

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

Charlene Langfur
American Bullies

As I write this, America's trouble is constant, coming out of the White House as it does into our living rooms—the hateful slurs—lock her up, making fun of the disabled, Mexicans are murderers and rapists. global warming is a myth, punch the press in the face, hurrah for the KKK. There is no end to it. For me, the starting point for all the trouble was April 2016. That's when my trouble began and changes and more changes and then full throttle. My clearest recollection of the starting point is when I broke my femur in an accident caused by my tripping over a broken water spigot in the back yard of my apartment. After the injury, I needed surgery and a metal bar inserted in my leg, a month of rehabilitation, enduring the excruciating pain that followed along with learning to walk again, the loss of my work reading educational essays.

And then Hillary lost.

It took my breath away. Many of us have not recovered from the cultural shell shock of her unexpected loss, and the shellshock repeated with the testimony of Dr. Blasey-Ford along with the sham vote for the Supreme Court Justice that followed. This is one incident in a time when smart, empathetic, hardworking women who care about their country and the environment are besieged all the time. Over the past two years we have all watched women disparaged in public in every possible way. In spite of this, life went on. For me this meant I learned to walk again, read essays again at a lower rate of pay than I was paid before the accident. I had to go through the steps of starting over as the rest of us shell shocked women have tried to do after the election. No matter how hard I worked I knew there was still a gender pay gap. In 2018 American woman were paid \$513 billion a year less than men but my pay gap was even wider as a senior who was still working. No matter how good my work was, I'd be paid less.

Soon, however, even as my work picked up, I began noticing indications all was not right in the over-55 complex where I had rented a two bedroom apartment and lived for five years with my small rescued 13 pounds dog Honey, a Jack Russell terrier who had been thrown off a truck in Desert Hot Springs and left for dead, a common mistreatment of dogs in the desert. As I had done all my life with dogs, I tried to save her and give her a purposeful life. While my dog and I pushed ahead on our daily walks I began to notice the large number of Trump signs as well as American flags had stayed up on my neighbor's doors long past the election. Although I saw this as troublesome at the time, I did not see it for the red flag warning it was. I realized that the parts of Palm Desert where I lived were more focused on what was taking place in Washington than other neighborhoods were.

I began to see more clearly that after the election, there was an undertow of arrogance and narcissism set in all over the United States. But at the same time I was working 15 to 20 days in a row, taking care of my apartment and my dog and learning to live with a minor disability. I focused on what had to be done in order to remain solvent and independent and although my job put me under constant pressure, it was a job I knew how to

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do And I had been at the time a published poet since the 1960s, included in publications with early feminists, so I still took the time to write essays and poems. As a poet, I focused on writing as a way out of the problems. I was extremely concerned about the fate of the earth. As early as 1987, I had assigned students writing assignments on global warming, so I was privy to scientific research about the topic for the last 30 years. Reagan tried to squash the subject by advising the Navy to alter the time charts on observing the changes in the oceans and in the ozone. Trump was not the first to squash data.

One day during this time period while I was walking to the mail box, an older resident in the villa complex stopped me and began an earnest conversation. He started talking to me about the heat and then out of the blue told me that if any Arabs came to our complex, he would take them out in back and shoot them. I think he meant Isis but he said Arabs.

I did not know what to say to him. I replied casually, "The heat must be global warming." This had been the first desert summer of five or more days over 120 degrees—clearly part of the warming trend. That's when he told me how there was no such thing as earth changes or global warming. "We've had shifts in climates before on the earth. Use your intelligence. The idea is a hoax."

Again, I was dumbfounded. This was before Trump's serious and incessant renunciation of earth changes and his dropping out of the Paris Treaty and Conference. I said he was wrong and tried in brief to explain the science behind it but he would have none of it, shaking his head and laughing at me. Before the election, he'd stopped to talk to me while I was going to my car. He wanted me to know the Clintons were going to be arrested on the next day for money laundering.

Soon afterward, I began to realize he was not alone in the complex of over 55 residents who believed the same and spent most of their time talking about conspiracy theories. Many of the more vocal residents believed this and spent most of their days talking about how the real news was fake and the Clintons were criminals. For years I simply had not noticed the behavior of the seniors who did not work as I did. I lived a private life there, worked long hours and wrote. An organic gardener of many years I kept a small organic garden in back of my unit, a miracle in the desert, a colorful patch of dirt with nasturtium, sunflowers, aloe plants and calendula. I gardened to lift my spirits.

But a whole series of negative events affecting me in a serious way began after the election. Aside for negative comments about the "Hillary" stickers on my car, the first most startling incident happened when a small group of older women with signs gathered on a small patch of grass outside building C where I lived. Most of the women were in their 70s and 80s, none of them worked, all of them were conservative. "We don't want you here," the fiercest of them Kitty, a woman who spent her days on her porch spying on others and gossiping, said to me. I had to get the General Manager of the place to come with me and get them to allow me to pass. I was upset and trying to figure out what I did wrong. They knew I was quiet, voted for Hillary, cared about gardens and the environment but I followed the rules, paid my rent on time and kept to myself.

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Eventually I realized it was exactly my difference as a woman they did not like. The group of women had the characteristics of 1950s women, insular, pro-white, anti-immigrant, heterosexual, speciously religious. This was not my way and never had been.

In addition to teaching, for ten years I had also managed a small company for my father when he became ill. Getting along with different kinds of people had never been a problem for me but I began to realize that even though these people, mostly women, at the Villas on the Green, came from different backgrounds and different places, they all seemed to become more like each other as time went by, especially after the Trump election.

One woman became especially hostile and she began to enlist others to do the same. One of the women suddenly acquired a large dog, which was not allowed. She kept the dog anyway and let it off without a leash whenever she felt like it even though the dogs she had prior jumped on a senior woman and knocked her down. Because of that, she was forced to find a new home for them. I was knocked down twice while walking my small dog in the morning before work. But when I reported it, the officious office manager, Mike, who had been fired from his previous position, was only interested in his corporate bonuses. He had alienated almost everyone by then but he was able to form an alliance with the group of difficult people when it suited him. Kitty lived next store to him and kept his secrets. She had the key to go in and out whenever he wanted her to do him a favor. In exchange for this there was an agreement he would protect her no matter what she did.

The collusion between the bullies and management was sinuous but I assumed my residence was a safe place because the state of California says I am guaranteed residence if I pay my rent and follow the rules. But I was wrong.

Soon Mike began renting units to people with large dogs in spite of the rules and rented out apartments to people with too many dogs on small hallways with little egress. He received a bonus to rent places and he did what he needed to do for the extra money. It was clear he did not like women, as he hinted to all who lived there. For a person with a metal bar in my leg, learning to walk all over again, this situation with the dogs was dangerous for me. None of my queries about the large dogs were acknowledged nor any of my requests to keep the group of women from talking ill of me. The same women wrote letters accusing me of causing situations that never happened.

I tried to document the problems. I had lived there for over five years without any complaints. Toward Christmas an old friend of many years visited me as she did once a week. We went for lunch and took a walk with my dog on the back of the property. My friend was concerned when one of the women let her dog off the leash, almost knocking my friend down. Anna wrote a letter to management telling them what happened. It was never answered.

Soon afterward on Christmas Eve morning, my next door neighbor who was often inebriated, yelled at me early in the morning as I stooped down in my doorway to get my newspaper. She called me names and hurried off. I was helpless in my nightshirt and I dressed quickly and fol-

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lowed after her to tell her that kind of behavior was not okay. The next day she left a note of apology on my door. But the day after that when I went to the office to say what she had done, she had already been to the office with a complaint about me, reversing her own note of apology and she had a witness who was willing to lie for her.

Days later I received a long letter from corporate attorneys telling me I had no right to speak to other residents in defense of myself. Even though I had her note admitting her culpability, they declined to change their letter or rescind it.

The next day, my car was covered with shit. The management documented it and took pictures but did little to help me or give me a more protected space even though I have a handicap sticker from the state California. Not only was I precluded from responding to anyone who said anything untoward to me, I was told I could not document any bad acts with pictures.

Shortly after these instances, I received a two-page letter from a delivery service at the door of my apartment while I was in the middle of a large job. It said I had to change my attitude and behavior. I was given 3 days to do this, otherwise I would risk eviction for non-cooperation. I had already paid the next month's rent and been given a receipt. My apartment was tidy and I had always paid on time and kept up my garden that many tenants visited out back. By all accounts I was a model tenant.

I couldn't believe their letter at first, I had a lifetime of furniture and personal belongings and I was in the middle of a job but the bullying was out of control. I have since learned that the state of California has many arcane rules for eviction that favor corporations and landlords when they want to get rid of people for any old reason at all. I found myself one of them, one of the any old reasons at all. The abuse was in full throttle by then. I moved out within 3 days even though I was not evicted, only threatened with it. I had no idea how to deal with the threats or fix something I had not caused. I had no idea where to go and during the Coachella Festival, I could not find a single motel or hotel room even though I was able to move and store my belonging in a storage unit. A month later after renting a house in the interim, I found an apartment.

The consequences of the bullying seemed endless and it grew as I tried to work at my job and move at the same time. The town lawyers advised me I had been discriminated against but no lawyer wanted to take the case on because it was complicated. It was now clear to me California has to shore up its laws about tenant rights. But the core of the problem was the bullying, the group of women and a few men thinking it was okay to insult and malign anyone who didn't fit their profile of what another tenant should be like. Not unlike the President, they became abusive at their pleasure. The parallels were exact. Fortunately, I did find another place. It was more than I budgeted to pay but less than a motel or renting a house and I needed to have a place to live in order to work and stay healthy. I was sixty-nine years old and bullied by a group of Seniors intent on taking away my security any way they could. We all know about Trump's bad manners by heart by now but what seems to be most surprising is how incessant it is, day and night, tweet or text or email or off the cuff, usually aimed at people who are vulnerable in some way. On the day of this writ-

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ing the president of CNN sent Trump a letter telling him, “words matter” after a pipe bomb was sent them. Clearly Trump had become a word thug perpetrating a constancy of the insults, calling women Horseface, Fatty, Pocohantas, bragging about how he loves to grab women’s vaginas. Repeating the “lock her up chant” against, Hillary, Diane and Nancy Pelosi.

Starting over again as a senior woman subject to the same kind of bullying Trump espouses from my own peers was tough. His bad behavior was copied. For me, losing our gains in protecting the environment is equally horrifying. Today I read the entire air pollution above China and India combined is less than we create here in the United States. The cumulative effect of Trump, along with the Tea Party, was in alignment against science and intelligent thought, a pattern of anti-science actions, hostility to the environment, even restricting public information to scientific research, an effort to convince people science is incorrect.

And it was about this time during my move that the local newspaper The Desert Sun ran an AP article by San Francisco writer. It reported about the new national problem with bullying in senior centers and communities. “They are like Mean Girls but everyone is 80,” it said. A clique system of bullying cropping up everywhere in senior centers and senior living complexes, in San Francisco and Niles, Illinois and St. Louis Park, Minnesota, an epidemic across the country. Some senior places were targeting gay people like myself and other such places targeted anyone they thought didn’t fit their mold of the way a woman should be. Many of the bullies are in the 80s, widowed or divorced, no longer working. They no longer had husbands or work to define them. I saw what was happening to other seniors across the U.S. was exactly what happened to me at Villas on the Green.

I was a woman who worked as a senior, an intellectual, a nerd, an environmentalist, a liberal, a lesbian. I did not fit the model for what a woman is for them. Seniors where I lived were breaking the Fair Housing Act by violating the rights of other seniors over 55.

Where I am now is a safe place. My neighbors are of all ages and we all get along fine. There are no American flags on every other door and no Trump signs hanging up in every nook and cranny. I experienced firsthand how we are on the cusp of enormous changes. It is not for the faint of heart or any of us unwilling to evolve but whatever path we take, words matter. We need to be careful with them or face dire consequences. There is little escape.