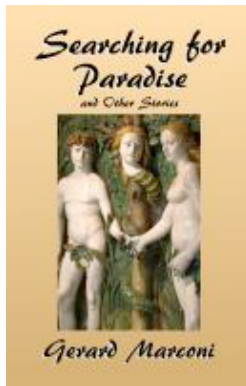


*Searching for
Paradise
and Other Stories*



Gerard Marconi



Searching for Paradise is a collection of entertaining and provocative short stories that explore the need for satisfaction or completion often referred to as paradise. Some are about the search for immortality and the divine. Others are about the creation of art and the imitation of nature. Some are about the yearning of the human heart for love and understanding, while others deal with what happens when we experience the opposite.

Searching for Paradise

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Searching for Paradise

And Other Stories

Gerard Marconi

Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there
Live, in what state, condition, or degree.
Then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A Paradise within thee, happier far.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

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Adam and Eve. Glazed terracotta relief ca.1515, workshop of Giovanni della Robbia. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.
Photograph by the author. Cover design by Greg Walsh.

Searching for Paradise

The destination on the Number 8 streetcar said *Paradise* but Sam Marinelli was going through hell. He was drenched with sweat because he missed his regular trolley and had to run several blocks to get the Number 8 instead. Paradise was a turnaround in West Baltimore but he was only going as far as downtown. The windows were open but no breeze entered the crowded car as it crept along Baltimore Street. When they came to a halt, the motorman clanged his bell loudly three times. Sam looked at the long line of cars ahead, their black roofs shimmering in the noonday sun. Today was a special day and he needed to get to work as soon as possible, so he decided to walk the last few blocks. He made his way to the front of the car and hopped down onto the street.

At the next corner he shaded his eyes against the dazzling sunlight, trying to catch sight of his friend, Ted O'Neil, who was directing traffic along the waterfront. Clouds of black smoke billowed from ships docked along Light Street, but there was no sign of the stocky policeman. Sam took out a handkerchief to wipe the perspiration from his forehead and neck. He should have brought a clean shirt for later that night. If everything went as planned, he would propose to his sweetheart, Margaret, after tending bar at the Southern Hotel. Suddenly a large shadow fell across the street in front of him. He looked up to see a huge object looming above the Baltimore Trust

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Building. It was moving slowly but getting bigger as it came over the skyscraper. He stared in disbelief until it completely blocked out the sun.

Two blocks away Officer Ted O'Neil looked up and saw it, too. All traffic came to a halt. Cars and trucks and streetcars stopped in their tracks while drivers gaped at the sight. Curious passengers emptied into the streets to see what was happening. Shoppers swarmed out of downtown buildings to catch a glimpse of the strange airship hovering over the city. Few of them had bothered to read a small item in the morning paper reporting that the German dirigible *Hindenburg* would be landing in New Jersey that afternoon. Even if they had, no one could have anticipated it would appear in the sky over Baltimore. When a thunder storm over New Jersey prevented it from landing as scheduled, the captain decided to head south and give his passengers a glimpse of the nation's capital. It flew over Atlantic City and the Eastern shore of Maryland before reaching Washington, where it circled above the dome of the Capitol with the black and red swastika of the Nazi party emblazoned on its tail. The *Hindenburg* was the largest man-made object ever to fly. Measuring over 800 feet in length, it was only 78 feet shorter than the Titanic. In the spring of 1936 it flew from Germany to America in just sixty-two hours. Newspapers praised the lighter-than-air ship and said that a new era of trans-Atlantic travel had begun.

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“Did you see it?” Sam asked Ted O’Neil when he came into the hotel bar after work.

“Of course I saw it. How could you miss it?” The policeman removed his hat and mopped his brow. Then he stepped up to the bar and ordered a birdbath. “It was up there for almost an hour,” he said, reaching for the double shot of whiskey straight up. “People went nuts. They left their cars to get a better view. They were afraid it was going to drop a bomb. It took me an hour to get traffic back to normal.” He downed his drink in one gulp and asked for another. “Damned Nazis,” he said, shaking his head.

Other regulars came into the bar and conversation soon turned to the upcoming presidential election. Franklin Roosevelt was running for a second term and Baltimore always voted solidly Democratic. Roosevelt was a popular choice when he first ran in 1932, but now critics were accusing him of trying to spread socialism in America. The Knights of Columbus at Saint Elizabeth’s Church had urged their members not to vote for Roosevelt, but Sam had already decided to vote for FDR again.

“He’s a communist,” Ted said when someone mentioned the president’s name. “All his programs are steering us toward communism. As a Catholic I can’t in good conscience vote for him.” He shook his head and downed his second drink.

“I admire the way he overcame polio,” Sam said.

“Another reason not to vote for him. He doesn’t have the stamina to run the government if we go to war with Germany.”

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Despite their differences, Sam liked the friendly cop whose father came from Ireland and worked for the B&O Railroad. Ted had three brothers and two sisters. The oldest girl was in the convent, but the other one was still at home. Her name was Margaret, and Ted had often hinted that she would be a good match for Sam. “She’s a lovely Irish lass and I want you to meet her,” he said before arranging their first date. Sam took Margaret to the premiere of “Gone with the Wind” at the Hippodrome Theater. They dated for six months before he decided to pop the question. Tonight was the big night, so he asked Ted to bring her downtown to meet him after work.

“What’s the occasion?” Ted asked.

Sam winked at his friend. “We’re going dancing in the rooftop ballroom.”

The Rainbow Ballroom of the Southern Hotel was a large dimly lit room on the twelfth floor with a stunning view of the city and harbor. As they rode up in the elevator, Sam admired Margaret’s black sequin dress, her clear blue eyes, and the way she wore her auburn hair in a wave on the side. “You look lovely tonight,” he said, and his heart leapt when she smiled at him. When they entered the ballroom he nodded to a waiter friend who led them to a reserved table by the windows. The band played several swing tunes before Sam asked Margaret to dance. He held her close during a medley of Cole Porter songs. “What’s your favorite?” he asked. “Mine’s ‘So in Love with You’ from *Kiss Me Kate*.”

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“In the Still of the Night,” she said, softly. When the band played the song, Sam looked into her eyes and sang along with the lyrics. *Do you love me, as I love you? Are you my life to be, my dream come true?* He kissed her on the cheek, inhaling the lilac perfume she favored. At the end he got down on one knee and proposed to her right there on the dance floor. Margaret blushed as band members stared and other couples applauded. Her eyes glistened in the soft light, but she said nothing.

Disappointed and confused, Sam led her back to the table. Had he messed up somehow? Ted warned him that she was a strong willed woman, but that was one of the things he liked about her. He thought back over their previous dates, asking himself if he had been too forward or stepped out of line. Once, lying on the grass beneath the stars in Druid Hill Park, they had kissed long and ardently, leaving them both flushed and breathless. But he had never done it again, content to wait until their wedding night to pursue his passion.

They sat in silence as he waited for her to say something. Finally, Margaret looked at him and said, “Sam, you are the dearest, kindest man I’ve ever met. Of course I’ll marry you.”

Sam smiled and took her hand. He had never felt so happy. Gazing out the window at the lights below, he thought about the giant airship that had flown over the city that day. It must be amazing to fly in something that soars so high above the earth, something lighter than air. That’s how he felt now with Margaret. *Lighter than air.*

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They were married the following spring, not long after the *Hindenburg* crashed and burned. Ted O'Neil said the disaster was an omen of terrible things to come and he was right. By 1940, the year of the first peacetime draft, Sam and Margaret were the proud parents of a two year old girl named Marie and there were plenty of other young men to serve their country. But in the days and weeks following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, millions of men enlisted or were drafted, including Sam and his friend Lucky. Lucky's real name was Luciano Ibolito, but everyone called him Lucky because he was good at shooting craps.

On New Year's Eve, after passing their Army physicals at Fort Holabird, they were shooting craps in the back room of a dry cleaning shop in Little Italy. "Come on seven," Lucky said, breathing heavily on the dice. He had been winning more than the others, but this time he rolled a three and lost. "Let's go, Sammy," he said. "It's time for lunch and I'm buying." The other players howled in protest but Lucky ignored them. Sam and Lucky walked down Exeter Street to their favorite pizza parlor. "I think I'll own this place someday," Lucky said, looking around after they ordered. "Maybe I'll win it in a craps game."

"I'm going to buy a pair of dice before we leave for boot camp," Sam said. "And I'd like you to help me pick them out."

Lucky's eyes lit up. "I know this pawn shop over on Eastern Avenue that's got a good selection." At his friend's

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urging, Sam bought a pair of white ivories with black dots. He paid more than he intended, but they came in a little brown pouch with a drawstring. It would be the only pair of dice he ever owned. When they came out of the pawn shop, Lucky pointed to the Navy recruiting office across the street. "I just got an idea," he said. "Life is a crap shoot, so why not take our best shot?" Sam followed him and they enlisted in the United States Navy just two days before their draft notices came in the mail.

After six grueling weeks of basic training in Norfolk, Sam was assigned to a ship bound for the South Pacific while Lucky was sent to the North Atlantic. When they said goodbye at Camden Station, each carried his own pair of dice. Sam boarded a train heading for Chicago while Lucky left on another train for Philadelphia. Thousands of old passenger cars had been painted olive green and put back into service as troop trains. Sam lugged his duffel bag through several dingy coaches that smelled of disinfectant before he found a seat. Despite the bitter cold, the inside of the steel coach was hot and smelly. On the long ride to Chicago, he slept on a wool seat that reeked of sweat and relieved himself in a tiny lavatory where the toilet emptied onto the tracks below. In Chicago he boarded a second train for the remainder of the trip to San Diego. This one was even worse than the first, the steel cars so hot and the roaches so thick that he could hardly sleep. As they crossed the Great Salt Lake, his seat mate caught one of the roaches, pulled out his pen knife and sliced it in half. "Look at this son of a bitch," he said,

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laughing. “The insides are all white.” Sam stared out the window at the brilliant white of the salt flats that stretched endlessly toward the horizon. He didn’t believe in cruelty, not even to the lowest form of life. How would he survive the war if he had to witness a single human death?

In San Diego Sam reported to an LST landing craft, a long narrow ship that transported Marines and equipment to the beachheads during an invasion. Lying in his cramped bunk on the first night at sea, he stared at the bulkhead pockmarked with rivets and recalled the newsreels of ships burned or sunk at Pearl Harbor. For the first time since enlisting, he was scared. He longed for the lighter-than-air feeling on the night he proposed to Margaret. Before falling asleep he rubbed the little pouch of dice for good luck. He slept fitfully that night, his dreams mingled with the throbbing of the engines. His stomach churned as the LST lurched between heavy swells and in the morning he awoke with a headache.

Later that day, while he was swabbing the deck in the hot afternoon sun with the rest of the crew, he felt sick to his stomach. An officer pointed him to the stern, where he hung his head over the railing with several others and heaved up his lunch. Then he went below to help prepare the evening meal. As Ship’s Cook Third Class, Sam spent endless hours during their passage to the South Pacific stirring fifty gallon containers of soup, boiling potatoes by the hundreds, and shoveling flour into a giant mixer to make dough. When they reached their

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destination, the nearest ship in the convoy was a thousand yards away but even in the galley he could hear the 16mm guns open fire. After the heavy guns fell silent, the call to General Quarters sounded and he reported to his battle station on deck. An officer barked orders, whistles sounded, and the black-faced Marines prepared to go ashore. It was the same everywhere they landed: the terrible pounding of big guns from the battleships followed by the frightened look on the faces of men preparing to go ashore. Sam would spend weeks with the Marines in the tight spaces of the galley and on the heaving deck of their ship, sharing cigarettes and stories of home. Then, as he watched them leave, he wondered who would die and who would survive. It reminded him of what Lucky said on the day they enlisted. *Life is a crap shoot.*

During his twenty-two months in the South Pacific, Sam never saw an enemy soldier first hand, never stared death in the face, and never had to kill another human being, but he saw the carnage left behind by those who did. Once, in the early light of dawn, he caught a glimpse of what looked like driftwood or dried seaweed on the beach. Then the morning haze lifted like a curtain and he saw clearly that the dark clumps of matter scattered in the sand were the bodies of dead Marines. Often in his sleep he heard their agonized screams or saw their lifeless eyes staring at the sky. And he prayed for them every night. *Sweet Jesus, have mercy on their souls.*

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Sam was lucky. After two years at sea, he was sent back home to help train new recruits at the naval base in Norfolk. From there he was able to visit Margaret and their four year old daughter in Baltimore. When they slept together again for the first time, he told her about his nightmares and the images of death burned into his mind. When she held him close, he found comfort in her warm embrace. They made ardent love and conceived a second child, Frankie, who was born the following summer.

Unlike Sam, Lucky was badly injured when his ship was hit by enemy fire in the North Sea. He was sent home with a shattered leg that was replaced by a steel one at the Veterans' Hospital and he walked with a serious limp for the rest of his life. After the war Sam often invited Lucky to dinner at their house, where he entertained the children by poking a hat pin into his fake leg. Whenever he did this, they stared at him with wide-eyed amazement. To them it looked like magic, or else a miracle. Despite the handicap Lucky became a familiar sight on downtown streets as an organ grinder. He had a trained monkey that danced at his feet and collected coins tossed on the sidewalk by shoppers.

As fate would have it, Sam was home on leave the day Japan surrendered. Like millions of others, he and Margaret took their family to church and said a prayer of thanks. They carried little Frankie inside with them but Marie was afraid of the dark interior, so they left her on the front steps with a

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neighbor. On their way out Sam looked up at the small stained glass windows beneath the high arched roof. Each window had a different image: a bag of coins, a basin of water, a ladder and hammer, and three dice. In his sermons the pastor often referred to them as the *Instruments of Salvation* and explained how they were all related to Christ's passion or death. The bag of silver paid to Judas for betraying Jesus. The water Pilate used to wash his hands of guilt. The ladder and hammer used to nail Christ to the cross. The dice used by Roman soldiers to determine who would get his robe. It was the dice that puzzled Sam. There were three of them in the window, not the two used in most games of chance that he knew. A shadow of doubt crossed his mind. Maybe what Lucky said was true after all. *Life is a crap shoot*. Sam could have been killed in the war like so many others, or come back with a shattered leg like his friend. It wasn't the only doubt he experienced after what he had seen in the South Pacific. He still believed in heaven or paradise, but wondered about the existence of purgatory. It seemed to him that most people suffered enough here on earth without being punished again in the next life.

Out on the sidewalk, Marie was screaming and pointing up at the sky. Sam took her in his arms and looked up to see a Navy blimp nosing its way over the steeple. "Don't be afraid," he said. "It's only a blimp."

That evening, thirty miles to the south, Harry Truman walked to the White House gates with his wife and waived to

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the crowds in Lafayette Park. When he announced a week earlier that the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, Truman called it a military target. But the country soon learned that eighty thousand civilians had been killed there, most of them incinerated in a single flash of nuclear death.

In Baltimore that night there was music and celebration in Little Italy. People hugged one another, popped champagne bottles, and danced in the streets. Sam and Margaret were there when a man with a trumpet climbed onto the roof of a car and played “Auld Lang Syne.” The sweet sadness of the melody played on a solitary trumpet reminded Sam of “Taps.” He thought of his buddies lost at sea or gunned down on the beaches. When the song ended there was silence. Many in the crowd were moved to tears, including Sam. At that moment he sensed that his life had changed somehow, that this was the end of one thing and the beginning of something else. As he walked home with his arm around Margaret, his sadness was replaced by a sense of hope and he felt again that wonderful sensation of being lighter than air. It was the closest thing to heaven on earth he could imagine.

Pittsburgh Madonna

Andy Warhol was surprised when the nurses in the emergency room treated him like everyone else, until he realized that no one recognized him. Maybe it was because he was paler than usual, almost white, and had lost so much weight. Or because he wasn't wearing his wig. When he left the apartment that morning he was in such pain that he just grabbed a hat to cover his head.

At the hospital he told the doctors about the pain in his stomach. He told them about his eating habits and his last meal in the restaurant. Then he submitted his body to their probes and tests and sat alone in the curtained-off area to wait for the results. He heard the low moaning sound of someone else in pain and thought about the time, almost twenty years ago, when he was shot. He remembered the awful ride in the ambulance, the confusion in the emergency room, and his body being hooked up to machines. His chest and stomach were still a patchwork of scars and he hadn't been back to a hospital since. Not until today. He told himself that it wasn't as bad this time, but then the doctors returned to say that minor surgery was needed. They said it was a simple procedure and the only way to make the pain go away. But he was still afraid.

Later, beneath a white grid of fluorescent lights, Andy stared helplessly at the ceiling from a gurney as a sea of electric blue and hospital green swirled around him. He was wheeled

into the operating room and a circular shape appeared above him, a pink face with an oval of blue over the mouth and nose. The anesthetist explained once again what she was going to do and waited for a signal to begin.

“Start counting backwards from one hundred, please.” He stared at the upside down face when she said this and wondered if she recognized him. By now most of the staff had figured out who he was.

“How far should I count?” he asked.

“Most people only get to ninety,” she said without looking at him. “Please start now.” Her tone reminded him of the collagen girl who administered his monthly scalp treatments.

Andy knew what would happen when he lost consciousness. He knew where the images and memories would take him. He thought about how often he had taken that trip in his dreams only to emerge from the dark tunnel of gloom into the white daylight of conscious memory. Reluctantly he started counting.

“One hundred. Ninety-nine. Ninety-eight.” Numbing darkness began to close in. He wanted to resist, to protest, but he couldn’t. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Not quite right,” he managed to say. “Too much contrast. Re-shoot the negative.” He was at the Factory, overseeing work on one of his favorite subjects but trying not to show any emotion in his voice. When his assistants were ready he had them pull the silk-screen again. This time the results were

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better, but still too dark. The next print was almost perfect, and the one after that was exactly what he wanted. As he watched, a life-size image of Elvis slowly emerged. He wore a holster and had a six-shooter in his right hand. The image was silver and black and somewhat faded, but otherwise it looked just like an old movie still.

Andy's head was full of such images. They came from everywhere: things he remembered, things he clipped out of newspapers, things he photographed, even things people sent him in the mail. Sometimes he sorted them out in his mind. Sometimes he drew them on paper until he got them right. "We'll use that one," he said, "and then you can do one more exactly like it. Only one. No more." He called it *Single Elvis*, and saved the second print for his private collection. He would decide later what to do with it.

"Save everything," Picasso's daughter once told him. "Then sell everything." He agreed completely, but he had to be careful. He didn't want anyone to know how much he was really worth, especially the IRS.

"Ninety-five, ninety-four, ninety-three" he heard his voice saying. He was on the train from New York to Pittsburgh. He didn't want anyone to know where he was going. He could have gone by private limousine, but he liked trains. It was a ride backwards in time. He saw factories and steel mills along the way. He saw mechanics and workmen beside the tracks. He realized that he no longer worked with his hands. Now he made

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money with his mind, with his imagination, with how he was able to manipulate images and colors. He felt smug about this. He felt superior. He felt things he didn't want to feel. He was frustrated by the vicious cycle of his life: he had achieved everything and yet he felt that he had nothing. He wanted to distance himself not only from the images of his childhood that he saw from the train but also from the success of the present.

And so he sat very still for a long time and let the images stream past the window. Gradually he became conscious not of the objects passing by outside but only of the sense of movement they created, of the sunlight flickering on his lap. His earliest childhood memory was of sitting on the floor with his mother in a patch of flickering sunlight. Then he felt calm again. He felt ready to face his mother. He had brought a photo of Elvis with him. She loved Elvis.

Before senility set in, his mother had once told him exactly how she wanted the details of her funeral arranged. She wanted two days for viewing the body at the neighborhood funeral parlor with a guest book for all to sign. She wanted her rose petal rosary from the Vatican wrapped around her fingers in the coffin, and the *Ave Maria* to be sung when the pallbearers brought the body into church. She wanted everyone to be invited back to her sister's house for a meal after the cemetery. She was even specific about the food to be served: pierogi and kielbasa, bigos and cabbage. There was always the sweet, pungent smell of cooked cabbage in their house.

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He was in a cab on his way to the funeral home. He passed through their old neighborhood. He saw the candy store where his mother used to take him for a Saturday morning treat, and the elementary school where the halls always smelled of bubble gum. He passed the barbershop on the corner, its windows now shuttered with chain link and its rust colored bricks spray-painted with graffiti. Everything seemed faded and flat now, not at all like he had remembered it.

At the funeral parlor he pushed his way past a cluster of mourners at the entrance and slowly made his way to the casket at the front of the room. His brothers were there but they pretended not to see him. When he saw what was left of his mother, he looked away from the sunken eyes, pallid skin, and gnarled fingers clasping the rosary. He stared instead at her flowery green dress and thought of the nickname she had once given him: A&W. Her favorite photograph of him as a child was of his first attempt to drink A&W root beer through a straw. She said his face was so full of happiness that he looked like an angel. He loved the soda and she loved the nickname.

For just a moment his eyes filled up and he was unable to breathe. He waited for the sob to subside and then looked around to discover that his brothers had seen to everything. Racks of flowers were neatly arranged behind the coffin and a podium stood at the back of the room with the guest book on it. There was even a little stack of holy cards on the kneeler next to the coffin. He took one of the cards and looked at it. On the

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front was his mother's name, the date of her death, and a prayer to the Virgin Mary. On the other side was a Byzantine image of the Madonna and Child that he recognized from the religious books his mother used to read to him as a child. There was something beautiful, serene, and otherworldly about the figure of Mary, with her long thin fingers and large sympathetic eyes. Very carefully Andy put the card in his wallet. He stood to one side of the coffin in his black suit, dark shades, and silver wig. He folded his hands and waited.

Eventually people he hadn't seen in years came up to him and said they were sorry about his mother. Some of them asked him what it was like to live in New York. No one in the family spoke to him. His brothers were more than content to leave him alone with his thoughts, which were mostly about how he could sneak the picture of Elvis into the coffin before it was closed.

During the funeral mass, the church was filled with the smell of flowers and burning incense, reminding him of their Sunday afternoons together. They would walk home through the park after church and she would cook his favorite meal of cabbage with caraway seeds and onions. He sat stiffly staring at the closed coffin until the *Ave Maria* was sung, then he took out the holy card and stared at it. The colors were rich and shimmering, the folds of Mary's deep red dress modeled in rays of gold that looked like sunbursts. The Christ child on her knee was clothed in royal blue, his right hand raised in benediction.

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Behind them was a procession of saints and above them angels hovered with layered wings of multicolored feathers.

At the cemetery the family waited on a bright green carpet for the others to crowd around the gravesite. Andy stared at the faded sky while the priest intoned the final prayers. Afterward they all rode in silence to his brother's house. While his sister-in-law was putting out the food, her kids started laughing at his wig. At first he pretended not to notice, then he took off his dark glasses and stared at them until they left. When his brother came into the dining room, Andy went over to him.

“Why didn't you ask me?” he said.

“About what?” his brother asked.

“About cutting off her life support.”

“She died in stages, Andy. You weren't here. You weren't part of it. We didn't want to bother you.” His brother filled his plate and turned away.

Andy felt a strange tingling in his head. He was back in New York, at his monthly scalp treatment with the odious collagen girl, telling her that he had changed his will, leaving everything to the church in memory of his mother. He told her he had changed his life as well: he started going to church again and helping out at the soup kitchen. He even abstained from sex. When she suggested that he was homosexual, he replied quickly “But I haven't swallowed any semen.” She started to laugh. Her laughter increased and was echoed by the swirling shapes around him. Andy became dizzy and disoriented. He

couldn't remember where he was. Then he became aware of a figure standing over him and asking something.

“Who are your next of kin? We need to know in case it is necessary to notify them.” He struggled to match the words to the moving lips. What a strange question to ask, he thought. He stared up at the nurse and didn't answer her.

On the first day after his surgery Andy felt naked without his wig, his scalp exposed, so he persuaded the nurses to let him wear a surgeon's cap. He called his friends to tell them they could come and visit him. That evening, when they came, he could tell by the intensity of their gazes that his condition was not good. They joked about the surgeon's cap. They asked him if he liked the food. Then, remembering the cause of his condition, they apologized for asking. When they left the shades were drawn and the room turned gray. Hours passed and the room remained a constant shade of gray. Andy realized that he was alone, that he had always been alone. Later he awakened in the middle of the night and vividly recalled the drug-induced dream of his surgery. He remembered the holy card from the funeral home and called the nurse to ask for his wallet. He thumbed through it until he found the card still there. The colors were faded now and the edges worn thin.

On the second day after the operation he grew weaker and the pain in his stomach returned with increased intensity. He was not good at pain: he liked to be in control, not to be taken by surprise or embarrassed. Repeatedly he read the chart on the

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wall describing the four stages of pain: Mild, Significant, Agonizing, Unbearable, each word illustrated by a scowling cartoon face in a parody of the usual smiley face. Eventually the doctor who had performed the surgery came to tell him that there was an unforeseen complication.

“We are working to get rid of the infection,” he said. “In the meantime, I can prescribe morphine to help you cope with the pain.”

Reluctantly Andy agreed to use the morphine pump. The first time he tried it, he squeezed too hard and immediately drifted into a deep sleep. He imagined that he saw his mother lying in the bed next to him. She stared vacantly ahead while her chest heaved with each gasping breath. Then her eyes focused on him and there was a hint of recognition followed by a painful smile. Suddenly the eyes widened in panic and she whispered “Why are you here?” He went to her and bent over the bed to hear what she was saying.

“Why are you here?”

“To be with you and tell you that I love you,” he said, and kissed her on the forehead.

She smiled again and he took her hand in his. It was red and swollen from the injection of so many fluids into her body. He gently stroked her arm as he stared at the tubes and machinery behind her bed. He stood there for a long time looking at her troubled face. He wanted to say something to ease her pain but he couldn't. He wanted to yank the tubes out

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of her body and yell “Breathe!” but he didn’t. Then he heard the awful sound. It began as an urgent raspy breath that resonated from deep within her frail body. Then, as if inflated by some invisible pump, it swelled into a cough that left her gasping for air. He reached down to stop the spasm, to comfort her, to make her well again, but he couldn’t. She was lost in a blur of images and gone.

On the third day his pain became Unbearable. He thought about death. He thought about his silk-screens of *The Last Supper*. He remembered his latest work, based on a religious pamphlet he had found in the street. It was a simple piece, like a poster. No images, just words. No colors, just black letters emblazoned on a white background. It read: *Heaven and Hell Are Just One Breath Away!* Just one breath away, he thought.

Now the pain was so intense that it came from everywhere. When he was awake he tried to focus on whatever would distract him, but nothing seemed to work. He stared at the white ceiling and the white walls. White on white. Outside the sky was white too, and the day seemed brittle, like his thoughts. Now he only wanted the pain to go away and the flickering images to stop.

He squeezed the pump more often and drifted into another dream. It was like being submerged in a heavy liquid and he swam for a while, helplessly suspended and unable to breathe. Then he began to rise up toward the sunlight above. When he emerged and opened his eyes she was there, waiting for him.

Searching for Paradise And Other Stories

They were in the old house where he had first learned to draw, sitting cross-legged on the sunlit floor. She was holding an A&W root beer for him and reached out to take his hand. "I am so proud of you," she said.

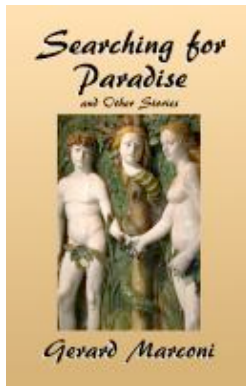
"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To church," she replied. "To see the Madonna."

"Do you forgive me?" he asked with tears in his eyes.

"Of course I do."

He smiled and took her hand.



Searching for Paradise is a collection of entertaining and provocative short stories that explore the need for satisfaction or completion often referred to as paradise. Some are about the search for immortality and the divine. Others are about the creation of art and the imitation of nature. Some are about the yearning of the human heart for love and understanding, while others deal with what happens when we experience the opposite.

Searching for Paradise

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