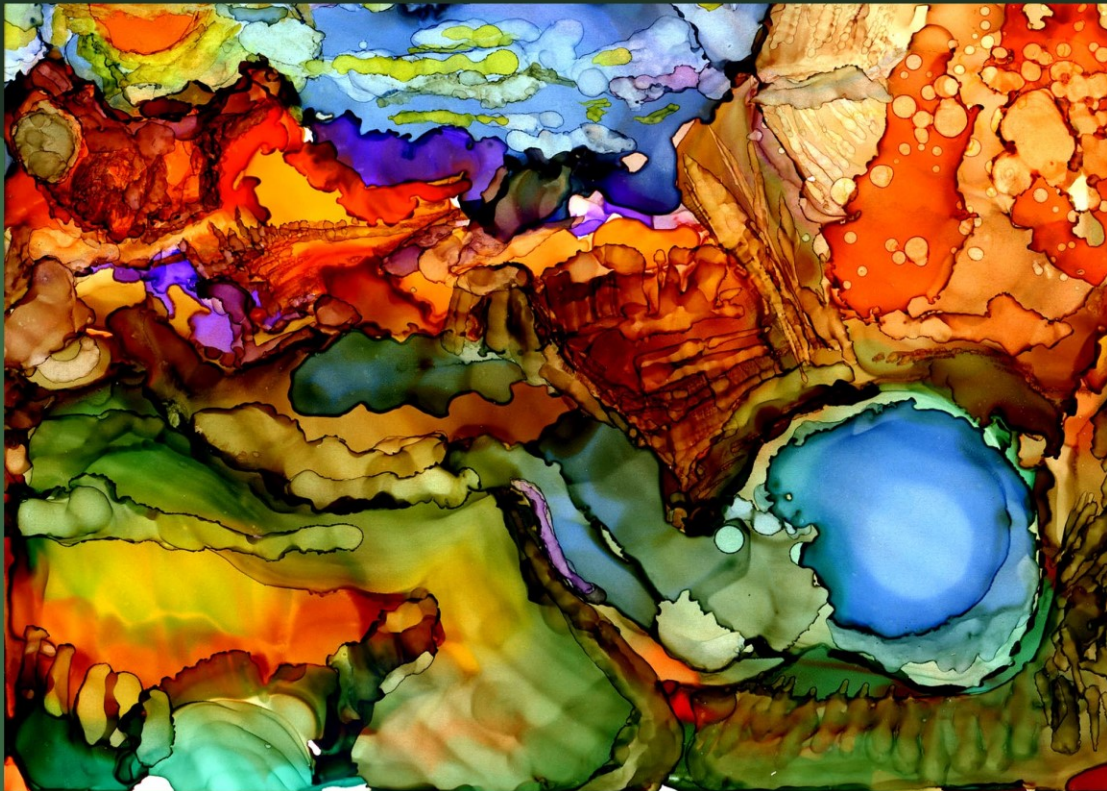


Volume 1 | June 2025

The Wordsmyth

Where stories are told . . . and read.



**A Slice of Life:
The Renaissance Man**

A Brother's Promise
Laura Mills - High Desert

The Ghost of Lucky Eddie
Rose Owens - Tri-Valley

Old Route 66
Scene 16 - Windmill

Three Poems
Constance Hanstedt - Tri-Valley

The Toy Store Heist
Wanda Sue Parrott - Central Coast

Cheryl
Damon Yeargain - Tri-Valley

The Night I (Almost) Met A Queen
Elaine Drew - Tri-Valley

Published by the High Desert Branch - California Writers Club

This first issue of *The Wordsmith* is dedicated to the memory of our friend and mentor whose vision made us better, whose stories enriched us, and whose passing has saddened us.



Richard Zone
September 26, 1949 to April 22, 2025

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES:

1. Font is 12-point Times New Roman.
2. 5,000 word limit. No exceptions.
3. Except for the first paragraph after a scene break, the start of all paragraphs will be "tabbed"—not back-spaced—3 spaces.
4. Short stories, poetry, essays, excerpts from member books, and member artwork are allowed.
5. All submissions will have 1.15 spacing between sentences.
6. All submissions will be edited for grammar, punctuation, and spelling prior to being submitted.
7. Photos/artwork will be 300 dpi. Photos embedded in a story will be no larger than 2x3 inches or 3X2, while photos/artwork submitted as individual items will be 6X8 or 4X6..
8. Photos of people not members must be accompanied by a release to publish.
9. **Stories with adult content/language cannot be overly graphic and must declare it at submission.**
10. Stories submitted with adult content/language will be printed with a warning to readers.
11. SUBMISSION DEADLINE FOR THE AUGUST ISSUE IS THE 30TH OF JUNE.
12. Political or religious proselytizing will not be allowed. Whereas stories, articles and artwork can contain religious or political aspects, but should not overtly seek to convert anyone.
13. Material that does not meet our baseline standard of quality will be returned to the author for revision.
14. The magazine will be published every two months. Submissions must be made by the 15th of the month a magazine is published. Example: Magazine is published on July 1. Submission deadline for the September issue is July 15th.
15. Publication is on a first come, first served basis. We will start with 15 submissions for the first magazine to determine its viability. Stories not printed will be carried over into the next issue.
16. Eight story titles and author's names will appear on the magazine's front cover for promotional purposes. To ensure impartiality, they will be the first eight stories submitted.
17. Free speech is respected but personal attacks on people in general will not be tolerated.
18. Stories that do not conform to the guidelines will be returned to the author for correction.
19. Include a short author's bio and a small profile photo with your submission.
20. Submissions should be emailed to: oksooner92311@gmail.com.

Plagiarism will disqualify any submission from publication. So will the use of any Ai authored material.

Remember! The submission deadline for the August issue is June 30.
Short stories, flash fiction, essays, articles, and poetry is accepted.

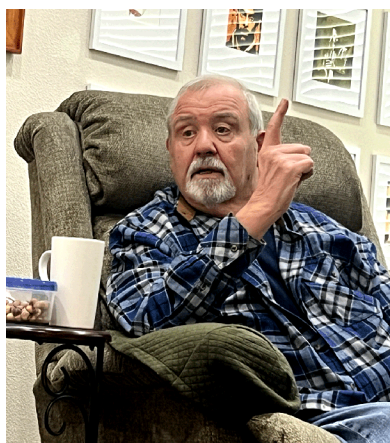
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A SLICE OF LIFE: THE RENAISSANCE MAN

by
J.P. Garner



In my seventy-five years on this planet, I had never known someone as smart and talented as Richard Zone . . . or as humble. It's unlikely I ever will unless I were to dine with Leonardo, but he'd not be humble. Richard was often as surprised by praise as he was delighted by it. A few weeks prior to his passing, about the time that his favorite football team, the Kansas City Chiefs, were being handed their butts in the Super Bowl, we were discussing our friendship's early beginnings with the Wordsymths.

During a discussion about his struggles to finish his book on the failures of organized religion—which he happily did here recently with his book, *The Philosophical Plate*—he mentioned that his favorite piece of criticism came from me in my curt appraisal of his beautiful short story, “Akiko.” At its conclusion, I had written, “You son of a bitch . . . you made me cry twice.” Thirteen years later, he looked at me with gratitude in his eyes and remarked, “That was the best John.”

The best.

I cry when I recall that afternoon in his livingroom. Those two words alone would describe him accurately to those of us who knew him, if it also did not fall on us, his close friends and the principal benefactors of his largesse, to broadcast his legacy . . . his story to a desperate world in need of such a man.

We often discussed my abstract view of God and religion and his erudite defense of a true and politically-detached Christian faith. When I read the first chapter in that book, and he looked at me with some eagerness for my opinion, I said, “This is awesome Richard, You have finally found a way to tell the story you started back with the Wordsymths. You're not preaching; you're teaching.”

He smiled broadly. I wish I could have captured the look on his face. It reminded me of my daughter's expression when presented with monkey-bars for the first time, and how, after gingerly crossing them and reaching the other side, she was elated and promptly crossed them again without any fear. Richard was like that the months before he departed: elated and without fear. He had been concerned that his stories would be construed as an attack on his Christian faith, and not as insight into the church's historical failures to inspire the masses, rather than imbue them with a fear of God who would punish us if we didn't.

Like all of us, he was the sum of his parts. But his parts were extraordinary, though none of us would have known it unless, in a private moment, he admitted to aspects of a past as a lobbyist for Jerry Falwell's movement and as a teacher of Spanish and Theology. That came before the painting and the writing.

Born in Argentina and raised by missionaries, Richard became a key actor in our country's Christian movement. He hob-knobbed with Washington elites and major lobbyists, and once was interviewed by Dan Rather for a 15-minute segment on *60 Minutes*. The interview was so important to the show's producers, they flew Dan Rather to San Francisco to conduct the interview. It was a major accomplishment for our friend, but also a source of deep regret for him as his mother, forewarned of the broadcast time, made no attempt to watch it.

After years in the political arena, that once involved a trip to National China (Taiwan), he journeyed into teaching high school Spanish and Photography. Annually he took students on tours of Europe and guided their efforts in putting together their yearbooks. Later he taught graduate school at Azusa Pacific, lecturing formally-trained pastors on philosophy and theology, striving always to encourage them to think and use reason when preaching scripture. What was remarkable was that he had a Master's and taught graduate school without ever

having earned a high school diploma. Azusa Pacific, in certifying him to teach in their graduate school, accidentally used his brother's transcripts during the hiring process.

But even more remarkable was Richard's skill as an artist, a writer, and possibly a musician, judging from the grand piano in his livingroom and the guitar poised next to it. I never heard him play but I know his love of music was deep as we often watched Youtube videos of various artist performing. I was told later that, as a young man, he received a four-year scholarship to attend the Juilliard School of music in New York City. I'm not surprised. I know he'd rather listen to music than watch daily TV fare which was, I think, uninteresting to him. Silence would have been—and often was—preferred to that misuse of valuable time. That which he loved on TV was football . . . specifically any broadcast involving his Kansas City Chiefs.



It was a book of Tony Bennett's artwork that sparked a desire to learn how to draw. He dutifully taught himself the techniques needed to produce the extraordinary pieces of art on display in every room in his house. From weird caricatures to superbly detailed recreations of famous people, Richard's artwork and skill at it was simply amazing.

It's sad that the world will never see that wonderful skill of his, though one famous singer, songwriter, and actor took notice of a portrait of him. Kris Kristofferson, who recently passed away, had a home in Hawaii, and in that home, there was two portraits of him: one by another artist and the other by Richard. When Kris performed in California, he invited Richard to the concert, where he was taken back stage and met Kris and his lovely wife.

But what Richard did in the last months of his life are testament to the human spirit, especially since he was not able to walk because of the neuropathy in his feet. He did not allow that to diminish his productivity but

his wife's passing did. He was totally devoted to Sue Ann. In the emptiness that followed her death, he was nominally active in the club, assembling and publishing the *Inkslinger* each month and sponsoring meetings at his house, but he didn't write much. Not until an idea for a short story sent him back to his Mac where, in a matter of months, he generated 90 stories, most of which were whimsical and humorous tales of almost anything from carnivorous cabbages to painting a duck.

My favorite of these stories is *Killing Innocence*. That story made me cry as well. Not once, but twice.

At the same time, his other book put his insights into the practice of a true Christian faith as intended by its first teacher. The stories will be published here soon in two separate books. It's almost fitting, if not intended by the God he loved, that his best work would come at the end of his life. There's something tragically poetic about that. And a lesson in it, as well, that we should not dally as tomorrow is guaranteed to no one. That, at the moment he shined the brightest, his light was extinguished and we are left to sort through the pieces of his magical life in the afterglow of his greatness.

Of the things Richard was to me, and to many others in the Club and to people in general, that will be gravely missed was his humanity. That ability to transcend pettiness and grudges, and the powerful punch of hatred that rocks us to our core. He was a mentor to many, a friend to all, and to others like me, a beacon of what genuine kindness and humility can wrought in our daily lives.

But most of all, he was sincere and truthful, and it is that that I will miss most during this time when they are the first casualties in a struggle with cruelty and lies. Through him I acquired the will to finish, and in our many conversations about God and religion, I learned that the God I believe in is not so different from the God he loved.

When I finish my trilogy, I will cry because he won't be there to see that I kept my promise.

And, then again, may be he will be.

In which case, when I watch Kansas City play again, I will yell, "Go CHEFS!"

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."

— Anton Chekhov

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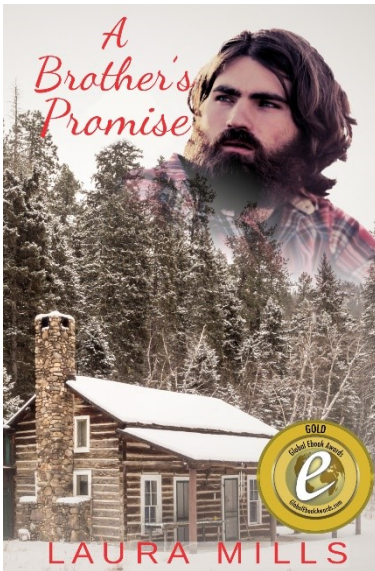
EXCERPT: A BROTHER'S PROMISE

by

Laura Mills

High Desert

Chapter One



Lead, South Dakota

June 7, 1890

“Good night.” Elijah gazed at the frail form lying upon the bed. He turned, but his brother’s voice stopped him as he reached for the doorknob.

“Elijah,” Ethan called out, his voice rough.

Elijah spun around to face his brother. “Yes, what is it?”

Ethan’s expression bade him to come closer to the bed. Elijah returned to his side and stood tall and strong over his brother, who lay weak and sallow. A sibling with whom he shared many attributes. They both possessed their father’s angled features and dark sable hair, but while Elijah had facial hair to complement the long strands of his shoulder-length locks and carried on their father’s blue-green eyes, Ethan was smooth shaven with a shorter length of hair and had their mother’s gray eyes. In physique, they were similar as well, although Elijah stood

two inches taller than his younger brother.

Elijah sat in a chair that groaned under his weight and he leaned forward to be closer to Ethan. For a moment, he concentrated on his brother, who had been just as strong as he, not so long ago. His brow furrowed as he frowned. Ethan had diminished in body, but not in spirit. The infection caused by the horrific injuries Ethan had suffered from being gored by a bull was literally killing him. Ethan always maintained a cheerful attitude, living with an abundance of energy; an optimist that no one could bring down. Not even this sickness that was eating away at his life on earth.

He was losing his brother and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Helplessness had been overwhelming him lately and he didn’t like it. Not one bit. Ethan was more than a brother to him. He was his best friend, his confidant. He was blood. Nobody was closer to him than his brother, especially since the passing of their parents, four years past.

Ethan grabbed Elijah’s hand and tightened his grip. “I need a favor from you, brother.” Elijah lifted curious eyes to his brother, ready and willing to do whatever he asked.

“I need you to protect Caroline.”

Elijah didn't hesitate. “Absolutely, Ethan. You don't need to worry about that.”

“By protecting her, I mean I want you to marry her.”

Elijah's stomach dropped and he swallowed hard. “Did I hear you correctly?” “I've put you on the spot,” Ethan acknowledged.

“Yes.” Elijah released Ethan's hand and rose out of the chair to turn away and stare at a pronounced knot within a log of the wooden wall. “Yes, you have, Ethan.” The aroma of honeysuckle drifted into the air. Elijah glanced down and found three mossy green stems with yellow flowers nestled in a glass jar on the nightstand by the bed. Caroline's doing. Honeysuckle happened to be one of his favorite scents.

In a broken voice, Ethan explained, “You're the only one I trust. You're the only one I would ever let near my precious wife.” He coughed. “She needs your protection, Elijah, from men who might take advantage of her, and marry her only for her share of the ranch. The ranch belongs to the Bradley family.” Ethan coughed some more. “We've worked too hard and too long to take that chance.”

Elijah found it difficult to breathe. His brother was dreadfully serious. Marry Caroline? His brother's wife?

“Are you opposed to Caroline?” Ethan asked.

Elijah turned to glare at his brother in disbelief. Opposed? He and Caroline were friends, and had become close friends this past year. But marriage consisted of a commitment made to a woman you loved and of your own choosing, not a duty forced upon you by imploring guilt. In this case, the person pleading with him was his brother, a brother who didn't have much time left to live. “Forgive me, but Caroline is not forefront in my mind when my brother lies dying.”

Ethan closed his eyes and Elijah stepped back over to him and sat down again. Ethan opened his eyes.

“Ethan, marriage is the last thing on my mind right now. My brother is slipping away from me. You are leaving me.” Elijah looked away, attempting to gain control of the sudden shortness of breath. Gathering courage, he faced his brother. Ethan's form suddenly appeared blurry. When two teardrops fell from his eyes and slid along his cheeks, he realized he'd begun to cry.

“Elijah,” Ethan rasped, sniffing to keep his own tears at bay.

Elijah wiped at his wet eyes with the palms of his work-roughened hands in an effort to dry them. “What?”

Ethan stared steadily into his brother's eyes. “I'm sorry for pressuring you, but I want your promise that you will marry Caroline.”

Elijah considered what Ethan was asking him as he searched deeply into his brother's eyes. How could he refuse his brother's dying wish?

“Promise me,” Ethan pleaded.

For an abrupt moment, Elijah's world tilted. Gone was the ability to select a marriageable woman of his choosing. Lost was the chance to expand the ranch business beyond only cattle since his plans to pick out exceptional breeding stock of bison had already gone astray. For generations of Bradleys, family had always come first, and he wasn't about to break the tradition.

Elijah took a deep breath. “Yes, I will marry Caroline.”

Ethan looked pleased. “Thank you. I knew I could count on you.” Elijah

smiled back half-heartedly. “Yes, you can,” he agreed.

“I love you, brother,” Ethan told him. “And one day we will be together again.”

Emotionally drained, Elijah rose from the chair, and then bent to ruffle his brother's hair. “I love you,” he whispered, and seeing that Ethan's eyes were growing heavy, he walked away and left the room.

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Sobbing screams tore through the wooden walls of Elijah's cabin. He awoke to what he thought was someone else's nightmare. The piercing sounds penetrated, louder and louder, through the cabin structure. Something was terribly wrong.

He flew out of bed, grabbed his Levis from the floor, and pulled them on while snatching a shirt that lay draped across a chair. The sobs had switched to agonized groans. He slipped his bare feet into his boots and headed for the front door. He pulled the door open to find Caroline on his doorstep.

The sun began to rise slowly behind her. Its rays made the straight, brown locks of her hair shine like a copper penny. Misery shone in her cobalt eyes and her cheeks were wet from the tears on her face. She shook uncontrollably and crossed her arms over her chest, but it did nothing to stop the trembling. When her teeth started to chatter, he pulled her into his cabin, shut the door, and went to get a blanket. After wrapping Caroline with a quilt, he led her to his bed and motioned for her to lie down. At first she resisted and kept pointing in the direction of her own cabin. "Ethan," she whispered.

Reality's strike was immediate and fierce. Caroline's nightmare had become his.

It took him over an hour to calm her down enough to settle on his bed and finally get some rest. While she slept, he went to his deceased brother and took care of all the necessary arrangements with the help of Stan, his godfather and friend of the family. By the time he made it back to his cabin to check on Caroline, she was awake, sitting on the edge of the bed, rocking back and forth with her head tucked into her chest. He sat on the bed next to her, examining the dark strands of her hair. "No more pain, Caroline. He suffers no more from pain."

She stopped her rocking motion and lifted glazed eyes to his. "What about me? I still suffer. The pain hasn't stopped for me."

"It will lessen over time. Believe that." "How can you be so sure?"

"Because of my parents." Immediately he blocked out the image he'd imagined of his parents' train wreck. Caroline shifted her gaze down to her shaky hands. "I'm sorry, Elijah. I'm being selfish."

"No." He took one of her hands into his and gave a supportive squeeze. "You need to grieve. We both do. I didn't expect to deal with this kind of pain so soon again after my parents, especially with my brother, but it is our reality for now."

She let go of his hand so she could wrap her arms around his body and pushed her face into the side of his neck.

Caught by surprise, Elijah didn't respond right away, not until she sobbed. He wrapped his arms around her small frame. Besides Stan, she was all the family he had left. He sniffed several times to hold back his emotions, to focus instead on calming Caroline.

He rocked her in his arms and whispered soothing words of encouragement, telling her that they needed to stay strong for Ethan. They would be all right because they could depend on each other. Caroline nodded against his neck in agreement, bathing his skin with her tears as she tightened her grip along his back.

He took a deep breath and detected the vanilla fragrance of sweetgrass. She'd been crafting braids or baskets again, probably as recently as daybreak. The hobby kept her mind busy and not on thoughts of her dying husband. But now, they were made to brave the truth.

She released her hold on Elijah and gazed into his face. "Thank you."

He gently dried the tears on her left cheek, "You're welcome. Would you like me to contact your parents?" She shook her head. "They won't come. My mother does what my father wants and he won't leave the farm for a burial, especially Ethan's."

"He still blames Ethan for taking you away from them." She nodded.

“All right. Let me know if you change your mind.”

Their gazes connected for a mere second before Caroline requested to lie down and rest again. He gave her that time, and left her covered in quilts on his bed.

When she woke the next morning, she seemed to possess a renewed strength; making breakfast for Elijah and starting her morning chores.

For a whole week, they went about a regular routine, with the exception of Elijah checking on her more often than normal. The morning of the burial, he had to search for her, but found her, to his relief, on a nearby hillside picking flowers.

Ethan was truly gone from this world, from Elijah’s sight. His brother’s body lay six feet below the grassy earth. Elijah stared at the gravesite incessantly, as if he could will his brother back to life.

The only distraction his subconscious would allow was when Caroline needed assistance. As she started to step forward, Elijah took her by the elbow and guided her to the grave so she could place flowers atop the newlyturned soil. The wild daisies she’d picked that morning lay in a loose bunch, their button eyes smiling toward the crisp blue sky. Just as quickly, Caroline excused herself and headed in the direction of her cabin. She’d been incredibly strong, considering what she’d been through during the last month.

As he watched her trail away, he reflected back to the last conversation he’d had with Ethan, the one when he’d promised to marry Caroline. She hadn’t mentioned a word about it, probably didn’t know what her husband had asked. He would choose a time and place to tell her, but in the meantime, he was still coming to grips with the agreement he’d made with his brother.

His gaze shifted to the pile of dirt with daisies spread over the top. “Why did you have to die?” Elijah sniffed. “I hardly know how to tell your wife about the promise I made to you.” He shook his head. “Why didn’t you ask her? Maybe she doesn’t want to marry me. Did you think about that?” A delicate breeze whispered over the daisies, causing their petals to flutter. Elijah’s gaze briefly slid to his parents’ headstones only eight feet away from Ethan’s resting place. He remembered his father’s animated voice, speaking the words of wisdom; family is the foundation for life. He focused on a single white daisy. “If she’ll have me, I promise to keep her safe, Ethan. That much you can count on.” Mourning doves cooed above his head as they perched in a giant ponderosa pine standing near the gravesites. Elijah looked up and caught sight of two doves sitting side by side. He cracked a smile at the pair and then slowly trailed back to his cabin.

Chapter Two

Elijah entered Caroline’s cabin as he always did for breakfast and the faint fumes of fried bacon assaulted him, making his mouth water. He loved bacon. She was scurrying around the kitchen, both hands full with plates of food. He grasped the handle of the water pump and quickly washed his hands. He couldn’t wait to bite into the perfectly cooked bacon. He almost ran into her when he went to take a seat and she was setting food on the table. “Plow into me, why don’t you,” she teased.

He was glad to hear the humor in her voice since it meant she was on her way back to her old self. “Maybe you were in my way,” he fired back.

“Unlikely.” She gave him a smile. She joined him at the table, and they said grace together before digging into their breakfast.

Elijah immediately grabbed a piece of bacon, still chewing it as he devoured a mouthful of oatmeal. He washed everything down with a drink of milk. “Did you see Stan this morning?” he asked.

Caroline had just set her glass of milk on the table. “No, I haven’t seen him today. He did mention yesterday that he was going into town last night.”

“He did. I believe he went to visit Sharon Taylor.” He was curious to see her reaction to that bit of news. Her eyes grew wide. “Widow Taylor? Is he serious about her?”

He knew she’d be happy about Stan having a woman in his life; it had been three years since his wife had passed. “Seems to be,” He finished the bowl of oatmeal so he could move onto the eggs.

Caroline cut into the over-easy eggs on her plate, using her buttered bread to mop up the egg yolk. “I’ve always been fond of Mrs. Taylor. She’s extremely nice and I think she would be a good fit for Stan.”

“We’ll see,” Elijah responded with a smile. “Meanwhile, Stan wants to meet with us tonight. I guess Ethan had him write a letter telling us how to divvy up his property.”

“I don’t see why it’s necessary that I be involved. Talking about land is a man’s discussion.”

He grabbed a piece of bacon. “Stan was insistent that both of us attend the meeting.”

She looked amused. “All right, I’ll be there. Ethan never was one to hide things from me. He wanted me to be a part of every aspect of his life, which was how I preferred it.” A trace of melancholy crossed her features. “I drew the line at his bull riding, though. I always had the notion that he would meet with trouble.”

“I felt the same way.”

Caroline flicked her gaze at him. “Then why didn’t you...”

“Stop him?”

All she did was nod.

“Sometimes you have to let a man follow through on the choices he’s made, and let him deal with the consequences.”

“But he was your brother,” she said.

“I know. Don’t think it wasn’t hard for me to watch him. In the beginning, I tried talking sense into him, but he didn’t want to hear anything I had to say.” A rooster crowed from outside. “Even though he was being headstrong and unreasonable, he was still my brother. So, I supported him. It didn’t mean that I approved of what he was doing,” he clarified.

“I didn’t know that you tried talking him out of it,” she said.

Something changed in her expression. “I did. Is something wrong?”

She gave him a weak smile. “It’s nothing. I just realized that neither one of us ever had a chance to make Ethan change his mind about bull riding.”

He sighed. “Nope. Ethan was too strong willed. Always has been.” He rose from the chair and helped her clear the dishes from the table.

Caroline finished stacking the dishes in the sink and reached out to swipe the towel out of Elijah’s hand. “Give me that. You’ve got enough work to do without spending time drying dishes.” “I just want to help,” he said.

“Sure you do.” She smiled. “You can’t fool me, Mr. Bradley. I know you’re only being attentive so I’ll bake you that apple pie you’re so fond of.”

Elijah had always loved her sense of humor, and her cooking. “Well, now that you mention it,” he replied with a chuckle.

“See?” She shooed him out of her kitchen. “Go on now. I don’t want to see you until lunch time.”

“But...”

“No, the pie won’t be ready until supper,” she told him, playfully pushing him out the front door.

He turned to tell her something when the door shut in his face. “Caroline?” he said, loud enough to get her attention.

She opened the door to acknowledge him. “What?”

Elijah couldn't help but grin. "Thank you for breakfast." The rooster's crow played again in the background. She smiled back. "You're welcome."

生

Later that evening, as Elijah was finishing dessert, he made a comment. "This apple pie is delicious."

Caroline rose from her chair. "You know it would save me a lot of time if all I had to do was cook you dessert."

"That's not true," he countered.

"Oh?" She leaned over for his empty plate.

"I like everything you cook. So having only dessert isn't going to cut it," he told her.

Caroline chuckled as she stepped over to the sink. "So much for increasing my leisure time," she said over her shoulder.

"Leisure time? Women aren't allowed leisure time," he teased.

Caroline spun to face him with her mouth dropped open. "Aren't allowed?"

Elijah chuckled but didn't have a chance to respond because a knock on the door interrupted them. Caroline quickly dried her hands and shook her head as she made her way to the door. She opened it to find their foreman on the stoop. "Stan, come in."

Stan gave her a brief smile as he stepped by her.

Caroline closed the door and then went to the kitchen area. "Pie, Stan?" "No thanks," he said in a somber tone of voice.

Elijah caught Caroline's gaze across the kitchen table. He shrugged and Caroline shrugged in return. Stan seemed down and out but that wouldn't be a surprise since Ethan's death had been recent and Stan was the boys' godfather.

Caroline sat in a chair at the kitchen table across from Elijah and they both watched as Stan reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out two folded pieces of paper. He slid one across the table to Elijah and one to Caroline.

"Ethan asked me to give these letters to you both after the funeral. I expect that you'll want your privacy to read them, so I'm not gonna stay. I'll see you two in the morning," he said and left.

"Well, that was the shortest meeting I've ever attended," Elijah said.

"Me too," Caroline agreed. Her gaze fell to the scribble of her name on the folded paper.

An ember popped in the fireplace. Noticing that she was deep in thought, Elijah quietly announced, "And since the meeting is over, I'm going to leave you alone to read your letter."

He walked to the hat rack and retrieved his Stetson, although he could feel her gaze on his back. "Good night."

"Good night, Elijah."

生

After the door clicked shut, Caroline opened the letter.

Dear Caroline,

Our time together was too short, but with you, I have some of the best memories of my life. I know you didn't like me being gone so often and I was a fool for it. I don't blame the bull riding, I blame my being bullheaded. You mean so much to me, Caroline, and as your husband I have to make sure that you are taken care of. Please understand that I feel this is best for you. Now that I am gone, I want you to marry Elijah. I want you to have the child you pined for, and by marrying my brother, it will guarantee that my family line will carry on. Please consider doing this. My dying wish is for you to be happy. Love,
Ethan

A lone teardrop splashed onto the piece of paper, smearing Ethan's name. The tears were for a man who'd died too young. The anger building behind the tears was for the predicament Ethan had put her in. It was true that Ethan had become selfish. They'd decided to wait the first year of marriage to have children since Ethan had wanted to concentrate on building up the ranch. Once the ranch had begun to sustain itself, Ethan got interested in bull riding. Someone he'd met in town one day had told him about the new event. He'd been intrigued and began traveling great distances to attend these affairs. She went to the first competition with him to see what it was all about, and once was enough for her. She never went again.

Two months later when Ethan had come home after being at one of these rodeos, he'd declared excitedly that he was becoming a bull rider. Caroline's heart had plummeted with the announcement and for good reason. Ethan was hardly ever home. For the rest of that year he would be home for a couple months and then gone for three weeks at a time, only to come home in a wagon with multiple injuries. His last bull ride had been his undoing and then it was too late; the bull had stomped into his body enough times to cause devastating injuries.

Another teardrop fell as she reread the letter. There it was, in black and white, clearly stating Ethan's desire that she marry his brother. She had wished for her husband to realize the mistakes he was making, but to her dismay, Ethan had continued to willingly jeopardize his life, ultimately leaving her a widow, and without a child. On his deathbed, he'd finally realized that she mattered, that maybe children were important to her. So, this dying request, a desperate attempt to make up for his selfish behavior, made her both sad and angry. And what about Elijah? What did his letter say? How was he taking his brother's appeal?

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Elijah sat in a rocking chair before a flaring fire. He took his time opening the letter, already expecting to see the words "marry Caroline" in it, but the additional request to have a child made him stop rocking back and forth. He shook his head and read the letter again, word for word.

Dear Elijah,

You've had my back for as long as I can remember. I couldn't have asked for a better brother, especially after losing Mother and Father. I know that I've asked a lot of you already, but you're my only hope and the only one I can count on.

I guess I thought I had all the time in the world to start a family with Caroline, but my time was cut short. Do I feel guilty about not giving my wife a child? Yes, I do. I'm begging you to give Caroline the child she's eager to have. I lost my chance at carrying on the family line, but you can make that happen for me. You would be a great father, a responsible one.

Regarding any real property I have, including the cattle, it's yours. Any equipment of mine you can give to whoever you think will use it.

Your brother,

When he had agreed to marry Caroline, he'd counted on it being a marriage of convenience. Not so after reading his brother's letter. Ethan's request sounded more like a duty, an expected obligation to be accomplished. A quiet rapping on the door gained Elijah's attention.

He opened the door and found Caroline standing before him. The sun had already drifted behind the farthest mountain, leaving them to stand on his porch in developing shadows.

"Did you read your letter yet?"

"I just finished it." He scanned her face, searching for clues of how she was feeling about Ethan's letter.

"Are you going through with this?" she asked quietly.

Elijah's focus sharpened. "I'm as stunned as you are, Caroline."

She stayed silent as if she were debating on whether to share her thoughts. As much as he would like to delay the conversation, the better option was to get it out in the open. "If you want to talk about it, we can do that now," he offered.

Her eyes sparkled. "I don't know what I want," she sighed.

He swallowed hard. He reached out to touch her arm in comfort, but she turned out of his grasp and hurriedly stepped away from him.

Bound for her cabin over a hundred feet away, Elijah followed her. "Caroline?"

Her footsteps sped up and he kept pace by taking lengthier strides. She was going into the cabin as he was scaling the porch steps. The door was about to swing shut but he stopped it with the palm of his hand and walked inside.

Shutting the door behind him, he stomped toward her. "What has gotten in to you?" Caroline spun around to face him. "You have to ask?"



Gold Medal Winning author Laura Mills merges romance and drama into compelling love stories. Historical romance is the period she usually writes about, having a passion for both romance and history, but she has plans to venture into contemporary and even action adventure. Laura is a Southern California native who grew up imagining characters for stories she longed to write. Music is an integral component while she writes as well as inspiration from her wonderful husband and their beloved Labrador Retrievers.

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THE GHOST OF LUCKY EDDIE

by

Rose Owens

Tri-Valley Writers

"Fellas, last night I saw the ghost of Lucky Eddie."

A smile flickered behind the grizzly beard of the old miner. The saloon stilled as Pickpan plopped his scuffed boots on a nearby chair and leaned back. He tucked his hands behind his head. And waited.

Pickpan collected friends and stories indiscriminately. Everyone responded to his friendly, generous attitude. No one knew what his actual name was. He had arrived in California with only a pickaxe and a gold washing pan, and he had been called Pickpan ever since. He delighted in telling stories about the miners and their claims. No one was ever sure if his fantastic stories were true or if he was stretching the truth. Today Pickpan leaned back a little further in his chair. He had set the stage and cast out his lure. Although his face was expressionless, the twinkle in his eyes invited questions.

Eventually a man at the next table couldn't stand the waiting any longer. He leaned forward. 'Ya really saw the ghost of Lucky Eddie?

Pickpan slowly nodded his head up and down. Up and down. "How close was he? D' you think he'll bring you luck?"

Almost everyone seemed to know who Lucky Eddie was—everyone except the skinny kid leaning against the bar. He had just arrived in Rich Bar. "But who was Lucky Eddie?" he asked. "Was he some miner who struck it fabulously rich?"

Pickpan roared with laughter, doubled over, and slapped his leg. "Not hardly, Kid, not hardly at all! Lucky Eddie was about the most unluckiest feller around. Lucky Eddie would grin from ear to ear, and he'd rub his thumb back and forth across his fingers, and then he'd say, 'Fellas, today's my lucky day. Today's the day I'm gonna' strike it rich. I can feel it in my bones.' That's why we called him Lucky Eddie."

"And did he strike it rich?"

"Wal, not for hisself. You see, Lucky Eddie only brought good luck to those around him—never to himself. Somehow Lucky Eddie could sense the presence of gold in the vicinity, but his instinct was never quite precise enough to pinpoint the exact location. So, it most usually was the miners around him that got rich."

Pickpan's eyes roved from one miner to the next, making sure he had everyone's attention. He continued. "I remember the day that Lucky Eddie came into Rich Bar, a pickaxe and shovel on his shoulder and a gold washing pan in his hand. Lucky Eddie staked hisself a claim and started to dig into the hillside. Every day he'd say, 'Today's my lucky day. Today's the day I'm gonna' strike it rich. I can feel it in my bones.' But he didn't. He dug and dug and the hole got longer and longer and still no gold. His hands got blistered and his back hurt and one day he were disgusted with that claim. He threw his shovel down and said, 'Fer twenty dollars I'd sell this claim.'

A stranger walked up and said, 'I've got twenty dollars. I'll buy your claim.'

'Done!' says Lucky Eddie.

Lucky Eddie was feeling pleased with himself. He was twenty dollars richer because he'd sold that green miner a worthless claim. Lucky Eddie was sure he'd find himself a better claim, and then he'd strike it rich. But Lucky Eddie hadn't gone very far before that stranger dug two more feet and struck it rich.

And was Lucky Eddie ever mad! He stomped through that camp, kicking rocks this way and that way. Them rocks was really flying. Then Lucky Eddie noticed something. The dirt on the toe of his boot looked a little bit shiny. It glistened--like gold. It was gold! Lucky Eddie almost whooped with joy. Then he thought better of it. Lucky Eddie quietly retraced his path in and out and around that camp to the place where he figured he'd first kicked that nugget of gold. He staked hisself a claim and began digging a coyote hole."

Pickpan stopped talking and looked right at the kid. "Have you ever seen a coyote hole?"

"No."

"Wal, a miner's coyote hole goes straight down—like the hole a coyote digs. That's why the miners call them coyote holes. They go straight down and down and down." Pickpan plopped his boots down on the floor and

leaned forward. He waved his hand toward the mountains. “You have to understand something about Californy. There’s gold up there in those hills—lots of gold. Every year the spring runoff brings the gold down from the hills. And gold is heavier than dirt. So, with every earthquake and rumblin’ here in Californy, that gold just settles down deeper and deeper. And if a miner digs a coyote hole straight down to bedrock he’ll find that pocket of gold—if he kin manage to guess the right spot, that is.”

Pickpan paused to make sure the green kid understood all that, and then he continued, “It takes two people to dig a coyote hole—one to dig and another to haul the dirt up in a bucket. The danger with coyote holes is that if the hole isn't braced properly the dirt'll collapse and kill the miner." Pickpan settled back in his chair again. His gaze moved from miner to miner, once more making sure he still had everyone’s attention. “Well, Lucky Eddie staked hissself a new claim and began digging a coyote hole. About the time it got too deep for one person, Anderson came along, and they partnered up. Lucky Eddie would dig for a while and Anderson would haul the buckets of dirt up and dump them. When Lucky Eddie’s digging turn were done, Anderson would help him out of the hole. Then Anderson would jump down into that coyote hole to dig, and Lucky Eddie would haul up the dirt and help Anderson out of the hole when his turn was done.

‘There's gold here,’ muttered Lucky Eddie one day as Anderson was helping him to climb out of their coyote hole. “Today’s our lucky day. I can feel it in my bones.”

‘GOLD!’ yelled the miner on the next claim over. ‘Eureka! I’ve struck it rich! I'm rich! Rich! RICH!’ With all that commotion going on, Anderson slipped, and Lucky Eddie fell. The coyote hole caved in and there he were--buried up to his neck in dirt, and it weren't paydirt. But Lucky Eddie never stopped believin’ in his lucky day—the day he was going to strike it rich.”

The kid nodded his head and waited for Pickpan to continue.

Pickpan slowly lifted his whiskey and took a drink. Just as the kid was getting antsy, Pickpan grinned and continued telling his story. “One day as Lucky Eddie and Anderson was walking through the camp, Lucky Eddie says, ‘Anderson, today’s my lucky day. I’m gonna’ strike it rich. I can feel it in my bones.’ At that very moment Lucky Eddie's foot got tangled in a rawhide rope that was attached to the saddle of a runaway mule. Lucky Eddie yelled, but that mule wouldn’t stop. It just ran faster and faster. By the time Anderson got that mule stopped, it were too late for Lucky Eddie.

Now funerals and buryings take place quickly in the gold fields. It's too hard to keep the body fer long and the miners jist don't want to take much time from their digging. And there ain’t much kinfolk around anyway. So, Anderson wrapped Lucky Eddie in a blanket and went to find the preacher. Now I’m not sure if he was really a preacher, but he had a Bible and could pray a fine prayer. Anderson dug a hole up there on Poverty Hill, and Preacher commenced his burying prayer.

Now, as Anderson knelt by the burying hole, his fingers sifted the dirt. In his mind he could hear—not Preacher's prayer—but Lucky Eddie's words. ‘. . . my lucky day. I’m gonna’ strike it rich. I can feel it in my bones. Gold. I can feel it in my bones.’ Anderson’s fingers felt a small lump—a pebble in the dirt. He cradled it in the palm of one hand and carefully flicked the dirt off that lump with the other hand.

‘Gold,’ Anderson whispered. ‘Gold!’

The preacher's eyes popped open. ‘Gold?’

Anderson repeated, ‘Gold!’ Preacher whipped out his handkerchief and tore it in half. Anderson whipped out his handkerchief and tore it in half. Preacher tied a piece of handkerchief around the handle of the shovel. Anderson tied a piece of handkerchief around the handle of that there pickaxe. They used their knives to stake out the other two corners of a six-foot square claim. Lucky Eddie's grave were in the middle. Oh yes, they buried

Lucky Eddie somewhere else—rather quickly, with no more praying because they had gold on their minds. And they began to mine the Lucky Eddie Claim.”



Rose Owens, is the Newsletter Editor and a past president for the Tri-Valley Writers Branch of California Writers. She is a recipient of the Sue Tasker Memorial Service Award and Jack London Award. Her three middle-grade novels, *The Maryalise Trilogy*, are available on Amazon. She is a wife, mother of seven and grandmother of twenty-six.

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OLD ROUTE 66

Scene 16 – Windmill



THREE POEMS

by
Constance Hanstedt
Tri-Valley Writers

Moments

I want to visit the Pacific,
walk one hundred steps
on the sand
where hermit crabs scuttle
and lifeless jellies lie

I want to float
on the procession of waves
where memory starts
and voices quiet

And everything
is white-rose perfect

And sunbeams
brush my face like petals

Red Oak

deep-furrowed with dark green
leaves broad as flags

yawns into the day,
then strong-arms gusts

until they quiet.

Model of resilience
for the tender saplings

poised like children
under their mother's apron.



(Pixabay)

Hummingbird

Unlike the rust-orange rufous
who flies long-distance marathons,
you flit from the red feeder
to the lean limb of the lilac bush,
choosing the same spot each time,
two feet beyond the patio door,
two feet from where I rest
on a blue leather recliner.

It's a matter of comfort, I suppose,
away from the scrub jay's constant
chatter and the squirrel's mad dashes
along the fence.

You perch your sleek body
and needle-thin beak sideways
with one tiny black eye peaking
at me, and I wave.

You don't move, and I think
how reliable we are—me,
with my just-below-the-knee cast

What if it was struck
by lightening, split in half,

heating sap to steam,
its tissues weeping?

Will the valley forget
its valor in battle

as the day cools
and blackened limbs

shudder?

elevated on a pillow,
you, content with a slight breeze
and sheltered from the blazing
summer sun.

I turn the page of my latest novel,
and I'm caught in the familiar tangle
of words,

in the normalcy of our days.



Constance Hanstedt is a member of Tri-Valley Writers, where she facilitates the Poetry Critique Group. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Calyx*, *The Comstock Review*, *Rattle*, and the *Naugatuck River Review*. She is also the author of the poetry chapbook *Treading* and the memoir *Don't Leave Yet: How My Mother's Alzheimer's Opened My Heart*.

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THE TOY STORE HEIST (Pacific Palisades Memorial)

by

Wanda Sue Parrott
Central Coast Writers

Life at 561 Swarthmore Ave., Pacific Palisades centered around the street one block west of us. Via de la Paz. My son Teddy's school, Palisades Elementary, was on Via de la Paz, along with the library, real estate buildings and a smattering of shops, including the toy store where kids hung out on the way home from school. The local newspaper, the *Palisadian Post*, stood by Palisades Hobby Shop that sold toy cars, boat and airplane model kits, art supplies, GI Joe and Barbie dolls, Hot Wheel cars, balls, bats and mitts.

By spring 1971, 7-year-old Teddy was too big for Mrs. Dorsett's pre-school day care, so I found the perfect solution to prevent his becoming a latchkey kid. As associate editor of the society section of the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, I volunteered to proofread the first edition of the society, financial and sports sections at dawn. If I found mistakes, compositors made fixes that ran in the sunrise edition and six subsequent versions throughout

the day. As proofreader I left Big Ted and Teddy to share quality father-son time alone as they had breakfast and then Big Ted dropped Teddy at school on his way to work. I could, thus, be home by the time Teddy arrived after school, giving us our own quality mother-son time together.

One afternoon Teddy dropped a hard, solid red rubber ball no bigger than a marble. When it hit the kitchen floor, it bounced over my head. "Where'd that come from?" I'd never seen such a power ball.

Teddy said, "The hobby shop."

"How much was it?"

"Free."

"How'd you get it free?"

"From the machine,"

"What machine?"

Teddy shrugged. I bounced the ball on the kitchen floor. It hit so hard it rebounded to the ceiling. It was some sort of missile that could blacken a kid's eye if it hit him. I wrapped the ball in my fist. *This thing's a lethal weapon.* "What machine was it in?"

"By the bubble gum machine near the door."

"How much was it?"

Again, Teddy shrugged. "Ask Bruce."

"Bruce P.?"

"Yeah."

"And why should I ask Bruce?"

"'Cause he got the ball out of it."

"Did he buy it for you?"

"No. He fixed the machine so the balls just came out. . ."

"So, you boys stole the balls?"

No response. I got the picture. A team of little crooks had pulled off a toy store heist. What to do? Teddy hung his head. I raised my voice. "If all kids stole stuff from the store, the owner would go out of business, and you couldn't go there any more? Would you like that?"

"No."

"So what do you think you should do about this?"

"Mmmm...er...uh..."

"Well, I think you need to pay for it. Do you have any money?"

"No."

"Then maybe give it back to its rightful owner so he can sell it. How does that sound?"

"Yeah."

"And maybe apologize for taking property that wasn't yours?"

"Aw, Mom... do I have to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's the right thing to do."

"Aw. Okay."

* * *

Teddy sat with pencil and paper at the kitchen table. For a child who was always sketching line figures, his pencil was unusually inactive and the page remained blank.

“Put it in your own words,” I said.

“I don’t know how. . . “

“Do you know the manager’s name?”

“No.”

“When did you boys crack the machine?”

“Today.”

“Okay. At the top right corner of your page you put the date in numbers. Then move down a couple of spaces to start your note on the left side.” He complied.

“Now what?”

“Address your message ‘Dear Sir’, and then go down two lines and tell him in your own words what you did, then say you are sorry, and last tell him you are returning the ball. Then you might promise not to do it again, but only if you really mean it.”

“Aw, mom. . . “

“Do it now. Before your dad comes home. . . ”

* * *

It took the short side of forever as Teddy asked how to spell words, then erasing and replacing them, as he printed black block capital letters. Finally: “Done!”

“That’s good.”

“Now what, Mom?”

“Go down two spaces and sign your name on the right side under your message.”

He signed “Ted P.”

“Good,” I said. “I suggest you add our phone number.”

“What is our phone number?”

He printed as I dictated each numeral.

“Congratulations,” I said. “Now you know how to write a letter. But it is not complete until you enclose it in an envelope you must address.”

“Mom, will you check it for me?”

I held the paper and read:

Dear Mister Sir:

I stoll this ball.

Im sorry.

It wont happene agan

Teddy P

“Perfect. I’m proud of you.”

He put the note and the ball in the envelope, licked the glue and sealed it.

* * *

We got to the store shortly before it closed. I parked at the curb.

“Good luck,” I said.

He waited for me to open the door. I just sat there.

“C’mon, Mom.”

“I’ll wait here, thank you.”

“But...”

“You can go in and tell the manager in person. . .”

“Aw, Mom...”

“Or you can hand him the envelope and then hurry out the door and I’ll be here with the motor running...”

“Uh... mmm...”

I picked the envelope up from the seat and gave it to Teddy. “Or you can deliver it like a scaredy cat who darts in, drops it on the counter and runs back out.” I leaned across the seat and opened the door. “Out!”

Suddenly my son sprinted across the sidewalk and vanished inside the hobby shop on Via de la Paz.

Two minutes passed. Then five. After ten minutes, I entered the store to check on Teddy. I found him and a mature man hovering over a glass cabinet where they were gluing together a balsa wood model airplane for a new display.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said, “but. . .”

“Aw, mom, do I have to go?”

“Do what your mother says, son,” the man said, “But you can come help me any time night or day.” He turned to me. “When I bought this place, I didn’t count on getting old and stiff. Teddy’s been a great help with his young, flexible hands. He’s a great kid.”

And that is how my son got his first job as well as place to hang out after school on days I was on assignment. His first pay was a free toy of his choice after he’d swept the shop or helped create a window display.

* * *

Five decades later, Bruce P., the undisciplined toy store heistmaster, had long since been freed from incarceration for felony drug dealing when, in January 2025, our neighborhood in Pacific Palisades was destroyed by the greatest wildfire in California history. Governor Gavin Newsom made international news on a corner of Via de la Paz as he stood by a skeletal white iron angel whose arms--outstretched in street-sign supplication—bore the combination eulogy-ode-grave marker whose black block letters mean in Spanish: THE WAY OF PEACE.

* * *

(Our house at 561 Swarthmore Ave., Pacific Palisades, was destroyed in the fires that devastated Pacific Palisades and Eaton Canyon in Southern California in the disasters of January 2025.)



WANDA SUE PARROTT, 90, has been a professional writer since 1960, using 18 pen names during her career (none of whom are rich or famous). After inventing the Pisonnet as Diogenes Rosenberg, she revealed her identity when pisonnetry went public during her lifetime. She is active in Central Coast Writers.

WRITER'S SALON

The third Wednesday every month between 4:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Instructor: Jenny Margotta
Email: jennymargotta@mail.com to reserve your seat,
and to obtain instructions to the class location.

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AC | AL

CHERYL

By
Damon Yeargain
Tri-Valley Writers

It was a big day for us—a big, big day. I lay on top of the sheets, my double-breasted suit, cummerbund, bow tie and cufflinks tossed onto a chair (or near enough for me.) I had my T-shirt and pants still on—the latter she liked to take off herself. It was a big day; it would be an even bigger night.

She was in the bathroom, getting ready. What would it be? A teddy? A costume? Or maybe she'll just come out naked and jump on top of me?

I smiled, stuffing another pillow under my head. How happy the world had become. Joy was now the norm, the expected result, our leitmotif. It was such a contrast from the way things used to be.

My body grew heavy and numb. Waves of tiredness washed over me. The room spun a little. Tonight was the first time in a long time I'd had anything to drink. Maybe I should have stopped after that second glass of champagne? I closed my eyes, not to sleep, just to rest. *Rest a bit, until she's ready.* A memory comes to me, floating through my tired brain in fragmented pieces: *the woods, a sultry night...a girl.*

I force my eyes open. *Need to stay awake.* I glanced at the nightstand. The hotel had neatly stacked the remote beside the channel guide. Maybe the TV would help. Then I reconsidered.

Music was also offered through the TV, and I flipped through the options until I found something romantic. Tomorrow we'd be on a beach in Hawaii. I raised an invisible glass towards the bathroom: *here is to a big day, a bigger night, and a long life together. May we be banging each other's brains out for many years to come.*

My eyes grew heavy. Again, the memory calls to me...*calls me back from so many years ago.* How many? Ten? *Holy Jesus.* Has it been that long since...*Cheryl?*

* * *

I remember going to bed early that night and was sound asleep when a loud THWACK jolted me awake. In a single bound I was at the window. I threw it open.

“Hey Tommie, want to come out and play?” a voice giggled from the dark.

Cheryl! I guess there was a reason my parents didn’t like her.

“It’s after midnight,” I whispered back.

“Are you going to turn into a pumpkin?” she asked.

“I have finals tomorrow. If I fail, I won’t be in eleventh grade next year.”

“Eleventh grade is overrated,” she answered. “Besides, you always ace those things anyway.”

“Probably because I’m usually asleep at this hour.” That’s what I thought anyway. What I sighed was “let me throw on some clothes.”

It was useless to argue with her, she always got me to do those things I would never do on my own. Cheryl was a year older than me—and cool! Just to be seen with her elevated me in the eyes of everyone at Wayne High. Back then, I was in desperate need of self-esteem elevation.

I dug through the pile of clothes Mom had been stacking on my dresser all week. She said that by tenth grade I should be able to put my own clothes away—clearly, her plan was working to perfection. It took some effort, but I think I found the right combo of shorts, shirt and underwear. My shoes were downstairs, and not wanting to risk waking anyone up, I slid on my flip-flops.

As to whether anything matched. Let’s just say it was good it was night—and Cheryl was the one girl who wasn’t obsessed with fashion.

I crawled out of my bedroom window. Our house was two stories tall; the garage, a single-story, sat right next to my room, making it an easy hop onto its roof. I then grabbed the rope I’d tied to a post on the side of the house—one I knew could hold my weight—and tossed it over the edge of the garage. I’d use it to climb back up later.

I squinted down at the black lawn below. Even though the jump had become almost routine, I’d only done it a few times in the dark—usually on nights when Cheryl wanted to take a late walk and gossip about whatever. Mostly she spent the time making jokes and mimicking the popular kids.

My heart was racing. Every other time I’d made this jump; I was wearing shoes. This time, I had flip-flops. I wasn’t sure how well that would go—or how I’d explain a broken ankle to my parents if it ended badly.

I took a deep breath and jumped into the void.

No sooner had I hit the ground, performing a tuck-and-roll as I did, when Cheryl shoved a pillow in my chest. “Let’s go,” she said.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To sleep in the woods.”

“But I don’t have my sleeping bag,” I protested.

“You’re so innocent,” she laughed grabbing my hand. “My sleeping bag is a double.”

“Oh.” I answered. *Oh-Yeah!!!!* is what I thought.

As she practically pulled me down the street towards the forest, I repeated to myself over and over again. *I’m going to get laid. I’m going to get laid. I’m going to get laid!*

At the height of my revelry, I was struck with a far more important, wider-reaching dilemma, one that could emotionally scar me well into adulthood. I remembered watching this movie where a guy got a cramp in the middle of doing it. What if that happened to me? Oh God, what if I can’t do it? Cheryl had lots of friends; it was sure to get around. I could see Bobby and Flip laughing at me.

“How come you’re so quiet?” Cheryl asked, interrupting my despair.

“Still a little groggy,” I answered.

“Well, you’d better wake up. We’ll be in the woods in a couple of minutes.”

Wearing flip-flops had definitely been a mistake. I kept having to stop and shake out tiny stones that got wedged under my feet. Then we wandered off the path into weeds full of sharp, spiky burs. I yelped. Cheryl apologized, then pulled a flashlight out of her purse and clicked it on. She slipped her arm around me and helped guide me out of the brush and back onto the dirt path.

She, of course, had little trouble with the stones or stickers because she wore the same ratty combat boots she always wore. They were a perfect complement to her cut-off shorts and torn, safety-pinned Sex Pistols tank top.

She was one of the most sought-after girls in high school and not just because of her boobs. Her hair flew every which way landing wherever it damn well pleased as if in flagrant protest against all rules and conformity. Cheryl didn’t care about anything (or so I thought)—not about the bugs or the spiders in the woods, not about her parents, and certainly not about how others perceived her.

While the rest of us—especially me—worried about everything: what others thought, how I looked, not being able to do it, and the wrath of my parents if I got caught on this little excursion. Cheryl had the freedom the rest of us lacked. It made her damn hot!

When we reached her chosen spot, she spread her sleeping bag on the ground. I tossed the pillow on top, then lingered there as if mesmerized by the forest.

She had chosen me—a tenth grader, a geek—and I didn’t have a fricking clue what I was supposed to do next. She laughed and slipped into her sleeping bag. Articles of clothing came flying out. Boots. Shirts. Shorts.

I stood there, frozen, wondering if she was wearing any underwear.

“This will lighten the mood,” she said pulling a bottle out of the sleeping bag. I guess she had it hidden in there. The plastic seal cracked as she twisted the top.

“At least my dad is good for something,” she muttered, taking a big swig. She handed the bottle to me. I held it in my hand for a long moment. The dark, shadowy woods made the liquid look black. I had the feeling of being in line at some crazy ride your friends talked you in to, not really wanting to go, but too afraid of what they’d say if you backed down.

I slowly lifted the bottle to my lips. What I thought was a small sip burned like fire going down my throat. I choked.

“You getting in or what?” She laughed.

I pulled off my shirt and fumbled my way in. I kissed her—or probably more accurately, I pecked her the way you would with your aunt or grandma.

She laughed and yanked off my pants and then put her arm around me. I was astonished by the warm softness of her skin. I tried to mimic the way she moved her tongue around the inside of my mouth. I had thoughts about moving my hand elsewhere, towards; well, you know. I would have gotten there eventually too; except she suddenly dropped her head onto my chest.

At first, I thought she was laughing. Then I felt moisture pooling up on my torso.

“When you go off to college,” her voice cracked, “Do you think we’ll still be friends?”

“Of course,” I stammered. “Why?”

“I don’t know. People, Mom...how can they be so—” She stopped and rolled away from me.

I became conscious of the sounds of the forest: cicadas, crickets and a critter rustling in the leaves. Above me, the faint outline of clouds drifted—gray, shapeless forms with no beginning, no end, no purpose. They simply hung there, drifting aimlessly with the wind.

“Dad came home drunk again,” she said finally, turning back towards me.

“Not that I care about that,” she continued. “He’s a halfway nice guy when he’s had a few. But Mom was screaming at him. I went upstairs to her room. I don’t know why, I guess I just wanted to escape. I grabbed her red nail polish. I don’t even like nail polish. It’s so fake.

“I didn’t notice the screaming stopped,” Cheryl continued “I hadn’t noticed Mom was standing beside me. Mom cleared her throat and the sound startled me, I dropped the bottle. It shattered into a thousand pieces. She then bent over and swirled her fingers in the red polish. Hunched over like that, she looked like a shell-shocked old lady from one of those war films they make us watch in history class... a refugee rummaging through the pieces of her broken, battered, bombed-out shit.

"But it was a fucking five-dollar bottle of nail polish. I told her I'd buy her a new one."

Cheryl paused, nervously tugging at the zipper of her sleeping bag—up and down it went, a little more forcefully with each iteration. Then, with a final, violent jerk, she zipped it all the way up and tucked part of her face beneath the fabric. In the moonlight, I could see the reflection of her tears.

"Then Mom stuck her hand in my face, like two inches from my nose." Cheryl continued, her voice low. "Red drops were dripping off her fingers. It was freaky. I couldn't tell if it was nail polish or if she'd cut herself on the glass."

I don't know if it was the drink or the night, but listening to Cheryl, I felt hyper-aware of the moment. I'd dreamed of being with her countless times, and now, I could see the faint outline of her naked breast under the sleeping bag. But there was nothing sensual about it. Instead, I had a heightened sense of the expression on her face—and it didn't seem like her.

Cheryl always made light of things. She cracked a snarky joke or said something wildly inappropriate that got everyone around her to laugh. Now, there was no humor. Only a face etched in pain.

"And then Mom—" Cheryl choked on the words. "Mom said, *'This is why your dad drinks.'* Then she hunched over the dresser and whimpered, *'You work, you sacrifice, and what do you get?'*"

Cheryl pressed her head into my chest again. She didn't speak for a long time.

Finally, in a whisper, she said, *"I made him do it. That's what my mom said. 'He wanted to have an abortion. But I... I made him have you.'"*

"I got the hell out of there." Cheryl said, "I had to get out. I wish I were older. I wish I had money. I wish I could go away for good and never come back."

She rubbed her hand against my stomach. "I'm sorry I made you listen to my fucked-up family shit."

I didn't answer. The details were different, but I understood. It was a common misconception then (and probably now) to think that kids doing well academically all have stable homes with squared-away parents. Experience has taught me otherwise—dirt is easy to find if that is what you choose to go looking for.

Still, I didn't know what to say. To Cheryl, until that moment I think I had always been the nerdy sidekick. But this girl, this bold, rebellious girl— was now vulnerable and afraid. She needed someone to be strong.

Yet, I could find no way to console her. So, I just lightly stroked my hands through her hair while she nestled her head into my shoulder. It wasn't until years later that I realized it was exactly what she needed.

We woke up the following morning to the sound of a bus. A bus we'd already missed. Luckily, we only lived two miles from the school—basically a warmup run in track.

Unfortunately, Cheryl didn't run track. I had to coax her into walking fast.

There were several large hills close to the school and Cheryl couldn't keep up. I grabbed her hand and gently pulled her along. She was out of breath when we reached the crest of the last hill. We could see Wayne High below.

"Yes," I said once she'd caught her breath.

“Yes what?” Cheryl asked.

“Yes, I will always be your friend.”

She grabbed me and kissed me. The moment was short. Too short as it turned out. But we had to keep moving if we wanted to make it to the next grade.

I only ended up missing twenty minutes of my first final. I didn’t ace it, but I didn’t fail either. I managed to pull off a B in the class. My parents left for work really early that morning, before I would have normally gotten out of bed, so they didn’t know I wasn’t home. They never found out I’d almost slept through my exam.

The last of the finals was two days later. Even though we really hadn’t done anything besides sleep semi-naked next to each other, Cheryl didn’t do anything to dispel the rumors that were flying around. In fact, she encouraged them.

“Oh yes,” she told a group of girls, “Tommy and I slept together in the woods.” The rumor boosted my stature throughout school. Girls who I didn’t think knew my name began talking to me.

I didn’t see much of Cheryl over the summer. She ran away, only not from her parents, at least not literally. She obviously drank. Once the school year ended, she quickly graduated into harder drugs—coke, speed, and eventually needles—she ran herself into an addiction. She ended up at a rehab center.

I kept my word though. By the time I finished high school, I had a completely different set of friends—but Cheryl was always there. When I went to college I came once a month to visit her at whatever halfway house she happened to find herself. It was all very platonic. We played cards and walked the grounds.

She said those visits are what kept her going. That, and stories about my life and success. Not my success at school or my eventual career—those things were expected, she said— but the way I grew socially: how I interacted with others... and with women. She watched me evolve, and it gave her hope. It gave her something to shoot for—a hero, not beyond her reach, but a concrete example that self-confidence was more than just rebelling for rebellion’s sake.

My budding self-confidence had its roots in that night. Before then, despite whatever act I might have put on for friends, I felt like I was just a dweeby kid—not deserving of anything, especially not from the opposite sex. What I take from the experience is that sometimes in life you need a mentor—an investor—someone who sees merit in your potential, even when you’re unsure of it yourself. That’s what Cheryl was for me that night: an investor in my soul.

She laughed when I told her that. “You think I decided to sleep in the woods with you in order to put you under my wing and show you how to be cool?”

She looked down at her food, still smiling. Cheryl had been clean for two years now, and we’d gotten in the habit of meeting for dinner once a month or so. This time, she suggested take-out at her place.

“No,” she said spreading her hands out on the table and using them to push herself upward. The tops of her breasts seemed to inflate as she did. She gave me a teasing smile as she spoke, “I actually liked you.”

Then her face turned serious. “Things were really fucked up that night. It felt like my world fell apart.” She looked down at her hands as if they contained wisdom. “In some subconscious way, I knew you were the one person who wouldn’t judge me...and would still be there the next day.”

She smiled at me while she nervously twirled her necklace. I liked to think I’d gotten good at reading cues from women. She’d changed our usual meeting spot to her place just a few weeks after I’d broken up with my last girlfriend. She wasn’t in jeans or anything casual. She wore a dress. A low-cut one, the kind that makes you notice without trying too hard.

Maybe I assumed it didn’t mean anything. Maybe we’d been in platonic mode for so long I couldn’t imagine us as anything else. Or maybe I never really believed it hadn’t been entirely accidental that we fell asleep that

night.

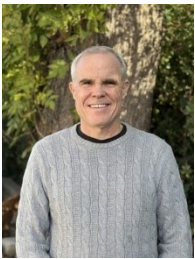
Not until she brushed the tip of her finger against mine and beamed “Many, many years later...and here you still are.”

That’s when I understood.

* * *

She came out of the bathroom wearing cut-off shorts, a t-shirt with a sex pistols tank top, ratty work boots and the veil she had worn earlier today. She was carrying a double sleeping bag and threw it on the bed. She jumped into it and her clothes came flying out. I wondered if she was wearing any underwear.

“Well big boy,” Cheryl said, “are you just going to sit there with your mouth hanging open, like a smitten tenth grader? Or are you going to hop in and make love to your wife?”



Damon is an IT Security Professional by day and a storyteller by passion. In his free time, he crafts both fictional and non-fictional narratives. His work has been published in outlets such as Bust Out Stories, The Toastmaster, Careers and the Disabled, Coping Magazine, The Challenge, Dreamers and Half and One. His work will also soon be appearing in the publications Nunum, Libre, and Free Spirit. Damon has also completed the draft of a novel about a man who continues to pursue his dream despite battling leukemia.

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RICHARD HARRIS

By

Richard Zone

THE NIGHT I (ALMOST) MET A QUEEN

by

Elaine Drew
Tri-Valley Writers

February 1992. My husband had been transferred to England. We had been living in Hampshire for two years when the invitation arrived. The function notes specified dinner jackets and informed us which decorations were appropriate. We were sent a parking permit and told which palace door to use. Note number 3 said, “Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother has signified her intention of being present. In order to make Her Majesty’s task easier, Committee members will be doing a little discreet ushering of Members to get them in small groups. Please co-operate.” I rushed into town and bought an evening dress, shoes, earrings, and an etiquette book.

Relax, the book told me. All the royal family are “extremely adept at putting people at their ease.” I heaved a great sigh and relaxed. Then I read the next two paragraphs.

I thought I could handle the curtsy: think ballet, 5th position, demi-plie. The Queen Mother, I discovered, should be addressed as “Your Majesty” the first time and “Ma’am” afterwards. The ma’am part is trivial for anyone who grew up in the American south as I did: there every adult woman is addressed as ma’am. Luckily, we would be spared the complications of meeting other members of the royal family at the same time, as this requires distinguishing the Her Majesties from the His or Her Royal Highnesses, not to mention unraveling the subtleties of which Highness gets a *the* before the rest of his or her title. Nor would we have to remember that female spouses of Royal Highnesses are Royal Highnesses, whereas males are only Sirs.

So far, so manageable. Unfortunately, I kept reading. Never, I was told, use the word *you* when speaking to royalty. After dropping this bomb my advice book glibly mentioned how silly it is that people get tongue-tied when introduced to a member of the royal family.

I practiced, hollering up the stairs to my husband: “Would Your Majesty be so kind as to bring the laundry on your, I mean his, way down?” Over and over I said to myself, “It’s a great honor to meet Your Majesty.” After that, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say that wasn’t fraught with difficulty. For example, what if Her Majesty paid me a compliment, such as “My dear, as often as we’ve seen that little Laura Ashley dress since it first came out six years ago, we must say it suits you.” Should I say, “Thank Your Majesty”? Or, “I wish to convey my thanks to Your Majesty”? Or simply, “So that’s why it was marked down so low”?

I knew I was tense the morning of the event when I drove into Winchester without the proceeds from the school disco which I, as treasurer of the parents fund-raising group, had carefully counted and prepared for deposit. I drove home again, muttering all the way, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty, excuse me, ma’am, I meant to say it’s a great honor to meet Your Majesty, Your Highness.”

I contemplated wearing a sign around my neck: Deaf/Mute. “I don’t want to meet her any more,” I wailed.

“Stop worrying,” said my easy-going husband. “No one’s going to expect an American to get it right.”

“Well,” I wanted to know, “what are you planning to say to her?”

“Please excuse my wife, Your Majesty.”

We had no trouble getting our car near the general area but it soon became apparent (no doubt a security ploy) that anyone attempting to drive to St. James Palace would spend the entire evening going in circles on one-way streets. A sign above the barricade on the street we needed coyly hinted t we should “Use Alternative Route.”

It was getting slightly past the time we were supposed to have arrived, so we abandoned the car and walked. In case we got lost, I was clutching a London A-Z.

We approached a building with 16th c. crenellated turrets peeking over dense scaffolding; we knew Henry VIII had built the palace for his royal residence. "That must be it," said Rob.

Somehow we wandered to the appropriate entrance, which was filled with chauffeured limousines and smartly uniformed soldiers, enormous rifles strapped across their chests. One of them was marching straight at us. I stared at him. I didn't know whether to snap to attention, put up my hands, or drop to the ground. He stopped marching, one foot coming down precisely next to the other, stood at attention, and saluted.

I looked behind me; no one was there.

"Did you see that guy salute to us?" I asked Rob.

"No."

"You didn't see him? He marched right up to us and saluted. Why do you think he did that?" I felt rude not acknowledging him. "Do you think I should have saluted back?"

"It would have made his day," said my husband.

As we walked past the entrance guard, he glanced at my A-Z and said, "Are you here for the function?"

"Yes," I said.

"I noticed you have a guide book." He thought we were gate crashers, and when he heard our accents it probably confirmed the suspicion.

I laughed and waved the book, "We live in Winchester."

"You will need to show your invitations ahead, sir," he said, very politely, tipping us off that if we were gate crashers we could leave now and save ourselves some embarrassment.

Up a gilded staircase we swept, past a vast ladies powder room, furnished with full-length mirrors angled for gown inspection, up more gilded staircases and into the Picture Gallery, a room dominated by a very large standing portrait of Henry VIII, after Holbein. I noticed a canvas of Charles I, one of his wife, another of his family. He spent the night before his execution in this palace.

As we entered, servants offered drinks on trays. When I tasted the red wine I realized I had been prepared for the slightly acrid taste typical of wine served in this fashion, but of course, this was the palace, and the wine was as rich and mellow as dark velvet. And plentiful. After about an hour of fending off the gracious, diligent fellows determined to refill our glasses, I began to wonder when I would be discreetly ushered into Her Majesty's presence.

Double French doors at the other end of the gallery swung open, a trumpet fanfare sounded. The diminutive Queen Mother, apparently, had arrived. "You're the tourists," said a man we were chatting with. "Go take a look at her. She'll walk through the room in this direction." Meanwhile he kept talking and it seemed a little impolite to scuttle him and go chasing after Her Majesty, and besides, I was still waiting to be discreetly ushered. I craned my neck to try to see in which direction the heads were bobbing, but couldn't tell. Time passed, and no discreet, or even indiscreet, usher arrived. The double French doors closed. Her Majesty was gone. I turned to Rob.

"You mean she's gone, and we didn't even see her?" Relieved and disappointed, I felt the way you might feel if, arriving all primed to take a driving test, you were told it had been cancelled.

It was time for dinner. We found Table 13 in the Drawing Room and met our table mates, a very congenial group. A legion of waiters and waitresses, one for every two diners, were mobilized to serve dinner. The man sitting next to me, who had been attached to the Russian embassy, was now an archivist; he told me about some of our fellow diners.

"Do you see that fellow sitting directly across over there?" he said, pointing to a man two tables away.

"Yes."

"He was in five concentration camps, including Auchwitz and Buchenwald."

My fork, loaded with a morsel of smoked poultry, stopped en route to my mouth. It seemed indelicate to continue eating. I stared at the man. I looked at the room we sat in, all scarlet and gleaming gold: walls covered

with rich red brocade, windows ornately draped in the same fabric floor to distant ceiling, elaborate gold chandeliers, intricately carved and gilded entrances. I contrasted this with the relentless gray of a concentration camp. How did the man make sense of his life?

“Have you heard of Viscount Slim?” my dinner companion was asking.

“Yes,” I said.

“That's his son over there.”

I asked someone if the women who were wearing metals had earned them or if they belonged to their deceased husbands. “They are their own metals,” I was told. A few minutes later Rob said to me, “Do you see the woman sitting next to the bald-headed fellow?”

“Do you mean Viscount Slim?” I asked knowingly.

“Is that Viscount Slim? Well, the woman sitting next to him was tortured by the Gestapo, and they made a movie about her.” The white-haired woman, who had to be in her seventies, was particularly beautiful, elegantly coiffed, her pale unwrinkled skin firm across high cheekbones.

But most of the conversation was chit-chat. One of the ladies, who had, by the way, managed to meet the Queen Mother, gave me a recipe for a sauce to be served with lamb: red current jelly, orange zest, and fresh chopped mint. She gave me her card and insisted we visit her village and come for tea. People talked of their children who worked for far eastern banks or the BBC and gave advice on weekend outings.

We were not without our little mishaps: the spirit of resistance was particularly alive among the tiny turnips on our plates. I tried to spear one with my fork; it jumped off my plate and bolted across the room, another lady's dived onto her lap. The woman across from me drenched herself in coffee. The funny thing was, I don't think any of us were embarrassed.

After dinner we wandered into the next room to look at the throne, said our good-byes, and left. Outside, a soldier saluted us again.

This time Rob saluted back.



Elaine Drew is a member of Tri-Valley Writers, where she currently serves as a critique group facilitator and previously served as Publicity Chair. She has worked as a writer, designer and illustrator. She holds degrees in English (Emory University, Honors, Phi Beta Kappa) and Fashion Design (Fashion Institute of Technology, New York City, Honors). During a four year sojourn in England she researched early English history as background for two novels and two illustrated tales, available at [Elaine Drew Books](#).

From the screenplay for the *Shawshank Redemption*:

Remember, Red. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well. Your friend. Andy.

By now, tears are spilling silently down Red's cheeks. He opens the other envelope and fans out a stack of new fifty-dollar bills. Twenty of them. A thousand dollars.

NOBODY

by

Tom Foley

High Desert

The dogs were barking, and there was a kid at the gate. There was no car, bicycle, or motorbike. That was odd since the old man lived five miles out of town and well off the pavement on a dirt road on the edge of the California, Mojave Desert.

“What the hell you want?” the old man hollered.

“I live down the street in the yellow single-wide trailer,” the kid yelled.

“So what do you want?” The old man rose from his workbench next to the shop door and took a few steps toward the front gate.

“My mom sent me down to ask for help. We hear you used to be somebody and knew a lot about motorcycles and how to fix them.”

“I’m nobody, and I don’t fix bikes anymore. Go away. No, better yet, ask your dad for help.”

“My dad is dead. He died when I was little.”

The old man stopped and turned around to look at the uninvited visitor. He looked about high school age, Hispanic, tall and thin, with neatly groomed hair. He was wearing Levi’s, a clean white T-shirt, and high-top black sneakers.

“So what do you want from me?”

“My grandfather gave me a 1973 Honda. It’s been in storage for fifteen years. I don’t want to mess it up when I start it. The kids at school want me to put gas and a battery in it and fire it up. If I do that, something might break. Mister Powel, up the road, said you used to race motorcycles and were a nice guy before your wife died. But now you’re a hermit, hate kids, and people in general. I thought I would ask before I messed something up. But if you don’t have the time, I’ll try to figure it out . . . never mind.” The kid turned and started back down the long dirt driveway toward home, his head down and shoulders slouched.

Not wanting to get involved, the old man turned and disappeared into the cinderblock building.

“Mister Powel’s right,” the old man mumbled.

* * *

As the day wore on, he saw the light dwindling through the shop door. Looking at his German Shepherd guarding the entry, he said, “Jake, it’s gonna be a good one tonight. Just look at all them clouds. Best we get ready.” Jake’s tail wagged in anticipation of the bone he knew was coming.

The old man grabbed the bottle of Kessler’s, opened a ginger ale, wiped out his glass with a reasonably clean rag, and blew into it, removing any lint. Adding ice, he poured in a hefty dose of bourbon with a dash of ginger ale and murmured, “Bourbon with ginger should hit the spot, don’t ya think, Jake? But I need one of these to

wash it down, don't I?" Reaching into the fridge, he grabbed a frosty Budweiser and chuckled to himself. "Ruby's watchin' Jake. I can hear her now—*Must you drink?*"

"Jake, you know what I said . . . Yup! Pissed her off every time. This time of night, gotta keep them demons where they belong and not in my head. Right, Jake?"

The old man sat in his well-worn vinyl armchair outside the shop door. His wife, Ruby, once occupied the empty chair beside his. Both had enjoyed the sunset spectacle on warm evenings when the clouds cooperated, even after she suffered the unexpected stroke. A massive heart attack finally took her away from him.

As the sun settled, the clouds came alive with colors of reds and blue-grays. The old man sat with Jake on one side and his three-legged golden-brown terrier, Sugar, in his lap.

Lifting the glass toward heaven, he said, "Here's to you, honey, till we meet again. I got close today, but you helped me through." He popped the top on his ice-cold Bud and chased the shot with a sip of beer. He was awed by the colors playing on the clouds streaking across the spacious skyline, but as always, they faded away. The stars began to shine as the colors drained from the sky and the grays scrolled into blackness.

The old man sipped the last of the bourbon and chased it with the now-warm beer. "A far cry from the old days, ain't it, ladies? We used to do a little hell-raising back in the day, didn't we?" When he finished talking to himself, the gray-muzzled dogs looked at him, knowing it was time for dinner. He enjoyed his nightly toddy, even when he drank alone.

Disappearing into the shop, he put the shot glass on top of the fridge, ready for another toast, and recycled the can. He turned out the lights and slowly walked to the house.

"Sit." The dogs obeyed.

He brought out their dinner and placed the bowls on the porch. Then, he sat back in the glider and watched them slurp up the tasty delight, reveling in the silence that the desert provided. Once the dogs finished, they all retired for the night.

* * *

On his way to town in the old Chevy panel truck the next morning, he saw a woman unloading groceries from the car at the yellow single-wide. He pulled in and stopped. Stepping down from the truck, he introduced himself. "Hi, my name's Mike Doyle. I live down the street and believe I met your son last night."

"Mister Doyle," the woman said flatly.

"Please, call me Mike."

"Mister Doyle, my son, Alfredo, came to you for help, and you could not find it in your heart to give it. He has dreams of racing and building motorcycles, like my father. Last night, he came home miserable, nearly in tears. I can't afford to send him to the schools he needs. You were his last hope. He's asked everyone else. He is so afraid of breaking my father's gift. The neighbors warned me you were an." She was looking for the word in English but couldn't bring herself to say it.

Mike cut her off. "I know the neighbors call me an asshole."

"It sounds stronger in Spanish."

"Ma'am, listen.

"My name is Mrs. Mendoza."

"Mrs. Mendoza, I don't work on motorcycles anymore for many reasons. At the top of the list is that I'm too old, and all the new bikes use computers. I'm a vintage guy. But the reason I stopped by."

“Just go . . . leave us alone. I’ll find another way to help my *mijo*.”

“I found this in my shop this morning. It’s an old motorcycle manual that covers the 1973 Honda. It may help him. If he has any questions, I put my phone number inside the front cover.”

Mrs. Mendoza was speechless as Mike returned to the panel truck and backed out of the driveway. He waved half-heartedly as he pulled out and headed to town.

Well, that went well. I’ll have to look up the word asshole in Spanish and see what it sounds like. The kid’s probably screwed up the bike already, and it’s beyond repair. Oh well.

* * *

That afternoon, the shop door was half-open, the fans exchanging hot air for slightly cooler air, when the dogs sounded off, indicating that someone was on the property. Mike looked out the door and saw the kid.

“I have some questions if you have the time,” Alfredo said.

Mike walked to the gate and unlocked the chain, “Follow me.”

Alfredo followed Mike to the gliders in the shade of the front porch, and Mike asked, “What’s your question?”

“Could you help me bring the bike home?”

“Where is it?”

“El Monte.”

“Geez. You have any money?”

“A little.”

“You have a truck or a trailer?”

“No.”

“You’re pushin’ it, kid.”

“Could you call me Fred?”

“You’re pushin’ it, Fred.”

“And I have to have it out by Friday.”

“Geez. You’re a piece of work. You want a freebie, and you want it now,” Mike said with a smirk. “All right, let’s do it tomorrow.

What time can you leave?”

“I’m out of school at two. I can be here at three-thirty—it’s a long walk if I don’t catch a ride.”

“How about I pick you up at the high school?”

“That’d be great. See you tomorrow.”

Fred walked to the gate and let himself out, this time walking home with his head up and shoulders back, almost at a run.

* * *

The next day, Mike parked across from the high school just as the kids flooded onto the street. When Fred came running with a backpack full of books slung over one shoulder, they headed down Cajon Pass to Interstate 10 in the slow lane towards El Monte, following Fred’s directions.

“This is it!” Fred said. “Just pull over here.”

Mike pulled in and parked, then they walked down the driveway to the single-car garage behind the house.

Fred unlocked the padlock on the sliding doors and rolled one side open, revealing a bike covered with a blue blanket. Pulling it off, Fred uncovered an immaculate red and white four-cylinder 500 Honda. “This baby looks like it just rolled off the showroom floor in 1973,” Mike said in amazement.

They rolled the bike out front and into the trailer. Mike had Fred secure the bike and close the door. On the way back up to the High Desert, Mike asked, “You going to leave it outside or roll it into the house?”

“Mom would never allow a bike in the house, so it’ll have to stay outside.”

“Well, you can store it in my dad’s garage. I have security and cameras over there. No guarantee it won’t be damaged or stolen, but I think it would be safer inside.”

“How much?”

“I’ll let you work it off in yard work after school if your mom agrees.”

“Sounds good.”

* * *

Well, that’s how Mike met Fred. Over the next few years, Fred graduated from high school and began attending junior college in Victorville. During their time together, Fred and Mike spent countless hours building, modifying, and selling motorcycles. The shop was never fully reopened, but customers always waited for a bit of Mike’s time. Fred was well on his way to becoming an excellent mechanic. Mike occasionally smiled as the young man developed his skills and matured into adulthood.

One winter afternoon, a light dusting of snow fell across the desert. Mike was coming back from town when he spotted billowing black smoke. There was a fire near his place! His heart began to race. He was sure the fire equipment he heard was headed very close to his house. He could see it wasn’t his ten acres on fire as he turned off the asphalt. Rather, it was the yellow single-wide trailer. He pulled over and parked.

Fred saw Mike and ran to him.

“Are you and your mom okay?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, we both got out. The fire started in the wall heater and spread upward. All I had time to grab were my books, laptop, and a few clothes. The whole thing went up in flames in less than ten minutes. It looks like we’ll be living in our car tonight.”

“What about your family?” Mike inquired.

“Mom has no family and had a falling out with Dad’s brothers and cousins. On the day he died, Dad drank with them all day and then he headed home drunk, lost control of the car, and crashed. They didn’t find him until the next morning at the bottom of a ravine. Mom’s never forgiven them.

“She holds two jobs to keep me in school, and we live without their help. I give her everything you pay me plus the money from my part-time jobs. We’re just getting by, and now this . . .”

Mike looked at Fred. “You two can stay at the house next to mine. It was my parents. It’s fully furnished, but no one lives there—I only use it for storage. I used to rent it out but never put it back on the market after a bad experience with a renter who didn’t want to pay and refused to leave. The cost of leaving it empty is far less than the misery of a bad renter, lawyers, and needing the cops to evict a former friend. I’ll give you the key. Put your stuff in the truck. I’ll take it to the house and turn up the heat.

It was late when Fred drove his mom to the house Mike had offered them. The lights were on in the family room when they walked in.

“Mister Doyle, thank you for putting us up tonight, I’ll try to find something I can afford tomorrow.”

“I’d be pleased to have you and Fred stay here.”

Mrs. Mendoza looked around the spacious front room, open kitchen, and down the hallway to the bedrooms. “Oh, I can’t afford this.”

“Mrs. Mendoza, pay me whatever you currently pay, and I will be money ahead. It’s my experience that when someone needs help, if I can, I give it,” Mike stated.

“You once told me I couldn’t find it in my heart to help your son. By helping him, I helped myself overcome the emptiness of losing my wife. I know you don’t like me because I drink, but I’m asking you to find it in your heart to help your son. Move in, get on your feet, and get on with your life. This fire can be a new beginning.”

“I don’t accept charity.”

“Neither do I, and I don’t work for free, as Fred can confirm. We barter, we trade, or I pay a fair price. He does the same. Help isn’t charity when it’s freely given. I needed help after my wife died, and you came along.” Mike dropped the keys on the dining room table and walked home.

◇◇◇

Mrs. Mendoza stayed at the house and found a better-paying job with the Unified School District as the lunch lady at the high school. With better hours and better pay, she increased the rent she paid. In turn, Mike used the money to repair and improve the house.

A couple of times a year, out-of-towners showed up at Mike’s, and a party would run into the wee hours of the night. Mrs. Mendoza would stay mad at Mike for a week or more because of the drinking, but she always forgave him.

One night, Fred stopped by the shop after class and noticed a rental car parked at the gate. Parking his bike, he let himself in and was immediately greeted by Jake and Sugar. Hearing the bike, Mike and two older guys walked out of the shop. One was a large, bald, black guy, and the other a short, portly fellow resembling Santa Clause. The short guy could have been Mike’s twin. All three were drinking bourbon.

“You guys been drinkin’ long?” Fred asked knowingly.

“Nahhhh,” came the slurred response.

“Let me introduce you to George, sniper extraordinaire,” Mike said as the tall black guy bowed.

“And the once very slim tunnel rat is Wild Bill.”

Bill bowed as if being introduced to royalty.

“These guys saved my life—time and time again. If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have seen twenty. They’re here to commemorate March sixteenth, a day we all somehow survived . . . and so many others didn’t.

“Fred, when I die, make sure you notify these two. I’d like them to be at my funeral,” Mike said.

“You know we’ll be there if our bell don’t ring first,” Bill said with a chuckle.

“Fred, what he meant by ringing the bell—that’s givin’ into death. Bill volunteered to be our tunnel rat in Nam, looking for bad guys, down a hole, in the dark, with nothing but a knife and a pistol. When he found them, he went wild. I’ve never met a braver man.”

“Oh, go on now,” Bill said. “Just doin’ my thing.”

“Wow,” Fred acknowledged.

When Fred left for school, the old veterans headed home, and Mike returned to his routine of tinkering with the old bikes in his shop.

* * *

One afternoon, on his way to town, Mike saw Mrs. Mendoza in her front yard. “May I have a moment?” he asked as he approached the fence. “Mrs. Mendoza, I was wondering if I could leave this with you. It’s instructions in

the event of my death.”

She stepped back.

“It’s nothing more than calling a couple of numbers and a lawyer. That’s all I’m asking. Everything’s been arranged, and the VA will bury me at the Riverside Veterans Memorial Cemetery. I just need someone to make the call. The doctor says my heart’s giving out—congestive heart failure—so everything’s gotta be in order before I go. Don’t tell Fred. He’ll make a fuss and want to fix it like he fixes everything else.”

Mrs. Mendoza reluctantly accepted the envelope. Across the front was written, “Open upon my death, Mike Doyle.”

* * *

A week before graduation, Fred noticed the shop light on over at Mike’s. It looked like he had fallen asleep in his chair again, watching the sun go down. Fred didn’t feel right going to bed without waking him, particularly since it was happening more frequently. He dressed, grabbed his keys, and walked to the shop. Mike was snoozing in his chair, the shot glass empty and the beer can in its holder. Fred smiled, remembering what a beautiful sunset it had been and knowing Mike had toasted Ruby as he had done a thousand times before. He looked content.

Fred shook Mike’s arm and realized it was cold, as were his forehead and hands. He checked for a pulse and found none. Mike was dead.

He ran home and woke his mom, “What should we do?” he asked.

Mrs. Mendoza went to the dresser, pulled out the envelope, opened it, and read:

Dear Mrs. Mendoza, if you’re reading this, I’ve passed. Enclosed you will find; the lawyer to call regarding the property, the crematorium to pick up my remains, and the veterans association notifying them of my death. They have the instructions for my internment. You’ll also find the phone numbers for Wild Bill and George, the last two members of my squad in Vietnam. P.S. You’re not being evicted, so please don’t worry.

Mike

To her surprise, the number she called for the crematorium was staffed twenty-four hours a day. They said they would contact the coroner and be there within three hours. She had Fred call Bill and George.

It was a long night of contacting the police to report a death, contacting the coroner, getting the body released to the crematorium, and now . . . the sun was coming up. Mrs. Mendoza was exhausted and, reluctantly, called work. After explaining the circumstances, she requested a sick day. Fred grudgingly left his mother for his final exams.

Later, after a short nap, Mrs. Mendoza called the lawyer’s office and was transferred to Patrick Rodgers.

“I’m calling to report Mister Mike Doyle’s death,” she told him

“I’m so sorry for your loss . . . please hold while I pull the file.” The phone played classical music while she waited.

“Is this Mrs. Mendoza?” Mr. Rodgers asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, I have some reassuring news. Mister Doyle has named you as the executor of his estate. He set up a Doyle Family Trust; you’re the sole beneficiary. To be clear, you now own the Doyle ten-acre parcel, both houses, all vehicles, a forty-acre parcel in Arizona with a cabin, and a safe deposit box at Desert Community Bank in

Phelan. Everything has been transferred into your name. I'll give you the key to the box when you come to Victorville to sign the paperwork. You have total control of the estate."

"I can't afford to pay you," she said.

"The three bank accounts transferred to your name have a balance over two hundred thousand dollars," Mr. Rodgers explained.

Mrs. Mendoza was glad she was seated. All the information made her lightheaded.

"My services are covered, and you can call me any time if you have questions or need help with the estate. There will *never* be a charge for my services," Patrick explained.

"May I come today?" she asked.

"Let me check. Yes, I have an opening at four-thirty."

As Mrs. Mendoza wrote down the directions, her head was spinning. When Fred returned from school, she told him what the lawyer had explained.

"So, you own the shop, both houses, and all the cars, trucks, and bikes?" he asked.

"Yes, that's what the lawyer said. Can you come with me to make sure I didn't misunderstand?"

"Sure, Mom. That's amazing. But why would he do that?"

* * *

After two hours of signing papers and making copies, they headed home. Final arrangements were made over the next few weeks. Notifications were sent, dates were set, and the headstone was updated. Mike had defined the program for his funeral. He did not want anything special; only the lawyer was to speak. He wanted a simple military service, and Fred was to receive his flag. "No muss, no fuss," were his final words.

Fred, his mom, and the lawyer went to pick up Mike's ashes. The curator asked if they were interested in a decorative urn. Patrick said, "No, Mike was a brown-bag kinda guy. He wouldn't want an urn. The black plastic container will be fine."

The day of internment arrived. Wild Bill and George had arrived the day before and stayed at Mike's. With George driving, the foursome and Mike's ashes headed for the National Cemetery in Riverside.

They rode in silence to the facility's entrance, where the funeral director greeted them.

"Name of the veteran?"

"Michael Doyle," George responded.

"Turn to the right, pull up to the wreath, and park. You'll be the first in line."

As they exited the car, off in the distance, they could hear the reverberation of Harleys bellowing as they exited the freeway. The sound accelerated as they neared the facility gate. The rumble of a dozen Harleys shook the ground as the riders pulled to a stop. They were a rough-looking crowd but respectful of the location and the occasion. Fred overheard one say, "Looks like a bunch of Mike and Ruby's extended family gonna' be here."

More cars and trucks pulled up, their license plates reflecting all parts of the country. Fred was fascinated by the colorful stories of the attendees and the camaraderie of the crowd. A golf cart drove to the front of the line, and the driver, a young man dressed in an Army uniform, announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are ready to begin."

The procession followed the cart to service area eleven. George placed the black box containing Mike's ashes on the stone table. Next to it, he placed three shot glasses, turning Mike's well-worn glass upside down.

Wild Bill addressed the crowd. “We’ve supplied the shot glasses, and by now, they’ve been filled at least once.” He lifted his, “I’d like to propose a toast. To Mike and Ruby Doyle, two of America’s finest, most giving and caring people on the planet—have left us. It’s now up to the remainder of the Doyle clan to pick up the slack. To Mike and Ruby.”

Patrick Rodgers stood behind the ashes. “May I have your attention, please?”

The crowd settled down to a quiet hush.

“We’re here today to say farewell to a friend who has impacted our lives. Each of us tells a different tale of how Mike’s actions and generosity touched us.

“His wife Ruby lost her entire family and was the sole survivor of a fatal car crash caused by a drunk driver. She was young and broke when she met a handsome young veteran riding a 1955 Panhead, and we all know how that story ended.” The crowd chuckled. “They made a living building, racing, and riding motorcycles. If you were down on your luck, needed a helping hand, a place to stay, a short-term loan, or a part for your bike, Mike was your guy. They were generous to a fault, but you all know that.

“We all have a story about how we met them, and each story is unique. Today, we will reunite the soulmates by placing Mike by Ruby’s side—for eternity.

“Mike told me Misses Mendoza and her son Fred saved him after Ruby’s death. Her loss devastated him. Late one afternoon, Mike was in the shop in a dark mood, cleaning his dad’s Smith and Wesson 45 revolver. He felt losing Ruby was the final straw. Most of his old friends were gone, and the joy motorcycles provided had vanished. He felt it was time to check out. He inserted one bullet, half-cocked the trigger, and spun the cylinder. Pointing the barrel under his chin, he pulled the trigger . . . it clicked!”

‘Damn,’ he said.

“He decided to try again. Spinning the cylinder, he placed the muzzle under his chin, but the dogs started barking. A kid was at the gate.

“Mike looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, ‘Ruby just intervened.’

“He checked the gun. The bullet was under the hammer. Had he pulled the trigger, he would have died. He put the pistol down and walked out in a foul mood to meet the kid. The boy had problems and wanted help, but Mike selfishly said no. It was against his nature, but telling the kid to go away grated on him all night. He decided to help and found an old Honda manual. As it turns out, the kid who helped Mike stay around for several more years is here with us today. Please stand up, Fred.”

Dumbfounded by the story, Fred stood up to the cheers of the crowd.

“Way to go, Fred!”

“You’re the man, Fred.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

Mrs. Mendoza was aghast, not knowing that Mister Doyle had contemplated suicide.

The lawyer continued, “Mrs. Mendoza is the sole executor of the estate. Mike had me put a stipulation in the will. Any individual contesting his decision will automatically be disqualified from the will . . . in perpetuity. As he put it, just in case one of you knot-heads claims something in the shop, everything was settled *before* he played *bullet roulette*.”

George stood next to the ashes, waiting for Patrick to finish. When he was done, he said, “I don’t care what Mike wanted! No muss, no fuss, my ass. Everyone here needs to know what kind of mettle Mike had. If you don’t already know—he saved *my* life!” He pulled out a piece of paper, looked at the crowd, and continued, “I’d like to read the citation Mike was given the day he saved Bill and me.

“It was raining, hot and humid, and we were hacking our way through the jungle. Mike was on point when the whole world went to shit—bullets flying everywhere. We’d walked right into an ambush. Mike crawled around behind one of the snipers and slit his throat. He hand-grenaded two more and pulled the injured Chilson and Bill to cover. Then he went back to find Smitty and pulled him out of harm’s way. I was hit in the leg and bleeding out. Mike ripped off his shirt, made a tourniquet to slow the bleeding, and pulled me to a safer location. All the while, they were shooting at us!

“The commendation reads as follows:

On March 16, 1966, Specialist Four Michael Doyle showed extraordinary valor in the face of deadly enemy fire, heroism in rescuing the wounded, and gallantry by repeatedly risking his own life for his fellow soldiers. For his actions, he is awarded our nation’s highest honor, the Medal of Honor.

“He always said he was nothin’ special, just another nobody, doin’ what he could when needed, George said softly. “Mike was never a nobody in my book, and I was fortunate enough to call him my friend, my brother from another mother. Godspeed, Mike.”

When calm returned, Butterfield’s “Taps” was played, and the honor guard folded the flag, presenting it to Fred. After the honor guard was dismissed, all the mourners passed by Mrs. Mendoza and Fred, each with a good word for the newest members of the Doyle clan.

* * *

Mrs. Mendoza wondered what was so important that it needed to be in a bank vault. One day after work, she stopped to find out. The teller took her into the vault and unlocked the box, leaving her alone with the contents. Inside, she found a handwritten letter.

Dear Mrs. Mendoza . . .

By now, you know you saved my life by sending your son down to ask for help. Call it divine intervention, karma, intuition, a ghostly intervention, or whatever—you prevented me from taking the easy way out. I’m indebted to you. What I’ve set up will hopefully be a down payment on what you have done for me. I can never repay you for the last few years you’ve given me and the joy Fred brought into my life.

You and my wife shared a common past of losing loved ones to alcohol. As my wife would say, when one door closes, another opens. My hope is that my passing will open new doors for you and your son.

Enclosed, you’ll find my Medal of Honor. I want Fred to have it as a reminder that no matter how challenging a problem may seem, he can prevail.

I keep it locked up because every time I look at it, even though it’s been decades, I relive the day they say I earned it. I sure do hang on to my misery, don’t I?

You have a fine son, Mrs. Mendoza. I know he will do well, and I hope your life becomes a little easier.

Mike



Thomas J. Foley was born and raised in California. He was jet engine mechanic for four years in the Navy, traveled extensively overseas from 1979 to 1986, supporting various airlines, and he worked at the GE Ontario engine overhaul facility. He published his memoir, *Chasing the Elusive Dream*, in 2022 and his second book, *The Rest of the Story*, in 2024. Four of his submissions were accepted and published in the CWC Anthologies *Unforgettable* and *Conflict*. He lives in Phelan, California, with his wife, Susan Andrusak Foley, and their five dogs.

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OLD ROUTE 66
Scene 13 - Graffiti



WINTER ODYSSEY

by

Joyce Wade

High Desert

Jack glanced at the speedometer, sixty miles an hour. *Better be careful; the roads are wet.* Scattered showers preceded his path while an occasional brilliant sun burst through the clouds, accenting the nearby snowcapped mountains. Postcard-like scenes flashed by, showing off the dense forest with trees draped in capes of snow, their boughs drooping.

Jack was not totally prepared for the trip alone this Thanksgiving, but then he never anticipated Betty having a heart attack in July either; who would ever think a woman like Betty could possibly have a heart attack? She had been so aware of a daily routine to ensure good health for a woman in her sixties, walking, taking vitamins, and eating a low-fat diet. *Geez, she was way too young to die,* Jack thought. *How could she leave when we hadn't finished our life's plan?*

Jack and Betty's son and daughter-in-law stepped right up to the plate and did their very best to help with this huge adjustment, but the plain truth was they were extremely busy with their own families. Three teenagers bogged David and Susan down; they found it difficult to find time for each other, let alone Dad.

Now, as Jack headed home, away from the comfort of a cozy fireplace and family and pumpkin pies, he thought over the past few days. It was the first Thanksgiving he had been without Betty. It was about all he could think of. The very thought caused him to be nervous, full of anxiety and pain. His eyes dripped tears as his heart raced. Deftly opening the bottle of digitalis, he swallowed the little pill and felt more comfortable.

"More snow expected later today," the car radio warned. *"It doesn't look bad now; I think they're way off base there,* he thought while sipping coffee from his thermos. Jack hummed along the ribbon of highway cutting through the Siskiyou Mountains. *Wonder if it might be quicker to take the Forest Loop? - The route Betty and I enjoyed so much just last summer,* he mused. How could he ever dream he would be here again, alone, on Thanksgiving? On their last trip, just a few months ago in June, they stopped at Mike's Gas and Food for lunch and filled the gas tank. Jack recalled the cost of gas at Mike's as he checked the fuel gauge. *Oh well, it's only money—I'll stop there again, just for old time's sake.*

Betty planned the June trip, as was her habit for most of their marriage. It was impossible to recount every vacation they had taken, every place they had been. Betty always kept notes of all their travels. When they arrived home, sometimes she would read the diaries of their trips. Reminiscing as he drove, those trips ran through his mind like a slide show. The East Coast, Canada, the Mexican Riviera, the Caribbean, and especially the European trip flashed through his head. They had been so happy. *Everyone should have a marriage like ours.*

Forest Loop, next exit, the sign said. In a split second, Jack made the decision to take the exit, slowing enough to maneuver behind the eighteen-wheeler. It was odd not having Betty there to help him decide which way to go. Turning left, he drove into familiar territory. The big rig drove on, avoiding the scenic route.

After all, it was only a few months ago that he and Betty were here. Munching one of the crackers David and Susan gave him, he headed east on Forest Loop.

The skies suddenly turned grayish white, promising a heavy snowfall. Polka dots of light snow began to splash the windshield, making it difficult to see. Jack was sure there had been some sort of road sign, a mileage marker, something not too far into the drive, but now concentrating on driving, he saw no sign by the roadside at all. *How far was it to Mike's Gas and Food?* Pushing the windshield wipers up to fast speed, the whip, whip, whip of the swishing wipers struggled to clear the view. Jack's comfort level decreased as he realized he seemed to be the only car on the road. *How could this be? Where is everybody?* Still, he drove ahead as the snow became heavier and heavier. Searching the radio for a clear station, the remote area made radio reception poor.

With no other traffic around, it became difficult to navigate. Jack glanced at the clock. It was almost four o'clock and snowing heavily, almost a whiteout. Realizing the sun would be setting soon, he made a decision right then and there to turn around and go back to the main highway. He had driven about a half-hour on the Loop, but with the snow coming down heavier and heavier, the drive would be difficult getting back to the highway. He realized he was not even sure how far he was from the main road, and his hands became clammy. Spotty radio announcements only increased Jack's anxiety level as the forecast became increasingly worse. His stupidity slapped him right in the face as he thought of David and Susan's pleas for him to buy a cell phone. He was not about to take on one more piece of modern technology. He very carefully drove ahead, only going about 10 miles an hour.

It was Thanksgiving morning when Jim Mortensen struggled to get out of bed; a whopping hangover was punishment for last night. He quickly dressed, hoping he could squeak by and no one would find out he was late starting work this morning. *They will never know I am this late*, he thought, as he brushed his teeth, combed his hair and dashed out. It was 7 o'clock and time for an annual duty.

Jim had worked for the Forest Road Service for almost twenty years and enjoyed the job. He had done this particular job for 7 years, but this was the first time he was so late. *Damn, why did I stay so late at Hal's last night? He dashed to his pick-up and looked at the snow, already piling up.*

He headed south, snow coming down heavier and heavier, and he squinted as he struggled to see the sign for the exit to Forest Loop. He slowed to a crawl when the sign caught his eye and slowly exited the highway. He turned left on the Loop, the same route Jack took. Being so familiar with the road, he knew he had two miles to the gate. He checked his odometer and drove ahead, stopping exactly at the two-mile mark. The snow was now so heavy he could not see the sign and barely could see the gate. Getting out of his pickup, his heavy boots left big, fresh prints in the snow as he made his way toward the gate. Glancing to the right, he searched for the sign. Where was it? He trudged his way through the snow and toward the spot where the sign should be when his boot hit something. Looking down, he saw it, half buried. *Someone must have hit the damn thing.* Pulling the sign up from its snowy grave, he wiped it clean as he propped it up. Then he stood back to be certain it was readable: WARNING—DO NOT ENTER GATE CLOSES THREE PM THANKSGIVING RE-OPENS MAY 25, WEATHER PERMITTING.

He slowly made his way to the swinging gate and pulled hard, dragging it through the fresh, powdery snow. He locked the gate, headache still pounding and returned to his truck. Barely able to drive back to the highway, he finally made it. That chore was his only thing he had to do all day.

Meanwhile, Jack struggled as he slowly made progress back toward the highway. The road was now impossible to see; the wipers only stacked up the snow deeper and deeper, leaving only a very small opening to see through. The gas gauge was flirting dangerously low, which only added to his anxiety. Mulling over his options, he reluctantly came to a decision. He should pull over to the side, use the remaining gas to keep the engine running, stay warm, and just sit tight for a road grader or some forest service truck to come along. That was it in a nutshell, no problem. Someone should be along within half an hour; he would have bet his life on it. *Yes, this was the smart*

thing to do, he thought, as he came to a stop. He poured a half cup of coffee, still warm, and munched on the last cracker. Then he sat and waited.

Drowsiness took over as Jack slumped in his seat, waiting for help.

* * *

David and Susan became concerned when they weren't able to reach Jack at home. They made frantic calls to the Highway Patrol; beginning one of the biggest searches launched in several years in southern Oregon. Search crews combed the freeway route, even venturing into some logging roads with snowmobiles. Helicopters dipped dangerously low over the snowy landscape, exploring canyons, combing the same area repeatedly. The snowfall set a new record for that time of the year, burying roads and cabins and closing roads.

* * *

Knowing the Forest Loop Rd always closed early Thanksgiving morning, it had not been explored. The Highway Patrol confirmed with Jim Mortensen of the Forest Road Service about the gate closure. He lied when he told them he locked gate shortly after sunrise Thanksgiving morning.

* * *

Author's Note: That snowfall set a record. It was not until mid-Spring that Jack's car was found.

.....
(Sorry –but we don't know where the dots came from or how to delete them.)



Joyce Wade is 88 years old and lives in Apple Valley CA. She has lived here 47 years. She is a retired banker. She's married and has three great grandchildren. She wrote many stories about 20 years ago and this year brought them back to life. Now she's hooked again.

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A BIG SPOON DAY

by
J.P. Garner
High Desert

It was a day like this that he passed away, all grey and cold and nearing its end. It was a heart attack, they said, which didn't surprise Gabriel, the way his father smoked, lighting a cigarette with a cigarette. You'd think he'd know better, as smart as he was, but it was the one habit he acquired in the Navy he could never free himself of.

At the time, Gabriel was stationed at Fort Irwin and was notified by the battalion's Staff Duty Officer. He had received a Red Cross notification and came to Gabriel's quarters to inform him. The lieutenant said that AER could help him get back to Oklahoma to be with his family, but Gabriel declined the offer. "Thank you, but no," he said. Oklahoma had been home growing up but it wasn't that anymore.

He had his memories and that was enough.

But it is the silence that fills the stadium and the recently-lined football field stretching out before him that, like some mystical force, pulls him back to that Saturday in 1958 when he and his father were among the 60,000 crazed fans sardined into Memorial Stadium, cheering wildly as Prentice Gautt and Wahoo McDaniel and the rest of the Sooner team powered past Nebraska 41-7.

It's a time in which he no longer dwells but visits often. A time in which he hated his father as much as he loved him. He hated him when he spanked him fiercely and, afterward, set him adrift in a sea of silence. But he loved him just as fiercely on those crisp, autumn Saturdays when Oklahoma played at Owen Field and they'd drive to Norman to see the games. They'd wear ashen gray sweatshirts, emblazoned with red lettering on their front that declared their allegiance to the university and its football team.



Afterward, they'd go to the Dairy Queen and consume foot-long hot dogs, smothered in chili and washed down by strawberry milkshakes that, when drawn up through two straws, chilled the back of their throats. It was there, bathed in fluorescent light, that they connected. There among the gleaming chrome and red vinyl, his father spoke the one language that spanned the ever-widening gap between them: football. It was a language with which his father was articulate and could speak easily without the aid of a slide rule—a subject that, like any conundrum involving mathematics, made him smile. But that too, the smile, was a conundrum itself as it appeared infrequently.

The games, though, were a thing of beauty, a kind of elegant geometry played out on a canvas of green, against a backdrop of spectators clad in red and white who, when considered as a whole and in the changing light, looked like the dappled brush strokes of an Impressionist painting.

The Saturdays, themselves, especially in the fourth quarter, were masterpieces of honey-colored light that angled in from the west and cast long shadows across the lush, green field. Even the gray days whose skies were swollen, and slung low seemed like paintings in which the stadium and its occupants were dwarfed by the impending fury roiling overhead.

As was their ritual, they'd arrive early and were among the few who, with some reverence, watched the great Bud Wilkinson stroll over the playing field, taking in the length of the grass, the gentle slope at midfield, and the direction the wind blew.

Thinking back upon it now, Gabriel wonders if, in that serene lull before the stadium filled and pulsed with manic energy if in that moment of quiet introspection, Oklahoma's head coach had been visualizing different situations in the game and developing strategies for them—mentally planning ahead for those times he had only seconds to make critical tactical decisions.

Probably.

It's what he does before the teams and spectators arrive before the stadium lights power up to full brilliance and burn a hole into the darkness. It's what he's always done in the serene lull before a game. That and utter a simple prayer to not fail his team. But on that Saturday that Oklahoma steamrolled Nebraska, his father pushed a crumpled grocery bag across the table to him and said, "Here, this is for you."

Gabriel was perplexed. *A gift*, he thought? *What was the occasion*, he wondered? His father rarely gave him gifts, and when he did, it was routinely a ten-dollar bill stuffed into an unsigned card. But given the package's size and shape, Gabriel knew immediately that whatever was concealed in the grocery bag wasn't a card, so there probably was no money either. He was disappointed. He could have used ten dollars to buy more books.

Setting aside his milkshake, he accepted the package which, from the way his father had compressed the grocery bag to the shape of its contents, Gabriel gathered held a book. "Go ahead," his father encouraged, "Open it."

He was animated which puzzled Gabriel. Again he wondered, *what was the occasion that he would give me a gift?* Slowly he peeled back the wrinkled brown paper and reached into the bag and clutched what was certainly a book. Pulling it out into the white light of the Dairy Queen, he saw that it was red and hardbound, but he saw no title as it was upside down.

Gabriel fretted that it was another book about dinosaurs. He liked dinosaurs because they were monsters and he liked being frightened and fascinated at the same time. But more than dinosaurs, more than monsters, he liked space invaders. He was as much a fan of the grainy sci-fi movies shown on TV each Saturday night after the news, as he was of the football games broadcast during the afternoon when Oklahoma didn't play at home. His favorite sci-fi movies were *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Thing from Another Planet*, so he hoped that this latest addition to his expanding library was about science fiction and not science fact.

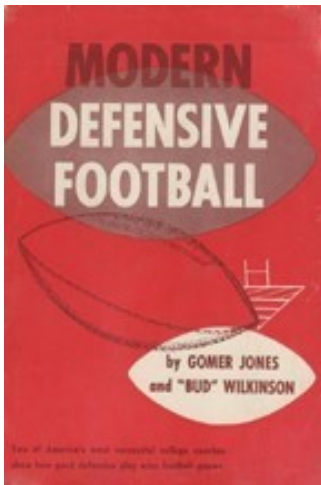
But when he looked up from the book, he was jolted from his reverie. His father was smiling. Not a small smile that wrinkled his cheeks, but a big, broad smile that turned up his lips and revealed straight, white teeth. Gabriel was shocked. His father was elated. "What do you think?" his father asked almost breathlessly as he leaned forward and flipped the book over in Gabriel's hands.

"It's a book," Gabriel replied.

"Yes," his father agreed enthusiastically. "But not just any book. Look at the title." He pointed to the book's cover.

Gabriel looked down. There on the front cover was a diagram of a goalpost. Between the uprights was printed the book's title: *Modern Defensive Football*. On the title page, in the book's front matter was printed the authors' names: *Gomer Jones* and *Charles (Bud) Wilkinson*.

Gabriel was dumbfounded.



His father had bought him, an eight-year-old, a book about football. "What do I do with it?" he asked.

The subject of the book looked as complex as the engineering books his father had stacked on the floor about the drafting table where he worked, often all night, doggedly pursuing a solution to a problem. He was an engineer, and he was brilliant. Not Einstein brilliant, but close. Very close. Unlike other fathers, Gabriel's father didn't go to work. The work was brought to him.

"You read it," his father said. "That's what you do with a book. You read it. Aunt Georgia said you were playing football at school with the other boys and enjoying it, and you read quite a bit, so I thought you might like a book about football." His expression changed. The smile disappeared.

"I do like football," Gabriel quickly said then, cautiously, added. "But I don't know anything about it."

He weighed the book in his hands, not sure what the gift meant. He loved football. He loved going to the games with his father, watching them on TV, and playing tackle with the neighborhood kids and those at school as well. But when he saw the disappointment etched on his father's face, he was suddenly afraid that his father was upset that Gabriel didn't fully understand or appreciate the gift. Gabriel was distraught that he had, in his confusion, derailed their time together on this golden Saturday afternoon.

And maybe the Saturdays to follow.

The book he could live without, but not this precious time together. It didn't happen often. Only in the fall. Only during football season. And when it did, it was the sweetest slice of life. Like a bowlful of Aunt Georgia's hot apple pie and melting over it, a slab of cold vanilla ice cream. The two extremes in temperature created a harmonious balance that could only be savored when consumed with a big spoon.

That was what today was like: a big spoon day. That was what every Saturday was like when Oklahoma played at home.

"I'll try," Gabriel offered.

After pushing the chili dogs aside to make room for the napkins he spread out on the table, his father retrieved an ink pen from his jacket. “I will help,” he said, as he put on his glasses and began to diagram Coach Wilkinson’s 52 “Okie” defense. Step-by-step, as if he was designing a bridge to span the distance between them, his father explained the mechanics of the defensive scheme in minute detail while Gabriel sat mesmerized, transfixed on the X’s and O’s his father drew onto the napkins.

Gabriel didn’t understand the illustrations or what his father was saying, but he loved listening. He loved hearing about the game that brought them together, so that now, so many years later, beneath the white light that bubbles out into the darkness, he is the coach who strolls over the playing field, taking in the length of the grass, the gentle slope at midfield, and gauges the velocity and direction of the wind.

In the distance, in the parking lot behind the locker rooms at the south end of the field, a yellow school bus parks and disgorges his team onto the tarmac. Gabriel walks to the home team locker room and is greeted by his players. They are eager to play. He is eager to coach. Tonight they play Barstow.

In the locker room, the silence is shattered by the players who talk loudly, and excitedly, their voices bouncing off the walls. Gabriel finds his briefcase and opens it to retrieve a piece of gum. His mouth is dry. In the front compartment is a book. It is red and worn. He extracts it from the briefcase and opens it to the first page in the front matter. He removes the napkins so he can read where, in perfect cursive, his father has written him a note. The ink looks like varicose veins.

“In Oklahoma,” it begins, “Sundays belong to God, Saturdays to Bud Wilkinson—and to you and me. I want every day to be a Saturday.”

It is signed simply, “Dad.”

Gabriel gently massages the words to imbue them with life, hoping they will leap from the page and take on human form. He wants the words given his father’s voice so he can hear them spoken aloud, rather than read. Their insertion into his life as merely a section of script he authored and confined to the interior of a book is troubling only because of what is missing.

So, Gabriel imagines a movie scene in which father and son embrace and, as his finger slowly traces the stroke of his pen, he corrects the error by inserting the word “Love” before “Dad.” It was the one word never uttered aloud; the one word that would have filled in the blank space at the end of a big spoon day.

On closing the book and returning it to his briefcase, a player approaches him with a question. “Coach G,” the player says, “I’m still confused about my force responsibility in that defense you installed this week.”

“You mean the Okie defense?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gabriel smiles. He suddenly misses chili dogs and strawberry milkshakes. “Come here,” he says, indicating the whiteboard on the locker room’s front wall. “I’ll diagram it for you.”



J.P. Garner is a retired veteran and high school football coach who has written two books about the game he loves and Book One of a romantic trilogy entitled, *That Comeback Season*. He routinely writes for the Pulse newspaper and once wrote, engineered, and narrated a two-hour radio documentary for NPR St. Louis (KWMU-FM 93) about the plight of Vietnam veterans returning home entitled, “A Coming of Age.”

“Read, read, read. Read everything — trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. – William Faulkner

WATCHING THE WORLD

by:

Andrea Frost

The night is young
The stars are out
The moon is shining
Eerily watching the world

It sits there stationary
Only moving with the tides
And the turning of this land
Forever watching the world

Songs have been written
Of the snow white globe
Moods have been felt with its intent
But he is always watching the world

No matter the time
No matter the place
Wherever you are
She is silently watching the world

It may have a face
Of woman or man
But it still will be seen
Sightlessly watching the world

Hanging in the sky
Be bright blue or black
Never leaving our side
Continuously watching the world



Andrea was born and raised in southern California. She began writing in middle school and has never stopped. She has traveled to over 16 countries, and draws inspiration from the people she has met and places she has visited. Her dream is to become a well know author and inspire others to explore their creativity.



FORGET ABOUT HIM

by
Debbie Walker
High Desert

Forget about him.
Get over it.
Move on.

Almost daily on my way to feed the horses, I drive the road he first took me down.
Ironically, the customer lives across the street from where we spent 7 years of our lives.

Forget about him.

I can't count how many times I have driven this road to get home to him.
The day he badly burned his hand on the wood stove.
Although I was nowhere near the house, I felt in my soul that he was in danger.

Oue souls were literally connected.

Forget about him.

The mall where we met.
The abandoned Tony Roma's where we got to know each other.
It was his break room.

He was Santa.
Forget about him.
Every year that Christmas comes around again but he's not here.
Forget about him.
The constant photo memories that pop up on my phone.
Forget about him.
Every yard sale or Estate sale.
He couldn't pass up a good sale.
I hated it.
I was always in a hurry to get where we were going.
Now I would give anything to go to a yard sale with him.
Forget about him.
He is always with me.
A ghost from the past but ever so present.
Forget about him.
NEVER!



Debbie Walker has written several short stories and a few poems. She is currently working on her first book. She is a mother of two and has four grandchildren. She currently resides in Oak Hills with her loving dog, Snowball. She is also a member of the High Desert Chapter of the California Writers Club. (EDITOR'S NOTE: She's also the nicest person in the High Desert and maybe the world.)

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SURVIVING MY CAREER AS A PSYCHIATRIC TECHNICIAN

by

Michael Raff

High Desert

Chapter 26

March 1998: Patton State Hospital

A highly suicidal woman was admitted to our unit clad in a set of walking restraints, indicating she was an extreme suicide risk. Her name was Debra Thatcher. I was the first staff member assigned to her for a two-hour one-to-one watch. Since she was so new, I had no idea what her crime was. We started talking. She had tried to kill herself on her previous unit by tying a bedsheet to a locker door to hang herself. She confessed that she had “gone crazy” and killed two of her three daughters. I did my best in those two hours—used every concept I knew—to

convince Debra not to kill herself. I emphasized that she had to face her crimes and recover for the sake of her surviving daughter and sons. After our talk, she attended an admission meeting with several staff members who concluded that Debra was no longer suicidal and took her out of the walking restraints. She told them I had talked her out of killing herself, and because of that, I had saved her life.

For her remaining weeks on 36, I took Debra on my caseload. As with my other patients, I held weekly individual therapy sessions. Since I was merely a tech, Patton didn't recognize these sessions as therapy. Nevertheless, I had a few tricks up my sleeve and did my best to help everyone on my caseload. Debra showed some remorse for her crimes, but it was marginal at best. She avoided going into detail but stated that her surviving daughter had written a book about her crimes. Disgusted, she exclaimed, "I don't know why Stephanie would do such a horrible thing!"

After Debra had transferred off 36, I purchased her daughter's book. Over the years, the woman was able to control her children with an iron fist, especially her two sons, whom she convinced to brutally torture two of her daughters. The first daughter, after being beaten to near death, was yanked out of a car trunk, tossed onto an isolated road, and set on fire. The second daughter was locked in a linen closet in extremely tight quarters and denied food and water for weeks on end. Eventually, she died.

Page after page sickened me. It was one of the few books I never finished. The author, Debra's daughter, didn't give me the impression her mom had gone "crazy." Her mother came across as cold, cruel, calculating, the ultimate controller, no matter the cost. It may sound unprofessional, but helping Debra and, possibly, saving her life, deeply disturbed me.

* * *

The male patients on 36 ranged from murderers to sexual predators, from sociopaths to drug addicts. And in my opinion, this was the *best* unit at Patton. Sociopaths are rare and hard to diagnose. But if anyone in the world was ever a sociopath, it was Jimmy Baker. A long-time patient at Patton, he couldn't be trusted with a baby bottle. Of average height and weight but muscular, Jimmy sported a goatee and wore his braided hair halfway down his back. I don't recall him ever assaulting anyone. That wasn't his style. He wasn't, however, beneath threatening his peers or *paying* them to do his bidding, whatever that bidding might be. He was, by all accounts, an extortionist.

We had our hands full with Jimmy. The minute he broke any of the unit's rules, he had his grounds pulled. That would *always* piss him off. He would try to talk his way out of trouble and would fool others, but not us. We held him accountable. There is no cure for a sociopath. Staff could only keep a close watch on him and structure his environment.

When Jimmy was finally transferred off 36, he had to pack his belongings into laundry bags. We had rules that patients could have only so many items in their lockers, including sets of khaki clothing, coffee, packs of cigarettes, and so on. Jimmy had to borrow a cart from staff and make his way to several of his peers' lockers to collect his overabundance of belongings. Of course, we busted him before he transferred off the unit. He was clever—but not as clever as he thought.

Gabriel Lang was muscular, about six feet four, with a face that appeared to have been chiseled from stone. "Joker," as he was nicknamed, was completely different from Jimmy Baker. Polite, quiet, and unassuming, nevertheless, he was a close friend and ally of the sociopaths. Jimmy was the instigator of threats and coercions; Joker was his enforcer. Judging by his appearance, the man probably never had to lift a finger on Jimmy's behalf. They were as thick as thieves in a jewelry heist. As much as Jimmy was disliked by staff, most of us liked Joker. He expressed remorse for his drug abuse and exploitation of others, quite the opposite of Jimmy, who enjoyed his

status as a big fish in Patton's pond. Joker managed to avoid violence while he was on 36—except for one *major* occurrence.

I was assigned a one-to-one the first thing in the morning: a male patient who had threatened suicide. Most of the patients were starting to ready themselves for breakfast. I relieved the night shift tech. A chair from the dayroom had been placed in the patient's bedroom doorway so staff could observe him and not endanger themselves by sitting directly in the bedroom. I was planning on waking my patient when things had calmed and there wasn't as much traffic.

Joker came out of his bedroom and headed down the hallway toward me. He wasn't fully dressed but was wearing shoes, his khaki pants, and a white T-shirt. As he neared, I greeted him. "Good morning, Mr. Lang." I usually called the patients by their last names.

"Morning, Mike," Joker returned, looking straight ahead. He proceeded forward, turned down the main hallway, stepped into Jimmy Baker's bedroom, and proceeded to beat the snot out of his so-called friend. He actually tried to kill the guy. The alarm sounded, and staff from 36 and other units burst into the bedroom and fought to get Joker away from Jimmy.

I was relieved by someone from Nocs and entered the fray. Joker was not giving up. He was big, strong, and fought like a wildcat. He never said a word. All during the time we tried to contain him, his eyes were fixed on Jimmy. Miraculously, we were able to get him into a restraint room and secured to the bed with leather cuffs and belts without anyone else getting hurt. Jimmy, on the other hand, ended up with two black eyes and numerous facial abrasions.

Joker spent hours restrained. He remained mute right up until the time we untied him. He said he didn't know why he attacked his friend. Uncharacteristically, Jimmy had little to say about the matter, proclaiming ignorance. Staff didn't buy their stories, but whatever happened remained between them.

I often wondered what caused the attack. There's always a reason. Joker had just gotten out of bed and hadn't seen Jimmy since the day before. Why would he wait through the night and then attack his friend? Some of us thought Joker suffered a psychotic break. He had had one several years before, according to his chart. He also may have had a Jacksonian seizure, which *probably* wasn't the case, triggering the attack on his closest friend.

* * *

One of my favorite patients at Patton was a short, nervous guy, Kevin Collins. He was peculiar, but I couldn't help but like him. Valerie liked him as well and kept him on her caseload. He was considered a sexual predator, but never appeared to be one. It was theorized that perhaps the charges were trumped up. He'd been at Patton for a long time, displayed no psychotic symptoms, and would have been discharged if not for one issue: compulsive bartering. He would barter away cigarettes, candy, coffee, clothing, anything he could get his hands on, and sometimes, items that didn't belong to him. Val would order him a khaki jacket, and it would be gone by the end of the shift. This habitual activity kept Kevin in constant trouble, turmoil, and behind locked doors.

Incredibly, Kevin was a *horrible* barterer. If another patient gave him their radio, he would go on the grounds and barter it for a pack of cigarettes, and then barter the smokes for a candy bar. The man was his own worst enemy. Although Kevin wasn't on my caseload, in an effort to help, I would take him to the treatment room and encourage him to give up his bartering and get on with his life. He would stare at his feet, shake his head, and mumble, "I-I know, Mike. I-I know." He tended to stutter, especially when he was nervous. "I-I just g-gotta give it u-up." He would promise me repeatedly, only to be busted for bartering the next day.

When grounds were called, a staff member had to stand at the courtyard gate and pass out the patients' grounds badges and make sure they weren't taking anything from the unit they shouldn't. Kevin would be busted before

he stepped out of the gate.

One time, he had his grounds pulled and was apparently going through some type of barter withdrawal: pacing up and down the unit, edgy, and what we called “noncompliant.” When he was confronted by staff, he tried to punch me. For that, he was restrained to a bed, fighting the entire time. He kept yelling and cussing me out. A few hours later, when he had calmed and was released, he approached me in the courtyard during a cigarette break. He shuffled about and kept his eyes locked on the ground. “I-I’m sorry, Mike. I-I don’t know what g-got into me.”

“That wasn’t like you, Kevin,” I replied. I made an exception with the guy and called him by his first name. “I’m always trying to help you. Why would you attack me?”

“I-I don’t know, Mike. It’ll never h-happen again.” My favorite patient, however, wasn’t above manipulating when it served his purpose. “W-when do you th-think I’ll get my grounds b-back?”

“Not for a while, Kevin,” I answered. “And this time, you’ll have to swear off bartering.”

With that, he nearly fainted.

November 1998: Patton State Hospital

I don’t recall when we received Ming Chow on 36. Patients would come and go, but it seemed as if we had to deal with Ming forever. Barely over five feet tall, she had long black hair and the face of an angel. But lurking inside of her, she had the mind of an assassin. She would attack without warning. Her targets were both staff and patients, but mostly, staff. She was capable of any kind of assault: spitting, punching, kicking, scratching, biting, hair pulling, and eye gouging. Ming could ruin a person’s week in a heartbeat. She was known throughout Patton. I called her “Ming the Mangler” but kept the nickname to myself. As a result of her behavior, she spent most of her days restrained to a bed or in walking restraints—forever on a one-to-one with staff. She was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. She didn’t speak the greatest English very well, but claimed the voices in her head told her to attack.

Sometimes, it didn’t matter if Ming was in restraints or not. She was still dangerous. Once, in the dining room, she was standing in line in walking restraints, accompanied by her one-to-one staff member. When I walked by them, she grabbed onto the staff member for leverage, lifted herself up, and kicked me in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind out of me and sent me to the floor. Ming was escorted back to the unit and restrained to a bed.

* * *

Shankar Kuman was a tech on 36 when I started. He was born in India, had been living in California for years with his wife and children, and spoke perfect English. He was of average height, somewhat hefty, his skin moderately dark, and he wore silver glasses. He was also smart, talkative, friendly, and always had a smile on his face. Everyone liked him.

The man was an open book and talked everyone’s ears off. He mentioned that his wife was more “traditional” Indian, and her wardrobe reflected as much. He sounded as if he wasn’t the most happiest husband or father.

Shankar would buy the day shift a large box of donuts a couple of times a week. Before long, he bought everyone’s breakfast on the weekends. He would hand us takeout menus, make a list of orders, go out and buy our meals, including omelets, breakfast burritos, pancakes, toast, and coffee. When we offered to pay our fair share, Shankar refused. “No, no! It’s on me,” he would say. “I have plenty of money!” Because of his generosity, he went from being well-liked to well-loved. Even Willard went along with Shankar’s indulging. After all, he was getting free food like everyone else.

Shankar couldn't keep a secret. He'd been visiting Tijuana on his days off and partying at a so-called "dance club." He met a young woman, and they would "dance" the night away. Although Shankar never admitted it, we thought she was a prostitute. After a short period of time, he fell in love with her. It turned out the woman was part of a smuggling operation and convinced the lovesick pushover to sneak illegal steroids across the border. This was how he'd been getting all of his extra money.

Shankar smuggled across the border for months. He would tell several of us on day shift about his adventures. He only admitted to smuggling steroids, but he may have graduated to drugs. He wound up leaving his wife and family for the so-called "dancer."

Shankar was finally caught at the border, spent time in jail, endured a court battle, and went broke. No more free breakfasts on the day shift. Shankar was deported to India but was able to return to the States many months later. Because of his criminal record, however, he was fired from Patton and could never be reinstated.



Michael Raff fell in love with writing at the age of thirteen. After publishing his romantic memoir, he completed four horror anthologies, a non-horror anthology, three horror novels and recently published his memoir, *Surviving My Career As A Psychiatric Technician*. Michael co-founded Nevermore Enterprises and has been active in the High Desert Branch of the California Writers Club since 2011.

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MOUNTAINS

Scene 8 – Sunset at Arrowhead



THE JOURNAL OF MARTHA ROSE TURNOWER

by

J Margotta-Ferrara

High Desert

It was hot, too hot, and Sarah had been at her less-than-pleasant task for far too long. She owed herself a break, even if they were short on time and the realtors were hounding them every day about vacating the only home they'd ever known. "Let them wait," she muttered. She was

going to treat herself for the rest of the afternoon by finally exploring the large, old trunk she'd been eyeing in the far corner of the attic.

Kneeling in front of the antique trunk, Sarah began to unbuckle the brittle, leather straps that helped to keep the lid firmly attached to the body of the large piece. The leather was stiff and resisted her attempts, but she refused to give up and finally managed to pull the tongues up and through the rusting metal buckles. Next came a round, hinged clasp. It, too, gave way to her efforts and Sarah could at last raise the heavy lid and begin to explore the trunk's contents.

Beneath a layer of yellowed newspaper, her first find was a long shallow box, old and filthy, covered with dirt, one corner peeling and stained from apparent water damage. The adhesive on the packing tape over the folded-over flaps had dried, easily pulling free when she tugged on it in her eagerness to see inside.

Her initial reaction was, "Oh, no, what a waste of time." But she didn't feel like returning to her previous unpleasant task—she had been working for several days in this cramped space under the eaves of the old house, trying to sift through generations of possessions. What to discard? What to keep? How was she supposed to know what was important and what was not? She resolutely put the heartbreak of those decisions aside and delved further into this new trove.

After brushing away some dust, she pulled out an old flannel work shirt—trying not to notice dead insects caught in the folds of the fabric. Next came a layer of newspaper. Then some lace-like fabric that simply disintegrated in her hands. *Seems like my inner voice failed me this time. There's nothing worthwhile here.* But curiosity had taken hold, so she kept digging.

Under the next layer of newspaper was a box tied with red ribbon which, like the lace before it, was fragile with age. Sarah gently freed the wilted bow in the ribbon and set the lid of the box aside. Inside was a gossamer-fine shawl, yellowed with its years, a pair of high-top, button shoes, cracked and brittle, what looked like a man's wool suit, and a half dozen tiny dresses, each intricately decorated with delicate embroidery. Finally, at the very bottom, under the last small item, was a long, white satin dress, its bodice finely pleated and beaded. Who had worn these clothes and why had they been saved? Sarah knew she'd never have the answers to those questions. Those who held those secrets were long gone from this world.

She smoothed the pieces of clothing, returned them to the box, put the lid back on, and set it aside.

In the next layer she discovered an old quilt, wool on one side, the other side comprised of various pieces of fabric blocked together with what looked like fine, hand stitching. The quilt, too, was set aside in the search for what else might be hidden in the depths of the big trunk.

Resuming her quest, Sarah's fingers closed around a large, leather-bound scrapbook. The first several pages featured cut and pasted newspaper clippings, headlines blaring in large, bold black type. **JAPS SANK MARE ISLAND-BUILT TANG** read one; **ONLY 9 MEN SURVIVED NIP TORPEDO** announced another. No dates, but it had to be World War II-era.

A turn of the page—dissolving at the edges despite her tender touch—revealed more memorabilia. Photos, a February 24, 1944, dental appointment slip, an embossed Thanksgiving Dinner menu—from someplace called Hogan’s Alley—dated November 25, 1943. Each successive page threatened to crumble in her hands as she eagerly poured over its contents. Photos, postcard-sized negatives, more war clippings. Newspaper comic strips—*Freckles and His Friends*, *Alley Oop*, *Li’l Abner*. An advertisement: **TWO-DIAMOND WEDDING RINGS, \$39.75**. Parts of some of the stories were missing, tiny, rice-sized pieces on the pages attesting to their fate.

Next, typewritten lyrics of a long-forgotten song. More photos: a sweet, smiling, blond baby. A man in formal military uniform, a woman—his wife?—standing at his side, looking both shy and proud. Coastal shots, fields and trees, ships, a factory floor crowded with workers, boys with fresh-caught fish—photos that captured long-gone lives.

Between the last page and the back cover were old letters, one dated February 10, 1890. There, too, was an original 1896 warranty deed. A faded, yellowed, report card for the school year 1902–1903, followed by more loose scraps and pieces. Sarah wanted to spend hours lost in those pieces of history, but there was still much more unexplored in the huge trunk.

She laid the scrapbook aside for now and reached into the dark recesses of the trunk to see what else would emerge. More minutiae. Sarah couldn’t imagine why some of it had been saved, but it must have been important to someone. Finally, at the very bottom, she found one last item: a small, rectangular box. Its faux leather cover might once have been white but was now the color of old ivory. Opening this last box, she discovered a small, thin, cloth-covered book. Carefully, she reached in and picked it up. Opening it, she found page after page covered in delicate, meticulous penmanship full of ornate curlicues and decorative tails, reminiscent of some historical documents she had once seen in a museum display. *A journal, then, she thought, not a novel or textbook. And old, obviously. No one writes like that anymore.*

Sitting down cross-legged on the bare wooden floor, unmindful of the dirt and debris that had accumulated in this old attic over the years, Sarah began to read. After just a page or two, she stopped reading and called out. “Tammy, come see.” When no one appeared, she impatiently called again. “Tammy, get up here. You have to see what I’ve found.”

Just as she was getting ready to call out for the third time, a head of curly red hair appeared in the opening in the attic floor. This was followed by the freckled face and slightly chubby body of a young woman climbing into the attic from the ladder below.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be working, not sitting around. We have to get all this junk cleared away. You know we—.”

“Tammy, listen, this is—”

“What’s the big excitement this time? I swear, you get worked up over the least little thing, Sarah.”

“Not this time, Tammy,” her sister replied. “This really is something interesting. Listen.” Her voice faltering slightly as she deciphered the small, ornate scrip, she began to read.

The wind howled around the eaves of the old house, sending icy fingers down the chimney to dance with the flames bravely trying to heat the high-ceilinged room. Tree branches screeched across the window panes in the darkened dining room. It was a fitting night for the task Hannah had set for herself.

“What’s that you’re reading from?” Tammy held out her hand. “Let me see.”

“It’s an old journal,” Sarah replied. “I found it in this trunk.”

“You were supposed to be clearing out all this junk,” Tammy repeated. “You know the estate agent’s coming tomorrow to get everything ready for the sale.”

“Yes, yes, I know, and then the house will be sold and we’ll have to move. It’s not fair.” Sarah was crying again, something she’d done too much of in the weeks since their grandmother had died. The grandmother who had raised them from the day—nearly eighteen years ago—when they had come to live with her, two-year-old, freckle-faced,

red-headed twins, orphaned when their parents had been killed in a head-on car accident on their way home from an anniversary celebration.

“Crying’s not going to solve anything, Sarah,” Tammy replied patiently. “We just have to keep going; we can’t change what’s happened. So . . .” She sighed then continued with what was obviously false cheer. “Let’s see what you’ve found.” She sat down across from her sister and held out her hand.

The book Sarah handed her was small, not much larger than her hand, and covered in a faded, violets-and-tulips floral pattern. The pages were brittle and yellowed with age. Opening it randomly, she read aloud.

Bonnie stared at the boy, well, young man, really, and remembered her grandmother’s words. “You will know,” her grandmother had always told her. “You will know.”

“Go on,” urged Sarah.

“That’s all there is on that page,” her sister replied. “It doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the page you read.” She started carefully turning the brittle pages. “It’s really odd, Sarah, every page has just one short thing written on it. No dates, so I don’t think it’s a diary. And there’s no continuity, so it can’t be a story. Listen, here’s another one.”

The little boat skimmed across the waves, its bright red hull and dazzling white sail etched sharply against the brilliant blue of the summer day. The water was crystal clear, but, Steven knew, would be so achingly cold if one were unfortunate enough to fall in. He felt as if the world were holding its breath, waiting for what was next to come.

For a short time the two young women forgot their sadness over the loss of their beloved grandmother, their anger at losing the only home they’d ever known, and their fear of what was to come as they were forced to make a new life for themselves alone in the world. They carefully read each handwritten page. Some pages took longer to read than others, as the script was ornate and the ink was beginning to fade. Some of the pages were nearly full; others contained only a short sentence or two.

Finally, Sarah stopped and looked up at her sister. “They’re all beginnings, Tammy, just beginnings. Did you notice? No middles, no endings, just beginnings. Isn’t that odd? Who wrote it, do you think, and why?”

“I don’t know,” Tammy answered. “Keep reading, maybe the answer’s in the pages.” As Tammy turned to another page, a small white envelope fell into her lap. Two identical pairs of eyes stared at it for a moment before Sarah—always the most impulsive of the two—reached across and picked it up. She held it in her hands for a moment then slowly turned it over. It was sealed with a small blob of red wax with the initials **M R T**, written in ornate lettering, embossed in the wax.

“Open it,” Tammy urged.

Gently, carefully, Sarah pried the edge of the wax loose from the paper with the tip of her fingernail. She freed the wax seal from the paper and lifted the envelope’s flap. Then she just sat, holding the small envelope in her hand.

“Sarah?” Tammy whispered after a few silent moments. “What’s inside?”

Sarah shook her head, smiling a little at her inexplicable hesitation. She pulled out a single sheet of paper, folded to fit the envelope. “Here, you read it,” she said, passing it to her sister.

Tammy took the small sheet, unfolded it, and silently began to read it.

“Well, what’s it say?” Sarah was back to her normal, always impatient self.

“It’s a letter, not another story, I think,” Tammy answered. She held the paper so both of them could read it at the same time. It was short and appeared to be written by the same person who had written the journal.

To my darling great-niece, Amanda:

“Amanda? That’s got to be Grandmother. Her name was Amanda,” Sarah whispered.

“I know that, silly,” Tammy replied. “Keep reading.”

News of your birth has just reached me by today's post. I am so pleased at your arrival. I do so hope you grow up to be strong and wise, but most importantly, I hope you grow up to find love and happiness.

Although we will never meet—do not ask me how I know this, but I do—I want you to know that I will think of you often. Had my life turned out differently, perhaps . . . No, I will not dwell on that.

I am leaving you my little journal. I liked to write, you see, but only for my own pleasure. You will be the first person with whom I will ever have shared my poor attempts. You will notice, I am sure, that I write only beginnings. Never endings—they can be so tragic. And never, never middles—they are always so very tedious and boring. Just beginnings. Anything and everything is possible in the beginning, you see. There is always hope in the beginning.

Treasure the beginnings. Go out and seek them as often as possible.

*Yours with love and affection,
In this year of our Lord,
Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Eight
Martha Rose Turnover
Winston Village, Vermont*

The sisters sat silently for many minutes when they'd finished reading. Finally, Tammy folded the letter and returned it to its envelope, gently placing it back between the pages of the small journal. When that was done, she rose to her feet and held out her hand. "Come on, Sarah. We've got to go find a beginning for ourselves."

Sarah held on to her sister's hand even after she stood up. With her free hand she wiped away a lone tear, leaving a damp trail down her dirty face. Despite her tears, she smiled bravely at her sister. "Yes," she said, "let's find a beginning. After all, at the beginning, anything's possible."



J. Margotta-Ferrara has edited nearly 250 full-length books and authored a unique cookbook and co-authored with her late husband two coming-of-age adventure novels set in medieval Europe. She is the sole author of *The Woman in Room 23*, a memoir about her mother, and numerous short stories, many of which have won awards. She is, in our opinion, the best editor of stories and books in the California Writers Club.

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Excerpt from *Find Your Way Back* by Laura Mills

. . . In the near distance, the broad shoulders of her friend Michael dominated her view as he looked beyond the creek they often visited. Leah strode toward him, admiring his proud stance and his powerful thighs as he skipped rocks across the water. Approaching closer, the whipping frenzy of his deep brown hair caught her eye as it stirred in rebellious abandonment along the expansion of his shoulders. She had been envious of his healthy, thick hair oftentimes comparing it to her own long and lifeless tresses.

SCRUFFY

by

Mike Apodaca

High Desert

“Look at his fuzzy tail! It’s shaking so hard! Mommy, can we take him home? Can we? Can we? Please!” The little girl went up on tip-toes and pressed her pugged nose against the frosty glass. Steam puffed in short streams under her tiny nostrils.

“He is adorable, Rachel. But we already have a cat. C’mon now, it’s getting late.” And with that the mother tugged the girl’s jacket sleeve and led her away, click-clopping down the slippery sidewalk.

Scruffy, a tiny cock-a-poo puppy just six weeks old, tilted his furry head to one side, causing his wispy golden bangs to fall over his left eye. He chirped a high-pitched bark, then panted happily, his tiny wet tongue hanging down.

When Scruffy was weaned, he was put in the pet store window with his rough-and-tumble brothers and sisters. One by one they’d been purchased, until finally, he alone frolicked through the newspaper shavings and watched the world go by behind the large pane glass. But Scruffy didn’t lose heart. He knew someday a family would want him for their very own.

If meanness had a scent, you’d smell the foul stench of Mr. Eugene Bartholomew Davis a full mile away. He was a hollow-chested man, with a swollen gut, spindly legs, and oversized feet. His hair was black and oily, his post-like teeth a dull murky yellow. On the right side of his face he had a large reddish moldy-looking birthmark that made it look like he’s washed his cheek in acid.

Mr. Davis worked in a factory assembling electrical motors. Hour by hour, day after day, year after year, he screwed in the tiny screws that held the wires in place. It was a job that shrunk his mind and withered his soul.

In his youth, the middle-aged man pushed away all potential friends and mates, creating for himself a small stale shell of a world where no one could hurt him and his opinions were always right. In time, this shell became so thick, and his ears so full of his own voice, he took no counsel but his own and cursed the world for ignoring his profound superiority.

Mr. Davis shuffled down the frozen sidewalk muttering complaints under his breath, ranting about the cold, the icy sidewalk, his job, and whatever else came to mind. He instinctively reached his hand into the pocket of his large pea-coat, grasping for a bottle, then remembered he’d finished it two blocks back. In anger and frustration he kicked a mailbox, causing caked snow to slide off the top, then continued coughing and wheezing as he trudged down the walkway.

When he came to the pet shop, he stopped. T was his custom, when in town, to pause and torment whatever animals were on display. He slowly approached.

When his ugly form filled the window, Mr. Davis let out a loud growl, shoving his wicked face forward, his crooked mouth dripping with spit. Scruffy whined and closed his eyes. Then the evil man threw back his head and laughed. There was something about causing fear—something about bullying something so small and weak into a state of panic—that gave him great pleasure.

When his laughing subsided, the twisted man turned to resume his walk toward home.

But after a few clumsy steps, he had a hideous thought. What if he were to buy this scrawny nothing of a dog? He could take the mutt home and have him there whenever he felt the need to release some of his seething anger. An icy chill ran up his spine at the prospect.

As his mind raced through various tortures he would perform on Scruffy, Mr. Davis reached for the icy door handle.

* * *

A long streak of light stretched into the blackness as Mr. Davis opened the front door of his house. He slipped his jangling keys back into his coat pocket, pushed the door open with his muddy boot, and reached instinctively for the light switch. As the room lit up, Scruffy scampered inside.

He was immediately hit with an overpowering smell. Scruffy recognized it as the same gagging scent that wafted from Mr. Davis' coat—a musty, unpleasant pungency that turned his stomach.

When Mr. Davis walked into another room and turned on the light, Scruffy decided to explore his surroundings.

The cold floor beneath him was wood, badly stained with layer upon layer of sticky grime. There were a few odd pieces of furniture, mostly wood, with sharp corners and ragged coverings. A dirty oval woven rug, its braids frayed and threadbare, stretched across the middle of the room. Scruffy decided this was where he would sleep.

He padded over to the musty mat, plopped himself down, and closed his weary eyes.

* * *

When he awoke the next morning, he stood and yawned. He could hear his new owner in a nearby room, banging pans and dishes, and muttering gruffly under his breath. The little dog walked slowly into the kitchen. He smelled the burnt toast, over-fried eggs, and bitter coffee.

Scruffy looked to the right and the left and frowned. Every dog that goes home with a new master expects to find one thing waiting there—a bowl of their own. It's something of a welcome mat, something that tells them they're really home. And if a dog ends up in a particularly good situation, the bowl will even have his or her name on it.

Scruffy saw no bowl at all.

Mr. Davis sat at his small metal table and began devouring his breakfast, making all sorts of slurping and crunching noises, interspersed with an occasional cough or wheeze.

He ignored the puppy.

Scruffy stared at the mud-caked boots nearby. They were made of thick rubber with inch-high soles with heavy bands of steel screwed into the toes. To Scruffy they looked like the shoes of a monster. The puppy's stomach gave him such a sharp pain of hunger, he yelped.

His master was suddenly silent, as if brought out of a muttering dream.

“Oh...I almost forgot about you,” he said, bringing his ugly face beneath the table. “You hungry?”

Scruffy nodded sheepishly.

“Here, I'm done with this slop,” he stammered, placing his food-stained plate on the tile floor.

Scruffy approached the dish with disgust. The black chunks of toast and red-orange stains of egg were not at all what he wanted. But he was so hungry, he nibbled on them as best he could.

The next thing the puppy knew, Mr. Davis was putting on his coat and heading for the door.

Before he could bark, the door slammed, leaving him alone in a very large, very dark house.

* * *

The front door creaked open, letting in light from a nearby street lamp. Mr. Davis' stark shadow stretched across the cold wood floor like a wraith. Scruffy, who'd been laying in darkness, raised his head and trembled. An instinct told him he should run up to his new master, stand on his haunches, and hang out his tongue in greeting. But a deeper instinct filled him with fear and made him want to hide.

Mr. Davis scraped the wall several times with his arm, trying to find the light switch. The overhead light came on, the dull bulb giving off a faint buzz.

"Scruf-f-fy?" the tall man's voice slurred in a funny way as he looked around the room.

The puppy backed further under the stuffed chair.

"C'mon out you stupid mutt!"

Scruffy, trembling, inched his way out. He whimpered uncontrollably.

"Fire me, will they? The ungrateful..." the gruff voiced waned as Mr. Davis searched the room with bloodshot eyes. And then his gaze fell upon Scruffy. "Ah, there you are!" he shouted. "You must be punished for hiding from me." The scary man pointed a bony finger toward the floor and boomed, "Sit!"

Scruffy froze.

"Sit!" The voice was louder.

There was nothing else to do. The dog slowly lowered his bottom to the floor.

Mr. Davis walked around the back side of the dog, leaned back, and brought the full force of his heavy steel-toed boot across Scruffy's backside. The blow was so hard, it sent the puppy sprawling across the floor. He yelped and whined as he crashed against the wall.

Mr. Davis laughed a low, evil laugh. "Again," the man snarled, just above a whisper.

At first the puppy, aching in pain, didn't understand.

"Sit! I said, sit!" he commanded in a loud frantic shout.

And then the dog caught on. For some reason, this man was ordering him to return for more abuse. The puppy cowered, but forced his legs to bring him back before his master. Perhaps he's done something wrong and deserved the punishment.

With great apprehension, he sat again and winced.

Mr. Davis circled Scruffy, stopping behind him. The puppy could hear his labored breathing, and sensed his cold stare on his back.

And then Scruffy heard Mr. Davis mumbled, "Sixteen years, for what? For stupid questions, that's what! Are you late again, Eugene? Is this all you've done today, Eugene? Have you been drinking, Eugene?" There was a terrible pause. Scruffy wanted to run, but fear kept him in place. "Well, they'll regret firing me. They'll be sorry! They'll wish they never sat eyes on Eugene Bartholomew Davis!"

And with this last explosive burst of rage, Mr. Davis pulled back his foot and kicked Scruffy across the floor. The little dog's tail shrieked in pain. It was now bent and broken.

Mr. Davis twisted the top off a glass bottle and took a long drink. He let out a deep gasping noise and left the room muttering to himself. On his way out, he flicked the light switch leaving the puppy in darkness, fear, and pain.

* * *

The next morning, Mr. Davis did not leave. He stayed, grumbling and slamming doors and cabinets. He fixed himself breakfast, but didn't put the plate on the floor when he was finished. Instead, he waddled into the living room and dropped into an overstuffed chair in front of the television.

The puppy decided, above all, to stay out of Mr. Davis' way.

As the days passed, the pain of hunger became more than the little puppy could stand. Although the idea repulsed him at first, he escaped starvation by eating bugs—dead flies, ants, scampering cockroaches and beetles—and an occasional mouse.

In time, Scruffy began to change. His white fur, which had been so fresh and curly, slowly became dark brown and matted with dirt and grime. Although he became larger, it wasn't the healthy meat-on-your-bones increase in size that comes with good food and proper care. It was rather the lanky increase one would expect of an animal left in the wild. And his behavior also changed. Whereas before, Scruffy scampered and frolicked, now he hid in the shadows, slinking around, always aware of Mr. Davis and how to stay out of his way. He never barked or even made a sound.

But one fateful day, Scruffy found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was chasing a cockroach across the floor when it darted in front of the kitchen doorway. Scruffy lunged for it just as Mr. Davis stepped into the room. With his heavy boot, Mr. Davis stepped on the dog, who let out a great yelp. At the same time, the man lost his balance and fell backward onto the floor.

Mr. Davis sat up with murder in his eyes. Scruffy tried to escape, but the man grabbed him and lifted him up by the fur of the neck.

"Ill teach you, you...stupid mutt," the man shouted as he rose to his feet, the dog dangling from his hand.

He took Scruffy in the back yard. Scruffy, who'd never been out of the house, looked around with amazement. There were old boxes stacked with an odd assortment of metal and plastic pieces sticking out of the tops. The sidewalk was old and cracked with weeds pushing through the small spaces between them. The lawn was a mixture of patchy grass, clumps of weeds, and dandelions, and barren dirt. A rusty chain-link fence enclosed the entire area.

Mr. Davis grabbed an oily chain and padlock from a nearby junk pile. He wrapped it tightly around the dog's throat. Then he took keys out of his pocket, unlocked the heavy lock, and fastened the chain together. Next, he took a wooden stake—a sharp splinter of wood about Scruffy's height—and pushed it deep into the dirt, the pointed end going through the last link of chain, holding it fast.

"That oughta' keep ya!" the evil man sputtered as he went back into the house.

Scruffy watched him go. The dog stood up and tried to walk, but the chain stopped him.

He thought about how hungry he was and moaned.

Within a few days, Scruffy's whole body ached with cold and hunger. Death drew near.

One morning, a short rain had blessed him with water which he lapped up happily. But it wasn't nearly enough to quench his burning thirst.

He'd tried to conserve his energy, but had grown so weak, he could no longer stand. He laid motionless, hard mud beneath his chin. His ears no longer heard the sounds of the neighborhood around him, but merely echoed the slow sad sound of his failing heart.

As the world swirled and faded into blackness, Scruffy sent out one last thought to his mother and his brothers and sisters, telling them he hoped to see them in heaven.

* * *

Mr. Thomas was out for his evening walk when he came to Mr. Davis' house. Now normally, Mr. Thomas wouldn't have stopped, but something in the backyard caught his eye, something he'd never noticed before. He saw a brown heap lying motionless in the dirt. The more he looked, the more he recognized this mound as a dog, his chest barely rising and falling with his failing breath.

"Oh my!" he said, and headed for the front door. He knocked, but there was no answer. As he weighed whether or not he should climb into the backyard without the owner's permission, he heard a key in the latch. The door opened a crack.

"Whadda you want?" a gruff voiced bellowed within.

"Excuse me sir," Mr. Thomas said politely. "I was wondering if you might be interested in...selling your dog."

"My what?"

"Your dog. I noticed him in the backyard. You see, I live alone and would love to share my home with this animal."

There was a long pause. Firstly, Mr. Davis had to remember that he had a dog and what he had done with it. Then he sized up the man at the door and the offer he's made. When it all came together, his lips curled back across his post-like teeth.

"A thousand bucks," he spit out.

"Excuse me?" Mr. Thomas asked.

"A thousand. That's what I'll take for my dog. You see, little Scruffy—that's my dog—he means the world to me...he's all I have...and...well...It'll take a thousand dollars for me to put my dog in the hands of a stranger."

Mr. Thomas thought for a second. Being an intelligent man, he knew that Mr. Davis was lying. But he also knew he couldn't just stand and let this little dog perish. He considered the cost. A thousand dollars was all he had, his entire life savings.

"I'll be back with the money," Mr. Thomas declared.

"Yeah...right!" Mr. Davis scoffed. "That'll be the day!"

And he slammed the door.

Of course, Mr. Thomas was true to his word. He went directly to the bank, withdrew his entire savings, and returned to Mr. Davis' house.

Mr. Davis opened the door and stared at Mr. Thomas in disbelief.

"I thought I told you—" he began to shout irritably.

"I brought the money," Mr. Thomas interjected.

"—I wouldn't sell Scruffy for less than..." His voice tricked off as he stared in amazement. Mr. Thomas had pulled a large wad of twenty dollar bills from his pocket.

"It's all here," he said quietly. "A thousand dollars, as per our agreement. Now, if you'll just sign this bill of sale," he pulled an official-looking paper from his jacket pocket, "I'll get Scruffy and be on my way."

Mr. Davis couldn't help but laugh out loud as he carefully counted the money, signed the paper and handed over the limp pile of dirty fur that was Scruffy. "Bye bye, Scruffy," he said with feigned sadness. "Your daddy's gonna miss you."

As Mr. Thomas walked away, Mr. Davis ran his thumb across the top of the stack of bills, riffling them again and again, and smiling.

"What a sucker," he muttered under his breath.

* * *

When Mr. Thomas arrived home with Scruffy in his arms, the dog was unconscious. He gingerly placed him on a thick warm carpet. He poured some milk in a pot, warmed it, and poured it into a bowl. He dipped his finger into the warm fluid, lifted the dog's head, and rubbed it on his tongue, saying softly, "Here you go, little fella. Here you go." He continued this—dipping his finger, rubbing the milk on the dog's tongue, and speaking to him encouragingly—until the bowl was empty.

Next he prepared a large bath of warm soapy water. He placed the puppy inside and scooped the water up with a cup and poured it over Scruffy's back. The man's hands gently rubbed the soap into the matted fur. The water was soon black. Mr. Thomas drained and refilled it, over and over, until it was no longer discolored.

When he was done, Mr. Thomas placed Scruffy on his own bed and pulled the covers up to his neck. Later that evening, when he was ready for bed, Mr. Thomas crawled in next to Scruffy and pulled him close, and kissed him on the forehead. Then he turned off the light and fell to sleep, his arm lovingly tucked around his new friend.

* * *

When Scruffy slowly opened his eyes the next morning, he found himself in a completely new world. The room was well lit, with freshly-painted pale green walls. Short transparent curtains were danced in the fresh morning air. The clean smell of well-washed linen and blankets filled his tiny nostrils and made him happy.

But when he turned his head, he was overcome with fear. A man was lying there, his back facing him. At first he thought it was Mr. Davis, and wanted to escape. But then he noticed this man's smell was different. It wasn't a stench, but a fragrance. And his hair was different—not oily and wild, but short and clean and brown. Lastly, this stranger didn't cough and sputter, but breathed in deep even breaths.

The man stirred. Scruffy, still uncertain of his fate, closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. Then he felt a kiss on his furry head and the man get out of bed.

The stranger picked up a phone and dialed.

"Hello, Frank? This is Brad. I won't be in for the next couple of days. I have a sick friend who really needs me. Fatal? No, I don't think so. Just needs some love and attention and some nursing. I knew you'd understand. Thanks a bunch. Bye."

The man put on a robe and left the room. Scruffy opened one eye. In minutes he smelled bacon cooking. His mouth filled with saliva, and he knew he was in heaven. He tried to stand up, but didn't have the strength.

Before he knew it, he was lost in a deep dreamless sleep.

* * *

It was two more days before Scruffy was strong enough to stay awake and eat solid food. Mr. Thomas had fed him warm milk and bathed him three times a day. His fur was now yellow-white and beginning to curl and shine like when he was a puppy.

"You're looking much better. That's encouraging. I wasn't sure you were going to make it," a soft voice chuckled. Mr. Thomas picked up Scruffy and brought his face close. The dog licked him for joy.

"How 'bout some breakfast?" the man asked, his words sounding like music. He carried the dog into the kitchen and cooked him some scrambled eggs. They were easy for Scruffy to eat. When he was done, he felt something he hadn't felt in a long time—a full stomach.

Later that day, after a long nap, Scruffy tried to walk. Although his legs were wobbly at first, he managed quite well. He explored the house, sniffing each new room, always amazed at how each smelled better than the last. Mr. Thomas followed behind him, standing back, giving him room to explore.

“This is your new home,” the man said in a gentle voice. “I hope you like it.”

After a few weeks, Scruffy had grown accustomed to his new life. He still slept next to Mr. Thomas. He’s wake early, just as the sun crested the horizon and shone bright and orange-yellow in the window. After yawning, the dog would let out a sharp bark to wake his master. Then the two of them would climb out of bed.

While his master showered, Scruffy would bring him his slippers. Next, as Mr. Thomas shaved, Scruffy would bolt out the doggy door and retrieve the morning paper, depositing it on the floor next to the kitchen table. Lastly, while Mr. Thomas dressed, Scruffy would stand on his haunches near the table, waiting for his master.

After a few minutes, Mr. Thomas would come, sit at the table, drink a cup of coffee, eat a bowl of cereal, and pet Scruffy, rubbing his fingers through his curly snow-white fur. “No time to read the paper this morning,” he would say. “I’ll look at it when I get home; when we take our walk. Is that okay with you, Scruffy?” Of course, the dog would bark in complete approval.

Taking his last sip of coffee, Mr. Thomas would grab his jacket and head for the door. He would tell Scruffy to watch over the house while he was gone.

As the door gently closed and the lock was set, Scruffy would make his own plans for the day. Some days he would chase birds out of his master’s garden. On other days he would bark at strangers, trying to look tough and protective. But, most of all, he would sit in the yard and think of his great fortune and the love he had for his master.

Every day, when Mr. Thomas arrived home, he would carefully put a leash on Scruffy and walk him to the park a few blocks away. There he would sit on a bench and read his newspaper while Scruffy stood nearby, lost in rapt admiration. And after an hour or so, the master would say, “So Scruffy, shall we go home and eat some dinner?” Scruffy would bark an affirmative and they would set out for home.

Scruffy thought of himself as the luckiest dog alive.

But one evening, something terrible happened in the park. Scruffy was standing by, as usual, waiting for Mr. Thomas to finish his paper, when he heard something strangely familiar in the distance. It was a muttering sound followed by a sputtering cough and wheeze.

A cold chill ran up the dog’s spine. It was suddenly hard to breathe.

Then he heard the heavy clomp, clomp of steel-toed boots.

Scruffy looked back at his broken tail and shuddered.

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe it was someone else. There was only one way to find out. The dog forced himself to take a peek.

Coming right for him, walking in broken, crooked steps, was Mr. Davis. He was grumbling and cursing as always, when his eyes came upon Scruffy. He stopped short and stared. And then Scruffy noticed a sinister recognition crossed the evil man’s face, followed by a maniacal toothy grin. It was the same awful expression Scruffy had seen in the pet shop window when all his nightmares with Mr. Davis began.

The twisted man stepped closer. Scruffy began to tremble. His heart pounded so hard he thought it might jump out of his chest. His breathing raced in sharp puffs. He wished he could be anywhere else in the world. He thought of escape, of running away, but felt the leash around his neck. He was trapped and Mr. Davis drew closer and closer.

The ugly man stopped right in front of the shaking dog. He coughed, then said in a low hissing voice, “Sit.”

Scruffy began to panic. All he could think of was his broken tail and the pain and humiliation he's already suffered.

"Sit," the groveling voice commanded a bit louder.

Scruffy thought he was going to faint. He was trapped. He slowly turned and faced his backside toward Mr. Davis. But he couldn't bring himself to bend his knees, he was so very frightened.

"Sit!"

And then Scruffy heard a different voice, a gentle soothing voice.

"Scruffy. Scruffy," Mr. Thomas said. "You don't have to listen to him anymore. I bought you, you belong to me. You're my dog. You never have to do anything Mr. Davis tells you to do again."

These words had a profound effect on this little dog. He suddenly realized that he belonged to one master and was obligated to obey him alone. As his fear left him, he knew he would never feel this way again.

Scruffy turned around and faced Mr. Davis. The dog's lips pulled back to reveal his small sharp teeth. He barked his loudest and jumped toward Mr. Davis, who jumped back so fast he fell over a trashcan standing nearby.

The dog's leash became taut.

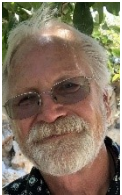
"I don't think I can hold him," Mr. Thomas said with a slight smile on his face, pretending to struggle to hold the leash.

Scruffy barked louder and the terrible man got up and ran as fast as he could out of the park.

"Well done, Scruffy," Mr. Thomas said, reaching down and scratching the dog's furry head. "Well done."

Scruffy barked and smiled.

And from that day forward, he was never hungry, never alone, and never afraid.



Mike Apodaca, a recent recipient of the Jack London, has authored eight books and several stories in anthologies and the prestigious Literary Review. He is also a member of the On-Topic speaker's bureau, an ordained minister, and a retired public school educator. He and his wife, Debi, just celebrated 41 years of marriage. He is the ever dedicated President of the High Desert branch of the California Writers Club in Apple Valley, CA.

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THE MASTER PAINTER

by

Langer Thompson

High Dessert

— For Richard Zone —

The suspended painter says,
"Start with a minimum palette."
His dark lines look like a child's squiggles.

"The simpler you start your painting, the better.
Stay loose. Go darker first. You can lighten later.

Try painting with your least dominant hand.”

“Everything in due time. If you work too close, you forget what it’s a part of. We see what is implied,” says this retired school guidance counselor.

“Some artists take one color and mix it into all others,” he says as he massages white into blue, making ocean waves roll.

“White is necessary to lighten and cool down things.” It’s above one hundred degrees outside in this desert. “I get my King’s Blue from a store in Maine.”

“I once had a student,” he adds, who had a near death experience. Do you know what she wanted? “She asked me to teach her to paint God!”

He looks up toward the sky, suspended in thought: “Everything in due time.”



Mary Langer Thompson is an award-winning poet and writer who was the 2012 Senior Poet Laureate of California. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has been featured most recently in *Vision and Verse*, the Altadena Poetry Anthology 2025, and *The Smalls*. Find *Poems in Water* and her two children's books on Amazon. The former educator and Principal was also the facilitator of the Wordsmiths, the best ever critique group at the High Desert branch in Apple Valley, CA.

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Excerpt from *That Comeback Season*
Nebo Annex, MCLB Barstow, CA

In the distance, the beast sleeps.

A gossamer mist, like that in a graveyard, swirls slowly about its steel wheels. From where he’s standing next to Warehouse #2, he can discern the beast’s length by the thin light that has escaped the night’s firm grip and dimly illuminates the metal roof of each rail car. Its three headlights pierce the blackness while its silhouette looms large against the city lights that, pinned to the void behind them, sparkle like jewels. When it awakens and lumbers toward him, he must beat it to the finish line at Warehouse #3 if he is to live.

If not, he dies .

OLD ROUTE 66
Scene 23 – Old House and Sunset

