

Entwined

a short story

By Andrew B. Hurvitz



Last year, I met an older woman.

Donna Buckwalt, an illustrator from New York City had contacted me on Facebook.

She found my photos online. And she complimented me.

MatthewJMcCarthyPhotoYonkers

She said she we shared a mutual friend, Candy Stafford. Candy lived in Paris writing about food. I had photographed Candy's cookbook, "Me and the Croissant", published in 2001.

*Photos by
Matthew
Joseph
McCarthy*

Ms. Buckwalt told me she was re-organizing her Riverside Drive apartment and office, and asked me to come down from Yonkers to work with her.

I wasn't working. Regularly.

My last corporate job was in 2004. I had been fired from the New York Press for digitally altered photographs of homeless people. I freely admit I added bruises, cuts and blackened teeth to their faces. It was more compelling.

I have since lived hand-to-mouth. I suppose I should not elicit pity, but I'm also HIV positive. I take medicines to forestall death. My parents died in the late 1990s. I have no children.

I came from that last generation to believe work edifying and productive. My high school graduating class, 1984, went off to college and many went up into the endless elevators of Wall Street and finance.

I never went anywhere.

Which is why Ms.Buckwalt's offer, paying for my train ticket, round-trip, seemed so tempting.

I emailed Candy in Paris to ask her about our mutual friend.

She told me to watch out. She said Donna had "entwining ways."

Donna's building, 37 Riverside, was about 13 stories tall, red brick upper body and limestone base, a solid mass of traditional style with a doorman, green awning and a brass door.

It stood on a hilly part of Riverside along the park, the Hudson in near view.

It was a hot, humid Monday in May. I rode the train down to Grand Central. I wore, illogically, a denim jacket and back strapped a camera case, and had walked, from Park and 45th, through Central Park, exiting greenery, moving west to Riverside, trekking through the mugginess up to 76th.

New York, I have observed, gets richer every year, even as I stay poor. But the lobby of 37; antiquated, dim, stuffy; old elevator and old ladies, seemed not so rich. Amongst its gentle decay I felt, strangely, at home.

The rapacious and rude city, was not evident, at this building, at this corner, at 76th and Riverside. It seemed almost courtly and humble.

New York City. So convinced it is on the cutting edge. Yet I know it as an old worn friend.

Old, it stays, so comforting, New York, old in its uniformed doormen, old in its regular dog-walking residents, old in its self-regard for the order of high to low, of doctors, lawyers, financiers, the Ivy League, Columbia-Presbyterian, the Metropolitan Museum. Old it stays, in its ancient tunnels going under the river, its bridges, its legends of success and its abhorrence of failure. Old it stays in trusting wealth, guarding power, sanctifying inequality. Old, it stays, in names, in neighborhoods, in zoning, in teams, in theaters, in hotels, in distinctions: East and West, Uptown, Midtown, Downtown, Jersey. Old it goes as it builds, slowly, over many decades: parks, highways, tunnels, subways, schools.

1920 was only yesterday. I was old too, made lethargic and cynical by accident.

I had come down here, 50 years old, factually and demonstrably failed in every sense of the word, yet imagining that this strange woman's invitation to her apartment might be the start of something better: to get me out of poverty and earning a living again.

Apartment #602: just to the left of the elevator.

I rang the bell and could hear the yap of a small dog and the master's footsteps on a wood floor.

A brown steel door opened. I shook the hand and introduced myself to a sun-fried dame in headscarf. She ushered me into a cluttered living room stacked with books alongside mismatched chairs. She pulled an oil painting off the sofa, offered me tea, sat me down. We talked about her. She loved playing tennis, sailing on Long Island Sound, and riding her bike down to Battery Park City.

"I'm good at my illustrations but fucked up in organizing my life. I need help. I've been a mess since I left Wellesley," she said. A phone rang and she went to answer it, an old kind plugged into a wall. I had entered an apartment from the last century.

Around the apartment there were things people don't use anymore: books, record albums, a tape recorder, an answering machine, a typewriter, and a hot plate. Plants sat on a radiator. A fan caked with grease and dust whirled on a desk near an open window.

I asked her what she wanted me to do. She brought me into her bedroom, where a double bed, covered in a white duvet, took up the whole room. She pushed the mattress back and opened a single closet door. Clothes, boxes, and books were packed into it.

"This is my main obstacle. I want to clear it out and get it on Etsy," she said. "I have cashmere sweaters from I Magnin and Bonwit Teller," she said, referencing fancy women's stores from the 1950s and 60s.

The piles seemed to agitate her. She said they were suffocating her. Everything lying around unused could make money she said.

She was enormously buried under her clutter; pulled together and petite in denim shirt and rolled up khaki. She anxiously picked up litter scattered on the floor, magnetized and energized like a rapidly spinning gyroscope.

Dignified, youthful, wrinkled, frantic, graceful.

Worried, self-assured, elegant, loony, intellectual, creative, consumed.

Her personal contradictions were her city's contradictions.

I observed her and she became self-conscious. "You think I'm crazy don't you?" she asked. Then she started scrubbing her toilet. "I'm out of bleach damn it!"

She came out of the bathroom and smiled at me.

With blue-eyes she looked at me, alternating between severity and empathy, her thin, bony arms and bony cage moving around the apartment. Then she collapsed on her bed, laid down on her back and began to free associate.

"I spent \$50,000 investing in my 25-year-old son's start up company. I must be crazy!" she said. "I'm 66-years-old. I have to watch my money!"

Why did she tell me that? So I would work for free?

I was down on my knees, inside the closet. She went into the living room. I heard a man's voice, low and grumbling. Then summer sweat and labored breathing came into the air-conditioned bedroom.

"Teddy meet Matthew. He's helping me organize," she said.

"Mother you always create drama. Problems invented to solve," he said, dropping his backpack on the bed.

"Do you live here too?" I asked.

"No. I wouldn't risk it. I'm in Brooklyn," he said.

He had his mother's blue eyes, freckled face and long, reddish hair hanging wet and limp on either side of a tongue that hung out of his mouth like a dehydrated pup. He wore loose and sloppy, walking as he dressed.

"In school?" I asked.

"What?" he said.

"Are you in school?" I asked.

"I work if that's what you are asking. I don't believe in college. It's a waste of time," he said.

Donna came in with cold water in ball jars.

"Pickle Paradise," Donna said.

"Mom stop it!" he said.

"My son has a very successful online pickle business that is expanding. He needs to build up his website. Pictures of pickles are what he needs! And he is too lazy to go out and get a photographer!" she said.

She suggested we leave the bedroom and its closet and go into the living room.

I learned that Teddy needed photos of his pickles. I had once shot photos of croissants. Mother and son wanted to know: could I now make images for Pickle Paradise?

I came down with a cold a week after I left Donna's apartment. The cold turned into pneumonia. And I was put on medication and into bed where I stayed for much of June. Serena, a Medi-Cal nurse and native of Belize, stopped in two days a week to take my temperature. She made sure I was taking my medications.

I lost 7 pounds. My cheekbones came through. My eyes, always big, became bigger, and sunken, and tired, and glassy. I lost my appetite and my energy. A dull fever moved in and kept me in torpor.

It rained most of my sick days, lessening the appeal of the outdoors, lessening the motivation to recover faster.

I sat in bed. I watched TV. I listened to the rain. I read *The New Yorker*.

I got out of bed several times a day, and went into the bathroom, brushing and gargling, shitting and showering, attending minimally to my upkeep.

After three weeks, I was again strong enough to get up and walk. I went out of my apartment and over to Epstein's Kosher Deli for chicken noodle soup, praying to each healing bowl.

This was the seventh time I had pneumonia since the onset of HIV. And each time, in each episode, after it passed, I went forward, weakened and saddened, alive and fighting.

Candy called me from Paris. She wanted to know how I was doing. I had not spoken to her since I started working for Donna. I omitted my latest sickness from the conversation.

I spoke as if I were engaged in a new project: as a personal assistant to an artist. My morale rose as I spoke about photographing pickles, organizing the artist's closet, helping her son get his food business off the ground.

In July I was well enough to go back to Donna's apartment. She now had a new task. She asked me to photograph her fashion illustrations, which she wanted to put up on Etsy.

"I won't pay you up front. But every print that sells, you will get 50%, which should inspire you to photograph. I have hundreds, if not thousands of illustrations," she said.

Starvation would be the motivation in anticipation of a payoff.

"What about your son's pickles?" I asked.

"He and I are not on speaking terms," she said. "He went to Bratislava with his girlfriend and they are living in a castle with her parents until September. And he left his pickle business up in the air. Irresponsible!"

She also told me she had ordered a new medium format camera for herself. She wanted lessons in how to use it. She would, of course, pay me to teach her, after I organized the closet and photographed her illustrations for Etsy.

On the days, and there were many, when I was not working, I would go down to Chelsea and walk Fifth Avenue, past the Flatiron and eventually end up on 17th Street.

I wandered there in search of wandering ghosts.

During my halcyon youth, two and half decades ago, 17th Street contained a strange lure of secret sex rendezvous meet-ups. I would meet men, from every walk of life; professors and taxi drivers, waiters and gallery owners, students and sales clerks; on the street, follow them, and eventually get naked with them.

I was good looking then, an Irish runner from Yonkers, looking somewhat like Matt Dillon, dressed in tight jeans, black leather jacket, black boots. I was cocky. I had an aura of risk. I sought it. I emitted it.

My time, in 1980s New York, was spent in a dangerous, broken, bankrupt, criminal, racial, contentious, argumentative, violent city. The Bronx burned, trains were pissed in and painted on, muggings and killings exploded. The whites were running away, the dark and the wild were ascending.

And twenty-five years ago, the empty buildings on 17th Street had old dry goods stores, old needle trades, old suppliers selling things nobody needed anymore. And between the dying off industries of old New York, we rebels poured in: new, vital and sexual. We got high, we fucked, we traded tricks at night, we wandered vacant spaces unclothed. We impregnated manufacturing dead lands with life's perversions and pleasures.

By December, I had shot some 150 photos of Donna's fashion illustrations. I created an Etsy page, and uploaded them. They ranged in price from \$75 to \$300 each.

Only three sold in two months. My share of the profit was \$100.

I rode the train down to her apartment a few times a week. I paid for my transportation. I had a job, but I was going broke doing her work.

But she had even more ideas for me. She wanted to know if I would be interested in designing a gallery for her in Soho. She would rent out a back room and hang her work on the walls. She asked me if I would consider the gallery assignment.

And while I was deciding she brought up another idea of hers.

She was making a homemade hair crème out of coconut oil. She knew someone who was a graphic designer and packager and Donna was intent on selling this hair product. Would I be interested in photographing the coconut hair product and put it up on the Etsy page alongside the non-selling fashion illustrations?

She proposed to let me shoot the hair glob for free and earn a commission on every container sold.

Every offer she made was a new web of potential, a sticky web that enveloped me in her ideas, her inventions, her imaginations.

Yet, I was haunted, sometimes, often, usually, by the utter futility of being her low paid go-to-man.

I found out in early February that my Yonkers apartment was getting torn down. It was a room in an old wooden house that was on land near the river redevelopment. Let it be torn down. I hated it anyway.

I thought about leaving Yonkers and moving down to Boca Raton where my friend Juan Lindo worked at Neiman-Marcus. Might he take me in as a roomie? I thought of migrating away from the certain fate of dying poor and unrecognized in New York, an old man in cold weather, sick and alive, drugged for life, surviving on handouts, charity, luck and coincidence.

"My son is in Berlin," Donna said. He had a teaching job and an offer from Siemens in Zurich to work as a software consultant. He was waiting there, expectant and certain of work.

Somehow youth, directionless, always, it seems, lands in money.

Donna had taken me out for pizza lunch on Broadway, a rarity, as her idea of sustenance was unwrapping a rice cake in her apartment and offering me bottled water. I was starving and devoured sausage and garlic and mozzarella and tomatoes.

She asked me if I wanted to sublet her apartment. She had a summer offer to go to France to teach illustration to retired people on a Loire River cruise boat.

"I have to go," she said, "I have my co-op, which I've been lucky enough to inherit, but one has to work, and this is a fabulous opportunity to live in France, and get paid for what I love to do!"

On Broadway, outside the windows of the pizzeria, the women pushed baby carriages, the old people went by on walker and cane, and the young carried yoga mats.

Donna sat across from me, contented. She sipped iced tea, unsweetened. And did not touch her pizza, at all. Not eating for her was a deliberate choice.

I asked, with some low-grade resentment, how she thought I could afford to sublet her apartment. She smiled.

"I thought I was being generous in asking," she said.

Last September she went off to France. I stayed in Yonkers.

On September 11th, I went into Manhattan down to Ground Zero.

I remembered it as it once was: two enormous towers, ugly gigantic blocks 110 stories tall. I once hated their brutality of form. Now I recalled their brutal destruction.

I felt again, in this sacred place, 9/11/01, a cataclysm of fire and flesh.

On that day, and the days after, the city stank of death. My city.

After I lost my job I never went downtown. My last memory of the World Trade Center: when all of the New York Press went for breakfast at Windows on the World.

Tuesday, January 4, 2000.

Publisher Russ Smith brought us there for our first day back at work in the new 21st Century.

Replaced now by resurrected architecture.

A skyscraper: 1,776 feet tall.

A workplace: Freedom Tower,
That is what they named it.

Symbolism, everywhere: packaged, sold, memorialized, edified, and consecrated. Shed a tear, buy a souvenir.

Cascading waters, names of the dead engraved on stone, trees and pathways, spaces for thinking about death. A museum for memories...

This is where I came one day last September. On one of my many free days wandering the city, free at last from the strange and distracting interlude of work and play with Ms. Donna Buckwalt at 37 Riverside Drive.

Untwined.

END