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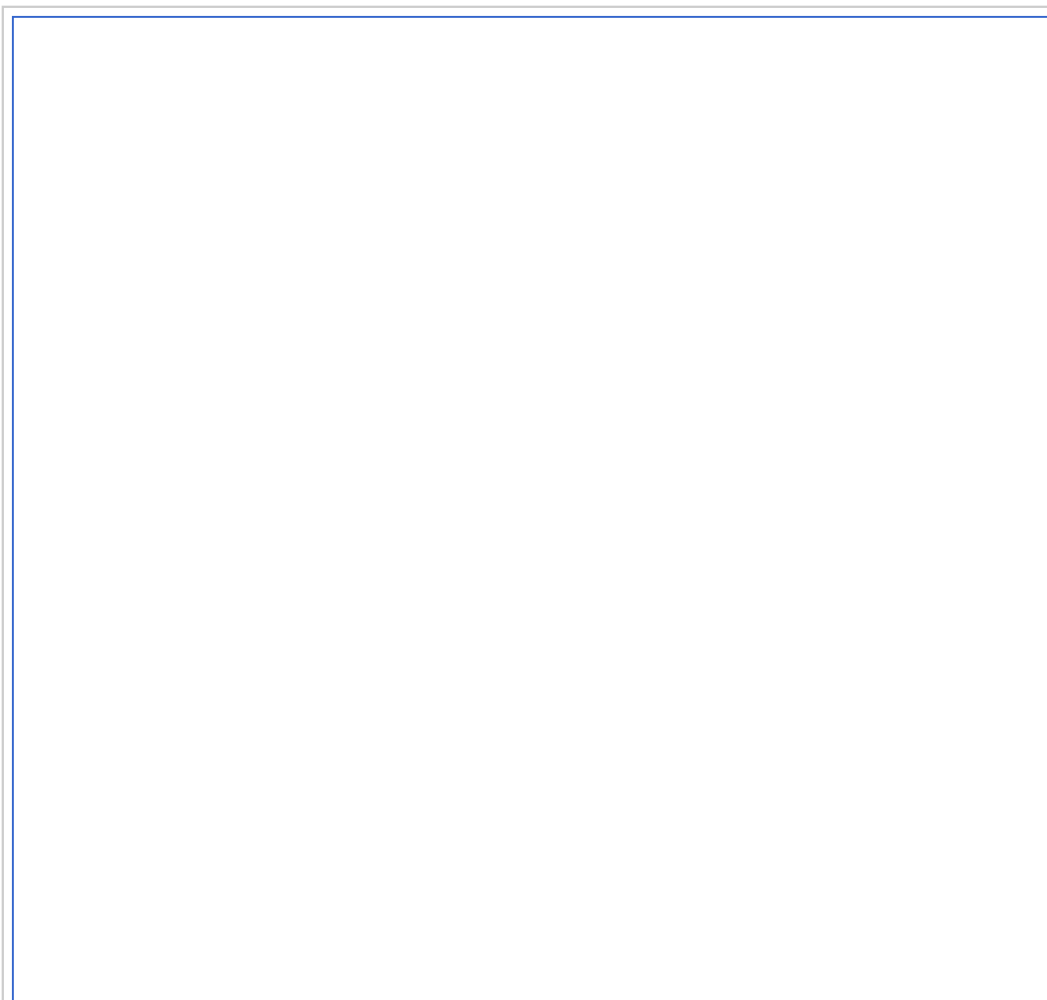
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"Crossroads of Life" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://cmichelleolson.com/>

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

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Masterpiece

by Michael Tidemann

Kelly made it *sound* like a good gig—Eagles Landing, a tony retirement community for the ultra-rich, nestled on the shores of Lake Onagonda. The people who lived there had money—lots of money. Living in a retirement community for them was merely transitioning from posh, lakefront villas to a posh, skilled nursing facility for the rich.

“How many books should I bring.”

“How many do you have.”

“A couple boxes—maybe fifty.”

“Bring them all.”

“Wow. You think there’ll be that many customers?”

“Believe me. These people have money. The parking garage is filled with Mercedes and Audis.”

“Great.”

“Meet me in the assisted living lobby—right out front.”

This was the opportunity for which I’d been waiting—to get my book into the hands of community leaders—more like national leaders, in this case. Lake Onagonda was known as one of the premier retirement communities in the country—and this was the reading for which I’d been waiting.

So I loaded up two cases of books—fifty total—into my PT Cruiser and made the half-hour drive through pelting sleet. A crawling feeling up my spine told me this was not going to be a good day. I shrugged it off as beginning-author jitters and made it with twenty minutes to spare.

Instead of Kelly, a somber woman of about forty met me at the front door. She wore a nurse's smock and her blond hair was brushed back severely; maybe painfully would have been a better way to put it. Devoid of makeup, jewelry, perfume, or facial expression, she looked askance at the two boxes of books with which I had lumbered in through the door. "Oh," she muttered, knife-edge frost in her voice. "So are *you* the *author*?"

I had never before heard the word author expressed with such imperious disdain. "I guess so."

"Well are *you* or *aren't* you?"

Instinct told me to leave—or flee. "Yes, I'm the author," I admitted, wondering whether I truly deserved the appellation in her eyes, or anyone's, at that point.

"And *what* do you have in those *boxes*?"

Wounded rattlesnakes to complement your glowing personality, I wanted to say. "Books?" I offered, feeling as though TSA was just about to nail me with twenty pounds of C-4 strapped to my legs at JFK.

"You'll need only one—to read from."

"O...kay." I huffed back through the doors into a sleet storm pelting bullets, wondering if maybe I shouldn't just leave. The storm worse than ever, I tucked a single copy of my book inside my coat and returned inside.

I must have taken too long because the woman—MARIAN I saw from her name badge—was tapping the floor with her toe so hard it looked as though she were trying to stomp a cobra to death. Then a cobra's bite probably couldn't have fazed her since she already had plenty of venom flowing through her veins. As we passed through an ultra-elegant lobby with a white grand piano and a fireplace so massive you could have stood up in it, she turned to me with what could have possibly passed for a smile—or extreme gas. "So what's your book about?"

“Oh,” I responded, feeling as though I had connected with an actual human being. “The title is *Doomsday*. It’s about how terrorists destroy the Internet and civilization collapses. With the collapse comes the total disintegration of the utilities infrastructure, communications, and law enforcement. People starve and freeze to death by the millions and the only ones to survive are those who live in isolated rural enclaves. The Amish do just fine...”

“You have got to be kidding,” said Nurse Ratched, standing between me and a massive steel door that said NO ADMITTANCE WITHOUT AUTHORIZED ESCORT.

“No, really. The Amish do just f—”

“Do you have *any* idea how our residents will react when you tell them that?”

“I’m sorry. Don’t they like the Amish?”

“*No*,” she uttered, daggers in her voice. “They’ll think it’s really happening. Do you have any idea how long it will take us to calm them down?”

“Uh, no.”

“Weren’t you told that you’ll be reading to MCU residents?”

Not knowing nursing home lingo, visions of patients hooked up to tubes and wires ran through my head. “They’ll still understand what I’m talking about—won’t they?”

“I’m sorry. We simply can’t have you terrifying our residents. Isn’t there a passage that doesn’t deal with death and destruction?”

Since pretty much everything in my novel that didn’t deal with death and destruction was a sex scene, I offered, “Yes.”

“Good.” She nodded and opened the door that at that moment could just as well have had a sign above, ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

On the other side of the door, it was just as nice, but a lot more clinical. Residents wandered up and down the halls to locked doors, tried them,

then walked back to the other side of the hallway where they tried another door, stared at it as it failed to open, and started the process all over again.

Saturday was when a lot of families visited their relatives, so a pretty good mix of people clustered in chairs and sofas, glimmers of recognition flitting in and out of the residents' eyes. Baby Boomers, probably the residents' children, seemed insistent on getting their relatives to recognize them while their grandchildren and great-grandchildren seemed bored to tears. Kelly was nowhere around.

"I don't give a damn what her name is. She isn't supposed to be here."

I turned toward where the voice had come from and saw a man, sartorially comfortable in a wool sport jacket and gripping a cane. The face of the woman he had been addressing, his daughter, I presume, was blanched with tears. Somewhere down the hall, a woman screamed the most horror-ridden, terrified scream I had ever heard. The man screamed back mockingly, adding, "Aw, shut up."

Marian led me to the Great Room where I was to have my reading. A grand piano and fireplace identical to those in the lobby were suitable appointments to the room featuring plush chairs and sofas. At the south end of the room a three-story window shaped like the side of a cathedral gave way to a quiet dark lake where the sleet storm had turned to snow, quiet, silent, elegant, each flake like a note as someone started playing the piano—something by Chopin.

One man seated in the front row kept getting up as though wanting to go outside and walking straight into a large window as though he couldn't see it. An aide would lead him back to his chair where he would do it all over again. Finally, they led him away.

One woman, also in the front row, farted a bass line to Chopin, pausing as one of her farts turned into something more and an aide led her off, dark stains rorschaching the back of her white slacks. Another aide removed the chair.

My audience was dwindling.

As the clock ticked down to a couple minutes before ten, I went to the podium they'd set up for me. I set my book on the small table with a chair

behind. Apparently, someone besides Nurse Ratched had been thoughtful enough to make my reading comfortable.

The woman playing the piano, a ravishing platinum blond wearing a black cocktail dress and pearls, smiled directly into my eyes as she played. Apparently, she knew her music very well, because no score was visible on the piano as she played from memory Chopin's *Etude Op. 25, No. 5* in E minor, lilting, beautiful, haunting, each note perfectly executed. As her ice-blue eyes rested upon me, her lips slightly parted as though singing silently to me—and only me. I could have sworn she was mouthing something about making love until dawn. She was so spectacularly ravishing she could have been any age – and age didn't matter. As one of the aides rested her hand on her shoulder to signal that she was to stop playing so I could begin, she segued perfectly into the refrain, haunting, beautiful, sad, and ended.

Applause shattered the room as the woman stood back from the piano bench. It had been a performance worthy of a President or king at Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center. I have never heard anything so magnificent before or since.

Taking Nurse Ratched's admonishment into consideration I began my reading with the standard reasons for why I had become a writer—the authors who had inspired me, my writing habits, work published and about to be published. The entire time, the blond who had been playing Chopin so magnificently nodded and laughed in all the right places, making intense love with her eyes—and all for me.

I managed to find a couple passages that weren't too traumatic—or sexual. Both were about how my hero and villain had both gone into the basement of an old house and found canned goods left by a past resident. Grandma reaching back from the grave to save them, I think was how I had phrased it. The residents and their families seemed to hang on my every word, clapping several times, offering an overwhelming applause when I had finished. They were the best audience I've ever had.

By then I was determined to ask the blond (probably one of the residents' daughters) out for dinner. I didn't have long to wait. She came right up to the podium, ice-blue eyes sparkling, luscious lips opening to speak—thank God audibly, this time. She opened a napkin to me upon which she had apparently dipped her finger into her water glass and written some epic—a story of war and love lost and found—a story that probably transcended

anything penned by Homer or Shakespeare or the Romantics. “What do you think of this?” She stood there, smiling, awaiting my pronouncement, my verdict of what I thought of her creation.

“Beautiful. Beautiful,” I repeated, meaning her.

A female aide came beside her and touched her elbow, preserving her dignity the best she could. “You must be tired, Linda,” the aide said as she looked to me. “I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t think of what to say as the aide led her away, the napkin falling to the floor, her masterpiece forgotten amid the scuff and scrape of chairs getting put away.

I snatched up her napkin and when I was alone, held it to my nose and sniffed and found her all over again. Her smile, her perfect playing, her great novel. I still have it, tucked safely inside an envelope I take to every reading where I sniff it just before I begin, not knowing what great artist the audience might hold.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is a journalist and adjunct college English instructor living in Estherville, IA. His nonfiction has appeared in *Overdrive*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the *Des Moines Register*, *Snowmobile*, *Western Business*, and other publications. His fiction has appeared in *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, *The Longneck*, and *Struggle*. This is his sixth appearance in thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org. His author page is available at: amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann

Red

by Larissa Malia Nobles

She told me to paint myself red every morning. I did it without question, because she said it was my color.

I hadn’t known that I’d had a color before I met her. I used to wear black and gray all the time, used to look at myself every morning and see dullness. I’d always seen a person who was the absence of color, but it had never really bothered me; it was just the way I was.

But she came and told me that apparently, I had a color. She was the first and only person to ever see something in me, so suddenly, I felt my dullness was a shame; suddenly, I was red instead.

So I swathed myself in it. When her mornings came, I consumed myself in red. It was the color of my cheeks when she stood behind me in the mirror. It was the color of my palms when her hands were in mine. Red was the color of my dress that she edged up my thighs, red was my arms, my legs, my lips, my heart, as she pushed, pulled, watched me in the reflection.

My red hair was long and curly for her. She told me it reminded her of love as she ran her fingers through it. Every morning I'd prepare it, just the way she liked, soft strands for her to rest in, and grasp at, and pull and yank on when she pleased. She'd brush it away from my face for me, and tell me my eyes were red. She told me they reminded her of love when she opened and shut them for me. Red was my mind, my world view, my perception of myself, because she told me.

"You are beautiful this way," she said. "This is who you are. This is who you've always been, but no one else could see it."

It felt good to have a color. I thanked her for seeing it.

After a while, she no longer had to tell me when to paint it, how, or why—I did it every morning, enthusiastically, and she watched. I did it before she'd even woken up, gladly. I readied myself and waited for her at the foot of her bed to look at me, to see how much I'd blossomed for her. I walked around town with my head held high telling every open ear how proud I was to be red, how proud I was to look my best.

To look her best.

But after some time, she began not to look at me. At least, not as much as she used to, and I didn't understand. I painted myself a second time over every morning, a little brighter, a little brighter, and she'd say, "What's wrong with your red today?" I was only trying to do my best.

"You're too red today," she said one day, so the next morning, I fixed it for her. "You don't look red enough," she said regardless, so the next morning, she fixed it for me.

It wasn't working, so I constantly looked for newer ways to wear red; there had to be a way she would love. I wore red roses in my hair, I wore red heels, I spoke red words; trying to invent new shades of the color she'd never expect, so I could surprise her, so I could be her love.

Sometimes, when I'd do well, she'd praise me. Red was the color of my hips when she told me that she loved them with her hands. But sometimes, when I'd mess up, she'd chide me. Red was the color on the floor when I'd worn too much red for her liking. Red was the color on the floor when I was too bright, when I was too dark, when she couldn't see the red well enough and was forced to draw it out of me.

I still did it without question. I feared not having a color at all, for how would she see me then? She'd think that I was ugly.

She only ever liked me for the way I wore my color. While she slept at night, I stayed awake in front of the mirror, coating myself in red, afraid to take my eyes off of it. I had to perfect it, I had to be *me*, this color was who I was, right?

I was nothing until she saw me for who I was.

She stopped noticing altogether.

"Remember when you used to wear red?" she'd say from behind me, even though I was all dressed up, even though red was all I had become.

"But I *am* wearing red," I'd beg. "Can't you see?"

"If you're really wearing red," she'd reply, "then show me."

But it didn't matter how many times I showed her.

She'd wake up in the morning, stare at my paint, and walk right past as if it were colorless, leaving me to my drawing board, leaving me to find the *one shade of red* she must be looking for, the one I must've lost.

It turned out red was not my color.

At least, not to her; red was the color of the woman she desired. She came to me and said that red was *her* color now, that red was the color of the woman she chased and called for and loved.

It was never my color all along, she said. *Well, f#\$% her*, I thought. She was wrong.

She was wrong, so I painted myself red every morning in spite of her, even though she was gone.

Why was she gone? She told me red was *MY* color. She couldn't just give it to someone else. I claimed it, it's *mine*. When she left me, I went out and wore red like I'd been born with it. I flaunted red, wanted men to see it, wanted them to know that *I'd* chosen red for myself, that red was not the color of my body when she touched me, but was the color of my power, my identity, *my* self.

I painted myself red every morning in spite of her. The mornings dragged on, and on, and on, and my red turned to anger, and then to tension, and then I was tired.

Red was the color of my skin from being rubbed raw. Red was the color of my eyes from losing sleep. Red was the color of my arms, my legs, my lips, as I went back, forth, going through the motions.

And after a while, tired began to feel like nothingness; like dullness. Red was no longer painful, red was no longer powerful, red wasn't even a color. It was nothing. I put red on every morning without even thinking about it, walking out of the house with it, forgetting that I was even wearing it.

And soon I started to forget to put my red on at all, day by day, and it didn't make a difference. There was no difference between dullness and color, between dullness and passion, between lonely and love.

But it doesn't bother me. Colorless is just the way I am, the way I was before she came, and it's not like I want her back.

I'm better this way, when I no longer color for her, aren't I?

Time is passing. Sometimes I think that as it passes, my mind starts to play tricks on me.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and it must be a mistake when I see myself start to turn red, without even wanting to. Sometimes when people touch me, the blush rises to meet their fingertips, and I wish that it wouldn't. I wish I could go back to a time when what I looked like didn't make me feel

shame; when I wasn't ashamed of both the way that I am dull, and the way that her color rises with my arousal, with my embarrassment, with my submission, with my weakness.

Every time I turn red without willing it, I think of her. Even if there are another's hands there, leaving red marks on my skin, I think they're her.

When I blush, I think she is watching. Somewhere, somehow, she's watching and telling me this color does not suit me, and somewhere, somehow, a part of me fears she is right.

I wonder if red was ever mine at all: if I was red *because* she looked at me, or if I was *before* she looked at me and I'd just never known. I think I'll never know.

I've gone back to wearing black and gray now, but sometimes I try red on again without expectations, color my hair and cover my chest in it the way she used to like.

Sometimes, for a moment, I can feel her love again when I am red. I'm reminded of how it was to think I was wanted, to think I was lusted, to think I was loved, and then to have thought wrong. Sometimes I foolishly think she's still there, still loving me, when my cheeks turn red.

But this color is not for me, she said. She said so, so it must not be.

I feel so, so it must not be.

Bio- Larissa Malia Nobles is a senior undergraduate student at the University of La Verne. She will be graduating with her B.A. in English in June 2014 and has been published in the *Prism Review*. Larissa plans to attend graduate school for an M.A. in Women's Studies and a Creative Writing MFA at some point in the near future.

Vitamin A

by Amy Neeren Steinman

She took the test.

It was positive.

Maya looked again. The two most perfect lines formed a plus sign on the stick. This was what she had been waiting for ever since she was little, when she'd pretended that her Cabbage Patch Kids were real children.

She brought in two different timers and her favorite yellow antique clock from Rome, the one with a miniature Piazza Navona painted on it. Her parents had bought it for her when she was a kid.

She peed on a second stick.

She waited.

She ran downstairs to tell her husband. Ben was mowing the lawn, trying to make piles of the colorful leaves that had fallen. He would be stunned. She'd told him that it would take six months to a year, like all her friends had said. No one expected a honeymoon baby. Before she could tell him, she ran upstairs to check just one more time, to make sure both sticks still had plus signs. They did. She looked again. Should she go to the store and get another one?

"IT...HAS...A...PLUS...SIGN," she said out loud.

She ran downstairs again and looked at her husband through the kitchen window. He was smiling like he always did when engaged in mundane tasks. This was one of the things she loved about him, his love for the simple things. Maya ran toward him. "I'm pregnant! My God—can you believe it?!"

His face turned white at the news but then the corners of his thin mouth curled. He hugged her and she inhaled his delicious, sweaty odor. He smelled like freshly cut grass with a hint of sweet, fading deodorant. He sniffed her left ear like a puppy; the way he did when he was excited about something.

"May, are you sure? How could it have happened so fast?"

"You must have Superman sperm. Or maybe all of those espressos from Italy made them shoot up super quick." She shrugged. "Or maybe I'm a fertile myrtle."

Maya was particularly cheerful the next day but she had to calm herself for her patients.

“It’s ok to be anxious.” She leaned in toward her first patient, Tessie, tried to show her compassion and empathy. “Stop blaming yourself. You can’t always control your feelings.”

“No, it’s not ok!” Mild-mannered Tessie raised her voice, startling Maya. “Do you have *any* idea what this feels like? These daily panic attacks are debilitating.”

“Are you asking whether I’ve experienced this directly?” Maya hedged. “Well, no, but I’ve worked with several patients, and—”

“It’s utter hell,” Tessie interrupted, “Maya, what should I do? Some days I’m curled up in a ball on the couch. I can’t cook dinner for my family.” Her expression echoed her frustration and shame, her eyes watering as her jaw clenched.

“I’m here with you.” Maya smiled her encouragement. “Can you pay extra attention to the distraction techniques I told you about? The deep breathing, and going down the list of things that might take your mind off your feelings, like a hot shower, a walk, or a funny show?”

“Here is the number for a psychiatrist that I love. Maybe you just need some medication for a bit to get you through this rough patch.”

Tessie’s jaw tightened further. “I don’t want any meds. I want to fix this on my own.”

“Tessie, you have an organic condition. If you were diabetic, you would take your insulin, right? It’s the same thing,” Maya reasoned.

Tessie left the office with the psychiatrist’s number in hand. Maya’s mood shifted as she rubbed her belly. She rummaged in her purse for her cell phone to tell her best friend Mimi the good news. Instead, she found the tube of Retin-A cream she had been taking for eight years. Was it ok to take during pregnancy? She went to her office computer and started Googling.

“Surely the likelihood of any teratogenic effects would be low because it is a

topical medication and less than 10% crosses the placenta,” the dermatologist said when she called him, frantic after what she’d read online. “We’re talking about a *micron* of vitamin A. It’s a category C medication, and we tell our pregnant patients not to take it because in very large doses it can cause damage to the fetus. But again, yours was a topical cream, which contains a small portion of vitamin A. And most of it comes off the next morning when you wash your face. It even rubs off into the pillow if you’re sleeping on your stomach.” The dermatologist was trying to reassure her.

But Maya did not always take the time to wash her face every morning. And she never slept on her stomach. She was sure of that.

The following day, Maya cried to her OB. She listed the birth defects she was certain she had caused after reading what excessive amounts of vitamin A could do to an embryo during the first trimester.

“Maya, you’re barely even two weeks pregnant. I wouldn’t worry at all. It’s like my patients who come to me freaked out that they had a drink or a cigarette before they found out they were pregnant. The first two weeks are sort of like a free pass, because the placenta has not even attached. Nothing in your system has gotten to the baby yet.”

“But I read that as soon as implantation occurs, anything the mom consumes can affect the baby. And I read about Accutane and everyone knows how horrible—”

“Maya,” Dr. Berg interrupted, “Accutane has at least one thousand times the amount of vitamin A that was in your face cream. Don’t worry about it. Relax. Enjoy your pregnancy.”

“But I also read this in-depth report from a clinic studying teratogens,” Maya persisted. “When women took vitamin A on day twelve, their baby was born with massive deformities. Is that day twelve post-implantation or day twelve post-fertilization?”

At the wedding of a former college roommate, Maya tried to put on a happy face. She and Ben snuggled together, Maya sitting on Ben’s lap. “I can’t stop kissing you,” he said.

Weddings always reminded them of their own courtship. They'd been married for only two months but had met and started dating in graduate school ten years earlier. Maya had been smitten the minute she saw Ben's blue eyes. She fell for his grungy look, the short, low pony tail held in place with a rubberband. And his love for Camus. Her mother had said, "Oy vey, you finally date a Jewish guy and he's a hippy—with a ponytail, no less!"

But her parents also adored Ben, for his quiet confidence and fierce love for family. He had treated her parents as his own as soon as he got serious about Maya, inviting them over with his own family for Sunday night dinners in his tiny apartment.

Maya slipped off Ben's lap and moved across the table to tell her best friend their news.

Mimi jumped up, hugging and kissing Maya.

"DO NOT say a word, Meem. You know me...I'm scared that just saying this aloud will make me miscarry."

Mimi started crying. "I'm gonna be an auntie!"

"And of course I'm so happy for you," she added quickly. "This is what you've always wanted."

Maya's lips quivered. Her legs were trembling. She bit at her fingernails.

"What's the matter May? You've got that look you get when you're worried." Mimi frowned. She knew the expression on Maya's face all too well: hazel eyes wide open, eyebrows raised. "And you're biting again."

"I'm petrified, Meem. I've been using Retin A on my face for years. I read last week that you're not supposed to take it in pregnancy and now I can't help but imagine the worst. Ben thinks I'm nuts."

Mimi laughed and tried to brush Maya's concerns off. She was familiar with her friend's anxieties.

Mimi held her hand. "May, I'm sure you're totally fine. What did your OB say?"

Maya shrugged. "I called him twice *and* went to see him. I even called my dermatologist. They both said not to worry, that it's so early, and that it's not even an oral medication so barely anything would reach the fetus. But you know—"

"Of course I know you, Sweets," Mimi interrupted. "But you've got to listen to the docs. Come here, give me a hug."

"But do you ever remember me being *this* anxious?"

"Are you kidding me?" Mimi looked shocked. "Remember when you moved to Manhattan for your internship after the London bombings? You were so afraid Ben would be caught in a terrorist attack on the train coming to visit and that it would be your fault. And you would only go through the Lincoln tunnel when it wasn't rush hour. You couldn't sleep for weeks. You called me crying."

"*I* remember, Meem," Ben chimed in, sauntering up to them with an India Pale Ale in hand. Only Ben would not care that he was the only person wearing a gray suit to a black tie affair.

"She called me ten times a day at least," he told Mimi.

Then he sneakily sniffed Maya's ear. "You're fine, I promise," he said. "Let's go dance."

They danced the Hora. Despite the festive mood Maya couldn't shake her intractable guilt.

Will our parents forgive me for using the skin cream?

Will they protect our child if it's born with some horrible defect caused by excessive vitamin A?

Ben swung her around the dance floor. It reverberated from the 12-piece band. "Come on Maya, let's do our silly shaky dance." She shook. She danced. *Will my child have a heart defect? Neurological problems? Will Ben ever forgive me for ruining our child?*

When dessert came, Maya felt like she was in a daze. The coffee and tiramisu was served in its perfect little china. People's mouths were moving slowly. She could not take a full breath. Her upper back hurt.

"An 8 ounce cup of coffee is nothing," one friend sitting with them boasted. "I mean, look at the size of a 'cup.' I must consume, like, forty-eight ounces a day!"

"I know, right? I have eight cups a day at least," Ben joked. "Between my research and the students I barely have time to breathe." He laughed. "But I love what I do. I really do." He grinned the half-smile that told Maya he was content. She rolled her eyes. Nothing bothered her happy-go-lucky husband.

She bit into the creamy tiramisu. Damn. Vitamin A was in milk. It was in this dessert. She tried to calculate the amount of milk she'd been consuming daily. Way more than 8 ounces. She had two, three, sometimes four bowls of cereal a day. With milk. How much vitamin A was in all of that milk? She recalled one of the milk cartons' labels: *High in Vitamin A Content*.

Vitamin A.

Everywhere.

In the cream she had in her decaf coffee.

In the smoothies Ben made for her daily.

The ones where he added the protein powder with extra vitamins.

Oh f#\$@.

In the chocolate milk.

In the loads of fortified cereal she'd eaten several times in the past few weeks because she was so nauseous.

I deserve to die.

She looked up at a watercolor of the Amalfi coast hanging on the red-brick wall in the reception room to calm herself. *Capri*. She thought back to when

she and Ben visited there on their honeymoon. They'd had sex on one of the small rocky beaches. It had been daytime, but they'd managed to do it. That might have been when the baby was made. She'd had endless cappuccinos that trip.

More milk.

No one would forgive her.

Ben will leave.

She looked over at her husband. He didn't look back. The watercolor looked darker now, with long shadows thrown from diners' heads covering it. Were the sailboats off Capri capsized? The water looked frenzied. Maya gasped, unable to breathe suddenly. She started to cry. She whispered to Ben, "We need to leave. *Now.*"

"What's wrong?" One friend asked, looking concerned.

Ben nodded to Mimi.

Mimi stood up to help, putting her arm around Maya.

"Sorry guys, we gotta go." Ben sighed deeply, rubbing his face as he got up. *He* knew there wasn't anything wrong, just her growing fear that cut all the fun in their lives short these days. He wouldn't meet Maya's eyes. "She's not herself."

"I'm not well," Maya admitted as she and Ben walked through the parking lot to their car. He would not look at her. "I need help," she pleaded.

"You're fine, May." Ben insisted. "What would you tell one of your patients who sounded this irrational? I thought you were over this. We've talked about this a zillion times already. Just talk yourself out of it. Come on, already. Get a grip."

I hate you, she thought. What the hell is wrong you? Just help me. BE HERE FOR ME. But she couldn't say anything. Who could blame him? What was happening to her? She couldn't wait to get home to check the labels on the cereal. *I must check that protein powder,* she thought.

Measure the milk. And the prenatal vitamins. How much vitamin A is in those?

It was all too much to keep track of. Maya fell to the pavement. "I'm done," she said. "I can't move."

Ben reached down and pulled her up. "You just need a good night's sleep. Everything will be fine."

She reached for Ben's hand. His grasp was loose, half-hearted.

"Listen to me! I don't feel right. Something is off. What the hell is wrong with me? Stop blowing me off. Something's *not right*."

Ben exhaled sharply. "Maya, come on already. Stop this. You're fine. It's just your crazy hormones. You have to be calm for the baby. You're acting nuts. Snap out of it or—"

Maya sprinted into the kitchen, poured milk into a measuring cup, dumped it into a bowl. She'd definitely consumed way more than 8 ounces a day. She read the labels of her favorite cereal. She couldn't get to them fast enough. The boxes flew off the shelves: Smart Start. Rice Krispies. Lucky Charms.

How much vitamin A was in the cereal? Twenty five percent of the daily allowance? How much was beta-carotene? How many times a day had she eaten cereal? How many ounces of milk? Had she drunk milk before bedtime?

Yes.

How much?

And what about milk in her oatmeal between classes at school?

String cheese.

Carrots.

That yogurt from the specialty store.

How much vitamin A?

She called Kellogg's, fingers tapping, heart speeding.

"Is the 25 percent vitamin A beta-carotene or preformed vitamin A?" Maya asked.

"I'll go ask my manager," the young girl on the line said.

Maya couldn't wait for the answer. She knew it was the bad vitamin A, the one that stays in the liver and becomes toxic, especially to an embryo. Shaking, she buried herself in a grey wool blanket. *Where the hell is Ben?* Through a peephole in the blanket, she stared at the wall.

She slumped into the spare bedroom. Why wasn't Ben checking on her?

She walked into their room. He was in bed. They stared at each other. Finally Maya scuttled back out of the room.

She shuffled back in again. "You're supposed to be by my side. Not against me."

"Maya, I'm trying. What else can I do? There's no use talking any sense into you. You need to be strong. You can do this. I know you can. Come on, May, please?" His eyes had tears in them. His face was flushed. He was sweating which he always did when he was angry or nervous.

"Just hold me. Be here for me. *Please.*"

Ben held her as best as he could. She could tell that his heart wasn't in it, but he held her limply while he turned on the TV and watched basketball.

As a clinical psychologist, Maya was the one to heal others. But now her thoughts were spinning, grabbing, pulling her from reality. In her third trimester bouts of insomnia crippled her. "Cognitive behavioral therapy is the gold standard of treatment when dealing with any type of anxiety disorder," she told her undergrad class through a thick, unrelenting mental haze. She felt like a fraud, completely disheartened by the profession she'd worked so hard to be a part of.

After class, she remembered the session with her patient Tessie months

earlier. She'd thought she knew what her client was experiencing. She had researched anxiety disorders for years. But she didn't know. Not until now. How could she have told Tessie to distract herself? She couldn't run from her thoughts. Deep breathing? What a joke; Maya could hardly inhale half a breath without curling over from chest pain. She was crawling out of her skin. She could not sit still. *Akathisia* was the clinical term for inner restlessness. She felt she might drop dead from a heart attack at any moment. Complete despair surrounded her, like quicksand, or all-consuming darkness. She had to end the semester early.

On the way to the psychiatrist, Ben stared straight ahead. He wouldn't hold her hand. "Ben, I don't know what's happening to me." Maya could barely keep her head up. "I haven't slept for the past three nights. I'm losing it. Am I going to die?"

Ben said nothing.

"Textbook obsessive compulsive disorder," the psychiatrist pronounced. This was a compassionate woman who specialized in anxiety as well as perinatal and postpartum depression. She removed her trendy glasses and looked squarely at Maya and Ben's bewildered faces, issuing this diagnosis after Maya described carrying money in her pocket as a child while walking to school in case a robber jumped out of the bushes; always telling her parents how much she loved them for fear that if she did not tell them enough they would die; and as an adolescent, checking on her younger brother several times in the middle of the night to make sure he was breathing. As an adult she obsessed that if something happened to any of her loved ones it would be her fault. A car accident on the way to meet her for dinner? Her fault for choosing the time, the location, the type of cuisine.

"Magical thinking," in clinical terms. A term Maya had learned about in an anxiety disorders seminar. Funny how she hadn't realized that she had been doing it her whole life.

"You've been suffering from severely untreated OCD for years," the psychiatrist said.

"Seriously? I really think if I had never looked up the vitamin A, then—"

“Nonsense. You were a loaded gun. The hormones and your vitamin A focus were the trigger. Make no mistake about this: you need to be on medication.”

More medication? Now? How the hell could she have missed this? Maya felt humiliated. She would never forgive herself.

“But what about the risks to the baby?” Ben asked. “I really don’t want Maya to be dependent on meds. Can’t you suggest something else?” he pleaded.

He and Maya were seated at opposite ends of the maroon sofa.

Ben’s an idiot, she thought. She wanted to jump out the window.

“The risks are far greater for your wife by *not* taking medication. This is a no-brainer. She must be on medication to stay alive. To keep your baby alive. Your baby will be *fine*. I promise you.” She said it so compassionately that for a brief moment Maya felt relieved.

“Maya has an organic condition. It’s no different than someone with diabetes needing to take her insulin,” her doctor explained.

How awful it felt to hear those words. “But don’t you see?” Maya said, “It is different. I’m a *psychologist*. But I can’t even fix myself.”

“Do you think marital therapists never get divorced?” the psychiatrist quipped. “Or cardiologists never get heart disease?”

“I don’t care,” Maya shouted. “I’m ruined! I’ll never be able to practice psychology again. What happened to the old me? Where did I go? I loved life. I have a zillion friends who always depend on me. When Mimi had an abortion two years ago, I was right there with her. I held her quivering hands in that barren white room; I helped her in the bathroom. Now she feels so sick because she doesn’t know what to do to help me. I can’t even get dressed. Ben fell in love with the old me: the goofy, ambitious, passionate me who loved to read, write comedy sketches, run, and now I’m barely alive. I feel like a monster. Who does this happen to? I had the best life.” She reached out for the psychiatrist, black mascara tears streaming down her puffy cheeks.

Ben put his hand on Maya’s back. “It’s gonna be ok. Everything will be ok.”

Maya knew better. She laid her head in his lap, sobbing. She would never be the same again. "I won't blame you if you leave."

She had never felt so close to others' suffering.

On the walk home after her 28th-week check up, Maya had vivid images of being abandoned by everyone who cared for her. She was certain she would harm her baby more from the meds she was taking. The baby would be born with Persistent Pulmonary Hypertension of the Newborn from the Zolofit. She wouldn't make it. Or she'd be in withdrawal from the Ativan, have serious neurological damage.

Ben would leave.

Her parents wouldn't live forever.

Who would she live with?

Maya visualized herself in a state facility, no teeth. No hair. No visitors.

Then she would kill herself.

When she arrived home Ben barely looked at her. He had his nose buried in *The New Yorker*, relaxing in his favorite green chair.

She tiptoed towards him. "The OB said again not to worry at all. That this is ridiculous to worry about. You know....what everyone has been saying this whole time."

"I'm not surprised." Ben barely looked up. He crossed his left leg over his right, took a sip of beer as he stared at her. He was clean-shaven and looked so professional, coming home from a long day of teaching undergrads.

"This is what I've been telling you non-stop. This is what everyone has been telling you. I can't take it anymore. Just take your medication and stop obsessing about it. You have to. Do want to end up on fucking morphine?" He chugged the rest of the beer, looked back down at *The New Yorker*.

Maya huffed up the stairs and tried to lie down. She was clutching her tube of skin cream. She re-read the instructions, even though she had them

memorized. One should apply only a pea-sized amount on the face each night.

Despite the extensive reassurance from her OB just hours before about the cream, and the anti-anxiety meds she was now taking, later that night Maya tossed and turned in the guest room. Had she put on too much of the acne cream? She went to the bathroom.

“Where are you going, Maya? Get back in bed,” Ben said impatiently.

She sat on the toilet and measured out the cream in the size of a pea, over and over again. What kind of pea exactly though—small or large? She took out a brown paper lunch bag that she kept hidden under the sink. In it were three different sized peas. Maya poured the cream onto them to see how they matched up. Even though she had done so before, she re-counted the days between refills at her pharmacy. The medication was supposed to last for 3 months minimum. She grabbed a piece of scrap paper out of the trash, searched for a pen and frantically did the math. Fear burned through her as she flinched from what she already knew: She had refilled on average every 1.5 months for the past several years. That meant she had used twice the recommended dose most nights.

She walked onto the tiny Juliet balcony attached to the guestroom. The wind was brutal, but Maya paid no mind. She stood there in her silky white maternity nightgown, looking up at the brilliant moon. She leaned over the railing. Stood up again. Rubbed her belly. “I love you so much,” she whispered to her baby. She leaned over again.

I could easily jump.

She looked at the snow-covered grass below.

I can't feel like this forever.

Her OB had once told her that this experience would make her a better therapist one day. She had almost spit in his face.

Anything would feel better than this.

She quickly turned and walked back into the bathroom. She stared at the yellow razors hanging from the soap bucket in her shower.

She felt drunk as she pulled one of the razors down. She was on a high, her heart thumping. She took the razor and carved a three inch slice in her knee, just to see what the pain felt like. The blood trickled down her leg. The sight of it brought her back to herself. *This is not how this is supposed to turn out.*

Maya stumbled out of the bathroom, dizzy and wheezing heavily. She collapsed onto the hardwood floors. She stayed there for two hours, panting and weeping.

Ben was fast asleep.

She went into the spare room, turned on a lamp and made herself look in the mirror. *Where am I?* She searched for an answer. She could hardly recognize herself. Half of her hair had fallen out. Her eyes were droopy and she was pale. *What the hell happened to me? Where am I?* She looked down at her belly, then back in the mirror.

Maya felt a sharp punch. Her baby, reminding her that some part of her wanted to live more than die, no matter what the cost.

A few years later, Maya stood in front of the Residence Medaglie d'Oro in Rome, the place she had lived while studying abroad with Mimi during college. The same place she had excitedly showed Ben when they traveled there for a vacation before they were married. Now Ben was teaching in Rome and Maya and their daughter were with him there.

Maya marveled at how outwardly nothing had changed at the Residence Medaglie d'Oro, with its courtyard boasting large cobblestones surrounded by lush gardens. While Maya held Ava's sweet, sticky hand, she gazed knowingly, lustfully, at all of the study-abroad kids wandering around, innocent and happy. As her family eased into the Italian lifestyle, Maya found it curious how she hadn't noticed the bags under the women's eyes she'd interacted with daily years ago, the women awoke at dawn to make pizzas in the *pizza rusticas* that lined the streets of Rome. She and Mimi had always gone to the one that had the best potato and onion pizza. The owner had a son in a wheelchair, with feeding tubes and his head tilted upward. He sat beside the pizza counter, smiling, in his own world. What that poor woman and her son had endured.

Maya and Ava roamed the cobblestone streets while Ben taught, each day a new and unplanned adventure. They smelled the delicious homemade gnocchi and espressos. The scents of the foods and wines brought tears to Maya's eyes. She was able to experience things so many others were not. Maya bribed Ava with gelato and toys just so she could sit in the *trattorias* for hours, chatting with the warm Italians while eating bruschetta and drinking red wine.

She envied the carefree families she saw each day walking the streets and in the parks. She wished she could be like those relaxed moms. She also envied the moms with more than one kid. She wanted another so badly, despite what she had gone through. Ben was reluctant, so they decided to postpone trying for a while.

Her anxiety waxed and waned throughout the day but it was her constant companion. She remembered what her psychiatrist had said to her after she gave birth: "Your identity has completely shifted, I knew you wouldn't be better right away." Then her eyes had lowered and her voice softened, "And Maya, you may never be quite the same again."

She tried to give herself the advice she had recently given to a client drowning in a deep clinical depression.

"Is there *any* upside to this?" Maya's patient asked. "What is the point of suffering like this?"

"It's awful, I know. It truly is horrendous. But I've learned that we can't help the way we respond to things. All of us are hardwired differently. But I can tell you that people who have emerged from this darkness have appreciated certain moments—individual moments in time—more deeply. That's all we have, really. They *feel* the warmth of the sun on their skin. They're grateful for the rare times they laugh at something. *Really* laugh. Gut-bursting laughter. Notice those brief moments, even if they only shine for a minute or so. Embrace them."

Her patient had smiled.

Now Maya smiled at the memory.

She looked down at her precious Ava, with chocolate gelato all over her face and neck and the top of her frilly pink dress, with her huge smile, and Ben's blue eyes, mischievous and sparkling. She was giggling and running around

Maya in a circle. Maya couldn't help but burst out laughing too, tickling and kissing Ava all over. The love she felt for this child was like none she had ever known.

Days afterward, Maya, Ben, and Ava were picnicking in Villa Borghese with several other families. It was a bright and beautiful day, the sky a deep blue with no clouds. All the parents were drinking wine at noon. The kids were jumping, giggling, and running around.

Ava ran to Maya and Ben and gave them a deep hug. "I love you, Mommy and Dayee. I love *Eetaly*."

They met an Italian family who invited them for long, lazy dinners with wines from Tuscany. They were swimming at the fancy club Alessandro and his family belonged to, having a blast splashing in the pool with his wife and their two little girls, when Maya felt a sharp twinge in her lower abdomen.

Two weeks later, she woke up with itchy legs and a fierce untamable hunger.

She took the test.

It was positive.

Bio- Amy Neeren Steinman is a clinical psychologist, clinical trials consultant, and adjunct professor of psychology at several schools in the Philadelphia area including Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College. She graduated with a B.S. in psychology from Penn State University and with Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Temple University. She is currently working on a collection of short stories as well as an early chapter book series for third graders.

Bittersweet

Based on true events

"In 2002 I began interviewing my parents who experienced WWII as children in Germany. Initially, I wanted to capture their memories and preserve them for our family. I wanted to understand what happened to

the civilian children of that time who were born at the wrong time and place, when insanity ruled and nothing was safe. I wanted to provide a view behind the scenes of civilian Germany against the backdrop of the country's physical, sociological and emotional annihilation during and after WWII—an era silenced or ignored as the last of the surviving war children die off seventy years later.”—A. O.

by Annette Oppenlander

Günter squats near the collapsed walls of a former villa while his best friend Helmut digs underneath a sideboard, all that remains of a kitchen. They're searching for valuables, anything suitable to trade on the black market. It's July 1945, World War II has ended.

Tires screech. A truck door slams.

“What are you boys doing?” a voice yells in broken German.

Günter looks up from the rubble. “Searching for stuff.”

“It's forbidden to remove items from bombsites.” The man in a British military uniform waves a rifle.

Günter keeps his eyes on the gun and the man's pistol on the leather belt. “We didn't know.”

“Now you do.” The soldier sounds irritated. “This is city property. Read the announcements.” As Günter and Helmut scramble down the street, the officer yells after them. “Next time, you'll be arrested.”

“At least he doesn't know our names,” Günter pants. He slumps behind a fence, ignoring the rumbling in his middle. Dinner is a long time away.

“Or where we live,” Helmut adds.

“Now, what? I've got to get firewood.”

“So we go back?”

Günter shrugs. He isn't afraid. “Maybe another place. Surely, they can't have guards everywhere. Half the town is in ruins.”

Helmut shakes his head. “I can't believe we are *forbidden* to take anything.”

“How are we supposed to survive?”

“Exactly.”

“Ridiculous.” Günter’s cheeks burn with frustration. “Next, they’ll tell us when to use the bathroom.”

“They’ll have an *administrator* of shit,” Helmut sneers.

“A commissioner of outhouses and water closets.”

Helmut scratches his head. “I need firewood, too. We’re almost out.”

Günter grins. “I know a place with a collapsed roof.” Roof trusses burn long and hot.

“We’ll need saws.”

“Wait at the corner, I’ll get them.” Günter races off. *At least my house still stands*, he muses as he approaches the row of modest apartment buildings.

“Mutter, I’ll be back in an hour,” he yells into the kitchen, a handsaw and ax tucked under his shirt.

The knock on the door startles him. He expected Helmut to wait for him at their meeting place down the street. Irritated, he yanks open the door.

“What? I thought you were—”

The visitor looks alien. Blackish filth covers his skin as if he’s spent years in a coalmine. His pants, held up by a piece of cord, are ripped, his shirt peppered with holes. Sores fester on arms and chin.

“It’s me,” the figure says.

Günter stares at the face and recognizes the voice of his older brother.

“Mutter, come quick,” he yells over his shoulder. “Oh...come in.” He motions the skeletal visitor into the house, searching for something to say. His throat feels strangely hoarse. “Man, you stink. How are you?”

“Much better...now that I’m home.” His brother grimaces through the muck. “I haven’t washed...”

“Hans!” As his mother hugs his brother, Günter tries to hide his shock. His brother looks like a scarecrow left to rot in the field. His once muscular arms are thin as sticks, leaving his skin in loose wrinkles. He seems to have trouble standing.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” His mother wipes away a tear. “Günter?” she shouts.

“I’m right here.”

“Fetch water, enough to fill the tub. Better go twice.”

Günter snatches the buckets. Anything is better than watching the crumpled figure in the kitchen.

His brother left last October, drafted as part of the *Volkssturm*, the people’s storm, one of Hitler’s last attempts of fueling the war with Germany’s adolescents. He’d just turned seventeen when he marched off to join the radio news troop.

They have to help his brother into the bath. In former times Günter would’ve been embarrassed to see him naked. Now he doesn’t care. His brother reminds him of a child, helpless and weak. They scrub and wipe, using their last reserves of soap to remove months of grime. At last, when the water is black as diluted coal, and dead lice and a layer of muck cover the tub, his mother is satisfied. His brother’s skin is marked with brownish residue and red welts, but he looks human again.

Though Günter is relieved that his brother is safe, he soon longs to be outside and away. With ever dwindling rations, he’s hoped his brother would help *organize* supplies. With an extra mouth to feed, they urgently need food. But a cloud hangs wherever his brother is. Sometimes he talks but it doesn’t sound like the old Hans. Meals—watery soups with shreds of potatoes and a few onion rings—are glum, their attempts at conversation awkward. His brother twitches all the time and Günter grows impatient when he speaks haltingly or stops in mid-sentence. Mostly Hans remains silent. All they know is that he was captured by the British Army in early 1945 and walked home from somewhere north.

“We’ll have to scrounge,” Günter says a week later, staring at the kitchen table scrubbed clean and polished as if it demands food. It’s his way of

saying they'll steal. What choice does he have? Their pantry is empty, stores remain closed.

Hans nods. "I'll come."

"We go after dark." Günter glances at his brother. "It's safer. People are roaming all over the place. I'll tell Helmut."

A half moon throws shadows across their path, making it hard to see where they're going. The air smells fragrant of grasses and blossoms, nature's indifference to the destruction around them. Summer has begun in earnest, lulling them with blue skies and warm temperatures. They find a handful of red currants in a front yard, the acidic fruit making Günter even hungrier.

They have gone farther this time to increase their chances. As they stop at the edge of a field of dark, leafy plants, Günter bends low. "You know what this is?" he whispers, barely containing his excitement.

"No idea." Helmut sinks to his knees. "My feet are killing me." He's grown quickly during the year and is much taller than Hans and Günter.

"Sugar beets." Günter fingers the leaves. "They've been left for the second season, so they'll be sweeter. Otherwise, they wouldn't be this big yet." He yanks at a stalk. The leaves tear but the root remains in the earth. "*Scheiße!*"

"What are we going to use them for? Make sugar?" Helmut has taken off one of his shoes. His sock has a large hole and a big toe pokes through the fabric.

"Molasses, you idiot," says Günter, sounding sharper than intended. Sometimes he's tired of being in charge.

"Hmmm, molasses." His brother's voice carries easily across the field.

"Shhh," Günter hisses. "The farmhouse is probably close."

"Let's hurry then. I'll collect." Helmut begins rummaging through his pack in search for a sack. Günter grabs a pointed rock to dig. It has been dry for weeks and the earth is hard and clumpy. His shirt is drenched with sweat as the pile of beets slowly grows.

Günter glances at his brother who sits motionless. “Why don’t you help?”

A dog barks in the distance. Günter freezes. There, more sounds: twigs breaking and heavy footsteps. Quietly, he crawls backward into a clump of hazelnut bushes, dragging the beet sack with him. Helmut follows, remembering his shoe at the last second.

“Who’s there? Damn thieves!” A voice drifts through the brush to their right. “You’re stealing my crop.” A shot rings out.

“Where’s Hans?” Günter peeks through the leaves. “Damn.”

Now free of clouds, the moon bathes the field in bluish light. Hans sits near the place they dug. He is clearly visible.

A man appears next to Hans, rifle in hand. “What’re you doing in my field?” he growls.

Günter keeps peeking through the undergrowth. The farmer has to be in his seventies. He is bald with the ruddy skin of a life spent outdoors. “Answer me!” he says. “I should shoot you on the spot.” His dog snarls as if to emphasize the point.

“Why don’t you?” Hans’s voice floats across. “I don’t care. I’ve had worse.”

“What are you doing in my field?” the farmer asks.

“Taking a few beets.”

Günter holds his breath, watching...waiting. Beads of sweat roll down his temples and chest. Any minute now the farmer will attack. Günter will never forgive himself if his brother gets hurt—even if he is positively crazy. His eyes on the dog, Günter gets to his knees. He has to show himself, confess to the farmer that it was his idea.

“Son, how old are you?” the old man is just saying.

“Almost eighteen.”

“You alone?” The farmer scans the dirt which shows the fresh marks of dug-up roots.

Hans remains silent. Günter shifts his weight. His knees ache. He can't wait much longer.

"You been in the war?"

"Yes."

"Thought so." With a sigh the man sets down his rifle. "Listen. You shouldn't run around at all times of night. You're liable to get killed. Just because the war is over doesn't mean it's safe."

Hans says nothing.

Why don't you move, Günter thinks. Do something. But he feels paralyzed just like his brother. To his surprise, the farmer stiffly drops to his knees and begins to yank and twist at the leaves, the bulbous roots pulling out easily.

The farmer stuffs the beets into Hans's arms. "Take these and get yourself home. Don't come back. Next time you may not be so lucky."

Hans stumbles and nearly falls into the bushes. He keeps walking, having seemingly forgotten about his company. Günter watches the farmer walk off in the opposite direction.

"Hans?" Günter whispers. "Over here."

"I can't believe this," Helmut says. "He got the beets for free. Didn't even have to dig."

"Let's go." Günter races to catch up with his brother. "I'll help you carry."

Hans hands over his beets in silence. As the gray of dawn crawls across the sky, they hike through the woods. Günter keeps glancing at his brother but Hans never speaks. *He used to be strong and order me around,* Günter thinks. *Now I'm the leader.* Somehow he resents Hans's slowness.

As the first mottled light filters through the trees, Hans suddenly throws himself on the ground, his face pale as the birch bark behind him.

"You all right?" Günter says.

"Fine."

“You don’t look fine.”

Hans blinks, his eyes shiny. “Leave me alone.” He rolls on his side, facing away from Günter.

“What happened out there? You could’ve been killed.” Günter tries to control his breath. He is fuming. “Next time we’ll go without you.”

“You almost got us caught,” Helmut says. “And shot.”

Hans remains silent as if he hasn’t heard.

Günter shrugs in frustration and grabs the beets. “Let’s go home. It isn’t far now.” Hans continues to lie on the ground. Running out of patience Günter taps him on the shoulder. “Come on.” His brother jerks and slaps hard at the hand, his eyes wild. “Ouch!” Günter yells. “Why did you punch me?”

Hans’s eyes widen as he stares at Günter. “Sorry. I thought...”

Günter rubs his fingers. His brother has turned into a crazy man with slumped shoulders and worn eyes.

Helmut jumps to his feet. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”

Günter is unsure what to do. Hans still hasn’t moved. It’s worse than caring for his baby brother. “Come on,” he finally says.

“What’s wrong with him?” Helmut says. “Wonder what happened.”

Hans sighs and mumbles something.

Günter bends closer. “Why don’t you tell us?”

Hans shakes his head. The silence between them stretches. Something rustles in the underbrush. Tired of waiting, Günter straightens. Helmut is right, they need to get home.

But when he looks up, Hans is muttering. “...Brits got us near the Belgian border. We marched northeast to Mecklenburg.” Staring into the lifting darkness, his voice turns mechanical. “Mostly boys like me without experience—stupid. The older men got treated worse. Some were shot on the spot.” He falls silent. It has been the longest he’s spoken since his return.

Helmut has picked up the beets. “Let’s go.”

Günter glances at his friend and shakes his head. “Where did you sleep?” he asks turning his attention back to Hans.

“In a field with watch towers and barbed wire. We dug holes in the ground to live. We’d fight over bits of cardboard or fabric to line the bottoms. When it rained, the holes filled with mud.”

Günter spits out a blade of grass he’s been chewing. “That must’ve been terribly cold.”

“Sometimes we’d get wood. We’d strip the trees until they looked bare like black bones.”

“Sounds awful.” Günter slumps down, his eyes on his brother. “How large was the camp?”

“Thousands. Many died. There were mass graves.” Hans picks up a stick and chews gingerly. Günter knows Hans’s teeth are loose. “Once you got diarrhea it was over. Guys just collapsed in the latrines.”

“What did you eat?” As usual Günter is interested in food.

Hans grimaces. “We received a couple of biscuits most days, sometimes a handful of dry beans.”

“Beans? What did you do with them?”

“We’d cook—if we had firewood.” Hans leans back with a sigh. “In the beginning when I made it up into a tree I mostly lost the wood. I’d throw the branches on the ground and somebody would grab them and run.”

“I would’ve punched them,” Günter says, a fresh knot of anger forming in his stomach.

“They threw you in the box for fighting.”

“What box?” Helmut interjects. He’s sat down, his back against a tree.

“A metal container, pitch-black, you couldn’t stand in upright, or lay down for that matter. Some people were in there for weeks.” Hans stares into space, once again in camp. “When they came out, they were hunched like

old men. I made friends with a boy from Frankfurt. He and I took up house together. It was safer that way, he helped protect our stuff. I'd climb on his shoulder to reach the branches."

"How did you cook?" Günter thinks of his own travels in the spring.

"A tin can. You'd burn your fingers and we never got the beans very soft, but it was something warm." Hans shivers as if he were back north.

"You're here now, safe and sound. We'll take care of you." Günter looks up. The sky has turned blue and a chorus of birds fills the trees. It'll be a beautiful day.

"What happened to your friend?" Helmut asks.

Hans turns paler, his chin quivering.

"We better take you home," Günter urges gently. "Come on, I'll help you up." He holds out his hand in safe distance but Hans ignores him.

"My friend is dead," Hans mumbles. "He was trying to help me and they pushed him down."

"The Brits?"

"Some gang. Rough guys. They took whatever they wanted. Real criminals. One of them stole my cup. It was enamel and better for cooking. I'd traded a load of wood for it. My friend came to help get it back, but they threw him on the ground. He hit his head on a rock. He lay there, bleeding and nobody did a thing." Hans's eyes shine.

"Couldn't you run away?"

"Some tried. They were shot." Hans wipes a sleeve across his face.

"Damn war." Günter looks at his older brother whose face looks pinched as if his skull has shrunken along with his muscles. "Let's go home and eat."

Hans ignores him and begins to tremble. "Why?" he suddenly says.

"Why what?" His stomach beyond growling, Günter suppresses the urge to yank Hans to his feet.

“Hitler wanted to kill us all.” Despite its low tone, Hans’s voice is seething. “They knew and didn’t care. My friends are dead. My classmates...dead. For what?”

Günter bites his lip. What can you say when your own country has betrayed you, sending fifteen- and sixteen-year olds to be slaughtered? Looking down at his brother, he feels his sadness and fury like his own. Wordlessly, he holds out a hand.

Hans finally takes it.

“We’ve got sugar beets,” Günter yells as he storms into the kitchen. The first rays of sun reach bright fingers through the window. Earth sticks to his hands and shoes and he yearns for a bath.

“We’ll have to keep an eye on him,” his mother states after Günter tells her about Hans. “I wish your father were home.”

Günter nods, not trusting himself to speak. Pressure is building in his throat. He swallows but the lump remains. The war ended two months ago, but his father has not returned. He’s been gone five years. What if he’ll act like Hans, the voice in Günter’s head whispers. Or not return at all.

“I can’t believe the farmer gave Hans beets,” he finally comments, clearing his throat.

His mother dabs her eyes. “We’ll need wood to boil them.”

With a sigh Günter picks up the saw. He longs for bed, but his hunger and need for distraction are stronger.

The sugar beet syrup looks like black gold, a heavenly combination of earth and sun melded into liquid sweetness. Günter licks his lips to savor each drop. Across the table Hans has dribbled syrup on a piece of cornbread. His eyes are closed, his face peaceful and relaxed as if asleep.

Günter smiles.

Author’s Note: Sugar beet molasses are a regional specialty in Germany’s Rhineland. Günter’s father returned from the war, having walked on foot

from the Balkans. Hans fully recovered from prison camp, married and has one daughter. He passed away in 2000. Günter still lives in Solingen. He is 85 years old.

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Swamp Bird

by Cassandra Ricks

I loved brown, brown was in everything. Brown made up the ground and colored the sky. Pop calls it mud, but Mama Swamp calls it "sweet dirty gold." Mama Swamp says that the sweet dirty gold is the world and the people. "The mud is life's essence, the mud is our land, and the mud is our home. If we care for the mud, the mud will care for us. The mud is our bread and water." That's what old Mama Swamp always says. She even told me that I was sweet dirty gold, she said "Oh baby girl, you came right out of the ground, just seven years ago the earth opened up and spat you out, all naked and wailing. Look at you, baby girl...you got brown on your hands, it's in your clothes, in your hair, it's even in your teeth, child." I didn't tell Mama Swamp that she looked like that too, it was just the way we were. When everything around you is brown, you start to be brown too. I breathed brown and I dreamed brown. And then...I met red.

It was a messy morning, the night before was all wind and rain, rattling our doors and shaking up the earth. It was that time of the year again, when the sky opened up and dumped trouble on us. The bigger folk didn't like it, it made work harder for them. But us kids, we loved it, the world stirred and roared like a giant beast waking from its deep slumber. The land became alive. You could feel the earth's heartbeat thumping under your feet. You could hear the sky breathing in and shouting out, yelling at all the swamp folk: "I'm your God, this is my land!"

I knew there was a lot to be explored with the new day. So as soon as I woke up I quickly ate my bread with Pop then darted for the door.

“You watch your step out there, Blueberry, the rain changed up the Wetland to be all brand new. Don’t get yourself stuck in the mud, you’ll sink downwards forever and I won’t know where to find you.” Pop pulled on his shirt then gave my chin a squeeze as he left through the door. He’s always called me Blueberry; he said I turned blue once when I was “a tiny little baby not gettin’ any oxygen” but it turned out alright. Pop took me to Mama Swamp and she made it all better, she always fixes the people.

The days after the storms were always nice. The ground was all messed up with water and mud being where it wasn’t supposed to be, but the sky would be blue. I wish it was always blue. I stepped out of dry dirt into wet dirt as I left the hut. The storm had ripped up some bushes and thrown them all over. Some floated on the water; others were stuck in the mud. The air was filled with the sound of busy bugs buzzing. You couldn’t see any of them. They were too tiny and hiding underground. As far as I could see there was only water and muck tracing all the way to the edges of the world. So I kept walking. It didn’t really matter where I went; I just had to not drown and die. Somebody had to take care of Pop.

Once in a while a wild pig would run off if I got too close. They were the one of the few animals in the swamp so they feared us swamp folk. We liked to stab them, stick 'em over the fire, and then chew 'em up. I was just chasing after a wild pig, squealing at it as it squealed back at me, when a big gust of wind came and knocked me on my bottom. As the cold muck seeped into my trousers and shirt I stared up at the blue sky, thinking about how mad Pop was going to be about my muddy hair. He’d only washed it for me three days ago. The wind picked up, carrying the clouds across the sky. I decided it would be best to stay on my back, stuck in the mud, until the big wind settled down and hope that another storm didn’t come and sweep me away.

The buzzing of the bugs faded away as the stirrings of the sky sounded. Looking up at the blue sky, you wouldn’t think it could make so much noise. From the flat of my back it looked calm and gentle, like looking up into the eyes of a Ma. Not that I would know what a Ma’s eyes look like. My Ma was never around. A high pitched whistling sound stole me away from my thoughts. I’d never heard that sound before. I lifted my head up from the mud to see a small bird caught in the wind, being swept in my direction. I’d seen birds before but none of them looked like this one did.

Squinting against the wind I saw a flash of something that set my heart to thumping awfully fast and hard. Before I could get a closer look at the bird it soared past my head, flapping its wings against the wind with all its might. Whatever it was about that bird that set my heart to thumping also put me on my feet chasing after it. The wind pushed against my back. I wasn't sure if it was hurrying me on or trying to slam me into the ground. I tripped many times as I couldn't watch the ground in front of me. I had to keep my eyes on the bird. It was quickly getting further and further away, becoming a small dot in the sky. Each time I fell to my face I rose up again, blinking mud from my eyes to search for the creature. I cried out as I saw the wind having its way with the bird, whirling it and twirling it, tossing it around and then throwing it to the ground. My own foot caught against a hidden root. Even as I went down I kept my eyes set to the spot where I thought the bird last fell. I could taste mud in my mouth and feel it in my nose. All this muck was getting in the way. Spitting out Mama Swamp's "sweet dirty gold", I again rose to my feet. My next steps were chosen carefully as I searched for the little bird.

It wasn't hard to find. There, lying in the brown upon brown, I saw a color I'd only ever seen in some of Mama Swamp's picture books. It was red. It was bright and alive, sharply biting against all the other dull colors of the big wide land. Red was better than seeing the blue sky, than breathing the blue sky. It was better than anything I'd ever known before. Where had it come from? Was there more of it somewhere?

Walking up slowly to the fallen bird, I knelt down to shelter it from the harsh wind. Two little black eyes stared up at me. I could see the bird's chest was rising and falling very swiftly. I think that its heart was beating even faster than my own. The beautiful red bird had had a rough landing, that much was easy to tell. One of its wings didn't look quite right. Laying there in the brown mud the little red bird looked small and broken. As I lowered my hands the little bird chirped a few times before growing tired. I knew Mama Swamp could fix the bird just as she had once fixed me. I scooped up the tiny creature carefully, the way I'd seen Mama Swamp scoop up new born babes. Picking up my feet I walked as fast as I could against the big wind, trying not to give Red too much grief. It was a long time before I got to Mama Swamps. The sky had darkened into a deep brown and all the mud on me had dried up, leaving me to feel all tight and flaky. Red had been quiet the whole time.

"Mama Swamp, Mama Swamp!"

A fuzzy mess of gray hair appeared out from Mama Swamp's doorway. "What is it, baby girl? Hush, child, no need to squeal like a pig. Oh look at you, Berry, covered in mud from your toes to your soul. You're sweet dirty gold come to life. Now what's that you're carrying around?"

Before I had the chance to answer, Mama Swamp moved aside from her doorway, giving me room to wiggle through. Her hut was the only one that didn't smell like mud. There were dried plants hanging from the ceiling and woven baskets filled with spices.

"Why, Berry, is that a bird, child? Look what the earth spit up!"

"The earth didn't spit it up Mama Swamp, the sky dropped it."

"Oh, baby girl, hand the poor thing over to me. Here, set it right here in this basket, let's have a look."

Mama Swamp dumped out one of her baskets and folded some cloth into it. She smoothed back my wild hair as I slowly set Red down. The bird was in even poorer shape than before. Red's chest rose and fell slowly, with eyes half closed and a beak opened wide. I wondered if there was any hope of Red making it.

"You gotta help it, Mama Swamp, you gotta fix it. You gotta save the red," I whispered.

Mama Swamp pushed me aside and bent over the bird. My heart dropped as I saw her lips purse up and then tug down in a frown. She shook her head from side to side. "Oh, this is a sorry sight. This little one has had a rough time."

"But you gotta fix it, you can fix anything!" She had to fix it. Never had I seen anything so beautiful. It wasn't right that it should die.

"I'll try, baby girl. Make yourself of some use, go wet a cloth and bring it to me"

I quickly ran to Mama Swamp's shelf and grabbed some linen. As I dipped it into the water bucket I heard Mama Swamp mumble under her breath, "Poor, poor creature, sweet baby...the world's too big a place for somebody not to get hurt from living in it."

I huddled in close to Red as I handed over the wet cloth, and then watched as Mama Swamp gently wiped dried mud from the injured bird's body. Brown was washed away, leaving in its place a red so bold that it made me feel brave and strong.

"Oh, it's even redder than I thought Mama Swamp! It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen."

The little bird opened up its black eyes and seemed to look at me and know my soul. I knew then that Red had to live, there was just no way that life was mean enough to kill it. Mama Swamp must have seen the look on my face because next thing I knew, she was pushing me outside the door telling me to "Go on home and come back tomorrow. I'll take care of the creature." I didn't want to go just yet but no one tells Mama Swamp no unless they want to be swatted. Besides, Pop would be getting home soon and his shoulders would need a good rubbing.

The next day as soon as my eyes opened up, I dove through the door and hustled my muscles right on over to Mama Swamp's. I had invited Pop to come and see red but he only grunted as he pulled on his boots. "I've seen plenty of red, Blueberry. I've seen red in the blood of our people."

"It's not that kind of red, Pop, it's different somehow."

I guess Pop didn't care too much for different, he just squeezed my chin and left to go and do big folk stuff just like he did every day.

Red didn't look much better and I wondered if Mama Swamp was losing her magic. I asked her as much and she laughed and kissed my cheek. "In time, baby girl, in time. Real healing is as slow as the thickest of sweet dirty gold. That's the only way to soothe all the sore spots. Just keep coming back every day. I'll even let you go and catch the bugs for our little bird."

For the next few weeks it was up to me to search under every bush and boulder to find creepy crawling creatures. Those mornings I spent snatching bugs out in the Wetlands weren't the same as before. While my feet and hands were on the ground, my heart and head were up in the clouds. I'd look up into the sky every chance I got to see what other colors the wind would bring. I guess the wind couldn't find any more colors; every time I looked around all I could see was brown upon brown. So then I'd hurry on back to Red. Red was becoming stronger every day. I'd laugh as

Red would hop towards me whenever I came in carrying the bugs. Mama Swamp said I shouldn't feed the bird so much. "Your bird's going to be carrying too heavy a belly for flying, child. Don't go forgetting we're trying to get this creature back up high in the sky where it belongs." Mama Swamp had kept a close eye on Red's wing, binding it up right. A part of me didn't want Red back up in the sky. I wanted Red down here close to me, where we could be together.

One day when the land was a little dryer, and the water went back to where it was supposed to be, I came into Mama Swamp's hut to find the red bird flapping around. Red flew up and batted its wings against the ceiling then darted back down to the table to land and look at the opened door. I stood frozen in the doorway as Red cocked its head then glided down from the table and hopped towards the brown sky behind me. I cried out, not wanting it to go. As I began to shut the door Mama Swamp grabbed my shoulder and hugged me against her side. "Let Red go, baby girl." My eyes got to feeling wet and I had to wipe at them in order to see Red hop towards the open door. Red hopped once, then twice, then just like that Red opened up its wings and took to the sky. Mama Swamp and I stepped outside to watch him go. We watched Red fly until the brown sky swallowed him up. Then we stood a little longer. Mama Swamp kissed my wet cheek then went back inside and closed the door behind her. I stayed there in the mud, memorizing Red, remembering where it fled, so that one day, when I was bigger and better, I could follow it too.

Bio- Cassandra Ricks was raised in a valley in the mountains. Currently she resides in Rexburg, Idaho as a student of Brigham Young University. Cassandra loves writing and all the possibilities that start with a blank page. The story "Swamp Bird" is her first work to be published.

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