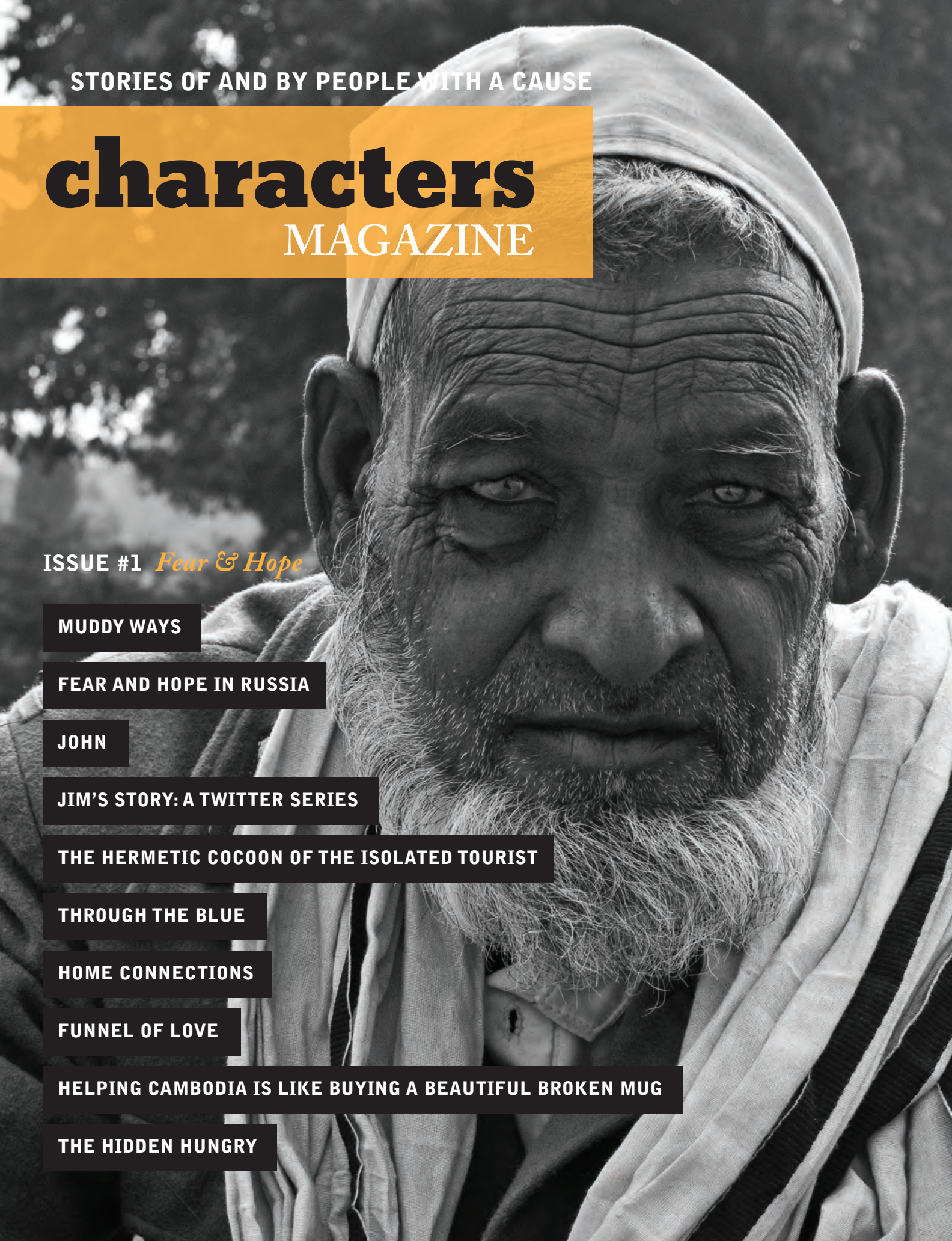

STORIES OF AND BY PEOPLE WITH A CAUSE

# characters MAGAZINE

ISSUE #1 *Fear & Hope*


MUDDY WAYS

FEAR AND HOPE IN RUSSIA

JOHN

JIM'S STORY: A TWITTER SERIES

THE HERMETIC COCOON OF THE ISOLATED TOURIST

THROUGH THE BLUE

HOME CONNECTIONS

FUNNEL OF LOVE

HELPING CAMBODIA IS LIKE BUYING A BEAUTIFUL BROKEN MUG

THE HIDDEN HUNGRY

STORIES OF AND BY THE NON PROFIT SECTOR

characters
MAGAZINE

# *Table of Contents*

## *Featured Stories*

MUDDY WAYS 6

FEAR AND HOPE IN RUSSIA 8

JOHN 11

JIM'S STORY: A TWITTER SERIES 14

THE HERMETIC COCOON OF THE ISOLATED TOURIST 18

THROUGH THE BLUE 19

HOME CONNECTIONS 22

FUNNEL OF LOVE 24

HELPING CAMBODIA IS LIKE BUYING A BEAUTIFUL BROKEN MUG 38

THE HIDDEN HUNGRY 40

## *Photo Essays*

CIRCLE CENTER 3

WHY I HAVE HOPE 12

THE FACES OF SURVIVAL AND LIFE 20

CASA DE LOS ANGELES 36

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE YOUR STORY



# Letters from the Cofounders

Katya Andresen, *Cofounder*

This magazine was born over breakfast one year ago, when I showed Mark the moving short story I'd been reading on the metro that morning. It was a prize winner in the *Mississippi Review* written by my cousin, Elisabeth Cohen, and it launched an impassioned conversation about why storytelling matters.

The story was called "Irrational Exuberance," which happens to be an apt term for the creative process. We fall in wild love with an idea, yet when we set it down in words, it becomes a deflated and devalued bit of what we imagined.

This is the maddening twin truth of story. It packs such power that every other form of communication is flat and feeble by comparison. And yet, as Flannery O'Connor said it so well, "Most people know what a story is, until they sit down to write one." A cracking good story could change the world, if only we could write it.

We are hell-bent on trying, along with you.

That's because we spend much of our waking hours working with good causes, and we know that there are thousands of people among us who hold within them extraordinary stories. That includes you. Maybe it's the story of who you are or what you do or why you came to care for a cause. Maybe it's an incomplete tale, a slice of everyday experience, that - if told - would transport us out of ourselves and thrust us into your shared space, never to be the same. We don't know what your story is, but we do know this: You must summon the irrational exuberance to try to set it down. Because it will make a difference in a way that taglines, mission statements or technological bells and whistles cannot. It is a direct conduit to someone else's heart, because it came from your own.

Because we think this is so important, we decided that morning to create *Characters*. It's both a call to tell your story and celebration of good storytelling by people who are seeking to change the world. The first law of story is to show, don't tell, so we are not telling you how to write a story (as if we could). We are showing you stories that matter. We called it Characters because in these pages are authors - characters trying to do good in the world - along with the characters within their own experience and imagination. It's a motley, entertaining and inspiring crowd you will most certainly want to meet.

Thank you to everyone who brought together these characters. First and foremost, Elisabeth, who agreed to be its editor. This is only fitting as she was the original character who started this story. Taughnee Stone and Jake Van Ness created the stunning design, and we are grateful for their talents. And last, but most important, thanks to everyone who had the courage to tell their story, in public, in these pages and on the Characters website. You show a cracking good story can be told, and we can write it.

**Mark Rovner, *Cofounder***

When I was four I carried my own hand-painted "Jim Crow Must Go" sign on the picket line outside the racially segregated amusement park near my home. Social protest was the closest thing my agnostic Jewish family had to religion.

Having grown up in the do-gooder sector, I am in awe of the power of stories to inspire action, to summon moral courage, and to change the course of history.

Stories are older than written language. Stories have started wars and built civilizations. They renew and sustain our faith traditions. They have freed slaves and upended tyrannies. They teach us what it means to be a good person.

For me, practicing the craft of storytelling is among the most rewarding, and most humbling, parts of my work. Storytelling tests every writer's mettle. It requires courage. And a willingness to expose one's self in public. And it can always be better.

If we are serious about our business of leaving this silly little planet in better shape than we entered it, however, we have no other choice than to give storytelling our all. I am so grateful to the writers in these pages for showing the way.



# Letter from the Editor

The critic F.R. Leavis said that the ingredients of great literature are "a vital capacity for expression, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity." It is the "marked moral intensity" which to me is the most striking quality of the pieces in this issue; collectively, they possess a strong current of moral energy powered by the work and ideals of their writers. In the United States and internationally, our contributors are working to bring food, safety, justice, and medical care to those who lack it.

It isn't easy. In light of that, it is not surprising that most of the writing here concerns challenges – from the self-imposed, such as an endurance swim in Jeff Tow's "Through the Blue," to negotiating linguistic or cross-cultural confusion, in Phil Caldwell's wry "Helping Cambodia Is Like Buying a Beautiful Broken Mug," to navigating the emotional, logistical, and legal hurdles of international adoption, in Becky De Nooy's affecting "Fear and Hope in Russia." Sometimes the struggle leads to honest, painful realizations about the writer's ability to cope, as in Kathleen Colson and Marley Rave's accounts of experiencing and witnessing privation.

Leavis' "openness before life" is a mixed blessing, as our contributors open themselves to experiences in the hope of improving the world, and risk distress, discomfort, pain, self-doubt, and failure in doing so. It is a quality Katya and Mark value, too. When Katya told me about her plan to start a magazine with Mark, I was startled. She is among the most energetic people I know, but she has a tremendously busy and full professional and personal life, as does Mark. If there are any people out there who have more legitimate reasons why they couldn't start a magazine in their "free time," I haven't met them. And yet, Mark and Katya, like our writers, did not let this stop them.

As James Baldwin put it, "There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now."

**Elisabeth Cohen, *Editor***

# Muddy Ways

Kevin Martone

The car changed everything. Our family's first car. It was September 1922 and my father had just been willed a car from his uncle. Great Uncle Ralph. My father hated Ralph. Couldn't stand him. But he loved his car. A shiny Ford Model T.

Our family was dirt poor. We weren't starving or anything, but let's just say we didn't eat a lot of meat. Except when a milking cow went dry, of course. We didn't have a car, that's for sure. We didn't really need one, seeing as we lived on the farm, which just happened to be a half mile or so down the road from town and our schoolhouse. Back then, me and my little brother Benny walked to school every day along that muddy road in our bare feet after doing our chores around the farm: milking the cows; feeding the hens; cleaning out the stalls and the coops.

Back in those days, you didn't see many deep ruts in the dirt roads, not in that area of Mississippi. You see, not many poor folks had a car or even a carriage. The roads were full of footprints and hoofprints instead. The prints filled up with rain and floodwaters from the streams and slews around the farms. And horsecrap. Benny liked the warm ooze on his feet from the fresh horsecrap. Not me. Not our teacher, Miss Peterson, neither. That little classroom stunk to high heaven after Benny's filthy toes dried up. You'd think a bunch of farmer's kids would be used to that kind of stink, but I guess Miss Peterson was delicate. Maybe she hadn't grown up on a farm; I just don't know. She did have her own smell of flowers, with lots of paint on her face. Anyway, she always made Benny go outside and wash his feet in the slew outside our little schoolhouse. His feet still came back muddy, but they had the fresh riverbank stink instead. Miss Peterson liked that a whole lot better than horsecrap.

That all changed when Great Uncle Ralph left us that car. Great Uncle Ralph had made a small fortune doin' who knows what. I didn't know and Benny didn't know, that's the truth. But Daddy knew. I think that's why he and Great Uncle Ralph didn't see eye to eye. All I know is Great Uncle Ralph sat on the porch of the local saloon all day, rocking in his chair, rubbing a big ol' shotgun in his hands, saying hey to all the townsfolk. And everybody waved hello back. Some even went up to Great Uncle Ralph, dropped little packages at his feet, and hightailed it out of there without so much as a glance up at his bloodshot eyes. They didn't stay long to chat about this and that like my mama often did with her friends and kinfolk. No, they kept on walking like they were scared or something.

Anyway, it was a mystery how Great Uncle Ralph ended up dead on the porch of that saloon, a big whiskey bottle smashed on the ground around him, Ralph just smiling like he always did, except for the blood hanging down into his deep eye sockets. Nobody ever found out who did it. Daddy didn't mind – he got that car. It turns out that Daddy was Great Uncle Ralph's only kin, so the car was ours. The sheriff brought the car down to the farm the day after his funeral. Funny how none of the townsfolk who waved hello to Great Uncle Ralph and gave him those little gifts showed up. I guess they were still scared or something.

After Great Uncle Ralph died, we didn't walk to school no more. Daddy loved to drive us into town. Mama said he was crazy, that we couldn't afford the upkeep, but Daddy didn't pay her no mind. I never saw my Daddy as happy as when he dropped us off in front of that schoolhouse, Miss Peterson smiling at him from the front step of the school. I always guessed she was glad that Benny's feet didn't have all that horsecrap on them no more.

Daddy loved that car so much, he started selling off the cows that hadn't even dried up yet, just so he could keep driving us to school. It must have been expensive to run a car back then, because we sold a lot of cows and we sold them quick. Every day was the same. Mama raised hell in the morning as we hopped into the back of that car and Daddy drove off through the muddy road. Me and Benny watched the wheels dig deep ruts into the mud and horsecrap. I guess we liked the car, too, although I think Benny missed the warm ooze on his feet. We only looked up from the road when Daddy honked at people and horses walking along the road the way we used to do. The only thing that changed each day was Miss Peterson. All of a sudden, she had a new dress or new necklace or some new smell on her every day when we got to school. And I don't remember when exactly, but after awhile, Daddy started getting out of the car with us to talk to Miss Peterson. Me and Benny were scared. We thought we were in trouble for sure. But we never a heard a thing about it.

It wasn't until me, Benny, and Mama moved in with Mama's kin that we found out Daddy and Miss Peterson weren't talking about us at all. Mama called our teacher all sorts of names, things we'd never even heard about before. And she always cursed Daddy's car. She never liked that thing.

Nobody called it divorce back then, but that's what it was. We didn't talk to Daddy much after that. We'd see his car parked at the schoolhouse, where he lived with Miss Peterson, when we got to school each day. Or we'd see him sitting in Great Uncle Ralph's chair on the porch of the saloon. He'd say hey to us, but we'd just wave and move along. Mama told us the devil had gotten into Daddy just like he'd gotten into Great Uncle Ralph. She didn't explain when we asked what she meant, but she said Daddy'd end up dead on that porch one day just like Great Uncle Ralph. We didn't know any better. We stayed away from Daddy and that car, too. If the devil had gotten Daddy, we were sure he came in that Ford Model T.

Sure enough, Mama was right. When Daddy turned up dead, nobody said a word. The sheriff came by again, and said the car was ours, but Mama wouldn't take it. Me and Benny didn't want that thing neither. We didn't want to end up dead from a bottle to the head like Great Uncle Ralph and Daddy. So Mama traded that car for a nice milking cow and a couple chickens. We moved back to the farm and walked to school down that muddy road again. Just like old times. Benny got his feet all dirty with horsecrap again, although our new teacher Miss Lawrence didn't mind as much as Miss Peterson. Miss Lawrence's kin must have been farmers like us.

In a way, you could say nothing really changed, even after the car changed everything. ■

*" Back then, me and my little brother Benny walked to school every day along that muddy road in our bare feet after doing our chores around the farm "*

# Fear and Hope In Russia

Becky De Nooy

*Becky De Nooy's passion is finding families for older Russian orphans; 87 children now have families through her efforts. This excerpt from her blog (RussianOrphanLighthouseProject.blogspot.com) describes one of the trips she took with prospective adoptive families to meet older Russian orphans.*

**Day Five**

Bleary-eyed and dragging, families from Michigan, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Illinois file into the hostel Friday afternoon. Even after the flight and the time change, they're itching to meet the kids. Shortly afterward, we tackle the day's sightseeing. It's fascinating to see how families and kids pair up on our walk, and how kids flit from family to family, in a heart-rending attempt to cover their bases.

We're hungry and spot a restaurant marked with golden arches on our way down Arbat Street, Moscow's sole pedestrian-only boulevard. The kids vote to eat there, but the place is so busy there's scant seating. We end up at MuMu instead, a delightfully atmospheric joint serving Russian food like pelmeni and borscht. It's delicious, but the kids would prefer something a little more American.

Wandering Arbat, we pass persistent salesmen hawking matryoshka dolls, knickknacks, and Russian kitsch, and a shriveled old woman wearing a sandwich board advertising a tattoo parlor. The golden domes of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior rise near the end of the street. The largest church building in Russian Orthodoxy, the original cathedral on the site was built to commemorate Napoleon's departure from Russia. In 1931, Stalin commanded the church's demolition, making way for a monstrous "Palace of the Soviets" crowned with a 300-foot tall statue of Vladimir Lenin. Fortunately, instability in the ground due to the nearby Moscow River rendered the plan untenable, and the project was abandoned. In its place, the world's largest open-air swimming pool was built. Larisa, our translator, and her brother, Dima, fondly recall swimming there, playing hide and seek in the steam of the pool on savagely cold days. They had mixed emotions when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the pool was closed and the church faithfully reconstructed according to original specifications.

Darkness falls early in Russia, and after the cathedral, we call it a day, boarding a bus back to the hostel. Larisa tells the driver the children are orphans, so he lets them ride free. Back at the hostel, we create a scene of domestic tranquility as parents work together in the kitchen while the kids play beside us.

As I retreat to my room to write, I know I've done all I can for this moment, and it's time to see what God has in store for the children and their futures. My head finally hits the pillow at three a.m. I sleep quickly, but not before reflecting on how privileged I am to play a role, and how honored I am to be entrusted with this unfolding, grand adventure.

**Day Six**

Halloween dawns Saturday, but no one dresses up in Russia. Larisa makes blini, thin Russian pancakes like greasy crepes, filled with a cream cheese-type mixture and topped with fruit and sour cream. She is a talented cook.

Leaving the hostel, we stop at Gorky Park. In summer, Gorky is crowded with families enjoying pricey spins on rickety amusements, but today it's abandoned, except for a man selling rides on a reindeer and a balloon saleswoman by the gate. I've no idea who their clientele is at this time of year; it seems dubious either will earn a single ruble today.

The temperature is everything you'd expect of Russia. The wide boulevards bustle with an eclectic mixture of Soviet-style jalopies, compact European cars, and the high-end luxury sedans of Russia's nouveau riche, so larger streets have underpasses where pedestrians cross. The Gorky Park underpass houses an art gallery, where we loiter a spell. We're less interested in the paintings than the warmth, as this tunnel is enclosed and heated. Outside it, we wander through a humble statue park. The kids stand by an oversized globe called "World of Kindness." It seems especially fitting for our international group, which is melding famously. Beyond is the Soviet Statuary Center. Larisa asks the kids if they know Stalin, Lenin, and Khrushchev. Serious Dmitry, 12, raises his hand and says he's heard of them; no one else knows anything. Larisa confides, "It doesn't mean anything to them. He's heard the names, but he doesn't know the deeds." She seems bothered by their historical ignorance, bemoaning people only learn from history when they actually study it; still she allows it's not the kids' faults.

Europe's largest city, Moscow is a sprawling metropolis, so we use the metro to get around. Constructed under Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s, it's a transportation wonderland. Deep beneath the surface, the subterranean stations were intended to serve as bomb shelters during World War II. Unfathomably long escalators ferry passengers to the bowels of Moscow. This metro, the second busiest in the world and much quicker than navigating the traffic above ground, is so efficient it's rare to wait more than a minute for a train. A destination in its own right, some stations are works of art, with mosaics depicting scenes from the life of Lenin, statues extolling the wholesome virtues of the Soviet worker's life, bas-reliefs of cultural pursuits, chandeliers, and marble. My only reservation about the metro is the crowds. Our adult-to-child ratio favors the kids, and it would be easy, and ruinous, to lose a child in the throng. Each time we exit a car, we do a frantic head count, and I breathe easier when we're all together outside again.

The metro transports us to the cosmonaut museum, situated at the base of a giant rocket-capped monument honoring Yuri Gagarin, Russia's most famous cosmonaut. In 1961, Gagarin became the first human to blast into space, still a matter of considerable national pride. Larisa asks the kids to name the first cosmonaut and Dmitry raises his hand, giving the correct answer. The museum surprises me; I would not have expected such a state-of-the-art showplace anywhere in Russia. Most of our kids are mesmerized by the space vehicles and the interactive computer displays, but Yulia, 12, and Maria, 10, are engrossed by the personal attention as a guide describes a single exhibit to them for over 30 minutes. The kids love posing with two stuffed dogs, Belka and Strelka, who ventured into space before Gagarin did. I appreciate the exhibit information in Cyrillic, since I need feel no guilt for not reading it.

On our way to a performance, we pass October Square, an electrical wire-and-exhaust-filled nod to communists who long for the old days. A large statue of Lenin, the only one remaining in Moscow, keeps watch over a mess of traffic. Before the show, we try a different McDonald's for dinner. Packed with Russians hungry for a taste of America, it epitomizes chaos. It takes brass to eat at McDonald's in Moscow if you want to sit while eating. Larisa asks diners who appear finished if they are leaving. Not enough are, so she starts directing some of our kids to sit in empty chairs at occupied tables. I am mortified, though I later learn this is socially acceptable. While I'm in line, Larisa somehow finagles seating for nineteen. For ease, I order ten Happy Meals for the kids, but the cashier is taken aback when told the quantity. She hears my halting Russian, and thinks I have misspoken. The number and industry of McDonald's cashiers in Russia is so staggering, I can't resist a photo while waiting. This act of restaurant espionage elicits a passionate tsk-tsk from a guard I hadn't seen; businesses here seem sensitive about cameras. When the meals arrive, I am unhappy to learn Russian Happy Meals are boxless and toyless. The kids, ignorant they've been gypped, don't mind and attack their fries and Coca-Cola with vim. Eating shoulder-to-shoulder and bumping elbows with the twelve around our table for six, it's incomprehensible how

McDonald's is so tasty in a foreign land.

At the end of a jam-packed day, we return to the hostel with cold hands, rosy cheeks, and full hearts. Sunday we'll find Russia's most famous sight in our scopes, one I can't wait to share with the kids and families. In the hustle of our sightseeing, I wonder if anyone is falling in love.

**Day Seven**

Yuri Luzhkov had a brazen plan, and ever the politician, made an audacious promise to accompany it. Weary of the snow that falls on the country's capital, and sick of the expense of cleanup, the mayor of Moscow decreed in mid-October that it would not snow in his city this winter. With the approval of the city council, Luzhkov has hired the Russian Air Force to spray clouds outside Moscow, encouraging snow to fall before it reaches the city limits. We wake up Sunday morning to find Mr. Luzhkov no different than American politicians: full of expensive promises he can't keep. A light blanket of snow has fallen, likely the first of many this winter, the mayor and the Russian Air Force's attempts to control the weather notwithstanding.

The metro whisks us to the city center and Kremlin. Along the way, we stop in front of the Lenin Library to feed pigeons. Anton, 12, catches several and hands them carefully to other children. Some kids feed sunflower seeds to birds tame enough to peck from their hands. We circle the Kremlin wall and honor Russia's Unknown Soldier. Turning, we climb a hill beside the State Historical Museum, and savor our first glimpse of Red Square. At its far end stands Russia's most iconic symbol, gloriously flamboyant St. Basil's Cathedral. It's the umpteenth time I've seen it, but cresting the hill, it still takes my breath away.

The kids pose in front of the cathedral and good-naturedly tolerate photo after photo in the chill. Afterward, we retreat into the ritzy GUM Mall, home of upper crust Western merchandisers like Cartier and Dior. A glass and steel arcade covers the three-story structure, and I photograph the kids on a bridge traversing a main hallway, harking back to one of my favorite photos of my own kids here during our adoption years ago. In Soviet days, the mall was nationalized and suffered fewer of the shortages for which the rest of the country was infamous. Larisa used to wait in lines snaking through Red Square for hours for the opportunity to buy whatever GUM had in stock. It was advantageous to know someone employed here; inside information might land a shopper a coveted item otherwise unavailable. Once trying to purchase shoes, Larisa reached the head of the line only to find those left three sizes too small; still, she dared not refuse them. Such was life in the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, things in GUM today are even less attainable than in communist times; grossly inflated prices ensure most people here now are working, browsing, or warming up.

On our way out of Red Square, we see two men dressed as Cossacks outside the State Historical Museum. The kids stop to ogle them, and the men browbeat us to pay for a picture. As we hesitate, Larisa works her magic. The men ask her if the kids are orphans; when she nods yes, the Cossacks tell us to take the picture free. I ask Larisa later how they knew. "They have good eyes, and know orphans when they see them," she explains cryptically.

*****

*After the heartbreaking December 2012 ban on Americans adopting from Russia, those at the Lighthouse Project are hopeful a special needs addendum will pass the Russian parliament, allowing the organization to continue helping older orphans find their families. The Lighthouse Project also seeks to duplicate its model in another Eastern European country.*



# JOHN

Marianne Genetti

He is not unkind… except to himself.

His arms are still healing. He rubs them with the back of his hands. The grafts are beef red. The suture lines are raised, puckered, and dead-flesh white. They are smudged with mud.

He has worked just two hours but has already donned a full day's dirt. Dirt does not look bad on John. It patterns itself symmetrically as if a decoration for hard labor. He wears it comfortably.

He does not live in the neighborhood but he is a part of it. He crisscrosses from door to door looking for work. Several months ago he lost his only steady job. The new owner prefers to sweep the walks himself each Monday morning. It is harder to find John now.

*"He does not live in the neighboorhood but he is part of it."*

John walks everywhere. He walks like a craftsman drives a nail, with purposeful rhythm not compromised by hurry. When asked about his driver's license, he lifts his eyes but not his head. "I lost it," he says. He never goes on. With John, one must cast the question and then patiently reel in the response. His words come singularly and each must be coaxed. Was his license lost when he was mugged? Was it withdrawn by those who had issued it? I can't cast that far.

His voice smiles when he speaks of getting it back. He says he would feel better about himself if he had a driver's license again. The "if" speaks of a dream, not a plan.

There were four straight weeks when John didn't drink. It was nice seeing him then. His words came in pairs or better and he would ante up a smile. His mind was sharp. His hair was washed. He said he had really given up drinking this time. He knew he could do it. It didn't work those other times because he wasn't really serious then. It is only now that he is serious.

She came back into his life. Things were no different. She went back to drugs. He went back to drink.

They saved his eye. Her nails had caught and ripped the lower lid. The damage would heal. He was medicated, stitched, and sent home. The arms were more recent and more serious. The boiling water had poached the skin in the crook of each arm. He was hospitalized. He was anesthetized. The burned skin was pried off. The new skin was stitched on. He was released.

He needs antibiotics. He has no money. He is looking for work. He stands on my porch rubbing his arms with the backs of his hands.

# Why I Have Hope

Betty Londergan

# *Jim's Story: A Twitter Series*

Lewis Kinard

*This story is adapted from a "Twitter series" that tells the true story of a Lone Star Legal Aid client. Some details have been changed for confidentiality. The series was originally tweeted between April 25 and June 13, 2012.*

**25 Apr** Jim could not hold it in any more. Sitting in his wheelchair in the small store, the tears poured out. #Jim10

**25 Apr** The tears poured out and Jim could not stop them. His whole body shook. It did not matter that he was in public. #Jim10

**25 Apr** When the Dr. told Jim he had ALS, Jim at last had a name for the physical problems he had battled for many months. #Jim10

**26 Apr** Some know ALS as Lou Gehrig's disease. Jim knows it as a cruel punishment for a once healthy body. #Jim10

**26 Apr** For years, Jim and a series of doctors explored possible causes for his endless medical problems. #Jim10

**26 Apr** Jim and his son lived in a small travel trailer. It was not comfort, but it was theirs. #Jim10

**26 Apr** Jim's landlord told him to move the small travel trailer somewhere else within 3 days. Where would he go? #Jim10

**26 Apr** While shopping for groceries at the store where his sister worked, it all seemed too much to bear. #Jim10

**27 Apr** The doctor told Jim he might have only six months left and that he should get his affairs in order. #Jim10

**27 Apr** Jim's son had his own challenges, but lately had been very quiet as he feared becoming homeless and losing his dad. #Jim10

**27 Apr** When Dorothy, the store manager, heard the story, she offered to let Jim and his son move onto her land rent-free. #Jim10

**27 Apr** Jim's sister found him in the store aisle and gave him the news. He looked up in disbelief. Was it true? #Jim10

**27 Apr** Even more than free trailer space, Dorothy said she would hold a fundraiser at her store to help him out! #Jim10

**27 Apr** With all this good news at one time, Jim's smile was as big as ever. His son could stop worrying so much. #Jim10

**30 Apr** Wiping his eyes, Jim wheeled up to the front of the store and hugged Dorothy. He offered to help keep the grass mowed. #Jim10

**30 Apr** Dorothy put an ad in the local paper advertising the benefit garage sale at her store the following week. #Jim10

**30 Apr** A couple in a nearby town heard about "the man with ALS" and offered to give him a used mobile home they did not use. #Jim10

**1 May** Jim couldn't believe it. Within a few weeks, he had gone from desperation to a sense of security. Prayers answered! #Jim10

**1 May** A local radio station saw the fundraiser ad and mentioned it and Jim. Lots of people stopped by the small store. #Jim10

**1 May** The donated mobile home had minor roof damage from Hurricane Ike, but a local church group offered to fix it. #Jim10

**1 May** Dorothy paid to move the new home to her land. Jim and his son moved in. A lot of stress was now off his shoulders! #Jim10

**1 May** Looking back, Jim now thinks it was strange that he never got any money from Dorothy's fundraiser. That was clue number one. #Jim10

**2 May** Jim and his son–mostly his son, due to Jim's ALS–kept the grass mowed and cleared off scrub brush, as promised. #Jim10

**2 May** Dorothy stopped by to visit often. She seemed to like Jim and gave him neck and shoulder massages while they talked. #Jim10

**2 May** One day, Jim's wife came to visit unexpectedly. As they talked, both wondered if they could live together again. #Jim10

**3 May** When Dorothy found out that Jim's wife was staying for a few days, she stopped coming over to visit. #Jim10

**3 May** Soon, Dorothy began to act strangely around him. Something seemed to be different, but Jim could not tell what it was. #Jim10

**3 May** When Jim saw the eviction notice on his door, he was shocked. #Jim10

**4 May** Jim asked his landlord Dorothy what he had done. She would only say that he had lied to her. #Jim10

**4 May** The letter simply told Jim he had 3 days to move off the property. It gave no reason. #Jim10

**4 May** Jim could not think of a way to move the mobile home or even where he would move it. He called some friends for help. #Jim10

**4 May** Three days after the eviction notice, a deputy sheriff knocked on Jim's door. Dorothy had filed an eviction case. #Jim10

**7 May** The strangest part about the eviction suit was that Dorothy claimed "nonpayment of rent." But she had donated the space! #Jim10

**7 May** Jim had heard about Lone Star Legal Aid, but was not sure if they could help him. He called anyway; he needed help. #Jim10

**7 May** Lone Star took an emergency application from Jim. With an eviction case, things move very fast. #Jim10

**7 May** The LSLA attorney could hardly believe what Jim told him. "So she is evicting you for living too long?" #Jim10

**8 May** From the outset, it was clear to LSLA that Dorothy was trying to take advantage of Jim. But it got worse. #Jim10

**9 May** LSLA got to work right away. With little time to prepare for trial, they gathered as much info from Jim as they could. #Jim10

**9 May** Jim was relieved to have someone review his case. It really helped that LSLA saw the injustice in his situation. #Jim10

**9 May** The eviction trial was coming up quickly in the Texas Justice of the Peace court. Jim was nervous. What would happen? #Jim10

**10 May** In Texas, evictions trials are held about two weeks from the date the case is filed. Not much time to prepare a defense. #Jim10

**10 May** The day of the trial, Jim was anxious. His son tried to reassure him that it would work out. His friends did, too. #Jim10

**10 May** Jim and his son arrived at court early. They wanted to be sure he could get into the courtroom in his wheelchair. #Jim10

**11 May** When the bailiff opened the courtroom, Dorothy and her husband went in first. She ignored Jim when he rolled in. #Jim10

**11 May** There were several witnesses for each side. They took seats behind the party they supported. #Jim10

**12 May** The justice of the peace came into the small, rural Texas courtroom. Jim's was the only case on the docket. "All rise." #Jim10

**14 May** The eviction trial had begun. Jim's stomach was in knots. The judge sent all witnesses to the hallway. #Jim10

**14 May** Dorothy went first, telling the judge she agreed to let Jim stay on her land because he only had six months to live. #Jim10

**14 May** Because Jim was still alive more than six months later, Dorothy continued, that meant he had lied about having #ALS. #Jim10

**15 May** Dorothy claimed that Jim was no longer welcome to live on her land, but what she really wanted was the mobile home. #Jim10

**15 May** Jim's attorney asked why she claimed "nonpayment of rent" when there was no rent charged. Dorothy's answer was shocking. #Jim10

**15 May** Dorothy looked at the judge and said, "Because that's what he told me to write." The courtroom was silent. #Jim10

**16 May** "So what you're saying," Jim's attorney pressed, "is that you are evicting Jim because he lived too long?" #Jim10

**16 May** Jim knew then that this was not going to turn out well. Dorothy had already talked to the judge before filing suit! #Jim10

**17 May** Dorothy called her daughter as a witness who testified that the mobile home had indeed been donated, but to… Dorothy! #Jim10

**17 May** With an elaborate story about how the mobile home was given to HER, Dorothy asked the judge to order Jim out. #Jim10

**17 May** Next Jim told his story, pointing out the lies that others had spoken. His hand and voice trembled as he talked. #Jim10

**18 May** Jim wasn't surprised when the justice of the peace gave Dorothy her eviction. "You have five days to move," he ordered. #Jim10

**18 May** LSLA immediately filed an appeal to stop any eviction efforts. That bought time to prepare for the next hearing. #Jim10

**18 May** LSLA's attorneys got to work investigating and gathering the evidence to support Jim's version of events. #Jim10

**21 May** First, medical records. Jim had files full of them to refute Dorothy's claim that he lied about having #ALS. #Jim10

**21 May** Next, the mobile home. They needed to show that Jim owned the home, not Dorothy. #Jim10

**21 May** Unfortunately, Jim did not have the title papers he needed for the home. That would be a problem. #Jim10

**22 May** With a little digging, LSLA found the name and last known address of the previous owner of the donated home. #Jim10

**22 May** LSLA then found the donors. They did not live far away. But would they be willing to help clear up the question? #Jim10

**23 May** When Jim's attorney contacted the couple, they confirmed that they donated the home to Jim and his son. #Jim10

**23 May** They were outraged that Dorothy was trying to take the home they had donated to Jim and agreed to sign an affidavit. #Jim10

**23 May** Jim's attorney drove to the next county to meet with the couple and their lawyer. They eagerly signed the affidavit. #Jim10

**24 May** With the donors' affidavit, LSLA helped Jim apply for clear title to the donated home. Then he could get it moved. #Jim10

**24 May** Once the documents were accepted by the state, Jim was able to hire a mover, but where would he move the mobile home? #Jim10

**24 May** Jim did not know how much time he had to work with, so he acted quickly. The county court had not set a trial date. #Jim10

**25 May** Jim found a small lot he could afford to buy and a mover who could move his home there for a reasonable fee. #Jim10

**25 May** When Dorothy found out about Jim's plan, she was furious. #Jim10

**25 May** Dorothy insisted that Jim leave the mobile home. She threatened to call the police if he tried to move it. #Jim10

**28 May** Jim's lawyer at Lone Star Legal Aid assured him that, with title to the home, he could move it anytime he wanted. #Jim10

**29 May** Jim scheduled the move. His lawyers stayed on call, ready to get a restraining order if anything happened. #Jim10

**6 Jun** The move occurred as scheduled. The movers picked up the donated home and set it up on his new land. #Jim10

**7 Jun** Now that Jim was off Dorothy's land–WITH the donated home!–what would Dorothy try next? #Jim10

**7 Jun** The answer was going to come through Dorothy's new spokesperson. A lawyer left a message that he wanted to talk. #Jim10

**7 Jun** Jim's lawyer at Lone Star Legal Aid returned the call, not sure what to expect at this point. #Jim10

**8 Jun** Dorothy's lawyer surprised everyone by agreeing that Jim should keep the home. He offered to dismiss Dorothy's case! #Jim10

**8 Jun** With the main issue resolved in Jim's favor, Dorothy had nothing left to fight for. It was over. Jim had won. #Jim10

**9 Jun** Jim still has #ALS and it is progressing, but his main concern has been addressed: his son has a home to live in. #Jim10

**11 Jun** The grocery store has since closed. No one knows what happened to the donated money. #Jim10

**11 Jun** After Jim settled in, Lone Star helped him with some estate planning documents to make things easier on his son. #Jim10

**12 Jun** LSLA was also able to help Jim clear up a few other legal loose ends and put his affairs in order. #Jim10

**12 Jun** "Lone Star Legal Aid did a lot for me," Jim said. "I can't thank you enough!" #Jim10

# The Hermetic Cocoon of the Isolated Tourist

Kathleen Colson

There is a lot of death and suffering here. People die openly and everyone is more connected to the circumstances of a human life – fluids, dead bodies, and sickness. In the west we lead lives of isolation that keep the symptoms of poverty removed from our daily lives. We just don't see it.

The same is true of the natural world. We like nature when we can see it out our windows or have it in the landscapes of our life, but it must be managed and contained. No weeds, no bugs, or snakes, or bats. We want to keep them out.

Here, the natural world climbs into my shoes at night, rummages through my bags and my bed, and lands in my tea. More than once I have crunched down on an insect in my food. Everything in the preparation of food is close and real – the slaughter and gutting of the animal, the draining of the blood. Now I am communing with the other part of the natural world that seems so pervasive here in northern Kenya. I am sick.

*"I am communing with the other part of the natural world"*

It must be the food that was served while we were in the field at Isgargaro camp in Loglogo. It came on slowly as we drove to visit Malawan in Ndikir village and I seem to be the worst one off. We reach Nanyuki by nightfall and I spend the night vomiting, with diarrhea and chills. The toilet would not flush and the cockroaches climbed on my legs. By the morning I had blurred vision and a pounding headache.

And so I caved. With an alternative motive to inspect the newly renovated Mt. Kenya Safari Club, I check into the hermetic cocoon of the isolated tourist. I take a long bath, and have room service deliver warm soup and a fire lit in my cozy room. I sleep.

Over the next two days I spend a few hours in our Nanyuki office with Kura and Sarah but then rush back to my cocoon for more sleep and soup. Each drive that I make in the Land Cruiser from the town that is bogged in mud and garbage and crowds, to the slopes of Mt. Kenya where it is cool and quiet and staffed with people who try to anticipate my every need, brings me closer to the reality that I am a lousy humanitarian.

All I can do is bear witness to extreme poverty and work to bring resources that will change the circumstances of a few lives. My visit with Malawan in Ndikir, a woman we have profiled in a number of publications, brings me also to the crossroads of being a woman. Malawan has eight children and it was the savings from her Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP) business that paid for the medical procedure she needed after the miscarriage of her ninth child. I love my encounters with Malawan because she does not give me simple platitudes of gratitude. She is passionate. I will never forget the first time I met her when she basically said to me, "Tell me that this program will work because I have eight children that I have to keep alive and right now I am having a hard time seeing how this program will do this."

Malawan's accomplishment, and that of her fellow business partners, is a joy shared by all of us. I'm glad we could change the circumstances of Malawan's life. I wish I had her strength, her fortitude, her will to survive despite a life that seems so hard to me. Because right now I feel just plain miserable and I want to go home. ■



# THROUGH THE BLUE

Jeff Tow

*The author and his wife, Sara Tow, plan to swim across Lake Michigan to raise awareness of postpartum depression and other perinatal mood disorders. This piece describes a training swim.*

The water felt really cold on Saturday.

The thermometer said 60 degrees by the shore, but it felt much colder. That initial shock on your body when you go under for the first time takes your breath away. Face, hands, feet… chilled. Shallow breathing.

We learned quickly as we started swimming in cooler water to resist the temptation to hyperventilate and take long smooth breaths to adjust to the cold. The water in Elk Lake, near Elk Rapids, Michigan, is a clear blue-green reminiscent of the Caribbean. But Saturday was no Caribbean day; there were cloudy skies and air temperatures in the low to mid-seventies.

My feet were cold for the first few miles, but Sara's body wasn't handling the cold well. We pushed through the miles feeling the cold water rush into the wetsuit and over our exposed skin. I came close to the shivering point a number of times and was getting worried. Sara crossed that line and not only had the shivers, but her hands started cramping up.

In the shallow waters I noticed some golf balls on the bottom and dove to grab a few. Squeezing them felt good and seemed to help the blood flow in my hands. I asked Sara to grip one and she truly couldn't. I think we were both starting to get worried.

We completed the third of seven miles and Sara wasn't doing well. Physically, this distance is not difficult for us, but adding the cold, waves, and currents, changes things up a bit. We pushed on to the fourth mile.

Swimming out approximately one-half to three-quarters of a mile we turned around to head back to our starting point. Partway through the return trip, Sara said something to me that had me concerned. There was a log poking up out of the water in one spot that we passed a handful of times. Knowing where it was, we steered clear of it, but it was also a useful guidepost.

"Don't swim that way, I don't want to hit the stick," she said. I responded by saying we were nowhere near it – and not even close to hitting it. It was surprising to hear her say that – it was out of character and a sounded a bit panicked – unusual for her.

It was at this point that hypothermia was overtaking her body (later she said she did not recall having the above conversation with me). We swam back to our floating buoy where we stash our drinks, food, and supplies. After four and one-quarter miles, she was done. She had to get out. The cold got to her and it was unsafe for her to continue.

I could see the look on her face of frustration and sadness. She told me to go on and finish the set as she strode out of the water to warm up. After all the training we've done together it was weird to swim the open water alone. And, like we discussed early on, if one of us can't continue and the other can, then that person keeps going.

I went out to our turnaround point and came back. She was sitting on a picnic bench. We waved to each other. I later found out she was in a lot of pain. Her hands so cramped up that she couldn't even take her cap or wetsuit off because she couldn't pinch her fingers together.

One more out and back and I'd be at the seven miles we'd aimed to hit on Saturday. After about three-and-a-half miles, my body got into a groove and the cold melted away a bit – for whatever reason, my body reacted differently that day. That's in contrast to the one day we decided to swim without wetsuits on a three-miler. I made it four laps before my body said "no thanks" and I was shivering down to the bone. That day, Sara did fine.

I got back to our floating supply station at the end of the swim and Sara wasn't at the table. I dragged our stuff out of the water and back to the car where she was sitting, still warming up – but disheartened.

She was quiet on the drive back.

After taking a shower, she was ready to speak. We hugged, she cried, and said she felt like a failure. I quickly assured her she was no failure and reminded her that what we are doing is difficult. Some days it works, and some days it won't, but risking health and life is not necessary. Plus, she pushed on, even through the shivering, for over a mile. So strong. So powerful. So inspirational.

It took many hours before her body was fully warmed up. The swim took a lot out of her – both mentally and physically. The cold is draining.

Much like dealing with postpartum depression – there are good days and bad days. There are days when you want to sink into a hole and there are days when you can walk on water.

We are a team. We push through and support each other in all situations. And knowing that support is in place and knowing that we have the support of family, friends, and the community is what makes this all possible. ■

# THE FACES OF SURVIVAL AND LIFE

Heather Dorsey

# HOME CONNECTIONS

Donna Quathamer

About twelve years ago I was flying home to the Chicago area. As the plane was making its final approach to O'Hare International Airport, I glanced out the window and I saw something very familiar, albeit from a very new angle. I saw the high school that my children attended. Seconds later I saw my house nestled among the elm trees on the corner of Cottage and Pleasant. Doesn't that sound like an idyllic corner of the world? I don't know why, but it was a thrill to be able to pick out my house, my home from way up there. I wanted to point it out to the man sitting next to me but he was sound asleep snoring. I wanted to show him where I lived, what my place looked like even though he was a total stranger. Home. The place where we should be loved unconditionally. Home. The place that we feel so comfortable, we sleep without fear. Home. The place that has so much to do with who we are and how we are. Home.

Since then, my home has changed radically. Now if I were in an airplane and we were flying low enough, my home would look like a square cement box with a rooftop I could stand on, nestled among the cacti of Central Mexico. Home. Still the place of unconditional love and comfort and influence. That's the thing about home. It's not so much the building, but rather it is about the relationships among the people living there.

Airplanes are interesting. Traveling on them is even more interesting. For me they are self-contained communities of people who hardly say a word to each other. Each traveler is in his own little world: wondering if Jacques Saunière will pass on the secret of the Da Vinci Code; dreaming of a World Series at Wrigley Field; of getting all those little cards up in the FreeCell row; trying to figure out just what a "Felix Titling" is and what will fit into the squares of the crossword; wondering if the Cubs will ever win in spite of the Curse of the Billy Goat (most of my flights involve landing in or flying out of Chicago.)

"I'm going to San Miguel de Allende because it is so beautiful . . . There are no poor people there." That's what the woman next to me was saying as I was trying to figure out how to put the numbers 1 through 9 in all those boxes without repeating them up, down, across… Sudoku. Now there's a puzzle to make you nuts. I turned to the woman. She continued, "Are you going to San Miguel de Allende too? It's a beautiful city isn't it? Have you noticed that there are no poor people there?" That was enough to get me started. Because, you see, my home is now San Miguel de Allende because I work there at a place called Casa de los Angeles… a place for families of low income single working moms.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott says, "If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans." I think there must have been some snickering in heaven the day I told God what I was about to do.

Casa de los Angeles began as a free daycare center located in the heart of San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico. It is a safe haven for the children of mothers who come from the outskirts of town to work as domestics or to sell their wares at the local mercado and in the streets of town. Often the children were being left home alone before this center was established. Casa de los Angeles has grown to be a community center in which mothers find the support they need to make a better life for their families. Besides help caring for their children, these families receive medical care, home and bathroom construction, emergency housing, scholarship opportunities, access to a food bank, all in a relationship of mutuality that respects the dignity of each individual. Casa de los Angeles now serves seventy-eight families, with 100 children in our daycare center.

From 1995 to 2000 I worked at Lewis University in Romeoville, Illinois. During that time I was campus minister, responsible for outreach, serving the needs of people in Chicago, Appalachia, Arkansas, and Queretaro, Mexico with groups of university students. Each time I traveled to Mexico, I felt compelled to consider what I could do to help the poor of this beautiful and compelling country. How could it be that this country, which shares a border with the United States, could be so poor and so invisible to the rich country to the north? Thus began the search for the place and the service to be provided. During 1998 and 1999, I traveled to Central Mexico and decided on the town of San Miguel de Allende but still was not sure of just what the work would be. The question posed to more than 100 women of the area was, "What would be a helpful program offered to your family?" The answer every time was "Daycare. I need a place for my children so that while I am at work they aren't locked at home alone." The work was decided by the women of the community.

In the spring of 2000, having decided to make the move, it was now time for to search for a building. An old abandoned restaurant in the neighborhood called San Antonio was found. A huge pepper tree in the courtyard seemed to say, "This is just the right place for children. Let them play in my shade." In Mexico, while there are mortgages, the interest rates are so high (up to thirty percent) that property is purchased with payment in full. That was a problem, but the woman selling it said that since the building would be used to help the community she would take a $10,000 down payment with the remainder paid in one year. That was a problem too, since I didn't even have the $10,000. Traveling back to the states, thinking of ideas to raise money, I realized that a miracle was needed. Upon returning, there was that familiar beep of an answering machine. The message was my friend the pastor of Cross of Glory Church. "One of my parishioners would like to donate $10,000 start-up money for your project." Off to Mexico!

I arrived in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico on September 18, 2000 with my two big suitcases loaded with everything I thought I needed to get started. The months from September to March were filled with sore muscles as the old restaurant was renovated to accommodate the children served as well as volunteer housing. What my suitcases didn't have was found in the many tiendas of my new town. Let me tell you, without a Home Depot it was an adventure of going to the maderia for wood , the ferreteria for tools, nails, and screws, the tabiqueria for bricks and to good ole Don Pedro for cement, sand, and lime.

I learned Spanish as I went along, learning the words needed when they were needed. My little dictionary sure came in handy, but what a way to have a conversation when every other word needed to be looked up. I learned the construction words during the renovation period, daycare words once we opened, and daily living words as I lived life in a new culture. The two or three Spanish classes that I took before moving to Mexico just didn't fit the bill. What had I been thinking moving to a country whose people spoke a different language? Not to worry. My new Mexican neighbor said that within a year I would be bilingual. Silly lady! It's been longer than that and I'm still learning new words each day.

TIME magazine named rock star Bono, along with Bill and Melinda Gates, as the persons of the year in 2005. Nancy Gibbs wrote about these three as people who empower the poor to create ways of moving forward, of changing their lives, and of participating in the solution to their problems. She wrote, "This is not about pity. It's more about passion. Pity sees suffering and wants to ease the pain; passion sees injustice and wants to settle the score. Pity implores the powerful to pay attention; passion warns them about what will happen if they don't. The risk of pity is that it kills with kindness; the promise of passion is that it builds on the hope that the poor are fully capable of helping themselves if given the chance."

That is the philosophy of Casa de los Angeles. That is how we work to help the poor to help themselves. That is the passion that drives us each day to work with the mothers who have been left behind, who have been abandoned. They are the ones who are willing to enter into the scary world of making a change, of moving to a place in their lives where they can provide fully for their children. They are the heroes.

The Gospel writer, Luke, tells us, "Blest are you poor; the reign of God is yours." Why is that? Why so much attention to the poor? What do those who are not poor have to learn from those who are? What does it mean to be poor? Does it have something to do with how much we have or don't have? Or does it have more to do with emotions, relationships, and attitudes? There are those who live comfortably but have a poverty of spirit. There are those who are poor, but are filled with a joy that cannot be measured.

We are connected by spontaneous conversations on airplanes. We are connected by land without borders. . . From that airplane there is no line, no border that can be seen between Mexico and the United States. We are all connected, by land, by relationships, by experiences, by the human spirit, by the same need to be loved, to be cared for, to be seen. We are connected by home.

# FUNNEL OF LOVE

Margot Knight

*The lights come up on ANGELA, sitting on a chair with a computer monitor on the desk in front of her. She speaks, for the most part, directly to the audience, confiding in them as if they are dear friends. Sometimes she directs her comments to WOMAN at a small cocktail table set off to the side of the stage.*

## PROLOGUE

**MAN 1:**
I am a businessman/consultant, own and run a fairly successful small business.

**MAN 2:**
Recently divorced, with no children, tall and still somewhat athletic… as a younger guy I was considered a pretty good athlete.

**MAN 3:**
What I am really interested in is someone who takes good care of herself.

**MAN 4:**
If you love blue eyes, I'm your man.

**ANGELA:** (to audience)
Have you read the description for this play? It's true… all too true. About a year and a half ago, my husband - the man I had spend the better part of three decades with, the man who was the father to our now teenage son, the man who I was supposed to spend the remaining years of my life with - decided to get drunk and make a pass at the maid. Who turned him down. Because she was gay. One moment I'm sitting at my desk, feeling more or less like the world was pretty okay, that despite the fact that I woke up in fear most mornings and came home to loathing most evenings, that all in all, my life was about as good as it was going to get. I made my bed-I would lie in. Above all, loyalty to a promise made twenty-eight years ago always trumped my own dissatisfaction with life. I was fond of quoting Bertolt Brecht, "When all chase after happiness, happiness comes in last." And that since my spouse was a good father, I could handle him being a bad husband. That's the story I told myself.

Then Mary's Maids called. To tell me they were cancelling my maid service. I asked why. Mary herself told me. In one moment I faced the possibility of losing a husband and a maid all at once, and that was too much for any woman to bear.

And then, as if I'd been in a years-long dream, I woke up. I was done. What did Ms. Magazine used to say? CLICK. I got it.

Oh then we did the de rigueur things-counseling, each telling and re-telling vastly different versions of the hundreds of stories that comprised the thirty-five years we've known each other. But in the end, he didn't believe he had an alcohol problem-he drank because I was, and now let me get this wording right-"a fucking bitch." And while he had been a terrific father for our son during his early years, I didn't think our son hearing his dad call me fucking bitch was such a great role model. I was done.

I stopped fighting with him and slept for the next five months on the couch while he continued to live in the same house as me. I was stalled. There wasn't a "Getting Your Unemployed Man Out of the House for Dummies" book anywhere to be found. And I guess I was still hoping. For what… I don't know.

I finally asked him to move out when he was actively seeking out other women on a lurid site called Adult Friend Finder. Have you seen it? Please, I am far from being a prude, but that site is downright bizarre. There's an *Angels in America*-length play cycle about my marriage but I need only provide some essential prologue here, so you understand what happened next.

Oh, and another thing. My mother left my father after nearly thirty years of marriage too. At the age of fifty she packed a suitcase and, quite literally, ran away from home. She feared Daddy's wrath so much that she hid at my cousin's for months. She carved a new life for herself, got a job 1000 miles away, and was dating. And at the age of fifty-one she had a brain-damaging aneurysm. She died in a West Virginia nursing home last summer, twenty-six years after her divorce and just one month after the maid incident.

The ironies rocked me. I was fifty-two. I was, despite all my protestations to the contrary, my mother's daughter. And, despite all protestations to the contrary, I had married my father. I lived with a dream of matrimony that I couldn't pound into submission. I needed to start living my own life before a house fell on me like it had on my mother.

**MAN/John**
I think you may be a modern succubus who thrives on and uses the energy of others.

**ANGELA**
John, I am done. I need to move on and figure out what will work best for me for the next thirty years. This is not something I ever planned for or expected. It is just a very clear, unambiguous decision that I have come to that has nothing to do with pride or pettiness. I am done.

**MAN/John**
You know Angela… What will stand out in court is that now that you are a big shot and now you just want to dump the liberal, pro-feminist man that made it possible for you to get there. You with your aging frippery, your rich kiss-kiss friends and your capitalist lackey job. If you want to get ugly then start the dance-you will find your head in your lap.

**ANGELA**
Six months after the maid incident, my separation became public.

I started sharing my situation with more people. And my waggish girlfriends started in.

## SECTION TWO: Yahoo.com with RICH

**WOMAN/Belinda:**
So have you started dating?

**ANGELA**
Nothing could be further from my mind. I can't imagine how I would even start, but late one night in November I took the plunge into Yahoo Personals. I called myself "CultureCommander."

Dating for the first time in thirty years:

Let me confess that I have only been separated for a little over two months, weigh 20 pounds more than I want to, and find this whole process downright frightening.

My friends who do this all the time say to meet quickly to see if there's any chemistry. And that one date will reveal if there are sparks. Regardless of the outcome, time spent in good conversation learning about someone else is never a wasted experience in my book.

(To audience) I didn't post my profile at first-just sent out emails to men who looked interesting. Most of whom never even responded. And then were the rejections.

Now I've been rejected. My favorites include

**MAN/Fred:**
Angela, promise me something

**ANGELA:**
Anything Fred.

**MAN/Fred:**
Promise you'll never write or call me after the summer is over.

**ANGELA:**
And my personal favorite – Jimmy:

**MAN/Jimmy:**
I have got to love Jesus before I can love a woman.

**ANGELA:**
But these rejections set a new standard:

**MAN/Richard:**
I am a far right Republican on the libertarian end. I would rather use my limited time and energy to explore a relationship with someone with whom I would not argue politics.

**MAN/Wayne:**
Gotta admit, we have a lot in common. Could probably have some lively discussions. Still I've never gotten on well with redheads. Happy hunting.

**MAN/Ken:**
Sounds to me you're looking for a late night romance... how would you suggest we go about this?

**ANGELA:**
Jeez, just because I said I didn't/wasn't ready to walk down the aisle, I'm sending the message that I want a late night romance?

I am looking for a meaningful relationship (I don't believe there is really such a thing as casual sex. . . don't we all fall in love just a little with everyone we sleep with?)

So can we laugh, talk about books, go to concerts, take in a movie, have long dinners? Argue about politics and still respect each other? I don't know.

If that's of interest to you, let me know (to the audience) I never heard from him again!

But then, lucky number twenty-three came through:

**MAN/Rich:**
Hi CultureCommander-does that mean you control a division of humble minions slaving over art tables under dim fluorescents with a few majors overseeing the horde?

Thirty years, wow. Sure, let's have some drinks and talk about life and its rollercoaster heights and drops.

I'll meet you on your turf, say in the 7:30 range? Friday, the ninth?

They call me RICH

**ANGELA:**
RICH, I have a name and a time. A real live date.

Dear Rich-Thanks for making the trip. While I didn't sense any sparks, your passion for your work and your art were crystal clear. Next time you're sand sculpting let me know.



**MAN/Rich:**
You're most welcome. I enjoyed our time together. You are right-we all need some sparks. It will come when least expected. Don't be afraid to be selective. And I will let you know when I sand sculpt again.

**ANGELA:**
My first, first date. Out of the way. Under my belt. I was off. I got it-this was a numbers game. The more men I reached out to, the greater statistical chance of meeting ones who I had something in common with. I jazzed up my profile and posted a sexier picture. Changed my headline to "Not glamorous but always laughing."

(talking while typing) Movies, plays, concerts, parties, travel, as well as quiet time exploring life's experiences. I would love someone to share some fun and meaningful conversation.

I'm just an old hippie chick who wants to make the world a better place and has figured out that wearing a bra and expensive suits helps me do a better job of that.

Looking for companionship to start. I like smart, self-confident people who pay attention to the world and have opinions. I like motivated people who recognize that making a difference in the world requires courage and commitment. Having said that, I like people who like to laugh and don't let hard times eat them up.

## SECTION THREE: SWEET WALTER

And then-came Sweet Walter and my first complete Alice-in-Wonderland tumble down the rabbit hole of love:

I read your profile and thought-yes. This is my kind of guy. And I love Kronos Quartet too-their version of Purple Haze is an all-time favorite. My musical tastes are wildly eclectic. Josh White, Diana Krall, Jimi Hendrix, Kingston Trio, Segovia, Kurt Weill, Marlene Dietrich. One of my best friends is a leading Bayesian theorist. Don't know if that's related to your work. Guess I'll have to re-read that last paper on model averaging. (ha ha—like I have ever concerned myself one whit about over-confident inferences.)

(aside) I am fully convinced that this playful mathematics talk will capture his heart.

**MAN/Walter:**
What a charming, attractive woman you are, ANGELA-now you are someone I have a few things in common with. Let's get together. I Googled you and you sound like you're in the middle of it all while I'm huddling up here on the fringe working. Sure you want to get to know a math geek hippie entrepreneur metaphorist like me? Ha! I bet you do.

I love that my daughter is named Angela too!

**ANGELA: (to audience)**
He's a Ph. D! Now I'm hooked! His daughter and I have the same name. Can you say kismet?

(To him) How about Friday night? We could check out the art galleries, walk along the lake, have dinner. We could discuss as many metaphors as you would like.

(to audience) Now, did I mention that my ex was a math geek hippie? Not an entrepreneur but a Marxist, not a metaphorist but a critical theorist. Somehow the similarities between Walter and the ex seemed charming rather than frightening. Maybe this Ph. D would be just like the ex, except nicer.

(To him) Are you an on-time or a late person? (I, being an Army brat am compulsively early to everything and die a thousand deaths when traffic thwarts my timely arrival!)

**MAN/Walter:**
Excellent, I generally leave time for delays and wind up early. FYI, I worked as a nude model for art classes as an undergrad, did course work in design, and took a couple of MFAs. I've been working on this art-science border for a while.

**ANGELA:** (to audience)
NOW THINK I HAVE DIED AND GONE TO HEAVEN. . .

And so we met-at exactly five minutes before the right time. We both smiled broadly when we saw each other-he WAS absolutely adorable, six-foot-three, with a headful of light brown curls. The gallery was just closing, but the owner opened the place up and gave us the cook's tour. Walter was impressed. And then he saw a painting called Darwin in America #4. An abstract painting with mathematical symbols and references to the scientific method. I was twenty minutes into a date with a man who spent $2,500 on a painting. I pinched myself!

He told me about his three marriages, his three daughters, his career, his scholarship, his dreams. We sat on a park bench and he kissed me. He kissed me with the same mouth that had earlier talked earnestly about metaphysics and science and religion. He looked at me with his blue, blue eyes and said, "You're hot!"

I have no memory of driving home.

(To Him) Sweet Walter,

Well, I am tossing and turning. Who needs sleep? After an evening with you the world seems crisper, its colors more pronounced.

Now don't get me wrong-all the stuff about Hegel, ritual, symbolism, the divinity of mathematics and seeking to reconcile Heidegger's argument with language was deeply erotic too. . . The idea of a mathematician whispering sweet nothings is one for the ages.

Six hours of talking and I could have talked all night.

And kisses-I want more kisses. . . Those were GREAT kisses.

In the old hippie days we would have. . . well, you know. I guess protocol and maturity demand that we have a few more dates (not to mention your own place and I've got that twenty-five pounds to lose).

"Let's take it nice and easy" go the lyrics to an old Rosemary Clooney song. No matter what happens-we'll always have Tavares (and you'll always have Darwin in America #4).

**ANGELA:**
(to audience) I was on cloud nine and had a great story besides. The story of the six-hour date. To which my friend Hank replied,

**MAN/Hank:**
Big deal-tell me when you have a twenty-four-hour one.

**ANGELA:**
Our second date was a jazz concert at a local college.

**MAN/Walter:**
Yeah! See you then. Thanks also for the math article. I forwarded it all over the place...

**ANGELA:**
anticipating
talking
talking
talking
drinking in jazz
eating
laughing
listening
kissing

**ANGELA:**
My dear, dear Belinda, Winona, Helen and Sara,

Well the second date with the mathematician is over-also a five-and-a-half-hour marathon but I don't think he'll be calling again. Early in the evening he remarked how different we were and told me he didn't see pursuing a romance with me as my life was too public. But he hoped we could have a good time tonight!

(to audience) I couldn't confess this to my friends at the time but as the lights went down at the concert, tears streamed silently down my face. I was crushed-and also amazed-that I was so crushed.

I think all the people who knew me, combined with the fact that I was recognized and thanked from the stage only made matters worse.

I clearly misread the first date or he just changed his mind (or, the dark thought of I'm just not pretty, or good or smart enough, and no one will ever love me is always a gloomy, looming plausibility).

**WOMAN/Helen**
Also possibly you are too wonderful. If we don't believe we're pretty and good and smart enough, who will?
Your second or third legitimate date since Donna Summer had a hit doesn't end in mutual simultaneous orgasms or a marriage proposal and you're thinking about throwing in the towel. That's the spirit.

Who knows why he isn't interested in pursuing a romance. But someone who thinks of himself as "a sit at his desk homebody" might not be the best person for you to use as the sole external source as you undertake a re-evaluation of your self-image.

For that matter, does your self-image need a rewrite? And is that why you're dating?

You describe kisses and conversation, in my book anything that doesn't end with my duct-taped corpse being furtively hidden in a dumpster behind the Taco Bell is a positive night out. But that's just me. And my expectations aren't what they used to be.

Best, Helen

**ANGELA:**
I think it's just a sweet dark hole left over from my suicidal days. I really don't believe it anymore-I am pretty clear about who and what I am. And I know that the package is a little (hell, a lot) overwhelming. I did notice that he had difficulty making the simplest decisions (which either frustrates me or revs me into bossy gear, neither one of which is attractive). And I was watching him last night and decided he walked funny. On the bright side, I've now dropped ten pounds.
And my reasons for dating? Interaction with testosterone. Kind of like taking vitamins.

**WOMAN/Belinda:**
Well, remember the old "you have to kiss a lot of frogs... " 'tho sweet Walter sounded like a pretty interesting frog...
Angie, we must remind ourselves that there are soooooo many men out there, and a handful of them will be worthy of us-I am quite certain of it. We must continue to make ourselves a priority-well, okay, and keep our jobs.

We'll find men whose passion will last more than two dates, or two months. We will look back and laugh-or maybe just continue to look forward and laugh.

You are loved, and lovable. Can we help it if we're smart and beautiful and wield great power in the world or at least in our small slivers of it?

**ANGELA:**
Thanks, sweetie. (to audience) It won't surprise you to learn that I didn't sleep at all that night (tears on my pillow and all that). It's clear that I completely intimidated poor sweet Walter. I was at least hoping to get to the third date and or sex part!

**WOMAN/Sara:**
Well really, he just doesn't sound like a good fit.

**WOMAN/Belinda:**
You need a strong man.

**WOMAN/Winona:**
He was CUTE. And I saw the way he was looking at you intently. Trust me, he'll call you again.

**ANGELA:**
No, he won't... But he did. Three weeks later.

**MAN/Walter:**
Hey, something you said haunted me. You said you don't trust people and I just wanted to make sure that I wouldn't be one of the people you don't trust.

**ANGELA:**
I am thinking, WHAT? But I don't say anything.

**MAN/Walter:**
And I wanted to let you know that I met someone and I slept with her.

**ANGELA:**
I am thinking, WHAT? But I ask if that happened between the first and second date-which would explain his unexpected behavior on the second date.

MAN/Walter:
No, I just slept with her eight days ago.

**ANGELA:**
I am thinking, WHAT? But I don't say anything except I got off the phone as quickly as possible. And I was bound and determined not to spend another sleepless night over this flake.

Dear Walter:
Finding myself on the verge of robbing myself of yet another night's sleep contemplating the quirky nature of your behavior, I make the following eight observations in no particular order and with no consistency of logic.

1) Your call had more to do with your perception of yourself (and your need to have me share your perception of yourself) as a nice guy than it did with me. I was a little insulted by the avuncular, gee-you'll-find-what-you're looking-for, I'm-in-a-different-place condescension.

2) My beliefs about trust have been part of me since my dad threw me in creek to teach me how to swim. It's been my experience that, most of the time, if I don't take care of myself, no one else will.

3) Having said that, my experience with you drove home that point to me once again.

4) I never expected to hear from you again. It was very clear that the kisses were goodbye kisses, not see you later kisses. But now our story has the postscript of the dumping-you-again-but-hope-you-still-think-I'm-a-nice-guy-telling-me-you-slept-with-another-WOMAN phone call.

5) There's no sense in negotiating a relationship- you had stated, quite clearly, that you weren't interested.

6) I know all too painfully well that the trappings of my life are a little intimidating-a lot of my female friends with demanding jobs have similar tales to tell. When we were seated next to the college president and I was recognized from the stage, I found myself apologizing to you. I am sick and tired of apologizing for myself.

7) I also recognize that you would be very proud to have any of your daughters turn out to be professionals like me. I'm exactly what you said you were looking for in your profile.

8) I appreciate your inclination to be friends-not sure that's wise given the sexual chemistry that exists.

And, having said all that I can go to sleep. I am sorry that we didn't get the chance to take it nice and easy but hope that YOU will. Take it easy, that is. You don't want to be talking in some dark bar down the road about what went wrong with wife #4.

Care and respect, Angela.

P. S. Dollars to doughnuts the new flame doesn't know Heidegger from Hegel, Kronos from Corea, and I guarantee you my blow jobs are better.

(Angela dramatically pushes the SEND button)

## SECTION FOUR – BYE DOC TO THE BI DOC

**ANGELA:** (to audience)
And then, a picture popped up on Match. com that took my breath away. New to town, worked in the medical field. An orderly, a doctor? I took another leap.

He called for a date. Seemed he had always wanted to go to the Daytona 500 and wondered if I were game. Sure. He picked me up at ten o'clock Sunday morning and we spent the next ten hours together, swapping life stories, freezing to death, being the only sober people in our section of the stands.

He was quiet and gentle. An internist. He grew up the son of an Italian hardware store owner in Philly. His brother got the store. He became a doctor. Two marriages-one for nineteen years, one for eight. The first breakup sounded like they just outgrew each other. The second fell apart because she became a born-again Christian. He had two children by his first marriage and he told me that he and his eldest son weren't speaking. When I asked him why he said he'd tell me after a glass of wine sometime. He told me about a girlfriend back in Birmingham. He said he was planning to break up with her as he found her fun but not very attractive and she wanted more out of the relationship than he did.

**MAN/Rob:**
When can we see each other again?

**ANGELA:**
This is a crazy time of year for me. How about next week?

**MAN/Rob:**
Oh, I need to see you again before then! I like your curly hair, your laugh and your stories.

**ANGELA:**
And, so we had a second date. At a sushi bar. And after a few sakes, I asked him why his son wasn't speaking to him. He looked at me carefully, the blood draining from his face. I could tell he was weighing whether to tell me or not.

**MAN/Rob:**
Well, my second wife told my first wife-his mother-something. And she told him.

**ANGELA:**
A long silence... I waited and held his gaze.

**MAN/Rob:**
She told him I had cheated on both she and his mother. With women and with men.

**ANGELA:**
Rob was pale and shaking. At that moment I stared at the glass door and imagined myself running for it. But then a kind of Zen, everyone-deserves-a-full-and-happy-life-feeling overtook me. I just reached out and hugged him. "You must be so lonely," I said.

**MAN/Rob:**
I can't believe you're being so tender about this.

**ANGELA:** (to audience)
And he told me everything. And I mean everything. The furtive trips to bathhouses and bars. The feeling that he had that if he just had more self-discipline this dark need would disappear. His absolute belief that he was not homosexual. The fact that the girlfriend in Birmingham knew nothing about any of this. His trust in me made me feel special.

(to typewriter)

Dear Rob,

Even though I'm not a feeler but a thinker, I am overwhelmed with emotions. I can safely say that I've never had an evening like tonight. I am so touched by your trust in me. I respect the courage it took to tell me the things you told me tonight. I feel deep sorrow AND lust for you—an incongruous set of emotions to be sure. I am so drawn to your kindness and warmth. It feels good to be around you.

I don't know what the future holds for us but I know it will not be like any other relationship perhaps either of us has ever had. (Welcome to the 21st century, boys and girls.) And in that process learning about myself and the viscosity of traditional relationship boundaries.

Oh yes-the kisses? Please note that I want more of those.

(to audience) In one fell swoop and a huge swoon, he became a transitional man and a project. I know, I know. He was unavailable with a capital U. But someone, at this point in the game, who seemed like an improbable but perfect match for me.

**MAN/Rob:**
Thank you. It was an incredible evening on many levels. I now can see possibilities that were never before imagined.

**ANGELA:**
For all my liberal talk I realize that I'm really no different than others of the gender might be. My exclusivity issues are temporal, geographic and gender specific. In other words people from other times and other places and people without vaginas are fine.

(to audience)
Have you ever been in that peculiar this-is-so-crazy-it-might-work frame of mind?

**WOMAN/Newscaster**
*The New York Times*, March 7, 2006 - Many Couples Must Negotiate Terms of 'Brokeback' Marriages

**ANGELA:**
My goodness, the timing of THAT piece was perfect. I mailed it to him.

MAN/ROB:
I hate to disappoint you. . . however, Wednesday night is probably not going to work for us, since I won't be available.

**ANGELA:**
Dearest Rob,

What's the story? Not available or is the girlfriend coming for the weekend earlier than you'd planned? Please, please please, don't NOT tell me things cuz you think it will hurt my feelings. I can ONLY be truly hurt by duplicity. . . Honor me with the truth. . . always.

I don't see how you can have a girlfriend AND still be in love with your second ex AND have an interest in me. Knowing you're a practiced liar upfront is helpful to me in some twisted kind of way. It allows me to explore the ways in which I lie but don't acknowledge it.

**MAN/Rob:**
You think too much.

**ANGELA:**
Yeah, I know. The truth will set you free. . . Call when you can.

**MAN/Rob**
My second wife asked me to come see the step-grandkids this week. Think I'll make a quick trip down there.

**ANGELA:**
The pursuit of your ex is a quixotic journey I think that only extends your pain about losing her. Your wry comment about playing out themes with your mother via her may indeed be the case but it doesn't really solve the issues you have with your mother. You would actually have to talk to your mother to resolve those issues. Lying to your girlfriend in Birmingham bothers me. It's just wrong. And I'm not wild about being thrown overboard when her plans change. . .

**ANGELA:**
But yet there was that magical fifth date – a sleepover! On the way to his house I called my best friend in Wisconsin. I was nervous as hell. Any advice?

**WOMAN/Nancy:**
Control the lighting.

**ANGELA:**
Which I did most skillfully. Another-dating-after-thirty-years passage accomplished. But after seven weeks, it was clear this man couldn't make a clean breast of anything. Though he continued to tell me the truth, he couldn't give me any time. And, over a drink at the mall, we said goodbye. And, I, now master of the goodbye email, sent another one that night.

Dearest Rob,

You said you felt rotten-please don't feel rotten on my account. You're only allowed to feel rotten on your own account.

Oddly enough, I shed a few tears in parking lot, but now I feel exactly the same waves of sadness and affection for you that I felt when you told me about your son.

It's not that you were leading me on-I know you to be exactly what you are. I told you I knew I could end up a casualty. Your Birmingham girlfriend and your ex will continue to be the ones truly hurt by you, not me. And, hey, look at the bright side. Now you can completely avoid telling either of them about me. One less lie, at least.

Listen Rob, I don't say this to be mean but you'll be cruising for hand and blow jobs within months. You'll justify it to yourself by saying she's "controlling" but you will be unable to resist the thrill and dramatic danger of it all. The next 28 years of your life be like the last 28. I hope you work it out with your son. (Write that letter!)

You matter to me. You prompted me to lose weight, buy some fancy underwear and remind me of the sexual being I had put on the back shelf the last few years. I am keeping all those things with me. And I thank you for that.

I can sleep now.

Since you had some pretty good practice being honest with me, why not just give your ex a copy of the *The New York Times* article about *Brokeback Mountain* marriages? Who knows? My wish is that she loves you enough to love you for who you are. Or, my other wish, that you get honest with yourself and find a man to spend your life with.

**WOMAN/Sara**
Angie, He is gay, and he will cause trouble for anyone until he admits it. You are much luckier than the wife. I will call later.

**WOMAN/Diane**
I think perhaps he was what you needed for that short period of time. And now I don't have to worry about him giving you any horrible diseases.

**WOMAN/Belinda:**
Brava! More sex will come. Less hurt will follow. You are smart and gorgeous and loving; you are worthy of an exceptional man. Be patient.

**ANGELA:**
I heard from him a few weeks later.

**MAN/Rob,**
Thanks for showing me the way to being honest and "the importance of being of Earnest".

Thanks to your encouragement, which has been lingering in my head, I finally wrote a letter my son.

**ANGELA:**
Cheers, Rob. . . Good for you!
I heard from Rob last week. His son never responded to him.

## SECTION FIVE – "You Rock!"

**ANGELA:**
And then, in May, I plunked down $1,500 and joined "It's Just Lunch."

**WOMAN/IJL:**
We'll set you up with 14 first dates or you'll be with us for a year—whichever is longer.

**ANGELA:**
You only learn first names and choose to exchange more information at the end of the date. Good thing.

There was Hercule, the supply chain expert who wanted me to run away with him to Greece after he won a bitter custody battle for his 5 year old daughter. He broke down in tears at the end of the date. I comforted him in a bar in Sorrento and told him he just wasn't ready to be dating.

And Tony-I met Tony for rum and Cokes at Sam Snead's. I told him about the breakdown of my marriage and explained the concept of functional alcoholism.

**MAN voice-Tony:**
Well, I have four or five of these a night and then I go to sleep. I don't think it's passing out.

**ANGELA:**
Well, I guess you understand that this will be our first and last date.

And then came, well there's really no need no need to disguise him. At least, not yet. Though he wants to be known as Carl.

Sam Snead's-different booth. And the time flew by. It was as if we'd been friends for a lifetime. He was funny and charming and literate. A grown daughter in the Peace Corps. He was an artist and a writer. He thought what I did was cool.

Dear Carl, "Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how…The artist never entirely knows…we take leap after leap in the dark" -Agnes de Mille
Have a happy birthday-I don't know how you feel about getting older but I love it cuz I'm so much happier than when I was young.

Here's to taking leap after leap in the dark. Hope your birthday is everything you wish it to be. Care and respect, Angela

**MAN/Carl:**
Thanks for the birthday greetings. You have scaled the heights beyond my dumb brothers and sisters who are 1-for-4 in the birthday card department. Yeah, art is like that-the leap in the dark. Many times I find it to be a boxing match-a real knockdown drag-out affair with forms and shapes that simply do not obey my commands. In the end I usually surrender, or reach a negotiated settlement with what's left on the canvas. Now with that setup you will have to see my artwork sometime.

Have a good time in Kentucky. Don't "horse around" too much.

**ANGELA:**
People who call themselves writers should never use tired metaphors like horsing around.

**MAN/Carl:**
Whoa Nellie, I tried a little humor there, but my metaphor got tired down the stretch. It was lame. I jockeyed for position — to get a leg up — so I could let go the reins of my stable of stupid puns. Well, win, place or show I guarantee I'll do it again!

We got some rain. I made it happen. I washed my car yesterday. Are you in Kentucky now? Did I get that right? Do they really have art up there? Don't tell me, they do a lot of charcoal drawings. Okay, I'll stop.

Gotta gallop off to the . . Okay, I said I'd stop. . .
See ya soon. Carl.

**ANGELA:** (to audience)
I was traveling a lot but the dates started to accumulate.

Dear Carl, time flies when there are award-winning conversations and kisses. All in all, most satisfactory.

And then, on the third date he said the most amazing thing.

**MAN/Carl:**
You know, Angela, you don't have to do anything-you can just be with me.

**ANGELA:** (all to audience)
My gosh-that was an arrow through the heart. Not be perfect, not perform or try to impress or edit myself. Just be? Did he really mean it?

The sense of hope and anticipation he gave me to just be was just as seductive to me as his kisses.

Dear Carl,
Tried to sleep but my brain does nothing but project a play-by-play-some scenes in slow motion-of last night. Every moment and body part bathed in candlelight. Better lighting than the movie. In a resolution that puts that fancy HD set of yours to shame. Come to think of it-all the resolutions last night-physical, intellectual, and cinematic—were deeply satisfying. (I have, for sake of continuity, edited out our differences of opinion over Iraq)

The only thing wrong with having sex is it makes me want more of it. Remember the lyrics to "The Song of the Sockeye"?-"When it gets in your blood, you can't shake it. It's the same as the fever for gold."

**MAN/Carl:**
You were awesome last night. I'm feeling even happier than usual. The video replaying in my head has a fantastic audio track as well. Love, Carl

**WOMAN/Winona**
He is terrific. Cute and funny

**ANGELA:**
Yeah, he's nice… But he's a little to the right of me politically.

**WOMAN/Winona**
Who isn't?

**ANGELA:**
Well, He's nice…. But he's more religious than I am.

**WOMAN/Winona:**
Who isn't? Angela, you have to stop saying the word nice as if it's a pejorative!

**ANGELA:** (to audience)
So I started to think about what real dealbreakers were. And they weren't about politics or religion.

**ANGELA:**
Dear Carl, I am peeling back the layers of the fear. There is no question that I am letting you in. Which every once in a while makes me want to scream and run. And then I think of those kind eyes of yours. Your compulsive hardwired honesty. How calm and content I feel in your kitchen and your bedroom.

I am feeling braver already.

**MAN/Carl**
Floating through the morning. You were sensational last night. All the food and the Veuve Cliquot were great. And a couple of big belly laughs in bed can really top off an evening. You rock.

**ANGELA:**
That was nearly a year ago. We've had our ups and downs. He lied to me once about something stupid and I went off the deep end.

(He said I overreacted, I said no, I reacted)

He saw his old girlfriend on the street a little while ago and it threw him into a tizzy. He's still stuck on her or at least on the idea of her but I can't fight a ghost. At this stage of our lives, everyone's damaged. Everyone's jumpy about intimacy. What is it Joni Mitchell sings? "Just like Jericho, let these walls come tumbling down."

I've got a new convertible and a new hair color and a great therapist. And I've got a b-b-b-b-boyfriend. I always thought that happy people had to be stupid-there are so many things to worry about in the world, happiness must be an illusion borne of negligence of thought or hallucination. But it's just taking things off the worry list.

I feel safe walking into my very-mortgaged house. I am working on sleeping in the middle of the bed. I feel calmer and more grounded. I feel differently than I can ever remember feeling. This might be what people call happy. At least I hope.

Carl still cracks me up. He looks at me with eyes that see something in me that I don't see in myself. He is still kind and good. And he loves me. We don't know where it's going but we sing sixties songs and make puns and walk around lakes and go to art museums and laugh a lot. And he's very good in… well, you know.

Hey, I'm trying to give everyone hope here.

**MAN/Carl:**
I'm a fan of yours Angela. You rock.

**ANGELA:**
And believe me, if I'd had time to tell you about one more man, Jack the English attorney, and let this actor here trot out his English accent, you would have had loads and loads of hope. But there was just no way to make the story about him acceptable. Trust me. Did I mention I spent 10 days in England?

And talk about hope. I've got my girlfriends. Sara, Belinda, Winona, Helen, Nora, Patricia. I love them all.

**WOMAN/Winona:**
What's said over chardonnay stays over chardonnay.

**MAN (in English accent):**
What happens in England stays in England.

**ANGELA:**
And I've got me. I still know more about what I don't want than what I do but I am figuring it out. The next twenty-eight years of my life will be different than the last twenty-eight. I hope that's hopeful enough.

# Casa De Los Angeles, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

Donna Quathamer

# Helping Cambodia Is Like Buying a Beautiful Broken Mug

Phil Caldwell

Last November, I was in Cambodia for about three weeks doing work for the Savong Foundation which I created to help a community in the northern part of that country.

A few days before I made the long trip back home, I met a lady who was trying to make a business by selling Cambodian pottery. She had a few samples for me to look at and I was very impressed at the quality and care that had gone into shaping each piece. Since I love to drink coffee out of large mugs, I thought it would be perfect to have her make a custom design for my morning caffeine ritual.

She was thrilled to have a new customer and I was excited about taking home a souvenir from a country that I had grown to love over the past couple of years. We sat down and I told her everything that I wanted: the size, the shape, the color.

And I wanted Khmer writing all over it. I didn't really care what the writing said. I just wanted it to be covered in the beautiful Cambodian script.

She smiled and nodded and took notes and I was convinced that she understood everything that I said. I asked her how much and she told me $20. It seemed a bit high (keep in mind that many Cambodians make $50 a month or less) but I was happy to support her fledgling business. I was told that it would be ready at least a day before I was scheduled to leave and we agreed on a time and place for the pickup. In my mind, everything seemed very clear and simple.

A day before leaving, I contacted the woman because I had not yet heard from her. Everything was fine she said but the mug wasn't ready. She assured me that it would be ready before my flight. I was a little worried about this because I had other last-minute things to do besides picking up a souvenir, but Cambodians are such gracious and happy people, I told her that it wasn't a problem and we would meet the morning of my departure.

I couldn't wait to see the mug. The delay only increased my excitement. On my previous trips, I had taken a few souvenirs back with me but this was something I could use every morning and in my mind's eye, I saw exactly what it was going to look like.

At the agreed-upon time, I anxiously awaited the woman's arrival. She was late but not by too much time. After spending three weeks in Cambodia, I was quite familiar with how fluid appointment times were, and since I was still on Cambodian time, it really didn't bother me. She greeted me with a huge smile and proudly pulled four mugs out of a large shopping bag. I took a look at each one.

None of them looked like what I had described to her. None of them.

I picked each one up. There was no doubt that they were all beautiful. Handmade. Rustic stain. And on the bottom was a Khmer signature. They were large but not the giant size that I had requested. I was disappointed but the woman was beaming with a smile and in some weird way, I felt like I couldn't disappoint her.

"I'll take this one." I picked up the one that had an elephant head for a handle.

"Would you like to take all of them?"

Did you ever read those books when you were a kid that gave you a choice at the end of the page? If you chose one thing, it would send you off to a certain page and if you chose something else, you would flip to a different page? The flow of the story would change depending on your decisions so you could read the entire book a couple of times and have several different versions.

I felt like there were several different ways I could answer the pottery lady and each answer would take me to a different outcome. For example:

"You can take all your mugs and stick them where the sun don't shine!" Although this may have required some Khmer translation, the emotion behind the words would have gotten my point across.

Or, "Are you kidding me? I gave you EXACT details on what I wanted for a mug and not only did you NOT do what I wanted, you are trying to sell me FOUR mugs that cost as much as a luxury meal in Los Angeles!"

Or, "Well, I'll take one but it isn't really what I wanted so I'll pay you $10 for it."

Or, "They're all so beautiful but I only need one. Here's $20. I wish you the best of luck for your business."

I chose the latter and handed over my money. She was thankful and she told me that she hoped she would see me again when I returned to her country. I assured her that I would keep my eye out for her-and buy my pottery somewhere else.

Actually, I only thought that last part. C'mon, I'm a polite Canadian.

Despite my crappy packing skills (I just throw everything in and hope for the best), the mug managed to make its way across the Pacific in one piece. I'm not sure if I was so lucky but I was at least happy to stuff fast food down my gullet once again and have a really long hot shower. You have no idea how luxurious a shower is until you've been deprived for three weeks.

Several days after arrival, I pulled my mug out of the suitcase, cleaned it up, and poured some steamy hot brew into it while I was weeding through my morning emails. Moments later, I noticed that the coffee that was supposed to be inside the container was now outside of it and dripping onto the floor. I snatched up the mug, and lo and behold, the beautiful souvenir that was supposed to be useful and meet my design expectations was clearly leaking from a defective seam in the bottom.

The older I get the more patient I get. I think it's from all those years working with animals. I have learned that the more upset I am, the worse it gets for me and anger really doesn't improve a situation. Ten years ago, I probably would have thrown the mug against the wall and stomped on all the pieces. Instead, I calmly emptied the remaining coffee into the sink, rinsed out the residue, cleaned up my desk and poured some stain remover onto the carpet. I dried the mug and contemplated its fate. I wasn't going to throw it away; I paid $20 for the damn thing. In the end, I stuck some pencils and pens in it and proclaimed it my Cambodian homemade pencil and pen holder.

And actually, I kinda like it. It is far prettier than the hazy piece of glassware that I used before and as a pencil and pen holder, it hasn't disappointed me at all.

Working in Cambodia is very much like the story of this mug. The Cambodian people are wonderful and NGOs such as The Savong Foundation want to see them succeed. Yes, we can do lots of planning to make everything perfect but everything seems to cost more and take longer than it should. And the end result is usually not what was expected. Should we be frustrated and angry and give up? Of course not, because that doesn't help anyone. A better approach is to be flexible, open and explore other possibilities within this unique culture and then something good will usually happen. Therein lies the reward and everyone goes home happy, even if it means using a big Korean Starbucks mug for the morning brew.

# *The Hidden Hungry*

Marley Rave

"Joel, you're taking us to the worst of the worst, right? We need to show the world the hidden hungry."

"You've come to the right place," Joel said.

The car coasted along the winding roads of West Virginia and once again I glanced over my interview questions for the homebound seniors we were visiting. We were gathering footage for a Meals On Wheels documentary about senior hunger in rural America. I was on a mission to tell their story of what it is like to be old and hungry in rural America. I thought I had seen it all: seniors living, more like dying, in trailers in Appalachia, on pig farms in Sherill, Arkansas (population 117), and in disheveled sheds without windows in the Midwest.

West Virginia was close to home for me. This one I've got down pat, I thought. What could be worse than what I've already seen? This perception ended up being the greatest underestimation of my career.

Stop one: a 73-year-old woman who lived in a small home on a hilltop far from the main town. She couldn't leave her home and had little money left in her savings. All of her funds went toward her husband's medical bills due to his prostate cancer. She bit her lip to hold back tears and looked away from the camera while repeating a single phrase: God will see us through.

Stop two: a 62-year-old man with diabetes. The disease had eaten away at his legs. He remained alone in his home in a wheelchair. He had trouble making eye contact with me while I talked with him, but then suddenly reached for my hand as I went to leave and thanked me for coming. Like many of the seniors, the Meals On Wheels volunteer was the only person he saw every day.

Stop three: Helen. We stepped into her one-bedroom home and the ninety degree heat, mixed with the smell of urine, mold, and the neighborhood stray cats, all hit me at once. I tried to keep myself from gagging so that the elderly woman didn't think I was being rude. I'll never forget the only thing on the wall: a poster of a beautiful, smiling Marilyn Monroe. Helen was close to tears and told me she didn't have any money to pay her caregiver. "Can you help me?" she said. I stumbled over my words while coughing from the stench. I felt panicked. Closed-in. My eyes kept darting back and forth. Helen. Marilyn. Helen. Marilyn. I had to get out. And I did while everyone else remained inside. I don't even remember if I told Helen goodbye.

Stop five: on the drive over, Joel told me we were seeing an elderly couple who were hoarders. They didn't throw out trash and the home was filled with animals and insects. We parked in front of their home and he began to warn me about there being little room to move, but I stopped him. There was dead silence in the car before I heard myself say, I can't do this one. Go in without me.

I've thought a lot about that day and what kept me from going into the fifth home. It wasn't the smell or the insects or the trash. No. It was pure fear. Fear of my reaction, fear the couple in the home would see me cry, and, most importantly, fear that they would think I thought less of them, because I didn't. That day was the first time the truth hit me like a smack in the face. Absolutely anyone can fall on hard times and be in need of help – my aunts and uncles, my mother and father and, yes, even my husband and me. No one is immune from dependency. ■



# How to **contribute** your **story**

## WHAT TO SUBMIT

The theme for our second issue is: **EVERYDAY HEROES**. Your story or personal essay does **NOT** need to be about your work or about the sector. It just needs to be yours.

From now until **August 1st, 2013**, we are accepting submissions in the following categories:

- Short fiction, including short stories, flash fiction, screenplays (not feature length please) and one act plays. Nothing over 7000 words, please.
- Nonfiction: personal essays, travel memoirs, etc. Please note that we are not going to fact check your submission, and matters of fact are entirely the writer's responsibility to get right.
- Photography: JPEG only, please. Feel free to photoshop the hell out of the image, as long as you took it and you retain 100% rights to it. If we like your image, we'll ask for non-exclusive publication rights.
- Illustrations, again in JPEG format. Submit in the photography category.

## HOW TO SUBMIT

**You can submit your work here:** http://charactersmag.submishmash.com/submit

Who May Submit

- Paid staff and/or volunteers for any non-profit or non-governmental organization from any country. We will ask you for your organization for identification purposes, but you may opt not to have that published.
- Consultants and for-profit companies who principally serve the do-gooder sector.
- Staff or officers of B corporations or other "triple bottom line" entities.

Truth is, if we like your stuff, we probably won't be all that picky about where you come from.

*Your story or personal essay does **NOT** need to be about your work or about the sector. It just needs to be yours and still own the rights.*

STORIES OF AND BY PEOPLE WITH A CAUSE

# characters
MAGAZINE

**ISSUE #1** *Fear & Hope*