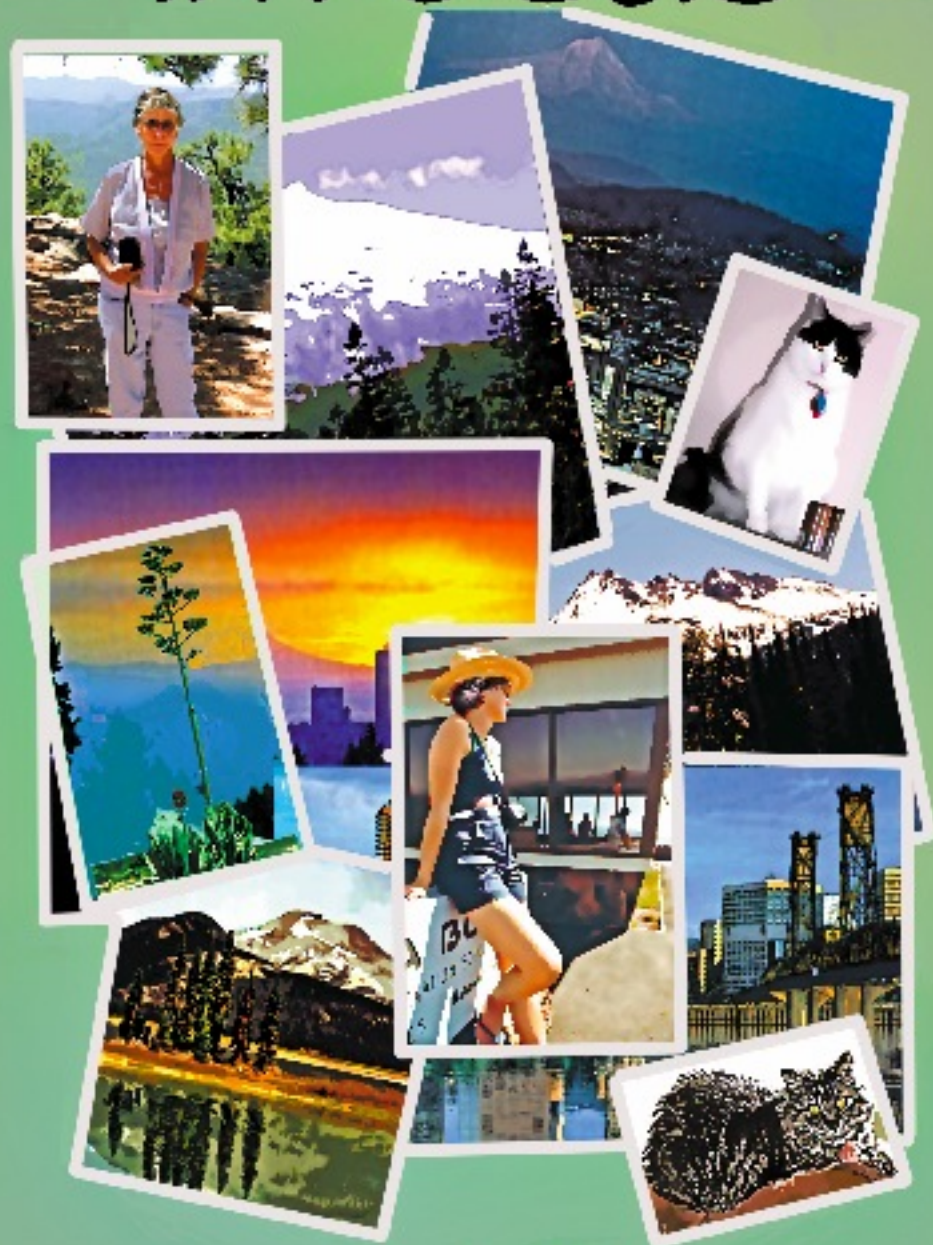
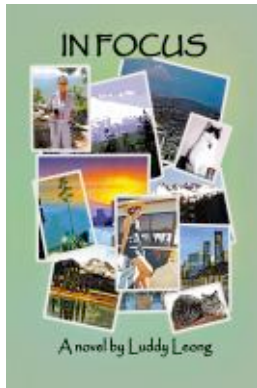


IN FOCUS



A novel by Luddy Leong



Sunny loses her job the day her partner drives away. Her crushed hopes inspire a search for a better life. She moves from the arid Southwest, and settles in the fertile Pacific Northwest where she focuses her hopes on a fresh start. When her sister-in-law faces a situation similar to Sunny's, she wonders where her loyalties belong. With her two cats, Sunny and her new women friends work to solve problems they each face.

IN FOCUS

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IN FOCUS

A NOVEL BY

LUDDY LEONG

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Selected passages: 1) photography, 2) family, 3) divorce, 4) cats, 5) physical therapy, 6) lesbians, 7) retirement, 8) Portland, Oregon.

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Chapter 1

“I got bad news today, Barb.”

“I have bad news for you, too. I’m leaving.”

“Oh? When are you coming back?”

“Never. I left a fifty on the desk for utilities and whatever.”

“What?” I shook my head. “Where are you going?”

“Barnstable. Don’t try to find me.”

She turned her eyes away from me, pulled up the handle of a rolling suitcase I hadn’t noticed before, gave it one tug, and was out the door. I heard the wheels bouncing from step to step, heard the car door open and shut and heard the motor start. I could tell when she drove out of the Century Apartments with a century plant in the middle of the complex, the plant that bloomed once every century, but not while we lived there.

I sat down on the sofa, too amazed to cry. Chubby Zorro jumped on my lap and purred. I placed an arm around him, fingering his soft fur. Long-haired Muffy cocked her ears but didn’t move from her cat bed.

“She can’t just leave,” I told my big black and white cat. “She has a job, a clientele, a profession, for god’s sake.”

I sighed. She must have been planning this for weeks, for months. All her clients must have known, everyone in her office must have been in on it. I was the last to know. And where in the world is Barnstable? Did she get another job there? At her age? That would be great. The day my school has to reduce its staff, the day my job gets downsized, is the day she goes running off to a better job.

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Wait. She left for a different partner. I knew it! I placed my fingers over my mouth, with my thumb on my chin, and tried to figure it out. She planned this for months right under my nose and I never suspected. I felt scared and got a sick feeling in my gut. Who lived in Barnstable, anyway?

While I tried to figure this out, Zorro must have jumped off my lap. I heard him meowing in the kitchen and then Muffy joined in. I guess they wanted their moist food dinner.

I stood up, but immediately collapsed into a stupid heap, my nose running and tears flowing from my eyes. I lost my balance. Lost my job. Lost my partner. Lost the sense of self.

When I became aware of my scumbled position, Muffy and Zorro were sniffing my nose.

“Mrow?”

“Meow?”

Despite my position, Zorro and Muffy recognized me, so I guessed I was the same old sorry mess I had been before. My body had bent at the middle and one of my long legs had twisted over the other. My short blond hair was disheveled. My glasses had fallen under the sofa. I had a headache in the sinuses above my eyes, the eyes still wet with tears.

My phone rang. In the distance, I heard my voice in my recorded message, followed by a beep. Then, “This is Celine from the Board of Ed calling for Sunny Lund. You can come down tomorrow to fill out the early retirement forms.”

I’m not going near the place. They can fax the stupid papers to me and I’ll fax them back signed and dated.

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I slowly got back on my feet, walked to the kitchen and turned on the lights. My cats followed. I opened a can of cat food, scooped it into two bowls, which I placed on the floor for my babies. I looked around. Everything looked the same, except it was getting dark outdoors. The clock on the stove told me it was almost 8 p.m.

As I turned around, I saw a photo of Barb and me taken at the Taos Pueblo this spring, the picture hanging on the living room's gray walls over a garage sale chair. I recalled the drive through the snow-covered tallest mountains in the state, the southwestern design of the motel, the swirling hot water of the Jacuzzi tub, and the soft smooth linens of the king-size bed. It had been a wonderful vacation.

Life seemed so different a couple of months ago, on my Memorial Day birthday, when Barb Blackman, as my partner, had set a sheet cake on the table in the dark dining room. Sixty candles, all lit, all for me. The light had seemed brighter than the light at a rocket's lift off. The heat produced by the burning candles reminded me of the warmth I felt when I sat beside Barb in a hot tub. The chocolate frosting smelled so good, I felt myself salivating.

Around me stood a few women singing Happy Birthday. For some reason, the joy they transmitted made me very anxious. I looked at all those candles, made my wish and blew as hard as I could. Right now, I couldn't even remember what wish I had made. Was it all sham? Had Barb known then that she would leave me?

Barbie, why did you do this? Of course we argued. Every couple does. I hope you...I broke into tears. No, I don't want to care about you anymore. You've forced me to seek a better job and a better life, a life you're not going to be part of.

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I went to the silent bedroom. The open door to the walk-in closet revealed one empty side. I lay down on the queen-size bed and reached over to the other side.

Never? She would be back never?

When I awoke, I knew I had been dreaming – I had opened the bedroom closet door and found the smelly skeleton of a huge fish hanging from a fishing line. The hook, the kind with the opposing barb, was still caught in its mouth, the fish dying perhaps because it couldn't spit it out.

I rolled around in anguish, and started coughing.

I knew I had to do something, but had no idea what to do. I walked around the apartment and made an inventory. None of Barb's clothes remained in the closet, and no mess was in the bathroom. In the living room, the entertainment center and two leather recliners stood in the same place they had for years. Nothing missing. Her laptop was gone but my part of the desk looked the same. I pushed the \$50 bill to the back, clicked my laptop open to check emails and documents, and they seemed the same as before.

Still, something felt very different. Even though Barb would have left for the office by now, the apartment felt haunted by her absence.

I heard a car motor outside and rushed to the window.

"Barbie?"

It was the trash men picking up from the apartment's dumpster.

Maybe I should run out and jump in the back of their stinky truck. No one would notice. No one would care.

"Mroe."

Well, isn't that super. The cats would care. Wonderful.

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I went to the kitchen and made coffee, remembering to put in only half the amount of water, but forgetting to change the amount of coffee I used. This will wake me up, I finally realized, as I smelled the potent brew. I poured creamer into my cup, an oversized vessel, brought the warm cup to the kitchen table, and sat down.

Zorro jumped on my lap, asking for petting. “I won’t leave you,” I told him as I stroked his warm angora-type fur. “Things will have to change, big time. I’ll have to think up some unconventional idea to get out of this quagmire. Think up an answer fast before it pulls me under.”

My thoughts disquieted my stomach, but I also felt hungry. I pulled a box of Cheerios out of the cabinet, brought it and my coffee to the desk, and started digging in the box for handfuls of zeros, while my emails loaded. When my coffee cup ran dry, I stopped crunching on the cereal, looked inside the cup and saw a smudgy mess. If reading coffee grounds was like reading tea leaves, I was in a mess.

Barb and I had problems, sure. We were both strong-minded and independent. I figured neither one of us was easy to live with, but who was, after all? The next day after we’d had an argument, the situation between us continued as if nothing had changed. I tried not to be judgmental of her decisions although I rarely agreed with them anymore. When I got angry with her, I forgot and forgave, knowing I needed forgiveness, too.

Barb was a very good divorce lawyer with a large firm in the northern end of Las Cruces, a svelte jelly-bean-munching lawyer, a lawyer who freed women from destructive relationships and old entrenched attitudes. She confronted social evils but didn’t seem to have patience or a good enough appraisal of herself to face her own destructive behaviors.

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I told Zorro, “Maybe, when she realized she was aging and our romantic endeavors were failing, she searched for a better life for herself. I can’t blame her for doing that.”

I looked around and realized I couldn’t stay in this apartment, with the century plant in the garden downstairs, the plant that lived so much longer than our love had. Too many reminders here. I knew what I didn’t want. That was all I knew. I had to make a big change, but what? Where? Any place might work. Except Barsnstable.

Don’t worry, Miss Barbara Blackman, I thought. I’ll never try to find you. I’ll find a better life without you.

I knew I couldn’t mope around the apartment all day. The phone message was still on the answering machine, the light blinking faithfully since yesterday. I called the Board of Ed merely to give them my fax number. Soon, afterward, I heard my fax machine grinding out the information. I looked at the dumb papers that detailed my choices for early retirement. I knew I wasn’t thinking straight, and decided to leave the papers blank until I had a chance to talk to JK.

Although I used to run my ideas past Barb, I had a lot of respect for JK’s opinions, too. She had lived here in Las Cruces, and then moved north to Portland, Oregon, about a year ago, where she became a real estate agent. She knew Barb almost as well as she knew me. She also knew Skyler, my brother, and his wife, Timi, who lived in Portland.

I phoned JK’s realty office and left a message, “JK Levine, this is Sunthia Lund from Las Cruces. Please phone me when you have a chance.” I gave her the numbers for my home and my cell.

My cell phone dinged after lunch. It was JK.

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“I got bad news yesterday,” I told her. I didn’t want to cry over the phone so I took a deep breath, pushed my fingers tightly against my mouth, and squeezed out, “Yes...No. Haven’t even thought about my hips.”

JK asked what else could be wrong.

“First, the principal called me and others into his office, said he had to downsize the staff, and we were the ones to leave.”

I heard a gasp on the other side of the phone.

“That’s not all. When I got home, Barb told me she was leaving for good. Well, not for good. For whatever.” My fingers returned to my mouth as I felt I was about to start bawling over the phone.

I heard JK asking questions, and I needed to respond, so I took a deep breath and continued.

“Why? No idea. She must have been planning this for some time...’Cause a lawyer doesn’t just run out on her clients.... She must have arranged for other lawyers in the firm to take them. And where’s Barnstable? That’s where she said she was going.”

I heard JK shuffling papers. Then she asked more questions.

“The why is still a puzzle,” I responded. “At 64, she’s not going to try to get a license in another state and start another law practice. I think,...” I stopped to take a deep breath. “...I think she has a new girlfriend. Maybe someone who lives in Barnstable.” I released my breath and waited a few seconds to keep from slobbering into the phone.

Meanwhile, JK said she had just looked up Barnstable and found that her realty company had an office there. It was on Cape Cod, in Massachusetts, near the places the Kennedys had made famous.

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“Massachusetts? Are you sure?...Why back east?...Must have been an overpowering desire, a wild crazy new love. She always had wild ideas.”

JK asked if I could find a job at another school district.

“I don’t think so in this economy. Other school boards are downsizing their staffs, also. Besides, I don’t really want to. A one-two punch like this leaves me shocked. That’s why I want to talk over some ideas with you...They’ll have to be unconventional, but—“

JK interrupted and said that I was good at thinking creatively.

“Not now. Not thinking well now. Don’t have any idea what to do. Barb warned me not to get a hold of her. I feel so rejected that it makes my stomach curdle. I’m sure she chose someone else over me.”

JK tried to comfort me, but what could she say or do about Barb? She returned to discussing my teaching job.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to go back to that school. Not any school. Not even as a substitute. I feel rejected by the Board of Ed, too. I have to fill out pages of forms. They offered an early retirement plan, touted as the best solution.”

She asked if I was ready to retire.

“I’m over 60. Job market’s poor. Can’t figure out what else to do in this economy. This isn’t like me, JK. I’m not thinking right.”

Things were no better in Portland, she told me. She brought up her own predicament, with dwindling house sales, and asked more questions.

“Yeah, no lease, just on a monthly basis,” I said. “I have a little bit in savings. Have to decide how to take my pension. A lump sum? Monthly payment?...Really? Portland?...Lemme look into it.”

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We clicked off and I felt a renewed energy. JK had brought up the right questions. Even a trip to see Portland, to talk some more with JK, would help me through these disastrous events.

JK had mentioned her problems with the economy. Home sales were down, and people who wanted to sell were offering ridiculously low, unheard-of prices. She thought I might want to move to Portland and take advantage of one of those low prices. She reminded me that I'd be closer to my brother and his wife. She said she could introduce me to lots of people. Real estate agents always knew many locals, she admitted.

I phoned JK back the next week, and said, "Ever since you mentioned it, I've been thinking about moving there. I've been paying half the rent and other expenses for the past three years. Have a little savings. The money will disappear before I can count to ten, if I pay the rent and bills by myself. I'll end up with nothing. Jobless and homeless."

Then JK brought up the medical care at the large teaching hospital in Portland.

"My doctors said they could correct this up to a point," I told her. "It went on too long without correction. Darn it, but they took their time in diagnosing it...All those MRI's, bone scans, X-Rays, blood work. After all these years, they still didn't make it right." I told her there were things I wish I could still do, but no longer could. I was glad I had done the fun things, like camping, hiking, biking and kayaking with Angie, while I could.

JK knew Angie Chavez, my former partner who had died with cancer.

After JK and I clicked off, I picked up my newspaper, and searched the real estate listings for Las Cruces. I didn't want to have to pack up and leave for some place thousands of miles away, where I would be alone. I leafed

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through one of the pamphlets put out by a local realty company, but realized I didn't want to stay in the same area, either. Too many painful memories.

I saw Muffy looking up and said to her, "I know I have to do something. I know what I don't want to do. I just don't know what I want to do." Muffy walked away, her tail high in the air swishing like the hips of a hussy walking the streets.

Right now, I didn't want the Board of Ed to have one cent of my money for even one day. Residual spite, I guessed. I thought I could invest it better than leaving the decisions up to the school board. I had to get my emotions under control. I felt rejected and angry, more frustrated than angry, more embarrassed than frustrated, and more depressed than embarrassed.

The next week, I phoned JK again and said, "We used to have summers together, Angie and me...Loved it. We traveled to the east and west coasts and a few places in between. I have great photos...Sure you do. Do you also remember that I was able to sell some?...Yes. We were in Portland during the Rose Festival. Rained the whole week. Our shoes squished through the mud in the park where the booths were. Photos didn't turn out well either."

JK said she would send me an email and we clicked off the phone.

I soon received JK's email with a photo of her back yard. I looked at the photo carefully and compared her garden to backyards of our friends' homes, whose yards held sand and gravel, prickly pear and teddy-bear cholla cactus plants, but no grass and no trees.

JK wrote that the rhododendron bushes were as tall as she was and, behind them, the Douglas firs were even taller. She said it took time for her to get used to the rainy and cloudy days. Once she did, she saw advantages in her yard.

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I didn't know if I could find something more cheerful than sunshine.

She also wrote that if I bought a home I could build equity, while in an apartment, the rent went to the building owner and built his equity. That made me wonder why I would want to continue renting.

The next morning I knew I had been dreaming – A snake lay in a desert spot around here, a huge multi-colored snake, wiggling out of its skin as easily as cats shed old toenails to let new nails take their place. The snake left the empty skin lying on the sand, stood up and started to hobble toward me. I hadn't been afraid because it looked funny, stepping on the stinging thorns of a drooping prickly pear cactus, moving to the right and to the left, wobbling on no feet.

JK phoned me in a couple of days.

"I've been thinking about coming and looking around," I told her. "I'd have to ask someone to look in on Zorro and Muffy...Right now, everything seems hard. Hard to get outta bed this morning."

JK guessed if my orthopedic problems made it difficult for me, but that wasn't quite right.

I shook my head and said, "Not my hips. What I mean is, if I could run this video in reverse and stop at that moment before my world broke into pieces, I could cope...Right. Not going to happen. I don't even know how far back I'd have to rewind, how long Barb's desire to leave had been percolating."

JK told me to first figure out what my needs were. She added that I would have to move on with my life even though I didn't know all the answers. Then we clicked off.

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I loved talking to JK and exchanging ideas. However, after we hung up I was alone again with my own thoughts. I sat at my desk, feeling deficient and rejected. I'd have to prove myself as competent and loving once again.

I regretted not being as active as I had been when I started teaching first graders. It became increasingly difficult to move around. Playground duty was the hardest time. Most physical activities aggravated my hips and legs, with the pain present for hours afterward. I limped along with a click for each step. Sometimes, I felt as if my leg was going to give out and collapse on me, as it had in the past.

My six-year old Subaru Forester was easy enough to drive. I could still shop for groceries, while hanging onto the cart for balance. I was still able to use the apartment's noisily vibrating laundry machines, cook fragrant dinners and desserts, and keep the apartment clean and neat.

I sat at my desk and wrote down my ideas for a new home in Portland. Number one was No Steps. I had tile floors in most of the house, so I could sweep it clean without having to push the heavy vacuum through any rooms except the two bedrooms, so I added Tile or Wood Floors to my list. More ideas came to mind. Small, maybe Two Bedrooms and Small Amount of Property, also. Plenty of Windows to let in whatever sunlight Portland got. After living in Las Cruces, one of the sunshine capitols of the Southwest, I knew I wouldn't want a dark and gloomy home.

I ended with Not Expensive, underlined that and emailed the list to JK.

I filled out the retirement forms from the Board of Ed, checked the box for lump sum disbursement, and faxed it to the Board. I faxed another sheet asking when I would receive the funds, as that was information I would need to help make my decisions.

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However, as soon as I looked around the apartment, my shoulders sank and I let out a big sigh. A move would require packing up all my books, kitchen pots and pans, and other heavy items. How was I going to manage that without getting into painful situations? With my bum hips, how could I drive with my cats all the way from New Mexico to Oregon?

I buried my head in my hands while Zorro watched me. “No, I can’t do it,” I told him. “It’s all a ridiculous dream. Maybe I should just accept my jerky life as it is and stay put.”

I clicked off emails on my laptop and clicked on Adobe Photoshop Elements, the computer program I used when I worked with my photos. It was fun to try creative ways to improve the images, and I was eager to start something creative after the destruction I had experienced yesterday.

I tried to lift my spirits, but soon realized that looking at old photos, mostly of Barb and me, was not a good idea. I saw the photos from the weekend we had stayed in a cabin in the Sacramento Mountains years ago. Traveling with Barb, although limited to weekends, included fun moments that I’d like to experience again. However, rejection was a terrible feeling I wanted to avoid.

At my age, who would be interested in dating me? No, that wouldn’t do. I’d set myself up for more rejection. I felt lost in a new world I hadn’t chosen, feeling as crushed and lost as my hopes were. Being old sucked. Being an old lesbian sucked more.

My phone rang, but I felt too depressed to pick it up. I heard the machine speak to me in a droning voice. “Sunny, this is Celine from the Board of Ed. I’ve submitted your papers for early retirement. You should receive a message from the bank in a few days. Disbursement will come on

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the bank's terms, so I don't know when you'll receive the money. Have you considered the Board's temp agency that could place you as a substitute when an opening arises? Call me if you're interested."

Not gonna do that. Not interested in dealing with the Board of Ed anymore. Maybe I'll travel around the country and take new photos so I won't have to look at the old ones. Maybe I'll just move to a new place and take photos there.

While I still sat in front of my laptop, I clicked off Photoshop and searched for web sites about Portland, Oregon.

First thing I noticed was that Portland was a large city, about five times the size of Las Cruces. The next thing I noticed was the big difference in climate.

I knew our weather in Las Cruces was very dry, hot, and had several weeks of above 100-degree temperatures in the summer, with sand and dust blowing during the frequent windy days. A rainy season in late summer alleviated the heat, but added humidity.

Meanwhile, the web site said that Portland has a damp, cloudy and misty climate, even more so in the winter, with mild temperatures throughout the year. When a rare wind came from the east, the cold from the Plains squeezed through the Columbia River Gorge and freezing might occur for a few days. Summer might have a couple of weeks of 90-degree temperatures.

Most experts agreed we were experiencing global climate change, which would cause changes in the local areas, changes that I couldn't predict. Even considering that, could I deal with the differences between the two cities?

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Portland seemed to be a paradise for gardeners, but gardening was not one of my favorite hobbies, since it involved bending, which made my hips hurt. However, I preferred green trees and bushes to sandy lots with cactus plants. And Portland's roses might make great photos.

I wrote an email to JK telling her my trouble in making a decision.

She replied in an email that the purpose of my first trip to the city would be to get the feel of the area. After I returned home from that trip, I would know if a move was the right plan for me. Then I could make another trip to find a house. I turned away from my computer and felt a sense of relief.

Zorro hopped on my lap. "This might be just what I need," I told him. "I'm going to take the risk. I'll ask your kitty sitter to come each day to feed you, give you water, and clean your litter boxes." Zorro gave me a kiss.

Flying would be relatively easy. I knew from previous experiences that I didn't want to take my forearm crutches because they created too much hassle. With increased security at airports, the inspectors thought my crutches could have all sorts of unconventional and nearly impossible uses.

Maybe I needed to take risks with some unconventional, nearly impossible ideas to solve my problems. I had to keep an open mind.

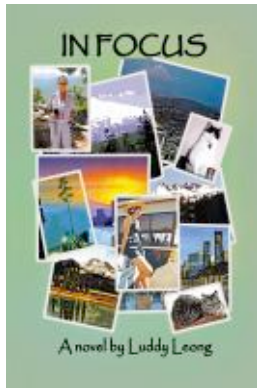
In the cool of the early morning, I drove over an hour to get to the nearest airport, ELP, in El Paso, where I got on a direct flight to Portland. I stowed my small bag in an upper compartment above my seat, looked out the plane's window, soon heard the roar of the engines, and riveted my eyes outside to watch the sudden slant of the plane as it lifted off the earth. This was the part of flying that I loved most of all. As the plane rose, I felt free of earth's problems, at least during the short flight.

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I didn't need to look out the window as we flew over the yellow fields of west Texas and New Mexico, having seen them many times. Instead, I decided to write in my journal. I pulled the little tray down from the seatback in front of me. I placed my open journal on it and closed my eyes, trying to clear my mind and get ready to write.

The next thing I knew, the attendant was tapping me on the shoulder, asking me to tuck away the table, before I had written a single word, since we were getting ready to land.

When I looked out the window this time, I saw green fields and forests, and a river wider than the Rio Grande. As we neared PDX, I noticed the tops of several mountains rising above the clouds and then saw the tops of the tall buildings in the downtown.



Sunny loses her job the day her partner drives away. Her crushed hopes inspire a search for a better life. She moves from the arid Southwest, and settles in the fertile Pacific Northwest where she focuses her hopes on a fresh start. When her sister-in-law faces a situation similar to Sunny's, she wonders where her loyalties belong. With her two cats, Sunny and her new women friends work to solve problems they each face.

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