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JOHN GARDNER FICTION CONTEST
FINALIST

LOVE THE SHAPE YOU'RE IN
Leah Freiwald

I'm in pretty good shape. Knock wood. I manage an hour of Wheelchair Aerobics, and I still see enough to draw pictures in the art room—nothing too complicated, something traced from a magazine, a cat, a girl on a swing, a bowl of fruit. According to Colette, the social worker on our floor, I function at a moderately active level.

My friend Irene hasn't been doing so hot. "Hang in there," I say.

"What for?"

Irene's depressed. The staff shrink put her on a strong antidepressant. It's also a strong diuretic; makes it difficult to sit through a movie. And it doesn't seem to lift her mood. Truth is, there's good reason to be depressed, if you let yourself give in to it. We're shut up here like a bunch of obsolete machines. What pill can make that go away?

Every day after breakfast the aides wheel us out and line us up along the wall opposite the nurses' station so they can keep an eye on us. Today I winked at the aide who was pushing me and said, "You'd better look sharp or we'll run off."

Irene smiled a little at that. She's fallen a couple of times. Last time they found her on the floor in her bathroom, bleeding from a gash on her leg. Two people had to lift her into bed. After that they strapped her in with a buzzer clipped to her sweater. If she tries to get up from the chair, the buzzer goes off. She doesn't try anymore.

I can get myself from bed to the walker and, if I'm very careful, in and out of the chair. I take my time. It wouldn't be fun to hit the floor; I'd probably crack my pelvis. But I believe you have to move it or lose it. Morning and afternoon I navigate the hall on

my walker. Making my rounds, I call it. When I pass her room, Betty always sings out, "How's life treating you today, Eleanor?" Her next door neighbor, Marie, can only nod and smile. Marie's on heavy-duty happy pills.

My first few weeks here I was angry. Uncooperative. It was like a prison; everything was regulated, every hour scheduled. Let me out of here, I screamed inside my head. I scowled. I declined to eat. The shrink sat down with me. "Eleanor," he said, "you're making this hard on yourself, on the nurses, on everyone. We're here to help you. We want what's best for you." What he considered best for me, should I be unable to adjust, was a tranquilizer. Right. Up the dose until I turn into a zombie, like Marie.

"I promise I'll make an effort to get along." We shook hands on it. And I do; I do my best. I participate in Current Events, where Colette reads from a newspaper and asks questions to see if we're alert, if dementia has rotted our brains. "Where is Iraq? Who is Michael Phelps? What is West Nile Virus?" That's one disease we're not likely to die from. There are no mosquitoes on the third floor. No dementia patients either; they have their own wing with soundproof walls.

Once a week they take us down to the atrium on the second floor. As many as four wheelchairs in an elevator. Volunteers serve tea or coffee—I prefer Oolong tea—and cookies. Sometimes a woman plays the piano, show tunes from *Oklahoma* and *The Sound of Music*. Irene's got macular degeneration. She doesn't see much, but she hears everything, and so far she remembers all the words to the songs.

In between activities, Irene and I have lots of time to talk. More often than not, though, the conversation is one-sided: I talk, she sits and broods. This morning Irene perked up and said, "What's the meaning of life?"

"You've heard that one already."

"Tell me again, Eleanor."

"OK, if that's what you want." I cleared my throat. "Once upon a time there was a man. He was determined to learn the meaning of life."

"That's the one." Irene settled back in her chair.

"This man went in search of a guru who knew the meaning of life. When he heard the guru was in Paraguay—"

"Brazil, Eleanor. He was in Brazil."

"Sorry, Irene. My mistake. When the man heard the guru was in Brazil, he followed his trail, and, when he came to the Amazon, he jumped in. Piranha gobbled up one arm."

"But he continued searching."

"That's right. He heard the guru was in Africa, and he hacked his way through the jungle, where a tiger ripped off a leg."

"They don't have tigers in Africa. It must have been a lion."

"Whatever you say, dear, a lion." I don't know why Irene is so fond of this story.

"Go on. Tell about what happened when he went to Tibet. That's the best part."

"OK." I paused to clear my throat again. "After a time the man heard the guru was at the top of a huge mountain in Tibet. He clawed his way up, ignoring frostbite on his last fingers and toes. When he reached the summit, he saw a cave, and inside the cave was the guru."

"And he said—"

"He said, 'Please, Mr. Guru, tell me the meaning of life.' He waited for the guru to speak."

"And the guru said—"

"If you know it by heart, Irene, what's the point?"

Just then the dietitian arrived with our supplemental nutrition drink. They make sure we get our daily amounts of trace minerals. It's highly sweetened, like thick sugar water. I guess we're not in danger of losing our teeth prematurely. I'd give an arm and a leg to eat out one more time, to take a break from the bland food they serve us. Puréed this. Stewed that. Find out whether I still have taste buds.

The dietitian handed each of us a drink: today's flavor, mocha caramel. I peeled down half the wrapper on my straw. When Irene was looking the other way, I aimed, blew into the straw, and hit her on the back of her head. She swiveled around, started

to say something, and then her face seemed to freeze. One eye stared at me, the other drooped. Her cup clattered to the floor. In an instant the nurse on duty was hovering over Irene. She called for an orderly, and they quickly wheeled her away.



No one will tell me when Irene's coming back. The nurse clomps past as if I'm invisible. The other residents pretend nothing's happened. Maybe for them that's OK. Who am I to judge? The trick is to look on the bright side. At the moment I don't see any bright side in what happened to Irene. I'm doing my best to be positive, but it's hard.

Ordinarily I make morning rounds just before lunch. Why bother? Today I think I'll just sit here. The rooms on our floor are in a circle, with a balcony in the middle that overlooks the atrium. On the floor below, straggly geraniums in planter boxes bloom all year. If I had a pair of scissors, I'd trim them, pinch out the centers, let them grow in lush and dense. Geraniums are without a doubt the most boring plants, but they're indestructible. Forget to water them, leave them alone for weeks, you can't kill them. The people who decide such things probably don't want us to see less hardy flowers fade away. Might give us the idea—well, you know—we're not going to last forever. Ha! The problem is we've lasted too long. We've outlasted our welcome. Outlasted our friends, lovers, pets, most of those who matter to us. Anyway, I'm not allowed scissors.

When I get into this mood, I try to stop myself. If I could see a way to break out of here, I'd do it. What could they do to me? Send out a posse, drag me back, and then what? Tie a buzzer on my wheelchair?

All I know is thinking about the past does no good. The memories are painful. I miss Harry. I miss my garden. This time of year I'd be out pruning the roses, cutting back the lace-cap hydrangeas, columbine, daylilies. I'd lug bags of compost

around, spread it and work it into the soil, preparing the ground for the next spring. By the end of the day I'd be tired. Good and tired.

Harry used to say, "Why do you work so hard, Eleanor? Take it easy. Get some rest."

"Plenty of time to rest when I'm dead," I'd say.

These days, if I squatted down in the dirt, I'd never get up again. Not under my own steam. Doesn't matter. I'm always indoors now, for however many springtimes I have left. Once I asked Harry what he thought would be better—to grow old with your mind okay but your body wasted, or to lose your mind while your body went on and on.

He threw it right back at me. "What would you choose, Eleanor?"

"If I could have my druthers, I'd keep my wits and my body wouldn't let me down."

"Me?" Harry said. "I'd rather get hit by a truck."

He got his wish, sort of. Had a massive coronary, lasted only sixteen hours in the intensive care. That's the only bright side I can think of about Harry's death—he didn't linger. If Irene can't come back and laugh at my jokes again, I truly hope she doesn't linger either.



When Colette came by, I must have seemed pretty glum. She tried to cheer me up. "Eleanor," she said, "shall I take you to the art room?"

I couldn't speak. I was so sad and angry at the same time.

"We have some new chinks, the bright colors you like."

I shook my head. At lunchtime, when the aides started wheeling everyone into the dining hall, I asked to go to my room.

My room is like everyone else's here. A bed, a dresser, a small closet. There's no place for a lot of stuff, and I really don't miss things I used to have. For sure I don't miss the house. It was

empty after Harry died. Like a tomb. Sometimes I would talk to his photograph, tell him about my day. I didn't ask about his day. I'm not that batty. Once in a while I dressed up, put on my pearls and rings and pretended I was back from a show. Harry liked me to dress up, liked to go out to dinner. Indian, Thai, Chinese, Brazilian, all kinds of restaurants. "Spicy," he always said, "that's how I want my food and my women."

After Harry died, no way could I live out my days at home. If I fell, I'd have moldered on the floor, sheer luck for someone to find me. So when Norm flew in from Miami and insisted I sell the house, I protested just to get his goat. He's not a great son, but he had the decency to organize it for me down to hauling away the boxes from the attic. I gave him power of attorney, power to pull the plug if I'm a vegetable. As soon as he checked me in here, he scurried home to his golf game and his second wife, Sherry. That was three years ago.

No, I don't miss the house. I don't miss the clothes, either. C'est la vie. What would I do with silk blouses, handbags, high heels? Lord knows I'll never need a winter coat again. In here it's the same temperature all the time. My outfit today is much the same as every other day of the week. A t-shirt and cotton pants with rolled up cuffs and elastic waist. Every now and then, Norm ships a package: seven color-coordinated shirts and pants Sherry picked out from a catalog. No-iron cotton. Easy for the laundry. Easy for the nurse's aide to dress me in the morning, for her to pull down my pants when she wheels me to the bathroom. Although in the haste of the morning, I often end up color uncoordinated, I am neat and clean. There's a mesh basket on the walker where I keep a cardigan, a box of tissues, a small amount of cash. No rings or watches. Nice as all the staff seems to be, jewelry tends to disappear. I gave it all to my granddaughter, Andi. She would've inherited it anyway. Let her have it now.

I almost forgot. Today's Andi's day to visit. I don't feel like seeing anyone. I'd just as soon put myself to bed and pull up the covers, but I'll do my best to be pleasant company for an hour or two. I'm

lucky she comes. Bless her, she has a good heart. She takes after her mother, Norm's first wife, Melissa. Norm rarely flies out from Miami anymore. He says it's too awful for him to see me like this. So be it. I say it's his loss. Not seeing Andi or Tina, I mean.



All afternoon I force myself to stay awake. Finally there's a knock on my door. How wonderful—Andi's brought Tina. The child runs up and throws her arms around my knees. She giggles, and I see she's lost another baby tooth. My spirits rise at the sight of her smile.

"Am I still your favorite great-grandma?" I reach down and pat her face.

"You're her only great-grandma," Andi says, mock serious. "That makes you her least favorite great-grandma, too." It's our regular shtick.

Andi fetches my walker. "What a beautiful day. Would you like to sit outside on the patio?"

I let her help me up. I smile at Tina. "Let's go, kiddo. Haven't had my exercise yet today." Tina skips ahead down the hall.

A rich resident willed money for a fountain. There's a plaque: "In memory of —." A concrete bird perches on the fountain—can't tell what kind; it's all one color, gray, but it's not a dove. Reddish-gold maple leaves clog the waterspout. We sit down at a table that looks like it should be at a French sidewalk café.

Andi goes inside to use the visitors' bathroom. "Tell great-grandma how you like kindergarten," she says over her back.

As soon as Andi disappears, I have a wild idea. "Tina, sweetheart, bring the walker close to me.... That's right.... Hold it steady."

She obeys me wordlessly. I push up from the table and grab onto the handles. "Let's go, kiddo."

I clasp Tina's hand tight against the cold aluminum handle. I can feel her pulse. We start down the ramp to the sidewalk. She tells me about her kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Williams, and her friends, Jana and Carson.

"I like art best," Tina says.

"Me, too, sweetheart."

Now we're walking along the sidewalk in front of the Home. The trees are scrawnier than they seem from my window. There are little white iron fences around the trunks, to keep dogs from peeing on them, I guess. Cars spew fumes. Tina coughs. The noise is louder than I expected. Up on the third floor my window is bolted shut. Sounds from the street are muted.

The sidewalk is bumpy and cracked. I lift my gaze from the ground long enough to wink at Tina. "We're escaping," I say. She scrunches up her face to blink both eyes at me.

The day is cooling off. A wind blows candy wrappers along the sidewalk. Sweat dribbles down my neck. I shiver, but I can't reach my cardigan. My legs shake from fatigue. I stop and lean on the walker for a moment. At the intersection I'm confused. Should we try to cross? With four lanes of traffic, we might not get to the other side before the light changes. I stand still, uncertain what to do. I'm really happy to be out, but I'm so tired I could sink down on the sidewalk.

"Wait, wait! Don't you dare move!" I hear Andi shriek from half a block away. She runs up panting, her face red as if she's finished a marathon. "What are you doing? You nearly frightened me to death. I thought someone kidnapped Tina. If I hadn't seen you down here, I'd have called the police."

I'm appalled. How could I be so thoughtless? "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't think. Please forgive me."

Slowly Andi catches her breath. A large tear forms and rolls down my cheek. I shudder in the wind. How can I explain? "I just wanted to get out of there... maybe to taste real food...one more time—"

"We're escaping, Mama." Tina clasps her mother's hand. "Come escape with us."

Andi relents. "Okay, you guys. No harm done." She holds onto Tina and puts her other arm through mine. "Let's see what we can find."

We turn the corner. Suddenly we're on a street of shops—a

dry cleaner, a place that cashes paychecks, a florist, manicurist, and, halfway down the street, a Cantonese restaurant.

"Shall we have a bite?" I say.

Andi looks at her watch. "Listen, I have a couple of errands. Why don't you guys go ahead while I stop at the ATM and Walgreens. Then I'll bring the car around for you."



Inside the restaurant, it's dark and almost empty. Red lanterns glow on the tables. The spicy smells hit me, wash over me, remind me how I love Chinese food.

A waiter motions us to a table. He helps me into a chair, parks the walker against the wall, and leaves two menus. He comes back with a pot of tea. I let it steep and then pour a cup.

"Shall we have a tea party?" I put some water in a cup for Tina. "Health and happiness."

Tina sips the water. I raise my cup and drain it. The tea warms my throat.

The waiter asks if we're ready to order. Tina pretends to read her menu. "I'll have pot stickers," she says and sits up straight.

"Vegetarian or pork?" The waiter waits to scribble on his pad.

"Vegetarian, please."

"Your granddaughter is polite," the man says.

"She's my great-granddaughter."

"Oh, a great-grandchild. You are fortunate." He smiles.

I smile back. Tina beams at us both. Sitting here with Tina is the best thing that's happened to me in years. For an instant I glimpse the teenager, the poised young woman she'll become. She'll make her mother so proud. She'll stand tall, a smiling junior version of Andi.

The waiter is expecting my order. "I'll have the won ton soup."

When the food comes, Tina takes a chopstick in each hand, lifts one of the doughy crescents, dips it in the sauce, drops it on

the plate, and ends up squishing it in her fingers. She wipes them neatly on her napkin. I wrap her hand around the chopsticks. Together we pick up a pot sticker. It falls into the dipping sauce. We both laugh.

In a rush I down two bowls of soup. The shrimp are perfect, not mealy at all. The water chestnuts crunch. The peapods are a fresh, bright green. I spear a black mushroom; it slides around on my tongue. Thank goodness I have my teeth. Maybe I should order the sesame chicken. I always loved that. And garlic scallops. Or the clams with black bean sauce. Maybe not. I'm not sure how much money I have with me.

"Here, kiddo," I say. "Try the soup." Tina guides my hand. I keep the spoon steady while she has a taste.

"Do you like it?"

"It's chicken soup."

"Have a won ton." I bring the chopsticks to her mouth.

Tina stares at the protruding veins on my hand. "Great-grandma Eleanor, are you going to die soon?"

"Why do you ask, sweetheart?" If I say yes, will I frighten her? The answer is most definitely, probably sooner than later, but who knows? I never expected to live this long.

"My goldfish died, and mama said it was because he was old. We flushed him down the toilet."

"Well, I'm old, that's for sure. But I'm in pretty good shape. Feel my muscle."

Tina laughs. "Feel my muscle." She bends her arm and makes a fist.

The liquid sloshes around in my insides. I feel full. Satisfied. Content. Whatever happens, I will do my utmost to remember this afternoon for as long as I'm able.

Tina is restless. She's been really good for a five year old. When the waiter comes by, I ask for the check. He adds it up and leaves it near me on a plate, along with two fortune cookies.

Without warning my bladder signals an emergency. Can I get myself to the restroom? If Tina brings the walker, maybe I can pull myself up. But where is the restroom? I feel flushed

and dizzy. My legs tremble at the effort it would require. No, I can't possibly make it.

I beckon the waiter over. "Tina, dearest, do you know the number of the little phone your mother carries in her purse?"

"Actually, I do. I know my address, too. Would you like to hear it?"

"Please tell this nice man the phone number." I put my head down on the table.

"She's on the way," the waiter says.

I will myself not to move. I hold my breath, suck in my abdomen. I clamp my knees together. Please, please, let me hang on. I promise I'll never complain again. I'll cooperate. I'll be good. Please, pretty please.

"Great-grandma, would you like your fortune cookie?"

I raise my head and manage a small smile. "That's okay, kiddo. You have mine."