

The Write Place At the Write Time

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Come in...and be captivated...



"Lovely Fern" by Karen Burene; <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chaoticartworks>

About this image: "We had taken an interest in this piece back in early autumn. Before we knew which stories would make the final selection, before we'd received all of them, we had envisioned this digital collage going above the fiction section. In doing final layouts, we determined the order (flow) of the stories. What we didn't realize and didn't plan was that the fourth paragraph in the first story, has a description of a vintage photo of the protagonist's great-grandmother, her expression, and her string of pearls, strikingly reminiscent of the figure in the collage..." —Editorial Staff

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

Featured Stories:

"First Days of Spring" by Claire Ibarra

"The Bather" by Michael Tidemann

"Housebound" by Terry Fischer

"The Gold Ones" by Kathleen Wolak

First Days of Spring

by Claire Ibarra

Ellen walked through the gloomy house. In the living room, she ran her index finger over the coffee table to check for dust, she rearranged the throw pillows on the armchairs, and then straightened a picture on the wall.

She entered the foyer and listened to the hum of silence.

Ever since her son had left for Cambridge and her daughter moved to another borough across the city, Ellen found herself adjusting. The order and cleanliness were what she relished, the quiet she was learning to tolerate.

She walked to the end of the hallway and stood in front of the black and white photograph of her great-grandmother. Virginia wasn't smiling for the photo, yet in those days nobody smiled for a photograph. She had a paintbrush in her hand, and she wore a painter's frock with a string of pearls around her neck. She appeared powerful in some mysterious way. Ellen stared at the paintbrush in Virginia's hand.

The next day, Ellen pushed through boxes in the musty, cramped space of the attic. She spied the easel leaning against the wall, then worked her way through more knickknacks, a frayed bassinet and a broken rocking chair, until she found the paintings. She picked up the canvases one by one, and grabbing an old tablecloth, she wiped them off carefully.

One painting was a still life of wildflowers in a glass jar painted in pale greens and myriad shades of pink. Another, much smaller, was a window framed by drapes that looked out into a garden of tulips. She examined them and was surprised to find that they weren't awful.

Ellen sat on a leather trunk and rested her head in her hands, as she thought back to when she was a student at the London School of Fine Art. She was still haunted by class critiques and pompous professors who criticized her work. Her paintings had been labeled timid and dull.

Shaking off those memories, Ellen continued rummaging until she salvaged one more painting tucked behind the easel. It was a large canvas, which she awkwardly lifted and placed on the trunk. It was a somber, coarse oil painting of red apples in a wooden bowl.

Each apple was subtly distinct. One was unnaturally shiny and perfect; another seemed strange and uninviting; another was old, dried, and withered; still another appeared bruised and battered. All of the apples seemed to tell their own story. She tried to remember when she had painted it.

She recalled it was after spending three weeks at home for a holiday. Rather than feeling remorse at having uncovered such a bleak picture of her family, she felt relieved that she was capable of depth after all.

Ellen took the painting to a nearby framing shop, picked out a rustic dark wood frame, and a week later hung it over the mantle of the fireplace in the sitting room, replacing a replica of Monet's poplars. The painting looked out of place in the room decorated with layers of satin upholstery, throw pillows and drapes in shades of peach and creamy white.

When she heard Franklin at the door, she ran to greet him. "Come, I have something to show you." She led her husband into the sitting room, lifting her hand toward the painting. "What do you think?"

"My Lord, Ellen, where did you find that?" Franklin stood with his hands on his waist and shook his head. "Have you been to the flea markets again?" He reminded her that since discovering the flea markets, she had come home on several occasions loaded with useless rubbish.

"I painted it," she said.

"I'm sorry, dear, yes, I can see that now. It's really quite lovely," Franklin stammered. He took off his suit jacket, draped it on the back of the armchair and then loosened his tie.

“No, it’s not lovely, but I still like it.” Ellen smoothed down her gray wisps of hair. “I’ve decided to start painting again.” Ellen needed something for herself, something to do that felt meaningful and fulfilling.

She had dedicated most of her life to her husband and children, but now they were independent and always busy. Though terrified by the thought of failure, Ellen knew it was time to rekindle her passion for painting, or let it rest and die away forever.

“Do you think you’ll have the time? You’re so busy with your charity work—” As usual, Franklin used a logical line of reasoning, which Ellen ignored, as she made plans to set up a workspace.

The following days, she took great care in setting up a corner in the sunroom with an easel, canvases, paints and brushes. She created a wheel of warm and cool spectral colors on the palette. Even their names—phthalo blue, mars black and burnt umber—seemed rich and exotic. When everything was ready, she sat on the stool and stared at the primed canvas. The turpentine was biting and oddly sweet, and it made her light headed. Though others complained of the fumes, she had always liked the smell. She picked up a soft sable brush and rubbed the bristles against her cheek and closed her eyes.

Upon opening her eyes to the empty canvas, she felt a tightening in her chest. I’ll start tomorrow, she thought as she put the brush down.

Just then Franklin came into the room. “How does a jaunt into the city sound? We can meet Henry and Madeline for dinner. Madeline’s been asking about you.”

“We’re not really friends,” Ellen stated flatly.

“Come now, you’ve known her for more than twenty years.”

The last time Ellen had seen Madeline they were having lunch together. The sunlight on the restaurant patio was intense, and Ellen had a glass of wine with her meal. Feeling slightly tipsy, she had let her defenses down.

“Madeline, do you ever regret the choices you’ve made? I don’t mean just a passing sensation, but profound disappointment—bordering on despair.”

When Madeline looked down at her plate of salad and tersely cleared her throat, Ellen immediately regretted the outburst, wishing she could have swallowed the words with her last sip of Pinot Grigio. She could hardly stand the thought of people judging her, and she had exposed herself. Among her circle, outward appearances and decorum were highly valued.

Now she explained to Franklin, “I think we’re only friends because of you and Henry.”

Henry and Franklin had been college roommates and were business partners, tennis partners and overall partners. She didn’t mention to Franklin that none of her friends were real friends, but mere social acquaintances; not one truly knew her at all. Then she noticed Franklin’s perplexed expression.

“Of course we can meet them tonight.”

“So, we’ll see them at eight o’clock.” Franklin kissed her cheek.

Ellen set the table for tea, using floral china ornamented with delicate rosebuds, and she cut cucumber sandwiches into perfect triangles. The light was soft around the room, as she walked over to the French doors leading out to her garden. It was spring, and the geraniums and impatiens grew in trim rows along the yard hooded by grandiose maples and elms. Everything appeared immaculate.

The next day, she sat once again at the easel. She stared at the simple arrangement she had made on the table: a teacup, a book and delicate wire rim eyeglasses. She tilted her head to one side and studied the still life. If I put sunflowers this would look much better, she thought.

More than a few days passed, and Ellen sat on the stool staring at the blank canvas. Franklin walked in and stood behind her. “What have we here? I might have thought you’d have the time to join the ladies for that charity luncheon yesterday after all.”

“I have been busy, and I wish you wouldn’t worry about it. This is my affair, and I’m doing as I please.” Ellen felt a rush of energy. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m trying to concentrate.”

But the truth was Ellen felt paralyzed. The white canvas was pristine; it was perfect. How would she be able to make nothing into something beautiful?

Franklin shrugged, but Ellen detected a slight smile as he raised his eyebrows with a look of surprise. He kissed her cheek like he always did and left the room.

Ellen gazed at the empty canvas and thought back to one of her old art professors, Mr. Galen. He was tall and slender, with longish hair for those days. He had deep set eyes and gentle hands, and when he placed his hand over Ellen's to guide her strokes with the fan brush, creating wisps of clouds in the sky or veins on leaves, her heart pounded and she was acutely aware of her right breast resting against his arm.

Just then Ellen heard a ruckus at the front door, followed by a shuffling sound moving through the house.

"Hello, Mummy."

"Oh, Daphne, I didn't expect you today."

Daphne was nothing like her mother. She wore a flowing skirt with shiny sequin beads, her long dark hair draped her shoulders, and she glided and twirled about as her hands fluttered over the objects set so precisely in their place.

"I saw your painting in the other room, and I think it's very soulful. All that talent hidden away! Are you ready to start?" Daphne leaned against the table to watch her mother work.

Ellen concentrated for a moment then dipped the brush cautiously into the cobalt oil. She swirled the flat brush around in the paint, watching rings form like ripples in a deep pond. "I can't start today."

"Mum," Daphne said knowingly. "Do it so I can see the first brushstrokes." She leaned her body toward the canvas in anticipation while drumming her fingers on the table.

Ellen let out a sigh, as if she had been holding her breath. "I can't, Daphne. Who was I trying to fool? This was a mistake."

Ellen realized that she could continue strolling art exhibits at the Tate Museum, sitting on the board of the Performing Arts, and collecting art books. If she gave up, nobody would notice and life would go on the same.

"You're so tense. It seems to me you're taking this too seriously; why don't you loosen up and have some fun?" Daphne picked up the small wire rim reading glasses and held them up as she said, "Now, this is what I mean. Don't you think these are a bit constraining? I'd rather write a thesis than try to paint these."

"I've got to run, have a belly dancing class tonight, but I'll stop by tomorrow to see how it's going."

Ellen reflected on her daughter's boldness. Daphne had a large girth, but that didn't stand in her way. Her daughter was always trying new things: sculpting, modern dance, writing poetry, learning Portuguese, all of which Franklin thought was entirely impractical. And it seemed Daphne didn't excel at any of these endeavors. Ellen and Franklin often argued about that.

Once again, the house was left still and quiet. Ellen listened for some sign of life, but only the refrigerator hummed in the background.

Ellen thought about what Daphne had said. Too serious...

Ellen walked over to the still life, to the book of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*—open to "A Midsummer Night's Dream." She glanced at the pages and then slammed the book closed. Ellen felt tension and fear burst out of her core, and suddenly she was angry.

She picked up the glasses, threw them on the oak floor, then stomped and ground them with her foot so that they made a crackling noise. The sensation of glass crushing beneath the sole of her loafer sent a shiver down her spine. She knocked over the fragile teacup, leaving it precariously close to the edge of the table. She fought the urge to move it, leaving it to its fate.

Ellen then walked into the kitchen, noticing the perfectly folded tea towels and the clean, bare counters. She grabbed a tea towel and crumpled it into a ball and threw it on the floor. She opened the cabinet and took out a dish, almost hurling it against the tile but then reconsidered. She tossed the plate carelessly onto the counter.

Back in the sunroom, Ellen picked up the brush with sticky, thick dark-blue, and rubbed it all over the canvas, creating bold lines and pockets of space. She took a tube of canary yellow oil paint and squeezed it onto the canvas, which added texture and contrast. Ellen began to work in a frenetic, wild state, picking up tubes of paint and smearing them over the canvas.

She ignored *fat over lean* and drying time, thinking, “What do I care about cracking, shrinking or wrinkling?” It was her grand experiment in surface contortion and she actually wanted to see it deform.

Franklin entered the room and saw Ellen with paint in her hair and all over her blouse, flushed and disheveled. He walked up behind her and kissed her neck. He rubbed his body against her and she dropped the palette knife on the floor, cadmium red splattering on the oak. Ellen turned her body to him, and she felt a wave of heat rise from her pelvis all the way to the top of her head. She couldn’t remember feeling such electricity and urgency in years. Ellen recognized the look of surprise on Franklin’s face—the same smile and raised eyebrows—as she unbuttoned his shirt.

Later that night, Ellen looked at the clock at her bedside and it read 2:06. She couldn’t sleep and so she slipped out of bed, put her slippers on and went downstairs. She sat in the sunroom, in front of the canvas, and looked at her painting. It was messy and aimless, bold and carefree. It had random shapes and colors, and was unattractive.

Ellen decided that she didn’t like it and she smiled.

She thought about the feel of the sable brush, soft and feathery when she rubbed it against her skin and the weight of it in her hand as she dipped into viscous colors. She imagined stroking the clean surface with paint, her hand dancing with the canvas. The materials and tools always came alive.

When she climbed back into bed, Franklin stirred. He turned over to face her and said sleepily, “You are more beautiful now than the day I met you. Remember that day? You were in the art room and wore a filthy apron caked with paint, and your hair was smudged with bright red. And you had a devilish sparkle in your eyes.” Franklin chuckled at the memory.

“I remember now,” she whispered.

Bio- Claire Ibarra is a writer, poet, and photographer residing in Miami, Florida. Her fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *The MacGuffin*, *Amoskeag*, *The Broken Plate*, *Natural Bridge*, *Sliver of Stone Magazine*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*. She is also a contributor to the anthologies *An Honest Lie*, *Dreams of Duality*, and *Torched*, among others. Claire teaches creative writing in correctional institutions, working with nonprofits dedicated to social change and justice. She is currently in the MFA creative writing program at Florida International University. You can learn more at www.claireibarra.com

The Bather

by Michael Tidemann

How Benny wound up in Philly was a mystery even to him. But here he was, in Philadelphia Museum of Art French Romantics room, gazing at a life-size painting of a clutch of women in a stream. *The Large Bathers*, named for its scale, was Renoir's most ambitious and taxing work. On the lower right was a young woman with the most impish smile. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen at the most. The rest of the women looked like a painting. But the girl on the lower right, splashing water on her friend, was fully realized. She emerged from the canvas as a living, breathing girl.

Every day Benny came here. Past the Miros and the Picassos. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* he could even live without. But every day he came to see 'the bathers', especially *the* bather—her. And when he was done looking at her, digesting her visual reality to his very core, he would leave the museum fully.

He had moved to Philly after being laid off from his job at the tractor factory in Iowa. His plan had been to go to New Jersey to help his dying brother with his towing business. He told Allen he loved him and his brother garbled the same thing back over the phone, and Benny headed out as soon as the human resources office handed him his last check.

Jessica felt pretty bad about dumping Mr. Heinrichs off at the bus depot in Omaha, but she knew she didn't have any choice. By now the police would be searching all of South Dakota and maybe Iowa too. In Nebraska she'd be safe—for a few hours anyway. Mr. Heinrichs, a ninety-year-old man with poor eyesight, was the latest victim of one of her father's schemes. She had no choice but to get out of there immediately, him in the car, the trunk filled with the cash and evidence from the fake driving school.

"You want me to what?" cried Mr. Heinrichs, standing there in front of the diesel-spewing Greyhound as she handed him his ticket.

"Just ride the bus back to Sioux Falls, okay?"

“But why can’t I drive? I drove all the way down here, didn’t I?”

Jess was still shaking from the ride. “I can’t go back with you. I need the car because I have to go somewhere else.”

“Well why can’t you go with me?”

“Because the cops are probably after me.”

“Oh, well why didn’t you just say so. I can drive with my new driver’s license when I get back to South Dakota then?”

“As long as the cops don’t stop you.”

Mr. Heinrichs winked as he stepped on the bus and turned to her one last time. “That was really fun.”

“Yeah...bye.” Jess waved as Mr. Heinrichs boarded the bus, not realizing that even God could not reinstate his driving privileges.

Benny’s trip out to his brother in New Jersey did not go well. He was barely out of Iowa when a weird grinding and crunching sounded under his car and he rolled to a stop in front of a repair shop at Prairie du Chien. A little over a thousand dollars later he was on the road, scratching. It had taken six days to find and install a transmission, so he had spent the whole time in the cheapest motel he could find.

“Bedbugs,” the doctor in Janesville announced.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ve seen them hundreds of times.”

He did as the doctor said, stopping to do all his laundry and take a shower and spend the night in a motel room in Peoria—a room infested with bedbugs.

He was really itching when he pulled up to his brother Allen’s house in Moorestown. Benny’s cell phone had gone dead because it had been a few days since he’d charged it, and he didn’t want to stop to plug it in. And so

here he was, staring at an empty five-bedroom colonial, featuring a pool in the back and a brook coursing through the highly desirable 2.2-acre lot. There were no deer and turkey abounding right now, though.

His sister-in-law Lynn, niece Taylor and her husband Rod, and their daughter Kristina arrived four hours later to tell him that his brother had just passed. They didn't really come out and tell him right away, though. It just sort of eked out, the same way they piled out of Paul's SUV as though frozen, even though it was August and humid as a four-hundred-pound gorilla's armpit.

"Grandpa died," said Kristina, taking out the ear bid just long enough to tell him. "Where were you."

"Well, I broke down in Wisconsin then got sort of...sick a little later." He knew he must have seemed to be pleading for forgiveness when he looked at them, trying to decide who was his ally and who was not. "Did he pass...peacefully?"

Rod cleared his throat, deferring to whoever dared speak first.

"He was in agony, Ben," Lynn finally said.

He'd better find a motel.

"I have a room ready for you, Ben," said Lynn, turning from him, no longer able to face him. "It was ready a week ago."

Things really didn't warm up after that—especially after the funeral. And when he asked Lynn if she still wanted him to help with the towing business she told him she was planning on selling it to their foreman. "There's no sense in your starting there now. He wouldn't want to keep you on anyway."

That was when Benny knew he was out of a job. And when Lynn found out about his bedbugs, he was out of a home and what was the rest of his family.

The drivers started getting more aggressive once Jessica was east of Illinois. After she passed through a tollgate, a roaring engine from behind soared past, the driver flipping her off.

Bob had always said the Bonneville was a fast car. “Be careful when you’re driving it, Jess. If there’s a top end to this thing I’ve never found it. We (he always said we as though her complicity somehow assuaged his guilt) need that extra horsepower though in case the cops come after us.” Her father had rambled on about things she didn’t understand—dual overhead cams, high-rise something, headers, supercharger...she didn’t understand a word of it. Much like his excuses. “Because it’s survival of the fittest out there and we need to work hard, step on a few backs, to secure our future,” “Because the system’s corrupt and we’re just corrupting the system to get our due like anyone else with some sense”, and ironically the one most effective and hated by her, “Because I’m your father.”

Ripped out of school her junior year to “help” him with his businesses, Jess had long forgotten what it was that she had wanted. She’d wanted to be an artist. Her sketchbook was the only thing she lamented leaving behind when she’d booked it in the Bonneville.

The next time someone tried to pass her and cut her off, she munched the throttle and tires screamed a smoking, unholy wail that left the other driver, the tollbooth, and a good portion of Butler County, Pennsylvania in a burning cloud of smoke.

Hands gripped on the steering wheel as though choking a chicken, rock blaring from the CD player, Jess entered Philly on the Schuylkill Expressway, ready to rip the city apart. With her determination, the city didn’t have a chance. She was going to be an artist, damn it. It didn’t matter if she had to sleep in the alleys along with the winos. No one was going to stop her now.

With the last of his money, Benny rented a gritty cold water studio in Chinatown. His landlord ran a restaurant on the main level. In the foyer glittering orange fish and crustaceans swam and crawled happily until they were plucked out and boiled or baked to perfection. Benny knew right away it would be difficult dealing with his landlord when he went into the restaurant to hand him the \$2,400 for the first and last month’s rent plus deposit.

That was when he saw the HELP WANTED sign. “You’re looking for help?” he asked the owner.

The owner glared at him, angry for his asking. “So you even know how to read. I always looking for help. Cooks, servers, dishwashers, bus boys. I need them all. Why? You want job?”

“Sure.”

“You pay rent first. Then we talk.”

Jessica pulled over at a rest area in central Pennsylvania to go to the restroom and have a cool drink. Before she headed out again, she opened the trunk and set the spare on the ground and lifted the carpet and flipped through Bob’s license plate ‘collection’. Oklahoma, Oregon—there they were—Pennsylvania. She unscrewed the Ohio plates from the brackets and threw a couple handfuls of dust on the new plates so they matched the rest of the car and headed out.

Through his first exchange with Mr. Chen, Benny became the only Caucasian employee of a staff of twenty—all Asian except for himself. Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Lao voices buzzed about as he started work the next day. Pointing, laughing, elbowing each other, it was a feast of languages and he couldn’t sample the hors d’oeuvres.

“No. You no do that right. Carry more like this,” said Mr. Chen as he carried four tables of dishes in his bussing tub to Benny’s one. “Otherwise you waste time I pay you for.”

The first time Benny tried it, three plates and a cup tumbled out and broke on the floor. “That cost you day’s pay,” Chen said.

How Mr. Chen figured wages was a mystery to Benny. Chen paid cash so there was no check stub, and when Benny looked at the \$283 for working from eleven to nine, ten hours a day, seven days a week, he couldn’t believe it. “So you took out for taxes?”

“Of course I take out for taxes. What you think? I some kinda gangsta?”

Benny already wanted to quit. That changed when Chen gave him a raise.

“Gee, thanks, Mr. Chen,” said Benny, counting out the \$347—another \$54 for the additional 21 hours. “Uh, how much am I being paid an hour, Mr. Chen?” He knew it wasn’t over six bucks an hour after taxes—and that was at straight time.

“What????!! You no paid by hour. You paid salary. You such a big shot already to question me? Maybe you want to go back to bus boy.”

“No, Mr. Chen. The pay is fine.”

“Good,” said Chen, nodding at the dining area filled with people. “Now hurry up and cook so you can go take their orders and bus tables and do dishes.”

Even working eleven hours a day, seven days a week, Benny found he was barely making a living with rent at eight-hundred a month. It helped that he ate all his meals at the restaurant, but he needed to earn more, so he took a part-time job delivering the City Paper once a week. Chen bristled when he asked for a day off with no reduction in pay. Surprisingly, Chen gave in, and Benny found himself with Mondays off—a whole day he could spend at the art museum.

“You must like that painting,” said a museum guard, impeccably attired in Armani.

“She’s beautiful,” said Benny, entranced in his own bit of heaven.

“There are other artworks here, you know,” said the guard.

“I know that. But just standing here admiring her is all I want to do.”

The guard shrugged. “It’s up to you. You paid to get in.” After that, Benny was visually monitored from the time he entered the museum until he left.

Jess spent her first night at a wildlife park just west of Philadelphia International Airport, jets roaring over as she sat under a shelter half that Bob had left in the trunk, heating a can of beans on the fire. She’d managed to catch a couple fish in Cobbs Creek, and they went well with the potatoes, bread and onions.

Jessica laughed as a bandit-faced raccoon caught the bread and tore at it with his paws, the sign DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS nailed to the tree above him. She didn't care, though. Raccoons needed to eat too, didn't they? And what harm would it be to feed one just this once.

Her fun with the raccoon was disrupted when a phalanx of motorcycles roared past her campsite—probably the most isolated in the park since she was still hiding from the cops. The leader, a huge man who sat atop the Harley-Davidson like a sumo wrestler on a football, stopped to smile at her through bug-encrusted teeth. “Hi honey, wanna have some fun with my bros an’ me?”

Jessica initially acted as though she hadn't heard and went to the Bonneville where she got Bob's .38 special from the glove box and turned to fire three shots in rapid succession. “Oh really? What kind of fun?”

The gang leader gawked at her .38 and roared off, the rest of the gang clinging behind.

As she placed the .38 down, Jess thought about guys in general. All she wanted was a good man—maybe someone misunderstood. Maybe someone who knew what it was to be down on their luck and just in need of a break. Maybe someone who felt as alone as she did and would be grateful enough for her love that he'd give the same in return and never try to take advantage.

As the fetid blanket of night descended, she decided to go skinny dipping in the creek. The cool water felt wonderful, washing away the grimy miles and memories behind her. As she stepped from the water and dried herself with a towel, she couldn't decide what to do with her hair so she did it in a braid. For some reason she felt like transforming herself into someone from a more innocent time, someone more like she'd been before having had to live life the hard way. She wanted to be seen differently. She wanted to be seen.

One Saturday night when Benny was just finishing up he came from the kitchen with his bussing tub when he saw her. The girl from the painting was there in the flesh, just a little older.

Benny slowly approached, picking up one table then another. The restaurant was empty except for the girl, pulling back her light brown plait, the most beautiful girl Benny had ever seen—the girl from Renoir's painting.

With Chen standing there, tapping his foot, Benny knew he wanted to tell the girl to leave. After all, all she'd ordered was a cup of egg drop soup and tea. It was ten after nine and Chen's naturally dark complexion burned darker every minute she remained. As Benny approached her table, she looked up at him.

"Excuse me, but..."

Jess looked up at him. "Yes?"

"You really remind me of someone."

"Oh, who's that?" said Jess, wrapping her hands covetously around her tea as she sensed they wanted her to leave.

"Well, actually not someone I know. Not exactly. You just..." he struggled for the right words. As Chen tired of waiting for Benny to chase her off, Benny stepped closer. "You just resemble a girl in a painting. I know that sounds weird, but it's true. Do you mind me saying that?"

Against her typical instinct, any defensiveness in her body language melted away. "No. I love art."

"Would you like to go to the art museum with me sometime?"

Jess looked at him, a natural smile spreading to her eyes. "Yes. I'd like that a lot."

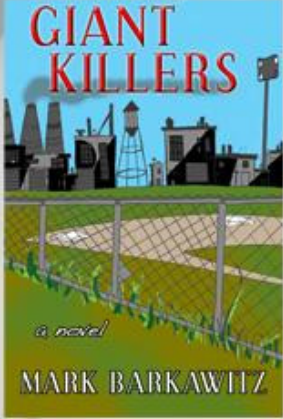
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Editor's Note: To read the prequel to this piece and learn Jessica's backstory, be sure to look for "Driving School" in our upcoming spring/summer issue.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is a newspaper staff writer and adjunct college instructor living in Estherville, Iowa. His fiction has appeared in *Struggle*, *The Longneck*, *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, and *The Write Place At the Write Time*. His nonfiction has appeared in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Overdrive*, *Snowmobile*, *Truckers' News*, *Truckers USA*, *Western Business*, *Writer's Journal*, the *Des Moines Register*, and other publications.

His author page is available at: amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann



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Housebound

by Terry Fischer

Pastor Mueller's posture was rigid. It matched the white collar which was starched to stiff cardboard and cut into his neck. He wore a pair of earnest, wire-rim glasses with his hair tucked behind his ears, and an honest smile. He smoothed his palms down his thighs as he said, "I'll be back again next month, the first Monday of February."

Across from Odessa, he was perched in front of the crocheted pillows, balanced on the edge of her frayed sofa. He ran a finger between his collar and neck trying to loosen its hold. Failing, he said, "You can listen to the sermon on the radio. I know it's not the same, but many housebound parishioners enjoy the broadcast."

At the window, heavy brocaded curtains fell to the floor and through a gap, sunshine displayed dust that danced lazily in the stale air. The room was over hot, yet Odessa sat with an aging afghan over her lap. "Here," he said, standing. "I'll tune in the station."

Odessa watched him cross to the bureau and fiddle with the radio dial.

Squawks and gusts of music filled the room. Satisfied, he clicked it off, and turned around. "Ten-thirty on Sundays," he said.

"Yah," said Odessa. "I live too long," her voice was heavy with the German accent she'd brought with her from East Berlin.

"Nonsense," he replied.

"Why am I still here?" Odessa picked at the edge of the worn Bible in her lap. "I am useless; I have nothing left to give."

Pastor Mueller took in her measure, a small woman with swollen knuckles, white hair neatly wound in a coil at the back of her head, and watery eyes that refused to focus. "Everyone has something to offer. Wisdom is with aged men, with long life is understanding, Job 12:12." He smiled patiently. "With God, there is a plan."

He reached into the backpack that sat on the floor at his feet and pulled out a book. "Here, I've brought you a gift." He placed it in her lap. "It's the Lutheran Hymnal; I know you love to sing." Seeing her confusion, he added, "On Sundays, you can join the service, even if you only sing along."

After Pastor Mueller left, Odessa reflected on her singing. Yes, she loved to sing. She'd played the piano too. Odessa had been the pianist at St. Paul's until the congregation raised enough funds for the new organ and hired a young man. Oh, but that was twenty years ago, she didn't have the strength

now, her hands too bent and gnarled. She still had the studio piano, all eighty-eight keys, with the ivory missing from middle C. She lifted the fall board and released the scent of lemon oil. With a wavering finger, she pressed Concert A. Autsch, even to her aging ears, it sounded out of tune.

"Nein, too old. Vat shall we do, old friend?"

Odessa returned to her comfortable chair and took the Hymnal in her hands. She let it fall open near the middle and began to sing, Hymn 305. "Soul, adorn thyself with gladness, Leave behind all gloom and sadness," Her song was meek, her vocal chords tight from lack of use. She cleared her throat and began again. With one hand beneath the tome and the other resting on the page, she warmed to the message. The hymnal lay open to Hymn 560, for with her failing eyesight, she could no longer see the page. By the third stanza, her contralto voice rose with conviction. And, in the end, she'd managed to remember all seven verses.

The first call came that night. It was late into the evening as Odessa dozed in her chair. The phone sat on the bureau and she struggled out of the cushions and tottered across the floor. She lifted the receiver.

"Hello?" she asked sternly, phone calls were for surveys and solicitors. "Hello," she asked again.

"Sarah? Sarah, is that you?"

"Nein," Odessa managed before the caller went on.

"Sarah, I can't take it anymore." Odessa could hear a baby crying and the caller's muffled voice, "Shhh, it'll be ok," then back into the phone, "he's out of work again. You know how crazy he gets. I think we can manage, but I feel like I'm at wits end. I only need a little help."

Obviously, this caller had a wrong number. Before she could point out the error, the caller rushed on. "I know it's too much to ask, but really, I feel so alone."

Odessa moved the phone away from her ear. She was about to replace the receiver, when a song began in her heart. It was Hymn 145. "Jesus, Refuge of the weary, Blest Redeemer, whom we love, Fountain in life's desert

dreary." The song had three verses and she swayed on her feet as she sang it to the end, low and tender. At the other end of the phone, she heard silence, finally broken by the faint sound of a baby's coo. Then click, the line went dead.

Odessa placed the phone gently in the cradle.

The second night, the phone rang as Odessa was putting warm milk on to heat. She took the dishtowel from the counter and dried her hands, placed the milk carton in the refrigerator, and waddled to the living room to answer. Well after the eighth ring, she said, "Hello?"

There was static on the line. "Yah, is someone there?" she asked, standing at the bureau looking out through the window at the night. The street lights were rung with halos and snow blew loosely on the walk.

"It's me," the caller said, her voice sounding far away, "From last night."

Odessa was confused. In the silence that followed, the furnace kicked on and pushed warm air into the room. "You sang a song."

"Oh," Odessa said. "You are better?"

"No, things are the same. But, you know, I felt better after your song. I forgot, for awhile. Just awhile. I still have my troubles. I guess, I always will."

"I'm sorry, it was not for me to do," said Odessa.

"Would you do it again?" she asked. "A song."

"Nien," said Odessa. "Ist a hymn, a Lutheran Hymn."

"Please, sing for my baby girl. Nelly is her name."

"Yah." Odessa laid the phone on the bureau and crossed to pick up the hymnal. She held it in both hands, opening it toward the back, then closed it, and folded it into her breast. In a fragile, pure voice, she began,

"Jesus loves me—this I know, For the Bible—tells me so. Little ones—to him belong, They are weak—but He is strong." When she finished, she returned to the bureau and picked up the receiver. Holding it to her ear, she asked, "Es gut?"

"Thank you," the caller whispered, and the line went dead.

They called again on Thursday. And, then on Friday night.

It became a ritual. During the day Odessa would hum and remember snatches of forgotten hymns. She would shuffle to the piano and push down middle C or G, testing her voice until she had the right key. She fixed hot tea with honey, drinking it to keep her vocal chords loose. She'd open the shades wide to let in the day. She recalled the Hymns that spoke of joy and hope, and each night she sang a hymn. Shared with a young woman and a baby.

When Pastor Mueller arrived on the first Monday of February, the piano tuner was already there. Odessa was seated, as usual in her chair, but the phone had been moved to the wooden table at her side. The afghan was neatly spread across the sofa back and the crocheted pillows fluffed at either end. The house smelled of cinnamon and a tray of pastries sat, temptingly, on the bureau.

God is good; she's discovered a purpose, he thought as he ran a finger between his collar and neck trying to loosen its hold.

Bio- Terry Fischer lives in Texas with her husband of thirty-five years and their three cats. She is a part time IT Coordinator and enjoys technology, travel, and playing in her church hand bell choir. Terry is an active member of the Clear Lake Area Writers Group and is a contributing author in their publication, *Clear Lake Area Writers - Selections Fall 2014*.



"Amongst the Chaos of Being" by Ken Steinkamp; <http://kensteinkamp.com/>

About this image: "This painting embodies the energy and essence of my style with a vigorous emotive use of line color and texture in a chaotic yet controlled manner. Using paint, pencil, ink, oil stick, carving tools and a grinder, I attack and play with the surface in search of its truth. The result is psychographic and amorphic shapes waiting to engage the viewer."

It was painted for a 2012 group exhibit at the Hygienic Art Gallery in New London, CT. The theme was to explore the relationship of art and science in the cosmos." —KS

The Gold Ones

by Kathleen Wolak

I never wanted to work at a school.

My whole life, I never got along with anyone under the age of twenty-five. I grew up in a shadowy area of the Bronx where the rats go to hang themselves. I made it a point to not make any friends when I was a kid because I didn't want to be one of those people that stuck around my neighborhood. In my young mind, forging any connection with the people I was growing up around meant that I would be stuck.

It was a stupid way to be, and I realized far too late that I was coming off as a pretentious little jerk. I isolated myself from everyone including my family. My only redeeming quality was that I could play the piano. I taught myself on the display keyboard that was in the window of a failing music shop around the corner from our apartment. The owner, Mr. Briggs, didn't care if I banged on the keys and tried to figure out the notes during business hours. He was far too wrapped up in his scratch off lottery tickets and race forms.

When the store finally did close, Mr. Briggs gave me the keyboard, free of charge. It was the best day ever—Christmas Eve, 1992. There was a knock on our door and when I went to answer it, there was Mr. Briggs, all three hundred pounds of him, standing there with the keyboard. There was a big green bow on it and he was sweating from lugging it up the three flights of stairs our building had in lieu of an elevator.

"Here ya go kid. Store's closing up and I think you're the only person to ever give this keyboard a second thought."

He handed it to me and I remember being so happy I couldn't breathe. It was the only gift I got that Christmas.

After I got that keyboard, I shut myself off from everything but my music. I picked up some old learning music books from the Goodwill and before long I was composing my own pieces. My mother didn't know much about classical music—she was an immigrant from Ecuador and didn't have time in between cleaning apartments on the upper west side to focus on her son's newfound hobby.

It was a teacher who recognized that I had musical talent. I always cut my classes at school to sneak off to the music room where there was a real

piano. I loved my keyboard, but banging out notes and sonatas on a real piano sounded so much richer to me. One day, when I was playing something I had written, one of the third grade teachers heard me and came into the room to see what was going on. She was a kind, older lady named Mrs. Jones. She was one of those women who had a stern face, but a very sweet demeanor. When she approached me, I thought for sure I was going to be in trouble. I knew I wasn't supposed to be in the music room, especially by myself.

Mrs. Jones approached the piano bench and sat down beside me.

"Was that you, playing just now?" She asked. She didn't seem mad, just genuinely curious.

I nodded.

"It wasn't a tape?" She asked.

I shook my head. "No ma'am. I was practicing this," I pointed to the sheet music I had written. "See, I wrote it last night and all I have at home to practice on is a keyboard."

Mrs. Jones turned toward me.

"Let me get this straight. You wrote this music, the music you were playing just now?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Alright. Tell me, where are you supposed to be right now?"

"Math class," I said sheepishly. I didn't want to have to go back to math. It was terribly boring and Mr. White smelled like sardines.

"Hmm. Okay, come with me." Mrs. Jones got up and led me to the door. I was very disappointed in myself for getting caught. I just hoped she wouldn't tell the principal that I was skipping class.

We walked to the principal's office and Mrs. Jones told me to wait outside on the hard bench while she went in and talked to Principal Shepard. I waited nervously and tried to distract myself with a piece of yarn that was hanging on the bulletin board behind me. I pulled it down and started to tie

knots with it when Mrs. Jones and Principal Shepard came out and stood in front of me.

“Well Mario, Mrs. Jones here tells me you have quite a musical talent.”

I was shocked. I looked up at Principal Shepard, who was smiling down at me and tried to nod. I couldn’t find a response in my dry mouth.

“We are starting an enrichment program here at the school. Something for the more, well, gifted students. Basically, for an hour after school every day, a music teacher from Gastineau Fine Arts Academy will be meeting with the students who have been selected to participate in the program. Is that something you would be interested in, Mario?”

I nodded my head so fast it hurt my neck. First of all, I was ecstatic that I wasn’t in trouble; secondly, I couldn’t believe I was being singled out because of my music. I never thought playing the piano would get me anywhere, and I honestly didn’t know myself if I was any good. It was nice to have someone who had nothing to gain from telling the truth tell me that what I was doing was being done well.

The next few weeks were unlike anything I had ever experienced. The teacher that was sent over from Gastineau was a pretty blonde lady named Miss Greenlough. She looked like an angel from a Christmas card but I quickly found out her demeanor did not match her ethereal appearance. There were only three other students in the program besides me, and she made it her duty to emotionally break down each and every one of us before the end of our hour together every day. I remember one day, when she asked us all to show her what we thought was our best work that week, I played a sonata I had composed. When I was finished, she crossed her arms and stared me down as if I had just insulted her core beliefs in life.

“What on earth was that? You say it’s a sonata, but if you think that is what a sonata is supposed to sound like, I think perhaps you should research the word. Who’s next?”

I never cried. Still, to this day, I haven’t really cried, but I guarantee that this was the moment I came the closest. It’s not that I thought what I had written was brilliant, or even that good-it was her face. Something about the twisted glare she put on while talking to me made me feel like I had just done something horribly wrong and would never recover from it.

That was my first taste of what a fine arts school really was. Miss Greenlough will forever remain in my mind as the singular representation of Gastineau, and all schools like it. She was an overlord who, while she probably didn't have many students under her control, delighted in breaking down the things they did that she personally did not find pleasing. She made subjective art something that was not subjective at all, and only her tastes mattered. I hated her, and dropped out of the program after only a month, and never went into that music room again.

I didn't play my keyboard for a while after the incident with Miss Greenlough. It just sat in the corner of my room and collected dust while I tried to actually get back in touch with the world around me. I wasn't happy, but for some reason the thought of playing or writing music made me even more depressed.

At breakfast one morning when I was in high school, my mother put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed it gently. "Mario-Por qué dejaste...uhm, *bang bang bang*?" She mimed banging on piano keys. Why did I stop playing the piano, she wanted to know. I was taken aback. I had no idea she even paid attention to my playing. "It, uhm, it made me happy to hear."

I felt instantly ashamed. I, like many children, let one terrible instructor ruin something for me that made me happy. I have since seen this very thing happen to many other people—kids who were once great at math or science get one miserable teacher and it breaks their whole world. Usually, these are the teachers that have demons of their own, and probably don't even know what they are doing to their pupils, but they always leave a lasting scar. The thing that shamed me the most was the fact that my mother, who barely spoke two words during any given day, was affected by my juvenile decision.

I grabbed her hand and told her in Spanish that I had just been too busy with school to play, but that I would start up again immediately. She smiled and gave me a hug—something she hadn't done in years.

I knew something must have been wrong with my mother for her to act so out of the ordinary. About four years after I told her I would start playing again, she died of stomach cancer. The day she asked for my music was the day she was diagnosed. I was away at college when she died and I had no idea what she had been going through. She sought no treatment, and just

went about her days as normally as she could. It was in a posh upper west side apartment where she took her last breath. She had finished cleaning, and had sat down on a white leather couch to take a quick rest. She never woke up.

My uncle, her younger brother, was the one who called me and told me the news. I came home immediately to bury my mother at her modest funeral. The only people in attendance were her brother, a couple of cousins I had never met before, and three other cleaning ladies whom she had become friendly with after years of riding the bus together.

After the funeral, my uncle mused that at least she got to die in luxury, even if she never lived in it. I found this oddly comforting. He then told me that she scared the ever loving shit out of the owners of the apartment, who were now selling the place. I remember smiling at this, but not really knowing why.

My mother's death meant my only real tie to my neighborhood was gone, which felt to me like a tether had been cut. I decided that it was now time for me to live the way I wanted to, so I dropped out of college and decided I would just play piano full time. I took anything I could get—cabaret clubs, shopping malls at Christmas, and children's beauty pageants. I was surprised there was so much steady work for someone like me, and even though I didn't get paid much for each gig, it was enough to make ends meet and afford me a tiny studio apartment in Greenwich Village.

I met my wife, Tricia while playing at a drag club in Chelsea. She was one of the stage hands and was having trouble setting up a light. I went over to help her and she was so grateful she bought me a drink. We bonded over our respective stories of struggle and poverty (though hers was mainly self-imposed rather than a birthright); she had always wanted to perform but couldn't quite get herself going, and she found doing the behind the scenes work more rewarding and much more steady than being in the spotlight. I liked her because there was no pretense. She was beautiful and earthy and could drink me under the table. She put her entire personality at the forefront—flaws and all. She was open about the fact that she was just too damn lazy to be a real performer.

"Ugh, going to auditions every day just to get rejected was not for me—and if you didn't hear 'no' outright, you heard it a few weeks after you told the

sleazy night club manager that you had little to no interest in sleeping with him. It's just a dirty business—for women anyway.”

She blew a smoke circle and patted my hand. “But you, Mario—you have actual talent, I bet you don't get too many casting couch proposals, do ya?”

I shrugged. “Just a few, but none of them were really my type.”

She laughed and I noticed how her entire face glowed. This was the woman for me. I got way too drunk and told her exactly that later that night. To my surprise, she didn't rebuff my forwardness, but invited me to her place for the night.

We were married six months later at a New York City courthouse. She had little to no contact with her family either, but unlike me it wasn't a sad story. Her parents were both professors of archeology at Yale and were constantly on grant-sponsored digs in parts of the world where communication was quite impossible. It suited Tricia just fine—she was always a loner and the less prying parental concern for her well-being the better. She delighted in finding her way in life with no input from others. It had served her well thus far, and made her sort of an urban adventurer. Of course, her parents had set her up with a tidy trust fund that enabled her to live such a life safely. I'm not going to say I wasn't grateful for this, but something about knowing there is money set aside makes it hard to truly strive to succeed. I chose to ignore the trust, and never touch it personally. Tricia told me I was being a pretentious starving artist, but I couldn't in good conscience take money from two people I had never met.

I was starting to get nervous about my decision to be noble when my gigs started to become more sporadic. I was only working about three times a week, and beginning to get desperate when Tricia told me she was pregnant. I was overjoyed but terrified, and she could tell. She petted my arm and told me that it would all be okay—that the money she had would be more than enough to cover expenses and that I should just be happy with her. I smiled and put my hand on her stomach, but it was no use. Call it machismo or biology or whatever—I was the man here and I wanted to provide for my family, no matter what.

It was by sheer luck I got offered the job at Gastineau the following night. Sheer luck or a curse, I still have not decided.

The man was sitting at the small table all the way to the left at CoCoNuts, the cabaret club I was playing at. I had never seen him before, and this was a place of regulars. He was a diminutive man who looked like the breeze from the constant opening and closing of the front door was having a dire effect on his fragile body. He kept moving uncomfortably in his chair every time somebody entered the club.

I made note of him immediately, mostly because he wouldn't take his eyes off of me. He stared intently as I played while the singer, Jessabelle, swayed and crooned into her gold microphone. When the set was over, he approached me. I was getting ready to let him down gently when he stuck out his girlish hand.

"Hello, Mario. My name is Peter Wexler. I'm the dean of Gastineau School of Fine Arts."

I tentatively took his hand and shook it. He could sense my confusion and immediately tried to put me at ease.

"I heard about you from one of our students, he likes to frequent clubs like this and I heard him raving about you the other day in the hall. Honestly, I had never heard such high praise-and I wasn't disappointed." Peter looked me up and down as though he was sizing up a car he wanted to buy.

"Anyway, to make a long story short, our best piano instructor up and quit on us last week and, well, it's been hell trying to replace her. None of the people we have seen seem to have the talent and timing needed for a place like Gastineau. So imagine my good fortune to hear you play tonight. Mario, please don't think of me as too forward, but you are one of the best players I have seen in a long, long time."

Peter leaned uncomfortably close to me. His nose was almost touching my chest.

"Uhm," I shifted awkwardly to try to prompt him to say something. I didn't want to assume he was offering me the job just yet, even though that seemed to be where this was headed.

"So, are you interested, Mario? We can have you on a trial basis. I am well

aware that teaching at a school and doing the night club circuit are two different animals entirely. I just sense something about you—the talent, the magnetism, I think you might be a perfect fit at Gastineau.”

I nodded, shocked. When I became aware that I hadn’t said anything in a while I got even more flustered. “Uhm, yes of course, of course, Mr. Wexler. That sounds terrific.”

“Wonderful!” Peter clapped his hands and smiled. “Here is all my contact info and the address of the school,” he said, handing me a small ivory colored business card. “Can I expect to see you tomorrow at 8 a.m.?”

I nodded again and looked on as he collected his coat and hat from the tiny table and vanished from the nightclub.

When I got home that night, I told Tricia the good news. She seemed reserved in congratulations, and when I asked her why, she explained tenderly that she didn’t want to see me sell out and be the type of person who destroyed other people’s dreams.

“Like that Miss Greenlough person you told me about,” she said, rubbing her belly.

I waved away her concern. “That would never happen,” I said. “First off, I’m not an angry bitch, and secondly, I honestly don’t care enough to try to destroy someone’s dreams. That takes effort.”

Tricia smiled and lightly slapped my forehead. “Well then, maybe this will come in handy after all.” She got up from the couch and retrieved something from the table near the front door.

“I bought you this today because I thought it would help you. You’re always so stressed out and I heard that writing down your stresses or keeping a sort of journal helps to clear the mind. Maybe you can use it to chronicle your time at that uptight jail for the talented. I hear it’s full of scandal...you could have a bestseller on your hands.”

She handed me a leather bound journal with intricate engravings on the cover. There was a leather chord wrapped around it and the paper was a perfectly aged off-white.

“I say you write an interesting fact in it each day and at the end of the semester you share it with me. It’ll be like a fun project.”

“Oh yeah, because projects are tons of fun,” I smiled at her scowl. “I love it baby, and yes I’ll keep a record of every little pompous thing that happens there. To be honest, I’m kind of curious to be on the inside.”

Tricia grinned and stretched her legs over my lap.

“Just don’t forget us little people when you’re on your way to the big time,” she said, before drifting off to sleep.

February 23, Day 1

Arrived at Gastineau forty-five minutes early and noticed something a bit strange. Not one soul was outside smoking. I’ve been around musicians for the past five years and if there is one thing we all have in common, it’s smoking. I figured a school filled with them would have at least half the student body outside enjoying a much needed break, but there wasn’t a soul around. Further investigation found the ashtrays spotless.

I went to Peter’s office to handle some paperwork before I started the day. He’s pushing me through the system quickly because, as he keeps saying, this is just a “trial period.”

Peter is an oddball. He kept referring to the school as a “she” and talking about it like he was defending his wife. Direct quote: “She’s a good school, but a bit temperamental. The students get worse every year—more privileged, more entitled, but the school itself, well she tends to stay the same.”

I nodded but had absolutely no idea how to respond to that. He would lean back in his chair and stroke the walls in an almost sexual way when he was thinking. It was very creepy.

After we finished up the paperwork in his office, Peter took a break from molesting the school to show me to the room I would be in for the year. It was small and dark but there was a beautiful Bechstein grand piano right in

the center. I had never been in the same room as such an expensive piano before and I swear to God there was a glow coming off of the mahogany.

I went over to the piano and touched the keys, half afraid that I would be burned by the warmth from the imaginary glow.

“Do you like the grand? It’s brand new,” Peter said, tenting his fingers nervously. This guy is doing more and more to weird me out.

The students that I met today were something else entirely. I met with three classes, each with about ten students. Nearly every last one of them was a strain of snob I had never encountered before. I could tell that after years of entitlement and strict music lessons that these people were programmed. When they were young, their parents forced them into regimented practice schedules and now they all think they’re Mozart. I appreciate that they all worked so hard to get here, but the level of arrogance and disinterest in their fellow man is alarming. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to last the year.

February 24

Had my other two classes today. These were a bit more tolerable—at least the first one was. I met Jeff, a flamboyant dancer who I discovered is the reason I’m here in the first place. Apparently he came into CoCoNuts at some point last month and was impressed with my playing, so he made sure to let Peter overhear him talking about it in the hallway. He’s the one person I’ve met here who has absolutely no pretense, he knows he’s not as wealthy as the other students, but he tried to let his talent speak for itself.

Jeff told me that the piano player who left was none other than Miss Greenlough, who apparently had a nervous breakdown after she found out she was infertile and is now residing on a sunny island somewhere getting some much needed rest.

“But I can’t imagine who would want to get her pregnant anyway. You ask me, she just found out that nobody wanted her because she would turn their penis into a popsicle,” Jeff said.

I like Jeff.

I have found out that besides instructing the piano students, the other half of my job is to play the piano for the exhibit that is held at the end of every year at Gastineau. Basically, the best of the best of the students put on a Broadway-quality musical for an array of agents, some small time producers and theater directors. Sometimes the shows are famous revampings, but occasionally, they are originals. This is Gastineau's way of trying to distract from the fact that while they are sitting on a billion dollar endowment, they refuse to offer aide to their students. So, they give them the opportunity to show themselves off to different people in the entertainment community as a sort of coup, at least for the students who can't use family money to buy themselves into this world. This is all according to Jeff and one of the other students who didn't come from means. I feel bad for the students that have to work three jobs just to attend this place, but it seems to have actually given them more energy than many of their spoiled counterparts.

This end of the year show is a very big deal to these students. I can already see the pressure to be cast in it is starting to take its toll. One girl, I was told, hasn't eaten in a week, and had taken to passing out while she was playing her harp. I imagine that this will turn into a disaster if it isn't rectified soon.

February 25

Peter is really starting to freak me out.

I saw him walking down the hallway petting the walls of the school. I am not imagining this, he was literally stroking the pristine marble walls as he floated down the hall, humming. He stopped when he got to a framed picture—of whom I don't know—and stared at it for a bit before continuing on his way. He didn't see me, which was probably for the best.

February 28

Peter has revealed what the year-end production will be, and it sounds pretty damn fantastic. It's an original musical featuring the music of Queen, and it's called "Bohemian Rhapsody". Apparently the school went through hell and a bunch of unneeded donations in order to obtain the rights to use the music, but it got done. The playwright is somebody in the writing

program here who apparently caused quite a stir last year when his off-off-off Broadway show, *Penis Envy*, caused an outpouring of angry letters from the gay community. Jeff tells me that his talent is exceeded by his arrogance, but he has pretty lofty connections at the school. Tomorrow, selections for the cast and understudies will be made, and the tension I feel in these hallways is electric. It hurts to breathe it in.

March 6

Learned some very disturbing things about Gastineau today. Jeff and his friend Andrew, who is an amazing guitar player and has been selected to perform in the end of year production, told me that it has become custom here for understudies to try to take down the head actors for a chance to be in the show. People have been seriously injured and even hospitalized. Andrew says that Gastineau is very good about covering these types of things up, which may explain Peter's consistently squirrely behavior.

"Also," Andrew said, "they always look like accidents. You see that movie, *Showgirls*? Yeah, it's a lot like that."

Memo to self: rent *Showgirls*.

March 9

Even though all the casting is set for the show, the tension in this ivory tower is still palpable. I noticed one of my best pianists, who also happens to be singing a solo in the production, was rushed out on a stretcher today. I hear she is going to be fine, but it seems puzzling to me how a sandbag made it to the dining hall ceiling.

I had a cigarette outside with Andrew, Jeff, and a very talented singer named Audriana. When I asked them why nobody else ever smokes, they informed me that Peter was a vehement anti-smoker and hated to see his students smoking on school grounds. Fortunately, there's not much he could really do about it, but his personal opinion appears to be keeping much of the student body tobacco-free.

My students are warming up to me, and starting to take me more seriously. Of course, it took me playing a twenty minute Handel piece in double time to get them to see that I can do certain things that their years of training did

not teach them. Most of my odd-day students have been cast in the show as the Bohemians, which is basically just the Greek chorus. They are not happy about it. I am happy to report that Jeff is one of the leads, and has three solos. I had no idea he could sing.

March 20

I feel guilty for not keeping my log, but rehearsing for this show has been a nightmare. Two of the main dancers have suffered injuries at the hands of a razor-blade laced door knob. It was a gruesome scene, but, as Andrew said, not out of the ordinary. Basically, the person gunning for the role slips tiny razor blades in the door of the lead's room in the student housing lofts across the street. There never seem to be any witnesses, and this prison-style violence is just accepted. It is a mystery to me how these seemingly upscale people can be so barbaric, but I am quickly learning that it is within this group that these urges lie dormant until they want something bad enough. I took note of the insidious brilliance of this particular trick. They have cuts on their hands, and one even nicked a vein, but their dancing shouldn't be affected, in theory. Of course by the time they heal, these poor girls are going to be way too shaken up to perform so they will willingly step down. Much more demure than the Tonya Harding/Jeff Gillooly school of thought, if you ask me.

Jeff is starting to look very pale and thin. His nerves are shot. Avoiding catastrophe at the hands of his understudy, Greg, and rehearsing all day is taking a very big toll on him. Still, he manages to pull it together every rehearsal. I think it helps he can't afford the student housing. It's so odd to see these people fear for their safety, but want something bad enough to still risk it all. Jeff in particular needs the opportunity this production will give him. He isn't connected and is starting to run out of money after losing one of his jobs because he could never make it on time because of rehearsal. He has told me more than once that this is his last chance and that is the only way he can truly keep focused.

I am very happy I could never afford a school like this when I was younger. Taking it in from my safe perch at the piano bench suits me just fine.

March 30

Everybody seems to be controlled by this school.

April 3

This is a terrible place. A student committed suicide here today by leaping from the roof into the garden. He fell fifteen stories and landed on his front. I don't know if it was the pressure from here or his parents or if it even was a suicide. Competition is everything here and while I don't think any of my students are murder-inclined, I just don't know. These people operate differently.

I was having coffee alone in the great dining hall when I heard screaming. I ran to where it was coming from, and found a group of about ten students staring out the glass doors leading to the garden. I saw two girls simultaneously vomit on each other's shoes and when the crowd parted, I saw the body.

It was Andrew, Jeff's friend. I could tell because he was wearing the orange hoodie that he had on earlier that day. Now, it was splattered with red. It looked as though the front part of him was trying to exit through his back, and I knew that the impact probably liquefied any trace of who he was. He had landed square on the concrete, next to a statue of Venus watering the plants.

April 10

I know I wrote earlier that this was a terrible place, but it has been proven to me tenfold over the past week. I expected a memorial for Andrew, something to help the students heal, but no. These students are incapable of healing because they are incapable of feeling. We were given one day off, and that was it. No break to mourn, or on site counselors, just business as usual. I voiced this to one of the dance instructors, a Russian man named Zak, and he simply shrugged it off.

"Last year, my friend, three students died, but you did not hear about it in the news, did you? What do you think that billion dollar endowment is for? It would not be too attractive to be known as a suicide school, would it? My theory is, if the kid can't handle the pressure of something so stupid as performing, then maybe this is their way of thinning the herd."

Zak is a cold bastard.

April 13

Jeff is not taking the death of his friend very well. I had a cigarette with him outside before rehearsal today and he was completely silent. Steely, even. His focus during rehearsal however has become razor (forgive the phrase) sharp.

Andrew's guitar solos have been given to a guy named Hardy. There's a rumor he's related to the Kennedy's or something. I know he won't be able to nail the notes Andrew could.

April 25

I had no idea how financially important this production was for Gastineau. The tickets cost \$1,000 each. I now know how they are making all that hush money. Jeff still hasn't really come to terms with Andrew's death and I don't expect he ever will. I find this fact strangely comforting. At least he isn't ignoring it or viewing it as one less person to compete with like the other students. I can't wait until this is all over. I will gladly go back to struggling to make my own money, and I have softened on the idea of Tricia's trust fund. She explained to me last night that if we use it for the baby, I shouldn't feel any less masculine.

"My parents aren't going to be here for the birth or probably most of the first few birthdays, so we might as well think of this as their way of helping out."

She's right. At least then we can actually raise our baby. Being around these sterile, robotic students has taught me that the most important thing a parent can do for their child is be there. These kids had no such luck, and most of them were raised by women who came from far away lands and had no real connection to them. They all make so much sense to me now.

May 7

The production is only a week away and there have been no further incidents. Jeff looks ready, and the past few rehearsals have been flawless.

He's even gotten some of his old self back, evidenced by him ribbing one of the dancers on her new haircut. She did not take it well and started screaming at him. He grinned and with a huge flourish, waved his hand in the air.

"Leett'sss take it from the top!" He cried, interrupting the girl's rants.

Andrew had been cremated, and his ashes sent to his parent's house in Minnesota. I know Jeff was bummed he couldn't go to the funeral, but time seems to be healing his wounds. Eventually, he will be okay.

May 13

The show is tomorrow, and I asked Jeff how he was feeling. I found his response quite disturbing.

"Like I could die for this."

I'm not sure if it's dark humor or what but I've never been so sure that I need to leave this place. Something about Gastineau infects the mind.

I am very worried.

May 14

The day of the show and something terrible has happened.

I was going to Peter's office to tell him that even if I passed my "trial" period, I would not be returning to Gastineau for another semester. When I got to the office, I saw that the door was opened and heard frantic whispering from inside.

"I don't give a damn, Peter. I made sure to make that donation extra generous because you promised me that Gordan would be playing the lead. Take Jeff out for God's sake. He doesn't have any stake here. I don't mean to be rude but has his family donated any money to you?"

"You don't understand, Mr. Sebba, Jeff is paying his own way through our school. His parents don't have the kind of money you have, and to be honest I've never met them. But the show is tonight and we can't make a switch like that!"

I heard a giant heave and an almost maniacal, triumphant laugh.

“Oh, so this kid’s parents aren’t even donors, and they aren’t even gonna see him perform. Of course that’s fair. My kid worked his ass off to get here, Peter. You know nothing is more important to Gordan than this show. Make him the lead or I will no longer be a donor to this school.”

My stomach sank and I leaned against the wall to steady myself as I heard Peter sigh and silently agree with the man in his office. I could feel him nodding.

Without another word the man exited the office. He was a tiny little thing—even smaller than Peter and I was surprised he was able to bend Peter so easily. Those tiny pants must have had incredibly deep pockets.

When I entered the office, I saw Peter with his head down on the desk. He stirred when he heard me sit down and I could see how drawn he really looked.

“Oh, hi there Mario. You wanted to talk to me about something?”

I nodded. “Uhm, yes. I know that my trial period is up and I just wanted to...”

Peter’s face brightened and he slapped his hand on the desk.

“Of course, of course. Congratulations, Mario. I would like you to be the newest addition to our permanent faculty.” He held out his hand with a forced smile.

I shook my head. “No, Peter. I came here to tell you I don’t want the job. And what just happened in here, well—that’s a shining example of why.”

Peter’s face dropped so fast I thought it would hit his desk. His eyes then quickly displayed a brimstone-type anger.

“You think it’s easy running this school, Mario? Do you think I can just turn down a man who is single-handedly responsible for the new wing on the third floor?”

“You’re destroying somebody’s dream!” I got up from my chair so that I could look down at Peter’s balding head. “For money to feed this awful

school which, forgive my saying so, you have an unhealthy connection with.”

Peter looked up at me with a mixture of sorrow and panic flooding out the anger in his eyes.

“Get out of here, Mario. And don’t expect to be playing tonight.”

“No problem.” I kicked the chair out of my way and headed for the door.

“You’ve squandered an opportunity here, Mario. You could have been playing for the gold ones tonight. Enjoy your crappy night club scene,” he called after me.

I looked back in his office, at the sad man obsessed with a school that made him insane and unfeeling, and smiled.

“Enjoy your tomb, Peter.”

Two Months Later

My time at Gastineau was terrifying, but it taught me that the need to be the best solely for the sake of being seen as the best can destroy people. The desperation in those students and even more so, Peter, made them feed that need until it was strong enough to take them over, consuming them like a forest fire. When someone forgets their real purpose and passion, they will come up empty-handed. I love what I do, playing the piano has always given me a joy that nothing else could, and I don’t feel pressured to reach a pinnacle because at the end of the day, I love the music. And that’s what I intend to instill in my students on the campus where I now teach as an adjunct professor. A job won by an audition and the fact that I’d survived a trial period at notorious Gastineau. Surprisingly, I discovered I did want to work at a school. It just has to be one that puts the student first, a place where I can make a difference.

Tricia loved the journal entries, but tells me that she will not be reading them to our daughter when she is born. I can easily understand her reasoning.

Though I have a new appreciation for the crappy night club scene, I only play at CoCoNuts for fun from time to time on weekends in hopes of seeing

Jeff. I have yet to spot him, but he's in my thoughts every day. I just hope that he realized Gastineau isn't everything. His own potential will open all the doors in the world for him if he doesn't give up, and as I learned from enduring Miss Greenlough's unorthodox teachings, the music is what's most important and you can always begin again.

Bio- Kathleen Wolak is a writer and blogger living in Hamden, Connecticut. Her published works include a young adult novel, *The Tasteless* (2014, America Star Books) and a short science fiction piece, "Area 1" which was published by *Hello Horror* in January, 2015. Her poetry will be appearing in *Feelings of the Heart Literary Journal* in May of 2015. When she is not writing or managing her entertainment blog, Tasteless Entertainment, she is hosting her advice show for writers on HerTube.TV, hiking with her dogs, and either marathon watching *Designing Women* or *The Simpsons* reruns.

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