

Tragedy shared is a rope that  
knows neither time nor distance . . .

# BONDS

FICTION by Marcia Yudkin

MY FATHER IS A REFUGEE. I AM A WANDERER. I WOULD say that our lives are a fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy that "The sins of the fathers will be visited upon the sons, even unto the fourth generation," except that we are not members of The Chosen People. Nor, as far as I can tell, has my father sinned. Though taciturn, he is scrupulously honest and treats my stepmother well. And finally, I am not his son. My father does have a son, but Prescott, who manages a concern that makes pipe fittings, is maddeningly solid. Though his breath has always run sour, he is blessed with good sense and complacency. When I have tried to talk to him about the tragedy that binds my father and myself, his nose wrinkles and he looks like he is about to spit. As mossy weights drop to the pit of my stomach, I almost believe that he is right. Then I laugh the nervous cackle that he says makes me an old maid, and leave for Bangkok, or Khartoum, or Northern Ireland.

I seldom see my father. I send him postcards. "See this peaceful country scene," I'll scrawl in the space for messages. "It's strewn with the wreckage of tanks now. Rivers of blood overflow the irrigation canals, and the crops float, burnt to cinders, through the pungent air. *Love.*" I never sign. He already knows from my published dis-

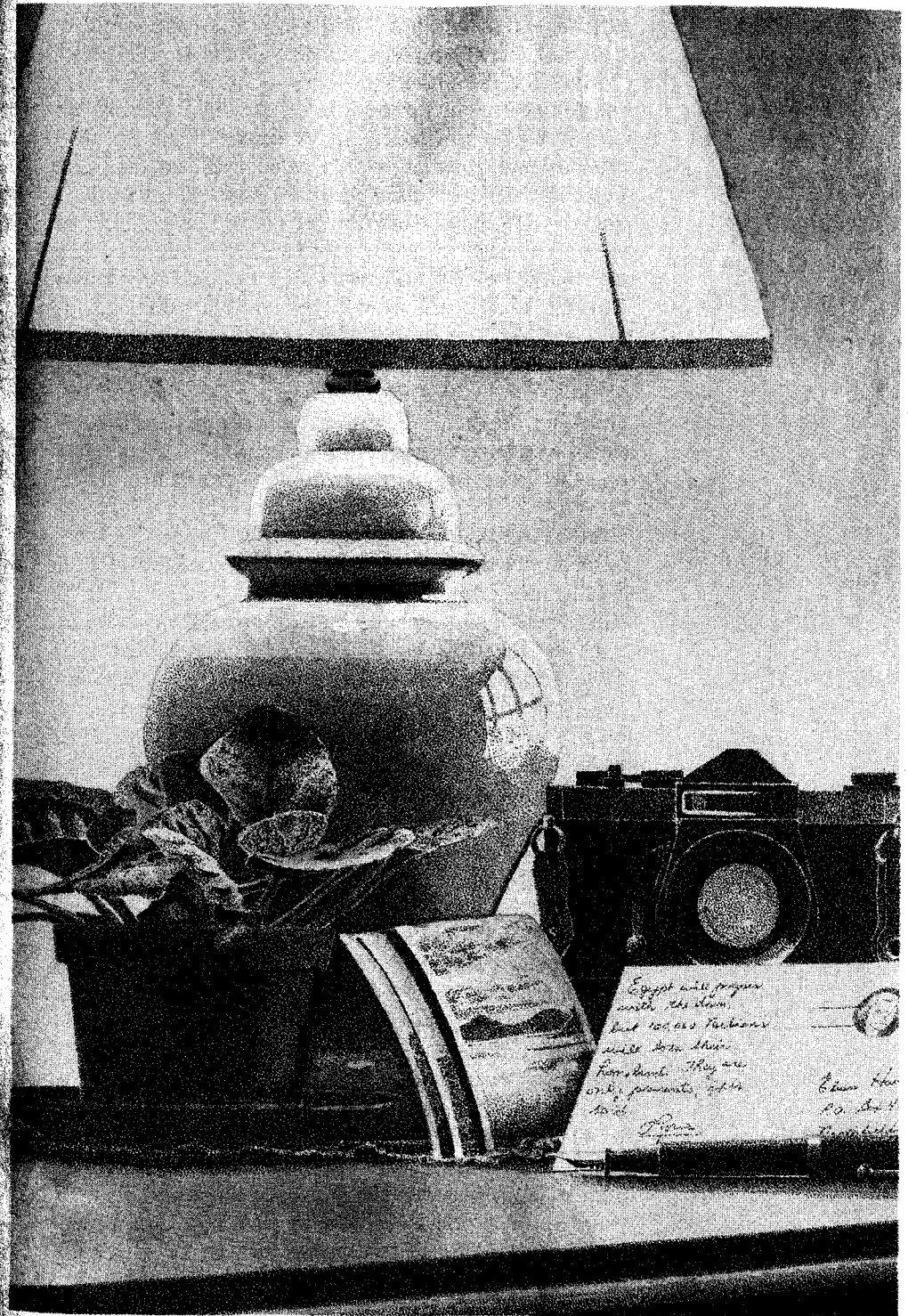


Illustration by Gary Postrech

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and my knack  
for disaster.  
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Mary . . . .

patches where I am. But I find it important to communicate that I have not forgotten, that I have not hardened. When I find the answer, it will be my father who receives the phone call in the middle of the night through an operator who can barely speak English. The line will crackle, fracturing my words, but I will hear his grave nod and receive his quiet gratitude. Afterwards, I will be able to wear dresses and powder my nose like a normal woman. I might even get married to a gentleman with children of his own and spend months cultivating a garden. His friends will scarcely believe that I was famous and snapped photographs at the brink of catastrophes, so demure and unremarkable shall I be.

I make a living with my pen, my camera, and my knack for disaster. My colleague Benjamin calls me Typhoid Mary, but I scold him that my arrival in a country one day before an earthquake or my presence at the scene of an assassination doesn't mean I caused the calamity. And besides, I remind him, my name is Dana, named after the town in Central Massachusetts where I should have been born. Disaster Dana then, he retorts with an envious twinkle in his eye. Tired of my luck, he once sent me a page torn out of an atlas with the towns of Massachusetts enclosed in a box and a dark line separating Dalton from Danvers. Poor Benjamin, his sense of history is thin. I let him think he'd exposed my fraud, when in fact he'd found the raw truth of my origins.

Dana, Massachusetts, appears on no contemporary maps, but it was once as real and thriving as Amherst, Leverett, or Orange. Caleb Hawkins, my great-great-great-grandfather, settled there in 1780. I know that from the family Bible, a cracked leather volume that made an appearance when Grandfather died. Marked by some zealous or contentious soul, its sallow pages will be my inheritance. I asked my father once why we had no family album like my playmate Sarah's — solemn women in black dresses and bushy-faced, starched men. Stolid, as if I'd scratched an old wound, he said simply, "It's gone." I have imagined him adding it to the pile of things to be auctioned, the way people cast into the flames letters from a lover who has abandoned them. Some family near Boston, I believe, gives my ancestors pride of place on their wall, delighting in the quaint, stiff poses. Only one of the sturdy faces twists with apprehension for the land, now frequented by fish instead of people.

There are documents in public libraries I have consulted to supplement the scanty tale Mother told when I was young. Boston, 65 miles away, wanted the Swift River's water. In 1921 surveys were made. In 1927 the Legislature doomed Enfield, Greenwich, Prescott, and Dana for a great reservoir. The towns would be evacuated and razed, residents forced to sell to the state or to private scavengers. Mother, Father, and Prescott left in 1935, among the die-hards. I was born six months later. Hordes of workers descended on the landscape to dismantle the remaining buildings, remove the cement foundations, and relocate all known graves. There are no Hawkinses in the Quabbin cemetery in Ware. Perhaps my father removed them to his new property in Northfield and buried them twenty paces from the huge oak tree. My father is conscientious of the claim of the dead. Before he dies he will tell me.

He doesn't need to tell me of his sorrow at acres and acres of trees chopped down, the land shaved like a patient for mortal surgery. I shudder at the very idea of the ugly scene. It is the impact of the loss of his roots that I imagine in vain, that sends analogous situations to me as to a magnet. Yet after the grip of attraction, the similarities don't satisfy. In Warsaw I hunted for the house of my friend Leah's parents, who had had to flee the Nazis. One street name had been changed, but I finally found the corner. Four blackened lots bordered it, the earth still smelling of burnt hopes. I sent my father a postcard of the gate of Auschwitz with its wracking motto in iron, "Arbeit Macht Frei." "Work Makes You Free," I translated for him. "A horrible perversion." But my father was not persecuted. No one wanted to exterminate the Swift River Valley's Yankees. And though Leah is like me a daughter of refugees, she has old family photos.

I visited Quabbin Reservoir once, unknowingly. When I was a Brownie Scout my troop picnicked at a huge lake. Our leader said the lake was new. As if that wasn't wonderful enough, the water was deep blue, sparkling, rich with leaping fish. One of us spotted a furry creature that looked like a fox. I couldn't wait to tell my father, knowing his love of animals. But when I told of my outing, Mother shushed me violently. I realized with horror that I had admired the water that had flooded my father's lost home. In innocence I had been hurtful and disloyal. I became alert and careful, questioning adults about what

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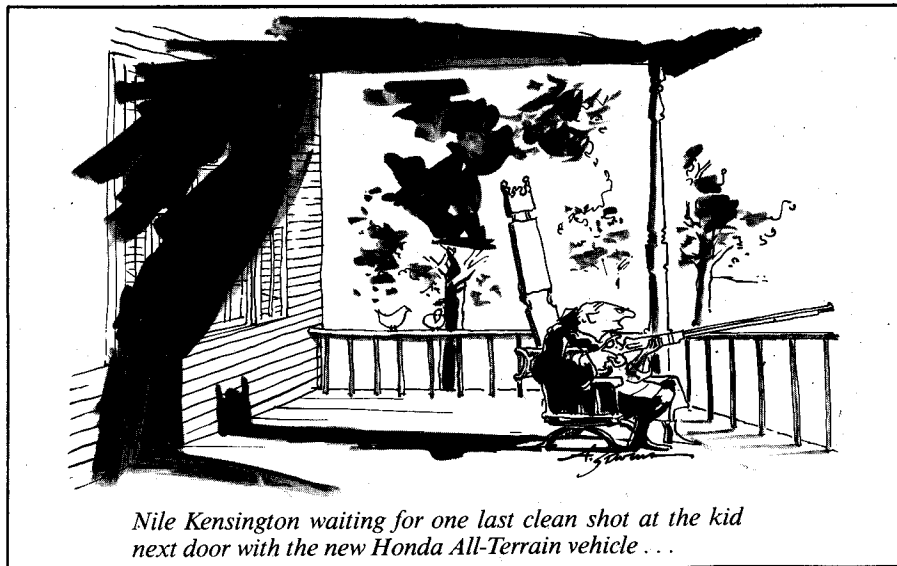
might lie beneath smooth surfaces. I learned to lift my chin like my father at their exasperation. Even now I avoid Routes 202 and 9 when I am in Massachusetts.

My father is loyal, too. It is a solemn allegiance, steady like the axis of the earth's rotation. When I am taken ill from contaminated food, I know he would send cheers, awkward but telling, if he knew. If I were jailed in Argentina or Korea, he would find out. On my release a stony-faced woman guard would hiss at me and thrust a small crushed envelope into my pocket. "Dear Dana," it would read, smudged by other hands, "I have written to the President. Don't worry. America is strong. This autumn the leaves are more colorful than ever. Eben Hawkins, Your Father."

I am accused sometimes of leftist sympathies. The denunciation pains me as it would pain my father. I have no preconceptions about who is right and who is wrong, which is what the charge of bias must mean. I simply learn the lesson again and again that one man's triumph is another man's tragedy. In Egypt I listened,

rapt, to a French archeologist's plan to save the temples at Abu Simbel from the inundation to be caused by the Aswan High Dam. The monuments would be hewn from the rock and moved. "Infinitely more challenging than resettling Nubians," he laughed from behind his moustache. Under the scorching sun my blood ran cold. "How many Nubians?" I asked. "Perhaps 100,000. Why?" he replied. I took my pictures, wrote my story, and bought a postcard showing the yearly flooding of the Nile. "Egypt will prosper with the dam," I wrote my father, "but 100,000 Nubians will lose their homeland. They are only peasants, it is said. *Love.*"

I have tried to imagine my father's expression as he reads my slanted handwriting and flips the card to consider the colored scene. But I'm not sure what room he'll read it in, and at what time of day. Perhaps he'll save it for his evening cigar and puff curls of angry smoke alone in his den. Or he could pluck it from the dented mailbox and smile that I am alive and thinking of him. Perhaps Nancy, his wife, stands them up beside his plate at supper and tries to spill soup on them. Once she pulled me aside and hissed that my messages were in bad taste. "Why?" I protested, sliding disingenuous surprise in place.



Nile Kensington waiting for one last clean shot at the kid next door with the new Honda All-Terrain vehicle . . .

"No more so than my articles and photographs." Petulance twisted her pink face before she turned away. Perhaps she sniffed conspiracy. She would be right, though it's not a dangerous one with a well-defined target.

Vengeance is not the point, I think. When young people were blowing up buildings, I dared to wonder if one well-placed bomb could even things out. But sabotage increases rather than removes damage. My father was paid for his land. Paid, not compensated. Mother told me that, but I could figure it out myself from the fact that he bought a large hardware store in Northfield. He hates the business. I once departed from my theme and sent a postcard captioned "Market Day in Punjab." "Can you believe it?" I wrote. "One fellow sells nothing but nails, used. He spreads them out on a rust-stained towel and crouches behind it waiting for customers." I regretted sending that one. It lacked the coil of irony I am usually able to set on the stiff paper. I try to avoid being sappy or simply factual. My messages must be tight, designed to nourish like compressed air. Strung to spring like explosives would be a wrong style, ruining my intention.

I don't think blame is the point either. If it were, a tornado — no one's fault — that reduced a housing tract to matchsticks wouldn't draw me for a report and a postcard vivid with tense sympathy. "In half an hour, whole houses shredded like government documents that shouldn't have existed in the first place. *Love.*" My father doesn't need to hear about guilt and innocence. The accusers usually turn ugly with their simplifications. In the press quarters near the occupation at Wounded Knee, I heard empathy with the Native Americans slapped down quickly. "What, the settlers were supposed to let the Indians kill them?" I heard an echo: What, Bostonians should die of thirst?

I don't know. But I have tried to think logically about that very issue. If Quabbin had not been built, what would have happened? My father would have kept on farming; I would have been christened

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with a family name and played among the buildings and landscape I have seen in old newspapers. I might have become a schoolteacher, married the regional superintendent, and now have children about to leave home. I would have visited my father on Sundays and resented his locked tongue. When alarm rose in Boston that the water was not sufficient for the populace, we would have read it in the papers, heard about the unrest on the radio, and watched convoys of tank trucks head for the capital. Perhaps evacuation would have been decreed, the most recent arrivals first. It is not a plight I would wish on anyone. Nor is my own.

So I do not know how to answer a letter that caught up with me in Afghanistan last month. Return-addressed from River Valley Enterprises, Northampton, Massachusetts, it was from the producer of a documentary. "I am making a film about water issues in Massachusetts," he said. "I understand that your father is a former resident of the town of Dana, destroyed when Quabbin was built. I asked him how he felt, and he said you can speak for him. Would you please let me know when and where I can interview you?"

But I don't know how my father feels. I have my search; he has his silence. Was that feigned politeness to put a pesky fellow off? Or was it meant for me as a kind of test? I am in Kansas City now. Yesterday I interviewed a distraught mother. Her son, who survived Vietnam, had both legs crushed when cement and steel tore loose and buried a hotel's posh dancing crowd. When I find a postcard of the Hyatt my attunement will be at a peak. I shall stab the blank square with my pen and engrave my sharpest message yet, ending with a double-underlined "*Love.*" I think I'll toss the filmmaker's letter away. The postcards consume my feelings. I have nothing more to say. Another disaster will beckon and I will follow. I am a wanderer; my father is a refugee. □ □