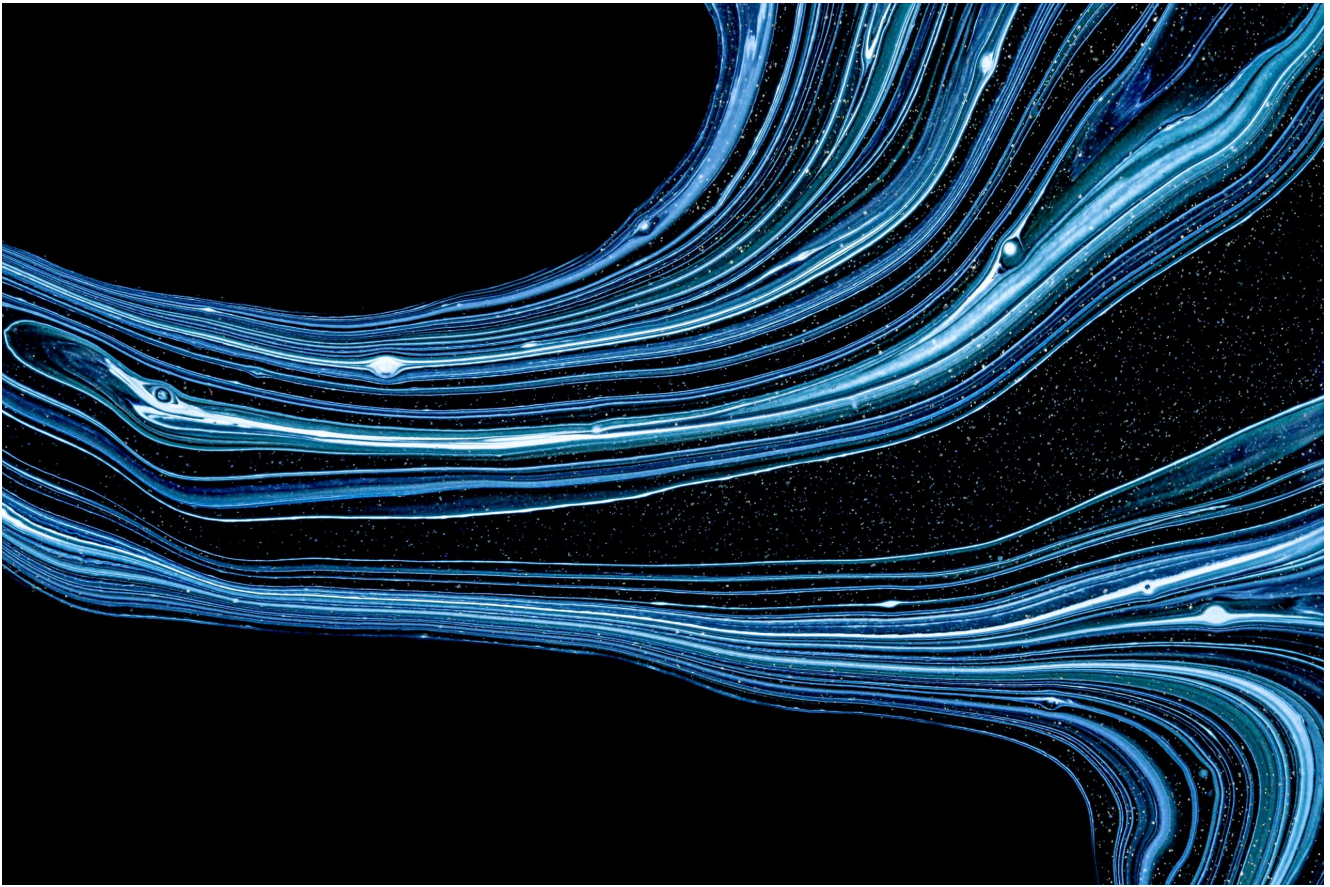


New Fiction by Nancy Ford Dugan: "Flow"



So, Abe, the pleasant guy who buzzes you in every week at the bubbled-roof tennis facility, takes your thick wad of cash (he appreciates exact change) and makes the usual small talk: weather, recent professional tennis matches, how he's doing fixing up the fixer-upper he just bought in Queens, etc.

Lately, you've also been discussing updates on when the tennis club is scheduled to permanently close. The date keeps shifting, but it's imminent.

He'll lose his job. You'll lose your precious hour of weekly tennis.

Today, you notice for the first time a large swelling at Abe's neck. Behind the plexiglass, you suppress a gasp and try not to gawk. You glimpse. It's protruding like an Adam's apple,

but halfway down his neck and on the side.

Is it new? Is it painful?

Should you tell him?

Is he blithely unaware?

Or is he fully aware and ignoring it?

Or is he aware and already undergoing medical treatment to deal with it, to keep it from growing, to keep it from consuming all of his neck and possibly his friendly, dark-eyebrowed face and even his shaved head?

Your long-time tennis partner would know what to do, and whether you should bring it up with Abe. She was raised down south and has impeccable manners.

But she's in Egypt for a climate change conference and to see the pyramids. Or so she says. You imagine she is a perfect spy or a radical activist. She is tiny, nondescript, unassuming, and so soft-spoken no one has a clue what she is saying. She is traveling despite all the warnings and articulated dangers associated with travel for someone her age during what is hoped to be a waning phase of the pandemic.

If you wait for your tennis partner to return (in a few weeks) to consult on how to handle Abe's situation, it may be too late for Abe. And it will be solely on you if Abe dies before her return from her high-risk trip because you neglected to mention the large swelling attacking his neck.

Abe is functioning fine. He's busy juggling multiple phone lines, multiple demands for coveted weekend court time. Not knowing what to do, you wave at him through the plexiglass, he smiles back, and you wander to your court, fully masked for action.

You and your tennis partner have been playing with face masks

on for several months now; they fog up eyeglasses, pinch behind ears, cut visual perspective horizontally and vertically, and muffle attempts at conversation. On the other hand, there is the possibility that wearing masks while exerting and running could improve lung capacity.

After ten minutes on the court with the young local pro, you are huffing and exhausted. So much for lung capacity. Fifty more minutes to go. During the expensive lesson, you want to make every costly minute count. But you are distracted. You hit the ball wide or long or inaccurately into the sloping net.

Is the distraction due to concerns about your partner's long, potentially dangerous trip? The amount of extra money you have to pay for a lesson while she's away?

Or is it all due to thoughts of Abe's neck growth? To wondering if it will intensify or expand to the size of a yellow tennis ball, while you are selfishly hitting one instead of helping him? What will Abe's neck look like when your lesson is over?

Will the growth turn yellow? Will that mean it is full of pus?

Why aren't you racing off the court to beg Abe for the love of God to go immediately to an urgent care center (there's one only a few blocks away) to address his neck issue?

You are unaccustomed to the steady onslaught of briskly and accurately placed balls the pro provides. He plucks the balls nonstop from a jam-packed grocery cart and smacks them at you.

You are accustomed to a sluggish weekly pace with your tennis partner, filled with rambling delays between points as she collects loose balls and places them in odd arrangements at the back of the court. You imagine she is plotting to

overthrow a government on a continent oceans away, beyond this smooth, immovable, and bright blue deco surface. You impatiently pace, wait, and sometimes perform jumping jacks until she is finally ready to successfully hit her serve with the intensity of ten thousand suns. Or she hits it directly into the net.

From his side of the court, the agile-legged pro speaks liltily about flow. "Where is your flow?" he asks. "Don't rush your shots. Get your arm back early. Get it! I like that one. Pivot! Run up to the net. Keep your wrist steady."

You have heard these commands, especially about wrist and flow, nearly every time you take a lesson when your tennis partner is unavailable and your back-up options (a sturdy friend from college, a hard-hitting former work colleague) don't pan out.

Your wrist is the size of a pencil, so what's a woman to do? It doesn't wobble on return of serve since you have time to prepare. But impromptu, at the net, it dips. Some might say it collapses. You start mumbling your "Grip!" mantra to yourself under your multiple masks. It helps you focus and slightly improves the wrist flailing.

As for flow, some days you have it and some days you don't. But honestly, how can you flow when a young man's neck might now be the size of a Buick while you, a masked idiot, gambol all over your side of the court and contend with an unreliable wrist?

You associate the word "flow" with menstruation, something you have not had to worry about for quite some time. Years ago, at a Long Island party where everyone discussed furniture, you were introduced to a much older, wizened man. Over the course of your very brief conversation, he chose for some reason to confide in you that he only dated women who still "flowed."

At the time, you silently wondered:

- Who invited this guy to the party and why? And who uses the word flow in this manner, much less in party patter with a stranger?
- How does he screen for flow status upfront, before dating anyone? Does he require a doctor's note? Does he check out bathroom cabinets? Does he ask women directly? Do they punch him in the nose as he deserves and as the woebegone look of his nose implies?
- Has he incorrectly assumed you no longer flowed, or God forbid that you were interested in dating him?
- You have a gorgeous and smart friend, a mother of twins, who went through early menopause in her thirties. If he had met her "post-flow" would this presumed Viagra user find her lacking? Chopped liver?

Now you wonder why couldn't that guy have a tennis ball affixed to the side of his creased neck instead of poor, young Abe? Abe, who hasn't even finished fixing up his house.

In fury, you use your two-handed backhand to nail a deep, perfect shot down the line past your lilting-voiced pro. He's unable to return it. He smiles broadly at you and says, "Nice!"

Flow or no flow, for a moment, you've still got it. And it feels so good to hit something.

Maybe Abe just needs some drainage.

Maybe your tennis partner will return safely and virus-free from Egypt.

Maybe the tennis club will stay open.

All unlikely.

But, maybe, and it's a long shot, a very long shot, maybe you will learn *finally* to go with the flow.

But, then again, why start now?