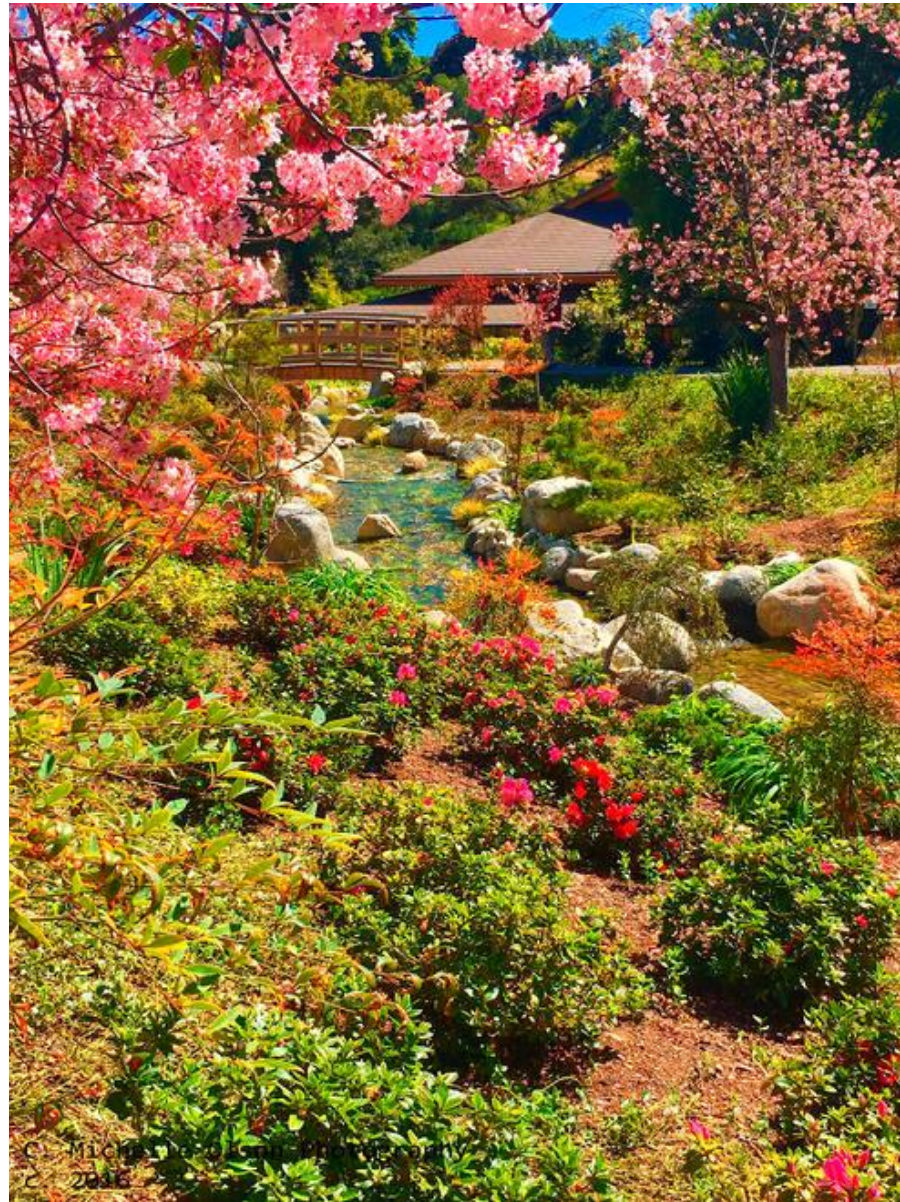


The Write Place at the Write Time

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"Garden" by C. Michelle Olson; <http://cmichelleolson.com/>

About this image: *"Spring is a time for preparing the heart and soul to awaken with new beginnings. When I came across this extraordinary garden setting, it instantly made my heart happy. I felt all life's cares were thrown away when my eyes gazed upon this beautiful*

Japanese garden. The symbol of this garden immersed in nature's flowers, trees, rocks, and water gave a feeling of 'stop and stand still to feel completely peaceful.' Nothing can distract someone from being in this perfect place. That was how I felt on that magnificent day, a feeling of newness, new opportunities ahead, brighter days on the horizon waiting to be captured." —CMO

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

Featured Stories:

"Artistry" by David Gwyn

"Travelin' Light" by Anita Solick Oswald

"Won't You Write Home, Martha Jane" by Michael Tidemann

"An Incident at the Park" by Rebecca Linam

Artistry

by David Gwyn

ONE gentle push from dainty, feminine fingers prods the door open. The hinges whine where rust scrapes rust. The side of the door that faces the living room is freshly painted a sharp white, the kind that seems to glow in the dark. It blends seamlessly into the modernist movement the artist unleashed on his apartment. The other side splinters and peels with burnt brown flakes, crusty and rough.

She observes him sitting in the middle of the room on a single stool in front of an unfinished canvas. A large tarp covers the floor below the stool and easel. Previously white, the tarp now shows scars of dry, dead colors. On top of the tarp, one person exists; beyond its boundaries, someone else does.

Paintbrushes litter the floor between them. The scattered utensils force her to carefully navigate the space by stepping over and around each one, cutting the distance between them in half before she stops.

Monotonous white walls break for a window on the far side of the room. The murky glass previously allowed for a stunning view of the city, but now a building bricks up the landscape.

His paintings break the constant flow of black and white. Ignored, most lay haphazardly behind the canvas on which he paints. Lacking a defining artistic style, nothing links his paintings together. Some portray realistic, albeit poorly completed, bowls of fruit. Others show the naked female form, though somehow more perverted than other artistic renditions. The paintings sit off to the side, flipped upside down, showing their skeletal structure of unfinished wood hidden behind the blanketed flesh.

The artist indolently strokes colorless green paint above a powder blue horizon. He knows she's there. Her heels click-clicked as she trespassed in his living room.

Everything in his apartment points to her leaving. Only one stool sits in front of the canvas. If she chooses to sit on the couch or love seat, she would be unable to see his work.

The artist masterfully manufactured this outcome. He doesn't want her, or any of the others, to admire him or his painting. She has served her purpose. This painting is his, even if he doesn't choose to love it.

The invasion of privacy is not in her seeing his face mid-orgasm. That act is public, flaunted and mundane. He knows the act of art should be intimate, but there's nothing there for him. There's not even a flicker of the heart thumping, stomach twirling anatomical reactions to passion.

She stands and watches for a while, wanting some sort of understanding for herself. The only sound between them is the tough bristled brush working against the confused canvas. She wants to believe that she lingers in the presence of cutting edge creativity. There is something here, something magical and transcendent. If only she stares long enough or comprehends the creativity more complexly, its meaning will emerge.

After all, she is the artistic type, a wild spirit. She knows about these things. So she craves an understanding to be able to have a comment on his art, or at least a way to explain it to her friends. She did not have sex with a stranger, or a man with no aspirations. He exists as an artist, a manipulator, and cultural commentator. And this painting proves it.

Somehow.

"What are you working on?"

“Nothing.”

“Don’t be modest.” she says coyly, “Tell me what it is.”

“What it is,” he answers, “is nothing. I don’t care about this painting. When I get bored, I move on to the next one. What is the purpose of perfecting one? What is the purpose of keeping one?”

“Well this is your art. It’s what you provide to society.”

“Society has done nothing for me, and so I have nothing to say to it.”

“Don’t you ever want to feel like you accomplish anything?”

“Accomplishment sounds tiring. I just like to paint. I don’t want anyone else involved in my painting. I don’t do it for others. I do it for myself. So when I get tired of painting I stop and when I get bored of a particular piece I throw it on the ground.”

Among casual artists, an ego’s self-preservation is vital, necessary, and tiring. So the honest but lazy ones give in. There’s no secret that his work lacks originality. Mediocrity often recognizes itself more than people know. His uninspired work stares at him every day, reflecting back to him the shortcomings of every brush stroke. It reminds him that he is nothing, so he knows that’s what he is.

“It doesn’t sound like you’ll ever get much done. What about your own personal gains? Don’t you want to be famous for this?”

“And the point of being famous?”

“People loving you and respecting you and in awe of you? It’s like being a god. I’m going to be famous someday.”

“For what?” he scoffs.

“I’m going to be an actress.”

“Well,” he says, turning to face her in an attempt to ensure she takes the brunt of his tone straight to her chest, “Your performance minutes ago reveals you to be *quite* talented. However, fame cannot be the reason you

choose a profession. Fame isn't a job, it's a fu@#ing hazard. Fame serves only to distract from what is real."

"And you know what is real?"

"No, but even I can see that you are not."

Her face scrunches into a scowl. "Oh, please."

"There are infinite factions of failed artists. I know which kind I am. Which kind are you?"

A defense reflex implores her to feel superior to him. She senses that the paintings lying scattered around the room will be thrown away someday. This man has less creativity than a child with finger paint. His truth lay in the fabric of canvas, but remains bound to it. More than anything, she sees complacency. His paintings are content to remain caged within this shitty apartment, the wood rotting the inside. She becomes disgusted with him and then with herself.

How could she have ignored the apartment's mist of failure, the stench of negligence? There's a lack of urgency that settles like dust on every surface in the room, even his shoulders.

But it's on her now.

Maybe it has always been there.

There's mold lingering in her mouth that she couldn't taste before. Like cigarettes after a long night, her taste buds are stale and hot. Her contentedness is palpable. When was her last audition? When did she relentlessly pursue a part or a role? She's never lost sleep over this. Hasn't she always taken 'no' for an answer? When did she last starve for acting? Has she ever? Maybe artists weren't actually starving because their art provided sustenance for their hearts, keeping their bodies frail, but their souls' plump.

She's never starved for her art.

The man in front of her doesn't want success badly enough, but at least he can admit it. Her own apartment has rotting wood, and she is reminded of that now. She hides behind the words of family and friends from her

hometown. The ones who say she'll make it. She chooses to neglect the ones who say she won't, forgets about them until now and how plentiful they are. In this single moment in time they rush like an avalanche to extinguish the fire of her aspirations.

Her love for recognition outshines her need to express art. She fell in love with people loving her. That's why she'll never make it. Because the end will never precede the means. She will never starve for art, only for fame.

She click-clicks her heels rapidly across the floor toward the door. Her thin, delicate fingers slam it on the way out, knowing which kind of artist she is.

Bio- David Gwyn holds a Bachelor of Arts from Muhlenberg College in English. Currently, he is looking for an agent for his first novel. He teaches 7th Grade Reading in Camden, New Jersey and lives in Philadelphia with his fiancé, Katie, and their dog, Reggie. His previous publications include "Better Know a Beer City, Part 7 – Philadelphia" an article written for The Virginia Beer Company.

Travelin' Light

by Anita Solick Oswald

The band members paraded through the gangway. Four long-haired men in jeans and overalls and one thin, young blonde woman in shorts, a sequined crop top, and platform shoes that were a bit run-down at the heel, were moving in next door. Tripping over foot pedals and coiled cords, the band lugged instruments and speakers through the tiny passage way. The procession didn't take long.

The group seemed to be heavy on equipment and short on furniture.

That morning I sat drying my long hair in the sun on the front porch of the frame cottage I rented in Venice. The young woman glanced in my direction and waved. Skinny, but a bit top heavy, her tight curls framed her thickly mascaraed eyes and heart-shaped face. The cosmetics made her look younger.

Steps from the Boardwalk, the tiny courtyard was my world for about a year—a refuge where I would try to recover after a horrible accident had broken me. Our pink and gray 1920s cottage was cheap, and the landlord

was a nice guy who would pretty much let you do what you wanted. He'd even pay for the paint if you wanted to spruce the place up. When I had the energy, when the vertigo didn't take me for a spin, I painted the walls and the old floors and sewed curtains from bright remnants I found at a fabric outlet. I made sun dresses for my little girls, Áine and Siobhan—bright, whimsical frocks that matched their cheery dispositions.

One balmy day, I decided I wanted an organic vegetable garden and the girls and I tore out the overgrown ivy next to my little house. The plot became an enchanted garden where everything grew, even artichokes which skeptics said took a few years to bear. The sandy soil was so fertile and light after years of lying fallow that even the seeds that Isadora, the cat, kicked into the yard grew into hardy tomato bushes. When the vegetables were ripe, I'd create some fanciful French-inspired meal. The beach and the sea air soothed and strengthened me. Venice was a good place to heal.

Claudette introduced herself to my girls first. They were playing Barbies on the front porch when she greeted them with a toothy smile and asked, "Would you like me to do your makeup? All girls like makeup." She carried an old Samsonite overnight bag that functioned as a case for the tools of her trade, and she'd made it uniquely her own. Festooned with sequins, ribbons, a rainbow, and stick on letters that declared, "Property of Claudette," the girls were immediately fascinated, but puzzled over her strange proposition. As if to offer a provenance, she patted the case affectionately, and said, "It was my Gran's. I took it when I moved out."

My older girl spoke up, "We're only four and five. We'll have to ask my mom." Claudette added, as if offering her resume, "I do hair and makeup for the band."

Áine opened the screen door—I was just a few feet away in the small room that served as living room and dining room—and asked, "Mommy, can we?"

"No, Áine, you are too young for makeup, but maybe our new neighbor would like something to drink." I got up from the overstuffed chair, and went out to meet the girls' new friend.

Claudette liked to talk. I'd barely opened my mouth to greet her, when she bounded up the stairs and shook my hand. Over a cup of coffee, she'd told me the entire history of her nineteen years. World weary and innocent at

the same time, her unguarded demeanor amazed me. “I grew up in a small town in Ohio, it was sooo boring, nothing to do there. I had a job at the Dairy Queen for a while, but Momma and Daddy got hooked on drugs and kept stealing my money. It didn’t seem worth it to keep going in to work, and those freezers were really, really cold. My hands got so chapped. I’d already dropped out of junior high, Momma and Daddy didn’t care if I went or not. One of my girlfriends said she was going to California, so I ran away.

“We hitched part of the way and got a ride from a nice couple that wanted to share the driving. They were going to Vegas to work in the casinos and said we could ride along. I knew how to drive because Grandpa taught me how to drive his tractor when I was eight. I drove it all over the farm. When we got to Nevada, I had them drop me off in Pimm, Nevada, population 1,000—that was wishful thinking. I bought a fake ID from a trucker and started waitressing in this dried out old bar that had a couple of slots. My friend Jolene and I rented a trailer for \$50 a month from the desert rat that owned the bar. He used to pat our butts when we walked past him, but he was pretty burnt out and harmless. We thought we’d save our money and move to Hollywood, and maybe get a job in movies. But not many people came by that bar and it was taking a long time to save up money for our LA trip.

“Then, one day, a tour bus broke down on Highway 15 near the bar, and that’s how I met the boys. It was about 120 degrees and they came in for a cold one while they waited for a tow or a mechanic to come out from Vegas. Jimmy, he’s the guitar player, got drunk and one thing led to another, and, well, he wound up sleeping in my bed in the trailer. We actually didn’t do much that night because he was too wasted. But he told me I was beautiful and asked me to stay with him and the band. Joe West, the manager, didn’t like it at first, but I told him I could clean up the bus and do the hair and the makeup for the band, I used to do my Gran’s hair, and I would make sure Jimmy showed up on time for his gigs, so Joe let me stay. And that’s how I got here. I’ve been with the boys for about a year now. They’ve all been my boyfriend at one time or another.”

Finally Claudette took a breath. I managed to tell her that I was from Chicago and lived in the cottage with my girls. I told her I’d been in a bad car accident, hit by a drunk driver when I went out one night to buy a carton of milk for breakfast. I told her I had nearly been killed, I was taking time off from work to recover, and that I had a long road ahead.

“That’s horrible! Did they catch the guy?”

I assured her that they had, that the police had found him passed out, draped over the steering wheel, uninjured.

“I am so glad to hear that. We don’t need that fool running around.” Claudette was all sympathy and bonded with us immediately. “I can play with the girls if you need to rest sometimes,” she offered. I told her I would take her up on it, but I also thought Claudette might need some caretaking herself.

Our neighbor, Swami, as I called him, the local yogi, lived in the big white Victorian house in the front. He took a great interest in my garden and decided to try his hand at tilling the earth. Always the optimist, Swami played “Happy” for beachgoers that cut through our hamlet every day over loud speakers that he placed in the front yard. “It is such a great song! We should all be happy,” he proclaimed when I asked him to turn it down. One spring day I threw down the gauntlet when I found him digging in the front yard. I told him that he could not grow potatoes in the unamended, weedy soil. Swami took on my challenge, meditating over the vines. Soon we had a bushel basket of potatoes. I made a vegetable stew and shared it with Claudette, Swami and the girls.

As the cool, foggy spring ebbed away, Claudette would invite herself along when the girls and I made our short trek to the beach. We’d talk about our lives and dreams while the girls splashed in the ocean waves and buried each other in the sand. I wanted to get back to school and finish my degree. Claudette didn’t have to tell me that she was clashing more and more with “the boys”—I could hear the arguments at night. “All they want to do is party after their gigs. There’s more to life than getting drunk.”

“Claudette,” I counseled her, “you are not Wendy, and they are not the Lost Boys. You need a way to support yourself—you need your own money. Maybe you can watch the girls sometimes when I go to the doctor. It is pretty hard to take them on the bus with me. I get so tired.” Claudette suggested she walk with the girls to the bakery run by the halfway house to buy the crusty whole grain bread I loved. Food for our souls. Watching as she took each by the hand, I smiled at how she’d taken to them. As she’d offered when we met, she would come by and play with them on afternoons when I needed to sleep and recharge for an hour or two.

On the way home, we stopped at a different bakery, the kosher one at the end of our block that made our favorite brownies, our traditional treat after playtime in the sand. Unable to postpone the pleasure, we four sat and ate our brownies before reaching the house. The memory of the smell, the moist, chunky cake, and dense chocolate flavor would linger long after the brownies were actually devoured. The bakery and the park benches that lined the Boardwalk were a favorite haunt of the blue-haired ladies who lived in the seniors' apartment building, the only one in our little neighborhood. Although they had to pinch pennies, the octogenarians wore tradition like a beautiful scarf and "dressed up" before they would be seen on the street. Many still wore hats and gloves. The ladies gathered daily to gossip, to share pictures of their children and grandchildren, to commiserate about their aches and pain, to enjoy the fresh, ocean air, and hopefully, to stave off the inevitable for another day. I'd met some of them when they chatted with the girls and told me how beautiful my children were.

Suddenly, I had a brainstorm. "Claudette, why don't you offer to do hair and makeup for the women in the apartments? I bet they would love having someone come to them, and you could make some money." Claudette agreed it might work and I offered to introduce her to the women I knew. "Word will spread—you'll see." I made the introductions and Claudette offered the first adventurous women a trial offer—\$10 for a cut and color, plus a free makeup consultation, satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Naturally gregarious, she soon built up a list of regulars.

As her business grew, so did the rows with the band members. The "boys" rolled in pretty late, and Claudette often left the gigs and made her way home alone. "I am an early riser. I can't drink all night. Those boys have no ambition. I have responsibilities to my clients." I'd see her, up early, makeup case in hand, heading down to the senior apartments. Friends told friends; her clientele grew further. As the hot summer passed, she rolled curlers, colored gray hair, plucked eyebrows and chin hair, and painted faces. I noticed she was dressing more conservatively and wearing less makeup—a simple, linen wrap blouse replaced the satin and sequined tops and the crimson lipstick was replaced by a pink lip gloss. She wore gel blush instead of the heavy foundation and powder rouge. I saw she had freckles. "Dressed for success," she'd wink at the girls.

We dined on fresh veggies and herbs all summer and now, as we moved closer to fall, we harvested the last of our bountiful crop. My physical

therapy was helping; I was pretty steady on my feet now, and a lot of the pain had subsided. The angry scars I called my dragon tattoo had faded with the plastic surgeries. My doctor said I could go only twice a week for therapy, and I could return to work and to university when the girls went back to Montessori school in September.

Claudette announced she had plans, too. “I am moving out. I am going back to beauty school!” Claudette had saved enough money to rent a small apartment in east Hollywood. “Jolene’s gonna be my roommate again.”

I told her I was proud of her, and we would miss her.

We decided to celebrate Claudette’s return to school with a last feast from the garden harvest. I made French onion soup, ratatouille, and a salad. Swami brought potato au gratin. We shared hot bread from the bakery outlet and drank Liebfraumilch. After dinner, Claudette told the girls she had a surprise for them. She left for a moment and returned from her cottage with a box tied with a big red bow. The girls squealed, “What is it, what is it?”

“Open it up, you sillies,” Claudette laughed. Inside was her grandmother’s overnighter, the bejeweled makeup case that she’d carried with her from Ohio. “I need something more professional for school and I wanted you girls to have my most precious possession. I love you two.” I asked her if she was sure, and she nodded. “I’m travelin’ light.”

Claudette took off the next morning; the girls waved goodbye as she trotted down the narrow alleyway to the bus stop. Then she was gone. Months went by; it was winter and it rained almost every day. The remains of the harvest were mulch now, protecting our magic garden until spring. My girls were back in school, learning to speak French and Spanish and how to read. I went back to work managing a small business and taking classes to finish my degree. Summer was a faint memory.

We hadn’t heard from Claudette since she’d left a few months prior when an envelope arrived addressed to me, Áine and Siobhan. Inside was a newspaper clipping and a photo. I recognized our Claudette applying makeup to a model. The caption read, “Nordstrom’s Winter Fashion Show—Hair and Makeup by Hollywood Beauty School Students.” She’d written a note: *I am on my way! Miss you, love you, Claudette xoxoxo.*

There was a lipstick kiss on the clipping. Áine and Siobhan taped the clipping to their dresser mirror, hung just above the special place they reserved for Claudette's makeup case, a retablo of a young woman's tenacity and will to survive.

Both Claudette and I knew about survival and healing in different ways. Nurturing one another during that time in Venice brought us together. And, together, we grew and flourished like the garden that had sustained us—against the odds.

Bio- Anita Solick Oswald is a Chicago native. She's written a collection of essays, *West Side Girl*, that are written from the point of view of her younger self and chronicle the colorful, diverse and oftentimes unpredictably eccentric characters and events that populated Chicago's West Side neighborhood during the 50s & 60s. Her writing has appeared in *The Write Place at the Write Time*, the *Faircloth Literary Review*, *The Fat City Review*, and *Avalon Literary Review*.

Anita lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her husband, Ralph, and her cats, Figaro and Clio.

Won't You Write Home, Martha Jane

by Michael Tidemann

May 1, 1852

Princeton, Missouri

On the highest hilltop for miles around, Robert Canary was digging. Inside the unpainted wood frame house his wife Charlotte was screaming as Robert set the maple tree, first checking one angle, then another. When her screams turned louder, he set the tree straight, filled the hole with dirt, and stood back to admire his work.

"Mister Canary, you'd best be comin' in to hep," the midwife called. "This here's a breech birth."

Robert stood, shovel in hand, and looked at the rolling hills to the west, south, and north, and seriously studied on heading for one of them. He knew though his wife would finally catch up with him, so he dropped his shovel and headed inside.

The midwife had managed to turn the baby's head but Charlotte was still having a hard time pushing it out. "Ya'll good-fer-nuthin' worthless sumnabitch. Wash them hands and help pull this thing outa me."

Robert did as he was told—he always did what his wife told him—and by the time he returned to Charlotte the baby's head had already emerged, drenched in birth fluids and blood. As Robert held out his hands, a baby girl popped out like a colt dropped from a mare, howling like a bobcat. Robert smiled with enormous pride as he held the baby who cocked back her arm and punched him squarely on the nose, her face bearing the same expression as her mother's.

When Martha Jane Canary, later known in Western lore as Calamity Jane Burke, came into the world, the nation was on the verge of tearing itself in two, of secessionist factions warring with Union loyalists, of Confederate-sympathizing Missouri State Guards warring with Union-backed Home Guards. Just like other border states such as Maryland, Kentucky, Kansas, and Virginia which would rip itself in half, Missouri was a battleground unto itself. A place where families sent some members North and others South. For some, the wounds would never heal.

Martha Jane took after her mother. When she saw how her father cowered under Charlotte's anger, how he learned to go to the other room or even better yet outside when she had been drinking, Martha Jane learned at an early age that women could have power over men. And when Charlotte took off, sometimes for days, to let herself be squired and used by other men and to squire and use them, Martha Jane learned that marriage was mainly for one reason—to keep the human race going so people could drink and fight and cheat on one another all over again.

She was nine when she heard of the battle over Athens way. The August heat seeped up from the ground to the maple branch where she sat looking over the countryside, wondering what it would be like to be a boy and grown up and able to go to war. She was already a pretty fair shot with her father's squirrel rifle. The maple trees clean shuck of critters was sign enough for that. But she wondered what it would be like if the squirrels should someday decide to shoot back. Now that would be something, wouldn't it?

"Thirty-one casualties," said their neighbor just to the west, Floyd Shannon. Martha liked Floyd, a big man with beard and hair to his shoulders and secessionist loyalties running as long and keep as the Mississippi far off yonder to the east.

"How 'bout them Home Guard bastids," her father asked.

Floyd raised a hooded brow. "Not nearly so bad. Three kilt 'n twenty wounded ah hears."

"Damn shame," said Robert. "Damn dirty shame."

"Sho 'nuff is," said Floyd. "So..." He eyed Canary squarely. "Y'all gonna take up 'gainst them Home Guards?"

"Caint," said Canary. "Got me a wife 'n three youngins to feed. Leana 'n Lijah, they's spurtin' up like a coupla weeds."

"Hey Pa, watch this." Martha Jane was hanging upside down, legs wrapped around a maple branch, swinging like a monkey.

"Y'all watch yourself, girl. Doc Bates is done gone joined the Union army and they ain't nobody gonna fix your haid y'all falls on top of it."

"I ain't gonna fall, Pa." Martha Jane pulled herself up and sat on the branch, studying him with her chin in her hand. "Kin ah go to war 'gainst the Yankees, Pa?"

"Now girl, y'all knows ya's too young fer that. 'Sides, they don't let girls into the army."

"Ah bet they's some in there anyways. Ah bet they cut they's hair 'n shores up their boobies 'n such so they's kin tote a gun 'n rucksack like the rest of 'em."

Shannon cast a knowing smile. "*How* old you say she is?"

"Not old 'nuff to be talkin' 'bout shorin' boobies." Robert shook his head at his daughter. "Martha Jane, y'all hush your mouth afore ah clean it out with

lye soap 'n tans your hide to harness leather. 'N gits out'n that there maple tree afore ya falls out'n it."

"Aw Pa, all right." She dropped eight feet from the tree, landing squarely on her feet like a Pawnee warrior. "Kin ah go over to Tommy's, Pa?"

Canary looked at Shannon. "Ah don't 'spect it'd be no harm. "Long's it's all right with Mistah Shannon here."

"Kin ah go play with Tommy?" Martha Jane asked Shannon, turning on her rare female charm.

"That'd be fine," said Shannon, chuckling.

Canary shook his head as Martha Jane whooped and raced over the field like a jackrabbit, bounding the rail fence in a leap like an antelope. "Ah swears that there girl is gonna kill herself one a these days."

"Or somebody elst," Shannon was quick to add.

Martha Jane found Tommy mowing hay with the horse and sickle. For eleven, the boy stood five-eight and his work-knotted arms and back glistened in the August Missouri heat. Martha Jane stood and watched him, first to surprise him, then just to watch him. She had come over to play, but some curious feeling rose up inside her that made her take a different look at Tommy—a look that sort of scared her.

"Hey, Tommy," Martha Jane said just as he turned the horse for another pass.

Tommy looked squarely at her, as though not sure he was glad to see her, then deciding he was, he reined the horse to a halt and patted its withers. "Howdy, Martha Jane."

"Y'all wanna play?"

Tommy studied her, eyes flitting down her soiled coveralls, then back again. "Whatcha wanna play?"

“Oh, anythin’.” Martha Jane held her hands behind her back, leaning foot to foot. “Why ya’ll lookin’ at me that way, Tommy?”

“What way?”

“Ya’ll know.” She looked off shyly. “The way growed-up folks looks at each other.”

Tommy chuckled. “Maybe it’s ‘cause y’all’s gettin’ growed up.”

Martha Jane scuffed her boots in the dirt, something Pa was always on her not to do, given the price of shoe leather. “I spect next thing y’all will wanna kiss me.”

Tommy took four big steps toward her before she could even look away. He was a good six inches taller, hair burnt to sand by the sun and blue eyes glimmering back the same color as hers. “So what if I did decide to kiss you right now? What’d you do?”

Martha Jane looked side to side. “Ah don’t know. Like it, ah ‘spect.”

Tommy bent over and kissed her on the lips just as square as her Pa taking a pot shot at a turkey in a willow tree. “So whatcha thinka that?”

She looked up, not a little bit in awe. “That was right nice, Tommy. Kin we do it agin?”

Nearly three years later...

“Kin we do it agin?”

It was April 1864 and the war had been raging for three years. Tommy was fourteen and Jane twelve and they held fast to each other like two boll weevils on the same cotton ball.

“Ah ‘spects we kin.” Tommy leaned over to kiss her, heated, fervent, unrelenting as he kissed her and leaned her back over into the prairie grass so tall a man on a horse could get lost in it.

Martha Jane looked up at him as he finished his kiss and leaned on his elbow to study her. She studied him back. Hard. “Pa wants us to move to Montana. Wherever that is.”

“Montana.” Tommy’s words drifted off toward mountains where the snow never melted. “That’s a fur piece for sure.”

“Ah don’t know as we’ll be comin’ back—not for a while anyways.” Tommy’s face blurred as tears raced down her cheek. “Ah’m gonna miss ya, Tommy. Ah’m gonna miss ya sumpin’ fierce.”

He brushed away her tears and leaned over to kiss her. His hand drifted from her shoulder to her collarbone, then lower.

She looked up at him, fevered, tentative, afraid, yet not. “Tommy?”

“Yes, Martha Jane?”

“Y’all know how ah always said ah’d kill ya if’n ya tried any of that there stuff?”

“Yes, Martha Jane?”

Her eyes flickered. “Ah wouldn’t kill ya if’n ya tried it right now.”

They were off the next day, Robert driving the team with Charlotte beside him, moody to be leaving but anxious for a new adventure—new places, new people. New men.

Tommy and Floyd Shannon were standing in front of their mud-rutted drive as they passed, Tommy with his straw hat in hand as though a funeral procession were passing. “Ya write home now, all right, Martha Jane?”

She smiled back at him, riding astride her horse like a man, not sidesaddle like a woman, rifle cradled in her hands as she watched for the first jackrabbit to skitter across their path. “Ah’ll do that, soon’s ah learns writin’.” She laughed, then suddenly sobered. “Ah loves ya, Tommy.”

Tommy, Floyd Shannon, her folks, the team, and her own horse looked at

her as she said it.

“Ah loves ya, Tommy. An’ ah always will.”

She shot not one jackrabbit but three by nightfall, her Pa rolling their carcasses on a spit over the fire as a pot of beans bubbled and biscuits in the Dutch oven browned and puffed up high as toadstools after a soaking spring rain. “Ah swears ya done got us ‘nough meat fer a week, Martha Jane. Kin ya lay off’n them poor jackrabbits fer a spell ‘fore the prairie’s clean shuck of em?”

“Aw Pa, they’s more jackrabbits out here ‘n fleas on a dog.”

“Well, y’all wanna not waste no bullets on ‘em?”

“But Pa, I shot them three jackrabbits with three bullets.”

Robert Canary shook his head and grumbled to himself, unable to argue. Because she had. He still seemed troubled about something. “What’s that ah heard ‘bout y’all tellin’ Tommy ya loved ‘em?”

“Aw, it’s just a ‘spression, Pa.”

“‘Spression.” He stopped turning the spit on the jackrabbits. “Ah loves ya seems a bit more’n a ‘spression.”

Martha Jane smiled and shrugged.

Robert Canary shook his head as he once more turned the jackrabbits over the fire. “Ah thinks we got ya away from that boy just in time, girl.”

Martha Jane turned from him and smiled, this time only to herself.

That fall they reached Virginia City, a bustling mining camp of canvas tents and wood-fronted hotels, saloons, and brothels. When a bigger gold strike came up Blackfoot way, they moved up there where in 1866, her mother took sick and up and died. Martha Jane had wanted to write Tommy, but between having to hunt food for the family and driving ore wagon teams,

learning to read and write seemed such a waste of time. When there was money to be made running a placer or driving a team, who needed to learn to write, she figured. Long as a person could read a scale good enough to weigh gold dust, that was all that mattered.

After her mother passed on, the family, now Martha Jane with her father and two brothers and three sisters, made their way to Salt Lake where her father died the next year. Little more than a child herself at fifteen, Martha Jane knew others could care better for her five siblings. She couldn't figure on anything better than heading 120 miles north to Fort Bridger where she found some families willing to take them in before she rode off into immortality.

She came to the Black Hills with the Jenny Expedition in '75, pulled a wounded cavalry Captain Egan onto her own horse to earn the name Calamity Jane, hitched her team up with several men, none of whom would stay around any longer than a tumbleweed before it dried up and blew away. She wore men's clothes and drank, cussed, and fought like a man. And in a smallpox epidemic she nursed a camp full of miners back from the drop edge of yonder.

Her last days were spent in the upstairs of Sheffer and Jays Saloon in Terry, South Dakota. Hand shaking, she scrawled out *Dear Tommy*, but they were the only words she knew.

Bio- Michael Tidemann lives in Estherville, IA where he is struggling to keep the cantaloupes in his garden alive. His nonfiction has appeared in *Overdrive*, *Western Business*, *Writer's Journal*, *Snowmobile*, *Truckers' News*, *Truckers USA*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune* and the *Des Moines Register*. His fiction has appeared in *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, *The Longneck*, *Struggle*, and *The Write Place at the Write Time*. For this story, he travelled to Princeton, MO, birthplace of Calamity Jane, to get the feel of the location. His author page is available at amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann.

An Incident at the Park

by Rebecca Linam

The girl sat on the park bench staring blankly into space.

The boy had been flying his kite when he noticed her. She had been staring at the same spot of air for twenty minutes now. She sat still, not moving a single muscle while the wind whipped her long, brown hair in tangles.

He wondered how long she would stare. He reeled in his kite and placed it on the ground keeping an eye on her the whole time. He had heard of elderly people acting like this after they'd had strokes, but he didn't think a girl his age could have had a stroke.

Then she moved slightly. Her lips rounded, and she whistled a short, high-pitched note that was barely audible.

A squirrel in a nearby tree climbed down, ran to the park bench, and hopped into her lap. She stroked it gently, making clicking sounds with her tongue. It climbed up to her shoulders and through her hair responding with similar sounds.

The boy had never seen a squirrel come when called by a human. He took one step toward her.

The squirrel tensed and scampered away. The girl jerked up stiffly and called, "Who's there?" She moved her head as if searching for someone.

Doesn't she notice me? the boy wondered.

The girl whistled again, but the squirrel never came. She sat still, staring into blank space with the same blank look in her eyes.

The boy took his kite and left, puzzled.

If he had taken a closer look at her eyes, he would have seen that she wasn't staring blankly. She had been listening to the song of the wind blowing through the trees and thinking about the squirrel she had trained. If she sat still, she could hear him better. During the past two years, she had trained the squirrel and learned what a few of his "words" meant. He had come for a short time today, but something or someone had scared him away.

"It was probably one of *them*," she thought. "Why are they always afraid to talk to me? I'm not afraid to talk to *them*."

She stood up and felt the hard pavement beneath her feet. She followed the path; she knew it would take her home.

The girl was sitting on the park bench again the next day, staring straight ahead.

The boy had brought his remote control racecar to drive around the park, but he didn't play with it. He watched the girl from behind a tree.

She called to the squirrel as she had yesterday, but it didn't come. She continued making the high-pitched sounds to try and entice him.

The boy leaned closer. His foot cracked a small twig. He held his breath, praying that she hadn't heard it.

She sat up and cocked her head toward him. "Who's there?" she asked.

He didn't reply. He let out the breath he'd been holding.

"I know you're still there. I can hear you breathing. Why won't you talk to me?"

The girl stood up frustrated. She followed the hard paved path home wondering why people were always afraid of her. In her heart, she knew they were probably just curious, but why did they hesitate to interact with her?

After reaching the carport, she unlocked the door and let herself inside. She brushed her fingertips against the cool, smooth top of the dining room table and entered the kitchen. Its floor was hard beneath her feet, unlike the thick dining room carpet.

She poured herself a glass of lemonade for its sweet, refreshing taste.

The girl's one true love was the piano. She made her way into the living room where her piano sat at the far end. She sat down on the bench and played Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, a haunting, sorrowful melody that reflected her mood. As she played, she wondered why the person at the

park had spied on her. Why had he or she never answered her questions? She turned a few possible answers over in her head but couldn't narrow them down to one.

He had followed her from the park walking along behind at a distance. He didn't think she'd noticed him. He followed her to a house with white curtains and watched her go inside. He was curious for a closer look. There was a large bay window at the front of the house. He crossed the yard and peered inside. He saw a living room containing a baby grand piano and two overstuffed armchairs.

The girl entered. She sat down at the piano and played. The music seemed to flow from her fingertips.

His first thought was, *She's good*. Then when he saw no sheet music in front of her, he thought, *She's really good*. A few minutes later when he noticed that she wasn't even looking at her hands, he thought, *She's the best I've ever seen!*

She played song after song, some of them fast and some of them slow. One of them scaled up and down the keyboard. Her face lit up with happiness as she brought the songs to life. It was almost as if she were in a dream world.

He stood at the window watching her play the piano for more than an hour. His fascination magically made the time seem like only a few minutes. He yearned for more.

Then he noticed a car pulling into the driveway. He ducked down behind the bushes and tiptoed home out of sight.

A day later, the girl approached the swings slowly and cautiously. Their typically squeaky hinges were silent. She grasped the chains of the nearest one and sat down.

It was a windy day, good for swinging. The wind blew through her hair making her feel as if she were flying. She pumped herself higher and higher without touching the ground. She felt like a bird.

A few minutes later, the chains of the swing next to her clanked as someone sat down.

She was swinging higher than he'd ever seen anyone swing before. Her hair blew in her face, but it didn't seem to bother her. She looked almost as happy as she had been when she was playing the piano.

He wanted a closer look at this mysterious girl. Casually, he walked over and sat down on the neighborhood swing.

They both swung in silence for a few minutes. The boy was just thinking about leaving when the girl turned toward him and said, "Hello." Her gaze seemed to pass right through him.

Startled, he cleared his throat. "Hello."

She smiled. It wasn't a big, gaudy smile that covered her whole face, but instead small and filled with eagerness.

She was so surprised at receiving a response that she didn't know what to say next. She swung even higher. This boy was one of *them*—one of the many people who never talked to her. Now, one of them had. She smiled both on the inside and the outside.

"Do you come here often?" she asked. She wanted to know more.

"Yes. Every afternoon since we moved here." His voice was hesitant and uncertain. "I live a block away."

"Have you been on the big slide yet? It's the fastest!"

"No."

"Then let's go!" She jumped expertly from the swing as it neared the ground.

The boy's feet scuffed against the gravel slowing his swing down.

The slide was located diagonally from the swings. The girl made nine giant steps away from the swing set. It reminded the boy of someone playing Mother-May-I when the leader has just ordered someone to take nine giant steps. Then she turned and made seven more giant steps in the direction of the slide. He wondered why she didn't just walk to the slide diagonally like most people. He realized that, even after talking to her, he knew little more about her than he'd known before.

After the seventh giant step, she took tiny shuffling footsteps like those of a toddler until she reached the gravel surrounding the slide's ladder. She grasped the railing and climbed up to the top where she zoomed down the metallic incline.

"Try it. It's fun!" she exclaimed.

He climbed to the top and slid. It was indeed fast. "Let's go to the monkey bars!" he shouted.

The boy's footsteps pounded against the grass, leaving her behind.

She followed the direction in which he'd gone until there was silence all around her. This boy was one of *them*. He could go places in diagonal directions. She had to reach them with carefully planned-out routes. She didn't know where the monkey bars were in relation to the slide.

She stood still and silent for a few seconds. The she burst into tears. She had almost made a friend all by herself, and now she couldn't get to him. Maybe he wouldn't want to be friends with her. Here she was somewhere in the park, and she didn't even know the way back to the concrete path that led home. She sobbed even harder. She just wanted to be like everyone else, but her mother would probably make her use that red-tipped cane again.

"Are you hurt?" a voice said.

It was the boy. He'd come back.

She gave a half-hearted smile through her tears. "No. I can't see, and I don't know the way to the monkey bars from the slide."

Her last sentence left him speechless. This girl was blind. He had known something about her was different, but he would have never guessed blindness. She had walked home by herself yesterday just like any other person. She had played the piano like a master. She had jumped from her swing so gracefully—something he could never do.

Her face turned red. “Will...will you help me?”

He could see that she was proud and strong-willed and hated to ask for help. Now she had been forced to ask for assistance. He gingerly took her arm and led her to the monkey bars. She climbed to the top rung and hung upside down by her knees, swaying back and forth in silence. She had that blank look on her face again.

“Thank you,” she finally said.

He could barely hear her voice. “I didn’t know you were blind,” the boy said. He thought it might somehow make her feel better.

She flipped right side up and looked toward him. “Is that true?” she asked. He couldn’t decide whether she was skeptical or hopeful or both.

“Yes, of course,” he replied.

The girl was so happy that she flipped over the bar she’d been holding onto three times. Someone had finally believed that she wasn’t blind. She felt invincible, as if she had just conquered the whole world.

The next hour passed quickly. When it came time to go home, instead of walking down the concrete path, she cut the number of steps she normally took in half and trotted home with the anticipation of a new friendship.

The boy rode his bicycle to the park the next day.

The girl was sitting on her usual park bench. This time she was smiling. The boy thought it looked like one of those picture-perfect holiday postcards. He got off his bicycle and leaned it against a tree.

The girl's head turned in his direction. "Hello, new friend! Is it you?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yes," he answered. "It's me." He sat down beside her.

She had turned her gaze toward the spot where his bicycle sat. After a few minutes, she said, "Is it hard to ride?"

"The bicycle? Not really," he replied.

"I hear people riding them here all the time," she said dreamily. "The chains make a clicking-buzzing sound."

She turned to him with a daring expression on her face. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he knew what she was about to ask, and it made him uneasy.

"Can I try it out?"

He was at a loss for words. He couldn't say no. That would make her think he didn't trust her. Then again, he couldn't say yes. What if she got hurt?

The silence grew.

"You don't think I can do it, do you?" she said with determination. "Nobody ever thinks I can do normal things just because I'm blind." She sat up straight and whistled for the squirrel.

It chattered at her from the top of a tree. It wouldn't come near as long as the boy was there.

The boy sighed. He knew that her one desire was to be like the seeing world. If he didn't let her ride, who would? All of her hopes and dreams would be in vain, and she had already made such progress. At that moment he decided that he would let her ride. He wasn't about to be just another person to let her down.

"You can ride it," he said.

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Really?" She made her way to the bicycle

with awe. “I know just where I want to ride it! The big hill!” She said it as if she had been planning it for years.

His stomach did a flip-flop. Then again, he had made a promise, and it wouldn’t be right to break it.

He took one handle, she took the other, and they both rolled the bicycle to the big hill.

When they reached the top of the hill, the girl sat on the seat of the bicycle. Whenever she had heard people ride by in the park before, she had thought and planned how she would ride a bicycle if she ever got the chance. Now it was time.

She felt for the handbrakes, turned to the boy, and said, “Tell me when I get to the bottom.” Then she pushed off with both feet.

As she raced down the hill, she kept both feet a few inches above the ground to keep her balance. She didn’t pedal; she let the momentum of the bicycle propel her. The speed blew her hair back and nipped at her sleeves. It felt like she was flying. It was much faster than the swings.

The front tire hit a rock. The bicycle started to fall, but the girl’s outstretched foot caught it. She continued racing down the hill.

“You’re at the bottom!” the boy shouted from far away.

She squeezed the handbrakes and pressed her feet to the ground. She now knew that she had found a true friend in the boy. He had once been one of *them*. Now he was different; he believed in her.

And he was her friend.

As the boy watched her glide down the hill, he knew she would never be entirely like the rest of the seeing world. No matter how many “seeing” skills she mastered, she would always be different; she would always see the beauty and adventure in life that others would take for granted and she’d taught him to see people for who they really are—how they look on the inside.

They walked the bicycle up the hill.

“I did it!” the girl kept repeating triumphantly.

“You can do anything,” the boy said, and he truly believed it.

Bio- Rebecca Linam teaches German at the University of North Alabama. Her previous work has appeared in *Lights and Shadows*, *Skipping Stones*, and *Times Daily*.

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