

*LOVE*  
*&*  
*OTHER STORIES*

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*Wising Up Press Collective*  
Wising Up Press

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## LOVE



It was many years ago, 1973, and I didn't know or appreciate it at the time, but I would never love anyone again like I did Emma Sumpter. She was my first real girlfriend, and we met as students at Sonoma State. I was a junior and had the dorm room above hers; I helped her carry a steamer trunk she was struggling with up our outside stairwell when she was moving in as a transferring sophomore. Things developed between us pretty quickly from there. After a few weeks, outside of my work-study and attending different classes, we became basically inseparable.

It's hard to say exactly what drew me so strongly to Emma. She was certainly pretty—slender, doe-eyed with long, brown hair, and broad shoulders that, when bare, I found incredibly sensual. Like myself, she had a quiet, reserved nature, and she was unusually thoughtful. Much smarter than me, she was a double major in Art History and Philosophy with clear post-graduate aspirations while I'd chosen Literature only because I had to declare something and liked to read. And we were one another's first lovers; in that regard, she had a tender ravenousness I would never again experience, but of course, this was another thing I had no way of knowing at the time.

We both had gone to high school in different suburbs of San Jose, but our paths had never crossed there. Her family was more affluent than mine, her father an executive with an investment firm. My dad was a district manager for an insurance company, and except for the five hundred dollars he and my mom had scraped together in our family of seven for me to start college, I was on my own for all other expenses. So, I washed dishes in one of the school's cafeterias during the week and was also happy to have my summer job as a construction company laborer outside of Hartford near where my dad had grown up. His brother, who was a supervisor for Connecticut Natural Gas, got it for me through a contractor he worked with. It paid twice what I could find at home or in Sonoma, and even after the cheap rent another relative

## FORTUNES



Just before Paul's Air Force squadron deployed in the fall of 2014, he was able to get a spot on a military hop from Anchorage to Juneau. It was just an overnight junket, but Paul wanted to visit his grandfather, who'd essentially raised him alone there and whose health was declining. Paul's upcoming deployment from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson to Afghanistan was scheduled to last seven months, but most recent deployments had extended well beyond that length of time, so he didn't know when he'd have another chance to return home. Since Paul's enlistment eight years earlier after high school, his grandfather had secured a subsidized studio via the Tlingit-Haida Regional Housing Authority in Fireweed Place Senior Apartments downtown, just a few blocks from their old rental duplex in The Flats. Paul's frequent military relocations had only allowed for a handful of trips back home, so he was excited for the opportunity of even such a short visit with the old man he affectionately called Pops.

Paul arrived in his fatigues and camo jacket around noon on Tuesday. Because Pops no longer drove and there were no ride shares yet in Alaska's capital, he took a taxi from the airport out in Mendenhall Valley into town. It was October, which meant Juneau was draped in its usual blanket of steady rain with low clouds hovering against the mountains on both sides of Gastineau Channel. He found himself gazing fondly at the landmarks that greeted him as the taxi turned onto Egan Drive. Thunder Mountain's expanse tumbled off to the left towards the glacier, and Sunny Point jutted like a short, green thumb into the channel on the right. His heart seized a bit when they came abreast Lemon Creek a little further on, and he forced himself to concentrate instead on the fishing trawlers across the channel along the rocky shore of North Douglas Island. Twin Lakes appeared just north of the salmon hatchery, followed by the boat harbor and his elementary, junior high, and high schools, then the service station at the foot of Douglas Bridge

## PIE



Andreas served a couple of different functions at the entrance to the strip club: he took the cover fee from patrons and also acted as bouncer when necessary. He stood behind a podium just inside the open front doors where he could see out into the parking lot, as well as inside through a plush red curtain's gap to the stage and bar. He was a big Greek-American who fit the profile of his job: bald head, long goatee, barrel chest, tattoo sleeves up both arms, gruff demeanor, and gray, steady eyes. All the dancers knew and trusted him. He'd seen plenty of turnover in the seven years he'd been working there on weekend nights. In the daytime hours, he swept chimneys.

It was a rainy Friday night in October, chilly for Los Angeles, and the place wasn't half full at eight when the dancers changed shifts. Except for Gail, he'd seen all of them who were coming on find spots at the back of the parking lot and scurry through the rain to the staff door at the rear of the building. He finally watched Gail's old sedan crawl into the lot at ten minutes past eight. Instead of parking near the staff door, she pulled her car towards the front of the lot a couple dozen feet away from where Andreas stood. Enough of the light over the entry reached her car for him to see her fiddle with something that looked like a blanket in the back seat before she pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and hurried into the foyer through the rain.

She shook off the hood and looked at him from the other side of the podium. As she did, something seized, as always, in his chest. Like the other dancers, she was pretty, even in her sweatshirt, jeans, and damp ponytail. But there was something different about her. She was a little older than the others, never smoked or drank, showed no sign of drug use, and seemed a bit removed, distant. That demeanor on stage, he knew, was part of her allure to patrons, which her tips reflected. She'd been dancing there for about a year, and always only on the same two nights he worked.

## GREEN FLASH



My wife, Beth, and I were sitting with our friend, Stan, on the roof-top deck of the beach house she and I had rented in San Diego. We were there for a month to get out of the long, wet Seattle winter; Stan had just come down to visit for Presidents' Day weekend. He still supervised a few residents at UW Medical Center where he'd been head of internal medicine, but Beth and I had retired completely several years earlier from the civil engineering firm where we'd both worked.

It was late afternoon, unseasonably mild, and we'd arranged our padded wicker chairs on three sides of a low table so the expansive view of sand and waves stretched before us from Crystal Pier to Bird Rock. Stan sat in the middle. We sipped bottles of IPA and nibbled off a plate of warm brie, crackers, and grapes while we reminisced about some of the trips we'd gone on together over the years. Beth and I were careful not to mention Carol, Stan's wife, who'd been along on all those journeys, too, because she'd left him after forty years of marriage without warning the summer before. So far, we'd shared stories about sailing among the Greek islands, skiing in Banff, and cycling between villages in Ireland.

Stan leaned forward, plucked a grape, chewed for a moment, then said, "How about that rafting trip on the Snake River?"

Beth gave a little huff and said, "Oh, no."

"Yeah." I chuckled. "Talk about adventures."

We all shook our heads gazing out as the sun crept towards the horizon. On that week-long trip, we'd joined eleven others on a remote stretch of the Snake, traveling on three large rafts commandeered in back by guides giving the paying guests paddling instructions. Each raft also carried a portion of our camping provisions, although I suppose "glamping" would be a more accurate description given the level of luxury and expense involved. The four of us were in the first boat along with the lead guide, who owned the rafting

## I LIKE YOU



Lauren was sitting on a towel at the beach applying sunscreen when a toddler, a girl, stumbled by chasing a seagull. She looked over in the direction from which the girl seemed to have come. A woman wearing a one-piece bathing suit against pale skin like her own was reclined there in a sling chair with her eyes closed; she appeared to be sleeping, a collection of sand toys cluttered around her.

"Hey," Lauren called. "Is this your daughter?"

But her voice must have been lost in the sound of the surf because the woman didn't react. The girl had red hair and even paler skin. She'd moved on another ten yards towards the water's edge, the seagull just ahead of her. Lauren got up and followed a little behind. Each time the seagull changed directions, the girl did the same, her arms outstretched. Once, she stumbled and Lauren reached to steady her, but she righted herself and was quickly chasing the seagull again, laughing. Finally, the seagull glanced behind it and flew away. The girl watched it go, then retraced her tottering steps across the sand. Lauren stayed just behind her until she got to the feet of the woman reclined in the sling chair and began playing with a plastic pail and shovel. It was then that Lauren recognized the woman as Ms. Denison, the mother of one of the students she had in her third-grade class, a small boy named Dylan with large, unsettled eyes. Ms. Denison had been haughty and abrupt with her at the meet-and-greet before the school year started several weeks earlier. Lauren didn't see Dylan anywhere in the area, so thought he was probably with his father; another teacher who'd had him in class the year before had told her that his parents had gone through a nasty divorce and that the mother had remarried and had another child soon afterward. Now Lauren could hear the woman's muted snores between the tumbling waves while her daughter filled the pail with sand. She shook her head and returned to her towel.

## A NICE DRIVE



Leonard still lived in the same apartment above a bar and grill in one of the little towns outside Watertown, the only city of any size that far north in Upstate New York. He and his wife, Edna, had first begun renting it after their marriage in 1957. Edna died thirty-eight years later when a produce truck smashed into her car after it lost control on black ice at an intersection a block away; Leonard heard the collision from his recliner in the apartment's living room. Afterwards, he began taking most of his dinners downstairs at the bar and grill. He worked a few more years at the paper machinery factory in Watertown before finally retiring at age sixty-six. He was a large man with slight cauliflower ears from boxing in the service, and the salt-and-pepper stubble on his head matched that on his face.

Weather permitting, at least twice a week Leonard drove over to the cemetery beside Kelsey Creek, sat under a red oak against Edna's tombstone, and used his fingertips to bury notes he'd written to her in the soft earth of her grave. Sometimes, as he sat there in the falling late afternoon light, he tossed acorns in the creek.



Leonard first noticed the woman in the laundromat across the street from the bar and grill shortly after he retired while eating his evening soup. He supposed she was about his age, and he was struck by her slow, deliberate movements as she loaded clothes into the washer or dryer and the way she licked the tip of her pencil doing the newspaper's crossword sitting on a bench while she waited. She came each Monday evening at the same time. He began to linger over a second beer so he could watch her fold the warm clothes deliberately into a brown paper bag which she then clutched to her chest as she left the laundromat. He smiled watching her walk away down the street. There was a gentleness to her countenance that reminded him of Edna.



## POCO A POCO



Joe was discovered unconscious in the bright sun on his back patio one afternoon during a July heat wave that was severe even for Tucson; daytime highs had hovered near 115 degrees for three weeks. His granddaughter, Chrissy, who'd lived with him basically all her life, came upon him when she went out for a smoke a little before three o'clock. She was thirty-four, and Joe was about to turn eighty-seven.

Their laundry basket caught Chrissy's attention first, tipped on its side with some of its contents, including the jersey she'd discarded on the patio table late the night before, scattered next to Joe. He lay sideways on the scorching pavers in baggy Bermuda shorts, a T-shirt, and Velcro rubber sandals. She screamed, ran to him, and shook his shoulders, which barely rose and fell. When he didn't respond, she fished her cell phone from her pocket and fought trembling hands to call 911. Then she backed away into the awning's shadows, banged at her lips with a fist, and cried until two EMTs arrived in a whining ambulance several minutes later.

After a rapid assessment, the pair carefully shifted Joe's small, frail body into the shade where the taller one used a garden hose to cool him down, and the other rushed to retrieve a stretcher from the ambulance. They got him into its air conditioned interior quickly, and while the taller one placed ice packs on his groin, armpits, and neck, the other called Tucson ER & Hospital through a handheld radio barking things like "elderly male . . . acute hyperthermia . . . possible stroke or seizure . . ." He broke off suddenly, turned to Chrissy where they stood at the ambulance's open back doors, and asked how long he'd been outside.

She shook her head, her stomach sinking. "I'm not sure. I thought I heard the patio slider open around noon."

"Jesus," the EMT mumbled.

When he asked her if she wanted to accompany Joe to the hospital,

## TOP OF THE WORLD



Alice and her mother lived in a trailer just outside of Fairbanks, Alaska. Her father had won it in a poker game two decades earlier. He'd left when Alice was five, but still sent an occasional check. Otherwise, her mother got by on disability payments and spent most of her time drinking and going through unsavory boyfriends who drank with her.

*Barren* was a word Alice grew to understand from a young age. It encompassed the tundra that surrounded the trailer park in all directions, the wall of the Alaska Range to the south, the empty ribbon of highway in the other direction where it literally ended at the town of Prudhoe Bay. It described the stand of caribou that sometimes migrated through in the distance during the fall or spring, the wide sky, the absence of sound. Barren was what she felt inside during the long hours by herself in the trailer while her mother was out, or rising alone in the morning to the lingering haze of whiskey and cigarettes. She had no friends; there was no one near her age in the trailer park. At school, she remained as invisible as possible. She was plain in all regards: a limp tangle of dark hair, an uneven complexion, big eyes that always appeared slightly startled.

Alice liked to knit. The old lady in the next trailer taught her how before she passed away when Alice was in ninth grade. She knitted scarves, mittens, caps, socks, sweaters, and sold some of them at crafts fairs and a consignment shop in town. She'd been carefully saving the money she earned from that and babysitting in a coffee can under her bed throughout high school. She liked the click the knitting needles made. She liked the steady, rhythmic movement of her hands. She liked the production of useful things she could hold, things that brought comfort.

Life with her mother held some fond memories. When she was little, Alice could remember her mother reading to her. Several times, they baked together. There was a period of a few months when Alice was in first grade

## REDEMPTION



Dan met his wife, Nora, for dinner to celebrate their thirty-seventh wedding anniversary at a new place in downtown Seattle that they'd heard good things about. He'd retired from his museum archivist job several years earlier, but Nora still did a ten-hour shift three days a week as a social worker at a hospital for medically fragile children, and since their anniversary fell on a workday for her, they decided to meet at the restaurant after her shift was over. On the way, she also needed to stop at the Target that anchored a mall near her disabled brother's apartment and get a few things to drop off to him; Ed was able to live independently but relied on her assistance a couple of times a week. Because of those delays, Dan had made their reservation for six forty-five, late for the two of them.

The restaurant was near Pike Place Market, a neighborhood catering to nightlife and tourists amidst shops, hotels, the convention center, and the bayfront. It was low-lit and small, quaint in an unpretentious sort of way, its dozen or so tables all full at that hour. Dan was already seated at theirs against the far wall nursing a glass of Chardonnay when Nora arrived. As soon as she came through the doorway, her troubled expression told him all was not right with her. He stood when she reached him, they kissed briefly, and then settled into their seats across from each other.

He poured her some wine, lifted his glass, and said, "To us."

"Yes." She gave a forced smile and touched her glass to his.

Dan waited until they'd both drank before asking, "Okay, what's wrong? Something with Ed?"

She stiffened a little. "He's fine."

"Work?"

"It's nothing." Nora shook her head and looked around. "This place is nice. Cozy."

He studied her eyes; they were what he'd fallen in love with about her

## NEIGHBORS



1

Henry and his father, Glen, sat eating dinner at the rickety picnic table their new landlord had left in the backyard. Light fell towards full evening. A screen door banged next door, and they watched their neighbor slowly descend her back steps, one hand on her cane, the other clutching a plastic sack.

Henry whispered, "How old is she?"

"Pretty old."

"Seventy? Seventy-five?"

"At least."

The old woman completed the halting journey to and from her garbage can, then hoisted herself back up the three steps. When the screen door clapped shut behind her, Glen and Henry both blinked. The short hedge of rosemary dividing their backyards gave off a faint, pungent scent.

2

The next afternoon, Henry was out back playing with his action figures. He'd built up two warring factions amidst clumps of dirt, rocks, and hunks of brush. He lay on his stomach on the worn grass rearranging formations and mumbling battle narrations with little bursts of explosions puffing his cheeks. He didn't hear the old woman open her screen door and emerge partway behind it onto her top step.

She regarded the boy for several moments before saying, "Where's your father?"

Henry went still. His eyes widened looking up at her. He shrugged, then said, "Working."

The old woman frowned. The prior month, between drawn curtains, she'd observed the two of them moving their things into the house that had

## LEFT IN THE WAKE



As our site's lone Reading Specialist, I simply wandered from classroom to classroom during our Back to School Night introducing myself where it seemed appropriate. When I entered our second grade classroom, I noticed that virtually all of the parents were, like me, not much older than thirty. The exception was an older couple who came in right after I had and hovered uneasily inside the open door next to me; I guessed they were both near seventy. They wore different colored chambray shirts and jeans, the man's held up with red suspenders over a sizable gut. The woman, whose salt-and-pepper hair reminded me of an old-fashioned leather football helmet, stared up at some pictures on the big bulletin board beside her while the man gazed about him with a slight grimace. Most of the parents were at their children's desks where work samples from the first couple weeks of school were displayed.

When the man's eyes met mine. I smiled and said, "Good evening."

His grimace remained. "Hello, there."

"So, you here for Back to School Night?"

The woman turned my way and said, "That's right."

"Which student . . . is yours?"

"Mitchell Robinson," she said. "He's our grandson."

I nodded. The teacher in that class had consulted with me earlier that day with concerns about Mitchell and asked me to do some individual reading placement testing with him and some other incoming students the next morning.

The woman pointed to the bulletin board and said, "That's his picture on top. The T-Rex." She turned back to me, a small, pained smile deepening the wrinkles around her lips. "He loves dinosaurs."

"He's a good artist," I told them looking up and back. "Very realistic."

They glanced at each other in a way that seemed hesitant, almost sheepish. "I'm Maude," the woman said. "And this is Hugh."

## JURY DUTY



The jury I was on had voted eleven-to-one for conviction four times over two days of deliberations before we finally agreed to send the judge a note saying we were unable to reach a unanimous verdict and were hopelessly deadlocked. Most of the other jurors seemed as surprised at the outcome as I imagined the judge and lawyers would be because the evidence in the case was pretty straightforward and overwhelming. The defendant, a young man in his early twenties, had been charged with operating a motor vehicle under the influence of marijuana. We'd heard testimony from the arresting officer and watched footage from his body cam confirming that the defendant had rolled through a red light making a right turn shortly after midnight the previous summer in a popular area of bars and nightclubs. After he was pulled over, the officer smelled a strong odor of burnt marijuana inside the car and observed the defendant brushing off flakes of what appeared to be grinded weed from the bottom of his T-shirt. When asked if he'd been smoking cannabis recently, the defendant admitted that he had "about an hour ago." He subsequently failed every field sobriety test, even pausing for over thirty seconds midway through the heel-toe walk while appearing to forget what he was supposed to do next. His red, glazed eyes had been dilated to an almost unheard-of eight millimeters, his pulse—taken twice at 15-minute intervals—was extremely elevated, his speech and responses were consistently slow and delayed, and he complained of being cold although the temperature at the time was almost seventy degrees. A toxicologist also testified that results from the defendant's blood draw were more than double the THC levels for moderate cannabis ingestion, which in her professional judgment clearly indicated impairment. The lead defense attorney, who seemed inexperienced and uncertain of himself throughout the trial, rested his case without calling a single witness.

The holdout for conviction was juror number eight, a red-haired woman

## CALLING



Embossed in gold on the cover of the new bible in his lap: "Father Seamus Mark Sullivan." He ran a thumb across the raised letters and still couldn't quite believe that had been his name now for the nearly seven hours since his ordination. After the ceremony, his grandmother had given him the Bible at the bus station before he'd left. Next, his mother had helped him pull the heavy turtleneck sweater she'd knit for him over his head and clerical collar, then adjusted its matching scarf under his chin against the chill. The two women both wept with happiness as they kissed him goodbye. His father had kept his own tears at bay after handing him the rosary he'd owned since childhood, but his embrace had been prolonged.

Father Seamus had departed on an express at noon that took I-94 east out of Detroit. He'd eaten his mother's sack lunch right away, and then his eyelids had grown heavy. He hadn't slept much the night before, whether from excitement or anxiousness he wasn't sure, and he'd fallen into deep slumber just after they passed through Ann Arbor. He'd awoken in the late afternoon near Gary, then had time to grab a burger at Union Station in Chicago before transferring to the non-direct whose final destination was Lincoln, Nebraska.

The second bus he was presently on traveled initially on Route 6, a mostly two-lane serving small towns along that east-west corridor. From his mid-span seat, Father Seamus looked out his window at fallow corn fields and early-spring patches of snow holding on grudgingly under the occasional stand of cottonwoods or sycamores. Telephone lines at the back of the fields seemed to nod in a lolling rhythm as they stretched off into the hinterland. He supposed the countryside of his new parish near the southern border of Nebraska and Iowa would look much the same. A converted Sunday School classroom serving as rectory awaited him there attached to a small, clapboard church, as well as an old, donated pick-up for his use—a "perk," the bishop

## YAKUTAT



My old friend Tom Kimberly called again after he knew I'd finally been able to have my feeding tube removed and could manage a diet of pureed foods. By then, it had been almost ten months since my last chemo and radiation treatments for head/neck cancer followed by six more of daily speech therapy sessions to address related swallowing problems. Tom had been after me for years to return with him to Yakutat, the largely Native fishing village in the remote upper corner of Southeastern Alaska where we'd begun our teaching careers together nearly a half-century before. Now he was at it again.

"Hell," he said, his voice falling into its familiar growl. "You just fought the medical battle of your life, my arthritis is getting so bad I can hardly make it around the block, and we're sixty-nine years old. If we don't go now, we might never have another goddamn chance."

"I don't know," I muttered.

"Just four days. Mid-September, fish the height of the coho run. I reserved the last available cabin at Sam's Landing. And Cody Mays insists on running us around in one of his skiffs; he's already started organizing a potluck reception for us."

Cody had been a student of ours, as well as Tom's manager on the boys' high school basketball team. He'd become the village's longtime mayor, managed the local power utility, and fished commercially part-time. I didn't have a Facebook account, but Tom did and had been in contact on it with Cody for a while. Tom had let him know about my cancer diagnosis that way, and Cody had sent a card almost immediately afterwards signed by more than a dozen of our former students, which probably comprised just about every one of them still living in the village. I'd coached the girls' team and taught secondary social studies there while Tom was the school's PE and science teacher. There were only about fifty students total in sixth through twelfth grades at the time, and we'd had them all.



*Author*

William Cass has had over 350 short stories appear in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. Winner of writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal, he's also been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, and six times for the Pushcart Prize. His earlier short story collections, *Something Like Hope & Other Stories* and *Uncommon & Other Stories*, were also published by Wising Up Press. He lives in San Diego, California.

