

## WAYNE THIEBAUD

*Student*, 1968  
Oil on linen, 60<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 48<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in



COURTESY THE DORIS AND DONALD FISHER COLLECTION AT THE  
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. © WAYNE THIEBAUD /  
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## PRISCILLA LONG Jona's Way

This is a story about a death. Which makes it, if you ask me, a story about a life. Jona Jovanovich opened her eyes to sunlight filtered through gauze, yellow like the pages of an old book. She woke in her narrow bed in her narrow room at the Josephinum, once a grand Seattle hotel, now low-income housing. She had arrived at the age of fifty-four the same way she had arrived in Seattle fifteen years ago—by happenstance.

This morning she felt pleased. Despite having the boss from hell. In her mind she reached out with her thumb and index finger and squashed Mr. Rodericks as if he were a bug. Then she soaked in the quietness of late morning, the small oak writing table, the composition books lined up, her current daybook lying open on the desk beside *Justine*, checked out of the library and renewed for the fourth time.

The bracelet glittered on the veneer-buckled bedside table, a chain-link gold bracelet studded with gemstones. Pink tourmaline, she was sure. Amethyst. Something pale blue. Something mauve. It was fucking beautiful. And if it turned out to be pricey as hell, she would not be surprised.

Some customer at the Warwick had let it slip into the crack of a booth seat and she'd found it while wiping down the tables right before closing. She'd dropped the glittery thing into her smock pocket. It would be missed by the inebriated party, that woman who had reminded her—so much so it was almost shocking—of Ruth Daniels. It had been years since she'd thought of Ruth.

Jona took responsibility for the bracelet. She would keep it overnight and return it in the morning. Jona Jovanovich was principled, honest to a fault, too honest for her own good, some would say. And since she would be, before too long, living on the street, it should also be noted that she was a clean-living soul, not addicted to alcohol or to any drug, street or otherwise. Nor was she stupid. Indeed, if her frugal father or her small-town elementary school had known of such things, they would have written her down as gifted, if only because she was so young addicted to reading. Nor was Jona Jovanovich mentally ill, at least not diagnosably so. But she was stubborn.

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At exactly three o'clock, an hour before her shift started, Jona arrived at the Warwick. She entered the restaurant, quiet, dark, carpeted, crystal and mahogany. The

afternoon shift was finishing up its duties. Poky Loki was putting out water goblets. Juan was following Loki, placing flatware rolled into a white cloth napkin, tied with a wide peach-colored satin ribbon. And there, of course, was Mr. Rodericks, resting his lardy pomposity against the podium. Jona reached into her pocket for the bracelet.

Mr. Rodericks was speaking into the telephone in his syrupy, the-customer-comes-first voice, all the while glaring at Jona. Then he slammed the receiver down.

“Jona! We have a problem.”

Jona did not speak. She walked up to Mr. Rodericks with her hand in her smock pocket. She took the bracelet in her fingers and lifted it up, dangled it before Mr. Rodericks’s face.

He slapped his palm on the podium. “Why did you not tell me about this?!” He picked up the phone and dialed. His voice coagulated into syrup. “Mrs. Michaels, we have found your beautiful bracelet. My employee, Ms. Jovanovich, will have it over there at the desk in the downstairs lobby in five minutes. Good, very good, you are so very welcome.” He put down the receiver with slow precision.

He turned to Jona. His face was shut. He said in a quiet, furious voice, “You might have come in immediately with it. You might get a telephone so you could be called in an emergency in case your presence is required. You might consider that other people exist beside yourself. You might let management know when a \$10,000 bracelet is found.”

Jona lifted her chin. “I’m supposed to know this is a \$10,000 bracelet?”

“They were about to call the police. Now you take that over to the Fairmont. It’s Mrs. Michaels. She’ll meet you at the desk. Get a receipt. Ms. Jovanovich, do you understand? Get a receipt.”

“You must mean the Fairmont Olympic.” To Jona, dropping the *Olympic* off the name of Seattle’s “historic living room” was akin to purveying Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* in the form of a classic comic. Besides, she’d had it with Mr. Fatface, half of whose job she was constantly obliged to perform at, needless to even mention, a third of the pay.

“Ms. Jovanovich, you do understand that I am not in a good humor?”

“Mr. Rodericks, may I bring to your attention the fact that I arrived at work an hour early?”

Mr. Rodericks puffed air out of his mouth like a dying fish, turned without a word, and stamped back to the kitchen.

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At the Fairmont Olympic Hotel, Jona nodded to the two doormen who, as she approached, opened the doors to the grand entrance. The Olympic was Seattle’s best, no offense to the Warwick, but the Olympic carried the greater weight of history, the royal guests, even Haile Selassie, even Prince Philip, even JFK with his four hookers provided by the Secret Service, not that anybody cared, but Jona cared, the austere weight of what has gone before, emperors, hookers, whatever. And here was Mrs. Michaels, in front of the reception desk. And Mrs. Michaels was Ruth Daniels, Ruth herself, not a resemblance. The real thing.

“It is Jona Jovanovich. My god! I couldn’t believe my ears!”

This Ruth, the old Ruth, the person standing before Jona, was a slender person of obvious means. A person who clearly worked out at a gym, who could have been thirty-five or forty, although she was fifty-two, who knew the value of dressing, who wore into the courtroom—for she was an attorney—expensive, strike-em-dead suits, who on vacation liked the idea of *expensive* jeans and *fabulous* food and *good* jewelry, who was now realizing with a shock that this dumpty, semitoothless serving person standing before her was her old friend Jona Jovanovich.

“I thought it looked like you.” Jona smiled. She remembered her missing tooth and shut her mouth. “But then I decided it wasn’t you. Ruth, old buddy, you were drunk.”

“Oh please!” Ruth flapped her hand as if she were waving away a mosquito. Then she squinted and looked Jona up and down. “My god. Whatever happened to you?”

Jona was stumped. She said, “Thirty years is a long time.”

Jona stood there. She stood accused. She had let herself go in the weight department. She was badly in need of some damned expensive dentistry. She stood in her black gabardine dishwasher/bus girl costume. She stood there on her bad knee and in this shape and in this form she found herself attending the college reunion from hell. Only this wasn’t a college reunion, it was a reunion of once upon a time “best woman friends” who, for one reason or another,

had not seen each other for a long time. Lives change. What could she say?

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And Ruth stared at Jona. Jona looked almost unbelievably lower-class. So matronly. She looked awful. Could this really be her? Ruth thought of the old Jona, the Jona she used to know, Grady Burns’s “old lady,” the hip, back-to-the-earth woman of the 1960s, living in that cabin halfway up Mount Griggs up by White River Junction, baking bread and cooking stews and roasting chicken and chopping wood, stoking the woodstove, anything for her Grady, such a handsome dude, such a fine fiddler, always out playing a gig. No way was Grady Burns going to stick with his sweet bookworm of long skirts and thick cardigans and hiking boots worn with thick wool socks. But this! How could Jona have come to this? A middle-aged matron. A kitchen worker for god’s sake.

Ruth caught her breath. “You work at the hotel?”

“I work the dining room. And you, what do you do?”

“I’ve become a partner in the firm.” Ruth was staring at Jona as if she had seen a ghost.

Jona looked away. “Your father,” she said. “Did you finally start speaking to him again?”

“Dad and I are close. This year he turns ninety.”

“Wow,” Jona said. “Times change. And what about your Harry? How is Harry doing?” Ruth and Harry had been such lovebirds. Harry was Grady’s best friend but he never took after Grady. Always the faithful one, Harry was.

“Haven’t seen Harry for years.”

“Oh.” Jona didn’t know what else to say. She held up the bracelet. “Here’s your bracelet. Something important. If you don’t mind, I need a receipt.”

Ruth reached out and took the bracelet, held it in both hands as if it were the Holy Grail. “I’m so glad to have it back. I’m a fool and I know it. James was furious.”

“You were mildly drunk.” Jona smiled, putting her hand over her mouth.

Ruth gazed at her. “Oh, Jona. I love beautiful things! I always did, even back in the sixties. I love dresses and silk sheets and art jewelry, real jewelry. James and I collect art, we eat out, we dance, we travel the world, we’ve been to Africa, Bali . . . We live very well. Isn’t that what life’s for? I know you believe . . . You don’t believe . . .”

*To Jona, dropping the Olympic off the name of Seattle’s “historic living room” was akin to purveying Lawrence Durrell’s Alexandria Quartet in the form of a classic comic.*

Jona stood there like a comic book misplaced among the fine bindings. “Could you possibly . . . I mean . . . I need a receipt,” she said.

“Do you still keep your copybooks?”

“I call them daybooks now. I’m on number fifty-six.”

“Daybooks. That’s nice! And what are you reading?”

“*The Alexandria Quartet*.”

“Wow. I never read that. Who wrote it?” Ruth asked Jona.

“Durrell. Lawrence Durrell. And what are you reading?”

Jona and Ruth had once talked books, on and on.

Ruth laughed and waved her hand. “I read magazines mostly. James, darling—” This to a deeply tanned tennis-player type, iron-gray hair, who had just walked up. “What am I reading?”

“You found it,” the man called James said. He bent to kiss Ruth on the mouth, a long, sexual kiss performed either as an index to Jona’s nonexistence or for her special benefit. Then he took the bracelet from Ruth’s hand. He looked at it as if checking the time on a watch, gave Ruth a meaningful look, and dropped it into the pocket of his blue blazer. To Jona he said, “Ruth told me you are a character from one of her former lives. Jona, is it?”

Mr. Rodericks  
was inspecting  
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“Jona Jovanovich.” Jona put out her hand and James shook it with a quick, weak touch.

“You realize this is a very special piece. A Hannelore Gabriel. Ruth was heartbroken when she missed it, and I did not relish the thought of flushing ten grand down the toilet. Can we compensate you in some way?”

“I need a receipt if you don’t mind,” Jona said.

“A receipt.” The man went into his wallet. He opened his checkbook and tore out a deposit slip.

“Jona manages the dining room at the Warwick,” Ruth said.

Jona opened her mouth but no words came out.

“Ah.” James spent some time writing on the deposit slip, folded it in half, and handed it to Jona. Then he drew out a wad of what she saw were \$100 bills. He counted out three of them. “Please!” he said.

“Oh, no.” Jona took a step backward.

“Sweetheart,” James said to Ruth, “we must thank this kind soul and go. We’re going to miss our plane if we don’t go right now.”

He turned to Jona. “Are you sure we can’t make it worth your while for returning Ruth’s piece? We appreciate your bringing it back when it would have been easier to—well, not return it.”

“Not return it?” Jona raised both palms against the insult. “Thank you, no. Enjoy your trip!” She said this with huge enthusiasm, as if she were saying to the diners at the

Warwick, Enjoy your meal! She smiled again, gave Ruth a little wave, turned, and walked away.

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She trudged back to the Warwick, barely seeing the commuter crowd surging along Fourth Avenue. Utter humiliation. But, she told herself, her work was honorable work. We are of the working people, her father had always proclaimed. We make America run. Nothing to be ashamed of. She lifted her head, for now, on the hour, the Skinner Building was performing its chimes. Jona adored the “Big Ben” chimes that bonged in downtown Seattle, mimicking the chimes in *Mrs. Dalloway*. It was four o’clock.

Now here was the Warwick again. A shift to get through, since Mr. Rodericks was in his typical foul mood. She walked into the glistening mahogany darkness, the clink of chinaware, the kitchen in readiness for a full Saturday night.

Mr. Rodericks was inspecting the salads, rather officially, as if he were a commander inspecting his troops. Jona walked up to him and handed him the receipt.

“They were happy,” she said. She smiled at him. Better try to get along.

Mr. Rodericks wiped his hand on his apron and opened the receipt. He frowned, looked at Jona, looked back at the receipt.

“So now you’re the manager,” he said. “Moving up to my job, are you?”

“What?” Jona said.

He held up the deposit slip. It read: “Receipt for the return of the Hannelore Gabriel bracelet, worth \$10,000, to Ms. Jona Jovanovich, manager of the Warwick Hotel Restaurant.”

“I didn’t know he wrote that.”

“What gave him the idea you were manager?” Mr. Rodericks stared at her. Cold hatred.

“I didn’t give him that idea.”

“You are dismissed.”

“Dismissed?”

Among the things that Jona had never considered, and would find incomprehensible if she had, was the fear, the near terror, with which the incompetent manager regards the employee who has “covered” for him for ten years. Another thing she had never considered: this same

incompetent manager might be quite competent at finding a different employee to cover for him for the next ten years.

Mr. Rodericks’s eyes bulged. He looked like he might be in the process of cardiac arrest. “Ms. Jovanovich, I’m the boss around here. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“You’re an idiot!”

“You will receive a check for your last hours.”

“How will you manage without me to do half your goddamn work?”

“Goodbye, Ms. Jovanovich.”

“I’ve been covering your ass for ten years!”

“Ms. Jovanovich, I have a lot to do this evening.”

“Fuck you, Mr. Rodericks.”

Jona raised her head and turned and walked to the door. With her tongue, she felt the gap in her teeth. She threw back her shoulders and walked out onto Fourth Avenue.

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If Jona Jovanovich had a case file, which she does not, the question hovering over it would be, how does such an intelligent, well-read, responsible-to-a-fault, honest-beyond-reason, hardworking, non-addicted, non-mentally ill individual become a homeless statistic?

Does she have family?

No. Her frugal and devout father, Jonathan Jovanovich, was a deliveryman. He believed in education and he read to her as he thought he should. He could not afford to send her to college. When she joined the “counterculture” in the 1960s, they stopped speaking, so outraged was he. Unfortunately, at some point during those years, before they had reconciled, Jonathan Jovanovich died.

Q. What about Jona’s mother?

A. Jona’s mother died giving birth to her. Jona was a motherless child.

Q. Why did this intelligent, well-read person have such low-level employment?

A. She was a child of the counterculture. Fuck the capitalist system.

Q. Why did this intelligent, well-read person have such low-level employment?

A. She was brought up to survive, not to succeed. These two trajectories require opposing skills. To succeed you must take risks. She was a reader but did not care to be tested by taking classes or by going back to school, where

all you did was cram from CliffsNotes and then take stupid tests that did not even ask interesting questions.

Q. Why did this intelligent, well-read person have such low-level employment?

A. She was arrogant and stubborn, a deficiency inherited from her father.

Q. Why was this intelligent, efficient, well-read person not the manager of the Warwick Hotel dining room?

A. She refused to climb the ladder. She despised the song and dance required of servers reciting the menu. She despised sucking up to customers. Besides, she liked washing dishes and bussing tables.

Q. Most homeless people are not well educated. Was not Jona Jovanovich well educated, despite being an autodidact? Hadn’t she read virtually every book in the library?

A. Like most homeless people, Jona Jovanovich was not very well educated. This fact was veiled by her long participation in the counterculture, where establishment credentials were looked down upon. She could read *The Alexandria Quartet* but could she write a paper on *The Alexandria Quartet*? No, she could not. However, she believed she could if she wanted to. But she had never tried.

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What next? Jona Jovanovich is nothing if not frugal. She lives for nearly a year on her savings. She applies for jobs, to be sure, but she doesn’t apply for enough jobs, and she doesn’t get a job and somehow her will to get a job has weakened. Of course, she has no recommendation from her last job, which lasted a decade. One morning she gets up and makes her bed and sweeps her room as she does every morning. And then she counts her money. She does not have the wherewithal to pay the rent. It’s the third Tuesday of the month and it is time to go down to the office and pay. She sits at her desk for a long time. She simply has not got it. She stares at her checkbook, at the total: \$200. Not enough to pay the rent: \$365.

She turns to her daybook then, for copying calms her down. She is now copying from Alexander Theroux’s strange little book *The Primary Colors*. She is copying out sentences on the color blue. She is copying because it calms her, but her big-knuckled writing hand is trembling. She sees that. Nevertheless she copies the sentence *Oh, there are many negative things about blue*. She likes that

*The public library is—  
what? A city’s proclamation  
that books are essential  
to its existence.*

sentence very well, particularly the *Oh*. Although *oh* is not going to pay the rent, nor will it raise the funds necessary for subsistence. She reads some more of “Blue” and then copies the sentence *There are many more blues than there are words to name them*. She likes that sentence too. She copies for a full half hour, during which it dawns on her that she must go down to the office and explain.

She thinks of what to say while copying the sentence *Indigo is strange*. She then rises from her little copy desk, which takes up its small amount of floor space she can no longer afford. She showers and dresses in a sweatshirt, socks, and running shoes. She goes out her door and locks it behind her and walks down eight floors to the Josephinum management office. She goes in and stammers to Mr. Sammy, the thin Haitian man at the desk, that she has a cash flow problem. Mr. Sammy is polite but non-committal. He motions for her to go into the inner office behind him to talk to the director. The director, Patty Baker, tells her she has three days to produce the \$365 check or money order. That she can go to the Salvation Army to get a voucher. That otherwise eviction procedures will begin. A social worker will want to see her.

Jona walks out of the office, onto the red-floral carpet and between the gold-painted pilasters of the mezzanine

of what was once a grand hotel. She holds her head high. She knows exactly what she is going to do and it does not involve going to the Salvation Army to receive a voucher. She has never had an appointment with a social worker and she does not intend to begin now. She goes back to her room. She sits on the bed for a long time, surveying her few possessions. She has always liked her frugal aesthetic, her bare-bones philosophy, her down-to-essentials life. She likes what she sees now. She breathes deeply to steady herself. Then she makes a plan. She shampoos her hair in the sink, puts her current copybook in its row of fifty filled copybooks.

She again leaves her room, locking the door behind her. She walks downstairs and out the door. In a way things are not too different from when she was on her own as a child, when she had nowhere to go after school except to the library, when her father was working his long hours, when she had to go home, wash up, eat the snack her father had left, and do her homework. Except back then her father would always look at her homework when he got home, whereas now no one cared what she did. It was up to her to survive, to manage as best she could. For the first time in years, she yearns for some friend, for someone just to gab with about the current situation. It’s true, like Ruth Daniels told her one time years ago, she’s a snob. Now she’s paying the price. She walks out on Second Avenue and it comes to her what to do with her daybooks. She will file them, discreetly, one by one, in various fitting places among the four million books in the Seattle Public Library.

And so a year will pass. Here are the things Jona Jovanovich will learn on the street: Kindness can be found anywhere. Cruelty and indifference are not uncommon. Keep a distance from crazy people. Eating out, no matter how fast or high fat or cheap, is expensive. Often you will feel ill, that same dull pain. Notebooks filed among library books take a long time to get discovered. Being cold is the equivalent of being unhappy. Sleeping is the equivalent of being happy. Food banks exist. She can survive on the street. She can spend most days in the central branch of the Seattle Public Library.

The public library is—what? A city’s proclamation that books are essential to its existence. A city’s proclamation that it holds literature to its bosom, that it considers instant access to any film indispensable, that it entertains a keen interest in the news items of today or yesterday or one hundred years ago. And what of Seattle’s new Rem Koolhaas library, with its steel truss and glass prism shape and shifting light, its perpetual views of clouds, of sky-tips of skyscrapers, of high-flying gulls? Seattle’s Rem Koolhaas library is Seattle’s proclamation that here is a city of the future.

To Jona it is a place out of the rain. She has been sitting now in the same orange seat, a square of orange foam designed to look like stone, a box with the low seat cut out, higher parts left for backrest and armrests. She has been sitting for some time at the Fifth Avenue level, the library’s “living room.” She looks up, gazes through parallelograms of glass fitted into pale-blue steel trusswork. She gazes at clouds and seagulls, looks up at the tops of the downtown towers. Oh, to be a seagull. To be a free spirit. To soar in the rain, as if rain were your home.

But it is time to move. She rises from the chair. She takes her backpack with her. She trudges to the gleaming green escalator going up one level. Why so tired? She can barely move. She passes the history desk, the rows of computers, library patrons typing. The same dull pain. At this point it never goes away. She continues up the escalator, up and up, an ascension into neon-green light. She arrives at the top of the library, the Betty Jane Narver Reading Room. She finds another seat, the same hard-looking but soft-feeling foam seat, this one purple. Here no one will care. Here she can stay till closing. It is evening. The sun casts its golden light on the turquoise and blue windows of the Washington Mutual Tower. Her favorite downtown building, certainly, the return of decorative elements, the end of the Bauhaus box. Thank goodness for the end of the Bauhaus box. And here she sits right inside another example, her real favorite, the Rem Koolhaas library itself. Which many hate, she knows perfectly well. But she’s not one of the haters. She gazes at this higher view of Seattle skyscrapers, higher parallelograms of glass fitted into the same steel truss, welded connecting plates and bolts and heat vents and wire-carrying pipes all visible. The light casts everything—the distant water of Elliott Bay, a ferry

coming in, the high buildings—in mystery. The gulls are wheeling and turning overhead, mixing with mist and evening light and clouds. To Seattle the cries of gulls are chimes or church bells, harbingers of evening, ferries, fishing vessels, sea winds, autumn rains.

Jona hears them from far away, calling, calling.

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They find her at closing, the unmoving patron who failed to respond to the last call for checking out books, who failed to leave the library at the ten-minute warning and again at closing. After they take all the correct steps, call security, call the police, clear the library in a routine closing-hour way, after they station a security guard next to the body of the dead bag lady, the third found this year and it’s only February, after all that is done and done properly, they each, all five library employees involved, quietly, and separately, and without speaking of it, say a small prayer for her soul.

**Priscilla Long**, based in Seattle, Washington, is a writer of poetry, creative nonfiction, science, history, and fiction, and a long-time independent teacher of writing. She is author of six books, including *The Writer’s Portable Mentor*, Second Edition (University of New Mexico Press, 2018); a collection of memoirist creative nonfiction, *Fire and Stone: Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (University of Georgia Press, 2016); and *Crossing Over: Poems* (University of New Mexico Press, 2015).