

## # 21. A River in Egypt

By Bara Swain (permission given to republish on this site by Bara).

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My mother was an expert in denial. When Dad rear-ended a truck carrying bulk cases of Arizona Iced Tea, Mom blamed it on a dirty windshield. “A blind spot,” she said, as I admired the new Frigidaire in my parents’ garage, crammed with tallboys wrapped in bright pastels.

Half of the chilled Green Teas were consumed by the time my father entered the adult day care center. Mom’s denial still served her well: “It’s his prostate,” she said, when the adult diapers were delivered. “I bought your father slip-resistant house shoes,” she exclaimed, as she recounted Dad’s fall down the stairs.

A year later, I packed the family car with the remaining cases of the soft drink and headed to the recycling center while Mom packed Dad for his next destination: the V.A. nursing home. Advanced Alzheimer’s disease. He was 73 years old.

Mom continued teaching for several more years. Shortly after her retirement letter was filed, my father died of aspiration pneumonia, secondary to dementia. For the next few months, Mom grieved privately. Publicly, she studied Italian for an upcoming trip, burped incessantly, contributed grilled eggplant at her book club meetings, and swam fifty laps daily at the local pool ... until she couldn’t. “Just a stitch in my side,” she said, dismissing my concern. “Stress on the ligaments,” she added.

The stitch in Mom’s side was a tumor wrapped around her intestines. “Recurrent melanoma,” the doctor said. “It’s aggressive.” My mother made a hair appointment and started a guest list for my sister’s birthday as the cancer metastasized to her liver. Three months later, my eldest sibling turned fifty and Mom’s face turned dark yellow. I drove her to the hospital. As our matriarch slipped into a coma, she asked, “When’s my next book club meeting?”

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Several years later, an amorous evening culminated in a throbbing headache. It persisted. “A coital headache,” said my doctor. “I’m dehydrated,” I told my sister. I filled a prescription for a suppository. Walking became difficult. “Neuropathy,” I

repeated. “It’s neuropathy,” I insisted. Three weeks later, I nodded off at work. As I slipped in and out of consciousness, I apologized. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

A second ambulance transferred me to neuro intensive care. “Are you sure it’s a brain bleed?” I asked the dark-skinned paramedic. As I lost consciousness again, I thought, “Denial is a river in Egypt.”

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**Judge’s Comments:**

I’ve never read a story with this much punch. I fell in love with its fast pacing, time jumps, and snappy language that isn’t afraid to venture into wordplay (that twist in the last sentence is perfect!). I especially loved the characterization of the mother and how her disposition bleeds into the narrator, forging an inheritance (and an ending) that is simultaneously amusing and tragic.

Small Blessings coordinator comment: Wow – what a story. I suppose a small blessing could be that we find humour in very dark situations.

**Inspired to make something in response?**

**Willing to gift it to the project?**

Once you have made your *Small Blessing*, [fill in this form](#) so that we can include your work in the project. We will contact you to arrange how to get your creation to Tuggeranong, ACT, Australia and/or include a photograph of it in the online gallery and on instagram.