

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Marina Antropow Cramer
In Case of Fire

"ACH, THESE CANDIES ARE SO GOOD." The little woman reached past Vera's elbow to take several tins off the supermarket shelf.

"Are they?" Vera glanced at the stranger, a middle-aged woman like herself, dressed, like her, in black pants, a white shirt and a sweater, pale lavender to Vera's vibrant purple.

"Oh, yes." She placed the tins in her cart and reached for two more. "Not too sweet, and they really taste like fruit. I like to bring a box when I visit old people. And look, they are on sale." The woman's voice carried a hint of Pennsylvania Dutch; she shook her poodle-cut gray hair for emphasis. "You should try them."

Vera studied the tins, the miniature fruits in sharp relief against a black matte ground, the boxes flat and round, designed to fit easily in a woman's purse. "Or nightstand," she thought, picking fruit pastilles for Solange and lemon drops for herself. "Solange will like these."

Solange, the girlhood friend of her heart, was not old, of course, but her shopping days were surely over. Their bond, in the way of women's friendships, was as strong as it was mysterious. Vera did not know what had drawn her, tall, bookish, reclusive, to the petite blonde with sparkling gray eyes who swore like a truck driver and never failed to use her compact, shapely body to best advantage. She was the first of their tight circle – Vera, Nina, Solange – to drink beer, and smoke, and ride with boys in cars. It seemed outrageous to Vera that she, Solange, would be the first to be struck down, too, as if her brash laugh and filthy mouth, her undeniable vitality, should have been shield enough against the cancer ravaging her beleaguered lungs. She, if anyone, should have been invincible, sailing through life on sheer audacity. When the relentless coughing turned to pneumonia, sending Solange, protesting all the way, into the hospital, the tumor was revealed.

"Big as a grapefruit," Solange told her friend, unblinking, her tone flat. "I'm fucked."

Except for a younger brother who traveled from war zone to disaster area as a foreign correspondent, Solange was alone in the world, her French immigrant parents long dead, her bridges in cinders. That left Nina and Vera – friends to the end – a vow all the more binding for having never been spoken. And Nina was in Hawaii, a bride at last at forty-eight, extracting every moment of rapture from her extended honeymoon.

Vera, too, had been away, enjoying the solitude of her annual writer's retreat. The futility of this habit was not lost on her; she had little hope of breaking into print at her age. But she relished the company of other aspiring authors, the evenings at the retreat lodge talking writing over wine, sharing their occasional successes with barely veiled masochistic envy. She returned to learn that, in her ten-day absence, Solange had been discharged from the hospital and transferred to a nursing home. The tumor was deemed inoperable, and further treatment was not recommended.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Vera could hear the television several doors down the dingy hallway, bells and buzzers and bursts of audience applause intruding on the heavy nursing home air as yet another twenty-first century Everyman pursued the prospect of more stuff and free money. It had always seemed to Vera a dubious recompense for possessing the answer to esoteric questions; knowledge was, to her mind, its own reward.

The quiz show was blasting from 433. Vera entered the room briskly and stopped, the clever remark she was poised to deliver falling away into the irretrievable oblivion of unspoken lines. Solange was sitting on the edge of the standard issue hospital bed, her pale thin legs dangling, child like, over the side. The threadbare privacy curtain was drawn almost completely around the bed, leaving an opening a foot or so wide so she could see – and be seen – out the door. Solange looked shrunken, her arms withered, her hair roots nearly translucent against angry pink bare spots dotting her scalp.

“What’s this?” Vera exclaimed, her voice loud and indignant to conceal the shock at her friend’s changed appearance. “Are you waiting for the doctor?”

Solange shook her head. “It’s like being underwater. I feel like a god-dam goldfish in a scummy bowl,” she said in a hoarse whisper, with a feeble wave at the encircling shroud-like cloth. “I’ve been sitting here like this since breakfast.”

“But why? It’s nearly noon!” Vera looked around the room, taking in the tall twin wardrobes, the large picture window with its view of the parking lot below, the frail old woman in the other bed, barely visible under a colorful hand-crocheted patchwork afghan, her back to the blaring television set, where a dejected contestant had just lost all her winnings on a double or nothing dare.

“It’s her TV,” Solange said, lifting dull gray eyes to Vera’s flushed face. “I guess I’m not supposed to watch it. Not that I would,” she added, “if I had a choice.”

“That’s stupid,” Vera claimed bluntly. “Then why don’t they put it next to her bed, instead of on the dresser, where you can’t help but see it?” The dresser stood directly opposite Vera’s bed, the drawers labeled Bed 1, Bed 2, two of each.

“I don’t know, Vera. Please don’t say anything about it.” Solange shook her head again, sadly. “I don’t know if she’s even aware of it, that poor woman. She never makes a sound. They come in and wash her, sometimes they feed her a little, but that’s about it. Her daughter came yesterday, she brought some more pictures,” she gestured toward the wall, bare on her side, but hung with cheerful children’s drawings above the other bed.

“So they don’t have you like this all the time? Behind the curtain?” Vera felt the anger subsiding, replaced by a glimmer of compassion for the dying stranger, touched by the visible tokens of tenderness surrounding her immobile form.

“No, not all the time. Maybe they were going to bathe me, and forgot. It happens.”

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

They looked at each other in tacit understanding. That could be you, or me. Maybe sooner than we expect. "What'd you have for breakfast?" Vera asked, to break the mood.

"Oatmeal, or some such slop. Cardboard toast. Shitty coffee."

"Here, or in the dining room?" She recalled passing a large sunlit room, round institutional tables for four with a plastic carnation on each for cheap perpetual cheer. She had noticed the near absence of chairs, assumed most residents wheeled in on their own seats.

"Here," Solange winced. "I can't take the dining room. All those sick old people, snot dripping down their noses into the soup, hands shaking so bad they can't even hold the spoon, let alone use it. We're supposed to try to 'socialize,' but, honestly, Vera, if anyone on this floor ever knew anything, they forgot it years ago. I know the poor bastards can't help it, but I just can't stand it." Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her hospital gown, crumpling then smoothing the worn cloth. "What I wouldn't give for a soft-boiled egg. Fresh hot toast, a cup of good strong tea."

"Don't hold your breath," Vera's mouth twitched in a sardonic half smile. "I doubt their kitchen has even seen a real egg. How'd you end up in this place, anyway?" She felt a twinge of guilt for having been away, for giving her friend's predicament no more than a passing regretful thought while she pursued the hedonistic illusion of literary accomplishment.

"Champagne taste, Medicaid budget," Solange replied. "The hospital gave up on me, I'm too sick to go home. I had a choice of two facilities, couldn't see a bit of difference between them. Eeny meeny. Here I am, sponging off your tax nickel."

"Sweetie, you've paid for it many times over. They owe you better than this."

"Oh, hell, Vera, what's the difference? I'll be dead in a month." Solange pulled the beige cotton blanket over her bare knees. "I just wish it didn't smell so nasty, like day-old puke covered with Lysol."

"Don't they clean?" Vera stepped to the TV, turned the volume down by half, ignoring the model housewife ecstatically folding fluffy white towels while her cherubic toddler crooned engagingly on the spotless floor.

"Sure. Can't you just see the ad sheet for the cleaning product? 'Authentically stale aroma, disinfectant highlights mingled with just a hint of ammonia undertones. Perfect for cheap motels, hospital waiting rooms, nursing homes for the indigent. Economical ten-gallon size in stackable non-recyclable plastic containers, guaranteed to clog up landfills until Kingdom Come.'"

Vera laughed drily. "Sounds like you're back at the ad agency. Did they at least give you a pension?"

"Nope. Eighteen years layout and pasteup, all I got was a handshake and a big smile. That perky little college girl, what was her name? Unpacking her new computer as they walked me out the door. Tiffany. Why would anyone name their child after a lamp?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

"Listen," Vera said, groping for a less sensitive subject. "Where are your clothes? Don't you feel like getting dressed? That sexy gown just doesn't do it for you any more."

"You think nobody wants to see these droopy boobs and skinny butt?" Solange deadpanned in mock surprise. "Look in the wardrobe, they stashed my stuff in there." The wardrobe yielded hot pink sweatpants, a bright floral shirt, a well-worn black sweater. "No underwear? These drawers are empty." Vera ran her hand deep inside to make sure.

"Welcome to the Depends generation. I've joined the ranks of the adult diapered," Solange said, not without a sly hint of caustic pride. "And my bra got lost in the laundry, so I'll have to hang loose."

"OK, here goes," Vera untied the hospital gown closures, held the shirt for her friend like an old-time gentleman helping his evening date into her wrap. "You lost some weight, huh? Getting your girlish figure back," she joked to mask her horror at the washboard back, the ripples of pallid loose skin around Solange's waist.

"You know it, honey. If I wasn't sitting down, these pants would fall off. Thanks," she nodded to the uniformed attendant setting down the lunch tray.

Vera lifted the domed metal cover and peered underneath. "Pasta," she proclaimed. "Shells."

"Oh, joy. I swear it's a government conspiracy to rid society of poor, sick people. Death by pasta." She glared vengefully at the plate, where two shells, their edges dry and curled from excessive microwaving, oozed snowy cheese into a pool of watery red sauce. "And this," she snorted, picking up an institutional packet of French dressing, intended for the single slice of translucent pink tomato resting demurely on a lettuce leaf. "As if there was anything remotely French about it. And Jell-o? Yes, Jell-o."

"So what do you want?" Vera covered the offending food. "I'll go get it for you."

"Nothing. I'd just as soon skip it." Solange sulked; for a moment or two neither woman spoke, while on the TV a clownish fat man extolled the virtues of a fist-sized hamburger, the meat glistening with fatty juice seeping through fluorescent orange cheese. "What's it like out?" Solange asked.

"Nice." Vera brightened. "I'll get a wheelchair, we can go look at the tulips."

They waited for the elevator for what seemed like much longer than the elapsed five minutes. "Hey, check it out," Solange pointed to the wall between immobile sliding doors. "How's that for comfort." The sign, printed on a yellowing card, read

IN CASE OF FIRE USE STAIRS

DO NOT USE ELEVATORS

The space where the missing "I" had been gleamed white between block vinyl letters.

"Must be somebody's idea of a joke," Vera guessed.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

"Huh. Just wonder if it's cheerful capable staff or captive inmates," Solange replied grimly. "Abandon all hope, blah, blah, blah. You notice how they hide us hard cases on the fourth floor. What are the chances, you think, of anyone carrying us gimps and lepers out of a flaming building? My guess is stars are a better bet."

They rode down in uneasy silence punctuated by the creaking and grinding of neglected machinery, landing with a jolt on the ground floor. "Don't forget to sign me out," Solange said. "I'm government property."

The grounds consisted of a grassy area at the side of the building, bordered by a few budding azalea shrubs against the wall and a narrow sidewalk abutting the parking lot. The tulips – pink, yellow, white – grew in a raised bed in front of two green plastic benches. A small picnic table, no doubt convenient for staff breaks, judging by the abundance of cigarette butts protruding from a sand-filled bucket, stood on a bed of gravel in the shade of a lone maple.

Solange raised her face to the sky and closed her eyes. "Sun feels good," Vera said.

"Like a lover's caress," her friend agreed, opening one eye. "Almost." Her skin looked papery in the bright light, like fine muslin draped over a barely concealed skull. How tenuous, Vera thought, our hold on life. How fragile the vessel.

"Hey, Sol, let's split this joint," Vera brightened at her daring idea with adolescent enthusiasm, lapsing easily into the retro-sixties lingo that was never far from her outlook.

"Hell, yeah," Solange breathed. "Where can we go?"

"My place. I'll make you that soft-boiled egg."

§

They drove without speaking for fifteen minutes or so, Solange cradled deep into the seat like a child, her slippered feet barely touching the floor, her head turned to the side window.

"Fuckin' flowers," she said, as if to herself, not looking at Vera. "Don't know if I ever noticed them before. Pretty."

"How much gardening can you do in a high-rise apartment? You never were a nature lover."

"Still, I never cared. Flowers came and went, it didn't concern me. If they weren't long-stemmed red roses – without thorns – from the man of the moment, I just did not see them." They lapsed back into silence, neither woman needing to say: Enjoy them now. When Solange suffered a fit of explosive, raspy coughing, Vera remembered the candies.

"Oh, hey, I brought you some fruit drops," she said, eyeing her friend uneasily, not sure what, if anything, she could do to help. "They're right here in my bag."

"Thanks," Solange seemed to shrink even further into her seat, her breathing rough and ragged. "I may be beyond fruit drops. But thanks."

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Vera's aging postwar two-story "starter" home, intended for young couples making their first real estate purchase, could not be entered, front or back, without negotiating porch steps. It was best for Solange to stay in the yard, they decided, rather than risk a fall from Vera's uncertain grasp.

"This is the part that sucks the most," Solange said grimly. "Two weeks ago I could walk. Now I think I would give anything just to get down on the floor and crawl across the room. Screw the dignity, I just hate being helpless. They can give me drugs for the pain, but nothing to bring back a little strength."

"Must be hell," Vera acknowledged, finding no words of comfort that did not sound anemic or trite. "What kind of tea you want? Earl Grey, Jasmine, English breakfast?"

"You got Russian Black? Yeah. Make it strong, sister, with lemon. No sugar."

Vera had pulled the car as far up the driveway as it would go, then half dragged, half carried her friend the short distance to the lawn chair she wouldn't put away until first frost, Solange making an effort to move her feet in a heroic semblance of walking. The yard was small but private. "Look up," Vera said, pointing. "The cherry's in bloom." She raised her own head to admire the masses of white blossoms swaying high overhead against vibrant green foliage and too-blue sky. The tree had grown wild, its smooth black trunk straight and strong, thick branches spreading above the diminutive Japanese maples and rhododendrons. The fruit, when it came, was strictly for the birds, who came for it in their plumaged variety, filling her yard with song punctuated with frenetic territorial squawking. Just now it was quiet, three crows holding an avian business meeting in a nearby oak, emitting the occasional guttural utterance, and a lone mockingbird practicing its deceptive repertoire, fooling no one.

Solange glanced at Vera with profound indifference, her mouth drawn down in pain, exhaustion dulling her eyes. "Right," Vera said, moving toward the house. "I'll boil you that egg."

In the kitchen she moved with efficient grace and culinary confidence, assembling the tray with an eye to aesthetic detail while the egg boiled and the teapot warmed. Within minutes it was ready, the brown egg smooth and hot in its yellow ceramic egg cup, the toast edges perfectly crisped, the cutlery nestled artfully in the folds of her best linen napkin, wild strawberry jam glowing like rubies in a small cut glass dish. Vera hesitated to add the salt shaker, but only for a moment. "Let her decide," she said out loud, placing the shaker on the tray and backing out the door, down the steps into the yard, where Solange sat perfectly still, eyes closed, legs straight out in front of her on the faded blue webbed chair.

"I'm not sleeping," Solange assured her. "Just zoning." She raised her head and reached for a slice of toast before Vera had finished settling the tray across her lap. "Do you know how much I love this? Hot toast with the butter just soft but not yet melted, is there anything better?" She bit into the bread, continued talking while chewing with evident pleasure. "You can keep all your fancy dishes, just give me a piece of decent god-dam toast."

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

The egg was cooked perfectly, the firm opaque white encasing a warm but still liquid yolk, which trembled like leaf-dappled sunshine on the spoon in Solange's pale hand. She ate slowly, dipping slivers of toast into egg, adding the occasional dash of salt, taking deep slurpy sips of mahogany-colored tea lightened with thin lemon slices. Vera sat, her own cup balanced on the arm of her upright lawn chair, saying nothing. Is this it? she thought – is this what it comes down to, all the struggles and aspirations, all the desire, heartbreak, frustration, accomplishment, the endless busyness of life lived at a frantic pitch of boredom and fury, violence and joy? An egg, a cup of tea, the perfect slice of toast.

"You want more?" she asked, watching Solange scrape the last shred of egg white out of the shell.

"No." Solange licked a stray spot of jam off her finger. "It was divine."

"You want some music? I could bring the radio," Vera offered, suddenly inexplicably shy, as if Solange's suffering had somehow extended her friend's horizons, placing her on a higher plane of existence where things were both simple and sublime, a blurry outline of peripheral concerns around a crystalline center focused by pain. It was an alien place, a place she could not go.

"No. There's nothing I want..." Solange pushed forward, unable to continue, her chest wracked by a fit of phlegmatic coughing, gradually subsiding into a throaty rumble, the episode leaving her gasping for breath. "You got a blanket, maybe? For my legs?" she managed, when her breathing quieted.

Vera took away the tray. When she came back a few minutes later, Solange's head was resting against the back of the chair, her chin turned to one shoulder, a faint flush spreading across her prematurely aged cheeks. She stirred when Vera tucked the blanket around her. "You're a fuckin' angel," she murmured, her voice hoarse and sleepy.

Vera went into the house. "Let her sleep," she thought. "I'll get her back to her keepers in time for dinner." She scraped the crumbs and eggshells into her composting bucket, watered the windowsill potted ivy with the last of the cooled tea, ran hot water over the dishes, and wept.

MARINA ANTROPOW CRAMER is the daughter of post-World War II Russian refugees who emigrated to America in the mid-fifties, and now lives in New York's Hudson Valley region. Her work has appeared online in *Blackbird* (Spring, 2009), and *The Istanbul Literary Review* (May, 2009). Several of her stories and book excerpts were read by professional actors in the Tunnel Vision Writers' Project series of performances in Montclair, NJ. She is at work on *The Vera Stories*, a story cycle, and a novel set in Russia and Germany in the 1940s. She is an independent bookseller by trade.