

Westland Writes 2025

A Collection of Local Writing

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Editor



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Poems

Sumyah Almashraeai

The Corona's Love

Whoever did not die of Corona,
Died already,
Died of Love or Disappointment,
Or Hope in a heart that let them down,
Or died of Longing for a heart that loves them and distances that
separate them,
Or are separated by endless Longing

Westland Snow

The snow was falling beside you,
But your love was greater,
It was forming piles, each in the shape of a heart, and then I
melted, even more unlike it!
The more the whiteness expanded around you, the more the passion
for your eyes grew, like a bramble tree,
Longing climbs my window for you every morning a thousand
longings,
I wish I could exchange snowballs with you, or even kisses, so my
heart would fall from me and you would catch it only with your
breath,
I have always believed that winter is only in hearts, and you are
purely my spring, and I'm a rose that is only fit to bloom in you,
It would not be an exaggeration if I told you that I want to live this
life with you, even just once,
There is no reassurance for my heart except that I loved everything
with you from scratch,
Like a newborn who has just been found. Would you please hold him
well?

Our first snowman together, March 2nd.

AsjaB

My Brown Skin

My Brown Skin represents beauty & power...

Soft like a flower...

It's just something about her...

My brown skin represents black excellence...

Black with brains...

Never question our intelligence...

My brown skin represents resilience...

I adored it...

Way before it...

Was cool to be a "dark skin"

Because they said "light skin"

Was the best skin...

My generation & our reputation ...

There is no real explanation...

Why they wanted us to hate ourselves...?

My brown skin represents that seat Rosa P didn't get up from...

My melanin is rich, they wish they had some...

My brown skin represents the courage Frederick D had...

Ain't it crazy how some of them still mad, when they should be glad,
we ain't still trynna get revenge on they ass... (ha)

But my brown skin also represents “world peace” like MLK said...

Or that mission that Miss Harriet T. led...

black means power, forget what “they” said...

& Black always been beautiful, forget the lies...

My brown skin represents Maya Angelou, when she wrote “& still I
rise” ...

My brown skin is Godly & angelic...

It’s captivating & magnetic...

Black is the ultimate aesthetic! ...

My brown skin represents my ancestor’s genetics

Healing

Healing sounds like chaos
 It's like mental warfare, nonstop . . .
 It looks like crying in the shower ...
 Or buying yourself flowers ...
 Healing is like a roller coaster ride ...
 Emotions go up and down from time to time ...
 Like one day you're happy & upbeat
 The next day, you're crying in disbelief...
 Cause u can't believe how much shit u let slide
 & all the undeserving mf's u let passenger ride...
 Healing hurts, & it's uncomfortable ...
 been done wrong, so now you vulnerable
 She's healing, not healed...
 So she's guarding her heart, without the shield . . .
 Been broke down, but now u can finally rebuild...
 Healing is lonely, & it's weird...
 Once she starts to like someone, she'll either ghost or slowly
 disappear ...
 healing, but that's clear. . .
 Keeping God in front, whenever the devil tries to appear ...
 Cause this healing shit can get ugly...
 I'm hurt, can u just hug me?
 I mean can you just hold me? ...
 I'm healing, don't judge me & please don't ever fold on me...
 Healing isn't easy, but it gets better each day
 Taking my time & not listening to what other people has to say ...
 I said I'm healing but not healed, so please don't come here to play!

Devin Baumann

Somewhere Else

I wish I were by a river.
Somewhere deep in the woods.
Peaceful and flowing.
It calms my heart and slows my breathing.

I look up, and the sun peaks through the treetops.
I can feel the warmth on my skin.
Golden rays flash in my eyes.
Leaves rustle from the wind, saying hello.

I doze on my blanket, at peace with my surroundings.
Feeling happy and free.
I am not scared of anything, not worried.

I could lay here all day.

The trees are flashes of green, and the river trickles endlessly.
Just like time and life.
It does not seem to ever slow down.

The air is fresh.
Warm.
I feel protected by it.
Surrounded by beautiful creation.

I feel safe.
I never want to leave.
Someday I will not have to.

Someday I will be somewhere else.

Private Moments

Private moments that belong to me,
Are often the very most sweet.

A cup of coffee I make disappear,
And nobody knows that a cardinal was here.

The cat just made a funny sound,
And it is only me with no one around.

A tiny moment of fleeting history,
That no one will ever see except for me.

Everyone has a private life,
A secret moment lost to time.

We all see things that nobody else does,
Except for maybe God above.

Even those close to us leave every day.
They too have private moments along the way.

We cannot read minds or go back in time,
Our ancestors lived the most private lives.

I cannot know them, nor can they know I,
But through my life I certainly try.

I wonder what they saw, why they laughed, why they cried,
And I wonder about their lost moments in time.

Lost memories of time, which died when they died.
Then I think about the most present life.

How this loss never ends.
Perpetually affecting lovers and friends.

My husband comes home, and I have not seen what he sees.
My friend lives states away, a life separate from me.

A funny feeling of jealousy arrives,
A sadness for privacy that is not mine.

Feeling close and wanting to be closer,
But when I see them, the moments are already over.

But they have not seen mine,
They too have lost moments of time.

My history lost to them,
So, we share time when we can.

And that is how we are remembered,
History is the time we spend together.

Forever, that is how we are known,
But the world will forget our time alone.

And that is why private moments are precious time,
They belong to me; the history is all mine.

We can choose to share, an effort to feel closer,
But in the end, every moment is already over.

Private moments become a gift,
Less about sadness but a reason to give.

To converse with friends and to share,
Drawing closer with loved ones who care.

Knowing they have private moments makes me feel fine,
That my loved ones can also find peace of mind.

So, I go on living with my private time,
Knowing my history will die when I die.

Jan Branton

My Home, Michigan

They say each state has its own special charm
But I say Michigan has the best.
With our Great Lakes, hills and valleys
It's where I find my rest.

How lucky we are that we get to enjoy
God's masterpiece called earth.
Will His wonders never cease as we
Look upon this beauty and all its worth?

Motown began in Detroit it's true
Many greats made their start here.
Stevie, Diana and even Smokey,
They keep coming home year after year.

Holland, on the west side, not far from the lake
Acres of tulips bloom early in spring.
Crowds of folks come to join in the fun
To delight in the merriment they bring.

On the way up the coast of Lake Michigan
The Sleeping Bear Dunes beckon us to climb.
Going down is easier than going up
And the view up above is so sublime.

Keep going all the way to Torch Lake
Called the Caribbean of our state.
The water's clear and blue like the sky
You'll see why we call it great.

The Mackinac Bridge connects lower to upper

The fort on the island protected us well.
No cares are there, only bikes and horses allowed,
You'll have many stories to tell.

As I reflect on my favorite season
Some may call autumn or fall,
I can't help but think that He gave it all for us
To appreciate the vibrant colors of all.

The sun's rays shine bright as we
Travel the Tunnel of Trees.
Don't blink too often, but be very sure
To revel in the beautiful leaves.

As I marvel at these amazing sights
They all came to life at His command.
And when I ponder why He did all of this
I want to treasure the beauty of this land.

Puzzled

Writing is good for the soul, they say
But my words are often jumbled.
It's clear that I need some time to think
And always try to be humble.

For what I write is straight from my heart
I try to help and console.
All of us have such similar feelings
That cut to the depth of the soul.

I have that crossword puzzle in my head
The words are yet to be revealed.
I pray and I hunt for the right ones to connect
And hope that they won't be concealed.

The message that will be brought forth
Is like a fresh new spring.
The way God teaches and speaks to me
Are the lessons that are true to bring.

Marie Bugg

State St

Walking in your fuck-you flip-flops the fish are flying across the river,
 beady eyes flashing,
 while the *Opheodrys Vernalis* exists as it always has,
 inconsiderate of the flies threatening the necrosis of the Earth.
 On either side the buildings offer sanctuary,
 their peering eyes boring into the concrete,
 reflecting the image of an angel that I simultaneously fear and
 worship.

What is that if not religion?
 I suffer through exaltations of turbulent journeys
 in order to take communion at the Hard Rock Café,
 Where you wonder aloud at whether it would be preferable
 to peer blankly into the unforgiving gaze of Helios
 or to taint masculinity forever
 for the sake of seeing.

Dimpled cheeks indented by heavy coins,
 the sepia-toned smile comes face to face with daylight
 for the first time in a decade
 The transactional relationship with existence
 takes a toll,
 Drawn back into the fold,
 one thousand tiny creases grow deeper with a sigh,
 feather-weight lightness purveys
 with a general sense of forthcoming doom

We cosplay the impoverished
 At a musical soup kitchen
 The weight of an eyelash equivalent to an elephant
 I wish to pluck them all as if they were guitar strings
 As you traverse through the realm of the insubstantial,

I sit the serving watch-dog,
Wishing I could take an iron to the wrinkles in my brain,
Unfold the hippocampus,
and get to the bottom of the secrets
that are dripping onto my earlobes
And pooling on the grass

A gasp, a sigh, a scream of utter terror
There's something religious in the laughter
I must express how this moment will probably be one of the last
things I think of before I die

Ruth Haury

Dear Younger Me

Dear younger me
I know life seems hard right now but I promise it will get better.
There will be ups and downs of all shapes and sizes along the way.
You will learn and grow so strong.
I know you are longing for a sense of belonging.
A group of friends to call your own is blazing on the horizon.
I promise we will have a community to call our own.
Our friends will be the sisters we always longed for.
So keep on pushing forward to the next bright morning.
The sun will continue to rise and set.
You will have some really low times, but you will rise from the ashes,
and you will be smarter and stronger for it.
Don't be afraid to ask for help when you are feeling low.
Your friends and family will be there to raise you up.
You will do great things with your love of little children and your
love of music.
You will have crushes on your friends while they are crushing on the
boys.
Don't despair, you'll find your girl.
Although I'm still searching, I know she's out there somewhere.
We found a choir that feels like home.
So don't give up, put one foot in front of the other.
It will all work out for the best.
Stay tuned for the rest.

Heidi Irvine

Untitled

Night drives are my creature comfort
Where will I go tonight?
I wondered
No one knows, not a single soul
Country roads, take me far from home
Just me, my dog and I
Eight miles high
This is my therapy
The darkness is comforting to me
It's the freedom of the road
A form of letting go
Chicken Noodle Soup for the Soul

The Ghost of My Memory

Like a phantom on Halloween
You came to visit me
Your presence is haunting
Your body, alluring
Your scent, effervescent
Paranoid manic depressant
I am the lonely ghost of this asylum
And you are the warden of my love
But by light of day you are gone
Like a criminal on the run
You stole my heart
Buried me in a tomb
And I dug my way out to find you
My clothes are torn and my knuckles bloody
I know a ghost isn't much for good company
But please don't dissipate so suddenly

Erin Knape

Birthday Card

It was your birthday like every year
colored pencils to paper
(what knives are to skin)
you told me green was your favorite color
—you didn't have one
I know that *now*
but I didn't know that *then*—
so I tore up the backyard
ripped leaves from maple trees
scooped moss in mighty handfuls
fistfuls, pocketfuls
to give to you
you lied because colors don't shine
for old shuttered eyes
closer to glaucoma than clarity
bleeding monochrome
the dull and dim
the world without harpsichord tones
on rolling hills born into richness
of flavor
of color worth witnessing
on the page and in your palms
you are running out of birthdays

Hummingbird

what must it be like to know someone?
not their favorite color or where they went to high school or how they
 like their scrambled eggs on any given Sunday
but the texture of their skin
the patterns on their fingertips
born in the womb of their mother
the webbing and weaving
are they high-strung or laid back?
with skin that sags around soft eyes
and peach fuzz
molded lips that taste of
dark-roasted coffee
and the beating in their chest like a hummingbird
when I press my ribs against, hip bone against theirs
we make a sculpture that breathes and pours
with sweat and some saccharine
pleasure in the moment
a pulsing and pressure
the roughness of legs
shaved two days ago
the bowing of their side and the curve of their arms
bracing and borrowing glances
eyes closed, mouth wide
taking honeysuckle and morning dew
speaking only of cardamom and chamomile
whispering of rapture
to be enchanted in a body
to feel, to know

Andy Mallams

On My Mind

I cannot see but I know you are there,
your presence is strong, your aura a glare.

I cannot hear but I know that you speak,
Your voice is like music, it strengthens the weak.

I cannot smell but I know of your scent,
I'm sure it's of flowers and spices, I meant.

I cannot feel but I know you are soft,
like grass in the meadow, like hay in the loft.

I cannot touch but I know it'd be nice,
to do it just once would never suffice.

I cannot hold but I know how it'd feel,
I'd never let go, I'd be stronger than steel.

I cannot caress but I know it'd feel fine,
be gentle, go easy, put chills on your spine.

I cannot kiss but I know it'd be warm,
the sky and the rain and a thundering storm.

I cannot taste but I know you'd be sweet,
I imagine the day if our minds ever meet.

My feelings deceive me, they say you're not here,
Then why do I feel you, my senses are clear.

I look all around just hoping to find,
But then I awoke, you were just on my mind.

Yellow Rose

A yellow rose so true in form,
You've weathered nature's strongest storm.

You stand so tall among the rest,
And all the birds they love you best.

Your thorns are sharp, your petals soft,
Your place is there in heaven's loft.

Your fragrance subtle and sincere,
Your blossoms full year after year.

Your roots are deep and strong you know,
Your branches will forever grow.

Although you think I speak of those,
It's you, you are that yellow rose.

Cheryl Martin, M.A., TDL

Halloween With Easter Hues

The Pumpkins are orange, perhaps a ghost one or two; with the skin
 a pasty white color,
 Contrasting against the typical orange,
 Yet there are those with a melon look with deep green veins that latch
 onto the pumpkin
 Like a rope of some kind, or a light weight steel plant holder, that
 bares
 their metal next to the flesh, yet these colorful gourds can be a playful
 trick on a watermelon
 with its design,
 A candle, perhaps two are lit, lining the driveway for the trick or
 treaters;
 Some adults in disguise and children dressed like soldiers,
 princesses, a giant banana peel,
 Another ghoul with whiskers and a black tail, carrying the plastic
 black pumpkin bucket,
 Dropping some candy in the driveway as, their little hands grab more
 from my witch's pail,
 As one piece turns into a handful of ten, followed by giggles, and joy,
 shouting, Trick or Treat,
 Running, and galloping down the street towards the next house with
 candles:
 Lit in the 1830's home, a mansion in its own right; cascading stair
 case, and roosters that
 Enjoy their freedom during the night; and maybe a short flight on
 Halloween guided by
 The luminous and at times effervescent full moon light,
 where the mood is light, fun, spooky,
 and downright chilly.
 When the wind blows just right, its mimicking an April 15th date and
 becoming Spring like in

The middle of the second month of anticipated warmer weather;
 with the same type of dark Spidery sky, with daylight much longer
 after March's dance toward
 a new season, with an appearance in the month of Spring, which is
 snow and sleet;
 Flower's burrowed still under the earth, instead of fully blossoming,
 but a month behind,
 where the Daffodils are supposed to be Evergreen with bright yellow
 pistils,
 Instead, are dangling with the October breeze; As Tulip colors are
 still unknown
 along the fence line,
 Hence Halloween lives year-round, not just in the month of orange
 and black with Raspberry
 Hues, thinking now of the pumpkins who are a seed somewhere in
 early spring.....That
 Memory of last year's pie pumpkin, and ones of all sizes reminds of
 the happiness of O Jack O
 Lantern;
 As the Pie Pumpkin is carved readying for the tender crunch of the
 seeds matching the harvest
 sky, and the vegetable flesh to make whatever out of the pumpkin
 goo,
 Some like the pureness for a substitute for a baked potato,
 Its sweet scent fills the home with an aroma that beckons of Pilgrims,
 and Native's
 And what they enjoyed with the fruits of their earth,
 Where the white pumpkin seeds can be baked, the freshness and
 crunch in each bite, a
 Delicious taste that harkens to when these seeds were created in a
 homemade hearth,
 Or perhaps on the rocks in their simplicity and creative and urban
 ways of cooking with
 What they had,
 To make a tasty treat, now, is simply a matter of time, quick time, no
 long standing over an

Uneven flame or fire to make sure the seeds are toasted just right, not
blackened with soot
Blown by the wind, or the flickering and popping hotness on the
stake or hand hewed utensil
As a dash of salt in 1850 would be different than the handy canisters
or salt packets we use
Today, or maybe not at all, as the healthy treat was more apparent
than extravagance, with
All that spice, as a dash of salt, adds a touch of flavor, yum, to the
crunchy seed;
Yummy it is!

Daffodils With Easter Lillies



White flowers with yellow pistils, cream colored, and sunlight,
Rebirth is here, whether it's the Resurrection where He Has Risen;
As symbolism is a guidepost,
Breathing new life into everything;
Whether it's the pulpit surrounded by the Easter Lily,
Awaiting a child's Catholic Baptism,
As the church's Psalm Sunday's heavenly fragrance is just that;
With the walkway lined with pale white Daffodils with their
delightful color,
It's a sign of the cross in many ways, a heaven here on earth for all,
Including Pope Francis whose hope and love embraced those who
Were graced to be here with ever- lasting life and glory, passed on
Holy Monday;
As his homily taught that each creature and person is worthy to be;
everyone belongs;
Glancing outside of the stained- glass windows,
Rows of Tulips, Purple Hyacinth intertwined with Easter Lillies,
Daffodils,
Budding roses and violet Lilacs,
Rows of early Spring sprouting during Easter week,
ignoring the winter's chill that stuck around
For too long;

As the blossoms on the forsythias with their butter flavor of buds
Blending in with the tender green soon,
Which will be fully blossomed before the arrival Cinco De Mayo.

Michele Matuszewski

SPRY?

We are not our mother's mother
Wearing an apron like a
Badge of Courage
Showing examples of the aged tarnished

No.

We are not our mother's mother
Hair uncolored and
Tied in a Bun
Showing example of a life lived simply

No.

We are not our mother's mother
Stooped over and tired
With the sweat of their brow
Showing example of a life of labor

No.

We are not our mother's mother
And ALLELUIA
We've broken the mold
We've cast off the die
Our example is nothing if NOT MORE ALIVE!

The book said she was "spry"
Condescending it sounded
We've gone far beyond this
And at this word we rebounded

Life is for the living
For the giving
For sharing
For loving
And for caring

We have no time for
Aprons and
Buns and
Sweating and toil
Today is our day
To rejoice in our spoils

Amber Moffett

Biblically Loved

You say my
I love you
sounds like heaven—
soft, sweet, and delicate,
with hints of honey.

You place me on a pedestal,
threading your fingers through my hair,
drifting down my body—slow and sure.
Are you searching for a crack in the marble,
or waiting for me to crumble in your hands?

You decided God was a woman,
solely because of me.
Now you say it like a prophecy,
like I rewrote the holy text,
or stained your thoughts with divinity.
This wasn't because I asked,
but because you needed a reason to kneel.

You built your altar the moment we laid eyes,
lighting candles in the shape of my name,
and you called it worship.
This was never faith, it was obsession.
You wanted holiness you could touch—
a deity with skin.
So you made me one, without asking if I wanted to be.

Reverie

Screaming mothers and laughing children,
covered by loud carnival music.
I gasp for air as I get in line,
for the long-awaited bouncy house.

I step in the castle as they
kick everyone out, except for me.
They know it's mine and not theirs to share,
I do not need to give up my space.

The painted butterflies on my face
share their wings and lift me up gently.
My weightless body soars, fast and high
flying over the dark grey city.

I am alive—finally noticed.
You all see me, you all know my name.
Me, the butterflies, and the blue sky
fit as one. This is where I belong—
All pain and all sadness have vanished.
Is this what freedom truly feels like?
I will not let this dream end, ever.

Until the sound of my dad's sharp yell
cuts through the stained, peeling wallpaper,
startling me awake from the daydream.
My voice echoes, sharp against the walls.
"What?" I shout, seeing if he will come
to finally say the words I crave—
"Dinner's ready." I try to guess what
we are having by the smell, but the
sewage stench seeps through, flooding my nose
and covering up the delight of
the unknown food in the dining room.

Melinda Montilla

Ancient Feet

I was surprised to come home
To a plowed driveway.
Must be my neighbor again.
I visualized him touting his snowblower

Assisted by holy helpers –
Jesus, apostles, saints –
Each equipped with a snow shovel.
I see Jesus in my mind's eye

Preach on the mountain of Capernaum,
Heal a paralytic in Bethesda,
Bring back from the dead
A good friend in Bethany.

Before ascending to Heaven
He told his apostles,
'Be my feet, walk the earth,
Bring everyone to me.'

Poof! The holy vision disappeared
When my neighbor opened his door,
Smile on his face endearing
When I handed over eggroll offering;
For his kindness – my thanksgiving.

Ancient feet are marching,
Pushing forward, effacing
Walls that divide time, divide people,

We can get connected
To ancient feet by asking sincerely,
'What can I do for someone today?'

Katherine Billings Palmer

One Short Weekend

I spent my weekend
With two young boys
And the stress of the world
Melted away

No doom scrolling
No hourly news alerts
The ones that make my muscles clench
And cause my heart to race

We gabbed about the planets, favorite YouTubers,
Why french fries should be dipped in Frosties,
Current video games, and Mufasa
Played a meme game and a dozen hands of Uno

While they peppered me with wild cards and plus twos
Until I had a fistful of cards,
No Uno in sight,
But merrily lost each hand

"I don't think melatonin works on old people."
"How did you decide to have my dad? Rock, paper, scissors?"

And so many questions I have no answers for
The meaning of life, where we are before we're born,
Interspersed with rap music, dancing,
And Gen Alpha language this old woman can't translate

(I think skibidi means cool)

Laughter, giggles, cuddles, games, and reading books at bedtime

The sorrows of the world dispelled
The sense of dread I've had for weeks
A distant memory

For a few fantastic hours, I imagined
the world was safe

Forgot the deportations, the shock and awe,
The dismantling of a nation, a constitution in shreds

And centered myself in joy

I know that soon
I'll have to take up a sword
That this danger can't be ignored
That all my grandchildren count on grownups to save them

But for a few sacred hours, my soul was nourished
And for one weekend, spent with two young boys

I forgot about the news
And fears for our future
Rooted myself in the present
And focused on what really matters

My Garden of Grass

When I think of grass
I picture lying in my yard as a child
Freedom from cares
Sun on my face
Breeze caressing my hair
Examining ants carrying supplies
into their tiny hill homes
Watching with innocence
Wonder and awe

When I think of grass
I picture romping with my friends
Dashing around calling, "You're It!"
Getting the wind knocked out of us
And laughing too hard
Dad complaining that ours
was the trampled lawn in the neighborhood
But letting us play there anyway

When I think of grass
I picture twelve-year-old me
Staying with my grandparents all summer
Grandpa and I made a trap
and I lay in the grass patiently waiting
for a chipmunk to fall captive to my peanut-pile lure
With one pull of the string, he was caught under my bushel basket
But I let him go home to his mother
then left summer and my childhood behind

When I think of grass
I picture myself as a teen
lying on my blanket on the ground
Soaking up the sun
Rock music blaring on my transistor radio

Ant hills and chipmunks ignored
Insects now annoying when they buzz by my head
Or land on my cocoa-butter-slick thigh

When I think of grass
I picture my grandpa's last breath
On a hot July day
After he pushed the lawn mower,
Cut a swath in the grass
Then lay still as the motor droned beside him
When his heart gave out

When I think of grass
It's the other kind
That I smoked to avoid the pain and hurts
Of youth
The kind that kept me mellow and out of touch
until my promising future evaporated in its smoke

When I think of grass
I picture my little boy and young niece
In the blow-up pool in the yard
Water splashing over the edge
Dried circles of brown left in evidence
of the fun we had that summer

When I think of grass
I see my late husband chasing his bluetick hound
Around our beautiful backyard
The ex-football player running and dodging
And whooping it up
with his four-legged pal

When I think of grass
I think of the harbinger of spring
The excitement of seeing that vibrant green

After the much-hated cold of winter
Then the too-soon leaf-covered expanse
telling me one more summer is gone

When I think of grass
I remember the cemetery we visited each month
My grandmother sitting in her lawn chair
While the younger generation worked with
spades and clippers
To make known their respect for the ancestors
lying under the fading headstones

And as much as I love the grass
in all its glory
And how just the word conjures
All these memories and emotions,
When I am dead,
I don't want to lie with those people
down under its loamy richness

I'd much prefer what's left on me
Be spread on the wind
to fertilize and feed
and make the grass lush and green
A visual expanse of memories
For another poet to ponder

Teresa Q. Tucker

Through It All

Every eye that is open
Doesn't see
What is visible.
Hope isn't always real,
Yet we can find ourselves moving toward something
That has been given its name, it's purpose.

How often are we slipping and sliding
Through it all.
Perhaps daily, possibly every moment of every hour, each minute.

Finding ourselves seeking is a job, a career,
A prayer, a meditation, a resolution,
A source of living.
A path from life to death.
And then beyond.

Shari Welch

Queen of the Beach

She strolls along the white sand
as her flowered frock swirls in the breeze
Her smooth sun kissed skin glistens like diamonds
as nature has blessed her

The sun presents as a spotlight on her aquatic stage
She seems to walk on water
as the waves embrace her ankles
The waves flow out to the deep
then comeback to shore
surrounding her presence

She walks with her head held high
In a deep mystic state
flowing along the aquatic fringe
Her energy speaks confidence, strength,
inner beauty, and peace to rejuvenate
in her daily ritual

Sherry Wells

Traveler

Traveler Today

Spring, Summer, Winter and Fall

The path ever new

Amara

Springtime Amara!
Here eternally in you
Each day something new

Alvin Wigley

The Surrender Prayer

God, help me respect and love You so deeply that I humbly bow
and surrender my pride and heart to You, seeking and gaining
the knowledge of You and Your wisdom and understanding, with
the inspiration to walk wisely in Your love and have the light of life,
even when Your grace and truth permit me to be Broken for
Something
Beautiful.

Creator, help me practice obeying You and exercising kindness
toward the
weeping soul's tears I'm called upon to dry, forgiving all who cause
me pain,
to sigh, or to cry, as He did on the Cross while the world still wonders
why.

As Good Samaritan help me serve those whose hope is no longer
nigh,
Remaining steadfast, immovable in submission to the Lord and his
work
and becoming something more beautiful by my new birth, as I learn
to trust Him to draw me close and one day in majestic glory and
matchless
radiant light, in perfect peace forever abide. Amen

Inspired by God

Left Alone

Tis true the born again has no claim to his body nor spirit for that is
God's now He owns

No wonder the light in us so dim, since our soul, the will, He left
alone.

Lord said, who has an ear let him hear what He declares as our
Master

Our will He left alone explains His unfaithful brides' disaster
What must it take to repent then closer to him be drawn?

Awaken and obey the Word of truth: loves the switch that turns our
light on

The unwise the truth disobey and remain as babes, not pleasing God,
nor Spirit led, nor grown

So the Lord's heart we break oft to please ourselves, since our will be
left alone!

The lost He bid invite to hev'n and not in hell where they be gone
We must be broken for something beautiful cause we rebel, while
Christ on the Throne, does not disown, but proves we're best not left
alone

Inspired by God

Stories

Claire Cade

Mothers, Sisters, Grandmothers, Children, Friends

As a little girl, I would listen to my mom's conversations with her good friend who we called Auntie Dolores. It was a time, when children stayed out of grown folk's conversations. My mother would shoo me outside. I would allow the screen door to open, make the squeaky sound and slam shut. Then I would sneak back in before it closed. I would then sit on the steps hidden behind the wall and listen.

Every day they talked.

Every day they laughed.

Every day they praised the Lord and prayed.

Every day they discussed topics from the news to who's child was graduating.

Every day I listened. Aunt Dolores had been my daycare teacher. Aunt Dolores and her husband had led the B Gee's and B Bee's (black girls and black boys) which was like Brownies or Cubs but for us little black children. Big stuff in the 70s, especially in a small city in Windsor, Ontario. It was so small that if my mom and dad saw a black person or what we called a colored person in the 70s. They would run up to them, hug them like a long lost relative and commence to talk for hours about everything from where they were born, worked and what family they knew or friend from Windsor, Amherstburg, Puce, Buxton, or Chatham. They always had many people in common. If they didn't (which was rare) my mom would quickly invite them to join the group. Aunt Dolores, my mom and the black women who were bonded by faith, church, learning and a collective love for progress. After exchanging numbers, hugs, and numerous restarted conversations, they would part. As I child, I would ask my mom how she knew them. She would look at me and say, "I just met them."

One day, Aunt Dolores called screaming, "Run to the TV there is a black person on TV!!!" Each time she would call, I could hear through the phone clearly, she was so loud. This went on for days and finally my mom saw the commercial. This was 1974 and after all of that

running and missing the commercial, we finally saw a silhouette of a black figure. This from their screams of excitement was progress. In between listening to mom and Aunt Dolores' conversations, I would look at commercials, the billboards, the books in my school and even the stained glass figures in the Catholic Church we attended and not one black silhouette of me.

Whenever someone graduated, Aunt Dolores and my mom and their group of ladies collected money to send this child off to college. Like the black people mom ran into at the mall, when I would ask mom who they were, she would look at me and say, "We don't need to know them. They are graduating and we are making sure they have a start."

Miss Sepia Pageant

Jackson Park

Again Mom and Aunt Dolores were involved in what was quite a huge event back in the 60s and 70s. A parade down a main street to Jackson Park during Emancipation Weekend. Years later, I would find out that Martin Luther King, Jr. and others participated.

Miss Sepia and Little Miss Sepia Beauty Pageant. They were excited as ever. Aunt Dolores was my and many other girls' coach as we practiced walking for this beauty pageant. Mom and dad argued. He said a two-piece bathing suit was not suitable for a little girl. Mom won because it had full shorts for bottoms and the one-piece bathing suits showed too much of my peaches. That is what we called our bottoms in my home in the 70s. How beautiful I felt and scared staring at this beautiful sea of people. I didn't realize then how fortunate I was to participate in this event.

I would hear a phone call with Mom and Aunt Dolores angry, sad, and still determined for progress but the City of Windsor denied, declined and revoked the permit for the Emancipation Weekend parade.

September, 2023

Fast Forward

Mom is crying. She is in a nursing home. I am leaving. I say, "Mom, do you want me to stay longer?"

"No," she says. "I have no friends."

I call Aunt Dolores' home phone. The phone number is still in the book and hasn't changed. Her youngest daughter, Dee, doesn't remember me because it's been years and she was just a baby in the 70s. I tell her my mom and Aunt Dolores used to talk every day and my mom is crying she has no friends. She tells her mom and they call me when they get there a few weeks later. This time Dee gets to listen to them.

My mom yells, "Bishop!" Who is Bishop? Well that is Aunt Dolores' maiden name. Dee tells me they hold hands and cry. Aunt Dolores asks Mom, "Why didn't you call me?" It was like Dee wasn't even in the room. They reminisce and talk about university and how they knew each other way before Darren was born. Darren is Aunt Dolores' oldest son who is 57 years old.

"How is Donald," my mom asks (that is Aunt Dolores' husband of over sixty years).

"Girl, he is the same. You know how Donald is girl!" And they laugh and smile. They laugh and talk. They laugh and they cry and they hold hands.

Hey Dee girl!!! Hey girl!!! And now we talk every day.

We talk about our mothers, we often talk about how we didn't realize how close they were and their connection. Aunt Dolores and Mom. They won't be in any history books but they were a part of the progress and they were a part of it. You may think this is made up but they died on the same day in November, 2023. We, the daughters of Aunt Dolores and my mom, are so glad we got them together one last time. Neither one of us knew that would be their last day together.

Ruth Duncan Dale

Memories of Going on a Snipe Hunt

If your friends were looking for adventure when they came to your house...take them for a hunt on the wild side...take them on a snipe hunt. It would be a hunt never to be forgotten. No guns, no flippers, nor any kind of weapons were needed. The only two items needed were a toe sack large enough to hold the snipe, and a blindfold to cover the eyes. The hunt had to take place in the dark of night since the snips were supposedly nocturnal animals. Your relatives or friends would scare up the snipe and the snipe would run into the toe sack.

It was a scary happening for you knew nothing about a "snipe." While you are alone and waiting to catch the snipe in the toe sack, your imagination was running wild. How big is a snipe? Does a snipe bite? How long do you have to hold the toe sack before they find one? After what seems like forever you finally remove the blindfold from your eyes. You use it to wipe off the nervous sweat on your face. However, it sure was a very funny time for those people who have taken you on a snipe hunt or you might call it a wild goose chase!

My brother Robby recalled being taken on a snipe hunt. He said he was only six years old when his brothers blindfolded his eyes with a bandana handkerchief. They left him behind a log barn in Kentucky which we called the Powder Plant place holding the toe sack. It was a long, long, long wait, and no snipe to be seen or heard. It was a frightening experience. My question to my brother was, "What is a snipe?" He laughingly replied, "An illusion."

Em Emanuelsen

Unrequited

Bill stood in the corner of his daughter's dark bedroom. "Ren," he whispered, wringing his insubstantial hands. "I need to talk to you. Please."

His daughter didn't stir. She was sleeping in the queen bed with her husband, arms and legs splayed around each other, the comforter slowly sliding to the floor. It was a new moon that night and the room was black as beetles but Bill didn't have any trouble seeing her. He had seen her in his mind every moment since the day he died.

Bill hadn't been able to approach his daughter until twenty-five years after his funeral. The first nineteen years he spent in a dead daze, floating thoughtlessly like cottonwood, unaware he was dead, unaware he was a person, unaware of anything at all. The twentieth year, his deceased brain fired enough synapses to reintroduce him to his own consciousness but as far as he could remember, he had always been bodiless, homeless, and invisible as the wind. The twenty-first year, he remembered his name. He remembered he used to be a human and he used to live on Sugarsnap Lane, and that he had a daughter and she hadn't cried at his funeral.

He spent his twenty-second and third years searching for her, for he had drifted aimlessly for so long, like the tide, he had been washed out to a place of dead grass and dust he didn't recognize. But he kept Ren's smile in his mind, her rosy cheeks and braces, her pet rock, her band uniform. She was the last thing pinning him to a planet that had spit him out.

Finally, twenty-four years after his death, he found her. He followed the ley lines sewn to his chest like heart monitor wires, tugged them and pulled himself forward until he ended up back in Colorado, back on Sugarsnap Lane, back at their old house, number 13425.

There was a tan SUV in the driveway. It said "Hybrid" on the lip of the trunk, but Bill couldn't imagine what it had been spliced with. There was a mailbox out front with two large hand prints and two

small set in paint and there was a name written on it that wasn't his own, wasn't his daughter's. Not Renata Bushnell but "The Stettons;" it stung like a slap to the face. There were so few Bushnells left and Bill remembered when she had promised never to change her name, even if she got married, which she had no interest in doing, anyway.

It was a warm summer evening and the sun was sinking low, but it was still light enough for the children playing basketball in the cul-de-sac a few houses down. He thought about knocking on the door but decided that was ridiculous and passed through the wood into the dark entryway of the house. He was worried that maybe his daughter didn't live here anymore and these were the toys and clutter of some other family. But then he heard a voice from upstairs and, while it had grown deeper and huskier with age, he knew immediately it was Ren's. He floated upstairs and found her. She looked like her mother but also his.

He watched her cautiously, tirelessly, following her from room to room but standing mute in the corner. He did this month after month, until summer left and came back again. He loved watching her, how she spoke softly to her children, how she snorted at inside jokes with her husband. But watching like a piece of furniture wasn't enough; he needed to be part of it with them. He needed his family back.

"Ren," he tried again, taking one tentative step forward into the bedroom. "Please."

There was no answer except the quiet throbbing of the refrigerator downstairs. He waited for a sign that she had heard him, even subconsciously, but her breathing remained slow and deep and undisturbed. Bill stood still, staring, picking at a thread that had come loose in his confetti-patterned scrubs, the same ones he had been wearing when Georgia the receptionist found him in the back room of the veterinary clinic after fourth of July weekend, his death smell mingling with that of the dog on his lap.

"Daisy wasn't one of them," Bill said in Ren's ear. "I swear."

Ren shivered, scratched the side of her face, and rolled over. She had heard him.

She wasn't one of them.

Bill and Ren had stood in the center of a meadow, Daisy's favorite place to play. Ren had stayed home from high school on that day and had spent the morning at the vet with Bill and their border collie. She had been sick a long time and Bill had decided it was her time. Ren said goodbye then cried in his office while Bill took care of the rest. He took her through a McDonald's drive thru, then took her home, and drove back to work.

That evening, Bill held the shovel and the white wooden cross with the spike on the bottom, and Ren held the bag of ashes Bill had brought home from the vet. He was still in his scrubs, his badge still clipped to his breast pocket.

Ren had been waiting at the front window and when Bill pulled up in the truck, she came outside immediately, holding the grave marker she had made and the shovel. He moved Daisy's ashes to the floor of the cab when Ren climbed inside. "You can put those in the back, sweetie," he had said, but Ren just looked straight ahead, her eyes puffy and red, her cheeks chapped from salt, so he put the truck into reverse and drove to the spot they had chosen.

It was a gray afternoon, overcast, threatening rain, but Daisy had loved running outside in the mud, so it was perfect. Bill stuck the tip of the shovel into the soft earth, pressed his tennis shoes to the lip and prepared to make the first cut, when Ren stopped him.

"Can I do it?" she asked, clutching the ashes to her chest. "I wanna do it."

Bill looked at her for a long moment, but she wasn't looking at him; she was looking at Daisy.

"Okay," he said and they traded.

Bill stood to the side with the bag as Ren struggled to dig a hole deep enough. Bill had suggested before that they could spread Daisy's ashes but Ren didn't like the idea.

"I can't visit her if she's everywhere," she had said.

The grass rustled in the wind blowing in the first few sprinkles of rain. The din of traffic from the freeway floated up over the trees and mingled with it, a nature sound all its own. However, nothing seemed so loud as the sound of the shovel slicing away the earth, digging un-

der leaves and roots, revealing black soil. It was unnatural, almost sacrilegious, for such a dark place to be exposed like that to the light, but it would only be open for a few more minutes.

"Daisy was a good dog, right to the very end," said Bill as Ren took the bag from him. "She didn't bite or cry or anything. We looked into each other's eyes and I felt like she was telling me it's, you know, it's gonna be okay—"

"Shut up, Dad," Ren said, her back to him like a cliff. "Can you just."

The Denver Pet Clinic and Hospital had the record of most euthanasias per customer in the state. It wasn't a record Bill and his colleagues were proud of and they tried to keep that statistic out of public view. They got more visits from the head office, more inspections of medications and procedures to make sure everything was up to code.

Bill was often the one to give them the tour and show them to the correct files and they never found anything amiss. Perhaps, they reasoned, that part of Denver just didn't take care of their pets as well as other places and only took them into the vet once it was too late.

"I know it's hard," he told a mother who had brought in her ten-year-old dachshund with kidney stones, "but sometimes, letting them go is kinder."

Bill was the head vet at the clinic and he was the only one authorized to make lethal injections; only his keycard opened up the cabinet of pentobarbital and he checked the authority settings for all the cards on the computer every week just to make sure it stayed that way. And when he did it, he didn't want anyone else in the room with him except the animal's owner, if they chose to be present, which most did. Bill invited them to stand at the head of the table where their dog or cat could see them and while they petted them and assured them everything would be all right, Bill made the injection.

The two or so minutes after the injection were Bill's favorite because even animals that had endured long, painful illnesses or injuries looked at peace, and the way their owners smiled bravely through tears seemed beautiful and holy; for a moment, Bill saw meaning cut through his gray life like soap through oil.

"Think of his quality of life," he said to the owners who were hesi-

tant, "You don't want him to suffer." By this he meant, "Let's all three of us ascend together."

Droplets pecked at the window behind the bedroom blinds. Sometimes the wind swept them away and sometimes it drove them even harder into the glass, making the glass bow and the casing creak. Bill stood next to Ren's head, motionless since she had turned over. It occurred to him that if she woke up and saw his ghost there towering over her, she might not recognize him and think he was an intruder, so he sat on the floor.

He crossed his arms and rested his chin on his knees, watching the rise and fall of the blankets, watching her short blonde hair splayed across the pillow like a spider plant. She looked a lot like him, more now that she was older.

The digital alarm clock on the nightstand read 3:34 AM. The night was half gone already and in a few hours, Ren would be getting up, turning on lights, and waking her kids up; by seven thirty, everyone would be out the door and on their way to school or work, and Bill would have to pass another day in solitude. He didn't want to do that—couldn't do that—not when he was so close.

He sat up on his knees and leaned over the bed. With one hand, he carefully reached over the piled blankets, over Ren's shoulder, past her hair until he found her face. It was pale, her eyes and mouth like shadowed holes in the darkness. It was his face; under her mother's nose and eyes, it was Bill's. He let his fingers sink lower, hesitantly, hovering above skin. He didn't care how she would react, only that she did. Maybe she would even recognize him. With a final rush of purpose, he let his palm rest on her cheek.

Ren's eyes shot open and she shouted in surprise. She threw her arms out to stop whatever was touching her. Bill jumped back and squeezed his hand protectively to his chest, dead heart pumping non-existent adrenaline through his limbs. The spot he had touched was a handprint, glowing blue like himself. Ren sat up and wiped a frenzied hand over her cheek.

Her husband sat up too. "What happened?" he pressed. "What's wrong?"

The two questions Bill hated most. He sank deeper into the corner by the door, letting the shadows swallow him up. He backed up further and further until he passed through the wall and out of the bedroom.

Ren's scream woke Fergus the Scottie and he was standing outside the bedroom door, ears and tail erect, when Bill passed through. They locked eyes, Fergus's brown and Bill's hollow, and Fergus's snout began to ripple like velvet, showing rows of small but very sharp teeth. Bill stepped to the wall to give him space and considered pressing back through when the door opened.

"Just getting some tea," said Ren as she stepped out in her white bathrobe, a shaky hand running through her hair, pushing it back.

Fergus barked a greeting then faced Bill again. He barked and barked and Ren didn't tell him to stop, only knelt and petted him and asked what was wrong.

When she looked up, her eyes met Bill's. Or so he thought. They must not have because after a moment, her gaze drifted aimlessly along the wall and then she stood up, crossed her arms uncomfortably as if to keep herself warm, and called Fergus to come downstairs with her.

When this house was Bill's, the stairs had been hardwood but now, they were covered with plush white carpet. The wood underneath still creaked in all the places Bill remembered. The old house couldn't be covered up so easily.

She went into Bill's kitchen and Bill followed. She set Bill's cast-iron tea kettle on the stove and clicked on the gas. Bill moved to the breakfast nook and settled into a chair at the table, hoping she would sit across from him and then he could pretend they were drinking tea together. He clasped his hands on the table and watched every movement; her shoulders raised and uncomfortable, her thin hand as it took two mugs out of the cabinet, the way she scratched the back of her leg with the top of her foot.

She brought the two steaming mugs of tea over to the table, setting one in front of herself, and another in front of Bill. Bill glanced back at the stairs, expecting to see William coming down to join her, but he never did. The mug in front of him had a chipped handle and said Denver Pet Clinic in faded purple letters with neon green sprinkles

and triangles around a faded cartoon dog. The tea inside was black as coffee.

Ren wrapped her fingers around her own cup and she stared at him, through him, like he was a dirty window she could almost see. Bill squeezed his hands together tighter and tighter. He wanted her to see him but he didn't want her to see him like this. The dishes in the sink began to rattle. Ren kept staring.

"Is that you, Dad?" she whispered.

Bill lurched up from the table, spilling his tea. He escaped through the wall and into the moonless night without another word.

Brooke Fullington

Chapter 1 from *The Gray of Stones and Decay*

I awoke to cold tears slipping down my cheeks. They dragged across my skin, falling onto the rough straw below me. *Have I been crying?* No, it wasn't tears, but ice-cold droplets from the cracked stone above me. I looked up at the damp stone ceiling, the cracks weaving through the rock like lightning. The water was traveling through the lines, ending above my head. *It must have stormed last night* I thought as I heaved myself into a sitting position from the stone floor. Ignoring the twinge of protest in my back, I rubbed my aching eyes and began my morning routine of picking straw out of my oily hair. I had gotten used to the ache, the crimson imprints on my skin from the unforgiving stone beneath me. The hay helped, but not much.

After the last of the straw had been plucked, I shifted on my hands and knees and crawled to the small concave shape in the stone across from me. I settled on my knees, rolling the straw from my hair into a tight ball. I started gathering my last portion of kindling, of which I had stashed in the fireplace to keep dry. It had been given to me eight mornings ago, and though I had tried to savor them, the pile could now easily fit into one of my small, boney hands. The wood I was given was also modest, but enough to keep me warm in the colder months. I reached into the alcove and retrieved the small piece of rounded glass from the corner that had been given to me my first night here. I'd been told only the one would be given, so I handled it with care and only when necessary. Luckily it seemed to be one of those rare mornings that a few rays of sunlight had managed to make their way into my cell.

I shuffled around, attempting to get a good angle, and raised the glass up, aligning the condensed ball of light with the hay I'd balled up. After some time, smoke began to rise from the tiny bunch and I watched as the hay began to glimmer. I quickly leaned down and blew gently on the pile until a small flame became visible. I carefully placed it into the pile of kindling and wood, continuing to blow until

I was satisfied with the results. As the warmth grew, I sat back on my heels and let my tired eyes drag across the fractured walls of my cell.

Exactly six steps wide and seven steps long, the room was big enough to hold the fire pit, an area for resting, and a small chamber pot. Nothing more. A small slice of stone had been carved out to form a miserable excuse for a window. The measly space overlooked the desolate, swampy marshlands that had once been sprawling with color and life. The once colorful wildflowers had become nothing more than rotting weeds that slumped toward the grey, wet earth.

It's been years since I walked across that field, since I let my toes sink into the warm pools as the tiny fish danced around my ankles. I had lost count how many winters had passed since I had been forced into this cell, only able to breathe whatever insignificant fresh air that managed to sneak through the window. My gaze traveled to the wretched, filthy stone walls surrounding me. When I first arrived in this room the stone walls and floors still had their distinctive cardinal tint, the color of bloodstone. The stone had been given its gruesome name after the second war, to honor those who had sacrificed their own blood to win the war, and this land with it.

Your land.

Now they were drained of their color, covered in mold and leaks. The sun used to fill the small space with golden light, warming the floors as well as myself. Now the sun always seemed to be hidden behind the storm clouds, leaving the outside world as grey and colorless as my prison. *It used to be beautiful* I thought. *When it was under your protection.* I shook my head and discarded the thought. Thinking like that brought other thoughts, other memories that I didn't care to have resurface.

I turned back to the small flicker of flames and raised my fingers to the growing heat. I studied my cracked, ivory skin, caked with dried blood from previous injuries. My skin was stretched taut across my bones, creating sharp edges along my willowy frame. I hadn't seen my face in so long, though I imagine it must be just as wane. Underneath my torn rags my skin was bruised as well as covered in dirt and filth. I was hardly allowed to bathe here. Whenever I *was* given fresh water, it was often frigid. Sickness seemed to hinder me

so easily now, so I mostly saved it for drinking.

Weak, bruised, and broken. Those were the things I was now.

They did this to you. Cassius and his damned army. They took everything from you, and you couldn't even fight back.

"Leave me be," I whispered through my cracked lips, shaking as I felt those thoughts rising again. "You have no place here, let me have my peace."

You've always been weak. Alric had been the only thing able to hold you together.

Without him you've become nothing. You were always nothing.

I felt my limbs begin to tremble, my head aching. I lowered my head to the icy stone floor and cradled myself, trying not to picture their faces.

"Dripping water, the fire, the wind outside..." I tried to name anything else, anything else to pull my attention to.

These demons often mocked me, invading my thoughts, pushing my limits. I despised them. I wanted nothing more than to silence them if I had the option. I chanted for a while longer, until I felt my breathing return to normal. Once I had gained a hold of my thoughts, I shakily rose to my feet and hobbled over to the water basin in the corner of the room. I wiped my hands off as best as I could and dipped them into the icy liquid. I brought my hands to my lips, and drank. The water dragged down my raw throat, numbing the dry ache. As I was reaching for another drink a loud, ominous creak echoed down the halls, sending a chill up my spine.

Wren.

I stood quickly, knocking the basin over in the process and shuffled towards my pile of straw. I placed myself down, facing away from the bars and hugged my knees to my chest. I didn't hear her approach; only the sound of her skin dragging across the iron bars as she wrapped her arms around them.

"Rise and shine, your majesty," she whispered, her voice hissing at me through the bars. "I hope you weren't waiting too long." I could imagine her lips pulling back across her teeth into a sneer, her eyes burning into my back.

"No miss," I managed to whisper. As much as I despised giv-

ing her any satisfaction, I had learned the hard way that ignoring her often led to new, more painful scars. I had plenty from previous missteps with her. Responding was the minimum. If I didn't respond in the way she approved, or at the very least found entertaining, I would be punished. I had tried to fight back many times during her first visits, but it was always in vain. My weak and frail stature was nothing compared to her healthy, well-fed body. For as young as she was, she made up for it in strength and height. Fighting back was one of the worst mistakes I could make with her, her punishments would often become ruthless. The clang and groan of the rusty metal as she unlocked the cell door and the sound of her steps dragging towards me made me shiver. I kept my eyes down as she made her way to me. I felt her fingers lace through my hair delicately, her other hand moving across my shoulder, traveling around my collarbone and stopping at my neck.

"I'm glad," she spoke "You've been so cooperative these past few days. *His majesty* will be glad to hear of it as well." As she spoke her nails pricked the skin on my neck, drawing a bit of blood from an old scab. Her jealousy was obvious, the attention that unhinged male gave me was like a raw wound for her, and in her opinion, completely absurd.

I agreed wholeheartedly.

In my mind flashed the image of her as a young girl. I had known of her family somewhat, her father had passed through the gate with nothing but a large burlap sack across his shoulder and the scrawny, golden-haired child attached to his side. I had only been seventeen, her much younger. The King's advisors had hired him to attend to the stables. I had no business with them of course, being a young noble woman. Sometimes whilst strolling around the grounds I would catch the ends of her light hair before they disappeared behind a post or around some shrubbery. She often followed me when I was outside the castle walls, a few times working up enough courage to speak a word or two. I hadn't minded, I'd thought her endearing, though a bit wild perhaps. Still, I didn't mind her company, she'd seemed sweet. That all changed after the ambush. When Cassius had attacked the kingdom some years later, I had thought her to be slaughtered or

worse by the hundreds of soldiers that had sacked the castle grounds. It wouldn't have been surprising, they had ruthlessly struck down every man, woman, and child they came across that had opposed them. It wasn't until she had been sent to me several months later to deliver a message from Cassius that I'd found out she had been spared. Her father had been killed in the ambush, but she had been taken to Cassius, along with several other young women. For what reasons I did not know and didn't like to dwell on. At first, I was elated to find out that she was alive, that she was unharmed.

Until she began the torturing.

She had been ruthless that first visit. I hadn't been able to stand, let alone walk, for a while after. For months I couldn't figure out for the life of me why she grew to have such an intense hatred for me. This girl that had once been almost a sort of companion to me. I suppose she blamed me for her father's death, as Alric was no longer here to hold any of the blame. I could understand why she would feel such frustration with our failure, but how she put so little blame on Cassius himself I never understood. Though I suppose he must have found it easy to guide her thoughts at her age then. From that day on Wren followed under Cassius's rule, doing constant useless tasks for him. She often boasted on her importance to him, but I imagined she was nothing more than a plaything for him in truth. Of course, there was more to the hatred she showed now several years later. Jealousy flared through her every lash and strike. She despised that I had been spared, that his attention still rested on me after all this time, regardless of my refusal to accept his *invitations*.

It had been no secret that Cassius had wanted me for his mistress. When I had been presented to the court as an eligible lady at sixteen, he had been the first to call upon my father, the Lord of Wilshire. At the time I had no objections to marrying him, not that any opinion of mine would have mattered, he had been handsome, a Lord of one of the finer realms in the kingdom. The few times I had met him he had been respectful, kind even. Everything had nearly been settled, that was of course until my father received a letter with a royal seal. The letter, written in the King's hand, had notified my father of his intentions to have me for his own. For what reasons I still

cannot fathom to this day. My father, of course, would not turn down such an honor, regardless of any previous arrangements. I had been shipped off only a few short weeks after, all thoughts of a future with Cassius long gone and buried. Though that had not been the last time I heard from him.

A sharp prick to my collarbone quickly interrupted my thoughts.

"You aren't listening to me," Wren sneered into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "What have I told you about ignoring me, Lydia?" Her voice ending in a familiar snarl.

Before I had time to react, she tightened her grip in my hair and yanked with full force. I landed on the harsh stone with a sickening crack. I grappled for anything to help bring me to my feet, but was stopped short by a sharp pain in my ribs as she struck me with her foot. The air was forced out of my chest in a hollowed wheeze.

I shuffled towards the window and used the ledge to pull myself up. I looked around the cell for her, but she was gone, and she had left the cell door open.

A tremble went through me. I knew what that meant.

I braced myself against the stone, pressing my heels into the crevice between the wall and floor. As she passed through the archway holding that long wooden cane, a gurgled whimper passed through my lips before I could stop it. Her eyes lit up with the sound, like a wolf that had cornered its prey. I tried to duck out of her path, but it wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

Her eyes became wild and excited as she swung the bar towards my chest, landing in my ribs, knocking me back to the wall. I tried avoiding her a second time, only to regret it immediately. Wren let out a screech as she pulled the stick back and swung it up into my jaw, forcing my head to snap back sharply. Before I could recover her arms came back down and I felt the sharp sting of the wood whipping across my face. I landed on the floor with a dull thud, the blood from my mouth and nose slowly trickling onto the stones below me.

"I'll be back tomorrow, your majesty," she sneered. "Maybe you'll have learned your lesson by then." I listened to the groan and clanking of metal, then her retreating footsteps as I curled into myself,

wishing for the pain to subside.

Sue Hayes

The Lost Photo

Lightning split the sky as Elliot Graves parked on Sparrow Lane outside the brown-bricked Victorian. He liked arriving early to estate sales—sometimes they let him in. Most times, they didn't.

He rang the doorbell. A woman in a floral sundress answered. "Am I too early?" he asked.

"It starts at 8:00," she said.

"I'll wait." Elliot stepped off the porch into the rain.

The woman glanced over her shoulder, then sighed. "You might as well come in before you get soaked."

Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of furniture polish and dust. Tables lined the living room, cluttered with the remains of someone else's life—vases, records, books.

"You're that news anchor from Channel 3, aren't you?" the woman asked.

"Was," Elliot said, already moving on.

He came for the deals. Not the memories. Since the station let him go, these sales helped cover his bills. "Budget cuts," they told him. He knew better. They wanted someone younger. Cheaper. Flashier.

He paused at a set of antique dishes, wondering if they were rare enough to turn a profit online.

Twenty minutes into his search, he spotted a vintage 35mm Nikon camera, \$40. A steal. He could clean it up and flip it for four times that amount on eBay.

Back home, Elliot barely had the door open when Shutter, his border collie, launched into his arms like a four-legged torpedo. He staggered back, laughing.

"Okay, I get it. You missed me. I was only gone an hour."

With camera in hand, he headed downstairs to his workbench. *I can have this cleaned and listed by noon. Maybe hit another sale after that.*

He gathered his supplies—cleaning cloths, cotton swabs, and com-

pressed air—and got to work. When he opened the film chamber, he found a roll of undeveloped Kodak film. He told himself it was probably blank.

Still, curiosity won out.

He carried the film to his darkroom. Images slowly emerged—a lake, a girl on a swing, a picnic basket on a red-checkered blanket. In the last frame: the same girl hung upside down on monkey bars. And in the background, a woman stood in a parking lot staring into the camera lens, her face twisted in fear. A man beside her clutched her arm, his fingers digging in.

Elliot's heart dropped.

He recognized the face right away—Gayle Martinez. A woman who'd gone missing twenty-two years ago. Back then, he was the reporter who covered the story.

She was never found.

He stared at the image. *I should give this to the police.*

But he failed to connect the dots back then. Now, here it was, practically begging him to try again.

Second chances don't come often. He couldn't waste this one.

After some digging, Elliot found out the house where he bought the camera belonged to Zachariah Shepherd, a retired librarian now living at Sunnybrook Nursing Home. He drove there right away.

Tucked between a quiet neighborhood and a tree-lined park, Sunnybrook was a single-story brick building with wide windows and winding cobblestone paths shaded by old maples.

Elliot was directed to Room 112, where Zachariah sat in a Geri Chair, eyes fixed on the TV. The air smelled faintly of bleach.

Elliot knocked on the open door and stepped inside. The man looked to be in his eighties—frail, with wispy white hair and thick black-rimmed glasses.

Elliot introduced himself. "Mr. Shepherd, I need your help." Zachariah glanced up.

"Could you look at this picture and tell me if you remember anything..."

Zachariah reached for the photo with a trembling hand, considered

it, flipped it over, and handed it back.

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "Lena."

"Who is Lena, Mr. Shepherd?"

Elliot waited.

"My granddaughter."

"Do you remember when this was taken?"

Silence.

"Please, Mr. Shepherd. It's important."

Zachariah pressed a button on the TV remote. The screen went dark.

"We were at the park, by the lake," he said. "Lena, her mother, and me. Havin' a picnic." He squinted at the photo. "Where'd you get this?"

"I bought a camera at your estate sale. Found a roll of film inside, so I developed it."

Zachariah's eyes lingered on the photo. "That was... 'bout a week before my daughter passed. Must've forgotten the film was in there."

Elliot watched the way the lines deepened around his eyes—as if the photo had unlocked memories sealed long ago. He pulled up a ladder-back chair and sat.

"I'm trying to identify the man in the background," Elliot said, handing the photo back. "Do you recognize him?"

Zachariah stared, then slowly shook his head.

"Nothing? Please—anything would help."

"I recognize the cap."

"The fedora?"

"There was a fella in town that used to wear one like that. Long time ago. Had a dark feather."

"You know his name?"

Zachariah frowned. "Don't think I ever caught it. Just saw him around."

Elliot thanked him and handed over the other photos—except the one of Gayle. "These are yours. I'll return this one after my investigation."

He left the nursing home with one thought in mind. *Could someone local have been behind Gayle's disappearance?*

Elliot drove into town and stepped into Sweet Sprinkles, the bakery owned by Zachariah's granddaughter.

Inside, the warm scent of doughnuts mixed with the rich aroma of coffee.

Behind the counter, a slender woman with curly blonde hair looked up. Her name tag read *Lena*.

"What can I get you?"

"Some answers, I hope."

She crinkled her forehead. "Excuse me?"

"I'm Elliot Graves. I just spoke with your grandfather. I'm looking into an old case I covered as a reporter."

Lena's smile faded. She called a coworker over, then led Elliot to a small back office. "What's this about?"

Elliot explained the undeveloped film found in her grandfather's camera, then handed her the photo—her hanging upside down on monkey bars.

Her expression softened. "That was by the lake. Me, Mom, and Grandpa. Our last picnic." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "I remember everything about that day."

"Do you recognize the people in the background?"

She studied the image. "No... I'm sorry, I don't."

He jotted down his number. "If anything comes back to you, please call."

She nodded.

Outside, Elliot showed the photo to people on the patio. No luck. Same result at the barbershop, two doors down.

Back home, he examined the photo again through his magnifier. The man was tall, well-dressed, face turned away from the camera. His left hand gripped Gayle's arm. Something dangled from his finger.

A keychain. With three keys. And a fish-shaped charm.

Elliot moved the magnifier closer. LUCKY CATCH, it read.

His pulse jumped.

The Lucky Catch—an old dive bar five miles out of town. He hadn't been there in years.

Not since before Gayle disappeared.

The perp has to be a local guy. And someone must know him.

He grabbed his keys.

Elliot was up by 7:00 a.m. the following morning. The Lucky Catch the night before had been a dead end. No one recognized the man with Gayle Martinez.

He set the photo beside his coffee and searched his memory.

Gayle had vanished on a sunny Friday afternoon. No ransom. No enemies. A shy girl. Her boss called her the best employee he'd ever had.

So why would anyone want her gone?

He rubbed the dog's head. "I'm getting nowhere, Shutter."

Mug in one hand, photo in the other, he moved to his office. Shutter padded after him, his nails tapping the floor. From the closet, Elliot dragged down a dusty box—old case files from his reporting days.

He found the Martinez file and flipped through it, searching for anything that connected to the man in the photo. He came up empty.

A metallic clank broke his focus—the mailbox. He stepped outside and retrieved a couple of bills, a magazine, and a plain white envelope with no return address.

Back in his office, he tore it open.

Inside was one line, handwritten in thick, jagged ink.

Destroy the photo before it destroys you.

His spine shuddered.

But beneath the fear, something stirred—the thrill of a lead. This time was different, though. The lead wasn't just a clue.

It was a warning.

And it was coming straight for him.

An hour later, Elliot sat across from Detective Marcus Reeves—the original investigator—inside a cramped cubicle at the police station.

He handed over the photo and the threatening note, now sealed in clear evidence bags.

Reeves opened a drawer, pulled out a folder, and slid a paper across the desk.

"This was left in Gayle Martinez's parents' mailbox three days after

she vanished. Never released to the public. And it needs to stay that way."

Elliot nodded, then read the note:

If she had just listened, this wouldn't have happened.

"Holy—" he stopped short. "It's him. Same handwriting."

"No prints on the original note," Reeves said. "We had a handwriting analyst write up a profile. Male. Right-handed. Educated. Confident. Controlling. We'll run prints and DNA on your envelope. There's no postage. This guy hand-delivered this to you."

"If he's local, what about matching the handwriting to public records?"

"I've got a faster route. Someone at the FBI who can run it through FISH."

"FISH?"

"Forensic Information System for Handwriting. It didn't exist twenty-two years ago. I'll let you know if we get a hit."

"I'll head to the library. See if he shows up in any photos taken in the park around that time. Might get lucky."

Reeves leaned back in his chair.

"Watch your back, Elliot. This guy's been quiet for a long time. Something tells me... he just woke up."

That afternoon, Elliot stepped into the local library. The musty scent of old books greeted him.

"Help you with something?" a librarian asked.

"I need to access the local historical archives. I'm looking for photos from events in the park twenty-two years ago."

"You're in luck. Follow me."

She led him to a small room where she turned on a computer and pulled up the Historical Society's website.

"They just finished digitizing their photos. All scanned by date. Looks like there was a craft fair, music night, community picnic, and Fourth of July celebration that year." She slid a chair over. "Have at it."

Elliot clicked through photo after photo, examining every detail. He studied people gathered around booths strung with flags, crowds watching a band perform in a bandshell, and kids running with spar-

klers on the Fourth of July. No one even slightly resembled the man he was looking for.

He opened the file labeled "Community Picnic." Twenty images in, his hand froze on the mouse.

Near the edge of the frame stood a tall man dressed in a light-colored shirt and dark slacks. The same tilt of the head. The same broad shoulders. Wearing a fedora with a dark feather tucked into the band.

Elliot leaned backed in his chair and grinned.

"Gotcha."

Detective Reeves identified the man in the photo as Bradford Barrett, a prominent figure in the local business community—and Gayle Martinez's boss at the time she vanished.

"Her boss? You're sure?"

Reeves nodded. "Just got a match on the handwriting I sent to the FBI. It's him. We're putting a team together now."

"I want in."

"You follow my orders," Reeves said firmly.

Thirty minutes later, Reeves led a team of officers to Barrett's home. The house stood at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac, tucked behind immaculate hedges and a wrought-iron gate.

The team breached the gate and moved into position, weapons drawn. Elliot lingered near the rear, adrenaline buzzing in his veins. An officer kicked in the door.

"Police! Search warrant!" Reeves shouted as they stormed inside.

Bradford Barrett stepped into the entryway, fussing with his cufflinks like he was prepping for a photo op.

"We have a warrant to search the premises," Reeves said.

Barrett scoffed. "That's ridiculous. Get out of here!"

"Mr. Barrett, you're under arrest for the kidnapping of Gayle Martinez." Barrett's smirk faded. His gaze flicked toward the open door.

Reeves quickly handcuffed him, dragged him to the living room, and shoved him into a chair. Officers spread through the house. The search was methodical, professional—but Elliot could sense something simmering.

Barrett's eyes followed them wherever they went.

Elliot watched him closely. When an officer walked past the basement door, Barrett's cuffed hands clenched into fists.

"Reeves. The basement," Elliot said.

"There's nothing down there," Barrett snapped. "You're wasting your time."

"Bryce. Jacobson. Check it," Reeves ordered.

Barrett's jaw clenched tight.

Minutes later, a voice rose from below. "Detective. You need to see this."

Barrett surged from his chair. "There's nothing to see!"

An officer pushed him back down.

Elliot followed Reeves down the stairs.

"Fake wall," Officer Bryce said, tapping it with his baton. "Hollow."

Graves pressed along the seams. Suddenly, there was a soft click, and a hidden door sprang open.

Behind it was a steel-reinforced door with a padlock.

"Get it open!" Reeves barked.

Officer Bryce jimmied the lock. It resisted. Then, with a metallic snap, it finally gave way.

Inside was a small concrete room with no windows.

A dim lamp sat on a table in the far corner. A woman sat in a chair. Pale. Motionless.

She lifted a trembling hand to shield her eyes from the sudden light.

Reeves stepped forward, his voice gentle. "Gayle Martinez? I'm Detective Reeves."

Her voice cracked. "Is he gone?"

Elliot stood frozen, unable to speak. After twenty-two years, Gayle Martinez was alive—breathing, existing. Somehow, she had survived all that time in a dungeon while the rest of the world moved on.

Reeves knelt beside her. "It's over. You're safe now."

Tears slipped down Gayle's cheeks. "Bradford was stealing from the company. I told him I wouldn't cover for him. I didn't think..." She bit back her tears. "I never thought he'd do this to me."

In the following days, reporters swarmed around Elliot. Headlines

hailed him as the journalist who never gave up.

A rival network came calling, offering Elliot the lead anchor seat. He accepted—on one condition: he'd be allowed to create a special investigative series focused on cold case disappearances and the families waiting for answers. Stories like Gayle's. They agreed.

One month later

The studio lights dimmed. "Five, four, three..."

The countdown buzzed in his ear. The light blinked red.

"Good evening. I'm Elliot Graves. Tonight, we begin with the extraordinary story of Gayle Martinez—a woman who refused to disappear. Hers is a story of resilience—a voice that would not be silenced. A powerful reminder that behind every missing person is a soul worth remembering, and worth fighting for."

His broadcast shattered the station's ratings record.

But for Elliot, this wasn't just a comeback.

It was a promise—to keep digging, to keep asking questions, until no one was left behind.

A.C. Kay

Pancake Saturday!

I look forward to Saturday every single week. Saturday is the day that mama is home with me, and we make a special treat!

We have a special name for today.

In the morning when the sun comes up mama comes to kiss me awake.

Mama says, "Do you know what today is?" I jump up and yell "Pancake Saturday, yay!"

We make our way to the kitchen and gather all the ingredients we need to make our pancake batter.

I wonder how mama remembers all the ingredients we need to make pancakes so I ask her, and she laughs and says "baby, I made these pancakes with my Mama when I was your age so I've been making them so long I remember, and you will too."

First, we take a big scoop of flour then a smaller one and dump them in the big mixing bowl. Then mama adds her scoops.

Finally, mama helps me measure the vanilla which smells so yummy then we mix, mix, mix.

I watch mama pour and flip pancakes in the hot pan. They smell so delicious. Daddy and my sisters make their way down the stairs to the table.

"This is the best day ever!" I shout and Mama laughs and says, "Is it because you get pancakes for breakfast?" and I giggled and said "no, it's because I get pancakes for breakfast with YOU!"

The End

Saturday Pancakes!

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

3 ½ tsp baking powder

¼ tsp salt

2 tbsp. light brown sugar

1 tbsp. pure vanilla extract

1 egg

1 ¼ cups of milk

1. Sift the dry ingredients together
2. Then add all the wet ingredients and stir
3. Heat a non-stick pan on medium heat and add 1 tablespoon of oil
4. Scoop about ¼ cup of the batter onto the hot pan
5. Cook for about 2-3 minutes, then flip
6. Cook until golden brown on both sides

Chloe Kertesz

I am Beautiful

Someone called me Beautiful today, a word I don't hear very often when describing myself. Sure, my significant other calls me Beautiful as a pet name, but other than that, it is rarely heard. It got me thinking about what makes me beautiful to others. While fun to think about, that can also be very dangerous since human beings tend to dwell on our imperfections and insecurities. We all know beauty is subjective, but society has tried time and time again to make it objective. That can make it hard to find the beauty within ourselves.

Trying to ignore what I have been told by the media my entire life. I have realized that what makes me beautiful has less to do with my outer appearance and more to do with the life I lead and the energy I give off. When you look at a smiling person, you can tell when that smile is genuine and not just put up as a face. That smile becomes more appealing when there is true positivity behind it, but when you can tell it has less than a positive meaning behind the smile, your view of that person changes. A smile with sadness makes you wonder about their emotional well-being. With a malicious smile, you tend to bend away from that person. The smile that always has positivity will always bring a certain amount of energy and light into a space, making them appear to have a beauty that isn't always there.

Beauty can change by how a person acts, or how they choose to live their lives. The media and other social outlets try to make beauty all about how your bones are structured, how your skin stretches over those bones, and how your muscles build under them. So, when thinking about what makes me beautiful to others and not just my mom or my partner, I have to consider that maybe what the media says is not always right.

According to the media, I am midsize, with a midsection that is soft and can be considered fat to others. The media says my eyes are a puddle with gross color, and I have two chins, which shows I must be heavier than most. What the media does not seem to understand is that

I am beautiful, and other people like me are beautiful. Even though we don't look like the models in their magazines or the people on the big screen, we are beautiful, and sometimes more so. The energy we put out is positive, light, and loving. No one, I mean no one can take that away from us. The media may try to put us down, but every once in a while, we will get called beautiful by a random stranger. We will sit and think about why that person said what they said and in turn, we will learn just a bit more about ourselves and the beauty within.

Manny Lee

My Love

I can't help the way He makes me feel. I've never been so into a Man like this before. He carries himself with such charisma and intent. He's a complex enigma of creativity, love, and life. His presence is addicting, He'll claim He's unaware that His energy brings peace, and gratitude to whatever space he's in. He is a plethora of multiple men, all wrapped into one. As a chameleon He effortlessly adapts, learns, and changes to make the environment around him suit His very unique vision. Oh how His eyes are full of soul, the depth of browns are infinite like the Love I have for him. He is unaware of how His wit and sarcasm makes me feel shy and challenged. Every time He lifts his eyebrow and cracks a side smile, I can't help but to blush. He's more than the "High School Crush," He's a Man to LOVE...No Reserve...Raw...Real LOVE. I'm weak to hold anything back from Him, my whole body undeniably wants him any place anytime. I've never been one to submit to any Man, but with Him I'm completely submissive. My heart has chosen Him. Everything up until our first kiss has played over and over in my mind, like the path I was on, has always meant to lead Me right to Him, it's been a long, constant search for Him. With no face, no name in all my dreams but right here, clear as day He stands before me, continuously in shock My Dream has come to life. It's Him...It's always been Him. My whole life has taught me, and prepared me, and it's led me straight to Him. I'm grateful for His love for GOD, for I have been strayed away from HIM for way too long. I know a future with GOD in our lives will put our scared heart at ease. He takes on a lot GOD but I know you walk with Him. I pray you watch over Him, and I know you'll catch Him wherever He may stumble. I say that because I know He'll never fully fall with you by his side. I pray for His strength, courage and wisdom to get through all life's challenges, struggles, and triumphs. He knows what He's capable of, but He needs support, not help, but support. I want to be his pillar of strength, support and Love. Thank You GOD for He is the greatest gift. He's my love.

Debra Madonna

Lilacs & Dementia

A Chapbook



Flora was born in 1898. C.W. was born in 1887. My paternal grandparents married on August 8, 1918.

Flora spoke her last words three years before she died on February 16, 1983.

She was quiet. She spoke no words except, "Yes," pronounced, "Yesch."

Flora remained in her home with C.W. until February 16, 1983.

This story took place in the Spring of 1972.

*Beautiful Lilacs
On a Beautiful May Day
At Flora & Clarion Wyoming's House*

I stopped by Flora and C.W.'s house the day before Grandmother's Day. I baked brownies for them and wrapped them in

pink tissue wrapping paper. The brownies were still warm when I got to my grandparents' house. Flora took one brownie and she seemed to be very happy. This took place as **dementia** was taking a hold over Flora.

Flora took prescribed medications, which caused her to sleep all day and wander all night. C.W. was exhausted.

Being the person who took time to figure things out, discussed options and solutions with Flora's doctor.

The doctor kept the same medications, but they were now administered in the evening, causing Flora to sleep all night long and now, C.W. could sleep all night long, every night.

The wanderings took place during the day, almost every day, all day. C.W. took Flora for long walks. She was so irritated about this, but after a long walk, she would be tired and very hungry.

Sometimes Flora took a walk by herself, laid down under a pine tree, and took a nap all by herself...until the neighbors found her and walked with her back home.

"The Grandmother's Day of the Brownies" was a bit hit. Flora enjoyed the brownie treats, making yummy noises, "*mmmmmm.*"

At the same time, she was admiring my sweater, touching, and looking very closely at every stitch, at every color. Flora loved my clothes.

Oh, I wish you can use your imagination and see what I saw on this day. My grandma created a wonderful world for me, every day of my life, and I was happy. I am still happy in this place.

I know that people are fearful of **dementia**. **Dementia** is a demon, but people aren't demons.

We think **dementia** steals our loved one. Maybe it does. It certainly changes the way our loved one looks and acts. It certainly changes the way we look and act.

Let me share a thought about this condition. During her battle with **dementia**, Flora remained a sweet person, a gentle soul, every day.

C.W. had planted dozens of varieties of lilac trees and bushes. It was such a treat to walk in on this lilac orchard. Each tree had a different color blossom and its own unique aroma.

As we walked, C.W. cut a branch from each tree and set them in my arms. If one lilac fell to the ground, C.W. picked it up and returned it to all the treasured lilacs in my arms. I don't know how I was able to carry them all. It was as if C.W. had tied the branches with invisible purple threads.

I put the flowers in my car and I went back into the house to tell Flora, "*Happy Grandma's Day*" one more time. When C.W. and I walked into the kitchen, we gasped. Flora had eaten every brownie. Her smiling face was covered in chocolate.

Even though there were no more brownies. She used her fingers to scoop up the crumbs. Smiling, she ate every last morsel.

I knew that she was going to have a very upset tummy. But geez, a tummy ache may have occurred because **dementia**, couldn't process "too much," but she was still enjoying life. So, we have to say the smiles and joy are a part of **dementia**, too. I think so.

When Flora and C.W. walked me to my car, Flora, held onto my arm and said, "*Men will tell you that they will use a condom, but they won't.*"

That is what I remember of that day: yummy brownies, delicate lilacs, and condom promises. What a sweet and gentle day. Our loved one needs to trust that we will love, care, and treat them with kindness every day of their life. They will trust us, even if they can't find the words.

Instead of mourning the part of a person we love that is gone, we can sit by their side, hold their hands as long as the need, as long as we need. Our loved one is still by our side. Celebrate the times you laughed and watched Lawrence Welk together, not the regrets.

Dementia can move slowly and day by day, abilities are silenced. **Strokes** can hit hard all at once. Retrieving abilities can be slow. **Strokes** have been known to steal a loved one.

If **dementia** took away everything from our loved one, then why did Flora say, "*mmmmmm*," when she ate all the brownies? Where did

the smiles come from?

I know.

Flora had a **stroke** and **dementia**. I had a **stroke**. What a team we are. It's not our losses I think of, but of Flora's favorite flower was the sunflower. She taught me everything she loved about flowers. She showed me the sunflower garden that was hers and mine.

C.W. built a bench for us girls to sit on in that garden on all the beautiful days.

If you are given a choice of accepting a bouquet of lilacs or have dementia, certainly, choose lilacs.

But understand, they may come as a package deal.

What is a Chapbook?

In a nutshell, chapbooks are teeny books. Merriam-Webster defines them as "a small book containing ballads, poems, tales, or tracts."

"They are collections of poems, stories, or an experimental mix of both. Chapbooks usually hover in the range of 20-40 pages and are more affordable purchases to their novel counterparts."

—Book Riot

RL McDonald

Penny Land

Hi, my name is Penny. Have you ever wished that you could go to a place where everything cost a penny?

One day I was looking in the big mirror in my room. Then all of a sudden, I was flying in the sky. When I looked to my right, there was my best friend Jenny flying with me in the clouds. I waved to her hello as we flew.

We flew and flew, up through the white fluffy clouds. As we flew towards a ginormous cloud, we could see lots of other boys and girls flying towards the cloud. Imagine our surprise when we got to the cloud. It was Penny Land!

The whole cloud was a big, big store where everything cost a penny. We were so happy. We went down every aisle. We bought bouncy balls, jacks, and jump ropes. We paid with one-dollar bills, but our change was all in pennies.

We found a play area with lots of club houses and lots of other children. The club houses were filled with dolls: rag dolls, curly head dolls, and bald-head dolls. We played house with the other children for hours.

We finally got hungry and went towards the food court. They had every kind of flavor of cotton candy. We had blueberry cotton candy. We had strawberry cotton candy and cherry cotton candy. But my favorite cotton candy flavor was ice cream cotton candy. All of the cotton candy was made from clouds and cost a penny.

Everything in the store cost a penny, and everywhere we spent our money our change was all in pennies. We had so much fun. We played and we ate until we got so tired that our eyes kept shutting. We went back to the club house area and found our favorite club house. It had two comfy plastic beds with fluffy cloud mattresses. We fell fast asleep.

The next morning, we woke up and went outside. The Penny Land Store had two big glass doors. We stood outside the doors looking out over the clouds. Then a big wind came, picked us up, and blew us both

back to our houses.

When I woke up the next morning, I was in my bed. I sat up and checked the pockets of my PJ's. I had pennies in my pockets. I did not know where they came from. Had it all been a dream?

Where will I go next?

Will you come with me?

Vanessa Mitchell

The Mall

Chapter 4 from *"WHY ME? And then I knew..."*

"We made it!" Harmony said.

Fashion Valley Mall was the best shopping mall of San Diego!

"Where do we start first, girls?" Kiyana said. "Oooh! I saw this dress online at Forever 21. Let's go there first. I want to look at that dress."

"Sounds good to me," Harmony said.

"Me, too," Beth stated.

"Alright. Let's go," I said.

We all locked arms and started skipping, singing and laughing. We strolled into the store. As we entered, our eyes spotted all the latest fashions of the world.

"Wow!" we all sang out in unison.

While walking around, Kiyana hollered, "Harmony, Beth, Mia, come here! Look! Look! I found the dress I saw online, and they have it in my size."

"It's beautiful," said Beth.

"I'm going to try it on. I am so excited," Kiyana said, twisting from side to side. "Okay. Now where is the salesperson? Do you all see one?"

Just as we were looking around, a man standing behind us heard us talking. He turned and said, "I am a salesperson. Hello! How may I help you ladies?"

As we shifted our attention toward the voice that we heard, our eyes became wide, and our jaws dropped in amazement. Avoiding the gaze from the salesman, we made eye contact with each other. We all whispered, "Wow!"

Looking at the other girls, I commented on how gorgeous he was. Harmony looked at us and took notice of his muscles. Kiyana said, "He must be the son of Idris Elba or Denzel Washington!" Beth, of course, came straight out and asked the salesman if she could be his girlfriend.

Kiyana told the salesman, "I'm sorry. Don't mind her."

I couldn't help but giggle because it was so unexpected at the time. Then again, I should have known because Beth is the outspoken one of the group. She pretty much always says what is on her mind.

"I would like to try this dress on," Kiyana said.

"My name is Ezra. If you follow me, I can show you to a dressing room."

"Thank you, Mr. Ezra!" Kiyana said smiling. "Ladies, come on. You all know I am going to need your opinions."

We all headed to the dressing room. After a moment, Kiyana jumped out of the dressing room.

"Ta-da! How do I look? Does it compliment my figure? What about the color?"

We all replied, "Girl, you look like a snack!"

"Do you think Noah will like it on me?"

Beth was completely all in that question like, "OMG! Like, seriously, if he doesn't there's something seriously, and I mean seriously, amiss with him!"

"True that," said Harmony. "So, are you going to buy it?"

"Girl, you know I am."

After a moment, Kiyana informed Mr. Ezra, "I am totally ready to buy this dress."

While the salesman rang up the order, I decided to ask Mr. Ezra, "Why are you working in a ladies' store?"

Mr. Ezra responded, "Women like to have a male's opinion sometimes on how they look in a particular outfit. So, I decided to apply at a women's store, and I find it rewarding. Women actually appreciate hearing my opinion."

"Then I should have let you see me in this dress to get your opinion," Kiyana said. "Oh well. Next time. I know you see so many ladies in this store that I bet you try and flirt with some of them."

"Nope. I am strictly professional," Mr. Ezra interrupted.

"Okay! If you say! I will take your word for it. Well, thank you very much for your assistance and, hopefully, I will see you the next time I come in. You have a good day."

"Same to you milady! Thank you for shopping at Forever 21."

Kiyana ran out of the store.

"Hey! Wait up, guys," she yelled to the group.

Beth yelled, "Catch up, girlfriend. We are hungry."

"Where are we going to eat?" Kiyana asked.

"We decided to go to the Cheesecake Factory," I said.

"Oh! That sounds good to me."

While being escorted to their table, I made a comment about how crowded it was.

"Yes," said Harmony. "But look at what time it is. It is four o'clock and people are starting to have dinner."

"Oh! It is getting late," I said. "We only have a couple of hours left before we have to go. So, let's order. Besides, I have to talk with you guys about something very important."

The waitress appeared seemingly out of nowhere and introduced herself. We ordered.

"Ladies, I need your help! I am really hurting! I don't know what to do," I said, pausing for a moment.

"Well, spit it out, girlfriend!" said Beth.

I paused again for a few moments.

"Again, I say, are you gonna tell us or not? Girl we can't just chill here forever. Life's too short for that!" Beth yelled.

"My dad!"

I paused.

"What about your dad?" they all asked in unison.

"Is he sick?" Harmony asked.

"No!"

"Is he leaving you all for another woman?" Kiyana asked.

"No!"

"Then what?" they all yelled.

"My dad just told me yesterday that he is being transferred to another base in another country. That means that I will be moving away, and I don't want to go."

All of a sudden, everyone's facial expressions totally changed. They were all in disbelief.

"No, you can't move," Beth said.

"No, you can't leave us," said Harmony.

Kiyana said, "We are sisters, and you can't split us up."

"We have all talked about our future. We've made plans for our high school days, going to college, our careers, our family..." Harmony and Beth said.

"I know. I know," I said. "San Diego is, like, the longest city I've ever lived in. When I moved here, I was like, this is it. Finally, I have a forever home! I had all these dreams of sunny beach days, palm trees swaying in the breeze, and making amazing memories with my forever friends. This move is like super serious in my life. Like, it's a big deal, a major change that's happening. It's like my whole world is being turned upside down, and I can't even begin to explain how much I don't want to move. This move would change everything. I would have to start my life all over again and I don't want to."

I started crying, trying hard not to be noticed by the customers. Under my breath, I called on Poppy.

"Help me understand, Poppy!"

"Girls, what shall I do?" I asked.

Just then, the server arrived with our food.

Harmony asked, "Where are you all moving to?"

I replied, "Rome, Italy."

"Italy!" my friends all screamed at once.

"Ooh! Can I go with you?" Beth asked. "Hey, girlfriend, you remember when we studied about Italy in class? It sounds sooo amazing! I mean, the culture, the architecture, the history. And don't forget the food; everything about Italy seems breathtaking!"

"You sound like you have been to Italy before," Harmony said.

"No, Miss Lady, believe it or not, I do read," Beth replied. "I have looked up information on the web about Italy since class. I would love to visit there someday."

"Hey, hey ladies," I said, getting their attention. "Remember me? What about me? What should I do?"

Right then, there was still quietness around the table. Everyone looked at each other with uncertainty; we didn't know what to say.

"Well, what do you think I should do?"

Hesitating, Kiyana asked, "Mia, have you spoken to your parents about how you feel?"

"Yes," Harmony agreed. "Have you spoken to them?"

"What do you think, Beth?" I proposed.

"I agree with Harmony and Kiyana. Have you spoken to your parents?"

I learned back in my chair slowly with my head bowed low. Again, I silently asked Poppy for help.

Angel, girl, I am here with you. I have not forgotten about the things that you and I have spoken about over the years, nor what you have shared with me this morning about how you felt. I hear you! You ask, "Why me?" I see your enthusiasm and passion as a young child to understand me. I am watching over you. Enjoy your day with your lifelong friends. Enjoy! We will talk again, I'm sure. I have plans for your life!

All of a sudden, I quickly raised my head.

"No! But, hey! I have an idea! Maybe I can stay with one of you guys."

"I don't know Mia," Kiyana said.

"Then I will run away, and they won't find me. Then I will be here with you all."

"Now Mia, make sense," said Beth. "You know that that will not fly, right? You could not be hanging out with us. What would we tell our parents when they ask who is going and we would have to tell them? And guess what? They will know where you are and tell your parents."

Everyone looked at me with sadness on their faces. Again, I lowered my head. After a brief moment, once again, I raised my head. To their surprise, they noticed I was smiling.

"Hey, why the sad faces? Cheer up! Let's dig in before our food gets all cold and boring for us sitting here too long!" I said surprisingly. "Nothing beats hanging out with my girls and food. You all know how we do; we like to eat! It's the bomb! The absolute best when we get together!"

Then, without hesitation, Harmony, Beth and Kiyana looked at each other in amazement at my change of attitude so quickly. After a pause, we said, "Oh, yeah!" and high-fived each other.

Beth looked down at her text. It was from her mom.

"Mom is on her way to pick us up. We have to hurry."

We hurried to pay the bill, and we ran to the entrance.

"Hey Mom," Beth said.

"Hi, Mrs. Schberg," we all said.

Harmony said to Beth's mother, "We appreciate you driving us around today! You're the best!" We all nodded in agreement.

Arriving back at Beth's house, her mom told me, "Your dad is here."

"Coming, Mrs. Schberg! Hey, girlfriends, I will hit you all up later. Thank you again, Mrs. Schberg, for driving us all around today."

I was heading to the car when all of a sudden, I stopped, turned around, and hollered back to my girls, "Who is coming to church with me tomorrow?"

They all looked around as though I was talking to someone else standing by, no them.

"That's okay, you heathens. You remember this when God cracks the sky. Bye, heathens! Love you!" I shouted back.

They all said, "Love you, too!" as they laughed at me and waved goodbye.

"Hi, Dad. I thought Mom was picking me up."

Dad replied, "She was, but I was able to finish early today. Since I missed you this morning, I told your mom I would pick you up. So, my dear, did you all have fun today?"

"Yes, we did, dad. It was an awesome day! We went roller skating. Michael, Ethan and Logan were there. Logan was trying to show off today. He was trying to show us how fancy he could skate and ended up falling and was twisted all up, looking like a pretzel. He wasn't hurt, but his ego was. We all laughed at him."

"Mia, that was not nice to laugh at him."

"I know, Daddy. But we waited to make sure he was not hurt. Then, we all laughed."

"How was your day Dad? I heard that you had some type of special project you had to do."

"Yes! I have to prepare this project to be sent over to Italy. It has to be ready to go within the next few weeks so that it will be there when I arrive."

Just then, we pulled up at home. "Hey, honey! We're home."

Mom asked them both, "How was your day?"

Big Kyle responded, "The project looks good."

I responded, "We had so much fun today, Mom. When we went skating, Michael, Ethan and Logan were there. We all skated together. Logan, you know, had to show off. He fell, but he was not hurt. Just his ego. The mall was fun. Kiyana bought herself a dress. Then we ate."

"Well, I am glad you both had a fun day. Kyle and I also had a fun and quiet day. We played games. Right, little man?"

"Yes, right. And I won all the time."

"Yeah right, little bro," I said. "Mom probably let you win."

"She did not!"

"She did, too."

"Not!"

"She did!"

"Hey, hey," said Mom. "Quiet day! Well, good night, little ones. Off to bed. Tomorrow is church."

"Goodnight, Mom and Dad," we both said as we retired to our rooms.

As I jumped into bed, I spoke to Poppy.

"Thank you for this day, Poppy. It was fun being with friends. Wish I could do this all the time, but you know. Poppy, watch over us as we sleep. Good night! I love you!"

NFluence

Grandpa

The school bell rang. Stampedes of children all excited for their post-educational activities stormed towards the golden chariots awaiting to sweep them away to their homes.

Mister stopped in front of a red parchment that wore a missing person's poster. It was plastered to the trophy case just before the windows of the principal's office.

His backpack slowly spiraled to the floor beneath him.

It was his best friend, Charles. Tears begin to pierce the veil of his swollen eyelids.

A passing group of kids can be heard.

"That kid disappeared after a playdate at his house I heard," they whisper.

The school doors are ripped off their hinges as Mister hears his grandpa ask, "Who is coming over to play today, M?" followed by a hearty chuckle.

Rapp rapp...

"Sir, sir you're needed inside." Mister awakens startled as he sees Diego, an officer of his team rapping on his car window.

"My apologies I took a quick snooze over lunch." Mister grabbed his badge and service weapon out of his glove compartment and treaded inside. The office is in one of those periods where it's wearing a costume to celebrate the season and raise spirits. Red and white tinsel draped from bannisters and snowflake cutouts dance along the ceiling and breezeways from nylon threads.

"Mister, Captain George would like to see you in his office, and I would make it snappy if I was you," relayed Margaret, the lovely agency office manager. We don't have receptionists at the agency. It was an outdated word from the 20th century. Margaret made very good points on why we should retire the phrase secretary or receptionist and the P.A.I.N (Paranormal Anomaly Investigation Network) will never go

back to using those ancient relics.

Mister collected his black pressed suit jacket from his coat hook and signaled his team to follow his mark. The seven gathered their service weapons, coffees, dossiers and fell into formation. Each saying good afternoon to Captain George as they entered his rectangular bright holiday costumed office. An eight-foot Christmas tree sat to the far left of the room catching the dazzling light of the two large windows facing the wooded area. Bedazzled with festive garlands, elves, Santa's and ornaments with each of the agency's agents' picture. Captain George was one of the most joyous souls outside of what he did for work. Displaying pictures of his home's decorations along with his family holiday photos. The photos featured a smile everyone would hope to be on his face when in his office, but that rarely made an appearance unless they were having a holiday party.

"Good afternoon, P.A.I.N team I have just finished reading over your case closure notes for the Pungent Public Pool discourse...I cannot believe you all followed those ghouls—WITHOUT BACKUP—through a tunnel from a local pool to a seaside creek where sea creatures were found to be capturing and devouring the reported missing kids. Don't get me wrong I am happy with the work, but goddammit why must you all go in so hot and heavy without fear of failure or even worse...death?" He took a breath and sipped his candy cane peppermint tea out of his Christmas tree mug. The team looked over at Mister awaiting him to lead the response.

"Sir, with all due respect my team sees danger and we yield to nothing but innocent lives. We take our duty of ensuring monsters stay within the confines of their governmental agreements very seriously, and those that decide to step outside those confines we take care of briskly and with extreme prejudice," reported Mister as if he was reading it from a teleprompter apathetically.

"...And we respect the tenacity your team has and possesses, that is why you all hold employ as our enforcement team. I don't believe anyone else has the ability to walk into moments and carnage and chaos as you all do, and for it we are thankful." Captain George wrapped up his statement as he slipped his executive office chair back and stood from his dark mahogany desk.

He marched over to his Christmas tree and pulled eight gifts from under its glittering LED body, each titled to one of the team and Mister. "Don't worry, these are not replacing your holiday bonuses, just something from my family to all of you to show our appreciation for the work you do, and maybe to smooth you all over before I provide you with a last-minute case that I need you all to enforce before your holiday break. I'm sorry, but this came from the top," Captain George relayed with reservation.

"Sir, I can take care of this myself. I'd like my team to get an early start on their time off with their family. I don't have plans for this time, and honestly, I could use something to stay busy," Mister responded.

Captain George gathered the dossier labeled "Sensitive" and pursed his lips. He had a good feeling him attempting to talk Mister out of this in front of his team would cause a riff in the chain of command and this was not a battle he needed to exert extra energy on. He said one thing as he placed it in Mister's hands. "Please be careful."

Mister waited till everyone on his team had tired-out and retired themselves to their troves for which were filled with loved ones, close and dear.

He began to read the details of the assigned case:

A small rural city of Boomward has noted during the last five years. A total of 215 missing children and teens. The local authorities have been attempting to identify what has been occurring. Authorities have exhausted all means and now suspect supernatural entities. They note this gradual increase since the relocation of the Black Site division. Boomward is pleading for some assistance. Majority of the missing children's parents report the child was attending a play date at a friend's house.

Mister stood alongside the side of the street in front of the Walgreens in downtown Boomward looking at the missing persons' posters plastered on the city's information board. They all reminded him of Charles, his childhood best friend. The Black Site division relocation meant any monsters under their supervision were allowed probation if they signed the contract. Mister had a gut-wrenching idea who was up

for parole this year. Reminding him of the dread he felt when he saw another agent had handled the capture of his grandpa. This feeling left him with a remorse that he didn't have the tools when he was younger to take out the first monster he ever discovered.

He returned to Boomward in the morning to meet with the local sheriff's office. There were eight homes settled along the riverbank outside of town. The sheriff shared most of the homes looked like traditional family units with their decorations except one. They shared they investigated the outlier but didn't see any evidence. The homestead belonged to an elderly man aged seventy-three and they could not foresee him having the ability to do anything untoward to these youths. Mister knew differently. He remembered how his monstrous grandfather was able to deceive so many social workers with his polite charm when circumstances called them out to their house to check on Mister. He could not help but feel responsible for the carnage that has taken place in this town. If only he was stronger when he was eight. He would have done what needed to be done. Instead, he ran away. This was his chance. This is why Mister does what he does for work. He will never be like the social workers that let him down or the police who couldn't always see what was hidden in front of them. This is what P.A.I.N does, what everyone else is not able to do.

Mister parked his service vehicle at the farthest end of the drive by the street and began to make his way up to the home. The foliage surrounding the home was green and lush, creating a stark contrast from the rest of the hibernating dead trees and winter setting around it. Mister approached the wrap around porch of the polished home.

"Hello there, young man, how may I help you?"

Mister cringed at how his grandpa looked the same as twenty-two years ago.

"Hello, Mr. Magee, I'm investigating the two-hundred or so missing kids, sir. Have you seen or heard anything?"

"...Oh, me, nope, can't say that I have. I'm a little old man I can't see much anyhow. I just sit here and watch the birds and wildlife at the river, usually with my grandson. You remind me of him. Could I offer you some tea or coffee?"

"I would love that sir."

As Mister approached the door of the elderly gentleman's home, he released the safety from his service weapon and unfastened its security lock. He followed the man into his hallway. As soon as Magee cleared the entryway rug, Mister looked down to read it—*Have a nice trip, see you next fall*—Magee pressed a button alongside the wall and the welcome rug cranked and the floor dropped. Mister, expecting the offensive action, jumped and tumbled across the threshold. By the time he landed and unholstered his weapon Magee was gone. His home was the theatrical rendition of a grandparent's home. Photos of what's believed to be grandchildren, family and friends. Warm colors and the overt smell of gingerbread.

The door to the kitchen moaned as it swung in and out. Mister approached and led with the barrel of his weapon. The door gave way to a stark change from the décor of the rest of the house. Gnawed bones spilled all along the floor. Dried blood and entrails collected and smeared in corners and along the floorboards. Mister looked for a secret entrance or exit. Inside and to the right stood the basement door. On a hook beside it was what appeared to be a child's skin suit and backpack hanging with it. Mister opened the door while aiming his weapon. Where the landing began there laid something that he could not make out until he was closer in view. It was the clothing and skin of Mr. Magee. Mister glanced down at the torch lined stone corridor and saw the four glossy red eyes. Mister flicked the switch but was met with no light. A deep growl was released as his grandpa charged up the steps. As he gathered his speed his growl grew louder until it was just two feet from Mister's face. Magee reached its four warms towards Mister; his service weapon fired and blew up the flesh of the monster all around him. The monster collapsed on him. Mister fell under the weight of the creature and rolled him off. He froze for two minutes and then let out a stream of tears that have been waiting for a release for many years.

"Merry Christmas Charles," he whispered to himself.

Suzanne Seidel

When You Love Someone

A well-meaning sex ed teacher one told them that sex was an act between two people who loved each other very much. Well, Jules and Junior loved each other very much, so sex is what they did.

She was fourteen years old when she started to notice something was different. It wasn't long after that her ninth grade literature teacher, Miss Compton, noticed, too. Miss Compton noticed that Jules rushed out of the classroom and to the bathroom three times in a week. She also noticed when the too small shirts that Jules would wear started exposing more of her belly, and the jeans that wouldn't button anymore.

One morning after Jules slept through a class discussion on *Lord of the Flies*, Miss Compton asked her to stay back. "I'm so tired lately," Jules said, before Miss Compton had a chance to say anything at all. "I sleep at night, I swear I do," she said, anticipating a talking to from her teacher. Miss Compton looked carefully at Jules. *She's just a child*, she thought. Jules looked just like her mom, only fresher, younger, less worn out from worry and substance abuse. Miss Compton had only met Jules' mother once, and it certainly wasn't at a school event. It was in a gas station parking lot, when Jules waved Miss Compton over to proudly introduce her teacher to her mother and younger brother.

Miss Compton looked at Jules there in her classroom and knew that with all the innocence of a student who proudly introduces an intoxicated mother to a public school teacher in a gas station parking lot, Jules had no idea. She had no idea she was pregnant. "Let's go for a walk," she said, picking up Jules' backpack from the floor beside her desk. The backpack was pink, dirty, and nearly empty. Miss Compton set her hand lightly on Jules' shoulder and steered her towards the nurse's office.

Junior's first reaction to hearing he was going to be a fifteen-year-old

father was intense joy. He still loved Jules as much as he did that afternoon when he unbuttoned her jeans and expressed his love for her just how he thought he was supposed to. His next reaction was intense fear. “Jules,” he said quietly, looking her straight in her blue eyes, holding her delicate face in his hands, “What are we going to do with a baby?”

They told Junior’s dad the same day Miss Compton walked Jules to the nurse’s office. They sat on the couch in Junior’s living room across from his dad in his recliner. They held hands. “Jules is going to have a baby!” Junior said and despite his fear he couldn’t hide his excitement. He and Jules had done this together, just the two of them, and no matter what happened, he was proud of that.

Junior’s dad had seen the signs, too, and like Miss Compton had drawn his conclusions. He was hoping he was wrong, however, and he was blaming himself. He ran his hand through his graying hair and wished for the thousandth time that Junior’s mom was still alive, that he didn’t have to do this parenting thing alone. “Well,” he finally said, “that is something.”

Junior beamed. Jules smiled weakly. It was her idea to tell Junior’s dad. She knew he wouldn’t yell. She knew he would care. She knew he would do something. “Well,” she asked, “what should we do?”

Junior’s dad blew out the breath he had been holding in. What should they do? How should he know? He had spent the years since his wife died burying himself in his work, out of necessity and out of desperation. He didn’t know how to do life without her. Now he looked across the small living room at this young man in front of him, this father to be, his son. Her son. Their son. It was like looking in a time traveling mirror. Thin and tall with black greased back hair, Junior looked just like his dad when he was his age. *Of course at my age I was too busy working to have time to knock anybody up.* And even though he thought that maybe he should feel a number of things—anger, disappointment, fear, shame—he looked at his son and all he felt was intense love.

“What we’re going to do is what’s best for everyone involved,” he said. He looked at Jules now, so small, sitting next to his son. He noticed they were holding hands. “Jules, Junior, what do you think about

putting this baby up for adoption?"

Junior couldn't believe how quickly Jules' stomach grew. He loved to put his hands right on it, to feel the tiny baby move around in there. She came to his house every afternoon after school. She said her mom still hadn't noticed her belly. He didn't believe that her mom hadn't noticed, but he didn't like to burst Jules' bubble. She was so positive, so sure of herself, yet he was sure that behind all of those weak smiles Jules knew that her mom had noticed. But pretending her mom hadn't noticed was easier than admitting that her mom didn't care.

The doctor at the clinic said the baby would be coming any day now. They had met with the adoptive family—that's what they were called, the people who were going to take care of their baby, the "adoptive family." Jules kept forgetting and calling them the "adopting family." Junior didn't correct her, because in his mind her word was just as right as the right word—they were the family doing the adopting.

The week before the baby came Jules and Junior got off the bus in front of Junior's old farm house. Junior carried his backpack on one shoulder and Jules' on the other. Her hand was on her lower back and she walked slowly to the house. He set their backpacks down with a thud in the foyer and helped her lower herself onto the couch. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked, crouching in front of her and resting his hands on her thighs. "Is the baby coming?"

"No, no," she said, laughing. "The baby's not coming. Not yet. It's just my back is killing me." She shifted on the couch in an attempt to get comfortable.

Junior sat back on his heels and thought for a minute. He had a flash of a memory—his mom coming in from helping his dad on the farm with her hand on her lower back saying, "My back is killing me." What would she do?

After a moment it came to him. "A bath!" he said.

"What?" Jules asked.

"A steaming hot bath!" he said, squeezing her thighs lightly. "That's what my mom used to do when her back was killing her. That's exactly what she'd say, too. She'd say, 'My back is killing me,' and then she would fill up the bath with steaming hot water—I mean it, there was

actual steam—and lay in there for a while. It helped!”

“Okay,” Jules said, putting her hands on Junior’s shoulders in order to hoist herself from the couch. “Do you think I could try a bath?”

“Of course! Yes!” Junior said, excited to be able to do something to help. He had rubbed her back during her bouts of morning sickness, helped her clumsily sew elastic into the waistband of her jeans, and helped her remember to take her vitamins. He wanted to be a part of every step. He started running up the stairs, then came back and took her elbow to help her climb to the top. He led her into the big bathroom, the one with the claw-foot tub in the middle. “You sit here,” he said, pulling over a stool.

He sat next to her on the floor and they watched the tub fill up with steaming hot water (“See the steam?”). When the tub was full, so full some was sure to slosh out when Jules lowered herself in, he said, “Okay, I’ll give you some privacy,” and headed towards the door.

“No, don’t,” she said. “You can stay. She dropped the t-shirt of Junior’s she had been wearing and her jeans on the floor. She stood in front of him in her mismatched bra and underwear. He looked her up and down and loved her fiercely. She smiled at him, felling safe with him, but she was still a child in so many ways. She turned and climbed into the tub in her underwear. He sat back down on the floor next to the stool, and smiled at her.

“How does it feel?” he asked.

“Steaming hot,” she said, smiling. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. The ends of her blonde hair floated in the water around her shoulders.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Junior figured she had fallen asleep. She did that so often nowadays. But then she turned her head to look at him and said, “Will you sit with me, Junior?”

He stood up. “What do you mean, Jules? I’m right here.”

“Will you sit with me in here?” she asked, indicating the tub with her head. “You know, behind me.” She sat up and motioned behind her with her hand. “Like in the movies.”

He knew what she was talking about. Anytime a man and a woman were in a tub together in the movies, the man sat behind the woman and she leaned her head against his chest. It sounded nice to him.

He wordlessly dropped his t-shirt and jeans next to hers, and climbed in behind her in his underwear. Some water splashed out the side, but neither noticed. She leaned her head back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her swollen belly.

They talked about all the things their baby might have and be and do. He kept his hands there on the thin skin that kept their baby safe and thought about how strong and wonderful Jules was to grow their baby. "I can't believe it, Jules," he said.

"What?" she asked. "You can't believe what?"

"That you did this!" he said. "That you grew an entire baby. Soon it will be here, breathing and pooping and crying. And you did that!"

She laughed. "We did it, Junior."

"You did most of it, though," he said.

They didn't hear his dad coming up the stairs. They were too busy dreaming and laughing and floating to hear him call for them. It wasn't until he was standing in the doorway (of the door they had left open) that they noticed him. "Oh," he said, utterly taken aback. "Oh."

Junior and Jules stared at him, wondering if he'd yell at them. Jules even put her hands on the edge of the tub like she was going to hoist herself out. But Junior's dad didn't yell or even say anything besides, "Oh." He just turned around and walked back down the stairs.

He walked back down the stairs, out the door, and into the field. "Did you see them?" he said to the wind, to his wife. The tears streamed down his face and only the cows could see. "They're just children. They're just babies, baby. But they love each other so much, you know?" The wind blew softly by his face, drying his tears as soon as they fell. He felt her there. She was the reason he recognized true love and he saw it there in the claw-foot bathtub where she used to soak after spending a day helping him on their farm.

"They're so strong," he told the wind, he told his wife. "They're so strong."

Sharon Westwood

Mrs. McKerreghan's Tree

Have you ever considered how the little things you do can change someone's life? Interacting with others can be an encouragement we may never really recognize at the time.

My mother had rules for everything, even climbing her tree. A big silver maple. It was the perfect climbing tree—sturdy, shady, and the first branch was just high enough to challenge all the kids in the neighborhood. She had three rules for climbing her tree:

#1 – First, you had to have your mother's permission.

#2 – Only two kids in the tree at a time, which cuts down on the horse-play.

#3 – Most important of all, you could only climb the tree under your power. You couldn't use anything or anyone to help you climb the tree.

This posed a great challenge to every kid in the neighborhood. Every year, the lineup would start. "Mrs. McKerreghan, can we climb your tree?"

Her response was always, "Do you know the rules?"

"Yes, ma'am," they would say.

"Then have at it, kids!" she would reply.

Off they would go and run to the tree. They would examine the tree. They would run at the tree, jump at the tree, and leap at the tree. As soon as they made it into the tree, they all hollered for the same person, "Mrs. McKerreghan, Mrs. McKerreghan, come see me! I made it into the tree!!!" No matter where she was in the house, she always came outside onto the porch and applauded them. She would tell them how brave they were, how strong they must be, and what a great thing they had done. Their little chests would puff up with pride, for they were now BIG KIDS!

Every spring, the lineup started with a knock on the door: "Mrs. McKerreghan, can we climb your tree?"

"Do you know the rules?" she would reply.

"Yes, ma'am," they would say.

"Then have at it, kids," she would reply.

Every year, the same ritual took place. That was until 1974. That was the year my mom died. Her death affected the entire neighborhood. She had been a surrogate mother to all the moms in the neighborhood and a friend and encourager to all the kids. By this time, most were grown, some had gone off to college, some had gotten married, and some had children of their own. Each of them had grown into strong, self-reliant adults.

One day, a couple of years after my mom died, there was a knock at the door. When I answered the door, I found a little tow-headed boy of about eight years old standing there. He was unfamiliar to me. He looked up at me with big blue eyes and asked, "Can I climb Mrs. McKerreghan's tree?"

My heart flew high! I quickly composed myself. "Do you know the rules?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Then have at it," I said.

The boy flew off the porch toward the tree. He studied it up and down, and all around. I started to walk away, then stopped. I stood there and watched him as he ran at the tree, jumped at the tree, and leaped at the tree. At one point, he had both arms and both legs wrapped around the tree, as if he could become one with the tree. Suddenly, I saw his little hand slide over the first branch, and then his other hand. Then he pulled himself up with all the strength he could muster. He was in the tree. I walked out onto the porch, and I applauded him. I told him how brave he was and how strong he must be. I told him what a wonderful thing he had just done. His little chest just puffed right up with pride. I felt that same pride inside of me, too. It was at this moment that I finally understood. My mother had encouraged all of those kids, all of those years. She never told them how to do it, but she encouraged and had faith in them. She helped them to become what they are now, strong, independent human beings. She helped them discover they have the strength inside. At that moment, I knew the joy my mom must have felt for each of the kids when they

finally climbed her tree.

Do we ever think just how our encouragement and caring for others can affect others on their journey? One tree and Mrs. McKerreghan made a difference to one generation in that neighborhood...and now I am looking forward to experiencing it and sharing it with a new generation. Thank you, Mom, for making a difference in so many lives, and thank you, God, for letting me carry on the story of Mrs. McKerreghan's tree. This majestic neighborhood tree has its own story. I am thankful for the many who have climbed this tree...and grateful for those who will experience this in the future. Mrs. McKerreghan's tree will continue to touch the children in the neighborhood, and the lessons they learn will be with them forever.

Anette Wolski

My iPhone has ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, otherwise known as ADHD, is prevalent today. According to a 2023 CDC study, an estimated 15.5 million adults in the US had a current ADHD diagnosis. Of those, 55.9% had received the diagnosis in adulthood. Treatment for ADHD can be behavioral therapy, medication or a combination of both.

ADHD is categorized into three main types: ADHD with Inattention, ADHD with Hyperactivity-Impulsivity and ADHD combined presentation.

A person with the Inattentive type may have difficulty concentrating, may be forgetful, may have difficulty organizing or finishing tasks, may be challenged in paying attention to detail and may make careless mistakes.

A person with the Hyperactive-Impulsive type may fidget a lot, have difficulty sitting still, may be impulsive and interrupt a lot.

My iPhone has many of the characteristics of the Inattentive type and I can prove it.

I received a voicemail from a man inquiring about my therapy services. Here is the transcription: Good afternoon. Yeah, large calling boss. My daughter, 100...16...and like to move alone. I'll see your father in the Philippines. ADHD. Taking medication for the Cheese Council. My phone number is. My phone number is 37 37. Area code 4. 73 06 888 4 73 06. Thank you and have a wonderful day.

Being a social worker, my heart went out to this large calling boss and his poor daughter who was either 100 years old or 16. I was happy to hear, however, that if she had the diagnosis of ADHD the Cheese Council was overseeing the case. I was confused however as to why my father was in the Philippines and how this man knew my father.

And then it hit me...my phone has ADHD. There is no other explanation.

Being a social worker myself, I am prohibited from providing therapy to my own phone. If any of you know of a good behavioral therapist or psychiatrist who specializes in iPhones, please let me know.

My phone number is area code 37 37 426 29 05 683.

Imelda Zamora

For Me, It Started with the Earlobes

Can you come here, please? He hurried to my side.

What is it?

My earlobes, I said.

Your earlobes, what about it?

Well, what do you think? I asked.

What do you mean, what do I think?

Well, are they soft or firm?

Why the sudden obsession with earlobes?

I think I am starting to shrivel. This is the first sign. My earlobes used to be plump and firm but now it is soft and sagging. I cannot wear dangling earrings anymore because they hang there like they will fall off my ears any minute. I hate to break the news to you, but you are now married to an aging woman, not that pardon me, you are not growing old yourself, sir.

What are you talking about? He laughed. *Nobody notices earlobes.*

I do and mine have become limp.

Your earlobes are just fine. He said “just fine” very slowly. I could tell that he was beginning to get annoyed so I let him go.

Thanks, I smiled, thanks for the support. Support, get it? Ha-ha. He didn’t laugh this time; so much for bad jokes.

Some people can find humor in getting older but for others it is a serious subject. Remember that first gray hair you discovered with horror when you were thirty, calling it premature? How about those lines on the forehead and around the mouth, the crow’s feet, jowls, bags under the eyes, thinning lips? All these can now be fixed for some money and some risk, a lot of risk. I bet they do earlobes, too.

A newspaper article my sister sent me once gave me a new insight on aging. Would you believe that it had to do with the brain? According to the article, the brain researchers had gathered enough evidence to indicate that the brain is a lot like a muscle—the harder you use it, the more it grows.

“Within the human brain, each neuron contains at one end thread-

like appendages called axons, which send signals to other nearby neurons. At the other end of the neurons are similar threadlike appendages called dendrites, which receive messages from nearby cells."

"Axons and dendrites tend to shrink with age, but experiments with rats have shown that intellectual exertion can spur neurons to branch like the roots of a growing tree, creating networks of new connections. Once a skill becomes automatic, the extra connections may fade, but the brain is so plastic that these connections can be tapped again if needed. Every brain, however, is limited by genetic endowment, and flexibility does decrease with age."

"But new thinking in brain science suggests that whether someone hits the wall at 65 or 102 may be partly up to the individual."

Naturally, after reading this and after silently thanking the intelligent rats that participated in the experiments, I immediately embarked on a crusade to find challenging ways to build my own brain circuitry. I became very busy thereafter doing intellectual exertions on my brain so that my axons and dendrites would stay alive and sparking, ready to send and receive messages at any time. Believe me, it worked. Now, according to my age, I should be old, but I could have fooled me, because I do not feel old. I bet I could foo you, too. Just don't look at my earlobes.

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