

# Beautiful Minds

New York Short Stories

Portfolio Samples

Jackie Goldman

## **About This Collection**

Beautiful Minds is a collection of first-person narratives featuring creative New Yorkers who followed their dreams to realize their personal and professional aspirations. The project celebrates artists, performers, activists, and innovators who have shaped their lives through passion and perseverance.

## **Ghostwriting Process**

Each story required extensive interviews to authentically capture a distinct voice, background, and artistic journey. Through careful listening and narrative crafting, I transformed interview conversations into compelling memoirs that reflect each subject's unique perspective, values, and experiences.

The following three stories demonstrate my ability to write across different voices, cultural contexts, and creative disciplines—from classical music to performance art to community activism.

**\*\***These narratives are based on interviews with New York creatives. Names and identifying details have been modified.

## The Violinist

*A classically trained violinist from the Canary Islands recounts her journey to New York. —  
Ghostwritten by Jackie Goldman*

HOW DO I DESCRIBE the feeling of playing my violin? It is a sensation beyond words, but I have only words to describe it: transcendent, meditative, magical. It is the instrument that shaped my life in every way, leading me on a spiritual and intellectual journey that propelled me to overcome every obstacle. On its back, I flew to more countries than I can count and met the most wonderful people that the world of art can produce. It cleaved my life into distinct chapters, and I am grateful for each one. How do you become great at something? You must first fall in love with it, and then it becomes your passion.

I first fell in love with the violin when I was just three years old. My parents, avid music lovers, often took me to concerts at the Teatro Pérez Galdós in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, an exquisite concert hall in my hometown in the Canary Islands. It was like walking into an enchanted palace. The majestic white and gray exterior, the marbled entranceway with its stained glass and arched passages, and the exquisitely decorated concert hall, never failed to create a shiver of anticipation for the musical fervor to come.

From our seats in the balcony, I watched the well-dressed people as they greeted one another and took their places in red velvet seats before I turned my gaze to the coffered ceiling and the beautiful paintings above the stage: a series of panels in the classical style, depicting artists from every calling, and created by local artist, Nestor Martin Fernandez de la Torre. Looking at them, I felt like they were returning my gaze and inviting me to be one of them. Then the violins started, and the music became a part of my very soul.

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Until the age of thirteen, I had an idyllic childhood in the perpetually warm, turquoise sea and pastel paradise of the Canary Islands. My house was always filled with relatives, and music and love abounded. These same relatives are fond of relating how I loved to perform

even before I began violin lessons: singing and dancing and dressing up. My parents always encouraged this free expressionism, and I think that is why, until this day, I have never experienced stage fright. I simply love to perform.

My first music lesson was when I was seven years old. It was like tugging the first bit of an endless spool of golden thread. While I continued to enjoy a wonderful, happy childhood with friends, family, and my four siblings, this golden thread of music began to weave itself into a sunny veil that let in only the best light to fill my childhood.

Then, at the age of twelve, I attended a summer music camp in Torroella de Montgi, near Barcelona, run by the acclaimed American violinist, Yehudi Menuhin. He recognized my talent and proposed to my parents that I move to Barcelona to study with his esteemed colleague, Xavier Turull.

Today, as the mother of a young child, I can better understand the emotions behind the symphony of tears and measured words of caution and reassurance from my own mother as she agreed to this arrangement. But at the time, I could only peek behind her shoulder to see where the golden thread was leading me: to a life of joy, independence, hard work, and unimaginable rewards.

And so, the chapter of my childhood ended, and a new one began. My father found a family in Barcelona that would take me in and, at the age of thirteen, I moved to mainland Spain, where I lived out my adolescence.

“Weren't you lonely?”

This is a question that I hear from everyone when I tell them that I left home at thirteen. But no, I was not lonely. Even though my family was not with me physically, I always felt surrounded by their love.

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Xavier was my teacher and mentor for the next several years. He was also the most elegant man I have ever met. Tall and handsome with a thick head of white hair, he dressed meticulously, usually in a suit and tie, and employed the most gracious manners to everyone he met. Outside of lessons, he introduced me to the greatest artists, composers, and poets in Spain. I had no understanding of how unique my life was at that time. As a teenager, these amazing people were my friends, and Xavier was like family. I loved them

and often performed in their homes. If it was a composer's home, I played his music.

Outside this enchanted circle, I lived a comparatively normal life. I went to school where I made a friend, Ivón; the only friend of my age I had during that time, and we are still best friends today. I studied hard, got good grades, and spent summers at music camps at various locations all over Europe.

Then, at the age of fifteen, I began my professional career as a performer at festivals and concerts around Spain. This odyssey included winning the National Award of String Players at eighteen and culminated in my debut at Palau de la Música in Barcelona when I was twenty.

At this time, the golden thread began to spin and spiral recklessly out of control. While recording and performing as a soloist with orchestras all over the world, my love for the violin never wavered. But our relationship was becoming simultaneously frenetic and stolid. When I arrived back in the Canary Islands to perform the Max Bruch violin concerto with the orchestra at the age of twenty-one, my mother told me I had to stop performing for a while and work on my technique. I knew she was right. I said goodbye to the second chapter of my life, the chapter of my teens and early twenties, and moved to Warsaw to study with the maestro Krzysztof Jakowicz.

This was the mid-90s, and Eastern Europe was still transforming itself from an oppressed, suspicious society to one that understood and embraced its freedom. Nevertheless, the people were genuinely kind and hospitable. I was greeted with flowers, delicious food, and warmth everywhere I visited.

The mentality in Warsaw was so different, so unique! I was amazed to see how revered teachers are there. Wherever we went, Krzysztof was greeted with bows and deference. He gave a concert and the response he got—it was as if he was a rock star! Krzysztof Was a different sort of teacher from Xavier. Although somewhat dry and tough, he was also very kind, and I learned a lot from him during the two-and-a-half years I spent studying there.

I then returned to Barcelona and resumed my career as a performer but travelled to London once a month to study with the Concert Master, García Asensio. he was the most gracious of men, welcoming me to stay in his home while he helped me prepare for my next performance or recording.

One day in January 2000, the morning after I arrived back in Barcelona from London, I was contacted by a mutual friend who told me that my old teacher, Xavier, had passed

away from a heart attack at the age of seventy-eight. The sadness of that moment was followed by an overwhelming sense that I had to leave Spain. I saw my life before my eyes. It would be more of the same. I had done everything, and it was time to leave; to follow the golden thread wherever it led me. It led me to New York.

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The New York chapter of my life is still unfolding. What can I say about this city? You meet amazing characters; do anything to make it, to survive. It forces you to dig deeper than you ever had to dig, and it rewards you with an audience that, more than anywhere in the world, has ears to listen and eyes to see. That is what I love about this place. People are not looking to enforce their old ideas on you. They want to hear new ones! They are looking for fresh concepts, and when you have them, they do not resent you for it. Instead, they are grateful and reward you.

In New York, I found what I want professionally. Since being here, I earned a master's degree and DMA (Doctorate in Musical Arts), got married, had a little girl, and still continue to perform and record music. Whenever I think I can't do it, I look at my daughter's face and then I know that I can.

Because that is where the golden thread has led me, after all. My journey is not over. My violin and I will continue to fly the skies and sail the seas, but my daughter's journey is just beginning. At some point she will find her passion, and then I will find the start of that long, golden spool and hand it to her. I know she will understand that it is a magical thread, and she must just believe; not only in it, but in herself.

## The Model and Performance Artist

*A Brooklyn-born performance artist discovers liberation and self-acceptance through body paint and public art. — Ghostwritten by Jackie Goldman*

TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS BEFORE I was scheduled to have major back surgery, a procedure which would either cure my chronic arthritic back pain, or potentially leave me crippled for life, I found myself standing naked and shaved from head to toe at a friend's New Year's Day party, having my body painted along with another friend, to be part of a living art exhibit.

The spellbinding but lengthy ordeal took three and a half hours, during which I had to stand perfectly still with nothing to do except smoke weed and watch, as my body was transformed by a stranger whose spirit seemed to be guided by a purity that mesmerized me. I had never really witnessed art before, not like that. This was art that came from the heart, stripped of pretention. The experience changed my life.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't your typical story about a guy who goes from working the corporate nine to five to someone who goes to parties naked, painted as a green pickle. I didn't quit my day job. I still work as a business consultant for all kinds of companies, from small startups and organizing music festivals, to big power companies. I just do this naked stuff on the side to keep myself sane, and to keep life in perspective.

But working in corporate America was one of the things that really opened my eyes to all the falseness in this world. For example, it's been my observation that the bigger the company, the more likely it is that people in their jobs are just playing a part, and they don't really know what they're doing. Even so, instead of being held accountable for any incompetence, they get rewarded.

That feeling of disingenuousness was one of the reasons I left home. I was a teenager, living at my family home on Long Island at the time. My mother's brother and his family lived around the corner. Well, one day their house burned down, and they came to live with us. The thing is—well, certainly as a rebellious teen—I had a hard time getting along with my uncle. Even then, I had a liberal sensibility, and he was a conservative guy, a rule

follower. My mother was the same way, I guess, but it just always seemed hypocritical to me.

I remember the two of them talking about how they could get the most out of the insurance money by having my uncle move in and so on, but at the same time they were telling me I had to follow the rules. Now, I know I'm the kid who set the lawn on fire instead of raking the leaves; trashed the neighbor's fence during one of the many crazy parties that my parents slept straight through; toured with the Grateful Dead at fourteen; and hid in a garbage can for four hours so the cops wouldn't arrest me for illegal fireworks on the Fourth of July, but I never tried to swindle or hoodwink anyone. That was too much, so I went to live with my grandmother in Midwood, Brooklyn, the borough in which I was born and lived until I was either three or six, depending on which of my parents you ask.

My late grandmother was the only person growing up who really just accepted me and respected me for who I was, no matter how stupidly I behaved. Looking back, even though on the outside she looked like your typical Jewish grandmother from Brooklyn, internally she had a very open and accepting way about her. I guess it's from her that I inherited a liberal sensibility; an ability to see through all the crap that society tells you you're supposed to do and be. To me, living how I want brings me pleasure, but it also means spreading love, truth, acceptance and honesty. That's what it's about, this thing I do.

I'll give you an example. Fashion Week, here in New York, is probably one of the biggest cons there is: All these models with the same kind of body that's supposed to represent what's beautiful, traipsing up and down the runway in clothing meant to disguise other people's "problem spots." Last year, during Fashion Week, my friends and I at Human Connection Arts organized the Polar Bear Paint in Times Square. People stripped down naked—all kinds of bodies and they were all beautiful—and let themselves get painted. It was freezing cold and raining but we had a blast, posing for photos with each other and with the tourists. That's our message really: That everyone is beautiful. We're body positive.

The thing is, deep down everyone realizes the truth of our message. I personally know it's true because once I started doing naked body paint modeling, I found myself surrounded by more positive people. Ninety percent of my arthritis pain went away, and I came to see



life clearly in a way that I never did before. It gives me a lot of joy, it really does, and I want to spread that joy.

So that's the reason I went to Check Point Charlie in Berlin, naked and painted with a Picasso-esque face on my torso and screamed "Freedom! Everybody get naked!" I was just spreading the love. And they did love it! Even the cops called me over to take selfies with me. They probably went home that night and told their families about the crazy naked guy, and everyone had a good laugh.

Maybe, when I'm gone, that's how people will remember me: that crazy guy. Well, maybe they'll remember me as that crazy guy who got them to try all kinds of sexual stuff, they never tried before. That's the other side of all the societal bullshit I don't go for: the sexual repression and people staying in miserable relationships because they believe that's what they're supposed to do. But there's a whole world out there. I've seen it. As a naked body paint model, I've appeared at a bunch of wild parties all around the city. People have no idea what goes on just around the corner from their homes.

But these parties, they're not just an expression of "free love." People are expressing themselves, and it's amazing. There's a kind of acceptance there that people in society who follow all the rules and think of themselves as solid citizens don't appreciate. Maybe a wild party isn't your thing, but for the people who go, it's an opportunity for them to be true to themselves, and they accept one another for who they are.

I model for those kinds of parties quite a bit. I went to a Valentine's Day Party painted as a Harlequin, and marched and partied at the Mermaid Parade painted as a green merman. I always have fun. Well, there was that one time when I caught on fire and almost had to jump in the river, but otherwise I'd say I have more fun than most guys my age, and I get paid for it. Sometimes I just model, other times I organize the party. I'm an excellent organizer because I know the law, and the parties that I curate are one hundred percent legal.

I think the downside of having so much fun is that people I know—people that I've grown up with—resent me, or they feel jealous. Those friendships aren't what they once were. I feel disappointed in a lot of people. It's hurtful, even if I do understand what's behind it. Well, making a transition like this opens your eyes to the world and people. You have to take the good with the bad.

So, the parties are cool. They're something. I had to mention that. But I also get to be a

part of this city in a really special way. I go to marches and demonstrations painted. For two weeks I was the Breitbart poster boy with the slogan “Embrace Love and Life” painted on my torso. But I also go to more establishment parties, like promotions for Vodka, Cigars, or art galleries. I always do whatever I can to support what I consider to be real art, even if it means swinging from a subway pole naked after being painted by the artist Quori Moorehaul.

In New York, Andy Golub is the artist who really pioneered and champions the body painting movement, and I work with him a lot. He is a pure soul who really gets it, and encourages people to love their bodies, because that’s who we are! My favorite quote from him is: “I don’t make art to blend into the environment. I make art to contrast with it.”

Right now, I feel like I’ve created the life I should be living. Doing what I do, and interacting with unpretentious people, has helped me understand what good art is: It’s art that comes from the heart.

People seeing me painted and out and about in the streets of New York might have a hard time believing that I’m also a family guy, with a wonderful wife and two great kids. And, with all the fun I’ve been having, if I think about my favorite memory, it’s the time my wife and I hiked a part of the Appalachian trail together one spring, years ago. Art is everywhere, I guess, but it starts with the human heart, in its purest state.

## The Volunteer Activist

*A New York accountant finds deeper purpose through global volunteer work and humanitarian service. — Ghostwritten by Jackie Goldman*

I WAS BORN IN Brooklyn, but just before I started high school in 1986, my family moved out to Central Islip, Long Island. That's where I started volunteering. It was just a regular thing, I guess. I went with some kids from my school to visit a mental hospital where we sang Christmas Carols. Some people might be turned off by being in a mental hospital, but for me, the experience opened my eyes to a different world, a world most people don't see. It woke something up inside me; a desire to give back and learn about different sides of life.

For me, volunteering is a way of giving love. Some people cut a check. Some people give speeches and attend or organize events. I give my time. Looking at all the volunteering I've done might give people the impression that I'm altruistic, but I feel like it's selfish in some ways since I've got so much back in return. I've had the opportunity to travel and see how incredibly different people's lives can be. That knowledge has expanded me—heart and mind—and enriched my understanding of life and the world in which we live. That's a gift. It's the gift I got back from giving of myself.

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When I was in college at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania in 1990, I joined Alpha Phi Omega's service fraternity. We volunteered all over the place: mental institutions, senior citizens' homes, neighborhood cleanups, you name it. There's something about that human connection, about being with people who need help and being with people like myself who feel compelled to help others, which I find gratifying.

After college, I earned my CPA and started working as an accountant for big financial firms in Manhattan. Still, I always felt the need to volunteer when I could, finding the time and energy to do so even though I was simultaneously earning my MBA at New York

University. Mostly, I found that an organization called “New York Cares” afforded me the greatest flexibility in terms of choosing the times and opportunities that matched my interests and schedule. Later, I started using my vacation time to volunteer internationally.

I joined other volunteers working with children in El Salvador, Kenya, Peru, and Fiji. There are areas where people live in the most deplorable slums, and the kids just run the streets, starting as young as age five. Life is so tough, they start doing drugs—sniffing glue mainly—and live on the streets. I helped in orphanages and children’s homes, playing games with them and doing crafts. It was a situation where their parents couldn’t care for them for whatever reason and had to give them over to an orphanage.

Visiting all these slums, well, it gave me a strange feeling to see people living like that, especially in Peru, the country my family comes from. The flimsy shacks, with roofs made of corrugated metal, were tangled into a hillside, without even any grass around. Families hung their clothes outside to dry and kept their water in plastic barrels on the porch. To be honest, it looked like a strong rainstorm followed by a mudslide, or the strike of a match, could bring the whole thing down in moments, but by some miracle, they clung on.

In Fiji, a place most people associate with fancy resorts and luxury vacations, underprivileged locals live in tin shanties in swampy areas with makeshift walkways to get over streams of water. The water is dirty and cluttered with garbage, but the kids swim and play there anyway. What else can they do?

One thing I noticed during this time is that the proverb, “wealth doesn’t bring happiness,” is so true. Even though many people are miserable and just give up, I also saw another side. The warmth; the strong family bonds; the inner joy and optimism that people can have even living in such abject poverty is something that I don’t often see here in America, the land of plenty. It taught me that you have to look inside yourself for that true joy that many of us seek, but often in the wrong places.

In 2008, when the financial crisis happened, I was laid off from my job at an esteemed financial institution in New York. That’s when I went to India for the first time. A woman at my church had a school in a small village thirteen hours by train from Delhi.

Mary is Indian by descent and works as a nurse at a hospital in Manhattan. Most of the money she makes she puts towards maintaining the school she established in a town outside of the mystical destination of Chitrakoot, India: a small city with a rich history of saints and poets, along the Mandakini River. Although in her seventies, Mary is vivacious

and spry and, along with her nephew, greeted me with feeling in Delhi before we embarked on the long train ride to Chitrakoot.

For most of the journey, we slept. Then, when the sun rose, we sipped chai tea served in small paper cups and chatted while staring out the less-than-clean windows. Through them, I gazed at lush green mountains and arid deserts; at the sides of tiny villages with houses made of mud and straw or aluminum siding. I was mesmerized by the contrast between the ambling people and animals and the brisk pace of the train as we wove our way through the countryside, ducking under the occasional tunnel hatched through rocky mountains.

The town of Kawri centered around an open market area. There was a mission against whose exterior wall people had constructed simple lean-to homes. The surrounding area was made up of sustenance farms with tiny houses, where large families slept in a single room and used outhouses. There was no indoor plumbing. Instead, people fetched their water and washed their clothes in the river, hanging it outside their houses to dry.

Near the center of the town, and not far from the mission was Mary's school. When I saw it, I couldn't believe she had done this thing; built it from the ground up. It was a three-story structure with a playground, classrooms, and happy children in cream and brown uniforms.

One of the men who worked for Mary at her home was Pakash. He was slight and cheerful and had this bicycle with an attachment on the back. Every weekday he rode two hours in each direction to pick up children and bring them to school and back. By the time he arrived at school, there were about fifteen kids all hanging off his bicycle. And then they all piled back on at the end of the day, and he took them home!

When I first arrived for a visit at the school, the children and teachers made a big deal out of it. It was such a small, isolated village, and they weren't used to seeing foreigners. They performed dances and gave me leis. It really touched me.

Mary lived in a humble but relatively modern two-story home. I spent weeks with her, touring the area and visiting her many friends. It's hard to explain how different it is in India. So many people are poor, but there is a happy feeling in the air. It gets into you.

One evening, towards the end of my stay, I was sitting on the roof of Mary's house, a flat concrete slab where clothing hung to dry, and monkeys scuttled occasionally along the raised edge. I stared out over the town nestled in by the distant mountains and felt so

at peace, yet that happiness was tinged with the regret of knowing that my time in India was coming to an end. I wanted to stay and resolved that I would come back to India and spend more time there if the opportunity presented itself.

When I arrived back in New York, I still had four months' severance. After working for so long and having such a euphoric experience in India, I was in no hurry to find another job. Instead, I started volunteering around the city, running programs for school children at UNICEF, and being a docent (volunteering as a guide or concert usher). I also attended seminars and conferences at NYU geared towards graduates trying to find their way back into the workforce after being laid off during the financial crisis.

That's how I found the job I have now, working as a controller at a non-profit. I started there in 2009, and everything was great until they hired a new CFO who was just miserable to work for. I soldiered on, but in the back of my mind, the flame of India still blazed, and I did some research and found out that my company had an office over there. I immediately booked a two-week trip.

It felt wonderful to be back. I remember it was May of 2011 because Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding was happening. One couldn't turn around without being faced with some televised aspect of the event or a trinket for sale to commemorate it.

I visited Mumbai and Goa. In Mumbai, I stayed close to the Hotel Taj, where the horrible terrorist attack happened a few years earlier. Mumbai was a beautiful mixture of antiquity and European flavor, and I visited all the tourist attractions and enjoyed myself immensely.

Goa is a coastal town, lush with greenery. I toured most of the area one day on the back of the motorcycle of a friend I made on the trip. Easter Sunday fell in the middle of my stay. I went to church, where I met a woman who told me about the International Justice Mission organization that offered one-year fellowships for people interested in volunteering in antihuman trafficking and slavery.

When I got back to New York, I applied for the fellowship. That email ultimately launched my application, acceptance, and training for this organization, where I spent a year aiding in the rescue of bonded laborers in Bangalore. The experience was both intense and humbling.

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Our days started early, at the police station—a sparse concrete building with just a few desks and chairs—where we filed paperwork and obtained release papers for people who had been duped into what amounted to human slavery at rock quarries and brick manufacturing plants.

Traffickers promised them vast sums of money if they went to work in these places and brought their families, but once there, they were imprisoned and never paid. They suffered physical and sexual abuse and, if ever any members of the family wanted to leave the compound, other members were made to stay behind to ensure their return.

It was illegal, and the police knew about it, but they didn't care about those people. We had to force them to do their job. A contingent from my organization would accompany the police officers to the quarry to conduct a raid and bring the people back to the police station. I remember seeing the first group of rescued people. They were tiny—stunted in growth and development from undernourishment—and stared at us with wide, fearful eyes, trying to figure out who we were and if we were going to hurt them or help them.

Generally, the first thing we did was get them food—usually some biryani: rice mixed with meat and vegetables. Then, together we sat on the floor of the police station and ate, and you could see them relax in our company over the meal. Gradually trust replaced the fear in their eyes.

We then arranged transport, rehabilitation, and counseling services. Once they were back in their villages, we visited them. Their villages were dusty enclaves halfway up mountainsides, where they lived in tiny huts with mud floors, no electricity, and no plumbing. Animals roamed freely, including the occasional elephant, and everyone lived in one room and ate off the floor, the food resting on dried banana leaves.

Everything was surprisingly clean, probably because they had so few belongings, just the clothes they wore and the cots they slept on. Yet I don't think they considered themselves poor. They didn't know anything else; just the comparable hardship and abuse of the quarries, so they were grateful to be home at last.

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After a year of working for IJM, I returned to New York. I worked at a few different jobs and reached out to my old company, where I heard that the CFO I disliked remained. I

felt at a crossroads, not sure what I wanted to do next.

Then, in 2013 I went back to India one last time for a wedding and a job interview. The company I interviewed with was ready to offer me the job, and I knew that this was it. I had to decide if I wanted to live in India after all. On impulse, I reached out to my old company in New York one last time and was greeted with the news that the old CFO had left. I knew the woman who was to replace him. She was a person I liked and respected, so when they offered me a position, I decided to accept it. I felt like I had been so fortunate to see and experience the world, but I also felt it was time to come home.

So, I returned to New York and my old job, but with a wonderful new boss who is an inspiring leader and mentor. Now I'm expecting my first child and am so excited to show him the world and see it all over again through his beautiful, innocent eyes!