

Over the Garden Fence



a micro-issue



Crescent Currents Literary Magazine

A Note from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Thank you for taking the time (and courage) to hop over the garden fence. It is a perilous task. I pray that your limbs remain free of scratches, and that no branches attempt to pierce you. I pray that your journey is a safe one-- but not one without risks.

Micro-issue 2.5 is the first to feature photography, which you will find scattered around the magazine's pages. These photos I took whilst exploring the countrysides of Buryatia, Russia, and North Carolina, eager to capture the breathless feel of exhilaration that accompanied a life anew among trees.

Prepare for much fence-hopping. In this issue, you will be taken through valleys, forests, and ridges interwordly. You will be made anew.

Enjoy reading,
Sia Moon, Editor-in-Chief

Table of Contents

Poetry

George Payne	1
Kemboi Allan	3
Paul Hostovsky	5
Kaitlyn Sun	7

Fiction

Kirsty Nottage	10
Veronica Lavenia	13
Alice Baburek	18

We weren't joking when we said micro-issue!



P

O

E

T

R

Y

George Payne

Adirondack Therapy



George Payne is a passionate advocate for social justice, a trained crisis counselor, and a former philosophy instructor with over 20 years of experience in the social work and mental health fields. His work spans various capacities, including program development, volunteer management, and grant writing, with a focus on addressing issues like intergenerational poverty, education, and mental health.

Adirondack Therapy

by George Payne

too many bills, too many
arguments

my father needed
to get away

so we went camping
no words, just the woods

ten miles in
we found the lean-to

jerky and trail mix for dinner
a few swigs of Beam

I reached for the binoculars
the perfume of balsam

rustling of chipmunks
crack of falling birch

the night sky was clear
as the Caribbean and Jupiter

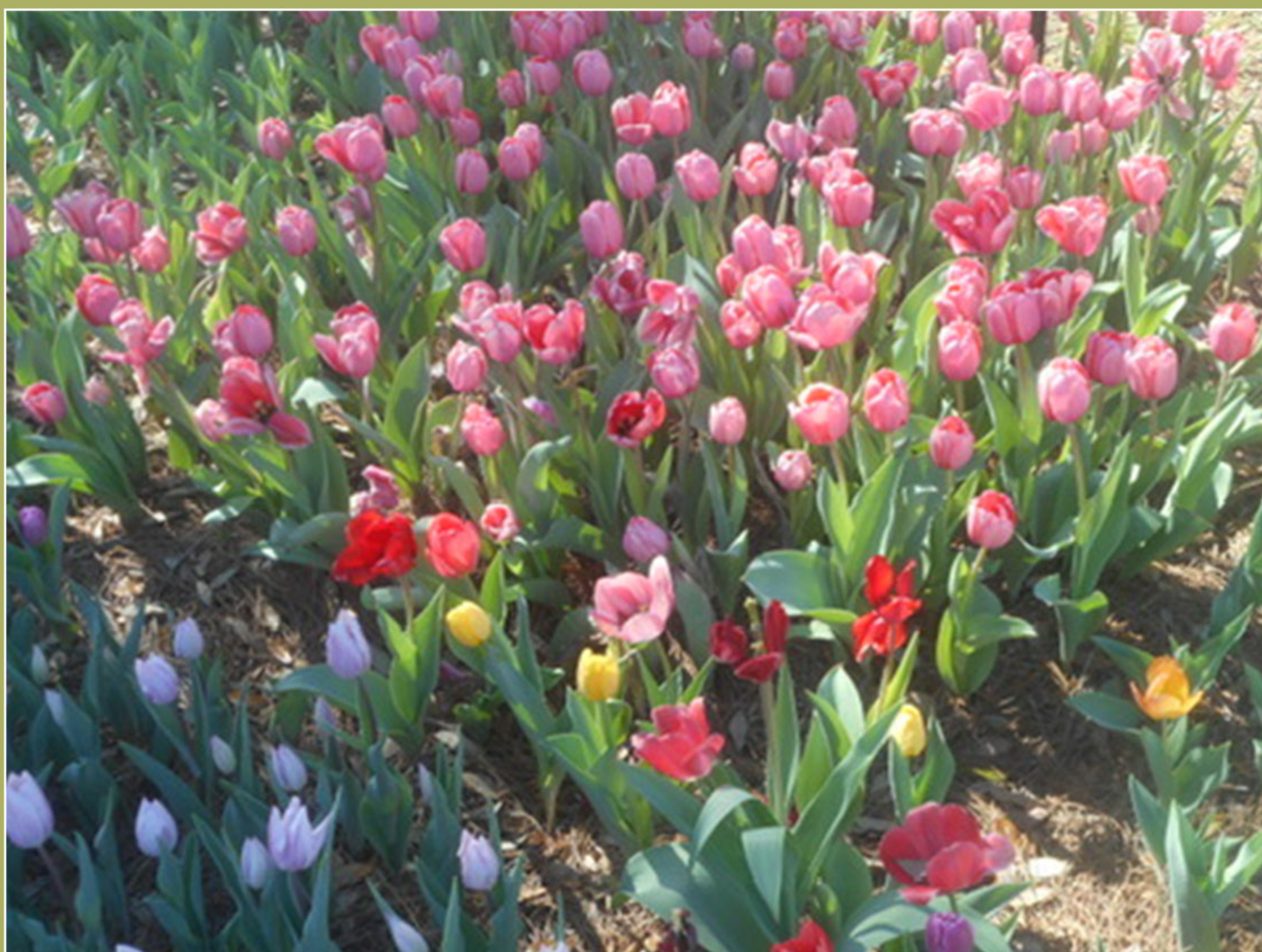
was a tiny white marble
its moons strung like a bracelet

of glass beads
a shimmering halo in the heavens

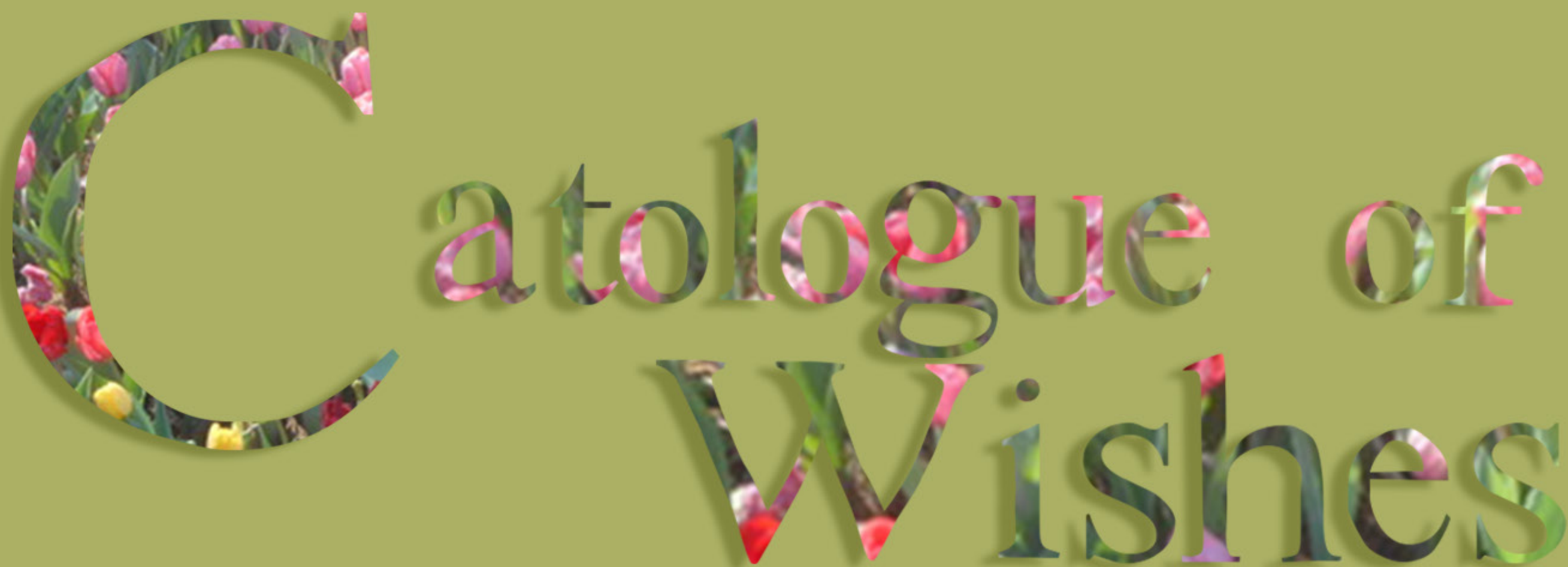
so wonderful and so
inconsequential

Kemboi Allan

Catalogue of Wishes



Kemboi Allan is a Kenyan writer residing in Nairobi. His works have been published or are forthcoming in Soul Poetry, Prose & Arts Magazine, The Wayfarer Art and Literary Journal, Everscribe Magazine, the RIC Journal, DoubleSpeak Magazine, MEN: An International Anthology of African and Latin American Writers, and more.



Catalogue of Wishes

by Kemboi Allan

I want to believe in good signs
dark clouds for rains
on a dry and punitive season
but I hate the premonitions
within my feeble assemblage
and I have to guard
my uneven thoughts.
I wish I could hear the birds
singing outside my window
A bright morning to behold in awe
the day is warm and clear
and I have a catalogue of wishes
problems of human existence
waiting for the beautiful evening.
I wish my knees will not buckle
as I step out to muck up
the daylight hours
ploughing through the tall reeds
problems of my own creation
to kill the fears within me.

Paul Hostovsky

Last Poem



Paul Hostovsky makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter. His poems and essays appear widely online and in print.

Last Poem

by Paul Hostovsky

It was just a tiny thing,
a handful of unrhymed couplets

about the warm tears
of old men,

tears that bless everything,
help nothing, no one—

each line like an empty clothesline
with a few orphan clothespins,

no clothes, no colors flapping
in the breeze. Just the sagging

line with its suggestion of a house
on one side, a tree on the other,

or two trees and no house—
then the clothespins flying away.

Kaitlyn Sun

2 poems



Kaitlyn Sun is a part-time poet and full-time magical girl. She fights mental demons with words. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Sad Girl Diaries, The Cackling Kettle, Bitter Melon Review, and Querencia Press, among others.

helium

by Kaitlyn Sun

the air here is thin.
my lungs breathe it in.
the watercolour transparency
makes my head spin,
a helium balloon drifting
from a child's grasping hands.

my vision is floating.
ephemeral oval breaking the surface
of the stratosphere,
omniscient as God.
everything becomes so distant,
inconsequential in the edgeless dark.



There will still be tomorrow

by Kaitlyn Sun

and when the time comes
for all things to be lifted
translucently from the earth
there will still remain
the brightness of tomorrow—

there will still be trees
and sunlight and shade
the trees will still thread their roots
tenaciously into the earth
the earth from which mushrooms
raise their white angelic heads
and leaves that shed in sunset colours
will return to rot
in grateful turn wildflowers will bloom
grass will brush between someone's toes
dappled light will still kiss skin
and there will be children
going into distant fields.

A misty forest scene with a pond and trees. The image has a soft, ethereal quality with a color palette of muted greens, browns, and greys. The text 'FICTION' is overlaid in a large, white, serif font, arranged vertically in the center of the image. The letters are slightly shadowed, giving them a three-dimensional appearance as if they are floating or standing in the mist. The background shows a dense forest of thin trees, with a calm body of water in the foreground reflecting the surrounding foliage and the light filtering through the canopy.

F

I

C

T

I

O

N

Kirsty Nottage

Brother Malachi



Kirsty is a writer dedicated to challenging perspectives and reshaping the way we view the world. Her work delves into how characters navigate complex situations, exploring the nuances of human experience. Her short story, *Reset*, earned her the Elegant Literature Award for new writers, recognising the skilful way she was able to show the grieving process. Outside of writing, Kirsty finds inspiration in the company of her two

Brother

Malachi

by Kirsty Nottage

Charlie loved being outdoors. It was one of the main reasons he'd joined the commune. As they packed away the remnants of their meagre picnic, he savoured the gentle breeze that made their sparse rations more palatable. Yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that the portions had shrunk since Brother Malachi's arrival. He tapped his fingers together—it must be his faulty memory. He was lucky to live in the commune. He'd experienced the hardships of outside.

The wind howled, breaking Charlie from his thoughts, replacing them with a new concern. The weather had worsened over the last few hours, unusual for the time of year. He glanced at Mary-Anne. "Do you think a storm's coming?"

"Maybe."

"Should we be preparing?"

"Charlie, you know Brother Malachi says we shouldn't worry. The Righteous Angel will keep us safe."

Charlie nodded. Of course, Brother Malachi was right. But surely preparations couldn't hurt? He considered speaking out but remembered what happened when Elsie had questioned Brother Malachi's new methods. Bound for a week, made to eat like an animal. He could still see her tears as the ropes rubbed her wrists raw. He shuddered. He must remain faithful.

As the wind grew stronger, Charlie wished he could check the weather. 'Stop thinking like that,' he scolded himself, tapping his fingers together,

A lightning strike in the distance shot through Charlie's thoughts and was immediately followed by a growl of thunder. "We should get shelter," he shouted over the roar of wind. Mary-Anne nodded, and they hurried to corral the pigs before running towards the self-built commune.

Inside, they found their comrades kneeling and chanting. "Protect us Righteous Angel!" they intoned. Mary-Anne fell on her knees to join them.

Charlie hesitated. "Where's Brother Malachi?"

"He's conferring with the Angel," a man replied, tears of hope in his eyes, "He told us to continue our protective chanting. The faithful will be saved."

A flash of lightning was followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder.

Charlie's thoughts screamed at him to board the windows and fetch supplies, but he knew they were doubts planted by the devil. He tapped his fingers together, then dropped to his knees, joining the chanting.

The first window smashing inwards didn't stop the chanting and nor did the second. When the wooden walls groaned and splintered, the chant lost its conviction. It was finally stopped completely when the wind tore the wooden walls down from the inside out.

Charlie curled into a ball, tapping his fingers, until a piece of wood struck his head, ending his movements completely.

After hours of waiting, Malachi tentatively opened the storm shelter that sat away from the commune. Seeing the calmer weather, he emerged with the higher-ranking members. He checked his phone. "Dammit, no signal." He glanced at the others, who were staring at the chaos surrounding them. "Come on, let's assess the damage. It looks like the Righteous Angel has been busy."

Veronica Lavenia

The Country Girl



Veronica L. is an Italy-based writer with a PhD in Iberian and Ibero-American Languages and Literatures. She has authored several non-fiction books, some published in English by Anglo-Saxon presses, along with works of fiction. Some of her her works in English have appeared/will appear on: Adelaide Literary Magazine; The Hoolet's Nook; Micromance Magazine (publication scheduled for July 21, 2025). Juice Press Magazine (release expected in 2025).

The Country Girl

by Veronica Lavenia

“Dad’s gone. You need to come home, Elsa. Now.”

My brother Luca doesn’t like to play with words. He gets straight to the heart of the matter. An approach so different from mine. I work with words. That’s why I always try to find the right ones, especially if I address them to those I love.

On a July morning the cards of fate turned my life upside down. The world tilted.

The loss of my father was a shock. He was the pillar of the family. The news of his sudden heart attack left me with a dilemma. What my world would be without his smile, his hugs, his boisterous laughter, and his unwavering guidance? What would have become of that girl, still full of dreams, with a job as a freelance journalist?

I knew that those dreams would be set aside. I don’t know for how long.

My father founded the family farm. The one that allowed us a wealthy life and, still today, gives work to other families.

My brother, after graduating in Economics, started to take care of the commercial aspect but still too young to take on such a huge responsibility alone.

On the road that brought me back from Rome to the Florentine countryside I thought about what my role could be.

One thing I was sure of: I needed to process the grief right there where everything began.

The rolling hills of Tuscany stretch out endlessly before me. I look out from my room and admire the wildflowers swaying in the warm breeze.

It’s hard to believe that a few weeks ago, I was moving through the busy streets of Rome, chasing stories in search of the next scoop.

The scent of damp earth and ripe grapes fills my lungs. The rhythm of the countryside is in stark contrast to the sterile buzz of the newsroom, the deadlines, the caffeine that kept me awake for so many nights.

I left the noise for the symphony of silence.

Our villa is more than just a house. It is a living, breathing entity, imbued with the laughter, the tears, the triumphs, and the struggles of generations past. It is Dad's sanctuary.

The first few weeks were tough. Not just for my inner balance. I knew almost nothing about winemaking, pruning vines or grafting trees.

I have always lived my life in the countryside as pure leisure. Typing on the keys of my laptop has always been my favorite sport.

My hands, accustomed to keyboards and notebooks, are clumsy as I fiddle with tools and get tangled in vines.

The farmers look at me with a mixture of patience and amusement.

And then there's Lorenzo, the agronomist who manages the vineyards. We have known each other since we were children. He has always had a soft spot for me, as I have given priority to work and passing stories. My parents have hoped for a long time that I could start a family with him. He gently takes my hand, indicating how to hold the bunch of grapes as I cut it. A caress that warms my wounded heart.

It seems that time helps us live with absence. Maybe it will be true. While waiting for that moment, I have begun to embrace the rhythm of rural life. Every day is an exercise in resilience. My days are marked by the clucking of chickens and the satisfaction of nourishing life from the soil. I am learning to understand the subtle balance of nature that allows vines to thrive. I find comfort in simple tasks: picking olives, breathing the fresh, earthy air.

Every afternoon, I find myself among the rows of vines, as the setting sun casts long shadows across the landscape. I run my fingers along the rough bark of ancient vines. Often, Lorenzo finds me there, lost in thought. "This land," he said to me one day, his voice soft but firm, "reminds me of your father, his care, his dedication. This land will guide you." I could listen to him for hours as he explained the intricacies of the vineyard, the fine nuances of each variety, the rhythms of the seasons. His passion mirrors my father's, a deep connection to the land.

Between hard moments and a sense of duty, I am discovering the power of change. What started as an obligation could turn into an opportunity.

Lorenzo inspires me with his suggestions and my father's legacy guides me.

Little by little, my mother is resuming her daily rhythms. She prepares preserves and tarts to serve to the laborers during breaks. She used to do this by singing. Now, she is silent but, from time to time, she gives smiles.

In the drawers of the cupboard I found notebooks with some of mom's recipes. In some pages I find my fathers writing.

I love your potato pie.

I love you. Baked pasta today?

This is my favorite cake. I adore you.

Those notebooks have become my comforting reading to devote myself to in the evenings while the sun sinks below the horizon, painting the sky with shades of orange and purple. Sitting on the porch, with a glass of the family wine in my hand.

"Why don't you start writing again?" Lorenzo asks me one evening in late August.

"My mom and my brother had the same thought as you."

"And you didn't have it?" He repeats, munching on yet another cantucci. 'Your mother's cantucci are always divine.'

"Mum's cantucci biscuits are addictive." I reply with a smile. "And as for writing, it doesn't seem like a distant idea to me anymore."

"So, will you return to Rome?"

I read a hint of melancholy in Lorenzo's eyes.

"That's not so sure." I say. "The magazine I write for will soon start a column dedicated to Italian food and wine excellence. I offered to write about

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Quis ipsum suspendisse ultrices gravida. Risus commodo viverra maecenas accumsan lacus vel facilisis.

Tuscany. I can do it from here, sending the articles, as and when."

"Your father would be proud of you."

"I hope so. It would be a part-time job anyway."

"A big decision."

“ My life has changed in a few months. My priorities are no longer the same. I had everything here but I looked elsewhere for fulfillment.”

“You’re young, it’s normal.”

“I don’t want to be just a journalist anymore. I would love to narrate, to weave the threads of my family’s history with my homeland.”

“Whatever choice you make will be the right one.”

“And will you be there?”

“Always. Forever.”

“These are important words. You may not be able to keep your promise.”

“I have always loved you, Elsa.”

His words are charged with a lifetime of unspoken feelings. I looked at him. He has always been a constant presence in my life, a silent guardian. Today, he could be something more than a special friend. He is a deep, abiding affection that was rooted in shared history and mutual respect.

Dad always said that change is inevitable but it’s how we respond to that change that defines us.

I look to the future with gratitude. For my father and my family. For Lorenzo.

A new chapter is starting. A chapter filled with new scents. The taste of home, the taste of love, the taste of my future. And I was finally ready to embrace it.

I’m walking through the darkness to find the light.

Alice Baburek

The Little Town Called Paradise



Alice Baburek is an avid reader, determined writer and animal lover. She lives with her female partner and four canine companions. Retired, she challenges herself to become an unforgettable emerging voice.

The Little Town Called Paradise

by Alice Baburek

In the thick hills of Virginia, the blazing sun began to set behind the majestic Appalachian Mountains. Bette Wilder adjusted the visor, then briefly took her eyes off the winding road as she reached across to the empty passenger seat.

“Now where did I put those damn sunglasses...” A deep horn blared, suddenly bringing Bette back to the road ahead. “Oh, no!” she screamed, yanking the steering wheel hard to the left.

“Now where did I put those damn sunglasses...” A deep horn blared, suddenly bringing Bette back to the road ahead. “Oh, no!” she screamed, yanking the steering wheel hard to the left.

Her heart skipped a beat. It took a second for her to realize how close she came to losing it all.

The beautiful setting sun cast an ominous shadow upon the deserted highway. Bette’s favorite tune played on the Suburban’s radio. She hummed along, with a slight smile. It had been quite a while since her last real vacation. Not having any family, and so few friends, Bette busied herself with her work. One day, hopefully soon, she would meet her significant other and settle down into an entirely different kind of life. A happy one—a house with a white picket fence—a dog and cat and enough money never to work again! But for now, she would enjoy her time off.

The small green sign on the side of the road read, “Town of Paradise – 1 Mile.”

It sounds quaint, she thought.

With no other traffic in sight, she glided easily into the right lane, then exited quickly, veering off the main road. The ramp circled once, then came to an abrupt stop. There were no signs of which direction led to the ominous Town of Paradise.

Bette sat back as her SUV idled. She contemplated which way to go. A single lane road stretched endlessly in both directions, surrounded by the waving green of never-ending fields. She shrugged her shoulders, then opted to turn right. Within seconds, a tiny blue sign appeared. Welcome to Paradise! Population?

Bette did a double take, then slowed down. Glancing up in her rearview mirror to check for any oncoming traffic, she carefully backed up to read the strange sign once again. Welcome to Paradise! the bold letters cried out.

“What the...”

Her voice trailed off. She could have sworn there had been a question mark after the word “population” which now was absent from the sign. A red light pinged on the dashboard. Bette’s attention drew to the idiot light. It pinged again.

Low Fuel.

She tried to think back to the last time she stopped for gas. Her mind was blank. In fact, she couldn’t remember a thing before getting on the interstate. Suddenly, it pinged once more.

“Okay, okay,” she mumbled to herself. Paradise, here I come.

Several minutes later, a lone gas station sat off to one side of the road. Cautiously, Bette maneuvered her Suburban and slowed to park adjacent to the single standing gas pump. The old tin sign upon the weather-beaten building read in black faded cursive letters: Joe’s Auto & More -- No job too big or small! Before Bette could shut off her car, the withered front door opened. She slightly gasped at the attractive middle-aged man. His sleek profile was accentuated by his salt-and-pepper closely cropped hair and beard. His spotless denim overalls hung loosely over his thin but muscular stature. Wiping his hands on a ragged towel, he made his way towards Bette.

“Afternoon...welcome to Paradise. I’m Joe. Can I help you?”

Bette slowly got out and stood frozen next to her car. She was taken aback by the saintliness that emanated from his being. It was as if he glowed in the lazy sunlight.

“Ma’am? Are you alright?” Joe finished with the towel and tossed it over his right shoulder.

“Ah...yes, yes. I’m fine. Thanks for asking. My car...gas.” Her words fell short as he stepped closer. A feeling of serenity radiated throughout her body. Oddly enough, she felt safe with this man.

“I can fill up the tank for you.” He flashed a smile, then turned on his heel and walked toward the gas pump.

“I can do it!” Bette called out.

Joe unhitched the nozzle. He pointed to the sign on the building. Bette's eyes followed the man's long finger. Joe's Auto & More—No job too big or small! Bette turned her attention back to Joe. He was already pumping gas into her car.

"I get it," she said. "Nothing too small."

Joe smiled and gave a thumbs up. As he returned the pump to its dispenser, Bette leaned back into her car to grab her wallet.

"How much do I owe you?" she called out.

Joe wiped his hands once again on the towel and slowly moved towards Bette around the car. "Here in Paradise, we do things a bit different. No charge for the gas," he explained. "Pay it forward. Kindness goes a long way." He gave a slight salute and walked back to the station.

Bette felt confused. "Wait! I don't understand. Pay it forward to whom?" she cried. But the creaky door closed behind Joe, and Bette was alone once more.

As she slowly sat down inside her car, the rickety door opened once again. Joe strolled back out. Seconds later, he was bending down and handing Bette a small business card.

"You'll need a place to stay for a while. Mary's Inn is just up ahead. Have a blessed day, Bette." Before she could reply, Joe had made his way back and disappeared inside.

"Well, I'll be...how did he know I needed a place to stay?" Bette sat for a brief moment before turning the key. "And how did he know my name?" she mumbled.

The engine revved. Putting it into gear, she got back on the road and headed to the curious town called Paradise.

Paradise had one main street lined with old-fashioned stores, a bank, a diner, and an inn—Mary's Inn, to be exact. Bette coasted as she looked about at the strange but charming, peaceful town. It would seem this unusual place had silently slipped by the years of progress, forever stuck in time. A definite tourist attraction by far, yet she could count on one hand the number of vehicles in the few designated parking spots. Maybe the residents of Paradise liked it that way.

Bette decided to check-in at the inn as the evening sky darkened. Hopefully, there would be a vacant room. She would love to spend a few days here, lost in the essence of tranquility. Parking her SUV in the space directly in front of Mary's Inn, she took in the ambiance of the huge colonial structure converted into, she assumed, a bed and breakfast.

Grabbing her small duffel bag from the backseat, Bette strolled to the newly painted white front door. Welcome Friends was meticulously painted in heavy black letters. As she slowly entered, a tiny bell rang. Bette gasped. Mary's Inn was a picturesque replica of a long-forgotten era. To the left sat a large parlor, with thick masonry walls and a stone foundation. The glossy wooden floors displayed floral woven oval rugs. Several brown leather wing-backed chairs and a colonial brick fireplace decorated the spacious yet cozy room.

Bette sighed at the wonder before her. A place where life gave way to the things that matter the most. Warm, hospitable, and above all else—a place of refuge.

"Hello, Bette. Welcome to our town of Paradise. I'm Mary...I run this inn, along with my cousin, Elizabeth."

Bette snapped back to reality. Behind the short, lumbered counter stood a petite, thirtyish woman. Her long brown hair was tied back into a ponytail. Blue eyes and a bright smile seemed to radiate from her angelic face. A flowered cotton blouse fit perfectly with her slim figure.

Bette realized she was staring. "Are you alright, Bette?" asked Mary. She tilted her head as her smile slowly slipped.

"Oh, yes...sorry, I didn't mean to stare. I mean..." Bette looked about the historic living area. "It's...beautiful...and so...so serene. I've...I've never seen anything like it." She sighed.

"Well, thank you! We try to provide a sense of warmth, serenity...an internal peace within one's self. A spiritual release of connecting with the more important aspects of life. Home away from home...we like to call it." Mary bent down and retrieved the guest register. "How long will you be staying?"

Bette looked at the large book in front of her. Names filled the lines on the entire page. "Wow, look at all these people." She turned to the previous page; once again, filled to capacity. "These people...come from

from everywhere...even other countries.” Bette looked up at Mary.

“Of course. The town of Paradise is quite different...you’ll come to see. People come from far and wide. Paradise is special in its unique and sacred way.” Mary winked. “You could say Paradise is a stop in between—from where you came to your final destination.”

Bette eagerly signed the register, adding her name to the hundreds of others who’d passed through Paradise.

Mary returned the book to its place. She unhooked the brass key with the number 3 embossed in gold. “At the top of the stairs, turn right. If you need anything, anything at all, just give a holler. Your room comes with a private bath. Breakfast is served at seven a.m. every morning. Dinner at six p.m. All inclusive. You’re on your own for lunch. Heaven’s Best! is just down the road and has a variety of delicious lunch items.” Mary hesitated for a brief moment, then continued. “Enjoy your stay here, Bette, and I pray you find what you’re searching for.” Mary’s movements were soft and direct as she lifted the key.

“Wait! How did you know my name and what do you charge per night?” questioned Bette. Mary still held the brass key. Her deep blue eyes twinkled.

“Joe gave me a holler and told me you’d be along, and I wouldn’t worry about payment right now.” Mary extended her arm once again with the key.

Bette gave a half-smile as she reached for it. She felt confused by the strangeness surrounding the unusual town.

As soon as her fingers touched the brass object, an electric jolt seized her hand and traveled up her arm into her chest. Bette gasped as a blinding light filled behind her eyes. Horrific images of a car accident replayed before her hypnotized eyes. The sound of a truck horn blasted within her mind, while she watched the car tumble over and over again off the edge of the road, down into a dark abyss. But as quickly as those terrifying images unfolded, they disappeared within the realms of a faded memory.

“Dinner will be served in the dining room within the hour. I hope you like fish. Everything we eat here in Paradise is home grown or caught daily in the nearby river.”

Bette stood frozen. It was as if her feet were permanently planted in the ground. She could hear the words coming from Mary’s mouth, yet she could not respond. It was the ringing of the bell behind her that snapped Bette

from her mind-bending trance.

Home away from home...we like to call it." Mary bent down and retrieved the guest register. "How long will you be staying?"

Bette looked at the large book in front of her. Names filled the lines on the entire page. "Wow, look at all these people." She turned to the previous page; once again, filled to capacity. "These people...come from everywhere...even other countries." Bette looked up at Mary.

"Of course. The town of Paradise is quite different...you'll come to see. People come from far and wide. Paradise is special in its unique and sacred way." Mary winked. "You could say Paradise is a stop in between—from where you came to your final destination."

Bette eagerly signed the register, adding her name to the hundreds of others who'd passed through Paradise.

Mary returned the book to its place. She unhooked the brass Key with the number 3 embossed in gold. "At the top of the stairs, turn right. If you need anything, anything at all, just give a holler. Your room comes with a private bath. Breakfast is served at seven a.m. every morning. Dinner at six p.m. All inclusive. You're on your own for lunch. Heaven's Best! is just down the road and has a variety of delicious lunch items." Mary hesitated for a brief moment, then continued. "Enjoy your stay here, Bette, and I pray you find what you're searching for." Mary's movements were soft and direct as she lifted the Key.

"Wait! How did you know my name and what do you charge per night?" questioned Bette. Mary still held the brass Key. Her deep blue eyes twinkled.

"Joe gave me a holler and told me you'd be along, and I wouldn't worry about payment right now." Mary extended her arm once again with the Key.

Bette gave a half-smile as she reached for it. She felt confused by the strangeness surrounding the unusual town.

As soon as her fingers touched the brass object, an electric jolt seized her hand and traveled up her arm into her chest. Bette gasped as a blinding light filled behind her eyes. Horrific images of a car accident replayed before her hypnotized eyes. The sound of a truck horn blasted within her mind, while she watched the car tumble over and over again off the edge of the road, down into a dark abyss. But as quickly as those terrifying images unfolded, they disappeared within the realms of a faded memory.

"Dinner will be served in the dining room within the hour. I hope you like fish. Everything we eat here in Paradise is home grown or caught daily in the nearby river."

Bette stood frozen. It was as if her feet were permanently planted in the ground. She could hear the words coming from Mary's mouth, yet she could not respond. It was the ringing of the bell behind her that snapped Bette from her mind-bending trance.

"Evening, Mary," called out the husky built young man. His snug jeans were torn about the knees. A faded T-shirt clung to his muscular chest. The bushy redhead grinned at the sight of Bette. "Evening, ma'am. I'm Andrew. I'm one of the fishermen here in Paradise."

Bette rapidly turned to face the stranger. His brown eyes delved into hers. Her heart literally skipped a beat. For a brief moment, she lost her words. Andrew held out his wide hand. Bette extended hers. As their hands clasped together in a shake, once again, a jolt jimmied up Bette's arm. But this time, she saw bursting colors behind her eyes. A peacefulness she'd never quite felt before.

Andrew slowly dropped his hand from her grip. "Could use you on the nets...you got a awful strong handshake for a beautiful woman." Andrew shifted in his worn boots, then flashed a Cheshire cat smile.

Bette instantly retrieved her hand. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean to hold on to you so tight." Her face flushed. She twisted the brass key with both hands.

"Don't mind at all." Andrew winked. "Mary, Simon is around back, hauling in the fresh catch of the day." His eyes refocused on Bette. "Let me know how you like the fish. And if you're looking for something to do here in Paradise...well, I've always got room on my boat for another strong, helping hand." With that said, Andrew turned on his heel and left Bette standing in awe.

Mary cleared her throat. "Bette, why don't you go up to your room and get settled in? Dinner will be served soon."

Bette turned to face Mary and ask her about Andrew, but Mary was gone. She let out a huge sigh as she grabbed her duffel bag and headed up the winding steps.

Room 3 was located down the flowered hallway. Her Key turned easily. Inside the room was as charming as the other areas within the bed and breakfast. It was simply decorated. A pastel blue covered the walls. Photographs of colorful flowers scattered the quaint and comfortable room. Braided throw rugs dressed the shiny planked floor. A four-post full-sized bed sat in the middle, with two round wooden night tables one on each side with matching glass lamps. A leather worn high backed chair sat near the wide-open window. A warm breeze filtered through the pale-yellow lacy curtains. A five-drawer antique dresser sat in the corner along the wall of the welcoming room. This could be home.

Bette sighed. She could definitely get used to this pace. Slow and serene. She closed her eyes and breathed in the summery air filled with the aroma of the waving meadow below. All kinds of scents swirled through her mind—fresh cut grass, roses, gardenias, buttercups—they went on and on. How could it be possible? So many wonderful smells. Now she understood the meaning of that overused cliché: “stop and smell the roses.” Her mind drifted to the few remaining childhood memories she so eagerly cherished. Images of her late mother and father occupied the empty void. Lacey and George Wilder. They would forever remain young and vibrant. Almost as old as her parents on that fateful day they were ripped from her younger self for all eternity. Tears formed behind her closed eyelids. A few escaped and trickled down her cheeks. It had been a long time since she gave in to the useless feelings of grief.

Suddenly, a knock on the door startled her back to the present. Bette quickly wiped her wet face with the back of her hand. “Coming!” she called out.

Seconds later, she twisted the knob and pulled the door open wide. Andrew leaned against the door frame with a huge white smile.

“Thought you might like some company for dinner. It’s being served as we speak.” Andrew bowed and extended his arm. “How about it?” A flutter jumped inside Bette’s stomach.

“Wait...what? Is this, like, a date or something because I don’t really know you?” she questioned. Her head tilted slightly to one side. His blue/green eyes captivated her being. Her stomach flipped-flopped at the thought of spending time with this handsome stranger.

“Sure...why not. If you don't mind dining here at the inn with a fisherman.” Andrew winked.

Bette's heart hiccupped. She slowly held on to the crook of his arm. A faint smell of aftershave lingered in the air. His clean, pressed white shirt fit well with the faded blue jeans. A pair of leather cowboy boots finished his attire.

“Wow...you got ready really fast. I just left you by the check-in desk,” commented Bette as they made their way down the spiraling staircase.

“That was over an hour ago,” replied Andrew. “Doesn't take long to shower and shave.” His presence calmed her eagerness. Bette's spirits lifted, and the memories of her parents' demise had slipped away.

The small, cozy dining area held several round wooden tables and chairs. A long banquet table fit snug against the far wall. It contained the evening meal, consisting of fish, home baked bread, and a variety of fresh grown vegetables. As with all the rooms at Mary's Inn, this one was no different. Decorated in the quaint atmosphere of a homey log cabin. The polished wood floors reflected the candle-like chandelier, giving the tranquil setting an air of serenity.

Andrew guided Bette to the brightly covered table smack dab in the middle of the room. He held the chair out for her as she gently sat down. “Here we are,” he said in a low, smooth voice. “All I need to know is which vegetable you'd like on your plate,” he asked as he made his way to the feasting table.

Bette was about to stand up. “Andrew, I'm more than capable of serving myself, but I appreciate your kind gesture.”

He already had a white plate in his hand and was serving up the tender fish and heavenly bread. “You just stay sitting, Bette. I've got this. Any special request for vegetables?” Bette shook her head.

“I like them all.”

Andrew scooped a heaping serving of squash, corn, green beans, and cauliflower on her plate. Seconds later, he placed it directly in front of her. “Now, tell me the truth. How's the fish?” he asked while heading back to the table for his own plate of food.

Bette cut into the tender and flayed fish. The taste of lemon zinged in her mouth as the heavenly fish melted on her tongue.

“Oh...my,” she said, with her mouth half-full. “It’s divine!”

Bette shoveled another heaping forkful. Her stomach grumbled. She couldn’t remember the last time she had something to eat. As she chewed the tasteful fish, she spread the soft butter across the homemade bread. The melting of the butter inside her mouth suddenly took her back to the days of visiting her now deceased grandmother, who always made her bread dough from scratch. Bette closed her eyes and thought about the elderly woman who’d played a small but monumental part in her upbringing. After her parents died, her mother’s mother, Agnes, took in Bette and raised her until her untimely death a few years later. Bette was devastated by not only the loss of her parents, but also the grandmother she so adored.

As Bette opened her eyes, a single tear crawled down her cheek. Her smile instantly vanished at the saddened image.

“It’s okay,” said Andrew as he lightly placed his hand on hers. Bette, overwhelmed with grief, began to sob. He gently squeezed her long, thin fingers. “We’ve all lost loved ones. Remembering keeps them alive within our hearts. If we think of them, they’re never far away.”

Bette composed herself as she withdrew her hand from his grasp. She used the cloth napkin to stifle the few remaining sniffles.

“Thank you, Andrew. I’m normally not this emotional. In fact, I hardly ever think about my parents anymore...let alone my grandmother!” She forced a laugh to cover the deep ache inside.

“Maybe you should start thinking about them more. Bring them back into your life,” he said while scooping up a spoonful of the colorful squash.

“What would be the purpose of that? They’re gone. And it doesn’t matter how much I think about them or how much I miss them...it won’t bring them back.” Bette was no longer hungry. She just wanted to run back to her room and be left alone. Crying like a baby in front of a stranger—a good looking stranger—made her feel like quite the idiot.

Andrew kept on eating. His appetite was unaffected by the sensitive woman sitting across from him. “I don’t know,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, “makes me feel good to think about the people I miss.” He reached for the tall glass of freshly squeezed lemonade. “Cheers!” he said as he held up his glass.

“You’re definitely an optimist, Andrew.” She watched him eagerly gulp

down half the glass, then wipe his mouth.

“You have to be, Bette...when being a fisherman. Have to be thankful for what you have, not what you don’t have,” he commented, with a half-smile.

“I suppose so. I guess it could always be worse...but...it could always be better, too!” She felt the serenity of his words calm her inside. “But I don’t think that’s the way the saying goes, is it?” Her stomach grumbled. She snatched another slice of bread and shoved it in her mouth.

“No, not really, but who says you can’t make up your own saying?” He laughed. Once again, she felt his ease of acceptance.

“How is everything?” came a voice from across the room. Both Bette and Andrew turned toward the petite elderly woman. Elizabeth stood hunched in the doorway, wringing her hands.

“Elizabeth! Once again, you outdid yourself! It was delicious!” exclaimed Andrew.

Bette noticed the deep wrinkles embedded within the old woman’s face. Why isn’t this woman retired? Sitting at home, enjoying what remains of her life? Why keep working?

Bette stood up. “Would you like to sit down, Elizabeth? You must be tired after making such a wonderful meal! It was fantastic...restaurant quality.” Bette moved toward Elizabeth.

Instantly, Elizabeth put up her hand in protest. “Thank you for the compliments...but I need to clean up the Kitchen before bed. No time to sit and chit-chat. I’ll leave that up to the fisherman.” Elizabeth turned on her heel and was gone before Bette could respond.

She reeled around to face Andrew. “Why is Elizabeth still working? She should be at home, sitting and...and Knitting or...reading books...or maybe even traveling or...whatever makes her happy! I don’t understand?” said Bette.

“She is doing what makes her happy—cooking and helping Mary at the inn. It’s their livelihood and purpose!” Andrew finished his food and gathered up his empty plate.

Bette sat silent for a moment. “Purpose?” she asked. “As in, because she’s a woman and her place should be to cook and clean?” A rush of heat rose into her face.

Andrew stopped, gave a slight sigh, then turned to face Bette. “No...not because she’s a woman...but because she loves and takes pride in the skills the Good Lord provided. You’ll see, Bette, Paradise is a place like no other. People here enjoy their work to the point where it’s not considered work at all. Please don’t think I could ever disrespect Elizabeth or Mary in the least. I’m sorry if you misunderstood.” He took her plate and his, then disappeared through the doorway.

Bette sat stunned. What’s wrong with me? Why am I being so offensive?

Mary popped her head through the door. “The best fish you ever ate...am I right?” she asked, with a smile.

“Yes, indeed it is!” Bette liked this caring woman. She felt a spiritual connection to her, and oddly enough, to the town, too.

After a few days, it would seem Bette had found her niche. The momentum for peaceful living surged throughout her entire being.

Now, with many of the townsfolk considered her friends, Bette’s presence deepened into a divine interlocking within the recessed soul of Paradise. She had tried several times to contact her employer for an extended leave, but cell phone service in Paradise was nowhere to be found.

Out on the boat, Andrew cast the fishing net into the calm waters. Bette wrapped the excess line around the thick holding pole stationed at the bow of the fishing trawler.

Andrew smiled at Bette as her curved body moved with ease and precision. He knew it was time to tell her the truth—the real truth about the unusual town called Paradise.

Bette shielded her eyes against the blazing sun. The calmness of the water was serene. She noticed Andrew staring at her. “A penny for your thoughts...or should I say a fish?” Bette chuckled.

Andrew tilted his head. “I was hoping you’d ask me,” said Andrew.

Bette narrowed her eyes. “What’s on your mind, Andrew?” questioned Bette. She turned and faced him. He gently leaned back against the inside of his boat. “You’re not going to tell me you’re secretly married and have a bunch of kids...are you?” She held up crossed fingers.

Andrew gave a half-grin. “No, Bette. I’m not married, and I don’t have children. Have you ever wondered about this place...Paradise?” he asked.

Bette glanced around. Small ripples raced across the calm waters. “Well, I did when I first arrived...but not too much now. I like it here, Andrew. And I enjoy your company, too.” She took a step closer to Andrew.

He crossed his tan, muscular arms. “Do you ever wonder about the afterlife? Heaven...hell...good...bad or somewhere in-between?” he asked as he moved toward her and lightly placed his rugged hands on her shoulders. His blue-green eyes held hers. “What do you remember, Bette? About that fateful day?” he whispered.

Her heart raced. Her eyelids suddenly felt heavy. Too heavy to keep open. Immediately, it came rushing back to Bette in horrible images—the flimsy guard rail, the car tumbling over and over while glass shattered around her unsecured body. Metal crunched metal inside the rolling death trap. Unheard words spewing from her bleeding mouth. And then—nothing but complete darkness.

“It can’t be...am I dead?” murmured Bette. She slipped into Andrew’s open arms. The warmth of his being enveloped her stiff body.

“Bette, if you mean are you alive in the physical sense of the word—no. Everyone in Paradise, at one time or another, was alive. A life filled with family and friends. But as with anything else, nothing lasts forever. And since each of us hasn’t a clue when we’ll be called to serve...I like to call it...spiritual duty.” Andrew gently released Bette.

Her eyes were searching—searching for answers. “I don’t understand,” whispered Bette. “You aren’t making any sense at all.” The sadness she felt had lifted. Was it possible she really was dead? And Paradise was some sort of stop-over before...before...whatever comes after life?

“I was christened a Catholic, but I hadn’t practiced it for many years. Is this Purgatory?” she asked as she twirled in a circle. Andrew chuckled.

“We don’t call it Purgatory. It’s the road taken when the Almighty calls us. Here in Paradise, we each a specific purpose. Whether it be fishing, running the bed and breakfast, gas station attendant...the list is endless,” explained Andrew. “And we try to make it easy for the newcomers...to help them along.”

Bette blinked. She should feel confused. Upset. But she didn’t—she felt calm. An inner peace deep within her soul. Enlightened. A part of something—spiritual—a higher plane. Above and beyond. The ever after.

"You feel it...don't you, Bette? Complete serenity. Something you've dreamed about and never thought could be possible. It's here, Bette—here in Paradise."

Bette rushed into his arms once more. He held her tight. His warm lips rested on top of her head. "How long does Paradise last?" she asked. Andrew shrugged his shoulders. "No one knows. It's indefinite--there is no beginning, and there is no end. It just—is. And that's why it's called Paradise." They smiled at one another.

Bette knew then she was right where she belonged.

The heavy-duty police tow truck groaned in protest as it slowly pulled the crumpled car from the bottom of the hill. Three police officers watched as it finally reached the edge and was dragged onto the blocked highway. Sparse traffic from the east and westbound lanes had been detoured from the mountainous road.

"It looks like a pancake," said Officer Drake. The other two law enforcement officials gave a slight nod. "It took paramedics three hours to free her body from the wreckage. She didn't stand a chance." All three men gave a cursory glance inside the demolished vehicle.

"Do we have a name for the deceased?" asked Officer Heldman.

"A thirty-five-year-old female by the name of Bette Wilder," answered Officer Hoban. "Parents are dead. No living relatives who can be tracked down. Worked at a small advertising firm. According to a co-worker, Ms. Wilder had just left on vacation. And then this..." His voice trailed off into silence. All three police officers stood stoic by the side of the unrecognizable SUV.

"She didn't stand a chance," repeated Officer Drake. He peeked over his shoulder at the ambulance. The yellow and red lights flashed silently. One of the paramedics was talking to the tow truck driver. They were in no rush to get anywhere soon.

"Well, she did try to stop...skid marks," Officer Heldman said as he pointed. All three men walked to the black marks on the road. "I don't understand, the weather was perfect. Not a cloud in the sky. Sun shining...a beautiful day." He rubbed his clean-shaven chin.

"Maybe something ran out into the road and she swerved to miss it,"

commented Officer Hoban. He placed his large hands on his hips.

“The person who knows what really happened is no longer here. We can only pray Ms. Wilder found her way to a better place.”

With that said, all three officers returned to their designated vehicles and followed the silent ambulance to the morgue.