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Featured Article

Scrambled Heart

Susan Jostrom

I have spent countless days in hospitals: Someone checks you in, you fill out papers, they take copies, you wait. Someone else rolls your son in a wheelchair down the wide corridor, past the grand piano where elderly volunteers play *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* and *Five Foot Two*, up the elevator to a private room on the sixth floor where you've been before. You follow behind, making small talk and smiling, packing the necessary equipment—cell phone, laptop, and an unread book—you will need to stay occupied while you wait. You wait for blood tests and x-rays and doctor visits while you play with your cell phone downloading worthless ring tones and pictures of purple mountains you will never look at. You watch the black shadows move down the concrete walls on the buildings outside your window. You rub your son's palm with your index finger, the way you did when he was a baby. You try to read, but your eyes blur. You fill up the room with balloons from the gift shop, because no one even knows that you son is in the hospital again, and no one sends balloons or stops by or calls. So you fill in the space.

This visit is for evaluation for a heart transplant. I try to act confident and cheerful and ask appropriate, intelligent questions of the doctors and social workers from the heart transplant team or the nurses who visit Zeke's room unannounced, twenty-four hours a day. When a doctor says he will be in to see you in the morning, it may be noon, or it may be evening, or it may be tomorrow morning, or he may have come while you stepped out for ten minutes to bring up a tray of tomato soup and iceberg lettuce from the basement cafeteria and you missed him, but no matter because he will be back tomorrow, or maybe not, and the nurse will contact him, or maybe not. And then, after two heart catherizations because one is not good enough, they finally have some results to share and a treatment plan and the results are all bad and they have no plan because there are no real options, and they tell you your son has "*a year-and-a-half to two years to live*" unless he has a heart transplant. Blood work reveals he has hepatitis C (this is a new thing!) no doubt from past blood transfusions, probably cirrhosis of the liver from the hepatitis, and his lung functions are extremely poor (you knew that) and consequently he may not be a candidate for a transplant and the transplant team quits visiting. They will change his medications and send you home—and discuss him in conference next week and let you know. And they tell you that he has "reached the normal life span of a child with a heart condition like this," and they tell you again that there are really no good options and his pacemaker is not working right and his mitral valve is leaking but they are not certain it would be worth the risk to open his chest again to fix those minor problems. I sit and smile at the doctors with my lips closed and I purse my lips wisely and nod my head and laugh a lot and I try to find something to be hopeful for because Zeke is sitting in the room with me and I need to always act brave and optimistic for him because I am still the mother and he still leans on me—a lot. I squeeze my eyes and don't let one little teeny drip escape because I know there are gallons more where those come from and I have learned after countless hours curled up on bathroom floors sobbing: There is no such thing as a good cry.

I was twenty-four when Zeke was born. Young and naïve about everything, but who knew about birth defects? When people asked if I was hoping for a boy or a girl I replied, "Oh, it doesn't matter, as long as it's healthy." That was in 1978, prior to testing to determine the sex or complications before a baby was born. Zeke had his first heart surgery at three days old.

He was a "blue baby," doctors said, born with a missing ventricle: a three-chambered, scrambled heart. *Tricuspid atresia*, the official diagnosis, means the tricuspid valve never opened and consequently the lower right chamber never formed. Mike and I stared at the cardiologist who gave us the diagnosis. "So this is serious?" I asked wide-eyed. "Very serious," he said.

A five-pound-ten-ounce infant, the surgeon operated on Zeke under a microscope. They didn't have a corrective procedure for Zeke's defect so the team of surgeons created a shunt; they rerouted the main artery to the right arm into the lungs to provide more oxygen to the blood. The cardiologist came out mid-procedure and told Mike and me they didn't expect Zeke to survive. I folded my arms across my chest and looked at the floor. The vessel they were trying to sew into was "like wet tissue paper" as the doctor described it, and would collapse if they attempted to suture it. "We're standing around meditating," he said.

I locked myself into the waiting room bathroom and did my own meditating—forehead flattened into the mirror, my hands stripping milk from my swollen breasts into the porcelain sink, the antiseptic soap smell making me nauseous. My legs buckled and I slumped to the linoleum floor, head on my knees, sobbing in silent gasps, praying—no, demanding—that my baby survive. "I want *this* baby," I told God. "Please, please, please, please, *please*," like a child begging for candy at the grocery store.

Eight hours later a nurse ushered Mike and me into the neo-natal intensive care unit. "Scrub your hands to your elbows for a minute," she told us softly, then led us to a tiny, naked infant, arms and legs outstretched and strapped to a table, warming lights blaring over his head. The baby was crying but not making a sound—a breathing tube was stuffed down his throat. "*My God*," I thought at first glance, "*that's somebody's baby*." I never took pictures. I didn't want to remember.

We ate and slept at the hospital. At night we spread out a thin piece of foam on the waiting room floor and buried ourselves in the white cotton blankets the nurses provided. In the morning we rolled up our meager bedding and wadded it into a closet.

Four weeks later we walked out the hospital door, Zeke cradled in my arms. We took the first picture of his sleeping face swaddled in a blue flannel blanket. If Zeke was a cat, he had lost his first life. The morning we finally emerged from the hospital, fall met us at the door. The air was blue and crisp, the sumac brilliant orange and yellow, red maples glowed gold in the sun. What a welcome to the land of the living. I took off my shoes and let the dew-covered grass cushion my feet. I have rarely felt more alive.

Twenty-eight years later, two more open heart surgeries, an e-coli infection, a deadly bacterial infection in his heart sac, numerous bouts with pneumonia, a dozen other minor surgeries and cumulative months in hospitals, along with two more pronouncements through the years from doctors that he would die—soon—Zeke is still alive.

It's been three years since doctors told us Zeke had "*a year-and-a-half to two years to live*" unless he had a heart transplant. Because of the hepatitis C diagnosis and subsequent cirrhosis doctors later agreed to evaluate him for a heart/liver transplant, quite rare, but half a dozen have been successfully completed around the country. Doctors wanted to do some lung studies first, before sending him to Seattle for a heart/liver evaluation. His lung functions are extremely poor, possibly due to fibroid tumors, probably from anti-fibrillation drugs: he would need a heart/liver/lung transplant. Although multiple organ transplantation has been successful, the three big guns have been transplanted only once before. After six months of waiting for results and decisions, a letter from Mayo Clinic arrived stating the "constellation of his anatomy" was in too great a state of disarray and he was pronounced a non-viable candidate—as though he were running for election. The sand in the hourglass draining, Mike and I began measuring time as though a bomb were set to detonate at the end of the two-year death sentence, "*a year-and-a-half to two years to live without a transplant*."

Poem

A Year of Almost Living

Gail Eisenhart

Despite its cheery disguise, the nursing home chills me.
Sunlight spills through ten-feet-high windows,
comes to rest on the vacant face of the receptionist.
I come often, wander freely; yet it's hard
to find my friend, my cousin in this

old man tethered to a mechanical bed,
his face like ancient etched soapstone, stubbled
with beard. A quiet snore shudders his curled frame;
lashless eyes, crusted, disappear in a pudding face.
Blanketed to his chin, in sleep he seems pain free,
a blessing I dare not interrupt.

I take the elevator up, find the love of his life
sleeping in her wheelchair. Her recently shaved cranium
is thick again with dark hair. . .no permed curls,
she's crew cut now: chic and strangely stylish.
Until April she was his caretaker and kept him mobile
through years of Parkinson's disease.

Today is their forty-seventh wedding anniversary.
Her withered limbs and skeletal body long to find
their way back to last Spring before a burst aneurysm
flooded her brain. Comatose for weeks, we gave up
and planned her funeral, even chose a final ensemble;
then she opened her eyes, said hello.

She wakes with a smile and calls my name.
I wish her a happy anniversary. Her eyes fill and close.
I comment on white balloons, flowers filling
the room with fragrance, paper hearts in rainbow colors
signed by adored grandchildren. I chatter,
nonsense and non-specific details of the week,
kiss her forehead, give her my love and tell her I must go.
She smiles, speaks softly and says
next year we'll celebrate.

Fiction

Ino's Love

Marianne Sciucco

A blast of hot air, pungent with the aroma of sautéed garlic, greeted me when I pushed open the door to Ino's third floor apartment. "Is that you, Ruby?" she called from the kitchen.

"It's me," I said, lumbering down the hall, both hands toting large shopping bags stuffed with freshly laundered clothes. The garlic smell grew more overpowering with each step.

"This place is like a hothouse," I complained, breathless. I dropped the bags on the kitchen floor and looked around in dismay. Onion and garlic skins, eggshells, and empty containers of ricotta cheese and tomatoes filled the sink. Dirty dishes littered the countertop. Breadcrumbs crunched underfoot. "What are you up to, Ino? I left this place spotless yesterday."

"I'm making dinner." Ino turned from the stove with a wooden spoon in one hand, her apron spattered by her efforts. "Company's coming," she said, a broad grin lighting up her wrinkled face. Tomato sauce simmered on the back burner, filling the room with its fresh, sweet smell.

"And who might that be?" I asked, tugging off my coat. As far as I knew, Ino never entertained. Most of her dinners were delivered by Meals on Wheels. Her only visitors were the lady in 3B, Father O'Brien, the visiting nurse, and the UPS man.

"Ray," Ino said proudly, her lips wrapping around the name like a kiss. "He called this morning. Said he was on his way. Said he had business in the city." She went back to stirring her pot. She was barely five feet, with a slight dowager's hump and skinny arms. Tiny pin curls dotted her head. A man's wool sweater, worn at the elbows and missing a few buttons, was draped over her pink housedress. Thick white socks covered her swollen feet and ankles, and her slippers sagged at the heels.

Innocenzia Bellarosa, my afternoon client. The agency sent me five days a week, four hours each day, to assist her with light housekeeping, remind her to take her pills, and see that she bathed. We'd been together almost two years.

I slipped off my snow-encrusted boots and placed them by the radiator on a stack of newspapers. "Is that right?" I asked. Her son, Ray, hadn't been by since he'd hired me to watch over his mother.

"I'm making all his favorites: meatballs and manicotti, a little antipasto, some garlic bread. I even have cannoli from Ferrara's."

I moaned, exasperated. "Ino, you're going to wear yourself out with all this cooking. And you're out of the hospital not even two weeks." Diabetes and heart failure sent her to the hospital several times a year, and she hadn't fully recovered from the latest bout. "Dr. Kaplan will have a fit."

"Oh, don't you worry about Dr. Kaplan." She waved the spoon at me. "What he don't know won't hurt him."

"He'll know if you end up back in the hospital."

"Honey, I feel just fine. I feel wonderful. Ray's coming. He'll be here at four o'clock."

I glanced at my watch: almost half past twelve. "Wait a minute, Ino. Where did you get all this food? You didn't go out, did you?" It was almost impossible for her to climb the stairs to her apartment.

"Of course not," she laughed. "I had it delivered." She'd lived in Little Italy all her life and knew everyone on Mulberry Street. "But I forgot a few things. Will you go to the store for me? I need fresh greens, and a nice tomato, ripe and firm, not pale and mealy. And a bottle of Chianti, a good label, nothing cheap."

"You're going all out," I muttered. I grabbed a broom, swept up the breadcrumbs and deposited them into the trashcan.

Ino didn't budge from the stove. "Hush, Ruby. He's my son, and it's the night before Christmas Eve. This is our Christmas dinner." She salted the tomato sauce, dipped the spoon into the pot, and raised it to her lips for a taste. "Like my mother's," she sighed.

Ino made the best sauce I'd ever tasted. She hadn't made it in ages. The acid upset her stomach. "You know all this is not good for your diet," I reminded her. "How was your sugar this morning?" I fished the eggshells out of the sink and dropped them into the trash.

"My sugar was perfect," She said.

"Did you take your insulin?"

"Of course."

Ino suffered mild memory loss. Missing her medications meant big trouble. I checked her pillbox and counted the pre-filled insulin syringes to make sure that her morning doses had been taken. No trouble today.

"What about lunch? Have you eaten anything, or are you just nibbling as you go along?"

"I had a sandwich and a glass of milk just before you got in." She gestured toward the dirty plate and glass in the sink.

"Huh," I said, running out of steam. She didn't look too bad. And the smile plastered across her face almost made a relapse worth it. *Almost*. Ino was in my care. I couldn't sit by while she wore herself out. "Are you almost done over there?" I asked.

"I just have to stuff the manicotti."

"Sit down," I ordered. "I'll help you." I pulled the bowl of prepared ricotta cheese out of the refrigerator and carried the pot of cooked pasta to the table. I held the slippery tubes while she spooned in the creamy cheese filling. It was tedious, messy work. By the time we finished, she was winded. Her cheeks were flushed. The pin curls by her ears were damp.

"You look pooped," I said, rising from the table. I slid the tray of manicotti into the refrigerator and checked the meatballs and sauce. "Let's take a rest."

I helped her from the kitchen to the living room. She huffed all the way, her feet dragging across the floor. She dropped, drained, into her recliner. It was worn and tattered, and clashed with the imported Italian leather pieces Ray had given her. I covered her with a fleece blanket and pushed the recliner back, her feet up. I pulled her slippers off, loosened the elastic band at the top of her stockings, and massaged her feet. Her head lolled back and her breathing grew relaxed and even.

An artificial Christmas tree glittered in the corner. We'd put it up together the week before. I'd helped Ino place the angel on top. Later we drank hot chocolate and listened to Frank Sinatra sing Christmas classics.

I turned on the tree's colorful light bulbs and hit the play button on the CD player. Sinatra softly crooned, *White Christmas*.

"That's nice," Ino murmured. "You always know what to do, Ruby."

"I know you, Ino."

We sat this way for a while. I could smell the tomato sauce all the way in the living room. A meal for a king. Ray didn't deserve it.

His face beamed at me from across the room. A "promotional photo," Ino had explained, flushed with pride. Raimondo Bellarosa as the CEO of a multi-million dollar Internet business. A magazine had written a big article about him; put his picture on the cover. Ray was some big deal. Handsome. Rich. A real success story. But he was a lousy son.

"What do your boys want for Christmas?" Ino asked, her eyes closed.

"What don't they want?" I snickered. "Electronics. iPods. X-Box. Cell phones. You name it." My three boys were voracious, but my husband's salary from the New York City Transit Authority barely paid the bills, and the money I made as a home health aide provided few extras. It would be a meager holiday.

"David settle on a school yet?"

I grimaced. "Most likely City College." My oldest, David, was a senior in high school. All-Star basketball. Straight A's. Destined for big things. Out of our league.

"He'll be fine," Ino assured me. "Ray went to a city school. We didn't have any money, either. See how he turned out?"

At what price? I thought. I wanted success for my boys, but not to the point where they pushed me out of their lives.

"And what about Damon and Devon? Must be excited about Christmas."

My heart thrilled at the simple sound of their names. My twins, thirteen, still sweet. "Well, they stopped believing in Santa years ago, but I told them, 'When you stop believing, he stops coming.' So they do their best to convince me they still believe. I hope Santa is good to them this year."

"I'm sure he will be," Ino said. "Ruby, can you check the sauce, please?"

I went into the kitchen, checked the heat under the pot, stirred the sauce, and sampled a meatball. My boys would love this. I finished the few dishes in the sink, tidied the kitchen, slipped into the bathroom and gave it a quick cleaning. I made Ino's bed and put away her clean clothes. She dozed in her recliner while I worked. I left a note in her lap before slipping out to do her shopping.

When I returned, she was awake, the TV switched on to her soaps. The diabetes had left her with poor vision and she listened to her favorite programs, eyes closed. She opened them when I entered the room.

"Did you get everything?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Did you get the Chianti?"

"The one in the fancy bottle."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, good," she said. "Ray's favorite." She shifted in her chair; put her back up, her feet down. Her swollen ankles seemed better.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"I have to get ready. Ray will be here in an hour."

In her bedroom, she pulled a colorful housedress from the closet and took out fresh underwear and clean socks. She shuffled to the bathroom and turned on the water in the sink.

I stood in the doorway, watching, ready to assist, but she wanted to do this herself. She swabbed at her face with a wet washcloth. I marveled at her creamy skin, her shining eyes. Even in old age, Ino was a pretty woman. She washed under her arms, dried herself, and applied powder. She dabbed on a little perfume, an expensive fragrance. She caught my eye in the mirror, turned around, and aimed the sprayer at me. I leaned into the spritz, letting it settle on my hair, my clothes. I held out my arms and she sprayed each wrist.

"Douglas won't know what hit him when you get home with this stuff all over you," she teased, a twinkle in her eyes.

I blushed. "Hush, Ino. It ain't like that."

"Don't hush me. I'm old, but I'm not dead." She reached behind her head and started unwinding the pin curls. I helped and soon her head was a mass of tiny gray curls. I worked her brush through her hair, and stood back while she fussed with a few stray pieces. When she was satisfied, I covered her head with a mist of hair spray. She applied rich red lipstick to her thin lips and smacked them together. We watched in the mirror as she was transformed from a sickly, old woman to a lovely lady looking forward to a special evening.

Poem

The Human Knot

Lisa Plowman Dolensky

Sheets fit like a second skin
Frayed are the veins of time
Interweaving,
Interaching,
rests the human knot

A gift unable to be undone, unopened
but not untouched
Legs-lost
Arms-punctured by needles
Kidneys-anchored by machine
Only the heart of it now left to tug at my own.

Keeping kindred beats

Like a tangle, I can not free it without it breaking
As it struggles and gasps
I choke on the toughness of tender memories

Stepping forward, where it could not
The lace of my soul—
My grandfather.

Poem

Calling My Mother Again

Penelope Scambly Schott

*I feel so guilty, she repeats, voice thin
and surprised as a child's.*

The phone is heavy for her to hold.
I feel so guilty.

I tell her, *You worked hard all your life.
You have no reason to feel guilty.*

*The white flowers, says my mother.
Always she talks about flowers.*

*So beautiful the things inside them,
she says. Long red things.*

*Is there anything we can give you
to eat?*

*What kind of flowers? I inquire.
I hear her ask her aide.*

And now she reports, *White lilies.
With red things. I feel so guilty.*

*The two birds. I don't deserve it.
Everything in this house is beautiful.*

Suddenly my ardent mother
is a shining spirit like a mountain

lifting up the entire sky.
It is for this that she has thrashed

her way through life, and now,
in her white cloak of helplessness,

as if from a high place,
she is teaching our poor world

its own magnificence.

Fiction

Last Dance

Barbara Zimmermann

When she answered the phone and heard her father's voice, she asked, "How'd you get my number?"

"I called your work. Figured you were still at the same place."

"I'm surprised they gave it to you." She hadn't seen him for at least ten years, '71 or so.

"Could you come down here and take care of me? I'm dying."

She worried the telephone cord like a rosary, twisting it around each finger, trying to decide what to say. "How long?"

Her father coughed, his voice cracking when he spoke. "Three weeks, tops, they say."

She blinked and swallowed the tightness in her throat. A photo of her mother sat on the end table, her steely blue eyes trained on Ruth as if to remind her of her prediction from the grave: "Just wait. When he's old and sick, *then* he'll want to see you." Still, with her mother gone and no children, her father was all the family she had, except for Matthew. She'd have to trust that her husband could take care of himself in her absence.

"Let me make some calls and I'll get back with you." She clicked off a list in her mind: notify the department store where she dressed windows, postpone the book club meeting at her house, and reschedule her appointment with the hairdresser.

"You're the only one, Ruthie."

Ruthie, the clincher. "I know. I'll work it out. Stay near the phone."

When Matthew arrived home late that night, she reheated the pot roast in the oven. After buttering a slice of bread for him and pouring his ice tea, she stood at the sink and told him of her father's call, then added at the end, "I owe him nothing." She could count on both hands the times she'd seen her father since he'd left when she was six. Usually he showed up at Christmas or on her birthday.

"Up to you, Ruth. I've never met your father but I wonder if you'd ever forgive yourself if you don't go."

"Go with me," she ventured, knowing his response before he spoke.

"You know that's impossible." He smiled, then came to her and hugged her, his need rising against her as he whispered in her ear, "Let's hit the sack."

She pushed down the anger rising in her chest, wishing he would at least say how sorry he was for her predicament and that he'd miss her. She shrugged and headed for the bedroom, Matthew at her heels. Neither spoke as they undressed. He lay down on the bed, then rolled over. She massaged his back, kneading his muscles, her fingers pressing hard into his flesh as she worked her way from the curve of his spine to his shoulders. Then she turned him over and climbed on top, leaning forward. She wanted him to kiss her on the lips. Instead he pulled her closer, whispering in her ear how much he needed her. She forced herself to relax, escaping for a while the thought of her father waiting by the phone.

For the third time, she dumped the bag of urine—thick and cloudy and rank with the smell of death—into the toilet, no longer queasy after one week of the daily routine. She glanced into the mirror above the toilet. Same dark coloring, arched brows and thick angular nose. When she turned eighteen, her mother had insisted that she keep her dark brown hair bleached blonde. “You don’t want to look like him,” she’d cautioned Ruth. Her hair now its natural brunette, she realized it was better to look like her father than to have yellow hair that made her skin look sallow.

She returned to the living room where the hospital bed dominated the cramped bungalow her father called his home and reattached the urine bag to the stoma after swabbing the opening in his abdomen with alcohol. “Thanks again, Ruthie. I knew you’d come when I called.”

She patted his hand, wondering if the word “sap” was tattooed on her forehead. How could he have been so sure? She pinned the tabs of a fresh Kotex pad to the clean Jockey briefs. When she first arrived, her father had explained that after the urostomy surgery six months earlier, the doctor told him the cancer had spread from the prostate and urethra to his bladder and a large section of the colon. “A combination of radiation and chemotherapy might prolong your life,” the doctor offered. Her father had refused chemotherapy. Yesterday, blood began to stream from his penis.

“A little higher with that pin, and make sure the pad’s centered,” he said as Ruth rearranged the pad in the crotch of the briefs. She nodded, then slowly slipped the shorts over his scrawny ankles and up his pale legs. He was still barely able to raise his hips to assist her but she knew his strength would soon ebb to nearly nothing. She tried hard not to look at the now familiar shriveled penis, bloody and forlorn, and testicles the color of plums and size of acorns.

“You know, before they knew the cancer had spread from the prostate, the doctor told me that later on they could insert a prosthetic device in my penis, and I would be able to inflate it for sex. Isn’t that something?” He glanced downwards as if considering the miracle of science that could provide such a gift to men.

She bent down to gather up the soiled underwear folded carefully on the floor and tried to think of something to say. He was still clinging to the only significance he’d ever attached to life. But when she considered it, wasn’t sex at any age one way to check one’s pulse? When she was sick with a cold and feeling crummy, if Matthew crawled into bed and awakened her, his breath warm on her neck and smelling of spearmint and scotch, she’d resist at first. With his gentle persistence, she had often responded as if on automatic, closing her eyes.

“Would you have had it done?” she asked her father.

His eyes wandered over her head as he considered her question. “Doesn’t really matter now,” he finally answered, fiddling with the sheet, then tucking the fabric beneath his hips as though to conceal his impotency. “Later, if you want, I could help you pin Kotex to shorts, maybe a dozen or so. Be easier on you and I want to help.”

The auto mechanic’s mind at work, engineering the best performance from a product, she thought. “Want to watch TV?” she asked. He’d become addicted to soap operas of late, nothing she would have imagined for a man who’d made his living as a grease monkey, liked his whiskey neat, and read Louis L’Amour westerns. She would watch *General Hospital* with him, and during the commercials ask him to bring her up to date.

“Can you imagine Luke and Laura marrying? Something will trip them up, always does.” Struggling, he managed to pull himself up in bed and then slipped on his glasses, too large now for his skeletal face, the lenses magnifying his eyes as he studied her, waiting for her response.

“Did something happen to ‘trip up’ you and mom?” She clicked on the TV, leaving the volume low.

“Look, there are two sides to every story. Your mom was a hellcat, always accusing me of cheating when I wasn’t.” He squinted at the screen, motioning for her to turn up the volume. When she didn’t budge, he looked at her and added, “Finally I figured if I had the name, I’d play the game. Our marriage was over by then.”

He’d managed to reduce seven years of marriage to a trite, one-line dismissal. Why had she expected more? “I’ll bring you some fresh water,” she said as she turned up the volume. She paused at the door and looked over her shoulder. His head was already nodding with fatigue. By the time she returned, he was sleeping.

She washed his underwear in the galley kitchen and hung them to dry in the bathroom. She’d rather his briefs dry in the sun but today was a washout, the rain a steady downpour since early that morning. As she rinsed, rinsed again, and wrung out the shorts before washing them in hot, sudsy water, she decided to try to catch her husband at the small fixed-base operation that he managed before he left for lunch. “I won’t call you, won’t know if it’s a bad time or not. You call me when you’ve got a free moment,” he’d said when he dropped her off at the airport.

The secretary seemed too cheery when she answered and said that Matthew was on a demo flight in a single-engine Cessna and offered to take a message. “No, never mind, Cindy, I’ll catch him at home this weekend.”

She hung up and returned to the underwear soaking in the rinse water, wringing each cotton brief until it no longer dripped. Her mother’s prophecy regarding her father’s philandering returned as Ruth hung the underwear on the shower rod: “Live by the sword, die by the sword. Your dad’s womanizing will come back to get him someday.” She wondered how it felt for her father to look down at his limp penis now cradled in a woman’s Kotex, useless except as a reminder of his cancer.

When she’d arrived a week earlier, the doctor had told her on the phone that her father might last three weeks. That was before the bleeding started. “We could do a procedure, seal off the origin of the bleeding,” the doctor told her when she’d called him back to ask what they should do. “Would it prolong my father’s life, make him more comfortable?” Ruth inquired. “No, but it will give him hope. Without it we have nothing.” She’d wanted to shout through the phone, “What’s this ‘we’ thing? My father isn’t stupid, unless you plan to lie to him.” Instead she’d agreed to discuss the option with her father.

Earlier that week, her father had chased the hospice representative from the house, propping himself on his elbows and mustering the strength to yell, “Would you want a stranger in your home, washing your ass and knowing everything about you? Get the hell out—now!” He had agreed, however, to a nurse from the Visiting Nurse Association coming three times a week for an hour each to relieve Ruth, bathing and shaving her father and checking his vital signs. Ruth had worried that she’d be expected to give injections. She imagined practicing on an orange, her hands shaking, certain that she’d end up introducing an air bubble into her father’s vein or cause him even more pain when she’d miss and have to wrestle with his arm to find another. She’d been relieved when the doctor prescribed liquid morphine. She measured the clear liquid into the disposable plastic shot glass. She hoped he would keep it down.

By the end of the second week, her father asked her to call his three favorite fishing buddies and today she watched as he directed from the hospital bed which fishing pole went to whom and who should get his tackle box. A part of him had already given up, she knew, and he had turned down the surgery to stop the bleeding. He continued to slip down farther into the bed, no longer strong

enough to use the triangular metal lifting bar poised over his bed. She wanted him to give something special to her, to show that she mattered, too.

After his last fishing partner left and she'd given him a dose of morphine, she asked, "Could I have the Saint Christopher medallion on your dresser, Dad?"

"Almost worn smooth, carrying it in my pocket all these years."

"I'd still like it. He's the patron saint of travelers, you know."

"Why, you going somewhere?" He feigned a smile, then added, "Sure, it's yours, Ruthie." He closed his eyes. "I'm going to try to sleep now."

She reclined the bed a bit, still high enough to assist his breathing, more labored with each day. He wouldn't allow her to turn on the air conditioning, preferring to sleep in his briefs with a sheet covering him to the waist. She'd tried using a small oscillating fan for a measure of relief, but even that, he said, was too much and so she'd put it away. Today the outside temperature hovered near 100 degrees and perspiration dripped down her back and sides. She wore Bermuda shorts and a tank top, a headband to keep the sweat from trickling into her eyes.

She reclined on the couch across from her father's bed and her eyelids became heavy. In her dream, seagulls circled above her as she floated on a raft, her father's ashes floating beside her on the aqua sea. The fingertips of her right hand treaded across the water, the glittering fragments of his flesh and bone clinging for a moment before sliding back into the water. One gull swept low and pecked at the rubber raft and it began to deflate with a slow hiss. She bolted upwards, her arms flailing.

Her father turned his head toward her and said as casually as if he were asking the time, "How long does it take to die?"

She went to him and smoothed the sheets, checked his urine bag, then held his hand. He was waiting for her answer, his eyes protruding from his shrunken face. She wanted to comfort him but she had no answer to the question she'd also asked herself. She glanced down, her eyes sweeping over his chest. His nipples were distended. Before she could stop herself, she asked, "Dad, are your nipples always like that?"

He pulled up the sheet to cover himself. "I guess so. What about it?"

Heat rose to her cheeks and she wished she could disappear. Her own nipples had always been a problem, showing through her sweaters or blouses no matter how thickly padded the bra. "Oh, mine are like that too, whether I'm hot or cold or anything," she stammered, ashamed of her desperation to find a common trait.

His mouth curved at one corner. As if he'd read her mind, he said, "That and my nose, you're my kid, all right." He shut his eyes and swallowed hard. "I've been thinking, Ruthie. You didn't have to come, I know." Without his false teeth, his mouth had collapsed and his words were usually garbled. This time, though he'd spoken softly, she heard him clearly. He licked his dry lips. She unwrapped a lemon-flavored swab and ran it over his gums and inside his mouth, tossed it into the trashcan by his bed, then bent the straw in his glass of water. He took a small sip, then shook his head that he'd had enough.

"Did you ever regret it, Dad, leaving us the way you did?" There, she'd said it at last. She wished that he would explain why he'd not been there for her all those years while he was reasonably healthy. His weight had slipped to eighty pounds, and she no longer strained as hard to lift or turn him for sponge baths or to pat antibiotic cream on his jagged hipbones to prevent bedsores. It was like lifting a child. The visiting nurse had told her that it was just a matter of time.

"After I left it just seemed easier for you and your mom if I just stayed away. I know it was wrong, but at the time I . . ." He paused and she thought he'd gone back to sleep. She turned to leave, disappointed, but then he added, "I screwed up *my* life. Don't you." Before she could respond, his eyelids fluttered and he was out once again, the morphine at work.

She wanted to forgive him for at least hinting at his own shortcomings, not an easy thing to do. But what about her own? Had she agreed to care for him out of duty or to watch him suffer, a witness to his own retribution? The last time she'd seen him, he'd come to town unexpectedly. He'd been drinking, his words slurred, hair thinning and his eyes puffy slits above a nose swollen and red. She had refused to accept that he was the same man who had become fixed in her mind: twenty-eight, thick black hair parted down the middle, and round, dark eyes that stared back at her from the portrait in her mother's album. And now as she watched the movement behind his lids, she wondered if he were following images of her from his past: at age seven, sitting by the door for three hours past the arranged pickup time, dressed in a pink cotton dress with a matching ribbon in her hair, waiting for him on her birthday, or at sixteen on Christmas Eve when he'd dropped off a clumsily wrapped package, his face flushed from drinking, the gift an afterthought of white bobby socks and a 45 record—Doris Day's *Que Sera Sera*. In the thirty-five years since he'd left, had he thought of her much? Had he fallen in and out of love, had other children and abandoned them, too?

Her eyes flickered toward the phone. At home, clothes were probably piling up on top of the hamper, cobwebs gathering in every corner, and unwashed dishes loaded in the sink instead of in the dishwasher. Two days earlier when she'd called Matthew early in the morning before he left for work, he asked, "How you doing, Sweet Cakes?" She'd taken the phone into the hot utility room off the kitchen and pulled the door nearly shut. "I love you, Matthew." He cleared his throat and said, "I do you, too." She wished that she could crawl through the lines and lie beside him, and he would hold her close without speaking, a respite before the long day ahead. "Did I catch you at a bad time?" she asked. "Actually, yes." He explained a busy day ahead: another demo flight, this time a twin-engine Cessna, and meetings with the airport authority. He'd have to get back to her, he had said before hanging up.

Perhaps, she thought, what had drawn her to Matthew at first was believing that he was the type of man who would believe in her, love her, and never leave her. Instead, she'd married a man who wined and dined her on the weekends and treated her more like his mistress than his wife. When she'd discovered she was infertile and suggested they adopt, Matthew's dismissal of her idea had seemed logical at the time. "Why complicate our lives?" he'd asked. They could be spontaneous, take care of their needs in bed and out without worrying about raising a child. Eighteen years of marriage had almost convinced her it was enough to be the only person other than himself who mattered.

Her father groaned.

She ran from the kitchen where she'd gone to fix a cup of tea, stubbing her toe on the end table. "Damn it." She hopped on one foot to his bedside and leaned over him. The thick lenses of his glasses magnified the pain in his eyes.

"It's okay, Dad, it's going to be okay." Her words sounded as hollow to her as she felt inside. What was going to be *okay*? Her injured toe? His suffering? His death? She could pray over him, she supposed, but for her own sake or for his?

His body had begun to evacuate itself, a constant flow of shit. She changed the disposable bed pad beneath his ragged hipbones and deposited it with the others in a black plastic trash bag, unsure what she'd do with the smelly collection gathering in the carport next to the '80 Ford he'd

purchased before he'd learned of the cancer. After bathing him, she pulled the sheet back up to his waist. He closed his eyes and grimaced. Though it would be another thirty minutes before his next dose was due, she figured there could be no harm in giving him relief.

She lifted his head and held the plastic cup to his mouth. "Open up, Dad. This will help."

He followed her orders and swallowed. Within minutes, he slept again.

How long *does* it take? She wanted him to die, the misery to end. A little over four weeks now. Could he see impatience in her eyes when she fed him, changed the bed pad, or patted lotion on his elbows, knees, and hipbones?

Poem

92

Kathleen M. Grieger

Her frail bones
clasped
my strong arms

Sobbing for relief
she begged me
to stop being selfish

I was holding her
in a world where she
no longer belonged

I was not
brave enough
to lose her

Gathering my courage,
speaking softly
as she slept,

I said she could
leave. I would try
to let her go

Raising an eyelid,
she drew me close
with her whisper

"I can hear you
you know,
I'm not dead *yet.*"

Crawling into bed,
I held her
skin and bones

Wrapping her cold
body
with my warm one

Personal Essay

Guilt Trip

Gary Presley

"You should call him more often," my wife said as she entered the bedroom.

I was reading a rich-people-gone-bad book by Dominick Dunne, but, given that we often carry on different conversations in parallel spiked with time delays, I realized she was talking about my brother. We had spoken of him at lunch.

"I'm getting vibes," she continued. "I think he has feelings, some sort of guilt maybe, about how he's dealt with your disability."

"He's a big boy," I said. "By the time you're an adult, you've got to handle that sort of thing yourself."

"Do it. Call him, and at least once a week. It's important."

"All right, I will. Promise."

And I did, even though I saw no need, and even though I didn't ask *Is something bothering you about my fanny in a wheelchair?*

What exactly could I say? He didn't put me in the chair, and he isn't keeping me here. If he resented me at some point because I acted like he had some special obligation to me, I never felt it. If he regrets feeling victimized when my parents sometimes put me first, he should realize it's me who should feel guilt. I feel nothing toward him but fraternal love and acceptance, and a good measure of pride. He is my brother, my only sibling, but I cannot help him with his guilt, and he cannot help me with mine.

But I telephoned because I trust my wife's instincts. I made the call; chipping away at whatever phantom barrier she thinks lies between my brother and me.

At this stage of my life, nearly fifty years riding along in a wheelchair, I am tired of guilt, that sour, sickening emotion, and I am especially tired of my own. I try not to acknowledge its presence, try to ignore it, pretend it isn't there. I have been a selfish ass at times, but no apology will erase the harms I have inflicted.

But I can't dismiss guilt altogether. It is there, this not always useful emotion. I think of guilt like my appendix. If things come together in the wrong sort of order, I will come down with fever and vomiting, poisoned by the rancid memories of all my failures.

Of course, I was born guilty. Not in the Christian sense of original sin, although I am willing to admit it is there, flawed humankind disappointing a Creator, the omniscient One having seasoned our spiritual stew with the pepper of free will.

No, I was born psychologically and emotionally guilty, tied to those quirks of temperament by an odd knot of DNA. I feel guilty for the things I have done and the things I have failed to do. I even possess an extra twisted little gene somewhere that allows me to feel guilt for failing to live up to other's expectations.

Nurture versus nature, you say? True enough, but not entirely so. I am not the only child sent to fail to exceed his parent's dreams. I simply chose to cook my own inadequacies into this fine broth of

guilt because I wasn't a good athlete, or a straight-A student, or a hard-worker instead of a dreamer.

Petty stuff, that. Grow up. Move on. Find your own bliss.

I did, more or less, but the real—the irrational, rational, unbearable, bearable guilt—that which will cast a shadow on my grave, came six months after poliomyelitis had sat me down to ride out my life a near-quadruplegic. It smiled at me when the March of Dimes ran out of rehabilitation money and sent me home for my parents to deal with—to wake me up, put me on the bedpan, dress me, feed me, wash me, lift me back into bed, undress me, all the while making certain my respirator would sustain my breathing night and day.

My mother was not yet forty. My father was forty-three. And their firstborn son, the child who planned to leave in May, 1960, to enlist in the US Navy, came home that same month in a wheelchair.

The equipment necessary to cope with my disability consumed every inch of the bedroom I had shared with my brother. He moved to the porch attached to the kitchen. I suppose I should feel guilty about that, but my parents enclosed and insulated the porch and turned it into an almost-cozy room before winter that year.

Thus we four began a life in which my parents became physically what I had lost, to function where I could not, to accomplish everything from wiping the feces from my rectum, lifting me out of bed, tending to the needs of the day, and then returning me to bed. Was my brother lost in the chaos of disability? I do not think so.

Poem

Discharge Summary

Mary O'Dell

She had no pain from the mastectomy,
no bad days at home. Her family
counted the get-well cards and voted
which one was best. She wanted help
with a bath but was told to wait another day.
Friends brought slaw and cherry pie.
Bouquets brightened every room. Her
daughter bought the complete recordings
of the Carter Family. They listened
to Wildwood Flower in the sun room,
filing their nails. In the middle
of the night she got up to pee, braved
the mirror and saw her naked chest
resembled a boy's on one side, stapled shut
like a wounded soldier's. The other breast
was unchanged, plump and tan. She knew
she was lucky. The next day she bathed. Alone.

Featured Art

Within

Sandy Palmer

*"If God has blessed you with a talent, the talent is within you.
It is going to come out one way or another."*

~ Tommy Hollenstein

In sync with a memory, emotion, or melody, Tommy Hollenstein glides, turns, spins, moves forward and then back, fast and then slow—painting. He says it brings back memories of surfing. When he's painting, he's free. The result is an amazing array of colors and textures that express emotion, movement, and beauty. Although abstracts aren't for everyone, his nontraditional approach to painting has gained the attention of art collectors, notable musicians, and corporate executives. Hollenstein, whose dream of becoming an artist remained dormant for more than a decade, is humbled by the success he has attained.

"Ever since I was five years old I loved to create, paint, carve, and build things with my hands." Teachers encouraged his artistic talent, which was evident as early as second grade. He wanted to be an artist but that dream was stifled by friends and family who believed art was a good hobby but not a vocation. Instead of pursuing his dream he went to the Orange Coast College of Culinary Arts, expressed his creativity with food, and he excelled.

Hollenstein grew up in the San Fernando Valley of California with a propensity for forward motion—playing football, basketball, skateboarding, biking, and surfing competitively on the amateur circuit. At the age of 24 that motion collided with the ground, head-first. "In 1985 I broke my neck in a mountain biking accident. I had no movement from my shoulders down, no use of my arms. I spent 19 days in ICU and six months in rehabilitation." He was told he would be able to do nothing more than shrug his shoulders. While in the hospital he met Christopher Voelker, budding photographer and quadriplegic who was seven years post-injury at the time. Voelker took some black and white photos of Hollenstein. The photographer's determination to pursue his dream made an impression on Hollenstein. (Years later, Voelker became the first wheelchair user to prosper as a studio photographer in the fiercely competitive Hollywood industry.) Hollenstein also met Joni Eareckson Tada, well-known artist and author, during an Abilities Expo. A diving accident caused her quadriplegia and she began drawing and painting by holding a pencil/paintbrush with her teeth. It was evident that creating artwork was possible as a quadriplegic, but when Hollenstein tried to paint using a mouth stick it felt too restrictive and he wasn't comfortable with it. His dream to be an artist seemed futile. He focused his efforts on therapy and within a year after his injury he was waterskiing. Two years after his injury he received a service dog, Weaver, through Canine Companions for Independence. Autonomy and freedom were ripped away from him in a split second when he broke his neck. When the yellow Labrador retriever entered his life he brought Hollenstein's independence back with him.

They became best friends and for the next 13 years were inseparable. Although Weaver's devotion for his master never faltered, his steps eventually slowed and his years of service were coming to an end. Hollenstein started thinking about how he might be able to capture the bond they had in some tangible way, other than a photograph. Then, Weaver had a stroke and Hollenstein knew he needed to act quickly if he wanted to have something with which to remember his friend. Much like a parent treasures the handprints of a child, he decided he wanted the keepsake to be the Labrador's paws next to the tire tracks of his wheelchair, visibly signifying their journey together. It took some coaxing to get Weaver to walk through the paint and onto the canvas but once he saw his master moving, he took his place beside him. They created two paintings together. Those paintings ignited a passion that the artist thought he had lost forever. Once Weaver helped his master rediscover his dream, his job was done.

"It is my calling to be an artist." Thanks to Weaver, he "found a way to make that happen." Hollenstein started painting whenever and wherever he could, experimenting with paints and colors, pouring puddles of paint and rolling through them onto the board. Inspired by having a creative outlet again, he bought a house in Canoga Park, had the garage renovated into a 300 sq. ft. studio, and began painting every day—sometimes three or four times a day. Once he completed several paintings he began going to galleries, showing them his work. His persistence paid off when the director of Bernard's Gallery in Calabasas booked a solo show in July of 2005. Of the 30 paintings he had on display, he sold nine of them. Selling prices ranged from \$1,600 to \$4,800, with two of them purchased by actor Joaquin Phoenix. The show reinforced his desire to be an artist and established his credibility.

Although he has experimented with a paintbrush attached to the footrest of his wheelchair and may try to do some more of that in the future, he says he simply loves painting with the tires. He knew of no one else who painted this way so he had to figure things out on his own in the beginning—learning what process, technique, and supplies would work best through trial and error. Initially, he used one chair for painting and another for transportation but found he has more flexibility using one chair for everything. Since his means of mobility is also his paintbrush there are always splashes of color and speckles of paint that he feels add "character to the chair." It seems quite appropriate for the chair to reflect the character of the man in it.



Tommy Hollenstein, *Spinner*, acrylic on Masonite, 2004, 24" x 24"



Tommy Hollenstein and Weaver, *Never Forgotten*, acrylic on Masonite, 1999, 48" X 48"

Fiction

Known by Heart

Ellen Prentiss Campbell

Alan was used to Grace's carelessness. She always left behind a wake of mislaid eyeglasses and car keys, overdue library books, socks without mates.

"You should be more careful," he told her. "Slow down, pay attention."

She seemed to court chaos and close calls. Years ago she had a fender bender on her way to work. She admitted afterward how frightened she had been to feel warm blood dripping down her face, seeping into her mouth. "Then I tasted it, and it was my coffee!" She laughed and did not give up balancing the mug on her lap as she drove the short distance from home to the library. He had been torn between relief she was not hurt and irritation at her slapdash habits.

She was not careless of people, remembering birthdays and anniversaries and standing first in the line with casseroles and comfort after death and divorce. And he paid close enough attention to things for both of them. What he noticed and she forgot, what she attended to and he neglected, had become part of the complementary distribution of labor in their long partnership.

The beginning was subtle, like a message slipped under the door. She left the plug in the laundry tub, ran the washer and the basement flooded. The gas tank was empty every time he got in her car. Then it was the bills.

"I wrote the check, I'm sure I did," she said.

"Then what did you do with it?"

"I mailed it, of course. Why wouldn't I mail it?" She was rattled.

"You're retired, you have less to do, and you're doing less," he said, taking over the checkbook.

Their daughter, Frances, lived nearby. Grace often took their granddaughter to the playground while Frances went to lunch with friends. Alan was in his office at the university when the call came from a borrowed cell phone.

"I can't find her. I can't find the baby."

He jumped in the car and sped the two miles to the park. It was the first warm day of spring, the sandbox overflowed with children, the slides swarmed. Even so, it was easy to pick out his little granddaughter, stolid and quiet, digging in the cold, damp sand with the delight and absorption he remembered on Frances's face thirty years before.

"Grace, she's right there, under your nose."

"Oh, my goodness, so she is. I forgot what she was wearing. I was so frightened I couldn't see her."

Alan sat shivering in the thin spring sunshine; he had not even taken time to put on his coat as he scrambled out the office door. He realized there was also something *he* had not seen, right under his nose.

The next steps, the tests, the diagnosis, were formalities. He sat with her in the neurologist's office.

"Today's date?" She smiled at the doctor, her charming smile. "Heavens, isn't that silly. . . I'm retired you know—the days just run together." She turned to Alan, "Dear, what is the date?"

"He's asking you."

Frances came with them to the appointment after the testing was finished. Alan distrusted the luxury of the doctor's office, the leather couch, the Oriental rug, comfort meant to soften the blow of bad news. He sat beside Grace, holding her hand. The doctor confirmed what Alan already knew. Grace flinched when she heard the word. She did not cry until they were home and called their younger daughter, Kate, in Chicago.

He doled out the medicine the doctor had been careful to explain could only "slow down the progress, not reverse it or halt it." It was the only medicine she took except for vitamins, and antibiotics twice a year when the dentist cleaned her teeth—a precaution due to a heart murmur, residual of childhood rheumatic fever. "The antibiotic protects against infective endocarditis," the dentist said. Alan had looked up infective endocarditis in his *Merck Manual—Untreated infective endocarditis is always fatal. Physicians recommend anti-microbial prophylaxis for high risk patients during oral-dental procedures.*

He taught his last class at the university and retired—sooner than he had intended. Alan tried to do as the neurologist said, "Put a safety net around her, but let her do as much as she can within it." When she could not find her way home from the grocery store, he hid her car keys, and scolded her for losing them again. He gave her car to Frances.

Grace protested, "You are being ridiculous, I'm not some teenager; I have been driving for fifty years." Better she be angry with him than cause an accident, better to be angry with him than realize what was happening.

He missed everything about teaching, even faculty meetings. His days were full and tedious—cooking, laundry, shopping. One day he returned from the grocery store and found Grace kneeling in the study, surrounded by piles of books. The shelves were bare. She collected poetry, specializing in first editions of modern American poets. Although a casual housekeeper, she was true to her training and habits as a librarian and kept her books in alphabetical order.

"Someone's been in my books," she said.

He knelt in the rubble of the study and began to make piles by author. She wandered out of the room.

Grace began to mix up night and day. He would awaken and find her side of the bed cold. Pulling on a robe he would stumble downstairs and discover her yanking books from the shelves in frantic search for what had been taken from her.

"We're seeing the progression from mild to moderate," the neurologist said. "Try day care. Her social skills are intact."

Only someone who had not known her could say her social skills were intact.

Alan remembered the laughing blond girl she had been—the most popular girl on campus, president of her sorority. *The way to have a friend is to be a friend. If you don't know what to say to someone, ask questions. Take an interest,* she had taught their daughters.

"Get an alarm system and identification bracelets. She won't remember her address and phone number, if she's lost," the doctor continued.

"She never leaves the house without me."

“Just in case.”

They drove past the zoo on their way home from the doctor’s and he pulled in. It was a golden, warm Indian summer day. The sort of day made precious by the threat of winter.

“Oh, how lovely. The zoo,” she said.

They walked together, holding hands, up and down the hilly, winding paths. He looked for the little golden tamarind monkeys in the trees, an endangered species. The zoo let them roam free, tracking them with tiny radio transmitters, hardening monkeys born and bred in captivity to be released in the South American jungle. Inside the monkey house he contemplated pairs of small gray monkeys, tails entwined. What if one fell? Did the other lose its balance?

They ate dinner at Hot Shoppes on the way home. She took so long coming back to the table from the restroom, he asked the waitress to check. In a few minutes Grace crossed the dining room clutching the waitress’s hand.

“She got stuck in the stall,” said the waitress.

“The door was broken,” said Grace.

He ordered the identification bracelets, his and hers, caretaker and care recipient. But when the bracelets arrived, he did not use them. Instead he taped one of their address labels to the sterling bracelet she had sent to him at boot camp, inscribed with his name, rank, serial number, and with *Your Grace* engraved on the back.

“Wear this, dear,” he said, slipping the bracelet on her wrist.

“Thank you. How pretty.”

He did not install an alarm system or enroll her in day care.

“I won’t turn our home into a fortress, or send her off to some warehouse,” he told Kate over the long-distance phone line.

Grace was quiet when they went to dinner with old friends; the conversation streamed past her. She seemed to take her cues from him, laughing politely only after he did. Her gracious habits persisted, “How are you? Lovely to see you,” but the words were like rote dialogue memorized in foreign language class; she could not improvise. Fewer invitations came and Alan stopped accepting most. She was restless at movies and concerts, and would be anxious if she had to use the restroom. He tried slide shows.

“Look, darling, there you are when Kate was born.” Alan fed slides into the magic lantern. *Grace, blond hair frizzy with heat, pulling aphids from her prize pink roses . . . running behind Frances, balancing the girl’s little two-wheeled bicycle . . . laughing over her shoulder as she leaned into her stroke in the canoe . . .* He stared at the screen, devouring the images. Grace was oblivious, dozing in her chair until he turned off the projector and helped her up to bed.

One night he awoke to the insistent buzz of the smoke alarm. She was not beside him. He stumbled downstairs to the kitchen. Grace stood at the stove over a blazing skillet; he pushed her aside and sprayed the fire extinguisher.

“What in God’s name were you doing? Stay out of the kitchen,” he said, shoving her into the dining room.

She looked at him with a mixture of defiance and fright. He recalled the same expression on his daughter Kate's face when she was three and he discovered her on the carpet in a puddle of her own warm urine. Alan glimpsed his face, flushed with anger, in the mirror over the sideboard.

"I'm sorry, dear," he said, unable to tell if her blank gaze contained forgiveness or just forgetfulness.

After the kitchen fire, Frances insisted he hire someone.

"You both are losing weight, Daddy. You look exhausted, you must get some help."

"We have help."

"A cleaning lady. Once every two weeks. That's not what I'm talking about."

Frances called the agency the doctor recommended, and Wanda invaded the spare room with her fragrant hair pomades and heavy wheeled suitcases.

"Who's that woman?" Grace asked him every day. "There's a strange woman here."

"Wanda. She's helping."

"We don't need help. I don't want her touching my things."

Though Grace was frightened of bathing and confused by dressing, Wanda could coax her into the tub and ease her into the baffling bras and slips. Alan thought of how gentle but effective Grace had been with their little daughters. *Women do better with this than men.* He felt Wanda watching him when he became impatient.

Wanda was a night owl. After Alan and Grace went to bed she cooked spicy stews for the next day, talked on the phone, played island music on the radio. One night Grace's screams awoke Alan.

"Get out, get out! Help! Police!"

He ran downstairs and found the two women in the kitchen, glaring at each other.

"This woman has broken in," Grace said.

Alan let Wanda go the next day, two weeks severance pay in lieu of notice.

Art

Abstract Realism

Sandy Palmer

“Art – my life. I write about it. Curate it. Speak about it.”

-Jim Fuess

When Jim Fuess was young he lived in Italy, surrounded by remarkable paintings, architecture and sculptures, raised in a culture that was and continues to be steeped in an appreciation of beauty. During that time he studied Medieval and Renaissance art but never attempted to paint or draw, reasoning that it was beyond his “physical abilities.” It was his plan to become an academic—a teacher and writer. His plan went a little off-course when a friend of his moved to Switzerland and left him with all of her painting supplies—canvases, paints, brushes, etc. She left and instructed him to “go play.” And so he did. It didn’t take long before he decided he wanted to be an artist. “I love being creative. When my work is going well, it is one of the great joys of my life.” Now, almost thirty years later, he has had numerous solo and group shows and has gone on to become a curator, juror, writer, and speaker.

His paintings are intriguing. The colors beguile—beckoning the viewer to come hither and take a closer look. You may question the shapes. They’re abstract, yet realistic images are recognizable. There is energy, motion, and grace. Fuess is careful not to divulge too much information—protective of the process he has developed. His method of painting has painstakingly evolved with decades of “practice” and no formal training in art. This process is his alone—a style of painting he developed partly due to his essential tremor (ET), a neurological disorder causing involuntary tremor, mainly in his hands. His grandfather also had ET and his positive influence instilled in Fuess the desire to succeed. The tremor, which has been present since birth, makes fine motor skills such as writing very difficult. “As the tremor has progressed I have varied my painting to some degree or another.” He has learned to adapt his technique and has some advice for others with ET. “Keep your sense of humor. Don’t go to a wine-tasting at a biker bar. Don’t mix nitroglycerine in your basement.”

When left to play with the art supplies, Fuess found freedom in painting with squeeze bottles instead of paint brushes. The nozzles have various apertures and with them he can create a seemingly endless number of spectacular effects. The acrylic paint in the bottles is very thin. He begins with a base color and works while the paint is wet—squeezing the paint, applying more pressure, using less pressure, tilting, bubbling, pulling, feathering, or breaking the surface tension of the canvas. Sometimes the process of allowing the paint to sit, meld, and dry (which may take all night) can create some interesting effects as well. There are days when he has to walk away and force himself not to “tinker too much” with a painting. His most recent work involves the use of a fan, drying the work quicker, and has resulted in an aesthetically pleasing crackling effect.



Jim Fuess, *Underwater Fire #1*, acrylic, 1999, 24” x 36”

Fiction

The Waiting Room

Susan M. Susser

Adina Porat waits. In the next room, her husband, Professor Yoel Porat, will soon have electrodes placed upon his skull and enough current applied to create a convulsion. He will have these treatments under general anesthesia three times a week over the course of many weeks. This is a last resort.

Yoel sits on the edge of the seat next to her, palms pressed against his thighs, his lean torso coiled forward as if waiting for the whistle to blow at the start of a race. Despite the air-conditioning, beads of sweat dot his pale blue, buttoned-down shirt and dampen the roots of his thick, silvery hair.

Adina's eyes rove. She takes in the colorful sign near the elevator instructing patients not to eat or drink ten hours before treatment, the low, round, white Formica table in the center of the room, the blue-gray metal chairs, attached, four to a row, and positioned inflexibly against the bare white wall. A small wooden library filled with dusty old paperbacks is tucked into a corner. Except for one or two English books, the rest are in Hebrew, the language of this country where she's been living for over thirty-five years, ever since she met Yoel that joyous summer right after college when she came to work as a volunteer on his kibbutz.

She glances at the other people in the waiting room. Patients are forbidden to drive home alone after treatment, so each arrives accompanied by a caregiver. They sit in couples, huddled together like pairs of animals in Noah's ark, ready to weather a fearful storm: a dark-skinned mother with a neat French braid holding onto the hand of a thickset teenage boy; a plump man in sandals, his arm around a bony, limp, red-haired woman; a dignified, elderly gentleman resting his hands on the wheelchair of his frail and shrunken wife; a middle-aged, well-dressed couple sitting side by side, waiting in silence, staring straight ahead.

It is not hard to tell who is the patient and who is the person here for support. Opposite Adina, leaning back in his seat with his arms crossed, is a Hasidic Jew with a graying beard, an open-collared white shirt and a black suit. He's here for the first time, she decides. He has the worried look of a helpless spouse. His wife is the patient—no doubt about it. Her crumpled shape, her pale face and blank expression say it all. For a split second, the man's eyes meet Adina's. His look is pained, questioning. Adina can guess what he's thinking. My wife? About to have electroshock? How can this be? Adina turns away. She has no answer for him.

The last time Yoel underwent electroconvulsive therapy was ten years ago. After twelve treatments in six weeks, he was back to himself. Back then, neither of them imagined his illness would recur. This *mental illness*. Adina hugs herself, wrapping her arms against a sudden chill. She finds the words hard to say.

Of course, she wants to be open about Yoel's condition. Stigma is entirely out of place. Attaching shame to this illness is as inappropriate as it would be for a common cold, she tells her daughter, her friends, herself. But when she must explain to colleagues why she will be taking off from work at the library—because Yoel is undergoing medical treatment—what she prefers to say is that her husband is suffering from a *psychiatric problem*. To her ears this sounds more manageable, as if it were simply a puzzle which can be solved, a difficulty to be overcome, surmounted, an obstacle we can rise above if we just put our minds to it.

She rubs her thin arms, stares out at the helpless religious man opposite her, then turns to look at Yoel. He has risen from his seat and is pacing the room. The other patients sit quietly. Only Yoel is unable to remain still. Cradling her chin in her palm, Adina bows her head.

Ten years ago, when Adina first brought Yoel for electroshock, she had no idea what to expect. It was at Tel Hashomer Hospital, in Ramat Gan. Caregivers waited on hard wooden benches in a narrow dimly-lit hallway. Staring at the frosted-glass door marked ECT; Adina had tried to imagine the procedure. Electricity beeped into Yoel's brain? Enough to cause a convulsion? The idea terrified her. She pictured zigzags of lightning flickering upon his forehead, Yoel's body all shivers and shakings, twisting and rolling. What would he be like after treatment, when she'd be called into the recovery room? Sitting there in the dingy hallway that first time, her heart beat like a gong.

Adina couldn't bear the waiting. Across from her, two women were chatting calmly. To her left, a woman with frosted hair and stylish jeans was speaking with a dignified elderly man. There was an air of experience about them, as if they had been through this many times.

"I'm so sorry to intrude, please excuse me." Adina leaned toward them as she spoke. The man looked up. He had blue eyes and looked like everyone's version of a professor, a doctor, or maybe a judge. "This is my first time here," Adina said timidly. "Can you tell me—how they are—I mean the patients—what are they like—afterwards?"

"Oh, don't worry," the man reassured her. "They're just weak—mainly from the anesthesia." The woman nodded in assent. "There's a kitchen in the other room," she added. "You can make your husband some tea when he wakes up. Then he'll be fine."

And now we're going through it all over again, Goddamnit! Adina bites her lip. The waiting room is different here at Shalvata Mental Health Center—the seats are comfortable, the lighting is better—but the misery on the patients' faces is the same. What she wouldn't give never to see these people again! Yoel is still pacing. How long can he keep this up?

Signs of Yoel's illness had first appeared when he returned from a month abroad where he lectured at various universities about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. After coming home, he was unable to fall asleep. It's jet lag, he told her. But as days and weeks passed, his sleep did not improve. He felt jittery, agitated. When classes at the university began, he had difficulty concentrating. His lectures suffered. He couldn't read more than fifteen minutes at a stretch. A colleague offered to take over his classes, to teach in his stead. He refused at first, then finally agreed. There was no choice.

Over time, his mood soured. He stayed in bed for most of the day, the sheets pulled over his head. His body was covered with sweat, teeming with anxiety. "Tell me what you feel," Adina begged. "I don't know, I really don't know," he said. His whole body trembled. So did his voice. He began to drink. Alcohol calmed him, but the effect didn't last. He drank more. A bottle or two of wine at a time. Seven or eight bottles of beer. He never turned violent, for at the core, he was a gentle man. Alcohol enabled him to sleep. Only then could he escape his misery.

Adina watched her husband slide into despair, her own despair right on the margins. Yoel had always been a man in control. From the moment he chose academia over his early life on kibbutz, his career had followed an upward course: PH.D.—with distinction, tenure at a prestigious university, and a long list of publications. With his thick, wavy hair, now silver-streaked, his stubby beard, his trim 5'11" build and bouncing gait, there was about him a boyish aura which he managed to sustain well into his fifth decade. Female students still flattered him with dreamy looks. Adina saw it every time she dropped in on him at his office. There was a sense of excitement about him, a can-do approach to life which drew others toward him, which had drawn Adina, too.

"I'm going down the hall to the bathroom," Yoel leans over Adina now and whispers. She watches him walk toward the corridor. He looks aged, as if his body-clock had galloped ahead and toppled

him, leaving him rumpled, stooped, his hair disheveled and matted with sweat. Adina draws in her breath, covering her mouth with her hand.

They met while she was chopping vegetables in the communal kitchen of the kibbutz. He came up to her without introduction—sun-tanned golden, with wavy cinnamon-brown hair and muscles taut from years of outdoor work. “Are you willing to help someone with English?” he asked in Hebrew.

“Sure,” she said. “Who is it?”

“Me,” he said. Then he turned around and left. A moment later, he returned. “Hey, what’s your name?” he asked.

“Adina,” she said, having decided to use her Hebrew name.

He took a step back and looked at her for a long while. “You look like an Adina,” he said. “Gentle.”

Now as Adina sits in the waiting room, she thinks about last night. Yoel had sat up suddenly in bed and cried out, “Oh, God. Oh, God, I’m scared!” “Try to sleep,” Adina said. She had awakened with his cry. “I can’t, he said. “Try,” she said, still half asleep. “Oh, God. Oh, God,” he said again, louder this time. She looked at the clock. It was 3:15 a.m. “Try to meditate,” she said, all she could think of to say. He laid his head on the pillow near her. “I can’t,” he said. But gradually, his breathing slowed. She could hear him inhale and exhale. A whishing sound—as if he was falling asleep. And he did, at least for the moment. But by then she was fully awake and decided to get up. In the morning, they would leave at 6:00 a.m. to beat the traffic, so they could be the first ones at the clinic. He’d rather wait for the doctor to arrive than wait while other patients are treated before him.

Air-conditioning in the waiting room was turned up too high. Adina hugs herself and hunches forward. “Aren’t you cold?” she asks the dark-skinned woman with the French braid when she catches her eye. “Freezing!” the woman says with a shudder. Adina surveys the room. The thermostat is on the wall near the doorway. As she gets up to lower it, Yoel returns from his trip to the bathroom. Unable to sit, he resumes pacing.

On days Yoel manages to get out of bed, he chugs from room to room, propelled forward, thrust into irritated motion.

“Tell me what you feel,” Adina grabs onto his arms in the kitchen one morning. She feels his muscles, their hard strength, and she pulls him close, burying her silver curls in his chest. Behind her, soup steams, filling the air with smells of pumpkin and curry. When she looks up, his face is closed, tight, drawn like a curtain against the light. His eyes, velvet-brown, are red-rimmed and sad. Cocker Spaniel eyes, she used to call them, warm and gentle. How long has it been since they’ve made love? It’s hard to remember.

“I can’t describe it,” he says, his face contorted in pain.

“Honey, please try,” she begs.

“I can’t,” the tips of his fingers probe the inside of his wrist, incessantly checking his pulse. “My pulse is racing,” he says.

“Do you think you could read for a while?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

"I don't know."

"Please, sweetheart, tell me what you feel?"

"I can't."

Adina lets go of his arms, watches him shuffle out of the room. What is happening to his voice? What is this wheezy, trembling sound, as if, all of a sudden, he's turned into an old man?

The first time they made love was in the citrus grove on kibbutz. It was a night with a sliver of moon and a dazzle of stars, and the crumbly, sweet-smelling earth between the clusters of trees offered fine bedding as they fell upon each other and tore off their clothes. Afterwards, they picked oranges and fed each other sections, sucking in the pungent juice, as moments before; they had drawn in the wetness mingling in their mouths.

Their family physician was a man both Yoel and Adina trusted and it was to him that they had turned ten years ago, after Yoel returned from abroad. He sent Yoel for blood and urine tests and arranged a late afternoon appointment for the following week to discuss the results.

On the appointed date, Adina and Yoel arrived early. The doctor greeted them and gestured for them to sit on the metal-framed, black plastic chairs facing his desk. He was a narrow, bony man with a freshly showered look, dark-rimmed glasses, and a harried expression. He sat behind his desk facing his computer, and rubbing his chin for what seemed to Adina and Yoel moments without end. On the screen were Yoel's blood test results.

"From what I see here, Professor, everything appears normal." He swung his chair around to face the couple. "Even the thyroid, which we suspected was the problem, looks fine."

"Then what explains my rapid pulse?"

The doctor kept rubbing his chin. "I wish I knew," he said.

Resting both elbows on the desk, he leaned forward. "From the symptoms you describe, you're clearly suffering from a depression. Because it's disabling you to such an extent, I'd call it a major agitated depression. What I recommend you to do now is consult a psychiatrist."

Almost a year passed before Yoel met with a psychiatrist. This was because, without warning or explanation, early one morning as a cool autumn breeze drifted through the bedroom window, Yoel woke up, turned toward Adina, and said, "It's over." "What's over?" she asked, still half asleep. "My depression, it's gone. I feel fine." And from that moment on, as strange as it sounds, Yoel really was fine. He went back to teaching and his high spirits continued. Colleagues greeted him warmly. Students flocked to his classes. He found a publisher for his latest book and wrote new articles as well. But as mysteriously as it began, and as mysteriously as it ended, after months of excellent health, the "black dog" attacked again.

Poem

Taking One Back

Steve Shilling

Today is the anniversary of the day I almost died. Perhaps I should commemorate it with a dinner in my honor, a plaque beginning, "On this day, in this spot." But I am content with letting this one pass by, as you leave for work, the kids for school. I'll just sit here at the kitchen table, fail miserably at the crossword, scratch the cat behind the ear and put my feet up on the couch, savoring my coffee as the morning slips by comfortably into noon.

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