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The Sea Urchin

Scott-Patrick Mitchell

When you wash across the beach
you are merely orb, hollow,
spherical minus your many spikes.

An ornament, a gift, colour licked,
hypnotic with imagination:
pale pink, purple, lemon sucker tips.

But out there, your body mimics
five-fold symmetry of sea star
carried on hundreds of tube feet.

These hydraulics march you on to eat,
barren landscape with teeth, mouth full
of trophic cascades. Aristotle's lantern

shines a light on complexity,
perfection, value as if nature
is a straight line, as if we all fit.

You remind me of my daughter
who craves full-meals, her sharp sideway looks
a barb in the heart of support workers.

She too is a multitude,
represents the five-fold figure of other kids
living houseless, on the streets.

But here, in the comb,
an empty tomb whispers
of might beneath waves.

Found flotsam, remind us
what value there is in existence,
to fight against annihilation.

Ocean's rush can smooth a stone,
but you learn to thicken your skin.
Dear God, protect us from the crush.

Front Porch Farewell

Bonnie Demerjian

Salmon leaps
a courier bringing news that summer is rolling away and
not too long before it drops over the edge.
We're on the outskirts of autumn nowadays.
The rules of this season —
    endless daylight
    dueling flight of hummingbirds
    a sometime wicked heat (no joy to us, acclimated fans of moderation).
These soon enough will melt away in steady rain as —
    beach grass yellows
    thrushes silence
    fireweed bloom ascends to the tip and parachutes away.
We stow paddles and those swimsuits, never worn again this year,
and kiss barn swallows goodbye.
Like those hummers
We'll sip a few last drops of sweetness
with our coffee and the dawn.
More delicious than ever now.
Now that it's August.

Extra Classic

Michael Ross

Why seventy-seven healthy whales arrive on the Isle of Sanday Orkney Beach

Patricia McLean

they were caught directionless
by acoustic channels jammed
with salt, the drumming of engines

they were exhausted
and drowned in the deep

they'd been to Scotland before
the Orkneys are nice this time of year

their balleen were broken
their calves, transparent

They weren't sure that death
did not already enfold them
so quiet is its touch sometimes

at night, the moon wavered
against the weight of tides, faltered
they fled before it fell

Lea night train

Jim Burns

twisted faces
press on windows
streaked
with raindrops
or are those tears
as they
tumble down
slip away
disappear
winds whisper
comfort
or slander
through stands
of bent sycamores
by the tracks
children stop
dream
adults
look away
in the dark
so close
so far
they hear
a whistle cry

Impressions

Susan Andrelchik

Bill sat alone sipping a gin and tonic in a rooftop bar, seven stories up. He squeezed a lime wedge into his half empty glass. The late spring day offered a perfect breeze. Having an afternoon drink was one of the regular activities Bill found himself engaging in ever since he started to work part-time. When his firm had finally hired enough people, he proposed the idea to his boss. Now he leaves right after lunch every day. He still had not told Janie, his wife, about his decision. Janie would not have a problem with it. They were well off, and both talked about retirement on a regular basis. Bill knew he would tell Janie in time.

Sometimes Bill walked in the city park or sat on a bench with whatever novel he had picked up at the local library. He regularly visited two different art museums and a botanical garden on the outskirts of town. Today he sat at the bar. He mostly used his time alone to think about his son who had passed away from cancer a year ago. Janie and he were getting through it, but the pain had taken its toll on their relationship.

Three women at a nearby table suddenly interrupted his thoughts. One of the women was pregnant.

"Ooh, that doesn't feel right. I just had my first contraction," the pregnant woman said while grimacing.

Her pretty blonde friend stood up. "Let's go! I'll hold the elevator. The two of you can wait in the lobby downstairs while I run to get the car!"

The pregnant woman groaned again while saying, "Second babies come fast. I just had another contraction!" Her two friends both said "oh no" at the same time.

Overhearing the three women, a server asked if they wanted her to call 911. The server added, “Go wait inside the restaurant. It’s empty.” She gestured toward the double doors to the left of the bar.

Bill stood up, bolted back his last sip, and put a twenty on the table. He wanted no part in the ordeal of a birth. He approached the elevator which was the only entrance to the bar and restaurant. His hand reached to push the call button when the doors opened and a man with an unzipped black hoodie jumped out. The man grabbed the nearest chair and stuck it between the closing doors. He brushed the hood off his head revealing dark hair cut in the style so many twenty somethings wear, short on the sides with a mop on top that flopped onto the forehead. He pulled a gun out of his waistband. The gunman’s eyes were rimmed in red as if he had been crying.

“Get on the ground!” the gunman ordered Bill. Bill crouched down onto his knees but kept his eyes on the young man.

The gunman turned to the other patrons. There were about twelve people in all, a few at the bar and the others in pairs at the high-top tables.

Waving his gun around he shouted, “You all need to sit on the floor! Get off your chairs!” Then he pointed to the space in front of his feet before he shouted, “Throw your phones down here!”

The server held a portable landline. The gunman shouted, “You, drop the phone and get over here.” Then he addressed Bill and the bartender, “Both of you over here, too.” Bill stood up.

The cook came out of the kitchen through a door in the corner of the bar.

“What the…” the cook’s voice trailed off as he put his hands up.

“You sit down, too!” the gunman shouted.

One by one each person scooted off their seats, tossed their phones, never taking their eyes off the gunman. Two women started to cry. Two of the men

held their hands in the air, as they lowered themselves to the ground. Once seated, some of the people placed their hands on their heads without being told.

Bill had not moved from his original spot. Now that most of the people were on or near the floor, he started walking backwards toward the bar taking tiny steps. Then he crouched into a crawling position on his hands and knees. His first instinct was to hide inside the restaurant and look for stairs.

The gunman spotted Bill and shouted, “I told you to get over here on the floor!”

Bill stood up and inched toward the gunman, with his hands raised. “I’m a doctor,” he lied. “There is a woman inside the restaurant in labor. I would like to go assist her.”

“Where’s your phone?” Bill reluctantly reached in his back pocket and handed it to the distraught man. Backing toward the swinging double doors, the gunman looked inside. The pregnant woman and her two friends had chosen the largest booth. The woman in labor was lying on the bench with her head in one friend’s lap. Her eyes were closed, and she was sweating. The other woman screamed when she saw the gunman.

“You, you and the other one get out here,” he said while waving the barrel of the gun. “Leave the pregnant one inside. Ok, doctor get in there.” The two women stood up and moved toward the door.

As one of the friends passed by Bill she gulped through her tears, “Her contractions seem close together. Her water broke. Oh God, when is the ambulance coming?”

The gunman answered, “There is no ambulance. Go sit down!”

Then he commanded everyone to slide closer together. He backed away from the group toward an outside stucco wall, never losing eye contact.

When he reached the wall, the gunman stepped onto the side of a cement planter that held a dwarf palm. He glanced down onto the street. He jumped off the planter and grabbed the nearest stool, sat down, and faced his hostages. He began to cry. The tears rolled down his cheeks and met in the middle of his chin. He stared at the hostages, never blinking while the stream landed, drop by drop, on the neck of his gray T-shirt, leaving a dark wet circle. He wiped his nose, slowly walked by the hostages, and backed up to the swinging doors.

"What's going on in there?" he yelled to Bill and the pregnant woman.

Bill yelled back, "She is going to need help! Please call the paramedics!"

The gunman said, "That's not gonna happen." Then he left to take his seat on the stool by the wall.

. Bill asked the pregnant woman her name.

"It's Isabel," she whimpered.

"Do you have any other children?"

"Yes. This will be my second. It's a boy. I already have a girl," she added and then began to cry. "My husband is picking up Lara at preschool. I wanted to have one last lunch with my friends before the baby came." Then Isabel moaned.

Bill stood up and jiggled the bench until it detached from the table.

"Steady now. I'm just going to give you more room."

He rolled up a white tablecloth and placed it under Isabel's head. Her legs spread open with her knees up, her navy jersey dress draped down to the middle of her shins. Her moans became more frequent which produced an "I'm so sorry" each time. Bill reassured her there was no need for an apology even though her sounds unnerved him. Maybe she had noticed him wince.

All the while Bill conversed with Isabel, his eyes darted around looking for a fire escape, a door, an exit sign, anything. He knew he would not leave Isabel's side, but the predicament of assisting in a birth and possibly being shot was taking its toll.

Bill found his thoughts drifting to the delivery room when his son was born. Momentarily he allowed himself to feel the joy of that day and then gulped back a sob. Isabel looked up and her brow furrowed. She started to speak, then she let out a louder cry than the previous ones. Her moans continued and started coinciding with the visible contractions of her stomach, each increasing in frequency.

One of the things Bill had loved to do when he was a new father was to be alone with his son. To him the baby boy seemed like a different person when Janie was not around. He was calm, undemanding, and pleasant. When Janie and the baby were together, the child whined and clung to his mother so that Janie had a tough time taking any time for herself. Whenever Bill said he would babysit, Janie grabbed her purse and bolted out the door.

Isabel's cry "the baby's coming" forced Bill out of his daydream.

"Can you push yourself closer to the end of the seat?" Bill asked. Isabel nodded. As she slid forward, her dress caught up under her, exposing her thighs. Her buttocks ended up about a foot from the end of the seat. She was barefoot and her heels hung on the edge to give her legs support.

Bill glanced toward the door and thought that he had better look like he knew what he was doing. He knelt on the floor in front of Isabel's open legs and looked directly at the top of the baby's head starting to crown. It was remarkable to see a baby entering the world for the second time in his life. He whispered his son's name.

Bill decided to touch the baby boy's head and jolted back slightly as he made contact. He hoped Isabel had not noticed his discomfort. He took a

deep breath and then reached again, taking note and feeling thankful the wetness was warm and not cold.

The next few minutes were a cacophony of loud groans that really had no beginning or end, and Bill shouting “I can see him, push, Isabel, push, yes, that’s good, here he is” as he retrieved the baby from between his mother’s legs, away from the cold slick Naugahyde. He placed the infant in his mother’s arms. He grabbed another tablecloth to wrap around the duo, umbilical cord, and all, and helped prop Isabel up. The gunman was standing by the swinging doors.

“Okay, doctor. Get out here.”

Bill stepped outside, but even the gravity of the situation did not detract from his feeling of awe. For the second time today, he swallowed hard.

The afternoon air felt cooler than when Bill had sipped on his gin. He joined the crowd on the floor. His hands still felt sticky and damp from the newborn and he wondered if any of the others were able to see the glisten on his palms. He whispered to one of Isabel’s friends who was sobbing, “Your friend is doing great. The baby is fine.”

He watched the gunman closely, observing facial expressions he had never seen before on a grown man. He noticed micro-contortions, the mouth barely opening and closing, rapid blinking, his chin lifting and lowering. Someone in the group whispered, “I think he is going to cry again.”

Bill’s first revelation of the day was that the delivery had bought him time. But he was still hostage, and he had failed to figure out where the stairs were located.

A second revelation came in the form of empathy. Or the idea that this situation called for it. The gunman was clearly sad and conflicted. It was worth a shot.

Bill spoke up, “You know I cried today.” The gunman looked at him. “My wife has cancer,” he lied for a second time. “She won’t get treatment so, I drink sometimes.”

After a long pause Bill added, “Why are you sad?”

An airplane purred in the distance. The traffic down below was gaining in volume as the end of the workday neared.

The gunman finally answered, “It doesn’t matter. I blew it. I threatened my girlfriend, and she called the cops. I’m going back to jail.”

“Not if you end it. No one is hurt. You let me deliver the baby. That was a good thing. Let’s end this without any trouble. No one knows what is going on up here. We can help you. We can help you get away.”

The people in the group who had been looking down now lifted their heads. One woman nodded. Then the cook said, “There are stairs off the kitchen. I can show you. Really, only the staff know about them. You can get away.”

Bill quickly added, “I will take you. I know where the kitchen is. Come on, let’s go. We do not want you to go to jail.”

The gunman rose. He let the gun hang down by his side for over a minute. Then he looked around and grabbed a tablecloth. He laid it on the floor and wrapped the phones up by tying the four corners together to make a pouch. Bill stood up with his hands raised. “It’s this way,” he whispered.

Bill led the way through the restaurant not pausing to look at Isabel. The gunman walked backwards by Bill’s side, pointing his gun. Once inside the kitchen they found the door to the stairway. The gunman opened the door, kicked a box of napkins at Bill, then ran down the stairs, his heavy footsteps heard for at least two stories. Bill waited and counted to sixty. It felt like an eternity but then he entered the stairwell and descended the seven floors.

When he got outside, he was alone in an alley. He walked quickly toward the main street where he had parked his car.

At home Janie was sitting in front of the television. When Bill unlocked the front door, he heard the news blaring louder than usual. As he walked in, Janie said, “You are not going to believe what happened downtown. Right by your office!”

The boisterous greeting took Bill by surprise. Most evenings Janie was in the bedroom, or if she were in front of the television the volume would be barely audible. These days they greeted each other with their eyes, no words.

Bill sat down to watch the breaking news with his wife. While listening to the familiar hostages interviewed, he noticed that some of the events were reported accurately and some were not. The hostages nicknamed Bill “the angel who saved them and the baby.” The broadcast concluded with the reporter saying, “So tonight we are on the hunt for the gunman who terrorized these poor hostages, and for one angel.”

Bill stood up and mixed himself a double gin and tonic. He poured his wife a glass of pinot. He went to bed that night confirming his decision not to tell anyone about his role on the rooftop bar. Bill wanted the ordeal to fade away as soon as possible. That night he dreamt of his own son’s birth.

Over the next few days, every news channel and radio station reported the story about the angel and the gunman. The public seemed more interested in finding the local hero. It became a regular topic of conversation with his wife.

Bill tried to go about his business. His mixed emotions of pride and horror and secretiveness distracted him from his work. His dreams were filled with his son as a healthy adult. He called in sick three days after the incident and sat around the house. He could not remember the last time he had spent the entire day with Janie. All morning, she had been speculating aloud that the angel was in fact a doctor, like he had told the gunman.

Bill spoke up, “Janie, would you mind changing the subject? I’m a little tired of hearing about it.”

“But you must admit it’s quite a story! He had to be a doctor for real. Otherwise, why would he have risked helping that poor woman and her baby?”

Bill wrestled with whether he should tell Janie. He saw himself breaking down if he talked about Isabel’s son. He knew he would not be able to leave out the part about his recollections of their own son’s birth. He thought if he started crying, he would never stop.

Bill called in sick a second day in a row. Janie chatted throughout the day. She talked about the sketch of the gunman. She mentioned she wondered why the police had not thought of sketching the doctor.

When Bill returned to work, the office staff continued to buzz about the angel. Many colleagues had drawn the same conclusion as his wife, that the angel was in fact a doctor. Others ventured that he was a psychologist who knew exactly what to say to the distraught gunman. Others conjectured that the gunman must have kidnapped the hero, otherwise why wouldn’t he be around to take credit?

After about two months the media stopped talking about the gunman and the angel. Neither had been found.

From time-to-time Bill’s thoughts drifted back to that fateful day. His dreams about his son had stopped for the most part. He stopped thinking about whether his decision to remain anonymous was the right thing to do. The story had somehow heartened Janie. He felt grateful.

Six months to the day after the hostage incident on the rooftop bar, Bill arrived home from work. He let himself in and heard voices coming from the kitchen. He smelled onions and garlic, suddenly feeling hungry. He wondered if Janie had uncharacteristically invited someone to dinner.

He stopped at the wet bar to mix a drink then headed into the kitchen. He saw the back of a woman's head, a woman holding a baby. She turned around. It was Isabel. No one said a word. The three adults stared at each other. Janie wiped her eyes.

Exuviae

Eve Müller

My ex and I bicker over the phone about money, kids, school – code for the unspoken wounds of twenty-seven years of loving and hating. I find a cicada trapped inside my car. It keens with rage. Thrashes its wings against the glass. I can't believe how loud it is. I open the door and it flies out into the humid, blanketing air. Shrieking into the morning. All day I think of the cicada. Wishing I could release my anger into the world in the form of searing, white hot noise.

decades belowground –
gutters overflow with
broken bodies of insects

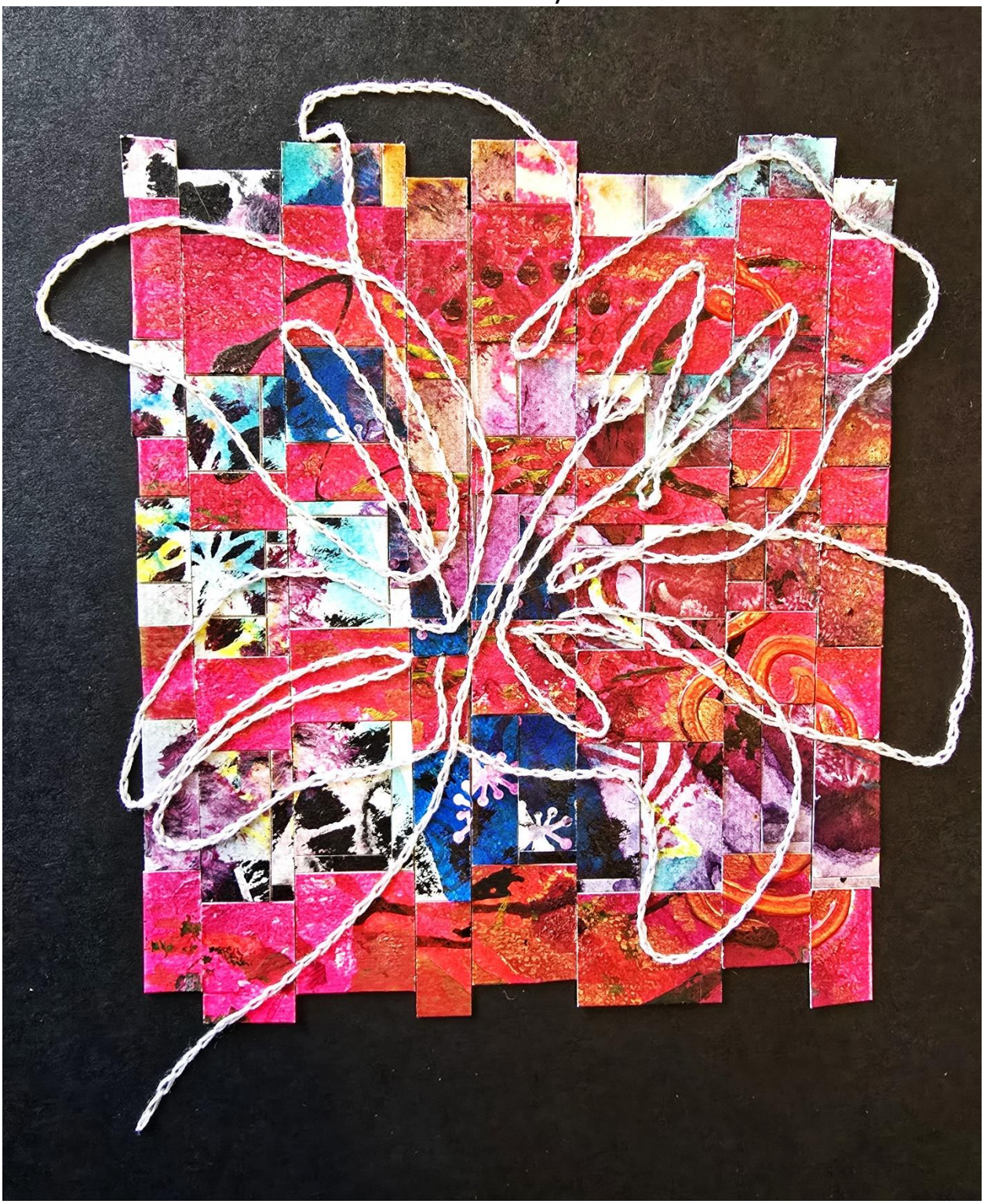
Empty Rungs

Megan Cartwright

After the bomb, there were only silhouettes;
flowers and bees, soot-black.
Eden is empty
God is empty.
This is no double-helix stairway
to heaven, never ascended.
Empty rungs.
Scorched lungs, empty,
save for the ashes of their dead.

Summer Bloom

Lisa Dailey



that tension between the zucchini

Rebekah Teller

Change my mind about the sordid way he smiled at me
and brushed his shoe against mine
I apologize
my foot was in his way
again
then again
so I lift an eyebrow as the server arrives
with a plate of appetizers
and I'm granted another smile
temptation
tension
I slip my foot out of its shoe
desperate
daring
slide it between his knees
into his lap
he caresses the ankle
my Achilles heel
and finds out
he loves zucchini

The Trinity

Michael G OConnor

I'm struggling.
Jerking awake into grey-lit damp
air thick with salt-sweat smell; clinging
sheet wrapping me into a tight ball.
My last dreams clitter like copper beetles, belly up,
litter the cool pine floor of our bedroom,
their black legs spindles of question marks
punctuating the air.

You lay beside me deep in some other world,
Breath calm and even, beautiful,
your dreams heavy with your ever sober focus of black and white.
Dark air whispers in your ear sweet as lavender,
a lover, laughing light at my inability to sleep.
I imagine you saying, as always, "it's fine. You'll be fine."
your closed lids
flutter and whisper,
and the perfume of flannel, your thick black hair, and copper skin
clutter the room, a frenzy of wings,
then circle
back, and my shabby bulk takes cautious bites of the dark between us.
I stretch and snap the long bone of my back
perch it to the bunched pillows
catch my breaths, stack them like shadows
pray they will protect me St. Anthony,
press them against feathered light creeping over the sill.
This morning, my passion shuffles the hall in a faded tweed suit.

I watch from my perch, watch the thin ghosts of light and dark chase along
the baseboards of hallway, ending in the kitchen,
then hang by the window with the thin China cups,
the Sears Roebuck clock and the Crucifix.
A low slant of beauty strays in the pale foam of light
and my mother, small and round with determined movement
pares the morning, calls it into being by naming it and the day is allowed to begin again.
My wife, my mother, not alike, not yet.
They are somehow bound together through me.
I try to see the morning kitchen through their eyes,
fold them together,
here in this kitchen
in the womb of this house, where beauty lives out its days and dies
among sober smells of borax waging holy war
on the bacon grease in the coffee can which
anchors the Kelvinator stove to the thin ribbed wainscoting
that starves in silence and slinks away
to do penance behind the cast iron sink.
I remember my mother,
by that sink, her shoulders not much above its yawing mouth,
wrapped in the starched clouds from the steam iron
her crippled knuckles clinging to the iron in a tangle of quiet strength.
The smell of black bread and Lysol clung to the hem of her skirts.
I still see her, with the aunts, putting up vegetables for the winter,
these small hard women, working the food devoutly, passing pared, sliced beans and cucumbers,
carrots and beets, like future blessings on the family.
They baked bread in coffee cans for the freezer,
prayed to St. Anthony for everything,

quick movement of lips, a sign of the cross snuck in between paring the apples.
I dream often of my mother now.
Mother of the prayer vanguard
keeper of the house,
Mother of the red paddle, Mother of the catechism, Mother of our virtue.
I think of her as I watch my wife lightly touching the kitchen table after a meal or watching our children through the window.
I struggle to reason how these two women, both mothers, both wives, both keepers of some sacred
flame
somehow tie my life together, live in my core,
see through me and through my eyes.
How they both give without thought, stack themselves like shadows against my demons
move silently through a quiet world of managing and scrimping,
tidying and smoothing wrinkles, feelings and crises,
watching from some distant perch of their own
dipping into our world now and again
Like a small, calming prayer.

~

c_zientek

on the way out of her
office she turned and
if there was a particul
on the autistic radio d
that forces you to finis
peoples sentences wit
commercial jingles or

he just smiled
and shook her hand,
“no” was all he said.

musical tourette's
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.
articles/PMC4723199/

The Surrogate

Paul Lewellan

Surrogate (noun): a person appointed to act for another; a deputy; a substitute

Don't dismiss me before you know the whole story. Hear me out.

When people hear "surrogate," they think of surrogate mothers, women who lease their wombs to other women unable (or too busy) to conceive. B-grade film buffs remember the 2009 Bruce Willis movie, *Surrogates,* about a future world where the occupants lived in protected homes while sexy robotic surrogates lived for them remotely. But the employment ad I found on the dark web was different.

> *Seeking WF, medium complexion, 50-60 years of age, size 12-14, fit, educated, articulate, a quick learner. Role-play skills essential.*
>
> *Devoted husband of 35 years desires surrogate wife during indeterminate recovery period. Duties include household management, pet care, light cleaning, basic cooking skills, and corporate related social obligations. Baking proficiency a plus. Rhubarb pie a must. Will pay a la carte for conjugal services. Cosmetic surgery may be required.*
>
> *Six-figure salary. Meals, lodging, wardrobe, and expenses. Paid time off, health insurance, eye care, dental, and psychiatric services as needed. Generous severance package when wife returns. Contact Jeremiah.*

A web address followed. The male advertiser hoped to switch out his wife temporarily until she could recover from whatever ailment she suffered.

The new identity and possible need for plastic surgery were pluses. When I left my husband, there would be no turning back. He would pursue, hunting me to ground. Until I read that ad, I had no idea how I might escape him.

I filled out the online form: height, weight, measurements, hair color, distinguishing characteristics, tattoos, birthmarks, eyes, etc. There was a space to paste a headshot, a second space for a full-frontal swimsuit photo, and a box for a 550-word bio. I finished the bio and pressed Send. I received an immediate acknowledgement at the email address I provided. This was an address unknown to my husband. The following day I received a thank you note, congratulations, and a $200 Amazon gift certificate, along with a new link. I'd made the first cut.

Tuesday night my husband Geoff bowled in a mixed league. Most Tuesdays he came home late and drunk, reeking of sex. Once I showed up unannounced at the bowling alley. He was cordial. He bought me a soft pretzel and a glass of boxed Riesling. He was attentive and affectionate.

When we got home he stripped me, whipped me with his belt, and tied me to the bed. The next morning when he untied me he hissed, "The bowling alley, that's my turf."

I logged into the library computer, went to the new link I'd been sent, and began the next round. I completed a Big Five Inventory-2 (BFI-2) personality test. I was asked about cutting ties with family, friends, and employer. I described my marriage in under 1000 words. I was queried about the traits I looked for in a husband. I wanted to write, "Anybody but Geoff," or "Not a Rapist," but choose instead to describe the man I thought I'd married twenty-three years ago, before his deployment, before our only son died, before he found uncomplicated sex in other beds.

The last question (marked *Optional) asked me to describe "the perfect romantic evening: courtship and intercourse to climax." I realized the asterisk was a lie. It wasn't Optional. Everything else with optional. This man wanted someone he could pretend was his wife (a person now lost to him), someone able to give him the sexual satisfaction that his wife could no longer provide.

Me. I could do that. I wanted to do that. He would pretend I was his wife, and I would pretend he was the man I'd married. Only the sex would be real.

I described the perfect romantic evening. Easy enough. I'd replayed it a hundred times. I'd make French onion soup using Julia Child's recipe with a crusty bread on the side, followed by grilled salmon with dill dressing, and fresh asparagus in a cheese sauce. I would be dessert, naked with dark chocolate syrup and whipped cream.

He would take me on the dining room table, then we'd shower together and make love again in the bedroom, slowly this time, with less urgency, but no less hunger. I'd serve him rhubarb pie and fall asleep in his protective arms.

I pressed Send and hurried home.

Geoff came home late, complaining about work. I handed him a beer in a frosty mug and listened attentively until he'd decompressed. I served him meatloaf and mashed potatoes, sweet corn, peaches and cottage cheese, then more beer and pretzels in his La-Z-Boy. There was a Cubs game on. He fell asleep in the chair before he could follow me up to the bedroom we shared.

In the morning, I swung by the library to check my email and there it was....

We should meet.

He suggested lunch at an upscale restaurant a bus stop away from work. *A formality*. *My wife's condition has turned. Can you start immediately?*

The next morning I made Geoff a ham and sharp cheddar cheese omelet with a side of cinnamon raisin toast with melted butter and honey. Crispy hashbrowns. "What's the occasion?"

"Do I need an excuse to pamper my husband?"

And now I'm going through the motions of an internal audit. At noon I'll tell my colleagues I'm meeting a friend who's come to town. I'll take my purse, and leave everything else behind.

It's short bus ride. I expect I will have a lovely lunch with a man older than he's suggested, more desperate than I am, someone sure to disappoint, as all men have, but a kind partner who will love me as best he can. I suspect that will be enough.

[i have nothing to give the leaves]

Scott Ferry

i have nothing to give the leaves / they fall / i have been sentenced to walk under them or over them / i have been instructed to stay in my body as the years bloom and rot / everything is contaminated by life / everything contains a ghost / mirror of viscera inside the mirrored eyes makes nothing but reverberations into itself / moist meat / skeletal fragments of prayers or half-definitions fed to the moaning intestines / the dead organs pass through us / spring in the mouth and winter's cinders out of the anus / we cannot contain them but take from the earth what we need / our inside is full of leeches / we are not the container nor what is hollow inside / i hold my spirit in my hands like a lost mouse in a fire / i am not the ashes after the cleansing / i am not the fear of passing through this burning gut / i am the leaves fallen / and the buds / and the sticky liquid wicked up all of the stems

Gated

Susan Lily Jackson

And if that baby, the size of an inch, made its way to be the adult that
we found next to the gate it couldn't miss---
Each feather in perfect stylish colours, even after being ruffled by death.
Or the fox, discovered by the flashlight;
unmoving, sounds like a raven to confuse me? Brown, brown; eyes wide—
unblinking.
Six to five chipmunks; Jolene, the only girl--now gone.
Was she somewhere with her babies?
Would they grow up, only to find no passage through the gate?
Real ravens chase the peanuts and I chase them.
Even the emerald river has colorful dots of kayaks and young kids laughing.
Did the grouse know? That beauty and distance were too much to fly
towards?
I think the three woodpeckers do--- They batter my glass windows and doors,
siding every morning --for nuts.
All is forgiven because of their red heads--
But not the gate.

Jumping The Card Shark

Jean Ende

Helen Rosen had short fingers, wide knuckles and chubby wrists. She had trouble putting on rings and fastening bracelets. But a pack of cards fit perfectly into her hands. She could cut a deck with surgical precision, create a fan or waterfall and have the cards fall seamlessly back all together.

Beginning in the 1950s, Helen had a standing poker game with the girls every Wednesday afternoon. When she was the dealer, the cards flew across Formica dinette tables and landed precisely in front of each middle-aged player as she provided a running commentary.

"A jack for Shirley, maybe the new grandbaby will be a boy.

"Possible full house for Bernice, maybe your son will surprise you and come home for the holidays.

"Nothing showing for Sonia, the new corset is really doing its job."

They were a core group of seven women, most of them Eastern European refugees whose families had fled the Holocaust and eventually settled in this middle-class Bronx neighborhood. And in each ample bosom beat the heart of a true gambler, someone who would leave a load of laundry unattended, thereby risking machine malfunction and a flooded house; or skip the opportunity to scrutinize a new cleaning woman who might be a thief or a just-sweep-it-under-the-rug type, in order to get to the game on time.

They played for 10¢ and 20¢, dealer's choice of game--sometimes five card stud or straight poker, frequently something more interesting like spit in the ocean, follow the queen or one-eyed jacks.

The game started at 10 a.m. at a different house each week. Tables were set so each person had a matching ash tray and dessert dish in which to store change. They arrived with voluminous handbags sagging with the weight of coins collected during the week's shopping. They paused at 1 p.m. for a lunch prepared by the hostess.

"Looks great but not too much for me, I'm still on a diet. Well, maybe just a sliver of your cheesecake. You use Saccharine don't you?"

The game ended at exactly 3 p.m. Children were returning from school and dinner had to be started. No one ever discussed how much they'd won or lost. If you played you could afford to play.

Helen had always been a gambler. One of the few American-born women in her social group, she was the proud holder of a high school diploma obtained at night-school after she was pressured to quit high school in her junior year, get a job and help her parents survive the Depression. She gave in to their demands but was determined the economy wouldn't defeat her.

A few years after obtaining her diploma and a job in the office of a garment center manufacturer, Helen married Saul, a stocky little man with a heavy accent who had his own business, betting his fierce ambition would lead to the comfortable life she craved.

Helen won the jackpot.

Friends who'd married American-born men with diplomas and grammatical speech lived in smaller houses, drove older cars, searched for sales. Helen had more jewelry, more vacations, more of all kinds of stuff including the admiration of a husband who considered her a prize and never commented on how much his wife spent on herself or the household.

And Helen appreciated Saul. She bought her husband clothes she thought appropriate for a man of his stature, learned to cook the dishes his family preferred (though purposefully not quite as well as his mother made them) and told her friends what a blessing it was to be married to a short man because high heels ruined your feet.

But, after many years, Helen became restless. Her children grew up, became independent. Shopping became tiring and new purchases didn't make her as attractive as they used to. Most of all, the neighborhood card

game wasn't as much fun. Gossip got stale, the excitement of a winning hand faded.

Then, one bright day, Helen discovered Puerto Rico. She found it in a beauty parlor magazine. In a full-page spread highlighting all of the island's glitzy attractions she saw strutting flamingos, white sugar sand beaches, flamboyant nightclub shows and best of all, casinos.

Helen did her research at the small travel agency under the El, interrogating the agent who had earned a reputation for reliability at arranging trips to Miami or Israel.

Saul had no desire to try something new. He was happy with the vacations they had been taking, two weeks in the mountains every summer. Among New York Jews, the mountains meant the Catskills, the borscht belt circuit. They'd drive up Route 17, stop at the Red Apple Rest for lunch, and then on to first-class hotels like Grossingers and the Concord, where all of the countryside's natural dangers had been tamed for the comfort of guests. Golf courses had buzz cuts, heavily chlorinated water circulated in indoor and outdoor pools. There was abundant kosher-style food served three times a day by college student waiters who were preparing for medical and law schools and happy to accept a young lady's phone number slipped to them by a parent or grandparent, along with the generous tip.

But Saul was used to letting his wife make decisions about anything that didn't involve the business, so they boarded a plane--two pudgy adventurers with overweight luggage. Not since 15th century explorers roamed the seas searching for new worlds had anyone been as excited as Helen to set foot on foreign soil.

And her luck held. She found a new promised land.

If you wanted to swim, you could wade in kidney-shaped pools with swim-up bars, or in the warm, calm water of the Caribbean where friendly natives set up umbrellas and lounge chairs and brought over towels and snacks and drinks served in a pineapple. All hotel attractions were easily

accessible, just follow paths studded with faux coral from which the strains of "Yellow Bird" played on a continuous loop

In lobby shops and town stores, Helen spruced up her Bronx wardrobe with flowered orthopedic sandals, straw hats and flowing tropical print dresses. Saul discovered the joy of golf courses with water views and Helen bought him pastel sports shirts and checkered Bermuda shorts that showed off his bowed legs. He wore linen sports jackets at the hotel's many gourmet eateries.

Helen was quickly right at home in the casinos. In the movies, gambling lounges are crowded with gangsters and floozies, leathery-skinned, diamond encrusted women and gigolos, sugar daddies and showgirls and James Bond movie extras. But the patrons of the island casinos could be easily swapped with the audience at *Fiddler on the Roof.*

Aided by pamphlets thoughtfully placed in their room, and mathematical skills honed during her bookkeeping days, Helen quickly mastered new games. A few hours at the blackjack table and she could spew out all combinations of numbers adding to 21. She discovered craps, where bedazzled ladies jingled their gold bangles as they rolled dice onto the felt-covered table and strangers exchanged hugs and kisses or scowls and impolite words as blank faced attendants pulled chips across the table with shiny miniature rakes. For a woman who couldn't change a fuse or read a road map, this game was soon as intuitive as Spit in the Ocean. And a lot more exciting.

Saul and Helen came home with sunburns, souvenirs carved out of coconuts, duty free rum, watches and perfume and tales of winning streaks at crystal-studded casinos. Soon all of the poker ladies were off to share the new adventure.

The women of Pelham Parkway discovered casinos on islands like Aruba, Curacao, Nassau, and the Bahamas, and the island marketing systems discovered them. Did Beatrice want a room at the Aruba Hilton? No problem, there was one waiting for her at a discounted price. Sonia need help booking a flight? The nice lady at the Paradise Island Hotel was glad to check the schedule and send a car to pick her up at the airport. Fanny having trouble

getting a reservation at her favorite Nassau restaurant? The good-looking young man at the hotel desk made all of the arrangements, including a free cocktail.

Helen and her friends, and her friends' friends, and eventually their children and grandchildren became Caribbean connoisseurs. But no one knew their way around a casino like Helen.

Where was Saul? He'd play blackjack for a while, put a few coins in the slot machines and wander into the lounge where he nursed a beer or two for an hour and watched scantily clad girls dance on the bar. Saul paid for his own drinks.

Eventually he'd find Helen and let her know he was tired. "So go to bed," she'd say without taking her eyes off the action. "I'll be up soon." He'd go to their room, watch TV and fall asleep, unaware of what time his wife came up. "I did okay," she always said the next morning. "I didn't play too long." He didn't ask for details.

Helen was a friendly woman who tipped generously. Early afternoons, when others were shopping, taking naps or lounging by the water, she stopped into the uncrowded casino, played a few hands and chatted with dealers and waitresses. Soon she knew most of the staff, asked after families, knew who was dating whom. She sympathized with break-ups, applauded news of weddings and cooed at pictures of new babies while the dealer drew cards and she threw down chips.

Her best friend was Jimmy, the casino pit boss at Paradise Island Hotel.

Jimmy was in his 40s when Helen met him and she quickly found out he was single. Naturally she was concerned. Jimmy wasn't a kid, he should have a wife to take care of him. But the girls he seemed fond of, mostly showgirls or dealers or waitresses, some barely past adolescence, were, in her opinion, not appropriate wife material.

While she searched local shops for "a nice Caribbean girl," Helen realized it was up to her to fulfill a few wifely functions for her new friend and bring Jimmy the type of personal supplies that, she knew, a man his age needed but was incapable of providing for himself.

Jimmy was a handsome, well coiffured guy, who strode through one of the largest gambling casinos in the world wearing expensive suits and antique gold cuff links, rubbing elbows with the rich and famous in private gambling suites. Helen brought him Banlon polo shirts, support socks (because he was on his feet so much) shampoo to prevent dandruff and help him keep his hair and pills to combat digestive issues common to men his age. She thought about getting him the special underwear Saul wore to protect against prostate conditions but decided that it could wait until Jimmy was older.

The pit boss accepted the gifts good naturedly, smiled and shook her hand. “Oh, Mrs. Rosen, you shouldn’t have.”

“Ah, it’s nothing,” she’d reply, forcing him into a breast squashing hug. “But after all these years when are going to start calling me Helen?”

“I don’t want your husband to get jealous,” Jimmy replied with a wink to Saul as he pulled away.

Maybe he was just being kind to a good customer, maybe he was legitimately fond of the kindhearted old lady. Who could tell? Jimmy always smiled as he made reservations for the Rosens and their friends at island restaurants and nightclub dinner shows. Their checks were often marked “compliments of the hotel.” Helen’s gifts were promptly handed to the custodial staff.

To Helen’s great disappointment, the gamblers’ gene seemed to have bypassed her offspring.

Her daughter Sarah once sat next to Helen at the blackjack table when the dealer had a deuce showing and Sarah had a queen. “Hit me,” the younger woman said confidently. The dealer briefly glanced at Helen who was looking at her daughter as if she’d ordered a ham and cheese sandwich at Katz’ Kosher Deli. The dealer gave Sarah a six and flipped over her cards. They totaled 26.

"Do you know what I could have gotten at Bloomingdale's with that money?" Sarah grumbled as her chips disappeared. Helen shook her head. Such a rookie mistake. She couldn't meet the dealer's eyes and didn't bother introducing her daughter to the nice waitress who placed a drink next to Helen's towering pile of chips

Her grandchildren were too young to indoctrinate. As politely as possible, the casino staff kept telling Helen she couldn't let her grandson sit on her lap, drop in coins and pull the handle on the slot machine. Yes, it was fun to watch him giggle as the pictures rolled around, the lights flashed and the coins clattered onto the tray. It was also illegal.

Of course the bar staff had no objections to the youngsters who stood on tiptoe to order "virgin pina colados charged to my grammy." The drinks arrived quickly with extra cherries and tiny umbrellas. Generous tips were added to checks charged to Helen and Saul's account.

Sarah once suggested a trip to an island without a casino.

"What can you do after dinner at such a place?" Helen asked. "It's too early to go to bed, there's nothing on TV here, what do you do if you can't gamble?"

"We'd take a walk, have a drink, talk," said Sarah.

"Eventually there's not much left to talk about," Helen said. "You should learn to play cards."

Saul had better luck with the younger generation.

While Helen shopped and gambled at the hotel he explored the Nassau harbor. Saul was comfortable in the busy commercial area among working people, didn't mind the smells of fish and sweat or the sounds of machinery. His heavy Yiddish accent blended with workers' thick Caribbean patois.

Saul watched local fishermen who'd been out since daybreak unload nets full of seafood which would be on restaurant menus tonight and listened to foremen yell at slow moving crew members. Those guys better be careful,

he thought, one day the fishermen will form a union and they'll be dealing with the Teamsters like I do.

Saul wondered if his family and their friends might enjoy fishing, a day in the fresh air away from the hotel and the casino.

He watched people line up for day trips on fishing boats, walked up and down the wharf checking how much each boat charged, and what comforts they provided. Saul watched passengers set up their gear, bait their hooks, buy beers and laugh while they shouted to each other and told dirty jokes. He shook his head.

Not for my family, he thought. These boats go out too far, for too long, too crowded. Helen wouldn't approve of how people talked. A grandchild would get seasick and Helen would yell at me while they threw up.

But Saul didn't give up on good ideas easily.

He kept walking and, a short distance from the line of large excursion boats, he found a few smaller boats. On the dock was a sign showing a gleaming boat, a man in a crisp uniform and the words, "Cap' Anders accommodates small, private groups, anyplace, anytime. Come aboard for a guaranteed good time."

Saul watched this boat smoothly enter the harbor and spotted the captain, a dark skinned, wrinkled man of indeterminate age who wore baggy denim shorts and a faded t-shirt with a reggae star's photo. Saul understood why the sign had used an old, doctored photo. He liked watching the captain personally make sure the boat was secure while his teenage helper assisted three smiling middle-aged couples shakily make their way ashore carrying plastic bags containing the already cleaned fish they'd caught.

Saul bought two beers and walked to the end of the wharf. "Hey Andy," he called "You got time to tawk?"

Anders flashed a gap-toothed smile at the stubby man wearing light green plaid Bermuda shorts. "Sure ting my friend," he called, giving the ropes one more tug before gracefully leaping ashore.

Saul looked at Anders carefully, found out that, after working for others for several years, Anders had bought this boat last year. He looked like a reliable, hard-working man, so Saul explained his family situation while Anders slowly sipped his beer.

"Okay, I can take care of you," he said. "We give the kiddies a good time and keep the mamas happy. We take dem all to Chicken Island."

Saul scrunched his bushy eyebrows together. "I never heard from any Chicken Island, vat you talking about?"

Anders described the excursion he had in mind. Saul thought about it for a few minutes, nodded, and the two men shook hands. Then Saul slowly walked back to the hotel trying to figure out the most difficult part of his plan—getting Helen to agree.

Generally when he mentioned his trips to the harbor his wife shook her head. "Feh! How can you stand it there?" she'd say. "It's noisy and it stinks. In the hotel everything is clean and smells like flowers. There's always nice music playing."

Saul decided he'd first speak to the other adults with them, their daughter Sarah and her husband, a nephew and his wife. He'd tell them that their children needed a change of scenery, a day away from the casino in fresh air. Sarah immediately agreed and she and her dad approached Helen together. Fortunately for them, Helen's defenses were down, she hadn't done well at the casino last night. Maybe a short break would do her good. She allowed her husband and daughter to talk her into the excursion.

The Rosens arrived at the harbor a few days later and found a freshly scrubbed boat with mini-life jackets for the kids, a canvas awning to provide shade and seat-cushions to make the boat's benches more comfortable. A large Styrofoam container held drinks and snacks from a local gourmet restaurant.

Helen wasn't impressed. The whole area smelled like someone had disconnected a refrigerator full of food , a man was spitting on the wharf, two

teenagers were necking without any concern about who was watching, at least three radios were playing different songs at full volume. She didn't return Anders' greeting as he helped her aboard, just loudly reminded everyone that she had plenty of seasick pills and suntan lotion which should be reapplied frequently or they'd be very sorry later.

As soon as Anders' boat smoothly left the busy harbor he brought out an assortment of fishing rods, including a few child-size ones. The helper quietly walked behind Anders carrying a large, rusty can full of fat, squirmy worms.

Helen refused his offer of a fishing rod, made a face and turned away. The youngsters squealed while the helper carefully baited their hooks. Each child could cast their line into the water, or have it done for them. They'd hold the rod until they felt a nibble or got bored and propped the rod against the side of the boat and started teasing a cousin or running around below deck where they explored Anders' miniature apartment with a cot, icebox and stove with burners that swiveled up and down to accommodate sea currents.

Anders kept an eye on each line. If the lure began to bob, he'd yell for the rod's owner so they could pull up their catch and get their picture taken with the wriggling fish while everyone cheered. If a younger child got frustrated because he wasn't getting any fish, Anders waited till he turned away, stuck a fish on the line and yelled for the child to pull up his catch.

Within an hour they reached a small coral reef covered with rocks and plants. Four or five chickens clucked loudly when the boat approached. Children and adults climbed down the boat's ladder and swam in the clear, still water. The more adventurous made their way onto the island's stony shoreline and chased the chickens. No one caught a chicken but they found a few eggs.

The children demanded to know how the chickens got there. "Chickens can't swim, they can't fly, there's no bridge connecting the island to the land," someone said with all the solemnity of a fourth-grade debater.

"Dese be Caribbean chickens," explained Anders. "Dey work harder den your New Yawk chickens. If dere's food on an island, dey'll go to dat island. Don't matter if dey has to fly or swim or walk over the water."

The children looked skeptical but no one contradicted the captain.

Anders had explained to Saul that, at low tide, there was a narrow land bridge which connected the reef to a nearby farm. Before they set off, the helper went to the reef and scattered a few eggs for the children to find.

At the end of the trip, Anders and the helper kept all the fish and the eggs. Saul tipped generously. The trip to chicken island soon became a regular part of Rosen family vacations.

Saul also enjoyed escorting the little ones to the two-story-high pink cement pyramid directly behind the hotel's main building. Inside the pyramid was a giant shark tank. An enclosed waterslide ran through the tank so children could zip through the pyramid while sharks swam around them.

If younger children were afraid of the vicious-looking creatures, Saul took them aside. "Everyone knows Grammy's a card shark," he said with a big smile. "These big fish are cousins of hers. Of course this part of her family can't visit us in the Bronx because they have to stay in the water. I'm not comfortable on the slide but I don't want to insult them, so please remember to wave and give them my regards when you pass by."

**

Eventually the weekly card game in the Bronx was disbanded, old friends got ill or moved to Florida. Saul refused to retire completely but, when his nephews joined the business, he agreed to take it easier. To Helen that meant more vacation time. Soon she and Saul were spending four or five days in the islands every other month.

As she aged, Helen grew shorter and rounder but she stayed basically healthy. Unfortunately it soon became evident that her mind wasn't keeping pace with her body. She became forgetful, would stare off into space humming tuneless tunes while the roast dried out and the chicken soup

boiled over. Once the smoke detector went off and, frightened and confused, Helen ran outside, yelling hysterically. A neighbor found Helen sitting on the sidewalk, tears running down her face. The front door was wide open so the neighbor went in and turned off the alarm. It took a while for her to get Helen to reenter her house.

The neighbor told Saul what had happened. When he asked Helen about it, she got angry. “Why are you listening to such a yenta? She makes things up.”

Helen started sniping at Saul, claiming it was his fault she was disoriented. “What did you do with the steam iron? You hid it, didn’t you?” she demanded.

Saul stared at his wife. What was a steam iron? Why would he be interested in moving such a thing? Saul walked around looking puzzled, perpetually wondering how to fix the situation at home. This was not his Helen.

It was disconcerting for friends to hear such a seemingly happy couple start arguing in public. “Why are you putting so much salt in your soup?” Helen demanded one evening at a local restaurant. She grabbed the salt shaker out of his hand and banged it on the table. “You’re ruining the taste and besides it’s not healthy.”

A few weeks later, at a different restaurant, Helen lashed out at Saul again. “How come you’re not putting any salt on your food? How can you enjoy anything when it’s not properly spiced?”

Confused, Saul shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly, reaching for the saltshaker. “I forgot.”

The people at their table looked at each other. What had happened to Helen?

But Helen was never confused about how to get to the islands, how to find her way through the casino and settle down for a few hours at blackjack or craps where dealers, servers and other staff were so nice to her. However,

friends who accompanied her on these vacations noticed that Helen was losing more, and more frequently, than she had in the past.

Of course, everyone loses. Despite the hotel discounts and freebies, gambling casinos are not philanthropic institutions. But Helen wasn't gambling like a pro. She miscalculated the value of cards, doubled down after losing large amounts of money, and lost even more. Friends shook their heads.

The stories about her mom's behavior quickly reached Sarah.

"Maybe she should see a doctor," said a long-time gambling buddy. "I tried to suggest it but she told me I should mind my own business. Maybe she'll listen to you. My Jason is interning at Mt Sinai, I could ask him to recommend a specialist."

Sarah was busy. She had a husband, a career, a young family. She had problems of her own. When she visited her mother everything looked fine. They had the same conversation they'd been having for years, Helen asked about her grandchildren, tried to get everyone to eat more than they wanted, gossiped about the neighbors. Same old same old.

Sarah told herself everyone was overacting. Sure, her mom occasionally misplaced things. Who didn't? And if her mother and father were bickering, well, it was probably due to his being at home more.

But one day Helen opened the door to greet Sarah with clearly unwashed hair. She'd obviously missed her weekly beauty parlor appointment, an appointment she'd kept for the last two decades unless she was very sick or out of the city. Sarah didn't say anything, just went inside. She soon noticed that the bed in her parents' room was unmade. Helen had always said she couldn't sleep in an unmade bed, the very sight of one disturbed her. Now it was 4 p.m. and the sheets were tangled, one pillow was on the floor and there was no sign of the bedspread or throw pillows. Kitchen cabinet doors were open, there were unwashed glasses in several rooms.

Sarah straightened the house while Helen watched her. "When does the cleaning woman come?" she asked.

Helen shrugged. “She comes when she comes.”

Sarah made tea for both of them, discussed TV shows mother and daughter both watched, left after an hour, not mentioning the state of the house.

Phone calls from a concerned Saul and worried friends mounted up until Sarah could no longer ignore the problem. She was worried about her mother’s health and safety, about her ability to care for herself and Saul. And, Sarah admitted to herself, concerned about how much of her future inheritance was being left in the casinos.

Well, it’s not my money, she’d tell herself. My parents have a right to spend their savings as they see fit and Mom seems to be having a good time. The real issue is mom’s health, her safety, the effect this is all having on my father. It’s irresponsible to let the situation continue. But wasn’t it also irresponsible to stand by while Helen happily flung handfuls of chips into the Caribbean?

Sarah thought about calling Jimmy, Helen’s good friend, the pit boss with the big smile, who made sure there was always a good seat waiting for Helen at the crap table.

But what could she say? “Hi, remember me? The nasty daughter who’s always rolling her eyes at her mom, the woman you’re so fond of, the one who’s always seems to be enjoying herself? Well, I think she’s getting senile. Look, I don’t have papers stating she’s not competent to manage her own affairs but I’d appreciate it if you’d ban my mom from contributing to your club’s bottom line. Oh, and don’t tell her it was my idea.”

No, Jimmy wasn’t the answer.

Her husband cautioned Helen to be sure before she took any actions. He said she needed a first person view of what was going on, not to rely on stories from her elderly father and her parents’ old friends. Sarah told her folks she needed a rest, wanted to spend time at a spa, get away from her family. They were concerned to hear Sarah was having trouble at home but glad to help out. Young people seemed so stressed these days. They

immediately invited Sarah to join them when they went to Paradise Island next week.

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There was a mix-up with the airplane seats and Sarah wound up assigned to a seat far behind her parents. "Don't worry. Just sit tight and I'll get you when the plane lands," she assured her mother whose voice was raising and would soon be yelling at the clerk who was patiently explaining the situation for the third time.

When they got onboard, Sarah made sure her folks were in the right seats, stowed their carry-on bags and fastened their seat belts. She got to her own seat and sighed with relief, three worry-free hours ahead. But when the passengers deplaned, Sarah found her parents' seats empty. She pushed her way into the terminal and quickly spotted them at the edge of the crowd, arguing loudly. Sarah rushed over and immediately saw—and smelled—the problem.

There was a big wet stain covering the crotch of her mom's mint green polyester pants. Her father was trying to tie his jacket around Helen's waist as she swatted him away and said not to bother her.

"He's such a klutz," Helen told Sarah. "He spilled his drink all over me."

"She couldn't unfasten her seatbelt in time to get to the bathroom and she wet herself," said Saul. "I tried to clean her and spilled my water. Your mommy yelled at me. Loud. The nice stewardess came over and gave us a napkin. Helen threw the napkin at her. I apologized and gave the stewardess $5 for her trouble."

"Total waste of money," said Helen.

Saul looked at his wife's damp crotch, looked at Sarah, turned away and watched the brightly colored signs flashing throughout the airport.

"Stop bobbing your head like a chicken," said Helen. "You want to wind up at that stupid island?"

“Okay, I’ll get our luggage. You can change in the bathroom,” Sarah said to her mother. “Meanwhile both of you just sit on this bench and stay still.”

By the time Sarah returned with the bags her mother claimed her slacks were dry, the bathroom was always crowded and changing would take too long. Sarah tried to argue but Helen briskly walked off toward the taxis. Sarah grabbed a porter to handle the luggage and loudly called after her mom.

Saul grabbed his daughter’s hand. “Don’t make a fuss. It’s not worth it.”

As the cab neared the hotel Helen’s mood abruptly changed. “Look how beautiful it is,” she cried happily. “Look how it sparkles. Such a paradise. A bright pink diamond.”

Sarah, jammed in the middle seat between her parents, looked out the window. Her mom was right, the hotel was sparkling in the bright noon sunlight. Strings of tiny pink electric lights were twisted around the palm trees which circled the castle-shaped hotel. There were huge plaster turrets and a wide drawbridge over a pond filled with goldfish. The whole thing was painted pink, bright, neon pink.

Good ol’ Pepto palace, Sarah thought.

As soon as the cab stopped, Helen jumped out and was immediately surrounded by grinning porters.

Hey, Mrs. Rosen, welcome back.

How’s my sweetheart?

Let me get you a pina colada.

Helen knew everyone’s name and smiled as they grabbed the luggage and led her and Saul from the cab to the check-in desk while they handed out tips. Sarah hurried to catch up.

They were given adjoining pale aqua rooms with paintings of an ocean sunset on the front wall and an ocean sunrise on the facing wall. A large basket of goodies wrapped in yellow cellophane dominated the dresser.

“See what you get when you travel with us?” said Helen, walking into Sarah’s room through the connecting door she’d asked the bellhop to leave

unlocked. “Such a basket, who knows how much it costs. But for us it’s all free. Everyone in this hotel is my good friend.”

Sarah shook her head, didn’t mention that a few fruit baskets weren’t equal to the cost of the ocean-front rooms the Rosens always booked.

Helen suggested they get lunch. There’d been no food service on the three-hour flight and she was sure everyone was hungry. Sarah suggested her mother change clothes before they went downstairs. Saul nodded. Helen rolled her eyes and said her pants had dried in the cab. Sarah followed her folks down the hall.

When the elevator doors opened onto the lobby, Helen gasped with delight and turned towards the casino’s bright lights, the slot machines’ siren call. She almost danced through the place, unconcerned when she bumped into other guests. Helen spotted a row of clanging, blinking, sparkling game machines installed since her last visit, reached into her purse and christened the new arrivals by dribbling a handful of quarters into each of their coin slots, barely pausing to see if she’d won.

Sarah looked at her father. “Mom carries coins everywhere?”

“She changed some money while we were registering,” he said. “Some coins, some chips, she likes to be prepared.”

Helen greeted dealers, waved to waitresses, walked down the line of craps tables, rubbing gleaming mahogany surfaces “for luck.”

Embarrassed, Sarah took a step towards her mother. Saul put his hand on her shoulder. “Don’t stop her. Nobody minds and she’s having a good time. I don’t often get to see your mommy so happy these days.”

Eventually Helen rejoined her family and they found the large lunch buffet where all sorts of culinary delights cascaded from large plaster sea shells on stiff pink damask tablecloths.

“Look. Look. Look what they got for me. Just what I like. As much as I want,” Helen said as she walked up to a large pyramid of rolls and inhaled deeply. “Nice and fresh,” she informed the man standing next to her. “Just the way I like them.”

The man ignored her and reached for the roll on top of the pile.

"No, no, no. Not that one. That's mine. You can have this one."

Helen gave the man a roll from the bottom of the pile and giggled as dislodged rolls tumbled to the floor. Two waiters immediately appeared, one whisked away the fallen food while the other rebuilt the pyramid and handed Helen a fresh roll. The man who'd been standing next to her shook his head, took a roll and walked away quickly. Helen laughed.

The Rosens loaded their plates and found a table. Sarah noticed that Saul mimicked his wife's food choices and paid careful attention to whether she was salting her food.

"So, ladies," he said when they finished eating. "I'm going to go see if they can find room for me on the golf course this afternoon. What are you two up to?"

"Let's unpack and then relax by the pool." Sarah told her mother. "First I'm going to the spa to book a massage and see if I can join an exercise class. See you at the pool."

When Sarah got to her room she didn't hear any sounds coming from her folks' room and quickly put her stuff away and pulled on her new miracle-cinch black bathing suit and matching shorts and t-shirt. Helen wasn't at the pool, and Sarah wondered if she was dawdling in one of the lobby shops. She found deck chairs under a canopy, ordered a pina colada and lathered herself with sunscreen. After a quick dip, she opened the book she'd been anxious to start. Sarah finished three chapters and her drink before realizing her mom should be there by now.

It wasn't hard to find Helen. From the casino door Sarah immediately spotted a long, bright-blue paisley caftan abundantly draped around a small, ample woman who was studying her cards.

"I've been waiting for you for almost an hour, Mom."

Helen didn't look up, "I was on my way to join you when I saw Lola and thought I'd just say hello. Look at her new haircut. Doesn't she look nice?"

A rhinestone trimmed badge identified the dealer as Lola, a thin young woman in a cutaway tuxedo who smiled at Sarah while she flipped cards. The man next to Helen had 21 and Lola gave him several chips. Helen's cards totaled 16 and she told the dealer she'd stick. The woman next to her had 24 and the dealer took the woman's the three $5 chips. Then she turned over her own cards. "Dealer has 18," she said as she quickly scooped up Helen's $100 chip.

Sarah noticed her mother didn't have many chips in front of her but bet all of them on the next card. And lost them all. She didn't seem to care, was busy complimenting the dealer on her haircut. Sarah wondered how many chips her mother had started with and if there were more in the flowered canvas beach bag beside her.

"How about taking a break, Mom? There's plenty of time to get in a swim and work on your tan before dinner."

Lola dealt the next hand but didn't give Helen any cards. "Go enjoy dis lovely afternoon wit your daughter," she said. "I'm sure your luck be better later on."

This interaction became routine. At breakfast Saul would announce his plans, golfing, walking on the beach, going to town or the harbor. Sarah would go to the spa and arrange to meet Helen afterwards. Helen wouldn't show up.

Once she had spotted her mom aimlessly walking through the hotel halls, two floors below their rooms. Sarah called out and Helen looked up. "Oh, hello," she said anxiously. "Do you know how to get home?" Sarah wondered if her mom wanted directions to their house in the Bronx or her room on another floor. "It's too early to go back, let's go to the beach" she said, taking her mother's arm. Helen quietly let herself be led away.

But usually Sarah'd just go to the casino and find Helen at a blackjack or craps table and join the crowd watching the action. You didn't have to be an experienced gambler to understand Helen was losing. Consistently losing. Losing big.

Sarah tried reasoning with her mom. “Every time I see you in the casino you seem to be losing. Doesn’t it bother you? Wouldn’t you rather do something else? Shopping? Swimming? Walking? Whatever you’d like.”

Helen sniffed. “Since when do you know anything about gambling? You can barely add to 21. Wouldn’t know if you were rolling a point or crapping out. Everyone loses sometimes, it’s part of the game. Don’t talk about things you don’t understand.”

Helen nodded at the other gamblers, the smiling casino staff. “My friends and I are having a good time. Go jump into the water yourself.”

Sarah tried talking to her father.

“You think I don’t know what’s going on?” he said. “Who do you think makes good on the markers your mother signs? I want she should enjoy herself. But lately, no matter what, she’s not happy. If I stop paying for the gambling, if they turn her away from the tables, she’ll be embarrassed. Confused. And angry. Very angry. She’s angry a lot lately. I didn’t expect to spend my old age with a wife who’s always angry. I want she should be happy but the best I can do these days is try to see she’s not too angry.”

Sarah knew it was futile to argue with her father when he made up his mind.

At 2 a.m., the night before they were to leave, Sarah heard pounding on the door that connected her room to her parents’. “Sarahleh, Sarahleh, wake up,” cried Saul. “Something has happened to Mommy. Something must be done.”

Sarah opened the door and found Saul in his shorts, trembling, running his hands through his thin hair, his eyes wide. “Find out do we need to call a doctor or the police,” he said in Yiddish, gesturing across his room to the hall door where the night manager was standing. “See if we need to pay money to someone.”

Sarah walked over to the manager who was relieved to see someone who looked rational.

"Is my mother hurt? What's going on?"

"No, I don't think so. Mrs. Rosen is on the beach. She won't come upstairs. We need your help."

"Let's go," said Sarah, grabbing her terry cloth robe. She and the manager started towards the elevator when she heard her father calling.

"Sarahleh, slow down," he gasped in Yiddish.

Sarah turned and saw Saul, his shorts flapping, stumbling after them. She wanted to tell him to stay in the room, that she'd take care of everything. But she knew he wouldn't listen. Saul needed to take care of his Helen. The manager and Sarah held the elevator door and waited while he put on the hotel bathrobe and slippers.

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With her back to the water the moonlit sand looked like snow to Helen, drifts of snow blowing around her and she wondered why no one had shoveled a path for her. The wind blew off the water and she shivered. Why was she outside in such a light dress? Where was her coat? The wind whipped her stiffly sprayed hair into a tornado. She'd have to go to the beauty parlor tomorrow.

Helen started walking towards the hotel's pink lights visible at the top of the dunes. After a few steps she tripped and fell into the hole some child had dug in the sand that afternoon. She sat in the hole, startled but unhurt, looked around and saw moonlight, a star-studded sky, the lights of a small boat crossing the calm Caribbean sea.

Are we going fishing again? Feh!! Who wants a smelly boat that rocks? And worms that crawl all over the place. And why go at night? Only crazy Saul could have such an idea. Does he think he can leave me on a deserted island with the dead fish and wild chickens?

Hah! I'm too smart for him. I've got lots of friends who'll help me. And I'm lucky. I've always been lucky. Jimmy will help me. Where is he? Where's the girl who brings me sandwiches? I'm hungry.

Helen looked around. Two long, dark creatures were slithering along the sand, growing larger as they came closer.

"Go away!!! Leave me alone!!!" She scooped up two handfuls of sand and threw it at the dark shapes. The wind caught the sand, threw it back into her face. Helen's eyes stung, she rubbed them with her sandy hands and they hurt even more.

The two teenagers wearing hotel uniforms had been hired to patrol the beach at night. Their job included carrying a rake and a heavy roller so they could make sure the sand was smooth and even for the tourists who would sun themselves there the next morning. One was much taller than the other but they both cast long moonlit shadows on the sand.

"Hey, you hear a lady yellin'?" said the shorter boy. They stopped walking and looked in Helen's direction.

"Yeah, she sittin' on de sand over dere. What she doin' out here?" said the tall one. "She from de hotel or wander over from town? Got somethin' goin' on inna middle a da night?"

They walked towards Helen, quickly covering the distance to her hole. "Hey lady! Dis private property," said the taller boy. "You need help gettin' up?" He leaned over and grabbed Helen's arm to pull her out of sand. Helen started to scream hysterically.

"Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" She tried to hit him, flailing her arms. The boy immediately let go. Helen fell back into the hole, screaming and cursing and crying.

"Okay lady, take it easy, no one's hurtin' you," said the shorter boy. He noticed her purse lying on the sand, reached down and opened it. "Let's see if dere's somethin' here tell us who she is."

Helen added the word, "thief" to the litany of curses she was yelling. "Just take my money, take it all, I don't care, just don't hurt me.".

"Not much money," said the boy holding up three $5 chips, "but she got a hotel room key. I'm goin' t' the desk. Dey'll figure out who she be. You stay here, make sure she don't hurt herself." He walked away before the other boy could say anything.

"Okay lady," he said "No need t' keep yellin'. I'm goin' to stand back here." He moved about 10 feet behind Helen. "Not goin' t' touch you. Just makin' sure you safe."

Helen stopped yelling. She sat in the sand, under the romantic postcard moon, quietly watching the boy rake the beach around her.

***

The elevator was programmed to stop at the casino floor. Sarah automatically looked out, scanned the gamblers, hoping the manager was mistaken, that she'd spot her mother at a table. No luck, no sign of Helen. A minute later they reached the beach and she ran out as soon as the doors opened. The manager remained behind and helped Saul negotiate the dark, sandy expanse.

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Where are you? How are you? What happened?" Sarah called as she ran across the beach, found her mother, helped her up and held her tightly.

"Oh Sarah, I'm glad you're here," said Helen calmly.

"I think she be alright. Just scared a de dark, and de shadows. Don't know what she doin' out here so late, so alone," said the boy who'd been standing guard.

"Thank you for watching my mother," said Sarah.

"He's a thief, he took my purse," Helen said sternly, standing up straight.

"No mam, nobody stole nothin'," said the boy. "My friend take your bag to de desk. Tryin' to find out who you be." They could see the other boy approaching.

Helen ignored them. She was glaring at her husband who was holding out his hand to her, panting as the manager guided him. "Saul, why didn't you

get someone to shovel the path so I wouldn't trip," she said loudly. "I could have gotten hurt while you were out fishing."

Saul turned to Sarah who still had her arm around Helen. "Mom's okay, just a little confused. Let's get her upstairs and into bed."

"Sure, sure. Don't worry, Helen, I'll have someone take care of it right away."

Saul turned boys now standing quietly a few steps behind Helen. "Thank you for taking care of my wife," he said reaching into his bathrobe pocket and pulling out a handful of bills. He gave a $20 bill to each boy. Two $20 went to the manager.

"I'm glad for your help," Saul said. "Now we're going upstairs."

In the dark, Sarah rolled her eyes and shook her head. Now that everything seemed under control she could smile. That's my dad she thought. So upset he runs down the hall in his shorts but remembers to grab some cash when he goes back for his bathrobe.

" Let me know if there's anything else I can do," the manager called out as the Rosens walked away, Sarah and Saul each holding one of Helen's arms. No one responded.

The manager turned to the boys. "You did a good job. It's not easy to deal with a crazy old lady. I'll see that your supervisor hears about this. The Rosens are good customers."

When they got to their rooms, Sarah unzipped her mother's clothes, ignoring the sand that fell to the floor and put her mom in a nightgown.

"Do you want me to get you some tea?" she asked.

"Nice hot tea will do you good," said Saul. "Room service will get you anything you want."

Helen was quietly looking around the room, not saying anything.

"Maybe it's best if you just get under the covers. It's time you got to sleep," Sarah said. "Don't worry about anything. We're leaving tomorrow, remember? Everything will be better when we get home."

Sarah dimmed the lights, Helen closed her eyes like an obedient child and was soon snoring softly.

"I'm going to pack up all of your stuff and then we need to talk," Sarah said to her father. "Go wait in my room."

"Okay, that's good. You take care of everything," said Saul. He walked through the connecting door, turned on the TV and sat in a club chair unaware of what was on the screen.

Sarah discovered that her mom had already put most of their stuff in the suitcase, Helen was an experienced traveler, knew how to get her luggage ready on time. Back in her room Sarah found her dad fast asleep, snoring softly, his snores synchronized with her mother's. She wondered how many years of sleeping together it took for that to happen.

"Daddy, Daddy, wake up." She turned off the TV, shook his shoulder gently and he was immediately awake. "

"Is Mommy alright?"

"Yes, sound asleep. I'm pretty sure she's okay physically. But there's another problem and you know we have to talk about it. Now."

They tried to figure out why Helen had left the casino and wandered out to the beach. There were lots of logical reasons. Maybe the ladies bathroom in the casino was too crowded and she was looking for another one. Maybe the noise was too loud. Or the air too smokey. But those things were always true. Why had she taken off tonight? Helen's excursion didn't make sense. And, of course, that was what had happened. She had stopped making sense.

Saul looked ready to cry. "I shouldn't have left her alone. But I was tired. And she doesn't want me around when she's gambling. And she's comfortable there, everyone knows her there. She's gotten confused at home, only a few times, nothing serious. Not like this. Not where she could get hurt. And it doesn't last long. Usually. Not too long."

"It's not your fault," Sarah told her father, kissing his wrinkled, grey bristled cheek. "We'll figure something out. I'll get help for her."

"You can't put her in a home. She wouldn't like it. I won't allow it."

"I know, I know. Don't worry. I'll get someone to come to the house to take care of her. We'll see how it goes. We'll adjust the plan as we need to."

Sarah looked into her father's eyes, spoke firmly. "But you have to cooperate. Have to promise me no more trips to the islands. It's not just the money any longer. It's not safe. No matter what Mommy says. Even if she seems better."

"You're right. Okay, okay, I agree. Now I have to go to sleep. It's been a long night."

The next morning, when Saul and then Sarah asked Helen how she was she looked at them curiously. "I'm fine, of course, but somehow my hair got all messed up. I must have been sleeping on it crookedly." She didn't seem to remember the previous night and they didn't bring it up. Everyone had a big breakfast and Helen lectured Saul about using too much butter.

When they checked out the day manager told Helen he was glad to see her looking so well, and he would miss her. Nothing unusual. Maybe the smile he gave Sarah was unusually sympathetic.

In the taxi on the way to the airport, Helen told Sarah she didn't think she had her evening purse with her. "This morning I looked at the stuff I packed last night and it wasn't there. It was such a nice bag, I got it at the store in the hotel lobby," she said. "I'll have to get another one on our next trip here."

"Sure, Mom. Don't worry. You've got others at home."

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Sarah opened the door to her parents' house and found Maddy in the kitchen. "Hey, I thought Peggy was here this afternoon," she said as she quickly hugged the tall caramel-skinned woman and watched her put newly washed dishes away on a high shelf. The kitchen had been rearranged so it

was better suited for the caretakers. “Didn’t Peggy change shifts with Betty so she could go to her grandson’s baptism?”

“Yah, but las’ minit Betty hadda take her son t’ de dentist so I shwist wid her. Dat okay?”

“Sure, always glad to see you here. You know you’re my folks’ favorite. Just remember to give me a call next time so I can keep things straight.”

Sarah fished a small notebook from her handbag and made a note to adjust the large chart she kept at home, recording who took care of her mother, when and for how long. At the end of each month she went to the bank to get enough cash to pay each aide the proper amount. The chart needed constant adjustment.

Although Helen’s medical needs were minor, primarily making sure her pills were taken on time, someone was needed in the house all the time, they’d learned that soon after that last trip to Paradise Island.

Helen would decide her clothes were wrinkled and then decide to watch TV while the iron burned into the blouse and the ironing board. Helen also liked talking to friendly telemarketers and had ordered $1,000 worth of merchandise from Disc O World with a credit card that had appeared in the mail and she’d somehow had validated. Now the aides shopped and cooked and cleaned and monitored all of Helen’s activities.

Sarah had tried getting aides from an agency, but Helen and Saul found things wrong with these women. Maddy had cleaned for Helen for a long time and the two got along well. And Maddy had friends, and the friends had friends, a vast network of Caribbean women eager to work off the books. Sarah remembered how her mother used to talk about how nice the people in the Islands were to her, how everyone in the casinos and the hotels were her good friends. How she wished they could be with her all the time.

“So how’s everything going?” Sarah asked Maddy after greeting her father.

“Jus fine. Your mom’s havin a good day. I was jus bout to get out de cards and chips. You in time for de game.”

Maddy reached into the desk that used to hold Sarah's school supplies. She spread a green flannel cloth over the table and placed 20 green chips and 10 red chips in each of three dessert dishes.

Saul, Sarah and Maddy sat on one side of the table. Helen sat across from them. "Time to place your bets," she said as she expertly shuffled the cards, her arthritic fingers having lost none of their former dexterity.

Sarah had seen her mother morph into a blackjack dealer many times but was always amazed. The cards zipped across the table and Helen immediately announced the total points in front of each player, calculating faster, and more accurately than Sarah could.

At the end of each hand Helen raked in the chips, carefully stacked them by color, and gleefully cried out, "I won! I won! I won!"

Contributor Bios

in order of appearance

Jennifer Pratt-Walter (she/her) is a Crone who finds awe in the simple daily miracles of life. She is a professional harpist, poet and hobbyist photographer. She has had poetry and photography published in a number of print and on-line journals, including VoiceCatcher, Calyx, and Palette. Jennifer has three grown children and husband and lives on a small farm in Vancouver. No AI is used in her work.

Scott-Patrick Mitchell is a queer non-binary poet living on Whadjuk Noongar Country. They were the recipient of 2022's Red Room Poetry Fellowship, Westerly's 2022 Mid-Career Fellowship and the 2023 winner of The XYZ Prize for Innovation in Spoken Word. Their debut poetry collection *Clean* (Upswell Publishing, 2022) was shortlisted for The Prime Minister's Literary Awards, The WA Premier's Book Awards, The Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and internationally in The Read Rainbow's Best LGBTIQA+ Books of 2022 Awards. Mitchell's second poetry collection will explore Perth Canyon, houselessness and the incantations that float in dark waters. SPM recently completed a Creative Fellowship in Writing at the National Library of Australia where they explored queer archives and oral histories.

Bonnie Demerjian writes from her island home in the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska, a place that nourishes her writing. Her poetry has appeared in Unbroken Journal, Locus Shells, and Cirque, among others. She has also written four non-fiction books on the area's human and natural history. When not writing, she is gardening, hiking, boating, birding, and watching the ever-changing ocean.

Michael Ross was born in the wild, watery woods of Union Lake, Michigan in 1974, got his head straight for a while in the desert green hotspring mountains

of New Mexico, and eventually went to school at Oakland University where he learned to love college radio and studied painting under the tutelage of Dick Goody, receiving a BA in Anthropology and Fine Arts. He has no visual influences but enjoys the works of Robert Crumb, Peter Max, Charles McGee and Frank Stella. Also that of John Cage, Yoko Ono, The Grateful Dead and The Fall. And Richard Brautigan and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He's very interested in Indian Classical Music and often cites the raga, with its inherent improvisation within a formal structure, as a touchstone for his own work. He has been painting at 333 Midland in Highland Park for the past 11 years. He is a painter, a muralist, a curator and an arts council member in his adopted home town of Pleasant Ridge, Michigan, where he lives with his fantastic four year old, his wife, an aged cat and a parrot. Find him at:
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Patricia J. McLean is a poet and novelist in Bend, OR. She is co-author with Duane Poncy of Bartlett House (2007), Ghosts of Saint Pierre, and Degrees of Freedom, book two of the Sweetland quartet. The duo are working on Entanglement the third book in the series. She enjoys research almost as much as writing. McLean's poetry, short stories, and non-fiction have appeared in various publications including Chaos Section, Central Oregon Writers Guild 2024 Literary Collection, Windfall, The Lake, and Panache. She has two chapbooks: Lines of my Palms and The Smell of God. She enjoys collaborating with visual artists and performing spoken word. Find her at:
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Jim Burns was born and raised in rural Indiana, and received degrees from both Indiana State University and Indiana University. He then spent most of his following years working as a librarian in Iowa and Florida. Retirement brought some blessed free time, and he turned to his love of writing. Since 2000 over 30 of his works have appeared in online and/or print journals, magazines,

blogs, and anthologies. He now lives with his wife and dog in Jacksonville, Florida.

Susan Andrelchik is a writer of literary fiction and poetry. She is the recipient of the 2023 Terry Kay Prize for Fiction. Her works have appeared in The Paradox Literary Journal, Roi Faineant, BarBar Magazine, among others. Susan resides in Atlanta with her husband and cat, and works as a speech/language pathologist.

Eve Müller lives in Eugene, Oregon with her sweetheart. She has recently published in About Place, Camas, Marrow Magazine, Sea Wolf Journal, Sequestrum, and Timberline Review among others. Some of her work has been anthologized, and she has had two books published within the last two years: Guide to the Ruins and Birds and Saints. She was awarded a PLAYA artists' residency this year, was a winner in the Cirque poetry contest, and her work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. When Eve is not writing, she bakes, hikes, conducts research on autism, hangs out with her mom and two feral daughters, and skinny-dips whenever/wherever she can.

Megan Cartwright is an Australian poet and teacher. Her work has featured in journals and magazines including Contemporary Verse 2, Mascara Literary Review and The Opiate. Find her at:
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Lisa Dailey's art is a celebration of color, texture, and the beauty of the natural world. A mixed media artist, she brings unexpected elements together to create work both vibrant and expressive, drawing inspiration from the intricate patterns and designs found in nature—whether the texture of a leaf or the colors of a sunset. Lisa's practice incorporates embroidery, crochet, watercolor, and acrylic painting, and she is always experimenting with new and exciting materials for collage. When not in her studio, she can often be

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Rebekah Teller earned her MFA in Writing at Lindenwood University and works as a copywriter. Her poetry has been published in *Red Ogre Review* and she self-published the trilogy *Flowing in the Trenches*. She lives in the Missouri Ozarks with her husband, two teenagers, and four dogs. Find her at:
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Michael O'Connor was born in Broadhead Manor and grew up in the Ingram, Sheraden, McKees Rocks areas of Pittsburgh. He Has an MFA. In Creative Writing from the University of Pittsburgh. and graduated there in the mid-eighties. While there he tutored in the Writing Workshop for two years. He is a former kick boxer, hunter, traveler, and grandfather of six.

c_zientek. a frustrated and disillusioned old man in denial about many of life's 3rd act revelations.

Paul Lewellan retired from education after fifty years of teaching. He lives, writes, and gardens on the banks of the Mississippi River. Supporting him in his literary efforts are Pamela his wife of forty-four years, a rescue kitten named Caitlin Cat, and Buddy an aging Maltese mix. Find him at:
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Scott Ferry helps our Veterans heal as a RN in the Seattle area. His most recent books of poetry are Sapphires on the Graves (Glass Lyre Press), 500 Hidden Teeth (Meat for Tea Press), and dear tiny flowers (Sheila -Na-Gig Press). Find him at:
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Jean Ende is a former newspaper reporter, press secretary for the City of NY and several local politicians, marketing VP for Citibank and Prof of Management at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pa and St. Francis College in Brooklyn, NY. Now retired, Jean writes fiction largely based on her immigrant Jewish family in the Bronx, NY. She is the author of 25 short stories published in print and online anthologies in the US and England. Jean's debut novel, "Houses of Detention" was published in April, 2025 by Apprentice House Press. To see more of her work go to jeanendeauthor.com.