

Summer Solstice
2003

The Microstories Project

Scribble Press

Life's rich pageant, one byte at a time

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Meeting Mike

I WOKE EARLY on June 21st and left Strathmore, Alberta. An hour later, as I drove through Bossano, I thought of stopping and giving my brother a piece of my mind. He had stolen every penny of my parent's money and hightailed it out of British Columbia. I sighed, decided I would be wasting my breath and only hear another pack of lies. Better to leave it to the lawyers, I thought.

A few miles down the road, I came upon a wrecked tanker truck. The cab was a twisted hulk of metal and one of the tankers was on its side. The maroon bumper lay twenty feet from the truck and resembled a contorted monstrous snake. The radiator was still steaming. I stopped, put on my flashers and got out.

As I walked towards the crumpled mess, I could hear classical music wafting over the fields. Then I saw a motionless man in the grass. I began to call out to him. "Hello! Someone is here. You are going to get help." With a sinking heart, I approached the body. He moaned! "It's okay. I'm here." I knelt down and saw congealed blood pooled in his right ear. He moaned again and moved his legs. "Don't move. It's great that you can move but please stay still until the ambulance comes."

Two men arrived on the scene. I looked at them and handed one of them my keys. "There's a blanket in my truck. Please get it. Has someone called for help? Does anyone have a cell phone?" The other man began to turn back. "It's okay," I said, "I have one here." I called 911. A woman answered, took the information and told me help was on the way. I covered him with my afghan and plunked myself down in the field to wait. Others checked the wreckage for fuel leaks from the tanker. My patient moved and told me he hurt. I reassured him that it was a good thing to feel pain and gently brushed the dirt from his cropped blond hair.

When the police arrived, fifteen minutes later, the officer asked, "What's your name?" "Mike. Mike Saverinski from Calgary." "Hello Mike," I said. "My name is Penny and I'm from Vancouver. I'll stay with you 'til the ambulance comes." I kept talking to him, in a quiet voice, while the music kept playing. In another ten minutes, the ambulance arrived. I relinquished Mike to their care, picked up the trucker's log from the dirt

and carried it over to the police cruiser. The officer looked at me as if I were a hero while taking my name and address. I thought to myself, *This was a far better thing to do than berate my weasely brother*. I retrieved my afghan, returned to my truck and continued on my journey.

Penelope Allen

Transport to Summer

My oldest son turned sixteen today. I bet his first conscious thought this morning had to do with car keys flickering like the wings of some bird taking off for no apparent reason other than the love of flight. For months, a number of his friends have been talking mostly about their cars. Many of these boys don't have their drivers' licenses yet, but their cars—Hummers, BMWs, Sebrings, some even brand new—have already been set up for them under the vaults of garages, some big enough to house a small congregation. What can I say? We live in Marin County, a suburb north of San Francisco, where the average price of a home is over a million dollars.

Affluence, like the tides that bring the brine and detritus of the sea to the wetlands ringing our shores, floods my son's imagination with the furious dreams of forty-year-old stockbrokers trapped in the dusty memory tracks of the summers of youth: fast cars, big houses, thin women....

Sweet sixteen, indeed! Since there was no key with the birthday card, my son's face darkened, and the sun set on all further talk. I railed about the evils of too much money too soon, and he dug deeper into his icy silence. This day should have marked a change of seasons for us all; instead we rode the same small-crested waves between the sea that moves his dreams and the quicksand of our parenting that traps his feet.

Maria Benet

Bent Music

I GOT MARRIED about eight weeks before the solstice. We couldn't afford a band or DJ, so the resident frustrated DJ (me) put together four CDs of music from around the world to serve as the soundtrack to our reception. Musical miscegenation was the theme; if it mixed two unrelated genres, in it went. And it went over well.

There was a movie about an Anglo-Indian girl soccer player out at the time we got married. I wanted to see it, but we were too busy. Amazingly, two months later, it was still playing. And since the wedding, I had started a job with IBM India (here in New Jersey, oddly enough), and was working with a number of Indian nationals, so it seemed even more fitting to see it. We viewed *Bend It Like Beckham* this solstice evening.

The movie was great. It had some technical flaws, and the soccer scenes could have been shot better, but all in all, a wonderful time, and the soundtrack was magnificent, a blend of British pop music and Anglo-Punjabi *bhangra*. The credits featured a *bhangra* version of the Caribbean classic "Hot Hot Hot," with shots of the cast and crew singing along (or should that be Singh-ing...) My wife turned to me and said, "If you knew there was an Indian version of 'Hot Hot Hot,' you would have wanted it for our wedding, wouldn't you?"

I married the right woman.

Ralph Brandi

London, 5:48 p.m.

READING the latest *Harry Potter* just outside a bookstore, a blond-haired girl of seven and thirty looks up and spies her friend. She does not mark her place before slipping the book in a bag. “Oo, just look what you’ve done with your hair— isn’t that lovely?” Demure assent with eyes downcast, the friend smiles and replies, “Will you look at those; new are they? You must tell me...” Here the hum and swish of affluent, aspiring people—avoiding all contact as they brush past—discretely veils the query’s end.

M. F. Corwin

Burn

“It was in summer’s nature to burn.”—Pasternak

IT HAD RAINED all week and it was still raining; we had long since stopped paying attention. There was a distant sound of thunder. My wife, at her computer, looked a little nervous; she worries about these things. I, at mine, trusting in power strips, didn’t. Low rumbling again, a pause, then a bang so loud it sounded as though something in the room had exploded, and a sharp electric smell. We jumped a little, looked at each other, looked around the apartment. The computers, amazingly, were unaffected. The television worked when tried. The radio carried on after that moment’s burst of static.

We went room to room; the lights lit, the many appliance clocks continued to display their slightly varying times, nothing amiss. Finally she picked up the phone: no dial tone, no signs of life. Fried. And we decided that of all the things we could have lost in the sudden surge, that was the one we would have chosen to dispense with, that old, unlovely phone whose ring we rarely welcomed.

Stephen Dodson

Shelter

A SMALL GROUP of men and women back quietly down the middle of the street, black and white *kuffiyeh* scarves wrapped around their heads and necks. They are wearing masks painted with tears. Two of them each hold a window frame arm's length. Another has a door. The rest huddle inside the shelter formed and maintained by the others. "Are you going to let this happen?" asks the small group of brightly dressed people who have insinuated themselves between this first group and the bulldozer — cardboard, painted with a cartoon caterpillar — lurching toward them borne by men dressed as soldiers, silently urged on by a 15-foot effigy of Ariel Sharon. Those thousands of us assembled at the edges of the tarmac just watch as the bulldozer knocks the door- and window-bearers to the ground, scattering the others. As if it's a show put on for our amusement, like that which came down the street just before.

Uncle Sam. I can't tell what he's saying. Just like Uncle Sam to not bring enough batteries for the bullhorn. "What's that he's dragging?" asks the woman next to me. As it gets closer, I see that it has a road painted in the shape of a question mark. "Ah," I respond, "it's the roadmap for peace in the Middle East."

I wonder if the players secretly hoped the crowd would leap into the parade route and tear their float to shreds.

Jim Flanagan

Promise

• • • **STREAMING** through the leaves, shivering and curling them over to show their sky-grey bottoms—not the sun but a cold wind. The trees, and the clouds seemingly hung in their tops, loom over the swimming pool where my son and dozens more 5- to 18-year-olds are suffering through a swim meet in mid-50s temperatures. As they leave the pool after their warmup laps, the pack of younger children skitter stiff-kneed and hunch-shouldered towards their towels, lips grey and teeth chattering. So—a cold, wet, spirit-soddened Spring, culminating in this? This, the summer solstice? “Sumer is icumin in?” Without the sun it’s just the longest day. This is more like the winter solstice on the far side of the world. Marking the summer solstice—recurrence, renewal, continuity—is one of those little rituals that hold our eccentric species close to home, that keep us from flying off into shadowy realms of abstraction and self-absorption. So when its proper observance is withheld, we feel a little misused. Later in the day, though, all is well. The sun takes back the sky, warming, swelling everything it touches, flowing through the trees. Long shadows whip and wave in the breeze. But life is short. In two hours we sag as we spot great dark clouds—holes torn in our blue sky—rushing toward us with a high wind at their backs, sending chill shadow...

Bill Gordon

A Sick Man

A SICK MAN can't pull his pants all the way up this morning. His wife thinks he's had another stroke. I take his blood pressure. His heart races even though he is only sitting. I can hear fluid in his lungs.

The wife, who is now riding in the cab of the ambulance as I drive, grew up in Oklahoma. They moved east 15 years before I was born so he could teach history. She keeps his medical history in her purse for occasions like these.

In the rearview mirror, I see the paramedic attach the EKG. A bag of liquid, probably saline, is hanging from the ceiling. When we arrive at the hospital, the medic moves him in quickly. I forget the combination to the ER door, and his wife and I have to walk in the main entrance. She thanks the three of us repeatedly before sitting down by his bed.

"So, recent EMT grad, what do you think was wrong with him?" the medic asks me.

"Stroke?"

"I think he was old."

The rest are just details.

Chris Jones

Taxi Line

THE TAXI LINE at LaGuardia was long. It was raining, and few cabs were coming to service the waiting customers. “It’s going to be an hour or an hour and a half before we get home,” the man in front of me said. I considered taking the bus, but didn’t move.

“Where are you going?” the twenty-something standing behind me asked.

“The village.”

“Is that anywhere near E. 78th Street?” she wanted to know.

“You’re going to the upper east side,” I said. “The village is downtown. Is this your first time in New York?”

She smiled. “Was here once with my parents, but last month I decided I was going to live here. Starting Tuesday, I’m going to be working in Soho. Selling things. It’s a new store, not far from Prada and Victoria’s Secret.”

I looked at her. She was not especially attractive, not in the physical sense. She was tall, maybe five-feet-ten and skinny. Her face was not remarkable in any way. Her hair was brown and lank. Lank was a good word for her.

“Why do you want to come to this city?”

“I want diversity,” she said with eagerness in her eyes. “I want to be humbled, to be broken down.”

I smiled, hoping without saying a word that she wouldn’t be broken too badly. “You mean you want your preconceptions dismantled?”

“Yes,” she said. “I want to be exposed. I want to learn. I want to see snow.”

Barbara Lewis

Failure

FAILURE IS MY FRIEND this first day of summer.

Today should be perfect. I have washed and dried the wine, beer and martini glasses, ironed a blouse and two pair of short pants with my new Rowenta that cuts wrinkles like a spoon through soft butter. Got through the pain-in-the-ass Ticketmaster phone line for good seats to the James Taylor concert in August. I am awaiting the arrival in next week's mail of a pair of ridiculously fine shoes, coveted since April and now to be mine at half price thanks to the nice sales girl at the Minneapolis Neiman Marcus. After last weekend's chaos, celebrating Father's Day with five little kids, three big brothers and three turkey breasts grilled on the Weber, this day should be Nirvana. Nothing to worry about, and the cleaning lady's coming on Monday.

It's 75 degrees, the wind reported to be 24 mph, gusting to 30. I get out my swimming suit. Extra fabric at the butt sags, but the suit is loose enough not to pooch skin at my sides, a fair trade. I apply the expensive sunscreen a Norwegian-Scotch-Irish wanna-be-glam-girl must, get my book, aim a lawn chair at the sun. And last five minutes. Yellow jackets, I think, and some freakish miniature sort of flies. In the strongest wind gusts, the little peckers swarm thickest.

A good North Dakotan does not let this matter. Only a failure would be *in the house* on a Saturday in summer.

I'm goin' back out.

Laura McDaniel

Solstice Patent Blues

My neighbor is inventing something again. He has invented before. A generation or two ago he perhaps would have acquired the moniker “tinker.” Other monikers come to mind. Let me explain.

In June of 1980, he had in his possession a David Bradley heavy farm rototiller and a 450 Honda scrambler with a blown engine. It only took moments of country logic to organize a plan to merge these two machines into a revolutionary new rototilling experience. In less than a day the two machine were one, complete with controls wired to the handlebars. The maiden flight included a trip around his house, a collision with a tree, much high-pitched screaming, and a barrel-roll through my backyard.

Next innovation, June 1984 — chainsaw lift. He wanted to cut a tree into log-length pieces before it fell, kinda like Paul Bunyan did in the Disney cartoon. To do this, he attached a pulley near the tree’s top, threaded a rope through the pulley, and tied it to his new McCullough. He then raced up and down the ladder, notching the tree, just so, culminating with the driving of the “felling” wedge. His hope was to have his lumber fold up and stack itself like a carpenter’s ruler. Instead, the first and second sections tumbled. Much to his surprise, he realized he hadn’t bothered to untie the rope. I’ve seen college physics teams assemble and test catapults, but never to this degree of perfection. Although the saw was never recovered, it is my best estimate that it traveled one-half mile.

I’m checking my homeowner’s policy and planning a day out.

T.W. McNemar

June 21, 2003: Schaghticoke, New York

I SEE THE RIPPLES from falling raindrops in the river; I feel drops on my shoulders and head as I quickly walk to the garden to cut some thyme for my lunchtime salad. My gardens are overgrown, weedy. Good weather and my scheduled time off have not yet coincided this year.

I cannot recall a spring so consistently wet and cool. It is as I've imagined the Northwest—Vancouver and Seattle—must be. On my return to the house, I see that moss has begun to grow on the northern sides of the maple trees in the yard.

Cowbirds and finches fight for supremacy on the bird feeder's perch. Chipmunks, cardinals, blue jays and mourning doves are content to wait for the aerial fracas to spill some seed to the ground. From the front of the property, I hear cars going by too fast on the road, hear the water spraying from their tires.

The afternoon has grown so dark that I need to turn on lights to see what I'm doing. As I strip the thyme leaves from the stem, my mother naps on the sofa. I probably should turn the living room lights on for her, but she wouldn't know anyway. It is the longest day of the year, but she will not know it. She is blind.

Outside a mourning dove cries, high at first, then a low, sustained set of coos. Is he yearning for the sun?

Debi Orton

Adeline Goes for a Swim

I AM HUDDLED on the front porch in wool socks, long sleeves. It's the day of the summer solstice, but this narrow cradle in the Blue Ridge Mountains will not swing to the season. And, it's raining again.

Over across the way, beyond the Blue Ridge, past Missouri and Kansas, Adeline Grace goes for a swim.

It is her first swim since she unfolded from the perfect pool in her mother's womb. Her swimsuit is pink, ample enough to cover her diaper, dainty enough to display the silken skin of her infant shoulders. She smiles, unconcerned that she has no teeth.

In my garden, the lavender is rotting and the evening primrose, confused, flutters half open. It has been dreary since memory began, and it's cold. Birds hover, tiptoe. Quilts are musty, windows swollen, floors sticky. My knees ache.

But, Adeline? She has gone for a swim. She has been dipped to her nose and up, more than once. She has floated on a barge of her mother's outspread hands, legs neatly crossed at the ankle, arms fluttering in salute. And, I know this girl. She has grinned with perfect joy.

It is still raining. Mist drapes the mountains, erasing the view. I am trapped in a gray cup docked between the raging brown of the Shenandoah and the Potomac. But the phone rings again, and I hear the water nymph's babbling report, her chortling, two-fisted grip on delight. And it's summertime even at Adeline's Grandma's.

Helen Alene Pollack



Who's Digging in the Garden?

TODAY IS June 21st. Summer Solstice.

I decided to go for a walk early this morning. It's suppose to rain again today, as it has every day for over a week.

I started my walk through the flower garden and noticed armadillos had been busier than usual during the night. After my walk, I would need to fill in around some of the plants.

Armadillos are not looked upon with favor by many people, because they dig holes. But I don't mind them. Sometimes they root in the woods, and leave the garden alone. I think they do more good than harm. Armadillos eat ants; that's not a bad thing.

As I left the flower garden, and entered the woods, I heard something rustling. I stopped to listen, and hoped I wasn't about to encounter a snake. The sound was coming from a palmetto bush near by. I could see leaves moving. As I watched a long nose appeared from under the bush, and then little beady eyes. A baby armadillo came into the clearing. I heard more rustling, and out from behind the bush marched three more babies. My guess is that these little guys had a wonderful time partying in my garden last night.

As I got closer, one baby stood on his hind legs and looked at me. I was glad that I remembered to bring a camera, and was surprised when he posed long enough, for me to take his picture. I wondered...maybe he stopped to say, Kiss-immee.

Eloise McCoy Ritt

Ospreys and Adolescence

ALL DAY LONG it has rained, as it has for days and days. I usually enjoy a rainy day, but sogginess is beginning to creep in. As I pull into the drive, the sky is clearing. I take a seat on the back porch, relaxing finally as I look out over the preserve that is my backyard. The clouds are still dark and gray, but with windows of brilliance peeking through from the setting sun.

There is a bird I've been keeping company with. He might be an osprey but I can't quite tell yet. No longer a baby, not yet an adult, an adolescent with the gawky body. His wings aren't big enough for him, his neck is too long, and he's still with tufts of down. He takes off, his flight wobbly, then a noisy crash landing on a branch, leaves and other branches shaking from his assault. Adjusting himself—I can almost hear him let out a breath...*whoaaa...*

Later I take a walk with my son. We meander down the winding road through the cypress stand. The frogs are noisy, the leaves lush with greenness, the light growing dim. My son is now taller than I am, and I'm a tall woman. Not yet used to his new stature, gangly, awkward at times, quick to smile as he chatters away with me. Watching him as he speaks, I see a smile light up his eyes, then darkness flows over his face as he puzzles and questions the ways of the world, turning a problem over and over. I can't help but wonder at such trust, at him not yet hiding his feelings. How much longer will the openness last before he cloaks himself, even to me...do you think really to me? Then he spies a lizard, chasing it down the road. Laughter spilling out of him again.

Carol Russo

June 21st: Day of the Canadian Soldiers*

WHEN THE CANADIAN SOLDIERS come to town, they do not march. Rather, like some elite fighting force, they secret themselves on the bottom of our common Great Lake — Erie — and, in the dark of night, arise, silent, dripping and motivated. In a classical military maneuver, they take up camouflaged posts from which they can secure the coastline, keeping an open water channel for future supplies and reinforcements. They are at the ready, awaiting the pincer movement programmed from more of their number, who are operating from some equally secretive location to the south. When the two forces finally combine, it will end in the immediate surrender of this city, Cleveland, Ohio. It is an audacious plan.

Unfortunately, this invasion, like the invasion last year and the year before that, runs into trouble. On this day, there are so many soldiers; it is difficult for them not to be noticed. While trying to remain inconspicuous, they cover the surfaces of windows, doors, buildings, stumbling over one another, rendering what is usually transparent into a lumpy solid. As in other years, the southern arm of the pincer is late. Soon, bored by their surroundings, buffeted by the wind and various, natural appetites, the soldiers break ranks, shed uniforms, mate. The invasion has become shore leave. It must be summer.

*Also known as Mayflies. In June, Mayflies arise from the Lake Erie's bottom, mate, molt and die within 24 to 72 hours.

John Stickney

Contributors

Penelope Allen (zeke_and_co@telus.net) writes short stories and poetry. She has published poems and once had a letter of hers read on National Public Radio. Mike Saverinski emerged from his truck's crash bruised but otherwise unharmed.

Maria Benet (MMBenet@aol.com) lives in the San Francisco Bay area. Her website, *alembic*, is at <http://www.ashladle.com>.

Ralph Brandi (microstories@brandi.org) says that web sites just seem to happen wherever he goes. Currently, they happen in central New Jersey. For example: <http://www.thereisnocat.com>.

M. F. Corwin (m@eudaemonist.com) is not British and does not live in London.

Stephen Dodson (zengid@yahoo.com) lives in New York City with a wife and far too many books.

Jim Flanagan (jimfl@tensegrity.net) is unsure where he ends and the rest of the universe begins. He resides in Seattle with his wife and their six-foot-tall cactus. His website, *Everything Burns*, may be found at <http://jimfl.tensegrity.net>.

Bill Gordon (Bill_T_Gordon@nps.gov) is a writer and editor for the National Park Service, working mostly with historical subjects. He goes into denial every winter.

Chris Jones (cmj1138@yahoo.com) lives in upstate New York and spends most of his time hanging out with unusual people. He has been published at GreenTricycle.com and muse-apprentice-guild.com.

Barbara Lewis has written poetry and short stories, and has completed the first draft of a novel. In honor of the solstice and new beginnings, she anticipates taking it out of the box, dusting it off, and making it sparkle for others to see.

Laura McDaniel (laura.mcdaniel@ndsu.nodak.edu) is an editor at North Dakota State University in Fargo.

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