STEVEN CARRELLI

Letter From the Storm (#3), 2008
Egg tempera on panel, 5 1/8 x 7 in

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SEAN STINY

Rita's Love

From Wartime London to Pebble Beach

My grandmother rests inside my parents' closet. The one with the baseball cards we used to collect and the bedsheets my mother gets out in the rare occurrence my brother and I are home.

It's not her, but she's there. In that closet. Next to those dusty baseball cards, some she gave to us herself. She's in a box within another box. About four pounds of ashes. I've looked at it. Once.

She died in 2008. I saw her have a stroke at a Carrows Restaurant while we ordered breakfast. I talked to the 911 dispatcher after signaling a hostess to make the call. We were visiting her after going to a concert. She had a few more tiresome months before her health relinquished. She was eighty-one.

She called everyone *Love*. Everything was *love* because once it had been *war*. Once it had been darkness and rubble and fear for her faraway family. And a rap on the hand when you spoke out of turn. And that speck of mold on your daily bread. Everything after the war was color and life and beauty. And vibrancy. And her children. Even when one took his own life.

Her name was Rita. She led a hard, sometimes wonderful life.

She grew up in London in the 1930s. She described a blessed childhood. Her father worked at Lloyds of London, the wealthy insurer. They owned the first car in their suburb. Neighbors looked in wonder at their four-wheeled contraption.

The youngest of three, she had two brothers. One with a mental disability. Injured by forceps at birth. She was protective of him. Outside of this, these years are a mystery to me. When she left London at age twenty-seven, she never saw her family again.

We lived four hours from Rita. A long drive across the dreaded Bay Area roadways and down the coast. Or down excruciating Interstate 5, then cut over to the coast. She'd come visit from time to time when we were on break from school. She always took Amtrak up and over the Central Valley to the train station where we'd pick her up near the State Capital.

The train ride, and car ride she'd coax to get to the train, would take her most the day. Hours bumping along hypnotically. The train marching to a slow halt at every major municipality. She loved it.

The people she'd see. Adults, children, students, commuters. Some going, some returning. Anxious, bored, nervous, excited, scared. The world out the window. Alive and in motion. She was enthralled by the landscape of people. She'd make small talk with a seatmate.

Comment on a book someone thumbed. Ask the suited Amtrak ticket taker how the day was going.

Mostly she absorbed the people and their vibrancy. Enjoyed the movement of the train and the anticipation of each stop. Sixty years earlier she boarded a train in London to escape Hitler's advances. Now she carved her way through the green hills of California to see her family, the track filled with faces and colors. A world apart from her dank passenger car railing its way to the British countryside, away from the bombs menacing London.

War

She hung a sign in her kitchen from wartime London. *Better pot luck with Churchill today, than humble pie under Hitler tomorrow.* Churchill portrayed as a Dutch oven, Hitler as an oppressive saucepan. It was a peculiar image I saw while visiting in my youth. Now a smaller version hangs in my kitchen, befuddling my wife.

The war. Oh the war.

She was a girl when Hitler started dropping bombs on her city. These are the stories she reveled in. The fear and confusion. Huddling with your family. Your mother and father's concern. The excitement as well. Would there be school today, or would the air raid sirens dictate differently. Would the morning bring books or bombs. These images flickered in her mind until her own final days.

She was evacuated as a girl to the countryside. A safe haven, to live in wonder with a strange family as a temporary orphan. She ate what they cooked, slept where they lay, fancied what they fancied. Bombs were dropping on her home and she was sent to summer camp with a thwack on the hand if she complained about the food.

She ran around with the other children. Played in the grass, sang children's songs, took turns on a bicycle. Her home could be rubble, the Nazis marching through London, but her only care was trying to get a piece of bread not yet moldy or hearing when the postman came with the possibility of a letter.

Officially, Britain called it Operation Pied Piper. Millions of citizens, mostly children, were relocated from London and other coastal towns at risk of Nazi bombing. The children filed onto trains and buses to be sent to the countryside. There, host families would take child after child until the Nazis were defeated or claimed Allied surrender.

Though thoroughly methodical, this exodus of British children resembled a refugee march. It was harrowing for each child, Rita among them. Though it also must've contained a glimmer of excitement as they joined the other children on this unforeseen adventure.

Each host family took as many children as they could fit under their roof, to inflate their government subsidy. In many cases they resented the children but clamored for their payment. It much resembled foster care of present. One of Rita's stays was brief because the rooms to let could fetch more money from the nearby Royal Air Force officers when they got their leave. The lady of the house rid herself of Rita forthright.

Hitler ordered thousands of bombs dropped over London from Heinkel and Dornier bombers. German pilots eyed their targets from above, missing far more than they hit. They scattered munitions across London, destroying large parts of the city. Bombs, some undetonated, are still being found in London.

The Blitz turned London to rubble. It was ten 9/11s in casualties. And ten thousand in damage. All told, thirty-two thousand civilians died and two million homes were destroyed. That's 60 percent of London proper turned back to brick and mortar. Maps showing the drops are undiscernible with their crimson dots turning the page solid red. Though young, Rita surely knew neighbors killed and homes destroyed. London was bleeding.

When talking about this epoch in her life she never forgot to mention how cruel her host family was, how awful the food, and how little they had. "You were placed in homes who had to take you whether they wanted you or not, and I was very shy and was not always happy, and with severe rationing was often hungry—I was moved a lot. The last lady I stayed with made dumplings with just flour and water, and they were awful."

In my youth I could not comprehend the times and adversities she remembered. My long summer days were filled with baseball in the yard until the light ran out. Eating ramen and otter pops for lunch, camping for the week my parents could get off work. Rita's sense of childhood was bombs and sirens, meager food, and fear that her mother and father were lost to Hitler's Blitz.

This part of her childhood lingered until her final days. The world was callous and harsh during the time of Hitler's advance. Rita lived directly in that path and it informed her life for the duration. This was her experience above all else. It was the axis on which she revolved.

The memory of those bombs and their rubble lingered for Rita in the foggy breezes above the California coast many years later. Rita lived in a modest house in the immodest enclave of Pebble Beach, California. Her neighbors had wealth. Lots of it. Their kitchens remodeled, their yards landscaped, their small foreign cars displayed in the driveway. Her driveway was fractured by tree roots. Chipped paint hung from the stucco on the front of the house, her fireplace unfit for flames. A crabapple tree sat on the far end of the yard among the wispy patches of grass. It dropped apples to brown and soften for the soil and earthworms.

Her hovel was filled with garage sale knickknacks and newspaper clippings containing a name she recognized, or an interesting blurb she'd mail to one of her children. I can still smell her house, musty like an old book. It was cold, creaky, and hard. The carpet thin, the kitchen minuscule, the dining table filled a foot deep with books and magazines and trinkets. The paths you'd have to walk through amongst her stuff. She surrounded herself with things she could collect and keep and own. They couldn't be taken from her. They weren't lost to the by-and-by.

In December she'd meet the unexpecting mailman and garbage collector at her curb. She'd slip them a few dollars and some Belgium chocolate or English cookies she got from Trader Joe's just for them.

She'd wander her neighborhood marveling at the trees and birds and people coming and going. A kitschy mailbox would catch her attention. It could be either a delight or an annoyance. She tended her yard, uprooting weeds, raking crunched leaves. She ambled around, hunched and silent save for a wave to a passerby.

She had short stringy hair that fell in her eyes. She had oval eyes and a round face. Her hands were aged and her teeth were aimless. She wore ratty clothes and drove a shoebox-sized car.

She had no material wealth. She had no extended family. Her children were distant in both geography and kinship.

But each day and its journey, the nearby ocean air in her lungs and waking each foggy morning were enough. The splendor of being alive and knowing her children and grandchildren were vibrant and spirited in this world.

Love was plentiful for Rita. She found it all around her. It was the robin on her backyard fence. The meandering walks she'd take through her forested neighborhood. The layer of cool fog coming off the peninsula in the Monterey morning. The simple miracles that fill each day.

And love was the people she saw. Especially the children. Especially her children. Then grandchildren.

She met my grandfather at a Valentine's Day dance in 1946. It was at the Finsbury Park Manor House Pub in London. That's what her obituary said. My uncle wrote it.

My grandfather was Joe. He was in the British army. He boxed. Had a mustache. A stiff upper lip. Very stiff. He was ten years older than Rita. They married in 1947. She was twenty, he was thirty. Her parents disapproved.

They had two children in London. Two little British boys. Seven years later they boarded a motor vessel bound for New York and never returned.

Andy is my father's older brother. They do not talk anymore. I'm unsure why. My dad idolized Andy when I was growing up. Andy traveled. Andy adventured. Andy got himself into trouble. Andy hadn't a responsibility in the world.

Andy is a small town newspaper reporter, though Taos and Albuquerque can hardly be called small towns. He's kicked around many places. He lived in Ecuador when I was young. He's attempted a life of indomitability, somewhat successfully. The kind of stuff he'd read in Hemingway. He's boozed and cavorted, doggedly pursued a life free of responsibility. He married for a time in Taos, but that didn't stick. The lady was nice and genuine and Rita sure liked her. Mary was her name. I think Andy even built a house for them in Taos. As expected, she was a feeble attempt at settling down, one that Andy soon ceded.

Andy went to Chico State. Majored in English. Boxed on the school's team for sport. Boxed like his father in the British Army. He got into newspaper writing and wrote for a few Bay Area rags early on. He'd grow restless and jump

to the next paper that'd print him. His words were as sharp as his temperament. He canoodled with other writers over an after-hours and occasionally during-hours scotch.

His boxing skills were once put to use when he put fist to editor when the editor didn't see eye to eye on a story. He darkened the editor's eye and took his words elsewhere the next day. Many years and jobs later he had a small feud in print with Hunter S. Thompson. Thompson didn't agree with something this local newspaperman wrote about a civic land issue or city council vote.

I grew up understanding Andy was my father's only brother. The oldest, borne in London. He traveled and wrote and didn't give a damn about much anything. He got cancer and beat that too. My middle name is Andrew, for him.

I've seen Andy sparsely in my life. Not in fifteen years. Andy is eight years older than my father. He was indeed born in London. But Andy was not the oldest son. I had been wittingly uninformed.

Little did I know my father had another older brother. Rita a son.

MV Georgic

Rita and Joe boarded the *MV Georgic* on October 6, 1954. The ship, ported in Southampton, Great Britain, was bound for New York in ten days. The ship's manifest lists on board four Stinys. They carried eight pieces of baggage, two apiece. They arrived in New York City on October 16, 1954. They spent ten days on the *Georgic*. Ten days at sea with an unknown land lying in wait.

The year 1954 was among the last years the *Georgic* was in operation. Built in Belfast, the ship was launched in 1931 by the White Star Line. The *Georgic*'s bedfellow in the fleet was the *MV Britannic*. Both ships were White Star Line descendants of the *RMS Titanic*. The *Titanic* was a rather large ship too.

The *Georgic* was built for the Southampton to New York route. It was a motorship rather than a steamer, and ran on tank after inky tank of diesel fuel. In 1934, early in her career, the *Georgic* began her voyage in London with a quick stopover in Southampton before the trek across the pond to New York. This made her the largest ship ever to travel down the River Thames.

In 1941, like many of her mates, the *Georgic* was ordered to serve the Queen in the British Army. She would courier troops to battle and return them home when hurt or killed or relieved. She'd miss her fleet mates and her home port, but like other soldiers, her duty was to Queen and country.

On July 7, 1941, the *Georgic* was in port in the Gulf of Suez, where Africa meets the Middle East. A scant eighty-six miles from Cairo, Egypt. German bombers were dotting the skies above, dropping their payload in the area. One found the *Georgic*'s stern and ignited the vessel. Ammo stored near the aft began firing and the ship was abandoned to sink in the shallow water. She came to a thud on the depthless bottom, most of the immobile ship still above water.

Her holes were sealed and the ship was lugged back to Belfast for repairs. Once mended, she trekked around Europe and Middle Eastern waters for the duration of the conflict. She continued her war duties hauling troops from sea to port, though she'd never see German wings over her funnels again. Her time in combat was over, but not before earning a wound stripe like many of the soldiers she carried. In 1950 she returned to civilian life hauling tattered immigrants to their next homeland.

It was in 1954, on October 6, that Joe and Rita, with two sons in tow, stepped foot onto her decks. Aboard her cabin for ten days, they journeyed across the vast Atlantic waters.

Departing on a damp British Wednesday, they arrived on October 16, a balmy New York Saturday. Greeting them was the Port of New York. Ellis Island. Eisenhower was President. McCarthyism was rampant. Elvis was beginning to burn up the airwaves. America was still discovering itself post-war. The Stinys set foot on the dock and found themselves in a profound time of American change.

Rita married Joe in Britain, bore him two boys there, and followed him steadfastly to this American land. Their marriage was never accepted back home. I contend Rita's family looked down on Joe. He was ten years older. He was short tempered. He was absent of wealth.

As well, (and this is conjecture on my part), he was formerly Jewish. As the threat of war loomed, his family name was changed from Steinschneider to Stiny. Steinschneider sounded too Jewish. Was too Jewish. They quietly renounced what little faith they had when Hitler began his ramblings. Steinschneider was discreetly abandoned somewhere in Europe many years ago. That makes some part of me Jewish. It's true. Some part a Steinschneider. I descend from the Jewish lineage, somewhere in Austria or the Czech Republic.

They had two children in Britain, but that did little to change the dynamic. Rita's family disregarded Joe, and Joe's unrest never subsided. Joe led Rita and their two children to America, turning their backs on London and those behind. Neither Rita nor Joe saw their paternal families again. Maybe a call here and there, but those surely trickled off in time.

Born in 1955 somewhere in Oklahoma, my father was the fourth of five children. Two sisters mixed in as well. Three boys, two girls. A quintet.

Rita and Joe and their British American mix of five left Oklahoma and settled in Pacific Grove, California. Steinbeck country. Joe had seen a photograph in *Sunset* magazine of the Monterey Peninsula, and off they went. The coast of California held promise for sun and water and a new life. Not unlike Steinbeck's wrathful grapes and the Okies fleeing the dust.

They bought a simple house at a reasonable price. Their address fell in the outskirts of the forested up-and-coming neighborhood of Pebble Beach. The streets then were lined with pine trees, not sports cars. It was still Steinbeck country when they arrived, canneries along the water. They fit in for several years alongside other suburban families, before golf courses reigned with a wealthy iron fist. They unwittingly found themselves inhabitants of what became the most prestigious neighborhood in the country.

The Monterey Peninsula has a population of British expats. This helped their decision to settle in the region along with that issue of *Sunset* magazine. Rita and Joe cultivated their young family among the trees and greens of Del Monte Forest. Their modest house sat within earshot of 17 Mile Drive and, just beyond, the coastline and curling waves. Within walking distance, the famous links.

Joe struggled with work. Teacher, car salesman, whatever he could maneuver to collect a paycheck. Rita worked at the telephone company. The old kind. Pulling wires and searching phone numbers frantically from a thick book. She worked Christmases for the double-time. Her consolation was Christmas mornings with her children. She'd then trudge off to relay phone calls in the afternoon. She'd take babysitting jobs whenever she could. Nannying in Pebble Beach was a lucrative gig. She enjoyed the children and watched them grow during her time in their fanciful homes.

With somewhat steady work finding them, and their oldest enrolled at Pacific Grove High, Joe and Rita seemed to have their expat family taking root. They found some solace and stability in these States, so far from their voyage across those blustery dark seas.

They brought two boys across the Atlantic. Then a daughter. Then my father. Then another daughter. Five in all.

Growing up, I had two aunts and an uncle on my father's side. All were distant. All seemed a little lost. Two aunts and an uncle. And my father. Four in all.

It was untrue. My knowledge was incomplete. A part was omitted. An essential part. Rita had not four children. There had been five.

His name had vanished. I'd hear it whispered much later. It today fuels my understanding of my father and Rita, my grandmother. His name was Ian. He had not vanished entirely.

Ian

Ian John Stiny was their oldest. My father's true oldest brother. Born in London in 1947. Sharply intelligent. Smarter than the other kids. Gifted even. A savant. His intelligence had prowess. With it came angst and disquiet.

He left his home at age seven for a transatlantic voyage that ended on the coast of an entirely different sea. Just younger than Rita when she voyaged from London and its bombs, his evacuation was chosen for him. The dampness of London replaced by the bright rays of California. His grandparents would become a distant memory as would his youth in London. His precociousness remained unchanged, even as he adjusted to his role as the accented outsider.

I came across an article in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* that hinted of this. The Monterey Science Fair was held in the Spring of 1965. Kids presenting their miniature volcanoes overflowing with ooze. Mobiles with ping pong

balls revolving around a lemon yellow sun. Other projects the fathers should have displayed with their name rather than their child's. "The top prize was taken by Ian John Stiny of Pacific Grove high school. He won a week's trip aboard a navy cruiser next summer for his project, 'Proving Newton's Second Law.'"

A Navy cruiser. Joe, and his military background, must've been proud.

As for Newton's Second Law, it defines the force on an object. It states that the sum of the external forces (F) on an object equals the mass of that object (m) times the acceleration of that same object (a). In short, F=ma. Pretty acute stuff for a teenager trying to navigate high school and understand his transplanted world.

Ian would never board that Navy cruiser. Nor would he accept a full scholarship offered from Cal Berkeley.

The circumstances surrounding his death are not clearly known to me. I know this. My father had an older brother who took his own life. I only know it was with a gun.

After arriving in the States, Joe and Rita settled in Oklahoma. Joe had a sister in the Sooner state and it was the first place they turned. They must've arrived by rickety bus from New York.

Rita's time in Oklahoma yielded a single story she was happy to tell. Tiptoeing through the night to check on her newborn, she stepped squarely on a scorpion. She yelped in the darkness as she made her way to the crib. Three inch bark scorpions are common in Oklahoma. Their wretchedly painful sting is common too. Scorpions in this foreign land. A scorpion in London was only found on a needle in a museum.

My father was born in Oklahoma. He was their third boy. He was the newborn Rita was tiptoeing to.

Ian was a month shy of his nineteenth birthday when he ended his life. His reason is obscured by grief and despair and time.

One clue presents itself, but tells little beyond its surface. Ian took his life on the day his father was born. Joe turned forty-nine and lost his son. Maybe there was contempt, disdain. Resentment. Maybe it's a large clue that remains unrevealed. Maybe it doesn't matter.

Years passed and reasoning faded. Rita's absence means, in all likelihood, I'll never know. This I do know. It altered the course of my father's life to this day. It altered my grandparents, Joe and Rita, and their other children in ways I can't explicitly understand.

Joe and Rita were British parents. No doubt they mourned in quiet and felt some sense of shame. My father dimmed his brother's death with books and introversion. He lived his remaining adolescence buried inside his mind. Much as he does to this day.

I picture my father, in the days and weeks after, sitting on his bed concealed in a book. The pages filled with stories of WWII. He was nine years old, bereft of the acumen to understand what had happened. Trying to reconcile his thoughts. Nine years old, and his oldest brother gone. Hardly the years to cultivate a brotherhood. Why had his brother left? What had gone wrong?

My father is now sixty. Fifty years removed, still trying to reconcile. Does he have a memory of his brother? An image, an emotion? There must be some notion of Ian in his mind. Does he think of him, or has the memory of Ian long since faded?

Suicide in a British family is a powerful amalgam for repression. It tears away at everything, leaving disrepair to those behind.

Gone was all they had strived and clawed out for themselves in these American states. The promise held in the years to come. The hope for their children and their family. Five thousand miles from their homeland. Eight bags and two children in tow across the Atlantic Ocean. Taken by the frigid gun held in their eldest son's hand.

Joe never much worked the rest of his life. Everything was shattered beyond repair. Rita had to endure for the other four children. She continued her job at the phone company and retired, still young, several years later. She nannied when she could, had a bit of a pension, but it wasn't much.

Ian's absence reverberated through their lives in the years that followed. The quintet of children, now a quartet, ambled through school and youth and maturation. Joe and Rita pulled back their parental reins for fear of troubling their other children toward Ian's direction. My father dropped out of high school to take a job without objection. He later got his GED. Eventually Ian's presence began to fade, his corners began to yellow. Though his mark was indelible, his pull loosened. His presence lingers over their quiet thoughts of childhood. His magnetism ever flickers in their compass, fifty years removed.

Absolution of Ian

Rita outlived Ian by forty-two years. Forty-two years of grief and sorrow and self reproach. And forgiveness.

In some quiet moment in one of those forty-two years, I sense Rita mournfully accepted Ian and his action. He was her eldest son. The first burst of life she brought forth into this world. The first proof that not war, not Hitler and his bombs from above, could destroy life's splendor. Somewhere in those forty-two years she converted from sorrow to absolution.

Ian was her son and he burned bright. Though he died, he lived for a time. He experienced love and kindness, beauty and sublimity. He understood what it meant to breathe life. And though he no longer colored this world, she did. The love Rita gave Ian still was there. The world he lived still was there. The unequivocal attachment they shared still was there. He was ubiquitous to her for forty-two surviving years. From the day his eyes opened to the day Rita's closed in departure, he was a feeling unchanged. The love Rita imparted, forty-two years subsequent his death, was Ian. Her eldest son.

Fifty years have elapsed since his suicide. Nearly a lifetime. What would he have done with them. Who would he have become. His lifetime has passed in his absence.

Ian, had he not taken his chosen path, would have gone to college at Cal. He would have kicked around there for a year or two, decided it wasn't for him, and returned home to the peninsula. Though she'd not dare say it, this would have secretly delighted Rita. Ian would take a job here and there, bagging groceries, portering cars, driving a pedicab down by the wharf. He'd fall into books and decide to try UC Santa Cruz on the other side of the bay. Joe and Rita would buy him an old car, something tiny so he could zip back and forth to class at the banana slug campus. He'd eventually move into a cramped apartment above a tax accountant's office in Santa Cruz. His novels strewn about on chairs and desks would transform into engineering textbooks. Though his all night immersion into them wouldn't change. He'd do a History minor for fun. And naturally he'd emerge towards the top of his class. After college he'd take a job at a small technology company in San Jose. He'd pack his feeble car and drive up and down Highway 17 every other weekend for a family meal. He'd catch the eye of a young girl in HR who processed papers. They'd date. And marry. And a child. Then two. Rita and Joe would age and love their grandkids. Ian would plan a trip back to Britain. He'd look up an Uncle. And see where he'd lived as a child. He'd become a senior VP at a large tech firm in the Silicon Valley. Now retired, he'd retreat to a small bungalow down in Carmel. He'd stay in touch with his siblings, some more than others. He'd still be alive today. Rita would be alive, though very old.

This was the life Ian could not live. I'm unsure why. Life at times is unimaginably big, boundlessly complex. Melancholy seeps in. But life itself is all we're given. However desolate, to not persist is inscrutable.

He was the bomb that eluded Rita during Hitler's Blitz. He lay dormant for twenty-six years, his delayed fuse finally igniting. It left Rita pained and marred. A child amputee.

Did Rita's parents in London learn about their grandson? Did Rita pick up the phone? Did it matter so far removed.

She made mention of Ian to me only once, when I was a teenager. In some forgettable context I stated to her that she had four children. She corrected me and said five. Her response startled me, and I withdrew. I knew about Ian from my mother, but I hadn't ventured broaching this with Rita. I planned to. Maybe when I passed adolescence, and she saw me less as a grandson and more as a young man with my own understanding of the world. I'm certain she wanted to. She wanted to talk about his life and his interests and his singularity. She wanted to talk about her memories of him and how she felt when he was alive, and then gone. That exchange regrettably never happened. She was old and frail by the time I wanted to have it. The wound cut deep and I didn't want to unsettle her. Writing these words, detective to my own family history, I regret it.

Ian's disposition is a dark blank canvas to me. I know not one detail of his personality. Not even if he spoke with a British accent.

Rita one time made mention to my mother how much I reminded her of Ian. I am reserved and introspective. I analyze and plan. I am affable and empathetic. I can be funny and cheerful. At times morose and dispirited. I feel

connected to Ian, fifty years posthumously. He is some part of who I am. What part I remain unsure.

Fifty years have slipped away since he fell still in their Pebble Beach home. Fifty years of grief and hurt and anger and silence.

Love

Rita lived out her life on the Monterey Peninsula, under her ramshackle Pebble Beach roof. Her home, once noisy and buoyant and animated, fell silent after Ian and in the years after her children grew and moved. Joe died in 1993. Her visitors in those fifteen remaining years, mostly mail carriers and garbage collectors, found a smile on her round face, a bit of loneliness in her gait. An occasional visit would bring a son or daughter or grandchild. The phone would ring here and there. But those middle hours in the day crawled by with little resolve. She nonchalantly got breast cancer one year too. She beat that in her mid-seventies without batting an eye. Or without telling us. She got out of the hospital declaring herself cancer-free. We didn't know she was cancer-full.

Ian's detonation remains evident in my father still. He's quiet and remote and solitary. I am as well. He's the only sibling to get married and have children. He had a forty-hour job, a mortgage. Coached my soccer teams and taught us fly fishing. He is restless though, living with a hushed desperation. I find myself similarly growing restless as years wane and restraints tighten.

At sixty, my father's lived longer with me in his life than without. He's never acknowledged Ian to me. I've never questioned. I don't ask. Not once. I'm too empathic, too clumsy to pierce that tightly closed wound. There's still time. But how much longer.

Rita called everyone *love*. It's a British term that traveled with her across the Atlantic. For Rita, the landscape she saw and the people in it were a reminder there was kindness and joy in this world. Nazi bombs set ablaze her childhood and her oldest son ended his own life. But life was teeming and bountiful and every day was to her astounding.

She died quietly on a summer morning in her neighborhood hospital. The same hospital she'd walked to countless times to take in the koi in their pond or a bowl of soup in the cafeteria. No doubt it was a foggy morning, the sun yet to break through.

She was thankful to have been given life and content to be at its end. She was at peace with all it had taken from her. She'd return to Ian. Forty-two years she'd posthumously waited.

I was absent from her deathbed. I picture a generous nurse present to hold her hand as she willed her last breath. Eighty-one years after her lungs took that first gulp of air in a London hospital.

It's come time to get her back to the salty air and coniferous pines of Monterey Bay and her nearby home in Pebble Beach. Restore her place among the changing tides and the delicate light at dusk painted by Steinbeck's words. Extricate her from that baseball card riddled closet and lay her next to Joe and Ian.

They occupy Cementerio El Encinal in Monterey. The "Cemetery of Many Oaks." I found them there online. It's next to El Estero Lake. It's also next to Dennis the Menace Park. Rita took us there as grandchildren. The park and the cemetery are adjoined on a map. We didn't know it, we were children, but this was Rita's introduction of us to Ian. He'd been there for close to thirty years before we bounced on the adjacent jungle gym. She could see where he rested as sand filled our shoes in that park. She was showing us the summation of her life. Joy next to grief. Hope next to sorrow. Her life filled with both. She escaped Hitler and now had grandchildren in a park.

She led a hard, sometimes wonderful life. Grief is heavy. Love is scarce. But Rita knew where it lay, and the balance always tipped in her direction.

A Northern California native, **Sean Stiny** studied English Literature at the University of California, Davis. He's a writer and burgeoning craftsman. He labors in marketing and escapes outdoors as often as permitted. He lives with his wife, a third grade teacher, in Sonoma County.

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Pieces of the Storm, 2007
Egg tempera on panel, 13 x 10 in

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