

## *The Write Place At the Write Time*

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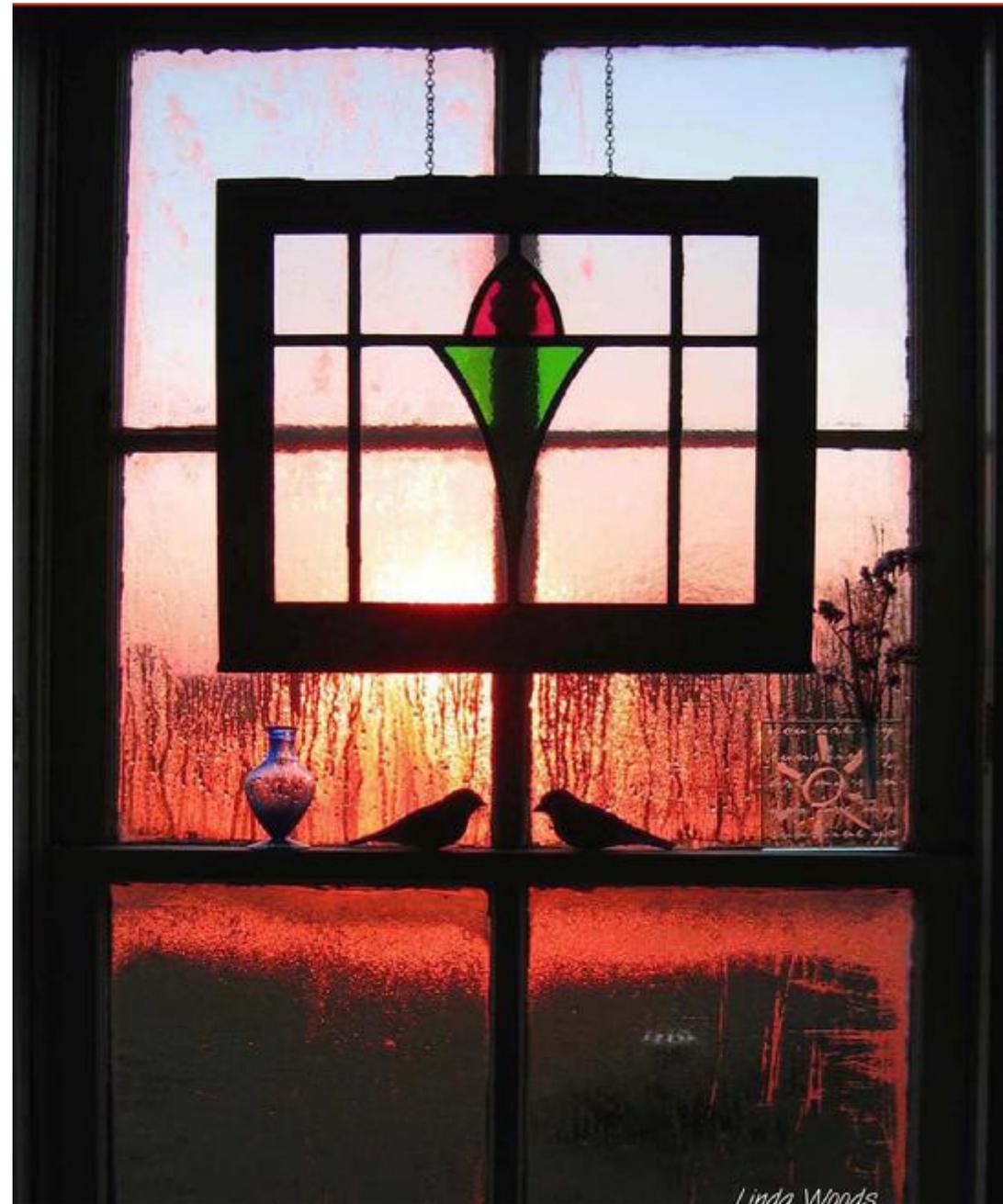
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## Welcome to our Fiction section!

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*Reflections on The Little Mermaid: A Few Moments with the Queen*

By Beate Sigriddaughter

I don't want to be ungrateful here, with my grandchildren at my feet and all that. But sometimes I wish I were that mystical and insubstantial creature that dissolved from love struck mermaid first into foam, then air. Sometimes I wish I, too, would be remembered not for what is or was, but for what could have been. If only.

Happy? Let's say I am content. And not entirely content to be content. I'd love to have ended up happy. But that would have required my husband's commitment. And I'm not so sure he's capable of all-out commitment. The physical aspect is okay. He appreciates his Sunday roasts, his wine, his massages, his sex. He will not leave me.

I'm talking human dilemma here. Testosterone. Estrogen. And the incompatible dreams.

I've been married to the erstwhile prince for 25 years now. I know my man. I know his aches, his moods, his foibles. Just as he all too frequently reminds me of mine.

You see, he always loves best what is just out of reach. Perhaps we all do. Although I have loved one fierce reality. There was a boy, not my prince, who touched the inside of my elbow once, and I was so stunned by the exquisite pleasure that I replay that touch today in memory when I need comfort in this bread and butter world.

When the little mermaid, my prince's pet girl, his mute foundling, slept on his doorstep every night, then he dreamt of me. Then I was the mysterious girl from the monastery who found him on the beach. He pretended not to have woken up until I came along and that I rescued him. Then he pretended it was fate, ordained by god, etc. It was convenient, since it turned out that our parents wanted us to make a political alliance by marriage in the first place.

Meanwhile he had her sleep on his door step, telling her she was his favorite of all. To a point.

Now he is getting older, but still imposing. A little slower with everything, that's all. He has his daily massages and flirts with the servants. He is convinced he is charming, using the same phrases and benevolently raised eyebrows his father used. Using the same phrases, in fact, that my own elderly father uses. Go figure.

Thing is, my prince never really wanted to do anything at all. He didn't come courting me. He didn't come doing anything at all. There was no dragon. No difficulty at all.

And who does he now dream of? The one who was willful and sentimental, totally unrealistic, cost everybody a great deal, most of all herself at that. Her love for my husband cost her her most precious voice. Isn't that often the case for a woman, human or merfolk?

As for me, the older I get, the more I learn. I'm not even 50 years old yet, and already a grandmother. Soon the grandkids will ask me for fairy tales, and tales of how our family came along, tales of how we met, one day by the sea. Will I tell them the dreams of happily ever after? So that they will be comforted in

their gullible youth that it will all turn out well one day, and bitterly disappointed later on when their prince or princess has feet, not even of clay, but of mere flesh and blood? For the longest time I couldn't grasp that it wasn't all about me, prince, crown, happy ending, marriage, and all. That my so-called happy ending was another's tragedy. And perhaps vice versa.

So I lie in bed reading poems and mystery novels, and he sits on his mahogany rocking chair on the terrace facing the sea, dreaming of her.

I know that, as the spirit of the air she became, she flies through the world visiting, especially children. Did she visit ours? Will she now visit our grandchildren and place airy kisses on their foreheads, filling their hearts with dazzling dreams of things that we have all wished for, and none of us have ever been selfless enough to fulfill?

The sea witch was the only one who didn't lie. Everything has its price, and oftentimes the price is beyond what anyone in their right mind should be willing to pay. Her magical voice. Her sisters' beautiful hair. My peace of mind.

I wish he could have loved me like a fairy tale. Like I, too, once thought it was promised, kissed by God only knows what spirit. The way he loved me at first, when I was still out of reach. Instead....

As I said, I am content, but not happy. That is perhaps the worst that could have happened, this achy kind of gratitude that knows that I'm stuck with what there is, and it is good, but it should have been better, and I only have this one fairy tale, and even in this fairy tale I am bleeding over the borders.

If I were a cat, maybe it would be enough to be content. But I am not a cat.

My heart is not broken, just bruised.

I assume at night he dreams of her and yearns for her—maybe the air brushes his forehead and he feels kissed by her spirit self. I remind myself, as though it mattered, that when she was there, he let her sleep on his doorstep, his little

mute foundling. But now that she is gone, she's ever treasured in his mind and has assumed cosmic proportions. I'm not consigned to his doorstep, thank God for that. But I'm permanently consigned to some sort of anteroom of his heart, while he's spent the last 25 years of reality building a mystic temple in his heart for her.

He doesn't speak of it; he leaves us that much dignity. But I can tell he is in love with her. He thinks she is exquisitely important in her elegant absence.

A man's love always has a price. As does a man's indifference to reality. His mute foundling lost her voice and her mermaid life as a price for love. I am paying a price, too, I'm sure, and I'm not even certain what it is.

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### She Always Begged Me Not to Lie

By Jackie Dawn

There's a playground across the courtyard and every now and then, I can see the children scattering across it like dandelion petals on the wind. On the swings, their skinny legs pump until their heels catch the sky; they dangle like ornaments from the monkey bars. Sometimes I can hear their faint laughter traveling through the breeze and into the window in front of my chair. A crack runs down the glass like a vein.

I can remember when my legs carried me freely through the playground, like they were a separate entity, and not withered in arthritic defeat. The sand box was always my favorite. There was something about the warm grains between my fingers when the sun beat down on it. I loved the way it meshed around my shape when I pressed my back to it, even though my mother claimed it was crawling with germs and begged me not to lie in the sandbox. She always begged me not to lie.

I wanted it to cover me; I wanted to feel the scattered grains down my back, across my middle and over my front. But it never did. No matter how much I rolled across the bumpy surface or dug my heels deep until they scraped the

wooden bottom, it was never big enough to cover me. I remember my mother's face on the way home, as she scolded me for the dirt under my fingernails and the grains of sand dusting my scalp.

I remember eagerly jumping into the hole my cousin dug at the beach and giggling with delight when he began to fill it in. I could feel the tiny grains slipping as they filled the void around me, filling in the blank spaces my body didn't touch. The sun beat down strong where my hair was parted and by the time the hole was filled in, only my head emerged from the sand like an odd rock. I was close enough to the shoreline to feel the mist of the sea spray when the waves flung themselves onto the beach, but I could also feel the slow, sinking heat off the sand. It radiated until I swore I could feel my limbs warming by the second, melting, distorting, dissolving into the sand. I itched, but couldn't move my arms encased in the hole. I imagined cement. It grew heavier by the second until I could feel it squeezing me from all sides and then, I couldn't breathe. But as the sun spun my head and the dark patches began to cloud my gaze, my mother reached under to hoist me out, dragging me back to the car and muttering that sometimes, Mille Jean, you are more trouble than you're worth.

Here, it is not so different. I am an odd rock confined to this chair, my useless legs a separate entity beneath me. I can still feel the warmth of the sun, but it is only through the window. Five long, mottled icicles hang from the edge of the roof, knotty and rough, like the fingers of a skeleton. I raise my hand to the pane. It trembles, as if it notices the similarities itself.

My mother's hands were beautiful. She had long, piano-player's fingers and perfectly manicured nails. You can always tell a lady by her hands, she'd say, gripping my fingers in hers, noting my calluses and hangnails. I'm not sure what people might think when they see yours.

I took her high heels one night while she was out playing Bridge. I'd made plans with Betty and Susan to meet by the train tracks, where all our mothers had forbidden us to meet under the trestle. The boys from a few towns over used to hang around there, cigarettes hanging from their lips, the red embers from the

lit tips glowing in the dark. One of them had told us that he'd pick up the three of us in his boss' car and take us out for a night on the town, so there I was, sneaking away under the streetlamps to meet with my fortune. The two old sisters that lived next door to us saw me on my way up the street, and one of them called hello to me, calling me my older sister's name. And I'd only smiled.

My mother's heels rubbed my feet in strange places until it felt like the leather itself was clinging to my skin. Each step toward the train tracks burned my heels, my toes, but this was what the boys liked, this is what they wanted to see, Susan said, they wouldn't like your old saddle shoes and besides, they're all scuffed anyway.

I walked the whole mile to the tracks, each step imagining my mother's heels as her hands, squeezing my feet to punish me. With each step, I could hear her words: Why. Don't. You. Ever. Listen. And. Who. Do. You. Think. You. Are. Anyway?

There were no boys that night and by the time I walked home, I had taken off my mother's shoes. It was too late by then, the welts on my feet rubbed against the pavement as I limped, the leather leaving jagged cuts like angry scowls across my feet. They melted into scars that stayed for months. My mother held up the shoes the next morning, the tell-tale scuffs on the soles, asking Was it you who ruined my favorite shoes, Millie Jean? Don't you dare lie to me.

I never did learn to walk in heels. And I would never be a lady.

The first job I took was in a tiny, dingy office that I rode the subway to. What business does a girl like you have riding a subway, my mother asked. It doesn't matter, I'd said, they wanted me for the job, and what did she mean, a girl like me? I had my own little cubicle, my own little roofless room at the end of the row and I'd push my chair as close to the desk as I could. Its edge dug into my ribs, close enough to stifle the air in my lungs. After a while as I typed and typed and typed, I could feel the chair pulling me tighter against the desk, even when I hadn't moved it at all. And then the walls seemed to grow taller. I could feel them springing up higher and higher—and every day, they moved in closer

and closer, until all I could do was stare up out of my ceiling-less hold, thinking of parakeets caged in iron bars, who only dreamed of their place in the sky.

There are no birds this winter; I watch for them in the trees every afternoon, but I hear no beat of their wings, no shrill calls. 'It's too cold out now,' the nurse tells me. 'But it'll be spring soon enough. You just be patient now, Miss Millie Jean, those birds will come back to sing to you.' But I know not everything comes back. Sometimes things stay, just for a little while, just enough to make you miss them when they fly away to somewhere warm, leaving you amid the ice.

Good night, my love, he used to say, as I'd slide into bed, tucking the sheets beneath the mattress, tight like a skirt two sizes too small, like my mother's heels, until I could feel my bones rubbing against one another. So tight, to hold me in. And I must have made his too loose, since eventually he was gone, just floated off somewhere like a dry leaf off in the autumn air. So hard to keep a man, my mother said, it might not have been your fault. Every night I pulled my sheets tighter until I almost couldn't fit between them, because if not, maybe I'd float away, too.

I watch the children scatter like snowflakes at the end of the day from my chair in front of the window, my hand pressed against the icy pane. The edges of their scarves dance with the wind; they recover missing mittens from their nesting places in the sandbox. They climb into strollers and hold tight to the hands of their mothers and I wonder what they talk about on their way home. I wonder what my mother would say to me, probably something like how does a girl like you end up alone here, when you could have been something else? And I'd say I don't know why and what do you mean, a girl like me? But the nurse always comes to wheel my chair away from the window and says, '...it's no use to think of those things now, Ms. Millie Jean, I'm sure your momma's proud wherever she is. Now come away from that window; it's too cold out and you'll catch a draft through that crack.'

She wheels me past Emira, whose eyes have clouded over. The doctors tell her they're cataracts; to me, it looks like sadness creeping over her from inside.

“I’m waiting for my day,” she says to me as we pass by. It’s what she always says, and it’s what we all are waiting for, sitting here in this place for the placeless. I wonder what my day will be like, the day when the long, dreamless sleep will come to pull me away in its grip. Is it like slipping away softly, where you don’t have to worry about pulling sheets over your head to keep you in? I wonder if it will feel like lightning, a rough jolt or if it would feel sad, disappointing—like a helium balloon, the hand of the child too loose on its string.

Sometimes, I wonder about my grave. Will I be able to feel the soft, crumbling dirt beneath my palms and between my fingers? Will it feel too loose, like the sandbox, not enough to contain me? Will it be too tight like the cubicle walls that closed in on me or maybe it will be like the hole at the beach, like the sand that stifled my breath and encased my limbs, steadfast in the earth. Maybe it won’t. Maybe in my final resting place in the dark where the sun can’t reach me and the stars can only wait until I ascend into their unknown, the voice of my mother and even my own will fall silent between the roots and the rocks. The soft earth will mold itself around the stillness of limbs, until there is a place in the world cut out just in the shape of me, a place that finally fits.

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### Casualties of Passion

By Nicole M. Bouchard

The sound of the television in the visitors' room running the news over, constant stream, in the wake of last night's elections is forcing the inmates to talk loud, almost yell to their friends and family members. I don't care to hear the conversations, I'm not envious of the ones who are going home soon, not empathetic to the ones that aren't. I'm leaving here in a few weeks myself but it's not what you think; I'm not enjoying one bit of this; you made sure of that. Brian only visited the one time to bring me some things and let me know how it would go when they release me so I didn't have any expectations of him. He hasn't called or picked up the phone

when I leave messages. It's just as well; I know the real punishment starts when I leave prison. Then the reality will set in. Then I'll see just how different my life has become and likely be the sorrier for it. The endless stretches of time I have to think are maddening so they allowed me a notebook and pencil; instead of being grateful, I'm just plain full of resentment over the fact that I couldn't have a pen.

"You could drink the ink or stab yourself," the guard remarked when I asked if she had a pen.

"Haven't you ever heard of lead poisoning?" I shot back rudely. "I could paper-cut myself to death too." She snorted and shook her head. I was talking to the rear of her as she'd already turned around to walk down the hall. I doubt very much if she heard me mutter "I hate pencils" as I sat cross-legged on the cot with the yellow notebook tight in my grasp as though it were precious cargo.

So here I am, pencil to paper, my hand already aching from the abrasive pressure of writing with it, charcoal gray covering half my palm and my thoughts turn to you. The bitch of this is that this redeeming confession can easily be erased but the damage of the events last August is permanent; engraved even and spread all over, cheap and thick, with you.

We had agreed before I moved down South that it was over, that it was the only way for both of us to survive. We would prove ourselves right in that respect- it had to be over then for both of us to have been able to walk away intact. My God, if I'd only known that it wasn't. I packed a pink suitcase filled with memories and wasted dreams tucked into the folds of my clothes; it wasn't until later on the bus that I found the cash you'd slipped in, knowing I wouldn't have accepted it. You always loved to flash your money around as if it would compensate for what you lacked in character or gave in affection.

Most things like this start out littered with the best of intentions; I can't even say that I'm sure of that on your end. What was more important- to

see me happy or to see me as yours, always and only? I know what your ultimate answer was but I wonder sometimes what you were truly thinking when we started out. You had me blissfully deceived at the beginning; maybe, in part, because I can never be sure, you always will. Does that admission satisfy you? Does it give you that same power high you had when you licked your lips, having the audacity to grin as you held me down, hands at my throat and I told you I didn't care; if I had to die I would be content to die by your hands so long as it proved my love to you...

The dark moments make you uncomfortable; you always hated when I'd confront you in the quiet aftermath, when I'd press the play back button on one of our frightening encounters as though you truly didn't understand that you had the capacity to be a monster. No one was more confused than you; you could hold the door, bring the sky down to make me smile, slow dance for hours with no music, rip your heart out in vulnerability at my pleasure. Who were you? I think I was closer to knowing that answer than anyone else; that is something, amongst many things, that Brian can never get past. There were parts that we owned of one another that were never returned. I had your secrets; you had the sweeter aspect of my devotion—the first in my world in so many ways. Brian and I could never conceive. You had that too; the child that was never born, lost as a casualty of our wars before it ever saw the sunlight much like our love itself.

It was a year after the miscarriage that I left for Louisiana. It mustn't have been more than three months until the clothing boutique I was working at got robbed in the night and I sat on the curb in tears obsessing over whether or not I'd remembered to lock the safe in the back room; my boss, a woman in her sixties, had her arm around my shoulders when the squad car pulled up and a handsome young officer stepped out. It was his hand that seemed to break the spell of anxiety as it reached down to help me up. Brian was so impressive and swift in handling every detail. He came back over to where I was to say that the safe in the back room had been blasted open; nothing was my fault. He offered me a tissue from his pocket. He was adept at cleaning up a mess, any mess at all.

He still is. I just wish more than anything that it hadn't been him on duty the night our worlds collided again for the final time. You and I were not his mess to clean up. But bless him, he did it. He told his partner to wait outside, said the less he knew the better. I wonder what I looked like to him, curled and sobbing in the corner, dark brown hair plastered to my face, your blood on my limp hands that still held the receiver from having called 9-1-1. No explanation needed.

The headlines still make my stomach turn as though the black and white ink is forever branded into my skin... *'Cop's Wife Arrested, Accused of Murder...'* The words don't come off this invisible patch of branded skin no matter how much washing or scrubbing is done, nor does the guilt. And it isn't guilt over you; it's guilt over how much I've hurt him. It gets worse instead of better with time because I realize more and more how little of me there was to love him. It doesn't even hurt anymore; I just feel badly for him which, of what I've done, is the cruelest thing of all.

Brian didn't have to ask me where I'd been on those late nights or unexplained day absences- all in one awful dose that night he understood it all; the obsession, the inability to let go, the violent passion, the charred remains of our fire that simply burned too bright from the moment it was lit. I stammered when I tried to explain how you'd threatened us both, how you swore you'd kill him or me if I didn't go with you, how you were already in trouble with someone who'd called your tough guy bluff and was coming to get all that damn money back. I didn't say how I cried and pleaded with you; that betrayal was all over my face.

It was eerie the way he swept through that crime scene without saying anything and made it all look a certain way so efficiently, emotionlessly... like a clean-up crew. It seemed not bother him that there was a bullet hole in the hood of his stove. To anyone, it would've looked like murder. I wanted to hate you that much, with every fiber in my being. Yet the same way that I knew your secrets, I held the knowing that I could never end the life so intricately wound around mine, for better or worse.

When the screech of tires ripped down the street to stop in front of the house while we argued, your face went blank. You'd left the main door open and someone ripped the screendoor off outside. You said you'd made a huge f\*^&ing mistake and pulled out a gun to aim into the hall. I screamed as two shots rang out. You and the stranger fell. I caught you in my arms. You told me to get his gun. Frantic, I pulled your upper body onto my lap before I saw that it was only a shoulder wound. The other man didn't move. A mere casualty of your selfishness? You kept saying, "I f\*^&ed up..." I realized that you'd brought your world of trouble and the danger in it with you to me in this new life I was trying to live, completely aware of what you were doing without a single thought for my well-being.

The stranger's car was still running outside, though he'd never see past the hole in his skull to get to it.

I told you to get out; to get in the car and keep driving so that you'd never come back. I was capable of making threats too; I knew what had happened, I knew about the money, I knew that you pulled a gun first and that the shot to your shoulder was only meant to wound, not to kill; you owed them too much and were worth nothing dead. You told me to call the cops and pretend it was a robbery; neighbors had heard the shots already, dogs barking up and down the entire street. Like a coward, you took off, leaving the ugliness behind you. I knew the robbery story wasn't feasible but I was willing to try it anyway. It was only around 8 o'clock, still just barely light when the cruiser pulled up. It killed me to see Brian's face then; an ironic play of events like the day we'd met and nothing like it too.

Do the details of the case matter?

It could've been far worse had Brian not stepped in. Two years sentenced, one served.

I know I won't see you again; even if you had nothing to fear from me you are still your own worst enemy.

No one will be there to pick me up when I'm released. No one will think of me the same. But I'd just as soon have it that way so I can cut ties and leave with the wind at my back. This will be my record in case you should ever try to catch the moth you let burn. I'm writing this most of all as a testimony of survival to myself; in case I still wasn't sure, here it is- I'm not another one of your casualties.

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### Best Chance, Chance Best

By John Bolen

Sitting down to the Thanksgiving meal, Mindy was filled with anxious energy. She smiled, then worried that maybe she was smiling too much and would be considered insincere in her smiling. Next she worried that maybe it looked to her hostess, with all that smiling and trying to control it, that she was not enjoying herself. In truth she was not enjoying herself; she was too concerned about looking like she was.

It is always hard to meet the parents. In retrospect it would probably have been better to meet them on a less stress-filled day than Thanksgiving, but it had worked out to be the most convenient time because Michael's parents lived out just far enough to make travel there a bit inconvenient during any other time. And if it hadn't been Thanksgiving, then Christmas was looming around the corner and Thanksgiving beat out Christmas hands down. Another factor in favor of the timing was how Michael seemed to definitely want to make the introductions sooner than later. The way he constantly fretted over their health, perhaps he felt that death's cold hand might grasp them at any moment.

Concerning Peter Stone's health it was obvious where Michael's apprehension of his longevity was founded, for the father was quickly falling victim to advanced senility, moving in and out of comprehension of the world around. But mother Anya seemed alert, vibrant even buoyant. So when Mindy had volunteered to help with the meal but Anya had insisted that she had things in hand and that Mindy sit back to relax as just a guest, it was certainly believable

that the elegant older woman was in control.

However, this only added to Mindy's anxiety, as she was the type of person that preferred to jump in and help; partly because that was how she was raised, partly because she liked to do so, and even more because it gave a vent for her nervous energy to cover her feelings of conversational inadequacy.

In just that kind of moment of conversational inadequacy, did Mindy offer, "This is the best," as the four of them sat and ate their first salad course.

"It's Thousand Island," Michael responded, conveying well through his tone that this particular type of salad dressing was the choice only of children and the unsophisticated, none of which were present at that Thanksgiving table.

"It's fine," Mindy retorted in defense of Anya's choice of dressing. "I like it." She wanted Anya's approval more than she wanted to side with Michael that day.

"It's Michael's favorite," Anya explained, oblivious to Michael's displeasure. As she spoke she speared a bite of the salad with her fork and fed her husband, Peter, as he stared out, appearing to be in his own world and oblivious to it all.

"My favorite?" Oddly, Michael's response was more irate than surprised. "What, from when I was nine? We haven't had this in thirty years. Are you and Papa eating this now?"

"No, we hate it. I got it for you," came Anya's timid response, like she was a little girl hurt and embarrassed by the reprimand of a parent. This was Mindy's first glimpse that there was something fragile about the older woman.

So with even more conviction, Mindy asserted, "Well, I haven't had it in a long time but it reminds me of when I was a kid... good memories." What Mindy really longed for was to reach that point in her and Michael's relationship where she could feel relaxed and confident to confess that Thousand Island dressing

was more to her than a quaint reminder of childhood past and, despite that fact that it would likely put her in the trenches of the unsophisticated, she was an adult who plain and truly liked Thousand Island dressing.

She could dwell on this thought for only a second or so, as Peter, suddenly, in a firm yet warm manner spoke for the first time since Michael and she had arrived, saying, “I only knew New York from the movies before I went there my first time.”

The three gave Peter their complete and total attention.

“All the films were black and white then, so that’s how I knew it. And when I got out of the taxi at Fifth and Forty-ninth, I was amazed. It was late autumn. It was overcast and had been drizzling on and off all morning, and there was New York. In black and white! The buildings were all gray, the sidewalk gray, and the street black with oily puddles reflecting the gray sky. The people wore black hats and coats and their faces were ashen white or dark black. And then I saw this delicate creature, jaywalking across Fifth Avenue and splashing in the water, with a white coat and hat and scarf, and bright yellow galoshes. You know, the kind of rain boots that grade school kids wear with those yellow raincoats, and at first I thought it must be a child. And then she turned toward me. Her coat was open in front, and she had the kind of cleavage a man could climb into and spend the winter. I remember the inside of her mouth felt like warm butter.”

“That’s enough, Papa,” Michael quickly interrupted, flushing slightly with an apologetic glance toward Mindy.

“It’s okay, Michael. I’m not a prude,” Mindy offered, charmed by Michael’s chivalry on her behalf and his father’s affection for his mother. “What a cute way for you two to meet, Mrs. Stone.”

“That isn’t how they met,” Michael whispered, correcting Mindy’s misconception.

“Oh!” was all that Mindy could respond with as her anxiety returned tenfold creating a strong logic in her mind that crawling under the table was the only possible solution for its ease.

“It doesn’t bother me,” Anya quickly added to calm Mindy’s discomfort.

By this time, Peter had returned to his staring out, oblivious to the world around him.

“I’m just so glad he’s talking. Sometimes he will go for days and not say a word. Just the other day he hadn’t said a word the entire day and he suddenly started crying. Whatever he was thinking about must have been so sad. Well, I sat down and held him, and before you know it I’m blubbering like a baby myself. Two old fools just sitting and crying. So it doesn’t bother me that he is having nice memories.”

Mindy smiled warmly at Anya's admission.

Peter suddenly turned to stare at Michael intently asking, “Who are you?”

“I’m your son,” Michael stammered out.

“Walter?” Peter queried.

“No, I’m Michael,” he replied sounding crestfallen.

“You never told me you had a brother,” Mindy whispered.

“I don’t have a brother,” came Michael’s angry whispered response. He then added, “...or at least I might not as well have one for all his involvement with the family. He lives in Florida.”

“Tonight you are going to learn to ride that bicycle,” Peter announced to his son, indicating well that the dinner he thought he was sitting down to was one of the past.

“Papa, I learned to ride a bike a long time ago,” Michael replied gently, embarrassed by the exchange despite having warned Mindy that such things might arise.

“More excuses,” Peter snapped at the seven-year-old boy he saw before him. “Spend all that money and he won’t even try to learn,” he complained to his wife. His gaze then turned to Mindy asking, “Are you Tina?”

“No, Papa,” Anya quickly interjected, “that’s not your daughter. That’s Mindy.”

“You never told me you had a sister, either,” Mindy complained to Michael in an even louder whisper. And there was sadness there, too, the sadness one feels when they find the secrets mounting up when they thought there weren’t any big secrets remaining.

“Same thing as with Walter,” came back Michael’s sad whispered response. “Her name is Tina. She lives in Oregon and never visits.”

“Michael and Mindy. Michael and Mindy!” Anya desperately attempted to change the topic of conversation. “Your names sound so nice together. Wasn’t there a television show called...”

“That was *Mork and Mindy*, Mama,” Michael interrupted, correcting her.

Mindy could see that he was tired, defeated and preoccupied which made him more tightly wound than usual.

“Ah!” Anya responded with that look that one gets where one hears the correction and yet feels that it’s at odds with recollection even if it is right.

Michael turned to Mindy and in full voice defended his disowning of his siblings. “If Walter and Tina acted like a real brother and sister they would be here to help me with this. They would act like caring children and help my parents out.”

“With what, dear?” came Anya’s oblivious query.

“With this,” he addressed his mother. “This! You can’t go on like this,” Michael’s frustration poured out. “He’s much too much for you to take care of and it is always getting worse.” Michael certainly had not planned to have this discussion at this Thanksgiving dinner that was meant to accomplish just the introduction of his parents to Mindy, but he could not control his feelings of desperation and responsibility.

“I’ve taken care of him for over fifty years,” Anya calmly replied, perhaps too calmly. “I think I can take care of him a while longer.”

“But you’re talking about him having these emotional swings,” Michael protested. “What if he hurts himself? What if he forgets who you are and turns violent on you?”

“Well, I’ll just give him a quick kick in the gonads,” she matter-of-factly replied. “It’s always worked in the past.”

The words kick in the gonads seem to reach out to whatever decade of the twentieth century Peter was occupying at the time and a pained expression crossed his face. “I’ve got to pee,” he announced, however he made no attempt to rise and depart to the restroom to relieve this situation.

“A 'kick in the gonads' isn’t going to solve all your problems,” Michael argued, and again the phrase elicited another pained expression from Peter.

“Can I help with the turkey, Mrs. Stone?” Mindy offered, hoping to change the topic.

A sweet smile came to Anya’s face. “You can call me Anya,” she offered to her guest.

“Okay,” Mindy agreed, thankful for the warm gesture. “Anya,” she tried it out.

“I bought the easy kind of turkey this year,” Anya explained. “You just put it in the oven and wait for the button to pop up.”

“Oh, those are great,” Mindy responded.

“It hasn’t already popped up?” Michael wondered aloud, as they had already sat down for the first course.

“No, but it should any minute,” Anya confidently replied, then instructed, “Peter, you need to go into the restroom.” Peter suddenly focused, arose and made his way.

“With what the doctor is telling us about you,” Michael pressed his argument with his mother, “I mean, should you even be cooking?”

“You know, I’m not the first person to forget to turn off a coffee maker,” Anya shot back, a bit agitated with her son now. “Everyone does it.”

It was hard for her to emphasize her point with a good hard stare like she wanted to as Peter returned to the table saying, “I need my glasses.” Then as if this were a ritual that the two enacted without thought, Anya pulled Peter’s eyeglasses from his front shirt pocket and placed them on his face. Peter tilted his head back as his eyes started to focus looking through the lenses, then stepped back to the restroom.

“The coffee maker did a total meltdown,” Michael continued. “It was a pile of smoking molten plastic. If I hadn’t come over when I did...”

“I’ve solved all that,” Anya interrupted. “I’ve put those little notes,” she said, giving that look like she was grasping for the word, “...you know, the kind with the stick-um on the back...”

“Post-its,” Mindy jumped in with the word.

“Yes, Post-its. I’ve put them all over the house to help me remember things.”

“That’s a great idea, Anya,” Mindy supported her hostess.

Anya smiled at Mindy and immediately Michael’s little protests were forgotten. “I like the way you say my name. How did you two meet, Mindy?” Anya asked.

“It’s kind of silly,” Mindy responded with a giggling smile coming to her lips. “I’m an anesthesiologist, and Michael came in for knee surgery. In the midst of it I noticed the surgeon was starting to work on the wrong knee. Michael promised he wouldn’t sue us if I went out on a date with him. Kind of ridiculous I guess.”

“Isn’t it how wonderful how chance comes knocking?” Anya marveled.

Peter returned then holding a Post-it note looking confused as he mumbled, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Let me see,” Anya gently requested taking the note and reading, ‘Turn off burners’. Oh, how silly of me,” she nervously laughed, and quickly exited to the kitchen where she let loose a scream. Then she nonchalantly walked back into the dining room and handed Peter a different Post-it saying, “Go back and take this one, dear.”

“What was that scream, Mama?” Michael asked.

“Scream? Did I scream?” Anya replied as if nothing had just transpired.

“Of course you just screamed,” Michael answered as if it needed saying.

Anya’s attempt to remain the calm hostess suddenly faded. The color drained from her face as she confessed, “The oven is turned off.”

“What?” came back from Michael in disbelief.

“The little button hasn’t popped up because the oven’s turned off. It has been this whole time,” Anya continued her explanation.

“It’s okay,” Mindy jumped in, trying to save the old woman from her discomfort. “I’ll cut off some of the turkey and we will microwave it. It will be fine.”

“It won’t be fine,” Michael argued. “Nothing is fine. I worry every day that you two are going to kill yourselves in some God-awful fire, or that you’re going to fall and he won’t be able to help you. This has got to end. How can I ask Mindy to be part of this family until we get things straight? You have to accept that it’s time. Time to let me move you to a place where someone can take care of you two.”

“But that Negro boy helps us all the time,” Anya argued.

“What Negro boy?” Michael had shot back at her before he realized how awful a phrase they were suddenly using.

“Mr. Johnson,” Anya answered.

“The driver of the Senior’s van?” Michael asked. “Mama, people haven’t used descriptions like that in fifty years,” he lectured, confused that such a phrase should come from his mother as if she were trapped in a time warp. “He’s African-American and he’s sixty-years-old at least. I hope you don’t call him a Negro boy to his face,” he worried in embarrassment that this had come out in front of Mindy.

“We call him 'Mr. Johnson',” Anya explained to Michael’s relief. “All the same, he comes in and we give him money and he helps us.”

“How much money?” Michael quickly pressed.

“I don’t know, just some money,” Anya replied.

“You don’t know!” Michael snapped in disbelief again.

“No, just whatever we have around, and if I need help getting Peter dressed or...”

“You don’t know anything at all about this man,” Michael interrupted.

“But he’s such a nice man,” Anya continued her explanation. “And like I said, if I need help lifting groceries or putting them away he always helps.”

“This is just what I’m talking about, Mama,” Michael said, throwing up his hands in exasperation. “You are so vulnerable. You’re too trusting and that makes you gullible. Do you know how much trouble I had getting you out of that Arkansas land deal?” he demanded as the years of mounting frustration were suddenly pouring out.

“But that nice highway patrolman, Mr. Estrada, made it sound so beautiful,” Anya defended herself.

“He’s not a real highway patrolman,” Michael replied, exasperated. “He just played one on TV.”

“He’s not?” Anya was shocked. “Well, they shouldn’t let people do that.”

“That’s it!” Michael exclaimed. “That’s just it. You’ve got to accept that it is time,” he pleaded, his voice softer now.

Anya set her jaw and with all the strength she could muster. “Don’t bully me, Michael!” she scolded. Then a look that she had forgotten something important crossed her face as she snapped, “Wait a minute!” Then she quickly left the room. Michael looked at Mindy with a lost look on his face, taking her hand, and Anya returned with Peter in tow, carefully helping him to his seat.

“Do you like Klondike bars?” Peter asked Mindy.

“Yes, I do, Mr. Stone,” Mindy replied, smiling and glad for a respite from the intensity of the last few minutes. “But I never buy them, they are so expensive.”

“That is why they are good,” Peter offered an explanation. “We never bought them ourselves when we were young. That was stupid.”

“I was in a sorority at USC in 1950,” Anya suddenly began to relate to Mindy, “...so full of myself and my father’s money, and Beth-Anne Helmesley and I were interviewing the young men who wanted employment as food servers, dishwashers, that type of thing and this tall lanky boy wanted to work for the Lambdas to help pay for his college costs and all, and Beth-Anne thought he was dreamy and insisted that we hire him. I argued against it, because I thought he was really full of himself, but she started whining in the way she used to that would drive me up the wall, so I finally relented. It took him two months to get the nerve to ask Beth-Anne out, and she said yes only if he found a friend for me and we made it a foursome. She only told me about it after all their plans were made, and I immediately said no, but then she started whining again, so once more I relented. They, Peter and his friend, took us to the Coco-Bowl, which was this gaudy Polynesian restaurant with dancing to a Big Band. Beth-Anne’s shoes were killing her, and Peter’s friend Artie literally tripped over himself on the dance floor, so they sat it out most of the evening and Peter and I danced and danced and danced. And that’s how it happens. That is how chance happens.”

Michael interrupted, “Mama, I...”

“If you take him out of this house,” Anya cried out, cutting him off, “...that will be it for him. He will be gone. And then he will die. And then I will die. He’s my best friend, my best everything. Let us have a little more time together,” she begged, tears forming in her eyes.

Michael attempted to continue, “Mama, I...”

“Michael, did you mean what you said earlier?” Mindy interjected.

Looking confused, Michael asked, "What did I say?"

"About asking me to be a part of this family?" Mindy replied.

"Yes. Yes, I..."

Mindy gave him a passionate kiss. It was the beginning of their future together. It dawned on him that he was assuredly defeated in trying to convince his mother to let his father go to a nursing facility at least until they were both ready; he couldn't separate them because he now knew what it was to share a love like theirs.

"How will I know, Mama? How will I know when it's time?"

"You'll know," Anya replied smiling at the couple before her.

"Tina wants a Klondike bar," Peter announced to his wife.

"It's Mindy, Papa," Anya gently reminded, "...and you'll both have to wait until dinner is over."

"And then I will teach him how to ride that bike," Peter reminded her.

"I'd better go in the kitchen," Mindy offered, "...and start some surgery on that bird."

"Make sure you start on the correct knee," Michael kidded.

"Then you better come in and supervise," Mindy replied.

"Yes, I guess I better," Michael agreed as he hugged her from behind.

"Isn't this the best Thanksgiving ever?" Anya beamed out to all.

"How can you say that, Mama?" Michael questioned. "The turkey is raw and

Papa won't be happy until he sees me ride a bicycle.”

“Because I have such a loving son,” Anya answered, “...and chance has brought him someone so nice.” The three laughed as they all headed into the kitchen.

Peter sat for a second and then a smile came to his face as he arrived at a different time and place. “The inside of her mouth felt like warm butter.”

The End.

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### Opening a Window

by Eliana Steinberg

I peered outside the white tent to see Rio placing a rosebud on each dinner plate. She walked carefully around each table, letting her shoes fall into the grass. Light silk wrapped around her thin waist, I think of Rio permanently in my basement playing video games with my brother Jarred. From upstairs I could hear a thump as she celebrated her victory, jumping into my brother's arms. They both stuttered and twitched, evidence of their disabilities. But when they were together their sudden movements seemed to be at rest, it was if their hearts were able to suppress each other's troubles.

“Ruby, look at me in this dress! Watch me twirl!” Rio yelled to me as she twisted her body around.

I went to her and draped my arms around her shoulders. She kissed my cheek and sunk into my chest.

“I’m nervous for today. It’s not everyday that I get married. You know, Ruby? It’s not everyday,” she said.

I nodded and threw my head back to laugh. “No Rio, it’s not. But you know what? You’re ready. Jarred loves you, we all really love you,” I said with a quiver in my voice.

We had numerous wedding rehearsals, but nothing could totally prepare us for this day. That afternoon, two special people were to exchange vows. They couldn’t read their own invitations, but they were sent out nonetheless.

And then I looked over to a table where Rio had placed four too many roses on one plate.

She glanced at the plate and said, “Oh, that one’s for Jarred. I’d give him every rose if I could!”

Jarred approached Rio from behind and wrapped his arms around her waist. In this embrace, they looked normal. They could be any regular couple on their wedding day, completely functional and totally in love. But then I looked to my brother and saw his eyes- slits of unknowing, holes of nothingness.

My mother had said you could tell everything from a person’s eyes: the depth of their soul, their intelligence. It was all held between their ears.

“You look like Ruben Studdard, Jarred. A classy, suited Ruben Studdard, ready to exchange vows!” I joked, as I patted his stomach.

He drew me in for a noogie, rubbing my styled hair with his massive fist.

“Any other day I would pummel you. But today my suit's gotta stay nice. Today you're off the hook,” he said smiling.

I took our normal sibling quarrels seriously. Teasing was a way to painlessly interact with him. As we shoved and yelled at each other, we were able to communicate as equals. The prospects of abilities, or education were forgotten, as we fought like any other brother and sister.

I wanted him to whack me, for him to push me to the ground; anything to show me that that day wasn't a turning point, that he wasn't about to leave. I thought back to the night in that hotel, when my parents had told me he was disabled. As a nine year old, I had no knowledge of my abilities nor his lack thereof. So I helped him read his emails and calmed him down after tantrums.

“Ruby!” my mother yelled to me across the yard.

I ran to her, as if it was an emergency. But I really just needed to break away from that moment. My brother whispering into Rio's ears, her innocent replies. It was all too familiar, and all too hard to let go of.

Draped across the couch was my mother. She was a sprawled five feet of drunkenness collapsed on the furniture.

“Oh just get me my glass, little Ruby. Help me up. You know, this day's hard for all of us, it's hard for us all,” she slurred.

Cleaning up her clothes, I settled her upright.

“Momma, I know... But it’s almost time. If we wait any longer, I’ll have a niece on the way,” I said as I pointed to Rio and Jarred canoodling in a corner.

She sprung up as fast as her wobbly feet would let and made her way to the tables. As she approached the couple, she stepped on Rio’s train slightly.

We knew what to expect. Rio had had her worst tantrums at our house, usually in retaliation of my brother’s affection. Her face turned sour as she began to sob. I went to gather some wet napkins to clean the mud off her dress, but my attempts were deemed unsuccessful.

Rio’s parents rushed towards her and my brother backed away in shock. Standing in the tent, I saw across the yard a scene of people, desperately trying to calm a panicked child.

They were delusional, I thought, each and every one of them. To let these, babies, essentially go off and live alone. My brother couldn’t care for Rio, nor Rio for my brother. It would be dangerous to let them leave, and completely unnecessary. Their love together was mature, but they themselves separately were not.

In heat, I ran to them all and burst: “This isn’t right. I’m sorry Jarred and Rio. But you aren’t ready to get married. And you four are supposed to be adults. How could you let your naïve children leave you, and enter the world so blindly? It’s sick”.

I exhaled and walked back to the tent. My father, looking stricken with a red face, a color unsuitable for his cheery disposition, chased me inside.

“You know what Ruby? That was rude. I understand that it’s hard. But it’s hard for all of us. I know you feel that it’s your job to take care of your brother, but we’ve got a handle on these sorts of things,” he said.

He rubbed my knee and wiped the tears from my face. For a bit he let me cry into his suit, as I had done as a child. I dug my face into the fabric and whimpered, a cry of goodbyes, my mourning of change.

It was late August, and the night was unusually cold. My brother was about to move away and begin a life he might not be able to handle. I would be left alone, missing his cinnamon bread and television shows.

My father took my hand and led me to Rio’s side, at the altar. Then the priest began the service and spoke about love. He talked about abilities and our limits as human beings. It sounded forced, but it made me tear. I began to think of my basement, which would soon be empty, and of the times I had braided Rio’s hair. I looked to my mother who was sobbing into my father’s shoulders. And then to my brother who was staring deeply into the eyes of his wife. I might have been looking for too long, but I think I saw a glimmer in his gaze. For a split second I saw something I’d never seen before: such knowledge and passion in his stare. And my mother was always right about the eyes.

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