

Segue

online literary journal

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Blue in the Face

One spring Bob Thompson caught a cold. He waited for it to go away, but it did not go away. It stayed on and slowly began to pull him down. Soon as he came home from the campus, he would take a nap, drag himself silently through dinner, watch the news, then go back to bed. “You really don’t feel well, do you?” his wife said finally. “It’s that cold you’ve got. Doesn’t seem to want to leave you. Maybe if you started drinking more orange juice, some vitamins.”

But nothing seemed to touch this cold which kept him in a kind of thoughtless, aching daze. In the past he had actually enjoyed the feeling of a cold coming on—he liked the vulnerable quality of being slightly achy, slightly feverish, and the tenderness his weak eyes evoked in his wife, but this cold alarmed his wife. She was an anxious woman naturally who put on a good act against her many fears while he knew she felt mysteriously in touch with some tragedy ready to befall them—something that lay just out of sight, arranged and sleeping, that when they least expected it, would be goaded by fate into stirring.

But no tragedy had befallen them. Their miseries were ordinary miseries—not enough money from his salary at the college. Not enough publications to his name. His mother and her mother—both widows who came to visit too often, who fought with hatred over the best way to make potato salad (the potato skins should be left on, soaked in cold water! No, soaked in vinegar is the only way!). Not much different from the hostilities that flew back and forth at work among his colleagues when he thought about it.

Then there was the time he had been mugged. At the downtown branch where he taught a night class. Jean had to drive through long distant crumbling slums to go get him at a dingy emergency room and bring him home with his nose swollen and bloody. A teenager high on drugs, flashing a knife near Bob’s face, had made him take off his coat and give it to him after finding Bob’s billfold had only three dollars in it. The mugger had been highly insulted and cursed him while he rubbed his coat in the snowy street, kicking it viciously. *You tryin’ a act like I ain’t no good or sumpin, hu ? Like I want somebody’s little shitty three dollar bills? I’ll kick your three dollar ass what I’ll do.*

Bob had tried to let the coat lay there. “But I had to go back and get it,” he told the police, “I couldn’t just leave it. It looked like me, you know, lying there, I guess.” He had laughed as he talked to the young policeman who didn’t look up at him, or even seem to be alive although sweat stood out on his forehead as he wrote down what Bob was saying, as if he found him a nuisance.

“That cold has been going on a long time, hasn’t it?” Jean said again. She was running the dish washer, leaning on the sink with a damp cloth under her hand. She believed in decisions, and she wore a decisive look on her face now. She was a good looking woman in her late thirties, always watching her diet and taking walks. She wanted to start working again now with the kids in school. But then she was terrified of driving the car. Of doing something wrong in traffic. Being bawled out by an angry motorist.

They had three children. They took up all her thinking. Steven, the youngest was nine. Big for his age. And arrogant. A monster at times really, but sought after by the other kids at school. Very popular. The phone was always for Steven, never for the two older children, Debbie and

Cole, who were whiny and unimaginative and thought their mother should explain their every complaint in long patient psychological jargon.

Because Jean had experienced something like a nervous breakdown once, from her bad childhood, she feared all her children might have one too, and she was extraordinarily careful with their heads lest she damage them forever. So they tormented her. Why didn't they have all the nice things other kids had? Why did Steven get all the good clothes? Why didn't the good kids at school invite them to their parties like they did Steven? Why didn't she at least try to understand what was going on in this town? They needed skate board lessons. Why couldn't she drive them? Why was she so afraid of the highway? If anything happened to Bob and she had to drive it would be a painful crisis.

"I suppose I should go see about it. It's been twenty-seven days now," he told her about his cold.

"Twenty-seven days? Then it must be an allergy," Jean said optimistically. "Not a cold. But it won't hurt to have the doctor take a look at you."

The doctor's office was just down the street, on a corner Bob passed each day on his way to the train. For years he had been aware of the white wooden doctor's sign, *Dr. Peter Jergland, M.D.*, painted in discreet antique lettering to match the neighborhood, the old town area with large homes like the one he and Jean rented. He had been aware of the doctor too for years, and as a healthy vigorous man, proud that doctors were unimportant to him. Proud that he lived outside this doctor's orbit, defiantly well. But now on a Tuesday afternoon he sat in Dr. Jergland's office, an uncomfortable body delivered up to the doctor, along with maybe everything else he owned. Once you come into a place like this, he thought, it's like being in an airport: they own you. You cross a line where your power ends and another power takes over. You had to submit. His head ached behind his eyes and made him sweat.

The doctor was a young man, younger than Bob certainly, who was forty seven. The two men shook hands, yet were dismissive of each other at the same time, as if none of this would matter in a few hours from now. "How did you hear about me?" the doctor asked.

"Hear about you? Oh, I didn't. I live just down the block," he motioned over his shoulder, nervously. "Saw your sign. It always sort of worried me," he laughed, "your sign. As if it were waiting for me. I come this way. To reach the train stop each morning."

The doctor stared at him with a slight smile.

"Oh, yeah? Well, OK. Sit down there," he directed Bob in a confident voice. "Let's get some information here. See what's happening."

"Well, something's going on, that's about all I can say. Your blood pressure for one thing—"

"Low huh," Bob said. "It's always been low."

"No. It's not low. It's out of sight. You've had this cold how long now? Weeks? A month? We'll have to do some tests. No, it won't take long. But I can't do anything until we find out what's wrong."

The doctor lifted his gaze to the patient suddenly, as if to get to know him. As if it might be necessary after all to get to know him, and their eyes met for a second in which Bob felt his heart wake to danger and a new angry need to get away came over him, or as if he had forgotten something, left the water running in the bathroom. Or his keys? Where were his keys? But it was impossible to get away. The doctor wanted to know everything. He had to go back over Bob's life.

The diseases Bob's body had fought. The Mumps. Measles. Yes. No. Nothing more. A fall in gym class. Pushed by a boy who hated him for no reason. Tall ugly boy trying to frighten him. Bob hurried away from the office as soon as possible, down the street towards home. The doctor was exaggerating. He had nothing wrong with him, he was certain of it, nothing serious. He told his wife he had to get some tests, some sort of tests. "If you don't have something wrong, they'll find something for you," he told her with a kind of haunted look in his eyes. She watched him climb the stairs pushing himself with vigorous bolting steps.

That night he dreamed the doctor was sitting in his living room talking with him. He wore a surgical cap and gown. A knock came on the door and the doctor went to answer. Bob recognized with alarm the voice of the teenager who had mugged him months ago, taken his coat and kicked it. He could never mistake that angry rambling voice. He tried to jump up and go confront the intruder but could not move. He could hear his name being called. The guy wanted to see him, but the doctor would not let him approach, he pushed the powerful dark body to the floor where they began to struggle and wrestle. Why did he see the man now as black? Not only black, but nude like a powerful dark marble statue come alive. Bob could see the doctor's strong hands go around the black figure's throat, squeezing until blood ran down between his fingers, dark thick blood over the man's chest and on to the floor. Bob tried to move and yell. "Honey, you're dreaming," Jean said. "What's the matter? You're all sweaty."

"So what is nephrosis exactly?" Bob asked, stunned. "What did you say—nephritis? I don't know what that is. I'm a historian," he said as if he had been singled out by some mistake. "An economic historian, you see. I study population. Population as an economic variable, you see. I've been doing a lot of studying on Eighteenth century population." The doctor looked up at Bob who had begun to speak rapidly. "You know the English did a famous census in 1848," he continued more slowly. "And from studying it I think the west industrialized due to its reproductive behavior. Family limitation. That's my argument. That's the book I'm writing. I've got to finish the book. The hard rational decisions people in the west made about family limitation. You see the question is this, why did the west industrialize and not the east?"

The doctor was listening to him with respect. When the kidneys failed to function properly, toxins built up and affected the mind and nervous system. Patients were often delusional. "That is," Bob continued, "if times were bad, if crops failed, populations in these western regions did not increase. However, in the old civilizations like India, China, and Africa, you see, even now they keep up a steady stream of reproduction no matter what. no matter what happens they keep on with the high birth rates. People talk about birth control. Modern birth control methods. But birth control has always been around."

"Right. There were methods, always a way, if people wanted a way," the doctor agreed.

"Yes. Family limitation has always been practiced in the West. A culture thing that the west can't force on the east. So the old cultures are going to keep right on producing. Arabs and Mexicans going at over four per cent, and that's an underestimation," he said, as if warning the doctor of a catastrophe, and with such a warning, with its edge of educated fear, the doctor would have proof that he, Bob, was worthy of being saved. "This sort of mind set, to plan—plan ahead—was all important to the industrialization of the west. I've got to make this message clear in my book."

“I see. That is very interesting. And hard work too, I bet. I hope you make money from your ideas?”

“No. I don’t make any money at all,” Bob said slowly. “I’m ashamed of that.” The doctor looked at him. “I’m ashamed of everything,” he added, as if to himself.

He remembered something then—certain photographs of people with fatal diseases, faces plastered on cans in supermarkets. Slots for coins. YOUR COINS CAN SAVE THIS MAN! He thought of his own picture on a collection can. People dropping coins into a can, a container shaped like his skull.

The nurse spoke to him as he was leaving. “Mr. Thompson, the doctor will need to talk with your wife as well. Your wife will be in need of instructions. I’ll have to make an appointment for both of you. Is Tuesday a good time?”

“My wife? Jean? You mean Jean? Hey, I don’t want my wife upset, you understand,” Bob said quickly. He leaned over the counter in a confidential way. “She’s not like other women.”

The nurse looked at him—this fresh young nurse, dark hair, perfect teeth. Smooth skin. An herbal scent rose from her movements. His eyes were on her in a strange way, this germ free woman who one day would put in her files that he was dead. *Robert Thompson (deceased)*. He knew she would do that, maybe already had the file out, a folder edged in black, marked *fatal*. But first he would get to her, upset her, this beautiful woman. Clean as lye. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped his nose. “Jean is seeing a psychiatrist now, you see. She has been seeing him for years now. She tried to kill Steven when he was born. That’s our son. She tried to kill him. And when he wouldn’t die she tried to give him away. Carried him out to the street and tried to force him on strangers. She’s just now getting better. She won’t drive in traffic. Won’t ride a bus. I don’t want her upset by all this.”

“I’ll see that the doctor knows all this,” the woman said openly, trying not to be shocked, but her large eyes were lifted to him in solid concern. Bob knew she was proud of her professionalism. Her skinny waist in the white uniform. Half her life was reserved for sex he suspected, probably with the doctor, the other half with thinking about it.

He and Jean no longer slept together. It was too uncomfortable for her. In the night the pain came to him as it never did in the day. It was worse then, in the dark, and he sweated in the dark. His swollen joints ached and his dreams were lurid, inflamed and rambling. He dreamed once he was in a sun-drenched wheat field, running alongside giant farm equipment that cut the wheat in wide swaths; but the machine operated on coins, and Bob had to keep up with it, panting and sweating as he put in the coins. Then too he dreamed of Niagara Falls. Of being transported across the wide roaring water in a tiny wicker gondola suspended from a pulley cable with the kids beside him, rocking it and laughing. He began to fight with the children, yelling until their laughter was replaced by fear.

Spoiled brat faces! Why did Jean always treat them as if they were ready to break? Well, he would see if they broke, if they splattered, he wanted to slap them until their eyes rolled around in their heads. He began to pull their hands loose from the sides of the basket while he screamed, “I’m dumping your guts! You’re going over the side! You’re going to hit the rocks like a glob of shit in an outhouse. You’re going to die!” he yelled, waking himself and clutching the side of the bed to halt his dizziness. The room stopped reeling. Had it actually been moving with him? He sat up and reached for the water Jean always kept by the bed, like a thoughtful nurse. Why did he want to hurt

the children? It wasn't their faults. Yet he resented them, he admitted it. At times he even hated them, they were so greedy and whiny after life, wanting things to consume, their wants and greed never ended.

A light was shining under the door. Someone was awake. His wife's voice streamed quietly, talking to someone on the phone. He looked at the clock by the bed. Only ten o'clock. So early! The entire night to go! Who could she be talking with? And laughing? What was so funny? Could she be laughing at him? He rose on his swollen feet and stood at the door, listening. He could make out only certain words. Swear words. But lightly said. Jean didn't swear as a rule. She was very careful of her language. She was a mother, a woman who was proud, but again he heard her say something foul. "The goddamn people on the department. They want Bob to go on disability. So they can put in Rosen. Well, Rosen's ass. They are trying to force him to take this disability just because he is on dialysis. So the dean had to step in and shut them up. The dean sure shut them up. He told them, You can't fire a man just because he's on dialysis. Sons of bitches, they just want to see somebody die. Sure, just give it up, just like that! After all he's gone through. All that grad school. All that money we paid those sodomites at Columbia just to get fucked around. I'll tell you something funny," he heard his wife saying.

There was a special instruction class they attended together with other patients who were to receive kidney transplants. The women patients he noticed became enormous. Grossly obese. But not the men. The men were thin. It was a mystery to discuss with the doctor.

A terrible restricted diet had to be followed or everything failed. There was to be no frozen or canned food. Everything must be fresh. No alcohol or even soft drinks. He let Jean take the notes.

She wrote down every word from the instructor and asked questions. She wanted to fix the best meals possible. What about potato salad? Was vinegar or cold water the best when you soaked the potatoes? She washed the fresh vegetables and fruits several times, to make sure no insecticide was left on the leaves. She made special bread so there was no doubt as to what went into it. No salt. She measured and weighed Bob's food. She knew he was going a little crazy. Almost any little thing would set him off. If there were too much butter on the peas he went to pieces and frightened the children.

At times he seemed to enjoy frightening them. Telling them terrible things. He told them he had canceled his life insurance policies, so there would be nothing when he was gone. And that he had dropped his payments to Social Security. They would have to get jobs when he died, how did they like that? Only Steven he couldn't frighten. Steven was made of stronger stuff than the others. He loved Steven most. He didn't care if the other two knew this. A good scare was good for them.

But he couldn't help his anger, Jean knew this. It was best to let the children have their meals apart, upstairs. So they carried their food everywhere in the house. Leaving dirty dishes on the stairs and in the hallways. What did that matter? As long as they were out of Bob's sight.

She was perfect at fighting this battle. A real little warrior with that thick straight blond hair swinging. So blond that people didn't believe it was real, but it was real. Jean was Swedish somewhere in her background. Her maiden name was beautiful, Martindale. What a beautiful name for a woman, for a wife. Martindale. A dale for martins.

And Bob had never seen her more alive and radiant. He often walked to the upstairs window to watch her drive off. She was no longer afraid of driving, apparently. His illness had forced her to connect to reality so she had no time for her own fears. But he knew not to draw attention to this. He had heard a friend say once, *With these neurotic couples—they're all the same. When one of them gets down the other one gets up. It never fails.* But what if...what if it were all an act? What if she were happy because she believed he was about to die? And she would soon be free? And all this kindness was to smooth a guilty conscience? What if she had someone? A boyfriend? Someone who kept asking her how much longer must he wait? Was that possible? If it wasn't possible why was she always talking to someone on the phone?

Well he would fix that little game. He knew someone who was in love with him. Someone in the dialysis room. A woman who in fact had been one of his students several years ago. Very heavy then, overweight but brilliant. She had laughed at his jokes and was fascinated with him. Now she was slender, unrecognizable, but still in love with him. She had become a medical student after losing a hundred pounds. They wouldn't let her into med school until she lost all that weight. Conda had a few problems but who didn't? He would ask her to marry him. He would divorce Jean who had become so happy looking, so competent at helping him die. He would show her. He and Conda would run away together. But not until he had received his new kidney. His brother would give him a kidney. Jim would have to give him a kidney. Until then, Jean must drive him around. But he was so afraid of infections he seldom left his room. When he did, he wore plastic bags over his shoes, and left them outside the door for Jean to collect and burn. He insisted that they be burned. He had to fight this thing that was taking his life.

There was no urine when he tried, standing with his legs apart over the commode. He shook his penis as if to force out a few drops: he strained his abdomen, but there was no urine. He walked back to the bed and lay down again, his feet were so swollen they were beginning to crack. He called his wife and she did not hear him. What was wrong? Where was she? On the goddamn phone again? Talking to Jim, trying to get him to give a kidney. But Jim's wife was against it. There had been a fight between Jim's wife and Jean. So his brother no longer came around.

He closed his eyes. Again he stood at Niagara Falls. It was wintertime with a howling gale beating the iced trees. Beating his face. Sea gulls flew and screamed in the swirling wind. He threw a piece of bread and the gulls dived in the white windy mist after it. Then someone was trying to get in his window, pounding around the frame. They were going to carry him out and throw him over the icy ledge. The gulls would swoop after the frozen crumb of his body. *No! don't throw me over! Please, oh, great god, no!*

He was yelling with Jean's hand holding his, trying to quiet him. "Bob, honey, you're all right! Everything is fine. The new kidney is in and working, working perfectly. They've got a great match. To hell with your brother! Soon as they hooked it up, they say it turned pink and started to make urine. It's a miracle, honey," Jean whispered. "Oh, god, how I've prayed for this day!"

He thought he was in a cathedral somewhere. Praying. His wife praying in a secret compartment, her knees resting on a stone floor. Praying quietly. While he was attending service elsewhere, in the Canterbury Cathedral under the tall, windswept ceilings where a crowd of silent people sat in attendance, all the women in large beautiful hats, like English women wore so well.

Or was he back at Columbia? Listening to lectures? Hearing his papers praised? Now he remembered. Yes. He was in the old Public Record Office in London. where he had done most of

his research, actually recounting the entire census of the 1840's. The room was round and darkish, like the bottom of a bottle. Pale, long nosed assistants carried in the census record books to him, old large volumes with rotting calf skin that crawled with little watery mites when he opened the dry pages.

No one had ever used these pages, never even counted this census, he realized with disbelief, yet volumes of theories had been written about these figures. The English assistant stood over him, disliking Americans mucking about in their old treasures. In each parish the curate had to sign the returns, and in the parish of Harworth it was signed by the then cleric Patrick Bronte, father of the great Emily.

He would tell the doctors about this and make them proud that they had saved his life. He would embrace these men and let them know he was at one with them, one of the good men who marched against the darkness of ignorance, the kind who pulled this world forward with one hand tied behind his back. The thrill caused his mind to charge ahead with ideas. Excitement for living jumped through him, a train in a dark tunnel, that was his mind. He could feel his wounds as the blood beat against them, over and over, like so many little waves against the patched sea walls of his battered body.

So the hospital would discharge him soon, this very afternoon. Just days after the operation. They were finished with his body at last and gave it back to him, along with a bill that was in the millions. After all it had been four years since he had become ill. Four long years in which he had become someone else, in which he had been delivered over to strangers who had studied him, watched him like a fetus in a bottle. Now everyone was flushed and talking about his homecoming, as if at a birth, a christening.

Jean prepared a big reception for him inviting all their friends. The children were excited. They had cleaned their rooms, wrapped gifts, and written letters to the doctor thanking him for saving their father's life. But why had not someone paid more attention to Steven! Why had they not noticed how overwhelmed Steven was? Just the other day he had cried out in anguish, "Dad looks like some old worm they've stepped on. Those old worms you see crawled up on the sidewalk after it rains! An old half dead worm!"

Why had no one paid attention when he wept and screamed at his friends, and then stayed by himself for hours. Had they paid attention they would have understood that when his father had come in the door from the hospital, walking stiff legged, but pink and smiling, the boy had become overwhelmed, overexcited, and in his excitement, did not know how to respond. So he ran to his father and hit him in the back as hard as he could with his fist. His fist hit the incision. Bob fell to floor with everyone screaming *Steven! Oh, God No! No, Oh, My god, No, Steven!*

Jean was beside him immediately. She knelt as if he had been gunned down, bending over him in terror.

It was too much after all the work! She had worried herself sick. Talked about kidneys and tried so hard to be cheerful, and now this! Now this! This childish incident. She began to bawl openly over him.

But Bob was smiling up at her, holding on to her.

“Oh, well, honey,” he said, “you know how it is. Easy come. Easy go.”

She looked at him with tears on her face, shocked with joy. “Then you’re not hurt? You’re laughing and you’re not hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Not hurt at all.”

But he was.

Author Notes

Jo Neace Krause recently published a collection of short fiction which won the Ontario Award from Black Lawrence Press. Prior to this her stories appeared in various literary journals such as Yale Review, University of Windsor Review, Exquisite Corpse, Witness, In Posse, Web del Sol, Potomac Review, River City, et al. Two of these stories will be republished by Massachusetts Review and Adirondack Review in November.