

the kindness

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Myles Gallagher - Left to Memory

IT TOOK ME MANY YEARS TO KNOW WHAT had been important, what I should have done. She didn't care whether I'd gotten to the West Coast, I finally understood, way too late. She just wanted to know I'd survived. Instead, I let her worry, how much or little I couldn't say.

I spent that afternoon hitchhiking westward across Pennsylvania. The last person to give me a ride had taken a turnoff just ahead, toward Beaver Falls, where he had a girlfriend of sorts. I'd no desire to see another town just then, so I stood alone on a seldom traveled road somewhere

in the farmlands near the Ohio border. It was getting into dusk.

The road curved away on either side, flowing from my feet out of my vision, as I hesitated, standing at the waist of a hill with the frozen dust of the narrow road turning blue before me in time with the desertion of the sun. It was one week before Christmas, but I'd forgotten this fact as I turned to gaze up toward the crest behind me and noticed the lights of a building.

It lay enwombed right below the ridgeline, its roof meeting the sky level with the hilltop. Strange how I knew this was a house, for from this distance it was just a bluish-white hulk, lights spurring from irregular holes in its opaque, elongated surface. Perhaps it was the warmth of those lights, their nonindustrial spectrum of white. I paused. It seemed an unlikely place for any sort of building, but no less odd for a house.

I had come to rely on an ability to perceive things of which I had no tangible knowledge. Wherever I traveled was a strange place peopled by strangers. My instincts guided me well in days and nights dominated by ignorance and raw fear. I knew the house was a house. More than that, even from this distance I sensed it was a home.

I turned back to the road. The sky shone pale at the western horizon and black overhead with the evening's first stars. A benevolent, calming sky, unmarred by any trace of cloud. There was no humidity and the world felt suspended, as though it would always remain this particular hour of this particular evening on this pointed speck of the planet. Later, when traveling at day's end, I would often find myself searching for that same sky.

I stood barely breathing in the chill air, neck bent back, gaze widened, the edges of my vision expanded, as if the periphery of my ocular field was melting away. I so longed to spend the night under this peaceful expanse, but I knew I would feel unsafe and not be able to get the sleep I desperately needed, lying by the side of that lonely road. Looking back up toward the house, my eyes glided from the flats and lights of its bulk back to the sky, then returned to rest on the building. I began climbing the hill, dragging my big, awkward golf bag at my side.

It was pleasant stuff to walk on, clumps of long, thick, winter-flattened grass, thinly patched with the leftover crusts of what had been a generous snow. Each step produced a sharp crackle as my construction boots broke into the airy space between organic matter and ice, for the frozen layer did not lie nestled into the shape of the dead stuff. Rather, it was a slashed, mottled sheet, uneven groupings of crystal supported only by the highest protrusions of weed, rock, leaf, or twig that lay upon that recently thawed and refrozen sloping bit of land. After long minutes of climbing, I paused, sweating, to lift my eyes from the flowing, darkly sparkling ground and saw that the dwelling was just barely ten yards above me.

Now it was fully a house, a tangible, namable, inescapable fact. A house with people in it. A nice house, one with a porch. Picking out the details, I waited for my mind to register a sign, cautiously weighing my chances. Edges of color and light ran together, and I knew that I was crying. I sighed, allowing my face to convulse, dropping my head, hugging my arms fiercely across my chest, for I knew I was alone and that I had to allow this grief to pass through me before moving forward, so I surrendered, wringing it out, eyes closed, finally doubled over.

I felt the golf bag with all of my possessions fall away from me. Opening my eyes I pulled the heavy sack upright, brushing bits of snow from the green plaid canvas. Wiping my face with my sleeve, I moved forward until the house no longer stood above me, but faced me head on, like a friend. A few more paces and the snow changed to a soft, silent powder. I was walking upon a lawn.

I looked down and saw lawn, lush rolling green, fresh cut grass smelling like watermelon. Lawn with a house, peeling of paint, surrounded by roses, backed by boulders.

I looked up again and the house was just a house. White clapboard, drapery at the windows to thwart a stranger's eye. A small, raised porch with a green front door. A swept stone path leading around to the side. A house. Someone's home. Not mine. A house with an aura that might surround me, protect me, if only I might gain permission to spend the night on its porch.

image info



My knock was answered by an elderly woman whose gentle look of surprise lay in my mind for a moment before the door was opened and she stood before me. This prevision, this playful warping of time and sequence happened often in those days, and in that moment as I saw her face fully, I felt the woman's surprise came not from the sight of me but rather from the mere fact of a knock sounding at this lonely door. This mental accommodation was almost lost on me by the immediacy of its form and by its astonishing power, at the time, to comfort and seemingly to protect me. The mental hijinks were unnecessary though, for this stranger's face was kind. Soft peachy folds of flesh surrounded her warm, deep-gray eyes. Soft gray hair, thinning to white on top, was brushed back from her face in smoky curls. Her full-lipped angular mouth smiled questioningly.

As she gazed into my face, the woman conveyed a curious but friendly uncertainty. I felt a growing surprise at her continued silence and steady gaze as she stood, her head slightly tilted to one side, a shallow furrow in her many-ridged brow. I waited. The moment seemed long. Then, as I approached bewilderment, in the instant when I would have broken the silence, she uttered a quiet, melodic "hello."

Only as she spoke did I realize that it was my place to explain my presence, my intrusion into this stranger's territory. My puzzlement in the face of the woman's silence was a continuation of that prescient moment, stolen from time, in which she had existed in my mind's eye before she opened the door. My perceptions projected themselves elusively, not to be trusted and, yet, irresistible. I felt an easy readability about her, a seductive sense of ease and quickness with which I took

in her appearance, and with her appearance, her mood and essence, it seemed.

I was frightened by my certainty about the woman, for I knew it could make me careless, and so I began to speak slowly, deliberately, seeing assurance grow in her eyes as I brought out the words. Still, I quaked inwardly, fearful of rejection in a matter I was not at all sure I could explain without seeming bizarre.

"I've been hitchhiking," I told her. "I was let off down on the road there." I swung my body around, swift and stiffly, pointing with my entirety down below toward the almost completely dark ribbon of the road. The woman nodded. She seemed to be taking it in.

"I was wondering if I might spend the night on your porch here?" I blurted out, sure that this was not the way to say it, humiliated by my lifelong inexperience at asking for things.

The woman's face froze, confirming my fears.

"The porch?" she said slowly, glancing down at the cleanly painted boards outside her door. "You want to sleep on my porch?"

"Yes," I looked at her imploringly now. "If it would be no trouble to you ma'am."

"Trouble?" she seemed to need to repeat the end of my sentences. "No, no trouble. But the porch? It's the dead of winter."

I relaxed at her words. "I have a sleeping bag," I told her, calmer, more self-assured now that I understood the woman's concern. "It's very warm. In here." I patted the waxed golf bag possessively. She looked at it vaguely, then returned her attention to me. Deliberately, without any sort of feigning, she looked me up and down, openly studying me. I relaxed further under the honesty of her frank gaze.

"Where are you coming from?"

"New York."

"Oh my!"

She gave me one more hard look, then appeared to make up her mind.

"Wait here." Holding up one finger, she closed the door, but not completely, I noticed, and disappeared. I stood waiting, reflecting on the sight I must have made.

I hadn't seen my full reflection in a long time, many weeks, which I'd come to think of

as a kind of freedom. Once in a while I'd find some part of myself in a public bathroom mirror, usually in a gas station, but these were invariably small, dirty, and far between. I'd gotten used to a rudimentary form of personal care and no longer missed the sight of myself brushing my teeth, washing my face.

If there was a glimpse I regretted losing, it was the way I sometimes used to look when I'd just washed my hair and brushed it out and it fell over my shoulders in big air-and-soap-thickened waves. Washing my hair was a luxury now, a rite seldom performed on the road. In fact, I only remembered that one time, in a tiny, grimy sink of a public washroom.

Gas station bathrooms, I'd learned, not only had the least traffic, but the least interested traffic as well. People didn't really care what you did in a gas station bathroom. While department store bathrooms were more comfortable, warm, and sometimes downright luxurious, doing anything major in a department store bathroom was risky. Restaurants were out of the question without the money to gain admittance. So at this point my stiffly braided hair was rather greasy, I knew, and while I tried to stay hygienic, I hadn't had a bath or a shower since leaving the city. The more feral I'd become, the less it seemed to matter.

I knew the woman was going to invite me into her home, an offer I'd be unable to turn down given her obvious concern, despite the itch of my animal need to sleep out under that clear soothing sky.

From my earliest memory I'd known I was an animal, an understanding that gave me something worth holding on to. When we'd learned about mammals in my fourth grade class, my father grew red with anger when I came home and told him we were related to horses and dogs, cats and sheep. We're not animals, he'd raged. Maybe he was right. It was hard to imagine a bear, wolf, lion, or lamb losing its temper or lashing out the way he so often did.

The woman was back at the door. This time she opened it wide.

"What is your name?"

"Michelle Biondi," I offered the name I was

traveling with, the one on the identification card in the golf bag.

“Well, Michelle, my name is Evelyn Gray. My husband and I have decided you may sleep here, but not outside on the porch. Please come inside.”

I nodded, grateful I wasn't surprised by her offer.

“Thank you, ma'am. May I bring my bag in with me?”

She seemed to see it for the first time.

“What is that?” she frowned.

“It's a golf club bag. It has my sleeping bag and my other things inside.”

She nodded. “Yes. Yes, of course. Bring it in.”

It was one of those times, I realized, when my polite manner, my standard grammar, my pale skin, my being a girl all combined in my favor.

Picking up the sack, I entered the house, a bare but bright and warm entryway with a wooden floor and creamy walls. I heard her close and bolt the door behind me and then she stood looking at me appraisingly.

Seeming satisfied, she turned and spoke over her shoulder. “Follow me. You can bring that sack. I'll show you where you can sleep.”

Up a flight of wooden steps and down a short hall, she entered a room with a twin bed, a nightstand, dresser, and a black-and-white, braided, oval rug. An angular man about her age appeared in the doorway.

“This is my husband, Joe.”

I nodded, making sure to meet his eyes. He stared a moment. “What's that?” He nodded at the golf bag.

“It's just my things. My sleeping bag and clothes.”

He seemed to take it in. “See you downstairs,” he said, looking at his wife.

“Yes. I'll just be a minute.”

She turned to me as he retreated.

“You should be plenty warm in here, but there are extra blankets in that trunk if you need them,” she pointed to a large wooden box I hadn't noticed under a window. Stepping to the doorway, she motioned across the hall. “There's an extra bathroom we don't use. Make yourself at home. Are you hungry?”

“No, ma'am. I'm just very tired.”

“Well, rest. Sleep as long as you need to.”

“Thank you.”

She left, closing the door softly behind her. I went to look at the knob. No lock.

They must have checked on me during the night, for when I woke up in my sleeping bag, which I'd laid out on the rug, a soft, blue cotton quilt covered me in my cocoon. I rolled over. Two blue bath towels and a matching washcloth sat on the still-made bed.

I wanted to ignore the soft knock at the door, but I didn't want to be rude.

“Come in.”

It was the man, poking his parrotlike head through the opening.

“Evelyn's making you breakfast.”

“Oh no! There's no need.”

“Well, she's doing it, so come on down.”

I nodded and he left, closing the door.

My bladder was painfully full. The hall air hit me with the seductive aroma of toast. In the bathroom I tried to see myself as a stranger might. Returning to the room where I'd slept, I rummaged for my hairbrush. The least I could do was appear at their table looking half tame.

I hesitated at the kitchen's arched entryway. The man eyed me over the top of his open newspaper, his finished breakfast plate before him on a wide plank table.

I was pretty sure he hadn't wanted to let me in the prior evening, that Evelyn Gray had gotten what she wanted in that quiet way some women have. “Sit,” he nodded at a place setting across from him. As I slid into a chair the woman turned from the stove. “Morning, Michelle.”

“Morning, ma'am.”

The dish she placed before me held a sunny-side-up egg, two strips of bacon, and buttered white toast.

“Thank you,” I whispered, stealing myself. I'd stopped eating meat more than a year ago and loose eggs made me gag, but I was determined to show my appreciation. Two thoughts had helped me escape the slow death of my father's house. The tentative cuts I kept inflicting and watching heal on my wrists made me reason that leaving gave me at least a chance of survival. Equally important, I'd somehow gotten the idea that people out in

the world of strangers would generally be good instead of abusive, would be nicer to me than my family. And while there'd been exceptions, while a few men had tried to harm me, to use me, my faith in humanity had mostly been borne out.

Evelyn making me breakfast buttressed my conviction. I picked up the fork and broke open the egg yolk. She handed me a glass of milk, which I had to stop myself from drinking in one overeager swoop.

As I wiped a last bit of bacon grease from the plate with a breadcrumb, Evelyn Gray sat on an adjoining chair and turned to face me.

“You know, you didn't have to sleep on the floor. You'd have been welcome to use the bed.”

“I know, ma'am. I'm just used to it I guess. Used to sleeping in my bag on the ground.”

“Where are you on your way to?”

“California,” I said without thinking.

“Oh my!”

“I've got folks there,” I lied, distressed by her alarm. “An aunt and some cousins.”

“That's thousands of miles. It's the dead of winter.”

“I'll be okay. I've got lots of warm things and I'm used to the cold. It hasn't been bad, honestly.”

She hesitated.

“People used to hitchhike a lot in these parts, but not girls, and not in any recent memory.”

“It's been fine. I'll be fine.”

“Are you sure? You're so young.”

“I'm eighteen,” I lied again.

“Sure you are,” the man snorted, shaking his head. His wife bit her lower lip, frowning at him.

I swallowed the last of the second glass of milk she'd poured me.

“Thank you. Very much. For everything.” I rose. “I should get going while it's still early.”





Evelyn rose as well, holding my eyes. “You’re welcome.” She hesitated. “Listen. I’d like it if you’d let me know when you get there. To California. I’d just like to know you got where you are going safe.” She pulled a slip of folded paper from her apron pocket, handing it to me.

“Here’s this address and our phone number. Please. Just send a postcard. Or call collect. Just let us know you got there.”

“I will,” I whispered, almost paralyzed by emotion. This is what it’s like when someone cares, I thought.

The man put down his paper. “You’re heading west?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t find it easy to hitch a ride around here. Might take all day. I’ll take you over to the interstate ramp.”

“Oh! There’s really no need.”

“Yes,” he said firmly, looking at his wife. “Yes, there is. I’ll take you. It’s just a ten minute drive up to six eighty. You’ll have to take it north a little ways to go west.”

I nodded a reluctant assent.

In the car we didn’t speak until he pulled up on a wide macadam shoulder across from an entrance ramp to the highway, putting his foot firmly on the brake.

“She’s worried about you,” he said.

I stared at him, unsure of how to respond.

“This town, this part of the state, whole region in fact has been through a lot. Years ago we’d find people at our door pretty often, passing through, asking for food. She always found something for ‘em.”

I found my voice. “She’s very kind.” I hesitated. “Both of you.”

He shrugged. “It’s just what you do. Can’t

let people starve when you’ve got enough to eat.” He put the car in park and turned to look me in the eyes. “They were always adults, mostly men. Never asked for a place to sleep. They were just hungry and desperate enough to ask for food. It didn’t affect her like you showing up, asking to sleep on the porch.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

“No,” he sighed. “You don’t. You can’t. You’re just a kid.”

“She asked me to let her know when I get to California and I will.”

“No. No, you won’t.”

“I will.”

“You’d best be going. Good luck to you.”

I was angry then at the finality of his words, at what I took as cynicism, but later I saw he’d just felt protective of his wife. I most certainly would keep my word, I thought viciously. I most definitely would let Evelyn Gray know when I got safely to the West Coast.

But I never did, even though I carried that slip of paper around like a talisman, protecting it, secreting it, taking it out to smooth open and gaze at in moments of despair. Evelyn Gray’s precise script, the soothing care she gave her penmanship.

In Missouri I was offered scotch, which I politely declined, by a cheerful couple in a freezing cold sedan. I’d stayed overnight in a trailer on a goat farm in Indiana, a bunk offered by a college student who’d given me a ride. Now I was starting to feel fluish, and I thought it might have something to do with the cold goat-pungent air in that trailer. Where the half-drunk couple let me out before they turned off the interstate, the snow at the roadside reached my waist. I had a cough.

The truckers who picked me up had a sleeping berth behind their seats. They weren’t going west. Heading someplace named Baton Rouge, they said. I was starting to shake with fever, in no position to be choosy, and these middle-aged guys didn’t feel dangerous. I went to dead sleep in the smelly bed, listening to the road’s roar and woke up in a warmer place. They let me out in a parking lot across from Genesis House, an LSU-student-led crisis center. I was still sick but not

feverish. When they drove off, I realized I was starving. I spent a precious thirty-five cents of my dwindling funds on a slice of pizza.

I never got to the West Coast. Never called or wrote to Evelyn Gray, but for years I kept thinking I would. I just needed to wait until I got to California. I kept the paper she’d given me in the little velvet sack I carried with the last of the money I’d stolen from my father’s dresser the morning I left, eight dollars whittled down now to two. Later, when I got the overnight shift at the diner, I kept the note in my pocket to give me courage when I had to wait on those cowboys from the rodeo camped in town. In the spring, broke, jobless, and defeated, I went back to New York. When I lost everything else I wrapped her note in a piece of toilet paper and slipped it into my sock. I kept it there when I tried living in the home for wayward teens, where I knew they’d steal anything they could find. Years later when I finally had a home, I left the thin, faded, many-times-folded note sitting brazenly on a bookshelf in my kitchen. I weighted it down with a snow globe improbably featuring the famous Hollywood sign to remind me of my guilt. I’d never let her know I was okay. I’d taken advantage of her kindness but never had the decency to reassure her as she’d asked.

Then, one day, the paper was gone. I hadn’t moved it. No one else had been in my apartment. It had to be somewhere. I thought hard. I’d had the windows open for days. In fact, I’d found some unpaid bills on the floor just the other night, blown from the stack on my kitchen table. Evelyn Gray’s note must have been nudged out from under the snow globe by a stiff breeze, I reasoned. But where would it have gone?

I examined every inch of the kitchen floor but found only a few raisins. I cringed. What if the note had blown into the garbage, and I’d shoved it down the incinerator chute with the trash? No. Don’t go there. How likely is that anyway? I got the flashlight I kept next to my bed and belly-flopped on the floor, shining the beam and squinting into years, probably decades of filth under the refrigerator, the gas stove. It wasn’t anywhere.

I was starting to panic but then . . . Ah! I looked up and saw the bathroom, directly across

the hall from the wide open kitchen window. I hustled over and there it was, standing on its side behind the ancient bathtub stopper. I picked it up along with a mound of wet dust and hair. It was gross but I didn't care.

Bringing the note back to the kitchen, I sank into a chair, smoothed it out on the table, and stared at the delicate writing I'd looked at so many times that I could see it behind my darkened eyelids. It'd been how long? More than fifteen years, I calculated. Enough! I couldn't keep nursing this guilt, and I obviously was never going to hitchhike to California. In fact, my hitchhiking days were over. Throw out the note or make the call, I told myself. She's probably dead, I argued. And even if she's still alive, she won't remember after all these years. But I didn't believe that. And besides, it didn't matter. What mattered is I'd never kept my word. She'd been kind to me and I'd been a shit. Call the number. Do it now.

I picked up the phone.

Oh, there is . . . was that same lilting "hello" I'd heard all those years ago. I let out the breath I'd been holding.

"Hello, is this Evelyn Gray?" I asked, confident in the answer.

"No, it's her daughter, Alice."

"Oh!"

"Who is this?"

I stared across the kitchen, thinking about that sunny-side-up egg, the one and only one I'd ever eaten.

"My name is Carla. Carla Sanders. You sound so much like your mother."

"How do you know my mother?"

How to explain? "I met her about fifteen years ago. In 1970, just before Christmas."

"Yes?"

I thought about the fake ID I'd used in those days. "I gave your mother a different name when we met. My name was always Carla, but I was a kid and I was using a different name because I was a kid, and I was traveling alone and . . ." I hesitated, hearing myself ramble. "Is your mom there?" I finally asked.

There was a long pause before Alice Gray said, not unkindly, "She's here but she can't talk on the phone. Can I help you?"

I let out another long breath. "She helped me then. Your mother did." I was still fumbling for words. "I was thirteen. A runaway. I wound up one evening near your parents' house and your mother took me in for the night. She was very kind to me. I've always wanted to thank her. To let her know I grew up and that I'm okay and that I never forgot her."

"Mom's got dementia," Alice Gray sighed. "But I'm glad you called. She told me about you after you were here, and she's mentioned it over the years. She's always wondered what happened to you."

Relief flooded me. "I'm so sorry she's not well."

"Yes, well. She's eighty-five. And it's not terrible. She just doesn't remember a lot of things, but she's not completely gone. She's like my grandmother was when I was a kid. Just kind of stuck in a merry-go-round of childhood memories. Not unhappy though. She laughs. She enjoys listening to music. Enjoys having me here even though she thinks I'm her sister most days."

"She was so kind to me, your mother. And I never let her know I was okay. I never got where I told her I was going, and I kept thinking I would, and I carried the paper she gave me all this time, but I just never called, and I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. It's okay. I'm glad to hear from you. Glad to know you remember my mom. She is a very good person and, like I said, she never stopped wondering what happened to you."

"Wow." I thought for a minute. "What about your dad? I remember him well also."

"Oh, he's fine. He and I take care of Mom together."

"Oh! I'm so glad to hear that. Will you tell him I called? He knew your mom was worried about me, and he didn't think I'd ever let her know I was okay. Would you let him know I did, please?"

"Of course."

"Well, thank you. Thank you for listening. Thanks for having such a nice mom."

"Thank you for calling. I'll tell Dad. I'll tell Mom too. I don't know what she remembers anymore, but she'll like hearing about you anyway. It doesn't take much to make her happy these days."

"Thank you," I said again.

"And hey, if you're ever in these parts again, look us up, okay?"



"I will. Goodbye."

"Bye. Thanks for calling." That lilt, I thought again. Just like her mom.

I stared at the paper Evelyn Gray had given me so long ago. I tried to picture her now, as her daughter had described her, demented but engaged in . . . what? For so long I'd carried her note around, ashamed at my failure to return her kindness with the simplest act of decency, of consideration. Maybe, I thought, I just liked the idea of someone worrying about me like no one who should have ever did.

I reached for a notebook where I'd started keeping a journal, opening it to the next blank page. In a firm hand, I wrote the date at the top. Then I taped Evelyn Gray's note to the page. I stared at it a long time, picked up the pen, and wrote: Spoke with Evelyn's daughter Alice. Kept my word at last. She said she'd tell her dad. 🐦