



*Du Frank Lit*

**JUNE 2024 – ISSUE 1**

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

DuFrank Lit was born in celebration of pure creation: the feeling of whipping up people, places, and events from imagination and breathing life into them on the page. Those creations then morph into connections as the characters resonate with a reader. Our imaginary people, born of our experiences and observations, then go on to become faces who grace our dreams and hold space in our memories. Literary creation allows us to witness what's never happened to someone who does not exist. We hope you find yourself wondering about these characters, what's happened to them, how they got to the moment we glimpsed of their world, and where they may have gone after you finished the last sentence.

This first issue is succinct. Not for lack of submissions, several of which were read multiple times and difficult to decline. We were selective for this first release with the intention to show our audience what content we are looking to publish and to further define DuFrank Lit. As writers, we know how it feels to send your work to a stranger and wonder (or perhaps worry) what they think. We think everyone who submitted this spring and will submit in the future is admirable for their power of creation, and brave for sending it for us to read. Thank you for your trust.

We'd like to thank these amazing authors for sharing their work with us for our first issue. We are publishing these pieces as submitted, unedited. We hope you enjoy them as much as we do and you come back to read more in the future.

Lauren Shelton

# FLASH

## Eastbound

By: Enana Jacob

In row nine of an eastbound airplane, a young boy is flying alone for the first time, reading a book. He is not afraid. He makes sure to tell this fact to a flight attendant, and she laughs, and he's not exactly sure why. After he closes his book and places it on the tray table so he can sip desperately on a plastic cup of Coke (which he is not, in fact, allowed to drink at home), the woman seated beside him gets a glimpse at the author. The book was written by a man she knew in grad school, however long ago. She asks the boy if he's liking the book, and he nods in the very excessive way that only 10-year old boys know how to do, his teeth still clinging to the edge of his plastic cup. The woman tells him, like revealing a magic trick, that she used to know the author. The boy asks 23 questions in approximately four minutes, barely catching his breath, and she tells him what she remembers about the man. She leaves out the fact that the two of them used to talk about getting married and having children, and that sometimes when she has a bit too much wine she still finds herself googling him. The boy doesn't know that the woman's name is Amelia, and so he doesn't know to tell her that the main character in the book is named Amelia, too. In the end, this is for the best.

When the plane lands, the passengers deboard, and strangers become strangers again. Time resumes. The limbo state of air travel is sinking into itself, a collapsing star, and the false reality reserved for airports and late-night diners is left behind. The air is still and clear and perfect, and life inches forward.

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Enana Jacob is a junior at the University of Rochester, where she is studying neuroscience and creative writing. Her poetry has been published in LOGOS Art and Literature journal, and she is a Staff Writer for the Campus Times, the University of Rochester's student newspaper. Enana is a graduate of the Yale Summer Writers' Workshop and the New York State Summer Writers Institute. She writes fiction, poetry, music, and anything else that makes her feel something. She hopes to write pieces that make others feel something, too.

# The Hole

By: Mira Martin Parker

I have just made myself lunch: two slices of toasted whole-wheat, mayonnaise and mustard, with avocado and tomato slices, plus a lettuce leaf. I'm eating at the table. I have turned my chair so that I face the courtyard of the apartment building I live in. It's sort of dim and gray outside, but I like it. It's early fall and the air is cool. My husband and I always have food in our refrigerator. Always. Things are calm. I'm breathing. I can do things. I can cook. I have a little money. Not much, but enough to get my hair cut regularly and buy new shoes when I want them.

What to know about me: I'm just shy of five feet tall. I do yoga on Tuesdays and Thursdays, after cleaning my apartment. My given name is East Indian, but I'm not. At least I'm not East Indian. My apartment is small but cute. It's in an older building (thank God, we have rent control). It has pretty crown molding and yellow vintage tiles in the bathroom. I especially love the bathroom.

My husband and I share the bedroom with our young son. My husband likes to stay up and read, using a camping light. Sometimes at night my little boy reaches over from his bed and grabs my hand.

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When new friends ask me about myself, about my past—where I grew up, and all that—I don't know what to say. I suppose I could make crap up, tell them lies and such. But instead I simply say, "I don't know."

Usually they stare back at me in confusion. How on earth I could not know my own past? Did I have an accident? Am I suffering from amnesia? Was I adopted?

I can tell them about my life now. I can tell them that I like to write. That I read. That I don't owe anyone any money. That I don't have a single dime of debt. Not one dime. Not one. I can tell them that there are no scenes in my life. No emotional outbursts. I can tell them our car is relatively new. I can tell them I met my husband in LA when I was twenty-three and taking classes at city college.

Before that? Nothing.

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The other day I was picking herbs at my plot in the local community garden—some sort of twig-like verbena thing that smells nice when you rub the leaves together. I looked down at the dirt beneath my feet and suddenly I saw all the way through. I leaned down to get a better view.

Then I fell in.

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Mira Martin Parker earned a BA at The New School for Social Research, and an MA in philosophy and an MFA in creative writing at San Francisco State University. Her work has appeared in various publications, including the Istanbul Literary Review, North Dakota Quarterly, great weather for MEDIA, and Zyzzyva.

# Sugar Daddy

By: Lisa Williams

Behind the dark sunglasses his eyes are the colour of Viagra; the restaurant is dimly lit but they give him a confidence, hide his crow's feet. When his dining guest enters the nearby tables speculate in whispers: 'Date or Daughter?'

It's their third date. They laugh and show each other pictures on their phones. He drops hers into his dessert when he's shown a picture of her Mum: a smiling face that he's not seen for a couple of decades.

The familiarity needs no further explanation and he stumbles out. His shades slide off as he vomits in the street.

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Predominantly a writer of short stories, flash or micro fictions, Lisa particularly likes the tight word constraint of a drabble. She's a cheery soul but you wouldn't guess that from her writing as she often dwells on the darker side of life. She regularly reads her drabbles on the radio and at spoken word events; she also helps the Editor at the popular flash fiction site – Friday Flash Fiction. Lisa has fully embraced social media and can be found as @noodleBubble on most platforms. NoodleBubble is also the name that she uses when she sells her art and handmade jewelry.

# SHORT FICTION

## Kismet

By: Mark Connelly

Tommy Ellison knew it all or knew where to find out. He was a lover of odd facts, statistics, trivia, coincidences, common knowledge, conspiracy theories, sayings, quotations, misquotations, canards, logical fallacies, lost films, etymologies, half-truths, falsehoods, and forgotten facts. He read voraciously, scoured the Internet, sought out sources, and rampaged through databases. From childhood on he was the know-it-all, the fact collector, the historian to his Little League team, his Sunday school, and his subdivision. He loved creating websites and web pages. Whenever a house turned over on Sea Cliff Avenue, he sent the new owners a fact sheet about their house, the street, the neighborhood, complete with maps, vintage pictures, and the long-forgotten 1959 plane crash when a Piper Club made a forced landing on China Beach.

He worked on the school paper, edited the college literary magazine, and started his own YouTube channel his senior year. He stayed on at San Francisco State to work on his masters in history. But his love, his thrill was his freelance job at 415Productions. And he got it by Kismet.

Among his college gigs was tending bar Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Union Square Hilton. It was a slow afternoon when a middle-aged pair, Lou Perelli and Francis Kupperman, strolled in for drinks after manning a booth at the Moscone Center.

They evidently had polished off a few before or were on a convention high. Both were expansive and talkative. Their multi-colored badges and bright ribbons matched their mood.

“I ran out of business cards in twenty minutes,” Francis laughed, signaling Tommy for another Scotch.

“I think we nailed them on the video upgrades. No one is going to match those prices.”



The bar was nearly empty, and both engaged Tommy in conversation. He was just twenty-one, but they seemed genuinely interested in his grad school plans and his YouTube Channel. He pulled out his phone and began texting them links.

They drank and watched his vids. After another round, Lou glanced at his watch and they shoved off, with Francis promising to text him as soon as she got to the office.

Tommy collected their napkins and glasses, energized by their chat but sensible about its potential. All the likes, shout-outs, and contact me's his YouTube channel collected never went past a thank you post or a shared link.

He forgot about the incident and got back to homework and Ubering. Two days later he was puzzled by a text from a strange number, then recognized the name. Lou Perelli asked if he was interested in freelance work. Tommy texted back and agreed to lunch the next day.

Over salads at the Irish House, Lou explained that 415 was a content provider, developing material for corporations and non-profits. A lucrative pet project of his was informative clickbait.

“For example, every time you go on Bing you get the news, weather, gossip, and you see slide shows – “Five Things You Never Knew About JFK,” “What You Missed in Goodfellas,” or “Who is So and So.”

“I’m a sucker for that,” Tommy nodded.

“Well, so often it’s shallow and wrong,” he said raising a finger in warning. “Wrong dates, wrong quotes, misspellings. We go in-depth. Our subscribers are political magazines, major newspapers, professional organizations, corporations, colleges, non-profits like charities and alumni associations. The ads generate revenue for them and for us. But we have a delicate balance. We need to attract people to click but not detract from the image and essence of the

host. They have reputations to maintain. You have to consider the content and match it with the subscriber. We don't do conspiracies or celebrities. A little more highbrow and academic. Think CPAN instead of Fox. You have to think about the audiences. What would appeal to symphony donors, retired doctors, or new mothers. No shock and awe. Interest. Value. Curiosity sure. But think education over entertainment. We want content that gets read not skimmed. We do serious background, fact-checking, and we include sources with links. A step above. We have good subscribers but need content every day. Now, some things are timeless. That we can build up over time. You know Netflix or HBO comes out with some movie or doc about the Dust Bowl. So, we have a "What Was the Dustbowl?" in our files ready to go. We have a lot of that. But we always need more. I need people who can get me stuff in 24 hours. Follow up on current events. Who's who? What's that? But a lot more than some facts and figures. Takes a researcher, not just a fact checker. Interested?"

"Sure. I love that. Send me a few examples and let me work up a couple of things from my stuff. See if I'm on the right track."

Lou lifted his beer mug. "Salute. Show me what you got." With a dramatic flourish, he proffered his business card with a smile. "We're located in artistic Ingleside."

Tommy smiled. "That's ten minutes from school. I could bike it easy."

A week later Tommy was sitting in Lou's office, signing a contract.

"We ended up getting a little more space than we needed, so I can give you a desk. You can drop in whenever you want. Meet the team. We got some great people. They can give you some ideas and background about our subscribers."

Lou escorted him down a narrow hall to a large room resembling a Student Union lounge. Young people were working on laptops. Large screens flashed images and videos. Cubicles

lined the walls. Pizza boxes and Diet Coke cans cluttered a buffet table. Lou made introductions. Everyone seemed to have a colorful nickname. It was less an orientation than a welcome to a frat house. There were no polite corporate handshakes. He was jabbed, poked, and air punched by guys, and given thumbs up and blown kisses by gals. It seemed like a fun team.

Lou guided him to a cubicle by the window.

“Here you go, your new home. Check it out. Got all the toys.”

Tommy slipped into his swivel chair. Seated before the snug bank of screens, phones, and computer keyboard, he felt like a pilot slipping into the cockpit of a 747. The clicking of keys, the voices, and buzz of printers made him feel at the center of things, vital, and important.

He loved his cubicle so much he sometimes went there to do homework or check his email. Working at home, he felt like a college student. At 415 he felt mature, employed, productive. It was the newsroom in *All the President's Men*, the Oval Office in *Thirteen Days*, a courtroom, an operating room. He felt like he was in *Mad Men*. Don Draper at the top of his game. Eager to be part of the team, he treated the gang to pizzas and salads, bringing organic cookies and sushi twice a week. He hung around, helping with edits, pitching in wherever needed. After work he joined the guys, jogging or drinking depending on their mood.

Lou, though busy and often out of town, joined the gang at least once a month. An avid tennis player, he took Tommy to his racket club. Watching Perelli on the courts, Tommy assumed his boss was his father's age, somewhere in his late forties. He was surprised when glancing at the bios on the 415 website he noticed that Lou had graduated Berkley in '86. But Lou seemed hip and cool and up to date on everything. A hip leader of a cool team. Tommy loved every minute he was at 415. He was flying high over his classmates who were driving cabs and pouring coffee to pay for grad school.

Then the pandemic hit. He was in high demand. Lou and Francis peppered him with texts. They wanted histories of the 1918 pandemic. Bio facts on Fauci. Descriptions of wet markets and bio labs. A classification of masks. Keeping up with 415 became a full-time job. His checks came in flurries.

But the office closed. Consigned to remote work, Tommy felt trapped in his small apartment. He spent time at his parents, preferring to work from his old room. The work was fast-paced, and the Zoom meetings filled his weekly planner. But he missed seeing everyone in person, missed the camaraderie of the buffet table, the jokes, the tennis matches and drinking games.

Tommy was delighted when he got the long-awaited text. 415 was open again. Back in full operation. What better day to celebrate than St. Patrick's Day!

Tommy arrived early with a box of shamrock cookies, Guinness chocolates, and six packs of Diet Coke. The 415 lounge was, as expected, showered in green. Shamrock bunting hung over the buffet table crowded with spreads, dishes, and platters. Tommy noticed the assortment of plastic green derbies, goofy green glasses, and Kiss Me I'm Irish buttons remained in neat rows, undisturbed.

Some of the gang were standing at the window. They seemed distracted and despondent, talking quietly. Tommy wondered if there had been an accident. He joined them, scanning the empty street for a reason.

Kim Shimi, glanced at him, detecting his confusion. "Guess, you didn't see the email. It's from Lou," she said softly.

Tommy went to his cubicle. He glanced around his snug desk, then switched on the computer, tapping in his password for 415. Amid the list of reminders, invitations, and ads was an email from Lou:

Guys, I'm glad you're all back at 415! The pandemic was a drag on all of us. I bet it feels good to be under one roof again. Francis Kupperman will be your new supervisor.  
I have decided to retire. This has been a difficult decision, but one I had to make.

What I thought was lingering "brain fog" from that bout of Covid last year proved to be something else. My doctors inform me that I am in the early stages of Alzheimer's. After consultations with them, management, and my family, I have decided it best to spend my remaining days at home.

It's been a great run. I was never part of a more creative and talented team. 415 was always a lot of hard work, but somehow it never felt like a job. You've been a second family to me.

I will remember all of you . . . for as long as I can. . .

Lou

Tommy touched the screen, his mind blank. No quotes, facts, insights, or words of wisdom came to him. He closed his eyes, sensing the horror of not knowing.

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Mark Connelly's fiction has appeared in Cerasus Magazine, Indiana Review, Milwaukee Magazine, Cream City Review, The Ledge, Smoky Blue Arts and Literary Magazine, Change Seven, Light and Dark, 34th Parallel, The Chamber Magazine, Mobius Blvd., and Digital Papercut. In 2005 Texas Review Press published his novella Fifteen Minutes, which received the Clay Reynolds Prize.

# Laundry Mat Joe

By: R. M. Davenport

“Don’t be gone all afternoon,” my roommate would say as I’d drag the hamper with the wobbling wheel down our impossibly steep staircase and out the door. He knew.

My boyfriend knew too.

The wind pulled at my exposed skin, dusting me head in an iridescent layer of snow before I even got to the end of our driveway. I navigated through the slushy stream that raced toward the culvert and fishtailed our clothes around the corner. I tried to be as small as possible under the scrutiny of those driving past. Without even flimsy cotton gloves, my fingers creaked with cold when I reached the tinted glass door.

I felt the dry heat blast down from overhead as I entered, heat that singed my frozen lungs, and sat on the hard plastic chairs just inside the door. I stripped down to my stained tank top and sweatpants, and loosened the ties on my boots with a hole in the toe, unpacking a book I had been meaning to read, and the last granola bar from our pantry. I dumped out coins of every color onto the hard plastic chair beside mine in the nook by the door and coughed, organizing them into piles.

“Trade?” I said to the man behind the counter, and handed him a large copper pile. He nodded and took what was there without counting it or looking up from his thick paperback, and handed me tokens in exchange.

Then I spotted what I had been craving. Warm and sensitive to my frozen hands, I felt the nerves awaken in my fingertips at the first touch. My face flushed at the heat running over my lips, my tongue; It was love.

We sat together under the flickering fluorescent lights, enjoying the quiet thrum of the machines. I read that neglected book as my socks air dried, and watched the laundry I hadn't sorted, a kaleidoscope of colors and suds.

Our affair was short-lived, and beautiful. Without it sometimes, I wonder if I could have survived those months at all.

Later that spring, my boyfriend and I moved to a better apartment in a town a few hours away. I must admit, I was happy to leave. Boots that are dry, and gloves that keep the cold from my fingers are no longer a luxury. I no longer walk down the main street, dragging a hamper of soiled clothes behind me. I walk it down my hallway in my home. I have my own machine now that makes the same metallic thrum, yet somehow it doesn't seem as romantic to me now.

Still, I will never forget the stiff and sobering taste of Laundromat Joe steaming in my cup.

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R. M. Davenport graduated from the University of Maine at Machias in 2020 from the Arts and Letters undergraduate program with a focus on creative writing and book arts. She currently works in human services in Maine. As an openly queer creative writer and painter, she is committed to shedding light on difficult conversations around trauma, poverty and mental illness so often shrouded in shame with openness through the arts.

# I Buried God's Gift in the Pennsylvania Woods

By: Ainsley Davis

*There is a train track running through the Pennsylvania Woods. Every day, the trains chug along past the abandoned steel mills, past the little red brick houses dotted along the hills, and disappear behind the tall trees. The sky is dark here, the clouds heavy with snow. And when the skies open and the snow falls, it's impossible to see anything through the storm. The hills and the tall buildings rise up to the sky, up to where I imagine they get to kiss God and all the angels. I imagine that Jenny is up there, beyond the steeple of St. Bernard's church and the smokestacks of the abandoned steel mills, her spirit trapped somewhere between heaven and earth.*

## **February 1979, Pittsburgh PA**

Ruth watched the man's pale, leathery hands as he reached over the cart and picked up a package of chicken from the fridge in the grocery store.

“Sorry sweetie,” he said, flashing one of those hungry, probing smiles that old men always seemed to give to young women. “Didn't mean to scare you.”

Ruth looked at his face blankly, then watched him shuffle back to his own cart. She immediately regretted the attention that she had paid to his face. What if he'd been distracting her while he dropped something into the vegetables in her mother's cart? What if he'd cut a slit in the chicken package with his fingernail and let a few drops of salmonella-laced chicken juice fall into the lettuce? What if it made her mother sick and she died?

Ruth clutched at the side of the cart, her hands shaky against the cold metal. Her mother had returned from the canned food aisle and began loading cans of beans into the cart while she hummed some song under her breath.



“I think we should get some new lettuce. That one looks kind of wilted.” Ruth was trying to control the shaking in her voice. She wanted to sound calm so that she would be taken seriously. It was hard to be taken seriously as a thirteen-year-old.

Her mother looked up at her, wrinkling her nose. “Don’t be stupid. There’s nothing wrong with that lettuce.”

“Mama, it doesn’t look right. Just let me grab a new one.”

Her mother sighed, taking the cart and pushing it toward the front of the store. “I’m not listening to you anymore.”

Ruth’s mother was a small woman, so slight that she might blow away in the wind or disappear behind a blade of grass. She looked so small pushing the shopping cart, so fragile next to the people around her as she unloaded her groceries onto the belt.

They left the store and Ruth helped her mother unfold the little collapsible wagon that they always used to take the groceries home. She folded over the tops of the brown paper bags and tucked them on top of one another, ready for the journey home.

There was fresh snow on the ground, and the cart left tracks behind them as the two took turns pulling the cart home. They lived only a few blocks away, in a small town house at the corner of Oak Avenue. The red brick stairs were worn, sagging down in the middle. Ruth’s mother kept a collection of pots on the porch, always planning to fill them with plants, but when the summer came around they always stayed empty next to the battered screen door.

The townhouse had a distinct narrowness in every aspect. Even the living room, the largest room, felt cramped. Ruth’s mother had tried to fill the place with things that she found beautiful. Blue and white porcelain plates that she had bought at the thrift store were stacked on

the coffee table, and two paintings of tulips hung on either side of the fireplace, both fished out of a neighbor's trash. There wasn't room for a dining table, so Ruth and her mother ate at a small desk in the corner of the kitchen. The desk was white and accented with small pink flowers on the legs and around the border of the top. Ruth's mother had gotten it from her boss when he decided to update the office furniture, and the two of them had painted the flowers on a few summers ago, trying to bring some joy into their small corner of the world. But no matter how hard her mother tried to make the space feel cozy, Ruth always felt too embarrassed to invite people over.

Ruth turned on the TV and slumped onto the couch, watching as a rerun of The Brady Bunch came on. Her mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner, and she could smell the onions and the garlic and the butter.

"Ruthie, can you come make the salad?"

She dragged herself up and walked into the warmth of the kitchen. Her mother was pouring a steaming package of instant rice into a pan, stirring it in with the beans. Ruth picked up the lettuce, carefully pulling away the plastic bag. She untied the twist-tie and put the lettuce into a strainer to wash it. She glanced back at her mother, making sure she wasn't paying attention. Then she reached into the cabinet under the sink and pulled out a bottle of disinfectant.

Carefully, delicately, she pulled apart the leaves of lettuce, like a flower that was being forced to bloom. Then she twisted the cap on the disinfectant bottle to the spray setting.

"Ruth, what are you doing?" Her mother snatched the bottle away, venom in her eyes. "I'm not putting up with this anymore. If you can't cook without all your crazy germ stuff then you can go do something else while I make dinner."

Seeing the look in her daughter's eyes, she put the bottle down and sighed. "Look, I don't understand why you do things sometimes. I know it's not your fault. But I don't know how to help you, baby. If I don't get you to stop doing it now, you're going to be like this for the rest of your life. Afraid." She put a hand to her forehead. "You're young. Your life doesn't have to be like this." Her mother's expression was soft now. The anger had passed. But Ruth still felt a deep shame. She looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry..."

That night, Ruth curled up on the top bunk in her and her mother's shared bedroom. She studied the lines on the ceiling, checking that each one was still there, that none of the cracks had gotten any larger. She held up her thumb and compared it to each of the cracks to make sure. Sometimes she worried that the old house would collapse on her and her mother as they slept. The house was fragile, just as they were. A woman and a young girl adrift in the world, with no one to protect them.

Ruth's father had left when she was only a toddler, and she had never missed him. Her mother had a scar running down the inside of her arm where he had stuck a knife in the middle of a drunken rage. To Ruth, it was a reminder. A reminder that the world was not kind. That no one could be trusted, no matter how much you loved them. She and her mother had each other, and that was enough.

Every Friday, Ruth and her mother walked down to the Pizza Castle on Columbia Road and bought a small cheese pizza to share. Jenny Burzinski was always working as the cashier on Friday afternoons. Jenny was short and chubby, with curly brown hair, in her early twenties. She always greeted them with a warm smile and made friendly small talk. Jenny went to the Catholic

church up on the hill, the same as Ruth and her mother, and she volunteered to teach Catechism classes to elementary schoolers who were studying to make their First Communion.

Jenny always wore a little silver bracelet on her right wrist. It was a dainty little chain with a heart-shaped charm on it. Ruth had asked her about it once, and she'd said that it had been a gift from her boyfriend.

Today, Ruth and her mother stomped the snow off of their boots before stepping into the warmth of Pizza Castle. The little bell above the door jingled, and Jenny, who had been laughing at something a coworker had said, turned to face them. There was a song playing over the radio: *Once I had a love and it was divine, soon found out I was losing my mind. It seemed like a real thing, but I was so blind, mucho mistrust, love's gone behind.*

Jenny grinned at them. "It's a cold one out there today, huh?"

After they paid for the pizza, Jenny handed over the box and Ruth reached out her hands. Her fingers brushed against the metal of the little bracelet. The metal was cold. And Ruth felt a sudden pounding in her ears, a tremor all through her body. As she followed her mother to the door, she felt like she was watching her own body from very far away.

When they got outside, Ruth turned to her mother. "Mama, I just got this really weird feeling. I felt like something bad was about to happen."

Her mother turned her face away, studying the store windows as they passed by. "I don't want to hear about this. You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing again."

Ruth looked down at the pizza box, trying to steady her breathing. She still had a horrible knot of dread and fear in her stomach. Over the next few weeks, the knot eased a little, but it never fully went away.

## **March 1979, Pittsburgh PA**

When they found Jenny's body next to the train tracks, her right hand was missing. That's what the choir leader at the church, whose brother worked with a friend of the wife of the coroner, had told Ruth's mother. Ruth imagined that Jenny had been cut just above the carpal bones in her wrist, where the bracelet would have rested. A rumor went around Ruth's school that Jenny had been murdered by a serial killer who collected a trophy from each of his victims. Some of the eighth grade boys came up with lurid descriptions of things that the killer probably did with these trophies, and Ruth tried to cover her ears whenever she passed a group of them in the hall. She didn't need to be any more scared than she already was.

She'd heard about the murder one day after school. She'd pushed open the front door to see that her mother was standing in the living room with the local news on, stretching the phone cord from the kitchen so she could talk to one of her church-lady friends.

"I know, I know...and Ruthie and I saw her just the other day, the sweetest girl, it's so sad." She twisted the cord around her fingers as she spoke.

Ruth dropped her backpack on the floor and sat down on the couch. There was a picture of Jenny on the screen. It looked like her senior portrait from high school.

"...police are asking the public for any leads after finding the body of a local woman in the woods near a residential area..."

The knot of dread that had been dormant in her stomach began to grow again, pressing on her bladder and her kidneys, squeezing her body from within until she thought that she was going to die.

"...police say that this was an isolated incident, and that there is no threat to the public at this time..."

Ruth's fingers were twisting together in her lap. She tried to breathe slowly, like the counselor at school had taught her to do when she was anxious.

“...she was last seen at the Lucky Star pub on Columbia Avenue...”

*I knew that she was going to die. I felt something that day at the Pizza Castle, when I touched her bracelet. I knew...I knew, and I couldn't save her.*

Ruth felt like the room was spinning. The panic was rising in her chest, but she couldn't tell if it was anxiety or if she was getting that horrible feeling again, that sense, that premonition that something was about to happen. She felt like her chest was caving in, like she couldn't breathe.

But her breathing was the one thing that she could control.

She counted to three as she breathed in, then held her breath for three seconds.

Counted to three as she breathed in, then held her breath for three seconds.

Counted to three as she breathed in, then held her breath for three seconds.

She knew that if she didn't do this, then someone else was going to die.

Ruth's elbows were resting against the pew in front of her as her knees pressed on the kneeler. She shifted her weight around, trying to make the position more comfortable.

The pillars of St. Bernard's church rose up around her, the lanterns hanging down on thick chains from the cavernous ceiling. Above the altar there rose a gold-plated cross where Jesus' near-naked body was twisting in pain. Blood ran down his forehead and oozed from his palms.

The priest was walking down from the altar, his face solemn and his long robes trailing behind him.

“Brothers and sisters, before we conclude Mass for today, I would like to offer up a special prayer for Jenny Burzinski and her family. Jenny was a light and a blessing to this community. She and her parents have been regulars at Mass every Sunday for many years. Jenny spent many hours volunteering to lead Catechism classes and to feed the homeless.” he took a deep breath, steadying himself. “Let us pray that her soul finds peace in Heaven, and that her parents are able to find peace here on earth.”

Ruth bent her head down, praying as hard as she could. No one else was kneeling now; everyone was standing, waiting for the procession of altar boys to go by so that they could leave. Her mother was gathering her purse from underneath the pew and straightening her dress.

*Please God, tell me what I need to do. Tell me how to stop something like this from happening again. I know that it was my fault. I knew that she was going to die, but I didn't know how to stop it. Please, please tell me what to do.*

Ruth counted to three as she breathed in, then held her breath for three seconds.

Counted to three as she breathed in, then held her breath for three seconds.

Counted to three as-

“Let's go.” Her mother was shaking her shoulder.

Ruth felt dazed as she stood up. The lights in the church seemed impossibly bright, all of a sudden.

The two of them flowed out into the lobby along with the crowd of parishioners. A few of the church ladies had set up a bake sale to raise money for Jenny's family, and Ruth's mother bought a snickerdoodle cookie that they split in half and ate while they walked home.

Ruth tried to breathe again, like the counselor had told her. It didn't help.

## **February 1980, Pittsburgh PA**

“Our special segment this evening deals with the new tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union caused by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the very tough reaction of the Carter administration...”

The light from the old TV was flickering over the table in the living room, over Ruth’s bowl of cereal, which had gone mushy, and over her backpack on the floor. She could hear the coffee maker whirring to life in the kitchen. She watched as images of tanks and missiles flashed across the screen.

“After the hydrogen bomb had been tested by both the United States and the Soviet Union, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved the hands on its Doomsday Clock forward to two minutes before midnight. Today, that number is seven minutes before midnight...”

Although she was wearing a warm sweater, Ruth shivered. She felt like something was crawling over her skin, making all the hairs on her body stand on edge.

She blinked one, two, three times.

She blinked one, two, three times.

She blinked one, two, three times.

She still didn’t feel safe. A commercial for toothpaste was playing on the TV now, but Ruth couldn’t get the little diagram of the Doomsday Clock out of her head. She thought about nuclear missiles. One could be flying toward her right now, and it would rip through the trees and the red brick houses and instantly melt the snow on the ground. Whenever she got an idea like that in her head, one that was painful and scary, a whole flood of other images came along with it. She found her mind settling again on Jenny.

They never found the man who murdered Jenny. He could still be out there. He could be



outside right now, waiting for her, waiting outside on the porch to kill her.

She breathed in for three seconds, held her breath for three seconds.

*Please...*

She felt terrified. There was really nothing she could do.

As she walked to school, she tried to take three steps inside each concrete square on the sidewalk. It made her feel a little better.

That night, Ruth couldn't sleep. There was something calling to her, some voice, maybe the voice of God. She climbed down from the bunk bed and tiptoed across the bedroom and out into the hall. She pulled on her heavy winter coat and left the house, pulling up her hood against the cold.

Her face felt raw from the freezing wind, but she knew that it was a form of penance from God. The pain was a good thing. God had chosen her. She should be happy.

She didn't understand why, or how, but those gut feelings, those surges of anxiety, they meant something. And the only way that she could make sense of them was that they must be handed down from above. Not from the sky, but from somewhere even above that.

*There is a train track running through the Pennsylvania woods. The trains chug along past the abandoned steel mills, past the place where Jenny was murdered.*

Ruth felt like her feet were moving of their own volition. She only had a vague idea of where she was going, but her body was moving nonetheless. She passed the Lucky Star Pub and stepped into the snow, walking past the dumpster at the back of the building. She was grateful for the plastic bags in between her socks and her boots that kept her feet dry.

*Past the little red brick houses that dot the hills, and past the tall trees. The sky is dark*

*here, and the clouds are heavy with snow.*

The trees behind the pub loomed before her. Their shapes were murky and uncertain in the dark, like giants swaying in the wind.

*When the skies open, it's impossible to see anything through the fog and the heavy snow. It's impossible to hear her screams because the snow and the trees absorb the sound. Only the squirrels and the birds hear the sound of her getting murdered, and they scatter in fear.*

Ruth followed the train tracks until she reached the spot where it had happened. She knew that she was close because there was a little altar set up near one of the trees, something that Jenny's friends had set up over the summer. It was half-buried in snow now, the laminated picture of Jenny had almost disappeared.

*Where the tall buildings rise up to the sky, where the clouds meet the smokestacks, is that where Jenny's soul resides?*

She fell to her knees in the snow. She could feel the dread in her chest growing, and that was how she knew that this was the exact spot where it had happened. She wasn't just close now. She was right there. The blood was gone now. It had been a year. But Ruth knew. She knew because of the sick, twisting feeling in her stomach. It was the voice of God.

"I'm sorry Jenny," she whispered into the darkness. "I should have saved you."

Ruth bent her body forward into the snow, until her nose was touching it. A chill ran through her body. What if Jenny's bracelet was here? What if it fell to the ground when her hand was cut off? She had to find it. There had to be fingerprints on it. Something. The anxiety was whirling around in her stomach, making her feel like she was going to throw up. But she knew that this was the intuition that had been granted to her by God. She had to be strong. She had been chosen.

She began to dig around in the snow in a delirium. It had to be here. The police must have missed it. There had to be something here.

Her fingers were beginning to go numb. But she didn't care. She was desperate. She couldn't get the feeling to go away, the feeling of knowing, The burden of knowing.

*I'm sorry Jenny. I will make sure that you get to kiss God and all the angels.*

Exhausted, she let her body fall down into the snow and began to cry. She wondered if she would be able to get up again, or if she would die in this very spot, paralyzed and buried under the snow, slowly turning blue in the cold, the blood in her veins slowing and freezing and eventually bursting.

She could feel the tears freezing on her cheeks.

"I don't want this anymore," she whispered into the snow. "I can't do this anymore."

Why had He chosen her for this gift? Why did He think that she was strong enough?

Suddenly, she felt the strength to lift up her body above the snow, throwing back her head to face the sky. "I don't want this gift anymore, God!"

The feeling of anxiety twisted in her stomach again, and she doubled over, clutching at her own body. The waves of fear rushed over her.

And then they were gone.

She was numb. And she felt nothing.

"God? Are you there?"

There was only the cold and the wind and the trembling of her body. There was only the mist of her ragged breaths stretching up into the sky.

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# The Thirty-Seventh President

By; Richard Klin

On January 20, Chestnut Point Elementary School dispensed with its normal, delineated school day and instead devoted the bulk of the day to viewing the live, continuous news coverage of the presidential inauguration.

Television sets, expertly positioned on large, metallic shelves and raised high for group viewing, had been placed throughout the school. There was no warning or prior notice that January 20 would be devoted to this. Students showed up and were simply presented with this sudden reality.

The second grader had been increasingly captivated by all things presidential. He was in possession of an ingeniously constructed paper presidential wheel, a device that yielded a treasure trove of facts about each and every president, a shift of the wheel offering up an impressive array of facts: place of birth, religion, birth and death dates. All was in numerical order, the first president to the thirty-sixth—Washington to Johnson. He made a mental note that there were two Johnsons—Andrew and Lyndon—and was aware of the slight complication when it came to Grover Cleveland, who was the twenty-second and the twenty-fourth president.

The second grader was eight years old. Martin Van Buren was the eighth president. He made a mental note of that too.

This interest in presidents had been augmented by the recent election, which he had absorbed in small, discrete chunks. Because the mother and father were in favor of Hubert Humphrey, the boy as well became a Humphrey enthusiast. He knew enough to feel some puzzled unease at a TV image of a George Wallace rally, the strange realization that each and every one of these people in the crowd were fundamentally flawed.

Both second grade classes, along with the hordes of older kids, were directed to seating areas throughout Chestnut Point's hallways. The novelty of watching TV at school, not at home, and his fascination with inauguration day vied for other feelings as well. Normal patterns and rhythms had been completely obliterated, which generated a low-level disquiet. Miss Dale, his teacher, was not sitting at her desk, greeting each and every one as they filed into the classroom. She was here in the hallway, along with the other second grade teacher, the older, fearsome Mrs. Schubmehl, both of them directing the students on where to sit, conferring with some of the other teachers.

A bout of alarm shot through the second grader. What if lunch was cancelled on this unusual day? Mrs. Schubmehl might very well do such a thing, simply out of spite. Upon reflection, however, this seemed to be an unreasonable fear. As if reading his mind, the authoritative voice of one of the third grade teachers boomed out that lunch would be commencing at a slighter later time today.

At the moment, the TV was showing very cold weather in Washington. There were lots of people, policemen, huge cars. One group, dressed in heavy winter clothing, waved signs and yelled. Others waved flags.

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The second grader's life was permeated by a wide variety of scents. Chestnut Point smelled of books, paste, paper, lunch. Winter weather brought with it a faint, yet omnipresent scent of woodsmoke that softened the icy air. In autumn, the air was perfumed with the sweet overlay of burning leaves. The father, along with the neighbors, loaded the displaced autumn leaves into sturdy metal receptacles and set them aflame, the olfactory comfort wafting over the

entire neighborhood. Hazy afternoons after school were delineated by a faint lemon scent that originated from the mother's furniture polish.

There were always the smells and sounds of barbeques and cookouts, the father and mother and other department faculty from the college gathered in a park, outdoor space, backyard; the kids playing hide-and-seek, espying the frogs that hopped along the banks of the creeks and ponds, the adults engrossed in meaningless conversation. The father detested the cloudy gray skies, the rain, often looking up at the sky and muttering in an accusatorial manner, as if the rain and clouds were a personal affront.

Mr. and Mrs. Castleton were always in attendance. They lived right down the block. Mr. Castleton and the father taught in the same department. Both the father and Mr. Castleton often discussed the news, the wildly exaggerated claims of American victories in Vietnam. Mr. Castleton's picture had been in the paper. He and some others had actually been arrested for protesting something to do with the army.

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To the second grader's mild dismay, James and Stevie had sidled up to him, in awe of the televised images of formidable black cars that were snaking their way through the streets of Washington. James and Stevie were his friends, yet he'd begun to tire of them. James had devised an elaborate system of calls that functioned as a secret code. Only the three of them would be privy to the specifics, which entailed three short caws and one long hoot. These details were not to be shared with anyone else. He could hear caw caw caw and then h-o-o-o-t from a block away as James and Stevie biked to his house.

Richard Nixon was now smiling and walking around. The boy's intense interest in the proceedings was again tempered with his slight aversion to the unexpected. Television was not to

be watched in the hallways of Chestnut Point. Watching television was the domain of the living room, next to the long, light brown bookshelf.

The TV screen filled with images of the crush of people, police, and—to James’s excitement—Secret Service agents, who were impossible to spot unless you were aware of what to look for. Two people in the crowd were wearing Nixon masks, the facial features distorted, the effect grotesque. The second grader wondered if Nixon would see these masks and if he did, how mortified he would be. He imagined someone wearing a mask of him, lampooning how he looked.

He let his gaze travel, affecting a mien of exaggerated nonchalance. In reality, he was trying to locate the whereabouts of Angie. Angie had very long, blond hair, certainly the longest hair of any girl in class and maybe the entire second grade. It had become a regular practice to ascertain wherever it was she happened to be. She had introduced him to the fascinating phenomenon of the PaintPop, an enormous, round candy that slowly changed color as you sucked on it: from red to green to blue to pink. It had fascinated him no end and he had prevailed upon the mother—who had strong objections to allowing such sugary junk inside the house—to let him purchase a few of these PaintPops. He had reported this back to Angie and then both of them shared a subsequent disillusionment with PaintPops, its sticky residue, the lack of a gumball deep inside. They had taken to borrowing all sorts of things from each other: paper, pencils, Elmer’s glue. And she had offered fulsome praise when he unexpectedly won the “most original” award during the Thanksgiving turkey drawing competition, a fanciful, abstract construction executed less out of imagination and more out of an inability to replicate a realistic turkey.

That pompous, opinionated fourth grader was now loudly asserting Nixon's middle name was M-house. The boy detested this fourth grader, whose name he didn't know. He was a loud, aggressive braggart who had the gall to stand—like he was making a speech—and transmit incorrect information. The boy knew, with absolute certitude, that Nixon's middle name was Milhouse, yet the only way he could be heard over the low-level babble and TV volume was to shout Milhouse as loudly as he could, something he was loathe to do. As if reading his mind, an announcer intoned Richard Milhouse Nixon and the fourth grade windbag, looking mortified, sat back down. Richard Milhouse Nixon. Lyndon Baines Johnson. These were certainly unusual middle names, unlike any middle names he had ever come across. Perhaps a strange middle name was a prerequisite for being president.

There were more images of the huge, imposing cars, the likes of which he'd never seen. The decision had been made to distribute little bags of potato chips to all the students, the bright red packaging and chips themselves piquing the boy's interest. He rarely—if ever—had potato chips at home. Older kids were distributing the bags, another enviable perk of being in the older grades.

Miss Dale was eating an apple; Mrs. Schubmehl's attention seemed directed elsewhere. The students used the potato chips as opportunities to stretch, to move around, to reconfigure their seating arrangements. Loud noise and laughter emanated from down the hall; some of the older kids, who were quickly quieted down.

Sandy and Angie were in close proximity now. His attention to the inauguration was wandering and now, with Angie so nearby, it wandered some more. Subtle restlessness began to incrementally increase. He and Angie and Sandy discussed the cold weather on the TV screen, the unpleasantness of it all.



Then came a panorama of Richard Nixon as a young person, clothed in the old-fashioned outfits, the laughable haircuts. Brief laughter and some jeers swept through the hallways. There was hushed commentary about the solemnity of the procedure, the transfer of power, the Bible, the oath of office. Then Lyndon Johnson lingered on the screen. “Why did they get rid of him?” Sandra mused. “He was good.” Looking at Lyndon Johnson now and finding nothing overtly wrong with him, the second grader was inclined to agree. Lyndon Johnson, in fact, looked vaguely like Mr. Castleton’s father, in the framed picture that was prominently displayed on the Casteltons’ mantle.

Talking to Angie, really, was effortless. Then Richard Nixon approached the stage, near Mrs. Nixon and an older man in a black robe.

Angie leaned over to him, putting her mouth near his ear and whispering—softly, but distinctly, “I like you.” She shifted back into her normal seating position. It was impossible for him to absorb this now. Not here, not amid the mass of students, Miss Dale, Mrs. Schubmehl, the television sets.

The hallways of Chestnut Point fell silent, all attention directed to what was on TV.

And Richard Milhouse Nixon took the oath of office, becoming the thirty-seventh president of the United States.

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# The Weight of the Egg

By: Patricia Schultheis

“My name is Persephone, and I’m the wife of an alcoholic.” The dark-eyed woman’s childhood name leapt from her mouth like an ancient augury. For two years she’d introduced herself to her Al-Anon group as Peri, and now suddenly her odd, old name was flapping around the dingy church basement and sending her back into her motherless past.

“You all know I’m Greek,” she said, “My father was born here in Baltimore, but his parents came from Greece. My mother actually was born there, in Mesolóngi . . . Persephone’s my baptismal name . . . what she always called me.”

For days she’d rehearsed what she wanted to tell them, now, instead, “Persephone” leapt out, forcing her carefully selected words to lump together in the back of her throat, while her mouth emitted incoherent stammers. And her anguished eyes roved over the group.

Across the circle, Hank’s eyes met hers and telegraphed. *“Oh, Peri-Persephone, or whatever you’re calling yourself today . . . just say whatever you want. Words aren’t the thing itself. The thing itself may be awful, but the words naming it are only sounds.”*

“Teddy’s left me,” she finally blurted. “He left me . . . us. Two weeks ago Saturday, Teddy left.”

Two weeks on her own, she still felt as if she was starring in an amateur summer production about a single mother — she kept waiting for the curtain to drop, so she could get off the stage and go home. But none of the others looked surprised — they’d heard her stories — the smashed cars, lost jobs, unpaid bills, toppled Christmas trees, and vomit-clogged sinks. The slag heap of broken promises dumped over the lives of herself and her children.

The group shifted in their folding chairs and cleared their throats. But over the creaking metal and guttural emissions, a sonic vacuum settled. To fill it, a torrent broke through the dark-eyed woman's stuttering stammers. The separation is for the best. . . she and Teddy both agreed to it. She was still in the house. And the kids were okay. It's been an adjustment. But everyone was doing fine. Everyone was just fine.

Her torrent rushed on, until finally a truth she hadn't realized she was keeping hidden tumbled out: "I'm afraid." April rain beat against the basement's dusty windows.

Hank leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, so the paper coffee cup wrapped in his fists hung over the basement's dull brown and gray linoleum squares. "What are you afraid of, Peri?"

"That's just it . . . I don't know . . . I've been married a long time . . . my whole adult life's been with Teddy. This dread that he'll get drunk, and some catastrophe will happen, I've been dragging it so long, I don't know what life feels like without it. His drinking's been a dead weight. But a familiar dead weight. *My* dead weight. If I'm not the wife of a drunk, who am I?"

"Maybe you could have a ceremony."

She knew only three things about him: that he worked for a video-technology firm; that his wife was in her third rehab; that his mother died a week before Christmas. "A what?"

"A ceremony. Mom was a schoolteacher, and years ago her kids gave her one of those big, old schoolhouse bells as a gag. But when Mom's cancer got bad, my sister moved in and put that damn bell beside Mom's bed, so she could clang it whenever she needed something. And when she passed, my sister and I buried the thing in our backyard."

"You think I should bury something?"

"Well, maybe just do something to mark your transition."

The dark-eyed woman almost smiled. “The problem is I don’t know what I’m transitioning to.” The meeting moved on to other issues, but Hank’s idea took root. That night, she called her older sister. “You remember how, when Mom died and Dad enrolled us in Briarwood Hall, I reinvented myself as Peri. . . I thought Peri would fit in with all those cotillion girls better than Persephone. Anyway, after all this time, at my Al-Anon meeting this morning, I introduced myself as myself Persephone . . . it just flew out. I think if I were walking down the street and someone called ‘Persephone,’ I wouldn’t know who they meant.”

“Except if that person was Mom,” Eugenia said. “Until the day she died you were her Persephone.”

“Some guy suggested I have a sort of ceremony to mark Teddy’s leaving.”

“Know what we should do?”

“What?”

“Visit Mom’s grave and tell her he’s gone. We’ll take her flowers.”

“I don’t know, Eugenia. Mom’s been gone so long; she probably won’t hear us.”

“We’ll yell really loud, Peri. It’s a cemetery, for God’s sake . . .it’s not like we’d bother anybody. We’ll tell Mom about Teddy, then go to lunch.”

But the day they’d planned to go, Eugenia had an emergency root canal, so Peri cut tulips from the patchy bed around her mailbox alone — none of them Lightning Suns, the type she and Teddy planted their first fall back in Baltimore after he gave up trying to make it as a writer in New York. She remembered him beside her, a bulb’s filamentous roots trailing down his wrist. “Know what we’re really planting, Peri?”

“What?”

“Faith . . . without faith, why on earth would anyone trust that something this ugly could mold in the frozen ground all winter, and then, come spring, burst out, an exquisite tulip?” Her Teddy—always a deeper, poetic meaning beneath the actual.

She had hardly known him as when they were teenagers and she went to Briarwood Hall and he went to Putnam Academy. But a year after she’d graduated from Barnard she walked into the Brooklyn party of one his Yale friends and there he was: Teddy Holbrook from Baltimore, a junior reporter for *Newsweek*, a grinning guy whose mind crackled with droll wit, keen observation, and tender insight. Their stellar degrees, their shared Baltimore roots, how did things go so wrong?

Suddenly wracking sobs folded her double, and her face nearly burrowed into her flowers. Every gasping breath carried the feral scent of fresh-cut tulips and salty tears.

But the neighbors mustn’t see her crying. Bad enough they all probably heard Teddy’s loud, drunken recitation of “Gunga Din” last Labor Day, and now here she was, down on her knees, crying for the whole neighborhood to see. Even the kindest among them had to be wondering the same question she felt gnawing her insides. . . *How was she going to cope?*

She wiped her eyes, took her tulips to her kitchen, wrapped them in soaking newspaper and drove to the Greek Orthodox cemetery overlooking a neighborhood of split-levels.

“All of this . . . all of this,” her father, an East Baltimore dentist, would exclaim whenever he drove her and Eugenia to visit their mother’s grave. One hand on the wheel, the other waving over the houses, he’d rave, “All of this, Pete Cristopoulos developed.”

Beside her on the backseat, Eugenia would roll her eyes. Their father’s story about Pete Cristopoulos never varied, how in the ‘60s, a wealthy Greek surgeon bought two large farms and developed tracts of four-bedroom homes. And as soon as the last thirty-year mortgage was

signed, he announced that the hilltop overlooking the new homes would become a Greek Orthodox cemetery, so that for decades Baltimore's Greek dead lay like skeletal rebukes to the mortgaged dreams housed in the split levels below. Looking back, she heard in her father's admiration for Pete Cristopoulos a first-generation American's striving to plant his own flag.

At the end of Toll House Drive, she turned into the cemetery and drove up the hill. At the base of her mother's headstone, she laid her tulips, then ran her finger over the engraved legend: *Sophia Spikos. 1952-1997 Beloved Wife and Mother.* Over and over, her finger traced the stone's code as if it held the riddle to her fate. Then she knelt. And on the scant possibility that her tears might seep through the earth and water her mother's bones she let herself weep.

*“Μοθερ, Μοθερ, χελπ. Mother Mother, help me. Give me the strength you had. I'm like Sisyphus without his rock . . . free . . . but free to do what? Without my worry-rock, I'm too scared to find out who I'm supposed to be.”*

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*“Oh, Persephone, my springtime girl, what have you done? . . . cut flowers from their life-source to lay on a dead woman's grave? What good are flowers to the dead? . . . except to remind us of all those springs we never bothered to stop and enjoy them? Much better that you take them home. Put the poor things in that vase I bought you the last time your father and I visited Mesolóngi.*

*“At least, then you and the children will have something beautiful to look at across the dinner table, instead of each other's own sad faces—I don't imagine any of you have many smiles since Teddy left. Still, I really do hope you and your children somehow manage to have dinner together.*

“Remember how your father always ranted that his practice would be twice as large if he had evening hours? But I always said No. That was the one thing I insisted on, even when I was so sick: dinner together as a family. Except for Thursdays . . . I let him have his Thursdays.

“And Persephone? . . . please don’t cry. I can’t help that fate gave me cancer and took me from you before I could caution you against marrying a man like Teddy Holbrook. I knew the type . . . a man who senses himself destined for greatness, but whose ancestral thread has become frayed by diluted cultures: Spanish, Italian, English. Such a cacophony of derivative cultures that he can’t hear the ancient keening choruses beating in the pulse of a woman like you. Being deaf to those ancient choruses, and ignoring the danger of overzealous ambition’s one-eyed monster, he let himself be seduced by Dionysius and heeded only whatever was current and glib so he could regard himself as clever and superior.

“I know that you came here seeking motherly comfort, but I have none to give. Only this: you are no less Greek than I. Like I was, you were born hearing the echoes from the ancient amphitheater of Argos. Your Teddy could have strained for millennia to hear those choruses, and never grasped their warning: his sense of destiny was an illusion. A frivolous masquerade compared to fate’s relentlessness.

“But those ancient choruses thrum through you, Persephone. Trust them. Yes, your marriage is over, but you are the daughter of a foundational civilization. The day will come when you’ll look back at the death of your marriage and realize that was the moment when your true life began.

“Besides, you’re not the only woman with sorrows. You think I want this scruffy cemetery overlooking a Baltimore suburb as my final resting place? I begged your father to bring

me home to Mesolónghi. There, I could have lain with my family forever, all of us sharing the rhythms of Ionia's pounding sea as it reverberated through good Greek soil and into our bones.

“Oh yes, Dimitris promised that whatever the cost he'd bury me there, but I knew he wouldn't. Just as I knew the real reason he wanted to see patients in the evening. I did his books: three quarters of the patients who climbed the stairs to his office were women. So, those Thursday nights when I let him work? . . . what do you think he was doing? Let me tell you, whatever cavities he was filling weren't in any teeth.

“You and Eugenia never suspected that, did you? Of course, not. To you Dr. Dimitris Spikos was Zeus. And I never had the heart to disabuse you of that notion. Early on, I saw fate's shadow darkening my path, so I knew my skein of time was short. And girls without mothers need to believe their fathers are gods; it's the only way they can feel safe. So, I let you and Eugenie have your delusions.

“Just as I let Dimitris have his Thursday nights . . . let him think he was getting away with something. But remember, even as I got sicker and sicker, I kept doing the books. All those Thursday nights, after dinner, when you and Eugenia were doing your homework, and I had those ledgers spread open on the table . . . what do you think I was doing?

“Skimming, that's what. I skimmed so much money and sent it home to my brothers, they bought the best fishing boat in Mesolónghi.

“And when your father took me back there because he knew the cancer was worsening, what a fuss my brothers made over him. He thought they actually liked him! Poor Dimitris. He'd go to the tavern, throw his arms over their shoulders and dance, so besotted with his own self-congratulations at being the good husband who brought his dying wife back to her people he



never saw the mockery in her brothers' eyes. But I saw it. And let me tell you something, Persephone . . . it felt good.

“Oh, my springtime daughter, I see the horrible pain you're in. And know you cannot fathom how the death of your marriage can open the door to your second life. But trust me: that second life is out there . . . waiting. Don't waste this chance. Lift the latch, open the door, and go.

“And Persephone? . . . take your flowers with you.

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The Tuesday before Memorial Day, she tells her Al-Anon group that Teddy wants to take the children to a baseball game that Saturday. But she doesn't know if she should let him. “What if he drinks? . . . you can't take five steps in the stadium without someone selling beer. What if he gets drunk?”

“Let them go . . . he's their father, after all. Let them go,” Hank says.

So that Saturday she stands in the front doorway and shouts “Have fun” to their departing backs as the three of them pile into their father's waiting car.

As soon as she closes the door. A new reality confronts her: from that point on, her children's involvement with Teddy will be separate and distinct from hers. From that point on, “their father” and “their mother” will never be “their parents.”

Whatever else he'd been, Teddy had been a good father, at least he tried to be. She remembered him discussing late into the night “The Merchant of Venice” versus “MacBeth” with Juliette. And going to see Putnam's headmaster about that trouble Lukas got into. And finding an alternative school when Briarwood Hall proved too tough for Amy. No, he hadn't been a bad parent, just an erratic, unreliable one. And from now on, whatever sense of “parent” he imparts to their children will bear no imprint of herself —she hadn't been prepared for that.

She wanders from room to room, seeking comfort from the familiars of their lives together. On the bookcase, his copy of *The Sound and the Fury* beside hers of *To the Lighthouse*— Juliette not born yet, the hot Sunday afternoon they stopped at a little Greenwich Village bookstore. Beside the fireplace, the floor lamp they'd found on the curb in front of a Brooklyn brownstone. And in a glass jar on the round table at the head of the stairs the shells they'd collected on their Cape Cod honeymoon. Everything from the past. Nothing telling her how to go forward. She goes down the hall.

Long ago, she'd stopped noticing the cardboard boxes in their bedroom—they'd been stacked near the window since they'd moved from New York: three, labeled ARTICLES, two FICTION. Better they were marked "Teddy Holbrook's New York Years" she thinks.

Before *Newsweek* fired him, he somehow managed to write fiction at night when the kids were asleep. He even had a few stories published in respectable journals: *Ploughshares*, the *Missouri Review*, *Gettysburg*. No, neither want of talent nor skill had quashed Teddy Holbrook's promise. Not even his kid-cluttered life.

The cause had been evident that Saturday night in Brooklyn: he was Teddy Holbrook from Baltimore. A very bright boy whose family owned a fleet of tugboats, but no private bank. A very bright boy who sailed the Chesapeake, but never raced to Bermuda. A very bright boy who'd gone each day to the Putnam Academy, but never boarded at St. Paul's.

And always, always, whatever reason his Yale buddies had for celebration—even christenings—the real purpose was competition. A bon mot dropped . . . good. A bon mot laced with Montaigne . . . better. A bon mot laced with Montaigne declaimed in French . . . best. She had never understood that exhausting gamesmanship, but then, she'd always been an outsider,

first at Briarwood Hall as the motherless, brainy daughter of an east Baltimore dentist. Then as the dark-eyed earnest girl known as the Greek Grind at Barnard.

But those New York years, when she'd been coping with the kids, she realized, had been a never-ending Olympiad of one upmanship for Teddy.

And, of course, always an accompanying drink. Always a raised glass disguised as a toast. Because, whatever the occasion, drinking was the ultimate triathlon . . . how much, how long could anyone hold it . . . that was the true test. Until drinking became its own purpose, at least for Teddy. And then *Newsweek* let him go, and, worse, the booze had so thoroughly muddied his early talent that rejections and acceptances of his stories became equal reasons to drink. Teddy . . . oh, Teddy.

If she ever went through all those boxes, she knew she'd see her own handwriting scribbled in the margins. Even into her third pregnancy, he was still turning to her for inspiration. But by then she resented his idealized version of her, resented how he relied on her opinions of his fiction when she was dealing with dirty diapers, doing laundry, cooking, shopping—he seemed to think some god descended to care for all that.

One rainy March Sunday, desperate to get out of their crammed apartment, they took Juliette and Lukas to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they tramped from gallery to gallery until she could go no farther— she was pregnant again, and Amy, so sweet in life, had been a hellion in utero.

“Go ahead,” she told him. “And take Juliette and Lukas with you. I need to sit a while.” In less than half an hour, they were back with a box from the gift shop. Inside was a miniature replica of a vase from Mesolóngi her mother had given her.

She remembered Teddy tilting her chin and kissing her, “The note” he urged, “read the note.”

She opened the little envelope: “To my muse.” And she remembered, too, how he mistook the exhaustion brimming her eyes for tears of happiness. The truth was that she never wanted to be anyone’s muse. Being a muse required being endlessly attentive and available, an impossible task for any woman with small children. Being a muse wasn’t part of the bargain she had made with the fates when they took her mother: she was owed the love of a reliable man. Instead the fates gave her Teddy Holbrook, a man who couldn’t even read his own wife’s tears.

The little vase from that Sunday sits on her dresser now. She glances at it, then turns away. To her bed. And rips the sheets off. She bundles them into a tight wad that she carries into Juliette’s room. Where she rips the sheets off that bed, too. Then those on Lukas’s bed. And Amy’s. The ripping, the wadding, rage energizes her. She had tried. Tried so damn hard. And this is what she gets? To be alone on a sunny Saturday afternoon with a load of dirty sheets?

She trundles the whole bundle down to the basement and throws it into the washer. She is making a mental note to buy more detergent when she spies the green, ceramic egg-shaped grill under the window.

“Take it back. Take it back,” she’d yelled when Teddy bought last Labor Day.

But he just set it on the patio and grinned. “It’s ceramic, Peri. The way the Indians used to cook . . . in clay pots. Plus, it was on sale . . . end of season . . . half price.”

“I don’t care what it cost, Teddy. . . take it back.”

But he left it the patio, drove off, and didn’t return until sunset, and then with a bottle of Glenfiddich and three rib-eye steaks. She watched from the kitchen as he sipped his scotch and

grilled his steaks on his new green egg. While their children waited at the weather-beaten picnic table.

*“Margaret are you grieving over Golden Grove unleafing?”* he started to intone, but Lukas interrupted. *“‘Gunga Din,’ Dad. Do ‘Gunga Din’.”*

So he began, *“You may talk of gin and beer When you’re quartered safe out ‘ere.”* On and on he went, when, by the final verse, he had all three kids banging time on the splintered table.

*“An’ I’ll get a swig in hell for Gunga Din!*

*Yes. Din! Din! Din!*

*You Lazariushian -leather Gunga Din!*

*Though I’ve belted you and flayed you,*

*By the livin’ God that made you,*

*You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din!”*

How her children’s chorused voices hurled that transgressive “a swig in hell” over the neighbor’s trimmed lawns and into the twilight . . . her children, embracing the rebellious, anarchic thrust of Kipling’s “hell.” What a delicious defiance endorsed by their father at the grill, their father who, by the glint in his eye encouraged them —“Come join me, kids . . . under the shimmer-tent of language. Come join me where nothing’s forbidden save mediocrity.” . . . her Teddy.

She gets a rag and wipes the dust off the egg, then opens the cellar door. She’d never made a fire — Teddy always lit the logs in their fireplace and the charcoal in their grills. But the egg would just gather cobwebs unless she hauls it out. Thinking she could carry it up the cellar stairs, she rolls it to the doorway. But then can’t lift it. She gets between the egg and the stairs,

and, facing backwards, uses her heels to feel the risers. She climbs two stairs, bends down, grips the egg's wooden handles and hauls . . . one stair up. She inches her heels up another step, plants her feet and hauls again. Again. She repeats the maneuver twice more. But midway up her back feels like it's going to snap, and she needs to catch her breath.

If she is going to get to the top, she must consider every move, but the weight of the egg is more than she expected. She can imagine everything crashing down, the egg shattering and herself lying hurt and bleeding at the bottom of the steps. The only way is up.

So, she hauls again. And again. Two steps from the top, the egg's lid falls off. She manages to grab it with her right hand, while her left keeps its grip the egg. But the effort makes her lose her balance and sends her backwards onto her rearend. So, she sits, one hand holding the egg and the other, the lid. Standing up is impossible — she doesn't have the leverage — the egg's counterweight is too strong. Tears of frustration rim her eyes and constrict her throat. But she chokes them down. Leaning so far back that the edge of the top step slices her back, she reaches her right hand behind herself and deposits the lid on the patio. Then she swings her newly freed hand to the egg's empty handle and grips the egg securely. But she's still on her butt. Staying seated, she manages to pull the egg up a step, leaving only one step between it and herself. Then she inches her butt up again and pulls again, until at last she is sitting on the top step, where she finally stands. Inching her heels onto the patio and being careful not to step on the unseen lid behind her, she pulls one last time. Finally, the egg, its lid, and herself are safely on the patio.

She inhales. How cool and sweet the air smells. Wispy clouds scud across the late springtime sky, and how beautiful, too, are the riotous orange lilies beside the violet hydrangeas growing by the fence.

Then, she notices a movement among the hydrangeas' lower leaves. Slight but odd — only the lower leaves move. Then they stop. Then, move again. More vigorously this time. She sits at the weathered picnic table and watches.

A small rabbit emerges. It hops across the lawn, eats a little clover, hops again, eats more, then sits on its haunches and looks at her. Still as a statue with a twitching nose, it considers her. She can almost see it weighing the risk she presents against its own wild wishes — friend or foe? — eat or flee? And beneath those primal urges, she detects something else. Curiosity. Who is that dark-eyed creature? What does it want? Will it kill me?

Apparently satisfied she's no danger, the little rabbit returns to its clover, while she stays at the table and watches. Then, its hunger satisfied apparently, the small brown bunny flashes its white tail and hops back under the hydrangeas. The last she sees it, it's flashing its white tale across her neighbor's yard.

Then she gets up, puts the lid on the green egg and rolls the thing nearer the table. When the kids come home, she'll figure out how to start a fire and cook some hamburgers. And the four of them will sit at the table, and she'll listen to them tell about the game. And she'll tell them about the rabbit. About how it evaluated her and apparently found her harmless.

She takes a deep breath and inhales the scent of a new season coming.

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The middle of three daughters in a Polish-American family, I grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and commuted by bus and train to college in New Haven. I graduated from Albertus Magnus College in 1965, moved to Baltimore, and met the man I married. While raising our two children, I had a career in public relations and editing, and contributed free-lance articles to various publications, including *The Washington Post* and *Kiplinger's Changing Times*. I didn't devote myself to fiction until my late fifties when I attended the Breadloaf Writers' Conference. Since then, I have had some 40 stories published, plus numerous essays and book reviews. I am the author of the award-winning short story collection *St. Bart's Way*, and of *Baltimore's Lexington Market*, a pictorial history published by Arcadia Publishing in 2007. *A Balanced Life*, my memoir, was published by All Things That Matter Press in 2018. I have received awards from The Fitzgerald Writers' Conference, *Memoirs Ink*, The American League of American Pen Women, *Winning Writers*, and *Washington Writers' Publishing House*. Most recently, my short story collection *Something Sensed; Someone Summoned* was short listed by Steel Toe Books. A widow, I continue to live in Baltimore, the setting for "The Weight of the Egg."