



# FOX VALLEY REVIEW

*Curating lifestyle, culture, commentary, and community  
from the river's edge.*

VOLUME I  
NOVEMBER 1, 2025

**MAGAZINE**

ISSUE 4

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A lyrical meditation on nature's twin seasons of abundance and release where summer's radiant heat yields to autumn's golden hush.

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A nostalgic reflection on family, memory, and the passage of time, this essay revisits the warmth and wonder of childhood holiday gatherings and the bitter-sweet ache of realizing that growing up means never quite returning to where joy once felt simplest.

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A haunting yet tender portrait of community and quiet resilience, this story captures a moment when the power went out and neighbors lingered by the fire, rediscovering connection, laughter, and the heartbeat of a town illuminated by its own warmth.

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In this quietly powerful reflection, two men share more than a workout; they share the weight of time, loss, and what it means to grow older in a changing town.

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A poignant conclusion to the caregiving series, this reflection explores the emotional and spiritual reckoning that follows years of tending to loved ones. With grace and quiet strength, it honors the labor, loss, and love that define the caregiver's journey.

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A Day at the Wild  
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Jeff's nostalgic vignette captures a father's simple joy in sharing a summer afternoon with his young daughter at a modest roadside amusement park. Amid rickety rides, laughter, and sunlit memories, the story becomes a tender portrait of parenthood and beauty.

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Grieving What  
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A powerful and deeply personal meditation on infertility, loss, and societal expectations, this essay confronts the quiet grief of what never came to be. With raw honesty and poetic restraint, it challenges the casual intrusions of others.

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# 01 Mission & Vision



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## WHO WE ARE

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## WHAT WE DO

## WHERE WE AIM TO GO

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**FOX VALLEY REVIEW** is a regional digital magazine dedicated to curating and elevating the voices, stories, events, and cultural expressions of the towns and communities along the Fox River. We strive to inform, inspire, and connect residents through thoughtful storytelling, critical reflection, and celebration of the local from neighborhood events to regional art, food, and civic life.

We envision a more connected and culturally vibrant Fox Valley where every town and resident sees themselves reflected in the stories we tell. Through inclusive journalism, creative expression, and civic commentary, Fox Valley Review aims to become the cultural compass of the region, building bridges between communities, generations, and ideas across the river.





**W**elcome to the fourth issue of Fox Valley Review, a labor of love and a vision long in the making. Rooted in our river towns and curated with care, this publication amplifies the voices, stories, and spirit that make the Fox Valley not just a region but a vibrant, diverse, unmistakably alive community.

As the crisp air of November settles over the Fox Valley, we find ourselves between seasons, that tender space where gratitude meets reflection, where what fades also deepens. This month's issue captures that spirit of transition: the warmth of shared tables, the ache of caregiving, the beauty in remembering, and the won-

der still found in ordinary days.

Each story in this issue, from Jeff Weisman's tender *A Day at the Wild West Town* to the soulful reflections in *Caring for Aging Parents, Part III*, reminds us that the heart of community lies in our shared humanity. We are especially grateful to Kim Wheaton, whose stunning photography paints our region in light and stillness; Diane, Lauren, and Alexis, whose creative energy and support helped shape the texture and tone of this issue.

### **FROM THE DESK OF THE CHIEF EDITOR DR. BAUDELAIRE K. ULYSSE**

I also extend heartfelt thanks to all who helped organize and attended the October release party. Your presence and encouragement reaffirmed what this publication is truly about: connection, celebration, and belonging.

As we gather around family tables and community events this season, may these pages remind us that stories, like seasons, are best when shared.

Thank you for reading, sharing, and believing in the Fox Valley Review.

“

*LET THIS BE  
YOUR WINDOW, YOUR MIRROR,  
YOUR INVITATION!*

”

May your November be filled with warmth, reflection, and light.

Dr. Baudelaire K. Ulysse  
Chief Editor  
Fox Valley Review

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### **RIVERWALK, ELGIN**

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*Autumn paints the Elgin Riverwalk in a symphony of gold and crimson, a perfect stroll through the season's fleeting brilliance.*

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***JON, DIANE, MARIA, & BEAU | GLOBAL BREW***



# Ode to Summer and Fall

The Most Effervescent Yet

**WRITER:** Beau

**PH:** Staff

Summer, sovereign of fire and bloom,  
You stride into the world unbidden,  
Your golden scepter turns all to song,  
And mortal hearts, once still, are smitten.

Your breath ignites seed and soul;  
The air is steeped in ripened mirth.  
All nature trembles, half in prayer,  
Half drunk with the heat of rebirth.

Waters gleam like molten glass,  
Embracing sky and mortal frame;  
Kissing the brow, breast, grass,  
Yet whispering softly passion's name.

O ardent sun, whose brazen stare  
Exposes all that flesh conceals,  
Your warmth unbinds the will to care,  
And sanctifies what pleasure feels.



*The air is steeped in ripened mirth.*

*All nature trembles, half in prayer,*

*Half drunk with the heat of rebirth.*

---

***“Then autumn comes, in rust and gold,  
A monarch robed in quiet grace;  
The fire burns inward, deep, and old,  
A softer glory lights its face.”***



Yet even you, imperial flame,  
Must yield to dusk's encroaching  
breath;  
For love and longing are the same,  
Each holds the other near to death.

Then autumn comes, in rust and gold,  
A monarch robed in quiet grace;  
The fire burns inward, deep, and old,  
A softer glory lights its face.  
Leaves drift as if from Eden's dream,  
Falling slow, without regret;  
Flaming bough recalls the gleam  
Of passions lived, but not forget.

Now every orchard sighs with weight,  
Fields bend low to time's command;  
Yet even loss feels intricate,  
A beauty mortised by the hand.

Summer and Fall, brief covenant  
Between delight and its decay,  
Between rain and its sunshine,  
Between grass, water, and tree line,  
Between bun, smoke, and swine,  
Between firepit, mustard, and bovine,  
'Tween beer, rum punch, and wine,  
Between festivals, chairs that recline,  
Between mundane and the divine,  
Between the mime and the sublime,

Between the plotline and the byline,  
Between daylight and nighttime  
Between dark and light saving time,  
Between all that dim and outshine,  
You teach that joy and grief are lent;  
Like an abundant yet scant grant,  
And they must bloom, then fade away.

Still, when your mingled voices call,  
Thru every pulse the truth is heard:  
That love, like leaf, like sun, must fall,  
And rise again within the word.

~Beau

***Image: “A festive welcome at Goebbert's Farm in Pingree  
Grove where pumpkins, gourds, and autumn blooms set  
the stage for the season's harvest cheer.”***

“A reflective holiday essay on gratitude and family legacy.”



## 03

# *Longing to Sit at the Kid's Table*

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### REFLECTIONS

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**WRITER:** Linda

**PH:** Staff

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**W**hen I was young, Thanksgiving and Christmas meant visits to our grandparents' house, a modest raised ranch tucked in a northwest Chicago suburb. The home wasn't far away and carried its own history: around. It had once

belonged to my parents, their first house purchased in the 1950s. They sold it after I was born, when our growing family simply needed more space. My grandparents moved in soon after, along with my aunt, who was single, working full-time, and



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*They arrived through Ellis Island,  
and settled in a Polish enclave of Chicago,  
carving out a life from scratch.*

”

caring for them as they aged in place. We alternated Thanksgiving and Christmas between our home and theirs. Our newer house had a separate kitchen and dining room, spacious enough to host a large family meal. When we entertained, there was no need for a “kid’s table,” that common holiday fixture of the era. My three older brothers and I sat right alongside the adults at our gleaming French Provincial dining table, protected, of course, by custom-made padding, and extended by several leaves to seat twelve comfortably, the full number of our father’s side of the family.

But at our grandparents’ house, it was different. There, a separate kid’s table always awaited us, a small, square card table draped with a simple cloth, set up in the kitchen corner near the back bedroom and the basement door. In hindsight, it was a cramped, curious spot for dining, but it was simply where space allowed.

That little table was our world. My brothers and I sat together, eating and giggling, while the adults carried on deep in conversation at the main table just a few feet away yet, somehow, miles apart. Our mother was the bridge between those worlds. She made sure we had enough food, gently reminded us to eat more than we talked, and floated between the laughter of children and the low hum of adult conversation. I was too young to appreciate what surrounded me, the intricate family dynamics, the cross-generational bonds, the warmth that filled the house with more than just the aroma of turkey and sweet rolls.

Years later, as my brothers and I grew older, we were finally invited to the main table. But that change came with loss. Our grandfather passed first, then our grandmother a few years later. I didn’t think much of it at the time;

I was too young to grasp the full weight of what we were losing. Only with age have I come to realize how formative those gatherings were, and how I wish I had been older, curious enough, patient enough, to ask questions and listen.

Now, looking back, I find myself longing for that kid’s table once more. I’d sit there, small again, eager to hear the stories of my grandparents, their “American story.” They were both from neighboring villages in rural Poland, married young, and brave enough to chase a dream across an ocean. They arrived through Ellis Island and settled in a Polish enclave of Chicago, carving out a life from scratch. They faced hardship and heartbreak, the loss of a child, the struggle to find work amid a language barrier, but yet they persevered.

They took whatever jobs they could, working long hours, saving every dollar, and eventually purchasing a three-story home. They rented out the



This holiday season, as we gather around our own tables, whether grand or modest, may we remember those who came before us, whose hands built the foundations of our abundance.

And may we always leave room, somewhere, for the kid's table.

~Granny

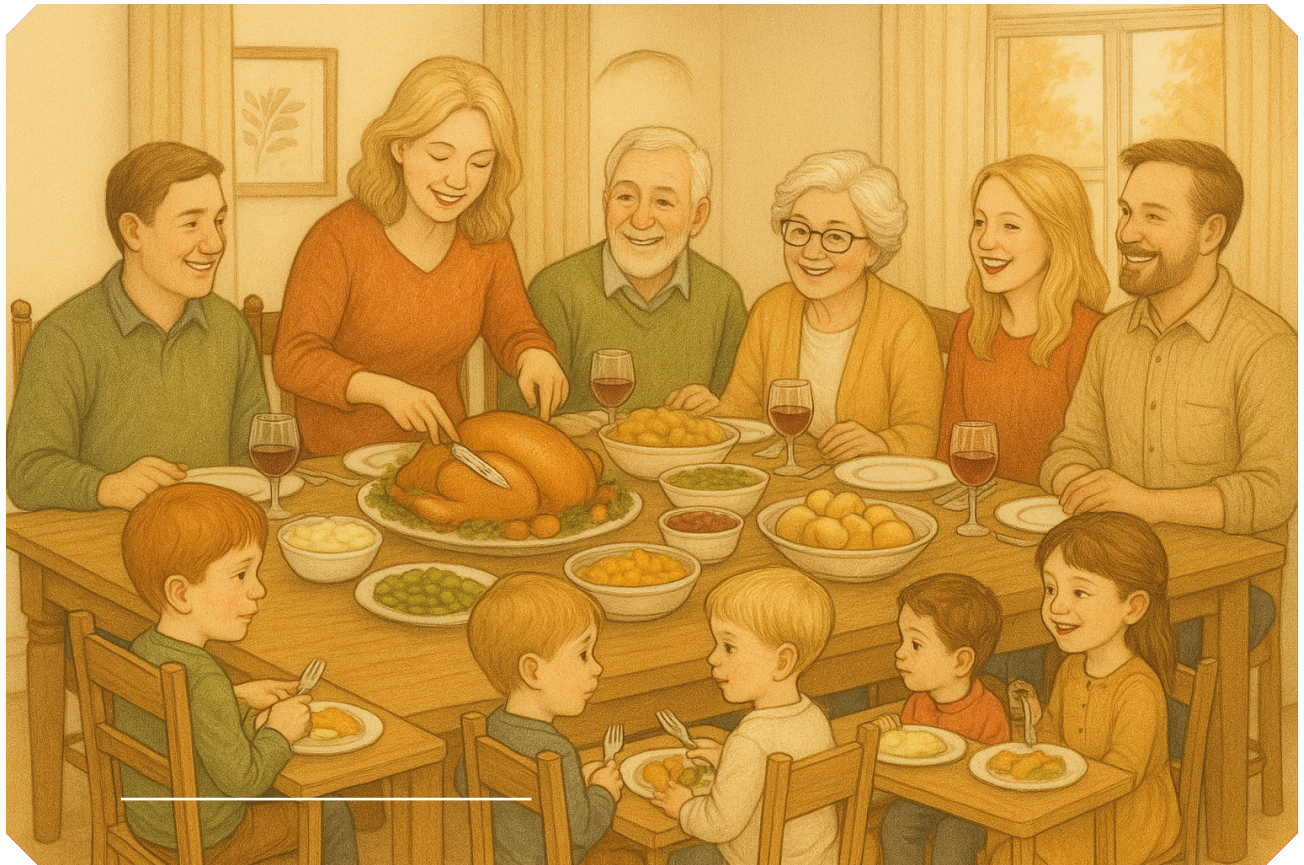
***“A vibrant still life of autumn at Geneva’s Scarecrow Walk: gourds, pumpkins, and kale bursting with the season’s rustic charm.”***

upper floors to other immigrant families, building community while making ends meet. From humble beginnings and steadfast sacrifice, they raised children who would one day live more stable, comfortable lives than they themselves had ever known.

That legacy deserves gratitude, deep, abiding gratitude, the kind that outlasts the season's feasts and decorations. It is the quiet triumph of endurance, of love passed down through effort and faith.

Yes, I long to sit at the kid's table again. To peer up at my grandparents, to listen with intent as they spoke in Polish and broken English, and to finally understand the richness of their lives: their courage, their hope, and the love that filled every small, crowded corner of that home.

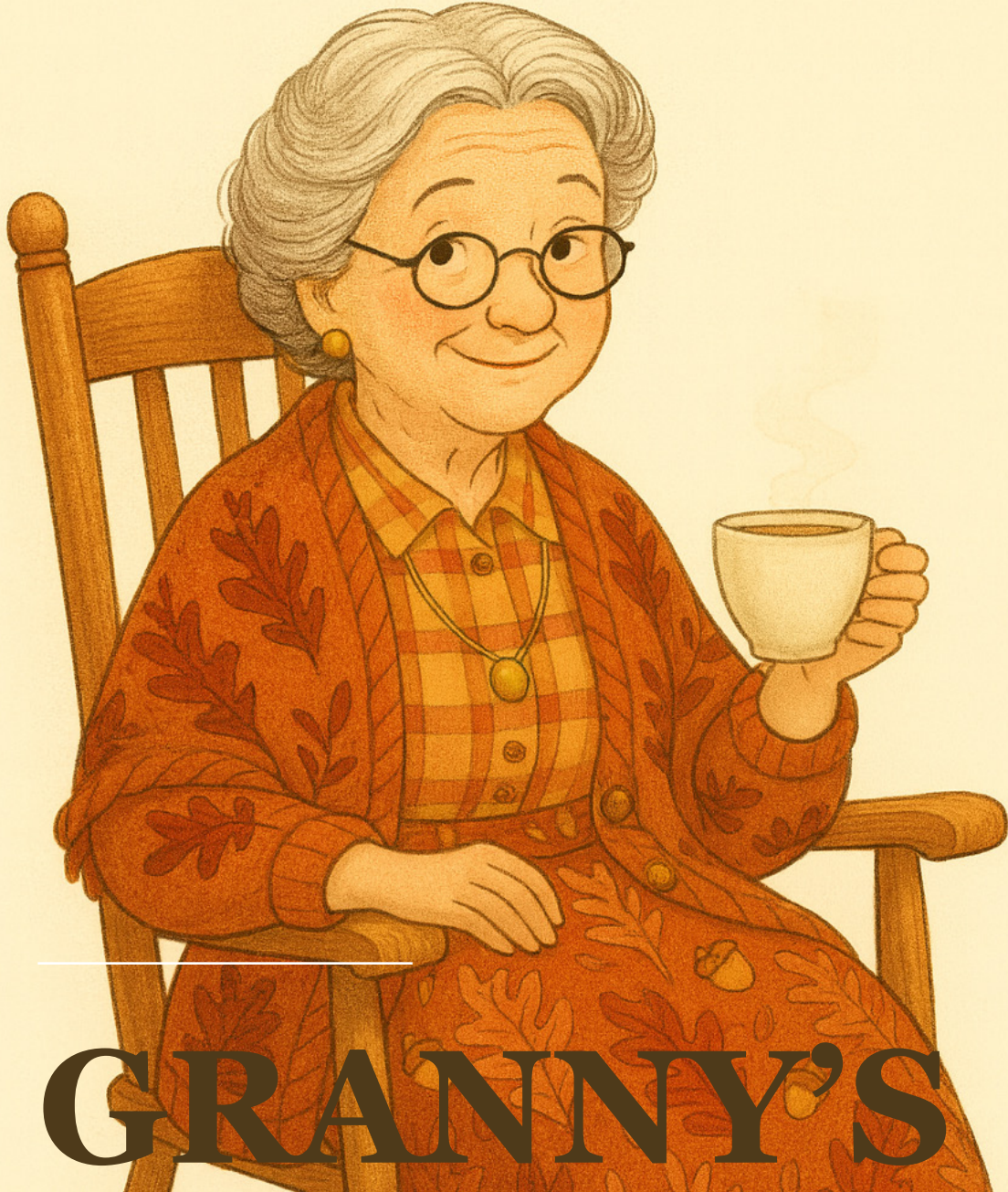




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***“Thanksgiving at Linda’s childhood home: laughter, warmth, and generations gathered around the table, where love was always the first course served.”***





# GRANNY'S

## *WOVEN QUILT SERIES*

THE DAY ELGIN STOOD STILL

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*THE BONFIRE IS LIT,**AND SO IS**THE SPIRIT OF ELGIN.*

”

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**WRITER: GRANNY**  
**PH: STAFF**

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04

They say you don't know how much you depend on something until it's gone. That became gospel truth one sticky summer evening in 1963, right here in Elgin, when the power went out, everywhere. One moment, the cicadas were humming in the trees and the tinny melody of The Chiffons played on someone's back porch radio; the next, silence. Then, darkness. It was the kind of blackout that makes the stars come out in full chorus and makes even the bravest of kids scoot closer to their mamas.

I remember it like it was yesterday.

Daddy had just come in from work, wiping his brow with a handkerchief that was more sweat than cotton. Mama was pulling a peach cobbler from the oven; the aroma hung in the air like a hymn. And then, poof! The house exhaled, and the lights blinked out.

At first, we thought it was just us. Daddy checked the fuse box. Nothing. But then we stepped out onto the porch and saw the same puzzled faces peeking out of every doorway on the block. One by one, folks trickled out. Flashlights flicked on. Matches struck.





You could hear whispers from every direction: “Is yours out too?” “Anyone call ComEd?”

Then something beautiful happened. Old Mr. Carter, two doors down, brought out his battery-powered transistor radio and started playing Sam Cooke. Miss Reenie from across the street lit candles in colored jars and lined her steps.

My cousin Jimmy showed up with his guitar, and someone passed around lemonade that tasted like childhood. Mama shared slices of that cobbler, and neighbors brought out whatever was half-cooked before their stoves went cold: chicken legs, corn on the cob, even a Jell-O mold that melted halfway through the night.

Kids chased lightning bugs. Parents shared news and laughter. And someone, I can’t remember who, lit a bonfire right in the empty lot where the new library now sits. It crackled and danced like it was made of stories waiting to be told.



***“Neighbors gather for a fall cookout at Elgin’s park, sharing laughter, stories, and the warmth of community beneath golden autumn trees.”***

That night, Elgin stood still; but it didn't shut down.

Without televisions or clocks, time slowed. We talked. We listened. We sang. We remembered how to be with one another.

The power came back on sometime after midnight, but no one rushed indoors. Some stayed until the last ember died down, their silhouettes glowing orange against the soft hush of a town briefly reminded of its own heartbeat.

So if you ever feel disconnected or overwhelmed by screens and schedules, remember: the bonfire is lit, and so is the spirit of Elgin. All it takes is a quiet night, a little darkness, and the light we already carry inside.

~Granny



***“As lanterns flickered and a guitar softly played, neighbors lingered by the fire, holding onto the quiet magic of a night when Elgin stood still.”***

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*Stay tuned for the next story from Granny’s Women Quilt Series. It’s coming up in the December Issue.*





### St. Charles Scarecrow Walk

A sweet reminder from St. Charles' Scarecrow Walk: "Being kind is sweet," says this candy-themed creation by The Whimsy Farm.





*Skeletons and pumpkins take center stage at Geneva's Scarecrow Week: a playful nod to Halloween's spooky spirit and seasonal fun.*

**WRITER: Staff**

**PH: Staff**

## ***-Leafman Season Looms- PART II***

**D**on leaned back on the bench press, towel draped over his shoulder, the hum of the gym filling the silence between our sets.

"Are you thinking retiring?" he asked me out of nowhere. His eyes were sharp, almost warning. "Don't go. You'll regret it."

I laughed it off, but his words hung heavy.

"I mean it," he pressed. "Now I spend time flipping through TV channels and the day feels much longer than it is."

***"Nobody tells you about the empty hours. It's like you've been training your whole life for a race, and then the whistle blows and suddenly there's no track."***





*"A towering Frankenstein welcomes visitors to Geneva's Scarecrow Walk where Halloween spirit looms large."*

Retirement? Nobody tells you about the empty hours. It's like you've been training your whole life for a race, and then the whistle blows and suddenly there's no track."

He wiped sweat from his brow, chuckled once, but it came out hollow. "Sometimes," he admitted, lowering his voice, "I think I'm losing my mind.

I come here just to blow off steam, just to feel like the hours move."

Don's restlessness wasn't just about age. It was also about loss of places, of meaning.

"You remember Pheasant Run?" he asked. "I worked there once. Thought I'd be a chef: real knives, real heat, not some side gig.

That place was alive. Comedy shows, big performances, people dressed up for a night out. It was St. Charles' heart."





*YouthBuild Elgin's creative scarecrow display at St. Charles' Scarecrow Walk celebrates community and the power of building brighter futures.*

His eyes hardened.

"Now? Some big firm bought it, let it rot. What was a landmark is just... gone. Brick and memory. That's what hurts.

Not just the job, not just my plans; but they let it fall apart like it didn't mean anything."

He shook his head, grabbed the bar, and started his next set. Each lift seemed to carry more than just weight.

~Staff Writer

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REFLECTIONS

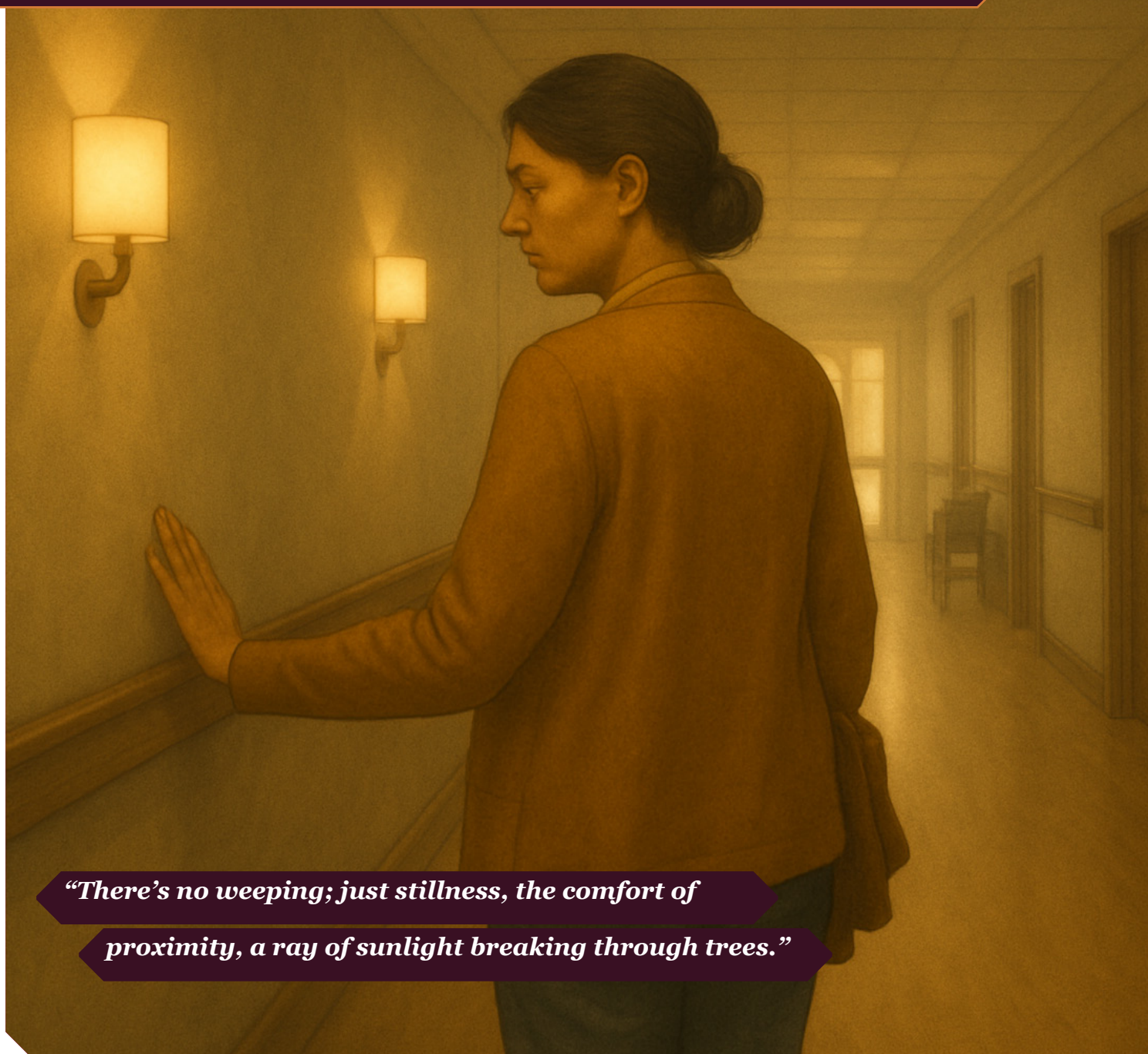
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WRITER: Miriam

PH: Staff

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# *Caring for Aging Parents, Part III*



*"There's no weeping; just stillness, the comfort of  
proximity, a ray of sunlight breaking through trees."*

***“In caregiving, love takes on new forms: patience, resilience, and the quiet strength to keep showing up.”***



This reflection closes our series on caring for aging parents, honoring the labor of love that shapes families and communities alike.

Though I began this journey with moments of self-doubt, I came to recognize my own strengths: the ability to navigate the health care system, to multitask and manage the daily demands of caregiving, and to step confidently into a leadership role within my family.

#### Gaining Perspective

While my story is personal, it is not unique. Many friends have shared similar experiences caring for their aging or ailing parents. My role, however, was naturally limited by my parents' lifespans and ended with their passings. That is not always the case for others, especially those caring for loved ones with lifelong disabilities or chronic mental illness, who must plan for care that continues beyond their own.

Looking back on family history, I think of my aunts, both of whom cared for their parents, my grandparents. One later became ill with cancer and did not receive the same support she had so selflessly given. In the 1970s, when they served as caregivers, there was little understanding or societal recognition of the vital role caregivers play. By contrast, I feel fortunate to live in a time when caregiving is increasingly acknowledged and discussed as both

a personal and social reality.

#### Opportunity for Ongoing Reflection and Processing

Even now, as I grieve the loss of my parents, I continue to reflect on and process what caregiving means in the larger story of my life. Since it occupied years, even decades, of my adult life, I have come to see caregiving as an essential part of my personal journey.

It brought hardship and sorrow, yes, but also perspective and profound joy. Small victories, safely transferring a parent without a fall, seeing wounds heal, restoring comfort in small ways, became the milestones of love. Most of all, I cherished the opportunity to meet my parents' needs in new and deeply meaningful ways, to bring them moments of peace and stability amid life's inevitable changes.

#### Profound Appreciation

Our parents' paths to hospice were different; our father remained at home until less than a day before entering a hospice facility, while our mother entered hospice while in memory care. In both cases, my siblings and I found reassurance knowing professionals were present around the clock, offering skillful and compassionate care. That peace of mind was invaluable when I could no longer do everything myself.

I often think back to the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when





*A quiet meditation on love, loss, and legacy: these moments trace the sacred arc of caregiving: the touch of hands, the echo of footsteps, the silence of an empty chair, and the enduring grace found in caring for those who once cared for us.*





*“Compassion lines up the garden  
outside the alzheimer’s facility, where care  
meets and inspires hope.”*

people across the country paused each evening to cheer frontline health workers and first responders. I believe that same spirit of gratitude should be renewed, not only for emergency personnel, but also for those who tend quietly to our loved ones as they approach the final chapters of life.

Questions for Personal and Community Reflection

As Fox Valley Review continues to celebrate life in our community, I invite you to consider these questions for personal and collective reflection: How does caregiving for aging parents differ from the care parents offer their young children?

Why does the caregiver role so often fall to women, even when men may be equally capable?

Are the personal and social costs of caregiving too high? What boundaries might you set for yourself?

As a Way of Closing...

We live in an age of astonishing medical advancement. Many of us now survive illnesses that once would have been fatal, yet we live longer in compromised states of health, which makes caregiving more essential than ever.

Although this series has focused primarily on my role as a sole caregiver for my parents, the stories of all caregivers and care recipients deserve to be told. They help us better understand the human condition, especially in life’s most transformative stages.

My hope is that this series sparks an ongoing dialogue within the Fox Valley community about caregiving, illness, and the resilience that binds us all.

~Miriam



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WRITER: Jeff Weisman

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PH: Kim Wheaton

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# *A Day at the Wild West Town*

*Sometimes the best memories aren't made in grand places, but in the small, sun-bleached corners where time slows, laughter echoes, and love feels enough.*





*“Sunset at Rotary Park in DeKalb, captured by*

*Kim Wheaton, where fading light lingers like a bene-*

*diction, mirroring still waters and quiet gratitude.”*

There used to be this old Wild West Town near Union, Illinois, that I would take my daughter to when she was younger. It wasn't much of a place; rinky-dink would be appropriate, but it was perfect for a child her age. And since I was a single dad on a tight budget, I'd take her there whenever I could. It didn't cost much, and it was something fun for us to do on a summer day.

She loved the place. I enjoyed it, too.

"Can I go on the canoe ride again?" she asked, climbing out of the small rollercoaster they had there. There weren't many attractions; just a donkey ride (one donkey only), a little rollercoaster (perfect for kids under ten), a few carnival-style games, and a strange museum filled with random odds and ends: cowboy gear, old tools, photos of saloons, taxidermy animals, including a decrepit bear, for some reason. There was also an outdoor stunt show, a mining box, the canoe ride (which only a small child could fit into), and a miniature train that an old man drove while sitting on the locomotive rather than in it. Altogether, it was the perfect place for a six-year-old.

By that point, we'd already been there for about an hour.

"Sure, sweetie," I said, squeezing myself out of the tiny rollercoaster seat. (I really couldn't fit, but she insisted I ride with her, so I crammed myself in somehow.) "Anything you want to do."

"This is so much fun, Dad," she said, walking down the metal stairs from the ride, her denim shorts and pink T-shirt rumped around her tiny frame. "I can't wait to ride the canoe again."

"It is," I replied, following her down



*"...a museum filled with random odds  
and ends: cowboy gear, old tools, photos of  
saloons, taxidermy animals, including  
a decrepit bear, for some reason."*





the stairs, shifting my backpack on my shoulder as the clank of my tennis shoes echoed against the metal. The sun hit my eyes. "I'm glad you're having fun."

"I am, Dad. I am! And after the canoe ride, let's hunt for gold."

"Sure," I said, finding the search for pyrite oddly entertaining myself. "Let's strike it rich. But then we need to have lunch."

(I always brought our lunch in a small cooler I kept in my backpack—it was cheaper, and often better, than what they sold there. But we'd always buy ice cream, a snow cone, or some kind of treat. That was mandatory.)

***Image 1: Joy in Motion Bronze statues of children at play***

***Image 2: Light and Geometry , a kaleidoscope of color reflects through Elgin's downtown sculpture.***



"Okay, Dad," she said, hurrying toward the canoe ride in the middle of the park. "But after we eat, can I go on the donkey ride again?"

"Wait for me," I said, taking hold of her hand as her shoulder-length brown hair bounced around her shoulders. "I'll take you to the donkey ride again. Sure."

"Yippee!" she shouted, tugging me along toward the canoe ride, oblivious to the elderly man dressed like a Wild West sheriff performing simple magic tricks nearby. "I can't wait!"

"Hold up, hold up," I said, trying to keep her close—we had all day, after all. "It's not going anywhere."

"I know, Dad," she said, not even slowing down. "But this is so much fun, Dad. It's so much fun!"

"It is," I said, struggling to keep up, as other parents wandered the park chasing their own kids.

"And then can we go on the roller-coaster again, Dad?" she asked as we reached the short line for the canoe ride. "I love it when you ride with me."

"Of course," I said, knowing there really wasn't anything more to life than this.

~Jeff

# Grieving What Does Not Exist

## Part I

*A quiet journey through love, loss, and resilience from isolation to connection, from intrusion to boundary, from grief to gentle acceptance, illuminating the tender strength of those learning to live with what might never be.*

Intermission is when the lights go up, and strangers get bold. My best friend and I are halfway through *Into the Woods* when the man a few seats down leans toward us, eyebrows raised like he's let in on a joke. "Which prince do you want?" he asks.

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**WRITER: Emma**

**PH: Staff**

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**W**e give the polite brush-off: "Oh, how could you choose?"

But he returns after the restroom rush, determined. "No, seriously, which prince?" I say the Baker. He tips his head. "Do you want children?"

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He pauses, decoding: stable job, family man. "I guess he's stable and has a good job and he likes kids."

The house lights drop, a mercy and a trap. I freeze. "Uh, yeah, eventually." "Eventually! Maybe?" "I mean, I have a lot cooking right now." "We're not talking about cooking," he says, satisfied that he's cornered me, and





***Couple reflect in a moment of silence.***

I swallow the sting for the first two songs and grip my friend's hand. During the rest of the show he keeps trying to catch our eye whenever a prince appears, bad theater etiquette, worse humanity.

As soon as the curtain falls, we do something we never do: book it to the lobby and out the door, running from a man who thinks my body is public small talk.

This is how the policing usually arrives, wrapped as banter, curiosity, or care. A coworker once made a harmless joke about my height and how my husband and I would make "such cute little hobbits." I used it as practice: "We won't. We can't."



***Couples wait anxiously for their appointments at Agency.***

I said it as evenly as I could, stuck to facts, mentioned we were pursuing adoption, and that we needed time to process and didn't want advice. I kept my voice steady. When I got back to my desk, I felt like I'd run a race. This is the after-tax of disclosure: calm on the surface, exhaustion underneath.

Then there's the dentist, the safest place on earth to ask questions you shouldn't ask because your patient can't answer. "How many children do you want?"

Silence while the hygienist sets the tray. "Haven't you thought about it yet?" Yes, I have. Unfortunately, we can't have kids. "Oh, you should adopt!" As if that were as simple as fluoride.

I explain the timeline, two years and counting and the cost and the classes and the background checks and the hope that keeps curdling into waiting. "Well," he says, "it's God's will." A god I don't believe in. A god whose will apparently scripts some people for infertility, others for parenting they don't want, and still others for platitudes in exam rooms.

Grief arrives sideways: a bathroom trip where my body announces ovulation as clearly as a signboard, and I remember it won't ever announce pregnancy. A cousin's ultrasound photo slides up my phone screen; she married months after I did and is two years younger. Instagram learns me better than I want to be learned, and my algorithm begins pitching swaddles like I'm "in market." I buy a friend's kid a birthday gift and a cascade of baby products follows me across the internet like a kindly, relentless usher. This is what the audience doesn't see: the ovulation cramp in a stall, the thumb hovering over a heart icon, the steady work of not resenting the the happiness of people I love.

The worst part is how quickly the culture deputizes everyone as fertility police. The old theatre-goer. The dentist. The casual friend who wants to be a grandparent by proxy. They don't know my age, orientation, bank account, medical chart, or marriage. They don't know that when my husband got his semen analysis, he offered me an exit: "I'd understand if you wanted a divorce." They don't know that when I thought I was the problem, I had already rehearsed leaving first to make it easier for him.

We married each other, not the promise of genetic continuity. We hold each other when the grief punches through; we practice the lines we need to get through a workday.

I have learned to set boundaries the way you learn a new instrument slowly, then with muscle memory. With friends: "Support, not advice." With acquaintances: "We're making plans to adopt." With strangers: nothing. Leaving early is an answer.

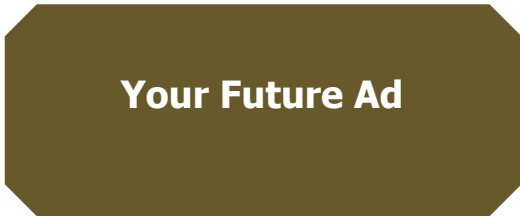
So here is my small request, offered from a lobby I fled and a chair that tipped back under a fluorescent hum: stop asking women about pregnancy. Stop auditioning us for fertility in checkout lines and waiting rooms and intermissions. If you love us, we will bring it up when our hearts can carry the telling. If you don't love us, why do you imagine our lives are yours to arrange?

The curtain falls. The orchestra plays us out. In the dark, my friend squeezes my hand, and we choose the oldest path to safety we leave.

Outside, the night air is a gentler audience. I am not a lecture you get to give or a confession you get to pull.

I am a person writing a different kind of family into being, one boundary at a time, stepping past the questions toward a story that doesn't require a stranger's permission to exist.

~Emma







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