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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice piece, Carolyn. I compressed it a little here and there. Sorry I've been holding it for so long.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 We are scarred. And we are scared.

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 'If life has given me scraps — well, then, I suppose I'm
3 just going to have to make a quilt,' a friend said. Me too! So
4 we're going to do it together.

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 I WAS SITTING AROUND the campfire at Red Clover Farm in
7 Putney with friends late one night years ago, and I stood up, only
8 to lose my balance and stumble backwards, landing hard and
9 catching my hand in the metal spring of a folding chair that
10 snapped shut onto my knuckles. It was the very definition of a
11 freak accident.

12 I knew only excruciating pain, the way a bear caught in
13 a steel trap must feel. Then, coming from I know not where, I
14 heard in my head clear instructions about how to respond to my
15 dilemma.

16 "Use it! Use your pain!" I heard. "Look for your 'calm
17 core' beyond the pain. Breathe into the hurt and feel whatever
18 you feel — fear, denial, embarrassment."

19 That voice told me to allow myself to be helped, to
20 maintain a quiet sense of humor at my predicament. "Show the
21 others, especially the young ones, how to respond to pain when
22 the going gets rough."

23 With that, my horrible pain then morphed into a more
24 interesting type that I could indeed handle. My buddies around
25 the campfire became a brilliant — and, yes, funny — rescue
26 team. I got to observe my daughter as the remarkable healer she
27 is, and I felt the power of a community coming together to
28 support one of their own.

29 My niece, I recall, had the job of distracting me by telling
30 the story of when her dog got lost. She kept us all in stitches. My
31 job was to look at her — not my hand — and to keep breathing
32 as calmly as I could.

33 "Breathe," I kept hearing. "Keep breathing."

34 Once the ambulance arrived, it took three strong guys
35 with crowbars to unhitch me from that darn chair! My hand
36 looked awful, its skin scraped down to tendon and bone, but the
37 spring had fallen straight across my knuckles where the hand
38 below is fleshy, so no fingers were broken, no tendons snapped.

39 I was lucky, and to everyone's amazement, still calm,
40 even though it hurt like hell!

41 Later, sewn up in the emergency department at
42 Brattleboro Memorial Hospital and sent back to the farm bruised
43 but not broken, I realized that I had not, for one moment, been
44 left alone with my pain. My daughter never left my side. The
45 others came in relays, sat with us, supplied us with snacks, and
46 told us how fabulous we were.

47 We were. And we could be again, I now know. We can
48 make it through these hard times by staying calm, breathing, and
49 doing what needs to be done — always with a little help from our
50 friends.

51 The most painful part of this freak accident happened
52 when I had to get on a plane not many days later, when a young
53 female security agent told me to “unwrap the bandage” that had
54 been skillfully wrapped at the farm, to protect my hand from the
55 inevitable bumps and stresses it would receive getting on and off
56 an airplane.

57 “What?”

58 There was no way I could neatly unwrap those layers of
59 gauze and cotton and get them back on again with one hand. I
60 assumed she was joking.

61 But she meant it.

62 I had to take the bloody thing off so this young woman
63 could personally see my bruises and big blue stitches to be sure I
64 was not hiding a weapon!

65 “Eww, gross!” she said, shooing me away as I trailed
66 bloody gauze behind me, looking for a quiet corner of the
67 concourse where I could re-wrap my hand and cry — for her,
68 more than myself — and for our culture that, in the name of
69 “security” demands heartlessness from our own young people.

70 At last, my accident brought me to tears.

71 * * *

72 NOW, DECADES LATER and now living full time in Putney, it
73 is only in my heart that you might find evidence of a scar.

74 We are all carrying scars, deep ones: for the children
75 languishing in detention centers at the border; for our fellow
76 citizens so scared they would vote a madman into high office; for
77 the forests still being destroyed for profit and for the icecaps
78 melting into polluted oceans; for the droughts and the floods, for
79 the insane wars, and for the homeless of every race. And for the
80 children, the frightened children.

81 We are scarred, every last one of us, whether we realize
82 it or not. And also scared.

83 Then I watched how my good friend Carol handled her
84 own wounds after she and her husband lost their home during a
85 big fire in California. They got out with their lives, but little else.

86 Then her grandchild got racked up in a car accident, her
87 son lost his job, and her husband had a mental health crisis. Her
88 shock level went way over the top. Her therapist alerted the
89 authorities, fearful she might kill herself.

90 She lost control completely. Carol told me later how she
91 was dragged off to the local psychiatric ward by six police
92 officers, two firefighters, two security guards, and two ambulance
93 drivers, who threatened to tie her down if she didn't stop fighting
94 them.

95 When Carol told me the story later, we roared with
96 laughter because she is a small woman and one of the most
97 grounded people I know.

98 *(Six police officers?)*

99 * * *

100 SOWHAT DO YOU DO when so much has been taken away
101 that you are left with almost nothing — except life itself?

102 Carol's feisty response: "If life has given me scraps —
103 well, then, I suppose I'm just going to have to make a quilt."

104 Me too! So we're going to do it together.

105 Fortunately, old fabric turns both of us on — some
106 people call folks like us "quilting maniacs." So we know just how
107 to start: with unsorted piles of scraps!

108 Carol's scraps may have been destroyed in the fire, but
109 I've got enough for both of us on shelves and in boxes, collected
110 over decades. She loves haunting thrift stores, finding old
111 embroidery on worn-out pillowcases, velvet ribbons, silk sashes,
112 old batik.

113 "My favorite thrift store sells scraps for 25 cents a bag!"
114 she told me excitedly. Our collaboration is underway!

115 One day soon we'll get together, kneel on my living
116 room floor, and lay out our stashes by color. As we place golds
117 next to purples and decide if we want patchwork or log cabin
118 squares, I'll ask about the family, and she'll tell me about the
119 latest catastrophe.

120 And I will listen quietly, placing pink satin next to a dash
121 of black-and-white check while she talks.

122 Inevitably, we'll get to our various children, and then
123 politics. Maybe we will cry together about the children who have
124 already died in detention at the border.

125 Sorting through scraps of calico and bits of raw silk, we'll
126 take bets on the country waking up soon enough to make a
127 difference. And then we'll lay out a log-cabin square with a
128 center square of cherry-red satin.

129 I'll go to the sewing machine to sew it up while she cuts
130 and irons pieces for the next square.

131 We'll no doubt wonder together about politics; about
132 what's going on with the British monarchy; about whether the
133 Democrats will listen to all the smart young women of color
134 taking the places of the old-guard guys; about how to start
135 changing the economic system that's got it all backwards.

136 "I love how this red satin looks in the center," one of us
137 will say.

138 "What about this off-white lace for the first borders?" the
139 other will offer.

140 When the square is sewn up and ironed out flat, we will
141 sit back, quietly admiring the new square for a while. Then we'll
142 embrace in a deep long hug.

143 "Ready for some tea?" I'll suggest.

144 "Sure," she'll murmur, sighing from deep down.

145 It's an old, old adage: If life hands you scraps, go about
146 your business, know who your friends are, and make a quilt.

147 I know it works, because I've done it. And more than
148 once.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

149 **CAROLYN NORTH** (carolynnorthbooks.com) is a writer
150 of books that address “the interface between matter and spirit.”

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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