

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

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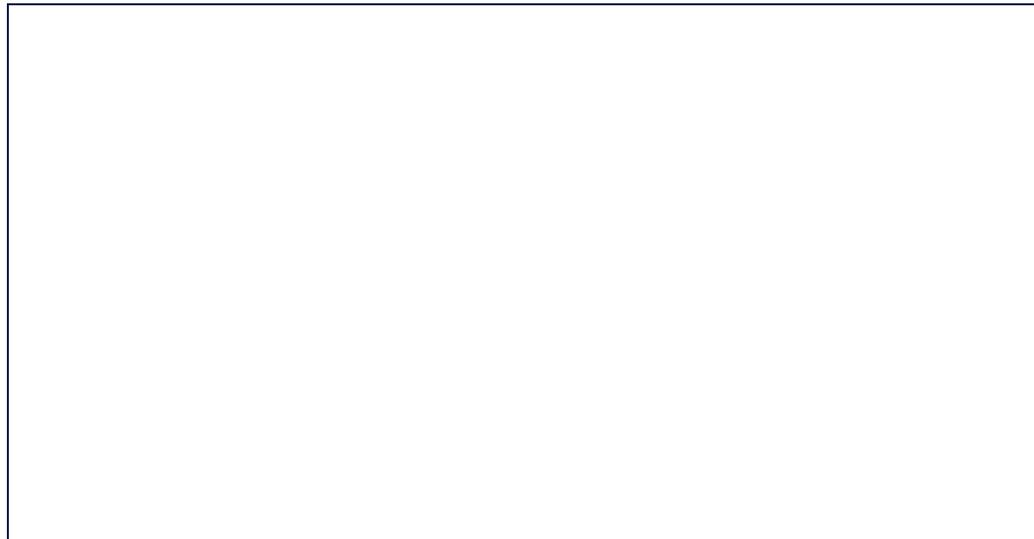
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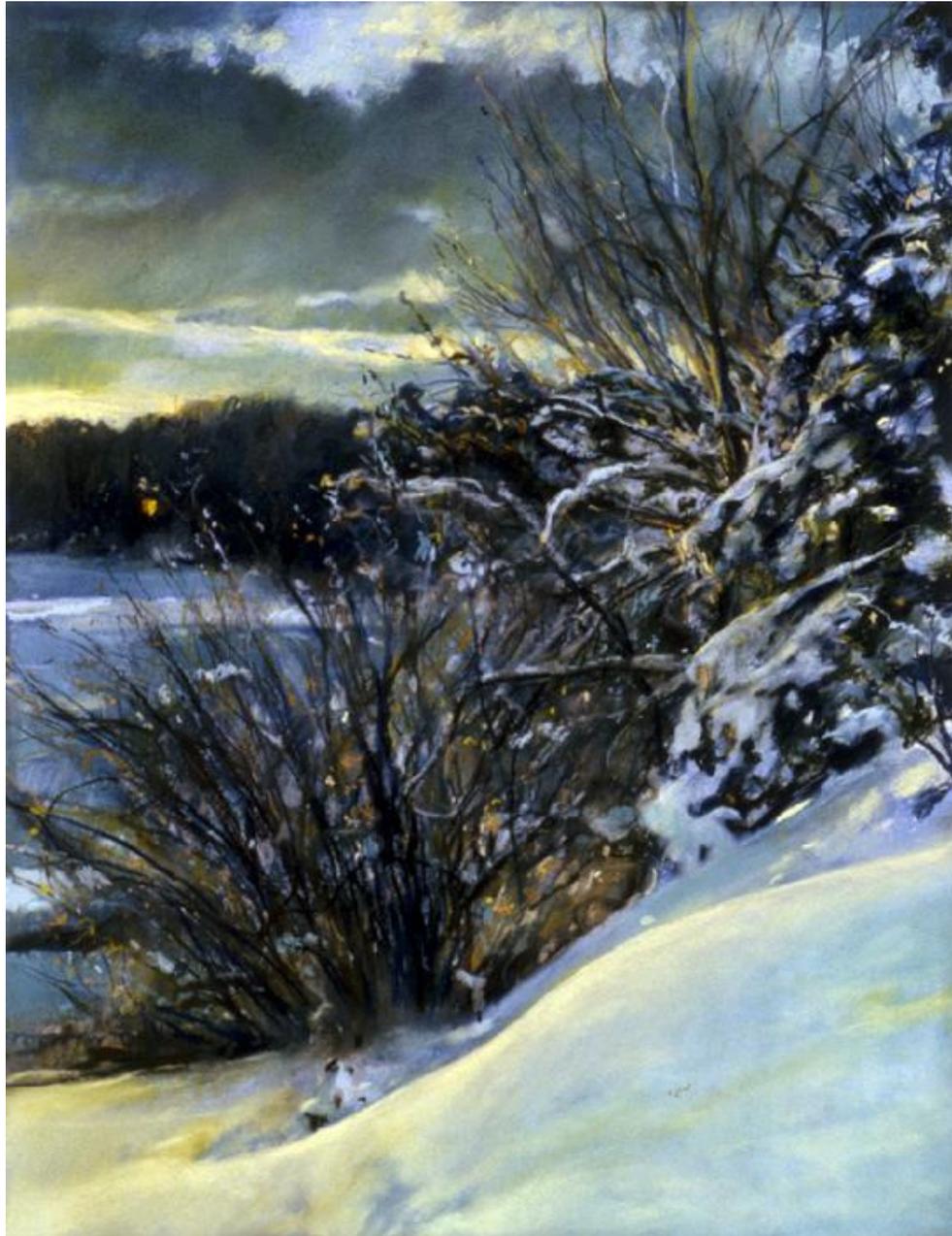
Come in...and be captivated...

### "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.





"Nocturne" by Jan Collins Selman; <https://jancollinselman.com/home.html>

*About this image: "I spent two days indoors waiting for the snows to stop.*

*I've lived on a nice ridge of land that sits between two ponds, for thirty-five winters. This crest is covered with pines and hardwood trees which are lovely places for snows to settle upon.*

*The large transparent sheets and whirling dervishes of snow, that whip up from one pond, and fall down to the other, had finally stopped. The sun winked to the left of me just before night fell in. I had perhaps ten minutes to make a small study of color notes; and to take a few photos. I felt wonderful that I had taken the energy and time to capture a scene that took my breath away rather than tucking it away as a memory painting."*

—JCS

### Thrift Shop

by Lori M. Hawks

I lingered near the rack of maternity jeans. Summoning courage, I checked the labels for a designer and size. *I could wear these even if I wasn't pregnant*, I rationalized.

A small baby with brown hairs and a lavender bow cooed in a carrier on the floor between the racks of clothes. She was being supervised by her older sister who must have been no more than four.

I put one pair of the jeans into my basket.

*These can be jeans for in the car, a spare in case I need to get changed after work or if I soil my pants with coffee, or have an accident with my underwear. For \$2, who wouldn't buy Liz Lange maternity jeans?*

The children's books called to me next from their shelf in the corner. *I shouldn't have come here*, I thought. The pregnancy books were haunting me with suggestions for fertility and labor. Then there were the parenting books.

Just three feet away was the baby in the carrier again. Her mother was nowhere in sight. *Reckless parenting*, I thought.

I chose three children's books and placed them gingerly into my basket. They were untouched and bound tightly with shiny covers. One was a journal with a dragon on the front, another was story about a little girl who

robbed banks, and the third was a tale about a little boy becoming a millionaire. I fantasized about reading them while tucking imaginary children into bed.

*Read more, Mommy,* they would say, eyes lit.

A lady counted my items, tallying up what I owed.

"The books are five for a dollar," she alleged.

"I'm starting a library for my students," I claimed.

"Oh! Congratulations," she said, looking at the price tag on my maternity jeans. "It's going around, you know. Both of my daughters are pregnant."

I wondered if she misheard me.

"Oh, um, thanks," I mumbled, feeling the pit in the bottom of my stomach growing. My face flushed. *What kind of person who can't get pregnant collects maternity clothes?* I handed her eight single dollar bills, and I thought I saw her glance at my belly. It was full and round. I self-consciously pulled my shirt down towards my hips to cover my bump.

Leaving the store with a full bag, bloated belly, and empty heart, I silently cursed the bowl of pasta with meatballs and chocolate cake I'd inhaled the night before. Then I cursed the negative pregnancy tests that lined my bathroom trash bin. I cursed my three miscarriages, the doctor's visits, the lab slips, the baby clothes hidden at the bottom of a toy chest in my closet, and my birthday the week before.

Turning 35 was not at all what I'd expected.

Bio- Lori M. Hawks is wanted by her public library for overdue book fines. She has loved writing ever since she began drawing in crayon on the walls above her crib. Her childhood summers were spent enjoying classic texts such as *Word Bird*. Her favorite TV show was *Reading Rainbow*. As a grown-up, Lori has taught English and composition for eleven years. She enjoys attempting yoga, spoiling her two cats & husband when she is not battling M.S. or infertility.

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Siren Song

by Susan P. Blevins

I first encountered Italians, with their exuberant *joie de vivre*, in 1963, when I started working for an opera company in England the month I turned nineteen. Just a few weeks into the opera season, I had fallen hopelessly under the spell of the Italian Muse.

They were so different in every way from the people I had grown up with. These artists loved to laugh, joke, throw bread at one another in the dining-room, flirt, tease, and all performed with such passion. I was hooked on them, but I fell particularly hard for Luciano Pavarotti, in those days just bursting onto the opera scene aged twenty-eight with his sublime, pure voice, and known to all the English female employees at the opera house as “Passion Flower”. He flirted outrageously with all of us, and we adored him.

After two years and two seasons, my decision to leave England and go to live in Italy was almost a non-decision. I just knew that’s where I was meant to go, and I had always believed I was born in England by mistake anyway! I’m an only child, and my parents fought me every step of the way, but I had the bit between my teeth, and nothing was going to stop me. I could smell the heady air of freedom, and I wasn’t going to back down. I just wanted to be me, and release my body from the bondage my mother had imposed on it ever since I was twelve. She insisted I wear a bra at that tender age, even though I was flat-chested, and worse, she put me in a girdle because it was “unladylike” for a nicely brought up girl to show the form of her buttocks. How all that changed after I’d been in Italy just a few weeks. Goodbye girdle, goodbye bra, hello to topless sunbathing on the beach, hello finally to sunshine instead of dreary, waterlogged, post-war England.

While I was still working at the opera house, situated in southern England, fate intervened. I met a lovely Italian girl named Iris, in England to learn English. We became close friends, and it turned out her father was the head of the hospital in Pesaro, a little coastal resort on the Adriatic. It just happened that his assistant, married with two small children, was looking for an English *signorina* to teach his 5-year-old and 3-year-old English. Arrangements were made, and suddenly I had a place to live and a meager stipend.

On September 7th, 1965, I departed on the ferry from Newhaven to Dieppe, leaving on the dock a weeping mother, her dreams for me unfulfilled, and a thunder-faced father. Crossing the English Channel was crossing the Rubicon as far as I was concerned, because it marked my point of no return. I never lived in England again. When I reached France I found my train and made my slow progression to Pesaro. It was not a pleasant journey, because I had been obliged to have all kinds of vaccinations in readiness for traveling to foreign lands, and my arms throbbed mercilessly from the injections.

After almost twenty-four hours I arrived at my destination and was met by Iris and her family. I spent my first month in Italy with her, adjusting to absolutely everything, climate, language, food, customs. So much to learn. Not least the language. I made my share of wild mistakes, causing great hilarity. September is the second fig season of the year, and I discovered an unknown passion for the sweet and succulent fruit. I decided to buy a kilo for myself, and bravely went to the fruit shop and asked for “a kilo of vaginas!” (“Un chilo di fiche,” rather than “Un chilo di fichi.”) What a difference one vowel can make at the end of a word! After much laughter I bought my figs and ate the lot! Needless to say, I broke out in big orange welts and felt nauseated for several hours.

I soon settled into my routine of mornings with the children, and late afternoons with my *comitiva*, new group of friends. The family I was living with treated me as a daughter, and I had the good fortune to learn about Italian society from an insider’s position. They were very strict with me, and I had to be back for dinner at eight. They knew all the people I was going around with, and they instructed me on what was acceptable and what was not.

Particularly, they taught me how to sort out the different levels of Italian society, and whom to frequent. One of the dangers facing a young English woman newly arrived in Italy, is that of being taken in by handsome good looks, elegant attire, and gallant demeanor. They taught me to inquire about the family of any young man who was interested in me, what his profession was, what his father did for a living, and they told me to find out about his level of education. This saved much heartache later on when I moved to Rome, because life in the big city as a foreigner presents many mixed cultural problems, and fortunately I avoided them all. When I was working at the UN in Rome there were many other young Englishwomen involved with Italian boyfriends, or husbands, and there were some very

sad stories indeed. One young Englishwoman jumped off the top-floor terrace of the highest building because she felt trapped in a marriage with an Italian she was unable to handle. Sadly, she left behind a small child. There were many mixed marriages, and very few of them worked. The Italians have a saying to this effect: *mogli e buoi dei paesi tuoi* (wives and oxen from your own country).

They also taught me Italian table manners, and about the evening *passaggiata* in the piazza, perhaps stopping to sip an *aperitivo*. I also learned how to dress like an Italian, how to react to wolf-whistles and other “forward” behavior, and how to blend in to daily Italian life, from shopping at the deli every day to going to church on Sundays, to taking a delicious dessert with me for the hostess every time I was invited to Sunday lunch at a friend’s house. I blossomed into this new life and my proficiency in Italian improved in leaps and bounds. I felt very happy and stable in my new context, and certainly approached life as an Italian rather than as a Brit. Eventually I was taken all the time as an Italian.

I was following in the grand tradition of the English migration to Italy and the rest of Europe for the “Grand Tour”, the difference being that I did not return. I even discovered my grandfather’s name in the register at the Hotel Danieli, in Venice, when I visited there years later.

I made the decision to leave England with joy and excitement, and I have never once regretted it. Life began for me in September 1965, and it will end when my ashes are scattered in the Mediterranean off the coast of Lazio.

Bio- Susan P. Blevins was born in England, lived 26 years in Italy, and has now resided in the USA for the past 23 years, first in Taos, NM, and currently in Houston, TX. While living in Rome she had a weekly column in an international, English-language newspaper, writing about food and restaurant reviews primarily, though not exclusively. Since living in the USA she has written pieces on gardens and gardening for N. American and European publications, and she is now writing stories of her life and travels. She loves reading, writing, cats, classical music, and stimulating conversation.



### Marathon Man

by Mark Barkawitz

I got my stem cell transplant on June 6, 2011 at City of Hope Hospital. As Helena the nurse hung the IV bag with my reconditioned stem cells—autologous; self-donated—she said: “Congratulations, today is your new birthday.” She spoke behind a paper breather-mask and wore blue, nitrile gloves for my protection. “Happy birthday, Marathon Man.”

“Thanks, Helena.”

The staff in the hospital had already taken to calling me Marathon Man because I usually wore one of my L.A. Marathon T-shirts on my daily walk around the corridors of our wing. I likewise had to wear nitrile gloves and a paper breather-mask when I left my environmentally-controlled room, so my face was partially-obscured to the nurses and doctors at their stations and other patients in their rooms with their doors and curtains sometimes opened like neighbors. Thus my T-shirt—with its stickman personification

of runners under a palm tree—was my most prominent feature; that and my full head of hair, the roots of which had somehow held snugly—unlike most of the other male patients in this wing—throughout my cancer treatments thus far. The trek around our wing was 1/8th of a mile—I tried to do a-mile-a-day—so most saw me repeatedly on my laps, often giving me the thumbs-up signal, sometimes cheering me on: “Go, Marathon Man!”

It was a hopeful day for me but far from happy. 95% of the cancer in my system had been obliterated by six months of chemo, two massive doses of which they’d IVD into me two days prior. And I still had a broken back from the blood and bone cancer—multiple myeloma—that had spawned in and deteriorated my marrow, so I was in a lot of pain. But there was hope now that I could actually beat this thing. I decided to give myself a birthday present and took the day off from my walk. I threw-up instead.

When I awoke the morning after my new birthday, my pillowcase was covered with hair. Damn. I didn’t know if it was the result of the double-dose of chemo—the strongest my system had yet endured—or the stem cell transplant. Didn’t matter. I brushed it carefully in the mirror but my hair collected in the bristles. And in the shower drain. And on my bath towel.

I held out a couple more days, then asked Helena to shave my head like the others. It looked okay in the mirror, but my naked noggin was freezing cold! The knitted cap they’d supplied me made my scalp and forehead itch. So I took a T-shirt and stuck the neck hole over my head down to my ears, wearing it like a pharaoh’s headdress until my bald head acclimated itself to the coolness of the room’s controlled climate. Who knew?

To harvest my stem cells and because the entire transplant process required so much intravenous work, my oncologist Dr. Htut (pronounced “Tut” like the long-ago Egyptian king) at City of Hope had prescribed a Hickman catheter for my treatment. As such, I’d had tubes surgically-implanted just below my neck, attached to my subclavian vein and some artery down in my chest. Sort of like a bolo tie with an insie and an outsie hose. I hated it at first—having to clean it daily so the incision wouldn’t get infected, the way it hung out of my chest like a symbol of my infirmity—but it sure was useful in here. During my entire incarceration (that’s what it felt like), I never got stuck with a single needle! The nurses just hung an IV bag with whatever Dr. Htut wanted to put inside of me and screwed it into my Hickman

catheter. Voila! So unlike most of the other patients who likewise walked the halls, I was one of the few who didn't have to drag along my IV bag (or bags) on a stainless-steel, me-and-my-shadow IV stand on wheels. The nurses just unscrewed me each day around noon for my daily walks—the best part of my days. So even with my broken back, I usually lapped the other patients. Go, Marathon Man! Go!

Because my immune system was compromised, I was scheduled to spend three weeks in isolation like all other autologous transplant patients (six weeks if it's somebody else's donor cells, so I tried not to complain). Oh sure, I could have visitors. But they had to wear masks and gloves and the whole rigmarole and to be truthful, I felt lousy and really didn't like entertaining people, making conversation. So except on weekends, I mostly phoned my wife and kids and texted my friends.

There's not a lot to do when you're isolated in an isolation unit. I kept telling myself: Three weeks is over in three weeks. I tried not to look at the calendar on the wall that first week. But the days were interminably long. I crossed off each with a black "X." I refused to watch TV before four o'clock, which gave me something to look forward to each afternoon, unless it was the weekend and there was an early game on. Each morning, I tried to bribe the food service guy or the custodian with a five-dollar bill to get me the L.A. Times from the newsstand downstairs. Because I had chemo-brain—short term memory loss from chemotherapy—I got to read the Sports section twice!

I couldn't keep food down, so they fed me intravenously. But I knew they wouldn't cut me loose until I could eat solid food again, so I tried daily and threw-up daily. Because they'd replaced my toothbrush with a mini-sponge on a cardboard stick—minimizing the risk of my gums bleeding and infecting—I just couldn't get a fresh feeling inside my mouth, even after gargling. I longed for my toothbrush!

There's a lot of discomfort involved with long-distance running. Successful runners learned to disregard the brain's efforts to halt the body's nonstop locomotion with a mind-over-matter modus operandi—it doesn't matter if it hurts, I'm running! You learned to push through pain. And once the endorphins started flowing, it was almost like a self-induced state of perpetual motion. Admittedly, it was impossible to get those same endorphins secreting on my strolls around the hospital halls, but I put on

my iPod ear-buds and forged through my laps anyway. The T-shirts with the racing stickmen (whom I physically-resembled now) were a reminder of the most difficult physical act I had previously achieved—six months of intense training, leading to a 3:44:42 race time over the 26.2 mile course. But admittedly, recovering from incurable cancer and a broken back made running the marathon feel like child’s play.

I was weak as a newborn, all right, but started doing arm curls while in bed with a dumbbell bar—just the bar; no weights attached; my weakened muscles and unstable spine couldn’t handle more—that I’d brought in my luggage from home. Eight days after my stem cell transplant, I was able to eat solid food again and keep it down. I worked back up to my mile-a-day walks. Seventeen days after I’d been admitted, Dr. Htut agreed to my early release. It was shortest stint for an autologous stem cell transplant that anyone on staff could remember. Go, Marathon Man! Go home! To my wife and my kids and my toothbrush! Voila!

Because it had served its purpose, the Hickman catheter was removed from my chest in an out-patient procedure a week later. Adios, Amigo! And having two birthdays a year now sounded pretty cool. I was actually looking forward to getting my back fused next (no pain—no gain). Who knew: Maybe the doctors and nurses at City of Hope could put me back together again? So far—so good! I figured to check with Dr. Htut about the record for multiple myeloma survival. Because Marathon Man intended to break that, too!

Note: “Marathon Man” is the title story in the forthcoming book, *MARATHON MAN & Other Cancer-Fighting Stories*, by Mark Barkawitz, due for release this spring by Woof Books.

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 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 in 3:44:42. He lives with his wife and has two kids in Pasadena, CA. [www.markbark.org](http://www.markbark.org)

The Tooth Debacle

by Kimberly Tucker

I was concerned about the tooth; of all things.

After he was pronounced dead, I consoled the nurse. "You did everything you could for him," I said, patting her back.

Her eyes were round and moist. I was numb. She kept apologizing but realistically I knew that lungs operating at less than 5% capacity for so long do not re-inflate. I was ready to escape the small gallery of mourners and leave for home. Two weeks of living in a hospital by someone's bedside without leaving the building had me starving for fresh air. I would cry at home, in private cuddled with my little girl. The bedside cot I'd been provided for my 2 week stay concealed my fanny pack that I'd stashed in its tangle of crisp white sheets. Or so I thought. I rooted for it. The search went on for an hour. Every trash can on the unit was rummaged. It never turned up. My anger was mixed with mourning. I lost fifty dollars, and all my important cards and photos, but I would also mourn the keepsakes from my pack; stolen at some point as he lay dying. I would miss the bolt I carried everywhere. Amidst all this, the gold tooth glinted in my mind; like the intrusion of an internet pop-up ad.

I was skilled in doing as I was told. Only thing was, this time his corpse voice was telling me like a madcap auctioneer from inside my head: "*Will ya' fulfill my wishes? Do I hear a yes? Do ah hear a yes from the woman in the big canary-yellow shirt? Pull the tooth before it's too late!*"

The funeral director was predictably somber; and out of breath for some reason. He wore creased pants that didn't reach his shoes. I could see when he crossed his legs; his silky dark socks that stretched up very high. He took me by surprise every time he spoke; his words pressing air like the low keys on an organ.

I rose an eyebrow; startled a bit when he said surreal things about a person who was now spoke of as 'the body.' My mood state was flat and that was normal for me. Starr sat beside me. Sue sat across from me where she kept falling apart. It was her son; after all.

The funeral guy told us he took an actual fingerprint from "the body's thumb." (In case we wanted to make fun crafts with it later!) I jumped in my seat and no one else did. They nodded accordingly. We could make all

kinds of jewelry with the body's thumbprint. It was like kindergarten all over again like when I put my hand in the plaster. Only not.

The funeral guy asked if we had any questions. He asked if anyone minded if he removed his coat. We didn't.

My mother in law's face exploded. I passed the tissue box. "Excuse me." She apologized.

I was the one who was going to have to apologize to *her*; after the words that were about to come out of my mouth, but it had to be said. I had to silence the auctioneer's voice.

I had been staring at the tan carpet the whole time but now I looked in Starr's direction for the strength it might lend me. "Well," I started, swallowing down any hint of a smile. "There's this funny thing. Starr, remember how he always said that he wanted me to have his gold tooth?" I cleared my throat. I clasped my hands. Somewhere classical music played.

"I do remember that, yeah," she said. She nodded. She was a frequent visitor at the end of his life; treating us to her good cheer and sunshine aura. Starr, my lifelong best friend, was my rock.

Sue sat up straight and plunked the tissue box down on its side table. "I didn't know my son had a gold tooth," she said, searching my face; then Starr's face. Then she searched the commercial grade carpet with her wet eyes. I wondered if she saw the lint and hair caught there; as I did. "The gold tooth must've been in the back of his mouth."

"It was," I said. "A souvenir of when our finances were a little better." *Hooray for me I made a giant sentence!* The voice in my head urged me on: "Spit it out, already. Good thing you aren't paying him for his time."

I spit it out: "Anyway he wanted me to have it. Is there any chance you could pull—"

Sue swiped for her tissue box. At first I thought she was swiping for me and I almost ducked. Actually I did duck; a little. The funeral guy swiveled his chair toward me, nearly spilling the paperwork off his well-dressed lap. "I do not feel comfortable with pulling a tooth from the body, no. I can't do that," he said, running quickly chosen words together.

Starr spoke up with her usual conviction. "I think if it's something he really wanted her to have and if it means something to the family then there has to be someone who'll get the tooth for them for a keepsake before he's cremated."

Well you could just pat that silence on the back. Offer it some paperwork to fill out and watch silence pick up the pen. That's how palpable it was. But I felt calm. The voice in my head was just—gone. Sue was a shade lighter than milk. I was sitting there, hands still clasped and wondering if the funeral guy was going to reply to Starr when he did. "I...I'm just not comfortable with that. Sounds like he just wanted something to represent his memory, something for the family to cherish of him, and I strongly recommend our fingerprint jewelry. That's an alternative." He handed me the brochure.

"B-but—" I stammered, experimenting with new ways to cross my legs, uncross them and swing my feet around. "What happens after cremation? Will his gold tooth be left in the ashes? He worried about that. That someone might steal it. Hey...will it be in the ashes that you give me so I can see it and fish it out later for myself to keep?"

Sue leaned forward like she had a stomachache. The funeral guy explained that the heat from the cremation process was so great that it would obliterate the tooth completely.

"I'll get it," Starr said pointblank. She shrugged and leaned back in her chair.

And then my mother-in-law's words *had* to come out. Her dam was only so strong. The words gushed. "What do you mean, you'll get it?" It was admirable. I saw that behind her wet eyes she was trying to have on her 'smiling public face.' (But she was a mess!) I was sorry for the frightened look across her features. I could not imagine losing a child.

Starr had a plan. With the voice of a conspirator she said, "After the wake I'll go in and get it out."

"And just how do you propose to get the tooth out of my son's head?" Sue asked, eyes wider than ever.

"I got some tools in the trunk," Starr said. I knew she would do it. She once got my dropped dollar bill back from a mean kid at the movies when I was seven. She would face down a bull if need be and I had no doubt it would

back off whimpering. She was also genuinely funny in a Whoopi Goldberg kind of way. But I knew she wasn't kidding. Her childhood nickname was Gutsy. No one was smiling. Except me. She had that effect on me.

At last it was time to retreat home to the sanctuary of my backyard where I stooped over the clover patch and crawled around for some time. I found seven four-leaf clovers. My son said that genetically this was a real freak of nature. As for the voice, it had not left my head. Now it had a microphone and it took on the tone of a sports commentator; perhaps because we'd mentioned sports for his obits column: *"I'm madder madder madder!"*

Within a few days the "body" was on display in a closed casket and I was back inside the funeral parlor. The cremation was going to be held sometime after the wake. The funeral parlor building itself held uneasy memories for me. When I was twelve, two older girls who smoked and wore a swipe of shiny blue "shadow" across their upper eyelids, chased me past the deli, all the way down the hill and into the funeral parlor's parking lot. I dared not go further so I turned and faced them; out of breath and scared. "So," one of them said, laughing at my tears and lighting a cigarette, "whaddya say we put you IN there?" She pointed at the white building with the dark shutters...

So his body was in the casket because they couldn't arrange a cremation right away. After most everyone had left the building, I found myself standing alone in the room in front of the closed casket with a handful of mourners. I wondered if he was wearing the hospital johnny coat or was naked inside the casket.

Flowers were lined up on the floor and more hung on the walls. Some had cursive words in gold script across the fronts of the flower sprays: *Loving Brother, Father, Beloved Son, Son-In-Law*. At a diagonal, to the left behind the casket hung a heart-shaped wreath of flowers in white and red, upon the stark white wall. Across the front was the word: **Husband**. So this was the one Sue ordered for me. With my financial affairs still not in order, since my pack had been stolen; she had paid for this wreath for me.

She announced solemnly I needed to decide 'now that it was over' what flowers to take home. But there were no voices today. I couldn't answer. She said we could donate them to a nursing home or to the hospital. My late husband Howie's sister loaded the "Brother arrangement" into her car. Everyone, save for us, was already en-route to her house for the after-

funeral get-together. Since Howie was to be cremated later, there would be no gathering at a cemetery because there would be no burial, no headstone.

Maybe I'd pluck one rose to press in a book next to my four-leafed clovers but *No*, I shook my head. Maybe I didn't want any at all. After over twenty years of having a man make every decision for you it was damned hard to decide if you wanted something or didn't! The way it was before I had to ask permission to purchase barrettes!

It happened so fast, landed on the smiling portrait of him and me. It went over face-forward onto the casket. The *Husband* flowers had a life of their own. What's more, they were like a drunk driver at the wheel that scarily made its way diagonally across the lanes. That's not supposed to happen. The red and white heart had surged forward on its own.

It landed on the casket right in front of *me*. I inspected the nail later. It would've had to lift UP from its wire hanger to do it. If that sort of thing happened a lot in the old black shuttered funeral home, no wonder the funeral guy always looked like a snail in a weasel hole. There was about five feet of distance between the wall where the arrangement hung and the casket.

I stood there, frozen to the spot, reading *HUSBAND* for a moment. We were all alabaster statues; fixated on the picture that the flowers had crashed into—and working out in all our minds the impossible route in our heads the flowers had taken. *Nothing falls off a wall sideways and falls forward/diagonally onto a picture on a casket!*

I broke the silence. "I'll take those home!" I announced to everyone. At least I finally answered Sue's question. I suspected someone was still trying to make decisions for me.

In the parking lot, I loaded my *HUSBAND* wreath into someone's car. Starr came up to me, her limp barely noticeable. She would never let M.S. get an upper hand. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder conspiratorially, toward the intimidating funeral home; the one I passed whenever I walked downtown to get prescriptions. I waited for her to speak. She was going to tell a creepy joke or something. I expected she might hum the twilight zone theme close to my ear.

Her eyebrows were up. *Uh-oh*. A ‘partner in crime’ look. She said, “Should I go back in there and get that tooth? No one needs to know.”

I looked at my new bargain bin shoes; already greened on the edges from the four leaf clover hunting. Then I smiled, at a loss for *my* true want. I knew *his* want. He wanted me to have his gold tooth. That want was recorded on his talking machine at home. The sky was cloudless. It matched my ugly blue shirt with the fake blue rose attached; chosen because it was his favorite color. I knew I would throw it away as it’d be tainted with the honor of being the ‘funeral’ shirt. I smiled at her devotion, avoiding her eyes. “No, I think we’ll let it go.” I said, surprising myself. Empowering myself.

“Are you sure? I’ll do it, if it’s important,” she said, “I remember him saying it. Got the tools in the trunk. Not a big deal. When everyone’s gone—” She made a hand gesture in the air. A movement like operating pliers.

Howie would’ve approved. You better believe it. *Excuse me, funeral guy. We’d like alone time with the body. Please grant us privacy here.* Oh yes, if he’d been here long enough to concoct the plan himself he would’ve approved right down to making me be the one who clamped the monkey wrench down on his gleaming three hundred dollar dental atrocity of a molar. Or whatever it cost. I wasn’t allowed to touch the checkbook. Really, I wasn’t allowed to even touch it.

When Starr asked if I was sure, you better believe I considered it. I looked to the heavens that June day and imagined every detail of the caper right down to the *Mission Impossible* theme music as we lifted the lid of the casket. As we ran out into the parking lot, the gleaming dental prize held high in the air—and then the *Laverne & Shirley* song would have to play... *Schlemiel, schlimazel!*

Yep. In that instant I wanted the caper more than the tooth. “I’m sure,” I said, smiling.

“Okay kiddo,” she said. She pivoted on her good leg and paused to look at me over her shoulder as she headed toward her car. It was as if she hoped I’d change my mind. Maybe she wanted a caper too. I shrugged. She turned and kept walking.

Bio- Kimberly Gerry Tucker is an artist and writer from rural Connecticut. Kimberly's art

and writing has appeared in several publications from 1999 to present, including *The Art of Autism*, *Women From Another Planet*, *Hearing Health*, *Kaleidoscope*, and *Planet Vermont Quarterly*, to name a few. Kim enjoys painting and shows her artwork annually in Good Purpose Gallery (Lee, Mass.), with AANE and in other galleries as well as with Kindtree online. "The Tooth Debacle" is an excerpt from Kimberly's memoir *Under The Banana Moon*, which is available at Createspace and Amazon. She is currently at work on her second nonfiction book, a children's book, and an anthology about celebrating the mentors behind autistic artists called *Words of Wisdom: 100 Tips From Mentors (Nurturing Success in Autistic Artists)* which will be available in the spring. You can find Kim's author page at Facebook/underthebananamoon.

## Law and Order

by Sue Granzella

Sometimes, the fact of my mom's dementia made me feel like I was in an episode of "Law and Order." I'd happen upon the evidence of some mysterious occurrence, and then would hunt for clues to help me deduce what had happened.

One afternoon, we were relaxing in the one-bedroom apartment of her retirement community. Mom was in her beige corduroy recliner, and I was planted on the floor next to her, absent-mindedly stroking her lower leg as we chatted.

Suddenly, she jerked her leg away, emitting a little scream. "No! Don't touch my sore leg!"

"What do you mean, your 'sore leg'?"

I gently pulled up the right leg of her teal-green polyester pants, revealing a deep gouge on her shin. The inch-long wound still looked raw, and it was surrounded with angry pink skin. This was a nasty cut.

"Mom! How did you do that?"

"I don't know." She shrugged slightly and raised her eyebrows, lips pressed together as if to say, "How in the world could I be expected to know that?"

"Well—did it happen here in your place? Did it happen where you eat dinner? Did anyone help you? Did you put a Band-Aid on it?"

It didn't matter how many questions I asked. She shook her head blankly, without any answers. I jumped up to investigate, to see if I could find out how the injury had occurred, just in case I could do something to prevent it from happening again.

In the bathroom, I discovered a large bandage that had been discarded, along with bits of medical tape. On the linoleum, I detected several large splats of dried blood. Hmm.

I dropped to all fours and crawled around the bedroom carpet, feeling for any suspiciously sharp items that were at shin level. As I rounded the foot of the bed, I encountered the prime suspect—the concealed corner of the metal bed frame. I lifted the quilted blue bedspread, and cringed when I felt how sharp the edge was. There was no doubt; I had found the perp.

I opened my mom's dresser drawer, grabbed a few bundled pairs from her store of identical white bobby socks, and wound a bunch of them around the protruding metal corner. After I did the same on the other side of the bed, I secured the socks in place with copious amounts of Scotch tape. *Voila! Case closed!*

Having scrubbed the bathroom linoleum and disposed of the evidence, I rejoined my mother in the living room. "Okay, Mom! I found where you cut your sore leg, and I fixed it so that won't happen again. You'll be all right now."

As Mom beamed her pleasure, I basked in the sweet glow of success. In this journey with the culprit that was stealing Mom one tiny bit at a time, so much was beyond our control. We couldn't stop it, predict it, or cure it. Figuring out the cause of her injury was a little thing. But that day, it sure felt great to make everything all right with just a few white socks and some tape.

Bio- Sue Granzella teaches third grade in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her award-winning work appears in *Hippocampus*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Switchback*, *Crunchable*, *Cleaver*, and *Rusty Nail*, among others. She loves baseball, stand-up comedy, hiking, road trips, and reading the writing of 8 and 9-year-olds.

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