium had picked up his body before I got to the condo.

Being Jewish atheists, our family tradition was to hold a memorial service a few days after someone died. In the condo’s community room, everyone sincerely praised his “quiet strength” and “gentle disposition.” One of his friends got so carried away that it seemed that Dad was responsible for the entire left-wing movement in Los Angeles. I also tried to accentuate the positive by explaining how Dad taught me about radical politics, hard work, supporting a family, and fixing things around the house. I also shared my Tuesdays with Morrie story.
I had trouble grieving after Dad died; the tears never came. I now realize that more than feeling sad about missing him, I mourn the loss of the positive emotional connection with him that I will never have. I still struggle against that withdrawn part of him that remains inside me. Forgiveness isn’t easy, but I’m moving closer. I’ve worked hard to break the Pincus chain of emotional coldness and I’m certain that when it’s Josh’s turn to write a eulogy for me, he won’t question my love and emotional presence in his life.

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I’ll never forget my first ski run down the steep black-diamond Regulator Johnson trail in Snowbird, Utah, in 1977. The temperature in the mid-thirties allowed the skiers to wear light-weight clothes. Falling on the snow felt like a light caress, compared to the shock and pain of crashing on hard ice with temperatures in the teens and below in the New York and New England slopes where I learned to ski six years earlier.

Skiing became a big part of my life after I started teaching at Binghamton University in 1971. I chose to move to upstate New York, because I thought it adventuresome to live in an area full of snow-covered mountains during winter. But, I was not ready for the reality of my first year. Snow started to fall in September. The ground vanished in the first week of November, not to reappear until early March. For a two-week period in February, the temperature never rose above zero. I now understood how ice ages originate.

The first winter I didn’t know how to enjoy my leisure time. My faculty colleagues introduced me to racket ball, a game similar to tennis played in a confined room with four walls. As a tennis player, I always ran after the ball, but in racket ball all I did was run into the walls. I wasn’t alone. Many of my fellow players went to the hospital emergency room after a game.

The next winter a friend advised me to take up something safe -- skiing. A group of us drove north to Greek Peak on Interstate 81 to learn to ski. We all loved it, in spite of falling on the icy slopes, spraining our thumbs, and surviving near zero temperatures.

By August, we novice skiers started looking forward to winter and would read national weather reports looking for
snow. Binghamton, NY is only a five or six hour drive away from the Vermont ski resorts of Stowe, Killington, and Sugar Bush. We spent many weekends mastering these difficult slopes.

In 1976 while on academic leave, assigned to the Department of Energy, I went to an energy conference in Snowbird, Utah. A friend had told me they had the greatest powder snow in the US. Not realizing the impact of a few beers at 8,000 feet, I purchased two timeshare units for two weeks in January. The new ski dates fit into my profession, since the state closed the University during the energy crisis in January in the 1970s because they couldn’t afford to heat the buildings.

At first skiing on powder was extraordinary, but I kept falling into the soft snow since I only knew how to ski on hard pack and ice. To fully enjoy the snow, I signed up for a week’s lessons. After teaching us how to turn in the soft powder, the instructor told me to take off my skis. Crestfallen, I thought I was being kicked out of the class. She took a file from her jacket and dulled my ski’s razor edges. We used sharp edges to cut into the ice in the East so we wouldn’t fall. She said they were too sharp, since my turns ended by skiing up the hill. Relieved, I put on my dull skis and made turns like the rest of the class.

For the first several years, the Snowbird slopes were always all powder in January with not a ray of sunlight bouncing off a shred of ice. Fifteen years later, ice became common on some of the trails facing the sun.

Twenty-one years after my first run down Regular Johnson, the lower slopes had great skiing being covered in hard-packed snow. But, the high altitude Regulator Johnson trail was encased in ice except in the wooded areas five hundred yards away and only a hundred yards lower in altitude than the chair lift. I should have remembered
to sharpen my edges, but I didn’t. The week before, Sonny Bono was killed skiing in Lake Tahoe. Skiers reacted by buying and wearing ski helmets. I sneered as I rode the chair lift and below me saw wimps wearing a multitude of ski helmets. They had to be dangerous since they restricted a skier’s vision. An expert skier would never need to wear one. Besides a ski helmet would not protect me if I ran into a tree.

I tentatively, started traversing the slope aiming at the woods. Less than thirty yards from the chair lift, my left or bottom ski slipped. I tried to recover, by picking up the ski and placing it on the track to the woods, but gravity defeated me. In slow motion, I started sliding down the slope. As designed, my skis fell off so they wouldn’t injure me. Gravity accelerated me and soon I bounced down the glistening ice-covered slope. In my fearless youth, I took up mountain climbing. As I learned when I fell, I tried to keep my feet below me to protect my head. Only partially successful, my head bounced off hard-ice moguls, protrusions of ice from one to ten feet tall set on the slope. Skier’s carving action on the snow as they go down the mountain develop the moguls. As I fell on a run hundreds of yards long, I wondered if my fall would ever end. I kept bouncing and turning. After an undetermined period, I crashed into a mountain road and stopped five feet before a cliff studded with bone-crushing boulders and sharp piercing pine tree branches.

When it ended, I caught my breath never fearing I was seriously hurt. I looked back up the mountain in awe, thinking I did that, partially proud of myself. I saw a trail of twenty-dollar bills adorning my path. Upon examination, I discovered my pants had split and my wallet was missing.

On the slope above, I saw a ski patrol member picking up the twenties, with my wallet and skis in his hands. When he reached me, he said, “Are you injured?”

“I’m fine.” I didn’t feel any pain.
“We usually have to call a helicopter after falls like that on Regulator Johnson. You slid over two-thousand feet.”
I thanked myself for trying to keep my feet below my head.
“Can you get up?”
I did, and he handed me my skis, money, and wallet.
After I put on my skis, he asked me, “Are you planning to ski the rest of the afternoon?”
“No, I’m going to ski down, go to my room, have a beer, and never ski on ice again.”
“Wise man. Since I’m still concerned, I’ll follow you down the mountain to see if you’re okay.”
I began skiing. Realizing I had a professional audience, I executed perfect turns. I waved good-bye to my ski patrol rescuer after he said, “You’re fine. Take it easy the rest of the day.”
I skied directly to my condo. I felt great that I knew how to fall on a horrendous mogul-filled slope and came out undamaged.
After stowing my skis in my locker I took the elevator to the ninth floor, entered my room and proceeded directly to the refrigerator, took out a beer can, opened it and chugged half its contents. I looked out the window to the slope and saw many skiers getting up after falling. I hoped they weren’t hurt and had a survival instinct as good as mine.
Turning on my laptop I sat at the dinner table and began searching my email. One from a beach friend, Mary Lou, attracted my attention. I opened it and read,
You should call your ex-girlfriend Gail to give her your condolences. Her son Paul, who had Huntington’s disease committed suicide, since he didn’t want to go through what his father had.
“Gail, I’m sorry to hear about your son. I hope you’re okay.”
“Frank, I don’t understand you. It sounds like you said, ‘How is your dog Greg?’”

“That has no resemblance to what I said. You phone must not be working.” What is she talking about? I called to make her feel better and she’s criticizing my speech.

“I still don’t understand you. Did you fall?”

“Yes, I just returned from a two-thousand foot slide on a steep expert slope, Regulator Johnson,” I said proudly, trying to impress her since she had seen the trail.

“I hope you can understand me. My deceased husband fell. After he stood up, he couldn’t speak straight. He had a concussion. Please get to the infirmary and have a doctor examine you.”

“Okay.” She talked a few minutes about her son, whom we both know had threatened suicide several times.

Since I felt good after I hung up, I didn’t follow her advice. My second beer did not taste as good as the first, but continued to relax me. I turned on the TV. I realized Gail was correct when I couldn’t remember the beginning of the sentence when it reached its end. While I had no physical pain, when I stood up to go to the front desk, I had little control of my body. I swayed and had to hold on to a chair, the kitchen counter, and the wall as I walked to the condo door. My self-assurance vanished as I rode down the elevator and hobbled to the front desk.

The desk clerk, asked, “Are you okay?” The seriousness of his face told me he didn’t think so. I summarized my ski accident. His perplexed look, told me I still could not talk straight.

“I’ll call the EMS staff. What is your room number?”

“907.”

Someone should be there in a few minutes. My gait and the exchange with the desk clerk deepened my fear and depression.
Five minutes after returning to my condo, I heard a knock on the door. The EMS gentlemen told me his name, which I immediately forgot. We both sat down and he said, “I’m going to ask you a few questions. It should only take a few minutes.”

Within thirty seconds, he was on his cell phone. “I need an ambulance sent to the Iron Blosam. Make arrangements for a transfer to a Salt Lake City hospital.”

His conversation stunned me.

After the new EMS crew arrived, they placed me on a stretcher, wheeled me to the ambulance, and loaded me inside. They started to take vital measurements of my pulse, blood pressure, oxygen content of my blood, temperature, and eye movement as we drove half way done the mountain to meet the hospital’s ambulance. The attendant kept talking to me asking me about my family, where I lived, and how I liked skiing. I’m sure he didn’t understand my garbled answers. I didn’t realize EMS personnel talked so much.

They rushed me into the emergency room and a physician examined me.

I couldn’t help but realize that during the examination, the nurses kept talking to me. They wanted to know about my life, where I was from, my work, almost anything. They kept smiling forcing me to answer their questions. I wondered why. I assumed they were flirting. My brain’s muddled male ego convinced me that even on a stretcher I was a catch. A week later, safe in warm Washington, DC, a nurse friend told me they talked so I didn’t fall asleep, since I might not wake up if I had a serious concussion. My male ego had deceived me.

The physicians in the first hospital didn’t have the proper tools to make a satisfactory diagnosis, and they sent me to a second so they could take an MRI of my skull. My first MRI experience frightened me more than the fall. I never knew a
medical device could be so claustrophobic.

My doctor told me three small blood vessels in my head had burst. My ex-girlfriend was correct. They released me two days later, and I took a bus back to my Snowbird condo. I didn’t ski for the remainder of my stay, knowing how close I had come to dying, but I did buy a ski helmet for next year.

The next Saturday I went to the condo lobby to wait for my limo ride to the airport. A dozen other skiers shared the lobby. I noticed, while I didn’t have outward signs of injury, over half my travel companions did. They either had casts on their legs, arms, or hands, or walked haltingly with a cane.

For those who say the effects of global warming won’t appear for twenty years, must never have skied in the Rockies. I and other skiers experienced global warming twenty years ago, and it almost killed me.

Sunday Afternoon
By James Fielder

It was a warm Sunday afternoon as we drove down the long gravel lane leading to my Grandfather's farm. Sunday between milking's and after church was always the best time to visit. The lane had fresh deep gullies from the angry torrents of rainwater that had washed the loose gravel down the lane during yesterday's late afternoon thunderstorm that brought torrential wind, hail, rain and devastation to his farm.

Dad motioned with a nod of his head to the left to look out the rolled window at field of flattened barley. There were some small pockets of hope with the stems of bearded barley standing proudly with heads held high as if in defiance to mother nature’s wrath that had ruined the remainder of the crop. But the patterns of destruction were overwhelming, there were some survivors as a few heavy ripe barley heads still hung in a desperate fight against gravity and its insistent pull. I knew the long hours of hard work it had taken to plow, disc, till and prepare the soil for the seed that was to provide winter’s feed for the large dairy herd of milk cows. We were supposed to help with the harvest the following day and now the thrashing would need to wait for the barley and field to dry.

Dad said, "Your Grandfather will be sick at the loss of half of his grain crop."

We drove further past the act of devastation as I tried desperately to think of what I could possibly say to my Grandfather. He was a gentle man who wore his years on his face like the roads on a parchment map. A big man of great reflection and kindness always ready to share a glass of fresh cold whole milk and some of his treasured Oreos, secreted on top of his refrigerator. I simply must think of something
to say. When the time came all I could say was, “Granddaddy, how do you pick up the pieces after a storm like that?”

A man of few words, he took me gently by the hand and said, “Let’s go for a walk.” I was about to learn something really important. He then said, “Let’s walk to the barn as I have something to show you.” We walked down the hill through the yard past his proud garden, the heifer barn and arrived at the big dairy barn. He opened the stall door and said, “There, now you see how I start new each day, there is always an awakening after the storm.” In front of me lay a fresh new Guernsey calf, born the night before after the storm.

He held my hand and as we walked quietly back up the hill to his home, he simply said, “Always remember it’s not the storm that matters, it’s what you do after the storm that sets your plate.”

James Fielder has previously published in Pen In Hand. He writes about his grandfather’s farm, Krome Hill, 1955. He is a member of South Baltimore Chapter of MWA.
My daughter and I sewed and donated nine hundred face masks between March 1 and November 30, 2020. This is their story.

During the early days of the pandemic—before it had been officially announced as such—information about the virus gave little understanding or solace. A virus, measured in nanometers (about 1/600th the size of a human hair, I read) grabbed and held the world's attention. In late January, Wuhan was in close-down for the next eighty days. In February, COVID-19 had spread to the Middle East, Italy, and South Korea.

In light of these events, our family—we live in a multigenerational home—began self-isolation in late February. This raised an unexpected question: What should I do to replace my daily routines? The whirl of opinions over whether or not to wear face masks left me unsettled. The expanding COVID-19 infection rates pointed to why face masks mattered, despite the void in national or state guidance. I realized then that that sewing and donating face masks was my solution to the daily routines question.

I liberated my venerable 40-year-old Pfaff sewing machine from the closet and inventoried my collection of fabrics and threads. I had enough supplies to begin making masks. I watched hundreds of YouTube mask-making tutorials. JoAnne’s Fabrics, a major retailer for all things sewing, also featured tutorials and offered online supplies for sale.

I selected a curved mask style and decided on ear loops. I realized I’d need muslin for mask linings, as well as elastic for ear loops. When I ordered them from JoAnne’s, a shipping delay message appeared as soon as I pushed the order button: four weeks or more. No elastic was available at all. I checked Amazon. Nothing there, either. Meanwhile, I created the mask
pattern, used my own fabrics and threads to make prototypes, and waited. Until elastic was available, I decided to make masks with ties.

One day, my daughter came into my sewing room, sat at the Pfaff, and started sewing. She tweaked the prototype I had made—it needed to fit more snugly, without gaps. Our sewing efforts accelerated.

Where to donate? Sources arrived through personal contacts and the neighborhood listserv. Callouts came for donations to homeless shelters, foster homes, churches serving immigrant communities. There were mask drop-offs at a local county health center and a collection box inside our community center.

During my childhood, I often heard, “Bad things come in threes.” Just when we had established a strong sewing rhythm, the “three things” mantra laughed at us. In May, without warning, my Pfaff stopped working. The on-off switch was dead. We turned to family members to borrow a sewing machine. My daughter, an only child, married into a large family; her husband is one of eleven. Within a day we had a sewing machine. The second challenge? It worked but not without drama. Something always went awry. As long as I kept the instruction manual and You Tube handy, we continued. Third, by June we missed the Pfaff enormously. I drove it to my sewing repair shop, which had reopened part time. Customers were not allowed inside. A space was provided outside to fill out a repair form and leave the machine. I was completing the form when the shop owner appeared. I explained the Pfaff’s problem. “There is nothing I can do,” he said. The Pfaff was too old; they did not have parts. I inquired about a replacement. He recommended a Viking Emerald 116, Swedish made. The catch? The back-order date was January 2021. I paid for the Viking and advanced on the wait list. We continued with the borrowed machine and its idiosyncrasies.
According to the childhood legend, good things should now happen. One did. An email arrived from a friend, an experienced quilter. During her stay-at-home sheltering she had cleared her shelves of boxes of fabric, now in thirteen garbage-sized bags. Would I like them? Yes! After we received the bags, I spent two days sorting, piece by piece. There was no way I would use so much. Time to share. I queried the local mask-making groups. Six bags of fabric soon found a home. Win-win.

On November 30 I donated the last of the masks, nine hundred total. Had we set a goal of nine hundred masks? Of any number? No. My daughter and I sat at the sewing machine whenever we could. No stress. I was amazed we’d produced nine hundred.

But less easy to grasp was the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths during our mask-making months. When we’d begun our facemask journey, the global number of COVID-19 cases was 222,643, with 9,115 deaths. By mask nine hundred, the totals were 66,673,093 and 1,531,153. I saw the same escalated pattern throughout the US, our state, our county, and our city. It’s hard to see an end in sight even with the hope of a vaccine.

I feel upbeat not only about making and donating nine hundred masks but also the current CDC guideline: Wear masks indoors at all times. At last, a strong, clear message. Will we continue making masks? Probably. And I’ll smile on the day I recognize on a local face the fabric that’s protecting another’s life.

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Deanna Crouse is a member of the Montgomery County Chapter of MWA. A longtime resident of Silver Spring and Takoma Park, Maryland, Deanna writes personal essays and memoir. A chapter on Asking Powerful and Effective Questions was published in *Improving Aid Effectiveness in Global Health* (Springer, 2015).
Uncle Pat Foley had two laughs. The first laugh sounded like fast pistol shots. The other one was like a plunger on a deep hole, sucking laugh after laugh from his lungs in slow, deep, rich pleasure. The first time we met -- I was five. Uncle Pat had put out his hand, man to man -- he was a tall and bony sailor, dressed in white -- and, man to man, he crushed every bone in my hand. That had happened a long time ago, when Uncle Pat was Superman. Now he was better than Superman, he said. He was a law student. He worked in the Foley and Foley office downtown as Foley No. Two for a while -- and he went to law school at night.

So he would have missed the Committee meeting at the Silver Spring Armory, too. But next morning, say, just before lunchtime, he’d be lounging in the blue flowered easy chair by the front door, laughing, as my father told about it again. I’d be sitting on the edge of the davenport, hearing more of what my father had been telling my mother at breakfast. All of us sipping Cokes. In the fresh light my mother on the arm of the television chair, in the blouse and skirt she wore grocery shopping, eyeing her husband with a watchful smile. My father pacing between, back and forth before the gilt mirror on the green wall. At times I glance up at four arms gesticulating, two mouths, and hands scratching two curly heads.

"Sooo," my father, halting, fingers scratching in his tall curls, would sweep one arm. "Colonel Lee polls the precinct chairmen. We're standing around, talking, very crowded, and it's a very excited crowd. Suddenly Ward Caddington walks up, the Chairman of the State Central Committee takes me aside, 'Jack,' he says, 'Brooke.' Brooke. To his closest friends the Colonel is Brooke."
I laugh, wrinkling my nose. "Brooke?"

"Brooke. It's an old Maryland name, goes back in his family two hundred, three hundred years. Now listen. Ward Caddington says, 'Brooke is very impressed with the support you have here. We're trying to put together a Harmony Ticket. 'Hah money, Hominy Ticket. We want Hominy.'"

Uncle Pat laughs; we all laugh.

"'We're putting together a Hominy Ticket and we'd like you to be on it.' What could I say?"

Bugging eyes, he holds his hands out like wings, and shrugs, and we laugh again.

My mother cocks her head and lowers an eyebrow.

"But wasn't this an issue in the last two elections?"

"What?"

"It seems to me that last time you were against these endorsements by the State Central Committee."

"When was I against being endorsed!"

A confused smile wrinkles her forehead.

"When you ran for the State Central Committee. When you ran for Delegate to State Convention."

"What?" say I. "You ran for something else?"

"I ran for the Committee in the Primary in 1950. I finished 13th in a field of 13!" He says it with a tough, proud mouth. Uncle Pat's lungs began to suck into a laugh. "I ran for Delegate to State Convention in the '52 Primary, and finished 8th in a field of 9! And got 7,000 votes!"

Uncle Pat's laugh is deep and rich.

"And I was the only candidate whose margin increased from '50 to '52."

"But you lost?"

"Of course!"

"But I never knew you ran for something."

"There's a very good reason for that." He sticks out his eyes and tongue."I never campaigned."
"But--."
"I only spent fifty cents to put my name on the ballot to see how many people would vote for me."
"The Holy Names," Pat smiles, "and the Knights of Columbus."
My father’s eyebrows shrug.
"As Election Day approached I got a little nervous, so I spent two dollars and fifty cents to print up a little green card, just for our precinct. I got 3100 votes. In '52 I did the same thing, only I didn't put out a card, and I got 7,000 votes! I was the only Democrat in the County who got more votes in '52 than he got in '50."
"But you lost."
"Of course I lost, I didn't campaign."
"But I don't understand--."
"Then I founded the Kensington Democratic Club, two days after Eisenhower's landslide in ‘52. Disaster creates opportunity for the opportune."
Uncle Pat laughs.
"The opportune!"
"But you still haven't answered my question," my mother breaks in with a suspicious smile, making the point with her finger. "In those Primaries you came out against slates endorsed by the State Central Committee. And now you're accepting their endorsement."
"Do you want me to reject it? Do you want me to get on the phone to Ward Caddington and tell him, 'I've reconsidered, I don't want your endorsement!?' He stares at her, wagging his head, his lips making big round enunciations, hands turned humbly to his chest.
"No. No. No," says she with a scowl. "I didn't say that, I'm just asking."
"You want me to say," fingertips to chest, "I fling your kind endorsement back in your face?"
"No, No!" The corners of her mouth stretch, irritated. "Let me finish!"

Uncle Pat, laughing, waves his hand.

"Jack! Jack!" He throws his arm forward. "All Lucy is pointing out is that in your ... vaulting ambition to become a Judge of the Orphans' Court, you seem to have compromised some youthful idealism."

She laughs, but her eyes are sharp.

"I'm not even saying it's so " she says quickly."All I meant was to make the observation ."

"But your observation was critical," her husband gestures, as though he were placing a big stone in front of her, twice. "Your tone was critical."

I try to break in, but I don't understand what they’re arguing about.

"Jack," says Uncle Pat. "When nobody endorsed you, you refused to be endorsed."

"I attacked Organization endorsements." He jabs the air with a heroic finger, laughing the laugh he laughed when he was caught.

"But now that you have matured with experience." Uncle Pat's forehead furrows wisely. "You have come to appreciate that getting endorsed is not such a bad thing."

"And I didn't ask for it!" Hands out, head shaking, again bug eyed. "They asked me! It's a free country. If they believe I am eminently well qualified to be a Judge of the Orphans' Court -- if they feel moved to endorse my ability, and my integrity, how can I repudiate anyone who endorses my integrity?"

They all laugh; I give up trying to understand.

"Why, they even asked Gene Ruppert to step down and take another place on the ticket. Ruppert is on the Court, now."

"Haaa. So." Pat takes a long swallow of Coke and smacks
his lips. "So you'll wait till next time to run for House of Delegates." There is a laugh in his brother's face.

"Well you see, Ward Caddington told me, 'We don't feel you're strong enough yet to run for the House of Delegates, but we feel you'd make an excellent Judge of the Orphans' Court."

Pat listens, his laugh beginning deep, then breaking off like gunfire; we all laugh.

"So, when do you file?" he says finally.

He is told.

"But we're not waiting till then to start campaigning. The K.C.'s have a Communion Breakfast coming up next week. It will be our – debut. We'll ."

"Who's we?" my mother tosses, with an eye sliding from her husband to his brother to her husband. "Since when are wives invited to Communion Breakfasts?"

"The Boy and I." Me. "Oh there'll be many meetings, many many functions funk shuns, I like that word, funk shuns where you and I will be in attendance."

She eyes him narrowly, nodding, nodding, the corner of her smile curling in a peculiar way. I know it well. We'll see, it says.

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Yes, we miss our old lives. Or we don’t. We want to shout into the wind, and perhaps need to shout at ourselves. We’re finally immersed in the monotonous details of our every day.

There was a tropical storm this morning. Dark and swirling. Threatening flash floods.

Get away from the windows.

Come downstairs.

Get off the porch.

The trees are old and tall. Canopies sway and twist, holding against the wind and risking themselves. The upturned leaves of the knotty oak stretch to funnel the rain to its feet.

Our dinky pier is swallowed by the muddy, brackish river. The air hangs still despite the ruckus.

In this new normal, we must lean on ourselves.

We hunker into it. Pillow forts and jigsaw puzzles and so many books. Watercolor paints. Slime recipes. Guacamole and chips for lunch.

The electricity flickers over and over for a few hours. Until it doesn’t. Until the blue sky sighs hello and the birds gather back to their watercooler.

Is it weird that I miss the storm?

I step onto the grass, crisp at attention having shed the old. A tangle of zinnias rebounds after the torrent. The hydrangeas elbow each other for sun yet refuse to bloom this season. A confetti of branches, bark and broken acorns lay martyred atop the heavy verdant floor of moss.

Earthworms scatter the steamy road, each separate and stranded in a draining puddle of their own choosing, in view of bluejays, the warriors of the woods. I aid a chunky
earthworm emigrate to the base of the peonies. A toad observes from his hosta overhang. I wonder if the worm imagines me an ogre or a savior.

Purple hearts unravel vines, each juncture filled with a quarter-teaspoon of fresh rain, garnished with a single pink bloom. A hummingbird cocktail. I pull Virginia creeper from the decaying trunk the children have dubbed the fairy garden. A tribe of blue buttons snap up for breath and sun. The hollies install drip gardens at their bases, unwittingly offering a series of watering holes for woodpeckers and squirrels alike.

We are an anonymous community, all following our cravings and offering innate and accidental help. Every soul is renewed and once again able reach for its prize.

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Loud music filled the room, making it hard to hear anything else. The radio was new, delivered from Italy or France or someplace. Its owners were new, too. Or at least, newly returned. Ilka could only conjure a watery outline of them in her mind from before the war. A young couple – David and Hilda – who had lived a few doors down from her family in the Bašcaršija, the old part of Sarajevo. David had a cousin in America, a cousin who had the money to get them out when things went sour. And so they left, and now they were back, with their white smiles and their tailored clothes and their radio.

Ilka fingered the threadbare hem of her sleeve as she watched Hilda, now well into her thirties, shift her hips in time to the music and maneuver through the crowded apartment. Hilda's red lips parted into a hostess' smile as she distributed tiny glasses of rakija – plum brandy – to the partygoers, who looked to Ilka like a whirling collection of scarecrows in loose-fitting suits. She couldn't fault Hilda for the ebullience. Now was the time to breathe again. The war was over and it was, they said, time to start living.

The radio was large, lacquered wood, and it sat prominently on the living room sideboard. It was relief, Ilka thought, not revelry, that spurred the drinking, the dancing, the lingering glances. Ilka leaned back against the wall, craning her neck towards Neti.

"What is this song, Neti?"

Neti shrugged. "I don't know; French or something?"

Hilda sauntered past them, a bottle of rakija in her hand, laughing and shaking her head. "Glenn Miller. You don't know him?" She raised the bottle. "Refill?"

Neti proffered her glass and Hilda poured.
"I know you," Hilda hiccupped and pointed an unsteady finger at Ilka. "You're the Alkalaj girl, yes? Herzl's child?"

"I am."

Hilda's foggy eyes drifted over Ilka's face and body, as if trying to extract the child she once knew from the woman before her. Her gaze landed on Ilka's left leg, the withered one. Ilka tucked her left foot behind her right leg and cleared her throat.

"Are you back for good?" Neti scratched at her arm and narrowed her eyes at Hilda.

"Not if we can help it. Just here to collect the rest of our things, then on to Palestine."

A man in thick-soled shoes stepped on Ilka's left foot as he passed. Ilka winced and buckled; Neti grabbed her by the arm before she went to the ground entirely. Ilka shook her off.

"You got anyone here in Sarajevo, Ilka?" Hilda said.

"Not exactly."

"Ever consider Palestine? Everyone's going if they can."

"I can't. I'm waiting for someone."

Hilda put a maternal hand on Ilka's shoulder as the music picked up in tempo. "If he's not back by now, honey, he's not coming back." A trombone wailed and someone called Hilda's name. She turned quickly, waving a hand high in the air as she walked back to the dancefloor. "You think about it."

Neti sniffed. "What a drag she is. Coming back just to show off and leave again."

"She's not so bad."

"So you haven't found anything, yet, about your friend?"

"No."

"What was her name again?"

"Maria Horvat."

"Excuse me, miss, would you like to dance?"
A tall, thin man in the brown suit stepped out of the crowd and offered a sweaty hand to Neti. She glanced at Ilka. "Go."

Neti extended her thin arm and with a flick of the wrist she was lost in the churning crowd. Ilka sighed and pressed herself into the corner, wincing. The scar on her leg still throbbed, a year later.

It had happened a year ago. Ilka had been standing on the dock at Split, one of the liberated cities. Barely eighteen years old; holding tight to Maria's hand. They had come so far together – the midnight escape from Sarajevo, the journey by car and foot to Croatia, and here they were, nearly safe. The ship to Italy, to freedom, bobbed passively next to them.

Ilka, still in her brown Partisan fatigues, urged Maria onto the ship. You go; I'll meet you at the convent in Assisi. Maria had begged her: please come. You've done so much. You've fought so hard. You've saved so many. It's your turn. Come with me.

Ilka had held Maria's eyes, brown like a mountain, in her own. "I can't; not yet."

And then Maria kissed her. There, in plain daylight, for everyone to see. A war raged around her, each horror more shocking than the last, and yet it was this – a kiss – that had thrown her into the greatest turmoil she had ever known.

The scent of her hair, the brush of her eyelashes against her cheek, the warmth of her breath. It wasn't more than a moment, but it was the only moment. They pressed their foreheads together; Ilka traced her fingers along Maria's temples, her chin, the Miraculous Medal that hung delicately along her collarbone. She didn't care who saw them.

"I'll meet you in Assisi."

"I'll wait for you."

And then Maria had sailed away, the setting sun illuminating her face as the ship drew out of the harbor. The
wind whipped up, and Maria had pressed herself up against the rails of the ship, her gaze unwavering as she grew distant on the horizon.

And that's when it had happened. One final menace from the Germans. The speedboats raced into the harbor, aiming straight for the metal sides of a British frigate anchored at the pier. It happened so fast: the whine of accelerating speedboats, the near-simultaneous explosions, the smell of burning oil and twisted metal. The explosions ripped a hole – a giant flesh wound – in the side of the British frigate. Ilka had been standing right next to it. She had seen the speedboats approaching; a frown of alarm spreading across her face. She looked from the speedboats to the dock behind her. She had willed her feet to run, but her eyes had turned once more to the horizon, to the departing ship, to Maria.

On the far side of the dance floor, Ilka watched Neti, wrapped up in a young man's arms, kicking her legs in time to the snap of a snare drum. Another man stepped into Ilka's view.

"Excuse me, would you like to dance? My name is Solomon Kabilio," he said, avoiding Ilka's gaze and blushing below his pale blue eyes.

Ilka smirked at the formality. "Hello Solomon Kabilio; my name is Ilka Alkalaj."

"TheIlka Alkalaj? The Partisan fighter?"

"The very same."

Solomon looked everywhere but Ilka's face. "Oh, sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

Solomon blushed even harder. "I didn't mean to... approach a married woman."

"I'm not married."

He tilted his head. "Oh; but I heard you were married."

"Where would you have heard that?"

"When I was in Italy during the war, I heard...they told
me...you had married an American and left."

"America? I was never in America."

In fact, she had never even made it to Italy. After the accident, she had awoken in a Croatian hospital ward, clean and white, nurses hovering over her.

"This leg will never fully heal," the doctor had said with a thick accent, shaking his head. Ilka had drifted into and out of consciousness, certain that she could hear the nurses and doctors calling the name Maria. How did they know about her Catholic lover, the woman waiting for her across the sea, where the war had already ended? She saw the blurry image of a priest at the foot of her bed, making the sign of the cross. I must be dead, she thought.

"Where is Maria?" Ilka whispered one morning as a nurse fed her chicken broth.

"Oh, my dear, your injury was severe; I know this all must be very confusing for you."

"Where is Maria?"

"Why, you're Maria, dear," said the nurse. "Maria Horvat from St. Joseph's parish in Sarajevo." The nurse had fished through Ilka's purse and produced a few small pieces of paper, which she pressed into Ilka's red-scratched palm before hurrying off to deliver more soup.

"I'm not Maria," Ilka said to the fast-moving nurses and semi-conscious convalescents nearby. "I'm Jewish."

She looked down at the papers the nurse had pressed into her hand. They were identity papers. Ilka looked again. Maria's identity papers. She shook her head; it felt thick and fuzzy. How?

She thought back to the last moment on the dock, with Maria. They had kissed. Then Ilka had turned away, just for a moment, to help a porter with Maria's luggage. And Maria had done something; put something in her purse. Ilka didn't pay much mind to it, but now...
Ilka fell back onto her pillow, tears leaking onto the starched white cotton, the purpose of Maria's sleight of hand becoming clear. She and Maria looked enough alike – brown hair, brown eyes, same age, same height. Maria had, in that final moment on the dock, slipped a Catholic identity into her purse, a pass to travel without fear, to conduct others to safety. Ilka closed her eyes. But what did it mean for Maria? Traveling without any sort of identity, in the midst of a war.

"We'll find each other," Ilka had whispered to the white walls of the hospital ward. "We'll find each other, Maria."

"Do you want to dance, then?" Solomon cleared his throat.

Ilka shifted her weight onto her right leg, the scar on her left aching from a night on her feet. "Not at the moment, but I'd like to ask you something."

Solomon looked sore, but he blinked it back. "Sure."

"When were you in Italy?"

"1944. That's where I heard about you. The famous Ilka Alkalaj. We all thought you had died."

"I almost did."

Solomon nodded. "I remember it so well. I was hiding at this convent in Assisi."

Ilka pressed her hands to the wall behind her. The convent in Assisi. Solomon was still talking.

"...and this girl there, brown hair, about our age. She kept asking for you. Every person who came to the convent, she asked about you. 'Have you seen Ilka Alkalaj? Have you seen Ilka Alkalaj?' She never stopped asking. And finally, we got the word from one of the other refugees – you had died. Died in a ship explosion."

Ilka slid down the wall.

"Hey, are you alright?" Solomon reached out a hand.

"And what happened...to the girl?"

"Oh, she lost it." Solomon frowned against the memory.
"She was... a wreck. She left soon after that. I don't know where she went. I never knew her name."

"Maria." Ilka looked up, tears in her eyes. "Her name was Maria."

Solomon blushed again and looked away. "I'm sorry."

Ilka blinked away the tears and took Solomon's hand. He pulled her to her feet and swallowed, looking towards the kitchen.

"Look, I'm going to go get a drink, do you...?"

"No; I'll be fine." Ilka gave a brisk wave.

Solomon pressed his hand into hers. "An honor to meet you, though."

"One more thing – who told you I was married?"

Solomon gave a half grin and scratched at his temple, as if drawing out a memory.

"Some guy I knew in Italy who was helping process refugees to America. Swore he did the transit paperwork for Ilka Alkalaj. Said you had become a Catholic and married an American. I didn't believe him; but he swore it. Said you were even wearing a Miraculous Medal." Solomon chuckled. "That guy drank a lot, though."

Solomon ambled through the crowd in the direction of the kitchen.

The room tightened around her; Ilka needed air. She made for the door, pressing her arms against the sides of the narrow entryway.

Maria had waited for her. Maria had thought her dead. Maria had taken her name.

"I didn't die, Maria." Ilka whispered. The pulse of Glenn Miller and his orchestra sent vibrations through the thin walls of the dark apartment. She heard the screech of a woman's laughter. "I'm still here."

"There you are, I was looking for you." Neti grabbed Ilka by the elbow.
"Where's your man?"
Neti scoffed. "Man? He's a boy. I won't even bother."
Ilka dabbed at the corner of her eye.
"Hey, what's wrong?"
"Neti, I found Maria."
"She's here? At the party?"
"No; she's in America."
"Oh, Ilka. That's wonderful. You can go find her."
Ilka blinked, and a tear traced a line down her cheek. "I can't, Neti."

Neti tilted her head and put a hand on Ilka's shoulder, the dim light casting their expressions into shadow. Neti's man reappeared at her side. "Can I walk you home, Neti?"

Neti turned and smiled, slipping her arm through his. She leaned into Ilka. "He's not a terrible boy, I guess. But...I can stay, if you like?"

"No, no." Ilka waved her off. "Enjoy."

Ilka looked around; it was time to go anyway. She gave a distant wave to Hilda, who was refilling glasses in the kitchen.

"Think about Palestine." Hilda mouthed the words to her over the din.

Ilka left the apartment and started down the building's worn concrete staircase. From an apartment above, she could smell soup and freshly baked bread. Her knee locked up and she grasped at the handrail, lifting her left foot off the ground.

"Can I help you, miss?"
The man was short and muscular, and he settled a fedora on his head as he closed the door to Hilda's apartment.
"I'll be fine, thank you." Ilka took a breath and tried to stand straight.
"I'll just walk alongside you then, if I may?"
Ilka nodded.
"Aron," he said, extending a hand. Ilka's knee jerked beneath her again and he caught her with a free hand. She let out a shuddery breath and rubbed at the scar on her leg. She closed her eyes and saw Maria's mountain-brown gaze, resolute and eternal, drifting into the horizon.

Aron cleared his throat. "And what's your name?"

In Hilda's apartment behind them, the music stopped, leaving a sudden silence that rang in Ilka's ears. Someone had bumped the radio. They heard a voice yell an obscenity, followed by a cascade of laughter.

"Maria," Ilka said, catching her footing and extending her hand in return. Her voice echoed in the silence of the stairwell, and her heart beat faster as she said it out loud. "Maria is my name."

Ilka was dead. Ilka was alive. Alive and married to an American. Dead and living in Sarajevo with a bum leg.

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Staring out at the horizon from the third story window, plain as day, I saw myself leisurely lounging on Inti Beach as was initially planned. Freed temporarily from the trammels of accountability. Sipping frozen Basil Martini’s, lulled by the gentle cadence of waves placidly tapping the Caribbean shoreline. The warm Mexican sun toasting my skin. Basking in eighty-plus degree temperatures.

And then my fanciful daze vanished quickly like a fata morgana at sea. Beyond my glum refection in the glass, what appeared outside instead – was the gray, barren expanse of winter. Shrouded in fog and mist, in all its dusky, dreary, bleakness.

When I planned this trip months ago, spending it in a hospital hadn’t been part of the plan. It was to have been a quiet week long retreat at Playa del Carmen. Completely alone. A much anticipated breather from the madness of the Christmas holidays, the mounting pressures of work, and the ubiquitous strain of living in LA. A quiet antidotal reboot. Happy as a clam at high water.

Brooding selfishly for my lost week’s refuge from the slog of everyday life, I softly whispered.

“THANKS DAD!”

Thinking – Even in a coma, you’re still finding ways to make my life miserable. You couldn’t have chosen another week to die?

Not that I hadn't loved my dad. If I didn't, I wouldn’t be here. But my love for him was finite. Much as his love for me, my older brother Ben and our mother Rose had been.

I got the call from my dad’s best buddy Jack Moretti. They, along with several other friends, were having their daily coffee clutch at Tutti Pazzi Cafe when it happened. I
grabbed the next flight out here.

So here I stare on Christmas Eve. Jack Bianchi. Ambushed by the impulsive whim of fate. My week-long reprieve from the encumbrances of life, inescapably swept away like felled leaves caught in an autumn rush of wind. Staring out a third story window, inside the ICU waiting room of New York-Presbyterian Hospital, with my ex-neighbor Joyce, who has graciously come to lend her support.

Joyce and her then husband Martin, were once our neighbors in the happier times of Christine and our marriage. I’m sure if I were to think long and hard, I might recall a few happy moments that Christine and I shared together. Although unhappiness is hard to mask. Even when infused with copious amounts of alcohol and Klonopin.

I thought to myself – stirred by the existential question – Why dulled clarity was the more preferred choice for some? Myself included. How survival in our bounded world almost always creates a shortsightedness to what may lie beyond it. Why choosing the mind numbing illusion, even when consumed in a cloud of lethargy and despair, as the more preferable option to a life of authenticity. Although that’s hardly a question open to objective debate. As if accepting the circumscribed tedium of one’s bite-sized life was reason enough for your continued existence in it. Believing as I had, that my life as bad as it was, was as good as it was going to get. Such was my lot in life I’d reason. Then you wake up one morning abandoning fear as your shield. Hungover. Kierkegaard whispering in your ear. Your liver shrieking. And just up and walk away from it all. The expulsion of years of abuse. Of a life screaming in the darkness to be found. Awake at last from a Clonazepam and alcohol induced life.

“Mr. Bianchi?”

I turned to see a gray haired, middle aged man dressed in surgical scrubs. I looked at the embroidered name above
his front pocket which read Doctor Moore. His round sallow face etched with concern. No doubt having had delivered this kind of dire news countless times to families before. I waited for him to speak.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news,” – looking at Joyce, then back to me – “can we talk in private?”

“That’s ok Doctor Moore, you can speak freely here. We’re all family.”

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, he continued.

“Your dad has suffered a massive Hemorrhagic Stroke. I’m afraid there was irreparable damage to his brain. We took emergency steps to try and alleviate the swelling surgically, but I’m afraid it was too late. His brain is showing no activity.”

Joyce’s eyes cast to the floor. While I tried desperately to suppress a smile. Hearing Ben’s voice in my head say;

“I’m not sure there was ever any in there to begin with.”

My brother Ben and he had never agreed much on anything. When Ben had been accepted to the University of Albany on a full ride academic scholarship mid-way through his senior year in high school, it played to my dad’s customarily cold, unstirred, indifferent self.

At the beginning of his junior year at Albany, Ben at first thought the headaches, forgetfulness and fatigue were nothing more than the residual effects of the stresses of academic life. Towards the end of the second semester he was diagnosed with AIDS. I was the only one he told.

Shortly after graduating summa cum laude with a BA in art history, for which our dad, no surprise, gave him little to no credit. Figuring Seattle was as far from Bensonhurst as one can possibly get without having to leave the country, he found a job there as a curator in a prestigious gallery downtown. Ben fell in love with the owner Gerald Gibbs,
fifteen years his senior, a man of means, and a well-respected citizen of the emerald city.

As expected, only mom showed up for their wedding. And then began Ben's long estranged relationship with our dad.

Before he would surrender to the enervative latter stages of his illness, Ben and Gerald travelled abroad extensively for months at a time. Spending a good portion of their time at their Italian villa in Tuscany. But as his illness unmercifully progressed, meeting his everyday living needs became more and more of a challenge, Gerald became Ben's full-time caregiver. Giving Ben the kind of unconditional love he had always longed for, but never received from our father.

Seven years after their marriage Ben passed away. My dad never showed for the funeral. A transgression my mom never forgave him for. Not even on her death bed. I'm not sure I ever did either. Or will. Even as he lies this night on his.

I had always thought that in my dad’s measured way of thinking, in my and Ben's pursuit of higher learning, that we were removing ourselves from the only world he knew and could no longer control. That distancing himself emotionally from us was a way of denying his own vulnerability. That shaming and belittling us at any sign of distress or weakness, in truth were the infirmities that he himself harbored.

My dad was a World War II veteran and ran the household very much like he was still in basic training at Fort Jackson. With the emphasis on discipline. Born Salvatore Benafacio Bianchi, he was a compact muscular man, square and squat. Even as Ben and I surpassed him in height later as adolescents, he remained an imposing figure. Although he never raised a hand to either of us growing up, his look alone was more than enough to drive home his message. Like a mood ring, his face would determine the hue of his temperament. The closer it reached the tone of a radish, the certain you were it
was time to implement a hasty retreat.

He grew up at the end of the Depression. The mantra at the time was, ‘Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without.’ These were the words my dad lived and breathed. He was derisively referred to by many in our neighborhood of Bensonhurst as being closefisted. Not one to mince words, my mom, more to the point, called him flippantly, “Ebenezer.”

In the rare event we ever went out to restaurants, usually for only blue-plate specials, my dad only ordered water. He always made his own coffee. And as his girth ballooned over the years, his clothes hadn’t. We drank expired milk, unless we could no longer get it beyond our noses to our lips. I inherited Ben’s hand-me-downs, no matter how ill fitting. We never threw out leftovers and we settled for TV rather than going out to the movies.

Except once a month, when the local drive-in offered a double-feature every third Sunday of the month at a discount. Five bucks for the entire car. No matter how many people could squeeze into it. Our mom packed up the car with bags of Mike & Ikes, M&Ms, Junior Mints and Cheetos. While my brother Ben and I strapped on our holstered six-shooters to our waists on our way to see Jimmy Ringo ride into town yet again in the movie, ‘The Gunfighter.’ A movie we’d seen for the past three months.

Just so our dad would feel as though he was maximizing his five buck investment, he would invite his buddies from work to tag along. His best friend Jack Moretti from high school, for whom I’m named, and Tony Russo, the foreman at the shoe factory where my dad had worked.

But not before each had contributed a dollar to the cause. Then we all jammed ourselves into his 1950 Pontiac Chieftain Catalina Coupe, as tightly as my dad could squeeze a dollar from a dime. And off we went.

My parents had their differences. My mom more often
than not, took the high road. Giving in to my dad’s unyielding steely stubbornness and impenetrable frugality.

“When are we going to buy new furniture Sal?”
“What’s wrong with da furniture we got Rose?”
“Because Sal, we bought this furniture when Eisenhower was in office. And he’s been dead now for ten years.”

Then my dad, sitting upright in his derelict recliner, leaned it back and delivered his “go-to” line dryly.

“But Rose, dis here recliner and me go way back.” As Ben and I giggled watching TV from the couch. Not helping our mom’s appeal in the matter.

Tonight lying in ICU, Salvatore Benafacio Bianchi is hooked up to a ventilator doing what he had been perfectly capable of doing himself for the past 84 years. Sustained on life-support, with tubes running through him like the Harry Pregerson Interchange. Given my dad’s self-regarding nature, this was not remotely how he envisioned his life to end. He wanted to go quickly. We talked about it often, especially in his later years.

“Jack, if fa whadever reason, ya find me one day lyin’ in a hospital bed having no clue what day it is, who da fuck I am, or who you are — pull da fuckin’ plug!”

We talked briefly on only one occasion about his preference for burial. That seemed to be a much harder subject for him to broach. After explaining to him how I thought conventional burial was a waste of valuable resources, environmentally and economically, that cremation was a far better choice – he bluntly interrupted.

“It’s against my religion.”

“Dad when was the last time you stepped inside a church?”

“What’s dat got ta do wit anything? I’m still a Catholic in God’s eyes. Plus, I don’t wanna be like a fuckin’ loaf of Ciabatta comin’ outa the Rimini Bakery oven! Just Fuckin’
bury me in da ground next ta ya motha’. Next subject! Oh, one udder ting. I want da casket closed. I don’t wanna have people comin’ up ta ya tellin’ you how good I look. Nobody eva came up to me and said I looked good before I was dead. Now da gonna fuckin’ say it?”

The doctor put a compassionate hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry Mr. Bianchi. Just let us know what you wish to do from here. If you wish to withdraw life support. If that’s your decision, you can contact one of the nurses at the nurses’ station and we’ll take the necessary steps to carry out your request.”

“Thank you Doctor.”

“Again, Mr. Bianchi, my condolences.”

As the Doctor turned to leave, Joyce threw her arms around me.

“I’m so sorry Jack.”

“Thanks Joyce.”

Releasing myself from the gentle equanimity of her arms, I made my way slowly towards the window.

I don’t know whether my dad had ever found a place for absolution in his heart, beyond the steely differences he and Ben had forged over the years. I tend to think not. My dad chose to never talk about Ben after his death. And had just as little to say while he was alive. Choosing to bury his thoughts and feelings and his inability to express them the only way he knew how. In silence. No doubt a heavy burden to bear and one that he’ll take with him this night to his final resting place.

As a tilted rain lashed feverishly against the glass, I peered into the hazy blear and heard the faint shriek of a siren off in the distance. Muzzling for those affected, like many that sit here tonight waiting on loved ones, the joyful spirit this night intended. Headlights of cars below swept past me heading to obligatory destinations. Delivering either the
excitement of the season, or the burden of commitment. The surface cheer. I continued staring into the turbid gloom of the night. Stuck in a haze. And watched as dog-eared memories and fragments of blunted thoughts hurtled before me in a ruminative squall.

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Joe Recchia is a semi-retired creative director with his own ad agency. He moved to Baltimore from Austin, TX 2 years ago. He is an avid traveler. He belongs to the North Baltimore Chapter of MWA.
It’s 2am at the White House.

The White House operator takes a call from the 24-hour situation room at NASA. The Solar and Helioscopic Observatory (SOHO), a joint NASA-European Space Agency satellite in orbit on the other side of the earth, has just detected an enormous Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) throwing a huge cloud of solar plasma into space. This eruption will produce a geomagnetic storm that will reach Earth in 90 minutes. The storm will produce an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that NASA calculates will be far stronger than the one that struck the earth in 1989. That EMP caused the collapse of a hydroelectric transmission system in Canada leaving 6 million people in the Province of Quebec without power for more than nine hours.

NASA calculates that this geomagnetic storm will produce an EMP equal to a “Carrington Event”. On September 1, 1859 a geomagnetic storm hit the earth shutting down all electrical systems on the planet and producing a phenomenon called an aurora - like the Northern Lights - that was so huge and so bright that it could be seen everywhere on Earth - even at the equator at midday! The magnetic storm was described by a 33-year old British astronomer named Richard C. Carrington, after whom the press named the event. In 1859, the only electrical circuits were for telegraphs. Now, over 150 years later, there would be no lights, no power, no Internet. Total blackout! Everywhere.

The President is awakened, and the staff have the presence of mind to get her to declare a “grid emergency” under the Federal Power Act and turn the responsibility for dealing with it over to the Secretary of Energy.

“Get John Toomey on the line.” President Heather
Forsgren Weaver orders her clearly flustered staff. Turning to the 2 aides standing behind her chair, the President says: “And get Secretary Arundel on the phone and get the Secret Service out to her house with the grid emergency codes.”

“What the hell is going on, John?” The President says into her phone 4 minutes later when the Director of NASA comes on the line.

“Madam President, it’s a huge electromagnetic pulse, and it’s going to hit us dead on. My people tell me there’s been nothing like it for over 150 years. It’s going to take out all of our electrical systems.”

“Take out our electrical systems?!” The President screams into the phone.

“Yes, Madam President. This is the goddamn ‘grid emergency’ that we’ve been driving ourselves crazy about for the last 3 years. If we don’t shut our systems down this EMP will short them out entirely when it hits. Thank God it’s the middle of the night. We’ll only have a couple hundred million teenagers going nuts because their cellphones and computers don’t work. But if we don’t shut down our power plants, they won’t work tomorrow either. Your assistant told me you’ve already contacted Secretary Arundel under the Federal Power Act.”

“Yes, I did.” The President replies.

“Kara doesn’t have a lot of time, Ma’am. Hopefully she’ll be able to get to the really major power plants. And hopefully, they’ll move quickly enough to shut down their grids. It’s going to take quite a few hours, Ma’am, to get the power back on for the whole country...and that’s if the pulse doesn’t cause any other problems.”

“John, I don’t like the sound of that. What do you mean by ‘any other problems’?”

“Madam President, we haven’t been hit by an EMP this
big in over 150 years. Not since a storm called the ‘Carrington Event’ in 1859.”

“So?” The President interjected.

“So, since 1859, Madam President, we humans have pumped hundreds of billions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. We don’t know how the EMP will react with those gases.”

“What do you mean? How could it react?” The President asked.

“Heat, Ma’am, heat. But how much heat, we don’t know because this has never happened before.”

“What are you telling me? How much heat could it possibly generate? A few degrees? Ten degrees? What’s your opinion? What’s really going on here?”

“We don’t know, Mr. President; we just don’t know. Nobody knows. I just had a conversation with your favorite enemy – your climate change scientist buddy over at NOAA, and even he doesn’t know.”

“What did he say?”

“He said it could be a few degrees? Or a few hundred degrees? We just don’t know. So, I’m sorry but I just don’t have a good opinion, Ma’am.”

“Oh my God! A few hundred degrees...! At that temperature, millions of people could boil in their skins! Well, please stay on top of this – minute to minute - with your guys at NASA. And keep me apprised at every step of the way. I’ll tell my operator to put your calls through to me no matter what I’m doing or what time it is.”

“Ok, Madam President. I’ll do that.” Toomey said with little confidence in his voice.

Twenty-five minutes later, the Secret Service arrived at the home of the Secretary of Energy and delivered the instructions for dealing with a grid emergency. She now has less than 15 minutes to deal with the crisis.
As Secretary Kara Arundel looks at the sheets of phone numbers the Secret Service agent gave her and picks up her telephone to dial, she has a flashback to the meeting in the Oval Office with President Weaver and NASA Director John Toomey discussing their ultimately unsuccessful strategy to get Congress to enact a “Cyber Emergency Compact”—a much better and more efficient way to handle grid emergencies like the present crisis.

After six attempted calls with no answers from any of these power companies in the middle of the night, she glances at the clock. It’s been 90 minutes since the NASA warning call to the White House. Just then, the Secretary feels a scorching sensation on her face, arms, and back. It stings terribly. But before she can even cry out, everything goes dark and the phone goes dead.

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The Last Hole
By T. C. Weber

It was unseasonably hot for October. At least it was dry, the golfers agreed. That was the important thing.

The foursome piled out of the golf cart and headed for the tee box. Their young caddies trailed behind, golf bags on their backs.

“Well, this is it!” the oil CEO announced ceremoniously. “Last hole!”

It was a long one, about 500 yards. Tall spruce trees lined either side, but opened up about halfway down the fairway.

The gas CEO, who’d shot a birdie on the 17th hole, was first up. His caddie handed him his favorite driver.

“It’s still my game to lose,” the coal CEO said. By his reckoning, he was in the lead by two.

“We’re all pretty close,” the senator said. The oldest in the group, he was still huffing from the last hole.

The gas CEO placed his ball on the tee and turned to the senator. “I’m impressed how you’re keeping up.”

“Thanks. And thanks again for covering my membership here.”

“Anything for a friend,” the gas CEO said. “We’re all in this together.”

“My son-in-law’s looking for a new job, by the way,” the senator told the others. “He’s as good a PR man as anyone in Washington. Invaluable on my re-election campaign.”

“We’ve always got room for more lobbyists,” the oil CEO said.

“Lucky you,” the coal CEO said. “You’re not getting hammered by gas and solar like I am. The ability to mine wherever we want is worthless if the damn stuff can’t be burned.”

The gas CEO didn’t respond. He focused on his ball, bending his knees and hips slightly, peering downrange.
“America should build more coal plants,” the senator said. “And ensure more are built overseas. We’re the greatest country on Earth, and should strive for nothing less than energy dominance. The whole world’s hungry for coal, gas, and oil, and we can provide it.”

The coal CEO scowled. “We’ve got to recapture public opinion. All that ruckus from so-called scientists about so-called global warming has been bad for business.”

The senator shook his head. “Climate scientists are all radical leftists or in it for the money. They’re playing the same game as the pharma scientists, making up some scare like the coronavirus and profiting from it. If it were up to me, they’d all be behind bars.”

The gas CEO took a practice swing and the others fell silent. He lined up his club, looked downrange, and swung. With a thwack, the ball blasted into the air and arced toward the distant flag marking the hole. It landed on the fairway about 200 yards away, bounced, and rolled to a stop.

“Nice swing,” the senator said.

The coal CEO swung next. His ball landed about twenty yards short of the gas CEO’s. The oil CEO’s landed closer.

The senator was last. He lifted his club, then swung. The club struck the turf in front of the tee, spraying grass and dirt into the air. The ball tumbled off the tee and rolled a distance of two yards.

The CEO’s turned away so the senator wouldn’t see them smirk.

“I’ll take a mulligan,” the senator said. It wasn’t a question.

“What is that, number twenty?” the oil CEO asked.

“Oh, go ahead,” the coal CEO said. “It’s a friendly game.”

The senator placed his ball back on the tee. This time he hit it well downrange. It sliced to the right, though, bouncing into the spruce trees. “Sonofabitch!”

As the golfers and their caddies walked downrange, the
senator complained, “Why are there trees on a golf course anyway? They’re nothing but a pain in the ass!”

The gas CEO’s caddie, an African-American girl, sniffed the air. “Smells like smoke.”

The CEO looked around, sniffed, and responded, “I don’t smell anything.”

The senator found his ball in the underbrush and surreptitiously edged it away from the trees to get a clearer shot.

The CEO’s also nudged their balls when no one was looking. They’d been doing it all day, along with fudging their stroke count. They considered it a natural part of the game. The caddies pretended not to notice, not wanting to ruin their chance at a good tip.

The next turn, their balls reached the end of the fairway. The caddies sniffed the air as they trudged forward with the bags. “Definitely smoke,” the gas CEO’s caddie said.

The tall spruce trees gave way to an open view of the hills beyond. The caddies stopped and stared.

“Hey, get over here,” the gas CEO told his caddie.

“Right.” She hurried over.

“I need my pitching wedge.”

“Umm, are you sure we should stay?”

The CEO stared at her. “What are you talking about? We have to finish the game.”

The caddie bit her lip and handed over the club. “Watch the rise, sir.”

Each of the CEOs hit their balls onto the green. The senator’s landed in a sand trap. “Mulligan,” he said.

“Sure,” the others agreed.

His next swing was better, and got him near the other three. “I’ve got some more legislative overhauls in the works,” he told them as they studied the green.

“Regulations are killing this country,” the coal CEO said. “In the old days, businessmen could do whatever they
needed. And look what those titans accomplished!"

“We’ve already turned back the clock quite a bit,” the senator said. “We’ll be back to the good old days in no time.” He brushed some ash flecks from his immaculate polo shirt.

The foursome ordered up putters from their caddies. The oil CEO sank his ball on the first shot. He pumped the air with his fist, then tallied his final score, fudging the numbers one last time.

The coal CEO sank his ball next, then the gas CEO, and finally, the senator. They compared their final scores. Somehow, they’d managed a four-way tie.

“We all won!” the senator said.

The gas CEO congratulated him. “Knew you had it in you.”

Trailed by their caddies, the partners walked back to their golf cart. Behind them, the caddies began to cough.

“Drinks on me at the clubhouse,” the oil CEO offered.

“Can’t turn that down,” the senator said, rubbing his eyes.

Behind them, writhing orange flames crept down the forested hills overlooking the golf course. The flames leapt up the pine trees and engulfed them. Greasy gray clouds boiled into the sky.

The partners piled into the golf cart. The coal CEO took the driver’s seat. “Hell of a game!” he said as they headed for the clubhouse.

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T. C. (Ted) Weber pursued filmmaking and screenwriting in college. His first published novel was a near-future cyberpunk thriller titled Sleep State Interrupt, the first of a trilogy which was a finalist for the 2017 Compton Crook award. The sequels, The Wrath of Leviathan and Zero-Day Rising, are completed. Mr. Weber runs a monthly writing workshop. He belongs to the Annapolis Chapter of MWA.
The Catch of the Day
By Pamella A. Russell

"What's wrong, Victor?" Dad hollered over to me as he aimed our 22-foot pontoon boat toward the channel marker at the mouth of the Ocean City inlet.

"I think Grandpa is choking," I shouted. He was hunched over the side of the boat, his back heaving up and down. I lunged toward him and wrapped my arms around his waist from behind, delivering a hard push with my fist into his diaphragm. It was the Heimlich maneuver we had learned about last year in fifth grade.

"Doggone it, why'd you do that?" Grandpa's eyes exploded as he wiped his mouth with the back of his leathery hand.

"You were choking," I said.

"I wasn't choking. I was being sick, doggone it. Now you've gone and made me cough m'teeth overboard."

"I sure am sorry, Grandpa." I reached out to keep him from stumbling over my tackle box as our pontoon heaved itself up over a huge swell.

The Ferris wheel, towering above the Ocean City boardwalk, sailed quickly out of sight. The foghorn belched, its croupy tones warning boats away from the rocks. "This inlet is too rough to be fishing today," Dad shouted, as he and some fifty other boats maneuvered back and forth past the channel markers. "Wind is too strong and we're drifting too fast."

"We're not going in!" Grandpa hollered. "This is the best time to catch a striper. Bay smells sweet as watermelon. Day's cloudy, water's churning, tide's changing. . ."

"And your teeth are missing, Pops," Dad added.

"Don't need no teeth to catch a striper. You only need 'em to eat the doggone thing," Grandpa shouted.

I slouched down on the seat opposite Dad and baited
another slimy, wiggly eel onto my hook. Sea gulls dipped in and out of the water, shrieking their eerie calls. My mouth tasted briny from the spray of the white caps.

For weeks, I had been measuring stripers in my sleep, wondering who would break last year's record in the Juniors' Striper Fishing Tournament. It didn't seem to matter, now. I cast my line out into the channel and began to think of ways to get Grandpa a new set of teeth. I thought about selling my baseball glove – the one Cal Ripkin signed the night he broke Lou Gehrig's consecutive game streak. I groaned. Shoot, this whole incident was ruining our day. The fishing rod vibrated in my hand – pah pah pah. "I've got a hit," I shouted and yanked up on the rod as hard as I could. It was bending in half but nothing was happening. "Naw, I think I'm just caught on the rocks," I said, trying to work my line free as it went slack. Boom! Down went the rod again. "It's a strike," I yelled, reeling in as fast as I could.

"Hang on to her, Son!" Grandpa roared, moving toward me with the net. "She'll put up a fight." For every couple of yards I reeled in, the fish was running twice that much line out.

"Tighten your drag!" Dad shouted. Anglers in surrounding boats watched, hollering out advice.

I saw my line slip under the pontoon. My breath caught in my throat. My hands felt clammy. "I'm going to lose her. She's under the boat." I moved along the starboard side, looking for the right spot to bring the fish out from under the pontoon.

"Careful, don't break that line!" Dad shouted, holding open the starboard door.

"Come on, baby! Here she comes. Into the boat! I've got her," I blabbed frantically to myself.

The big fish rolled over the side. The eel was still dangling out of the striper's mouth where the hook was fastened in
its throat. I collapsed beside her and ran my hand along the flanks and belly. She was remarkable. Her back was blackish, brightening to silver. She flaunted the thin, vertical black stripes of the coveted striped bass. I was too stunned to speak. Anglers all around whooped and cheered, pointing to the name on the side of our boat – Lucky Us. Dad was jumping up and down, pantomiming the size of the striper to them.

Quietly, Grandpa knelt down next to me. His rugged hand gently stroked the fish. He ruffled my hair and smiled his applause with his mouth closed. I stared at the striper's lower jaw jutting out as if it were missing its upper plate. For an awful instant, it looked just like Grandpa without his teeth.

We headed over to the marina to weigh-in. I held my breath as they hoisted up my catch.

"Sixty-eight pounds, seven ounces," Dad boasted, "and measures fifty-three inches. You broke last year's record, Victor." He smacked me on the back.

"What good is breaking the record if Grandpa can't smile for the camera," I said, as the newspaper photographer shuffled us around the record breaking fish to take the winning shots.

After the photographer finished, Dad started to gut and clean the fish. "Look at all this stuff!" Dad was pulling eels, squid, small fish, and assorted items out of the belly of the striper. "Hey, get a look at these teeth!"

"Teeth?" I asked, bending down for a closer look.

"What kind of teeth?" The photographer stood, camera ready.

"Stripers don't have no teeth look like that," Grandpa said, twisting his cap in his hand and scratching his head.

"They do if they're your teeth, Gramps." I pulled the upper plate from the striper's giant belly, wiped it off, and
delivered it to Grandpa.

"You have a powerful tooth fairy, Pops," Dad declared, shaking his head.

"It's the catch of the day, served on a genuine, striped, silver platter," I announced.

We burst out laughing – even Grandpa, gums and all. That's when the photographer shot the real winning picture.

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Pamella A. Russell is a graduate of Rutgers University with a Master of Library service degree. During her six years in São Paulo, Brazil she developed her love for multiculturalism and the Brazilian people, culture, language, music, and especially their rich folklore. Adventures of the Sací Kids: A New Home was published in March of 2020. In this story Sací, a one-legged prankster in a magical red cap discovers family. She attends the Eastern Shore Chapter of MWA.
This Is Joy
By Keshni N. Washington

The fish maneuvered the currents of the ocean's depths with seeming effortlessness. It belied the years spent refining the economy of each muscular swish of his sleek aquatic body. Moving this way inflated a stillness inside him. It grew until it filled up all the hollows. Movement was nothing and everything all at once.

Is this joy? he thought to himself.

And the fates smiled at the tranquil reverberations created by creatures that were in symmetry with their purpose.

He would never be sure if it were just chance that led him to come up for air at that moment, in that particular spot. He saw her diving elegantly to kiss the water and soar up into the sky again. The impossible overcame him, a deep yearning to join her. He watched for a long time. A rupture formed in the stillness inside him. The longer he watched the bigger the puncture grew. An ache now filled up the hollows. He ached for the world above the water, for the bird. No attempt to return to his practice of perfecting his swim could distract him from this. He found himself returning to the spot, repeatedly seeking her there. Sometimes he caught a momentary glimpse, sometimes he watched for hours.

And silently buoyed by admiration he thought, this is joy.

The bird loved to dive. Maneuvering her winged body to take advantage of the currents in the sky took work to master. She found nothing more thrilling than surrendering to the full force of gravity when heading straight towards the water. Testing her control and skill at the last second, she pulled up and spread her wings to soar back up into the sky. The precision and release were nothing and everything all at once.
This is joy, she thought to herself. The first day she caught a glimpse of iridescence just below the surface she didn’t acknowledge it. Nothing would detract her from the perfect dive. But as time passed and the solitary spectator always found her, she began to feel curious about the intensity behind the gaze. Until one day she found herself looking forward to its presence. This silent communion created a shared experience of sea and sky even from afar.

Puzzled at first, the fates soon instead became intrigued. Charmed. Then the day came when they were completely mesmerized by this undeniable connection between these unlikely creatures. Moved by the creatures’ earnestness, the fates intervened and granted a magical quality to the moments that sunset painted everything pink and orange, melting oceans into the sky. In these moments, the fish was able to join the bird in the heavens. The dream of reaching the winged was made manifest. Finally, beside one another, they turned to each other and knew that this was joy. And the fates smiled at the blissful reverberations created by creatures who had found their purpose.

Keshni Naicker Washington, born and raised in South Africa, now resides in Washington D.C. She has published in Yellow Arrow Literary Journal and MER VOX Quarterly in 2020. She is a VONA (Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation) Workshop Alumnus and hosts The Signal Fire Series podcast. She belongs to the Montgomery Chapter of MWA.
The Samaritan
By M. K. Randolph

Anita always said I was a loser. Life's just sent me to the mat. I'm dazed- punch drunk from its pummeling and the Ref's already on the eight count. There's only so much a guy can take, you know? Job let me go. Wife let me go. Kids call another jerk Daddy.

"Going a little heavy on the hooch lately, Jim. There was a time when you weren't this much of a lush." Carl swung back my way. I liked him. Usually. When he wasn't asking too many questions. I could tell by his tone that he was really asking me to spill my troubles. Carl was a cornstalk of a man- a long body poking over top the ancient bar and arms with hands forever holding something. He usually held a bottle for the patrons or a chamois that gave up being clean when flappers gave up bobbing their hair. It'd been a long day and the bags under his eyes looked ready to be unpacked. Still he worked, which was more than what I had going for me.

"You're the only one that still gives me a tab, Carl. I'll gladly pay you tomorrow for a glug of Jack today." I flicked the rim of my lowball. Carl gave me a conceding nod, he wasn't going to need much cajoling to pour me more.

"You're looking ragged, Jim. Is it the wife? The job? You don't need them. They come and go. Dust yourself off and get back in the game." He wiped some errant bourbon that got away from his pour. "That enough platitudes for you?"

I lifted the glass and looked through it. Little specks floated inside; A testament to Carl's cleanliness. I banished them with a swirl, "A few more of these and I'm not going to care, Carl." Then I gave in. Like a living cliché, I spilled the beans to my bartender. "The Wife's lawyer's been pounding me like a steak. How is it, Carl, that when you get yourself unshackled from the ball and chain, they still find a way to
sink you in the river?"

"I'm one of the smart ones, Jim. Never married. No ankle biters. The envy of all. They trying to squeeze more blood from the stone?" Carl mastered the art of placing his attention in multiple places and people. He spoke to me, but his eyes were at the other end of the bar where a couple of broads just sat down. He not-so-discretely made faces at them that he intended to be charming.

"Something like that. Anita's juicing me before she ties the knot with the jerk filling my space on the bed." Carl continued to molest those women with his eyes, so I gave him the chance to talk to them. I savored my latest glass a little longer which gave him tacit permission to excuse himself and be of service to them.

Was that my seventh glass? Ninth? Nothing was clear. I rested my chin in my palm and rolled my head. I looked toward the two broads. They had a cheery quality. Kind of bubbly. This establishment catered to a harder class of clientele. Their presence is why Carl was trying so hard with them. You know, these broads were candy compared to the usual knackwursts that came here.

"Hey, Carl. Carl! Thank you for what you do for me. You're a- hey, ladies, hey- that man there? Saintly." This got the bubbly broads to look at me. They laughed and pointed at me. They had prettier smiles than Carl was used to. I thought they were saying Hi to me. It was nice finally feeling chatty.

The space between Carl's eyebrows scrunched. He held up a finger to the women, gestured in my direction and said something quietly. He came over to me, "Had enough, Jim? You're getting loud and cramping my strut."

I shook my head and rolled it around in my palm again, letting my chin return to its perch and drumming my fingers on my cheek, "No, Carl. No. I'm not down for the count. I'll get a job. Forget Anita, right? Forget my kids. They've got a
new dad now, right? I've got you. And this bar. And that's all I need. Who needs them? Blood from a stone. I've got no more money left for them."

My cheeks warmed and I heard my heartbeat in my ears.

Carl plucked my lowball glass off the bar like a claw game plucking a prize from the pile. He cleared his throat as the glass disappeared behind the bar. I turned my head to look at him. He cleared his throat again, "Speaking of which, Jim. This isn't the best time to bring this up, but when is it ever? My boss wants me to call in your tab."

I sat there and stared at him. It was obvious, even with how I felt now, that he waited until I was half into a bottle to spring this on me. I shook my head and sat up. Or I tried to. I didn't realize until I was down that my chin slipped off my hand when I moved. I peeled my forehead from the bar top and groaned. "Blood from a stone, Carl. I've got nothing. What do you expect me to do?"

Carl shrugged, "I don't know, Jim. I still have a job and don't want to join you on a barstool. The boss wants to tighten things up. I'm sorry. Do what you got to do, Jim. Borrow, beg, steal." He paused and gave a humorless laugh, "Yeah, steal. Rob a bank or something."

That was a thought.

Life hit me with the old One-Two and I needed to do anything to get back up again. The Ref's motioning to call it a TKO. I never wanted to be a Black Hat, but Carl's joke was my last shot. After all, the bills were piling up and no one would give a deadbeat a loan. If I got another threat of eviction, I'd be able to build my own split-level out of the paper.

I stood on the curb outside the Main Street Savings & Loan building. My wide-brimmed hat and duster protected me from the downpour that, I swore, was following me.
everywhere like a half-starved junkyard dog. I looked up at the building, its facade weeped in the rain. I had to do this. The Remington 31 strapped at my side and leg under the duster felt awkward. It made me walk like a gimp. I had to do this, I kept repeating to myself to combat the itch in the back of my mind. The itch was an annoying sensation. A conscious can be persistent. I knew wrong from right, but I wasn't ready to throw in my towel.

I had no idea how to plan a caper, so movies were my inspiration. I would go in, toss my hat to the side, undo my duster's belt with a flourish, make my demands and back them up with suggestive waves of my pump action. People would drop to the floor and the tellers would shove bags of greenbacks at me in a plea for their lives. I had it all worked out. I was ready to go until I was interrupted by an old Ford peeling down Main Street. This was a surprising feat in the rain, since Main Street was doing its level best impersonation of the Mississippi. The truck stopped across the street and the driver's door swung open. A rough-and-tumble sort of man scrambled out with a huge pistol in hand. He splashed and swam his way past me and to the Savings & Loan. He didn't even look at me, but he did stop at the door. His free hand rested on the door, ready to shove it open. The wild man lowered his head and I saw his back heave when he took in a deep breath. Then through the door he went.

That was my luck, right? I finally get the moxie to make my move and someone beats me to the punch. I thought about turning around and leaving this chump to his spoils. I took my own deep breath. No. Change of plans. It's not what I wanted to do, but it was what I would do. I undid my duster's belt with a little more effort than my imagination had me expect. With reservations, I freed the Remington 31 from my side, puffed out my chest, then went inside.

The stone facade outside may have looked like it was
weeping, but inside it was all velvet ropes, immaculate
carpet, and marble columns. Opulence. Exactly what you
wanted in a Savings & Loan. What you didn't want inside
was a man with a gun. This place boasted two, now.

The door slammed shut behind me. I stood there with
my Remington held in one hand resting suggestively on
my shoulder. Everyone turned to look at me. The floor was
littered with the prone and prostrate bodies of bankers and
patrons. At the teller's table, the teller in a three-piece suit
stood with the wild man's hand-cannon shoved in his face.
The wild man didn't waste any time. When he turned toward
me, I realized how young he really was. He had the build and
posture that screamed teenager, but the dark stubble on his
chin and mop on his head that argued otherwise. He looked
like he'd stolen the clothes off a hobo, once I got a real good
look at him.

"Don't do this, Buck-O." I said, sliding the shotgun off my
shoulder.

"Oh, thank Jesus!" Came the saccharine cry of a young
blonde behind a hostess's table.

Right. Jesus. I was angry. Had I gotten here ten minutes
earlier, it'd have been me demanding to get my hands on the
lettuce in the vault, not this kid. Life took a swing at me and
I didn't know whether to duck or weave.

"Help us." A man laying a few feet away from me bleated.

"He's got a gun." Another plea from a different person.

"No," the young hobo shouted, "I cased this place for a
month- a month!" He sounded a hair shy of the definition of
raving. "No Bull was supposed to show up. Not now! Get on
your knees and pray!"

I almost gave in, nearly forgetting my own much larger
gun. I just stood there at the door. Instead of a bank caper,
I felt like I was in a cops and robber's picture. I pointed the
Remington at him to complete the image of the picturesque
stand-off. Guns were drawn and fingers twitched.

"I know how you feel. Life's hit you with the old One-Two. Life's threatening to call it a TKO and ring the bell, right? We wouldn't be doing this otherwise. I get it." I said, approaching the teller's table slowly.

"You're not stopping this, Bull. You don't know anything! What I've got riding on this. Too much! Do you think this is a joke? I'm not fooling and I'm not asking. On your knees!"

The teller took the distraction I provided as his opportunity to hide. The people kissing the carpeted floor squirmed. The kid in the hobo's clothes looked antsy, his feet shifted like a dancer who forgot which step came next.

"We all have something riding on something, Buck-O. This isn't our day. It's over. Drop the gun." I gestured at his Smith & Wesson.

Somehow, this convinced him. He lowered his head and his gun. Whatever spine he grew for himself to pull this stunt gave way to cold feet. Patrons and bankers closest to him rose up off the floor like grass after the rain and formed a scrum around him.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I released it. I lowered my shotgun and looked up at the ceiling. It wasn't the chandeliers, arches, and sconces I glared at; It was the Man Upstairs. Soon after my one-sided stare down, I had to contend with an aching arm from all the congratulatory back slaps and handshakes. I didn't go to the Savings & Loan for the gratitude.

I wasn't a hero. I didn't have the stamina to even pretend I was. Life's follow-up to the old One-Two was a Haymaker. I was ready for the ten count. Every paper in town had my picture in it. Not a mugshot or the police dragging me off in iron bracelets. These were pictures with words like Good Samaritan and valiant under them. The dailies may have
parroted those words, but the crowing voice of Anita in the back of my mind kept my ego in check. What was I? A fraud? Definitely. A coward? Probably. I kept these thoughts locked away like a loon in the bin, especially when Carl used me as a sales prop.

My usual stool at the bar became my stool. Unofficially. If someone sat at it when I arrived for my twice daily visit, that person was prompted to move if they didn't do so on their own. I was the local hero and Carl wanted to juice my celebrity for all it was worth. It wasn't all bad— I got to quench my thirst whenever I wanted.

"See right here gentlemen." Carl said when a couple of new people entered the establishment. By that time, I had a baker's dozen empty lowball glasses forming a semi-circle in front of me on the bar. My head was elsewhere while Carl spun another fantastic yarn about my exploits. Each time he told it, I did something even more fantastic than the what the papers published.

"Sit, sit. See right here. Right over here, yeah. You read the papers, gentlemen? Here- Let me get your drinks started while you meet a real live, honest to God, hero. Look at that face. Tell me you recognize the man you're sharing a bar with?" Carl continued.

The two men sat down tentatively on their stools. Each of them leered at me in their own way, as if this wasn't their first stop of the evening. One of them slurred, "I don't know, mister. Kinda looks like Cary Grant. You know, if Cary Grant were shorter, fatter, balder, and looked like this guy."

I took another slug from my glass and ignored the second man's laughing jab. I held the glass dangling over the bar top and turned to look at them. I had a comeback swimming around in my head, but I couldn't convince it to stop thinking about what was left at the bottom of the glass.

"Now come on, Gentlemen. Honestly? You haven't seen
Carl flourished his chamois at me. The two men with jokes shook their heads and took possession of their fresh drinks. Carl said, "Why this is the genuine hero of Main Street Savings & Loan. He was all over the papers a couple of weeks ago. Hell, this lucky stiff was in the paper just this morning. Main Street's announced this guy right here's getting a reward. Recognize him now?"

"Quit it, Carl. Let them drink." I said this, but doubted they heard it the way I intended.

"This guy? A hero?" The first one asked after taking in his drink like it were his first in three days.

The second man said, "Oh yeah? That guy's a hero? And getting a reward?" He laughed, "Yeah, I remember that story. Cary Grant here made the front page, now that you mention it." He paused and his amused look shifted to disgust, "Remind me-" He said to his drinking partner, "-never to be a hero. Hey- get me another will you?"

Carl smiled with them and dutifully poured.

I turned back to my glass. I looked through it and noticed that Carl nailed a second-edition copy of the local rag over the mirror at the back of the bar. I put the glass down and stared at it. Local hero to be honored with reward and accolades, it read in big bold letters. I knew they were big and bold, because squinting only let me read that headline. Everything else around it faded into a mass of black and gray. I was tired. The life of a hero was tiresome. I didn't care that Carl used me to sell drinks since my tab got ignored as part of the exchange.

"Hey, Cary Grant. Whatcha doing with the reward money." One of the two, I didn't care which, asked.

I shook my head to clear my mind. What would I do now? Job's let me go. The wife's let me go. Two kids calling some other jerk dad now. Wait until Anita's lawyer hears about the reward.
"Well, Cary?" They asked again.

"He's got plans, alright," arl cut in, "Full of prospects and investment opportunities. Ain't that right, Jim?"

I laughed, "Yeah," my words sounded funny even to me, "Full of them. Carl- This is the last one, alright? Ref's at the ten count. I'm throwing in the towel. Gonna explore those Pro- Prosp-"

"He's not Cary Grant. It's Porky Pig!" The two lushes laughed at me.

I would have shot them a look, but slipped off my stool to beat feet toward the door instead.

"Need a cab, Jim?" Carl asked, I couldn't tell if that was actual concern I heard in his voice.

"No. Going to hoof it, thanks."

"See you in the morning. Things're looking up, there's never a dull moment. Remember, No more blood from a stone."

"It's always dull. You just have to look past the luster of mediocr-" I couldn't get the word out of my mouth so I gave up.

I was a loser.

———

M.K. Randolph is the pen name of a writer/member of the Maryland Writers Association, Howard County Chapter. The author is presently working on a novel.
Pillow Talk
By Steve Lubs

(The master bedroom, late at night. Jane is sitting up and reading. Richard is lying down on the other side of the bed, asleep and snoring.)

(Jane puts her book down, shakes Richard.)

Jane: Rich, there's something we need to talk about.

(Richard's snoring is interrupted, but resumes. Jane shakes him again.)

Jane: Now. (Richard's snoring continues. Jane grabs his shoulder and shakes him, hard.)

Jane: Now.

Richard: What? Whoa, did the alarm go off? I swear I fell asleep only a minute ago--(He looks at the clock, pauses.) It's one o'clock in the morning! Wait. Fire? Burglar? What's...

Jane: We need to talk.

Richard: Can't it wait?

Jane: I've been waiting for three weeks.

Richard: Huh? Why didn't you bring this up during dinner?

Jane: Because you're usually prattling on about what's going on at your office or what your favorite football team is or isn't doing. Add to that, the last time I tried to bring something up, you wanted to watch that--that mini-series. Do you know what it feels like to play second fiddle to a TV program?

Richard (groaning): Okay. I'm sorry. But not in the middle of the night. After dinner...tomorrow.
(Jane shakes him again.)

**Jane:** No way. You after-dinner-tomorrowed me all last week. We either discuss this now, or we have a re-run of painting the house.

(Richard gulps.)

**Richard:** Uh...um...you're right, dear. What do you want to talk about?

**Jane:** Do we plant wildfire roses or lilacs in the empty space in the garden?

**Richard:** You woke me up at one o'clock in the morning to...

**Jane:** Now, or I start ordering paint after breakfast.

(Richard takes a deep breath.)

**Richard:** You're right, dear. What do you want to do?

**Jane:** I'm thinking lilacs. But I can't find the varieties I want.

**Richard:** Yes, dear. Varieties.

**Jane:** I can find varieties I like in the roses, but they take a lot of preparation.

**Richard:** Yes, dear. Preparation.

**Jane:** So, I'm thinking if we mix and match...

**Richard:** Yes, dear. Mix and match.

**Jane:** We could also put in some man-eating Venus flytraps.

**Richard:** Yes, dear. Flytraps. Man-eating.

(Jane punches Richard.)
Jane: Wake up, you jerk! You're talking in your sleep again!

(Richard snores.)

Jane: Okay, you asked for it. (She starts typing on her phone.) Let's see...blue plaid on a bright yellow background for the dining room, peach with strawberry stripes for the kitchen, pink daisies on tortoise-shell green for your office...

———

Steve Lubs, an engineer, writes science fiction, fantasy, mystery, drama and poetry. He has published in Pen In Hand. He is the current President of the Howard County Chapter of MWA.
Maya
By Gandharva raja

(In the small square den, Paula and Paul are seen seated on a tufted loveseat. Her head tilted back, Paula’s right leg rests on Paul’s lap. Her eyes are half-closed and dreamy. Periodically Paul shifts his eyes from Paula to a framed photo of a saffron-clad Hindu sage on the mantle. A tranquil smile lights the bearded face.)

Paula: I wonder who I was...?

Paul: You are a church-going Christian turning into a chanting Hare Krishna...

Paula: I was thinking about my past life. Who was I? Was I very pretty? Was I married to you?

Paul: Or to Phil...I wonder what Dr. Phil was in his previous life! Did he suffer long waiting hours in a physician’s reception room reading outdated large-print Reader’s Digest? Did he spend seventeen percent of his income to cover padded hospital bills? Did he suffer hours of bladder cramp before the nurse brought him a urinal? Ishwar had pity on him! God made him a golf-trotting Doctor in this his next life.

Paula: O how you suffered with that kidney stone! But this is how it works. (Pointing to the framed photo on the fireplace mantle) Guruji says it is karma.

Paul: Perhaps you were married to Benji?... an abacus rattling CPA working for the IRS, he is reborn a teller. Handling real money at Chase!

Paula: Chaste! I must remain chaste till you marry me, Paul.

Paul: Or till you are no longer chased.
Paula: You will marry me again (*stresses the word again*) in our next life, won’t you Paul?

Paul: I am appalled. I haven’t yet figured out how this confused system works. If you ask me to pass the ring a life in advance! How does that work? Now making advances! I don’t mind that.

Paula: The wise think ahead...

Paul: and prepare to be chased...

Paula: by you...

Paul: and Benji, and Phil.

Paula: You really don’t think that I actually sleep with...

Paul: Does it matter? What difference is there between a clay lion and a clay mouse? Grind them both. What is left is the same. Clay dust.

Paula: From lust to dust.

Paul: Benji, Phil, Paul – all turn to clay. (*mockingly*) As your Guruji says, it is illusion, maya.

Paula: Clever! You wriggled out of that ring!

Paul: Wiggle? Did I miss something?

(Slowly and with deliberation, Paula removes her right leg from Paul’s lap. Her legs folded beneath her thighs, she clasps her hands in front of her breasts, posing to pray. She faces the portrait of her serene-faced Guru as Paul looks on with amused bewilderment.)

Paula: (Looking at the portrait of the Guru on the mantle, with folded hands) Pranam, Guruji! (*she whispers, making certain Paul can hear her words*) One clever manipulation today – not
a lie, more accurately a well-disguised half-truth today will bring many gifts tomorrow. This is my karma. (She turns her face towards Paul) No man turns me on as does Paul, Guruji.

**Paul:** Truths, half-truths, your karma and mine! You think I am going to fall for this?

**Paula:** Guruji, no one has stolen my heart as he has. Please rid his mind of all his doubts.

(Paul is confused. He turns to look at the mantle.)

**Paula:** Tell him, Guruji, I am maya, an illusion, till he enters the ring...

(Paula closes her eyes. With sinuous deliberation, she places her leg back on Paul's lap. Her ring finger extended, she stretches her left hand towards Paul. Aroused and eager, he hastily digs his hand deep into his trouser pocket, as he begins to lean towards Paula.)

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**Gandharva raja** is the pen name of Dr. Tapendu K. Basu. He is a member of the Academy of American Poets, Maryland Historical Society and Maryland Writers' Association and Mystery Writers of America. He is the editor of *Pen In Hand*, MWA's biannual literary magazine. His publications include *Hoofbeats, A Song of You: A Poetic History of the United States; August 29: How Kabir H. Jain Became a Deity; Epic Mahabharata: A Twenty-first Century Retelling,* and *The Last Day of Ramadan.* In 2017, *The Nisha Trilogy* was produced as a Bengali movie, *Tadanto* in Tollywood, Kolkata. *Satiric Verses: The American Century* was published in 2019. His historical/romance parallel novel *The Author and The Emperor,* and *Murder at the Fountain and Other Crimes* await publication.
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