

# REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

## *SHORT STORY*



## The Sill

BY REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

Edna cracked open the window and lay there, cheek on the sill, gasping. So much for that, she thought. As she let the cold air wash over her head, she tried to figure what had happened. Not that she understood the mechanics of the gas range she'd cooked on for more than half a century, but she tried to work it out just the same. Then it struck her. "Too much wind." She spoke this out loud as though explaining to someone who had just walked into the room. But there was no one. She noticed that, thought the hell with it and continued. "Yep. Musta blown down the vent in this night a wind. Not enough gas left to knock me out. Guess I should a picked a calmer night for it."

Now she was feeling cold. Temperatures had been below zero for days, and with the searing winds that had started that morning, she thought her face might freeze to the sill if she stayed there much longer. But she didn't move.

"Maybe I could freeze myself to death instead." She was liking this talking out loud. It made her thoughts seem less crazy, less lonely, less confusing. The tone of her own voice inside her skull reverberated in her ears with what seemed to her like clarity, like conviction even. She did begin to feel her skin burning with the cold and thought how odd that extreme heat and extreme cold feel about the same.

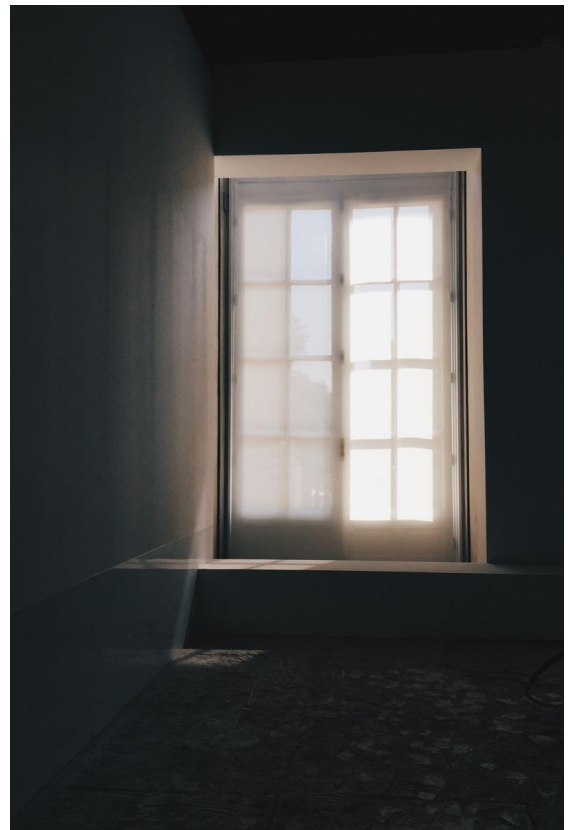


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*Who was the other voice in her head if not her? If she was talking to herself, then she was listening, and so the voice was the other.*

“Just be calm, Edna,” she told herself firmly. “This is a necessary experiment we’re havin’ tonight.”

Now she felt the skin start to go numb so it didn’t really even feel like her own face anymore. The question bubbled up and she decided to give it platform: “What if my face does freeze to the sill, but I don’t freeze with it? Will I die of hunger instead, all stuck here, afraid of tearin’ the skin to go git somethin’ to eat?”

What a question, she thought. How gruesome. She hadn’t thought so far into the future, or at least this part of her hadn’t. That was also puzzling, come to think of it. Who was the other voice in her head if not her? If she was talking to herself, then she was listening, and so the voice was the other. Which one did she feel more like? She wasn’t sure, but if there was a plain choice in the matter, what did that mean? Was she verifying her own craziness this night? Was it back to that? Better speak up, she thought.

“Yeah. Thoughts don’t sound so cracker box when I say ‘em out loud like I’m doin’ right now. Why didn’t I think a this before?”

Who was she asking? But before she could think it through, there came an answer.

“I didn’t think of it before because I was too scareyd a bein’ crazy. Now I kin see a way ‘round it.”

And what’s that?

“Why darlin, git your ol’ face off that sill, and I’ll show you.”

Without another thought, Edna lifted her head up with a jerk and felt the skin tear down by her jowl. She looked at the ledge and saw the thin, pale flesh stuck in the ice. Oh my Lord, she thought. She put her hand to her cheek and then looked at it. Blood. Not a lot, but enough to get her attention.

“Now what?” Her voice sounded mournful.

“Hell darlin, you were gonna snuff yourself in the oven just an hour ago and now you’re fretting over a bit a lost hide?”

Edna started to laugh at that, but her face was beginning to thaw already and the movement brought a knife of pain into her. She put her hands on the sill to draw herself off the floor, but she noticed that one hand was right over the skin she’d left there. Instinctively, she jerked it away. Putting your hand on the skin on your face was one thing; doing it when that skin had left for good was quite another.

She pried herself up and pushed the window down against the wind. As she did this, she felt the sharp ache of her cheek and some wetness slip down her neck. “Better go doctor it, hon.” The voice was sounding more firm and clear, like someone she once knew, maybe.



Photo by Brendon Thompson on Unsplash

*The tone was so soothing, Edna started to cry. A lone tear ran down her raw cheek, and she felt the salt burn.*

Edna pulled herself across the floor. It was slow going. Like a slow motion movie or like she was dragging lead weights across the bottom of a pool. Had she done that once? Why else would that image put itself in her mind? She passed the kitchen and noticed the oven door gaping open. She flashed on why it was like that. Had someone come in and opened it?

“No, silly. Remember? We wanted to try the old head-in-the-oven trick, but the wind fouled it all up. Just git yourself to the bathroom now.”

The tone was so soothing Edna started to cry. A lone tear ran down her raw cheek, and she felt the salt burn. “Ow!” She reached up to wipe the tear but remembered the skin on the sill.

“Best not.” This made her laugh again, and the pain flashed across her face. She pushed open the bathroom door, reaching for the switch. She hesitated.

“What will I see?” She felt genuine fear.

“Of what, darlin?”

Would her bloody face be ruined? Would she have to get to the hospital? They’d think her insane. Unless she could come up with a plausible reason for her cheek skin being gone. She thought a moment but came up with nothing.

“We can worry about that later,” she heard herself say. She felt momentarily comforted.

But then she remembered that she’d have to call an ambulance. Her car hadn’t worked since some hose or other burst in September. The siren would make the neighbors take notice. Jim and Nell would get all up in arms, making her business theirs just because there wasn’t anything better to do, and it all would become a mess. Lots of explaining when there wasn’t any good explanation so she’d have to make up something, and that required a whole lot of effort she didn’t have.

“Oh, hon. Just take a peek. Can’t be that bad.” The voice sounded just then almost sarcastic. And so familiar. If only she could think...who was it?

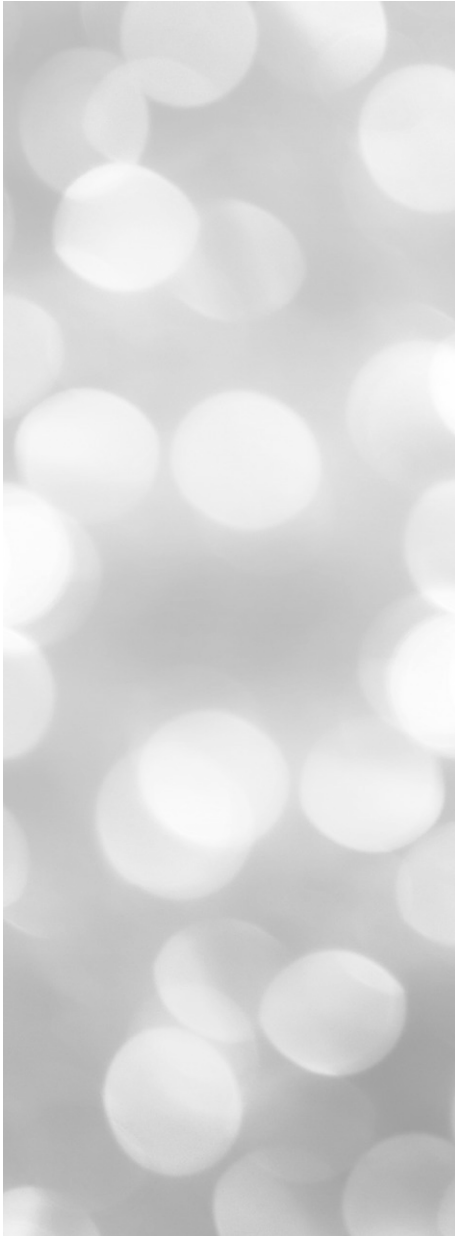
“Now go on in there. Git. Put that light on and take a look.”

Edna flicked the switch but stood staring at the wall above it. She felt the warmth from the bulb, naked ever since the glass cover had fallen off last summer. Or was it the summer before?

Would she just stand here all night? Maybe she’d freeze here instead.

“Yes’m, that is a possibility. Or you could just turn yorself aroun’ and take a gander in that mirror.”

Edna turned slowly. There was blood. But just the thinnest, seeping covering. She had lost just one or maybe two layers of the epidermis. But the whole side of her face was peeled.



“Dermabrasion!” She blurted it out and then laughed at her joke, causing the sharp pain again. “Good Lord, I gotta stop that.” Her cheek smarted.

She opened the medicine cabinet and looked in. Not much there. Some old lotion, gone sour. A red lipstick tube from the days when she still made up her face. Her toothpaste and brush, two aspirin lying forlorn at the bottom of the open jar. But no first aid to speak of.

“Use toilet paper. Git it wet and sop up yor face. Then we’ll figure out what to use as bandage.”

Edna did as she told herself, although her voice was beginning to sound more and more like someone else’s. The thought was of some concern to her, but with raw flesh oozing blood right in front of her, it took a back seat.

The roll was on the back of the toilet. She just couldn’t be bothered putting it on the spool anymore. It was just her anyway, so who cared?

“That’s right, hon. No need puttin’ on the dog when there’s no one ‘round to notice.”

She squelched the urge to smile again at her own humor, and instead thought about how much had gone by the wayside of late. The car, the light cover, the old lotion, TP on the back of the toilet—all these were small signs of something else. Something that was happening inside her. It felt like weariness and, at the same time, like letting go. Letting go of the struggle to maintain order, to keep the decay, the falling apart, the natural order of things at bay. She hadn’t thought of putting on makeup or lotioning her skin as fighting back the tendency toward rot, but she now saw, just this moment, that had been exactly what it was. And the oven stunt was no more than her own hand pulling up, once and for all, the dried remains of her garden, admittedly a bit before it was time. If you knew it was going to happen anyway, why not get a jump on it?

“Because it’s not really yor call.”

Edna waited for the pause to end.

“There’s a time for everything, you know as well as anyone.”

Well, what did that mean? Edna shook the two aspirin from the bottle and put them on her tongue. Her face stung, and she’d decided to treat herself to the last of her stash. She leaned down, sipping enough water from her cupped hand to wash down the pills.

“Go on now, lie down in yor bed an’ think it over.”

Edna shuffled out of the bathroom, still feeling the cakey pellets in the back of her throat. She left the light on, the arc of which showed her well enough to the bedroom. She let herself down slowly over the bed and then fell the rest of the way so as not to stress her knees. She’d figured out this maneuver a while back, thinking it’d save her from knee operations. So far, so good, she mused.

*"There's a time for everything;  
you know as well  
as anyone."*



*Edna drifted off into an easy sleep, gliding along the surface of the wide, white sill, still cool from the open window.*

“Think what over?” She recalled her own voice of a few minutes ago. She felt a bit riled. Her mind was definitely muddled what with all the talking to herself, and this voice taking on a quality of “other” and yet so strangely familiar. Reminiscent of something...

Edna drifted off into an easy sleep, gliding along the surface of the wide, white sill, still cool from the open window. From the sill she slid into the night air and flew over her roof and then past Jim and Nell’s, whose front light cast its dim wake over the porch steps. She puffed herself up to make herself lighter for fear she might slip out of the sky and land there. It worked, too, for soon she was higher in the night sky. She was dazzled and frightened at the same time. Her belly felt funny. The same way she’d felt that time so many years ago swimming in Owl Lake. She’d been leery of something scratching her stomach, and now in the air it was the same. She noticed herself sucking in her gut so it wouldn’t drag over whatever might be sticking up. But then she realized this was ridiculous and relaxed her muscles to better enjoy the flight.

It was dark, and she could see lights twinkling all around and in front of her. The air was cool but not uncomfortable. She had no idea where she was going and sensed some fear about how she might get back. Yet part of her knew she was dreaming and wanted to explore.

“When you git up high enough it knocks you out.” She said this aloud as she came back to consciousness. She felt the disappointment she usually did when she awoke. Her dreams now were more interesting than her life. “By a long shot,” she heard herself say.

How long had she been sleeping? It was still dark, and her fingers were stiff with cold. Her face ached and was tight—she dared not move.

“How do *you* know what happens up there?” She felt the pre-nap irritation return, as if her flight had taken her floating above it, but on landing, rested right back on it.

“I know a lot, actually.”

“Okay, Miss Smarty, who are you then?”

“You know.”

Jesus. Edna’s delight and comfort in the voice shattered into disgust. She hated people telling her what to do; she hated know-it-alls. And this voice was sounding just like that. She decided not to answer.

“You can try an’ ignore me but that’s really plain silly since I am in yor head, ya know.”

Edna ignored the voice and pushed herself up on the bed. Her head spun from the exertion, so she sat a moment to catch her breath and clear her mind. As she sat there she realized she was ignoring her own self. And then she felt panic. What if



*"So it's normal for there to be two parts of us, and for those two parts to have conversation, even disagreements, maybe."*

this is what crazy was like? Having fights inside your mind that no one else could see or hear? She might even hurt herself. And then she put her hand to her cheek and realized she already had.

Her breath came faster and shallower as if she were running. But there she sat, on the edge of her bed. She was afraid. Afraid of the dark, of the loneliness that suffocated her in this house, afraid of what her neighbors thought and said behind her back. But mostly afraid of this voice, talking to her, that was her own. Her body rocked with fear, and she suddenly fell slack against her pillow.

"Hon, look at you. All worked up and panicky. Yor okay. Nothin' to fear but fear itself, right?"

There she went again. She hadn't even had to make an effort. The voice just came out of her mouth, talking to her now as if she were possessed. But by what? Or whom?

Suddenly she saw her baby sister, Bess, when they were little girls. With her wispy, yellow curls that looked like a darn halo. Bess had had an imaginary friend. She spoke to her all the time, even in front of other people. Finally, their mother had told Bess that it was fine she had an imaginary friend, but that she should only speak with her in private. What was Bess's friend's name? Sarah? Sue Ellen? Something like that. Anyway, Edna had figured that her mother was trying to spare them all the embarrassment, but now she wondered. Was she having an imaginary friend, too? Or was her sister's imaginary friend really just herself, her other self, with whom she discussed things out loud that most people learn to keep to themselves?

"That's sounding more like it, hon."

"So it's normal for there to be two parts of us, and for those two parts to have conversation, even disagreements, maybe."

"I think so."

"So everybody has 'em."

"Yup."

"But why do little kids and old people carry on the conversations out loud? Why doesn't everybody?"

Silence. It was obvious. Because it looked crazy, of course.

"And because adults are too busy scurrying 'round most of the time to notice the conversation."

I'm certainly not busy, Edna thought. "Far from it!" She giggled and felt her tight cheek again.



Nell sat at the kitchen table turning cards. One after the other. She'd stopped playing Solitaire awhile ago and now was just turning up card after card, marveling at what appeared. She liked to guess the cards and was still surprised to find that she was right more often than not. This mesmerized her so that when Jim opened the door, she jumped.

"Whoa girl. I live here, remember?" Jim went to the fridge to get another beer.

"Yeah, I was just concentratin' on the cards is all."

"Whatcha playin' at?"

"Solitaire." She knew Jim wouldn't understand the other.

"Ya know, I noticed Edna's front window half open an' her lyin' with her face stuck out it for the longest time. I was just about to call to ya when she closed it up. Strange, hey? With it bein' below zero an' all. That woman's goin' loony if you ask me."

"You think?" Nell had started turning cards again.

"Yes I do. In fact, I wonder if I oughtta go over there and check her out. See if she's okay. I mean why would a old lady lean out the window on a icebox night like this?"

"Hmmm. You got a point," Nell replied without looking up.

"Woman, are you payin' attention to me or to them cards?"

Nell turned toward him. "Why you, of course, hon'. If you wanta go over to Edna's, I'll go with you."

Jim murmured something into his beer bottle and turned back out the door. It swung to, and Nell went back to her cards. Pretty soon she was guessing each card, three, Jack, nine, Ace, four.... Now in her groove, she started working on predicting the color, too. Black King. Nope. Red five. Yup. The colors were harder, but just for now, she thought. I just need more practice.

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Edna still lay on her pillow. She felt the cold in her bones and reached to pull the coverlet up. There was Bess again, with her blond ringlets and chubby cheeks. Bess had been the baby and the sweetest of them all. Everyone loved Bess. Edna used to tell her stories to get her to sleep in their shared room at night and sometimes sang to her. What was the tune?

"It went like this," and her voice hummed a few phrases. Then the words came to her.

"Mama's little baby loves shortnin,' shortnin,' Mama's little baby loves shortnin' bread."

*She liked to guess the cards and was still surprised to find that she was right more often than not.*



*But finally, Edna would get no answer and know that she was alone in the night. That was when she would sing.*

What else was there? Something about being in bed, just like she was now. What was it?

Three little children,  
Lyin' in bed  
Two were sick  
And the other 'most dead  
Sent for the doctor  
And the doctor said,  
"Give those children some  
Shortnin' bread."

"The other 'most dead." That was her, she thought. Lying in bed, almost dead. But why would she think that, her mind snapped at her. She felt fine, just tired was all.

"That's right. Tired. Of the livin'. Of the rottin'. Time for movin' on." Her voice was so soft now she had to strain to hear it.

"Movin' on to where? Where else is there?" Edna felt herself getting nervous again. Panicky. She wanted to bolt out of bed. To go splash water on her face. To stop this talk. But she didn't. She lay there. Waiting.

"Ol' girl, there ain't no need to wait. You kin just move on. You kin lay down and let go. You kin decide. When it's your time, that is."

Edna felt riled again. Riled and confused. What did that mean? Move on, decide, when it's my time? Before there had been something about it wasn't her call. Now supposedly it was? This really was hogwash—the ramblings of an old woman going to the dogs, she thought. She needed to get up, to move, to shake this craziness off. Like she'd been doing these past months. Shaking off the coming craziness, the voice in her head, talking to her, confusing her, making her think things she didn't understand.

Still she didn't get up. Instead she drifted into a reverie with the Shortnin' Bread tune in her head. She was lying in her bed with Bess across the room. She could see the stars out her window, and she watched them as she told her story. Every few lines, she'd ask Bess if she were still awake. And Bess would reply in her sweet, baby voice that she was. But finally, Edna would get no answer and know that she was alone in the night. That is when she would sing. She would sing the Shortnin' Bread tune to keep herself company and drown out Bess's raspy breath. Her grandmother had taught her the song, and she liked it. She liked it because it was bouncy and talked about shortening bread, which she thought must be delicious. She sang to herself to drown out her own thoughts, the thoughts that jangled about in her head and kept her from sleep.

The song played, whether in her head or out loud, Edna no longer knew. She felt herself getting heavy and then suddenly very light. So light that she floated up out of her bed and through the window into the night sky. The sky she had watched while spinning her Bess stories. She floated up above the house, seeing the cracked roof tiles and bird droppings. She saw Nell and Jim's and noticed Jim





*The black got blacker as she moved away from her street and the lights of houses and posts, but she felt the air like a soft blanket...*

looking out the front window toward her house.

She knew he was concerned for her and wanted to let him know all was well. But she was floating too far for him to hear her, even if she had tried to call out. She didn't think about her stomach this time, nor did she need to puff herself up so she could clear the roof tops and chimneys. This time she seemed to have plenty of what it took to float high without any effort at all.

The black got blacker as she moved away from her street and the lights of houses and posts, but she felt the air like a soft blanket that wrapped around her making her more comfortable than she could ever remember. She looked up into the dark and felt two hands on her face, cupping her gently like a lover readying for a kiss. And she was kissed. A sweet, welcoming kiss that made her forget everything, including what had been her name.

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Jim was looking out the front window when Nell came into the room. He turned and saw the look on her face.

"What?"

"Don't know..." Nell couldn't decide if she should tell her husband. He wasn't up for this kind of thing.

"You look like you'd seen a ghost. What is it?"

"Well...I was in playin' cards when I heard a sound. Did you hear it?"

"No. What?"

"It sounded like singin'."

"Singin'? Where?"

"I don't know. That's why I came in here—I wondered if you were doin' it."

"Nope. I was just lookin' out the window."

"It was that old Shortnin' Bread song—remember?" And she sang the chorus for him.

"Yeah, I remember it. But why would you hear that? Woman, you been drinkin'?"

"No." Nell was frustrated with her husband and she didn't think she'd tell him the rest.

"There's more, huh?"

"Well, it was odd."



“Yeah?”

“It sounded like Edna’s voice.”

“Ooo-wee, that is crazy. But maybe you’re just feelin’ guilty ‘cause a what I tol’ you before. Maybe we should go check on the old bird.”

“Yea, that’s probably it.” Nell wasn’t all that certain, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to go to Edna’s either. She had a feeling. But he was putting on his coat and handing her hers.

They walked down the front steps, barely illumined by the old bulb in the porch socket. They approached Edna’s stoop, and Nell held back while Jim all but hopped up to bang on the door. They waited. Jim knocked again. He looked at her.

“Maybe she’s sleeping. Should we wake her?”

Nell knew she wasn’t sleeping. She figured she had to go through the motions though because Jim would never believe her otherwise.

They found Edna in her bed, sure enough. She looked completely calm, and they figured she’d passed away in her sleep. Good for her, they thought. Who wouldn’t want to go that way?

But later, when they told the story, there were a few odd details, ones Nell said she never could figure out: Edna’s oven door being open, for one, and the skin missing from her cheek.

- The End -