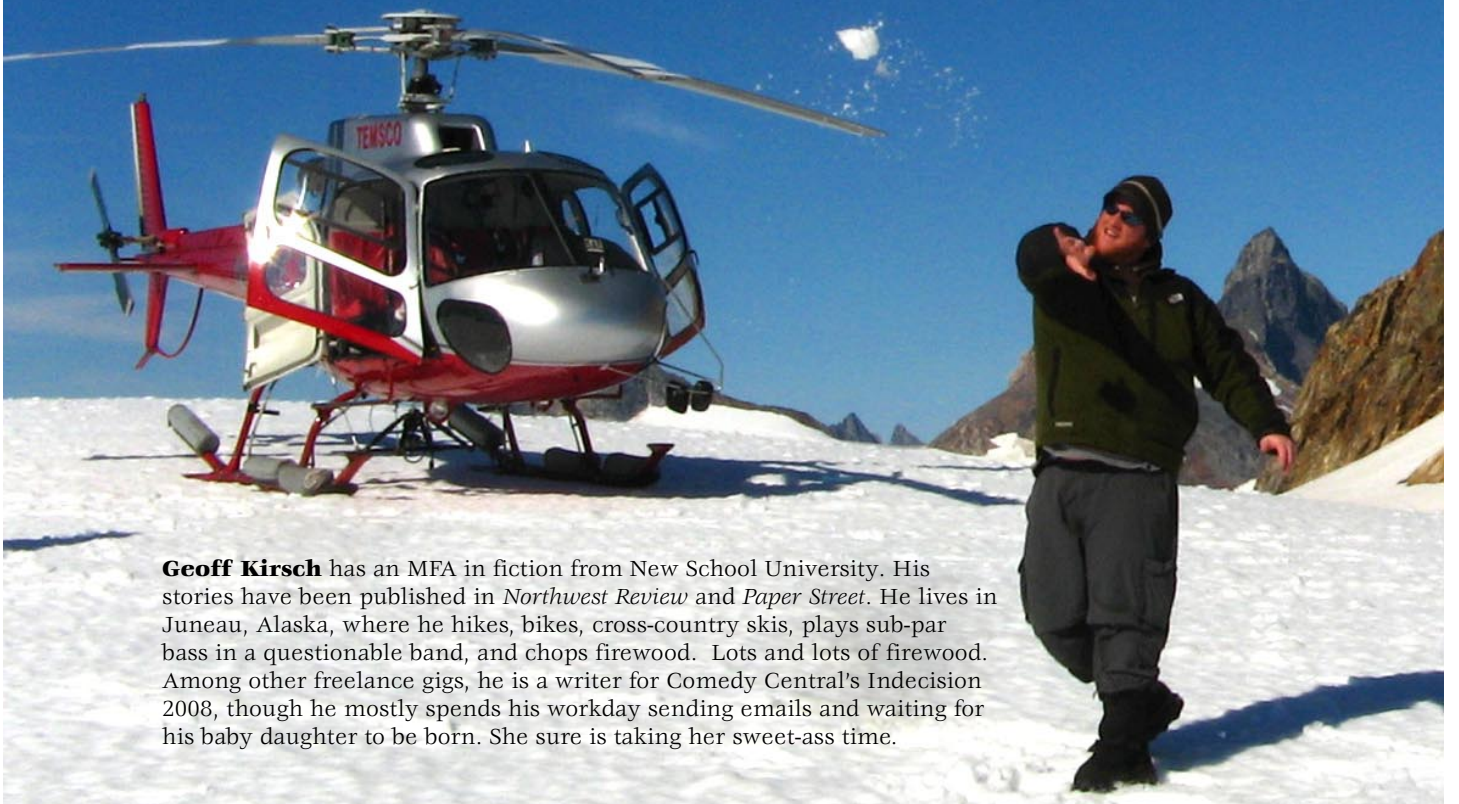
story by Geoff Kirsch

The Danger You Know

"Thank you, Beryl dear," Grandma Rena said. "And please, you've been married to my son for thirty years. Call me Mrs Cantor."



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For her eightieth birthday, we decided to give Grandma Rena an oxygen tank. Of all the aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins and parents involved, I was the only one who thought that might not be the best idea. Isn't there something else, I'd wanted to say, like a porch swing or the Abbot & Costello library on VHS? Granted, the woman's lungs were spent and her healthcare plan the lowest-frills around, but the thought of sharing such close space with the thing made my skin crawl. A reminder of mortality, maybe, of what I might expect somewhere down the road? I couldn't put my finger on it.

Then we all embraced Grandma Rena, delicately avoiding her osteoporitic hump. She smelled of past-date perfume and icy-hot arthritis cream.

But as usual, with everyone in agreement, dissent seemed pointless.

And so we convened in the pastel-colored private room of the Kokopelli Restaurant at the Four Winds Country Club in southern Arizona, to celebrate her milestone over lunch. The tank, wrapped in shiny paper with a great big bow slapped onto the *Do Not Use Around Open Flames* sticker, rose up from the gifts pile like a missile. It was the first time we'd all been together in several years, and aside from Great Uncle Conrad, who, spooked by a tabloid headline on his way to meet me at JFK, refused to leave Manhattan, the entire Cantor family was either here or dead.

At half past noon, Mountain Standard Time, Grandma Rena and Grandpa Chick shuffled through the doorway, arm in liver-spotted arm. Her pale white jowls hung like crepe party decorations over the collar of her magenta shirt.

"Hello, children!" my grandfather boomed. Nearly deaf on one side and completely so on the other, Grandpa Chick spoke at gut-rumbling volumes.

"HELLO, CHILDREN!" he said again, also prone to repetition.

"All right, Chickie, they heard you the first time," Grandma Rena said. She aimed her papery voice at what could best be termed his good ear, which had a bright pink hearing aid crammed into it like a rubber stopper. When I was little, I thought it prevented his brain from leaking out the side of his head.

"WHAT?!"

"They HEARD you the FIRST TIME," she said, and, grimacing from the effort, continued her stiff advance toward the table.

Judging by her pace of movement, you'd think my grandmother negotiated her environment carefully. But slow, I've learned, doesn't always equal cautious. For her, every room was a minefield, full of hazards she'd invariably fail to recognize, like, say, recessed flooring or uneven carpets. Two steps into the Kokopelli Room, her foot caught on a blip of molding, and Grandma Rena lurched forward.

I pushed aside my drink—we'd all ordered drinks, and they all arrived in novelty cowboy boot glasses—and jumped up to the rescue. Crisis averted, on with the festivities. The men in our party took turns pumping hands with the beaming old man, who demonstrated his still-considerable strength by reaching around and pounding us between the shoulder blades. Then we all embraced Grandma Rena, delicately avoiding her osteoporitic hump. She smelled of past-date perfume and icy-hot arthritis cream.

"Isn't this nice," she rasped, looking over her progeny.

My grandmother was an incessant smoker. From FDR's third term up through Bill Clinton's second, she'd sit with a cup of Sanka and a sheaf of grocery circulars, clipping coupons and exhausting two packs a day—Chesterfields at first, before the switch to Basic Lights sometime during the Nixon administration. In fact, despite the

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mounting national obsession with health risk, it was the spiraling price of tobacco that finally snuffed her habit. But by then the damage had been done.

Grandma Rena offered her hellos and dusted us with kisses as dry as the scorched terrain that extended in all directions beyond the golf course. She leaned her bulk on the four-pronged cane she reserved for special occasions, to which someone had tethered a mylar balloon. It bobbed sickly in the clubhouse air conditioning.

"Rena," my mother said. "We've saved a special place for you."

She was a pleasant woman, my mother, with teased, frosted hair, and, that day, a smart silk scarf knotted around her neck. It struck me that she never seemed sure how to address her mother-in-law directly. Not once did I hear her call Grandma Rena Mother, or Mom, or even Ma'am, as I presume they do in the South. Certainly not Rena. But this was a special occasion. Perhaps she let her guard slip. Perhaps we all did.

"Thank you, Beryl dear," Grandma Rena said. "And please, you've been married to my son for thirty years. Call me Mrs Cantor."

"Now, mom," my father said sharply. He sat as usual, with his elbows on the table and a dour expression on his face. Almost sixty, his curls had gone from burnished copper to rusty steel, and his paunch was starting to grow less stately, more unhealthy, like he'd resigned himself to whatever fate genetics had in store.

"Loosen up, Stevie-boy," Grandma Rena said, as she prepared to sit. "Can't a woman make a funny on her birthday?"

She laughed and clacked her dentures and I helped her into a white wicker chair whose back fanned out like a giant cobra hood. It creaked under Grandma Rena's weight, her pulpy thighs spilling over the edge of the cactus-patterned cushion.

"WHAT?!" said Grandpa Chick, who'd been staring at the last available place. He was left-handed. Don't ask me why, but this had great bearing on which side of the table he preferred to sit. Not a meal went by where he didn't remind us of it.

"A funny, dad," Aunt Barbara said. She took a long swallow of her Black Russian, tilting back the glass to slosh the remnants from its pointed toe. "Mom said she made a funny."

Aunt Barb was a dead ringer for my father, only shorter and female. Draped in an earth-tone caftan with a beaded necklace and wooden earrings, she looked every bit the psychoanalyst she'd been before Uncle Ely consigned her into managing his dental practice. That's right about she first began to appreciate the finer points of vodka mixers.

"It wasn't that funny," their son Jason said under his breath, but loud enough for his sister Maxine to hear from across the table. Ah, the cousins. Maxine found almost anything anyone said to be hilarious, and had been laughing gently at my grandmother's joke. But Jason's

He smiled and nodded but did not sit. "Why doesn't he turn up his Miracle Ear?" my father asked.

comment sparked her zeal. Droplets of a Cosmopolitan flew from her mouth, spattering the laminated specials list: Kokopelli Crab Cakes with Southwestern Slaw; Kokopelli Crabmeat Quesadilla with Southwestern Slaw; Kokopelli Captain's Platter with Southwestern Slaw; Fettucini Kokopelli (add crabmeat, $3.95). Ordering seafood in the middle of a desert—talk about taking your life in your hands.

"Cool it, you two," their father said. Uncle Ely was a man with marked impatience for everything; his children and my grandparents topped the list.

Aunt Barb motioned for the cocktail waitress.

"Why don't you take a seat, dad," my mother said, fearlessly calling her father-in-law "dad". He smiled and nodded but did not sit.

"Why doesn't he turn up his Miracle Ear?" my father asked.

"We came here once before and we couldn't hear ourselves think," Grandma Rena said. A gob of sputum appeared on her lower lip. She reached inside her shirt and produced the wad of tissue she kept tucked under a prehistoric bra strap. We were a classy bunch, the Cantors.

"Thinking?" Uncle Ely said, contemplating his double scotch neat. "What about? Eating, sleeping, or eating some more?"

"Ely, please, this is supposed to be a celebration," my mother said. My father and aunt exchanged glances. Then they both motioned for the cocktail waitress.

"It's okay," Grandma Rena said. "We may not be so active, but still, we watch the news, twice a day, and read the paper—the national on Sundays. We've gotten pretty savvy in our old age, right Chicke?"

"I CAN'T SIT ON THIS SIDE!" was my grandfather's response. "I'M LEFT-HANDED! AND MY GOOD EAR IS TO THE WALL!"

"I wish we were high for this," Jason said, and nudged me in the ribs. He'd been expressing that sentiment ever since he turned fourteen, when he grew out his hair and started sporting Led Zeppelin T-shirts. Half a decade later, and now a high school fifth-year, he was still trying to impress me the same exact way.

But I didn't answer, I wouldn't answer. Not my cousin, not anyone, not for the rest of our time together. Sure, I loved my family, especially when I was younger and my grandfather let me stay up late to watch *Miami Vice*, or my aunt hosed down garbage bags so I could slide across the backyard in my Underoos. Once, Uncle Ely let me try out his gun. But that was years ago. Even as a full-fledged adult, with an office (that I shared) and an apartment (that I didn't), a modest IRA and, at long last, the ability to grow a full Fu Manchu mustache (as had always been my dream), whatever I had to say was invariably discounted by my youth, like the time I crapped in Grandma Rena's bathtub, or was caught one evening pantsless in the garage, perusing the

She'd already picked up her cowboy boot of Bloody Mary, which was brutally thick and had a tortilla chip floating in it.

lingerie section of old Sears catalogues. So eventually I just accepted it: getting through these events painlessly meant doing it wordlessly.

"You can switch with me, Grandpa," my older sister Heather said. She'd already picked up her teal napkin and her cowboy boot of Bloody Mary, which was brutally thick and had a tortilla chip floating in it. Heather stood very close to our grandfather, almost brushing his hand with the curves beneath her sleeveless sweater. Though I preferred not to, I could tell she'd had ample practice leaning up against men.

"Very good," my grandfather said.

To a thunderous exhale and the rolling drumfire of cracking rheumatic joints, Grandpa Chick sat down at the foot of the table, with plenty of elbow room and one ear trained on the family like a cartilaginous satellite dish.

"VERY GOOD!" he repeated, and gazed across the length at his wife, who, at that moment, was emptying the sugar caddy into her purse.

No sooner did Grandma Rena begin sizing up the faux-crystal salt shakers, than our waitress materialized from the main room. She was dressed in black pants with teal piping down the sides, a billowy white shirt, a teal vest that just missed harmonizing with her pants, and a clownishly small cowboy hat. On the back of her vest was a detonation of red, yellow, and orange embroidery. On the front, a nametag: Trish.

"Can I get y'all another round of drinks?" Trish said. "For the birthday girl?"

"I really shouldn't," Grandma Rena said, and shoved her purse under the table.

"Come on, Rena," Uncle Ely said. It seemed more out of impatience than a desire to see her get funky. He glared at his watch, a huge stainless steel affair with a Harley Davidson emblem on its face. For the last few years, my uncle the periodontist had been nurturing an obsession with motorcycles. When last I saw him, he was lifting weights four times a week—squats, mostly, leg press, a little Romanian dead-lift—in hopes of getting strong enough to kick his Screamin' Eagle Electra Glide off the stand so he could actually ride it. That he'd arrived at lunch by Volvo suggested he still had a ways to go.

"KOKOPELLI BLT!" announced Grandpa Chick, so loudly that even the golfers on the links could've grabbed their midget pencils and jotted down his order.

"We're not there yet, dad," my father said.

"WHAT?!"

"Black Russian," Aunt Barb said, dragging her hand over her forehead. I'd seen her make this gesture before, but never before dessert.

"You're getting another, Barbara-girl?" Grandma Rena said. "That's quite a lot to drink, dear, this early in the day."

"Make that two," my aunt said. Jason gave her the OK sign, Maxine cracked up, and Aunt Barb told Trish to hurry, please hurry, before she killed someone.

"And more sugar-in-the-raw, when

“Four dollars? For a bowl of chili?” Grandma Rena said. She pursed her lips. Hot pink drugstore lipstick peeled off like lead paint chips.

you get a chance, and some of those little jellies,” Grandma Rena added. The purse had re-emerged. My father looked at the floor.

“You bet,” Trish said, surely relishing the flat twenty-percent gratuity levied on parties of eight or more. “Y’all let me know if you have any questions about the menu.”

The menu was emblazoned with the likeness of the Anasazi tribal deity after whom the room, the restaurant, and apparently everything else across the American Southwest were named. Kokopelli Art Gallery, Kokopelli Realtors, Kokepelli Chiropractic, Kokopelli Auto-Wreckers; these were but a few I’d noticed on the drive down from Tucson Airport, whose gift shops themselves were glutted with his image. Kokopelli, the humpbacked flute player. Kokopelli, venerated symbol of fertility and life. Kokopelli, painted on rocks and chiseled into canyons eons before the dawn of the gated retirement community. Kokopelli, now a lawn ornament, a T-shirt design, the frolicsome logo of Kokopelli Funeral Home, Inc.

“Four dollars? For a bowl of chili?” Grandma Rena said. She pursed her lips. Hot pink drugstore lipstick peeled off like lead paint chips. “We used to get a hot dog, a movie ticket, and an ice cream soda all for under a quarter.”

“That was seventy years ago, mom,” Aunt Barb said.

“If you want the chili, get the chili,” my father said. “Let’s all get the chili. I make a professional’s salary, let’s get all the goddamn chili we can eat.”

“Look, Steven, they have paninis,” my mother chirped, sensing the sour turn his already fermented mood was taking. “Remember the paninis we had at the mall?”

My father grunted and unbuttoned his collar.

“Chili gives me gas,” Grandma Rena said.

“Panini,” Heather said to no one in particular. She smacked her lips around a lime wedge. “Sounds exotic. I’m into exotic.”

“That’s because you’re young,” Uncle Ely said. “Grow up some more, you’ll see. All exotic means is dangerous. Give me a good old American steak any day. It’s patriotic, and it’s high in protein.”

“Yeah, America’s high in protein,” Jason said, and mimed taking a hit off an imaginary joint. Then he passed it to Maxine, thus placing his sister in serious jeopardy of wetting her vintage Levi’s.

Trish returned with sweeteners and a plate of assorted fruit spreads for Grandma Rena, as well as two Black Russians for my aunt, very little ice in each.

Grandpa Chick reloaded his lunch order and shot again.

“Jesus, dad,” Aunt Barb said. “Have you never been to a restaurant before?”

“Barbara-girl, don’t be so fresh to your father.”

“It’s not like Chick can hear her, anyway,” Uncle Ely said, fiddling with the thick gold hoop that perforated his left ear. He looked like a squat, Jewish Mr. Clean.

"Looks like we got ourselves a feisty bunch over here," said Trish, tapping her pad with a chili pepper-shaped pen.

Gifted at stretching gags far beyond the breaking point—his only gift, well, that and distance spitting—Jason kept at it with the phantasmal doobie, while Heather put her foot on the table and Grandpa Chick spun around like someone said his name but who?

"Shoot me now," my father said, and I could tell Aunt Barb prayed for a similarly instantaneous end. Truth be told, I started to see an appeal there, too.

"Steven, wraps!" my mother said. "Shrimp salad, your favorite."

"Looks like we got ourselves a feisty bunch over here," said Trish. She'd been standing hand on hip, tapping her pad with a chili pepper-shaped pen. "If I could just get everybody's orders, I'll be back in a jiff. Sound good?"

Orders were taken, drinks refreshed, our own pot of coffee percolated, and before we knew it, we were facing down immense platters of southwestern-themed food, around whose rims silk-screened Kokopellis in yet another shade of teal danced and played.

Ignoring her Kokopelli Blackened Chicken with Southwestern Slaw, if only for a moment, Grandma Rena grasped her cane, inhaled a deep rattling breath, coughed several times, and, with what appeared to be a great deal of exertion, finally stood. She eyed both sides of the family—Cantors and Finks—tearfully.

"Before we eat," she began in a trembling voice. "I just wanted to—"

"SALT!" my grandfather yelled, already digging into a side of mashed yams.

"As I was saying, I want to thank you all for celebrating with me. Whether—"

"PEPPER!"

"Keep still, Chickie!" Grandma Rena said. "Whether you flew in from far away, or drove here from your house. With the world the way it is, it's nice to have the family together in one place again, if only for an afternoon."

"That was lovely, mom," my mother said, without a note of sarcasm. "Don't you think so, Steven? Steven?"

My father mumbled something unintelligible.

"Here's a thought," Uncle Ely said, knife poised over a petit cut Kokopelli Strip Steak. "If someone dropped a bomb on the Four Winds Country Club right now, that would be it for this family."

"Wow," my sister said. "Wait. Wow."

"It's the age of terrorism, after all," he added, and sliced into the bloody center.

"Not this again," Aunt Barb said. She removed her wooden earrings, tossed them on the table next to her Kokopelli Mandarin Chicken Salad.

"I agree with Barbara. Let's talk about something more pleasant," my mother said, and turned to my aunt. But Aunt Barb was three too many Black Russians in the hole to be anyone's ally, so the ridiculous conversation went on unhindered.

"For once, I think my dad has a point," Jason said as he folded a handful of Kokopelli fries into his mouth.

"Yeah, yeah." Now Maxine was

“That guy’s definitely a terrorist,” Jason said. “He wears a turban and he won’t sell you cigarettes without an ID.”

chiming in. “We’d be, like, wiped from the face of the earth. Like we never even existed.”

Even my father seemed to perk up a bit.

“Uncle Conrad’s smarter than all of us,” he said. Well, he was right about that.

“What kind of party talk is this?” my mother said. But it appeared as though her panini wasn’t doing nearly as much for her as the one she’d so fondly remembered, and her attention quickly shifted to her sister-in-law’s salad, which she began gaping at as if it was a designer pants suit on 20% markdown.

“Mind if I steal an orange?” she said. “Maybe a tiny piece of chicken?”

“Yeah, you’ve got sleeper cells all over the country,” Uncle Ely said. He was off and running now. “Probably even here in Huachuca Vista. And you can bet they’re funded by the guy who owns the gas station over on Kokopelli Boulevard.”

“Good,” Grandma Rena said in assessment of her lunch. Her mouth was full. It came out sounding like “goob.”

“That guy’s definitely a terrorist,” Jason said. “He wears a turban and he won’t sell you cigarettes without an ID.”

“You kids smoke?” Grandma Rena asked. She was blasting fragments of Southwestern Slaw everywhere.

“I told them they shouldn’t, and I used you as an example,” Aunt Barb said, allowing my mother full access to her plate. My father had finished his panini, and moved on to the one my mother had abandoned.

Ely: “That’s why I won’t fly anymore, either. If I can’t get there on my Harley, then I’m not going.”

“You ride a Harley?” Heather asked. She twirled a long wave of orange hair.

“In another six to eight weeks I should, assuming the creatine works the way the bottle says it does.”

“Berry goob,” Grandma Rena said.

“WHERE’S THE COFFEE?!” Grandpa Chick said.

“At the mall in Dix Park,” my mother said, “a suicide bomber could’ve driven right up to the entrance.” She dropped her fork on my aunt’s empty plate. “But then they put up traffic cones. Now I feel so much safer.”

“You’ve got to take those precautions,” my father said.

“The danger is real,” Uncle Ely said. He pushed his plate away. More than half his meat remained, precious grams of protein going to waste. Whatever, the Four Winds used Canadian beef anyway. It said so on the menu. Guess he must’ve missed that.

“And the worst part is,” he added, “you don’t know where it’s coming from.”

Everyone, including Grandpa Chick, nodded in agreement.

This is where I wish I’d said something, stopped suffering down that Kokopelli Quesadilla—hold the crabmeat, thank you very much—and sang like a tenor.

See, what I should’ve said, and maybe even would’ve said had Trish the waitress not moseyed into the room

We were smiling brightly. After all, this was why we came here in the first place, to award life with additional life.

carrying Grandma Rena's birthday cake, is this: of course you know where the danger's coming from. You can pinpoint it exactly. It comes from smoking and drinking and riding motorcycles. It comes from anger and from promiscuity, from aging and from overeating. Bad crab, even. But most of all, it comes from irrationality. Why waste your time worrying about dangers you don't know—like airplane crashes or terrorist attacks—when you're far more likely to get it from the danger you do?

"All right, y'all, let's sing happy birthday to Grandma," Trish said. She was balancing a sizeable sheet cake on her shoulder, littered with unlit candles.

"How many did you put in that thing?" Uncle Ely said.

"Forty-one," Trish said cheerfully. "Half her age, plus one for good luck."

With her free hand, she pushed back the dirty dishes that had collected in front of my grandmother, and lowered the cake to the table. Sad, she really was a good waitress.

"I can't blow out all these candles," Grandma Rena said.

"Mom! Mom!" my mother said. "I know we don't usually do this until after cake, but we got you something that might be just the trick. Steven, why don't you give your mother her present?"

My father complied. He got to his feet and walked to the pile of gifts in the corner. The rest of us made our way toward Grandma Rena's wicker throne, my sister leading Grandpa Chick by the hand. Steve Cantor selected the largest gift, and, settling it into its little cart, wheeled it over to his mother.

"Happy birthday, mom, from all of us," he said. We were smiling brightly. After all, this was why we came here in the first place, to award life with additional life. Or so were our firmest intentions—because for all the talk of danger, no one, not even me, noticed the most immediate threat to everyone in the pastel-colored private room of the Kokopelli Restaurant at the Four Winds Country Club in southern Arizona.

"I wonder what it is," Grandma Rena said. She removed the bow and placed it in her purse, taking equal care not to tear the paper beyond reusability. "Oh my, an oxygen tank. This is the best gift anyone's given me in my whole long life."

"Too bad it's not nitrous oxide," Jason said, nudging me one final time.

"Try it on, grandma," Heather said. She helped her untangle the plastic hose and fit the nose piece into place. The oxygen began to hiss, and, almost immediately, Grandma Rena's breathing became noticeably easier.

"On my count, y'all get ready sing," Trish said, producing a tiny box from her vest pocket. "One… two…"

Then she leaned in and struck the match. We never did get to three.