

Looking for Cal

by [Gary Duehr](#) (January 2025)



Copley Square, Boston (George Luks, 1904)

Barbara Rose was looking for her son, Cal. He'd told her sister Luann he'd make the holiday party at the condo of Barbara's pal Jim. Cal had promised he'd catch the 5 pm Northeaster up from New York. But where was he? It was almost 10:30, and snow was pelting the dark windows like soft fists. Maybe the train had gotten delayed or he'd had trouble catching an Uber at South Station.

She scanned the kitchen, stuffy with heat from the oven, the counters strewn with scraped-out pans of lasagna and mashed potatoes. By the fridge, two women her age were talking intensely, nose to nose. A young boy with a silver earring, seven or eight, was reaching up to pick at the carcass of a ham.

She saw Jim, the host, trapped by the back door with three of his students. All in black, his graying hair swept back in a ponytail, he looked like a monk lecturing his novices. He flung a questioning look at Barbara to ask if the break's over, and she shook her head no. She was due to sing one more set after dessert, and she wanted Cal to sit in for their drummer Nick.

Barbara's punk band, Bad Habits, reconvened every year for this party, conjuring up their string of hits from Boston in the '80s: "Suicide Sister," "When the Cradle Rocks," "Stone Cold Woman"—which broke the US Top 100 and sparked a whirlwind tour opening for Aerosmith that cracked up the band. Literally, too many bad habits and too much grinding disappointment that they'd hit their apex and flamed out.

She needed another drink. In the hallway by the front door a table was crowded with wine and seltzer. She pushed them aside to find a squat bottle of brandy. She poured a plastic cup half full and downed it in one fiery gulp. Looking up, she caught her reflection in a mirror. A halo of thin white hair flowed down to her shoulders, swathed in a paisley scarf. She thought she looked good, considering.

If she had to play the cancer card to get Cal to come home, just this once, it was worth it, even if she'd been in remission for months. That Cal was collateral damage, that he'd walled her off for years, was her one aching regret. He had his own demons to deal with.

She poured another and stared at the front door as if willing

it to tremble, shake loose and burst open in a gust of snowflakes. No luck. Maybe if the band starts up, she thought, it will work as a kind of voodoo to draw him near.

She spotted Luann coming out of the bathroom, tugging at the waist of her caftan.

“You hear anything?” Barbara asked.

“He texted from Penn that the train was on time.” She held up her phone’s glowing screen. “Nothing since. Sorry.”

Luann gripped Barbara’s elbow then turned toward the kitchen.

In the dining room, stray guests were slumped around the long table, comatose from the feast. A baby was sprawled across the big lap of its mom, who was trying to spear a slice of apple crumble. At the far end, two college kids, a boy and a girl, were giggling as he toyed with a broken candle. The lace tablecloth was dotted with half-eaten pies, crumbs of debris and a knocked-over wine glass, a purple stain oozing out. It looked like the scene of an accident.

Barbara grabbed the mic on a stand and snarled, “Ok, you pathetic leftovers, one more for the road.”

Jim stumbled out of the kitchen and grabbed his golden Les Paul next to her. With a grunt, Billy stooped down to strap on his bass. Nick pushed away from the table and stood there, waiting to go over and settle down behind the cymbals. He squinted through his wire frames at Barbara. He knew what she was hoping for.

Barbara waved him over. “Come on, babe, let’s play so loud they can hear us down in New York.”

Nick counted off with his drumsticks, and they launched into the crunchy chords of “Stone Cold Woman.” She’s saved that one till later, till he could be there.

“I know you think I’m stone cold,” she growled, “but I’m not the only one.” Like a chainsaw, the guitars whined on.

The front door banged open, and everyone held their breath. Into the dining room swept a swirl of flakes that settled on heads and melted into the tablecloth; the snow kept coming as it littered the wood floor and began to pile up in sparkly mounds on the windowsills.

The band jerked to a stop in a blare of feedback, but no one applauded, no one shifted in their seats. Barbara was staring straight ahead, clutching the mic stand.

It was getting chillier, but no one got up to close the door. They could hear a train chugging a few blocks over. The wind was wailing louder now, and pellets of ice knocked against the windows. Everyone understood it was their mission to stay there, frozen in place like statues. Most of them had known Barbara their whole life, and they knew what this night meant to her. Even as their fingers grew numb and their breath came in frosty gasps, they would never move, never.

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Gary Duehr has taught creative writing for institutions including Boston University, Lesley University, and Tufts University. His MFA is from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. In 2001 he received an NEA Fellowship, and he has also received grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the LEF Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. His writing has appeared in *Agni*, *American Literary Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Cottonwood*, *Hawaii Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Iowa Review*, and *North American Review*, and his books include *Point Blank* (In Case of Emergency Press), *Winter Light* (Four Way Books) and *Where Everyone Is Going To* (St. Andrews College Press).

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