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THE EDITORS' CHOICE:

NEW
AMERICAN STORIES
VOLUME I

COMPILED BY
GEORGE E. MURPHY, JR.



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INTRODUCTION

"The renaissance of the short story," as it is being called in literary circles, is upon us. From burgeoning independent and university-supported literary journals to the slick national magazines, an enthusiastic celebration of the form is under way. And nowhere is this trend more in evidence than at publishing houses where only recently the novel, not to mention nonfiction, all but shoved "shorter fiction" into obscurity.

Last June, *The New York Times Book Review* featured a front-page article entitled "The Boom in Short Stories," which humbly suggested that "there is a widely shared impression that something has definitely happened to the quality as well as the quantity of American short stories. Among readers as well as writers, the short story has lost its status as a warm-up exercise for the more serious work of novel writing."

Some speculation about the causes of this trend has ranged from the heavy influence of the proliferating creative writing programs at universities across the country to the perhaps more cynical suggestion that television has reduced our attention span. It is just as likely that the American short story has, for years, been undergoing an evolution and has of late succeeded

in effectively mirroring the tastes and sensibilities of the American reading public.

For over six years, I have been operating what is commonly called a "small press," publishing books of poetry and fiction, more often than not books I thought deserved publication but that were unlikely to be accepted by larger, more commercial houses. Two years ago, I found myself in the unexpectedly providential position of having published an anthology of short stories* edited by Tobias Wolff, one of the writers represented in this collection. Much to our mutual delight, it went into repeated printings. On the heels of that success, I began musing on the possibility of creating some sort of annual collection of stories. Two such collections already existed—*The O. Henry Awards* stories and Houghton Mifflin Company's annual *Best American Short Stories*, both highly respected. One learns best from the old masters, of course. So I went to the library, gathered these sets of volumes for five years, and sequestered myself on a beach chair for a week to read them.

I made two observations. In *The O. Henry Awards* stories I noticed not only a predictable high quality, but also overall predictability; the selections are made each year by the same editor, William Abrahams. In the annual *Best American Short Stories*, I found an interesting reversal; since each year (following the death of its original editor, Martha Foley) it hosts a different fiction writer as guest editor, the selections, though also of unusually high quality, seemed as much a reflection of the particular sensibilities of that writer/editor as of the truly eclectic scope of short-story publications. An example of the individual and sometimes quirky influence of the guest editors is that the late John Gardner's deliberate exclusion from the 1983 collection of stories from *The New Yorker*—which publishes more new fiction each year than any other magazine—because he didn't like their editorial tastes.

Though I wasn't exactly sure what the alternative method of selection might be, I was convinced of two things. First, that good fiction was being published each year by many magazines which rarely received the recognition and respect that comes

**Matters of Life and Death: New American Stories* (Wampeter Press, 1983).

from being included in one of these two annual anthologies. Second, that if I were to create an alternative anthology, it should neither be any more predictable from year to year than are the magazines that publish fiction nor should the editorial selections be left to the taste of a single judge.

It can be safely said that, for over a century, nowhere has the short story been more respected and nurtured than in American magazines. The short story has found its true home in our periodicals. Clearly, if such a "renaissance" is taking place, it has occurred because the editors of our best magazines have painstakingly searched for great writing and pored over "slush piles" for worthy new talent—what one editor recently suggested to me was "magic." They have succeeded in keeping pace with, and sometimes shaping, the tastes of the reading public.

Suddenly the answer was clear. I would appeal to those who make the real decisions about which stories we get to read: the fiction editors. I would ask *them* to tell me, of all the stories they'd published in a given calendar year, which represented their editorial ideal.

Creating a list of contributing magazines was easy at first. There could be no question that such glossies as *Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, and the other national magazines included here are well known for their fiction. However, it is also true that many independent and university journals have for years served both as a launching place for good new writers and as a forum for high-quality, though less commercial, stories. The literary journals included here are among the best. My only regret is that I could not have included more of them.

To avoid the possibilities of overlapping authors or themes, I asked each of the nominating editors to contribute as many as three stories in, if they chose, an order of preference, from which I made the final selections. Those invitations were met with enthusiasm and support.

I was delighted to find work by such well-known authors as Alice Adams, Margaret Atwood, Laurie Colwin, Thomas McGuane, and Anne Tyler as well as many stories by younger, lesser-known writers. In the case of Amy Hempel, Beth Nugent, Janet Beeler Shaw, Charlie Smith, and Daniel Woodrell, these are their first published stories.

One other noteworthy observation that may be made about the stories in this collection is the obvious influence of the Writers Workshop of the University of Iowa. Four authors—Beth Nugent, Charlie Smith, Robley Wilson, Jr., and Daniel Woodrell—are all affiliated with that program, clearly a successful and influential one.

There is one notable omission here. *The New Yorker*, without question this country's most ambitious publisher of short stories, has internal editorial policies that prevented the singling out one author's work over another's.

Despite this omission, I believe that this collection not only offers a choice selection of many of the very best short stories published in the past year, but also that it also serves as a helpful tool to short-story authors who are seeking to determine the editorial tastes and preferences of fiction editors and to gauge whatever trends may be taking place among those magazines that are their primary market.

In any event, it is abundantly clear that these are good times for American short stories, and it is my hope that I speak for all the editors when I suggest that these are indeed many of the best stories of our time.

—George E. Murphy, Jr.
Green Harbor, Massachusetts, 1984



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A L I C E A D A M S

ALASKA

FROM SHENANDOAH

5

ALTHOUGH MRS. LAWSON DOES NOT DRINK anymore, not a drop since New Year's Day, 1961, in Juneau, Alaska, she sometimes feels a confusion in her mind about which husband she will meet, at the end of the day. She has been married five times, and she has lived, it seems to her, almost everywhere. Now she is a cleaning lady, in San Francisco, although some might say that she is too old for that kind of work. Her hair, for so many years dyed red, is now streaky gray, and her eyes are a paler blue than they once were. Her skin is a dark bronze color, but she thinks of herself as Negro—Black, these days. From New Orleans, originally.

If someone came up and asked her, Who are you married to now, Lucille Lawson? of course she would answer, Charles, and we live in the Western Addition in San Francisco, two buses to get there from here.

But, not asked, she feels the presences of those other husbands—nameless, shadowy, lurking near the edges of her mind. And menacing, most of them, especially the one who tromped her in Juneau, that New Year's Day. He was the worst, by far, but none of them was worth a whole lot, come to think of it. And she was always working at one place or another, and always tired, at the end of her days, and then

there were those husbands to come home to, and more work to do for them. Some husbands come honking for you in their cars, she remembers, but usually you have to travel a long way, buses and street cars, to get to where they are, to where you and them live.

These days Mrs. Lawson just cleans for Miss Goldstein, a rich white lady older than Mrs. Lawson is, who lives alone in a big house on Divisadero Street, near Union. She has lots of visitors, some coming to stay, all funny-looking folk. Many foreign, but not fancy. Miss Goldstein still travels a lot herself, to peculiar places like China and Cuba and Africa.

What Mrs. Lawson is best at is polishing silver, and that is what she mostly does, the tea service, coffee service, and all the flatware, although more than once Miss Goldstein has sighed and said that maybe it should all be put away, or melted down to help the poor people in some of the places she visits; all that silver around looks boastful, Miss Goldstein thinks. But it is something for Mrs. Lawson to do every day (Miss Goldstein does not come right out and say this; they both just know).

Along with the silver polishing she dusts, and sometimes she irons a little, some silk or linen shirts; Miss Goldstein does not get dressed up a lot, usually favoring sweaters and old pants. She gets the most dressed up when she is going off to march somewhere, which she does fairly often. Then she gets all gussied up in a black suit and her real pearls, and she has these posters to carry, NO NUKES IS GOOD NUKES, GRAY PANTHERS FOR PEACE. She would be a sight to behold, Mrs. Lawson thinks: she can hardly imagine Miss Goldstein with all the kinds of folks that are usually in those lines, the beards and raggedy blue jeans, the dirty old sweat shirts, big women wearing no bras. Thin, white-haired Miss Goldstein in her pearls.

To help with the heavy housework, the kitchen floor and the stove, bathtubs and all like that, Miss Goldstein has hired a young white girl, Gloria. At first Mrs. Lawson was mistrustful that a girl like that could clean anything, a blonde-haired small little girl with these doll blue eyes in some kind of a white pants work outfit, but Gloria moves through that big house like a little bolt of white lightning, and she leaves everything behind

her *clean*. Even with her eyesight not as good as it was Mrs. Lawson can see how clean the kitchen floor and the stove are, and the bathtubs. And she has *looked*.

Gloria comes at eight every morning, and she does all that in just two hours. Mrs. Lawson usually gets in sometime after nine, depending on how the buses run. And so there is some time when they are both working along, Mrs. Lawson at the sink with the silver, probably, or dusting off Miss Goldstein's bureau, dusting her books—and Gloria down on her knees on the bathroom floor (Gloria is right; the only way to clean a floor is on your knees, although not too many folks seem to know that, these days). Of course they don't talk much, both working, but Gloria has about twenty minutes before her next job, in that same neighborhood. Sometimes, then, Mrs. Lawson will take a break from her polishing, dusting, and heat up some coffee for the both of them, and they will talk a little. Gloria has a lot of worries, a lot on her mind, Mrs. Lawson can tell, although Gloria never actually says, beyond everyone's usual troubles, money and rent and groceries, and in Gloria's case car repairs, an old VW.

The two women are not friends, really, but all things considered they get along okay. Some days they don't either of them feel like talking, and they both just skim over sections of the newspaper, making comments on this and that, in the news. Other times they talk a little.

Gloria likes to hear about New Orleans, in the old days, when Mrs. Lawson's father had a drugstore and did a lot of doctoring there, and how later they all moved to Texas, and the Klan came after them, and they hid and moved again, to another town. And Gloria tells Mrs. Lawson how her sister is ashamed that she cleans houses for a living. The sister, Sharon, lives up in Alaska, but not in Juneau, where Mrs. Lawson lived. Gloria's sister lives in Fairbanks, where her husband is in forestry school.

However, despite her and Gloria getting along okay, in the late afternoons Mrs. Lawson begins to worry that Gloria will find something wrong there, when she comes first thing in the morning. Something that she, Mrs. Lawson, did wrong. She even imagines Gloria saying to Miss Goldstein, Honestly,

how come you keep on that old Mrs. Lawson? She can't see to clean very good, she's too old to work.

She does not really think that Gloria would say a thing like that, and even if she did Miss Goldstein wouldn't listen, probably. Still, the idea is very worrying to her, and in an anxious way she sweeps up the kitchen floor, and dustmops the long front hall. And at the same time her mind is plagued with those images of husbands' dark ghosts, in Juneau and Oakland and Kansas City, husbands that she has to get home to, somehow. Long bus rides with cold winds at the places where you change, or else you have to wait a long time for the choked-up sound of them honking, until you get in their creaky old cars and drive, drive home, in the dark.

Mrs. Lawson is absolutely right about Gloria having serious troubles on her mind—more serious in fact than Mrs. Lawson could have thought of: Gloria's hideous, obsessive problem is a small lump on her leg, her right leg, mid-calf. A tiny knot. She keeps reaching to touch it, no matter what she is doing, and it is always there. She cannot make herself not touch it. She thinks constantly of that lump, its implications and probable consequences. Driving to work in her jumpy old VW, she reaches down to her leg, to check the lump. A couple of times she almost has accidents, as she concentrates on her fingers, reaching, what they feel as they touch her leg.

To make things even worse, the same week that she first noticed the lump Gloria met a really nice man, about her age: Dugald, neither married nor gay (a miracle, these days, in San Francisco). He is a bartender in a place where she sometimes goes with girlfriends, after a movie or something. In a way she has known Dugald for a long time, but in another way not—not known him until she happened to go into the place alone, thinking, Well, why not? I'm tired (it was late one afternoon), a beer would be nice. And there was Dugald, and they talked, and he asked her out, on his next night off. And the next day she discovered the lump.

She went with Dugald anyway, of course, and she almost had a very good time—except that whenever she thought about

what was probably wrong with her she went cold and quiet. She thinks that Dugald may not ever ask her out again, and even if he did, she can't get at all involved with anyone, not now.

Also, Gloria's sister, Sharon, in Fairbanks, Alaska, has invited her to come up and stay for a week, while Sharon's forestry-student husband is back in Kansas, visiting his folks; Sharon does not much like her husband's family. Gloria thinks she will go for ten days in June, while Miss Goldstein is in China, again. Gloria is on the whole pleased at the prospect of this visit; as she Ajaxes and Lysols Miss Goldstein's upstairs bathroom, she thinks, *Alaska*, and she imagines gigantic glaciers, huge wild animals, fantastic snow-capped mountains. (She will send a friendly postcard to Dugald, she thinks, and maybe one to old Lawson.) Smiling, for an instant she makes a small bet with herself, which is that at some point Sharon will ask her not to mention to anyone, *please*, what she, Gloria, does for a living. Well, Gloria doesn't care. Lord knows her work is not much to talk about; it is simply the most money she can get an hour, and not pay taxes (she is always afraid, when not preoccupied with her other, more terrible worries, that the IRS will somehow get to her). On the other hand, it is fun to embarrass Sharon.

At home though, lying awake at night, of course the lump is all that Gloria thinks about. And hospitals: when she was sixteen she had her tonsils out, and she decided then on no more operations, no matter what. If she ever has a baby she will do it at home. The hospital was so frightening, everyone was horrible to her, all the doctors and nurses (except for a couple of black aides who were sweet, really nice, she remembers). They all made her feel like something much less than a person. And a hospital would take all her money, and more, all her careful savings (someday she plans to buy a little cabin, up near Tahoe, and raise big dogs). She thinks about something being cut off. Her leg. Herself made so ugly, everyone trying not to look. No more men, no dates, not Dugald or anyone. No love or sex again, not ever.

In the daytime her terror is slightly more manageable, but it is still so powerful that the very idea of calling a doctor,

showing him the lump, asking him what to do—chills her blood, almost stops her heart.

And she can feel the lump there, all the time. Probably growing.

Mrs. Lawson has told Gloria that she never goes to doctors; she can doctor herself, Mrs. Lawson says. She always has. Gloria has even thought of showing the lump to Mrs. Lawson.

But she tries to think in a positive way about Alaska. They have a cute little apartment right on the university campus, Sharon has written. Fairbanks is on a river; they will take an afternoon trip on a paddleboat. And they will spend one night at Mt. McKinley, and go on a wildlife tour.

"Fairbanks, now. I never did get up that way," says Mrs. Lawson, told of Sharon's invitation, Gloria's projected trip. "But I always heard it was real nice up there."

Actually she does not remember anything at all about Fairbanks, but for Gloria's sake she hopes that it is nice, and she reasons that any place would be better than Juneau, scrunched in between mountains so steep they look to fall down on you.

"I hope it's nice," says Gloria. "I just hope I don't get mauled by some bear, on that wildlife tour."

Aside from not drinking and never going to doctors (she has read all her father's old doctor books, and remembers most of what she read) Mrs. Lawson believes that she gets her good health and her strength—considerable, for a person of her years—from her daily naps. Not a real sleep, just sitting down for a while in some place really comfortable, and closing her eyes.

She does that now, in a small room off Miss Goldstein's main library room (Miss Goldstein has already gone off to China, but even if she were home she wouldn't mind about a little nap). Mrs. Lawson settles back into a big old fat leather chair, and she slips her shoes off. And, very likely because of talking about Alaska that morning, Gloria's trip, her mind drifts off, in and out of Juneau. She remembers the bitter cold, cold rains of that winter up there, the winds, fogs thicker than cotton, and dark. Snow that sometimes kept them in the little hillside cabin for days, even weeks. Her and Charles: that

husband had the same name as the one she now has, she just remembered—funny to forget a thing like that. They always used to drink a lot, her and the Charles in Alaska; you had to, to get through the winter. And pretty often they would fight, ugly drunk quarrels that she couldn't quite remember the words to, in the mornings. But that New Year's Eve they were having a real nice time; he was being real nice, laughing and all, and then all of a sudden it was like he turned into some other person, and he struck her. He grabbed up her hair, all of it red, at that time, and he called her a witch and he knocked her down to the floor, and he tromped her. Later of course he was sorry, and he said he had been feeling mean about not enough work, but still, he had tromped her.

Pulling herself out of that half dream, half terrible memory, Mrs. Lawson repeats, as though someone had asked her, that now she is married to Charles, in San Francisco. They live in the Western Addition; they don't drink, and this Charles is a nice man, most of the time.

She tries then to think about the other three husbands, one in Oakland, in Chicago, in Kansas City, but nothing much comes to mind, of them. No faces or words, just shadows, and no true pictures of any of those cities. The only thing she is perfectly clear about is that not one of those other men was named Charles.

On the airplane to Alaska, something terrible, horrible, entirely frightening happens to Gloria, which is: a girl comes and sits in the seat next to hers, and that girl has—the lower part of her right leg missing. Cut off. A pretty dark-haired girl, about the same size as Gloria, wearing a nice blazer, and a kind of long skirt. One boot. Metal crutches.

Gloria is so frightened—she knows that this is an omen, a sign meant for her—that she is dizzy, sick; she leans back and closes her eyes, as the plane bumps upward, zooming through clouds, and she stays that way for the rest of the trip. She tries not to think; she repeats numbers and meaningless words to herself.

At some point she feels someone touching her arm.

Flinching, she opens her eyes to see the next-seat girl, who is asking, "Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

"I'm all right. Just getting the flu, I think." Gloria smiles in a deliberately non-friendly way. The last thing in the world that she wants is a conversation with that girl: the girl at last getting around to her leg, telling Gloria, "It started with this lump I had, right here."

Doctors don't usually feel your legs, during physical examinations, Gloria thinks; she is standing beside Sharon on the deck of the big paddleboat that is slowly ploughing up the Natoma River. It would be possible to hide a lump for a long time, unless it grew a lot, she thinks, as the boat's captain announces over the bullhorn that they are passing what was once an Indian settlement.

Alaska is much flatter than Gloria had imagined its being, at least around Fairbanks—and although she had of course heard the words, midnight sun, she had not known they were a literal description; waking at three or four in the morning from bad dreams, her nighttime panics (her legs drawn up under her, one hand touching her calf, the lump) she sees brilliant sunshine, coming in through the tattered aluminum foil that Sharon has messily pasted to the window. It is all wrong—unsettling. Much worse than the thick dark fogs that come into San Francisco in the summer; she is used to them.

In fact sleeplessness and panic (what she felt at the sight of that girl with the missing leg has persisted; she knows it was a sign) have combined to produce in Gloria an almost trancelike state. She is so quiet, so passive that she can feel Sharon wondering about her, what is wrong. Gloria does not, for a change, say anything critical of Sharon's housekeeping, which is as sloppy as usual. She does not tell anyone that she, Gloria, is a cleaning person.

A hot wind comes up off the water, and Gloria remembers that tomorrow they go to Mt. McKinley, and the wildlife tour.

Somewhat to her disappointment, Mrs. Lawson does not get any postcards from Gloria in Alaska, although Gloria had mentioned that she would send one, with a picture.