

Falling

Dying is like falling. I'm standing on a precipice and far below someone yells, *Jump! I'll catch you!* Fear of the unknown makes me hesitate, but the enemy is almost upon me, an unconquerable, cancerous presence. I must jump. I *want* to jump. I step closer to the edge...

An excruciating jolt funnels me back into my body. A sense of smallness, tightness, as my soul squeezes into the sack of meat that is my fleshly self. Dimensions flatten. I hear an ugly, stifled groan in my throat. I am conscious for only a few seconds when I realize they have resuscitated me with the paddles. If only they knew what a disservice they've done me.

Hours later I wake to the wail of a siren outside the hospital window. It sounds like a traitorous voice screaming, *Life! Life! Life at all costs!* in a sickening decrescendo. I grunt, move my head an increment, wiggle my hand. This stubborn body persists. Tubes and wires connect me to machines that tick and hum. The doctors have succeeded. My feeble grunt turns into a dull laugh. *Dying shouldn't be this hard.*

Something rustles. I see shadows against the curtain that divides the room. So they've put me in a room with someone else. My insurance must be running out. I tweak one corner of my mouth in an ironic smile.

"Hey there," the shadow figure says. "Y'awake?" The curtain zips aside. I gargle a reply.

The old man in the adjacent bed startles at the sight of me. "Holy crap, you look like death warmed over!" He laughs apologetically and slaps his hand on the sheets. He looks like hell himself.

I clear my throat and blink a few times. A pulse of circulation pricks my cheeks. I lick my lips and work my jaw. “That’s exactly what I am,” I croak. My belly convulses with weak laughter. “I was almost dead, and the fuckers zapped me back.”

We chuckle and let our heads fall back onto the pillows. “Did the same to me,” he says. “I guess we’re such fascinating guys they can’t bear to let us go.”

“Right,” I mumble. I stare at the acoustic ceiling tiles thinking about those Hollywood death bed scenes with family gathered around holding hands as the beloved one slips into peaceful oblivion. What about guys like me with no one around? I look at the man in the next bed. He’s about my age: eighty-something. The only hair on his head is the kinky hair sprouting from his nose and ears. Liver spots speckle his crepey face. The pitted, pink nose of a drinker dominates most of it.

“You got any family?” I ask.

“Nah.” He looks vacantly out the window where an empty flagpole stands with a rope snapping hollowly against it. “My wife left me after my kid died from leukemia in ’62.” He looks back at me. “Never got over it. Drank too much all my life. Stuck with my lousy, stinkin’ job for forty years, out of pure laziness, I guess. Factory work.” His gaze shifts. “Packing boxes.” His chin drops onto his chest. “It’s a bitch to die alone, ain’t it?”

I raise my eyebrows.

He says, “Ya been here for two days and no one’s showed up. I guess you’re in the same shoes as me, hey, pal?”

“Guess so,” I admit.

“So what’s your story?” he wants to know.

How to sum up my life in the few sentences I can ride on my breath? “Never married. Was a teacher all my life. Wanted to do something *meaningful*.” My fingers pull at the sheets. “Hmph.” I frown. The students had become more and more intractable over the years, until I was just someone in their way.

“Didn’t turn out as expected?” he asks rhetorically.

“You’d think one of the hundreds of kids I taught might’ve stopped by to wish me well. Say goodbye,” I manage to croak.

“You ever take the time to follow up with *their* personal tragedies?”

He had a point.

“Where’d ya teach?” he asks.

“Just down the street. Montague High,” I point with a crooked finger.

“No kiddin’? I went to school there. Class of ’55.” He smiles broadly.

I focus more intently on him. “Class of ’55, you say?”

He tips his head at me. “Isaac McGuinty,” he says. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Ike?” I whisper.

He squints one eye, his big nose pales. He studies my face. “I heard the doctor call you Mister Wilson when they brought you in.” He rubs a gnarled hand across his face and studies me again.

“Willie? Is it you?”

We're both too old and weak to hold back the tears. He was my first best friend. This shriveled, old man is big, muscley, indestructible Ike McGuinty who won the All-State Shot-Put Championship in 1954. A teenage Adonis. We dated the same girls, drank our first skunky beer together under the football bleachers. When I lift my hand across the space between our beds, his grip is weak, his fingertips icy. He already feels half-dead.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "Last I heard you moved to Texas."

"I came back for my brother's funeral last month and then I got sick. Guess it was too much for me," he explains.

"Well." I don't know what to say. "Seventy years passed by, Ike."

"And here we are," he says.

We sigh and go quiet. A notion comes into my head. "Ever notice how some people get stuck at a certain age? They're old geezers like us and still acting like a high school bully or a homecoming queen?"

He nods.

"I feel like I'm still back there in 1955," I confess. "Like I never really moved on. Wonder why that is?"

He cocks a smile. "You always were a strange little bastard," he says.

It was something he always said to me back then. I laugh and cry at the same time, hearing it. But I feel compelled to explain what I'm thinking. "Sometimes people get stuck at a point when things go very right or...very wrong." I'm saying it as much for him as for me, trying to sum up how our lives turned out.

“Or maybe,” he says, “you and me got stuck at a jumping-off point, when our lives should’ve moved forward, but didn’t. We got mired down in our anger or weakness and life moved on without us.”

It’s a profound statement. “You always were a surprising son of a bitch,” I say. We chuckle and fall onto our pillows again. I hear something go wonky on his machine. A change in the frequency of blips. Mine speeds up too.

“Hey, Ike? Do you believe in God?”

“Hell, Willie. I guess I believe in God, alright. Trouble is, I’m not sure he ever believed in me.”

“That about sums it up,” I say. Now our machines are beeping a disturbing, syncopated rhythm. I hear distant footsteps padding down the hall. As we start to fade, we reach out and grip our hands together tightly like we used to do in the huddle before every high school football game. We make one feeble thrust downward.

And we let ourselves fall.

Dana Rodney/ BIO

Dana was born in Westchester, New York in 1962. The majority of her professional career was in the design industry in California’s Napa Valley.

She began writing seriously in 2018, motivated by the loss of her home in a California wildfire. Tragically, another home was lost to a wildfire in 2020. As a result of those experiences, she became interested in climate change and wildlife conservation issues, and began writing a novel from the point of view of the earth, titled *The Last Polar Bear*. Another finished historical novel inspired by those losses is titled *One Extraordinary Thing*, which unfolded from the idea that objects contain memory.

She won First Place for an excerpt from *The Last Polar Bear* in the 2021 Jessamyn West Writing Contest at Napa Valley College. Dana has won numerous poetry and writing contests and published in local anthologies.

