

Village Writing School's Literary Agent Summit First Page Panel

***** #1 *****

4:30 A.M., September 2018, Anagni, Italy: Once Calista Michele was hidden behind the fig tree, she fanned her black hair in front of her face. The gray coverall she wore blended into the limestone wall of the Anagni Cathedral, and if caught by the security guard she hoped to convince him she was an early shift sanitation worker.

Breaking into an ancient papal palace was no game. The Italian courts would take it seriously with jail time, heavy fines, and publicity that would discredit her as an archaeologist. Calista closed her eyes and leaned hard against the cold wall to prevent the tiniest movement.

She'd always loved a quest. The Benedictine sisters at the orphanage had nurtured her talent for convoluted puzzles. Mother Ilaria had tucked riddles in the marble hands of the saints' statues and watched a young Calista race to the solution. When the orphanage closed, Calista had been the last child remaining. Those lonely years, influenced by the aging sisters, had made her a religious eccentric with a strong sense of propriety.

This last year had been hard professionally. A male colleague had stolen and published her research, and her superiors at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints had been slow to defend her. The injustice made this drastic step of breaking into the crypt seem appropriate. No one knew she was here. There would be no chance anyone could steal credit for what she would discover. These thoughts steeled her nerves and forced her to focus.

From this palace, in 1160, Pope Alexander III had excommunicated the Holy Roman Emperor, Fredrick Barbarossa. The time period was her specialty, and when studying modern schematics of the pope's fortress, Calista had wondered at an irregularity in the stone work. For months she had sneezed her way through dusty archives, until she found an explanation in an obscure chronicle.

***** #2 *****

The gala reception was in full swing — live jazz band, aroma of camembert with truffle — and I was miserable.

"Lara! There you are. Would you mind freshening my drink?"

Amber Kent, the star of *Zombie Princess* and the Global Council's newest Goodwill Ambassador, thrust her empty glass into my hand.

"Actually..." I said. Actually, I would mind very much. I had longed to be with the Council to work on important health matters and make a difference; instead I was on loan from my department to babysit a capricious Hollywood star.

"Mojito with lime and extra mint," Amber said. "You're a doll."

"My pleasure," I said, when it wasn't. I didn't enjoy mingling. I was a behind-the-scenes type of person, good with charts and statistics and not with harvesting extra mint for someone's Mojito. I didn't like wearing taffeta, which was scratching right now around the neckline. My idea of a perfect Saturday night was curling up with *National Geographic*.

As I made my way through the Four Seasons Grand Ballroom to refill Amber's glass, I crossed paths with Pablo Morales, the director of the Africa unit. He was the one person I had hoped to run into at this party.

"Lombard!" he greeted me in his hearty voice. "You're the first person who's lasted more than five minutes with Amber. My hat's off to you."

"No problem," I said, and hated myself for lying. The truth should matter, even when it's inconvenient.

"Mr. Morales," I said, my voice uneven, my heart in my throat, "I understand there's a position opening up on your team. I'm very interested." I tried to sound confident. Pablo was handsome and smooth-skinned — but what really made him stand out was his air of utter confidence. I wanted to have that, too.

***** #3 *****

Number 3 has been removed at the request of the author

***** #4 *****

Ch. 1 On the Road Again

To Do (3/2/16)

- Gym!!
- Groceries for Tom's birthday sleepover
- Order chocolate cake
- Get cancer
- Again

As March's late winter morning light filtered through in my kitchen window, I already scanned the news, read my email, and checked the day's schedules. My kids teased me about my to-do lists and color-coded calendar. I could say my system was a deeply ingrained result of years of Catholic schooling. I'd never risk a detention over a missed assignment. But my need for order went much deeper than that. Careful plans prevented bad things from happening.

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I stared at the phone ringing on my black soapstone desk in the kitchen like it was the first time I'd ever heard it. The wireless phone stand was tucked between my lists and file organizer. I saw the caller ID and date. It was my breast surgeon.

That was quick. I only had the biopsy two days ago.

I inhaled to push down the coldness creeping from my stomach to my chest. I answered the call. I held the phone between my ear and shoulder and clenched my hands against my stomach.

"Chris, we have the biopsy results," my doctor said.

He paused. I imagined him sitting in his office with the dim light of his computer flickering as he read my results. Perhaps, he had hung his pristine white lab coat on the back of the door or folded it over the back of a chair and rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt.

"And . . ."

“I’m sorry to tell you, but you have a small invasive ductal carcinoma in the right breast. We need to run some additional tests to come up with a treatment plan. They can take about a week.”

“Oh God.”

***** #5 *****

I take the long way home this February Friday, trudging through the piles of dirty snow all along the mile and a half from my junior high to our little red-shingled house on Locust Street. After my dad’s death ten months ago—an Easter morning heart attack without resurrection—my ailing mother searched the classifieds until she found a place we could afford on her widow’s social security check, this four-room cottage several towns away. My brother, Tommy—out of high school, working, and hoping to avoid the draft—took the small bedroom while my mom and I share the large one, our twin beds on opposite walls, a dresser between us.

Now we’re all adjusting to a new normal. I miss my dad but feel all twisted up with a mix of secret gratitude that it wasn’t Mom who left me so suddenly and guilt for feeling that way. I can’t imagine life without her.

One evening, weary from a long day in retail management, Tommy installs himself in my dad’s Naugahyde recliner. Sprawled on the sofa, I twist my body into a weird position and prepare to watch the Million Dollar Movie, resolving, as I periodically do, to “freeze this moment and remember it forever.”

I’m delighted to see Shirley Temple, singing and dancing as always, this time around tables filled with admiring orphans. Settling in, my thoughts take a dispassionate turn.

My father’s dead, so if my mother died, I guess I’d be an orphan. They’d send me to an orphanage, too.

The idea that I would also sing and dance for dozens of adoring friends – defying the inevitable sadness – remains unformed. I give little thought to what the reality of life without both parents might actually look like. There is, after all, no need to worry.

***** #6 *****

So Beautiful, Here

A Memoir

PROLOGUE

War, I’d thought, was behind us. For the last eight months, the central force around which my days revolved had been the return of my husband from Afghanistan. Now, not even four days after I flung myself into his camouflage-covered arms at the airport, I am clinging instead to the edge of the passenger seat, as far away from him as possible without falling out the car door. Our hands, no longer clasped, remain on either side of the center console. Not even our pinkies link.

“What you never seem to understand, Tom, is that every time we move, you transition straight into our new life with a job and a social network. I arrive with nothing. And by the time I build something of my own, it’s time to move. Again!” I say, words that flow too easily, as if floating from well-worn grooves on a record, a chorus that began

playing when he joined the Navy a few years ago. A life shift that had caught me by surprise.

Tom eyes the road ahead, weighing his reply. The summer sky seems manic, pouring, then misting, then pouring, then static, but always grey.

“How can you say I don’t understand what you’re going through?” he asks. “I’ve told you a million times: you can do whatever you want!”

“Don’t say that. It pisses me off when you say that.”

Feigning ignorance of lurking fumes, Tom lights a match, asks, “Why?”

I dodge his gaze and peer out the passenger window, where the passing shrubbery blurs, green earth and blue sky ablending. We should shift topics, I know. There is no use. Neither of us will ever fully understand the other’s position. Neither are we willing to forfeit feeling wronged. But the dam has burst, and I am too tired of holding back to fight the flow.

***** # 7 *****

May 1932
Washington State

The San Juan Archipelago,

White-capped waves slammed against the bow of the runabout lifting it skyward. Jazz tightened her grip on the wheel and held her breath as she tensed for the fall. Only a moment passed before the small craft crashed back into the trough, her stomach dropping with it. Against a sea, powered by near gale force winds, the Evinrude engine labored.

Jazz’s could see little more than fifty yards beyond the bow. A glance to starboard reassured her as faint, familiar house lights winked on from a tower atop the bluff. She’d found her bearings—Pear Point to Turn Island, then west into the safety of Friday Harbor.

Her brother, Seb, screamed above the wind. “Hold this course! We can out run them and make for the cove.”

“What if we can’t?” Despite Seb’s boast that they had the faster engine, his face was taut and his lips pressed into a grim line, doubt shading his eyes.

With a slight lift of his shoulders, Seb tipped his head in the direction of the bags, stacked within the cockpit. “I’ll dump it.”

Hand over hand, sidestepping the cargo of burlap-wrapped barrels, he pulled himself to the stern. Yanking open the aft seat compartment, he grabbed his rifle.

Something struck the console. She ducked her head and threw another glance over her shoulder. In an instant, her brother’s expression transformed from confidence to shock. Jazz screamed, “They’re shooting at us! Why, Seb? Why would they shoot?”

“I might have poked a stick in the hornet’s nest.” He met her eyes for a brief moment before grabbing the next barrel. He nodded to the bow. “Make for Turn Island!”

Above the roar of wind, she heard the splash of barrels dropping over the side.

***** #8 *****

Do not pick up hitchhikers.

I’ve read this sign weekly for the past six years as I drive by the barbed wire-topped fencing, the sniper towers and stadium lights, the men exercising in the yard. *I’m too busy*, I tell myself. *I’m a mom, a wife, a college chaplain and a volunteer already.*

The men wear white tank tops and blue pants. They congregate by race—whites lifting weights or jogging, blacks on the basketball court, Latinos playing soccer.

I am doing enough. I've led studies of mass incarceration and Michelle Alexander's [The New Jim Crow](#). I've taken students to observe programs for ex-felons and to argue for criminal justice reform.

Twenty-four years ago, nobody wanted these men as neighbors. The governor said the prison was necessary to get dangerous criminals off the streets. Prisons were being built all over the state, he said. They were a boon to the economy, a source of jobs. The community protested. The governor got his way. The prison was built to incarcerate nine hundred men at medium security. Today, there are over eighteen hundred men up to maximum security.

The need would overwhelm me.

In seminary I volunteered for pastoral counseling at a women's prison. I met with two women who spoke about survival on the streets, getting involved with gangs for protection, support, belonging, and ultimately crime. Drugs and addiction felt like an inevitable path in their neighborhood. I wondered what separated me from them. My zipcode? My family? My whiteness? My sheltered existence exposed, I struggled with "Why them? Why not me?" and finished the practicum wiser than I began.

But this is a men's prison. They probably wouldn't even let me in.

***** #9 *****

When Valerie died, none of us knew she was using heroin. She kept her drug use secret even when she prepared to attend a graduate program on a full-merit scholarship. For almost thirty years I practiced clinical social work, including conducting psychiatric and drug-use assessments in the Emergency Department. I missed all the signs and didn't realize how much work defined me.

Two months later the answer arrived. Back at my third-floor office after Oncology Rounds, I swiveled my chair into the morning sun streaming through the window. Out the window a garden bloomed with the remnants of summer flowers. My desk telephone rang.

"Mrs. Bourgoine," I recognized her voice from all my calls to her over the summer. Dr. Jennie Duval was the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner of New Hampshire. This was the woman who had visited Valerie's body at the funeral home. This was the woman who had performed the autopsy. She had examined each of my daughter's organs, conducted tests on her blood, and the fluid in Valerie's lungs. All summer Dr. Duval repeated the same information to me on each of my calls: her preliminary cause of death was an undetected heart condition. Valerie's lab work results would be calculated, which could take weeks and weeks. In the meantime, I worried that Tamara and Chad might succumb to a similar cardiac issue like their sister. I pressed for EKGs for each of them.

I added my second hand to steady the shaking receiver of my desk telephone. Sweat formed on my palms. My queasy stomach churned. Pain throbbed from my tightened jaw. From the hallway, I heard two colleagues laughing their way along the corridor.

"I've identified the cause of Valerie's death."

I took a deep breath.

"Valerie died from an overdose of heroin."

He looked like a common thief with his back pressed hard against the cool, damp wall. The shadow of the stone tower ran down the hill obscuring his own. The evening's fog had risen off the moat early. The shroud rolled across the bailey obscuring everything, including him.

Makai drew in the damp air and continued to listen for his signal. It was still not there. He had waited for twenty minutes processing each sound. Children, horses, a dog, none of them had been correct. *Crunch*.

He froze. His pulse quickened and he drew his dagger. *Crunch, crunch...*the footfalls approached him. He withdrew into the hood of the stolen black riding cloak allowing it to fall past his jaw. *Crunch*. The shadowy figure moved close enough Makai could discern the outline of his hat and cloak. *Crunch*. His lungs burned, however, he could not risk a breath.

Squish. He smiled.

"Drakka!" the shadowy figure swore, then a few moments later came the solid sound of muddy leather soles on the dirt path some distance away.

Makai released his breath and wrapped the cloak tight in front of him to cover the insignia of the Order of Wardens. In this disguise, he might manage his escape. The hairs on his arms stood up, tiny bumps racing from his wrist, he shuddered at the thrill of freedom. The patrol would change soon, signal or not, he could wait no longer. He broke from the wall.

***** #11 *****

Prologue: Please let me on the plane, airport commissioner.

Oranjemund, Namibia January 2019

"We usually don't let people who can't walk on the plane." The check-in agent said to me. "Maybe the elderly, people with canes, but if you need assistance we can't let you board."

After checking me in and getting me through security, he came back to retrieve me from the waiting area and tell me I wasn't allowed on the plane.

I was in the airport of Windhoek, Namibia on my way to the diamond mining town in the southern edge of Namibia where the Orange river that runs into the Atlantic Ocean also separates Namibia from South Africa. The town is called Oranjemund.

The equipment they used to load me off the plane I had arrived on from Johannesburg was designed for the Jetways and wider aisles of larger, international flights and wasn't compatible with the local flight. They had nothing to help me up the 6 stairs into the smaller plane.

"I can get myself up the steps." I said to him, sipping the latte I bought to use the cafe WiFi.

"You can't." He corrected and questioned simultaneously.

"No. I, can." I corrected and affirmed and insisted back.

I knew the issue was imagination. He saw me, wheelchair, stairs. And threw up his mental hands and gave up.

I had reached a summit of 2200m in the Himalayas partly on my hands and knees that year as a birthday adventure with my friend Sarah. This tiny Air Namibia plane was not out of my range. But he had no way of knowing that.

“The commissioner wants to discuss it with you.” He said, I abandoned my full latte at the table as he escorted me back through security and into a hallway of offices where I started and contained a familiar panic.

My phone only worked in the cafe on the other side of security, how would I arrange new accommodations or alternate transportation 9 hours through the desert to my destination? My bank card wasn't working to get enough cash for a taxi out of the airport. The fear of a bad outcome squeezed my chest.