MARK SHETABI

Girl on a Bicycle, 2013
Oil on Linen, 20 x 25 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

HARRIET SCOTT CHESSMAN

Halliday's Treasures

At first, Caro thought of the neighbor as a child-like figure, in spite of the fact that his often bare paunch and silvery hair suggested he must have been at least in his fifties. He lived in a tiny bungalow nearby, a fairy-tale house on a blithely untended Palo Alto property, surrounded by larger, newer houses with meticulous gardens. He appeared as unaware of wealth as a garden gnome might be, come to life.

Caro couldn't feel at home in the hush and privacy of the neighborhood, where hedges loomed twenty or thirty feet in the air between houses and outsized rosebushes or agapanthus lined the walks. In her small town in Rhode Island, the boundaries between one property and another were gentler and more diplomatic—a row of forsythia, a few small shrubs. You could see people's houses and children playing in all kinds of weather. Here, you might see a child following a mother inside, from the car, but it was rare to see kids having fun in the pretty gardens.

She had come to California with Henry, so that he could attend the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Each day of their journey in the old Jetta, with their even older dog, Butter, she daydreamed that they might turn around—that Henry would say, "Just kidding. How could you think I'd really go to business school? I'm an artist!" and she would throw her arms around him and vow for the thousandth time to love him always, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer. "Yep, poorer!" he'd say. "Peanut butter for dinner, here we come!" Yet Henry and she continued to move forward along the interstates, taking turns at the wheel and stopping at 7-Elevens for chips and big cans of iced tea and at rest areas for Butter to relieve himself on shaking legs. Henry hadn't even brought most of his canvases with him. He'd made two runs to New London to stash paintings and materials in his dad's garage. "I'm free of it, Caro. It feels good," he'd said.

Caro looked for teaching jobs in Silicon Valley elementary schools, but it was already August by the time they arrived, and the harried people in the school offices couldn't help her. She had always said to Henry that never again would she do waitressing, but the only job she'd been able to find so far was as a waitress in a new, upscale restaurant at an outdoor shopping center that sported palm trees and flowers. The tips were good and probably worth the fact that she was run off her feet by healthy people so

familiar with delicious food that they scarcely ever praised their duck confit pizzas or local goat cheese and organic butternut squash salads. Caro barely had a chance to see Henry, since she was at the restaurant four days a week, from eleven a.m. to ten p.m., with a break of an hour or two in between the lunch rush and the dinner rush. On her days off Henry was usually in classes or studying.

* * *

The neighbor had a way of not quite looking at you, if you walked past him along the street. He'd just start talking, as if to the magnolia trees in front of his Hobbit house, or to the sunflowers he'd planted in a section of dry earth along the sidewalk, struggling to gain half of their intended height. He lived with his dad, she gathered—a wiry, serious-looking old guy with his white hair in a ponytail, who looked straight ahead as he rode a rickety bike.

What the neighbor liked to do was tell stories. In spite of not looking at Caro, or maybe because of it, he could catch her attention and compel her to stand on the sidewalk with Butter while he recounted one story after another. Most of them were about his childhood in Palo Alto, when it was a really small place—a university town, then too, but filled with areas, especially to the south, that no one had built on yet. Waving in the direction of the houses and high trees on either side of his property, he said his family had originally owned the whole block, half of it just meadows and an apricot orchard. He described for Caro how the rolling acreage, a mile away, toward the Foothills, had all been covered in pastures. Sometimes as Caro listened, she felt time dissolving, so that the earlier landscape showed through this one. It had been more like country. Dogs had roamed freely, and sometimes people had owned chickens and ducks. Caro imagined a paradise, with parrots flashing through trees and goats instead of lawn mowers. All the people looked like her neighbor, walking around with bare feet, or maybe on delicate hooves.

The neighbor loved books almost as much as he loved to talk. He was a nut for history books especially—anything about the Spanish missions, or the settling of California, or the great, terrible wars of the twentieth century—and one day he brought Caro inside his bungalow for a minute, just to show her three full walls of old volumes near an ancient woodstove. Once he realized that she liked books too, he offered to lend her piles of them, and she had to convince him that she already had plenty in her own house, just waiting to be read. This was pretty much a fib, because books were a luxury, and she and Henry always went to the library instead.

Caro noticed that some of the other neighbors habitually crossed the street in order to avoid her new acquaintance as he stood on the sidewalk. A few gave a brisk nod as they rushed past him. The other neighbors, in fact, weren't like neighbors at all. Caro had no idea who they were. No one came to greet Henry and her in the small carriage house they were renting behind one of the grander houses, whose occupants—their landlords—appeared to be in Greece, and then in New Zealand, leaving the details of the rental to their personal assistant, a matter-of-fact woman in her forties with red hair and new blue jeans. Certainly no one brought a welcome treat, as Caro's mother always did in Rhode Island. It could have been because this was a small city and not a small town. But Caro's grandparents lived in an urban section of Providence where people always had time to chat, and where a paper plate filled with cannoli or powdered doughnuts was considered a proper welcome for a new family in the neighborhood.

Halliday, the neighbor's name turned out to be.

"It's an English name," Halliday said one sunny October morning, to the trees, and then he almost looked at Caro, and added, "People call me Hal."

People? thought Caro. What people? A slim guy with a freshly groomed golden retriever walked by, earbuds in his ears, an iPod tucked into a pocket. You couldn't see his eyes, covered as they were in dark glasses. Caro had told Henry that the minute he started wearing sunglasses and looking like a Facebook or Google guy, she was quitting and going back to the East Coast. Henry had laughed, but he had also just bought flip flops and two button-down shirts for a ridiculous price at J. Crew, and had started a five o'clock shadow, something he used to laugh about in other people his age.

That particular morning, Halliday had chosen to go bare chested, and his paunch floated over oddly short shorts. Of course his feet were bare too. His toes curled like little snails, with tufts of grizzled hair sticking out of the tops. He was carrying around a few pieces of yarn-like plastic, which he'd been braiding together. He often had crafts projects going on, which made Caro think of the second-grade classroom she had taught in Rhode Island, her first and so far only class of kids. She'd poured her own money into extra materials.

Halliday showed her how far he'd gotten with his braided plastic.

"I made one of these seven feet long."

"You did? What did you do with it?"

He looked straight at her for a second, his eyes a flash of startling blue.

"Well, I make a lot of these. They're very useful."

He then told her how, when he was a child, he'd measured the distance from his house—this very bungalow, she gathered—to the train tracks two and a half blocks away, using a three-foot version of this sort of item.

"Halliday! Why did you do that? Wasn't that dangerous, to go up to the train tracks?"

"Oh, this was all just fields then."

Butter lay down carefully on the sidewalk, right on top of Halliday's feet. He was a rescue dog and had a soulful, generous spirit.

Halliday laughed, but took a couple of steps back. Butter looked at him with understanding.

"We had a dog once," said Halliday.

"You did?"

"An Irish setter."

"Oh, those are beautiful."

"He was very smart. A very intelligent dog."

Halliday looked down at the plastic strands and studied them.

"I'm going to have to do more work on this one. It's going to be a good one."

* * *

Caro missed Henry's paintings. She missed how he always used to carry sketchbooks wherever he went. At the beach in Rhode Island, as Caro would swim and read, Henry would sit covered in a towel, with a big straw hat on his head, and he'd draw the water, the sky, the people, Caro's feet, the curve of her back—whatever was around him.

Now Henry's business books and papers covered the secondhand IKEA desk in the kitchen. He would sit for hours over charts and small print, or his expensive Mac, rubbing his forehead. Caro felt victorious when he agreed to take some time off, going with her to the Baylands or to one of the ocean beaches south of Half Moon Bay. Maybe Henry felt victorious whenever he could persuade her to come to some of the parties held by his classmates. Caro tried to hide her feelings of awkwardness, especially when she had to tell people what she did. "You're a waitress?" they'd say. "Wow!" Or they'd reminisce about how they too used to have jobs like that, as if they had somehow become much older people, with more serious things to do.

"Well, I'm really a teacher," she said one day to a handsome, jittery guy from L.A.

"Oh, where do you teach?"

It wasn't worth explaining. She could see the horror and the pity barely disguised in his keen eyes. She felt too embarrassed to say she'd taught second graders and was hoping to teach them again.

One foggy morning in December, as Caro headed home from a slow walk with Butter, she saw Halliday sitting on the curb in front of his house. She hadn't bumped into him for a few weeks, and he looked different somehow—maybe it was his hair, which looked wilder than usual, or maybe it was his dazed expression. His elbows lay across his knees, as his hands hung idle. In spite of the cool weather, he was still in an undershirt and shorts, although Caro noted with relief that for once he had on an old pair of loafers.

She had just been worrying about Butter's new limp and thinking maybe she should find a job she could do at home, so she could take care of him better. Somehow, seeing Halliday looking so forlorn, she couldn't help wishing to turn poor Butter around and to go in the opposite direction, before Halliday could spot her.

She kept walking, however, and as she approached him she said hello. Just as she was about to say she had to get Butter home, Halliday said quietly, "Well, it was surprising."

"What was surprising?"

She realized that his hands were shaking. He lifted up his undershirt, as a child might, to show her what looked like a long red burn on his plump side. Butter moved closer to him and sniffed the wound. It looked bright red still, but pretty clean, and Caro hoped it wasn't infected.

"Good heavens! How did that happen?"

"Well—well." Halliday seemed to gather himself

together. This appeared to be one story he didn't relish. He looked up the street. "A woodstove can be very hot."

"You burned yourself on your woodstove?"

He gave a noncommittal shrug.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"Oh, I have medicine," he said, as he pulled his undershirt down.

Caro was doubtful.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw that Halliday's house looked woefully in disrepair, even more than she had remembered. The roof of the little front porch seemed to have caved in, and whoever usually mowed the weedy yard had apparently stopped. Halliday and his dad seemed to use the back third of the property for collections of junk, and apart from forays into sunflower growing, they didn't have a garden to speak of, yet Caro knew that this large square of land, right in the heart of this wealthy neighborhood, would be worth a lot, if it were sold.

"Is your—father home?"

"Pop is gone."

He said this so softly that Caro couldn't be sure she'd heard right. Halliday's big toe was poking through his left loafer.

"Where is he?" asked Caro.

Surely she should be doing something more for this fellow, who clearly had not cleaned his undershirt or shorts for many days, and who had handled this burn with such fortitude. She tried to think back. When had she last seen the elderly man on his bicycle? She and Henry had only been here for a total of four months, although it felt like ten times that. Caro couldn't wait to jump on a plane in a few days to go home for Christmas. Her only worry was that she had had to find a house sitter, so that Butter would not have to go to a kennel. One of the waiters at the restaurant had agreed to come live in the carriage house and walk him each day.

"Well, Pop died." Halliday said this with just the quickest glance at Caro.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Halliday."

A nanny walked past on the sidewalk, nodding slightly to them, as she pushed a fancy stroller holding a little girl with curly golden hair. The child stared at Halliday with wide eyes as she clutched a toy lion.

"My sister is coming," Halliday said.

"She is?"

"Oh, yes."

Caro felt ashamed of the enormous relief that filled her.

* * *

The next morning, at breakfast, she told Henry about Halliday's situation. Henry looked up from his computer, where he'd been reading the *Wall Street Journal* online as he ate his eggs and toast. He was in the midst of his first-quarter exams, and Caro had never seen him so tense.

Henry had actually wept the night before. Caro had arrived home from the restaurant a little earlier than usual, and when she walked into their little house, she heard a strange sound, as if someone was trying to get gulps of air as they drowned. At first she thought it was Butter, dying, and she rushed to look for him, but then she saw him sitting outside the closed bathroom door, with his head up, ears alert, his doggy eyebrows knitting together. Henry had the shower on, and when Caro opened the door and peered inside, the gulping got louder, and she saw that he was standing in the steam and hot water, sobbing. Without thinking, she took off her clothes and got into the shower with him. She held him close as the water pelted them both.

Tucking into his eggs, Henry said he was totally fine and there was nothing to worry about. He'd lost it for a minute in the shower, and he was sorry—he wouldn't do that to Caro again. He just felt like an ignoramus sometimes, with some of his classmates, but he knew it would get better.

"Of course it will," Caro said.

She hadn't intended to tell him about Halliday, especially given how worried Henry already was, but he looked a little calmer as he buttered a second piece of toast and spread it with raspberry jam, and before she knew it she was describing the burn, and the dirty clothes, and the bewildered look on Halliday's face.

At first Henry looked confused. Maybe he was wondering who in heaven's name Caro was talking about. He'd actually only met Halliday once or twice, because Caro was usually the one to walk Butter, and Henry didn't really have a big connection to the neighborhood.

After taking another bite of toast and chewing it thoughtfully, though, Henry said, "Christ! That's a frightening story, Caro."

Caro nodded, feeling again the sense of shame. How had she been helping poor Halliday? How had she been a better neighbor to him than any of the others? All she had done was listen to his stories, including this last, most awful one.

It struck her how hopeless life was for everyone, even if people tried to disguise it. Halliday just wasn't as good at such cover-ups. She had the uncomfortable idea that she might take Butter in a different direction that morning, to avoid her suffering neighbor entirely.

Henry, though, surprised her. He quickly finished his toast, downed his coffee, closed the computer, and said, "Let's go see about this guy."

* * *

Halliday wasn't on his usual sidewalk spot, and when Henry rang the bell of the bungalow, the house just seemed to hunker down, hiding. Butter sniffed at a bowl, which might once have held oatmeal or soup and which now bloomed with various colors of mold.

"Where could he be?" said Caro, beginning to panic. "Do you see him?"

She stood on the overgrown front walk, picturing her neighbor spread out on the dirty floor, beset by a new burn or scrape, a broken bone, a stroke.

Henry cupped his hands around his eyes as he peered through the front window.

"I think I see him in back," he said.

Caro followed Henry around the house to the junk pile. There indeed was Halliday, absorbed in sifting through a pile of old toasters and other metal objects. He had put on a clean undershirt, and today he wore a pair of new leather sandals.

Halliday barely glanced at them. "I'm looking for something important," he said. "You know, there's a lot of very precious items here."

Henry looked at the toaster in Halliday's hands.

"That's a nice toaster," he said.

Halliday nodded. "This is a good one. It has to be fixed, though."

Henry bent to pick up an old tin can, miraculously protected from the elements. It had a red and white picture of a shiny car, like the one Caro's grandparents used to own. Next to the car was a man's all-American smiling face and waving hair. Hodder's Car Polish, the letters spelled out cheerfully.

"That has stamps in it," said Halliday, and sure enough, when Henry opened the tin, Caro saw dozens of little stamps, carefully preserved: English and American, French, Spanish, Chinese, Argentinian.

Henry was delighted. "Look, Caro! Here's one from Denmark. And look at this beauty—Brazil."

Caro stood at Henry's elbow. She wished this morning could stretch out all day. This was how Henry used to be, hanging around looking at stuff, wherever he could find it. His dad had a shed filled with junk, where Henry had happily spent hundreds of hours.

Halliday walked over to another section of his yard and pulled a plastic sheet off some slender lengths of wood—pine, a light maple, maybe birch. It looked as if the wood had stayed surprisingly dry, except for the planks at the bottom.

Henry picked up a large wooden frame, the edges perfectly beveled.

"You make frames for paintings?" he asked Halliday.

"Pop did those," said Halliday."Our family business." He started to list the various kinds of wood you could use for frames, as if he were reading the list from the air just above Henry's head.

Henry told him about a birch tree that had been struck with lightning in New London, and how his dad had given him a piece of it when he was a kid, and he'd made a boat out of it.

Halliday listened to Henry's story with a distant, abstracted air, and then he said, "Oak is a good wood for a boat."

Soon Caro heard a car rolling onto the gravel driveway. A car door slammed, and then a woman came around to the backyard, carrying two bags of groceries. She was about Halliday's height and age, but her hair was dyed blonde, and she wore a flowing white silk shirt, hand embroidered, over white jeans and high heels.

When she saw Caro and Henry, she set the bags down and introduced herself. She said she was Hal's sister, Imogen, and she lived in Aptos. Caro nervously mentioned the burn, and Imogen nodded, looking embarrassed.

"Yes, I took him to the doctor." She shook her head. "It's been hard for him since our dad died," she added in

a low voice. “I live over an hour away, and the rest of our siblings—I mean, the ones still here with us—are scattered north of San Francisco.”

Henry nodded and said, “Is your brother okay living here on his own, do you think?”

Imogen looked at Halliday, who was now sitting on an old deck chair, comfortably trying to fit fresh pieces of wood into right angles and sanding their edges.

“I tried to get someone to come in, but Hal didn’t like living with anyone but Pop. He fired two women, one right after the other.” She laughed a little. “Well, he’s too nice to call it firing. He just told them they could go.”

Caro couldn’t remember any women coming out of the bungalow, or looking through the windows to keep an eye on Halliday.

“Our family is going to sell this property,” Imogen added. “You’ll probably be glad to hear it.” She rolled her eyes at the mounds of stuff, the weary little house.

“Where will—?” Caro asked, looking at Halliday, who had kicked off his sandals, so that his bare feet were on a patch of grass by the chair.

Imogen looked self-conscious, with a touch of defiance, as if Caro and Henry were people who had a stake in Halliday’s future and might put up a struggle.

“I’ve found a good place for him, closer to me. He’ll be in a community.” She looked at Caro as if to gain her blessing. “He’s so isolated here.”

Caro nodded, but all she could picture was Halliday being asked to wear a real shirt and trousers each day, to take baths and brush his hair, and cover his snail toes with socks and new shoes. How much good junk would a community home have lying around for him to sift through?

Henry seemed to be wondering the same thing, because he said, “He really likes it here.”

He gazed at the backyard, which even Caro could now see as an outdoor art shop, eccentric but organized, filled with treasures. She thought of Halliday’s sunflowers out front, doing their best to look normal.

* * *

The property sold quickly, without a sign even having to be posted. Caro saw online that someone had paid over eight million dollars for it. She and Henry went home for Christmas, and once they came back, Halliday had already left. In January, as the lemons ripened in the surrounding gardens, wire fences went up around Halliday’s property. The bungalow looked like a prisoner, waiting for execution. And one spring day, as Caro walked past with Butter, she saw that the land had been cleared entirely. The fairy-tale house, the books, the woodstove, the mounds of treasure, all of it had been whisked away. A new house quickly rose up, in the style of a Mediterranean villa, and soon after that, an instant garden appeared, with orange and mango and olive trees, roses, and large squares of pebbles surrounded by California grasses, all of it protected by a freshly built cream-colored stucco wall. The bushes in front of the wall grew rapidly, so that within a year a passerby could only catch the smallest glimpses of the house.

By then, however, Caro and Henry were living in Rhode Island. Henry worked at a dusty art shop and had a studio in the garage of their rented house. Caro taught a class of kindergartners. Butter died in his sleep one August morning, as Henry stretched a new canvas.

Harriet Scott Chessman is the author of the acclaimed novels *Someone Not Really Her Mother*, *The Beauty of Ordinary Things*, *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper*, and *Ohio Angels* in addition to the libretto for a contemporary operatic piece, *My Lai*. Chessman’s fiction has been translated into ten languages. She has taught English and creative writing at Yale University, Bread Loaf School of English, and Stanford University. After many years in the San Francisco Bay Area, she now lives in Connecticut.

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Night, 2015
Oil on Linen, 48 x 60 in

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