

Kathy Bratkowski

## Half Life

“Look at that,” Glenda said, as Paul slowed the truck to a crawl. A doe and two fawns stood beside the road. The doe lifted her neck, ears twitching. Glenda was always surprised at how unafraid they were of humans. Back home she could get within ten feet of them in her garden before they bolted.

Paul made a finger gun, using his thumb as a trigger, pointing it at the doe as he drove past. “Ka-pow,” he said, turning to Glenda for a reaction. He wanted a laugh. “You wouldn’t do that,” Glenda said. Her husband was the type to rescue box turtles from the road. Once, they found abandoned baby opossums living under their porch. He insisted on taking them in their son’s gerbil cage to a wildlife rescue center. That was years ago when David was a boy. Now he was a married attorney with a new baby. Glenda and Paul decided to make the trip to Oregon into a cross-country vacation.

“You never know. I might make hunting a retirement hobby,” said Paul. He’d threatened all sorts of ludicrous life changes since he retired from the brokerage. It was a running joke.

The doe looked at Paul and Glenda for a moment; its hesitation felt like defiance. Of course, that was ridiculous. Glenda hadn’t taught high school biology for thirty years without picking up a healthy skepticism of projecting human emotions onto animals. Still, something in the doe’s expression and stance seemed like a challenge.

Paul drove slowly on the circular road that bordered Route 66 State Park. In the spirit of taking their time, they’d pulled off the interstate to explore. The park was beautiful in a way, thought Glenda. She never imagined that Missouri would be scenic. Foxtails grew from ponds and backwaters, swaying in the wind. Stands of oak and hickory intermingled with pine trees. An old couple wearing bicycle helmets passed them, grey hair sticking out below their helmets. That’s all that you’d find here in the middle of the day on Tuesday, Glenda supposed: old retired people with plenty of time on their hands.

“Let’s stop in here,” Paul said, pulling into the visitors’ center. The low set, whitewashed building reminded Glenda of a small town roadhouse.

“Really? You want to take the time?” said Glenda.

“What do we have but time?” said Paul, smiling and opening the RV door for her.

“Keys?” Glenda held her palm outstretched. These days she suggested such things as a matter of course. Chances were good he’d lose them.

The visitor’s center was a pleasant surprise. Glenda hadn’t expected much but it was actually nicely arranged. The building had once been Steiny’s Inn, a restaurant that overlooked the Meramec River along Route 66. Enlarged black-and-white prints lined the walls, highlights of a Route 66 road trip through Missouri: the Garbage Can Café, the 66 Drive-in Theatre in Carthage, the Coral Court Motel in St. Louis, once a place for hourly trysts. One sign described Route 66 as America’s red light district and the old tourist motels as “whoopie cabins.”

She found Paul standing by the part of the display that described how the park had once been the city of Times Beach. Some beach, Glenda thought wryly, thinking of her beloved Nags Head beach back home on the Outer Banks.

“Did you know that this was once a toxic waste site?” Paul said. “Says here the federal government bought out the whole town. “

“What was it?” Glenda said, lifting her glasses and moving closer to the sign. There were some nuclear waste sites in this region, she recalled from news reports. But this was dioxin, a byproduct of Agent Orange, one of the dirty dozen of environmental pollutants. Just as bad as radioactive waste, maybe worse. It didn’t take much dioxin to do damage and the half life was very long. She’d have to ask the woman at the gift shop what happened to the contaminated soil. “This is some bad stuff,” said Glenda, turning to talk to Paul. He was nowhere in sight.

Glenda searched the adjacent rooms past antique motorcycles and neon signs from long-shuttered businesses. Surely she’d find him in the gift shop, deep into some book. But he wasn’t there either.

“Excuse me—did you see a man leave in the past few minutes?” she asked the woman near the maps and brochures at the entrance to the building.

“He went out the door a few minutes ago. Is there a problem?” she said.

“I hope not. He’s not been himself lately. A little disoriented.”

“Tell me about it,” said the woman. “My husband’s a space case.”

Glenda wished it were as simple as that. Since they left North Carolina, the spells were more frequent: more blank stares, more dead halts mid-sentence. Then there was the pancake incident in Columbus, Ohio, at an awful Yogi Bear Campground. Paul liked to cook pancakes in the full kitchen of the RV. The recipe was simple, right out of Betty Crocker, one he’d used for years: flour, vegetable oil, eggs, milk, baking soda, vanilla. Most likely he left out the milk and doubled the vegetable oil. He served them to Glenda with the batter oozing across the plate.

“I’m not sure these are cooked. Did you leave something out?” Glenda had said. She was seated at the picnic table.

“I didn’t leave anything out,” Paul said.

“They’re sort of gooey.”

“Forget it,” he said, raising his voice. Paul snatched the ceramic plate from the table and shoved it into a trash bag hanging from the awning of the RV. Two pre-teen girls on bicycles stopped and stared. “You’re always criticizing. It’s like everything’s some fucking competition with you.” By then he was shouting.

“Shhh....,” Glenda said, motioning toward the girls.

“Don’t shush me. I don’t give a fuck who’s hearing this.” He turned toward the girls. “You hear me? I hope you fucking hear me.”

“Paul! There are little kids all around here,” Glenda said. It was baffling, disorienting even. He wasn’t like this. He’d always had a sweet demeanor with children. Paul glared as the girls rode away. A sudden flicker of realization crossed Paul’s face, quickly morphing into an expression of fear. That had been the worst part of it all, seeing his terror at realizing what he’d done.

“I’m leaving,” he said, his voice thick with shame.

“Where are you going?” Glenda said.

“I’m fine,” he said. He was crying.

“Paul,” Glenda called after him. He waved her off as he walked away, a one-handed motion over his shoulder. For the next hour, she puttered around the camper, running through possible scenarios. She could try to drive the RV and look for him, but where? He’d left his cell phone, so there was no use in calling. Involving the police would make it into a major episode. If she phoned David, he’d be panicked, and to what end? He had the baby and Erika to worry about. Glenda busied herself with unhooking the camper and emptying the trash, mulling over what to do. Paul returned an hour later, calm and maddeningly clearheaded.

“Look what I got at the camp store.” He showed her a laminated paper with a catalog of birds of the Midwest. “You’ll see flycatchers and palm warblers all through this region. I need some better binoculars. There’s a Wal-Mart right at the interstate. You ready?”

Glenda had felt unmoored ever since, a bewildering sense of living a life that was not at all what she’d planned. The feeling had become all too familiar during their road trip. She’d begun to document his “spells” in a spiral notebook hidden in a closet in the RV. It seemed right to think of them as spells, as if a malevolent spirit had taken possession of her smart and loving husband. Soon enough, she’d have to describe his behavior more accurately and clinically: memory lapses, behavior changes, violent outbursts, an inability to retrieve words, all signposts to something ominous. Once there was a diagnosis, she’d have to use proper, clinical names, and once named, denial was no longer possible. A full workup with the neurologist was scheduled for when they returned to North Carolina, but Glenda knew the possibilities presented a vortex of bad news. Alzheimers. Dementia. Parkinson’s was less likely because he had no tremor—she’d learned that from obsessive, late night Google searches. Once whatever-it-was was named, there would be doctors and medications and assisted living and finally a nursing home. There would be bedpans and soft foods and she’d hate being a caregiver and feel

guilty for that. Some day, he might not recognize her or David or their new grandson at all.

That day, at Route 66 State Park, she exited the museum and shielded her eyes from the glare of the white gravel road, scanning the landscape.

Nothing too perilous was in sight, except a rusted decrepit bridge. Glenda debated whether to cross it on foot. On the other side was the paved road they'd just driven on. Probably Paul wouldn't backtrack. She headed toward the banks of the river where a small wooded path lined with jewelweed and poison ivy led to the Meramec.

Paul stood on the muddy riverbank. He threw a rock halfway across; the river wasn't terribly wide at that point. Glenda let out a long, deep sigh. She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath since leaving the museum. Paul hurled a stick across the water like a frisbee.

"Where've you been?" Paul said.

"I just went to the building to pee," she said. She wrapped her arms around his waist. Sometimes it was less upsetting just to play along. They climbed up the hill to the RV, arm in arm like young lovers. They greeted a young woman, slightly chubby, who walked a beautiful white long-haired dog past the visitor's center and across the bridge. Glenda had to wonder what brought her to the park on a weekday afternoon. Everyone has a story, she thought, as she climbed into the RV, handing the keys to Paul.

Several hours later, they stopped in Springfield for the night. Paul liked KOA campgrounds. They had plenty of full hookups with pull throughs. Usually Glenda and Paul could find a site away from the snack bar and pool in the far reaches of the property. But the only open spot that night was on a gravel circle packed with other campers.

"Hi there." Glenda waved to a woman lying on a plastic lounge chair at the next site. A toddler squatted beside her drawing in the mud with a stick. "Hey. I'm Rhonda," the woman answered. "Where are you two heading?"

"Portland, Oregon. We have a new grandbaby," Glenda said.

“This one here is my fifth,” said Rhonda. She was no older than her late forties. Her hair was long and dirty blonde-grey.

Glenda bent over to greet the girl. “What are you drawing?” she asked. The toddler looked up. Half of her face was crimson red and splotched and her cheek was swollen.

“It’s a birthmark,” Rhonda said. “I can’t pronounce the medical name. A strawberry something.”

“Where are you all going?” Glenda said. It was clear they’d been there for a day or two. A tricycle and lawn chairs and plastic tubs were scattered around the pop-up camper. Dirty towels hung from a clothesline and bags of chips and cookies were scattered across the picnic table.

“Oh, we’re just going to Tulsa. We’re taking Livvy here back to her momma. She’s just getting out of the hospital. Don’t look so sad, it’s just one of those rehab places. It’s good news that she’s getting out.” Rhonda stood up. She was slimmer than she had appeared. She picked up Livvy and propped her on her hip. “So you’re seeing your first grandbaby?”

“We are,” Glenda said. Paul bent underneath the clothesline separating the two sites. “Here’s my husband Paul,” said Glenda. After greeting Rhonda, Paul aped a big smile at Livvy. Shy, she buried her face on Rhonda’s shoulder.

“You need a change,” said Rhonda to Livvy, patting her back. “Scuse me while I take care of this one here. The rest of my group is at the lake. They should be back soon.”

Paul stretched his arms out wide and took a deep breath. “These woods are something, aren’t they?” The woods Paul referred to were some distance away, past the gravel loop and a dozen jammed together RVs. Campgrounds reminded Glenda of refugee camps she’d seen on the news. Everyone looked homeless to her.

“Yeah, it really is lovely,” she said, careful not to let sarcasm creep into her tone. She’d vowed to herself that she’d tolerate the RV trip because Paul loved it; he seemed

genuinely happy on the road. Her reward was seeing the baby, her only son's only son, the whole reason for the trip.

Inside the camper, Glenda stretched out on the bed in the smaller of the two bedrooms. Since it was only Glenda and Paul, they slept in separate bedrooms in the camper. Sex wasn't all that frequent for them, and it never had been. But, despite everything, that part of their marriage was still alive unlike some other couples in their circle.

Glenda opened the laptop. She heard the camper door shut and Paul peeked his head around the corner. "There you are," he said. Glenda knew that he'd hoped to find her in the master bedroom, the one he slept in: it was her way of telling him that she was in the mood. With two bedrooms, Glenda had a place to go when she wanted to avoid the issue of sex, and to have solitude.

She entered the words "strawberry birthmark" into the search engine. Images of faces with scarlet splotches popped up. Some were just closeups of cheeks. In one photo a woman had a birthmark that looked like Livvy's. A black rectangle covered her eyes to protect her identity. What must it be like to go through life with such a birthmark? When Livvy buried her face in Rhonda's shoulder, the unmarked side of her face showed a pretty complexion, a rosebud mouth. Growing up like that would be so hard. David had been small for his age and tortured for it throughout elementary and middle school. What would it be like for Livvy?

Glenda learned that the birthmark was a strawberry hemangioma. Medical journals described how difficult surgical removal could be because of an intricate network of blood vessels. It had been done successfully but plastic surgery was required afterwards. Poor Livvy. She had to finish growing before it was even a possibility.

Glenda logged into her Facebook account. Her daughter-in-law hadn't sent any photos to them. Instead, Erika told her to download some from her son's Facebook page. "Paul, come see," Glenda called. "They've got some new pictures up."

Paul crawled onto the bed beside Glenda. "Apparently the grandmother doesn't get treated any differently than David's 952 other friends," Glenda sniffed. She felt she should be able to see the new photos of baby Jacob before the rest of the world.

"He's smiling!" Paul said.

"It's gas, I'm sure," said Glenda. But cute none the less.

"Where is David?" Paul said.

"Oregon? Where we're traveling to?"

"Well, who's taking care of him?" Paul was confusing Jacob with David.

"This is David's son. Jacob," she said, pointing to the screen. Paul nodded but he clearly couldn't retrieve the memory. She turned and kissed Paul on the cheek. "Isn't he something?" said Glenda. She probably should continue to explain, to help Paul become oriented. But seeing Jacob's photo made her too happy to destroy the moment.

Later that night, Rhonda's family joined Glenda and Paul at their fire pit. Paul had been David's scout leader for years and was proud of his skills in the outdoors. He insisted on making a fire when they camped, even when it was just the two of them. That night they were joined by Rhonda, her husband Carl, her granddaughter Lori and Lori's friend Haley.

"The girls are fifteen. They've known each other since they were Livvy's age," said Rhonda as she and Glenda sat in lawn chairs by the campfire. Lori helped Livvy roast a marshmallow. After stoking the fire, Paul stood and tickled Livvy's feet. She laughed hysterically. What a glorious sound, thought Glenda. She couldn't wait for Portland.

"Lori's like a little mama," said Rhonda.

"Good thing," said Carl. He popped the tab on a third can of beer, crushing the empty and tossing it to the ground.

"Carl and Jodi had a falling out," said Rhonda. "Jodi's my daughter, the one in rehab. Carl's stepdaughter."

"It ain't no falling out," said Carl. He had a drunk's argumentative way about him. "That's got nothing to do with it," he said.

Glenda interjected, careful to sound polite. "Then what is it?"



“Look what that junkie did to her little girl.” Carl motioned toward Livvy.

“Daddy, that’s not what caused her birthmark,” said Lori.

Carl stared at Lori. “Who died and made you an expert?” he said. “She thinks she knows everything,” Carl said to Glenda.

“We looked it up, Mr. Rayburn,” said Haley. “Nobody knows what causes a birthmark.” She swatted a mosquito on her leg. Haley was one of those young girls with the body of a middle-aged woman: trunk-like legs, thick midsection. Glenda felt sorry for her. She wore horizontal stripes; had no one told her that it made you look fatter?

“Haley and Lori are both straight-A students back home in Poplar Bluff,” said Rhonda. She explained to Glenda and Paul where their hometown was located, 100 miles or so south of St. Louis.

“We just went through St. Louis, didn’t we?” Glenda said to Paul. He was looking through the binoculars at the trees. “We thought it was pretty. The Arch and all. We didn’t stop there though.”

“What are you looking for out there?” Carl said to Paul. “Seems pretty dark.”

“I think I heard a barn owl.” Paul walked up the steps into the camper.

“Is he a birdwatcher or something?” Carl asked Glenda.

Before she could answer, Paul came out with a flashlight in hand, letting the screen door slam shut. “I’m going to go see.”

“Be careful,” said Glenda. She was aware that worry registered on her face. Paul crossed the gravel road toward the woods.

“Is something wrong with him?” said Rhonda.

“He’s been having some spells. You know, getting forgetful.”

Lori handed Livvy to Rhonda, settling her girl in her lap. “We’re going to get some ice cream,” she said.

“That friend of Lorinda’s doesn’t need to be eating any ice cream,” said Carl as the girls walked the gravel path to the camp store.

“That’s not our business,” said Rhonda.

“Good thing. We’ve got enough problems. We got enough mouths to feed,” said Carl. “I wouldn’t want to feed that one, for sure. I’m heading in.”

“More mash mellow,” said Livvy.

“Shh,” said Rhonda. She placed a pacifier in Livvy’s mouth.

“Can I hold her?” said Glenda. Rhonda settled Livvy on Glenda’s lap. The girl’s hair was as fine as feathers, her scalp sweaty in the humid air. Glenda patted Livvy’s back.

Glenda was glad that Carl was leaving and she’d be alone with Rhonda. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could stand his commentary. She shut her eyes and rocked from side to side, soothing Livvy. The night air was thick with the sounds of crickets and tree frogs. Back home, it was seagulls and geese and, always, the white noise of the waves.

“In North Carolina, the wild horses come up to our beach cottage,” said Glenda to Rhonda. “We have this rye grass that they like. They’ve been on the outer banks for something like 500 years. They were left behind in a shipwreck. You’ll see them in the early morning. Anyway, I like to get up before Paul and watch them. I need my coffee and my solitude in the morning, you know what I mean?” Glenda looked over at Rhonda.

“I don’t get too much of that,” said Rhonda.

“That can be good, too. Our son lives 3,000 miles from us. How often am I going to see that baby?” said Glenda.

“I do get to see my grandkids,” said Rhonda.

Glenda smoothed Livvy’s hair as the girl’s eyes fluttered closed. “You know they can do a surgery for Livvy, eventually. What do the doctors say about it?”

“Her doctor sent us to a specialist in St. Louis. They said it might fade with time. Or it could cause a blood clot and be fatal. That’s what got Carl all worked up and mad at Jodi. But the doctor said her problem didn’t cause it.”

“What was her problem?” said Glenda

“Heroin.”

“Oh! But she got help for that, right?”

“Let’s hope she’s clean,” said Rhonda. “Lorinda cares for Livvy real cute-like but she’s too young to be a mother. I want that one to go to college. She’s a smart one.”

The women stared into the fire. “Lately he’s been having these memory lapses,” said Glenda. “I call them spells because I don’t want to think about what they really are.”

“Has he been to the doctor?”

“He goes to the specialist when we get back. I’m bracing myself for bad news. I don’t know why all those corny jokes keep running through my head. You know: ‘The great thing about Alzheimer’s is you meet new people every day.’ Or ‘With Alzheimer’s, you never have to watch reruns on television.’”

“I never think those jokes are funny,” said Rhonda.

“Me neither.” For the first time, Glenda thought about the meaning behind the stale jokes: For Paul, the worst part of what happened was the moment of realization, his consciousness of what he’d done. Chances are he’d lose that too, eventually, meaning only she would remember how he used to be. Leaving her to suffer the loss.

Rhonda stood and pulled her phone from her pocket. “This has a pretty good flash. Let me get a picture of you two. Then I have to get her to bed.”

Livvy sat up in Glenda’s lap, her pacifier bobbing up and down with tired energy. Rhonda sent the photo in a text message to Glenda’s phone. Livvy’s birthmark was barely visible, with the unmarked side of her face closest to the camera.

Glenda was pleased with how she looked in the photo. Having Livvy in her lap hid the more unfortunate parts of her figure. The photo hid her flaws; the same could be said for Livvy.

When Rhonda took Livvy to bed, Glenda went inside her camper to wait for Paul. She turned on the television in her bedroom. Even though it was only ten o’clock, she dozed off watching the local Springfield news station. She could have slept through the night. But she was jolted awake just after eleven by the sound of Paul shouting.

Glenda went outside the camper to see Paul jabbing a finger at Carl. “You give them back to me,” he said.

Rhonda stood beneath their camper's awning, holding Livvy, who was crying loudly. "He banged on the door and woke us up," said Rhonda.

"Paul, what is going on?" said Glenda, mortified and panicked. Paul had red scratches on his shins and calves, likely from the underbrush. He had a hole in his teeshirt; it looked as if it had gotten caught on a sharp twig.

"He took my bird glasses. I just bought them and these rednecks took them."

Carl looked as if he'd sobered up somewhat. "What's he's talking about? What are bird glasses?"

"He means his binoculars," said Glenda. "Paul, he couldn't have taken them. You had them when you left tonight."

"I left them right here," said Paul. "Right here on this table." He pointed to the picnic table.

"That's not so," said Rhonda, a lilt of irritation in her voice.

"I know," said Glenda, hearing the desperation in her tone, in a plea for understanding. "Paul, you went out to look for a barn owl. You had the binoculars. Remember? We were here with Rhonda. And with Carl and Livvy and the girls."

Haley and Lorinda came out of Rhonda's camper. The girls stood side by side, a quilt draped over their shoulders. They stared at Paul with equal parts puzzlement and alarm.

"I ain't standing here for this," said Carl and turned toward his camper. Paul reached over and, with a balled up fist, grabbed Carl's white undershirt.

"Look at you with your wife beater shirt. Give me my bird glasses back, you son of a bitch."

Glenda heard Rhonda gasp. Glenda tried to remove Paul's hands from Carl. "Come on, Paul, we can get more binoculars," she said, trying to keep her voice calm. Paul knocked her hands off of his arms with a backhanded motion. He didn't strike her; it was nothing intentional. Still she stumbled, nearly losing her balance. Rhonda grabbed her elbow to catch her.

"Come on in and sleep with us tonight," Rhonda said.

Glenda shook her head. "See Paul, it's Livvy. And Livvy's family. You want Livvy to stop crying, don't you? Just like you wouldn't want to make Jacob cry."

"Let's go in," said Carl. Protectively, he put his hands on the shoulders of Haley and Lori and led them toward the camper. Paul folded onto the bench of the picnic table with a confused look on his face.

"Don't stay with him tonight," said Rhonda.

"I'll be okay," said Glenda. "Really. It's fine." She sat next to Paul and linked her arm through his. He stared at the ground. "I'm sorry," he said to Rhonda.

"See? We'll get through this," Glenda said to Rhonda.

"I guess we all get through things, somehow," said Rhonda. She paused, scrutinizing Paul. "Are you sure? I'm going to need to lock our door," said Rhonda. Glenda nodded. "Well, if you need us, just text me." Rhonda opened the door to her camper.

"She won't need you," said Paul.

Livvy stared at Paul and Glenda with a toddler's soulful gaze. Glenda blew a kiss toward Livvy as the door shut behind her, knowing it would be the last time she'd see the girl.

That night, Paul slept soundly; his foray into the woods must have tired him. Glenda didn't sleep at all. She moved about the RV, as quietly as possible. She put away dishes and folded blankets and readied the camper to close it up.

At sunrise, she looked out the kitchen window at Rhonda's pop-up camper. All was quiet. Glenda picked up the envelope. She'd left blank the payee part of the check so Rhonda could use it, or sign it over to Livvy's mother. She scrawled a note on the front of the envelope: "*Hope this helps with Livvy. Love, Glenda xxoo.*"

Careful to not slam the screen door of the camper, she slipped outside and taped the envelope to the door of Rhonda's camper. It was important that they leave before Rhonda found the check. If Glenda handed it to her in person, she'd be too proud to accept it. Just before Glenda woke Paul, she logged onto her computer and saw a new

photo of Jacob on Facebook. He had a Tar Heels cap on, cocked to one side as he slept.  
In two days, they'd be there.