

Aurora

Literary Arts Magazine

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Literary Arts Magazine
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Lilith & the Fireflies, Acrylic on Masonite

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Aurora provides a forum for original literature and creative arts. Submissions remain anonymous until a staff of readers complete the review process. The editor maintains responsibility for final selections in preparation of works for publication. Please address all correspondence and submissions to the editors. Submission guidelines and dates available upon request.

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W hat is the purpose of all this? Why would someone want to devote hours of her young life soliciting the work of members of the Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods College community? This is Aurora and she is ours. Our purpose has been to discover and to share what you have created. This is Aurora and she is now ours.

I promise you that there will be no tests to take or critical essays to write over what can be found on these pages. What I am asking of you is this: read *Aurora* and think for yourself. Be illuminated. Engage in discourse with yourself and then engage in discourse with others. Our dialogue might disrupt the universe. Our work could be the contents of the next chapter of the anthologies of American Literature. Is this a cataclysmic notion?

We have discovered the undiscovered in our contributors. Our staff is young, and we are eager. By opening this issue and being in its presence, you may already feel the change. Our goal this year has been to return Aurora to her roots. We have immersed ourselves in past issues while at the same time envisioning our own Aurora. This year's Aurora is a beautiful paradox. She is both old and young. A new Aurora has been born. This is light and air. Breathe it in.

Miranda Silotto, *Editor*

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A Pink Ticket

by: Miranda Silotto

who's behind you in the lunch line?
look, but don't make it obvious
pretend you are tying your shoes
they are velcro, and they are mended
with that- ugly electrical tape

don't draw attention to those

look behind you,
and take that laminated
Pink Ticket
out of the pocket
of your navy blue sweatpants
and hand it to the lunch lady

she's giving you one of those...
closed-lip smiles
both sides of her wrinkled mouth pucker

don't look at her pink mouth

it will make you look down
at the velcro
and the tape
and the scuffed linoleum tiles

you'll think she's feeling sorry

you look back,
because this is the first time you've used a
pink
plastic
ticket to pay for your lunch
and it's the last time.

tomorrow you'll skip lunch
you'll stay hungry
with your feet pulled up
off the floor
in the boy's room.

'Round

by: Nicole Timmons

The Ferris wheel was like a constant firework
Partially hidden behind the trees
Deliberately spinning
High to
Low
The shriek of a child
Here and
There
But mostly men
With their women
Side to
Side
His eyes looking out
Her eyes looking down
Groans from the gears
Below
Floating up to the lights



Untitled, Cheryl Pound, Photograph

Contrary

I sometimes find I'm

s d r a w k c a b

Always good with the workbook

But never liked the lab

I sometimes find I'm

hypo

critical

Always good in English class

But never liked recess

I sometimes find I'm

under pressure

s t r e t c h e d a p a r t

by: Nicole Timmons

Untitled

By: Freda Rohrer

Thomas Malprope knew that it was bad when he answered the phone and heard his daughter's quavering "Daddy?" on the other line. Within minutes, he was driving home, praying that the cops wouldn't catch him doing seventy miles an hour in a forty-five zone. But the police were all there, outside his house, with their red and blue lights snapping around like fireworks. A crowd had already formed, but his neighbor caught him by the sleeve and pushed the onlookers out of the way, pulling Thomas to the ambulance where his daughter, Sara, sat clutching a blanket around her shoulders. He scooped her up and buried his nose in her hair. He could taste the smoke.

"Sir, you're going to have to set her down." Thomas glared at the EMT over Sara's shoulder. "Please," the man said. "Just for a moment. We have to clean this gash." Sara clutched at her father's shirt and sobbed into his collar until the man gently pushed her down on to the gurney and ran white gauze over the bleeding cut on her forehead. Thomas held her hand and winced whenever she did, but a tall man, wearing a long trench coat and a concerned expression, pulled him away.

"Sir, I'm Detective Ward. At one-twenty-four this afternoon, your house was the center of a large explosion--"

"How did Sara get out? And my sons? My wife? Where are they?"

"Your daughter was apparently in the backyard when it happened. Your sons were inside. As was your wife. I'm really very sorry, sir."

"Where are they?"

"Right this way, sir. And to warn you, they're not in good shape." Thomas was led to three gurneys with a large black bag on each one of them. One bag was longer than the others, and the detective paused a moment until Thomas nodded before drawing the zipper down. Thomas choked, and then coughed.

Detective Ward drew him away from the bags. "At this time, we don't know the full details, but we suspect that there was a gas leak somewhere and that someone unintentionally lit a flame. This caused the gas to ignite and—well. Boom. Do you know who—"

"She wanted barbeque for dinner tonight."

"I'm sorry?"

"My wife. Lydia. She was planning on barbeque for dinner. She just called me a couple of hours ago from the store. Asked me if I wanted hamburgers or steak. She must have just gotten home, and started the grill. I didn't think she'd get home so soon. No one would usually be home yet. It must have been a half day at school. Everyone was supposed to be at school. She teaches—she taught— Oh, God. Oh, God."

"I'm very sorry, sir." The detective paused for a moment. "Sir," he said. "Do you have any idea how this might have happened?"

"It was a gas leak. You said it was a gas leak."

"Yes, sir. But there was no news of a leak in this area. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless it was only in this house. Perhaps, it was set up to be in just this house. You see how contained it is? Your neighbor's house is okay."

"What do you mean? That someone deliberately blew up my house and my family?"

"I'm not saying that."

"Do you know who this someone is?"

"We don't have any leads yet. But I need to ask you a few questions." Thomas waved his hand wearily.

"I'll be up front, Mr. Malprope. Do you have any enemies? Anyone who would be capable of this?"

"No, of course not. No one."

"Are you sure, sir? Your neighbor, Mrs. Goshep, mentioned financial troubles."

"What? Where would she get an idea like that from?"

“Apparently your wife spoke to her about it on many occasions. So is this true?”

“No, of course not. I mean, we might have had a little trouble. Nothing more than most people, I’ll bet. It was just a few thousand. Not a lot. Just a hundred thousand or so.”

“I see. You were about to lose the house, weren’t you?”

“No! Of course not, where would you get an idea like that? We just needed to move, that’s all. It’s a bad neighborhood. We just wanted to get away, that’s all.” The detective glanced down the suburban street. The white picket fences were bright in the waning sunlight and the mown lawns were strewn with leaves and toys.

“I don’t like it when people lie to me, Mr. Malprope.”

“Detective. Please, I can’t do this now. My wife – my children – Please. Not now.”

“We found this, Mr. Malprope.” The officer held up a twisted mass of metal and red wires. “Do you know what it is?” Thomas closed his mouth with a click.

“It appears to be homemade bomb, set to go at a certain time. This part was the timer. I’ll ask you again, Mr. Malprope. Do you have any enemies?”

“No – No, I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

Ward sighed. “How did you lose the money, Mr. Malprope?”

“Just here and there. Living expenses, you know.”

“Not gambling? Anything like that?”

“Oh, no. I don’t gamble. I might play a little poker with friends, but nothing really big. We’re all just good friends. We don’t play for much. I don’t win very often, but that’s all right. It’s not anything—”

“And did you lose a lot of money playing with these ‘friends’ of yours? A hundred thousand or so?” Thomas looked at the detective, looked at the smoking house, looked at his feet.

He didn’t say anything. Then, quietly, he said “Eddy Blozhar. He owns a bar down on Squeers Street.”

“Yes, we know of him,” Ward said, nodding his head towards the police car parked

“He runs Texas Hold ‘Em competitions in the back room. I—I don’t win very often. I tried everything to pay him back, but it wasn’t enough. He threatened to—The only other way I could think of—The only way I could get even enough—” Thomas rubbed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

Ward patted his shoulder, once, and left his hand there. “This was a nice house, Mr. Malprope.”

“Yes, it was,” said Thomas.

“Big. Lots of yard space.”

“Yes... the kids loved it,” said Thomas distantly, looking at Sara.

“Must have cost a fortune to insure.”

“Yes, but worth it.”

“I see. You have insurance on the house? A lot of insurance? A couple of hundred thousand, perhaps?”

“You don’t understand. It was too early. No one was supposed to be home yet. It wasn’t—”

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way, right?” Ward put his hand on Thomas’s shoulder.

“It was supposed to be perfect. No one would get hurt.”

“Nothing’s perfect, sir. Could you come this way, please? That’s it. Watch your head. Your mother has been called. She’s going to meet your daughter at the hospital. You’re in a bit of trouble, Mr. Malprope.” Thomas settled into the leather seats of the patrol car and looked out at the still smoldering crater between his neighbors’ houses. It was supposed to be perfect. Everything was going to be okay.



Michelle Adler, *Dusk in the Meadow of the Fireflies*, Oil on Canvas

A Dream

by: Freda Rohrer

My brother was gone,
Snatched out of his computer chair
By a man in a tall hat and
Pretzel-shaped sunglasses.
Three tasks, the man said.
Complete them and he will be returned.
I zipped up my jacket
So that I was invincible,
Slogged through gray sand
To win a footrace against a deer
Who changed into a wild-haired boy and back,
Took an emerald-encrusted lamp
In the shape of a blowfish
From an old woman with slender teeth like a piranha,
Told the ghost in the VCR
To bugger off and stop dripping metaphysical goo
On the carpet, and then
Went back to the man in the tall hat
And demanded my brother back.
He laughed and turned into a black cat
And darted under a car.
I woke, flushed and tense
Until I saw my brother totter past my bedroom door.

Woman, Unpainted

by: Miranda Silotto

Her muddy boots are too big.
Coat Size: too small
squatting in the corner
where the tall building and dumpster shake hands,
and say "Hallo"
She looks up at me.
with vacant eyes, and sunken cheeks
irises cold and gray like Chicago steel
she is as thin as the colored paper that she folds
into pink flowers
and sells
On Maxwell Street,
She'll sell her flower.
amongst the Polish sausages
where she swims in a lake of Klezmer melodies
there on the street
now in a corner
crouching in a pool of piss and vomit
she looks up
and smiles
and,
I'm thinking of Carl Sandburg.



Alexis Rusch, *Disarm*, Photograph

Being Young

by: Michael R. Aycock

Being young, we thought it possible:
the ton and a half granite stone, the bent
iron dock struts and split logs, the
crowding pines sighing as we levered it,
thunder and fragrance, crushing
maple starts and ferns like the ancient
ice had rolled it, face on face,
to the form of a rough egg
perched by the lake basin
it had carved before leaving.

Dripping and shaking, we rocked
it around a few times, hard
against the cottage, until
my aunt could see it
with sedum in a cleft, and
it was home.

That night, we lay
by the boathouse
listening to the hoarse
rolling the glacier had
given the lake. We pointed
north from the rim of the Dipper
to light that had left Polaris
the year that Cartier
encountered the Micmaes,
and on deeper, with the fainter stars,
past the grinding of the sands
toward the creation
and, being young,
were home.

Slouching Once More Toward Canterbury

by: Michael R. Aycock

The revolver is always
a big one, as it snakes out
of his tweed coat at the end of a huge
paw, somehow measured to the bulk
of the old linguist who taught
me Chaucer. He's making his way
up the stairs, hunched over against
the work of heaving himself up
to the half-lit waiting room where dozens
of people on benches catch their breath.

I know who he's coming for,
and it's not the Pardoner, no,
an ample nun with the
lines of the Wife of Bath
doesn't distract him long as
he pulls himself erect and proffers
the muzzle of a narrow corridor
that gets a step longer and darker
each time I breathe,
with a door cracked at the end, faint
music I should recognize
dribbling out.

I know better than
to burst in and find
Wallace Stevens, his left
hand noodling at a
clavier, the right waving
that Beretta at the linguists
crouching around him.

Winter

by: Sandra Hua

I can still remember your red coat in the coldest winter,
Your hands held my hands and warmed mine.
“A cup of hot coffee and a piece of black forest cake, please.” I said.
I seemed to be a spoiled child to you.

Your face was pale, because you were cold.
I hugged you,
I would stay with you, promise.

You smiled, warmly,
I gave you a cup of hot coffee, and a piece of black forest cake,
You said thank you,
But you didn't eat them.

I can still remember your red coat in the coldest winter,
I was five, and you were sixty-five
You smiled again, and hugged me tightly.

You promised me you would come back soon.

Is heaven the place that you won't feel cold?

I can still remember your red coat in the coldest winter,
And your warmest smile.

Memory

by: Freda Rohrer

Lake Michigan at the edge of winter:
I'm playing with my friend and her dog.
My jeans are rolled up to my knees,
And the water turns my legs pink and heavy.

On the beach, there is no sand, only stones.
I run my fingers through them,
Getting grit under my fingernails
As I search for fossils of ancient snails
And stuff my pockets with green sea glass.

We eat peanut butter sandwiches,
Laugh, talk about nothing,
And watch the wind push the waves up to our toes.

That was the last time I saw her.



Michelle Adler, *Arabesque in Black*, Stoneware



Michelle Adler, *Backwards Ran the Broken Clock*, Thrown on Altered Stoneware

Another “Mass on the World”

by: Carolyn Sur, SSND, Ph.D.

The whole earth is altar for celebrating Mass, when, like Teilhard, I have neither bread nor wine.

I, too, stretch out my hands and say the sacred words, *“Hoc est enim corpus meum.”*
But, like the spiritual communions of medieval nuns, something is withheld.

In solidarity with Teilhard and silenced, I concelebrate with other would-be-priests,
I place on my paten, O God, the harvest reaped by aggiornamento in the open air,
 Offspring of a woman theologian simultaneously obedient and impatient.

Transform this host, O God, raise it; braze it;
Bake it in an oven which transcends liturgy’s formalities.
Into my chalice I shall pour the sap which has been pressed out
blood pressed taunt to satisfaction by the chosen tensions of constraint,
breath hot and expectant, repressed to silence.

On the cosmic altar-turned-womb is spilled the birth fluid of all my children of the universe, Catholic school
children of three-thousand teenagers in four decades.
Their collective voices, a drone below the choir’s chant, their teasing and cajoling, a bell in the high steeple.
Their faces punctuate the offertory litany; in the classroom, faking disinterest, and learning nonetheless.

Like a pregnant woman anxious for delivery, I birthed them within predetermined cycles of nine-month inter-
vals. And they transformed me, ordained me to womanhood, to a kind of priesthood, at mandatory Masses
and classes.

We grew together, shedding our Gregorian chants, like a virgin’s first night,
forcing the vernacular rhythms, we strummed guitar bodies with the innocence of lost Latin.
made music echoing the stiff vibrations of some distant planet, surely.
Later, their sustained liturgical whispers, modulated the clatter of science dishes with the chatter of teenage
romance.
We exchanged peace with easy warmth, preparing for life’s long-range harshness.

And I, I the catholic teacher turned theologian, celebrate memorials and all of life, at the altar of my wordless
Mass.
I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself.

Like Little Therese who taunted pined for priesthood, baptismal priesthood was also my first call, the font,
my altar.
But now, I make the whole earth my altar and on it, will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world.

Across different continents now, we still lift our hearts to an aching planet, in the priestless churches—sursum
corda.

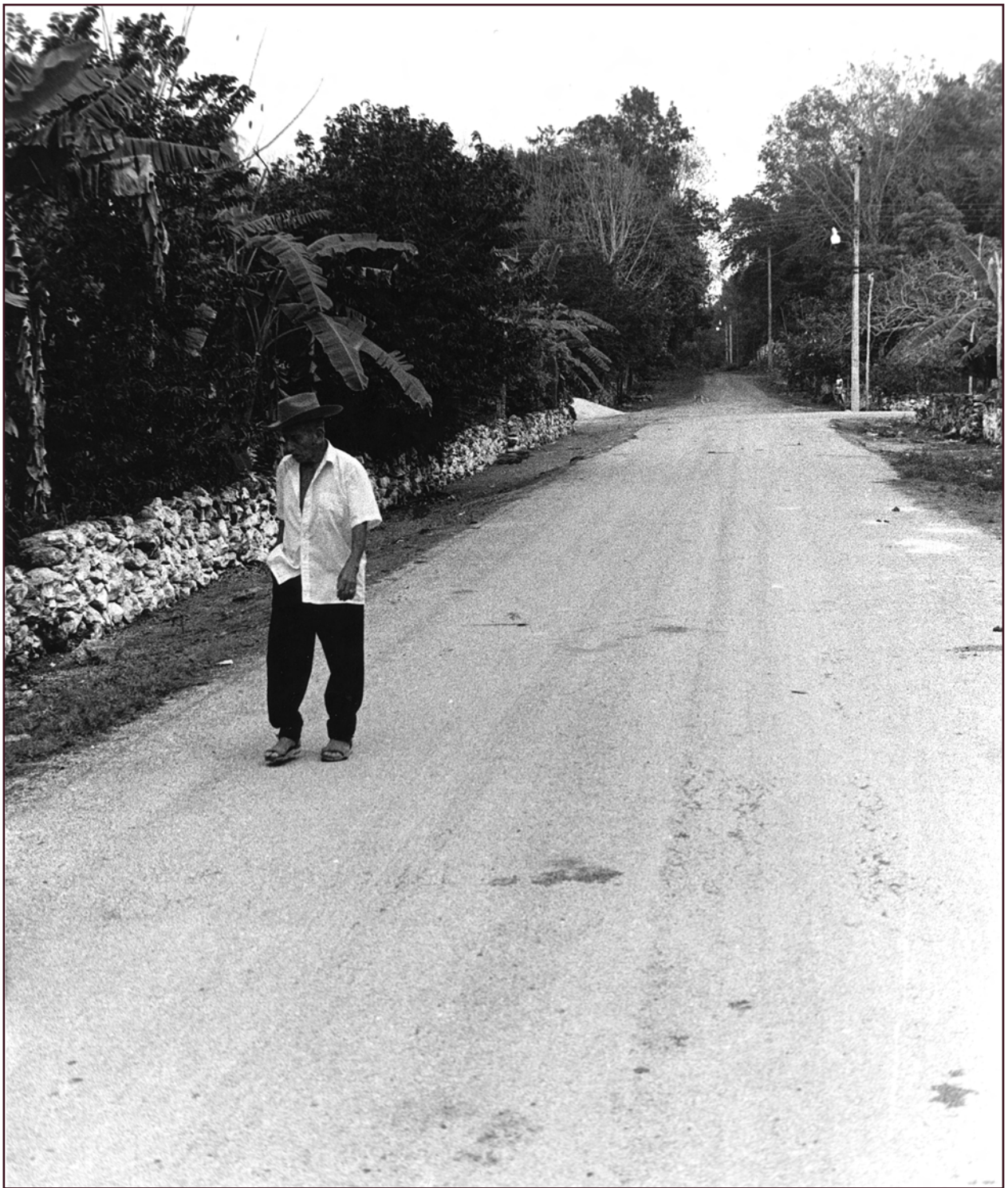
The birthing of a Church in the Post-Modern World groans in labor.

Carolyn Sur, a School Sister of Notre Dame, is Director of Campus Ministry and Adjunct Professor at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College.

Words in italics, from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s The Heart of Matter. London: Collins, 1978.



Cheryl Pound, *Untitled*, Photograph



Alexis Rusch, *Strollin'*, Photograph

The Man and His Dog

by: Amy Kozol

It was nearly seven o'clock in the evening, but Olivia Hayes, or Grandmother Olivia, as little Meri called her, was only now on the verge of having dinner ready. This was an unusual circumstance, since on any other day Olivia would have had a feast on the table by five-thirty, or by six at the latest. Of course, it was also unusual that the feast was planned for over twenty people instead of just two, and that the many smells in the kitchen, including the delightful, sweet smell of two apple pies baking in the oven, were competing with the pungent smell of fresh paint.

"Grandmother Olivia, who taught you to make such good pies?"

Little Meri's giant, brown eyes sparkled as she watched her grandmother scoop the two heaping pies out of the oven and place them on two wire cooling racks. Meri had been watching her grandmother all afternoon. She hadn't wanted to help the others paint the house. She hated the smell of the paint just as much as her grandmother did. Meri was perfectly content to sit still and watch her grandmother's every move. It was almost as if her grandmother was dancing, Meri thought, the way she glided to one end of the kitchen and then the other, measuring, mixing, chopping, grinding, stirring, kneading, and doing all the other things that had to be done to prepare the feast. Meri wanted to grow up to be just like her grandmother. That was why Meri watched so intently. It was also why she asked so many questions.

"Well, Meri," Olivia spoke, "my mother taught me to make pies. I think I was about 14 years old when I baked my first one. My mother showed me how much flour to use, and how much sugar, and butter, and fruit, and how to put it all together in just the right way. Of course, a pie wasn't the first thing I ever baked. My mother taught me to bake biscuits, and muffins, and breads, and cakes and cookies and all sorts of things before she taught me how to make pies. Even then, my first pie wasn't nearly like the pies I make now. I had to practice many times before I could make pies like this."

Meri nodded slowly, as if she was sucking on the words like caramel candy. Meri's thoughtfulness was one of the things that Olivia liked about having Meri in the kitchen. Meri's questions were constant and often demanding, but somehow, they tickled Olivia. Often, the questions made Olivia remember things, things that had happened a week before and things that had happened long ago in her childhood. Many of Olivia's favorite memories were the ones from before she and her husband Jeremiah had sold the big farmhouse in the country and moved into town. The more Olivia was prompted to remember times past like those, the less the images faded in her memory. Meri was still gazing at the two pies, watching the steam rise from the three great slashes across the top of each one. She concentrated on the sweet, buttery smell of the pies, trying to ignore the paint odor that brazenly continued to sting her nose.

Olivia turned her attention to the stovetop.

"Grandmother Olivia, who is that man walking by with his dog?"

Olivia's eyes followed Meri's to the big window with the white linen curtain that looked out over the street.

They soon found the little white-haired old man, hobbling along behind his black and white-speckled Border Collie. A moment later, Olivia returned her attention to the bubbling pot of brown gravy.

"Meri, I don't know who that man is. Why would I? He's not part of our family. I've never met him before. But my-oh-my, little Meri, this gravy is not nearly thick enough!"

Olivia's voice trailed off as she glided toward a high cupboard near the pantry and extracted a square container with "CORN STARCH" written on it in black marker.

"Grandmother, that man looks very lonely. His dog must be the only friend in the world that he has."

Meri's eyes remained fixed on the man and dog pair as they slowly but steadily traversed the section of sidewalk in front of the house. The Collie led the

way calmly, looking right, left and then right again, sniffing the blooming pansies for a moment here and the lilac bush there.

Olivia dumped a heaping spoonful of corn starch into a bowl, added a few spoonfuls of water, and began stirring the mixture to form a thick white paste.

“If I was that man,” Meri continued solemnly, “I would be very sad. I wouldn’t have my mommy or daddy, or Ian or Hannah or Joey, or you and Grandfather Jeremiah, or Aunt Bonnie or Uncle Timothy, or...or anybody to be friends with me. I would have to eat dinner alone every day, with only my furry dog to keep me company. The dog would sit beside me, and I would pet him, but it wouldn’t be the same as having people for friends. People talk. Dogs only bark.”

Now that the gravy was boiling again, Olivia poured the cornstarch paste into the pot and began stirring vigorously.

“If I was that man,” Meri added, “and I needed my house painted, there would be no one to come and help me.”

Olivia looked over her shoulder at her granddaughter. She shivered, a sharp whiff of the acrid paint smell penetrating her whole being for a moment.

Meri now stared at the empty pavement outside.

Olivia reverted to the stovetop. The air above the pot of slowly thickening gravy was hot and humid, but at least it was breathable. It smelled of chicken broth, not paint.

“Grandmother Olivia,” Meri suddenly exclaimed, her eyes opening wide, “I saw that man and his dog yesterday TOO! They are the same ones who walked by right before you said that the chili was ready to eat.”

Olivia only nodded. The gravy was thickening now. When she lifted the wooden spoon out of the creamy

brown liquid, the gravy slipped off the spoon’s sides with grace, rather than tumbling down like water as it had before.

Olivia felt a tug on the side of her skirt, and glanced down.

“Yes, my little Meri?”

“Grandmother Olivia, please tell me, who is that man?”

Meri’s eyes were glassy again, only this time, they were pleading.

“Meri, I told you, I don’t know who that man is. He walks past the house with his dog every evening. I suppose he has been walking past ever since Grandfather Jeremiah and I moved in. But I really don’t know anything about him. Why should I? He’s not part of our family. He’s just a stranger who walks by.”

Meri refused to release Olivia’s gaze.

Olivia could only endure the accusing stare for a few moments before she had to turn back to the gravy, her cheeks flushed red. Dinner was ready.

The family paint crew moved upstairs the following day. Consequently, the paint smell in the kitchen became significantly less pungent than it been the day before. Olivia was thankful.

“Grandmother Olivia, you said that you began to learn to bake before you made your first pie. How old were you then?”

Today, Olivia was standing at the island in the middle of the kitchen, right across from where Meri was perched on her favorite high kitchen stool. Olivia was chopping vegetables to go in an enormous pan of lasagna. Her knife made a rhythmic click, click, click each time it came down on the glass cutting board. She didn’t look up.

“I’m not exactly sure, Meri. I suppose I was about your age when my mother first started allowing me to help. I measured out the flour and the salt for the

bread dough that she made.”

Meri’s eyes wandered to the stovetop, where a gigantic bowl was covered with a damp white cloth. The bread dough, rising in the gentle warmth from the heating oven, was growing out of the bowl like a balloon.

“Now that you mention it, Meri, I believe that I was just your age when I first baked my very own batch of cookies.”

Meri’s eyes lit up.

“They were peanut butter cookies,” Olivia continued. “I remember rolling out the balls of wet, sticky dough, and then pressing them flat with a fork.” Olivia’s own eyes seemed to glow a little as the memories took shape in her mind.

“A fork?” Meri questioned.

“Why, yes, of course,” Olivia replied, beginning to chop again. “The fork makes a pretty criss-cross pattern on the cookies. Peanut butter cookies are always made with a criss-cross pattern.”

The click, click, click of Olivia’s knife continued like music.

“I believe I sprinkled sugar on top of the cookies too,” Olivia added. “That way, the criss-cross pattern on top sparkled like jewels.”

“Who ate the cookies?” Meri questioned.

“Why, my family,” Olivia chuckled, slicing into the last red bell pepper.

“Grandmother Olivia, will you let me bake some peanut butter cookies?”

The knife fell click, click, click to the cutting board a little harder and faster.

“I suppose you are getting old enough, now aren’t you Meri?”

Meri sat up as tall as she could.

Olivia finally smiled.

“Why don’t you start by finding that big glass bowl that I keep...”

“But Grandmother?” Meri interrupted earnestly.

“What?”

“Can I bake the cookies tomorrow?”

Olivia paused for a moment, staring Meri, then shrugged and returned her attention to the bell pepper.

“We can bake cookies tomorrow, if that’s what you would like.”

Meri wrapped her arms around Olivia’s waist and squeezed.

The next day, with the outside of the house and the downstairs rooms completed, the entire paint crew began work to finish the upstairs rooms and the attic. Meri gathered flour, sugar, butter, baking powder, salt, and most importantly, peanut butter, with contagious joy. By the time she had the dough mixed, shaped, and placed in rows on two enormous cookie sheets, the kitchen looked like a disaster area. But Olivia didn’t mind. She felt a little tingle of pride each time she looked up from shaping her Parker House rolls to watch Meri’s innocent determination.

“Grandmother Olivia?”

Meri was standing over her precious sheets of little brown peanut-buttery balls, gingerly holding a fork. The peanut butter smell almost completely covered up the lingering stink of the paint.

“How do you make the criss-cross?”

Olivia wiped her hands across her apron and walked over beside Meri. Meri handed Olivia the fork.

“Like this.”

Olivia pressed firmly down on one of the balls with the tines of the fork, then repeated the motion with

the fork turned perpendicular to the existing pattern on the cookie.

Meri watched with owl eyes, then took the fork and smashed the next ball.

“That’s just the idea,” Olivia confirmed, eyeing Meri’s new, lob-sided criss-cross.

Soon, the cookies were safely tucked away in the hot oven. Meri remained riveted to the timer, waiting impatiently for each second to tick away.

“When they’re done,” Olivia spoke, pulling another small ball of creamy dough from the bowl and rolling it smooth between the palms of her hands, “you can run upstairs and tell everyone that they can take a break for a treat if they want to. I bet everyone will love the cookies.”

Meri’s head snapped away from the timer.

“But Grandmother Olivia, if everyone eats the cookies, there won’t be any left.”

Olivia flattened the ball into a long rectangle and brushed it shiny with soft butter.

“Why do we need to have any cookies left? They won’t taste nearly as good tomorrow.”

Meri blinked.

“Why Grandmother Olivia, we need some left to give to the man and his dog. He doesn’t have anyone to bake cookies for him.”

Olivia froze, about to fold the buttered rectangle in half. It was as if time had paused to take a breath. Then, plop, the roll landed hard on the cookie sheet.

“Meri, you haven’t met that stranger either. How do you know that he doesn’t have anyone to bake cookies for him?”

Olivia’s palm came down unforgivingly on the next ball of dough.

“Besides, Meri, even if he doesn’t, he can always just

go to the grocery store and buy cookies there. We don’t need to give him cookies. He’s just a stranger.”

Meri’s eyes were beginning to become glassy.

“But Grandmother Olivia, you’re always telling me and my mommy too how things in packages from the grocery store are never as good as things made with love at home.”

Another roll landed plop on the cookie sheet.

Then, barely audibly, “I guess I have said that before, Meri.”

“Grandmother Olivia,” Meri responded, almost as softly, a single tear beginning to run down her cheek, “may I please wrap the cookies in plastic when they’re done and share them with the man when he walks past today? Just this once? You won’t even have to go outside at all. And I won’t give him all the cookies. That way, there will be some left for our family too, everyone who’s painting. I’ll even give up my cookie so that the man can have one.”

Plop, then silence.

“Yes, Meri, you may.”

The oven timer began to wail.

Meri jumped up, determinedly flinging the tear from her cheek across the room.

“They’re ready!”

Soon, a dozen of the soft, criss-crossed peanut butter delights were carefully arranged on a paper plate and wrapped with tenderness in plastic wrap.

Meri sat waiting for the old man and his dog, her chin in her hands and her eyes fixed on the window, while her grandmother covered the pan of shaped rolls to rise a second time.

Instead of the man and his dog, however, dark, black clouds gathered outside the window. Soon, big, heavy drops began dripping from the sky, a few at a time at first, and then in countless numbers all at

once. It was a downpour.

"It's a good thing that they finished painting the outside of the house yesterday," Olivia remarked, glancing at the gathering puddles outside.

A tear appeared once more on Meri's cheek, but she remained glued to the window. Then, a second tear followed the first. As Olivia watched, Meri's own torrent began to collect on the countertop in puddles just like the rain outside.

The puddles only grew larger as Olivia put away the leftover butter and scraped the remnants of dough off the countertop. The kitchen remained silent except for the sounds of the rain pattering on the roof, and

Meri's occasional soft, sad sniffs.

The rain didn't stop. Neither did Olivia in her dance around the kitchen.

Meri wished that, just maybe, the man and his dog would walk past despite the rain. She imagined how the white-haired man would look wearing a yellow rain coat and holding a big, red umbrella over both himself and the speckled Collie.

The sidewalk remained empty.

At last, Meri's tears stopped falling. Once Olivia noticed, she silently wiped up the salty puddles, pausing for just a moment to let her hand rest on

Meri's little shoulder.

Meri kept up her vigil as long as she could, until dinner was ready.

After the lasagna was eaten, Olivia announced that

Meri had baked peanut butter cookies for dessert.

The cookies were devoured readily, and Meri received endless praise the entire night. Exclamations were continually made by almost everyone.

"Meri, your cookies tasted wonderful!"

"Meri, someday, you're going to just as good of a baker as Grandmother Olivia is."

"Meri, that was very sweet of you to bake cookies for us!"

Meri smiled obediently and thanked everyone who complimented her, but she was not her usual cheerful self.

Finally, as Meri's family was leaving later in the evening, Meri gave her grandfather his usual hug goodbye, and then, she walked up to Olivia. As Meri hung her arms around her grandmother's neck, she whispered in Olivia's ear.

"Maybe you are right, Grandmother Olivia. Maybe he does have a family somewhere. Or maybe, someone else baked cookies for him today. Don't worry about him too much. He should be alright."

Meri's mother beckoned, Meri's siblings already waiting in the family's small silver Toyota. Meri jumped down from Olivia's lap, and in a blink, she had disappeared from Olivia's sight.

The next morning, Olivia rose at sunrise, as she usually did. The house was especially quiet after the commotion of having the entire family there for the past three days. The silence was almost deafening. Olivia made the oatmeal for breakfast with her usual dance, but each clink of the stirring-spoon against the pan seemed to echo like noises in an empty cave. After lunch, there was hardly anything at all to be done in the kitchen. There were only two plates, two cups, and a knife and a couple of spoons to be washed. And there were plenty of leftovers waiting for dinner.

Olivia hung her apron carefully up on its hook after she and Jeremiah finished lunch, thinking of what she might need to get done that afternoon. She tried heading upstairs, to tidy up after the painting job, but her husband had already put all the pieces of furniture back in their places that morning, and her daughters had scrubbed the whole place clean the night before.

Olivia wandered back to the kitchen. She sunk down

on the stool that Meri usually sat in, and she stared out the window at the pansies waving in the wind outside.

Then, she checked to see how much peanut butter was left in the jar.

Later that afternoon, her husband Jeremiah appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, holding his straw gardening hat in his hand. His dark gray hair was all sweaty where the hat had been on his head.

“Olivia,” he spoke, in his mild, husky voice, “what’s the occasion? I do believe I smell cookies baking.”

Olivia started. She had been staring out the window again, lost in her own thoughts.

“Do you not like peanut butter cookies?” she snapped, her cheeks growing fiery red.

Jeremiah took a step backwards.

“Why ma’am no, I DO enjoy peanut butter cookies just fine. I only know that you tend to save the cookie-baking and other things like that for days when we’re expecting guests.”

Olivia sighed.

“I admit, it’s true, this isn’t like me. Would you like a cookie Jeremiah? I was just about to take them out of the oven.”

“I suppose a little afternoon treat could be just the thing,” Jeremiah responded cheerfully at last, after a moment’s hesitation.

The smell was tantalizing when Olivia opened the oven.

“Well, it looks as if the cucumbers are going to survive after all,” Jeremiah ventured, sinking into one of the wooden kitchen chairs while hanging his hat on the chair back beside him. “I was worried that we weren’t going to be able to enjoy any of your famous pickles this year!”

Olivia slammed the oven door shut.

“Pickles are so much work anyway.”

There was silence as Olivia slid the cookies onto the wire cooling rack.

“Those cookies DO smell good,” Jeremiah reiterated.

“I would hope so,” Olivia retorted. She slapped the last two cookies from the cookie sheet on the table, dropped the sheet onto the cork pad on the stovetop, and plunked down on a kitchen chair across from her husband. She could only bring herself to remain sitting on the chair’s edge.

“Well,” Jeremiah said after another pause, this one more ginger than the last one, “the house is painted now, just like we were hoping for. It seems to be a job well done. And what a blessing that we didn’t have to hire the job out.”

“Are you having another cookie?”

“If you’re offering, I guess...”

Olivia found herself slapping another set of slightly cooler and firmer cookies on the table. Now, she couldn’t bring herself to sit down at all. Not until had she wrapped a plate of cookies and carefully stowed it on the counter. Jeremiah chewed in observant silence.

Olivia could feel his gaze following her quietly. Finally, Olivia returned to her seat, taking a bite of her own cookie.

Then she suddenly jumped up again. She ran to pick up the plate of cookies and dashed out the door. Frowning, Jeremiah stood, replacing the gardening hat over his mop of sweaty gray hair. Before he could get out of the kitchen, however, something outside the window caught his attention.

There were a white-haired man and a black and white-speckled Border Collie outside, the man standing halted outside the house and the Collie sitting obediently beside him. The two appeared to have been walking past when Olivia bolted outside with the cookies.



Michelle Adler, *Apples, Peaches, Pears and Grapes*, (copy of Paul Cézanne's), Oil on Canvas

The Sunday Times Crossword

by: Miranda Silotto

Racking our brains
(which are mostly water)
at the very back table
the one with all the
clichés
first and last names
carved into it
52 across: mollycoddle
is the clue
and this
Indian sitar music
is driving me
absolutely crazy
I can't think.
but I like the way
your black-rimmed glasses
do a shimmy down your nose
mollycoddle: baby,
the paintings above your fine hair
are hung with clothespins
and they make sweeping sounds
like feathers make
on the wings of bright, blue birds
12 down: food from heaven
as we count boxes
we melt
into two puddles
of brain
mostly composed of
words and water

Praises

By Sylvia Lewis

Praises are the words of utterances
that lift from a heart unto God Almighty
Praises are sweet fragrances
that ascend unto the Presence of Him on High
Praises are a burst of laughter
that comes from happiness bubbling inside
Praises are tears falling softly
from a face that has found the Eternal Truth
Praises are the hands lifted
in humble sacrifice to the mighty Creator
Praises are the high, sweet, lovely tunes
of a flute's voice into the universe
Praises are what I will give to my Lord
from now unto all eternity...

Turtle Woman Rising

By Janice Dukas

The day that Turtle Woman was born, a target was drawn around her big brother's heart. He was five years older. His world seemed always five times larger than hers. While she was crawling on a square of blanket he was patrolling the boundaries of the back yard on fast feet. By the time she could follow him around the yard he was on two wheels, crossing streets beyond their block. When she got two wheels, he got four. Her earliest memory of him was the sight of his back moving away from her, out the door, down the drive, and out of sight around a distant corner. No matter how she pleaded to go along, no matter how she hurried to keep up with his pace, her older brother left her behind with a quick white smile tossed at her over his shoulder. They were a study in contrasts: he darkly handsome with blue long-lashed eyes and a lean athletic frame topped off with a wild spray of curls; she fair and blond, all short stocky limbs with brown eyes with a puggish bump of a nose on a face that family and friends politely said was "perky."

One morning when she was eight years old, her brother sat high above her head in the neighbor's tree loft that overlooked the brushy back corner of her back yard. She could hear his voice along with those of the pair of brothers whose father had built the raft of planks in their giant red oak tree. The crude ladder of crooked short boards nailed into the tree trunk intimidated Tessa. The neighbors, Deke and Rolly, were the bad boys on the block, known for random acts of destruction and cruelty. They were slightly younger than her brother Jason, and because of that, the two admired him and were always inviting him to join them in some game or adventure. Most days Jason enjoyed merely teasing his kid sister, but when he roamed with these two teasing often escalated into torment, as if her brother had to defend his alpha position in the pack. Tessa was never invited, but trailed after them as far as she could. The tree loft was out of bounds, because she was a girl and because of her fear of those rickety boards. This day she crouched under the bushes in hopes of overhearing their talk.

This space beneath the arching branches of honeysuckle was one of her favorite places to hide, though her invisibility was really only imagined, as the brightly colored sun tops she favored were easy to spot. Tessa's long blond hair glistened brightly from the shadows. Still, no one else in her family was small enough to actually enter there, so she felt alone and liked it. For her it was a hidden world filled with mysterious and fascinating creatures: pincer beetles, ants large and black or small and red, praying mantis, caterpillars, and the occasional toad or box turtle. Tessa was content to squat amid them in close study for long periods of time. While watching them she would break off honeysuckle blossoms and pull out their dripping stamens to suck their sweet nectar, the way that her mother had shown her. With a stick tool she knocked granules of dirt from their mounds back into the ant holes so that she could watch the flurry of rebuilding activity that followed. Sometimes she teased a pinch bug into clamping hold of her stick so that she could lift it into the air like a tiny black flag, or coaxed a praying mantis onto it for viewing right at the tip of her upturned nose. The toads she could capture under cupped hands where their struggles tickled her palms, and when she picked them up they would wet on her and leave a dank, uniquely toady smell. But the box turtles were the rarest finds, her favorites, and that was what she found in her hiding place that day.

She snatched it up in mid-step as it tried to lumber away with that funny plodding walk they had—the front legs arched and the back legs bent forward with cocked feet, like a crawling baby's. Left front moved with right rear, then right front with left rear, in a motion that would seem to set it spinning, but always the domed shell lurched straight ahead. At first it closed its hinged bottom shell into impregnable armor, impossible to pry open with fingernail or stick. But she had soon learned that if she left a turtle still long enough, its hinge would crack open ever so slightly, the wedged snout reappearing. Cautiously its round red or brown eyes peeked through the narrow opening and eventually the hinge would drop like the ramped tailgate of a truck, its head and neck snaking out first, and then the rest of the front and rear shell separating top from bottom, the legs and tail venturing out again. After a time, a sort of trust seemed to build between her and a turtle. She

could lie still on her tummy look into its eyes. It looked back. Sometimes she tapped their snouts to make them disappear again, but if she didn't they would stay out and walk and she would set them back on their paths a few paces only to pick them up and reset them again and again, just to watch them waddle. She loved to run her small grubby fingers over the bright yellow and brown patterns on their shelled domes. Sometimes their shells were smooth and sometimes bumpy. This one was bumpy. Its colorful swirling patterns reminded her of the quilts her grandmother made, the way they looked like individual patches seamed together, with a scalloped border in alternating yellow and black rectangles skirting the slightly flared bottom edge. She lay on her back and placed the smooth cool underside of its belly on her own. When the turtle felt safe to open up again, she delighted in the tickle of its long curved toenails scraping her bare skin.

She was on her back with a box turtle on her bare belly when her brother called down to her from his perch.

"Oh, Tessss-eee," Jason called.

"What?"

"Whatcha doin' down there?"

"Nothin'" she replied.

"Yes you are," Jason accused. "Probably eating bugs," he said, loud enough that she, as well as his friends, could hear. This set them off in a peal of laughter.

"Am not," she shouted.

"She puts them in jars and then eats them," Jason joked.

"Shut up, stupid," she said. "I heard you cussing. I'm telling Mom."

"OoooOOOoooo, am I scared now," he mocked, but it was more to maintain his status with the boys than it was for her.

She knew that it was a solid threat. If she told their mother, Jason would not be allowed back in the tree with his friends. Long before she had learned that keeping a file of her brother's crimes and misdemeanors was a kid sister's only leverage to power, her only defense. She smiled and stretched her limbs out to their fullest. The turtle shell bobbed atop her ribs. From above the boys' muffled voices floated down, unintelligible. After a few moments, she heard their sneakers scrape against the crude steps and then the three successive thuds as they jumped to the ground. Seeing who could skip the most rungs for the final leap was a point of honor among them.

"Let's go to Sand Hill," suggested Deke.

"Naw, the creek. We can catch some crawdads," her brother said.

"Yeah," agreed Rolly, the youngest of them. He was always trying to ally himself with Jason against his elder brother.

Neither of these locations were places that Tessa was allowed to go. The turtle's hinge dropped and its nose tentatively, partially, poked out. Tessa lay very still, waiting for the snake-like neck to unfold itself.

"Hey, Tessa!" Jason yelled.

She didn't respond; the vibration might frighten the turtle inside again.

"Tell Mom I'm going to Miller's Creek."

She heard their feet crunching the gravel of the alley now as they passed just a yard from her beyond the back fence. They halted. Jason squatted down, his face appearing in patches of light and shadow through the briars and honeysuckle vines.

"Hey," Jason said again. "You hear me?"

Tessa felt the cool tickle of scaly legs and long claws curl out and plant themselves on her skin. She resisted the urge to giggle, watching her emerging friend with fascination and awe. Its wizened face turned stretched slowly to the left, then the right,

before the claws dug in to lift its shell and slowly rotate away to move along her abdomen through the valley of her hips. The short pointed tail like a caressing fingertip dragged along behind.

“Hey, she’s got a turtle!” Rolly exclaimed with delight.

“Cool,” said Deke. “Let’s go see.”

The three boys raced into the yard. Tessa watched as their scuffed, frayed sneakers pounded up puffs of brown dust at the fringe of her protective bush. All three dropped to their bellies, sweat and dirt-streaked faces gawking at her like curious monkeys. The turtle was making its unsteady way along the ridge of her thigh, struggling to avoid slipping over the side.

“Hey, let me see it,” said Jason.

“No,” Tessa said. The thrust of her voice knocked the turtle on its back on the ground between them. Like a whip Jason’s arm lashed out and snatched it to him.

“Cooooo,” he crooned, grinning at the tightly boxed prize.

“All right,” said Deke. “Lemme hold it.”

Tessa scrambled out from under the bushes on her hands and knees. She lunged on top of her brother and reached for the turtle, but her reach was, as always, too short to span the distance of his outstretched arm. With ease he pushed her off to one way as he rolled to the other and sprang to his feet. He stood over her tossing the turtle hand to hand like a softball. Deke and Rolly stood, too, instinctively moving apart to form a triangle around her. Jason tossed the turtle to Rolly, who tossed it to Deke, who missed. The turtle thumped like a rock at his feet. Again Tessa darted for it. She managed to cup her hand over its back, but Deke pinned her wrist under his foot. Tessa yowled, “Owwwoooo, you’re hurting me!” with tears swelling on the edge of her voice.

“Get off her!” Jason ordered and shoved Deke away with a palm smack to his shoulder.

Tessa quickly dug her toes into the ground, thrusting the turtle under her belly as she pressed herself forward. She grinned, triumphant.

“You little faker,” Jason accused. “What a baby.”

“I got it, didn’t I?” taunted Tessa.

“Not for long, little baby,” her brother threatened. “Grab her feet,” he told his companions.

As the boys moved, Tessa kicked her legs wildly, her hands gripped tightly on the turtle beneath her as she spun and flailed. Her attackers danced in and out of their striking range like boxers avoiding punches. She managed to land a few good ones to each of their shins before Rolly locked both hands around one ankle. With an upward jerk he planted her face in the dirt. Pain jolted from her nose through her face, but she pressed her arms harder against her ribs and gained enough leverage to turn her head, spitting dirt, exhaling forcefully through nostrils packed with soil and blood. In the pause created by her struggle to breathe, Deke grabbed her other ankle. In unison the boys lifted her enough for Jason to reach under her his sister and yank the turtle from her grip.

“Way to go, team!” shouted Jason. He raised the turtle aloft in one hand and the boys dropped Tessa’s legs to high-five each other. Tessa flipped onto her back and landed a mighty kick to her brother’s backside. He stumbled forward a couple of steps, but otherwise appeared unfazed. He turned to look down at her and smile in that cocky gotcha way that vexed her spirit.

“Eeeeyuck, you’re a mess,” said Deke. “You need a bath bad, pig face.”

“I hate you,” she said, struggling hard not to cry. Miserably, she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. As it dropped to her lap she stared helplessly at the streaks of snot and dirt and blood that colored it and licked at the stream of red pooling on her lip.

Jason approached and leaned down to examine her face. There was a flicker of concern in his eyes.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “Tilt your head back, it’ll stop the bleeding,” he advised, as if he were saying something wise and instructive, like grip the bat like this. Then his voice switched back into enthusiastic action mode as he ordered, “Come on guys. Let’s go check out my new turtle.”

Tessa watched him lead them back toward their own yard. She heard them climb back up to the loft. Their voices drifted toward her in randomly recognizable words and phrases as she pulled herself to her feet and stumbled to the garden hose. She sprayed her face and arms, then sucked in a drink and felt somewhat refreshed, if overall defeated and depleted. The thought of going into the house to rat on Jason crossed her mind, but she dismissed it: If her mother saw her disheveled and wounded, she would keep her in the house for a bath and treatment, but probably leave punishing Jason for their father’s return from work. Rattung always carried a hefty payback price. Besides, Tessa still held out hope that Jason might give her turtle back, if she could just be patient. He sometimes committed unexpected acts of kindness, sharing his ice cream, teaching her how to hit a ball, or fixing her bike—though he always made a big deal of how she should remember this the next time she thought about ratting on him. She had learned that she had to be patient and wait for these gestures; he rarely gave in to her requests or demands, and he always battered away at her resistance to do his own bidding, as she should have remembered this time with the turtle.

So she returned to her hiding place as quietly as she could, hoping that the boys were too preoccupied with the turtle to notice her. Sitting cross-legged, eyes and ears straining toward the loft, she heard Rolly say, “Man oh man this sucker is tight.”

“Yeah,” Deke agreed. “How do they do that? It’s like trying to open a freakin’ tank.”

“Maybe if we use a smaller stick,” suggested Rolly.

Just wait, Tessa thought. Stupid boys. He’ll come out if you wait.

“Maybe we could crack it open,” said Jason.

“You mean drop it?” Rolly asked.

“Naw, not on the ground. Shell’s too hard. On cement or metal maybe. We could find a box and keep it,” Jason suggested.

Deke said, “Naw. Let’s try it anyway. If it doesn’t crack, we can try a rock. Or a hammer! I could get my dad’s hammer.”

“Let me drop it first,” Rolly begged.

Tessa’s heartbeat geared up to panic. She couldn’t tell—was this all just talk to tease her? Were they serious? If she could have seen their faces she would know for sure. She was afraid to scream at them as she wanted to; it might just egg them on to do what they were threatening.

“I wish we could see what’s inside this thing,” said Jason. “I bet they bleed green.”

This comment roused a round of grossed out laughter.

“Come on, let me drop it.”

“No,” Jason objected. “If we crack it we might mess it up too bad to really see stuff.”

“Yeah,” Deke agreed.

“We could use your knife, Jason,” said Rolly. “I’ll do it. Let me use your knife. Come on, man.”

Tessa held her breath. Every pair of pants her brother owned had the faded imprint of his Boy Scout knife on the right rear pocket. He kept it sharp and polished. He used it to poke, pry, slice, jab, and carve his way through the world. In the face of this challenge and temptation, she feared that Jason might see her turtle as just another lock to pick in search of hidden treasure.

“Nooooo!” she shouted. “Nooooo!”

But her protests did no good. After a few moments, one bloody clawed foot rattled through the bushes and thudded in the dust beside her. The shock of it reduced her protest to silent, voiceless tears.

“Knock it off,” Jason ordered. “Pitch it in your own yard, butthead.”

Tessa’s face contorted in agony as she sobbed helplessly. From above the boys’ voices punctuated her pain with exclamations of glee, surprise, disgust and awe. One by one she heard the muffled thumps of pieces falling to the ground. At last the emptied shell came down with a recognizable clack. By this time Tessa was emptied of tears. She waited until the boys descended and went off to some other distraction, then she made her way into Deke and Rolly’s yard. She found the shell at the base of the tree. Squatting, she fumbled for it through blurry eyes and, holding it like a bowl in the palm of one small hand, filled it with all of the severed body parts she could find. She then fetched her mother’s garden trowel and buried the turtle beneath the honeysuckle, placing yellow blossoms on the mound.

Naturally her mother wanted to know about the blood on her clothes. Tessa didn’t hesitate to tell her story, seated on the closed toilet, her mother’s neck and face tensing steadily as she struggled to keep her anger out of the strokes of the wash cloth on Tessa’s face.

Jason came home as late as he dared, but not late enough. Their father had been filled in by their mother and supper was delayed while Jason cowered under the wrath of his parents. He was forbidden to play with the neighbors again, ever. He was grounded for a month. He was a mindless, mean little jerk. He had to surrender his knife to his father’s hand.

“What the hell were you thinking?” demanded his father.

Jason shrugged miserably. “I dunno,” he mumbled.

“We just wanted to see inside the shell.”

“Save the dissections for science class,” his mother told him. “Apologize.”

With his head down to hide his tears, Jason approached Tessa, who by then was just wishing that

all of the yelling would end because she was hungry. “I’m sorry, Tessa,” he said. “We shouldn’t have roughed you up like that. I’ll get you another turtle if you want.”

“Okay,” she replied.

Jason’s offer was sincere, she knew, but he couldn’t keep it. For all of his searching, he never did find another turtle. Tessa found several on her own, but never told him. So Jason tried to make it up to her in other ways for several months, even letting her tag along with him to Miller’s Creek a couple of times, until the incident receded far enough into the past that he resumed his old teasing ways and seemed to forget about it, but Tessa never did. She took pleasure in bringing it up at critical moments, like when he was introducing a girl he was dating to the family. She could still make him wince by telling the story, well into adulthood.

Though her parents had called Deke and Rolly’s widowed mother that night, Tessa never knew if they were punished, and didn’t really care. They stayed clear of her after that, which was enough. But in the middle of the night that following spring there was a major storm with forceful winds and tornadoes touching down all around. While she huddled with her family in their basement they heard a loud creaking moan, a series of crackles and scrapes, culminating in a thunderous crash that rattled windows and vibrated the walls. Venturing out the next morning, yellow sunlight filled the space where the oak tree had stood. Between their houses the giant oak lay on the ground like a small forest grown overnight.

Tessa wavered between sad and happy about the tree’s loss. She missed the sight of it, the shade it provided, but she also felt relieved that the constant reminder of that horrible day was gone. Later, when she was older, she applied the words karma and poetic justice, and nature’s revenge, to the tree’s demise, but it gave her no lasting satisfaction. Deep down she still hurt and writhed. Always within her a small cache of pain and anger remained. It wasn’t, after all, the tree’s fault. Poetic or not, it didn’t feel like justice.

When she turned ten she asked her father for Jason’s

old knife. She began doing her own dissections on animals and insects—already dead when she found them—and she felt that she understood the boys a little better then. Her fascination with their interiors rivaled her delight in their exteriors to the extent that she was no longer sad, but delighted, when she found a dead specimen fresh and intact enough to cut open and explore. And so when she announced that she was going to study biology in college, nobody was surprised. When she specialized in turtles as a wildlife biologist in grad school, they were even less surprised. Her brother laughed and shook his head at the news. “You don’t have to do this just to get back at me, Tess.”

“I’m not,” she told him. “You know what they say about revenge, big brother. Your dish isn’t cold enough yet. You won’t even see it coming.” It was an empty threat, though, as she had no idea or plan; only the feeling that he had to pay some way, somehow, for the death of the turtle.

Sister and brother were distant for many years, not communicating much, except for holidays at home with the family. Tessa learned that Rolly was in and out of jail through the years. Deke was killed drunk and speeding. She felt sorry for their mother, but accepted the news with a shrug and a nod, saying, “Well, they had it coming.” Silently she feared that some similar disaster might befall her brother. She didn’t want that for him, because she loved him. It was on the day that Jason’s son Luke was born that Tessa found a stuffed turtle for the baby.

Seven years later, Dr. Tessa Farraday returned to her camp after a day up to her knees in pond muck and carefully removed from her bags the specimens she’d collected. She placed them in wire cages or water containers, according to their needs. Not until she had housed and fed them all did she remove her hip boots and start a fire. After a refreshing shower from the solar water bag suspended from a tree branch, she settled in next to the fire, and thumbed through the messages on her cell phone.

The first call she returned was from her brother.

“Hey, kiddo!” she said, when her seven-year-old nephew Luke answered the phone.

“Hi, Aunt Tess. Dad said I could call you. Bernie’s sick.”

“Oh yeah? I’m sorry to hear that. What’s wrong?” Bernie was a one-eyed, three-legged musk turtle (also called a stinkpot) that Tessa had found at one of her research sites and given to her niece.

“There’s some kinda colored gunk on his back, and soft spots,” Luke told her.

“Oh. Don’t worry, honey. It’s not that serious. I think we can fix it. Put your dad on the phone.”

“Okay.”

Tessa heard Luke’s breathing change as he talked while climbing the stairs. “Did you find me another box turtle?” Luke asked.

“No, but I got you a red-eared slider. Looks like something punctured its shell.”

“CoOOol,” Luke crooned. “Okay. Here’s daddy...it’s Aunt Tess,” Luke told him.

“Hi, Tess, how are you?” said Jason.

In the way of siblings, the two had achieved an affectionate tolerance of each other. Jason had grown weary of apologizing, of insisting that he really hadn’t considered Tessa’s feelings or done it to hurt her; that it was “just a turtle and he wanted to see what was inside the shell.” Besides, he swore, it was Rolly who had done the cutting, not him. Tessa, having by then dated enough teenaged boys to believe such insensitivity, if not comprehend it, had guessed this already, but still it was nice to hear. Now she and Jason talked at least once every few weeks and visited on holidays.

“Just dandy. Up to my neck in pond scum,” she replied. “I collected four specimens today—one endangered. That was nice, finding them here still. Haven’t found any here in five years.”

“Good,” he said, adding, “Nothing for Luke this time, I hope.”

Tessa smiled and said, “Well, actually, there’s an injured snapper that—”

“Oh no, Tess. Come on. No more,” Jason pleaded. Tessa closed her eyes to conjure up the scene on the other end, her balding brother standing in the loft over his garage, which had once been his home office, surrounded by cages and aquarium tanks that were home to various crawling, floating, injured turtles, up to his waist in assorted containers of aquatic insects and small fish for their feedings, plus a refrigerator stocked with dead mice for the carrion-eaters.

“Just kidding,” she told him, deciding not to mention the red-eared slider. “Luke says you’re having problems with Bernie. Sounds like shell rot.”

“Serious?” he asked.

“Can be,” she said. “Are the soft spots small or big?”

“Small, I guess. Two of them—dime-sized. He stinks worse than usual.”

“He’s a musk turtle,” she reminded him.

“I’m well aware of that,” he said.

“You can treat the rot yourself as long as the spots are small,” she told him. “Got something to write with?”

“Yeah, hang on.” She waited while he readied himself and then said, “Okay, go.”

Tessa spoke with frequent pauses to allow him to write. “Okay. First, remove the thin layer of peeling keratin—the softened shell—from the affected area, then gently clean the bone with betadine cleanser or povidone-iodine, and apply Gentocin or Polysporin ointment. Repeat that for three days. Then paint the affected area with 2% gentian violet every other day until it has dried up. Protect the area with a bandage so it stays clean, but make sure air can get to the wound. Keep the turtle out of water except for necessary soaking and to eat.”

Jason sighed heavily. “Oh, jeez...I think I got it,” he said.

Tessa smiled. “Are you keeping up with the nail trimming?” she asked with a lilting tease in her tone.

“Luke’s taken over most of that now,” he replied. “Thank god.”

“Good for him,” said Tessa. She often fondly pictured the day that she had taught her brother how to trim a turtle’s nails. How clumsy yet careful he had been, with little Luke pressed against his side, his brown eyes shifting from worry for the turtle to proud confidence as he looked up at his father from under a fringe of blond bangs. From the day when Luke was a toddler and Tess had arrived at their house with an injured box turtle, Luke had toddled around with it cuddled in the crook of his arm and wouldn’t settle for the night unless the turtle stayed in his room.

Now that he was old enough, Tessa sometimes took her nephew along to her field sites and her lab at the university where she taught.

“Now you get on that shell rot right away,” she advised. “Cause if you don’t, big brother, I’m telling.” Jason laughed wearily and said goodbye.

With a contented sigh, Tessa leaned back on her sleeping roll and spooned cold beans from her can, watching the stars emerge in the darkening sky.

Notes

