

Adults Only

by Pam J. Hecht

It's moments like these, when the snow is coming down hard and there's a soft whooshing sound in the air, when I think back to that time in Florida. Funny, isn't it? In the middle of a snowstorm, to think of such a faraway time and such a different place. I gaze out my window as thick clumps of white crash down fast and furious, flake pounding on flake like someone or something is chasing them down from the heavens. The new white world echoes of their descent. It reminds me once more how everything falls and everything changes.

...

"You don't really want to go up there, do you?" I looked Linda straight in the eyes, willing her serious stare to crack and break into a relenting smile. No, no, no, no, no.

We were at Coconut Grove, a popular section of Miami known for its artsy vibe and slightly seedy nightlife, standing under the awning at a place called The Coral Kitten. Kids dared each other all the time to go in there, but we didn't know anyone who'd actually done it.

She stared right back at me and tensed, like a tiger ready to pounce. "What, you chicken? Come on. Cancer-please?" She moved in, put her hands on my shoulders and tilted her head to one side. I knew then that she wouldn't waver on this one. Damn.

It's not that I always went along with everything Linda said. I had my limits. But if whatever it was wouldn't necessarily cause me to die and she threw in the cancer-please, I'd do it.

It was an ongoing joke, the cancer-please. Short for "pretty please, do it for me because I'm your best friend and I'm only seventeen and I have cancer." She'd come up with it the day I visited the hospital during one of her treatments and she'd asked if I'd go get her a root beer. Originally from South Carolina, she still said "beer" like it was "bear." She drank the stuff around the clock and I nicknamed her "Rooty the Bear," or "Bear," for short.

"I can't help it," she said, when I teased her about her Southern accent. Then her eyes would flick upward in a hopeless look, which made me laugh uncontrollably, partly because for her, "help" had two syllables.

Now, after months of treatment, Linda was in remission again. The doctors tried to stay hopeful, but there were no guarantees.

She was a tropical bird let out of its cage.

I looked up and saw that it had started to drizzle "Where do birds go when it rains, do you think?" I was stalling and she knew it. She stuck her tongue out to catch the rain.

A winking mannequin head with purple hair and a tilted Panama hat leered down at us from the lit window above. I tried not to think about the cars driving past us, kids hanging out the windows puffing on cigarettes or joints, hooting.

We weren't supposed to be here. It was an adult store, I pointed out.

"For God's sake, we're almost eighteen." She grabbed my hand, pulled the door open, and began dragging me up the dim stairwell.

"Yeah, in a year."

I heard a police siren in the distance and hesitated.

She tightened her grip as we trudged up the narrow steps. "Keep it moving, sister. Excitement awaits."

I kept my eyes wide open.

Lightning can split a tree in half while you're sleeping.

We pushed through a mass of beads hanging in the doorway and stood for a moment adjusting our eyes.

"Might I help you?" A hulking woman, bracelets tinkling, heaved herself up from where she was kneeling on the floor. She'd been stacking little boxes on a shelf and was slightly out of breath. She took a step toward us and the smell of cigarettes floated up from the swishing folds of her purple skirt.

"Enchanté, Mademoiselles, a pleasure I'm sure." She noticed I was eyeing the box in her hand, and her thick ruby-red lips curled in a smirk. "I'm sure you know what those are for. Maybe you'd better take some. You don't want to make babies quite yet, do you? Just eighteen or nineteen, am I right, les bébés?"

I backed up a step to leave, but Linda thumbed at me. "Pauline here just turned nineteen but my birthday's not until June."

Linda was the one who could be on Broadway, not me. I envied her that. But I don't belong here in this shadowy place; I am really just a child.

"Well." She eyed us up and down. "Look all you'd like. I'm here if you have questions." Flicking a bang out of her eye, she checked her earrings, fingertips lingering on the large silver loops for a second like she was afraid they'd fall off. Black stubble was just popping out on her upper lip and she had a bead of sweat on the tip of her nose. It made her seem less scary somehow and I had the sudden urge to dab it dry.

She saw that I was staring. "I don't embarrass easy, so ask away. Call me Sparkle, like a diamond." She stretched her arm out toward me to display the diamond ring on her finger.

Linda was already standing in front of a shelf crowded with colorful plastic cylinders of varying sizes. So I gave Sparkle a quick smile and walked over to her.

"Look at this, Pauline." She picked up a soft pink tube shaped like a penis. "Wonder if she has one of these," she whispered, nodding toward Sparkle.

I stood on my toes to glance at Sparkle over the top of the display. She was polishing the top of the glass counter in lazy circles but didn't look up. Even with her head tilted down, the top of her poofy brown hair nearly touched the ceiling.

We were the only customers. I hoped it would stay that way. *What kind of person would go into a store like this?* I tried not to worry. (Weeks later, a therapist would tell me to take deep breaths, to say the words, "It's going to be okay," when my mind travels to the dark side.)

When Linda danced up to me with a blow-up doll, I rallied. "How dare you steal my man? Bear, you ignorant slut."

"But he's so sexy," she said, giggling.

She let the doll fall to the floor and I followed her around the corner to another aisle, where she plucked a lacy black negligee from a rack. She held it at arm's length and we squinted at it. Then she held it against her chest and looked down. In the dimness, under the green light bulbs that hung from the ceiling, she looked like a ghost.

I blinked hard and for a second, she was just an ordinary teenage girl, dreaming of things to come.

Butterflies flapped their wings inside my heart.

At the back of the store, Linda pushed aside a rolling clothes rack and we saw there was a wooden door behind it.

"A portal to a better, safer place," I said. "It's probably locked."

She sing-songed, "A door, a door, another door, what's on the other side?" and turned to me, expectantly. It was a joke, something we got from an old kid show on TV.

"Maybe it's a chugging train, to take us on a ride," I answered.

She turned the knob and it opened. I jerked my head around to make sure Sparkle wasn't nearby.

More stairs. She opened the door a little wider. "Where do you think it goes? She craned her neck and looked up. "Outside, it looks like. Let's go. Follow me."

I didn't bother to protest this time, because I knew she wouldn't listen. *We won't stay long.* We crept up to what turned out to be a rooftop terrace with a few potted plants against the wall and a couple of rusty *chaises longue* with a small table in between.

"Cool," she said, looking around. The door closed behind me.

"Yeah, really cool, unless Sparkle follows us up here."

She twirled around, dropping her purse on the floor. "If that happens, you'll save me, right?" She spun around a few more times, then froze. "If I go, I mean really go, I'm gonna miss you."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and blinked hard. "You're not going anywhere."

...

Earlier that night, we'd sat on rickety metal chairs outside Señor Iguana, as throngs of people shuffled past us on the sidewalk. The table next to us was celebrating a birthday, singing and clinking oversized margaritas. Two men in sombreros sat on stools, thrashing guitar strings in a fast Latin rhythm. I watched their hands moving up and down until I got dizzy.

"Remember that time when we were around ten, when you were afraid to ride a bike?" She flicked a tortilla chip out of the bowl in front of us, then grabbed another one and shoved it in her mouth.

"What about it?" I said, practically yelling, so she'd hear me over the music. I dipped my fork into the salsa and swirled it around.

"You kept tipping over, falling onto the grass, even though I was holding the back of the bike."

"It's not my fault I was a chubby kid trying to ride a tiny little bike." I felt the moment again, when she let go and I lurched forward. The rush of freedom. Keep going, keep going, keep going.

"You got it eventually."

"Yeah, but then you wanted to race me and I fell off the damn thing."

"But you beat me." Linda pointed her index finger at me. "I knew you could do it."

"You're trouble, kid. But you're still the best."

She blew me a kiss and took a sip of her ginger ale. "Let's get in trouble now."

She crossed her arms across her chest and tipped back in her chair. "I wasn't supposed to take the car all the way to the Grove tonight."

She was always surprising me, especially after the fact.

...

Once when I visited Linda after not seeing her for days, I couldn't remember any of the funny stories I'd stored up in my mind to tell her. She'd been sick and I wanted to cheer her up and I froze, cursing myself. I didn't expect to see her face so tiny and pale against a pillow.

She looked up at me and smiled. "Tell me again about the time you went to Colorado, how you tried to ski and kept falling on your head. That was so funny."

I could always get Linda to laugh, even now, when she was lying in her bedroom with the shades pulled down to block the Miami sun, feeling sick from the chemo. Even when a hurricane was looming.

Linda's parents were out back, bringing some of the smaller patio furniture and potted plants into the house.

"I don't see what's so funny about failing to stay upright on a pair of skis. It's not my fault I'm unbalanced."

"That is so sad, I could cry," she said, drawing out the word sad.

"You even cry Deep South." I twisted my fists in front of my eyes like I was crying, then flipped my hair like a debutante.

It was a familiar game. We'd played it since junior high.

"I am not a Southern baby, I'm a French baby." She rolled her eyes, then scrunched up her face and added a few "oui's" with her wah's. We cried like every kind of character we could think up. She was a melancholy opera star. I was a lonesome chicken.

"I love crying with you," she said, her eyes at half-mast.

"Of course you do, you big baby. Now go to sleep. I'll be back."

I turned in the doorway for a second to wave goodbye. She was like a turtle, head retreating into shell, sinking underneath the thick sage-colored blanket, seeking refuge in a storm.

...

The weather is funny in the subtropics. The sun blazes as the thunder rumbles. Rain taps a slow drumbeat into the rising steam, then suddenly it's pouring down in a wild torrent. Before you know it, another hurricane's on the horizon. The eye of a hurricane, the dead center of the thing, is peaceful, but the uncertain truth of it lies around the edges. In the end, it will go exactly where it wants to go. Your house could be pummeled to the ground in a minute, while five miles away, someone's blowing out birthday candles on a cake.

...

The last time we'd gone out like this was right before she was diagnosed. It was spring break and we were celebrating. She was at the wheel in her shiny new white Volvo, the safest on the market, she said.

We twisted and turned down curvy, half-dark roads under the canopy of the banyan trees, singing "Tomorrow" from Annie. At the chorus, she turned down the music and lifted her hands off the wheel.

"Drive. Do it. You said you wanted to learn."

The car shifted slightly and we were headed straight for a peacock ambling by the side of the road. I lurched over to her side and she leaned back as I grabbed the wheel. "Take the wheel back. We're going to die."

She put her hands back on the wheel. "We're all going to die. It's just a question of when."

...

When the night-blooming jasmine buds open into little white stars and the warm South Florida air holds still their heady scent, the flowers reach into the dark, screaming, "I am here. I am here. I am here." But when the moon begins to fade, they deign to reveal, "Goodbye, goodbye, we are leaving."

...

From our perch on the roof of The Coral Kitten, we could see the tops of palm trees swaying in the breeze. We listened to the cacophony of sounds down below and looked into the top floor of an apartment building across the street. Through one of the windows, a woman in a strapless dress was putting on lipstick. She fluffed her hair with her fingers and disappeared.

Linda plopped onto a *chaise longue* and let out a deep breath. "This is the life, isn't it?"

I sat down beside her. "For sure. And bonus, there's a pretty moon. La luna."

"La luna, la luna, la luna. Say it three times fast, dahling, then fill me up with more champagne." She held her arm out to me, pretending to hold a glass in her hand, holding up a pinky finger.

"Yes, my dear lady, anything for you. Isn't life...swell?"

"Oh my yes. But tell me, why tarry when there is a grand ball on the horizon?" She bolted upright as I lay back, stretching out my legs. The toenails in my sandals were bright pink.

...

It is starting to rain again and she is at the wrought iron railing, looking up at the stars. I note the swirls and curves of the metal. I notice pretty things like that.

I am a counterpoint, a watchful iguana resting on a banana leaf. She is a gust of wind that pushes the ocean waves to the sand.

She is peering down at the street below and I see that the seat of her pants now sags.

It is the last thing of her I see.

...

It wasn't that I refused to explain what happened when the police officer visited me at home the next day. I just couldn't exactly remember.

One minute, Linda was looking down and pointing at a group of boys gunning a convertible down the street and the next, she was gone.

It was the in-between part that was fuzzy.

All I could do was sit down on the street curb and look down at my hands shaking and wait for someone to come for me.

“Were you with her when it happened, ma’am?”

I was.

But was I?

From the back seat of my parents’ car, the traffic lights screamed red then green, and the cars in front of us inched forward in the haze, windows down, heads shaking, music screaming out.

Did they not know there was tragedy in the world?

...

I heard snippets. It was all in the landing. Someone else might have broken an arm or two, maybe a leg. Another might have cracked a spine.

But Linda was luckier than that, or not, depending on which way you looked.

The revelation comes later, after tears subside long enough to think of her and not myself. She beat the cancer. Stopped it right in its tracks. That’s the story I tell myself. It’s the ending that matters.

...

A “freak accident,” they said. But I am the freak, I think. Every morning I wake up and think she’s still here.

It happened so fast. Like lightning.

I see her flip over the railing but my feet are cemented to the floor. I hear the shouts below and my breath catches in my throat.

I pummel down the stairs to the street, two at a time, like I am in a movie. I am acting my part and the audience is screaming around me, mouths wide in terror.

I do not see her wig lying in a puddle on the street, hair splayed out in a blonde fan before someone retrieves it. The tire marks on it would have killed me.

...

I had a dream about her once, long after moving up north from where I thought I’d left her behind. She was hurtling downward through the air and laughing, while I waited, watching, from below. I looked away for just a second and she was gone.

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Previous post: [The Passenger](#)

Next post: [Mrs. Ferry](#)

- **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- **Issue 23 – Fall 2020**

- **Home**

- Elizabeth Lutyens
[“Using His Words”](#)

- **Profile**

- Marie Hefley
[“Tommy Hays: A Writer in Full”](#)

- **A Collective Reflection**

- The Great Smokies Writing Program Community
[“Gratitude for Leadership, Friendship, Inspiration”](#)

- **Craft Session**

- Barbara Cary
[“An Acrostic on Craft”](#)

Nonfiction

- Margaret Ann Faeth
[“Death Be Not Proud”](#)
- Lindsey Pharr
[“Held in the Hands of Dangerous Men”](#)
- Emma Ensley
[“The Passenger”](#)

Fiction

- Pam J. Hecht
[“Adults Only”](#)
- Jeanette Reid
[“Mrs. Ferry”](#)
- Patrick Siniscalchi
[“Gabardine and Ivory”](#)
- Carol Gottshall
[From *The Treatment*](#)

Poetry

- Norma Bradley
[“Wheat Field with Lark”](#)
[“Walk the Mountain”](#)
- David Henson
[“The Vine and the Branches”](#)
[“Called Back”](#)
- Lynn McLure
[“Bloodroot”](#)
[“Bowl”](#)

[Archives](#)

• TGSR

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