

Collected Short Stories: volume IV
by
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Two Zen Monks

Two Zen monks climbing a hill on their way to the monastery, notice a geisha waiting by the side of the road. A rain storm the previous night has transformed the street into a minefield of slippery mud and puddles, so that the woman is unable to reach the tea house without soiling her pretty kimono and shoes. "The older monk tells the geisha, "Climb on my back and I'll carry you up the hill". She agrees and off they go. A few hundred yards up the mountain, the older monk lets the woman down in front of the tea house. The geisha thanks him profusely and the monks continue on to the Buddhist temple. Just before they enter the shrine, the first monk turns to his friend and says, "'About that Geisha..."

"How is it that you are still carrying the woman," the older monk replies, "when I left her at the tea house five minutes ago?"

Anonymous

"Got a map of Maine lying about anywhere?" Sarah Portman asked. They had just returned from the market and the older woman was shelving groceries.

"There's a New England roadmap in the glove compartment," her husband, Rob, qualified. He passed a green pepper to his wife who deposited it in the vegetable bin. When no further information was forthcoming, he added, "Are we going somewhere?"

"No, not exactly." she pulled the freezer door ajar. "Hand me the sherbet."

Later that evening Sarah spread the tattered map on the bedroom comforter and ran an arthritic finger up the interstate in a northerly direction. A short woman with watery green eyes, Sarah's auburn hair began sprouting silvery roots from an early age. In recent years she bought dye. The color didn't make her look younger but rather like a woman on the front side of seventy refusing to grow old gracefully, so she stopped using color and let her reddish-brown locks bleed gray.

“What are you looking for?” Her husband pressed.

“Unity... Unity, Maine.”

Rob located the rustic hamlet on the directory nestled near the upper, right hand side of the page then ran his eyes up the map past Lewiston, Augusta and Waterville before veering off to the east. “Who do we know in Unity, Maine?”

“The Stevenson’s granddaughter, Bethany, is studying conservation law at the local college. She wants to be a game warden, park ranger... something of the sort. The college offers courses in environmental science, marine biology, bear tagging and a hodgepodge of sustainable agriculture programs.” Sarah pursed her lips. “A couple weeks back Bethany was eating lunch at a pizza place in the center of town and spotted Midge Parker leaving a rooming house.”

“A rooming house?” Rob shook his head in disbelief. “That doesn’t sound like Midge Parker.” He scratched a hairy earlobe pensively. “What’s it been... five, six years since she moved away?”

“More like eight.” Sarah corrected. “Thought I might drive up there,” She said vaguely.

“That’s a four hour trip. You’d need to spend the night.”

“Hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

“Driving through Boston, you risk getting mired in rush-hour traffic,” Rob added. “The route 128 loop would be preferable.” When there was no reply, he asked, “When were you planning to go?”

“Tomorrow...early.” She scanned the map uncertainly. The region seemed desolate. Huge empty tracts of virgin country pockmarked by tiny villages, each separated by forested expanses once travelers ventured off the freeway.

“Don’t like you driving that distance alone.”

“I don’t mind,” she protested.

“With the cataracts,” her husband shot back, “and night blindness you can’t see for crap once the sun goes down.”

“I’ll just be gone a day and won’t drive after dark.” After a tense pause, Sarah said, “This is something I have to do.”

Edging up behind her, Rob slipped an arm around her waist and pulled his wife close. “Of course, I could stay at the motel thumbing through musty back issues of National Geographic,” he offered with a dry inflection, “while you wander the boondocks of central Maine in search of your long lost friend.”

The soft-spoken offer was what she would have expected. A Taurus through and through, the man was practical, slow, plodding and slow to anger. The latter trait frequently infuriated his emotionally impetuous spouse. Her poor vision notwithstanding, Rob would never let Sarah travel unaccompanied so far from home. Since the children married and went off to pursue their own lives, the Portmans did most everything together. It was a package deal, a bittersweet revelation that old age evolves into a comingling, a communion of like-minded spirits on a final journey.

Sarah rested her hands on a boney wrist. “Perhaps we better start packing.”

* * * * *

The last time Sarah had seen Midge Parker the two women spent a summery day at Horseneck Beach on Cape Cod. On the drive south the lanky woman with the weather-beaten features cracked jokes and spoke sparingly about personal matters.

Midge's husband had passed away of a heart condition six months earlier. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – that was the technical term. For reimbursement purposes, every disease required a diagnostic code. The code for the heart ailment was J449. From the outset Midge noticed the innocuous coding on all medical bills. A half year later when her husband of forty-five years suffered a fatal coronary embolism, COPD had set her retirement finances back to the tune of eighty-five thousand dollars and thirteen cents.

So what happened to the couple's neatly ordered universe? As Midge explained with a sardonic smile, life had a nasty habit of intruding at the least opportune moments and mucking things up. Out of a sense of decorum she substituted an 'm' for the ubiquitous 'f'.

As they approached the ocean, a hint of salt flavored a humid breeze. The suburban landscape had been replaced by an endless expanse of scruffy pines and slender birch trees rooted in sandy soil. "How's your daughter?" Sarah asked.

"Last April Elsa reconciled with her estranged husband," Midge replied in a humorless tone, "but that doesn't appear to be going particularly well." "When their marriage fell to pieces, she borrowed a considerable amount of money," Midge confided with a papery thin smile. "Now that they're back together, she wants more."

Strangely there was nothing judgmental in her assessment of Elsa's romantic tribulations. Sarah remembered the daughter as a 'difficult' child through her formative years. Now, as Midge described her, Elsa had evolved into a dysfunctional, ne'er-do-well, train wreck of a middle-aged woman.

"I don't particularly like my daughter," Midge blurted in an offhand manner.

"You love her, though," Sarah qualified.

"Tolerate would be more a more candid choice of language... it's the best I can manage."

Sarah stared at her friend uncomprehendingly. The observation seemed crass and mean-spirited. "That's awful!"

"I'm just being honest."

Later that night over a cup of chai sweetened with buckwheat honey, Sarah tried to imagine how she might feel if she had given birth to a conniving, utterly thankless daughter like Elsa, and her disdain mysteriously evaporated.

* * * * *

"Moby Dick... did you ever read the book?" Midge asked. They were sprawled on beach chairs on the wet sand twenty feet from the incoming tide. A toddler a few feet away in the foamy surf was draping seaweed necklaces around her plump shoulders, while an indulgent mother looked on.

Sarah shook her head sharply. A junior in high school, she just barely read up to the scene in the opening chapter, where the narrator meets the harpooner, Queequeg, at the sailors' inn. From that point on she relied heavily on the CliffsNotes study guides.

"There's this scene," Midge continued, "toward the end of the novel, where Melville describes the sperm whale's sexual habits in graphic detail." The older women watched as a lanky adolescent, skinny arms splayed out in front of his lithe torso, body surfed into shore then ran back out to catch another cresting wave. The infant with the seaweed necklace draped a band of vegetation on her head – slimy, moss-colored dreadlocks.

“The younger whales are quite randy... horny bastards,” Midge picked up the thread of her conversation. “They swim about with a harem of cows, impregnating each female as she reaches fertility. Fidelity doesn’t factor into the equation.”

Sarah, who clearly relished the topic of over-sexed, misogynous whales, grinned wickedly. “Just like humans.”

Shortly after Sarah and Rob moved into the neighborhood, they were invited to block parties through the late summer. The festivities began innocently enough, but by the end of the night intoxicated husbands were telling racy jokes and tossing neighbors’ wives into the swimming pool. All harmless fun - a healthy expression of free-thinking libertarianism - until rumors of infidelity sprouted like late summer weeds and the ‘For Sale’ signs appeared.

Sarah and Rob only attended a handful of the raunchy parties before drifting away. That sort of lewdness didn’t play well into middle age, especially when the shenanigans got totally out of hand, turned mean-spirited and crass.

“What were we originally talking about?” Midge, who had momentarily lost her train of thought, dug her toes in the briny sand.

“Moby Dick whoring his way across the seven seas.”

“Yes, well at some point in middle age the white whale reconsiders his debauched ways, abandons the harem and wanders off alone. From this point until death he leads a hermetic existence.” Midge wagged her head emphatically. “No more female hanky-panky, no nothing.”

She settled back in her chair, surveying the cloudless expanse of cerulean sky. In the distance, a cargo ship was chugging out to sea. Arm in arm, a teenage couple strolled past in the bubbly surf. The dark-haired girl wore a French-cut bikini, the bottom portion little more than a thong that left little to the imagination. “I’m selling the house,” Midge announced.

Sarah felt her brain lurch in freefall. “You’re downsizing?”

“Not exactly. I’m selling and moving away.”

“What about a one-bedroom condo or flat in a senior complex?”

“That’s just more of the same old same old, the status quo.” When there was no reply, Midge added, “Since my husband’s medical bills, the finances don’t add up. There are a few modest investments, but car repairs and real estate taxes are eating me up alive. I can’t make ends meet.”

“But have you considered -”

“This isn’t some spur of the moment decision,” Midge upended her friend’s protest. “I’m not some addled-brained, disaffected hippy from the 60’s.”

The way the conversation ricocheted from one fractured thought to the next, a stream of consciousness with no logical destination left Sarah uncomfortable. Along with the raucous gulls an array of smallish seabirds, mostly plovers and dark-headed terns patrolled the shoreline searching for scraps of discarded food. Brushing a dusting of powdery sand off her thigh, Midge gestured in the direction of the toddler with the seaweed headpiece. The child was babbling in a singsong monotone, an obscure incantation of total bliss. “We’ve slogged through the better part of a lifetime... finished with raising children and finding our own way in the world. Why can’t we be that happy?”

“I hope that’s a rhetorical question.” Sarah was still trying to digest the recent news about her friend’s impending departure.

“No, seriously.” Midge leaned closer, patting her forcefully on the wrist. “I can remember in middle school racing about town on a three-speed bike that my father picked up at the thrift store. No matter that it was secondhand and showed more rust than chrome on the handlebars.”

“The neighborhood kids fastened a baseball card to the front wheel fork with a clothespin to make that crazy, flapping sound.” Midge continued. “It reminded me of a blown muffler. We sometimes used small balloons, but they wore out after a while. The baseball cards weren’t nearly as loud but more dependable.” Midge fell silent for a moment savoring the poignant memory. “I rode that ugly bike to the ends of the earth and then went home, ate supper and fell off in a drugged sleep. It was total joy.”

“But what’s your point?” Sarah spoke petulantly. She recalled moments of childish rapture back to her own youth. Fishing trips with an older brother. She did little or no fishing but simply lay in the grass along the river bank watching the dragonflies and butterflies – mostly monarchs and darkly beautiful, blue swallowtails drawing sustenance from the wildflowers.

“Perhaps,” nudging Sarah out of her nostalgic reverie, Midge spoke with a more strident sense of urgency, “like the white whale, we need to shake things up.”

* * * * *

Around three they packed the car and headed home. “There’s a clam shack just up the road a piece if you’re hungry,” Midge noted. They were only a short distance from the beach headed back in the direction of Fall River.

“Yes, that would be nice.”

At the diner a clot of beachgoers snaked in a raggedy line, placing orders at the window of a small structure sided with weathered cedar shingles. Sarah bought a hot dog and French fries. She assumed that the hot dog would be grilled but the soggy meat was boiled and tasteless. Midge ordered a cup of white chowder and clam cakes. “Want one?” She pushed a fried clam cake the size of a golf ball across the tray, an edible peace offering.

“Thanks.” Sarah nibbled at the morsel. They ate in silence.

Midge wandered off in search of a bathroom. Ten minutes later when she didn’t return, Sarah located her friend in a clearing at the rear of the clam shack. “What a delight!” Midge gestured with a broad flourish at an expanse of goldenrod in late summer bloom. The field stretched the length of a football field, the mustard colored blossoms covered with thousands of honeybees. A lesser number of bumblebees were interspersed among their smaller cronies.

“Last opportunity for the girls to gorge themselves before the fall dearth,” Midge said, indicating the agile honeybees darting from blossom to blossom. By comparison the stodgy bumblebees seemed to be flying in slow motion.

“Why do you call them girls?”

“Only females collect pollen and forage for nectar.”

“And the males?”

“The drones only exist for one purpose to impregnate a new queen if the old one dies or becomes infertile.”

Sarah surveyed the field, where bees flitted from plant to plant, spawning an audible, throbbing hum. “And where did you learn all this?”

Midge reached out with a poised index finger and stroked the backside of a diminutive insect. The bee hardly paid the woman the slightest interest as it continued gathering food. “My

grandfather was a beekeeper... kept thirty Langstroth hives. I tagged along when he inspected the frames.”

“It will be slim pickings once this goldenrod dries up.” The honeybee Midge had been fondling flitted off further into the sea of gold. “Pepper bush and linden blossoms seldom make it much past late August and all that’s left is sedum, late summer asters, mums and maybe a few woodbine.” Midge took one last, wistful glance at the goldenrod. “My grandfather claimed honeybees were divine messengers... empirical proof for the existence of God.”

The remark caught Sarah off guard, less so because of the peculiar choice of language than the fact that her friend always boasted of being an unapologetic atheist. Overhead a hawk was circling the bay riding an updraft of ocean breezes.

Honeybees were divine messengers... empirical proof for the existence of God. Was Midge Parker talking inscrutable code? Deciphering her intent was like trying to read the soggy tea leaves at the bottom of a fortune teller’s cracked cup.

* * * * *

Later that night Sarah showered and packed her overnight bag. Downstairs she found her husband sitting at the kitchen table. Two rectangular stones and a large kitchen knife were laid out on the table along with a small can of machine oil. “Are you packed?” she asked.

“Threw some stuff together while you were bathing.” Reaching for the can, Rob ran a bead of transparent oil across the surface of an orangey stone then positioned the blade over the gritty surface. “I checked driving directions on the map.”

“There’s GPS on my cell phone.”

He lowered the blade until it was almost flat to the stone and pushed the metal through the slippery slush. “We could lose internet service up in the hill country of central Maine and then what?”

Sarah blinked and felt the breath catch in her throat. “Hadn’t thought of that.”

Rob eased the blade across the stone a half dozen times before flipping the knife and working the opposite side. Testing the edge gingerly with a thumb, he reached for the second stone, which was grayish white and considerably smoother.

He snaked a bead of oil over the new stone and repeated the process, lowering the angle several degrees. “I was in Boston near Copley Square the other day. Coming out of the subway not far from that Gothic church near the public library, I caught sight of a disheveled, fair-skinned guy with thinning blonde hair careening toward me. He was babbling to himself... some unintelligible drivel.”

Rob suddenly laid the knife on the table and stared bleakly at the back of his mottled hands. “When I graduated high school fifty-two years ago, Lars Nilsson, was our high school valedictorian. The blonde-haired brainiac, was a straight-A student and president of the honor society. He won a full academic scholarship to Brandeis...was voted most-likely-to-succeed.” “Over the years I heard rumors that he’d gotten weird... dropped out of college in the second semester of his junior year... was arrested for barbiturates.”

“The deranged fellow you saw in Copley Square...,” Sarah interjected.

Rob nodded. “Somewhere between Brandeis and downtown Boston, Lars Nilsson sailed his perishable dinghy a tad too far from shore and fell off the edge of the known world.”

“And you’re telling me this now because...”

“Maybe you should brace yourself in advance of what you’ll find in Unity.”

“You think my friend’s gone bonkers?”

“Not necessarily,” Rob backed away from the damning prospect. “Perhaps a bit eccentric.” “Regardless,” he cautioned, “you best keep an open mind. The Midge Parker hunkered down in the backwoods of Maine may not even remotely resemble the urbane creature from your college days.”

Finished with the sharpening, Rob began stropping the edge by pulling the blade backwards. Every so many pulls, he reversed direction honing the opposite surface. Satisfied with the look of things, he held a strip of paper between a thumb and index finger and lowered the knife until it made contact with the sheet. The blade glided through the paper effortlessly. “It’s just a weird scenario... the way Midge chucked all her worldly attachments and is travelling incognito... flying under the radar.”

“You think I haven’t considered that?” When reminiscing about her friend, the image of Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, flitted across Sarah’s mind. In later years the author of the Tao had vanished, gone off in seclusion to seek nirvana, contemplate his navel and pursue whatever it was that blissed-out, otherworldly types did in their twilight years.

But Midge Parker was an inveterate, suburban housefrau, a woman who shopped the local mall and visited the hair salon at least once a month. And then, there was that unsettling remark about Moby Dick, when they were sprawled in the surf at Horseneck beach. Was it an ominous metaphor, a subtle hint of impending psychic upheaval?

Rob ran the water in the sink, rinsed the stones clean and patted them dry with a paper towel. “Let’s get some rest. We got a long trip in the morning.”

* * * * *

Traffic north was minimal. Forty-five minutes into the trip, they spotted a Paneras and pulled off the highway. Approaching the entrance to the restaurant, Rob lagged far behind. Sarah noticed that her husband of forty years walked considerably slower these days. Where only a few years earlier the man was still quite limber, now he dawdled along with a shuffling, herky-jerky gait.

Ordering a spinach soufflé, Sarah glanced about the restaurant. Those diners who weren’t preoccupied with their breakfast were fiddling with cell phones, laptops or iPods. Everyone seemed caught up in their insular universe. “Are you familiar with the parable of the two monks?” she asked. In recent months Sarah had developed a fondness for tidbits of Eastern trivia – Zen koans, Sufi sayings, haiku, and Persian aphorisms.

Her husband’s features dissolved in a closed-lipped smile. “Never heard of it.”

She recounted the story, sipped at her tepid coffee then added. “There’s a hidden message, but I’ll be damned if I can wrapped my brain around it.”

“We all carry tons of excess baggage,” Rob ventured. “Trick is figuring what to do with all the mental trash.”

“Yes, that sounds about right.” Eating in silence, they were back on the road in twenty minutes.

How is it that you are still carrying the woman, when I left her at the tea house five minutes ago? Sarah felt her face flush hot with an odd mix of shame and moral indignation.

When exactly had Sarah slipped into the untenable role of younger monk to Midge's unencumbered free spirit? Even back to their college days, Midge always exuded an air of false bravado. No – that wasn't terrible accurate. In her twilight years, having pared away her wants and needs to a bare minimum, the aging widow was travelling light. She would exit this world much as she entered.

How many of Sarah's friends and relatives had squandered their best years, lived mired in regrets and shackled to an unforgiving past? Midge's husband died young. The medical bills upended her sedate, middle class existence. Rather than become embittered, she used the tragedy as an opportunity to reinvent herself, in the late December of her years to embrace act two of the bittersweet adventure. As Hal alluded to in his terse, no-nonsense commentary, most people drown under the suffocating weight of accumulated, excess baggage. Midge side stepped the emotional debris. She went incognito, disappeared into the solitary wilderness of central Maine.

As they sped north the landscape altered, maples and oaks replaced by hawthorne, elm, and occasional bitternut willow. A mile outside of Augusta they pulled into a rest area. Sarah noted that the trash barrels were covered with heavy steel lids; a sign tacked to a pine tree warned visitors against leaving food unattended. There was no mention of bears, but the underlying message was unmistakable. The country had grown desolate. A solitary farm gave way to five miles of empty space, a scraggily, rock-strewn riverbed and forested ravines. Every so often a 'Moose Crossing' highway sign appeared. They sped past a dozen or more signs but never a solitary moose.

Leaving the interstate, they cruised east on a narrow road. The traffic petered away to nothing. The road zigzagged in a roundabout manner so that they had no idea what direction they were actually heading. Thirty minutes later a small sign on a faded, wooden placard tilted at a cockeyed angle plaintively announced 'Unity five miles'.

* * * * *

"The rooming house where Midge lives is just up the street." Sarah was pulling on her walking shoes. They had checked into the bed and breakfast and hauled their luggage into the room. "I thought I might pay her a brief visit before we settle in for the night."

Her husband was staring out the window at a main street no more than three blocks long before fading off into wooded fields. "I'll be here when you get back." After the tedious, drawn-out journey Sarah felt conflicted abandoning her spouse, but the trip was neither vacation nor personal lark. Without further discussion she left the room, cracked the front door and stepped out into the sultry autumn afternoon.

Sarah crossed the street, veered sharply to the left and struck out down the pebbly sidewalk. A group of young girls dressed in cotton skirts that stretched far down to their ankles and sleeves that buttoned at the wrist passed on the far side of the street. Sarah had heard about Amish farms and settlements in the region. She slowed in front of a dilapidated, three-story wooden structure. The slate blue paint was peeling profusely. Checking the tenant directory, Midge Parker's name was prominently displayed three rows down. A wave of weariness bordering on panic shook the legs out from under her. Sarah blew out her cheeks sharply and slumped down on the topmost step.

What if, what if, what if...

What if Midge Parker had experienced some belated midlife crisis and morphed into Lars Nilsson, a drooling, glassy-eyed android who barely recognized her former friend? Sarah waited a few moments until her breathing became steadier, rose and climbed the rickety stairs to the third floor.

“Can I help you?” A massive black woman with a silver ring embedded in her left nostril was staring back at Sarah.

It took her a moment to collect her scattered wits. “I’m looking for Midge Parker.”

“She ain’t lived here for six months.” The woman replied tersely and made a motion to shut the door.

“But her name’s on the directory downstairs.”

“Landlord never bothered to remove it,” the black woman muttered. “That lowlife don’t do much of anything around here.”

“She’s an old friend and I travelled quite a distance to find her.”

“Well, you’re out of luck, cause she’s gone.”

Her weary brain in freefall, Sarah felt the blood throbbing in her ears. “Gone where?”

“Don’t hardly know. You’re the second person come looking for Ms. Parker.” The black woman, whose stony expression never wavered, slipped out into the dimly lit hallway. “About a year ago Midge’s daughter come for a visit, but that was a bust.”

“How so?”

“Seems like the daughter was experiencing major cash flow problems.” The woman sniggered wickedly. “What a mooch!”

“What happened?”

“The woman started a ruckus... using foul language and threatening the mother, but Midge held her ground, and after a while the bitchy daughter went off in a snit.” The black woman seemed to derive great pleasure recounting the story. “The daughter... she never come back.”

“You don’t know where Midge moved?”

“Cleared her stuff out over a snowy weekend in late February and I ain’t seen her since.” The black woman rubbed her fleshy nose with a taut index finger causing the silver hoop to bob up and down. “Felt sorry for your friend... a rickety old lady living alone with hardly no friends and an ungrateful, loud-mouth daughter who come around only looking for a free meal.”

“Midge wasn’t that old.”

“That so?”

“She’s only in her early seventies.”

The black woman scrunched her face as though enjoying a private joke. “My grandmother just turned sixty-two so your buddy ain’t no spring chicken.” She stared at her pudgy fingers. “Last winter before I moved here I was living down the hallway and took sick with the flu. Couldn’t attend any of my classes over at the college. Midge Parker brought me soup and sandwiches every day until I was well enough to fend for myself.”

“What are you studying?”

“Conservation Law. Be getting my degree in June.”

“Well that’s nice!” Sarah tried to imagine the burly black woman with the slangy speech gussied up in a park ranger’s uniform, a broad-brimmed hat tilted at a jaunty angle over the squat face. Would they allow her the luxury of the nose ring or would the exotic jewelry be deemed politically incorrect?

“When I took sick, Midge come by every day around noon,” The black woman continued, “with hot food. Wouldn’t take a freakin’ cent for the groceries. Sometimes that old woman talked in circles... all manner of silly-ass gobbledygook that didn’t hardly make no sense. But then... I dunno.

“What did you talk about, when she came to visit?”

“Nothin’ special. Mostly she talked books.”

“Books?”

“Moby Dick... she liked that one the best.”

“So she told you about the whale.”

“No, she hardly never mentioned the whale but once or twice. She told me how Queequeg got deathly sick after going down in the hold to find the oil leak. The harpooner feared dying at sea so he had the ship’s carpenter build a coffin, but then the fever broke and he got well. When the whale smashed the boat all to pieces, Queequeg drowned but Ishmael climbed into the coffin and floated away to safety.”

The black woman smiled and nodded a nappy head peppered with cornrow braids emphatically. “Midge Parker sure was nice,” she reminisced.

Midge Parker certainly was a benevolent if somewhat cryptic creature, and when Sarah’s odyssey was over, she would have travelled eight hundred desultory miles round trip to learn that unremarkable truth. She made a motion to turn away, but the black woman suddenly grabbed her wrist with both hands. Her fleshy lips screwed up in an attitude of intense deliberation. “Just remembered somethin’.”

* * * * *

“So, tell me,” Rob insisted, “how you finally hunted Midge Parker down?” They were travelling south on the Route 95 interstate just north of the New Hampshire state line.

“As I was leaving the rooming house, the black woman remembered that Midge volunteered at the Unity Public Library.” Up ahead a bridge spanning the Piscataqua River connecting Portsmouth with Kittery came into view. “The reference librarian had taken her mother in to live with them when the older woman took sick with a stroke. The mother hung on a couple of years in failing health. After the funeral the family was looking to rent out the in-law apartment, and because Midge seemed such a dependable sort, they offered it to her.”

“It’s just a single room with bathroom and shower, but Midge has kitchen privileges so she can cook and store food.” “Not,” Sarah added as a giddy afterthought, “that she would ever take advantage. The woman always ate like a bird.”

Rob shook his head and smiled wistfully. “If the black girl hadn’t remembered that Midge volunteered at the library, the trip would have been for not.” “She still drive that Volvo?”

Sarah shook her head. “Sold it and bought a three-speed bike with a straw basket strapped to the handlebars.” They passed a meadow overgrown with white trillium. “She had a falling out with her daughter. Elsa wanted a cash advance on her inheritance, but Midge told the ingrate to wait until her name appeared in the obituaries.”

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107 Degrees Fahrenheit

Kissing his sister goodbye in the lobby of the Bonanza Bus Terminal, Nicholas Holyfield was blind-sided by a wave of emotions. He hadn't seen the tears coming, didn't even have time to avert his puckered, soggy face. "Sorry."

Mary Beth only smiled and wiped the wetness away with the heel of her hand. The visit to Providence lasted two days. The bus to Boston was boarding now. She pulled him close for a final hug and said half-jokingly, "If you meet a pretty coed at college, bring her along next time." She nuzzled his cheek with her lips, turned and limped away, swinging her crippled, left leg in a sweeping arc as though the errant limb had a mind of its own.

Nicholas boarded the bus and sat next to a fat black woman, poorly dressed and smelling of body odor laced with Jean Naté. As he slumped down, the woman, who had been reading, looked up and smiled. One of the front teeth was capped in gold. Nicholas leaned slightly forward and peered out the window. Mary Beth was a good two hundred feet down the road headed in the direction of the East Side, her body bobbing up and down like a cork on rough, tidal water. The way she moved gave the false impression she was careening at a diagonal when, in fact, her forward progress was straight ahead.

More tears came and, this time, Nicholas couldn't shut the spigot. Like a toddler bereft of its mother, he was sitting on a Boston-bound bus crying inconsolably. His shoulders heaved, the breath caught in jagged spasms. The black woman glanced up curiously, opened her mouth but then closed it without saying anything. She turned her attention back to a pamphlet printed on cheap, grainy stock. The driver shut the door and threw the shift into reverse. Moments later, they were leaving Providence, Rhode Island, heading north in the direction of the interstate. Nicholas felt something soft and fluffy rubbing insistently against his wrist. The black woman pressed a Kleenex into his hand and discreetly turned away.

The bus passed the statehouse exit; the ivory dome of the capitol building materialized and was gone in a blur. They entered Pawtucket with its grimy factories and mills. The mayor had been indicted for extortion and racketeering the previous year and was now somewhere out of state at a country club prison for white-collar criminals. His biggest regret wasn't betraying the public trust but being careless enough to get caught. "My sister was hit by a car." Nicholas spoke, not so much from a need to unburden himself, but to justify his lack of restraint.

"Dear God!" The black woman threw the pamphlet aside and stared at him. Her sympathy, though slightly theatrical, was genuine, not driven by idle curiosity. "She isn't in a coma or on life support?"

Nicholas frowned and felt the skin on his cheek draw tight where the salty moistness had evaporated away. "No. The accident occurred last winter while jogging. A car skidded on black ice. Broke her leg in three places."

"Driver drunk?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Not hardly. Just an old lady returning from church at twenty miles an hour in a residential area. The car skidded on the frozen road. No one was at fault."

The black woman directed her eyes at her hands which were large and formless, devoid of jewelry except for a simple, gold band on the third finger of her left hand. "Why was your sister jogging in the middle of winter?"

Nicholas reached into his breast pocket and located a wallet from which he removed a newspaper clipping. Underneath a picture of Mary Beth dressed in a sweat suit with a medal hanging from her neck, the caption read: Collegiate track star places in first, NCCA professional meet. "That's my sister."

The black woman took the tattered paper and held it to the light. For a woman with hands like Stillson wrenches, she was remarkably gentle with the parchment-thin clipping. "I'm trying to recall," she chuckled, "last time I was that thin, but my mind don't travel quite that far back." She handed the article back to him. "Where'd she run?"

"The track meet was in New Jersey - East Rutherford. Fifteen hundred meters."

Nicholas had been to East Rutherford in February of 1990. He was twelve years old but still remembered the competition vividly. The athletes, especially the runners with their unwieldy, long legs - calves hewn from rock maple, bulging, muscular thighs. Glistening, sexless, sinewy bodies primed for one task: outpace the echo of the starter's pistol from the sprinter's block to finish line. Mary Beth's curly brown hair was tied back with a single strand of blue ribbon, a matter of convenience rather than aesthetics. Her tanned, lightly freckled face pivoted to one side as the women settled into their respective lanes. On your mark! Get set!

"Mary Beth didn't actually win. She came in third behind the Romanian, Doina Melinte, and Mary Slaney. The Romanian ran the 1500 meters in four minutes, seventeen seconds and set a new world record. My sister was only 8 seconds off the winning time."

"Eight blinks of an eye!" The black woman said with a earthy grin. "Since the accident, she don't race no more?"

"No," Nicholas said softly, "she can hardly walk much less run."

"My nephew, Delroy, got a club foot." She held her paw of a hand up with the fingers skewed stiffly at an odd angle. "Like this."

Looking at the stubby fingers made Nicholas slightly nauseous, and he regretted sitting next to the garrulous woman. "The bum leg taken aside," the black woman rushed on, oblivious to Nicholas' distress, "Delroy done good with his life... works in an upholstery shop. Got married a few years back and has two healthy children." She smoothed the front of her dress with the massive hands. "What does your sister do with her free time now she ain't racing?"

"With the money from the insurance settlement she doesn't really have to work."

Mary Beth turned professional athlete in January, three months before the accident. Negotiating the size of the financial settlement, her lawyer estimated potential earnings (including commercial endorsements) at half a million dollars. The insurance company balked, arguing that, in her short-lived career, she hadn't won any major races, and it was unclear whether the young woman would fulfill her athletic promise. For every Doina Melinte, there were half a hundred also-rans. Mary Beth's lawyer threatened to push for a jury trial.

Check. Checkmate.

Despite all the legal maneuvering, the final settlement proved rather modest. Mary Beth paid her lawyer and invested the remainder in stocks. A month later, she moved to Providence, Rhode Island and took a studio apartment on the East Side.

"I meant," the black woman clarified, "what does your sister do with her free time now that she can't run anymore?"

"She fashions custom wedding albums from fabrics and lace and also takes small orders for decorative brochures."

When Nicholas arrived at the bus terminal on Friday, his sister was there to greet him. He hadn't seen her in six months, since the fall when she moved south. Mary Beth had aged. Nothing dramatic. It wasn't the smattering of gray hair or crow's-feet dimpling the eyes. Rather, her wiry body had gone soft and sedentary. The hard-edged posturing was gone; she no longer looked like a competitive athlete. Worse yet, she didn't care.

"Little brother!" she hugged him close and led the way out of the bus terminal in the direction of her 89 Nova. Turning onto North Main Street, she shot up College Hill. Though the temperature was hovering in the low nineties, Mary Beth wore dungarees. She always wore pants or long dresses to hide the scars and ravaged muscles on her left leg. When she was leaving the hospital, an orthopedic doctor suggested further 'cosmetic' surgery, but she nixed the idea. "Leave well enough alone."

A group of college students with backpacks and tanned faces passed in front of the car. "That deep sea diver remark," Nicholas said, directing his words at the dirt-streaked windshield, "hurt Mom's feelings. She cried for half an hour."

The previous month, Mary Beth's mother visited Providence. It had been six months since they had seen each other. Mrs. Holyfield was a short, round woman with close-cropped, dark hair. The short hair made her look heavier; to compensate, she wore loose-fitting shifts and baggy dresses which only compounded the problem. "Why do you cloister yourself away, avoiding family and friends?"

"Think of me as a deep sea diver coming up for air as slowly as possible so I don't go get the bends or go crazy," Mary Beth replied cryptically. Taking her mother's hand, she squeezed it gently. "Don't know how else to explain it."

Mrs. Holyfield saw no connection between the question asked and answer proffered. The remark frightened her. It was the first thing she talked about, returning home after the visit. "If your father were alive," she confided petulantly to Nicholas, "he'd make Mary Beth go see a counselor." "A psychiatrist!" she shrilled just in case her son failed to grasp the magnitude of the problem.

In late March of the previous year, Mary Beth returned home from the rehabilitation center. Having run the 1500 meters in just over four minutes, it took half as much time to hobble sideways, one riser at a time, up a short flight of stairs to the second floor landing. She refused to answer the phone, would not go outdoors except to sit in the back yard staring morosely at the empty bird feeders. If neighbors appeared, she retreated back into the house.

A week passed. Mrs. Holyfield took Nicholas to the K-Mart near Beacon Circle and bought bird food - a mixture of black sunflower seeds, cracked corn and millet for the jays and cardinals, thistle for the finches plus blocks of greasy suet for the woodpeckers and other, insect feeders. "Hard to believe," she said, letting the feathery-light thistle sift through her fingers, "there's nourishment in such tiny seeds."

Mrs. Holyfield stuffed the feeders to overflowing and placed a wedge of peanut butter suet in a rectangular, wire cage. "Except for the most common varieties, people don't know their birds; the hard part is recognizing differences among species - the downy woodpecker, let's say, from its close relative, the ladder-back." Mrs. Holyfield launched into an unsolicited and rather long-winded description of each bird's physical attributes, distinctive markings, size and habits. She picked up a single thistle seed - an eighth of an inch long and the thickness of several sheaves of papers - and let it roll off the tip of her finger. "Or a goldfinch from a pine siskin.

That's a bit harder. But still, where's the pleasure of bird watching if you don't know what to look for? It's like giving a house party and not bothering to remember your guests' names."

"I think," Nicholas said warily, "your analogy's a bit thin."

"Yes, but you understand what I'm trying to say."

Nicholas shook his head. He did, up to a point, understand the implicit message.

The next day when Mary Beth went to sit in the yard, her mother joined her. It was forty degrees, the ground muddy and lifeless. "A pair of cardinals were here earlier. A male and his brown mate. They only stayed a short time. I think the jays scared them off." Mary Beth shrugged noncommittally. "And all the goldfinches have lost their color. The bright, lemony yellows have faded to greenish brown. It may be a seasonal thing - like deer molting in the spring."

"Yes, probably," Mary Beth said dully.

"Don't stay out too long or you might catch a chill." Mrs. Holyfield went back in the house, sat down at the kitchen table and began to cry. Upstairs in his bedroom, Nicholas placed a pillow over his head to drown out the sounds of his mother's private anguish.

After supper he went to his sister's room, knocked and let himself in. Mary Beth was lying on the bed with her hands wedged between her thighs in a modified fetal position. She didn't bother to look up. The color was bleeding out of the evening sky, causing familiar objects to blend and blur. "Tell me what to do?" he whispered.

In the kitchen Mrs. Holyfield was drying the last of the supper dishes and humming a melody from the church hymnal:

*Lamb of God, You take away
the sins of the world.
Have mercy on me.*

"Tell me what to do to make your pain go away."

Mary Beth continued to lie quietly on her side. A half hour later the spongy, gray light congealed into total darkness and Nicholas trudged quietly back to his own room.

After Mary Beth relocated to Providence, Mrs. Holyfield began talking in code. She would say peculiar things like, "I talked to Providence,..." when she could have just as easily said, "I spoke to your sister, Mary Beth, earlier and ...". Was she trying to transform the infirmity into an abstraction - to restore her daughter through linguistic alchemy?

The night before Nicholas went to visit his sister, Mrs. Holyfield came into the room. She sat quietly on the edge of the bed with the latest issue of The Audubon Society magazine nesting in her ample lap. Nicholas was packing. Not that there was much in the overnight bag - a change of underwear, socks, a disposable razor, toothbrush and Sony Walkman. He pulled the zipper shut and placed the bag on the floor.

"What're you wearing?" Mrs. Holyfield asked. Nicholas pointed to a pair of cotton slacks and a navy shirt draped over a chair. "Yes, that will do nicely." She drifted to the open window and looked out into the back yard. The bird feeders were empty. She never filled them after the middle of April. "Did you know," she tapped the magazine lightly against the window sill, "that in winter, a black-capped chickadee can raise its body temperature to 107° Fahrenheit?"

Mrs. Holyfield was constantly collecting fragments of incidental tidbits from the various birding magazines and newsletters she subscribed to.

Familiar with her melodramatic pronouncements, Nicholas stared at his mother with a dumb expression. "Their bodies become feathery furnaces, internal combustion systems to ward off extreme cold." She came away from the window and sat down again on the bed. "At night while they're resting, their temperature can drop as much as thirty degrees - a survival mechanism to preserve energy for daytime foraging." Mrs. Holyfield smoothed Nicholas' navy blue shirt with the palm of her hand. "When you're in Providence, don't say anything that might stir up bad memories." She waved a finger preemptively. "Not that I doubt your good judgment in all such matters."

All such matters. Nicholas had no idea what his mother meant by the odd remark and strongly doubted that she did either. "No, Mother, I won't say anything that might upset Mary Beth."

The previous winter on the third of February, two feet of snow fell through the day; a wicked, bone-chilling nor'easter sent the wind chill plunging to fifteen below zero. Nicholas, at his mother's insistence, dug a path out to the bird feeder and filled the trough with fresh seeds. Only the chickadees - apparently, hunger took precedence over fear - were brazen enough to feed while he was standing there adjusting his gloves. With Nicholas a mere ten feet away, they flew up to the lip of the feeder and pecked away at the ice-covered corn and sunflower seeds.

But where were the larger, normally more aggressive birds? The red-winged blackbirds? The crows with their lacquered, silver-green necks? The bedraggled mourning doves, the woodpeckers, jays and cardinals? Nicholas took a step closer. Several chickadees flitted away but were quickly replaced by a fresh batch of voracious birds. He moved closer still. The diminutive birds never flinched. Another two steps nearer; he was five, perhaps only three, feet from the feeder and, with the powdery snow swirling up around their black heads, Nicholas could see the birds in fine detail. The patch of white stretching from the eyes around the side of the face, the narrow, gray edging on the wing feathers.

Nicholas turned and stared at the house. In the upstairs bedroom window Mrs. Holyfield was gesturing frantically, imploring him to come in from the cold. For a fleeting instant, Nicholas had the impulse to hunker down in the soft, insular snow and, if only for an hour or so until the light seeped totally out of the western sky, renounce humanity. But by then the birds would be gone. Even the chickadees had better sense than to remain exposed through the bitter night. A blast of frigid air caught Nicholas under the rib cage, knifing through his parka and flannel shirt. He picked up the shovel and empty seed pail and trudged back to the house.

Mary Beth pulled up at a traffic light, reached out with a free hand and tousled his hair. A wistful melancholy swept over her face only to be replaced by a good-natured grin. "About the deep sea diver remark - it was meant as an allegory. I didn't get the bends or go crazy." Turning onto a side street, she pulled over to the curb in front of a three-story, wooden structure and got out of the car dragging her foot stiffly. "How do you feel about sleeping on an inflatable mattress?"

Nicholas shrugged. He wasn't quite sure what to say - or feel. "All that money in mutual funds and you can't afford a sleep sofa?"

"It's a studio apartment," Mary Beth quipped. "Where the hell am I going to put a sleep sofa... on the goddamn fire escape?" All bitterness dissipated; the spell was broken as they went into the building.

The apartment was, indeed, quite small. A room with a bay window that fronted on a gentrified, tree-lined street served as a combination living room-bedroom. A tidy kitchenette and bathroom were connected at the far end. The furnishings were meager - a twin bed with a maple headboard, two end tables and a cheap stereo – vintage, Salvation Army decor. Despite the monkish austerity, the apartment had a cozy, lived-in feel. Nicholas went into the bathroom and threw cold water on his face. When he came out of the bathroom, Mary Beth said, “We’ll get something to eat and then feed Elliot.”

“Who’s Elliot?”

“She grabbed her keys and headed for the door. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Most of the artsy college types had cleared out for the summer leaving a mishmash of locals and diehard, summer students. A saxophonist with a goatee and dark sunglasses was playing Up Jumped Spring in a breathy legato at the corner of Thayer Street; a hat with dollar bills lay at his feet. In his sister’s presence, Nicholas had always felt a sense of reverence bordering on the mystical. At first, he associated the feeling with her athletic prowess, but, following the injury, realized that he had always felt that way. He experienced it now sitting opposite her in the restaurant. “Do you miss running?” As soon as he spoke, Nicholas realized the blunt foolishness of his remark.

Mary Beth’s head was cocked to one side. She was still listening to the saxophonist in the street. The player ran a series of dissonant, polytonal progressions then deftly modulated into another bebop tune. “I still compete, after a fashion. At night, in my dreams, I run a mean quarter mile. And that’s without the rigors of daily training!” Glancing up, she saw that Nicholas was flustered, his lips moving inaudibly. “The best kept secret in track and field,” she continued impassively. “is that East Rutherford was my high water mark. It was a fluke; nothing more. I peaked and was already past my prime.”

“You had some good races after that,” Nicholas protested.

Mary Beth’s features dissolved in a dark smile. “Half the races I never even placed, and in the few that I did, I was too far off the winning time to be considered competitive.” She put her hand under his chin and lifted his face so their eyes met. “It’s over, Nicky. Except in my dreams, I don’t run anymore.”

Walking back to the apartment, Mary Beth detoured through a park. She knelt down beside a scruffy plant with a thick stem and wide oval leaves. Withdrawing a jackknife from her pocket, she cut the stem, and a viscous, opalescent liquid resembling Elmer’s Glue bubbled out, staining her fingertips white. “Milkweed,” Mary Beth replied in response to Nicholas’ probing eyes. She put the jackknife away and they retraced their steps.

On the porch in the rear of the apartment, was a cardboard box. The sides had been cut away and replaced with a screen mesh. Inside was a caterpillar, its bulbous body ringed with yellow and black stripes. “You raise caterpillars?”

“Butterflies,” Mary Beth clarified, lifting the top of the box. “Monarchs. The caterpillars are just a means to an end.” She removed a wilted stem - most of the leaves had been chewed away to nothing - and lowered the fresh offering into a container of water wedged at the bottom of the box. She pivoted the plant so several leaves from an adjacent stem were touching, creating a bridge from one diminished food source to the next. Replacing the cover, they went back into the apartment.

“Where did you find your little friend?” Nicholas asked.

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