



A Window by the River

by Kimberly C. Harris

24th Annual Fiction Writing Competition

The Editorial Board of the *Georgia Bar Journal* is proud to present "A Window by the River," by Kimberly C. Harris of LaGrange, as the winner of the *Journal's* 24th annual Fiction Writing Competition.

The purposes of the competition are to enhance interest in the *Journal*, to encourage excellence in writing by members of the Bar and to provide an innovative vehicle for the illustration of the life and work of lawyers. As in years past, this year's entries reflected a wide range of topics and literary styles. In accordance with the competition's rules, the Editorial Board selected the winning story through a process of reading each story without knowledge of the author's identity and then ranking each entry. The story with the highest cumulative ranking was selected as the winner. The Editorial Board congratulates Harris and all of the other entrants for their participation and excellent writing.

Samantha stops by her doctor's office Tuesday morning in hopes of getting a prescription renewed. The doctor isn't there. Apparently Samantha has the days mixed up again. She thinks it's Tuesday when it is Monday. See, this is the very thing she wanted to talk to Dr. Marty about, in addition to renewing the prescription. She has wondered why she has been so forgetful lately; and of the simplest things. She can recall clearly the vacation she took with her parents when she was 10. She just can't seem to remember whether today is Monday or Tuesday. Of course, she knows what Dr. Marty will say: "What a laugh! Forgetful? You of all people. Aren't you still working six days a week?"

It isn't that Dr. Marty actually knows her all that well, but she is the primary care physician for many of Samantha's older clients, and it's a fairly small town.

Instead, Dr. Marty's PA, Katherine, phones the next day to tell Samantha that the prescription

is ready and that Dr. Marty has referred her to a neurologist to see about her “mind problem.” The PA has made an appointment for her. Samantha is annoyed that the PA has referred to her forgetfulness as a “mind problem.” It isn’t a *mind* problem. It’s just a memory problem. And being an elder law attorney, Samantha is certainly familiar with the issue. Perhaps she *has* been working a bit too much and not getting enough rest. She has interviewed several younger attorneys about taking over her practice, but none of them seemed to find the world of Medicare and Social Security particularly interesting. She smiles as she recalls that one of the interviewees actually made the unfortunate comment that he couldn’t imagine spending his days talking primarily to “old people.” Oh well, whatever. Truth be known, Samantha wasn’t quite ready to slow down anyway. She loved her practice. And she wasn’t yet comfortable with the thought of turning it over to a “youngster.”

“Ms. Stevens are you still on the line?” Had she been speaking with someone Samantha suddenly wondered?

“Yes, I’m here,” she says.

“Ms. Stevens, I was saying that this particular neurologist specializes in dealing with elderly patients.”

“Well,” says Samantha, “hopefully it is with elderly patients who are off their rocker.” Dr. Marty’s PA laughs. Well, at least someone laughed.

The PA says that the neurologist’s office is located about 25 miles away in the town of Boring. “Great,” says Samantha. “That’s probably what the entire visit will be.” The PA doesn’t get it, begs her pardon. “Never mind, I’ll be there.” Things have changed so much over the past few years. She used to be able to visit one doctor there in town for any problem. Now everyone is a specialist and specialists never seem to be conveniently located. Your primary care physician is on one side of town, your dentist is

on another side of town and now the neurologist is in another town altogether. She chuckles to herself. The same can be said about lawyers she supposes.

Another thing, it seems to take her so long these days to get from place to place and now she’ll have to ferret out where this new doctor is altogether. Suppose she is late. Samantha hates being late, though she can’t imagine why in the case of doctor visits since you have to wait forever once you get there. But, traveling somewhere new like this seems to make Samantha more anxious lately, so she decides to drive to Boring to locate the office of the “crazy specialist”—as she decides to call him—on the evening before the day of her appointment. That should give her plenty of time to find out where he is, so there will be no danger of her possibly arriving late and creating a bad impression right off the bat.

She could get her partner Winnie to go with her, but Winnie volunteers at the Red Cross and has a meeting tonight. Samantha doesn’t want her to miss it. And besides, she can find the place herself. Dr. Marty’s PA gave her directions. It’s a beautiful evening for a drive; early fall, the worst of the summer heat is over and the evenings are cooling off. She’ll still have daylight until around 8 p.m.

When Samantha turns onto the interstate, headed west, she finds that the sun is just low enough to shine into her face, but if she sits up really straight and lifts her chin, she can get her eyes into the shade provided by the visor. She spots the sign which tells her that she has 10 miles until the Boring exit. When she reaches the exit and turns south, she notices the town limits sign: Boring. Population 2,703. Really? Why do they bother to put the three there? Doesn’t it just keep changing?

Samantha thinks about the habit she and Winnie have always had of checking out small towns just for fun to see if they could live there. This one seems to be about

the size they might like. In the past few years, so many of their friends have moved to large retirement communities in one of the warmer states. She and Winnie have visited them on occasion and joked that the atmosphere was like a Disney World for seniors. You can participate in some sort of activity literally 24/7. Oh well, maybe when we get older, she thinks. But at least for now they are agreed that a smaller, quieter place still appeals to them both.

As she turns onto the main street through town, she notes a decent-sized grocery store where you could probably get fairly fresh vegetables, and perhaps good meats. Winnie loves to cook, so that is a plus. There is also a small coffee shop and bakery, which they would both enjoy. Further down the street she sees a sign that reads “Laundromat,” though Samantha can’t think what that sort of establishment is right off. She notices that the pharmacy is an adequate size, and wonders if they stock good magazines. That reminds her of a magazine article she had recently read. Odd, she didn’t recall the article being on paper. She thinks perhaps it had been on some sort of device with a tiny television screen, but she must be wrong. That seems silly. She forgets the article and thinks instead that she must remember to share all of this with Winnie. Maybe they would drive back here on the weekend to explore further.

Of course, there are also signs that the town has seen better days in some respects. Right off the town square is a neon sign in a store window that promises Fine Jewelry, but the light is missing several bulbs. And the store doesn’t appear to be a jewelry store at all. It and several stores on either side of it appear to be full of old china, furniture and assorted junk. There are a couple of vacant stores along the main street, and one restaurant with a sign in the window announcing that it is closing on Dec. 31,

2014. Odd, Samantha thinks, that they would be announcing a closing 10 years from now. Maybe it was a misprint. Should she stop in and mention it? Well, maybe she should just stop and park anyway, she decides. It's probably better to search out this doctor's office on foot rather than continue driving around the square. Surely it's in the downtown area. In her momentary distraction she missed the parallel parking spot in front of one of the vacant stores and had to circle the square again. This time the first vacant space she comes upon is one she can pull straight into. She decides to park there since there is plenty of room and she's not the best at parallel parking anyway. Winnie always teases her about that and insists on doing all the parking when they travel.

Almost immediately after exiting the car, she spots a three-story glass building a couple of blocks away and she is ready to bet that is it. Doctors used to have their offices in small homey buildings, but then they began affiliating themselves with hospitals and other groups of doctors and before you knew it these big, modern, sterile professional buildings began appearing everywhere. Sure enough, the sign on the front of the building reads "Medical Professional Building."

She pulls the scrap of paper on which she has written the doctor's name out of her pocket to check it. There are 15 names on the directory to the right of the door, but none are the name on Samantha's piece of paper. And no wonder, because nothing is written on her piece of paper but a number. The number is E 7 ½. It is the shoe size of her niece, Emily. It takes her a while to figure that out, the E standing for Emily, but scribbled in a hasty way. She faintly recalls something about buying slippers for Emily last Christmas, or was it the Christmas before last?

She's not sure what she should do now. It could be that the doctor she is supposed to see has just moved into this building and his name has not yet been put on the directory. She thinks she should ask somebody. First, she should knock on the off chance that somebody is in there working late. She does this, and it is a good thing in a way that nobody comes, because the doctor's name that she is after still has not come to mind. She has another idea. Isn't it quite possible that this person—the crazy specialist—has a smaller office here in town? It would make sense and be cheaper. You probably don't need a lot of medical equipment for crazy doctoring.

With that thought in mind, Samantha continues her walk away from the medical professional building and off the main street surrounding the square. The doctor's name that she is after has come back to her as such things are apt to do when there is no longer a crisis. The buildings she walks by were mostly built in the 20th century. Some of wood, but mostly brick and glass. The glass ones are mostly two or more stories high, the brick ones somewhat more modest, a story and a half with slanting ceilings and upstairs rooms, lofts they call them now. Some front doors open just a few feet from the sidewalk. When she was a little girl, people would have had the doors open and would have been sitting outside enjoying an evening like this. No one was sitting outside now, just empty benches and steps. No conversations to be overheard about the weather or the Bulldogs or the Braves or some friend who had taken ill and was not expected to recover. No speculation to be overheard about herself, once they thought she was out of earshot.

But had there been people sitting outside, she would have conversed with them to put their minds at ease that she wasn't some crazy person wandering the streets. She would have asked if they knew where the



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doctor's office was. This would have given them a new item of conversation. What does she want a doctor for? And which doctor? (This of course, after she had moved out of earshot.) But no one is on the street; they must all be in their lofts. There are numbers on all the buildings, but no names, and no sign that there is a doctor in any of the buildings.

She arrives at the end of the block and just across the street, adjacent to her, is a large brick building with gables and some sort of clock tower. Perhaps the building is a church, or an old school. The hands have stopped at 12, for noon or midnight, which certainly is not the right time in either case. There is a large flower garden that seems professionally arranged—some flowers spilling out of a wheelbarrow and more spilling out of a milk pail on its side. There's a sign near the flower garden that Samantha can't read because the sun is shining straight onto it. She walks across the lawn to see it at another angle. Higgins Funeral Chapel. Now she sees the portico where the hearse probably parks. Strange. For a moment she has the feeling that she has been there with Winnie. But, that can't be. They don't know anyone from Boring, so she is sure they have never attended a funeral here. Well, never mind. She had better get on with things.

She continues down the street past the chapel and turns onto a side street where there are very large, well-kept homes. They are each slightly different, yet somehow look all the same. Gently colored stone or pale brick; peaked or rounded windows. Ah, she thinks, one of these might be the doctor's office. At least there are people out and about on this street. They haven't all managed to shut themselves up inside. A boy is skateboarding on the sidewalk, taking diagonal routes across the pavement. Something about his riding is odd, and she cannot figure it out at first. He seems to be riding backward. That's what it is.

A woman who might be too old to be his mother—but who is

very trim and lively looking all the same—is standing in a driveway watching him. She is talking to a man who could not be her husband—both of them are being too cordial. Samantha looks ahead and sees that the street is a dead end. No going farther. Interrupting the woman and man, she excuses herself. She says that she is looking for a doctor. "No, no," she says. "Don't be alarmed. It's not an emergency. You see, I just need his address for an appointment. I thought you might know it." They inquire as to the doctor's name and then comes the problem of realizing that she has again forgotten the name. They are too polite to show any surprise at this and apologize for not being able to help her. She turns to leave and the boy on the skateboard comes flying by, barely missing all three of them. Laughter from the woman and man. No reprimand. A perfect little jerk and they seem to positively admire him. They all remark on the beauty of the evening, and Samantha begins her walk back the way that she has come. Except that she does not go all the way, not quite as far as the chapel. There is another side street just before the chapel. She ignored it before, perhaps because there is no street sign there and she had not thought of a doctor having an office on such a street. She turns onto the side street, more of a gravel drive really. The sidewalk ends abruptly and there are no houses. Two men are busy erecting some sort of canopy over freshly dug ground. She doesn't think she should interrupt them. Besides, she still can't recall the name of the doctor and she certainly doesn't want to make a fool of herself. They are probably already whispering about her.

Looking beyond the two men and the canopy she sees something interesting ahead. There is a hedge that comes right out to the gravel drive. It's high enough that she does not expect to be able to see over it, but thinks she might be able to peek through. But she doesn't have to. When she gets past the hedge she

finds that the area is open to the drive she is walking on. It appears to be some sort of park, with flagstone paths diagonally crossing the freshly mown grass. In between the paths, and bursting from the grass, there are flowers interspersed among slabs of marble. She knows the name of some of the flowers—the dark gold and light yellow daisies for instance, yellow and red iris—but she is no great gardener herself and there are wide displays of all colors and varieties that she can't name. All of them are in such perfect rows for quite a distance in each direction. Everything is so pretty, even the fountain that shoots up seven feet or so before falling down into its rock-lined pool. She walked in off the drive to get a little of its cool spray, and there she finds a wrought-iron bench where she can sit down.

A man has come along one of the paths carrying a pair of grass clippers. Gardeners are evidently expected to work late here. Though to tell the truth, he does not look like a hired workman. He is tall and very thin and dressed in black pants and a black shirt with a white collar. It has not occurred to her that this property could be anything but a town park.

"This is really beautiful," Samantha calls to him in her most approving voice. "You keep it up so well."

"Thank you," he says. "You're welcome to sit there a while."

She knows by his tone he is informing her that this is not a park. It's probably private property, and he himself is probably the owner. "I'm sorry. I should have asked your permission."

"That's okay." Preoccupied, he is bending and snipping at some grass that is encroaching on a slab of marble nearby.

"This is yours, is it? All of it?" After a few more snips with the shears, he stops. "Well, yes, in a manner of speaking, it's mine to care for," he responds.

"I should have known. It's too imaginative to be public; too

unusual." He doesn't answer. She is going to ask him whether he likes to sit here himself in the evenings. But she better not bother. He doesn't seem an easy person to be around. One of those who probably prides themselves on that very fact. After a moment she will just thank him and get up and leave. But instead, after a moment he comes and sits down beside her. He speaks just as if a question has been put to him. "Actually, I feel more comfortable when I'm tending to the grounds," he says. "If I sit down I have to keep my eyes off everything, or I'll just see something else that needs doing."

Samantha thought she should let him get back to work, but still she was curious. She asked what was there before he made the garden.

"Oh, I didn't make this garden. It's been here quite a while. I think many years ago there may have been a mill here. All smaller towns on rivers likely had mills. But in time that went under and the lovely old building was preserved and it became a church. And eventually the parishioners decided the church needed this garden."

Samantha knows from his accent that he's not from around here. As if reading her thoughts he says: "I'm not from around here, so I don't know the precise history. I had a friend who lived here though. In fact he used to tend this garden. When he died I came up just to say goodbye. Then the church asked me to stay. My friend had been sick and the place had become somewhat of an eyesore."

"I'm sorry if I seem inquisitive," Samantha said. "It's just that I know I haven't been here before, but it feels as if I have, as if someone were waiting on me to come back," she says. "Of course, I can't have been here before, or I'd have seen this spot. I've just now been walking around looking for something. I thought I could find it better if I parked my car and walked. I'm looking for a doctor's office, actually." She quickly explains that



she is not sick, only that she has an appointment tomorrow, and doesn't want to be running around in the morning looking for the place. Then she tells him about parking her car and being surprised that the name of the doctor she wanted was not listed anywhere. "I couldn't look in a phone book either because you know how the phone books and the phone booths have all disappeared now. Oh, now I'm beginning to sound quite silly."

She suddenly remembers the name of the doctor, but the gardener says it doesn't ring a bell. "But I don't know all of the doctors in town," he added.

"You're very fortunate then. That means you must be healthy. At any rate, I'd better get back to my car." When she stands up he

says he will walk with her. "So I won't get lost?"

"No," he says. "I always like to have a walk this time of the evening. Gardening can leave your legs cramped."

As they walk Samantha says, "I'm sure there's some sensible explanation about this doctor. Do you ever think that there used to be more sensible explanations about things than there are now?" He does not answer. Maybe he's thinking of the friend who died. Instead of being embarrassed now when she has spoken and he has not answered, she feels a freshness, a peace in the conversation. They walk along for quite a while without meeting a soul.

Soon they are back at the square facing the main street with the medical professional building she



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first saw just a block away. The sight of it makes her feel somewhat uneasy, and she's not sure why. Then, after a moment, she is. She has an absurd notion when she sees the building that the name she said she could not find has been waiting there all along. She moves more quickly, finds that she is shaky and then, when she reaches the front doors, reads the 15 useless names, just as before. She sees the gardener looking at her and she pretends to have been hurrying because she thinks she saw someone inside. But the gardener is not really paying attention to her movement. He says that he has just thought of something.

"This doctor," he says. "I wonder if he might be connected with the assisted living home."

They are walking again now. They have arrived at the coffee shop where a couple of boys are sitting on a bench out front, playing with what looks to be a phone of some sort. As she and the gardener pass the boys, Samantha is certain that one of them stretches his legs out deliberately so that they have to move around him. Young people are so rude she thinks. The gardener doesn't appear to have seen any of this.

"Assisted living home?" Samantha asks.

"Yes. You wouldn't have noticed if you came in from the interstate," the gardener says, as they continue toward her car. "But, if you keep going out past the church and the garden towards the river you will pass it. Not more than half a mile out. You go past the shopping plaza on the south side of the road and it's just a little farther on, on the other side. I don't know if they have a live-in doctor there or not, but it stands to reason they might have."

"Yes, they might have," Samantha says. "It stands to reason." Then she hopes he doesn't think she is mocking him. She doesn't want to offend him. She wants to go on talking to him longer. But, now comes another of her problems—she has to think

about the whereabouts of her keys, as she often does before getting into the car. She is regularly worried about whether she's locked the keys inside or dropped them somewhere. She can feel the approach of familiar, tiresome panic. But then she finds them, in her pocket.

"It's worth a try," he says, and she agrees. "There's plenty of room to turn off the road and take a look. If there's a doctor out there regularly there's no need for him to have an office here in town."

The gardener holds the car door while she gets in, closes it and waits there until she is turned to go in the right direction, then waves goodbye. When she is on her way out of the town she catches sight of him again in the rearview mirror. He has stopped to talk to the two boys who were sitting on the bench in front of the coffee shop. He had ignored them previously in such a way that she is surprised to see him talking to them now. Maybe they are making remarks about her, some joke about her vagueness or silliness. Or just about her age. She's sure she now has a mark against her, and with the nicest man. She had thought that she would come back by the garden to thank him again and tell him if it was the right doctor. She could just slow down and laugh and call out the window. But now she thinks that she will just stay out of his way. Forget him.

She sees the shopping plaza coming up. She has to pay attention to where she is going. Then there it is, just as he has said. A sign across the street read "Riverside Assisted Living & Memory Care." And there really is, from here, a view of the river, a thread of dark blue and green water along the horizon. A spacious parking lot. Two long wings off the main building with what looks like separate apartments or good-sized rooms at least, with their own little gardens or places to sit. A latticed fence quite high in front of every one of them for privacy or safety. What a nice place she thinks. She and Winnie talk so often of liv-

ing by the water somewhere. Yes, they must drive back this weekend. Perhaps there is a nice house for sale in this part of town, something where they can look out their windows and see the river. People who live here must love to sit outside. Though nobody is sitting out there now that she can see. Well of course not. Bedtime comes early in these establishments. She likes the lattice work. These sorts of places have been changing in the past few years. The hard, institutional look has disappeared.

Once in the driveway Samantha parks under the brightly colored portico that has a look of welcome, of cheerful excess. Some people would find it too colorful she supposes, but isn't it the very thing you would want? All those bright colors must cheer the spirits of the old people, or even, perhaps, of some people not so old but just off kilter. She looks for a button to push or a bell to ring as she walks up to the door. But that is not necessary—the door opens on its own. And once she gets inside there is an even greater expression of space, of loftiness, a blue tinge to the glass mirrors on the walls. The floor is shiny tile, the kind she used to love to slide across as a child, and for a moment she thinks of the residents sliding and slipping for pleasure and the idea makes her lighthearted. Of course, it cannot be as slippery as it looks, you wouldn't want people breaking their necks.

"I wouldn't dare try it myself," she says in a charming voice to somebody in her head, perhaps Winnie. "It wouldn't do, would it? I could find myself in front of the doctor, the very one who is getting ready to test my mental stability. And then what would he have to say?" At the moment though there is no doctor to be seen. Well, there wouldn't be, would there? Doctors don't sit behind desks here waiting for patients to show up. And she isn't even here for an appointment. She will have to explain again that she is just making sure of the time and place of an appointment for

tomorrow. Suddenly all this has made her feel rather tired.

There is a rounded desk, waist high, whose panels of dark wood look like mahogany, though they probably are not. Nobody is behind it at the moment. It is after hours of course. She looks for a bell on the desk, but does not see one. Then she looks to see if there is a list of doctors' names or the name of the doctor in charge. She doesn't see that either. You would think there would be a way of getting hold of somebody, no matter what the hour. Somebody must be on call in a place like this. There is no important clutter behind the desk either. No computer or telephone or papers.

Of course, she has not been able to get right behind the desk, so there may well be some compartments she can't see. There are surely buttons a receptionist could reach that a visitor of course can't. She gives up on the desk for the moment and takes a closer look at the space she has found herself in. It was hexagon shaped, with doors at intervals. There are four doors in all—one is the large door that lets in the light and any visitors, another is an official and private-looking door behind the desk and the other two doors (exactly alike and facing each other), would obviously take you into the long wings, to the corridors and rooms where the inmates are housed.

Each of these doors has an upper window, and the window glass looks clear enough to see through. Samantha goes up to one of these possibly accessible doors and knocks, then tries the knob. It won't turn. It's obviously locked. She cannot see through the window properly, either. Close up the glass is all wavy and distorted. In the door directly opposite there is the same problem with the glass and the same problem with the knob. The click of her shoes on the floor, the trick of the glass, the uselessness of the knobs have made her feel more discouraged than she would care to admit. She decides to not give up, however.

She tries the doors again in the same order, and this time she shakes both knobs as hard as she can and also calls out "Hello?" in a voice that sounds at first trivial and silly, then aggrieved, but not more hopeful. She squeezes herself in behind the desk and bangs on that door with practically no hope. It doesn't even have a knob, just a keyhole. There is nothing to do but get out of this place and go home. This is all very cheerful and elegant, she thinks, but there is no pretense of accommodating a public visitor here.

Of course, they shove the residents or patients or whatever they call them into bed early. It's the same old story everywhere, however glamorous the surroundings. Still thinking about this, she goes back to the door from which she is sure she entered, and gives it a push. It is too heavy. She pushes again and again. Still, it does not budge.

She can see the pots of flowers outside in the open air. She sees a car going by on the road. She sees the last mild evening's light fading. She has to stop and think. There are no artificial lights on in here. The place will get dark. Already, in spite of the lingering light outside, it seems to be getting dark. She realizes no one is going to come. They have all completed their duties, or at least the duties that brought them through this part of the building. Wherever they have settled down now is where they will stay. She opens her mouth to yell, but it seems that no yell is forthcoming. She begins shaking and no matter how she tries she cannot get her breath down into her lungs. It is as if she has a blotter in her throat. Now she is suffocating.

She knows that she has to behave differently before someone comes along and notices. More than that, she has to believe differently. Be calm. Be calm. Breathe. Breathe. She doesn't know if the panic has taken a long time or a short time. Her heart is pounding, but she is nearly safe. There is a woman here

now whose name is Hannah. It says so on the name badge she is wearing, and besides, Samantha realizes she knows her anyway.

"I've been looking everywhere for you Ms. Stevens," says Hannah. "I came by to check on you. I expected to see you in your chair by the window reading. But the door to your room was open and I couldn't find you anywhere. Why are you out here in the lobby? Did you fall asleep and have a dream? You must have had a dream. What were you dreaming about?"

"Nothing in particular," says Samantha, more calmly now, as Hannah guides her back through one of the doors with the wavy glass. "It was just back when Winnie was alive and when I was still driving my car."

"That sounds like a nice dream. What kind of car did you have?" Hannah asks.

"It was a red Volvo wagon," Samantha replies, "older, but comfortable and familiar."

"See there," says Hannah, as they continue down the hall arm in arm, "You're still sharp as a tack." 



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