



After the Storm

Paul Hilding

MAY 2020

Drive. Faster feels better. Windows down. Music up. Way up. You feel like you are looking for something. Or are you just trying to leave the darkness behind? The question is vaguely familiar, from another time in your life.

Your mother died on Easter Sunday. A few days earlier, after the facility was locked down, the man in the white mask had set up a facetime call. Her hair was neatly combed, and she was sitting in front of the window, wearing her favorite embroidered blouse from Switzerland. She looked OK, a half-smile on her lips, but her eyes kept fluttering shut.

Follow the road along the river out of town, towards the dam. Park at the trailhead. No one else is here today.

When you first moved away to college, she called you at least once a week. But at some point, after you got married, she stopped. Perhaps she felt you were taking her for granted. And, of course, you were. You always had. It took a while to realize she was waiting for

you to call her for a change. So you did. Your routine was to call on Sunday evenings and talk about family and weather and vacations. Never anything too personal. Always upbeat.

The start of the trail is rough, a game path overgrown with thistle and wild roses. Push through brambles and thorns. Then follow the river through head-high cattails.

You feel guilty about how many Sundays you forgot to call. Or worse, chose not to.

After maybe half a mile, turn left into the slot canyon. The trail is wider here, but still a single track, meandering through sage and rabbit brush. The first wildflowers have started to bloom. You hear the faint buzz of bees and a single meadowlark.

The man in the mask holds the phone for her. She doesn't speak when you greet her. You are surprised. Your conversations had always been effortless. You stumble through a few opening lines. "The weather is nice." "The lawn is greening up." "Stephani



Shoshanna Ahart, *High Noon Beyond Pietenfeld*

started some carrots and onions.” There is a long silence. You ask a few questions about the weather and about the flowers in her window box. Nothing. The man in the mask tries to help: “Uh. It’s a beautiful day. The flowers are coming in nicely. She was sitting in the garden earlier.”

There is only one tree in the canyon, a twisted old hackberry with bare, gnarled branches. An owl is asleep on a perch near the middle, protected by a dense thicket of thorny branches.

She was born in Switzerland in 1930, less than a year after Anne Frank. A mile from the German border. When she was a teenager, she would watch fireworks, of a sort, from a hill near her house—allied bombers flying across Lake Constance at night into a wall of anti-aircraft fire on the German side of the lake. You never asked her if she was scared. She never told you she was a Jew.

Turn left at the tree and hike up the small side canyon, maybe a hundred yards. The wind is still. There is no sound here. You have left the rushing river and the trilling blackbirds behind. Even the meadowlark has gone silent. And then you see them, on the north slope. An entire hillside covered in lupines. A sea of blue. Perfectly still. Perfectly silent. You sit down on a sun-warmed rock. You breathe in the sweet fragrance of

wildflowers and sage. You feel your shoulders sag, your jaw unclench, tears on your cheeks.

She loved everything about life. Her family. Her friends. Laughter. And mountains. Especially mountains. She delighted in summer hikes through fields of wildflowers shadowed by snowy peaks. In the winters she skied, starting before she could even walk and continuing well into her eighties. She once told you that it was the mountains that had saved Switzerland from the Nazis.

From prior years, you knew the lupines would be here. But you didn’t expect the flash of gold that floated and danced in front of them, a large butterfly. The back edge of its yellow and black striped wings is decorated with perfectly spaced rows of sky blue crescents, the same color as your mother’s eyes. It is a tiger swallowtail. You know its name because you had seen one ten years ago. After a storm. The day you nearly died.

AUGUST 2010

The late summer drive across Nebraska seems endless, hundreds of miles of straight-line driving through a monoculture landscape of corn and soybeans. Far in the distance, the sun-baked road seems to float upward on

waves of heat, giving the illusion of distant foothills. But the shimmering highlands, with the tantalizing promise of fresh air and changing scenery, remain forever out of reach on the eastern horizon.

You've been on the road for nearly a month, chasing another kind of mirage. Freshly laid off from thirty years as a paralegal in Los Angeles, you somehow feel both crushed and liberated at the same time. The road trip is sheer impulse. You were sick of L. A. And somewhere, in the back of your mind, you had a sort of half-formed idea that you would find . . . something . . . by wandering the highways and byways of America. A place to land, perhaps, or a sense of purpose. A better life, or maybe just an escape. Something.

The air conditioning in the ancient camper can't keep up with the heat, so you open the windows, but the air smells like boiling tar and is so hot that it is painful to breathe. You quickly roll the windows back up and endure the heat in sticky silence.

Last week, your search for "something" led you to sign up for volunteer work in South Dakota with a raptor biologist. You met her at a diner in Idaho. She told you she rehabilitates injured eagles and hawks and that she was just completing a tour of the state, showing some of the rescued

animals to schoolchildren. She said she needed help with her next project: re-establishing ospreys in South Dakota where they had been wiped out by pesticides. At the time, preventing the extinction of a beautiful bird seemed like as good a life goal as any. And, perhaps, you might find a way to rescue yourself as well.

At dusk, near the border with South Dakota, you find a campground shaded by enormous cottonwood trees next to a small lake. The osprey release site is only a few hours away, an easy drive tomorrow. You park near the lake and savor the cooler air. Exhausted from the drive, you scavenge a day-old tuna fish sandwich and a half-empty Gatorade from the cooler. You make up the narrow bed in the back of the camper and are asleep almost as soon as you lie down.

You awaken to a loud knock on the back of the camper. It is midmorning, but you feel tired and disoriented from yesterday's ordeal. A man with a baseball cap and a worried frown is peering through the window. A patch on his shirt says he's the campground host. You open the rear door.

"Morning. Just got word there's a storm coming this way. You'll need to take shelter." He motions vaguely to his left and hurries on to the next campsite before you can say a word.

You get dressed and climb out of the camper. The air is still, and there is not a cloud in the sky. There are a few structures in the direction the man pointed. One is a wooden ticket booth that you drove past when you entered the campground. Farther away is a small cinderblock building, probably the campground's bathroom.

You take another look at the empty sky, shrug your shoulders, and climb back into the camper to start a pot of coffee. While you wait, you tidy up the bed and sit down to study a map.

Minutes later, a few large raindrops plink against the camper's metal roof. You look out the window. There are still no clouds over the lake. But then a flash of lightning is reflected in the glass. As you turn around and look out the other window, your heart skips a beat. A wall of black thunderheads has appeared out of nowhere, towering above the trees like ramparts of an enormous medieval castle. For a moment, you are unable to move.

The wind picks up rapidly, shaking the camper back and forth. Very quickly, the sky above the campground turns inky black and the sprinkle of raindrops becomes a torrent. You hear a roaring sound, like a speeding train. For the first time, you begin to think about the danger from the giant cottonwood trees surrounding the camper.

Now the camper is rocking violently, and you think of another threat. It might actually tip over. You grab your cellphone and open the door on the lee side. The roar is deafening. You kneel down to avoid flying debris and watch the camper tilting more and more with each new gust of wind. Large branches are now falling throughout the park. An entire seventy-foot-tall tree crashes to the ground, flattening the ticket booth. You know you can't stay where you are, but the safety of the cinderblock building seems impossibly far away.

And then a branch the size of a piano explodes on top of a nearby car, shattering the windows and collapsing the roof. You take a final look at the pitch-black sky and the disintegrating forest and sprint towards the restroom. After a few steps, your flip flops stick in the mud and you run the rest of the way barefoot, dodging branches, broken glass, and other debris. It seems like an eternity, like one of those nightmares where you must run through quicksand to escape a monster.

When you finally arrive, a number of other campers are already there, ashen faced, some crying, some with small cuts and bruises. A few more straggle in, completely drenched and looking shell-shocked. Something very large and heavy crashes against the metal roof, but it remains intact.

And then, less than half an hour after it began, the storm is over. The sun comes out, and everyone wanders off to survey the damage. You find out later it is called a microburst and that wind gusts had reached 110 miles per hour, the equivalent of a Category 3 hurricane. Thankfully, no one in the campground is badly injured. But a number of tents, RVs, and campground buildings have been flattened by falling trees and branches.

You pick your way back through the debris field to check on the camper. It looks like bombs have exploded everywhere in the surrounding forest, but somehow the camper is undamaged.

And then, out of that shattered landscape, a large yellow-and-black-striped butterfly floats towards you, unhurried, its wings as thin as tissue paper. You wonder how it could possibly have survived. It is the most fragile and exquisitely beautiful creature you have ever seen. You stand dumbstruck as it drifts close and then flutters away. You watch until all you can see are distant flashes of gold in the shadows of the broken trees.

In your muddled state, it feels like the performance is meant for you. And for no reason you could ever have explained, you think about your mother and about another road trip—one she told you about when you were a child. It was in Europe, less than two years after the end of World War II.

JUNE 1947

The way she told the story, she and her Swiss girlfriend—both just graduated from high school—had a grand time hitchhiking in western Europe and then crossing the Channel to Great Britain. Most of the rides were from truck drivers. They were unfailingly nice, sharing their food and going out of their way to help them get to their next destination.

In Scotland, she learned that a nearby mountain was the tallest in Great Britain. On an impulse, they hiked to the top. They'd brought a picnic and were enjoying the view when a group of young Englishmen appeared, wearing crampons and heavy packs full of climbing gear and ropes. She said they were astonished to see that the two Swiss girls had summited in their tennis shoes. And, she added with a smile, her eyes dancing, the young men were charming and very good looking.

What she never mentioned—and what you never thought to ask—was what Europe looked like in the aftermath of the deadliest and most destructive war in history. No mention of the towns and villages ripped apart by bombs and artillery. Of fear and privation. Of the mass slaughter of innocents.

As a child, your mother survived the Great Depression, the Holocaust, and World War II. She lost her father



Shoshanna Ahart, *Sunflowers at Hessental*

when she was thirteen. Her life was difficult. But, somehow, miraculously, she floated out of that shattered world of hate and death unscathed, loving life, and expecting only the best of people.

accident of being born a mile away from the country where Frank was born and died. And it suddenly occurs to you that, perhaps, the “something” for which you have been searching for so many years is not to be found on the road, but in the example she set.

MAY 2020

There is a picture of Anne Frank that looks very much like a picture of your mother at the same age—narrow face, unruly dark hair, wistful smile. Less than a year before her death, Frank wrote in her diary: “In spite of everything, I still believe people are truly good at heart.” Your mother lived her entire life with that same belief and with a joyful heart, even though she must have known her fate would have been very different but for the lucky

*With the help of the man in the mask, you manage a few more exchanges with your mother. But then she slumps forward in her chair with her eyes closed. He says she is tired. You tell her you love her. Her eyes flutter, and perhaps her lips move a little. You see the towering peaks of the Wasatch Front through the window behind her. The mountains are shadowy, their snow-capped crests bathed in yellow late-evening sunshine. You say thank you. And goodbye. **