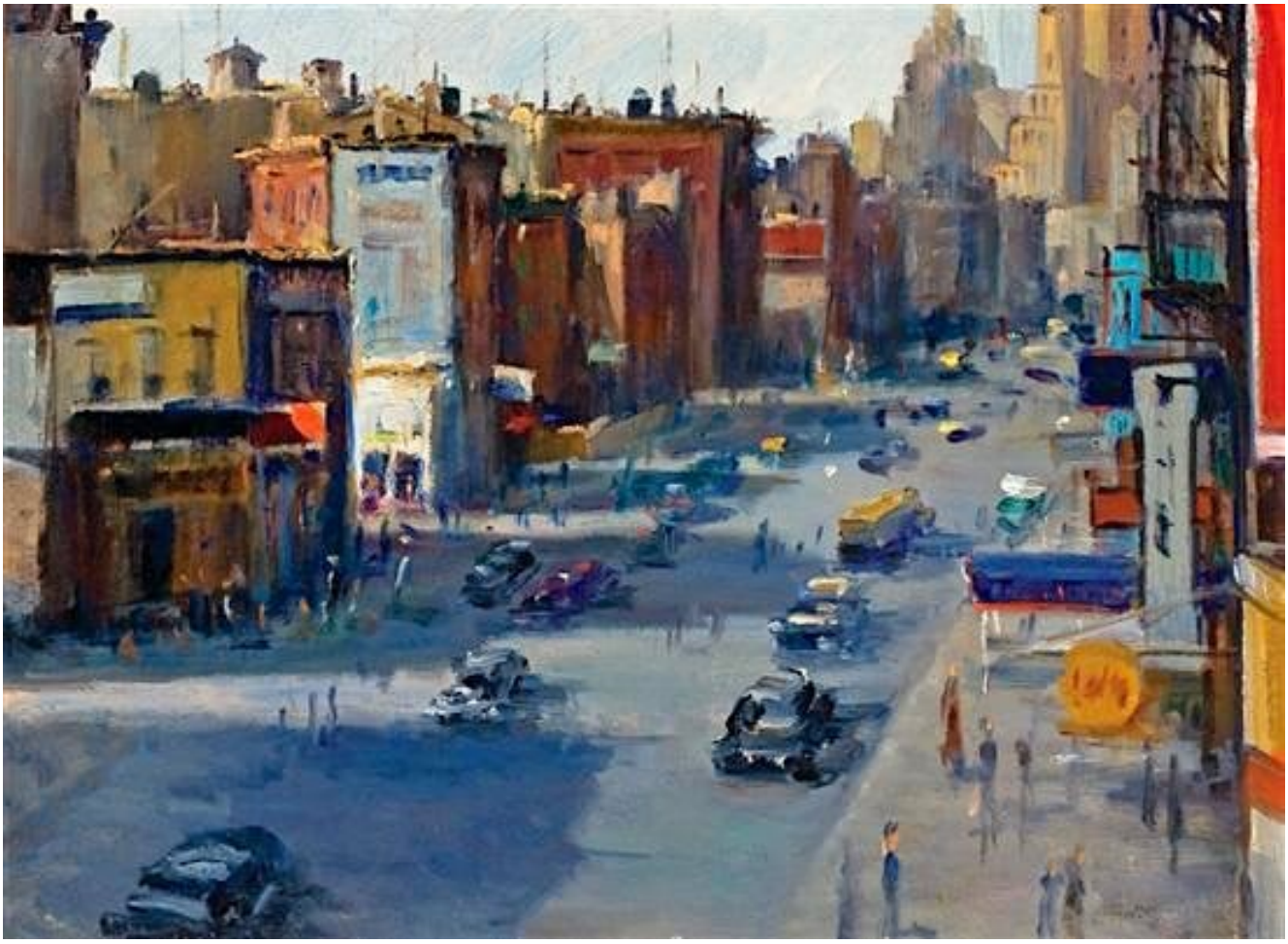
This Life

by Mary Ann McGuigan (May 2025)



Seventh Avenue, Greenwich Village (Alfred Mira, 20th C)

The biting wind lifted the woman's hair across her face, so Alan could see only her chin and a bit of her nose before the bus came between them, hardly time for the shock of it to register, barely enough to be certain. He stood with the little crowd that had emerged from Penn Station, waiting in the stubborn slush to cross 7th Avenue. The woman was on the other side of the street, leaning out from a doorway, one of those gray entryways tucked between two stores, a door not meant to be noticed, drab filler between garishly decorated storefronts. She wore a long coat he thought he

recognized—beige with a silky red lining—and she seemed to be staring at something in the distance, expecting someone. Her hair reached her shoulders, wild and directionless. Dark, lengthy roots surrendered abruptly to a frosted blond, marking a boundary, a time when she must have cared how she looked. The bus took forever to pass, and when it was gone, so was the woman. And so was the young man's certainty that it was his mother.

The woman looked homeless, ragged, and Alan couldn't imagine his mother that way. She'd been gone five months, since just before his fall semester started at NYU. Her passport was gone, but all her luggage remained in the closet. His father went through the motions of trying to find her, but not for long. Her absence became Alan's unrelenting companion, a torment and an accusation. Guilty and confused, he'd study the ceiling in his dorm, unable to sleep. He'd drink, smoke weed when he had the money, imagine her alone and sick somewhere, dead even, but never like this, like someone despised. Even at his sister's funeral, back in May, she'd looked good. A friend from school remarked on it, but it was nothing Alan hadn't expected. She'd arrive at the hospital outfitted perfectly, even at the end, when Eva couldn't open her eyes anymore. His mother had stopped speaking to him by then. He'd driven her daughter into a tree, and at the funeral, she ordered him out of the limo. The silence in the car swelled from the shock of it, until Alan obediently opened the door. "That's so hurtful," his father said, a lame intervention.

"What difference does it make?" she said, sinking back into the leather, as if the matter had long since been settled. Alan didn't want to believe that was how she felt, even when she seemed indifferent about his injury from the accident. She went to the hospital only once after the surgery on his hip. When he told her he didn't think it was healing right, she had his father look into it, but his efforts were minimal. Alan gained weight, stopped playing tennis. The pain never fully

subsided and the weed he smoked did little to ease it.

When the light changed, Alan failed to move with the crowd. His mind was still at home in New Jersey, the house smelling of Douglas fir, the front porch twinkling in darkness, the mantel missing two stockings, the dog given away. Eva's room was a guestroom now, the furniture replaced, her posters removed, her friends' photos gone. He remembered sitting on the edge of her bed, a few nights before the accident, as she listened to him sort out feelings he had no name for, his feelings for a girl who'd never been on an Honor Roll or a college campus, a girl who worked with an apron on.

Through the Christmas break, he spoke very little, and never got around to telling his father how many courses he was failing, or the reasons why. He'd wake too tired for class after roaming the streets, searching for his mother, or too hung over to focus. He saw no point in college anyway, not for him. If he wanted a job, his father would find him something. He was president of a financial firm with tentacles everywhere.

And there was Rosa, Alan's secret waitress girlfriend, who remained in the shadows even though his disapproving mother was out of the picture, a secret who was probably carrying his child. He didn't know for sure yet because he was so shaken he hadn't answered her calls since she'd gone to a doctor to confirm the drugstore test.

"Oh, shit," he'd said, as they watched the two pink lines appear. "That's all I need."

"Maybe it is," she whispered, turning away. He watched her tuck the tester into the book on her night table, pictured her returning to it after he was gone, treasuring it.

He went home for the holiday break without a word, then blocked her calls. He knew she'd want the baby and he was afraid he'd lose her if she saw how panicked he was. Decisions

this weighty had never been left to him. He'd perfected the art of acquiescing. Being a father seemed alien, something he had no right to. But he planned to see Rosa this morning, first thing, before his first class, try to explain. Still, he prayed the test had been wrong.

"You havin' a tough day?" someone said. It was the old fellow who manned the table to collect donations for the homeless, smiling his toothy smile.

"Bad spot for daydreaming," Alan laughed, seeing that the light had turned red again and he'd have to wait. He'd forgotten the old man's name but noticed he'd reclaimed the spot where the Salvation Army's Christmas Santa had been. He wore the same suit he wore every time Alan saw him, a thin faded wool that must once have been a dark gray, now a thick sweater underneath. The man nodded, and Alan felt the awkwardness he always felt at that point in their exchange, when he'd deposit his dollar into the huge jug. He wished their ritual could have remained the way it started, when he saw him infrequently, when he didn't feel obliged to pull an earbud away to hear what the man was saying. But by April last year Alan was coming home every weekend to visit his sister, already on hospice care.

The light turned green again, and Alan limped forward, his hip pain flaring, then halted, realizing he should ask the man if he'd seen the woman across the street.

"You having some trouble there*?*" the man said, motioning toward Alan's hip.

"It's nothing," Alan said, the same thing he'd told the paramedics after they'd gotten Eva into the ambulance. "I'm fine." But he wasn't. The pain was often as intense as the images of his sister. So broken. Sometimes Alan welcomed the pain, when it got bad enough to empty his mind of anything else.

The man’s name came to Alan then. “Hermie, did you notice a woman standing in that doorway over there—about that tall?” He held his palm face down at the level of his shoulder. “Hair was all messed up? Roots and stuff?”

Hermie pushed his glasses against the bridge of his wide nose, but had no answer.

“She was standing in that doorway across the street. Had on a long beige coat with a red lining.” He swallowed hard, afraid he might lose control. “Pretty disheveled looking.”

“You talkin’ ’bout Patsy? She got a coat like that.”

“Patsy?” His mother’s name was Patricia. No one ever called her Patsy.

“I see her around now and then. Sure. Not today though. Sorry, son.”

Hermie had never called him that before. *Son*. Alan’s face went warm. Maybe something in his voice had given him away. Describing his mother’s appearance as anything short of perfect did not come easily. Hermie’s look was unsettling, as if he had questions he didn’t want to ask.

“Never mind,” Alan said. “Thanks anyway.”

“You can cross now,” Hermie said, motioning toward the green light.

Alan nodded, tried to keep up with the crowd, but a few steps from the curb, a thick-necked man in a tight-fitting coat, a bulldog of a man, stepped into his path. His bulging attaché case caught the strap of Alan’s gym bag, and he had to skip after him in the slush to keep from losing it. But the big man stormed ahead, pulling Alan to the ground. Most of the crowd swarmed past as he stared up at them, cursing under his breath. As the traffic reclaimed the avenue, he struggled to get to his feet, and a blaring SUV shooed him toward the

sidewalk. Stragglers from the crowd stood around him and he realized he was down again, his body twisted, hip throbbing like a bad tooth, warning of worse to come. A girl standing on the sidewalk had his gym bag. She looked like Eva. Exactly like Eva. She wore a long green sweater, like the one Eva wore on St. Patrick's Day, on the night of the accident. He watched the girl pull her hair back nervously, the way his sister had as she got into the car with him, asking again if he was okay to drive. "One beer," he told her, but that wasn't true. He thought of the blood on the dashboard, on her face, the gurgling as she said his name, how she seemed to resist as he tried to pull her out of the car. But this girl's face was unspoiled, no stitches, no swelling.

Alan closed his eyes, braced himself against the pain spreading through his back, and made up his mind to get up. By the time he got to his feet the girl was gone, the gym bag left on the sidewalk. He walked toward the bag, picked it up, surprised his back didn't hurt from the weight of it, and headed down 32nd Street toward Herald Square, for the subway downtown. He hoped he'd see Rosa at the restaurant near the subway station at school.

Half a block ahead something caught his eye, a flash of red disappearing into a doorway. He quickened his pace, glancing into doorways he'd never noticed before. The street was fairly crowded with pedestrians, their footsteps silenced by a pneumatic drill starting up a few yards away, but no one seemed to notice him. A few yards farther along, a door appeared, dark blue, paint chipping from wood that framed a dirty square of glass. He wasn't sure if this was the one she'd entered, but he stepped onto the little square landing. Peering through the glass, he could see a hall, dimly lit, and a staircase leading up to the next floor. He tried the metal handle, heard a click, but he had to press his shoulder to the door to get it open.

The air inside smelled like cat pee and grease, like the garage where his grandfather would get his car fixed. Alan stood still, his heart pounding. A colorless narrow hall beside the staircase led into darkness, but from upstairs he could hear the faint sound of someone humming. A dim light sprayed the landing at the top of the stairs and he headed toward it then froze as his steps wakened the old wood to a menacing creak.

“Is that you?” a man called. Alan remained still, waited for him to speak again. Nothing. He continued his climb, holding the banister this time. The surface felt uneven, decades of paint had bubbled and thickened. His throat felt tight and he struggled to take a deeper breath. The air tasted heavy with grit and he couldn’t keep from coughing.

“Who is that?” the man called.

Alan said nothing, climbed a few more steps. Before he reached the landing, something scurried along the base of the wall, into the shadows at the end of the hall. Not far from the top of the stairs a door was slightly ajar. It bore a makeshift sign that read *Satellite Angels*, and Alan moved toward it. “Hello?” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“It’s too late now,” a man called. “You were supposed to get here an hour ago.” The door opened a bit wider and Alan heard heavy, sloppy footsteps, as if someone wearing his work boots untied were moving away from the door and back into the room. Alan pushed it open to let himself in. A tall, wiry man with gray unkempt hair stood in the center of the room, his back to Alan. He wore saggy jeans and a loose white dress shirt that didn’t seem right for him, as if a stranger might have picked it out, mistaking him for someone with somewhere to go. The place was poorly lit. Boxes and shopping bags, most hand-labeled *canned food* or *toiletries* or *paper towels* lined every wall and crowded the floor space, leaving only a narrow path for navigation.

“Excuse me,” Alan said.

The man turned toward him, his cloudy eyes taking the young man in as if he expected nothing new. “The truck was here on time. More than I can say for you. The driver was circling the block.”

“Sorry. I’m not—”

“Nowhere to park. He couldn’t wait any longer,” the man said. He was a homely fellow, made uglier by his bent nose and the grotesquely impatient expression he wore.

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m not—”

“We have to reschedule the pickup.” The man turned his back to him and moved to a small table, bare except for what appeared to be a list of items, several pages thick, and a lamp with a dusty, yellowed shade. The lamp was lit but the bulb so dim it was pointless. The man picked up the list. He held the papers close to his face, as if in a comical imitation of a nearsighted old man. Alan was reminded of Rosa’s father, misplacing his reading glasses, how his wife and daughters would tease him. Their bond seemed a tangible thing. It would stay with Alan long after the visits, the care they took in being with each other, the gentle way they passed a serving dish or paged through their photo albums. They seemed to know the world to be a fragile, precious place.

“You’re new,” the man said, turning toward Alan again. “I can see that. But if you’re going to help load this stuff, you need to get here on time.” His voice wasn’t harsh, just uncompromising.

“The door was open downstairs,” Alan said. “I heard you call.”

The man studied Alan’s face.

“I’m looking for someone.”

He nodded, as if he understood something now.

“I saw her on 7th Avenue. Just now I thought I saw her enter the door downstairs.”

“You must mean Patsy?”

The name made Alan’s throat tighten. “I … I don’t know.”

“Have a seat.” The man gestured toward the table, with its two wooden chairs. “We can talk.” He spoke the way Alan’s high school basketball coach would have spoken before a tough game, a warning of disappointment ahead. He was the first to reach out to Alan after the accident, saying, gently, he knew a good therapist. “Suit yourself,” Alan’s mother told him. “Words are easy. You’ve got exams coming up. Try focusing on that for a change.” But drinking kept him from having to choose.

“Come on. Sit,” the man said, pulling a chair out for Alan. “You look a little pale.”

Alan didn’t want to sit down. He didn’t like this place. It had so little light. His mother used to tell him how he loved sunlight as a child, even as a baby. He would get upset if she closed the blinds on hot sunny days. But he wanted answers, so he moved to the wooden table and sat down. The chair legs were thin and unsteady, the back hard.

The man sat across from him. “My name is Pete,” he said, extending his hand across the table.

Alan shook it. “I’m Alan.”

“You’re a student?”

“Yes, I was headed for the subway downtown. That’s when I saw her.”

“NYU? Is that your school?”

“Yes,” he said, though he never thought of NYU as his. It was

his mother's choice, her alma mater. He hated the place as much as he'd hated his high school and its top-of-the-heap reputation. He'd posed as the student everyone expected him to be, hard-working, sights obediently set on a promising future. Eva did the same, but it came easier to her. She was smarter, able to charm her way through situations she didn't like. And maybe for her it wasn't a pose. Maybe she saw something waiting for her at the end of the obstacle course. Alan saw nothing, wanted nothing, except maybe to be left alone, to have five minutes when he didn't have to prove himself.

"Who is it you're looking for?"

"A woman. Early fifties, about five-four, hair to her shoulders, kind of frosted, at least it used to be." Alan felt something at his back, as if he'd leaned on a wet towel, but saw nothing on the chair when he turned to look.

"Sounds a lot like Patsy. What do you know about this woman?"

Alan didn't like this. His mother had always been a very private person, never talked much about herself. When Eva went into a coma, she didn't even tell her in-laws until the third day. His father argued with her about keeping things secret. "We don't need any more thoughts and prayers," she insisted, but Alan wondered if his mother was somehow ashamed of what was happening. Her Eva, her pride and joy, was now scarred and disfigured, her strength lost, her beauty gone, and now even her consciousness compromised.

"I wish it was me, not her," Alan told his mother.

She was silent, as if there was no need to respond, no need to say it. Then she did.

"You're lying."

"I don't know anyone named Patsy," Alan told Pete. The air in the room felt heavy, his breathing shallow and difficult.

“Well, how do you know this woman, the one you saw on the street?”

“I think she might be my mother. She’s been gone since August.”

“What do you mean *gone*?”

“She just left. No one’s heard from her.”

“And you think you saw her?”

“I’m just not sure, because my mother would never look … like that.” The care she took in the way she dressed—the color of her nail polish, the way she tied up her hair—baffled Alan as a boy. Not just the transformation she achieved—which other mothers didn’t seem to bother about—but the idea that she would trouble so much with how she looked, even to drop him off at school or a game. Later he hated it. The mascara, the shiny lipsticks, the blush on her cheeks were the paints she used to craft a fiction about her worth. In truth, she’d bounced from one foster home to another as a child. To this day, Alan didn’t know who her real parents were, though he was convinced that she did.

She fussed just as much with Eva, who seemed to love the attention. But nothing about her son was ever right enough. His hair, his clothes, his attitude, nothing passed muster unless she’d chosen it.

“What makes you think it’s her?” Pete said.

“There was just something about her face. And the coat she was wearing. My mother has a coat like that.” Alan wondered if she might have given the coat away in one of her grand gestures.

“Listen,” Pete said, then paused, as if unsure how much he should say. “Tell me how much you know. I mean about what happened to your mother.” His voice had a certain force in it that Alan found hard to counter.

“I don’t know anything,” he insisted. “I don’t know where she is. No one does.”

The last time Alan saw his mother—the August afternoon her staff took her out for a farewell lunch—she wore a tailored suit in a burgundy so deep it made him think of the robes of royalty. She’d resigned from Phoenix, a huge New York fundraiser dedicated to fighting poverty, claiming she needed to work with the homeless on the street, not from behind a desk. Her access to New York’s got-bucks gentry had made her the organization’s top money draw for more than a decade. Brian, her closest friend at Phoenix, told Alan later that he’d left the luncheon with her, that she was quiet, too quiet, but he assumed she had a lot to process. Her daughter was dead barely three months, and he knew she’d finally split with her husband, a man whose deference for wealth was outweighed only by his contempt for the indigent, a state he considered optional.

Alan still called Brian every week, hoping she might contact him. The answer was always no. So he’d wander the streets of the city—the places transients favored, the doorways before dawn, the parks after sunset—desperate to find her, beg her to come back, start over. He’d talk to vagrants, bag ladies, hoping they’d encountered her.

“Was she sick?” Pete said.

“No, she claims she’s never even had the flu. She acts like she’ll never die.” When the doctors proposed taking Eva off life support, his mother refused. “You’re sentencing her to *die*.” She spoke the word as if the act of dying was inexcusable, as if there were another choice the doctors refused to see, as if her daughter’s injuries could have some other outcome.

“No, I mean was she depressed, anything like that?”

“I guess she must have been. I mean first my sister died. Then

she and my dad finally split. But she'd never let anyone see that. Never."

"Did you?"

"I … you know … yeah, I could tell. She was missing work, not returning people's calls. My dad said Phoenix was ready to replace her. Then she gave her notice." Alan knew she'd stopped taking her meds. Rummaging for cash, he'd found the bottle tucked in a coat pocket, still nearly full, weeks after they'd been prescribed. He never asked her about it, never told his father.

Pete placed both hands on the table, the tips of his fingers touching, clearly hesitant to say more.

"So have you seen anyone with a coat like that? Was she here?"

"If you mean Patsy, she was here today, but very briefly. She's been coming here for quite a few months. Off and on. But she's not well."

"What do you mean?"

"She's unstable. Mentally. The first time she came, she said she worked for the city, had ideas for helping with the distribution. She carries this notebook. Always writing furiously. She said she had the go-ahead to revamp the whole system, had to study it. But after a while, I could see. I mean none of it made sense. And she started to look kind of, I don't know, bedraggled."

"She said she was put in charge?"

"She made it sound that way, but I called the city. I couldn't find anyone who'd ever heard of the program she talked about. I've asked around, Googled the name she gave me, but I couldn't find anything."

"But she keeps coming by?"

“Sometimes she’ll stay for a long while, mostly we wind up chatting about politics, family stuff now and then. Other times she rushes in and out, like today, like she’s late for something important.”

“What family stuff?”

“She’s vague, says she had children, but they both passed.”

The skin on the back of Alan’s neck went cold. Had she truly given up on him, sentenced him? “What else did she say? About the children?”

“Not much more than that really.”

“What name did she give you?”

“Walczewski. I’m not sure of the spelling.”

“That’s her name. That’s my mother’s maiden name.” Alan stood up, his legs now as weak as the chair’s.

“Wait. Sit.”

“I’ve got to find her,” he said, but the words seemed like a line in a play, like something a good son would say.

“Look at you. You can barely stand up.”

Alan moved away from the table.

“Look at you,” Pete said, this time pointing a finger at Alan.

Confused, Alan looked down at what he was wearing, feeling again a dampness at his back. Twisting his jacket around, he saw that parts of it on one side were discolored, darkened. From the slush in the street? He pulled it open slightly and saw patches of blood along his side. He felt no pain but now he wondered if he’d been hurt worse than he realized. He felt light-headed, frightened.

“Where does Patsy live?”

The old man gave a hopeless shrug. “I just don’t know.”

Alan stepped closer. “She must have mentioned something. Some place where she stays?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where she goes.”

He felt relief flooding through him and he cursed himself for it. He feared for his mother, his guilt even heavier now, like a shroud, but he didn’t know if he could look at her again. He wondered what good would come of finding a woman who didn’t want to be found, who considered him dead. He wanted to get away from this man, be outside. Maybe he could reach his father, do that much at least, tell him she was wandering the city.

He grabbed his gym bag and left, stumbled down the stairs. Outside he reached into his pocket for his phone, but it wasn’t there. His search through every pocket and the bag turned up nothing. Thinking it might be on the street, where he fell, he headed back to 7th Avenue, searching the sidewalk along the way, in case he’d dropped it somehow. When he got to the avenue, the light turned green and he crossed slowly, trying to spot the phone. Nothing.

As he neared the curb, he heard someone cry out, “Oh, my god. My god.” Hermie stood, his folding chair turned over, his hands to his face, pulling at the thick skin of his cheeks, as if to contain himself. “Look at you, boy,” he said, staring wide-eyed at him. “I thought for sure you was dead!”

He looked as if he’d been crying or was about to, and Alan wanted to reassure him. “Dead?! You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m right here. I’m fine.” But even as he said the word, he knew he wasn’t, and hadn’t been for a very long time. The end had come slowly for Eva, painfully for all of them. His own end had begun almost as far back as he could remember, unfelt by

anyone. As a boy he'd had glimpses of a life he could enjoy, a self he wouldn't despise. The deadening came gradually, with no visible injury, until the only feeling left was shame.

A smile—broad and unstoppable—overtook Hermie's face. "Well, I'm sure 'nuf glad to know you're not dead," he said, almost hopping in place.

Hermie extended his hand, and Alan took it, the broad palm, warm and callous. The strength of it spread up Alan's arm, pulling him toward something, a choice. He thought of Rosa, her luxurious dark hair tied back, her dark eyes, the kindness he hadn't earned. He could almost feel her smooth skin under his hand, her belly with its tan lines. And now maybe a tiny life had begun. He wanted to see her, to apologize for not calling. She'd understand how hard it had been for him to be home for Christmas, the house crammed with reminders of so many barren years. Rosa always understood. He needed to find his phone, to call her, to tell her she was right. He wanted life, a new life.

"I can't find my phone," Alan told Hermie. "Have you seen it? I think I dropped it when I fell." He glanced down at the table, thinking someone might have given it to Hermie to hold on to. The big jar was rather empty and Alan couldn't remember if he'd put in a donation. He had only two twenties in his wallet and he couldn't afford to part with one. He dug his hand into his coat pocket and felt for coins. His three quarters landed soundlessly on the dollars in the jar, and he looked away, embarrassed at his paltry contribution. "That's all I have," he said, but Hermie nodded too slowly, as if he knew that wasn't true.

"I'm sorry," Alan mumbled, ashamed of the lie. He pulled out his wallet, removed the twenties, rolled them up and slipped them into the jar. "I'm sorry," he said again, more distinctly this time. It felt right to say the words out loud, without hesitation, the way he should have said them to his mother

after the accident. Instead, he waited, mute and stubborn, spoke them softly, privately, only to Eva, whom he was never sure could hear them.

“Bless you,” Hermie said, holding up his broad hand, and the gesture reminded Alan of a benediction, a kind of forgiveness. “You’ve got the light. Go ahead, cross over.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to find that phone. I’ll see you next time.”

“Next time,” Hermie agreed.

Next time. The words stayed with Alan as he crossed the avenue again, scanning the pavement for any sign of the phone. But as he glanced down the street where he’d seen his mother, he had a sense that there would be no next time, that he would not see Hermie again, or his mother, because he was never coming back. He would talk to Rosa, make something right. He could be with her, with his baby. He was going to change things, leave school, maybe even the city. He’d do something else, anything else. He’d leave this life behind, the one his mother had chosen for him, and find another way to be.

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Mary Ann McGuigan‘s short fiction has appeared in *The Sun, Massachusetts Review, North American Review*, and many other journals. Her collection *Pieces* includes stories named for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. *That Very Place*, her new collection, reaches bookstores in 2025. Her creative nonfiction can be found in journals such as *Brevity, The Rumpus, X-R-A-Y*, and *The Citron Review*. The Junior Library Guild and the New York Public Library rank Mary Ann’s young-adult novels among the best books for teens, and *Where You Belong* was a finalist for the National Book Award. She loves

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