

# KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

Number 84  
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## RESILIENCE: THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

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*"Ashiana" by Kavitha Yaga Buggana*

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*"Matchmaker" by Courtney B. Cook*

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*"Maladies and Miracles" by Laura Kiesel*

## Contents

---

### ◆ FEATURED STORY

---

Ashiana 4

*Kavitha Yaga Buggana*

---

### ◆ FEATURED ART

---

Imagination is Key 32

*Sandy Palmer*

---

### ◆ FICTION

---

Flames of Life 20

*Kelly A. Harmon*

---

Saturday Morning—A Portrait 44

*Linda McMullen*

---

Matchmaker 51

*Courtney B. Cook*

---

### ◆ PERSONAL ESSAY

---

Step-by-Step: My Journey  
through Sepsis 37

*Jackie D. Rust*

---

### ◆ CREATIVE NONFICTION

---

Operating in French 14

*Judy Kronenfeld*

---

Maladies and Miracles 26

*Laura Kiesel*

---

Be Still, Don't Move, Just a  
Bit Longer 48

*Kristin LaFollette*

---

The Other Side 58

*Tereza Crvenkovic*

---

### ◆ BOOK REVIEW

---

The Flavors of Friendship 62

*Nanaz Khosrowshahi*

---

### ◆ POETRY

---

You Still Know Me 13

*Alan Balter*

---

Waterlilies 31

*Lucia Haase*

---

Breath of Life 31

*John Dycus*

---

Soothing 36

*Linda Fuchs*

---

Magenta Fleece Sweatpants 46

*Diane S. Morelli*

---

Borderline Personality Disorder 50

*Alana Visser*

---

Cornbread 57

*Wren Tuatha*

---

You Look Like Him 57

*T. L. Murphy*



Erik Jensen, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 2019, recycled computer keys, 47" x 36" (3,250 keys)

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◆ **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES** 64

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*This award-winning publication expresses the experience of disability from a variety of perspectives including: individuals, families, friends, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and educators, among others. The material chosen for Kaleidoscope challenges stereotypical, patronizing, and sentimental attitudes about disabilities.*



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# ASHIANA

KAVITHA YAGA BUGGANA

Devaki carried the tray with four bowls of mango and two teacups. She paused at the doorway of the dining room. Trying to remember every detail was futile, she knew. Yet she paused and noted the fresh yellow chrysanthemums in the glass vase at the center of the dining table. There was Sid, his head bent over his notebook, wisps of his black hair curled up on the back of his neck. Shriya sat to his left, drawing, crayons strewn around a coloring book. Amma sat across from them, staring out into the garden, her head resting on the back of the chair. Dust hovered overhead in slants of late afternoon sunlight. Her mother turned to her and smiled.

“Already, Devaki? Already tea time? How fast the day has gone!”

Devaki set down the tray. Shriya scooped up a fruit bowl with a whoop. Sid barely glanced up.

Devaki pulled out a chair. “Sid, it’s Himayat. Your favorite.”

“I’m *trying* to finish my history project.”

Shriya dug into the bowl of mango. “What’s it about?”

“Hadrian’s Wall.”

“What’s the big deal about Adrian’s Wall?”

“Not Adrian.” Sid raised his eyebrows. “*Hadrian*. It’s Roman history. You wouldn’t know, Shri.”

Devaki smiled at the note of self-importance in his voice. At fourteen, her son was all elbows and knees, but with each accrual of bone and muscle, he grew more like his father. Raghu was a handsome man and though the divorce had been finalized four years ago, Devaki was not unhappy that Sid took after him. Shriya was nine years old and took after her grandmother.

Shriya waved her paper. “See, I’ve finished my drawing!” She sprang off the chair and eagerly leaned over, her hands and chin resting on her grandmother’s shoulder.

Amma held the paper. “Abboo! Lovely!”

Shriya pointed to a woman smiling at pink and yellow roses. “And there you are, Ammamma, the day we planted the roses, Mummy and you and me. I wanted you to see them bloom, soooo I made them bloom, in the picture.”

Sid chewed on his pencil. “I had maths tuition that day. I wish I had been there.”

Amma squeezed Sid’s hand, “Next time, we’ll plant the flowers together.”

Shriya looked up. “When will that be?”

No one answered.

Shriya said, “Ammamma, what do you want me to draw next?”

“Anything, *paapa*. All your drawings are first-class.”

“No, no. You tell. When were you the happiest? I’ll draw that.”

“Hmm.” Amma bit into a piece of mango with an absent-minded smile.

Devaki stirred the sugar and placed the teacup before her mother. Amma’s eyes had lost focus, her mouth opened like a half-moon.

“Ammamma?” Shriya clutched the sheet of paper and shuffled her feet.

Devaki gently pressed her daughter’s back. “Why don’t you just draw your favorite thing about Ammamma?”

As Shriya sat back in her chair, Devaki noticed Sid glancing at his grandmother.

“So, Sid, tell me, why did they build the wall?”

He straightened. “Some people say it was to keep invaders out. Others say it was to show the might of the Roman Empire. But no one knows for sure.”

Shriya picked a blue crayon. “You’d think they’d have figured it out by now.”

Sid scoffed. “As if you know anything.”

“I know lots of things.”

“The first time I rode a horse.” Amma’s voice was soft, but everyone turned to her. “I was just a girl, twelve, maybe thirteen, on holiday with my family. Where was it? Huge mountains in the back. Snow, white like some magic powder. *Shimla*! That’s where. And I rode a pony! For years, more than anything, I wanted to ride a pony, and there I was, on a lovely brown pony! I was so happy I thought I’d evaporate.”

Shriya bounced in her chair. “I’m going to draw that!”

Amma continued: “Then once, I came home from a party. My closet was fully open. My saris, blouses, petticoats were all over the bed. Devaki was just seven or eight. And there she was, in front of the mirror, nicely wrapped in my sari. And you should have seen her face! She was so scared that I’d be angry. But I couldn’t stop laughing. What a little thing she was—tottering on my heels, lipstick all over her face. We had a marvelous tea party where she pretended to be me and I was my friend Sashikala. After that, I always locked my closet carefully. But on that day, what a time we had!”

Sid grinned and reached for his mango bowl. “Mom! I didn’t know you were so naughty.”

“I don’t remember this,” Devaki said. She wanted to ask if the sari was silk or cotton. What color was it? Was her hair tied? Was it evening?

“It sounds like so much fun, Mummy,” Shriya said.

Devaki sipped her tea. “When I was growing up, I remember all the hullabullos. Family get-togethers. Neighbors and friends dropping in. My father’s parents lived with us so we had a constant stream of houseguests, cousins, and aunts from the village. Amma was always chatting with someone or other.”

Her mother smiled. “You’re saying I’m a chatterbox?”

Devaki cocked her head. “And you were quite the card shark, too. You ruled the bridge evenings at the Bangalore Club.”

“Don’t listen to your mother!” Amma swatted her hand and chuckled.

Sid speared more mango. Shriya bent toward him and he let her eat the piece.

“Why did you stop the kitty parties, Ammamma?” Sid asked.

Her mother blew on her tea. “Oh, the ladies all became oldies. Only I stayed young.”

The kitty parties were disbanded after seven of the ten women died. The bridge games at the Bangalore Club stopped when Devaki's father fell ill.

"Guess what?" Devaki squeezed Amma's shoulder. "I got dinner reservations for tonight. At the Blue Sky Café."

Shriya swung her crayon. "Yayyy!"

"For tonight?" Sid looked up.

"You still have a few hours to finish your homework, Sid. It will be special to take Ammamma out tonight."

Amma said, "The ice cream there was great. *Sitaphal*, right?"

---

**Devaki noticed other oddities.  
Amma's gestures bore no relation  
to what she was saying, as if she  
was speaking aloud to you and  
silently to someone else.**

---

"It's a seasonal flavor," Devaki said. "And they still have it, I checked."

Devaki carried the dishes to the kitchen and piled them in the sink. She went to her bedroom, booted up the computer and began editing a document. She worked in the communications department at a tech company. She liked her work. Most of the other employees were young graduates who had moved to Bangalore from smaller cities and towns. Devaki liked their naiveté, their raw ambition, their zeal. She saw her work as a creative process of paring volumes of information into clear and easy lines.

Devaki had always loved working with words. She had written for her school newsletter and had edited her college magazine. Even now, she jotted down haiku in a notepad. She read books of all kinds with an almost ferocious joy. When the beauty of a specific sentence struck her, she stopped and repeated it out loud. At times, a particular word brought to her mind a picture so vivid that it felt more real than the space around her. As a young girl, she had confided this to her father. He said she was bringing snippets of her dreams back to her waking life. He called her a dream catcher.

Her father had worked in a publishing house. He devoted his mornings to birdwatching and his evenings to All India Radio. As a girl, Devaki had sat by his side, immersed in her storybooks as the radio hummed in the background. Her father had worn khadi shirts, thick black-rimmed glasses, and a Titan watch. He had treated his wife with indulgence and a kind of wonder, as if she was one of his exotic birds. Amma, in turn, had fussed over his food, his lack of exercise, his smoking, and he had glowed with the attention.

After he died, Amma took over the finances. At first, she invested in small stocks and chit funds. Over the next year, at the instance of a trusted friend, she mortgaged the house to invest in an import-export business. By the time Devaki found out, the business had gone bankrupt. Devaki settled out of court—a court case would have dragged on for decades. Still, she had no option but to sell her mother's house. The house sale shrouded Amma in a thick fog and she had moved in with Devaki like a child being led by the hand. That was three years ago.

Within the intimacy of their new living arrangement, Devaki began to notice her mother's strange behavior. Amma navigated the new spaces of Devaki's house with the old map in her mind. She would gaze in astonishment at the sight of her clothes in a strange closet, her old appliqué bedspread on an unknown bed. And how had the old dressing table moved from that corner to this?

Devaki noticed other oddities. Amma's gestures bore no relation to what she was saying, as if she was speaking aloud to you and silently to someone else. She'd say *orange squeeze* when she meant orange juice, and *lady-sack* when she meant handbag—only hers, and not anyone else's. Devaki guessed that these were phrases from her mother's childhood, a secret language that had resurfaced in old age.

The times when her mother seemed like her old self had grown further apart. During the past year, Amma had started bumping into walls. Devaki would come home from work to see bruises, like ink stains, on her mother's face. After administering a physical examination and a panel of lab tests, the doctor confirmed what Devaki already suspected. Devaki wasn't sure exactly when Amma's dementia had set in, but she was certain the slide had begun soon after her father's death. In any case, Amma needed a part-time nurse and a full-time caretaker. Despite working twelve hours a day, Devaki knew she couldn't afford that.

Two months before, on a warm morning when the kids were away with their father, Devaki showed her mother the brochure for Ashiana Nursing Home. The home was located in a quiet, hilly area outside the city. It was run by two of Devaki's college friends who promised to keep an eye on Amma. Ashiana seemed ideal and a room had recently become available.



Devaki had spoken to her mother at length. They had visited a few times. Amma was to move there tomorrow. Devaki thought her mother was ready, but these days, with Amma, she could never be sure.

It would soon be time to go to dinner. Devaki attached her document and sent the e-mail to the client. She made a couple of calls and switched off her computer. There would be no more time for work that weekend.

She changed into a white cotton dress and twisted her hair into a casual knot. She took a green woolen shawl from her dresser and walked over to Amma's room.

Devaki could hear the water running in the bathroom. On the floor lay two open suitcases. Saris, petticoats, and blouses were neatly piled inside them. Devaki placed the shawl in the larger suitcase, tucking it underneath the red sweater.

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**“Listen, Amma.” Devaki leaned forward, her hands pressed between her knees. “Are you sure you want to leave tomorrow before the kids wake up? . . .”**

---

Amma had insisted on packing only the everyday saris. The ones she had collected over the years were stowed in her closet, each wrapped in muslin cloth with a naphthalene ball. Devaki opened Amma's closet and unwrapped the saris one by one. The Assam off-white silk embroidered by the nuns of a local convent with designs of cranes in flight. The Jamdhani in light pink fabric woven with paisleys of pure gold zaree. The black and red dazzler from Banaras with geometric designs. The rich silk Kanchivaram sari woven in two shades of yellow with flower *bootis* and a temple border. Devaki wrapped them and carefully stacked them back on the shelf.

The bathroom door opened with a creak. Her mother appeared, steam silhouetting her slight frame. “Devaki? Am I late for the café place?”

“There's plenty of time. I just got ready early. I packed your shawl.”

Devaki watched her mother lower herself onto the cushioned dressing stool. Staring at her reflection, Amma turned her face this way and that. Slowly, she combed her white hair and arranged it, like reams of thin silk threads,

into a bun. She patted English lavender powder on her face, smoothing it into the wrinkles. Dabbing lipstick, she pressed her lips together. She unscrewed the white cap of a red bindi bottle. Her lips were tight and her hands shook slightly as she applied her red bindi. It took her three tries to make it round.

Devaki closed the bindi bottle and put it away. Amma stood and re-draped her sari with precise folds, pinning the *pallu* in layers on her shoulder.

“OK. Ready. Let's call the kids. I don't want to be late for dinner.”

“Listen, Amma.” Devaki leaned forward, her hands pressed between her knees. “Are you sure you want to leave tomorrow before the kids wake up? They're really keen to drop you off. They'll be so upset if we leave without telling them.”

“I'll find it hard to say goodbye, Devaki.”

“But *I'll* have to deal with it afterward.”

“I know. Blame it on me.”

Devaki inhaled deeply. “I'll still be the one to face the fallout.”

“I think you can do this. You can make things a little easier.”

Devaki shook her head and rose. “It's never going to be easier.”

The Blue Sky Café was spread over an entire side of the open courtyard of an old farmhouse. Orange trumpets and blue morning glory hung in clumps on wrought iron trellises. Women with craft jewelry chatted about vegetable dyes and men with casual hair ate edamame chat. Devaki opened the menu and was glad she came here only rarely. Everything was overpriced yet hard to resist.

She had come here often with Raghu when they were still married. It was the one thing they had agreed on, other than the divorce. Raghu, a doctor, lived in a village four hours away and practiced at a health care NGO headed by an earnest woman who Devaki was quite sure he was seeing. Two weekends a month, he drove to Bangalore to visit the children. Shriya marked these days on her school calendar. Sid wanted to be a doctor like his father. He sometimes talked about Raghu, the crazy things he had done in college, the movies he loved, the concerts he had attended. It all came as a surprise to Devaki, as if she was listening to the story of someone she had never known.



The purple-haired waitress placed their dishes on the table and complimented her mother's sari.

Amma waved her hand and chuckled. "Oh, it's just so simple."

With the sounds of voices, laughter, and the clinking of silverware on plates surrounding them, Amma's face began to light up.

Shriya bit into her pizza. "Yummy! I can't believe we haven't been here in *years*!"

"We were here a couple of months ago, drama queen," Sid grinned.

Amma laughed. "It seems like a whole year, right?"

As Shriya prattled on about her school play, Devaki forked up pieces of raw guava from her salad.

Amma put down her spoon. She patted her chest, as if she was soothing a cough, and said, "Devaki likes the guava from our garden, sliced with chili powder and salt."

"But, Ammamma," Shriya said, "we don't have a guava tree in our garden."

"Shriya," Devaki said sharply, "you should know this by now. Ammamma means in her old house. In her old garden."

"Every house has a heart, you know," Amma began. "Some houses, it's the kitchen. In some it's the library or the living room. In my house, the heart is the garden. My house may be small, but my garden is, what's the word? Extravagant." Her mother opened her arms in a sweeping arch. "My garden is extravagant. You care for something, you give it time and thought and effort, and that is how you open up the beauty in it. Devaki, your father loves birds, so I hung feeders on the guava trees, bird baths on pedestals. For sweet smells, I strung jasmine on wires. The roses need sun, so they went up front. Now the hibiscus, I confess, I don't do much to the hibiscus. But it still blooms. Red, like *kunkum*. Oh, and summer! Summer is all about mangoes."

Shriya sipped her juice. "It was the prettiest garden, Ammamma. Even my friend Zehna says so. We played hide and seek there once. A long time ago."

Devaki wished her mother would stop talking about a house that had been torn down and a garden that was now the cement floor of an office building. Devaki had driven past the old house only once, just after they razed the trees.

The waitress brought the dessert. Sitaphal ice cream for Amma, and chocolate cake for the kids. Shriya and Sid grabbed their spoons. Amma looked away.

"Don't you want your dessert, Amma?" Devaki asked.

"But I've had too much. I can't eat another bite."

Devaki's lips thinned into a line. "Then why'd you order it?"

"It's okay, Mom." Sid touched her arm.

---

**Devaki wished her mother would stop talking about a house that had been torn down and a garden that was now the cement floor of an office building.**

---

"No, it's for you, Amma." Devaki's voice rose as she scooped ice cream into her mother's bowl. "It's your favorite flavor. In fact, the whole dinner was for you. Do you know that? This whole thing was for you and you've hardly eaten."

Her mother spooned up a small bite. Sid began to tell his Ammamma a story from his history lesson. He was completely absorbed, completely intent, as if he could erase everything by just keeping everyone focused on what he was saying. Devaki slowly dabbed her lips with her napkin and turned away.

On the way home, Sid sat slumped in the front seat. Shriya slept in the back, her head resting on her grandmother's arm. Amma stared ahead, her eyes lightly crinkled. Devaki wondered if she was thinking, remembering, or trying to forget.

\* \* \*

The next morning, before the sun rose, Devaki opened the kitchen door. Yawning, she poured *idli* batter into grooved plates and readied the steamer. Outside, the streetlights were still on, and the lights reflected off the garden grass, green and white. The garden had thrived under her mother's care and now green barbets crooned while red heliconias drooped on large leaves.

She had sat with her mother in the garden the day she had first brought up Ashiana. She remembered that Amma had remained silent. Devaki hadn't been able to gauge the cause of her mother's silence. Was it fear, resignation, or shock? To Amma, the idea of a nursing home would have been about as real as a palace in the sky.

Her parents hadn't made an old age plan. Whatever her father had managed to save had been spent on Devaki's private school and her college and he had even withdrawn half his provident fund for Devaki's wedding expenses. Her parents hadn't made an old age plan because their old age plan was Devaki. They expected to live with her, just as their parents had lived with them, and their parents before them, and so on. It was a quilt, and each generation stitched on another piece. Devaki knew she would not be adding hers and that this absence would be the first of many.

The pan whistled. Devaki carefully spooned out the steaming white idlis. She brought out the coconut chutney and broke pieces of dark chocolate onto a platter. This was her mother's favorite breakfast.

She walked down the corridor. Amma's door was open, the lights were turned on.

"Amma, breakfast!"

Her mother was bent over the suitcases. Clothes lay in piles on the bed.

"Amma! What's all this? What's going on?"

"Devaki." Amma's voice was breathless. "Someone came in the night and packed these suitcases. But who?"

"Amma, stop this! Seriously."

Her mother straightened, a folded towel in her hand. "Look! They wanted to take my saris, my towels, everything."

Devaki took a deep breath. "We packed them. You and me. Don't you remember?"

Her mother's eyes opened wide.

"Come, come, sit. Just sit for a while." Devaki led her to the dressing table.

Amma sat on the stool and faced the mirror. She ran her fingers on her cheek as if she didn't know the old woman staring back at her, then looked at her daughter's face reflected beside hers. Devaki felt herself becoming less solid, less real, as if she was not a person, but an idea that her mother couldn't quite grasp. As they gazed at each other, Devaki was struck by the fear that, as her mother's memory faded,

pieces of their lives were breaking off and drifting away. She put her arm around Amma's shoulders.

"Why don't you have your breakfast?" she said, guiding her mother out of the room.

They sat on the veranda overlooking the garden. They watched the sun rise as they ate breakfast. Afterwards, they sipped their coffee and Devaki showed Amma the Ashiana brochure again. She pointed out the pictures of towering trees, the trimmed hedges, the small pond, the whitewashed brick building.

---

## **Her parents hadn't made an old age plan because their old age plan was Devaki.**

---

Amma slowly turned the pages of the brochure. When she reached the end, she carefully placed it on the table. She turned her face to the garden and gazed at it for a while. She then drained her coffee and looked straight at her daughter. "We had better leave, then," she said, pushing her chair back. "The kids will be waking up soon."

Devaki refolded the clothes on the bed. She packed her mother's powder, bottu bottle, and comb in a large kit bag. When it was done, her mother closed the suitcases.

"Devaki?" Amma creased her eyes.

"What is it, Amma?"

"There's something I wanted to do. Do you remember what it was? I wanted to make some arrangements."

"What arrangements? No more arrangements, Amma! We finished everything yesterday."

Her mother cast her eyes around the room and opened the closet with the saris stacked in the back.

She unwrapped a yellow sari.

"That's it. There it is," Amma said softly.

"Your Kanchivaram?"

Amma handed the sari to Devaki. "I've saved this for Shriya. Make sure it's the first sari she wears."

In her mother's new room stood a dresser, a desk with a stiff wooden chair, and a single bed with a cheery orange bedspread covered in leafy designs. The small window faced east to let in the morning sun.

Malini, the nurse on shift, was small and her light pink uniform hung around her like a balloon. Malini spoke so quickly as if each sentence had a deadline.

The nurse pointed to a red button near the bed. "Red is emergency only. Non-emergency, use the white bell on the table." She opened a small door. "Here is the bathroom."

Amma sat on her bed, her hands pressed on her knees.

---

**" . . . It's not so unusual, Amma.  
Lots of people are going to  
nursing homes these days . . . . "**

---

Malini unlocked the closet with a flourish. "See, Aunty, so much space. Just for you." She began to chuckle.

Devaki nodded. "Thanks. We will manage now."

"OK. OK." She smiled as she closed the door. "Call for anything!"

Slowly, Devaki put everything away in the closet. She placed two framed photographs on the desk and sat beside her mother on the bed. They both looked out the window. In the garden, people ambled on the path and shuffled in walkers. Ladies wearing blue saris and big name tags pushed people in wheelchairs.

Devaki picked up one of photos and looked at it. She had taken it in her parents' garden soon after Shriya was born. Amma was holding her granddaughter while Sid sat on his grandfather's lap.

"It seems like only yesterday. The children loved the old garden, Amma."

"You loved it too. I remember your face the first time you plucked a mango. That seems like yesterday, too."

"We had the sweetest juice mangoes."

"There were so many! I had to pulp and freeze them. They'd last till the end of winter, you know."

"I can still taste them."

"And the temple flowers. I'd pluck two. I'd put them in a bowl at the entrance."

"Every day, new flowers."

"Our guavas weren't the best, I'll admit," Amma said, "but a dab of salt and chili powder and, well, you loved to eat that when you got back from school."

Devaki placed the photograph back on the desk.

"Amma. I think you'll be happy here. It seems nice. Lovely, in fact."

Her mother gave a quick smile and looked down at her hands.

"I know we've talked and talked about it. It's not so unusual, Amma. Lots of people are going to nursing homes these days. In places like America, people do it all the time."

Devaki waited for her to say they were not in America, but her mother remained silent.

Devaki picked up the other photo. She couldn't have been more than two years old at the time it was taken. Her father was smiling directly at the camera as he carried her, and her mother was holding a Diwali sparkler. Devaki tilted the photo to the light. The moment a camera snaps a picture, it forces the hand of memory. Though she had no recollection of that night, Devaki would forever think of Diwali in this way: a sparkler in her mother's hand, her father radiating a confident smile, his glasses slightly askew, his arm tilted at a jaunty angle as he held an open-mouthed baby. Devaki imagined reaching back in time to the moments before the photograph was snapped and telling her father about a day in the future when his wife would be looking out a window of a nursing home.

Devaki placed the photograph back on the desk.

Amma turned to her. "Did we pack my thin towels? The sweater? Devaki! Who will give me my medicines?"

"Everything's packed, everything's arranged. It's going to be fine, Amma. The nurse will give you the medicines. I'll call every day. I'll visit every week."

"Okay."

After two small knocks, the door opened and Malini stood at the doorway. "Aunty! Time for the community meet in the common room."

Devaki pressed her lips together. “She will come soon, Malini.”

“It starts in ten minutes.”

“Okay. I’ll bring her.”

When door closed, Devaki turned to her mother. “It will be good here, you’ll be with people your own age. This is the right thing to do, Amma.”

“You know what’s best.”

Devaki didn’t know what was best. She wished somebody would tell her.

Amma said, “You’ll come next week?”

“All of us. For sure.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s go now. And you should leave, the kids will be waiting.”

“In just a few minutes,” Devaki said. She held her mother’s hand.

A warbler landed on the windowsill, cocked its head, and flew away.

\* \* \*

In the kitchen, Devaki looked up pomfret recipes. At the dining table, Shriya folded squares of paper into swans and Sid sat slouched over his books. Just as Devaki had predicted, the kids blamed her for not having taken them to the nursing home that morning. Shriya’s histrionics had exceeded anything Devaki had seen in a long time. Sid maintained an air of silent resentment.

As she patted the fish dry, she heard Shriya say, “Now she won’t be able to see them.”

“See what?” Sid asked.

“The roses we planted. Ammamma won’t be able to see them.”

Devaki put aside the pomfret and leaned against the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. Dinner could wait.

Sid lifted his head from his notebook. “Ammamma is old and she’s sick and we can’t take care of her. Maybe there’ll be roses in that Ashiana place. Better ones, even.”

“But they won’t be *her* roses.”

“Shriya, you’re being irrational.”

“Whatever that means.” Shriya carefully folded her paper.

“It means you’re not understanding things properly.”

“I understand lots of things.”

Shriya flipped the paper over.

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**“Ammamma is old and she’s sick  
and we can’t take care of her.  
Maybe there’ll be roses in that  
Ashiana place. Better ones, even.”**

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“Sid?”

“Now what?”

“Do you think Ammamma wanted to go?”

“I guess. Mom said she talked to Ammamma about it. A lot.”

“What do you think Mummy said to her?”

“How would I know?”

Shriya placed a purple swan at the center of the table and picked up another piece of paper.

“Will they take care of her if she gets older?”

“That’s why she’s there.”

“What about when she has to be fed? Sid? Will they take care of her if she gets to be old and yucky?”

Devaki pressed the back of her head against the doorframe.

Sid stared at his sister. “She had to go away. You weren’t home that day, you don’t know. Ammamma figured out how to open the locks and she just wandered off. Mom and I searched everywhere. You know where we found her? At the traffic lights. In the middle of the road. Think about it, she could have been run over. Mom was scared. I was scared too.”

Devaki had been in the middle of a client presentation when Sid called to say he couldn't find his Ammamma anywhere. Devaki had raced home. She and Sid searched every street and side street, brandishing Amma's photo at *kirana* shops and *bandis*. They found her in the middle of a busy road, holding on to a traffic signal pole. Cars and lorries honked and zipped erratically. Amma's face followed the cars as if she was watching a strange movie. Her hair was neat and her face powdered, but she was in her blouse and petticoat. She had forgotten to wear her sari. Devaki covered her with a scarf and led her to the car. Amma did not look at Sid, and Sid seemed to understand that he should not look at her either. As Devaki drove, she caught a glimpse of Sid in the rearview mirror. He was trying hard not to cry. That was the day Devaki began looking into nursing homes.

Devaki wondered what her mother was doing in Ashiana. Was she sitting in the common room with the others? Maybe she was walking in the garden, inspecting the flowers. Or was she alone in her room with her clothes and her photographs?

She wondered whether a time would come when Amma forgot everything. Then, every experience would be unfiltered by memory and every taste and sight would be fresh and riveting—a life lived with the wonder of an infant and you could laugh with someone one minute and forget them the next. How would it be, Devaki wondered, to remember only the distant past? Living in memories, you could be eternally young with a mind quick as lightning and a body free of wrinkles and creaking joints. It seemed to Devaki that forgetting could be an act of rebellion against the world, against the body, against time.

She watched her children, immersed in their thoughts and oblivious to the frailties of the world and of their bodies. For now, she knew they were hers. She could still gather them in her arms. But soon, they would become other people. Over time, she too would change. Her bones would give way and strain to carry her, and her mind would struggle to keep the details straight. Devaki knew she could not expect to live with her children in her old age. She should make her own plans, but she didn't know what those would be.

Devaki retreated back into the kitchen. She closed the recipe book, rubbed whatever spices she could find onto the pomfret and slid it into the oven.

She strode into the dining room. "Dinner will be ready pretty soon. We're having fish."

"Okay, Mummy," Shriya said.

Devaki tucked her daughter's hair behind her ear. "I heard you talking about Ammamma. I know you miss her."

Shriya nodded. "I still can't believe she's living somewhere else. I can't believe we didn't say goodbye."

Sid tapped his pen on his notebook.

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## **It seemed to Devaki that forgetting could be an act of rebellion against the world, against the body, against time.**

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"But we're going to see her this weekend, remember?" Devaki said. "We're taking her out for lunch."

Shriya's face lit up. "I can show her my origami swans."

Devaki picked up the swan. "She'll love that. Just a few days more and it will be Sunday again and we'll see her."

"Wait!" Shriya sprang up. "Mummy, Sunday is Zehrab's birthday. I have to go there for lunch."

"Oh!" Devaki pressed her fingers on her forehead. "How could I forget? But Shriya, your Ammamma is waiting to see you kids. And Sunday's the only day I can take you. You're with your father next weekend. Listen, why don't you go see Zehrab when you get back from lunch?"

"Then the party will be over, Mummy! All my friends will be there. Everyone! And Zehrab is my best friend. What if I don't go to the birthday party and Zehrab doesn't want to be my best friend anymore?"

"But what about Ammamma?" Sid mumbled.

"I want to see her too!" Shriya slapped her hands on the table and burst into tears.

When Devaki tried to put her arm around her, Shriya leapt up and ran to her room. Sid turned away. She walked back into the kitchen to heat up the rest of the dinner.

When Devaki called Shriya to eat, she found the girl asleep on her bed, her hands curled on her chest. Devaki tucked her in and turned on the fan. As the blades began to whirl,

some papers fell to the floor. Devaki picked them up. She recognized the drawings. Three people smiling in a garden. A girl on a pony. Devaki placed them under a book on the bedside table and turned off the lights.

Devaki went to her own room and opened her closet. She brought out her mother's yellow Kanchivaram and unwrapped it. She had a distinct image of her mother wearing it. Amma was returning from a party, her arms swaying in a half-sleeved blouse as she walked, earrings dangling, heels clanking, sari rustling. Devaki turned to face the door. She had the feeling that her mother would appear in the doorway at any moment. Amma would enter with neat hair, a perfect red bindi, her lips curving into a smile. Devaki craned her neck and waited, her heart pounding. ♦

ALAN BALTER

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## YOU STILL KNOW ME

once they would have called you "feeble minded"  
or "senile," but now they say you're "demented"  
not that it matters to me my friend,  
because I call you Michael

the nurses say you don't know me  
but when I hold your quaking hand in mine  
and a crooked smile plays around your lips  
I know they're mistaken

not long ago we played our games  
between sugar maple trees and a red brick building  
where they warehoused sheets of metal for some war  
instead of once brilliant men

and the day after, we went to college  
where we learned the law yet still found time  
to write poetry for pretty coeds with blond hair  
and full lips who loved us in your rusty Studebaker

then somehow, it became today  
and I've come to visit you, as I will tomorrow,  
and your eyes will brighten because you still know me  
my good and dear friend Michael

# OPERATING IN FRENCH

JUDY KRONENFELD

My hunger increased by visions of *pain au chocolat* and *pain aux raisins*, I hurried down the staircase of our modest hotel, my Frenchless husband, who had no intention of contributing to the order, some paces behind. We'd awakened quite hungry on this fourth and last morning in Brittany, but had packed our suitcases before considering food. I'd suggested we buy some pastries at the *boulangerie* just across the street, and enjoy them on our little balcony overlooking the pleasantly scruffy garden, making do with the tea and coffee packets and the small electric teapot in our room. We were leaving as soon as possible for Normandy, where we would join our Foreign Service son and his family for a precious few days—the *raison d'être* of our relatively short and somewhat last-minute trip to France, our most beloved European destination. They had been on their own vacation in Europe, and were making their final stop at a French country *gîte*, before returning to his post in Phnom Penh.

No traffic on the little street I began to cross, almost running, eyes to my left on the goal—though, at well over seventy, with arthritis in one knee, and a knee replacement in the other, as well as osteoporosis and a history of fractures followed by long-worn casts in my last decade and a half (arm, leg, and knee, as well as a couple of hairline others), I don't ever *really* run. There was a bay on my left, on the far side of the street where shoppers parked their cars, sometimes leaving them with motors on, while they leapt into the *boulangerie* and out again with their baguettes. Perhaps for that reason, I didn't expect the sidewalk to jut out into the street in front of me and to my right; I tripped over the curb, was bowled over by gravity's nonnegotiable shove—the elapsing second long enough for me to think, *I can pull myself upright oh no not again*—and my right hand twisted palm skyward, and smashed into the concrete when my body fell on top of it. *Again*. Using my left hand and arm, I somehow got my lower body into a sitting position on the sidewalk; my right hand dripped off its

arm like a steak held up by a butcher. The skin was peeled off and pebbles and grit clustered in the bloody open gash. My instincts told me the wrist (at least) was fractured, yet I hoped against hope for a mere deep wound. I held my right arm with my left, and rocked with pain, tears sprouting from my eyes, my husband, now in front of me, shouting "What happened? What happened?" and I felt pitifully embarrassed and chagrined, to have turned, in an instant, from a passably adroit traveler into a doddering American tourist who had plopped into people's lives on this mild French morning on so quiet a French street.

As if summoned directly by my pain and fear, people appeared around us, in action. One man was on his cell making a call, presumably for help. Another, clearly versed in treatment for shock, offered what looked like an old blanket. Our hotel host (Summoned by unseen social networks?) quickly strode across the street, and squatting by my



side, asked if I wanted an orange juice. I fended off the blanket, approved the juice to come, agreed mentally, without talking to the man on the phone, that whoever he was calling needed to arrive. Catapulted out of our balmy European escape, I was in it now—the emergency, the awkward, annoying, faintly ridiculous situation.

Our ample and leisurely dinner the night before at our hotel's restaurant "gastronomique"—a meal of several courses, further punctuated by miniscule *amuse-bouches*, moistened by a palpably good rosé, and enhanced by the evident joy and pride of the staff, whose pleasure in hosting definitely increased ours in eating—now seemed like a distant rosy memory of a kind of experience not likely to be repeated. I was no longer simply a traveler on vacation, strolling to meals or for a drink in the mild summer weather—enjoying the deep, restful, siesta-like quiet of a tiny French town, fostered by shuttered windows and broken only by the basilica's bells, or little blooms of chattering people emerging from behind closed doors. I was no longer a playful linguist, as I had been with our charming and charmable hôtelier, contending about which one of us got to "practice" the foreign language—in that manner of French conversation that always seems just a few millimeters short of outright flirting. (His English was better than my French—which is well-pronounced, but lacking in extensive vocabulary or great ease with verb tenses—so his ceding to my wish, at least some of the time, had felt like part of his affable hospitality.) It was far too familiar, this feeling of my body defeating and disappointing me. I knew the drill.

Yet at this moment I wanted to say to our hôtelier, squatting near me again, juice in hand, as I sat on the sidewalk, "Alas, I'm afraid the wrist is broken," with a rueful smile that would lift me some millimeters out of being pathetic. But was "*brisé*" the right word for a fracture? Or the right word at all for "broken"? And what in heck was the word for "wrist"? I didn't think I'd ever had the occasion to use it. *Poigner*? Or was that some kind of knife? And what was I going to do about the fact that I really had to pee?

Before I could attempt to resolve these quandaries, the French Fire Department—the *pompiers*—arrived. I was helped onto a gurney inside their small truck by an attractive young woman whose boyfriend, I soon found out, was the driver. My husband secured our room in the hotel for another night, the siren was turned on, and we were on the road to the nearest adequate hospital (in a town of about 50,000 some twenty kilometers away), my husband following in our rented car.

The young woman in the back of the fire truck with me was focused, concerned, personable. Her help felt small-scale, unofficial, perhaps not frequently enough given to become routine or boring for the givers. But to convey to her, across the language barrier, my urgent need, which, at this moment vied with the pain in my throbbing, meat-limp hand, seemed more uncomfortably personal than speaking English to an English-speaker, because my grip on connotation (having never said anything more than "Pardonnez-moi, où sont les toilettes?") was uncertain. Was the verb *pisser* which I settled on vulgar, or not? Should I have chanced *faire pipi* (Or was that only

for two-year olds?), or even *uriner* (But wouldn't such formality make me sound bizarre?). The young woman offered a bedpan, and I tried to explain to her, with a number of left-handed gestures, that I was afraid I couldn't manage—lying down and one-handed, as I was. Hoping I sounded as polite as I meant to be, I asked for her promise to lead me to *les toilettes* as soon as we got to the hospital, and so we chatted about where I was from in California, and what I was doing in France, and where she'd gone when she visited Les États-Unis. Everyday non-substantive chit-chat not driven by necessity—even with a broken wrist and burning bladder, I wasn't half-bad at that.

An hour of dual discomfort later—including a transfer from the *pompiers'* gurney to the hospital's emergency room gurney, questioning, paperwork (not filled out by right-handed me)—and, finally, I was briefly allowed to stand and be led to the promised relief. The young woman departed quickly, I thanked her sincerely, waving my left hand, I was wheeled to an examination room, where, eventually, someone cleaned the wound and lightly bandaged it, and, after a while, a doctor entered and asked me the usual questions about my injury, and also, atypically, inquired about my work. He was relaxed and talkative—in the way that some doctors, cross-culturally, seem to train themselves to be, perhaps because of the high tension of their jobs; or, perhaps it was a bit interesting for him to talk to *une étrangère* in this regional hospital.

I mentioned that I was a retired teacher of English literature and creative writing, that I had written a book on Shakespeare, and some books of poems,

surprised that the French words for all of this were actually flowing (finally under medical care, perhaps I relaxed a notch, and stopped second-guessing myself so much). The doctor picked up on the Shakespeare with evident interest and knowledge, remarking that the playwright was *un miracle!* coming almost out of nowhere, and, as if we were having a conversation over glasses of wine at some intellectual soirée, I told him I understood exactly what he meant, that Marlowe, for example, born in the same year as Shakespeare, was nowhere near as complex or profound a playwright.

On I went with my little French script of literary pleasantries, feeling the tang of pleasure as every third or fourth word that issued from my mouth surprised me that I knew it—and this, in spite of my fears: Would I have to have my first surgery after a fracture and miss any or all of the few days my son, daughter-in-law and grandkids were going to be in Normandy? I was a woman over seventy, with a broken hand. A train wreck.

But as I created my part in the continuing conversation, I felt as if I were building an actual French edifice, placing my words like bricks, binding them with the mortar of my sentences. For these minutes I was more than a woman beyond “a certain age” and a patient, more than a victim of chance, fragility, carelessness. I felt not the slightest quiver of disdain or distaste coming toward me. For all the French valorization of *l’amour, la beauté, le plaisir* (and the building-sized car ad featuring a naked young belle I had seen on a previous trip), this doctor did not make me feel the least bit typecast as an old woman. I felt *seen*. An American doctor, even an interesting and surprisingly literary one, surely would not have pleased me this much!

The Shakespeare-loving doctor also saw that my hand was definitively fractured, though he ordered an X-ray, nevertheless. And soon, with my husband—moral support and sounding

board—having been allowed to join us, we were talking, while I occasionally translated—almost as if I were participating in a planned conference involving French and English speakers—about my options for surgery.

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The doctor explained that we *could* go to Paris, but assured us with some chest-inflating pride that medicine in France was much more centralized than it was in the U.S., so there wouldn’t be *that* much difference between my treatment in the capital and in this regional hospital. I couldn’t imagine being in the car for several hours with an open wound, clutching my arm, then starting the process of being admitted all over again someplace much more crowded. A surgeon was going to be available and surgery could take place today, where we were. And if I’d had to choose a travel destination to fracture bones in, France, with a medical system often rated best in the world, would certainly have been it. I was down in the pit of the situation again now, on the ride, resigned, surrendered. But there was something beyond that: the glow of my love of the language, the country, the culture, was cast over this hospital and its workers, too, as if they could do no wrong.

At that moment, it was as if I had a path laid out before me—the challenge of dredging up and gathering French words into my net, in order to propel

myself through this cross-cultural experience with a modicum of aplomb—and negotiating that path would occupy most of my cerebral neurons, thus pushing most fears aside. Had I spoken French without mind-filling premeditation, or any sense of intrinsic glamour, I just might have felt, or even proceeded, differently.

Within an hour or so, I was in a room, reading a book I had with me, having given most of my personal possessions to my husband, who finally went back to our hotel in search of a meal. I’m quite sure I was given a pill for pain, but I’m not sure I asked what it was; uncharacteristically passive, I may have just accepted it from the tiny corrugated cup handed to me, although, in the very few hospitalizations for surgery I’d had in California, I’d inquired scrupulously about all medications. Perhaps my brain was spent with summoning and trying to understand the French I needed to navigate my situation; perhaps the glow of Frenchness was enough to turn it off.

Time passed slowly until a startlingly squat and coarse-faced woman, contrasting noticeably with the lithe and quite lovely nurses, arrived to take me to the shower. She placed the carbolic soap I was to scrub with in my left hand, then finished the job brusquely and efficiently herself since my out-of-commission right hand made it incomplete. She washed my thick, curly hair with something prickly that left it sticking out in all directions. She didn’t exude any charm; the few shreds I tried to send her way dissipated in the air. When I asked her if she happened to have any conditioner, she laughed. I wondered why I wasn’t a little more weirded out. Was it my realism and resignation kicking in again at this particularly *unglowing* moment, or had there been something more than a pain-killer in that pill? In any case, when you submit yourself for care, whether in your native language and land or in a foreign one, you have little choice but to get with the program.

In the busy area I was next taken to on a gurney, sometime later, someone I surmised was an anesthesiologist gave me a nerve block in my arm; I was reassured that my preference for a local anesthetic had apparently been heeded. He seemed pleasant, but, not surprisingly, my conversation with him was very limited. When he asked how I was doing, I blurted, “*J’ai peur*” (I’m afraid), at least in part because I wasn’t sufficiently sure of the word for “nervous.” Then he asked me if I was on vacation and where I was going next, in what seemed a well-intentioned effort at diversion. Had I sufficient faith in my linguistic instincts and the incredible number of cognates to English words in French, I might have spoken in a less alarmist way, preserving my *sang-froid*, or at least its appearance: *Je suis un peu nerveuse*—“I’m a little nervous” (and even gotten the feminine ending of the adjective correct). But of course the anesthesiologist’s main concern was whether I felt *douleur* (pain). I wasn’t entirely sure (*Was* that nerve block working?), but I said “I don’t *think* I feel pain,” giving the anesthesiologist the benefit of the doubt.

At that precise moment, perhaps I didn’t focus well enough on rounding my lips for the vowels of *douleur*, because in a little while I heard him laughing, saying something about “dollar” to someone else, mocking my American pronunciation. It was snide. Perhaps worse, did his speaking within range of me mean he didn’t think I understood much French at all? Suddenly I felt the same way I might in crowded American hospitals, not *seen*, invisible, out of hearing, just another body on a gurney. I thought, as I often had in clinics and hospitals: *medical procedures are routine for doctors, but unique for the patient. And then, a parallel thought: speaking a language is routine for the native speaker, but uniquely and riskily adventurous for the foreigner.* And then I was routinely wheeled into the operating room, having my hand poked with something sharp, and be-

ing asked, again, if I felt pain. And then—expressed wish for only local anesthesia perhaps necessarily by the by—I was out.

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## **Suddenly I felt the same way I might in crowded American hospitals, not seen, invisible, out of hearing, just another body on a gurney.**

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I awoke peaceably in recovery—and remarkably without the slightest tinge of nausea (score that point for French medicine)—where the nurse asked me if I would like to speak to my husband, and, amazingly (score again), also handed me my cell phone on which to call; I had no recollection of arranging for the disposition of my phone. Eventually I was taken to my room, where my loyal husband, having made another trip to the hospital, found me fantasizing, mouth watering (having had nothing but orange juice all day), about those never bought or eaten pastries so flaky and sweet. After he left for the night, the nurse on duty seemed to be getting me ready for bedtime; she looked somewhat surprised when I mentioned food. I couldn’t even remember, in that moment, the simple addition of *très* (very), that would increase the intensity of “*J’ai faim*” (I’m hungry). But at last, about 10:00 p.m., a bowl of some modestly tasty thick creamed soup arrived and I devoured it.

It was difficult to find a comfortable position in which to sleep, my hand—seemingly only fragilely bandaged and protected—hurt. It was very hot in the un-air-conditioned room, and my roommate on the other side of the protective bed curtains, who sounded older than me and crazy, continually moaned and talked loudly to herself. The rose-

colored glasses through which I tended to see the French were losing more of their hue: it was clear that the nurses were no more capable of handling this patient than nurses anywhere else might be, and favored the cognizant and in control; they scolded her, and told her to behave. But one of them very kindly brought me a portable fan, and I slept, on and off.

I didn’t know my exact diagnosis, or even whether someone had communicated it to me, and I had failed to understand; I certainly didn’t know how my surgery had gone. But I was focused on getting released in the morning, which I heartily hoped to do, since we were already missing a day with my son and his family and would not see them after this planned visit for a very long time! For that reason, I told every nurse who came into the room while I was awake that I wanted to see the surgeon as soon as possible; they seemed very deferential at the mention of his name, perhaps protecting his time as nurses everywhere might do.

At some point in the morning, he was announced, and I looked up to see him at the foot of my bed, speaking quite quickly, and saying something I wasn’t fully getting, although I think I was emotionally and linguistically prepared only for non-substantive pleasantries, for being released back to being a tourist *en vacances*—although one armed with pain pills and antibiotics, and fully prepared to check her progress with doctors once back home. The surgeon said something about the bones in my hand being very soft—not very surprising, given my osteoporosis. I waited to hear the qualification, as in *But everything went very well and we expect you to make a full recovery.* Instead I heard a slightly unexpected emphasis on *hope*, and on his *best efforts*, even something about the available *equipment* for the surgery, which dinged in my brain, but didn’t develop enough speed to burst through the barrier of my desire to see my family, and—as now

seemed possible, if somewhat tricky—to resume the pleasures of travel so delightfully bracketed from ordinary life. After all, I was on vacation, I was in France, and I was, *un miracle!* speaking, if not always completely understanding, French. And then the surgeon exited the room.

The procedures of release, involving some technical or uncommon words I had little grasp of, upped the opacity quotient; I felt little more attuned to the situation than my husband, at my side again, having made yet another trip. I certainly did not recognize the word for the rigid velcro-closing brace that was needed to protect my wrist and hand, and it wasn't clear whether it would be provided at the hospital (it eventually was), or would have to be procured outside. Furthermore, apparently, as I finally grasped, I would be required to have the dressing on my wound changed and the wound cleaned every two days during our remaining days in France by a licensed nurse we would have to locate in whatever town we were in or near. And we would have to purchase a very generous collection of supplies from a drugstore, to bring to these nurses—a large variety of bandages and a number of antiseptics. (Pain-killers and an antibiotic were provided by the hospital.) Free at last, we paid the hospital bill, which was remarkably modest, and certainly renewed our appreciation for the single-payer French medical system (The *pompiers* had cost nothing at all!) and drove back to our little town, where I felt compelled to wash my hideous hair in the sink in our hotel room with my left hand and a little coerced help from my husband, and where, afterwards, we procured that cornucopia of bandages and antiseptics (costing almost a fifth of the amount for the surgery and hospitalization) at the local drugstore. Then, *finement*, we were off, with one stop on the auto-route to have a snack and buy a couple of cheap comfy pillows to rest my hand on as my husband drove.

Now, clearly, there was no thought of cutting short our plans to go to Normandy and to spend a little time in the Loire Valley, afterwards, before flying home from Paris. Yes, there was pain, and some worry. And it wasn't easy, as it turned out, for foreigners—one of whom was awkwardly one-handed and whose other hand was aching—to figure out how to search for the appropriate kind of nurses, to find their names and numbers, then phone them, and locate them, every other day. But it was all part of an anthropology of travel, of experiencing a slightly different medical system from the inside, almost as a native would. How curious it was that each nurse had a different method for cleaning, dressing and bandaging. How amusing that one of them suggested we didn't need half the supplies we were lugging around (and we donated them on the spot). How fortunate, after all, that it was “only” my hand this time, and not a knee or a leg. A hand is kind of remote from the rest of the body (Isn't it?), from the torso, especially—with all its vital organs, a center of “the self.” And one has an extra.

If slowly, and with great care, I could at least walk up and down the staircase in the beautiful stone farmhouse in Normandy where we joined our children and grandkids (So amazing and marvelous to see right in front of us!). And, after that, with even greater care, I could walk up the banister-less soft stone steps of the circular staircase to our room in a hotel on a narrow medieval street in Chinon in the Loire, holding on to the wall and the occasional rope “railing.” The *hôtelier* there, eyeing my bandaged hand in its rigid brace, told my husband he could park in his private garage, rather than the one normally used by guests, from which there was quite a climb. And my conversational, non-technical French seemed to have improved with exposure to the language around me by the time we were there; my brain was even less occupied with premeditation as I spoke. *À la fin*, in line for hours at Charles de Gaulle for our very delayed flight back

to California, I became engaged in conversation with a young Frenchman, who barely seemed to notice the brace on my hand, and told me my French surprised him, because it didn't have an American accent at all! Once again, my glasses took on that lovely rose. I felt so un-pigeonholed, so happily *seen*, and the glow lasted, though my wrist hurt, the hours-late plane was crowded and cramped, and there was no hot food on the flight because of a fire at the suppliers.

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**But it was all part of an anthropology of travel, of experiencing a slightly different medical system from the inside, almost as a native would.**

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If one is going to break a bone that requires surgery (but conveniently doesn't impede walking), there's something to be said for doing so on holiday in a foreign culture one loves, whose language is a source of delight, and palpable—in the mouth, on the tongue, in the nose, in the busy mind—and not well enough spoken not to be—every sentence emerging with a mental pat on one's own back. How lovely to remain traveling, on vacation, released from duty and routine, seeing a little bit of the inside of another culture, every sight new; how lovely to feel one has the power to summon up that language one admires, and to maintain one's pride by not mangling it utterly beyond recognition. Such delights and desires ultimately burnished a difficult if not impossible situation, distracted me; pulled me through.

Just two weeks later, I am following up at the first available appointment in a

clinic near my home in Southern California, having my hand fluoroscoped by a remarkably bouncy young hand surgeon. I am not on vacation, not shaping words in a foreign tongue that please and distract me; I am only a patient. And he is saying, “Hmm, that looks pretty good, yeah,” and I am thinking *adventure over* until he looks at another view and says “Uh-oh, there are some issues here.” He ponders for a while, then tells me—as the French general surgeon’s words about soft bone, and *hope* and *best efforts* and even *equipment* revive in my mind—that there is an area of very gravelly bone, and that the metal plate and pin I have in my wrist now are not adequate supports; the plate is too small. (Much later, when I actually read the surgery report, I see that “the distal radius was extremely *comminuted*,” which I have to look up: apparently it describes a fracture producing multiple bone splinters.) The energetic and quite kindly hand surgeon says that he understands that undergoing revision surgery so soon is not an appealing idea, but if I want to

recover full use of my right hand, he thinks it’s necessary. (After quite a few months of fairly arduous therapy, I did make a fine recovery.) And, he goes on, “the French just aren’t up to American standards in equipment, by the way.” I am certainly far from thrilled to be operated on again, but I feel no anger toward the French general surgeon or anyone on his hospital’s medical staff. I had no real choice, and they really did do their best. A relatively small regional hospital—probably not as well equipped as a Parisian one, after all—they just didn’t have the right plate.

So, the next day, I am once again lying on a gurney, waiting hours for surgery, an old hand (ha!) at the drill, and having to pee. But it’s easier to ask about that in English, and soon I’m wheeling my IV pole to the restroom. The nurses, and the anesthesiologist who comes by later, are all very cheerful and willing to answer questions. But, compared to some of the French emergency and medical personnel, especially to the Shakespeare-loving admitting doctor,

they seem more bound by their roles, and more likely to require me to play mine as patient; they keep on their masks. I’m the only one left in the pre-operative holding area. I rebel a little. I sing, “It’s my surgery, and I’ll cry if I want to, cry if I want to.” At least one person at the nurse’s station chuckles.

Pushing three years later, I am even more careful than I was, no matter how enticed. I am grateful for my functioning right hand. I am grateful to have, thus far, broken no more bones. A nano-second of slip, so delicate a rupture, has so extended a consequence, and powerfully reasserts the brittleness of the armature supporting our bodies. But what a miracle to heal from physical wounds, and even more importantly, from a destructive sense of our own fragility, to manage to live in the present as much as we do, to move with anticipation toward the next moment of *plaisir* and *joie*—until that day, hopefully in the far and hardly imaginable future, when we no longer can. ♦

# FLAMES OF LIFE

KELLY A. HARMON

**B**ranson Luc woke to the sound of water boiling over in the hearth—sizzling on the fire dogs—and pink smoke erupting from the communications cauldron. The smoke coalesced into a flat missive, then wafted back and forth in the air as it settled to the packed-dirt floor. Though the smoke was contained, it still filled the air with its burnt-paper smell.

He rubbed his eyes, then pulled on his prosthetic right leg—a stout oak branch padded out with sheep’s wool—and eased out of bed. He lit a lamp with a brand from the fire, then retrieved the ragged-edged smoke-paper from where it had landed under the table. The message surprised him: *Tinker/Large Animal Doctor needed at Oakmoore Cauldron Factory. Well paid for services rendered. Come quick!*

*Doctor and tinker, Bran thought, something is wrong with the coke ovens.*

Lifting a cinnamon candy from the table’s dish, he popped it into his mouth, hoping it would alleviate the smokey taste. The candy bit into his tongue with a fire, softened by sugar, and left his mouth strangely cool, the lingering taste of cinnamon stinging the tip of his tongue.

He stood and limped to the window and looked up at the Great Oakmoore Mountain. Clear purple skies of early morning glowed in burgeoning sunlight, devoid of the usual

cloud of smoke rising over the oak trees. The entire steel-making process had ceased.

*So, was it mechanics, or dragons?* He couldn’t know unless he investigated.

But would they want him there?

He was a damn good mechanic, and a damn fine animal doctor. He couldn’t be blamed for the accident. He’d told the abbey they needed to take more safety precautions—and when the worst happened they’d blamed him instead of owning up. And he was the one who’d lost a leg. It wasn’t his fault—and yet, few seemed willing to trust him.

So would the witches want his help?

Well, the law was the law. They damn-well couldn’t turn him away—unless the job was complete when he got there. And since he lived so close to the mountain, he might be able to arrive before anyone else—if he hurried.

If he could fix the ovens for the witches, maybe he could pull his reputation out of the cesspit.

Branson packed quickly, tinkering tools and doctor’s bag—omitting the obvious items the witches should have on the premises—and including some things they probably would not. And just for good measure, he wrapped the rest of the

cinnamon candies in a napkin and shoved them into his pocket.

Then, he saw to the horse and wagon.

\* \* \*

It was always a challenge getting to the Oakmoore Mountains, even when the witches knew you were coming. Hell, even when they invited you. You still had to cross the poisonous Shadow River, and make it up the slippery slope leading to the factory's front gate. But once you got directly on the path, things were usually all right.

Thank the one-eyed god it was springtime. He'd hate to have to do this in winter.

The trip was slower for him than it used to be, since he could no longer sit a horse. At least that allowed him to carry more equipment.

As he passed over the narrow, swinging bridge at Shadow River, he looked west to the docks where the cave-mouth opened over the water; the place where the witches loaded the cauldrons aboard ships for delivery. *Deserted*. This wasn't just the witches' problem. It affected nearly everyone in the area.

\* \* \*

Branson slipped on the steep, gravel walk, catching his balance, the acute stabbing pain of the wooden prosthetic digging into his hip. He rubbed at the pain—sharper in the cooler air of the higher altitude—and approached bare, steel doors, built directly into the side of the mountain. He yanked on the overhead bell chain, with its tiny steel cauldron dangling from the end. Behind the doors, a bell-tone rang, *bah-dah, bah-dah, bah-dah*. Six beats of a ball-peen on three different-sized cauldrons, the pitches ringing higher every second beat.

A young witch answered the door, the pointed, green tabs on her collar announcing she was a novice.

Bran held out the pink-smoke missive. "I'm here to fix the ovens."

"Are you a tinker, or an animal doctor?" the witch asked.

"Both." Bran said it with pride. Not many tinker-doctors in the area.

Her smile died. "You must be Branson Luc."

He nodded, confirming her fears—and confirming his own suspicions about his reception.

The witch started closing the door. "Sorry—we already have someone working on the problem."

"I can wait."

"That won't be necessary—"

Branson stepped forward, leaning precariously on his prosthetic, keeping one booted foot on the threshold. "I believe the law says that you must let me try if your current help can't do the job."

The witch sighed—clearly having her orders if he'd pushed the issue—swung the door open wide and pointed to a bench. "Come in. You may wait right here." She started to walk away, but turned back to him. "Are you here in your capacity as a mechanic or a doctor?"

"Both," Branson said, knowing it would annoy her. It also gave him two chances to fix the problem. He lowered himself to the bench on his good leg, and waited.

A short time later the novice came back for him. "It's your turn. Please do not kill the dragons—or burn the place down."

The last crack was completely unnecessary. If anyone would burn the place down, it would be the dragons. But Bran didn't want trouble, not when he had this chance to clear his name.

"What's the problem?" he asked her.

"We can't keep the ovens hot enough to burn the coal," the witch said. "The temperatures keep going down."



She led him through a set of smaller, double doors into the factory.

Bran had never been inside before. It was larger than he thought it would be, stretching as far as he could see in both directions in the dim light, the walls carved out of natural rock. Coal wagons, heavy with ore and still as statues, lined one side of the factory. He'd bet his good leg they zoomed on their rails when everything was operational. Empty shelves lined the other side—for *finished cauldrons*?

This is where the magic happened—though not literally.

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**The dragon cave sparkled with iridescent flashes, torchlight bouncing off dragon scales—red, blue, and green—of the three towering giants lounging on a great pile of gold.**

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Here, the witches forged the best steel cauldrons in the world—able to withstand a range of temperatures that no other cauldrons achieved. You could boil molten iron in them—if you needed to—then toss them into the snow to cool them off—no harm done. Neither would the cauldrons rust, due to the finishing spells the witches cast on them. They were a work of art.

But if the ovens weren't working, no cauldrons could be made.

The novice delivered Bran to the factory floor, to the foreman-witch in charge. Her long dark hair was pulled back and loosely braided. Her face was pale, like she'd never seen the outside of the factory. *Maybe she hadn't*, Branson thought. Behind her in the distance, loomed the three large coke ovens, like stone sentries, overlooking the entire process.

Bran approached the witch. "I'd like to see the dragons first, if I may."

"Why?" She looked irritated, brows furrowing, her lips turned down.

"If you can't get your ovens hot enough, the problem might be your heat source."

"Who said the ovens weren't hot enough?"

"The novice at the door."

The witch shook her head, and several strands of hair escaped her loose braid to curl around her face. "The heat source is fine—but it fluctuates. We shouldn't be seeing such large dips in temperature in the ovens, especially when we're trying to bake the coke. If things don't heat evenly we'll get volatility. Not good. There's definitely something wrong with the ovens."

"I'd still like to see the dragons first—just to rule them out."

She looked mutinous.

"If there's nothing wrong with the dragons, it's only a ten-minute check," Branson said. "Would you want me to spend hours on the ovens only to learn that one of your dragons is ill?"

"The dragons can't be sick," the witch said. "They're—"

"Why don't you let an animal doctor decide?" That silenced her. He knew the witch meant well, but she was just getting in his way.

\* \* \*

The dragons rested in the caves below the coke ovens.

A small, rough-hewn passage circled downward at a gentle slope, but even the moderate angle aggravated Branson's hip. He'd regret this in the morning—and for days to come.

The dragon cave sparkled with iridescent flashes, torchlight bouncing off dragon scales—red, blue, and green—of the three towering giants lounging on a great pile of gold. Branson wiped his arm across his brow, sweating in the warm, humid air of the cavern. He was glad he hadn't donned his protective gear.

Branson bowed to them—three separate bends at the waist—three separate pains in his hip. "Good morning, kind friends. I am Branson Luc, a doctor of animals. I have come to check your health."

*It is not time for our annual checkup*, thought the red giant. Branson heard the response in his head, deep and low, but obviously feminine.

He bowed to her again. "I know, Grandmother, and I am sorry for the intrusion. May I take your temperature?"

The green interrupted with a shake of his beard, his voice booming in Branson's head. *WHY DO YOU WISH TO CHECK OUR HEALTH?*

Branson smiled, covering his confusion. Had the witches not informed them *why* they weren't working? He had to tread lightly here. One false remark and the great serpents would stand mutinous against him.

Branson bowed to the green dragon. "Grandfather, the coke ovens are not as hot as they should be. The witches are concerned for your well-being."

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## **Before the witches employed the dragons to burn coal into coke, they'd used up most of the trees in the forest on Great Oakmoore Mountain.**

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A scramble of the gold coins they lounged upon heralded the entry of the blue dragon into the conversation. He rolled a gold coin over the knuckles of his claws and back again. Then he spoke. "The witches think we're taking a vacation, do they? Perhaps they should return to cutting down trees for their fires."

"Oh, no, Ancient One," Branson said, bowing lower than before. His hip would be purple before he finished this examination. "They make no such accusation." Would blame and groveling on his behalf soothe this beautiful, temperamental creature? He tried. "In fact, it was *my* suggestion. A quick test of your inner temperatures would quickly prove the problem resides in the oven mechanics. If you would be so kind to allow it, then I'll bother you no more."

The dragons looked to each other. There was nodding and shaking of heads, while tinkling coins rolled down the heap of gold and clattered to the cave floor. An unfurling of wings—just a quick shake—enough to wash a cool breeze over Branson as the red got to her feet. She turned to him, resigned. *Where's your thermometer? It must be warmed before you proceed.*

Branson smiled. Had that been the problem all along?

"Relax, Grandmother." He pulled a band of treated, woven cotton from his bag—his own invention. "I need only touch it to your neck to take your temperature." He limped closer to the dragons. "It is difficult for me to climb the ladder. Would you do me the honor of bending?"

The red dragon stepped forward and bent, huffing moist breath the aroma of beef in Branson's face. Branson wrapped the cotton around the dragon's throat and watched as the thermochromic properties kicked in. The cotton warmed to blue, then deeper blue, to green and finally a bright red, indicating that the red's temperature was perfect.

The blue and the green dragons were fine as well.

Branson bowed and thanked them, and made his way to the factory.

\* \* \*

Before the witches employed the dragons to burn coal into coke, they'd used up most of the trees in the forest on Great Oakmoore Mountain. Employing the dragons changed everything.

*It really was an ingenious system*, Branson thought, while walking back to the factory floor. Shifting to dragon heat freed the witches from having to spell the wood to burn hotter and without oxygen—saving them both time and effort.

Now, the ovens were filled with coal and completely sealed. Dragons breathed flames into the ovens through special openings, burning the coal and creating the coke, a small amount of sulfur that the witches used for other things, and gas which they siphoned off the top.

The gas fueled the rail system above the ovens—opening and closing the oven doors and allowing coal to be dumped in or coke to be pushed out.

But the coke is the important thing. It's used as both a fuel and a reducing agent in the blast furnaces for smelting the iron ore. No smelted iron—*no steel*. No steel—*no cauldrons*.

Branson approached the three tall ovens, waiting for the heat to hit him. But he realized they hadn't worked for so long they were completely cool, making examination easier. He couldn't have asked for a better situation. Smiling, he pulled out his tools and started looking.

Three hours later, he leaned against the cavern wall, staring at the coke ovens. He hadn't found anything wrong.

He was doomed.

The witch-foreman came along, her braid now tidied. "What's the prognosis?"

"Not sure yet." Branson hated to admit that. "But I'll find it."

“There are others waiting.”

Branson ran a hand through his already-disheveled hair. “I know why your temperatures are falling, I just can’t figure out where it’s happening. I need a few more minutes.”

The foreman nodded and walked away. “Half an hour.”

It was generous.

He’d checked the seals. He’d checked the gas pipes. He’d checked every port and opening which might allow air in and heat to leak out.

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## **An orange nose, no bigger than one of the cinnamon candies peeped from inside the coke oven. The nose twitched.**

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*Where was the heat escaping?*

Branson combed through the coke and ash and coal left remaining in the ovens, sweeping it away from the bottom edges, looking for something in the hardened steel of the ovens. Could there be a minuscule crack? Maybe something that only showed up when the oven was hot?

He sighed, wondering if he’d have to heat up the ovens to find it. He didn’t want to bother the dragons again.

“Time to go, Master Luc,” the foreman witch said behind him. He startled, having been so engrossed he hadn’t heard her arrive.

“Another moment.” He had to see this through.

“Your time is up. You will be paid, of course, for looking over the dragons.”

And then he saw it, the scat, the smooth, tiny ovals on the underside of the coal, so small he’d almost missed it. And if the ovens had been cool for a few days, *they* were starving.

“I know what’s going on,” he said, limping to his bag and retrieving a flask of lamp oil and a shallow dish which he set just outside the oven door. The strong, varnish scent of the oil stung his nostrils as he poured a little into the dish

and struck flint and steel together to light it. Purple flames licked across the surface of the oil. Branson waited.

“This better not be a trick.” The foreman crossed her arms on her chest, looking as though she’d like nothing better than to turn him into a toad.

“It’s not.”

He limped away from the ovens, leaned on the rock wall near his tool bag, and pulled the napkin from his pocket. A cascade of cinnamon candy got loose and skidded across the floor to the ovens. He bent and stretched for the nearest, then stilled.

An orange nose, no bigger than one of the cinnamon candies peeped from inside the coke oven. The nose twitched.

As fluid as the flames in the dish, the neon-yellow lizard snaked out from behind the coal and raced to the nearest piece of candy.

Surprised, Branson grabbed another shallow dish from his bag, poured the remaining candies into it, and pushed it toward the salamander.

The salamander lifted his head, breathing in the cinnamon scent and scuttled to the dish. He lifted his head over the rim and plunged his blunt snout into the candy, the hard ridge above his nostrils clacking against the crisp, red, candies. He chomped on them one-by-one, crushing the spicy sweet to dust between flat teeth, saliva-turned-red dripping out of his maul like blood.

The creature looked at Branson and paused, lifting his head. *A smile*, Branson thought, smiling back. He bent, and lay a hand against his booted prosthetic and waited.

The salamander went to the burning oil and sucked the flames from the top of the dish, leaving just enough fire to reignite the entire surface. Then it wheeled on its haunches and raced for Branson, leaping first to the wooden leg, then scampering across Branson’s fingers and up his arm onto his shoulder.

“You are quite the fine little fellow,” Branson crooned, dusting a fingertip over the lizard’s brow ridge and stroking down his back to his tail. Cat-like, the salamander closed its eyes, lowered its head as Branson continued to stroke the delicate, moist skin. The salamander purred, its tongue rasping slowly in and out of its mouth with each slow pant.

Suddenly, the creature sucked in a convulsive breath. Branson cupped it in his hands, thrusting it away from his body. He knew what was coming.

The salamander burped, expelling a cinnamon-scented fireball the size of a cantaloupe, singeing the hair on the back of Branson's fingers and very nearly his eyebrows.

"Salamanders?" the witch said, a sound of curious awe in her voice. "Eating the flames?"

Branson nodded, laying the creature on his forearm and stroking it again with his finger. "My guess is this is just one of a brood," he said. "A scout. We should be able to entice the others out fairly easily." He frowned. "Mama must have died. I don't think she would have allowed them to siphon off so much heat if she'd been around. Salamanders are rather crafty, and good at hiding their tracks."

"But you can remove them?"

He tickled the lizard under its chin and nodded. "It shouldn't be a problem to relocate them."

\* \* \*

Branson was carrying his things through the great steel doors, ready to depart when the head witch came to greet him. She carried his payment in a small purse and she was smiling.

"Would you consider staying on?"

"As mechanic, or doctor?"

"Both, I think," the witch said. She handed over the purse. "The dragons say you have a pleasant touch."

Branson smiled—to have the respect of dragons—who could ask for more?

But he wasn't certain. He enjoyed tinkering around his cottage, helping the neighbors' animals—and he'd bet after this the villagers would call upon him for help again. To work for the witches would be an honor—and those dragons—beautiful creatures.

"What about the people in the neighborhood?"

"You could help them—as long as your official duties were taken care of."

He looked down the mountain to his cottage. The path was long and painful. And if he offered to help the villagers, he'd be making the trip often. It was tempting to stay, but . . .

"We could help with that leg of yours," the head witch said.

And yet, Branson still wasn't sure.

"Let me think about it."

He patted his horse and climbed into his cart, and headed for home. The yellow salamander climbed over his shoulder to watch. The red and the orange crawled out of his tool bag and played at his feet. They kept him company all the way down the mountain. ♦

# MALADIES AND MIRACLES

LAURA KIESEL

In the beginning, there was the crooked way I came out of my mother's womb.

But even before that, there was the broiling in her belly that began immediately after she finished Christmas dinner—a hard and queasy ache that confused her—could it be food poisoning or the onset of labor? But then her water broke, and so there was the car ride through the snowy streets of Brooklyn from one neighborhood to another where the fancier hospital was located and where she insisted I be born.

My mother was so hysterical with pain, I was told they sedated her into a state of so-called “twilight sleep” (a formidable cocktail of morphine and scopolamine) before they could pull me out of her by my slimy shoulders; my bluish body wet with placenta, the sharp curve of my left foot catching on the top of my mother's cervix like a fish hook.

The late 1970s was before the advent of mainstream ultrasound technology, which meant my parents did not know whether I would be a boy or girl, nor did they know if I would have any kind of disability, until I emerged from my mother.

The story goes that after my umbilical cord was clipped and I was cleaned off and diapered and the attendant brought me to the nursery and held me up to the glass for viewing, my grandparents gasped. Otherwise physically perfect, my left foot curled inward at such a slant that it was almost entirely backward, the kind of thing toy Transformers and Gumby dolls do, but not the kind of trick that is appropriate for a human infant.

No one knew the cause.

My father was defensive when he was asked if it ran on his side of the family and denied it, but admitted to me many years later in a matter-of-fact manner that he had a cousin who was born with a less serious case of clubfoot than I had. Nowadays, smoking is often pinpointed as a possible culprit, so my mother's two-and-a-half-pack-a-day habit, which she continued while she carried me, could have been to blame. But my brother (by a different father) was born six years later straight-footed, despite that she smoked at the same furious frequency while pregnant with him. As such, my malady seems to have been the result of not only a confluence of genetics and my mother's bad behavior, but my own restless fetal inclination to contort my body into strange configurations, perhaps as protest against my confinement—some fierce, but futile struggle for freedom and a sense of separateness from my mother that dated itself all the way back to the womb.

I was only a few weeks old when I had the first of two surgeries to correct my clubfoot.

During the first surgery, the doctors sliced through my Achilles' heel and cut me open, from right above my big toe to about a quarter-way up my calf, twisting my bones and snapping them back into their proper place like Legos, before sewing the skin back up and sticking a metal rod through the back of my foot in order to train my muscles and bones while they were healing to settle into their new location.

However, that wasn't enough to make my foot suddenly not want to constantly slide back into its in utero position. To make sure my bones would set properly and my foot wouldn't try to keep curling inward again, I had to wear a cast from infancy through toddlerhood.

Since a baby's bones are always growing, this meant the cast had to be changed every four to five days. The first few times the change was performed by my podiatrist, but then my family was trained and sent home with a DIY cast-cutting-and-making kit.

My mother's hand frequently trembled when she pressed the slicer to my foot, as I attempted in turn to pull it free, bobbing my tiny body around in my bassinet and giddily gurgling baby nonsense. Sometimes she'd cut too deeply into the cast and nick me, a line of blood barely forming on the surface of my thin infant skin, causing my giggles to immediately cease and be replaced by an indignant, glass-shattering scream. If she was there (which she often was), my grandmother would take over at that point, patiently prying the slicer from the tight grip of my mother's shaking fist. Then she'd gently coo to me until I calmed down, while cutting my cast open with the same deft skill she used to slice her Sunday hams. Then she'd swaddle my foot with the swift and impeccable motions she'd later use to sew up dresses for my dolls.

I achieved most of my first milestones while casted—crawling, walking—dragging the plastered weight that swallowed my left foot behind me everywhere and even brandishing it as a weapon when I deemed it necessary. My mother said I liked kicking things—and sometimes, people—with it, laughing triumphantly at the point of impact and then hobbling away without apology.

If I had been born in an earlier decade or even today in an underdeveloped country, I would have been stuck with the severe crook in my foot. Nearly eighty percent of clubfoot cases in the world occur in low and middle income countries, a majority of which are never corrected.

"It was a miracle you were born when and where you were," my mother said repeatedly over the years whenever she recalled those initial months marked by a flurry of treatments and seemingly endless visits to surgeons and specialists.

Now my foot appears "normal" at first glance, save for the shiny scar left over from where I was twice stitched up, gleaming like a large, silvery seahorse on the lower portion of my inner left leg. It feels like satin and, when I was a kid, I used to like to stroke it the same way I would the hair on my dolls' heads or a stolen strip of silk or velvet from my grandmother's sewing case.

My brother would also ask to pet the scar, staring at it as if it held some secret.

"How does it feel?" he'd ask, while he traced it with his finger where it curled around my anklebone. "Does it feel like the rest of your skin when it gets touched?"

"No," I'd answered honestly. "Not quite."

With deeper investigation, though, there are other irregularities as a result of my clubfoot—irregularities that rippled in my body from the bottom-up, becoming more apparent as the years advanced.

Upon a closer look, one can notice my left leg muscle is underdeveloped, the calf about half the width of its sibling, so thin I can nearly grab all the way around it with just one hand. The left foot is also smaller—over a half-size—than the right, making shoe shopping more a burden to me than the recreational pursuit many women might consider it. On damp days, it swells arthritically in the ankle area and I walk with a noticeable limp. My left leg is more than a full inch shorter than the right, so that the latter's knee seems like it is stacked above its twin if I stand up straight with my legs closed together. This means my hips are not at all perfectly parallel, but rather the right one is hitched up much higher, so that it looks like I am slinking the left one down at a deliberately lower angle, like some supermodel attempting to affect a sexy posture, but failing miserably.

And I am utterly arch-less: flat-footed as a duck and unable to endure any but the tiniest (two inches, at most) squarest heels on my shoes, if at all.

But the problem runs deeper than aesthetics or style restrictions. This is the kind of unevenness that later lent itself to a slew of physical problems I began to experience in my twenties—twisted tendons in my hip flexors, torn and degenerated discs in my lower back, the muscles nestled

against my spine and located in my calves prone to stiffness and spasm—all from a lack of proper and persistent treatment throughout my crucial years of childhood development.

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**“I swear you’re doing this for attention,” she’d hiss, while I limped along quietly next to her, trying to keep up with her brisk pace.**

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Shortly after I turned six and my brother was born, my mother quit her job and went on welfare so she could become a full-time addict. This meant she stopped taking me to my monthly podiatrist visits, stopped buying me special shoes or orthotics to place in the soles of my sneakers or shiny Mary Janes.

Her decision dictated that I would walk for years, then decades with a significant leg length discrepancy, my right leg always overcompensating for how my left leg constantly came up short in my stride, building its muscle while the thinner one continued to wane and waver and the rest of the body above it began to crumble bit by bit, like a bridge that had been built atop an uneven and all-too-fragile foundation.

I was almost always in some sort of pain and though, thankfully, for most of my life, it was the more moderate variety that can be partially (if not wholly) treated with topical creams or ibuprofen. At times, the pain was excruciating, continuing for days, or occasionally even weeks, refusing to be placated even by prescription remedies. But even that changed as the pain became more unrelenting and severe as I approached middle age.

As though the clubfoot was a foreshadowing of my future health, I was a somewhat sickly kid, predisposed to colds and frequent fevers, to tonsil and ear infections, to tummy aches and vertigo.

At eight, I inexplicably began breaking out head-to-toe in hives—stubborn scarlet patches full of pink, pimple-like welts, which I would brutally scratch to the brink of bleeding. For several months they were a mainstay, disappearing only for a few hours or a day or so at a time before they’d erupt again, rearranging themselves in an array of interesting patterns.

My mother would desperately slather my skin in Calamine lotion and subject me, every evening she was coherent enough, to tepid oatmeal baths, drugging me afterward with Benadryl, so I could sleep through the night without incessant scratching. When that didn’t work, she’d loosely bind my wrists together or to the sides of my bed with ACE bandages.

She took me to my pediatrician and then to two separate specialists, but none could identify any allergy or solid source of irritation, other than it might be “mental” and triggered by trauma of an emotional nature.

“Is there something going on at home that could be upsetting her?” they’d inquire with whispery voices, while sneaking surreptitious glances over their shoulders at me sitting solemnly on the examination table, slowly swinging my bare, hive-ridden legs back and forth. My mother shrugged, her long-sleeved shirt covering up her fresh track marks. Later, she’d drag me back home hard by my arm.

“I swear you’re doing this for attention,” she’d hiss, while I limped along quietly next to her, trying to keep up with her brisk pace. “You must be rubbing something on your skin when I’m not looking.”

That wouldn’t have been hard to do, as she was hardly ever looking. But the hives were as much a mystery and misery to me as they were my mother.

That same year, I caught chicken pox, the blisters of which would spread themselves in between and even over the preexisting patches of hives. When the chicken pox had no more room on the practical parts of my body like my belly and back, they crowded onto my scalp so I couldn’t comb my hair, as well as inside my mouth and down my throat, making eating an agonizing endeavor. I even had a pock in one eye, which I would try to rub close-lidded until my mother caught me and smacked my fist down, warning me I could go blind if it popped. To divert my attention from rubbing, she bought me an eye patch to wear and I slunk around the apartment in my pajamas when I was feeling a bit better, pretending to be a pirate.

It was the first of two chicken pox breakouts I had, one in winter and the other in early spring, so that, combined with the hives, the sensation of itching became an intimate acquaintance and exquisite torture for me. But I made sure to wreak my revenge, maliciously picking at my blisters until they burst and crusted over, making me a walking landmine of oozing sores and half-healed scabs for the rest of third grade.



The hives dissipated for good only after my mother, brother, and I moved into my grandparents' home and they permanently took over our care.

Six months after settling in, I was hit by a car while crossing the street to our apartment building. A Mercedes Benz came tearing around a corner at fifty-five miles per hour—sending my fifty-five pound frame sailing through the air before landing on the asphalt, busting out my two remaining baby teeth and leaving me bloody-mouthed and with a broken arm.

The doctors later confirmed had I not been wearing the backpack that padded my head when I collided with the concrete, I would have likely died of a snapped neck or split skull (or a combination of both).

Given my delicate, small-boned stature and the speed the car was traveling when I was hit, they were all especially flummoxed that other than some scratches, a bunch of black-and-blue marks, a hairline fracture, and some shock to my legs that made it difficult for me to walk for the next month, I had somehow not broken every bone in my body, particularly on the side that was struck by the front fender of the car.

“Your granddaughter has bones of steel!” they all exclaimed. “She’s like Supergirl!”

This would later become my nickname in the neighborhood, from the kids hanging out on the playground who saw me soar through the air and strike the ground with a crunching thud; somehow surviving with so little wrong with me, unlike so many other kids who had been hit on that same street corner over the years (one conspicuously missing a traffic light in this inner-city neighborhood where almost all the kids were poor and not white)—kids who typically became comatose or quadriplegic, or didn’t make it at all.

“It’s rather miraculous,” one doctor concluded.

But I assured them all there was a practical explanation: I drank milkshakes every day. My grandmother had an old-fashioned malted-making machine, the kind they had behind the counters of drugstores and five-and-dimes, and every morning with breakfast and evening after dinner, she’d whip up one for me. Of course, all that calcium made my bones super-strong. They all nodded enthusiastically and smiled in mock agreement at my precociousness.

Meanwhile, my grandmother embraced the notion of how special the situation was and continued to call me her little miracle for many months after the accident.

Right before I was hit, my grandmother had been leaning out the window, motioning for me to cross the street, when the car came out of nowhere. Upon its impact, I could hear her scream—a desperate, high-pitched wail calling out my name as my body became airborne. By the time I was on the ground, she was already kneeling over me, wet-eyed and barefooted (she had run out of the apartment without shoes).

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**“Your granddaughter has bones of steel!” they all exclaimed.  
“She’s like Supergirl!”**

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I kept asking everyone who came to inspect me—the off-duty nurse who saw me hit as she walked by on the sidewalk, and later the paramedics as they fit me with a neck brace and loaded me onto a stretcher and into the ambulance—if I was dying. They all said “no,” but I was old enough to know that adults often, if not always, lied to kids.

Once in the ambulance, a paramedic prodded my legs and asked if I could feel his touch, and when I told him I could he smiled and then asked me to wiggle my toes and fingers and flex my feet.

“But it hurts a lot when I do,” I whined, while obeying his orders and making the movements.

“That’s good news,” he said. “It means you are not paralyzed.”

And my grandmother, upon hearing this news, began to weep again.

My mother, on the other hand, was nowhere to be found the day of my accident or for another week, until she stumbled in through the front door one evening, still inebriated from her latest jaunt.

After we moved in with my grandparents, my mother often disappeared for days, and sometimes even weeks, at a time. My feelings about this were mixed: I was always afraid she wasn’t alive, but also always secretly happy because finally there was no one around to curse at me or steal from me or strike me. The times my mother was gone were the only times I stopped feeling the fear I think a hunted or experimented-on animal must—an empathic intuition that later encouraged me to become a vegetarian.

Other than a vague concern for her safety, the larger part of me always wished that every time my mother disappeared, it would be for good. I secretly hoped she would be permanently shipped off to some sort of sanctuary—a far off farm that sheltered and cared for those with her kind of affliction—somewhere she couldn't be hurt or hurt anyone around her.

When my mother came home that night, she immediately went to her bed to lie down, but found she had no pillows.

I watched her go back into the kitchen to ask my grandmother for one while I sat on the couch watching *Return to Oz*, with probably every pillow in the apartment propping up my aching arm and legs. At that point, my uncle, baby brother, and grandparents were spoiling me as though I were a princess destined for the throne. Even our dog Prince refused to leave my side day or night and often whimpered while he licked my wounded legs and gently jabbed my ribs with his snout in solicitation of chin scratches and head pats.

"No!" my grandmother snapped at my mother's request. "Why don't you go back to your pimp and see if he has a pillow."

"Oh, fuck you," my mother retorted. Then, returning to the living room, she roughly yanked the pillow that was supporting my fractured arm out from under it.

"Ooooow!" I squealed dramatically.

My grandmother came running into the room. "What happened?"

"Mom took the pillow that was under my arm," I said smugly, itching to snitch, to get her into trouble so that maybe she would go away again.

My grandmother grabbed the pillow and they played tug-of-war while cursing at each other like two tattooed, vile-tongued sailors.

"You stupid bitch," my grandmother said while pointing at me. "Look at your daughter. She was hit by a car while you were gone . . . A WEEK AGO. And where were you? Shacking up in some crack den, sticking your arms full of filthy needles! You know, they threatened to call the police, to take her away from us, because you weren't there."

In the ER after the accident, the doctors refused to release me for hours to my grandparents' care because they were not my legal guardians. They kept asking my grandmother where my mother was over and over and she continued to evade them, saying only that she was the one who took care of me the most.

I heard them mention "DCF" and shoot me pitying, side-long looks. When night finally fell, I started crying so hard for home they finally let me go out of mercy for the bruised and broken-armed girl who wouldn't let loose the grasp on her grandmother's shirt sleeve and who sat there loudly sobbing, her chin and neck still stained as if with Kool-Aid—but really with the blood that had sprayed out her mouth, Quentin Tarantino movie-style, when she hit the ground.

"Yeah right," my mother scoffed, not noticing the sling.

It would take at least another two or three days for her to understand that my grandmother was telling the truth—that the sling and my inability to walk well, which required my uncle carry me to the bathroom and back by piggyback whenever I had to pee, hadn't all been an elaborate scheme to set her straight.

In the months that followed there would be a lawyer, and then there would be a lawsuit. First for me, but then my mother would try to file a second suit for her "emotional pain and suffering." Her effort was not a success, as it was quickly discovered she was nowhere to be found either during or after my accident. When she asked me to back her up, I sat there in the lawyer's office like a stone, my left arm still in its sling, refusing, for once, to be an accessory to my mother's lies. My silence permeated the room, palpable in its livid intent.

I remember the tremor of stifled fury toward my mother at her audacity in attempting to file a lawsuit for her supposed suffering that simmered just below the surface of my still-sore body. My bruises and scratches had significantly faded but were still visible—their reds and purples and blues becoming a sickly pale green and yellow that checkered my skin.

In the same way unresolved wrath eventually settles into lingering, queasy bitterness. ♦

LUCIA HAASE

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## WATERLILIES

I drift  
amidst inspiration,  
a bud floating  
waiting to bloom.

I'm patient  
for ripples  
of the ink's flow  
to stir me gently—

these words  
surrounding me,  
a permeating of  
essence . . .

an opening up  
and sharing  
of inner beauty  
calling

the eyes  
of the world  
to my place  
of fragrant peace.

JOHN DYCUS

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## BREATH OF LIFE

Wednesday morning at 2,  
lying there awake,  
a thought came:  
wonder how long i can hold my breath?  
so i took a big gulp of air  
(like there was anything else to do)  
held it  
let it out  
20 seconds  
huh  
tells me nothing, really  
wonder if i can do 22 seconds?  
took another cavernous breath, held it, released it  
24!  
now it's a contest  
Bronchialympics 2020  
every 30 minutes for the next four hours, went another round  
right before i got out of bed, hit a milestone  
65 seconds  
after breakfast, timed by a computer clock,  
i consistently reached the 50s  
turns out my moonlit seconds might have been long  
seconds are not one mississippi, two mississippi  
using an actual clock, they're more one missi, two missi  
but who's counting  
i'm not suggesting you attempt breath holding as sport  
there is no peer review here, no clinical trial  
i make no claims of cause and effect  
but  
four days of this and my appetite's up  
i'm not as sleepy during the day  
i seem to be more alert  
and i have breather's high  
i want more  
this morning around 5,  
thought i'd try again  
took a deep breath  
held  
released  
80 seconds  
not bad for an old guy in a wheelchair

# IMAGINATION IS KEY

SANDY PALMER



Erik Jensen, *Wasatch*, 2018, recycled computer keys, 22" x 40" each/2 pieces (3,300 keys)

*"Art is my first language."*  
- Erik Jensen

**B**ins of beautifully-colored plastic pieces fill the shelves that line the walls of the 500-square-foot basement studio of computer key artist Erik Jensen. This unconventional assortment of hues has become a unique, multi-layer palette for the energetic teacher turned entrepreneur. We use computer keyboards for emailing, surfing the web, paying bills, or maybe even drafting a novel. We're closely connected to computer keys. Literally. Our fingers perch on home row, poised to tap each letter. Or maybe hunt and peck is the preferred method. Regardless, our fingers strike the keys and the world is at our fingertips. Jensen says, "Computer keys are *so* cool. They're so awesome and there's so much history in them. I love computer keys and the connection people have with them."

Odds are, you've never thought about your connection to the keys you tap or considered them to be an artistic medium. This gregarious artist has found that many people have

an affinity for his work because they can relate to computer keys. Not everyone has painted with oils or watercolors so they may not feel a personal connection to a piece of art created with those mediums. But nearly everyone has used a keyboard. "Oftentimes we think that art comes from paint, clay, and pencil, but art really comes from so much more."

The self-professed perfectionist loves computer keys that are all tapped out. Discarded. He takes pride in repurposing something of no value and making it valuable again. Keyboards cannot be recycled and end up in landfills so he uses the keys in his art. He pops them off the keyboard with a flathead screwdriver—the first step in his time-consuming process of creating art with them. What follows is cleaning, sorting, and dyeing keys in batches with the "secret recipe" that took him years of trial and error to perfect and finally produce the wide range of colors necessary for his artwork.

After the extensive prep work is completed, the transformation of trash into treasure continues when he sits down to work and takes off his cochlear implant. Silence. In that space, he can concentrate and cogitate. He generates a pixi-



Erik Jensen, *Apollo*, 2019, recycled computer keys, 36.5" x 36.5" (2,500 keys)



*Apollo* close-up (with quote outlined)

lated grid on the computer for each image he wants to create and uses it as a guide. He selects the colors needed and makes the necessary adjustments to individual keys, like sanding rough edges, when they do not fit quite right. Laying out the image, one key at a time is a long and tedious process. It requires patience. He often needs to stand on a chair, above the keys, to get a better view of the entire image as it progresses.

For him, the process of creating the work is more important than the end result. Each creation is a page in his life journal. Keys have letters on them so he incorporates hidden words and messages. A small piece (225 keys, 12" x 12") may have one word and a large piece may contain an entire quote, like *Apollo*, which includes a quote from Mark Twain: "Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows to anyone." Looking back at completed pieces, he can reflect on what was happening in his life based on messages within the work. Each piece is a part of his journey—an entry in his three-dimensional, international, pixelated journal.

Jensen is a dreamer—an enthusiastic, silly, animated, savvy, award-winning dreamer. He knows how to make things happen. His exuberance, passion and high-spirited energy are evident in his videos—even those without sound. Maybe it is because he uses American Sign Language (ASL), which is very expressive. Maybe he just can't sit still? He appears to be bursting with energy. One day he decided he wanted to learn to ride a unicycle. And so he did. And then he rode that unicycle from Utah, where he lives, all the way to Canada. His zest for life, his family, and art are obvious.

Born deaf, as a young child he didn't speak. He created things as a way to communicate with people, which is why he refers to art as his first language. He was five years old before he spoke a full sentence, later attended a deaf school where he learned ASL, and at thirteen received his first cochlear implant (a small electronic device that can provide a sense of sound to a person who is deaf).

"I am definitely more of a three-dimensional artist. I was always building crafts and things as a kid and then in high school I got into ceramics, which earned me a full-ride





Erik Jensen, *Soaring*, 2018, recycled computer keys, 43.5" x 33" (2,700 keys)

scholarship to Utah Valley University.” In 2017, he graduated from UVU with a BA in art education. He taught art and ASL to high school students for four years while also working to perfect a way to create art with computer keys. He loved teaching and always encouraged his students to follow their dreams. One day he realized it was hypocritical, if he was not willing to take his own advice. He took a risk, quit his teaching job, and focused on his art. He knew he would become a better artist and teacher by taking this leap, and says, “You don’t have to follow what everyone else does. Do what you want to do. Rise up. Be different. Stand out.”

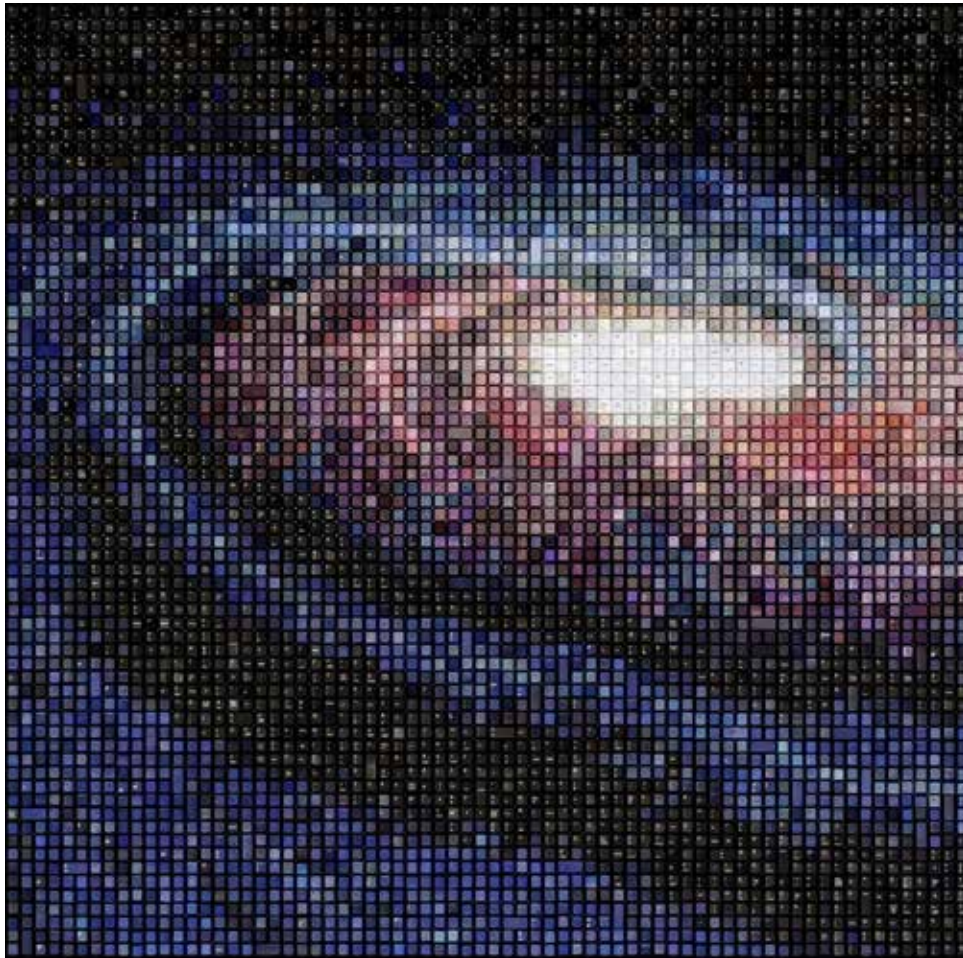
He enjoys the challenge each piece brings so there is not a particular finished piece he treasures. Whatever his current project happens to be, that is the one he favors. He says, “I get excited about the process of making it and trying to figure out how to make it work.” The challenge is what he loves the most. Since some keyboards date back to the eighties or nineties, there are variations in size and shape of the keys and getting all of the pieces to fit properly can be tricky. Some keys are taller or shorter based on the year and brand. Sometimes the color is a little splotchy or smudged after the dyeing process. One key may be a little crooked, or imperfect. It has taken him a while to learn, *that is okay*. It will not be noticeable. It is just *one* small piece of a larger picture. If you take a step back, you will see minor imperfections disappear, revealing the final image.



Close-up of keys within Pendello Solutions logo (inset shows entire logo)







Erik Jensen, *Nebula*, 2019, recycled computer keys, 51" x 51" (4,900 keys)

Once every single key is placed, and he is satisfied with the end result, the gluing process begins—piece by piece. After it dries, he builds a frame around it in his garage, which he recently converted to a framing shop. The finished piece of artwork will be delivered to whoever commissioned it or it will go into his collection of finished originals for sale online or in-person at an art festival. In the beginning, Jensen did everything himself but his work has generated so much business, he has hired two assistants who help with some of the prep work like popping off keys and gluing. He says, “I love being able to provide jobs and it allows me to focus more on the creative process of dyeing and laying out the artwork.”

In addition to his computer key artwork, he produces videos for his YouTube channel, “Art Out of Everything,” where he encourages people to think outside the box and create art with ordinary objects—rolls of tape, chocolate chips, PEZ dispensers, and much more. He recreated Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom from Want* out of 400 pieces of toast. A sweet portrait of Marilyn Monroe was made with Skittles.

And, incredibly, he and his wife assembled a sixty-four square foot s’mores portrait of Einstein in their driveway. He ingeniously assembles these images and is equally clever in his method for disassembling. For Einstein, he invited friends and family members over, built a campfire, marshmallows were removed, roasted, and smashed between graham crackers and melty chocolate. The portrait became



This Marilyn Monroe portrait made from Skittles reminds us that art can be made from anything.



a tasty treat enjoyed by everyone. And in a very palatable way, he made art accessible to everyone. The image contained twenty pounds of chocolate so he and his family were eating s'mores for quite a while after that escapade. To see videos of his adventures or to learn more about this delightful artist, visit his website ([www.erikjensenart.com](http://www.erikjensenart.com)) or follow him on social media (@erikjensenart).

The artist with a proclivity for perfection has learned patience, acceptance, and the importance of taking a step back to look at the big picture. Look too closely, for too long, and tiny flaws seem egregious. Problems seem insurmountable. Take it one moment at a time. Let go of past mistakes. With a piece of artwork, as in life, one element might be slightly askew but it is just *one* piece of a larger picture. One step along the journey. Enjoy it. ♦



Artist Erik Jensen at work

LINDA FUCHS

## SOOTHING

I count my steps from door to car—33  
22 from kitchen to living room  
9999 on my odometer  
these smooth numbers soothe me

wash hands 10 minutes or more  
followed by sanitizer  
no sickness here

lock and unlock doors and windows  
five times each then check again  
you can never be too careful

packing for a weekend trip  
brand new sheets and pillowcases  
backup sheets and pillowcases  
keep bedbugs away

new toothbrush  
backup toothbrush  
new tube of toothpaste  
use samples once then throw away

why do you judge my methods  
to survive my fearful mind

# STEP-BY-STEP: MY JOURNEY THROUGH SEPSIS

JACKIE D. RUST

**O**n April 4, 2017, my husband and his mother carry me to the car and drive me to the nearest emergency room. I'm placed in a wheelchair. I hear EKG and think, *This is going to cost so much money.* And then nothing.

The doctors tell my husband I'm going to die, but I don't know this; I am too busy fighting to stay alive.

The doctors can't find the source of the infection, then stop trying. It is more important to keep me alive.

Words my husband, Steve, and my niece, Sarah, have to hear: blood pressure 67/40, blood clots, infection in her blood, induced coma, ventilator, kidney failure, dialysis, strep, septic shock, feeding tube, strep of unknown origin, white blood cell count more than 30,000.

My husband rails against the system. He HAD taken me to the doctor the day before. The doctor diagnosed me with the flu and sent me home. Hours are critical in fighting sepsis. I have lost twenty-four.

The doctor tells my husband the reason I'm alive is because I am so healthy. I'm alive. My first blessing.

Blood pressure drop, so extreme, I need a drug to save my organs, but this drug doesn't always save extremities. My second blessing: I didn't lose any fingers or toes, arms or legs. The tips of my fingers turn dark in color. The doctors say I will probably lose the fingernails and I may lose the tip of my left pinkie and the tip of the second to last left toe.

Leg pain so severe, the doctors use strong opioids to induce a coma-like state. I don't remember the pain. My third blessing.

Hallucinations and delirium follow:

Entire episodes of *Futureama*. A show I'd only seen bits and pieces of and didn't even like. And I add pornographic episodes.

Klingons.

The raspberry and lime colored prayer blanket, given to me by the hospital, weaves through my mind.

Escaping to see Steve, but my mind saying, "He's going to kill me."

Heartache.

White glasses.

People drift in and out.

My mind splits. I know people, then I don't. It's a war to see which side wins. I yell at Steve and Sarah, "go home." And then am so glad they come to visit.

I bring my niece to tears. "I like your pink hair extensions." Then, "I hate your pink hair." Then, "get out of here."

"Get the f— out of here," when a friend says she'll pray for me. (I was so upset by saying this, but Steve told me I never said it.)

A nurse, jump, jump, jumping outside my room. (When I later ask her, she says she hadn't.)

A woman, in an apron, keeps walking around in my room.

My next lucid memory is April 15, when I ask Mark, my ICU nurse, why everyone is talking about Easter. Easter is a couple weeks away.

He says to me, “Jackie, Easter is tomorrow. You’ve been in a coma.”

I think about this, losing eleven days of my life. “Mark, I’ve been down the rabbit hole.”

“Yes,” he replies, “you have.”

Easter morning, I’m so excited because Steve is coming, and I know he is coming, and I know who he is. But as the morning goes on, and he’s not here, I feel myself slipping. I’m losing him. I try hanging on to his face, his memory, to him, but I lose him. He walks in a stranger.

The woman, with the apron, walks into my room. She is real and not a hallucination. “I know you,” I tell her.

She replies, “I should hope so. Yesterday, you said, ‘I’m going to kill you.’”

Solidity, sanity, stability come slowly.

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## **Pain. Scream. Something’s trying to eviscerate me.**

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People still drift in and out.

I ask my brother to get me a glass of water because I don’t trust Steve. I’m sure he gets my water out of the toilet.

“There’s the alien.” I point to the two red eyes and curved head, on the wall.

Steve replies, for the umpteenth time, “I know it looks like an alien, but it’s the scanner the nurses use when they give you your medicine.”

“But, there’s an alien.”

No visitors, not ready yet.

No reading of cards from students. Too sick.

Can’t turn myself in bed.

Can’t hold a spoon.

Can’t wash myself.

Rectal tube.

Blisters on legs, too much fluid. Must be treated as burns and dead skin peeled off.

“Cough.” The nurses say.

“Cough.” Steve, Sarah and Joanne, my mother-in-law, say.

“Are you trying to kill me? I can’t cough anymore.”

“You have to cough to clear your lungs. You don’t want to get pneumonia.”

I know what pneumonia is. It doesn’t matter. I can’t cough anymore!

“Cough.”

The nurses tell me I get to sit in a chair. This is good, until they roll me from side to side, to put a sling under me. They attach the sling to cables hung from the ceiling, a Hoyer lift. It lifts me out of bed. It’s scary moving through the air. It sets me in the chair.

Words I have to hear: You have to eat, PTSD, possible permanent dialysis, rehabilitation facility, amputation.

Funny how I accept that I might lose the end of my left pinkie and left toe. I even told people I might lose it. But when the doctor says possible “amputation,” I fall apart. Amputation means cutting it off, not just the euphemism “I might lose it.”

Pain. Scream. Something’s trying to eviscerate me.

Terror. Waking up. Not knowing where I am. Calling the nurse. Not knowing where I am.

Calling for Steve. Not knowing where I am.

Oxycodone causes both, gas pain and night terrors. I take myself off. Fourth blessing: the extreme pain, that put me on Oxycodone, is gone.

My brother and his wife visit many times, even though it’s a two-hour drive. Until his last visit, I didn’t know my brother. MY BROTHER WAS A STRANGER TO ME. How can my brother be a stranger?

When he kisses me on the forehead, I say, “You can’t do that.”

His answer, “You’re my sister, I’ll kiss you if I damn well please.”

Words I have to hear: Your brother died.

Do I call it a blessing that I recognized him before he died?

I can't go to his funeral. I can't even grieve. I'm still grieving for myself. I tuck my grief in a pocket in my heart, until I can stand at his grave and take it out.

Words I'm not ready to hear: transfer to rehab hospital, by ambulance. This has been my home for a month. They fed me, cared for me and now I have to leave. I am an embryo and the contractions have started. They use an ambulance to transfer me and put me on a gurney. A gurney. Gurneys are for sick people, people who are dying. This brings too many memories. I'm scared.

I wait and worry. What will it be like, this new home, in a new city? St. Paul is only across the river, but here in Minneapolis I'm close to Steve and Sarah, and an easy drive for Joanne. The ambulance departs. I've driven to St. Paul countless times, but what I see is strange, unknown.

The ambulance stops. We're here and I'm alone. No family to greet me. Gurney in elevator. Anxiety. Fear. Help. As the door closes, Sarah scrambles in. She tells me she couldn't let me arrive alone and left work early. She says she saw the ambulance and raced it to get to me, before it stopped. My heart stores this.

A monster tries to tear me apart. There are no overhead tracks for the Hoyer lift, so the hospital has a free-standing one. It grabs at my toes. It swings and sways. It will drop me. I know it will.

Steve complains and complains.

It's decided this room is too small for a free-standing Hoyer lift. It feels like a parade when I move to a room with overhead tracks.

There are visitors who I wish didn't visit: dialysis, physical therapy, occupational therapy. Occupational therapy asks me to put pegs in holes. I used to ask my preschoolers to do that. Breakdown. I'm doing preschool activities. I'm told it isn't about mental abilities, but physical coordination.

Physical therapy wants me to stand. STAND. The parallel bars are tubes of torture, parallel lines into infinity. I try, but the fear is too great. I WILL fall. I will fail.

In ancient Chinese medicine, the doctors talk of a snake inside a person. Another word for the snake is fear. It waits inside me. Waits. Waits until I'm not prepared or not expecting it. Then it springs. A rattlesnake bites infusing me with its venom.

Venom, PTSD, they're the same. PTSD is trauma, whether it's that of a soldier in Iraq or me in a hospital fighting for

my life. And it doesn't go away because the soldier comes home or I survive.

My first shower in a month. A reason for cheer. The room is not heated enough. So cold. So cold. Can't stop shivering. The cold takes away all my joy. I'd rather have sponge baths.

The social worker comes in to test my cognitive abilities. I tell her they did that at the other hospital and I'M FINE. Doesn't matter that I am upset, I have to be tested. Puzzles, mazes, equations. I tell her that I couldn't do those before I got sick. How does she think I am supposed to do them NOW? Analogies, sequences to remember. I'M NOT A PRESCHOOLER. Finally, she agrees and leaves.

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**I can't go to his funeral. I can't even grieve. I'm still grieving for myself. I tuck my grief in a pocket in my heart, until I can stand at his grave and take it out.**

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Fifth blessing: friends. One gives me a back rub, like nurses used to do. One gives me a makeover. We laugh. Two women walk in that I don't know. Classmates I haven't seen in twenty years drove two hours to see me! Cards telling me how strong I am. Me? Strong? More cards telling me how strong I am. I start to feel stronger. I don't want to disappoint them.

The snake strikes. It's hidden inside my knee. "Don't bend my knee," I scream. My knee, my fear interferes with the Hoyer lift. It interferes with physical therapy, this fear of bending my knee too far. It hurts, but deep down, I think I know it hurts more in my head, than my knee. Doesn't change that it hurts. The snake waits.

I have to pee, but can't. The urge is there, until I'm on the bedpan. We learn from childhood that we aren't supposed to pee in bed, and yet that is what they want me to do. I can't pee, so in comes the ultrasound. If there could be music here, it would be the theme song from *Jaws*. If the ultrasound shows too much urine in my bladder, I have to be catheterized. So, glad I took Spanish in high school. I count in Spanish to distract me from the searching tube. Discuss Foley catheter vs. straight. I want a Foley. It stays in. The doctor wants a straight, less chance of infection. The doctor wins and I continue to count in Spanish. Five tries tonight, two different nurses. I can't count high enough in Spanish. They call a special nurse, a man. It's the first time I've

been catheterized by a man. But, not the first time I've been embarrassed. I remember the incident with the young, male aide and the bedpan. I know it's no big deal to them, but it is to me. There is no dignity here.

Finally, I ask if there is a portable commode I can try. The Hoyer lift can't get me into the bathroom (no overhead rails) and I'm not strong enough, to stand, to get into a wheelchair. The Hoyer sets me on a commode and I pee! No more catheter!

There is still dialysis, three times a week. The kidney doctor is not hopeful that my kidneys will recover. They should be showing signs of improvement by now.

The occupational therapist helps me sit on the side of the bed and I stay there. I'm sitting, by myself.

The OT works with me to wash my own hair, while sitting in my wheelchair. Clean hair. I never thought of clean hair as a luxury.

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## **I'm moving to a transitional rehabilitation facility. *I'm not going home.* How did I think I could go home? I can't even stand.**

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Another pill! My third high blood pressure pill. Before my BP was 90/60. Before . . . before, I measure my life in before. The psychologist comes in. He wants to put me on a pill. NO MORE PILLS.

I brush my teeth. Steve had to turn the electric toothbrush on and off, but I brush my own teeth.

A Chinese doctor friend recommends nettle tea. In Chinese medicine, it rejuvenates the kidneys. Steve grabs onto it like it's a life ring and I'm drinking three to four cups of nettle tea a day. A week later, the kidney doctor walks in shaking his head. He doesn't understand how my kidneys are doing so well. They take me off dialysis. My kidneys are fine! My kidneys are fine!

This means the port they use to dilate my kidneys can come out. I'm terrified. They are pulling it OUT of MY body, out of my shoulder. I worry. I stress. The doctor comes in.

I can't do this. He tells me to look the other way. I tense. I wait.

"Done."

Done? I didn't feel a thing.

"There are no nerves where the tubing was. Of course, you didn't feel anything."

I don't know whether to be mad or glad, at the doctors for not telling me this before they pulled it out.

I'm moving to a transitional rehabilitation facility. *I'm not going home.* How did I think I could go home? I can't even stand.

I need clothes. For two months, the hospitals have clothed and fed me and now . . . I need clothes. But I can't go home and get them. I can't walk. I can't even stand at the parallel bars. I give directions, to Steve and his mom, where to find underwear (I have to wear underwear) and clothes. Do I remember where everything is? Will I remember how to put everything on? Will I be able to put everything on?

They move me. No ambulance, just a wheelchair transfer vehicle. Steve's mom waiting for me. My new home. I want my old home, with my cats and my bed and Steve in the bed, with me.

No adaptive silverware. I'm using spoons and forks, like everyone else.

The OT gives me a stick with a hook, to help me put on my pants. I don't like pants, never did, but now I REALLY don't like them. I have Steve take the pants home and bring skirts, full skirts, so I can still do PT.

A problem: my shoes don't fit. My feet are too swollen. My feet were never swollen, BEFORE. Steve and Joanne shop and bring them in. Too tight. Shop and bring them in. Too tight. Finally, a Velcro closing bedroom slipper fits.

PT shows me a machine of torture. Long arms reach out to grab me.

"It will help you stand," the smiling, oh, so helpful OT informs.

"Stand. I can't stand. My legs won't hold me."

"Which is why we have the stand aid. It pulls you up and holds you. When you're tired, we will sit you back down."

"I'm tired," I tell them.

"You haven't stood up, yet," she answers in her patient OT voice. She places a belt around my back. It is attached to the stand aid. She pushes a button. The machine pulls.

I rise. Panic rises. "I'm not ready. Please put me down." But, they don't. I stand for one minute, twenty seconds. They're pleased. I'm relieved to be back in my wheelchair.

My room is on the ground floor. I open my windows. Birds, green, fresh air. What a treat.

The Hoyer lift, the other machine of torture is now giving me a gift. It puts me in a La-Z-Boy. *Almost* like I have at home.

Three and a half minutes on stand aid. My reward: no more Hoyer lift, just stand aid to move me.

Sitting in my La-Z-Boy, I have to pee. I press and press my bell. I'm told the stand aid is busy. I've worked so hard, to not pee in my pants. Steve is with me. I tell him to get a straight back chair. I squirm onto the chair. He turns it and I wiggle, twist and slide my butt onto the bed. He brings the bedpan. I'm so pleased with my ingenuity. The nurses are not. I tell PT/OT and they are not pleased with my ingenuity, either, but they decide no more stand aid. I'm ready for a transfer board. I learn to do it myself. I can move myself. I go from the bed, to my chair, from my chair to the wheelchair. I'm mobile!

Since there is no more stand aid, I now have to learn how to stand on my own. Wait! You tricked me. I thought losing the stand aid was a good thing. PT wheels me up between the parallel bars. No. No. No. Can't do it. I can't stand. PT doesn't believe me. They never believe me. I grab the bars and pull. I sit. "See I can't do it." But, somewhere inside me, I want to do it. A strong woman would do it. So, I pull and pull and STAND. I'm standing. I stand and stand.

"Take a step," PT tells me.

Whoa, what? My foot won't lift. I cry. Fear of failure, fear of falling, just fear.

Each day my PT wheels me between the bars. Hmm, standing is easier. Hmmm, I took two steps, four steps, I walk the length of the bars. My grip is pliers tight, but I'M WALKING.

A large machine sits in the PT/OT therapy room. It looks like something out of *Star Trek*. The Alter-G. It's a treadmill that alters gravity. It will be like walking on the moon. Less gravity means less pull on me to fall to the ground. I can't use it until I can hold myself up long enough, for them to

zip the bubble around me. They tell me I'm ready. Steve is so excited. It's progress.

I can do this.

I don't want Steve here the first time. I want to be good before he comes.

They push the wheelchair onto the treadmill. I pull myself up and hold myself up . . . and they take away the wheelchair. Bring it back. I panic. I can't do this! I'm going to fall! I hear, "You're fine. You can do this." I think they're crazy. They zip this large plastic bubble around my waist and from the waist down; I'm on Mars. I'm standing. I'm feeling pretty cool, until they start the treadmill. Wait. Slow down. I look: 1 mph. Oh.

I walk. I'M WALKING ON A TREADMILL.

"Are you ready?" asks my PT/OT.

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## I can do this.

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"Ready for what?"

"You're done. We're going to gradually increase the gravity, until you're back on Earth. Then you need to hold yourself up, while we unzip the bubble."

I don't need to watch the dial, to know the gravity is increasing. My legs feel the pull. What if I can't stand up long enough? What if I fall? Where's the wheelchair? I panic. I yell. I cry. It bumps the back of my legs. I sit.

The entire room watches me. I'm so relieved Steve isn't here. I will do better next time.

And I do. I practice. I'm ready.

Steve cries when he sees me walking.

As days go by, the PT increases the gravity. The goal is 100%, just like in the real world. I like the *Star Trek* world better.

OT decides I'm ready for a shower. In a shower, in my room, like a real person. I board transfer to my wheelchair, to the shower chair, and the nurse pushes me into the shower. I'm taking a shower. *I'm taking a shower*. As I'm drying, I look down and see two fingernails swirling towards the drain. I look. They're mine. I now have eight to go, well

seven, the little finger on the left hand may still may need to be amputated. See how easily I said that.

I don't know if it's me or PTSD or even if it matters, but my first response to anything new, anything challenging is to cry. Cry and say, "No, I can't do it." The PT and the OT are so supportive. Never do they shame me, but they also let me know that tomorrow, "we'll try again." I go back to my room and give myself a stern talking to and the next day . . . I try. I might cry a bit, but I try.

Another shower, another two fingernails.

My next challenge awaits: transfer from the wheelchair to the toilet. No more bedpan, but I have to stand. Stand and twist and sit. The desire to be free of the bedpan (during the day) is strong, but the fear is also strong. My OT acknowledges my fear and tells me to stand up. I pull myself up, turn, and sit on the toilet. I did it. I DID IT. I don't feel so much like an invalid, now that I don't need a daytime bedpan. I still need a night bedpan because of the sleeping pills, too easy to fall.

Fourth of July. I'm supposed to be at my brother's, for his big fireworks celebration. But he's gone and I'm here.

Squeezing clothespins: a challenge.

Turning nuts on bolts: a challenge.

Crying, always crying. My OT should have been a psychotherapist. She tells me I'm grieving the loss of my old body and it's OK to cry or scream. I'm going through the five levels of grief. I feel better.

Steve and I have a new nightly routine: cuddling. It's not home. It's not our bed. But, it's us, holding and touching. Then he goes home . . . and I don't. I snuggle my stuffed cat, Marigold, so I don't have to sleep alone.

I've been here a month, but I'm not going home. I thought a month in each hospital, so a month here. No. There is no set discharge date. *I'm not going home.*

I don't like the food. Steve brings me dinner every evening. His best accomplishment: fried sunfish, freshly caught by his brother.

Friends bring me dinner. The sixth blessing.

Standing, walking using parallel bars, seven minutes. Next step. There's always a next step. I walk, using a gait belt, with the wheelchair right behind me. We walk down the hall. Each step is a worry. Will I fall?

Now that I can shower and wash my hair, I want a haircut. My friend cuts my hair, what there is of it. I'm shedding, like my cat.

I graduate to a walker. Today I walk thirteen feet. It feels like 1300.

My new motto: fear will not define me.

No more wheelchair, only a walker, even in the bathroom. I have to brush my own teeth and wash on own face, all while standing, balancing, and relying on the walker. Are they crazy?

It's Steve and my wedding anniversary, twenty-four years. We usually sail on our anniversary. The only sailing I do this year is the anchoring. I'm anchored to the bed, to the walker, to the green chair, and to the toilet.

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**Crying, always crying.  
My OT should have been a  
psychotherapist. She tells me  
I'm grieving the loss of my old  
body and it's OK to cry or scream.**

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I recall a line from a Robert Frost poem. "And miles to go before I sleep." My version: *and miles to go before I'm home.* I walk 220 feet today. 220 feet, *not much*, I think, although it feels much longer. People keep saying, "don't look at how far you have to go, but how far you've come." I try to stay focused on the present, but I want to go home. Then I remember Anne Lamont's book, *Bird by Bird, Some Instructions on Life and Writing*. Bird by bird, step-by-step, I'll get home.

Sitting in my green La-Z-Boy, I take off my slipper and the end of my toe comes with it. I stare horrified, fascinated, thrilled. The toe that is left is pink and healed. I won't need to have it amputated. Blessing number seven.

It's time for AFOs (Ankle Foot Orthotics), as my PT calls them. I call them leg braces and I don't want them. I've seen old people wear them and at sixty-four I do not consider myself old. But from all the time lying in the hospital, I have drop-foot and my toes need to be trained to stay up. I'm fitted. They're made of carbon steel and look kind of

cool. Now, we need to get shoes to wear them with and then . . . practice walking and practice walking and practice walking.

I'm leaving the building. No, not quite that easy. First, we work on transferring from the wheelchair to the car. We have a RAV4, perfect butt-height transfer. We practice *until* it's easy and *then* we leave. Wait! Why is Steve driving 100 mph, on city streets? No, it only seems that fast. We go to Schuler's. They know just the shoe I need.

Steve asks. "Do you want to go out to dinner?"

"Yes." *I'm going out to dinner. I'm going out to dinner.*

Steve rolls the wheelchair right up to the table. It's so much easier than I imagined. I'm doing something normal. I can be normal.

Steve and I go walking, just the two of us . . . and the walker. We walk around the square in the rehab facility. We both cry a bit. The next day, we go outside. "I'm walking on air."

My OT takes me into the rehab kitchen. I need to learn kitchen stuff. I know kitchen stuff. But when she has me stand at the counter. I don't know anything. How am I supposed to reach into a cupboard, while holding onto my walker, my lifeline? What do you mean *get the milk out of the fridge and put it on the counter*? There is a tray on my walker. The door must be stuck. I pull. The milk must be a gallon. I set a quart on my tray. The counter is in the next county. I push my walker five steps.

At home our bedroom is upstairs. I want to sleep in our bedroom, so I have to learn how to climb stairs. I had to learn to eat, to walk, to pee, and now to climb stairs. There are four steps in the OT/PT room. I have fifteen at home. The first step. I'll just set my foot on it. My foot doesn't move. I push. It doesn't move. Using my hands and arms, I pull myself up onto the first step. I scale Devil's Tower. Then P . . . U . . . L . . . L. I scale the next step and the next. I make it to the top of Mt. Everest. What do you mean I have to come down?

The "H" word has been uttered. My OT and PT are planning on my going home sometime around the middle of September. I am elated, excited, and scared to death. I'm going home with my walker and without my PT. The human body is so frail, when it comes to falls. But I'm determined. I am strong. I will do it. Homemade chocolate chip cookies, cat hair on my clothes, and my husband in our bed will soon be a reality.

Another step before going home, we start working on the four-wheel walker, complete with seat. My first spin around, I say, "I don't know if I like this." This baby moves. It's like going from a car to a NASCAR racer.

My PT replies. "When have you ever liked something the first time you tried it?"

She knows me too well.

Home where everything will be normal and perfect. Except it isn't. My first hurdle is a hurdle. I have to step up onto the curb. My next obstacle, on this course to get me into our house, is four steps. As I had practiced, I pull my right foot up onto the step and then my left. I pull my right foot up onto the next step and so on and so on, until I'm on the porch. One more hindrance to my goal of home: the threshold from the porch to the house. I have to lift the walker over the threshold, not quite the same as being carried over the threshold. I'm in the house.

Only it isn't the house I left five months ago. It has become Steve and his mom's house. It has to be. They were living here. I wasn't.

My kitchen. Yes, my kitchen will bring back normality, but it's not my kitchen. Pieces are missing, to make room for the walker.

A cup of tea will make it all better. I dreamed of making a true cup of tea, black tea, with milk. No nettle tea or chamomile tea or some other herbal concoction, that's good for me. I fill the electric kettle in the sink, and lift it up. Only, I don't. I can't. It's too heavy for me. I can't even make my own cup of tea. Steve makes tea.

I push myself to my La-Z-Boy, sit down, and reach for the handle to pull up the footrest, only I'm not strong enough to pull it. I want to fall into "poor me," but I won't. I made that promise to myself: *no poor me*. I'm home. No, it's not the home I left, but my husband's here and so are my cats. My things are all here, just in different places. And soon I'll be in my bed. ♦



# SATURDAY MORNING—A PORTRAIT

LINDA McMULLEN

Ariel's mother Amanda called at precisely 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, with all the bonhomie of a disenchanted drill sergeant. "I'd like to book a sitting *this morning*, if you're available."

"I'm not," I said, glancing ruefully toward my camera case, which lay nestled—like me—awash in bedsheets. Happily, my home studio lay ten feet away, and my first appointment wouldn't arrive until 9:15. Loads of time.

"Right," she sighed.

"A week from Tuesday—"

"I've *almost* talked her around," Amanda said.

"Sorry?"

"Samira Hammoud said you worked with—*special* children."

Samira's son possesses a heart of sunbeams, and also happens to have Down syndrome. My habitually irascible Canon submitted meekly to his manifold charms. I only pressed the buttons.

"Once."

"Right."

"Sorry . . . you talked her around?"

"I've got a camera-shy nine-year-old with Asperger's who argues like a trial lawyer."

*Goodbye, lunch.* "See you at 12:30."

\* \* \*

Ariel manifested as a slim fourth-grader with somehow bitable cheeks. She flapped her arms a time or three, avoided my gaze, and asked her mother, loudly, but not maliciously, "WHY do you NEED my picture?"

"Your grandparents want—"

"They already HAVE one."

"Last year's."

"I don't LOOK different," she reasoned, her cadence inharmonious, but incontestably sane. "And it's the same dress, because you said it's too expensive to wear just once."

"We could use a new backdrop," I offered.

"But I'M still the same."

Point, Ariel.

"What about a necklace?" I might just as well have suggested slow strangulation.

"I don't WANT TO"—amid several unhappy arm waves.

“She doesn’t like things around her neck,” Amanda offered, belatedly.

“Fair,” I said.

\* \* \*

After extensive evaluation of my screens—during which Ariel catalogued every sticky thumbprint, crease, and dust mote—we settled on tan.

“I like that picture,” said Ariel, pointing at a sepia-tint portrait of my beshawled mother on the wall.

“Thanks. Sit still, like her.”

But Ariel’s eyes eluded the invasive lens . . .

After a dozen attempts, Amanda said, “Honey, look at your book while I talk to Veronica.”

It was an illustrated American history volume. Ariel Johnson, Esquire, complied without making any further motion. Amanda caught me looking, and said, a hair defensively, “Ariel likes it.”

“I’m just impressed it doesn’t have ‘dragon’ or ‘underpants’ in the title.”

A knock, then eight towheaded Townsends and their dachshund Daisy let themselves in. “Sorry we’re early—ready when you are!” called Mrs. Townsend, over unremitting yaps. Ariel pressed her hands over her ears.

I wanted to, too.

“I don’t want to *force* Ariel to—” breathed Amanda.

“Me neither.”

“No, Daisy!” Mrs. Townsend cried. I bolted instinctively, caught the wriggling canine sneaking into my bedroom. Then I glimpsed Mom’s shawl trailing from my upper-left-hand drawer . . .

Ariel, it transpired, had no objection to dress-up.

Amanda draped the shawl sash-like around Statue-of-Liberty-Ariel, folded it across Betsy-Ross-Ariel’s lap, tied it in a bandage around Clara-Barton-Ariel’s arm—even wrapped it around Whistler’s-Mother-Ariel’s shoulders.

And in her historic/artistic guises, Ariel’s silver-green eyes centered every shot. ♦

DIANE S. MORELLI

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## MAGENTA FLEECE SWEATPANTS

Laundry,  
washed and folded,  
sits in two baskets.  
A pair of magenta fleece sweatpants  
lay atop each of the stacks of clothing.  
The smaller of the two garments  
belongs to my toddler.

I dangle the pants in front of her.  
I feel like a matador  
taunting a cornered bull.  
She bolts backwards,  
and declares, "I want my princess pajamas."  
I tell her  
She *is* Sleeping Beauty.  
I smile to assure her that I'm no beast.  
In reality,  
I *am* Cinderella,  
and need to get myself off to work.  
I remind her,  
"Today is Wednesday."  
Her newest friends,  
Sophie and Aaron,  
are already there,  
waiting for her  
at daycare.

I pass a cool, damp facecloth under her chin.  
And with it,  
wash behind her ears,  
dab beneath her nose,  
caress her flushed cheeks  
and wet her hairline a bit.  
Mid-swipe,  
she grabs the rag  
and puts it to her lips.  
She bites on the washcloth until  
it's sucked dry of saline and sadness.  
Then she tosses it across the room,  
into the dog's water bowl.  
The drama has ended.  
Together, we laugh.  
Neither one of us feels defeated.

On her own,  
my young child picks out a matching top,  
that looks quite nice with her  
magenta fleece sweatpants.  
Her arms stretch overhead.  
She's waving her hands in anticipation.  
Yesterday, Miss Cindy told her that  
after morning stretches and story time ends,  
She'll be the one to play the tambourine.  
On Monday, she made a paper airplane.  
I told her that it's built sturdy enough  
to carry the two of us all around the world.  
As I planned the trip for next weekend,  
My little one said, "We can't go without Grandma."  
I crashed down hard  
from the aborted magic carpet ride.

I'm right back where I started.

Laundry,  
Washed and folded,  
sits in two baskets.  
A pair of magenta fleece sweatpants  
lay atop each of the stacks of clothing.  
The larger of the two garments  
belongs to my mother.

I dangle the pants in front of her.  
I feel like a *caballero*,  
Bleeding at the behest of a bull.  
Mom looks confused.  
I place her clothing on her lap.  
She says, "What do you want me to do?"  
I smile. Then I say, "It's time to get dressed. You should put your pants on."  
And while Mom and I  
aren't fairy-tale princesses,  
We're starring in a saga  
that doesn't have a happy ending.

No matter what I do,  
I feel like a beast.  
Because my mother doesn't know what I'm talking about  
when I say, "Today is Wednesday."  
She isn't aware that  
her newest friends,  
Elizabeth and Joe  
are the people  
who come into our home  
to keep her safe while my daughter and I are out.

I pass a cool, damp facecloth under her chin.  
And with it,  
wash behind her ears,  
dab beneath her nose,  
caress her flushed cheeks  
and wet her hairline a bit.  
Entertained by visions and songs and voices that  
nobody else can see or sing or hear,  
she clutches at her version of reality.  
Mom tells me that she was at a fancy restaurant today.  
She had no money on her.  
And was so happy about being fed  
without paying the bill.  
Mid-swipe,  
I stop washing her face.  
I bite down hard on my lower lip,  
then I toss the washcloth on the floor.  
The drama repeats itself again and again.  
I turn away.  
She doesn't see me cry.

Thankfully, only one of us feels defeated.

## Call for submissions

# KALEIDOSCOPE

*Kaleidoscope* magazine has a creative focus that examines the experience of disability through literature and the fine arts. A pioneer in the field of disability studies, this award-winning publication expresses the diversity of the disability experience from a variety of perspectives: individuals, families, friends, caregivers, educators and healthcare professionals, among others. The material chosen for *Kaleidoscope* challenges and overcomes stereotypical, patronizing, and sentimental attitudes about disability through nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and visual art. Although the content focuses on aspects related to disability, writers with and without disabilities are welcome to submit their work.

• Double-spaced, typewritten

• 5,000 word maximum

• Electronic submissions preferred

Email submissions to [kaleidoscope@udsakron.org](mailto:kaleidoscope@udsakron.org) or online at [kaleidoscopeonline.org](http://kaleidoscopeonline.org).

# BE STILL, DON'T MOVE, JUST A BIT LONGER

KRISTIN LAFOLLETTE

I've always been interested in anatomy and the human body, even as a kid. Whenever I was sick, I would carefully examine all the posters and models in the doctor's office, secretly wishing I could take home the plastic models of the throat, the inner ear, the eyeball. Once, while waiting for the doctor to come in for an appointment, I read everything on a poster labeled *OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGY*. I traced my finger over the various structures of the ear, saying them out loud as I went: *tympanic membrane, eustachian tube, semicircular canals, cochlea*. While most kids don't like going to the doctor, I never minded. I wasn't bothered by vaccinations, by tongue depressors, by the nurses' and doctors' cold hands on my skin. I wanted to learn, to hear them use medical terminology, to observe as they pointed to structures on a diagram or model, to memorize the names of bones and muscles and the tissues that connected them.

I attended a small elementary school in Sergeant Bluff, Iowa, for most of my childhood, and our school nurse would stop into our classroom a few times a

year for various reasons. Sometimes it was to check our scalps for lice (if another student had been sent home with lice), other times it was to have us bend at the waist and touch our toes to check for scoliosis, and, once a year, it was to administer a hearing test. I found the whole setup fascinating and always wanted the chance to tinker with the machine and administer the *beeps*. When the school nurse arrived, she would set up her bulky machine on the shelf above the books off to one side of the room. She would call each of us over one-by-one, we would sit on a metal stool, and she would position a heavy pair of headphones over our ears. She would instruct us to listen for the *beeps*, to raise a hand even if we heard just the slightest of *beeps*. The *beeps* would be heard in one ear or the other, and we were to raise our right or left hand depending on where we heard the sound.

The first time I remember participating in the hearing test, I was in third grade. I was intrigued by the test, but as I sat on the stool with the headphones over my ears, I began to notice subtle chang-

es on the school nurse's face. I thought I was doing fine; I raised my right hand or left hand every time I heard a *beep*, but I couldn't help but notice that the nurse started looking progressively more concerned as the test went on. The look on her face told me I wasn't doing the test right, that I had somehow misunderstood the instructions, that I had failed in some way. It never occurred to me that her looks of concern were because I wasn't *hearing* all the *beeps*, that I wasn't registering softer tones, that I never even noticed some of the *beeps* that were being administered through the headphones.

I don't remember the nurse saying anything to me after the test, but I do remember my mother asking me about it after school. I remember her saying:

"We got a call from your school nurse."

"You didn't do well on your hearing test."

"They are concerned."

"Can you hear me?"

“Can you hear?”

After the concerning hearing test, I went in for a professional hearing test with an audiologist. I didn’t want to fail again, so I channeled all of my energy into *listening*; my ears were humming and ringing as I sat alone in the testing booth, and I hit the button on the handheld remote every time I heard even a faint noise. After, the audiologist told my parents I did fine on the test. She told them the nurse’s test, then, must have been a fluke.

However, that wasn’t my only failed school hearing test. The next year, the nurse expressed concern to my parents again about my performance on the test. During the test, I thought I was doing better, the nurse’s concern not as immediately visible. Despite my confidence, my parents were alerted about my less-than-satisfactory performance. This time, I was sent to the hospital for a one-hour long CT scan. The idea was that, since my last “professional” hearing test came back normal, there must be something more serious going on. But even as a nine-year-old, I found the CT machine to be so interesting. As I listened to the *whirring* of the machine, a woman spoke to me over the speaker:

“Be still.”

“Don’t move.”

“Just a bit longer.”

The results of the CT scan came back clear and my impaired hearing continued to be a mystery.

In middle school, high school, and college, I found myself always sitting in the front row, misunderstanding people in loud situations, nodding and saying

yes or laughing when I was tired of asking people to repeat themselves over and over. My left side always seemed to be worse, and I often found myself turning my head to the right to understand people, hoping they didn’t notice, hoping they didn’t get annoyed by me asking, “What? What? What did you say?” At times, I could *feel* my hearing decreasing, feel the ringing increasing, feel like someone had packed cotton into my ear canals. I always thought, *It must be an earwax buildup*. After shooting a flush of warm water into my ear and seeing nothing come out, I would feel a sense of panic coming

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## The change was remarkable. I could suddenly hear everything.

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over me: *Am I going deaf?* While in college, I visited my family doctor and told him about the stuffy feeling, the cottony feeling, the turning of my head to the right when people talked. He struck a tuning fork, placed it on the bone behind my ear, said things appeared normal.

At the age of twenty-three, I was in graduate school and engaged to be married. My father had just been diagnosed with hearing loss and was prescribed hearing aids at the age of fifty-three. I remember my mother telling me over the phone:

“The doctor said the hearing loss could be genetic.”

“Could be.”

“You should get your hearing checked again.”

This time, I bypassed my family physician and went directly to an audiologist. I told him about the ear surgeries I had as a young child (tubes, twice). I told him about the concerning hearing tests from my childhood. I told him about always sitting in the front, about the consistent ringing, about being self-conscious in places with crowds and background noise and music and lots of people talking. His tests were longer and more in-depth than the ones I remembered. I heard the familiar *beeps*, listened hard for the soft tones, recited words the audiologist asked me to repeat: *hurt, beach, dog, rough, couch*. After the test, the audiologist confirmed my hearing loss, confirmed that the hearing in my left ear was worse than my right. He referred to the hearing loss as *sensorineural*, said it was most likely *progressive*. He said hearing aids would help and suggested a receiver-in-the-ear type; the case sits behind the ear and the speaker goes from the case to the ear canal by a clear wire. He gave me multiple colors to choose from. I chose pink.

When my hearing aids came in, the audiologist showed me how to place the case snugly behind my ear, showed me how to make sure the speaker was positioned properly. He explained that the hearing aids would take some getting used to, but to wear them from the time I got up until the time I went to bed. The change was remarkable. I could suddenly hear everything. I heard every creaking board in my old house, could focus on one voice in a room full of people, could hear my footsteps as I walked, no longer had to be looking at someone’s face and mouth to under-

stand them. I had begun teaching college students around this time and was about to get married. I felt like I could truly understand my students in the back row for the first time. At our wedding, I heard our guests in the crowded reception hall as they talked with and congratulated us.

Years later, I still have those same pink hearing aids. While my yearly tests show my left ear getting a bit worse, the hearing in my right ear has mostly remained the same. I do worry from time to time about the increasing stuffiness I *feel* in my left ear and wonder if there will be a time when I won't be able to hear at all on that side, if I will have to go back to always turning to the right, if I will have to return to the days of nodding and saying *yes* and laughing instead of truly understanding. While I never went into the medical field, I still have an insatiable interest in medicine, anatomy, the human body. When I think of my own hearing loss, I think of the inner workings of my ears and nerves and brain, think of how, even as a kid, I and others knew something wasn't quite right, even if I/they couldn't pinpoint what it was. I think of how, during a recent visit to the audiologist's office for my yearly hearing test, I saw a poster with a diagram of the inner ear on the wall. I think of myself when I was a kid and how I knew the structures of the ear, could point them out, could say what each structure was responsible for, but somehow couldn't identify my *own* hearing loss, my *own* lack of understanding. Now, I'm grateful for the hearing aids that allow me to do my job well. I'm grateful for the hearing aids that let me hear my students all the way in the back row. And, I'm grateful to be able to put a name to the mystery: *sensorineural* hearing loss, a disconnect, a problem in the nerve pathways. ♦

ALANA VISSER

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## BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER

Natural disaster hits  
 Boom!  
 Take cover  
 Run  
 Seek shelter

But when the very earth beneath you shudders,  
 There is no way of escape

There are no victims,  
 Only volunteers  
 Defeat  
 Or be defeated

No longer a victim  
 I choose to be a survivor  
 I will no longer be victimized  
 Because I survived

Make it work  
 It works if you work it  
 So, work it  
 You're worth it  
 (if you say so)

I will get there  
 I will overcome  
 I will conquer

"A recovering Borderline."  
 I'm not quite sure what that means  
 I might be bruised,  
 But I'm not broken

Call me crazy  
 It's true.  
 But that's what makes me interesting  
 What makes YOU interesting?

# MATCHMAKER

COURTNEY B. COOK

“Up a little more, you’ve almost got it!”

I stretched my hand to the right, shifting my weight even more to my right foot, which was balanced precariously on a tiny rock climbing hold. I felt to the right, around the curve of the wall, and my hand found the next hold. I smiled, readjusting my grip, and let go with my left hand. Gravity pulled me to the side as I let my foot slip off the other hold, and I swung around the wall. The hold dug into my hand as my full weight was shifted to that one hand.

I heard Jeremy laugh below. “You know you could have found the foothold over there first, right?”

I pulled myself close to the wall, stopping my swing. “Where?”

“By your right knee,” he called.

I found the foothold, and after climbing up a little more, I finished the route. I swung up on top of the wall and sat on the edge. I was glad this was a spot where I could sit on top of the wall. My smile was so big it felt like it was going to

split my face in half. There’s nothing like the feeling of finishing a new route. Finally, I sighed and jumped back down to the mat, and Jeremy slapped me on the back. “Nice job, Duncan!”

“Thanks! That was a fun one.” I wiped my chalky hands on my shorts. “What time is it?”

“Time to head to school if we want to shower before class.”

I sighed, but I followed Jeremy over to the bench by the front desk. That early in the morning, the gym was quiet. I heard the occasional thud of someone landing on the mat under the bouldering wall, and farther off there were a few climbers yelling commands as they belayed up the taller walls in the main area of the gym. It was the perfect time to climb.

A rhythmic thudding started as we got closer to the bench, and a wet nose found my hand. I scratched behind the soft dog ears. “Good girl, Lucy!” I rubbed her head, and she twisted her head around to lick my arm.

“She watched you the whole time you climbed,” a cheerful female voice said. “Nice job finishing that route, by the way.”



"Thanks, Mrs. Sanderson." I stood up, and Lucy jumped to her feet next to me. "Did you set that route?"

She laughed. "How do you always know?"

My elated grin returned. "You always throw in something interesting, like the stretch around the wall. It was really fun."

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## **I made a decision: my friends were dorks, and they were going to need my help.**

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Jeremy joined the two of us as I slipped on Lucy's harness. "We'll be back after school, Mom."

There was a scuffle as Mrs. Sanderson pulled him into a hug, as she always did. I grabbed my duffle bag. "Have fun at school, boys!" Mrs. Sanderson told us.

Jeremy and I gathered the rest of our gear and headed out of the gym with Lucy leading the way. The gym was only a few minutes' walk away from the school, so we were able to walk at our own pace. The streets were almost as quiet as the gym was, with only the occasional car splashing through the puddles in the road. A few people passed us, too, and some of the regulars said hi to all three of us. Lucy carefully guided me around all of the puddles on the sidewalk, and I couldn't tell if it was for the benefit of my feet or her paws. The smell of rain soaked everything around us, making everything smell clean, but it still didn't drown out the smell of the coffee shop we always passed. *One more block.*

We stopped at the usual intersection, waiting to be able to cross, and familiar, light footsteps hurried our way. "Hey, guys!" Kate, my best friend since kindergarten, called. "And Lucy," she added as she came to a stop next to us. Lucy's tail tapped against my legs slightly, but that's all the greeting Kate got. Lucy was on duty, after all.

"You're running late." Jeremy added. We started to cross the intersection as the cars began to stop. "A few more seconds and we would've left without you."

"Oh, sure you would have," Kate said teasingly. "How was the wall this morning?"

"It was a blast," I replied. There was nothing more freeing to me than when I was on the rock wall, especially on the old routes I had memorized—the familiar ones where it was just me and the wall, no guide needed.

"We missed having you there," Jeremy added. I tilted my head to the side thoughtfully, but I kept my mouth shut.

Our conversation continued all the way to school, with Kate and Jeremy bantering back and forth. I hid a grin as I noticed that Kate was moving closer to Jeremy as we walked—whether she did it on purpose or not, I wasn't sure. I noticed Jeremy's steps were slowing and I knew for sure he wasn't slowing down on purpose. He laughed at something Kate said, and it was his crush-laugh, as I called it, the one he unconsciously switched to when he was talking to a girl he liked.

I wondered if they realized they liked each other. I wouldn't be mad at all about my two best friends dating. I knew Kate would be concerned about that, and I knew Jeremy would be nervous about admitting his feelings to her. He'd told me before that he felt like the newcomer to our little group, but he was beginning to feel much more at home, and he wouldn't want to risk the change, knowing him.

I made a decision: my friends were dorks, and they were going to need my help.

My phone vibrated in my pocket with a quick seven-beat pattern. I cleared my throat, interrupting their conversation. "We might need to pick up the pace a little bit," I hinted, tapping my wrist like I was wearing a watch.

"You're right." Jeremy's steps sped up.

A few minutes later, we made it to school, and Jeremy and I took off to the boys' locker room. "See you in homeroom, Kate!" I called over my shoulder.

"She gave you a thumbs up," Jeremy informed me.

I nodded, tilting my head in his direction and doing my best to look innocent and not mischievous. "So, are you going to ask her to prom?"

He stopped in his tracks, and Lucy and I kept walking. I struggled to keep a straight face as he hurried back into step with us, his footsteps more indignant. "Why would you say that?"

I smothered my laughter. *Too defensive.* "You realize I've known you long enough to tell when you like a girl, right? The question is, do *you* know you like her?"

"I don't!" Jeremy protested. "Kate's just one of my friends, that would be weird."

Shrugging, I brushed my hand through my hair—then remembered I probably still had remnants of chalk on my hands. "I dunno. Relationships that start as friendships always seem to turn out better in the long run. Or at least, they have a better chance of working out well." *I think.*

"Yeah, but that would be awkward and weird, since we've been friends so long."

I raised an eyebrow. "Only if you make it weird."

"She's taller than me, too, so there's that." His footsteps sped up slightly, probably trying to get to the locker room faster. *Finish before we get there.*

I snorted. "Now you're just fishing." An idea sparked in my head. "I mean, you're probably right, she's not exactly your type. You always go for shorter girls."

"I mean, she's not too much taller than me," Jeremy countered. "And she's really nice."

"And cute?" I added, fishing a little.

He laughed. "Yeah, especially when she laughs. And—" He came to a complete stop, then groaned. "Oh no. You're right. I do like her. How do you always know?"

Now he's exasperated. "Blind intuition," I said with a smirk. "So are you going to ask her to prom? It's just a couple of weeks away."

He sighed as we reached the locker room. "Look, I don't know. Kate's awesome, and we've been talking a lot more lately, but I don't know if she likes me." He opened the door of the gym, holding it for me and Lucy. "I mean, you've known her longer than I have." A sly tone entered his voice. "Wait . . . do you know if *she* likes *me*?"

I shrugged as Lucy guided me into the locker room. We were hit with a wave of humidity from the showers. "You'll never know unless you ask her. I'm not playing match-maker. I'm just making sure you know that I know you like her."

Before Jeremy could reply, a shower curtain screeched as someone yanked it to the side. "Hey, there's a girl in here!" a male voice hollered, then drifted into laughter. "Hey, Lucy!"

I smirked at the familiar joke and patted Lucy's head, and Jeremy gave me an elbow in the ribs that clearly said "We're not through with this."

I rushed through cleaning up and left the locker room before Jeremy finished, yelling a "see you later" over my shoulder as I left. I mostly wanted to escape any more questions about Kate since I really didn't want to interfere too much, but I also wanted to do a little snooping before homeroom, and I knew Kate always went to class early.

Lucy led me to the stairs and into the hallway. It was starting to get louder, with lockers slamming and chatter beginning to rise. Lucy guided me around the groups of students that were starting to congregate in the hallway. A few people called out to us, saying hi, although there were a lot more people saying hi to Lucy. Her step perked up, accepting the praise but still focused on her job. "Show off," I teased her, then added an instruction to find Kate, just in case she wasn't in homeroom. I didn't need to worry, though, because Lucy guided me straight to the classroom.

The door was open, so Lucy guided me straight in. "You guys are here early," Kate said from her normal spot in the middle of the classroom. I can hear her pencil scratching across a paper, probably her journal, or homework for next week.

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## "Blind intuition," I said with a smirk.

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I get Lucy to guide me to the desk next to Kate, then let her know she's off duty. She immediately leaves me to greet Kate. *Traitor.* Then again, she's known Kate almost as long as she's known me.

I slid behind the desk. "What are you working on?"

Kate taps her pencil on the desk. "I'm just writing in my journal. Why are you here so early?"

I shrugged. "Since you weren't at the wall this morning, I just wanted to hang out. Were you helping your mom?"

"Yeah. She had to leave for work early, so she asked me to get Abby to day care."

I smiled. “You know you’re an awesome big sister, right? Abby thinks you’re the coolest person on the planet. And I say that because that’s what she told me last time I babysat for you guys.”

Kate laughed, making her chair squeak as she shifted and pulled something else out of her backpack. “Well, she’ll find out I’m normal eventually, I’m sure.”

I tilted my head up to the ceiling, trying my best to put a thoughtful expression on my face, tapping absentmindedly on the smooth desk. “Kate, I’ve known you for a long time, right?”

Her pencil scratched on paper. “I mean, yeah, since I tried to explain colors to you in kindergarten.”

“So we can be honest with each other. And we know each other well enough to know when something’s going on.”

“Yeah?” Her pencil stopped. “Is everything okay?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Like when you told me in second grade that you liked William and you wanted to hold hands with him.”

Suspicion crept into her voice. “Why are you bringing this up?”

It was a struggle to keep from grinning. “And remember that time, a couple of years ago, when I told you to stop liking Matt Herman, because he was a jerk when he wasn’t around girls?”

“Duncan . . .”

“And you didn’t even realize that you had a crush on him, either.”

“Okay, fine!” Kate groaned. “Yes, I like Jeremy, okay?”

I pasted an innocent look on my face. “Why, Kate, I had no idea! And I’m shocked that you would think I’d stoop so low as to try and manipulate you into telling me that.”

She couldn’t hold back a laugh. “I don’t know how you always figure things like this out. I mean, I haven’t been exactly subtle, but you can’t see the way I look at him.”

“No. But I can feel the way you look at him.” I winked.

Kate snorted. “How long have you known?”

“Only a couple of days,” I admitted.

“Ha!” Kate’s voice was triumphant. “I figured out how I felt three weeks ago.”

I shook my head. “I’m slowing down in my old age.”

She shifted in her seat, making it squeak again. “So, now that you’ve found out, I assume you’re going to start playing matchmaker?”

I held up my hands defensively. “Nope, not this time. Not when it’s my two best friends.” There was a pause, and I could tell she didn’t believe me. I also knew I had brought up one of her doubts—messing up our friendship. “Seriously, trust me, I’m not matchmaking. I’m just being my nosy self.”

Lucy’s tail thumped. Kate must have started petting her. “Yeah, but that’s the thing. Even if something did happen, somehow, it would be awkward for you. I don’t want you to feel like a third wheel.”

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**I pasted an innocent look on my face. “Why, Kate, I had no idea! And I’m shocked that you would think I’d stoop so low as to try and manipulate you into telling me that.”**

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*Perfect. Now to dismiss her fears.* I shrugged. “Maybe, but I wouldn’t mind. Besides, what would you be missing out on if you didn’t go for it?”

Another pause. I knew her well enough to know that she would make up her own mind about it. “I don’t know,” she said quietly.

I shrugged again. “It’s not my place to make a decision for you or anything, and you don’t even know if he feels the same way, right?”

“No,” Kate admitted. “And you’re not going to talk to him about this, right?”

I nodded, raising an eyebrow. “Of course not. Like I said, I’m not doing any matchmaking. You guys have to handle this yourselves.”

“Suuure.” Kate lightly punched my arm. “We’ll see how long that sticks.”

The bell rang, saving me from having to reply. I called for Lucy to lay under my desk as students filed in, and I did my best to keep my face neutral.

Later, after lunch, I made my way through the halls to my least favorite class: English. I loved reading, but I would rather just enjoy it and not have to analyze it. I was trying to convince myself it wouldn't be too bad when I heard Jeremy calling my name. Lucy and I paused, and Jeremy stopped next to us, panting. "Man, I always forget how fast you walk. It's hard to catch up with you."

"I didn't think we were going too fast, but you can blame Lucy if you want." I tilted my head, hearing the slight sound of him bouncing like he always does when he's nervous. "What's going on?"

"I think I'm going to do it." His voice was a mix of excitement and anxiety. "I'm going to ask Kate to prom."

I punched him in the arm. "Nice! So what's your plan?"

He hesitated. "Oh, I'm just going to . . . ask her after school today. You know, just . . ."

"You don't have a plan, do you?"

"Well, you know her. She wouldn't want anything complicated. She always makes fun of those big prom-posal things."

I made a face. "Well, yeah, but you could put some effort into asking her."

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**It was rough in my hands, and a little slobbery. I made a face. Lucy was panting in front of me, and I tossed the ball in the air. It made a solid *thunk* when she caught it.**

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He shuffled a little bit. "I mean, I don't want to embarrass her, or go too crazy if she doesn't like me in that way. That would be awkward for both of us. And I mean, I'm going to buy her chocolate or something."

I nodded. "That's good, but maybe you could make it more exciting somehow." I shrugged. "I mean, it's up to you, just maybe, if you're going to go for it, you should commit. I'm

not saying fireworks or a hot air balloon, but just something memorable." I clapped him on the shoulder. "And you're a great guy. If she doesn't like you back, then she's missing out."

"I don't know . . ." He didn't sound quite convinced, but he sighed. "Maybe you're right. I'll see what I can come up with."

The bell rang overhead, making me wince. "Gotta go. I'll see you after school."

The rest of the school day was uneventful, and I met up with Jeremy and Kate in front of the school once we were through, as usual. "You joining us this time, Kate?" I asked.

"Yeah, but Jeremy's ditching us," she said, her voice overly dramatic.

"My mom asked me to pick something up!" Jeremy protested. "I'll meet you guys there. It shouldn't take me too long."

Kate, Lucy, and I headed off to the rock wall. We decided to take the long way, cutting across the park behind the school. That path took longer, but it was a nice day, so we didn't mind too much. We even stopped for a few minutes and let Lucy play in the dog park. Kate kept an eye on her for me.

"Here's a tennis ball," Kate said, and I accepted the ball from her. It was rough in my hands, and a little slobbery. I made a face. Lucy was panting in front of me, and I tossed the ball in the air. It made a solid *thunk* when she caught it.

"Nice!" Kate exclaimed. After a few more minutes, we called Lucy and headed to the rock climbing wall. It didn't take us long to put on our climbing shoes and hit the wall, leaving Lucy at the front desk with Jeremy's mom. We mostly worked on a few easier routes, waiting for Jeremy to show up. I convinced Kate to try the route I had finished in the morning. I listened to the sound of her climbing and winced at her sudden yelp as she fell off.

Kate picked herself up off the mat. "How did you make it around the wall on that one section? My center of gravity was way off."

I tilted my head. I wasn't the most helpful person to climb with, since I can't see people climb and see what they do wrong, but I knew Kate's style from how Jeremy described her climbing—and same with him, based on Kate's description of his climbing. "I just swung to that other hold, but you might try finding the foothold first."

Kate was in the middle of trying the route again when the bell over the front door rang. “Jeremy?” I asked Kate.

“Yeah,” she called down to me.

I turned toward the door. “Over here!” I waved.

“Hang on, I’ll be there in a few minutes,” Jeremy yelled back.

I turned my attention back to Kate. I can hear her struggling a little bit, then a slight scuffle and the sound shifts around the wall. “Yes!” she exclaimed.

“You got it!” I grinned, glad my advice helped.

A few seconds later, and I heard the familiar sound of someone pulling themselves up on top of the wall. “Finished!” Kate’s voice was elated.

“Nice job!” I yelled up at her.

“Thanks!” She called back. There’s a pause. “Hey, Jeremy, what are you doing up here?”

Someone came up next to me, making the mat shift underfoot. “Jeremy brought flowers and chocolate on top of the wall,” Mrs. Sanderson whispered.

My heart jumped in excitement. “What?”

“It was all his idea, to surprise her when she finished her route.” She sighed dreamily.

We moved closer to the wall so we could hear what they were saying. “. . . You’re amazing, and I don’t know if you feel the same way that I do or not, but . . .” I could hear a slight quiver in Jeremy’s voice. “Do you want to go to prom with me?”

Silence. I feel panic growing. “Is she smiling? What’s going on?” I called to Jeremy as quietly as I could.

“I don’t know, she’s covering her mouth.” He sounded panicked. “Um, Kate, I know this is really weird and awkward and I’m sorry—”

Kate burst out laughing. “Yes, Jeremy, I’ll go to prom with you!”

“Yeeeee!” I yelled, finally letting my grin come through.

Jeremy started laughing too. “That was really dumb, wasn’t it? I should have asked Duncan to help me plan it, so it wouldn’t be so lame.”

“It wasn’t dumb at all. I loved it.” Kate sounded so delighted. “I think we’re coming down, so you might want to move,” she called down over the edge of the wall.

We moved out of the way, and Mrs. Sanderson patted me on the arm. “He probably doesn’t want his mom hanging around, so I won’t embarrass him in front of Kate,” she whispered. “I’ll see you on your way out,” she called as she left to head back to her spot at the front desk.

Kate and Jeremy dropped down onto the mat a few moments later, and Kate immediately gave me a hug. “So you really didn’t play matchmaker, huh? We did it all ourselves.”

I held my hands up in mock surrender. “I promise I had nothing to do with it.”

\* \* \*

“And that’s how I got your parents together.”

Emma tapped my shoulder. “So Mommy and Daddy wouldn’t be married if not for you?”

“Nope.” I pulled her onto my lap. “Uncle Duncan helped them fall in love.”

“Will you help me find a boy to marry someday?” Emma asked, bouncing.

“Did you say something about boys?” Jeremy said, coming into the room.

Emma jumped off my lap and ran to him. “Daddy! Uncle Duncan says he’s going to find me a boy to marry!”

“Not for a very long time he’s not,” Jeremy said emphatically, and I hid a grin. “Why are you talking about that, anyway?”

*Uh-oh, busted.* “He was telling me how he made you and Mommy fall in love, when you asked her to prom.”

“Is that so?” Kate asked, entering and sitting down on the couch. “I seem to recall you didn’t do any matchmaking, and we handled it ourselves.”

I leaned back in the armchair with a mischievous smile. “It all depends on how you look at it.” ♦

WREN TUATHA

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## CORNBREAD

Cotton takes care of me.  
I mend and wonder where  
a word went as Cotton hops  
out of bed, feeds the herd,  
showers. I'm late with his  
coffee. I have one job as he  
capers around, clipboards  
and clients' keys, leash  
and a dog to walk.

My hours pass in turns of  
whiplash and molasses.  
I'm glad he's at work,  
not watching. We both recall  
when I was brilliant.  
He soldiers and I try.  
Who takes care of Cotton?

He's aged out of his market.  
Once six figures, now Cotton  
cleans houses. Five today,  
done at six. Home at seven  
with rags to wash and stories.  
Spreadsheets and payroll.  
Menu ideas and shopping lists.  
Leash and a dog to walk.  
Cotton cares into the void.  
Tonight he'll make cornbread.

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Reprinted with permission of the author.*

T. L. MURPHY

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## YOU LOOK LIKE HIM

I remember you,  
the hair, the eyes, even the smile.  
But he isn't here.  
I knew you when you were small,  
but you aren't him.

You look the same  
an older version, a little gray.  
You have the memories,  
some, at least.  
You even sound like him at times.  
You have his hands.  
You wear his shoes.  
But you aren't him.

He's gone.  
You're here.  
You even have his parents.  
It's startling  
how much you look like him.  
I tried to cry about it.  
You look so much like him.

We sit, we talk,  
discuss old times.  
It's a miracle.  
You must miss him too.

# THE OTHER SIDE

TEREZA CRVENKOVIC

*Down. Down. Down. Would the fall never come to an end? "I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere to the center of the earth."*

- Lewis Carroll,  
*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Last night, I woke up heavy, drenched in sweat. I opened my leaden eyelids to the frenetic white flash of lights around me; I closed and opened my eyes again, but the relentless flashes continued.

Now I lie in a dim cubicle in the emergency room of a large city hospital. Around me, noises roll into each other, forming a discordant sonic mass.

"You've had a stroke."

The young, ginger-haired doctor holds me in his gaze.

I blink. The noise dissolves: dead silence; shock.

"I'm forty-four years old . . ."

Stop. Of course, age means nothing.

Earlier in the afternoon, I sat in my father's oversized armchair watching

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. When I stood, my left leg collapsed. I opened my mouth: speech slurred, words overlapped. *Something's not right*. I touched my lips; had to see my face.

My partner and father helped me to the bathroom. In the mirror, the left side of my face lopsided; my lip drooped.

"The full extent of the stroke will be revealed in a few days, as blood from the hemorrhage leaks into the surrounding brain tissue," says the ginger-haired doctor.

He pauses.

"Things will probably get worse."

\* \* \*

A constant stream of interns, residents, and nurses check on me during the night. They ask me the same predictable questions: "What's your name? What's your date of birth?" They shine a piercing torch into my eyes, poke at me, test my reflexes. They ask me to wiggle my fingers and toes, prick the soft pink tissue.

"You need to get some rest," someone says.

I can't; I'm worried. *Really* worried.

My left arm lies limp on a pillow and feels like dead weight; my fingers are frozen, immovable.

Through the night, I beg my arm, hand, and fingers to move. I even use my right hand to coax my left. But it remains unresponsive. The same goes for my left leg and foot.

With my left-sided limbs dis-abled, I've crossed a fissure into a trackless landscape.

\* \* \*

A rehab specialist in a dark blue suit who smells of expensive cologne, visits me early the next morning. He performs the same *obs* as the doctors did the night before, then from the inside pocket of his jacket, pulls out a plastic pen. He holds it up, looks me in the eyes and points to the tip.

"What do you call this part of the pen?"

"The nib."

Relief flickers on his face.

"You'll be alright."

I cling to the hope his comment brings throughout my recovery. For now, he tells me a bed awaits me across the road in rehab.

"We need to act fast. The sooner we start, the better the outcome."

Yet this doesn't happen soon. As my condition worsens, I'm moved to the ward where the full extent of the stroke reveals itself.

\* \* \*

I can no longer feel when I should or shouldn't pass urine or defecate. The stroke has left me incontinent; I now wear a wrap around.

At times, I want to move, but can no longer turn over, sit up, stand, or walk. My left side is now almost paralyzed, my whole body stiff, each muscle in a painful spasm.

During the first few nights on the ward, I compulsively buzz the night duty nurse to check my wrap around.

Often there's nothing there. When it's full, the nurses clean and change me, and assure me that I can't help it. But I feel myself sinking into an ever-widening well of shame.

At this point, the doctors aren't sure when or if the relationship of signals between my brain, bowel, and urinary system will return.

\* \* \*

"You can get another kidney, but you can't get another brain," my neurologist says.

Spinal fluid from a lumbar puncture shows that the herpes zoster virus caused the stroke. *Shingles*. I'm questioning the need for intravenous antiviral treatment because of its potential to damage my most precious gift, my transplanted kidney.

Dr. G, a sensible, silver-haired professor of medicine, draws attention to the fact that my brain is my most precious gift. His logic is airtight, absolute. In the end, I relent.

I received my kidney transplant sixteen years ago—from my mother. In a last-minute bid to improve its declining function, my immunosuppressive medication was switched to a stronger, more damaging drug.

The diagnosis from the lumbar puncture is surprising: zoster-related stroke is rare. But it makes perfect sense.

A few months earlier, I'd been hospitalized with a vicious attack of shingles: huge blisters radiated from my right shoulder over my chest to my breast and down my arm. Bits of peeling flesh exposed the fresh pink underneath.

Pain so bad, so severe, not even the strongest opiate cocktail could suppress. Pain so fierce, I wished to leave my weeping flesh, my burning wounds, fly free from my fettered body, die. There was no reprieve; nothing.

Nurses came to gawk. Some said it was "the worst herpes zoster outbreak" they'd ever seen.

In the end, my hemorrhagic stroke was on the right side of my brain—the side of my shingles outbreak—leading to left-sided paralysis.

\* \* \*

Death. I wake up thinking about it. I open my eyes and squint at the clock on the wall: 2:00 a.m. Yellow light radiates through a chink in the blinds, but a dark shroud surrounds me. For the first time since the stroke, deep despair wells up inside me.

*I could die.*

Unsure how much time has passed—days, nights, dreams, waking moments all blur and collide. Time spent straddling the life I know and the life beyond: the other side.

I'm aware of the gravity of my condition. Waves of pain batter my head; nausea and vomiting crash through my waking life. The possibility of another stroke is very real.

The people in my life, the beings I love, the things I love to do and have done, drift into my mind.

*I'm not ready to die. Still so much to do.*

I sob uncontrollably.

Fear washes over me, takes hold of me, pushes me into its depths, churns, and whips me about. A feeling of unreality consumes me. It's as though I'm no longer in my body, like I'm observing myself from the outside. My body feels devoid of life, like an empty shell.

I need human contact and buzz the nurse. As I wait for her, I resolve to pull myself up from the undertow, to put all thoughts of death to the side.

Fight for my life where I can.

\* \* \*

It dawns on me that I'm no longer recognizable as the person I was before the stroke. My hair, my pride, my crowning glory, has been cropped, is thin, and reveals patches of scalp; my face is pale and puffy from the high-dose cortisone used to treat the swelling in my brain; my strong body has collapsed and withered. I'm now the sum total of the stroke in all its malevolent parts.

I'm beginning to understand what it's like to be physically disabled, mentally ill, homeless, disadvantaged, elderly, poor. I'm now also marginalized, invisible, misunderstood. An outsider.

Although I don't immediately comprehend it, this will follow me wherever I go for years to come.

\* \* \*

"You're going to rehab tomorrow. You'll need to work hard," the ginger-haired resident says to me.

The papers he holds fan out in his hand, but I remain quiet.



The stroke has had a serious impact on my balance, gross and fine motor skills. I'm unable to feed, toilet, and shower myself; two people have to help me sit up, stand and walk, at all times.

Words no longer flow from my mouth without effort. The letter "s" is flat and dull, almost like a lisp.

"Hopefully, when you get out, you'll just need to use a walking stick."

His parting comment stings.

*I will not use a walking stick! I'm a yoga practitioner, a dancer, a swimmer.*

I refuse to allow the prick of his words or the reality of my condition to penetrate.

I turn my head to look at the crane outside my window, framed by an overcast, winter-gray sky.

I sense something at first small, uncoil, rise, and expand inside me, see a faint light in the distance, catch a glimpse of my future.

*I'm going to get back on my feet and walk again. I'm determined.*

\* \* \*

*I walk down a set of stairs, toward the beach. I reach the ramp, kick off my flip-flops, slip my feet into the pale, yellow sand. Grains of sand between my toes, my feet move in unison with my legs. Speckled patterns dance on the silver ocean; frothy white waves crash on the shore. This is where I want to be.*

\* \* \*

Two weeks after my stroke, I'm moved across the road from the hospital to rehab, where my recovery formally begins.

As I'm wheeled in, I notice the décor: lemon-colored wall paint, speckled-blue corridor carpet. In my room, my timetable has already been pinned to the wall: physiotherapy and occupa-

tional therapy each day; speech therapy twice a week.

In the gym, I'm not only confronted by my personal challenges, but feel shock when I see the challenges of those around me: amputees, victims of car accidents, work-related falls, hip replacements, and of course, other "strokies." Each one of us is broken in our own way.

In the first few weeks, I'm pushed around in a wheelchair, with my name and a smiley face scrawled on a small piece of whiteboard tied to the back. It still takes two people to help move me around, but I'm determined. With a padded walking/lifting belt around my waist and the help of my physiotherapist K, I spend two hours in the gym each day standing, sitting, and then standing again.

I tremble from the effort and tire easily: the stroke has sucked up the physicality of the woman I was before, has

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### ***I'm going to get back on my feet and walk again. I'm determined.***

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changed the way my body feels and moves, altered the instant recall necessary to stand and walk. But all's not lost: the memory of that physicality—in the bones and muscles and flesh of my body—remains intact, guides me, pushes me forward.

In spite of my lived experience, an innate knowing of what it's like to walk and move manifests in the frustration I feel in *not* being able to move or correct my form.

Not long after my stroke, I dream that I walk around the streets of the hospital at night, pushing an IV pole, next to my father, as we search for a Chinese restaurant. Vivid, visceral dreams where I walk with ease, materialize for many years after.

\* \* \*

I soon progress to walking between parallel bars, being led by K and my partner around the gym, followed by assisted laps around the rehab corridors.

E, an occupational therapist, works with me to improve the strength, motor skills, and coordination in both hands. One is damaged from shingles, the other from the stroke. I have to re-learn how to shower, wipe, dress, feed myself, hold a pen, and write.

During this time, I realize that an unparalleled sense of camaraderie, moral support, and humor thrives in the rehab community. Brought together by our battered, shattered bodies and minds, I'm no longer confronted by the challenges of those around me, but bear witness to their heroic efforts.

One day, K suggests visualization. She's just read a book about neuroplasticity, namely, the ability for the brain to create new neural pathways after injury.

"Imagining that you're using your muscles," she says, "will strengthen them."

The book, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, by Norman Doidge, will later become my recovery bible.

From that moment, every night before I go to sleep, I visualize that I walk laps on the soft sand at the beach, my morning routine before my stroke.

\* \* \*

One overcast Saturday, J, a senior nurse, helps me shower.

"Why don't you try to walk from the shower to your bed?" she asks, when we're finished.

I'm surprised, anxious, excited. *Ready.*

Knees locked—barely lifting my feet from the ground—I walk one little shuffle at a time. Tears roll down my

face as I grasp the impact this short walk will have on the rest of my life.

\* \* \*

My medical team is impressed: six weeks after the stroke, I'm standing and walking on my own again. My walking is awkward. *But I'm walking.* My physios attribute the speed of my recovery to the yoga I've practiced for fifteen years. The power of repetitive practice, so intrinsic to yogic discipline, has provided the necessary framework for recovery.

On the day of my departure from rehab, I learn from K that the initial battery of tests used to assess balance, sensation, motor, and joint function, had me living in a nursing home.

\* \* \*

Back at home in the neighborhood I know and love, I'm faced with another obstacle: the stroke has rendered me unrecognizable to friends, acquaintances, and locals.

Most afternoons, I emerge from the walls of my house and shuffle down the street toward the beach. Sometimes, I wave to people but get blank stares. Some turn their heads away; some are blunt, telling me my face is big or that I look like an eighty-year-old woman; shopkeepers raise their voices when they speak. Strangers mimic my limping, misshapen, wooden gait.

At times, I feel beaten, struck down, bruised blue, hurt, unable to continue. Their aversion, their fear, their derision, is a constant reminder of my loss, a loss I feel in every pore, every part of my body. Would it hurt less, if I made myself smaller, disappeared, left my door shut?

So much of my life, my future, depends on this afternoon walk. If I don't walk, I won't recover my walk, my gait, my fragmented spirit, my life.

One day, at the start of my yoga practice, I stand in front of a mirror in *tadasana* (mountain pose—the starting position for all standing poses). I look at my reflection: all I can see is my thin and withered frame, my crooked posture, my bloated face. Deep, sorrowful sobs flood my chest. *I can't do this anymore.*

Then, out of nowhere, the words:

*That was then this is now.*

I take a deep breath in and exhale. I rest in the comfort these words bring, look at myself again.

Warm, palpable relief.

To recover, I have to put my previous life behind me, free myself from the burden of being who I was. I can no longer walk in the shadow of loss: I have a right to be in the world just as I am.

In this moment, I perceive that the stroke has led me to the very core of my humanity. The strength, resilience, and humility I need to recover, reside in the most damaged part of my being.

So, I take my clumsy, grotesque gait, walk, and practice yoga each day. I celebrate steady progress, small and large victories alike. My life's work now is to reclaim my life. Cross over the fissure, get back home.

\* \* \*

*My legs are strong enough to walk on the sand again, to withstand the force of the frothy white waves.*

Eleven years have now passed since my stroke. While it involved enormous psychological and physical hardship, I've received countless life lessons and gifts.

I've a deeper sense of spirituality, a more heightened connection with other beings and with my surroundings, a more intense appreciation of life and

nature. I'm less anxious and more empathic. I find enjoyment in simple things that were beyond my reach, like driving, walking up a steep hill, pushing a shopping cart. I'm more comfortable in my skin than ever before.

My balance hasn't recovered to its pre-stroke days: I can no longer, for example, ride a bike, run, jump, or balance on one leg. Yet I'm uncertain whether these deficiencies are from the stroke itself, or the severe, residual pain from the original shingles outbreak with which I now live.

My walking pattern is what's referred to as "normal," although when fatigued I walk with a slight limp and a mild wooden gait. But I feel profound pleasure in the power of my leg muscles and my long, strong stride.

Perhaps the ultimate life lesson I received from the stroke was the absolute necessity for courage. During the last eleven years I experienced other serious health battles, including multiple surgeries, ongoing neuropathic pain, hemodialysis for seven years and finally, a second kidney transplant. There were many moments in these battles and other life situations, where I had to call upon the courage gifted to me by the stroke. There is a certainty that courage lives inside me and is never far away.

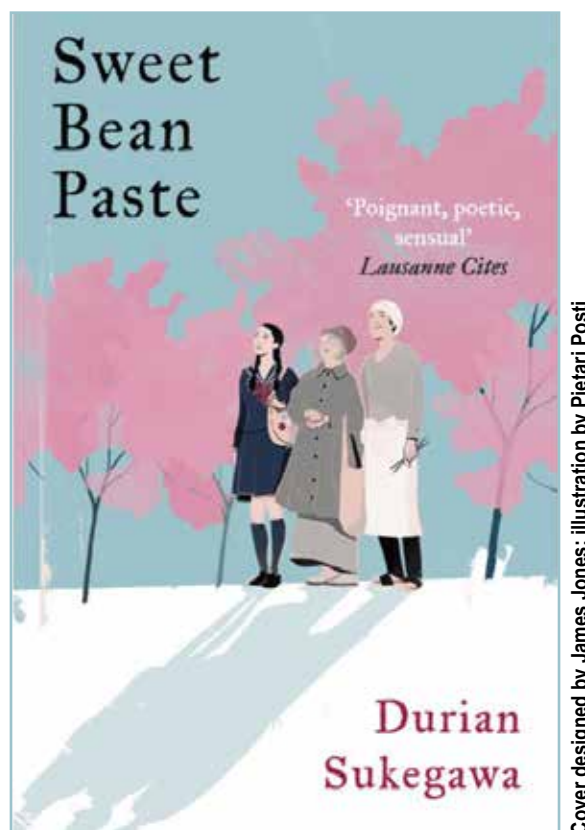
On a final note, as stroke survivor and neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor says:

"Expect me to recover. Even if it takes twenty years!"♦

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# THE FLAVORS OF FRIENDSHIP

NANAZ KHOSROWSHAHI

*Review of Sweet Bean Paste by Durian Sukegawa, One World Publication, 2017*

**S***weet Bean Paste* is an international bestseller of Japanese fiction translated to English by Alison Watts. Set against different seasons with the changing cherry blossom trees, the book weaves the story of Sentaro and Tokue through a struggling confectionary shop in Japan. One day when the elderly Tokue, disfigured by leprosy, mysteriously arrives at the Doraharu sweet shop, she demonstrates to Sentaro, the man preparing the food and serving it, how to prepare sweet bean paste to fill pancakes with, or

*dorayaki*. Sales start to soar as the recently paired duo serve shop customers both young and old the *dorayaki*. The right amount of ingredients, blended at the right time, yielded a delicious result. The improved *dorayaki* is comparable to how altering just one factor in life can create a drastically different pathway.

Even if you lack a sweet tooth there are other swirls of the story that will meet your taste. Characters flow in and out of the book as the secretive histories

of Tokue and Sentaro, who is young enough to be Tokue's grandson, are unraveled. Sentaro and his boss must deal with the perils of running a local business, like the financial need of creating sufficient profit, even if you have an increasingly popular menu item, and fair labor wages to avoid exploitation. Sanitation laws need to be followed to protect the customers and maintain the shop's image. Hours spent mulling and arguing with staff over food waste, proper storage, quality ingredients, for baked goods to be devoured in seconds

while working in sweltering hot kitchens reminds us of the unattractive side of the dessert business. Sentaro feels trapped by his job duties, the customers, his obligations to his boss, and Tokue for her wisdom and experience. Our moral code is tested by our willingness to complete favors we believe we owe someone. As Tokue teaches Sentaro to properly soak adzuki beans you will absorb through their running oral dialogue that despite being of different generations due to age, a commonality all people have are aspirations and failures. Her semi-paralyzed face and disfigured fingers working the pancake griddle harshly contrast the ideal image for a bake shop but we all have something we want to hide or avoid confronting. When confined in physical spaces such as employees at work sites, kids on school grounds, and patients in hospitals, we are expected to uphold rules until we break free of the walls surrounding us. It is easier to discriminate against people with disabilities in the workplace than people who are not labeled with a disability. The shop owner puts increasing pressure on Sentaro to dismiss Tokue out of fear her image and bacterial infection will force the shop to close down permanently.

The book touches upon what is defined as disability, including silent illnesses, and how others view it in contrast to how the person who has the disability views himself. Through the Doraharu shop readers see how mental and physical health issues affect a person's work life and interactions with others. Biology and medicine surprisingly enter their way into the story and Sukegawa accomplishes a nice application of these hard sciences, explaining physical disability, therapy, and ethical treatment of patients without sounding like a dry

research paper. Sentaro and Tokue meet Wakana, a female customer in her teens who notices Tokue's weird fingers and bares her home problems at the shop. Themes of hiding disability, folks finding out, and how to break the news to them permeate the book.

Wakana exits her teenaged world as she assists Sentaro in deciphering who Tokue is; Tokue and Sentaro help Wakana as her home life becomes more restraining and the three of them eventually form an unexpected friendship. As the cherry blossom tree petals fall to the ground, leaving the branches bare, the trees renew themselves through loss and later growth. Similarly, the characters lose themselves in service to one another for self-transformation. Wakana, the daughter of a single mom with a boyfriend, is never dismissed as being too young to be useful.

Tokue remembers picking fallen cherry blossom petals to pickle in salt water for tea drinking, making the most out of something that appears purposeless laying beneath walking feet. Elements of Japanese culture and history dot the book. Sukegawa refuses to allow readers to feel like foreigners or tourists while reading.

The Japanese to English translation is a bit awkward at times but there is no prerequisite required on Japanese culture to appreciate the book. It is a quick read that will squeeze a good taste in your mouth. ♦

**Alan Balter** of Northbrook, Illinois, is a retired university professor with a Ph.D. in special education. His chapbook, *Melancholia*, was published by Kelsey Press, and his poetry has been published in *WestWard Quarterly*. He takes great pleasure in family—his wife, six children, and fourteen grandchildren—loves to travel, and says, “I write because it distracts me from my illness and has helped me adjust to my disability.”

**Kavitha Yaga Buggana** is a writer who has lived in various parts of the world but is now living in Hyderabad, India, with her husband and their very excitable golden retriever. Her work has been published in *The Hindu Newspaper* (2018) and *Killing the Buddha Magazine* (2021). Her travel memoir, *Walking in Clouds: A Journey to Mt. Kailash and Lake Manasarovar*, was published by HarperCollins Publishers, India (2018). She is currently working on a short story collection and wrote the story in this issue because, “I see the distress faced by my elders in India as they deal with dementia, Parkinson’s, and other age-related diseases. I also see the conflict faced by their children in caring for them.”

**Courtney B. Cook** is pursuing her master’s degree in English at Abilene Christian University. She loves learning new things and incorporating them into her writing. “I have several friends with disabilities, and as I talked to them, I became interested in researching more about disabilities and bringing awareness to how people with disabilities should not be defined solely by what they can’t do.” She enjoys rock climbing, swing dancing, crocheting, and hopes her writing “inspires community and starts important conversations.”

**Tereza Crvenkovic** is a literary writer and editor who lives in Sydney, Australia. In most of her writing (various forms), she draws from her life experiences which include kidney transplantation, chronic illness, stroke, and disability. Her work has appeared in *Spineless Wonders* (2020), *Hektoen International* (2018), and *Australian Yoga Life* (2017). “I write because disability narratives are epic. I find them impossible to contain. They demand to be spoken and to be heard.”

**John Dycus** retired twice from the University of Texas at Arlington where he was an advisor of the newspaper. He has cerebral palsy, limited use of his limbs, and writes when he feels he has something to say. “I like to think that I am a grateful, observant, prayerful conservationist, skilled editor, happy to reach out when reaching out is needed, and an individual who hates waste, hypocrisy, and deceitful, traitorous politician-bullies.”

**Linda Fuchs** of Grove City, Ohio, is retired and says, “The silver lining of this is I have discovered my creative side in writing and painting. These pursuits help soothe me and allow my true feelings to be shown.” Her work has appeared in *Evening Street Press*, *Open Minds Quarterly*, and *Wordgathering*, among others. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1999, she says, “I write to share my reality and hope it may somehow give hope to others . . . to let them know they are not alone.”

**Lucia Haase** is a wife, mother, grandmother, poet, and spiritual person who lives in Spring Valley, Illinois. She says her writing is a direct result of “spiritual experiences that have occurred in my life.” Her work has been published in *Bible Advocate* (February & December 2020), *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal* (Spring 2020), and *Nostalgia Press* (October 2020), where she is a featured writer.

**Kelly A. Harmon** is an award-winning journalist and author, and a member of the Horror Writers Association and the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. A Baltimore native, she writes the Charm City Darkness series and her short fiction can be found in many magazines and anthologies. Regarding the story featured in this issue, she says it was written “for a dear friend who underwent a hemipectomy. He taught me a lot about what it means to be disabled. That’s definitely influenced my work.”

**Nanaz Khosrowshahi** lives in New York and is a freelance writer and licensed pharmacist with more than fourteen years of experience. Her book review of *Craftivism* was published on [permaculture.co.uk](http://permaculture.co.uk) (November 2020) and her review of *Why We Swim* was published on [swimswam.com](http://swimswam.com) (June 2021). She is married, has three children, and says she writes because, “it allows me to be creative and express myself.”

**Laura Kiesel** is a freelance writer/journalist and writing teacher living in Massachusetts. She won first place in the Harvard University Science Story Slam Championship and has had personal essays published in *Narratively* and *Salon*. Living with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and OCD, she says, “I am a disabled writer who is preoccupied by injustice. I devote much of my time trying to write in ways I hope can proactively address injustices, as well as offer hope and comfort to those experiencing adversities.”

**Judy Kronenfeld** is a retired college lecturer, poet, and writer living in California. Multiple collections of her poetry have been published and her second full-length collection, *Light Lowering in Diminished Sevenths*, won The Litchfield Review Poetry Book Prize (2007). “I am a first-generation American, very much shaped by my parents’ immigrant experience. I am a mother and grandmother of far-flung, international children, and grandchildren.”

**Kristin LaFollette** is a writer, artist, and photographer. As a professor at University of Southern Indiana, she researches and teaches courses on rhetoric, writing, and gender and sexuality issues. In 2017 and 2019 she received Pushcart Prize nominations for her poetry and won the 2021 Harbor Editions Laureate Prize for her full-length poetry manuscript, *Hematology*, which was published by Harbor Editions (December 2021). She lives in Evansville, Indiana, with her partner and their greyhound.

**Linda McMullen** is a wife, mother, daughter, diplomat, and homesick Wisconsinite who is currently living in Bahrain. A connection to someone with autism led her to address disability in her work and she says, "I particularly enjoy writing flash fiction because I create an entire world in a tiny space—a snow globe in words."

**Diane S. Morelli** lives on Long Island's east end. She worked in the securities industry before retiring to a passion-driven life of attending culinary school and caring for her grandchildren. Inspired by her love of family, food, and local beaches, Morelli writes short works of fiction, memoir, and prose poetry.

**T. L. Murphy** of Alberta, Canada, grew up in an academic family but chose a blue collar career and says, "Carpentry and poetry have both sustained me." He is the current poet laureate of Canmore, Alberta, and his work has been published in *Freefall* (Spring 2020), *Antigonish Review* (Spring 2015), and *Grain* (Fall 2014), among others. The experience of raising a child with a brain injury has influenced his world view and given him a unique perspective on what is important and what is not important.

**Sandy Palmer** studied graphic design at The University of Akron and is a freelance artist who works with a variety of media. She contributes to *Kaleidoscope* as the writer of visual artist profiles, having joined the staff as art coordinator in 2002. Palmer is the full-time graphic design specialist at United Disability Services.

**Jackie D. Rust** is a teacher and writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who explores her artistic side through sewing. She works from home and says, "I write because I have to—the words cajole me to come out. I enjoy baking and biking, although now I'm on the back of a recumbent tandem, due to balance issues. And I read and read and read."

**Wren Tuatha** earned her MFA at Goddard College. Her first collection is *Thistle and Brilliant* published by Finishing Line Press (2019). Her poetry has appeared in *The Cafe Review*, *Canary*, *Clover*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Lavender Review*, and others. She's founding editor at *Califragile* and former Artist-in-Residence at Heathcote Center. Tuatha and her partner, author/activist C. T. Butler, herd rescue goats among the Finger Lakes of New York.

**Alana Visser** is an English subtitle/script editor living in South Africa. Publication credits include *New Reader Magazine* (2021), *Insanity*, *Blades of Bliss*, and *Silent Symphony*. "I write because a non-writing writer is a monster courting insanity."



Erik Jensen, *Loyal*, 2018, recycled computer keys, 33" x 40.25" (2,475 keys)

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