

## [The Write Place at the Write Time](#)

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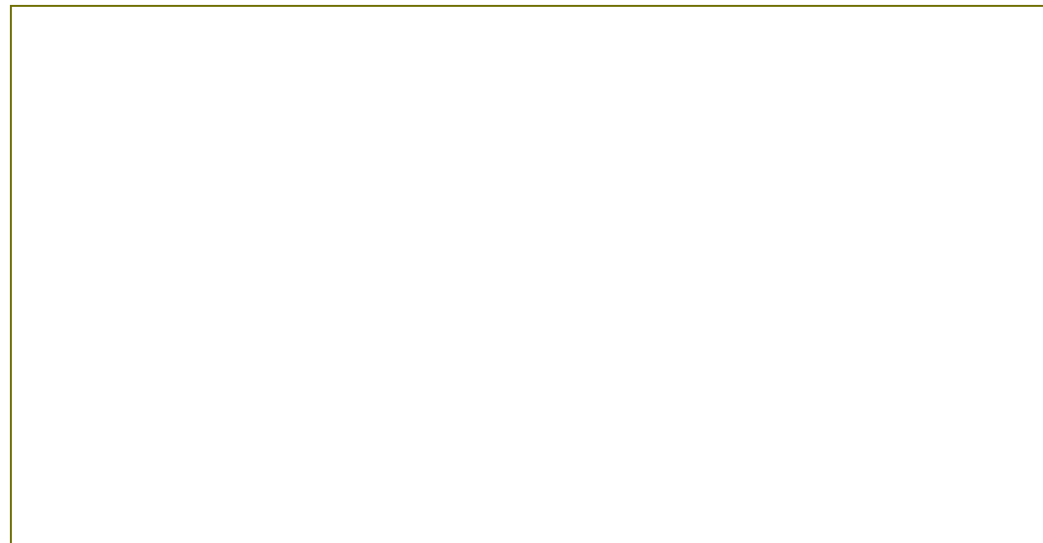
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Come in...and be captivated...

### "Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.





"Journey Markers" by Linda Bigness; <http://www.bignessart.com/>

About this image: *"In creating these works I sought to reveal cultural awareness and meaning as interpreted through the experience of seeing. The abstractness of the paintings invites the viewer to seek meaning within the surface. These abstract works embody the richness and tapestry of displaced cultures crossing borders and intertwining their lives into other lands. Abstraction of color and line embodies the whole rather than singling out one culture from another. By employing abstraction I was able to create a textile appearance with rich color and line to represent the psychological challenges that displaced peoples encounter when entering into unfamiliar surroundings. The textile appearance also represents the importance of clothing to cultural identity. By intermixing familiar symbolism through the calligraphic line drawn into the surfaces I strive to create a shared language that symbolizes the strength of these people to survive and continue their lives without losing their inherent culture."* —LB

## The Artist of Paprikash

by Patty Somlo

A few minutes before six o'clock, my mother pulled into a parking space, three over from the door. We had our windows rolled down because it was hot.

At exactly six, the Greyhound bus turned off Route 38. Next thing I knew, the bus rolled to a stop in front of the Mount Holly Diner's shiny silver front door.

The bus door opened and a woman resting a baby against her right hip got off. After that a black man stepped down. A young red-haired woman came out next.

We'd probably seen about thirty people get off before a fat white sandal and matching white ankle sock appeared on the top step. My grandmother emerged from the bus then, sideways, while she wrestled several large and wrinkled paper bags out the door.

Keeping her right hand on the railing, she clutched the shopping bag straps with her left, as she heaved down, pausing to catch her breath between every step. After successfully reaching the bottom, she steadied herself on the pavement, then turned and looked around. The moment she spotted my mother and me, my grandmother lifted her lips into her signature crooked smile, a centimeter short of a sneer.

She bent down and picked up her bags. My mother dashed over and snatched the bags out of her hands. I could see they contained cooking utensils, bottles and jars, and an assortment of pots and pans.

"Vat's tzis?" my grandmother asked, as she brushed her fingers against my faded jeans.

"What's what, Grandma?"

"Tzese pants. Vy are you vearing such tzings?"

"It's the style, Grandma."

A headache throbbed over my right eye.

“So tzin, she is, Jane. Ven did she get so tzin?”

While I had lost some weight, my grandmother hadn't changed a bit. Five feet tall and solid as a rock, she looked like the sort of woman a peasant farmer would be delighted to have as his wife. She had on a flowered housedress, with her white ankle socks and matching white chunky-heeled sandals.

Her fine white hair was pulled back off her face and twisted into a knot. Several wispy strands curled down toward her nose. Her olive-colored skin was dotted with liver spots. The tense set of her mouth caused her to look permanently angry. On the rare occasions that my grandmother smiled, she looked as if she was hiding a scandalous secret.

Studying her face, I was reminded of my grandmother's most striking characteristic. My grandmother had two different colored eyes. The left eye was milky blue and the right one, mud brown. This phenomenon had made me tremble as a child, when I looked at her, expecting to see two matching colored eyes.

From the moment of my grandmother's arrival that June evening, she put herself in charge. She cooked meals and cleaned, letting my mother know how dirty she'd found the house and what a low opinion she had of my mother's cooking.

My interactions with Grandma Somlo followed their familiar pattern.

“You look like a hobo,” she told me one evening. “Your vazer, he vorks hard so you don't have to go out looking like tzis.”

It wasn't only how I dressed that offended my grandmother. She took an instant dislike to my boyfriend Jeff, probably because he dressed much like me. His appearance was such an affront to my grandmother that she viewed it as a sign of bad character.

“Tze boy is rude,” my grandmother said one morning as I made coffee.

She let out a noisy sigh.

“What boy, Grandma?”

“Your boy.”

“You mean Jeff?”

“Vatever the name is.”

“Jeff’s not rude, Grandma. He’s very polite.”

“Tzat’s vat you tzink,” she said and shook her head. “Vit tzose boots. And tzat long hair.”

She had pushed her chair back from the kitchen table to make room to cross her legs. The small reading glasses she wore were perched halfway down her nose and she peered over them at me.

“And vere can you possibly go at tzat hour?”

She dropped her gaze down toward her hands and resumed mending her flowered housedress. In a low voice, as if talking to a friend who shared her dismay, she added, “So late. A girl your age. Out vit a boy like tzat. In tze middle of tze night.”

In addition to my social life, Grandma Somlo and I argued about food. I was careful as I could be about what I ate, because I wanted to stay thin. My grandmother kept trying to get me to eat her sour cream soup, calorie-clogged pastries and thick-sliced dark bread.

*You must eat*, my grandmother would say, holding a plate in front of me piled with inch thick bread slices.

*I am eating, Grandma*, I would argue back, taking bites of plain broiled chicken and salad dampened with low-cal dressing.

*You vill make yourself sick eating like tzat*, she warned.

My grandmother had long believed that, without her, our family would starve. Several times a month, she sent us cardboard boxes filled with home-baked goodies. The boxes sagged when we lifted them, their worn outer surfaces smothered in tape.

There were small round butter cookies with chocolate swirls, slightly hard and great for dipping in milk. There was a fruit-covered pastry with a criss-cross of soft dough on top I once saw her make in a long rolled log she sliced in half-inch thick rounds before baking. And once in a while she sent a hard prune-filled cookie that resembled Hamentash, except that it was smaller and round.

I knew very little about Grandma Somlo, except that she was Hungarian-born and at a young age had married my Romanian grandfather, Alex. At some point my grandparents immigrated to Cleveland, where my grandmother's sister Jewel opened a tavern catering to Hungarian immigrants. On hot afternoons during my family's annual visits, my sisters and I would sit at my Great Aunt Jewel's dark bar eating handfuls of salted peanuts and sipping tall Cokes, while my parents gathered around a table with the relatives, drinking beer and playing pinochle.

Grandpa Somlo was a photographer with a portrait studio on Detroit Avenue. When my grandfather retired, he and my grandmother moved to Miami. Not long after, he suffered a massive heart attack and died.

Like me, my mother wasn't eating much of Grandma Somlo's food. Nearly always on a diet, my mother survived on grapefruit and cottage cheese, dry toast and plain skinless chicken breasts.

In response to our lack of interest in the food she spent hours preparing each day, my grandmother started filling the freezer with foil-wrapped packets. One afternoon she took off her apron and put on a black felt hat. She unfolded a worn shopping bag from the collection she stowed under the sink and filled it with frozen foil-wrapped packets.

When the bag was full, my grandmother headed for the front door.

"Where are you going, Grandma?" I asked.

"Visiting," she said.

That night, I asked my mother about Grandma's visiting.

"She's been meeting women at the A&P," my mother said. "She talks about food and cooking with them. Then she goes over to their houses and gives them some of her frozen stuffed cabbage."

The moment Grandma Somlo arrived, we started praying that she would leave. The daily criticisms and assaults on the fragile life my mother, sister and I had stitched together while my military father was in Vietnam took a toll. She made us feel that we needed to sit down together for meals or spend time talking. My sister and I were accustomed to retreating to our rooms, while my mother holed up in the den to watch TV and smoke and drink.

Her visit stretched on through the hot, humid weeks of July into the sweat-soaked afternoons of August. She refused to let us know how long she planned to stay. None of us had the courage to ask.

At the end of August after coming home from eating pizza with Jeff, a wave of nausea struck. I made it to the bathroom just in time. Weak and dizzy, I practically crawled to my room. It didn't take me long to fall asleep.

When I woke up the next morning, my body ached and I felt almost too weak to sit up. I forced myself to walk downstairs, where I called the office of the migrant workers' program I was working for that summer and told them I was too sick to go in. Then I went back upstairs to my room and fell asleep.

The next time I woke up, my nightgown was drenched. I didn't know where I was. But then I noticed my grandmother's liver-spotted hand lying on the sheet.

"Tzere you are," she said.

I turned to see my grandmother sitting on a chair she must have brought from the dining room while I was asleep.

"A little better, I tzink. No?"

She lifted her hand to my forehead. Her fingers felt cold.

"How long have I been here?"

"You slept all day and all night. You had a fever."

She stopped talking and studied my face.

“I tzink you vill live.”

“I don’t remember a thing. I called into work and that’s the last thing I remember.”

“You vere delirious for a while. Talking, talking to somevone. You had a temperature of 103.”

“When was that?”

“All tzrough tze night.”

“You were here all night?”

“Of course,” she said and smiled.

“Have you gotten any sleep, Grandma?”

“No, no. How could I sleep ven my favorite grandchild vas so sick?”

She dipped a washcloth into a bowl filled with water and wiped the sweat off my face and neck. Then she ran the washcloth down my arms and hands, caressing each one of my fingers.

A week later, my grandmother announced that she would be baking her own birthday cake. If left to my mother and me, she knew the cake would come straight from a box. It was, she informed us, her seventieth birthday. For such an occasion, a cake from a mix wouldn’t do.

The morning of her birthday, I heard my grandmother in the kitchen even before her accustomed waking at six o’clock. When I could no longer sleep, I went into the kitchen for coffee.

“You’re up so early this morning, Grandma.”

“I had to get the dumplings started so I could vork on the cake. You and your mother must eat.”

She smiled. But instead of her usual sneer-grin, Grandma looked as if she might be about to cry.



“I used to bake tziis cake for your vazer ven he vas small. Laurent, your vazer, he loved to eat. Always skinny, no matter how much I fed him.”

“Why did you call my father Laurent?” My father’s name was Lawrence but most people called him Larry.

“Laurent is your vazer’s name. Tzat is vat your grandvazer and I named him.”

She sighed and wiped her hands on her apron.

“He wanted to be American. He vas ashamed of being Hungarian. So, he changed his name. Larry. Can you imagine? He had a lovely name. Laurent. Now he chooses such an ugly one.”

I sat down at the table to drink my coffee. My grandmother mixed the ingredients for the dumplings in a bright yellow bowl, then slapped the ball of dough onto a strip of waxed paper dusted with flour. Leaning down, she pressed the rolling pin back and forth, until the dough stretched into a slender ribbon that fell over the table’s edge. Then she snipped pieces of dough with a pair of small black scissors and shaped it into bite-sized cylinders.

I told Grandma to give me a small piece of chicken and not too many dumplings, since I wanted to save room for cake. I hadn’t eaten paprikash for years. Chicken paprikash was my father’s favorite dish, and for this reason my mother had been forced to learn to make it. She didn’t have trouble with the stewed chicken or the sauce, but the dumplings were another matter. For several years we sawed our way through my mother’s hard, rubbery dumplings, until the memorable evening she got it right. I remember the feeling of biting into a dumpling and finding it chewy and light.

Once my mother perfected the dumplings, chicken paprikash became my favorite dish. Made with chicken parts stewed in their skins until the meat pulled easily from the bone, and dumplings, all smothered in a thick sauce, the chicken paprikash (*csirke paprikás* in Hungarian) was heavenly to eat and also to look at. Blending sour cream, finely chopped onions and a generous amount of sweet Hungarian paprika, the sauce was a pale orange shade. The texture of the dish was nothing short of comforting.

Because my grandmother's seventieth birthday was a special occasion, my mother had set the dining room table with the Noritake china and the sterling. When we finished the paprikash, I cleared off the dishes and Grandma brought out the cake.

We sang "Happy Birthday" and when we finished my grandmother cut a slice of cake and passed it to me. Then she cut several more for my mother, my sister and herself.

"What's in the cake, Grandma?" I asked.

"It has a dozen eggs," she said, "and sour cream."

I waited for her to finish telling me the rest of the ingredients. But she stared at me with her milky blue eye and the mud brown one and refused to say another word.

I looked at the slice of cake on my plate. Grandma had barely scratched the surface. Before me sat a delicacy with twelve or fourteen of the thinnest layers of cake, separated by fillings of fruit, jam, nuts and cream. After studying the cake I took a bite. I indulged myself even more by savoring the flavor a moment before regretfully letting it go.

A week after my grandmother's birthday we drove her to the Mt. Holly Diner to catch the Greyhound bus. She was headed for Cleveland to visit her only daughter, Midgie. We watched her get on the bus with her bags. All summer my mother and I had wished that my grandmother would leave. Now that she was going, I was surprised to see how sad I felt.

As the bus pulled away my mother lit a cigarette, breathed in and slowly blew out a line of smoke.

"Well, she's gone," my mother said.

Then she started the car and headed home.

Two weeks later, Aunt Midgie called.

"Stomach cancer," Aunt Midgie told my mother over the phone.

After my mother hung up, I asked her why Grandma Somlo hadn't told us.

“She didn’t know,” my mother said. “She found out the day before she died. It was the first time she’d gone to a doctor. The first time in her life.”

My father divorced my mother a few months after Grandma Somlo died. As soon as the divorce was final, my father married a woman named Val, who had been the chief flight nurse in his med-evac squadron. They soon retired from the Air Force and settled into a large Spanish-style house in San Antonio.

The first time I visited my father in San Antonio I noticed that he had grown older, looking much more now like his mom. His olive skin was freckled and liver-spotted. His smile reminded me of her smile.

The night before I was scheduled to leave, my father took us to a new restaurant downtown specializing in Hungarian cuisine. I took a sip of the bitter red Hungarian and then indulged in my first bite of paprikash.

“Do you remember when your grandmother used to make this?” my father asked. “She would get up at five o’clock in the morning to make the dumplings. Rolling the dough out on the table. Snipping the dough off with her scissors.”

That night my father gave me a picture of Grandma and Grandpa Somlo, taken on their wedding day. Originally black and white, the photograph had been hand colored.

I studied the face of the young blond girl in the photograph, trying to find my grandmother there. That’s when I noticed. The smile that was barely there. The grin edging perilously close to a sneer.

I looked more closely at the eyes. Familiar, yes. Certainly my grandmother’s eyes. But there was one important difference.

The eyes of the girl in the photograph had been colored the same shade of blue. Both eyes looked exactly alike.

They were that shade of blue you see when you come upon a small bird’s egg and place it gently in your hand. The sun shines down on that achingly beautiful blue shell and suddenly spills an unnatural brightness all over it.

Bio- Patty Somlo has received four Pushcart Prize nominations and has been nominated

for storySouth's Million Writers Award. Her essay, "If We Took a Deep Breath," was selected as a Notable Essay of 2013 for *Best American Essays 2014*. Author of *From Here to There and Other Stories*, her second book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, is forthcoming from Cherry Castle Publishing ([cherrycastlepublishing.com](http://cherrycastlepublishing.com)) in January 2017. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including the *Los Angeles Review*, the *Santa Clara Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Guernica*, *The Flagler Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *WomenArts Quarterly*, among others, and in sixteen anthologies.

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## Desert Storm

by Sara Etgen-Baker

I glanced in the side view mirror of the U-Haul truck. One mile forward, one more, and then another. With each mile forward everything familiar slipped further and further away. The lush, tree-covered green hills of North Texas slowly gave way to the parched, bland Permian Basin with its sage brush and low-lying mesquite trees. By late afternoon, absolutely nothing was in front of us except miles of dry, hot Chihuahan Desert. Flat was the land—yellow, ochre, and brown.

By dusk a gnawing wind stirred across the desert uprooting tumbleweeds and forming a huge wall of dust. "Driving through this wind and dust is impossible!" Bill gripped the steering wheel. "Let's stop for dinner."

So, we exited the interstate and stopped at Chuy's—an old trailer converted to a diner. Once inside, I heard the sand patter like rain against the trailer's metal walls and brush across the windowpanes. Silt accumulated beneath the door and on the window ledges. I breathed in and choked. The desert, like my anger and resentment, tasted bitter and brown.

I looked outside; the only thing visible between the diner and the interstate was a battered barrel cactus, a couple of yucca plants, some cinder block houses, and a ramshackle motel aptly named The Desert View Motel. Bound for El Paso, eighteen-wheelers roared down Interstate 10 leaving clouds of dust in the dry desert air. The hot wind carried the dust across the parking lot of the diner and deeper into town where all the dirt roads seemed to lead nowhere in particular.

“You and your husband aren’t from around here are ya?” The waitress handed me a menu.

“No, we’re not.” I frowned and sipped on my water.

“Never seen a haboob, have ya?”

“A what?”

“A haboob—it’s that huge wall of dust you’ve been driving through.”

“No, I’ve never seen one.” I glanced out the window. “So, what causes a haboob?”

“Locals say a haboob happens when the desert is angry with itself. When the anger persists, heat grows fueling the winds that stir up the dust. Eventually, though, cool winds replace the hot air and bring the desert back into balance.”

“Sounds like a myth to me.” I wiped the dust off my hands and opened the menu. “All I know is that I feel gritty and dirty.”

“Then you’ll be needin’ a warm shower and clean bed. You can get a 30 percent discount over at the Desert View Motel. When ya check in, just show Carlos your dinner receipt. He’ll fix ya right up.”

“Um, I don’t know.” I cleared my throat and glanced over at Bill. “Isn’t there a LaQuinta or Holiday Inn nearby?”

“Nope. The closest hotel is in El Paso, 35 miles down the interstate. Trust me. It’s not safe to drive down the interstate during a haboob.”

So after dinner, Bill and I heeded our waitress’ advice and checked into the Desert View Motel. Although our room was cramped, it was clean—clean that is until we turned on the air conditioner. Trapped sand inside the air conditioner flew across the room; and a layer of the grit landed all over our sheets and pillowcases. I showered and fell into bed; but even as tired as I was, the sandy sheets irritated me. So, I lay awake most of the night and stared at the ceiling trying to stop the anger and turbulence that swirled through my mind.

Why was I so angry? After all, Bill's wasn't to blame for being laid off. He hadn't been able to find a coaching job in Dallas, but was moving to this colorless, lifeless, god-forsaken desert the right place? I got up and paced around the dark room. I wanted Bill to be fulfilled, but what about me? Was leaving behind my family, friends, and dream job a mistake? I opened the blinds, pulled back the curtain, and stared out the window at the inky darkness freckled by thousands of tiny stars. The occasional hoot of a great horned owl and the chirping of tree frogs were the only sounds permeating the empty silence of the Chihuahan night. Was it even possible for me to thrive in this barren land? But what about my willingness to embrace something new? Where was my spirit of adventure? I closed the venetian blinds; plopped down on the edge of the bed; and leaned back finally falling asleep.

I woke early the next morning—the sun sparkled off the dusty venetian blinds and cast a warm glow across the room. Curious, I peeked through the blinds; the sky was now abundantly clear. The sun glistened across the sand and beckoned me outside. So, I slipped into my running clothes and jogged across the motel parking lot and onto the sandy land in front of me. As I ran through the desert, my feet sank in the soft, cushiony deep sand. My ankles felt weak, and I teetered from side to side unable to keep my balance, eventually falling face forward in the gritty sand.

“Damn you, desert! I hate you!” I spit out my resentment—tasting the bitter, ochre-colored sand on my tongue. I looked up and saw a cactus with one lone, yellow flower. How could anything bloom here? Something rustled behind me. I turned around and sat up. A short distance from me a roadrunner dashed across the desert. Other than in cartoons, I'd never seen a roadrunner. How amazing!

“Miss! Are you alright?” asked a genial voice behind me; I turned back around and found a bronze-faced teenage boy staring down at me. “Here. Let me give you a hand up.” He pulled me up, and I dusted the sand off my legs and arms. “If you're gonna run in the desert, pick up your feet and look ahead; otherwise you'll continue to lose your balance and fall.”

“Thanks for the tip.” I bent over and retrieved my sunglasses.

“You might want to get different running shoes—ones that balance your body and support your ankles. By the way, my name's Miguel.”

“Nice to meet you, Miguel.”

“I run pretty fast, but you’re welcome to follow me if you like.” Miguel restarted his stopwatch. “Oh, one more thing. Never eat the sand!”

Miguel chuckled then sprang forward on his toes and sprinted across the desert; and for a short while, I followed Miguel’s graceful form, mimicking his style as he ran through the open Chihuahan Desert. Ultimately, I lost sight of Miguel but continued running alone until I found a place to turn around. I stopped momentarily and noticed that a gentle, cool breeze had replaced yesterday’s gnawing winds.

As the breeze brushed across my face, I removed my sunglasses and closed my eyes. I inhaled, filled my lungs, and then exhaled. And there in the barren stillness, a space opened up inside me that hadn’t been accessible for weeks. When I touched upon it, I pressed upon a tender spot—a bruise, a discomfort that was both welcome and oddly necessary.

I slowly opened my eyes, and for a moment the sun blinded me. I shielded my eyes and looked far off in the distance. The aridity had somehow freed the light and unleashed the desert’s grandeur. The sand dunes in front of me took on sunlight and pulse. No, the earth here wasn’t cloaked in forest, nor draped in pastoral, peaceful green. Instead, the desert donned a simple, comfortable, khaki-colored robe. I clutched it close to my heart, resumed my run, and retraced my steps back to my motel room.

“Bill, Bill!” I threw open the motel door. “Hurry! Come outside. It’s beautiful out here. The sky is a gorgeous, intense blue color.” I stood in the doorway; and using my fingers, I traced the outlines of the wavy sand dunes on the horizon. “I’m sorry, Bill, it’s just...” I tried to stamp down the rush of emotion. “I think we’re in a desert.”

“Cactuses and tumbleweeds?” He pulled me towards his side.

“No, just lots of sand. It’s kind of orangish-gold with hints of pink, and I can see tiny clouds of it floating above the ground, like...like smoke.”

“Piles up in lots of hills?”

“Yes, exactly! And it’s beautiful.” I hugged him. “And I think I’m gonna like living here.”

Bio- Sara's love for words began when, as a young girl, her mother read the dictionary to her every night. A teacher's unexpected whisper, "You've got writing talent," ignited her writing desire. Although Sara ignored that whisper and pursued a different career, she eventually re-discovered her inner writer and began writing. Some of her manuscripts have been published in anthologies and magazines including *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Guideposts*, *Wisdom Has A Voice*, and *Times They Were A Changing: Women Remember the 60s & 70s*. She's currently working on her first novel, *Dillehay Crossing*. When not writing, she enjoys spending her time with her husband, Bill.



Photo for "Epic, Brah!"; image credit Mark Barkawitz

## Epic, Brah!

by Mark Barkawitz

The sound of waves crashing outside the open, second-story windows facing the ocean woke me. My wife—sleeping peacefully next to me in bed—and I were staying at her parents' condo in South Oceanside, directly



above the beach below. The waves sounded big. Because I'd checked Surflife.com to look for waves before we'd left home yesterday, I knew they were coming. I sighed quietly in the dark. Not too big, I hope. After all, I wasn't a kid anymore. Big waves were dangerous. (A local body-surfer had broken his neck and died on the beach right out front during a big swell a few years ago.) I tried to get back to sleep but I was anxious about tomorrow. I knew I would be. It was always like this with me—wanting to ride the bigger waves but fearing them, too. Paddling-out tomorrow was going to be tough. So I needed a good night's sleep. But instead, I couldn't help thinking back to last October and another restless night here...

I'd spent the week alone at my in-laws' condo on a private beach above the public beach, doing some repair work and painting, surfing The Rock daily—the beach break in front of the condo so named after the only natural, mostly-submerged (depending on the tide), rock formation in the water in South Oceanside. But the waves had been meagerly-small all week. The day before I was to leave, I'd walked down the hill to the Buccaneer Café—a permanently-placed, cooking hut at Buccaneer Park with a few, umbrella-covered picnic tables on its patio—serving breakfast and lunch across Pacific Street from the public beach. Because it was mid-week and past peak tourist season, there were only a few customers ahead of me, who looked to be mostly locals. Behind the counter, Linda—fortyish, tanned, with braided, blonde pigtails and her usual, girlish smile—took my order for a stack of pancakes. A graying surfer-dude cooked on the grill behind her. She handed me my change and asked:

“You hear about the waves coming tomorrow?”

I hadn't. There was no Wi-Fi connection at the condo, so I'd left my laptop at home, glad to be away from the e-mails and internet for a few days anyway. (And my cellphone wasn't *smart*.) I stuffed a couple bucks into the tip jar on the counter.

“Supposed to be pretty big.”

“Just my luck—I have to leave tomorrow.”

She shrugged. “Too bad.”

I stood out front, waiting for my order, watching behind my Ray-Bans across Pacific Street at boogie-boarders playing in the little waves that lapped the shoreline. Purposely, I overheard two, twenty-something surfer-types on the patio, likewise awaiting their orders, wearing sunglasses, trunks, and tees. The guy in the over-sized cap educated both his dread-locked buddy and yours truly about the approaching swell from a tropical storm and the predicted, warm, Santa Ana winds.

“Overhead waves with offshore wind.” The guy whose cap tucked-in the tops of his ears concluded: “Could be *epic*, Brah!”

His dread-locked buddy smiled and nodded. “Outstanding.”

The evening newscast confirmed it and I awoke later that night, too, to the sound of waves pounding the beach—one after another after another—outside the open windows. It sounded big! I could barely get back to sleep, anxiously anticipating. When I woke just after daybreak, it was overcast from the storm and there they were: six-to-eight foot, barrel-shaped waves, feathering at the top from a light-offshore wind, and then pitching forward like the opening—then quickly closing—mouth of a hungry sea monster. Peeling-off at break-neck speed, the overhead waves looked like freakin’ Pipeline!

Yet as I sipped black coffee and watched from the living room out of the open, sliding glass door—like a big-screen TV—surfers one-third-to-half my age failed to make it out; the waves were too fast and too consistent, pounding all who tried. (Unlike a point break or reef break, there was no paddling *around* the waves at a beach break. You had to paddle directly *through* them.) And if those younger guys couldn't paddle-out, there was certainly no way I could either. *Don't even try it, Mark! Remember your surgically-repaired spine!* (A remnant from my previous bout with incurable blood and bone cancer—but that's another story—which I had somehow managed to survive. Thank God and my doctors, too!) The physical consequences of which had turned me into a small-wave specialist nowadays—that, and my age. So I got dressed and walked down the hill to the Buccaneer Café.

Linda smiled. “I see you’re still here.”

“Only half-day. Then I have to head back home.”

"You gonna go for it?" she asked, staring past me across Pacific Street at the overhead breakers, pounding from way outside all the way to the beach.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Maybe?"

I ordered, then walked over to the pedestrian bridge, where a dozen, local surfers stood watching the only two guys who had somehow made it out all morning—a knee-boarder and a surfer on a gun (big wave board). Each dropped down the steep face of an overhead wave, turning hard at its bottom, then racing across its face, only to be swallowed up by the lightning-fast tubes, disappearing, then popping up behind like corks in the water, only to get pounded by the next, big waves in the set and pushed back towards shore. We *ooed* and *ahhed* their courageous attempts, but each was one-and-done—unable to get back outside through the successive eight-footers—making the consensus on the bridge that it was crazy to even *try* paddling-out at the beach breaks of South Oceanside that morning. I felt somewhat relieved by the group sentiment; the pressure was off.

So I got my Buc Muff—a scrambled egg and bacon-filled English muffin (yum!)—returned to the condo, ate, and watched others' unsuccessful attempts to paddle-out. There was a strong, ocean drift towards and past The Rock, which was mostly-submerged, just north of the condo. I strapped my surfboard to the roof racks on my truck, then finished packing and cleaning-up, reminding myself all the while: *Don't be stupid; you're not a kid anymore; you could drown out there! And if one of those eight-footers were to break on your back...* But the clouds broke, the tide changed, and the waves became slightly-less consistent. Two surfers made it outside. Then another. *Go home, Mark! Don't act crazy! Or am I just being chicken?*—my usual, interior discourse when the waves were big and challenging.

Twenty minutes later, the sun shined in a bright-blue sky and I stood in front of the condo in the shore break in my shorty wetsuit, waxed surfboard under my arm—crazy or not—waiting for a break in the waves so I could *try* to paddle-out. A twenty-something belly-boarder stood nearby, likewise waiting.

"Ready to get your butt kicked?" I laughingly posed.

"No way around it," he agreed. "Good luck, Brah." We bumped fists. "See ya' out there."

We both pushed through the inside breakers, waited and waited until there was a momentary lull in the outside sets of waves, then both started paddling like maniacs through the impact zone—where the bigger waves crashed down—barely making it over the tops of cresting six-footers. But the surf gods were kind—the lull held—and we both made it to the outside without getting crushed by in-coming waves! Thankfully, I sat on my board, breathing deeply, relieved, getting my wind back. A big set rolled in from outside. I paddled for the first wave and attempted to drop-in, only to back off at the last instant—fearing for my life as I peered down from the top of the eight-foot wall of water—almost getting sucked head-first over-the-falls with the breaking, booming wave. I turned around quickly and paddled barely over the next few waves in the set, back outside next to the belly-boarder.

"You get that wave?" he asked.

"Naw. Chickened-out at the top. Would've crushed me anyway." I sort of laughed.

He nodded.

But inwardly, I berated myself. *Chicken isn't going to work out here, Mark!* Aggressively was the only way to successfully surf these waves.

Another set started to roll in. We both paddled into position.

"You takin' it?" my belly-board buddy asked, his eyes on the approaching wave.

"Yeah." So I turned, took a few, hard paddles, and the wave lifted my surfboard to its peak. I jumped to my feet as my board dropped down the steep face of the developing eight-footer, then cranked a hard, backside turn at the wave's bottom, accelerating, moving forward on my board, crouching down for more speed, as the wave feathered and pitched over my head. I was inside the barrel-shaped tube, racing across the face of the breaking wave just ahead of its breaking curl, when it suddenly appeared

directly ahead of me as the wave sucked-up the water covering the only natural, rock formation in the impact zone—The Rock—in all of South Oceanside!

"Whoa!"

I stood out of my crouch and turned hard out of the tubing barrel, directly towards shore. The overhead wave crashed down from behind, knocking me to my belly on my board. As I clung to the surfboard's rails, the enveloping whitewater pushed me safely away from the jutting rocks and I rode the powerful soup all the way in on my belly, then jumped off in shallow water. Standing in the shore break, winded, I looked back at the powerful, breaking waves outside, each peeling off perfectly—*epic, Brah!*—as if from an over-sized assembly line. But I decided instead to heed the ocean's warning. So maybe I wasn't crazy, after all? I took a deep breath, laughed, pounded my heart twice, and raised a peace sign to the heavens.

I'd stood up to my fears. No need to press the issue. (My doctors would likely concur.) I took a quick, cold shower outside the condo on the private beach, then changed into some dry shorts, and again strapped my board to the roof racks on my truck. Admittedly, I had a grin on my face—repeatedly replaying my spine-tingling, rock-dodging, one-and-done ride—most of the two-hour drive home...

I lay next to my silently-sleeping wife in bed in the condo, where the breaking waves outside continued to boom in the dark night, conjuring more impending, liquid scenarios. And like some pensive protagonist from a Hemingway tale—who'd faced his fears, only to be challenged again—I eventually drifted-off to an uneasy sleep.

Bio- Mark Barkawitz has earned local and national awards for his fiction, poetry, essay, and screenwriting. His work has appeared in newspapers, magazines, literary journals & anthologies, 'zines, and on dozens of websites. He has IMDb feature film credits as screenwriter, actor, & associate producer (Mark Bark) for *Turn of the Blade* (NorthStar Ent.) and supporting actor in *The Killing Time* (New World Pictures). He's taught creative writing classes, coached a championship track team of student-athletes, and ran the 2001 L.A. Marathon. He lives with his wife, two dogs, and has two grown children in Pasadena, CA. His new book *29 Again & Other Cancer-Fighting Stories* is due to be published this fall by Woof Books available in both print and e-book @ Amazon.com and other outlets.

[www.markbark.org](http://www.markbark.org)

## My Explosive Honeymoon

by Susan P. Blevins

My husband and I eventually went on our honeymoon a year and a half after we were married. Merrill never did anything in a hurry. He was from Kentucky and had a laid back southern manner, so it was not surprising.

He decided we would go by ship to Egypt, and thence to Lebanon. We were living in Rome at the time, so on 24th September, 1973, we set sail from Genova on the *M.N. Esperia*, bound for Alexandria, with a short visit to Marseilles en route. We stayed in Alexandria a few days and then drove to Cairo, where we did all the usual sightseeing. I felt instantly at home there, and loved the noise and the smells, the camels, the donkeys with their loaded trays of flat bread, and the historic Nile. We were staying at the recently opened high rise Sheraton, with commanding views in all directions.

On 6th October, all hell broke loose, as Egypt launched a full-scale attack on Israel on the holiest day of the year for the Jews, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in retaliation for their defeat in 1967. From one moment to the next, all our plans changed. We could no longer go down the Nile on the Hilton boat, as we had planned and paid for, because all Nile travel was considered too dangerous and suspended. Instead we went down to Luxor by train, following the river, with only dim blue lights permitted in our sleeper compartment so that we would not be visible to planes flying overhead. The whole night I kept a watchful eye on the cockroaches which crawled like an invading army over the walls of our compartment. In Luxor we were able to go around the magnificent temples, and in the Valley of Kings we were alone, save for a couple of German tourists.

From Luxor we went south to Aswan, a magical town on the Nile, where I rode in a felucca for the first time at sunset, admiring the hieroglyphs carved into the black basalt rocks of Elephantine Island, returning to the Old Cataract Hotel, where we were staying, in time for cocktails. An Agatha Christie moment. The High Dam at Aswan was off limits to civilian traffic, but we did manage to see the Abu Simbel temples, saved and relocated when Lake Nasser was formed behind the dam.

By this time the war between Egypt and Israel had escalated, and we returned on the “roach express” back to Cairo and the Sheraton, and studied our options. Our original plan had been to catch the next Italian ship of the same line going from Alexandria up the coast to Beirut, but all such traffic had been cancelled. The airport in Cairo was closed. We were stranded.

Merrill was Chief of Protocol of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations when I married him, but prior to that he had been a career diplomat with the US State Department. Accordingly, we went to the US embassy and he presented his card, which he did whenever we traveled abroad. We were ushered in to speak to the ambassador, and to our surprise, my husband was summarily called back into active duty, and told he was being put in charge of the evacuation of all American citizens currently in Egypt.

We went back to the hotel with lists of names, and organized ourselves. From the top floor of the hotel we watched the Israeli Air Force jets bomb Cairo airport, and via the ticker tape machine in the hotel, we followed the progress of the Israeli Defense Force towards Cairo. By this time Israel had the upper hand and the Egyptians were in retreat. I recall seeing a photograph in the newspaper from this time of a pile of boots removed in haste by Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai, the better to run away from the approaching Israeli tanks.

Each night for three or four nights in a row, my husband was in close contact with the US embassy, and all the Americans assembled in the lobby of the Sheraton, awaiting the signal to get into buses that would take us to Alexandria, and to a ship that the US government had chartered from Greece for its citizens. We waited and we waited, but it was too unsafe to travel because Israeli jets were bombing the bridges across the Nile delta.

Finally, on about the fourth night of waiting in all readiness, my husband got the green light, and the convoy of around fifteen buses roared up to the hotel. We all gathered our belongings, boarded the buses and departed in haste. The driver knew the road well, which was fortunate, because he dared not use his headlights and we could hear the bombing not too far distant.

We arrived at Alexandria and drove straight to the port, where we were deposited to await the arrival of the *M.S. Knosos*. It was not in port, because

for safety, it had waited outside territorial waters until the group was assembled on the dock. When it received word that we were waiting for it, it steamed into port at full speed. It only had a skeleton crew on board to run the ship, so we had to haul our luggage aboard ourselves. I should add at this point that I had accumulated seventeen pieces of luggage. Assuming we would be continuing to Beirut and thence back to Italy by ship, I had bought some large and heavy pieces of copper ware.

After so many sleepless nights, and hauling our luggage on board, I was exhausted. The Captain told us that once we were outside territorial waters we could help ourselves to food and wine in the hold, and prepare our own food in the ship's galley. This helped render the motley group even more jovial and cooperative, and our evacuation turned into one long party. Later, my husband and I were fortunate enough to have a cabin assigned to us, though most people slept out on deck. Until we were out of port, however, we just had to wait.

As we prepared to steam out of Alexandria, my exhaustion overtook me, and putting together three hard chairs in the cafeteria, I told everyone I was going to sleep and I didn't care if we were blown up. We sailed out of the harbor to the sound of loud explosions, as depth charges were cast over the sides to deter any intrepid frogmen who might have come to attach limpet mines to our hull. A shipload of Americans would have made a prime target for terrorist groups to blow up.

Our honeymoon may have been delayed, but it definitely went out *with a bang, not a whimper*.

Bio- Susan P. Blevins, an ex-pat Brit, lived in Italy for twenty-six years, traveled the world extensively, and has now settled in Houston, Texas, where she is enjoying writing stories based on her travels and adventures. She had a weekly column on food in a European newspaper while living in Rome, and has published various articles on gardens and gardening when she lived in northern New Mexico, before moving to Houston. Her passions are classical music, gardening, nature, animals (cats in particular), reading and of course, writing. She has written a journal since she was about nine.

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The Mirror

by Cheryl Somers Aubin



My face changes, softens. My eyes soften, too, taking on different hues. I see not just my face but sense the other woman who has gazed into this mirror.

I imagine my Great Aunt Virginia “Jenny” looking in this mirror and removing her hat pins. She’s smiling her crooked smile. A new bride, she is shy and nervous and so in love. She removes the hat as she sees her husband’s reflection in the mirror entering the room with his arms wide open to embrace her.

This same mirror will capture her face filled with joy and apprehension as she stokes her large belly and awaits the birth of her first child. A daughter. And later she holds that blond-haired girl in her arms and stares at their reflection in the mirror. There are many kisses for the baby girl. There is such joy watching her grow. She is laughing and happy and walking all over the place to explore the world around her.

Right up until the day she becomes ill.

Jenny will look once again at her reflection and see a woman in a black veil with empty eyes. Her knees will buckle as she grabs the edge of the dresser. She will wonder how she can go on, wonder why God has cursed her so, as she prepares to bury her daughter. Three years later Jenny, with a cautious smile, looks into this mirror and gives thanks—another baby on the way. Placing a hand on her growing belly she feels an awakening, a blossoming in her heart. Like the sweetheart roses in the garden she and Jack tend in their backyard.

A year passes but her baby boy, George Armand, does not develop. He cannot hold his head up, cannot crawl, cannot truly engage with her. Jenny’s days and nights are filled with the deepest fear for her child.

More time will pass before Jenny will learn of the severe damage suffered by her son during his forceps delivery. She goes to her mirror and glares into it asking, “Why? Why? Why?” She braces herself on the bureau in front of her. “I will not survive this,” she whispers to herself. She will not know that her son will spend the rest of his life bed-ridden, only able to make a few sounds, and live at home under her care until he is 31, when he will die of pneumonia.

But for now, she hears the baby moan, and knows that she needs to go to him. This is her son. She will bring her baby to the mirror and sing to him and give him kisses and whisper in his ear that she loves him.

As the years pass, she manages to go on. She cares for her son. She looks after her husband. Jack and Jenny start a restaurant, but it fails during the depression and they lose their home. Jack finds work in the dining cars on the Southern Pacific railroad. Eventually they are able to buy their own home and live there for the rest of their lives. Her sister adopts a beautiful baby girl and Jenny loves her, too, looking after Nancy often, singing to her, and watching her grow.

Every time Jenny looks in this mirror there is a shadow of sadness behind her eyes, but also strength.

When I was born, the first daughter of Nancy, my great aunt was immediately taken with me. A blond, curly-haired baby girl, I reminded her of her lost daughter. During visits in my younger years, Jenny always pulled me to her tightly, hardly taking her eyes off me. The day my Great Aunt Jenny died, the watch she gave me stopped working.

In her last days, Jenny will look into this mirror and see the lines etched deep in her face. And yet, even with all her losses, she has known happiness, too. A marriage that lasted for 50 years. A great sense of humor and a love of travel. And, she had two babies, two babies that she felt grow and move inside her and she held them and loved them while she could.

So, I will look into this mirror and stand taller. I will embrace the joy in my own life, and keep perspective on the worries I have about my own child. I will pick up my son and bring him to this mirror. He will make his baby cooing sounds and reach out for our reflection. And I will see in my own eyes a new strength. And Jenny, I know, will be smiling.

Bio- Cheryl Somers Aubin has been writing and publishing for 25 years, and her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Foundation Magazine* and other newspapers, magazines, and online journals. She has a Master of Arts degree in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. Cheryl teaches memoir writing and is a featured speaker at personal history writing symposia, writing conferences, book festivals, and workshops.

Her first book, *The Survivor Tree: Inspired by a True Story*, is available at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum and online at Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

## Faraway Encounter

by Mi West

The curious gaze explores me; looks me straight in the eye. We're just a step from each other for an infinite moment. This is neither 80 degrees north, nor a virgin forest, nor the foothills of a glacier. It's a short trip to a Scandinavian capital, and I've just taken a plunge in a suburb bay.

The water's clear, no longer icy, and bottom rubbish is visible: an old muddy horseshoe, a skull, a worn children's shoe with neither laces nor any common denominator to tie all that junk together. On land, I saw butterflies, and a viper; they're tied together by nature.

The gazing cub can't take the eyes off me. It's a fox. We're breathing calmly without stepping closer. Neither of us is shy. It's cute out of this world; a disarming gaze letting time take timeout.

A step from us, ants are rushing, waves lapping, ducklings bobbing, fish jumping, dragonflies droning, a reed swaying.

A mile from us, students are reading, discussing, laughing, flirting. Programmers thinking, testing, cussing, bug-fixing. Bank clerks authorizing, transferring, logging off. Pilots flap-setting, turning, descending. Subway drivers closing doors, accelerating, taking crowds across the city. Businesspeople calculating, deal-closing, hoping for black figures. We're just gazing, enthralled; a few steps into a faraway world.

I wish cubs could talk. The black eyes speak a tacit forest language; stillness is talking in forest thoughts. I've no idea for how long we've been standing here. There's always enough time for just being.

A white yacht and a sailboat ply by, slowly. A cyclist spins up a bumpy path beneath the trees. A spider climbs up my shoe. Soon, I'll be rushing down the escalator and into the subway train, exploring a sunlit city from its sewer side. There's never enough time to be timely.

The cub keeps looking me straight in the face, full of confidence. We embody contrast. Four-legged worlds, and two-legged. Bare survival, and abundance. A breathtaking stillness further North, and swarming crowds of people further South. Kissing in white June nights, and cussing in dark December afternoons, a pianissimo in major, and a forte in minor. Without contrast, the chords along the journey of my life would fade away unheard.

Bio- Music reverberated every day in a homeful of books while Mi grew up in an artist family, hence some inclination for sounds and music patterns when he writes. A father of two, he now lives in Scandinavia among humans, wild animals, glassy lakes, gems of language innovation such as "ungoogleable," and addictive ski trails that match his current slide into slipstream. His thinking is shaped by decades of yoga and zen, which comes in handy in both writing and skiing.

His prose has appeared online in *Paper Tape Mag*, the EEEL, BWG Writers Roundtable, and the *Release Magazine*. He has honorable mentions from the 2012 Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition and the 10th WriterAdvice Flash Prose Contest (2015), was among the five finalists in the Tethered by Letters 2014 Flash Fiction Literary Competition, and is at the moment among the ten Fiction Finalists in the 2015 Tiferet Writing Contest.

When neither meditating nor writing, he is seeking agent representation for a completed novel.

[www.blogger.com/profile/12819779820904464905](http://www.blogger.com/profile/12819779820904464905)

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