




Winter 2007

The Summerset Review

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We're inclined to keep lists. You may have noticed the one linked from our guidelines page titled Recommended Readings. You might remember the poll of favorite stories we ran a few years ago, chronicling all pieces readers mentioned. The weekly shopping list, the holiday gift list—we can even make a list of our lists.

In keeping with this compulsion, and to battle every editor's urge to ramble, here is yet one more list—ten quotes from honored writers over the years:

1. "I'm a great believer in not pushing or straining when it comes to creativity, which is probably just an excuse for laziness." - Mary Yukari Waters (interviewed by Sherry Ellis in *Glimmer Train*)
2. "When I was seventeen, I read the story 'Miss Brill' by Katherine Mansfield and was so incensed by the sadness of the fate of that poor dear old lady that I decided to write a letter to the author and tell her how badly I thought she had treated her leading lady there, found that Katherine Mansfield had been dead for many years, and was intrigued by the fact that the words of a dead woman could produce such a powerful emotion in me and decided I wanted to be a writer." - Thomas E. Kennedy (interviewed by Susan Tekulve in *The Literary Review*)
3. Steps to avoid the blank page: "I leave off mid-sentence, and then can finish it the next day with less anxiety expended than for a new thought." - Binnie Kirshenbaum (interviewed by Felicia C. Sullivan in *small spiral notebook*)
4. "There are some things that I never read aloud because they work best in the eloquent silence between the writer and the reader." - Judith Ortiz Cofer (interviewed by Lorraine M. Lopez in *Crab Orchard Review*)
5. "I've been absolutely shocked in classrooms where I've heard my stories discussed. Sometimes I've been so enlightened, I've taken notes." - Ann Beattie (interviewed by G. E. Murray in *StoryQuarterly*)

6. "It's good to tell a good story, but it's so much better to tell it beautifully." - Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum (interviewed by Jacqueline Kolosov in *Orchid*)

7. "I hear the voice of the narrator as I type. Sometimes I'll read sections of the story out loud to see if it seems the same; sometimes I'll just speak sections of narration or bits of dialogue in the voice of the character as I'm walking the halls of the college where I teach, and I'll carry these snippets of prose around in my head until I find a place for them in the story." - Robert Day (interviewed by Fred Whitehead in *New Letters*)

8. "To me, it's all about perceptions, perceptions about life or human nature or the way something looks or the way something sounds. Two or three of them on a page in a notebook, that's what it's really all about. Getting enough of them to enliven every page of a novel, like light." - Martin Amis (interviewed by Francesca Riviere in *The Paris Review*)

9. "We discover through writing that we know more than we know." - Gish Jen (in *Ploughshares*)

10. "I have received very few unfriendly letters. I did receive a letter from a woman who had bought *Falconer* and thought it was disgusting and tried to burn it. She went into some length about how she tried to burn the complete book, and it would not ignite. And then she had tried to burn the book by taking off the jacket. And it was only by tearing the book in little pieces that she was able to ignite it. And then she bought the collection two years later and wrote a letter saying, 'I am terribly sorry. I am the woman who burned *Falconer*—and please accept my apologies.'" - John Cheever (interviewed by John Callaway in *StoryQuarterly*)

Catherine Ryan Hyde's short story "Dancing with Elinor" is our Lit Pick of the Quarter, fresh from the beautiful literary magazine, *Gettysburg Review*. In the Summer 2006 issue, her story starts with the problem of a delayed airline flight, and goes on to delve deep into the lives of several female characters. One of the major themes of the story is hope:

I felt how hard I'd been clinging to believing I couldn't know yet, not until I got there. How important it was not to know. For a little bit longer. Just to live in Maybe Land for four more hours.

Aside from the intensity of emotions and what happens in this piece, we see that the voices of the two characters are segregated, and here is one from the other, referred to as Madam President:

Not that I think of myself as the easily affected type. God knows I'm not. But it broke my heart to see her standing in that no-man's land of airport where people get met. Among the black-suited mercenaries holding up signs. Just standing there, taking in the nothing.

We caught a little bit of commentary in another literary magazine (*Glimmer Train*) this author appeared in recently, where she defines the meaning of success: "Doing work you love, every day, whether anybody pays you for it or not." Amen, Catherine.

We're hoping that by the time our next issue comes out, our Spring 2007 issue in mid-March, we will be very close to releasing the first print issue of our magazine. Keep posted, and join us in celebrating this accomplishment.

The volume will be a collection of pieces that have appeared online over the last four years. Some may ask, *Why not anything new?* We thought, by doing that, it would take away from the wonderful work we read, loved, and published on the web. Another question we are bound to get: *Why bother when we can read the stories for free online?* Our answer: Read them online, then. With our compliments.

The Somerset Review

Joseph Levens – Editor
Amy Leigh Owen – Assistant Editor

A literary journal released quarterly on the 15th of March, June, September, and December. Founded in 2002, the journal is devoted to the review and publication of unsolicited short stories and essays.

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Wyatt and Fay Eklund sipped drinks on the veranda of a small resort hotel on the Cape. Fay, lustrous and conspicuous in an open shirt over a brief bathing suit, drew covert glances from other tables, but she was used to that and would've been mildly dismayed had she sat unnoticed. Wyatt's attention was on the beach, where the lone figure of a man was following the surf. Wyatt abruptly rose from his chair. In yachting cap, royal-blue jersey, and white ducks, he had the stance and swagger of a reserve naval officer on active duty. "I think I know that guy," he said, shading his eyes.

Fay said, "How can you tell from here?"

He strode to a table occupied by an elderly couple, the Boyds, regular summer guests at the hotel, and snatched up Mr. Boyd's binoculars, training them on the man he thought he had recognized. Mr. Boyd, whose jowls wobbled his face, said, "Is that someone you know?"

"Could be. Could very well be."

Mrs. Boyd, her face dense with makeup, said, "You have a lovely wife."

Wyatt returned the binoculars and, with a knowing smile, rejoined Fay. "God damn," he said. "If that's who I think it is, he was one of my professors at Dartmouth. That was about ten years before he killed his wife."

Fay shuddered. "Why isn't he in prison?"

Wyatt sipped his martini while his free hand grazed his wife's knee. "Two mistrials. They let him go."

The Boyds were on their feet. Mrs. Boyd's permed hair was the yellowish pink of a tea rose. Mr. Boyd, a retired marketing executive for Nabisco's cookie and biscuit division, had protruding eyes that cast an air of aggression. He smiled at Fay and said to Wyatt, "Would you two like to dine with us this evening?"

"Can't," Wyatt said. "A friend of mine has shown up out of the blue."

"The fellow on the beach?"

The beach was now deserted. The sail of a distant boat looked like a gull's feather stuck in the sea. "That's the one."

Mrs. Boyd said, "Then bring him along, by all means."

"Not a good idea," Wyatt said. "He's a murderer."



Late afternoon, Wyatt let himself into the room. Fay was stretched out on the bed, her sprawled legs of superb shape and length. Huskiness gave her more value to the pound. He enjoyed gazing at her, as if she were prime stock. She opened her eyes.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

"He's not staying at the hotel. He's probably at a bed-and-breakfast. I mean, if he's anywhere."

"Why is it important you see him?"

"I never said it was."

Fay used an elbow to prop herself, auburn hair falling across her brow. "Why did he kill his wife?"

"The papers said she had a lover. Or a bunch of lovers. Or maybe somebody told me that. You hear a lot of stories."

"People love stories. Adds spice to their lives. Was he a good teacher?"

"He was a hard marker. Unfair, most people said. Shoved Pound and Joyce down our throats."

"He made you work."

"He was too damn tough," Wyatt said distractedly, as if feeding on the memory. He plunked himself down on the bed's edge and vaguely caressed the solidness of her calf. "His wife had red hair. Redder than yours."

"Mine's not all that red."

"That's what I mean."

Fay was curious. "Did you know her?"

"I talked to her once at a student-faculty luncheon." Wyatt cupped his wife's knee. "Her name was Rita. She was a beauty, like you."



Fay hiked beyond the bend of the beach to partial privacy, where she spread a towel on sand and shed her bikini top. Arms tight at her sides and legs stretched to the full, she lay in the midday sun and let the shadows of gulls glide over her. She enjoyed breezes on her body and salt air in her hair. As a child she had relished rain on her face and had run barefoot in the summer. In adolescence she had welcomed the boldness of her body and the mystery of her looks. She'd been a by-blow: she knew her mother, not her father.

She lifted her head when faint voices wafted in from a point where beach plum decorated dunes. At the margin of her vision she discerned Mr. Boyd in a breach of manners with his binoculars, which annoyed only a little. Mrs. Boyd led him away.

Evident from a half-mile away was a salt marsh's brackish smell, always tantalizing to her, and she wondered if it had winged the distance solely to intrigue her, to mark her as special. One of the few times she had not felt special was at a party with Wyatt and his friends. Listening to their reminiscences of boarding schools and European jaunts, she had felt doubly misbegotten. Another time was her first visit to Wyatt's family home south of Boston. His father, notably patrician, spoke in an easy voice that suggested the finer things in life, his mother was a reserved length of perfect manners and charm, and his sister had dazzling teeth that exaggerated an insincere smile.

Fay lay with the sun a lazy weight on her face. Eyes closed, she sensed a presence near the surf. Warily sitting up, she rapidly reattached her bikini top and made out the figure of the man glimpsed earlier, this time his face discernible, not at all what she had expected of a murderer.

"I didn't mean to intrude," he said from the short distance. His face was pleasant and agreeable, with distinct planes and a dry exactitude significant enough to be remembered.

"But here you are," she said. His graying hair seemed in the process of falling into place. Dressed in T-shirt and khaki shorts, he cut a reasonable figure. Suddenly he started to move on. "Please," she said, rising. "Wait up." With a leap and a skip, long legs flashing, she joined him and fell in step. Following the surf, they left tracks on a long wet carpet of sand. Waves rousting pebbles spoke a language she strained to comprehend. "My name's Fay. What's yours?"

His glance was oblique. "Manning."

"I understand you taught at Dartmouth. My husband was in one of your classes. Wyatt Eklund."

Manning shook his head. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"I'm sure you'd remember him if you saw him. Tall, exceedingly handsome. He wanted to be a writer, then a painter, but neither worked out."

"Some artists fail to defy gravity. Words, colors fall flat. Your husband could do what I did and teach." Manning shifted his eyes to the orderly arrival of waves, pebbles chattering, the wash ruffling the sand's edge. "So what does he do now?"

"He doesn't have to do anything. He comes from money."

They slowed their step and stopped. A whale-watching boat was plowing a path in from deep waters. Manning placed his face in a breeze while Fay wondered whether his murdered wife terrorized his dreams.

"He's been looking for you," Fay said. "He'd like you to dine with us at the hotel."

"I think not," Manning said, without explanation. His gaze trailed a gull shaving the surf.

"Wyatt will be disappointed."

"Then don't tell him you've seen me."

"That would be a sin of omission."

"Many sins are."

Fay found herself looking into calm eyes that divulged nothing. The only other killer she knew was Ray Hughson from her hometown in upstate New York. A month on the police force, Ray had responded to a call from the public library, where an eccentric old woman, Hattie Bragg, was causing a ruckus. When Hattie threatened Ray with her cane, he drew his service revolver and shot her dead. Ray was a clod. This fellow Manning was not.

Manning said, "Why are you staring?"

"Am I? I'm sorry," Fay said, and they resumed walking, sidestepping washed-up weed and wading through a hollow of warmish tidal water. The whale-watching boat, surrounded by swooping and squawking gulls, was curving away. In a careful voice, Fay said, "Wyatt read about you in the papers."

"So you know about that," he said without inflection. They were walking now where the sand was stiff, like asphalt.

"Should I be afraid of you?"

"That's up to you."

The afternoon was wearing down, accepting shadows in the dunes, which made Fay leery of walking much farther from the hotel with him. He was a sealed document, contents unknown. "I'd better turn back now," she said.

"I'll keep going." Turning away, he slowly glanced back. "What's your husband's name again?"

"Wyatt. Wyatt Ecklund."

"Wanted to be a writer, did he?"

"For a while."

"Couldn't have shown a great deal of promise. I'd have remembered."



The Eklunds dined with the Boyds after all. From a veranda table they could hear the tide swishing in. Fay wore a ribbon in her hair and a clinging dress, and Wyatt was spiffy in a blazer and a white shirt open at the neck. In Fay's eye the Boyds looked make-believe. She saw only the jowly dance of Mr. Boyd and the tea-rose hair of his wife, both babylike in lobster bibs.

"You were joking, of course," Mrs. Boyd said, and Wyatt, consuming baked stuffed sole, shook his head.

"Who'd he kill?" Mr. Boyd asked and, with authority, cracked a lobster claw.

"His wife," Wyatt replied. "And got away with it."

The Boyds were depositing broken shells on a platter, which glittered like a bed of live embers. Fay imagined the glowing coals of hell and said, "His poor soul."

Mr. Boyd wiped the melt of butter from his mouth. "Why'd he do it?"

"Story I heard is his wife humiliated him," Wyatt said nonchalantly. "Her tastes ran sideways."

The steward, a corkscrew curl gracing his brow, fished up bubbly from the bucket, ice scaling off the bottle, and refilled glasses. Mrs. Boyd, roused that afternoon from a dream in which a naked man had played a part, was intrigued. "What does that mean, sideways?" she asked as the steward moved off smartly.

Mr. Boyd, who had an aptitude for trigonometry, envisioned threesomes. "Use your imagination, dear."

"Women," Wyatt explained. "She liked other women."

Mrs. Boyd was further intrigued. "How did he kill her?"

"Bang, bang," Wyatt said.

Fay, shuddering, deliberately shifted her gaze to another table, where young honeymooners clinked glasses in a toast. Fay saw traces of herself in the young woman and a bit of Wyatt in the man and wondered whether one would eventually kill the other for whatever the reason, be it selfish, silly, or senseless. Almost didn't matter.

The Boyds were scavenging the last of their lobsters. His teeth cracking a feeler, Mr. Boyd sucked out a thread of flesh. Mrs. Boyd said, "You don't often get away with murder. Or do you?"

Wyatt shook his head. "He was lucky."

"He must've been desperate," Mrs. Boyd mused over her champagne. "Maybe his wife taunted him with her misbehavior, drove him to violence, made him an animal."

"A crazy man needs no reasons for what he does." Wyatt said.

Fay came to attention. "Are you saying he's crazy?"

"He can't be right, can he?"

Mr. Boyd couldn't repress a belch. He had eaten too much, which didn't deter him from studying the dessert menu with his wife. Simultaneously they decided on peach shortcake. Fay and Wyatt ordered liqueurs, which arrived promptly.

"Pity you couldn't find him," Mrs. Boyd said. "It would have been exciting to meet him."

Wyatt laughed. "He was a professor of mine. You'd probably find him a crashing bore. Show me an academic who isn't."

"There's mystery in all of us," Fay said.

"What's your take on the fellow?" Mr. Boyd asked her.

Wyatt answered for her, a habit of his. "She's never met him."



The four of them rode the elevator to the third floor, where the Boyds vanished into their room and the Eklunds into theirs. Fay yanked the ribbon from her hair, and Wyatt lifted her dress, her underpants little more than a label to be peeled away. "It must be the salt air," he murmured.

"Or the champagne," Fay said.

He provided protection retrieved from his toilet kit. His idea. They had no children. His decision. Always he entered her with a sense of triumph, as if he were a warrior and she the spoils, their bed a field of battle. Invariably lust pulled his face out of shape, which had once mesmerized her and now merely disconcerted her. Eventually he rolled away and, as usual, fell into a thick sleep. She was wide awake.

The moon glazed the beach. Carrying her sandals in one hand, she tramped barefoot over wet sand and salted her face in the ocean air. Mist swirled over the surf, which had lost its force and was retreating like winter slush pushed back by a plow. "I knew you'd be here," she said to the figure at the surf's edge. Moonlight glanced off the planes of Manning's face, and shadows nuanced it. Her imagination fed on him. "Did you really kill your wife?"

He glanced sideways at her. "I've never denied it."

She wondered whether he had suffered a psychotic episode. A deed done in the high heat of the moment, for which he could not be held liable. They commenced walking together, the beach a river of pearly light. She dropped a sandal and didn't bother to pick it up. "Your wife had red hair. Like mine?"

"No. Real red."

"That's what Wyatt said."

In the moonlight, gray touches at his temples looked powdered, endowing him with the air of a stage actor. Farther down the beach two couples were taking late-night strolls. Short-sighted, Fay glimpsed only their patterns. Manning spoke abruptly in a near toneless voice, surprising her. "Do you and your husband love each other? I mean, do you love each other very much?"

She liked to be truthful. About everything. "Just normal. Like most people."

"Then neither of you will do the unthinkable."

She didn't ask for an explanation. She didn't want one. Or need one. Was his wife, she wondered, the single rare moment in his life? She let the salt air ripple against her face. "Was she beautiful?"

"Rita was flamboyant. And a free spirit, which generated lots of stories about her, some half true, most maliciously false."

They slowed their pace. The only sound reaching Fay was the slushing of the retreating surf. "I have another question," she said. "Where do the gulls go at night?"

"Nowhere. They simply disappear and reappear in the morning." Looking off, Manning spoke from his chest, as if unloading it. "It's never easy to kill somebody, you know, even if that person is dying and suffering terribly. Rita wanted it to be fast. But my hand shook. God help me, I had to shoot twice."

Without warning, the faces of the strolling couples blossomed into view, their voices audible. Fay recognized the twosome, young and attractive, who had clinked glasses in a honeymoon toast. Neither, so far, had killed the other. Manning stepped away before anyone came face to face.

"It's late," he murmured.

Watching him move off in full stride, she called after him. "I'm not afraid of you."



Dangling a single sandal, Fay entered the lobby, nodded to the night clerk, and rode the elevator to the third floor, where she noticed that the door of the Boyds' room was open. Peering out, Mrs. Boyd drew her in with a frantic gesture. Without makeup, the elderly woman's face resembled fabric. Mr. Boyd lay silent and still in bed, eyes shuttered, covers drawn to his jowls.

"He's not well, but he won't let me call a doctor. It's his heart. Not good. Not good at all."

"I didn't know," Fay said contritely, as if she should've guessed. She had seen him put away food.

Mrs. Boyd seemed stuck in a spell. "I always do what he says, but I don't want to lose him."

Fay regularly deferred to Wyatt on all matters, overriding the fact that she had been president of her class at her community college, no grade lower than A-minus on her blue examination books, whereas Wyatt had finished at the bottom of his class and may not have even graduated, at least not properly. "Would you like me to call a doctor?"

"I don't know, dear. I've been so sheltered. My first husband pampered me and never told me anything, not even when he knew he was dying. He didn't want to upset me."

Staring absently at the weave of Mrs. Boyd's face, Fay chided herself for comparing her associate degree with whatever degree Wyatt did or did not receive, and for pitting her little college against a hallowed institution like Dartmouth. Marrying her, Wyatt had plucked her out of working-class obscurity and given her the prestige of the Eklund name. "Tell me what you want me to do, Mrs. Boyd."

"I don't know. I've never been good at these things. Did you lose a sandal?" Mr. Boyd's breathing turned crooked, and both women turned sharply. Mrs. Boyd shivered. "I was young when my first husband died. I wouldn't hold his hand because I was afraid he'd take me with him. Things like that you never forgive yourself for."

Eyes open, Mr. Boyd uttered a sound that startled both women. His Adam's apple looked like blockage trying to break free. His eyes sought Fay and subjected her to a thyroidal stare.

"He wants water!" Mrs. Boyd cried, and Fay, with a start, poured bottled water into a glass. As Mrs. Boyd lifted her husband's head, he opened his mouth like a baby bird. "You do it," Mrs. Boyd ordered, and Fay fitted the glass between Mr. Boyd's lips as something infant-like took over his face. As he gurgled, his hand crept out of the covers and patted the bed. "He wants you to sit there," Mrs. Boyd said. "Could you do that for him?" Fay paused for a tight moment and then made a place for herself beside him, where she felt more a priestess than a nurse. "Maybe you could stay a few minutes, dear. And could you hold his hand?"

"Absolutely not. You should hold his hand, not I."

"It's yours he wants, dear."

Mr. Boyd mumbled something through a distorted smile, as if his face

were in some sort of death grip, but then, his smile straightening, he entertained himself with a fortissimo of farts. Mrs. Boyd shot him a homicidal look that left Fay with scant doubt that, given hammer and knife, Mrs. Boyd was capable of shattering her husband's skull and slashing his throat.

Fay was on her feet.

Mrs. Boyd said, "You did wonders for him, dear."



Fay slipped out of bed after Wyatt left for a day of golf. Room service was prompt. She relished her first cup of coffee. She enjoyed skinning a navel orange, the strong scent of the peels lingering in her nails. Before showering, she struck poses in the mirror. Wyatt's sister had had surgery to remove belly fat. Fay had an honest body, with a depilated private area that made her feel like a child. From the window, the ocean was rivetingly blue, drawing her to it.

Her face wrapped in sunglasses, she carried a nylon tote bag and a towel down to the beach. A bevy of women occupied a shelf of sand near the tideline while their squirrely children splashed in a tidal pool in view of a lifeguard, who was a prince on a perch, sun block on his nose. Fay hiked to the privacy around the bend, where she spread the towel, undid her top, and oiled herself against the onslaught of a sun edging toward its height. Legs crossed at the ankles, eyes closed under blue-black lenses, she waited. She gave Manning an hour, though fifteen minutes was enough. Without opening her eyes, she said, "I knew you'd come."

"You take chances."

She opened an eye as he dropped down beside her and stared at the surf. "Does a bare bosom embarrass you?" she asked.

"Depends."

Sitting up smartly, she hunched her shoulders, embraced her knees, and shielded herself.

"I put myself through NYU modeling at the Art Students League, eight dollars an hour. That's where I met Wyatt. Love at first sight, I guess. I was nude."

"Nudity has its own finery."

"Wyatt likes to show me off, picks out my clothes, my shoes. We've been married only a few years, though we lived together before that." She stopped herself. "Why am I telling you these things?"

"Some things don't need a reason."

Fay fished a snapshot from the tote bag and, while handing it over, felt she was almost near enough to the shell of his ear to hear the roar of his brain. "Now do you remember?"

Manning viewed the favorable features of Wyatt Eklund. Nothing seemed to click, and his teeth shone in a smile that didn't last. "Sorry. I've blanked out a lot of things."

Fay reclaimed the picture and deftly restored her top. The front of Manning's hair tended to flop, and she watched him shrug it back. "Do you have children?" she asked, and he shook his head. "Wyatt and I have none. His decision and, I suppose, mine." Sensing he wasn't listening, she scrutinized the lines in his brow but failed to get a reading.

"Last night on the beach," he said suddenly and softly, "I was thinking of ending it, but you came along and brightened things up."

His words were a gentle assault on her sensibilities, for it was possible he was lying. Wyatt told lies all the time, and back in high school Ray Hughson had told her stories to get his way. She said, "You wanted to end it? That would be giving up."

"Dying need not be giving up. It could simply be a cease-fire."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know what I believe. At the moment I'm just throwing out words." A breeze off the ocean washed over them. A few friendly clouds roamed the vivid sky. "I'm leaving tomorrow," he said. "It's doubtful we'll meet again. Probably best we don't."

Fay felt a twinge, a longing to know more about him. The little she did know was already locked into a memory any stray breath of salt air would stir. She knew that as surely as she knew that every hello carries the inevitability of a goodbye. A shadow fell across her. He was on his feet and poised to leave without a word. She sat up. "People shouldn't just walk off," she said. "They should part in a ceremonial way."

Without hesitation, he squatted in front of her. His face loomed. "The past is real. I'm not sure what I'm doing now is." He kissed her cheek, firmly, meaningfully, as if she were special, perhaps even a princess. As he rose, she gazed up with quiet eyes. Nothing to be said. Then he was gone, his absence more palpable than his presence.



Fay shared a table on the veranda with Mrs. Boyd. A waiter served them iced tea. "Goodness knows where my husband is," Mrs. Boyd said. "He wandered off with those binoculars of his and probably got lost. I sometimes think I should pin a tracking device on him."

Fay was smoking a cigarette, the first she'd had in months. She said, "You used me."

Mrs. Boyd wore a sun visor over her eyes. "Whatever do you mean, dear."

"He wasn't dying."

Mrs. Boyd tasted her tea. "He was sick, you saw that."

"He's a pig. He overstuffed himself at dinner."

"He's an old man, dear. His joys are few."

Fay exhaled a great deal of smoke. "You shouldn't have asked me to sit on the bed, and you certainly shouldn't have asked me to hold his hand."

"It pleased him."

"And cheapened me."

Mrs. Boyd almost laughed. "You're overvaluing yourself, dear, but no matter. And no harm done. We're all silly at times, aren't we?"

Suddenly it became clear to Fay that in marriage Mrs. Boyd was meat and potatoes while naïve women like herself, surrendering their souls at the altar, were little treats, frosted cake, sips of punch.

Mrs. Boyd finished her iced tea. "I really should look for him. I never know where those binoculars are going to take him." Fay crushed out her

cigarette, and Mrs. Boyd rose with effort from her chair. "I envy you, dear. My first husband was handsome in his day, but nowhere near as handsome as your husband. You're a lucky woman." Mrs. Boyd paused. "That's what I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?" Fay said coldly, and Mrs. Boyd applied a smoothing hand to her tea-rose hair.

"Your friend on the beach. My husband said you made a charming couple."

"Really." Fay lit her second cigarette. "Then maybe you should pass that on to Wyatt. I'm sure his ears would perk up."

A false look of alarm flashed across Mrs. Boyd's face. "I'd never do that, dear. We women have to stick together." She winked. "Otherwise where would we be?"



After dinner the Eklunds went to an ocean-front bar, quite crowded, quite noisy. From their little table, where they were sipping Pinot Noir, Fay spotted him first. He was by himself at the bar, wedged in, jostled by strangers, smiling now and then in an odd way, as if his face were sore. Then Wyatt saw him and, rising, said, "No doubt about it. It's him."

Fay watched Wyatt snake his way through the crowd and approach Manning. She craved a cigarette, but there was no ashtray, no smoking. Crossing her thighs, the left over the other, she watched the two men shake hands, Wyatt the aggressor, Wyatt in charge, his posture martial. Then, weeding this way and that, his smile broad, Wyatt ushered Manning toward her and appropriated a chair for him. Fay immediately unclenched her thighs to make room, but there was little to spare. Knees bumped.

"He remembered me right away," Wyatt said with satisfaction. "I knew he would. Professor, meet my wife. Fay."

She and Manning smiled politely at each other, as if their meetings on the beach had never taken place, as if he had never placed a poetic kiss on her sun-hot cheek.

Wyatt said, "I had the professor for Modern Lit. Joyce, Pound, Proust, those guys. The heavy hitters, he called them."

Her face an oval of feigned indifference, Fay would have bet her soul that his lectures were mind-stretching. With a violence of feeling, she would have soaked in every word, with no need to write any down. She'd have been Molly Bloom shouting *Yes! Yes!*

Wyatt's voice deepened. "You didn't give me a very good grade, Professor. In fact, you flunked me."

"Did I? I don't remember."

"You accused me of plagiarizing."

Manning had brought his tankard of beer from the bar, half gone, some in spillage on the way. "Yes, now I do remember. You nearly didn't graduate. A hearing was necessary. Your father came with a lawyer."

"I had my own heavy hitters."

Fay tried not to look at Manning, for their knees were unavoidably touching, steering her mind into places it shouldn't go. Swiftly she stole a look at him in the event his face was giving out secrets. It wasn't. Not a

one.

Wyatt said, "I used to watch your wife crossing the Green. We all had eyes for her."

"That's understandable. My wife was beautiful."

"Red hair. You couldn't miss her. We all felt sorry for you. We knew what was going on."

Fay's knee pressed decisively against Manning's in the hope of conveying a feeling she was sure was valid, that a man and a woman need each other if only for balance. She wanted it known that her father, her uncles, the spear side of her family, were weaklings while the women were warriors. She was worthy, she wanted to tell him, but he was speaking to her husband.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Eklund, I won't respond to that."

She wanted to tell him that her husband had wanted to be a great painter like Matisse, who was not much of a man. Matisse turned his back on his wife and children and sought safety in the unoccupied zone during the Nazi occupation. His wife worked for the Resistance, and so did one of his daughters. They were warriors.

"I may have cheated on an exam," Wyatt said, "but I never killed my wife. As you can see, she's sitting here alive and well."

"You're absolutely right, on all counts." Manning raised his tankard, drained what little remained, and sighed profoundly, as if his thoughts were from another life. Fay felt his knee slip away. "Well, I must be going." She wanted to reach for his hand and hold him in place, but he was already on his feet and glancing down at Wyatt and then shifting his eyes to her. Her heart sank. He was viewing her as if she were a curiosity, nothing more.

"Not driving you away, are we?" Wyatt said.

Fay gazed up at Manning hauntingly. He said, "A pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Eklund."

They watched him leave. With a smile of satisfaction, Wyatt said, "I've waited a long time to get back at that son of a bitch."



Wyatt was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Fay, who knew he would be, went down to the beach, stood on a moonlit spit of sand, and let the ocean encroach on her. Waves broke nearer and nearer. Seawater rushed over her bare feet, chilling them. She hiked her dress when it splashed her knees, and when it threatened her thighs she stiffened, as if a cold claw were reaching up there, unkind, unloving. She retreated to dry land. Had there been any hope of Manning's showing up, she'd have sat on the sand, till dawn if necessary.

The night clerk noted her return with a nod and her bare feet with a smile, her pumps left behind, perhaps washed away like her abandoned sandal. A growing fatigue weighted her legs as she rode the elevator, and hampered her stride when she stepped out. The door to the Boyds' room was half open, which didn't surprise her. Mrs. Boyd was in a chair by the bed.

Fay spoke softly, with only a modicum of irony. "Another bad night for him, Mrs. Boyd?"

"This time I may lose him."

Curiosity carried Fay into the room. Mr. Boyd lay with his mouth open as if to draw a last breath, his eyes near-zeroes. His face seemed to lack not only meaning but identity as well. Frozen in her chair, Mrs. Boyd spoke mechanically.

"I'm afraid to move. I want the chance to say goodbye."

Fay gradually became aware of unmistakable sounds seeping through the wall. The honeymooners were exerting themselves. She and Wyatt had gone to Florence on their honeymoon. That was when he still wanted to be a painter, a noted one, and was sure he would be. She kept her doubts to herself.

"We've had a good life," Mrs. Boyd said. "I don't know what I'll do without him."

Wyatt took her to the Uffizi to see Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Venus lying languidly in the altogether, roses in one hand, her groin in the other. In their hotel room, at his urging, she reconstructed the pose so that he could sketch her for a painting he had in mind, one that would exalt and immortalize them both. Instead he hovered over her with a look in his eye, and the sketch was never done. It was a game he liked to play.

With vacant eyes, Mrs. Boyd said, "I have no children, none whatsoever. When I was young, a hysterectomy left me with an empty dish."

The honeymooners were at the height of their entertainment. Fay could almost feel the heat in their voices aswirl in her ear. The man's voice was pitched high like a boy's while the young woman's had gravel. Mrs. Boyd was oblivious of everything except the chill of impending loss and aloneness.

"Did he make a pig of himself again?" Fay asked.

"A little." Mrs. Boyd gripped her husband's hand as if to anchor him, as if he had a tentative foot in the spiritual world and might drift away. "I regret he and I have never really talked to each other. You know, back and forth, real close, like a couple should."

You don't know how to oink.

"Were you about to say something, dear?"

Fay shook her head. Mrs. Boyd squeezed her husband's hand, and surprising everyone, perhaps himself the most, Mr. Boyd squeezed back.



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Every night, Luz Cifuentes kneels by her bed and prays to Saint Vitus, the patron saint of dance. With divine intervention and enough liniment of wintergreen, she hopes to go on teaching tap and ballet as long as unruly young girls line up to register for her classes.

"Dear Vitus, who died a martyr's death, please continue to grant me flexibility and perfect posture. You know I would not ask for these things if they weren't essential."

Luz doesn't worry about having enough girls. Even at sixty-three, she has maintained her reputation as the best tap teacher in Lake Charles, Louisiana. She has been "Miss Luz" to generations of students.

Luz fingers a crease in the bedspread and wonders what else to pray. With her spring recital drawing close, she prefers that God and Vitus focus their attentions on her dance, so she leaves off her usual blessings for her husband, Charlie, and her mother, Mercedes.

Luz never bothers praying for her daughter, whom she pretends does not exist.

She crosses herself, ending with a graceful flourish of her right hand, a habit the nuns at school were never able to extinguish. (Her friends overheard the sisters mock Luz behind her back, whispering, "She's such a star.")

The Saltillo tiles of the bedroom floor feel cold and hard against her knees. She stands and goes searching for Charlie.

Mercedes, the early bird, sleeps in the bedroom across the hall. Luz worries about her mother. At ninety, Mercedes has grown forgetful. Some days she goes outside with naked gums, leaving her dentures in a half-full glass of water on her bedside table.

Luz presses her ear against her mother's door to listen for breathing. Soon she hears the familiar whistling and puffing. "Goodnight, *Mamacita*," Luz whispers.

Charlie has fallen asleep in his easy chair, fully reclined. The top of his bald head reflects the light shining through the kitchen doorway. Today's newspaper, tented over his face, vibrates with his breathing.

"Charlie?" Luz lifts one corner of the newspaper. "Bedtime."

"What? What?" Charlie blinks, as if he isn't sure which side of sleep he is on. Then he smiles and reaches out to catch a fold of her white nightgown between his rough fingers. "I was dreaming of you."

He claims that he dreams of her every night, ever since he spotted her at the Burger Palace fifty years ago. Luz was fourteen and her family had just moved to Lake Charles from Laredo, Texas. She was trying to reconcile herself to wearing shoes all the time, even in summer, because Mercedes had developed a phobia of hookworms in the damp soil.

After the move, Luz could no longer envision herself as a barefoot Isadora Duncan, skipping over grass-grown cracks in the hot sidewalks. When Charlie first saw her, she was wearing all white, except for her shoes. Luz had taken to wearing shiny black Mary Janes, the same style as her tap shoes. Her friends dressed in checkered blouses and jeans rolled up to their knees.

"You stood out from the others," he told her later. "You seemed to shine, like an angel."

Luz was aware of this shining quality in herself. Her father said that if she stood on the shore, sailors could guide their ships by her.

Mercedes liked Charlie, but she insisted that the two of them sit in the living room, at opposite ends of the sofa. For five years they sat there pining away for each other. Their longing was so strong that, afterwards, anyone who sat on either end of the sofa would tumble towards the middle.

They married when Luz was nineteen. When she was twenty-five, they had a little girl and named her Eva.

After forty-five years of marriage, Charlie still says Luz glows. Even when she declared that they would never speak their daughter's name again, Charlie went along with her, though he dragged his feet for weeks. Luz got so tired of the scuff marks, she made him take off his work boots at the front door.



Tonight, he holds her hand as they walk to bed, and whispers, "My Luz. My light."

The next morning, Charlie picks up his metal lunch pail, which is battered and dull with age. She would like to have him carry something nicer, but he insists that this is good enough.

"I'm working the refinery today," he tells her, after kissing her on the

cheek.

"No," she says.

"Just for a few days. Lots of people out sick. They need me."

Luz hates it when he works in the refinery. The company moved him to the office three years ago, after his heart attack. Luz is sorry for the heart disease, but happy not to worry all day long about explosions.

She once saw a refinery fire on the evening news. When Charlie works there, she can't tear herself away from the television, as if watching it will keep away bad news.

In the afternoon, Mercedes brings in the mail. Silently, she hands Luz a letter, in a plain white business envelope. The return address is in Bridge City, Texas.

Luz hands the letter back. "I do not know this person."

"Eva wants to see you."

Luz says, "I do not wish to see her. She came out at me."

Mercedes shakes her head. "Eva came out to you."

"What's the difference? She shouldn't have come out at all."

Five years ago, Eva told Luz that she had taken up with a woman, a "partner." This is a term Luz does not understand. Are they in business together? And what is coming out supposed to mean? Had anyone locked Eva in a dark cellar? Had she burst forth, squinting like a mole in the sunlight?

The woman Eva calls her partner is named, inexplicably, Montana. The name certainly does not reflect the woman's physical endowments. She is short and as flat-chested as a man.

A name should mean something. Luz loves her own name, which means "light." It has always seemed an almost-perfect choice.

"Why did you not name me Estrella?" Luz asked Mercedes once. The double "L" tickled in her mouth. She was progressing rapidly in her dance classes, and carried herself as if always on stage.

Mercedes answered, "You do not have to be a star to be a light."

Eva never did shine, however much Luz scrubbed her and dressed her in angel colors—white or the faintest shades of color (shell pink, blue as pale as the reflection of sky on snow). Luz used to send her to school every day with no less than six bows in her braided hair. All she had wanted was to pass her own gifts to her daughter.

For years, Luz tried to teach Eva the Buffalo shuffle. The child would stumble her way across the room, ignoring the beat from the vinyl record whirling on the turntable.

"Smile," Luz would say. "And stop clenching your fists."



The last time Luz saw her daughter, Eva wore all black, and her hair was shorn as short as a Labrador's coat.

Today, Luz watches the television all morning, warding off bad news from the refinery. In the afternoon Luz teaches classes. First come the

tinest students, who aren't yet in kindergarten.

At the beginning of the year, some of these girls stood so sway-backed, Luz thought she would have to tie them to fence posts to straighten their spine. Now they have all mastered both the front Irish and back Irish.

"Perfect," Luz says when class is over. They line up in front of her and hold out their hands. "Your parents will be so proud at the recital."

"Thank you, Miss Luz," they say, as she applies a foil star sticker to each one of them, on the back of their hands.

"Thank you, Miss Luz."

"Thank you, Miss Luz."

How she loves them.

Mercedes spends her afternoons at the studio, sitting on the loveseat in the business office. The office is a cubby just large enough for the couch and desk. More than one new student has looked into the office and mistaken Mercedes for a life-sized doll in her lacy black mantilla. It is only when they venture in to touch her that they realize their mistake. Mercedes' body is warm and her thin, crinkly skin feels like crepe paper to their touch.

At five o'clock, the advanced class comes. Luz catches her breath when she sees Avery Alonzo, a ten-year-old who takes three classes a week. Avery wears her dark hair in neat French braids. She walks with her head held high, like a true dancer.

Luz has decided to let Avery help her with classes next year, as a sort of junior instructor. She plans to announce it at the recital with the awards. She imagines Avery's surprise, her radiant smile. Luz secretly imagines that Avery will grow up to take over the dance studio.

The five o'clock class performs well, except for Laurel Mars, who ties the laces of her tap shoes so loosely, they come undone and trip her.

Luz's last class is the "tap biddies," three older women, who show up every week in sloppy work-out clothes. Today Jackie wears gray sweat pants and a yellow T-shirt that says, "Ask me about my grandchildren." Wanda and Ruth both wear baggy shorts, which end just above knobby white knees.

The way they have let themselves go, it is hard to believe they are roughly Luz's age. Jackie might even be younger.

When Luz advertised this class, she hoped to meet artistic, graceful women.

These three come mainly to socialize. Luz tries to teach them the basic shuffle-ball-change, and they giggle like children over their mistakes. The class has been practicing a soft shoe number for the recital, with canes and gloves. So far, they haven't gotten through one song without someone dropping their cane.

"Hey, Luz, are you going to do the same solo this year? I really loved it last year, when your taps sounded like a drum roll." Jackie says.

"I have a new routine," Luz replies.

"Do we have to dance after you?" Ruth asks. She looks down at her feet, as she practices a simple shuffle, a movement she has been working on for two years. She moves more like a scarecrow than a dancer. "I'd hate that. Put us as far in front of your dance as possible."

"Luz will get us over with quick, so people can enjoy the show," Jackie says.

Wanda, the shyest one, drops her cane and giggles.

After class, the three women huddle together. They are going to the boats, to gamble, as they do every week. Their favorite casino has a senior special on Wednesdays—half-priced Manhattans.

Ruth breaks away from the huddle. "You want to come, Luz? You'll have a grand time. Guaranteed."

"No, thank you," says Luz. The women ask her every week, and every week she turns them down.

They head towards the front exit.

"Ready, Mercedes?" Ruth asks, poking her head through the office doorway.

"You bet, *hija*."

It takes a moment for Luz to register that her mother is going out with these women. "But, *Mamacita*..."

Mercedes looks at Luz without recognition, and Luz understands that her mother has stopped speaking with her again. Five years ago, when Luz sent Eva away, Mercedes had posted a letter to Luz, spending the money on a stamp, when she could have walked into the kitchen and handed it to Luz. The letter said, "I will not speak to you until you make up with her."

She kept her vow of silence for months.

As Mercedes leaves, she drops a scrap of paper on the floor. Luz picks it up. In Mercedes' blue handwriting, it says, "Aluminum."

Luz stares at the note. What can she mean by aluminum? Luz thinks back. The only association she makes is to the time her family lived in Laredo, and the sun shone so bright and hot, Mercedes had applied foil to the inside of their windows, to turn its rays back towards the sky.

No matter. She will not worry over Mercedes and the meaning of the note. She has the recital to look forward to.

After the women leave, Charlie shows up. He likes to see Luz dance, and he says Luz still looks good in her leotard. (She considers this an extra benevolence from Vitus.)

Charlie has showered, and she can almost forget that he worked in the refineries today, except for the grease under his fingernails. He walks like his shoes are too heavy.

"Pick up your feet, Charlie."

He hugs her, then glances around the studio. "Where's Mercedes?"

"Out gambling with the tap biddies."

"Ah," he says. "Why didn't you go?"

She wrinkles her nose. "I have nothing in common with those women."



The next morning, Charlie wakes before Luz. The bed creaks as he

eases out of it. He tiptoes across the bedroom in his bare feet, as if trying not to wake her. She lies still, listening to his padding footsteps.

"Charlie?"

The footsteps pause. "Yes, Luz?" His tone is apprehensive.

"Be careful today."

"Don't worry."

She wants to say, "How can I help worrying?" but he is gone.

After she makes coffee, Luz peeks into Mercedes' bedroom. Mercedes is still in her bed. A red velvet money bag lies on the nightstand next to her false teeth glass. Mercedes snores louder than ever. The tap biddies must have given her liquor.

Luz eats cornflakes and stares at the rooster on the box. She turns on the small television in the kitchen. The morning show host announces that Mother's Day is two weeks away. In all her preparations for the recital Luz has forgotten.

She wonders if Eva will send her a card. Last year she sent one, signed, "Love Eva and Montana." Luz threw it in the trash.

Mercedes gets up at noon and enters the kitchen without saying a word. Luz silently poaches an egg and lays it on top of a bowl of brown rice for her mother. Mercedes sniffs the dish, as if she suspects it might be poisoned. Then she eats, never looking at Luz.

Luz cannot bear the thought of silence between herself and her mother another minute. "Do you remember when I was a child in Laredo?" she says. "How you used to sing me to sleep?" Luz begins to hum the tune of "This Little Light of Mine."

Mercedes doesn't answer. She pulls a note from the pocket of her housecoat and slips it under her plate. When she leaves the table, Luz reads the word, "Glitter."

Aluminum? Glitter? What could they mean? Luz is still pondering, when the television newscaster breaks in with an announcement.

Luz's heart skips a beat. There has been a fire at the refinery, she just knows it. Charlie could be injured. He could be dead. She imagines a house with no noise except the sound of footsteps. And when Mercedes dies, whose footsteps will she hear?

But other words proceed from the newscaster's mouth. *An outbreak of complicated strep throat in east Texas, in the Beaumont area. Ten cases of rheumatic fever over the past six months.* Luz realizes she has been holding her breath. She lets it out. As far as Luz knows, none of her students live on the other side of the Sabine River. This news has nothing to do with her. She takes another deep, cleansing breath. Everything is O.K.



The girls' recital costumes have arrived at the studio. Luz always looks forward to this day, sorting through a sea of spangles, netting and feathers. She gives the youngest students their costumes after class, instead of stars on their hands.

They whirl around, holding the sparkling outfits like dancing partners. When the girls' mothers arrive, a group of them talk about the

rheumatic fever outbreak.

"It hasn't come across to Louisiana?" Luz asks them.

"Not yet."



Luz sits on a short stool in the corner, as she waits for her older class to arrive. Normally, she would visit with Mercedes in the office, but she cannot bear to hear her own unanswered words ping around the room like an echo. She leans one shoulder against the cool mirror. The stool is really a child's wooden step stool, and if she straightens her legs in front of her she can feel a stretch.

The front door opens and closes. Just outside the dance floor entrance, she hears a girl's voice say, "I hate dance. Why do I have to come? Miss Luz is old, and she smells like medicine."

The voice sounds like Avery's. But it couldn't be. Avery loves dance. She loves Luz.

Luz could understand if it had been Laurel who complained.

Luz waits for the mother's voice, expecting her to scold the child for her disrespect, but only hears, "I know you have mixed feelings about dance, and that's O.K. Sometimes people have more than one feeling about things."

There is no more. Luz leans toward the door to listen and almost falls off her stool. She rights herself.

Avery glides into the room, smiling, followed closely by Laurel. Luz glares at Laurel, who meets her gaze, and then rolls her eyes. Luz decides it was certainly Laurel who made the comments.

Avery would never break her teacher's heart.

"Are you chewing gum, Laurel?" Luz asks.

Laurel opens her mouth to reveal a great wad of lime-green.

"Spit it out."

Laurel ambles over to the trash can, and lets the gum fall from her mouth.

They practice their recital piece, to "Fly Me to the Moon." Luz accepts no mistakes from Laurel tonight, making her repeat her double paddle turns until the girl complains of being dizzy.

Avery does every step perfectly. After class, she asks Luz, "Why can't we have modern music?"

Luz glances at her turntable. "These songs are classic. Frank Sinatra. Dean Martin."

Avery shrugs. "My grandmother likes them."

Mercedes does not speak to Luz all evening. After class, Luz finds her pockets stuffed with single-word notes in blue handwriting.

"Nickel."

"Water."

"Cloud."

"Glass."

When Luz arrives home, the answering machine is blinking. She presses the play button.

"Mom. It's me, Eva. I'd really like to see you soon. There's something important I need to tell you." Her voice sounds hoarse, and Luz wonders if she has taken up smoking.

Luz presses the erase button. Her throat feels tight. She sets herself to the task of gathering all of Mercedes' notes. Each slip of paper holds a single word, but Luz cannot find a pattern. She stretches a piece of string from one wall of her bedroom to another. Then she clips the notes to the string, side-by-side like laundry on a line.

"What is this?" Charlie asks, when he sees them.

"*Mamacita* gave them to me," Luz says. "But I don't know what they mean."

"Ah," he says. "She's not talking again?" He puts his arm around her shoulders.

That night, they lie down, side by side, as always. Luz squeezes Charlie's hand. "It has been a long time since we made love," she says. He has never turned her down, though he initiates intimacy less and less often.

"I've been waiting for a sign from you."

She rolls over and kisses him on the lips. "Here is your sign."

"You are beautiful," he says. "How you glow." Even afterwards, lying beside her, he repeats it. Luz indeed feels a quiver of light glowing from her.

In a moment, Charlie says, "Has Eva been trying to reach you?"

"I can't stand to see her."

Charlie sighs. "Why are you so angry with her?"

She clenches her fists, waiting to experience rage. To her surprise, rage doesn't come. "I don't know," she finally says.

It is not until after Charlie falls asleep, that she begins to wonder how he knows about Eva's attempts to contact her. The following morning, Charlie does not wake Luz, which puts her into a sour mood.



She finds fault with all of her students except Avery. She now sees that they are still sway-backed and chubby, despite her best efforts. And they speak a slang-language she cannot understand. It is as if they talk into their hands, and then hold them up to Luz to reveal nothing but air.

Instead of dancing, the tap biddies gossip about the outbreak of rheumatic fever. Jackie says she warned her daughter to watch for sore throats. "Told her she shouldn't take any chances. This can be serious."

"Best to be careful," Ruth agrees.

After class, the women turn their attentions to gambling.

Ruth says, "Mercedes had a great time last week. Her purse got so heavy, she could barely carry it, so she bought us all drinks."

"May I go with you tonight?" Luz asks. Perhaps Mercedes will even talk to her after a drink or two.

"Sure thing," Ruth answers. "You going, Mercedes?"

Mercedes shakes her head. Is there the trace of a smile on her face?

"Maybe next time," Ruth says.

The four of them ride in Jackie's Buick. Luz and Wanda sit in the back. Of the three tap biddies, Luz knows the least about Wanda's life outside the dance studio. Jackie has her brood of grandchildren. Ruth is divorced and volunteers for Habitat for Humanity.

When they arrive, Jackie and Ruth grab their favorite slot machines. The machines are strange blinking, beeping things, like robots in a space movie.

"Want to find a quieter place?" Wanda asks Luz. She cringes with every clink and beep. "Maybe the bar?"

Luz, who doesn't care for gambling, goes with her. Within ten minutes, Wanda has had two drinks. She begins to blubber about her cats, listing a string of names. Cali, Echo, Bridget, Fangs. Luz stares at her, not knowing what to say. Finally Jackie and Ruth come to find them.

"You poor thing," Jackie says. She dabs under Wanda's eyes with a cocktail napkin.

Ruth whispers to Luz, "She's scared to death her cats will die. They're all she's got."

All she's got. All she's got. The words echo in Luz's head.



The next day, Luz finds more notes from Mercedes, who still won't talk to her. *All right. Enough. I'll see Eva, but on my own terms.* Luz pens a note: "I will meet you alone, without that woman, if you come to my recital."

She writes Eva Cifuentes on the envelope, seals it, and gives it to Charlie that evening.

"What is this?"

"I assume you know her address."

Charlie reddens, but does not deny it.

Luz begins to go to the studio every morning, to practice her own dance for the recital. Her feet feel frenzied and forgetful. Twice, she forgets her inside slide, and has to repeat hop-double hops to allow the music to catch up. Why is she so anxious about dancing in front of her daughter? It is not as if Eva can fault her dance.



At the recital, people display signs that read, "Miss Luz Still Has It." Luz scans the audience, and recognizes the faces of past generations of students. She does not see Eva.

The tap biddies giggle their way through their number, each one dropping their cane at least once. Ruth stares at her shoes the whole time, her head bowed. Her classes stumble through each of their numbers. Luz sees every mistake. Both Avery and Laurel chew gum on stage.

Luz remembers the voice she heard that day in the studio. *Miss Luz is old, and she smells like medicine.* She realizes it was Avery's voice.

After each number, the audience claps and hoots wildly, as if the performances were perfect. *What are you doing?* Luz thinks. *They don't deserve applause for their mistakes.*

Now it is her turn. She feels her legs tremble beneath her, as she takes her place in the center of the stage. Charlie sets the needle down on the record and there is crackling, followed by music. Luz dances to "New York, New York." She performs each move perfectly. At the end, her heart pounds, but not from exertion. She hopes Eva is here. She hopes Eva saw the dance.

After the children's encore, she presents the awards. When she finishes, one trophy remains. Its inscription reads, "Assistant to Miss Luz." She pushes it behind the bouquet of flowers.

People line up to congratulate Luz, who glances over their shoulders, looking for Eva. Eva isn't there.

Charlie packs up the sound equipment. "There was a note on top of the turntable. I think it's for you." He hands it to her. The note reads, "Diamonds."

Suddenly, Luz realizes the connection. All of these things reflect light from other sources. She calls out, "*Mamacita?*"

No answer.

"I know you're here." She stands on the stage and looks around at the empty seats. Her eyes sting from tears she refuses to cry. "You're here somewhere."

She sees a hand peek up from the back row. Mercedes' hand. Luz walks down the stage steps and stalks towards the back row. Her tap shoes click against the vinyl floor. She stops in front of Mercedes.

"Don't you think I have a light of my own?" she asks.

Mercedes shrugs.

"All these things reflect light. I am not like that. I am a star."

"No, *hija*. The light we have is a gift. And soon you will have no light at all, if you don't accept love from the people who truly matter."

Luz glances over her shoulder at the stage. She wants to say, "My students love me," but remembers *Miss Luz is so old...*

Mercedes seems to guess what she is thinking. "What are these strangers' children to you?"



On Saturday, Luz drives to the empty dance school. There are no classes for the summer, but she must stay in shape. As she parks in the space marked "Miss Luz," she feels her heart thumping. The varnished planks of the dance floor frighten her. She pictures them rising up like piano keys, to trip her.

The mirror frightens her most, however. Her reflection is dull as dust. She paces back and forth in front of the office, working up the courage to venture onto the dance floor. Instead, she goes into the office and begins to sift through her records and trophies and picture albums.

Luz goes to the studio every day, even Sundays after mass. She doesn't touch the dance floor, just sorts through memories. On Mother's Day, Luz locates the picture albums from when Eva was a girl. In Eva's photographs, she isn't looking at the camera. She never smiles.

One Sunday in July, as Luz approaches the studio, she sees two figures—Eva and a little girl. The girl appears to be about four years old, and wears pink. Eva wears blue. The two of them have been peering in through the storefront window, but turn at the sound of Luz's arrival.

Luz gets out of her car. She cannot take her eyes off the girl.

"I wanted to come on Mother's Day," Eva says, after Luz draws near.

Luz still stares at the little girl, not looking at Eva. "Who is this?" She tries to place the child's eyes. Are they Charles'?

"This is what I wanted to tell you."

"Whose?" Luz says.

"Ours. Montana's and mine," Eva says, with the stubborn look. "I was going to keep her from you, but then she got sick. She had rheumatic fever. I was afraid she'd never meet you."

"I heard about the outbreak."

"She had a complication. Movements. They call it Sydenham's Chorea, or Saint Vitus' Dance." Eva laughs a mirthless laugh. "I never thought I'd be appealing to Saint Vitus."

"Is she still sick?" Luz squats and holds out her hand for the child, who comes to her.

"I'm better now," the girl answers. She stands tall, shoulders back.

"Your name?"

"Luisa Mercedes."

Luz glances at Eva. "Does Mercedes know about Luisa?"

Eva nods. "Yes."

"And Charlie?"

Eva nods again.

Luz shuffles one foot. "Do this," she says to the girl.

The child moves perfectly and Eva does not try to stop her. Luisa is lithe and graceful. Luz catches sight of their reflections in the plate glass store front.

They are all glowing, even Eva.



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Gaming Andalucia

by

E. P. Chiew



Alison called ahead to the Venta Morena and asked to sample the *gambas pill-pill* and the *lenguado la plancha*. She explained in terrible Spanish that her mother, bless her soul, must be surrounded by fish. For the more carnivorous of the guests, she wanted the *costillas de cerdo*. When we arrived at the rambling white hacienda-like structure, Alison and I gasped at the sprawling green rolling away like a plush blanket down the fairway. Little peak-capped figurines dotted the green at the various tees. The bunkers looked like daubs of taupe on a painter's palette.

"Here's the place to play golf," she said.

"It does beat the courses in Marbella and Malaga," I said. We parked at the hilltop restaurant overlooking the course. I had told her I was playing golf during the day to explain my absences.

Alison tapped me on the arm. "Don't forget, it's Lane again."

The maitre d' was waiting for us at the door.

"Buenos tardes, Senorita Lane." A dapper man with a handlebar moustache, he looked like he'd just walked off the plaza de toros ahead of a vanquished bull, chest heaving, slicked-back hair falling over his tanned brow, a slightly crooked gait as if he'd been scoured from the side.

The maitre d' smiled as Alison launched into her spiel. "A delightful restaurant, Senor Galvan. Our breaths are quite taken away by the panoramic views. Here's what we're thinking: a small intimate ceremony at our hotel in Mijas or Estepona—oh, you should've seen the smart little places we saw. Beautiful, lovely courtyards with fountains and arches. But we're still debating the content of the ceremony. I'd love to have Padre Dominguez conduct the ceremony, it would so please my ma..."

The man cut Alison short. "And then a little reception-cum-dinner, with white tablecloths, white napkins, silver napkin rings, hopefully at Venta Morena?"

Alison looked at him for a second.

"Why yes, exactly. How do you know that? You must be a genius. But I'm told the food here is *muy delicioso*, especially with your famous *gambas* and *lenguado*, so Andalucian! We fell in love with the region when we came years ago. Isn't it fitting that we should be married here?"

"Yes, if you will allow me to boast, our *gambas* is better than at La Quimera. Our *lenguado*, to be fair, is equal."

Alison continued as if Senor Galvan hadn't spoken. "Here's what we are thinking: white tablecloths, ribbons round the chairs, lovely Spanish wines, it's all got to be exactly local. It would be enchanting, even though Ma is bound to remark over the cost of everything. But you'll be sweet to us, won't you? Because, you see, we're going to have oh so many guests. Hundreds, I'd imagine, don't you think, Nicholas?"

I nodded, smiling expansively for the maitre d'.



We sat down to *gazpacho andaluz*, chilled, light, with a hint of spice. I didn't even have to chew my potatoes. Senor Galvan served us the Viñas del Vero Chardonnay from Somontano, delicious, bready and buttery, a hint of oak.

Alison's voice was like the twang of an electric guitar. "For evening dining, we'd love candles on the tables, these tall tapering ones. Can you get them here? And yes, flowers, we've got to have all roses, red, red roses with their stems hidden. Do you have those little flowerpot vases? Also, Senor Galvan, your best silverware and china. Like this soup bowl here, it just won't do, you see. Why, this one's even a little chipped at the corner. Don't you have lots of local Andalucian pottery here? I'd love one of those giant plates with the sun and moon painted on it, *mas romantica*, wouldn't you say?"

Senor Galvan gave me a wink, which I interpreted to be a conspiratorial comment on wives and fiancées.

I savored the *gambas*, spearing pieces of neatly-cut succulent jumbo prawns, so fresh I could taste the seawater still, the dash of garlic, the chilli oil kicking in at just the last moment before swallowing. I had to give it to Alison. Her enthusiasm was infectious. If anything, over time, her delivery had become more spontaneous and effervescent.

"These prawns are done just right. I knew this would be a sure thing,

Senor Galvan, and Nicholas and I would love to meet the chef later, if he'd be so inclined. Isn't this marvelous, Nicholas?"

Over the grilled cod, flaky and aromatic, toasting each other over glasses of Vionta Estate Albariño from Riaz Baixas, I couldn't stop looking at Alison, glowing and resplendent in her milieu. Not without some nostalgia, I reflected that Alison and I had been together quite some time. I've seen her through seasons of hair styles, from the 'Nicole Kidman' redhead to the short clipped brunette with bangs, to the layered 'Heather Locklear' blonde. None suited her as much as the jet-black curly waves framing her face like an Eskimo parka and the large golden hoop earrings. This was the Alison from college days, the Alison I became enchanted with, as if she knew the turbulence going on in my heart and had proclaimed herself the antidote.



We met at a Hillel meeting, during the one night when the Shabbat dinner, for a sense of real community, was going to be cooked exactly the same as the one that the Birthright Israel reunion had at Bar-El restaurant in Tzefat. We were both drawn by the food, and thus to each other. Sitting across from me, she said, reading the sticker on my lapel, "So Nicholas, what do you think of this *challah*?"

"I came because of the home-made *challah*. I'm homesick, but I can't afford to go home during breaks. This is as good as it gets." I gave her my best boyish smile.

Her brownish green-greenish brown eyes flashed, and she said, "You know, you and I are going to be very good friends."

After the meal, I offered to carry her books and walk her back to her dorm. At the entrance, she turned around and said, "You're nice, Nicholas. We may be better than good friends. But you're not really Jewish, are you?"

I was embarrassed, "No, I'm not."

"Oh, don't worry," she said, "I'm not, either."

I found out she'd taken her stepfather's last name—Krauss, that she had gastronomical ambitions (she wanted to be a restaurant reviewer for a food magazine), that she liked salt on her fruit. Beyond food, nothing else she told me about herself remained constant. One day, she'd be afraid of flying. The next, she'd be ready to jump on a plane and confess to me in a hushed whisper how much she'd always wanted to get a pilot's license. She told me she almost drowned in the ocean when she was eight. But when we went to Montauk, she easily swam thirty laps in the hotel pool. I was tempted to think of her as a pathological liar. But that would also presume that there was an actual unwavering truth in the plumbing depths of the package she had loosely tied together. When she told me she'd grown up in Arizona surrounded by red rock canyons, she embarked on a discourse of the formations of the layers of sedimentary, metamorphic, and igneous origins of the walls, mesas and buttes of the Grand Canyon—how it was carved by the great flood, washed by seven oceans, lifted up by the massive movement of the Colorado plateau.

"Do you know if God really created the world in six days, then in the geological history of the Grand Canyon, each day would be equivalent to 767 million years? So God would have created the Vishnu Group, the oldest rocks in the Canyon, at approximately five p.m. on a Thursday afternoon."

I was fascinated by this fast-talking, knowledgeable, mercurial changeling who could recite statistics from memory at random. I

believed her when she said she'd grown up surrounded by these awe-inspiring formations of sandstone and shale, rising like temples of dawn, at a phenomenal scale that almost didn't look three-dimensional, like a chimera, an ophthalmologic deception, at least until the next story she told me, that she'd grown up on an army base in Okinawa.

"I thought you said you grew up in Arizona?" I said.

"Did I?" she laughed. "You must have heard me wrong. I said I wished I had grown up in Arizona because I love the Grand Canyon. I read everything I can about it."

Who was I to question her version of her origins, when I had such dubious claims of my own? I told her I got my name from a phone book, that I didn't know who my father was. That my mother was a two-timing basil-eating broad, who used men as substitute child support. Alison's eyes shone with sympathy. There was no need for me to tell her the truth about my origins either.



Senor Galvan came back into the dining room, where we were the sole customers, escorted by two waiters and a trolley. They carved the pork ribs into two portions in front of our table. The aroma was incredible, honeyed and smoky.

"I hope you like," Senor Galvan smiled, deftly switching wine glasses. "The Faustino is from Rioja. It is a mix of three grapes—*tempranillo*, *mazuela* and *graciano*." The wine swirled a little when poured by Senor Galvan's expert hands.

Alison drank a big gulp. "Ummm... rustic. Sweet. Smoky. Very nice. You are a genius, Senor Galvan. This is marvelous. Tell me, Senor Galvan, are you from around here or do you hail from the big city?"

Senor Galvan told us he grew up with his entire family, five brothers and four sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great grandparents, and all lived on the same street in Antequeria. Everyone and his or her family still live there now.

Alison clapped her hands delightedly. "To have such unchanging continuity!" she exclaimed. The maitre d' at the Parador de Granada yesterday told us he'd grown up on an olive grove not far from Loja. Over *coquinas a la marinera* (tiny clams cooked with wine, garlic and parsley), *alcauciles rellenos* (stuffed artichokes), the *pescado en amarillo* (fish cooked in saffron and wine), and the *caldereta de cordero* (a stew of lamb, pepper and onion), Alison gently extracted morsels of personal information from the waiters and the maitre d'. She also convinced them in the process that there was no other place where we would conduct our reception dinner but at the little outdoor courtyard with hanging wisteria and a babbling octagonal fountain, overlooking the gardens of the Generalife. "We must have cava and cava cocktails. And Spanish music, although my favorite is really Paco de Lucia," Alison said.

As far as I knew, we didn't own a single compact disc of Paco de Lucia.

When we left, after an elaborate back-and-forth about paying the bill, we had secured invitations to come back and sample more dishes. As the maitre d' haughtily told us, there was no way that the Venta Morena could possibly compete with a restaurant in Granada. "You try more dishes. You don't like, we change," he said.



This was my idea to begin with. After three intervening years of shifting personas, a wild dizzying ride of sifting fact from fiction, we had arrived at a stasis. Alison's career hadn't taken off the way she'd hoped. She was still free-lancing. I slogged away as a media analyst at an advertising agency on Madison Avenue where the money wasn't bad. Our Friday night dates usually went like this: Alison would come home and tell me that there's a huge wedding at such-and-such place. I'd dress up in my tuxedo and she in her silk dress. We'd walk gaily uptown or downtown depending on our destination. On arriving at the venue, Alison would send me in with her purse, while she herself came in separately a few minutes later after having told whoever at the door she was going back inside after a cigarette. It never failed to amaze me that no one ever questioned a man walking into a function holding a woman's purse. We mingled as guests would mingle. We ate and drank and made merry. We always took care to arrive after the guests were seated. Only once did we find ourselves without seats because all the guests actually showed up. But then, we told them we were with the caterers, and no one was the wiser. Sometimes, Alison went up to the newly-married couple and wished them a very, very happy life together. There was nothing Alison loved more than a free meal.

One day, on the Number Six train going uptown, I leafed through the *Condé Nast Traveler* I had just purchased, and saw a picture of the mosaic arched courtyard at the Casa de la Condesa Lebrija, a private mansion in the heart of Seville. Reading about Mudejar treasures and Moorish architecture, I suddenly felt a longing I couldn't explain, a desire that was almost akin to shedding my own skin.

"Let's take a trip to Andalucia," I said to Alison when I got home. "It'll be a gastronomical tour, a tour of the palate. You've never been there. What do you say?"

She clapped her hands delightedly. "Why, are you going to propose, Nicholas?" This momentarily stymied me, but I smiled winningly, amorously, and saw no reason to mention that perhaps a couple of other things could be resolved as well.

Later, I reflected that it was the first time she had mentioned marriage. I watched her dance around the room in her bedroom slippers, and I looked at the unmatched socks she had thrown in the corner. What kind of person would wear a brown sock and a green sock together? Did she notice or did she just not care? How did one reconcile that odd sort of behavior with the fact that her toiletries were neatly lined up in the medicine cabinet—her toothbrush on the far left, the toothpaste next to it, then the mouthwash, dental floss, the cold face cream, deodorant, makeup kit and ending with nose tweezers? Even the brands kept changing, Crest to Colgate to Aim to Aquafresh, from Sure to Secret to Dove to Certain Dri to Dessert Essence.

The only thing we had in common, I reflected, was food.

We told our friends, Jacky and Diego, who laughed and said it was a brilliant idea. I had always had a thing for Jacky, with her green eyes and red hair, the fact that you always knew where you were with her, but I thought Diego was a sorry excuse for a boyfriend, buffing machismo with his dark Hispanic looks. Jacky said to us, "Oh, how I wish it was me going. Imagine, lounging by the beaches nude! Palm trees and paella, flamenco and the first cold press olive oil. Oh, you lucky bastards." I didn't say anything, but pictures of Jacky nude on a beach in Marbella lingered.

We ended up dining at the La Meridiana on our first night in Marbella. Alison had called ahead and explained what we were trying to achieve. They fed us pickled partridge salad with pomegranates, sautéed sea scallops with Serrano ham, lemon grass and ginger, and then the ox tail à la Malaguena for two, finished with Crepes Suzette. After dinner,

Alison wanted to take a stroll around the open terrace to see where everything would fit, she said, and the maitre d' was entirely compliant. I tried to pay the bill, but he said, "No, no, it's O.K. We want you to book your wedding here."

Alison couldn't believe it when I told her. Over the course of the next week, she called ahead to the Las Tabernas, La Chozita, La Hacienda, El Caprichio, El Bote, the Faro Playa, always ordering their known specialties, venturing further and further afield from our medium-rate hotel. We didn't spend a single peso for dinner.

"This is a wonderful idea, Nicholas. They are falling all over themselves to please us. Now this is what I call gastronomical enlightenment. Thank you, sweetheart. It's the best present you've ever given me."

That wasn't strictly true. I hadn't planned on giving her anything. While I wasn't always faithful, I played the perfect boyfriend quite fiendishly, with flowers for Valentine's Day, a small jeweled brooch for her birthday, a subscription to *Bon Appetit* for Christmas. But here we were, three years later, wondering when exactly during the flight from JFK that I, or perhaps we, had eased into the idea of pretending to organize a wedding. We couldn't go back to the same place twice, but there was no dearth of wonderful places to eat in Andalucia, and we drove everywhere.

Our lovemaking, from the start, had always made me feel as if I was going for Sunday communion, but the delectable cuisine and the mouthwatering desserts must have awakened something primordial in Alison, for she suddenly tore at me with her molars and mandible, crushed me with her sharp bony thorax and wrapped her legs around me in a lioness grip. When she came, she gave feral and maddened growls, the sounds punctuating through the years of silent lovemaking and jolting me. I knew nothing permanent about Alison's background, but over the years, there were mannerisms she repeated, identifying quirks that betrayed no origin but stood independent of her constant bravura and rapid talk. Like the way she tended to stroke her eyebrows when nervous or the way she kept her hands perfectly still even when words spilled from her like champagne froth. Like the way things have to be immaculate when we made love, the bed freshly made, our bodies cleaned, and the prophylactic on before the foreplay started.

My knowledge of her consisted of the years we've been together. Our lovemaking was the best we've ever had, but it's thrown a wrench into my accumulated knowledge of Alison. I did not know what to make of even the person I did not know.



We finished with an almond tart, as Senor Galvan told us he had something special prepared, something that would be an interesting surprise, a little treat he was waiting to give us. He brought out a muscat from Alicante. He also brought out the chef, Pablo Molinero Ruiz, a pudgy man with pudgy fingers and bulldog jowls. Senor Ruiz had a terribly mournful expression and he bowed in front of Alison. Alison held out her hand as if she wanted it to be kissed, but he shook two of her fingers instead. They sat down, and Senor Galvan motioned to a waiter to bring two sweet wine glasses around. I always enjoyed this last little bit, shooting the breeze with the culinary staff, because it built so much goodwill and it was a joy to watch Alison at work. Before long, she usually had the entire staff at her heels. A couple of the waiters came to serve us and stood by.

"So have you enjoyed everything today? Is everything to your satisfaction?" Senor Galvan said.

I reflected that the muscat tasted like the exquisite nectar of orange blossoms. Alison addressed the chef, "Everything was incredible. You are a genius in the kitchen, Senor Ruiz. Every bite was heavenly, wouldn't you say, Nicholas? And Senor Galvan, thank you for arranging everything. The cod and the prawns are superb, and the *cerdo* was incredible. I wouldn't change a thing. Ma would especially like the cod."

"I am so pleased you enjoyed the food. Senor Ruiz was working extra hard to make sure you would enjoy. So tell me, Senorita Lane...."

"Alison, please."

Senor Galvan laughed a little, "O.K., Alison, so tell me, how do you think our restaurant compares to La Quimera in Marbella?"

We both paused, but only for a second. I could see Alison mentally ticking off the restaurants we'd been to. "Hmm? What do you mean?" Alison said.

"Well, you see, we are constantly trying to improve ourselves here, and Senor Ruiz is a ...what do you say in America, perfectionist? Yes, he is a perfectionist, and we want to know how our *gambas* compare to the one in La Quimera?"

Alison was perplexed, but laughed, "I wish I have an answer for you, Senor Galvan, but I've never been to La Quimera."

Senor Galvan steepled his fingers, "Really, have you never been there?" He turned to the chef and they exchanged some rapid fire Spanish. I looked at Alison for a translation, and her brow was furrowed, concentrating to catch some meaning.

"Verdad, Alison?"

"Of course I'm sure, Senor Galvan. I'd know if I've been there," Alison snapped. She now cast me a quick glance, a glance that was questioning. Her fingers sought her eyebrows. I noticed suddenly that all the waiters had gathered round.

"Ah yes, well, Senor Ruiz's cousin is a chef at La Quimera. He told us a story this past weekend. An amazing story. It made us laugh. You see, he told us about a young American couple from Nueva York, good-looking, idealistic, loves food. Came to sample the *gambas* and the *chipirones en su tinta*. Tells Senor Ruiz's cousin they are getting married. But the young lady, well, she drank too much of the wine, and she says it's crazy that we let couples who are getting married sample for free. Never happen in New York, she says. She says couples can pretend they are getting married, and then they will go all over Andalucia to many different restaurants, get free meals everywhere, try the most expensive wines, eat the known specials. And so, Senor Ruiz's cousin has a theory. He thinks she's talking about themselves; there is no marriage. The wedding is a.. how do you say... a trick, a game. Alberto, he says to me, watch out for this couple, they will come to your restaurant, this Jacky and Nicholas."

We were stunned, Alison and I, for separate reasons. It took Alison a few long seconds to recover her composure. But then, she burst into gales of laughter.

"That's indeed a very funny story, Senor Galvan. Charming, even."

"Yes, Senorita Lane, I am quite amused myself," Senor Galvan smiled and twirled his handlebar moustache, "And shall I catch them?"

Alison's eyelashes swiftly fluttered down, "What are you implying, Senor Galvan?"

He did not reply but looked at us without blinking. There was something

assessing in that gaze, as if he could see the truth of everything about our relationship, even the truth that was not there. The waiters were now whispering to one another in Spanish, as if coached in a shaming ritual, "Estafadores. Mentirosos." Con artists, liars.

Alison suddenly got up from the table. Her chest puffed up and she stormed, "Well, I've never been so insulted in my life. Is this how you treat your guests? You impugn their honesty, their credibility, their integrity? You come up with this cockamamie story, this ridiculous couple, and you ask us to do what exactly? You should be so lucky if we don't sue you for libel. We are most certainly not this Jacky and Nicholas. Did your good friend, Senor Ruiz's cousin, also give you a description of this couple? Does it match ours? Did you check? I suggest you do that. Meanwhile, you have simply ruined my meal. Entirely ruined it. There is absolutely no way I will have a wedding dinner here after this. What's more, I don't believe there is a way you can make it up to me. You've mortified me."

She gestured to me, "Come on, Nicholas, give them your credit card and let's get out of here before they insult us further!"

I took out my wallet and handed over my Amex. But Senor Galvan had a further trick up his sleeve. He waved it away. "We deeply regret having offended you. There was entirely no implication intended. I merely wanted to ask your opinion of a newsworthy event I have heard. I most sincerely apologize. For suffering the indignity, the meal is on us. But if it is true what you say, this being a case of mistaken identity, surely you would not mind if we take a picture of you and we will circulate it and tell the other restaurants that you are not that couple, Jacky and Nicholas, si?"

"I most certainly do mind," Alison began, but she didn't get anywhere. One of the waiters produced a Polaroid from behind his back and snapped our picture. Her truth would not save her now. The choice was crystal clear: we had to make a swift decision whether to beat it while we were ahead of the game or risk further embarrassment extracting the photograph. Senor Galvan had called our bluff.

I tugged at Alison's sleeve and said, "Let it go, honey."

To Senor Galvan, I said, "This is a crazy joint, Senor Galvan. I don't know what kind of game you're running here, but we're nice people, and we're going to let this pass."

Alison and I left without having coffee.



In the car ride back from Venta Morena, we did not talk much. Alison fumed beside me.

"I don't recall ever using the name "Jacky." It's odd, because my memory never fails me."

I ran a hand through my hair but kept my eyes on the road. "It's a mystery all right."

"That what you call it... a mystery? Do you suppose they got us mixed up with someone else, some two-timing couple with the same idea?" Her voice boiled with anger.

I shrugged, keeping my silence.

We drove past scorched brown hills dotted with olive groves. A sign on the roadside read "Antequera - Salidas - 2 kilometres." Alison stormed, "That Jacky is so straitlaced and Diego follows her around like a little

mastiff. But underneath it all, she's just another lying bitch."

I said, "Wait just a minute, you should talk."

That stopped Alison cold. I could see her fighting for composure. Then, sweetly she said, "Why, Nicholas, is there something you want to tell me?"

I shook my head. Fear knotted itself in my stomach. I glanced back at the golf clubs I'd forgotten to put in the boot. Just in case. "Oh no, you were phenomenal. A tour de force performance. They never guessed until now. It was fun while it lasted."

Alison's fingertips smoothed her eyebrows in a placid gentle motion, but I could see they were trembling with suppressed emotion, "So that's how it's going to be, is it? Yes, it's been a great game. All of it. It's been one great game."

I drove without looking at her, and with ice-cold resolve said, "We mustn't mind too much. That's all it is. A game. In a game, there's a winner and a loser. Always." I turned, and Alison's face was a mask, a strange and cryptic smile now playing about her lips, even as she touched her fingers to her eyebrows.



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Disappeared

by
LaTanya McQueen

The police found my husband six days after I reported him missing. A couple out sailing spotted his body floating over the San Francisco bay.

The day I learned of my husband's death I was baking a quiche. I stood in the kitchen looking out at the park across the street while listening to the ticking of the timer. A quiche was the only thing I knew how to make properly, and I wanted to get it right. I picked up the timer and stared at the dial, waiting. Then there was a knock on the door.

After the police left my apartment, I sat in the living room in silence. I was afraid to turn on the television, afraid that I might see the couple the police were talking about. I imagined their faces, horrified at what they'd found. I didn't need that; imagining was enough.

I sat there until I thought I smelled smoke. Then I got up and ran into the kitchen.

"You should call this guy," my mother said over the phone. "His name is Dr. Cohen. He'll help you."

"Who says I need help? I've been doing O.K. so far."

"It's been over a year, Andrea. You've got to try to move on." In the background I heard the television. I listened to the muffled voices of two women talking.

"Mom, what's that noise? What are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing," she said. I heard her turn off the television. "Do you have

a pen? I'm going to give you Cohen's number."

"O.K.," I said.

"Make sure you call him. In fact, call him today, he might still be in. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a pen? Here's the number. Make sure you write it down."

Dr. Cohen is a fat balding man with round glasses that sit on his nose. He looks at everything but me when he speaks. The first afternoon I met with him I sat in the chair across from his desk. He said I could sit on the couch if I wanted, but that seemed too expected, so I stayed put. This way I could look at him.

"Why do you think your mother recommended me?" he asked.

"Because she's crazy. She thinks I need to be here."

"And you? What do you think?"

"That she's crazy," I said. "Maybe I am too, because I came."

"People come here for other reasons."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Pain, fear, loneliness. You'd be surprised how many people need someone to talk with. There are a lot of lonely people out there."

"Isn't that what bars are for?" I asked. Cohen chuckled a little bit. Watching him laugh, the little double chin jiggling up and down, it made me laugh. He smiled when he saw me loosen up, then told me if I wanted to keep talking I could and if I didn't that was fine too. I didn't, so the two of us spent the rest of the time sitting in silence.

Before I left I booked another meeting with his secretary.

I decided one day to sign up for a weekly cooking class. I picked Thai because, after doing a little research, it was the cheapest one I could find. I went the first day and spent the first hour listening to a woman named Mali—described in my pamphlet as a master chef—tell me how I'll be able to make authentic, mouth-watering Thai dishes by the end of the course. The last thing I remembered cooking was that quiche, which I had forgotten about until now.

Mali told us that the food we would learn to make wasn't westernized, and that for some of us it may be too spicy to eat. She said if we thought we couldn't handle it we could leave now and get our money back. No one left.

Among other things, Mali taught us how to make salmon poached in green curry sauce with Thai eggplant and basil. After that came a calamari salad with lemongrass, mint and lime sauce. Dessert was bananas covered in coconut cream. When we finished, we had the option of sitting down with everyone to eat the creations we made. I asked Mali if she had any take-out boxes so I could go home.

"Go home?" she repeated. "Why would you want to go home now? Stay, eat, enjoy with everyone else."

I told her I felt sick and clutched my stomach. "But I'd really like to take the food home, for later."

"Oh," she said. "Well then, let's see what I can find."

I took the food home and ate it cold that night while watching Letterman's Late Show. I knew it probably didn't taste as good, but I didn't care. I ate it all and fell asleep with the boxes next to me.

I spend most days trying to get myself into a routine. Wake up, make the bed, shower, get dressed, eat a simple breakfast. Work at the office filled the day. I took up knitting in the evenings when I didn't have an appointment with Cohen or cooking with Mali. I made a list of books I wanted to read and started a library of the ones I had. I recorded lavish soap operas and watched them in mini-marathons on the weekends. I took up running.

Yet still there seemed all this time to fill and I was running out of ways to do it.

"Why are you paying me to do nothing?" Dr. Cohen asked, after our third visit.

"You're not doing nothing," I said.

"You're not letting me help you, Andrea."

"I thought you said I didn't have to speak if I didn't want to."

"You don't, I really don't mind. But like I said, I won't be able to help you if you never speak."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Well, for starters, what kind of man was he? Was he happy?"

I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to tell him something other than how my husband liked to listen to Hank Williams while driving. He tried to learn Spanish from a set of cassette tapes left from previous tenants, and I'd listen to him in the living room as he repeated phrases that neither of us understood.

He liked to eat pickles with eggs.

But was he happy?

"No," I finally said, and then I told him how, yesterday, I made stir-fried long beans with roasted chili sauce and steamed jasmine rice. I told him I was learning how to knit a sweater for winter.

"If you want, I could make you one. What's your favorite color?" He didn't answer. I tried looking at him but he kept glancing at the window near me.

I watched as Cohen frowned. Neither of us spoke for awhile after that, until finally before time was up I told him I'd make him a green sweater. It'd match his coloring.

"You know it's July right?" he said. "It's a little early to be making sweaters for winter."

"But it's coming." I said. "Eventually."

My husband was a good enough man. He sold insurance policies and real estate which had earned him enough to take care of both of us. He was always on time, he never forgot a birthday. He hated my cooking, even the bad dishes, never saying a word about it. He took me to plays every other week, and had a decent sense of humor. He was a good man.

But did I know him? Did I know the type of man he was?

He was reliable, I can say that much. He ate Corn Flakes with sliced banana every morning for breakfast. He only liked Volvos because he believed they were the safest. He made it a point to never be late.

And he wasn't, up until the day he disappeared.

I started cooking Thai dishes at home. Garlic noodles with barbecued red pork. Hot and sour cucumber salad. Coconut tapioca pudding with water chestnuts and strawberries. After a few weeks my kitchen looked like the inside of one of the Thai restaurants downtown.

One of the neighbors in my building knocked on the door. "What is that smell?" he asked. "Whatever you're cooking, it smells delicious."

I didn't invite him in to eat. Instead I made him wait while I went into the kitchen and packed food in a take-out box. I had been saving them from the classes.

When I was a child, a teacher taught us how to feel our pulse. We were supposed to take our middle and index fingers and press hard onto our necks. We had to be silent and still, and all of us sat quiet, waiting to hear our hearts beating, to feel the tender thumping.

I waited the sixty seconds, watching the teacher counting for us. I remember getting nervous about not feeling my heart. I kept moving my hands, trying to find the steady beat. There was nothing.

I spent the rest of the day putting my hands to my neck, frustrated with the fact that I couldn't find my pulse. When I got home, I told my mother, saying, "Mom, I don't have a heart. I can't feel it. It's not there."

She looked at me and said, "Well, of course you have a heart. You may not feel it all the time, but it's there."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Cohen asked. "Do you feel guilty about your husband's death? About what happened?"

"No," I said. "It's not that."

"Then what, Andrea?"

I changed the subject by talking about the sweater. I told him that it was almost done. I told him I was about to start making a scarf to match. I could tell he was upset that I wouldn't talk about the things he wanted, but I knew he would never understand. It wasn't about his death; I felt

guilty about my husband's life.

Chicken soup with galangal and kaffir lime leaves. Glazed crispy noodles. Black sweet rice pudding with toasted coconut and sesame.

I was cooking meals all the time now. I ate crispy noodles for breakfast.

The days filled up, and I became so busy I didn't have to think anymore.

My husband's body was found floating over the San Francisco bay. I wondered, did I ever really know him?

Did I even know myself?

I did know the feeling of guilt. It's the opposite of weightlessness.

I'll tell you what I miss: the warmth of his body in the darkness, the sound of his heavy breathing echoing off the walls, the way his skin felt next to mine underneath the sheets—all these things reminding me someone was once with me.

There are nights when I believed he really was there. My eyes would search the room looking, trying to find a silhouette, the silhouette of a man I could have known.

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Contributors' Notes

E. P. Chiew lives in London, England, and has been previously published in *Verbsap*. She was a finalist for the *Glimmer Train* Short Story Award for New Writers, Fall 2005. Her stories are also forthcoming in *In Posse Review* and *Alimentum*. Write to her at pecklengc@yahoo.com.



Andrew Coburn is the author of thirteen novels, three made into French films. His novella, "My Father's Daughter," was included in a recent collection of British and American writers and was published in the U.S., the U.K., and France. His work has been translated into thirteen languages. A nonfiction piece entitled "Cop Talk" will appear early next year in *Oregon Literary Review*. He can be reached at coburnand@aol.com.

LaTanya McQueen is a fiction writer originally from North Carolina. Her work has appeared in *The Emerson Review*, *Rumble*, *Alighted Ezine*, and the anthology "Brevity and Echo: Short Shorts by Emerson College Alumni" by Rose Metal Press. She can be reached at latanya.mcqueen@gmail.com.



Nancy Stebbins is a psychiatrist in central Texas. She writes mostly about quirky psychotherapists. Miss Luz is her first foray into tap dancing characters. You may contact her at the address: stebbinschabot@yahoo.com.

The Somerset Review

Guidelines for Submissions

Writers are invited to submit literary short stories and essays of up to 8,000 words. To get more of an idea of what we are looking for, please read *The Somerset Review* or consult our [Recommended Reading List](#).

Email submissions to editor@somersetreview.org as an attachment in MS Word, or as plain text. We suggest you include the word "Submission" in the title of the email, so that we don't mistake it for junk mail. You may alternatively submit in hard-copy by sending to 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA.

All submissions receive replies as quickly as possible. If we have not responded within three months, please hassle us. We read year-round and never go on hiatus.

All submitted work is assumed to be original. Book excerpts will be considered if you believe the work stands alone. Reprints will be considered if the work has not appeared elsewhere within the last two years. Simultaneous submissions are encouraged.

We do not give previously-published authors any more attention than new writers, and judge submissions objectively on literary merit. Even so, a brief note accompanying the submission is preferred. We are not sure what we want to read in this note, but would appreciate the extra effort, rather than a blank email with an attachment. We are always interested in knowing how you've heard of us, and what you like about us.

Authors will see drafts of accepted pieces for review prior to release, and will receive twenty-five dollars at release time for their contribution.

Writers retain all rights to use their work elsewhere, however, we reserve the right to republish the material, without modification, in a nonprofit print volume. We also reserve the right to quote brief excerpts of text at literary events, with no connection to monetary gain, crediting the author in all cases.

We have nominated stories annually for various anthologies and awards, including *Pushcart Prize*, *New Stories from the South*, *Creative Nonfiction's Best Of anthology*, *storySouth's Million Writers Award*, *Sundress Publication's Best of the Net*, and others.

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Recommended Reading List

Author	Title	Source
Aciman, Andre	Cat's Cradle	From the November 3 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1997
Altschul, Andrew Foster	From A to Z	From Issue #1 of <i>Swink</i> , 2004
Anderson, Dale Gregory	The Girl in the Tree	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Alaska Quarterly Review</i> , 2003
Ashton, Edward	Night Swimmer	Online at <i>The Blue Penny Quarterly</i> , Spring/Summer 1995
Baggott, Julianna	Five	From <i>Other Voices</i> #28, 1998
Bardi, Abby	My Wild Life	From <i>Quarterly West</i> #41, 1995
Baxter, Charles	Snow	From the collection <i>A Relative Stranger</i> , published in 1990
Benson, Amy	Vectors: Arrows of Discontent	A memoir excerpt in Issue 29.2 of <i>New Orleans Review</i> , 2004
Borders, Lisa	Temporary Help	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Bananafish</i> , 1998
Brooks, Ben	Wildflowers	From the Spring issue of <i>Georgetown Review</i> , 2005
Broyard, Bliss	Mr. Sweetly Indecent	From the Fall issue of <i>Ploughshares</i> , 1997
Burns, Carole	Honour's Daughter	From <i>Other Voices</i> #31, 1999
Cain, Chelsea	Pretty Enough To Be a Showgirl	From the Spring issue of <i>Grand Tour</i> , 1997
Cheever, John	The Stories of John Cheever	A collection published in 1980
Christopher, Nicholas	Veronica	A novel published in 1996
Clark, Susan	Besides the Body	From the Spring issue of <i>Red Rock Review</i> , 2004
Coake, Christopher	Solos	A novella from Vol. 9, No. 1 of <i>Five Points</i> , 2005
Crane, Elizabeth	When the Messenger Is Hot	A collection published in 2003
Crowe, Thomas Rain	Firsts	Online at <i>Oyster Boy Review</i> in January, 1997
Dancoff, Judith	Vermeer's Light	From <i>Alaska Quarterly Review's</i> Intimate Voices issue, 1997
Dormanen, Sue	Finishing First	From the Summer issue of <i>Lynx Eye</i> , 1998.
Doyle, Larry	Life Without Leann	From an issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> in Fall, 1990
Kennedy, Thomas E.	Kansas City	From Vol 62 No. 4 of <i>New Letters</i> , 1996
McInerney, Jay	Model Behavior	A novel published in 1998
Millhauser, Steven	Enchanted Night	A novella published in 1999
Moses, Jennifer	Circling	From the Spring issue of <i>Gettysburg Review</i> , 1995
Murakami, Haruki	South of the Border, West of the Sun	A novel published in 1998
Offill, Jenny	Last Things	A novel published in 1999
Orlean, Susan	The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup	A collection of essays published in 2001
Perry, Rachael	Sullivan's Inventory	From No. 82/83 of <i>Confrontation</i> , Spring/Summer 2003
Raboteur, Emily	The Eye of Horus	From <i>StoryQuarterly</i> #40, 2004
Robison, Mary	Why Did I Ever?	A novel published in 2001
Russell, Karen	Haunting Olivia	From the June 13 & 20 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 2005
Salinger, J.D.	For Esme - With Love and Squalor	From the collection <i>Nine Stories</i> published in 1953
Tilghman, Christopher	The Way People Run	From the September 9 issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1991

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