Ten Spurs

Introduction by Brantley Hargrove

The Best of the Best
Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference

Vol. 12, 2018

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FRANK W. MAYBORN
GRADUATE INSTITUTE
OF JOURNALISM

Ten Spurs

Michael J. Mooney, editor
Neil Foote, associate editor

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Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference
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Foreword 

by Michael J. Mooney

This is a strange time to be a journalist. Right now, it seems there is no more popular rhetorical punching bag than the amorphous amalgam referred to as "The Media." Of course, we live in an age rife with all manner of media, and these complaints are almost never specific. A vague attack on The Media could be aimed at the traditional newsgathering outlets in print and television, or the new media endeavors that only exist online, or the hardcore partisan groups that only exist to foster useful outrage. It could mean a makeup-laden talking head on TV or anonymous blogger based on a different continent. The swipe could also be aimed at the purveyors of movies, radio, podcasts. It could refer to the stars or producers of reality TV, or social media influencers, or the so-called "citizen journalists" making YouTube commentary videos – these are all parts of The Media.

Further complicating the matter is the fact that you don't need a license or permission to call yourself a journalist. You don't need a degree to question the people in power or to document the human condition. Nor should you.

But that means a complaint about journalism could be pointing out a legitimate issue related to tone, subject choice, or source verification. Or it could be an outright attack on the truth by people who benefit from public ignorance. The designation "Fake News" could refer to overtly untrue articles created with the specific intention of fooling a targeted audience. Or it could refer to something demonstrably true albeit politically inconvenient.

Like I said, this is a strange time to be a journalist.

One way to negotiate these challenges, I think, is to build and reinforce a supportive community of individuals dedicated to telling important true stories. And that's exactly what we aspire to do at the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. We gather hundreds of the keenest minds in the industry. We spend a weekend in a hotel in Texas at the height of summer – away from the rest of the world. And we discuss the art and craft of narrative nonfiction: the books, articles, podcasts, and documentaries that reveal vital truths and resonate enough to effect change. It's a celebration of great, essential storytelling, but it's also a celebration of a community that cares about the truth.

Every year, the incredible team at the Mayborn School of Journalism, at the University of North Texas, strives to assemble a conference full of writers, editors, agents, photographers, and filmmakers whose work motivates the rest of us to be better and work harder. It's a weekend full of thoughtful conversations about every aspect of narrative nonfiction, from reporting techniques to the business of getting published. But it's also a weekend full of memorable moments: Pulitzer Prize winners telling the stories behind the stories, reporters confessing their biggest fears over lunch, legendary authors hanging out at the hotel bar.

The conference has also become a place where writers go for support. Every year there are workshops led by award-winning professionals from some of the best publications in the country. And the conference writing contests offer awards for unpublished personal essays and reported narratives that total $12,000. The top ten stories, as selected by a panel of outside judges, get published here in Ten Spurs, the Mayborn literary journal. There's also a contest for book manuscripts, the winner of which receives a check for $3,000 and a book deal through UNT Press.

The Mayborn also publishes the annual anthology, Best American Newspaper Narratives, and Mayborn Magazine, a student-run operation that's won a slew of awards.

Our goal as organizers is to have every attendee leave at the end of that weekend ready to go back to the world rejuvenated and inspired to tell the stories that matter, and to tell them the right way.

That mission seems more crucial now than ever.

Acknowledgments

by Neil Foote

Each year, Ten Spurs makes me smile. I am always thrilled to read these fascinating stories featured in this publication. We publish these extraordinary works to symbolize "The Best of the Best Literary Nonfiction of The Mayborn Conference." Our judges don't have it easy. There's no clear rubric they follow. Sure, they are looking for expertly crafted pieces, but overall, they are looking for great stories. In talking to our judges over the years, this is never an easy process. Every one of the entries is worthy of recognition. Perhaps acclaimed journalist and author David Halberstam says it best, "Telling a good story demands a great conception, a great idea for why the story works – for what it is and how it connects to the human condition. It is about ideas, about narration, about telling a story. You must be able to point to something larger." I can tell you these stories live up to Halberstam's statement.

My words here hardly capture the great pride, respect and appreciation I have for the writers, the judges and all those responsible for making publication a reality.

Let's start with the writers: Christina Hughes Babb, "Sins of the Mother;" Elizabeth Cernota Clark, "Lidice, Remembered;" Meagan Flynn, "Life After Deportation;" Jamie Friedlander, "Brony Up;" Brent Jones, "Pictures Worth a Thousand Silences;" Rick Jurgens, "150 Banana Slugs;" Jen McGivney, "Untethered;" Richard Rejino, "The Reluctant Soldier;" Adam Rhew, "Ms. Judy the Comforter;" and Debbie J. Williams, "Duet."

Thanks to our unpaid judges who do this work because they are passionate writers, journalists and storytellers who know, love and respect great writing. Thanks to Michael Lindenberger, Brantley Hargrove, JK Nickell, Stella Chavez; David Tarrant, Peter Simek, Katie Fairbank, Paul Knight, Kim Cross, Tom Huang, Tim Rogers, W.K. (Kip) Stratton, Zac Crain, Jim Hornfischer, BJ Robbins, Susannah Charleson, Tara Nieuwesteeg and Ronald Chrisman.

One of the very special components of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference is that we host workshops for these writers prior to the kickoff of the conference. For nearly eight hours, they gather around the seminar room tables to lead these writers down that painful, though rewarding, journey of picking apart their stories. They are tough. They are patient. They are precise. They push each writer to justify each word, each paragraph they write. They facilitate conversations among the writers in the room, urging each other to share their ideas on what works and better yet, what could make that story better.

Thank you workshop leaders: Sam Eifling, Michael Graff, Joan Donaldson, Peter Simek, Michael Lindenberger, Susannah Charleson, Jason Fagone and W.K. (Kip) Stratton.

There are many other pieces of Ten Spurs that are required – beyond the writers, the judges and the workshop leaders. It's the work of many others who have to design, lay out and ensure that the publication continues to live up to its outstanding national reputation. This year we welcome Caitlin Meza, whose day job is answering calls and questions from Mayborn students, but who is a gifted and talented artist who read through our essays, then pulled out her pencils and charcoal to create memorable cover art and additional illustrations

that are sprinkled throughout the publication. James Dale, the Mayborn School's marketing director, works with Jake Straka, the talented graphic artist and designer to do all the production work for the book, including the layout and design for Ten Spurs, Vol. 12, 2018. My co-director, Mike Mooney, juggles his intense career as a writer, often traveling around the U.S. and world to report his stories, to edit these essays to get them ready for publication. He recruited Brantley Hargrove, the Mayborn alumnus and author of "The Man Who Caught the Storm: The Life of Legendary Tornado Chaser Tim Samaras," (Simon & Schuster, 2018) to write the introduction, and veteran editors Kathy Floyd and Wendy Moore to copy edit.

The reality is that so much of these essays may have never seen the light of day if Jo Ann Livingston, a Mayborn alumna, didn't spend hours on the phone and responding to dozens of emails, urging writers to submit their entries, answering their questions and cracking the proverbial whip to make sure they met the contest deadlines. She also corrals the judges, making it even more convenient this year for them to access stories online, then setting up the in-person and conference calls with the judges to sift through the essays to choose the winners.

Join me in thanking all those who have helped produce this edition of Ten Spurs. I know you will enjoy reading these captivating stories that represent journalism at its best. Thank you all!

Introduction 

by Brantley Hargrove

Ed Grubb, the chaser behind the wheel, reminds me to breathe. He lifts a ham radio handset to his mouth. "I'm just gonna go up as far as I can go here, boss," he says, then clicks off.

The voice of Tony Laubach, the guy in the Subaru behind us, follows: *"Lead the way."*

It's June 16, 2014, and we're racing east along U.S. Route 275 in the northeast Nebraska farm country. Above us, the low vault of the storm is as dark as the asphalt, wet from passing rain. The slick road below us heaves and falls along with the gently folded hills of the Elkhorn River Valley.

Grubb swings into the oncoming lane and guns it past a snarl of slower vehicles. The rain is hissing against the windshield again. I'm straining to see, but a copse of hardwood trees along Humbug Creek rises ahead, obstructing my sight line. Even so, with the hills now melting into the smooth plane of cornfields that stretch to the limit of the eye, Grubb knows we're about to get our first clear look. "OK, here's your shot coming up right here, when it crosses the road," he says.

The line of cottonwoods slips past. The hairs on my arm stand on end. For the first time I really see the thing: beautiful, terrible, otherworldly. It angles out of the southwest toward the road, a deep-gray tower, like coal ash, taller than any skyscraper, as wide as five football fields laid end to end. It's surrounded by a drifting nebula of soil, debris, and centrifuged rain. Broad rivers of scud cloud arc around the vortex and into its core. The tornado enters the road directly ahead, less than three-quarters of a mile out.

This is exactly what I've come for.

We've been on the road for nearly a week, myself and two expert storm chasers who agreed to let me tag along through nearly every state in Tornado Alley. On my third such trip this season, I've just seen my first-ever tornado within the last half hour. This is now the second. The ridiculous number of miles, the long, sedentary hours, the humble motel lodging, the storms that failed to produce – it all led to this. Our afternoon so far has been adrenaline-drenched, completely unforgettable, and yet somehow just beginning.

In moments, we'll witness one of the rarest tornadic events of a generation. For my guides – veteran chasers with decades of experience between them – this is the high-water mark in their search for swirling wind. But I should note here that I'm not a real storm chaser, not like them; I couldn't interpret dew points on a surface chart if my life depended on it. This is more like experiential research for me. I've been on a reporting trip whose outcome I couldn't know until now. For nearly a month, I've gambled real money on the remote prospect of glimpsing something intangible about a man I set out to understand but can never meet. I wanted to immerse myself in a world I knew only through television and "Twister." A story brought me here.

I look to the southeast. The third tornado of the day, newly formed and swelling by the second, knifes toward the road like a plowshare's blade. I glance over at Ed Grubb. He grins at me. Then, he hits the gas.

*****

Let's back up for a second. Before this extraordinarily bonkers day – before a remarkable story lured me into unnerving proximity with one of the deadliest storms I'll ever personally witness – I was a rudderless University of North Texas undergrad with a serious case of angst. I hadn't the slightest idea what I was going to do with a bachelor's degree in journalism. Although my experience as a staffer at the campus newspaper had yielded a few good clips, I left with serious doubts about whether I was even cut out for this work. I simply couldn't see the path forward – at least not one I was interested in following. It was 2005 and I'd be graduating within a year. The real world loomed larger every day. Where would I find my place in it? And would that place be as a writer?

I suspect this was why my professor, George Getschow, had been urging me to give over three weeks of my summer to his inaugural narrative-nonfiction course. It was to be located a couple of hours from campus in a tiny North Texas hamlet I'd never once heard of. The entire class would be bunking in an ancient hotel, where I'd room with a complete stranger. In this remote location I'd learn *something*, I was assured, about writing about a people and a place.

Honestly, it made about as much sense as anything else, and it sure beat spending another sweaty summer vacuuming rental cars. So, I signed up. I packed a bag and steered for Archer City, the place where the post oaks clear out and the mesquite scrub rises up. I pulled into this postage stamp of a town, really nothing more than a highway crossroads with a fire-gutted movie theater, a single grocery that doubled as a gas station, and an incongruous preponderance of antiquarian bookstores. Apparently Archer's native son, Larry McMurtry, Texas' most prodigious novelist, had decided on a whim one day to turn the oil and cowtown into an unlikely literary destination.

I peered up at the Spur Hotel's bluff three stories. Once I'd lugged my bag to my room, I settled into one of the chairs on the front porch, watching as the cattle trucks lumbered past. Other students started straggling in. That day I met Mike Mooney, a grad student with whom I promptly made a beer run. Then, Paul Knight, a familiar face from class, showed up. And before long, there was George, arriving in an aging convertible Mustang whose rear end sagged beneath a trunk stuffed with books. We helped him deposit them onto the dining room's banquet table in unruly mounds. They were supposed to serve as exemplars of fine and important writing. But I think George also placed them there, at the center of every class, as a not-so-subtle challenge: One day, if you keep working at it, you might add to the pile.

As class began, George's charge to us was at once simple and uncomfortably nebulous: Immerse yourself in this town. Try to see it through a storyteller's eyes, through the eyes of the people who live here, through McMurtry's, if you can. Find a story and tell it. You've got three weeks; make the best of them.

That's what I did or, at least, it's what I tried to do. I wandered through Archer City, looking for what, I had no idea. As the heat of the July sun beat down, I felt as adrift as I had in Denton. If anything, my doubts were reinforced when I returned to the Spur, day after day, without a story that spoke to some truth about this place. This continued for the first couple of weeks. In the meantime, I patronized the Legion Hall, the only bar. I embarked on long, purposefully aimless drives down

dirt roads gridded between the sprawling ranches of Archer County. Mike, Paul, and I would pull over somewhere late at night to drink beer, to listen to the coyotes chatter, and to look up at the stars we'd never been able to see back on campus. I was having a fantastic time, truth be told, even if I was no closer to a breakthrough, whatever that was supposed to look like.

Then, one evening, while I was lounging in my room, I started rifling through some of the books on the nightstand. There were probably a few McMurtry tomes, but the only one I remember was the big yellow doorstopper, titled "Trails Through Archer." It was a local history published back in '79 and written by a rancher named Jack Loftin. The pages contained harrowing true stories of drought, murder, cattle drives, tribal depredation, and skirmishes between Texas Rangers and Native Americans – the whole bloody frontier history of a single county.

I called Loftin up. He invited me to come over to his ranch the next morning. I woke at dawn and drove out to the eastern edge of the county. Pulling off onto the buff caliche of Loftin Road, I covered a dusty mile or two, then rumbled over his cattle guard. Loftin's house swung into view. It was a little oil pumper's shack he'd bought for a couple thousand dollars decades ago and had had trucked out to this rise on the original family homestead. The spread where McMurtry grew up was just due west of here.

I walked up to the house. Loftin came out, the door to the screened-in back porch rattling shut behind him. Well into his 70s, he swayed from side to side on a bad hip as he hobbled toward me. His blue eyes were mostly closed by a lifetime in the sun. His right arm had been snapped like a dried-out mesquite limb in a tractor accident, and he hadn't been able to straighten it out since.

Loftin, I quickly discovered, wasn't much for small talk, but he could hold forth on the astounding collection of Ordovician-, Permian-, and Pennsylvanian-period fossils he'd amassed as a local guide for Ivy League paleontologists. His termite-eaten tool sheds spilled with huge prehistoric lizard skulls, gargantuan nautilus-like shells, and the fossilized bone fragments of extinct sail-backed reptiles.

The man was a walking encyclopedia. He seemed to carry in his mind an internal map with the locations of arcane histories since forgotten by everyone else. He took me out to his front pasture, where Marcy Trail wagon tracks were literally etched into the bedrock. We piled into his old rattletrap Ford pickup and drove onto a land littered with relics: the crumbling rock foundation of the county's first school house, half hidden in the buffalograss. The prairie grave of some young cowpoke who'd been shot down and buried where he died. We took a long hike through the mesquite to the secret site of a Native holy ground still strewn with stone implements.

I became something of a fixture at the Loftin ranch, in his truck, at his dinner table. Even after the class was over, I came back. Sometimes I'd even go out on my own to hunt down the landmarks in his book. I trespassed to get to the site of a battle that had cost the Texas Rangers more men than had ever been lost in a single engagement. It was just as Loftin had described: a boulder-crusted knob thrust up out of the plains, flanked by shallow ravines they'd used for cover. That day, Keechi warriors set fire to the buffalograss to flush the Rangers out. I tried

to imagine the horizon walled in by smoke as bullets and arrows whistled by. I suspect Loftin had done the same once. And I was positive Larry McMurtry had, too; he recounted that very fight in "Lonesome Dove." The famous writer might play by different rules than Loftin, but their tools were the same.

That was the story I ended up telling, about a rancher who did the yeoman's work of historical excavation, and about the novelist whose stories made that history indelible.

I earned my undergrad degree not long after, in 2006, and moved into the Spur Hotel. For reasons I'm still not sure I can satisfactorily articulate, I wasn't ready to let that place go. So, as I forestalled the future, I did grunt work for the hotel's owner, who also had a ranch and a construction business. I kicked around town, made a few friends, and took a good number of long, boozy drives down dirt backroads. I knew it couldn't last forever, and I was pretty sure I didn't want it to. Certainly the hotel's owner wasn't interested in subsidizing my procrastination indefinitely. I'd already written the story I'd come to tell. Now it was time to move on.

It didn't matter much where I went, so long as there was some kind of adventure to be had, and maybe a few stories I'd never find where I was from in Texas. I ended up at a newspaper in a coal-and-natural-gas boomtown in the far northeast steppes of Wyoming. After that, it was an alt-weekly in South Florida, with its sun-soaked beaches and weird crime. Next, I was in Tennessee, a state with its own strain of gothic tale. But eventually, as Texans usually do, I came back. In the summer of 2013, I was at the Dallas Observer when I read a report that sounded made up, like "Twister," if "Twister" were a tragedy. An inventor and storm chaser had disappeared along with his son and a meteorologist inside of the largest tornado ever observed. Their bodies were recovered over the course of that evening and into the next morning. I had so many questions. Why had they gotten so close to a tornado that seemed purpose-built to ensnare chasers? What were they trying to accomplish out there? Who was Tim Samaras?

I managed to convince my editor to send me to Oklahoma, where Samaras had died, and to Colorado, where he'd lived. As I tracked down friends, colleagues, fellow chasers, and the sheriff's deputy who'd found him out on that desolate backroad, the outlines of his life, and his death, came into view. He was an autodidact – a self-taught genius in his own specific way – who'd worked as an instrumentation engineer for a research and defense contractor. His gig was to use high-speed electronics to characterize the shockwaves and effects on targets of all manner of explosive military hardware.

While flipping through a clearinghouse publication for federal contracts in the late '90s, he'd stumbled across a call for proposals from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency was seeking bids for what Samaras instantaneously understood to be his dream project. Once he'd secured the NOAA contract, he set about cobbling together a device with components he'd used on the test range – a singular instrument hardened enough to take meteorological readings from inside tornadoes. This was something field researchers with PhDs had been trying and failing to do for decades. There simply was no data from that region of the vortex, where houses fall and people die.

Tim's quest stoked hope within the severe weather community, as well as a healthy measure of skepticism. After all, the guy had nothing but a high school diploma. But in 2003, he pulled off what was probably the most dramatic coup in atmospheric science so far this century. He dropped one of his probes in front of a mammoth tornado and made his escape without a heartbeat to spare. For the first time in history, we had data from the core.

Tim spent the rest of his days attempting to derive more and better data from the hearts of the most violent tornadoes imaginable. Then, one day in Oklahoma, his mission cost him everything. He came up against a monster unlike anything he'd ever encountered. It took his life, his son's, and his chasing partner's.

I finished the article for the Observer, but I felt as though I'd only skipped across the surface of a much deeper story. In the spring of 2014, I got a book contract from Simon & Schuster and started digging. As imperative as it was to nail down the hard, biographical facts, I knew the book would suffer without the intangibles that can be found only in the presence of apocalyptic storms. If I were to truly understand this man, I'd have to hitch a ride with some of his best friends, like Ed Grubb and Tony Laubach. I needed to see through Samaras' eyes the wild and dangerous world that had both possessed and, at the very end, doomed him.

*****

That's why I'm in Nebraska. That's why we're approaching as close as relative safety permits. Today is a day I know Tim Samaras wouldn't have wanted to miss. After listening to hours and hours of his recordings, I can practically hear the excitement in his voice as if he were here next to me. Two debris-loaded columns of lethal wind loom within hundreds of yards of either side of U.S. Route 275. Each scorches the cornfields with gusts of up to 200 miles per hour. Somehow, a single storm is sustaining two EF4 tornadoes. It's both a nightmare and a storm chaser's giddiest dream.

Where the tornadoes touch the surface I see vertical jets, skyward eruptions of soil and condensate moving at velocities I've never observed in nature. Turbulent waves propagate at hundreds of feet per second up the tornadoes' flanks. Mostly I mutter to myself, but here and there I manage at least a sentence fragment: "The violence of it," I gasp.

We continue to close the distance. Laubach comes in over the radio: "Are we seriously about to field-goal ourselves?"

I laugh nervously as the first frissons of panic start fluttering around my guts. We drive over a muddy slash in the road where the northernmost tornado crossed.

"I'm gonna field-goal up to the next one," Grubb says. He punches the accelerator and whips around an SUV. The first tornado is to our 10 o'clock, moving away to the northeast. The second is now to our one o'clock, just south of 275, already ejecting a debris plume over the road. This means the way ahead has just closed.

Grubb pulls into the breakdown lane, a giant to our left and another in front. I make the rookie mistake of opening my door with his already ajar. Our SUV becomes a wind tunnel. My ball cap is whisked from my head and into the field. Grubb's eyeglasses disappear. He manages to snatch my notebook in midair before

it, too, vanishes. As I wrench my door shut, one of the tornadoes chews through a stand of trees and a cluster of grain silos. The air around the funnel bristles with swarms of dark shapes: huge cottonwood limbs and trunks, tumbling sheets of steel paneling, and God knows what else.

The inflow feeding the tornadoes is a sustained gale, steady as jet engine exhaust. It sucks past our legs and flattens the corn. The sound of a tornado, I find, is changeable and dependent to some degree on what it eats. When it moves through trees and structures, the pitch is low, that locomotive roar you've always heard about. But when it moves over grass or wheat or corn, the sound is like whitewater, only it seems to come from every direction.

As we stand to the side of the road, bracing our bodies against the inflowing wind, the tornadoes' paths cross, an alignment of celestial bodies. For a moment it looks as if one has ingested the other. But before long, they appear to cleave again. Radar and damage surveys will later determine that this apparent split is actually the death of one tornado and the birth of the fourth EF4 of the day. At an estimated 530 yards across, it's the biggest yet.

The tornadoes recede into the north, tracing nearly parallel paths, two smoke-colored incisors sunk into the horizon. I could lose myself peering into the kaleidoscopic swirl of cloud material and debris. And if I watch very, very closely, every once in a while, I catch for only an instant these pale pillars of cloud – tornadoes within the tornado – in orbit at the periphery of the funnels.

Eventually, we lose sight of them through terrain and deepening slugs of rain. As we trace their paths north, we see the profiles of skeletonized trees like bared teeth, almost entirely denuded. We see cattle, some dead and others limping, all plastered in casts of windblown soil. It was a close call in nearby Pender. We drive along Main Street, the siren fading and swelling, snapping off the buildings downtown. Even if the tornadoes haven't dissipated yet, we won't be able to catch up with this storm. Our chase is over.

Exhausted yet still pinging with nervous excitement, we gather at a Texas Roadhouse in Sioux City. Ordering steaks after witnessing a tornado was one of Samaras' rituals, and Grubb and Laubach intend to honor that. This day merits a slab of medium-rare beef more than any in recent memory. The event that will come to be known as the Pilger Twins is sure to find its place in the pantheon of astounding tornadic events.

Laubach remains in the parking lot to transmit his footage, which will appear tonight on CNN and CBS News. I drift inside. I sidle up to the bar, order a celebratory Glenlivet, and happen to glance up at the flat-screen, tuned to the local news. There is a queue of ambulances stretching as far as the eye can see down State Highway 15, waiting to get into Pilger, a village of some 350. I consult the maps function on my phone to place Pilger in relation to our route.

The moment that would always be fixed in my memory, when the trees cleared, and the fields stretched before us, and I saw every eddy, every ripple, and the bright glitter of hurtling debris? That was moments after it left Pilger in its shattered trail, and cast its ruin into the muddy fields to the north of town. Two people were killed, including a little girl.

As we waited for storms to initiate late this morning and into the early afternoon, the sun had shone, and the day looked for all the world like a bright one beneath untroubled skies. But we knew different. We knew the sky was likely to fall on someone today. Turns out, we were there at the precise moment when it did. It's the recursive moral conundrum of the storm chaser, one Samaras knew all too well.

I think I better understand him now, this chaser who is both a stranger and someone I feel I know intimately. After getting to know his family, friends, and colleagues, I see a man who is curious, ambitious, obsessed, gutsy. Confronted with the power of the sky and the horrors that follow, he decided he could be the one to chip away at the mystery before him. He pressed into these spaces unexplored, his proximity to danger growing all the while. And somewhere along the way, as he faced down some of Earth's most violent storms, fear's grip loosened, even if just a little.

But there are things about the man that couldn't be gleaned in an interview. Embedded with these chasers – some of his closest confidants – I lived the rhythms and strategies that shaped his life each spring. Beneath the storm, with the wind at my back and the roar in my ears, I felt alive, vulnerably mortal, and completely insignificant. I suspect Tim once felt the same way. I can imagine being with him on that other side. Not behind the tornadoes, as we were today, but squarely in their paths. I can see him activating his probe, pressing it into the dirt, and casting a wary glance over his shoulder at the approach of the dark wall.

This is exactly what George was always telling us back in Archer City. The only way we'd ever understand the people we write about is to obliterate the barriers between us and to live, at least for a time, in their world.

*****

I went back to the little North Texas town where I first learned that lesson last summer, as I do every now and then. The first order of business is always to take stock of what's gone and what's left.

Most of McMurtry's bookstores have closed, of course. And there isn't a restaurant that hasn't undergone at least a few iterations of new ownership since 2005.

Jack Loftin died a few years ago. It's strange to me to think that he isn't out there puttering around anymore, weather be damned, feeding his cattle and checking in on his hand-chiseled historical markers. I won't say Archer lost its memory with his passing, because he left behind a book for that. But it has lost one of the few remaining direct links to the pioneers. His great-grandfather was the third to settle here, back when the county was a wild and very-much-unsettled place.

Yet Archer hasn't really changed, not in those immutable ways. There's still grit in the wind. And though the countryside might be a tinderbox some years, and as green as Eden during the wet ones, the contours – and those backroads – are as familiar to me as a street I grew up on.

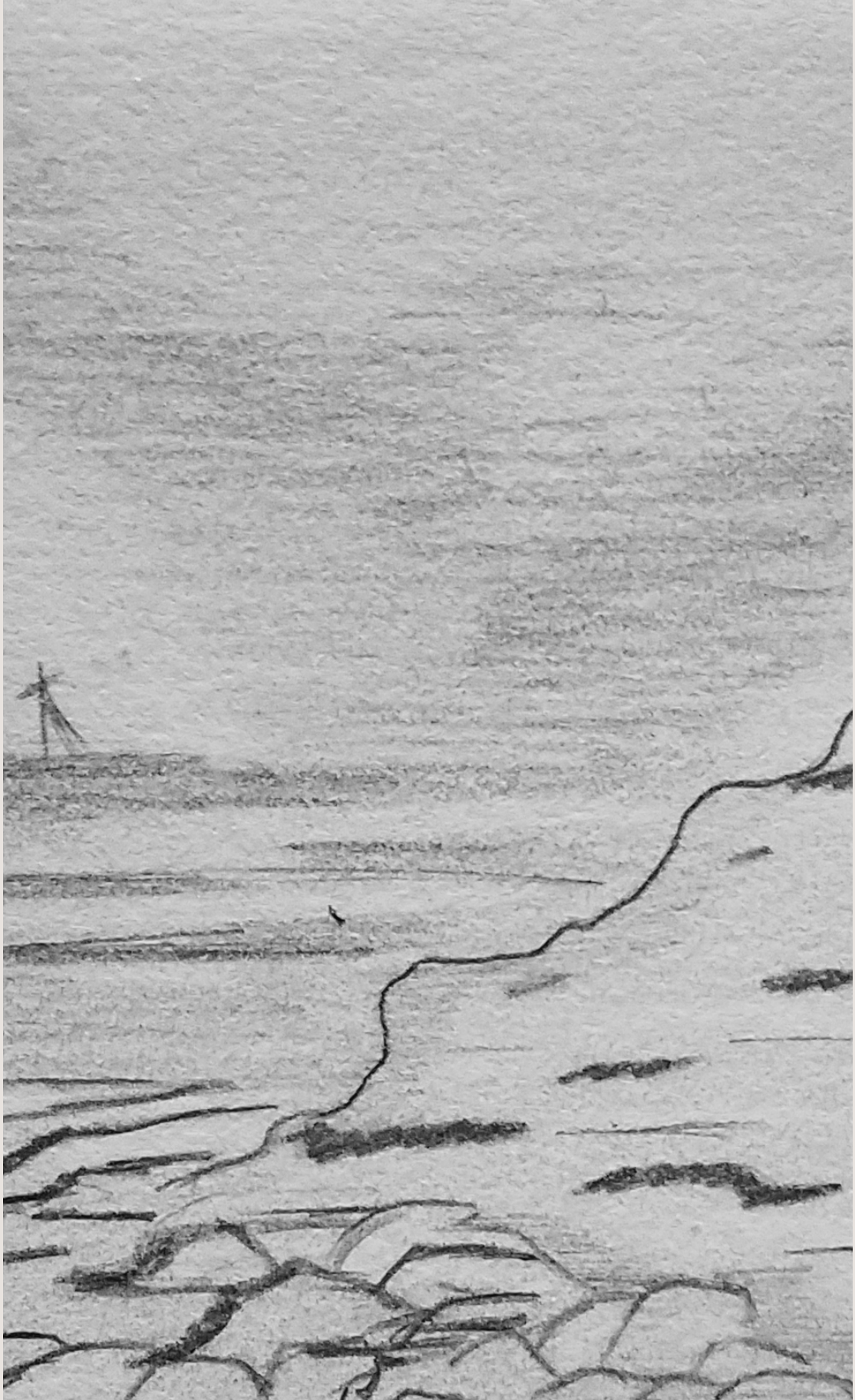
No, if anything here feels different now – as it increasingly does with each passing year – it's because I'm different, not this town. I've heard the cliché that you can never really go home, if home is both an idea and a reflection of a very specific

time. Writers are supposed to avoid worn-out axioms, but hell if it isn't true. And that isn't a bad thing necessarily. In fact, it's kind of comforting to be reminded of a former self and a former time. That's probably why I'll keep coming back every year or two, I hope.

By the time this essay comes out, my first book, "The Man Who Caught the Storm," will have already been published. Maybe next time I head north to Archer City I'll bring a copy with me. There won't be any unruly mound on the banquet table; the Spur Hotel has since installed a couple of nice bookcases. But I'll leave one behind anyway. I'll add to the pile. Then, I'll probably go for a drive.

Best of the Best

Ten Spurs



Lidice, Remembered

by Elizabeth Cernota Clark

Dawn slipped into the city, rippling along its shoreline and into alleys and expressways, dipping into neighborhoods, suburbs, and spring-green farmland. Beyond city limits on this warm Chicago day, dawn's lengthening rays brushed open rose petals and lit paths for a crowd that would soon gather at Lidice Memorial Park, a quiet street-corner sanctuary nestled among 1940s-era bungalows in Crest Hill, Illinois.

Some visitors would bring wreaths for remembrance on this day, June 10, 2017. Others would simply bring themselves – and their memories – to mark the 75th anniversary of the tragedy of another, faraway Lidice.

I've known about Lidice since childhood, when the very name provoked angry, perplexing conversations – usually on Sunday evenings in early summer at my grandparents' house on Harvey Avenue in Berwyn, on the near-west side of Chicago.

"Who is this Lidice," I'd wonder, "who makes them so angry?" I'd pick clues from their Czech dialogue like a bird at a feeder: "Heydrich," "Horak," "Benes," "Lezaky." The assortment was not always in that order, but always the same names.

It would be several years before I'd learn the story of Lidice, a village in old Bohemia.

My father, an only child born in 1914, had grown up on Harvey Avenue in this snug, two-bedroom brick bungalow, playing with gadgets and bicycle pedals, cranks and wrenches, and exploring wild onion fields with his friends. The name "Chicago," they'd learned in school, is from the native Algonquin for "striped skunk," a useful label for the onion-scented alliums they chewed on their prairie playground. Dad and his buddies learned English, too, at Hiawatha Elementary School. But in summer they reverted to Czech as they fished the creeks, played marbles, and snuck off to smoke catalpa-leaf cigars.

Most of Dad's friends, whose parents had emigrated, like his, from Old-World provinces –Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia – would grow up to know Lidice very well.

I especially loved my grandparents' house in spring and summer when the high-backed wooden rocking chair returned to the front porch and a floor-to-ceiling American flag billowed proudly on Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day, snapping in the breeze like a sail. In the backyard – bordered by chain-link fence and a whitewashed shed – poppies fluttered in the breeze, opening to a cycle

that would, with a few months of sunshine, yield seeds for Grandma's braided breads and buttery pastries. Prairie currents flowed unobstructed here, rocking the hammock and pulling the scent of dill from her garden through open kitchen windows and even into the attic, where thick goose down comforters had settled after the long winter.

On Sundays, her kitchen table was just big enough for the seven of us: my parents, grandparents, me, and my older brother and sister. Grandma had earned her passage to "Amerika" by working as cook and nanny for a Salzburg family; she spoiled us with her gourmet recipes. The oven-rich fragrance of roast goose, pork, or svickova (braised beef) with dumplings and dill gravy would tease us all day, mingling with kindred aromas wafting throughout the neighborhood. As we ate, we children half-listened to the grownups' conversations. We knew some Czech words – we could easily distinguish them from Polish or Slovak – but we barely spoke the language.

We'd linger through evening in those days, playing dice games, reading the Sunday comics, bouncing old rubber balls saved from Dad's childhood – and maybe taking a walk to 26th Street for ice cream.

Grandpa, a cabinetmaker, had apprenticed in Vienna and would sometimes show us what he was working on in the shed. Or, he might open the garage door to admire his shiny old Ford sedan. Toward twilight, we'd go back in the house to munch on ring bologna or sulc (head cheese), set out on the table with warm milk and crackers. At dusk, "Twentieth Century" came on TV, and kitchen chairs moved into the living room.

Prudential Insurance sponsored that CBS documentary series, hosted by Walter Cronkite from 1957 through most of the '60s. Each episode opened with a heroic theme song and Prudential's logo, the Rock of Gibraltar. Seeing that sturdy rock and hearing the rousing brass band made me feel as if we were bound in a safe, secure cocoon, like the ones on the leafy catalpas holding the hammock in the backyard.

Depending which World War II newsreels flickered across the TV screen, the grownups either watched quietly or shook their heads and complained bitterly. But only in Czech. By nature, my parents and grandparents were peaceful, soft-spoken, and generally cheerful, so it puzzled me that "Lidice" triggered such simmering rage.

Eventually, "Soo-li-vahn" (the Ed Sullivan show) lifted their mood with his comedians and circus acts. And laughter – and English – returned to the living room.

If my brother or I asked about Lidice on the way home, we'd get a vague reply: "Oh, it happened a long time ago … it's nothing to worry about now." But of course, we did. And if our older sister knew what had made the adults so angry during "Twentieth Century," she didn't say.

Back at home, tucked into bunk beds, we'd listen to Mother read from Margaret Sidney's "The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew." She, more than Dad, wanted us to know about life in America and how families work together to

overcome hardships and sorrow, just like the five little Pepper kids did. Her own father, who had emigrated from Pilsen, Bohemia, had married a first-generation American from Chicago's old Pilsen neighborhood. Together, they built a business and raised six children.

If Dad put us to bed, he'd tell fairy tales and legends: Rapunzel, Rip Van Winkle, the headless horseman, the sleeping knights of Blanik Mountain, and the Loch Ness monster.

Blanik and its knights especially intrigued us. The knights were giants, Dad said. And in the mountain where they slept, a human year was but a day. A day! This beloved ancient Czech legend promised – *promised* – that the knights would rise up during their country's greatest hour of need and charge out of their mountain cave on horseback to save their country.

I wondered if Blanik looked like the Rock of Gibraltar.

As the 1950s merged into the 1960s, the mention of another Czech word – Lidice – faded. New conflicts began dominating Cronkite's "Twentieth Century," and Lidice became just another word in a language we recognized by sound, but which my siblings and I still neither spoke, wrote, nor understood, save for a few phrases: "Dobry' den" (Hello), "Dobre rano" (Good morning) "Dobrou noc" (Good night), "Na zdar!" (Here's to your health!).

Still, occasionally on Sunday evenings in June, the few names I'd picked out from long-ago conversations would resurface on TV, with a couple of additions: "Gabcik" and "Kubis." I sensed a connection between those names and my grandmother crying softly sometimes at the kitchen table.

"What is it, Pa?" my father would ask his father in the living room. "Lety," Grandpa would reply.

Lety, I concluded, must be a person, like Lidice. Perhaps both were close friends of my grandmother's and had died.

The question, "Who is Lidice?" was finally addressed when I was about 9 – but slowly, carefully, in small bits, and in English. To my surprise, Lidice was not a "who" but a "where." Heydrich was Reinhard Tristan Heydrich, "the butcher of Prague." Not the kind of butcher, though, like my grandfather from Pilsen who ran a meat market in Cicero, on Chicago's west side.

Our parents explained as gently as possible, but not at bedtime. Lidice would never be a fairy tale. Lidice's story line was plotted by another household name: "Hitler."

For me, the truth emerged when I still believed in fairy tales.

"Why didn't the knights wake up?" I challenged. "They were supposed to wake up and save the people!" I asked Grandpa, too.

"Blanik is just a story," they'd say. "Just a story." And they'd look away, as if forever stunned by images they'd seen on those newsreels, and the horrors they discussed among neighbors.

And so now, with reluctance, I retell the story of Lidice. ...

In the early morning of June 10, 1942 (while the mythical knights dozed in their crystal caves at Blanik Mountain), Hitler's Nazi soldiers crept into Lidice, a Roman Catholic village of around 400 people, 15 miles northwest of Prague. The soldiers rousted everyone, roughed up the men, and wrenched babies and children from their mothers. The men they took to Horak's farm, lined them up against mattresses alongside the barn and shot them – 173 total. Fifty women were shot and killed that day, too, and 200 more were trucked to Ravensbruck concentration camp. Children were deported to camps in Germany and Poland, such as Chelmno; what German radio called "learning centres" in its broadcasts from Prague. Some children who looked adequately Aryan were placed with German families.

In her 1942 book-length poem, "Murder at Lidice," Edna St. Vincent Millay tackles the enormity of Lidice. One of the gentler excerpts:

"The whole world holds in its arms today
The murdered village of Lidice,
Like the murdered body of a little child,
Innocent, happy, surprised at play, –
The murdered body, stained and defiled,
Tortured and mangled, of a helpless child!"
--xxv, "The Murder of Lidice"

The Nazis' next tasks: burn and otherwise destroy the village, fill in the lake and divert the stream that ran through the valley. On June 24, a new target: Lezaky, a colony nearby whose men toiled in a stone quarry. After that, orders were to secure the gypsy camp at Lety near Pisek, south of Prague, as a labor camp for Czech Roma. My grandmother, the gourmet cook, was from Pisek.

The annihilation of Lidice and its neighbor, Lezaky, was retribution for the May 27 assassination attempt in Prague of SS leader Reinhard Heydrich, whom Hitler had promoted to governor of Bohemia and Moravia as reward for his work with Kristallnacht, the 1938 attacks against Jews in Germany.

Heydrich's assassins – Czech paratroopers Josef Gabcik, Jan Kubis, and Josef Valcik – had arrived in Prague from London on orders of the London-based Czech government in exile led by President Edvard Benes. The code-named Operation Anthropoid (though they nearly bungled it) ultimately succeeded.

As Heydrich's open-top Mercedes limousine rounded a bend near the Vltava (Moldau) River on May 27, 1942, the paratroopers ambushed it. Gabcik leaped in front of the car, aimed his submachine gun at Heydrich, and pulled the trigger. The gun jammed.

Heydrich drew his pistol, ordering his driver to stop. Kubis, another paratrooper, emerged from the shadows to throw an antitank grenade that exploded near the limo, injuring and further infuriating Heydrich, who collapsed in his car. The driver briefly pursued the assassins before hailing a vehicle to transport Heydrich to

Bulovka Hospital, where Heydrich died eight days later, on June 4.

It would have been my parents' third wedding anniversary – June 11, 1942 – when news of the Lidice massacre surfaced via news reports from Reuters and German Radio-Prague. Adolf Hitler, the reports said, had declared Lidice erased from all maps and human memory. Those early bulletins warranted only a few inches inside The London Times, The New York Times, and The Chicago Daily Tribune.

But the headlines grew. And the world would remember. People began naming their babies Lidice. Towns, parks, hospitals, and streets were renamed in the United States, Mexico, Great Britain, Palestine, Peru, Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil, and Panama.

In Phillips, Wisconsin, Czech immigrants dealt with the staggering news by building a Lidice Memorial that still stands in the town's Sokol Park.

Near Joliet, Illinois, developer Dominic Romano renamed Stern Park Gardens in memory of Lidice and in honor of the neighborhood's immigrant families, many of whom had sent sons and daughters to serve their new country during the world wars. Although the Lidice subdivision was eventually absorbed by the city of Crest Hill, it retained its Lidice Memorial Park, street signs for Lidice Memorial Parkway, and a collection of archives at the public library.

Each June, Czech-American organizations assemble a commemorative program at the park, including the posting of Czech and American flags. In 2017, old Czech hymns floated across the old neighborhood, sung by United Moravian Societies Singers. Children from two Czech-language schools recited their original poetry. Jerri Zbiral, a filmmaker and daughter of a Lidice survivor, spoke about the village's influence on her life.

Some historians view the massacre at Lidice as a turning point in World War II: a garish wakeup call to Adolf Hitler's capacity for hate, cruelty, and violence.

The news from Prague and London was a turning point in other ways, as it threatened to unravel – or at least distort – the delicate, protective strands of life that immigrant families had so carefully spun since arriving at Ellis Island. Even if they weren't from Lidice, these Bohemians, Moravians, and Slovaks knew of the village and where it was. Taken together, their home provinces would have roughly fit into the state of Colorado.

Many of these immigrants, including my grandparents, were teenagers when they embarked for the New World around the turn of the 20th century. Desperate to escape Austro-Hungarian oppression, they made it to America before World War I broke out. In 1918, a month before an armistice between Germany and the Allies ended the war, Czecho-Slovakia's provisional government declared independence from Austria-Hungary. And the ancient Czech lands fused into an independent albeit short-lived democratic republic: Czechoslovakia.

By 1939, darkness returned to the villages that this newest generation of Americans had forsaken. Germany invaded, occupying and progressively weakening the Czech nation until 1948, when the Soviet Union – which had kept its unblinking eye on those charming Slavic provinces – conquered them in a bloodless Communist coup. Russian soon trumped all other languages, and private property owned by Czechs became state property. Borders were once again

rigorously controlled.

All this my parents, grandparents and neighbors watched from afar, further frustrated by Soviet control over families that were separated by an ocean and the Berlin Wall.

At last, after four decades of Communism, the Czech people regained their freedom. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 revived the spirit of the Blanik Knights as the people themselves rose up to save their country. Once again – but this time without Slovakia – Bohemia and Moravia formed a democratic republic. Freedom to own property enabled entire families and their descendants – including some who had become American citizens – to reclaim land and houses in the democracy known, at least for now, as the Czech Republic.

As for Lidice, it was rebuilt after the war, on a different site but near the old village. The Soviets promoted Novy Lidice (New Lidice) and helped locate and return some of the women who had survived Ravensbruck. A few were astonished to reunite with children they had thought dead.

Within months of Lidice's destruction in 1942, a British group, "Lidice Shall Live," had begun collecting funds to help rebuild the village. Led by Sir Barnett Stross, a physician and politician, they also promoted the idea of a vast memorial rose garden to bridge the old village site with Novy Lidice. About 30 countries contributed plants for the garden, which opened in 1955 as the Garden of Peace and Friendship.

In addition to thousands of roses shipped to Lidice, other plants arrived: lilacs from France, tulips from the Netherlands, orchids from Venezuela, palm seeds from Cuba, exotics from Uruguay, and trees from Greece: olive, myrtle, and laurel.

The Garden of Peace and Friendship continues to connect the new village with the original, where foundations remain of Horak's farm, the village school, and St. Martin's church. Stunning during late spring and summer, the garden is planted in the design of a rose in full bloom with drooping leaves and thorns, flanked by a smaller rose and a rosebud.

Planting beds that form the shape of the largest rose, its leaves and thorns, bloom with roses in several shades of red to symbolize the blood spilled at Lidice and the houses set on fire by the Nazis.

Both dark and bright-colored roses mingle in beds forming the smaller rose: dark blossoms to symbolize the fate of most of the women; brighter hues to represent survivors who returned to the village. A single rosebud, whose beds bloom with white and pastel roses, is dedicated to the lost children of Lidice.

In the year 2017 – 75 years after the tragedy – the Garden of Peace and Friendship thrives on the soil and story of Lidice. Together with outdoor sculptures donated by Czech artists and others, the garden reminds visitors that life ultimately triumphs over tragedy.

Adjacent to the garden, Lidice Memorial houses a library, archives, art gallery, auditorium, and restaurant. An annual international exhibit of children's artwork – dedicated to the lost children of Lidice and to young victims of other wars – is on display each June through November as part of the Lidice International Children's

Exhibition of Fine Arts. Once again, children's voices ripple across the grounds, especially during theater and art workshops.

Pondering the gestures that continue to help the world come to terms with the tragedy of Lidice, I wonder whether it was by reading about this garden and hearing Walter Cronkite tell the story on "Twentieth Century" that my grandparents' discussions of Lidice became softer, gentler in their old age.

Long after I stopped believing in fairy tales, I visited Prague (Praha). By that time – 1972 – Russian border guards had replaced German border guards. My last name, Cernota, was still reason to delay the tour bus as guards searched my suitcase and scrutinized my passport.

Once in Praha, I was free to explore. My first purchase: a paperback copy of "Lidice," spotted in a bookstore window. On the book's cover: a black-and-white photo of a simple cross in a field, wreathed in barbed wire. An English translation, it contained familiar words from childhood: Heydrich, Horak, Benes, Lezaky, Gabcik, Kubis, Hitler.

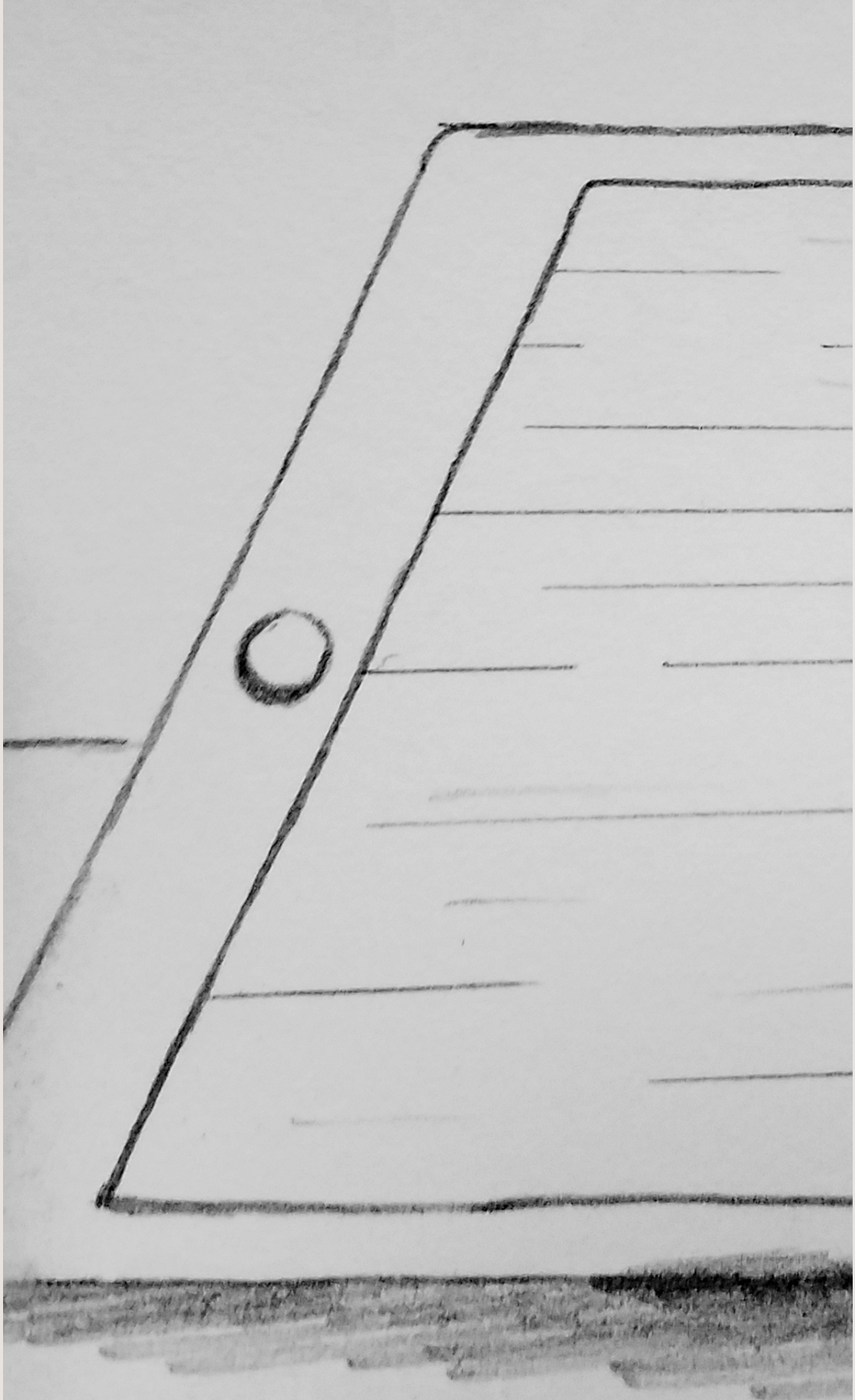
The cross, shown in a field leveled by Hitler's Nazis, was crafted from the charred beams of a Lidice farmhouse destroyed in June 1942.

I wonder now, as a parent and grandparent, if some of Lidice's children were afraid of the dark as they went to bed on June 9, 1942. Did sphinx moths flutter against their windows like they would along Harvey Avenue, in search of night-blooming flowers?

Perhaps a mother or father told their restless children a bedtime story. And perhaps, as they watched the stars come out, they were comforted by the legend of Blanik Mountain, knowing that the sleeping knights were keeping watch.

Those mythical knights still slumber, embraced by the gentle granite curves of Velky (large) and Maly (small) Blanik mountains southeast of Praha. So cherished is the old legend that in 2014 the Czech government designated these ancient geologic forms, along with their surrounding landscape, as Blanik Knights' County Geopark, a protected national site.

From here, the sparkling Blanice River flows freely through the forest and down the mountain, joining the Sazava River and eventually, the country's longest, most famous river, the Vltava. Likewise, Lidicky potok (Lidice brook), the stream Hitler's troops rerouted in 1942, still flows through the valley into a larger stream that joins the Vltava. Along the way, these waters help sustain Novy Lidice and the 24,000 rose plants that bloom each June in the Garden of Peace and Friendship.



Life After Deportation

by Meagan Flynn

On the night that her husband was deported, Rose Escobar was busy making a Cat in the Hat craft with her 7-year-old son, Walter.

He had been waiting for her to come upstairs, to help him, but Rose had spent most of the day crying in private. She told Walter and her 2-year-old daughter, Carmen, that Dad was just working late and wouldn't be coming home for dinner. They stayed with a next-door neighbor while she talked about options with her lawyer and the immigrant advocacy organization that had been helping her and her husband, Jose. By now, he was nearly 2,000 miles away in El Salvador, making nervous small talk with extended family he had not seen in 22 years, since he was a child.

But here was Walter, wanting to do a Dr. Suess project – the kind of school activity Jose would have been doing with him, Rose said.

She knew he would ask about Jose. It was well past dinnertime.

"You know how I'm a U.S. citizen, you're a U.S. citizen and Carmen's a U.S. citizen?" Rose remembered telling Walter.

"And Daddy too?" Walter asked.

"I said, 'No, honey, Daddy is Salvadoran. When Daddy came in the U.S., he came in as a child, and he didn't ask for permission. And a lot of people got very upset.'"

Walter wanted to know why – was his father a bad guy?

Recalling the moment from her living room in Houston, two months after Jose's deportation, Rose swallowed the recurring lump in her throat yet remained visibly restrained, having grown accustomed by now to these regular questions from her 7-year-old. She knows that his naivety won't last forever, but what can she really say? How many times must she tell Walter that Jose will be back soon before soon loses its meaning?

"He said, 'Well is Daddy going to come back home?'" Rose continued. "I said, 'Walter, you know what? He will. I promise. I'm going to do everything I can to get your daddy back.'"

The truth is that Jose is barred from coming back to the United States for 15 years: 10 years as punishment for crossing the border illegally when he was 14 years old; five years for missing a court date at age 17.

At that time, Jose had needed to renew his application for temporary protected

status, allowing him to be in the country legally. But his first lawyer had overlooked a paperwork error. When Jose had the chance to explain this to a judge, his second lawyer advised him not to go to court because his case was not fixable and he would be deported. Nevertheless, because he failed to appear, a judge entered the deportation order anyway. It hung over his head for 13 years before it was finally enforced, weeks after Donald Trump assumed the presidency.

Today, the couple's new immigration attorney, Raed Gonzalez, says that Jose's deportation is a prime example of how the Trump administration has made it clear that it does not intend to simply go after "bad hombres," as Trump has put it. Jose had a spotless criminal record. He later cooperated with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, attending yearly check-ins with ICE agents as part of the supervision order and work permit he received in 2011. He followed every rule of the order, never vacationing outside of Texas so as to not be seen as a flight risk, informing ICE any time he traveled anywhere.

He tried to attain legal status through President Barack Obama's work permit programs, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Deferred Action for Parents of Americans. But because he dropped out of high school to help his mom pay the bills he was ineligible for DACA, and the U.S. Supreme Court struck down DAPA in 2016, while his application sat in limbo.

No matter his efforts, it seemed the one thing he could not shake was the identity American politics had bestowed on him: illegal. The only identity that seemed to matter.

"I keep hearing that word – *illegal, illegal*," Rose said. "It's penetrated into my brain."

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Away in El Salvador, Jose has managed to remain a part of his family's lives largely through a small screen.

At dinnertime, Rose places her cellphone or tablet at the head of the table where Jose would normally sit, and the family goes around in a circle and talks about their days. At bedtime, Rose holds the phone while Walter reads his nightly book aloud. If Rose goes upstairs to take a hot bath, she asks Jose to watch the kids playing in the living room through security cameras, which he can access on his computer. Jose will call Rose's phone when he sees Walter misbehaving, and tell him to knock it off.

"I used to be the type of person who doesn't like to be on my phone," Rose said. "Now it's like, my phone is my husband. That's how it feels."

Jose came to the United States with his mom in 2001 to escape the violence enveloping his country. One night when he was 13 – the year before he left El Salvador – his grandma gave him a good smack for coming home late, only to learn that Jose had to take the long way home from work to avoid gang members who were trying to recruit him. That was all his mother needed to hear. She and her son took their chance to flee to America after an earthquake left El Salvador in ruins in January 2001, killing 844 people and injuring more than 4,700 others. It took them more than six months to travel through Mexico and into Texas. When they finally

settled in Houston, they were able to qualify for temporary protected status due to the upheaval in El Salvador.

He and his mother had renewed their status once – but after changing addresses, they did not receive the letter in the mail alerting them that it was time to resubmit their paperwork a second time. Jose, 17 then, realized his work permit was expired when he went to go apply for a job. Jose asked his original attorney, had he submitted the change-of-address paperwork to immigration officials? Why had he not received the letter? But it was too late. Within a matter of months, in 2004, the judge ordered him deported, and Jose, at the advice of an attorney apparently unwilling to contest the case, simply chose to lay low rather than fight it.

And for the next seven years, it worked out. He and Rose married in 2006, at age 19. Jose had steady work as the supervisor of a maintenance business that repaired or rebuilt apartment complexes, complete with painting crews, landscape crews, carpenters, and Rose later worked as a receptionist at Texas Children's Hospital. In 2011, when Walter was a baby, the couple bought their first house, a two-story suburban home in a neighborhood in southeast Houston.

That same summer, their first in the new home, ICE came knocking.

When Rose promises today that she will get Jose back, it is not so hard to believe – if based only on her track record.

For seven months, while Jose remained locked up in the Houston ICE detention facility throughout 2011, Rose never stopped fighting for his release. Even after a judge again ordered Jose deported, after an attorney informed her they had exhausted all their options, Rose did not stop. People told her to leave it in God's hands but she didn't want to leave anything. She connected with the immigrant advocacy group FIEL Houston, made up of an ambitious group of college students. They got the press involved, mounting a huge publicity campaign and leading dozens of people to rally behind the Escobar family. Rose called the office of U.S. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, pleading for help. The congresswoman called Rose back herself, saying, "I'm taking on your case."

Following Jackson Lee's intervention, ICE released Jose back to his family on an order of supervision in January 2012, requiring him to check in with ICE once per year. The order remained in place until one month after Trump took office.

When Rose thinks back on that long seven months in which her only contact with her husband was through glass at the detention center, she thinks of Walter, age 2. "Jose is missing out on the same age with Carmen now," she said.

As Jose's absence grew more pronounced, Carmen, Rose said, kept looking for him. She would prance around the house pointing at photos of Jose, saying, "Papi!" She liked to dangle a key chain around that depicted a cartoon of the Escobar family, yelling Papi. Whenever the doorbell rang, she yelled Papi.

It is why, still, two months after Jose's deportation, Rose ends many of her nights puffy-eyed. Jose notices.

On a recent phone call after the kids had gone to bed – time reserved to talk about how their days really were – Jose told her he could not bear to look at her.

"He said, 'Because, Rose, look at your dark circles. I can see it in your face, how tired you are,'" Rose recalled. "'You've been crying.'"

"I said, 'Yeah, Jose, I have.'"

"I hate how you have to go through this," he told her. "Maybe if I would've never sat in front of you in that cafeteria, if I would've never talked to you, you would be with a whole different man, and you would be happy with your family."

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These days, Rose keeps a scrapbook on her coffee table, dating back to the couple's first school dance in eighth grade. Flipping through it, she exhibits a type of rosy-eyed nostalgia, still able to recall seemingly every date with the kind of precision reserved for lunch-hour gossip about teenage crushes.

"This is the first rose he gave me," she said.

"El Portal – our first night club," she said, turning the page. "It was horrible."

Rose saved every card he wrote her, petals from every corsage. She saved every movie ticket: "Spy Kids" in 3-D, "50 First Dates," "Austin Powers: Gold Member" – the first date he took her on with Rose's mother's permission. They left the movie early because he wanted to get her home on time.

When Jose arrived at McAuliffe Middle School in Houston, he did not speak English. Boys introduced him at Rose's cafeteria table as the kid who "got stuck in Mexico for six months." And after Rose's friend caught him staring at her, Rose turned and told him, "Take a picture – it will last you longer!" before immediately feeling bad. She found him later at a basketball game and apologized.

"He asked if I spoke Spanish, and I said, 'A little bit.' He said, 'Well how about I teach you Spanish and you teach me English?'"

Five years later, they were married.

Not everyone was supportive. Their moms thought they were too young (Jose's dad left when he was six; Rose's died when she was 14.) Some of Rose's friends were skeptical, believing that Jose was just marrying her for papers.

In reality, that was impractical.

Charles Foster, a prominent Houston immigration attorney who has advised Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush and presidential candidates Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton on immigration policy, said that most Americans simply think undocumented immigrants can just hop in line to become legal, or get a green card once they marry a U.S. citizen. Not so.

"I say it's like Harvard University: You can't just say I'm going to get in line to go to Harvard," Foster said. "Why? Because Harvard selects very few people, and they have a high standard. That's our legal immigration system."

Because Jose's deportation order was entered before he and Rose were married, Jose was not eligible to apply for a green card anyway. Even if there was no such deportation order, if he wanted to get a green card when he married Rose, he would have still had to leave the country for 10 years and go back to El Salvador as a punishment for entering the country illegally as a teenager. It is possible to waive

the 10-year punishment – but to apply for the waiver, he still had to return to El Salvador first, and there was no guarantee he would get the waiver. Foster said that, to get one, people must prove that their absence will have a detrimental effect on their families.

So, Jose and Rose went on building their lives and paying their taxes. In 2006, months after Hurricane Katrina hit, they moved to New Orleans because Jose wanted to help with the cleanup efforts. They lived in a rat-infested apartment and sometimes didn't even have money to go grocery shopping. They tried to start a family, but Rose had two miscarriages. Finally, they came back to Houston, lived in Rose's mother's guest home, saved up money for a house, and brought Walter into the world in 2010.

For their wedding anniversary in 2017, they planned to return to New Orleans to take pictures of their old home – Rose's scrapbooking hobby never stopped – and look back at how far they've come. They planned to ask the ICE agent for permission to leave the state at a supervision check-in scheduled for February 2017.

They never had the chance.

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Since going public with her and Jose's story, Rose has received hate mail. How could she be so stupid to marry an *illegal*? one man wrote to her, a question that reverberated painfully for weeks.

The story of how immigrants seeking the American dream somehow became dehumanized begins much earlier than the day Donald Trump called Mexicans rapists, saying the Mexican people weren't "sending their best." It dates back long before 9/11, causing anyone wearing a turban or a hijab at an airport to be seen as suspect.

With slavery outlawed, racism in immigration law began in the late 19th century with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, continuing with the Immigration Act of 1924, which barred immigrants from Asia and Africa and limited immigration from Eastern Europe, where Jews and Polish and Italian Catholics were most concentrated. It accelerated, most ironically, after Congress sought to reverse these racist policies in 1965 by developing a quota system that made 20,000 green cards available equally to every country in the world.

While the law's legacy has been its end of the prior discriminatory quota system, it also marked the first time any immigration quota had been imposed on Latin America, or anywhere in the Western Hemisphere. And at the same time, Congress cut off a flawed but viable temporary workers' program – the Bracero Program – that had allowed hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers to legally migrate to the United States each year and return home at the end of the harvest or the job. With the abrupt termination of the program and around 30,000 fewer green cards available to Mexico per year under the new quota, unauthorized immigration on the southern border soared.

According to data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, while temporary bracero workers from Mexico fell from about 450,000 per year in 1958

to zero after 1968, yearly illegal border crossers from Mexico increased from fewer than 25,000 in 1958 to an estimated 450,000 by 1978.

It was around this time, according to researchers with Princeton University's Mexican Migration project, that "the rise of the Latino threat narrative," fueled by fears and apprehensions about American identity, began.

"In the United States, especially, immigrants carry significant symbolic weight in the narrative of American peoplehood," wrote researchers Douglas S. Massey and Karen A. Pren, "and how they are depicted in the media, portrayed by politicians, and treated by legislators probably reveals more about America's aspirations and hopes – and its fears and insecurities – than anything to do with immigration itself."

In their 2012 paper, "Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Policy," Massey and Pren used a newspaper-archive software to trace the metaphors used to describe Latin American immigration over the decades, which in the 1970s began to be viewed as a "crisis."

"Initially marine metaphors were used to dramatize the crisis, with Latino immigration being labeled a 'rising tide' or a 'tidal wave' that was poised to 'inundate' the United States and 'drown' its culture while 'flooding' American society with unwanted foreigners," Massey and Pren wrote. "Over time, marine metaphors increasingly gave way to martial imagery."

In a 1976 article in Reader's Digest, the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service authored an article titled, "Illegal Aliens: Time to Call a Halt!" He said the service was "confronted by a silent invasion of illegal aliens. Despite our best efforts, the problem – critical [in 1973] – now threatens to become a national disaster."

In 1992, the chief of the San Diego sector of Border Patrol filmed a video titled "Border Under Siege," depicting Latino actors literally climbing over cars and dodging in and out of traffic on Interstate 5, pouring into California. Pete Wilson – the governor of California who infamously tried to sign a law that would have prohibited undocumented immigrants from receiving health care or going to public schools – used the footage in his re-election campaign attack ads.

The reality is, Massey and Pren note, the restrictive immigration policies and border security beef-ups that came in the '80s and '90s did not actually reflect immigration trends – only public opinion of the day. They called this an immigration-enforcement feedback loop. A paradox.

While estimated illegal border crossings did sharply rise between 1965 and 1977 – due to the abrupt termination of the temporary workers' program – from then on, it tapered off and eventually fell in the '90s, down from an estimated 450,000 in the late '70s to 131,000 in 2000. Nevertheless, the number of Border Patrol line watch hours doubled, the number of agents increased 2.5 times, and the Border Patrol budget increased by nearly seven times from 1977 to 1995. "During and after the 1970s, in other words, the border buildup was increasingly disconnected from the actual traffic in illegal migrants," the researchers wrote. In fact, frequency of the negative newspaper metaphors was far more closely associated with the rise

in border apprehensions – it was a nearly one-to-one correlation, the researchers found. Today, the disconnect has only grown, as Donald Trump forges onward with his promised wall while illegal border crossings are down two-thirds since 2000.

"Right now, I think we are in this very nativist space," Zenobia Lai, legal director of the Cabrini Center for Immigrant Legal Assistance of Catholic Charities, said of the rhetoric toward immigrants. "We have this very warped image of what America should look like, and create policy to kind of color our system, color our population. I don't think it's any accident that recent immigrants in the last two decades are less likely to be Europeans, less likely to be white, and our immigration policies seem to react to that reality in a negative way."

Still, there is even a disconnect between Trump's rhetoric and his administration's actual deportation efforts.

Since taking office, Trump has made highlighting crimes committed by immigrants a priority. He has directed the Department of Homeland Security to publish a weekly list of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. He has created a new office called VOICE, the Victims of Immigrant Crime Engagement office, and has ordered the agency to study "the effects of the victimization by criminal aliens present in the United States."

Yet in fact, he has so far deported fewer criminal undocumented immigrants than President Obama during the first six months of his tenure, compared to the same time period in 2016. From January through June this year, ICE has deported 61,370 criminals, down from 70,603 during the same time period under Obama, who was as celebrated by the immigrant community for his immigration executive-actions, creating the work-permit programs, as he was scorned for his aggressive deportation actions, earning him the nickname "deporter-in-chief." In general, according to ICE statistics, the Trump administration has averaged 16,900 deportations per month compared to an average of 20,000 per month during Obama's slowest year, in 2016. At Obama's administration's peak, in 2012, ICE was deporting roughly 34,000 people per month.

That is not to say Trump's promised crack-down is not in motion: Arrests of undocumented immigrants during Trump's first six months increased roughly one-third compared to arrests of immigrants during this time last year, largely thanks to Trump's own immigration executive orders greatly expanding the classes of immigrants ICE should prioritize targeting.

Such as those with outstanding deportation orders never carried out, who are instead living in the United States on supervision orders, such as Jose.

*****

On a Thursday evening in May in El Salvador, Jose is coming home from church with his aunt when his phone rings. It's Rose calling on WeChat, the long-distance video-and-audio app that goes in and out, blurring Jose's face every now and then.

He sits in his mustard-yellow room where he spends the majority of the hours, playing chess against a computer and watching TV on a screen the size of a toaster. In the background a pet bird is screeching loudly but Jose doesn't seem to hear it. Asked the robotic question, "How are you?" Jose smirks and raises his

bushy eyebrows, and immediately the question seems like a mistake. “I’m just trying to survive, that’s all,” he said.

Today has been better than others. He got a call back for a job at the nearby tuna-fish processing factory. Finally: something to look forward to. When he first arrived in El Salvador the only job he could find was at a call center, two hours away – three by bus – where he would make $10 a day. It was impractical but was his only option. Not even the local grocery store would take him. “It’s not like over there in America where you submit an application and a resume and they might call you back,” he said. “Here, no – if you don’t know nobody who can put you there, you don’t get a job.”

And so, Jose stayed inside the house, afraid to venture around the neighborhood without his cousin or aunt to vouch for him when gang members approached, wondering who he is and what he is doing here. He looks too American. He doesn’t sound Salvadoran, talking Spanish more like a Mexican. He thought maybe he could still fit in with old friends from elementary school. But the only friend he has is his cousin.

“Everybody else,” he said, “they’re in gangs or dead, or they left the country.”

Jose is breaking up, his voice sounding as far away as he is from Rose. Rose takes back the phone – “No puedo oírte,” she says, pointing to her ear. He disconnects. He tries her back on a different app, Viber. “Can you hear me?” he says. Too choppy. He tries Facebook. “I used to hate this,” Rose says, as Jose configures the audio. “Now it’s just part of our lives.”

Jose’s days revolve around these calls. All he can think about, he said, is how his family is managing to get by on Rose’s salary as a receptionist. He can’t sleep, not until usually 3 or 4 a.m., kept awake thinking of it. How will Rose make the mortgage this month? Does Rose have money to go grocery shopping this week? Does Walter have enough money in his lunch account today? Sometimes he worries that Rose forgot to set the alarm while they are sleeping, and he checks it remotely on their security software. He stays awake watching the cameras.

“It gets to my head that I’m missing things, like my son’s practice at the jujitsu place, Carmen’s growing up,” he said. “I see her now – it’s been two months, but now she talks more. She expresses more. She’s growing bigger. One thing that I hate the most is all this time, you know, you’re missing stuff, time that you’re never going to get back.”

Rose and Jose’s only hope for his return is a motion to reopen his case that their attorney, Raed Gonzalez, filed with the immigration court. When Jose was detained at his supervision check-in in February, Gonzalez had filed a stay of deportation – but for whatever reason ICE ignored it, Jose never even saw a judge, and he was deported within the week. If immigration officials agree to revisit Jose’s case, Jose hopes he can be home in one year, maybe two, perhaps five for the punishment for missing court that time in 2004. Perhaps 10, if he can’t get the waiver.

On a recent phone call with Walter, Jose promised his son that, if he waited patiently for him to return, they would go to Lego Land, where Walter has been begging to go for months. It is a promise Jose intends to keep, as long as his son doesn’t grow up too fast.

Brony Up

by Jamie Friedlander

In order to help me spot him in the morning crowd at Starbucks, Kyle Hedlund, 25, said he would be wearing a white hat.

The white hat would not have been the only clue to separate Hedlund from his fellow coffee drinkers. He's donned a white fedora, white button-down shirt and crisp black vest and slacks. Curly dark brown hair peeks through the sides of the fedora. Two small, metallic rainbows in the shape of lightning bolts fasten the cuffs of his shirt. On the table in front of him sits a plastic purple pony with flowing, vibrant hair.

No, he's not a Liberace reject. Hedlund is one of many men across the world who call themselves bronies, or adult men who are fans of the animated TV show originally created for young girls, My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. If Hedlund felt self-conscious about discussing the show, his face didn't indicate it. As he expressively chatted about brony fandom at length just before 9 a.m. on an uncharacteristically warm spring day in River Forest, Illinois, neighboring coffee drinkers shot inquisitive stares and crooked smirks our way.

To say the least, My Little Pony is an unlikely show for a grown man to enjoy. It follows the adventures of six female pony friends. But bronies are in fact quite average men (albeit sometimes nerdy) typically in their 20s. They have been around since the animated show first aired in 2010 – it's about to start its seventh season. Most bronies are heterosexual, single and educated. And there are lots of them. In 2015, just over 10,000 people attended BronyCon, the annual brony convention held in Baltimore. (In 2016, the conference saw a slight dip, with around 8,000 attendees.) An entire news website dedicated solely to brony culture exists called Equestria Daily. Women are part of the fandom as well and while most still call themselves bronies, some do prefer the term pegasister. There are also quite a few military bronies. Three documentaries have been made about bronies since the fandom started in 2010. Robert Downey Jr. even posted a photo on Facebook saying, "Crap, am I gonna have to go Brony?" in which he compares the characters in My Little Pony to famous television superheroes.

Despite some people's initial reactions that bronies are creeps, quite the opposite is true. Bronyhood is merely a fandom for a group of quirky men. We all have our "thing" – our hobby, interest or obsession that we don't feel comfortable sharing with our co-workers, parents, or even some of our friends. The world is overflowing with fandoms just as bizarre as bronies – furries, juggalos, and trekkies, to name a few. These people merely found other people who understand their quirks and

unique interests, and they formed a bond.

I later discover Vinyl Scratch, a DJ pony from the show, is the character that sits on the table in front of Hedlund. His cufflinks depict the "cutie mark" of one of the ponies, Rainbow Dash. Cutie marks are small symbols drawn on the pony's backside that resemble each pony's virtue or talent.

Late one night in 2012, Hedlund was mindlessly surfing the internet. He typed the term "brony" into YouTube – he had heard the phrase, but didn't know exactly what it meant. Then he found out. Knowing himself and that he might become addicted to the show, he flipped a coin to determine whether or not he would watch it. The coin said yes. So he watched one episode. And then another. And before he knew it, he binge-watched the whole first season.

Hedlund, who went to culinary school and worked at a Jewel grocery store deli counter when I met with him (he now works at Argo Tea), eventually decided to attend a Chicago brony event.

"The first time I went to a meetup, I lied to my parents and told them I was going barhopping with friends in the city," he says with a laugh. Eventually, he came clean. Though his parents tolerate him having such a peculiar interest, he says he suspects, "They're probably saying to themselves, 'When is this going to be over?'"

He struggled telling his parents about being a brony. "At first, I was a little bit afraid because obviously, it's something very different," he says. "It was something that not everyone accepted. And I just kind of decided that if I'm going to be part of this, I have to tell my parents. I have to let them know I'm into this."

*****

In A Brony Tale, a documentary film about bronies, Ashleigh Ball – a voice actor from the show – says, "The pervert alarm for sure went off in my head when I first heard about it."

However, most bronies insist that no unseemly motive lurks behind their fandom, but rather that they are impressed by the show's flash animation and can relate to the themes presented in the show – friendship, loyalty, and kindness, things that some of them didn't experience growing up. Many creative types also watch the show and "give back" – Hedlund is a "brony chef" known as Le Brony Gourmet who creates recipes based on the show. Many other enthusiasts also write fanfiction, create music, and draw art inspired by the show.

Marsha Redden, Ph.D., a psychologist based in Houma, Louisiana, began studying bronies with other researchers in 2011. Around this time, she and the other researchers put out a survey so they could learn more about brony culture.

Far from perverts, Redden says, "The stereotype of bronies is gay, high-school dropout living in their parents' basement smoking dope and playing video games."

Their survey, also known as "The Brony Study," found this wasn't the case. Most bronies are heterosexual, educated men. All of the bronies I met did not live in their parents' basement, but rather lived alone. According to the study, bronies range in age from 14 to 57, though most are around age 21. The majority of bronies, 86 percent, are male. Eighty-four percent of bronies reported being heterosexual,

10 percent described themselves as bisexual, 4 percent reported being asexual and just fewer than 2 percent reported being homosexual. Only around 3 percent of bronies are married.

Most single bronies – a little over 60 percent – said they were not currently dating but are interested in doing so. Only around 6 percent said they dated frequently.

Chad Hufman, 23, says he shies away from bringing up his lifestyle on first dates. Hufman, who has pale skin, slightly curly brown hair, glasses and a faint goatee, feels apprehensive about telling people he's a brony.

"I don't bring it up because I realize it's kind of a weird thing, especially for girls," Hufman says. "When they hear it, they're like, 'You like a little girl's show?'"

Hufman identifies most with Rainbow Dash, the pony who boasts loyalty as her individual virtue.

"I connect very strongly with the loyalty aspect of her," he says. "I'm very loyal to my friends and my family. It's one of the things I tell my dates, when I go out on dates: I'll never cheat on you, I'll never go behind your back. And I believe very strongly in that. I actually got a tattoo of it."

Hufman slowly pulls back the sleeve of his red T-shirt to show me a tattoo inked on his right bicep: a colorful rainbow (the same as Hedlund's cufflinks) with the word loyalty inscribed on a banner across it. The symbol is Rainbow Dash's cutie mark.

Most bronies I met outwardly expressed their love of the show. Michael Standiford, 25, unzipped his black jacket at one point during our conversation to reveal a My Little Pony T-shirt with the phrase, "20 percent cooler," an inside joke among fans of the show. Standiford is soft-spoken and short with fair skin and long brown hair reminiscent of the popular Emo-style haircut of the early 2000s. When I met with him, he had just graduated with a degree in electrical engineering from Purdue University, where he discovered the show. Like many bronies, he has decided to keep his love of the show a secret from his family. He worries that his parents, who live in Hawaii, might find his brony-ism strange.

"When they visit me here, I usually take all my pony merchandise, stick it in a box and hide it," he says, laughing.

*****

If you were alive and had any form of TV exposure during the 1980s and 1990s, you probably encountered the My Little Pony franchise. Young girls played with the small, vibrantly colored Hasbro ponies and occasionally watched the animated show on TV, which was designed, more or less, solely to market the toys.

My Little Pony has had several iterations over the past few decades, but aficionados identify with what they call Generation Four, (Friendship is Magic) or the most recent version of the show that began in 2010. Animator Lauren Faust – also the mind behind The Powerpuff Girls – created the fourth generation. Although the earlier versions of the show were much girlier and focused on marketing the pony toys, the fourth covers adult themes, features high-quality flash

animation, and highlights characters who aren't just "girlish," but have distinct personalities. An animated film, My Little Pony: The Movie, hit theaters in October 2017.

Brony Matt Drummond, 32, says some in the fandom believe bronies existed during the show's earlier generations.

"Something we've learned since, is that there were guys back then," he says. "I'm sure they were fewer and far between, but ever since the brony fandom came out, there were a number of people who came out and said, 'You know, I really wish this existed 20 years ago, because I was a fan of MLP in the '90s.'"

Perhaps they could not bond over their love of the show because internet culture was just blossoming. Or perhaps people weren't as willing to be public about their unique interests. Regardless, they seem to have relished the opportunity to explore a shared interest with each other now.

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Between bites of his "healthier" cheeseburger at Lyfe Kitchen (served with a citrus kale salad, not fries) Hufman tells me how he has been trying to drop weight to join the Army. At five-foot-nine, he currently weighs around 285 pounds. In order to meet the Army's weight requirements, he must get down to 180. He has been breaking a sweat at the gym and watching his diet in order to meet this goal.

Hufman explains that military bronies – yes, they exist – can be seen as the outcasts of the armed forces. They're often very skinny, not strong, and work in tech or computer support roles. Many are in the Air Force as well. Despite facing stigma, Hufman says bronies are proud of their military counterparts. Not all work in IT positions. Some even fight in combat and have patches of My Little Pony cutie marks sewn onto the sleeves of their jackets.

"We're very proud to have a military side because it really shows that we're not all weird, we're not all nerds," he says. Hufman hopes to be an Army Ranger, what he describes as the Delta Force of the Army, like special ops.

"I've got a high goal," he says, smiling.

*****

Most bronies I spoke with acknowledged that brony fandom is odd. They know that although most people might be skeptical of their hobby, they tolerate it. But there is cause for some concern. As with every fandom, a dark side lurks beneath the brony culture. Some artists and fans create animated pornographic films and sexual drawings based on the show. The internet calls masturbating to the show "clopping." Hufman says the pornographic side of My Little Pony is "obviously more creepy since it's a little kids' show."

The large majority of bronies insist that this is a small fraction of the fandom and that they shun anything having to do with that type of behavior. Many try to counteract it by taking sexual fan art or pornographic animations off the internet. "Obviously, there are little kids who like this show and there are parents who are looking at it," Hufman says. "We don't want you to type in 'My Little Pony' and have a bunch of porn come up on Google."

Drummond told me about one situation in which the pornographic fan art side of My Little Pony took a bad turn. Most bronies have an "original character" or OC, which is a pony they create or have commissioned by an artist that they feel portrays them. One young boy was able to have his OC made into a character on the show on behalf of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. According to Drummond, the young boy's mother was familiar with the brony community and asked bronies to refrain from creating sexual fan art based on her son's character.

"Unfortunately, when you go and tell the internet [not to] do something, there are people who go out of their way to do it," Drummond says. "This isn't the brony fandom, this is the internet. The brony fandom got its start on 4Chan, which is the Mos Eisley spaceport of the internet." Mos Eisley is a spaceport in Star Wars that Obi-Wan Kenobi describes as "a wretched hive of scum and villainy."

One Facebook group, the Anti-Brony Coalition, prides itself on hating this world and "trolling" the internet to anger and annoy them. According to Sushi, a spokesperson from the Anti-Brony Coalition, bronies aren't as "pure-hearted" as some might think. Sushi said he would only respond to questions under the alter ego name "Sushi" because "some bronies will pay anything to get information on us."

Sushi says fanfiction is a prime example of the dark side of brony culture. "There's one [fanfiction] about how one of the characters cuts another character to small pieces and bakes them into cupcakes which is served to her friends," he wrote in a Facebook message. "Another is a forum or Tumblr page called 'Princess Molestia.' This is a series where one of the characters molests others."

Most internet fandoms have trolls. But like the majority of bronies, Drummond doesn't let the haters and pornographic fan artists ruin the show for him. He thinks the show allowed him to move away from his quieter, more anxious self.

"One of the things the show did for me is that it really convinced me to break out of the shell where I was trying not to make waves, trying not to get in peoples' faces, trying to be quiet, trying to be more reserved," he says. "It really convinced me [and said], 'Hey, you can absolutely be as boisterous as you want to be.'"

Drummond, who dropped out of college and worked at a Chex Cereal factory when I spoke with him, also thinks brony culture has allowed men to break away from the idea that they have to be tough or unemotional. "One of the interesting things about the brony movement is it's letting guys like me redefine what masculinity is," he says.

*****

In the documentary Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony, John de Lancie – the voice actor of the villain Discord in the show – can be seen embracing the brony community at BronyCon. Many bronies admire the actor for his stint as Q on Star Trek.

"Bronies are not just fans that are interested in watching a cartoon," he says in the movie. "What makes them special is that they're willing to take the lessons from this show – and they're lessons that were intended for children – and turn them into adult lessons, and they're still the lessons that we need to be applying as

adults."

As we sit at Starbucks, Hedlund's fingers dramatically swipe through photos on his phone of his Le Brony Gourmet concoctions. First, he pulls up a photo of what looks like a Cosmopolitan martini. Instead, he says it's the "Flutterbat Gazpacho," a combination of cucumbers, apples, raspberries, apple juice, cherry juice, sea salt, and ginger inspired by a character named Flutterbat. Then he shows me the "Rainboom" Noodle Bowl – a dish that includes rice noodles, chicken Andouille sausage, and various sautéed veggies and is inspired by the pony Rainbow Dash.

"Basically, what I like to do is cook, and I like to cook about ponies," Hedlund says, clarifying, with a grin, that he doesn't cook the ponies themselves.

"Plus, I want to be the first brony to ever be featured on the Food Network – even if it's just for a few seconds."

Sins of the Mother

by Christina Hughes Babb

It's 1 a.m. on a Wednesday, and Josh, my husband since we were too young to buy a beer, is just home from a hectic night at the restaurant. He cracks the bedroom door and waves a hand. "Hello, goodnight, I'm going to play a quick game of Madden," he says. "I need to unwind."

I say I can't sleep either. "Sorry, hon," he says, sealing the space between us with a doorknob tug.

Sprawled on the bed, my back damp with perspiration, I relive the wrong side of a coke binge. Dread. Jitters. Exhaustion. Shame. People in Narcotics Anonymous like to say they are comfortable in their own skin. I know how that feels only in that it is the diametric opposite of what I am, now, and most of the time.

These episodes, tornadoes of varying scale brewing inside my guts, are part of my perpetual penance for past behavior. It was a decade ago that I atoned, served a sentence imparted by a county judge, but the karma police are less merciful. They lock me up, toss me in solitary confinement, keep knocking and demanding more. These internal storms oft serve as a warning. They are coming.

Maybe I am just worried about work. Print is dead! The storm swells and I start whispering Hail Marys, a habit I picked up in Catholic school.

They knock.

My heart slams. "Out! Out! Let me out!" – it insists by way of violent vibrations threatening to rupture my eardrums.

On my feet. Sprinting to the entryway.

"It's the police," Josh says, shooing our dogs to the garage.

"I knew it," I choke. I am ice inside now. A premonition of doom has one benefit: with its fulfillment comes disassociation.

On the porch, two uniformed policemen.

"Is your son Stephen?"

"Yes," I say.

He extends a hand, a small piece of paper between two thick fingers. I take it and dial the scribbled number.

My husband asks questions I don't hear. I slip on my shoes and grab my purse as the phone rings at a distant hospital desk.

"Richardson Methodist ER," a woman's voice answers.

"My son, Stephen. He's there. Is he alive?"

There is a pause before the woman on the line answers.

"He is here in critical condition. He overdosed. I cannot tell you anymore," she says. "Please get here as soon as you can, and his doctor can fill you in."

I must have repeated, "Overdosed," because my husband slams the heel of one hand hard against the wall Cole helped him paint buttercup yellow.

I place car keys in his trembling hand.

"We can't leave Morgan," he says.

Together we extract our 15-year-old from her bed.

"It's your brother. We have to go to the hospital."

We are a trio transfixed for a moment until our daughter's intense emerald eyes, through a veil of long tangled brunette hair, register terrible everything. She starts to cry.

Neither of us say it will be OK. In this family, we know better.

There's a nurse at the neighborhood high school. Her name is Nancy Cripe. Her son, Stephen, reminded me of my son, Stephen. He was beautiful, hilarious, sensitive – something people say admiringly, sensitive, but it's a curse, isn't it, really, to feel so deeply?

After Stephen's father died, Stephen smoked pot to ease the pain. Then he discovered that heroin did the job even better.

After her son's multiple stints in rehab and several relapses, she decided to follow the advice of the specialists and practice "tough love."

"He had a room at my house, but after he relapsed I told him he couldn't stay here. I told him I'd give him bus fare and he could go to the 24-Hour Club downtown," Nancy Cripe told me when I interviewed her for a magazine article.

Stephen Cripe didn't make it to the 24-Hour Club, an around-the-clock Alcoholics Anonymous meeting venue and shelter, but instead scored, shot up and died in a Jack In The Box bathroom that night.

She said the hospital staff called her late and told her he was in critical condition and that she should get there as soon as she could.

"I guess they just don't want to tell you over the phone that your son is dead," she'd said.

Her words were so chilling that I augmented the font and pulled them to the forefront of the layout. One co-worker admired the "powerful pull quote."

The hospital is a 15-minute drive. Josh gets us there in less than 10.

Heaviness and silence try to suffocate us. So, it is with tremendous force that three car doors fling open and a feral family bolts across the endless lot, past the handicap spaces, fleeing both from that enclosure trying to smother us and toward our dying beloved; we burst into an empty emergency room waiting area. The

woman behind the glass stands to let us in. “He’s in here,” a nurse tells us.

My boy is on a vomit-and-blood spattered, sweat-soaked gurney. His skin is sheet white, and his freckles look painted on. Four visible tubes protrude from his body – mouth, nose, neck, arm.

A machine beeps.

Josh gasps, strangled by a sob. In two steps he is at his son’s side and brushing back his matted hair. “Cole,” he croaks. “Cole.”

He’s Stephen, named for my dad, but we’ve called him by his middle name since the day he left the maternity ward 18 years earlier.

Morgan and I each grab a limp hand. Josh and Morgan are both sobbing when the doctor enters.

“I’m sorry. I know this is the phone call no parent wants to get,” says the man in the white coat.

Thirty minutes ago our son was lifeless, he tells us.

Heroin, some sort of pills, too … two kids brought him in … we intubated him … got a pulse … his heart started … running some tests … permanent damage … not sure … kidneys … brain function … .

“Where are they?” I hear myself ask. “What? Who?” Someone responds.

“The friends who brought him in. Where are they?”

A nurse says she thought she saw them in the waiting room.

To exit, I punch a knob that looks like a cartoon destruction button and charge into the waiting area. No one is there.

I am wearing pajamas and untied athletic shoes.

I run to the parking lot. There is a security guard and I ask if he’s seen two teenagers. He says he has not.

I dart around the whole hospital campus before re-entering the waiting area. Here they are.

Two young people. One is bony with greasy hair. Beside her sits a heavy-set boy, hair in face, in tattered T-shirt and grungy threadbare shorts. They do not look familiar.

They see me. They straighten. Their eyes double in circumference. Their force field is a sleepwalker’s disconnectedness. A walking-dead look I had seen in many faces.

For 10 years, I saw it in the mirror. We are the people who can’t tolerate life’s full force so we medicate.

*****

Cole was just a little boy, Morgan so small, when I left them. I was gone for a long time. I hated myself for it. But I was sure it was the only way.

One November day, I awoke to a stiletto piercing my frontal lobe, a wasps’ nest awakening in my gut and sounds of angry chatter and slamming doors – the sort

that lock from the outside. A bag of bones, holding myself together with atrophied arms, I shivered on the concrete floor and fought in vain to keep my insides from erupting. The arrival of a tray through a slot thrice a day provided the only evidence that time was still moving forward, that a world existed outside of my isolated hell. I would not sleep in my own bed for another 18 months.

I had been fueling my life – overwhelmed with young, unexpected motherhood and school and waitressing jobs and a career as a reporter and a husband with whom I shared an incendiary, juvenile relationship – with pills.

Stimulated opioid receptors rocketed me through all of it. Those little white dots made me normal, energetic, thrilled and immune to agonies with which I had once lived. I believed, maybe still believe, that for a while, they made me a good mom.

Thomas de Quincey, in the 1800s, wrote "Confessions of an English Opium Eater." It is considered the first addiction memoir, though absent is the excess/hitting-bottom/recovery/redemption formula familiar to the genre.

Penguin Classics published the edition that sits on my shelf:

"Just, subtle, and mighty opium! for the wounds that will never heal, and for 'the pangs that tempt the spirit to rebel,' bringest an assuaging balm; eloquent opium! that with thy potent rhetoric stealest away the purposes of wrath; and to the guilty man, for one night givest back the hopes of his youth, and hands washed pure of blood … here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered; joy might now be bought for a penny, and carried in the waistcoat-pocket … and peace of mind could be sent down by the mail."

The language is archaic but the description is spot on.

When those little pills ran low, should I fail to procure the necessary dose, I entered a realm of terror. Realizing that you have become a mere template of a person, prepared to do anything for relief, triggers panic unparalleled. The only relief is in a couple, then a handful, then 50 and 75 of them a day.

An addict needs her drug in the same way vampires need blood. Without human blood, vampires get sick. A vampire with a good upbringing – one whose mother is a Catholic school teacher and whose father is an attorney and war veteran, for example – might feel conflicted about drinking human blood. They just proceed, pushing thoughts of consequence from consciousness, and do what they must to go on living.

I tried quitting, but opiate withdrawals aren't like you see in the movies – writhing on sweaty sheets for 48 hours before awakening fresh and new. The heaviness, the exposed-nerve pain of being awake and the madness brought on by inability to sleep, hangs on for weeks, months, even years for some. The only thing to do was keep writing fake prescriptions until someone stopped me.

The night before Mother's Day, after I had been home for a few years, we found Cole drinking whisky in his room, and Josh turned on me. "This is your fault. You gave this to him." I know he did not mean the booze; he meant the craving.

*****

The duo in the ER waiting room look awake, scared now. Jolted from the dream. At first I think they are frightened of me. Then I realize they think he is dead. They watched him die, after all.

I want to rip one's hair out and strangle the other with it. Instead I hear myself asking what happened. Pity stabs my belly as they babble bullshit – "we don't know where he got it, we didn't see him do it, we don't do it, we were just drinking … ."

And then I tell them that he's still alive, and that is only because they brought him to a hospital. I thank them for that.

The big guy's head drops to chest and his massive shoulders begin to convulse.

We move to a room. We wait for another doctor to arrive. I walk to the chapel.

I spent my childhood in Catholic school, went to church twice a week, knelt and I stared all the hour at bleeding, naked Jesus, ribs protruding, hanging on a cross above the altar. I asked a nun if the nails went through his hands and feet or wrists and ankles, because I had seen the crucifixion depicted in both ways. Sister Gabriel told me it was the wrists and ankles, because the nails would have torn through his hands and feet, sending his skin-and-bones human form spilling to the dirt atop Golgotha. I was in third grade. My eyes filled as I thought mostly of Mary, Jesus' mother, watching her child's torture. Like the heartbreaking scene in Game of Thrones – Ned Stark's execution as his young daughter Aria watched from her hiding place. "Hail Mary, full of grace … ." The nun told me not to cry.

I open a "Prayers" journal sitting near the chapel door. It is a lined notebook containing hand-scrawled pleas. For our son Jesse, that the seizures will stop … . God, guide the surgeons' hands. The baby needs her. So do I. Please, please, ple [water smudge] … . For Rita's soul, and mine, after sharing my life with her for 50 years. Maybe you could take me now? Ready. In a child's penmanship, God please make my dad better. Dear God … .

I slam the book; I shake my head to get the prayers of the faithful out of it. It is too much to bear.

Don't cry.

So, sitting there, I recall a recent article that made me angry. Anger feels better than desperation, so I look it up on my phone.

The Dallas Observer's headline reads, "Governor Abbott to Drug Overdosers: Drop Dead."

The bill was part of the legislature's effort to respond to an alarming rise in opioid deaths from prescription pain medication and heroin (most recently, those increased in America by 22 percent between 2016 and 2017, according to a September 2017 New York Times article.)

"Texas House Bill 225 was not controversial … it would have allowed people who call 911 to help a friend who's overdosed on drugs avoid charges for possessing a small amount of drugs themselves. So-called Good Samaritan provisions already exist in 24 states and Washington, D.C.," reported the Observer's Stephen Young. "The bill passed the otherwise acrimonious Texas Senate 30-1. It passed the Texas House 140-4. Protection from prosecution would have extended to the first person

who called 911 as long as he or she stuck around and cooperated with medical personnel."

The Observer goes on to report that Governor Greg Abbott vetoed the bill almost two weeks after it was sent to his desk and just after the Legislature left session, making a veto override impossible.

"What an asshole," I thought at the time, about both Abbott and a guy called Bill Phelan, who opined in the comment section, "Junkies should all be 'dnr' [do no resuscitate] what's the problem? [sic] this is the best state in the union to work in and people have time to just want to destroy themselves and others? move to the northeast if you're so inclined – i don't want my tax dollars funding your lameness. [sic]."

Phelan's profile image includes himself and a tiny boy on a park bench. I wonder if it is his son or grandson, and whether the child might someday pop a hydrocodone pill for pleasure. Might the boy in the future be injured and receive fentanyl in a hospital or a prescription from his doctor and decide he likes the way it makes him feel?

What if the boy tries heroin because it does the same thing and is easier to obtain, since the government's primary response to the overdose problem is to control prescribing?

The boy might be a genius, an artist, a musician, a poet or a brilliant mathematician. He might be a student at NYU or MIT or UT and still become a junkie. I wonder if Phelan has ever considered this. I do not think he has.

I doubt it has crossed his mind that the user most at risk of dying from an overdose is a first timer or someone who slipped after a period of sobriety.

After Southwest Texas State expelled Cole for possessing marijuana on campus, he moved back home with the condition that he would stay clean. I took him to counseling and meetings and found a psychiatrist to evaluate him. He tried. He was clean for several weeks.

The pair at the hospital – I do not know their stories. I do know that they snorted heroin and that Cole snorted the same amount. They had a tolerance. He did not. They got high. He fell face-first into a coffee table and stopped breathing.

Nancy Cripe's son Stephen had been clean for several months, living in a sober house, when he relapsed. He died because his attempt at staying clean lowered his tolerance of the drug.

There are more high-profile cases, too. Actor Cory Monteith looked like Cole. Once, while Morgan was watching "Glee" my 2-year-old nephew pointed to Monteith's character, Finn, saying, "Cole? Cole," and we all laughed, agreeing: he does look like Cole, huh? Monteith died of a heroin dose during the summer of 2013.

"After a period of cessation from opioid drug use, previously tolerated drug concentration levels may become toxic and fatal," read the coroner's report.

They died because they tried to quit.

In the room my husband is standing, hands on hips, staring intently at the

beeping machine, as if it might stop if he averts his glare. He looks sad and tired; his hair is shorn, half gray, and his body is stout. His eyes are bloodstones, those green gems sprinkled with red jasper, less shiny than the fluorite crystals embedded in our children's faces, but no less spectacular.

When I was pregnant, Josh looked just like Cole looks now – tall, lanky, long hair, olive skin. Except the bridge of freckles across his nose. The freckles – like his sensitivity, his obsessions, his vice, his tendency to keep secrets – he inherited from his mother.

Now a doctor rushes in. It's early on a Wednesday in September, and Cole is crashing.

This balding, quick-moving man tells us to leave the room and pulls the curtain shut. I stand, arms wrapped around myself, at the window. Josh and Morgan are there, but in this moment, we are islands. I can see but a corner of spotless tile floor. A needle-cap hits the space, emitting a crimson splatter. A bloody medical glove smacks the wall and slides into its ivory crook.

I stare at the items, the wet red spray. I am quiet. I am screaming inside.

*****

Oh, how I screamed back then, when I realized I was pregnant. In a fit of rage, I trashed my apartment. I broke a television and a lamp and my neighbor called the police. I cried all night long.

"We have found a couple in New York who wants to adopt the baby," my mom said a few weeks after I quit my college soccer team and explained that the weight I'd gained was not, in fact, the Freshman 15, as Dad had joked. I did not drink or smoke or take any drugs while I carried Cole in my belly. Back then, I still had control. Maybe out of stubbornness, or because I already loved him too much, I said I was keeping him.

One morning, years later, my cellmate, a large, quiet black woman occupying the bunk below me, would ask, "Who is Cole and Morgan?"

"They are my kids," I would whisper; the question left me gasping for air; she might as well have punched me full-force in the gut.

"You talk to them while you asleep," she would say.

*****

I wonder if, when my functionality depended on drugs, a friend had overdosed, I would have called 911, knowing I could go to jail, knowing that I could even be charged with manslaughter if the friend died.

I would have stayed, called 911, followed the ambulance to the hospital, even if I had to face grieving parents, go to prison, forfeit my family and suffer insufferable withdrawals – right? But when in the grip of addiction, morality and logic take odd shapes.

I used in secret, mostly, so I never had to decide.

The lives of beautiful, talented, loving people like Cole and Cory and Stephen Cripe often are in the hands of a sick acquaintance faced with an awful choice.

The boy who called 911 when Cole was dying, allowed Cole to live and saved our family. He sent Cole a Facebook message a few days after the incident – it contained nothing but sorrow and regret. I don't think he hesitated or thought of his own wellbeing when Cole needed help. Yeah, he was a junkie. And a human, with a heart, who, despite evidence to the contrary, cared deeply about my son.

The opioid epidemic, as we now know it in America, is confounding, terrifying. Those who have become slaves to the drug understand how this happened. We also realize that fixing it is unfeasible. The only way to keep even the slightest hope alive is to keep people – users and addicts – alive.

There is another saying 12-Step program members issue, often after someone has relapsed and returned to the club, head hanging.

"As long as you are alive, no matter how much turmoil you might feel, you stand a chance. Just. Stay. Alive."

*****

It's summer 2017, and a tiny girl sees the ocean for the first time. She scrambles from my arms and toddles fast and fearlessly into the surf.

"Shit," deadpans my dad. Another caution-be-damned child, he's thinking.

A gentle wave splashes her face just before I swoop her up and she spits and laughs and insists, "Down!"

She runs, manic, in wide circles, evading anyone who might try to stop her, in and out of the water, pausing to point at ships and windsurfers. "Aha!" she exclaims. Like she just discovered life's secrets.

Her joy is so infectious that a crowd gathers, giggles along with us, until, concurrent with the setting sun, the cherub plops prostrate on the wet sand, spent.

She is Issy, Cole's daughter.

Cole is 22. He works two jobs. He engages in long, thoughtful discussions about politics, social issues, music and movies and writes gut-wrenching poetry that he prefers to call rap.

He stayed alive, so we still get to celebrate Christmas and birthdays. We did not become zombies. We don't have to live in a post-apocalyptic, dead-child world. So, I clutch and hold and sear into my soul memories like that day on the beach. Or the sound of Morgan singing. The way Cole hugs me tightly when he comes and goes, and how Issy pats my sweet dog Seamus's scruffy head and tries to say his name, "Shay!"

I have decided that karma is bullshit.

At least in the simple, earthly sense I once feared, it is. I have written hundreds of articles by now, the grind of the contemporary reporter. Some of the articles are about loving, hardworking parents whose children are kidnapped, raped, beaten, killed or run down as they cross the street; others are about cheaters and egomaniacs elected to public office or mean-spirited chefs who land a TV show. A dying child is prayed over by hundreds of believers, and lives. The same community prays for a dying child, and he dies.

"Life doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints." It's a line from "Hamilton," which I saw on Broadway with Morgan. (That a sinner such as myself – a junky who left home for close to two years, who continues to make mistakes and keep secrets – scored Hamilton tickets is substantiation of its truth.)

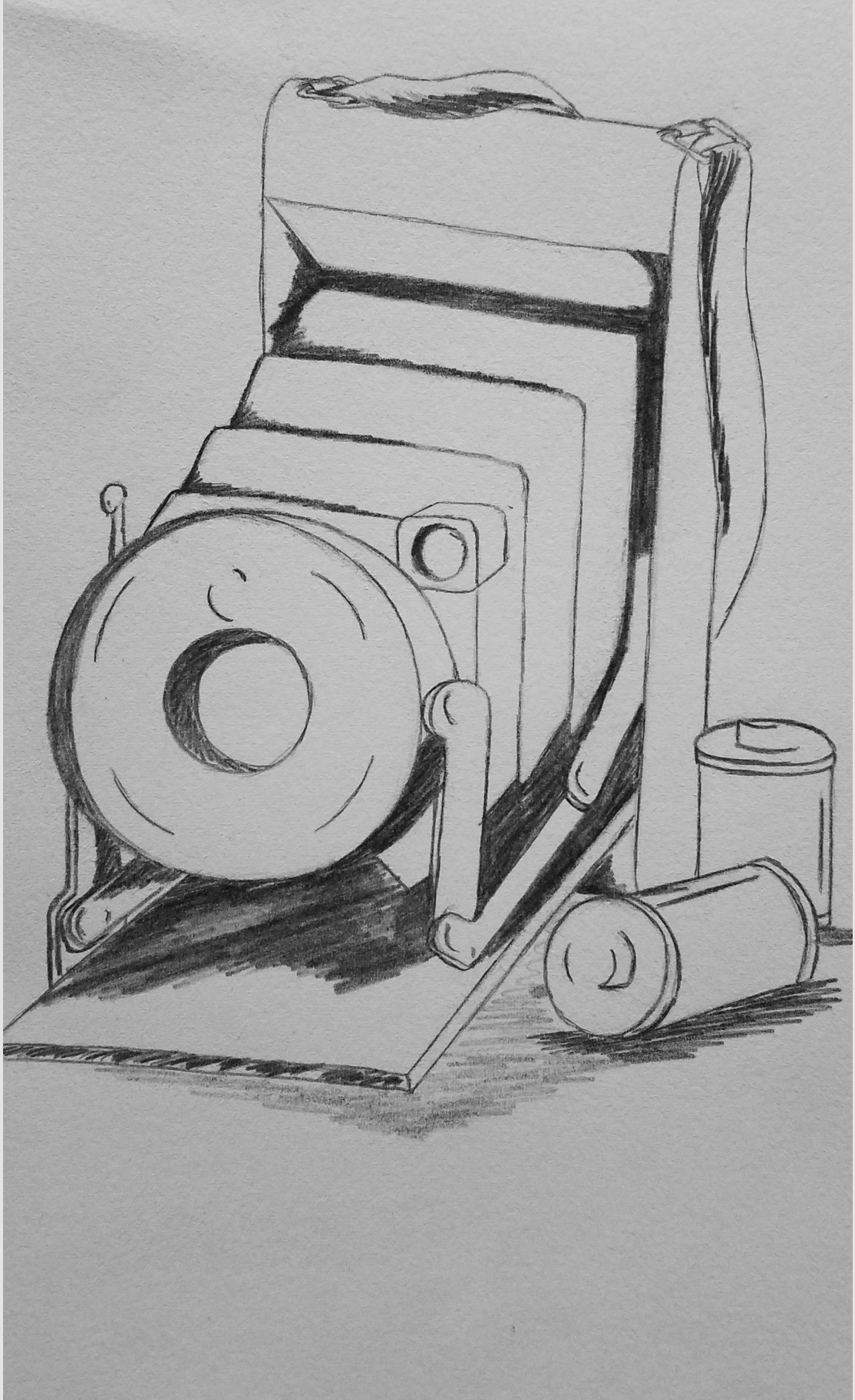
Furthermore, people aren't good or bad. Great men are unfaithful; innocents are abused and become abusers; doctors who save lives are hooked on narcotics. Still, philosophy and spirituality do not protect us from pain.

The indiscriminate action of the universe makes me feel more detached from it, further away from comprehending it, less sure that *"God doesn't Give you anything you cannot handle"* or *"Everything happens for a reason, those hackneyed yet comforting clichés."* ["With randomness there can be no punishment," wrote author Dave Eggers. "You're pleading for punishment in hopes that you'll see your God."]

I haven't of late felt the premonition of doom. But I am certain that both agonies and ecstasies, if not Fates and Furies, lie ahead.

Deep nights, when I am the only one awake, I wonder: What will the death toll look like when she is 16?

Will it come for her? Someone she loves?



Pictures Worth a Thousand Silences

by Brent E. Jones

If my Uncle Lawrence had talked about it, I doubt I ever would have met Herman Schnipper. The two men could not have come from more disparate backgrounds in World War II America: A Texas farm boy versus a son of Ellis Island; one Protestant and the other Jewish; one who had never seen a body of water bigger than a river and the other who grew up within sight of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Yet fate placed them together aboard a U.S. Navy cruiser during the final year of the Pacific War, where they learned firsthand about far-flung places with names like Luzon, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Together with more than a thousand other American boys, they shared the squalid confines of a 600-foot ship taking the war to Imperial Japan. And yet they never met.

Uncle Lawrence died before I was old enough to develop an interest in his World War II experience. I knew his crew had battled kamikazes, perhaps seen terrible things. In later life he sometimes grew faint at the sight of blood. His sleep often brought the nightmares of memory. But he never talked about the war, at least not with his family. Now that he never could, I decided to build a website dedicated to his ship, USS Astoria, in the hopes that surviving shipmates or family might reach out and find me.

I scraped together what I could locate, mostly some basic text about the ship's history, and discovered that Astoria's wartime photographer was a man named Herman Schnipper. A few articles and reunion publications to which he contributed years ago made their way online, including a handful of his photographs. I added the images and waited, my fledgling website positioned as a baited hook for others who might have more to share.

The plan began to work almost immediately, and also became the first humbling lesson of 2008 in my amateur foray as an historian. One of the first people to reach out was none other than Mr. Schnipper himself.

The email from the octogenarian left me stunned; I didn't realize he was even alive, let alone online. His message was short and to the point: "I was surprised to find that you have a website. I noticed you have a number of pictures I took for which I should have gotten a byline." As I read and reread, my heart plunged. In my first effort to memorialize the man's work, had I merely managed to offend him?

I can fix this. Note to self, I thought – bylines are very important, particularly to photographers. Most of the images I tracked down only carried the credit "-U.S. Navy photo" if anything at all. Eager to get into his good graces, I corrected the images on the site with the caption: "-photo taken by ship's photographer Herman Schnipper." I emailed him an apology and update, and I waited.

A few days later I got a response. "Except for those in this section … I didn't take those."

Okay. Again, I made corrections and sent to him. "This one was actually at Ulithi Atoll, not Leyte Gulf…" We went back and forth for a period of weeks, me tinkering, him correcting; captions, dates and place names, until we had something that actually contributed a bit of new insight about the Pacific War.

We eventually spoke on the phone. His tone was softer than I imagined, gentler. He expressed gratitude for my interest in the ship and building the website. I came to learn Mr. Schnipper was a man of few words and short emails, matter of fact and down to earth. I realized I misread him from the start.

*****

Six months later I'm on my way to his door. I'm in New York City on business, and the Schnippers have graciously invited me to dinner for a first meeting in person. I'm late. There is no GPS in the rental, just a printed map on the empty passenger seat under the dome lamp. I foolishly thought my past experience navigating New York City would translate to the Jersey suburbs, but 2008 has grown full of humbling lessons for this Texan. First I hit a wall of traffic at dusk, then foul up getting on the freeway and find myself somewhere off the map, headed out toward Newark. My destination lies in the opposite direction – an apartment building in Hackensack, where the 85-year-old man has his entire family waiting to meet me for dinner. I'm not doing myself any favors in the effort to make a good impression.

After a slow sequence of right-turns (I will come to learn what "jug handles" are in New Jersey) I pull up, check in with the doorman, park in my assigned slot, sign the guest log, and fast-walk my way down to the apartment. I'm trying my best to not look frazzled as I arrive at the door, fully 45 minutes late and damp with perspiration. I knock and wait.

A murmur of voices makes its way to the door from inside. I hear the latch pop and my heart leaps. The door opens to reveal the old man – trim and small, much shorter than I expected – flanked by family members. Kind eyes meet mine in the briefest silence – maybe I'm taller than he expected? Certainly less punctual. I have my explanation ready to reel off the tongue but he speaks first in his soft tone, his lip curling into a wry smile.

"So what do you think? Do I look like a Navy combat photographer?"

*****

The family rooms are brightly lit, impeccably clean, and covered in artwork. Symbols of the family's Jewish faith are displayed around the home. Mr. Schnipper's wife, daughters, and grandchildren bustle about as dinner is ready…. Tuna and pasta salad. I wince to myself – I have always had a hard time with tuna.

But at this point I will eat anything put in front of me out of manners and courtesy, and so I do.

We chat cordially, comparing life in the northeast to Texas. His wife Julie can carry any conversation, the gift of gab from her many years in real estate. We share dessert and coffee, and afterward Mr. Schnipper looks at me again with that hint of a smile. "So, you want to look at some pictures?"

The photographer has a room, a "man cave" from long before the term was coined. One wall of shelving is packed with decades' worth of still and movie cameras. Another wall holds framed portraits of the ship and a panorama of her wartime crew. Everywhere I look I see history books, reunion materials, newspapers, and artifacts. I spot a box of 11x14 enlargements, part of his collection of World War II-era photographs. Photos he took himself, armed with a Navy-issue press camera like the one right there on his desk. I learn the camera's proper name: A Graflex Medium-Format Anniversary Speed Graphic.

He offers it to me, a bulk of wood and metal, ten inches on each side, heavy and awkward. The photographer might as well have handed me a bowling ball. Yet taking it back he handles it deftly, renders the antique elegant. His hands come to life with a dexterity that defies age. After years of use the camera is an extension of his arms as he opens the accordion bellows, raises the viewfinder. He shows me how to release the shutter and remove the film magazine. How many times had he performed this sequence of steps? Against a backdrop of smoke, the cacophony of naval gunfire, and the stressor of suicide planes overhead.

He lifts a thick, oversized photo album and ushers me back to the dining room table. I thumb through pages of photographs in the album, original contact prints, as he goes back to the room and returns, setting another album on the table. I'm still looking through the earliest photos taken aboard ship when two albums become three. Thump. The stack grows. Four. To the room, back again. Five. Thump. Six. It's immediately overwhelming; Herman Schnipper has literally hundreds and hundreds of photographs he snapped aboard my uncle's ship.

In one of the first images, a young sailor dressed in the chambray shirt and dungarees of the U.S. Navy work uniform stands framed in a ship hatchway, bathed in sunlight. His wavy hair pushes the limits of Navy regulation, a cocksure curve of a smile on his face. In his hand is the unmistakable Speed Graphic camera. Boyishly handsome, the young man can only be Herman Schnipper. If the man standing next to me is more than twice my age, the skinny kid in the photo is perhaps half of it. I look over at him, crisply dressed in a plaid long-sleeve oxford and trousers. A far cry from the Navy-issue uniform and M1 helmet he wore at sea. "Good looking kid, huh?" he says.

I don't even know where to begin. I see image after image of freckle-faced boys who are maybe 18, weighted down with flak gear and helmets, manning gun mounts. I wonder if he has any photos of Uncle Lawrence.

"Where did your uncle work?"

"He was an electrician's mate. Worked in the engineering spaces below deck, I believe."

"Oh, yeah. We called them the 'Black Gang.' I didn't go down there much; the smell of the fuel oil made me nauseous."

I nod and keep turning pages. Photos of ships pitching and rolling in typhoon conditions. Skies black with anti-aircraft fire, aircraft carriers burning and belching smoke from Japanese suicide attacks.

"Mr. Schnipper, you took all these from the ship?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"Almost all. A few were given to me by other photographers. They are marked."

I recognize the familiar outline of Iwo Jima. Surrounding ships firing on Mount Suribachi. The next page – incoming Japanese planes, another carrier hit and burning. Men certainly dying. He remains quiet and lets me process each page on my own.

One image is immediately recognizable – six Marines planting an American flag, perhaps the most famous photograph of World War II. I see the signature of the photographer in the corner of the photo – Joe Rosenthal. "A few were given to me by other photographers..." I shake my head.

I come across a cheery portrait, a beaming face posing for the camera. I'm on the cusp of asking him if the man was one of his friends aboard ship when Mr. Schnipper points to him. "That guy – very anti-Semitic. He hated Jews."

So much for my question. The photographer pauses, then cocks his head. "You wouldn't put that on your website, would you?"

"No, Mr. Schnipper. Only what you are receptive to sharing."

"Okay." The old man begins to saunter off, leaving me to peruse the albums, then turns back. "And call me Herman." I force back a smile at the mild irritation I detect in his voice, the product of my formality.

The evening flies by, and work will come early for me the next morning. When it is time to go, I am barely through half the albums. Herman walks me to my car and shakes my hand. "Let me know next time you are going to be in town."

Driving back into the city, something nags at me. His collection has left me speechless, but Herman strikes me as a man haunted by something. I can't put my finger on it. Proud of his Navy service and his work as a combat photographer, yet ... saddened by it all somehow. I wonder if such complex layers can ever be peeled away.

*****

In spring 2009 I make my next trip up east for work and again pay Herman a visit. This time I bring my laptop and a professional scanner with me. I make the correct turn onto Interstate 95 and arrive on time. Doorman, assigned parking spot, phone and sign in, I remember the drill. This time we have barbecue for dinner! A language my southwestern palate speaks fluently.

Herman and his family have agreed to let me scan a cross-section of his photos, perhaps fifty or so, for the Astoria website. I don't want to push further than that, given the generosity I've already been shown. I select some of the standouts from the last visit, gently placing them on the scanning bed. The machine whirs and

works its magic. Herman leans in close to my laptop as I show him the result. He is amazed to see that the digital output can be cleaned and restored, the contrast repaired, dust and scratches removed, incredible detail unlocked. Together we breathe life into scenes with a clarity he hasn't seen since he processed the negatives in developer fluid at sea more than 70 years before. He comments on each photo with remarkable memory.

As we work, I learn from his daughter Sari that Herman has been taken advantage of before. Photos that were "borrowed" for research somehow never made their way back. Others have been used in a variety of ways without permission or credit, even sold. Hearing of such things saddens me. It also reinforces the privilege he is giving me in accessing his work. I thank him again for the opportunity, and assure him I will only use his photography as we have discussed. At the end of the evening he walks me to my car again.

*****

In late 2009 I access the National Archives repository in College Park, Maryland. I'm hoping to track down more photos from Herman and combat photographers stationed aboard other ships in Astoria's task group. It's my first visit to the fifth-floor photography section, and an archivist directs me to a sea of decades-old card catalog cabinets stretching the length of the expansive room. The cards are only the starting point to a process both archaic and arcane. To request the actual photos, you must identify individual numbers, cross-reference them with lists of archival boxes, then put in requests for an employee to pull the boxes from storage. They allow scanning, but I must wear white cotton gloves when handling photos and documents. I am required to work one box at a time, one photo at a time.

Oh man, this is going to take a while, I realize.

I thumb through drawers of yellowed index cards in what the archives calls Records Group 80-G: World War II-era U.S. Navy photographs. Further complicating the process, the catalog is alphabetized by ship pennant number.... The light cruisers are CLs ... CL-88, 89 ... CL-90. That's Astoria!

My first thought is disappointment at how few cards are present, each representing a single photo taken from the ship. My second is recognizing the familiar handwriting scrawled on most of the index cards. There is no signature revealing the author, but I chuckle at the unmistakable penmanship. Herman was in here some years earlier, correcting the Astoria photo dates and locations. I laugh first that he took the time to do that, and second because he is absolutely right. They have numerous photos listed incorrectly. I'm comforted on that first day in the archives knowing he's right there with me in spirit.

Curiously, Herman never left his name.

While I find a wealth of material on the trip, I am saddened by the small holding from Astoria. The National Archives preserved exactly 27 negatives taken by Herman, all simply credited as "U.S. Navy photo." As I work over the course of a week – one box at a time, one photo at a time, white gloves on, of course – it sticks with me. The sum total of Herman's legacy from the Navy to the National Archives, over a year at sea, is these 27 images. But he took more than a thousand

more. For the vast majority of his work, Herman almost certainly has the only surviving print.

*****

Throughout 2010 my "day job" brings me back to New York repeatedly, and I almost always manage a side trip to visit Herman. A friend from work has started loaning me his Jeep to save the rental car expense, and I know the way without directions. We chat while Julie somehow manages to play hide and seek with her granddaughter without leaving her chair.

My website has grown by leaps and bounds, with dozens of people reaching out. I have tracked down the ship's deck logs and interviewed a number of other shipmates. Now I know what to ask, where to explore. And each time Herman lets me scan more photos for restoration to add to the Astoria site.

He shares the story about the National Archives. When he came off the ship in 1946, he left the full set of negatives behind, as they were Navy property. He left a full set of prints as well, but kept a second set for himself. When he visited the archives 40 years later, he was shocked to discover that almost all the negatives and prints had been destroyed. "To make room," he was told. Only the 27 were retained. As he recounts what happened, deep sadness lingers in his eyes.

Herman also opens up more about his role as photographer. Young enlisted men at sea got paid about $60 a month in 1945. Not only was that a tiny amount, but they truly had nowhere to spend it. Herman had the real currency aboard ship, the most powerful currency in such circumstances – he could take a photo of a sailor or Marine, perhaps surrounded by his buddies. Something to send home to his family. Out of 1,200 men aboard ship, only Herman could give them something truly meaningful to send back to parents, sweethearts, wives, and children.

A barter system developed. In exchange for photos, laundrymen pressed his uniform, cooks provided a hot plate for soup and coffee in his darkroom, and so on. Herman never ran short on smokes. But an oddly alienating effect also emerged. Men pestered him wherever they saw him, and he grew withdrawn over time as a result. I notice this in his photos, as many later ones are taken from a distance, overhead, or behind. Openly brandishing the camera became a liability.

At this point I feel as if we have grown close enough that I can return to the subject of religion. Herman has pictures of services aboard ship – Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. The Jews are clearly a small minority. Herman shares that throughout his service he dealt with a significant amount of anti-Semitism, culminating in something that happened right when he was about to head home. He pauses, reflects. "But I don't really want to comment on that." I don't push further.

Herman Schnipper served in a military that was segregated by race. One of the most powerful images we come across is of a gun crew at their battle station during a lull between attacks. While most of the men are congregated, smoking and engaged in conversation, a lone sailor looks out to sea, very clearly not a part of their group. The sailor is black, and the photo captures his solitude in a way that perhaps words cannot. Herman is a man who understands exclusion.

Beyond the experience of combat, beyond personal portraits and candid shots, the photographs also reveal his sense of humor. One depicts the ship's captain going through the chow line, still wearing his hat (against Navy regulations). Another shows an exhausted sailor asleep on watch (a huge no-no). A third has pharmacist's mates handing out "personal hygiene kits" to men going ashore on liberty (where the Navy strictly regulated the local brothels). Men in the showers, boxing matches, an emergency appendectomy at sea – no aspect of Navy life was spared from his lenses.

But such photos are always bookended with something sobering. One image of Mount Suribachi captures a great explosion rising from the summit as naval gunfire rains down, supporting the advancing Marines. A newspaper clipping shares the same album page; the death announcement for a boy Herman knew from his hometown of Bayonne. The boy was a Marine killed on Iwo Jima the same day Herman took the photograph from the ship.

*****

It's 2011 and I'm back in Hackensack. Over four years I have scanned almost 1,300 photographs from his collection. I'm finally on the home stretch, working in album six.

The hum of the scanner serves as white noise in the quiet, the thin beam of light peeking from under the platen lid, passing over image after image and page after page as I sit alone at the dining room table. Julie went to bed long ago. Herman has been in the den watching an episode of HBO's Band of Brothers. He comes in to check on me. It's almost 1 a.m. I wonder if he will ask me to wrap things up, but then again, I know he's a night owl.

"Those guys really had it rough," he says, shaking his head. He's referring to the paratroopers in Band of Brothers. I look up from my work.

"Herman! You spent three straight months in action during the Okinawa invasion. You guys ate and slept at your battle stations for days on end. You got hit in the face by shrapnel during a kamikaze attack. The officer standing next to you was so badly wounded he almost died."

The old man is nonplussed. He mulls for a moment in his thoughtful way, then nods. "Yeah. … But those guys had it bad." He heads back to his show, then walks me out when I wrap up sometime before two in the morning.

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2012. I call Herman occasionally, and Julie usually answers. As she muffles the receiver, I hear, "Herman! It's Brent from Texas about the ship!" Slowly taking the phone, he always says something like, "Are you just calling to make sure I'm still kicking?" His dry wit can be missed if you don't know the man well.

The last time I saw him was at his grandson's Bar Mitzvah. We talk of the people who have contacted me through the website, literally hundreds ecstatic to learn about their family member who served aboard Astoria. Many even pick out their father or grandfather or uncle in some of the images online. Throughout, they chorus: "Dad never spoke about his time in the war … Uncle Jerry wouldn't ever say much … He never talked about it. …" I can always relate. Herman is surprised and

pleased that his work could mean so much to so many, conveyed via the internet. He's pushing 90 now, and I can tell he is slowing down a bit.

My growing collection of books on the Pacific War has uncovered more instances where his photography was used, something I am pleased to share with him. I don't mention that the captions read, "U.S. Navy photo" and "National Archives photo." Anything but "taken by Photographer's Mate Herman Schnipper."

Over the summer I track down and recover several of his originals for sale on eBay to return to his collection.

*****

In 2013 I go back to graduate school. The load of full-time work and higher education forces me to park the Astoria project, but by now I am convinced there is enough to write a book about the ship. I let Herman and his family know, but school forces distance and we don't speak as much.

Going into my final semester, I am contacted by a reporter from the Bergen County Record. Herman's family has managed to get a spotlight piece written about him that will run shortly. While interviewing me about our relationship and the website, the reporter informs me, "Mr. Jones, I have to tell you that Mr. Schnipper is a different man than you remember." Age is catching up with Herman, who is now 91. His memory and ability to articulate simply aren't what they once were.

His daughter Sari and I chat on the phone to celebrate the story after it runs. She is driving with her husband Dan, bringing her parents back from an event. I reiterate that once I graduate, the book project will take center stage and be a main focus. From the backseat, in the way only she can deliver, Julie replies, "You better hurry up! Have you seen how old we are?"

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I return to Hackensack in spring 2016. The graduate degree hangs on the wall back in Texas, and the freed-up evenings since have been devoted to organizing research, structuring the Astoria book project, and putting word to paper. As his family gathers around, I show Herman what the proposed photo inserts look like. More than 100 of his selected images, formatted and crisp, to be included in the book. Beneath each of them lies a caption:

"-U.S. Navy photo taken by Astoria ship's photographer Herman Schnipper."

He is frail. Speech is difficult for him. We review together and his daughters assure him that his photographs will be presented well and cared for. I stand behind him and gently squeeze his shoulder. No one says it of course, but we know this visit is a goodbye.

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Summer is fading when we gather again in August. Herman's daughter Rachel and his two eldest grandchildren show strength and courage, speaking eloquently about him. For my own part, I speak to his extended legacy – beyond family and friends he knew, it can be found in the lives he touched and will touch through his work, people he will never meet or know about. Sailors from a local unit fold the

American flag covering his coffin, revealing a simple pine box with a Star of David atop. They present the flag to Julie.

I have never attended a Jewish funeral. At the graveside, I ask Sari and the rabbi if it is appropriate for me to take a place in the line of mourners. Both assure me it is; honoring the dead is not limited by faith.

The shovel feels oddly heavy as I stab into the mound of soil, after family and friends have taken their turn. I hold it as the others have, lifting with the blade intentionally inverted, balancing carefully to keep a small scoop of earth on the convex bottom as I transfer it over Herman's grave. Taking this awkward action for the first shovelful is a custom of Conservative Judaism, symbolizing the reluctance and work involved in burying a loved one. I dump the dirt in a clatter of pebbles against the pine box. Flipping it over I scoop normally, one, then two more heaps into the opening. Another mourner takes the shovel. They do not stop until the coffin is completely covered. Leaving the service, several people remark about the Texas license plates on my rental car, a coincidence I didn't even notice at the airport. "You drove all the way up here from Texas?"

*****

Back at the apartment, I approach the doorman. "I'm here to see … " I catch myself. "I'm here for the Schnipper family reception." He nods in understanding. For the first time I am not directed to an alphabetical parking spot. No sign-in is required at the door. Once inside I don't knock, just push the door open into a room filled with the Schnippers' friends and family. A side table holds a spread of finger sandwiches and sparkling water. I look at the sandwiches and smile. Tuna fish.

The mourning rite of Shiva begins after the burial and takes place over the seven days that follow. Family and friends gather at the house of the deceased to pay respects to both the dead and those who survive him. Herman's family has allowed me to become temporary custodian of his collection, reviewing the contents and helping ensure all are identified for their proper destination. Some artifacts will remain in the family, while the large photo albums will eventually be donated to an appropriate museum's archival collection. I work alone in Herman's room as his family receives visitors making calls of Shiva.

Sundown after the funeral brings Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. It also brings the thought that I never once posed for a picture with Herman. I didn't even think of it until our final two visits, and both occasions were also on Shabbat, when observant Jews are forbidden by Jewish law from posing for photographs. There's a fitting irony there somewhere.

The process of going through Herman's Navy possessions takes most of the following day, which I do as the family observes the day of rest. I hear Julie and her daughters Sari and Rachel chatting in the next room while I sit at his desk, opening drawers and boxes that have been his and his alone. Going through his most personal things. I find letters to his mother, written at sea during the war. He signed each of them Sholem, his Hebrew name meaning "peace."

I discover one last set of documents dating to April 1946, in his final weeks of

active duty. One is a telegram informing him of the sudden death of his father. The rest reveal the story of him trying to secure a coast-to-coast flight home, so he can be there with his family before the Shiva period ends. His request was denied by an officer. Adding insult to injury, he was released from the ship and active duty the day after Shiva ended.

I'm shaken by the realization I was allowed to do something for Herman that he was not permitted to do for his own father – mourn. I discuss this with Sari, and she recalls her father telling her once that an officer said to him, "You bury your people too quickly." Herman never told even his daughters the full story. Instead he internalized his grief.

I recall Herman's oblique reference to this when we spoke of prejudices years earlier. It must have been a terrible thing dealing daily with others who were "on your side" but looked down on your religious beliefs or viewed you through a filter. He weathered it, and ultimately buried it.

But it was completely in character for him to stay quiet. Herman was a man more comfortable behind the camera than in front of it. He never sought attention, fame, or royalties. Where a 20-year-old kid pointed a bulky camera at anything that flew, shot, or exploded, an older man just wanted it known there was a living soul behind that camera, braving terrific danger to record history as it happened. The combat photographer merely wants to be remembered, not discarded like so many photos in an archive. All he ever asks in return is the small credit underneath.

I reflect on words the rabbi spoke at his service, that burial is the one gift you can give someone for which they can never repay you. Perhaps in Herman's case there has been another such gift. His photographs have the lasting ability to give families understanding, to provide the words for a thousand shipmates who never found them. A gift of closure for the relatives of men who sought refuge in silence while living, made permanent with their passing. He certainly has given that to me.

I hope Herman takes comfort from that thought. I hope he left us this parting gift knowing his name will be remembered from here forward. I wrap up my work and take one last moment for my friend, then leave his room in silence, and peace.

150 Banana Slugs

by Rick Jurgens

The news came in a late evening telephone call from a surgeon who had examined my wife, Diane.

He told us of the outcome of a "tumor board" – a panel of doctors at the University of California, San Francisco, that earlier in the day had considered a plan to cut out, or resect, a 1,600-cubic-centimeter growth on Diane's liver.

We had sought out the surgeon at UCSF, a leading academic medical center near where we lived, after some disturbing discoveries by the doctors who a few weeks earlier had begun treating Diane for nausea, abdominal pain and diarrhea.

At first these symptoms hadn't seemed a serious concern. Diane had weathered minor health storms in the past. This time, she even welcomed the loss of 15 pounds.

But then an ultrasound test showed a mass roughly the size of an ostrich egg on her liver. And a biopsy determined that it was cancer. And so we scrambled to find the UCSF specialist.

At first, he gave us hope. During a late-afternoon appointment in his small office overlooking Golden Gate Park, he explained that a cancer like Diane's, if it had not yet spread to other organs, might be cured through resection. And Diane, only 59 years old, and with an otherwise healthy liver, seemed a good candidate for such surgery. We left his office resolved to prepare for a major operation and a lengthy recovery.

But five days later, as we leaned over an iPhone on our dining room table, straining to hear the doctor's voice, that hope evaporated. The tumor board had viewed an additional scan that showed that Diane's cancer had already spread. Cutting out the tumor was not an option. Barring a miracle, there would be no cure.

Journey

The surgeon referred Diane to an oncologist.

Prim, pretty and youthful, Katie was businesslike and confident and had experience dealing with cholangiocarcinoma, as the deadly cancer that had originated in Diane's bile ducts was called. The best remaining response was chemotherapy, Katie told us.

Diane asked how long she had to live. Katie said that while some patients

survived for 10 years, there was too little data about this rare disease to support reliable predictions. She could only tell us with some confidence what the next two or three months were likely to bring. Meanwhile, chemo would become a permanent presence in Diane's life.

Out of all that, "10 years" was what Diane heard and remembered and the goal that she embraced. To pursue it, we took advantage of all the medical care, insurance coverage, financial resources, social skills, personal ties and informal care-giving networks of friends and family to which we had or could find access.

As it happened, our journey lasted only 15 months. Along the way, we struggled to make sense and use of the massive, complex and fragmented array of medical and related services in place to care for cancer patients.

That experience reinforced the pre-existing skepticism that Diane and I had about large insurance companies and giant hospitals. But inside the glass and steel structures of the nation's medical-industrial complex, we also discovered islands of humanity and support. Kind people with skills and compassion helped Diane cope with the ravages of illness and the challenges of treatment.

And although that care didn't dispel Diane's anger at the too-early approach of death, it did help her continue, until the end, to embrace life and savor some of its pleasures and satisfactions.

Houston

It was still a few minutes before dawn. We were barely awake as we set out for Diane's daily dose of cancer-killing radiation, which would be streamed into her abdomen by a linear accelerator about the size of a small car.

We drove through the darkness across flat parkland, toward neon signs atop distant skyscrapers that identified our destination as the MD Anderson Cancer Center.

The attendant at valet parking – free to radiation patients – recognized me, smiled, reached out for the dollar bill I handed him each morning with my keys. Small things lubricate the passage of the juggernaut of death.

MD Anderson – a unit of the University of Texas with 1,700 doctors and scientists, 21,000 employees and 14 million square feet of hospital, laboratory and administrative space – seemed a juggernaut in its own right.

We went to Texas after a knowledgeable friend advised us to look beyond UCSF for care, either to MD Anderson or Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York. With more doctors and a higher degree of specialization, one of those giant cancer centers might offer advanced care or clinical trials not available at UCSF.

Despite our reluctance to question Katie's knowledge or skill, at our next regular Friday appointment we gingerly suggested that we would like to travel to Texas to visit Diane's family and might also seek a second opinion at MD Anderson. Katie quickly agreed. And on the following Tuesday, she emailed us the name of the oncologist to see there and two dates he would be available.

At MD Anderson, we met that oncologist, and he suggested that radiation could

slow the growth of the large tumor that threatened to shut down Diane's liver and block a critical vein near her heart. He sent us to see a square-jawed radiologist with close-cropped hair who informed us he could precisely target radiation to attack the cancer in Diane's belly. And though his lips pursed when we asked him about the risks involved, he gradually relaxed and assured us that he had done this procedure often and safely. A web search showed he had authored more than 90 papers in medical journals, many describing the use of radiation in patients' abdomens. His Texas confidence seemed rooted in reality. Let's go, we said.

Within a few hours, a team of doctors laid Diane on her back and, with the aid of a laser and a CT scanner, created a "four-dimensional" map of her abdomen (the fourth dimension: time, to take into account the slight motion in breathing in order to avoid exposing nearby tissue to radiation). They then tattooed coordinates on her tummy for technicians to use to guide the device that would, during three weeks of treatment, blast her tumor with 15 doses of radiation totaling 58 grays (a single, whole-body exposure of eight grays is lethal, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency).

That night, we flew back to the San Francisco area, where we had five days to put our affairs in order and line up a place to live for three weeks in Houston. No problem: we used the telephone and internet to apartment hunt, our check for $2,092.72 cleared and we had rented a unit a five-minute drive from the radiation clinic.

Then another phone call. A polite and soft-spoken MD Anderson administrator wanted to talk about money. Our health insurer said that Diane was no longer covered. That wouldn't prevent her from starting the radiation treatment, he assured us, so long as we were prepared to take responsibility for payment – $63,000 worth of responsibility.

That turned out to be a five-figure false alarm. We discovered that after Diane lost coverage from group health insurance through her employer, the insurance company had failed to act on our request for coverage under COBRA, the eerily named law that allows former employees to pay their own way to stay covered by a group policy. The COBRA change was made. We wouldn't be on the hook for $63,000.

In Houston, the early-morning treatments were taxing, as was the accompanying regimen of tests and appointments. In the lulls, we visited Diane's parents and siblings, and explored an unfamiliar city. And after three weeks, we returned to California exhausted and uncertain as to what had been accomplished.

Then progress. Two months later after the radiation ended, Diane's energy and appetite returned, and scans showed that the large tumor on her liver had shrunk from 8.3 centimeters – about the length of a standard business card – to 7.8 centimeters.

But imaging tests showed that the cancer had continued to spread across Diane's liver and in her lungs. Soon excruciating pain would announce that the cancer had invaded Diane's pelvis.

Travels

Family photographs from Diane's Missouri childhood show her smiling proudly as she fans open a new dress and heads off to kindergarten; gazing protectively with her siblings at Janet, their youngest sister, who died of heart disease at the age of 14; fighting back tears of joy as her election as Sweetheart Queen of St. Charles High School is announced; giving the finger to the photographer who captures her lying in the sun in a bikini.

Soon after Janet died, Diane dropped out of college and, with her friend Tanya, left the suburbs of St. Louis and headed west in a Volkswagen van. When they stopped to spend the night in a Wyoming campground, Diane wrote in her journal: "There are mountains on either side of us and about 20 feet from the tent a rapidly rushing creek that is clear and cold … . This is the first night that we have set up the tent and fixed ourselves a meal. It's great so far – our only needs are in the back of the Volkswagen and in ourselves. I actually felt tonight that it would be great to always live like this. Maybe we'll get tired of setting up and taking down the tent, and only (being) able to cook one thing at a time and being a little dirtier (than) usual, but right now I feel great and free."

Diane entered my life years later. Mutual attraction led to abiding love. We lived together, went off to work, supported multiple causes and campaigns and, from time to time, went on our own road-trip vacations.

But suddenly cancer imposed new limits on our lives. Thoughts of future employments, causes or wanderings fell out of bounds. Mountains and cold, clear creeks were only in our memories or in pictures on Sierra Club wall calendars.

Instead, we made excursions to a fifth-floor infusion center at UCSF where chemotherapy patients – some attended by family members or friends, others alone – sat in padded chairs and napped, read or tapped on laptops through appointment routines that began with blood tests, continued with infusions of anti-nausea medications and concluded with the slow drip of tumor-killing chemicals.

Life with cancer sometimes passed as slowly as gravity moved the clear chemotherapy solutions from plastic bags on an infusion stand into Diane's veins. We felt pain, fear and frustration, and an acute awareness of losses suffered and losses still to come. Yet Diane and I craved time, hoarded time, cherished time.

Chemical Warfare

It was Katie's job to choose the weapons and chart the maneuvers for our battle against Diane's cancer.

In our appointments, Katie was reliably cheerful and caring despite the steady undercurrent of urgency that reminded us of the limits of her time and attention. Usually, she arrived in the exam room a few minutes late, greeted us pleasantly, conducted a roll call of Diane's current medications, discussed her latest symptoms and test results, probed her abdomen and fielded our questions. At the end, Katie presented to us the tactical and strategic choices of the hour. Her calmness and clarity belied the havoc of Diane's disease.

Previously, I worked as a reporter and writer. As illness transformed our lives, I took on the new role of loyal and attentive caregiver.

I was always in the exam room with Diane. I paid attention and provided her the comfort of my presence. She took meticulous and detailed notes while I sometimes helped her identify broader patterns and issues.

I also tried to sense, and help us avoid, gaffes and conflicts that might put us at odds with our doctors and nurses and their supporting squadrons of attendants and administrators. I worked to charm Katie, teased her about the preppie reputation of the Harvard house where she had lived as an undergraduate and made small talk about hiking trails and commuting routes. More seriously, I signaled to her that we understood that some of our most important questions had no clear answers, and that we didn't expect her to express certainty where none existed. We needed Katie's ideas and judgments, even when they extended beyond the evidence-based horizon of medical knowledge.

Katie opened the doomed but sometimes-effective campaign by ordering weekly attacks with gemcitabine and cisplatin, the conventional chemicals to fight cholangiocarcinoma. At the start, two Fridays of chemo, one Friday of rest. When the gem-cis staggered Diane with nausea and lethargy, Katie backed off to biweekly infusions. Later, Katie abandoned gem-cis, and attacked with one new set of chemicals, then another.

As the effectiveness of these second-line weapons diminished and Diane reeled under their side effects, Katie searched for fresh approaches. Eventually, Diane and I spent a Sunday in our living room reading and preparing to sign the 30-page informed consent documents that explained, in painstaking detail, the routines and risks of a pair of early-stage clinical trials of new chemical combinations. Diane steeled herself for a new regimen of appointments, infusions and side effects. But the drug company sponsoring the most promising trial rejected her after a CT scan indicated that she'd had a small stroke. Her weakness and the advance of her cancer made her an unlikely candidate for other trials.

Katie offered one more prospect: Tarceva, a new drug that might, perhaps, slow the progress of Diane's illness. But it had not yet been approved for use against cholangiocarcinoma. Only after two appeals did Diane's insurance company agree to pay for Tarceva's "off-label" use.

Changes

The growing cancer weakened Diane's body and shrunk her world.

A serious cook with an encyclopedic recall of food facts and bulging files of recipes clipped from gourmet magazines and newspaper food sections, Diane no longer had energy for kitchen projects. Finding and preparing foods from which her cancer-ravaged digestive system could extract nutrients became part of my caregiving responsibilities.

After she was prescribed strong opioids for pain, she no longer felt able to drive safely. Unable to get to work, she opened a laptop on our dining room table and tried to stay on top of her responsibilities as a portfolio manager for a wine

distributor. But soon she was too exhausted.

Home generated its own worries and annoyances. Diane felt increasingly ill at ease in the brightly painted but poorly maintained house we rented, about a 45-minute drive from UCSF. Before each appointment, we fretted that a traffic jam on the San Francisco Bay Bridge would make us late.

Diane also loathed a different form of traffic that appeared periodically inside the house: a flood tide of ants attracted by crumbs left on a kitchen counter or a dab of shampoo in the shower.

And outside our front window, the yellow oxalis flowers that briefly brightened the yard left behind a thicket of weeds. "I hate oxalis," Diane would say, annoyed that she no longer could counter those invaders by crouching down to uproot each tiny bulb by hand.

While the cancer could not be removed, the house could be vacated. And so, with much support from friends, we moved. And of all Diane and my many moves together, this was the most satisfying.

In our new home, we were an easy, bridge-free half-hour drive from UCSF. As spring unfolded, blossoms on fruit trees heralded each sunny morning outside the window of the second-floor bedroom where Diane slowly awakened, sipping the tea I made for her as I brewed coffee. After the blossoms fell, Diane spotted the hummingbirds that perched on the trees' branches and swooped down on our back yard feeder. When Diane went downstairs to the living room, our front yard feeder brought along the hummingbirds.

Diane passed her days sitting in her reclining chair, dozing, listening to National Public Radio, channel surfing for Friends reruns and slowly working her way through The New York Times. Sometimes she would go outside and bask in the warm California sun.

At night, together under the covers, the devastation in her abdomen prevented us from cuddling or spooning. But I could still lie beside her, and she would extend her hand, which I would hold.

A Wedding Together

Life continued, and we struggled to stay part of it.

An invitation was pending. The son of Diane's best friend, Denise, was getting married in New Hampshire over the July Fourth weekend. Could we make it there from California?

We would try. Katie tweaked the chemo schedule, and arranged for a blood transfusion to boost Diane's energy. A travel agent helped me spend thousands of dollars for first-class airplane tickets. Diane, worried about losing her hair, bought a wig. Denise was surprised to find her children ready and able to supply marijuana in Boston so that, beyond the gauntlet of airport security, Diane could find her most reliable antidote for nausea and lack of appetite.

The wedding trip offered a series of shared pleasures. As we awaited the lakeside nuptials, we saw an eagle glide over the water and dive for a fish. Diane dined at

the reception, elegant in a floral print silk scarf and her own silky hair. In Boston, she joined former co-workers to feast on roast chicken at a favorite Peruvian restaurant. Old friends made pilgrimages to our hotel room. A tiny feud got settled, hugs exchanged, stories told.

As the visit concluded, Diane told Denise that she knew the end was approaching.

Exhausted, Diane rested. Meanwhile, I chose five pictures of her, happy and proud at the wedding, and emailed them to Katie and to Nancy, our palliative care nurse. They had helped make these moments possible. I wanted to share some of our joy.

Palliative Caring

Back in the Bay Area, we resumed our routine of medical appointments and pills mixed with quiet days and brief walks in the sun. Seeing Katie gave us comfort, despite the silent metronome that always seemed to be summoning her to her next patient. There was never enough wisdom. There was never enough time.

In the first days after Diane's diagnosis, I dreaded the onset of excruciating pain from which she could find no relief. I imagined seeking an end to her suffering by standing on the Golden Gate Bridge, putting my arms around her and leaping together to oblivion.

Fortunately, powerful opioids mostly held Diane's pain in check. Still, she endured endless doldrums of discomfort and fatigue and nausea and diarrhea and constipation.

Katie suggested palliative care. At first, Diane wanted nothing to do with what seemed to her a three-dollar synonym for hospice and an implicit signal of surrender.

But sometimes words matter. Diane was open to Katie's offer of a referral to UCSF's "symptom management service." Diane had no shortage of symptoms, and no reluctance to seek help managing them.

We met Nancy, a nurse practitioner, in a small waiting room with a selection of herbal teas, a pastel watercolor on the wall and an artificial orchid on an end table. The short, steep stairway we climbed and the heavy glass door we struggled to swing open seemed to mark this location as a neglected backwater in UCSF's empire of medicine.

But this was a welcoming backwater. Compared to the doctors, Nancy seemed unfazed by the passage and pressure of time. She listened intently, questioned gently, patiently looked at and touched Diane, and noticed the tears that came into her eyes at a mention of the end that was coming. Nancy's presence put us at ease, especially her intelligent but unchallenging gaze, and her voice, which conveyed sympathy mixed with small measures of sadness and resignation and avoided the cloying note of false assurance – "I know the secret to transcending death, so I can make you safe" – that soured the words of some otherwise well-intentioned caregivers.

Diane's boss in a long-ago job at a management-consulting firm once wrote her a letter of recommendation that noted the "professional attitude under the most trying circumstances" of his "cheerful, competent and reliable" administrative assistant.

In Nancy, Diane found a peer. Deliberately and meticulously, Nancy examined, deciphered and adjusted the pharmaceutical equations embodied in the plastic pill dispenser that Diane – like the president's military aide with the nuclear football containing the codes to launch atomic weapons – carried with her everywhere.

Diane's arsenal, aimed not at the capital of a hostile power but at her digestive tract and bloodstream, included Protonix to reduce stomach acid; Lasix to alleviate the swelling in her legs; Imodium and Lomotil to stem diarrhea; Miralax and Senna to ease constipation; Zofran, Reglan and Ativan to prevent nausea; Valium and clonazepam to relieve stress (but not to be used along with Ativan!); Ritalin for energy; magnesium and potassium to supply minerals that her body was struggling to produce; assorted vitamins and eye drops; Arixtra, the blood thinner she injected each day into her abdomen; Roxicodone, the fast-acting opium derivative with which she fought off surges in pain; and OxyContin, the slow-release opium derivative that she took three times a day to mask the pain and pressure of the deadly mass growing in her gut.

An Alarm

Ten months after Diane's diagnosis, I grew alarmed when a blood test showed a big increase in a protein that Katie used as a measure of the advance of Diane's cancer. I emailed Katie to ask whether that signaled "the need to move ahead with planning for end-of-life or hospice care or arranging final visits from distant friends."

I added: "Our focus remains on living as well as possible with the cancer while recognizing grimmer matters also require some attention."

Katie responded that the protein increase was a "pretty trivial change overall" but added a warning: Recent scans had shown "quite a bit of progression" in the cancer and "there is more of a chance for things to change for the worse in (the) near future."

Five months later, things changed. Diane fell as she tried to sit on the toilet. A shingles infection, caught and treated with antibiotics in time to prevent a spiral of pain, still struck with flashes of agony. For the first time, Diane wanted help filling and organizing her trays of medications. During our daily walks she gripped my arm ever more tightly and we shortened our route, first only three blocks, then two.

With her abdomen swollen by cancer and fluids, she would manage a laugh as she told friends she looked pregnant. We continued to shower together, but as we stood under the stream of hot water and she leaned forward to lay her head on my chest, I was careful to wrap my arms around her shoulders but avoid putting pressure on her midsection. No longer able to lie comfortably in our bed and exhausted by climbing stairs, she began spending nights in her downstairs recliner.

Final Days

After the sun rose on Diane's final Monday, I sent Nancy and Katie an email describing Diane's decline over the weekend. "I told you I'd tell you when I thought it was time to start hospice," Nancy replied. "I think that time is now." Katie concurred.

But Diane balked. Hospice implied surrender. I arranged for Nancy to call. Patiently, she listed the advantages of beginning hospice. A nurse would visit regularly. Hospice workers could monitor Diane's medications and help install grip bars by our toilets and shower. And Rick would need help. OK, Diane said. We made a hospice appointment for next week.

But things moved quickly. On Thursday morning I emailed Nancy and Katie: "Diane woke up this morning (and remains) very disoriented (asking "is it Sunday?" and "is there anyone else in the house?"), able to speak only with effort and more in phrases than full sentences and whimpering and sometimes calling out in her sleep." We moved up the hospice appointment.

Then, later that day, a reprieve. Diane and I sat together on our couch as a friend arrived with some ribs for lunch. "Steve's here," I told her. "Hello, Steve," she murmured. He went into the kitchen, warmed up the ribs, put together a salad and set the dining room table. Gently, I removed Diane's head from my shoulder, got up and joined Steve at the table, intending to eat, then take a small plate to her. But as we began the meal, we heard a noise in the next room. Diane was up and walking. She joined us at the table, made her own small plate of ribs and salad, and chatted with Steve about his job and his daughters. After a few minutes, she tired and returned to the couch.

Diane's sisters and her mother were scheduled to fly in for a visit. I emailed them that Diane was "sleeping most of the time, disoriented, having difficulty speaking full sentences, unstable when she walks … . I'm told the cancer hijacks the nutrients in the body and makes it hard for the healthy organs to do their jobs."

On Thursday afternoon, our friend Pam arrived. That evening Diane asked, "Pam, will you stay?" Pam said, "Yes." Diane said, "Oh, good, cuz I didn't want to drive you to the T" – the transit system 3,000 miles away in Boston, where Diane and I lived for many years.

During the night, Pam took Diane to the bathroom. Later, sitting in the room with her, Pam made a note: "Diane wakes up - looks around - I wave, she smiles."

Final Hours

As Diane's life waned, her choices and actions took on new meanings and poignancy.

Diane requested a last taste of lobster. She made a firm decision to replace adult diapers with real underwear. She revisited her long-standing frustration with mechanical devices in a confused attempt to change a television channel using a cordless telephone instead of a remote. She asked to switch back to coffee from the chamomile tea that had been her morning drink throughout her illness.

She labored to scribble detailed notes of meetings with hospice caregivers. A telephone conversation overheard from the next room elicited this challenge: "I'm not delirious. I'm confused."

So many tasks: food preparation, bathroom trips, pills to swallow and record, blood thinner injections, arrangements for a hospital bed, appointments for hospice visits, calls for assistance from friends, planning for airport pickups of visitors. ...

But weren't these sacred moments? I sat on the couch, Diane's head on my shoulder, holding her and whispering, with as much reassurance as I could muster, "I love you, I love you." I clung to the moment. I felt her presence. I couldn't imagine her absence.

When I left the couch, I went over to the CD player, and put on Miles Davis, Kind of Blue. Music infused with the tenderness and beauty I desperately wished to continue sharing with her.

As dusk approached, I went upstairs to nap. Pam and Gladys, a friend who had been a physician in Peru, stayed with Diane. When I returned downstairs, Diane laid back in her recliner, laboring for breath and for words. I decided to make coffee. I needed to remain awake, and with her.

Things were unraveling. Diane could no longer swallow her OxyContin pills. I panicked at the thought of the torment she might experience without her narcotic shield. But she declined an offer of morphine. I went into the kitchen to discuss other medications with the hospice nurse. While I was there, Pam and Gladys persuaded Diane to let them put some drops of morphine into her mouth.

And that began her final descent. Diane no longer talked. She seemed at rest. Gladys lay down on the couch next to Diane's chair. Later in the evening I replaced Gladys. I dozed, but every hour I checked Diane. She slumbered, barely breathing. At 2 a.m. I wondered whether she was breathing at all. I asked Gladys to check. Gladys said Diane's breathing had stopped. We telephoned the hospice nurse, who returned to the house and, at 3:09, pronounced Diane dead.

A Wedding Alone

I had not prepared to continue. But I had to find someone to take Diane's body from the living room recliner. And it was the middle of the night.

I called a crematorium. With Tom, Gladys' husband, I waited for their crew to arrive. The driver and his assistant, dressed in ill-fitting suits, were polite but awkward. They suggested that I leave while they prepared to take away Diane's body. I refused. They put her body in a plastic case and onto a carrier. I gave them a tiny doll to also put inside the plastic case. Tears welled up. The undertakers left. Tom and I went into the kitchen to talk. Our words seemed hollow but necessary.

More necessity. I went upstairs and sent emails to Katie and Nancy, and to friends, including Chris, whose daughter's wedding would occur that evening, and family, including Diane's sisters and mother, who would cancel plans to fly in the next day.

The sun rose. I was numb. I performed simple tasks of cleaning and sorting, and amazed myself by continuing to talk with and be aware of other people. After I sank into sleep for a few minutes, my consciousness quickly bobbed back on a flow of adrenaline. During the morning, my high school friend Prescott and I walked, and talked, about Diane and about our high school days.

After a nap, the adrenaline was still flowing. I called Nancy. I thought I might go to the wedding, I told her. Am I crazy? I asked.

Not if you can handle it, she said.

The ceremony was in the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. I entered a chamber of tropical plants, humid air and nicely dressed celebrants. I made small talk but felt detached, as if my life had moved onto a plane that separated me from everyone else. People who knew of Diane's death were consoling but gently distant. I hoped that the others assumed I was just some weird guy who cries at weddings. Only Chris, who also had incurable cancer, and her sister talked with me about Diane.

Was she afraid of dying? Chris asked. I wondered, searched my memory for clues. Diane must have been afraid but she was never consumed by fear, was the best answer I could find. I felt perplexed and a little ashamed that I didn't really know how to answer, and suddenly and sadly aware that I could no longer ask her or include her in that, or any, conversation.

Redwoods

After a couple of days, my adrenaline level subsided and my senses revived. I walked into the redwoods on a trail that Diane and I had often hiked together and where, on one rainy winter day, she had counted 150 banana slugs.

Among the trees, I began to settle. Diane was here once. Now she's gone. I am here. Eventually, I will leave. The forest will remain.

Untethered

by Jen Tota McGivney

In a few weeks, I'll be older than my cousin Chris for the first time. The four weeks that separated our birthdays were heady days for me as a kid – "I'm as old as *you* are!" – as if age was a mark of achievement and not natural progression. Chris had me by 11 months, allowing for this small window of equality. It was a matter of weeks before life resumed its natural order: Chris, older and wiser; me, like a kid sister, trying to keep up.

Chris died last year. I finally caught up to him, and I've had an entire year of being 39 like he was. In a few weeks, I'll turn 40. He won't.

Death pursued Chris from birth. Doctors predicted he wouldn't survive infancy due to a congenital heart defect. His childhood brought risky surgeries and tenuous recoveries, and adults treated him carefully, like porcelain, for good reason. But Chris trained his siblings and cousins to ignore his heart defect. If we asked Chris how he was feeling – even while he was strapped to tubes in a hospital bed, which he was often – we wouldn't get more than a terse "fine." We stopped asking. In summer when the boys would play shirtless, we'd pretend not to see the scars crossing his torso (due to the scar tissue in his chest, surgeons began to cut through his back, too). He distracted us. He wasn't the sick kid; he was the funny kid. The instigator. It's hard to pity the guy who gets you into trouble.

Chris was small. Even later, after law school and marriage, his five-foot-nine frame didn't hold more than 120 pounds. His hair rebelled against the style it was corralled into, wisps of straight brown hair falling onto his forehead. For a figure so small, his laugh would fill a room. It was a deep inhale more than a chuckle. He'd throw his head back, close his eyes, and savor the laugh as much as the joke. And wherever Chris was, that laugh – that deep-throated *heeeeh heeeh heeeh* – was there, too. His wit found an easy audience in me. I was shy, and Chris drew me out by cracking me up. Laughing felt like belonging. One Thanksgiving when we were kids, he made me laugh my way into an asthma attack. I was so happy that I refused the inhaler that my mom insisted into my hands. I wouldn't trade that feeling for oxygen.

My favorite memory involves a day when the cousins were left alone with a free afternoon and our poor decision making. Chris was 9; me, an unfortunate 8. He had a broken arm – between his frail body and risk-prone behavior, this was typical. The heart transplant prospect had become an inevitability for Chris, and our parents warned us to take it easy with him.

What happened next was his fault.

We had four bikes between the five of us. To bridge the gap, Chris grabbed a skateboard and a rope. He tied one end of the rope to the back of my brother's bike, then sat on the skateboard behind it, holding the other end of the rope with his unbroken arm. This seemed like a sensible solution. We rode to Hemlock Road, the best hill in the neighborhood, my brother towing Chris behind him.

We got to the top.

I don't know enough physics to understand why the speed of the skateboard exceeded that of the bikes on the way down, but Chris caught up to me on his skateboard, his rope now tethered to the bike behind him. He seemed surprised, but not displeased, by this development. He looked down the street – a hill ending in a tight curve – looked back at me, smiled, shrugged, and dropped the rope. He ventured before us on a solo journey of greatness. It was glorious. We watched him from behind, a small boy perched atop a speeding skateboard, his bowl haircut surrendering to the wind. When the street swerved and he couldn't, a bush caught him. We pedaled furiously toward the bush and the little body embedded inside. Our terror disappeared when the bush released a *heeeeh heeeh heeeeh*. We pulled him out as the hero who conquered Hemlock Road. We retold the story immediately on our walk back up the hill, each telling it from our own perspective ("And then he got in front of me!" "He dropped the rope!"). It was legend by the time we got home.

Our parents didn't share our sense of awe.

Chris was smart. He knew he was on a different timetable than the rest of us. While this gave him every reason to take it easy, to slow down, to think of his heart – entreaties made of him daily – he went the other way. He wouldn't think of death, even privately: Chris could be careless taking vital medication; he didn't prepare a will. He was less worried than worried about. For a guy who faced death all of his life, not much seemed scary. He learned that his bad ideas were his best ones.

Chris defied geography as much as health. He hailed from a small western Pennsylvania town that kept our grandparents and great-grandparents busy in steel mills but had little to offer later generations. Life there wasn't easy; the drinking there was hard. His parents – among the kindest and hardest-working people I knew – were custodians whose paychecks didn't extend far, especially with a sick son. Chris wore clothes donated from the church and drove cars that caused astonishment when they rumbled their way to destinations successfully. But Oscar Wilde's words guided him: "Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination." With stellar grades and eyes beyond Pennsylvania, he earned a college scholarship, being the first in his family to get a degree. He won a grant to study abroad and discovered a love of travel, being the first in his family to get on a plane.

He traveled when and how he could – even when broke, which he was often. One night in his early 20s, after enough beer to provoke reflection, Chris mentioned to friends that he'd never been to California. He should go. Right away. It was the kind of idea that should've faded with sobriety, especially then. Transplanted hearts last about 10 years, and he was past due to talk about the next. It was a good time

to stay close to home and to the hospital, but to Chris, it was time to venture. At 2 a.m., he, a friend, and his German shepherd Abel began a road trip out west without a plan nor money for hotels. He didn't tell his parents he was gone until he got to St. Louis. They yelled and reminded him of the bad shape of his heart and his car. He reminded them that he had never been to California.

A picture of Abel on a Los Angeles beach became one of his favorites.

He came back. He had his second transplant. The family prayed and hoped, kept vigil in the waiting room. I pretended not to worry. Chris was not bound to the same laws of mortality as the rest of us, I'd say. When he was well enough to talk, we swapped stories about parties we'd been to and traded suggestions for books to read. I didn't ask him how he felt. He had trained me well.

So it went. The kid from a blue-collar family in an old steel mill town who wasn't supposed to survive infancy earned two advanced degrees, married a fashion photographer, had an Instagram-famous bulldog, and lived in Brooklyn and then Los Angeles as an immigration attorney. He traveled throughout Europe and China. He was at the center of stories that caused marvel yet not surprise. He mastered the art of strategic recklessness.

Chris entered the hospital again at 39. Time for his third heart transplant. As he waited, passing time with playoff football, Doctor Who, and David Foster Wallace, his kidneys crashed. I pretended not to worry; kidneys are easier to come by than hearts. I talked to his wife about getting tested to donate one of mine, thinking more about the excuse to see them than the surgery. This was in January 2016, when a Carolina-Pittsburgh Super Bowl seemed likely. I brainstormed a story pitch about a Panthers fan donating an organ to a Steelers fan as they watched their teams battle from the hospital. As Chris and I were fluent in the language of sport shit talking, it would be a hilarious story.

Then Chris died. An infection. A fucking germ killed Chris. After everything. Our family prayed and wept, found solace in a divine generosity that gave him 39 years that he wasn't supposed to have. I screamed and wanted to believe in God just long enough for my anger to have a target.

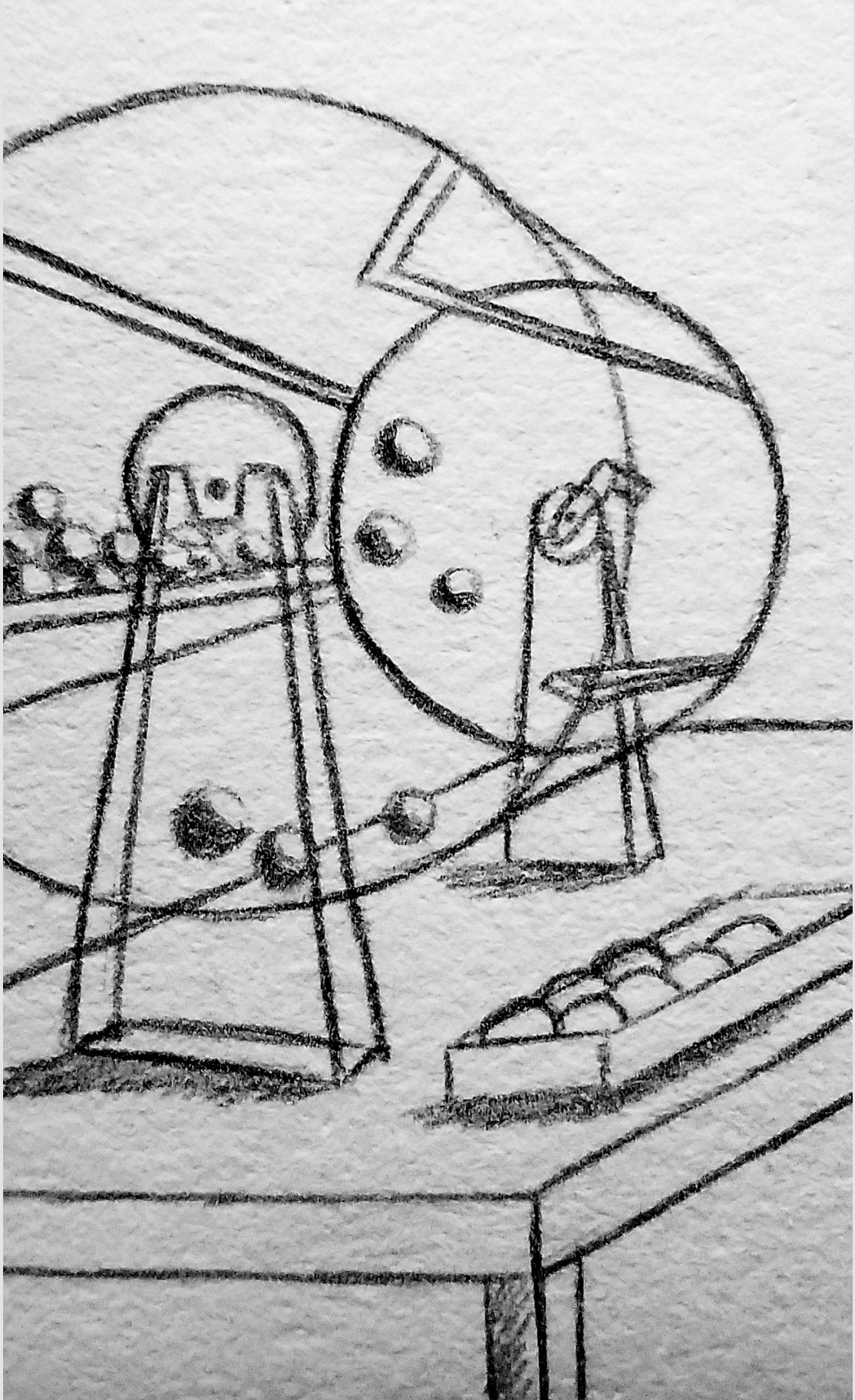
Chris returned to that Los Angeles beach; his wife spread his ashes where Abel once played. He went to the Grand Canyon at last; his wife spread some there, too, during the trip he was supposed to take. When she goes somewhere he would've liked, he goes with her and part of him stays. I can't think of a truer act of love for him.

Maybe my life would look like this anyway if it hadn't been for Chris. Maybe anyway, I would've moved from my hometown to a city where I didn't know anyone. Maybe anyway, I would've gotten a master's degree in literature just because it sounded interesting. Maybe anyway, I would've stretched a tight budget for trips to Paris and Prague and Florence because I'd never been there. Maybe anyway, I'd have learned that curiosities multiply when fed, that good ideas don't seek permission.

But probably not.

Friends ask if I mind turning 40. I don't. I *get* to turn 40. When it happens in two

weeks, I'll be in Ireland. My bank account can tell you how irresponsible this trip is. But my bank account suffers from a lack of imagination. When I lap my cousin in age, I insist on doing so in Chris fashion. I'll be in the Irish countryside hiking along oceanside cliffs. Taking walks amid the baahs of sheep. Singing with new friends in pubs. And then I'll go to Dublin and pay homage to the statue of Oscar Wilde, the troublemaker who inspired the troublemaker who inspired me. I spent 38 years trailing Chris, like a kid sister, trying to keep up. Now, somehow, I got in front. Speeding ahead, forced to drop the rope.



The Reluctant Soldier

by Richard Rejino

I

If I were to ask my brother if he felt proud to have served his country during the Vietnam War, or if he felt that society owed him a debt of gratitude for doing his duty, his answer would be no. He has never felt compelled to participate in a Veterans Day or Fourth of July celebration, and when veterans are asked to stand in recognition at Memorial Day services or community events, he rarely does so. Part of the reason comes from our parents, who taught us to expect nothing in return for doing what had to be done. The other part comes from something buried deep inside of him that resents the inequities of war. Like the thousands of other young men who were called to duty, he was wrenched away from the world he knew, a world for which he fought to return. This is his story.

On any given morning in May 1966, my brother, Ben Rejino Jr., might have already been at work on his tractor an hour before dawn. From the time he was a young boy, he loved sitting high on a tractor, feeling it rock back and forth like a boat as he crossed fields brimming with corn, cotton, and wheat that to him were as big as oceans. He took pleasure, solace really, in working alone in the middle of our West Texas farm, where all he had ever known in his young life was aligned in perfectly measured distances between one row and the next. His appreciation for such simple joys was much like watching the countless sunrises creep over the horizon. He had little preference for one over the other. They were merely a part of what he knew. They were a part of home.

On this particular Wednesday morning, however, Ben wasn't on his tractor. He lay in bed dreading what was to come. The draft notice had arrived in the mail a month earlier, addressed to him personally from President Lyndon B. Johnson, and it advised that he get his affairs in order and report for duty in 30 days. After four years of avoiding the draft through a series of school and agricultural deferments, Ben could no longer escape America's increasing commitment to the Vietnam War, and he was caught in a tidal wave of 35,000 young men who were being called into military service every month. All Ben could think of that morning was that he was being forced to fight a war to which he had paid little attention, much less understood.

Before he left, our mother prepared his favorite breakfast of eggs, bacon, salsa, and soft, warm tortillas. We all sat together, eating silently, politely passing the food between us, and all the while feeling the terrible dread that hovered over the table. When he finished, Ben collected the few belongings he was allowed to

take with him and went outside where my father's pickup truck was waiting. My mother, my sister Erlinda, and I stood on the patio and one by one we hugged him goodbye. We watched as he got into the truck with my father, Ben Sr., and drove away on the dirt road, disappearing into a cloud of dust.

My father, a tall and quiet man who always wore a straw fedora hat, hardly said a word. His calloused hands held the steering wheel and his dark eyes pointed north by northeast toward Hereford, Texas, some 30 miles away, where my brother was to report for duty. He didn't dare take his eyes off the road, fearing they might drift over to his first-born son, his namesake, and be confronted with the inevitable reality that was coming closer with every mile. The hum of the road drifted up into the cab and was the only thing that stirred the silence that had wedged itself between them.

Ben watched the rows of cotton and wheat and sugar beets fan across the window of the pickup. He thought about supper the night before with his family, and the fresh tortillas and frijoles my mother made every day. He thought about the weekend nights of driving up and down Third Avenue in Bovina, our hometown, with the radio blaring "We Can Work It Out" by the Beatles or Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Were Made for Walking." He thought about how he'd miss the drag races in Lubbock and Amarillo, where he and his buddies tipped back a few beers on a Friday night. He also wondered what was beyond the road in front of him and what Vietnam would be like. Most of all, though, he thought about Estela, a girl with whom he had fallen in love and said goodbye to a few weeks before.

When they arrived in Hereford, my father parked the truck and watched his son, a younger version of himself, tall, lanky, and sporting a crew cut like his father, as he walked around the front of the truck. With heavy heart, he stepped out and fought to say the words, "Be careful, son. *Dios te bendiga*. God bless you." My brother, who was only 22 years old, nodded and the two of them embraced. My father got back in his truck and drove home; Ben got on a bus that took him to another world.

*****

An hour later, Ben and a bus full of drafted young men were dropped off at the Amarillo airport where he boarded a Braniff passenger plane. Anxious faces stared at him as he waded through them toward the back of the plane to take his seat. He had never been on a plane before. A few minutes later, he felt the rumble of the engines come up and vibrate through his body. As the plane accelerated down the runway, he felt the force of it push him back into the seat. Recalling the moment, he said, "When I tried to sit forward, I felt as if I were walking into one of those stiff winds back home that come in the spring. Then, when we were airborne, I looked out my window and watched everything getting smaller and smaller. Houses and trees, they all looked like little toy models, the kind you see on one of those electric train sets in a department store. It felt like I could just step out and fall right out of the plane."

Once in the air, Ben saw how the fields of crops were arranged into neatly formed squares and rectangles, reminding him of his mother's homemade quilts. Several minutes later, the plane crossed over into New Mexico, and the silhouette of the

distant mountain ranges came into view and looked like layers of ocean waves. As the plane continued to climb higher, Ben couldn't tell where the horizon stopped and the sky began. At cruising altitude, he stared as if he were seeing the world for the first time.

A couple of hours passed and the excitement of Ben's first plane ride was tempered as it began its descent and was about to land. A young man named Schaefer, sitting nearby with shoulder length blond hair, interrupted the edgy silence and said, "We're screwed now, boys!" A nervous laughter simmered around him. Ben felt the jolt of the airplane as it touched down on the runway. Then a voice came over the intercom and announced, "Gentlemen, welcome to Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas."

The young men were transported to a processing center on base and officially inducted into the U.S. Army. An officer handed them a pair of aluminum dog tags with their name, service number, blood type, and religious preference stamped on them. The boys were instructed to wear them at all times.

Next, the newly minted soldiers formed a line leading to a large room where the sound of buzzing shears filled the hallway. Everyone had heard about the "haircut," the dismembering of their pride, and the final step toward becoming an Army grunt. One by one, the boys sat in the barber chairs and watched their hair roll off their shoulders and onto the shiny linoleum floor. Ben wore a crew cut, like his father, so he didn't look that different, but several of the recruits made fun of the others while they waited their turn, especially Schaefer, who pointed and laughed the entire time.

One of the barbers who had been watching called him up. "Get up here, Blondie." Schaefer strutted over and fell into the chair, smiling back at the others.

"My God, you have really nice hair, son," the barber said. Schaefer grinned with pride and winked to the others. "Hey, Jonesy, come over here and take a look at this guy's hair. You won't believe it. It's like silk."

Jonesy, a barber from across the room, walked over and looked at Schaefer. Then, in a well-rehearsed motion, took his shears and shaved the boy's head right down the middle, clean and bare. Dangling his hair in front of his eyes, Jonesy looked at Schaefer, "Yep, it sure is" and let it fall through his fingers and on to Schaefer's lap. Ben watched as the others shoved each other, laughing. Schaefer's face turned bright red.

Outside, Drill Instructor (DI) Jackson, a sergeant, peered from behind the stiff brim of his hat at the newly peeled heads that circulated around the entrance of the building. He marched toward them with his muscular shoulders and broad back proudly encased in a khaki shirt and tucked firmly into Army green slacks. The sound of crunching gravel rose up from his spit-shined boots when he spun around and faced them at attention. "Line up, ladies! You're in the U.S. Army now. You're not walking down the street. Form a line." The sergeant walked in front of them. "Straighten up and shut up. I don't care what you did before, how you lived, or who you lived with, from now on I'm your mama and I'm your papa and I'm your girlfriend. You do exactly what I say."

Schaefer snickered. “Here we go, boys. He’s gonna kick our ass.”

“Shut up before you get us in trouble,” someone hissed.

The sergeant turned around, “Eyes straight and shut up. I won’t tell you again.”

My brother had heard that basic training was meant to break down an Army grunt until he learned to follow orders like a machine. “The Army told you how to do everything: how to walk, how to salute, how to eat,” my brother said. “We marched everywhere. I was terrible at doing pushups, so when the drill instructor wasn’t looking, I rested. There were about 100 of us in the platoon. I was pretty good at hiding. The worst of it was getting up before dawn and the constant hurry up and wait. We ate a lot of ‘SOS’ – shit on a shingle. I knew what they were trying to do to us. No matter how bad it got, I thought to myself, well, they’re not going to kill me, so I just did what I was told, no more, no less, and never let it get to me too much.”

After eight weeks, Ben had endured everything that was demanded of him; the 4 a.m. runs before breakfast, the pushups, the marching, drills, the constant yelling, the discipline of barrack inspections, all of it, and he graduated from basic training with the rank of private first class. The Army classified his military occupational specialty (MOS) as 11-B infantry. To the Army grunts, 11-B stood for 11-Bulletstoppers or 11-Bush. It meant they were going to Vietnam and fight on the front lines.

When he came home for a 30-day furlough, our family was filled with pride to see Ben in uniform. His crew cut had grown back and he looked the way we all remembered, only a little more lean. At 9 years old, I marveled at his shiny belt buckle made of brass, and he taught me how to shine my shoes to be as bright as his boots. As soon as he could, he was back out in the fields helping my father with the farm. He returned to the life he knew as if he had never left.

After his furlough was over, Ben reported to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for advanced infantry training (AIT). There, he learned to fire the M-14 and M-16 rifles and distinguished himself as an exceptional marksman. He also learned about laying claymore mines, throwing hand grenades, and using a grenade launcher. His distinction as a marksman earned him the assignment of gunner in his squad, and his weapon was the M-60 machine gun, a 20-pound firearm supported with two front legs at the barrel.

His platoon trained in an area of terrain that had been altered to simulate the thick brush and jungle of Vietnam called Tigerland: Training Ground for the Infantry Soldier of Vietnam. “Every day we were taken out there,” he said, “I was reminded that I was going to Vietnam. We were trained in how the Viet Cong (VC) lived, what he ate, how he dressed. Most of the DIs had done a couple of tours over there, and they told us that the VC could be a farmer by day and a soldier by night, that he could be anyone. They taught us about their guerrilla tactics, the booby traps, snipers, the mines, and everything you could do that would get you killed. There was more one-to-one training, and they told us like it really was. Things were a lot more serious.”

Ben noticed right away that there were more people of color in Fort Polk than

there had been in Fort Bliss. They came from everywhere, and no one had first names. Cherry, a tall black man, came from Pennsylvania; Sanchez was short and athletic and came from El Paso; Delgado was from Arkansas; Ramirez hailed from deep South Texas; and a guy from the Polish section of Milwaukee went by "Alphabet" because his name was too long to fit on his uniform.

Ben's training at Fort Polk ended in October 1966 and he spent his second 30-day furlough at home working with my father during the harvest. He tried to return to a normal life, but things were different this time. We all knew that the worst part of his service was about to begin. Before taking him to the airport, my parents bestowed a blessing on Ben, steeped in a long-standing Catholic, Mexican tradition. He knelt in front of them and in hushed voices they placed their hands on his head, and blessed him with the sign of the cross, saying, "May the Lord bless you and keep you safe from harm, and may the Holy Spirit be with you every day. We ask this through Christ our Lord, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

II

My brother's 18-hour flight to Vietnam began in Lubbock, Texas, with stops in San Francisco, Hawaii, Japan, and finally, Saigon. Six Braniff stewardesses served the 200 soldiers on board. They went about their job and did their best to be polite, but in what had become an all too familiar refrain of soldiers going off to war, they tolerated the taunts and roving hands on their bodies to which the nervous, fearful young men felt entitled.

For most of the flight, the cabin was quiet. Ben tried to sleep but could only manage to doze off for short periods. Mostly, he closed his eyes and stared into a strangely blank consciousness. The anxiety he had felt before had faded into numb acceptance. It was a trick he had learned growing up as a teenager. The chores he hated doing, the homework he loathed, and the monotony that bored him, were all merely an experience in a life full of experiences. He forgot about them almost as soon as they happened and moved on.

By design, the plane landed in Saigon after dark to lessen the chances of it being shot at. Ben strained to see something of this new and foreign country as the plane taxied to the gate. Except for a few faint lights in the distance, the area was completely dark. When the plane came to a stop the door opened, and the stench of Saigon flooded the fuselage.

"Whoa, what the hell?" Sanchez said, raising his hand to his face as if to protect his eyes.

"Oh, shit," Ramirez recoiled, his head snapping back.

Ben stepped out and into the molten heat; the smell of rotting garbage mixed with fumes of hot jet fuel choked him. Almost immediately, perspiration collected on his temples and a bead of sweat traced the curve of his back. They jumped onto the back of trucks parked by the gate, which took them to base camp. Army Lieutenant Gomez was there, waiting for them as they entered a large empty barrack. "Welcome to the 18th, men, Charlie Company, and welcome to Vietnam."

Charlie Company had a reputation of valor that followed it through several theaters of war, from World War I to Omaha Beach on D-Day, to Vietnam. Unaware of the legacy they were about to inherit, Ben and his friends, Ramirez, Schaefer, and Cherry, were assigned to Charlie Company and sent to different platoons.

Little time was wasted before Ben was back on the tarmac with a dozen other soldiers. They stood, covering their noses, and waited for a Huey helicopter that would fly them to Forward Support in Bien Hoa, a small village 30 miles north of Saigon. Within a few minutes, the Huey approached, diluting the foul air as it descended and touched down nose first. Ben saw several bullet holes along the side of the hull as he and the others moved quickly toward the helicopter.

*****

The first night in Bien Hoa was short. Ben slept in an open-air Army barrack called a hooch. When he arrived, Sergeant "Top," a name given to all sergeants in charge, issued him his Army jungle fatigues, a pair of canvas boots, socks, food rations, and a banged up M-14 rifle. When he changed into the lightweight, cooler fatigues they were too big for him. Ben looked around at the others and confirmed what he had come to know all too well about the Army: most things didn't fit and didn't work.

The next morning, he awoke to the same wilting heat, but without the stench that had besieged him the night before. His first thought was, "Only 364 days left." The daily countdown soon became a habit, a ritual that he revisited each day. It was something everyone did, and the closer a soldier was to going home the more careful and serious he became.

His stay in Bien Hoa was short. That same day, an Army transport vehicle took him to Phuoc Vinh, a 1st Infantry Division base, 30 kilometers northwest of Bien Hoa and halfway to the Cambodian border. When Ben stepped off the truck, it was the first time since he had arrived in Vietnam that he could take in the terrain. The land was cleared and flat. Coils of razor wire lined the outer perimeter of the landing zone (LZ), three layers deep and stacked four high. Beyond the barricade, rubber plantations and rice fields were tucked away in every part of the land. He thought for a moment that Phuoc Vinh was a little like home. There were farmers all around him, but on the fringes of the fields, wild bush and bamboo jungles covered the mountainous terrain that was home to an elusive and dangerous enemy.

Learning to live and work in the LZ was the first step in acclimating to the war. As one of his first duties, Ben pulled night guard in one of the bunkers on the perimeter. There were two other soldiers with him. Two stood guard while the third tried to sleep. They rotated every two hours.

"We hated the night shifts, because we couldn't sleep for very long. Nothing ever really happened the first couple of weeks. There were a lot of stories, but if we heard anything, we radioed the tower and they would shine a spotlight over the area. It felt like a lot of hurry up and wait, just like we did in basic training. I wondered if there was a real war we were sent to fight."

In the first weeks Ben was "in country," the monsoons came and made life

miserable. Rain fell in torrents of heavy gray sheets, and sometimes it fell softly, but it was always relentless. He waded through mud six inches deep and through water-filled ditches and creeks crawling with parasites. Despite cinching up his pants and boots, leeches wormed their way in and attached themselves to his back or his legs. It was common for the soldiers to emerge from a river and line up half-naked, each searching the other's body for leeches that could be as plump as a cigar.

At night, sometimes the clouds would break and uncover stars that were as luminescent as candles. It was also when the mosquitos came out of hiding in the hunt for anything that smelled of human flesh. The bug repellent that Ben carried proved useless against the swarm of vampire insects. They crawled through netting and the poncho in which he wrapped himself, and the serenade of their high-pitched buzzing kept him awake for hours.

In a few weeks the monsoons passed, and the heat and humidity that followed was like steam coming up from the ground. It was stifling. If Ben wasn't wet from the rain he was drenched in sweat. Hygiene was the least of their worries.

Every day, platoons patrolled the area around Phuoc Vinh. Occasionally, they encountered sniper fire during an ambush patrol, but most of the time they hiked across rice fields, humped over bush country, and hacked their way through thick jungle with a machete without any sign of the enemy.

The first time Ben came face to face with gunfire, he was out on a kick patrol, which was a search and destroy mission and part of Operation Quick Kick IV. Between 1966 and 1967, Charlie Company carried out hundreds of these operations in the areas surrounding Phuoc Vinh and Bien Hoa. After bombing raids on suspected enemy weapons caches, tunnels, or concentrations of VC guerilla soldiers, it was the FNGs, "fucking new guys," who were sent in to see what and who were left.

"One time we were on a search patrol for a VC base camp that had been reported somewhere around Phuoc Vinh," Ben recalled. "The platoon ahead of us had engaged the enemy and called for reinforcements. We were in some pretty heavy jungle when we heard 'rat-tat-tat-tat.' I hit the ground and hid behind anything that could stop a bullet."

"The VC fired heavy 50-caliber guns and dropped mortar shells on us. I fired my rifle back in the direction of the enemy, but I never saw who I was shooting at. I was an ammo bearer for one of the machine gunners, so I had to stay close to him. It was all over in just a few minutes. Luckily, no one got hurt. The VC always hit us quick and then disappeared. You just never knew who they were or when you would run into them. By day, we walked through villages and met the people who lived there. They all dressed in rice hats and in black pajamas. A lot of them were friendly, but we knew that they might be guerilla operatives at night. I hardly ever saw the enemy, and I remember thinking that there was no way to win a war like this. You didn't know who your enemy was."

After the VC melted back into the jungle, Ben's platoon went in to count enemy casualties. The smell of fresh gunfire hung in the air as they moved through white smoke that draped the undergrowth. "Be careful for booby traps, boys," the

sergeant whispered. The ringing of gunfire still echoed in Ben's ears as his squad advanced, each soldier hunched over with eyes open wide.

They came to a small opening in the jungle, and there, lying face down at the base of a tree, Ben saw the twisted body of a VC guerilla soaked in fresh blood. He stopped in shock and looked at the mangled remains. Blood was still oozing like syrup. Then he looked up and saw a leg dangling from a tree and entrails strung from one branch to another, swinging back and forth as if a feasting bird had been scared away. The bile in his stomach began rising up into his throat and the sweat on his temples turned cold. He turned away from the body, closing his eyes and covering his mouth, and tried to stifle the horror that overwhelmed him.

*****

A few weeks later, Private First Class Slater was playing cards and drinking beer during a layover at base camp. His commanding officer (CO) found him and told him that he would be point man on the ambush patrol at dusk. Ben overheard them talking. He knew, like everyone did, that the point man was the most exposed soldier in a military formation. Slater kept on drinking several more beers and before they went out, smoked a joint. When dusk came, everyone fell into position. Slater led the way across a field of tall grass with two men slightly behind him on either side. Ben was positioned in the second layer of soldiers, carrying an extra hundred rounds of munitions on his back. He noticed Slater carrying his M-14 slung across the back of his neck, his arms dangling on each side.

As they approached the edge of the jungle, Slater's carriage had not changed. He stopped and turned around, and looked at everyone behind him. "OK, let's go," he said. He ambled forward seemingly without concern when the sound of a single shot pierced its way through the vegetation and struck Slater in the neck knocking him down. Everyone hit the ground. Squad leader Cox pointed his M-60 in the direction of the shot and opened fire, spraying machine gun rounds in a circular motion. Ben ran over to Slater who was on his back, panting desperately.

"I got down close to him and propped him up on my leg. He tried to say something to me, but he started spitting up a lot of blood. I'll never forget his eyes. They looked scared and as if he were trying to say, 'help me, help me.' I yelled for the medic and laid him back on the ground. Otherwise, I could have been hit, too." Ben took his position by the gunner and blindly fired shots into the dense vegetation.

Afterwards, the shock of Slater being hit numbed everyone, relieving them from the anxiety of the ambush patrol. For the moment, the enemy had retreated and the soldiers could breathe, even at the expense of one of their own. A Huey helicopter swooped in and took Slater to base camp. They never heard of him again. No one asked. No one wanted to know if he lived or died. Ben learned to just keep moving, a little more hardened, and a little less sure of what his life meant.

III

In a typical 12-month tour of duty during the Vietnam War, a soldier had a 3 percent chance of dying. He stood a 10 percent chance of being seriously wounded

and a 25 percent chance of earning a Purple Heart. Eight months into his tour, my brother was unaware of his odds of survival, but he knew as well as anyone that at any moment he could step on a land mine, be hit by sniper fire, or worse. He had been in country long enough to witness soldiers become paralyzed with fear; he watched how marijuana and hard drugs poisoned soldiers, putting others in danger. He remembered what Drill Instructor Jackson had told him in basic training, "Keep your nose clean and pay attention. Do that and you'll be OK over there. It's the guys that think they want to be heroes or are just plain stupid that don't make it back."

These thoughts were on Ben's mind when he got word that his platoon had been assigned to a 30-day mission along the Cambodian border. As the recently promoted leader of his squad, Ben was told that the Viet Cong had infested the area and were attacking U.S. soldiers, then retreating into Cambodia where the U.S. troops could not follow them. A Viet Cong base camp of underground tunnels and rooms underneath a small village had been found deep in the jungle, and an air strike was ordered. Several two-ton bombs were dropped leaving craters 30 feet wide. The platoon was to go in, find whatever they could, and count the dead.

In some ways these kinds of reconnaissance missions were the most dangerous. If there were survivors, they could hide under the debris or act as if they were dead, and there was always the threat of snipers. The soldiers hacked their way through the piles of shredded trees the bombs left behind. Ben had never seen so many bodies, parts of bodies, and so much devastation. It was hard to do a body count.

A few days later, the platoon was moved to an area where the terrain had been cleared and was populated with rubber tree plantations. Ben and two of his fellow soldiers were assigned night duty just outside the plantation to guard an incoming road that led to the Army base nearby.

"We were there to stop any traffic at night from getting past us. The sergeant drove a stake in the ground about 20 yards out and told us to shoot anything that went past it. Just before dark, we spotted a kid coming down the road. He looked like he was 13 or 14 years old. I was in charge of the machine gun squad, and we were told that if anyone approached our position, we had to call out 'HALT!' three times before we opened fire. My gunner, Martinez, a young guy, maybe 19, saw the kid coming toward us. He yelled for him to stop, but the kid kept coming. Martinez yelled out a second and third time. The kid kept coming toward us. We could see the boy was carrying some kind of satchel. He smiled and waved at us. I kept watching him and then I looked at Martinez. 'You've got to shoot,' I told him. Martinez froze. The boy kept coming. 'Martinez!' The boy was getting closer. 'Martinez, shoot!' Martinez closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The boy took a burst of seven or eight rounds before he fell to the ground."

Several infantry men went out to the boy while Ben and Martinez stayed back to give them cover. One of them yelled back, "You got him, Martinez! You got him." Martinez leaned back away from the gun with his head down.

Ben went over to him and put his hand on his shoulder. "You did the right thing. They found explosives in the satchel. You did the right thing."

"He was just a kid … just a kid," Martinez mumbled.

"Yeah, I know," Ben reassured him. "You saved our lives, man. It was him or us. You did the right thing."

*****

Near the end of the 30-day mission, Ben's squad and two others were patrolling a large area of rice farms in Tuy Ninh. The soldiers stepped up and down quickly along the dikes to stay out of the water-filled paddies, knowing they were exposed to snipers. At nightfall, the soldiers set up a perimeter inside several dried-out paddies. The dikes would protect them in case they came under attack. Ben set up his M-60 machine gun on the dike and his ammo bearer, Ramirez, stayed with him. The two had become friends because Ramirez was from Texas and his family lived close to Raymondville, where Ben's girlfriend lived. He was 19 and volunteered for the Army out of high school.

Earlier, Ramirez had noticed a small patch of plants growing in the corner of a paddy.

"Hey, Rejino, take a look at this!"

"What is it?"

"Check it out, man. Do those look like jalapeno peppers to you?"

Ben leaned over, "Yeah. There's some onions over there, too."

After they had set up for the night, Ben opened the C-rations with his P-38 Army-issued can opener. He diced the peppers and onions with a Bowie knife and prepared the meal while Ramirez stood guard. They chowed down on chicken and dumplings, and a healthy dose of chopped onions and hot peppers. When they finished eating, Ben lay on the ground with his back leaning against the dike and his M-60 perched above him. His feet were crossed at the ankle and his fingers were intertwined, resting on his stomach. Ramirez sat on his helmet looking forward.

"That was really good," Ramirez said, picking his teeth.

Ben looked at him and smiled, "All it needed was some of my mother's tortillas and rice."

"Man, what I wouldn't do for a hot plate of carne guisada right now."

The two of them kept talking about home and the things they looked forward to doing.

"Say, didn't you tell me that your girlfriend was from Raymondville?"

Ben nodded. "Yeah. I go see her several times a year."

"When we get out of here, we should get together when you visit her. My family's ranch is probably less than a hundred miles from there. We could go do some hunting and … ."

Suddenly, Ramirez's voice disappeared. The explosion from the Claymore mine swallowed everything. It threw Ben up in the air and flipped him completely around, landing on his stomach. Chunks of rocks and dirt rained on them. The ringing in his ears brought him back from the numbing shock of the blast. In a

panic, he reached for his helmet. Seconds passed and Ben searched frantically for his M-60. He found it on its side and quickly pointed it forward, spraying several rounds into the dark.

Ben kept looking forward in case the enemy slipped past the other soldiers who had fanned out across the field. From behind him he heard a soft moan. It was Ramirez. Ben looked over to him and yelled. "Medic! Medic!"

There wasn't time to see how badly Ramirez was injured. Ben kept his eyes forward and watched for VC. The seconds after an attack were the most dangerous.

Ramirez moaned again, "I'm hit. I'm hit."

"Can you sit up?" Ben looked back quickly, taking his eyes off forward position. "How bad is it?"

"I don't know. It's my arm."

Ben looked forward, his eyes scanning left to right in the dusk, his ears still ringing. He turned back again and saw Ramirez holding up his arm. Shrapnel from the blast had shredded the muscle from underneath the forearm and exposed the bone. What was left was hanging by tendrils and skin. Ben made Ramirez lie flat on the ground and propped up his head on the dike. After the other soldiers had secured the area around the blast, the medics came and tied a tourniquet on his arm and bandaged up the wound. Ben started to walk toward the other soldiers when the medic called out to him.

"Rejino, get over here," the medic said.

"What? Why?"

"You're hit, too. Your leg," the medic pointed.

Ben looked down and his heart plunged. His right boot was covered in blood. The medic cut the leg of his fatigues open and uncovered a bloody, four-inch wound glistening with shrapnel. He bandaged it tightly. Then he and Ramirez were helped into the Huey helicopter that flew them to base camp.

*****

Ben flinched as the doctor prodded the wound. "How's Ramirez? Is he going to be OK?"

"They're flying him to Saigon, then to Japan where they can take good care of him." The doctor pulled the shrapnel from his leg. Ben heard the pinging as the doctor dropped each piece into a stainless steel bowl. "You boys are lucky this wasn't worse. I've taken out as much as I can, but there's still some in there that are too deep and too small to get. After the wound heals, you're going to feel some itching. Nothing to worry about; it's just the shrapnel working its way out of your leg. It could go on for years."

Ben stayed at base camp for two weeks as his leg healed. He welcomed the R&R and the chance to sleep for hours at a time. A few weeks later, in a formal ceremony, the commanding officer presented him with the Purple Heart. He and other deserving soldiers stood in rank and file as the CO called out their names and pinned medals on their uniform.

The blast that injured him and his friend played itself over and over in his head, and he wondered what had happened to Ramirez. He never saw him again.

*****

Toward the end of a soldier's tour of duty, he is filled with the fear that he could be killed days before going home. Every soldier in the field had heard of or even seen a comrade killed just before his service was up. This was true for Ben, too. Some of the soldiers in his platoon had gotten a seven-day drop, which meant that they were called up to go home a week before the official end of their one-year tour. Ben was down to one day before he got his orders. He was on an ambush patrol in the jungle when his sergeant called out, "Rejino! Get ready. It's your time to go."

Ben turned around and saw his buddies looking at him.

One turned to him smiling. "You leaving today? Man, I thought you had another six months."

"You lucky son-of-a-bitch," another said.

"Don't forget about us, Rejino. I know you will, once you see that girl of yours," a gunner said as he put down his weapon.

"The next swoop is yours," the sergeant called out. "Be ready. It'll be here soon."

Ben's emotions stirred at the thought of leaving the field and the soldiers who had been there for him. "That was one of the few times that I felt a real closeness with the guys," he said. "They knew me, and I knew them. We all knew that you wouldn't be left behind if you got hurt; you could count on them to be there and pull you out. It made me feel close to them. I guess because we were all willing to do that for each other, I felt sad to leave some of them. I have to say, though, that I got rid of that feeling pretty quick. I had done everything I was told to do and it was my day, MY DAY, to go home. So, I turned and said, take care guys, I'll see you stateside."

And just like that, Ben's tour in Vietnam was over. The helicopter dipped down long enough for Ben to jump in and flew him back to Phuoc Vinh, and within the next 24 hours, he was on a plane to San Francisco.

"The best feeling I ever had was when I landed in California. When the airplane tires hit the ground, I knew I was home. I called Mom and Dad right away to let them know that I was stateside and that I would be there the next day."

"When I landed in Lubbock, I didn't call them right away. I decided to take the bus home because I just wanted to take it all in. I wanted to sit without anyone talking to me and look at the fields. It was the same road I had taken hundreds of times before, but it seemed a whole lot prettier. I felt strange to be back after so long, after everything that had happened, but nothing had changed." He sat quietly, looking at the deep red soil. The smell of it drifted into him, and slowly, the anxiety in his body began to untangle itself.

Ben called my parents when he arrived in Muleshoe, 20 miles from home. It was early afternoon. The sound of their voices reminded him again that Vietnam was over and that home was no longer a memory. When my parents arrived at the bus station, he pursed his lips and smiled through the emotion that filled him. Their

tearful, desperate reunion was full of the kind of emotion that reveals itself only a few times in one's life, when a family understands what pure and overwhelming love really is.

"It was good to see Mom and Dad, and when I got home, I remember looking at the house for a long time, thinking, man, it sure looks nice. Everything was the way I remembered it, and it felt great."

When Ben came home I was 11 years old. After school that day, I came in the house and saw a green duffle bag on the freezer. Immediately, I dropped my books on the floor and ran into the living room. He was sitting on the couch, and with my eyes brimming with tears I ran and jumped into his arms and hugged him tightly. I was shocked by how sunburned he was, almost black, and how terribly thin he had become. He weighed 180 pounds when he entered the Army and was 135 when he got home. He could barely keep his pants on.

Within a few days he was back on the tractor, reacquainting himself with the early mornings and familiar sunrises, and tried to settle back into his life before he left. He thought a lot about the last two years: the Army, Vietnam, and how in six months he would be home for good. He thought about Estela, whom he would soon marry. It took him a while to shed the remnants of the war, but eventually he stood in the middle of the farm and whispered to himself, I'm home.

Epilogue

In Vietnam, Ben wasn't thinking about Old Glory, or serving his country, or the amber waves of grain he helped produce; he feared for his life. If he fought for anything, it was to be able to come home and be with his family, to marry Estela, and to be able to live his life in peace, to live his version of the American Dream.

When I interviewed him for this story and asked why he didn't want a military funeral and why he eschewed recognition as a veteran, he didn't have an answer. Then one day at the end of one of our many conversations, he stopped me before hanging up the phone.

"You know, I've been thinking a lot about that question you asked me: why I don't want a military funeral and why I'm not more proud to be a veteran.

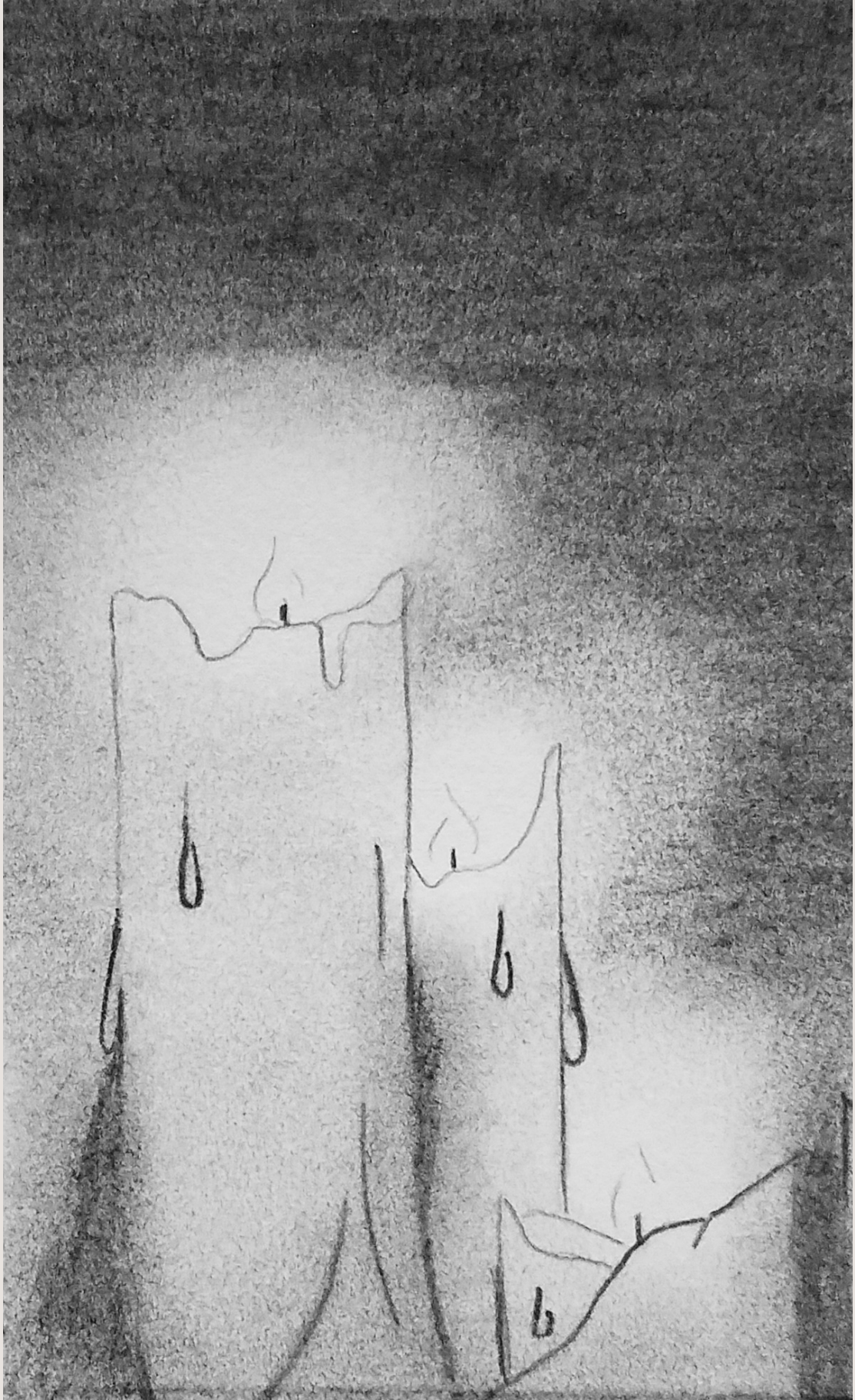
"When I came back, I tried to put all of Vietnam behind me. I remember after a few months of being home there were times when I didn't think about where I'd been, but it all came back at night when I went to sleep. I kept thinking about the ambush patrols, especially the ones at night, and sometimes I woke up thinking I was still there. I told myself that there was nothing to be afraid of, that I was home, and I made myself go back to sleep. Each day that I didn't think about it was one more day that the memories were fading away.

"The thing is, the whole time I was in Vietnam, almost everyone I dealt with were lower to middle class people who didn't have much. Most of us were Hispanic or black, and the white guys were poor." Ben's voice began to quiver, "I kept asking myself, where is everybody else … where are all the rich kids? That has always bothered me, and I guess that's the reason I feel the way I do. It's my silent protest against the unfairness of how we were chosen to be there.

"I'm lucky. I didn't have the problems that some of the other guys did. I was one of the ones who made it back without being haunted by the war. I remember when I landed in Phuoc Vinh. I was a little scared. A priest came by while we were waiting on the tarmac to be flown out and asked if anyone wanted to hear Mass in the hangar. A few of us went. It was short, and when he gave out communion, I put the host in my mouth and asked God to forgive my sins, and to take care of me. Then I sat down and I'll never forget the feeling of peace that came over me, and I knew, somehow, that I was going to be OK.

"There were a lot of guys who came home with psychological problems or were handicapped. They ended up losing a lot more of their lives than just the time they served. The Army didn't do anything for me, and I never let myself want anything in return because a lot of guys did and they were disappointed. I didn't want to be disappointed. I did my duty. That was it, and when it was over, it was over."

After we hung up the phone, I wondered if being drafted and serving his country, however grudgingly, made Ben a good American. Is a reluctant soldier's service equal to that of a willing soldier? The answer for Ben was, of course, that the answer didn't really matter. He did what his country told him to do. He did the honorable thing. Whatever feelings of resentment he may still harbor from the inequities of the war have been transcended by the manner in which he chose to survive them. That kind of personal honor, that clearly etched integrity, is the greatest gift he could ever give to his family and his country.



Ms. Judy the Comforter

by Adam Rhew

Her goddaughter was strangled to death by a serial killer nearly 25 years ago. Since then she's held candlelight vigils for hundreds of murder victims. Who will take over when she retires?

The faces are arranged in neat rows and columns, affixed to the gray, accordion-fold display board, the kind companies take to trade shows. They're black and white, affluent and crack addicts, elderly and infants. A few of the photographs are of police officers in uniform; others are clearly mugshots. The pictures are mounted on white cards, each a little smaller than a business card, printed with each person's name and birthday.

Judy Williams, her silver hair pulled back into a messy bun, stands here in her cluttered office in a working-class neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina, and stares at the faces. It's an unseasonably mild day in January and she's propped the door open to let in the spring-like air. Her memory isn't what it once was, she says, and not all of the people stand out like they did years ago. Ms. Judy – that's what everyone calls her – has a minister's warmth and a judge's bluntness, although she is neither. She's just an apartment complex manager, in pink and purple socks, who can't walk away.

"The boyfriend killed her," she says, pointing to a young black woman who died in 2006. "Same thing here." The tip of a manicured nail taps on the Plexiglas sheet protecting the photos. Twenty-three years of murder victims. Her finger hovers and then finds another familiar face, and then another, and another. "This one's still unsolved. They're still trying to figure out who killed him. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was killed at a cookout."

They are the faces of people she's never met, mostly, who were shot, stabbed, strangled, and worse. Ms. Judy sat with their parents, their spouses, their confused children. She organized candlelight vigils in front of their homes. She told young, black men who lived in her neighborhood to stop killing each other. Her nonprofit, Mothers of Murdered Offspring, printed stacks of cards like the ones on the display board for each family it's helped since the early 1990s. Volunteers hot-glued safety pins to the backs, and nearly a quarter-century later, there are women here who

don't leave home without their child's picture pinned to a lapel. "It's my mission," she says. "I'm the comforter. I'm here to help you to get through this. God has trained me over the years in how to help people who need to know that somebody cares."

I count 753 people on the board.

"That's not even all of them," Ms. Judy says. She opens the seam of a plastic sandwich bag, pictures she hasn't had time to post with the others, and dumps dozens more cards on the table.

*****

She didn't know, on that sad night in the winter of 1993, that it would turn into this.

Ms. Judy had invited a small group of family and friends over to her apartment for dinner. They'd just buried her goddaughter. Shawna Hawk was a 20-year-old paralegal student who had been raped and strangled and left in a bathtub full of water in the house she shared with her mom, Dee Sumpter. Hawk worked at a Taco Bell to pay for school, and her manager was a man named Henry Louis Wallace. Despite his friendly demeanor, Wallace was a violent crack addict who preyed on young black women he met at fast food restaurants where he worked and ate. Hawk was his third victim; Wallace raped and murdered seven additional women by the time Charlotte police connected the cases and arrested him in 1994. Reporters called him the Taco Bell Strangler.

Of course, the crowd gathered in Ms. Judy's small living room didn't know that.

As they grieved, Ms. Judy turned to Hawk's mother, Sumpter, and suggested they start a support group for families of murder victims. Sumpter wasn't ready. But Ms. Judy kept pushing. A week later, she brought up the idea again, and then again. Sumpter agreed, and before long Ms. Judy called everyone back together in her living room again for a brainstorming session. They came up with a plan, a mission statement, a motto: "End the madness, stop the sadness." They picked a theme color, purple, because it was Hawk's favorite; her friends called her the Purple Princess.

Ms. Judy wanted to call their organization Mothers of Murdered Children. Sumpter suggested Mothers of Murdered Offspring, and the group agreed. MOMO was born. "The main focus was to help Dee," Ms. Judy says. "We had to get her focused on something other than her loss. We weren't thinking about longevity or anything like that, whether it would even last."

The city, as it turned out, would need MOMO as much as Sumpter did. There were 129 murders in Charlotte in 1993 – the most in the city's history, including four committed by Wallace – an overwhelming caseload that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department homicide detectives couldn't solve fast enough.

"When Henry hit," Detective Garry McFadden tells me, "it just blindsided us."

He was one of just six homicide detectives working cases in town at the time, the height of the crack epidemic in Charlotte, with rampant violence that hit the black community hard. McFadden is brash, quick with a one-liner, likeable, and

telegenic. He retired in 2011 after 21 years on the murder squad, but came back to the department part time a month later. The cliché would have that McFadden is straight out of central casting, and there's some truth to that: He reviews old cases as the star of his own TV show, "I Am Homicide," on the Investigation Discovery channel.

We meet on a chilly Monday, a couple weeks after I visited Ms. Judy, at McFadden's "morning office," a retro-themed diner close to downtown. He's dressed in a blue plaid blazer and navy oxfords, polished to a shine. As Tom Jones blasts from the overhead speakers, McFadden recalls MOMO's early days, which weren't comfortable for cops.

"We did not get along," he says between bites of turkey sausage and grits. "They came on hard. It was MOMO against the police." At one point after they arrested Wallace, he recalls, MOMO asked the city council to fire him for the way the CMPD handled the serial killer investigation. He thought the group was uninformed. Slowly, over several years, MOMO and the cops began to cooperate. "One day it just clicked," he says. "To this day, couldn't tell you what it was. But they were there. We were there. And neither of us could go away."

MOMO held candlelight vigils for many of the more than 800 murder victims McFadden investigated. He would be at a scene, and there'd come Ms. Judy, candles and lapel pins in hand, ready to hold a vigil. Victims' families started calling MOMO with tips. The relationship between police and the black community improved. "As a department, sometimes, we see it as a case, as a number, as a file," McFadden says. "MOMO makes you understand this is somebody's daughter, somebody's mother."

In 1999, MOMO held a vigil for Cherica Adams, the pregnant girlfriend of Carolina Panthers wide receiver Rae Carruth. She was shot five times in her car on Carruth's order, and before she died, she told police he was responsible for ordering the hit. During Carruth's murder trial, Ms. Judy babysat the couple's brain-damaged son, Chancellor. The organization held vigils for national tragedies, too. Ms. Judy sent ribbons to grieving families after the Columbine school shooting; to Newtown; to the congregation reeling from the Charleston church massacre two years ago.

She organized vigils for addicts and prostitutes, people whose deaths were worth only a short story on the inside of the local section, a quick mention on the nightly news. Some of the killings happened in the Boulevard Homes community – "the Homes," people in Charlotte called it back then – just a couple miles from Ms. Judy's apartment. The Homes was one of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods, a place people didn't want to linger outside. At the worst of the violence, a suspected car thief executed two cops after they chased him through the Homes. Officers Andy Nobles and John Barnette have pictures on Ms. Judy's board, too.

At one point, the antenna on the Honda she drove was festooned with purple ribbons, each hand-stamped with a victim's name. The ribbons fluttered in the wind like sad streamers off a little girl's bicycle handlebars.

*****

Ms. Judy says she's not tired. Her knees just hurt sometimes.

She keeps a small stool in her van and if a vigil runs long and the concrete feels hard under her feet, she'll pull out the stool and rest a spell. She says she feels sharper, mentally, than she did at 26. Ms. Judy wants to keep running MOMO until her health dictates otherwise. But she turns 66 this year, and the possibility of retirement, first from her landlord job and eventually from MOMO, is easy to conceive. "The problem is, there's no one waiting in the wings," says Ms. Judy's son, David Howard, a former city councilman who helped start the organization with his mother in the '90s. (When he ran for office for the first time, Howard says people didn't know who he was until he started mentioning his mother's name. "Oh, you're *Ms. Judy's* boy," he remembers people responding.)

The CMPD has its own Homicide Support Group, started eight years ago, which meets once a week and sends representatives to crime scenes. It's a little better organized, and feels more institutional than Mothers of Murdered Offspring. But the department's "family advocates" aren't as overtly religious as Ms. Judy. The missions are similar, but they don't cleanly overlap.

MOMO was never supposed to scale in the way many nonprofits desire to grow. Hiring a big staff and chasing grant money isn't the goal, and its leader needs to understand that, Howard says. But more than anything, whoever comes along after Ms. Judy has to care about the victims and their families – to have the strength and grace to comfort them at their darkest moments.

"Without that, MOMO will go away," Howard says. "After all these families it helped, to not have that anymore is a shame."

*****

She needs to get back to work – there are apartment applications to process – but Ms. Judy can't walk away from the display board.

"It's just … ." She stops and shakes her head. "It's just crazy. I've never counted them before. There are so many."

Without prompting, Ms. Judy picks out more faces. Despite her insistence that her memory is fading, she is able to recall details, even from crimes that happened 20 years ago.

"Mr. Jung-Sup Pak. He was the store owner over there on Freedom Drive, right there at Allegheny. Somebody went in there and robbed him. Did a big candlelight vigil for him. Patricia Jones. She was here for a meeting in Charlotte with her company and these guys carjacked her and shot her. We sent her family some stuff. I remember talking to her husband."

She keeps going.

"Man, this one. He had gotten out of the military – made it out the Army – and was working over there at the Hardee's at Cotswold. You remember that Hardee's? He was working there and someone went in there to rob the place and shot him in the face with a shotgun. Couldn't even open the casket." Her nails tap the plastic. "These three. They were all killed on the same day. They shot 'em all and put their bodies in a car and set the car on fire.

"And, of course you have to remember little Kevin," Ms. Judy says. Kevin Rodas was a 7-year-old picking up candy from a just-broken piñata at a front yard birthday party on Labor Day weekend two years ago. A group of men shot into the crowd, killing Kevin and wounding two other people. The shooting is still unsolved. "What happened to you, Kevin?" she asks, as if the little boy's picture would come to life and speak to her.

*****

One night this past winter, Ms. Judy unloads the back of her minivan at the edge of a covered basketball court just outside downtown. The sun set an hour ago and it's cold; she wears a fuzzy white hat and a white fleece jacket, zipped nearly to the top.

She sets two folding tables together on the concrete court. On one, she carefully places two white picture frames and scatters a dozen purple votive candles in front of them. The frames have purple mats with white writing down the sides: "WE LOVE YOU" and "R.I.P." Ms. Judy drops a purple wicker basket on the second table, with dozens of lapel pins inside, similar to the ones on her board at home.

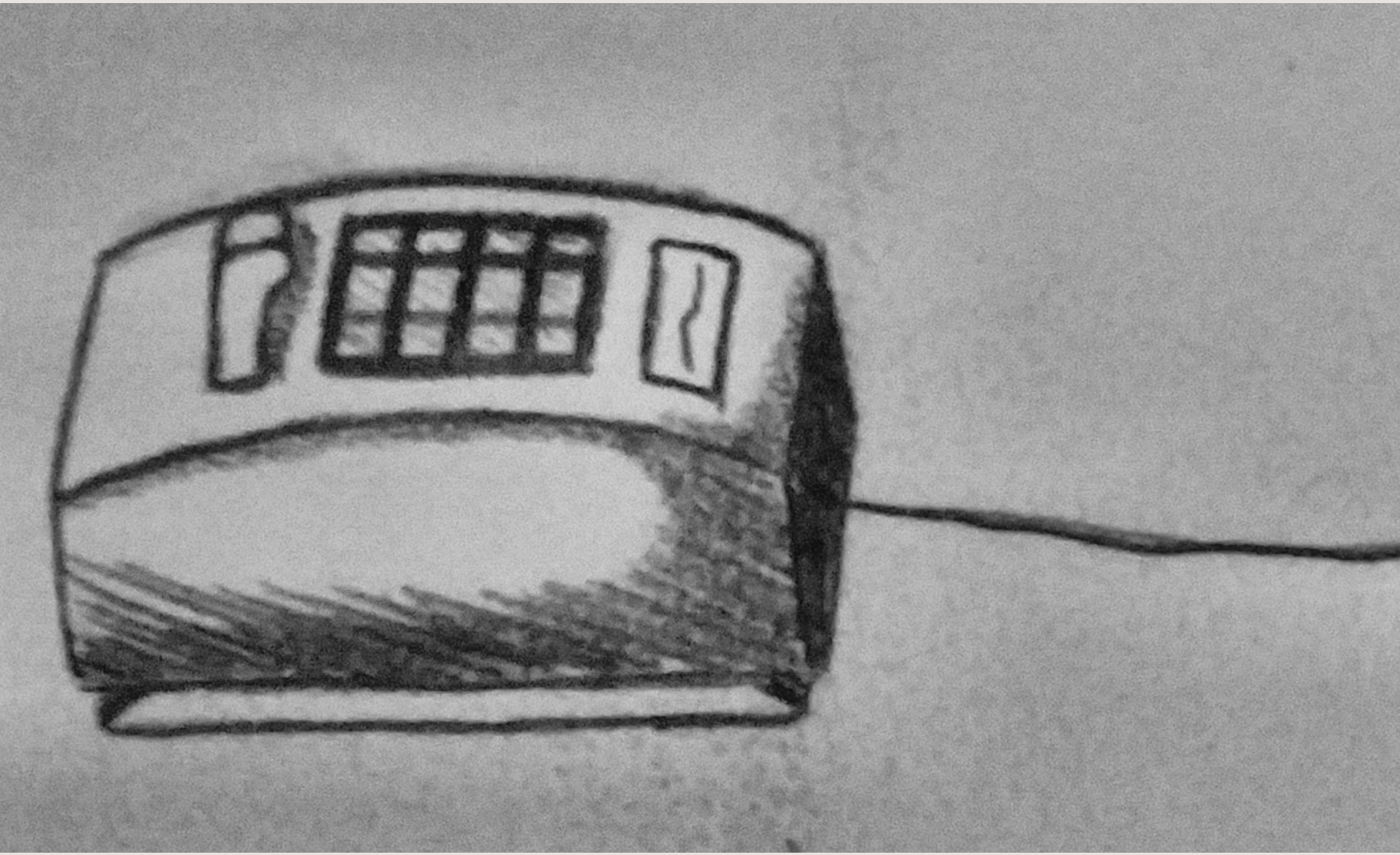
This time, the picture on the cards is of Mariya Owens, a 4-year-old girl with pigtail braids and a gap between her two front teeth. She was beaten to death on Christmas Eve, hit hard enough to lacerate her liver and aorta. Police charged her mother's boyfriend with murder right away.

MOMO used to hold these candlelight services near the scene of murders, sometimes as soon as detectives cleared out. Often, there'd be subtle signs of an aftermath – a scrap of shredded yellow crime scene tape, a pile of flowers. A few years back there was a shooting at the end of a MOMO service, though, and the police department encouraged Ms. Judy to move the services to the covered basketball court.

"If I were scared, I wouldn't be able to do this," she'd told me. "I guess I don't have the sense to be scared. Maybe I should be. If I get shot, God's got a purpose for that, too. But I can't live in fear of that. It won't get you anywhere."

A little before 7 p.m., people start to arrive. More than 50 show up to grieve. They pull pins out of the basket and fix them to their jackets. They light candles and hug each other. The vigil starts and tears fall.

Children, some just a couple years older than Mariya, press close to their parents' legs. A woman takes the microphone and leads the crowd in a wrenching version of the gospel song "I Shall Wear a Crown." As the people lift their candles to the sky, the singer hits the hymn's final verse: *"I'm going to put on my robe, tell the story / of how I made it over / Soon as I make it home."*



Duet

by Debbie J. Williams

"She has scabies."

The ER lights leave no shadows, exposing me as I stare at pus-oozing scabs marking my daughter's face and hands. Kelsey's* brown hair curls softly from under an orange stocking cap she had jerked on in the car. She had always been truly beautiful with heavily lashed, arresting blue eyes; long, slender fingers; and teeth straight enough for an engaging smile. I had quickly adapted to this observation others made of her, ever since my husband and I had taken her into our home when she was barely three. She was my beautiful, loving, sweet girl. In the lights, I study her for hints of the laughing child who gamely picked up worms for fishing, who agonized over the order of colors in crayon rainbows to decorate the fridge, who dressed our white cat in her baby sister's pink onesie, then softly crooned while rocking it. Here, in ER lights, she is someone I don't know. Her fingers gouge at scabs, smear blood onto her jeans, then flit to her mouth where she bites her nails bloody. She paces. Writhes. Punches cabinets. Tortures exam bed sheets. Spews words we never say at home.

I struggle to refocus. The ER doctor. Scabies? A dubious diagnosis at best. Kelsey once had scabies in the third grade, I tell him. It looked nothing like this. She had scratched and whined, not picked and punched and cursed.

At that moment, I realize that I have a problem. I can't process what it is. It has no words, no recognizable melody. It's painful, like times singing church music a capella in my youth with a song leader who couldn't hit the high notes true, who couldn't keep pace – who slowly and methodically and painfully and blasphemously drained the song of any worth, until other voices could only whisper, longing for the mess to end. On this day, Kelsey has just ended our song of "Before Meth." I can't, as of yet, anticipate the cacophony of "After."

*Not her real name.

*****

When Kelsey came to our house, she had started calling my husband "Daddy" after only a couple of weeks. I referred to myself as "Mommy," yet I remained "Debbie" for months. I understood the reasons she would be delayed in awarding me mommy status, but I still brooded each night over how to respond, as if solving an equation to earn an "A." I knew that good mothers spent time with their children, but by the time my husband and I had come back to visit family for Christmas and found her needing a home, I was a full-time doctoral student

at Purdue. We had taken on this child, and I couldn't even get her to call me *Mommy*. I tried always to be with her. I studied mostly when she slept. I only left her to attend and teach classes in my doctoral program – only three hours on three weekdays – and those times, Kelsey was with women who cooed to and hugged her in our church's preschool where my husband worked as the youth minister. Even so, each day as I dropped her off and started walking out of the preschool, her tiny voice's frenetic, rhythmic screams of "Debbie, Debbie, Debbie" began. Each school day I tried again. She would perch on my hip, gripping my clothes while watching me leave my house keys in her cubbie: "See, sweet girl, I have to come back. I can't get into our house without you." Some days, I left her wearing my watch. I left with whatever I thought would communicate, "I love you. I will *always* come for you." I left her whatever she asked.

She still screamed.

During those days, she asked basically by pointing, having been so neglected during those first three years that both her speech and her body were underdeveloped. Her size-two clothing should have been size four. This gap was such an issue that the new pediatrician, clearly wondering if he needed to report *me* to Child Protective Services, asked me to go home for the paperwork proving I was the adoptive mother. *Me*. I bristled. I was her *real* mother, her forever mother. But inside, I knew the truth: while I understood the rhythms and paperwork of academe, I did not know how to study mothering. I did not know how to be a mother.

Striding angrily, fearfully to Kelsey's familiar screams, I left the doctor's office, making my way to my car. Twenty minutes later, I plopped paperwork on a table and scooped her from a nurse's lap. Hoarse and snotty, she squeaked my name and scrubbed her face into my blouse. We rocked just so – her forward and back motion, not my instinctive side-to-side motion. I whispered what I hoped were mom secrets into her tiny ear.

Many nights during those years, Kelsey's indescribable night terrors prompted her to wake and scream my name. Those nights, for some reason, she would not have my husband, flailing her arms and legs against him. I still wasn't Mommy, but I rocked her just so, until we both slept slumped in each other's arms.

After one such night, the doorbell rang. Earlier that day, I had dragged myself to school, had stood in front of students and said a bunch of crap about the importance of writing effective arguments, then had shifted from teacher to student in a doctoral class where the professor had handed me my quiz folded in half. I cracked it open to read, "You appear to be reading but not processing the text. Make an appointment with me this week. 42." *Forty-two! That's a score I would make in math, not in my field. What business do I have in graduate school when I can't even process a theory chapter? I can't even get my kid, who isn't even an infant, to sleep at night. Such a loser.* When the doorbell had rung, my "loser" tape had been playing as Kelsey beat me to the door. "Wait, Sweet Girl! Wait for Mommy." Unlike careful good moms, I had forgotten to lock the deadbolt, leaving her to open the door to the mailman.

"Sign here, please." The letter was some sort of legal declaration that my uncle,

Kelsey's biological grandfather, was suing us for custody. Not knowing what that even meant, much less what to do next, I shared chocolate with Kelsey, spread out crayons and paper on the kitchen table for drawing rainbows, and cued up my inner *loser* track.

*****

Many of those days passed with her screaming for me, and my running for her. However, as Kelsey grew older, I still seemed to run for her, but she seemed to scream at, not for, me.

The circumstances that had brought us to the ER when she was 16 had been festering for some time. Once again, I had heard, but not processed, the words.

As I dropped Kelsey off at the high school that morning, I had re-assured myself: honestly, what day with a 16-year-old wouldn't begin with a fight? That day, though, she had run away from school again, only to be caught and taken to the guidance counselor. I was called. I walked in the guidance counselor's office to find her being told to "sit and be still." I sat in the chair beside her, acknowledging to the counselor that yes, I was Kelsey's mother. Then I noticed the sores on her hand and face. The counselor fired off his questions so quickly while I puzzled over the sores. I couldn't form speech. Did I know she had skipped school? *Well, no, actually, I had waited in my car and watched her walk into the building.* Had I seen her with sores like that before? *No. I had not.* Hadn't I wondered why she dressed for school in jeans and a hoodie in 80-degree weather? *Well, no. I had actually congratulated myself for having gotten her out of the house and into the school in some form of modest dress.* Didn't I think she needed to see a doctor?

The counselor and I stared at each other. I finally spoke aloud.

"Yes. Yes, I guess I do."

To this day, I don't know how Kelsey and I got from the high school to an ER exam room. Then, I had been so angry that no one in the ER seemed to know how to help her. I realize now that the doctor didn't know what he was seeing, either. Meth couldn't be the problem with a pretty 16-year-old whose pant-suited soccer mom had brought her to the ER in a green minivan. When he handed me a script for scabies and left me to escort her out, I ripped it, leaving it on the crumpled pus and blood-stained sheet. Kelsey screamed laughter. She and I walked down the hall and out of the waiting room, as I murmured apologies for her loud profanity-punctuated laughter as if I were waving to a parade-watching crowd. Ringing in my ears, though, were the words she had repeated like some chorus from the time we had left the high school – *it's the drugs*. When we got home, my computer search "sores from drugs" produced page after page after page after page of hits.

Meth sores.

Fortunately and unfortunately, meth sores became the bridge in our new song. When the dime-sized sores oozed on Kelsey's arms, legs, and face, she scratched. They bled. She scratched. They only scabbed when she was clean for 36-to-48 hours, depending on the amount of meth she had snorted or swallowed or shot up.

I can't remember what happened that night after the ER incident. I don't know how my younger two children got home from school. I likely picked them up,

as they didn't ride the bus. I think I followed my mom routine – cook, check backpacks, and homework folders, drive someone to a sports practice and back, wash a load of laundry, grade and prepare to teach. However, that night, I'm *sure* my husband and I fought because of her. I'm sure that our younger two children began their closing up against family crap, and I'm sure that Kelsey launched her odyssey away from us, her family.

Not long after the ER incident, Kelsey ran away. Pregnancy, not meth was the catalyst. Not knowing how to present this new information to the family, I had called my mom who suggested that Kelsey stay at least overnight, if not the weekend, with her. I felt guilty for seriously considering her offer. My mom already cared for my brother who had cystic fibrosis and my dad who had had strokes and cancer. But in the end, Kelsey wanted to be away from me. I let her stay.

Early the next morning, my mother called. Kelsey was gone.

This time, my mom watched my younger children while my husband and I drove to Austin where Kelsey's closest cousin, Kathleen, lived. The two had been in communication over the past day. When we didn't find Kelsey there, my sister-in-law suggested we check with one of Kathleen's older friends. I had already called the city police to file a missing person's report, and an officer said that he would meet us at the friend's home. The officer directed my husband and me to a nearby park, insisting on going to the house alone. I clung to my husband's arm as we waited by our car.

The officer returned without her.

I don't know why I had expected him to find her at the friend's home, but I had. I had been certain that the three of us would go home, find a counselor at the university where I taught, and she would be voted the beautiful, recovered-addict prom queen her junior year. Instead, I cried and begged him to open his car for my inspection. I leaned across the edge of the empty back seat, as if Kelsey would crawl from under some crevice. My husband and I made our three-hour trek home alone. The next day after my husband and kids were gone, I scream-cried my soul inside-out in the shower. I'm not sure what, exactly, I grieved – her loss, my inability to care for her, my lack of control, my inept relationship with my husband and other children. I had never cried like that before.

I don't remember how much later it was when she actually made a brief return home of her choosing. I only remember scenes.

*****

The house phone rang, and as usual, I sprinted to answer in hopes of hearing from my runaway child. "Yes?"

"You the family of … ." A male voice drawled on the other end, and "Bail Bond" appeared on the caller ID. *Hmmm. What was "bail bond"?*

"Ma'am. Ma'am! Hello?"

His voice jarred me from my musings. "Um … yes, sir. I'm, I'm, it's just that I'm not sure what you're asking."

"Do you want to bail her out?"

"What does that mean?"

"Ma'am, you ever known anyone in jail?"

"No." I may have whispered that. I may have been crying quietly by that time. His voice lowered, and he slowly and rather gently explained that Kelsey had been arrested for drugs, taken to jail, and what it would mean to bail her out. I still didn't understand how to respond. "What would you do if it were your child?" I asked.

I wondered if he had heard me, he was so quiet before he responded. "I can't tell *you* what to do. I think it may not hurt to let her stay a night or two." Then, he explained that I could visit her before she was "booked."

"I … I don't know where the jail is," I began. I think he sighed. He asked me to get pen and paper, then gave me instructions – how to get there and what to do once I was in the facility.

I visited Kelsey that night. I visited her every time the state of Texas allowed. I didn't bail her out.

*****

Just as the change in Kelsey's screaming marked the change in our song, I never seemed to find a melody line. I wobbled between helping my mom care for my sick dad, terminally ill brother and aging grandparents while thinking I was maintaining patterns with my husband and younger two children. I pretended we had harmony in all parts of our lives, while lying to myself that I could love Kelsey away from her demons.

*****

"The uniform is in the dryer. I didn't forget! Go check!" I yelled at my son from the kitchen.

"You better not have forgotten them." He appeared in the kitchen door, a frustrated 12-year-old without his junior league baseball uniform. "You *always* forget, Mom. Guess I need to run away." He muttered it just loud enough for me to hear as he spun on his heel back towards the laundry room.

"Just a sec." I removed the overcooked potatoes from a burner and twisted my wildly curly hair to stuff it under my collar so I could see into the dryer.

"Mom, I gotta go now. The guys are already warming up. Can't Jillian take me?" He was already dumping an armload of clean laundry on the couch and pawing through it.

"Do not start with me, Bud! I told her she could go to the skate park." I rifled through the pile myself, producing gray still-grass-stained ball pants, a navy game shirt with the name of some roofing company on the back, a pair of socks and a belt.

"My cap … ."

"Is on the fireplace like I told you." His icy blue eyes engaged mine. He was already my height. "Get in the car," I spat through my teeth, hoping I had turned off the burner in the kitchen.

He played well that night, though I missed seeing him complete a double-play because I had been trying to grade essays while watching the game. His team won, which helped some, but I smarted from his snide comments about my not even being able to watch his ball game. Then, my husband observed that "chicken jerky and potato mush" weren't exactly his favorites. I glared at him, considering a retort when Jillian floated in wanting to talk about the dreamy skater she hoped she'd see again. "That sounds wonderful, honey," I cooed, hoping I could focus later on what she was saying. I woke the next morning, having drooled on two essays instead of grading them.

The next morning, my husband left for work, my two kids got themselves to school, I washed a load of clothes, graded two essays, taught, wondered what to teach. And hoped for a phone call from Kelsey.

*****

Years, or maybe just months, later, I ran again to the phone to hear another man's voice: "Hello, I need to speak to the parents of … ." I hated those phone calls. I knew that being called "ma'am" by a male voice on the phone when I hadn't left my debit card at the Walmart checkout meant either someone was dead, or there was *big* trouble.

I took a breath. "This is she."

"Uh, I need your help." *This is unusual.* "See, your daughter knows people we need to find … ."

"A meth bust?" I had learned a few things since that first call.

"Well," he paused, "Yes ma'am. You see … ."

"What do you need from me?" I interrupted.

"Look, she knows where these people are, but she won't talk. I need you to come to my office and see if you can get her to talk. I need those names." He paused and spoke deliberately, "It will *really* help her situation."

I drove frantically 40 miles to the Nolan County Sheriff's Office in Sweetwater to find her. She sat sober, as far as I could tell, her hair bleached an unreal gold. Hands cuffed in her lap. No sores. Then I looked around us. Five or so men in tan and brown sheriff's uniforms stood against the wall, encircling us. As there was no chair to pull beside her, I gingerly lowered myself to the floor, sitting as close to "criss cross" as my basketball-damaged knees could fold. I took her hands.

"Oh, Mom," she spoke softly, bending her head over our hands. I kissed her hair.

"Oh, Honey, I love you so." Most of our conversations would begin this way. I usually wouldn't remember what came in the middle. I would have murmured words of "doing what's right" and "saving others by making good decisions." I would have told her "how proud of her I was that she was 'clean.'" At some point, she sat up.

"I'm not as clean as you think, Mom." Her words slapped me into "God talk," and I began mashing together various bits of scripture and hymns I would write on her jail cards and letters. I told her what a blessing she had been when she had come to live with us. As I talked, I fiddled with her fingers, extending and curling them. I

traced the metal cuffs around her wrists.

Sounds of sniffling and scraping chair legs made me aware of my own stiff knees on cold tiles. I glanced around to see the men standing, some teary, as the sheriff unfolded a metal chair for me beside my girl. He let us sit together a bit longer. I hugged her. We rocked as best we could while I murmured secrets of mothers and daughters. As I stood to leave, I turned back to her. "Honey?"

"I'll think about it, Mom," she whispered.

Leaving her sitting quietly was almost worse than if she screamed for me. Driving home I tried to think about anything but what she might decide. Highway lines blurred as my eyes burned from tears and lack of sleep.

After singing myself hoarse with hymns and backup harmony for Barbara Streisand favorites, I plumbed my memory for distractions.

I had secretly feared agreeing to go for reasons I couldn't really articulate. I trekked behind my college friends for the better part of the day in and around caverns exposed only through our flashlights. We swam through an underground lake with water so clear that we could see the strings of our sneakers in our light beams as we kicked across, yet it was so cold that I had to focus on measured breaths rather than enjoy its surreal loveliness. After all that, I was confident my friends and I were close to an exit as we crawled on our bellies. My frizzy hair would catch on the ceiling as I ooched, but I stayed focused – *I can do this!* Checking our progress, the boy ahead of me shined his flashlight toward what we thought was our way out.

Spiders scattered. Their movement made a rolling sound like the trill of a soft Spanish "r." Closing my eyes, I made myself shimmy along, against the thought of spiders above and below, willing myself to conjure the soothing, enveloping heat of a closed-up car after a frigid summer church service. Our spelunking would surely end with our mud-streaked grins surfacing in after-trip Polaroids. Yet when I eventually crawled into the summer heat, the thought of spiders still followed me. I found myself scratching as I drove home.

About 11 that night, I struggled to wake, woozy on the Benadryl and Nyquil I had taken to sleep. I answered the ringing phone. "Yes?"

"You have a collect call from … ."

I heard Kelsey's voice pronounce her name for the recorded message. She was back in the local county jail, which meant that she had shared names. My immediate reaction was that her situation was as good as it could be. I waited to receive the simple kiss of the phone click that connected our voices. "Honey?"

"Mom?"

I knew what came next. I would write and visit. She would sit. I would start to think about when she would finally be released. I would imagine running to hug her.

*****

One Saturday, I dried my hands from washing lunch dishes to answer the door. "Mom!" She greeted me, arms wide. Her hair – black this time – was actually a color

that suited her well. Her pupils were large, though, and her makeup, heavy. It was too warm out for her long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans. Her words ran over each other, burying me. "Come on, Mom. Aren't you glad to see me? Sit. Let me talk to you." She directed me to the kitchen table.

"Honey, of course I'm glad to see you. I … I just thought you had a little longer." I offered her food and drink again and again to see her hands since I couldn't see her arms. She refused. As she talked, I learned that a man named "Paul" had bailed her out several days earlier. They had had things to do, been busy, but he had promised that she could see her mother. He would pick her up soon.

"Mom. I'm not hungry. I don't need anything. Just listen … ." They had bought things. She would buy me whatever I wanted. Her words were so manic I couldn't initiate conversation, but I recognized a new verse in our "after" song: it wasn't just about addiction, but now, about selling meth. Likely also about manufacturing the meth sold. I looked at the oven clock. Ten minutes had passed, possibly 15. I didn't know when this Paul would return, but by the way she kept glancing out the curtain, it would be soon.

"Honey. Honey, Honey! I need to go to the bathroom," I interrupted. I left her, her fingers picking at makeup-covered scabs. I closed my bedroom door, then my bathroom door. I stepped into the tub and, as if a layer of plastic would help, pulled the shower curtain and dialed, my fingers punching buttons from habit.

The woman's voice was firm: "Abilene Police Department. How may I direct your call?"

Expecting Paul's quick return, Kelsey willingly went outside to finish our visit. Mercifully, the officer arrived before Paul. When the police car pulled up, she pivoted back into me, shaking me by the arms. "Mom. MOM!! What?! Why did you do this to me?" As the officer approached us, she gripped me tightly, trying to step behind me. "MOM! Don't let him take me." I scooted my legs forward toward his car. As the officer pulled at her shoulders, she screamed "Mom" again. This time it sounded like when she had screamed my name when she was small, when I would've given *anything* to have her call me "Mom."

The memory of her expression through the backseat window, as she registered my betrayal, haunts me still. She didn't include me on her jail visitation list, so I didn't get to see her before Paul bailed her out two days later. I didn't see her then, either. Within the week, a drug detective phoned to say that she had been arrested but was in the ER having small triangular plastic meth packets pumped from her stomach. He said that police had been watching Paul's activities since he had bailed Kelsey out, acknowledging to me the manufacturing as well as the selling of meth that I had suspected. He explained that when police had confronted Paul and Kelsey in the Target parking lot, Paul had locked them in his pickup and screamed at her to "help him out," that he couldn't be arrested if there was no evidence. The officer said he and his partner had screamed at Kelsey from outside the pickup, banging on the windows for her to unlock the door, not to suicidally O.D. just to keep Paul out of jail.

Although jail protocol kept me from seeing her in the hospital, eventually I ran to answer one of those phone calls to hear, "You have a collect call from … ." The

next morning, I perched on a metal stool, hunched forward just to watch Kelsey walk down the long hallway to the visitation stalls. She plopped onto a metal stool with a wall, a window, and speaker vent between us.

"Mom. Love you."

I matched her hand on the window with mine. "Love you, Sweet Girl."

*****

"Mom."

Now 30-something, Kelsey scoots in beside me at the picnic table in a state park. More than a decade has passed since we sat in the guidance counselor's office. Her 10-year-old daughter giggles with her cousins as they try to knock marshmallows off each other's sticks while making s'mores by the campfire. We'd been through my dad's and brother's deaths; our family had slogged through those years. In the meantime, my younger daughter and son transitioned into adulthood, one with marriage, college, and babies; the other with the military and a new bride.

Stretching my stiff knees against the cool of the spring evening, I turn off my phone's flashlight feature that has been guiding placement of chocolate pieces on s'mores for the grandgirls. Campfire light flickers between their wiggly silhouettes as they try, with Daddy, Uncle, and Granddad to adequately roast another round of marshmallows. Later that night, some of us will struggle to sleep in tents; others will give up on roughing it and drive 20 minutes to fall into our beds, but not before more stories and s'mores.

I lean into her. "What, Hon?"

She spits over her shoulder, hard and solid, as well as I'd ever seen her brother spit. "So, I show up dipping and smoking, with two six-packs, wearing a skanky shirt, and you haven't said a word."

"Yeah." I turn to her, leaning against her arm. "Growing up, I guess. Show me the cakes you decorated at work today." Her laughter focuses my gaze on the cigarette glow just below the corner of her mouth. I feel for the reassuring shape of my inhaler in my jean pocket.

As she begins searching for recent pictures on her phone, the glow illuminates the inside of her left forearm, as it stretches across the picnic table. Her graceful fingers cradle her phone and swiped, and I'm able to study the thin, tattooed stems braided over track marks scars. The stems open into a profile of a poppy, with shadowy veins of every petal offering the faintest contrast against her skin as they reach just below each petal's edge. Self-tattooed without official government-sanctioned license, the poppies, she had said were a reminder of something other than substances that killed. It's about life *after*, she explained.

"Here, Mom." I am called back by the light of her phone to a screen split between a text reading "... you bitch!" and a blue cake. "This was a nine-inch double-layer ... ." Her voice weaves into and around me as I study the cake.

Vanilla cake is draped in a cornflower blue fondant. I know from having watched her bake that she would have kneaded the fondant until it had succumbed to the powder-sugary warmth of her strong fingers and could finally be flattened with a

rolling pin. The blue casing envelopes the cake, smooth like every lake I've ever seen at sunrise. Swirling from the center – white scrollwork – filigree was the word that popped onto my tongue – explodes across the center. Small tendrils curve in, twirl, then crescendo into lily-shapes down and around the sides with the brilliance of a tie-dyed pattern, and, at the same time, the perfect, fragile precision of ice crystals on a window.

I lack words for what she's offered me. The white, thin-lined loveliness of her work fades at the edges of her phone screen. It mutes the "Are you really going to try to drive yourself and your daughter into town tonight with everything you've had to drink?" tirade I had been stifling for the last half hour, as I watched her drink.

The cake's scrollwork is as purposeful as my husband's "try it like this" guiding of our granddaughter's sticky fingers in a strum across guitar strings. It is as riveting as the swish of my 1-year-old grandbabe's diaper when his fat legs thump across the plastic tent floor to avoid his mother's "bedtime" embrace. It is as beautiful as the sway of my son's back arched in laughing response to his brother-in-law's hilarity over sculpting s'mores from accidentally crushed graham crackers. All of it is an unexpected score for me to follow – an "after after" song.

Kelsey spits again, waiting for my response. Then reaching for another cigarette, she somehow manages to swallow three times from a beer bottle without choking on the dip curled into her bottom lip – a feat that, had I not been so tired, might have struck me as somewhat marvel-worthy.

"Sweet Girl, this is the loveliest thing I've seen today. I am *so* proud of your work."

Her phone screen fades. She sucks deeply on her fresh cigarette, the red glow softly highlighting smile crinkles at the edges of her eyes. "Love you, Momma," she exhales.

In the darkness, I hold my breath, watching her smoke scroll between the tree branches, briefly blurring the moon.

Authors

The Authors

Elizabeth Cernota Clark
Lidice, Remembered

Elizabeth (Beth) Cernota Clark grew up near Chicago amid the lyrical cadence of the Czech language and the Old-World fairy tales of childhood. Her family's passion for the arts, education and culture, along with their dedication to civic participation in a democracy, shaped her life and career.

Born in Oak Park, Illinois, she lived in nearby Berwyn and Cicero which, during the mid-20th century, were havens for Central and Eastern European immigrants, many of whom had landed in Chicago's old Pilsen neighborhood and progressively moved west. Her journalism career began at the Chicago Daily News in the early 1970s, when newsroom jobs were opening to more women and minorities, and dramatic changes were taking place in the publishing industry. Her career took a turn toward Texas in 1976 and she worked as a reporter, editor and freelance writer for a variety of Texas publications including Neil Sperry's Gardens magazine, the Denton Record-Chronicle and the Lewisville News-Advertiser.

A 2002 graduate of the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism, she is a senior lecturer at Texas State University School of Journalism and Mass Communication in San Marcos. Previous teaching positions were at Texas Woman's University and Winston-Salem State University (North Carolina), where she advised the campus student newspapers. Her bachelor of arts degree in English literature and composition is from Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.

Story Behind the Story

"Lidice, remembered" is based on two stories from childhood that meet in this essay. One is a favorite Czech fairy tale about the sleeping knights of Blanik Mountain whose sole mission is to save their country in its greatest hour of need. The other is the true story of Lidice, a village in old Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic. Because my grandparents had emigrated to the United States from Bohemia and Moravia at the turn of the 20th century, the Old-World fairy tales and ancient legends they brought filtered easily to my generation of the 1950s and '60s. The more recent, and true, story of Lidice – a World War II tragedy – unfolded reluctantly as I outgrew fairy tales.

Meagan Flynn
Life After Deportation

Meagan Flynn is a reporter on The Washington Post's Morning Mix team. She was previously a reporter in Houston for both the Houston Chronicle and Houston Press, where she covered criminal and social justice issues extensively. She is a 2015 graduate of Drake University.

Story Behind the Story

Following Donald Trump's immigration executive orders, the fear within Houston's immigrant communities was very real. FIEL Houston, the advocacy organization that helped Rose and Jose Escobar, told me that one woman brought her husband to FIEL because he was too afraid to leave the house for fear of ICE agents, and he needed to be assured that it was safe to go about his daily life. I talked to a woman whose father was deported one week after getting pulled over for driving with a broken taillight. I met a mom whose daughter just got accepted into one of Houston's most renowned health sciences preparatory schools, but who was taking the kids back to Mexico after their dad was deported and they missed him too much.

The stories of families being split up due to deportation kept rolling and, while all of them were tragic, Rose's stuck with me. I first met Rose at a press conference the night Jose was deported. She cried and told of how Jose was the only boyfriend she ever had. She told of the life they had built together and how he had not a spot on his criminal record. Perhaps most strikingly, she had not yet decided how she was going to tell Walter. More than a month later, I wondered if it was something she grappled with every day.

Jamie Friedlander
Brony Up

Jamie Friedlander is a longform magazine writer and editor based in Chicago. Although her primary interest is in health and science reporting, she has covered everything from gang violence interrupters in Chicago to her own experience performing stand-up comedy. When she's not writing or editing, she can usually be found traveling with her husband David, drinking copious amounts of green tea or surfing Etsy late into the night.

She received her master's degree from Northwestern University and her bachelor's degree from New York University. Her work has been published in New York Magazine's The Cut, The Chicago Tribune, Business Insider and SUCCESS Magazine, among other publications. Samples of her work can be found at www.jamiegfriedlander.com.

Story Behind the Story

I have always been intrigued by subcultures – from juggalos and furries to fitness enthusiasts and nudists. One day, I received an alert for a new documentary on Netflix, "Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony." After watching the trailer, I knew I'd be hooked on learning more about this subculture. The world of bronies fascinated me. I wanted to learn about the nuances of their fandom. Are they as creepy as people think? What about the TV show appeals to them? How do they feel telling people they are bronies?

I did a deep dive into brony culture in an attempt to get to the heart of what it means to be a brony. I met with numerous men in the Chicagoland area, watched several documentaries and spoke with a researcher who studied brony demographics.

Christina Hughes Babb
Sins of the Mother

Christina Hughes Babb is a freelance writer, following a 10-year stint (serving at various times as reporter, editor, and publisher) at the Advocate magazine in Dallas. She is a 2011 contributor to Ten Spurs, which includes her essay about addiction and ultrarunning, and recipient of a Society of Feature Writers award on the topics of addiction and motherhood. Photo credit: Danny Fulgencio.

Story Behind the Story

A comment online prompted me to write "Sins of the Mother." (I know, *never read the comments*). It declared: "Junkies should all be "dnr" [do not resuscitate] what's the problem? [sic] this is the best state in the union to work in and people have time to just want to destroy themselves and others? move to the northeast if you're so inclined – i don't want my tax dollars funding your lameness. [sic]." This followed a 2015 article about Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's veto of a so-called Good Samaritan bill, which would have allowed people who call 911 to help a friend who's overdosed on drugs avoid certain charges. With overdoses rising at unprecedented rates, laws such as the one vetoed by the Texas governor are being enacted across America in order to keep people alive, which, given the nuances of the problem and the absence of a solution, is the best we can do, at least on a large scale, at this time. I read the comment, and I thought about my family. We are journalists and entrepreneurs and classically trained musicians and poets and beautiful children. Still, two of us to date have nearly died due to our use of opiates. People thought we were worth saving. My goal simply is to show, with fierce (and still sometimes mortifying, I admit) honesty, one real family dealing with an epidemic that has many faces and endless stories, which, at their guts, probably look something like mine.

Brent E. Jones
Pictures Worth a Thousand Silences

After a 20-year career in business operations and corporate writing, Brent E. Jones is pursuing his passion for historical nonfiction. He has built two websites chronicling the U.S. Navy during World War II, written for the U.S. Navy Cruiser Sailors' Association and conducted oral history interviews with numerous Pacific War veterans. A native of Austin, he lives in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex with his wife and rescued German shepherd dogs.

Story Behind the Story

I have spent several years preserving and remastering the wartime photography of Herman Schnipper. What began as a family genealogy project grew into a hobby, then continued to grow over time. His images are now a primary source of reference material for a full-length book project in the works. While the book covers the experiences of Herman and his shipmates across the duration of the war and its aftermath, there is no practical way to incorporate the 10-year relationship I built with Herman and his family into the text. I believe the journey to get to know him, to really understand him, is worthy of a written account on its own merit. "Pictures Worth a Thousand Silences" is my testament to the memory of an American veteran who has left us so much in his wake.

Fair winds and following seas, old sailor.

Rick Jurgens
150 Banana Slugs

I am a freelance writer living in White River Junction, Vermont.

For over two decades, I was a reporter covering health care, energy, real estate, consumer finance and predatory lending, economic events and policy and financial markets for daily newspapers (the Valley News in Lebanon, N.H., and the Contra Costa Times in Walnut Creek, Calif.), the Dow Jones News Service and the National Consumer Law Center, a nonprofit in Boston. I have also written for the Center for Investigative Reporting, The Wall Street Journal, the Christian Science Monitor, Nieman Reports, San Francisco Public Press, San Francisco Business Times and CNBC.

I was born in Detroit, grew up an army brat and graduated from high school near San Francisco and from college near Boston. In those two metropolitan areas, and places in between, I worked as a tenant organizer, cab driver, steel worker and letter carrier.

Story Behind the Story

In 2012, my wife, Diane, was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. After putting most of my reporting and writing work on hold, I devoted my energy and attention to supporting her as she sought care and continued to live.

For 15 months, I used the skills I had learned as a reporter and the muscles I had developed as an advocate to address the multitude of urgent tasks that arose as she worked to find comfort, meaning and fulfillment.

Diane died Aug. 24, 2013. After a few months, I decided to direct my reporter's eye and questions at the memories, emails, records, pictures and other materials we had accumulated during our short sad journey.

I hope that my story about the experience I shared with her will offer readers a chance to explore and consider some of the powerful emotions and confusing realities of death. At the least, writing this story gave me an opportunity to affirm and share some of the hope, determination and humanity that sustained Diane at the end of her life.

Jen Tota McGivney
Untethered

I work as the digital media director for Queens University and as a freelance feature writer. For the past several years, I've been a regular writer for Charlotte magazine, exploring topics like refugee resettlement during the Trump administration, southern preachers fighting for social justice and animal shelters finding creative solutions to help homeless animals. My favorite stories show people who see the odds stacked against them and who persist, nevertheless.

Home is Charlotte, North Carolina, where I live with my husband Jimmy and our two spoiled dogs, Charley and Phoebe.

Story Behind the Story

I didn't go to my cousin Chris's funeral.

Chris influenced me more than anyone. In a family that revered home – with five generations and counting living in the same town – Chris and I fixed our eyes on the horizon. We craved adventure, wondering where to move next, plotting how to travel as far as we could as cheaply as possible. He made everything seem within reach and I borrowed his bravery until I found my own.

But when I began to make flight reservations for his funeral – the credit card propped against my laptop screen, numbers halfway entered – I couldn't do it. I couldn't return to my family's hometown when he wouldn't be there.

I put the funeral money aside to do what I imagined Chris would prefer: blow it on an irresponsible trip. Maybe that was self-serving (I've examined this motive many times) but maybe that was me having learned what Chris taught me. I hope that it was. I hope that if it was my funeral, he would've done the same.

But when my family gathered in a church to honor Chris, I wasn't there. When my relatives stood at the altar to talk about how Chris changed their lives, I didn't take my turn. This essay is what I would've – and perhaps should've – said then.

Richard Rejino
The Reluctant Soldier

Richard Rejino is a pianist, teacher, writer and professional photographer. Currently, he is an account executive for Madeleine Crouch & Company Inc. and is the executive director for several organizations including the National Piano Foundation, Retail Print Music Dealers Association and the Leica Historical Society of America.

His degrees include a Bachelor of Music Education from West Texas State University, a Master of Music in piano from UNT, and a Master of Liberal Studies in Creative Writing from SMU. He is the author of "What Music Means to Me," and has been published in several music publications. He is the executive editor for Pony Express(ions), SMU's Graduate of Liberal Studies literary online journal. As a photographer, his work has been featured at the Museum of Making Music in Carlsbad, California, and he is the 2015 winner of the LHSA Annual Photo contest.

Story Behind the Story

The Reluctant Soldier is the story of my brother's Vietnam War experience in the late 1960s. It is part of a larger, unpublished series of short stories, "Water for the Harvest," about my family, and how each of them illustrates a particular quality I admire and that has helped guide my life. My brother's war experience illustrates how Ben has always tried to live his life by doing what is right. As the first-born son in a Mexican-American family, he worked on our West Texas farm helping our father. He went to college and had met a girl with whom he fell in love. When he was drafted, he was uprooted from his life to go off and fight a war 7,000 miles away. He did what he had to do.

Up until I wrote his story, my brother rarely spoke about his war experience to his family, despite having been married for almost 50 years, with two sons and grandchildren. In my interviews with him, I learned about the horrific death and devastation he witnessed, and the things that lingered with him. He served in Vietnam out of a sense of honor to himself, his fellow soldiers and his family. His story conveys a personal integrity that I aspire to emulate.

Adam Rhew
Ms. Judy the Comforter

Adam Rhew is the senior editor at Charlotte magazine, the city magazine in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he edits and writes longform features. Previously, he worked at television and radio stations in North Carolina and Virginia. His work has been published by GQ, SBNation longform and Our State, among other outlets.

Story Behind the Story

I've known Judy Williams for the better part of a decade; when I was a television news reporter, I'd often run into her at the scene of a murder I was covering. She started Mothers of Murdered Offspring in Charlotte, North Carolina, to help a friend whose daughter was murdered by a serial killer 25 years ago. Since then, she's mourned with the families of hundreds of murder victims. Even though I knew all this, I was stunned when she unfolded a display board with the pictures of more than 700 murder victims her organization has helped. Ms. Judy is in her 60s and, although she's not ready to retire today, she's starting to contemplate her future – and MOMO's – after she steps down.

Debbie J. Williams
Duet

Debbie J. Williams directs the writing program at Abilene Christian University where she has taught for 23 years. She studied creative writing and American literature at Texas Tech University, from which she received an M.A., and she holds a Ph.D. from Purdue in English with an emphasis in composition and rhetoric. Her research interests and publications are focused on the discourse of illness, political analysis and pedagogy. She lives in West Texas with her husband and two cranky cats. When she is not teaching or enjoying conversations with her adult children, she enjoys having adventures, both real and pretend, with her grandgirls.

Story Behind the Story

Deb grew up a caregiver at an early age, helping with two younger siblings with mutations of the cystic fibrosis gene and her father, who began having strokes and cancer when he was 53.

Her caregiving experiences changed with a daughter's meth addiction. Deb, while a doctoral student at Purdue, and her husband had adopted Deb's 4-year-old second cousin, Kelsey (not her name). Deb and her husband would later have a daughter, four years younger than Kelsey, and a son, seven years younger.

Kelsey's teen years began tempestuously, with fallout from neglect and abuse occurring before her adoption and questions about her adoption. At 16, she ran away for the first time, marking a decade-long odyssey of addition and struggle. As Kelsey's addiction deepened and Deb's brother and father entered end-of-life care, Deb struggled with depression while trying to maintain the patterns of family life and work.

In the last scene, Kelsey had been sober for almost nine years and it had been a decade since her last felony. Kelsey is currently a successful cake decorator and able to support herself and a daughter. Deb is "recovering" from caregiving after the deaths of her brother and father; her marriage intact and her younger children actually flourishing, in spite of both Kelsey and her.

The Staff

Staff

Michael J. Mooney | *Editor*

Michael J. Mooney is the co-director of the annual Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, and a member of the conference advisory board. He is the author of *The Life and Legend of Chris Kyle*, and he contributes to ESPN the Magazine, Rolling Stone, Outside, SUCCESS, Texas Monthly, and Popular Mechanics. His stories have appeared in multiple editions of *The Best American Sports Writing* and *The Best American Crime Reporting*. He lives in Dallas with his wife, Tara.

Neil Foote | *Associate Editor*

Neil Foote, co-director of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, is currently a principal lecturer at UNT's Mayborn School of Journalism. He teaches classes in digital and social media for journalists, multimedia storytelling, business journalism, and media management. He also is a contributor to the textbook, *Race, Gender, Class, and Media: Studying Mass Communication and Multiculturalism* (Kendal Hunt Publisher, 2011). Foote has worked at The Miami Herald, The Washington Post, The Dallas Morning News, the Belo Corporation, the Tom Joyner Morning Show and ASNE. Foote is chairman of the National Kidney Foundation Serving North Texas, president of the National Black Public Relations Society, Inc., and a past board member of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Jo Ann Livingston | *Research Assistant*

Jo Ann Livingston is a writer/journalist whose career with Texas-based newspapers included 10 years with the Waxahachie Daily Light, where she was honored as the 2010 Star Reporter for Class A newspapers by the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors. A many times award winner at the local, regional and state level, she received her Master of Journalism degree in 2014 from the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas. She is currently enrolled as a doctoral student in UNT's Interdisciplinary Information Science program and works as a research assistant for the dean of the Mayborn School of Journalism.

Caitlen Meza | *Illustrator*

Caitlen Meza, University of North Texas alumna, graduated with her Bachelor's degree of Fine Arts in Studio in May of 2015. Since then she has joined the Mayborn School of Journalism as the Administrative Specialist, while continuing her craft through commissioned pieces and personal projects. She developed her personal technique of hand stitching images onto painted canvas while she earned her degree. In the past few years she exhibited the sewn pieces in the Fort Worth Community Art Center shared show titled "Light and Dark" as well as The Women's Museum at Fair Park at Texas Women's Caucus for Art mass show titled "Vignette."

Jim Dale | *Conference Manager*

Jim Dale is the marketing director for the Mayborn School of Journalism and also manager of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. Prior to joining the Mayborn, where he completed a Master of Journalism degree, Jim worked in the advertising, public relations and communications consulting fields for a wide range of Fortune 500 clients. Jim is also a freelance writer with articles published in numerous magazines, newspapers and online publications. He is a published author.

Jake Straka | *Design & Production*

Jake Straka is an alumnus of the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism and now works full time for the University of North Texas as a communications specialist. He splits his duties between the Mayborn School of Journalism and the Division of Institutional Equity and Diversity, handling the design and production of marketing materials as well as updating/managing the content on both of their websites.

"Words form ideas, ideas build into stories, and stories convey the meaning of our lives. The stories gathered each year in Ten Spurs are deeply powerful illustrations of the way we, as writers, build our words into stories that add something to the world around us. Ten Spurs tells us that the work we do matters."

— Skip Hollandsworth, American author, journalist, screenwriter and executive editor for Texas Monthly magazine

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