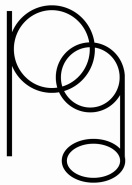


WE WILL TAKE WHAT WE CAN GET



Matthew Salesses

Short fiction by Matthew Salesses has appeared or is forthcoming in *Glimmer Train*, *Hobart*, *Mid-American Review*, *Pleiades*, *Quick Fiction*, *Monkey-bicycle*, among others, and has received awards from *Glimmer Train*, MAR, and IMPAC. He is a fiction editor at *Redivider*.

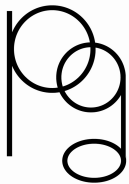
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65.

If this seems a natural ending, the last day of the year, I didn't plan it. All experiments, great or small, must end.

As I drive Cathreen to work, something I say causes a storm to pass across her face, and I know I haven't been fair to her. I've been too harsh on her character, and perhaps on my own, as I am prone to do. Except this is real life, not fiction.

"Don't writing about me anymore," she says. "I'm getting frustrated." I stare blankly ahead. "Now you're going to writing: *Cathreen says, 'Don't writing about me anymore. I'm getting frustrated,'* right?" I can't help but think this is the perfect ending. I don't want to make her angry, but our honest reactions, in injury and in recuperation, are what I've been trying to capture—before the heightened tragic state eventually peters out.

When the credits roll, Cathreen says, “We have a happy life, right?” The family in the movie lost their house, watched their friends die, were almost killed by children bearing arms. I should have been thinking about this in the same way.

63.

At home, Cathreen lies in bed and reads the news. The world is stressing her out. I wish the world would quit it.

So much has happened in the last two weeks. Her hand, her hair, our good days and bad, Christmas. Israel is bombing Palestine.

I wish we would learn.

64.

In the morning, we wake up early to take out the recycling from the past two weeks and in the parking lot, boxes are piled high like the ruins of cardboard castles. Cathreen says everyone is cleaning for the New Year. I think about Italians throwing plates out of windows to keep away the spirits of their pasts—something like that. Tomorrow is the arbitrary day we say the earth begins another orbit around the sun.

With 2009 comes the clean slate we set for ourselves.

We will take what we can get.

We Will Take What We Can Get

1.

I’ve just pitched the idea to Cathreen and she does not look happy about it.

“You think I’m funny character?” she says.

“I think we both are. Look at all the ridiculous things that have been happening to us,” I say. I tell her I’ll post the essay online.

“Give me money,” she says. She calls her sister to complain.

2.

This started when I slammed her hand in the door—two days ago. Today her hair caught fire in the bathtub. I had filled the tub and lit candles to relax her from the bad mood she had woken up in. The pain from the injury, she says, is shocking, though she doesn’t mean this like surprising, she means it like electricity. The doctor says she has to wear a soft cast and keep her arm in a sling for two weeks; her hand has swollen up and, last we saw it, was badly bruised. When I tell people what I have done, I know they are thinking I beat her. Other people’s ideas frighten me.

3.

Now she comes into the room and asks, "Are you going to use my name? You going to write down everything I say? You didn't get a permission from me."

She says her family will read it, though they will have to struggle through translating it into Korean, and my family will read it. I tell her art has to be honest. "Let me read first before you put it," she says. I read it to her. "Not funny," she says, "your story."

4.

During the day, I take her to the hospital to get a second opinion on her injury. The first doctor asked her to stay in the infirmary for a week. While we're waiting, a nurse pushes a cart into my toe and doesn't apologize.

"Ouch," I say.

"That's ouch?" Cathreen asks.

"I don't mean it's as bad as yours."

She squeezes my hand between the embedded bones of my thumb and forefinger. "Even that's ouch?" she says.

5.

We met over three years ago, when I first came to Korea to teach English. I was born in this country but adopted. So I'm Korean only not. Now we're engaged and living in her mother's house while her mother is in America.

59.

In the morning, or really, afternoon, we go to the bank to transfer some money home. The exchange rate flickers every few minutes, my savings becoming more and less before my eyes.

"1,287," I say. "1,278." I don't say anything when it goes up over 1,300 again.

The economy is so uncaring.

60.

Cathreen says that in section 43, I didn't say, "It's an expression," but I wrote that I did. Maybe I was just thinking this. Maybe I wanted to think she didn't understand when she did. I think, even, that I didn't say, "Life is a bitch," but, "Life sucks." Simply, unambiguously, enough.

61.

This morning, Cathreen's elder student was supposed to read but only spoke the words as he had memorized them. I tried to make him look at the letters, but he kept repeating mistakes that only existed in his head. How can you fight what isn't really there?

62.

We see another movie. The movie is called "Innocent Voices," in Spanish, and is set in El Salvador during the civil war. For the first half, everything seems so true I almost forget it's based on a real story, but then the boy becomes a man.

though. We've only just met.

55.

I teach her students how to cut paper snowflakes. At first the littler one doesn't get it: how if you snip the edges everything falls apart. I tell him he has to cut out the parts where the paper can support the loss.

56.

Last night her hand buzzed with pain but I had a headache and couldn't be sympathetic.

This morning I woke up with the headache still. Usually the pain goes away after sleep.

57.

I keep thinking back to that movie, *Secret*. There are things that didn't make sense, things that do not add up. The shock of reconfiguring what kind of movie I was watching made these things seem as if they didn't matter, but they do.

58.

Meanwhile I try not to think about what the doctor will say today, how long he will say she has to stay in her cast, how long he will say before our life can go back to the way it was.

Cathreen is wise and sweet and kind.

The day of the door-slamming, we were fighting about the future. Cathreen has always told me to be more careful with doors—which, a fact I like, are called “moon” in Korean.

6.

After I finish work, I meet my beleaguered love at a Korean department store. She's had a haircut and keeps asking if I like it. Her hair has always been long and beautiful; now it's short and makes her look a bit like a doll and a bit like a thirteen-year-old. It surrounds her face in a bell-shape and new bangs even out above her eyes.

“Do I look cute?” she asks.

“Okay,” I say. “I like it.”

We watch a Chinese movie about two music students who fall in love, the girl about to die, called *Secret*. We aren't able to finish it because she feels sick to her stomach—the new medicine is too strong, and she says she is depressed about her hair.

7.

If I rethink posting this essay online, I suppose I am a little worried. This whole project will test me on the asshole-o-meter, as I've already done so much to hurt her I can't say anything now that could be taken the wrong way.

8.

Cathreen makes me catch the cat and hold him while she brushes him.

“Maybe it’s time Boise gets a haircut, too,” I say.

She doesn’t answer.

9.

I dream of doing something I’ve always wanted to do. In the morning I can’t remember what it was. I wake to find Cathreen’s face beside me. Usually she tutors at this time. She says I need to do her lesson for her—she’s too dizzy.

I nod that I will and then roll over in bed.

“You need to go now,” she says. “It’s time issue.”

I’ve obligated myself to do this for her, by causing her pain. “Okay,” I say, “I’ll go. Just don’t bother me. I can wake up on my own.”

I’m only a few minutes late.

10.

I teach her student about the growth of San Francisco, a subject I don’t expect him to be interested in. He says he wants to go there and find gold.

“There’s no more left,” I tell him. “They’ve found it all.”

Here’s what happened on Christmas:

We had a spat on the way to her sister’s house, but I figured the baby would cheer her up. “Uri Ji-hwan,” she calls him, “our Ji-hwan,” though he is only our nephew.

She decorated a cake and made cookies and I tried to make eggnog but failed.

After eating sweets we went to a Christian university high on an island mountain. Lights were strung up everywhere and people filled the streets and you could see the city below.

“Do you feel like it’s Christmas now?” Cathreen asked as we walked through a candy-cane forest. “Was it worth it?” I said it was.

We walked to the car, and I felt my tenderness for her and hers for me like a thinning of air, making it hard to breathe.

For dinner we ate raw fish and fried chicken and drank failed eggnog and soju and beer.

53.

Cathreen says, “Describe me as wise and sweet and kind.” I promise I will. This is the truth: Cathreen is wise and sweet and kind.

54.

I clean up after the dogs again. Before Cathreen was hurt she used to do this. Now I can appreciate how much she loves those dogs. They aren’t my dogs,

48.

We tell my boss I'm not coming on Christmas and it's up to him whether he wants to fire me. "It's God's day," Cathreen says. That's right. We'll leave it up to God.

49.

I get fired.

50.

When I wake up, Cathreen comes and lies down next to me. I slept in the other room again. She says she's sorry she was cranky.

Her palm hurts. But she can move her fingers, if only a few centimeters.

51.

Now she calls me into the other room. The cat is eating the dog food. This, we figure, must be why they hate him.

He is supposed to be dieting to fit on the plane to America.

52.

In the afternoon, Cathreen sits down and reads what I have written since the seventh post. She asks, "Why didn't you writing about our Christmas?"

"Okay," I say, "I will. You told me not to." I should have stopped with "I will."

11.

Later, at her sister's house, Cathreen asks what I wrote yesterday. When I read it to her, she says I'm making her look bad. "I'm not," I say. "I'm making myself look bad."

She voices a few complaints. "Where's the part about how I'm hero?" she asks. What she means is we've been watching this TV series about people who develop superpowers—she says hers is knowing the future, how she's been buying wide-sleeved, loose-fitting clothes for years and now they're easy to fit on and off around her cast.

I write what she asks.

12.

Someone from home asks how much of Cathreen's hair burned. A lot or just a little singing, he asks, as in from the verb "to singe," not "to sing."

13.

I sit by my nephew and write. Cathreen's sister had a baby five months ago, an active thing with a big voice who thinks he has two mothers.

"Hello," I say. He starts to cry. He doesn't remember me.

When Cathreen tells her sister what I'm writing, they say it's "evidence."

14.

After work I come home to more bad news: Cathreen has chipped her tooth. I tell her this has to go online. “Some people I guess won’t believe all what happened to me,” she says. I don’t believe it myself. This is the kind of thing that wouldn’t seem honest in fiction.

15.

We go back to see the rest of the Chinese movie, *Secret*, and it turns out the girl wasn’t dying. The secret she was keeping was that she was a time traveler from twenty years in the past. The movie goes on from here for another forty minutes.

I saw a Korean film once about two jesters who perform for the king. The first half of the movie is comedy. Everyone dies in the end.

I think about Cathreen’s hand, her hair, her tooth, the movie. Something here seems significant.

16.

Here are some notes about this project, good and bad:

First, how the format allows a simulation of real life—good and bad.

Second, how I’ve censored myself—bad.

Third, how what I write affects what I write—good and bad.

(This last one, for example: if Cathreen reads what

44.

My Christmas Eve lesson is about hibernating animals. Woodland frogs, I find out, hibernate under leaves, their bodies freezing and then thawing in spring.

The kids are not as amazed by this as I am.

We talk about monsters. We talk about things that scare them. I tell them again about dolls that look too much like people. But I keep thinking of frogs coming back to life.

45.

When I get home Cathreen has a new cast. It’s small and blue and looks like one of those knee braces except for it’s on her hand. Compared to the last piece it’s adorable. It allows her fingers to breathe.

She says in the morning she washed her hand and dead skin flaked off like rain.

46.

These events have me thinking about the New Year, starting fresh. Cathreen comes in and says not to write about our Christmas.

47.

Before midnight we deliver presents for her tutoring kids, calling ourselves Santa’s helpers. The two boys have plastic bows that shoot arrows with suction cups on the end. I shoot one boy in the stomach. I tell them not to shoot their teachers, and they listen.

40.

Since we get to the restaurant a little past 11:00, they let us eat in the café. Cathreen is furious at the guy and I'm tired from work and drove like an idiot to get here, stopping in the middle of the street at a red light. But the food is delicious.

41.

I think I can keep her happy.

42.

Cathreen wasn't able to convince my boss to let me have Christmas off. We talk about whether I'd be willing to threaten to walk away.

I might, but I'm scared for the future.

We need the money for when we go to America, which we will in March, if we get the visa, to get married. Then we will live in Boston. I will finish my novel. Everything will work out.

You see, we have plans.

43.

After the restaurant, my responsibilities as heavy as a drowning body I can either leave or rescue, I say, "Life is a bitch."

"No, it's not," says my love.

"It's an expression," I tell her.

I write, that changes what happens and what I write next, not like working with a set past.)

17.

In the morning I fry eggs and bring Cathreen her medicine; I tutor her student again; I come home and wash her hair. I cook the rice with too much water and it sticks together in one big lump, refusing to come apart. When the grains are too loose, Cathreen calls it "flying rice," an expression in Korean.

18.

As I write the dogs are scratching at the floor in the living room. Some holdover from their primal urge to dig holes.

19.

I don't know how much longer I can post this. It seems like I'm only looking out for the next bad thing that will happen.

I get a package from home and it's full of wet books and paperwork. Something inside is leaking.

20.

One of the teachers where I work is leaving and they have a cake for him. He says he is going to travel around Eastern Europe for a while. I tell him when he's in Prague to go to the top of Petr'ín hill, where lovers meet, and drink at the monastery there. "Best beer in

the world,” I say. I know he will not remember this. I don’t say, “Have a good life.”

21.

I pick up Cathreen. On the way back we make a U-turn I think is unnecessary. I am unreasonably angry about this.

We both know who will win the next one thousand fights.

22.

I wake up at three p.m. There is feces on the floor—the dogs have no respect. Sometimes after Cathreen and I make up I think about the woman in Grace Paley’s “Wants.” (Hello, my life.) How sad.

23.

I will stop writing now. It is time for Cathreen’s medicine. Later her stomach will hurt as much, it seems, as her hand, though I know this can’t be true.

24.

For dinner we go to a beef restaurant we tried once and liked, and on the way Cathreen says we can stop by her sister’s house afterward. The restaurant is closed, but as we settle into the car again, her sister calls to say she had a feeling she should ask where we were.

Cathreen has told me before how they have a psychic connection, like twins. I remember the night she

38.

At work I pull a girl out of class and tell her to talk to a Korean teacher about her behavior. She comes back embittered and straightened out. I’m surprised how well this has worked.

She’ll forget it by the next class. Both of us hate the material.

39.

I rush home to pick Cathreen up for dinner. I’ve planned an expensive place on a hill that overlooks the ocean.

“Someone’s blocking us,” she says as I help her with her clothes, fitting them carefully around the cast. I ask her to wear the boots I bought for her. “More bad luck.”

We take the elevator down and a produce truck is blocking three cars, one of which is ours. This is at 10:40 at night and the restaurant closes at 11:00.

The security guard calls the guy, goes up to his apartment, talks to the wife, the wife promises to call the guy. We see the guy walk toward us, but he doesn’t stop. He hurries for the elevator as we call at him.

We go back to the security guard. I am ready to key this guy’s truck.

The security guard calls the guy, the guy comes down, tells some ridiculous lies, finally moves his truck for us, then drives it back in to block the other cars.

This almost ruins our night.

34.

She goes to sleep before me. I have a beer and stare at the computer. I stare at this essay but don't write anything. When I enter the bedroom she is sprawled across the mattress. I kiss her on the temple. I worry.

35.

In the morning we wear our hats to her student's apartment, and the two boys there both have animal hats as well.

36.

We go to the hospital afterward.

The doctor says it will take her another month to regain movement in her hand. He shines some sort of laser on her. My eyes hurt to watch.

"Don't look," I tell her.

"I'm not," she says. She calls her sister and I lie down on the bed across from her.

37.

I want to write here that this will be a good day, because I will make it one. I decide to write this. I write, "I want to write here that this will be a good day, because I will make it one. I decide to write this. I write . . ." But I stop before it gets stupid.

I'm thinking about self-fulfilling prophecies.

I click, "publish post."

had stomach cramps and woke me up screaming, and in the morning, she called her sister and it turned out the baby had been born.

We eat at their house and watch a movie afterward. I walk with her brother-in-law to pick out the DVD. He says something in Korean, and something else, and then tugs on my earmuffs, and we walk out in the rain not understanding each other.

25.

Christmas shopping. Why is it so hard to pick out something other people will like? I don't know whether I ask this as a personal question or a human one.

26.

The dogs and cat fight like dogs and cats. Cathreen looks at dog-training devices online. The machines look complicated. Here's one for multiple-dog houses: a bark is amplified at dog pitch, and the other canines, annoyed, beat up on the first one to teach him a lesson.

I think.

The reviews do not sound promising.

27.

Cathreen seems to have lost interest in the essay. Her hand is healing. She didn't take medicine all day yesterday. Instead she stayed in bed and surfed the Internet.

She came out once to watch TV and dug her nails

into my skin without noticing. I yelled, frightening her out of her reverie. She went back into the bedroom. Later we both apologized and went to sleep. That was the weekend.

28.

When I slammed the door on her I was trying to storm out of the room and make a scene. I didn't know her hand was there. This doesn't make it any better.

I am shipwrecked on an island of guilt.

29.

A few days ago, her mother asked her to go to the family fortune teller and retrieve their fortunes for 2009. My luck was supposed to get better in December.

This is the same fortune teller who thought I had died when I was two, when Cathreen went to see him about us getting married. He said my life in Korea had ended then. I was adopted when I was two. He said we're a good match if I'm still alive.

Or maybe this was another fortune teller—I can't remember.

30.

I think "Shipwrecked" would be a good title. We're wandering around picking up the fragments of what was broken when her hand almost was. We'll build a shelter here against cannibals and bad luck.

31.

During the day Cathreen complains that, since she started healing, I haven't treated her as nicely as before. I help her put on make-up before she goes to my workplace to convince my boss to let me have Christmas off.

There are so many things girls can do to their faces. Things that look dangerous. She runs a pencil across her eye and I try not to make any sudden movements.

32.

At night, I come home and she's despondent on the bed, her cast off. The sides of her fingers are white and pruned. "Skin's off," she says. They look skinny from the top and fat from the side—the swelling is mostly on her palm, as if she has another hand inside the first. We talk about how we've never seen a bruised palm before.

It's hard to create an arc when life keeps starting us back at the beginning.

33.

We buy hats for Christmas while we purchase another bandage to wrap her hand. Hers is a polar bear. Mine a raccoon. I am inappropriately excited. Maybe it's compensation.

I know in some ways this whole experience will help us. I will always be more careful with her.

Or maybe it will only help me. But maybe that's enough.