

The Journal

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SPRING ARRIVES ON HUMMINGBIRD WINGS

Sharon Canfield Dorsey

Whirring green wings helicopter around my head,
pausing for lunch amid the Linton roses I'm watering.
I hold my breath, hoping my guest won't fly away.
The orange-necked sprite steals a drink from the
hose spray, then settles into a large, water-filled leaf,
fluttering up and down, shaking droplets from tiny
feathers. She buzzes me one more time, as if to say,
"Thanks for the shower,"
before disappearing into the pink azalea bushes.





THE WORLD NEEDS A TALKING STICK

Sharon Canfield Dorsey

I am a talking stick. I was carved from a piece of cedar—chosen for my interesting shape, the grain and strength of my wood. I was carried to a drying building, where I was allowed to season for several months. Then, a talented carver whittled and sanded me into a talking stick.

I am descended from a Native American tradition. I have helped to mediate territorial disputes, avoiding wars. The elder of a tribe or village would hold the talking stick and begin a discussion. When he was finished, he would pass me to the next person and the next, until everyone who wished to speak had done so. Whoever held the talking stick held the power of words. Everyone else had to remain silent and listen.

This process allowed quiet members of a group to speak their truth too. I helped to create equality and respect for other opinions. Holding me provided uninterrupted time to collect thoughts. In those quiet moments, the speaker might discover feelings or ideas they had not acknowledged or shared. The talking stick is a powerful reminder of the validity of other points of view.

We can find answers to difficult questions through listening. We learn that life has many options, many paths. If we allow ourselves to be guided by the wisdom of others through the talking stick, we may be given an opportunity to grow through alternative routes. Perhaps it's now time for our congressional leaders to adopt the empowerment of the talking stick and actually listen to each other. On a broader scale, the United Nations could benefit from a very large talking stick.

We could create a new motto, "Talk softly and carry a carved stick." Imagine that – a world where we listen to each other. Our angry, ready-to-explode world has never needed a talking stick more.



WAVE GOODBYE

DM Frech

Rio waved like a madwoman as Tom's red Ford Ranger disappeared past a thick row of pine. When her son didn't look back and wave, involuntary tears crossed her cheeks.

She brought her hand to her face and wiped the soft, fragile skin so thin the aroma of onion grass soaked into pores. Tom said he had to leave and meet friends. Rio's last friend died a year ago. She hated not having a friend. At the age of eighty-six, Rio figured she might have been dead too, but wasn't and wouldn't see a familiar face for two weeks. Tom's next visit.

It was the middle of August. Muggy air clung to Rio's neck. The humidity reminded her of summers past when her son was a child, and they had discovered the world.

During this visit they looked at old photographs, but not for long.

"Tom, remember Jamestown? I packed our lunch and we walked around an old fort. It was fun."

"A little boring." Tom said.

"Maybe, but good."

Tom looked at his phone.

"I loved when we bicycled First Landing." Rio pointed to a picture of them on bikes.

“Yeah, that was fun.” Tom kept an eye on his phone like he was about to leave.

“Ben and Mark came. So glad they did.”

Rio held the photo higher as though it would help Tom see. He looked over and smiled.

“You guys had your own plans. I said, ‘If I get kidnapped, I’m taking this trail.’ Remember?”

Tom appeared pensive. She knew he had to go.

“Sorry, Mom. I’m supposed to meet up with Isaiah, and he keeps changing the plans.”

Rio nodded. Tom always tried to accommodate others. He was a good guy and had his own life. She was glad for that and glad he stayed busy. Today was Saturday, his day off. He had made plans with friends, of course. Tom was an adult, needed to live his own life and not babysit his mother. They once had a life together, took trips to historic homes, visited state parks, canoed, hiked on the shore, rode bikes. She had been active in his life, even in high school.

“Tom don’t forget your school project and lunch,” she had reminded him more than once. “I put some chocolate in.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He had smiled wide like a clown, lifted both fists to his shoulders and shook them like a hoorah. Made her laugh and feel good. He was funny even when he didn’t try.

Before he’d left, he’d given her a hug, kissed both her cheeks then kissed his hand and tapped it to her head. Whenever Tom drove away, the car window would go down, and he’d always look back and give a hearty wave. He’d keep waving until he disappeared past the pine. His silent wave said, “I’m leaving, but we’re still in this together.”

Whenever Tom returned, he looked happy to see her. She, always happy to see him.

After Tom turned twenty, an emotional distance formed between them. Maybe his peers told him he needed to not be so attached or maybe it was because she divorced his dad. A year later the man died from a stroke. Perhaps Tom blamed her. Sometime later he moved out, got married and divorced before any grandchildren were born. Somewhere in the quagmire of life events, Tom stopped waving goodbye and she got old.

Aging hadn’t been in her plans. Rio only thought about it when forced to, like when brown spots appeared on her face, she applied lotion to erase the transformation. It didn’t. When her hair began to gray, she dyed it a natural brunette. It never did look natural. After wrinkles appeared she quit dying her hair. Fighting gray was bad enough, but then her hair thinned. It had always been thick. She never guessed she might lose it. To mask the limp tufts, she massaged gel into strands. The sticky balm whimsically stuck hair in all directions like a bird’s nest, but it was better than hair lying flat like straw, so she thought.

Before Rio aged, old age seemed like a bad rumor meant to scare people into buying products they didn’t need and old people, simply, old people. Rio felt immune. She had been a modern dancer until her late thirties and had physical endurance.

As a performer she reshaped gravity, flew above the earth with suspended leaps, and moved like a pioneer who discovered new land, intuitively reflected in her minute nuances of music interpretation, capricious timing, phrasing, and an occasional improvisation. One time after a concert a friend told her, “Rio, you really inspired me. I used to play the trumpet but haven’t

in years. Seeing you dance, I realized how much I wanted to play again.”

Her friend began to practice his trumpet, and, after a year, he performed around the city with small orchestras. It felt good that maybe she had triggered his motivation. Even without the approbation she loved to dance. She often showcased in New York City’s trendy venues: Dance Theatre Workshop, The Joyce, Saint Marks Church, Judson Dance Theatre, innovative domains.

That intense creative fortitude had to be worth something.

When her dance career ended, she painted landscapes that eventually became too difficult; her arthritic hands too pained for fine strokes.

To stop aging was impossible, like stopping lava. Rio aged, and Tom was no longer the boy who kissed both her cheeks and tapped her head with a kiss. All that was gone; the only affection was a sidled hug and his visits a gasp of air.

“Tom, I set up a chess game.”

“I haven’t played in years, Mom.”

“Let’s play so you don’t forget, just one game, then take the board and pieces with you. It’s a nice set.”

“I only have a minute. You keep the board, and we’ll play next time.”

His words were respectful but hollow, disinterest coating his action. Tom’s visits were just long



enough to take care of bills, check appointments, and make sure the house hadn't crumbled.

"Don't forget your dentist appointment Tuesday. Senior Transit will pick you up at eight."

"Tom, I sliced up a Fuji apple for you. I also have Tostitos and Oreos. I can get you a sandwich. Would you like a soda or glass of wine?"

"No thanks. You eat the apple; it's good for you."

Rio was an obligation, a duty. There was no sense of closeness. She missed their conversations, the talking, listening, laughing. With no one to rattle her day or stop the quiet that bounced from walls, loneliness tortured every move, every breath. There wasn't even a familiar neighbor to chat with; the ones she knew had moved. And she couldn't go grocery shopping because her driver's license had been revoked. Food got delivered—nice people, but they had been hired and didn't want to stay longer than to explain what they'd brought. And apparently no one knew how to play chess.

On Sundays, Rio got a ride to a nearby church. Her old church was too far for someone to pick her up. In the new church she hadn't gotten to know anyone. She tried. The congregants, mostly middle aged, were cordial. They said, "How are you?" as they flowed down the corridor, like a downstream river, unable to stop because of the current. Her wrinkles and slouch may have repelled them, but she wasn't a leper; old age wasn't contagious. Maybe they feared her wrinkles. Eventually they would get them too but not from her.

A raging despair clung to the lost wave goodbye. She missed it with ravenous hunger and everything it had been. She needed Tom to need her. She wanted her son to wave because he wanted to, because it would grieve him not to, but it didn't happen.

Rio put on a clean, white summer dress and draped a soft, cotton scarf around her neck. She stiffly brushed her barnyard strands and lifted her arms to heaven.

Solitary days were physically agonizing. Gloomy pressure squeezed her chest until she could hardly breathe—nearly unbearable. Rio was never meant to be a recluse; it was suffocating.

Tom brought her a Cabernet with the top lightly screwed. He said it was good to enjoy wine every now and then. She poured a glass, drank it down, then poured another and looked out the window. Clouds began to smother the cerulean sky as she finished her second glass. She poured a third and noticed two rabbits scamper across the yard, lovely: rabbits, horseback riding, bicycling, hiking, standing on the shore, grilling filet mignons, barbecued chicken,



corn, the zest of orange in a cannoli. Gone. Most of all she missed having a friend to talk and laugh with.

Rio placed her sleeping pills on the counter and took one, then two, as a wave of clicks from clocks echoed around the house. She kept taking pills with the wine until she figured it was enough to put her to sleep and never again feel the terror of isolation. She was probably going to hell, but it didn't matter. Her mind had become a terrified leech that clung to nothingness, her house a nameless cave with hushed mantels. No one talked or heard her miserable cries. Rio was in a holding tank, castaway, because of her physical collapse. Tom would be all right. He had a job and a condo. He had brought her there once and she had met his friends, good friends.

Rio went into her bedroom and closed the door.

The phone rang. She froze. It had to be Tom. "Hello."

"Mom, I forgot my bag. I'm coming back."

"Not now. Get it later." Rio sighed.

"I need it tonight. I'm supposed to bring kishka for a get-together. They only sell it in that Polish shop near you. I didn't want to leave it in the car, so I brought it in."



"I'm in bed." Her stomach jolted.

“You don’t have to get up. I have a key. Remember? I’m just letting you know, so you don’t wonder who’s in your house. Just stay in bed. I’m on my way.”

“Tom.”

“What? Mom don’t worry. It’s okay, just stay in bed. I’ll let you know it’s me.”

Rio felt ill but got up. Above the dresser, she saw a reflection of a troll. Hallowed circles, sagged cheeks, a grid of lines covered her face, so many lines. The skin below the chin draped like melted wax, her younger face unrecognizable. She pressed her hands on the dresser. A surge of unknown anxiety nearly knocked her over. Rio tried to ignore the ignited battle. Had she made a mistake? She hadn’t and lay down.

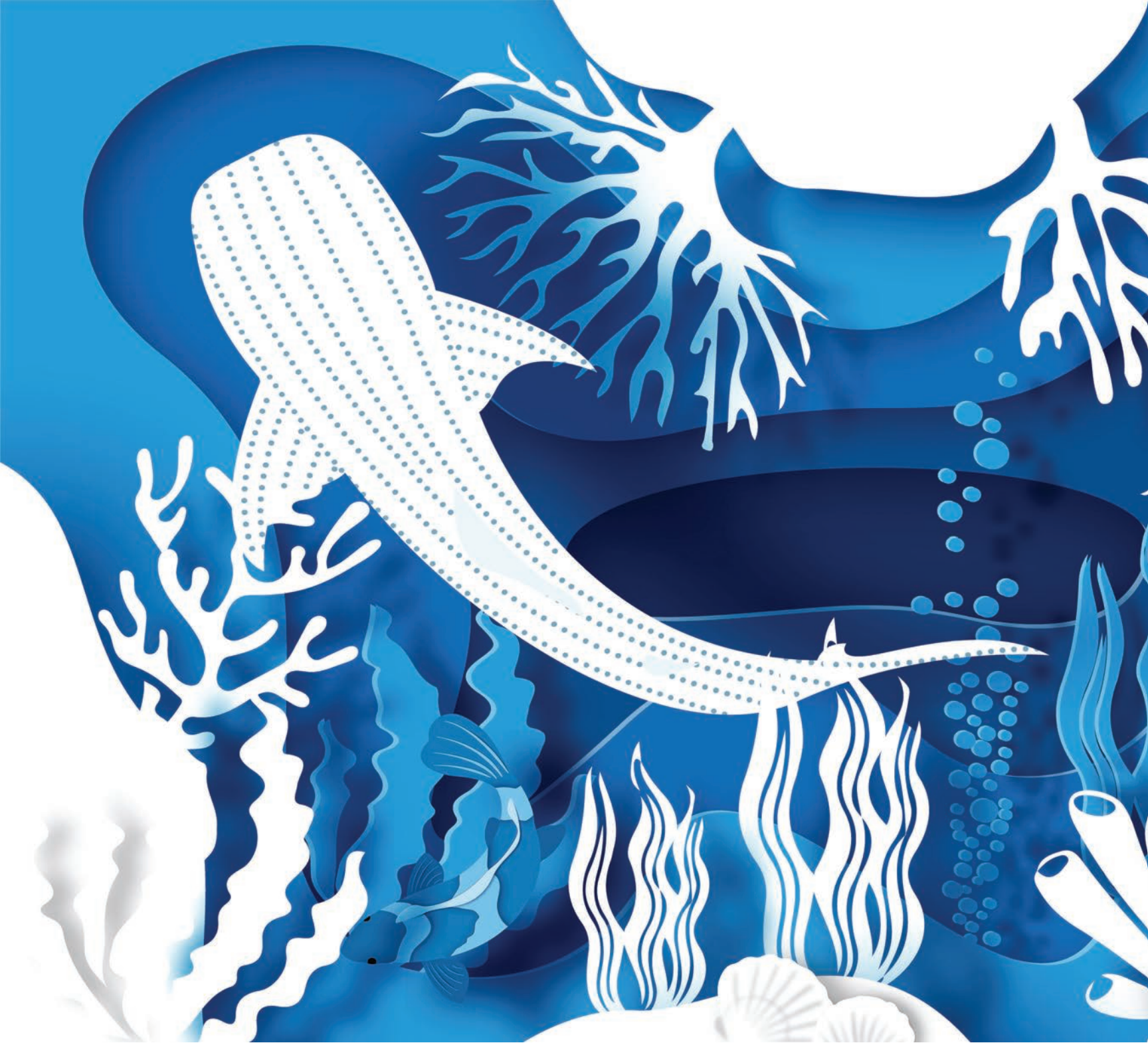
Suddenly there was a ring, an intermission of footsteps, and a soft knock. Tom’s voice came through her door. “Mom, sorry about that. Don’t sleep too much; it’s not good for you. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

A moment of stillness sat between them.

“If you want, next time I’ll bring you more than one bottle. Just let me know.” He must have seen the nearly empty jug.

Rio tried to speak, but her voice slipped into a wormhole. Her head and throat filled with sand. Indistinct voices. A storm. The sound of the front door thumped. Tom was gone.

A quiet crowd of white billowy shapes filled the room, followed by dark jagged points. Rio lay helpless as she entered the frontier and began to shake. Fear besieged her. As she faded, a trembling regret appeared: she hadn’t written Tom a note.



FIN'S WHALE

Marjorie Gowdy



Pier's end, planks roll more than usual.
Our app says your Maria, the great white, is almost here.
These dancing boards predict her entry.

Why is it you love a shark so, my Finley?
Is it that they are lone
and fearsome surfers with little to lose?

Shark's allure a selachimorphophile
sees, her armor of steel wards off pilot fish,
angels, and flounder.

Her one friend out there is a gentle soul
who lumbers with an eye for plankton.
Rare right whale, glimpsed flashing tail.

Maria tells you: love the whale.
She has deep-souled eyes like you,
that maternal instinct my kind forsake.

Our new app: Whales of the North Atlantic.
Your curls of new teak shimmer
as you lean over the railing and wave.

THE CUT

Marjorie Gowdy

Camille forced her ugly way through there, making ever wider
a washed path between the islands.

Horn to the east, playground and fisherman's rest. Bent Live oaks, brush.
Ship, East Ship actually, to the west, forlorn sister of ragged, muddy dunes.

On Sundays still, you see them. A horizon of double-seamed shrimp trawlers.
The men and grandmothers work island shallows all week.
At night, their lights like scattered pearls on the briny gulf.
In the mornings, before heat's blanket drops, they repair nets, wash the decks.

Steel-hard work. Paint chipping, pungent slips of transparent shrimp pulled
to the surface by the stooped, the tired, the aged.
Little Buddha bounces at starboard, incense drifts in a stream.
Knife-sliced fog, an August gale, bad times by any count, will end this.

But Sundays. Anchored midway 'cross the cut, one trawler, ten fresh from shore
fills gaily with children. A clear May Sabbath, spring tides of sand dollars
and stingrays.

Girls and boys lean and lovely, jump off the shined beams, squealing.

Waters half salt, half sand, memories mesh:
Fathers felled in rice fields, babes lost crossing, doors closed upon arrival.
Yet compunction, endeavor, faith carry on. The young swim from the bow.
They swirl, dance on water, shake off, and forget.



TRAPEZE

Marjorie Gowdy

A movie when I was a girl:
Circus tent, masses hunger for danger.
She dangles above the net,
kicks gravity in its shins.

Like a swift in springtime
the girl is quick
twirls in mid-air.
Head up, eyes down.
Heart of steel.

Men desire her, dark angel
beyond their reach.
Gina Lollobrigida flies. Then misses.
She tosses her hair in scorn.

Tonight's news:
A pier nearby, oohs and ahs.
This crowd's hungry, too.
Dented trawler limps, torn nets dragging.

Right whale, not yet twenty, stretches.
Winter's journey from cape to bay.
The captain's cries confuse her.
She surfaces as a shattered spyglass,
too stunned to see astern.

Chopper spots her near the reef,
close in nautical miles.
Seine a sluice of blood.
Spurned, beloved, her defiant life sinks to sea.

LATE SUMMER EVENING

Marc Meth

Williamsburg Section of Brooklyn—September 2004



Bedford Av

DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION

North 7 St



Gary Holland and Tommy Franco had just finished eating at the diner and were walking to Tommy's car. They planned to meet some friends in Manhattan and hit some clubs. As they turned the corner, distracted by two Latinas across the street, they nearly walked into two Latinas coming toward them. Before Gary could apologize, he was struck speechless by the dark brown eyes of Gina Morales—his onetime girlfriend whom he'd never gotten over.

It'd been five years since he'd last seen her, and she was even more beautiful than she was in high school. She was wearing a red halter top with matching lipstick, earrings, and shoes and a short black skirt. Gina knew how well red contrasted with her dark skin and used it to her advantage. Guys whistled, hooted, hollered, and hit on her wherever she went.

Gina didn't seem to recognize him at first, but then her eyes opened wide. "Gary, oh my God! It's you," she cried with that faint Puerto Rican accent he'd always loved."

"Hello Gina, Isabelle," stammered Gary, almost unable to get the words out.

Before he knew it, Gina had him in a bear hug, and he instinctively hugged her back. They had done this before but weren't much more than children at the time. The coconut scent from her freshly washed hair, and the bittersweet memories that came with it nearly brought him to tears. Feeling Gina's shapely body pressed tightly against him, Gary became weak at the knees. His heart pounded and his face flushed. When Gary's lower body began to respond, he gently moved her away.

"Oh Gary, I didn't even recognize you. Look how grown up and handsome you've become. And all those muscles—my God!"

Isabelle nodded enthusiastically while tapping her heart.

"Well, puberty finally caught up."

Gina was about to speak but stopped when she noticed the scars on his face and neck.

Gary felt a nudge on his arm. "Oh, sorry, this is my friend Tommy Franco. Tommy, this is Gina Morales and Isabelle Diaz." The girls smiled and said hello.

Tommy looked at the girls, eyes bulging, and envisioned a completely different evening from the one they had planned. Isabelle wasn't quite the beauty that Gina was, but she was pretty enough. He made eye-contact with Gary expectantly, but Gary ignored him.

"I'm so happy to see you Gary," Gina said. "We were just talking about you the other day. It's been so long, and I was wondering where you were and what you were doing."

"It's true Gary, she was just asking about you," said Isabelle.

"Really Gina?" he said, genuinely surprised. "I didn't think you cared about me at all."

"I know why you feel that way Gary, but I never stopped caring about you. I finished college in May, and since then I've had a lot more time to think. Last month I was at the Bodega, and I remembered how we used to meet there for sodas, then go to the park or the library. I was so happy when I was with you, and I couldn't help but wonder where you were now."

Gary took a deep breath to regain his composure, then guided Gina to the entrance of a closed business for some privacy.

"I don't get it Gina. We didn't exactly leave off on good terms. You made it very clear how you felt about me."

"I remember," she said, sounding regretful.

"The last two years of high school you wouldn't speak to me, or even look at me. The last time we did speak, you yelled at me in front of all your friends, telling me to go away and leave you alone. Then Arturo told me to get lost and pushed me so hard that I got a concussion when my head hit the sidewalk. I had to go to the hospital, and you never even asked how I was."

"I'm so sorry Gary."

"I loved you Gina," he said.

Gina took a step closer, but he stepped back.

“I loved you from the first moment I saw you in the fourth grade. I know that’s not typical for a nine-year-old but that’s what it was. Then in high school, after how close we’d become, you embarrassed and humiliated me for it. You and your friends made fun of me and laughed at me because I couldn’t get over losing you.”

“I know I hurt you Gary,” she stammered as her eyes welled with tears. “But I never laughed at you or made fun of you—never. Please believe me,” she implored.

Isabelle, now within hearing distance, stepped closer and handed Gina some tissues. “It’s true Gary, she never laughed at you. The rest of us did, and for that I am sorry, but not Gina. The day Arturo pushed you she cried all the way home.”

“Okay, so you just ignored me the last two years of high school. I don’t know which was worse.”

“Gary, I can’t change what I did in high school, but I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. If we hadn’t bumped into you tonight, I would have gone to your house. I just needed to work up the courage to do it. I missed you and wanted to see you again.”

Gary softened. “Okay Gina, I believe you, and I accept your apology. So, what now?”

“Well...” Gina took a deep breath and patted her eyes dry. “If we can put this all behind us, Isabelle and I are going to the diner, and we don’t have any special plans for the night. Would you and Tommy like to join us?”

Tommy, who had approached behind Isabelle, nodded his head vigorously. “Sounds great!”

“No.” Gary said firmly to Tommy, then turned back to Gina. “We just had dinner there and we have to leave. We’re meeting some friends in Manhattan.”

“Can you spare twenty minutes for a cup of coffee?”

“No, we have to leave.”

“Gary,” Tommy chimed in almost pleading. “I can call the guys and tell them we’ll be late. It’s no big deal.”

Gary gave Tommy the evil eye. “No!”

“Okay,” said Gina, resigned. “You’ve already made plans for the night. Maybe now is not the right time anyway. Can we meet tomorrow or real soon? There are some things I want to say to you.”

“I can’t. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Leaving? Where are you going?”

“That doesn’t concern y—”

“North Carolina,” interrupted Tommy.

Gary glared at Tommy, clearly annoyed.

“North Carolina?” replied Gina puzzled. “When will you be coming back?”

“That also doesn’t concern you.”

“Don’t be mean to me Gary! I’m trying to make amends,” she pleaded, her eyes tearing up again.

“In five weeks,” said Tommy defiantly. “He’ll be back in five weeks.”

“What’s in North Carolina?”

Gary ignored her question. “We have to leave Gina.”

“Camp Lejeune,” replied Tommy. “Gary and I are in the Marines. We were home on leave, and our leave is over tomorrow.”

“Marines!” Gina and Isabelle shrieked in unison. “So that’s why we haven’t seen you around all these years. Are you getting out in five weeks?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Gina took a pen and paper from her purse. “Here’s my number,” she said as she put it in his hand. “And look, I have my own phone,” holding it up to show him with a hopeful smile. “Now you don’t have to go through three generations of Puerto Ricans to speak with me anymore.”

Gary looked into her dark brown eyes and was once again a lovesick teenager. He wanted Gina more than ever, but the thought of getting her back and losing her again was too much. He looked down at the paper for a moment then put it back in her hand. “I don’t want it.”

“Why Gary? Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Then take it, please,” she pleaded. Gina went to give it back to him but hesitated when she saw his trembling hands. Gary saw that Gina noticed the trembling and pulled them away. She looked up at him alarmed. “Gary, why are your ha—”

“Gina,” Gary interrupted, voice cracking. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go through this again.”

Suddenly, Gina understood. The scars, the trembling, the Marines—the war in Iraq. She stepped close to him, wet eyes filled with love, then kissed her fingertips, and gently touched them to his scars. Gary’s feelings for Gina, long repressed, came flooding back as his eyes filled with tears.

As Gina took a tissue and dried Gary’s eyes, Tommy looked on in disbelief. Here was his best friend, heartbroken, and crying over a girl he’d never heard of. He turned to Isabelle and she looked back at him, tears running down her cheeks. Tommy took his finger and gently wiped them away. Isabelle smiled faintly, moved a step closer, then leaned into him and held his hand.

“You still love me Gary, I can see it, and I still love you. I knew it the moment we met tonight. After all these years without you, I realized that you were the best boyfriend I ever had, and I loved you even if we were just kids at the time. We can have that again, only better. Won’t you give us another chance?”

Weakening with every touch of her hand, Gary took a deep breath, regained his resolve, and removed her hand from his face. “We have to leave.”

“At least take my number so we can talk.”

“I’m sorry Gina,” he said sadly. “I’m not the same person you knew in high school. I can’t let you hurt me again—I’d never recover.” He turned and walked away.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Gary!” Gina cried out in despair, then collapsed into Isabelle’s arms.

They walked to the car in silence. Tommy stopped before they got in and glared at Gary.

“What?”

“Are you out of your mind? You’re really going to walk away from her?”

“Yes.”

“You’re making a big mistake my brother. If I were you—”

“You’re not me!”

“Shut up and listen, or you can take the subway to Manhattan!”

“Okay, okay,” he replied, taken aback by Tommy’s admonition.

“As I was saying, if I were you, I would run back to the diner, take Gina in my arms, and pledge my undying love for her. Then I would slip a napkin ring on her finger and ask her to marry me—tonight.”

Gary chuckled.

“It’s not funny Gary. Your beautiful ex-girlfriend comes to you practically begging you to forgive her for some teenage stupidity, wants the chance to love you again, and you walk away.”

“You don’t know what she did to me.”

“Yes Gary, I do. I heard the conversation and I know she hurt you, but that was five years ago. Do you really want to push her away now because of some immature behavior in high school? Two minutes ago, you were both crying over each other.”

Gary went silent staring at the ground as Tommy’s words sank in.

“Look,” said Tommy in a more sympathetic tone. “We’re leaving tomorrow so nothing big is going to happen between you and Gina anyway. Just talk to her and if things go well, as I expect they will, give her another chance. It’s obvious you still love each other. And you’re being discharged in five weeks. Maybe she can fly down when you get out, and you two can spend a week in the Outer Banks.

Gary nodded. “Okay.”

They walked into the diner and looked around but she wasn’t there. Gary turned to the

cashier. “Did two Puerto Rican girls just come in here, one of them wearing all red?”

“Yeah, but for just a moment. The one in red was upset and couldn’t stop crying, so they left.”

Gary’s heart sank. “Shit!” he yelled, forgetting where he was. The cashier jumped back and people in the diner turned to look. He apologized to everyone and they walked outside.

Tommy said, “We just missed them. Let’s drive around a bit and see if we find them.”

“Okay.”

Filled with remorse, Gary started to get that sickening, sinking feeling in his gut that he hadn’t had since Afghanistan. They drove around but didn’t see the girls. What he did see was the sun shining on a neighborhood alive with people enjoying a beautiful late summer evening.

“Let’s just head to Manhattan. I’ll call her tomorrow,” said Gary staring blankly out the window.

“You never took her number.”

“I’m pretty sure I have her home number in my room somewhere. If not, I’ll go to her house tomorrow morning before we leave.” They turned onto the Williamsburg Bridge and drove into Manhattan.

Once they were over the bridge, Gary spoke. “I thought I’d gotten over Gina, but when I saw her tonight and smelled the coconut from the shampoo she’s always used, I turned into a heartbroken fifteen-year-old again.”

“How come you never told me about her?”

“By the time I met you, we’d been broken up for four years, and I hadn’t seen her for two. I was trying to forget her, and until tonight I thought I had. It’s true though, I’ve been in love with Gina since the fourth grade. She was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen, and I fell in love instantly. Her dark brown eyes, black hair, and coffee-colored skin took my breath away.

“She was new to the school. Mrs. Feldman introduced her to the class, then assigned her to the empty seat next to me. I was both thrilled and terrified. Gina asked me if I had an extra pencil she could borrow. I was so nervous I couldn’t even speak. When I handed her the pencil, our eyes met briefly as she smiled and said thank you. I blushed and quickly looked away—my heart pounding like mad. I think she knew I liked her right then.

“At the end of the day, we got on the same school bus, but she sat with the other Puerto Rican girls chattering away a hundred miles an hour in Spanish. We lived in the same neighborhood, but she lived in the Puerto Rican section and I lived in the mostly Jewish section. The following day, the other Puerto Rican girls asked Mrs. Feldman if Gina could sit with them across the room and she agreed. I was miserable. Gina’s seat was now toward the front-left of the classroom and I was in the back on the right. I could still see her, but I had to lean to the right to do so. I couldn’t take my eyes off her, and it wasn’t long before some of the kids sitting nearby noticed. Word got around that I liked her, and the teasing started. During lunch, Gina

sat with her friends, and sometimes the girls would glance over at me and giggle, but not Gina.

“One day, Mrs. Feldman announced a geography project in which the class would be divided into small groups for part of the day for a couple of weeks. Gina, I found out later, had asked Mrs. Feldman if I could be in her group, but not to tell anyone she’d asked. Mrs. Feldman arranged it.

“The project started the following week, and for two hours each day, Gina, three other fourth graders, and I worked on our project. I was in heaven! Gina was sweet and friendly, and she began to like me also.

“Gina and I started to meet for a soda on the weekends then go to the park or the library. We were always holding hands or had our arms around each other. We became inseparable. Sometimes we would eat at each other’s houses. My parents loved her, and her parents loved me. Also, she had two older brothers who liked me, which came in handy later on. I took Gina to our fifth-grade graduation prom. She was my first date and my first kiss. We were ten years old.

“In junior high school we didn’t see each other as much because we weren’t always in the same classes, but we’d still meet some afternoons and most weekends. Gina’s girlfriends were jealous because they had no interest in boys, and they couldn’t understand why she would want to be with me instead of them. The Puerto Rican boys were jealous because Gina was so pretty and wouldn’t go out with one of them.”

“Yeah, what about the Puerto Rican boys?”

“Well, one day we were confronted by three of them coming out of the Bodega. I was about to get my ass kicked, but Gina stepped in front of me and took over. She and the boys had an angry conversation in Spanish with some finger pointing and raised voices. In the end though, they just glared at me and walked away cursing in Spanish. Gina had told them that if they didn’t leave us alone, she would have her brothers talk to them. That’s all it took.”

“I caught that comment about puberty. Was that the problem?”

“Part of it anyway. Things started to change for us the second year in high school. At age fifteen, Gina was developing into a beautiful young woman, and I still looked like a kid. Soon older boys, even college guys, were asking her out and she forgot all about me. I was crushed.”

“Good looking high school girls usually go out with older guys Gary. You know that.”

“I do, but I thought Gina and I had something special. Anyway, I didn’t give up easily and continued to ask Gina to meet me. When she refused, I’d follow her around. I guess I kind of stalked her, which is what led to the incident with Arturo.”

“Then, some of this is your fault too.”

Gary paused. “Yeah. I never really thought it through.”

“Do you think you can forgive Gina for being a normal teenage girl?”

“Yeah, I just hope she’ll forgive me.”

“I’m sure she will.”

They didn’t stay out late because they wanted to be on the road no later than 09:30. Just after midnight, Tommy dropped Gary off at his house.

“You’ve got company, buddy.”

Gary looked over and saw Gina sitting on his front steps. “Oh, thank God!”

“Now don’t mess this up. I’ll see you at 09:30. Oh, see if you can get Isabelle’s number for me.”

“Will do. You’re a good friend Tommy. Thanks.”

“*Semper Fi* dude.”

“*Semper Fi.*”

Tommy drove off, and Gary slowly approached Gina. He wanted to do just what Tommy said to do: take her in his arms and pledge his undying love, but he restrained himself. As he got closer, he saw that Gina was petting an orange striped cat sitting next to her.

“Who’s your friend?”

“He’s not really a friend...more like an acquaintance. We just met. He’s got a collar, and he’s clean so he must be a neighbor’s cat. I was just sitting here when he walked up and sat next to me. A bit presumptuous of him I think.”

“Can I sit next to you? On the other side of course.”

“That’s a bit presumptuous of you I think, considering what happened earlier.”

“At least I’m asking.”

“Oh okay, sit,” she said pretending to be annoyed.

Gary sat as close to Gina as he dared. “I went back to the diner looking for you.”

“I know. We had gone in just after you walked away, but I couldn’t stop crying so we had to leave. After I composed myself, we went back in and the lady said you and Tommy had been looking for us. That’s why I’m here.”

“When you weren’t at the diner, I almost got sick right there on the street.”

“Why’d you come back?”

“I owe that to Tommy. He jumped on me pretty hard for walking away from you. He made me realize the mistake I was making. He said I should run back to the diner, put a napkin ring on your finger and ask you to marry me. I think if you were there, I would have done just that.”

“What if they didn’t have a napkin ring?”

“I would have twisted a paperclip around your finger or anything else I could find because you were right. I still love you. I’ve never stopped loving you, but I didn’t realize that until tonight. I was hurt and angry at you for so long that it blinded me. For years I’ve had this

revenge fantasy in which you were sorry, and crying to get me back, and I walked away. This played out perfectly tonight, and in the beginning, I enjoyed it—”

“Asshole!” Gina interrupted. Both laughed.

“But as you got more upset,” Gary continued, “I felt angry with myself for hurting you, and seeing you cry became unbearable. All I wanted to do was hold you and tell you I loved you, but my anger held me back. Thankfully, Tommy helped me put things in perspective.

Gina shuffled closer so that their bodies were touching, and he put his arm around her. The cat, roused by her movement, got up, meowed, and nestled closer to her. “I think you have competition.”

Gary pointed his finger at the cat. “You stay away from her. I’ve waited six years for this—she’s mine!” The cat yawned and closed his eyes.

“What did Tommy say to you?”

“It was simple really. He said that you were just being a typical teenage girl. As pretty as you were, you were bound to attract older guys and date them. Me, still being a couple of years from puberty, didn’t interest you anymore. But then he said that if I let you go now because of what happened then, I was an idiot. I realized he was right, and we went back to the diner.”

“Wow, he’s got it down,” she said. “It’s not that I ever stopped caring about you Gary, or even loving you in our adolescent way, it’s just that for a while, I outgrew you.”

“Bitch!” Gary muttered, and they both laughed.

“I was overwhelmed with all the attention I was getting from older guys, and I wanted to be with them.”

“I understand, *mi novia*,” he replied as he stroked her hair.

Gina smiled at the Spanish endearment. “I’m sorry I ignored you, but I didn’t see any other way to break up with you. You were kind of stalking me.”

“I know. It must have been a little creepy,” he said and they both smiled.

“And I’m sorry about Arturo.”

“Yeah, about Arturo, where is he? We have some unfinished business.”

“You don’t mean that. Anyway, I don’t know where he is. He finished college and is working somewhere on Wall Street. He doesn’t live around here anymore.”

“I can find him. I owe him an ass kicking.”

“Don’t be silly. That was six years ago.”

“Yeah, but I got a concussion. I had to go to the hospital.”

Gina batted her dark brown eyes at him. “Would you be willing to drop the whole Arturo thing if I let you kiss me?”

Gary stopped to consider the offer. “If you let me kiss you? I don’t know Gina, that’s a lot to

ask for just a kiss.”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows and an inquisitive smile. “Just what then would I have to do?”

“Well...” was all he could get out before he started laughing.

“But remember stud, it’s midnight and you’re leaving in the morning, so it has to be something we can do right now, right here on your front steps.”

“Damn it!” he laughed in frustration.

“Oh, and just so you know, I felt it.”

“Huh?” he said still laughing. “What did you feel?”

“Your little Marine,” she said pointing down.

“What!”

“When we first met tonight and I was hugging you, I felt him waking up. I believe you call it reveille.”

“Oh no!” whispered Gary as he buried his face in his hands.

“Please tell me he was still a little sleepy when you stepped away, otherwise this night could end badly.”

Gary burst out laughing.

Gina wrapped her arms around his neck, rested her head on his shoulder, and laughed with him.

“He was still sleepy, I promise.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” sighed Gina affecting relief.

After a minute, Gary regained his composure. “Oh my God Gina, I don’t remember the last time I laughed that hard. Thank you. Now what were we talking about?”

“We were talking about Arturo, and I offered to let you kiss me if you’d forget about him.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll let it go, but I really do owe him an ass kicking.”

“Shut up and kiss me!”

It was their first real kiss and it was gentle but with a passion Gary had never felt before. As they separated, she looked tenderly into his eyes. “I’ve never stopped loving you either *mi novio*.”

As they moved to kiss again, the cat, attracted by the affection, stepped onto Gina’s skirt, meowed, and put a paw on her face. “Oh, someone feels left out.”

Gary pointed at the cat. “You’re crossing the line buddy. This is your last warning.”

Gina petted him and kissed him lightly on his head. The cat lay back down and went to sleep.

“Gary, I’ve dated a lot of guys, a couple of them long enough to call boyfriends, but they

didn't last. I think because, in the back of my mind, I was always comparing them to you.

The last four years I was focused on college, and I had a part-time job. I didn't have time to think about much other than that. I was at the Bodega last month and since then I couldn't stop thinking about you. I meant what I said. I was going to stop at your house within the next couple of weeks. I had to find out where you were, what you were doing, and hope you weren't involved with another girl. You were such a sweet, beautiful boy and I loved your soft, straight, brown hair and green eyes. I knew you'd grow up to be handsome, and I was determined that if you weren't seriously involved with another girl, I would hunt you down."

Gary smiled. "I've been a bit preoccupied myself. I barely thought about you at all, or anyone else for that matter except my fellow Marines."

"Yeah, that blew me away. What made you join the Marines?"

"I didn't join the Marines. I joined the Navy." He stopped and waited for the confused expression on her face that he loved from earlier days, and he wasn't disappointed.

"Huh?" she said. She crinkled her nose and cocked her head to the side, making Gary laugh.

"When I finished high school, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew I didn't want to go to college yet. I worked in a dingy warehouse for a few months and that got old really quick. I knew I wanted to travel, but how does an eighteen-year-old without any money do that? I had a long talk with my father, and at the end of it, he suggested I join the Navy. He had been an Army medic in Vietnam so there was no way he would have recommended the Army. He knew I wanted to travel, and who travels around the world like the Navy? I liked the idea, and I liked what my father did in the Army, so we went to see the recruiter. I looked at other jobs but I decided to be a medic, or Hospital Corpsman as they are called in the Navy. My recruiter was honest and told us there was a small chance I could be assigned to a Marine or Seabee unit in a combat zone, but that my chances were slim since there was no war on, and there were usually plenty of volunteers for that. My poor father didn't know what to say. Anyway, I joined up to have financial stability, travel and do something interesting. Believe me, I had no desire to fight anyone. I entered basic training in October 2000 but was eventually assigned to the Marines after the towers came down. We just got back from a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan two weeks ago."

"Is that where you got those scars? Is that why your hands tremble?"

"Yeah, but the scars will fade in time, and the trembling only happens when I'm stressed. That should go away after a while too."

"Was it really bad there?"

"At times."

Gina held his hand and interlaced their fingers. "What will you do when you get home?"

"I think I want to go to college for nursing. As gruesome as it was in combat, I really liked what I did. I've looked into it, and I should get about a year of credit for my military training

and experience. That would mean only three years to a nursing degree. What about you novia? What'd you study in college? Where'd you go?"

"I went to Brooklyn College for graphic design and I really like it. I have a job here in Brooklyn, and Isabelle and I are talking about getting an apartment together."

"Yeah, it's time," he said. "And we'll have a place we can be together when we can because I'll probably have to live at home while I'm in school."

Gina smiled. "That'll be nice."

"Speaking of Isabelle, Tommy thinks she's pretty and would like to get her number if possible."

"Funny you should say that. When I decided to come here tonight, Isabelle asked me to give you her number for Tommy. I forgot about it until now." Gina reached into her purse and handed a piece of paper to Gary. "Tell me something about him so I can tell Isabelle."

Well, he's my best friend. We're like brothers. When I first got to Lejeune, I tried to put up a brave front, but I was scared to death. I got assigned to his platoon, and when he found out I was from Brooklyn also, we started hanging out. We really hit it off so he arranged for me to be transferred to his squad. Tommy had already seen some combat in Iraq so I looked up to him. Once in Afghanistan, he watched me like my mother until I got my act together. I owe him a lot. I can tell you he's smart, funny, and a good guy. He's getting out in five months and wants to be a teacher. He'll be good for Isabelle."

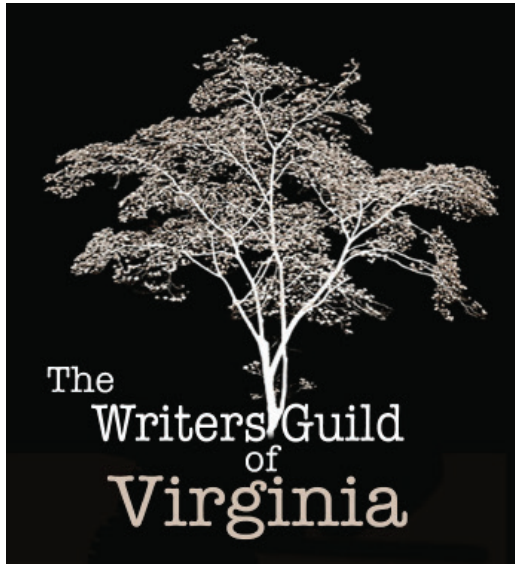
"Sounds almost as wonderful as you."

"Almost."

They sat quietly for a while, Gina resting her head on his shoulder. Gary turned and smelled her hair, savoring the coconut fragrance. He noticed the cat was fast asleep snuggled against Gina. Maybe they might move in together and get their own cat. Gary looked at the stars, the few that could be seen from Brooklyn, and thought they were wonderful.

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "I've got to get you home young lady."

"I suppose so," she said sadly, then they stood—much to the cat's displeasure. Gina gave him another light kiss on the top of his head, "Good night, kitty." Gary and Gina wrapped their arms around each other, and he walked her home.



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Marc R. Meth



I am a police officer near retirement with a late life penchant for writing. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, then moved to Connecticut when I was 18. Right after I turned 21, I met the beautiful Italian girl who was to become my wife and enlisted in the Navy. During 15 years of on again/off again attendance, I was able to piece together a Bachelor of Science degree from New Hampshire College. Once upon a time I was an electronic technician, a graphic designer, and a variety of jack-of-all-trades type jobs, but my passion to protect and serve never faded.

I live and work in Hampton Roads with my wife of over 40 years. I have a son in his mid-thirties, and a cat who recently celebrated her first birthday.

So far, I have written a novelette, a novella, and I'm putting the final edits on my first book. What I write about varies from the gravely serious to the hilarious (hopefully), but whatever I write about comes from my heart. What I hope for in the end, is that those who may read my work will laugh, cry, or in some way be moved for the better.

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