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## Prism of Time, 1950-2020: A Collection of Short Stories

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**A Prism of Time, 1950-2020: A Collection of Short Stories**

By

Rosalie Marcovecchio

A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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### Abstract

This collection presents a variety of literary styles including pure fiction, auto fiction, historical fiction, biographical fiction, and creative non-fiction. Racism, abortion, political and societal events are addressed by way of the 1960s and 1970s Anti-war Movement, Feminism, Art, immigration, mid-century inter-racial attitudes, California wild fire, and individual responses to sexist behavior, war, and death. Also serving as vehicles are adult behavior through a child's eyes and, in some cases, humor. The stories are set in the 1950s and 1960s in the Cleveland Museum of Art and Western Reserve University; also in pre-Soviet Belarus, 1920s Paris, Renaissance and 1970s Venice, and 2016 United States. Historical figures fictionalized in the stories include Sonia Terk Delaunay, Robert Delaunay, Josephine Baker and Veronica Franco. Also fictionalized are Rosalie Marcovecchio (the author of this work) and members of Marcovecchio's family. All the stories were written between 2015 and 2020; each represents a reflection on an occurrence, real or imagined, during the past seventy years of Marcovecchio's life. These stories are the work of an aging writer who imagines *facts* to fill in gaps of unknown or forgotten reality to create fiction.

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## Introduction

The works presented in this collection were written in my seventies, between 2015 and 2020. They profit from a perspective of ripeness, from a life-time of experiencing, observing, remembering, imagining, and engaging with people and surroundings, and are ready to harvest. They reflect reality and fantasy from the 1950s through the intervening seventy years.

The stories come from my own reflections, some memories embellished with a patina of time, some made up based on true events, others ninety-nine percent imaginary. Places, other people and incidents, even fragments of others' conversations may have inspired them. All are referential of the political mood of their time. They are literary works. Some might be described as creative nonfiction, some as fictional autobiography or historical fiction. Each has at least a grain of truth. Each, in its own way, has been informed by my life: participation in the Second Wave of Feminism, a childhood spent among survivors of the Great Depression including immigrant grandparents, twenty-five years' service as a Deputy Public Defender, two marriages, motherhood, and, most recently, my engagement in graduate school in my mid-seventies.

These stories are told through the lenses of history and of philosophy, of life and literary experience. A major benefit of my Dominican experience has been learning to analyze literature. This practice has broadened my perception of the specifics and vagaries of creative writing, what makes it art. The readings, discussions and support for my writing from the Master of Arts in Humanities program at Dominican have widened my views and my appreciation. I'm encouraged to continue learning, analyzing. To have seasoned writers respond to my work and urge me on, to being introduced or introduced in profound new ways to works of great writers such as Eudora Welty, Alicia Ostriker, Margaret Atwood, and to embark with guidance on research of my own choosing without the constraints of finding precedents for legal arguments



has been my joy. Each of the writings suggested by my professors, including, essays, articles, novels, poems, short stories, text books, plays, has imbued me with knowledge that helps me to write and gives me a broader frame of reference in life.

Events prompting some of the stories in this collection were public in nature, all are personal. Some are character-driven; some aim for wit; others wisdom; all have an emotional quality. Themes of particular stories take in responses to Viet Nam era events, notions of anti-racism in the early 1960s, a child's perspective of adult personages, a fantasy of my grandparents' pre-Soviet emigration from Russia, the circumstances of a young mother's abortion, an art museum as a place of worship, imagined effects of motherhood on an artist and the reunion of lost brothers.

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“Acceptance” is the longest and most populated of the stories. It starts in the Pale of Settlement in Russia where my grandparents were born and continues into 1954, when my grandfather and his brother were reunited. A few years ago, I read a biography of my favorite visual artist, Sonia Delaunay, and learned that she was also Jewish, and also born around 1885 in the Pale of Settlement. This fact by itself didn't surprise me in that virtually all Jews living in Russia between the late eighteenth century and the Soviet era were restricted by czarist decree to the area referred to as the Pale of Settlement. It included Belarus, Lithuania, and most of the Ukraine. What *did* surprise me is that, in contrast to my grandparents who escaped the pogroms to struggle for a working class life in America, Delaunay became a respected artist with paintings and textile designs in current museum collections and was a prominent member of between-the-wars artistic society in Paris. I was astonished. I began to wonder: *How did it happen that two women, Sonia and Grandma Fanny, with similar beginnings followed such divergent paths? I*

continued to wonder and made up the story “Acceptance.” The characters in the Kransky family are based on my family. Sonia Delaunay in my story was a real person, as were her husband, son, and ex-husband.

Real people appear as characters in “The Angel.” Lois, the narrator, and Blind George and Harvey were real friends of mine at the time. I was the co-worker. “The War Against the War” might be an example of creative non-fiction, or it could be labeled an essay. Joe is in fact my ex-husband. My aunt, uncle and cousin appear in “Growing Pains.” In “A Day Off,” I am the narrator and the protagonist. And, clearly, the Cleveland Museum of Art, mentioned in “A Day Off” is real, as are the details and events and emotions remembered. Everything in the story actually happened. However, “A Romantic Comedy” and “The Other Myth of Venice” are entirely fictional, with the exception of the hotel room in Venice circa 1989.

Each of the stories is set in a real location. Care was taken to present them accurately as to time and senses. Mid-century train travel, Yellowstone National Park, Venice, Cleveland Museum of Art, Case-Western Reserve University, California State College, Long Beach (now California State University, Long Beach) are included. Even when a location isn’t mentioned, I have an actual one in mind.

Among the most outwardly political of the stories is “The Angel,” in which a white woman and a black man become friends, inspiring a black woman to gain perspective on racial questions. “The War Against the War” relates personal and public responses to the war in Viet Nam, visceral, emotional, life-changing. A woman’s s decision to improve her life and her children’s future is supported in an unexpected way in “Maggie’s Ride,” a sign that feminism is taking hold, being taught and understood.

\*

Memory does not usually improve with age; however, as our daily routines change or our level of activity lessens, we may allow ourselves more time to remember and daydream. In my own case, my imagination benefits from the exercise. I allow myself the time. My graduate studies at Dominican have taught me to give voice to my visions.

My writing has been informed by my life, but the words would not be on paper without the guidance I received from my professors during my studies in the Graduate Program in Humanities. It was in their classes and extra meetings where I learned to how to employ the vocabulary to form a thought on the page, in words not limited to fact or opinion, and then to change them and rearrange them, to change them again and again to express what I had in mind. They instilled in me the value of deep reading, of critical thinking.

My reserve of subjects is not peopled by a large family or appealing individuals I've encountered in my career as a lawyer. Therefore, novels have added to my resources. I may have forgotten most of the novels I've read over the years, but I often call up a relationship, a setting, a detail of decor that serves as a prompt for a journey.

The diverse archive of novels I've read is the consequence of being a member of a serious book club which was founded several years before I joined in 2001. The privilege of selecting the book (almost always a novel) belongs to the host of the monthly meeting, where we tell each other whether we liked the book, or not, and why, often comparing it to others we've read. In this way, I've been presented with insight into how other readers perceive specific aspects of creative writing, and, perhaps more importantly, I've engaged in a rich array of literature. The writers included in our archive include Eudora Welty, John Updike, Tobias Wolff, Jack Kerouac, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, Philip Roth, Jonathan Franzen, E.L. Doctorow and Amor Towles.

Doctorow's "Homer and Langley" and Towles' "A Gentleman in Moscow," are just two of the book club selections that have intrigued and inspired me. They are exquisite stories of individuals confined to a defined physical space. The protagonists' minds supply most of the action. They are studies in interior description.

The Welty novel we read seemed autobiographical. Her descriptions of characters, their relationships and their habitats made a vivid impression on me. The same is true of Zadie Smith, and I'm sure there are others. I feel like I knew Philip Roth as a kid. On the subject of kids, Wolff's "Old School" and Updike's early short stories precipitated an entry into the mindset of a writer, someone who, recalling an event, creates a story about it or the setting or the circumstances or the actors. Kerouac seems to just *let go*, using people he knew or knew about as characters for his stream of conscious poetic prose.

Each of these writers has shown something that has stayed with me. Franzen's characters in "Corrections" are as familiar to me as my own family members, a generation removed. On the other extreme, "Homer and Langley" and "A Gentleman in Moscow" are remote while effecting a sensation for their readers of being with the actors; they are that real.

McEwan is a master craftsman of plot. His stories support my faith that it is not required of fiction writers to know from the beginning where they will eventually wind up. It is crucial for a writer to develop self-trust.

\*

The stories in my collection are diverse. The thread that connects them is my life, all seventy-plus years, from the start in a blue-collar second-generation American family, through the struggle for direction and education, and ultimately, to finding voice and identity as a writer.

People often asked of me: *You're a public defender? How can you represent those people?* The answer is the same as it is to the question: *Why do you write?* My answer: Because I have to.

\*\*\*

## Acceptance

Josephine was not the first black person she had ever seen. Twenty years before, when she was new in Paris, Sonia would frequent the markets where she saw African women, mostly from the Ivory Coast, in their native dress. Josephine Baker had come to Paris with the *Revue Nègre*. Spinning off her fame, she formed her own troupe. She was a star in her prime in 1925. Sonia and everyone she knew had seen the show and were bedazzled by Baker and her retinue. Sonia knew immediately that she had to meet her, to design for her.

“Welcome to our home! *Bienvenue, Mademoiselle Baker.*” It was the Delaunays’ Sunday salon and the usual guests were there; however, this week was special. Sonia had made an arrangement with a mutual American friend to bring Josephine.

“*Ah, merci bien, Madame Delaunay. Je suis délie être ici.* But please call me Josephine.” Josephine’s French was understandable, but only because Sonia was fluent in English—also French, German, and, of course, Russian, and a couple of other languages. Eventually, she and Josephine spoke together in English.

Sonia wanted to make an ensemble for Josephine, not a stage costume. Josephine’s costumes were little more than faux bananas and ropes of beads. But her street clothes and her evening wear! *Oh, la la!* She wore hand-sewn silk Poiret couture and magnificent furs and jewels. Sonia wanted a sense of Josephine’s life story, to know the person, to develop a look that would be recognizable as a Sonia Delaunay design, but would highlight what it was that made Josephine Baker the icon that she was. She asked her to talk about herself, where she came from, and how it was she came to Paris.

They found a high round table in a corner and sat with their cocktails while Josephine recounted her journey, from her early life of want in the mean streets of St. Louis, to her life of

luxury in Paris. When she compared the racism of early twentieth century middle-America to the Parisian liberal acceptance and current obsession with “exotic” black entertainers, Josephine declared Paris was paradise.

Sonia, listening to Josephine, was transported against her will to her earliest childhood memories. Her family lived in poverty. Food was scarce, and even if there had been more money, *everything* was scarce. Revolution was being threatened. Their existence seemed threatened. The Czar’s police repeatedly raided the villages for men and boys to fight in his war in the East. Jews, especially, were made to suffer arbitrary deprivations.

The two women looked at each other. “We’re not so different, you and I,” Sonia observed. “Look at us now, so sophisticated and modern. How did this happen?”

“Not by itself. You and I have something the girls we left in the dust never had and never will. What can you call it?”

“Will power? Drive? Talent? A leg up?” Sonia offered.

“Chutzpah,” announced Josephine, grinning deeply.

Sonia was so surprised by the familiar Yiddish word coming from Josephine, she laughed until tears ran down her cheeks onto the appliquéd multi-colored discs on the breast of her original Sonia Delaunay dress. The word translated loosely as “nerve” and Josephine used it perfectly.

They were quiet for a while, smoking and sipping Calvados in their corner of the large room. Sonia suddenly spoke. “Do you ever wonder about your family in St. Louis? Do you ever want to write to your little sister and send her a steamship ticket to join you and show her Paris?”

“No, really, I’m glad to be away from all of them.” Josephine responded matter-of-factly. “What about you?”

“My sister Fanny would be like a fish out of water here. She would feel insulted and think I was showing off my success at her expense. She was always such a little housemaid. She’ll never leave Gdemsk.” Sonia allowed herself a moment to think of Fanny, the five-year-old she said good-bye to all those years ago when she left the family to live with rich relatives. Did she even say good-bye? She took a slow drag on her cigarette and exhaled. “Fanny probably married the neighbor boy when she turned sixteen and has half a dozen grown offspring and a village full of grandchildren by now.” She sipped her digestif. “Although, I’ve heard that many of those little villages emptied out with everyone going to New York before the Soviets took over.”

“Things haven’t been a bed of roses in New York either, mon amie.”

Sonia reflected. “However things turned out for Fanny, I think they’re for the best. And it’s best to leave it alone.”

Their mutual American friend came over to their corner. “Oh what a relief to hear English being spoken. I need a break.”

“Say, have you heard?” Caroline the American interrupted the free-floating silence in her New York English, “We women in America have the vote now, even if we don’t own any real estate,” making conversation, bringing them news of her part of the world, sounding a bit boastful. “I voted last time I was home.” She adjusted her gaze toward Josephine. “Did you get to vote before you left?”

“I tried, but I couldn’t prove my age and I was the only colored girl trying to vote. I could tell they were never going to let it happen.”

“How about you?” Caroline looked at Sonia. “Is it legal here?”



“I guess not. I’m not interested. As long as I’m left alone to paint and design and work, and have an occasional cocktail, and as long as my husband comes home every night, I don’t need to vote. Politics is dull.” She motioned for the maid to bring them more drinks. Caroline and Josephine were the last guests to leave.

Sonia fell asleep that morning, uncharacteristically thinking of her first home and the last occasion associated with it.

\*

It was almost the end of autumn, almost the turn of the twentieth century, in a countryside of northwestern Russia. The silence was broken only by an occasional chirp or buzz and the crunching of drying vegetation under the little girls’ shabby shoes. They were walking hand-in-hand, six-year-old Sophie, dark-haired and serious in her expression, the year younger Fanny, blond and prettier, on the way to their family house with its overgrown vegetable garden. A few tomatoes still clung to the falling vines, a yellow bird sat on the surrounding wire. Moishe, a boy of eight years, ran toward the girls from the back door of the house waving his arms about.

“Uncle is coming. Uncle is coming.” As he motioned to the girls to come to the house, they broke into a trot to catch up to him. Moishe picked up a stick and dragged it behind him. His hands and face were dirty, hair a mess. One could guess from his bearing and expression that this child had known disappointment and had been a source of disappointment. He was sour and truculent.

“I hope I can go with them to St. Petersburg. I hope they really take me this time, not just talk about it.” He looked at the ground while he ruminated, all the while dragging the stick in the dirt. “Ma says she wants me to have a bath before they come,” he snarled through his teeth. Then

suddenly, interrupting his preoccupation, “Oh, and she says you two are to come inside right away and that, Sophie, you should put on your holiday clothes.”

At that, the girls hurried toward the house. Moishe slowed down, distracted by a root the stick has uncovered.

In the open kitchen and dining room their mother was preparing food. Aroma of cooked cabbage permeated the small house. A bowl of chopped potatoes and onions was on the table. Esther, mother of five and not yet thirty, looked older than her years. Fanny and Sophie burst in, out of breath.

“Fanny, darling, bring Ma the rest of the tomatoes from outside. Sophie, what took you so long. Where’s the salt I asked you to buy from Mr. Sokov?” Sophie’s eyes widened. She’s done it again. She’s failed to take care of her mother’s needs. “I’m sorry Ma. I forgot.”

Esther, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling, was clearly disappointed. “Why do you think I gave you fifty kopeks? Where’s the money?” Sophie dug the coin out of her pocket and handed it to Esther, who then put it in her bosom. “If Aunt and Uncle ask for more salt, I’ll tell them why they can’t have any. Go put on your holiday clothes and be quick about it. They’ll be here soon.”

Fanny returned and carefully transferred the few soft-looking tomatoes from her upturned skirt to the table. “Ma, should I put on the blue dress that used to be Sophie’s?”

“Yes, but Fanny dear, help me first with the cabbage. You do it better than I can.”

Scrubbed and dressed as if for a high holy day, the little girls sat cross-legged on the floor in the dormitory-style bedroom. Fanny looked over Sophie’s shoulder watching her draw. When a toddler started to cry from one of the two cribs that filled a corner of the room, Fanny got up and went to him. She cooed and comforted him through the slats while Sophie

continued to draw and the infant in the other crib slept untroubled. Fanny, startled by their father's appearance in the doorway, jumped up and ran to him.

"Papa, how come you're home in the middle of the day? Are you feeling alright?"

Schlomo stood in the doorway, a big man in his thirties with huge work-worn hands. His clothes are clean and neat with a button missing here and there. His cowlick sticks up from his slicked-down hair. "Perfectly alright, my little rabbit. Both of you look absolutely elegant." Sophie looked up and smiled. He smiled back and winked at her before joining Esther in the kitchen.

"Do I look okay, Esther?"

"Yes, dearest. You look your best. That's all they can expect."

"And you, Esther, you look beautiful—still." With that he pecked her cheek, then looked into her eyes insistently. "You're still sure about Sophie? You can change your mind. *Now* is not too late."

Esther stared steadily into Schlomo's eyes. "And *you*?"

"I am looking at the positive points. I'm *with* you."

"Go on, get the children. I just got Moishe cleaned up. Make sure he didn't get dirty again. I think I hear the carriage. Go greet them." Schlomo, his nerves making him a bit absent-minded, went outside, forgetting to check on Moishe and the girls.

Esther, a nervous woman, felt cursed by her own fertility. She had continued to have children after becoming overwhelmed by her first. Sophie was her second and there were three younger ones. She was a dispirited woman who had painted and read poetry before her marriage. Her older brother was educated and had earned certifications which allowed him to live outside the Pale, the ghetto where the czar confined the majority of the Jews. Esther's envy plagued her.

This same brother and his wife were in the carriage approaching the cottage. They were childless and begged to raise Sophie in St. Petersburg. Esther recognized this as Sophie's big chance. Oh, what she herself would have given to grow up there! Obsessed with getting out of Gdemsk, Esther was fearful that a revolution would come or the czar would kidnap her husband and then her sons for his army, that she would be abandoned. She hoped her three boys would show sufficient aptitude at school to be trained for a career that would get them out of Gdemsk. The one remaining girl, Fanny, would be her help, her anchor, her nurse.

The carriage arrived. With an apprehensive Schlomo standing and watching, the driver climbed down from his seat to open the coach door and adjust the steps for the uncle. Schlomo wondered *Does that driver earn more than I do for work that is so easy?* He had met his brother-in-law a few times, and exchanged several letters, but he didn't know him well. Henri Turk, his wife's privileged brother, presented an impressive figure, almost six feet tall, dressed in a soft grey suit and top hat. Esther sent the three oldest children outside to join Schlomo. They stood in a line near their father silently staring at the uncle helping the aunt out of the coach. She, too, was tall and fashionably dressed. Powdered and perfumed, graceful, Anna Turk appeared somewhat older than her husband. As the men shook hands, Schlomo slapped Henri on the back. The aunt then extended her gloved hand to Schlomo who kisses it, almost.

Placing her gloved curved index finger under Sophie's chin, Anna appraised her elder niece. "Sophie, how charming you look in the dress I sent you for your birthday." Sophie blushed, obviously deeply impressed and smiling.

In the house, Esther removed her apron, smoothed her hair, then called out "Let them come in for god's sake. Don't keep them standing outside." Schlomo led them inside where

Esther took their hats and coats. The uncle had the driver help him carry several packages into the house and told him to come back for them before dark.

“Sophie dear, you must show me your latest art work. I would like to have the very best one framed to hang in my study,” the uncle said standing next to the aunt. He moved closer to Sophie and rashly informed her “You know, dear, that if your mama and papa agree, we want to take you home to live with us in St. Petersburg.”

Sophie was shaken. *Is he making a mistake? Grown ups make mistakes, too, sometimes.* Her shock registered on her face like a theatrical actor’s, but it was entirely involuntarily, dropped jaw, round eyes, raised eyebrows. She didn’t quite believe what the uncle was saying, still thinking he meant to take Moishe. She moved to Schlomo and took his big bear hand in her little hand.

The excitement of opening the packages distracted the children for the moment. “Thank you very much, Anna.” “Use it in good health, my dear.” “Thank you, Uncle.” “Wear it in good health, young man.”

After the “oohs” and “aahs” and the rustic dinner were over, there is a hush. A heavy silver picture frame, a flacon of perfume, scented soap, and a fur blanket, now set out on the sideboard, resembled a window display in an up-scale St. Petersburg shop. The silence gave the uncle another opportunity to engage Sophie. He crouched down to be face-level with her and took each of her hands in his. They looked into each other’s faces. He, into her eyes; she at his lips forming the words, smelling of pipe tobacco.

“You have the hands of an artist, Sophie.” She looked at her hands, not comprehending what he saw—just hands, the hands she always had. “In St Petersburg, you will have lots of

pretty dresses. And you can have an easel and paints. You'll go to school with other girls and have lots of friends. I'm sure there are many little girls who will want to be friends with you."

It was beginning to sink in. Uncle really did mean to take her away. To separate her from Papa. To sever a tie she had never been without. Sophie revered Schlomo, who never gave her the slightest reason to distrust him or to foresee a willingness on his part to abandon her. The uncle didn't let up. He was selling himself to her as her *future*. He wanted this badly, as did his wife. They would never have a chance like this again, to raise a child, a young child with talent, as their own. "And, did I mention, we have lots of good food at our house? Would you like a pet cat? What do you say to that?"

She had no words.

She looked across the room at her father sitting at the head of the dining table, his chair askew so he could cross his big feet in front of him. Tears welled in her eyes as she ran to him and climbed on him until he shaped his legs into a lap.

Sophie sobbed at her father's neck. "I don't want to leave you, Papa." Running out of breath, she could barely speak. "Do you want me to go?"

Schlomo's heart ached. Every fibre of him ached. He knew another chance like this for one of his own to live a life with opportunities would not come again. He held her to him. He willed his faith in what he knew was right to overcome the conflict he felt. "There, there, my darling girl."

"Don't you like me anymore?" She threw her head back then roared into her father's chest, hot tears springing from her dark eyes. Then she took a moment and seemed resolved to collect herself. "I won't be selfish or careless ever again from now on. I'll help more. I'll pay

more attention to the babies.” Then she lost most of the control she had rallied and began again to wail. “Please don’t send me away.”

Schlomo’s chin rested lightly on top of Sophie’s head where her coiled braids made a nest. He turned his big scratchy face to the side so he could speak and made his voice soft in an effort to soothe his second child, his elder girl, his darling. He rocked her as he spoke. “Sophie Darling, Papa loves you. So does Ma.”

“So why don’t you want me anymore? Was I a bad girl?” She looked up into his moist grey-blue eyes.

“No, bubelah. You are a sweet child and we aren’t punishing you. We’re giving you a reward, a better life.” He held her tight to him again. They quietly sobbed together while the rest of the family looked on. An infant could be heard fussing in the bedroom, then a piercing scream. Esther went to him followed by Fanny, then came back into the room alone.

Schlomo and Sophie had stopped crying, but he continued to hold her. He put his paws on her small shoulders, extended his arms a bit so he can look into her face. “Uncle will provide everything you need, everything your heart desires, everything I believe you are entitled to. Ma agrees. It will be so much better for you, sweetheart. You’ll see.” He pulled his huge handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose.

“How do you feel, Papa? Are you sad—as sad as I am?”

“Yes, my dear, I’m sad. But, I’m also content.” He lied to himself cruelly, brutally, willing his strength to triumph. “The sadness will last for a while and then we’ll learn to hold it at bay and allow ourselves to be happy.”

“But Papa, you’re so old. Will you still remember me when I go with Uncle?”

“Of course, I will! Every day. I’ll remember you every day. I have many years

to remember you, my darling girl.”

Five-year-old Fanny stood in the bedroom doorway staring, listening to Sophie and her father. She was stupefied. She had a history of being teased for her gullibility. She tried to sort it out. *Were they just playing, pretending? No, this was real.* Fanny looked at her mother. *Would it be okay to speak up?* No one had directed her to do so. Would she be making trouble? Her mother could not endure impulsiveness. As young as she was, Fanny knew better than to offend, but she felt duty-bound to fix things. Uncharacteristically, she took a chance. “I’ll go instead of Sophie, Papa, and then you’ll let her stay.” Everyone’s attention turned to Fanny whose face was the color of beet borscht. “I c-c-couldn’t help it! I’m sorry, I had to say it. I’m sorry, Papa.”

“Fanny,” her father said looking at her with a mix of affection and empathy. “Ma needs you so much. What would she do without you?”

“Oh, Papa.” By now Fanny’s face was wet with her own tears. “I don’t want *Sophie* to go, *either*. Maybe you’ll let me go instead when I’m bigger. Maybe when Ma grows up she won’t need so much help.”

Esther gave the child a crooked smile and took her hand to lead her away from the central drama. She sat and Fanny climbed onto her lap, where she regarded the continuing exchange between Sophie and their father, then Sophie and their uncle.

“Sophie, little niece, I know you like to draw. I have many drawings and paintings and books of art in my house. You’ll have materials and lessons. There will be parties with other children and dinners. You’ll like living in the big city. We’ll go to concerts and ballets. I’ll take you to see the czar’s palace and his art collection.”

Sophie softened slightly in response to her uncle’s speech. He continued: “Please don’t be sad. Aunt Anna and I will do our best to make sure you are content.”



Meanwhile, Moishe was sitting on the floor near his mother's chair seething. He had anticipated, in error, his own invitation to go with the uncle. He had heard something about a boy's school in the city on a previous visit. He wanted very much to go to St. Petersburg—not to school, though. He disliked his own school and, therefore, all school. Lately the rabbi had made complaints to Papa about his work habits. The boy was about to lose his temper as he had done many times in the past. Then he remembered the slap he had received that ended the latest tantrum.

He checked his tone. "Ma," cooed her eldest boy. He stood up, placing his hand on her shoulder. "I thought *I* was to go with Aunt and Uncle."

"Moishe dear, we'll see what the next year brings. It's up to your uncle," she whispered to him while she continued to hold Fanny on her lap. "Your chances of getting out of here will be better if you work harder at your studies." He sat back down and sulked.

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"Sophie, you'd better pick up your suitcase. Hold Aunt's hand and be a good girl. Aunt and Uncle will be your parents now and you must mind them and not make them ashamed of you. Don't give them reason to be sorry. Give Papa a rest and come here and give me a kiss good-bye."

Sophie obeyed. When her father lifted her into the carriage between his wife's brother and her sister-in-law, he tried his best to hide his tears, but failed. The horses started at a trot. Sophie did not look back. Later she would be nostalgic about the yellow birds of her childhood home in Gdmsk, the flowers, anything with color. She would almost never allow herself to think of the people she left behind.

“Are you comfortable, Sophie dear?” her uncle asked as the horses gained speed. He unfolded a fur lap rug. He and his wife held the opposite ends and adjusted it so that the three of them were snug. As they drove away from the village, the aunt gave Sophie a pendant of polished amber in the shape of a rotund heart suspended from a delicate gold chain. The amber was the most beautiful color, like the honey Sophie loved, dark like burnt sugar, and about the size of a fifty-kopek coin. The aunt unfastened the chain’s clasp and re-fastened it around Sophie’s neck.

After about an hour, Sophie fell asleep nuzzled against her uncle’s chest, while his wife smiled with fulfillment.

\*

Esther and Schlomo Stein would have preferred her brother and sister-in-law to take their eldest boy, Moishe. But Henri and Anna wanted Sophie. Anna wanted a girl. It was true the Steins had a slightly easier time of it with one less dependent, but their motive for entrusting Henri and Anna with their elder daughter was the privileged life they could afford her. They never doubted their decision.

Her newly adoptive parents arranged for Sophie’s art lessons almost immediately and enrolled her in the best school. It took no time at all for Sophie to adapt and socialize with children who belonged to the same stratum as the Terks. They were from Jewish families who had discarded the old ways, ways that focused entirely on their religion and keeping their own society. Jewish families in St Petersburg, such as the Terks, were modern and engaged in the mainstream culture while observing an up-dated version of their religion. They were *accepted*. To craft a more cultivated image of herself, Sophie pressed her friends and adoptive family to call her *Sonia* rather than *Sophie*. A name from the old country, *Sophie* seemed like a baby name,

unrefined. After all, Uncle Henri had been known as Hymie in his youth. The idea was to *blend in*.

Sonia Terk, as she came to be known, rarely thought about her parents. She was a serious, quiet child, motivated by her love of art. Any resentment she may have harbored against her parents was supplanted by her unwavering determination to be an artist, a better artist, an avant-garde artist. By the age of fifteen, she had read of the radical artwork being shown in Paris, the new center of the art world. When Sonia had completed preparatory school, the conservative Terks sent her to a traditional art school in Berlin, following the recommendations of her teachers, where she would live under the supervision of Henri's business associates.

"But, Aunt, Berlin doesn't inspire modernism. It's out of step with the times. Please let me go to Paris." Sonia was obedient, but she was also assertive. She was under the spell of the Belle Époque. She had read of the World Fair, the Eiffel Tower, the Métro and Montmartre.

"It's out of the question. It's much too far for you to travel alone. And, there's the Dreyfus affair, for god's sake. Their government is unstable. They're all anti-semites."

"I'd be careful. I can take care of myself. Have I ever given you cause to distrust me?"

"Of course not, pet," Henri concurred. "But, you're still only a girl. We'll allow you to take the train to Berlin, but accompanied by Aunt Anna's maid, and only to stay with my friend and his wife. They have a large home and staff and will look after you. They are very pleasant people, my dear. I have no doubt this is for the best."

Sonia settled, but continued to lobby for training in Paris. During her stay in Berlin, she attended all the exhibits of contemporary art she could find, making a move to Paris all the more appealing. Her own work in comparison seemed too tame, in need of a new light—something was missing.

After what seemed like an eternity in Berlin, holidays at the family vacation home in Finland and at the St. Petersburg residence, Sonia finally convinced her Uncle Henri to allow her to study in Paris. He agreed on the condition that she live in a women's hotel, for which he made arrangements, and also that he select the studio where she would study. However, he worried about her future. She had turned twenty and should be married, the sooner the better. It was understood Sonia was not a great beauty. Her uncle wanted her to marry a man of his own class who would treat her well. *Was that asking too much?* She had suitors in St. Petersburg. She just had to select one. He himself had made a good match in Anna, the niece of the bank president who employed him. "At least promise one of them. You can insist on a long engagement."

"I don't want to marry *any* of them. They're all perfectly nice boys, but not of my temperament. Why promise something I would dread?"

Sonia moved to Paris soon after the start of the twentieth century, at the start of the twentieth year of her life. Having an allowance from her uncle, she had no need to earn a living. Uncle Henri made his preference known. He wanted her to remain in his house and give up her dream of a life in Paris, but he respected her artistic talent and gave his permission, and support. Only later would he threaten to withdraw his funding should she ignore his preferences.

In Paris, Sonia began to paint with increasingly varied and bolder colors, and to experiment with abstraction and some cubist ideas. She was lauded by her colleagues, but her teachers were disappointed, and disappointing in Sonia's view. She rarely attended class, instead visiting museums and out-of-the way galleries. It was at one of these galleries she met the forty-year-old Dutch art dealer Willy Oude, and they became fast friends. Impressed with her work, he introduced her to some of the Parisian painters in his circle—Ferdinand Léger, Henri Rousseau and Robert Delaunay.

As a year passed, then another, and another, Uncle Henri's demands that Sonia move back to St. Petersburg to make a marriage match became increasingly insistent, hinting he would cut off his financial support if she refused. He had a further, unexpressed, motive: rumors of war in western Europe. Rumbblings of revolution in Russia somehow didn't alarm him as much. He felt he could protect Sonia if she were in his house.

When Sonia related her situation to Willy, he proposed that they marry. Unbeknownst to Sonia, Willy was in a long-term relationship with his butler. Naïve as she was, she was desperate to get out from under her uncle's tiresome harping and she accepted the fate of a non-romantic marriage.

She loved Willy as much as his preference would allow. However, within a year, Sonia fell in love with fellow artist Robert Delaunay and was soon pregnant. It became obvious the personages required rearrangement. In a paradoxical farce worthy of a Theatre of the Absurd performance, Willy made arrangements for the required legal evidence to show he had had relations with *a woman not his wife*. Sonia and Robert married some months before baby Charles was born. Henri and Anna Terk, who had come to consider Sonia a hopeless spinster at twenty-six, were delighted and sent a nice nest egg for the newlyweds and later, for the baby.

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Sonia had met Serge Diaghelev, the ballet impresario, through her ex-husband. At her behest, Diaghelev engaged Robert to design a set and Sonia to design fabrics and costumes for a Ballet Russe production. From her surplus fabric, she fashioned a quilt for her baby. Years later, the quilt would be exhibited along with her paintings and other designs at the Paris Museum of Modern Art.

Sonia and Robert attended the premier performance of the Ballet Russe's *The Rite of Spring* as Diaghlev's guests. The audience had been rowdy, jeering, and had actually thrown things at the orchestra. Robert sent Sonia home early in a carriage. When she awoke the next morning, the baby was sleeping peacefully. The nurse had wrapped him in his quilt. Robert was still out. She was glad to have time for herself.

She sat alone for a quiet moment, seeing in her mind's eye a new way of using color, shaping and shading, making the color, rather than the form, predominant. Matisse's "Woman with a Hat" impressed her, had stayed with her even though she was less interested in the figure than the use of color. How would she separate the colors without giving them a form? Would she merge them? How and to what degree? She would have to experiment, observe, stay true to her vision.

She had *just one more thing*, one more thing to do before she could start her painting. This project would be a radically new type of self-portrait using color, solely and exclusively, color. The night before, studying herself in the mirror, she saw the palette she would use: indigo and red and green going toward the black, the whole touched with yellow, the yellow of the birds she remembered from her childhood home in Gdmsk. She chose to remember sensations, visual and tactile, rather than people or events in Gdmsk. In fact, whenever possible, she chose pleasant memories over the unpleasant. Sonia was hardly the same person she had been at six when she left for St. Petersburg with her uncle and aunt. She concentrated on her vision, her creative passion.

*Just one more thing*, one more thing. She was already in her smock, her hair neatly tied. The Paris light filtered through the new windows at just the angle she liked. Just one more thing until she could begin.

She had responsibilities, some were easier to deal with than others. She had engaged a nurse for the baby. She had bought a wreck of a ground-floor apartment and hired workers to make it habitable. Adding to her labors, she had a husband who, himself, was spoiled, an eternal child with a bad temper. Robert had no idea how to run a household, let alone how to participate. He was either painting or strolling about visiting this cafe or that, propounding on the direction of art as he knew it, as he created it. He painted, he talked, he argued. He dressed himself, was talented, and could be amusing. Aside from these abilities, Robert Delaunay required looking after. His mother had given up and left the task to Sonia.

Sonia sat erect at the tiny desk. She had taken care of answering the inquiries about the sale of Robert's latest painting and confirmed that they both accepted an invitation to enter work in the next Paris salon and arranged for delivery. *Just one more thing.* Her next business was to pay the workers, the nurse, the grocer and to decide where to give a small donation. Her generous uncle had taught her to give to worthy causes from the monthly allowance he faithfully posted to her. *One more thing,* the last thing. She decided on a sum designated for food to a home for the aged. So many requests: a restoration project, a Catholic school, a veteran's home. She could wait for Robert to come home and ask his opinion, look into his handsome face reflecting a stunning blankness, failing to grasp the idea. At last, now she could start.

"*Entrez-vous, mes amis,*" Robert urged as he led the small entourage of poets and fellow-artists into the large room that served as studio, office, salon, and dining room. They continued shouting at one another, going on with their philosophizing and debating as though they were still in a café or out on the street. Baby Charles could be heard from the adjoining bedroom. He was angry at having been woken by Robert and company, and his wailing made this known.

“Can’t you keep that little devil quiet?” Robert complained to Sonia. The nurse did her best, but Robert, whose reaction was making matters worse, continued to bellow. “Aren’t you supposed to be feeding him or nursing or something? What does he want?”

The nurse wrapped the baby in the quilt, and paced with him, rocking.

“Why does he always have to cry and scream about it? When will he learn his manners?”

Robert’s comments were addressed to the ceiling, impliedly to Sonia or the nurse, it made no difference to him who responded. The nurse’s efforts were ineffective. Robert became more irate and continued to scold, further upsetting the nurse and as a result, Charles screamed louder.

Just then the maid returned with groceries. Seeing the herd of men she asked Sonia, “Should I put out some refreshments, Madame?” Another decision. Another postponement. Should she allow herself to show her feelings or just let it go? “Yes. Yes, of course, feed them. Let’s see what you’ve brought.” *One more thing*. Just one more.

It had grown dark. “I’m going home now, Madame,” the maid told her.

“What? Is it that time already?” The nurse had already gone for her night out, leaving the baby awake and fussing. Sonia took him with her to her easel. She couldn’t work until the baby calmed. *Just one more thing*. She held him close and the two of them cried.

It seemed like hours before the men left and the baby quieted. She put him in his crib, splashed some water on her face, and painted. Her vision and passion carried her through the night. She persevered, painting without the light the day took with it. Nonetheless, the colors were resplendent in the sunlight the next day. Mercifully, the nurse arrived in the early morning and Sonia slept, waking at noon to resume her work.

\*



As the former Sophie was starting her art studies in Paris, her eighteen-year-old sister was packing her carpet bag for the journey from her village to America with her parents and the rest of the family. A paper pinned to her coat bore her name and birthdate: Fanny Stein, 25 April, 1887. They would take a train to the harbor to board a ship to New York, then find a train to Cleveland. A relative of her brother's in-law's wife had a hat factory there and promised them work.

Fanny's sweet-heart, Louie Kransky, and his family would be traveling with the Steins. Fanny and Louie wanted to marry, but that would have to wait. Everyone knew it, but first things first.

She took everything out of her bag and surveyed her necessities: a fresh bar of soap, extra hair pins, two changes of underwear, a pair of house slippers, a skirt, a blouse, a few rags, a shawl, a light wool blanket, yarn, crochet hook, and her life savings, a little more than the equivalent of three U.S. dollars at the time. Papa had the money and tickets for the trip. Her face was flushed, her eyes watering, tiny beads of sweat showed on her upper lip even though the day was cool. Her mood was a mixture of terror and anticipation. She repacked her bag and checked on her mother. Esther always needed something. Fanny always looked after her. There she was, trying to manage two bags, one a cardboard suitcase, the other a carpet bag of the same pattern as Fanny's. They spoke in Yiddish.

"Ma, I can carry one of those, but please don't make them too heavy." Let's see what you have in there." She seized the suitcase. "*Oy*, this weighs a ton." She emptied it and found a glass perfume bottle with a few drops of liquid at the bottom, three bars of soap, a fur blanket, a family photo in a heavy silver frame, a jar of dill pickles, in addition to the necessities. Fanny rearranged everything between the two bags except the pickles, which she put with the bread and

other food in the picnic hamper they would carry on the train and use later to make the other bags lighter.

Fanny had heard her parents talk of this trip ever since Sophie left. They mentioned a revolution. The rumor of the closure of the nail factory was becoming more acute. They would be prey for the Cossacks if the factory was no longer vital. Esther, who hated Gdemsk, had always wanted to live somewhere else—anywhere else. Finally, she convinced her husband to get them out of there, as she had done years before for Sophie.

Fanny circled the exterior of the house by herself, wanting to remember it, wanting to remember growing up there. She went to the center of town to the store as she had so often with Sophie when they were little. She recalled the day her sister left. No one spoke of the details, but the entire episode was vivid in her mind. As she walked back toward the house, she replayed the events of that day years ago, as she did from time to time. Their older brother had come running out of the house, excited, jubilant. *Uncle is coming. Uncle is coming. Ma says that Sophie should put on her holiday clothes.* A quiet child, Sophie, like her mother, was frequently lost in thought. She was always drawing, using anything that would make color. Fanny was not creative and what little attention she received from her mother was in exchange for Fanny's attentiveness to her. Jakey, her youngest brother, interrupted Fanny's rumination. "The Kransky's will be here soon. What are you doing out here?"

"I was remembering years ago when our aunt and uncle came for our sister Sophie. You won't remember; you were a baby."

"Tell me what happened. No one talks about it. Only you."

"They came in a fancy carriage. We all went outside to meet it. Uncle Henri is a banker. He's Ma's brother. They didn't have children and wanted to adopt Sophie. Aunt Anna told

Sophie she looked *charming*. When Uncle Henri told Sophie he wanted her to come live with them, she began screaming that Ma and Papa didn't love her anymore. Papa told her that the uncle could take better care of her than he could." Fanny remembered it well. At the time she felt a mixture of envy, disappointment, and something else too vague for a five-year old to analyze. Sophie visited only one time, years ago, while the aunt and uncle had business in Warsaw. She brought presents and offered Fanny a reading lesson. Tension caused an unpleasantness. Sophie insisted on being called "Sonia." She wore clothes that were inappropriate to the location and class. She didn't want to play and get dirty, only to draw. That's the last Fanny saw or heard from Sophie.

"Why didn't they take *me*, Fanny? I would like to live in St. Petersburg and go skiing in Finland." Jakey didn't understand.

"Who knows? Who cares anymore? You know, the truth is, we didn't miss Sophie very much. She was so quiet and dreamy, drawing all the time. She upset Ma because she never helped out." As they walked back to the house, Fanny thought to remind her father to contact the aunt and uncle telling them of their move, but she realized they had no address, as yet, in America.

As the Stein and Kransky families made their way to Riga to board the ship, Fanny thought again of Sophie: this voyage was a special privilege for Fanny, one not shared with her sister. She may have already accepted that they would never meet again, never speak or write. Fanny didn't read newspapers and had no interest in art. She would never know that her sister became famous, an extraordinary artist whose paintings would hang in museums, and who would outshine her well-born artist husband. Nor would she know that while she was raising her own five children in Cleveland, Sophie was raising her only child in Paris and creating dresses for

socialites and designing sets for theatre and having her photo featured in the culture sections of the Paris newspapers.

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Francine addressed Fanny from across the dining room table as the main course was winding down: “Grandma, I have a new friend at school and *her* grandma’s last name used to be Stein, just like *yours*. Because that was your last name before you got married, right?”

It was Friday night and Francine and her parents had been invited for dinner as usual. Fanny and Louie’s daughter, Ava, and their two boys were also seated at the table. They all stared in surprise at Francine. Children rarely started conversations with the adults. Francine’s question broke a lengthy silence.

Fanny turned red, touched the top button of her dress, and gave a small nervous laugh, as was her habit when she was addressed in English. Ava translated back and forth, English and Yiddish.

“Lots of people have that name.”

“I know, but Miriam’s Grandma Sonia was born in Russia in the eighteen-eighties. Isn’t that where you and Grandpa Louie were born?” Fanny wished her son would take his wife and daughter home. She didn’t want to be reminded of unpleasantness.

It had been fifty years since her arrival in America. Fanny and Louie, along with their daughter Ava and her family, were now living in a comfortable Cleveland suburb. Louie was thinking about retiring from the bakery, Ava’s husband was making a good living at a print shop. However, Ava’s ideas about raising her children and keeping peace with her husband differed from her mother’s. Living together as they did, in a small two-story bungalow, their interactions were constant and often difficult.

Compounding the tension that already existed in the house, the family had received long-term guests over the past year or so, from South America. When Rabbi Levin of the largest synagogue in Cleveland announced he was making a tour of Jewish houses of worship in South America, Louie, thinking his brother may have gone to *South* America instead of *North* America, made a formal request that the Rabbi ask about any congregants named Zalman Kransky.

Louie had offered to stay behind in his youngest brother's place when the family was about to leave Riga all those years ago but, of course, that wouldn't have solved anything. It was Zalman who had the eye infection and was refused passage. Louie had promised his mother on her deathbed that he wouldn't give up trying to locate his brother Zalman. They were sure he was alive—somewhere.

Louie, who had recently been sworn in as a U.S. citizen, met with the Rabbi personally and related the story of his brother. Zalman had been left in the care of an old woman in Riga who never responded to their letters. Within a few weeks, Levin miraculously found Zalman in Buenos Aires and put him in touch with Louie.

When "The Uncle," as he was called, finally arrived, it was Indian summer. He wore a full-length woolen topcoat over a dark suit and a black fedora. He seemed always to be wearing a tie. He was tan. His bald head, viewed on the rare occasion his fedora was absent, was the color of tobacco and smooth as kidskin. His lips and eye-lids were a dark purple, his eyes sparkled like jets. Next to pale, blue-eyed Louie, Zalman appeared to be entirely of another tribe. Louie did not practice his religion save for the high holidays, and then he prayed at home. Zalman, who was devout, insisted on walking to the shul every day. The brothers conversed in Yiddish; however, where Louie occasionally embellished his conversation with English words and phrases, Zalman embellished in Spanish. Differences aside, the two were inseparable, overjoyed

to be together. Louie even took time off from the bakery. After twenty-two days, a formal family portrait was taken and Zalman went home to Buenos Aires. An article appeared in *The Sun Press* and *The Jewish News* with the photo.

Within a few months, Zalman's wife came. It was a snowy winter with sub-zero temperatures in Cleveland. Coming from south of the equator, she had no coat. She borrowed Fanny's Persian lamb and stayed two weeks. Again, Ava's sons were forced to give over their bedroom. And then within the next few months, much too soon, Cousin Julius, also from Buenos Aires, arrived and stayed and stayed and stayed some more.

During each of the guest's stays, disruption grated on the family's already frayed nerves. Ava's elder son, Randy, never let up on his complaints, wheedling payment of one sort or another for giving up his half of the bedroom he normally shared with his little brother. Little Barry was moved into his parent's bedroom. Tempers rose. Ava's husband, the perpetually libidinous Joe, was miserable and grouching. The ever-irritable Randy acted out even more than usual, reminding Fanny of her younger brothers at that age. Whenever Ava or Joe tried to discipline Randy with threatened violence, Fanny positioned herself between the adult and the boy with outstretched arms and apron, physically shielding the child and yelling at the parent. There was much crying and hollering. Fanny had *had it*. She wanted her home back the way it was, without any more visiting relatives.

Eleven-year-old Francine persevered. "Miriam's grandmother is a famous artist. She lives in France."

"France! Oh, then for sure she's not related. No one in the village went to France. The furthest any Gdemskite went, as far as Grandma knows, is St. Petersburg," Ava explained, "and that city even has a different name now." Fanny didn't want to say, but she believed her entire

family had been wiped out in the revolution that gave rise to the Soviet Union, and that if any of her relatives had been spared during the revolution and its aftermath, they had died during Hitler's invasion. Truthfully, she would rather not know.

Fanny's marble cake was served for desert, the buttery yellow crumbly cake with the very bitter unsweetened cocoa powder batter swirled in. The kids tried to hide the hunks of acrid chocolate, but Fanny never got the hint.

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### A Day Off

She frequently considered running away. She didn't really do it, but from time to time, she did run away for the day, from school. Actually, on those days, she never even got to school. Her destination: The Cleveland Museum of Art. "Is it a school holiday?" the odd adult would ask now and then on the bus or in the museum. "No. I'm writing a report," Francine would explain. The inquirer's facial expression would change from puzzlement to awe for the attributed brilliance of this young girl, misplaced or unearned, maybe. How old could she be? Fourteen, fifteen at most.

She stepped off at the bus stop for Case Western Reserve University. Sometimes she walked through the campus and into the neighboring area, pretending she was a college student, luxuriating in the unexpected, weird yet welcoming, vague familiarity of the cobblestone streets, the porched framed houses, and ivied alley ways. Once she had even gone into the university library and spent the day on her latest obsession, possibly trade unions, or the history of stage makeup.

This day, Francine went directly to the museum, an imposing 1913 edifice with a willow-lined, plaque-ornamented path circling a large lagoon in its foreground. There was a pair of swans that that lived in the lagoon and she had named them. A casting of Rodin's *The Thinker* was situated at the main entrance. Her first visit to the museum had been with her parents when she was little. They had gone to see the Easter parade, the path around the lagoon serving as the route. Men and women walked in pairs sporting the most magnificent dresses and suits and accessories. Bodacious, ostentations, a riot of color. And the hats! It was the best thing she had ever seen.



A few years later, she had her first view of the interior of the museum when a neighbor family invited her to come along. Inside the museum she was spellbound. She didn't want to blink for fear it would disappear or that she'd wake up. The serenity of the place held her and the reverence came back each time she returned.

As was her custom, before entering the museum, she paid a visit to a sculpture that lived in a small garden at a side entrance, a bronze in the form of a toddler, chin lifted to the sky and grinning with abandon while standing, toes curled, on a beachball-size representation of the Earth. Each hand held a turtle by the tail. Four more turtles, only their heads and front feet visible beneath the sphere, supported the Earth's weight. It was the gleefulness of the child and her ingenuousness that welcomed Francine so; she felt outside of herself, outside the life she was playing hooky from. She was joyous, carefree, relieved.

Francine entered the high-ceilinged noiseless foyer with its marble figures, their flowing draped garments. How could stone look so real? She wandered alone from one gallery to the next, taking in detail, shape, composition, color, without really studying what she was looking at, but noticing and remembering, making friends of the paintings and sculptures. Her mother had recently died and Francine suffered the uncertainty and loneliness that comes with such a loss at her age, fourteen, one month and twenty-six days. It had happened a year ago, but the emotional nerve endings were still raw. In the museum she felt safe, alone to be free, to feel. Some organic need was fulfilled by those visits to the museum, starting with looking, then later, learning more ways to look, always, deeply enjoying being there. In a museum of art evidence of the weight of the world exists only if it's given meaning through the lens of an artist.

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### **The Angel**

It was early days in the Kennedy administration. I had been working at the University for a couple of years when a new girl came in, Violet Vogel. Like our supervisor, she was half my age. Unlike me, she was white. She was easy to train and easy-going and, from our coffee break tête-à-têtes, I would have to say she was, not *easy*, but ahead of herself in the dating department. I admit I'm guilty of encouraging her to tell me about the goings-on in her young life. I knew Violet would be my friend when we began exchanging conspiratorial smiles after our supervisor's daily appearances. Miss Finkle would come in and announce "The School of Law denial letters are due today," then do an about-face and leave a full cart of files between the two flex-o-writers.

"Should we have stood up? Curtsied? Said *Good morning, Madame Princess?*"

Violet asked. She, who might have been a princess herself had she not been raised by a part-time retail clerk and a bookkeeper. She was a wise-ass, creative and quick but lacking some polish, in spite of her tailored clothes, off-black sheer stockings, and French twist. What was she doing in this dead-end job? Until she started, I routinely did crossword puzzles under cover of my blotter to fend off dozing. I was paying my kid's college tuition. What was *her* story? After she had been there a while, around the time John Glenn went into orbit, I asked her.

"All my life I've wondered why you became a flex-o-writer operator." *All my life* was the way we often started our conversations. This came from our reading each application letter that crossed our desks solely for entertainment purposes, each one invariably beginning with *All my life*, for example: *All my life I have wanted to be a geriatric nurse* or *All my life I have wanted to be a divorce lawyer*.

“If you really want to know, Lois, I’ll divulge the details in their entirety, but it will cost you. Trade me your nurse letters for my lawyer letters. I’ve had my fill of impending mouthpieces. My interest is waning with alarming alacrity.” (We often spoke in a pseudo-literary arch mode.) “They’re so vapid, their reasons so nebulous. *My father is a lawyer; My hero is the Attorney General*. Who gives a crap? Give me the nurse letters. At least they want to help people, do some good in the world.”

“It’s a deal.”

“Would you prefer the comprehensive version, or just the facts?”

“What do *you* think?” I didn’t want to miss any details.

I rolled a fresh eight-by-eleven into the machine and lit a cigarette. Violet adjusted the tape in her machine and inserted the date, February 22, 1962, and began her story.

“You know where I live, right? It’s a ten-minute walk from campus. You know where Hessler Court is? No one does, it’s a block long and all the houses need a paint job. I have roommates, three of them. Two of them, I told you about, they’re married to each other. They both work in bookstores, but different ones, and they’re competitive. And the third one is actually my landlord, but he’s a sweetheart.”

“Okay, okay, get to the point, I have a lunch break coming in two hours.”

Violet opened a file and turned toward me. “So I was sitting on the porch steps one day last summer playing solitaire like I always used to do when it was hot out, and I see Blind George from across the street come out of his house. He had a guy with him, George has lots of friends, but I had never seen this particular guy before. I said, ‘Hey George,’ and waved to them from the steps. George held his red-tipped white stick in one hand and his friend’s arm in the

other, steering the guy over to me and all the time he has his usual expression where he's smiling but you can't tell at what—probably something only he can see. You know what I mean?

“He said 'Glad to see you.' He always says that. 'I'm playing Friday afternoon in a student recital at the Institute. I expect to see you there,' and he gives me this stern look.” Violet gave me her version of George's expression. She looked at me over her cat-eye glasses and pursed her lips. I rolled my eyes.

“So, it was a blind musician who talked you into this job? How did *that* happen?”

“No, no. Be patient. The guy he was with nudged him and George says, 'Oh, this is Harvey. He wrote the piece I'm going to play.' Then he turns to Harvey and tells him 'This is Violet, the girl I told you about.' George is a great talker, and a brilliant pianist. You should hear him play blues. We call him *the white Otis Spann*. Of course I promised to be there, I was going anyway. George's playing is gorgeous and I always went to those free conservatory recitals. I saw Harvey there that Friday and complimented him on his composition, mainly to be diplomatic. I didn't love his piece.

“After that, it seemed like every day I was out on the porch Harvey would come by alone, just happen to be passing.”

“What did he look like, this Harvey person? Was he good looking?”

“He wasn't bad looking, and he was incredibly polite. He actually dressed in button-down shirts and pressed khakis. His hair was practically buzzed and he smelled good, not of cologne, but of soap. He never wanted to come in or anything. We took walks together is all, sometimes we'd go to the art museum. We took the scenic routes, the red brick streets and that one with the antique wooden cobblestones shaped like cubes and all those converted old houses

on campus. We talked about everything except ourselves. He had never asked me a personal question, until one day he asked me a doozy.”

Violet paused and flicked the switch on her machine, starting it rumbling. “You *are* going to tell me what he asked you. *All my life* I have wanted to know what Harvey said to you on that sweltering day last summer.” I realized the paper in my machine was still blank.

She took her time. I sensed maybe she was changing her mind about telling me what happened, when in came Miss Finkle. Every once in a while, she got lonely and would bother us with her personal life. Today her tale of woe had to do with a wedding in Akron. Apparently, she didn't want to go, but it was her cousin's frat brother and somebody was going to be fixed up and it was ruining her plans to go skiing.

During the time Miss F was imposing herself on me, Violet was typing away. I surreptitiously looked at the wall clock and saw the minute hand nudging noon. Violet looked over at us and rolled her eyes. While still feigning attention to the bloviating Miss F, I stood and edged my way over to the coat rack and took my coat off the hanger. She got the hint and, after checking the wall clock for herself, finished her thought as we walked across the office and parted company.

Imagine my surprise when on my return from lunch, I found a note from Violet folded up and tucked into my blotter. It must have been the personal question Harvey asked her:

*Would you be able to have a Negro boyfriend. How would you feel about it? I don't want to put you on the spot. No matter what your answer is, I want to be friends.*

“Oh my god!” I said out loud. I was relieved no one else was in the room. I didn't want to share the note or explain my response to anyone. My thoughts were in such disarray trying to

process what the note conveyed, I wasn't sure what my response would be, it was beyond articulation. I buried the note in the circular among the punch tapes.

Certainly, I was aware things were changing. My son got on me last time he was home about my casual disapproval of his friend's signing on to be a freedom rider. I had been following Dr. King's statements about civil rights and couldn't disagree with them, but I've always believed that you start by bettering yourself, you work hard and make a good impression, and people will respect you. It worked for me and it worked for my husband and my friends. But, here this young man, this Harvey, was being presumptuous, wading into some dangerous waters. I thought about mixed-race romance and how the black person is always accused of *something*, it never fails to come to that. Even if they are seriously in love, there's no guarantee a mixed-race couple will be accepted by black *or* white people. In fact, quite the opposite. Of course, a person can't help whom they're attracted to. But if you give your heart, it's going to end up broken.

What kind of man could this Harvey be? From Violet's report, he seemed like a clean-cut kid, not some cruiser looking for sex in the wrong neighborhood. He seemed a little like my Stuart maybe. Oh my god! What if Stuart did something like that? He could get lynched for god's sake! If he heard me, he would tell me to chill out. He would be right, I knew, but it was so ingrained in me to be suspicious, to avoid trouble, to be alert to danger. I tried to be rational. Things were evolving. Myself, I had become comfortable with white people—my Adult Ed professors and the other students. And look at Violet. The child had opened herself up to me like a friend. I guess we *were* friends and we still are. *I* would say so. I hoped this Harvey thing had been resolved. A thought occurred to me: What if she asks me for advice!

Violet was in her art appreciation class and wouldn't return for another hour. I went to work on the School of Law rejection letters and put off further contemplation of Harvey's question.

“Thank god, you're back. What in the wide world of sports does this question of Harvey's, provocative as it is, have to do with how you got this job?” Violet was just taking her coat off. She looked at me over her glasses.

“Oh yeah. Harvey.” She looked pensive.

“What did you *say*? How did he *look*? What *happened*?”

She took her time settling into her chair and getting her work organized. She inserted a loop of punch tape in her machine and adjusted it before she continued.

“Well, he wasn't looking at me and we just kept walking. I remember I was looking down at my feet, trying not to show how surprised I was. I actually felt a little disappointed. I thought we were *already* friends. What was I thinking? Obviously he's a guy, what did I expect? Always on the prowl. On the other hand, I have a lot of friends who are guys and not necessarily romantic interests.”

“How did you feel? I mean talk about being put on the spot! What did you do?”

She began slowly. “I remember starting to perspire, my upper lip had those little beads of sweat, you know. If I told him the truth, that I didn't like him that way, I was sure I'd lose him as a friend. I thought maybe I should *try* to feel differently? I was so afraid of hurting his feelings my stomach got all clenched up. It felt like the blood drained from my head, but I felt hot at the same time, like I was blushing all over. I didn't want him to see my face so I stared at the sidewalk in front of my feet as we walked. He had said he wanted to be friends even if I

turned him down romantically, but I wasn't buying it. Do you think I was wanting too much from him, to be rejected without shutting me out completely?"

I could deal with giving that kind of input. I'm good at universal subjects. I figured I was getting off easy. Whew! "I don't think so. It seems like he was a big boy, he should have been able to handle it. And, if he wasn't, well, you don't need that kind of friend."

"I didn't like him as a *boyfriend*. He was pudgy and preppy. He wasn't funny or cool compared to my other friends. Not to say he was shallow or anything, but to me, he was so conservative, more of a science guy than a creative one. Looking back, I didn't find his music avant-garde enough to be all that interesting, although it did seem accomplished. Bottom line: I didn't feel any physical attraction to him at all. I was conflicted, flattered, embarrassed and at that moment just then I felt very, I don't know, unsophisticated. I could have used your advice, Lois."

*Uh-oh. There it was.* I realized my hands had been resting in my lap. I resisted the inclination to say what I was thinking, not that I could have put a coherent sentence together. I put another tape in the machine for Miss F's benefit, trying to look a whole lot more nonchalant than I was feeling. I knitted my brow and tried to look thoughtful, wise.

"I would have told you to go with your gut," I told her, trying to sound confident. "What did you do? How did you handle it?"

"I forced myself to be realistic in a kind of naïve way, I guess. After all, what do *I* know. I knew I had never had a black friend before that, although I knew a couple of people who left to join the freedom riders in the South. I knew my parents referred to black people as *colored* and I'm ashamed to say I have an aunt who said seeing mixed couples made her sick. I knew my grandma hired a woman to help clean her house twice a month whom she referred to as the *schvartze*.



“I asked myself, would I want to be his girlfriend if Harvey were Harry Belafonte? I was trying to be both diplomatic and positive, not necessarily sincere.”

As she went on, I tried to ignore my outrage, but it was out of control. The corners of my mouth were pulled down, my hands were spread palms-down on either side of my machine. I turned my head and faced her.

“What the *hell* did you say, girl?” I honestly couldn’t say whether my outburst had been in reaction to the reference to her aunt, or my impatience to know how Violet had dealt with this young man. I’m pretty sure she assumed it was the latter. I think it was both, mostly the former. I was hyperventilating. At that moment, I wanted to leave the room, to go home. I wanted to put on my coat and take a cab, not even wait for the bus. Just go home.

“What did you *say*, Violet?” I sounded like somebody’s mother, reprimanding, insistent, voice raised. I’m sure my facial expression said it all. She realized she had struck a nerve, a dissonant chord. My feelings were hurt and it was because of her choice, or was it thoughtlessness, to say those things to me. Didn’t she know I would be offended? I had become accustomed to her sensitivity, her manners. This blindsided me, irrelevant information, an unpleasant reminder. We never had a conversation of any depth about race before. I knew she wasn’t a racist, but I needed a moment to compose myself. She had been quoting others, not expressing her own ideas. But still....

Violet reached over and touched my hand, looking into my face as I reproached her. “I know people use that language and have twisted realities, think they’re so superior that everyone else is garbage compared to them. Like we’re not human. Like your aunt saw an animal....” I admit I was shaken by Violet’s mention of her aunt's racism. I can blame myself for asking the question and for encouraging her to be open with me. I’m sure her parents were innocent, just

ignorant, out of touch, not knowing that the polite word to use these days is *negro*, the preferred current word being *black*. But that disgusting aunt of Violet's, how hateful she must be! How vile, obnoxious! Enough, enough, no wonder I've developed high blood pressure. I took a deep breath.

Violet still had her hand on mine and apologized. "Let's not talk about that part of my upbringing now. It's my problem and I'll deal with it." I think we were both on the verge of tears.

After calming myself, I forgave Violet and lit a cigarette. Then I urged her to go on with the story about Harvey and how it resolved. She adjusted her paperwork and continued. "I stopped dead in my tracks and looked him in the eye. 'I already have a boyfriend.' I said, and I quick looked down again."

I looked at Violet, half-expecting to see a smug expression on her face, as if to say *look how brilliantly I handled that*. But no, there was no sign of that. She had stumbled on a solution, a fib, that had the potential of dodging the bullet while keeping a friend. Yes, it was a lie, but it was a small one, devoid of guile. We looked at each other for a minute. "I don't know where the words came from, honest to god, Lois. It just seemed like the only thing I *could* say."

"You really are a piece of work, kiddo." I gave her a lop-sided smile and shook my head. I felt like my old self with that weight off my chest. "What did Harvey do? What did he say? And, oh yes, and when the hell are you going to tell me how you got this damn job?"

"Patience, my dear Lois. Okay. So he may have stuck out his lower lip just a fraction, just the beginning of a tiny pout, and looked at something invisible over my shoulder. Then he put his hands in his pockets and we both looked straight ahead and walked. He never mentioned it again."

“Did he ever come by after that?”

“Oh yes, and boy was I relieved to see him, let me tell you! So now do you want to know how I got this job?”

“Mm-hm.” I opened a file in case Miss F came in.

“Before I started here, I worked temp jobs just often enough and short enough to pay my rent. I came home from a job one day and there was Harvey, waiting for me. We walked over to the campus cafeteria for supper. I used to eat there a lot. It’s cheap! I was complaining about the stupid job I’d been sent on. The office had been too hot and the people were stuck-up. I had to take three buses just to get there. Harvey looked at me across the table, almost like he was worried or annoyed. I thought he might tell me to quit whining, but he didn’t. He said ‘I know someone high up in in the University Personnel Department. I can put in a word for you and get you a job if you want. You'd still be typing, but you could walk to work.’ He was giving me a list of advantages, and kind of, I don't know, kind of encouraging me. Honestly, I wasn't sure he was serious. This had come from out of the blue, completely devoid of expectations of anything in return.”

“I don't know, Violet. Sounds to me a little like he was trying to wiggle his way around the boyfriend issue. Was he?”

“No. I'm sure he was cool with my position, he accepted it and it never came up again. Whether he believed that I, in fact, had a boyfriend is another question. We were friends. I told him I would think about the favor he offered me.

“So that night I made a decision. Going to work every day would be a big commitment. In spite of all my complaining about the temp work, it did give me some choices and a little freedom and a change of scenery. On the other hand, with a regular salary, I could fix up my

room, buy an electric window fan. And, I could take free classes. Deep down, I knew I could always go back to the temp agency if I washed out or hated it. The next time Harvey came by, I told him I would give the *straight* job a try. He asked me, 'Do you have any objection to pretending you're my girlfriend when you go for your interview? If I tell the lady there that we're a couple, you'll get the job for sure. She's really into mixed couples. Her husband is white.'

"What could it hurt? 'Of course I have no objection,' I told him."

"How did that go down?"

Violet leaned back and took a breath. She closed her eyes and said, "I can see myself right now walking with Harvey into the admin building. He held my hand for the first and last time going into the personnel office. With his free hand he greeted his friend behind the desk. She nodded at us. I was in.

"After he walked me there, he said 'Good luck!' and winked, then walked away."

"What a guy, that Harvey! I'd like to meet him. He did you a solid. I bet he's proud of you, Vi. You're a success, you handled yourself with exceptionally nuanced poise, finesse, *savoir faire*, and massively remarkable wisdom, my dear. Does he still come by?"

"Yes, but not as often as he used to. He's more likely to show up in good weather or on the weekends. I think he has a girlfriend."

I thought, *you know, if I had a daughter, I'd want to invite Harvey to dinner.*

I asked, "If you had it to do over, would you still go for the straight job?"

"In a heart-beat. *All my life* I've wanted to be a flex-o-writer operator."

It was five o'clock. We covered our machines, put on our coats and left the building, still smiling. Violet was becoming quite a woman. She'll move on from here when there's a good reason.

On my way home, I thought about Violet and our dialogue in the office, and how she responded to my flare-up. I think the child learned a couple of things that day. I thought about how she came to be my co-worker and the idea that the university atmosphere might be a harbinger of improvements for all of us, of long-standing senseless fences wearing down, one way or another. I was hopeful.

I remember asking myself then: How would I feel if Stuart brought home a white girl? I thought, *it would depend on the girl.*

Maybe Violet wasn't the only one who learned something that day.

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## Growing Pains

*Thursday, June 5, 1952*

*Dear Diary: I am soooooo excited. I won the Jello contest, the one where I wrote the five major reasons why Jello is my favorite dessert. Now all I have to do is convince Mommy to convince Daddy to get train tickets to Yellowstone National Park so we can stay free of charge at the Dew Drop Inn next to the park. Wish me luck!*

*Yours truly,*

*Francine Ruth Kransky (AKA Franny).*

A couple of years ago, when I was almost ten, I entered the Jello contest and, to my astonishment, my entry won first prize, a family trip to Yellowstone National Park. The hitch: it did not include travel expenses, only lodging and accommodations.

Neither of my parents was available for such a trip. They told me it was because of my father's job and because my mother always has to take care of my father. Conveniently, my aunt and uncle wanted to take a vacation with their son Randy who was one year my senior, about eleven. They generously offered to take care of the train costs and take my parents' place so we could stay for free at the Dew Drop Inn near the Park. My overly protective parents consented immediately. I was so surprised.

The train was streamlined and silver, shaped like a bullet. It was called *The Mercury*. Uncle Joe was always looking for a deal and had wrangled me a free ticket. It was good for kids *under* ten traveling with an adult. At the time, I was actually exactly ten years, three months, and seventeen days old. On the two-day train ride, I was allowed to talk to strangers. In fact my aunt and uncle encouraged it.

"How old are you, Dear?" Age seemed to be a popular topic with grown-ups.

“Ten, I mean nine. I mean I’m almost ten. I’m not ten yet, but I will be soon.”

“Is that so? When is your birthday, dear?”

*Let’s see. It’s August now. Next is September and then October.* “October first. That’s when I will be ten.”

“Oh. And what grade will you be in when school starts again?” I will never know why grown-ups care so much about what grade someone is in. I’d really be going into sixth grade and Randy was going into seventh, but I’m much smarter than he is in so many ways. I felt like mentioning this fact to the lady who was asking all the questions, but my mother told me that if I had nothing nice to say about a person, I should say nothing. She also told me not to talk about anyone behind their back. If I remember, when I grow up, I’m gonna tell Randy off big time.

“I’m going into sixth, I mean fifth grade.”

“My, you’re such a bright girl, especially for only nine years old.” I felt guilty. But I loved the train ride and couldn’t imagine the Dew Drop Inn being half as great.

Dark fuzz had grown on my cousin Randy’s top lip. No way he could have passed for nine. On the trip, he acted more like a teenager than a regular kid. In fact, he pretended not to know us most the time. His main activity was combing his hair and inventing new ways to check whether his fly was zipped. My uncle seemed proud of Randy’s attitude, taking it as sign his son was entering manhood. My aunt was used to it.

At the Dew Drop Inn, Uncle Joe borrowed fly-fishing gear for Randy and me. We caught a lift to a stream inside the Park about twenty minutes away. Randy refused to put on the waders and sauntered off trying to keep the shine on his new cowboy boots and checking his fly. I was gung-ho about wading and trying to catch fish. A guy at the inn told us that you could sometimes stand on the bank and spot trout in the water.

Uncle Joe was up on the bank scouting trout while I was up to my knees in the middle of the stream. Suddenly, he shouted at me: “Francine, get out of the water NOW!” He sounded very angry about something. If he wasn’t angry, he would have called me Franny, as usual. I thought he really meant business, so I obeyed as best I could, navigating the moving water and rocky stream bed in rubber waders and felt-bottom boots while toting an eight-foot rod and fishline with a hook dangling off the end. After Uncle Joe helped me climb onto the bank, he told me to turn around. “Look behind you.”

A single-file herd of buffalo was in the process of parading down the stream. One by one, they waded into and through the exact spot where I had been, seeming to know exactly where they were going. We watched them make their way downstream and, eventually, we saw one buffalo after the other climb out of the water, roll on its back in the dusty dirt, get to its hooves and mosey off. No wonder the trail from the road was named *Buffalo Ford!* Randy was laughing his ass off. It was a little creepy, but once the buffalo were out of sight, I got back into the stream. It didn’t matter that the trout weren’t biting. We wouldn’t have known how to land one anyway. The wading was wonderful and I couldn’t imagine anything better.

The inn was run by Ma Thompson and she was also the cook. She commented insensitively on my freckles and chubbiness. Humiliated, I declined when she offered to serve me low calorie meals. I perked up though when she announced there would be an after-dinner contest. I won, again. This was getting too easy, but I should mention this contest required zero effort on my part. Ma invited the kid guests to stand in a line. Randy refused. That left three tow-headed pre-schoolers and me. It was a Howdy Doody look-alike contest! When I heard the prize was a pony ride, I was disappointed.



I had fallen in love with wading. However, being a sport, the next morning I allowed myself to be escorted by a guide to the stable where I was introduced to my ride.

Her name was Tinkerbelle. She was very tall for a pony. In fact, *pony* was a misnomer. She was more likely a plow horse. I was hoisted up, way up, to reach the saddle horn, and then I gamely swung my leg over her wide back. The guide showed me how to use the reins and stirrups, and we were off. After what seemed like hours of unrelenting torture, the guide decided a rest might be a good idea. Apparently, I was on the verge of sunstroke and looked ill. He helped me down, handed me the reins, and told me to take Tinkerbelle to the stream next to the trail and let her drink. I was careful to walk on her left side as instructed, but Tink was kind of a klutz and managed to step on my foot. Later, Ma put a band-aid on it and said I was a budding horsewoman. I couldn't walk without pain for about a week and it wasn't because of my foot or the sunburn. Randy laughed his ass off, again.

On the train ride back, Randy got in trouble for playing with his jack knife after he had promised to keep it in his pocket. He got yelled at. Uncle Joe threatened to put him off the train. It was kind of embarrassing, so whenever I could, I pretended I wasn't with them. The passengers on the return trip were even nicer than the ones before. One lady even gave me some of her dry sherry in a paper cup from the water fountain.

Back home again my mother asked me, "Did you have a good time?"

"Yes," I answered.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

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## The War Against the War

We picketed against the Reserve Officer Training Corps when its ranks were on maneuvers on the Long Beach State College football field. The majority of the smartly uniformed aspiring soldiers were still in their teens. It was 1968 and I was a faculty wife. Joe, my husband at the time, was an associate professor. His male students were being drafted for the bloodbath in Vietnam. I knew jack-shit about wars. All I knew was that I hated them, the greed and bad judgment of the powerful causing death. What could be good about that from either side?

Joe saw the war as a call to arms—not to join the fighting, but to fight against it. When his teaching career began, Joe was twenty-five, a poet, a medievalist, the ink on his master's degree not yet dry. He went to the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago to protest the war in Vietnam and joined an anti-war demonstration. The National Guard was called in to shut down that demo—not because of unruly demonstrators, but in response to the local police using *unrestrained violence against* the protesters. That's what eye-witnesses and journalists called it. *Unrestrained violence by the cops*. Newspaper photos show clubbed victims lying bloody in the street, uniformed police officers with clubs raised wearing protective head gear. An official federal report describes the violence as a "police riot."

Joe came back a political radical. He saw the war as a fascist plot to enslave the impoverished. The government was using its power to make instruments of violence out of young men who couldn't escape its clutches, the poor kids, the black kids, the ones who gullibly believed they would have a better chance at success when they came home, *if they came home*. Some of them were not yet of an age to vote until that irony was ironed out in 1971. The anti-war

movement had its own armies, its own slogans and ethics. Joe became his own version of a revolutionary, obsessed.

I was newly separated with a toddler son in 1971, living in San Francisco without family and with few friends, most of whom were also single moms. The record-breaking heat wave and prevailing politics aside, I had reasons to be depressed.

I would cover my eyes and peek through my fingers at the coverage of the war on TV, until one day I witnessed the most despicable, real, horrendously vivid act I had ever seen. I count myself lucky and privileged that the scene emanated from the TV, and that I did not view it in person. Revealed on the screen was a film clip focused through the sight of a rifle in the hands of a G.I. The rifle was trained on a Vietnamese person. As I looked through the sight, the G.I. fired. I, along with thousands of other viewers, saw the victim shot, his body cave in and fall to the ground. I saw him die.

It was a virtual murder and an actual murder. A killing I believed and still believe was wrong. I felt that I had pulled the trigger and shot and killed a fellow human, a stranger. Whether the victim had been a spy, a civilian, or “the enemy” didn’t matter. The blood, metaphoric as it was, remained on my hands. This killing was being done in my name. I had a vote and used it in favor of a pro-peace presidential candidate. My vote counted, right? My candidate lost, but it was a fair fight, democratic, right? Richard Nixon had been elected. I was powerless to correct these real life repugnant events. It was a nightmare and I wanted to wake up.

My low spirits fell even lower. The Vietnam War seemed endless, but at least there was an ongoing national debate about its validity. Gradually, I became aware of a strengthened resistance to the pro-war line held by the “hawks,” with more out-spoken media coverage of the pro-peace “dove” point of view in print and on the air. Many TV celebrities and movie stars

became critics of the war and were vocal and visible at rallies. This progressive change in public perception made an impression on me. I could see a shift for the better. My friends and I, with our kids in strollers, demonstrated for “Peace Now.”

In that time most older people, including our own parents, were more conservative than we are now and were loath to speak out against the president. They felt ill-equipped to decipher their leaders’ goals and strategies, confident their official actions were done for the benefit of the nation. It was chiefly the younger people who turned the tide, persuaded so many others, politicians and parents, news broadcasters and veterans, that to continue the carnage was unwise and making a catastrophe out of the original questionable investment.

Many Americans came to agree that the lack of value placed on human life was shameful, although many of the “hawks” were swayed more by the ongoing, obscene amount of money being spent by the military. *Let not our dollars have been spent in vain.* The “doves” ultimately won out and the war ended.

Having lived through that era, I find it appalling that some people still hold the paradoxical belief that killing is an effective way to make peace.

The boy behind the gun, the actual shooter in the televised news clip, what was he thinking or feeling at the moment when the bullet left his rifle and hit its mark? Was he heartbroken? Was he thinking, *Scored one for the team?* Was he sad, angry, proud, numb, distraught, in his element or a fish out of water? Did he throw up? Or did he cheer? And, I wonder, did he make it home? And, if he was a draftee, does he regret not opting for a prison sentence?

If that boy did make it home, how did the war affect his view of the world? His personal life? And what does he make of the fifty years that have followed when bullies continued and still continue to make war?

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### The Other Myth of Venice

“Why would you go to Venice? I heard they still have a ghetto there.” What was the draw, my mother wanted know. “Why not go somewhere to get in touch with your roots, like Israel or even try for Belarus or Lithuania or whatever the Soviets are calling themselves now.” She had heard contemporary Venice compared to Disneyland and had once seen a performance of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. To her, Venice was a tourist trap and a hotbed of anti-semitism. She didn’t know that Venice had five synagogues for its seven hundred Jewish residents. And while my mother’s primary travel interests were Jewish museums, synagogues, and shopping, mine were art museums, strolling the neighborhoods, and shopping. My draw to Venice, the purpose of the trip, was to get lost there in an academic way, to submerge myself in research. I was beginning my Ph.D. thesis on the migration of Jews in the fifteenth century. I hadn’t decided yet whether to focus on their expulsion from Spain during the Inquisition, or from Poland after the crowning of an intolerant king. I had learned that thousands of Jews found their way to Venice during that era. The topic just felt right.

There was a fact about Venice that neither my mother nor I were aware of, a more personal one. My mother’s father, Marcus Levi, about whom no one spoke, was from an Italian-Greek family and had emigrated from Venice. All I knew about him at the time was that he had chosen my mother’s name, *Selene*, in honor of the moon, then died in New York in 1918 of influenza just a month before her birth. Selene’s mother, my grandmother, never remarried and she wore black the rest of her life.

Truth be told, Selene is a bit loony. She’s big-hearted to a fault, but narrow-minded on some subjects. She’s a religious chauvinist, and has been accused more than once of being prejudiced. Her self-promotion has been key to her success as a businesswoman. She’s my

mother and I love her, but at certain times, I wish she would just keep her big mouth shut! I'm forty-two years old. Why does she think I would welcome her views on Venice? At least, on the bright side, she didn't invite herself on the trip!

\*

My name is Stella Hersch. My mother, Selene Levi Hersch, often told me that if I had a twin sister, she would be named Luna. Ever since, if I look at the moon too long, I think of my sister who never existed. I get a sentimental ache missing something I never had, like a happy childhood, or a gene for organizational skills. At times, I suspect I had a twin who didn't survive birth. And when I become morbid I try to direct my gaze elsewhere.

Preparing for my stay in Venice had been difficult, money was tight for me in the eighties. The accommodations and other practicalities had been a challenge. Once the plane took off, I felt relieved. I found it restful, an uncommon sensation on a red-eye, trans-Atlantic economy flight. I dozed off reading the poems of Veronica Franco and had a dream that took me to the golden age of Venice. A courtesan and a Jewish girl stood on a balcony watching the Marriage of the Sea ceremony.

"Are you staying in Venice, dear?" The woman in the seat next to me was my mother's age and had an Italian accent. By the time we landed, I had learned her name was Beatrice Levi, that her family had lived in Venice for at least four hundred years, and she was the wife of a rabbi. I also had a dinner invitation to her home the following Sunday. The fact that Beatrice's married name was the same as my mother's maiden name didn't register with me until much later. Even then, I dismissed it as a coincidence. The surname Levi, honoring the grandfather of Moses and Aaron in the Old Testament, has had vast popularity for thousands of years, especially among Jews.

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The hotel I booked was in a quiet alley not far from a canal, but then nothing in Venice is far from a canal. My fourth-floor walk-up had two windows side-by-side that looked into an apartment across the alley with a bit of sky bordering the top and side edges. The morning sun brightened the otherwise drab room. The bed was comfortable and the writing desk and chair were serviceable. The bathroom floor had a drain in the center and an unenclosed shower head affixed to the tiled ceiling made the entire room a shower with a sink and toilet. Everything that was supposed to work, worked. I was paid up for thirty days.

I fell into bed and slept, then slept some more, a dreamless sleep that lasted around the clock. It was noon when I awoke famished. I quickly showered, dressed, grabbed my briefcase and hit the pavement. The unmistakable redolence of pizza and grilled *melanzana* hit me immediately. I followed the scent and ate my fill, then set off for the library.

I never imagined a library could be a palace for books, an edifice as ornate as any museum or opera house. Its grandeur was breath-taking. Entering into the Biblioteca Marciana, I felt absolutely royal. Eventually, I settled in and learned when lint-free white gloves were required and who was the most knowledgeable librarian. I was amazed at the breadth of the collection. I found the library itself fascinating, distractingly so, and Jewish migration of the fifteenth century aside, I let myself be drawn away and researched the launch of the library. I thought of it as preparation, finding the doorway into my topic. I learned that the harmony of the building within its setting was absolutely intentional, and that congruity was a central component of not only Venetian Renaissance design, but Venetian society and government. Perhaps it was their sense of harmony that encouraged a certain level of tolerance and appreciation of Jews. Venetians businessmen used Jewish money-lending to their benefit. However, Venetian self-



importance required safeguarding the purity of the city by keeping the Jews in the ghetto, separated and *other*, attempting to prevent Jewish customs from becoming harmonized with their own.

The library's collection began in the thirteenth century, before construction of the Biblioteca, with a donation of ancient Greek manuscripts. Printing was a new technology when construction began in 1537, the press having been invented less than fifty years before. Jacopo Sansovino, the Biblioteca's designer, and his successor, were sculptors as well as architects, which accounts for the many friezes and sculptures on the exterior. I saw for myself the astonishingly rich interior. The ceilings alone would dazzle anyone contemplating them. Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese each had his fine Italian hand in the painting of them.

The image and reputation of Venice must have become all the more glorified with the addition of the Biblioteca. The idea and the funds to build such a magnificent monument to reading, learning, disseminating information, for housing its collections of poetry and pious tomes reflected the brilliance, beauty, piety and harmony of the self-christened "La Serenissima." The university in Padua may have had a library to train lawyers and theologians; Venice had a library housing a unique collection of material meant not only for lawyers and theologians, but for all classes of readers, the pious as well as the profane. I have found since that those readers would not have included the women of the patrician class, those ornamental, illiterate vessels of purity. Courtesans, on the other hand, were permitted to be educated.

I drifted off while thinking about life in Venice when the Biblioteca was built—the Venetian economic success, their form of government that had flourished at that point for hundreds of years, their victories and annexations making the Republic of Venice worthy of praise, respect, and, to some, suspicion and jealousy.

My work was progressing, but at a snail's pace. I was finding so much peripheral information, peripheral, but fascinating. I even considered for five minutes changing my thesis topic. I realized how little I knew or retained of Medieval and Renaissance history, of the size and power of the various empires on either side of the Adriatic Sea. Venice seems like a small private world now, supported mainly by tourists keen to view works of art and attend festivals and celebrations, when in fact, up to a mere four hundred years ago, the Republic of Venice was rich and powerful, the ruler of the sea. Venetians considered themselves the chosen, their city had the blessings of St. Mark and God.

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Sunday was the day of the dinner invitation I received from Beatrice, my neighbor on the flight from New York. I set off for her house via water taxi. It took less than ten minutes, but when we arrived I was certain I had the wrong address. The lavish house, with its frieze and sculptures surrounding the entryway, was built on the edge of the canal with stone steps leading to the massive front door. There was a *mezuzah* on the door frame and a name plaque above the knocker reading "Levi."

A girl of about twelve, Beatrice's granddaughter, led me up to the second floor. Beatrice introduced me to her husband, Rabbi Simone Levi. A son, two daughters, and their spouses were seated in the front room, enjoying aperitifs. The son stood and poured me a glass of Prosecco. They were all welcoming, genial. Our light conversation was in Italian and English, somewhat disjointed, but effective.

The room was large by any standard. There were four floor-to-ceiling windows that opened onto balconies overlooking the canal. Several heirloom Turkish rugs covered the interior floors, smaller ones hung decoratively on the balcony railings. A few paintings were on display

in gold leaf frames. As the sun set, its reflection on the rise and fall of the water in the canal cast light and shadow on the faces of the family. The lower the sun set, the more pronounced the chiaroscuro effect on the gathering. When the conversation lulled briefly, I silently compared the light and dark, the contrast accentuating the beauty, to Venice itself, its balance, elegance, the darkness of the water at night reflecting the brightness of the stars. This place spoke to me.

Dinner was served in a formal dining room by a uniformed maid, after which we adjourned to the front room where we were served coffee and biscotti. Steadily moving moonstruck ripples from the canal cast shifting light onto the ornate rugs in the middle of the floor and occasionally across the glass-covered paintings and the dark colored walls behind them. The maid returned with a tray of digestifs. The son served.

“Do you know what brought your family to Venice?” I thought I might gain some insight into my thesis topic. I hoped no one would mind my taking the opportunity.

Beatrice spoke up. “Simone’s family and mine had been friends forever, it seems. I can’t be certain when they immigrated. I’ve heard stories handed down that their arrival may have pre-dated the ghetto. All I know for sure is that our family helped build our synagogue, that was in 1575. I’ve read that in the 1400 and 1500s Jews were driven out of various places and that Venice was known for tolerance of outsiders. Its stability as a wealthy maritime business center was famous. And there were opportunities here as money lenders, if nothing else. My own father and grandfather were doctors. Whether that was a tradition or not, I don’t know. I guess our families were seeking better circumstances and safety from persecution, like the others.”

“Can you tell me anything of your family’s history once they arrived here?” I asked of the room.

Without missing a beat, the son spoke: “Yes—but then we’ll have to kill you!” When the laughter faded, Beatrice again responded as the matriarch.

“Oh yes, we love this story. Or maybe you’d call it family lore or legend. I’m glad you’re interested.” She made eye contact with me, making sure her assumption was correct.

“As the family story goes, Simone’s relative, Maria ben Levi, wanted to learn to read. I’m using the first name plus *ben* plus the father’s name, as our parents did when they repeated this story to us. I understand Jews at that time didn’t use surnames. Also they didn’t educate their daughters, only their sons. So Maria asked Bella, a highly regarded, privileged courtesan, to teach her to read and the courtesan complied. It had to be sometime in the fifteen hundreds because Tintoretto, again according to legend, was painting the courtesan’s portrait. Maria and Bella met frequently and they became friends.

“Maria was engaged to Giuseppi ben Abraham. Her father was doing his best to raise a dowry for her, his only child. He was having difficulties so he went to his rabbi for advice, asking how to avoid the required dowry. Then he came to Giuseppi with a proposal: ‘I, Joachim ben Levi, promise that you will have all my earthly goods on my death, including my money-lending business, if you will henceforth from your marriage to my daughter claim the name Levi to be your own, Giuseppi ben Levi. I will look to you as my son who will carry my family name. This I offer you freely along with the pitifully small dowry I’ve raised.’

“Giuseppi had six brothers of whom he was the youngest. He already had a dozen nephews who would carry his family name. He and Maria had loved each other since they were very young. And so, he agreed. Maria was more important to him than her father’s money or lack of it.”

I couldn't help but interrupt. "Wouldn't all the daughter's inheritance go to her husband anyway? Were women permitted to have property? In fact, were Jews permitted to have property then?"

"Who knows?" Beatrice shrugged her shoulders. "Like I mentioned, this is how the legend was passed down. Maybe the offer was a symbolic gesture" She smiled slightly. She seemed pleased I was paying attention and continued.

"An April wedding date was planned, after the Feast of the Annunciation. However, the wedding was postponed. It seems Giuseppi was hired to sail with an *ad hoc* crew headed to pick up passengers at a nearby port and then bring them to Venice for the Festa della Sensa, the celebration of the marriage of Venice to the Sea, which takes place in May. He couldn't refuse because the regular crew was needed at home to prepare for the celebration, and he needed the money. He was told it wouldn't take long, but the weather turned bad and, by the time he returned, Maria showed signs of pregnancy.

"Maria's first reaction to her condition was one of joy. And then the truth showed itself. She would be shunned by her community. Her child would suffer. Her family would be shamed. Don't forget, this was around fifteen hundred-something. Maria went to her friend, Bella, the courtesan, for advice. She accepted it and followed it in every detail.

"Maria and Giuseppi married the day he returned from sea and lived in her parents' home. Maria stayed inside while she was pregnant and, after her son was born in late December, she kept him out of public view. Many houses, even the one we're in now, have walled roof gardens, so it is possible to stay off the street without being caged.

“When he was two-years old she brought the boy, whom she had named Cristoforo, to Bella, who kept him as her own. She treated him like a prince. He wanted for nothing. We believe she even had a portrait painted of herself holding the child.

“Maria visited often. When Cristoforo was five years old, Bella returned him to his true mother. He received the education appropriate for a Jewish boy and, as an adult he became a teacher and a leader among the congregation of his synagogue.

“Maria and Giuseppe had many other children, all Levi’s. When she was asked about Cristoforo’s birth, Maria would try to avoid a direct answer. Sometimes she said he came from heaven, or he came from God. She was extremely proud of him, yet concerned for his reputation. When pressed, she would say she adopted him from the courtesan, who had accepted him from a fallen Jewish woman whose father had been unable to amass a dowry.

“So what’s the truth? We really don’t know, but we like to think that Simone’s ancestor’s actions were just. We know the family was blessed with good fortune. They survived and ultimately established a successful insurance firm for seafaring merchants. It’s been updated to include all forms of shipping and still exists.”

As Beatrice told the story, her granddaughter sat on the floor with her face pressed against her grandmother’s knee, looking up at her. Beatrice luxuriated in the acknowledgment and attention she was given by her family, although her narrative had been directed to me. She took a long sip of her Martini & Rossi, deftly avoiding the orange peel, while searching my face for any reaction. I sighed, doing my best to express admiration, at least for the telling of the tale.

“Well, how interesting! You’re so fortunate to have such an early family record!” I hoped my pause hadn’t been too long.

One of the daughters, clearly amazed, asked “Do you think it might really have happened?”

“I shouldn’t have said ‘record.’ First of all, it wasn’t written and, secondly, I know of no way to prove it one way or the other. But it certainly is legendary, like a folk tale that repeats itself now and then, here and there.”

“But, what do you *think* as a person who’s studying the migration of the Jews, and, obviously, their role in Venetian history? Is it plausible?” Now Beatrice wanted my opinion.

I didn’t want to say “no” flat out or just shrug my shoulders. That was not the response she was looking for and it probably would have upset her. It had not gone unnoticed that the names of the couple in the story mirrored those of Mary and Joseph of the New Testament. My own ambivalence, wanting to believe the story while intellectually rejecting it, heightened the care I took in responding.

“They say every legend or fable has some truth in it, whether it’s a grain of truth or true for the most part but unverifiable. In this case, I think what matters most is that the legend lives on, that your children and their children repeat the story often. No harm can come from believing in it.” I silently reflected they might refer to it as a family “myth.”

Beatrice and her family seemed satisfied with having learned nothing they didn’t already know. The conversation shifted to the events scheduled at their scuola, their synagogue’s school and social hall, to coincide with the coming Biennale Arte, and then to questions about Venice, California. Eventually, the men began conversing among themselves, as did the women. Beatrice told me she had been in New York visiting a younger son who was in medical school. She was hoping he would come back to Venice to practice, but it was unlikely, she told me with a sad look fanning out from her eyes.

Thea, Beatrice's elder daughter, was my age and recently married for the first time. She had studied architecture at the University of Padua and was working freelance. As we talked, we found common territory. When I was saying my good-byes, Thea gave me her number and suggested we meet for coffee. Beatrice asked if I would like to visit the scuola with her later in the week. All was going well—new friends, a prospective network, an entertaining evening.

As Thea and I were saying good night, I noticed a birthmark the size of a penny on the outside of her lower right arm, much like the one on my right arm and exactly in the same place. I showed her my arm and told her that my mother had the same mark. Thea told me Beatrice had one too, and they jokingly called it “the mark of vecchio,” In English, “the mark of old.”

I couldn't wait to call Selene to ask if her mother or father had the same mark. I never remembered asking her about it before. I always assumed it was just something passed down like green eyes or red hair.

Now I'm beginning to wonder about many things. I have a lot of questions to ask. In Venice I may have found a root of the tree of my life.

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### **Maggie's Ride**

Maggie was pregnant again. Her son Ian was three years old and in the Valley Co-op Nursery School. Her older boy, Dan Jr., was in first grade at Saint Joseph's. Her husband was a man who didn't believe in sin, but neither did he believe in abortion, or any birth-control for that matter.

Maggie and Dan Sr. had a row. He had been talking for weeks about moving back to Ireland. Now, Dan was insisting that they move back right away. They had moved to San Francisco when Maggie was pregnant with Dan Jr., partly to get away from the physical dangers they faced in Ireland, but mainly as an experiment, an adventure. At the time, they both wanted to be free of The Troubles, the violence between the Nationalists and the Unionists in Ireland, but also they were both free-spirited and wanted to raise their family in a place that had more to offer. They lived in a rented house in a predominantly Irish neighborhood, but unlike their native Irish county, it was heavily mixed with Italians, Chicanos, and Jews, with a few Asians and Blacks. Dan was a welder, confident he could get a job anywhere. Maggie had been a practical nurse before Ian was born. Supposedly, she would earn her degree once Ian was in grade school.

Yes, Dan admitted, the danger was still present in Ireland, but they were turning their backs on their country. "If every man uprooted his family in the face of danger, there would be no one left to defend Ireland." He felt guilty leaving his father and younger brother at "home." After six years, Dan still considered Ireland his home, having grown up there in the Roman Catholic Church and having allegiances to the Nationalists. Dan's older siblings and their families had remained and there had been almost no communication from them since he and Maggie left for San Francisco.

Maggie had the nursing school enrollment forms for San Francisco State. Having another child at this point meant she would be postponing her studies another six, maybe even seven years. She didn't tell Dan she was pregnant; she wanted some time to think. She knew she could never change his mind about going home. "What about what I want?" she asked. They both knew the question was rhetorical because, in their world, the one in which they were both raised, a woman was expected to be bound by the man's decision. He wore the trousers.

What Maggie could not, would not, tolerate was to be removed from the new home she had made in San Francisco *and* having her own pursuits pushed years further away by giving birth to a third child. She was resolved. She would not be robbed of her new home *and* a realistic chance of a future career. Clearly, she could not prevent the former, but she could do something about the latter.

She had made some friends through the boys' schools. There were some couples who socialized together, Dan and Maggie among them. Maggie needed a confidant, she needed a friend, and she needed a ride to and from the Planned Parenthood Clinic where she had decided to end her pregnancy. She was a nurse, if not a graduate of nursing school. She could say the words: "I want to have an abortion."

Those were Maggie's words to Lee, another parent at the Valley Co-op Nursery School. She didn't know Lee well, just to coordinate projects together for the children. She knew enough. Lee was not Catholic and, unlike the couples she socialized with, had no connection with Dan. Maggie also knew Lee was a feminist, consistently insisting the children be given equal choices of toys and activities, encouraged to respect and include each other, to let them role-play however they wanted.

“It has to be while my boys are in school. I made an appointment for 9 a.m. They said I would be out in ninety minutes. Will you please drive me there and take me home. Alice’s mom will bring Ian to her house after nursery school when she picks up Alice and then pick up Danny when she gets her son. Then she’ll bring them to me. She’s my neighbor and we’ve picked each other’s kids up before. She won’t have to know. I’ll be fine by then. I’ll tell Dan I have cramps. He’s used to it.”

“You sound like you know what you’re doing. You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’ve thought about it. I would do it regardless of the battle with Dan about moving back. My future would be the same as my present, I’d just be older and with one more baby. I want more from life. I don’t think I’m being selfish.”

“Who said anything about being selfish? You’re entitled to your own life. I will drive you and wait and then drive you home, if that’s what you want.”

On the morning of the abortion, Maggie, fair-skinned naturally, was extra pale. Her brown wavy hair blew in the wind, her pea coat and scarf wrapped tight against the chill air. She walked around the corner resolutely where Lee was waiting in the car. They had both dropped their children off and now they took off for the abortion appointment.

About an hour after Maggie and Lee arrived, a medical assistant came into the waiting room. She approached the only man in the room and said, “Your wife is ready to leave now. Everything went fine.”

Lee made eye contact with her and said, “Thanks but I’m not her husband. I’m her ride.”

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### **Fire at the Jail**

The bus roared down the steep driveway narrowly missing a ditch. The driver raced from the fire that was raging and consuming the Valley County Jail. The back of the bus was hot and some of the twenty prisoner passengers thought it might explode. Loading had been done under extremely urgent conditions and the inmates were not shackled. “Goddammit.” One of the prisoners had grabbed onto the metal bar facing his seat to steady himself and burned his hand.

The Fire Department had been called, but their arrival time couldn’t be predicted. There was another fire burning in a residential area some distance to the west of the jail. The roads between the jail and the freeway had some hairpin turns.

Protocol required the driver to deliver the prisoners to Collins State Prison. The prisoners knew this and their anxiety was intensified by the fact that Collins housed the state’s most vicious criminals. Most of the prisoners on the bus were petty thieves, drunk drivers, or minor drug offenders.

After twenty minutes of white-knuckle navigating, the driver approached the road to the freeway. A sheriff’s radio car was parked on the shoulder across on the westbound side. The deputy waved him to pull over and then walked up to the bus. He ordered the driver: “Let me see your ID.”

The driver showed his badge while explaining. “We have a real bad fire up at the jail. We need some help. There might be possible people still inside.” He was stuttering, nervous, making an effort to keep calm.

“Where were you headed with these prisoners?”

“I was about to get on the freeway, over to the jail at the courthouse in St. Rose, get ‘em at least some distance from the fire. If they couldn’t take ‘em, I’d have to drive ‘em all the way down to Collins. I’m real glad to run into you. Can you radio ahead for me, mine’s busted.”

“It’s tough going on the freeway right now. It’s narrowed down to one lane in each direction. We’ve got a fast-spreading residential fire over northwest of here, not far, in Sunny Hills.” He pointed to a road a short distance from where he stood. “Our trucks will have to use that road for access. They’re coming now, about ten minutes away on the freeway. I’ll phone the Chief to see what he wants to do about your situation.”

It took the deputy less time to get his orders than it did for him to walk to his car and back to the bus. “He says your prisoners are going to assist our firefighters to contain the residential fire.” There was no one to approve or disapprove. The Sheriff and Fire Departments had apparently agreed it was a necessary measure. The inhabitants were being evacuated and help was urgently required. An elementary school was in danger.

The information streamed through the bus. The response was mixed. There had already been an element of panic, certainly heightened excitement, if for no other reason, the novelty of the situation. The news fanned the flames in some cases, and in others presented a measure of calm, purpose, relief. They spoke not so much to advise one another, but to record where they stood on the matter.

“I’ll do it if I can walk away afterwards.” The ultimatum was delivered by Inmate No.634588. His deep bass voice rumbled through the bus, followed by nervous laughter from some of the other inmates. The youngest at twenty years old, said “Of course, I’ll do what I can to save people.” Asking no one in particular, an erstwhile weight-lifter, wanted to know “Will they shave some time off my sentence?” Another inmate, who weighed hundred-and-twenty

pounds, tried to yell out to the driver. “Does this mean we won’t have to go to Collins? No problem.” A sweet-faced old-timer told his seat mate “I only have three days left. Let ‘em burn.”

The driver obeyed the fire chief’s order and drove the bus with its twenty passengers up the road toward Sunny Hills. He kept the heavily loaded bus close to the side of the hill, driving as rapidly as caution would allow, so as not to impede the firetrucks that would no doubt soon be climbing behind them. The bus tilted dangerously taking the turns up the winding road. The fire was on the upper back side of the hill and not yet visible from the prisoners’ vantage point. As they reached the apex of the rise, the driver slowed to a crawl.

“Hey! We’re safe now. Let’s get out of here” someone on the left side of the bus urged. One look from the window on the right side of the bus confirmed the danger of such a plan, the road’s steepness and narrowness presenting little opportunity for a safe descent from the bus. As the fire came into view, panic took over some of the men. As the imagined perception of the residential fire became a reality, some of the inmates were more vocal than others. “[panting] I don’t want to go there. Let me out.” “This is slavery. I’m going to sue their ass when I get out.”

The scene they approached looked bad, but not as bad as the fire at the jail. Some of the prisoners wondered why the warden hadn’t ordered them to help put out the fire at the jail. Of course, the answer was above everyone’s pay-grade. The driver parked the bus and ordered the men to stay put until the firefighter’s arrived and gave them instructions.

The only inmate who tried to escape while fighting the fire was No. 634588 of the rumbling bass ultimatum. His friend landed a sucker punch on this chin knocking him out. He did it for the guy’s own good the friend explained later. The weight-lifter refused to leave the bus unless he could be guaranteed a reward in exchange for his joining the firefighting effort. The bus became coated with ash. The weight-lifter could still be seen through the smoke-smear

windows, watching blank-faced from perceived safety as his peers risked their health, if not their lives.

After the fire was put under control, the inmates were taken to a minimum security jail and, with one exception, received a thirty-day kick for helping put out the Sunny Hills fire. The weight-lifter who had refused to leave the bus was denied any decrease in his sentence.

The old-timer who had three days left on his sentence was released, but he stuck around to complain. "Thanks for nothing." He wanted compensation for his work commensurate with the twenty-seven days of freedom he was already entitled to. The inmate on the receiving end of the sucker punch, deep-voiced No. 634588, filed a claim against the county alleging that he received an injury while in custody. The youngest prisoner is trying to have his record expunged so that he can apply to become a fire fighter.

The inmates had helped to save an assisted living home, an elementary school, a golf course, three hundred homes, several hundred acres of green space, and an unknown number of lives. An unattended campfire in the green space, probably started by transients, had been taken by the wind and was the probably source of the near-catastrophe.

The Valley County Jail burnt to the ground. The actual cause of the jail fire is still under investigation. No deaths were reported.

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### A Romantic Comedy

She had worked side-by-side with him for a year and, although they sized each other up and exchanged wisecracks regularly, they never socialized. Everyone at the factory ate lunch at the same time in the break room. They brought their own or bought from the food truck. The TV in the break room was always on, always tuned to the news station. That day the Republican candidate debate was on.

“Trump is a joke. He can’t possibly win.” Everyone agreed. Absolutely no one in the room believed he would even win the candidacy, much less the presidency.

Mr. Gregor came in. His driver waited in the Cadillac outside the front of the brewery building. He was the owner and usually came once a day to check on the brewers, and only occasionally visited the bottling and packaging facility on the ground floor. He let a lot of cold air in with him. He kept his top coat and fedora on, also his gloves. He smoked a cigar. “None of you think that clown can win? Don’t kid yourselves.” He had heard the remarks against Trump and looked in Stacey’s direction. “What do you want to bet Trump is elected president?”

Stacey looked down at her feet. She didn’t relish conversing with Mr. G and certainly didn’t want to bet with him. She also didn’t want to look like a wimp and willed herself to look up. He was still looking at her questioningly. He apparently attributed the overheard comments to her.

“I don’t have the money to make it worth your while to take your bet.” Her remark was intended to reflect her opinion of the meagerness of her salary as well as its literal truth.

Mr. Gregor got the humor and the truth in her remark. “Point taken, but let’s keep tabs on this and see how it goes.

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“Is that the new coat you’ve been talking about for weeks? Did you finally buy it?” Tom, her co-worker wanted to know. “Yeah, why?” Stacey wanted to know.

“It’s not what I expected. It’s too plain. You should have saved up longer and bought one with a fur collar. It’s kind of frumpy, too practical.”

“Well I’m so sorry you don’t like it. Tell you what. You don’t have to wear it. And, by the way, couldn’t you find any more nerdy shoes. But I have to say, they go with your nerdy glasses.”

Stacey started shutting down her station on the line. She had permission to leave an hour early Tuesdays and Thursdays to go to secretarial school. Tom left an hour early the other days to go to business school. He asked her, “So what will you do when you get your precious diploma?”

“I’ll get a secretarial job with double the salary I make now.”

“If you’re really *really* good, maybe I’ll hire you because that’s what I’m going to be when I get my diploma—*your boss!*”

And on it went, day after day, the digs, the jabs. It made the work less tedious somehow. But, then anything would make bottle-capping less tedious.

When Trump became a candidate, Mr. G seemed to be coming in the break room more regularly, just peeking in during the national campaign news, staying for five minutes tops. Even during the short stop he would single out Stacey. “Would you like to go out for a steak dinner, Ms. Kravansky?” His attention to her was always formal and public. Nothing in the content of his invitation standing alone would make a case for lascivious conduct. He didn’t peek in and invite her often enough to make it a case of harassment, though it made her nervous.

The World Series was over and the election was nearing. Surprising the world, Trump won the Republican candidacy. “Well, Ms. Kravansky, have you considered what we should bet on the outcome of the election?”

“I’m still thinking.” She imagined his aim was to get her in bed, that if Trump lost, he would give her money, and if he lost, he would expect her to go to bed with him. *Stacey Kravansky, what the hell is the matter with you. That’s prostitution. That’s lower than the lowest. On a scale of low to lowest, it beats out unprotected sex and working in a strip club and illegal abortion put together.* Her unshakable belief that Hilary Clinton would save the day kept her from freaking out.

As election day drew closer, Stacey came up with the plan, a bet she could live with: she would bet Mr. G that if Trump won, she would let him buy her a steak dinner. If Trump lost, that would be the end of it. Mr. G went for it in a big way. His eyes had a gleam in them Stacey did not like, but she put on a “big-girl” face and pretended she was cooler than she was.

Finally, it was over. The returns were complete and the unthinkable was proven real, or real enough to be believed by the masses. Stacey was stunned, mainly by the election results, with her bet, her promise, running a close second. Sure enough, Mr. G was at the factory at lunchtime that day. “I came to arrange to make good on our bet.”

The “arrangement” involved Stacey being picked up by Mr. G’s driver at the apartment she shared with two other girls. She would be driven to the Club Lupanar where she would order champagne, which he had squared with the management, and wait for him. He would show up at eight o’clock and they would order the steaks and whatever else she wanted.

Stacey told her roommates where she was going, but not with whom. They guessed it was someone married, why else the call for secrecy. The fact of Mr. G’s marital status was not the

worst of it in Stacey's mind. "Hey Stace, that's a pretty fancy place. Do you want to borrow my grey chiffon strapless?"

"No thanks, Roberta. I'll be fine." She chose a boat-neck sweater and billowing taffeta skirt. She looked her age, eighteen.

At the restaurant, she was shown to a small round table. The decor was all white and silver with deluxe linen. She remembered what Mr. G had said about ordering champagne, but decided not to. What if he didn't show up? She wouldn't be able to pay for it and, anyway, she would feel too self-conscious drinking it alone. Suddenly the maitre d' arrived. She became flustered and blushed. "Your escort is on his way. He asked that I give you this." He presented her with a corsage he had been holding behind his back, a red rose with ferns and white ribbons. After about five minutes of wondering what to do with the corsage and whether it was too late to beat it out of there and whether it would end her career as a beer bottle-capper had passed, a tall lanky figure in dinner clothes appeared at her table. He stood so close that Stacey had to crane her neck to look up at his face.

Tom was flustered and blushing. Stacey burst out laughing. "What are *you* doing here?"

"May I sit down?"

"I don't know. May you? I was expecting someone. By the way, do you come here often?"

"My uncle sent me. He won't be coming."

"Your uncle? What does he have to do with this?" Stacey was desperate that Tom not know that she planned to meet Mr. G. He would never stop teasing her and would think the worst of her. *I wish I were dead.*

“My uncle is Mr. G. He knows I’ve wanted to ask you out. He also knows I can’t afford to take you anywhere this nice. So I made him a bet. If Trump won, I would take you out instead of him and he would underwrite it. I can’t believe I bet on Trump. I figured I had nothing to lose. I really wanted to take you out, and have for a long time.”

Her smile was bigger than her corsage. “Do sit down,” she appealed to Tom, while looking into his eyes with her large round baby blues. The waiter appeared with an ice bucket and a chilled bottle of champagne. Tom and Stacey held hands under the table, trembling just a little. Tom looked handsome in his white dinner jacket. She almost wished she had taken Roberta up on the grey chiffon.

Suddenly, Stacey’s hand darted up to her mouth as she yelped. “Oh my god, Trump won. This is a disaster.”

“I know. Try to hold that thought at bay for an hour while we polish off the steaks we just ordered. I have a plan.”

Tom had his uncle’s chauffeur let them out a block away from their destination. He had refused to tell Stacey where they were headed, but she guessed. The local pub. They drowned their sorrows in beer and put away some memories for the years ahead.

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