

Judith Gwinn Adrian and Jaylin M. Stueber (2023) From Hardship to Hope: Crossing the great divides of age, race, wealth, equity, and health. HenschelHAUS, Milwaukee, WI

COMPLETELY ALONE

Sometimes a man gets himself in a tight spot and there ain't much he can do. Not up to him any longer. I don't give up on you even though you made some bad choices, my Marcus.

Marcus. Marcus? Nah. I forgot. I'm woke now. You're gone. You're in jail. Oh shit!

Ruby Blue pulls the threadbare blue blanket around her more tightly, then sits up awkwardly on the grimy couch where she has slept, rubbing her fingers together to get rid of something sticky and feeling like an unmade bed of a human.

Hate this couch. It is a good thing I can't sleep on my stomach, with the baby and all, 'cause I don't want to breathe in the dirt; it ain't healthy. I have got to buck up. Why is it so quiet? Most of them are not usually sleepin' now.

Wrapped in the blanket, Ruby Blue opens the bedroom door and shuffles down the hallway where the smell of smoke loiters, shoving an empty pizza box to the side with her toe.

Quiet. Just too quiet.

The only sounds are muffled voices from daytime TV in the neighbors -- next apartment over -- fighting, again. The living room and kitchen are littered with empty plastic grocery store bags, shards of shriveled pizza crust, a single flowered child's sock, broken plastic hangers in pastel colors, and fast-food containers with drips of BBQ sauce dried on the sides. It appears there is a path carved through the clutter, guiding her eyes toward the exit, the apartment door.

My...my... my. I thought I was pretty basic but now see I'm so dumb it'd take me an hour to cook Minute Rice. Guess I ain't got no good sense. I wouldn't do 'em like this. Gone. They all gone. Yeah, we're mad now. Wait?

Ruby Blue twists and quickly returns to the bedroom, looking for her backpack.

The stimulus relief debit cards. Mine and Marcus'. Gone. They took my money. Our money. Nah, I'm not playin'.

All that's left in the bedroom is Marcus' blue hoodie. Ruby Blue drops the blanket for the moment and slowly puts on his sweatshirt. It is too large but she pulls it tightly around her distended body, recalling the scent of him.

Alone. We are completely alone in this world. My baby and me – well, a pregnant woman is never actually alone. But we gotta focus on our feet – keep ‘em movin’. Take control of what we can. No time for tears. I will call the 2-1-1 Helpline. Maybe there is room in a temporary shelter for me.

ZOE PROFILE

I wasn't always old. A distraction, some call *life*, turned my head, surprising me. This, however, is more observation than complaint. Olding is actually entertaining in its own odd way with its ruminations that don't reliably lead to serenity. Who knew?

Now, wrinkled, gnarled, and desexualized, I visualize myself liquifying, watching the rhythmic blue pulse when my hands are still. No question I'm invisible to most people, even though the pulsing in my veins infers life.

A still dignified withering creature, I am, blandly Midwestern and genetically British. I do know how to sit with grace, one leg behind the other to lower myself into a seated position, gently as a flutter, sitting with decorum and gentility. Whether erect posture is useful at my age is questionable, but it is a carryover; taught as one of my parents' many family-honored decrees.

Don't get me wrong. I love my hands, my relatively strong legs, and reasonably viable body. These parts are old trusted friends that can still stand tall, albeit slowly, and will never be this *young* again. Many of my wrinkles slope inward to amiable spaces, from a habit of smiling over the years, when I knew how to turn teaching and learning into an engaging game and honored the truth that we are all teachers and all learners.

I thought I was aware of the privileges that came my way, some earned but many unearned. Over the years, writing many an academic grant proposal, I spouted evidence-based buzz words describing human differences, like race/ethnicity, Eurocentrism, language, citizenship, physical ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, beauty, arrest record, formal education, accessibility, poverty, emotional ability, socioeconomic class, religion, marital status, and on and on. But, as I was soon to be taught, I was surprisingly naïve in thinking I understood these terms, while not fully seeing how my narrow experience had framed my grasp of the larger world.

I was Dr. Smyth, a woman who believed she knew what the hell she was about. I was never one of those teachers, as the joke goes, who spoke while others slept. Student immersion was priority number one. Personal engagement. Involvement. Community.

Now, since retirement, I'm simply *Zoe*. I have learned not to bother about a crease or a spot on my shirt. No one knows, or cares, that in my previous life I taught literature and traveled much of the world -- sometimes with students, sometimes with my husband, Fred. Curious I am, yes, with a hint of adventure.

Decades ago, I married Fred. A wise man for whom hands-on meant hands-in the dirt. Large hands that radiated warmth and smelled of raw earth. He taught agrarian ideas on the rez, respectfully learning as much as he taught. Fred, Fred, Fred.

My life mantra is, *there are many right ways*. And for us, our pragmatic marriage pattern was to teach at colleges separated by 1000 miles, one of us in the arts and one in the sciences. We spent holidays together for twenty-five years and shared many delights. Perhaps such distancing is one edict for preserving long-term love. Our almost nomadic lifestyles meant we chose not to bring children into our marriage.

Recently, we had both retired to our house and were discovering how to live together, more like conventional marrieds.

Then Fred got sick. Covid. The evil virus that aggressively encircled the planet for more than two years. Why weren't we humans aware that a pandemic could happen in modern times? Naïve? Arrogant? Or maybe just too busy doing, doing, doing, to ponder this possibility.