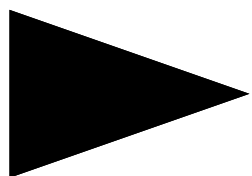


Writing from the Edge



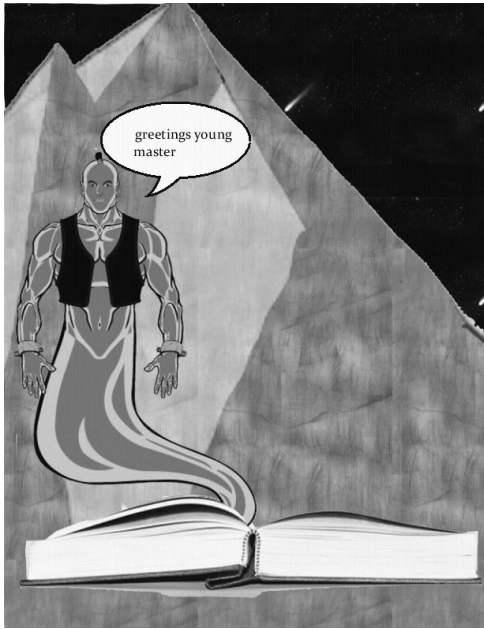
Stories and Poems of the
Edgewater Library Writing Group

About the Edgewater Library Writing Group

The Edgewater Library Writing Group was initiated in the spring of 2017, in response to participants in a library-sponsored creative writing class who expressed the desire to continue writing. Considered an extension of the public library as an open community, the writing group welcomes anyone seeking to develop their writing and contribute to our community of writers. Please join us on the second or fourth Tuesday evenings of each month, from 6:30 to 8 pm.

About the Community Writing Project and Real Conditions

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers, and publishes their reflections and stories about everyday life in *Real Conditions* magazines. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are interested in the creative expression and unique understanding of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them. Their stories are found in these pages.



*Illustration courtesy of Terrence Hull, member of the
Edgewater Library Writing Group*



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INTRODUCTION

The Edgewater Library writing group convenes every second and fourth Tuesday evening in an ample conference room on the second floor of this airy, modern building. The people who attend are as diverse in their backgrounds as in their writing styles; but all are passionate about the power of a story well told, and committed to developing and sharing their distinct voices and visions.

At each session, the workshop participants spread out around two long tables and settle into an evening of shared writing. With a collaborative disposition that is at once casual and intent on the task at hand, they write, read, discuss, and revise work of diverse genres: personal narrative, fiction, poetry, essay. The variety keeps discussions edgy, as writers consider the verisimilitude of fictional characters and storylines; contemplate whether a piece is best rendered as poem or prose; or confess to poetic license in stories that draw on personal experience to teach truths and give counsel.

Every Community Writing Project writing group cultivates a unique sensibility, and the diversity of genres shared during the Edgewater writing sessions makes this group distinct — and exhilarating. Time and time again, the writers have noted that no matter how personal and particular a story may be, the group inevitably teases out universal themes and truths: about small acts that impart kindness and wisdom; the intrinsic value of each person's life; the simplicity and depth of our daily searches for identity and affirmation; the reliance on a sense of humor to carry us through challenges that seem insurmountable in the moment. In discussions that run up to the closing time of the library, writers have marveled at the way the workshop process helps us find and explore these common themes, in this way surfacing connections to other stories and to writers' life experiences.

As the Edgewater writing group continues to change and grow, we invite other writers to join in and add to the tapestry of writing and experiences that characterize this unique group.

— *the editors*

JULIANA RAVELLI

The Bingo



They look like a mob when they are together. Six senior sisters walking as a wolf pack, talking as a flock of birds. Twelve years separate the oldest from the youngest (my mom), but you should never ask who is the first-born or Aunt Ira will eat you alive.

When I'm with them, I am still a kid and only speak when someone asks something. There is no way to overcome their voices. My mom and Aunt Tere play volleyball in one of the recreational centers for seniors in the city. The Beagle Sisters is their nickname, in reference to the Beagle Boys, the troublemakers from Scrooge McDuck stories. But really, they are good people.

Each one of my aunts has a key role in their intricate relationship. Aunt Maria Luiza, for instance, is the unconventional, the outspoken, the pioneer (sometimes by choice, others by necessity). It was her idea to invite all her sisters to the Holy Family Church celebration that afternoon. The parish, the main Catholic church in the city, is the one she attended for mass every week.

The celebration happens every October in the square in front of the church. Plenty of Italian food is prepared by matrons wearing white disposable caps. Men take care of the barbecue, Brazilian-style. Young people are in charge of the beverages. Everything is very organized.

Aside from the *fogazza*,* the most famous attraction is the Bingo. What a funny, addictive, and competitive amusement it is. Children to elders can play Bingo. The only restriction should be stamped in big signs spread across the tent: "No place for amateurs." But the senior sisters mob is no beginner: they don't miss any numbers; they know how to shout "Bingo!" when they fill a column on their card. And before they buy into the game, the sisters always analyze and discuss which *prendas*** they want the most. My mom, for example, is a fan of clothes irons, blenders, and other home appliances.

The most important position in a church festivity, at least in Brazil — the one with the greatest responsibility — is the Bingo caller. That's the person who announces the number printed in the small, randomly selected wooden balls. She or he has to be the most trustworthy and the best speaker in the entire community. Being a Bingo caller is a Caesar-style job: you need to conquer the spot and, once you're there, you only leave it if you are betrayed, if you die, or if you make a huge mistake. I'm not sure, but maybe Aunt Maria Luiza knew who the Bingo caller of the Holy Family Church was, a white-headed man wearing a buttoned-up shirt and thin-rimmed glasses.

All my five aunts, my mom and I bought a Bingo card each. And our turn began. "Letter I, number 25." "Letter I, number 16." "Letter O, number 62." "Letter G, number 49." "Letter B, number 10." "Letter I, two ducks in a row, number 22." "Letter N, number 40."

We were very anxious. My mom yelled, pleading for her missing number: "The good one! The good one!" And the Bingo caller continued: "Letter G, number 51." After many other numbers, I finally completed a column. Yeah, I'm good at Bingo. But because of my shyness, I didn't shout "Bingo!" appropriately loud and sufficiently fast. And then the pandemonium began.

Everything happened very quickly. The Bingo caller didn't hear me, and because of that he announced the next number. My aunts and my mom started to protest. Loudly. In the meantime, another woman completed a column with the number called after I had won.

My aunt Maria Luiza, who had already got up, started walking in the direction of the Bingo caller, with her right arm and index finger extended in front of her body, moving as a metronome:

"No, no, no, sir. The girl announced first."

"No, this lady won this round," said, calmly, the Bingo caller.

"No, sir. The girl called 'Bingo!' and you didn't hear. It's your fault, not hers," Aunt Maria Luiza insisted, angrily.

Other members of the audience supported her. "The girl won first," some people shouted, my mom and my other aunts among them.

I put my hand on Aunt Maria Luiza's right shoulder. "Don't worry, Aunt. There's no problem. I don't mind. Let it go."

"No way, young lady. You won," she told me, while she was getting closer to the Bingo caller. "Listen to me, sir. The girl announced first she had won. You didn't listen to her."

"Actually, this woman declared it first. She won," he replied, smiling and pointing to the lady who said loudly "Bingo!" right after me.

At that point, I thought, "Too late." My aunt Maria Luiza declared: "Oh, yeah? Yeah?" And then she turned to the audience and roared in the middle of the square, in the Bingo of the Holy Family Church: "So tell him to get the *prenda* and stick it in his ***."

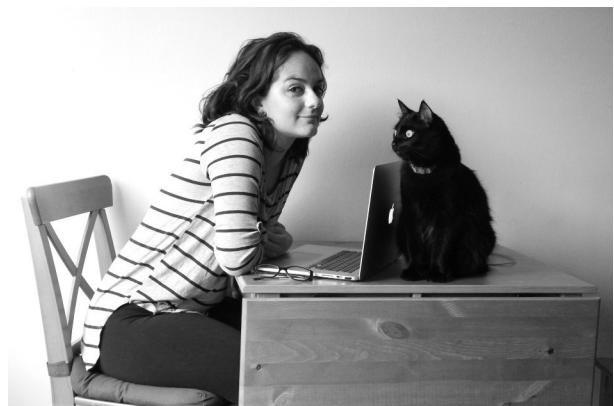
Freezing silence. Yes, she actually said the word. "Oh my gosh," I thought, without breathing. My aunt Maria Luiza was the only one moving at that moment, walking toward her chair. I just remember blushed people calling us back. "We'll fix that," said the Bingo caller, under the disdainful gaze of my aunt. Well, in the end, the other lady, my aunt and I took *prendas* home.

It's funny how family stories become legends over the years. We can swear that something happened in that precise way. "But they did," I'll say. The beauty, the humor, the love, even the sadness in those tales keep people alive or, at least, that is exactly what we wish.

My aunt Maria Luiza passed away recently. She was a great, strong, determined woman. My aunt never walked with her head down, she never let anyone put her in a place she did not want to be.

**Fogazza is a relative of the calzone and a distant cousin of empanada, but much, much better than them.*

*** Prendas are the prizes in the Bingo.*





MARY NISHIURA

Meals: Stories of Food, Language, and Friendship

PART 1 Ramón and Jackson were seated at a small table near a sunny window. It was an early morning in late August, but the heat and humidity had yet to reach sticky hot levels. Rather, Ramón and Jackson were enjoying the cool early morning breeze coming through their open window. It was 8 o'clock, an hour before their ESL class.

Sam, the owner and only waiter, brought over Jackson's usual order, a café au lait, already poured into a huge flowery container the size of a soup bowl, and the croissants, laid out on an equally flowery platter. Then he went back to the kitchen to get Ramón's chorizo and eggs. This was tricky because the chorizo and eggs were on an upper plate, below which was a tortilla warmer containing a huge stack of warm tortillas wrapped in a towel, and in Sam's other hand were all the hot sauces Ramón was expecting with his meal. So, every Tuesday morning, Jackson, Ramón and Sam would make a silent prayer that this precarious feast would make it to their table. But this Tuesday like all the other Tuesdays since Jackson and Ramón had been coming to Sam's Diner was without incident.

Sam's Diner was a tiny neighborhood restaurant owned and operated by Sam. No one knew his last name or how old he was, although people speculated. Sam was tall and slender with a light brown, some would say tan, complexion. He had thick dark brown hair with touches of grey and he had light brown, almost hazel eyes. Sam had one of those faces that never seemed to wrinkle, except when he laughed, so he could have been thirty or sixty.

What Sam did have was a menu Jackson and Ramón appreciated. Jackson was the first to discover it when, in such a rush to get to his first ESL class, he had skipped breakfast. So, standing in front of the community center, leaning on his cane, he wondered what to do. He looked at his watch. He had an hour before class. He scanned the street and saw Sam's Diner. He was terrified at the thought of reading an American menu and then ordering, but he was more terrified of embarrassing himself with a growling stomach on his first day of ESL class. How to explain that in English?

MARY NISHIURA

PART 2 Jack and Ramón were in the restaurant. It was the first formal restaurant that they had ventured to try. For the immigrants, it was scary tackling a menu in a new, unfamiliar language. But they were young, bold, invincible. They could handle anything.

So when the pretty waitress --- Ramón noticed her first -- came to their table to take their order, Ramón pointed to the middle of the menu and said confidently, "Yes, I would like a salad." "With dressing," he added.

"What kind?" the pretty waitress asked. "We have" and she proceeded to expel a series of syllables Ramón couldn't understand but was fascinated to hear.

Finally Ramón blinked and said, with his most beguiling smile, "The first one, please."

"Oh, oil and vinegar. Will do."

Jack stared at Ramón. His confidence was amazing. He looked down at the menu lying in front of him over the multiple layers of plates and silverware, many pieces of which he couldn't identify, and panicked. Then he remembered the conversation he had with the girl in his ESL class. She had told him she liked desserts, especially cool things. "I like chilly things," she'd said. Jack looked down at the menu and the spotlight arrows led his eyes to that word.

He ordered. The meal came and Jack was surprised to have his first taste of American Tex-Mex chili. Not the cold dessert he expected, but it was welcome. It reminded him of home. And Ramón, he discovered he absolutely did not like vinegar on salad.



TERRENCE HULL

The Order



You're probably wondering why a woman in a dark hood is perched upon a roof, in a city ruled by crime and corruption. My story begins about eight years ago. My name is Sophia DeMarcosi. I am a 30-year-old Italian American woman who stands 5'9", 135 lbs. Before I became a member of the Order, I made a living as a high-priced criminal defense attorney, until one night I was on my way home from work when I heard a scream coming from a nearby alley. When I got to the alley I found a woman who had been beaten to death. I got my phone from my purse and called the police. When I got off the phone with the police, I looked around and saw that there were lights on in the surrounding buildings, and imagined that I wasn't the only one who called the police. When the police arrived twenty minutes after I got off the phone with them, it dawned on me that I was the only one who called the police. I've heard it said that the police can't do it alone, that the community needs to help also.

Now that I know that my neighbors won't help a person in need, I have to be prepared to defend myself. I began by studying aikido, karate, shaolin kung fu and tae kwon do intensely over a four-year period, gaining the highest rank in each discipline. It wasn't long after that I was approached by a man in black. He offered me a chance to make a difference in this city. This city is drowning in crime and corruption. I asked him how could I make a difference. He told me to meet him tomorrow night at the address on the card he gave me, and he would tell me how. I went home and thought about the man's offer. I have many skills that could be useful other than my martial arts skills.

The next night I went to the address on the card. It was an abandoned warehouse on the west side of town. I went inside and was greeted by a group of people wearing hoods that covered half their faces. One of them walked towards me and removed his hood. It was the man who approached me the night before.

"I'm glad you could make it." he said. "My name is Raphael Durante. Welcome to the order, Miss."

"Sophia DeMarcosi. What is the Order?"

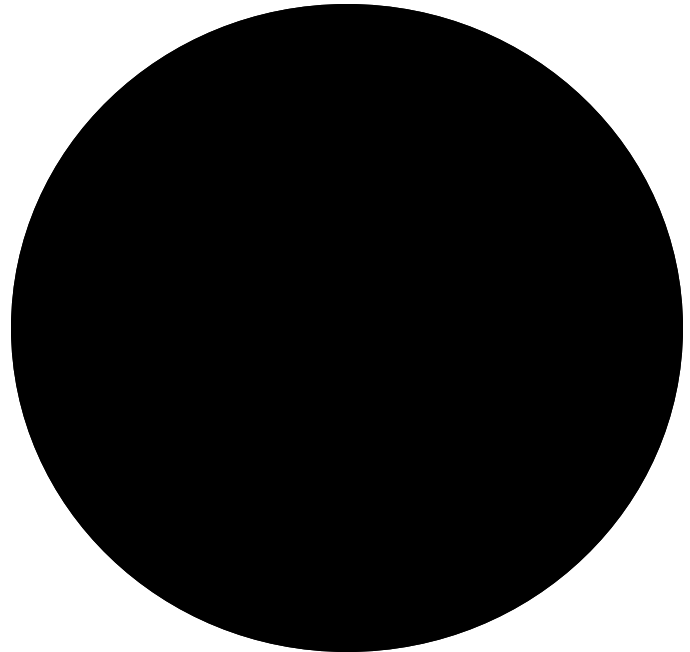
The Order is a guild of vigilantes that has existed since the 12th century. We watch from the shadows and step in when needed. The time has come for us to step in again. Crime and corruption has risen to unacceptable levels, with your help we can insure that the innocent remain safe."

"Then count me in." Sophia said.

" Your training will start tomorrow." Raphael said.

The next night I was given a weapon called the redeemer. It's a gauntlet with a retractable blade on one side and mini crossbow that fires poisoned darts on the other. I was shown how to fight with it. I also learned parkour (the French martial art of evasion) so I could move quickly around the city. With my training complete it was now my duty to protect those who can't protect themselves.

This brings us back to the present and why I'm on this roof. I'm tracking the two men responsible for robbing the bank and shooting two police officers. Between me and the other members of the Order we will find them soon and they will get what's coming to them.



TERRENCE HULL

Creating Characters

When I start creating characters for a story or role playing game, the first thing I think about is the character's abilities. Will he/she be supersmart, superstrong, or a combination of both? Then comes the question of his/her personality. Will he/she be inquisitive, patient, annoying, short tempered or mean? Next is the question of what kind of work he/she does. Once I figure this out, then I will decide on gender and physical attributes. I know it appears that I'm doing this backwards, but it's the best way I know how and it works for me.

MIKE CALLAHAN

Strip Mall Baptism

Every Sunday people from the West Side went to a church in Forest Park. It is a huge church connected to a mall. There was a very rich man who owned half of that mall, I think his name was Bill W.

I was pan handling on the highway ramp that day because everyone was on their way to church. I hate to say it now, but I thought I would make a killing.

A man pulled up to me and asked if I would like to be baptized that day. I saw dollar signs, God Bless Me. I got in the car, and we drove to the church. It looked nothing like a church. Inside, a big ass cathedral.

Halfway through the service, I was called up to be baptized along with ten other people. They took us to the back and we all got in robes. One by one we walked up to the priest in front of the entire congregation and were dunked headfirst into Holy Water. Donations were collected and I walked away with \$50.

I left the church and went straight to the Blue Line. I took the subway back to the West Side. Fifty dollars richer, I bought my blows and alcohol.

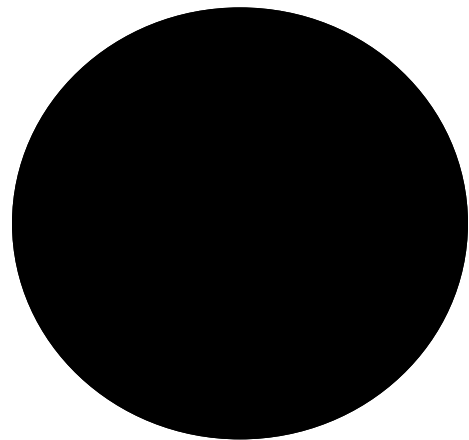
MIKE CALLAHAN

If My Memory Serves Me

I've had two brain surgeries, maybe three. After all of those years using different alcohol and drugs and living on the streets, I can't remember.

The first time was when I got hit by the car. I think it was my fault because I was not in the crosswalk, I was going across the street to get to one parking lot from another. A car making a left hit me. I went through the windshield, if I remember correctly. I had so much adrenaline going through me that I didn't want to go to the hospital, but they took me anyway. *Thank God* they did because I had bleeding in my brain. As far as I can remember, they did brain surgery on me and sent me back on the streets. Homeless again.

I'm not sure what happened before the second brain surgery, I just know I was in a coma for a month after. I'm not sure if there was a third or not. The last one, I remember...I was on the phone with someone who was asking if I wanted a state guardian. I was so high on the hospital meds that I just said yes.



MIKE CALLAHAN

Chicken John

My ex-girlfriend and I partied with about \$8,000 on heroin and we both had a methadone problem. So we got our fix in the morning and then went right to the city. I had so much money because every hour you work in the union they take \$4 for a check at the end of the year, because you most likely get laid off in the winter.

I moved into my friend Rich's condo when my grandma sold her place and I couldn't live with her anymore. I was already using heroin for like half a year but I wasn't using every day. So I wasn't getting sick yet.

I think I was with Rich when I caught a D.U.I. I went to live with him because he was my boss in the union. But I did not stay there long because two alcoholics can't really live together. I think that's when I went to Chicken John's. People called him that because he was a skinny guy, about 100 lbs soaking wet. He had a wife that was 350 lbs, maybe more. I really don't think she could get out of bed to use the washroom. She ended up moving to a nursing home and I cleaned that apartment. It was disgusting, but he paid me. There were dishes piled high in the sink and potatoes sprouting plants in the trash.

He had just gotten a big check from his aunt who passed away. That is how he had all the money, and I knew about it. Chicken John wanted to start his own construction business. All he ever did was drink and party with cocaine. He did not know anything about construction. But he bought a construction van and everything. I knew a coke dealer so we would drive to the city in the van and John would buy 8 balls off of him. I remember one time that I was messed up driving the truck and I hit a motorcycle on 240 & Cicero and took off. I never told John about it but I know the ticket got sent back to his house. I wonder what ever happened with that.





JOSEPH DOMINGUEZ

Raul's Interview

It was ten minutes until the interview, and Raul was trying to navigate himself through the massive campus. He had been applying for jobs for the last month and he knew this was the position he wanted most. One week ago he had opened his email to discover that he had received an interview for a scientist position at a big company. He had bought himself a suit using a credit card, hoping that it could be paid off with his first paycheck.

He entered the main building and the security guard handed out a visitor pass to the young adult. The security guard gave him a map because there were ten buildings, and the guard said, "It can be confusing out there; make sure you get on the road and take two lefts, and then one right." Raul left the Visitor Center and proceeded to the building across campus. Even though Raul had followed the instructions, he did not account for the additional time needed for navigation. It seemed to him like some of the most important events have less minutes in an hour, as if God wants to make things more challenging.

As Raul was driving around the parking lot, he found an available spot near the front of the building. He closed his car door and took two steps when he realized that he was forgetting his briefcase. He quickly opened the door, grabbed the item, and then ran to his interview. As soon as he got inside he called the number listed on the email; a voice on the other end asked for another ten minutes.

The lobby had several fake plants and a front desk where a security guard sat. Raul saw several chairs and sat on the chair closest to the door on the right side of the building. He opened his briefcase and took out his notes. In his notes, he had a broad history of the company: its achievements, mergers, and stock information. He had also looked up the interviewer's name on LinkedIn and printed out her profile page to recognize the individual. There was also a list Raul had prepared of his "strengths and weaknesses," and a list of questions they might ask him. Every day people are searching for jobs, sending out applications that take hours to prepare. Yet HR may spend at most five minutes on a single application. He didn't know how he had made it this far, but he wasn't going to let this job slip away.

The interview lasted three hours and Raul talked to four people; he knew immediately it had gone well. He had walked in and made certain to give each person a strong and firm handshake. He talked louder than he usually did, laughed when a joke was told, and made sure to slow his speech and avoid the "uh" that slips out of his mouth before he speaks. It wasn't his true self, but it was definitely a version that was more likable. His coworkers could learn about him after they hired him. And hire him, they did.

JOSEPH DOMINGUEZ

Raul's First Week

It was Raul's first day at work. He had bought a suit for the interview and now it was time to pay it off. He had earned his Bachelor's in Biology, yet he was not prepared to working with chemists. They were a different type of people. A biologist will be happy to clock out at 4:02 pm, instead of 4:00 pm, and record himself or herself as working eight hours; but a chemist will wait another three minutes and record him or herself as working eight hours, five minutes. A chemist will record a compound's weight as 6.94048 grams, while a biologist records 6.940 grams. Even though Raul had convinced his employer that he had an adequate level of chemistry knowledge, he had spent the last four nights behind the book *Quantitative Chemical Analysis* in order to prepare himself for the major transition.

Raul spent the first three days going over training; the training was not so much to teach as it was evidence for the FDA in case any lawsuits developed. During those days, he read many documents that went over the basics of chemistry. Scientists trained him on something as simple as measuring water, to using complex instruments. It was after the initial training that he was left alone to conduct his experiments. For his first task, Raul's supervisor had given him a list of chemical solutions he had to make by 1 p.m. The first compound on the list was 1.5 liters of NaPO_4 at a molarity of 0.2M. "This is easy," he said to himself under his breath.

He looked up how many grams of the compound he would need to get the right concentration for 1.5 L and poured the white crystal-like powder into the deionized water. He went through the list, making each compound until he was at the last assignment. He then saw something he did not recognize: 0.4N H_2SO_4 . He knew H_2SO_4 was jargon for sulfuric acid, but never in his life had he seen a capital "N".

Raul glanced around the lab and saw three other workers. If he could take out his phone then he could find out what "N" meant. But there was a rule that prohibited phones. "Well, N is right next to M on the keyboard," he thought. "Maybe it's a typo." He prepared the reagent as such and gave it to his boss. After he got out of the lab, he found out he had made the compound twice as concentrated as it was supposed to be. Luckily, the failed experiment burned only one of the supervisor's eyebrows.

KATHERINE LINEHAN

Shiny Shoes



My dad taught me several life lessons should follow into proper shoe should follow for shining shoes.

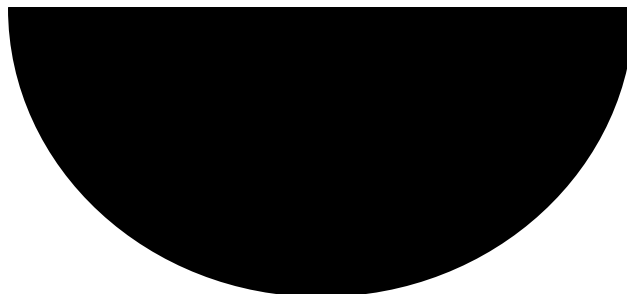
as a child. The one that stands out to me now is the process one maintenance. More specifically, there are particular steps you

I lay out the newspaper on the floor. It's not for reading today — I have a different purpose in mind. It is a layer of a couple of sheets, just in case. I gather my supplies: I've got the polish, the rags, the horsehair brush, and of course the shoes themselves. I pop off the lid and the smell is comforting. It's not so much that the smell is pleasant but it is familiar, it's strong, and it smells like it will get the job done. I twist the rag around my index and middle fingers, dip into the polish and make a swipe. It's smooth, gliding across the surface, and I have a smudge that I spread about each shoe.

Now I have a choice. Do I wait and move on to another chore? Or maybe I pick up another pair of shoes and start over? According to my father, a proper job is part art, part science. Is this what the Army taught him or is it just something that he is very particular about? Now, I suppose, I've become quite particular as well.

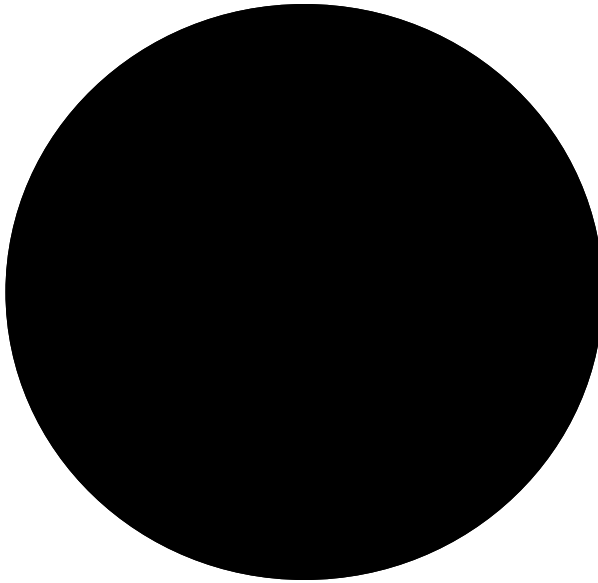
I move on to a second clean rag. Again I twist it around my fingers. I wonder, why don't I use a pair of disposable gloves? Habit? Wouldn't it save me that black (or navy or brown) polish stain that always seems to leak through the cloth rag? Maybe next time. I make small circular motions around and around the shoe. It's like waxing a car. I look at the rag and see the shadow of the polish. It's coming off, but it's supposed to. How do I know when to stop? I guess that's the reason it's part art and part science. Over the years, under my father's guidance, you just know.

Finally, I move on to the horsehair brush. There are other brushes out there, but horsehair — real horsehair — is absolutely critical. It's just not right without horsehair. I feel the weight of the shoe in my hand, and my hand knows the quick *swish swish* motion: it's muscle memory. I see the shine, I smell the fresh scent of a job well done.



KATHERINE LINEHAN

Thanksgiving Dinner?



I sniffed the air; something delicious was cooking and had been all afternoon. I hoped Katy would share. Lately, she hadn't given me anything but my regular food. She used to be so much more generous, giving me a little taste of whatever she was eating. But ever since we went to see the scary lady in the white coat, Katy hasn't been sharing. That lady told Katy that I have allergies — whatever that means — and told Katy a bunch of rules that I tuned out because all I wanted to do was leave and go home. Katy could do whatever she wanted, right?

So here we are at the people's house that smell like her and even look like older versions of her and I hear the man grumbling about "animals need to get out of the kitchen." Not sure who he's talking about because where Katy goes, I go; that's my job. I also handle perimeter checks. And then there's Buddy. They call him my cousin, and he also lives in this house. I've been drinking Buddy's water and that's in the kitchen, so why wouldn't we be there?

Katy takes me by the collar and leads me out of the kitchen and says she's going to wait to get food when there is more room to move about. Does that mean there's hope for me yet? We sure drove a long way to come to this house for some special meal, so is this what we've been waiting for? I sure hope so! It smells wonderful . . .

Inspired by the Chet and Bernie book series by Spencer Quinn

ASHLEY TELMAN



The Security Guard

The hospital security guard is a hulk of a man. He barely fits in the standard issue uniform — his neck bulges out and gives way to a graying beard, broad smile, and shaved head.

We arrive at the hospital at nearly the same time every day — a little after 7:00 am. Every morning when I hustle in, he is positioned right next to a six-inch desk fan, trying to combat the heat that seems to suffocate the aging hospital entry during winter and summer months alike. The fan is laughably small to begin with, but seems like a toy next to this man. Since the fan doesn't quite do the job on its own, he is constantly loosening the tight cuffs and collar of the black security guard suit, trying to cool off.

Despite his obvious discomfort, he flashes a straight toothed smile, every morning, and in a rich radio host baritone, greets me: "Hello, young lady, alllllright."

I used to respond with a question, sort of a joke about the temperature, "They aren't trying to cool it down much for you, are they?" But he would shake his head so sadly that I stopped asking him. Now, when I greet the guard in the morning, I tell him, "It's a pleasure to see you today." And it is, even if the heat is overwhelming and the day ahead feels long already.

JENENE RAVESLOOT

Eddie*



A frightened Joe Louis at the onset of his fight with Champion Jimmy Braddock; Joe Louis knocking out Jimmy Braddock in the eighth round; Joe Louis saluting the crowd after the fight; these yellowed newspaper clippings of Louis and an old copy of *The Knockout* with the headline “Checking Louis in 1939” crammed into a battered scrapbook. This isn’t Eddie’s scrapbook.

Eddie flips through it quickly, then gets up and stands in front of the full-length mirror that is propped against the bedroom wall like a punch drunk fighter.

In this light, Eddie looks jaundiced. His masked face, bare chest with the tattooed eagle, exposed knuckles and heavy legs glow like yellow neon lights at midnight. Eddie leans in.

This isn’t the Eddie he used to know. He now looks like a tired action figure, forty pounds heavier, and no longer young. His days of skipping rope, fancy footwork, and preparing for a fight are over. Just like his dead granddad, Eddie isn’t fighting anymore.

Didn’t he turn his life around? Didn’t he learn a thing or two about business? Isn’t he successful? Expensive Merino wool suits hang in his closet. Black wing tips sit beside his favorite leather chair. Silk pajamas are draped across a dressed-down bed. A silk robe adorns his almost-naked body. He’s doing OK.

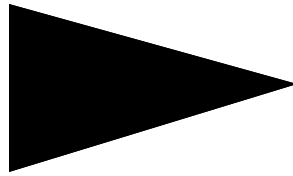
Eddie strikes an action figure pose in the mirror in his striped Our Cover boxer shorts. He’s wearing his granddad’s champion belt around his waist. Yeah. He’s doing OK.

But sometimes he still misses the smell of a gym full of grunting, sweating men; misses those punch mitts and his trainer; misses the sound of something hard meeting the softness of flesh.

***Inspired by Ed Paschke’s, painting *Mid-American*, 1969**

TOM ROBY IV

Best Christmas Ever



Snow on the windowsill. Frost ribbons on the panes. Jimmy pushes up the sash. Wind blows into his room. He packs a snowball. Flings his shot. Shatters an icicle that hangs on the drainpipe.

It is 1946. Jimmy will be ten next year. His dad is back from The War. His mom is going to be nicer. Today, Christmas Day, is going to be perfect.

It's 6 a.m. No one is up yet. Jimmy grabs a coat from the closet, sneaks into the hall, then down the stairs. He turns into the living room. Red stockings, with soiled white fringes, are tacked onto the mantle. He sidles past the sofa's frayed gold upholstery, glides into the dining room to stare at a nine foot spruce that presides over a pile of presents, right out of Jimmy's dream.

Silver and gold tinsel drape the tree. Sky-blue and rocket-red globes decorate the green branches. Jimmy turns on multicolored bulbs which spotlight diverse choirs of wooden angels carved to play viols, harps, and drums.

They serenade a fractured family scene — here a donkey, there an ox, the baby Jesus alone in the manger. The Virgin Mary reads from a scroll in a nettled arbor. Joseph argues theology with three bearded men across a side branch. At the tree's peak, the Archangel Michael stabs his sword into the ceiling.

Jimmy breathes in the Christmas colors. Behind the tree he sees snow through spider-eye window panes. It covers the bed of the Victory Garden like a white comforter. The garden gear, compost pile, and a few lawn chairs have disappeared under it. Jimmy sprawls on his belly and gives himself up to the rainbow tree with its back-lighted halo from sunlight that now flows through the panes.

The tree's image doubles, then triples. Colors, gifts, the room itself shrinks. Light begins to vanish. Jimmy blinks and shakes his head to make everything pop back into view. Where did it all go? The urge to go outside seizes him.

Jimmy's street looks super real. Spaces seem emptier. Indigo shadows loom. Sunshine glitters on the foot-deep snow, which will not face a dirty plow until nightfall. A few chimneys exhale cigarette-blue puffs. Time fades.

Jimmy throws a few snowballs at his friends' houses. He wants to wake up some of the gang and brag about his unwrapped presents. Somewhere a car backfires. He plows his way into the empty park at the end of the snow-covered street and looks down the hill to the river. Sledding down the hill would be fun, but he needs the gang to help stomp down the snow. Worse, his sled's gotten too small. Jimmy hopes to find a new Flexible Flyer in his pile of presents.

Just to show everybody that he's been there, Jimmy lies on his back, incises an abstract angel in the snow, moves his limbs like windshield wipers to make the skirt and form the wings. His Levis begin to chafe. He stands up and looks around.

The world is a blank book. No freight cars break his view on the buried tracks along the shore. On his left, the Virginia Electric Power Company's huge black coal bin is covered with a whitish tarp. On his right, Standard Oil's pier pushes out into the ice of the river and fades.

A cloak of snow obscures the spectral timbers of the abandoned boat that the gang nicknamed "The Flying Dutchman." Distant sunlight merges foreground with background. He can't see if silver-blue water flows in the middle of the river. Fog obliterates the fuchsia stain on the vanilla hills of Maryland. Jimmy stares into a perfect whiteout.

Jimmy's mom whistles. He is always amazed by how far it carries, since she only purses her lips. She believes it's unladylike to use her fingers.

The pull of the whiteout still holds him. Then he walks backwards on the indent of his footprints. He looks at the park one last time. Jimmy's angel shape has already lost its angles. Jimmy shivers. He feels sick.

His mom whistles again. He hates whistlers.

Jimmy's mom and grandmother are waiting for him in the vestibule. "Mrs. Streuter called," says his mom. "She claims you threw a snowball at her."

"That old biddy isn't worth it," declares Jimmy as he pulls off his cowboy boots.

"Look at you, your boots are soaked," Jimmy's mom raises her hand.

"Don't you slap the child. You'll addle his brains," Jimmy's grandmother snaps.

His mom uses her raised hand to smooth her hair. "I wasn't going to. He has such a hard head. He hurts my hand. His father can give him a good strapping."

"Leave him alone."

Relieved, Jimmy puts on his slippers and quietly slips into his place at the dining room table. He starts in with the applesauce and Cheerios, but he can't swallow. His stepdad and grandfather are well into their Scotch, even if it is still early morning. It's Christmas, and they are trading stories of their respective wars.

"Why aren't you eating?" His mom asks.

"My throat hurts."

"Well, it's no wonder, the way you soaked yourself in the cold."

"Go lie down on my cot," Jimmy's grandmother says. "See if the fire makes you feel better. I'll get you a blanket."

"You always spoil him," his mom complains.

"If you were nicer, I wouldn't have to."

Jimmy feels sleepy.

"Let me feel." His grandmother fingers touch his throat, underneath his jaw, and the sides of his neck.

It hurts, but Jimmy keeps quiet, hoping it'll go away. His grandmother returns to the dining room.

"Merry Christmas," she announces. "He's got the mumps."

Jimmy's stepdad knocks over his glass. The two men retreat quickly into the kitchen, while his mother blots out the spill on the dining room table.

Jimmy's grandmother walks him up to his bedroom, stair by stair.

"It's not fair. Now I've caught every kid's disease except scarlet fever, and when I get that, I'll have to go away and never come back, like that sick kid down the street."

His grandmother fluffs up a white pillow. "You can't relish the ups, if you never endure the downs."

"Where's Dad?" Jimmy asks his grandmother.

"He can't come. He's never had the mumps. If he catches them from you, he'll go sterile and won't be able to have a family."

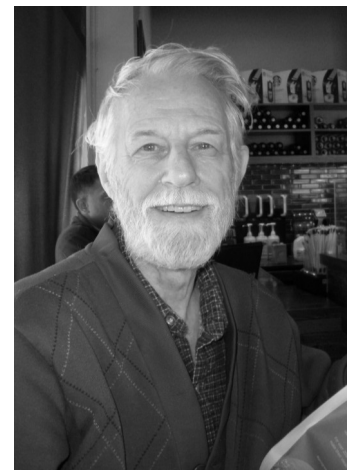
"Why does he need a family? He's already got one."

"Never mind. He just can't afford to get sick. Look at the bright side. You won't have to go to school for a while."

"Yeah, and all of you are going leave me stuck up here by myself with a sore throat and no radio."

"Radio rots your mind. I'm going downstairs. Now relax. I'll play you some music from the record player."

Jimmy closes his eyes. Haydn's *Farewell Symphony* disappears like melting snow.





Edgewater Public Library
(photo courtesy of the Edgewater Public Library website)

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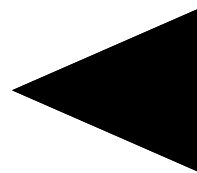
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