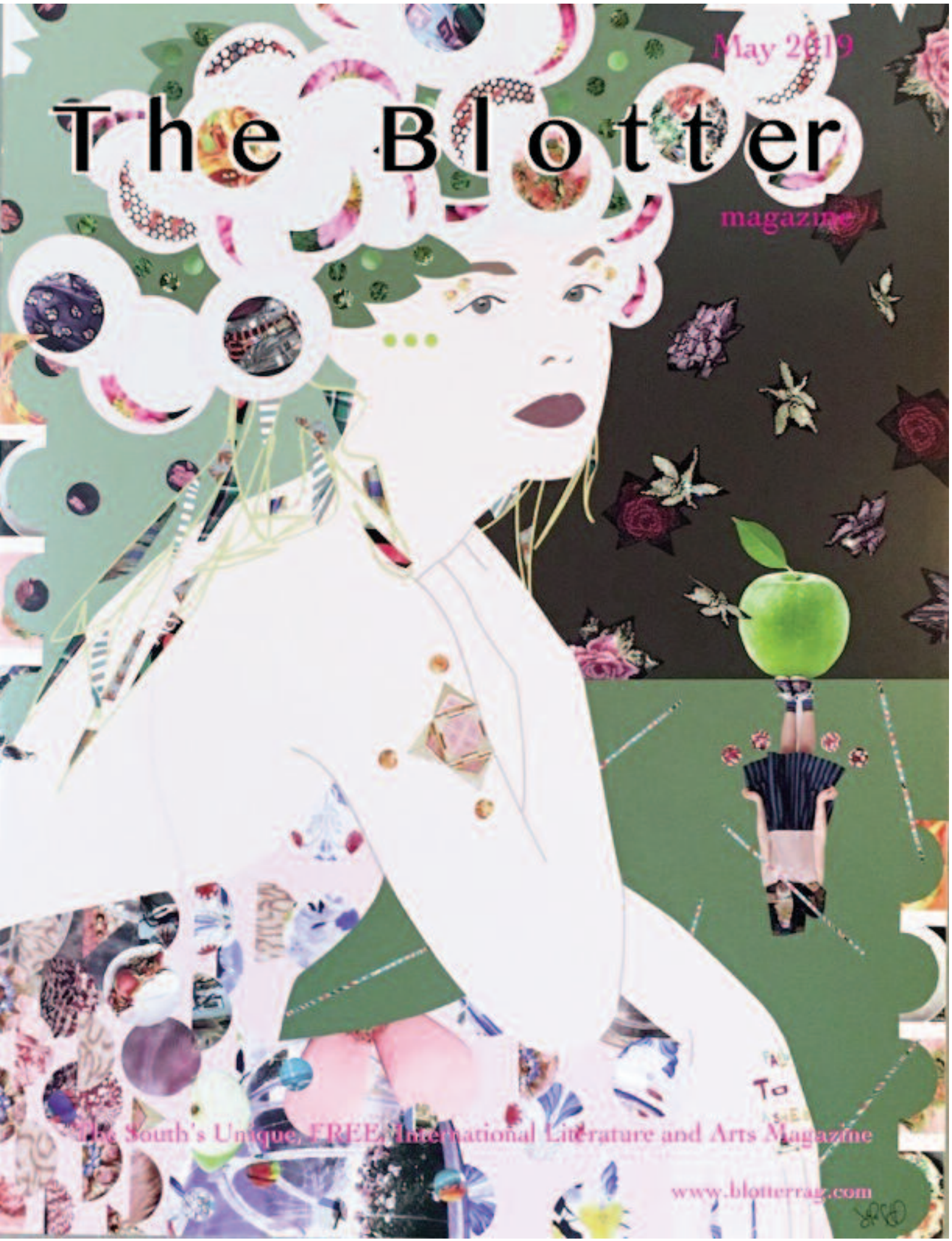


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The Blotter

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"Anniversary Issue"

We're all a little heavier, or lighter, or grayer, or not gray anymore at all. Puffier around the eyes - sixteen years will do that to you, or a bit stockier, or bent over, or achy, or not so as you'd notice. Can't run quite as fast, or long, touch those toes. Sixteen years will make you sad that they've gone by, and happy that you're done with them, that you can begin the next, and the next after that.

Sixteen years! That's a new two-door coupe driven every day to the grocery, to work, to school, regular oil changes and tire-rotations, then sold to a young couple who need a second car because they've got a child on the way, and they use it to get to work and the grocery (at night because that was the last diaper in the bag) and then to the park to play in the sandbox, and then to preschool, then they sell it to parents who want a banger for their teenager who's about to get her license – thanks mom and dad! - and she drives it to school, placing it every morning way out in the safest section of student parking because she's seen the dings other kids' doors and quarter panels have. And she fills the back seat and trunk with all of her stuff when she goes off to college, the happy blue and white "Congraduations!" paint still leaving a little ghost on her back window. She hands it down to her "little" brother when she lands that first big job in Boston – it's OK, really, either she'll get a new car or live in the city and learn the MTA by heart. And nowadays he's still puttering around under the hood with the timing belt and sparks and such.

Sixteen years and what do you get? A lot of reading – a whole lot of reading – and writing, to say thank you, and please, and no and yes, and wait...what? What is *that* word supposed to be? And before you go is this what you meant here? And some giggling amongst friends. Sixteen years is so many sunrises and sundowns that it's just silly to count them – each sunup joined to the light of the computer monitor and that same screen being the last glow before going to bed. Sixteen years is a fair few gallons worth of coffee, in once or maybe two cups per day, mind, but there's lots of coffee and always room for more. It's also a new desktop computer, and then a laptop on the side for getting away from the desk and the office and out onto the porch to read and type. Sixteen years is two different operating systems and a crashed hard drive and learning how to replace a crashed hard drive. It's wiping the hard drive clean of viruses and replacing it with Linux. It's two printers, three mice, a few hundred reams of paper, seven bookcases, three web-developers, four website-makeovers. It's a lot of meetings and that means a lot of burritos (and who's hurt by that?)

Sixteen years is a lot of embarrassing mistakes, and some fortunate errors. It's proofing and going to print and finding a boo-boo after and deciding

it's like those flaws in a Kilim carpet that are there on purpose. It's layout and tweaking and acceptance and rejection. It's strategy and tactics and give and take and taking the bull by the horns and playing well with others. It's the happenstance and kismet and serendipity of life. It's a lot of luck and much sweat equity. It is love and wonder and curiosity and coercion and frustration and passion and patience and Girl Scout cookies and Queso, only not together – never together – and it's laughing out in front of the coffee shop which is your coffee shop and people come by and say hey there, because you are a fixture there as much as the graffiti and the wireless password and the duct-tape repaired chair seats.

Sixteen years? That's a career, a good long one, in the bigs, then leaving to polite applause while you can still wallop the long ball – sock it a country mile. It's a millimeter of calcium-carbonate, calcite, deposited on a stalagmite deep in a cavern in Kentucky. It's ten feet of volunteer jackstraw pine height, over by the edge of the yard where you never mow. It's time to replace the roof. It's I still love you even though we're both a little long in the tooth. It's a child's whole life in school, now ready to go to university and do...something creative. Study writing, maybe. Poetry, even. God, I hope so.

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CAUTION

Scattywumpus

"The Engagement Party"

by N. West Moss

When I was fifteen, I went to France to be an *au pair* for the summer, to take care of the grandchildren of my parents' friends. They owned a very grand chateau in the Loire Valley in a town called *Vitry-aux-Loges* and I was to live with Madame and Monsieur's adult children and young grandchildren, who lived next door in a house on the edge of a field of black currants. I remember very little of that long ago summer, except for Monsieur, a large, elegant man. It was also the summer of Lady Diana's wedding to Prince Charles, and it is Monsieur and the doe-eyed princess-to-be that the summer of my fifteenth year has become distilled down to.

At home in New York I chattered incessantly, but in France that summer, armed with just one year of high school French, I barely understood people, missing entire swaths of dinner-time conversation. I had a lot to say and felt things deeply, as teenagers do, but could not put my longing into words, despite the French-English dictionary I kept in my attic bedroom. In New York I was outgoing, but in France I was almost silent, so it was an isolated, lonely summer. I never did learn the French word for loneliness.

Eventually I learned the children's French that had to do with my two little wards (their faces and names utterly forgotten by me now, and middle-aged themselves, I suppose). I learned little kid colloquialisms like, "*Je veux faire dodo*" (I want to make sleep-sleep), and how to say "Goldie Locks and the Three

Bears" in French, a phrase I've neither forgotten, nor ever found a way to use in conversation.

Monsieur de Beauregard, the grandfather of my charges, was a bearish, charming man with a full head of white hair and a voice that reverberated throughout this quiet, aristocratic world. He seemed always to be laughing and holding out an arm to tell a story, and when he spoke, everyone turned to him and smiled, anticipating something lovely.

He was kind and generous, and had the air of a beneficent king. Even without understanding him well, he made it clear to me that he adored my parents, and that he would extend that adoration to me, despite my awkward silence.

The day of Lady Diana's wedding, I was allowed to sit in the TV room of the chateau with Madame and Monsieur and their house guests (who I only realized years later were the Prescott Bush family, of all people) and we sat together and watched the pageantry. I studied Lady Di's face, a girl herself really, just a few years older than I was. Mostly, though, I loved being in a room with Americans chattering away about Texas and New York, and about the chateau and even about Madame and Monsieur. It was a pleasure to be able to speak English, even with people I didn't know, and people with whom I had very little in common.

Being allowed to watch the wedding in the chateau was an example of how I was at once a servant and an honored guest, that yes

I took care of the grandchildren in the mornings, biking to town to get the bread for the day, but I was also invited to the chateau as a guest to hang out. I see now that there was a concession made for me because I was part of the same class as the de Beauregards, and that Monsieur in particular had an idea that he wanted me to be able to go home to New York and tell my parents that I had been treated very well, which of course I did.

Later that summer, when I'd begun to dream in French, I wandered along the gravel path that circled the chateau. Along came Monsieur with a gardener-type who was pushing a wheelbarrow full of wine bottles. Monsieur stopped to tell me that there would be a *fiançailles* for his daughter here in a few days (which I looked up in my dictionary that night and learned that there would be an engagement party. His daughter was getting married.). Monsieur was thrilled and waved off the man with the wheelbarrow so that he could tell me what they were planning. There would be a feast, he said, and the de Beauregards would be serving their own wine from their own vineyard that they kept in their very own wine cellar, and that cases of Champagne would be arriving soon too, and get this, he said, kissing his fingertips, "We will have *des wheatras*." I oohed and aahed, trotted out things like, "*Fantastique*" and "*Encroyable*", and that night I searched and searched for the word "wheatras" in my dictionary, trying every spelling I could imagine, but I couldn't figure it out. I understood that it was something as exciting as Champagne, which I knew about from Mom and Dad, who seemed to find reasons almost daily to pop open a bottle. An entire shelf of our fridge at home was dedicated full-

time to keeping Champagne bottles cold.

Over the next week, the preparations continued. Gardeners came and spruced things up, raking the gravel, cutting away dead branches from the stocky little apple trees in the front of the chateau, backing vans up and unloading cases of food, and arm-loads of fresh flowers. On the day of the event, the wait staff arrived, followed soon thereafter by the guests. It was not an enormous party – there were maybe forty of us. People stood in the garden by the apple trees and drank wine. I wore the best outfit I'd brought with me, which I remember feeling was shabby in comparison to the stylish guests. I wanted to be invisible, was happy to just be a fly on the wall and watch the day unfold, and was even thinking of taking the afternoon to myself to sit in my garret and read.

But then out came Monsieur, greeting the little packets of guests, putting his large hand on their backs and waving them inside. When he saw me he came over, and I admit that I thought maybe he was going to ask me to run an errand, but no, he came up to me, this shy, silent, under-dressed fifteen-year-old, took my arm and told me that he had seated me in a place of honor at the head of the table next to him. This unexpected sweetness flooded me with emotion. I hardly believed it. It struck me even then as a very noble gesture for him to make on such an important day. He didn't need to look out for me. I was no one, really. He and I would never see one another again after the summer. It might have been the unnecessary-ness of his kindness that impacted me.

Inside, it was all quite grand, with overflowing vases of flowers, buckets filled with ice and

Champagne bottles, and waiters rushing around. The sun was streaming in the windows, and a breeze blew in the open front doors. I felt such a hush of gladness to be a guest at this grown-up function, without my parents, with no other Americans, and seated at the head of the table. Monsieur held out a chair for me and introduced me (as I'd seen my parents do for countless guests at their own table at home) to the people seated near me. He did not introduce me as his grandchildren's *au pair*, but as the daughter of dear friends from New York.

We all sat except Monsieur who lifted a glass and made a toast to the happy couple that I understood well enough. My French was improving. "Champagne?" he offered me when he sat down, and I said "*Oui, monsieur. Merci,*" and he poured me a glass before turning to charm other guests who stood in a line to speak with him. I sipped at my Champagne trying to act like I belonged, like I went to hundreds of these things and was always seated at the head of the table drinking Champagne in a chateau in France. A waiter came and whispered in Monsieur's ear, who then turned to me and with a sly wiggle of his bushy white eyebrows said, "*Des bûitres ont arrivent.*" The "something-or-others" were about to be served. A reigned-in feeling of pure joy flooded through me.

Out of the kitchen came a procession of black-clad waitstaff, each carrying a single burdened plate, piled high with fresh, raw oysters. They put one plate in front of each of us, the guests groaning with delight, but not me. I was a teenager and I did not "do" seafood. I had never eaten an entire shrimp, hated canned tuna even, and I certainly had never eaten an oyster, cooked

or raw. What was I going to do?

Somehow Monsieur sensed my dilemma. While he continued to smile at his guests, he leaned toward me a bit and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Have you ever eaten an oyster before?"

"Non, Monsieur," I whispered, red-faced and sweating now.

"Watch." He drew no attention to what we were doing. He simply said, "OK, you loosen it from its shell *comme ça*, you squeeze the lemon juice on it *comme ça*, and then you slurp it into your mouth, and *voilà*." He demonstrated, and I tried out what he had shown me, picking up a shell, using my little silver fork to loosen the oyster from its mooring, squeezing a lemon wedge over its mucilaginous mass, and then, tilting my head back as Monsieur had done, I slurped the oyster into my mouth.

Good God. I bit into its spongy, quivering body only once and then swallowed it whole trying not to gag. A shiver ran through me. There was a heap of maybe forty more oysters still to tackle on my plate. I steeled myself to eat every last one. I'd have to. That's how I'd been raised.

Monsieur pushed his elbow softly into my side, and when I looked up, he was looking down into my eyes with kindness. I reflected back what must have looked like a worried little smile. Then he leaned over sideways again while looking and waving at other guests, and he said in slow, simple French, "Here's what we are going to do. When no one is looking, you will slip an oyster onto my plate, and then I will put my empty shells onto your plate, one at a time. In this way, no one will ever notice. Yes?"

"Yes," I said. I wanted to weep. Yes yes yes.

And that was how I learned

what *des huitres* were, and about grace. I have never eaten an oyster since, but I have thought often about Monsieur who must be dead these many years. My gratitude for him continues to be, so deep. Unnecessary kindness is so unusual.

When the summer drew to a close, as a gift to me I suppose, the de Beauregards gave me their apartment in Paris for the week before I was to fly home. It was the early 1980s and I mention that because sadly, it wouldn't likely happen today, a fifteen-year old American being given an apartment by herself in Paris for a week. Nor, I suppose, would parents allow that to happen even if it were offered. It's a different, more cynical, frightened time now I think (and maybe for good reason, but I'm not sure). But that is what they did, and it was no big deal as I recall. Underneath my shyness beat a brave little heart, and with my guidebook and a little bit of cash from my now former employers, I got around easily on the Metro, which was much easier to navigate than the New York City subways.

My first day in Paris I dropped off my suitcase and went right out to sit at a busy café and have coffee. That would have been enough, to go out every morning and find a café to sit in. There's hardly more that I want now, but at fifteen, I was sure that a Parisian café was as close to the center of the universe as I'd ever be. And I wasn't wrong.

I did venture beyond the cafés, finding my way to the Louvre (where I discovered Lautrec), and *Sacre Coeur* (where I bought a little necklace with a cross hanging from it). I went to Napoleon's Tomb where I pretended to be French to some American tourists who asked for directions, and later a bow-legged woman who wore a scarf

tied under her chin waddled three blocks out of her way to help me find where I was going. Despite warnings that the French would be mean to me, I felt welcome and safe. At night I went back to the cavernous apartment, showered, wrote post cards, and read through my French-English dictionary until I fell asleep.

On my last night there, the de Beauregards came to stay at the apartment with me. I was going home in the morning, and there was a certain air of devastation that the end of summer always brings. But for now, it was the last gasp of summer, and after dinner the ten of us sat at the dining table as Madame brought out a basket of peaches she'd carried from the market. She called them White Peaches, something I'd never heard of before. They were the size of baseballs, and Madame stood at the head of the table peeling each one, then stabbing it with a silver fork and passing it like a lollipop down the table until we each had one. Then she passed around a large crystal bowl filled with white sugar (using a tea towel to mop her forearms, which were dripping with peach juice). When the bowl came to me, I copied what everyone else had done and rolled my peach in the white sugar and ate it, juice dripping down my chin. I laughed out loud, the most demonstrative I'd been all summer. I laughed out loud! The next morning, one of them drove me to the airport and that was that.

I've never seen any of them again.

When I tell this story now, people admit that they worried it was leading to something different, thought it would turn out to be a story where Monsieur did something terrible to me. But that is not

what this story is, and I feel the same irritation that I feel when my students see pedophiles in every poem that we read together in class. I tell them that their interpretation is too rooted in their own cultural moment, although I understand it. The revelation of so much suffering at the hands of powerful men makes it almost an inescapable conclusion to jump to.

What I want to explain is that this story took place in the early 1980s. It was a different time, I think defensively, different in so many ways that it might as well have been an alternate universe. It was a time when a 15-year old girl could stay for a week in Paris by herself, and no one worried. How could I ever have been that shy 15-year old girl? How could Lady Di ever have thought that her marriage to Prince Charles was going to be a happy one?

But that young girl *was* me, and this is a story, simply, of one old man's kindness, and one girl's brave little heart. It's a story of generosity, and isolation, and also of grace. It's a story of me growing up, of being forced out of my own familiar world into noticing things

I tell it because I understand Monsieur's generosity and my adventuring heart now in a way I was unable to then. I like to remember the generosity and bravery, despite, or maybe because of how ruined the world sometimes feels today. Or maybe I tell it to assert that there is still space for stories that lack cynicism, however warranted that cynicism might be. I tell it because it startles me that the powerful gust of Monsieur's sweetness is still stirring the curtains of my life.

I don't recall the names, or even the faces, of the two children I cared for. I don't know how I looked that summer because there

were no selfies then, and because au pairs don't get their picture taken. But I remember the early morning bike rides into *Vitry-aux-Loges* to get our bread, doing a balancing act of pedaling while trying to keep the long loaves from tumbling out of my bike's basket. I remember the smell of the sun beating down on the black currants beneath my attic window at sunset. I remember watching Lady Di's wedding, she and I both so young, both on the verge of absolutely everything, both so vulnerable with hope.

Now that enough decades have passed, I understand that I will spend my life looking for a peach as delicious as the one I rolled in white sugar that made me laugh out loud. I will always be searching for the scent of black currants baking in the late afternoon sun. And because of crossing paths with that old man four decades ago, I still look for the shy people in every room. Even now, in my 50s, I can remember the feel of Monsieur's large, plate of a hand at my back, urging me forward into the waterfall of my own, still very promising life. ❖

"London, the first six days"

by Cristina Richie

Ed. Note: This submission is presented as as-is as is possible (tongue-twisting unintentional). Is it a story? A prose-poem? Don't know, don't care. Brilliant!

April 2.

Day one.

Well, it really began yesterday. After a five-hour fight and that incident in the bedroom, where I screamed "NO!", he and I reconciled, as we always do. Reconciled just in time to ignore the inevitable as we ate afternoon cereal and sat in silence. At 5.15 I called my \$40 cab to take me to LAX. An hour through security and I was at my gate. 10 hours to Dublin; interrogated about my financial stability at passport control; then one hour in a place capitalism had yet to touch (the Dublin airport).

Just one more hour—quick flight up and down—to London. Then an hour and half Underground ride to meet my crazy landlady.

She comes from another Generation, where wearing a backpack is suspicious and American banks put limits on ATM withdrawals. She lives where people younger than her are poor judges of quantifiable noises and cannot count. She lives in the perpetual drama of constantly being late, having personal meltdowns, and the consequences thereof. . . .

Morning, 11am. Breakfast on the porch; walked down to the Brixton Market and bought food from the

stalls. An Italian man made overtures at me. I rolled my eyes. In the second hand Bookstore they were playing Van Morrison and a good-ol'-boy lay dozing in the corner. I went to the "modern Russian authors" sections, but didn't see your memoir. I left pining for a romanticized version of a European bourgeoisie family that never existed.

The Windmill Brixton, 3 pm. Irish and English bards were celebrating the launch of new journal. They had set up the event to read their writings to each other and congratulate themselves. The women were androgynous, the men proper, and most well educated. I bought my first pint, excused myself just as a drag queen dressed in a super-woman costume came into the loo and went on a buzzy walk home.

Dinner. 8 pm. It took an hour to figure out the gas stove, soaked lentils, and cook my meal, but it only costs 75 p. per serving, and it will last until Thursday.

"Good night, London."

April 3.

Day two.

The book. The book. The book. I work on it little by little, but really need a closer deadline. Hopped my first bus (double decker, and red as a candy apple) to Piccadilly Circus. The tourists don't know that £1.5 you can get a "real" bus tour. I caught sight of Big Ben, saw my Abbey (Westminster Abby) as we crossed the Thames.



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Went to St. James Church, where Blake was baptized. They were playing a sonata by Shostakovich. Lovely. After getting 900 quid from the ATM I decided to celebrate being *nouveau riche* by...

going to McDonalds!

A cone with a flake in it for only 99p is the right price. I narrowly escaped the arrow of Eros before heading back to my flat. Tired from the wind, the day, and the commotion of the city. I end, "in a sentimental mood," with his playlist.

April 4.
Day three.

One year ago the Judge declared my marriage legally dissolved due to "irreconcilable differences," without knowing the details. I celebrated by having a Quantum Laser zap my ring finger til it bled. Bandaged my wound. And walked out an emancipated woman.

Ambling through Turnham Green, I unearthed a Lutheran Church enrobed in rough-hewn onyx tiles, picked up 5 nectarines for 1£ and hoofed it 2 km to the National Archives for a multi-media presentation on integrating archival work into art. I can't say it was very interesting, but I stayed to eat my hand-packed lunch among pensioners and reserved potbelly men anyway.

Among the intelligent children and friendly street merchants in the posh district of Kew I discovered a bookstore with the expected Russophile literature, a market with vegetarian "bangers" and, finally, my train home. Decided to skip a 1928 film I had RSVP's for in favor of a frustrating ice-shower, chocolate malty dinner, and some sustained SMS messaging with SNS.

April 5.

Day four.

Morning. I remove my earplug, my false teeth, and my diaphragm. I sympathize with Lady Macbeth, muttering "out damn spot!" as I wash blood from my pants.

Morning. I put in my contacts and turn on the phone, the computer, and the water kettle. I lay out my breakfast and accouterments: instant coffee, skim milk; cereal, banana, cinnamon; vitamin; spoon, bowl, mug.

Morning. I put on makeup, jewelry, and remove hairs from my face. I don't shave. Anywhere. I decide to open the bedroom blinds for the first time. Mainxie (my fickle feline flatmate) jumps onto the windowsill. I tell her that I will meet her at the backdoor. We breakfast together.

Morning. It is a day of, what some would call rest, but I would call work. Two hours of emails, an hour to do laundry and clean. I am not ready to unpack. Mainxie is sleeping under the shrubs in the garden.

Afternoon. I take a break to read last night's *London Evening Standard*. Nothing has happened since the morning, and nothing overnight. I make lunch: eggplant, sausage, tomato, and the rest of an apple from yesterday's lunch. Mainxie is gone.

Afternoon. I repose on the couch confronting my fear of this apartment and the 60-times and hour "BEEP!" that emits from next door. I smile. The sun is out, my curtains are open and the floor-to-ceiling windows bring fresh air. I pick up Dostoyevsky.

Afternoon. I put Dostoyevsky down and work on chapter two of my book. I work until you get up and the sun is past mid-point. I stop work as your day begins. I conclude my day's efforts when you arise. I must get out. I make a cup of coffee and walk down to Brixton Village.

Early evening. I shop. I look at shoes, dresses and men's clothes (for you). I go into food museums. I compare prices. I stop to look at street spectacles. I smell flowers. I handle items: lollies, puddings, mashies, and pies. I ponder these items, along with chutneys, digestives, mueslis, ales, and bread. I don't buy anything, but I stop in every store along the way. I am just like you when in a new place. Curious, lackadaisical, spontaneous.

Early evening. I walk until I get hungry. Really hungry. I think about spending my last 4£ for the week on pizza. I don't buy anything. I pick up *London Evening Standard* on my way home and tuck it under my arm. I read it in the park. Diesel cars owners have extra fees levied on them. A Scottish representative calls the sunshine in California "boring weather." I read until the Church chimes "quarter til," and the group of men who are drinking get really loud. I read until I get cold, cranky, and witness public urination. I walk home with the day's workers. They walk, head down, to the corner market to purchase pre-packaged single-serve dinners and prepare for tomorrow. I worked today, too. Remember that.

Evening. I get home and eat three mandarins standing up. It means I won't be able to have jam on my toast later tonight, but I don't care.

I need to make dinner, but I feel too poor to eat. I've had curry for dinner four days in a row already and want something else. I check my email, my Whats App and my refrigerator.

Evening. I eat ½ a large jar of Masala sauce. Delicious. Steam some broccoli, add meatballs and heat up that damn curry. This slight variation on a theme satisfies. I feel like I'm going to die if I don't eat peanut butter, but refrain and finish ½ of a bread roll that I got on the plane ride here. It came in a package. I can still eat tonight if I want. Eggs. Or peanut butter. Or beer.

Night. I struggle with my shower. I prevail.

Night. I struggle with my cunt. I lose. The blood comes out of me in splashes, drawing long red lines across the white linen. I try to clean it up. More blood. Why would anyone buy white sheets? I clean and clean and clean. It is too much and I decide to run the washing machine even though it won't stop until past midnight, leaving a heap of soggy towels that will need to be air dried in the morning.

I think I am getting sick. I should do more work. Maybe I'll stay in tomorrow, too.

Evening. I work until my eyes crust and my head aches. Kate sent me a text. I respond. Time to watch TV in bed, take out my contacts, and brush my teeth. I end sending this message to you. I decide not to eat anything else, after all.

April 6.

The 159 bus is *not* running to Marble Arch, so I hop the Tube to take me here. I wander through BBC headquarters and into All Soul's Church to worship with my

hands in my pockets and 40 other faithful congregants. The lunch is not free, but the coffee is, so I grab a cup and sit outside watching people eat on their lunch break, or check their phones, or meet each other with a kiss.

I've heard that St. Christopher's Place has a hanging garden. It is mediocre, but I find a gallery with original Bob Dylans. He paints Los Angeles. I don't stay long.

The Wallace Collection is sponsoring the *Portrait Artist of the Year* contest: one model; four painters; sixty minutes to transfer the life of a person onto a dead canvass. After putting my paces through the military weaponry room and Dutch masters (Van Cuyt; Rembrandt), I have lunch on the grass outside a private garden. You need a key to get in. And I don't have one.

Now, the sun is high and gets in my eyes. I try to go home, but the siren song of Patisserie Valerie is strong. I buy a take-away slice for 3£; change in my pocket.

At Primark I fight my way through the overweight Muslim women and scrappy white women until I find a pair of trainers that fit and don't make me feel like my knees are collapsing. I get them. The 159 bus *is* running from Marble Arch and I go home.

April 7.

I wake up a little late and spend an hour working with the labor of someone else's *dacha*: peel, clean and fry potatoes. Then I do my academic work. I am a professor, after all and I do need adulation. Manixie shows up in time for lunch on the porch.

I finish a chapter of Dostoyevsky and get on with more work. I plan

my Scotland trip. Some kids harass me. I want to call my Lover.

He does not answer. I decide to go out, but get a leading text, so I call. His voice is. so. sexy. Little nothings; little details. The contact with my Lover has made me wistful. I depart.

Slipping into my new trainers I go birding at Brockwell Park. Coots, mallards, ibis, swans and other *petichi* warble and preen; swim and eat. A man who lives in the park shows me how to get into the Gated Garden and I watch the sunset from there.

Three things the British are good at: drinking at all times of days, walking by themselves, and egalitarian childrearing.

I wander down to Herne Hill just as the only bookstore is closing. It's my first Friday night, my first walk home alone at night. With 1.35£ left for my week's budget I buy Scottish pancakes and soda water.

I am so happy that when I get home I celebrate with vegetable *assortis* but suffer the din of my neighbors debasing themselves, for another week has gone by. ❖

Two by Gerald Sarnat

"Informer Informed"

Culturally so Jewish
-- but on another hand
nada gullible enough to
truly believe in religioso

nevertheless, every Wednesday
I pick up number four grandchild
at his Hebrew-speaking toddler preschool
my Israeli son-in-law vehemently insists on.

For some reason (one of many I don't claim to
understand), Liav's teachers do usual Friday night
Shabbat prayers over candles, grape juice and challah
middle of week instead -- right after Tzedakah box donations.

What that most basic gist is you put gelt in kosher piggy banks
to help support charities -- in Temple Beth Jacob's case, the state of
Israel, which not to make too fine a point of it, could mean good stuff
however nowadays may support discriminatory practices versus Palestinians.

Stipulating ambivalence at best, still wanting to avoid rocking proverbial boats,
I've learned to bring extra nickels, dimes and quarters so those kids whose mothers
or more likely Hispanic nannies (frequently I'm only male adult) haven't given them
or brought can participate: this often boils down to an adorable dark-skinned little girl.

Today her mom comes over to thank me for past times I've offered coins when she's late,
then goes on to explain they just lost a boy relative in Kashmir near where Pakistani family live
during the recent latest skirmish with Hindu Indians: when I commiserate, particularly regarding
possibilities of nuclear war, Banafsha warns me, "Oy, two-state solutions are in no way panaceas."

"Reflections"

I looked in the mirror today.
Yes, I did, really did, this day before my seventy-third birthday.
Of course it took two tries; I wasn't wearing glasses the first.
But trying doesn't matter today,
alone in time and space this fine Indian summer Sunday.

In the bathroom, I looked, really looked.
I looked longer and harder than ever:
I'm not sure I've looked in before.
Because underneath I think I'm a little shy of being me.
And god knows I realize each cell deeper inside is aging in sync.

I looked and looked in the kitchen window.
How long does this face have left?
I'm a child, not deceived by the gray and wrinkles,
bags and crows feet, the scars and lumps under my chin
(not many) -- and that bald patch that luckily hasn't grown much.

I can see every quality and part I perceive better than anybody.
Not bad ... I never noticed the sadness in my eyes.
Still I'm not so unhappy with me.
Are you the same? Are you pleased with you?
To me you look like you used to too.
Do you happen to know how long we might have left?
Who are the ones to ask forgiveness and forgive:
whom should we forget?
When I lean in close, unwrapping gauze from my dream,
I see my breath and laugh with glee:
Fifty-nine is certainly perverse
-- but much better than its reverse.

This month's artist, **Sharon E. Burroughs Stevens**, is a visual artist from Chapel Hill, NC, who works in acrylic, collage, and photography while influenced by her background in graphic design and not influenced by her degree in chemical engineering. To see more of her work visit sharonebstevens.com.

Sharon writes, "*The Joy, the Joy, the Joy!* — Pumping the pedals of my stationary bike, I watch through the screen that tempers the morning sun. My gym presides over tennis courts which sometime inhabit tennis players, but today it's mostly puddles, forgotten balls and an errant crow. Around me are conversations about visiting a son and daughter-in-law expecting twins. If you're going to Denver pack chapstick and drink water and then drink more water. We're chipper. It's communal. There are times the conversation goes deeper. We're together in this gym because we are cancer survivors. Most of us show no evidence of disease. Others of us are trying to hold on to our strength. You can talk or not talk. All are welcome, although we're sorry when another joins our club.

Every time I see you falling. . . . — The song booms through the speakers, and I am my teenage self charging onto the dance floor of an underage club in suburban Illinois, pals by my side. I always surrounded myself with the cool kids. Sure I had dark eyeliner, but my friends had home-bleached hair. They wore black, but my mother only allowed me in navy blue. Black, such a dour color. Black, to be technical, is not a color but the absence of light. I'm sure we said this more than once in our art classes.

...I get down on my knees and pray. . . . — Oh to dance. When we were young and gorgeous, underappreciating the beauty of youth. We were picky and cruel to ourselves then, as I see in my own teenagers. Now I dance with my Boston Terrier, and dammit he has no idea what's going on but I like to think he's equally exhilarated.

...I'm waiting for that final moment. . . . — In late eighties Chicago, my friend's older sister lets us tag along to see live music, Pop Will Eat Itself. I'd never heard of them and I didn't care. We blasted the tape deck during the drive, and that night I was the happiest of front row moshers. As the band began their most popular song "Can U Dig It?," the lead singer hoisted concert goers onto the already cramped stage. My charmed friend and I danced with abandon — throbbing and beaming. The joy, the joy, the joy!

...You say the words that I can't say — And the song is over and I'm still pedaling. Thank you New Order and Pandora's 80s Cardio station. "Sweet dreams are made of this. Who am I to disagree? I travel the world..." Talk has turned to bravado, all guaranteeing the dominance of the University of North Carolina men's basketball team over Duke this weekend.

And I think about songs in my adolescent's lives. My older son plays alto saxophone in his high school jazz band and thrives in musicals, whether onstage or in the pit orchestra. My younger son falls asleep listening to classic rock and will tap along with the AM oldies station. My daughter likes rap, the song Mo Bamba is her current craze. The profanity, the bass, the ascension of a basketball star, the bass. She and her volleyball teammates chanted this pump up song, humming out the coarse parts, as they marched up the streets of D.C. on their way to hopeful victory at a three day tournament. I think about my kids' unfolding experiences and how I want to be around for it all. I think about the songs in my future grandchildren's lives and I keep pedaling. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterrag.com

January 8, 2018

I am reading an alternative newspaper about a woman who eats feces. I meet the woman for a date. She says she loves me, which totally turns me off, because she doesn't even know me. I tell her so but she doesn't hear me because she's strung out from eating feces.

January 23, 2018

I save my ex-boyfriend's life by pulling him up from the side of a mountain. We are both men from the 18th/19th century. His name is Ethon and he is played by Kenneth Branagh.

April 18, 2018

My sister is a Scientologist. She tells me she can only use the bathroom twice per day, and never at night. I say it's not the religion for me. There are two dogs running around us. One is from the Church of Scientology and looks like a deformed noodle covered in mop fibers.

LH - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

N. West Moss, author of *The Subway Stops at Bryant Park*, is proof of the serendipity that you can find in the writing community. We've known her for years, inasmuch as you can know someone what you only communicate with via mail, read all of her stuff, love her writing, and do what we can to further her success. She is generous and brilliant, and if our luck holds out we'll meet her someday, over coffee and a danish in the City.

Cristina Richie is the author of *Principles of Green Bioethics: Sustainability in Health Care* (Michigan State University Press, 2019) and over 50 scholastic articles, book chapters, book reviews, magazine articles, and academic blog posts. Her writing awards include the William E. Lapus Health Science Library Author Recognition Award (2017, 2018), the Evangelical Press Association Higher Goals in Christian Journalism Student Writer of the Year (2016), the Catholic Health Association Annual Theology and Ethics Colloquium graduate student essay award (2013), and the San Ramon Valley Times Gold Pen Award (1999) for an effective editorial. Richie has a B.A. in English Literature from Colorado State University, a Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, a Master of Theology from Boston College, and a PhD in Theological Ethics, also from Boston College. Dr. Richie is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Bioethics and Interdisciplinary Studies at the Brody School of Medicine (Greenville, NC).

Sharon E. Burroughs Stevens - see page 14 for bio and artist's statement!

Gerard Sarnat is a physician who's built and staffed homeless and prison clinics as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. He won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is published in academic-related journals including Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Virginia Commonwealth, Arkansas, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, Slippery Rock, Appalachian State and the University of Edinburgh. Gerry's writing has also appeared widely including recently in such U.S. outlets as Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, MiPOesias, American Journal Of Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, Blue Mountain Review, Danse Macabre, Canary Eco, Fiction Southeast, Military Experience and the Arts, Poets And War, Cliterature, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, The Los Angeles Review and The New York Times. Pieces have also been accepted by Chinese, Bangladeshi, Hong Kongese, Singaporian, Canadian, English, Irish, Scotch, Australian, New Zealander, Australasian Writers Association, French, German, Indian, Israeli, Romanian, Swedish and Fijian among other international publications. Mount Analogue selected KADDISH FOR THE COUNTRY for pamphlet distribution nationwide on Inauguration Day 2017. Amber Of Memory was chosen for the 50th Harvard reunion Dylan symposium. He's also authored the collections Homeless Chronicles (2010), Disputes (2012), 17s (2014), and Melting the Ice King (2016). Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids, five grandsons and looking forward to future granddaughters.

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