

## Willing to Be Dazzled by Cynthia Carbone

I had slipped into a slump. I lost my motivation and momentum, spent a lot of time in a tee-shirt and pajama pants, didn't bother to brush my hair, and ate an awful lot of ice cream, which doesn't actually help. It probably had a lot to do with the weather—we've had days and days of gray and drizzle. Monte has been literally on his knees outside for an endless demolition and repair job of a rotten deck and ceiling, our friends next door are moving away, a series of expenses have made me feel financially uneasy. But also, as usual, the news of the world is not of the feel-good variety. And the ghosts of my past have been especially noisy and restless.

But I followed my own advice and shoved myself outside during a lull in the weather, and a procession of delights unfolded. The sky arranged itself into layers of gray and white above a dark sea, and through a clearing in the clouds, Santa Rosa Island gleamed...I could see streaks of white sand on its banks. A vulture landed on a post and spread its wings wide open to dry out. I gathered rain-beaded oranges from the ground and I noticed that our little plum tree is adorned with fledgling fruit.

Perhaps the smartest thing I did was to visit my Bestie in Los Alamos early in the week. I felt better as soon as she came to the door. We sat at her table and had lunch on china plates, and it was like taking a time-out in 1910. We even sipped tea from fancy cups and of course we talked about everything, in the way that we do, and we found sustenance, mutual sustenance. My Bestie didn't start out from an easy place either, but meanness did not make her mean, and a paucity of money did not make her greedy, and injustice simply prompted her to work for what is right. She is brave and kind, a fellow traveler. We consolidated our bewilderment and stumbled upon answers and eventually it all distilled into amazement and gratitude. She sent me home with a loaf of bread and the scent of roses in my head.

The next day, I drove to the ranch office to help count ballots in a special election of our homeowners' association. I heard someone calling my name as I dismounted my trusty steed...okay...as I maneuvered myself out of my rickety little car. It was George, an affable fellow who works here, tending to trees and grounds and maintenance jobs.

"Weather is changing," I said to him, instead of hello. "Everything seems to be pending and shifting. I don't know what's going on, George."

George leaned on his shovel with his head against the sky. "Sometimes change feels a lot like discomfort," he said, sounding like a guru. "And then, at some point, it reaches a crescendo, and it becomes something good and necessary. Growth. This is how we grow."

Honestly, that's almost an exact quote. He even used that word "crescendo". There are philosophers lurking everywhere.

Then I walked through the remnants of a hundred-year-old orchard to the historical house where the ballots were to be counted. We opened envelopes containing slips of paper, each one nameless and secret, reading the votes out loud to two other citizen volunteers who were carefully tallying. This was true democracy in action. Local community. It's the sort of thing that makes me giddy and grateful.

Afterwards—speaking of philosophers—I decided to visit my friend Aristotle, who lives in a house on a hill at the west end of the ranch. We sampled various kinds of cookies and sipped decaffeinated green tea, and we vented, kvetched, and rhapsodized, as we are prone to do. Mostly kvetched, if the truth be told.

Aristotle just turned ninety, and I seek the wisdom of an elder from him, but he is too modest to admit he has acquired any. Somehow I found myself telling him a little about the sad history of my family of origin, how noisy my ghosts can be, and how even now, they are still angry and disappointed in me. I realize this theme comes up too often—I could imagine Monte getting bored and impatient, having heard it all many times before. But this was a new listener. I indulged myself in the telling. It was almost like sitting with a psychiatrist.

Aristotle was sympathetic but a little baffled. “When will you finally believe what a good person you are?” he asked.

“The voices of the dead are hard to argue with,” I told him.

“Has it ever occurred to you that you may be mis-hearing them?” he said. “Their views have changed by now. You need to listen differently. Maybe they are telling you to enjoy your life.”

Could it be? Sometimes I think so. Why the hell not?

We talked about friendship and family. Who knows you best? Who sees your current self most clearly? Listen to your friends.

Better yet, look outside. The light was shifting toward the borderline of day, and a cluster of clouds opened up to reveal San Miguel island shining in the distance.

The walk back to my car was all downhill, and even when it began to rain again, I didn't mind.

The next day, I saw mountain lion scat in the driveway, and that was pretty exciting. I walked with two good friends up to a high place while big plump clouds raced around in the sky, and light and shadow played upon a patchwork of fields and meadows below us, painting it in many hues of green and gold. We calculated that among the three of us, we had accumulated 218 years of living, and we marveled over the fact that we have been friends across decades of work and change and raising children and were now a trio of grandmothers. We sat on the ground and managed to get up again. We were thankful and surprised by everything.