

## TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



## What the [double-bleep] just happened?

I am suddenly and irrevocably old. And if you've been reading this paper as long as I've been writing here — 20 years, 1,000 essays — you're just as likely as me to be waking slow and looking long into your bathroom mirror, and asking that blurred reflection: *Who is that, paused there?* And then the inevitable: *And aduh'illaah (OMG), where's our time gone?*

Pero you know, my job is not indulging nostalgic grandpas and myopic grandmas. Not like *AARP The Magazine*. Not at all. There're so many troubling matters sinking so many more old and young; straight and gay; urban and rural; white, brown, black, and blue. Stalling us in front of our morning mirrors.

According to my own totally sciencey survey — conducted in Starbucks coffee lines, on Target up-escalators, and across Pho Van's steaming fragrant noodle bowls — more vexing than *Whose face is that?* Or *Where's the time gone?* is: *What the [double-bleep] just happened here?*

That Big Q has KO'd almost everyone 16 to 60. To be more specific, I'm talking about what the heck just happened to your love interest. The lost one. I'm asking about that moment of discovery that left you silenced, to the bone. Utterly disoriented.

You've seen this moment in vintage war movies: A laden Atlantic steamer's mortally struck by a single dead-on Nazi U-Boat torpedo. Vvvump. There's a long wide-eyed moment of nothingness, no fright, no flight. Then, the entire world is punctuated by ferocious flame and thunder, by deck planking and iron sheeting, heaving high into the overcast sky.

It's that very thin moment of awful awe, before the blast, we're asking about.

### Invitation to play

Colored Pencils Art and Culture Council is collecting moments of love suddenly torpedoed. It is a common core experience to all Portlanders — those of us living on River Willamette's leafy westside, those throwing down super-sweet Mexican cokes on our far eastside, those of us rolling between extremes in wheelchairs. It's happened.

Like a steely Atlantic U-Boat commandant, let me be even more precise about what our story requirements are.

Stories should not be about wrong-doers. Of course, all just-torpedoed pauses are followed by a blast of sadness and madness. Pleadings and even beatings follow. For parenting couples, three generations of suffering follow. But, this is not an invitation for those stories.

No villainizing. Certainly, all over town real psychopaths cozy up to really sincere lovers. But it's statistically rare. Just as rare are introspective stories about me and you at the unexpected silent end of love's intoxicating arc.

The story we ask you to tell must be from your perspective as a willing (not a clueless) participant; as a smart (not an incompetent) contributor; as an active (not a passive) partner — in a dynamic relationship that went belly up. Before it swiftly sank. In 600 words.

What's very valuable is a storyteller honestly reporting his or her voluntary and intelligent investment in that sunken ship. That's the story we invite. That's how we learn. And get better.

### One such story

Love is ecstatic joy and glorious sorrow. We willingly pay to play. Sixteen-year-olds don't yet get this. But sweet sixteen's multiples — 32-, 48-, 64-year-olds — know it well. Here's an example of one such story, in 600 words.

When I was one of those multiples just mentioned, I fell in love. I mean immediate and breathless love. Inexplicable love. I'm not too proud to tell you: Crybaby radio stations, both teen pop and Country Western, made deep abiding sense to me. There's more: I shamelessly parked my quarter-million mile Toyota *in front* of Hallmark stores, walked in and studied cards, aisle after aisle of *I Want You* and *I Miss You* cards. Coupled with pastel envelopes.

Surely, you've heard of local knuckleheads falling into hot-hot love while travelling in elegant Old Bangkok or seaside Puerta Vallarta. Not me. I did it in crazy-cold Wisconsin. Smack in America's thick middle. Love hit me, I kid you not, inside a packed Marriot up-elevator at a national child-welfare conference. People were talking too fast, laughing too loud, the way they do at these things. She was quiet. Modest. Boo-boo lips mouthing our lift's ascending numbers. It was her scent. For sure. It filled me. So familiar. So I got up close. As close as a body can be, without actually sharing another's shirt.

Earlier that fateful year, I was honored by several writing awards and publications in prestigious places, then a teaching fellowship at a Master of Fine Arts program. I was so happy. I walked away from 20 hard years of lawyering. And imagined myself an Oxford tweed, college prof. Writing full time.

I had committed earlier that year to presenting at that Midwest conference, so I had to go. That's where love took over. Took everything. "Oo-oo-oooo, baby baa-by. Oo-oo-oooo, baby baa-by," Smokey Robinson warbled at the top of my car radio, inside my reverberating skull too, long after locking up, tip-top floor of the Fourth Avenue SmartPark.

I walked away — no, waltzed away — from my new career. I packed a single bag. I gave away my little rice sparrows and their bamboo mansion cage. I cashed out my savings and caught an eastbound 737. She met me at Milwaukee's airport wearing a leather coat, khakis, black shoes, and a checkered keffiyeh — urban-hip symbol of resistance in occupied Palestine. Exactly the same outfit I arrived in. We looked like a Mideast nightclub act. I moved into an International Hostel near her workplace. I got a job there.

She and me had a lot in common. She

was a Snake Year foreign-born middle kid, me too. Though I'm one snake cycle (12 years) older. After her Midwest bachelor's degree, she did Peace Corps in West Africa. After my Pacific Northwest bachelor's degree, I did graduate research in North then East Africa. We each came back with great scars, stories, parasites, and twisted copper snake armbands. In trying to reintegrate into America, she married a white guy, I married a white girl. They made us bright and brave babies. Beautifully.

After her master's degree, she went to the Philippines. She researched those millions of unexploded U.S. bombs lying around the Laos Democratic People's Republic. After my doctorate, it was Manila for me too, to focus on Laos and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, extracting refugee families and political prisoners.

When our lives ultimately intersected inside that same stuffed Milwaukee elevator — she and her husband had two kids; they lived in a two-story, two-bedroom cottage on High Street, a nice Subaru parked out front. All that, exactly like my former wife and I shared, before we divorced 12 years earlier.

### And then, it was done

And when it all ended, all these wonder-filled well-fitting Legos notwithstanding — when it all de-constructed, suddenly and badly, Smokey's "Ooo Baby Baby" was still its faithful falsetto soundtrack:

*"I'm just about at  
the end of my rope.  
But I can't stop tryin',  
I can't give up hope."*

After six years of trying and trying. Of awful then awfuller twists. Of taut ropes leading to monster overhangs. She let loose her grip. She had less to fall. As for me, aching arms and screaming shoulders, I hung on, dangling way out there. Frigid Wisconsin above and below.

She started sleeping with a judge. Three months before one of us believed we were marrying. That, was my *What the [double-bleep] just happened?* moment. That was my long, silent, just-torpedoed moment. A big bad hit. Just like in those movies. Smack amid ships. An oceanic pause.

Inside it, inside that agonizing pause, I scanned the body of evidence, bookshelf after bookshelf, lining the belly of my doomed Atlantic steamer. I reviewed the evidence of my belief of our blended personal and communal histories. The stories and the scars, the twisted iron snake armbands and the checkered Palestinian keffiyeh. I breathed deep her familiar scent.

It wouldn't add up — all that stubborn belief, suddenly punctured by this U-boat torpedo, lying there, ticking off its final seconds. I sat on it, recalculating the Snake Years cycled, the continents she and me crossed, the seas we crisscrossed. Check, check, check. My math seemed tight.

I reassessed the algorithm. She left her white man — staid math teacher, proud Major League Baseball fan. She loves me — misplaced ricepicker, sweaty community mechanic. She feels free.

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Understood. Accepted. She trades for my opposite. In every way. The waves were making me seasick.

I pushed down the distracting (and entirely irrelevant) disbelief that this white boy judge must be believing in some kind of immunity from the major smackdown I was now bound to administer. On his head. *I know, you know, every brown, black, and blue man knows* — I mumbled to myself — *that a Costco-size beatdown is mandatory in these situations. Right?* It's inevitable. Natural. Biblical. *White guys don't really believe they get a pass, do they?*

To confirm my rationale, I called every self-respecting man I knew, inside my long, silent, moment. That nasty Nazi torpedo whirred and hissed.

A decade, a thick one, has now settled itself between my mid-sea sinking and now. 2015. I am in River City. We are six hours by Boeing 737 and two time zones, west of Wisconsin.

Today, I tell you true: Even if I find an empty steel back stairway, even if I silence my iPhone, sit down, and examine what remains of that memory, I cannot tell you for sure if that tick-ticking torpedo went off. Or not.

If it *did* detonate — different from, say, all those sleeping U.S.-made high explosives waiting to be poked by a simple farmer or by his bright daughter — if my Nazi torpedo actually blew, throwing me out of this precious life, then I am a ghost. Present, but not living. Not really. Present, but powerless to affect the living.

If it *did not* blow, if no deck planking and no iron sheeting heaved toward our heavens — which is my story's more likely end — then, why is that humbling monster moment still hovering here? It weighs on me like a sea-soaked woolen blanket, laboring my achy arms, dampening my voice and gauzing my eyes. Keeping me from living, really. From crossing oceans, eagerly. From paying to play, for sure.

Detonation or not, my guts're gone, all the same.

Notes:

Please submit your stories, and encourage others, too. Five readers or performers will be selected. Our event is planned for mid-September. Please send questions to <polo.nwccounsel@icloud.com>.

Colored Pencils Art and Culture Council puts on evening programs, some big and some intimate. Events always combine culinary, performing, and fine arts, centered on a theme common to those dozen-or-so Portland ethnic, faith, sexual orientation, and socio-economic communities producing each particular event. Lots of food, fun, family.

To learn more, please visit Colored Pencils at <www.cpacc.blogspot.com> or on facebook.

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