

UNCOMMON
&
OTHER STORIES

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Wising Up Press

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UNCOMMON



It was just before 9:00 a.m.. Ryan had been sitting in his car at the curb for ten minutes after pulling up in front of the house he'd been looking for. His shoulders were still slumped. The place was about what he'd expected, a ramshackle little bungalow surrounded by a dried-out lawn and a low fence badly in need of paint that was missing pickets on each side. An empty bird bath perched in a bed of dying roses in one corner, a few late blooms wilting through their tarnished foliage. Where the front walk met the sidewalk, a crooked mailbox dangled partway open like a stifled yawn.

Ryan waited a little longer, listening to the diminishing tick of his engine, then forced his lanky frame out of the car. He blew out a long breath and made his way up the red brick walk and three short steps to the front door. There was no bell, so he pounded on it twice. He heard shuffling inside, accompanied by an old woman's mumbling voice. Perhaps a minute later, a series of locks were unleashed, and she emerged in the opening. She couldn't have been much more than five feet tall and wore a shabby blue housedress that she clutched at her chest with one hand. In the other, she held a green plastic cup. He could see her skull through her cap of cotton-candy hair. Behind large oval glasses, her eyes darted then narrowed, uneasy and suspicious. Ryan put her in her mid-seventies.

She said, "You the young man who answered my ad?"

Her voice was low-pitched, gravelly. He nodded.

"You're Ryan."

"Right." He saw her frown deepen. "You Mrs. Wheeler?"

"Yes."

They regarded one another while a car alarm sounded nearby, then stopped.

Finally, she said, "And you're trustworthy."

He shrugged. "Hope so."

"You keep yourself clean, bathe regularly?"

He nodded again, then watched her lift the cup to her mouth and spit

LONG AGO, WHEN I WAS YOUNG



When I was seventeen, I used to like to go up to the Maryknoll Seminary in the hills above Los Altos, California. I can't remember how I discovered it exactly; perhaps I just noticed its old, mission-style buildings nestled among oak and eucalyptus trees from the freeway down below. My family had moved up to that area at the start of my senior year, my first attending a public school, where new friendships were all but nonexistent. As a result, I spent a fair amount of my free time on my own exploring places like that. Mostly, I just wandered the grounds, admiring the striking vistas overlooking what wasn't yet known as Silicon Valley or hiking the trails that meandered off into the vast nature reserve behind the property. There never seemed to be many people around, so even back then in the early 70s, seminary enrollment must have already been on the decline. Occasionally, I'd see a priest or brother on preoccupied strolls of their own, black-robed and solemn in that manner I'd grown so familiar with during my many years surviving a Catholic education until it was curtailed by my abrupt dismissal at the end of the prior semester.

Strangely, I never came upon a lone seminarian there until late on an early-winter afternoon when I heard the strains of a cello being played in one of the garden courtyards bordering the dormitory. The melody was haunting, spare but lovely, so I followed it until I saw its source a handful of yards away through the branches of a cypress tree: a boy about my age sat on a stone bench in a black cassock with the instrument between his knees. His eyes were closed and his head bent to his musical endeavor; when he drew his bow in a long note across the strings, his chin followed suit. He wore the same style of plain, plastic glasses that I'd seen on some of the older clerics, and a slight spray of acne riddled his forehead where a loose curl of black hair danced with his movements. He was surrounded by foliage of every shade of green through which dust drifted in shafts of descending sunlight.

Suddenly, the music took on a lilting quality, his head lifted skyward, and I felt a kind of heat behind my eyes at how alone the boy seemed. As alone, I realized, as I felt myself. Just as suddenly, the music halted, he sighed,

HACIENDA TRANQUILA



My wife, Gwen, and I started our B&B-type hacienda after I took early retirement at the public health clinic where I worked. I'd been the lead pediatric psychologist there for more than three decades by then and had just had enough of grant applications, annual budget cuts, and increasing accountability mandates. Gwen was still content enough with her hospice nursing position, so we had her ongoing income in addition to my pension. Our two adult sons were living on their own, which made our family home needlessly large, so we sold it and used the profit to buy and renovate the hacienda property that we'd ridden by and speculated about for many years.

The place was unusually large by central Phoenix standards. It sat on a full acre of completely overgrown land with an old, mud-adobe main house, a decrepit casita behind, plenty of dead lawn, and an empty pool in a back corner. To say it needed work was an understatement. But the brother of my clinic's receptionist turned out to be a handyman-extraordinaire who'd just moved here from the Dominican Republic and was happy to live in the casita while he did the entire renovation, contracting laborers as he needed them. My wife and I got an extended six-month escrow on the sale of our old home, all of which was needed to complete the project. When it was finally finished and we moved in, we were astounded by how beautiful it was inside and out: refreshingly unique and distinctive, a sprawling oasis within a few stone throws of restaurants, bars, and shops.

The main house could be divided into two separate living sections. Gwen and I lived in the high-ceilinged rear portion with its expansive kitchen/dining/great room, loft, and bedroom suite. Two bedrooms, a bath, and studio-like space formed the front portion and connected to ours through a hallway door leading into our dining area. We left that door open when our sons were visiting and using the bedrooms, but otherwise, kept it closed and rented out the front.

The renovated back casita also had two bedrooms, bath, kitchen, and living area. Both units had their own patios, as well as access to the long,

SOMETHING LIKE THAT



After I got my administrative credential, I was hired to be one of the assistant principals at the high school where I'd been a PE teacher and girls' basketball coach. My new position involved a variety of site and district-level duties, but one I hadn't expected to face so early on occurred in mid-November when my supervisor, our school principal, told me I needed to take her place on an expulsion hearing panel. She barged into my office shortly before dismissal and apologized for the short notice, but said she'd just gotten a call that her young son had broken his arm in a playground accident. She'd cleared my taking her place at the hearing with the head of the panel, a cold, gruff man named Roy Miller who was the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services. She told me it would start in a half hour, then hurried out of my office as quickly as she'd entered it.

I sat for several moments afterward staring at where she'd been, a slow wave of dread crawling up through me. I knew about that expulsion case because one of our school's other assistant principals had initially handled the incident. It involved a student on our boys' basketball team and its coach with whom I'd worked for many years. Our practice courts and locker rooms had been right next to one another. I'd long cringed at the way he berated his players, the shouts, the cursing; I'd even heard he'd sometimes put his hands on them. The boy being brought up for expulsion, a senior and star player named Brad Holland, had slugged him during practice the week before and broken his nose. The other assistant principal said Brad had told him he'd just lost it after all the coach's abuse. "That may have been the case, but the kid crossed a line," my colleague said and then chuckled. "Suppose you could say this expulsion is a slam dunk."



I got to the conference room adjoining the district office boardroom where the hearing was to be held a little more than twenty minutes later.

INCONCEIVABLE



A bee stung the bottom of my foot one morning in late June while I was paying bills. Right beneath the third toe. A big bumblebee. How it got under the desk in my study, I have no idea. Initially, I felt a prick, and then a sharp pain followed. I jumped out of my chair thinking that perhaps it had been a spider or red ants. But there was the bumblebee, lying on its side beneath the chair, waving its fragile legs.

I ended its misery with the squish of an envelope, dropped it in the wastebasket, and then began to sweat, an anxiousness spreading up through my chest. The reason for this was that I'd been determined to be allergic to bee sting many years earlier when I was a teenager. The first instance occurred when I was stung on a golf course and broke out all over in hives. My mother had me lie in a bath of cold water and Epsom salts, and gave me Benadryl; after an hour or so, the reaction eased. The second happened when I was working on a construction crew for a summer job in college. I was jackhammering a patch of blacktop, and a bee flew into my mouth and stung the back of it. I spat it out. The inside of my throat immediately began to swell, and my breathing constricted. The crew foreman drove me to an Urgent Care nearby. By the time I got there, hives had begun again, and I was laboring just to breathe shallowly through my nose. The doctor gave me a cortisone shot and calamine lotion for the hives. He had me wait in the examining room while he saw to other patients long enough to be sure the swelling in my throat had decreased and my airway had cleared. When they had, the foreman drove me home while another laborer followed in my car. But it scared me. And I stayed scared of bees from then on. Much later, after epi-pens were common, a girlfriend suggested that I get and carry one, but I never bothered doing that.

Somehow, more than twenty-five years had passed without further bee incidents. So, I was unsure how my body would react to the bumblebee. I'd heard that allergies could change over time, but I had no way of knowing if that had been the case for me. And I wasn't sure what the potency of a

IF YOU TREAT THEM RIGHT



Iris bought the place shortly before she retired after thirty-seven years on the grounds crew at Northern Arizona University. It was only twenty miles south of Flagstaff, but a couple of thousand feet lower in elevation, so heavy snow was infrequent and the coldest temperatures less severe. Besides being drawn by the more temperate winter climate, she'd loved the surrounding piñon-juniper woodland, the raised bed garden, and the greenhouse. Although the place needed work and what was advertised as a house could really only be called a glorified cabin, it suited her. She felt at peace there.

Iris was a loner by nature. After starting work at the university, she'd quickly developed a penchant for dealing with struggling flora, a niche that allowed her comparative solitude; she routinely refused opportunities for advancement in the department in order to avoid the additional interactions they would require. Because of her gruff manner and self-induced isolation, there was no ceremony or recognition attached to her retirement, hardly a farewell or acknowledgment of any kind.

Aside from a futon and a desk she bought for the house's little second bedroom, she simply arranged all her furniture, myriad potted plants, and other belongings exactly as she'd grown accustomed to having them in her old apartment and spent most of her energy outside on the garden and greenhouse. She moved in early September and within days had functioning drip irrigation and composting systems in the garden with vegetables, herbs, and flowers flourishing by the end of that month. The greenhouse took longer to repair. She ran a water line to it, replaced some rotted framing, inserted new high-quality plexi-glass, and built hotbeds to improve heat retention in colder months. By late October, she began using it to cultivate seedlings, a variety of succulents, and a few orchids on its newly latticed shelves. She spent a good portion of her remaining time reading on her back deck, playing online chess, or hiking nearby red-rock trails through swaths of Ponderosa pines, aspens, and Douglas firs. Iris was sixty-six years old, squat and solid, and wore her silver hair like a bathing cap.

SWAP AND SHOP



Like every Saturday morning from October to April, Stan listened to *Swap and Shop* while he split wood for the week. He kept the old radio in a corner of the woodshed near the chopping block and ran an extension cord to an outside outlet on the log cabin. Priest Lake was nestled up at the top of the Idaho panhandle against the Canadian border, and the radio station in Coeur D'Alene was ninety miles away, so the reception was sometimes a little scratchy. While he listened, he quartered rounds from dead tamaracks he'd found and felled during the summer along one of the fire roads in the surrounding mountains; it took him about an hour to chop enough wood for the following seven days. He liked the steadiness of the exercise, the peaceful lap of the lake on the pebbly shore a dozen yards away, the satisfying accumulation of V-shaped logs, the symmetry of the growing stack in the spreading morning light, and the varied descriptions of things people wanted to buy, sell, or trade on the radio. He looked forward to it all week.

Stan always split slowly. He was alone there—his wife had left him five years before—and he was in no hurry to finish. He often chuckled over the exchanges on the radio. Stan liked the way the host never passed any judgment over what the callers had to say, however ludicrous or bizarre. With his easy demeanor, the host simply repeated their essential words, then emphasized the digits of their telephone numbers twice in conclusion. As he did, Stan pictured him writing the information down on a legal pad under his suspended microphone. He liked the folksy tenor of the host's voice, its drawl hinting somehow of Southern roots. He pictured the host to be about his age, early sixties, with short slate-gray hair like his own and a similar affection for untucked flannel shirts, jeans, and worn ball caps. But the truth was he'd never met or seen a photo of the host, so that visual notion of him was born entirely, Stan supposed, of some vague inner wish. The host sounded like someone Stan would have liked to have had as a friend. He didn't have any of those here; they were all back in Portland.

Stan had been at the cabin full-time for three years, since retiring early

MAKE YOUR OWN BED



Tim had gotten up early. The trailer was still. He lifted the corner of the bedroom curtain with his finger and looked outside: it was snowing again, hard. Only the week after Christmas, and already the heaviest winter snowfall on record for that part of the Cascade Range. He dressed, walked down the short hallway, plugged in the Christmas tree lights, and started breakfast.

Austin woke up next. He came in carrying the new stuffed elephant that had been poking out of his stocking, holding it by the ear. He sat on the edge of the couch and looked at the tree, his eyes full of sleep. Tim poured pancake batter into small circles in the greased skillet.

"Hey, bub," he said.

Austin rubbed his nose and asked, "When do we have to take it down?"

"No special time. We usually wait until the first of the year and make a bonfire out back. You remember last year?"

The boy shook his head and looked for the first time at his father. His brown hair was mussed and his mouth drooped like his mother's.

"That's all right," Tim said. "You weren't even three yet. You'll like it. We can roast marshmallows."

"Like when we go camping?"

"Sort of. Go snuggle your mom. Breakfast's about ready."

He padded off in his footed pajamas. Tim turned the radio on low. The weather report said that even heavier snow was expected throughout the day across the region. He flipped pancakes with the spatula, then slid them with the rest onto the plate he was keeping warm in the oven. He poured more batter into the skillet and looked outside again. He watched the snow fall in big flakes over the rusted storage shed out back and breathed as slowly as he could. The snow had almost covered the tires that he'd left leaning against the shed when he'd changed them out on his truck for the winter.

His wife came down the hall holding Austin's hand. She was a big woman who'd kept getting bigger after giving birth. Her bathrobe strained its cord, and her strawberry-blonde hair was cinched in a short ponytail. They

SURPRISE



The cabin phone rang just as my wife, Molly, and her parents were heading up the path for their morning walk along Lake Almanor's eastern shore. I answered it and called to my father-in-law. I heard Ralph stop and retrace his steps. He looked in the window.

"It's your sister," I told him.

He made a face and came back inside. I handed him the phone. He walked into the kitchen with it after saying, "Yes?" I turned the stereo down; he'd put on a Mozart CD before they'd left. I heard him say, "When?" Then, "Shucks."

I walked up the hall to look in on Ben. He was asleep in his crib, his feed almost finished. The pump made its soft whir on the pole. I checked the connection at his G-tube and it was fine. Molly had left the parts to his nebulizer scattered about again, so I put them away.

When I came back to the front room, Ralph was just putting the phone back in its cradle. We stood and looked at each other. Finally, he said, "Well, my Aunt Rita just passed away. She was eighty-something. Sometime in the middle of the night when she was sleeping. Down near Bakersfield or Barstow somewhere. Where she's lived just about forever."

"That's too bad," I said.

Ralph looked out at the lake. The sun had just touched the tips of the tall trees across it. "Well, she's the last one of that bunch. That generation is gone now." We were quiet again. Then he raised his eyebrows and said, "I'm going to try to catch the girls."

I watched him pass the window with his tall walking stick and listened to his footsteps go off up the path. I increased the music's volume again, but not as loud as it had been. I poured another cup of coffee and took it out on the front porch. A woodpecker skittered along the side of a thick fir tree. I could smell the dusty pine needles, not yet sun warmed.



WOUNDS



Stuart started as a patient in the hyperbaric oxygen chamber about a week after I did. We were both part of the early afternoon treatment group, which meant we had to be changed into our hospital-issued scrubs and waiting for our vitals to be taken by 12:15 each day. He always got there before me, his motorized scooter stored off to the side, leaning on his fold-up walker and chatting with one of the staff. He couldn't have been taller than five-and-a-half feet; even the smallest of the scrub pants they issued us dangled over his blue tissue booties. His wounds involved acute circulation problems in his toes, and for some reason, he wore the booties over his bare feet instead of his socks or shoes like most other patients; the sight of his smaller toes through the tissue reminded me of dried cranberries, and his big toes of prunes.

The wound clinic and chamber were in the basement of Sharp Grossmont Hospital just up the freeway from San Diego State University. Along with an alternating staff member serving as our "tender," there were usually one or two other patients with Stuart and me on our chamber "dives," although those others changed fairly frequently. Stuart and I were the only patients that I was aware of who'd been authorized for forty dives, each of which lasted an hour-and-a-half and consisted of three thirty-minute sessions while "submerged" with a five-minute break in between. The chamber itself resembled a small submarine that had benches along one side with bed pillows for seats and back supports. Once the patients were settled inside and the chamber was sealed, it took about seven minutes for it to be pressurized to a depth of forty-five feet. Then the tender secured clear plastic hoods over our heads that snapped onto snug rubberized rings around our necks, and the flow of concentrated oxygen was started inside of them. The theory was that the oxygen would promote blood flow to wounds that otherwise hadn't healed naturally. While Stuart's were in his toes, my own wound was internal and involved the cavity that had formed where a cancerous tumor had been located in one of the lymph nodes in my neck. As a result, secretions that collected in it flooded my mouth, often mixed with phlegm, which I usually had to spit out every few

SUNSHINE IN A BOWL



1.

Ruth sat on the edge of the waiting room chair. She hadn't really moved from that spot since arriving at the hospital with Carl at 6:30am, an hour early for his outpatient surgery. A thin woman with white hair twisted into a tight bun at the back of her neck, Ruth had just turned seventy-one; Carl was a few months older. While she waited, she glanced often up at the wall clock and unconsciously shifted her weight. At eleven, an hour-and-a-half after Carl was supposed to be moved to recovery, she left for a few minutes to use the restroom. When she returned, she sat in the same spot, watched a square of sun inch closer across the carpet, and bit at a thumbnail.

A little before two, a nurse finally approached and startled her from her daze.

Ruth looked up at her, then said, "Yes?"

"I'm afraid they've run into some complications with your husband. Having to do with his procedure." The nurse paused. "That's the reason for the delay."

"Is he all right? Carl?"

The nurse offered a hopeful smile. "They should know soon. It shouldn't be long now."

Ruth lowered her eyes and stared off at the opposite wall. The waiting room, nearly empty, was almost silent. She said, "Thank you."

The nurse gave another encouraging smile, but Ruth didn't see it. She continued to stare straight ahead and only heard the retreating footsteps and click of the door. She began folding and unfolding her hands in her lap.



2.

The surgeon finally came into the waiting room in his scrubs just after three-thirty and perched on the edge of the seat next to Ruth. He was an

THE HAY IS IN THE BARN



I'm sixty-two years old. Like most my age, I suppose, there are a number of things I regret. For some reason, one occupies a particular place for me. It's not the most significant or memorable in my life, or even very notable in and of itself. But, when I think of it, something different falls in me, something irrevocable.



It occurred between my junior and senior years of college at UC Santa Cruz. I shared a rambling old rental house downtown with five other guys who played with me on the school's basketball team. One was my best friend, Eric. We'd been high school teammates over the hill in San Jose, and then were happy to keep playing together in college. The house had four bedrooms; Eric and I each had our own and the other guys shared. We all became pretty close spending that much time together. We kept the place over the summer, but except for Eric and me, the rest of our housemates left during the break for jobs at home or to travel. He and I stayed to keep up the yard service business we'd started when we were sophomores. It wasn't much, but it helped pay the rent, and we could build a flexible work schedule to accommodate classes and practices.

One of our housemates, Drew, grew up over the hill, too, in Menlo Park. Our high schools had been in the same league, so we'd played against each other before becoming college teammates. He was a nice, easy-going guy who'd had the same girlfriend, Claire, since middle school. She'd just transferred to UC Santa Cruz the semester before so they could be together, and she rented a room in a house around the corner with some other female students from school. Drew was spending the summer at home working for his dad, as he had for years during school breaks, painting houses. But he was about to take his annual July trip to Montana to help bring in the hay on his aunt and uncle's farm. He asked me if I wanted to come with him to help,

THE COW JUMPED OVER THE MOON



I'd just celebrated my fifty-ninth birthday by selling my graphic arts and website design business in Seattle to a competitor across town. With what I got from the sale and that of my house, I was able to downsize to a little condo outside of Reno and sock the rest away. It had been 1976, almost four decades earlier, since I'd last been there doing volunteer work after college and developed a fondness for the area. The nicer weather certainly figured in my decision. As did the fact that it didn't really matter where I lived because I'd begun doing almost all my work remotely. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that getting away from things was also a major factor; while almost fifteen years had passed since my wife and our daughter had died in their rafting accident, that painful memory still lingered never far away.

So, I retained a dozen or so of my most longstanding clients, drove down to Reno to meet the movers, and left most of the boxes unpacked inside my new home. Then I flew back to Seattle to finalize the transfer of the business, make a last visit to the cemetery, and sell my office furniture. I'd just finished that final task when I got a call from Nick Phillips.



Nick was one of those few longtime clients I was holding onto, and I'd grown to know him pretty well over the years. On a kind of whim, he'd started his fishing lodge on a little island about four hundred miles up the British Columbian coast from Vancouver. He and his wife had previously run a successful government lobbying firm in Olympia, and he told me he'd gotten tired of dealing with all the political shenanigans and maneuvering day in and day out. He said he just asked himself one sleepless night how he could make a living doing something he loved and the fishing idea put itself together.

He looked around and found that remote spot advertised on the internet. It had begun as an Irish potato farm, had later become a kind of hippie

SAM



I live in Iowa, always have, in a place which is not a farm. There are lots of farms around me. Mostly corn, some dairy cattle. My place isn't a farm, but I have an old white house, a big field on one side, some tall trees, a vegetable garden, a chicken coop out back, and a little corral with a lean-to where my horse, Pronto, used to stay. Pronto up and died of old age twenty years ago, about the time I started getting old too, just before Sam and her mother rented the house next door.

I suppose Sam was about seven or eight then. She was a short little thing who mostly wore red sneakers, overalls, T-shirts when it was warm, and a gray hooded sweatshirt when it wasn't. Her mom told me that the thing with Sam's hair was that it had just never really grown in fully. She had a kind of coating of white, new-corn silk on her head, big blue eyes, little nose. Her face was mostly eyes, though.

Her mom was a nice lady. When the school year began, she started working days as a checker at a supermarket in town, but she was back when Sam came home on the bus. She also did alterations on her sewing machine for a clothing store. She was a quiet, thoughtful lady, but she was pretty busy working as much as she did, and I didn't ever know her too well. Anyway, it's Sam I mostly want to tell about. Sam and that late summer and fall, a summer that stayed plenty hot and a fall that was cool and short, before they moved down to Omaha.



I guess I first noticed Sam soon after they arrived on an early August afternoon sitting out in her back yard by their row of poplar trees looking up at the birds. Those were wrens up there who gathered on the high branches and telephone wires to wait for evening so that they could invade undisturbed the fields and vegetable gardens like the one I was tending that day. Sam sat cross-legged on the grass looking up at the birds and scratching Mrs.

AUTHOR

William Cass has had over 280 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He has won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*, been a nominee for both Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net anthologies, and has also received four Pushcart Prize nominations. His first short story collection, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories*, was published by Wising Up Press in 2020. He lives in San Diego, California.

