

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

*Kate Brandes*  
**War Garden**

The boarding house where we lived had a dining room with big windows that overlooked the garden Maggie put it in shortly after she'd arrived. Song birds hid in the bushes nearby and would sometimes bump into the glass before flying away again. One spring morning, while a group of us ate breakfast, a goldfinch crashed into the window so hard the pane shook. We hurried over and looked to the ground. The bird lay still as death.

I saw the finch's eyes flutter, so I headed upstairs and got a shoebox out of my closet. I put a pillow case in the bottom of the box and went outside. Maggie was already standing there cupping the bird in her hands.

"It's not moving," she whispered, her face pale.

"It's stunned I think. If we put it in this box where it's dark and quiet, perhaps it will recover."

She pulled the bird close to her chest. "But it's not meant to be trapped."

"I've watched my dad do this more than once. Honest. The small, dark space will calm it so it can fly again."

She wasn't entirely convinced, but after a few moments, Maggie handed the goldfinch over and I placed it in the box. Its eyes were closed. We sat down and I put the box on the ground between us, keeping my hand on the cover. After a time, I lifted the lid and the bird flew.

I collected the box, stood up and offered a hand to Maggie. She smiled at me, tears in her eyes. Those sky-blue eyes I fell into that day.

The next morning I came down to breakfast to find the window hung with silver streamers. Maggie would do what she could to make sure that never happened again.

Dear Jack,

Two weeks ago, Vivian, one of the women I've become friends with in here, died of an asthma attack. A guard thought she faked it and wouldn't help her. She was young and beautiful with a small child at home. Everyone loved her and after she died, I ran down the hall and pulled fire alarms. Some of the others saw what I was doing and before I knew it, fire alarms rang on nearly every floor. When we got outside, we raised hell to let it be known that Vivian did have a voice and that she would be heard. We wanted God to know.

They locked us down and sent some of us to the hole, including me. I was alone for a week in the dark. But it was worth it. More so because I could finally think clearly for the first time in the four years I've been inside.

We'd been married seventeen years when my wife was arrested. For

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

a while I thought that if I could understand Maggie and her intentions, I wouldn't be a fool and our lives together wouldn't be a lie. Perhaps there would be a future for us again after she served her sentence. Our lawyer said it could be as short as seven years, if her term was reduced.

Soon after Maggie went to prison, I looked up her father, Bob Sayer. We'd never met. He was gracious and invited me into his kitchen. His blue eyes were the same as Maggie's. We sat at a worn, wooden table. Red and white checkered curtains rippled in the summer breeze while we talked over cups of instant coffee.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am. We worried that she was dead," Bob said. His voice was low as he looked out the window. "Our lives were eaten up. It's hard to forgive something like that."

"Yes."

"Her own mother died and she didn't even know it. I've never seen my grandbabies, and now you tell me they're almost grown." He wiped his face with big, calloused hands.

I looked away.

When he sipped his coffee, his hand trembled and some of it dribbled on the table. "We did the best we could for her."

"I don't doubt that," I whispered.

He leaned back in his chair and looked at me for a moment. "Was she happy?"

"I think so," I said, even though I didn't know.

He sighed, collecting himself. "She's written me some letters since she's been in prison."

"Oh?" I managed. I hadn't gotten any letters. My eyes burned and I looked at the floor to keep the hurt to myself.

He finished his coffee. "Let me show you the garden."

We walked out the kitchen door and around to the back of the house. It was June and the garden grew lush and promising. At the sight of it, I remembered Maggie with a longing I hadn't felt since her arrest.

The tidy vegetable beds flowered, and ripe strawberries hung from large terra cotta pots on a stone patio in the center of the space. Yellow roses bloomed on a trellis along one side of the patio. The asymmetrical design was familiar, as was the color of the roses.

Bob Sayer sat on a bench in one corner of the garden and I took a seat opposite him.

"She wasn't the kind of a person to do something like that," he said.

I shrugged. I couldn't get words past the lump in my throat.

"I've wondered if her brother's death had anything to do with it."

"Brother?"

He looked at me. "Mark. He died in basic training."

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

"She never told me."

My voice sounded monotone and foreign to my ears. My wife was a stranger.

Bob Sayer watched me with Maggie's eyes.

"Hmm. Mark had a heart condition we didn't know about. She blamed me for his death. Thought I'd pushed him into joining."

He stood up and ran his hand through his hair. "Maybe I did. The last time we saw her, she'd come home for Mark's funeral. We had a horrible fight the day after the service. She left without saying goodbye."

He walked over to the rose bush. "She joined up with that radical group right after Mark died." He held one of the blooms in his hand and some of the petals fell to the ground. "She might have been looking for another family."

I intended to give myself up all those years ago. I was close before I became pregnant. But as the children grew, so did my silence and isolation, no matter how much love there was in our family.

It's not easy trying to go unnoticed and unseen.

My work in the emergency room brought meaning to my life. It had always been my dream to become a physician and my wife helped me get through medical school and then stayed home to raise our children: Janet, Susan and Sean, our baby. Maggie became the one they turned to for most everything. My call schedule kept me away at odd hours, so she became the bridge between me and the children.

Maggie spoke very little to me or anyone else about growing up in California. She talked in generalities about being political in the sixties and seventies, and rarely mentioned her parents. She didn't dwell in the past and I didn't press her. No one did. It's easy enough not to ask questions of someone who's always listening.

How does our backyard look this spring? I think of it often.

Remember the night I told you about the war garden? That evening where it seemed the fireflies were trying to catch the attention of the candles on our patio table. I can still feel the warm weight of the cat on my lap and smell the rosemary scenting the air every time the breeze caught it. I was trying to let you see me that night, Jack, at least until those sirens reminded me I could not.

I remember the night. It was when the kids were still small. She'd had some wine, which was unusual, and we sat on the stone patio Maggie had built in the middle of the backyard garden. It was early summer and the fragrance of roses and those herbs only she could name filled the air.

"My dad loved his garden," she'd said.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

I looked at her, listening. Time slowed and the night became sensual and intimate. My mind drifted for a moment toward our bedroom.

“He called it his war garden.”

“Why was that?”

“My grandfather started a war garden, during World War II. Some people called them ‘victory gardens.’ They were meant to relieve pressure on the food supply, but they also gave people a sense of hope.”

I reached for her hand.

“When the war ended, people went back to the grocery stores, but the war garden stuck in our family. My grandfather came to love growing things and passed that love onto my dad who passed it onto me.”

She poured herself another glass of wine and took a sip. I noticed she was wearing lipstick, also unusual. I longed to kiss her.

A siren sounded in the distance. She startled. The wine sloshed in her glass, but didn’t spill. We turned to watch as a police car pulled someone over further down the street. The flashing lights lit up Maggie’s face in the darkness.

I settled back into my seat. “Did you spend a lot of time with your dad in the garden?”

She blew out the candles and collected our glasses. “It’s getting late. The children might wake. We should get inside.”

When I changed my identity I lost everything, my name, my place in the world, my parents. I’m starting to get some of these things back. I’m finding old roots to myself I thought had been severed. I am Mary again—it’s taken me a while to get used to saying it. I suppose you don’t know that Mary was my grandmother’s name. And I’ve been writing to my father. He hasn’t written back, but it still makes me feel closer to him.

It’s my place in the world after I leave here that remains in question.

We were in the kitchen talking about what to have for dinner when the knock came. Our 13-year old son, Sean, opened the door to two detectives asking to speak to his mother.

When Maggie and I came to the entryway, the detective went for his handcuffs. Maggie reached up and squeezed Sean’s arm and then let go.

“Mom?” Sean’s adolescent voice cracked.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Maggie looked at me, her blue eyes cool, steely. She said, “I’m sorry.”

I asked one of the detectives. “What’s the charge?”

“Mary Sayer, you are under arrest for attempted murder of a police officer in 1973. A grand jury indicted you for the crime in 1977, while you were underground.”

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

"But there's been some mistake. This is Maggie Porter, my wife."

When Maggie took a step toward the officers, I tried to put my arm around Sean, but he shrugged me off and stood against the doorway looking out at his mother.

"Sean. Take it easy. We'll straighten this out. Maggie?"

She looked back at the house and then at me, a stranger.

Before she turned to go with the detectives, her eyes met Sean's with a flicker of sadness. She said, "Be strong."

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I have a tape of Maggie's police interview after her arrest. Our lawyer made a copy for me. I've listened to it a few times, when the kids weren't around.

"What is your real name?" asks the detective on the tape.

Her voice starts out clear and sure. "Mary Sayer."

She says this without hesitation and I still can't listen without my breath catching.

"Tell me what happened in 1973 in Los Angeles when you were a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army."

"I helped them after Amy's murder."

Amy, a friend of Maggie's, had died in a 1971 standoff with police. I learned this later, during the trial. Like the rest of the nation, Maggie had watched the whole tragedy unfold on television. Five hundred cops outside the house, six Symbionese Liberation Army members inside. Amy was one of them. Forensics experts later reported that 9,000 shots were fired that afternoon, roughly half by the police and the other half by the SLA group. The house was so full of holes it would have fallen down— if it hadn't burned first.

"The SLA made mistakes that day, terrible mistakes, but those kids shouldn't have died." Her voice begins to quiver.

The tape hisses in the silence that follows until the detective asks her if she wants a sip of water. After a short moment, she continues. "They were too scared to come out. They were found huddled in a crawl space. The building burned down around them. Some of them had their eyeglasses melted to their faces." At this point Maggie's voice is barely audible. The prosecutor soon turns off the tape. The last sound is Maggie's quiet sobbing.

From testimony at the trial, I learned Maggie never got over Amy's death and wanted to send a message. She built a large pipe bomb, packed with heavy construction nails. She planted it under the police car outside a restaurant in 1973. It was designed to go off when someone started the car. Instead, the fuse burned out 1/16 of an inch from the detonator. The target, a young police officer named Ed Tibson, said later in a statement that a girl and her mother had been walking their dog past his car. If the bomb had gone off, two innocent people would have been killed right along with him.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

During the trial, as I came to understand what she'd done, a tightness crept into my chest that stayed with me day and night and never left.

Here are some things I haven't told you about: I live in an 18- by 18-foot cell with seven other women. I sleep on a hard bunk. I shower next to the beds in a bathroom with no walls or curtains. There is ceaseless prison noise: chatter, fighting, orders, cell doors opening and closing. The lights are always on. The only privacy is inside my own mind. Every minute is a negotiation of personalities and boundaries. I'm on alert and vigilant almost 24-hours a day just to survive. A woman two cells down from me, who I'm told thinks too much of herself, was stabbed last night by one of her roommates with a shank of sharp metal that was smuggled in.

I have to be invisible to protect myself, which I've gotten good at. But it's also something I thought I could finally leave behind.

When I met you, I'd been on the run for over two years. I had enough distance from what I'd done to know it was a mistake. I was afraid of getting caught by the police and losing my chance at life.

You offered me a choice. A place to start over.

Many people wonder why I remain married to Maggie. Reporters and friends have asked me how I could stay in a relationship with a terrorist. I tell them the same thing I tell our kids – that she was an activist, fighting for what she believed, and that the sixties and seventies were a different time. People's behavior then can't be judged the same in today's world.

I'll never forget the first time I went to see her in prison. I walked past two layers of razor wire fence and then through a series of metal doors and every time one clanked shut behind me, I worried I wouldn't be able to get out. That I'd be trapped there, like Maggie. All the visitors had to go through a metal detector and some were pulled into a side room for a full body search. I wasn't among that group, not that time. I had no idea how I would survive prison and wondered if she could. My throat closed when I saw her sitting in the visitor's room surrounded by dangerous criminals. So much so I could barely get any air. The pervasive tightness in my chest I'd first noticed during the trial grew worse and I felt on the verge of hyperventilating.

But what really struck me was the look on her face. She was defiant. Suddenly she had a hard edge I wasn't used to.

We visited in a room crowded with other inmates and their families, all of us watched by guards. There was never a moment alone. Never time to be able to talk without being monitored.

That first year, I visited every month traveling from Ohio to southern California, the place of Maggie's crime and imprisonment. Sometimes the children came too.

I drew strength from my wife in the beginning as I saw her survive from one visit to the next; it became normal to see her in prison. Soon it

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

was normal to talk about. As her prison term became a regular part of our lives, space opened for resentment.

I resented the constant questions from people that I alone was left to answer. I resented being lied to. I resented the loss of my children because Maggie was my link to them and when she wasn't there any longer, neither were they. All I could do for them was what I'd always done – work. Work to make sure they had enough money to do what they wanted. And so I put in more time than before. Out of necessity really, to keep my sanity.

I gradually saw the light fade from Maggie's eyes and I could do nothing about it. She was a husk of her former self. Her red hair, streaked with silver at fifty, went completely white during the first six months of incarceration. Her athletic body became frail. All of the defiance I'd seen in my first visits was gone.

In the sixth month of her term she asked me not to bring the kids anymore. She said she didn't want them to see her like a caged animal. Maggie could barely make conversation when they visited. Her increasing apathy scared them. When I told them it might be best if they stayed home the next time, they didn't argue.

The effort it took to cross the country to visit her started to seem unreasonable. Every minute in the air or car began to irritate me.

Near the end of that first year, she came into the visiting room with a black eye. I felt somewhere between helpless tears and rage. I took her hand and squeezed it, trying to reach her. She was so detached, like a walking dead.

"Remove your hand sir," said the guard standing next to us. We weren't supposed to touch. I let go.

"What happened to your eye?"

She shook her head.

"Please, tell me."

"Nothing."

"Maggie. If you want to save yourself from whatever kind of hell you're living in, you've got to do something. Talk is about the only thing we've got."

She sat quiet for so long I became sure she would say nothing more. I looked at the clock. The light coming through the barred window cast vertical shadows on us that split us part and then into pieces.

She said, "Prison is not a place for sharing."

She looked out of the corner of her eye at some of the other women visiting with their families and lowered her voice.

She said, "My whole life has been spent avoiding capture."

She stopped talking. Her face was blank, unreadable. I looked at the clock again.

My head pounded. "I'm not sure I can come next month."

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

She looked at me, tears coming to her eyes. She laughed bitterly and said, "I've erased myself."

The guard called time and I left, willing myself not to run.

The longer we were together, the harder it became to tell you the truth. Especially after the children.

Both of my daughters were in college by end of the second year of Maggie's prison term. Sean spent a lot of time at his friend's house. The children needed to love her – at least the memory of her – and wanted more than anything to believe in her.

Those first couple years when I felt more generous, I knew much of the reason Maggie never told me the truth was that she didn't want our children to suffer the consequences. She wanted the life she was pretending. I was not simply a means to an end. But as time passed, our relationship began to seem more and more of a farce. Anything I said in her defense I said as an act of self preservation. I told people I believed in her because otherwise there was an absurdity to my life. But the truth of it was that, as time passed, I understood less and less about her or us. I stopped visiting her completely after the first couple years.

Time stopped having any meaning. One month bled into the next. One weekend, when the Sean was gone, I rented a dumpster and had her things hauled off. I took her cat to the pound. I lived a monastic, barren existence filled with work and poor sleep because the repetition served as a tenuous anchor to my life.

I went on like this, barely speaking to anyone outside my work, until the middle of an especially cold winter when Sean found me in bed with pneumonia, so sick I could barely move. He'd called an ambulance. The doctor later told me I was lucky to be alive.

Truth is I didn't really want to live. While I was in the hospital Sean brought me a letter from his mother, at long last.

I've learned how to get by in here and I'm learning who Mary Sayer is. I'm scared you no longer want to know.

But I want us to try again.

In the spring, I cleaned up her garden. Nothing had been done in the years she'd been away.

As I cleared away some of the weeds, there was less tightness in my chest. I still tired easily and rested at the patio table in the middle of the backyard. The breeze blew and stirred the herbs I still could not name, reminding me of Maggie on that night long ago. I'd chosen not to see her as much as she'd chosen not to be seen. I wanted her back in my life and I would start with the garden, where she always was.