

# Burnt Alum



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If you're at loose ends and never quite sure whether you're going or coming, you may feel safer in a ghost town dazed with its own decline, safer from vigilant authorities who in a metropolis teeming with the busy and self-assured could target you in a heartbeat. No need to pretend to hurry past storefronts if they're boarded up. If your sense of direction wobbles, you may take comfort remembering that the blue floodgate marks north, and that wandering in any other direction will take you in circles or eventually bring you to riverbank, Ohio or Big Muddy.

When I was first learning our alphabet I took the second letter to be my name. It seemed proper, me the second daughter. In fact my name proved a nickname, as wasn't the case with sisters Lucy or Hannah. Or so I was told, but the longer form felt the more playful, and Bea itself felt almost perverse, three letters when one should suffice. Inasmuch as the letter, the insect, and I each spelled our shared name her own way, I wondered which of us would win in a spelling contest. Anyway I was happy to learn of queen bees and royal jelly, something to recall when papa Lou was calling baby Hannah his princess. I didn't so much relish the phrase "plan B." Be that as it may, even now I'm Bea

pure and simple, long since it could matter. The longer version seems empty for me, from what little I know of the Dante comedy, and when I once skimmed the Shakespeare comedy, the business about her wild heart only made me think, why, my own odd heart can never be tamed because it's never been wild.

By now I'm familiar with Cairo Illinois in its several hopeless moods. I have yet to see the blue floodgate drop like a sky panel when rising water makes the city an island. Should it happen while I'm here, when helicopters drop in food and medicine, I prefer to imagine that scavenging should prove easier. Anyway, I've survived all four seasons nearly twice over, summer with its lolling tongue, dank fall and winter, risible spring all hours and especially thick daybreak with fog rolled in to engulf abandoned dealerships and dives, neighborhoods still as hospital wards. I've looked down from the eighth floor of the abandoned hotel whose seventh and eighth alone stand clear of the fog bank that might hide anything at all, and listened to foghorns and the wash of tankers and cargo boats plowing the rivers. I sleep fitfully. Truth be told, in much of my waking time, especially here in Cairo, I seem to be dozing somewhere in my head.

Move along there, I've often heard in other cities but not yet here, not even from the uniformed authority dragging his nightstick along a wrought-iron fence protecting an empty house, probably because the whole city seems to be loitering, or maybe out of some tired pity for a slight thirty-year-old derelict with a baboon's narrow mug and cheekbones squeezed high, her ethnicity off the local charts.

In the public library where congregating homeless avail ourselves of AC or heat and pass notes like schoolchildren, notes written with stubby pencils on scrap printout about shelter and grub, or flip through mags gazing with no glimmer of recognition at the smiles paraded there, online I've looked at a Cairo map layered onto an aerial view, and seen how the city once burgeoned against the green Ohio to the east as though shrinking into a half moon away from the fallow bottoms that slope west under the wide deceptive brown, territory okay for a stroll so long as you keep a weather eye for furred and scaled denizens, the little creepy ones, but you wouldn't want to camp there. I saw other maps and pics in the tall white stone house on a street of shambles, a residence become a museum of fecund local

history, where I noted Cairo's burden of the peculiar malady of black-white racism that to me growing up in California had seemed more lore than history.

Elsewhere I had passed seedy lounges and bars, strip clubs and package stores, and once glanced into a hotel bar with plants and an aquarium, but Cairo boasts (a brochure might say) a mother of all bars, and functioning, I discovered one afternoon my first week here, September adrift, no warmth yet not cool either, transitional, me wandering in mere capris and a glitter tee, flip-flops, hears Come on in here young lady, wet that pretty whistle. Nobody but me and the old barman in an apron down to his shins, who invited me to name my pleasure, on the house, and what a house, crystal chandeliers lighting a bar shaped like a racetrack and almost as big, of black marble rimmed in thick rich wood for your forearms. I requested a lemonade and Monte brought me pink with three cherries in a goblet too heavy for one hand. We shot the bull an hour. Even after he gave up engaging me on sports or current events, he kept the ball rolling in hopes I'd lure in some of the sparse pedestrian traffic, but no luck. He didn't offer a refill and I didn't request one. I'm no teetotaler but the cold sweet and sour confection had hit my stomach like alcohol. When Monte asked did I have a pet I said a dog once. He asked the name and I had a blank and so I winked and said classified. I still miss her.

In childhood I had gum lesions, yellow ringed with angry pink, mama Hiroko called them ulcers. They were less painful than the treatment with an astringent powder called burnt alum although as I recall it was pure white. It surely burned. I so dreaded the treatment that I would keep a lesion hidden in taciturnity, or improvised mispronunciation when I couldn't avoid speech. Hiroko explained that without the cure the ulcer would grow and trouble more, but sometimes in my heart of hearts I'd have been ready to gamble that indeterminate future against the immediate pain. Hiroki dabbed my tears but somehow (bite my tongue) her comfort felt playful, even as if it contained a twinkle of mockery, and it ended quickly with a little hug or a kiss on my forehead and she was off tending other matters. The physical sting would have calmed by then, but puzzled Bea was left wondering why only she should be afflicted. Was it that I had no superlative, neither oldest nor youngest, only undefended middle?

After Hiroko's death in a freak terrorist attack when I was five, I treated the ulcers myself as their incidence declined to zero. Lucy took our mother's death hardest but even she soon recovered, and Hannah had a baby's resilience. Me, though I did miss Hiroko (if not the alum), I was clueless when it came to grief. Papa Lou so busied himself at the service and after, and a couple of years later cycling on Prince Edward Island, that middle Bea had her mental hands full juggling his tacit claims and firewalls.

Lou took the Grable circus to Prince Edward Island because of *Anne of Green Gables*, the girls' book he'd made sure his had under their belts. I doubted how much the princess, or Lucy for that matter, had digested but Lou couldn't have quizzed anybody, himself having delved no deeper than the front and back covers. We cycled two weeks on tandems, oldest girl and youngest on one, Lou and me on the other, early summer vacation still cool, roadside lupins in bloom. It was a comedy of errors, misread maps, flat tires, flu, a museum meant to foster loyalty to the fictional girl whose tale had already faded some for me, though not the ancient illustrations, Anne shinnying up a tree like a monkey, her like a tightrope walker on a roof ridgepole. Lou beamed when any of his brood expressed interest. Mine was muted alas (like everything about me) although I did venture a question about gables and chastity (without knowing how to name it), having read another story about an old maid and her bachelor brother rattling around in a gabled manse.

My untrustworthy memory blurs much of my first eighteen years. I was solitary and slow, and so reluctant to open my mouth regardless of ulcers that once when I muttered something to a schoolmate she burst out, "Ms. Perez, Bea Grable is *talking!*" At the prom in cream and taupe gauze chosen with Lou's approval by a neighbor, when the hapless nobody who'd invited me *faute de mieux* put his tongue into my mouth I could hardly wait for him to remove it.

With my mediocre high school record I had no hope of following Lucy to U. C. Berkeley. I squeaked into junior college over in Palm Desert, home to Palm Springs domestics and functionaries. I lived in walking distance of the campus in an efficiency. When it came time to declare a major I considered business administration but the math requirements damped that flicker of ambition and I settled on

philosophy. I tanked in logic. My favorite was “Ideas of the Great Philosophers,” two mornings a week around a seminar table. I didn’t say a word all semester and as for the text and the professor I suspected we weren’t getting the whole story but I enjoyed thinking about the great ideas, in over my head. Thanks to my essay on Spinoza I pulled a B-, the highest grade of my academic career. Still I graduated, the first of the Grable girls to do so.

Then, as if passing that hurdle had strained me past some breaking point, I totally lost it. System after system faltered or shut right down. Take memory: I was back at home supposedly until I found a job, waiting to hear about my application for a position as a soda jerk when names began to elude me, people and then quickly the most mundane objects. This thing in my hand I write with, it took minutes before I retrieved pencil and then pen one morning at the kitchen island. Or imagination, which ran away with me. Sometimes I couldn’t tell it if was safer to keep eyes open or closed.

It lasted nearly two years. The first half I spent sedated in facilities or home under round-the-clock watch although without any tendency toward suicide or other violence. I felt like a deflated balloon. Recovery such as it was lasted eight or ten months. The family took it in stride, never seeming to reproach, always guardedly cheerful. Recovery seemed to mean closing the parenthesis, picking up where I’d left off, and resuming the role of one you make allowances for, the one not playing with a full deck.

I withdrew as much cash as I dared from the bank not to set off alarms, packed a rucksack, and bused into Oregon and then after a mostly sleepless night in a doubtful motel, back down to Las Vegas which seemed disappointing until I realized it was only a town of the same name in New Mexico. Long story short, my homelessness began there in a bosk on the edge of town. I bedded down in a nest of grass and leaves and napped there through the first night undisturbed except for a fox that eyed me from a distance, right forepaw lifted, until my spoor certified I wasn’t carrion.

I tended to personal necessities in restrooms, the municipal park of a café or gas station, and foraged nutrition behind fast food establishments. I travelled by hook or crook, in boxcars or on foot, or sometimes at a freeway rest stop or stuck stop I hitched a ride

somewhere farther along—Navaho territory, El Paso three months and another month a couple of years later, Arizona and Nevada, a loop back into California, the San Joaquin Valley's fields lying a fallow breather between fall harvest and winter planting. I could write a book about those travels, what I saw and did.

One still morning from an outcrop overlooking an Ozarks interstate I saw a fourteen-wheeler crowd a weathered Camry off the road without stopping. I scrambled down to the pavement, crossed and peered down at scree too disordered to register the track where the car had tumbled into a dark mountain lake whose surface had already calmed, except that fifty yards from shore a dog's head popped up. The dog reconnoitered and then paddled toward me. I knelt. The dog stepped ashore, shook, and turned to scope back at the dark water, considering plunging back in to dive for the drowned car, and waiting longer than necessary for signs of life as the surface flattened to glass. The dog shook again, shuddering I thought, before turning to address me.

Deliberate and alert, tail between legs, it came forward to sniff the back of my outstretched hand. I sat and she—now I saw her gender—sat beside me. I stole a glance at her tag and learned she was Rachel. Her short chestnut fur was drying, I learned when I put my arm around her shoulders and in so doing discovered that in a ribbon from below her shoulder-blades down nearly to the base of her tail her coat pointed forward rather than back. I couldn't understand the anomaly, which seemed longstanding rather than caused by the accident. We watched the quiet lake some time more, and turned at moments to search each other's eyes. Once when she looked back at the lake she gave a low woof as if to say, "Humph, impossible." When I stood so did she. I said, "Come, Rachel," as if we knew one another. In the same spirit she followed me up to my campsite, where I opened a can of tuna for us to share.

From then until her disappearance we were more or less inseparable, if you include the time she spent waiting tethered, say, outside supermarkets where I restocked plastic produce bags for her morning walks, and for my own solid waste when needed. While she reduced odds of hitching car rides, she enhanced security across the board. I had lost virginity shortly after going on the lam, intentionally

and without overmuch pain or pleasure, in a Nevada culvert behind a locked playground, surely late for my generation. Late too and otherwise anomalously (I believe), I took occasional pleasure from nameless men, homeless and others in encounters that fell into my lap, ones I bartered or played along with out of pity or some allegiance to flotsam and jetsam but, as may be imagined, I had to stay on guard, for I knew there were strangers who would think nothing of killing Rachel and me both.

She herself was fearless. As I learned at public terminals and chewing the fat with other marginals, her breed, Rhodesian ridgeback (for the strip of contrary fur) was bred for the speed and courage to track a lion and hold it at bay until the dogs' masters arrived. The breed shows marked loyalty—marked but transferable, at least with Rachel—to the master, and indifference to other humans and other dogs, who seemed barely to register with Rachel. At soup kitchens, in boxcars, it seems one habitué in ten has a canine but Rachel ignored their attempts to lure her into play or combat, as if no dog challenger, however big or fierce, could measure up to the lion in her imagination.

Her tag provided the info that she was neutered, with what I took to be her owner's email address. I detached the disk from her collar so that nobody but her and me could know her name. It lay in my rucksack until I thought better of keeping any evidence linking me to her past life. I buried it in an El Paso landfill one day as we scavenged under a lowering sky.

As I've wandered or washed up for the odd stay, my first life has thinned and drifted away, parents and sisters, college dormitory, Spinoza, I miss less and less. It's eons since I saw a movie, the last (whatever it was) on flat video during the convalescence before I skipped out. I miss close-ups and aerial views when I think about it, and in my former life I did have a passing crush on a Bollywood idol, but overall what I see and hear on my own seems more real and entertaining. No food ever thrilled me, and as for shelter, I'm glad to happen on it, and with Rachel I welcomed it to keep her paws dry, but eschewing hope for any permanence has become second nature in my second life.

Immediately before Cairo I spent three weeks in Memphis, twenty days longer than expected, mostly on the eastern edge in a mall. Maps situate Memphis and Cairo closer in the U.S. than in Egypt but

otherwise the American pair resembles the African for lying on their continents' major rivers although they flow in the opposite direction. Also, from what I gather, in both pairs decay has progressed faster up river than down. A trucker let Rachel and me off in Memphis Tennessee, where a park borders a mall.

The park restrooms proved locked and no spot looked hidden enough for me to risk urinating there. I attached Rachel to a flowering tree and crossed to the mall. In my former life Hiroko must have taken me shopping to some Palm Springs mall, and I must have visited such a place in junior college to purchase mildly jaunty camouflage, but times had changed. I seemed to have blundered into a theme park full of busy mothers and children and the elderly, parading up and down escalators, past a waterfall and a carousel, between display windows and shop doors wide open and upstairs through a covered courtyard for consuming fast-food offerings. There, directed by a formalwear saleslady from below, I found a loo with a blessedly empty stall.

Back out in the mall I understood that I hadn't exited the restroom by its entrance. It was too late to retrace my steps and so I took the nearest way down, a crowd elevator that opened on two sides on the ground floor. I tagged along with the larger cohort of shoppers into unrecognizable territory, where statues of shoppers mingled with the living. I heard carousel music and laughter in the distance but it meant nothing.

I took the nearest exit, untroubled by my failure to recognize cars and SUVs (par for me), and crossed to the park some distance from where I had left it. A squirrel fussing in dry grass watched me pass. Rounding a raised and seldom-used bandstand with a roof like a coolie hat I saw what I thought should be the besought tree, but no Rachel. More slowly I approached. Sure enough there lay her water dish. I half smiled, like when somebody tells a joke I'm supposed to get but don't. I looked this way and that. I almost supposed that clever Rachel was playing a trick on slow Bea. Nothing stirred though and then the false smile must have vanished in a little wave of fright that I might be relapsing into miasma. I snapped out (good girl), shook the dish dry, and returned it to my rucksack. I hypothesized that authorities had noticed Rachel and abducted her without leaving an explanation.

Later, between four and five, the dogcatcher would unload Rachel and her fellow unfortunates at the pound. After two weeks, if no one had come to rescue her she would render into fertilizer for this very park. Still, beautiful as she was even with her ridge, someone would take her unless I showed up to claim her and buy new tags and sign a promise never to misbehave again. With no clue whether the twenty and three ones in my ruck would suffice, I found my way to the pound by early afternoon. A cheerful gramps acted as if he had dealt with my sort before. He waved me through to the yard where a dozen dogs, each in its own cage, barked and pawed the chain link, tail wagging, except for the hopeless who lay muzzle on concrete and watched, but no Rachel.

In the grimy industrial neighborhood I found a bus stop bench where I watched a wall clock in a closed cybercafé. At four-thirty, when only two vehicles had passed, neither a van of strays, I probed Gramps further. There would be no delivery that day, I learned, or before Thursday when the animal control would next sweep Memphis. Friday morning I could call to see whether my ridgeback had been apprehended, and I could leave a deposition describing her. I omitted her name and signed with a pseudonym. Back at the bus stop I began to suspect that, assuming Rachel wasn't in the hands of the authorities, she must have been kidnapped, for ransom or heart's desire. Through the next weeks I lived in a shelter or under the stars in an alley. I checked classifieds in discarded newspapers and hung around the park as much as I dared, and telephoned the pound, until at last I gave up and hopped a northbound boxcar.

The train whistled and slowed for towns and cities, chug chug, and then gathered steam for the next clear shot through dusk, deepening night, chug and chug, until a more lonesome whistle roused me to alight on a railroad bridge. In streaming moonlight I watched the last car, a methane tanker, clatter north (caboose long since vanished into legend) until I saw "Cairo" characterless in fading black capitals on once-white metal.

Below slept the designated, dark but for some streetlights, as if dreaming the vanishing whistle, and dreaming me too, as if I would last no more than a blink at waking, except that the town might more be lost in a trance where successive phantoms flickered in and out under

any number of names forever. I nodded the rest of that night on the bridge, and before dawn I crept down into my new whereabouts.

In my first days and nights I came to appreciate that, in contrast to other populations I'd slipped or struggled through, Cairo hangers-on scarcely noticed me and, when they did, seemed beyond judgment. I located a soup kitchen and a free clinic, and a shelter where I might pass the odd night, except for the registration requirement, which the clinic waived when I had to seek treatment for the bite of a rabid raccoon that had fallen through the ceiling of an abandoned house and landed on my sleeping stomach. Most houses and businesses seemed abandoned and vandalized. I moved camp often, less in winter when I preferred to forego slogging through ankle-deep wet snow or breaking a leg when it merely filmed pavement. The odd cash windfall let me supplement my diet with dry dog food softened after dark with public drinking water in Rachel's dish.

Around my second month I hatched the idea to spend an occasional night in the abandoned hotel. Police cars cruised past but, so far as I could tell, authorities didn't patrol inside. After dark in mild weather I jimmied the lock on a rear loading-platform entry and made my way through to the lobby, past ottomans and silent elevators, through darkness and moonlight and on up to the bedrooms, some with doors ajar. In one that looked on the river I turned the mattress and, hearing nothing but scuttling animals, passed a night drifting between sleep and blurry wakefulness. In the morning and during subsequent visits I saw wine jugs and human scat in corners but I encountered nobody until, past winter and frail spring and into summer, I settled into an armchair on the top floor and realized I was not alone.

"Help you, Miss?" He sidled out of the bedroom and leaned against a doorjamb picking his teeth, a few years younger than me, wiry and unkempt as if waked, with matted hair blacker than mine, unshaven, a ragged Hawaiian shirt, black undertaker trousers and steel-toe boots. When I hoisted my ruck to leave he said, "Not so fast. Let me explain."

He explained that he was a loan shark in mufti, first night in town, casing the burg. I hardly listened because he looked like trouble. Sure enough, he pulled a pistol and said, "Okay, off with them duds, bitch."

I thought I knew the drill, having been violated before, but this was worse. On the bedroom floor I had to kneel and take his thing in

my mouth. He held the back of my head with his hands. Then I had to go down onto all fours for him to take me from behind, in the regular place and then the other, the first time in my life and great pain. His shirt buttons raked my back and his breath reeked over my shoulder when he cursed me with names I didn't understand. At last he cleaned himself with my panties, zipped up, hoisted his gear, and said, "Okay, old Mongo bag: you squeal and its curtains." He ran around a corner and down a service stair. He meant his threat to keep me from alerting authorities (fat chance) in case he decided to hang around, but he seemed to drift on through Cairo, for I haven't laid eyes on him since.

When it got to be time for my next visit to the hotel, of course I had second thoughts, and I kept watch through a night and day. Even so I declined the penthouse and camped on the fifth floor in a corner room whose extra light should, I thought, discourage nocturnal fauna. It stank of tobacco like the rest of the hotel and indeed like every Cairo interior I'd known except public services, museum and library for the mind and clinic for the body, but louvers allowed some cross ventilation. As I began to doze I didn't fear I was tempting fate. The notion hadn't crossed my mind, and if it had I'd hardly have known what to make of it. Thus I first felt a suffusing shame when deep in the night I woke to a hand on my shoulder. Late middle age, thickset, unwashed, freckled and peeling from wind and sun, hair some kind of red I could tell even in the moonlight. This rape involved only the one entrance and I felt no hatred or contempt from him. Indeed I suspected I could have averted it by whimpering an appeal.

Then it was his turn to doze, on his back, mouth open. I pulled my drawers back on and lay beside him, and after a while I too dozed. When I woke, daylight had begun and I could see that the man's hair was fiery red sprinkled with ashen grey, how Anne of Green Gables's would have looked had it never darkened and had she reached his age. He stirred, waked, collected thoughts, and turned to address me as Sweetie.

He had skipped out on child support or something and had paused in Cairo for his trail to cool before he continued by bus to east Tennessee where he had a shoe repair job lined up. He'd tailed me half a day, pegging me for homeless. He had to shake a leg up to the Days Inn near the floodgate to collect his gear for the 11:49 bus out. And

look, Sweetie, if you feel like tagging along, meet me at the station, my treat. It's hard to see much future for you here. Whatever he meant, supposing he knew and supposing there was some truth in it, by 11:30 I stood in line at the soup kitchen, Bea no kind of adventurer.

The other morning when my ramble took me past the hotel, on a whim I ventured back to the loading platform and discovered that authorities had secured the door with a heavier padlock and posted Keep Out, without noticing that the rope holding up the bottom section of the fire escape had rotted. In view only of broken attic windows behind a ruined domicile and pigeons atop its eaves, a short leap from stacked crates let me catch the structure and, breaking the seal of rust, swing it down to the concrete without much noise.

Step by careful step I climbed the metal stair past the mezzanine and two floors until I saw that proceeding any higher would bring me into view of half of Cairo, the idly curious as well as vigilant authorities, and so I paused on the landing in the air as if I too were a bird but one who preferred to rest out of the sunlight. Beside me a small window showed through a dark bathroom past a doorway in better light a low table and a settee, where I saw curled on her side with eyes closed, hands serving as pillow, a woman smaller and older than me and darker, the color of a peroxide bottle, in a clean indigo shirtwaist, little white nurse oxfords side by side on the floor, silver braids peeping out a black do rag, as if she had lain down for a nap.

I held still for fear that it might scare the life out of her should she wake and see me loitering outside her bathroom window. At length however I came to understand that nothing I might do would rouse her, for she wasn't breathing.

Back on solid ground I meandered to the levee. A convoy of river freighters groaned upstream, to Cincinnati I supposed. From the last a stevedore waved. The woman in the hotel would seem to have been derelict by the end of her life, to have fetched up the way she had. At the same time in her face and person I'd seen none of the bleak resignation by which we homeless recognize one another. Rather she looked as if she had slipped out of life with a good secret in her heart. Indeed by then it even seemed she might have been a figment of my own mind, but I saw no point in returning to check.