

Copyright © by Joanna Sandy
Goucher College Fiction Workshop
All Rights Reserved

Purple Mountains

by Joanna Sandy

The house was lost among all its objects. Norma could make out pieces of wall peeking out amidst the mountains of rubble, the marbled corners of a counter, the desperate upholstery of a hidden armchair. Her white sneakers stood at the precipice of an ocean of junk. The trash tidal waves, frozen in haphazard place, looked like one of those postmodern art pieces she had seen visiting the art museums with her Aunt Sally in New York. These antique sculptures, mismatched shoes, mounds of unused clothes, coffee table books, collectibles and bric-a-brac alluded to a different type of artistry, one producing not wonder but an onset of panic. She felt the urge to turn right around and flee to her Camry, turn the key in the ignition and drive back

toward safety, soothed by the chilling order of the air conditioning. But rent was due in a week, and with a finger swipe Norma had, the day before, consented to this task of uncluttering.

“Sorry about the mess,” the woman the app called Bernadette A said, breathily. The weight of gravity pulled wrinkles and sags down on a fifty-something-year-old face that Norma imagined had once belonged to a beautiful girl. Her dark plum fleece softened the curves of her noticeable paunch, which reminded Norma of how obese Americans were.

“I suppose that’s why you’re here. I’ve been meaning to get to this,” the woman said, gesturing vaguely to their surroundings. “But you know how it is.”

Norma nodded and smiled, wondering how any sane person could live this way. “Yes,” she said.

Bernadette A turned and walked into the fray.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, walking through an entryway bracketed by a stack of dusty records on the floor and a bookshelf filled with old atlases.

“It’s no problem,” Norma said, spotting a framed photograph of a younger Bernadette, smiling next to a handsome suitor. Norma’s chest tightened as she followed the woman into another explosion of stuff, underneath which she made out the basics of a living room, a small television set broadcasting the animals of a faraway savanna. On the opposite wall was a large framed portrait of Jesus.

Bernadette picked up a dusty photo book with a square photo of a baby on it, bordered in lace, and used it as a talking stick. “I never used the app before. My nephew does. He’s a builder. He puts together that Ikea furniture for these college students in town.”

It had been a month since Norma’s coworker and confidante at the diner, Mary Anne, had suggested she join Tasker, a gig site that she posed as a solution to Norma’s financial woes. All

Norma had to do was help out with odd jobs, the only prerequisites being an able body and a tolerance for menial tasks. For her first gig she'd spent a morning picking up groceries and cooking supplies for a mother bringing her kids to soccer practice. Norma remembered the way the young white mom's ponytail had swayed as she rated "4 Stars" and cried "Thank you!" while untying a squirming boy's cleats. Next, Norma had helped an adult son and daughter clean out their deceased father's apartment. She'd smelled the unique must of the elderly as the sunlight shining through pleated shades illuminated dust motes in the air, dispersing as the tall son rushed through, moving a box outside.

As the reviews came in, Norma accumulated a 4.5 average. She supposed her smiling, youthful face attracted customers, along with the description that Mary Anne had helped with one day on break, nonchalantly puffing a strawberry-lemon vape: "I am happy to assist you with whatever tasks you may need. I am a hard worker and have a flexible schedule and reliable transportation." Within weeks, Norma began to build a humble business through the app, albeit at the mercy of the behemoth corporation that controlled her wages.

With the constant onslaught of task requests, Norma quit her job at the diner. Feeling hopeful for the first time since high school, she eagerly completed the application for a job at RideWithMe, a ride share app blowing up in the city which promised better wages and benefits for "partners" like her. Her first passengers were a group of kids on the way to a show, the streets quiet, close to midnight. They smelled of marijuana and beer and took selfies in the back seat. The work was tiresome, but she'd take anything over the hell that were the grabby hands of her manager at the diner.

Never had she anticipated the otherworldly overflow of this task.

She smiled. Bernadette stood with her hands on her hips. “I bought this house in 2004, after my husband passed away.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my babies here to keep me company.”

As if on cue, two wiggling Dachshunds appeared, greeting Norma’s ankles with sniffs and canine smiles. “Bert and Ernie,” Bernadette said. “You know, I heard on the news that they were a couple? I always say, don’t mess with the basics! People always want to put their ideas on everything these days.” Norma’s chest tightened. She thought of the \$200 she’d be receiving from the job, enough to cap off that month’s rent. “I used to watch Sesame Street with my little girl, Laura,” Bernadette said, picking up a manila folder stuffed with papers and placing it on a built-in shelf mindlessly. “But she’s all grown up.”

Norma smiled. “How sweet.”

“I appreciate you coming,” Bernadette said. “I guess we ought to get started.”

Norma followed Bernadette back into the entryway. Norma stood there, surveying the years’ accumulations of a solitary life. Bernadette hurried into the kitchen, fridge decorated with magnet souvenirs, and procured a gargantuan black trash bag from below the sink. She shook it open and for a moment Norma had the odd thought that the woman might suffocate her with it.

She snapped into focus. “Let me know how I can help.”

“Okay,” Bernadette said gravely. Slowly, she bent over and picked a wrinkled green sweater from the top of a pile of clothing. “I suppose this can be donated. I never wear this anymore.” She placed it in the trash bag with a rustle.

Norma reached down for a pile of haphazard sweaters.

“Oh, no. Those are my holiday sweaters.” Bernadette grabbed them and clutched them to her chest. Norma’s foot knocked into a small mound of novelty items and a cascade of rubber ducks sputtered onto the ground. The Dachshunds wriggled around the trash heaps like silverfish.

“You know what?” Bernadette said. “This is a big project, these clothes. Why don’t we move into the office? I’ve got some papers that have been sitting around for ages.”

“Okay, sure.” Norma followed Bernadette into the office where a desk was covered with stacks of papers. An old brick of a computer sat on the floor surrounded by miscellaneous monitors and bulky gray hardware that reminded Norma of early childhood. Tangles of wires snaked around the claustrophobic space like bramble. Above it all, a rotating fan created a hypnotic pulse.

Bernadette grasped a small stack of papers and declaratively placed them in Norma’s hands. “Trash.” Norma nodded, grabbed a trash bag from the kitchen and tossed the stack in. Bernadette looked on with a grimace. The woman sorted through papers melancholically, placing some in the trash bag, which Norma held open for her, from time to time. Norma heard the buzz of a shredder and turned to see Bernadette feeding papers into the old machine.

“Receipts,” she told Norma.

A box labeled “Jerry Files” perched on a wire shelving unit. Norma’s gaze lingered on the old box until she noticed Bernadette swiveling in an office chair ever so slightly, staring at the ground. Suddenly the woman got up and exited the room. “Excuse me, I have to make a phone call.”

She rushed out into the living room, leaving Norma in the middle of the paper melee.

Norma heard whispers. “This isn’t working. . . She’s of no use. She just stands there. I don’t even need the help. . . I can do it myself.” Silence. “Well then why don’t you come over and do it? You’re free anyways.” Silence. “Damn you.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude,” Bernadette said, blocking the doorway. “My daughter, she just thinks she knows everything. She’s got control issues. I don’t know where they came from. We let her do whatever she wants, raising her, no rules. She never needed them. She was always the sweetest girl.” Norma stood bewildered, suspended in time like a fly caught in a spider’s web. As the minutes went on, she wondered if and how her money would come and whether this woman was searching for a companion rather than a declutterer. But despite her growing desperation to leave, she couldn’t be rude. The Tasker customer guidelines instructed that the customer was always right.

“May I use your restroom?” Norma asked.

“Of course, it’s just around the corner.”

“Thank you.” Norma followed the maze past a substantial laundry room overflowing with dirty clothes. On the right was a small powder room. She closed the door.

She turned and found herself in a closet-like space whose small counter was cluttered with products—bars of soap, brushes, tubes of toothpaste. The small trash can overflowed with used tissues and an empty brown toilet paper roll perched on the toilet tank. Norma took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled. “Please Jesus let me get through this,” she said, clasping her hands together. “Let me just do what I came here to do and go home in peace.”

Norma looked at her reflection in the mirror, obscured by smudges. She brushed strands of hair out of her eyes and reapplied a layer of pomegranate chap stick to her lips. She scrubbed

her hands with a mostly water-filled soap container as if doing so would cleanse her of the primordial chaos of this house, a black hole in the center of Aurora.

Norma re-emerged from the bathroom to find Bernadette sitting on a reclining chair in the living room, looking through old photographs. She seemed to have calmed down. Norma wondered if she might have some sort of mental condition. They spent an hour or so going through items, a mere fraction of which made it into the trash bags which lay dormant on the carpet.

Every so often, Bernadette would tell her a story of some object or other. A little girl's Minnie Mouse dress bought at Disneyland for Laura in the 80's, the way she'd cried at the loud booms of the fireworks show. The argyle sweater that was a birthday present to Jerry from her mother, God rest her soul, who always thought her husband needed to up the ante on his fashion. Bernadette found a photo of Laura with a handsome man, the two wearing college sweaters at a football tailgate. "Ah," Bernadette remembered. "Laura and Brad. The college days. We missed her so much."

Norma looked on. "She's pretty. Are they still together?"

"Yes, Bernadette said. They have a two-year-old, Jackson. You have a boyfriend?"

Norma coughed. "No," she said, smiling politely.

"Nice girl like you, I'm sure there's dozens of guys who'd love to take you out. Round here, mountain men. Always climbing, higher and higher. Jerry was like that. Had a keen eye for the market. We settled down here, planning for retirement, until. . ." She looked away winsomely. Her face betrayed a rushing void of tragedy that Norma might never understand but feared she might.

And she felt compelled to answer to the task that perhaps she had been truly called to do.
“Do you need to talk to someone? We could just talk.”

“Talk?” Bernadette scoffed. “You’re here to do a task.” Norma swallowed hard. A wave of guilt overtook her, smothering her heart with garbage. “Look at this place. You haven’t moved a single thing since you’ve been here. I took off my workout at the Y for this. This generation, so entitled.”

“I’m sorry, I- I don’t want to impose.”

“You know what?” Bernadette sighed with pseudo politeness. “I’m sorry. This isn’t working. I’d like you to leave.”

“Are you sure? I’d be happy to help in any way I can.”

“Sure. Well, you know what? People are always trying to help me,” she said exasperatedly, tossing items to and fro, bounding toward Norma, practically chasing her out the front door. “I don’t need any help. I’m perfectly fine here on my own.” Norma hurriedly gathered her bag and rushed outside into the mountain air where, in the driveway, a pretty woman stood. The woman closed the trunk of her SUV, balancing plastic bags and cleaning supplies on her knee as Bernadette yelled.

“I am so sorry,” the woman from the photographs said, rushing towards Norma. “She gets like this. You know, we’ve been trying to get her help for years. My husband told me about this app. You looked so friendly, we thought you might be able to ease her into decluttering. She’s drowning in there. This was a mistake.”

Norma stood there baffled. At her feet she saw two wiggling rushes of brown. The dogs assailed Bernadette’s daughter—Laura. “Hi, hi, hi,” Laura said, exasperated, pressing her supplies on her hip while petting them. One of the dogs moved to the yellowing grass and took a

crouched stance, squeezing out shit. Norma stared in horror. She could hear Bernadette shouting from the doorway. “Thank you,” Norma said rushing past Laura, who called out apologies. Tears welled in Norma’s eyes as she flung open the door to the Camry. As she sped away, the air conditioning felt like shards of ice, blasting in her face like laughter.

That night, Norma lay in bed, streaming a baking show on her laptop. A smiling Black woman held a piping bag gingerly as a perfect swirl of pink icing appeared on the top of a cupcake. Something sweet. It soothed her. She mindlessly scrolled the social feeds, then mindlessly opened Tasker to see if she’d been booked for any new tasks. A review popped up. “1 Star.” It was from Bernadette A.

“This woman was entitled and bratty. She didn’t take the task seriously and wasted my time. We didn’t get a single thing done. Do not hire her.” The review had sent Norma’s average plummeting down to a 3.2, reminding her of the devastation caused by a recent RideWithMe passenger who Norma had refused to let smoke a cigarette in the car. Her face fell. At least she’d be able to make rent.

Two days later, sitting in her car outside the diner, in the shadow of the Rockies, she deleted her Tasker account. Inside, she begged her manager to take her back. At least there she would have the human connection of Mary Anne. They’d gossip about celebrity couples and kvetch about demanding customers. At night, after classes which stretched on into oblivion, Norma would lie awake, the shadows closing in and suffocating her, as her dreams filled with fractal mountains of all the things she’d never done and would never do.