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EDITOR

Beverlee Blair

LAYOUT & DESIGN

Meghan Snatchko

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

John Al

Beverlee Blair

Jeremy Corn

Stephanie D.

Dianne F.

Susan Iannuzzi

Eddie Kunz

Gene Lysick

Meghan Snatchko

Lisa McCormack Tajak

Holly Thyen

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Greater Pittsburgh Area

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ANTELOPE CANYON

BY LISA MCCORMACK TAJAK

As we bumped along in the white tour van crossing the terra cotta colored Arizona desert I began to reconsider my choice of this excursion. I looked over at my husband and my son and envied their excited smiles as we were launched airborne over a particularly jarring crater. They looked back at me with expressions of concern noticing my clenched fingers around the support pole.

"Mo-o-o-ommmm!" Joe teased. I had vetoed his request to sign-up for an extreme dune buggy experience in Sedona for a more subdued hike through Antelope Canyon near the Utah border.

But now I found myself racing across the desert in a V-formation caravan of vehicles driven by our Navajo tour guides. I felt uncertain as I watched our driver, Lillian, gunning the vehicle even though she was barely able to see over the steering wheel. With a deep inhalation I willed my spine to stay intact.

Within minutes the vehicles slowed and synchronized parking yards from a small opening in a rocky hillside. Lillian opened the door and instructed us to disembark and follow her. The sun's heat radiated the land and I looked down with anticipation at my gray hiking boots already dusted with orange sand.

Lillian gathered us around her to set the ground rules for the afternoon, emphasizing a plea to respect this sacred land. She told us the story of the young Navajo girl who found the canyon while looking for her family's sheep. For decades the area had been freely open to all visitors and then, due to a string of violations and mishaps, had been taken over by the Navajo Nation. Now visitors could only enter the area with a tribal guide.

"For example," Lillian continued in her self-assured tone, "the reason you weren't permitted to bring any bags or backpacks on our tour is due to a history of visitors deciding that it was acceptable to spread the ashes of their dead loved ones inside. Very disrespectful. We bury our dead in the land and we had to have a medicine man come in to clear the souls from the canyon." Lillian meant business.

The interior of the canyon was captivating. Intermittent light filtered through the ceiling as we walked in awe from cavern to cavern. The group automatically spoke in hushed voices or not at all as we allowed the intervals of light and darkness to wash over us.

Lillian would stop us occasionally to show us how to take vertical panoramic photos or to point out a spot where if we stood just right the incoming rays made us look like we had the wings of angels.

She told foreboding stories. In 1993 eleven hikers had been killed in a flash flood that pushed a 40 foot high wall of water through the canyon. Navajo park rangers were now stationed far up the “wash” and in the event of a downpour we would be evacuated. Other vandals shot rifles inside the canyon to experience ricochet and left bullet holes in its walls. These stories were told with a heavy heart.

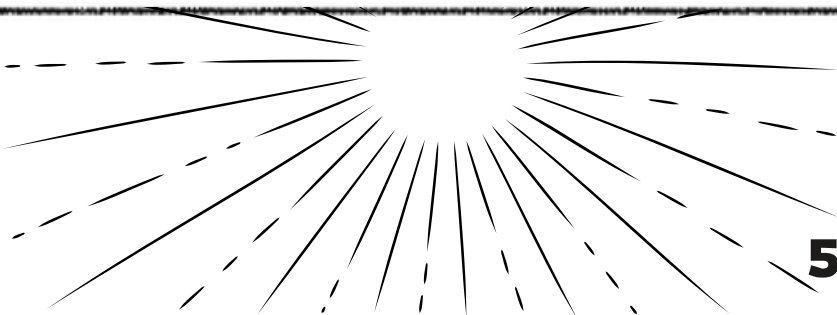
As we traversed through one chamber Lillian indicated that National Geographic was banned from the area due to an incident in the early 2000's. The Navajo initially sanctioned NG to film the flooding of the canyon for an upcoming article. Without prior authorization the production team bored into the cave walls and mounted camera equipment leaving scarring holes in the sandstone.

Lillian then motioned to me to stand by her near the damaged wall while the others continued ahead. She tenderly touched the wound with her fingers and motioned for me to do the same.

“Their cameras were washed away in that flood. They were never recovered.” Then she turned to me with a soulful look in her eyes. “I call that karma.”

“I do too.” Gazing back at her our eyes met in a moment of deep understanding.

Soon it was time to walk back to our transport. The guide ahead played his flute and haunting music floated and danced with the waning light rays. I walked in solitude and was filled with awe at the unexpected gifts of the day. I placed my palm on the wall near the entrance to leave a blessing and realized reciprocity. Antelope Canyon poured its mysterious light into the lantern of my heart. I looked out at the setting sun, a breeze blew, and the gentle desert sand kissed my face good-bye.



THE DARKEST PLACE PART I: DESCENT

BY JEREMY CORN

Parts 2 & 3 of this story will be published on woodshedwriters.org

The wise women tell of how the clan found Semāah's Valley of Moonlight in the long shadow of towering Ratatantset, the Father Mountain, in the time of the Hetōt'és youth.

Many, many bountiful seasons the clan has passed since, dwelling in the Valley of Moonlight. It is a good place.

It was a good place.

Last winter was long, desperately hungry, so, so cold. The spring thaw brought floods and mire, then the heat of summer brought raiders from over distant hills to kill our warriors, take our children as slaves.

Now, autumn wanes, another winter fast approaches.

The Hetōté, grown bent and old during our long years in the Valley of Moonlight, sent his eldest to lead a hunting party so that we might fill our stores before the game digs in, before Ėssa, who is the Sun, flees.

The Hetōt'és eldest was the best of us - beautiful, wise, broad-shouldered - and he is dead now. They carried him back from the hunt with a stag's antler in his belly.

Now time is growing short. If we stay here in the valley, this winter may well be our last.

These thoughts and more churned in my mind while the sound of the wise women piling rocks at the cave entrance - walling me in - echoed throughout, and my torchlight made shadows dance along the walls.

When the torch burns out, I will be alone in the darkness of the cave, entombed beneath towering Ratatantset.

I am here seeking revelation, perhaps prophecy. I seek a new path for the clan, to a new home, because the favor of silver Semāah, who is the Moon, has fled the Valley of Moonlight, and the shadow of towering Ratatantset has become an oppression.

I turn towards the Center of the Earth and begin to make my way down.

I still hear the wise women building the wall, but the sound is growing faint. Their task is nearly complete. I also hear my own footsteps slapping on the wet stone, and the water dripping from the

stalactites festooning the roof of the cave.

The air is cold, wet, and I can feel it clinging to my skin, dampening my hair. My torch, coated in reindeer fat, still burns. For how much longer, I cannot be sure. Before it goes out, I must find who I seek.

It is known that all life was born from the Earth's Living Stone. This is especially true of the clan.

The wise women tell of how the Hetōté was birthed, full-grown, from a cave beneath shining Atantsa, the distant Mother Mountain, who's face we see shining on the clearest days.

The wise women say the Hetōté emerged a fair-haired, fair-faced man. Shining Atantsa had given birth to a demigod ready to lead his people.

And when he had led his people to the bounty of the Valley of Moonlight, he chose the most beautiful, the wisest, the best of the clan's men and entombed him in this cave beneath towering Ratatantset, a sacrifice seeking the favor of the Mountains and the Living Stone.

This wise one, this keeper and guardian of the clan's soul, long buried under the Father Mountain, is whom I seek. He will be somewhere far below, in the true darkness of the deepest parts of the cave. I must find him before my torch burns out.

TUNNEL VISION

BY BEVERLEE BLAIR

Had I not known for certain that I was still alive, I would have believed wholeheartedly that I was, in fact, a ghost. The face before me (after me, not me, please) seemed washed out, emptied of what had been a full and varied life – if a little haphazard and peculiar.

Why?

It wasn't my face looking back at me at the other end of the weed-strewn tunnel under the Boulevard.

A dark sludge remained on the cobblestones from the most recent, flooding rain. Neither of us had as yet stepped into it.

I must be dreaming.

I cringed at the literary gaffe and wondered if I stared at my ghastly doppelganger long enough, the other might morph into

something like a formless image in a kaleidoscope, changing, changing. Something that I could step over on my way somewhere else.

Oh, dear God! Could it be that she'd never left? Could I warn her somehow that she must go? She really, must go.

She inclined her head slightly as if she had heard something behind her. Then, she moved to her right to make way for a borough utility truck just rounding the corner behind her. I moved to my left as the truck entered the tunnel...and disappeared.

There is no straight line between us. There are worlds, dimensions, constellations. I see that you have learned one thing, though: never square off against a perceived enemy.

I thought of curtains and how the absence of them in front of my windows – even with the window shades down – made me feel exposed. I needed something even as insubstantial as a curtain between me and her.

The woman raised her hand. I took a deep breath, held it, let it out slowly, relaxed my shoulders to take the burden. If there were a lesson here, I must learn it.

I raised my hand to calm her. I could see that she could not recall having met me before on the stairs of the asylum where she had given her first piano recital. I had sat down just behind her and she seemed to relax in that strange and threatening place.

I wonder if she knows that the Village will change in ways that can never be remedied.

I wonder if she knows that the hour that she'd spent at the asylum would mark her in ways that will haunt her for the rest of her days.

I wonder if she knows that most of the people in the room that day had never heard Fur Elise played quite that fast or that all but one or two of them would neither have known nor cared.

A shadow of whimsy seemed to mask her and she regarded me intently. I closed my eyes and imagined her fingers playing lightly over my face as if she were blind and I was the object of intense but benign curiosity. And in her fingers, such tenderness and grace. Perhaps she had been the one who should have taken piano lessons. I laughed aloud at the thought and opened my eyes.

I smiled back at her and knew that she was just visiting after all. Exploring those places that were still there and that meant something to her. Nothing particularly important, but something. She will find that what is beyond the tunnel has changed, but it should not matter. She will leave

soon enough with a mind full of more pleasant memories than the ones that await her.

I raised my hand to her. It was my turn. Suddenly, there was no point in my pressing on. I would go back and away and come back some day.

I nodded. She did not respond. I turned and went back the way I had come. And I hoped that whatever my future held, I might avoid whatever had gutted her.

CROSS SECTION OF A VOYEUR

BY MEGHAN SNATCHKO

When I was 6, my dad took me to the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. By then, Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle had been a permanent fixture in the former World's Columbian Exposition Palace of Fine Arts for 39 years. If I had known any of its history then, I wouldn't have cared once I saw miniature perfection. The castle was plucked from my dreams, hermetically sealed, and placed in a perfectly dark room that made the edges of the universe expand endlessly as I shrunk and discovered each chamber. My curiosity filled me with a thrill that felt like sinning. I must confess that it's been almost forty years and I still chase that high.

Forgive me. For I am sitting in my basement with a warm kitty on my lap listening to the worst day of someone's life unfold on the police scanner. It's not very nice down here. Silverfish and centipedes scurry when the fluorescent lights ignite and every time it rains hard, rivulets run to the drain in the lowest spot of the painted concrete floor. There is a ghost down here and she seems nice. Thankfully, she never comes upstairs. I wonder what she did to deserve an eternity below?

I've always been curious about the secrets hidden in houses, especially in their basements. Joints, shared. Dirty laundry, cleaned. Pittsburgh Potties on mini cement stages encore for spiders. A child's steps quicken as the shadows between the risers morph into skeletal hands poised to grab his ankles right before he runs out of the dark.

An ancient plaid couch waits for dirty deeds that come when the

rest of the adults are asleep and unaware of what secrets Uncle Ed makes the cousins keep. Real monsters drink Irons at the homemade Steelers bar in the corner. Things are pickled. Fermented. Buried. Things never forget what happened here. Move over so I can see.

I'm not cleaning or writing or one of the thousand tasks that endlessly fill my should-do list. Chores can wait, because this developing story hits harder than anything on my list. Before the dispatcher switches to a secured line that my scanner can't access, I hear the address. My laptop is open faster than bullets fired from one hand, but entering two heads.

Who needs a Fairy Godmother when you have Google Maps? I type out the address and take a deep breath. Exhale. Another. I think about what this feeling of excitement says about me. Exhale..... I don't want people to die. Inhale. I'm not that far lapsed as a recovering Catholic. I think I am a good person because...don't we all? Justify all the way to rock bottom, I guess. I press return as I exhale.

Curb appeal oozes out from between the keys like grape juice, clinging to my fingers as I explore. Oh, I can tell what sort of neighborhood this is. Schadenfreude takes over as I drag and drop the yellow figure to begin Street View. The gray colonial is beautiful and well-taken care of. Dozens of large orange pumpkins line the walkway. I imagine the basement, comparing it to the one I currently inhabit. If I could see a cross section of this adult-sized castle, what would I see? I click the transparent arrows on the street until I have a view of the garage and sliding patio doors. Doors that as of 10 minutes ago, were battered open by SWAT.

I consider my next move. I will look up the owners on the county property site. Once I have names, I'll Google them. Obviously next is criminal records on the UJS Portal and, of course, you can't forget Instagram and Facebook. That's when I see it. Between dentless garage doors that probably go up and down like mine don't, I see a large flag showing a profile of a Dalmatian. Underneath in bold red is her name. ALICE.

I imagine Alice on a recent Friday night, lying at their feet as they watch a movie in the finished basement. When SWAT barreled in, did she run? Is she the sole witness to the crime? Maybe she got her paws messy in the warm puddle seeping out from under the

bathroom door. Why do I feel worse for the dog than I do her owners who just lost their lives?

I look down at the warm puddle of purr in my lap and feel a clunk on the back of my head. It's not unlike the kind my dad would offer when my brother and I would do something utterly boneheaded. It wasn't ever hard enough to physically hurt but to this day I'm still recovering from the shame reverb. It resurfaces to check I'm still human and not yet a ghost sentenced to eternity in a stranger's dingy basement.



Clouds shift and sunlight beams through the south-facing glass block windows. The sleepy boy in my lap lifts his head and focuses somewhere far away and behind me.

"Yeah, buddy. I felt it too."

The storm has passed and it's time to feed the dogs.

"Let's go upstairs. While we still can."

KEYSTONE JUSTICE. AMEN

BY JOHN AL

Lombardi felt above his ankle for that reassuring sheath. He knew there had been a reason he was still wearing it, despite being retired for nearly eleven years. Such a shame Josephina wasn't alive, as nothing would've tickled him more than bragging about finally having such a heroic use for it while she pretended not to hear him.

The former detective rubbed his eyes, squinted, and peered into the recesses of his brain for old case file photos. Could that tethered goat really be Father Benlico, Lombardi's white whale who recently dropped off the Pennsylvania FBI's Ten Most Wanted? Rather than draw undue attention to another unsolved sexual battery case, the authorities had opted to declare him dead. Of course nobody would miss this cassocked scofflaw.

The victims? Only about 90 children. And that was just through 1978 before Detective Lombardi had been kicked off the case. Lombardi should've known better, as Chief Borecca had always been a devout Catholic and mouthpiece for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He even swore off his son after the boy refused to

attend his own confirmation, thereby denouncing his faith. It would be years before Borecca's murder/suicide forced the community to face what really caused their schism.

Lombardi gulped his espresso and stood. The old priest was gazing at the Palazzo Pamphilj like an overwhelmed tourist. The sun dangled even higher, the shadows casting a jagged dark throw rug on Piazza Navona's floor for Lombardi to move along without being noticed or even heard. Lombardi took one last deep breath. He thought of Josephina on their wedding night, of his younger brother graduating from medical school, but mostly he recalled the haunting rectory footage he received anonymously years ago.

Lombardi emerged from the baroque born shadows, his mind racing while considering all potential outcomes, wondering where exactly he'd crossed his Rubicon. The wind howled, the buildings loomed larger. His quickening pulse provided percussion in his ears between gusts. The salty air he'd been tasting all morning evaporated, leaving behind only smacking lips and an aftertaste of sawdust. He ignored the anxiety and dismissed the trembling as old age instead of nerves. He reached toward his ankle.

Despite the high traffic piazza, the Good Lord provided no witnesses to his crime, only the aftermath. Italian authorities spoke with three different tourists – in three different languages – and while testimonies clashed, a clear consensus had been made. Father Benlico, Benedict Lucarelli according to his expired passport, had attacked an American tourist with a knife during a disagreement.

The retired detective, a widow vacationing in Italy to honor his wife's posthumous honey-do list, had approached the priest asking for directions. When the priest wasn't reimbursed for his time and acumen, the altercation became physical. The American suffered a cut to his left temple and a 1.5 inch stab wound to his left forearm while defending himself. The assailant acquired two holes of his own, one puncturing his right kidney and another that reached the femoral artery in his left leg. The former priest lost consciousness before being transported to the nearest hospital, where coma was induced due to the catastrophic blood loss.

Lucarelli would not be able to give his side of the story any time soon. Lucky for Lombardi, his wounds had been nonfatal, thanks to a brother that graduated near the top of his class. The younger sibling's

anecdotal advice, secured years ago under the guise of law-abiding pretense, had been that scalp wounds bleed obnoxiously and forearm punctures were the least life threatening, though limited future mobility would always be a possibility.

When Josephina had been in hospice, she whispered that her proudest accomplishment was marrying a man who chose to protect and serve out of instinct, not oath. She would've been beaming today.

Their son should've turned 32 this year, same as Chief Borecca's boy. And while Lombardi had never addressed the rectory footage with his son out of fear that he'd resurrect trauma the boy had perhaps blocked out, chances are Anthony would've been proud of his father too. It may have taken nearly a quarter of a century, but Keystone justice never wore a watch anyway.

“HOLY SHIT,” SHEILA'S SAGA - PT. 5

BY STEPHANIE D.

Parts 1-4 of this story can be found on woodshedwriters.org

Sheila turned her head to look out her car window, hoping Joe wouldn't notice the fear in her eyes.

“Holy Shit, Sheila!”

“Joe, the kids!”

“Sorry, guys.”

Joe whispered to Sheila, “It’s that reporter, Carlton Trucker, and he’s walking towards us.”

Sheila sternly demanded, “Turn the car around, Joe!”

“But maybe he wants to talk to us.”

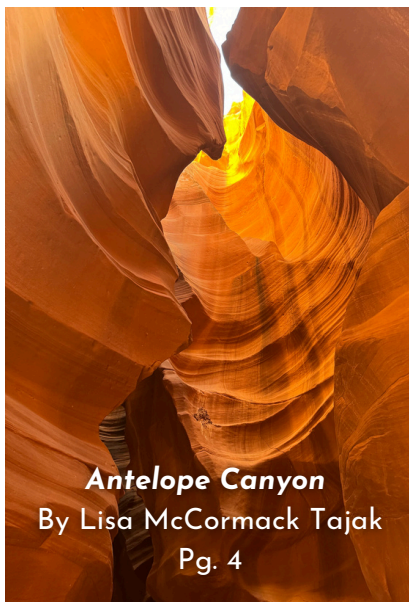
“Don’t be ridiculous. Think of the kids. We need to get home.”

Joey screamed, “But we want to see the Bunny,” while Emmy wailed.

Sheila took a deep breath and then turned to the back seat and explained, “I’m sorry, but the policeman said the Easter Bunny has gone to bed. The Bunny needs to rest up for his candy deliveries tonight.”

Satisfied with this explanation, the kids returned to eating their ice cream.

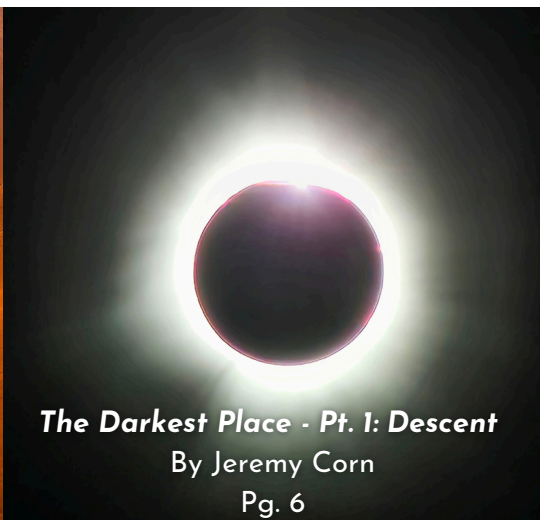
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Antelope Canyon

By Lisa McCormack Tajak

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By Jeremy Corn

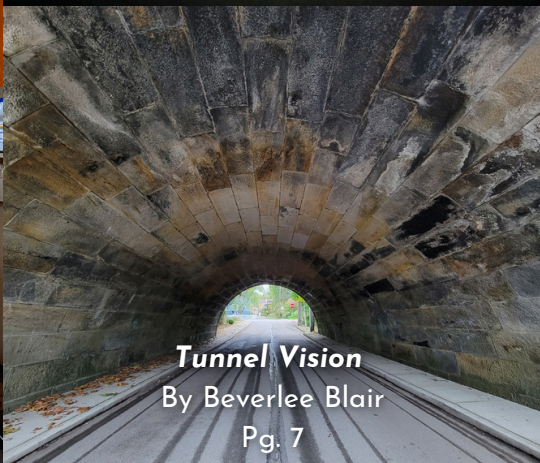
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Cross Section of a Voyeur

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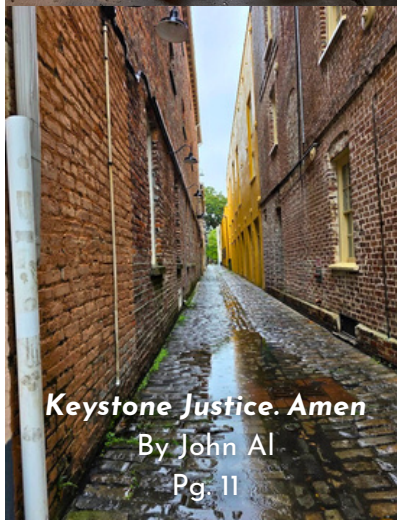
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Keystone Justice. Amen

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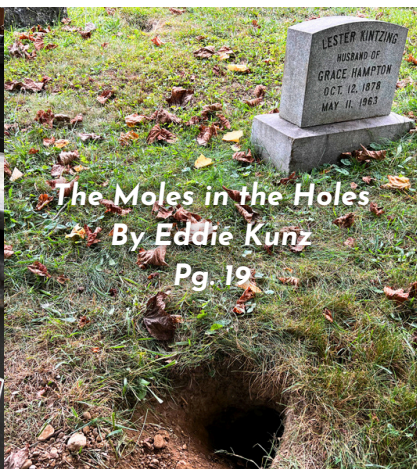
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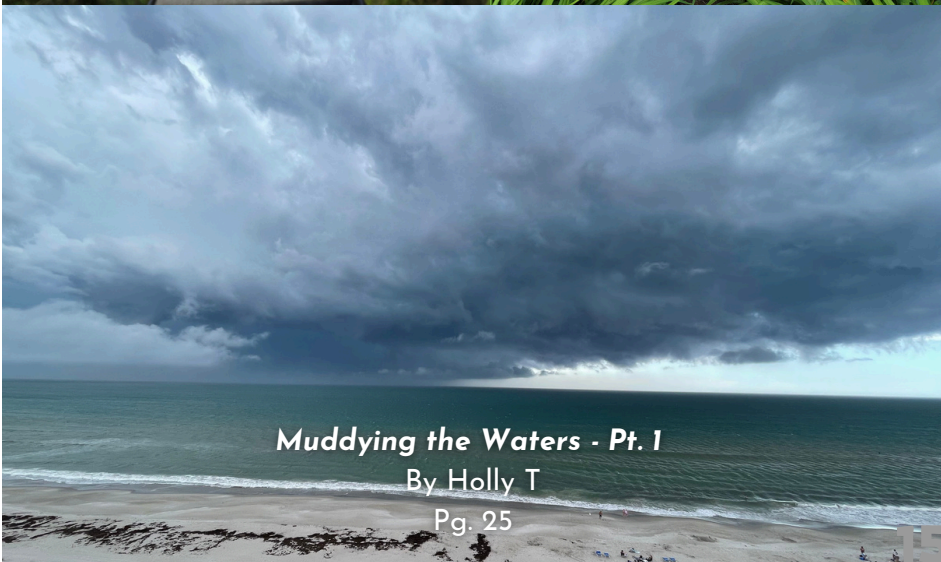
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Muddying the Waters - Pt. 1
By Holly T
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"Fine," Joe conceded. Disappointed, he put the car slowly into reverse and then drove home.

The nighttime ritual was harder than usual, as the sugared children didn't want to go down. So, Joe joined in the ruse.

"You know, if you don't get to bed, the Easter Bunny won't come tomorrow."

The kids ran to their rooms, jumped into bed, and pulled up their covers. "Good night, mommy and daddy."

Sheila and Joe kissed Joey and Emmy goodnight and closed the door.

"Can I interest you in a murder mystery, Ms. Marple?"

"So long as it comes with a drink."

But once the parents plopped on the couch, Joe turned to Sheila.

"So, who do you *really* think started the fire, Sheila?"

"I told you, Joe. The stupid mower started the fire."

"But what if it's the crazy neighbor, Sofia?"

Sheila paused, then sighed. "As much as I wish it was Sofia, I'm sticking with the mower."

Joe persisted, "But what if Sofia tried to frame the gardener? You said she hates immigrants."

"Enough, Joe! Yes, Sofia hates immigrants, and I hate Sofia. But I'm telling you, it was the murdering mower."

"And you're sure it wasn't, Antonio?"

"No! Antonio is *always* kind to the kids and me. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

Joe, somewhat satisfied, reluctantly relented. "Yea, you're probably right. Sofia has too much to lose. And if Antonio started a fire, he'd lose his job."

Relieved, Sheila commanded, "Turn on the tv, Joe, so we can solve a 'real' murder mystery."

Joe laughed and turned on the tv. "I think it's the wife."

"You always think it's the wife. She's too sweet. It's clearly the husband."

Joe laughed and offered a compromise. "It's probably the plumber. The detective hasn't focused on him, but he had access to the gas furnace."

"That makes more sense," Sheila agreed.

"Holy shit, Sheila!" Joe shouted, as he shut off the tv. "We can solve the Senator's fire *together*."

"Drop it, Joe!"

"No, listen. I trust your heart, so if you don't think it's Antonio, that's good enough for me. But I've got the mind of a detective, and I think Sofia's involved."

Sheila got up from the couch, "Enough, Joe! I'm going to bed."

"I'll be up in a minute," Joe promised, and then started scrolling through his phone, quietly looking for clues.

Sheila trudged up the steps and closed the bedroom door behind her. As she leaned back on the door, she whispered to herself, "It's not Sofia. It was me."

THERE'S A HOLE IN THIS CIRCUS TENT

BY DIANNE F.

Step right up. It feels more like a circus than a courtroom. The main event is a washed-up character – a "has been" of sorts. He shows up with a puffed-up chest and hair gel so thick you cannot decide if he forgot to shower and needs to fire his low budget barber or he is wearing a helmet as a shield to protect him from the truths of his past. He used to be a "someone" and now, he is a "no one" trying desperately to appear inflated and confident behind his shattered ego. It's all a smoke show to deflect you from his true character. Tuck the crazy in with your collared shirt, it's time to manipulate the judge.

The attorney calls him to the witness chair. He stands. Shoulders back, gut out, anger written all over his face. He approaches the stand with a newfound strut – slow motions, leaned back, imitating the stance of the long line of criminals in his family. It's unauthentic and theatrical. He is so caught up in his attempt to strut that he forgets to stop and swear in. Shit. This is already unraveling.

Pull it together. Walk back and follow the instructions. Pretend to be compliant. This is your time to shine. You have been waiting for this moment for almost two years. Slow down. Breathe – a forced and dramatic breath. You need to make sure everyone knows you are

annoyed and inconvenienced by the rules of the court. Rules don't apply to you. Didn't someone tell them? Add an eyeroll to seal the deal.

Back to the strut. It's more strained now. That deep breath almost popped the top button on your pants. Poor guy is holding on by a thread. This is the only presentable outfit in your closet – a suit selected by your ex for a funeral years ago. Thank God, she gifted you the designer Italian loafers to match. Your current yet dated shoe collection wouldn't coordinate as well – save those for grandma.

Now, it's time for a dramatic recline into the chair. Take up space. Own the podium. Captivate your audience. Pretend like you have a full face of your best clown makeup on – wait, that part might be true. You are a showman – not the man who had pending felony charges for abusing your wife and children. No, you are a star. A unicorn. A gift to the courtroom.

They ask you to state your name. "Salvatore Giovanni Caruso." They ask you to state your relationship with the defendant. You shout, "She is nothing to me." Your bulging veins and cracked voice tell a different story. You want to gauge her reaction, so you stare at her – right into the eyes of your wife. Yes, you are still legally married.

The next question, "State your relationship with the minor children in this case." Let's amp up the victim statement a notch. You cry out, "They were mine until she snatched them away." Again, stare at your wife. This time with seething disbelief for her betrayal. You still cannot wrap your head around the absurdity of her leaving YOU, the king.

Her attorney is quick to respond.

"Your honor. I do not like the plaintiff's attempts to intimidate my client. He has been glaring at her since we walked into this courtroom."

A series of sharp taps from the gavel attempt to restore order in the unruly courtroom. The bailiff stands and centers himself in front of the judge, between the witness stand and defendant's table. You are finally getting all the attention you deserve. Everyone is forced to listen to you with no way out until the closing arguments.

The judge hits the gavel again. He states, "Mr. Caruso, I am going to ask you to direct all responses to the person asking you the

questions. We will not tolerate any intimidation."

You feel a tad deflated but also inspired by the insinuation that you still have some level of control.

Next question comes from your attorney, "Mr. Caruso, were you aware at any time that Mrs. Caruso was recording you without your permission?"

Fix your face. Switch back to the victim. "No, I didn't even know she was doing that to me." Yes, to me. Don't focus on the fact that you were threatening to kill her and the children in all twenty-five videos. Instead, flip the script and attempt to make her look like the criminal. There must be laws in place to protect you, the victim. Wait there are laws – but in the state of Nevada, they go right out the window when you put someone's life at risk. Shit. Refocus.

THE MOLES IN THE HOLES

BY EDDIE KUNZ

There it was, right in my front yard. A massive hole. I walked onto my porch to see if it was a trick of the warped window glass, or maybe I hadn't had enough coffee yet. No, sure enough, there was still a hole there even after I had my morning coffee.

"What in tarnation!"

I looked around my neighborhood and found that as far as I could see, every neighbor had a similar hole in their front yard. My neighbor, Pete, came over to my yard.

"It's the darnedest thing, Bill. When I got home last night, my yard and every one else's were as perfect as can be as always. Not a weed or overgrown blade of grass in sight. Now each and every one has at least one hole in it. Some even have two! What do you make of it?"

"Well, Pete, it's got to be some kind of joke, right? There's no way this was a natural occurrence."

"Then how did they all appear in a matter of just a few hours? There's no way someone could dig these holes that fast!"

Pete had a fair point. Even if someone brought in heavy-duty equipment to dig these holes, they couldn't have done that without making noise loud enough to wake the whole neighborhood. Just then, a woman screamed. Pete and I turned toward where the noise

had come from.

"It went back into the hole! My goodness, it was massive!"

"Jillian, what was it?"

"It was a mole! A giant mole!"

Jillian fainted, and Bill carried her to her porch chair. Just then, a mole popped up in another yard. Then I saw a second and a third. Each hole had a different giant mole pop out, then go back down before popping out again.

"Bill, they're everywhere. What are we going to do? Can we call an exterminator? If we don't do something, they'll run us out of the neighborhood!"

Pete was right. We had to do something.

"I'll be right back, Pete." I ran to my garage.

"I know it's in here somewhere! Oh, there it is!"

I held the wooden object in my hand, getting a good feel for it. I had never noticed how heavy it felt, and how much heavier it would be once force was behind it. I walked out to my front yard and as soon as the mole popped out, I bopped it with my wooden mallet!

"There you go, Bill! I'll go grab mine, too. Hey every one, go grab your wooden mallets and let's whack some moles!"

Every one quickly ran into their garages and brought out their wooden mallets. In no time at all, the moles were no longer popping back out of the holes, and we had won the day. Sitting on my porch having a beer with Pete, I thought of something rather odd.

"You know, Pete, I actually had some fun with that today."

"Bill, believe it or not, I did too! It sort of felt like a stress reliever, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did! This might sound crazy, but what if I made that into a game? You know, like those games at arcades. I can call it Whack-a-Mole!"

"Well, Bill, I'll be the first in line to play it!"

Later that night I got to work. I figured I would add several holes and lots of flashing colors. Who knew that whacking a mole could be so fun?



THE HOLLOW SCENT

BY SUSAN IANNUZZI

I never meant to take over the soap cooperative.
Not at first.

When I joined, the group talked casually, no, frivolously, about “scent journeys” and “meditative lather.” The women giggled, swirling colors without purpose, and their soaps were small things that were terrified of living.

But Maribel was different. Her hair was pinned back so tightly that I could see the tug in her hairline when she glanced sideways at a notebook crammed with bullet points of fragrance ideas. I recognized in her a kindred hunger, the kind that groaned from a cavern so deep that it no longer distinguished need from ambition.

My soaps were different, neither apologizing for taking up space nor pretending to be gentle. They weren’t bars so much as declarations.

The others mocked my dill-cucumber creation.

“Like regret in bar form,” murmured Arielle.

But they kept staring, which told me their mockery was just envy cloaked in a cheap disguise.

Maribel noticed their staring, and after a few heart-to-hearts on what the cooperative could be, she started to see things differently.

First came the photos “just to track progress,” then, the standardized backdrop, because individuality doesn’t photograph well, and finally the slideshow.

“We could be a brand,” Maribel announced

Only Cass frowned. Arielle blinked rapidly, but I nodded, because the first person to do so is the one who moves the room.

Dues increased to maintain standing in the cooperative, and expectations followed. Wednesday nights demanded deliverables.

“You have been doing this for years,” Maribel reassured them.

“Reach back for those favorites. We all need to produce.”

Produce. I could read the others’ resentment. They just didn’t understand. Creativity without output is just a mood, some fleeting vibes that barely constitute a hobby.

Arielle rarely showed up with even a single bar, although what she brought was a Proustian masterpiece that could transport anyone to their grandmother's garden, with the subtle aroma of peonies and sweet peas. But scent doesn't translate to the screen, so her timely payment of dues was the only thing that prevented Arielle from becoming dead weight. Cass tried but was soon apologizing for bringing only two bars a week.

I, however, brought twenty.

Ugly ones. Strange ones. And if they weren't slick with possibility, they were embossed with cryptic symbols or suspended inside colorful spheres.

When we introduced the idea of ASMR soap slicing videos, Arielle resisted.

"It's ridiculous," she said. "Why would anyone want to watch us slicing bars of soap?"

Why indeed? Most claim ASMR is soothing, but it's really about control, watching an object surrender without protest. And the sound... Oh, the sound... Soap under a blade hits between a soft crunch and a quiet crumble, the sound of submission captured in high-fidelity.

We set up the mic and adjusted the ring light.

Maribel closed her eyes and sighed: "That's it."

Arielle flinched while Cass searched for her own reaction in the expressions of the others.

Maribel's eyes met mine.

"It's time to slice. Let's make our mark," she announced.

I smiled. Good girl, Maribel. If you want loyalty, promise belonging. If you want obedience, promise purpose.

Arielle walked out just before the shoot.

She set the knife down, hands shaking.

"I was happier when things just dissolved," she said.

The others followed. Of course they did. These women were bonded by nostalgia. They would choose to fade.

After the door clicked, the ensuing silence was hollow.

Maribel turned to me. "What do we do now?"

I moved toward the bar we had cast for the ritual and said, "We keep going. Melting away is not a legacy."

I ran the blade across the scored bar, keeping an even pressure to allow the mic to capture a consistent sound. As the flakes fell, I considered Maribel. Perhaps I had misread her. She had seemed genuinely crestfallen. Maybe I had mistaken her as someone who feared dullness more than loss, who would rather break something than watch it soften. But one thing was evident. Maribel had not grasped the simplest rule: Control belongs to the one who can destroy.

As the last crumbs tumbled onto the tray, Maribel sighed, and I reached for the next bar. The sweet scent of peonies declared their innocence as we filmed another take.

FOREVER IN BLUE JEANS

BY GENE LYSICK

I am in my seventies, the age where you pause and think about death. "Death," more in terms of preparedness versus morbidity.

My spouse and I had everything laid out. Our wills, power of attorney, trusts and personal wishes. It was also time to go through the many boxes that held years of hoarded memorabilia. While going through our personal stuff, I came across a pair of Levi jeans that were in a box with other clothing. I called my wife to come and see this relic.

"These must have been from my college years. Look at the holes. Look at the pictures of flowers someone drew on them with a highlighter."

"Yeah. I wonder who the artist was," she said with a wry smile.

"I can't get rid of these. I want to be buried in these. These were the beginning of my formative years."

I remember the Christmas back in the sixties when my hippie cousin gave them to me. It was Boyd who played a part in my formative years.

"Your cousin, Boyd?"

"Yes. That Boyd. The one who grew up with Michael Keaton here in Moon."

The acid dropping counter revolutionary who took twenty some

people to Woodstock in a U-Haul truck. I always looked up to him. He was a good guy – and still is.

It was he who gifted me my first pair of Levis back then. I was nerdy and Boyd felt he was helping with my self-actualization.

Back then, my mother, who worked in Pittsburgh, would go to Gimbels basement to buy my clothes: Chinos and button-down shirts. We were not allowed to wear Levis or any type of jeans back then. When Christmas break ended, I tested the waters by wearing those jeans to school. I was promptly sent home. I thought there and then that Levis fit with my attitude of being a contrarian. Not to mention the comfortable fit they provided. Nothing like getting into a broken-in pair of Levis.

The moniker “contrarian” suited me fine. As the years passed, I found myself wearing jeans whenever I could get away with it. Looking back on my career in corporate America as a pharmaceutical rep, I recall wearing them on a sales call to a doctor’s office and heard one doc exclaim, “I never saw that before!”

Not long after that, I was fired.

After many attempts at many different jobs and many terminations, I decided I would get my MBA and at the same time, manage a retail store to pay the bills. No problem here. I could wear my faithful Levis. But I had a notion that I could do a better job than the owners at running their business. I was fired when I suggested that in a college town, they needed to carry Levis, Guess jeans and Birkenstock sandals. I decided to become an entrepreneur and made an offer to buy the business. My store was around the corner from the college campus. My instincts proved to be right. The store became a hit with the college scene.

But along came a mall and, there went the business. Fate dealt a hand, and I was at the right place at the right time. One of my clothing customers offered to buy me into a startup company, and I jumped in with both feet. The bonus was that as a partner, I got to wear my Levis for the next twenty-five years. I was pleased as punch. Here I was, living a life on my terms, thumbing my nose at the establishment naysayers. I was one lucky bastard, not necessarily because of the money, sweet as it was, but as the Neil Diamond song goes, “Forever in Blue Jeans.” Where would I be if I had not gotten those jeans?

MUDDYING THE WATERS PT. 1

BY HOLLY THYEN

I meticulously planned our family vacation hoping that a little rest, relaxation and saltwater might temporarily wash away my exhausting anxiety and foment some family fun. The first thing I noticed when my toes touched the burning sand was that the color of the Atlantic Ocean at the Coligny Beach shore on Hilton Head Island was indescribable, running the gamut from onion soup to azure blue. I waded further into the sea and the water changed color the deeper I went. As I stood knee deep in the eighty - eight degree ocean that matched the eighty - eight degree rays scorching my arms and shoulders, I debated plodding any further. My husband was fifteen feet ahead of me in waist deep water, walking slowly away from the shore as the waves formed white caps around him. I turned toward my husband, who had shaded his eyes with his hand while he stared at the swimmers further out to sea.

"Do you have eyes on the boys?" he asked suddenly.

I felt my stomach sink as a frothy wave crashed around my waist while my feet lost their grip and collapsed into a sinkhole. I began to backslide down a hidden sandbar and then scurried to steady myself. My body's response was immediate and automatic. As I felt the claws of panic grip my heart, I stood like a frozen statue impervious to the blazing heat beating down on my head and shoulders. No, I did not have eyes on the boys. My neck and head jerked into action as I began scanning the faces and bodies of everyone frolicking in the water. My husband and I stood on less than solid ground with our heads on a swivel, silently scanning and searching the outstretched sea.

"There they are," he said matter of factly, pointing about twenty - five yards to our left and another thirty feet or so past where we were standing on the sandbar.

My youngest son was crouching down in the water while my middle son somersaulted off of his shoulders. Our teenagers were splashing around and laughing with each other, oblivious to any real or imagined danger. "I'll go bring them in and see if they want a sandwich," my husband stated calmly. In his mind, a crisis had been averted and there was nothing more to worry about. I stood for a moment sinking in the shifting sand as I watched my husband wade

out toward the boys. Then a wave knocked me backwards off my feet, warning me that it was time to swim back to shore.

During my walk back to our spot on the beach where my mother-in-law had been holding down the fort, I began to feel as if every step in the scalding white sand was scraping off a whisper - thin layer of anxiety. By the time I was drying off with my beach towel, I felt a little foolish for imagining the worst about the boys. Some time later, I was half asleep in a beach chair under our pop-up tent. My nose was ensconced in a paperback while my toes were buried under a few inches of sand, burrowing for a cool spot. The irregular flapping of the partially - secured beach canopies around us and the smashing of the waves at the shoreline served as a soothing lullaby.

"Have you seen the boys?" my husband asked.

My head snapped up in response to my husband's urgent question. He was hunched over, looking directly at me, standing in front of the opening of the tent. Beads of sweat dripped from his sunburned nose. For a split second I was flummoxed. My mind had been happily nestled in the ethereal realm while playing hopscotch between the characters of the romance novel I was reading and the vibrant yet elusive landscapes forming an otherworldly backdrop to my dream state. The critical nature of my husband's question was a scythe to the vicissitudes of my reveries, slicing away the fantastical settings into dust while sweeping my mind out of the ether and back into strident reality. I pulled my toes out of their hole in the sand and stared back at him.

"No. Were they supposed to check in with me?" I asked.

I grabbed my phone to check the time. I felt the searing heat on my index finger the moment I touched the exposed screen. Three o'clock. I realized this was useless information because I had no idea how long I had been reading and napping. Apparently, my husband and mother - in - law weren't sure how long the boys had been gone either. I felt my heart plummet like an anvil into the depths of the Mariana Trench.

Part 2 of this story can be found on woodshedwriters.org

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