

# Letting Go

Len Joy

## Contents

Riding a Greyhound Bus into the New World (*Bannock St. Books*)  
Triage (*The Legendary*)  
My Father's Ice (*Johnny America*)  
Fifteen Minutes (*Pindeldyboz*)  
Mary Bryan Cake (*The Foundling Review*)  
The Girl from Yesterday (*Specter Magazine*)  
Some of this is True (*Linnet's Wings*)  
Dalton's Good Fortune (*Bartelby & Stokes*)  
The Quick Pick  
The Toll Collector (*Boston Literary Magazine*)  
Nina's Song (*Absinthe Revival*)  
Kid Parker Gets a Title Fight at the Garden (*Every Day Fiction*)  
Pickup Line at the Ritz Carlton (*Dogzplot*)  
Last Call  
Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood  
Summer of '66  
Birdhouse Builder (*FWRICTION: REVIEW*)  
Time Don't Run Out on Me  
The Lovebox (*Melusine, Or Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*)  
This Train Makes all the Stops  
Letting Go (*Annalemma*)

## Riding a Greyhound Bus into the New World

On the second day of my married life, I found myself sitting next to Edgar Rawlings in the back seat of a Greyhound Bus bound for Montreal. I was on my honeymoon. Edgar was returning to prison. It was snowing.

My first day in this new world hadn't gone so well. It was my wedding day and I'd left Crystal's ring at my parent's house on Long Island. When I told her, she tried to give me her angry look, but she couldn't pull it off and started giggling. She would tell the "Joel forgot my wedding ring" story for the next thirty years. She thought she was so funny. Crystal died last year.

Forgetting the ring unnerved me but was nothing compared to how I felt when her father asked me about our honeymoon plans.

"We're driving to Montreal. Staying at the Hotel Bonaventure," I said. Her father was tall, grey, and imperious. I unfolded my roadmap on his desk and showed him how I'd red-penciled our route. He didn't even look at it.

"Joel, how the hell are you going to drive to Montreal? Don't you know they aren't selling gas on weekends?"

It was December 1973. I was aware of the energy crisis in sort of an academic way, but in grad school we never drove anywhere. I stood in his den, clutching my stupid map, my face burning. I was going to be married in three hours and had already screwed up our honeymoon.

He tossed me a phonebook. "Call Greyhound."

We spent our wedding night at the local Holiday Inn, overslept, and nearly missed the bus. Crystal squeezed into a window seat next to a woman who had to weigh three hundred pounds. She winked at me and started writing thank you notes. I found a seat in the last row, next to a skinny kid in green workpants and a baggy flannel shirt.

He moved his bag. "Here partner, take a load off." He patted the seat. "I was hoping they'd oversell and bump me. Get to extend my furlough." He held out his hand. "Name's Edgar Rawlings."

We shook hands. "I'm Joel. You're a soldier?" I asked.

"Nah. Prison furlough. Trustee's meeting the bus at Napier to drive me back."

Edgar had a rough buzz-cut and the hint of whiskers on his chin and upper lip. He opened his sack and took out a croissant. He pushed the bag towards me, "My mom baked them."

I wondered if there were rules about eating on the bus, but didn't want to offend him. "These taste awesome, Edgar," I said, my mouth full.

His face lit up. "Where you headed, Joel?"

When I told him I was going to Montreal on my honeymoon he nearly jumped out of his seat. "Montreal's the greatest city in the world. I know a place has rolls almost as good as Mom's. Let me borrow your pen."

I reached for the silver Cross pen in my shirt pocket. Edgar ripped a piece of paper out of his notebook and wrote down the name of the bakery. "Ask for Mario. Tell him Edgar Rawlings sent you."

Turned out Edgar was a Yankees fan. When I told him I'd grown up on Long Island and had actually been to Yankee Stadium he pumped me for information. What was Billy Martin like? What did I think of Winfield? Did I ever see Mickey Mantle play? When the bus stopped in Napier, I couldn't believe we'd been talking for two hours.

"Good luck, Edgar." I stood up and shook his hand.

"You and your girl gonna love Mario's." As he reached the bus door he looked over at Crystal, still shoehorned into her seat, and gave me a thumbs-up. He didn't act like someone going back to prison. He didn't act like he'd been in prison. He was just a kid, like me.

I watched him stroll towards a rusty van parked near the bus. The driver, a bear of a man with greasy matted hair and a beard, got out. He pushed Edgar up against the vehicle and frisked him. Then he shoved him into the back of the van and marched over to the bus driver who was smoking a cigarette at the curb. The bus driver shrugged and lit another cigarette as the van driver boarded the bus and headed down the aisle to my seat. "This your pen?" he asked.

He was holding my Cross pen. My hand rose to my shirt pocket. "Uh...."

"That punk stole it from you. Damn stupid thing to do."

I could tell Edgar was in big trouble. "It's not my pen," I blurted.

“What...?”

“I gave it to him for, uh...his croissants.”

“Sure you did.” He wrinkled up his face and poked the pen into my pocket like I was a grade-schooler. “Cons can’t have fancy college-boy pens. Might make a shiv. Hurt someone. Wouldn’t want that on your do-gooder conscience.”

He wheeled around and stomped off the bus. As we headed off down that highway I looked out the window at the van taking Edgar back to prison. I wondered what would happen to him. He was a good guy.

So was Joel. Somewhere on that highway he got lost. Some days I forget he ever existed. But on these cold lonely nights when snow covers my world, I miss that boy.

## Triage

Frank Summers wandered into his garage in search of a project. After thirty years as an emergency room surgeon at Phoenix General, he'd been forced to retire when PG was gobbled up by one of those hospital corporations run by accountants.

In his first month of retirement he'd swum a thousand laps in his pool, mastered thirty new iPhone apps, read five forgettable novels and played one round of golf with his wife, Lilly.

Car keys in hand, Lilly entered the garage. "What are you doing out here, Frank?" Her blondish hair was ponytailed and she was wearing jeans and a tee-shirt. Her animal shelter uniform.

Lilly, who'd retired ten years ago, had been no more excited about Frank's retirement than Frank. She played golf three days a week, volunteered at the shelter on weekends, and took writing classes at the college. She was busier than when the kids were at home. And happier. Frank didn't want to interfere with her life.

"I thought I'd clean the garage."

She wrinkled her nose. "In this heat? Do something fun." She pointed to the mountain bikes hanging from the ceiling. "Take Frank Jr.'s bike. You can ride along the canal all the way to 75th Avenue."

"Good idea. I haven't been on those mountain preserve trails in years."

"Not the trails, Frank. The bike path. Leave the saguaros for the kids."

Frank cruised through the mountain preserve on the novice trail that circumnavigated the mountains. Not as exciting as the ER, but it beat the hell out of golf. Two girls passed him and took the intermediate trail that branched off to the right. Frank followed them. He missed his nurses. The close quarters of the operating room. The camaraderie. The not-so-innocent touches.

The trail got rougher – pebbled with chunks of white granite and guarded by bottle cacti and some distant saguaros. It was high noon, blistering hot and eerily quiet. Everyone had gone home – even the birds. He rounded a large outcropping and headed downhill, with mountainside to his left and steep valley to his right. He tugged on his helmet strap, then squeezed the brakes.

It was a rush. His heart beat wildly as the bike careened down the rocky pathway. And then the image of Inez in her hot tub – her bronze breasts and brown nipples luminous in the foamy water – popped into his head, uninvited. She'd been his last ER nurse.

A bowling-ball chunk of granite loomed in the center of the trail. Frank steered hard to his left, but the bike fishtailed into the wall, shot back across the path, hit another rock and went airborne.

Frank lost his grip and hurtled into space.

His son's twenty-year old helmet smashed into the mountainside and split like a walnut, but when Frank stopped bouncing fifty feet below the edge of the trail he was still conscious. The helmet had done its job. Frank wouldn't die from a head injury. However, as he assessed his situation, he found little reason for optimism. His palms had been filleted, his right ankle severely sprained and he had at least four broken ribs, one of which had punctured his lung. With the stifling heat and the oozing wounds he figured he had three hours, tops.

The bike with his iPhone and water were a hundred feet farther down the mountainside. The trail ledge was closer, but with his hands nearly useless, he couldn't climb. He rolled over. The broken rib stabbed his lung. He took shallow breaths and when his heart stopped racing he rolled over again.

It took him two hours to reach his bike. His water bottle was missing. He unsnapped the seatbag with his teeth and coaxed the iPhone out of its pocket.

No bars.

Fucking retirement really sucked.

He closed his eyes, then remembered the pictures. He pressed his bloody fingertip on the photo app and opened the Nurses folder.

Crazy Kelly on her boat.

Bonita flashing her snake tats.

Wendy giving him the finger.

Karen.

Sami.

Rebecca.

Inez in all her hot-tub glory.

One last look, then he deleted the folder.

He opened the family album and thumbed to the photo of Lilly and him on the beach at Malibu.

So young. So happy. So in love.

He kissed the screen and propped the phone on a rock so he could see it as he lay on the mountainside.

## My Father's Ice

I have come to the Whitney Museum today to find Harry Giles. Not the wealthy investment banker with the beautiful socialite wife. Not the man who read "Goodnight Moon" to his daughter every night. I want to learn about the young man who dropped out of Cornell to follow his hero to an abandoned Brooklyn tenement in the pursuit of art. What happened to that boy who would become my father?

Last week my mother, not the most sentimental of women, sent me a photograph from her prom. She was decluttering and this cheesy relic didn't make her cut. She'd attached an annoying post-it note: "Carly – Look at that hemline!!!" Mother loves her exclamations.

The photographer naturally focused on my mother, blonde and sunny in a red mini-dress, with her perfect swimsuit-model body. My father stands off to the side, looking uncomfortable in his rented tux. It doesn't matter. No one's going to notice him.

I am my father's daughter. Dark. Anxious. My smile always a heartbeat too late for the camera's flash.

Today I've decided to attend the Whitney's exhibition of my father's hero: renegade architect, Gordon Matta-Clark. Mother is not pleased.

"Gordon's been dead thirty years, Carly. Why waste your time?"

Sometimes I imagine telling my mother what I really think.

"You know the difference between you and me, Mom?"

In my imaginary world she waits for my answer.

"You never understood why Dad ran off to New York, and I never understood why he came back."

The exhibition is showing a documentary from 1974.

Matta-Clark uses his chainsaw to transform a Brooklyn tenement into a three-story sculpture. As he carves a hole, a boy emerges from the shadows, holding a floodlight. Shirtless, body slick, lips pressed tight.

I have seen that look before.

I remember the day we moved from cozy Skokie to snooty Winnetka.

My father was in the den packing his photographs of Gordon's work. He was studying one of them, but it wasn't a building sculpture.

It was a photo of him with his arm draped around a curly-haired girl. Next to them, a long-haired man with a bad complexion.

"Gordon?" I asked, pointing to the blotchy-faced man.

He smiled. "Yes."

"Who's that lady?"

There was a slight pinch around his eyes. "We worked together. She died."

He shoved the picture in with the others and wrote "ATTIC" on the packing carton.

Matta-Clark stops the chainsaw. The curly-haired girl sweeps. The boy with the light moves closer and says something. She laughs.

The summer after we moved, my parents hosted a lawn party for the firm's newest class of MBAs. While father grilled, Mother entertained with her story of how Mr. Giles started with the firm.

"Harry took a most unusual path. Fell in with a bad crowd and abandoned his studies." She smiled indulgently as the MBAs looked skeptical. "It's true. He joined an avant-garde artiste-troupe. They vandalized abandoned buildings."

The MBAs laughed nervously. I wanted my father to tell them the truth, but he just shrugged and offered the young acolytes his faux-smile.

I took art in high school to annoy my mother.

“Colleges will not take you seriously,” she said.

I wanted to tell her I didn’t care, but instead I tacked into the fierce wind of her displeasure. “They’re for extra credit, Mom.”

Then I discovered fashion and pursued it passionately, ignoring my mother’s disdain. One day I showed my designs to my father.

“These are special, Carly. Gordon would have been impressed.”

He could offer no higher praise.

“I’m sorry his buildings got torn down,” I said.

He shrugged. “Nothing lasts, Carly.”

Pratt, in Brooklyn, offered me a full scholarship. Mother wasn’t pleased.

“Fashion is not the life you want. Trust me.”

She was certain Pratt was a mistake. I was certain of nothing. In a battle of wills – a huge mismatch. I needed father’s help.

He was studying financials at the ornate teak desk Mother and her decorator had selected for his den.

“Mom’s not thrilled with Pratt,” I said.

He put down his documents. “She doesn’t think it’s practical,” he said.

“You wanted to be an architect. Was that practical?”

He smiled sadly. “I met Gordon at Cornell. He was a guest professor for a term. He made architecture exciting. When he asked me to come to New York, I didn’t think twice.”

“Where was Mom?”

He grimaced. “Back in Chicago, waiting for us to get married. I worked with Gordon for a year. Then he got a commission in London. I couldn’t go with him.”

“Why?”

He shook his head. “Ancient history. I came home, got married and your grandfather offered me a job with the firm.”

“But you wanted to be an architect?”

“He assigned me to Stanley Wiggins – serious rainmaker. Stanley told me a few years and I’d have enough money I could do whatever I wanted.”

He pushed his chair back. “The world doesn’t work that way. I know that now.”

“One late winter day, Stanley decides that instead of eating lunch at his desk, he’ll walk to his club.” My father walked over to the coffee table and picked up a glass paperweight. “A chunk of ice, no bigger than this,” he held the paperweight above his head, “dislodges from Hancock Tower and crushes Stanley’s skull.”

He lowered his arm and set the paperweight back on the table.

“I replaced Stanley. Dollars fell on me. I couldn’t leave.”

My father’s ice was a small blood-clot, the size of a pea, which dislodged from his heart and found its way to his carotid artery where it blocked the blood to his brain. In the battle between his good heart and his brilliant mind, that was the only time his heart won.

He died a month before I started at Pratt.

At the exit, one of Matta-Clark’s home movies is playing. Gordon talking to a group of rowdy conventioners. Suddenly the camera zooms to a table in the corner.

A young man clasps the hands of a freckle-splashed girl with a tangle of curly red hair. I hold my breath. She has dark eyes and full lips. Her arms have a comforting fleshiness as she wraps them around the boy. They kiss. A lingering, gentle kiss. When their lips part, the boy turns towards the camera.

His face is radiant and his thirty year old moment of happiness fills the screen and bathes me in its glow.