



John Griswold

THE STORK

There might be a few wood stork left around here, but it's mostly the white heron, ibis and other long-legged fowl that stalk around fast food drive-thrus, coming up out of the ditches to stare in car windows and stick their long beaks in where they shouldn't be. They pick smashed bugs off radiator grills and bumpers, and scabble onto the hoods to stab at grasshoppers caught in the windshield wipers. They hold up traffic all over Ft. Myers with their bobbing around and get crushed for their ambitions—a sudden loose nest of plumes as disorganized as a pile of pickup sticks on the melting asphalt.

Normally we don't poke fun at a man so far down on his luck, but somebody called him The Stork one time, since he walked around like he was knee-deep in nothing and looking for dinner, and the name stuck. The odd thing was that he came to us at only forty-four years of age, after his long, thin body was ruined by two quick-fire strokes. In order to walk, he had to yank his knees up very high and set his feet down carefully, and the damage to his vision obliged him to tilt his head to see. When he did, his unkempt hair flopped over like a comb, and his red eyes stared unblinkingly through tinted glasses in the same intense, snakelike way the wading birds' did. It would be awful to say he looked comical, but even worse it was the kind that made you want to cry.

It didn't make it any better he wore a tutti-frutti bathrobe all day, the largest we had, or that the sleeves pulled up short at the elbows and the hem was at mid-thigh on him. He wore only a pair of ratty athletic shorts under the robe and looked lewd and unthinkable in his dirty plumage, standing under the awning in front in black sneakers, white socks, and his robe open to the navel, smoking one cigarette after another as his long pink legs twitched with palsy. But he was friendly and cheerful to visitors, those dragged to see relatives that embarrassed them, and who feared sitting too long in one place, as if they might get put in a bed too.

Between smokes, The Stork made his rounds, trying to get a rise out of residents who needed one, and to calm the others, such as Mrs. Wieland, a frail old woman in a print dress, who lived in a wheelchair in the hallway. She had been screaming "Girls! Girls! Girls!" with such a brassy voice day and night for 14 years that the other residents had long ago hollered themselves hoarse from their rooms in vain attempts to shut her up. Mrs. Wieland was 98 and had no one but us, and even we let her be.

In passing, The Stork took her outstretched, evil-smelling hands and spoke to her with his unwieldy tongue; Mrs. Wieland went quiet for those restful few seconds, and everyone drew breath. She looked thankful, too, to have some peace, and smiled sweetly at him, as if her own children,

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John Griswold's writing has appeared in *War, Literature & the Arts*; *Mediphors*; *Perigee*; *Monkey Bicycle*; and *Natural Bridge*, which nominated him for the Pushcart Prize. As Oronte Churm, he's a columnist for *McSweeney's* and a contributing writer for *Inside Higher Ed*, where he keeps a creative nonfiction blog called *The Education of Oronte Churm*. He teaches at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.



was just from falling to blow carbon dioxide from his frothy lungs. Mrs. Wallace patted his sunken temples and smoothed his mostly bald head.

"See, Darling? Here's The Stork. I told you he'd be back to see you." Mrs. Wallace used The Stork's real name.

"Oh, we're so happy to see you," she said. "Bill has been asking for you, and I told him we'd just have to wait and see if you had time to visit him this evening."

The Stork jerked forward, picked up the old man's thin hand and shook it with both of his own. "Pleased to make your acquaintance," he said, grinning lopsidedly. "You still with us? I thought for a while there you were going to fight your way out of here."

Mr. Wallace nodded weakly, eyes widening, and held his finger up as if to make a point that wouldn't come.

"Bill's always been a fighter," Mrs. Wallace said. "He was in the Army. That was before we moved to the States. His whole regiment was taken by the Germans. Many of them never came home," she said sadly, pulling at her husband's coverlet. "He lost many childhood friends that way."

"A sergeant major, huh?" The Stork said.

Mr. Wallace straightened his back, and pride and strength changed his face.

"Oh my, Bill was never a sergeant major, no," Mrs. Wallace said. "They let him enlist, but he was too young to be at Dunkirk, thank heavens. We met in Portsmouth. He was a dental technician and I was in the Navy."

The Stork smiled and continued to crane over Wallace's face. He may have winked behind the glasses. "I never would have made a good soldier, myself. Besides, they never would have let me in. I'm a wanted man. They got my picture up in the post office on the Ten Most Wanted List. For murder. Of fish, in the Gulf of Mexico."

Wallace's eyes smiled.

"Oh, that's funny," Mrs. Wallace said. "Isn't that comical, Darling?"

"You like to fish?" The Stork asked Wallace.

"Bill doesn't fish. Never did, even back home, and people go there now to fish the rivers all the time. Of course, his dad was a commercial fisherman—right, Bill?"

He looked at her.

"Dad Wallace had a boat and fished the North Sea. That's hard work. He used to fish all around Lossiemouth, where Bill's family lived then, and then he sailed up to the Shetlands or cut through The Glen to fish around Skye."

Mr. Wallace nodded once as his wife put a teaspoon of melted ice cream in his mouth, where it lay on and ran under his tongue while she talked.

Mrs. Wallace beamed at The Stork and told him he was a godsend, a good influence and a darling. The Stork smiled and slid down the plastic bracelet on Mr. Wallace's arm so it wasn't cutting into his skin.

By the next day, The Stork was as permanent a fixture in Wallace's room as the bed curtains, the aphasic roommate, or Mrs. Wallace herself, who refused to eat or nap and only went home long after visiting hours were over. She returned at dawn when the humid air was cool and thunderheads squatted on the Gulf. The Stork stood smoking in the Florida Room and watched her carefully lock the doors on her new Toyota that she and Bill were going to use to see the sights. She picked up the small bundle of laundry she meticulously washed, dried, ironed and folded every night, and walked painfully but quickly into the home, where she greeted us by name and asked for her husband's health. There wasn't much to tell. He was dying.

And yet something in that strange relationship between him and a total stranger added to his life, and it didn't do The Stork any harm either. The Stork cut back on cigs, ate most of his meals, which we delivered with amusement to Wallace's room instead of his own, and he developed a more respectful attitude toward all of us, from the company doctor, who made rounds once a week, down to Eddie, the man hired to bathe people.

See, The Stork used to get snippy if you tried to tell him something, or so we guessed, since we couldn't always understand him, but his attitude sounded like orders or a good bawling out. We had some times. Of course, his age made us uncomfortable—for the grace of, and all that—but the worst thing of all, they told us he was a rich Yankee. Most of us were from the North too, but there's a pecking order to these things, and we'd been in South Florida longer. In short, we assumed he'd done something to bring this state upon himself, else it would follow that any one of us could be in a nursing home too, smiling like the village idiot at whoever walked in the security doors, and that we couldn't acknowledge, not even to ourselves.

Now The Stork spent his days talking only to old man Wallace, who just listened, or at best whispered a few words back. Both men were unintelligible to us, but The Stork was at it for hours, clasping hands with Mr. Wallace like they were long-lost boyhood friends. We chatted up Mrs. Wallace in the quiet hours to get her part of it, since she claimed to understand them both.

The Stork, she said, had owned a small chain of used office-supply stores in New Jersey that he started from the trunk of his car twenty years ago. When the superstore came to town, they wanted his warehouse, retail outlets and customer base, and they wanted him gone. At his wife's urging, The Stork sold out and became, on paper, a millionaire several times over.

He and his wife were thrilled, but each had their own idea of retire-

"How wonderful. You've had full, long lives and are blessed," Barbara said. "Very few people are able to expect as much as you have had together. Now you must find the courage to give him permission to die, Mrs. Wallace. He needs to die, wants to die, but he doesn't want to leave you like this. And it's our final responsibility to show him how much we love him and to begin to say goodbye."

"How can I possibly do that?"

"You tell him. Lean down and whisper to him all that you feel and think, how precious he is to you, the memories you have, but also tell him it's okay that he leaves, that everything has been prepared. Tell him that his funeral arrangements are made, that the will is ready to be executed, that you have money in the bank. Tell him you are safe and well, and that your house is fine."

The Stork tilted his head and watched Mrs. Wallace intently, as if expecting her to reject this weakness, this self-defeating nonsense. When she said she couldn't stand to see Bill suffer, that they never planned to have things turn out this way, The Stork turned and staggered back into the room. Furious at her fickleness, he aimed to show Bill Wallace that he could expect one true friend in this life, no matter how long life lasted or whatever its condition.

He stepped into the room as we were trying to get Wallace into a chair to change the bedding, and the whole place reeked of urine. The old man's fringe of grassy hair stood out from his head, and his eyes were wild. He had been insisting to us that robbers were standing at the foot of the bed—right there, goddamn it!—and he had pulled his nightgown off his chest. The upper plate of his dentures, which was all we could fit in his mouth now he was in such bad shape, hung out bucktoothed and grinning, and when he turned his fury on us because we wouldn't look for his wallet and safeguard it from the robbers, we laughed. He looked to us like someone impersonating an old man on late-night TV.

"Jerry Lewis, you know what I'm saying?" an attendant said.

"Crazy professor," the second said.

"Hey lay-dee," the first said. "Hey pefessor."

"Damn, stop, man, I can't breathe," said the second, sagging with his hands on his knees.

"No, wait. Bucky Beaver."

"Stop it, stop it."

"What's up, Doc? You know what I'm saying?"

"You're killing me."

We thought we might piss our pants. The Stork was at the door, watching in horror.

Mr. Wallace quieted when he finally noticed The Stork, but his dentures

went straight to Bill Wallace. Mr. Wallace was near the end, drawing breaths now and then to see if he'd gone missing. But he came in, eventually, and at the warning posed about gators. We glanced at the closed-circuit chain-smoking, scratching one leg with the side of his other foot, staring he stood on the bank of the drainage pond behind the back parking lot, his appetite, he grew even skinnier and more birdlike. That last afternoon from his smokes for him. With the nicotine suppressing what was left of the Stork didn't go back to see Wallace, but we knew he had recovered lapse and be our ward along with her husband.

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You'd think The Stork would have had his fill worrying about strangers, or that Mr. Wallace would die that night, and that would be the end of the story, or the start of redundant ones, since Mrs. Wallace would move back north to be near her distant relatives, and ten more would migrate to the Sunshine State to replace her.

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men, and the only thing that coincided in their visions was the move to Florida. He would have been happy living on a sailboat, or in a tin-roofed house set on pilings in the shallows. His wife, however, pictured the white-washed limestone and pastel shutters of the Bermudian governor-general's residence, which she'd seen on TV. They compromised by building a dark, two-story brick house better suited to Long Island than the Gulf Coast and turned up much of their new wealth putting in sewer, water, gas, electric, and a quarter-mile driveway from the one big road that ran up the island. Pine Key was associated with celebrities then—certainly a factor in their decision—but only because there was a detox clinic on one end.

The Stork wasn't about to sit around in an air-conditioned house for the next 30 years, no matter how much Ethan Allen furniture it held, nor with the Glades and 10,000 Islands right there, and he began to do what he had come for: fish and sit around in the marina jacking with whoever turned up that day. His skin browned, and he let his hair grow long in imitation of those he imagined were true Florida Crackers.

His wife grew bored. We were not the sort she had expected, and good shopping was far down the coast or hours across Alligator Alley. Her friends in Jersey were still raising children, running businesses, learning to make chasseur sauce and having affairs, and were all too busy to visit. She did not want to admit to herself that she had been part of a bad decision, or worse, that it was working out badly for her alone, so her complaints were of other things. She told The Stork that his muscles were knotty and stringy from being outside all the time, and they groused her out. She said there was no culture here. The Stork said that might be true enough, but there was no one—reacquainting himself with the world, and since he was never lonely, in his mind, he still was in business, just a different and more important one—reacquainting himself with the world, and since he was never lonely, couldn't see why she thought they didn't spend enough time together now. He tried to be reasonable and came home for dinner every night, just as he had when he ran his business; she had never complained before, so he couldn't see why she thought they didn't spend enough time together now. The Stork said that might be true enough, but there was no one—reacquainting himself with the world, and since he was never lonely, in his mind, he still was in business, just a different and more important one—reacquainting himself with the world, and since he was never lonely, couldn't see why she thought they didn't spend enough time together now. He tried to be reasonable and came home for dinner every night, just as he had when he ran his business; she had never complained before, so he couldn't see why she thought they didn't spend enough time together now.

or the ugly house they'd built, he didn't foresee her taking everything she could put in a very large U-Haul and driving home to Jersey. Didn't leave him a stick, and the house was put on the market, but it wasn't a good time to be selling. He said that 30 seconds after it was all gone, he was sure he'd never had anything, never done anything to account for his fatigue, it was all waste. But maybe, he thought, it was his wake-up call to real life. He was hurt, of course, and feeling vaguely guilty, but he resolved that any pain he was experiencing would become part of his effort to know the world fully.

He got more than he bargained for when he had two massive strokes a month later and woke at three in the morning in his studio apartment, disoriented, unable to stand or even speak. The Stork had no one, something he had never thought much about; most of his friends in Florida were beer or coffee cronies, and he had no family, anywhere, other than his soon-to-be-ex-wife, who he didn't even call. When he was released from Cape Coral Hospital, The Stork was sent to a nursing home with rehab facilities in hopes that his body could be retrained to walk, talk and feed itself. And so we inherited him as we get everyone, eventually—if you don't die on us first—and despite his shortcomings we grew to like him. After all, he'd only been really rich for a year, and it was a sudden fall. Here was a man who worked hard all his life, built up a business and tried to make a nice home, and his wife ran off on him right before his hour of need. Now he was ruined, or soon would be, since it cost more to stay with us than in the nicest hotel in town, but he spent his time working for Mr. Wallace.

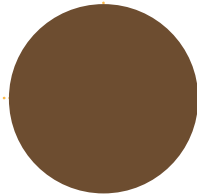
We wondered what the old man would do in heaven without The Stork by his side. Maybe he should take him with, somebody said.

Over her dead body.
I think heaven is a place those three can talk without hatred in the spirit of purest fraternity.

Heaven is one of those dark woods in the interstate median, where you sit around a campfire with your tribe, passing a jug of wine.

You're an idiot; heaven is the glitter of Burdine's jewelry counter.
More like the sparkle of sun on bonefish flats.
My Mama's arms.
Your Mama's arms.
Girls girls girls, cried Mrs. Wieland....

Mysteriously, Mr. Wallace not only hung on, he grew stronger. It was a frightening strength that came from nothing and served only madness. The food he ate wouldn't have filled a rat's hole: a smear of vegetable mush, a thimbleful of pudding, enough water to wet his lips. But he sat now propped up in bed, pulling on the rails until they nearly bent, threading invisible needles, asking his wife what was in the shadows, flying into a rage when she denied anything was there. The Stork sat with them, polite,



them for funeral homes. Things don't always go this way, but it was one of the Wallaces.

Barbara speaks three languages, has her doctorate and her own practice. She's also a non-denominational minister; one of the girls in the kitchen had her marry her and her husband last fall. We might have accomplished some of those things too—and be dressed as stylishly—if our husbands and wives were CEOs and we waited 'til our f50s to start work, but we would never suggest it to Barbara. She's a hard woman, and we're afraid of her, but we trust her as a result, and some days she counsels us more than she does residents.

When Barbara walked into the room, Mr. Wallace was in fine fettle. He had been yelling most of the day about piss-ants on the ceiling and how the walls were closing in, and he was still mad at his wife over some confusion to his gutting chest with a stethoscope, but when he wasn't having any, she told him he was only hallucinating due to the meds and looked quickly through his chart. She called Mrs. Wallace into the hall, and The Stork followed. Barbara smiled at him.

"This is The Stork," Mrs. Wallace said. "He's been such a comfort to Bill. A real gentleman. I don't know what we would have done without him. He's really been too kind. I think he spends too much effort on Bill and should really be looking after himself instead."

The Stork blushed. We had to laugh at how sheepish he looked when faced with his folly. Barbara only smiled.

She said, "Mrs. Wallace, you need to begin to reconcile yourself, and you need to muster your last reserves of strength. I know you're exhausted, but think of what Bill is going through. He doesn't want to leave you when you're unprepared to be alone, so he's staying alive for you. It's a precious gift, but think of the cost to him to do it."

Mrs. Wallace sobbed and held a tissue to her nose. She nodded vigorously. "The Stork seemed lost," Bill's very active," he said. "He's got more determination than anybody I ever met. We were just talking about France."

"Your husband hasn't eaten in many days, he's severely dehydrated, and I hear more fluid in his lungs than ever," Barbara said. "He obviously loves you very much. It's what has kept him here so long," Barbara said. "But he's—how old?"

"Seventy-eight," Mrs. Wallace said.

"Yes. And he is so tired. I know you love him very much too."

"We would have been married fifty years this January."

not pushy, mostly feeding Wallace nonsense stories and letting his wife fuss over them both.

Mrs. Wallace was an endless stream of cheerful, mindless chatter of her own. She told her own stories, filled Bill in on the gossip in their retirement community, how one of the two blue herons in the lake had gone missing.

The Stork said he figured it was eaten by an alligator, really too bad since those birds mated for life. Mrs. Wallace turned away and sobbed into a tissue.

Her husband didn't have long to live. That was obvious to anyone except The Stork, who had become so involved that he no longer seemed to notice when we bared Wallace to the groin to change him.

And so The Stork and Mrs. Wallace began to move apart, The Stork toward hope, Mrs. Wallace toward resignation. Death was the less imaginative and maybe more humane way, but The Stork had set his mind to Wallace's recovery. Sensing Mrs. Wallace's mood, he began to overcompensate, doing anything to get Wallace's attention, even singing dirty songs,

Some men die of whiskey
and some from drinking beer.
Some from constipation
and some from diarrhea.
But of all the world's diseases
there's none that can compare
with the drip drip drip
of a syphyllitic prick
of a British Grenadier.

He fetched water and coffee he sloshed on the floor, tried ineffectually to help the nurses slide Wallace up in bed, and generally made a pest of himself. Mr. Wallace still responded tiredly to his voice but had grown more agitated, incoherent and mean, just as his wife continued in her loyalty and selflessness but with a new set to her mouth, sudden tears and a certain coolness toward The Stork, who never noticed.

Sundowner's Syndrome hits us hard at the facility. Maybe it's the fading light or imperceptible sounds of the earth cooling that make our residents uneasy; in any case, they seem to understand something we don't, and what should be a wind-down at the end of a long day becomes bedlam instead. The agitated grow violent, the confused deranged. A cacophony of cries for help issue from doorways. Residents pace and grumble, food trays clatter to the floor; door alarms ring every few minutes. Above it all, Mrs. Wieland eternally vibrates, "Oh Jesus God Girls!" This is the hour many choose to die, and when it happens we go around shutting doors to the rooms so residents won't see the corpse wheeled out by strange men hired to retrieve