



THE QUIET READER

a new international
literary magazine

Edition 1
September 2020

The Quiet Reader

Edition #1 September 2020

Copyright © 2010 by The Quiet Reader and all its authors.

www.thequietreader.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the authors, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

mailbox@thequietreader.com

Contents

The Quiet Reader is a brand new international literary magazine, born in a town called Solitaire, in the state of Quarantine in the country of 2020.

Pre(r)amble by Ramon Stoppelenburg

The Milliner's Daughter by Zannier Alejandra

Absolution by Michael Anthony

Coalesce by Aarushi Shetty

There's No Right Way to Say This by Yen Radecki

The Blood Test by John Walters

Anniversary by Alec Hutchinson

The Black Pen by Matias Travieso-Diaz

Because It's Poetry by Ron Healy

Renaissance by Margery Bayne

My Autumn by Elizabeth Guilt

Pre(r)amble – Ramon Stoppelenburg

It was in the spring of 2020 that the idea sprouted for a new international literary magazine. I was sitting in a comfortable extended window frame of an old colonial villa in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, my home for the last 10 years, while reading an e-book. Or staring outside. Or reading again. It was so quiet everywhere.

The state of spring 2020 was that of a worldwide pandemic outbreak. A coronavirus traveled worldwide and was testing humanity in staying indoors, on lockdown, in quarantine or on high alert once outside. Even though my location didn't have anything but the advice of outdoor mask-wearing, which pretty much everybody in Asia already does for years (unless you enjoy the horrible fumes in traffic) and frequent hand-washing, it was quite a change of life. Schools had closed and a lot of my foreign expatriate friends had left on the last flights out, back to their presumable safer home countries.

I run a small art house [movie theater](#) in the capital city and survived on offering private movie sessions for small groups that found it safe to be out together. The movie theater became an important escape haven for those with little to do. During the day I would read a lot and work on my own writing.

In a corner was a printed copy of a Dutch literary magazine; literature from my home country. It was quite popular and successful and I loved the contents, but it had ceased to exist after two years. Online, there were a few literary magazines to be found. Mostly published by universities, or big time review sites that would publish anything including current rants against American politics in lengthy essays, next to non-fiction exploits about parenting in quarantine and fictional short stories that were, in the end, hard to find.

With my background in writing and publishing I decided to take matters in my own hands and just launch a new online literary magazine. Looking at anything from all over the world, looking for fiction and non-fiction stories that matter and take me somewhere else, while I would read them wherever I would be. What do you do when you read? You are silent, you are quiet, you are submerged into the pleasure the authors present to you. And The Quiet Reader was born.

I gathered some of my international published writing friends, those who have published books or have a lifetime of experience in the writing and publishing industry and those who are avid and critical readers of pretty much anything they can get their hands on – and invited them to join me.

And here I must apologize to them. We received over 60 submissions, varying from a few hundred to over 7,000 words per story, but hugely differing in style and quality. We read every submission. We commented on them all and rated every story. I gave my team a hard time in a dusty gold mine. We were reading thousands and thousands of undisciplined, poorly written, rambling words with some ill-constructed stories to get to a few nuggets of gold.

This reminded me of the Phnom Penh International Film Festival I had organized myself a few years ago. I run a movie theater, so why not accept submissions from all over the world by filmmakers who want to submit their movie to an international film festival in Cambodia? And

submission was open and free, as I wasn't planning on an award ceremony or inviting the film makers over with Q&A's with their movie screening. My theater seats a comfy 32 people max. I got overwhelmed with over 300 submitted films in less than 2 months. To make the selection easier, I invited over my local movie lovers and put them in the movie room for a few afternoons a week. I almost lost a few friends there and witnessed them screaming *Noooooooo* when something horribly experimental had started on the screen. Or a lengthy movie had started where the cinematography was off the charts, the acting really bad and the story... well... didn't exist in the end. Some of my judges would storm out of the movie room and demand a stiff drink before continuing.

This happened at a micro level in our mailbox, full of submissions of stories by authors from all over the world. Somehow my few tweets on Twitter and on some Facebook groups about a new magazine opening up for submissions, made people send in their works or even write something specifically for our magazine.

Behind the scenes we go through everything and read every story. There were a lot of stories by people who can write well, but the story just wasn't there. Or the genre was off. Or the structure rambled. To quote the British comedian Bill Bailey, after a suggestion from the audience did not led to a joke: "It was a long and windy road along the beach, only to find out the café was closed." That covers a lot of the entries we have received. Not that they were not promising. We got in contact with quite a group of really good writers.

And we learned a lot as a little team of readers and editors. That we would need more time, next time. That we will have a group of preliminary Staff Readers and an Editorial Team for the finer selection.

But we found the nuggets. We have hereby selected ten stories that we present you as pieces of polished gold, true finds of great enticing writing, superbly executed ideas, intriguing stories and beautiful, heartfelt dialogues. We found emotions, intrigue, suspense, thrills, history and exposures.

With this first edition of The Quiet Reader we launch these literary discoveries into the online world for all to enjoy and with a website designed for proper reading perspective, even on your mobile devices. Take your time while reading, as every story is different, and applaud the authors who wrote them.

Share your favorites on social media and support the authors, and help spread their great works. Let's keep them encouraged to keep on writing and perhaps open the eyes of agents and publishers that see bigger works by them.

Our next issue is set for **January 1, 2021**, with a deadline set for December 1 this year. We expect way more submissions in the coming months and we will give every submission the attention it deserves. Are you a writer? Let us know and we will see what the future brings us.

Ramon Stoppenburg

Editor-in-chief

Ramon Stoppelenburg studied journalism in The Netherlands. As a former world traveler he left his mark on the internet with one of the first ever social networks, *Letmestayforaday.com*, which allowed him to travel the world for free for two years without spending any money. The British *Sunday Times* named him *Internet Personality of the Year* in 2002. His adventures, hanging around with Steve Irwin, partying with Geri Halliwell and getting stuck in the cold Canadian north, all ended up in the Dutch book with the same name. After living in Cambodia for ten years, while writing various short stories and travel writing for various websites and running a little community movie theater in Phnom Penh, Ramon is ready to settle in the republic of Georgia as soon as possible. You can find him on www.hereigoagainonmyown.com, @TravelingRamon and on Instagram @whereisramonnow.

The Milliner's Daughter – Zannier Alejandra

It was the week before Christmas when I first noticed the milliner's daughter. The shop was bustling with the familiar Yuletide mob of young society ladies, overbearing mothers and adoring husbands.

My husband was the reason I was there myself. For the fifth year in a row, he had decided to give me a new hat for Christmas. Except, on this occasion, he was unable to find the time to commission it himself. Instead, he handed over his purse and sent me to the shop to purchase my own gift. I could have taken the money and bought something I truly desired, but a hat was expected.

The milliner was appalled by the eleventh-hour request. "A week before Christmas?! It can't be done! It don't matter how much money you have in there, it can't be done!"

I looked around hoping no-one heard him, the implications of his rebuttal sending agony through my soul. A married woman, with no Christmas gift from her husband! What would everyone say?

That's when an unlikely savior came to my rescue. "I can get it done, papa," said a young woman, appearing from the back of the shop.

I searched my memory, but I could not recall ever seeing her before; perhaps, I simply was not paying attention. The milliner's daughter was not a particularly striking girl but possessed an understated type of beauty girls her age cannot escape – velvety skin, luscious locks, and eyes full of life, regarding me with an intensity I first mistook for admiration.

"You go on then," her father said. "If the lady doesn't mind."

I gave them a curt nod. It was a slight, no question about it, but it was better than nothing. Perhaps the girl would surprise me by making a good hat, good enough it could pass for her father's and none would be the wiser.

That first encounter was brief. She showed me a few ribbons and fabrics. I selected a dark grey satin, but she swayed me to a crimson organza that would "draw the eyes to the rouge of my lips." She made it sound like a desirable outcome, so I agreed.

After we were finished with materials and sketches, she bid me goodbye and asked me to return in a few days. I distinctly remember a foreign exhilaration as I left the shop. A new hat is always exciting, I told myself and didn't give it another thought.

It was the day before Christmas, when I next saw the milliner's daughter. The shop was completely empty and, assuming it was closed, I nearly walked away; but, the milliner's daughter spotted me through the window and rushed to the door.

With solicitous expediency, she helped me with my cloak and hung it on the wall. A curious sensation washed over my skin—the burning tingle of intent eyes on the back of one’s neck; except, I could feel it on my entire body. “Where’s everyone?” I asked.

“Most orders were delivered yesterday,” the girl explained. “It will be quiet today. Father went home to rest.” She uttered the last sentence with more gravity than required for the simple information she was conveying.

She reached behind the counter and produced a large round box. I opened it and dug through the endless layers of white tissue. When I finally unwrapped my hat, I was breathless. “It’s beautiful,” I said sincerely.

The wide-brim hat was the color of fine wine, unapologetic in its exuberance, with three silk roses in the middle and a single red feather sticking out from the side.

“I wanted it to be beautiful,” the milliner’s daughter said.

I noticed a deep blush on her youthful cheeks.

“I remember seeing you around town since I was a young girl,” she continued. “I remember thinking I’d never see anything as beautiful. I wanted the hat to be just like that. A bold sort of beauty.”

I was left speechless, unable to believe I could be the inspiration for such a beautiful thing, but it went beyond aesthetics. This headpiece reflected myself more than anything I had ever owned. Somehow this young woman had seen me, in a way no-one seemed to see me anymore. “A bold sort of beauty,” I repeated to myself. “Will you try it on?” she asked with endearing eagerness.

I was happy to comply and planted myself in front of the full-length mirror. She stood behind me and put the hat on my head. She didn’t step back, she stayed where she stood, her body almost pressed against mine.

I caught her eyes in the mirror and noticed what I must have known for a while. The look on her face was not one of admiration, as I first assumed. It was something else, and it felt good to be on the receiving end of it.

I turned around very slowly, glancing down at her face. She brought her hand to the edge of my long sleeve and traced the lace all the way up to my neck, until her fingers made contact with my skin. She closed her eyes and touched the line of my jaw, my lips, the contours of my cheek. She was methodical, as if trying to chart the outline of my face and commit it to memory.

I remained still, even when she finally gathered the courage to lean up and kiss me. Her lips were sweet, warm; her hand around my waist eager. For a few seconds, I allowed her to taste and touch me the way she clearly wanted. When I stepped back, I had a smile on my face.

I grabbed my cloak from the perch by the door and left the shop, proudly donning my new crimson hat. Unawares, my husband had given me the best gift of all—to feel desired, even if just for a few seconds.

Lady Eden left the milliner's shop without turning back. She went home, gave her husband a kiss, and told him she wouldn't be needing another hat next year.

***Zannier Alejandra** is a Bolivian writer, living in the United Kingdom. In a past life she was a credit analyst for an international bank but traded in her spreadsheets for more creative pursuits. Her fiction has appeared on Liar's League and in the dieselpunk anthology Grimm, Grit & Gasoline.*

Absolution – Michael Anthony

I did not come to Rio for its world-famous beaches, churrasco restaurants, or pink sunrises over Sugarloaf Mountain. I came because it was as far away as my money could get me from Manhattan.

Far away from conference room meetings; weekly sales forecasts; drinks after work with a potential client; the dreaded phone call I was going to be late again and no, don't hold dinner; the climb up the stairs to the third floor; the steel door left slightly ajar; the sad eyes peering into mine silently saying I should quit the investment firm and study design at Cooper Union; the claustrophobic nights staring at the invisible ceiling wondering if Ida still wanted a baby after what she had gone through the previous year; and, as far away as possible from the night we strolled Delancey Street, ice cream cones in hand until that shadow leapt from the alleyway.

Everything from that moment on is a blur; everything except a puddle of blood and melted ice cream on the sidewalk. No matter how many months or thousands of miles away, I cannot escape that image or the echo of my words, "Take it easy, man."

That is what brings me here, the search for a world so different, so foreign, so isolating that not a single thing will resemble New York. Maybe I have a death wish; a need to confront another trigger-happy lowlife who will erase my guilt and leave me dead on some nameless back alley.

Knowing neither the language, nor customs, nor even what neighborhoods are safe, I check into a dingy hotel in one of the favelas that ring the city. The taxi driver looks incredulous at my decision before he speeds away shaking his head. Perhaps the seclusion and penitence I seek will be found in the dark hotel room that reeks of previous guests and unspeakable acts.

I rely on feeble hand gestures and the limited English of locals who take pity on this crazy American. After swallowing a cup of tar-like coffee and a coconut pastry in the tight hotel lobby, I ask the diminutive woman who runs the place, how I might get to the statue of Christ The Redeemer that looms over this favela with its arms outstretched high atop Mount Corcovado. She draws a map to a bus stop on a scrap of paper. In a nearly indecipherable jumble of English and Portuguese, she warns of favelados, who will attack for nothing more than a cross look.

The decrepit bus is packed with people carrying bags of food, others with stained boxes containing who knows what on their laps, and still others half asleep, their heads resting on greasy windows. With the hotel woman's warning fresh in my mind, I make no eye contact. Nor does anyone else. We pass through one favela to another farther up the mountainside.

Peering out the window of the bus as it slows, I spot a woman in a tattered flower print dress trudging up a path alongside the narrow roadway. Seen only from behind, her arms and legs are the color of honey. Long waves of chestnut brown hair sway with her every step as she balances a wicker basket atop her shoulder. What color are her eyes? Ebony? Hazel?

Frustrated by the gridlock of cars and trucks and screaming motor scooters, the thick-necked bus driver leans on the horn while shouting out his window. Passengers chatter and laugh. With the

bus now stopped, the distance between the woman and me grows. I'll never know about those eyes.

A trio of teenage boys approach from the opposite direction. One picks up a rock and launches it, likely aiming for the basket on the woman's shoulder. It misses, but not her head. The basket and its contents scatter as she crashes to the ground, her hands cradling her unseen face. Unintelligible comments ripple through the bus. Yet, no one moves. No one rises to help.

The woman curls into a fetal position as the three taunt her; kick her; and grab the spilled fruit. The image of melted ice cream flashes through my mind.

I yell out the window, "Hey! Stop!" With an audience, their tormenting escalates. Charging up the aisle of the bus, I shout, "Let me out!"

The bus driver barks, "Nao Corcovado."

"Out," I demand as I push against the door, which springs open and then slams shut the instant I'm on the pavement.

Music blares from a small café up the road where two men watch from the doorway. Bus riders just stare.

"Stop!" I shout as one of the toughs launches a vicious kick to the woman's hip. Infuriated, I run the last few steps, driving my shoulder into one guy who tumbles into the gutter like a drunk. The second one darts for the trees across the empty lot. The third digs frantically in his pocket.

For a knife? A gun?

Before he can find whatever it is, I plow into him as well. We both go down hard. He lands on my ankle. A burning pain shoots up my leg. I holler, "Get the hell out of here!" They flee down the street to an open-air market overrun with shirtless children, bandy-legged old women, and balding men with bent cigarettes dangling from their lips. The injured woman reaches for the lemons and oranges and mangos strewn about the dirt. Long hair hides her face like the dark mantillas old Italian widows wear to Sunday Mass at St. Lucy's.

Trying to stand, I realize instantly my ankle is sprained, or possibly broken. Either way, I'm hobbled. The whoosh of air brakes announces the bus's departure, leaving only a cloud of diesel exhaust in its wake. With no way to make it back to the hotel, I'm screwed if those punks return.

I spin to the woman. Her eyes are not the ebony I expected, but the color of a gray November morning haloed by the purest white. In that single moment, I see all of Brazil in her face. The left side is the serene beauty of endless golden beaches and lush rainforests – mysterious, perfect. The right side is the country's wretched underbelly of poverty and squalor.

Blood, from where the rock struck, trickles down to her right eye, which sags towards a patch of grafted skin that stretches from cheekbone to jaw. Half her mouth is upturned; the other half cruelly contorted. Scarlet ridges snake up her neck, disappearing under her hair.

“Inglês?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“Jack Crandall,” I say while balancing on one foot. Still no reply, I repeat, “Jack,” this time tapping my chest.

She nods nervously.

I limp to a crumbling block wall where I sit; hoping the pain will subside. She pushes her hair forward, trying to shield the scarred side of her face. Several locals pass doing nothing more than whisper.

The nameless woman points to my ankle, then motions as if snapping a twig.

I try to put weight on it. No way I can walk without help.

Hoisting the basket to her hip, she gestures for me to stand. She coils her free arm around my waist and leads me through thigh-high grass. The few people still outside the café turn away as we inch down a narrow path past a building plastered with signs for Guaraná Antarctica and Esso petrol.

The path tapers to little more than trampled weeds strewn with empty bottles, rusted car parts, and blanched animal bones. Like veins of a leaf, side trails shoot off left and right. At each juncture, the woman silently signals the way.

I tap my chest, saying, “Jack.” Then, I point to her and shrug.

She whispers, “Doralice.”

We maneuver through a dense thicket of trees until we reach a white stucco house behind palm fronds that arc to the ground. Purple jacaranda blossoms weave a fragrant carpet beneath us. Doralice unbolts a rusted iron gate and eases me against the door, which unlocked, swings open. Carved mahogany moldings and tiled floors suggest this once might have been the home of a prosperous family. But, such days are long gone. Walls crack from floor to ceiling. Meager furniture tilts on broken legs. Despite the condition, the place neither smells nor offers even a mote of dust anywhere. Clearly, the woman takes pride in her own isolated refuge away from malevolent whispers and physical threats.

Doralice smiles, and though imperfect, it is the first she has offered.

In a flurry of gestures and one word questions like, “Taxi?” and “Bus?” I learn both are unlikely.

‘How the hell do I get back to the hotel?’

Momentarily forgetting about my ankle, I go to step inside. Suddenly, I’m on the floor, my leg folded beneath me, my head twisted against the door jamb.

Doralice attempts to lift me, but can’t. I drag myself to a chair in what appears to be a kitchen. Once seated, I scan the interior looking for signs of a husband, boyfriend, roommate, anybody. None are visible.

Doralice opens a small battered icebox to reveal several bottles of good old coke, a pineapple, and something wrapped in brown butcher paper. She runs a cloth under a weak faucet and offers it for my ankle. I thank her with a timid, “Obrigado.”

She sits across from me at the table. Then, while dabbing the bruise on her forehead with a tissue she looks away, as though suddenly self-conscious. When she does, I study the old wounds that have etched her mouth and cheek. Scars from failed reconstructive surgeries are evident. Her face is a dichotomy of beauty and its opposite, each existing mere inches from the other. One eyebrow arches gracefully, the other a jagged cypher. Ropes of scar tissue run down her neck and under the collar of that flowered cotton dress.

Her scars are visible; mine lay hidden beneath layers of self-loathing.

Doralice turns back and smiles until she sees my wedding ring. After several uncomfortable seconds, I fold my arms in an X across my chest; tilt my head back; and, close my eyes. Then, I open my cupped hands as though freeing a dove to fly away.

“Morta?” Doralice murmurs.

I nod. Sweat beads my forehead. I am suddenly uncomfortable, weak. Motioning I need air, I wave my hand in front of my face and pant.

Doralice disappears into another room, returning with a cane, its handle worn smooth. I limp outside and rest on a bench beneath that jacaranda. A bright green parrot clicks and clacks overhead, offering the only sound in the leafy canopy that veils the house. How different from Manhattan, where the incessant hum drowns out the plaintive song of the lone bird.

The air is thick as Doralice hands me a chilled bottle of coke, its surface damp. Sipping it, I realize how bizarre this all must be for her; opening her home to a man who does not speak her language, a man unknown to her but an hour ago, a man whose intentions remain unclear.

She is either very trusting or very naive. Either way, I mean her no harm. The throbbing in my ankle eases and my body begins to relax. I close my eyes and lean against the trunk of the tree. For the first time since that night no memories of New York stab at my conscience.

When I awaken from a nap of uncertain duration, I see Doralice standing in a shaft of afternoon sunlight. Gold gilds her hair. Her mocha skin shimmers. She is radiant, like those paintings of The Madonna that line the walls of St. Lucy's.

Doralice helps me inside to the table on which she has placed another coke, a paper towel, and an orange, peeled and sectioned on a blue and white plate, its rim chipped but spotless.

I thank her and nibble the orange. With no common language, we sit like two old friends exchanging simple smiles and stolen glances. Blinking eyes and twitches of her misshapen mouth suggest she is trying to communicate.

Yet, the more I look at Doralice, the fewer scars and imperfections I see. It is as though the hand of some phantom sculptor smooths her skin; erasing the jagged lines until my eyes can no longer discern what my brain knows to exist. Gesturing if I want another coke, Doralice stands. I shake my head. She appears newly nervous as she walks to a frayed sofa and kneels with her back to me. The thin dress stretches tight across her hips while she pulls something from beneath the furniture. In a fleeting moment of carnal desire, I crave the touch of a woman.

Returning to the table, Doralice places a worn, old leather album between us. After pointing to her face and then the book, she pushes the album towards me.

It holds a ragged collection of yellowed newspaper clippings some quarter century old. I don't need to read Portuguese. The grainy photographs tell her story. A small girl lies in a hospital bed, her head, face, and neck encased in bandages. Standing next to her, a bearded elderly man holds a long hunting rifle and what looks to be the severed claw of a jaguar.

Later clippings show a somewhat older girl with smaller bandages beside a doctor in a white lab coat. The caption is indecipherable except for the doctor's name, James Malone; the words Estados Unidos; and, the name Doralice Vidal. The most recent clipping, from fifteen years ago, has a photograph of that same doctor and a taller Doralice standing in front of the house in which we now sit.

I run my finger across the album page, then point to her.

She nods, her smile flawless; her face smooth as alabaster. Has it changed? Am I insane? Does it even matter? With her story now known to me, I want to share mine. But, how do I tell her I failed to save my wife near the base of the Williamsburg Bridge? That blood-streaked ice cream puddle returns.

We watch the orange sun disappear behind that cruciform silhouette high atop Corcovado as strains of pagode music float down from the favela.

While I search for words, Doralice motions to my ring; pats her chest imitating a heartbeat; and makes that breaking gesture again. She's right. My heart is broken. She holds her hands open in front of her heart; points to me; and, slowly brings her hands together, signaling what was once

broken in her is now whole. Despite Doralice's belief I saved her earlier this day, I know it is she who has saved me.

Michael Anthony is a writer and artist living in New Jersey in the United States of America. He has published fiction, poetry, illustrations, and photographs in literary journals and commercial magazines. Most recently these include the Tall Tale TV Podcast, Dime Show Review, Apeiron Review, and Goat's Milk Magazine. His work may be viewed at: MichaelAnthony.MyPortfolio.com.

There's No Right Way to Say This – Yen Radecki

The wake was being held on Saturday afternoon at Jay's parents' house, so the four of us drove down together that morning.

It wasn't that none of us could get there on our own — although Arjun certainly would have struggled to get his scooter going fast enough for the freeway — but that it made sense to go together, the same collective front as seniors as we had been freshman year. We stood around the gas station before setting off, filling the car and pooling our ignorance like pocket-change between us. None of us had met Jay's parents before, and I was the only one who knew Jay's sister — but we could all agree on the existence of Bucky, a childhood dog glimpsed in the corner of more than one Facebook picture.

“Labrador?” Libbie guessed, squinting at the phone screen as she guided the pump to the car's gas tank.

“Golden retriever,” Marco corrected, taking the phone back to peer at the screen. “Wait, that's diesel, right?”

Once the car was full, Marco went inside to pay as the rest of us fumbled for loose bills to contribute. It was quarter past seven, and the sun was just visible through the haze of gasoline, shivering its way into the sky beneath the station's peeling awning.

“We're getting coffee, yeah?” Arjun asked as Marco made his way back towards us. We piled into the car and began shucking layers like peeling corn. “Somewhere that isn't Timmy's?”

“No one's rooting for Tim Horton's.” Libbie was settling into the front seat, fiddling with knobs to clear the windshield. “And of course we're getting fucking coffee.”

As the only one in possession of a car large enough to fit us comfortably, Marco had volunteered his Chevrolet for the task, and Libbie, the only one who'd driven further than Gravenhurst before, had reluctantly agreed to drive it. By tacit agreement, I sat up front to help her navigate, while Marco and Arjun slumped from side to side in the back, and occasionally against each other's shoulders, thumbing idly at their cell phones. The sun was high by the time we pulled off the ramp onto the freeway, sliding around the windshield to glare over the brushland, and the extra macchiato I'd accidentally ordered at the drive-through sat untouched by the gear shift, equally steadfast.

“Music OK?”

Arjun was leaning forward between the two front seats, fingers hovering over the radio's dial. Libbie glanced over and shrugged.

“Sure.”

In Marco's car, it was the radio or nothing. With a practiced hand, Arjun flicked us past Christian rock, *Ici Musique*, and a handful of crackly, indigenous local stations speaking a language I didn't know. I leant my head against the car window as the speakers competed lymphatically with the hum of the wheels below.

We were headed to Redbridge, Ontario, where Jay's parents lived. It was where Jay had been raised, and where they'd fled by coming to U of T, and we'd joked together about it back in the day, its barren appearance on Google Maps: a single road, a general store, trees and trucks and campervans dotted along the roadside like hopeful hitchhikers. None of us had ever expected to see it in real life. Though Jay had never said so, it had always been understood that they went by a different name back home, and that returning for the holidays had been not dissimilar from a brief vacation in inferno.

In fact, the only positive thing I could remember Jay mentioning about Redbridge was Lake Nipissing. The town wasn't right on the water, but it was close enough for a trip; close enough to make it one of the only viable outings growing-up. In the summer of Jay's twelfth year, they'd gone there fishing with their father—caught a pickerel within an hour, and cried until it had been released. It wasn't until later, driving license acquired, that the lake had become Jay's properly, a spot for them to smoke and sext and swim. On Facebook, you could still see one of their jaunts there in their profile pic: Jay wet-haired, red-eyed, and happy, now eternally.

Beside me, Libbie leant forwards and thumbed at the car's touch screen.

“Alright, straight for like, three hours, and then we're looking for Highway 63. Trout Lake Road. Wow, they're really leaning into the whole hillbilly thing.”

The car swayed over a rumble strip, rattling my teeth. The sun was lower on our left now, and it striped dust through the car in searing beams. In the back, I could hear what sounded like a *Funny or Die* skit. Inside, the air was hot and thick and still.

It wasn't a long drive, only four hours or so in total, but it had been a while since any of us had been on anything that could even charitably be called a road trip. There just wasn't the need, living where we did: Marco in res, and Libbie so close to class you could see the cross on St. Michael's College by hanging your head out of the bathroom window, as we'd discovered one afternoon toking. Jay lived further out, but in practice they spent more time at Arjun's place or at mine, just two stops from the Sandford Fleming building on Line 1, and more than once, I'd come back from class to find them still asleep on my futon, a winter coat tugged on as a blanket.

“When does it start?”

It had been long enough since the hillbilly comment that I stirred like I was waking. In the rear-view mirror I could see Marco sitting up too: his breath had fogged up a neat circle on the back-left window.

“Midday,” Libbie said. She was the one who’d done all the correspondence and planning. “I don’t know when it’ll wrap up. Maybe an hour or two? I figure we can stop for food somewhere on the way back; don’t think there’ll be much by way of dining.”

I stared at the GPS for a moment: the little white arrow of the car, fording flat shapes in grey and green. The road we were on wasn’t named, just numbered.

“Did Jay ever mention anything much about growing up here?”

“Nothing good,” Arjun said. He was looking out the window, the pupils of his dark eyes juddering as he watched the trees sail past, like some kind of personal strobe light.

“I think it basically sucked,” Libbie elaborated. “I don’t think there’s much to do out here unless you really like fishing. Or hunting. Or like... tilling the field.”

“Ah yes,” Arjun said. “Jay’s three favourite pastimes.”

“What about people?” I said. “Grandparents still alive on their mother’s side I think, right?”

“Father’s,” Libbie corrected from beside me, and briefly looked over. “Why?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. Trying to think of what to say.”

“At the wake? You’re speaking?”

“They asked me to.” Begged was probably the right word for it, but it seemed an ugly thing to detail. “I guess they wanted a friend to do it, since the funeral’s family-only.”

“Sophie...” She didn’t have to say anything else, but she did anyway. “How much thought have you given this?”

I’d thought about it, but only indirectly, the way you might avoid looking straight into the sun.

“I’m only asking because I’m not sure how Jay would feel. You know?”

Arjun made a noise of surprise from behind me. “Why wouldn’t Jay want Sophie to speak?”

Marco answered before anybody else could, sitting forward and wedging his shoulders into the gap between the two front seats. “Probably the same reason we weren’t sure if we should even go today.” His voice was still husky with sleep; the first time he’d spoken since Huntsville. “Because nobody there knows the first damn thing about Jay, and they wouldn’t be coming to the wake if they did.”

Libbie was watching the road in the side-view mirror, and she finished changing lanes before answering. “You don’t know that, Marco.”

“Like hell I don’t.”

“Dude,” Arjun breathed, “come on. I’m sure Jay’s folks aren’t perfect, but nobody’s are.”

“Perfect?” Marco repeated. Sitting forward the way he was, I could see his face properly for the first time all morning: the places he’d cut himself shaving. “You think that’s what they were holding out for? The fucking Brady Bunch? Jay’s piss-poor excuse for a family is the reason we’re here right now, you know that, right? Literally the only reason.”

“You don’t know that,” Libbie said again, and Marco sat back finally with a thump.

“It’s the only thing I do know.” His face turned back towards the window. “And you all do, too. Fuck. Whatever. It’s fine.”

It wasn’t, but then it hadn’t been since Tuesday, when I’d woken up to find a message on Facebook from Jay’s sister, only the first line visible in preview: *there’s no right way to say this*. A little more wrongness wouldn’t change much of anything. On the radio, an excitable Quiznos customer made obscene noises over a chipotle sub, and Libbie leant over to turn it off.

“It’s your call, Sophie,” she said. We were pulling off the freeway now, the rhythmic beat of the tires gradually slowing to a stop as we lost speed over the asphalt. I heard a squeak behind me as Marco eked open his window and wind rushed in. “But even leaving aside everything else, I don’t know if it’s going to be possible, to talk about Jay without ever calling them anything.”

I shook my head and Marco made a sound so sudden it seemed involuntary.

“Don’t you guys think Jay’s family deserves to know who they’re mourning?”

“Look, maybe, but do you really think a wake is the right time for that conversation?”

“OK, so not when Jay’s dead, not when they’re alive — when exactly were you thinking?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Marco,” Libbie snapped, finally lifting her eyes off the windshield. It was impossible to see from the angle of the passenger seat, but I imagine their eyes met, briefly, in the rear-view mirror. It was a good thing we were off the freeway. “What’s the matter with you?”

“The matter with me? I’m the only one who —”

“How about respecting Jay’s wishes?” It was Arjun, cutting through Marco’s hysterics with the practiced mildness of a physician. They’d shared a room together freshman year, while Marco was still hopped-up and over-compensating, doing lines in bed with hook-ups while Arjun studied econ in the bathtub. “If Jay didn’t tell them, I’m guessing there was a pretty good reason.”

“No shit, there was a reason; like maybe how their family are Westboro Baptist-level psychos, and you guys just want to let them get away with it?”

The mechanical femininity of the GPS interrupted with terse instructions to make a U-turn.

“Shit,” Libbie said, glancing between the display and the windscreen. “Marco—when did you last update this thing?”

In the sudden silence, Marco’s shrug was audible. Libbie heaved a sigh and steered the car off onto the side of the road, scraping to a sharp stop over the gravel.

“Has anyone got reception? I’m going to need someone to talk me through Maps since this GPS hasn’t been updated since Prohibition.”

“I’ve got one bar.”

“Here, I’ve got two.” Arjun held his phone over Libbie’s shoulder, and Libbie took it and passed it over to me.

“We need to turn around.”

“Terrific,” Libbie said, already guiding the battered Chevrolet back across the lane markings. “Now can we shelve the bullshit until we get there, please? There’ll be time for a pissing contest over who loved Jay best later.” There was a beat when nobody said what anyone was thinking, which was mainly that Libbie would come dead last in that contest, so of course she didn’t care when we held it.

Now that we were off the freeway, the scenery was getting downright pastoral. Trees crowded in on one side of the car while water stretched out on the other, sidling close and then rolling away until it was just a blue-grey glint behind vacant billboards. We passed rusted mailboxes abutting roads to nowhere, clearings of dismantled cars and jacked boats half-covered in tarp. I tried to imagine Jay growing up here, the awful dull comfort of it, where everything was flat and there was nothing to follow but the powerlines. The closer we got, the more I could feel the others trying too.

Redbridge, when we reached it, was too small to have a sign. The only warning that we got was the local general store: a stout wooden building with a peaked attic and a small flag taped to a traffic cone out front. The cursive B had been freshly repainted. Libbie slowed the car to a crawl and rolled down her window to stick her elbow out. For some time now, we’d been the only car on the road. Arjun leant forwards in the back to read the clock on the dash.

“Shit. We’re early.”

I rolled down my window too and looked out. Google Maps hadn’t lied: Redbridge was a single street as far as the eye could see, punctured errantly with wide dirt roads that led off to clusters of thinning spruce trees. In the distance, I could see pylons and broadleaf trees: sleet grey road

meeting muddied sky like the horizon line over a sea of dust. Somewhere beyond my sightline, on this little patch of earth, was Jay's family home, with Jay's family inside it, mourning a son they'd never known.

Libbie was half out of the window now, Arjun's phone held close as she squinted at Street View.

"Well, good, 'cause it looks like this place doesn't do street numbers."

"Of course it doesn't," Marco muttered behind us, and the car came to a sudden stop.

"Want to give me a hand instead of bitching about it?"

"Sure. I'll get out and walk."

"Me too," Arjun said, clicking off child-lock. "I want a smoke before this thing starts."

This was how we arrived: in slow, drunk diagonals down the street, while Arjun and Marco followed the tire tread, sharing a cigarette and shivering. Jay's family home was an old pine two-story with a front veranda and an unkempt lawn out the back—the kind of predictable family white-picket where terrible things happen in adaptations of Stephen King. A small group of adults was huddled beside the mailbox in muted clothing, thumbing at phones as big as bricks. One of them raised a hand as we pulled up, in welcome or in warning.

The box had been placed in the living room, weighed down with flowers and reeking of patchouli. Jay's mother, Eileen, stood at the door greeting people with pathological efficiency. None of us missed the way she looked over Arjun during introductions, up and down, up and down, as though a second viewing would resolve the discrepancy. Meanwhile Jay's father stood at the buffet, cossetting puff pastries on a paper plate, and watching it all, atop the casket, a framed photograph had been placed: a baby-faced Jay at their first communion, squirming in their suit, pupils dilated by candle flame.

Afterwards, the four of us drove to Lake Nipissing at my suggestion. Although it was cold, the lake's surface wasn't yet frozen, and Marco took off his shoes and sat down on the rocky shore to wet his feet. The rest of us stood there in silence, the loss of Jay growing heavier and heavier inside us until I wasn't sure that the car would start again when we piled back in.

"Sorry," I said. The word was caught and dragged away in the wind, and I turned around to repeat it. "Sorry. I thought—this seemed to be somewhere Jay liked, so I thought we should come here."

"It was a nice idea," Libbie said, but I think we all knew it for what it was—an inadequate salve for still open wound. As though we could host our own, second wake by coming here; as though such a gathering, without Jay's family in attendance, would be any better than the one we'd spent all day disparaging. "But I'm tired, and it's freezing, and I could just about eat a horse."

She shook out the car key on its ring as Arjun flattened a cigarette beneath his shoe.

“I’m going to go get the motor running. See you in a bit.”

They left us there, me and Marco: like they thought an apology and a handshake might be in order. Instead, we just looked out together across the water. The opposite bank was so distant we might as well have been at the edge of the ocean.

“You think Jay saw any of that? The wake? Everything?”

“No,” Marco said. He lifted his legs slightly and looked down at them, how the water had pasted down the long dark hairs of his ankles and shins. “I think they’re dead, and they didn’t see anything.”

I looked sideways, along the coast, where the water worked at the rocks it hadn’t changed yet. It reminded me of Jay’s profile pic, the similar shoreline on which they’d posed, dripping, and made the peace sign with their fingers. The thought of the image was comforting: Jay pixelating across my phone screen in eternal defiance of the bale-eyed boy in his Sunday best who would adorn mantels north of Algonquin. Nothing written in stone, nothing written in ink. Death hadn’t suddenly made Jay static; hadn’t suddenly pinned them down to any one thing. Under ground as above, they would remain unfinished: like Schrödinger’s cat, only consistent in the moment of viewing. Marco had simply been watching when I happened to blink. But now the coffin was closed, and no power on Earth could reopen it.

***Yen Radecki** was raised across three continents and is now based in Japan, where she teaches English and writes poetry and fiction in her spare time. Her writing has previously appeared in STORGY Magazine, Ibis House, and Baby Teeth Journal. Online, she can be found at @yenradecki.*

The Blood Test - John Walters

The enigmatic woman in black showed up for the first time at one of my bookstore readings. She sat in the back and did not come forward for the signing. Instead, she stood far off across the room, apart from the crowd, watching me with an intense quizzical expression.

The rush of popular acclaim was still so new for me that I had not yet become jaded by success. I welcomed every person in the autograph line that stretched from my table in the lobby to the far wall and then wound around several aisles. Too recently I had been broke, struggling to pay my bills each month, wracked with despair, and convinced that nobody would ever recognize my efforts and buy my books.

So I greeted each one as they reached the table, autographed whatever they brought, and thanked them sincerely for coming - even when my fingers became cramped, my back ached, and my bladder emitted signals that it required emptying.

By the time the final customer had left and I had relieved myself and was exiting the building, employees were turning off the lights and locking up.

She waited for me on the steps.

She was in her mid-thirties, I guessed. Her long dark hair was so wavy it almost qualified as curly. She had a slim face with a sharp chin and the slender body of an athlete or dancer.

And something about her looked vaguely familiar.

"Excuse me," she said. "I need to talk to you."

I'd been accosted by attractive young fans before. Sometimes I'd even overridden my better judgment and had gone out with them, but it had not ended well. Thirty years ago I would have been better able to handle casual romance; now it ill suited me.

Still, I didn't want to be impolite. "Did you miss the autograph session? I suppose I could spare a signature, if you've got something ready."

"No, it's not that. I really need a few minutes of your time."

After the crowd scene, I wanted to do nothing else but get back to my hotel room, kick off my shoes, pour a drink, and watch a film. I was in no mood to play the seduction game.

And yet...

She didn't come across as the average fan. In fact, she didn't seem on the make at all. She displayed none of the intense eagerness of a fan approaching a celebrity. She was intense, yes, but it was a different sort of intensity.

I became intrigued. Instead of hurrying away, I slowed down and stopped.

"Can we talk?" she said.

"There's a bar at my hotel. It's just down the street. We can sit there."

As we started up the sidewalk, I zipped my coat and put on my gloves. I had no tolerance for the evening chill.

"Since you were at the event, I assume you know who I am," I said. "What's your name?"

"Pamela Winters. Believe it or not, I've come a long way to meet you."

"And yet you never even got an autograph. So it's not because of my writing."

"No, not really."

"Then this is an interesting mystery."

Abruptly the cold air stung my sensitive esophagus and I was hit with a paroxysm of coughing. She took my arm as if to steady me, and we walked like that, arms linked, without speaking, until we got inside and sat down in a booth.

I ordered gold tequila on the rocks, and she ordered white wine.

The murmurs of quiet conversations lapped like waves against the silent shore of our isolation from one another.

As the tequila warmed and relaxed me, I began to think I had made a mistake in inviting her to join me.

Abruptly she said, "Do you recognize the name Sarah Winters?"

I tried to think back. "No, but I'm not so good with names."

"You would have known her about thirty-six years ago in Seattle."

I shook my head. "I don't remember much of what happened back then."

"She worked as a secretary in a transport office. And she was a dancer. She had dark hair kind of like mine."

The name hadn't rung a bell, but the description was enough to trigger a memory.

Of course. I'd been waiting at a bus stop. In fact, I was on my way to visit another woman, someone I hooked up with on a semi-regular casual basis. When I saw Sarah standing there I lost

focus on my original objective. I sidled up to her and started a conversation. Somehow we worked our way past the bullshit fairly quickly. She had a boyfriend but that was becoming less and less important by the moment. By the time the bus arrived, I had lost all interest in keeping my previous appointment. I accompanied Sarah back to her apartment. We poured glasses of wine and sat on the living room floor. We talked for hours. The culmination of the situation was inevitable: we ended up stripping and having sex right there on the floor.

I never did call that semi-regular casual acquaintance and explain. Instead, I got together with Sarah every weekend. Sometimes we went to parties; sometimes we met at her place and stayed there together instead of going out. As far as I knew, she had never broken up with her boyfriend. I was an extra, an anomaly. I never questioned the arrangement or tried to make it more than it was. Those were strange times; I never seemed to have a relationship with anyone that lasted longer than a month or two.

And so it was with this one. In those days restlessness consumed and eventually overwhelmed me no matter what I did. I left town and lost touch with Sarah.

But it didn't end there.

About a year later I found myself back in Seattle, and I decided to look Sarah up. I didn't have her personal number, so I called the company where she had used to work.

The secretary who answered informed me that she didn't work there anymore. She'd moved back to her parents' home in Idaho.

Why?

She'd got pregnant.

Pregnant?

I managed to wheedle the Idaho phone number from the secretary and gave Sarah a call.

Yes, she said. She'd realized she was pregnant soon after I left. She had decided to move back to her hometown to have the baby so her mother could help her with it. Although she was still ostensibly linked with her old boyfriend, he had commitment issues.

The baby was a girl, and she was already three months old.

"She asked me to take a blood test," I said.

"She did?"

"Yes. She said that she had asked her boyfriend to take one too. She wanted to know for sure who the physical father was."

"What did you tell her?"

"I didn't answer right away. I wanted to think about it. Honestly, I wasn't worried about the result. I didn't think there was much chance that I was the father. But there was more to the situation than that. I'd been drifting around - not completely aimlessly, but almost. I knew I wanted to be a writer but I didn't know how to go about it. I needed some sort of specific direction, something to stabilize me. And... I was lonely. Deeply lonely. If you've never been there, you have no idea how it can be on the road. I needed a home. So... During one of our phone conversations, I proposed."

"What?" Up until this moment, Pamela had remained fairly composed, as if she'd heard most of the story before, but this latest revelation was obviously something new. "I never heard about that," she said.

"I told her that I didn't want to take a blood test and that I didn't care who the flesh father was. I said that if I married her I'd be the baby's father, and test results didn't make any difference one way or the other."

"Did you really believe it?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing right then. When I called back for her answer, the first thing she said was that her mother thought I was a hero. Then... She turned me down."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I think it probably had something to do with my personal situation. I had no job, no home. She probably thought I wasn't fit to take on the responsibility of a family. Or maybe that wasn't it. She may have been hoping to patch things up with her boyfriend."

"Did you love her?"

I sighed. "In the sense of romantic love - no, not really. I thought she was physically attractive, and I liked her. I thought that would be enough, and that we'd grow into love. Anyway, I dealt with the disappointment the way I usually did in those days: I left. I wandered off to another part of the world and never communicated with her again. I found a different wife and raised a different family. I thought of her sometimes, and wondered how she was and how you were, but eventually I lost her phone number and forgot her name. I never forgot her though."

"And here I am."

"Yes, here you are. I admit: you surprised me. This is completely unexpected."

"Well," she said, "I'd like to tell you the rest of the story."

"All right."

She hesitated and quietly sipped her drink for a moment before continuing.

"I pieced some of it together while I was growing up," she said. "Some parts I only learned recently."

"Such as my involvement, you mean."

"Yes. When I was young, I thought that the man my mother eventually married was my real father."

"The boyfriend?"

"No. He did have commitment issues. He disappeared shortly after you did. Then she met someone else. He was a relatively successful businessman and provided the stability that I suppose she needed." She shook her head. "Though my mother never even hinted that anything was amiss, as soon as I was old enough to discern it, I began to wonder what was wrong. He didn't act like a father. He was remote, aloof. As I was growing up, he didn't love me or hate me; he was indifferent. When I was nine or ten years old I flashed on the reason by comparing my birth date with their wedding date. I confronted my mother and she admitted that the man she was married to was not my biological father, but she wouldn't say more about my real father - only that he'd left."

She sipped and then stared at the wine in the glass. "Once I reached puberty my step dad started to pay more attention to me. At first I thought he was just being nice, and I appreciated it, but then it dawned on me that he was acting the same as other men acted when they leered at me outside. I began to be afraid of him, and especially to be afraid of being alone with him. My mother misinterpreted his affection towards me as renewed commitment to the family unit, and I was ashamed to tell her the truth."

She hesitated.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It must have been a difficult time. You don't have to go into details."

She appeared confused, her eyes unfocused, as if she were reliving those times. "One day when my mother was out, he grabbed me and pulled me towards him. When I tried to pull away, he hit me hard in the face with his fist. I passed out, and I woke up with a black eye, a purple bruise on my cheek, and a concussion. It was the end of the marriage. I never saw him again. He's lucky he didn't get locked up."

"He should have been," I said.

"Maybe," she said. "I was happy just to put him out of my mind. After that, it was just me and my mother. And so it remained as I grew up, went to college, moved out on my own, became a professional graphics designer. I focused on my work, my career. And then... I put everything on hold to move back in with my mother."

"Why?"

"She was diagnosed with breast cancer."

At which point something inside me snapped.

We had been getting more and more intimate in our conversation, Pamela and I, even though we were all but total strangers. On my part, her connection with an old girlfriend that I had always retained positive feelings about had caused me to let down my defenses. I'd had a nasty divorce. My career success solved the pain somewhat, but inside I was still devastatingly lonely. I hadn't even gone on a date in years. It was like I didn't know how anymore. And here this was happening.

I couldn't cope with it.

I had the surreal sensation that I was going to wake up any moment from a dream, and I wasn't sure whether it was a good dream or a bad dream.

Pamela mistook my vague, abstract expression as an empathetic response. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"No, I'm sorry." I shook my head to try to clear it. "It must have been a difficult time. My mother also died of cancer."

Again Pamela misinterpreted my response. "Then you understand how it was. She had a mastectomy and went through chemotherapy. Nothing the doctors tried was effective. She lost a lot of weight and developed sores around her mouth and in other areas."

Pamela was near tears.

"You don't need to go into the details," I said.

She wiped her eyes with a napkin and said, "Yes, you're right. During this time, as I sat by her bed for hour after hour I pressed hard for details about my past. And specifically about who my real father was. She told me everything she knew, but ultimately all she could say was that she never found out."

"How... How is she doing?"

"She died about six months ago."

I wanted to say I was sorry, but when I heard myself in my own head, it sounded too much like a cliché. Instead, silence descended over our corner of the room for a while, and as if the volume had been suddenly turned up, I became distinctly aware of the sounds around us: the murmur of conversations, the scrape of chairs, the click of glasses on tables...

I said, "Do you want another drink?"

She nodded. "Sure."

When the second round arrived, we sat sipping. I felt regret that I had agreed to converse with her. I had a strong desire to make my excuses and cut loose from the situation. This wasn't what I needed. I had done the father scene and graduated from it. I didn't want to get involved in this woman's life. It was obvious that she had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to find me, but what was the point? She was an adult; she had a career; she must have friends and family where she came from. Who was I in this mix? Nothing. Nobody.

Finally she spoke. "I'd like to ask a favor."

"Look," I said. "I'm not questioning that you are who you say you are, but this isn't a good time right now."

"It's just one thing and it won't take long."

"What's that?"

"I'd like you to take a blood test."

"A blood test?"

"I just want to know for sure," she said.

"Why?"

"I suppose that anyone who always knew who their father was wouldn't understand."

"A lot of people don't know who their parents are, and a lot of people wish they had different ones."

"Does it seem like an obsession to you?"

"I don't know you and I don't want to judge you."

"I just want to know."

"Have you asked your mother's old boyfriend?"

"I haven't been able to find him. At least not yet."

I frowned and chugged the rest of my drink.

"It's late," I said. "I have to go. I sympathize with your predicament but there's really nothing I can do."

"Please," she said. "I know it's not logical, but it's become the most important thing in the world right now. I can't see beyond it."

"I'm sorry," I said. "To be honest, back then when your mother suggested the possibility, I never thought that I could have been your father. You're looking in the wrong direction. You need to find the other man."

And with that I walked over to the cashier's desk, paid the bill, and left.

* * *

In my hotel room, I logged into Netflix and perused the menu for something to watch. This night, though, nothing seemed to satisfy. I found it difficult to distract myself from the issue at hand.

She was an intruder, I told myself indignantly. She had no right to impose herself upon me at this stage of the game. The window had long passed. People made decisions and moved on, and that's what her mother and I had done so long ago. And now here she was muddying up the waters of the past.

The bookstore sponsoring the reading the next evening had scheduled the event in the auditorium of an art gallery. As I commenced my introductory banter, I scanned the standing-room-only audience but caught no glimpse of her. I requested that the lights be lowered and read a dark fantasy about a rock group that discovers a cursed book high in the Himalayan Mountains. One by one they become bloodthirsty and murderous as they succumb to the spirits of strange creatures that inhabit the manuscript.

When I finished, I received a standing ovation, but I had reduced myself to a state of paranoia. I almost asked to cancel the signing, but realized that not only would I be giving in to my fears, but also that it would be exceedingly unprofessional.

So as the line formed, I sat down at the table, dreading the moment I would encounter Pamela Winters. I attempted to remain upbeat and encouraging to everyone who approached, but it was difficult when all I could think about was avoiding the woman I had labeled in my mind as a stalker. I knew the image was unfair, and I loathed myself for thinking of her in those terms, and that added to my inner confusion.

The signing finished. The bookstore owner shook my hand and thanked me. Pamela hadn't come. I silently berated myself for my misplaced fears.

I buttoned my coat and was just about to push the doors open to leave when I saw her standing on the sidewalk at the base of the front steps.

I went out a side exit and kept to alleys and back streets until I found a cab that could return me to my hotel.

* * *

That night I couldn't sleep. To provide full disclosure: most nights I don't sleep well, but that night the reason was specific and isolated. The scenarios played over and over in my head. I would recall what I could of my affair with Sarah and my proposal to her. I would look at it from all angles and judge myself from a moral perspective. Had I done anything wrong? Should I have reacted differently? Should I have made different decisions and said different things? On and on the tangled speculations erupted, grew, and divided into other timelines according to random circumstances and choices made.

The next reading, the final one in this city, was in the main branch of the public library. The room was designed like an amphitheater, with the podium below and semicircular rows of seats rising steeply one tier after another like the end zone sections in a football stadium.

I was exhausted. What's more, the thrill I usually felt when I read for an audience was absent. I envisioned taking a long break from public appearances after this.

I spotted Pamela halfway up the rows on the right side.

Time slowed almost to a standstill.

I discarded the past and future.

It was one of those moments when you've been coasting for far too long and you realize you've got to get some fresh momentum. A reboot, you might call it.

I stepped up to the podium and performed the reading without trepidation, word by word and sentence by sentence.

I can't even remember how the audience reacted.

Afterwards, I sat down and signed my name in book after book, without concern about who might show up in line.

When I finished, she was waiting for me. We sat down together on the bottom row in the near-empty room.

She looked at me expectantly.

"I'm not going to take the blood test," I said.

She looked as if she were going to respond but then thought better of it.

"Don't try to get me to change my mind. It won't work, and it will only spoil any chance we have for communication in the future."

"Do you want to keep in touch?"

"Sure. Why not? I'd like to know how things work out for you. But you want some advice? Forget your mother's old boyfriend. He obviously didn't want to be found, and that's why he took off so long ago. With that frame of mind, he's not going to agree to a blood test either, and your search will have been a waste of time. Instead of the past, focus on the future."

"That sounds like a cliché."

"I know. I would never use it in a story."

She emitted a short, grief-tinged chuckle.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"If I give this up, I have nothing left. This has been the focus of my life since Mom died."

"She was a wonderful woman."

"Was she? Do you really think so?"

"Look," I said, "I've had a good go of it with my late second career. It's been fun. But sometimes when I can't sleep and it's just me in the small hours of the morning, I go back through my life and question the decisions I made. When I think of your mother, I wonder if I should have pushed harder for the marriage - perhaps even gone to Idaho to work it out. And then I wonder how we would have gotten along together. I think we could have made a go of it."

Pamela smiled, her eyes tear-filmed.

"But we didn't," I said. "That's the truth of it. And no amount of speculation can give us a chance now."

"But there's still a chance for us."

"Yes."

"Well." Pamela stood. "Did you mean it, about keeping in touch?"

I stood too. "Yes."

We walked together to the library main entrance, where she smiled, touched my shoulder, and left.

It's not often that ghosts from my memories take shape and confront me. This one continued down the steps and up the sidewalk without a backward glance.

John Walters is an American writer who spent 35 years abroad in Greece, Italy, India, Bangladesh, and other countries. He currently lives in Seattle, Washington, USA, with two of his five sons. His website is johnwalterswriter.com.

Anniversary - Alec Hutchinson

‘Which is more representative, your first impression of someone, or your lasting impression?’

It was something Philip had been rolling over in his mind for a while, a question he was only half conscious of, but now it had taken shape and here he was, rather unusually, asking his wife.

It took Jane a moment to turn back to her husband. Since they’d arrived she had been thoroughly occupied, first with her phone, then with trying to figure out whether it was in fact Samantha and Henry on the far side of the restaurant. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to see them so soon after the coke *faux pas*; on the other hand, it might have given her credibility. These things are difficult to judge. But it didn’t matter anyway because she was slowly coming to the conclusion that it wasn’t them, although she was still staring in their direction when Philip had mumbled his query. ‘What was that, dear?’

He looked at her awhile before he spoke, the thin features, neck pulled high and tight. Her voice had the champagne ring of certain London dinner parties. This wasn’t something he was noticing now, just a point to acknowledge; he too had affected the accent. Maybe *that* was what he was grasping. You have to adapt to fit in, after all; quirks and domineering individual flair are best left to teenagers. ‘I was just thinking—’

‘Dangerous.’

He pushed on, unfazed. ‘Do you think the first impression you get of someone, when you first meet them, is that who people really are? Or is it the lasting impression, the one they’ve built over time with you?’

He looked like he had more to say, with his earnestly scrunched brow and nervy-looking face, but she cut him off. Better not to indulge this sort of pseudo-intellectual nonsense and spoil what was going to be a perfectly good meal. ‘What on earth are you talking about, Philip?’ The question was defiantly rhetorical. ‘Eat your squid. Have a drink.’

So Philip did as he was told, dipping the battered coils into what was probably mayonnaise and chewing pensively at the rubbery texture. He sipped his wine and looked out at the other patrons while his wife returned to her mobile, having, as she typically did, refused to order an appetiser. The question, however, would not go away. It seemed important. He ruminated further, picking up another piece of squid and treating it like a problem, grinding it between his molars until it had become more of a fluid. Sixteen years, he thought. The number seemed abnormally large. The kind of number you notice.

‘Jesus!’ Jane was sneering at her phone.

‘What is it?’

She had to look up to register him. ‘What?’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘With what?’ She stared back blankly. For a woman of forty-four, she was remarkably wrinkle-free. Lots of creams and scrubs. A careful regime of stoicism. A little Botox—but not a lot.

‘Something on your phone,’ he said, nodding his head and tilting his fork toward her, as if poking it over a tiny wall.

‘Oh, no, don’t worry about it.’

With this he dropped the fork on the plate and sighed and sat back, a trifecta of movements that he hoped would signal that he was tired of being ignored. And yet some part of him also worried that he’d overdone it, that she would turn on him, punish him for his breach of decorum, and so he tried to smile. The effect of all of this at once, to any observer, would have seemed rather sad. But no one was watching. Jane was still fixated by her screen, immersed in a shared story about local scandal involving no one she knew beyond reputation. Philip gazed around the restaurant again: other couples, no families. Mostly the men were much younger than he was, muscles still firm, hair still dark. The din of voices and oriental mood music made it impossible to tell what they were saying to their partners, but the leaning postures — all reciprocated — connoted interest, youth and passion.

He wondered how long ago he Jane had last had sex? Fishing through recollections for an image or a colour, he struggled to place anything.

Philip mulled this tired crease as he finished his final piece of squid, ticking all the old excuses: children and work, the natural settling of age. He’d passed the stage of writing odes to his lover’s eyebrow sometime back. Which stage was he meant to be in now? He could never recall more than half the monologue before skipping to the final lines about oblivion and missing teeth... He remembered Jane skimming an article about sexless couples in Japan and commenting on it while he was in the kitchen — how long ago was that? — bringing it up in passing and in such a way as to preclude any reply. Very advanced culture, she’d said, before leaving the room like a breeze through a window.

The memory stirred an odd sense of injustice, and with his appetiser gone (had he been covering behind it?) he felt the need to speak. ‘This is hardly the way I wanted to spend the evening.’

Jane had heard her husband — it seemed she’d ignored him long enough to agitate him—but she knew from experience that he could be soothed quickly. He didn’t require much, frankly less and less as the marriage matured. Instead of snapping at him and sending him back inside that shell of his, she slowly put the phone away, making sure it was evident that she was doing it of her own accord — finishing the last sentence of the article — and smiling back up at him in a fluid motion, a smile she knew would work. It was the same smile that had sold her in the first place. ‘And how would you like to spend it, my dear?’

‘Talking, I guess. You know, the way everyone else is.’

‘And what would we have to say to each other?’ She’d meant to pitch this line playfully, as if teasing him in a friendly fashion, but she was out of practice and it came out with the wrong inflection, altogether too close to the way she actually felt. He ignored the nuance though, simply pleased he had engagement.

‘Well, I asked a question. Indulge me.’

She held the sigh and committed herself. It was about holding up her end of the bargain, after all. Philip had done his part: he’d been professionally successful, well-respected in his field, mostly tolerant of her parenting decisions. Yes, there had been hiccups. He wasn’t pleased with her diktat that Julian and Celia were to be raised as pescetarians, for example, but she’d overruled him. And that had become the way it was with most things, Philip taking a hands-off, conflict-free approach to their family and social obligations and free to dodder in the background of his own life — a man fifteen years his wife’s senior whose pockets were deep enough to fund trips to the Galapagos and keep her in Bollinger through weekday afternoons. The Galapagos really had been nice — sea turtles and marine iguanas. She was glad she’d arranged it.

‘Okay then,’ she said. ‘What was the question again?’

Without any sense of fatigue, Philip repeated it: ‘What do you think is more truthful, a first impression, or an impression built over a long time?’

‘How do you mean?’ She placed her index finger on her lower lip and her thumb under her chin in a way she felt might give the impression of consideration. Philip seemed fooled.

‘Let’s say you meet Frank and the first thing you feel is that he’s, I don’t know, lecherous.’

‘I like him already. Is he tanned?’

‘But then let’s say you get to know Frank and it turns out he’s only lecherous because he’s desperately lonely and he can’t really get close to women, and so he’s — what’s the word? — overcompensating.’

‘Well that’s just far less attractive.’

‘So there’s the situation: who’s the real Frank — the sleazy one or the lonely one?’

The conversation was very quickly boring Jane, but she tried not to let him see it. ‘I think it’s possible to be both. Can’t he be both?’ Just then the lights and siren of an ambulance sped by on the street outside the restaurant, its syncopated whining receding into the night. She turned her head as it passed. Philip kept his eyes on the space between them, investigating, it seemed, the intricacies of the tablecloth.

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But which is the more authentic one? Which one is more objectively the way it is?’

‘Honestly, Philip, that’s a matter of perspective.’ She finished her glass of wine and started helping herself to another.

‘Well, how about me?’ He was feeling emboldened now; he had something close to a conversation going and it didn’t involve her planning the children’s future or telling him when she’d be home.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your first impression of me.’

‘But you know that story, Philip.’

‘No.’ He shook his head, his grey hair wriggling as he did so. ‘I mean: is your impression of me now different to when you first met me, and which one, according to you, is the most accurate one...?’

She’d been listening, but she had lost her patience. She knew he was sometimes slow on social cues, but she’d never taken him for logically stupid. ‘That’s obvious, Philip. Of course I know you better now. I’ve spent sixteen years with you. I have lots of evidence from which to draw my conclusion, and so my opinion *now* is the accurate one. It’s the one closest to the truth.’

‘Well what did you think of me back *then*?’

She lied, as she always did. She’d lied so often about this over the years, using the same words and the same lilt to her voice that she believed it had become quite blatantly a falsehood to both of them — a section of the narrative for the outside, a tailored piece of public relations that wouldn’t bear the weight of close scrutiny, so why scrutinise it?

‘I thought you were dashing, successful. You hurtled into my life like James Bond.’

Surely he knew this wasn’t true, that it was just part of what he’d purchased at the time, that she’d been simply an excellent saleswoman — and, frankly, an excellent product.

‘And how do you see me now?’ He was fixated.

She took a breath and prepared herself to peddle the spin once again, but something held her back... He was supposed to know this stuff; it was for when other people were in earshot. Here, right now — she didn’t see the point. She found herself stalling. Was he testing her to make sure she had their story straight? It was time to meet his gaze. ‘Why are you asking this?’

‘Do you want to know what my first impression of you was?’

‘Not really, Philip.’

‘Dazzling. Utterly dazzling.’ He smiled at her and paused, losing himself momentarily in the corridors of memory. An art gallery event, something he didn’t particularly understand or enjoy, and there she was, floating across the room — floating up to him — as bubbly as the champagne. He remembered the vivid rouge of her lipstick, short blond hair that hinted at yachts off the coast of France. The reminiscence folded in on itself. She was in front of him, at the table, fingers clasping her glass.

‘It’s just, I’ve been thinking,’ he said. ‘At least, I think I’ve been thinking. Let’s say one’s a good judge of character in general and they meet someone for the first time, all the impressions are raw. They’re fresh. So one can really sense them. Have them fully soak in, if you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, Philip.’

‘But to get to know someone over time, well — I think it’s possible to end up knowing someone less. Your view of them becomes less clear.’ He was imagining foggy windshields and steamed-up shower mirrors, a woman’s outline lost somewhere behind them. ‘Because although they’ll reveal more of themselves to you over time — evidence, as you suggested — *you’re* also changing. You might have a stake in that person, so your judgement gets cloudy, tainted. You become a victim of your own prejudices when you’re making your observations, and so you can’t really see them as true. So your lasting impression of someone could well be the least accurate...’

Jane had been paying more attention as Philip jabbered on. She was getting it now, and maybe for the first time in their marriage she was gathering a full understanding of how little her husband understood what he had bought, or about the terms of the contract. She settled her wine on the table and spoke in a calm, measured tone: ‘How do you see me now, Philip?’

Her husband was looking at the salt and pepper, at his hands around the empty squid dish. He glanced up at her briefly, but he couldn’t seem to articulate what he wanted to say. ‘I... It’s...’

‘I’ll help you,’ she said. Her pulse had not raised, her hands remained calm; this was something she simply had to do, a form that needed filling out—an animal that should have been euthanized long ago. ‘You think I’m cold. You think I’m distant. You think I don’t find you interesting or attractive.’ Her voice retained the same level stillness, like a pond.

‘Jane...’ He could feel a whirring in his ears and found it difficult to move his jaw; it was like he’d been caught in the middle of something indecent, his crime projected for everyone to see, his need to deny it coming not from that fact it was untrue, but from having unclean feelings exposed. She seemed to sense this, though.

‘It’s fine, Philip. You’re right. It doesn’t have to be a nagging suspicion anymore. Your impression over time, well, it’s spot on, old chap...’ The whirring in his ears became hot and loud. The rouge images of the art gallery, her laughter, the turning of her head — they were

breaking into shards. Across the restaurant he could hear someone laughing. ‘I’m just sorry you didn’t understand the terms sooner; if I’d known, I would have made it clear.’

‘What do you mean...?’ He was unused to the forward rush of emotional honesty; the abruptness of it all scared him and made it difficult to sort. She was a teacher explaining the lesson too quickly. ‘You don’t *love* me?’

‘Jesus, Philip!’ She’d raised her voice, squishing him with it. ‘This is what *love* is!’

Philip’s eyes had become glassy. Behind them, sixteen years of stock memories were shuttering and clicking, twining and looping — whole reels of life being watched again and reviewed, watched again and burnt. ‘This isn’t what I wanted,’ he stammered.

‘Sure it is.’ The poor guy seemed to have sprung a leak or blown a gasket. He was just sitting there, upright, his hands at his sides—the way someone might after being flung from the wreckage. Best to tear the bottom right out and start again. She was already thinking what a great anecdote this would make. It was time to press it home.

‘This was the arrangement: you get the wife on the arm, you get some progeny.’ Philip’s eyes remained wide, mute, almost (dare she think it) contrite. Jane continued. ‘You renege on it, it’ll cost you half and probably custody, so you might as well see it through.’ She stopped to take a sip of her pinot.

‘Jane...’ He couldn’t think. It was all rather hard to process. Somehow, he felt the need to apologise... But for what?

She planted her glass and went on. ‘If you didn’t want this, then you should have known better. It’s your fault for being hapless in the first place. The terms are the terms and that’s the way it is.’

He was breathing heavily when the main course arrived. Again, someone across the restaurant laughed. The pan-oriental music continued providing ambience as the waiter refilled Jane’s wine.

They ate in silence.

One of them thoroughly enjoyed the meal.

Alec Hutchinson is the author of three indie novels: *The Bell*, *The Last Resort* (under pseudonym Josh Caverton), and *The Vectors of Herbert Fish*, as well as a collection of short stories, *Asynchronous Ferox*. Originally from Auckland, New Zealand, he currently lives in South London, UK, where he toils happily as a teacher.

*"When you die, others who think they know you, will concoct things about you... Better pick up a pen and write it yourself, for you know yourself best." **Sholom Aleichem***

Since the Castro regime came into power in Cuba, thousands upon thousands of its citizens decamped the island. It is no secret why so many people left: within weeks of assuming power, the new government embarked on a course destined to control every aspect of life in the island. By doing so, the regime made life in Cuba intolerable.

I was one of those who managed to leave. This is the story of the circuitous way in which I made my departure to join the ranks of the Cuban expatriate community.

1

On April 17, 1961, an anti-Castro Cuban assault force that called itself the "2506 Brigade" landed on the southern coast of the island at a beachhead known as Playa Girón, in the swampy Bay of Pigs area. Within seventy-two hours Cuban armed forces decisively defeated the invaders, killing several and capturing the rest. The prisoners were jailed and held for ransom by the government. At the time of the failed invasion, I was eighteen, a freshman studying on a scholarship at a private university. Students and faculty at that university and in other private schools were looked upon with suspicion by the government as wealthy "counter-revolutionaries" and risked imprisonment at any time.

We were hardly typical of the rich and middle-class families that had been streaming out of Cuba since the Revolution came into power. We were blue collar, living hand to mouth in a modest home in one of the poor neighborhoods that ring the center of Havana. My father drove an ancient Chevy taxicab and worked sixteen hours a day to support us. My brother was fourteen and a high school sophomore. My mother was a typical Cuban housewife, devoted to her family and having no significant outside interests.

We were politically inert and under normal circumstances we would never have considered leaving Cuba. However, after the defeat of the 2506 Brigade an atmosphere of near panic surrounded those not belonging to the ranks of the government. There was a rumor that the Government would round up all underage children and move them to internment camps, where they would be re-educated and molded into the Marxist system. It was also rumored that the Government would institute a compulsory military system and keep young men like me from leaving the country. It was a maelstrom of fears that added to the day to day struggle to survive in the increasing penury of the government-controlled economy.

2

In late 1961, my parents reached the painful decision that the family, and we children in particular, had to leave for the United States as soon as possible. Getting out was a lengthy,

difficult, and expensive process involving multiple steps. One of my mother's sisters had left early and had settled in Miami. Her family could afford the fees involved in the process and provided money to pay for things like airline tickets, which had to be purchased in dollars. The main obstacle to our departure, though, was bureaucratic. The United States had broken diplomatic relations with Cuba in early 1961, so there were no consular offices where one could apply for a visa to travel to the United States. Instead, a way in which some could come to this country from Cuba involved the use of "visa waivers." Such waivers could be issued automatically to children under sixteen years of age; older minors needed clearance from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the FBI. In either case, once minors entered the United States, they could bring in their parents by applying to the State Department for their visa waivers.

Thus, our plan was to apply for visa waivers that would allow my younger brother and I to travel to the United States. Once there, I would apply for a visa waiver for my parents.

Although my brother and I applied for visa waivers at the same time, he obtained his in June 1962 and was approved for departure the next month. Because I was older, the processing of my visa waiver application took much longer, so that when my brother was given a departure date my application was still pending. That was the first wrenching decision my family faced: whether to keep my brother with us until we both could leave, potentially forfeiting future travel opportunities for him; or send him to the United States alone and have him wait there for my arrival. There was no way we would have agreed to send him alone, but my aunt in Miami told us that she would take care of my brother pending my departure. On that basis, he left in July 1962.

It was never clear to us why my aunt would not have my brother live with her. Instead, he was turned over to a program run by the Catholic Welfare Bureau, which had established shelters for unaccompanied Cuban minors. My brother was placed in one of those shelters, called Camp Matecumbe, where he remained cut off from all except for occasional visits by my aunt. He was traumatized by the experience.

3

Finally, in mid-October, we were notified that my visa waiver had been approved and my departure from Cuba was impending. I had mixed feelings about leaving my family behind under such a precarious state of affairs, but was prevailed upon by my parents, who insisted that my first and greatest duty was to go to Miami and rescue my brother. I bowed to their pressure, but also was somewhat egotistically glad to leave Cuba's hellhole behind. On Saturday, October 20, 1962 I received a telegram (the government official notices to departing citizens came by telegram, frequently in the dead of night) setting my departure for a week hence, on October 27. I was to present myself at the office of Pan American Airways and purchase a ticket for the flight.

4

On Monday October 22 I arrived at the Pan Am ticket office and found it in turmoil, with literally dozens of people roaming around, begging and arguing in increasing loud voices as they tried to get on a flight out of Cuba, although in most cases they were not authorized to travel and Pan Am was unable to honor their requests. It took a couple of hours for me to clear past the mob and reach the window. Five minutes later, I was on my way home, airline ticket in my pocket and a deep feeling of relief in my heart. I arrived home in time to listen to the evening newscast from the Voice of America on the short-wave radio that we hid in the kitchen. The news came on: its first item was the voice of President Kennedy announcing that the United States was imposing a naval blockade on Cuba to prevent the arrival of Russian ships, now in the middle of the ocean, that carried nuclear warheads with the intent of deploying them on the missiles already in place in Cuba, aimed at the United States.

The following morning the Cuban government cancelled all commercial flights in and out of Cuba. The Pan Am office where I had just purchased my ticket was closed.

5

As the gravest military confrontation the world had seen unfolded, my family experienced a crisis of its own. Like all Cubans, we feared that if there was open warfare between the United States and the U.S.S.R., Cuba would certainly be wiped off the face of the earth. But I faced an additional, personal threat. I was marooned in Cuba and everybody in government knew that I was a traitor that had been trying to leave the country. If there was any military action, I would be one of the first people to be rounded up and jailed, as had happened in 1961 during the Playa Girón invasion, when thousands of disaffected Cubans throughout the island were rounded up and caged for several days under threat of execution. We hardly slept those terrible days, as brinkmanship between the two top world powers brought the planet to the verge of ruin.

6

Finally, the Russian ships turned around and the international crisis was defused. But in Cuba things did not go back to normal. All people like myself that had been in the process of leaving Cuba, plus many others that had been prompted to try to escape by the “missile crisis,” began looking for alternative ways of getting out. People lined up by the hundreds, day and night, at foreign country consulates, anxiously seeking nearly impossible to obtain visas to travel to those countries. I went to the Mexican consulate once and left in deep despair. People who could not claim a direct link to that country were being turned away, thus my chances of being able to leave in that manner were non-existent. My future life prospects were dim. I could not try to go back to school, for admission to the State universities would have required me to become a member of the Communist Party. So, I entertained myself by studying French and German at schools sponsored by the respective embassies, and read a lot, but tried to keep as low a profile as possible, always under the watchful eye of our block’s *Comité de Defensa de la Revolución*, the vigilante group that spied on us and our neighbors to ensure we did nothing proscribed by the state.

7

In the meantime, the United States and Cuba had been negotiating a resolution of the problem posed by the imprisoned 2506 Brigade members. Talks had been going on for a year and a half when, in the aftermath of the missile crisis, a deal was finally struck. In an effort financed by the U.S. Government and some private enterprises and fronted by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Cuba agreed to release the prisoners and allow them and their immediate families to be transported to the United States in exchange for fifty-three million dollars' worth of food, medical supplies, and tractors, which Castro touted as great benefits to Cuba from the deal. Ferries were engaged to bring the food, the tractors, and other supplies to Cuba. On their return, the same ferries would take the released prisoners and their families to Miami. The ferries, however, had more capacity than what was needed to take the prisoners back, and an addition was made to the deal. There were several thousand unaccompanied minors in U.S. government facilities, at great cost to this country and considerable pain to the children and their parents in Cuba. Space would be provided in the ferries for the children's parents and underage siblings to come to the United States, under what became called the "family reunification program." The Castro government agreed to this expansion of the deal, for it cost Cuba nothing and allowed it to get rid of a large number of undesirables.

My brother was among the unfortunate children that now were going to be instrumental in rescuing their parents, a surprising twist in the Cuban exodus saga.

8

For many months, my parents had been burdened by guilt at leaving their youngest child alone in a strange land. The news that they might be able to finally rejoin him brought immeasurable relief to their conscience, but as the days came and went and the ferry trips approached their end their relief was replaced by anxiety. Why were they not being contacted? There were rumors that people had been able to bribe their way into the ferries, despite having no right to do so. Were they stealing our place? My father went to the former U.S. embassy, now being staffed by Swiss embassy personnel, and tried to get an explanation. He was told politely that the process was ongoing and was sent away. My father was never a patient person and being brushed off that way made him angry and disconsolate but there was nothing for us to do but wait.

Finally, we received a telegram from the Swiss embassy addressed to my parents asking them to appear on Friday, May 17, 1963 at the U.S. embassy building for processing. We were concerned because I was not included among those summoned for the interview with the Swiss officials. What were we going to do?

My father was as decisive as I ever had seen him: "All three of us will show up and we'll see what happens."

9

The U.S. Embassy building sits on the waterfront in the wealthy section of Havana. The building itself is large but unimpressive: a concrete and glass box without great architectural appeal. For those of us who were desperate to leave Cuba, it was the symbol of a freedom that only a few months earlier had appeared unattainable and now seemed within reach. Entrance to the building

was guarded by Cuban soldiers as well as Swiss diplomats. As always, there was an inevitable line of people with and without appointments trying to get in to confirm their good fortune or plead for help. It was a warm May morning, and a pleasant breeze blew in from the sea. As I stood in line, however, I was shivering.

My fears were reinforced when my father showed the appointment telegram to the Cuban guard at the entrance. He reviewed it, nodded at my parents and demanded: "And who's he?" pointing to me. "It's my son" declared my father, adding in a firm voice: "He's coming with us." The guard was about to protest, but the Swiss clerk intervened: "That is OK. Let them through."

We sat in an auditorium, in the company of about a hundred other men, women, and small children. As we waited, we witnessed scenes of human distress and anguish. The couple sitting behind us had a minor daughter alone in Miami. They were set to rejoin her, but the wife had a conflict: her other, older daughter had cerebral palsy and had nobody to care for her. They were trying to decide whether they would go together to the States, or the mother would stay behind. The wife wavered, once and again changing her mind, wringing her hands, and crying desperately. Finally, the exasperated husband turned to her and almost bellowed: "Listen, a horse has four legs and all go on the same road. Either we all go together or we stay here and pray that God protects our Felisa."

We never knew how the unfortunate couple dealt with their dilemma, because my father's name was called and we were taken to a small office adjacent to the auditorium. There, behind a desk, sat the blondest man I had ever seen. He was in his forties, pale as chalk, and immaculately dressed in a grey suit and a matching silk tie. He wore in his lapel a carefully stenciled name tag that read: "Klaus Spenhauer, First Secretary." He spoke gently, but with great authority.

"So, you are the parents of [my brother]. Do you wish to travel to America to reunite with him?" My mother almost didn't let him finish. "More than anything else!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you are in luck. The ferry trips are over, but there have also been flights that came to bring perishable medications and took people back to the United States. The next to last of these flights leaves on Wednesday, May 22, five days from today. Can you be ready by that day?" My mother replied impetuously: "Yes, yes!!"

My father placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Mr. Spenhauer, Sir, there is a problem."

"What's that?"

My father pointed to me and said firmly: "This is our other son [...]. He needs to come with us, but is not on the list."

The Swiss turned to me: "Son, how old are you?"

I gulped and answered truthfully: "Twenty."

Mr. Spenhauer turned to my father and shook his head in sympathy. “I’m truly sorry. The program under which you are to travel is available only to the parents of unaccompanied minors in the United States and their minor children. Your son is not a minor. I cannot authorize his travel.”

I felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck me and rendered me insensate. I fought the numb feeling and addressed the man for the first time: “Sir, I am still a minor under Cuban law.”

Mr. Spenhauer looked at me appraisingly. I held his gaze. There was a pause. The only sound in the room was the whirring of the window air conditioning unit.

Finally, the Swiss reached into his coat pocket and extracted the most beautiful artifact that I have ever seen: A black Montblanc fountain pen. He unscrewed the top and carefully entered my name on the telegram that advised of our parents’ authorization to travel. He then opened a drawer, took out a sheet of paper and added the same name to a typewritten list. He got up and waved us goodbye, and shook my hand as we left. “Good luck in America,” he said.

10

That weekend we alternated between frantic activity putting our affairs in order and waiting fretfully for the final days of our stay in Cuba to end. Sunday afternoon we received the fateful telegram from the Ministerio del Interior advising that the three of us had been granted a permit to leave the country and were scheduled to depart on Wednesday. The same night we received the departure telegram, we were visited by four female members of our block’s *Comité*, the vigilante group that spied on us and our neighbors to ensure we did nothing prescribed by the state. They came to draw a detailed inventory of our household possessions, which were to become government property upon our departure. They took note of everything we owned, from my mother’s frying pans to my father’s two dress suits (one of which he would be allowed to wear the day we left). The leader of the group, a Socialist firebrand by the name of Crispina Vázquez, even opened the bookcase in the living room and entered in her notebook the titles of all my books, from the high school textbooks to the few comic books that I had kept since early childhood. Somehow, that felt like a particularly stinging violation and I had to restrain myself from crying out my anger at the vultures.

11

Monday flew by in a blur of activity. We spent very little time packing, for we would be allowed to take with us only one change of clothes per person, our shaving gear, and my mother’s modest cosmetics bag. We would not be permitted to take an extra pair of shoes, for there was a great scarcity of footwear in Havana and our other scuffed and worn shoes and sneakers would benefit worthier members of society. Apart from packing, each of us went out to visit close friends and neighbors to say our goodbyes, and my father took a long bus ride to see his cousin Pablo, who had a truck and agreed to drive us to the airport the following morning. I went with my father to turn over his taxicab at a government depot, several miles away from home. It was a blood curdling drive: the ten-year old Chevy had three hundred thousand kilometers in its odometer and was on its very last legs. It coughed and sputtered and stalled on us twice as we made our

slow way to the depot. It stalled one final time, and died, right in front of the depot; fortunately, the entrance to the lot went slightly downhill and we were able to shift the car into neutral and gently push it into an empty parking space. We got a receipt and left as quickly as our legs would take us, for it was virtually certain that the car would never start again.

12

The last requirement before departure was the inspection of our home Tuesday morning by the Comité women, who were to ascertain that we are leaving everything on their list behind and had not tried to give anything away. They promptly showed up at seven-thirty and went over the entire house with a fine tooth comb. Then a problem arose when Crispina Valdés, looking at the contents of my bookcase, noted acidly: “There’s a book missing.” “What’s that?” I replied, torn between anger and fear. “*Fortunata y Jacinta* by Benito Pérez Galdós” replied the dragon lady, reading from her list. There followed a few moments of panic, while I went over the contents of the bookcase, and mother opened and closed drawers in all rooms. I couldn’t make sense of the loss of that book. My mother seldom read anything besides the papers, and I loathe the work of Pérez Galdós and would not have given that book even to my worst enemy; the book had belonged to my grandmother and had come into my possession after she passed away.

Things were starting to get testy when my father cleared his throat and confessed sheepishly: “I know where the book is.” He led a procession to our small bathroom, opened the door, and pointed to the top of the toilet. “It’s there.”

I went over and picked the large paperback tome, whose pages were yellow with age. “Dad” I exclaimed, “I didn’t know you liked Spanish literature.” He cleared his throat again and explained: “With all the excitement, I have been constipated for several days. I took the book to the can to pass the time while nature took its course.”

He handed the book to Crispina, who opened it and let out a tiny scream: “But this book has been mutilated. The first 78 pages are missing!”

My father turned crimson and went on to explain: “This is not the first time I take this book to the bathroom. I like it because the pages are thin and brittle with age and crumple easily.”

I could not repress a chuckle. “Señora Vázquez, I am very sorry, but this is all we can give you. The rest of the book is no longer available.” In my mind, I added: “Dad found a perfect use for Pérez Galdós.”

13

On Wednesday morning cousin Pablo drove us to the Havana International Airport and dropped us and our bags at the entrance. Unlike an earlier era, the airport was mostly deserted – except for a side corridor where a trio of Interior Ministry officials, in full uniform, sat at a wooden desk inspecting the documentation of the hundred-plus passengers that were to depart that day for the United States. They made no effort to conceal their disdain for us worms seeking to leave for the land of the imperialists. They looked at all our documents in meticulous detail, trying to find

something that would justify keeping us from getting away. The leader of the three looked at the pen-inscribed entry that had me on the approved departure list. He frowned: "This is very irregular. How come you were approved to travel? You don't look like a child." I tried to remain calm and replied icily: "Don't ask us. You need to take this up with the Swiss." I thought he was going to strike me; he turned red and replied: "I most certainly will. In the meantime, you can proceed with your family to the examination room for the physical inspection."

The physical inspection was a humiliating full body exam to make sure we were not trying to smuggle jewelry or other valuables in our bodies. My mother wept from embarrassment. I could see from my father's clenched fists that he was at the verge of exploding and ruining our chances of escape. Luckily, he was able to control himself.

The next step was to move to the departure lounge (colloquially dubbed the "fish bowl"), a glass enclosed cubicle next to the tarmac where a solitary Pan Am propeller plane sat. All the prospective travelers sat in full view of the plane while, outside the fish bowl, friends and relatives of the soon to depart passengers carried conversations among themselves and, by gestures, with their loved ones who they might never see again. There was profuse crying on both sides of the walls.

I was oblivious to the tumult around me. The threat of the Cuban official still resonated in my ears; I expected to be dragged out at any minute and be separated from my parents, perhaps forever.

They began calling the departing families, one by one, and after a last look at each voyager's papers, they were escorted through the side door of the lounge and on the pavement for the walk to the plane. A Swiss official stood at the plane's stairway and shook the hands of each one as they mounted the final steps towards freedom.

The families were called in alphabetical order and, since we were near the end, I shook uncontrollably, wishing for the first time in my life that my surname had been Aguilar or Alvarez. But nobody came to arrest me. My guess is that either the Cuban official gave up on his quest or was countermanded by his superiors, for nobody dared risk antagonizing the Swiss diplomats.

We boarded the plane, were seated, and were greeted by a pretty stewardess in Pan Am uniform with a Red Cross armband as an insignia. She quickly distributed ham and cheese mini sandwiches, cups of Coke, and small packs of Chesterfield cigarettes. She apologized in heavily accented Spanish: "Today's flight will be short. We will land in Miami in about thirty minutes after takeoff. Please enjoy your flight and welcome to the United States."

I sank into my seat and closed my eyes as the engines were started and the plane slid on the strip and after a few seconds climbed onto the skies. I missed my chance to take a last look at the country of my birth. At the moment, I did not feel sorry for the loss. Now I do.

I never found out what happened to the unsung hero of this story, Carl Spenhauer. Presumably, as a member of Switzerland's diplomatic corps, he led a successful professional life and died, perhaps in the company of his family, somewhere in his beautiful homeland. I made it a habit of buying Montblanc pens, and the last one is still in a drawer in my office. I don't use it; who pens letters any more? Still, I take it out occasionally, look at it, and remember my Swiss benefactor with undying gratitude.

Matias Travieso-Diaz is a Cuban-American engineer and attorney, retired after half a century of professional practice in Washington, D.C. Following retirement, he has taken up creative writing and authored many short stories of various lengths and genres. His stories have appeared in over two dozen publications in the United States, the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Because It's Poetry - Ron Healy

“Old People from Texas eat spiders” (head bones).

“Virgil Can Not Make My Pet Zebra Laugh” (facial bones).

In high school biology I tried to memorize all the bones in the human body. If the teacher called on you and you could recite some bone systems (cranium, wrist, shoulder, etc.), you'd get extra credit. I could remember some because of their catchy mnemonics, but too often I was thoroughly distracted by the lovely Suzette L _____, who sat in front of me, whose entire body, from head to toe, I will never forget. Who frequently turned back to whisper to the girl sitting next to me, revealing her enchanting profile. Ah, those lovely bones: zygomatic (cheek); mandible (jaw); and inferior nasal concha, palatine, and vomeronasal cartilage (nose). And more: the bright blue eyes (framed by the nasal, lacrimal, and zygomatic bones), the blond curls (undergirded by six or seven of the cranial bones), the captivating smile (mandible, maxilla, plus a bunch of muscles). And when at the end of the class she stood and gathered her books in the basket of her arms, forcing a sumptuous amplitude forward...all bones were forgotten in that splendid moment.

“The anus is nothing, it's just a hole!” Thus, several years later in the large lecture classroom, my Biology 101 prof as he concludes a didactic journey through the human alimentary canal.

And a querulous student voice: “Do we have to poke holes in those poor frogs? I don't have the heart for it.” And the prof: “Three things: Number 1: It's called pithing. You pith frogs.” Scattered titters through the lecture hall.

I hear a whisper from several rows behind me: “Did you know that they piss when they're pithed?”

Another whispers: “I guess it really piths them off.” Localized suppressed laughter.

Disgusted look on the prof's face. “You have something to share back there? No? All right. Number 2: Yes, you do have to pith frogs. Or would you rather work with cadavers?” Silence except for a few groans. “Number 3: The heart is not the seat of emotions. It's here in the brain”—tapping his head—where all thoughts and feelings originate. Get this! The Mesopotamians thought it was the liver!” Here he slaps the right side of his besuited belly, distaste on his face, as if he would spit were he not in the lecture hall. “Heart, liver, whatever. That's not science! That's nonsense! That's just poetry!” He pauses, clears his throat. Smiles condescendingly. “And speaking of brains and hearts: The octopus has nine of one and three of the other. (I'll leave it to you to find out which is which.) We humans somehow get by with only one of each. Furthermore, the octopus, like the banana, has no bones.” Puzzled looks throughout the lecture hall. “The octopus makes do with just cartilage. This allows it to squeeze through the tiniest spaces, unlike the great escape artist Houdini, whose many bones severely limited his abilities.” Pauses. Continues to smile condescendingly. “My next lecture is on the human

skeleton. Who can tell me how many bones are in the body of a fully grown human? (Which you may assume yourselves to be.)”

A few voices (mine included): “206!”

“Good. Some of you have been reading ahead in your textbooks. However, some consider the sternum to be three bones, which, scholars”—gesturing at the class—“would make a total of how many?”

A chorus of “209!”

From the back of the room a bold dissenting voice: “208!”

“Exactly!” says the prof. “Stand up!” The student stands up. “A true scholar! A for the day! A+! The rest of you...” (sarcastically) “scholars: Do the math! Class dismissed!”

Two weeks later, in a lab session on the circulatory system, we are instructed to team up with the person to our right and take each other’s pulse. I’m in seat three of six in the row and to my right in seat four — Thank you, Jesus! — is a girl who could be Suzette L.’s better-looking cousin. She takes hold of my wrist in a practiced way (sending a chill down my spine), looks at her watch, and releases my wrist after only fifteen seconds. “Twenty-two. You have a piano pulse,” she says.

“Wait! You only took it for fifteen seconds. And what’s a ‘piano pulse’?”

“Do the math. I’m studying to be a nurse. Fifteen seconds is all I need. Is your pulse always that rapid?”

“Only when you take it,” I say, amazed at my own glibness. I take hold of her wrist, placing my thumb underneath and my middle finger on what I have recently learned is her radial artery. She flexes her wrist slightly as I grasp it.

“Is that your scaphoid I feel with my thumb?”

“I don’t know. You aren’t counting.”

“I used to know all eight bones of the human wrist. Now all I know is the mnemonic.”

I whisper it in her ear. She colors, snatches her hand back, and turns away from me.

“What’s going on there?” the lab instructor, a grad student, says.

“I goofed. I didn’t get her pulse.”

“Did she get yours?”

“Yes!” she says. “Eighty-eight too many!”

Puzzled, the instructor cocks his head. “Well, never mind. Let’s move along. Get together with your lab groups. We’re going to look at some blood.”

“Take some of his,” she says. “I think he’s got too much.”

Later, after my English class, which is devoted to an attempt to define poetry, I linger in the hall with the prof. I tell him about the mnemonic for the wrist bones and my gaucherie with the girl in biology lab.

“You whispered *that* in her ear?” he says. “You devil you!”

I tell him I think it’s odd that I can remember the mnemonic but only one bone, the scaphoid, which is represented by the first word of the mnemonic. And I tell him about the biology prof’s equation of poetry with nonsense. He is appropriately indignant.

“See this?” he says. He wags his finger in my face. “This is how I use my wrist to respond to your biology prof. Who cares what the wrist bones are called! Now, say it again, the mnemonic.” I say it again. He laughs. “That scans nicely. After the initial monosyllable it’s trochaic. Say again.”

Some lovers try positions that they cannot handle.

“You know why you remember that?” he says. “Because it’s poetry.”

Ron Healy lives in the woods near Sleeping Bear Dunes (Empire, Michigan, USA) near Lake Michigan. He is retired, having worked at a variety of jobs ranging from pulpwood cutter to academic librarian, his last job. He discovered poetry as a child in the fifties, published in little magazines in the eighties, stopped submitting (but not writing) for several decades, recently started again, and has read poems in the last couple of years at (and was published by) Poets' Night Out in Traverse City. He expects that this current writing and submitting phase will last the rest of his life. This particular piece of writing started as a poem but turned into a story.

Renaissance - Margery Bayne

Chip creeps up like a fog.

“You want something to drink?” he asks loud enough and close enough to be heard over the heartbeat thump of the music.

You tell him the same thing you do every night.

From the VIP balcony you watch the crowd of a hundred-plus people pulse like one organism below. Dancing among them, like a neon splotch, is a girl in a hot pink tube top, who is definitely too young to be in here.

Chips spider-fingers graze your arm as he passes you the glass of bourbon. Had he left and come back already? Or had he come prepared?

There was a time when you took pleasure in being the only person Chip would get a drink in his own club.

Below, the lights go down and the crowd roars. It's 11 o'clock. It always happens at 11 o'clock. The band frontman yells: “Are you ready to get down tonight!” An electric guitar squeals.

The air tastes tangy and oppressive with sweat. Overhead, an air duct churns to life, spurted your shoulders with cold.

“You could join us,” Chip says into your ear.

Behind you are a pool table and leather couches, and a party of the exclusive selection. They're alumni of Chip's same business program, or his father's friends' sons, or some other distant collaborations, plus plus-ones.

There was also a time when you played hostess. You would laugh. You would charm. You would curl your hand around Chip's arm like touch was desirable.

But you feel like someone at some point has taken a paint stripper to you, and all that's left is faded out and smudged. Maybe you did it to yourself. You paint on your face now instead: eyebrows and eyelashes, contour and blush. An imitation of a person you don't have the energy to pretend to be. If your face is pretty, you don't have to expend the effort to be a pretty soul, or a soul at all. People will take you at face value and extrapolate.

He's gone. You're gone. You drink. You taste nothing.

The band descends into its first song of the genre pop-y, danceable, and forgettable. Except for a harmonizing voice. It's familiar. You blink at a distant face on stage. You know that man on the guitar.

After the set, you totter down a narrow staircase in dangerously high heels.

A green room. A knock. An admittance. Eyes meet.

"Kris." He says your name like it's a note that never fits on any scale.

"Nick," you say back, a million greetings, an impossible history, all fit into his name.

A whole lot of words pile on after this -- 'how are you' and 'I missed you' and 'how long has it been?' and 'ten years' and 'wow, really, ten years?' -- and it doesn't matter who says which part.

What's ten years and small talk platitudes between two people who used to share 'I love you's'? An impassable chasm and also a single step forward into a familiar embrace.

He pens a phone number on your hand in blue ink like an extra set of veins rising to the surface.

"Where've you been?" Chip asks when you reappear in the balcony like an assistant in a magic trick.

"I wanted to talk to the band." An answer that's an equal part mystery. It's been a long time since you've wanted to do anything.

But it's 2am; the club is closing. Chip cellophanes an arm around your waist as if to test your sustainability, and leads you to the car, to the penthouse, to the bedroom, to sleep.

#

You awake some time north of noon and glide around undead for a few hours after. The phone number is a readable blur on your left palm after sleeping, washing hands, and forgetting. Was that written there last night? Two nights ago? Or just a few hours back?

You call. Hang up at three rings. Wait forty five seconds. Call again.

"Hello?" A curious voice. His. Probably pitched at a note he could identify.

"Hey." A reply. A drone, but he knows you.

A plan is set: coffee, today, soon. You need a shower first.

Because you're bad at time, because it slides past you like cement and also sometimes skips forward outside all rules of relativity, you arrive twenty-three minutes late. Regardless, Nick stands when he sees you, like this isn't just a coffee shop with vinyl tables, vinyl chairs, and vinyl pastries. People stand for judges and queens. Not for perpetually 29 year old unemployable women who haven't even picked up a paintbrush for six (seven? nine? thirteen?) months.

No gallery showings, no awards, no sales, no contests or acclaim. No paintings are even being made.

Forget all hypotheticals about trees and forests and sounds the real inquiry is this: if you're an artist that doesn't make art, are you still an artist? Or is the pure ambition enough? Because if you do it and fail, you're a hack or a sell out or the bullshit dreamer everyone hates. Get a real fucking job, amiright? If you stop painting, you can't fail, and you might just save your pure artistic soul from unoriginal damnation.

He asks about the painting, after the lattes are brought, the biscotto is split. Of course he asks, because 'art' in its hallowed glory was your shared religion, once upon a time in the beginning, although you were in the denomination of the visual and he a worshiper of the sound.

You deflect, take a sip of that over-sweat coffee-like drink, say, "Oh, it's... coming along."

"I know how that feels," he says, but you deny him this common ground. No, no. He was on stage last night (two nights ago? Just a few hours back?). He was hashtag making it.

"Well, it's... it's..." He is embarrassed, but he's glowing from the inside. "It's not exactly what I'd do with all the creative freedom in the world, but it's getting paid to do what I love. It's an audience caring... I can never hate the frets under my fingertips."

You close your eyes and instead of darkness you see goldenrod yellow.

#

The girl in the hot pink tube top is back. She weaves through the crowd like that is its own sort of dance. You watch her. She never goes to the bar, never lingers long with any one partner, and doesn't seem interested in finding someone to leave with.

She's just here to dance.

Not for fame. Not to seduce. Just for the existence of the dance itself.

"When was the last time we danced?" you ask Chip when he comes over to deliver your drink. Did your mind skim over and forget him asking you what you wanted, or was he the one that skipped his part?

“Did you want to?”

You shake your head in a tiny shimmer of ‘no.’ Dancing feels young, and you feel too old. And tired. And weary. Like it’s perpetually winter.

But you do... want. Not dancing. Just -- in its various sensations -- want.

#

The studio had been a gift easily given by Chip: a spare room in a spacious place. Chip was good at supporting when it came to financial things. Studio, supplies, shrinks. And it was good to have a pretty girl who had something on her mind to talk about at dinner parties.

Before you - a stool, an easel, and a blank canvas are already set up from the last time you entered. The last time you left without making a mark. When your desire to make that first stroke of the perfect vision in your heart had been constricted by the limitations of the brush, the acrylics, the talent.

Today you pool paint in your palm and smear it across the canvas. This isn’t art. It’s evidence. The cool paint is like congealed blood in your hands.

When you’re done, you’re covered. Yellow and green, chartreuse up your ring finger, periwinkle across your wrist.

You don’t need art right now. Not art as it’s become, choking you with pretension and expectations and the ever pounding, anxious need to be great. And the ever pounding, anxious fear that you never would be; that it was already too late.

No, you just need creation. Something that didn’t exist that now does, with you being that chemical factor. Just you and the canvas and the monstrosity smeared on it.

You hear a knock on the door. Chip leans in the frame in his daytime business button down.

“It’s been a long time since I walked in on you in here,” he says. “I like it.”

You blink, think: pretty girls with something on their mind to talk about at dinner parties. A girl that paints on canvas is better than a girl that just paints on her face.

He steps closer, looking past you, to the canvas. “Would that be... abstract expressionism?”

Oh, you think.

Because Chip hadn't known anything about art until he met you, and then gallivanted across the city to every museum and gallery you wanted, listened to you talk, and (most important) remembered.

Oh.

You've judged him too harshly. You had fallen into a living nightmare illusion where you were unlovable and unloving, so you absorbed what everyone else saw and spat it back out. What else could the magnet attraction between a rich guy and a pretty girl be but tactical self-service?

"I guess," you say. "Kind of... Joan Mitchell-like."

"I'll have to look her up," he says. You know he means it.

Just because love was something you've forgotten the shape of doesn't mean he had too. You had loved him once, back when you saw everything full hue instead of deeply tinted with gray. Maybe you could again, if you could push far enough through the smog.

You say, "I haven't been very nice to you lately, have I?"

"You've been depressed." He meant that with a capital D.

You press the back of your hand to your mouth, transferring paint to your lips by accident, the taste base and chemical.

"I want to love things again," you say, although want, in itself, isn't enough. You can "want" out of your allergies or back pain, but that doesn't heal you. But *want* is more than what you had yesterday, this morning, an hour ago.

He looks at you with a softness in his eyes. Yesterday, this morning, an hour ago, you would've interpreted it as a vacant look, looking beyond you, his mind busy with elsewhere more interesting. Right now, because you're feeling good enough (not good, not better, but good enough) you had remembered what the little dip in his eyelids meant: he wasn't just looking at you now, but at you past, present, and future. You hadn't been able to accept yourself as even a paint smear recently; how were you to believe someone else saw you as the Louvre?

"What's different today?" he asks. "From other days."

From yesterday, this morning, an hour ago.

What answer do you have to give? Maybe your brain is on your side today, balancing out. Or maybe the medicine is kicking in. Or maybe a melodious echo from the past reminded you who you used to be and who you used to want to be. Or, a fortuitous combination.

You turn back to your painting-creation. This is it. Every meal your mother ever cooked you. Every laugh a friend ever dragged out of your chest. Every memory imprinted in your head, and

every one you imprinted in someone else's: a bad painting, a catchy pop song echoing in your ear, a dance just for the sake of dancing, all the things that exist because you make them exist.

You say, "I wanted to know I was still alive."

This is it.

***Margery Bayne** is a librarian by day and a writer by night. She is a published short story writer and an aspiring novelist from Baltimore, Maryland, USA. In 2012, she graduated from Susquehanna University with a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing and is currently pursuing a master's degree in library science. When not reading and writing, she enjoys running, origami, and being an aunt. More about her and her writing can be found at www.margerybayne.com.*

My Autumn - Elizabeth Gault

"I can't believe how warm it still is."

"No, must be that global warming they're always on about."

They roll me backwards and forwards between them, smoothing the new sheets onto the bed with a practised lack of attention.

"The seasons are all over the place. When is autumn supposed to start, anyway?"

The September equinox. It fell on September 23rd this year.

My voice comes out as the faintest wisp of sound and the uniformed nurse looks as surprised as if the pillows had tried to join in the conversation.

"What was that, Mr Peters?"

The equinox. The 23rd.

Even I can barely hear my words.

"I'm sure that'll be lovely," she says loudly, patting my shoulder. They tuck in the final sheet corner and bustle on.

I gaze out of the window, where the trees are dancing their green-gold leaves against a cloudless sky. The window is shut, but I can imagine the dry and rustling chatter of the branches.

* * *

I can still hear the deep, hearty crunch of the drifts of leaves I waded through as a child. Golds, reds, browns; I loved the colours of autumn. The gorgeous, glowing scarlet of the acer tree in the churchyard and the shining gloss of a conker newly popped from its shell. I came home with my pockets stuffed with leaves and horse chestnuts, and was soundly scolded by my mother.

"Why are you bringing those dirty things into the house? Look at the mess!"

I gazed dismayed at the crumbs and crackles of dead leaves that lay around my feet on the pale grey rug.

"Get back outside and put all that rubbish where it belongs!"

I trooped dutifully into the garden, heading behind the trees to the compost heap where the gardener threw the grass clippings, windfall apples and raked leaves. I emptied my pockets, stroking my fingers over the fiery colours and trying to ignore the heart-breaking wrench of throwing such beauty away.

The three biggest, shiniest, newest conkers I hid in various pockets and resolutely turned my back on the neat row that now lined the edge of the compost heap. My mother shook her head as I slunk into the house.

I smuggled the conkers up to my room, and in bed that night I took them out to gloat over them. By then they were already beginning to dull, and by morning they were simply the pleasant brown of the table in the dining room downstairs.

I never tried to bring autumn home with me again, but each year I roamed through the woods, rustling through the giant piles of leaves and glorying in the colours. I could never resist picking up conkers, cracking them damply out of their spiny shells. I took beeswax polish from the kitchen, and varnish from the tool shed and even my mother's face cream from the bathroom cabinet, but nothing could preserve their beautiful sheen.

* * *

"Come on, Mr Peters, nearly finished."

She lifts the spoon up to my mouth, tilting in the soup. Carrot soup, I think, though I can't be sure.

She follows my gaze out of the window, where the sun is setting behind the trees, and for a moment she puts down the spoon and smiles at me.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

* * *

As I got older, my walks strayed out of our grounds and into the wilder woods beyond. The bare trees were noble in the frosts and snows of winter, and each spring I watched for the acid,

stinging green of the new beech leaves. Late summer saw me eating wild blackberries until my lips were stained and my fingers scratched and torn. But it was in autumn every year that I spent every hour I could outside.

My mother frowned and sniped about my long walks, but so long as I kept ahead in my schoolwork and got home in time for meals, my father nodded his permission. Daily I raced through Latin declensions and algebra, determined to have an hour or two of daylight to walk the narrow paths before supper.

That September I had been watching a hare, hoping to catch a glimpse as she returned around sunset to feed her last litter of the summer. I crouched half behind a tree, watching for the reddish fur and black tail in the long grass, wondering when the leverets would be left to fend for themselves.

I turned my head to one side, trying to ease my cramped neck, and gasped as I saw a girl my own age lolling easily against the base of a huge oak. The afternoon sun fell on her brown hair, hitting pure notes that sang like new chestnuts. She smiled at me, and her lips looked berry-stained even though I knew the last of the blackberries had fallen weeks ago.

I straightened up, holding my hand out to pull her to her feet. I wanted to gather her into my arms, run my fingers through her shining hair, kiss her berry lips. I reached towards her, then snatched my hands back, shocked at my own rudeness.

"I'm sorry! My apologies, miss." I felt my face burning, probably an unpleasant brick red compared to the delicate apricot flush that spread across her cheeks.

She laughed and swung easily to her feet, put her arms around my neck and leaned against me. She smelled of late, golden sunshine and bonfire smoke, and when I put my hand on her arm her skin was as soft as the furred inside of a beech husk. She kissed me, and she was every shining autumn colour I'd ever seen and every ripe fruit I'd ever tasted.

I ran away every evening to meet her, skimming on homework and scrambling recklessly through the forest. My feet dragged deep scars in years of decomposing bark and leaves as I took the shortest routes down steep banks to reach her. The sun set earlier each day, and after a few weeks the failing light made her hair seem plainer and her lips less red.

But each day we fell into each other's arms, kissing and laughing as the leaves turned brown and dry around us.

One evening, around the time I was regretfully thinking that I must head home, she shivered a little against me.

"I won't be here tomorrow."

"Won't be here? Why not? Where will you be?"

"It's time for me to move on."

I was sixteen, and in love for the first time, and I couldn't bear to think of losing her. I cried, I begged, I even shouted at her in a rage, but she simply held me, told me she loved me, and that she had to go.

I tried to persuade her to come back to the house with me, to meet my parents. "My mother will be delighted!"

"Will she?" she asked.

"Of course," I began. But then I looked at her beautiful hair, tangled and threaded with dry leaves. At her arms, bare and scratched and marked with loam where we'd rolled on the forest floor. Her skirts were torn and muddy and she wore no shoes.

I tried to imagine her sitting at the dining table in my parents' house, holding silver cutlery in the flickering lamplight and making polite conversation, and realised that she was right.

I asked if I could come with her, but she kissed me into silence.

"Let me go. I'll see you next year."

* * *

"Hello? Are you awake?"

Stephen sits on one the tubular grey chairs, uncomfortable as visitors always are in hospital rooms.

I smile, and nod a little. I barely have enough breath left for words.

"How are you feeling? Are they looking after you well?"

I nod again. As well as can be expected.

He fiddles with his shirt cuff. "It's surprisingly warm for the time of year. The maple trees you planted still have all their leaves. They're looking particularly splendid."

He's a good lad, this Stephen. I know he's balding and portly, old enough to retire, but to me he'll always be the boy who ran to show me his pictures. Once he'd finished art school and found his own style he enjoyed some success; mostly hard, blue cubist paintings that meant nothing to me. But he still took the time, one October, to paint my favourite view of our woods.

"Don't tell anyone it's mine," he joked, showing me a painting in the most conservative and classical style. It hangs in pride of place on my study wall. He lives in London, most of the time, and never shared my interest in watching the seasons turn. I appreciate that he thought to tell me about my maples.

I'd like to see them again.

"Sorry?" He leans closer, bringing his ear almost to my face.

I'd like... to see them. Again.

"Maybe when you're a little stronger."

* * *

The August of my seventeenth birthday dragged by. My schoolfellows complained and griped about the end of summer freedom, the return to school, but for me it couldn't come quickly enough. Each day I waited, squirrels scurrying to and fro along tree branches and starlings swooping in seething clouds overhead.

She didn't come, and I began to grow bitter at the thought of the promises she had made, faithlessly. I raged at her, shouting at the sky and kicking over fat clumps of fungus to leave broken, white scars behind me. I cried embarrassed, stifled sobs when I thought that I would never see her again.

But still, every day, I waited and then suddenly she was there beside me, her hands on my shoulders and her lips to mine. She stayed for a little over a month, and then began to talk of leaving. I clung to her, as I had the previous year, begging and promising. I talked, wildly, of imprisoning her, anything to keep her with me. She shook her head, and I saw how tired her eyes were, how pale her cheeks, and I let her go.

I waited more calmly the following year. Not patiently, but with more hope.

For a few, painful years I barely saw her, snatching all the days that I could before the world caught up with me and swept me back to Cambridge for the start of the university term. As soon as I graduated, I settled back into the family home and vowed to arrange my life so I would never be away as the leaves began to turn.

Each year I waited, and each year she came. And slowly I learned to feel the moment of stillness when the earth hangs poised, its axis ready to tilt away from the sun, sending us all towards winter and me headlong into her arms.

I aged; she did not. And suddenly I was too old to roll on the forest floor with her, and too embarrassed by what someone would say if they caught me with a girl who looked more than thirty years my junior.

"Come to the house," I suggested. "There's no one there to disapprove of you now."

She shook her head. "Houses are not for me."

We compromised, slowly. I fixed up an old, tumbledown cottage on the edge of the woodland. It was just a single room, with bare stone walls and a little fireplace, and I furnished it with the simplest things I could find. Wooden chairs, made cosy with sheepskins, and a bed with wool blankets. When the sun began to set I would sit there with a glass of wine and wait for her to blow in on the breeze. She always left the door open, and until she grew to trust the place, always looked nervously at the walls.

Two years ago, I was fighting a chest infection, and on only one evening felt well enough to walk down to the cottage. I found her waiting, curled up on a sheepskin with the firelight dancing in her eyes. We shared the flask of hot chocolate I'd carried down, and she lay with her head in my lap as I tried to tell her that I might not see her again. I stroked her red-brown hair and failed to find the words.

The following September I knew I couldn't walk to the woods. The carers who came night and morning fussed and flapped if I so much as sat near an open window. But one evening, as I stared at the rich tapestry of colours across the hillside, I saw her. She eyed the house warily, and I could see the lines of strain in her face deepening as she approached. I stuttered to my feet, fumbling with the lock on the French doors and stepping haltingly into the garden.

She had stopped, half-hidden by ivy on the wall of the kitchen garden. I smiled at her, raised my hand, and shuffled across the lawn towards her. She flew towards me, hands cupping my face as she kissed me on the lips.

We talked, briefly, and once again I didn't tell her that I wouldn't see her next year. She felt me shaking in the evening air, and helped me back to the house, turning away towards the woods as I locked the French doors against the cold.

* * *

"Are you his son?"

I hear the stern voice of the ward sister outside my room.

"No, he never married. I'm his next of kin, a second cousin." When Stephen was little he called me uncle, but the relationship is more distant.

"It's quite out of the question, of course." The sister's tone was final. "Mr Peters' health is failing rapidly, the chill of the air..."

"It's remarkably mild." Stephen is polite, but I can hear irritation. "Unseasonably so."

"Nevertheless, he's not strong enough to make a trip like that. He needs to conserve his strength as much as he can."

Stephen drops his voice, and I imagine he thinks I can't hear him. "I think the question, at this point, is what is there for him to conserve his strength for?"

* * *

The woodland paths are not meant for wheelchairs, and I bump and jolt as Stephen pushes me along. He pauses, solicitous, every few steps to check on me, to tuck in the blanket more tightly, and I do my best to smile even though every bone aches.

We admire the sweep and dip of the woods against the hillside, the drying leaves still clinging to the branches.

"I can't believe it looks like this in December."

December?

A sweep of panic runs through me. December? I hadn't realised it was so late in the year. I can feel my blood pounding in my head, grey clouds rolling in at the edge of my vision.

She will be long gone.

A blast of wind hits the trees, shaking them angrily, asking them why they will not bow to the oncoming winter.

And there she is. Her face is lined, and her clothes even shabbier than usual. There are threads of grey in her chestnut hair, but her smile is the same as ever. I leap to my feet, arms outstretched, and pull her to me.

"My Autumn," I whisper against her hair. "I thought I'd missed you."

"I've been waiting," she whispers back. "Come with me."

She takes my hand and leads me towards the setting sun.

***Elizabeth Guilt** reads and writes stories to make her daily commute on the London Underground in the United Kingdom more enjoyable. She has fiction published, or upcoming, in Luna Station Quarterly, Straylight Literary Magazine, and All Worlds Wayfarer. She can be found on www.elizabethguilt.com and on Twitter @elizabethguilt.*

About The Quiet Reader

The Quiet Reader is an online seasonal literary magazine, born in a town called Solitaire, in the state of Quarantine in the country of 2020, founded by travel writer Ramon Stoppelenburg.

Our goal

Our goal is to publish mesmerizing (English) creative fiction and non-fiction, flash prose, travel writing, literary translations, and writing for young people by new, emerging, and established writers.

What are we looking for?

We are looking for writing that surprises, captivates, takes us to another place or just comfortably joins right next to us on the couch.

We encourage submissions from writers of all identities, of any background and living anywhere.

Take us along

Writing that is adventurous, fresh and feels like that late-summer first day at school when you were young. New writing is always new, refreshing and strange at first sight. But let's get to know the characters involved, take us along and make us smell all the new stuff you present.

Seasonal and in print

The Quiet Reader will be a quarterly online publication, but we are also envisioning a future annual print edition. To hold in your hand. To smell the ink on the paper. To pass on to those readers we missed online.

We strive to publish new material four times online per year.

Writers get paid

Writers who get selected with their submission will get paid a US\$ 20 stimulus for their work.

Who We Are

Editor-in-chief:

Ramon Stoppelenburg

Senior Editors:

Jim Clarke

Frank Yetter

Gabi Yetter

Editorial Assistant:

Betina Fuentes

Staff Readers:

Tim Lundergan

Jonathan Fuentes

Michele Van Rensburg

Connect with us through the general mailbox@thequietreader.com.

*All financial support for **The Quiet Reader** is provided by donations from individual readers.*

General Submissions

The Quiet Reader now welcomes submissions of literary short stories (max 7,000 words), flash fiction and non-fiction for our 2nd edition until December 1.

Our **standards are high**. All work is read by preliminary readers, then referred to our editors, so that our online readers can look for some fine juried pieces.

Guidelines for Submitting Work

Please submit only one (1) story at a time. Only previously unpublished work will be considered. Simultaneous submissions are allowed, but if your piece is accepted elsewhere we ask that you please let us know.

We encourage submissions from writers of all identities, of any background and living anywhere.

Novellas and novel excerpts are always welcome, as long as they are readable on their own. Translations are welcome, but it is the translator's responsibility to secure rights to the work before it is submitted.

Please note we cannot accept revisions to pieces once they've been submitted.

All submissions received will be read.

We will make every effort to respond to your submissions within one month, though at times it may be longer. If it has been more than four months and you have not yet received a response, we will be happy to reply to a query regarding the status of your submission.

To submit your work, we are for now using submission@thequietreader.com for all submissions by authors. Please **add a little bio** (and where you are from) in your email and attach your writing document to the email.

Format requests:

- No PDF documents or Read-only files
- Name your document file [title] – [your name]
- Clean formatting, start with title and author name, no headers, footers or page numbers, please.

Writers who get selected with their writing get paid US\$ 20.

Your rights

You retain all the rights to your work after publication (online, as ebook and/or once in our annual print edition). Your published work will be housed in our internet archives in perpetuity, and we may re-post a link to your piece on our social media channels from time-to-time.

The Quiet Reader survives entirely on donations, which after nominal webserver and domain fees, go entirely to our writers.

The editors of The Quiet Reader invite you to **consider a donation** to the Authors's Fund. Your generous support will help us to produce our internationally recognized literary magazine, and to compensate our contributing authors for their work.

- Donate \$20, and you can sponsor a story or author in an issue. Please indicate in your message if an author inspired your donation.
- Donate \$250, and you can cover our costs for one issue.
- Donate \$1000, and you can cover our costs for one year.
- Donate \$1, and you've still done your part to reward literary art and to lift the spirits of everyone involved with The Quiet Reader.

You are very welcome to make a wire transfer to our online international account with the details below:

Account holder

Ramon Stoppelenburg

Account number

8310558101

Wire transfer number

026073008

Bank code (SWIFT/BIC)

CMFGUS33

Routing number (ACH or ABA)

026073150

Bank Address

TransferWise

19 W 24th Street

New York 10010

United States

We thank you for your support.