

Exile

Volume 45 | Number 1

Article 11

1998

Storyteller

Emily Vogel
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vogel, Emily (1998) "Storyteller," *Exile*: Vol. 45 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol45/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Storyteller

Cali smiled at the man sitting across the counter, the smile she always smiled at customers when they asked about her name. "What do you think it's short for?" she said.

"I don't know...Calindra?"

Cali squinted her eyes at him and snorted. "Calindra?! What kind of a name is that?"

He laughed with her. "I don't know. What is your name then?"

"It's California."

He frowned and smiled at the same time. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, it's true. I'm named after a state."

The guy paused for a beat. Then, "Why?" he asked, shaking his head.

"Are you sure you want to hear the story? It's kind of bizarre."

"Now I definitely want to hear it."

She smiled again. "I was born on January twelfth, 1970, in the middle of the worst snowstorm Blue Point, Oregon, had ever seen. Blue Point is this really small town exactly in the center of the state. In fact, there's a little blue dot on the sidewalk of Rhodes Street that marks the exact middle. Anyway, the town is so small, and the storm was so bad, that everyone was gathered in the community center until it was over. My mother was eight and a half months pregnant with me, and went into labor just after she and my father got to the community center. Blue Point isn't big enough to have its own hospital, or even its own doctor, so they'd planned to have me in Mercy Hospital, fifteen miles away. Well, those plans were out the window, freezing a slow pitiful death in the storm. Luckily, though, the Meyers, who were...kind of eccentric and insisted on smearing everything they ate with bananas, they had their cousins visiting from out of town, a married couple who were both doctors. I was safely delivered in just under three hours. They were pretty amazing. So guess where they were from."

"California," he said, grinning.

"No, Oregon. But guess where they were headed."

"California?"

"Yup. I'm told they talked about nothing else until the storm was over, and it drove everyone crazy, but my parents wanted to honor them in some way. So I was named after their travel plans."

The guy howled. "That's the best story I've heard in a long time. Is it true?"

Cali smiled again. "Do you want another martini?"

He grinned and slapped a twenty on the bar. "Nah, I gotta go. Goodnight, Travel Plans." He stumbled away, chuckling and muttering, "Blue Point, Oregon."

"Cali, is that your real name?" The woman was sitting at the bar, sipping a gin and tonic.

"Yeah. Well, it's a nickname, short for California."

"You're named after a state?" A guy sitting at the bar joined in.

Cali laughed a little. "Yeah. Actually after the people who delivered me, it's a long story."

"I've got time."

Cali picked up a rag and began to wipe off the beer tap as she talked. "January of 1970 was the worst storm ever to hit Blue Point, Oregon, a little dinky town in the far left corner of the state. Incidentally, there is a little blue dot on the sidewalk in front of Woolworth's there that marks where Anna and Joe had the town's first log cabin. No one knows their last name, actually, but just mention Anna and Joe, and everyone knows who you're talking about."

"Anyway, the snowstorm hit and everyone had to go to the community center for emergency shelter. My mom went into labor there, and everyone panicked because the hospital was in the next county. Luckily the Meyers, a lovely old eccentric couple who didn't wear anything except blue cotton, had their cousins visiting who were both doctors. They delivered me in three hours. My mother was so grateful. And guess where they were from."

"California?" The woman smiled.

"No, Oregon. But guess where they had *their* daughter."

"California," the guy said.

"Yeah. They kept complaining about the weather in Oregon and how it never snowed in California, blah blah blah. My parents wanted to remember to never get that annoying, so I was named California to remind them."

"Okay, Cali, is it?" a customer on his second drink asked her one night. She nodded and smiled. "I'm going to ask for advice, because you're always supposed to ask your bartender for advice, right?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, here goes. Should I get a bird?"

"No."

He looked at her, waiting for more. When she was silent, he said, "Why not?"

"I hate birds as pets."

"Really?"

She nodded and picked up a lemon and started slicing it for garnishes. "My mom had a parrot when I was a really little girl. I was terrified of it, and it knew it. Of course, it's name was Polly, and it always ate these stupid little crackers designed especially for birds. Then my mother killed it."

"What?"

"She was sleepwalking one night, and got the idea that it was time to feed Polly and, in her sleep, gave Polly rat poison. Polly was dead by morning. That was when she was pregnant with my brother, Andrew. She walked in her sleep when she was pregnant. That's how we knew."

"That she was pregnant?"

"Yeah. Mom and dad always got around to telling us months after we already knew. They thought it was bad luck before the fourth month."

"How many kids did your parents have?"

"Ten. Sarah, California, Rebecca, Peter, Thomas, Mary and Joseph—who were twins—Andrew, Anne, and John."

"Whoa. They Catholic?"

"Oh yeah."

"So how come you're the only one with a name not from the bible?"

"When mom was pregnant with me, the second child, they read somewhere that a good way to avoid sibling rivalry and get an older child to accept the new baby was to let the older child name it. Sarah thought California was the most beautiful word she had ever heard. Of course, mom and dad weren't happy about this choice, and they told her thousands of names in the bible that she might like better, but she insisted, and they had promised, so they had to do it. They never made that mistake again."

She turned and noticed a guy at the end of the bar, looking as if he'd just run over his own dog backing out of the driveway. Cali felt sorry for this sad stranger and walked over to lean on the counter towards him. "Need a drink?" she said softly.

He looked up. "Huh? Oh. Yeah, I guess." He sighed. "Gimmee a Heinekin."

He was pouring over a newspaper when she came back with his drink, his face two inches from the counter it lied on.

"Bad news?" She said to the top of his head.

He looked up at her again. Sitting back and picking up his bottle, he said, "The worst," and chugged half his beer.

Cali looked down and saw that he was reading the horoscope section of the newspaper. "You a Capricorn?" she guessed, and he looked up at her from the paper, startled again.

"How did you know?"

"You're supposed to stay in bed today." She pointed to the paper.

"I know!" he moaned. "Get this," he leaned toward her, "I'm supposed to drive to Ohio tonight. How can I drive to Ohio on my stay-in-bed-day? I'll get in a wreck, I'll get amnesia, and I'll never see my dog again."

Cali smiled as he looked sadly at his almost-empty beer bottle. "You know," she said, "amnesia might be pretty cool. You get to start all over again from scratch. If you don't like somebody, pretend you don't remember 'em."

He looked at her and pursed his lips. "Okay, so I get amnesia and I don't have to talk to the people I don't like. I still don't ever get to see my dog again." He crossed his arms on his chest.

"Bring your dog on the trip with you. You get in a wreck, you both get amnesia, you start from scratch together." Cali turned her palms toward the ceiling and grinned.

He took another chug from his beer and narrowed his eyes at her. He moved his eyes to the left, then to the right, then set his beer bottle down hard on the counter. "Okay." He threw a five dollar bill on the counter and turned on his bar stool, striding quickly out the door.

"Good luck," Cali called after him, but he was already gone.

Cali walked to the other end of the bar and asked a woman sitting there if she wanted another drink. "What's that guy's problem?" she asked as Cali mixed her a new drink.

"The guy that just ran out of here? He just found out that he has a long lost twin brother."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He saw his picture in the paper. He didn't know if he should go meet him or not. I told him to go for it."

"Wow." She sipped her drink, then stood. "Hey, I'm waiting for somebody. If a guy comes in here, short, bald, wearing a suit and tie, looking for Marilyn, tell him I'm in the bathroom, okay?"

"Will do."

A minute later, a voice assaulted her from the other end of the bar.

"Hello? Can I get some service here sweetheart?"

She smiled and waved. "Hi," she shouted.

"Hi. I'll have a Stoli martini, semi-dry, two onions, no twist," he called.

"A what?" She squinted at him.

"A Stoli martini, semi-dry, two onions, no twist!" he shouted.

"A whole martini? Five onions and a twist?"

"No, *Stoli*. *Stolichnaya* vodka. Dry."

"Vodka? Rocks or up?"

He got off his stool and finally marched over to her. "I want a Stoli martini. Semi dry, two onions, no twist." He was sweating and she feared he would spray saliva at her.

"Okay. Are you here to meet Marilyn?"

He stared at her and waited a while before he answered. "Um... No. I'm not meeting Marilyn here tonight."

"Mark, what are you doing here?" Marilyn's voice startled them. The man gasped in what both Cali and Marilyn could see was phony surprise. "Marilyn!" he cried. Then his eyes narrowed. "Marilyn, who are you meeting here?"

She perched on her barstool. "Mark, I thought you weren't going to do this."

He slid into the stool next to hers and whined, "Marilyn, just tell me who it is."

"Mark, please leave, before he gets here."

Yeah, Cali thought. Please leave before you sweat a puddle.

At that point, a short bald man wearing a tie walked up to the bar, his eyes searching the clientele. Marilyn locked eyes with him. Mark saw this and turned to lock eyes as well. His mouth opened and he turned back to Marilyn. "My brother?!" Marilyn closed her eyes and the brother made his way over to them.

"Hey, Mark. What's up?"

"Ted—" Marilyn began, but had to stop as she leapt between the two to prevent Mark from hitting Ted.

"Hey, man, I thought you were cool with this!" Ted backed a couple steps away from Mark and Marilyn.

"My own brother, Marilyn?"

"Why not, Mark? It's only fair. You sleep with my best friend, I go out with your brother. You agreed, remember?"

Mark's anger was almost tangible as he and Marilyn glared at each other, and then suddenly it was gone. Mark's shoulders sagged, and he started to whine again.

"Marilyn, I can't stand this. I know this whole open marriage thing was my idea, but I hate it. I don't want to date other women. I couldn't even touch Audrey when I went out with her, and now you're having drinks with *Ted*." Marilyn, Mark, and Cali glanced at Ted who, for his part, did nothing to fight for his date with Marilyn.

"Mark." Marilyn took his hand in hers. "Look at me." He did. "I hate it too. I knew going out with Ted would make you crazy. Is this out of your system now?"

He stood up straight. "Yes. Yes, I love you, baby."

She sighed. "I love you, too. Let's go home."

They left holding hands, and now it was Ted's turn to slump into a barstool. He held his forehead with his left hand and stared at the counter. Cali pretended to be busy washing glasses.

"I was really going to do it." Ted mumbled finally. "I was going to sleep with my brother's wife. Jesus Christ. Gimme a J.D. Double."

"My sister slept with her husband's brother," Cali began. "She said it was really weird. Like sleeping with the guy she married, but not like sleeping with him, too. Besides that, he kept telling her to call him by his brother's name."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Ugh. I would never do that."

"I wouldn't either, if I were you. Ted is much sexier than Mark. It'd be easier to yell out in the height of passion."

He smiled. "How did you get a name like Cali?"

"Some guy yelled it out when I was in bed with him." Ted started to laugh. "I thought, hey, it's as good as anything else. It's better than what I used to call myself."

"What's that?"

"Bertha."

"Cali," a customer leered at her chest, as if it took him that long to read the nametag, "that's an unusual name."

She smiled politely and shrugged. "I like L. L. Cool J. When I was nineteen I had my name legally changed on a dare. Now I'm attached to it."

One night a week later, Cali returned from the back with a fresh bottle of vodka and was surprised to see a familiar face at the left end of the bar. A hand that belonged to it was bouncing a green rubber ball. She put the bottle down and walked over to him.

"Hey, remember me?"

He looked askance at her.

"You want a Heinekin, right?" she said.

His eyes opened wide in alarm. "How'd you know?"

Now her eyes opened wide too. "Did you really get in an accident?"

He burst out laughing. "No," he said, "of course I remember you! My dog

didn't make it, by the way. He got carsick and I had to leave him with my aunt Ruby in Minnesota, and then I forgot him on the way back." Cali gasped. "But, he's probably better off with Ruby. And I got a new hamster. Want to see him?"

"Is he here?" Cali's face lit up.

"Mmhhh. He loves to travel." He put the green ball in one breast pocket, and reached into the other breast pocket of his jacket, which Cali now noticed was bulging, and pulled out a tiny golden ball of fur.

"What a cutie! Can I hold him?"

"Be careful," he said quietly as he nudged the hamster from his hands to hers.

"What's his name?" She watched as it made its way up her arm to sit on her shoulder and twitch its whiskers.

"Leroy."

She smiled appreciatively. "He looks like a Leroy."

He grinned. "Yeah."

He came in the next night with Leroy. "Don't let too many people see Leroy in here," she told him. "I think it violates some health codes."

"Sshh," he replied. "He's sleeping."

Sam nursed his beer and listened to her telling stories to her patrons. At one point he caught her with a free moment and said, "Cali, what are your brothers' and sisters' names?"

"Sarah, California, Peter, Mary, Joseph, Thomas, Rebecca, John, Elizabeth, and Andrew."

"Uh huh. Now list them from youngest to oldest."

She half smiled. "Oh, go away." She muttered. So he did.

The next night he came into the bar and put a pretzel in his breast pocket. "In case Leroy gets hungry," he said to Cali's raised eyebrows.

"How thoughtful."

He nursed another couple Heinekens that night, and was one of the last to leave. As he did, he gave Cali his money, and said, "Exactly how does one go about changing one's name, legally, if one is so inclined?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Any courthouse'll do it."

"Is that so? Say goodnight, Leroy."

"Goodnight, boys."

Twenty-four hours later they were saying goodbye again, and Sam said to her, "Do you ever fly in your dreams?"

"No. Never. Sometimes I'm swimming in my dreams, and I always wake up

gasping for air."

"D'ya ever wake up sweating?"

She nodded, swallowing.

"Isn't that the worst feeling? You feel like you're working in your sleep—"

"And the air is all heavy in your chest. I always do that when the room is too hot where I'm sleeping."

"Sometimes I fly in my dreams, but I'm always in an airplane."

"That's weird."

"Not really. I'm a pilot. A lot of my dreams take place in an airplane."

"I've never flown in an airplane."

"You're kidding me."

"That's the honest-to-goodness truth. I'm a firm believer in cars."

"You're afraid to fly?"

"No. I'm afraid of moving in vehicles I can't control. I would fly if I was a pilot."

"You a backseat driver too?"

She sniffed. "I don't sit in the backseat."

He didn't come in for two nights after that, and when he finally did, she placed a Heinekin on a napkin in front of him without a word. He looked at it sadly.

"Leroy..." was all he said as he stared at the bottle clouding with condensation.

"Oh, no." She reached forward and placed her small, thin hand on his thick fingers. He looked down at their hands and sighed.

"He was a good little guy, wasn't he?"

She nodded.

"How was I supposed to know he was out of his cage, Cali? A man's got to run his sweeper sometime."

"Sshh...don't blame yourself."

"Christ." He shook his head and took a swig of his beer. "Did you ever have a hamster, Cali?"

"A hamster? No...I did have a guinea pig, though. His name was Ralf. He liked classic rock. Then he got a tapeworm and..." She looked down at the counter.

He squeezed her fingers. "I know. I know."

Cali concentrated on pouring a shot of amaretto, laughing politely at the lame joke her customer had just made, barely hearing it.

"I used to know a girl named Cali." He drew out the end of "girl" a little too long.

"My real name is California." She flinched at the cleaning water that was too hot as she dipped dirty glasses in it.

"Whaa...?"

She raised her eyebrows and nodded, smiling politely. "California. Like the state. Only my mother didn't know it was a state until I was three. A neighbor lady mentioned it to her and she had a mental breakdown because of it. She's out of the hospital now, but she never remembers my name, always calls me Susan."

He stayed after everyone else had left that night. "Whew. What was up with the stories tonight, Cali? Kind of hostile, don't you think?"

She stared at him in frozen surprise for five seconds. Then she exhaled. "My building was just bought out by a guy that wears a bad toupee."

Sam raised his eyebrows.

She laughed and threw her head back in a "Why me?" gesture, and he started to giggle too.

"It's like, two shades darker than his natural hair and I think he wears it backwards because it looks like a big beaver's tail hanging down his forehead. He probably made it himself with, like...dog fur."

"Dog fur? Is *that* bad?"

She nodded. "And I have to spend an hour with him tomorrow going over my lease and the new renter's rules and still keep a straight face. I'm just itching to grab it off his bald little head. It'll be torture."

Sam took a drink of his Heinekin, and Cali returned to wiping the counter. She draped the rag over the sink and looked at her watch. He looked at his as well. "Do you ever play basketball, Cali?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I played when I was in high school, but I was never very good."

"I got a ball in my car if you want to run out some of your frustrations. There's a court about a block from here. It's probably clear 'cause it hasn't snowed in a while."

She squinted her eyes at him to show she was considering it. She had an old pair of sweats she always kept in her car, and she wore tennis shoes when she worked. "Okay."

Cali locked the door as she left the bar, turning on the alarm system. She threw on her sweats as he grabbed the ball out of his car and they walked together to the basketball court.

He let her take the ball and dribble it on the way there. "So when was the last time you played basketball, Mr. I-always-keep-a-ball-in-my-car? Ready-for-a-game-wherever-I-go? Are you going to kill me?"

"Nah. I haven't played in at least three days."

"Great."

The basketball court was small, a neighborhood court paved with asphalt and a streetlight at each end casting an artificial yellow glow. He bounced the ball in her direction and she touched it with her fingertips as she dribbled. Their breath hung white in the air as she moved into the basket, wary. He stood with his knees bent, waiting.

Cali faked to her left and twisted around to shoot a lay-up that missed. The ball bounced off the rim and back to her, though, and she shot again, this time making it. He grabbed the ball and ran to half court, swiveled around and charged toward Cali. She met him in front of the basket and he turned his back to her and started to push her out of the

way with his backside, but she had long arms and they were everywhere whenever he turned around. He finally tried a shot, but she blocked it and knocked the ball to the other end of the court. Half a second passed, and then they were racing to retrieve it, grabbing fistfuls of clothing to slow each other down. Cali cut him off as they reached the place where the ball lay, and she snatched the ball up, wrapping her arms around it and hugging it close to her body as if she were a medieval queen who had just lost her head. Sam backed off and let her take the ball to half court.

She bounced toward him, turning her back to him as she got closer. They galloped from one side of the court to the other, his chest pressed aggressively to her back as she jockeyed to gain a step ahead of him to give her a chance at the hoop. Finally, she stopped and turned toward the basket, swinging the ball wildly around over her head. But his hands were everywhere, gangly and looming. And then he started to count, obnoxiously, Cali thought. "One...two...three..." As he reached four, she swung her arm underneath his and the ball swung straight up over their heads, high into the night, and neither player moved. He snatched it out of the air, taking advantage of his height, and dribbled it to the basket to make the lay-up. Sam turned to look at her. "I'd give that an A for effort, at least."

She grabbed the ball and held it in both hands at half court, looking up at the basket. It was a small court, certainly not regulation size. She took two steps forward, dribbling, and shot the ball. It bounced off the backboard, bounced off the rim, and went in.

He turned to her with raised eyebrows. "Somebody's a showoff."

"I figured it was my only chance. Your shot."

He bounced the ball from one hand to another, bobbing up and down where he stood at half court. She stood in front of him, crouched down, bobbing with him.

"Let me show you something, Cali."

"What's that, Samuel?"

"It helps to get way down low like this. It makes you more defensive."

Cali copied him, placing her feet far apart, and as soon as she did, he bounced the ball through her legs and ran around to the other side of her to catch the ball and make a lay-up just as she was turning around.

"I can't believe I just fell for that. I used to do that to my sister all the time. She had to play basketball with her feet four feet apart."

He bounced the ball to her and she looked up at the streetlight. "Hey, it's snowing!"

He looked up too, and they were silent for a minute.

"Oh, wow, that's beautiful."

"It looks like floating glass flakes."

They looked at the snow for another minute. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Starving."

"Let's go get some coffee and doughnuts."

"I would love to have some coffee and doughnuts."

The city slept around them and they strolled beneath trees that were sticks reaching for the night. The snow that had melted and turned to slush during the day was now icy again in the chill of the night. There was no wind; the air was still and cold, white

puffs of breath evaporating behind them as they walked.

Cali leaned her head back and looked up at the streetlights and the roofs of the townhouses. She groaned and slowly moved her head back forward, looking sideways at Sam as they walked. He saw this out of the corner of his eye and looked over at her. She looked down at her feet moving on the sidewalk and shoved her hands deeply into her pockets. "Do you like your job, Sam?"

"On a good day. People can be rude sometimes."

"Huh. Try tending bar."

"You ever waited tables?" She shook her head. "Man, that's the worst. People are probably at their rudest when they're hungry."

"I think I've been at this job too long. Have you always wanted to be a pilot?"

"No. For a long time I wanted to be an Olympic swimmer, but I was never good enough."

"It always pissed me off that my high school didn't have a swim team."

"Those days were the best. My coach was an Olympian. He always made us feel like we had a chance."

The houses were dark as they walked past them, town houses that were tall and narrow, with boxes full of dirt and seeds that slept.

"I played basketball because it was fun, and because I was bored. I never cared if I was any good."

"You were pretty good tonight. You're still alive, at least."

"Me and my sister used to play one-on-one when we were kids. I didn't start beating her until we were in high school."

"So you do have a sister."

"Yeah. Just one. She's a year older than me. She writes books for kids."

"Cool."

A cat perched on a garbage can watched them silently as they passed. Cali reached out to coax it toward them, but it mewed and leaped out of her reach, jumped down and disappeared under a porch.

"Why are you really named California?" he said quietly.

She looked up at him, surprised. "Do you want the truth?"

"I've heard enough stories, Cali. Tell me the truth."

"My name isn't Cali. It's Frieda."

"What?"

"Free. With a 'duh' on the end."

"You're kidding me!"

"Yeah, I am."

He gave her a look, and she laughed at it. "Come on, Sam! There's no story. My parents liked the word. They were hippies. I'm lucky I wasn't named Ohio to honor the four dead heroes at Kent State University."

Sam shook his head. "I knew that bullshit about Oregon and the snowstorm was a lie. Why do you do that to people?"

"It's what they want to hear." Cali shrugged, a little defensive. "People come to neighborhood pubs like that because they don't want to go home. They don't want to be with their spouses or they don't want to watch TV alone. They want to talk to someone

who wants to talk to them. There's a lot more to my job than just mixing drinks, you know." Cali was quiet for a minute, and Sam was too, because he could tell she wasn't finished. "You know some guy came in there one night and told me he'd been to Blue Point, Oregon? He said he'd seen the blue dot and everything. Now you and I both know Blue Point, Oregon, doesn't exist any more than the Meyers who wore blue cotton."

He grinned. "I love that part, by the way."

She smiled and paused, accepting his compliment. "A week later I heard that that guy had shot himself in the elevator of his apartment building. And I remembered he laughed like crazy when I told him about my name. He ate it up. There probably wasn't very much that that man could laugh at in his life. So I'm glad he came in to listen to my story."

He smiled at her then. "Me too."

They walked through the glassy snowflakes until finally Sam slowed and said, "Can I ask you something?" He stopped walking, and she stopped too, turning to look at him.

"Sure."

He looked down at his feet first, for two seconds, then looked up into her eyes and said, "Can I kiss you?"

Cali stood for three seconds, closed her eyes, and pushed her forehead into his chest, exhaling loudly. Before Sam could react, she looked up, her face an inch from his. "Sam, never ask a woman if you can kiss her. It sucks all the romance right out of it."

He smiled. "Sorry," he whispered as he leaned down and touched his lips to hers. They moved their bodies closer to each other, his hands rose to her cheeks, her palms rested on his back. Their sweatshirts bunched between them in the cold and they pulled apart, laughing white air and trembling, chilled and excited.

"I have doughnuts at my place, you know."

"I would love to have your doughnuts, Cali."

She laughed again. "I'll bet you would."

Snowflakes dusted their heads and they walked to her home, her fingers curled around his, their laughter breaking the cold.

—Emily Vogel '99