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Bottom

by Susan Tepper

After the explosion some of us managed to sink to the bottom. We wandered about for a time looking at each other and realized there was no longer anything to fear. The cold dark Atlantic had become our warm new berth. We could snuggle into it and everything would be all right. We didn't have to dress for dinner or do anything else that was required aboard a luxury transatlantic liner. We no longer had to frantically summon Nelson, the First Class steward, when the circuits blew every night from all the hairdryers before dinner. Those hairdryers have given my husband Harry some pause. "All these blown circuits give me pause," Harry had said. He was a Brit and used expressions of that sort.

All of a sudden it hits me hard: Harry is past tense. Or passé composé as the French like to say. Well isn't *that* interesting! Because, I had planned on ending things. I was going to tell Harry before the ship docked in New York. I was done. And when you're done, you are done.

Looking at the expanse of water around me, above me, everywhere — wider and deeper than any universe I could imagine, I say, "Well that was easy. You didn't have to do a hurtful thing and you got your freedom." And I start to dance, all by myself, holding myself tight around the shoulders and spinning and twirling. An almost unbearable high!

Others down here have similar tales. Impending death they hadn't yet discussed with spouses, affairs they hadn't fessed up to, pregnancies terminated — the list is endless. A guy named Clancy killed nineteen people by shooting them straight through the eyeballs while he was IRA. He is elated to be here, too, and his smiles go on forever. "I was spared the worst," Clancy says.

Such buoyancy! It penetrates every thing and every being here.

At first it was dark. Darker than any night. Those of us down here call it black magic. I believe a woman named Lucia coined the term. And magic it is. A kind of super-super- inflated blackness beyond any other. It took a while for the eyes to accept, and people at first went around by feel and bumping into things. I bumped into a large, muscled bald man and suddenly thought of calling him Mister Clean. That kind of startled me because I had never scrubbed anything during my time above water. Others scrubbed for me, picked up after me, did my shopping and cooking and washing. Even the washing of my hair. Harry was a rich man and I had been born into riches. We fell together like two dynasties for the purpose of expanding borders. Until.

There is always that moment, that *boing!* when things turn. I hate to link backward (upward). But how else to make this understandable? Kind of like how the stars came out at night. They weren't there, then they were. Who ever saw exactly when it happened?

With Harry and me, I felt a great trust in him then didn't. I can't say what made me cross the line. He was himself, always himself. It was I who had changed. No

other man in the picture, or woman — it was nothing like that! If I think about how things used to be, I feel a momentary anxiety, but then I let go and sea water fills me to swooning.

Clancy (ex-IRA) appears in the shadowy depths in front of me. He says he's discovered something during his wanderings.

"What?" I ask.

"A hulk of a thing, massive, the likes of which I can't describe," Clancy says.

I have difficulty accepting that; accepting anything more than what is around me.

Then some old seed begins to move in my mouth, falling onto my tongue, one that was stuck between my teeth then got dislodged. "Take me to this thing," I tell him.

Trance-like we move through the indescribable darkness, and when I glance toward Clancy his eyes are missing. Hollows. Quite beautiful. Is that what his enemies eyes became after he shot them out? It tempts me to ask but instead I just follow him.

I can't say how long we travel. There seems to be an opening, a rushing sound like gazillions of tons of air pushed back and quickly released.

Then Clancy says, "We're here."

We stop to take in this sight. It's nothing like us. He turns to face me with his empty hollows.

"I can't help you," I say. Then I know that I know this thing. "Ship."

"What do you mean?"

"That was our ship."

"I don't know what you're talking about, luv."

And I realize he's telling the truth. How lucky he is — why am I not so lucky? He has forgotten, why haven't I? Is this really necessary? The past to appear but broken and hideous?

Clancy is moving forward toward this hulk of a thing — the Ship. He turns and looks back at me and waits for me to catch up. We move into a place where chairs connect in rows.

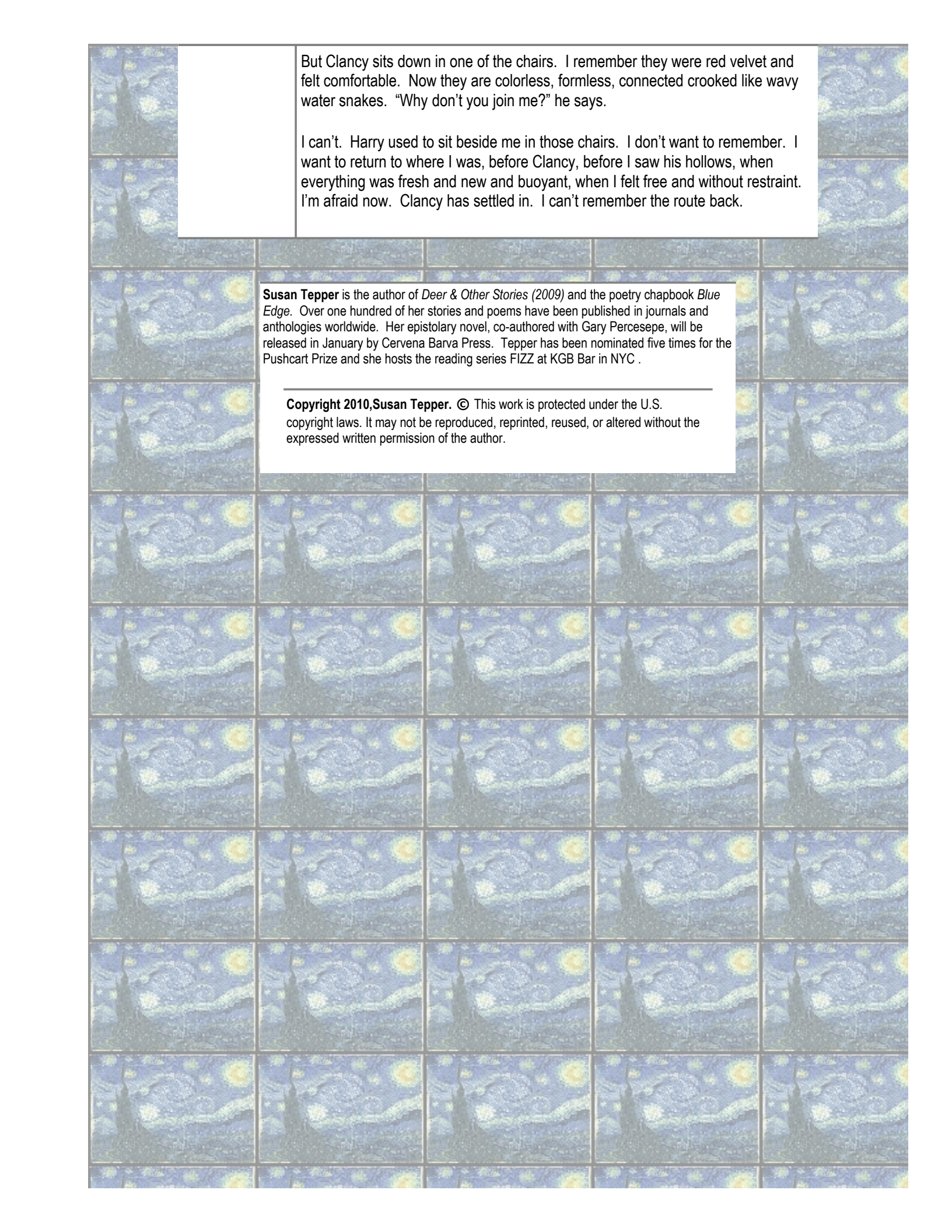
"This was the theater," I say.

"The what?"

"Where they had the entertainment."

"Entertainment?"

"Let's keep moving," I tell him.



But Clancy sits down in one of the chairs. I remember they were red velvet and felt comfortable. Now they are colorless, formless, connected crooked like wavy water snakes. “Why don’t you join me?” he says.

I can’t. Harry used to sit beside me in those chairs. I don’t want to remember. I want to return to where I was, before Clancy, before I saw his hollows, when everything was fresh and new and buoyant, when I felt free and without restraint. I’m afraid now. Clancy has settled in. I can’t remember the route back.

Susan Tepper is the author of *Deer & Other Stories* (2009) and the poetry chapbook *Blue Edge*. Over one hundred of her stories and poems have been published in journals and anthologies worldwide. Her epistolary novel, co-authored with Gary Percesepe, will be released in January by Cervena Barva Press. Tepper has been nominated five times for the Pushcart Prize and she hosts the reading series FIZZ at KGB Bar in NYC .

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