

Lindsay J. Cropper Creative Writing Contest

Volume 2018

Article 1

October 2018

Helping God Get On With It All

Maddison S. Nelson
University of San Diego

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/croppercontest>

Digital USD Citation

Nelson, Maddison S. (2018) "Helping God Get On With It All," *Lindsay J. Cropper Creative Writing Contest*: Vol. 2018 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/croppercontest/vol2018/iss1/1>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lindsay J. Cropper Creative Writing Contest by an authorized editor of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

Helping God Get On With It All

BETH'S BRIGHT GREEN exterior peeks out from the cold gray buildings and rain. The bell on the door rings welcome to a couple. They shed their coats once inside. The woman takes the man's to their table, and he goes to order their drinks, which the redheaded barista -- not Beth, but a surrogate -- rings up. During the day the coffee shop is nothing special: it's a place for old folks who go to matinees of plays to grab a civilized cup of coffee and a homemade pastry. One such old man eats a croissant with an ever-shaking hand. He has nothing in front of him, not even a newspaper, as if eating takes all the thought in the world.

Taking care to not spill the over loaded mugs, the man traverses the checkered tile floor to the table without moving his torso, shoulders, or arms. When he places the two mint mugs in front of the woman, the brown liquid with a precarious swirl of whipped cream sloshes against the sides, and topples over in some places. She takes brown paper napkins and cleans the sides of the mugs. A smile breaks across his face, and he presses his hands into his thighs with spread fingers. She returns the smile with silence.

His smile fades, and he reaches his hand across the table. "We'll find a way," he says.

"She's not interested in ways."

"Maybe she just hasn't heard of a way she likes."

She looks him up and down. He's always so clean-cut. He's trim, dressed in red pants rolled at the ankle with a yellow sweater on top. He's too clean-cut to get it. She picks at a loose thread in her sweater. "She just doesn't like that the doctor's taking my side."

"Casey, I can see what trials are being done that don't involve chemo," he suggests.

"Just leave it alone."

"Cancer doesn't wait for decisions to be made."

“I know, John. I’m not a child.” Casey leans back in her chair and looks out the window.

John pulls out his buzzing cell phone. “Shit. I gotta take this. Be back.”

Casey steadily focuses on the street, where she sees a little girl jumping in the leftover puddles from the morning drizzle. Her mother dutifully walks behind her with a hand near her back to ensure she doesn’t fall. Casey grabs her mug, takes a sip, and gets whipped cream on her nose. She wipes it off like her mother would have done: roughly. She thinks of the doctor’s waiting room she had sat in with her mother earlier today. Her mother sat pin-straight in the upholstered chair in her gray, pilling sweatpants and Joe’s old high school t-shirt. She flipped the pages of Glamour for the sake of making noise. Casey sat next to her and tapped her foot in nervous rhythm with the crinkling pages.

“Martha?” A nurse called into the room as she looked over her glasses.

In the doctor’s office, the two sat in front of a man in a white coat. He clasped his hands, his face scruffy and tired. Casey thought that he might look like this all the time: a way to make people pity him since he has to tell people they’re gonna be dead come next Christmas.

“I’m afraid I don’t have good news,” he says as he straightens his glasses. “It’s stage three ovarian cancer.”

“But people have come out of stage three before, right?” Casey asks.

“There’s a good chance that Martha can make it out of this. I have a few facilities in mind that have the best treatments possible, and they’re all nearby.”

Casey’s mother places her bony, thin hand on her daughter’s fuller thigh. “I don’t want anything.”

“What?” Casey asks.

The doctor spreads his hands. “There’s a good chance that you can fight this.”

Martha sighs. "I'm tired of fighting."

"Mom, let's just see what other options there are."

"I don't want any of you doin' nothin' to me. And that's final."

PILLS. PILLS ON the table, dotting it with numbers and colors and directions for relieving symptoms. Casey's mother had moved in a week ago with grit teeth, and she's already made herself comfortable by spreading her belongings from the guest bedroom, to the kitchen counter, to inbetween the couch cushions, where Casey props her up each day before she goes to work. Martha didn't want John or Casey to go on leave for her, so a nurse comes to sit with her a little before Casey gets her settled into the couch. Martha often complains about the nurse not fluffing the pillow properly.

They always eat dinner together. Each night, Casey brings out the matching set of plates, puts a kettle on the stove, and shoves some heavily seasoned protein in the oven. Her mother had always made dinner so Casey could have a semblance of normalcy, so Casey feels she has to do the same, even though everyone's lips tighten after taking their first bite. John will nod and compliment Casey in his little way and her will mother roll her eyes and push away her plate. Tonight, she pushes the plate away with more fervor than normal.

"What, too salty again, Mom?" Casey asks.

"I'm not eating."

"Well, that's obvious."

"They'd feed me better in hospice care. Wouldn't put rosemary on a pig with such a heavy hand," her mother says as she examines her fingernails.

"You weren't interested in hospice care, remember?"

Her mother puffs up. "I'm not, but at least they'd treat me better there."

John shoves more food into his mouth.

Casey makes a list on her left hand with her fingers: “You don’t want chemotherapy, you don’t want hospice care, you don’t want John and I to miss work to take care of you, and you hate the nurse.”

Her mother shrugs. “She snores.”

“So what are we supposed to do with you then, Mom?”

“Can’t you let me die in my own home?”

“How is this not better than home?”

“Doesn’t have my plants.”

Casey slams her hands on the table and stands. “Why are your *plants* the dealbreaker? Shouldn’t you care about dying in the presence of someone who loves you instead of in a house where you and your kids were tossed into walls on a weekly basis?”

Martha pulls away from the table in her wheelchair, wheeling into the guest room. The door feebly shuts behind her, just missing the latch. John puts his hand on top of Casey’s, but she lifts her hand out from underneath and walks to their bedroom. The apartment shakes when she slams the door. After a moment, the deep throbbing of sobbing seeps through the wood as John sits alone at the table, slowly lowering his fork until he resolves to get some tupperware and make tomorrow’s lunches.

MARTHA LEANS AGAINST the beat up pickup truck. She thought that owning one in the city would be a major inconvenience, but the nurse had told her that she doesn’t live in the city, she lives out in the country, where most of her patients are. Martha’s the odd one out. The nurse slams the driver’s side door and stands next to Martha.

“I was serious when I said this before,” the nurse says, “but it’d do well on the market.”

Martha appraises her home. The paint is chipping off the side of the Victorian facade, and the shutters have exposed their original honey-wood color. Behind the screen door she could see a little, young family of four happily living there. Old Victorian homes sell well to flippers and restorers alike, and a re-do would send a breath of fresh air throughout the halls of the place. It would be as if Martha and Paul had never ate breakfast on that porch. As if Paul hadn't opened holes in the thin doors with his fists. But no, this is still Martha's home. Her reclamation project.

Inside, her plants greet her and shake a little hello with their green leaves. The nurse takes a seat in the kitchen, dark and teeming with life. She pulls out her phone and reads her Facebook newsfeed for the fifth time that day. Martha likes to keep count of how dull she is to the nurse, even though the nurse is sitting in a house being eaten by foliage. Shouldn't she find some wonder in it? Martha feels herself going crazy.

Martha sets her watering can under the kitchen sink and fills it up, the first of her series of refills. She teeters around the house, resting at moments against the furniture. Martha's plants reach out to touch her, to caress her, to tell her that they've missed her. She kisses each bud, traces each flower with her fingertips. When she sees a vine beginning to wrap itself around the banister, a thrum takes up in her heart. Nature's invasion marches onward.

"SHERYL TELLS ME you two had quite the adventure today," Casey says to Martha through her second attempt at getting pork loin right.

"Who's Sheryl?"

"Your nurse."

"Hm."

"So, your adventure?"

"Who died and made *you* my mother?"

“You went back to the house, didn’t you?”

Martha pauses mid-bite. “What’s it to you?”

Casey sighs. “You know Mom, I’m tired of this shit. Just leave your damn plants to their devices. You need to stay close to the hospital in case anything happens.”

“But I’m a part of their devices.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m helping them some things move along.” Martha waves her hand in the air and picks up a bite of pork loin, the first time she hasn’t pushed something away.

“What do you *mean*?”

“Paul’s dead but he ain’t gone. Not yet.”

“Remind me to tell the doctor to put you on a lower dose of--”

“To hell with the doctor! I’m *destroying* him!”

“Hey now, that’s just about enough!” John weakly cuts in. “I think we should--”

“People who know nothing should say nothing,” Martha says to him. She turns to Casey. “Do you want to see?”

AT NIGHT, THE sundried house looms over the neighborhood like a monster over a child’s bed: the columns are its long gnashing teeth, and the windows its empty black eyes. For the second time that day, Martha leans against a vehicle, looking at it all head-on. Casey slams her door shut and hands her mother a blanket. Martha doesn’t take it.

“I hate this house,” Martha says. “I hate every square foot of it.”

“Take the blanket. You’ll freeze.”

Martha walks up the steps to the house and Casey puts the blanket around her shoulders. Casey folds her arms and bundles herself further into the sweater that Martha had knitted years ago: the accoutrements of the devoted, of the desperate.

“I’m tired, Casey,” Martha says. “I can already feel the cold swallowing up my bones, traveling up and down my spine. Death’s coming for me, I know it. This blanket won’t keep it away from you or me.”

Casey pauses at the front door, but follows her mother inside. The dark in the house is warm and wet, almost dripping with precipitation. Casey holds out a hand and gasps when something greets it. Martha flicks on the lights and a rainforest greets Casey’s eyes.

“Holy shit, Mom. So this is your ‘project’.”

Branches and vines puncture the walls, weaving in and out of the house’s framing. Family pictures with Paul feature his face covered with leaves. Trees that normally would stand in pots dig their roots through the hardwood floor, and grass pokes its way through exposed concrete. Flowers grow out of sanded-down dressers and old school papers. Drawings from Casey and her siblings serve as the madness’s mulch.

“You were the only one who picked up my call,” Martha says, sitting on a couch dusted with soil. “I left Joe and Sam voicemails telling them about the test...” Martha’s lip quivers. “I guess I fucked all of you up, and you all hate me for staying here so long.”

“Mom, Joe’s usually drugged out of his mind, and Sam hasn’t bothered to call me for three years. They’re not of the mind to pick up calls from us. That’s not you. That’s them.”

“I’m glad you’ve come to see what I’ve done.” Water collects in Martha’s eyes. “I had to stay after you kids were grown. I couldn’t give you any type of college if I’d have left, but staying with him gave you that. And sometimes he wasn’t so bad.” Martha’s eyes dig roots in

Casey's. "But most of the time, he was evil." Casey wipes away the tears gathering on her mother's cheeks. "So when the bastard finally choked from the poison I'd been slipping into his cereal all those years, I started planting. Because that bastard and this house must return to dirt. That's the way. I just want God to get on with it all."

Casey lays her mother down on the couch as her little deteriorating body heaves, and gives her little 'shush'es and kisses. She covers the thinning body, the balding head with blankets and sits in a chair beside her.

"I want to return to the earth," her mother sobs. "I want to go."

WHEN CASEY PULLS up to the apartment complex in the middle of the night, John pulls Martha out of the passenger seat, carrying her like a newborn. Sheryl greets them at the door and watches as John lays Martha on the couch. Casey holds Martha's hand as Sheryl runs Martha's vitals.

"Looks like she's not going anywhere yet. She's just tuckered out is all."

Casey relaxes and Sheryl pulls out her phone.

"Let's get out of here," John whispers. "She'll be fine. We won't go far."

They go to Beth's: the only light on in the city that they care about. Beth sees them, waves, and has a trainee start pulling their shots of espresso. The place is brimming with laptops, sketchpads, notebooks, textbooks, and over-caffeinated hands. John and Casey fit themselves into a corner table which wobbles back and forth like a rowboat. She takes his coat, he goes up to pay, and she takes out her sketchbook. Its empty fibers open like valleys before her.

"Watch it, watch it, watch it, I'm coming in hot." John slams the mochas down. The whipped cream on top stands victoriously in spite of all the movement. "Good to go?"

“Yeah,” she replies. She picks up her charcoal and takes it in wide sweeping arcs, dashes and dots it, smears it on the fibers. Black coats her fingers and he chips away at more of his novel. He notes the energy in her hands, the fervor, the light in her soul. He sees it, and treasures this spotting.

Her memories pile up in the fibers. Her mother’s Thanksgiving turkey burnt, on the ground, her left cheek hot and red and angry. Her failing report card and the belt. Her brother stealing cigs from her father and his scar. Her sister sneaking out and never coming back. All those memories pile into wood and doors and beds and chests of drawers and toys broken apart by drunk, fevering hands. They built themselves into a house crumbling through nature’s slow revenge. As it eats through her father’s lowly coffin, as it tears her mother apart, it also reaches out for her brother, her sister. For him and for her.

BEFORE THE FUNERAL Casey places leaves in her mother’s wig, pollen on her eyelashes, and has the mortician help her put flower petals in her hands. When the mortician finally leaves Casey alone with her mother, she pours Ziploc bags of soil into the casket under her mother’s body, with seedlings planted inside. She uncaps a water bottle and pours it into the mounds of soil. She kisses her poor mother’s head.

“I’m sorry,” she says, before she pulls away and joins the rest dressed in black, the accoutrements of the devoted, the desperate, the dying.

They gather around the casket, letting out gasps and weeps and ‘we’re so sorry for your loss’-s. They coo at the altar flowers fixed near the coffin, they cry at the eulogy. Dirt sifts through their fingers and piles on top of the casket, which is lowered and then covered. The ground there remains fresh and churned for a while before hardening with cold. The melted snow then feeds the dormant seeds. They take root, bursting through clumps of dirt in the warming

sun. Nearby, the cemetery plants a tree which grows and grows and covers the ground. I stretch some of my limbs as two more graves are dug beneath me. I want to wrap them in my blanket of shade.