

under the **gum tree**

TRUE STORIES. REAL ART. NO SHAME. FALL 2022.







this is no ordinary lit mag

Each issue of *Under the Gum Tree* is a carefully curated showcase of art and literature. Its full-color, glossy pages honor the work of our contributors.

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We believe that publishing true stories told without shame alongside visual art brings beauty into the life of our readers—that's you! And the magazine would not be what it is without your participation in what we like to call contemporary, grassroots patronage. By incorporating the beauty of these pages on your living room coffee table, or waiting room magazine rack, or in your hotel lobby, you can support talented, hard working artists and writers.

Though producing gorgeous creative work is rewarding in itself, it can't buy the celebratory wine. With your help as a subscriber, we can begin to pay our contributors and staff. For some, writing is therapy and for others, reading is therapy—and therapy is expensive! Instead, for less than the cost of one visit with the psychiatrist, you can have a whole year's worth of beautiful art delivered straight to your inbox.

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you are worthy of care

I haven't been feeling well the last few weeks. In fact, as I type this it is day 27 of experiencing neuropathy in my body. It's so bad in my hands today that I'm using voice-to-text to write this letter.

I'm sharing this because there are a lot of things I can't do right now, and it's really hard for me to ask for help (Enneagram 8 here). And in the midst of all of this, I also hosted my sister's bridal shower over the weekend, and, thankfully, had a lot of help for it. After it was over, I was so tired and in so much pain that I couldn't stand. So instead I sat on the couch and let the other bridesmaids and my mom do all of the cleanup, put dishes away, move furniture back, take down balloons, all while I sat there and all I did was answer questions about where things go.

It was a very strange feeling for me.

A friend sent me a post on Instagram that said: "You're worthy of care."

It hit me, because it got me thinking about how difficult it is, especially for women, to receive. Whether we need care for health reasons, like I'm experiencing currently, or just because someone wants to love on us for no reason, we have such a hard time because we have always been in the role of doing the giving.

It also got me thinking about storytelling as a form of caregiving. We tell each other stories because we care, but we also have a hard time telling our own story because it's such a challenge to care for ourselves and to believe that our stories really matter to others. That's why I am continually amazed, inspired, and comforted by the stories I read in the *Under the Gum Tree* queue, and in these pages. Because these writers care enough about their own story to craft it, to shape it, send it to us, and ultimately allow us to share it with you.

In this issue you will find stories of how Lola—a tiny jumping spider—became a child's beloved pet during the Covid-19 quarantine, how another child conquered her fear of the "big slide," the loss of a breast to cancer, diminishing eyesight, and the terrifying, yet vital, vulnerability and bravery of opening oneself up to others.

These stories remind me that I'm worthy of care and I hope they remind you that you are worthy too.



Janna Marlies Maron
Editor & Publisher

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{ *feature* }



losing flesh

laura johnsrude

1

I can flex my pectoralis muscle like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

b

But, only my left pectoralis, which was lifted from my chest wall by the plastic surgeon after my breast cancer mastectomy when he placed an expander beneath. Online, you can watch bodybuilders with dancing pecs, alternating left and right to a thumping rhythm. Look at those proud

men—those grinning, bare-chested men. They’ve choreographed a little routine.

When I flex my chest, my natural right breast doesn’t move at all, but my left, fake one jerks up and out with accentuated diagonal rippling of the skin and tattooed areola, like a bit of physical

I eat whatever I want. I just don’t want as much as I used to. Today, I had coffee, yogurt, ten spears of leftover asparagus, and two pralines—all before 11:00 a.m.

There are lots of things I don’t want now.

“

I didn’t try to lose weight after my breast cancer diagnosis last year. I don’t know what happened. Some witchy magic. An enzyme kicked in, or a genetic switch turned off, and wine suddenly tasted like apple cider vinegar, and one serving of food seemed like enough.

”

comedy. Medicine always has a name for conditions—my jerking pec is an “animation deformity” or a “dynamic distortion.”

I have not made a video.

2.

I didn’t try to lose weight after my breast cancer diagnosis last year. I don’t know what happened. Some witchy magic. An enzyme kicked in, or a genetic switch turned off, and wine suddenly tasted like apple cider vinegar, and one serving of food seemed like enough. I didn’t have nausea from chemotherapy or radiation because I didn’t need either, just the left mastectomy and reconstruction surgeries.

3.

My left breast was where my nine-month-old son last breastfed twenty-three years ago, after a pediatric allergist advised me to switch him to an elemental formula because of severe protein intolerance. I remember that final feeding, holding him in the crook of my left arm and sobbing, feeling like I’d failed. He knit his eyebrows and watched me, solemn, and put his hand on my face—on my wet cheek—holding it there while I cried.

4.

My plastic surgeon didn’t bring up my weight loss for a long time. Surely he

noticed my right breast getting smaller as we approached the date for the second surgery—when he would replace my left expander with a permanent implant and lift and reduce my natural right breast to match my artificial left one, to balance my chest. He carefully measured the 50 cc volume at each office visit before injecting it into my left expander port beneath my skin, preparing my tissue for the final implant. We could control the final size of that new left breast, he reminded me. He could stop injecting fluid at any time.

Now, months later, my breasts don't match because I kept losing weight after the second surgery.

I imagine my natural right breast expanding with weight gain and collapsing with weight loss, over and over again, in a GIF of time-lapse photography—like bellows—while my new, round, rubber left breast stubbornly remains the same, filled with 625 ccs of salt water.

Always and forever.

5.

Seven months after the mastectomy, my oncologist frowns about my continued weight loss and mentions that my serum calcium level is still a little high. We both know some cancers can cause elevated serum calcium, but she assures me the number isn't due to breast cancer, because my breast cancer is gone—excised by the surgeon. Still, she keeps me on a more-frequent-than-usual exam schedule.

I worry there's a bit of rot hidden somewhere inside me.

Along my left forearm, I can feel little round balls beneath the skin—smaller than marbles, larger than BB gun pellets. When I roll my fingers over them, they slide around like lymph nodes, but they're in strange locations. At the base of my spine, low on my back, I can feel a fleshy growth, but I can't see it.

Looks benign to my husband, Chris.

Looks benign to my dermatologist.

But maybe she's wrong. When I return to see her in a year, maybe she'll go quiet, and then I'll know why my calcium has been elevated.

Once you've had cancer, everything looks like cancer.

6.

I take the tour at the local Gilda's Club, curious about a cancer-support community. I feel light-headed by the end of the introductions, each of us telling our stories, pausing between breaths, unhurried. Eyes like candles, with tiny flames.

"Do you want a blanket?" someone asks.

I want to fold into myself, curl up into a ball. I feel like I am wasting their time by being there. Taking up space without warming the room.

7.

I'm so cold. I wear a sweatshirt and soft mismatched gloves during exercise class until I warm up. Two different shades of gray, the lighter one on the right. Lost the mates.

Sometimes, there's an awkward exchange when another Jazzercise lady compliments me on my more petite body and asks how I did it—how I started losing weight.

I pause and say, "Well, I was diagnosed with breast cancer in the fall . . ." and the listener either gasps and looks stricken or recovers quickly to reply, "Well, I don't want to lose weight *that way*."

Midway through my hour-long exercise class, a song by 5 Seconds of Summer starts. I know jumping jacks will warm me up, but they will also trigger a sensation of long fingers reaching over my left shoulder to seize the wing of my pectoralis muscle with each leap into the air—each windmilling of my arms—seat-belted my fake breast to my chest. A bruise with each bounce.

My pilot light flickers on, and I peel my gloves off.

8.

Now that I'm on a daily pill to block the conversion of my natural androgen into estrogen, I miss estrogen. Part of the bargain, since my cancer cells sported estrogen receptors.

Clever little monsters, using my "female" hormone to increase tumor cell growth and division in my breasts, one part of my body I've always liked.

As a teenager, I imagined a rushing tide of hormones sloshing around inside me, making me angry/pimply/crampy/moody/teary/steamy/curvy. Now, there's a wall keeping the hormones at bay, or the spigot

is turned off, and all is dry and no longer tethered to the earth by the same gravity.

Even my bones are losing weight now, because of the estrogen-blocking drug to slow down the cancer cells. My hip-bones (like wings), and my spinal vertebrae—fitted together like puzzle pieces—are thinning. Once a month, I take another medicine to decrease the odds that parts of my skeleton will break.

9.

It occurs to me that my husband, Chris, might be imagining life without me, and I wonder if the thought is a tiny bit welcomed. Thirty-three years is a long time to be married to one person. He could start over with a younger woman who brings home a paycheck and has two matching breasts.

10.

Under the pool table in the basement, there's a plastic bin for the stuff I want to suffocate. The pink blanket given to me by the hospital. "How to Live with Breast Cancer" brochures. The Percocet bottle, which used to contain pills I didn't take. A piece of paper where my daughter logged volumes of fluid from the drainage bulbs hanging from the holes in my chest after my one breast was removed. The single gray "knitted knocker" prosthesis, made for me by a friend, tucked away in a pink organza drawstring bag.

11.

When I touch my left breast mound—the fake one—I feel a narrow, tightly-drawn

cord that runs diagonally from the top edge of my breastbone towards the place where I used to have a left nipple—like a guitar string or a rubber band. I don't feel anything like that inside my natural right breast, so this cord must be part of the fake material planted there in the operating room.

Yet it feels like a tendon, and I envision it

as a satiny white piece of connective tissue. I can depress it slightly into the soft pillow, but I can't grasp it between two fingers—though I have tried. I worry at it with my fingers, wanting to know if it is a piece of me or of the alien silicone.

As though that matters. 🌻



Laura Johnsrude's writerly life began after her family settled in Louisville, Kentucky, and she retired from practicing general pediatrics. Laura writes about vulnerability, illness, mothering, and caregiving. Her essays have been published in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Hippocampus*, *The Spectacle*, *Please See Me*, *Minerva Rising*, *The Boom Project* anthology, and on *Brevity's Nonfiction Blog*. Her book reviews have been published in *Good River Review*.





{ *feature* }



intimacy costs

sarah rose cadorette

“People use secrets like currency,” I told Carmen.

W

“What do you mean?” she asked, in her honey-toned mumble.

“The way that people measure relationships. The more you share of yourself, the more that’s supposed to mean, right? So if I share my deepest, darkest secret with you, that’s supposed to be a marker of some intense emotional connection that we now share, and it’s like a stepping-stone in our relationship.”

This conversation was my indirect way

of defending myself. Carmen and I had gone on six or seven dates, about three years before. We made out twice, which I had initiated, and which I knew were the first times she’d kissed a woman. Then one day, I told Carmen I wasn’t ready to be in an emotionally-invested relationship—which was true—and she didn’t speak to me for over a year. I couldn’t blame her. I had let the evidence pile up that I was ready to be her first female relationship. Whether my heart felt like a freshly grated block of Gouda

was irrelevant. We had spent significant time together, often in serious conversations—we had performed the transactions of intimacy.

This conversation with Carmen was the first time I openly admitted, under the guise of talking about *people, you know, society*, that this is how I learned to view human—and especially sexual—relationships: You input certain values, and your output is a greater form of intimacy. The most valuable input is,

of course, the rarest: secrets. The number of times you make small talk with the barista at your local coffee shop over the course of a year may only amount to one story about your childhood told to a friend. It was as if I carried a card in my pocket, to consult when I needed to make an assessment about a relationship without the messiness of human emotions getting in the way:

Intimacy Costs

<i>Friends</i>	<p><i>Acquaintance:</i> 1-3 shared, meaningless experiences, OR 1 shared experience AND 1 story about your family</p> <p><i>Friend:</i> 4+ shared experiences, at least 2 of which are meaningful, OR 1 deeply meaningful shared experience AND at least 5 common interests</p> <p><i>Best Friend:</i> <i>Friend</i> criteria AND 2+ secrets known by max. 1 other person</p>
<i>Lovers</i>	<p><i>Lover:</i> 1+ sexual encounter</p> <p><i>Boyfriend/Girlfriend:</i> 5+ dates AND 1+ sexual encounter AND the term used in front of other people</p> <p><i>Significant Other/Partner:</i> <i>Boyfriend/Girlfriend</i> criteria, AND 1+ secret that could have easily ended the relationship by now</p>

According to my parents I was a *very sensitive* child, one who seemed to experience things *too* deeply, which made my first relationships in high school feel like I was a storm chaser who had suddenly ended up inside the tornado I'd been pursuing. I would become too invested, and the break-up would

drive me to dramatic conclusions about how my intensity would keep me forever alone. The only way to avoid this dire fate was to develop a rational system for acquiring friends and lovers, so that I seemed like someone who experienced linear emotions—just as, I assumed, everyone else did.

In my system, there were also points that people could accumulate in other parts of their lives to make them more attractive. Success Points, for example, were ones that I accumulated in my work life—but since my job was academic, and therefore not “cool,” these points rarely counted towards my Level of Attractiveness. Beauty Points were won, as far as I could tell, from taking selfies, which I couldn’t take seriously. Being in a band or making films gained you Artistic Points. According to friends, I was tone-deaf and couldn’t compose a decent photo, even with Instagram. Nothing could filter out a poor sense of *je ne sais quoi*.

Despite all that, I was pretty confident. I had tricked several people into thinking I was Very Attractive, because I was *persistent*. I put in the work. In my meritocracy, anyone could substitute secrets exchanged and hours spent together for the Level of Attractiveness of a high-end fashion designer with an acoustic guitar and a Facebook full of their best angles.

I tried explaining this recently to Michael, a new Friend and potential Lover, while using the same displacement I had used when talking to Carmen—it wasn’t about me, it was about *society*, specifically Sims-playing, capitalist society.

“Think about it,” I said. “The Sims asks users to commodify their time in the same way that capitalism does. Serfs never used the hours they spent in the fields as a measurement for compensation. They just did the work, and got their share of the harvest or whatever. But then capitalism says, ‘Look,

we’re going to pay you according to these units of time.’”

“So, what does that have to do with relationships?” he asked.

We were walking from Prospect Park to Michael’s apartment in Bushwick, at his suggestion. My body was exhausted from biking all day, but I weighed [the possibility of sex - the time we’d spend walking there] against [the mystery I’d gain by going home early - the cost of cab-bing home], and the former won out.

“That’s how people measure themselves,” I said. “Like Malcolm Gladwell’s theory of genius. If you put 10,000 hours into something, you’ll master it. That’s what The Sims teaches us too, and that’s how people view relationships.”

Michael wasn’t conventionally attractive and, when we met at a mutual friend’s birthday party a few weeks earlier, I hadn’t considered his becoming more than an Acquaintance. Until we walked home together—a good ninety-minute trek—and I saw the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. +1 Beauty. Then he told me he worked in public radio. +7 Success. By the end of our walk, we’d been bantering for over an hour (+8 Humor), and I’d decided that he had a high enough Level of Attractiveness that I wanted to sleep with him. I gave him my number.

I do, and did, recognize the hypocrisy here. Even while decrying capitalist modes of thought, I was using them to evaluate Michael and my relationship with him. But it was the only way I knew to explain how I

had begun to see myself and my interactions with other people in terms of discreet, accumulable units. When I delved into the theories of utilitarianism in high school, I found justification for this thought process. *I'm just viewing the world like philosophical genius John Stuart Mills*, I thought. *Everything can be valued against everything else.*

As I grew older, and realized how dangerous this perspective could be to my relationships—and therefore, me—I made a conscious effort to use my feelings about people, instead of their points or our exchanges of intimacy. But emotions were arbitrary. What if I became friends with someone who hadn't invested any secrets in me, had shown no insecurity? How would I know if they thought we were Friends? What if I fell in love with someone who barely considered me a Lover? Where were the criteria? Every time I ventured into the murky waters of intimacy based on my intuition, I felt myself growing bolder, a little less afraid of the sharks I had assumed lived in this part of the ocean. But these relationships were short-lived, usually dissolving within a few weeks, and I could happily swim back to solid land.

When I finally allowed myself to date someone based entirely on *feeling*—despite all of the negative points she had racked up by being abrasive, ignorant and unstable—I ended up in an emotionally-abusive relationship that nearly cost me a few close friends. That would be, I vowed, the first and last time. The points system kept me safe. Its structure was a sanctuary.

* * *

Years after this promise to myself, and just two months after yet another break-up, I was trying to forget entirely about love and sex, and focus instead on Friends and building up my own statuses. Halloween was just around the corner, and Quinn, a friend from college, had been trying to get me to celebrate with him in New York City for a few years. I'd learned how to successfully navigate moving people between the categories of Lovers and Best Friends, and Quinn was one of those people. We'd had a brief and tumultuous fling in college, but managed to form a solid friendship. I saw him infrequently, but when I did, it was like a supernova—an intense outpouring of energy and emotions over forty-eight hours. We didn't talk often, but I'd told him some heavy secrets, and he'd spilled some demons. I trusted him completely. I bought round-trip bus tickets from Boston and started planning my costume.

By the time we ended up at a strobe-light-ridden, drag-costume contest, Quinn had two ecstasy pills, and I slipped one under my tongue while dancing. A drag queen dressed up like a giant, glittery vagina catwalked across the stage, batting enormous fake eyelashes, while people around me clapped and giggled and my body swung its hips and smiled and sparked warm where the air touched it. I finally understood where the drug got its name.

At one point, while Quinn was spinning me like a music-box ballerina, I became seasick. My legs felt too bendy, like they might collapse.

"I'll be right back," I yelled, and wove my way through mermaids and monsters to the bathroom. The line was at least ten-people deep, but it didn't really matter. I just needed a moment here, against this wall, waiting for this tide to pass.

I turned and there was Quinn, loping towards me down the line. I smiled at him and, without a word, he leaned down, gave me a lingering kiss, and walked away.

My nausea and dizziness vanished. All of the emotions I'd felt about him before—the giddiness and head rush and full-body blush—flooded up to the surface. *It could be because I'm on drugs*, I thought. But when I came out of the bathroom and he asked, "What took you so long?" I responded, "What—in the bathroom, or for the past five years?"

"Both," he responded, before pulling me into another long kiss.

Quinn and I spent the rest of the night and well into the next morning naming everything we could that was proof we'd really wanted to be lovers all along—how our original romance was cut short, how each time we hugged his cologne made my heart race, the jokes he'd made about wanting to kiss me that held a nugget of truth.

"You were always leaving for some foreign country, or in a relationship," he said. "Or, I was. One of us was always unavailable."

I hadn't thought of our relationship that way, but maybe he was right. We had just never gotten the timing down. But now, finally, we could.

"Yeah, but like, I don't know if you're even into me," I said, half-joking.

"I'm in love—" he stopped himself, shaking his head. "Yes, I'm very into you."

But it was too late, I'd heard it and he couldn't pretend it hadn't been said. Later, when recounting the story to friends, I would admit that yes, *we were on ecstasy*, so I didn't take him seriously, but even if he meant it only halfway—and in combination with the divulgence of apparently five years of building up to this moment—it was enough for me. I was ready to work.

We both bemoaned the moment I had to leave the next day, and for months afterwards we attempted to recreate this weekend. One of us would visit the other, we would get drunk, have sex, and spend hours laughing into the morning, examining moments we'd shared years ago. The times between weekends were filled with one long conversation. We texted constantly, and he'd often send me songs, or quotes from books he was reading. I was trying to be rational about all this—after all, Friends can send each other songs—but when he would text things like, "remember that time we read each other's horoscopes aloud at the bodega? so cute," it was impossible for me not to feel my breath catch.

But I also knew, from the days we'd spend together, that he texted constantly with another woman named Ashley. Quinn put much of his life on social media, so I'd seen her in a few of his photos, but he seemed reluctant to talk about her. He told me stories about everyone in his life,

including his preteen cousins. Where was Ashley in our conversations?

Just after New Year's, Quinn told me how, if really pressed, he could "only name two people who he trusted with his life, who he could tell anything to," and one was his best friend since childhood.

"I'm not sure if you know the other person," he said.

"I know of her," I said. "Though, as I've told you before, we've never met."

I had nothing against Ashley. Which is to say, I knew so little about her that it was impossible for me to make the kind of petty

comparisons I could obsess over when I needed to determine if I was better. All I knew was that she lived in L.A. and took photos with her head thrown completely to the side, as if her spinal cord had been severed. I gathered that this is how glamorous women show how long and luscious their hair is.

While I was tempted to comb through all of her social media accounts, looking for evidence of her mediocre existence, I also knew that I didn't actually want to hate her—what I wanted was to gain more points. So I tried instead to focus on my score so far:

Accomplishment	Total Occurrences Oct. 31st, 2015-Present
Utterances of "love" or "in love"	II
Sexual encounters	IIII
Most consecutive days without any communication	I
Times Quinn referenced our relationship in future tense	HHH HHH
Displays of jealousy in reference to other men (and two women)	HHH III
Unprompted references to romantic moments we'd shared	HHH HHH II

The total is where I got tripped up. I could point to all of these instances that added up to *something*, but when Quinn asked me—as he did in nearly every serious conversation we had—what I was looking for, I always said the same thing—that I wasn't *looking* for anything. I couldn't imagine what I wanted. I had always just input these numbers into my system, and

received an outcome that seemed to make sense. My system, in fact, was supposed to prevent me from the fantastical hopes I often created for my love life in moments of unchecked daydreaming, which always ended in brilliant, heart-rending disasters. I allowed the system to dictate my desires, and assumed everything would work out in favor of the winner.

But to Quinn, my answer was a deflection of what he assumed was my true desire—a monogamous, very serious, long-distance relationship.

“I have issues with women and distance,” he told me one night while we were lying in his bed. “It makes me anxious.”

“Okay, well, we don’t need to be in a relationship,” I said. I wanted to work up to being his Girlfriend, but didn’t think about what a future together would actually mean. I never fast-forwarded to how we’d decorate our apartment, or how our parents would

goodbye when I left once again for the bus. Our texting returned to normal. *I’ll just give him some space*, I thought. Maybe then he’d believe I wasn’t trying to trap him in a web of monogamy. Maybe some time would let him see that we could still reach euphoria, if only for a few hours.

* * *

Two months after this conversation, and the last time I visited Quinn, his apartment was under construction. The kitchen was moved, in its entirety, into the living room, where book-shelves shouldered each other

“

Feeling like my insides were champagne and I was desired, right now, was enough. I didn’t even need to be the only one just the favorite.

”

get along. Feeling like my insides were champagne and I was desired, right now, was enough. I didn’t even need to be the only one—just the favorite.

“You’re lying,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“I don’t believe you,” he said, louder.

“Why?”

He shook his head and changed the subject. Soon, we were having sex, and I fell asleep hoping it was a drunk conversation that wouldn’t hold much meaning in the daylight.

And the next day, he seemed fine—we got breakfast, bantered, and he kissed me

around the sofa—and still, the first two items I saw, featured prominently on the displaced fridge and burdened coffee table, were photos of Ashley. We hardly had to go through the motions that followed, the dramatic proclamations of “being unable to do this anymore” and vague references to “someone else,” for me to understand that it was over.

I’d lost.

No matter what I did, the time I invested—because it was, in all senses, an investment—in traveling to New York City and back, the empathy I put into talking through his issues with his father and the

masculine insecurities that stemmed from that relationship—it somehow wasn't enough. These were my points, I had been telling myself, ones I had earned through hard work. Ashley lived too far away to visit as much as I did. She could never amass my score.

And yet here she was, winning. It didn't make any goddamned sense.

* * *

The weekends I used to spend on Chinatown-bound buses and in candle-lit bars, laughing with Quinn over one whiskey-ginger too many, were now replaced with days spent wrapped up in blankets on the couch, sobbing. One Saturday my body felt so heavy, as if my muscles had been replaced with sacks full of sand, that I doubted my ability to get up to use the bathroom. So, I thought, *this is the infamous Depression*. This sort of pain was what my whole system was supposed to protect me against. I spent the day staring at the ceiling, wondering why I was alone. I had done everything right.

The year before, when my girlfriend and I broke up for a reason she couldn't articulate, I told my mother that I was upset because it didn't make any sense.

"No, it doesn't," she said, "but that's love. It could happen to your dad and me tomorrow. People fall out of love sometimes, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Well, that's stupid," I said.

"Maybe," she agreed politely, "but honey, have you thought that perhaps the reason you're so upset is because your ego is hurt?"

It had been four days since my nearly

two-year-long relationship had ended, and here she was, telling me exactly what I didn't want to hear. I felt justified in being angry—who breaks up with their Significant Other when they can't even say why? But I also knew that part of it was the frustration that she had left *me*, the girlfriend who heaped praise upon her, who organized our couple's vacations, whom her mother adored. I was a fucking redheaded *dream*, but none of that mattered. If I was alone again, as I had been two years before, then I was back at 0%. My Relationship Meter was completely drained.

And now, less than eight months after *that* heartbreak, I was soaked in another, like a baptism that succeeded in wiping me clean, but failed in renewing my spirit. I was forced to recognize that Quinn's experience of our relationship was not cumulative. He didn't see the series of sexual encounters and romantic conversations as a series at all. They were bubbles of contained emotion, small pockets of desire and loss. No matter how I valued them, his scale was different. It was nonexistent.

But I know now I wasn't delusional. My system of accounting for affection was toxic to my own thought processes, but it wasn't based on nothing. The points reflected his actions. As much as I should have recognized the haziness of this logic, and the sometimes-overwhelming feeling that Ashley had settled into a chamber of his heart that had no key, he was continually giving me reason to believe otherwise. My scoreboard was simply the method of a metered mind to track the many, many signals he was sending me.

I tried, I am trying, to stop blaming myself. I am trying to make new connections with people without thinking about what our relationships could eventually become, and what it would take to get there. Because I want, for once, to experience happiness without keeping a running tally. 🌻



Sarah Cadorette is a writer whose nonfiction has appeared in publications including *Meridian*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *Emerald City Lit Mag*. She has received awards from *Sonora Review*, *The Southampton Review*, and *Blood Orange Review*. She holds a Creative Writing MFA from Emerson College, and is a 2022 Kenyon Writers Workshop and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference participant. Sarah is working on a book of essays on obsessions and possessions.





(*flash feature*)



the big slide

ashley cowger

The green plastic slide crackles with static electricity. My hand hovers above it, and the air around the slide pushes against my flesh. The translucent hairs on the back of my hand stand at attention. The plastic, which I'm sure has always been smooth, has been worn to a slick slope from many years of vigorous playground use, and as I push my fingers through the force field to touch it, the slide fights back with a biting electric shock.

You cheer me on from the bench. “Go, Mama, go!” You fling dimpled arms in the air. Curls whip around your bobbing head.

I do not want to go down this slide, but I can’t let you see that. It suddenly feels as though teaching you to go down the slide on your own is the most important lesson I will ever impart—more important than teaching you to brush your teeth for two minutes, more important than potty training, more important than not letting you eat candy for dinner. Those things are all about getting by. You are three, and I am thirty-three, and at this moment, right now, I’m teaching you how to live.

You watch expectantly as I sit at the top of the slide. You’ve never dared to go down the big slide at the little playground in our apartment complex. The small slide, sure—countless times. The big one, though? It’s always seemed too big. You announced today that you were ready as we walked, hand-in-hand, toward the playground.

“I’m going to slide today,” you said, and though you didn’t specify which slide you meant, I knew. “But you have to go first.”

“Okay,” I said, and smiled to hide the sinking dread in the pit of my stomach.

“Are you scared, Mama?” you ask.

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” I say, and it is both true and a lie. The moment of static shock

will hurt, but only for a split second. I will probably not fall over the edge as I glide down. My bones will probably not break when my legs hit the ground upon landing. I can do this. I will do this. And yet ... I hesitate a moment longer, look over at you, and wave.

At three, you don’t know that adults have fears, too. You don’t know anxiety often feels like it will eat me alive. You don’t understand that eye contact is difficult for me, or how hard it sometimes is for me to leave the house—how afraid even the smallest social interactions make me. All you know is that you are scared of going down the big slide, but you want to do it anyway. You want to do it, but you need me to do it first. You need me to show you that it will be all right.

I give you one final wave from the top of the slide, then take a deep breath and push myself off. Though my body is in contact with the plastic slide, I feel momentarily weightless, followed by the sensation of falling. Gravity is in control now. It pulls me down to the ground, where I do not, as it turns out, break my legs, though the hard thud upon landing is a little unsettling.

“I did it!” I call to you, but you are already climbing the stairs, ready to take your plunge, yelling down to me from up high, “I’m going! I’m going to do it now! Watch me, Mama! Watch me go!” ⚡



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(flash feature)



the reduced world

amy monticello

Last summer, six months and counting, my husband captured a jumping spider from the back porch, where we spent most evenings gazing out at the weeds, and beyond. A gift for our daughter, the animal-lover.

Six years old and not quite feral, yet, from too many days at home. She named her spider Lola. My husband built Lola a Plexiglas terrarium using hot glue and a drill for air holes. Inside, he placed delicate bamboo skewers for

Lola to climb, her world suddenly reduced. Simplified.

As it was in our two-bedroom apartment, 900 square feet for our pacing, where things from the outside came to our door—Lola, the groceries, delivery from restaurants we

wanted to save. Signs of life clinging on—the way Lola clung to the sides of her terrarium, gazing out at us.

Evenings, when the heat let up, my husband ventured outside to catch Lola's dinner with a net he'd ordered for just this purpose. When he had three or four flies buzzing around the empty herb shaker in which he collected them, he'd pop the cork of the terrarium and spill them inside. Then we'd watch Lola hunt.

Jumping spiders ambush their prey like cheetahs, great white sharks, or viruses. Lola would swivel imperceptibly on her skewers to single out a fly with her eight onyx eyes. Then she'd creep toward her fat, disoriented meal—sometimes it'd take a few minutes, other times, an hour. Once within striking distance, she'd leap three or four times her body length, curling herself around the fly, paralyzing it with venom.

My husband took a video and shared it on Facebook.

Worst nightmare, people said. *Hell no*.

But a lonely child isn't picky. We were all happy to have something new to look at—even the cat, who parked herself in the sunbeam in front of Lola's terrarium for an hour every afternoon. Despite no vacation, no farm camp, no trains downtown to ride the carousel, my daughter rarely complained. Amazing what kids adapt to, I thought, as she adjusted her mask and counted to twenty while washing her hands. Excelling in a pandemic is a dubious honor, but my daughter isn't picky about honors either. She still believes in the transactional nature of

things. Brownie points exchanged for bigger rewards or freedoms.

We knew Lola was a female when she spun her first egg sac. For three weeks, we watched for baby spiders to hatch. But the egg sac was a dud.

In September, my daughter's school announced they'd begin the year online.

What else was there to do but build another egg sac? Lola got to work. The second one hatched at the end of the month and my husband took another video and posted it online. *You guys like swarms of things, right?*

By now, we'd accepted a long haul. Take that as you will. We released the babies in mid-October, the Japanese maple in our neighbor's yard ablaze. But my daughter loved Lola. We ordered roaches by mail to feed her through the winter.

The calendar changed over. The three of us continued teaching and learning at home, gazing out at snow we didn't have to shovel because there was nowhere to go. We set up personal stations in the apartment: daughter in her room on her Chromebook; husband in the kitchen; me in the bedroom, ruining my neck by working in bed. One day, I Zoomed with a colleague from the living room.

"Oh, it's nice to see you out!" she said.

Trips to the kitchen made my legs heavy. It became an event to sit on my own couch. Amazing what people can adapt to, I thought, and felt as I did the first day I didn't cry after my father died.

Lola made it through the winter, and the spring, and most of this summer. In June, with

cases falling, we took our vacation. My husband and I went out to dinner at a restaurant and spent our whole date talking with the women seated at the next table. *Isn't it wonderful?*

By August, our masks were back on. California burst into flames—again.

On another 90-degree day, my husband popped the cork of the terrarium and found Lola dead. She'd woven herself a translucent silky sac and climbed inside. But she still looked alive, clinging to the side of her Plexiglas prison.

My husband had to shake it to show me. ⚡



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{ s o u n d t r a c k }



a duck among *penguins*

bill harrison

I'm onstage with my bass guitar, wearing musician's overalls (a tuxedo), shoehorned between Dean the keyboardist and Jim the drummer.



Our twelve-piece band is crowded onto a riser along one edge of a cavernous tent in Chicago's Grant Park. The gig is a black-tie fundraiser for who-knows-what charity. The venue is packed with politicos, corporate bigwigs, and their

wives (plus a sprinkling of husbands), all decked out in their finest formalwear. The tuxes and dresses are black. The faces, including mine, are mostly white.

A commotion bubbles up near the main-tent entrance. In strides an unexpected guest, Mayor Harold Washington.

“Well,” begins the mayor. “I feel like a duck among penguins.”

He’s wearing a dark blue suit, not a tuxedo.

The mayor’s quip could have been a metaphor for his political life as well as a self-deprecating joke. Harold Washington was Chicago’s first African American mayor.

white audiences. Black musicians worked the South Side, reflecting the intractable racial divide in Chicago. And, with rare exceptions, women who didn’t sing—regardless of race—weren’t welcome in any musical group.

The idea that my peers and I were perpetuating systemic racism would never

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It was another iteration of the same, old American story without acknowledging rampant structural racism and sexism, and exerting conscious efforts to achieve racial and gender diversity, proportional representation in the music business was never going to happen.

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He was relentlessly opposed by the infamous majority-white city council, led by two evil Eddies (Vrdolyak and Burke). During Washington’s first stormy term in office, these “Council Wars” (as they were dubbed by the local media) prevented him from enacting most of his legislative agenda, much the same way an obstructionist Congress would later inhibit progress throughout the presidency of another fine Black Chicagoan.

At that point in my career as a freelance bassist, most of the people I worked for and with were white men. A person of color might make an occasional appearance, but if the gig was downtown or farther north, mostly white musicians played for mostly

have occurred to us at the time. I saw that Black and Brown musicians, including some I knew from the jazz scene, weren’t getting hired for the lucrative downtown gigs, but I did nothing about it. Musicians of color were invisible to white contractors and bandleaders.

It was another iteration of the same, old American story—without acknowledging rampant structural racism and sexism, and exerting conscious efforts to achieve racial and gender diversity, proportional representation in the music business was never going to happen.

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Our union’s history reflects this

bifurcated racial inequality. The Chicago Federation of Musicians' designation is Local 10-208. The hyphenation is the result of segregation. When the precursor to the modern union, Local 10, was organized in 1901, it barred African Americans from membership. Black musicians responded by forming their own union, Local 208. The two groups didn't merge until 1966. I've talked with colleagues, both Black and White, about this over the years. It seemed that most musicians were either ignorant of this history or preferred to forget it.

Half a century later, Chicago's musical community remained stubbornly separate and unequal. In the '80s and '90s, I felt wedged in the middle of a moral dilemma. Working to expand the pool of players to include more people of color would have begun to even the playing field between Black and White musicians—and it would have made it less likely I'd get called for certain gigs. It wasn't in my best interest to advocate for inclusion.

I knew a certain Black bass player—I'll call him Lawrence. Based on his talent and skill set, he ought to have been getting hired for musical theater jobs, some of the best-paying steady work in the music biz. He exuded a confidence that reflected his years of experience in recording studios and with touring bands. But the theater contractors who booked those shows hadn't worked with him, so he didn't get those opportunities. I could have introduced Lawrence to the right people, but I was too worried about my own position in the musicians' pecking order to

stick my neck out for him. The cognitive dissonance between what I knew was the right thing to do and what I was willing to risk precipitated a storm of crushing guilt whenever I gave these thoughts any mental bandwidth. So, I did what I imagine many of my white musician peers did—I tried not to think about it.

Then, one day not long after that charity ball, I became the odd bird.

Early one morning, I was looking for a parking space near a South Side elementary school where I was scheduled to meet up with jazz pianist Willie Pickens and the rest of his quartet. We were about to play a concert and do a Q&A for the students and staff.

Willie spotted me and waved me over to the parking lot. He was a stocky man in his fifties with a welcoming grin. One of a handful of Black musicians I'd gotten to know and make music with regularly, we had taught and played concerts together at the American Conservatory of Music—and elsewhere—over the previous several years.

Willie introduced me to the tenor saxophonist and the drummer, guys I'd never met. I was the only white dude in the band. I knew I was good with Willie—he'd hired me, after all—but I wondered if the other musicians were going to be cool with me. Anxiety stirred in my belly as we were escorted into the auditorium, gear in tow. I stuffed down the jitters as best I could. I didn't want those cats to think I couldn't cut it.

Onstage, I peeled the cover off my double bass and set the instrument down

on the polished oak floor. Students filed in, row-by-row, classroom by classroom. The auditorium filled with children and teachers. It was surprisingly quiet. The kids were watching us, wide-eyed, mesmerized by the sight of us setting up our instruments.

All at once, panic rose in my throat. Besides me, there wasn't a single white person in the room. My face burned. My hands turned clammy. I scanned the room frantically, searching for someone—anyone—who looked like me. I suppressed a visceral urge to grab my bass and make a run for the exit. What am I doing here, with these musicians, on this stage, with these people? Who the hell do I think I am? It was all I could do to stay put. I forced myself to freeze, still as a mannequin, clinging to my bass for support.

At that moment, a gig from last summer hijacked my thoughts. That day, I had performed at an outdoor festival in front of several hundred people in Stone Park, a tiny Italian-American enclave west of Chicago. I was completely at ease that cool sunny afternoon—myself, a couple of other white men, and Frankie, an African American drummer.

I had turned to Frankie and said, "Man, it looks like you're the only Black person for miles around."

"Makes no difference to me," he'd said, with a shrug.

"Doesn't it feel weird?"

"Maybe the first dozen times. But you get used to it. You have to, to survive in this messed-up world."

The present snaps back into focus. I am definitely not used to this. The kids were on their best behavior, sitting there watching us intently. The other band members were chatting amiably, while I was paralyzed by irrational fear—of what? Was I even going to be able to play in this state? I bit my tongue and picked up the bass.

"Let's hit with 'Billie's Bounce,'" Willie called across the stage. He snapped his fingers on beats two and four. "One . . . two . . . one, two, three, four."

My body knew what to do with this twelve-bar blues. I fixed my gaze on the drummer's right hand as I matched the boom of my walking bass line to the ting of his ride cymbal. The tenor player blew like Sonny Rollins as he weaved Bird's melody through Willie's crisp accompaniment. As always, the music took over.

The kids broke out in enthusiastic applause after every number. During our post-concert Q&A, one little girl asked me, "How old is your cello?"

I'd calmed down enough by then to answer with ease.

"Well, it's not a cello. This is a double bass. It's much larger than a cello and has a deeper tone. This bass was built in 1820, so it's almost two hundred years old." I smiled as I heard a few people *ooh* and *ahh*. I almost felt as if I belonged.

• • •

I retired from the music business in 2017. In recent years, I've observed some positive developments in Chicago's music scene. More women and people of color are

showing up regularly on symphonic stages, in orchestra pits, and in dance bands at private parties all over the city and out in the suburbs. The band for the three-plus-year run of *Hamilton* was integrated by race and gender. And, until the pandemic wiped out everything, I was glad to see that Lawrence was in the bass chair at some of the better-

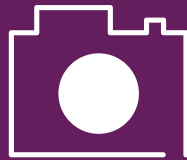
paying theater pits around town.

Yet, there's plenty more work to be done, in Chicago and the rest of the country. If we don't incinerate ourselves, and if the country doesn't tear itself apart at its political seams, perhaps there will come a time when no one is made to feel isolated from the flock of humankind. 🗨️



Bill Harrison is a psychotherapist and former pro bass player. His memoir, *Making the Low Notes*, will be published by Open Books Press in 2023. Other work is forthcoming or published in *Sledgehammer Lit*, *After Hours*, *The Sandpiper*, and *Allium*. Bill lives in Chicago with his social worker/poet wife and a bad Bengal named Jazzy.

{ 1,000 words }



the lonely war

nathan eigenfeld







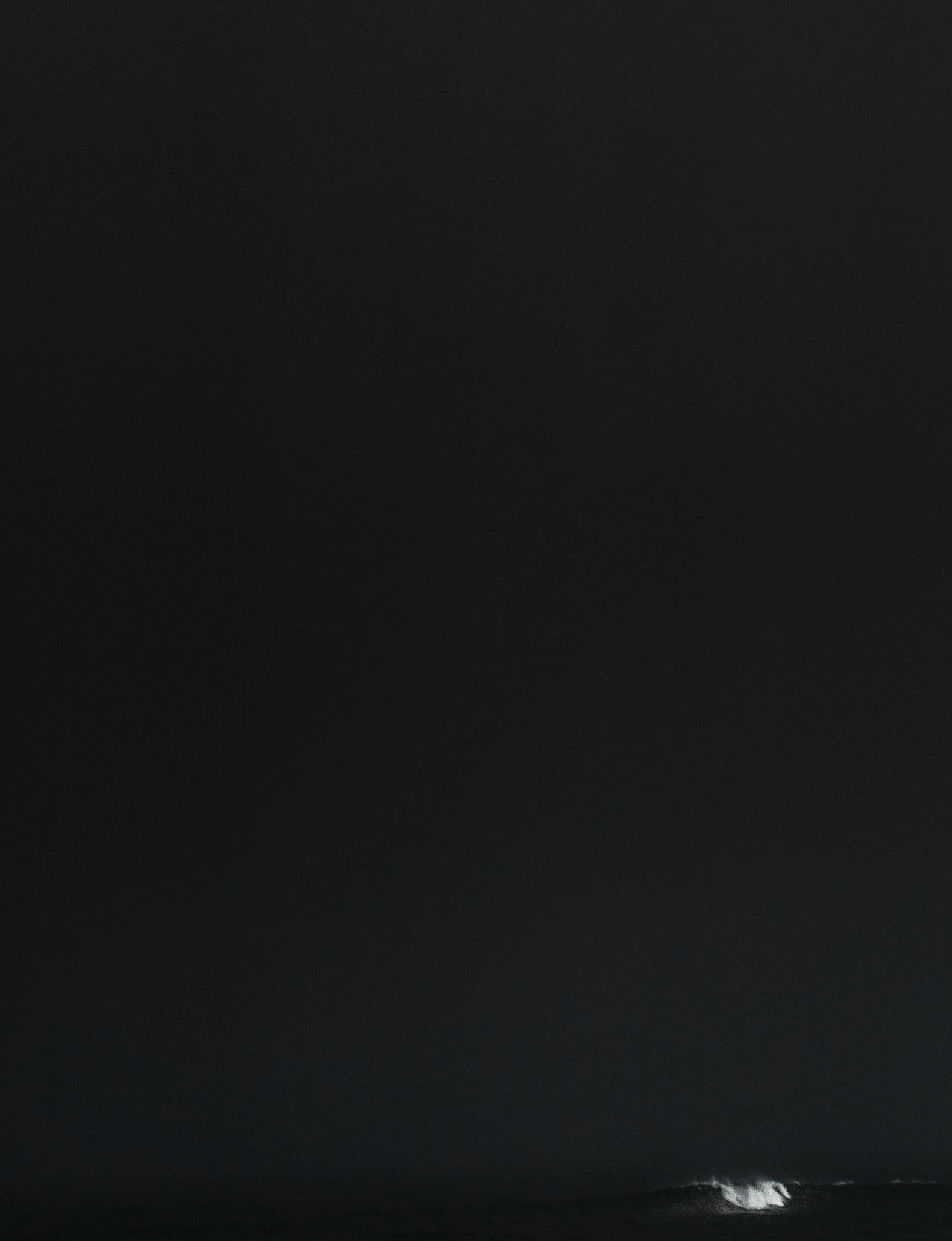




















Nathan Eigenfeld is a photographer based in Rollinsville, Colorado. To document his adventures, he has traveled across North America in his truck and tiny house trailer. As a photographer, he specializes in wild landscapes, and, in his work, he seeks to recreate recurring childhood dreams of searching for who he was and where he came from in the abstract beauty of natural settings. He is a third-generation, mixed-race adoptee and has been reconnecting with this biological family and heritage.

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{ *stomping ground* }



obeah child

joella aragon

Mamacita Ella's thick shoulders sagged. She wiped a river of sweat from her forehead with the back of a thick hand.

She sighed, heavy and loud, then pushed the kitchen door open with wide, soft hips. Mild breezes from the Macal River floated across the dining room table, dancing the edges of the blue, checkered tablecloth. Stew chicken,

rice, beans, and corn tortillas would be ready in an hour for the midday meal.

My three brothers, my sister, and I were hungry—always hungry. Our grandmother chopped, cut, boiled, and fried-up our meals morning, noon, and night. We kids

ate everything in sight, while our mother grew thin. Her hips, once curvy, grew razor sharp through her white cotton slip. From the moment our plane landed in British Honduras, mother stopped speaking to her children, and once we'd moved into grandmother's house, she rarely left her room, where she sat on the edge of the bed, smoking.

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Nine months earlier, the Vietnam War raged as my father drove Marie, our blind, sick mother, my brothers—Douglas, Roberto, and Freddy—my sister, Anne,

with knowing. Yet she couldn't take care of herself, or her five young children, who, at the time, ranged in age from four to twelve. At nine, I was a middle child.

I didn't tell my parents how terrified I was to leave everything I knew behind—my home, friends, and school. I had already learned by example from my older brother and sister to keep my worries to myself. I couldn't share my fears with Grandma Ella either. With six more people under her roof, and our mother of no help with us kids, she was always busy, always doing—cooking, cleaning, sewing, endless piles of laundry,

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I had already learned by example from my older brother and sister to keep my worries to myself.

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and me, to the airport. We were being sent to live with his mother in the hot-as-hell, tiny village of Santa Elena, across the Hawksworth bridge from the twin village of San Ignacio.

He had no other choice but to send us away. Social workers knocked on our door every week asking the same questions.

“What will you do with your children while you're in Vietnam? Who will look after them?”

Marie was blind, but her sense of smell was keen. She knew people by the scent of their skin, whether she saw them every day or every few years. She'd crank her neck, tilt her head, and her face would light up

overseeing our schoolwork, mediating our squabbles.

• • •

My grandmother's thick fingers rummaged through her remnants basket, scraps of brown, blue, and floral cloth.

“This will work,” she said, waving a piece of fabric the size of a loaf of fresh baked bread in my face.

“Listen to me, child.” She gently cupped my chin with her palm. “I spoke to teacher Zunigar today. He tells me Carlos Diaz tripped you on the playground again. He said the boy teases you about your mother and that you punched him on the playground. This time Carlos' mother came

to school to complain. She insists you apologize.”

“But Carlos started it! He starts every fight and he gets away with it.”

“Don’t whine.” Mamacita Ella swiped my tears away with calloused fingers.

“I’m not whining,” I whimpered, wiping my nose with my shirt sleeve. “I’m just trying to tell you what happened. Besides, teacher says we should always tell him if something bad happens out on the school yard.”

“No one wants to hear your problems—not the nuns, the teachers, or anyone else—even if they say they do. To survive this life, you must learn the power of sweet, secret revenge. I’m going to teach you how to make an Obeah doll. Obeah magic will save you.”

She smoothed the brown scrap of cotton cloth on the dining room table, then dug in her dress pocket for a chunk of yellow chalk.

“Don’t just stand there, Joella. Come closer. Watch what I do.”

My heart pounded against my ribs. I grabbed my chest and twisted my shirt, afraid I was having an eight-year-old heart attack. Hot tears flowed down my cheeks and onto my lips. I licked them with the tip of my tongue.

“This is not the time for fear,” she said. “Fear will only cripple you. Watch me—first draw the doll’s head, then the torso, arms, legs, and feet, in that order.” Her fingers tightened around silver scissors. “Next, cut out the body.”

The efficient snip, snip, scratch filled the quiet corners of the dining room.

The Caribbean sun was gentle that day. We were alone in the dining room while she worked magic with scraps of cloth. As was so often the case, Mother was in her bedroom, staring into the blackness. My siblings were in the backyard, playing, waiting for the midday meal. I could hear their distant chatter and the sing-song of the neighbor’s radio.

“Your doll shouldn’t be any bigger than this.” She tapped a wooden ruler gently on the tip of my nose. “Now, continue cutting where I left off,” she instructed, handing me the scissors. “Then stitch the body together like I’ve taught you. Don’t forget to leave an opening at the top of its head, to stuff your Obeah doll with more scraps of cloth, then tie the neck with twine, and sew two green buttons on its face for eyes.

“I have work to get back to in my sewing room. Mrs. Espinoza’s burial dress needs to be completed by early tomorrow.” Mamacita Ella sighed, her eyes drooped and tired. A permanent frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. “The money from your father isn’t enough to feed and clothe this family. Believe me child, I’d rather sip hot tea and relax on the porch swing, but I have a sewing business to run, and we need the money.” She rubbed her thumb and two fingers together.

I threaded the needle the way Grandma Ella had taught me, stiffening the thread with a dab of spit. Placing the right sides of the fabric together to make a clean seam, so the

rough edge would be hidden on the inside, I plucked up the weave of the cloth with the point of my needle, over and over again.

Don't be lazy, I told myself, as I formed a stitch and tugged the thread through, struggling to keep each new stitch even and tidy as the one before. Do it right. Pull your work out and start over again if you must. Frayed edges and crooked stitches must never be seen. Take pride in your work. My grandmother's instructions echoed in my ears.

snatched it from me with a force that stung worse than a slap to the face.

"Treat Obeah magic with respect," she hissed. "It's not a toy. No one must ever know you're an Obeah child. Follow me."

She shoved the doll into my chest. Burning with shame, I followed.

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My grandmother managed her sewing business out of her bedroom at the front of the house. My favorite place to perch was

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If a person needed a new garment in two days, she pumped the pedal faster, moving specialty dresses like baptismal gowns or fancy suits for men beneath the needle with amazing speed and control.

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When I'd finished the doll's body, I twisted the end of the thread between my index finger and thumb to tie the final knot and snipped the excess thread. I chose two shiny, green buttons from an old cookie can and sewed them to my Obeah doll's face, stuffed my doll and tied twine around her neck.

Proud of my handiwork, I raised my doll to the ceiling and danced to the salsa music that wafted through the window. I swung her high and in circles above my head.

Mamacita Ella walked into the dining room and caught me swaying to the music with my Obeah doll in my arms. She

on a small wooden footstool near her Singer sewing machine, stitching buttonholes on shirts and listening, rapt, to her stories.

The entire village knew of her sewing expertise. As a child, I believed she was famous—and perhaps in that town she was. "Go to Miss Ella's house before the baby shows. She'll make a wedding dress for you. She knows how to keep a secret."

She would pump her sewing machine pedal and sing while she stitched. I can still hear her words. "*Need to earn a nickel, need to earn a dime, food on the table, a stitch in time.*"

If a person needed a new garment in two

days, she pumped the pedal faster, moving specialty dresses like baptismal gowns or fancy suits for men beneath the needle with amazing speed and control. I knew the light burned in her bedroom at all hours of the day and night. The more pressure she was under to finish a suit, burial or wedding dress, the faster she worked, and—or so it seemed to me—the more stories she told. I must have stitched hundreds of plastic pearls on wedding gown lace while I listened to my grandmother’s stories.

With a cup of hot tea in her hand, she stared out her window at the glowing kerosene lamp light coming from the house next door.

“Tell me a story,” I would whisper.

The sewing machine would begin to hum, her voice would grow guttural and low and—as she pushed wedding gown silk beneath the needle and quickly hemmed a blue, floral dress—she would begin. “Your great-grandmother, Feliciano Viana, was kidnapped by a Guatemalan soldier over sixty years ago.”

“My great-grandmother was kidnapped?” I would murmur, wide-eyed.

“Yes,” she said, with a glance and a sly smile my way. “A Guatemalan soldier rode his horse onto the land where she lived with her husband and child. The horse’s front legs pawed hot, sticky air. Feliciano stared at this stranger in horror. Her mouth gaped open. Dust burned her eyes. She tried to scream, but no sound came out.

“The soldier snatched her away in a whirlwind of dust. Feliciano had paused too

long when she should have run like the wind in a storm. In the seconds it took for her to wonder what she should do, the soldier had lifted his leather riding crop high above his head and snapped it around her legs.

“Her face hit the ground. Blood poured from her mouth. The soldier leaned over the side of his horse and twisted Feliciano’s black braids around his thick, brown hand. He pulled her up onto his horse. Her screams were carried away with the speed of the horse and the matching speed of the wind.

“Feliciano Viana was never seen again.”

“Tell me more,” I begged.

I always begged for more.

• • •

Completed jobs hung on hangers ready to be tried on in a makeshift fitting room, complete with full-length mirror and a raised platform to stand on. A tuck here, a snip of thread, shorten the hem, take in the waist. A parade of customers collected their precious new dresses and suits wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. Smiles radiated satisfaction as they handed me crisp, British Honduran banknotes carrying the face of Queen Elizabeth.

“Your grandmother is much admired in this town,” a City Council member smiled as he admired his new black, silk suit. “She’s a member of the Town Judicial Council, you know. No one messes with your grandmother.” He tousled my hair.

I was proud to be her granddaughter and felt her success was also my own.

• • •

As the moon began to rise, Mamacita

Ella lit ten hurricane candles in the windowsills, and on the nightstand next to her bed. Shadows danced on her sewing room walls. I hugged my doll close while the lemony scent of burning candles tickled my nose.

She shuffled her feet side-to-side to Cumbia music from the radio in her bedroom and began to chant, low in her throat, then thunderous loud. She clapped. She laughed. She gyrated her hips. She plucked a needle from her pincushion and held it to the red, hot candle flame.

“Set your Obeah doll here.” She pointed to a small metal table beside her sewing machine. Still swaying to the music, she rammed the hot needle straight into my Obeah doll’s heart.

“Oh! Great Spirit,” she cried out, “help my granddaughter find the courage to protect herself. Work your Obeah magic.”

She held the needle to the flame again and stuck it into the doll’s neck.

Fear cramped my gut. Bile burned my throat. I stumbled back against the wall.

Mamacita Ella’s bare feet pounded the mahogany floor.

“Oh! Great Ancestors, I call on you to protect my granddaughter. She must learn courage in order to survive.”

I was timid at first, unwilling to dance. Then an unfamiliar power, burning hot like the Caribbean sun, coursed through my body. My movements began to match my grandmother’s. Our pounding feet grew thunderous loud. We laughed. Our fists pummeled the stagnant air. My grandmother’s

body moved, nimble and free.

“Oh! Great Spirits,” she shouted, “You are in us. We are in you. Guide us. Show my granddaughter the wisdom of her own power.”

We danced side-by-side. Though I was only a child, I understood we were becoming one with the spirits from our past.

“When Carlos asks you why your mother is blind, tell him it’s none of his business. Run home. Stick a hot needle in your Obeah doll’s right eye. He’ll stumble into town screaming with pain. Puss will ooze from his eyes,” my grandmother said, cackling.

“Don’t turn your eyes from me.” She grabbed my chin and forced me to look into her eyes. “If you let that boy get away with harassing you, he’ll do it again.” She blew hot breath on another needle, passed it through the red flame, then jabbed it into the Obeah doll’s knees.

Grandma Ella beckoned me with her index finger. She stuck the needle into the doll’s stomach.

Rhythmic dance pulsed inside me from the place where I knew my female ancestors lived. We danced the dance of sweet, secret revenge.

“Now you do it,” she demanded, holding the needle out for me to pluck from her fingers. “You must learn to protect yourself. No one can do this for you.”

Pounding rain poured down, flooding the streets. Dogs howled in the distance.

My heart raced. Sweat—peppery and bold—seeped from my body, mixing with the lemony candle scent.

“Will I go to hell if I use Obeah magic?”
I asked, holding back tears.

“No child, hell is a myth. You are gathering strength, courage, wisdom, and protection from the long line of your female ancestors.”

Cautious at first, I clutched the needle, then held it to the flame.

“Breathe,” my grandmother said. “Just breathe. You are strong. You can do this. You must do this.”

I rammed the hot needle into my Obeah doll’s heart. My courage grew like the waves of a hurricane. With every thrust of the needle into my Obeah doll’s heart, head, arms, and knees, I became strong and free. Over and over I thrust the needle into my doll’s body.

“If the boy in your class puts his foot out to trip you, his knees will buckle with pain. If he changes his ways, forgive him. If he continues to call you a prissy, little whitish girl, or laughs because your mother is blind, stick the needle in your doll’s left eye.”

Mamacita blew out the last candle in her sewing room, then pulled me close.

“Obeah Magic will protect you if you respect it. Use its powers only when necessary. Otherwise, heartache and pain will follow you for the rest of your life.”

“Now, hurry. We have a burial dress to finish. You’re coming with me.”

“I am?”

“I’m no longer strong enough to dress the dead by myself. I need your help to turn the body. Mrs. Espinoza must be perfect for her end-of-life celebration.”

• • •

The following evening, yellow kerosene lamps shone in Mrs. Espinoza’s windows. Rice and beans simmered on the stove. Bottles of rum were lined up like wooden soldiers on a table in the kitchen.

My grandmother and I washed Mrs. Espinoza’s body with warm, soapy water. We turned her body, slipped the burial dress over her head and shoulders and covered her body. Her lips were painted red. Rose-colored powder covered her cheeks. When family arrived to pay their respects, she rested in peaceful repose on the dining room table, perfect as Mamacita had said she must be.

A musician played the banjo on the veranda—another, the steel drums. Glasses of rum were passed. Children and adults laughed and told stories until morning.

The Macal River sparkled under starlight and the dangling moon. Iguanas languished on branches. A lone monkey scratched its arm while sitting in a mango tree.

Long after the mourners had departed, Mamacita Ella and I walked home under full moonlight, happy and exhausted. She kissed the top of my head, then reached for my hand.

“Mrs. Espinoza taught me Obeah Magic when I was a young woman. Before she died, she said I must pass the magic on to you because you understand.”

• • •

A few days later, Carlos Diaz teased me again.

“White girl! White girl! Prissy little white girl! You think you are better than us. You’re

not. Your momma is blind. Your momma is crazy!" Carlos laughed.

Carlos called me that because I'm light-skinned compared to my darker-skinned brothers, and my Belizean, Creole, father. In that small village, we were different. People often stared and asked questions. Father's heavy Creole accent and Mother's blindness brought unwanted attention wherever we went. *Why is your father's hair so kinky? Is he Black? What's wrong with your mother's eyes? Why won't she talk?*

"Asshole! I'm going to tell teacher," I screamed at Carlos. Then I fell silent, as a small but mighty voice whispered in my head, "No one will save you. You must save yourself."

After school, I ran home, set my Obeah doll on the dining room table and lit five candles. My arms flailed. My body rocked. I passed a shiny silver needle through the red, hot flame.

"Oh! Great Spirit, help me find the courage to protect myself."

"I want Carlos to stop teasing me," I chanted.

I rammed, jammed, and pushed the hot needle into my Obeah doll's knees and eyes.

With the force of a Caribbean storm, the kitchen door slammed shut, flew open, then shut again. I grabbed onto the edge of the kitchen table, afraid I had felt the force of the devil himself.

The next day, Carlos wasn't in school. I heard he had tripped over his feet crossing the Hawksworth Bridge on his way to school—that he fell, tore a hole in the knees

of his pants, that blood seeped and puss oozed out of his eyes, that he screamed in sorrowful pain.

I laughed out loud with the tattle-tale children who told me the story.

• • •

A week later, there was a knock at the front door. Peering through the screen, I spied Carlos and his mother on the veranda. He held a platter covered with a white dish towel. His white shirt was tucked into his starched school pants, his hair still wet from a shower. He and his mother looked as if they were on their way to Mass.

Carlos still had a white cotton patch over one eye. We stared at each other through the screen—he with his one good eye, both of us speechless as my mother.

Breaking the impasse, his mother gave him a gentle shove.

"Go on," she said.

"We made these tamales for you and your family," Carlos said. "I'm sorry I said those mean things about you and your mother."

I hadn't noticed, but Mamacita Ella hovered just behind me. She pushed the screen door open, and beckoned Carlos and his mother inside. As they passed, Grandma Ella narrowed her eyes at me. I widened mine, as if I didn't understand what she wanted. She pinched my waist.

"I'm sorry too, Carlos," I mumbled.

My grandmother cleared her throat.

"I mean, I'm sorry I punched you in the stomach."

"Joella," Mamacita Ella said, taking the platter of tamales from Carlos, "put these

on the dining table and call the rest of the family to eat. Tell them we have company.

"You'll join us, won't you?" she asked, turning to Carlos' mother with a wide smile.

"Come," I said to Carlos, "help me find my brothers and sister. You know Freddy, right? I think he's in the backyard. But first I have to bring my mother to the table."

Together, Carlos and I walked past the table, heavy-laden with fresh tamales, stewed chicken, rice, beans, tortillas, and a cool pitcher of lime juice, and into my mother's dim-lit, smoke-filled bedroom.

"Take her hand, Carlos," I said. "Help me guide her to the table. We can't let her fall down the stairs."

Our three eyes met and held for a moment. I can't know what he saw in mine. But I was pretty sure Carlos wouldn't be teasing me anymore. Mamacita Ella's advice—to never hold a grudge, or heartache and pain would follow me for the rest of my life—whispered near the edges of my mind.

At that young age, it was easy to forgive and still dance the dance of sweet, secret revenge. 🏠



Joella Aragon is a retired elementary school teacher and labor union representative for the California Teachers Association. She spent much of her childhood traveling to different countries, and parts of the United States, with family and her immigrant father who was in the Air Force. Her fondest memories are from when she lived in British Honduras, now Belize, with her Mamacita Ella.





{ *stomping ground* }



snapshots
of a girl with
eyeglasses

carole besharah

Age 4

The rough living room carpet digs into my bare
knees, but I dare not move.

d

Dad wants to show me a trick using a crisp sheet of paper that I try not to crease with my hands. His hulking figure

crouches beside me. On sunny weekend afternoons, he snoozes on his stomach on the carpeted floor under the picture window where the large rectangle of light

creeps from one end of the living room to the other.

Today, my father's palms brush my cheeks when he removes my thick, tortoiseshell eyeglasses. The way he moves is gentle, like the time when he placed Mom's much-loved dish made of milk glass on a shelf out of my reach. I squint, the large window transforming into a bright, sky-blue blur. The sunlight warms the tip of my nose, which tickles because of Dad's aftershave.

He holds my glasses with his right hand and takes the sheet in the other. Everything's

When he hands them over, I put them on and see a hole the size of a silver dollar in the paper. Dark grey flakes fall from its rim onto the carpet.

"The sun hits the lens to make the fire," Dad says.

He keeps explaining, but my heart's loud singing drowns out his words. I am a girl with magic glasses.

Age 6

I sneak up to the enormous oak tree at the far end of our backyard. I look up

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My insides flip with the thrill of this rough-and-tumble kid's attention. Emboldened, I stand on the branch. I wobble. I hug the trunk, the rough bark digging into my arms.

”

blurry, but I can make out a shadow on the paper. In its center shines a bright, still, white circle of light. I wait in quiet anticipation, eyes itchy from trying to focus and not blink away. I don't know if minutes or seconds pass before an inky smear starts to spread and an acrid smell burns my nostrils.

Excited, I reach for my eyeglasses but instead feel the coarse hair of his big fingers covering the lenses.

"Careful now," he says, checking to see if the eyeglasses are too warm for me to touch.

at my big sister and JP, the freckled-nosed boy who lives a few blocks away. They're nestled in the crook of thick branches high above my head, chatting in secret, big-kid language. Laughing.

I wriggle my way onto the lowest branch and sit there, feet swinging, wondering how I can get up there too.

When JP notices me, he says, "Come on, is that the highest you can go?"

My insides flip with the thrill of this rough-and-tumble kid's attention. Emboldened, I stand on the branch. I

wobble. I hug the trunk, the rough bark digging into my arms. My heavy eyeglasses slip down the bridge of my sweaty nose. I don't try to push them back up. I can't let go or I'll fall. If I look up, will my sister—rescuer of my misadventures—notice that I need help?

JP chuckles and makes a show of waving his arms. "Look kid, no hands!" he says.

I squeeze my eyes shut and tighten my hold on the tree. I hear my sister huff and climb down to help me. When we're both standing on the lawn, she tightens the barrette clasp the mess of curls away from my face.

JP cries from above, "Let's pop some wheelies!" He vaults from his perch in a swift, effortless arc—just like his favorite cartoon character, Rocket Robin Hood—would do.

I run behind them toward two big bicycles at the end of the driveway, but he stops and stares back at me.

"Not you, Four Eyes," he shouts. Bringing his hands to his tanned face, he makes two circles with his fingers and peers through the holes. He sticks out his tongue and runs away.

Watching JP hop onto his lowrider, the full weight of those new words smothers me. I didn't know there were bad words for kids with glasses. Soon, I'd learn more bad words from meaner kids.

Age 12

"Please let me have contact lenses,

Mom," I say. "I promise I'll keep my room clean from now on."

Eighth grade starts next month. I dream of trading my current identity for a cooler one. My braces have just been removed. My dark hair cut short. My closet filled with new baggy, pleated pants and matching acrylic sweaters bought with a year's worth of babysitting money. My pink, coke-bottle glasses play no part in my New Girl aspirations.

Mom relents. She enlists the help of a new optometrist, Dr. Rosien, since my current one refuses to prescribe contact lenses for a kid with severe farsightedness and astigmatism.

On a hot August afternoon, I sit before a well-lit vanity mirror in Dr. Rosien's musty basement office. He's given me the how-to-take-care-of-your-lenses spiel, and I squeeze saline solution over the lens in the middle of my left palm. I try and try, but I can't seem to press a contact onto my eyeball without it falling off my finger or getting stuck in my long lashes.

Wide-eyed with panic, the optometrist—a small-town, middle-aged bachelor—doesn't know how to deal with a frustrated girl who squeaks and gags when she tries to touch her eyes.

When his 2 p.m. appointment walks in, the doctor leaves me to practice on my own. He checks in again before his next client arrives. I haven't made any progress. A pile of crumpled tissues, damp with tears, snot, and saline solution rests in the wastebasket at my feet. My eyes are red and

sore from trying and from all the tears shed in the process.

After his last client leaves, Dr. Rosien pulls up a chair, sits, and looks me right in the eyes. "Listen, if you can't put your contacts in within the next five minutes," he says, leaning in so close I can see his nose hairs, "I won't let you leave my office with them. It's now or never."

I grumble, bang the saline solution bottle on the counter, then jab a lens onto my right eyeball. It sticks. Neither one of us says a word as I grab the other contact lens,

the kind of girl who will sit alone on the twenty-minute bus ride across town.

"See? That wasn't so bad," he says. "Not bad at all."

Age 16

Having finished studying the novel, we sit at our desks to watch *The Lord of Flies*.

"A treat," Mrs. Barbeau, our English teacher, called it. Though it's not the recent Hollywood adaptation starring Balthazar Getty. It's the campy black and white 1963 movie.

“

“Listen, if you can't put your contacts in within the next five minutes,” he says, leaning in so close I can see his nose hairs, “I won't let you leave my office with them. It's now or never.”

”

drench it in clear liquid, and press it to my left eye. It sticks, too.

The doctor praises me, a triumphant smile plastered on his face.

Mesmerized by my reflection, I pay him no heed. My blue eyes look small, and the skin under them seems sallow without my glasses. My throat aches when I notice the bushy jumble of hairs stretched across my brow bone. The girl staring back at me isn't the kind of girl who will fit in with the popular crowd. Nor, the kind who'll get her first kiss anytime soon. She looks like

I loved reading the book about castaway boys gone wild on a deserted island. My affinity for Piggy, the voice of reason who used his spectacles to make fire, was fierce. I cried when reading about the eventual demise of the boy whose eyeglasses and chubby belly were constant fodder for teasing by the others.

In class, we snicker when Piggy's glasses get smashed, thanks to Jack's slap across the face. And we snicker again when the pudgy kid yells, “Just you wait!” in his whiny English accent. But when a jagged

boulder smashes Piggy in his squinty face near the film's end, we lose it. We laugh so hard, Mrs. Barbeau looks up from her desk and tells us to simmer down.

My giggles, though, are a fake nervous tic. A traitor to Piggy. A traitor to my younger self who endured the same kind of bullying in the schoolyard. Looking around at my classmates, I realize most didn't know me as a kid and had never seen me wear my hideous glasses. None know that every day, I endure sore, itchy eyes and an end-of-day lens scrubbing-and-soaking routine to blend in. Would these people treat me the same if they knew I was a real-life Piggy?

After class, walking toward my own in a row of orange lockers where I know I'll find my friends huddled and chatting, I wipe wet eyes and hope they won't notice.

Age 20

I wake twisted in a mound of rank bedsheets that belong to a handsome, disheveled boy. Last night, we left the bar with its black walls and galactic cocktails. Me, laughing and pulling his bare hand in my mittened one—he, smiling and tugging his pierced bottom lip with his teeth.

Upstairs, his roommate blasts "The HIV Song" by Ween. A hellish, carnivalesque melody outpacing the thumping in my head. All of my muscles ache, and my tongue feels like a dry, stale sponge. Recollections of dumpster diving for day-old baguettes behind Boko Bakery turn my stomach. That, or last night's Screwdrivers still sloshing around in there.

My hands feel around on the bedside milk crate for my contact lenses, one in a Styrofoam cup, the other in a Strawberry Shortcake mug—a relic, he told me, from his childhood home. Both lenses float in cold tap water. If only I had my glasses, I wouldn't have to endure this burning ritual of putting dirty lenses on dry eyes. My eyelids—still daubed with clumps of silver glitter—cannot stay open, and the pain inflicted by my contacts makes me moan. Blind as a naked mole rat, I search the concrete floor for crumpled clothes. I feel the boy's quiet, hazy stare ablaze on my bare back.

Age 27

I visit Dr. Rosien for my annual check-up. I take a deep breath before he starts prodding—long visual field test to track my worsening peripheral vision, itchy fluorescein eye stain to check for injuries, and dilating tropicamide eye drops to examine the large deposits on my optic nerve. After fifteen years, he no longer attempts to flip my upper eyelids to check for whatever tumors may lurk beneath them. He knows I can still be stubborn sitting in his optometry chair.

With a new, full-time job with benefits, I can finally afford laser vision correction surgery. The long-time wish to see without contact lenses or thick glasses is now within reach. I ask him for a referral.

Dr. Rosien furrows his dark eyebrows. He straightens, fixes me with a firm stare, and says, "You are not a candidate for

LASIK. You have three strikes against you.” He goes on to explain the limits for people with bad eyesight like mine, but all I hear is “can’t,” “won’t,” and “not strong enough.”

A tear slides down my cheek.

He hands me a tissue and waits. I wipe my eyes and blow my nose. His concerned expression reminds me of his mild panic all those years ago, when I was a squeamish kid freaking out about touching my eyeballs for the first time.

“Oh well,” I say, with a shrug, chuckling to make him—and myself—feel better. “Maybe in the future, they’ll make bionic eyes for people like me.”

Age 35

The snug bodice of my trumpet-style wedding dress makes it challenging to sit down across from my new husband. We laugh.

We are the only patrons in this intimate Prague restaurant inside a stalactite cave that opened early for us. We have just wed in enchanted Old Town Square on a blistering summer afternoon, having just tied the knot during our trip without telling our kids, family, or friends, back in Canada.

It’s my first visit to a Michelin-class restaurant with its sommelier and pianist, but not Brian’s. He has traveled, wining and dining clients for work. My husband lets me soak up the glitz and answers patiently when I ask about the three sizes of wine glasses at our place setting. I can’t make out the writing when our waiter hands us menus. It’s a fuzzy blur.

“I can’t see the words,” I say.

I blink and look up at Brian. I see him with clarity, bright-eyed and handsome in a black suit. Confused, I try reading the menu again. Still distorted. I bring the menu close to my face, then pull it away at arm’s length.

Nothing.

“Maybe your contacts aren’t strong enough?”

Right. I’m wearing contacts for the first time in years. A disposable pair Dr. Rosien agreed to prescribe when I pleaded, “Don’t let me look like Bubbles from the *Trailer Park Boys* on my wedding day!”

“But you won’t see well,” my optometrist warned me.

“I don’t care. It’s just for one day. I can’t wear hideous glasses with my white dress.”

After a half-dozen years working in a network of primary school libraries, I developed Contact Lens Intolerance (CLI) from dust allergies. I’d gone back to wearing glasses.

But not today. Today, I’m wrapped in taffeta with a diamond eternity band on my left ring finger, sitting across the table from a funny man with greying temples. In a fairy-tale city, speckled with Baroque church spires and lined with cobblestone roads.

I don’t know it now, but it’s the last time I’ll wear contact lenses. Soon, I’ll wear progressive glasses and begin to lose vision in my right eye. In the coming years, having magnified eyes won’t even cross my mind, so long as I can still read most books without large print. Do 1000-piece

puzzles with my kids. Watch backyard hummingbird duels with my husband. My husband—who right now is smiling as I delight in the caribou entrée, and who

won't tell me about the bouillon dribble on my wedding dress so I can hold on to this day with nothing but joy. 🏠



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