

The reader will learn that through the arts and creativity one can come face to face to moments of clarity, joy and understanding as coping strategies.

Musings of an Improvised Life

By Lorelei Joy Goldman

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MUSINGS
— OF AN —
IMPROVISED
LIFE



Lorelei Joy Goldman

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Seems like some of her love of art rubbed off on me. Of this, I am glad. All in all, I have some sweet memories.

Grandma's Legs

My legs are swelling and look like big melons.
A quick touch on the skin, a deep indentation
tells me there is not proper circulation.
Of blood flow through the tissues, this is a mighty
issue.
I will have to monitor the legs and ankles without
hesitation.
The doctor calls it venous stasis, and I think, "Oh,
my gracious."
I won't take the medication, another adventure to
bear, and a part of me feels a bit of a scare.⁸

My shoes don't fit one day. The nurse calls to say, "You know you have venous stasis." WHAT? "Insufficient blood flow," she states. I look down at my swollen ankles and legs. They are Grandma Gussie's legs, not mine.

Grandma would sit—knees splayed about a foot apart—so I could see her flabby, milk-white legs. Beige nylon stockings were tied in knots, wrapped just below her knees. Grandma sat in an old brown armchair on the second floor of the two-flat building where I grew up.

⁸ LJG

In my mind, I step up the wooden stairs to her second floor, where—opposite their apartment—was the closet where my brother hid his porn.

Grandpa was a tailor and every day he and his wife Gussie rose at five to catch the train to South Water Market Street to work in their shop named “Alice Vogue.” I was allowed to work there as well. Grandpa Ben gave me a rather large magnet, and my job was to pick up the garment pins that fell into the slits of the shellacked wooden floor.

Thinking of Grandma’s legs leads to memories of the gingerbread man she made for me as a treat. I felt that I was special then. She instructed me to put raisins on the head to create the features of the cookie’s face and then add more raisins on the chest for buttons. We would knead the dough in a deep, cream-white ceramic bowl with a blue band going around the center. The dough would slide down the edge of the bowl like a creamy strip off a smooth cliff. I always got the wooden spoon to lick before it went into the dishwasher.

My body is betraying me.

Now and then, I monitor the blood flow in my veins. Taught to touch the skin and count how long the indentation stays. If longer than three seconds, I take medicine: potassium and a diuretic when needed. I often swallow the pills along with a banana.

Playing my organ recital (a clever name for speaking about medical issues) with teeth extracted, cataract surgery, ovarian cancer surgery, capillary fragility, arthritis, potential knee surgery, mitral valve

regurgitation and many traumatic wounds. And now, I have my grandmother's legs.

Tante Alice

Alice was born the third daughter to immigrant parents from Rovno (now known as Rivne), Russia. She enjoyed being, and was grateful to be, “the baby.” She was also labeled, “the cute one,” being—as an adult—five feet, two inches, and always dressed fashionably. She had brown eyes and salt and pepper hair when I knew her.

She had two older sisters, Anne, referred to as “the neurotic,” and Berta, my mother, the eldest, and the “good one.” These were the terms the family applied to the girls and these labels stayed with them all of their lives. The two older siblings were symbiotic and spoke to each other every day. Alice was proud that she could distance herself from her sisters so she could be separate and independent.

She looked forward to the Rovner Rayon Village celebrations in rented halls on Sundays. Ukrainian immigrants would mingle and talk, entertain and retell stories. Alice would walk forward and sing a song titled *Temptation*. There was a story retold about Uggie, an old woman, who—during the pogroms—hid in haystacks to avoid the Cossacks who were looking for Jews. Cossacks rode through the fields on horses with their daggers out slashing at anything or anybody Jewish. They would push their large blades into the haystacks hoping to find them.

close to her early injuries. We were in an iron lung. I shared possible wishes with her that she may have had in that very solitary and irregular iron lung. What did she yearn for and what did she need? Zerka created surplus reality which practitioners employ in directing. This is when we move out of our own reality into a novel and different reality.

I can still hear her laugh and sometimes I actually sound like her when I laugh and it is truly her giggle that I hear.

The Future is Where I Live

This sequel of *The Future Is Where I Live* comes from a story written in the early nineties. I struggled for several months, asking friends if they had a copy of this published work. They did not until my friend Sally met with me and presented the printed, published material. I was elated at her find and enthused about reviewing this story and reflecting on the content and metaphors within: The complete work of Lorelei J. Lettvin (Lettvin being my maiden name). I read it through, noticing the challenges that were present when I worked at the Park Ridge Youth Campus in Illinois.

“The Future Is Where I Live” he wrote as he took his thumb out of his mouth and sheepishly looked up at me for approval in my Wednesday, third-period poetry club that I had formed at our special-education school. This was a club to lift our spirits as I slowly began to feel burned out.

The student's name was Melvin and it is his title for one of his poems. I thought it then so apt and essential to his place in the world. "The Future is Where I Live" seemed, then, to have promise. Now, with an administration in chaos in the land, especially in funding for education, I worry about our future. I worry about our children losing out on the arts and the public education so necessary for growth and diversity.

"You are sweet, Ms. G., and you're different," he says as he peers half-way at me and smiles. Then he says, "You've been voted the best teacher here."

He knows my moods and wants me to feel uplifted. He has known me nine months and can tell by the timbre in my voice if I am in a humorous mood. He is a kid from the city streets shipped away to this residential placement facility. In this place, kids come to shape up, learn social skills, become tamed, say O.K., or be locked away or sent to a more suitable location. Many of them come to us without background information, no histories, no medicals and we cannot label their disabilities.

I look back at my time there, seventeen years, and am triggered by the term "locked away." That's what I was told to do with my mother and brother. Lock them away and be "responsible for them for the rest of my life." I wanted to protect my family as I was protecting the kids at this residential facility. I couldn't lock them away.

"We must label the malady to get funds." They must be suitable for the placement, and who makes the decision? An intake worker, a principal, the director in

chief of the welfare department for youth? It keeps changing as our system continues to become impotent.

“I’m a Project Kid, so?” Kevin declares.

His “so” is slightly threatening and I feel his shame. Melvin and Kevin put their fingers in their mouths the way a kid nestles to the mother and stays attached to the mother’s breast. Both kids hold on tight. Kevin has his pointer finger in his mouth. Once when he studied the Black role models in his world culture book, his fingers fell out of his mouth and he was connected to a different view of the world.

Every day I look for glory in these kids and I find it in their eyes. They apologize to me with their notes (“you look nice today”), their poetry and their tenderness when one of their pals goes to the hospital or when the siren screams and they look scared, their toughness melting away.

I have witnessed many ambulance rides. My own when thrown out of the passenger side of a van that was taking me to a teaching job and then being lifted on the gurney towards the entrance of the ambulance. Also, watching my daughter being lifted into an ambulance after she had a car accident and a seizure. Chaotic memories. Fully charged with stress and trauma.

In poetry class, Sherry walks in, her eyes bloodshot and her shoulders hunched, a gang-raped youngster, small and fragile, always running. Once an adolescent myself, I know the need for nourishment and attention. I drifted into the doorways of black silhouettes that looked like horses and caverns and kings. I saw clouds

in the sky that looked like cotton candy and elves. I still see formations in clouds. It's fun to imagine.

Sherry looks at me suspiciously and asks me if she can read her poetry. I recall her face when I have said, "No," and respond, "After you finish your assignment." I then tell her, "Yes." I want her to trust me.

These kids need instant regard or they think we are like the others who have betrayed them and slapped them and put them off. The first time I sent her out of the room was when she spread her legs wide in a seductive pose and talked about her breasts and let the boys tease her. I stated, "No, not here." She tells me her boyfriend wants to marry her. Her poetry is full of longing for male care. Tight, tough and heroic is her poetry. She hangs on with her writing like the last leaf on a cold oak tree at the edge of winter. I bless these old memories.

Now, she sits close to me and carries the green, three-ringed notebook I gave her to hold her poems and there is a shift in her walk, the way she thinks a poet would walk. We like her poems and put them, Xeroxed, in the student newspaper.

On goes the train of troubled teens, interrupting, farting, kicking, screaming, being late, tripping others, waving gang signs, putting out a foot to trip the scapegoat, yelling, "Fuck you, bitch." Their stories are told and read and acted out and the staff tries to set goals and justify the plans of mice and men.

I directed a scene from Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" for parents' night. I reminisce about their concentration as my students took on creative roles as

they played out their characters on stage. The lines of Lenny and George, where Lenny once again asks, “George, tell me about the rabbits.” I cry now as I recall their tenderness with each other on stage. They know their roles and identify with the characters.

It hurts me when they call me names. I hear them saying, “You’re senile,” and I need then to take a walk, go out of the building. We, the staff, are the enemy, we demand compliance.

Then there are days when it’s quite the other way.

“Let’s make a circle and say only positive things about each other,” says Latasha. “I am I and you are you” she says. Into the circle now, she holds out her hands and grasps mine and looks up at me with great admiration that causes tears to well up in my eyes. “You are one of the greatest teachers I have ever known,” and Roberta chimes in, “That’s true.” I wanted to touch their lives differently, strive for true community, rebuild what has been lost and trodden on and trampled. I dream of a flag across an empty field with the kids at one end of the field and me at the other end. I worked too hard then. This flag has been ripped apart by poverty, poor housing, class systems and available drugs. There is innocence here, yet every day I see the terror and tremor in their gaits. They are like wounded mares upon the city fields struggling in an educational model that demands sitting down, shutting up, giving eye contact and being compliant and respectful. This is the Boys Town model objectives originated by Father Flanagan at Boys Town, Nebraska.

I have been trained to use their model and hope to decrease unpleasantness in many school situations.

“Go iron your face,” he says and he reminds me of my wrinkles, yet how creative are his words. I know he must sometimes kick out and defy authority. I am the enemy.

Never protected or nurtured, they know their own holocaust. In this building bursting with pathology, pupils are putting out behaviors of mistrust and abandonment. I shake my head uneasily wondering who I am here, and irritation swells up in me, cynical comments drift out of my mouth like, “Let’s play school.” Let’s play school as if playing a role doing my job will heal the damage already done, for they go to jail, they run, they kill. My co-worker says, “It’s a zoo, they’re animals.” I resent the label “animals.” I resent all labels, even good ones.

I wonder if “The Future is Where I Live” is my motto, too. It’s not because my future is compromised. I have less time for teaching and more life experiences. Moving forward I think of these times in the classroom. Now, our administration is planning to get rid of special education, public education and free lunches. I shake my head.

I carry the metaphor of “The Future Is Where I Live.” I wish to make things work and I support the underdog. Often, instinctively and with care.

The phrase, “go iron your face,” stays with me and I wonder could it be that the wrinkles need ironing? Is this the student’s mark for his teacher? It is not graffiti on the city walls, but it is a mark nonetheless as he

calls, “prune face” which causes me to melt into feelings of hurt as they laugh, and I feel strangely inadequate to call him aside and read him the riot act, waiting for his eye contact.

“Do I call you names?” I ask. He looks down and his whole body pulls to the side, and I stand firm and he looks away, armed with rage, and I wait. I am not afraid. He acquiesces and says, “Okay” instead of “so?” He is weakened by our exchange. I declare, “Good job. You have high awareness.” He is far from his peer group now. I wonder why I stay and is there a better way?

I’m so tired. Day after day is played out while I hear for a second and third time that we may be closing, that our budget is tight, that we union people will have bumping rights. I feel like I am being toyed with, flirted with like a cat plays with a mouse and then leaves it behind. I often feel left behind...Do I allow myself to be left behind or does the administration make us feel that way?

Then they tell me to stay put. They say I’m too old to be transferred. Nobody wants to hire somebody at my salary level; they want a young kid just starting out. I feel demoted and devalued. Statements like “cooperative learning” and “regular educational imperative” slide across my desk and then drop into the wastebasket. This is really not happening. I have to stick it out six more years until retirement.

The kids keep coming, keep coming, get in your face kids, locked out kids, shouting foster kids, orphans, sheltered kids, satanic cult children, project children.

The self-mutilators tell me it's okay to cut yourself. They need to feel something. They have blue, inverted pitchforks on their arms and legs, boldly displayed without honor. Etched in their skin, cut sharply on their arms and legs, screaming out, "I can feel, now." "Oh, I cut myself, I need to feel something."

The newspapers claim that, in the United States, one child is shot every thirty-nine minutes and 260,000 guns are in our schools every day. The upper echelon administrators say, "You are working with the dregs of the world. I couldn't work for more than a week with them." I join the Coalition Against School Violence.

"Clear the halls," says the principal. "Be on time." "Get your finger out of your mouth," he shouts across the hall.

Mary sits at her own computer and masterfully keyboards with the promise of her new skill. She has written a poem entitled "Frustration" to work out some of her own. She shares a little.

"You know, Ms. L, when we get to know you, you are nice."

She has the voice tones of my own daughters and suggests softly that we have computer time for all the kids. She is always looking out for all the kids and softly cries when one of the students is carted away to the hospital or goes on an AWOL run.

I check out assignments and hear, "I did it already." They haven't done it already. The lack of motivation drives me crazy.

Juan brings in a slick poster with six sports cars and asks me to put it on the board. "What do you think

they're worth?" he asks. I couldn't care less; gang bangers and youth offenders needing magazines so they can fantasize. Nobody is buying cars for these kids.

Juan is from Bolivia and his academic level is around 3rd Grade. He loves nature. I bring him a stuffed bird; he loves birds. He seems to think that I am the only one that cares about him. He was a stowaway on a boat, his parents dead, abused by foster parents and he lives in the group home. He jumped in front of a car and was hospitalized for depression. He was running on empty.

The shop teacher says Juan has jumped on my car. I tell him that I am not mad at him and remind him of his hospital stay. I'm worried about his injury, not my car. The next day he doesn't speak to me. I see him looking at me with baby brown eyes as he hands me a carefully folded letter written in his high-topped slanted writing. I really am not angry about the dent on my car and I love his effort. To him even negative attention is better than none. He is usually respectful; depressed children are better behaved and easier to deal with. He draws a toucan bird and places it in a plastic file and then puts it on my corkboard in the classroom. He then looks at me and crossing his eyes and we laugh together.

My tenderness for Juan reminds me of the softness I feel currently for a young adult who works as a bagger at the Jewel grocery store and drops in at my psychodrama class. She asks questions of me and then laughs, "I knew you would understand, I knew it." She finds comfort in our relationship.

The delight I have for people does not change.

With nine behavior-disoriented kids, I wept and I did not let them see my tears for then they would take care of me. I hate being a policewoman. I am a teacher. I want to get rid of the constant admonishments, “You need to give eye contact, practice your basics, open your book, get your file out, put your cards on my desk, keep your hand to yourself, stop the gang signals” all to be cleared out of the way like vines on a trail to make a path before we can actually communicate.

At the door, I wait. Then the silence. “You need to keep your head up,” I announce and I give them a ten-second rule I created where they must wait ten seconds, raise their hands, wait for their name to be called, take their turn before talking. It works. I can then breathe and hear myself think and I mind their simple requests that need permission. My voice tone changes and my pace declines as the day moves on.

Then there is a calmness and safety abounding and the students look hard and down at each other. They like being calm for a moment and I like it too. Juan looks at me and states, “You’re sweet, Ms. L.” I reply, “No, I’m not. You are.”

Muttering Mind

My muttering mind holds images and utterances for a few days. They then get dimmer, yet continue to be called up and haunt me. I am convinced that I have to detach myself from my major caretaking instinct. I can keep some of it, but I need to delegate to others when there is a crisis.

mask. It has soft tan wood and there are feathers placed around the mask. The nose is in the form of an eagle.

I believe that masks can protect us, tell us stories, allow us to hide, and preserve and tell about culture. Sometimes we can role play and learn new perspectives about ourselves. What will the history books tell us and future generations about the Covid-19 surgical masks and colorful cotton ones we've been wearing?

"Take off your masks, just take off your masks, I ask, won't you take off that false face and just let me know that I am safe to do so..."

Microbe Madness

There is a universal microbe invisible and tough,
energized by the sinuses and that can be tough.

The microbe cannot be stopped for it is unseen, giving
doctors and nurses cause to scream.

Millions of microbes gone astray, sucking up our lungs
and having their way.

Chairs are assembled six feet apart for
the scientists have told us this will be smart.

No longer can we handshake, so we send a wink
and hope that this will bring relief.

A banner inside the homo sapiens states, "We like to
congregate

and settle in you, and just you learn we are not the flu.

Missing a pat on the back to a friend in need

I feel removed from a loving scene.

At least, I have my sight and hearing
but losing touch is so demeaning.

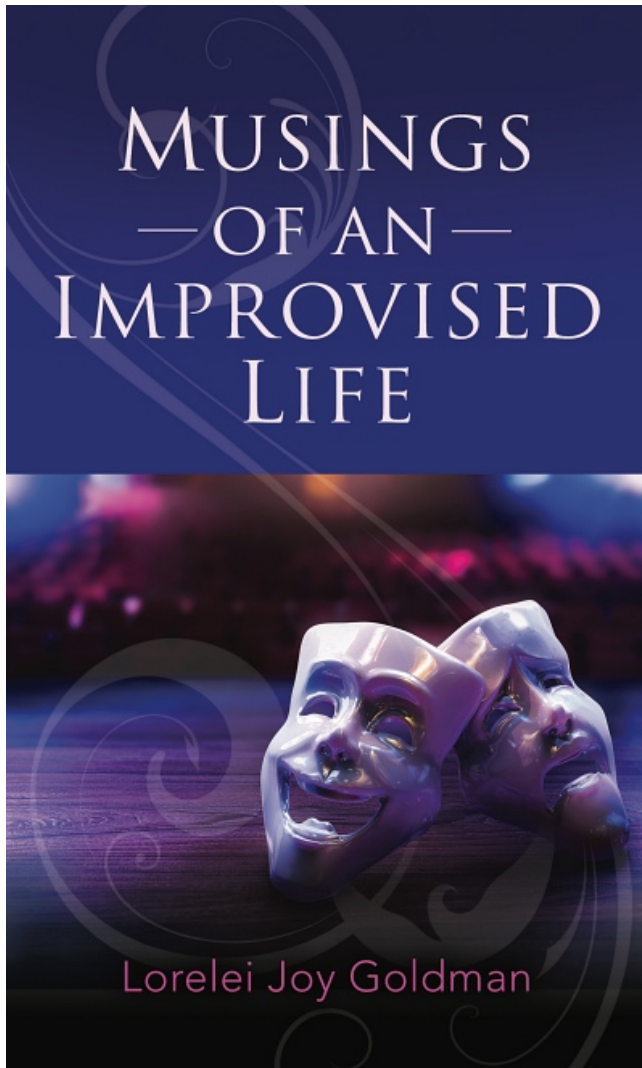
The town is so uneasy and chaotic that some people think we are bordering on neurotic.²⁸

Once Upon a Time in Widespread Valley

Once upon a time in a faraway place called Widespread Valley, there lived millions of microbes. In this village lived a young boy with sand-colored cropped hair and seductive green eyes. He was looking everywhere for his sister, Covidis. He saw her kneeling down by their favorite river, looking at her reflection and smiling. As Pandy moved closer to his sister, he saw that rainbow-colored tears were dropping into the water.

Pandy sat next to her and lovingly patted her on the back. She thought to herself, "We have to get to the emperor and get some order." Covidis pleaded, "Go into the river and wash the microbes away." They walked hand in hand through the forest to the emperor's castle. The emperor came out onto his balcony and shouted, "All siblings shelter in their homes until I say, all is well." They understood and skipped home. They went to the back of their abode and found large vats of hot soapy water and they gingerly threw the water onto their bodies and especially rubbed their hands. The microbes shouted out, "We will continue to strive

²⁸ LJG



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