President's Message

Solitary teamwork
The importance of meeting

By Arlene Smith

We all know the challenge of finding time to write. Writing slips down the list of priorities when family, work, or health maintenance demand our attention. As writers we often pay the most attention to finding solitary time to write.

I think an equally important aspect of the work we do is meeting and collaborating with other writers. When writers gather with supportive fellow writer, they receive inspiration, confirmation, or new ideas.

Writing is solitary work that requires a team.

We have a list of accomplished writers presenting at our meetings this 2017-18 season. Listening to them, asking them questions is guaranteed to inspire you.

We have two workshops planned this year. Please give yourself the gift of focused writing enhancement in a group setting.

Our writing circles offer the perfect opportunity for you to receive high quality, constructive feedback on your work, and to learn to be a better writer by thinking deeply about the work of others.

And the conferences that Canadian Authors participate in open you to editors, publishers, agents and other writers across Canada.

Our organization offers the best kinds of opportunities for you to evolve in your writing craft. Join us to inspire and be inspired!

October Meeting

Historical Writing

Where to look for what you want, with L.D. Cross

DATE: Tuesday, October 10, 2017
TIME: 7:15 p.m.
LOCATION: McNabb Community Center, 180 Percy St.

Research never stops. You can always learn something new about an old subject.
agency, publishing house or self-publishing? If you want to publish a book, you have to make an important decision after completing the manuscript: How do I publish my book? Do I offer it to an agency or a publisher? Or should I do it myself through self-publishing?

If you want to find a publisher for your book and want to take advantage of all opportunities, you should first submit your book to publishing agents. That is because agents do not take a manuscript, which has already been rejected by several publishers. So, even if many agencies have rejected the book, you can still try directly with the publishers. In the end if neither an agent nor a publisher offers you a contract, then you can still publish your book as a self-publisher.

AGENCIES

An agent examines a manuscript to determine its marketing opportunities. If the verdict is positive, the author is contracted. The agent will then try to find a publisher to publish the book.

Since agents usually have good contacts, the chances of making your book a reality are higher. They know personally many publishers and related academics with influence and what they want and need for successful publication. They can offer a manuscript to the right publishers.

Serious agents will only require an agency fee from you when you sign a contract with your publisher for your book. Usually, the agents get a “success bonus” of between 15% to 20%. That is, they get a share of all the revenues the publisher pays you for your book.

Most agencies specialize in specific genres or themes. You should check on their homepage to see if an agency would be interested in the book that you have to offer. An overview of agencies and their areas of interest can be found in the Handbook for Academic Authors or Writer’s Market.

PUBLISHERS

If none of the advertised agencies is interested in your book, you can go directly to the publishers in the next step. Before writing to one of the publishers, you should check whether your own manuscript fits into the publisher’s book program. Usually a look at the homepage or a walk through the bookstores is enough to find this out.

If you are dealing with a book project directly with a publisher, you need patience; it often takes several months until you get an answer. Not infrequently the cancellation consists of a standard letter without
justification. But a rejection is not a quality judgment because there are many reasons to reject a manuscript: the publisher does not want to publish the book because it does not fit into its program, or there is already one with a similar topic being published, or their budget is exhausted, and many more. So, you should therefore not be discouraged by negative responses and continue the quest for publication of your life’s work!

If your manuscript has already been rejected by several large publishers, it is worthwhile to look for smaller publishers. They are often specialized in a specific topic, a region, or a specific target group. If you find a small publisher that fits your book, you usually have a better chance than with a big publisher. For example, if an avalanche dog plays an important role in your book, then perhaps a publisher specialized in books about dogs will be more interested than a large publishing house. However, you can have problems with small and large publishers. Bad or unhelpful intercourse with authors does not depend on the size of the publishing house, but on its corporate culture.

SELF-PUBLISHING

As a self-publisher, you can publish your own book. For this you do not need a publishing corporation, only a suitable service provider. Self-publishing is widely accepted today in the book market. The Frankfurt Book Fair has set up a "Self-Publishing Area" and the Chicago Book Fair has also a special program for self-publishers. Many well-known writers, such as Nele Neuhaus, Hanni Münzer and E.L. James brought out books before they were "discovered" by a publisher.

Of course, publishers are only interested in self-publishers if their books are successful commercially. A manuscript that flopped in self-publishing, or is simply placed on the web somewhere without much attention will not likely be accepted by any publisher.

Self-published books must be up to the quality standards of other books with perfect spelling. If possible reviewed by a professional. A professional design of your cover is particularly important. If you have that, then your chances of selling a few copies of your book are not bad. Self-publishers also have to market their books themselves—and that will create a lot of extra work. If you think seriously about self-publishing, you should get comprehensive information.

PRINTING COST-CONTROL PUBLISHERS

Printing ink offset publishers are not an alternative. They only cost money and give you little or nothing in return. They can see that you are willing to pay them a lot of money as an author just to get your manuscript printed at all. At the same time, this type of publisher or printer will make you believe that he is serious and has examined your manuscript critically. In fact, the printers are usually keeping your manuscripts and should pay for them to the author, rather than the other way around.

So, go take on the day and good luck to you, passionate good writer.

BIO: Kati Lyon-Villiger grew up in Europe and was educated in several countries, obtaining a doctorate in economics (int. fin.) in the United States. She has written and published professional works and children's stories, novels, an epistolary, and books of short stories. Kati is married and lives and works in Ottawa, Canada. Klothild de Baar is her nom de plume.
30th Annual
Canadian Authors Association
National Capital Writing Contest
2017
Third place: Poetry

Sunset (for Gwen)
By Gill Foss

The fragility of her life fluttered as
a falling leaf caught
in a shaft of sunlight.

She walked a tightrope
over the abyss without a safety net
balancing hope and denial.

Belief in trust leaves words unsaid
and all our little lamps of hope died down
the night she breathed her last.

The dead have found a way to float
into our mind’s eye unannounced.
The dead are never quiet:

with dappled sunlight filtered through the drape
of memory I hear her still
whispering old dreams.

With our gathering to celebrate
her life, that day we said goodbye to
the last setting of her sun.

BYLINE ADVERTISING RATES

Members are entitled to a 1/8-page advertisement at no cost.

Otherwise, Member Rates are:

Single issue:  1/8 Byline page: N/C
              1/4 Byline page: $15
              1/2 Byline page: $30

One year - (4 issues - price of three)
Quarterly 1/8 Byline page: N/C
              1/4 Byline page: $45
              1/2 Byline page: $90

Non-Member Rates

Single issue:  1/8 Byline page: $15
              1/4 Byline page: $30
              1/2 Byline page: $50

One year: (4 issues - price of three)
Quarterly 1/8 Byline page: $45
              1/4 Byline page: $90
              1/2 Byline page: $150

Note: Yearly prices reflect the cost of three issues;
the fourth publication is free.

Byline is distributed by e-mail to those on our
extensive CAA–NCR mailing list. To have your
name added to our mailing lists, contact the editor.
November Meeting

TOPIC: Writing Historical Novels for Young Adults:
SPEAKER: Ruth Latta
DATE: November 14, 2017
TIME: 7:15 p.m.
LOCATION - McNabb Community Centre, Percy St. at Gladstone

Ruth Latta, who reviews young adult historical novels for Canadian Materials magazine, and has published three young adult novels set in the past, will talk about approaches to writing this genre, with reference to some outstanding works in this field including her latest novel, Grace and the Secret Vault.

BIO: Ruth Latta's most recent book is Grace and the Secret Vault, an historical novel set in 1919, for readers ages ten and up. It was shortlisted for this year's Northern Lit award for literature in English, presented annually by Ontario Library Services North. Ruth won this award in 2011 for her collection of short stories, Winter Moon. She is at work on another novel about Grace Woodsworth, set in the 1920s/early 1930s. Ruth often reviews young adult historical novels for the online magazine, Canadian Materials. For more information about her books, which include two other young adult novels set in the past, visit her blogs [http://ruthlatta.blogspot.ca](http://ruthlatta.blogspot.ca).
HAS THIS EVER happened to you? You're at a party, telling a new acquaintance about a plot twist for your story, and they look at you with polite bewilderment, and perhaps a wince of boredom. But later, you tell a fellow writer about the same plot twist and they're sincerely interested, even offer helpful suggestions.

Hmm, who would you rather hang out with?

Here's my advice. Don't expect non-writers (I call them civilians) to understand what you're wrestling with as you hone your craft. They likely don't get it. But writers do. They know what you're going through. The frustrations. The highs. The setbacks. The lows. The sheer joy in the work despite the lows. They get it.

It goes deeper. A civilian can wound you. It's not intentional, but a tossed-off comment like "Are you still working on that book?" can be a dagger to your heart.

Your writer friends will never do that to you. We are your tribe. We care for each other.

A source of deep satisfaction in my writing career comes from the bonds I've formed with other writers, especially those I've mentored. They've become my friends. You'll find more below about how my personal mentoring can help you, but first let me tell you about some of these friends.

Robert Rotenberg attended one of my master classes while writing his first novel, Old City Hall. That book became the first in his series of mysteries—five so far—featuring Detective Ari Greene, which have boosted Robert to bestselling author fame. Ever since he took my class, Robert and I have been good friends, sometimes chatting over the high-octane coffee he loves at his Toronto neighborhood bistro. His new book is Heart of the City, and the reviews are spectacular. Buy it!

When T.K. Thorne, who'd won awards for her historical novel Angels at the Gate, switched to writing a paranormal thriller, she brought me the manuscript for an evaluation and I helped her get it into top shape. Later, as an organizer for the AWC writers conference in her home city of Birmingham, Alabama, T.K. invited me to be keynote speaker. I visited her charming hilltop home and we spent hours gabbing about writing and life, instant sisters. And her manuscript? Great news. T.K. just signed a 3-book

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Veronica’s Papers

BY A. COLIN WRIGHT

Gerald Clayton, suffering from amnesia, receives a package of papers from Veronica, a former clinical hypnotist. She tells him they accomplished his fantasy of gathering together, on the ship Marguerite, his past loves with the two of them present, but in disguise. In hopes of discovering his own past. Gerald invites the passengers to share in a mystery by guessing what, or whom, they all have in common.

Available:
http://www.coldcoffeepress.com

CAA SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERT IN RESIDENCE

- Members who sign up receive a weekly tip from the SME—an action they can take right away to improve the way they use social media.
- Participants can also submit questions to the SME in Residence at the email address SME@canadianauthors.org.
- Each month, the SME will conduct a live Q&A session where she will answer questions submitted by members.
deal with Camel Press. When *House of Rose* is released, buy it!

My friendship with Janie Chang began in 2013 when she interviewed me about my novels and writing tips for her blog. Janie was then unpublished, but she soon sold her first novel, *Three Souls*, set in 1930s China, to HarperCollins. When Janie, who's based in Vancouver, came to Toronto for meetings with her publisher, she and I met for lunch. We laughed a lot, and traded writing "war stories," and have kept in touch ever since. Janie's exquisite writing has won her international fame. Her new novel, *Dragon Springs Road*, has already shot to bestseller lists. Buy it!

The writers I mentor inspire me constantly with their talent, commitment, and generosity with each other. Hey, we also have fun!

**PERSONAL MENTORING TO HELP YOU ADVANCE**

You, too, are a member of our tribe. You're eager to achieve your goals as a writer and fulfill your dreams. There's no satisfaction like finishing your book and knowing it's really good—the kind of book that can attract a top agent and win an offer from a major publisher.

But moving forward on your own can be a challenge, so you may be finding yourself a little stuck. If going it alone is holding you back, here's a way forward. Starting in September, I can be your personal mentor.

**BIO:** *Barbara Kyle is the author of the acclaimed Thornleigh Saga series of historical novels and of contemporary thrillers, with over 450,000 copies sold in seven countries. Barbara has taught writers at the University of Toronto, and is a popular presenter at writers conferences. Her master classes and manuscript evaluations have helped launch many writers to published success. Barbara's latest book is Page-Turner: Your Path to Writing a Novel That Publishers Want and Readers Buy*

Writers can learn a great deal from other professions.

Watch a potter, for example, and notice how their first step is to throw clay on the wheel. Often the artist has only a general idea of how the finished product will look, and the shape of the vase doesn't form under the potter's hands until she starts to mold the clay.

As she works, she adds extra clay where she wants the vase to curve out more, removes some to create a sharper curve. Only when she has achieved the desired shape does she add texture to the surface, ridges, possible a lip and a base.

No decoration is applied until the very end.

This is a useful image to keep in mind as you write your first draft. Throw some clay on the wheel: dump all your ideas on this subject into your first draft. Then add, subtract, reorganize until the piece you're writing takes shape. And don't bother checking spelling, grammar, or adding a clever lead until the very end.


The strengthening step is key. Without strength the tall vase will tumble. Without strong sentence structure and word choice, your writing will also collapse. But it all starts with throwing clay on the wheel.

Figure skaters can teach us about persistence. Part of their training includes learning how to recover from a fall. Instead of feeling defeated when an editor rejects your work, pick yourself up and get back on the ice.

Skaters also know how to respond when they lose a competition. Keeping the next season in view, they identify their weaknesses and work on improving their performance.

Similarly, don't give up just because the publication at the top of your list isn't responsive to your query or submission. Perhaps your piece needs reworking. Or maybe your pitch lacks punch.

Should you aim a bit lower this time, at a local or regional market? Skaters begin by achieving a few bronze medals in local events before heading for the Olympics.

Marketing your work is like any other type of sales. John Saltus, retired sales manager for such companies as G.E.,

*Continued on page 9*
Wells Fargo, and Bank of America, shared proven techniques used by top salespeople.

1. **Pay attention.** Successful salespeople listen carefully to potential customers. What do they want and why? Writers need to do the same. Read the magazine; study the guidelines; analyze the ads.

2. **Follow the trends.** What kinds of magazines or book genres are rising in popularity? Who are current ad campaigns targeting? Key your pitch accordingly.

3. **Put your best foot forward.** Saltus compares your initial message to an editor to the well-dressed, smiling salesman on the floor. The most polished approach is by postal mail, using professional letterhead, a well-crafted query letter, and one or two of your best clips. Many editors don't open e-mail from strangers, and don't appreciate phone calls that interrupt their busy days.

4. **Use the proven five-part sales formula in your query letter.** Saltus describes this as **ATTENTION, INTEREST, CONVICTION, DESIRE, CLOSE.**

   Grab the editor's attention with a catchy lead. Spur interest with your slant on the story, and convince the editor why you're the one who can produce the best article or book on this subject. Create a desire (why readers will want to have this information or read this story) and close with a request.

   If you're querying a magazine, ask how many words, in what format, and the deadline.

   For book editors, attach your carefully-crafted book proposal, following the guidelines on the publisher's website.

5. **Follow up.** Give magazine editors two weeks to reply to your query, and if you don't hear anything by then, send an e-mail. It still isn't wise to phone, but you could call ahead of time to let the receptionist know an e-mail is coming. You need to close the sale, and not give up until you receive a definite answer.

   For book proposals, it's sensible to wait six to eight weeks before following up with a simple email asking if they received your proposal.

   Saltus told me about several incidents when he returned after being turned down the first time, and made a sale on his second try. Don't forget to return to magazines that may have rejected you initially. If there's a change in the editorial line-up, the new editor may welcome your query. Even the same editor may reconsider if the topic you're proposing seems more relevant in light of recent trends or events.

6. **Keep a marketing notebook.** Saltus suggests that if you're planning a larger project, such as a book, or a marketing plan targeting better-paying publications, you should take a small spiral notebook and divide it into five sections: **Attention, Interest, Conviction, Desire, and Close.**

   Then think of all the words that could be used to describe your idea. Which words will grab attention? Which will generate interest? Which will lead the reader to conviction and then desire? Which words will close the deal?

   Use this notebook to brainstorm and then read through each section carefully to outline your project. This proven sales technique works not only for selling your project but also for writing it.

   Pay attention to how other professionals achieve success. Their techniques can work for you.

**BIO:** Barbara Florio Graham is an author and publishing consultant. The author of three books, Five Fast Steps to Better Writing (20th anniversary edition), Five Fast Steps to Low-Cost Publicity, and the award-winning Mewsings/Musings, she served as Managing Editor for Prose to Go: Tales from a Private List, which is now available as an ebook for just $4.99. Her website, http://SimonTeakettle.com, contains a great deal of free information, including resources for writers and publishers.

Read more about Simon Teakettle on page 10.
Simon Teakettle in the Guinness Book?

Simon Teakettle plans to apply to Guinness World Records for The Most Diverse Fan Club in the World, as soon as Antarctica is added as the seventh continent in the website Fan Club. The Fan Club currently boasts 115 species from more than 40 countries on six continents.

Simon Teakettle had became famous when he wrote for CATS Magazine, was a frequent “guest” on various CBC radio programs, and was featured in a segment of Animal Planet Canada. As the website bearing his name became more popular, we set up a Fan Club web page, which quickly filled with other cats from the U.S. and Canada, as well as Israel, Egypt, Greece, Holland, New Zealand, Malaysia and the U.K.

Soon dogs wanted to join, then other pets, and friends added wildlife they photographed, both at home and abroad.

All photos were taken by individuals. None are stock photos, or lifted from websites. There are bison, bighorn sheep and elk from Montana, a Japanese raccoon dog from Okinawa, a skate-fish in the Maldives, a seal swimming along the beach at Bray, Ireland. Elephants were photographed by one friend in Laos and another in Thailand, and chimney sweeps in flight in northern Ontario.

There are two goats in Kenya named for Simon Teakettle family members. One is named Terzo, for Simon Teakettle III. It was a gift from Steve Pitt, one of the most prolific contributors of photos for the Fan Club. They were both donations made through The Creation of Hope, one of the charities we support.

The Fan Club continues the tradition at Simon Teakettle Ink of promoting responsible pet ownership, spaying and neutering, rescuing feral and older pets who might not otherwise be adopted, and keeping cats indoors.

The current Simon Teakettle spokescat is Q.T. Penny, a three-year-old female rescue. She's featured on the Simon Teakettle FaceBook page, and maintains both the Fan Club and the blog.

Simon the Elder: 1970-1987
Simon Teakettle III (Terzo), 2006-2014
Simon the Younger, 1987-2006
Q.T. Penny, born February 2015

Simon was dubbed the cat who owns the company in an article in Business Week which was quoted on CNBC stations in 10 major markets, Simon Teakettle was also mentioned in articles in Cat Fancy and other national magazines.

Simon Teakettle was mentioned on CBC radio network programs for 25 years, beginning in 1981: R.S.V.P., The Radio Show, Basic continued on page 11
A Small Grief
By Bev Chambers

It was just a little thing
And yet somehow it wasn't too small to mean a lot.
The flat cap pulled down,
stylishly worn
in a way my father never could have.
Reminding me.

You think your grieving is over
when some small thing shoots you back into a maelstrom of feeling.
It could be a turn of phrase.
Or wondering what he would think of his great granddaughter,
to whom I recite rhymes
using all the different voices as my father did to me.
Watching her smile with delight, arms twirling with excitement.

It is the little things that catch me unaware.
Walking around the neighbourhood, listening to the birds,
and remembering my father whistling to the cardinals,
excited when they called back.

Over the years one thinks the grief has lessened
When suddenly it grabs you by the throat, pinning you to the wall,
leaving you gasping for air.
Until you realize, if you relax and embrace it grief will wrap its arms around you,
and comfort you in its memories.

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Black, Morningside, Gabereau, Disc Drive, and Here's To You. Simon the Younger exchanged letters with Bill Richardson’s cat on the CBC radio network program Cross Words.

Simon Teakettle is the co-author of the award-winning Mewsings/Musings, which contains back-back humour by Simon and Barbara Florio Graham.

Barbara Florio Graham's article, “Training Your Cat Like a Dog,” won the $1000 award for best article on training (judged by a vet who specializes in animal behaviour), and is now on several websites, including one for student vets.

Simon Teakettle the Younger appeared on Animal Planet (2002 Canadian Pet Awards) broadcast on Discovery and repeated several times over the next two years on the CTV network.

LINKS:
http://SimonTeakettle.com/fan.htm
http://SimonTeakettle.com/blogsimont.htm
http://SimonTeakettle.com/biobfg
TheStoryofSimonTeakettle:
http://SimonTeakettle.com/simont.htm
Video of Simon Teakettle demonstrating training results

CONTACT:
Barbara Florio Graham
BFG@SimonTeakettle.com
http://SimonTeakettle.com
“GOOD MORNING. Accounting Department,” I say into the phone. “How can I help you?”

“Hi, Mrs. G.”

Oh my God. It’s her. I bite my bottom lip.

“Mrs. G? Are you there?”

“Yes, Afton,” I finally say. “I’m here.”

“Oh, I thought I lost you like there was a bad connection or something.”

“Nope, there’s not a bad connection.” What the hell does she want? “I’m … surprised to hear from you.”

“I know. It’s been awhile. Weird eh?” I hear her giggle. “Me calling you now.”

“Weird? I guess you could call it that.”

“Anyways, I was wondering,” Afton carries on. “I’d like to take you out for coffee. We need to talk. There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Pardon?” A pulse thumps in my ear. “Oh, Mrs. G. Relax. It’s not that.” She laughs. “You don’t have to worry about that ever again. Can we go for coffee? I really need to talk to you. I want to, you know, explain stuff.”

“I don’t think there’s anything left to explain, Afton. It’s been a really rough summer. For all of us.”

“I know. But, I’m over it. It was tough at first but, honest, I’m good. Please,” she begs. “Come have coffee with me. My mom’s coming too.” “Your mom is coming?” I grab a clump of permed ringlets and wind them around my finger till the roots tug my scalp. “Afton, I don’t think this is a very good idea.”

“Yes, it is. You’ll see. Please! It’s real important that I talk to you. And then, then you’ll never have to see me again unless, you know, unless you want to. Okay?”

I say nothing.

“Please Mrs. G. You won’t be sorry. I promise.”


—the bell jingles above the door as I enter the almost empty coffee shop. With a cup of decaf in hand, I take the corner table so I can watch who comes in.

What the hell am I doing?

I blow across the top of the cup before I take a sip. The bell jingles again. Afton and her mom walk in. The bottoms of Afton’s flared jeans flap against each other as she hurries towards me.

“I knew you’d come.” She turns to her mom. “See, I told you she’d come. She never lets me down.”

I force a smile so big my cheeks hurt. After they grab coffee, Afton and her mom sit across from me. I wrap my hands around my warm mug and nod at them with the same stiff smile. My blouse sticks to my armpits. Afton takes a wad of pink gum out of her mouth, rolls it into a ball and sets it on a spoon. Her mom drops a napkin over it.

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“I’m so glad you came. I’ve wanted to tell you this for months. I just didn’t know how to. And Nathan, well, he didn’t really want me to.”

continued on page 13
I force my face to remain expressionless. What in the world has dear Nathan, teenage-son-of-mine, gotten himself into this time?

“It’s been so long since it all happened but I told him I was going to tell you. You need to know. Don’t be mad at him. Okay? Promise?”

The fragrant coffee aroma does nothing to quiet the alarm bells going off in my head.

Afton taps my hand. “Promise?”

I shake my head. “Promise what? What did you say?”

“Promise not to be mad at Nathan … you know, after I tell you.”

“It kind of depends on what you have to tell me, Afton.”

“I told him it wasn’t his baby.”

I clamp my lips shut.

“Sorry. How can anyone forget that?”

The bell above the door jingles. I glance to see who’s coming in.

Afton drags me back to the conversation with, “Before I decided to do it, Nathan and I talked, a lot.”

“I told him it wasn’t Nathan’s baby?” I whisper.

“Before I ended it so he would know. I didn’t want him to be all bummed out.”

“Afton’s mom pinches Afton’s arm hard enough to make her wince. “Quit it! I’m not going to tell you again.”

Afton’s mom pinches Afton’s arm hard enough to make her wince. “Quit it! I’m not going to tell you again.”

“I told Nathan before I … before I ended it so he would know. I didn’t want him to be all bummed out.”

“Afton does motorcycle driving hand motions. “He’s a lot of fun but he’s not ready to be a dad. He can’t even take care of himself.”

I can’t blink. Or breathe.

“Stop it, Afton!” Her mom cuffs her on the shoulder. “Drop the drama.”

Afton glares at her and then in unison, they face me with comic-almost-happy-face expressions.

What the hell am I doing here with these two lunatics? I take a sip of coffee.

“When Nathan and I were talking, I told him something.” Afton stops, inhales, then looks me straight in the eyes and says, “I told him it wasn’t his baby.”

My heart stops.

“It was Brian’s. You know Brian? The guy that races dirt bikes.” Afton does motorcycle driving hand motions. “He’s a lot of fun but he’s not ready to be a dad. He can’t even take care of himself.”

I nod.

“And you know how everyone was all in my face about having a paternity test?”

To be continued.
“I know. He tried to. He wanted to. But everyone was so tense. He never found the right time. And then, when it was over, I never saw you guys.”

I blink.

“I ran into Nathan last week and he said things were kind of back to normal at home. He didn’t want to get you all,” Afton raises quote fingers in the air and says, “‘wound up’ again.”

“He knew,” I stare into my coffee cup, “and he didn’t tell me?”

“I know. I’m so sorry. That’s why I wanted to tell you. Mom and I talked and she said it wasn’t fair you didn’t know. She figured you’d being going through all that gramma-guilt stuff. And being sad. I didn’t want that. Not if I could help it. Life’s too short.”

“We all thought,” I look up at her, “everyone in town thinks …”

“I know. I’m sorry about that too. There’s a ton of stuff I screwed up.” She shrugs. “But I can’t fix it. Brian doesn’t know. And there’s no point telling him now. It’s not like he can do anything about it. Besides, he’d go totally ballistic. He’d really lose it.”

“He’d lose it?” I say.

Afton’s mom sits up straight and presses her clasped hands into the edge of the table.

Air whistles out my nostrils.

“So, let me get this straight.” I say slowly as I lift my left hand in front of me and spread my fingers out. “First, you tell Nathan you’re pregnant with his baby after you guys had split up. For months.” I bend down my index finger. “Then I take you to the clinic to confirm you’re pregnant.” Next finger bends. “When you wanted someone to go with you, I came along to the doctor appointments. We made sure both you and the baby were healthy.” I look up at them as I push my ring finger against the others.

Afton and her mom frown and drop their eyes to my raised hand.

“And then, before you have the abor … you tell Nathan it’s not his.” I push my pinkie finger into the palm of my hand. My thumb is the only one standing. I poke it. “But no one tells me? We spend months agonizing over it. And no one has the decency to tell us?”

“I’m so sorry.” Afton rubs my arms.

I flex my forearm.

“You know Nathan.” She gives me a sugar-sweet smile. “He hates seeing people get into shit. He’s the one always trying to fix stuff so everyone gets along. He didn’t want you to not like me or think I’m this terrible person. He’s such a great guy.”

“Really?” I tap the side of my cup. “He’s such a great guy?”

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“Yeah. He would have been there for me, the whole way. I know that. You did an awesome job raising him.”

I remain stone-faced. “You think so, do you?”

For a few seconds the coffee shop noises fill the quiet between the three of us.

“So, are we good?” Afton points to me then herself. “Are we good now? Everything’s out. No more secrets.”

I glance from her to her mom then back to her.

“I’m glad you know now.” She claps her hands together. “I’m so glad I told you.”

I take a deep breath, hold it and let it out in a steady exhale. Then I pick up my purse and my jacket. I stand up and reach over to shake Afton’s mom’s hand. Her watery eyes blink. She leans over, squeezes my hand and nods her head a few times. Afton jumps up and gives me a giant bear hug. She pushes back to look up at me but doesn’t let go then pulls me in and hugs me hard again. I pat her back and rest my chin on her head.

My heels click on the tiles as I force my legs to walk to the door. I pass tables with people deep in conversation, some laughing, hand gestures in the air. My heart thumps so loud but no one looks up. I focus on the exit.

When I get into the car, I put on my seatbelt and take deep breaths. In. Out. In out. The seatbelt digs into my heart. This breathing exercise, it’s supposed to keep me from flying off the handle. Sometimes it works. I breathe in and out eleven more times till my chest stops feeling like it will implode.

I drive home, conscious to keep my fingers light on the steering wheel. Once the car is parked in the driveway, my face gets warm. The steady pulse in my ear gets louder again.

“Nathan!” I slam the front door shut. “Get in here. Now!”

The basement door squeaks open.

“Hey, Mom.” Nathan tips his head back. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t you dare ‘Hey, Mom’ me, Mister!”

He nods that slow nod that his dad does when he’s trying to figure out what I’m pissed about.

I throw my purse on the chair. “How dare you!”

“Mom.” Nathan's head stops moving. “I love you.”

I can’t answer.

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