Now in the long evenings after dinner she often found herself standing before the bathroom mirror, trying hard to glimpse some of the prettiness her husband had always championed. She felt like a cliché from a fairytale, but she couldn’t help herself. The glass portrait started well above her head, and just enclosed her youthful, unremarkable breasts, but left out the last three inches of her fine and luminous pale-blonde hair. Sometimes she would gather it all and bring it round one shoulder, holding it in her hands so that she could see the ends of it. Her hair was the only feature that satisfied her, but she was afraid it also made her vain. With so much time and
aimlessness on her hands, she washed and brushed it sometimes twice a day. Could she ruin her one excellence?

The nervous thought made her eyes shift to her face, which she almost never liked. Her eyes were certainly too large—something Andy thought was wonderful!—and she had never figured out their changeable greenish color exactly, which gave her pause on forms asking that detail. Her thin lips and the size of her mouth were OK, she guessed, but just OK... she had never understood why Andy would so often trace those lips with one finger, quite kindly, before kissing her, as if he had to use a spell to open a door always available to him.

She blinked and sank deeply into another memory she found inescapable of late. Every time it had been her turn to undress him, she would pull off his socks last of all and then climb him with a growl or giggle, and grab the eager standing part of him like a branch on a tree. Then she would lower her head and mouth him with graceless enthusiasm, always feeling she must make a good show to compensate for not knowing exactly what to do. She knew she had no technique, and couldn’t manipulate his arousal like she was supposed to—but nonetheless he flailed about and whimpered like a puppy left in a room by itself. Sometimes this made her forget what she was about and begin to laugh, which always made him pull her head up to his and her mouth to his, then he always wanted her too fast, when she wasn’t ready...

The familiar cramp below her stomach seized and unfolded, releasing nausea to her center, and she found her face in the mirror again. Why couldn’t she stop this? How many months would it take to forget that kind of thing? These mournful reveries made her think she might really need help, for sometimes they were even worse than the dreams. But she could make it: she simply had to concentrate. She concentrated on the uninterrupted roundness below her lips. No chin, she thought sadly. No chin at all.

She reached over to the hook on the door and drew off her thin white gown, which when brought round her did little more than veil the dark texture of her nipples. She knotted the frail sash under her breasts, and looked up to the mirror to find a strange demonic grin on her face, a demon in her remembering the glint of desire Andy always showed when she came to bed wearing that suggestive sheath. Once she had sat on the edge of the bed and, pushing his large hand away with both her own, asked curiously, “Why does this particular item of clothing make you crazier than usual, mister? It’s practically the same as naked.”

His reply had stolen her breath, like all of his best surprises. “Because it makes you a secret,” he whispered eagerly, raising his long forearm to push her back to the bed while he nuzzled her stomach through the gown.

She decisively clicked off the bathroom light just in time to short-circuit the nausea—there! she thought; I did it—and strode forcefully down the hall to the living room. She took her usual cross-legged seat on the floor by the beaten orange couch, and before reaching for the TV’s remote control tried to find her last thoughts. She was trying to learn how to think continuously, without lapsing into painful memories and punishing fantasies, and sometimes it was helpful to back up to the point before her mental lapses. Chin, she thought, and rubbed her palm wistfully over the chin that wasn’t there.
Andrea — now there was a woman with a chin! It was prominent and squarish like Andy’s, but smaller and somehow stronger. You noticed that forceful jaw first, then the slender rise of her face that made Andy’s sister—or “Andrew the First” as she often wryly introduced herself—a stern and startling beauty. Brother and sister had the same dark, almost predatory eyes, but Andrea’s were wiser; Andy usually chose not to look into things too deeply. His wife marveled that he could sidetrack his own intelligence so deliberately, but perhaps it had kept Andrea from killing him outright. What a rivalry those two had had! Andy had told her many times of the fifteen years of long silences and battling visits with his sister, from the time Andrea had left for college in California until their parents had both been lost in an air disaster. By then Andrea was thirty-four, and she unexpectedly left her university position and her whole life on the West Coast to live near the brother she supposedly couldn’t stand. Andy had closed the deal by silently surrendering his side of the sparring, becoming habitually clownlike in Andrea’s presence.

Why had he acted so strangely, wondered his brooding widow — why in fact had his whole purpose foundered after losing his folks? His mourning had gone on too long, cutting off his sense of direction, so that he floated from job to job, mostly manual labor, in the three years of their marriage, and took up more short-lived hobbies than she could remember. She had felt helpless to counter or calm his thrashing about — probably because she knew she was no mental giant herself. So they both became charges of Andrea, who would call at least weekly, inquiring after everything from Andy’s current job troubles to whether they were eating well. It irked Andy, but he would not challenge the precarious peace of the family he had left, and his wife actually liked the attention. Andrea always was smarter than both of us put together, she thought, finally reaching for the remote control to push a button but vividly recalling a flash of Andrea’s anger instead.

They had been eating out, she and Andy with Andrea and a woman friend from the Institute. Andrea was explaining why their names were “only one letter different”: “You see, I was really Andrew the First. Our young man here was what my father wanted, but he futzed around and got born second.” Her fork clattered to her plate, interrupting her tone of forced affection, and she finished her story with a fiery gaze travelling between pairs of eyes to a far corner of the restaurant. “That’s why I had to be so goddamned smart.” Later she commandeered the check and charged it, flourishing the signature “Andrea Waycross Ph. D.”

Andy usually laughed off these bad moments, his wife ruefully remembered, with a high nervous titter that made her uneasy. It was nothing like the clear, free laughter that had enchanted her on their first meeting. She looked back on herself as a silly sorority girl, floating through an average Virginia college with only the dullest of aspirations; she shook her head at the chilling realization of just how pointless her life then seemed today. She’d been nervously trying to act her way through a mixer with the boys from the University when she spied a long-legged, unfashionably long-haired odd bird looking lost by the corner of a table. Feeling suddenly responsible for playing hostess, she approached the stranger boldly as he pulled a pipe from a deep coat pocket and began fooling around with it in the clumsy manner of a novice. She was comfortable with his ungainliness already.
“So,” she had said in the sweetest, blondest voice she could muster, “are you from the University too?" – a question so dumb she still winced seven years later.

But the boy gave her his first surprise. “Sort of,” he choked, his eyes darting around like a fugitive in a silent comedy.

At that age she was not accustomed to the unexpected. “Oh,” she answered vacantly. “That sounds interesting.”

He smiled tensely and gradually brought his dark eyes to focus on hers. A moment too long passed between them in silence. “Well, what’s your name, I guess,” he said in a rush, a dark red flush rising from his neck.

“Tully,” she said, carefully practicing her new, clipped nondrawl. At the time she had badly wanted to be from northern Virginia, not almost-North Carolina. But then the truth spilled out before she could stop herself. “My name is the most interesting thing about me.”

The boy started, and then his mouth opened wide in the uninhibited, ringing laughter Tully would always wait to hear in their subsequent life together. It came in four or five overlapping peals, like the sounds of the bell tower at dusk. He dropped the charade with his pipe and shook his mane of brown hair as if to refocus on her. For an instant he seemed incredibly adult and wise. “Really?!" he grinned, thoroughly pleased. “Well, at least you’re a damn sight prettier than all these other fas-ci-nating ladies,” he declaimed grandly, making a broad gesture to encompass the tackily decorated hall she had felt abandoned in just moments before.

Tully squeezed the remote control hard and watched a hot, blurry vision of a fatherly Bill Cosby appear on the TV screen. He was so charming, she remembered bitterly, with that Georgia grandiloquence and complementary lack of knowhow. Ten minutes later they had moved out to the humid balcony of the ancient building, his teeth clicking around her ears because he didn’t seem to know exactly where to start. She didn’t care; she was hugging him as fiercely as she had the fireman who had saved her life when she was five. She could feel his erection against her lower belly and imagined it as a dark, mysterious thing.

So young, she thought, squeezing her eyes tight to push out the tears. She marveled at how much older she felt now — “but you’re still a young woman!” barked her mother’s panicky voice inside her head. It was true, she realized, but for now she preferred to remain a young hermit. It was nine months since Andy’s death, but her so-called girlfriends — most of them divorced, she thought meanly — already wanted her to go out with them. “At least you can try to have a good time,” her mother had cajoled yesterday, taking her friends’ part. Tully turned on the sound for the television, but not quite to where she could make out the dialogue. Only Andrea seemed to understand—she would walk into the apartment, undisturbed by the lingering presence of Andy’s possessions, and speak in the tone of an answer before any question was asked. “It’s OK," she always said. “It’s OK for now.”

Tully wished Andrea would come to visit her tonight, and almost every night, but the proud, handsome woman came on Tuesdays and Fridays only, always punctually, always matter-of-fact. She would repeat the usual excuse: “The light is so much better at your place,”
she would say in mock envy, dumping her notebooks on the couch. But Tully knew that Andrea studied on most nights at home, inferior lighting or no. She studied all the time.

Andrea would read, pencil clenched in her mouth and papers rustling in her lap, while Tully watched the quiet television blankly, with the disinterest of a drunk. She usually was a little drunk: intoxicated by the presence of this woman with the firm, forward breasts and lean, athletic legs, and the unmistakable air of Tully's lost husband. Tully felt guilty for the sensation, as if she were cheating, or tempting fate. But she didn’t care to do anything else, and had no reason to send Andrea away. She would just as soon give up her life, and it shocked her when she realized this was so.

The evenings with Andrea passed so much faster than these alone; that was one reason Tully wanted her there. They talked very little, yet a mutual comfort settled over them at every reunion. Late — usually about midnight — they would go to the kitchen and eat together while making small talk, then return to watch whatever was left of television together. Tully regained her seat on the floor but Andrea would push her work aside and sit forward on the couch, her legs lightly embracing the blonde woman by the shoulders. And for half an hour Andrea would play with Tully’s natural prize, braiding, unbraiding, swirling, and simply stroking her long, obedient hair. Something like a rapture would sooner or later rise in Tully’s throat, and she had to clench her jaws to keep from crying or even turning aside to embrace one of Andrea’s protecting legs. But this she could not do – envisioning it, as she often had, led her to an edge of mystery black and full of anxious murmurings.

She was certain Andrea was knowledgeable about it all, and yet she never did anything; if the stroking stopped for long Andrea would soon release a full, collapsing sigh, and then Tully would excuse herself for bed, as if on cue. She had to be up at seven to reach the reception desk at Dr. Morgan’s office punctually at eight; she was proud that she had never been late, and only took a week off following Andy’s death, though the gray-haired patriarch had begged her to “give yourself more time,” and take some extra money too.

Andrea usually made some joke about “the life of an intellectual,” and feigned an interest in watching an old late-night movie, or even David Letterman, whom Tully despised. Tully slipped easily into sleep on these nights—Andrea’s hands in her hair worked like a narcotic — and she never knew when Andrea left, though she suspected it might be very late.

Tully blinked and noted with minor alarm that the Cosby show was ending — she had really meant to watch it but her mind was running loose again. What would Andy think of this... this friendliness with his sister, Tully worried suddenly. Andrea’s rare interest in men (she would sometimes mischievously remark on a “nice tiny ass” when the two of them were out shopping together) had always been a subject that Andy pretended complete innocence about, yet he studiously avoided socializing with Andrea’s crowd from the Richmond Institute of Women Scholars. Last January, just seven months before his death, Tully had collared him into going to dinner to celebrate Andrea’s single-handed procurement of a survival grant — she was so smart! — on the grounds that he would really hurt his sister by not going, and besides there had to be at least a couple of other men there.
She was wrong, and gulped when the two of them approached the eight women seated at a long table in the Italian restaurant Andrea had long haunted. None of the women were like her — basically passive, Tully thought with a strange defiance—and Andy could hardly deal with his sister alone and sober, much less drunk (she already was) and amplified by her friends and their accolades, even if well-deserved. Tully suffered through a long night, wincing every time Andy made a lame remark, which was often since his charm failed utterly among women with quicker tongues.

Tully also remembered that night for Andrea’s behavior, which turned moody near the end of the party and included several long, unfocused stares into Tully’s eyes. Tully would then slip her hand to Andy’s bony thigh, squeezing softly to reassure herself and somehow ward off Andrea’s attention. After one such silent episode Tully looked to Andy only to see him staring open-mouthed at Clarissa, a huge, unsteady bear of a woman with thick eyeglasses who was vociferously recounting her dressing-down of a professor.

“And then I said,” Clarissa boomed with mounting enthusiasm, “Dr. Roundhouse, you are one stupid son of a bastard!” Then she banged the table too hard, eliciting less laughter than she obviously expected. Tully caught Andrea rolling her eyes heavenward, as if to say This never happened, but instead she thoughtfully sipped her beer and spoke to Clarissa in a measured, disciplinary tone. “Well then, I hope we don’t need the good doctor’s assistance anytime soon.” Clarissa fell silent. Andrea’s solemn gaze returned to Tully and brought a hot flush to her cheeks; Tully had to excuse herself to the restroom.

After the dinner Andy had abruptly displayed a mischievous mood. As they walked home on the winter night, he was actually skipping, ecstatic, perhaps, that he had simply escaped the dinner intact. Suddenly he did an about-face and grasped his wife gently by the shoulders, the mock-seriousness of his face barely decipherable in the light from a streetlamp. “Tell me something, Tully — do you think some of Andrea’s pals might actually be lesbians?

His face flickered with both his conscious good humor and an unpredictable testiness underneath, and Tully had no time to consider strategies. Instinctively she backed away, held her arms out in front of her as if grasping a barrel, and boomed as gruffly as she knew how: “Andrew Waycross, you are one stu-pid son of a bastard!” Andy slapped his hands in delight, laughing a little too hard perhaps, but revealing a kind of yielding that always made Tully feel safe to be with him.

She placed the remote bar on the floor carefully and leaned back against the couch, unsmiling despite the warmth of the memory. He was a stupid SOB, she thought; he fell out of a tree and died instantly on a green suburban lawn. Dr. Morgan assured her that he died instantly, falling flat on his back, his head whipping violently backward over a limb fallen just seconds before him. It was the first job he’d kept for more than six months since the death of his parents, and he had begun to take it seriously, bringing home thick manuals on tree surgery Tully would never have guessed existed. In six more months, he had gleefully told her on the bright August day before the fall, he was certain they “could work on that baby of yours.” Tully closed her eyes in deep reverence, the word baby bringing slightly less pain than times before. At least I still have Andrea, she told herself – and the wooden man.
She leaned far over to the coffee table between herself and the television, and grabbed a six-inch high Buddha crafted from solid green glass. She had not even told Andrea about the wooden man, although a psychologist might be expected to understand — no, she had told no one. The secret gave her a bizarre delight, as if she had the perfect right to tempt insanity on her long evenings alone. Yet she doled out the craziness to herself in careful portions: she thought she should not dream of the wooden man more than once a week. This night he was due again, so she ritualistically placed the small statue on the floor facing her, and stroked his static braids much like Andrea petted her on their nights together. *It's the Buddha*, she told herself girlishly, *who brings the wooden man.* Then she recoiled slightly, a whisper of madness hissing again along the back of her neck. *What am I thinking?* She didn't even know what a Buddha was supposed to be.

Andy had found him at a flea market about a year before, seizing on the odd object placed on its side between a corroded toaster and an ancient radio with vacuum tubes. Tully watched in wonder as he hefted the thing like a long-lost trophy, then lofted it several feet in the air, where it spun rapidly before returning to his open palm with a loud smack. “I kinda like this guy,” he said breezily, and held it out toward the old fellow sitting on a worn pick-up’s running board. He seemed to have an eye for softies: “Twenty doller,” he wheezed, “cuz it’s real jade.”

“No!” Tully cried instinctively, outraged at a sham even she could see through, but Andy smiled like he was somehow getting the upper hand. He took some of their precious money from his wallet and handed it over, and Tully felt a flash of anger which made her wish she knew how to discipline her husband. Instead she thought, *Just wait til Andrea hears about this*—and Tully knew she’d make sure of it.

But despite Andrea’s vitriolic lecture about household economics, the Buddha became a kind of household pet whom even Tully began to regard as having a personality. That winter Andy announced that “the Buddha does love his basketball,” and turned the statue to face the games which absorbed Andy so completely. “Charlie,” Tully once heard him say to the green man after his beloved Cavaliers dropped a very close one to N.C. State, “what do you think of these Wahoos?” Tully paused in her dinner preparations to listen for what might come next — Andy was a little drunk from an afternoon with a six-pack, and he could be very funny in that condition. “Honey,” finally came the call, Andy exaggerating his own slurred accent, “could you bring Charlie here a beer? He’s absolutely *disgusted.*”

Tully smiled to herself and cupped the whole head of the Buddha with one hand. Now she only touched it to dust it, or on the nights when she wanted to dream of the wooden man — who always hurt her, yet whom she longed for in the depths where he hurt her.

The wooden man was Andy, of course, but she preferred not to think of that name for him, and she had the liberty of that choice now. His face had Andy’s features, although they were chiseled very crudely out of the dark mahogany grain which composed the man’s entire body. He would always be standing naked by the bed when she looked up from her lonely sleep, and she no more than had to think “Yes” before he climbed upon her with a terrible, awkward weight and pushed himself inside her, the unyielding straightness of his passion causing jabs of pain.
From his throat came a strange, ghastly crying like the rubbing together of high limbs in a windstorm, and she was nearly consumed by fear of him — yet she clung to him nonetheless, knowing he was all she had left. Sometimes she even felt something like an orgasm, a partial clutching and starry release nearly lost among her cries and the wooden man’s stormy groaning. But he never seemed satisfied — he would only stop inexplicably and stand, murmuring a low nonsense, then retreat into the closet Tully knew to be a forest at night.

The last time — the sixth occurrence of the dream — the wooden man had broken his murmuring after their anxious lovemaking to look at her tenderly — she had never noticed his carved black eyes before — and say clearly the word “You...”, as though he meant to speak a sentence but forgot its purpose. Then he began his usual retreat, but Tully lunged after him, grabbing at the erect branch between his legs. She wanted it to be slippery and wet with herself, for then she would rub him and cajole him back to bed, no matter what the pain. But her hand closed on a dry wooden knob, and she awoke, her throat parched and her cheeks tracked with salt.

The next day Tully was riding with Andrea in Andy’s old green Volvo—Andrea had wordlessly claimed it days after her brother’s funeral—when she noticed the ball on the oldstyle gearshift vibrating near her knee. She tingled with a perverse vision of straddling the stick, wondering if she could accept the cold shape inside herself, and then suddenly Andrea’s hand covered the ball, downshifting the car decisively into second with the same strong-arm movement Andy would have used. Tully gasped at the merging of the visions, so loudly that Andrea turned her head and said with great concern, “Tully? Are you alright?”

The blonde widow felt tears sting her eyes — would she ever stop crying?—and looked into the face of her husband’s sister, lit with Andy’s light. Tully felt it impossible to hold herself back. “I really do love you, Andrea,” she said softly, lowering her eyes in a habit ancient and commanding.

Andrea pushed the ball and stick up into neutral and the car drifted to the side of the road, rattling slightly as it was braked to a stop. Tully felt a cold fear rise in her bosom — what would happen now? She imagined Andrea moving toward her, and wondered what she would have to do if the older woman tried to kiss her. Then she felt a warm familiar hand on the back of her neck, tugging softly at her hair as usual. Tully looked up; Andrea still had one hand on the steering wheel. When she spoke, the words came in a rolling Georgia lilt—the accent she claimed to have lost in California years before.

“You’re all the family I’ve got now, sweet Tully,” Andrea said calmly. “I don’t think I could live without you.”

They seemed to shudder together, and soon both were crying freely in their unchanged positions. Andrea halted herself with a harsh half-sob, drawing away from Tully to rub her nose vigorously with the back of one hand, forcing a laugh. “What would Andy do now?” she said with difficulty. “Both his women weeping at once would scare that boy to death.”

Tully nodded, laughing and crying, noticing but not caring about Andrea’s slip of the tongue.
Now she lifted the Buddha back to its place on the table, and made her way to bed. She swallowed one of the sedatives Dr. Morgan had given her, hoping that it would not black out her dreams as it sometimes did. She slipped out of her gown and into bed, absent-mindedly fingering the hair between her legs as she pictured the wooden man, preparing herself for the assault and the delirious intimacy. Her hand fell still on her thigh in a very short time.

When he appeared the wooden man looked different—he was partially covered in a growth of new leaves and twigs. She thought he looked like Robin Hood, and told him so silently; he only smiled broadly and reached out a hand, unexpectedly warm, to massage her breast, stealing her breath for a moment. Then he moved with uncustomary gentleness upon her and filled her perfectly, slipping his broad, sinewy hands beneath her in a way he never had before. His care made her feel warm and liquid, as if her inner heat was melting her body. “Oh, my Andy,” she murmured, but she felt him begin to shake his head, and she opened her eyes to see what he meant.

“I am growing away,” he said clearly, too slowly to have made a mistake, his half-wild face even showing a mischievous delight in his pun. “You...” and then his speech stopped again, as before.

Tully shifted her hips slightly, the ease of their union washing her heart with pride, and grabbed the tree-man’s face, traversed by two vines, with both her hands. “You can’t leave without telling me!” she taunted in sudden gaiety.

“You...” her faithful lover sighed, straightening his spine somewhat; a cool breeze blew between their bodies. “You are the light of the world” he sang inexplicably, driving hard into her with that part of him that was wooden, but growing too, and it struck electrically into her like a root, its branches, fibers, and tendrils burning all the way from her opening out to her toes and fingertips. Her head swam as the wooden man disappeared, and she felt a flash of lonesomeness, a farewell, before she moaned and rolled on her side to look toward the window she saw first thing every morning. But it was spinning, detached from everything, high in an early blue sky. As its rotation slowed she saw that its curtain was actually her filmy white gown, and when it had swirled to a stop around the window frame a soft puff of air blew the gown open, allowing just an instant of absolute golden light to flash through the open window, stunning the young woman into wakefulness, which she entered gasping, clutching at her bed sheets, laughing with a long-lost gladness, forgiving her husband.

****

This story was originally published by THE SUN and later appeared in the anthology STUBBORN LIGHT: The Best of THE SUN Volume III.

Also by D. Patrick Miller:
Instructions of the Spirit: Poems & Intimations
http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/2541

6 Miracle Essays: Combined Edition
http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/2151

Shining Through: 5 Spiritual Survival Techniques for Trying Times
http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/1878

Choose Your Publishing Option
http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/2482

See bio and complete list of e-books at
http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/fearlessbooks