

Patricia Schultheis

Stopped

We were stopped . . . yes, stopped. At a light. At the first glint of orange you had started slowing (Cautious . . . you are always cautious.) So we were stopped. At a light across from the Taco Bell. Almost trapped. Coming from where? Shopping for chairs? A rose bush? Feeling a little frustrated. And tired.

And we were going home. Late. Yes. Yes. I remember – it was late. And we were eager to get home. But we were stopped. The radio was on. National Public Radio. (We always listen to NPR, you and I.) Nice to have a radio when you're stopped at a light across from Taco Bell.

So there he was – Alan Alda on NPR! You wanted to listen. I did, too. We like him so . . . Alan Alda. Fans. Yes, we are. From way back. Hawkeye and Hot lips. Who could resist? And, yes, of course, he talked about MASH. Alan Alda on NPR across from Taco Bell where we were tired and stopped at a light.

Oh . . . and then he talked about that other thing, Alan Alda did. He talked about polio. Yes. Alan Alda talked about polio. About his polio.

But I never do. I never talk about my polio. I want to, though. I want to talk about my polio, like Alan Alda does about his. But I never do. I am always stopped.

But there we were, at a light across for Taco Bell. Going home.

“Polio. Did he say polio?”

“Yes . . . polio,” you said. And then, “Turn it off? Want me to turn it off?”

And I said, “No. Listen.” We were, after all, stopped at a light and polio was long, long ago. And yesterday.

I am six. I'd just had a birthday. Just six. Going to start first grade soon. Listen, now.

Alan Alda: “Thought it was the flu. Flues were new fifty years ago.”

Could be a flu. An August flu. Pray for a flu. Company. We have company. In August. I am six years and a week old. In August. I throw up. We have company. Sophisticated company . . . world travelers . . . off to Europe. My mother in a frazzle to impress. And I throw up.

“A flu,” company says. “My, she has a flu. She's a little floozy.”

My mother: “Give me that gum. Then to bed.” And then, “Give me your leg.” Her hands in an enamel pan, wringing out a blue cloth. “Give me your leg. To wash.” But I can't give her my leg. So, I give her a scream. No flu.

Stopped. Trapped. The next morning, wrapped in a blanket. I say nothing. My mother tells the cabby, “Hospital.”

Cabby says, “Tonsils?”

My mother: “Polio.”

Cabby says nothing.

Yes. Yes. On National Public Radio, Alan Alda: “Two women, it was. They saved me. Two women. My mother. My mother and Sister Kenny.”

"Sister who?" says the interviewer.

"Kenny. Sister Kenny. She thought of heat."

Hot, hot blankets. In August. Let them steam. Steaming blankets. Press them round. In August. Steam.

Trapped. In a crib. Three cribs in a room. One, with me and a curtained window to the hallway. And another, with one saying nothing, and a view of the door. And the third, with the brazen one and the window to the world. Then the brazen one says, "Hey, you by the hall, hear that? Hear those footsteps?"

Yes. Footsteps. I hear footsteps. Down the hallway. They carry a smell. What is it? From the one trapped in the crib with the window to the world: "You'll find out. Oh, boy, will you ever."

Alan Alda: "They were steaming. They were really steaming. Not sopping wet. But hot, really, really hot. It was painful. It was very painful."

Footsteps down the corridor. Hear them? Yes. But we're trapped. In cribs. First the footsteps. Then the smell. Wool. Wet wool. Steaming. Steaming. And the nurses: "Give me your legs. Give me your legs." Trapped. I, my legs, shriveling away.

Alan Alda: "My mother took care of me. She saved me."

I move the curtain at the window by my crib. I look out to see my mother! And she's smiling. And she's holding up cards. But I can't read them. I am six. It's only August. She had promised I would learn to read in September. I will miss September. I try to read my mother's face. She is smiling. She cannot read the cards to me. The glass is too thick. I cannot hear her. I can only see her smile and read her lips: "I have to go. I have to go," she says. I hear her footsteps going down the hall and growing smaller.

Then, we go down the hall. They take us down the hall. One by one. To what? Hot baths? Exercise? I don't remember. I remember a mirror. The mirror is over the iron lung that breathes for the woman with brown hair. Brown hair on a white pillow, trapped, and looking at the world from a mirror hung over an iron lung. And she smiles. At me as I go where? To exercise? Baths? Yes, hot, hot baths. Now I remember. Save me.

And then the one trapped in the crib by the door leaves. And then the one with the window on the world. And then that window is mine. And I find a way to climb out of the trap. And they say, "No More!" So they bring me slacks and a pretty blouse. I have been six for six weeks. And I am old.

Two women. My mother and I. Trapped for years, she and I. I remember visits. Our family, mine and yours and our sons, visiting, like company, in her house. The house where I grew up. But hers — "If you don't like it, you can leave!" And so I did. And I found you. Cautious you. All those years ago.

Remember? We were at the table in the kitchen, her kitchen. She and me, and you. And she said: "I kept listening for your footsteps. I wanted to hear your footsteps. If you had a limp. How I listened for your footsteps as you came down the hall. How I remember listening for a limp."

Would she have loved me if I had one? If a leg had shriveled a lot instead of just a little? Listen, now.

My mother: "How hard it was. The sweat running down my back. And I had to drive you out there for therapy. All the way out there. So hard. Pregnant with your sister. The heat made me sick. You were so sick. It was so hard. And you had to do exercises. I had to help you. Down on the floor. It was hard. And you would cry. And I would cry. So hard. Remember? And it cost us a lot of money. And in those days we didn't have insurance. A lot of money, it cost us. Remember?"

I remember. I listen. I want to talk. But I don't. And we are stopped at a light. We are tired, and we want to get home. But we are stopped at this intersection. (Because caution is how you care, you had begun slowing early in orange.) And Alan Alda is on NPR. And you are gripping the wheel. And listening. And staring ahead because you cannot bear to look at me for fear you might see the little girl coming down the hallway that smells like wet wool. The old-looking little girl whose eyes carry a quizzical look: Will she love me? Or will she not? Because, for you, such a question is unthinkable, because I believe you loved me before I was born, you grip the wheel and wait. And then light goes green. And we go. Together. Wherever you, cautious you, drives.

Patricia Schultheis has had several essays and more than a dozen short stories published in national and international literary journals. She is a fiction editor for *StoryQuarterly*, a regular book reviewer for the *Missouri Review*, a member of The National Book Critics Circle and The Author's Guild. She also is the author of *Baltimore's Lexington Market*, a pictorial local history published by Arcadia Publishing of South Carolina. Patricia holds two graduate degrees from The Johns Hopkins University. Her undergraduate degree is from Albertus Magnus College in New Haven. She lives in Baltimore.