

## Maybe Some Other Time

**Notice:** This piece contains language and content some readers may find offensive.

Martin looked out at the gathering of walkers and wheelchairs and bolstered himself. He wasn't sure how this crowd was going to take bad news. This was only his third month working at Winston Senior Center; for most of it, he'd been dissociating through a blend of weed and plastic shot bottles of Fireball.

Before taking the job, he had fancied himself a writer. Publishers had not. So, after realizing that no one wanted his novel about underwater zombie whales, he'd taken the first full-time job that turned up. Now, he would have to do the hardest thing he'd been tasked with doing since he had started working there.

Martin put up a hand and asked for the attention of the guests at Winston Senior Center. Most of the seniors were vaguely pointed toward him, so he decided that was good enough.

"Yesterday," Martin began, "during a particularly rousing game of Bunco, our beloved friend Philip Krantz passed away. While some of you may have already heard this news, I realize others may be learning about this now. I understand how difficult this may be to hear. We'd like to take a moment to recognize Mr. Krantz as an important member of our senior center and community. On behalf of Winston Senior Center, we'd like to convey our condolences and recognize that many of you may be struggling with his loss."

He cleared his throat and stopped staring above their heads. He scanned the crowd. Several seniors had dozed off. It seemed in poor taste to continue without waking them, but he couldn't think of a respectful way to do so. Martin sighed and opted to continue. He belched cinnamon, but obscured it with his fist. This mannerism made him look overtaken with bereavement.

"Philip was a vibrant man—"

Doris raised her hand, her mouth half-open and her eyes googly behind her oversized glasses. Hand still half-aloft, she did not wait to be called on. "Was he the black guy?"

"No," said Burt, "You're thinking of Calvin. Calvin went to Harbor Rest Nursing Home. He's not dead."

Martin attempted to take back control of the room, which smelled of oatmeal and Ben-Gay. “Calvin is doing well in his new home,” he said reassuringly.

Burt intervened, scratching at his stubby neck. A few large flakes of dead skin sloughed onto the card table in front of him while Doris sucked her teeth. “Calvin was a Mexican, anyway.”

“Complainer was what he was,” Doris barked. She was wearing her Tweety Bird sweatshirt today and there was a large brown food stain on her right breast.

Martin flapped his arms in a way that he hoped said, *now, now, let's focus*. A gentle chastisement. Perhaps he just needed to speak louder. Many of the seniors wore hearing aids, but they didn't seem to work properly. “Philip was known for always having a ready smile. He always had a funny joke or a great observation about our little world.”

He pictured the time Philip had told him that the world would be better if people in large cities were not allowed to vote on anything that might affect him in their small town. He had tried to nod without appearing to agree, a nod that just sort of confirmed that you'd heard the person. He hadn't wanted to hear what that meant to Philip, because the vibe was definitely not good. That was pretty much the only one-on-one conversation he and Philip had ever had.

Martin pressed on. “He loved coming in for Bunco and our classic movie afternoons. I fondly recall him telling me that *Key Largo* was one of his favorite films.”

Gail, whose dementia was starting to ramp up a bit, picked away at the piano in the corner of the community ballroom.

“That's not right,” said Burt. “That's not ‘Heart and Soul.’”

“I'm not playing ‘Heart and Soul,’” Gail said irritably. “I'm playing ‘Love Me Tender.’”

Burt shambled over and pushed Gail's hands off the keys. He began playing a surprisingly competent rendition of “Heart and Soul.” No one was listening to Martin now. The sound of the piano had awakened a few of the sleepers, and several people were naming songs that they liked and hoped to hear Burt play. Some didn't recognize “Heart and Soul” and were singing “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Overall, the group looked happy, unfazed by the news that Martin was trying to convey.

He considered whether anyone would care if he stopped talking about Phil. He decided it might be better to just start distributing the checkers sets at the tables. He had withheld them

during the morning set-up period because he knew it would distract them too much to focus on this informal eulogy. It hadn't occurred to him to cover the piano.

Martin began moving his cart of game sets from table to table. He tried to think of Phil fondly, but soon started thinking about lunch. He'd brought the tuna sandwich, yes? Or was today a salad?

He placed a checker set in front of Gene, who asked where Philip was. Martin gave him a long, tired look. Gene stared back patiently.

"Philip is at home. He has diarrhea, so he can't play checkers with you."

Gene looked devastated, then pointed across the table at Ronald. "You mean I have to play with this homo?"

Ronald cracked his knuckles, set his jaw, and replied, "I'm red. When I play, I'm red, or I don't play."

Sensing a chance to break away from them, Martin quickly put the cart in motion. As he did so, he noticed the first hints of his edible kicking in.

*Thank God. Rest in peace, Philip.*

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Philip was not exactly resting in peace. Instead, his ghost presided over the room, unimpressed with Martin's efforts. *What a bunch of assholes*, he thought.

The afterlife was turning out to be mostly voyeuristic. He hadn't really met anyone else who was dead, and nobody could see him. He'd tried to eat an enormous slice of unattended deep-dish pizza at his favorite pizza-by-the-slice stand, but he had failed. He couldn't move anything tangible, let alone ingest it.

"God's Plan" thus far left a lot to be desired. And that begged the question: was there a God at all? If there was, he had not checked in with Philip. He conceded that God, if in existence, was likely visiting with all of the fascinating dead people instead of boring guys like himself. He'd had an ordinary life and a semi-embarrassing death, but he was ultimately forgettable.

Philip wondered if he'd somehow fallen through the cracks on meeting the Lord. Maybe there was a scheduled appointment right at death and he'd biffed it? Was his bossy feminist daughter right about the whole she-bang being a sham?

*Goddamn*, Phil thought, *all of those fucking tithes*. Jesus H. Christ, he'd given up a lot for a fucking fairy tale. They'd saved and saved and never did afford that pool. Not even the above ground. Meanwhile, someone in a stained-glass palace was swanking it up on his dime. It burned him.

His thoughts were interrupted by Doris, who had forgotten she was playing as the black checkers and was now demanding her opponent start over. Gene was relentlessly calling Ronald a "fag" and then attempting to wink at him. Ronald was audibly farting and didn't realize it because his hearing was poor.

Phil sighed, thinking he'd had enough of these people. He'd wish himself elsewhere. It was a thing that he'd learned that he could do quite easily.

He'd tried it earlier in the day and gone back to the day his daughter was born, but it had made him sad. He watched living Phil sigh and look disappointed that he hadn't gotten the son he'd wanted. Younger Philip had spent the past six months imagining a robust namesake. It had pinched a little now to see how that Philip grimaced like a spoiled child over his healthy, curious, and trusting daughter.

The ghost of Phil didn't linger in the hospital room too long. He'd seen enough. Plus, she was all goopy; his skin crawled a bit, seeing the smears of blood and whitish yuck all over her. Like a horror movie. Better not to think about it too hard.

Next, he had tried spying on his neighbor Caitlyn while she was in the shower. She was a lean redhead with a fantastic ass that bounced when she ran past their home in her neon pink trainers and leggings. He'd been secretly fantasizing about her since the day she'd moved in, so he was quite jazzed up to have a gander. His ghost had easily slipped the purple shower curtain, but he'd found her crying. Worse, with some odd sense of awareness that he now possessed, he knew she did this frequently. He'd never noticed that she seemed unhappy. Why would a beautiful young woman be unhappy? Surely, a woman like that had the world on a leash.

He moved on, returning to the senior center. The place had seemed like a harmless haunt, but now he felt otherwise. *Nothing but idiots*, he thought. Had he been the same when he was alive? Certainly not. These were real bozos. Philip decided to leave the senior center. Martin was smiling, his body slumped in a chair, lop-sided in the corner. Philip stared at him in dismay. Martin was nothing, an unqualified dope fiend. For a second, it seemed like they were gazing at one another, but no.

Philip decided he'd look for opportunities to feel good about the world. He closed his not-real eyes and meditated on "young children," then snapped them open as a rank odor struck him. Before him was a classroom full of preschoolers who were screaming excitedly and bashing toys around. In all of the hubbub, a skinny boy named Aidan had clearly farted.

*Oh*, thought Philip, *oh no*.

This was not the serene image he'd hoped to find. He looked at them more closely, and his not-real skin crawled as he looked at their crusty mouths and sticky hands. A young teacher was beside herself running after them.

"I bet you cry in the shower, too," Phil said. Of course, no one heard him.

He could not shut his eyes fast enough. Maybe his distaste for having a daughter instead of a son was misled, but now he was doubting children in general. They were a total fiasco. A family was a miserable kind of obligation.

He wasn't suited to being a family man. That's what it amounted to. Did that make him a failure? Some kind of sociopath? He couldn't help it. Some people think cauliflower is good, and some people know it's just a solid fart. Phil knew a fart when he smelled it.

Of course, there was a time when he'd been more optimistic.

Phil had liked his wife initially. Hell, he'd loved her. When they had met, she was twenty-four years old, her hair a wild tangle of black curls and with teasingly innocent freckles splashed across her face. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She was interested in Freud, loved to play Rachmaninoff on the piano, and painted endless landscapes in the evenings. Her intellectual qualities and artistic interests had made her a catch. It had made Philip feel good knowing he could attract a woman like that. He'd felt excited in her company, alive and vital.

They used to ride on his brother's motorcycle, long rides into the night. They'd spit cherry pits into the lake and made a game of it. She was special, lively, and strange compared to the primly starched girls who spent their lives preparing to be good wives and dutiful Christians. They played by the rules. Not Denise. Denise did as she pleased. She thought as she pleased. So, he married Denise and swore it would look different from all his friends' marriages.

It didn't take long to realize that everyone thinks that when they are in love. They were predictable. They had Deanna, bought a house, and fell into debt.

He stopped bumming it and playing piano at the local bars for tips and took the job at Harper & White Cooling. Suddenly, he came home in a company polo shirt while Denise sat

sedately on the sofa, a fat baby in her arms. Now her short hair was set, no more wild curls because babies like to pull long hair. Her mouth also looked set, now a thin line that matched her patience. Deanna had colic. Deanna had a diaper rash. The dryer went out. The neighbors gave them a kitten, and the other neighbors accidentally backed over it in their driveway. Denise and Deanna took to wearing “mommy and me” matching dresses. Home meant something different now.

Denise no longer signified aliveness and freedom. When he looked at her, he saw a trap that had closed on him.

At work, the stress had thinned his hair and given him an ulcer. He was always miserable and lonely. Once, he'd given over to temptation and kissed his office mate at a Christmas party. Her name was Cindy Jensen, the bookkeeper for Harper & White Cooling. He'd never paid much attention to her before, but she was trim and blond, and he'd drunk too much. She'd tasted like old hot dogs and stale coffee. It was quick and quickly regretted.

That night, he had come home and vomited. Denise had stroked his hair in bed, but now she did so in the same way that she'd softly stroke Deanna's flaky baby head. Cradle cap, they'd called it. Now, his own baldness and dandruff were nothing more than that of another family member in need of comfort, a sexless sack of feelings in need of soothing. Bodies were a disaster. He hoped that Denise hadn't felt the dampness of a few tears that had rolled across the bridge of his nose onto her leg.

Surely this wasn't how Denise had pictured their lives either. They didn't even get to go to Italy or Spain, the places they had hoped to honeymoon. Instead, they had to settle on a honeymoon suite at the Hilton in Duluth. It was cold and there wasn't much to do, but the room was on special and had a Jacuzzi tub.

Had Denise ever strayed? Could he know that now?

Closing his eyes, Philip searched for the right phrase. He could land on nothing other than, “Denise fucks some guy other than me.”

He opened his eyes to a younger, sweaty Denise riding a guy in a cowboy hat. He guessed that this was her in her late teens. Denise and the cowboy were stretched on a thin motel bed, rattling the pastoral scene on the wall behind the headboard.

He looked at her eyes boring into that landscape painting until he saw her going wild in a way that suggested she was about to orgasm. Her wildness eclipsed her passions in bed with Philip, that was for sure.

In the early years, she'd been lively. She'd been game. This fierceness, though, no. Never this intensity. It was unsettling, and it stung despite his knowing that this was before they'd met. He also reminded himself that he was now dead and he couldn't even eat pizza-by-the-slice, so what did any of this really matter?

The two were laughing and kissing now. Then Denise stole the painting off the wall and shoved it into her suitcase. The cowboy seemed to like that because he was smiling at her the whole time.

"I think I want to learn to paint," Denise said.

The cowboy yawned. "Paint me a landscape, baby. I'll tell my wife I bought it for her. She'll never know, but I'll think of you every time I see it."

Phil cringed. This asshole was married? Poor Denise. When he had met her, he'd probably looked like a white knight on his steed after a bum like this guy.

The look she gave the cowboy drove a stake through Phil's heart. "I'll paint you a million. I'll paint you a billion! I'll never stop wanting you."

Had Denise *loved* this man? Now Phil recalled all of the paintings she'd made, and all the times when those paintings disappeared. She'd pack them up to run to Goodwill or to give them to her sister. Then, the paintings would be gone with barely enough time for the paint to dry. Certainly that couldn't be connected to this guy, not all those years later.

Philip looked at this halfwit cowboy, his wife's dreamboat. Had this buffoon been schtupping his wife all along? Christ.

Then, he realized something that cut deeper than his wife's potential, probable infidelity. Maybe for Denise, Philip had been the beginning of the end right from the start. He hadn't shown up like a savior; he was the slide away from a free and exciting life for Denise. He was the ball and chain.

Denise was laughing and twisting in another man's arms, promising a lifetime of her paintings, inspiration, and creativity. Denise had been Philip's peak, but he was not hers. This buffoon was hers.

This was something that he'd have been better off never knowing.

*Well, for fuck's sake, he thought. What a horseshit life. I married that bitch. I took a drone job and bought a stupid Cape Cod home with a fenced-in yard. I gave her my whole wasted life. Meanwhile, she was always wistfully dreaming of this nincompoop.*

Phil looked on in horror as the dipshit in the hat scratched his testicles. His wife had been in love with a buffoon the whole time, and he'd been too dense to notice. His guilt over kissing his office mate was obviously misled. His ridicule of the boring Christian wives was probably wrong, too. *They* probably actually loved their husbands. *They* were faithful and good. Phil had been taken in by the flashy woman, and she'd been a tramp.

"Fuck you, Denise."

But Denise was too busy re-doing her make-up over the sink. She was watching herself put on blood-red lipstick. He closed his eyes, which now stung and burned.

This time, he made a wish instead of a demand. "Let me forget her."

He said it quickly and meant it, although he wasn't sure if he'd have meant it in five minutes. That's why it was important not to wait.

When Philip opened his eyes, he couldn't recall why he was snooping on the young couple in a motel room. He tried to remember if these were his old neighbors from back when he was a boy. It seemed like the man next door had a dark-haired wife. Maybe he'd had a boyhood crush on her?

*Well, whatever.* Phil decided that there wasn't anyone he needed to revisit now. Maybe he'd just pick something like a landmark he'd missed when he was alive. Before he settled on one, the naked woman glanced up in the mirror. Just for a second, he'd have sworn she looked right at him, just like Martin had.

But no. Funny, that. Funnier still how, in that instant, he'd felt a wave of love pass over him. She was gorgeous, and maybe that's why he'd reacted so strongly to this stranger.

For just a moment, the love and recognition set him back on his heels. Something like a captured breath hung between them. Then, the sinewy gentleman was urinating alongside them, and he forgot about the breath they were holding.

He moved on. He'd never seen the Golden Gate Bridge. *Okay*, he thought as he closed his eyes, *I think I'd like to do that.*

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Martin watched as the seniors milled out to the bus that would drive them all to their various homes. He would do a bit of paperwork before leaving for the day. All he wanted was to go home and watch *Dancing With the Stars* or maybe take a nap. He envied the seniors their freedom. He had at least another hour of work to do.

He also felt obligated to head over to his grandmother's house and check in on her tonight. His grandfather had passed a few weeks ago, and she'd been pestering to take some of his things home. An outdated suit. Some toolsets. His lucky cowboy hat. She told him to also take some of the landscapes. She couldn't bear to see all those precious gifts from her doting husband surrounding her. Redecorating would help her to forget just enough for it to hurt less. Martin felt sorry for her, so as the sole grandchild, he felt obligated to take care of her.

"You're a bachelor," she'd said. "You could use a few of the paintings to decorate your space. A woman's touch. Your grandfather was such an art lover."

Martin hated landscapes.

He printed the fliers for *Casablanca* night on the senior center copier. Another bland event that half the attendees would sleep through. Sometimes, their open, semi-toothed mouths filled him with a miserable sadness. He called his grandmother and told her he'd take all the paintings if it made her feel better about things. She sounded relieved.

Then, he wondered if he should quit his job. He felt so tired, so bored. He patted his pocket for his edible before he remembered that he'd already eaten it.

He wondered what his grandfather saw when he looked at those landscapes. What did it inspire in him that made him return to buy more and more of them over all those years? He imagined his grandfather staring into those scenes and longing for another place, another kind of life. Or maybe he just liked the colors. Travis had been a quiet man at a time when that had been the way men were taught to be.

Martin laughed as he tried to imagine his grandfather showing up for *Casablanca* night, then decided to pick up a pizza and go home.

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Travis tried to light a cigarette, then realized he couldn't do that anymore.

*Well, shit.*

He was still getting used to the afterlife. He let the wind blow through him, and that felt good. A stray dog barked at him, and he laughed. Dogs really could see ghosts. What a trip.

He reached out and tried to pat the dog's head, but he felt nothing under his fingers, and the dog just backed away.

Shrugging, he reclined in the grass and stared straight at the sun and remembered his mother telling him he'd go blind if he did that. Now, he could stare at it, and it wouldn't cost him a thing. He guessed he'd done it, and this was heaven.

Travis smiled. *Okay then. But I'll sure miss having a smoke.*

### **Author Bio**

Sarah Sorensen (she/her), MA, MLIS is a queer writer based in the Metro Detroit area. Sarah's most recent work can be found in *Soundings East*, *Jet Fuel Review*, and *The Bryant Literary Review*. Sometimes she daydreams about rescuing every shelter dog in Metro Detroit, but she just has one tiny fireball of barks. Her work is forthcoming from *The Sonora Review* and *Hare's Pare Literary Journal*, so stay tuned!