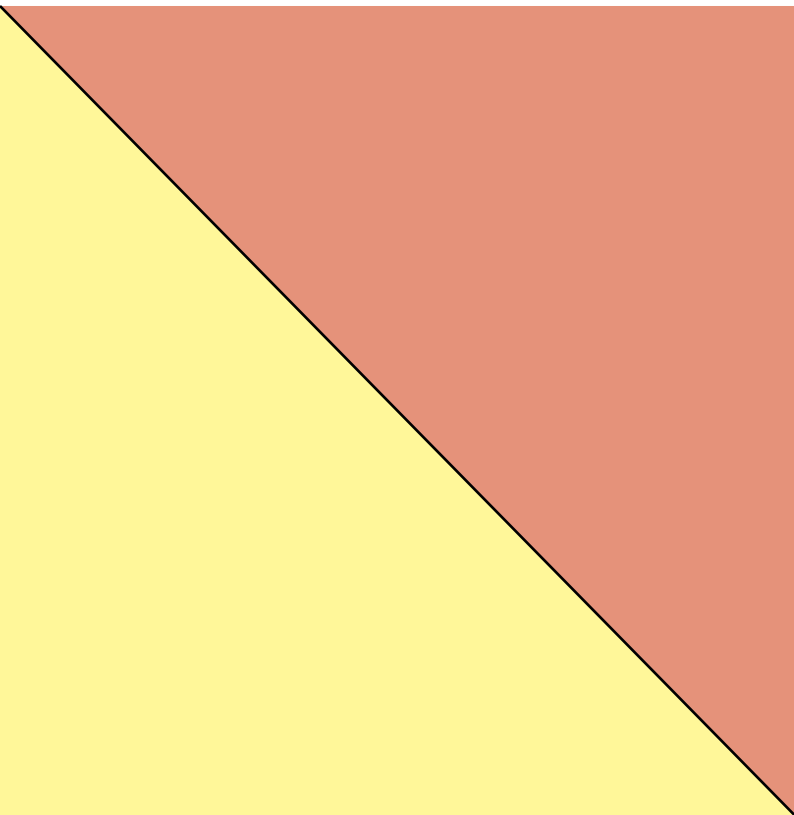


WENSUM

Literary Magazine

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WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

Welcome to the latest issue of WENSUM, where we're proud to show you the creativity of our contributors. With each issue, I'm blown away by the quality of the submissions we receive from all over the world. This issue is all about family and the inevitable highs and lows that come with love and loss.

These types of issues have a way of curating themselves, all the pieces coming together and finding each other on the page. As editor, I've had the privilege of reading all these pieces together, and I hope they resonate with you.

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Before the Storm

Paul Hilding

The dogs and I don't go as far as we used to. Instead of the half-mile jog to the mailboxes at the top of the road or sometimes to the river another half-mile beyond, it is all Cabo can do to limp alongside me for a few hundred yards. Loma stays close in the alfalfa field, chasing geese and checking scents left by deer and other late-night visitors. But he's started to slow down as well, his hips stiff with arthritis.

Our unhurried pace allows me to study the weeds along the roadside. As fall becomes winter, I watch the goldenrod fade to cream and then grey. The same cold weather alchemy transforms the grasses and mulleins into muted shades of hazel, rust and beige. Scattered rows of curly docks have turned entirely brown, as if cast in bronze from stems to leaf tips.

It is easy to succumb to melancholy during this season. Surrounded by so much death, it

is natural to think of the short time we have left with our ageing dogs. And with each other.

But there is also beauty in this stark landscape that draws me out each day into the December chill. And something more. A meaning, perhaps, to be worked out.

Now, as dusk approaches, I pause at a desiccated stand of wild sunflowers. Their straw-coloured skeletons remind me of candelabras, dried blossom heads tipped upward toward the slate grey sky. Storm clouds float low in the western sky like silent battleships, crests tinged blood-orange by the last light of the winter sun.

Cabo takes advantage of the break to sit heavily at my feet, seeming to admire the scene as much as I do. After a long moment, he slides to the ground, sighing in a way that seems almost human.

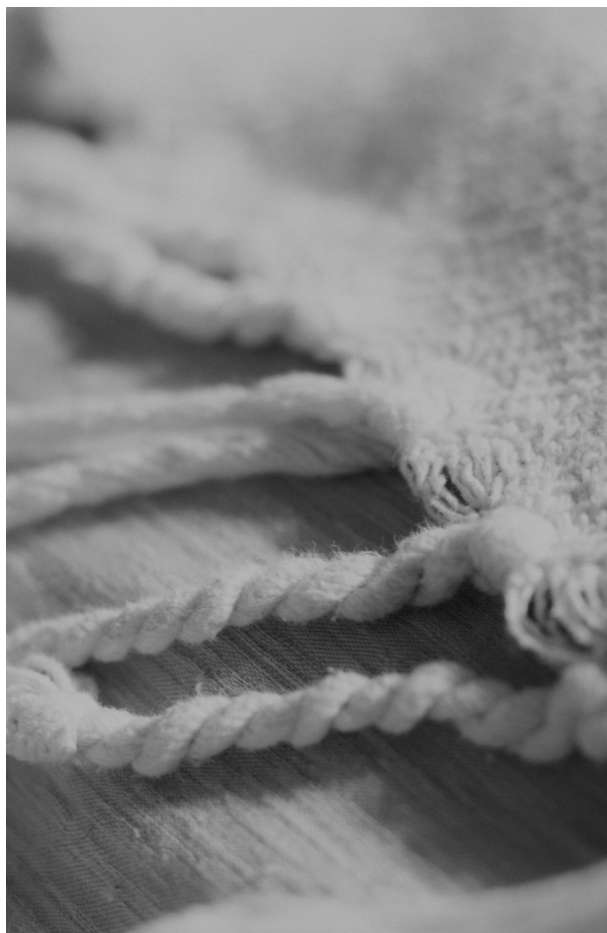
I kneel and stroke his head. His sad eyes meet mine and, not for the first time, I imagine he understands it all, my own future as well as his. The symptoms had returned a few days ago, and the meds were not working as well. "It's a progressive condition," they had said.

The horizon darkens. The battleships sail closer.

Eventually, Loma sniffs the approaching storm and looks over from the stubble-strewn field. The lifeless stalks shiver in the rising wind. I whistle softly and pull my jacket tight against the cold. For today, it seems, this is the right place to turn around.

The dogs wag their tails as we start the short walk back to the warmth of the cabin. And I feel grateful as well. For these moments before the storm. For all of these moments, every day. Before all of the storms.





Blanket

Melissa Llanes Brownlee

Don't let me be lonely she says, her arms cuddling her yellow blanket, her legs splayed underneath, painted toes peeking out, because it's too hot to have a blanket, but she refuses to be without it, give me a hug she begs, her nails scratching the holey patches she's made over the years, a comforting tic she doesn't even realise she's doing, and I wonder how long this one will last before she gets another one, and I lean in to give her a hug and she swaddles me in her holey, scratchy blanket, which I think should be a barrier between us, but it's not, sucking me down into her and I can't get free, don't leave me she whispers into my ear, and even though I want nothing but to do just that, I stay, because she is my mother after all.

Grandma Has Magical Powers

Wayne Fitzgerald McCray

“But I have another question?”

Mack was again told to take his butt outside. To go take advantage of the beautiful day. Go get some fresh air. Go play. Go do something. She didn't care where or what. Just as long as it wasn't there. She needed a break from him. And at some point, he should give her one. Every day, he had questions. He inquired often on the mechanics of a thing, a topic, or an idea until it made sense in his mind. He was smart. But also aware that if he stood there too, too long trying to look as innocent as possible when he wasn't, pressing for an answer, and working on her last nerve, often involved an unpleasant threat.

“But I have another question?”

“Machiavelli!” she said.

She unplugged the sink stopper so the dish-water could drain. Her wet hands were dried on a nearby kitchen towel. All the while, she

gave him a frank look and akimbo stance. Her face and posture said it all. They both conveyed he had better go on somewhere and do it fast. Unless he wanted a slap upside his head. And it came as swift as it stung. Aware of this, he got out of her face.

Shortly thereafter, she heard him leave. The concurrent door slams, front and screen, confirmed his departure. Each one had its own distinct sound when it shut. She couldn't help but shake her head. Her grandson was something else. A loving thorn. She grabbed her can of Prince Albert smoking tobacco and English pipe off the kitchen table and then went to the living room window to see where he was headed. And based on his direction she knew right off his destination, and that he wouldn't be there long.

Sure, the day was clear and the sun was dazzling. Ideal for fun and play. But he went up the road with a particular place in mind. As the sunshine darkened his skin, Mack knew when she was fed up with him. So he left so she wouldn't pop him upside his head for being too

sassy and find odd things for him to do. Last time, he ended up weeding the garden, picking fruits and vegetables, gathering dandelions, and a plant called Screaming Pussies while she stood over him. He disliked her brand of discipline. It involved work.

Mack spent his summer vacation with his grandmother, Nancy Khoisan Skybird, an indigenous woman born in 1900, who lived in East St. Louis, Illinois. His mother sent him there annually so he could know what he was, is, and where he came from. It was his birthplace. A small rural town, but not the “country, country.” Although it was a place that had an abundance of trees and nature, it had its share of sidewalks. Just not as many. The homes where his grandmother lived lacked them altogether. Their front yards met blacktop roads, not curbs. Even though they were manicured, the lawns never grew sideways.

Each homeowner had their own acre of land

with its own shade and fruit trees and garden, but not so far apart to be strangers. It wasn't heaven, but idyllic. So much so the children could play in the streets. The streets also doubled as the sidewalks for jumping rope, riding bikes, playing catch, and going up and down them. Playing on the grass wasn't allowed. So yield whenever cars come along. So when he left the house, Mack walked up the road until he reached Bond Avenue. It had sidewalks and it went to where he was headed.

The place was Cap'n Jacks. It was a former train depot now a corner store. At first glance, it resembled a rundown shack. When in fact, it was a white stone building. It was? But decades of train soot had stained it; naturally, in that it was next to rows of train rails. Trains came and went, daily. Because, east and west of town, there were two massive railroad yards. Each one was linked to the other. Both kept busy moving box cars, tankers, and flatbeds back and forth with goods and merchandise.

Mack had a fascination with Cap'n Jack's. He hung out there more than anywhere else. The

place wasn't anything special. Sure, just like the other corner stores, it supplied the usual necessities. Milk, bread, and eggs. Can goods. General foodstuff. Soda pop. Liquor, beer, cigarettes, pinball machines, and candy galore. Kool-aid flavoured pickles. Pickled pig feet. But they weren't close, which was an important factor since he had a sunset curfew; in that, he had to be home before the sun went down. Aside from that, what made it different from the rest was the large kiosk full of magazines.

Capt. Henry Jackson, the owner, was a former WWII veteran. He was big into reading and didn't care what. Just as long as one reads. He carried Life and Time, Jet and Ebony, The Atlantic and The New Yorker, The Chicago Defender and Final Call, and comic books galore. Mack was there for the comics. He followed them. So when the new monthly issues came out, he would read as many as possible. Black Panther. Inhumans. Captain America. Thor. Hulk. Man-Thing. Defenders. Avengers. Fantastic Four. X-Men. Spiderman. Name it? Capt. Jack had it or could get it. Just don't steal nor

ruin them and buy one when done.

Those were Capt. Jack's kiosk rules. Now when Mack entered he was glad that nobody else was there and the kiosk for himself, for once. For him, the comics offered up new words and outlooks on life and differences between characters, particularly their magical powers. The ethical and moral viewpoints between celestial and terrestrial beings. From these comics, he used the ideas within them to question his grandmother. Questions about creation, nature and mankind, mythology stories, and how come men more so than women get granted genius and superpowers. It made him wonder how much of it was based on actual events in history. These were the things he thought his grandmother kept tight-lipped about because she had the answers.

He read his last comic. At the back of it, it had novelty gift ads for all kinds of crazy stuff. X-Ray glasses. Dracula fangs. Onion gum. Stink bombs. Horror masks. Sea horses. Yet the one item that held his attention was the ad for a slingshot. The image spoke to him. Then, it dawned on him. An epiphany. He could use it

as a ploy to get one of his questions answered. He would go back home and make one and put his idea to the test. He paid for two comics. Seventy-five cents were put on the counter. He thanked Capt. Jack, and waved goodbye, and was out the door.

She was on the front porch, in her sit-spot chair, when he came running up. Mack had a determined look. The gate and doors opened and shut as fast as when he left. He went straight to his bedroom, threw his comics on the bed, and grabbed two unused wire coat hangers from the closet. After that, he reached for his yellow toolbox from under his bed – a gift. It had all the basic tools, including electrical tape, wire cutters, pliers, a bag of rubber bands, paperclips, a pocket knife, a zippo lighter, and fabric scraps. He sat there on the bedroom floor and got to work.

She knew he was up to something. It was too quiet. But there wasn't any need for her to go check on him. Anytime he was inside for a considerable length of time he was building something, and she wouldn't see it until he brought

it outside to test it. He always did. Last time it was a box kite. A week earlier, a giant piñata. He was unsure whether the material he used would burst open when struck violently by a broomstick. He didn't want the gift for a friend's birthday party to fail to work right. Just then, the front door burst open. It was Mack holding a slingshot.

"What are you about to do?"

"Nothing."

"Don't let nothing get you into trouble?"

"It won't."

"We'll see."

The grandmother never rose. She sat there looking on, smoking her pipe, enjoying the sunny day. Her grandson was now on the other side of the fence looking down at the rock driveway, searching. Every now and then, he would stoop to pick up a white rock. Six in all. He then went into the front yard and looked skyward and into the trees. She looked at what he looked at and at what he didn't see. And thus far, his vision wasn't sharp. Suddenly, his and her eyes locked onto the same flying object. A

large pigeon had landed on the powerline.

She puffed incessantly. Then, she watched him watch it. Admittedly, she took pleasure in watching him put his hunting skills to work, moving stealthy, and staying in its blind spot. His eyes fixed on the target. He loaded his slingshot and pulled the socket and elastic band back. She thought the distance between him and the bird was too far. That slingshot had to be powerful. His vision sharp. Aim pinpoint. She had her doubts. Mack proved her wrong. The rock struck the bird. The pigeon's wings fluttered, floppy-like. It pooped, then fell. He celebrated his act.

Before the bird fell to the Earth, she moved at a breakneck pace. The pipe was set down. She left the porch and fast. She held up her long skirt so as not to impede her running so her short legs could reach him quickly. And once there, without any sign of fatigue, she delivered a sharp whack right upside his noggin. The blow caught him by surprise. "Owww," he said, looking at her then back at the house. He rubbed his head, but then realized the old woman had effortless-

ly ran a considerable distance in a short span.

“Machiavelli! What’s wrong with you?”

“What I do?”

“You shot a bird.”

“Okay? It’s just a bird.”

“It’s not just a bird.”

His slingshot was taken and examined. She congratulated him on his ingenuity and craftsmanship but kept hold of it. She snatched him by the arm and the two crossed the street to where it fell, a grass lot. There it laid on its side with a hole in its chest. She told him to pick it up. Mack protested. Again, she went upside his head.

“Everything has a soul,” she told him. “Pick it up!”

Mack bent down to pick up the carcass. Bloody feathers moistened his fingers. Now the bird required a ceremonial burial. He was told that he had separated it from nature not for food but for sport. She also informed him that his entitlement as a human being was a myth. The bird just like all other lifeforms had a greater right to life than he had. Nature and all its creatures

would flourish without him. While in comparison, his life was seen by nature as the most insignificant.

He heard this as he carried the large and heavy pigeon. Mack held it like it was dead, with his arms stretched out, and far from his body. He tried to lighten his grip to lessen the blood. Plus, she made him hold it up so he could look it in its eyes and know what dead eyes saw. Even lifeless eyes speak. The two were back on their property. Mack was guided to where to bury it: underneath the Willow tree.

“Just wait there and hold it,” she said. “Don’t move nor drop it.”

To do otherwise guaranteed him a spanking. So when she finally came back, Mack still held it in his hands. She had a tin pail in hand. Within it was his slingshot, a bottle of turpentine, a box of matches, dried kindling and newspaper, some wild purple and yellow flowers, the colourful moss she grew around the backyard, and a garden hand shovel. She handed him the tool so he could dig a deep grave.

He set the dead bird aside. Now on his hands

and knees, he began digging. It took a while and some effort, but soon a square pit was dug out. The earthworms he encountered were thrown onto the dirt pile beside him. She then gave him the bright-coloured flowers and moss so he could layer the grave's bottom. The bird was laid next, followed by his slingshot which he reluctantly added.

The kindling of dried tree branches and twigs and strips of newspaper went next. They were laid on top of the bird and weapon. With the makeshift pyre done, he stood up, slightly sweaty, and doing his best to keep his dirty and bloodied hands off his face and clothes. She then doused the grave thoroughly with turpentine. Two wood stick matches were struck and thrown into the pit. Soon the grave crackled and flickered. A tiny flame grew into a fierce fire.

"Did I have to put my slingshot in there?" he asked.

"Yes. The bird must have it when he sees you on the other side."

"What?"

"It might want to shoot you? So I suggest that

you seek its mercy and forgiveness and tell it why you did what you did.”

“The bird and I aren’t the same.”

“Really? You really think that?”

She went inside her apron to pull out a green and white Beech-Nut tobacco bag. Mack had heard about it from his mother. It was where she kept folk medicine. That pouch supposedly contained crushed-up shrubs, berries, flowers, and herbs she often scavenged for from the grass fields, wooded areas, and animal pastures. She inserted two fingers and pinched off something dark and fibrous.

“Open up and chew!”

Mack grimaced but ate it. It was quite sweet and tasty and strong. It made his jaws tightened. He felt an instant energy boost. Below him, the grave glowed hot. Smoke billowed. The scent of fried flesh, plant, plastic, and metal went up into the tree and through the canopy. He soon noticed a whole bunch of incoming birds. They all landed somewhere in the tree top. Robins. Bluejays. Cardinals. Sparrows and Blackbirds. None of them chirped or tweeted. They all, in

unison, behaved weird and unnatural.

“They’re ready,” she said. “Now, say your peace.”

Mack knew what she meant and shut his eyes, his head lowered. Suddenly, a strange feeling overcame him. Somehow, his spirit had departed. It left his hollow body planted. Mack felt free and airborne. He was a bird in flight. In the sky, gliding on the wind. He heard this clicking-like language being spoken. He flew about then landed on a powerline. The view was breathtaking. Then he saw himself taking aim. Pain, then darkness followed. His head snapped up. Tears had run down his face. Mack clutched and felt his chest, smearing blood and dirt. In chorus, all the birds whistled tunes of joy. Droplets soon fell. He thought it was tree sap and leaves until he saw it was bird poop and feathers.

“Relax,” his grandmother told him. “It will pass.”

The birds soon flew off. Mack’s chest hurt. His heart pounded. He gasped for air. The world around him was blurry. As soon as things cleared, he saw that his grandmother was un-

scathed, her eyes glinting in the light, and was impeccable, and this was possible when she stood with him underneath the same tree. “It appears you’ve been forgiven. Now put the dirt back, worms too. Bring the hand shovel and tin pail back with you,” as she turned and went back to the house. “And make sure you take off your clothes. You’re not going back inside looking like that.”

He watched her go indoors then, she reappeared on the side of the house carrying a large towel and pulling the garden hose. She sat in her sit-spot, towel nearby, and smoked a relit pipe. Mack tried to make it make sense but couldn’t. He completed the backfill and packed it down. He stood up. Still woozy. He moved slowly toward the house, coated in bird faeces and feathers, when he saw the outstretched wingspan of a giant bird shadow on the ground. He looked up, but it was gone. The birds he saw couldn’t make a shadow that big.

“Grandma? Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“You do have magical powers, don’t you? Are

you a mutant? An angel? A witch?”

“A what? No. I’m just an old woman.”

“I don’t think so.”

“First off, promise me you’ll respect nature from now on.”

“Promise.”

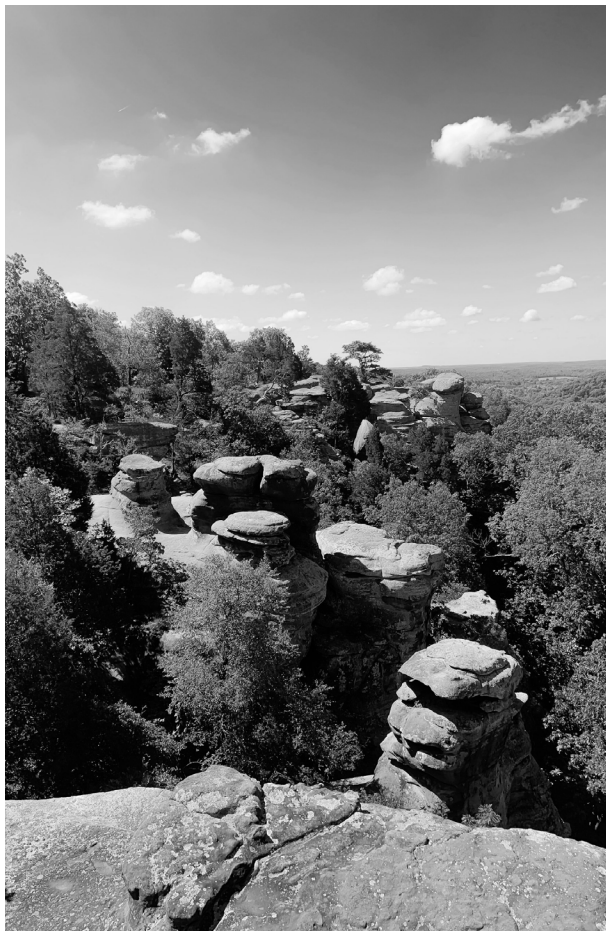
“Good. Now take those clothes off.”

“But Grandma...”

She let him know she won’t dwell on today. Just get rid of the clothes she repeated. So he got to it until he was fully naked. The bloodied and dirty clothes were thrown in the tin bucket. He was unsure what was next and feared the worst. She stood up. Garden hose now in hand. The nozzle was twisted and she hosed him down. He danced and circled in place. Bird droppings, blood, and feathers were washed away from head to hands to toe. And after a thorough cleaning, the agony and dizziness had subsided.

His teeth chattered even though it was warm. She tossed him the oversized towel and told him to dry himself off and come sit beside her. And he did. He wondered if what he did was worth it. Would he find out what he had been seeking

for the longest? Did she possess some kind of magical powers? Besides this bird incident, what else could she do? No ordinary person could make nature do its bidding. In his mind, he figured Grandma was likely an ancient superhero. An alien; and then, right there, he got his wish. She took the time to talk about things he asked earlier. About times before they were born. And, of course, he had more questions.





Sanctuary

Ali Rowland

It's so cold here. If I was at home I'd have to switch the heating on. She'd be calling me, nagging me, summoning me, until I did it, and made her a hot water bottle too while the house warmed up. She can't stand the cold. She can't stand any discomfort. And it's my job to keep her content.

I don't know how I got here. I don't mean how I got to the church – I know that, silly! I walked, then got a bus, and then walked again. If I went to the local church, she might find out. She's got a host of spies, her friends who pop in for chats. The ones I wait on with milky tea and those tedious dry biscuits they love. I prefer a cookie, myself, but I'd never dare offer any of them one – they'd think it hadn't been baked for long enough. They've lived sheltered lives, restricted lives.

Obviously, I do know how I got into this situ-

ation. I never escaped. I should have got away before caring for her became a routine, my life. You can't have your own life when you're needed at any minute in case there's an emergency. You have to be on call. Like the police.

Even the thought of them makes me shiver. I'm safe here, though. In old films, the type she likes to watch on afternoons, the criminals always go to church for sanctuary, where the police can't set foot.

A door creaks, a warning before anyone appears. I put my tissue away, my hands together, eyes closed, like they taught us in school, and then I'm as good as praying.

It's the woman vicar. I peep to see her moving round the altar. She looks back and sees me. I'm glad she knows I'm here, she'll come over. There's things I need to say.

"Are you okay there?"

"I'm a bit cold," I say.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She smiles. "I can make you a cup of tea. Come into the vestry, it'll be quieter in there. We can talk."

She has a lovely voice. The lilt makes her sound

like she's about to sing, like an actress in one of the old musicals. I know she doesn't know how I like my tea, but never mind.

"That's kind, thank you."

It is better in that room, even though it's cluttered with books and candles, and in need of a good vacuum. The tea's okay, although I asked for just a little milk, and she sort of slopped it in, so it's not quite as strong as I like.

"When it's all over, it'll be me making you tea," I say, "just how you like it."

She looks away. I've noticed this before, when I've mentioned after. Is she embarrassed? Or afraid? I'm not good at reading people. So long as she does what she promised, that's all I really care about.

"You don't need to do that," she says. "Probably best if we don't see each other ..."

After, that's another story. I need assurance now. "You're still on, though? You'll go through with it?" I'm assertive here. That's what she, herself, has told me before. To be strong about what I want.

"Listen, pet ..."

She's called me that before. It's a sweet, northern thing. But I can't be sentimental now, not even with her.

"You did promise. I got your word on it. You won't let me down now, will you?"

"Please understand, I felt sorry for you. You caught me at a vulnerable moment. We should talk more. Maybe if I do some counselling for you..."

I interrupt her then. I know it's rude. My aunt would never stand for that. She'd shout at me. She'd want another cup of tea, and all the other stuff I have to do to make her feel better when I've upset her. But this is different. It's the vicar woman. The one who's going to save me.

I slam my teacup down, and a bit spills out onto the table. Someone will have to clean that up. "We have an arrangement," I say, and my voice is suddenly loud in what is little more than a cupboard, and the words echo off the walls. "You promised me." I stand up, and she shrinks a bit. Am I scaring her? Something in my head clicks. "You said you'd do it, and if you don't, I will tell someone. There'll be trouble for

us both then. You don't want that. I don't want that." I'm close to her. It's more than I've said for years, as if there's a tap in my head turned on.

"All right," she says, "don't distress yourself." She stands, and puts her arms out to touch me on the shoulders, a gesture of reassurance. I shrug her off, I don't want anyone touching me. She's kind, and brave. Just what I need. But she must agree to do it.

She's slightly shorter than me. My aunt is taller than me. I'm dominating her now. But I don't move back, not yet.

"Say you'll do it. Like you promised. That you'll help me." I'm not shouting at her, but my voice is firm, like when she's demanding something, giving orders. I'm confused. For a moment, I'm not sure who is talking to who.

"It's okay. I'll help you. Please, sit down. It'll be alright, I promise you."

I do sit down. I wipe the spilt tea up. We don't say much then. She knows where, and how. She agrees she'll go today because I'm not going back. She gives me the key to her flat. I'll go there, and if it's anything like this vestry, I'm

going to have a lot of tidying up to do. I think I'll give the kitchen and bathroom a good scrub. Then I'll go out and buy biscuits, and some cookies, and then we'll settle down.



Clothesline Murmurs

Cheryl Rebello

Mid-summer: If the clothes drying on the nylon ropes under their window have any veracity to convey, and they do, the man whose apartment window is directly opposite mine wears a lot of corduroys. It appears he owns a lot of solid, full-sleeve shirts to go with them. His wife, on the other hand, favours an assortment of smart casuals. I notice she only wears salwars from brands that are a tad bit expensive for me. She seems to love pretty pastels that compliment her complexion. She has good taste; I'll give her that. He opts for three-fourths to wear around the house, while she opts for spaghetti tops and short shorts.

Monsoons: His corduroys seem to have been replaced with chinos. I'm assuming because they dry a lot faster. She has begun to wear pin-afore dresses that are flowy and loose around

the waist. There have not been leggings on the clotheslines for a month or two. I wonder why.

Winter: The corduroys have returned! He seems to have a pair in each dark colour. Her clothing has gotten more comfortable. Still pretty, just more comfortable. What, is she having twins?

Still winter: I spy a round contraption with clothing clips. Infant-sized onesies hang from it. Also, cloth nappies the size of kerchiefs act like soundless wind chimes. Most of the clothes are a light shade of blue. It appears that the child's a male, well at least at birth.

Summer: The baby's caps are adorable. I like the bear-eared one in particular. The swaddle cloths make my ovaries somersault.

Rains: The parents seem to have purchased suspenders, a bow tie and a little suit for the little one. Maybe they had a photo shoot or a half-birthday celebration.

Winter: The clothing line has been bare for the most. Once a week, I see corduroys, every colour of darkness, with full-sleeve shirts still rolled up to their elbows. He's a boxers man. Funny, I've never seen underthings put out to dry before. Maybe, he's doing the laundry for a change and he's not good at it. Maybe, she's at her mother's with the baby. Maybe...

The last few days of winter: There have been no clothes lately, although the house still seems to have an inhabitant.

The last day of winter: The nylon ropes are still empty. One of them is missing.



Things That Count

Beth Sherman

It's been four hours and you're still sitting in the green bucket chairs, not reading the array of People magazines on the table, as the wall clock barely ticks forward and Ryan sits next to you playing Fruit Ninja on his phone, using his left hand because the right one got hit with a line drive. His third and fourth fingers are an angry shade of purple and the hand itself looks swollen.

But not swollen enough. Heart attack, appendicitis, head injury – these are the things that count in the emergency room.

“Can we get something to eat, Dad?” Ryan says.

You don't want to get up and go to the cafeteria because you'll lose your place in line like you're in the drive-thru of Chick-fil-A.

“In a little while,” you say, thinking why did this have to be your weekend with him? If Leah

was here she'd have forced her way in to see a doctor.

There are five other people in the waiting room. One is a man with a nosebleed but apparently, it's not serious enough either because he's been waiting longer than you have. You've walked over to the front desk so many times the nurse on duty glares as you approach.

"We won," Ryan says, checking his texts.

When you were a kid, you played second base because you couldn't catch and everyone knew it. But Ryan is a pitcher, the best one on the team. Although he's only in fifth grade, they're already scouting him for Middle School.

"That's good. Does your hand hurt?"

"A little."

"More than before?"

"I don't know."

You realise you can't talk to your son anymore. All you do is ask questions and the questions are so basic and pointless about school and sandwiches and field trips, and now the mangled hand, it's no wonder Ryan tunes you out.

By falling in love with someone other than

his mother, you've dropped your family in a blender, watched helplessly as the blades relentlessly chop it to pieces. What you really want to ask Ryan is whether he hates you. Instead, you rewind the accident again: The kid at the plate heaving his bat, Ryan stabbing at the ball with his bare hand, then collapsing onto the artificial turf, cradling the hand like a wounded bunny. You sprint onto the field yelling his name and after you reach him there's not a thing you can do to ease his pain.

"Dad," Ryan says.

His hair is falling into his eyes and he flinches as you reach over, sweeping some of the ginger strands away from his face.

"Yeah?"

"I hate baseball."

"Then you don't have to play."

"Really?"

You remember the time some kid in preschool told him the tooth fairy wasn't real and you confirmed it. How you mourned his lost innocence, his three-year-old self already moving away from you.

“Really,” you say, examining Ryan’s injured hand again in the glare of the fluorescent lights.

His fingers are bent like a person with arthritis and it occurs to you that someday Ryan will be a middle-aged man trying to talk to his own kid, to reach that elusive place where fathers and sons say what they mean.



CONTACT US

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