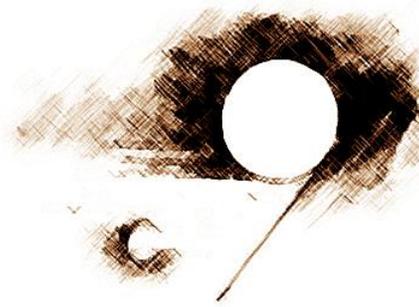


Circles

By: Bernadine Fox

A Short Story by Bernadine Fox



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This is a fictional story. Any similarities to persons alive or dead is coincidental.

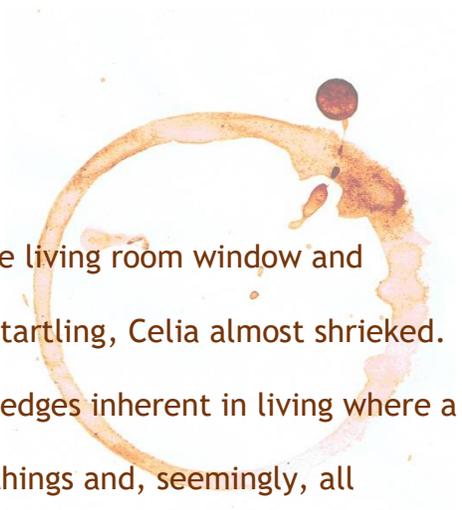
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The light of a Christmas moon reached down through the living room window and plucked a bit of bare flesh out of the darkness. It was startling, Celia almost shrieked. Early she might have numbed herself to the disquieting edges inherent in living where a mere alcoholic beverage maintained authority over all things and, seemingly, all people. Liquor had rules this family intimately understood. The muddled haze of their lives lulled them into compliance with its edges. Celia was a novice at grasping the predictable nature of the chaos and how substance abuse robbed the world of good people who held buckets of unused potential.

On this holiday eve, this family's home held no festive tree or decorations. No stockings hung waiting for the Great St. Nick to emerge from a nonexistent fireplace. No presents would magically appear here by tomorrow morning. No turkey would be cooked. No feast of potatoes, candied yams, cheese-covered broccoli, warm brown



buns with creamery butter, or fresh cranberry sauce would be savored by friends or family alike. There would be no toasts of gratitude made with chardonnay in crystal glasses. It was not from lack of love. Old Saint Nick had never delivered toys to the good girls and boys who lived, hoped, and waited within these walls.

Celia and her partner, Jared, entered the room. From that small patch of skin, a partially nude body emerged sprawled across the floor. The living room was strewn with scattered papers, crumpled bags, overcoats dropped as they were removed, and clothes (dirty, clean, trashed, or used as rags to clean up spilled booze). Cigarette butts littered every surface: floors, windowsills, tables, and inside ashtrays or objects used as ashtrays until they overflowed making room for even more butts. The fine, feather-soft ash from smoldering tobacco perched in perfectly shaped circular chunks or in long, cylindrical rows that burned straight lines leading to forgotten, cold filters. The air saturated with the stench of stale booze, vomit, urine, and smoke sunk heavily around her.

Tonight, the house was dark. Its occupants had clearly passed out before the sun had set as no lights were turned on. Only the warm glow of one came from out of the bedroom Jared's parents used. His 60-year-old mother, Bertha, however was not safely tucked in.

The fibers of her skin had been loosened by 10-some pregnancies long ago. Decades of poor nutrition, fatty foods, and abundant alcohol had swelled her belly until it cascaded around her bones like a soft, water balloon. The blue moon caressed her olive skin, then melted into the dark shadows that drifted off into darker corners. Her girdle, panties, and black leggings were wrapped around her ankles. Her genitals and pubic hair lay exposed. A white cotton shirt was pulled open exposing her chest and a bra full of generous breasts. One sleeve was pulled around to the other side of her body pinning her left arm underneath her own weight. Her clothing had transformed into restraints that prevented her escape. Her face bore the early marks and swelling of a fresh blow from a clenched fist. Dark blood was clotted in her nostrils and had dribbled down one side of her face and chin where it lay dried and crusted. The fact that she hadn't yet moved was not disconcerting. This lack of consciousness was normal every day except for those directly prior to Welfare Wednesday when no money meant no booze. On the other hand, her partial nudity was unusual. At least, it was to Celia. Jared seemed quite unaffected by his mother's current state of undress. In fact, it appeared that he would prefer to retreat to the next room and ignore the reality of what was before them. Celia took her coat off and returned to the living room. Jared hung back.

Bending over her, Celia pulled the front of Bertha's shirt back together. She struggled to attach one or two buttons. Bertha moaned and offered up a drunken flail of the hand swatting at unseen things in the air. Celia wrenched the tangle of clothes apart from around her ankles, piece by piece. Finally, Jared stuck his head

out around the kitchen door and peered at what she was doing. He chuckled and slipped back into the darkness. Clearly, this was nothing new to him.

Celia struggled to get her mother-in-law's underwear up around her torpid body. Her cumbersome girdle, however, created a larger problem. Pull and push as she might Celia was not having much luck. Eventually, Jared began to help.

Neither of them turned on the lights. Silence surrounded them. By moonlight, they clumsily pulled, tugged, and squished clothes, straps, and body parts. Then, each of them took one heavy leg and managed to pull up her leggings. Now and then, Bertha groaned or moved. As she did, this mountain of flesh would topple around hampering their pitiable efforts. They continued until just a couple of buttons were left. Bertha was now essentially a dressed, drunk (albeit mostly unconscious) woman.

Neither Celia nor Jared spoke. They did not talk about what seemed obvious to Celia: Jared's mother had been raped but more so, his father was the most-likely culprit. By tugging on her arms and pushing from behind they got Bertha to her feet. Celia retrieved a tan-coloured purse from the floor and, instinctually, Bertha clutched it to her side weaving its thin straps between her arthritic fingers. They maneuvered her body to the other side of the room towards her bedroom. She made an ineffectual

defensive gesture and let out an intoxicated groan, exhaling the pungent smell of stale wine through plaque-ridden teeth.

From out of the bedroom, Jared's drunken father yelled, "*Hey, Bertha, you goddamn bitch get my beer.*" He fell quiet listening to us move about. "*BERTHA!*" He yelled again, "*Where's my beer? BERTHA! ... BERTHA! Get my beer! BERTHA, you goddamn bitch....*" There was more swearing, name-calling, and threats but they soon petered off into whining, slurring, and unintelligible sounds until silenced by a wave of drunken snoring.

Bertha sprang awake, "*Where's m' purse? Where's my money?*" Celia assured her that the purse was in her hand. Accusingly, she shouted, "*Where are you taking me? STOP! Leave me alone. STOP!*" Jared replied, "*Quiet, you old woman. We are taking you to bed.*"

Bertha resisted, "*I don't want to goooo... to bbbbed. I don't want to be with that old goat.*" She yelled out at the empty bedroom doorway to her husband, "*You Old Goat! I'm not drunk.*"

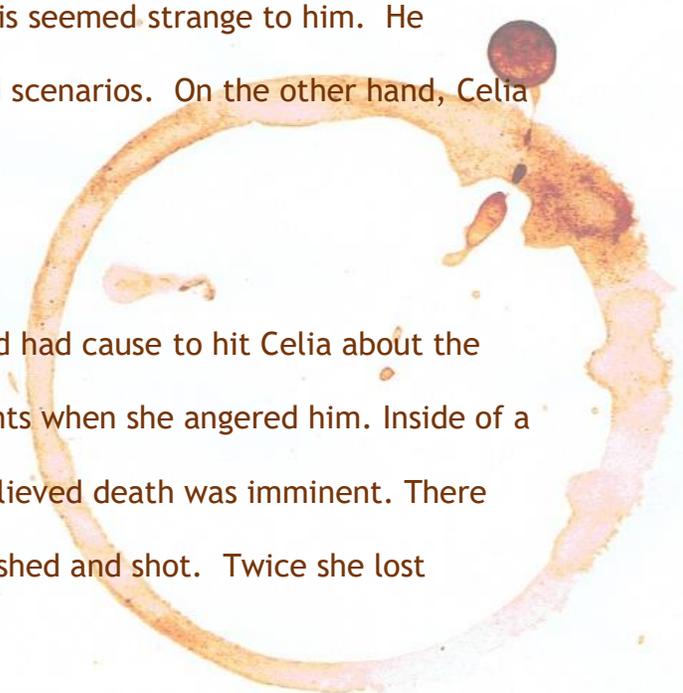
Bertha's husband yelled back, "*BERTHA? Where's ma beer? You took m'beer!*" Bertha struggled against their grip, "*I didn't take your beer!*" Changing course,

Celia and Jared steered her inebriated body away from her now semi-conscious husband and towards one of her children's beds in the room across the hall.

For this night (if they came home) one of Jared's brothers would have to sleep on the floor. Frank, 17, was the least likely to do so. Curt, 14, had been gone now for two and a half days. Celia was sure someone other than her must know his whereabouts. In a home uncontaminated by alcohol, the disappearance of a teenager would cause concern, a search by phone or foot, or even a call to the authorities for help. But here, there was seemingly no response to his absence. From what Celia could know neither parent had noticed. And this was ordinary. Thomas, at twelve, was the youngest. He was fast asleep by the time they dropped his semi-conscious mother into the bed next to his.

Through all of this, Jared said little to nothing. He did not look up. He made no disapproving sounds. Unlike for Celia, none of this seemed strange to him. He intimately knew these words, sounds, smells, and scenarios. On the other hand, Celia was learning quickly.

Within a few short weeks of living with him, Jared had cause to hit Celia about the face. Then came the punches or physical restraints when she angered him. Inside of a year, the abuse escalated. Several times, she believed death was imminent. There were knives at her throat and loaded guns brandished and shot. Twice she lost

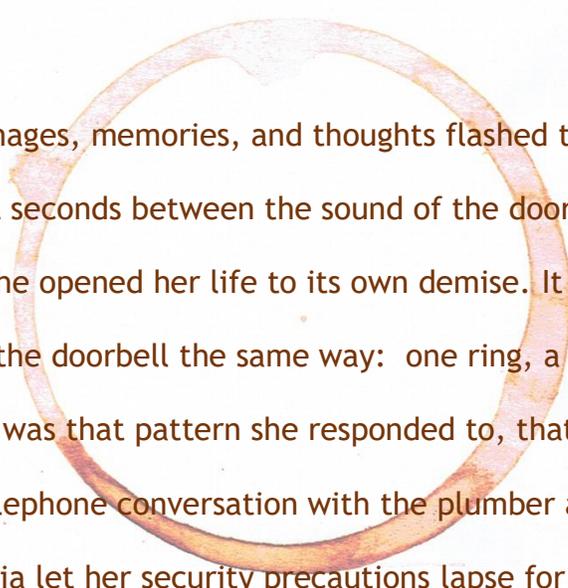


consciousness when, in a fury, his hands wrapped around her throat. The last thing she saw was his crazed, angry face up against her own as a thick darkness faded it all away. Celia believed there must be rules to the whys and hows of his anger. There appeared to be an association between her insistence to assist his mom and his right fist pummeling her jaw the next morning. However, it took Celia two more years to realize that it wasn't what she did - but what he did that caused this violence. Her ability to numb it away merely normalized it to him and more particularly to her. By the time she ran for her life, Jared had taken to remind her endlessly that, "If you ever leave, I will kill you."

In running, Celia learned to hide. When he found her, she again ran and hid and then again. Never did the physical experience of his blows leave her face. Years later, the choking sensation of his hands around her throat could still wrench her awake in the dead of night. Sounds outside the house would cause her to pace repeatedly checking each lock and every window. Celia's stringent security precautions were extreme by any normal person's standards. She paid no attention to how people jokingly questioned them. She cherished that which produced even the smallest sense of safety. It wasn't so much that she assumed something would occur. It was that her sanity relied on believing (however delusional it might be) that it could not because she had control over each lock. And, in this manner, twenty-some years passed.

Many years past that moonlit night, Celia's nineteen-year-old daughter would come over each Sunday afternoon. They would spend the day lounging in the garden,

soaking up sun, admiring the flowers, bees, and birds while talking - quite literally - about almost everything. However, Celia shared few details of her life with Jared on these leisurely days. Celia drank coffee. Her daughter sipped diet cola. They would share their familial sense of humor that bordered on bizarre with their language cropped to an intricate form of shorthand that was always lost on those who attempted to follow.



It was these smells, images, memories, and thoughts flashed through Celia's brain during those few short seconds between the sound of the doorbell and her hand grasping the knob as she opened her life to its own demise. It was Sunday. Her daughter always rang the doorbell the same way: one ring, a pause, and then another quick ring. It was that pattern she responded to, that afternoon, while preoccupied with a telephone conversation with the plumber and an immediate need for a pencil. Celia let her security precautions lapse for that one moment and without checking opened the door. By the time she had finished writing down the necessary number and turned around, decades of protective measures had disintegrated and lay useless on the newly sanded, stained, and then varnished hardwood floor of her hallway.

There, in her "safe" home stood Jared, grinning. He was still taller than Celia. His hair had grayed. His face had sagged. However, his eyes had remained exactly as she had recalled in every one of her worst nightmares. Inside, she screamed. Outside, she smiled. It was the cruelest sentence of every battered woman: to have to smile at her

abuser in hopes of mollifying his disposition and, thereby, saving one's hide... one more time. It was an unconscious, automatic lie striving to create a normal facade for an abnormal situation. In reality, the smile was self-sabotaging pretension. Rarely, did it provide protection and it was, inherently, double-edged permitting the abuser to interpret past violence as acceptable and, therefore, of no consequence.

Jared looked down at Celia as if he would eat her whole. It was that familiar look of sexual expectation that made her body feel dirty and cheap. Instinctually, she stood back and pulled herself inward. Crudely stuttering about a present, he thrust a paper bag at her. It held a necklace. Celia's brain thundered. Her smile had quickly become her noose. She pulled the jewelry out of the bag trying to fake some form of social norm. But he knew: she wasn't happy to see him again. His hand reached up around to touch the back of her head. She flinched but the trap was set. His fingers tightened onto her hair at the nape of her scalp. With his free hand he locked the deadbolt on her door.

With the strength of one arm, he was able to force Celia in the direction of her bedroom past the French door she had installed and past the new faux finish of her walls with the pink and red hearts painted in rows. As he pushed her past the rug, she had just purchased a week ago, she attempted to hit him from behind. But he was still stronger. Struggle as she might, Celia became his puppet propelled through the corporeal space of the present back into the past when these hands were the

source of weekly trauma and then plunged forward into a horrifying moment that she literally had no physical power to stop. He drove his right fist into the side of her face and nose. Blood splattered.

Time slowed. Every breath she inhaled took forever to exhale. Beads from the necklace broke away from her hands and bounced ever so slowly and methodically

around the floor. He rammed her now bleeding face into her new duvet on the antique wrought iron bed she recently painted black with gold leaf. With one hand he pushed her down into the soft bedding with its pink and red roses. His face came close to her cheek. Warm alcoholic breath hit her nostrils as his fingers locked around the front of her throat. The weight of his body pressed Celia's into the bed. A sound came out of the lowest part of his throat. It pierced her right ear causing her gut to wrench in horror. He spoke no words.

Jared's hand gripped her throat with such force it instantly stopped the intake of air. Celia's lungs frantically but unsuccessfully searched for oxygen. Her tongue began to swell filling her mouth. The sense of him over her and the hum of her neighborhood faded away. Except for the throb of her own heart pounding rhythmically on her eardrums, all went silent. Lack of oxygen caused her brain to fill with images of pubic hair, a girdle, arthritic fingers, a large soft balloon, and a magical Christmas moon that leisurely drifted in spherical patterns across a black sky. She saw life funneling back

around into the circles woven into lives and creating intricate patterns that made complete sense. A thick, familiar darkness overtook her consciousness as Celia lived her very last moment on this earth.

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Jared became aware that Celia was no longer moving. He pulled away as if disgusted even wither death. He then angrily spewed, “I told ya, I’d kill ya”. And with that he walked out her front door.





(photo by Valerie Arntzen)

BERNADINE FOX hails from a place on this planet that is so flat you can see company coming over ten miles away. Fox raised two girls as a single parent and is now a single nana raising her granddaughter. She paints, draws, teaches, curates, and organizes art events. When she isn't doing that, she writes, and writes, and writes. This is her first (but not her last) chapbook.

Other Books by Fox: *Coming to Voice: Surviving an Abusive Therapist*
Nana & the Kali-Alley Kitty



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