

## Out of the Blue

Most days I wake up with the sun, walk from my home along Coast Lane, hang a left onto Main Street, and pick up the newspaper from the sundry shop at the hotel on the corner. I pass the hardware store, where I breathe in the perfume of its first batch of popcorn percolating in the popper. I meander past that new exercise place and sneak a peek at the slender ladies in their skin-tight bodysuits, even though I know I shouldn't. Then I roll along past The Coin Shop and end up at The Coffee Club. I order rye toast, and a coffee. If I have any errands to do, like I do today, I set out from there to tick them off one by one.

I like the calming rhythm of routine.

Today I see Fernanda, the post-person, who gives me a big smile and says: "Beautiful day, Mr. Lark." If they still wore caps, I have no doubt she'd be tipping hers. A few minutes later, I'm transacting with the ATM machine at Wells Fargo, when I am jolted by a KABOOM. It's like a bomb has exploded behind me. I turn to see an instant crowd form around the source of the noise. I can't see much from my position on the outskirts of the group but, as I inch around looking for a better view, I see a cream-colored Cadillac that appears to have hit something. Everyone has rushed to surround the something that's been hit but, oddly, no one approaches the now stopped Caddie. *The Cheese Stands Alone* comes to mind from *The Farmer in the Dell*. Silly, sentimental tricks of the brain.

The multitude of noises I hear do remind me of a barnyard though. One attacked by foxes in broad daylight.

I start to make my way over to the Caddie, to see if I can help there since I can't seem to get near whatever's been struck, and because I feel an inexplicable pull coming from that Caddie.

A woman wearing a Wells Fargo name tag blocks my path.

“Are you a man of faith?” she asks me.

When I do not answer, she takes my hand anyway, and I am swept up into a prayer circle faster than I can say Amen.

\*\*\*\*

There it is. The Coin Shop. Sandwiched between Exhale Fitness and The Coffee Club just as her dad said it would be.

Amanda McKesson slides her Prius into an open spot across the street and turns off the engine. Taking a deep breath, she reviews her earlier conversation with her father regarding the coins. She has to get it right, yet she knows nothing, absolutely nothing, about coin collecting. But her children’s education depends on the outcome, so she takes five more minutes to rehearse.

Those three kids — Annie, Ellis and Charlotte — are her life. Together they are her North Star, the most enduring light in the heavens, keeping her ship on its destined path. Just that morning she drove them all to school and stayed for Annie’s Lacrosse game at Waterview High. Her boss gave her the morning off, but now it’s 11:41 am and she still has to conquer The Coin Shop before she swings by the house, makes her Dad his salami sandwich, and hightails it to work.

“There’s a lot of junk in there, Amanda,” Dad explained earlier over breakfast. He pushed his eggs around his plate then dropped his fork on the floor. “Let them bargain you down on those, but stay firm on the 1969 Lincoln penny. It’s worth at least \$35,000.”

Dad had been collecting coins since she was a child. She could still smell and taste the metal on her fingers after counting jars full of coins on rainy afternoons. Her fingers had tasted salty and coppery like blood.

“Dad, are you sure?” Amanda asked as she leaned over to dab the corners of his mouth. She picked up the fork from under the table and started to clear the plates. She knew he was finished eating. The fork on the floor had become his signal that he was done with his meal.

“Amanda, I am sure,” he said while backing his chair away from the table and smack into the wall. “I am tickled pink that my silly hobby can be converted to cash for my grandkids’ college fund.” His tone was reminiscent of his gentle but firm instruction when she’d been just a girl. “Now...that 1982 dime without the ‘p,’ the one you found on eBay offered for \$3,000, that’s not so valuable so don’t insist, but that 1965 silver dime? That’s a beaut. Worth at least \$10,000. If old George gives you guff, make him weigh it. They stopped making silver dimes in 1964 so the ones from 1965 are a rare mistake. They weigh 2.5 instead of 2.27 for the copper and nickel versions.”

Amanda is always amazed at how her father can remember minutiae such as weights of dimes when sometimes he forgets her children’s names.

“Then there’s the 1914 Indian head gold eagle. I call that my *Amanda*.” He chucked her under the chin as he said it, making her feel five-years-old and care-free again. No man had ever loved her so, not even her ex-husband.

“Dad, come with me to the shop. I’ll be lost without you.”

“Amanda, you’re the smartest person I know. What if I forget what I’m saying in the middle of negotiating?” As if to prove his point, he tossed his knife and plate into the trash along with his dirty napkin. “That old fox George will take advantage and we’ll never get top dollar. Besides, he’s got a weakness for a pretty girl.”

Amanda sighed. “Is there anything I can do for you before I go?”

“That play list you made for me, honey. The one with Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra on it. You know, that *Nature Boy* song. Play that.” She rescued his dish and cutlery from the bin as soon as he’d tottered off, contentedly singing to himself: “*There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy...*”

Oh God, how she’d miss Dad when he was gone. To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world.

It took a court fight with her ex-husband, Todd, to get permission to leave Washington, DC with the children to care for her father. Dad gave up his driver’s license when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s a year earlier. It wasn’t too advanced yet but he needed someone to drive and tend to his other needs. He’d been all alone in the modest ranch house since Mom passed a few years ago.

Honestly, Amanda was relieved when she returned home to California. After the initial ego-swell and prestige of landing the job in the Obama administration, she’d felt deflated most of the time. New jobs were like sugar highs. Once the sweetness was forgotten, the aftertaste of office politics lingered on the tongue.

In the rear view mirror, Amanda studies The Coin Shop, as if expecting something about its face to change. The front glass window benignly reflects dwarf palms and sunny skies just, as she imagines, it always has. It’s the kind of October day that would be called Indian summer in Washington, D.C. but here, in California, it’s just another perfect day.

Amanda exits the car and walks around to the trunk, opening it with the remote. Dad packed his treasures in a blue and white Pan Am carry-on that he and Mom acquired on their first and only trip to Europe. Amanda opens the Pan Am bag and gingerly picks out the most valuable pieces, which she clutches in her right hand. She slings the bag with the remaining coins — and her cheat sheet — over her left shoulder. She slams the trunk and makes her way back to the car’s front door to grab her purse,

when she is distracted by a red-haired woman wearing sunglasses on the sidewalk, gesticulating wildly. Next to the redhead another woman, wearing a baseball cap, seems bolted to the sidewalk, eyes open wide and hands glued to her mouth, as if to halt a hiccup, or suffocate a scream. A car door slams. Someone shouts: "Watch out!"

Amanda's senses are on high-alert. She smells the aroma of popcorn from the hardware store and the metallic scent of the coins now embedded in her moist hand. Everything seems to stop and sharpen, like a high-definition TV show on pause. Before she has a chance to turn, she freezes, like the hare who feels danger but not the direction from whence it comes.

An excruciating blow from behind forces the air out of her lungs and sends her purse and the Pan Am bag flying. A fleeting image flashes behind her eyes, of the World Trade Center as it is rammed by a 737. She feels on fire too. She realizes that her father's collection is being scattered across the asphalt. Someone will steal them, she thinks, so she wants to chase after them. The coins are rolling, rolling, rolling, every which way, under cars, in the street, but she cannot move her legs. She is pinned between her Prius and the monster that has hit her from behind.

She hears screams and sobbing, yelling and praying. Sounds amplify and echo, as if she were listening from the bottom of a swimming pool. Distorted, slow, and deep. She floats there, between the cars, in a space neither of nor not of this world.

*What's happening, what's happening?*

Images flutter through her brain, a magic lantern Zoetrope, moving backwards from that moment in time, skipping too fast through those episodes she would have thought of as profound – Charlotte's crooked baby tooth, Annie's first kiss, Ellis's tonsillectomy when he had almost died from too much anesthesia. The slide show stops in the most unexpected place, a roulette wheel arrested, the ball

falling on the wrong color after you went all in with your life's savings. Todd. Of all people, why Todd?  
Because he'll get the kids IF...

"What do you think about while you're running?" Todd asked her the day they had met.

Amanda's been a runner for as far back as she remembers. In the playground, around the school track, along dirt trails, on a treadmill. If only she could run now. Run and not look back. Run to the top of Mt. Horn, run in place until the sun sets over the Pacific, bruising the sky purple and bleeding red all over the horizon. Run for her life.

A groan erupts like the grumble of a volcano, beginning somewhere in the center of the earth, entering her body through the asphalt, shuddering through her useless legs and melded-to-metal diaphragm. It escapes her swollen lips with a guttural, prehistoric sound.

Amanda tries to make her legs move to run, run, run. She tries to will it. But her legs ignore her.

*Oh my God. Who will pick the kids up from school? Todd? Oh but Todd's not here. But if he were, would he?*

Would Todd know or care that Ellis hates sports? That Annie spends too much time on her iPad? That Charlotte has problems reading?

Amanda can no longer look up or turn her head. Her eyes feel like slits and she sees only shadows and the color red. Her car is red. Her hands are red. The street is red.

*Is someone chanting? Prayers? For me? Am I dying? I cannot be dying. I need to be at work at one, I need to cash in the coins, make Dad's sandwich. I need to pick up the kids.....*

"DON'T MOVE THE CAR!" several onlookers shout at once. Amanda hears feet running. She hears a creaking sound, similar to the sounds from an old spring bed when a great weight is lifted. A

sound eerily like a death rattle. She feels her body move. She is still pinned between the cars but the miniscule shifting causes a thunderbolt of pain and her body slides. Amanda slides deeper and deeper. Here but not here.

An old song whispers to her gentle as a lullaby. She imagines a boy serenading her, *an enchanted boy, a little shy and sad of eye*, with a message of great import. She strains her ears to hear him, his message, but suddenly sirens hum, then buzz, first one then a swarm. Deep barking male voices.

*Am I saved?*

Amanda has to concentrate harder than she ever has before to hear his song, the boy who now shares her father's voice: *The greatest thing you'll ever learn, Is just to love and be loved in return.*

\*\*\*

Ruth Larsson has been shopping at the hardware store for some Rose-Tone, pleasantly distracted by the old-fashioned popcorn machine emitting the most delicious memory-filled scent into the air around her. Now she returns to her car and inserts the key into her cream-colored Cadillac and the smell of popcorn helps her remember bringing her grandson, Reed, here and his father, Stanley, before that. Stanley died five years ago of massive heart failure and Reed, himself a father thrice over, settled down on the East Coast. Ruth frequently reminds herself that Stanley was an old-ish man of 66 when he passed, but still it's unnatural when your child goes before you do. Especially an only child.

Stanley was born here in Waterview, as was Ruth. Both at Central Hospital, which has since been converted to expensive condominiums with ocean views. Ruth shook her white-haired head in

disbelief when she read that someone had paid over five million dollars for what used to be the morgue. The irony of rebirthing a place known for being a repository of death was not lost on Ruth.

Waterview was a different world back then. A sleepy little hamlet, where everyone knew everybody else. Seems as though all you have nowadays are tourists. And dogs. Nearly every person has one. She could see a French bulldog walking his owner at that very moment. The tourists are a different matter altogether. They travel in throngs, like gnats, so thick sometimes you can't see through them.

Ruth has her eyes glued to the rear view looking for an opening to back her car out into the opposite lane (she's going west, not east, after all). Long ago, in the off-season, the only traffic on Main Street was bicycles. Gosh, she and her friends did cartwheels down the middle of the street, like human tumbleweeds. Yup, things change. But, all in all, she's had a good life, compared to most people she knows, and she counts her blessings every day.

Even though traffic on Main is light today, it's still tricky to find a synchronized opening in both lanes. The cars in the rear view swell like the waves on Waterview Shores, growing larger in the mirror as each one approaches, until it seems about to knock you down, before dissipating into the road ahead.

Finally, an opening!

Ruth swerves across the two lanes in reverse and pauses. She looks ahead to make sure there aren't any pedestrians in the crosswalks. It gets confusing sometimes, glancing this way and that at an intersection, checking all four crosswalks, making sure no one had entered just as you take your eye off the ball. As luck would have it, all four are free and clear. Ruth steps hard on the gas.

The first thing Ruth Larsson thinks when she feels the THUMP in the back of her car is that some teenage driver has hit her rear fender. She sure hopes that this one has insurance.



Within seconds, Ruth realizes that something more than a fender-bender has occurred. For one thing, she's gone backwards, not forwards. And the racket. Gasps, commotion, clamor, pandemonium. She hears a roaring to rival Reed's old high-school football games. A small crowd charges toward the rear of her car, so thick it blocks her view. Ruth doesn't know what to do. She feels as though her 91-year-old frame is shrinking inside the clothing she so carefully chose that morning — black slacks, white Peter Pan collared shirt, pale blue cardigan. All 110 pounds of her willfully channeled into her right foot, which is glued on the brake like an anvil.

Time isn't relative, as Ruth had once taught her students. It is irrelevant. Ruth has no idea if she has been there for five minutes or five hours, and it matters not one iota. Although it is a warm day, she is shivering. A knuckle tap, clicking on the driver's side window like Fred Astaire's heels on a marble floor, disturbs her reverie. A man, about the age Stanley would be if he were still alive, opens the door. He looks vaguely familiar but, when you live in a small town as long as Ruth has, everyone looks familiar.

The man reaches over Ruth and shifts the gear from reverse to park.

*Is this the man whose car she just hit?*

Ruth leans toward the glove compartment to get her insurance card ready. She is still shaking and knocks over her purse, which had been sitting on the front passenger seat. The contents scatter across the floor. Helter skelter are her rosary beads, blood pressure pills, Coral Crème lipstick, Life Saver candies, house keys on a Sea World key ring, and other detritus of an ordinary life. Loose change spills out, coins rolling, rolling, rolling, on the worn car mat.

The man practically lifts Ruth out of the driver's seat. With only the changing of gears and slight shifting of weight, the Cadillac emits an exhale that sounds to Ruth like a sigh of relief. The subtle sigh of relief is drowned out by loud shouts: "DON'T MOVE THE CAR!"

“What happened?” Ruth asks. She repeats her question but the man does not answer. He shields her eyes and leads her to the sidewalk.

Ruth hears sirens and sees police arrive. They cordon off the scene, with yellow and black tape, stretching for blocks on end, returning those streets and intersections to the deserted and solemn ones Ruth remembers. She barely stands, still shaking, held up only by the strong arms of a Good Samaritan. As he tries to shelter her from the worsening storm, Ruth is pelted by a hail of judgments:

“Old people shouldn’t drive.”

“Lock her up and throw away the key.”

“No one over 75 should get a license.”

\*\*\*\*

The woman from the bank, four others, and I are in a circle holding hands. The others are praying but I’m silent. From the chatter, I’ve put together that the Cadillac backed into a pedestrian, pinning him or her between it and a white Prius. The soft chanting around me is interrupted by an authoritative shout. I use the distraction to break from the circle so I can better see what’s going on.

“Disperse, disperse.”

I stop and look for the speaker. No megaphone in sight, but you could’ve fooled me.

“Are you an off-duty police officer?” a redhead with sunglasses asks the first voice.

I see the first speaker now, in the middle of the street, waving her arms to divert traffic. A female shape dressed in black Spandex.

“No. But this is bothering our patrons. I work across the street at Exhale Fitness.”

I feel the fury rise from the crowd at this callous remark.

“Do you think she’ll make it?” A woman in a baseball cap asks.

“I don’t know....she must have massive internal injuries,” a blonde lady answers. The blonde has a dog, a French bulldog, tugging and pulling at the end of its leash.

Through a break in the crowd, I see a lovely young woman, maybe mid-forties, pinned between the rear of a cream-colored Cadillac and a white Prius. Her expression reads like a dictionary of emotions, like those paintings of Christ on the cross in the Villa Medici in Florence. Pain, defeat, sadness, surprise, resignation....I watch her face until I can’t watch any more.

There are so many on-lookers I wonder where they’d all come from. I see a young Latino man in a restaurant apron taking pictures of her with his cell phone. Other people are frantically poking at theirs, dialing 911, I suppose. Ladies in exercise clothes, tourists with shopping bags from The Gap and Lululemon, bodies without names drawn from their offices, cafes, shops, by the Big Bang. Random particles thrown together by an accident.

I see the Caddie, and its driver, still alone.

At first I only see the back of the driver’s head, hair white and wispy, like albino cotton candy. Something feels familiar, but it isn’t until I break from the prayer circle and walk to the driver’s side door that I recognize her. Ruth Larsson, the mother of my childhood friend, Stanley. My 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher from nearly 60 years earlier.

My reflexes take over; I have to get her out of that car. Without another thought, I tap on the window, grab the car handle, fling open the door, shift the car from reverse to park, and practically lift Mrs. Larsson out to safety.

I don't know why I don't re-introduce myself to her. She clearly doesn't recognize me. Perhaps knowing each other is such a low priority at such an intense moment. Maybe anonymity is prophylactic. Perhaps I want to remember her as I knew her, pure and wholesome as milk. The Mrs. Larsson who opened my mind to Einstein and baked the best Devil's Food cake in the world.

A policewoman approaches as I stand on the sidewalk with Mrs. Larsson. She is shaking so hard I worry she might have a heart attack right there in my arms. She feels so slight, I am afraid that if I release my grip she will flutter away like a scrap of newspaper in the wind.

"The driver?" the officer asks, indicating that she means Mrs. Larsson.

I nod.

"You know her?"

I nod again.

I give my name, address, and cell phone number and agree to wait until Mrs. Larsson is settled to give my statement. The officer leads Mrs. Larsson into Wells Fargo and I wait for an indeterminable amount of time. I focus my eyes on what seem to be hundreds of coins, flat and lifeless, in the street.

Stan Larsson was in my class at Waterview Middle School. We sat next to each other in nearly every class, him being Stanley Larsson and me, John Lark. Those were the days when we recited both The Lord's Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance in home room. I knew from Stanley that his mother was a young widow and that's why she'd gone back to teach. And I'd heard that Stan died a few years back too. Damn shame, really. Elderly, alone in this world, and now this.

The randomness of it is terrifying. What if Ruth Larsson had woken up with a cold and decided not to do her errands that day? What if a telemarketer had delayed her by five minutes to try to sell her a reverse mortgage? What if that young woman got stuck in the check-out line at Trader Joe's delaying

her just ten minutes? What if her husband or boyfriend or brother had sent her roses that morning and she had phoned to say thanks?

Horrible things happen to people all the time, seemingly out of the blue. What keeps us going, day after day, and from not just drowning in a cesspool of despair?

“Mr. Lark?”

I look up to see the fresh-faced officer hovering over me. “Yes, officer?”

“Ready to answer a few questions, Sir?”

“Sure. Is the driver ok?” I ask.

The officer looks me straight in the eyes. “She’s in shock.” Pen and pad poised. “So, Sir, did you see the actual moment of impact?”

“No.” I answer honestly. “I heard it first. I was over there, at the bank.”

From the corner of my eye I can see the EMTs lift a stretcher onto an ambulance.

“What exactly did you see?”

I close my eyes. I see chocolate cake. I see a rose garden. “It, it...was a horrific accident.”

“I understand, Sir. But I need facts. Anything you can remember. A woman is near death and we need to know what happened.”

*Two women*, I think.

“Sir? Did you happen to notice what gear the car was in when you opened the door?”

I try to make sense of it. This incident just a microcosm of what I see daily on CNN. If I ever believed in God, the arbitrariness of what I’ve come to think of as tragic selection — a kind of perversion

of Darwin's theory — had long convinced me otherwise. But what do I believe in then, if not the desperate thread of hope that others call God?

A kind word, a soft touch, a rose garden, chocolate cake....

"No," I say. "I did not."

I quietly leave the scene as the police continue to interview witnesses and collect evidence. As I walk away, a curtain of sadness seems to fall over this final act, as though signaling to the audience that it's time to go home to their real lives and safe beds.

In the paper the next day, I read that Amanda Jane McKesson, 45, mother of three, died of her injuries at Waterview Hospital. The story is an inch long on the bottom of page four. A life reduced to six lines of type. A week later, *The Waterview Light* runs an obituary that Ruth Larsson, 91, former science teacher, member of Waterview Presbyterian Church, recently involved in a vehicular homicide, is discovered dead in her home. In a note left on her bedside table she requests that her ashes be scattered in her rose garden.