

All the Silent Spaces

By Christine Ristaino

Prologue

The shopping cart we find in the parking lot has Cinderella on it and my children think they are at Disneyland. Their chubby arms and legs move with purpose as they climb inside. As I push my children toward the store, I glance down at them. They're cute. I know this about my kids. My curly hair blows in the breeze, lifting and settling every few seconds near the sides of my face. When I reach the sidewalk and the wheels become stuck on the curb, a man on a bench stands and walks in our direction. I see him and acknowledge him with a nod, hoping he'll help me lift the cart onto the sidewalk.

The man grabs the shopping cart with one hand and with the other he throws his fist into my face. The pain concentrates on the bridge of my nose for a second and then moves into my head. I can feel something open inside me. I smell blood as it flows out my nose.

The man is wiry. I keep my hands on the cart, wanting to create space underneath for my children, who are somewhere below me.

Something isn't right with my shoulder. All the ligaments, muscles, and skin are pulling off the bone and the bone itself seems to move away from the socket. Each time it is pulled, I feel a wave of nausea. I want to crouch low to the ground and nurse my arm, but my children are below. I squeeze the cart, almost touching my palms to my fingers.

I stare at the man's face. It is angular, thin. It does not smile. The lips press themselves together, wormy, contemptuous. I hear a crack. It sounds like the snap of a chicken bone. This time it's my jaw. The force brings my head back. My neck hits my shoulders. Another wave of nausea, and something wirelike pulls against my arm. It's my purse strap. It must be caught on the cart. I thrust my shoulder back to keep it in place, and this brings on searing pain.

He moves closer. His breath is sour. There's blood on his face and hand. He tries to yank my purse from me. So that's what this is about.

"You're a prick," I say and his eyes move away from mine.

He steps back and then his fist strikes my right eye. I am retching. The muscles in both arms ache with this new force. I let go of the cart and cover my face with my hands. The purse strap slides off my shoulder. I'm falling. There's the thud of my own head and a sharp pain where it hits the pavement. Dots appear and disappear in front of me—an electrical current, the wiring all wrong. Blood creeps through the cracks in my hands, and then I hear his footsteps as they recede, and look

to see my two children inches away, staring from the princess cart. I can feel the cold blacktop on my skin. I hear a child wailing. It's my daughter. I am covered in my own blood. I want to close my eyes.

Retrogression 1: September 17, 2007, 2:30 p.m.

It is the Monday after the attack. I am at a meeting with the second highest ranking official at my university, Provost Ray Stevens, a historian by training, a gentle speaker, a black man. He is talking about a trip he has recently taken and I can't remember where he went, even though he must have told us three times. It is a rare and important meeting, for we are finalizing something that will change the university in a positive way, but they are asking me about my black eye, or something about my eyes. "Why won't the health center give you an appointment for a scan?" they ask. "Because they didn't have one available until Thursday." Suddenly Provost Stevens is on the phone and I am in a car, driving there, driving to the health center with an appointment, just like that, only I am not driving; my colleague Jackie is. Then I am at the hospital. "Why did you take me here?" I ask her. "Because your pupils were two different sizes and you were slurring your words," she says. I don't care. I want to hear more about Jackie's crazy childhood with eleven kids, or something like that, playing on the train tracks and sneaking into movie theaters.

Chapter 1: Victims

I have heard stories from victims since my late teens. Initially I listened, but never knew how to react. When a man beat me up at the store in front of my children, stories of survival became part of who I was. Overnight, I was a member of a community. Stories tumbled into my pathway, one after another.

Zahra called me immediately after she was attacked when I was living in Seattle in my early twenties. She was badly beaten, with a black eye, a sprained ankle, a dislocated knee, and gashes to her head. I walked through her front door into the middle of a conversation.

"All I hear is you apologizing for this guy. You have to call the police," her boyfriend said.

"No, I can't. I promised I wouldn't."

"But he could hurt somebody else," he told her.

"No, I absolutely cannot," she said.

Zahra had been walking her dogs in the park when a

man jumped her under an overpass. He grabbed her hair and smashed her head backward into a concrete wall. Then he threw her down and pinned her to the ground.

"I am going to rape you and kill you," he told her.

Zahra began to say her name, first to herself and then to him.

"I'm Zahra. I work at the university. I'm innocent. Who are you?"

"Joe," he finally said. "My name's Joe."

Joe pushed himself off Zahra's body. Zahra managed to stand and take Joe's hand.

"Joe," she said. "You are innocent. God loves you. I need you to help me collect my dogs and then walk me to my car."

Joe began to sob and threw his arms around Zahra's legs. Zahra was an atheist, but she began to pray, "Dear God, please forgive Joe."

By the time they arrived at Zahra's car, they had formed a bond.

"I will not call the police if you promise not to do this again, to anybody," Zahra said.

"I won't," Joe promised.

Around this same time, Natalie, a college friend of mine teaching nearby, called to warn me she would be on the six o'clock news. During an assembly at her high school, a student had grabbed her around the neck and placed a knife to her throat.

"We're up next," he told her.

He dragged her out to the middle of the basketball court, and everyone laughed until they realized he was serious.

He took the microphone. "I'm going to kill her, and I'm the one you'll all remember," he said. He repeated these same words a second time.

Natalie tried to escape his grasp by tucking her chin and pushing her arms up over her head. As she did this, the school principal snuck behind her attacker and grabbed the knife. The only injury was a cut on the principal's hand.

People sent Natalie bouquets of flowers, and she got a few days off. Then she went back to work. Teachers at her school thought Natalie must have been failing her student, but this wasn't true. There was actually trust between the two. "He was doing fine in my class. It's a power thing," Natalie told me. "Until communities can help children to fully become themselves, this type of crime will continue to happen."

Margo, a neighbor, invited me to coffee right after I was beaten up. She told me how difficult it was to get over an assault and described what had happened to her. The man was in his early twenties, and Margo remembers being annoyed when he tried to coax her friend into staying with him at a party. She was waiting in the car when she saw the man hit her friend in the face. Margo shot out of the front seat and confronted him. The man hit Margo and knocked her over. She landed in the dirt, muddled and confused.

Later that evening, Margo called her mom from her friend's house, sobbing. "Please come and pick me up. Something's happened," she said.

The people in Margo's town wanted her to write it all off as an unfortunate peculiarity of the man's character. He had a reputation for assaulting women. "These are just the actions of a drunk man," they told her. "Let it go."

But Margo and her mother wouldn't let it go.

A court battle ensued, humiliating and long, but it felt right. He was convicted of assault. Margo went off to college the following year and no longer visits her hometown.

A year after my own attack I met Marina at a university workshop. Marina asked me which courses I had been teaching and if I was happy to be finished with the semester. I responded that I had just completed a leave of absence.

"Were you doing research?" she asked.

"No," I said, and I began outlining the circumstances of my leave: how my children had seen me bleeding on the pavement, how my son could no longer sleep at night, how my daughter had cried every night before bed for a month. I told her I was writing about it. Then she told me her story.

"I worked at a bank until the day we were robbed. They had us lie on the floor. They all had guns. I was the bank's one black employee. They took everyone's money from their drawers except mine. My drawer counted down perfectly, to the penny. Maybe it was a togetherness kind of thing. I don't know. But hey, I didn't want that kind of togetherness. Afterward, my employers and the police thought I had something to do with it. I never went back to the bank. For a while, every time I saw somebody with a nylon coat and one of those ski caps, I would get nervous. But I had to get over that fast. I couldn't be afraid of my brothers.

"You said your children were afraid after your attack?" Marina asked after a pause.

"Sam was for a while. Every time we went to his preschool and a black dad dropped off his son, Sam would crawl behind my legs and hide."

"You know, my brother was jumped by three guys, but my mother didn't want him to press charges. She went and talked with the attackers' mothers instead. 'That would have more of a positive effect,' she had said, and it was good for me to see as a child. My mother explained she didn't want them to go through the criminal justice system. It would destroy them. It would turn them into criminals. I'm glad she gave me this perspective. My father was upset. He wanted them all to be in jail."

"My husband, too," I said. "He's so angry. After I was robbed, he called my cell phone, and somebody answered. My husband yelled into the phone, 'Do you like to beat up women and scare children? Do you get your kicks this way, you asshole?' My children and I have all had counseling. But Mark is still fuming mad."

"This must be more difficult for your husband right now. The three of you experienced it together, but your husband, he was alone in this, wondering what to do."

I nodded, and we walked silently.

I thought of Marina's story, and the others flowed to the surface—Zahra's near-death escape, Natalie's knife-wielding student, Margo's court case, and many more. Two friends were molested as children. Male and female friends were beaten up for things they said or did at school. A friend who worked at an Atlanta bar lost control of his bladder when two men put a gun to his head.

And there were more incidents that came to mind. A woman I knew was raped in the 1950s when she was only thirteen. My college roommate was mugged on a dark street in Berkeley. My brother was beaten up numerous times for his wallet in San Francisco. Another brother was held up on a New York subway. Two friends were threatened at gunpoint in their home in Atlanta. My own grandmother received a black eye on more than one occasion from my grandfather. And my brother George was robbed at gunpoint when he worked at a sub shop. Even I had been raped when I was in college, held down by arms much larger than mine, paralyzed by the weight of his body as he forced his way into me. And there was one event I had kept to myself for years: a man I trusted had molested me when I was nine. I hid this story, even from myself. It barely affected me, I reasoned, and like other events I had heard about, I felt distant from them all. But more than twenty years later, in a parking lot, seeing my children's faces during our attack had jolted me awake.