

WHERE YOU SEE YOURSELF

Catherine Uroff

The Interview

I go over everything. Every twist and turn on the bumpy road of my uneven employment history. I even slide past the part about being let go recently. Boy, I was sweating that part—how to explain what happened at McMullan’s in a few words without standing up and tearing out my eyes and bellowing out my betrayal. I end up mumbling something about corporate restructuring, and that seems to work. There’s two of them interviewing me—a man and a young woman—and they both seem to buy it.

Then the guy leans back in his chair and pushes my resume forward a little with the side of his hand as if it’s something dirty that he doesn’t really want to touch. I’m not really concentrating by this point. I’m thinking that the tie I’m wearing is all wrong. It’s too loud and cheerful. I’m thinking I should’ve

gone with something subdued or possibly striped like the one that guy's wearing, and then he says to me, "So, tell me..."

I snap to attention. My old boss at McMullan's, Chuck, used to admire that about me, how quickly I could focus on something when the time was right. But still, I can see the guy's lips move, and I'm sure he's asking me something important, but his voice is low so I have to shake my head and ask him to repeat himself, which is strike number one because in this job market you don't want people to think you're too old to hear.

"Where do you see yourself in five years?"

I need to come up with some kind of answer fast, something that will make me sound passionate, motivated, hungry, ready for any challenge. *Hey, in five years, I see myself working my ass off, contributing to this company in any way that I can, and if that means working twelve hour days seven days a week then that's how I see myself because, frankly speaking here, I see myself any way that you would like me to see myself.*

Instead, I get a picture of these paintings in my head, something I saw a long time ago in a book. It was called *The Voyage of Life*, or something like that. Funny, the things you remember, the things you can't forget. It was a series of paintings, and one of them had this dude in a flimsy boat on his knees

praying because the boat's clearly headed for the rapids, seconds from going over. He's crying. He knows he's done for.

"Where do I see myself in five years? Still alive, hopefully," I say, and then I realize that I've said it out loud. I try to make it into a joke by laughing, but the guy just frowns. Only the young woman laughs with me. She has a small, narrow face and sleek, black hair curled behind her ears. Tess, I believe her name is. She hasn't spoken once since this interview started.

"OK, how about this? What do you like to do when you're out of the office? In your spare time?" the guy asks, and I suddenly remember that his name is Robert. That's right. Robert and Tess.

"Like," I say to stall for time, "you're asking about my hobbies?"

"I'm trying to get a sense of you. I see from your resume that you're very experienced. But what are you really like? Would you fit in with our team here? Who is," Robert looks down at my resume, presumably to check my name, "Lyle Bennett?"

Another question I'm not expecting. I clear my throat. I loosen the knot in my tie. I take a sip of lukewarm water from the plastic cup that has been sitting on the conference table ever since I walked into this windowless room, twenty minutes early for my scheduled interview. First thing I want to say to

them is Lyle Bennett is a fifty-five year old man who was recently fired by his boss, Chuck, who he had thought was his friend, well kind of anyway, and it's not like Lyle doesn't know things about Chuck that, if made public, would cause some kind of embarrassment. Like the fact that Chuck contributed just \$5 to the office's Project Santa adopt-a-family program when everyone else donated at least \$20 each, and Lyle carefully guarded that secret for two years in a row but still got fired.

Lyle Bennett is a fifty-five year old man who shouldn't be in the position of begging for this job, which is entry-level and at a salary he made twenty years ago, from a man called Robert who has protruding eyeballs and a receding hairline, and let's face it, Lyle Bennett doesn't have much but at least he still has his hair, which is one thing I guess.

Lyle Bennett is a fifty-five year old man who rents a house in Chicopee, Massachusetts, where you can't walk downtown by yourself without carrying a gun because it's just that kind of place. No matter how many times the mayor says that Chicopee is going to rise again, it doesn't. Just like Lyle Bennett.

Lyle Bennett is a fifty-five year old man who hasn't ever been married, although one time he thought he was coming close with this woman who worked at McMullan's and was divorced and who cried a lot in the office

unisex bathroom, fifteen minutes at a time barricading herself in there. Lyle defended her to others and tried to comfort her, and she was grateful and said he was a great pal, but then a man she met on Match.com asked her to move in with him and she said yes and quit McMullan's without even a two week notice.

Lyle Bennett is a fifty-five year old man who tried Match.com himself a few times, and the last time he met a woman at a bar in Springfield and she arrived to their date wearing a fur coat. The bar was dark and cold, and she wrinkled her nose when she saw him standing up to greet her, and she said, as soon as she got to him, "You're not at all what I was hoping for."

Instead, I take a different path.

"I've been thinking a lot these days," I start, "about philosophy actually. The deeper questions. It's really something to ponder."

I should stop right then and there, but for some reason I can't. Robert is already looking down, bored with my answer. Tess is doodling on a blank piece of paper.

"I mean think about it," I say, leaning forward, trying to capture their attention. "What are we all really doing here? And are we really here? I mean, I'm looking at you," at this they both look up, "and you're looking at me, but

are we really seeing each other? What are we really seeing? Am I really here? Why am I here? Why was I born at a particular time instead of another?"

Robert nods, a quick, curt bob of his head. His lips are tightly closed. Tess puts her pen down.

"Sometimes," I continue, even though I have this vague understanding that I should stop now, shouldn't have started in the first place, "it keeps me up at night. I'll be honest. Thinking about these things. All these unknowable things. The vastness of the universe. Our purpose within it. The fact of our existence. How strange it all is. Surreal really, if you think about it. We're here, I suppose, but for what purpose? And how, exactly, did we get here? Oh, I know all the stuff about divinity and natural selection, all that stuff Darwin says, but what does that really mean?"

There's silence. Robert is clearly forcing a smile on his face.

"Just some things I've been mulling over."

"Yes, well," Robert says.

That's when Tess interrupts him. God bless her for that, I think to myself as I see her hold her hand up.

"It's kind of like," she says, "the chicken and the egg."

I can't tell if she's joshing me or not. Sure, make fun of the poor chub sweating it out in his interview suit with the clashing tie and the fat jowls and the big gut and the wheezing breath. Then I watch her look over at Robert, all of her determination gone in a flash as he glares at her.

"Which came first, you know," she says softly as Robert pushes his chair back and stands up. The interview, I understand, is over.

References

I parked my car on the side of the road, right across the street from McMullan's. I was happy that I'd gotten a good space. Most days, I got to work too late to get such a prime spot. I was sitting in my car, engine still on, listening to the radio. Two clown DJs, laughing about something. And that was when it happened. Madeline, the receptionist at McMullan's, slipped. She was walking on the icy sidewalk in front of the office, taking tiny, nimble steps, but then she must've stepped on a hidden patch of ice because she started to wobble, her arms wind-milling. She tilted one way and then the other, trying to keep balance. Her purse flew away from her, landing on top of a snow bank, and she went down on one knee. I thought that was going to be all to it, but then she fell forward. Face splat on the ice.

She got up fairly quickly, before I could open up my car door and run over to help her. She fetched her purse, rubbed her hip, shrugged a little, and then made her way to the front of the office to disappear inside. When I saw her again, she was behind the front desk, turning on her computer, switching the phone off its night ring.

“Hey, look, you OK there? Quite a nasty spill you took.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, which I took as her way of telling me that she knew that I’d watched her fall, she knew that I sat my fat ass in the car and didn’t try to help her because the DJs were still cracking jokes about HOV lanes and morning traffic and Donald Trump, because it was warm in my car and cold outside, because with my overall agility I didn’t think I could get there in time to do much help anyway.

“Goddamn winter,” I said, thumping my fist on top of the front desk counter, trying to change the subject. “Sometimes it feels like it’ll never end.”

“Cool it, Lyle. Will you?” She said, and then the phone rang. It was Chuck. I could hear his voice, even though she held the phone close to her ear. He was telling her to tell me to come to his office as soon as I got in.

Chuck’s office was huge, big enough for not only his wide desk but a full-sized sofa and a long coffee table too. He was a bald, muscular, tan guy with

very white teeth. If he wore a hoop earring, he'd be Mr. Clean, which was something I said once to one of the young kids he hired last year to do some programming, and the kid just looked at me, completely baffled, as if he'd never heard of a character called Mr. Clean before. Which was a strange reaction to me until it wasn't. What do young kids today know about cleaning products, TV commercials, jingles? Everything they watch is on their computer.

"Lyle," Chuck said.

"Madeline had a nasty fall," I said. "I'll call the Town first thing and make sure they clear that sidewalk right away. Yeah, I will. It's wrong. What they put us through. Just to get to work. Just to do our jobs."

"Well, I appreciate that, Lyle. You taking care like that," Chuck said.

I'd forgotten that he'd called me in. Or, to be precise, called Madeline to call me in. I was working on that—the quality of my work, my attention to detail, one of the things that Chuck had rated me low on during my last review, along with my general tardiness and interrupting people in meetings and sometimes wearing shirts that had food stains on them. I started backing away from Chuck and his enormous desk. I was already thinking about the cup of coffee I was going to pour from the burner in the back of the office. I'd gotten

a mug that said “The Boss” on it during last year’s holiday grab bag gift swap, something that was probably bought with Chuck in mind, but I took it and I wouldn’t trade it even when he asked me to. I was thinking about picking up that mug and going to get coffee. I always left the mug on the top, right hand corner of my desk every night so that it’d be readily accessible in the morning; that was an attention to detail that just didn’t get noticed—

“I probably don’t need to tell you this. I mean, you must know. But things haven’t been good here for a while,” Chuck said.

And just like that, I was listening. You don’t have to hit me over the head with things. My father used to say that about me. “That Lyle,” I once heard him say to my mother, “Don’t have to tell him twice.”

“No,” I said to Chuck.

“I mean, what I’m about to say, none of this should really be news to you. You see the monthly, the quarterly reports. In lean times like this, you’ve got to look at everyone’s overall contribution and make some tough decisions.”

“Right.”

He squirmed in his seat. His leather chair had big wheels and wide armrests. His wife picked it out for him from a catalog, and he spent a week

debating with me and half the staff about returning it because it didn't swivel smoothly enough.

"I'm just adding up the numbers. It's the little guy that feels the heat, believe me." Chuck pulled on his collar. "Sit down, will you?"

"I won't do that."

"Come on. Make this a little easier. Nothing's happened yet. I'm just saying—"

"What are you just saying? I want to hear it directly from you, if you don't mind, if that's not too much to ask. I've been a fairly good employee, I mean, considering that no one's perfect."

"You're not always the easiest to get along with. Some people in the office, well, they think you've got anger problems."

"Hey, anyone who's not angry these days is missing the point entirely."

"What does that even mean, Lyle?"

"I won't beg for it, if that's what you want. I won't do it."

"You're just making it harder on yourself, acting this way."

"It's two weeks before Christmas."

"The timing on this kind of thing is never ideal."

"Would you be doing this to me if I had a wife and kids?"

“What? What does that have to do with it?”

“Pick on the fat, old single man, why don’t you? Get him out of the way fast enough. As if I’m not upset enough about the state of my life. Now I have to be punished for it too?”

“What are you accusing me of? I don’t like it, Lyle. Don’t act like this, Lyle. Look, I’ve got other employees who really care about their jobs, who really want to do well, who come in every day to do the best they can. Can I say the same about you?”

“Fine. You want me to beg? Is that it? OK, I’ll beg.”

Now Chuck stood up.

“Don’t do that. Get up, Lyle. Come on. You’re embarrassing yourself. I’m giving you a heads up, that’s all. Nothing’s happened yet. But I wanted to let you know that there’s that possibility. Despite all the complaints I’ve gotten about you over the years, I’ve always liked you, Lyle. I really have. Despite everything, there’s something about you.”

“You’ve always liked me? Jesus.” I got up off my knees and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “Two weeks before Christmas, Chuck, and you tell me I may be getting let go soon.”

“I told you during your last review that if your performance didn’t improve—”

“Uh-huh. What gets me the most is that I never much liked this stupid job to begin with. It was just something to do while I figured out what I really wanted.”

“Well,” Chuck said to me after a long pause, “Think of this as a grand opportunity then.”

I left Chuck’s office and went to my cubicle. I turned on my computer and stared at the screensaver. Three-dimensional, primary colored balls bouncing wildly against each other. I shut down my computer and picked up my briefcase, which was empty because I’d forgotten to make lunch for myself in the morning and I only used the briefcase as a way to carry my paper bag lunch from home to work every day. Madeline was at her desk, typing on her keyboard when I got to the reception area. She barely looked up when I said good-bye.

The Offer

So the interview is over. Neither Robert nor Tess offers to walk me out. I take the elevator to the lobby and I do a mock salute to the receptionist there,

always good to keep the charade up until the last second, and then I walk outside. It's four in the afternoon and pretty cold out. The sun has started to weaken. Everything looks dark and light at the same time. The tail end of winter is a cruel time here.

There's a bar across the street that has a lit sign of a Budweiser bottle in one window. I'm not a drinker. Never have been. My father was the town drunk, and when you grow up the way I did—patting your mother's back as she cried because your father decided to dress up as Santa for the church Christmas party and got piss drunk as all hell beforehand because he was nervous about his "performance," as he put it, and fell on his way up the steps to the church and tried to pass out the gifts anyway from his pillow-case bag to the little kids who were screaming because Santa had a bloody mouth and broken teeth, Jesus he was more of a Jack-o'-Lantern than he ever was a Santa—you don't touch the stuff. You understand that drinking is a luxury that you can never afford.

Still, I am drawn to this bar right now. It's called The Ruck, and it has a wooden statue of Uncle Sam by the front door and inside there's an open grill where you can see someone flipping burgers and there are TVs on the wall and plastic ketchup bottles on the bar and for some reason this place feels like the

only place for me right now. What's the alternative? Go back to my empty apartment and rifle through a stack of bills that I don't want to have to pay? Call up Chuck and beg for my job back again, even though I just called him two days ago and Madeline said he was in a meeting and it was eight thirty in the morning so I asked her how long his meeting was going to last and she said 'Lyle, let it go'? Go by my mother's house to see if she needs any groceries or just a friend to talk to, and she can tell me what she told me last week, which was she's been seeing a therapist about my father and the therapist has suggested that she burn all the letters that my father ever wrote to her as a kind of exorcism?

My father was a great writer when he was a young man, and I've read some of the things he used to write to her, all about how beautiful she was to him, how knowing her was knowing the secret of life itself. Grand words from a big-hearted man who nevertheless ended up being found face down in a snow bank one morning, frozen to it all. So, no, there is nowhere else for me to go but to this bar across the street from my interview, but don't mind me if I order a diet soda. And a basket of chicken wings.

I'm there for an hour, sitting by myself, and then the door opens and Tess walks in. She's wearing a coat with a hood but once she steps inside and pulls

off her coat, I see that it is her. She is a lovely looking woman. Way too young for me, but if I had a son, I'd like to see him with someone like her. Delicate and graceful and earnest. I wave to her like I'm flagging down a bus, and she hesitates for a second and then sits down next to me at the bar.

"Hi," she says.

"Fancy meeting you here," I say, lowering my voice like I'm a radio announcer or something.

"Yeah, well," she says.

"We don't have to talk about it. I'm not going to ask you a thing about my interview," I say. "If that's what you're worried about."

"OK."

"In fact, why don't you let me buy you a drink?"

"No, that's OK."

"No, seriously, I insist."

I try to get the bartender's attention. He's a little rat-faced guy with red hair who just twenty minutes ago refused to even look at me when I asked for a refill of my Diet Coke, but when he sees Tess, he's immediately available, asking her what she wants, how he can help her.

She orders a glass of Chardonnay, but she doesn't take a sip of it when it's served to her. I admire that about her, the restraint she shows.

"So," she says after a pause. I'm pretending like I'm watching some football game on the television, even though, truth is, I've never kept up with any sport, professional or college. Truth is, I was always the pudgy, short kid in school who got picked last for teams, and I've never gotten over the sting of that. Holding a grudge is another one of my faults that I'm surprised Chuck didn't bring up when he canned me. "What you said in there," Tess continues. "I've got to tell you. About the whole meaning of our existence? It made a lot of sense to me."

"Yeah? Well, that's good. That's very good." I wipe my mouth with a cocktail napkin. I'm worried I've got grease on my lips, food stuck in my teeth. "Though I don't think your friend, Robert, there felt the same way."

"Robert's pretty picky," Tess says.

"Well, I guess that's his right."

"My last year of college? I took a Philosophy course."

"Always a wise choice. Or at least I think so. I know plenty of people who might think it's a waste of time, learning that stuff, but that's the whole point, isn't it? Don't get me started. I could talk all night."

“I needed it. I needed to think about what our picture of reality is really like. What knowledge is. What value is. What kind of people we should be. All of that stuff. Unlocking all the, you know, paradoxes in the world.”

She’s kind of lost me, but I’m nodding my head so fast it might fly off.

“Yeah, sure, I can see that,” I say, taking a sip from my empty glass of Diet Coke, nothing but ice cubes stuck to the bottom. “Of course, back in my day, I took a lot of science in college. I had this idea that I could become a scientist. One of those men in a white lab coat, looking through a microscope. But then I needed to find a job to pay back my student loans, so I started working for this insurance company. My title was great though. Associate Data Scientist, they called me. It made me feel better, that title did, because the job? Paper pusher. Data entry. All around gofer. Our offices were in the basement. No windows. You get the picture. So much for my great career as a scientist. And all those things I thought, well...”

I make a gesture with my hands to indicate something blowing up.

“Let me give you a little hint,” I say. “Someday, and you don’t ever know when or where, you run up against the limitations of your life. And you think to yourself, ‘Oh, now I get it.’ You see how foolish you were to ever think

otherwise. Hate to be the one to tell you this, but it's true. You looking for truth? That's one."

Tess is staring at me.

"Don't say that," she says slowly.

Now it's my turn to look at her. She's got to be twenty-five years old, not a day older. She's very earnest, and I imagine that somewhere out there is a young man who is also earnest and sincere and devoted to her and together they will make a good life. I can just see it.

"What are you doing here right now talking to an old man like me? You've surely got better places to be."

She's probably got a family, a whole unit waiting to support her. There will be a mother who bakes cookies and wears aprons. A dad who has a gut like me and watches football on Sunday afternoons. An older brother who teases her but gives her a box of chocolates every Valentine's Day. A younger sister who idolizes her and begs to borrow her clothes.

Tess is looking down. She still hasn't touched her wine and that's when I understand that she is here, not to talk to me, not to drink by herself, but to meet someone.

“Hey, look,” I say, “I’m intruding, aren’t I? I’m sorry. You’re waiting on someone. I should give you some space.”

“It’s OK. He’s a little late.”

“Still, I’m taking up your time.”

I think that will be the end of it. I will pay up my bill once I can get that rude bartender’s attention. I will button up my coat, wish Tess a pleasant evening, trudge out of the bar, get into my car, drive slowly home. I’ll walk into my empty apartment and before I turn on the heat, I’ll take a deep breath and remind myself to place one foot in front of the other. That was what my father said to me once. It was when he was in rehab. I visited him there. He felt guilty about the expense of it because it was inpatient and insurance only paid for a quarter of it so when he saw me he started to cry, telling me that he was bankrupting my mother and then, practically in the same breath, he said that the most important thing he’d learned in rehab was to place one foot in front of the other. “Keep walking,” he told me. “I’ve lost almost ten pounds since I’ve been here because I won’t stop moving.”

But before anything can happen, Tess’s date comes in. He’s not at all what I expected. He’s not earnest. And he’s not even particularly good-looking. He’s got a wide nose and thin lips and rippled cheeks. He rips the hat off his head

as soon as he steps inside, and his thin, wispy hair sticks straight up. When he sees Tess, he scowls.

“Frankie,” Tess says.

“This place is a dump,” he says. He’s got a nasty little voice. High pitched and nasally. “Why in the world are we meeting here?”

Tess sighs. “I don’t know, Frankie.”

“Of all places. As if I haven’t had a bad enough day. I’ve got to tell you what happened. But not here. Not in this dump. I can’t talk to you here. And I need to talk to you, Tess. I really do.”

“I’m sorry, Frankie.”

“I don’t like it here. It’s like, I could tell instantly. The second I walked in.”

Frankie takes a big breath in. His nostrils flare like he’s trying to pick up every scent in the place.

“It’s no big deal. We’ll go somewhere else,” Tess says.

She picks her purse up off the top of the bar. In a few seconds, she will be gone. I will never see her again.

“Let the little lady finish her drink, at least,” I say.

Frankie turns towards me slowly.

“Who are you?”

“Just someone keeping Tess company while she waited for you. You shouldn’t keep a girl waiting. That’s the first thing you should know.”

“Yeah? What’s the second? What’s the second thing I should know, ya big genius?”

“Figure it out yourself, you son of a—”

Frankie looks at Tess.

“Really? We’re going through this again?”

She holds her hands up in the air.

“Frankie, honest to God—”

But he’s not listening to her anymore. He’s back to me and he’s smiling.

“Hey, I’ve got a piece of advice for you, big guy. You want to hear it? Why don’t you mind your own fucking business? Go back to your chicken wings there and leave us alone. There’s a thought.”

Frankie winks at me then, which starts a whole chain of events, beginning with this big idea that I get. Enough of Lyle Bennett sitting on the sidelines. It’s time for Lyle Bennett to stand up and demand to be counted and actually do something with his life. Starting with protecting this girl here. I didn’t do anything when Madeline fell and I should’ve, but now I’ve got the chance

again to be kind and courageous and helpful and fuck all if I'm not going to take it this time.

So I stand up and push the bar stool back. I take one step towards Frankie who first puts his hands up to shield his face and then he whirls around like he's going to leave and I think to myself, *I did it. I really made a difference. This coward is going to run out of here without me having to even lift a finger*, which is a good thing because I've never won a fight in my entire life, and that's when Frankie turns around again and sucker punches me in the softest part of my gut.

I wasn't ready for it. If I had been, if I'd been able to steel myself for it, it would've been better. But he caught me unprepared, kind of like Chuck did when he told me I was getting fired soon, kind of like Madeline did when she fell on the hard sidewalk, kind of like Robert the interviewer did when he asked me how I saw myself in the future. So I grunt and double over and then—Goddammit I wish I could roar—I lose my balance and I'm grabbing at the back of it seems like every bar stool in the place to keep upright, but still, I go down.

By the time I can put things right again, Frankie is gone. Tess has her hand on my shoulder. She's trying to help me up, but the bartender is shouting at

us. “Get the hell outta here,” he’s saying. Other people in the bar are staring, pointing. Someone is actually giggling.

“Yeah, I’m a big fucking joke,” I mutter to myself as I check my pockets to make sure my wallet or any loose coins didn’t fall out. Tess is the one who ends up paying the bill and then she walks with me outside the bar. She is much shorter than me, but still she asks me to lean on her if I need any assistance.

“Your date’s got quite the temper,” I say as I zip up my coat.

“I’m sorry he hit you. Frankie and me, we’ve been going through some things. Still, it was wrong to involve you.”

We are walking away from The Ruck, passing parked cars covered in snow, weak streetlights barely illuminating the black ice on the sidewalk. My head is still buzzing from what happened. I can’t even remember where I parked my car, if we’re walking in the right direction.

“We were engaged once and it all fell apart in this really spectacular way. The closer and closer we got to the actual wedding date, the more I started to feel it. This like really big numbness coming over me. And so I did a lot of things I’m not proud of. Was with one guy after the other. People at work. People I just met randomly. After a while I didn’t care who they were. And of

course Frankie found out. How could he not? Half the town knew what I was up to.”

“Jesus, that’s a story.”

“The wedding was cancelled. Obviously. My mother lost a lot of money on the invites and the deposit she’d put down for the venue. It took a while, a long time, but Frankie eventually forgave me. He’s still jittery about everything though, and I don’t blame him. He always asks me, ‘How do I know you won’t do this again?’ And I never can answer him. I don’t know how to explain it. What came over me. But we keep on trying. We fight a lot and I end up crying a lot and I’ve apologized to him like ten million times and sometimes I think it’s always going to be like this. We’re in this loop, you know?”

I really don’t know what to say to this young woman. I wish I could say something that is declarative and honest and bold. I could pound my fist on my chest to emphasize my point.

“Things will get better,” is what I end up with, which is corny as all hell and I usually never think like this, going with the general premise that life is just one sucker punch after the other. But I want to assure this girl of something. I want to lift her out of her sad story.

“Thanks, mister.”

“Lyle,” I say. “My name is Lyle Bennett.”

“Of course. That’s right. Lyle. I forgot.”

We’re way past her office now. We’re passing apartment buildings that have bars on their windows, dying wreaths still hanging on the front doors, even though it’s way past Christmas. We can’t look at each other because both of us have to look down, concentrate on every step we take so that we won’t fall. It’s like we’re alone but together at the same time.

“I’m not going to get the job, am I?” I ask after a little while.

She doesn’t hesitate. “No, probably not.”

We stop at a crosswalk, but there are no cars. It’s as if the whole world has gone to sleep. We step off the curb and cross the street. The more we walk, the better I feel. Frankie’s punch wasn’t that hard after all.

“Where are we going?” I finally ask, and that’s when she turns to look at me. The tip of her nose is red, and I wonder what she sees when she looks at me.

“I don’t know,” she says, and I think that will be the end of it, but we keep on going.

Catherine Uroff's short fiction has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *Prairie Schooner*, *New Madrid*, *The Roanoke Review*, *Floodwall*, *Prime Number*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Carve Magazine*, and other literary journals. She has been nominated for the Million Writers Award and the UCLA James Kirkwood Literary Award and was a finalist for American Short Fiction's Short Story Contest. Her short story collection, *Grieving Women and Other Stories*, was a two-time finalist for the Snake Nation Press Serena McDonald Kennedy Award. She has recently completed a novel, *Guests*, that centers around a rundown lakeside inn in New Hampshire.