**Artichokes**

Stephanie Greene

One day when she was eight, Pauline’s urine turned black. It was Bright’s Disease, but no one (surely not the local quack) knew it then. She was hustled into bed by our frantic mother to begin her long reign over the household.

She had the room to herself; the rest of us doubled up. Our aunt sent her a doll, and we watched, rapt, as she stripped and redressed her, murmuring secrets into her hair. She had books from the library, a luscious stack by her bed.

We took turns keeping vigil. Mother was wrong. It wasn’t solicitude but entertainment that glued us to the doorway. This was during the Depression; there was no television, and the radio was busted. Here was our very own princess, wasting away!

Every morning, one of us would sneak in to see if she’d made it through the night. Of course she had, but there were no assurances. Her daily miracle of survival blessed our day too, with drama and eminence.

It wasn’t long before my brother Harvey, a natural barker, had set up a kind of neighborhood Lourdes, open daily for business. Misinterpreting again, my parents found the urchins’ piety touching. Harvey was careful that there be no visible exchange of goods. But we suddenly enjoyed access to the neighborhood bicycle, first ups at stickball, our pick of candy stolen from Wellman’s.

For her part, Pauline discovered the power of refusal. Mealtimes were fraught with protests that food hurt her. We didn’t, *couldn’t* believe it; as she wept, she stole glances at us through her fingers. We wolfed our Depression fare—peanut butter and mayonnaise sandwiches—as we marveled at her tray being set aside, covered with a cloth napkin.

She did not have to do her sums; they gave her terrible headaches, and Harvey was ordered to take care of them while she recovered.

But as the weeks dragged on, her audience grew bored.

“What’s she do all day, anyways?” Pico asked. “My Ma says she’s faking, just for attention.” He spat into the dirty snow.

Harvey defended: “Her pee is black as *coal*.”

“Prove it, then,” Pico challenged.

Harvey screwed up his face. “That’s sick! What are you, nuts? It’s probably catching!”

“’Fraid you’ll get her imaginary disease, Harv?” Pico taunted. “Mamie will do it, because she ain’t chicken. Won’t you Mamie,” Pico said, turning to me.

I backed away, ignoring Harvey’s imploring look. “Nobody messes with her pee, ‘cept the doctor. It costs money to have him come!” I cried.

“There you go,” Pico replied, like it was settled. “You can help the doctor and bring some here.”

When Harvey appealed to Pauline to supply the necessary proof, she refused, so, his reputation on the line, he bolstered his courage and offered Doc Palmer his services. Sure enough, Doc ordered Pauline to produce her ink, examined it and handed it to Harvey for disposal in the outhouse. The sample was brought outside in a Mason jar, with which Harvey silenced Pico and chased a girl he liked. It ended up in a ditch.

Like many a small-town doctor, Doc Palmer pursued medical training in order to have ready access to morphine. But he saw actual promise in Harvey and hired him at the princely salary of five dollars a week, offering apprenticeship and eventual advancement. Harvey took to the work, even filling in for the doctor when he was indisposed.

Though Harvey’s future looked good, everyone else was miserable. The grey winter stalled at five degrees above zero. Our mother grew more distraught, and Pauline more resolute. Finally, after a fight over an uneaten dinner that left both of them in tears, Pauline announced that maybe she did want something to eat after all: an artichoke.

At that time, they were controversial, as well as expensive.  Ciro Terranova, east coast Mafioso, had cornered the artichoke market, ratcheting their price up 50% and making a killing. New York City Mayor La Guardia even declared the purchase of artichokes illegal. Though short-lived, the ban made them almost impossible to procure, especially upstate.

But somehow our mother did it. She sat on Pauline’s bed, gently prying apart the flower petal by petal, dipping each one in melted margarine, and handing them to Pauline to rake across her crooked little teeth. Mother defanged the thistle, to reveal the heart, which she quartered and fed to Pauline, who for once opened her mouth like an obedient little bird.

Pauline survived, lived another 50 obnoxious years, demanding and receiving the best of everything.

The rest of us obsessed over this magic bud that had cured her. Later that spring, when they were in season, Pico swiped a bag of them from poor old Wellman’s. We took them out to the woods, boiled them half to death and made a smelly meal of them, dismembering them with our grubby fingers, concluding that like Pauline, they were hardly worth the fuss.

In retelling the story, Pauline always insisted that at the time, she didn’t even know what artichokes were; it was a deep mystery that she asked for one at all.

At the end of her life, she again requested artichokes, craning for another miracle. Though I fed them to her every day, their magic failed to halt the cancer’s progress. I watched, surprised at my heartbreak, as her faith imploded; she became a wizened bird, bewildered by cosmic betrayal.

All myths are preposterous: Athena climbing out of Zeus’s head, Odin’s eight-legged horse racing across the world with runes carved upon his long yellow teeth, Huitzilopochtli tossing his mother’s head into the sky to become the moon.

What do they explain, except that life cannot be tamed, and Gods aren’t compelled by human bargains?

Our poor little lives—we try so hard.