

Harvest Time

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Harvest Time
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What Marks the Spot

The last of the summer flies
buzz and spin on the window sill.
Their evasion of months of cobwebs
and fan blades have earned them
this much. A final hurrah at the warped
pains, the manic whirl of their magnetic
wings; they will drop like anise seeds
and dry into caskets of lint in the light
of late November. They suspected the air
outside was warmer when it wasn't.
Heat as only a factor of magnification.
It is the physic of glass, sun, and angle
which matters. It is the physics of memory
which lies.

As the belladonna casts off
her batik scarves the fields outside
wash to ochre, umber, sienna, sepia,
dun— sash weights ripen inside the walls—
the knocking heard from within. Outside
the harvest's opulence of gourd and blackberry
is revealed by the naked black limbs
of the trees gesture to the lovers
walking their dog up the grass hill where
there is an acorn tree and a hundred
and sixty degree view. The portrait of a city seen.
Knotted like the tails of kites,
trails of smoke rise from the riverbank suburbs
The radio tower's aerials blink
their single red eyes, and above them,
the contrails of jets seem
to spell something—

Philip Kobylarz

River Flowing Underground

When was it when the birds
were singing in Greek
and the water tower changed
sheaths of rust for a jacket of leaves
in what had begun
an august August.

The measure of entelechy's
arc is the span from
a man's wrist to the silver
of his fingers in knife-light.

Exempt is the insatiable
with a glass of port and white
wire around the instep
of its stern.

A rain bird calls its codex
of cloud show surmounting
aero-born bits of lightning

and simply taken into consideration
is the advancing of the night
in the frozen vein of river
lies under ice.

Philip Kobylarz

View From The Coast

So many snail shells in the sand
suggest a desert, the graveyard it hides.
Rocks grow into trees, the light echoes;
a valency, whatever it might be, happens.
At the pass, painted graffiti, expected to be
primal and in another language.

Then, a painted stairway, first step
to the last, always going up. Resulting
in footprints or best seats at a cloudshow.
Rains comes leaving calling cards
of fallen leaves. Snails try to enter –
for the fun of it– an empty fishbowl.

Seagulls, really mutes, try to talk
while what we hear, we interpret as
begging. The park is cluttered with people
and the flags of plastic bags they leave.
If the word for sin in French is close to
peach tree, there is redemption.

Philip Kobylarz

The Status Quotidian

Old photos in another language,
the people look vaguely the same
Separated at birth, families cling
to umbilical cords of memory— powdered,
thought collects in luggage stored
in rooms. Is nothing is kept safe?

Hills render clouds endlessly, there's
nothing better for the weather to do.
Arbousier tree blooms spiked red candies
of fruit, free for the taking. In the city,
the cemetery is joyous with visitors.

What is not usual becomes coincidence.
Those who don't gamble appear when
there are stakes. With umbrellas. Glory
can be as deep as coats of paint on white
windows. People gather around kiosks to hear
the papers speak of a stolen plane that flew
through the legs of the Eiffel tower again.

Philip Kobylarz

Autoportrait

Jay had a recurring dream: he walked, panicked, along a white hallway. Gray doors on either side were locked. Jay thought he had a key but had forgotten it; he felt the doors really should have been unlocked. A view from above would show the hallway continued for some ways in both directions. After he woke, he felt the entire experience folding in on itself as if the dream were a memory and the memory a lie he had told himself.

He found himself thinking of the dream as he stood on Rue des Beaux Arts, staring into the window of small art gallery. Jay stood to the side of the large window so the man inside would not see him. The name of the exhibition of photographs was "Poems." Hung on the walls of the small gallery were three photographs: an image of a short three sentence paragraph appeared on each. It was impossible for Jay to read the words.

He didn't enter the gallery. The man inside was typing on a white notebook computer just inside the door. Jay could see his fingers on the keyboard; he was almost able to read the text on the screen. His memory of the dream had caused him to momentarily fear walking through doors, even ones that were open. Jay removed his camera from his pocket and took close-ups of the computer screen and the photos with the words printed. He then took pictures of the sign above the gallery, the man's hands, and the street number above the door.

He crossed the street to the hotel where Oscar Wilde had passed in 1900 of meningitis. His guidebook mentioned a funny remark that Wilde made shortly before his death. He underlined the quote with his pen and travelled back to Rue de Seine.

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Moving across the ocean had been a mistake. For months, Jay had the sinking feeling that the decision he had made was very wrong: it engulfed him in a terrible sea of uncertainty and doubt. He lived at the edge of a small village. Small roads and bike trails connected the wheat, maze, and flaxseed fields beyond his street.

Before his trip to Paris, Jay had started taking daily walks on the roads and trails through the fields. One particular route took him by a series of strange markers and buildings. Jay began formulating a story that linked the places that intrigued him on his walks. By the third or fourth walk, Jay's story was a full-fledged novella, one that he didn't think he had the skill to write. He smiled every time he passed one of the markers, knowing that he had a secret.

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After he finished his walking tour of the Left Bank, Jay found a cafe once frequented by Ernest Hemingway and decided to sit and work on his novella *The Stations in the Fields*. He thought his title was ominous and described a work wrought with mystery and psychological tension. After reading a few Hemingway novels before his trip, he made an effort for muscular, taut prose that was unadorned and left the reader to draw conclusions on his or her own. As he started writing, his thoughts continued to drift back to the man typing in the window of the gallery.

He wondered if the words in the frames meant something, or if what the man had typed was a message for him. At the time, he'd felt that the man typing knew he was looking. He took out the camera to look at the photos.

Photo 1, Framed Words: Line 1: "Life damages dreams." Line 2: "Dreams damage the journey." Line 3: "The journey damages life."

Photo 2, Framed Words: Line 1: "Life is not a dream." Line 2: "Dreams inhabit life." Line 3: "Dreams happen to life."

Photo 3, Framed Words: Line 1: "Do not read this." Line 2: "Reading this is harmful." Line 3: "Dreams are harmful."

Jay felt a sense of relief; the framed words were meaningless and had nothing to do with him. He'd seen artwork from fellow students that resembled this: small letters on pure white canvases. The words usually meant nothing – the artist wanted the observer to appreciate the technique of creating perfectly formed letters that would appear type-written from afar when in actuality they were finely painted. Some of the best of these featured painted watermarks and a graininess that simulated the kind of business stationery one would use for a résumé. A friend had once painted a canvas that was his vitae; his professor had used the piece as an example of how to get a gallery owner or art buyer's attention. Jay then remembered that the framed words in the Paris gallery were photographs. The idea was silly to him. The technique was as meaningless as the words themselves.

Jay turned his attention to the picture of the man typing in the window. He zoomed in as far as he could to make out the words on the screen. The words were fuzzy and hard to make out, but eventually he could read most of the writing:

"Don't be frightened. It's taken some time to find you. I am shocked. I need your help. When you think about it, please stop by and see me in person."

Jay was frightened. This must be a trick set-up by someone that knew he was coming to Paris. But how would someone know when he would come this way? It didn't make sense to him. He looked over his shoulder; he thought he heard laughing in the corners of the bar. His stomach tied itself in a knot, and he could hear his own breathing. The itch of paranoia crawled up his spine and lodged itself in his throat. He felt that he might hyperventilate.

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The Stations in the Fields by J P

I'm writing to you from the present. As a matter of fact, you can pretend I'm sitting next to you as you read this. I'm sure that you're in a nice comfortable chair with a fire crackling; perhaps, you have a cup of warm tea or coffee and someone you love is sitting next to you. You can pretend I'm part of this lovely domestic scene; I could be reading the story out loud so that all may hear. I'm sitting near you telling you this. I am.



Also, pretend that this is a taut, psychological story: one that might resemble the plot of a novel near the supermarket checkout with familiar characters that resemble you and your friends. The prose should be muscular and tense. You'll need to pretend this. Also, think of this story as more intelligent than the above mentioned supermarket novels: maybe this story is more intelligent in its details and has more discerning reference points; perhaps, it even reminds you of a contemporary fiction writer that is reclusive and genius. You'll need to pretend this.

The way I'll tell the story is like this: there are 5 stations. They are in the fields beyond my house in the foreign country that I live in. It's a small village, and I live on the outskirts. I've not left my house much and am surprisingly depressed and maybe a little out of my mind with loneliness. The stations are along the roads and bike paths that connect the fields. I think the crops are corn, flaxseed, and maybe some type of mint. Can you also pretend that this is a long story...perhaps a novella?

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Jay didn't know many people in his new village. No one knew him. He went to work every day and sat almost motionless in his cubicle typing reports, emails, and other documents. He rarely spoke to his coworkers. He was shy and didn't feel making friends would make his life better. He couldn't think of anyone who could have set up such an elaborate hoax.

He thought he might be hallucinating and referred back to the photo many times to be sure he wasn't delusional. Though, the next day, he did find something in the photo in the bottom corner. Even at the highest resolution, he couldn't make out what it was. He thought it might be a token hung from a copper bracelet on the man's wrist. The shape looked very familiar, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. It was something iconic, one of those images that is stamped into the mind of young children in elementary school. Jay felt that if he solved the riddle of the image, he might have some clue to why this was happening to him.

His thoughts exhausted him, and he found that because of the blurry image he could not continue his tour of Paris. He was tired; every site he travelled to seemed bland and held none of the mystery and grandeur he thought it might. He returned to his small room and lay on the bed, thinking.

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### Station 1: The Condenser

The first station is right after you pass from the main road that winds through the neighborhood onto the gravel road where the large farm vehicles travel to get to the fields. There is a large home that is unfinished; the outside isn't plastered and building supplies and dirt are piled in heaps behind it. Through the windows, you can see a family sitting at their table, having some simple dinner as you pass; I'm never sure but I don't think they ever speak as I walk past: their lips are never moving. Here's the odd part: not one house in this area has forced air conditioning, but this one does. Most homes have floor or radiator heating and never have cooling systems. Yet this home has a large condenser unit in the back...it rumbles low and certain as I pass. It is heating the house. The sound is so uncommon to me since I left to come here that it scrapes against my

senses. In the winter, there are no sounds as I pass except for the rumble and every few steps the croak of crows. The first station, I think, sets the mood for the others. It turns this ordinary family into agents of otherness, as if the fields beyond with the other stations are owned and managed, sinisterly, by them. I cannot fully explain how unsettling all this is, so you have to just take my word for it. Try to remember a particularly foreboding music cue in a suspense movie; play it in your head as you think of this family sitting at their table eating meat and potatoes as the condenser rumbles in their backyard. On the other side of the house, water always stands no matter how long since the last rain; this adds to the eeriness and you should note that the water is grayish-tinged and often capped with ice. Sometimes your feet crunch in the ice as you pass. The sights and sounds will continue to play in your mind well past the first station. I promise you that this happens. I promise you.

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In the middle of the night, Jay woke up from a dream that he could not remember. The only thing he remembered was the silhouette of the Eiffel Tower. Jay thought this must be the blurry image in the photo. He struggled with this idea: it seemed far too simple. He often scoffed at movies and books where the key to unlocking some plot sequence was so easy. He preferred unexpected twists, off-kilter plot devices, or even jarring conclusions that left the reader/viewer wondering what would happen next.

Although he wasn't quite convinced, he felt a pull to go the Eiffel Tower, a site he had planned on skipping for all the reasons other tourists wanted to go.

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## Station 2: The Barn

You must know that approaching the barn is unnerving; know that crows nest here in the rafters, finding holes where large masonry stones have come loose. The outside is littered with juvenile graffiti; even in this foreign land, teenagers find it amusing to draw distorted genitalia and what could be gang signs. I'm sure this frightens the farmers who use this barn to store their equipment and seed. What makes it unnerving is how large it is against the fields. As you approach, it seems very close for a long time because it's so big. Close up, though, it seems small, like it's actually nothing to fear. I think this characteristic has a post-modern feel to it. I read this story once where the house kept changing and the character had to adapt each day. He did adapt, perfectly, and even welcomed the change. Then, he went blind from a terrible bacteria that grew in his bathroom. Some pipes had burst when the rooms were changing, and he never bothered to fix it. The bacteria grew and then infected his eye. Then, the rooms altered and changed, and the man couldn't find anything and soon died from hunger and exhaustion. You should wonder about the barn and why it seems large from far away and small from up close. This should make your hair stand on end. You'll still be hearing the rumble of the condenser even though it's far out of range; the noise and the shock of this barn will frighten you. It will be at dusk during the fall and all the dead leaves will crunch under your feet. You may hurry past trying to avoid it, thinking of the bodies of blind men that may be rotting inside. You will want to avoid it. You will.

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Jay took the Metro to Avenue d'Iéna. The stop he wanted to get off on was under construction so he had to get off early. He wasn't sure which direction to walk and had to ask directions in his limited French: "Où se trouve la tour Eiffel?". His head was spinning as the Frenchman pointed in various directions, mumbling something incomprehensible. Jay took what he could from the man and walked under a section of scaffolding below a large apartment building. He had to cross a complex of boards connecting a sidewalk under repair. His head ached with anticipation.

At Place du Trocadéro, he had a very clear view of the tower. The base was crawling with tourists. Jay's stomach turned; he hated masses of people brought together by expected awe. Everyone's head was tilted back, eyes poised on the interlocking grid of iron that really had no purpose other than to bring tourists. It was disgusting to Jay. He found a bench and sat for a time thinking about what to do.

He decided to approach the tower, stand in line with others, and buy a ticket to the top. He hoped that a clue would reveal itself. He knew that all of this, all of his hope, was probably in vain. None of it made sense to him, even his own expectations. The line was long, wrapping around in many directions, folding in on itself like a maze. He thought he'd found the end a few times, but when he stood behind the last person, someone would tap him on the shoulder or nudge him and point in another direction, speaking French or Italian or German. The barriers that helped form the line were made of gray metal, resembling cages; once inside it was impossible to leave until there was a break in the barriers. The breaks were far apart; Jay usually thought that a break would be the end of the line. He finally found the end after much frustration and doubt. The line was impossibly long. He prepared himself for a long wait.

Jay could feel panic and tension creeping up his throat and spine. Someone or something seemed to watch from above. The skeletal frame of the tower loomed, and even though he knew it was impossible, he perceived a low rumble, something like a sound he wrote about in his novella. He knew that the sound was not real, but it caused him more anxiety. His eyelids started to twitch uncontrollably. He rubbed his forehead and twisted his eyebrows.

The man in front of Jay, perhaps Indian or Tamil, spoke with a British accent. Jay noticed that he had struck up a conversation with a security guard in French and would translate for the other man he was with. Jay listened in, trying to take his mind off of the rumble that was now engulfing his mind. The Indian man translated that the long line was due to a security threat: a package or bag had been left on the second level, and the entire structure had to be evacuated. No one was able to go up until the threat had been cleared. Because the rumble was increasing and wavering, Jay had to lean in to hear. The Indian man noticed and began to turn to Jay, as well, so he could hear the translation. He said that it may take up to two hours before the line would start to move. Jay was upset but couldn't make himself move away from the line.

It became obvious that the rumor was true. Jay could see tiny figures moving down the legs of the structure toward the base. The elevators were not in operation. Hundreds of people were streaming out through the 3 bases of the structure that had staircases open. Tourists in the line started to make their way out of the gray barriers at the breaks; They left in droves, and the line slowly began to move forward. In less than thirty minutes, Jay found himself at the front of the line, awaiting security checks before he could buy his ticket.

After another thirty minutes, Jay approached the ticket counter. He was only able to buy a ticket to the second level; the top had been temporarily closed due to high wind conditions. He asked the clerk about the security threat; the clerk shook his head and muttered something about a "misunderstanding." He was told his ticket would be good for two hours. Jay hoped he didn't need that long to find out why he was there.

Another Indian operated the elevator; he looked very similar to the man in line ahead of him who had left after he heard of the two hour wait. Jay could feel it was the same man. They were the only two in the elevator; the rumble in his ears had stopped, but his eyes were now seeing spots. Jay figured he was only imagining it was the same man.

He stepped on the platform at the second level, and immediately was swept away by the hazy view of Paris. The rain from the morning had exhausted itself and left the entire city shrouded in a wall of fog. Many parts of the city could not be seen at all. He felt that he was hovering above the world on a cloud. The level's shops were all empty; even the food vendors had evacuated. Partially made crêpes were burning on griddles. The smell of sweet bread filled the air.

Jay was alone at the top of Paris and felt nothing but disgust. He had no idea why he was there. He didn't see any clues. The rumbling in his ears had returned and was beginning to overtake him completely; he was lost in waves of noise. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed a black briefcase on the stairs leading up to the observation deck. Jay looked around and saw no one. He picked up the case quickly and walked back to the elevator.

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### Station 3: The Initiative

You've seen movies and television shows that feature places like this. One of them is more recent. You've seen the one with the people who crash in a plane and are stranded on a beautiful tropical island. Other people are on the island and are very mysterious. The survivors find "stations" that have strange structures, mystical powers, and weird symbols painted all over them. Sometimes, they find long numbers on hatch doors that mean something spectacular in the complicated plots. Another show is older. It's about a man who keeps getting transported into weird locations on a hidden island. I think someone is chasing him and finding him and moving him in his sleep. Sometimes, a large sphere chases him. I can't remember if there a bizarre "stations," but you get the same idea when watching this series. The movies are too many to name; there are many of them. If you can't recall any of these, I'll describe the station. I call it "The Initiative" after one of the TV shows. It's completely buried underground except for this hatch or doorway in the front. The whole structure is fenced in with a gray barrier; it's very high and you cannot get through it. The hatch or doorway has the same graffiti as "The Barn." You will notice that the rumbling from "The Condenser" is very loud here. It is not a real thing though; it is only in your mind. It isn't real because you are only imagining it. You'll have to imagine it. It is very loud and consumes your senses. You will want to put your hands over your ears and clamp them down very tightly. The noise will continue. You will begin running to get away from the noise. You may not notice that grass and weeds cover the entire structure except for the doorway or hatch. You'll want to get away very quickly from this station. You'll want to run fast from it. You will.

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Jay ran to the Metro stop, losing his way only once. He was very afraid and the noise in his ears was overwhelming. In the subway, he felt that everyone was watching him. He felt guilt, more guilt than he had ever felt in his life. The feeling was as if the entire world blamed him for taking the case. All eyes focused on him. He moved to the door, wanting to run as soon as the train stopped.

He suddenly found himself in his hotel room. He didn't remember the half-mile walk back there; the noise in his ears had stopped. It seemed to cease as soon as he closed the door. The light from the windows was bluish and soft; he thought to himself that it was very Parisian, artistic and beautiful. If he could have painted that light, he would have.

He sat on the bed and fumbled to open the briefcase. It was not locked but his thumbs kept slipping from the latches. It took him five or six tries to open it. His anxiety was increasing, sweat pouring down over his face and hands. The blue light had suddenly become very yellow and bright; he was now hot and consumed by a feeling of the unknown. He felt his body slipping into a burning and painful place, the light now engulfing his eyes.

Finally, the case opened.

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#### Station 4: The Painting

I'll set the scene. The path winds for some time. You'll see fields of corn and flaxseed here. At times, the path is very narrow with tall stalks on either side. You might feel claustrophobic, but the good news is the rumbling is now gone. The light above you will look unnaturally blue and beautiful. You might want to be an artist so that you could paint it. A calm will come over you. You will feel peace for the first time on your walk. It will all seem worth it. All the guilt in your life will disappear in this moment. I know it will; I've felt this. You'll come to a clearing; the light will change as it becomes harsher yet still pleasant. It might be yellow or burning orange, and it might be hard to see; you'll want to blink. You might get very hot and sweat. Off in the distance in the field of yellow grass, you'll see a small house or shed. It's hard to tell what kind of structure it is from far away. You'll investigate it because you want to get out of the sun to find a cool place. When you get to the house/shed, you might not remember going across the field. It happens to the best of us. Inside, the light will change again. It will turn blue and soft.

Now you should remember a very famous painting. In the painting, a man dressed in a dark gray suit and red tie faces the onlooker. He wears a bowler hat. The sky behind him is filled with storm clouds and a beautiful blue lake is beneath it. He stands before a waist-high cinder block wall. His face is almost completely obscured by a hovering green apple. You can see the tops of his eyes above the apple. Although you can't see his mouth, you know he's saying something to you. Maybe he's telling you a secret, something you need to know to continue. It's truly a dreadful feeling.

Inside the house/shed, it doesn't look like this. But you get the same sense of dread. It creeps over you. You'll not want to stay long as it climbs up your throat and spine. You'll want to go back to the path. You will.

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A print of a famous painting was in the case. Jay didn't touch it; he only stared at it. He remembered it well from his college art history classes. He was surprised. He remembered how he spent long hours staring at this painting thinking of the man that painted it. Jay felt sadness.

He remembered that this painting was in Paris. He had been saving the gallery for his last stop before leaving the city; he had so much anticipation about seeing the works of this artist, he wanted to wait until the very end to see them, leaving a wonderful impression of Paris in his mind.

Jay was exhausted. He lay down on his bed and thought about what to do. He seemed no closer to finding his clue. He was dumbstruck and felt very stupid for chasing something that was only a phantom. He felt he had no hope. He remembered his dream of the long corridor with locked doors. He also remembered the words from a letter he once read: "You can't see it right now, but you don't need to find anything."

Jay was in Paris and had no idea why.

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## Between the Stations

You may want to take a break but you won't be able to. The next station isn't that bad. It's very relaxing and beautiful and there isn't much noise; maybe some birds. So just walk and relax and be ready for the end of the story. I know it seems like a short one, and maybe I've not been that great of writer. I only have limited skills, and I fear that my metaphors and references are very weak for my ambition. And yet, I feel this is okay with you and you'll sit and listen to my story. This is the calm before a peaceful, beautiful and maybe touching and sad end. If you are with a loved one or friend, maybe you can hold their hand now and whisper how great the story is. And you'll observe how afraid you were and how warm and open you feel about life, now, and what the future will be. After all, art should make us feel what the artist intended. I intend for you to be safe and comforted and joyous. I promise I'm not going to manipulate you. I promise.

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Jay woke to his last day in Paris. He had his ticket to the last gallery. He took a long walk; the Metro would only make him more anxious. He wanted a calm walk and the sun beating down on his face. He wanted to feel like Ernest Hemingway, strong and full of youth and wonderment.

He walked through a section of the city known for its art galleries, bohemian shops, and cafes. Jay felt exceptional but had no idea why. He felt as good as he had on the first day. The art gallery and the poems and the Eiffel Tower all felt like an old dream, one that he would forget or maybe write about one day in a new novella.

He stopped in a cafe and ordered a hot drink, burning his hands as he tried to pick it up. He smiled at himself, feeling the heat and small amount of pain run along his fingers, arms, across his chest and into his heart. He sensed something he hadn't felt for years: abandon. He felt as if he could do anything in that moment, as if all things were possible. He knew it was a false sense, but he enjoyed the moment and decided to sit and finish his novella. The wallpaper in the small cafe featured caricatures of famous artists; Hemingway smiled over his shoulder.

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#### Station 5: The Table in the Forest and the Blue Notebook

The journey is now complete. I've been to this station many times and have known that experiencing the first four stations was worth the moments I've spent here. You'll come to a curve in the road and off to the left you'll see path into the forest. It's not a real forest, only a large stand of trees that feels like something greater. You'll want to go inside. A table and bench are here, and a small blue notebook. The notebook is open to a page, and someone has written a message on it. You'll feel compelled to sit and read it. It may not make sense to you at first, but later when you are able to reflect the words will become clear. This will last in your mind forever, and although you may feel hurt, you'll appreciate what was written. You will, I promise. Thanks for listening to me and remember to look for my other stories. I hope to write many, and I hope you read them all.

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Jay felt satisfaction once he had finished the novella. It was the most difficult and complex thing he had ever written. It sparkled with what Jay felt was mystery, doubt, humanity, and above all intrigue. He would send it back to his old college and see if the literary quarterly would publish it.

Jay left the cafe and realized he was only blocks from the last gallery. He reached inside his jacket pocket and felt the ticket. He smiled.

The gallery was in an old Parisian mansion, a wonderful maze of rooms and hallways filled with his favorite artist's works. It was grouped by period: Blue, Rose, Cubism, Synthetic Cubism, Classical, etc. All of them were wonderful, and he cherished each one. He followed the map backwards, hoping to save the Blue to the end. He loved the brooding sadness of the period, and although his mood had changed positively on his last day, he wanted to feel the devastation of the poor, hungry, and lonely. He wanted to feel the weight of the world's indifference.

Jay came to the final room. One painting hung in a large space. No one was in the room. Jay immediately knew that it was the painting from the briefcase. His heart jumped and began spiraling downward into a misery he had only known once before. He closed the door after entering the room; he locked it. He moved quickly across the room to close the exit door; he locked it, too. He averted his eyes until he was directly in front of the painting. He moved closely toward it. The title was written on a small placard in many languages including Braille: Autoportrait, Selbstporträt, Autorretrato. Jay felt the Braille; the bumps felt like his entire world collapsing into points. A tear rolled down his cheek.

The figure stares down, unflinchingly, his eyes as dark as oceans. His coat is a mountain of black, a stone that pierces the unworldly blue. The white face, a ghost of memory, is Jay's face. He stands locked in this room with himself. Jay knows now. He knows why he is here. He's looking into himself. He's seeing himself for the first time. He sees himself.

Jim Phillips

Your Renaissance, My Renaissance

Everything and everyone here is dead. I'm surrounded by wet, decaying grass, loose dirt, and graves. They go on for acres to the left and to the right. I'm in the middle of dead nothing. The mud dripping off my construction-grade boots, the squelching sound of the earth pulling me in – these are the only noises for miles. This is where she is.

Like the crossroads, where demons make deals, this place is secretive and hard to navigate. The names are in no particular order, and the dates jump from civil war deaths to baby boomers saying goodbye. It's a labyrinth and I'm supposed to feel lost; there are too many headstones to count. No one wants to feel death as being organized. Chaos is more fitting.

I try to keep my thoughts more upbeat. She'd want today to be about life. It's not her funeral; today is her rebirth. The Indiana air will breathe with her if only I can be patient.

I carry everything I could need in the duffel bag draped on my shoulder; the bowl, the knife, the incense and candles. I got the dried sage and althaea leaves from Natalie. She offered to give me blood, too. The spell called for a virgin's, but I still fit that category and I'm related, so things will run more smoothly if I go in alone. Natalie would have me, she's the only one who believes in me, but she's not who I want.

I stole the book from an occult store on the main road. The guy behind the counter wouldn't let me buy it because I wasn't eighteen. Guess it has some inappropriate illustrations. Doesn't matter. It was easy to lift and hide in my sweatshirt. I'm a big guy. Finding the boline knife was a tricky matter, what with needing a credit card to buy it online, so then there was the matter of finding my mother's and making the charge look like it was from a cooking site, but the how is not the important part. It's the why. Her.

Laura was my cousin. Is my cousin, I remind myself. We grew up together.

My first memory is of myself pushing her down to retrieve a Lincoln log under her feet and the sound of her crying. I felt so upset that I cried too. I hadn't meant to hurt her. When we were nine and she started hanging out with girls instead of me, I was a mess. I started having nightmares that made me pee the bed, about her disappearing into an inky mass of black goo. I would cry out her name and she would yell back that she hated me. I sabotaged some of her friendships to get her back. I'm not proud of these things.

When she got her license I bought her a really expensive cheesecake with all the money I had. It had two layers, with chocolate swirls and flowers made of sugar spelling out "Congrats!" I loved her more than my own parents, who were usually distant from me, in a way that they sometimes forgot I still lived under their roof. They aren't mean or abusive; they're just unable to remember who I am. When my birthday is. What food I am allergic to.

Finding her memorial isn't hard. Her father had a statue made in her likeness. He came from money. My aunt was lucky to snag him. Her body, sculpted and swathed in marble, is polished and smooth. As I look at her, I'm sure she's glistening just for me. She's watching. Right now. Urging me on.

The sun is dropping down below the tree line as I lie at her feet. Her stone dress hides her toes and is caught in a permanent sway around her hips. She's looking up at the sky, one hand reaching towards her face, like she can't believe how beautiful the clouds are. Like she knows what's up there waiting for her.

But it wasn't supposed to be her time.

None of my friends think this will work. I didn't bother telling anyone in the family. Not if my best friends, the people I thought knew me the best, looked at me scared, and branded me a loon. Magic is fake, magicians are cons, witchcraft is some silly thing preteen girls do in their closets to get kissed, blah, blah, blah. There is nothing that could stop this. The damp ground under my back is telling me nothing is solid. Nothing is definite. I feel very poetic under her feet.

She didn't die right. That's how I know she's meant to come back.

She died alone. No one saw it, but her body was splayed so perfectly, so elegantly when they found her, it was like she floated to the ground on a breeze and was frozen.

It was a mix-up. She took three pills from an aspirin bottle her mother kept in the bathroom's mirrored medicine cabinet, not knowing that's where her mother put her Valium tablets from her postpartum depression days. Laura had backaches from the gymnastics training she had done when she was younger, so she often needed three to kick the pain. She took them with water. She didn't notice the different letter on the tablets. She trusted an aspirin bottle to be an aspirin bottle. It was such a small chance that they would affect her so strongly, that her body would have such an adverse reaction. It was a fluke on top of coincidence. And it was wrong.

I can't sleep.

I haven't slept for more than an hour or two at a time in the past three months. I ate but it might as well have been mud in my mouth. I was shrinking and becoming a pale nothing that people avoided like a sickness. I wasn't always this pathetic. I didn't walk around in graveyards and ignore girls who looked at me. Natalie asked me out and before Laura died I would have said yes. She's a sexy thing with big hair and big breasts and a proclivity for laughing like a banshee. She is happy all the time. I would have eaten that up and asked for seconds.

I would have taken almost any girl to keep my mind off Laura. When we were caught kissing behind a tree at my twelfth birthday party she got hit with a belt. My parents didn't say much to me, only that it was wrong. But I wanted her. She wanted me. Her hair was soft in my hands and I can still taste her tongue if I concentrate and think of the apple smell of her.

I've never had sex, not because I don't want to, but because in some sick part of my head I was waiting for her to be my first.

It's dark now. I pull out the book and the bowl, light the incense and the candles, and roll the sleeves of my sweatshirt up over my elbows. The curved knife is thinned to such a point that I know it would take nothing at all to bleed all over the ground.

If this doesn't work I don't know what I'll do. Maybe I will let myself bleed out. Maybe I will buy some drugs off Mark at school and take them all at once. Maybe I'll stay under this statue, looking at her face, until I starve. Melodramatic gestures, sure, and Natalie will probably come looking for me, but in all honesty I can't imagine going about my life like this. Nothing is right. The world is tilting and discolored and no one is noticing. I've been told by counselors and friends and strangers at her wake that I will feel better. I just need to wait out the storm and the walls will look white. Right now I only see red.

I sprinkle the herbs, crushed by hand earlier this morning, over her grave. I hold the book two inches from my face, struggling to pronounce the strange symbols in the candlelight, stumbling over the letters like a toddler. A wind picks up and I tell myself this is good, this is working. She will come back and we can leave. We can run away. I emptied my savings, brought a few clothes. We're good. Nothing will stop us. I even snuck into her room and brought her the jeans she loved so much. She'd drawn a robot on the pocket with a sharpie during geography.

Everyone will still think she's dead, and I'll just disappear. It will take my parents a few days to realize I'm gone. I never leave my room now. I'm quiet. I'll dye my hair and wear different clothes. I won't touch Laura's long, dark hair. Wouldn't dream of it. I want her back just the way she was. When it's time to cut my hand I grind my molars together, shut my eyes, and drag the tip of the knife down my palm fast. I don't feel it until two seconds later and then I'm holding back tears and my arm is shaking. I look at the cut, thinking I might have hit a nerve or something, but the blood is flowing and I picture Laura, her cheeks pink and warm because of my blood and it seems a small price.

I hold my hand palm-down over the grave and walk in a circle like the book tells me to. I repeat the strange words over and over until I'm screaming them and feeling ever more grateful that this place is so large and that no one comes here. Our town is very out-of-sight-oriented. I pour everything I have into the words, hoping I am saying them right, that I can hold her again, her slender body against my thick frame and bury my face into her neck. Smell her apple body spray. Hear her voice, always so serious and so thoughtful.

I don't know where she is but she belongs here, with me, and I repeat this to myself inside where it counts as I scream the words. The wind blows out the candles and the incense cone is knocked over. It starts a small fire in the dead weeds but I stamp it out. When I stop shouting I realize other things were shouting with me. An echo fades out. Birds were cawing and the wind was howling through the barren trees, still empty from winter storms. I shiver and pull my sleeves down. I clench my bleeding hand into a fist and look up into Laura's marble face, her stone dress. Her bare toes are the last thing I see before I pass out.

It's light out when I wake up. I can hear rustling on the grass near me and think for a moment of snakes before I realize where I am and what I've done.

My eyes open and I see her marble toes. Breath leaves me and I feel an ache in my throat as I realize I've failed. But they move. Her toes grip the dead grass slightly and her feet shuffle. They are dirty. A delicate green fabric brushes her ankles. Green, not stone.

I look up, and the sun spikes into my eyes. My head pounds but I cannot close them, because she is here. She is standing, leaning against her marble replica, her arms at her sides. She is looking down at me, but the sun makes it so that I cannot see her face.

“Laura?” She kneels and it’s her. Her soft eyes, her long dark hair, her pink cheeks. It’s all here. It’s perfect. I sit up and grab her to me, cupping her head in my hand and rocking myself back and forth, clutching her tightly, trying not to sob. Tears leak from my face anyway and I find myself whispering, “Oh my god, oh my god, Laura, I can’t believe it.”

I feel nauseous from blood loss and my head is spinning but she feels so good against me. I pull back only enough so that I can kiss her but the look on her face stops me. It’s not radiant or excited or confused. It’s just, she’s just...blank.

She darts her gaze back and forth between my eyes, and I realize that she isn’t holding me back. Her fingers are brushing the grass by her ankles.

“Laura?” I ask.

“Is that my name?” she responds.

I pull away, my knees sinking in the overturned earth where she had risen from the ground, and look at her, wondering where the flaw is. Trying to find the mistake I’ve made. I followed the book. I did everything it said. I stole and lied and cut myself for this. For her. And she doesn’t even know her own name.

“Laura. Do you know who I am?”

I hold my breath while she concentrates on my face. A small line appears between her eyebrows while she thinks and it’s adorable but even while I think this I can feel something inside me shriveling and crumbling like a dried prune.

She shakes her head no, looking around her at the graves.

“Am I dead?” she asks.

“No. No, you’re not dead. I...” And then I stop.

I see her crying as a toddler, and eating cheesecake and kissing me behind that tree and I don’t know what to do. She’s everything to me. She knows me better than anyone else on the planet. She’s held me together my whole life. What if I am now nothing to her? A blank face with no meaning; our history lost. But then, suddenly I am seeing it a different way.

A new history. A story I can write. I can make all the rules. We’re lovers, or husband and wife. We live alone in the middle of nowhere with only each other for company. I can tell her that I am her everything.

“Your last name is Andrews,” I lie, testing her.

“Oh. Okay.”

Her voice is soft and windy and she looks around her again, her eyes drawn again and again to her stone likeness.

She would believe anything. Do anything I told her. A hundred fantasies play through my mind; ways I've wanted to hold her and kiss her, places I've wanted to make love to her. She'll never want for anything with me. She'll know only me. I can tell her everything about herself. A sour taste hits the back of my mouth.

What if I get it wrong? What if I don't know her as well as I think? I know her favorite ice cream flavor, her favorite books. I can tell her about all the parties she's gone to. Even the names and addresses of all her friends, but...then she would be this person I made. I don't know what she thought of every minute of every day. I can't tell her those things. She would be only what I know of her. She would be this thing I put stories in, like a box with no bottom I could fill with lies forever and ever. Even if they were truths, this isn't Laura, this is her empty box.

This empty shell didn't stand in line for three hours to buy me tickets to my first concert. This shell isn't the girl who liked to trace the lines on my hands with her fingertips. Filled with my thoughts of her, would she still be her? I'm so confused I don't notice her stand up and climb the small dais of the monument and touch her cheek against the statue.

"It's me." It isn't a question, but I reassure her anyway.

"Yes. That's you."

"So, I am dead."

Her voice isn't sad or angry, just flat and soft; wondering. I'm crying now and I can't seem to stop myself. My face is hot. What have I done, what do I do, this isn't what I wanted, this isn't Laura. Just her body.

With one last hope I stand up and pull her from the statue. Her body is light. I kiss her. Her lips move automatically but this kiss is not Laura. I pull away, crying harder. I have lost her all over again. She looks frightened and pulls away from me. Holding my hands out to her, showing her I'm harmless, I motion for her to sit.

And I tell her a story.

When she walks away a few hours later I'm still shaking, and now I am dizzy and misted in sweat. She's heading towards the bus stop. My duffel bag is lighter two thousand dollars.

Her name is Laura Stevens again, only because she saw the name on the statue, otherwise I would have had her stick with the new one. I'm just some guy who fell for her while she was here on vacation, doing what she could, trying to find some work after her parents died. There were so many loose ends. So many questions I tried to anticipate that strangers would ask her. I covered all the bases I could think of. Creating a person is hard. This girl wasn't Laura and I didn't want to make her a funhouse version, so instead I gave her someone new to be.

I was broken from this whole night. I felt empty and loose in my skin, like I was a different creature, just living in this fleshy costume. A new me. Just like a new her. I reached for my cell phone when Laura was out of sight and called Natalie to come pick me up. I could barely stand, let alone walk out of this place.

When Natalie asked me what happened I told her it didn't work. She was right. Laura's still dead.

Cassandra Mortimer

Sleeping with Myself

I was watching a lurid melodrama that didn't exist. I was in love with myself but jealous of the other me that was sleeping with the me I couldn't have.

I think it must have seemed like a long time to me as I let the current carry me where it wanted, but I don't remember that. I remember an island where I built a house and was very busy taking care of the place I had made for myself on that island. Many visitors came, but none stayed very long. I was satisfied with that. I thought I was happy, and maybe I was, but it's hard to remember what that felt like. I began to long for the pull of oars, but the rowboat I remembered no longer seemed seaworthy, and I built another one. This time I set out alone, pushing myself away from my own house, with my oar pressing into the sand. The oar let me go slowly as I pushed the boat away from the shore and was then pulled part way back with each effort. I had to pull against the oar I had just pushed into memory to retrieve it from the water's clinging suck and continue edging out to the interior sea.

South Dakota, January, 1961, 6:30 A.M. I lean my bundled body against air, cold and constant, and chill-factored farther below the minus already there. It holds still. I have come to deliver myself unto this morning of the farther north against a wind so strong it holds me up if I try to fall into it, unless my knees argue and buckle, and then it lets me down like a wall, white with a relentless excess of something you could almost call purity since it does not contain us, but I contain it, and I have known no other kind of winter and have need of approval from parents and the makers of fat Sunday newspapers from Minneapolis with valuable coupons and news of others drifted over by this newest invasion of rest from ambition and prosperity that does not apply to newspaper trucks or those like me who must meet them. I give in and look forward and further forward towards an icy trip to the drugstore for bubblegum and the next Green Lantern and perhaps some imaginary small piece of summer camp deeply hidden there in the icicles that were just now my breath, before it left me and began clacking in shivered code from my iced ski mask. I try not to think of all the mothers who never have the checkbook when I arrive to collect or the fathers whose boxers flair, opening all the way till tomorrow, which is always payday and always further away.

First it's big. Then you break it down into pieces you think you can handle. Then you handle those pieces, and then there aren't as many pieces. Handling the pieces badly doesn't help. Handling the pieces well feels good, and doesn't help. So you try to break what's left into smaller pieces, and now there are more pieces, and you can't help comparing these pieces to those other pieces, the ones gone now, and it reminds you how small they all are. So you put all the pieces in a big hat, and put the big hat on your big head, and just think about all of it until the wind comes along, and then you find out how well you do things, things that didn't seem to matter much, like putting your hat on your head and thinking about it, and then it's small, and you can't get to it with big ideas, and you can't take it off without spilling something.

So I ask the sun to explain the dust it left on my hat like evidence of a crime. In the heated air there are so many things to do wrong, and they all lose a little of their bravado. With each success there's a trail of increasing inertia and the bigger crime gets left behind. You have to listen a long time to wake the criminals, guilty as they are of collecting themselves from the unexplained air. If you have to be there, take along a little yesterday. Don't expect today to fill you.

I don't really need a philosophy of moonlight.

Don't listen to the self-taught crickets explaining why nearly everywhere is here, and we have a meeting later explaining why we have a later meeting. All the real criminals eventually fall apart and go to sleep though the sleep no longer belongs to them.

A local owl, in his puffy trousers, fluffs on his stump and circulates his vision, a far more local and piercing yellow than any child's impression of sunlight. That's the way it is with absence—

You have to take it in to be taken in by it.

This time the journey was longer, so much longer it was painful, and I remember it clearly. After a very long time, it brought me here. I wasn't sure it was the right place. I wasn't sure I wanted to stop moving across the water. But I was hungry and tired. And I wanted to talk to someone.

In my youth I entered the wilderness once more with only the wonder of freedom to guide me. Quickly I became lost, but I was not concerned. I still had plenty of time to surround me with possibilities and even the difficulties were pleasurable. I began to look for something I could not yet name, unsure if I truly wanted to find it, nearly satisfied with the search itself. A lengthy process of elimination ensued, and I felt a growing sense of importance attach itself to the journey. I began to look forward to the journey's end, for I desired rest, but I was reluctant to let go of the fleeting, and therefore more desirable, pleasures along the way.

After many years of teaching each other, the two largest parts of my limited understanding had come to the plateau upon which our shared happiness lived, and we greeted each other as if we were strangers, which was partly true, for it was an even greater happiness living there in our meeting than was contained in the happiness we had known before it. And it was not long after this that the woman containing the current moment of my love said she would be leaving. I could not believe what I was hearing. After all our "success," she was abandoning me?

I tried desperately, many times, to dissuade her. And it was in this way that I realized she had learned more than I had learned. I knew it without knowing what it was that she could have taught me, just as she too, I think, knew there was a lesson, but knew only that she moved in its direction, without knowing how to arrive at it. Finally, I grew to accept that she was leaving. It was only through my newfound happiness in discovering our love would be remembered by us both as the greatest achievement of our lives that I was able to come to this acceptance. It was not until I told her of my acceptance that she realized she could stay.

It is not by knowing the answer that I satisfy the hunger created by the question. I had to learn this lesson several times.

It is the weakness of one that creates the strength of the other. If one cannot see the weakness, one cannot find the strength, but if one uses the weakness like a donkey, to carry one's load, then one's strength follows behind on its path.

When the loved one departs, the love does not. There is no reason for waiting.
Love the one you're with.
Love the one you're with more when you're alone.

What did the bear say to the holy man?
Don't worry, you're just as important to me as the sinner I had for breakfast.

What did one holy man say to the other?
I don't know why we can't just shit in the woods like everybody else.

What did one holy man's buttock say to the other?
I've got half a mind to kick our ass.

No, really, what did one holy man say to the other?
If we all shat in the woods, where would the bear pray?

What did one bear say to the other?
Holy shit, the man is back. Let's pray he doesn't want to make a religion out of us.

No, what did one bear say to the other?
Scat, here comes the holy man up our endless mountain.

Once when I became ill, a fever lifted me from my concerns and held me in its palm like a god. Only in this way had I ever experienced time as an endless creation, with countless doors to the experiences I had had in the past, as well as windows through which I could see what I had not yet experienced, and these new visitors entered through the openings in my sickness, with no distinctions among them.

I lived a long and rich life in that house, which seemed as large as the world, but before I was to die, I ventured out onto the porch and saw that the world outside was not as it had looked through the new doors and windows, for several days had passed and in that time nothing of real importance in my former life had changed. As I realized this, the details of the long life I had lived in those days faded, but the feeling of gratitude I had experienced did not.

Rich Ives

Alone

Tangerine sunlight drips on Aaron as he walks down the sidewalk. He quiets Jen to hear the end of Frankie's joke. Claire chimes in, flashing her new candy-stripe nails. Aaron's attention zigzags between the three and he feels warm panic bloom in his stomach. Sweat slides down his skin, but it doesn't really feel like it's flowing from his pores.

A lone boy in his late teens drifts down the street. He treads with jagged steps, dragging his feet. Wind rushes through his greasy hair, tying it into thick knots. The boy's threadbare parka barely shields him from the cruel, cold weather. Rain begins to storm down, but he continues to walk, unfazed.

Jen notices the anxiety that's dripping down Aaron's face. She leans in close and whispers that he should calm down. Frankie and Claire listen in, smiles spreading across their faces. Laughter flutters around Aaron's friends and suddenly he feels silly. He should know he never has to worry with them. He can see their bond reflected in the envious faces around them; people who so desperately want to cut the ties that bound them together. It's something special for them alone.

His presence makes others' insides quake with pity and fear. Passing pedestrians veer to the side to avoid the solitary teen; no one wants to be near a person who aims his jumbled words at empty spaces of air. A couple huddled under a purple umbrella come dangerously close to him and for a split second they can see his mangled mind creep through his eyes. Shivering, they hurry on, trying to shake off the sorrow they feel. No matter how hard they try to push the thoughts away, neither of them can help but wonder who 'Jen' is or why the boy kept on smiling.

Miranda Konoplisky

We Killed Them

Artists don't sit inside all
day to write and type and suffer,
they play on their iPhones and Macs
with dull eyes editing music files,
remixing old sounds, taking
photographs that seem
somehow older, even though they
don't know why, they catch the movie
to marvel at the book (it's YA fiction)
then the next day read it on the train
cover out and facing the crowd, and
they dance at night clubs to hip-hop and
techno in the nearest up-and-coming
neighborhood, their drunken image tagged on
Facebook, exchanging that for actual fame,
and remain blissfully ignorant of the truth
because artists don't think for themselves
or think at all anymore, hell,
they don't even try, because
for the most part
when their head hits the pillow
around 5am
they're plain fucking dead
and nobody gives a fuck.

Thomas Pescatore Jr

Trying To Get Some Sleep

I could hold the sky in my palm,
wipe it onto depth-less reality like
an unguent cure in this after-night
morning glow pink rising to a
dark purple that settles like a fog on abandoned streets,
instead, I get up and walk heavily to the bathroom
to wash my face and hands,
the floor boards creak with each step,
my ceiling fan whines non-stop,
the subway makes its first run, and
I'm alone counting the surges of pain in my knees,
waiting for the next rattle of tracks heading north,
waiting for the sun to rise from the east
and annihilate this perfect thought

Thomas Pescatore Jr

An Update to Today

Nothing seems more right
then reading Bukowski while taking
a shit; and why do all the little
girls in Chinatown wear purple
winter coats? Yesterday I slept,
woke up, got a bus, slept, found you
sleepy and sick in your bed, slept,
dreamt I was Apocalypse coming to usher
in the end of the world, I reveled in that
thought, the end, the beginning, death and
life and all that, I was in a theatre, someone
had written a musical about my godlike feats,
I watched it from the balcony VIP, but I couldn't remember
her name, I called her Ashley and was wrong,
woke up had dinner, a cold turkey sandwich
from 7-11 (Joe would be proud) then turned in
for the night with you coughing and wheezing, and
me feeling you up,
I am sorry
I left for the night
into my running head
to nothing
and now I'll leave Bukowski
in the bathroom for you to find and ask
why?
So I can laugh and we
can go to
bed together
because it makes sense.

Thomas Pescatore Jr

Cherry Blossom Festival

outside the soft gray sky watched me mournfully,
on page 419—which I turned to filled with a haunting feeling of sorrow,
somehow knowing there would be unsolvable crimes soon,
a loss both tragic and unstoppable—a single petal from a cherry blossom
clung to unread words, nearly transparent with hope, I guessed,
it was like love pink and innocent and bitter before it could be explained,
or felt on whispering spring winds, I folded my bookmark
absently, tossed the ideas, the foreshadow, the vanity into the ether,
it was all meaningless, just a track on loop, a song on repeat
and if you don't get it, what I'm getting at, then you've never read it
or felt it or denied it, you've never found a helpless pink lifeless thing
under overcast skies

Thomas Pescatore Jr

June Storm

June greets us with hot days.
Plants thrive blooming, growing more each day.
Grass green, mowers drone.
Trimmers chime in.

Thunder claps echo in the distance, a storm approaches.
Bright flashes of lightning.
Trees bend, yielding to the mighty wind.
Hail stings as it hits.

Rainbows arch into a blue-gray sky.
Storms pass leaving
Wet cement behind.
Smells clean and fresh.

Storm sewers cannot remove
The rain deposited during the storm.
Which make the plants and grass grow green.
Trees once full of leaves, have lost some.

After the storm,
Downed leaves pile up, slow the flow
Of water.
Creating swirling streams.

David Frazier

Like Rain

"I have big dreams," she said, tossing a stone toward the tracks. "I'm going places."

Her thick, wool overcoat couldn't protect her from the gravel that gouged at her back any more than it warded off winter's dry sting.

"What places?" asked Eugene. "The movies? Friday school?"

She adjusted her position, folded her arms behind her head to form a cradle above the ground.

"Maybe," she said. "For now."

"And always."

Eugene was not tall, but scrawny with eyes like manga and hair that waffled between frizz and dreads. No matter how much he ate or how many trips to the gym, he couldn't seem to bulk up. To the school, he was Crack Baby.

"Can't go to Friday school forever, stupid. They kick me out once I turn twenty-one."

They were both on their backs, looking into the sky like there was something more up there than the flat iron grey of November. The clouds were motionless. Sometimes a bird flew far away across the world.

Helen didn't know the last time a train had chugged along these tracks. Not in her life. There were ties missing and lengths of railing. People took them for art projects or shanties or to melt down the metal, and no one seemed to care. Helen didn't see why they should. The same old unconnected cargo car had been sitting on this spot two miles from her house for at least sixteen years. It wasn't going anywhere.

"It's funny how you said that," Eugene spoke after a while. "I have big dreams. I'm going places.' People don't talk like that."

"Well, I'm probably stoned," said Helen. "It's making my words weird."

They both started laughing, and Helen choked on her tongue because she was laying on her back, so she rolled to her side in the rocks and dirt and that made them laugh harder until tears filled their eyes and their stomachs cramped.

"I don't even know why that was funny," said Helen after a minute. "Just that something needed to be."

She worried that she wasn't making sense, but then she saw Eugene nodding in a way that relaxed the knots from her shoulders. He got her. Even in the unforgiving starkness of their first high. Even when the yard lay so silent that the only sound was crystallizing frost, she thought he still heard her and agreed.

There were so many things that it was almost impossible to say out loud. Helen's dreams, for example, were so perfectly cloudy that moving them from her head too quickly might burst them into invisible, wispy strings.

"I read in class," she said because it was only an interesting fact and not the swirling sounds and colors that represented her innermost desires, "that three-thousand people died in New York on nine-eleven."

She paused and thought about how many people made three-thousand.

"That's, like, one out of every seven people in Ashland. That's, like, almost the whole college." "There's only three-thousand students at the college?" asked Eugene. "That is so sad."

"Yeah, well, I don't think it's a very good school or anything, but that's not the point."

She sat up and crossed her arms around her knees.

"I mean, I don't even remember it happening. My mom said she'll never forget listening to the radio that morning. How at first it sounded like it was just an accident, like the plane had lost contact with its tower or something, then, just a piece at a time, it was like everyone started to realize. The reporters and my mom and people at her work, and it was, I don't know, this huge shock or something. Like, how could this happen here? In America, right? And suddenly everyone realizes there's a whole world out there, and we're only a part of it, at least that's how my mom tells the story, and I don't even remember it happening at all."

Eugene stayed on his back.

"My dad's there," he said.

"I know," she told him.

"He's already reenlisted twice."

They'd smoked over an hour ago now. Stalled by the abandoned car on their walk home from school.

"Please, Eugene?" Helen had asked.

"I just don't know why you want to. It's not really like you at all."

"I wish I could explain," she said, but since she couldn't, she didn't say any more.

The weed hadn't been very strong. There was too much in the bag, and it was loose like herbs, not like the sticky, crystallized balls she'd seen kids smoke in the park. The boy she bought it from laughed when she smelled it.

"It's cool," he told her. "Not oregano."

"Nope. Smells like skunk cabbage to me."

She paid him twenty dollars.

"Forty-five," he said.

"This is crap," she told him, pretending to know for sure.

The English teacher came whistling out her door, balancing a cup of coffee on a stack of papers.

"Helen," she called, "give me a hand?"

"Hope you choke on your crap, then," he whispered and disappeared down the hall.

She was glad she hadn't gotten something better because this was already too much. She didn't hallucinate like she'd worried, and she didn't feel crazy or pee her pants or anything. But she couldn't stop thinking about things. The footage of the World Trade Center had re-aired on all the news channels in September. She'd never seen it before. The people falling from the sky. It seemed like a long time ago then, still glowing from the tail end of summer, safe at school, inside the unreality of textbooks, but the smoke made those tiny business men and women three dimensional. She wondered what it had been like to stand on the street while they fell around you like rain.

Her pocket started buzzing, probably her mom calling to ask when she'd be home. She let three rings pass before she hit ignore through her jeans.

"When you're old enough, do you think you'll go with him?" she asked, but when Eugene didn't answer, she realized she'd forgotten to say it out loud.

"Can you or can you not read my thoughts?" she asked. "If you can, I just want you to tell me. It won't freak me out. I promise."

"That is, by far, the weirdest thing you've ever asked me."

"Except the time in first grade when I asked you to lick my eyeball," she said, "but just answer me anyway. It will make me feel better to know."

"I can't read your thoughts," said Eugene. "And I think I'm glad about that."

"Okay," she said.

"Okay."

They stood up, one unit, and started walking toward the center of town. She thought it might be four. Or five. It was getting dark already. There was an ice cream shop they liked to go to, and she hoped it would be open when they got there.

"I'll probably join," said Eugene. "When I'm eighteen."

You liar, Helen thought at him loudly, but he didn't even blink.

"I don't want to be here forever either, and I probably won't get into any schools. Not like you. You'll be able to go anywhere. I lied when I said you couldn't leave."

"My dad's in Italy. I visited him there once when I was thirteen. He let me drink wine."

"You drank with your dad? When you were thirteen?"

"Yeah, well, he was living with some lady that I'd never even heard about. She was super young and was always hugging and kissing me and say how capital "B," Beautiful I was in her loud, look at me, accent. Whenever she got close, I smelled pool cleaner. It was actually pretty crappy."

"Oh."

"I'm only saying because I can't go there. You said I could go anywhere, but I can't go there. It's off limits."

"I can't go to Delaware," said Eugene. "My dad's parents live there and they totally disowned him when he married my mom. We're too black for their money."

"Whatever," said Helen. "You should show up at their house just to spit in their faces."

Eugene laughed. "Nah," he said. "What's in Delaware, anyway? I don't really see the point in taking it back."

The ice cream shop was still open. Its fluorescent lights ricocheted around white tile and made Helen feel uncomfortably normal, like she really was just living another pointless day. The weight of it pressed the breath from her lungs, and she stopped talking as soon as they stepped through the door.

"Helen?" Eugene said, and she shook her head.

He took her hand and led her to the counter where they looked down at the tubs full of color. She couldn't read any of the names. The letters kept running into each other. She couldn't remember what she normally bought. She pointed at something white with purple streaks, and when the woman behind the counter asked if she'd like a bowl or cone Helen didn't even look up.

"Waffle cone," she heard Eugene say for her.

She wanted to crawl under his arm and lean against his chest in thanks. He paid at the register while Helen stood behind him, staring at the reassuring slimness of his back.

"Want to eat outside?" he asked, turning and folding her hand around the cone.

They stepped back out the door.

"I didn't like it in there," she said.

"So I noticed."

"It was too much like my life."

They almost sat down at a small metal table.

"Look at this," said a voice from behind. "Crap Eater and Crack Baby."

They went to the same school, but Helen didn't know his name either. After asking around, she had been pointed in his direction only by description. The built kid with the baseball hat. They'd neglected to exchange pleasantries.

"Fancy meeting you," she tilted. "Always a pleasure, I'm sure."

"I'm sure," he smiled.

He stood with another boy who smiled too.

"Ice cream," he said. "That's sweet."

"Isn't it?"

Helen struggled against the desire to back away, to turn and run. She couldn't tell what territorial line she'd crossed, which parts of her fear were paranoia, but speaking now seemed strange when they'd dismissed each other so quickly earlier that day. She noticed Eugene adjusting his position so he stood in front of her, and she knew he felt it too. The snarling dogs that bristled under windbreakers and Polos, their slavering, snapping jaws, the sensation of being circled, assessed for weakness. It shivered through her.

"I was thinking," said the boy, "looking at your ice cream, that maybe you owe me another twenty-five after all. What do you think? Crack Baby?"

She sensed, more than saw, Eugene tense and clench his fist. It made her afraid that he always felt bigger than he was. Invincible. That inside he was already a soldier.

"I think you need to back the fuck off," he said, pushing Helen behind him. Stepping up.
"This your boyfriend?"

One hit and Eugene was down.

The swing had come so quickly after the question that Helen almost missed it. But she heard the crack of fist on jaw. The too real, non sound bite, smack of skin on bone. The joint dislocating, giving way to absorb a fraction of the impact.

Eugene began to stand almost immediately, and she knew the shame of falling would not let him walk away. She did not need to brace herself for the next blow. Her body had already frozen in place, crystallized in a moment of panic as the world around her raced on.

Eugene fell again.

The boy in front of her said something, but Helen could not hear what it was.

"What?" she wanted to ask, not because she cared, but from her desperation to catch up. He grabbed her wrist and Eugene's arm shot out to break the hold.

Then, suddenly, they were gone.

Something popped in Helen's ears.

"Get the hell off my property. I already called the police."

The woman from the ice cream shop towered over them, her bust jutting like an awning, hands on ample hips. Eugene was standing again, but blood streamed from where the skin on his cheek had split. His nose looked broken.

"This wasn't our fault."

"Get. Out." the woman repeated.

They walked in silence for a moment before Helen reached for his arm.

"You don't have to join the army," she said. "You could get into a school."

"Yeah," said Eugene, noncommittal, still dabbing at his cheek with his sleeve. His shirt front was ruined with blood, but she pulled his hand away and used her own jacket instead.

"I'm so sorry."

"That guy was an asshole. Not your fault."

"It was all my idea, and it was a stupid one. I just froze."

"You were in shock."

"I don't know what I was," she said. "Am. A mess."

He stopped and took her by the shoulders.

"You're not a mess," he said. "And this is fine." He flicked his already purpling jaw with just the slightest wince. "Passing. Just a stupid high-school memory."

Helen shivered as a body fell to the pavement in front of her eyes. It was Eugene's father, spine snapped backwards, rifle in his hand.

"My mom's sick," she said.

Eugene let her go. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Like, a cold, or something?"

"No," said Helen. "Like, Parkinson's, or something. She was having this tremor. It seemed weird so I made her go to the doctor, and next thing you know she's going to have trouble walking and talking and peeing and whatever. Not now, but, you know, someday."

"Someday when?" asked Eugene. "Then what?"

"Well," said Helen. "It's just us, so she could go into a home." She looked down at the already darkening blood on her sleeve. "Or I could stay here with her."

They passed the movie theater, and Helen led him down its alley. Hidden behind the bulk of the dumpster, she cracked the loosely chained lid and tossed what was left of the bag inside.

"I don't think I'll ever do that again," she said.

Eugene shook his head.

"But I think I had to today."

He put his arms around her and kissed her on the mouth.

"I don't need anything," he told her. "I just love you."

"Thank you," said Helen. "I love you too."

She started laughing, though she didn't know why.

"If you want, I'll take you around the world," he said.

"That's all I want," she told him. "Let's leave tonight."

If Helen could go anywhere, she didn't know where she would choose. She really liked curry, so Thailand seemed good, but she liked sushi too. She didn't know anything about Hungary, except that it had a cool name. Africa was a whole continent of frightening animals and burning hot mystery. She took Spanish in school, and that seemed to apply to a good portion of the world, but she'd also had, for the last year or two, since she had discovered her unquenchable love for Nabokov and Anton, the exchange student's, East Slavic accent, a great desire to learn Russian. She wanted to study art, and it seemed like Chicago might be a good place for that, or Seattle. She hated her father for claiming Italy, but she thought China might have something worth knowing. She liked the idea of transferring from school to school, sucking in technique like a fountain pen.

Then she would become a master of craft, an oil on canvas ninja.

Eugene pulled Helen close and she huddled to his chest, sending her most private, unformed thoughts straight to his heart. The ones filled with red and blue, gunfire and smoke. The pictures of his father home for Christmas and others where his brain leaked out onto desert sand. The flavors of coconut milk mixed with lime. Her fear and dreams of the future. The rattle of wheelchairs. Trains creaking back to life and pulling away down long abandoned tracks.

Jane Elliott

Overdue

A shaft of sunlight passed through the crack between the thick iron doors of the McGrath family mausoleum. It cast a golden streak across Edward's open coffin. He scrubbed at his bearded face and climbed from the satin-lined box. The morning air felt warm inside the musty room built of huge granite blocks. He retrieved his trousers, shirt, waistcoat and jacket from the top of his brother's sarcophagus and dressed quickly, fumbling with the ascot. Donning his bowler, he passed through the doors and stood on the grass near the edge of the Odd Fellows Cemetery.

At the time of his death in 1906, the graveyard lay south of San Luis. He'd been carried there in a black hearse pulled by four dark horses, its windows trimmed with fancy acid-etched designs. His parents, brother Matt, and the minister had followed in a carriage that led a dozen others filled with mourners. But more than a hundred years had passed. Now, a broad boulevard choked with traffic bordered the cemetery. The noisy town had swallowed up the open fields where he and Matt used to hunt ground squirrels.

Edward burnished his shoes on the backs of his trouser legs and walked north toward downtown. At a busy intersection he strolled into traffic, smiling to himself. As semis and automobiles passed through him, their drivers' faces flashed momentary panic as they collided with his cold spirit. He used to have fun doing the same thing with teams of horses. But he'd stopped after too many people got hurt when their steeds spooked.

He continued toward the town's center. For two thirds of the 20th century, except during Prohibition, Edward had spent his days at the Golden West Saloon. He'd perch on the corner barstool and listen to local merchants and ranch hands swap lies and debate the issues of the day. Around the time of World War I, most of the men still stuffed six shooters into their belts or hid pistols inside their jackets. On a sultry afternoon, he watched Big Mike McCluskey take aim and blow a quarter-sized hole in Allen Tuttle's chest. They'd been arguing about a busted land deal. Al died of the single shot from Joe's .44.

The bar's owners eventually demolished the ramshackle saloon and put up a toy store. Edward had moved up the street to the Blue Diamond Lounge and a new corner stool. A few times, some jerk would try sitting in his spot. They'd complain about a wave of intense nausea and move quickly. Once, a hung-over blonde in a mini skirt and huge earrings sat on his lap. She shrieked and jumped off, splashing her Corpse Reviver across the counter. Laughing, the bartender taped a sign to the stool that read, "Ghosts Only."

In late afternoons when the three-martini lunch crowds had left and the after-work patrons hadn't yet arrived, Edward left the Blue Diamond and walked north to the University, backed up against the Santa Lucia foothills in California's coastal mountains. It had started as a tiny agriculture school a few years before his death. The campus now felt like a city. Edward wandered its streets, attended lectures, and sat next to pretty women. He loved the smell of their perfumes, their young skin, and their willingness to display so much of it. But every so often he'd come across a girl that looked like Helen, his long-dead fiancée, and the pain of missing her made his chest ache.

As the decades passed, he couldn't help but question his existence, the reason why he stayed in the world, alone, unable to touch people or speak with them, unable to eat or sleep, and never aging. The remains of his parents, brother, aunts and uncles all decayed happily in their crypts. So why was he left behind? What mortal sin had he committed to deserve being marooned in a life as visible as the wind?

On Valentine's Day, the year the Teapot Dome Scandal broke, he had holed up in the Carnegie Library next to the Old Mission and sorted through the Tribune newspaper files. He'd found a front page article about his death, felt numb while reading the few short paragraphs: Edward McGrath, age 20, killed in an accident at the Central Coast Granary. He'd been smothered by tons of winter wheat when he fell into a grain bin. It had taken the crew two days to dig his body out. His father's bank had closed for the funeral.

Edward enjoyed his quiet hours in the library, except when Miss Clayton manned the front counter. She'd scold children and adults alike for turning in their books late. Her tirades were so severe that many of the little tykes left the building in tears. Small, round-shouldered with a hawk-like nose and white hair, she sniffed loudly whenever Edward passed and stared into his face. Of all the townsfolk, she seemed the most capable of divining his presence.

But he had put his invisibility to the ultimate test on a hot August afternoon, shortly after the Korean War. Edward stripped naked, except for his shoes and socks, and walked into town. He spent the afternoon on a bench outside the J.C. Penney's store, watching the women come and go. He got no reaction, although they seemed to pick up the pace whenever they passed close, and a few had chuckled.

In the 1960's, he laughed at the strange clothes the young people wore, marveled at how many of them played guitars, and sniffed at the strong smell of hemp burning in backroom coffeehouses. It reminded him of the scent he'd smelled as a kid, from Chinatown boarding houses where railroad workers spent their off hours. One quiet afternoon, he strolled along a shady downtown street. A young man with long hair and a beard approached. He wore denim dungarees, sandals, and a paisley shirt, carried a leather shoulder bag filled with books. Edward stood on the sidewalk, directly in the man's path, and waited for the pass-through. But instead of the slight tingle that he normally felt, they collided head on. With a yelp, Edward fell to the concrete. The man sprawled beside him. The books scattered.

Edward scrambled to his feet, his face burning. He retrieved his bowler and offered the man his hand, stuttering, "I...I can feel...you are..."

The stranger seemed equally astonished. "Hey man, are you a spook?"

"I must be. I've been roaming this town for sixty years. You are the first that I've..."

"Yeah, I'm a ghost too. I OD'd five years back on some bad acid. But I'm just passin' through – thought I'd take these books and..."

"But why are you...real?"

"Heavy question, man. What's real anyway?"

“Do you have any idea why we can’t...die?”

“Beats the hell outta me.” The man laughed.

“I’m still tryin’ to return this stuff.” He pointed to the books. “Ya know, like that song says, ‘...everything’s been returned which was owed’.” He hummed a few notes that Edward didn’t recognize.

“So are you staying here someplace? Maybe we can talk more about...”

“Nah, man, I gotta keep movin’. I’ve been up and down this coast dozens of times. Maybe I’ll run into ya next time through.”

Edward smiled and helped him pick up his books, strange titles by an author named Richard Brautigan. He watched him wander along the boulevard, heading south toward the gap in the coastal hills and the sea. He wished he had stayed...with so much to talk about and nobody to listen.

Edward smiled when he remembered that chance meeting and thought about the books he’d read so long ago. He camped on his corner bar stool in the Blue Diamond and watched the incoming tide of office workers from the Courthouse, the men and women in slick suits. The ranch hands and local shopkeepers had disappeared from downtown saloons long ago, except for a scattering of weathered old men hunched over their drinks.

That afternoon he returned to the mausoleum early and rummaged through the things his mother and father had stored near his casket. His father had been impressed with the writings of the British archaeologist Howard Carter and his discovery of the Pharaohs’ tombs in Egypt. His parents had stored some of Edward’s possessions in the mausoleum, hoping they might help him in the afterlife. He peeled back the canvas tarp. Among the small mound of articles he found a book titled, “The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure” by Stephen Crane. He had read it right before he died but never quite understood the meaning of the title story.

He opened the book and flipped through its pages. At mid-volume he found a small sheet of paper. At the top was stamped “San Luis Public Library” and below, written in tight cursive, “Return by 16 May, 1906.”

Edward shuddered. What would Miss Clayton have done if someone had returned a book 106 years late? He grasped the volume and hurried downtown to the new library built in the 1980s. Inside, he watched a gray haired woman with a kind face check out books and take in returns. A sign on the counter read, “Overdue Fines: 25¢ per day to a maximum of \$8.00.”

He took out his wallet and extracted eight folded bills, large silver certificates with ornate artwork, and slipped them inside the book cover along with the return notice.

When the woman turned away, Edward laid Stephen Crane’s collection on the counter. When she turned back, her mouth fell open. She picked up the thick volume with its illustrated cover and inspected the slip of paper and the old dollars.

“Hey Ellie, get over here,” she called, her voice shaking.

A few library patrons looked up from their reading and glared. A woman in a tight-fitting suit joined the librarian and they both stared at the sheet and money. The suited lady grabbed a telephone and pressed its numbered buttons. In a few minutes a crowd gathered and the clatter increased to a low roar. A pretty woman followed by a man toting a television camera pushed through the growing crowd and began interviewing Ellie.

“Yes, this goes to show that even after all this time, our patrons...and their decedents...are honest enough to return their books.”

“But what would the fine be for 106 years overdue?” the reporter asked.

“Well, if we charged the daily rate for the entire time, it would be almost ten thousand dollars. Fortunately for that patron, our fines max out at \$8.”

“But is that real money they paid with?”

“Oh yes, each of these bills are collectible and might be worth much more than their face values.”

Edward grinned sheepishly when he heard Ellie’s comment about his honesty as a library patron. The crowd’s chatter followed him as he slipped out of the building. He walked slowly back to the family mausoleum and entered just before sunset. In the cool evening, the day’s events flashed through his mind. As he lay in his coffin, the man’s words came back to him from the 1960s, “Everything’s been returned which was owed.” He felt his eyelids grow heavy for the first time in over a century and wondered what would have happened if Miss Clayton had been a kind and gentle soul. Edward smiled, tugged the coffin lid shut, and drifted into the long deep sleep.

Terry Sanville

Hangover

so this is how it is
in my head
is a little man
this isn't some double
consciousness metaphor
he's really in there
he's wearing cowboy boots
and probably a brace
of colts pistols
who knows
and he's lying
on his back
like a drunk frat boy
in the back of a squad car
trying to kick out
the windows
of my skull
with his boot heels

H.D. Brown

Gutterball

Didn't I come home with you from the bar, was the rather well-played response
the naked inebriated and disoriented Larry "Gutterball" Graham offered to the critical question
what the fuck are you doing in my house.

It may have saved his life.

Clutching the crocheted Afghan with which he'd curled up on the couch a few hours earlier, Larry
searched for his boots and pants and spoke to the man

in soothing tones as one speaks to a horse in the presence of a dead calf,

easing into a gentle dissertation on any port in a storm

and the perils of leaving the front door unlocked,

knowing all the while the man could just as easily take a .38 out of his desk drawer

and put an end to all talk.

By then he'd found his boots, was pulling on his pants.

As stay the fuck out of my house was still hanging in the air

he'd already begun crafting the narrative he would tell that night at the bar.

H.D. Brown

Magic Lamp

Lighting the wick, the old kerosene
lamp sprang to life. My young son's
eyes grew wide and his chin dropped.

His puzzled look changed to a question,
"Where do you plug it in?" I smiled, and
told him you didn't need to plug it in.

The puzzled look on his face grew
deeper. "Then, where do the batteries
go?" "Shaking my head I replied,
"No batteries either."

Cleaning out our shed for spring, I
chanced across my dad's old
kerosene lantern. Shaking it, I could
hear it slosh.

Fascinated by the dancing shadows,
my son was disappointed when I blew
it out. He asked if I would light it again.

I thought he had forgotten all about it
when we went to the house for some
lunch. Excitedly, he told his mother,
"Come to the shed and see dad's
magic lamp."

Mike Berger

A Portrait of the Woods and the Woman

The trees lurched his car as he drove around the mountain, above the lake. Each tree seemed to have a lustful vengeance for swiping up the little vehicle and tossing him straight into the lake. The road created sudden curves as he drove on through the tunnel inside the mountain. Each twist was closer and closer to suicidal fate.

The dismal man was heading to a cabin that he had rented. He mostly needed it to get away from the city which was destroying his every emotion and he also just had a morbid fascination with the woods. The cabin was conveniently placed in the center of a long-forgotten area that was never really inhabited to begin with. It would just be him and everlasting loneliness.

The shady man that rented him the cabin let him have an incomplete map with vague directions towards the little cabin. The only way he knew he was oriented in the correct direction was that the man said there would be a “mountain-tunnel thing” when you started to near it. He was currently under it so he assumed that the cabin would pop up near or towards the end of the seedy tunnel.

The top of the tunnel didn’t look like it was in a good condition so he sped up for the remainder of it. He made it out fine, and the glacier sky greeted him as if to say, “good luck!” in the devious voice that it acquired at birth.

He was so excited for the trip that he never bothered to admire the wonderful scene of green trees mixed with icy, grey sky or misty lake below that was translucent enough to see the sorrowful trees jutting through it furiously. Or he just didn’t want to look because such scenery could depress someone to the brink of perpetual despair.

Now that he was out of the tunnel (or cave, more appropriately) he still didn’t see the mysterious cabin that the man had told him about. It was still just dirt paths leading towards darkened forests of enigmatic wonders. He stopped in the middle of the street, since there were no sidewalks or other cars, and looked at the map. There was a bloody-red line that gave the general idea of heading straight. So he began to do so.

There were separate paths set up alongside him, but he took the path that led straight into a shadowy forested area. There was a large tree-tunnel hanging above the entrance into the black hole so he somehow knew that it would lead him to his destination.

Inside the forest-hell, there was nothing but trees to right and left of him. He could hear the minor scrapings of his car from the branches swiping him deftly while he drove by. He could no longer see the dull sky, but instead a swamp of arched green and villainous plants eating away at what used to be the ashy sky.

With a hint of fear in his brain and stomach he continued driving for a reason unknown to him. The drive never loosened up, it continued to be a desolate dirt road shrouded in green. It seemed perpetual as well; there appeared to be no end to the winding trees.

At the end of the journey, which lasted about ten minutes, he found a wooden box that he believed could be the cabin. It was set in a circular patch of land that was guarded by those familiar trees. The place was small, but he was only one man and could make it work. He decided early on that he would rather live in the cabin than in the busy intersections of the concrete town he normally resided in.

By this time, it was rearing up on six p.m. which didn't leave him with much left to do for that day. He didn't mind though, just finding the place was a enough to wear out a thousand men, and he felt that exertion.

He didn't pack much for the trip, but he did bring a week's worth of food which consumed most of his car. The man who gave him the key to the place mentioned that there would be basic supplies inside; blankets, candles, matches, and, most importantly, alcohol.

He went to his car and opened the trunk. The food flowed out of it but he somehow gained the strength and arm length to carry it up to the cabin. He set it on the cold porch while he dug out the keys to the place. He then opened it and shoved all the food inside.

Although the look of the place on the outside was small and undersized, it appeared to be an illusion because the inside felt spacious and roomy. There were two bedrooms, which were attached by the hallway that led to the living room. Connected to this hallway was also the bathroom and closet. The most impressing part of the entire home was the fireplace in the living room that jutted out of the wall. It was brick and took up more than half of the wall. The couch was placed conveniently in front of it for a perfect view of the cinnamon flames that he would light that night.

With not much to do, he walked outside and sat on the wicker chair that rested on the dusty porch. The musty wind picked up and blew the orange leaves solemnly across the ground. It created a sense of loneliness for him. There was no one there to view these leaves or feel the fragile air. It was just the trees and himself to see these rustled leaves and that wasn't enough company. He pushed the feelings aside like he always did and drowned in the beauty of the nature outside instead. Eventually he fell asleep in the chair and didn't dream of anything, just white. By the time he woke up, the stars were high and the moon was ample and frosty.

He decided to go back inside and visit the fireplace. For whatever reason, there were already unburned logs in the fireplace. So he used a lighter that he brought with him to light them. He sat back on the couch in front of the fireplace and waited for the fire to build up its ferocity, which it did.

He noticed something ghostly in the corner of his eye. Through the window next to him, he saw something. Or maybe it was somebody, he thought. He didn't fear whatever it was; he sensed somehow that it was a friendly being.

He turned his body to get the full view and realized that it was a woman wearing all white. She had on a dress that was so white that he could see it even in the abysmal dark. She walked closer to the cabin, and the fireplace lit her appearance. She had auburn hair that was as flowing as a river down her arms and back. Her eyes were like azure diamond set in milky skin. Her lips were laced with a crimson lipstick.

She waited at the door for a few seconds, not knocking nor making any effort to inform him that she wanted in. He got up as quickly as he could opened the door for the, what seemed to be, apparition. He opened it and was about to ask something when she held up her index finger and put it to his lips. He knew that she wanted no words to be exchanged between the two. He also knew now that she was not a ghost because he felt the warm flesh of her finger on his lips. He stepped aside as a sign that she was allowed in. She brought her ethereal self to the couch and sat. She held her arms open to indicate that he was to be placed in them.

He took the hint and walked over to her and set himself in her arms. He didn't find anything strange about it, he just went with the flow. All the misery that he carried with him disappeared in that instant. He felt as if she wouldn't leave him, ever.

Somewhere during the night, while they were still holding each other, he decided that he loved her. He didn't know her name or a single fact about her but he was absolutely infatuated by her. He had a strange feeling that he was being awarded for enduring so much loneliness in the past. He just hoped she'd stay with him.

They clung onto each other's presence throughout the long, miserably cold night. She was so warm and comfortable that he hoped her skin would never leave his alone. Without warm flesh on his, he was a self-deprecating, cold being but with the flesh, he had some sort of resolution that couldn't be retained when she was gone.

At some point, he figured it was morning, he felt a fading of warmth. She left his arms. He didn't worry at first because he just figured she was in the bathroom. He opened his eyes and found that the sky was orange which meant it was around six a.m. now. After about five minutes he began panicking.

He turned his body towards the window and noticed something dreadful; his car was not present. The woman and the car evaporated from his life. He didn't much care that she took it because he knew that she didn't just use him, she took it so he'd be alone. Somehow she gained the knowledge that he hated loneliness and used it against him.

Without much thought, he ran outside. He ran past the trees and through mud to get to the lake. Once he arrived he saw the car floating in the lake. She was not in it thankfully. He sat down on the ledge of that cliff and stared down at the lake. He began crying. With nothing left to do or see he trekked back to his cabin.

He went inside and sat. He decided that he was never leaving, not until she came back at least.

Richard Shiers

Summer 1998

We launch stone after stone,
at the old barn.
miniature Davids arrayed
Against a dilapidate red
Goliath.

The impact of one makes
a witch's face in the
window, the tinkle of
glass her cackle.

The view inside through
Her eyes
makes DO NOT ENTER
a challenge.

Nathan Elwood

The Price of Freedom

A ghostly image of a soldier
stood in the background,
as a mother with a babe in her
arms stood by a grave site.

She lowly whispered, "Father
this is your son. Son this is your
father. He gave his life so that
others might live."

Now she is alone, but she
will survive. She will raise
this child without the aid
of others. This child will
grow to be a strong man
because his mother was strong.

Shirley Smothers

Repo Man

Nobody weeps for a repo man. There are people all over town that'd raise a cheer to see Hank Wynd in the obits. Can't really blame them either. It's my job to take from them, to collect on the debts they can't pay. No, I don't wonder why the local undertaker's still a more popular guy than me. Still though, I don't think I deserved a bullet. I got kids you know, even if I ain't seen either of them for a long while. But I know they're good boys. I trust that Meredith raised our kids up right, even with that Keith fella instead of me. Yeah, Mikey and Joey will be just fine. I don't even figure the news of my untimely demise hit them too hard, and thank God for that.

You know, when you're a kid you always hear that you get to see your whole life before you go. You'd see it in the cartoons and Bobby Carver from up the street would swear up and down how it'd happened to him when he almost got run over by that semi. I used to think maybe that was some kind of compensation. You're going away, but you get to take the whole trip again, really get a look at the good parts one more time. I'd of liked that. My touchdown at the Homecoming game back at Roosevelt... The day Mikey was born... It would have been real nice to see that stuff again. That ain't how it worked out for me though. I didn't get all 48 years of my life. All I got was that day. The day I died.

I woke up that morning, same as always, just a few minutes before the alarm went off. Thing hasn't had a chance to beep in years. Next I got up for my shower. Grabbed the little necklace from the nightstand and went for the bathroom. The necklace had a little Crucifix on it. I wore it every day since Father Tom gave it to me. He said it was for the generous donations I'd been making to the Church. I figured 10 percent of my paycheck was the least I could do. Wasn't for the AA program they run out of Sacred Heart, I don't know where I'd be. I just wish I'd gotten into it before Meredith took the kids. Before she took away the visitation rights.

It's ok though. Those boys are probably better off for it anyway.

After getting ready and having a bowl of Cheerios, I took my old Beetle out to the Repossession Lot. It wasn't much to look at, my car, but it got me where I needed going and maintenance was a breeze. Not like on the new ones. Those are a real pain in the ass with all the electrics and wires they got in them now. I remember a car I repossessed recently, one of those hybrids. Well, the owner, she knew we were gonna take the thing away, so she went in and just started pulling wires out, just whichever ones she could get at. Then she closed it all up again and let us pick it up with no trouble. It was about a week before we figured out what she'd done to the damn thing.

Pardon my language.

Where was I? Right, the Lot. Well, I got there early, as I always do, and I just shot the shit with Stan for a little while. Stan's my boss you see, but him and me go farther back than that. He was my sponsor when I joined the AA. Gave me my job, kept me on the right track. I'm 14 years sober thanks to Stan. Through all of it though, we never became best friends or anything. I trust and rely on Stan, and he trusted me enough to give me this job, but he always had to keep a little bit of distance as my sponsor, so as not to be "emotionally compromised." He's a good guy though. I don't know if my opinion weighs too much on this, but I just figured I'd put my two cents in, seeing as how I'm here and all.

Stan sent me out on a job pretty early that morning. 2001 Ford Focus to be repossessed from Cherry Hills. That made me want to swear a little bit. Cherry Hills is subdivision, a pretty nice one, and that has its own set of problems for repo men. See, the scary parts of town, I know how to deal with those pretty well. I've got my gun, and most of the time whatever I'm picking up is too banged up to be worth fighting over anyway. But in these residential neighborhoods, having your car taken away is embarrassing, and embarrassment is something most of these people just can't deal with. So they make a fuss, they scream and holler and then the neighbors come out. If I don't play it just right, the repossession could be reversed, and the company would have to pay damages. See, as repo men we have a non-delegatable obligation not to cause a Breach of the Peace. Pretty fancy talk, huh? Basically, if the person I'm taking the vehicle from makes a big enough scene, they get to keep the car, and some of the people in these type of neighborhoods know that.

Luckily, it was a Tuesday, and I guess the owner of the car was at work by now. Still, I hooked it up to my tow truck and took off quick as I could. Looking back in the mirror as I drove away, I saw a wrinkly old man in a robe and tighty whities wander out of his house to see what was happening to his neighbor's Focus. Well, least Grandpa has a story to tell everybody when they get home. That should brighten his day a bit.

That's what I'm all about, you know. Brightening up peoples' days.

I had three other pickups that morning, and they all went smooth as you could want. Two of the owners even watched me as I took it. Both of them had willingly given up the car so they could keep paying for a roof over their heads. Made my job easier, but it really struck me how many vehicles we were repossessing lately. I read just the other day that repossessions are up 15 percent nationwide, and sure, that keeps me in business, but, frankly, I don't like it.

Rest of the morning was spent at the lot, fixing up the vehicles for auction. Lot of these vehicles got problems, some from lack of care, and some from deliberate action. Most of the time the action isn't subtle like the lady with the hybrid either. Had a Camaro come in the other day that the owner had actually taken a sledgehammer to. I worked right on through till lunch, when Stan came down and told me to go ahead and take a break. I told him I wanted to finish up on the engine of this 1968 Ford Mustang we'd pulled in a few weeks ago. I was still amazed we'd found anything like her. 320 horsepower, 390 GT engine, 4 speed manual transmission... that baby could eat up a quarter mile in 13 seconds flat if I could just get her running again. Real classic car. Same model they used in Bullit. You remember that movie? You guys watch movies up here? Well, Stan remembered, so he let me tinker around with her for another twenty minutes before telling me to go ahead and get some food in me. I wiped my hands off and went inside. There was a turkey and tomato sandwich in the fridge I'd been saving, and it was calling me.

I was pretty content there, munching on the sandwich, daydreaming about that car. I was starting to think that maybe when the auction came around I could put in a bid or two. Stan walked up and handed me a grape pop. I took it and thanked him. He sat down next to me with his own soda and smiled.

"Pretty good work you've been doing Hank. Keep this up and there won't be a car left in Jefferson ain't in this lot."

“Well Stan, no disrespect, but I hope you’re wrong.”

He held onto that thought for about a minute. You could see it rolling around in his mind. Then he just sorta let it go. Stan’s a focused man, not really one to philosophize, you know? But that’s good for a man like him. He’s got a business to run, and his focus helped me stay on the straight and narrow for years.

He looked me in the eyes then, back to business. “Hank,” he said, “I got another job for you. I don’t really like sending you out for it, but it’s gotta be done. Listen, you go get this car and you can stay in the lot for the rest of the day, work on that Mustang. How ‘bout it Hank?” Stan handed me the repossession form with all the pertinent information. 1999 Ford Ranger. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing but the address: 185 Lincoln Avn.

I knew the neighborhood pretty well. I’d spent some time there. Before the AA, but after Meredith left. But I’m sure you all already knew that, huh? So you already know why I was there. What I was doing in Lincoln Avenue, meth capital for three counties around.

I never claimed to be a saint. I’ve burned a lot of bridges in my time. But I was trying to make up for it. 14 years I’ve been trying to make up for it. It didn’t have to... Ah, forget it. Doesn’t really matter now, does it?

Well, you know the rest of the story. I asked Stan if maybe one of the other guys could get this one. He told me none of the other guys were around, and the owner was a probable flight risk. Had to be done today, he said. Then I could go work on that car for as long as I pleased.

So I went, and I hooked up the car, and the skinhead dealer came out with his gun, and I reached for mine, edgy as I was to be back in that hell-hole. Then I got shot. It took me three hours before I went into cardiac arrest. The doctors did all they could. I don’t blame them.

They buried me on a hill. Stan spoke at the funeral. Meredith and the boys were there. Keith waited in the car. I never did like Keith, I hope you’ll forgive me for that. A few buddies of mine from here and there showed up, along with some guys from AA. Wasn’t any kind of big deal though. Dry eyes all around. I don’t really mind though. I appreciate that I got to see it.

You know, it kind of funny. They buried me on a hill right next to a willow tree. It never made a single sound. It’s like I told you. Nobody weeps for a repo man.

Nathan Elwood

Human Bots

Like an animal farm
A crawling ant, creeping cockroaches
In the woods
Of small lakes
And some awkward looking
Two legged animals
together
With surprising pale blue eyes
In perfect harmony and motion
Without flexibility
Just looking around;
And the frightening rotating heads

Santosh Kalwar

Strokes of Confidence

“Oh my God, fat ass!” Jimmy Turner yelled while pointing at Darin.

Darin’s eyes peeled open as he woke from a nap on the couch. His scratched knee stung from being rubbed on the couch’s fabric.

“It’s all Jimmy’s fault,” Darin thought.

Darin was humiliated from a very public and very theatrical failed attempt of jumping from one mound of dirt to another with his bicycle. He failed to reach the dirt-landing ramp, and his front tire smashed into the ground violently halting the momentum of the bike and throwing his body over the handlebars. His hands let go of their grip on the handlebars, and he fell on the ground with his back landing first. He slid a few feet on his back in the dirt lot peppered with sharp rocks. His shirt was torn, and blood dripped from the few cuts on his back. His hair was covered in dirt, and he cried. Jimmy and the other kids at the dirt lot laughed as he rode away.

Humiliated.

Darin’s parents pulled into the garage on their way home from the movies with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. Darin, hearing the noise of the garage from inside the living room, ran into his room and put on pants to shield his scratched knees from his parent’s concerned eyes. Darin’s father opened the garage door.

“Darin,” Dad said.

Darin emerged from his bedroom and saw his father.

“Hey,” he said.

“I hope you didn’t eat yet.”

“No I didn’t.”

Darin’s mom walked in carrying two brown bags of food from a new restaurant that makes burgers to go.

“Hungry honey?” She said.

“Yup,” answered Darin.

The three sat on the couch eating their cheeseburgers and watching The Ed Sullivan Show. Darin readied for bed when the show ended.

Darin brushed his teeth while his mother straightened his sheets and fluffed his pillow. Darin

washed his face while his father smoked a cigarette at the empty dinner table. Darin was ready for bed and met his mother in his room who was sitting on the edge of his bed. Darin slid his body under his dark blue sheets and comforter. His mother pulled the sheets up to his chin and lowered her body to his forehead kissing it.

“Good night, I love you,” she said.

“I love you too.”

She rose and walked to the door, before flicking the light off she turned back to Darin.

“Are you mowing Mr. Johnson’s lawn tomorrow morning?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, want breakfast before you go?”

“What are you going to make?”

“Pancakes.”

“Cool.”

She flipped the light switch and closed the door. Once the door was shut, Darin shoved the comforter off his body. It was too hot to sleep under covers. Darin stared up at the ceiling a long time thinking of the bike crash. Finally, after his nervousness subsided, he was able to sleep.

“Darin!” his mother yelled from the kitchen, “get up, I made pancakes and they are going to go cold if you don’t get up and eat them.”

Darin’s eyes opened to his mother’s shouts. He rolled out of bed and got dressed. A few minutes after he woke he sat at the kitchen table to eat the three pancakes with butter and syrup his mother had prepared. Darin ate and his mother drank coffee and smoked cigarettes at the table. She sat and smiled while he ate. He smiled too.

After breakfast Darin’s mother went to work in her office, which was Darin’s sister’s old bedroom before she went to college. She was an artist and sold her art to people all around the world. Darin was proud of her. He left the house and walked to Mr. Johnson’s house.

Though walking took longer than riding a bike, he didn’t mind. He was dreading mowing Mr. Johnson’s lawn. When he arrived he walked into the backyard through the side gate as he did every Saturday. He pulled the Johnson’s lawnmower out and started on the lawn. Once he finished he put the mower back in the backyard, and Mr. Johnson came outside to meet Darin in the front yard.

“Darin,” Mr. Johnson said.

“Hey Mr. Johnson.”

“Looks damn good out here Darin, you’re getting real good with the lines.”

“Thanks.”

Mr. Johnson pulled out a dollar to pay Darin for his lawn mowing services.

“Say Darin, I might have some additional work for you.”

“What’s that Mr. Johnson?”

“Well someone or something dented my car and I need to fix the dent.”

Darin’s hand started to shake and his heart rate increased to that of a young man fresh off the plane in Korea.

“I don’t know how to fix a dent Mr. Johnson,” Darin stuttered out.

“I do, but I need help. Can you come by tomorrow and help me?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Ok see you tomorrow around nine in the morning.”

Darin walked home and spent the rest of the day playing with his Johnny Reb Cannon in his room. The Johnny Reb Cannon was a plastic cannon that fired plastic cannonballs up to thirty-five feet (according to the wording on the box).

The next morning Mr. Johnson picked Darin up in the cherry red Oldsmobile 442 in perfect condition except for the football shaped dent on the front passenger side panel. Darin did not speak very much during their first stop at the hardware store to pick up body filler and a mallet to bang the dent out. Once entering the neighborhood where their families lived, Mr. Johnson pulled out of his pocket an old baseball playing card. It was wrinkled and scuffed to the point where the pitcher’s face was barely visible.

“I found this by the car Darin.”

Mr. Johnson held the card up so Darin could examine it. Suddenly Darin’s hands began to sweat and he felt as if the Sun moved significantly closer to the Earth and was baking the planet.

“A baseball card?”

“Yup, must have been left by the person who hit the car.”

“Really?”

“Would you like it? You can put it on your bike and make it sounds like a motorcycle. Kids do that, right?”

“Umm.”

“Maybe the wind blew it over, either way, you want it?”

“Sure.”

Though Darin’s hands felt weak and his heart was racing he grabbed the card and pocketed it as the 442 pulled into the driveway.

A few minutes into repairing the car Darin was sure Mr. Johnson had forgotten about the baseball card. Mr. Johnson applied the body filler while Darin mixed the paint. As the body filler dried Mrs. Johnson treated the two repairmen with lemonade and blueberry tart. Darin nearly inhaled the tart, as blueberry was his favorite.

“Once the filler dries I will show you how to paint it,” Mr. Johnson said.

“Ok, is it hard?”

“No, but you need to be confident. If you are not confident you will hesitate, and if you hesitate you might mess up.”

The filler dried shortly after Mr. Johnson finished his tart and lemonade. He showed Darin how to paint the car with a few swift smooth strokes of his brush before handing the tool to the boy. Darin started at the top of the filler. His first stroke was curvy, and the paint clumped together in little waves. The old man took a wet rag and rubbed away Darin’s mistake.

“This time think smooth and calm,” the old man said to the boy.

Darin looked up at the old man. This time his paint appeared on the car almost as perfect as the old man’s first perfect stroke. Darin smiled and glanced at Mr. Johnson who was smiling back. They finished the car, and Mr. Johnson dropped Darin off at his parent’s house. Darin helped his mother prepare dinner that night. Instead of watching television he exercised by completing pushups and sit-ups as his parents smoked and talked in the kitchen. Darin struggled sleeping again that night. His restlessness that night was not from anxiety but from a new found pride. His mind would not stop running through scenarios of him conquering a slew of problems that previously seemed impossibly difficult to confront. He imagined himself laughing at a table at lunch with his friends. He saw himself jumping his bike at the dirt lot with perfect precision. He landed on the ramp and skidded his back wheel forward stopping, and a victorious dust cloud billowed up into the air. Jimmy would go next and crash and all Darin’s friends would laugh at Jimmy and Darin would point and laugh too.

Darin woke the next morning and walked energetically to school arriving in class six minutes early. At lunch he first sat in his usual table alone. He then spotted an open seat at Jimmy Turner’s table. Darin stood and walked to Jimmy’s table.

“Can I sit here?” said Darin.

Jimmy looked up from his food and over to his friends. He smirked and looked at Darin.

“Sure, take a seat.”

They ate for a few minutes and Darin sat quietly eating his food and smiling. Tucker, a tall slender boy who smoked his brother’s cigarettes, joined the conversation.

“Hey Jimmy you going to the lot today?” Tucker asked Jimmy.

“Hell yeah I am,” replied Jimmy, “hey Darin are you going to the lot after school?”

Darin looked up from his food and his smile disappeared instantly. His stomach clenched tight, and he hesitated to respond.

“Darin, are you going to the jumps?” Jimmy demanded.

“Umm I don’t think I can.”

Jimmy smiled, “Why not, too afraid you’re going to eat shit again?”

Darin felt his eyes swell with tears, and he got up and walked away from the table. He willed his legs not to run, though they begged for it. Tears flowed from his eyes to his cheeks and finally onto the cement of the school’s courtyard. Outside of the cafeteria he was able to oblige his legs. He ran as hard as he could, attempting to crack the pavement with every step. Darin ran into the nearest bathroom and into the nearest stall, slammed the door and wept wildly. Whatever false notions of confidence he had from his victory over the car were now gone. The rest of the day went as it usually did. Darin sat in the back of the class as he always did; quiet, unnoticed, safe.

After school he walked home slowly with his head down, pitying himself. As he dragged his feet along the sidewalk he heard a sound coming from behind that froze him in place. Jimmy Turner, Tucker, and the rest of their friends were at the end of the street riding their bikes towards Darin. He could hear their chatter and laughter. He hated them.

“Hey Darin, where did you go at lunch we missed you?” Jimmy taunted.

At the same time, Mr. Johnson was leaving his house two streets away. He pulled out of his driveway in the 442 and headed to the pharmacy to pick up some medication.

Darin did not respond to Jimmy. He just kept walking with his head down. The other boys appeared all around Darin on their bikes.

“You going to the lot with us?” Jimmy asked.

Darin still didn’t say anything. He just kept walking. His stomach tightened and his heart raced. He felt his hands start to sweat.

Mr. Johnson continued towards the pharmacy now only a street away from Darin and the boys. Jimmy produced one final jab, “I guess you’re not going to go huh? You’re probably too much of a fat ass to make the jump anyhow. You’ll probably just eat shit again.”

Darin lost all control of his body and lunged at Jimmy who was on his bike just a few feet away.

“Fuck you!” Darin screamed.

Darin punched Jimmy in the face, knocking him off his bike. Jimmy rose and ran at Darin tackling him to the ground as Mr. Johnson pulled onto the street.

“Fucking fat ass!” Jimmy shouted as he pummeled Darin in the face. Jimmy sat on Darin punching him over and over in the face. Darin never stopped fighting. He did all he could to try and kill Jimmy. Darin kicked and punched and clawed away at Jimmy’s flesh. Darin’s face was bleeding and he tore into Jimmy’s arm with his fingernails. Darin cut Jimmy’s right arm and blood emptied from the wound. Mr. Johnson noticed the boys fighting as he drove up. He stopped his car and got out quickly, and ran towards the group of boys.

“What the hell is going on here?” he shouted.

Tucker tugged at Jimmy’s shirt and Jimmy got off Darin’s stomach. Darin’s face was covered in blood and his eye was nearly shut. Jimmy’s shirt, and the ground were stained with Darin’s blood. As Mr. Johnson approached and recognized Darin, his expression changed from concerned to angry. He turned to Jimmy who was standing victorious over Darin.

“Don’t worry about it old man, it’s over.” Jimmy said.

“You ok?” Mr. Johnson said to Darin.

Jimmy now about 10 feet from Mr. Johnson turned back and muttered under his breath, “Oh course he is, I doubt I could even hurt him with all that fat on his face.”

Mr. Johnson ran to Jimmy who was attempting to mount his bike. Mr. Johnson grabbed Jimmy with both hands and threw him off the bike. Jimmy’s back hit the ground, and he looked up at Mr. Johnson.

“What the fuck is a matter with...” Jimmy yelled but his voice was cut off by a swift punch in the right side of the jaw by Mr. Johnson.

“I’ll tell you what the fuck is a matter with me,” Mr. Johnson spoke as he continued to produce precise and powerful blows to Jimmy’s stomach and face.

Jimmy’s face broke open and blood seeped out onto the pavement. Tucker and the rest of the boys stood petrified in horror, but Darin screamed and grabbed Mr. Johnson’s arm.

“Hank!” Darin screamed.

Mr. Johnson stopped, took a deep breath and stood up over Jimmy’s body.

“Do not, and I mean ever, in your life say anything negative to Darin or any other kids. Do not think for a second you are better than anyone,” Mr. Johnson spoke slowly to Jimmy and moved his head back down to Jimmy’s ear. Then Mr. Johnson spoke so that only Jimmy could hear his words, “because you are nothing but a stupid, weak little fuck without a care in the world.”

“Please Mr. Johnson,” Darin yelled grabbing at his shirt.

“Get in the car son,” said Mr. Johnson.

Darin ran to the car and got in the passenger seat. Mr. Johnson entered shortly after and drove off back towards Darin’s house.

“I am going to drop you off at your place Darin. But you need to understand something. No matter what, and I mean no matter what anyone says, you did the right thing defending yourself.”

“Ok.”

“No Darin, you don’t. You did the right thing, and whatever happens now is not your fault.”

“Ok.”

“You must be confident in yourself son, you must defend yourself and you must love yourself. Because, if you do not, no one will.”

“Ok,” Jimmy said crying and shaking.

Mr. Johnson’s eyes began to tear up, “do you understand Darin?”

“Yes, I understand,” he replied as red colored tears dripped onto the black cloth interior of the

M. D. Dho

Melissa

Glen knew it was Melissa. It was her time to call. She called when it got dark. He picked up.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Glen.”

That was all. Then silence. It stayed like that, always, until he said the next thing. What if he didn’t say anything? What if he hung up?”

“Hi, Melissa. What’s going on?”

The thing with Melissa’s mom was over. Glen met Judy in a bar. She needed a lift home. It was understood he’d be coming inside.

“I miss you, Glen”

“I miss you, too, Melissa.”

“Then come over.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not your mom’s boyfriend anymore.”

“But you’re still my boyfriend.”

Melissa worried about things. Her mom couldn’t take care of herself, let alone a little kid. What Judy could do was attract men, but all the wrong kind. The night Glen and Judy met she’d already been in a car crash. She was drunk and ran into a tree. She walked back to the bar.

“Melissa, we talked about that.”

“Talk about it more.”

Glen did like her, but Melissa liked him too much. It was his fault. He brought her candy and presents. He spent time with her. He let her sit on his lap. Judy was a problem from the start. She did drugs. She drank too much. She went out and left Melissa alone. Melissa slept on the couch. She was afraid of her room. Not all the time. Only when it got dark.

“How was school?”

“School was fine. I hate it there.”

“If it’s fine, why do you hate it?”

“Because everything is fine and I hate everything.”

“What did you have for supper?”

“Fish sticks, but they were still cold inside.”

“Did your mom cook them?”

“No.”

Judy was out again. He should go over there. He should buy a bag of groceries and go over there. But then what?

“Are you alone?”

“Not if you come over. Bring a Happy Meal.”

There was something wrong from the accident. Something broken inside. Cracked ribs? A spine injury? Sex hurt. Judy cried out in pain, or bit her lip and whimpered.

“Let’s stop,” Glen said. “This is too much.”

“Don’t,” Judy said, “it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Judy always wanted to go out. Glen offered to pay for a sitter. It never happened. Neither of them knew any babysitters. So Glen brought liquor and Judy shared her drugs. They watched TV. Sometimes they fought. Often it got ugly. One time the drugs ran out and Judy blamed Glen. He had to buy more. He had to go out and come back with drugs.

“I can’t do that.”

“Then give me some money and I’ll go.”

“How much?”

“Fifty.”

Glen gave Judy the money, and she left, but not right away. First she changed her clothes and put on make-up.

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know. An hour, maybe two.”

Glen had a pizza delivered. He and Melissa watched TV. They fell asleep together on the couch.

“Who is this joker?” Judy was back, but not alone.

“Nobody,” Judy said, “the babysitter.”

“Then it’s time for the babysitter to leave.”

Melissa woke up and covered her face with her hands.

“Melissa,” Judy had her by the arm. “Go to your room. Now!”

The guy took a twenty from his wallet and tossed it at Glen.

“No, thanks.”

“Hey, if you’re the babysitter you get paid. If you’re not the babysitter, who the fuck are you?”

This was a big guy. Glen wasn’t a fighter. He took the twenty and left.

The calls started a couple day later. They always ended the same, with Melissa crying, and Glen wanting to kill himself.

“What kind of Happy Meal?”

“I don’t care,” Melissa said, “nuggets and a girl toy.”

“I’ll be there.”

Dan Nielsen

Birthday Girl

Fourteen

Cautious rays of early morning sun penetrated through the closely drawn curtains, playing on the beige walls of her bedroom before finally resting on her sleeping face. Laura woke up with a start and sat up in bed, her heart skipping with eager anticipation. Today was her birthday but that wasn't why she was happy. She didn't really get excited about her birthdays, she wasn't a kid anymore. Although she had to admit that, as the suffocating July night turned into a misty London morning, she felt like a kid again. This year, her parents promised her something she's been dreaming of for as long as she could remember. On this day of her fourteenth birthday, she was finally going to get a kitten.

Although it was much too early, there was no way she could go back to sleep. Groggily she walked down the corridor and paused outside her parents' bedroom. She considered waking them but decided against it. Her mum looked so tired these days, so unusually thin and gaunt, her eyes dark and withdrawn as if she hadn't slept for weeks. She probably needed her rest. And it was going to be an eventful day, with the long awaited trip to Guildford to choose the kitten in the morning and then a party for all her friends in the afternoon. Just thinking about it made her smile with exhilaration.

When she heard her parents' voices, she was already walking back to her room. Surprised, she stopped in her tracks. Normally she wouldn't dream of overhearing what her parents were talking about but it sounded as if they were arguing, and her alarmed curiosity outweighed the slight guilt she felt as she listened to the adult conversation that wasn't meant for her. For some inexplicable reason her heart was suddenly beating fast as if in premonition of some important and unexpected event. The truth was that she's never heard her parents argue. All through her childhood, she saw her mother and father hold hands and look at each other with such unrestrained adoration that in her innocent fascination she wondered whether she would ever find someone who would love her that much, to the exclusion of everything and everyone around. She remembered her mum laughing a lot, chatting cheerfully and singing out of tune while she cooked their family dinners and packed sandwiches for her to take to school. It made Laura feel tranquil and contentedly secure. Now, however, her mother's voice was anything but cheerful. Instead, it was angry and hoarse as if she was trying to hold back tears.

'What do you mean, you are in love with someone else?' she demanded accusingly.

Heavy, oppressive silence followed, only occasionally interrupted by her mother's sobs.

'I'm sorry, Jane. What do you want me to say? These things happen.' Her father sounded dejected and apologetic.

'How long? How long has it been going on?' whispered her mum and Laura had to lean closer to make out the words that barely reached her through the thin wooden door.

She shook slightly, not only from the shock of her father's painful revelation but also from a peculiar curiosity at glimpsing a part of the mysterious adult world, curiosity that was both frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

‘It started two years ago.’

She heard her father get up and pace heavily up and down her parents’ spacious room.

‘Two years? You’ve been lying to me, to us for two years?’

Hearing the stunned heartbreak in her mother’s voice, Laura suddenly felt dizzy and leaned against the wall.

‘You know we haven’t been getting along. We drifted apart a long time ago. These things...’

‘Don’t tell me that these things happen. Stop making excuses,’ Jane interrupted him tersely, raising her voice. ‘We’ve been drifting apart because you turned our marriage, our family, our whole life into a sham. Two years!’

‘Keep your voice down, Jane. You’ll wake Laura.’

‘How dare you mention Laura? Have you even thought of her? What will this do to her?’

‘She’s not a child. She’ll understand. She doesn’t need a father anymore.’

‘She’s thirteen,’ said Jane, her voice firm and forceful again, as if the unbearable absurdity of her husband’s words had a sobering effect on her.

‘Fourteen today. And once she gets this kitten, she won’t even notice that I’m gone.’

‘What kitten? I can’t handle a kitten right now. I can’t deal with it!’

Jane started sobbing again and, not able to take it anymore, Laura made her way back to the soothing security of her own room. Trembling despite the suffocating heat, she got under the blanket, blocking the outside world with a pillow. As she hugged her worn out old teddy bear to herself as tightly as she possibly could, she tried to analyze what just happened. There, in her room, surrounded by the reassuring familiarity of all the things that she knew since she was a child, she went over her parents’ words time and time again but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t understand the full meaning, the implications of it all. What she did understand, however, as she watched the early morning shadows dissolve and give way to hazy British sunshine, was that from that moment on something in her life had irrevocably, irreversibly changed.

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When she awoke two hours later, her mum was in the kitchen and her dad was gone. Jane had curlers in her hair and her eyes were red and swollen. She zoomed around their tiny kitchen with lightning speed, cutting ingredients for the salad, stirring the simmering sauce on the stove and mixing sugar and flour for the cake. Her hand slipped and she knocked over the pan, bright red sauce leaking all over the floor and looking slightly alarming on their spotless taupe tiles. Jane buried her head in her hands and sighed. She looked done with her day.

‘Hey, mum,’ said Laura brightly, surveying the disconcerting mess of their normally flawless kitchen. ‘Do you need a hand?’

‘I’m ok, sweetie.’ Jane smiled, stealthily wiping the tears off her face and hoping that Laura wouldn’t notice. ‘It’s your birthday and I am not letting you do anything today.’

‘But I enjoy helping you.’

Laura picked up the almost empty pot and put it in the sink, filling it with water and rubbing the sticky sauce stains with a brown sponge.

‘Where is dad?’

‘You know your father. He had to go to work.’

‘Work? It’s Saturday. Aren’t we going to pick up the kitten?’

Laura tried to muster as much enthusiasm as she could but her smile was forced and her eyes were cautious. A cloud of anxiety passed over Jane’s face and she looked away.

‘I don’t know if this is a good time for a kitten, dear,’ she said wearily.

‘Mum, you promised.’

Jane didn’t answer, pretending to fix the hems of her old grey apron that had come loose.

‘I heard what dad told you this morning. I couldn’t sleep and I heard,’ Laura whispered.

As if in shock, Jane leaned on the kitchen counter, tears streaming down her face. Seeing her mum’s sorrow, Laura felt a sudden apprehensive fear, an odd unsettling sensation that she tried to ignore.

‘Mum, what does it mean? Is it very bad?’

Jane held her daughter close and Laura felt her hands shake.

‘Yes,’ Jane said after a long silence. ‘Yes, it’s very bad.’

‘Is dad leaving us? What is going to happen?’

The thought of her father moving out to live somewhere else and, what was even more incomprehensible, with someone else, was at once preposterous and disturbing. Nothing in her safe and happy childhood had prepared her for this hollow feeling of emptiness and loss. She sighed as she sensed her mother’s tears on the bare skin of her shoulders.

‘I don’t know, baby. I don’t know anything.’

‘He is coming back for my party though, isn’t he?’ Laura whispered hopefully.

‘Of course he is. He wouldn’t miss it.’ Jane tried to sound confident but her voice trembled.

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The party was in full swing and her friends were having a great time, giggling, gossiping and chatting about shopping and boys. The phone rang as Laura was getting ready to blow out her fourteen candles on the giant chocolate cake that her mum baked for her the night before.

‘It’s your father,’ said Jane, passing her the phone.

‘Hey, baby!’

The line was bad and her dad’s voice was dropping in and out.

‘Happy birthday!’

‘Dad, where are you?’ Laura said reproachfully, taking the phone into her bedroom and closing the door behind her, shutting out the noise and excitement of the party.

‘Aren’t you coming home for my birthday?’

‘I’m just held up at work. I’ll be there in an hour.’

He sounded just like his usual self, happy, optimistic and up-beat but there was something different in his voice, too. He was distant and distracted as if he had something else on his mind.

‘Work, really? You couldn’t come up with a better excuse?’

Her throat contracted with sudden tears.

‘What are you talking about, baby? My phone is breaking up, I can hardly hear you.’

‘You are with her, aren’t you? You are missing my party so you could be with her?’

Laura shook with painful disdain, a burning jealousy making her eyes tingle. There was a long silence on the other end.

‘Dad, are you there?’ she whispered.

When he finally answered, he sounded guarded and a little angry.

‘Did your mother put you up to this? I can’t believe she told you.’

‘No one told me. I heard you. I heard you tell mum that you are leaving us,’ she sobbed.

His anger evaporated, just like his earlier cheerfulness. Now he sounded tired and cagey.

‘I’m not leaving you. I’m leaving your mother. It’s different.’

‘Different how?’ she screamed in confused frustration. ‘It’s my birthday, dad, and you’re not even here. You couldn’t wait till after my birthday to have this conversation?’

‘Listen, I have to go now. I’ll be home in an hour and we’ll talk. It will be ok.’

‘Well, guess what, you are right! I’m old enough not to need my father anymore.’

Angrily she threw the phone in the corner and collapsed on her bed, weeping silently into her pillow. She stayed there for a long time, staring into space, while outside her friends celebrated her birthday, their happy and excited voices drowned by the deafening rap music that she loved.

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It was after midnight and all the guests had left a long time ago. Seeing the lights in her parents’ bedroom, she knocked and entered. Her mother was crouched on the window sill, gloomily watching the dimly lit street outside.

‘Mum, what are you doing?’ Laura blinked in surprise.

‘Nothing, dear.’

Jane sounded casual but her eyes were dull from recent tears. Nevertheless, Laura thought that her mum looked stunning in the dark blue evening dress that she was still wearing. She lost a lot of weight recently and the dress suited her perfectly.

‘I thought I heard a car downstairs and was just checking to see if it was your father coming home.’

‘He’s not coming home, mum,’ Laura said miserably, sitting on her parents’ king size bed.

‘Of course he is. Sooner or later he’ll realize that he made a mistake and he’ll come back. We are a family.’

Jane threw one last look out the window and sighed. Reluctantly, she climbed down and sat next to Laura.

‘Mum, are you ok? Do you want anything? I could make some chamomile tea, it will calm you down.’

Jane shook her head forlornly.

‘No,’ she said quietly. ‘No, thank you. But maybe you could talk to your father, ask him to come home?’

‘I’m fourteen, mum. He’s not going to listen to me.’

They were silent for a while, then Laura got up and hugged her mother.

‘Try to get some sleep. It’s late.’

Jane looked suddenly scared in the eerie light of her little bedside lamp.

‘Can you stay here for a bit?’ she whispered. ‘I can’t stand being alone.’

‘Of course,’ Laura said reassuringly, stroking her mother’s arm. ‘Don’t worry, mum. I’ll look after you. We’ll get through this.’

Fifteen

‘What are you doing for your birthday this year?’ asked Laura’s best friend Julie, absentmindedly flicking through a fashion magazine.

‘Nothing,’ said Laura, idly inspecting the empty schoolyard. ‘Birthdays are lame.’

‘You have to do something. We can invite some people over to my place. It will be fun.’

Laura shrugged. ‘Yeah, ok. Whatever.’

‘We should get going. History is about to start,’ said Julie, reapplying her lipstick and combing her hair so that it looked even bigger than before.

While Laura was most comfortable in her favourite jeans and a t-shirt, Julie liked to look feminine. Her idea of feminine was six inch heels and tiny skirts that barely covered her plump hips.

‘You know what, I can’t be bothered today. I’m going home.’

As she watched her classmates walk by, Laura felt disheartened and apathetic.

‘But you hardly ever go to school anymore.’

Picking up her backpack, Julie looked at her friend with concern.

‘What are you, my mother?’ snapped Laura. ‘I’ve got stuff to do, ok? I’ll see you later.’

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Laura leaned against a thick tree trunk, watching the white two-storey building across the road. It was an ordinary townhouse, identical to the ones on either side of it, except that the front porch was overflowing with flowers and her father’s car was parked outside. Through the kitchen window she could make out a tall blonde woman clearing the dishes and cutting vegetables for dinner.

Gingerly she crossed the road and rang the bell. When the door opened a few seconds later, she found herself face to face with the woman she'd never met but continuously thought about. Laura studied her sulkily, her appraising eyes scanning the woman's figure up and down. She was very young, not even in her thirties yet but Jane was so much more beautiful, Laura thought. The blonde was wearing a designer suit as if she just got home from work and her long hair was tied back into a bun, making her appear even taller than she actually was. She looked nothing like Laura imagined. She certainly didn't look like someone who was capable of breaking up a family. She didn't look predatory. Perplexed, Laura continued to stare without saying a word.

'Can I help you?' said the woman, her eyes clouding with surprised recognition.

'I'm here to see my father,' Laura stammered.

For a fleeting moment a shadow of bewildered uneasiness ran over the woman's face but it was quickly gone and Laura wondered if she had imagined it.

'He's not home right now and you shouldn't be here.'

'I'll wait for him then,' said Laura brashly, attempting to push past the woman and into the living room.

'Who do you think you are, budging in here like this?' The blonde squared her shoulders threateningly, blocking Laura's way.

'I'm his daughter. Who are you? And what do you think you're doing with my father? He's got a family, you know.'

Stunned by her own audacity, Laura raised her voice and an elderly neighbour lounging in his front yard looked up at them with undisguised curiosity and enthusiasm of someone who was considerably bored with his afternoon.

'Get out of here before I call the cops. You think I don't notice you every night watching us from outside like some kind of stalker?'

Her pretty face convulsed in anger.

'I'm not going anywhere. Today is my birthday and I haven't seen my father in weeks.'

Laura tried one more time to get past the blonde and into the house but the woman pushed her and managed to close and lock the door behind her. She was surprisingly strong for someone so slim. Shaking in anger, Laura clasped her fists helplessly. Crossing the road, she picked up a rock and threw it at the kitchen window which shattered with a loud bang. It felt so liberating that she picked up another rock and threw it at the bedroom window. Stealing one last glance at her father's new home, she turned around and ran as fast as she could.

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When she got home from Julie's, it was two AM. With a sudden dismay she realized that her mum was waiting up for her. Slightly shivering in the cool breeze, Jane was sitting on the porch in a worn out brown cardigan and her favourite slippers. There was a cup of tea in front of her and her face looked grey with worry.

'Mum, what are you doing up? It's late,' Laura murmured, instantly feeling guilty.

She didn't mean to upset her mum and add to the perpetual stress that her life had become.

'Where have you been?' Jane shouted, her momentary relief giving way to anger. 'I was worried sick. I've been trying to call you all night.'

'I was at Julie's. My phone battery is dead.' She tried to squeeze her way past her mum. 'I'm just going to bed. I'm tired.'

'You are tired?'

Jane grabbed her by the shoulder and, shaking her like a puppy, marched her into the living room.

'Do you have any idea what time it is? You are out of control.'

'I'm sorry, mum. I lost track of time.'

Feeling six years old again, she squeezed her eyes in childish fear. If dad was still here, she thought, he would calm mum down like he always did. She shuddered.

'Your school called today. You have the worst attendance record in your entire year. I work two jobs just to make the ends meet and I have no time to watch you. When are you going to grow up?'

Jane looked at her intently and Laura lowered her head. The bitter disappointment in her mother's eyes was too much to bear.

'I grew up a year ago, mum. When you didn't even try to get dad back.'

Gasping, Jane stepped back as if from a slap.

'It's so easy for you,' Laura continued, ignoring the shocked pain on her mother's face. 'You act as if nothing happened. Well, I can't do this anymore,' she raised her voice, burying her head in her hands. 'I don't know how to handle this emptiness inside me.'

Jane watched her without saying a word, the expression on her face softer, no longer angry. Finally, she wrapped her arms around Laura's shaking body and held her tight.

'Your dad moved on with his life,' she said quietly. 'We need to do the same.'

'How do we do that, mum? How do we move on?'

Relaxing in her mother's arms, she felt the familiar pain inside her subside a little.

‘I don’t know, baby. But we certainly don’t do that by throwing rocks at your father’s windows.’

Jane stroked Laura’s head, her eyes twinkling. ‘Come to the kitchen. I baked a carrot cake, your favourite. We can celebrate your birthday, just the two of us.’

Sixteen

When his car pulled up in the driveway, Laura and Julie were on the porch chatting and enjoying fresh strawberries that Jane bought for them at Portobello market that morning. Julie just braided Laura’s hair and they both looked at their reflections in the mirror, giggling and making funny faces. They stopped abruptly when they heard the car door slam and saw Laura’s dad walk slowly towards them.

‘I’ll be right back, Jules,’ said Laura and ran down the stairs to meet him. ‘What are you doing here, dad?’ she asked sternly, suddenly out of breath.

‘Looking for you.’ He smiled, trying to hide the reproach in his eyes. ‘I’ve been calling you for weeks but you never returned my calls.’

‘I’ve been busy. I’m trying to concentrate on school and gymnastics. We have nationals next week.’

She looked into his face, and her heart skipped a beat at its painful familiarity.

‘You’ve been avoiding me,’ he said quietly.

‘It still hurts, ok?’ she cried, staring at him with contempt. ‘It hurts every time I hear a song that reminds me of that time two years ago when you walked out on us and every time mum wears the perfume she used to wear back then. I am just trying to move on with my life.’

‘You can’t move on with your life by shutting me out. I’m still your father.’

He took her hand and she stepped back cautiously, pulling away.

‘I wish you remembered that two years ago when you left us.’

She struggled to keep her voice even.

‘I left your mother. I never left you.’

‘You were never around!’ she shouted. ‘You are never around,’ she said a little quieter.

‘You are not a child anymore. You don’t need me as much. You’ll have a family of your own soon,’ he said, trying to sound reassuring but sounding pleading instead.

‘Yeah, right. As if I could trust someone after what you did to us. And I was only fourteen, dad!’

She shook her head in disbelief.



‘I miss you. I want my daughter back.’

He took her hand again and this time she didn’t pull it back.

‘I want my father back, too. I want the father who taught me how to play football, who took me camping, who read to me when I couldn’t sleep. But he’s gone,’ she said, feeling the protective wall of resentment that she’d been building against him for so long slowly melting away.

‘I’m right here, baby. I’m not going anywhere. Can I take you out for your birthday? Unless you have other plans.’

‘I don’t have plans. I don’t celebrate my birthdays anymore.’

Wanting to appear older and in control, she suddenly wished that her hair wasn’t plaited into silly childish braids.

‘Really? Since when?’ he asked.

‘Since I was fourteen,’ she said, her voice bitter.

He sighed sadly and said,

‘I’ll pick you up at six. We’ll talk. I want to spend some time with you.’

‘Ok, dad. But mum and I, we are leaving next month. We are moving to Paris. She’s getting married and I want to go to University there.’

He didn’t speak for a long time, watching her in remorseful fascination. She was so much taller than he remembered, almost as tall as him.

‘That’s good,’ he said finally. ‘Good for you. A new beginning.’

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘A new beginning.’

‘I have something for you. It’s in the front seat of the car, have a look.’

‘What is it, dad?’ she said as she walked around the car, unable to hide her excited curiosity.

It’s been a while since she received a present from her father. She opened the door and looked inside a tattered cardboard box that took up the whole seat. The box was filled with old shredded newspaper.

‘A kitten?’ she exclaimed in incredulity, picking up what looked like a tiny orange ball and hugging it tightly to herself. ‘I can’t believe it! Mum will never allow it.’

‘I’ve already spoken to your mother. And I’m sure you can take him to Paris with you.’

‘Oh daddy, thank you!’ she squealed in delight and threw herself into her father’s arms.

Looking up at him, she was shocked to see silent tears running down her father's cheeks. She wiped her own tears off her face, inhaling his familiar scent that instantly reminded her of so many joyful times that they shared together over the years when she was still a carefree little girl and he was still the centre of her world. Smiling, she hugged him again.

Svetlana Kortchik

## The Upside Down J

July 11th, 2010

Now here he is sitting before me—still, silent, and beautiful. He doesn't need to speak. When there is love, passion sings in the air; it sings songs that human language cannot translate. I am watching him, and he is wonderful. I can see his chest moving as he breathes between the ropes I bound him in. His large gray pupils swiftly scan the room. He is so intelligent, and he is mine now. His hands keep fumbling like he is trying to free them from the bonds. I know he just wants to reach out and touch me, but I am afraid I can't free him yet. Even though I know we're in love I can't trust him. I had a hard time catching him. It must be fear of commitment on his end, but that doesn't bother me. We're together now. That's all that matters. My Darling will be OK because he loves me. The story of our romance proves it.

Our romance began when I was out one evening searching for my dog. Clarence ran away from me again; I guess it's a Jack Russell Terrier thing. It was getting later and later into the night. I ended up in some desolate place void of human life. My memory is a bit foggy on exactly where I was, but it was quiet and dirty. I felt something wet like a mist come upon me. I was afraid... I think, can't really remember for sure. Though I do recall feeling dizzy and seeing a shadow that was cast from the full moon. Next thing I knew I was feeling groggy and lying on the cold, wet ground. That's when I saw him for the first time. He was hunched over me, staring into my eyes. He has the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. They have amber irises that compliment his gray pupils. As I gazed into those hypnotizing eyes I swear there was a union of our souls. I felt warm all over and there was an energy that was almost tangible. The more I basked in the radiation of our love, the larger his pupils got. Then my Angel ran off. He left me. But that was alright. He was probably just in shock from feeling true love for the first time. My, how he runs fast! I don't know what he was doing when I first woke up. There was definite strangeness that night. Magical. I was questioning it all on my way home; it was an exhausting walk.

Once I was home (I gave up looking for Clarence), I noticed I was feeling sore down in my lower stomach. That's when I discovered an upside-down "J" carved in my abdomen. At first I was upset about it, but as the days went on, I began to understand. Now I get butterflies every time I see the carving—I think it's My Love's mark. He claimed me! Maybe it's like an engagement ring. I believe his name must start with the letter J. I don't really know because he doesn't speak, but he's just allowing the passion to sing.

My hand cramps. I will finish the story of true love later. Besides, Clarence is whining. He came back on his own. I'm afraid about him getting loose again. When he came home last time he brought some sort of grotesque, blood covered thing in his mouth. He kept spitting it out at my feet. Silly puppy seemed to think I wanted it.

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July 12th, 2010

I have spent the day trying to get my Darling to speak. I keep reminding him of all the times he rescued me from danger in our past. Those exhilarating moments that confirmed we are meant for each other! He stays silent. I do like looking at him though. We don't need words to communicate. I worry that he is still nervous about being mine now. I try to soothe him. I sweetly remind him that I cannot remove the ropes entirely until he professes the feelings he has for me. But I do feel concerned about how pale he has been getting. He seems a tad gaunt in the face. Love sick. That must be it.

I guess I should record the rest of our love story. My second encounter with him was when he rescued me from drowning. I was fishing with this dumb boy I used to like. I think his name was Lewis. I don't know for sure anymore. I like calling him "Dumb Boy" better. I would have done anything to be around that loser. That was before I met my Darling. Dumb Boy had a little boat and we were drifting above Lake Veronica in it. I hate fishing; I was getting bored. So I tried to lighten the mood by diving into the water. But no-fun Dumb Boy just started yelling about how I was scaring away the fish. He kept saying that. I wanted him to dive in and play with me in the water. He wouldn't do it. I am the determined type of girl though, and I usually get what I want. So to make Dumb Boy fun I started to swim away from the boat so he would try to find and catch me.

Only after I swam for a while and turned around I noticed Dumb Boy and his boat were absent. I was getting tired. I went under water to test how deep it was so I could take a break, but to my horror I got stuck on some sort of rubbish! I began to drown. Just when I felt like my eyes were going to float out of their sockets, My Angel came. He wrenched me free and took me to shore. He swims like no other man. He took me to shore and he watched me with such concerned eyes as I coughed and sputtered, and then he left me without a word again. Actions speak louder than words. I recognized him as the man that keeps me safe. From that day on I have loved him. O yes! After that thrilling experience of being whisked away from Death, I began to stage peril to be saved from. Just so I could see him.

I can't wait to show my parents my Rescuer. They didn't believe my stories. If anything they were fretting about my sanity. They almost didn't go on their second honeymoon vacation because of their meaningless fretting

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July 13th, 2010

I'm starting to believe that the reason for this intolerable silence is that my Dearest is mad at me. I have been examining myself in every way possible to understand why he is upset. Why else would he refuse to speak? He won't even look at me. I have done everything to attempt to please him that doesn't involve setting him free. My last resort is to try making him a feast of a dinner. I have a stuffed chicken in the oven now. I do hope it makes him feel better. He woke me up last night from making this whimpering moan. It was very sad. I dashed over to him; I wanted to help—only I failed. He started hissing at me as he writhed in his ropes.

I think he's angry about how I made him mine. It wasn't my fault. My frustration was escalating from seeing him but never having time to chat. So I came up with a genius plan to keep him around a while.

See, I quickly caught on to his superhero traits and started staging danger. I would purposely run out on the road in front of semis—and he would appear, swoop me up, and take me to safety. He's a great leaper. I would go hiking in the woods and walk off a bluff, and he would catch me. My love for him kept growing. I don't know where he used to hide so that he could always save me. I tried to be sneaky with mirrors, but I never saw him looming nearby. Ah how love is mysterious.

So I decided to fake one more damsel in distress situation. Only this time I would be armed with my father's tranquilizer gun. Having a veterinarian in the house is so useful. I decided to go in the old shed on our property and hide the tranquilizer, along with some fire extinguishers, inside. The timing was perfect; my parents were far away and unable to stop me from capturing my Soul Mate. I settled close by my hidden goods and lit the shed ablaze. This was such a sacrifice for me. I treasure my Hero so dearly I could barely stand the thought of hurting him with the tranquilizer; however it was worth it for our romance.

I sat patiently in that fiery place and waited for him to come for me. Sure enough, like a ray of light, My Angel rushed in! There was so much smoke that he was struggling to find me. That's when I shot him. He was so divine as he fell. I put out my fire and dragged him to the house and into my room. And now here we are! Only I guess he's upset about how I was forced to shoot him. I nearly cried when I saw that dart sticking out of his skin. I really didn't want to do it, but he made me do it! I needed to take action! He loves me. He'll forgive me. We'll be happy and in love again in a matter of hours. I'm sure of it. I wish I would have known him before my 16th birthday. We could have celebrated it together. I can't believe I wasted my birthday with Dumb Boy.

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July 14th, 2010

Today should be a day of grand celebration. I've been with my Darling for a total of two and a half days. I can't tell if he's still angry or not, but I have decided he must not speak English. No worries. Words only lead to broken promises and lies. It is the actions that are important. But the chicken dinner went over very well. You know what they say; the way to a man's heart is through his stomach!

But, I am starting to feel the slightest bit of wonder about him, and not in a completely whimsical way. He still won't speak to me, and it is getting harder and harder to feed him. After the chicken, he wanted to eat a lot. When I started to spoon feed him the chicken (he still needs to keep the bindings of love on) he ate the spoon! Such strong teeth he has! Never have I seen such strength. So, I ended up feeding him with my fingers. I would kind of drop the food in. He ate that whole chicken and all of those potatoes, and was still hungry. He started making a type of racket I have never heard before. It must be his magical way of expressing himself. It was so beautiful it gave me chills because it was that great! His language is made up of grunts and snorts, like a magnificent, wild stallion. I am so lucky to have him.

He kept begging for food in his own perfect way, and I was only too honored to continue feeding him. Only he just kept eating, and eating, and eating. It was so cute to see how excited he got when he saw me bringing up food. He loves everything I serve. Except I don't know if I can afford to feed him like this for long; I guess being a hero gives him a ferocious appetite. He ate an entire frozen pizza, three pounds of ground beef, two cans of Campbell chicken noodle soup, a box of Oreos, four boxes of pasta, and well....he ate nearly everything in the kitchen; I became so desperate to appease his stomach that I even had to give him the can of pumpkin in the pantry. I couldn't help myself in feeding him. He's too fantastic to resist. But I was a tad worried he'd get sick. Never have I seen a man eat like that!

When I ran out of food and drink, and he realized I couldn't produce anymore, he did a funny trick. He closed his eyes and turned olive green. For a second I thought he was dead, but then I saw he was breathing, such a sweet sight. I love him so much! But I can't take him to a doctor. The doctor might tell me I can't feed him like that anymore, and that would be too sad. He loves to eat. And it has to be OK for him to do so, he's so thin! He's been green and asleep for a while now. I just sit back and stare at him. I suppose I will have to leave him for a little while to get more food. I'm starting to get a little hungry.

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July 18th, 2010

My parents will be returning home in two days, and I am excited about them meeting my future husband. I'm sure they won't be upset that I used the emergency credit card to stock our food supply. I know they will understand.

I have decided to name My Love. I have named him Jameson, oh what a powerful name. I've been spending all my time with him. I got fired from my job at Burger King because I missed my shift twice, but I don't care. How could I leave my Jameson? Plus, Jameson stopped being green two days ago, so it was worth it. I could spend eternity looking at those amber irises. Oddly, he hasn't wanted to eat anything since he woke up. I'm sure he'll get that hunger back soon and start making those adorable noises.

I've been telling him all about how our lives will be soon. I know he's excited about it. I can see it in his eyes. I tell him how he's going to be my little old man someday and how he will play guitar on the porch of our little house on the beach, and how I will sing for him as he plays. I tell him about the children we will have and how they will look like him. They'll have his amazing metabolism and oral strength, his amber eyes, and his buttercream skin. And if we're lucky, our daughters will boast his long limbs and jet black hair. I know Jameson is thrilled about how I'm going to get the little mark he carved on me embellished at the tattoo parlor. His upside-down J is scarring beautifully. I showed him how nicely it is scarring, and he furrowed his thin eyebrows and reached out towards it. He actually seemed upset about it for some reason. I thought I saw a few tears weld up in his beautiful eyes. I reached over and tried to hug him, but he flinched and wouldn't look at me. I think he feels bad about the small amount of pain his mark has caused me.

I know we can have a life together. I released his bonds when he stopped being green, but I was sure to keep my tranquilizer close by just in case he wanted to resume hero work. I know he's a workaholic because when I let him loose, he started running all over my room. This dedicated attitude screams how fine of a husband he will be someday. Marriage is a job. I was delighted to watch him show off his fleetness. He was athletically leaping from my dresser to my bed and everywhere—then he started scratching at my window. I was afraid he'd hurt himself by breaking out. So I had to shoot him again. It looked like he was going to start banging his head against the glass or something. He howled in pain, but he was soon peacefully slumbering.

I decided to buy him a harness intended for big dogs and a leash. The harness is such a romantic symbol of our love. It's a way of saying how his heart can't contain the passion he has for me. The passion brings on an explosion of emotion. I keep him in the house in case the neighbors don't understand our relationship. My only concern at this point is keeping him restrained. He is stronger than me. He tugs the leash hard. I may have to buy a little shocking device so I can get his attention again.

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July 20th, 2010

Jameson got his appetite back today. I found out because I caught him eating the carpet. I'm amazed at how he can digest anything. I was quick about rushing down to start a feast for him. All of this time in the kitchen is reminding me of how I used to desire John—that stupid jock at school. I don't know what I liked about him. His athletic skills are nothing compared to Jameson's. Oh, but back then, before Jameson and Dumb Boy, I would spend hours baking treats for that stupid Jock and his team; I didn't care about the countless hours I lost, or the fact I was failing geometry. At least my foolish past infatuation with that jock made me a better cook for my Jameson!

Mom and Dad's flight got delayed because of a thunderstorm. I will see them tomorrow. I hope they don't get upset about the carpet. I wish Jameson would have told me he was hungry. I thought I comprehended the noise code. I only hope he doesn't turn green again since I want Mom and Dad to meet him right away. And the shock collar is working like a charm. Jameson is learning fast. Love is a universal language.

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July 21st, 2010

Mom and Dad are upset about some of the small bits of damage Jameson has done to the house (silly Jameson eats about anything he can sink his grandiose teeth into). So I bought some time to get Jameson trained by claiming the famine kitchen and damaged woodwork, carpet, and books were from a rambunctious party I had. They believed it, but the chew marks are causing suspicion. I attempted to blame Clarence. I'm not sure if they bought it. I need to train Jameson better. I am so grateful that he is in the green stage right now. Those eating frenzies must take a lot out of him.

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July 25th, 2010

Horrible news! Yesterday Jameson stopped being green and was all wild and wonderful, but my mom discovered him and says he must go! She says he is repulsive and questions his humanity. How many tear stains can one poor girl's journal hold? I can't believe she doesn't understand! What Jameson and I have is truly special. She wants to report him or take him to a doctor. I might have to let him go and possibly never see him again. I don't know if I have the strength to do that. But I'm sure a doctor can prove just how human Jameson is. I tried to show my mother how I can control him with the shock collar, but she won't listen. She says I am being selfish and cruel. Dad isn't being helpful either. He's trying to study him! He looks at Jameson, and starts mumbling how Jameson is very close to being human. I am disgusted. My Dear is now in an industrial cage with only a blanket for comfort. A deep anger is brewing inside of me. I can scarcely tolerate looking at my parents for what they have done.

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July 30th, 2010

The doctor is full of venom and lies! He said truly barbaric things about my Jameson. He made claims that Jameson doesn't have any organs—only one that is completely foreign. The doctor even found some sort of decaying, molding wings. The doctor says Jameson's blood is orange (that I did notice from the tranquilizing dart but everything else is a total LIE), and his body is full of strange pouches of a type of stored energy—but that is debatable.

I saw some of the testing done in the office before the medical people whisked Jameson off to a place I cannot go. What I saw was dreadful. I felt so sorry for my Jameson. He shrieked in terror as those evil nurses held him down so the doctor could perform test. I know the nurses wanted to put their hands on him. They are jealous of me. Jameson hated everything they did. The light in his eyes, the tapping of the knee, the blood pressure—all of it. It is all my parents' fault. I hate them.

I did everything I could to save Jameson in the doctor's office. I tried to distract those foul medical people by attempting to open the biohazard box, but I was stopped. I began screaming and hitting everyone I could. Jameson is mine! My efforts were regrettably futile. The asylum talks started. They are the crazy ones. The way they treated Jameson was grotesque. They are going to keep him away from me to continue testing him. Can't they just accept he is a man of magnificent rarity? But no! Instead I am homebound with my idiotic mother and father. I hate them.

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August 2nd, 2010

I still rot in my home. I constantly desire Jameson. My parents are still intolerable. How dare they not let me visit him! All my parents do is cry about what has become of me. I don't love them anymore so I couldn't care less about their petty sorrow. I am determined to venture out and save Jameson from whatever hell he is in. Those doctors know nothing. All of those lawless tests and they still know nothing. They were even desperate enough to call an old Irish hag called a "Seanchai" in for answers about what Jameson is. At least my evil mother and father tell me the Jameson updates...even if it is just an attempt to win back my favor.

The Seanchai says he is called a "Leech Fairy," and he lives by stashing his organs in people. He has magic that puts people to sleep so he can take out a potential carrier's organ and replace it with his. They claim Jameson's body can't support his organs. There's a carrier for each different organ. The carriers usually never know, and there is no change in behavior reported.

Leech fairies also eat a lot to sustain energy, and then "rejuvenate" by going into a green sleep mode. They have the ability to teleport only when one of their organ carriers is in danger so they can rescue them. Great strength is also granted on rescue missions by magic. If a carrier dies, the leech fairy dies. The old hag—the Seanchai—had the nerve to talk to me on the phone. She started telling me that I have tried to humanize a wild being. She said that Jameson does what he does out of instinct. BUT JAMESON SAVED ME BECAUSE HE LOVES ME!

I will never believe that woman. I yelled at her and was creative with my insults, but the doctors are so dumbfounded I think they do believe her. There are lies everywhere around me and I can see them in form now. The lies look like little black monsters that wiggle constantly. The lies try to grab me. I see them clinging to my parents and crawling down the walls. But the black hellions can't touch me. The truth is protecting me. Or maybe it's the love I have for Jameson that protects me. But I must go and rescue my Jameson. My parents have finally accidentally told me where he is. Tears, interrogation, persistence, and lies pay off.

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August 28th, 2010

Days have passed. I still hate my parents and refuse to look at them when they visit me in this dreadful place. I am confined in an insane asylum. I am amongst truly crazy people.

My life is empty now, but I finally feel enough sparks in my depressed soul to write in my journal. The white coats say journaling is "therapeutic." The hope of reuniting with Jameson keeps me alive; as does the faint belief that he may need my life to stay alive. He might actually be a Leech Fairy. Without this knowledge, I would surely die of grief.

I cannot believe I have lost the battle for love. When I set off for his lab, I was certain I would prevail. I was sly and daring. I got to Jameson's room by switching places with a cadaver that was supposed to be experimented on. It was worth shoving the heavy body in the closet and then going under its sheet. The table was cold on my naked skin; Jameson's harness was uncomfortable being crammed under my back to hide it, but I felt it would be worth it. I couldn't risk any part of my clothing being seen under the thin sheet. Once I was wheeled into somewhere I leaped from the table and scared the enemy to death. While they were stunned I made my escape to begin my search.

When I found him, he was surrounded by a pile of food and was eating. He seemed happy. I could make him happier. Luckily, the guard that was watching Jameson was an idiot; he was sleeping. I tackled Jameson and wrestled him into his harness. Jameson seemed upset that I disturbed his meal—No! He was upset about when the guard woke up and sounded the alarms. Jameson wanted to come home with me. The guard was talking to me, but I wasn't listening. I think he said something about the police. Not that I cared. I was too busy trying to get Jameson to move. Then all of these people came rushing in, but I seized an IV pole and was ready to fight them. It was chaos. The scientist grabbed my arms and pulled my hair. People were trying to take Jameson's leash, and Jameson was trying to eat a pineapple.

I screamed and begged Jameson to intervene and save me one more time. I cried out louder and louder as I was being taken away. I heard police sirens. Then Jameson's eyes widened and his skin seemed to throb with the rush of blood rampaging in his veins. I was filled with joy. I was positive Jameson would save me, but Jameson only kept standing there till his eyes couldn't widen anymore. Then he vanished. He was simply no more. I never cried so hard. I wept as the handcuffs were put on; a sheet was draped around me. I started rethinking everything the old hag said about leech fairies, especially the teleporting to rescue a carrier part. Perhaps Jameson isn't a human after all. That doesn't matter; I still need him. Perhaps Jameson put one of his organs in me and that is why he was always there for me when my life was in danger. Although, he didn't save me out of instinct, he picked me because I am special to him.

I remember seeing how anguished the scientists were at how My Love was no more. I heard them grieving and thinking of ways to find him again. But I didn't tell the scientist I was a carrier. I won't team up with vermin. I don't trust them. They might use me to bait Jameson back. When I escape from this asylum I vow that I will endanger myself to get him back. I will get out someday. I am studying the security carefully. I have noticed the stairs are not watched as cautiously. When I do escape from this appalling dwelling, it will be happily ever after for the two of us.

Molly Hamilton

## Because We Could

I sit on the warm, plastic bench, reflecting on the time I used to spend here. I tumble back through the years. The paint on the aging plastic bench, once a brilliant yellow, has now faded almost completely. I shed my shoes, just like I used to do. I look down at my feet as I stir the mulch, feeling the wooden pieces slipping between my toes. The mulch replaces what used to be brown rocks when I played here. I liked the rocks, I longed for the rocks. A warm breeze ruffles my hair as I close my eyes and I remember the good times I had at Hot Tot Park in St. Peters. I'm five-years old again, surprised at how easy it is to slip back in time. I picture my little self scampering around with my friends. Not tall enough for the monkey bars, I go back to the blue slide. My favorite. My skin tingles as I remember how the plastic, baked by the hot summer sun, burned me on those long-ago days. I smile and remember how a little burn wasn't going to stop me from going down the best slide in the world. I loved going to the park. No worries. No stress. Simpler times. I didn't have to worry about homework assignments, papers, tests, work, boys. OK. I may have worried about boys, but surely not like I do now. Sitting on this warm bench, I think about my life, how far I have come, and what I am now. So much began in this place.

I find myself wondering, thinking, reminiscing. Where has the time gone? Just yesterday, it seems, I was running around this place--not caring, just playing. Playing and running so hard; sweat running down my forehead and off the tip of my nose; cheeks as red as my hair; big smiles, glowing blue eyes, and loud laughs.

I see myself standing at the top of the curved and twisted blue slide. I would wave to my mom who used to wait anxiously for my arrival at the bottom. I smile that same big smile. I wanted to show my mom how big I was, how I could go down a slide all by myself. I wonder if she'd be proud to see the places I've been to now. Gripping the green bar tightly, I sit myself down on the bright blue plastic. I remember the feeling of my heart racing, beating so fast. My palms sweat. My smile broadens. The thrill of rushing down the big slide, knowing that my mom is at the bottom with open arms, ready to catch me. I remember thinking how proud she must be. 1...2...3...Go! I can see myself starting to glide down the slide, almost in slow motion. Then as I begin to pick up speed, so do my memories. Screaming playfully, I open my mouth, as if trying to catch the air that's passing by, flying through my hair. I see my mom, and I know she'll be there to catch me. I reach the end and pop out quickly. My mom, quick on her feet, catches me and swirls me around in a million circles. We both shout in laughter.

I find myself longing for this time of certainty and confidence in my mother that has since faded. I love my mom. I love the way she made me feel when I was young. I grip the bench tight, thinking about how different life is now. Would she be there when I came down a slide now? Is she as proud of me, now, as she was then? She was there when I was five. She was there when I was ten. She barely made it to my fifteenth year. Twenty now, I'm afraid of falling still, but she is no longer there to catch me.

I look around the park, wondering where the time has gone, remembering Hot Tot Park like it was yesterday. I wish so bad that I could go back to being five again; playing, and being silly because I could. I want to find my inner child. I want a place to belong again. When you're little, everyone gets along. No big break ups. No fights between friends that can end the everlasting bond that is promised in the beginning. No arguments with parents that have any real meaning. All you have to worry about is what your friend said the other day, or when your crush threw a pencil at you, but couldn't figure out why. We look back, and we know why. It's because he could.

I close my eyes again, breathe a deep breath, take myself back to when I was five. My mom stands me back on my feet after she gives me a big kiss on the forehead. I smile up at her, feeling the heat of the sun on my face. I giggle, and run toward the swings. They're my second favorite. The idea of being in the air with nothing more than a rubber seat between me and bruised and broken bones amazed me. I couldn't pump my legs, so my dad was always good at helping me get as high as possible. The "Underdog" was my dad's specialty. He pushed me until I was high enough, and once I was, he would push one last time, and then run underneath me before I swung back again. He would count down, too, so I knew when it was coming. 1...2...3... Go! I smile as I remember how nervous I would get. I always thought I was going to hit him on my way back. My dad is a tall guy, so it was risky business. I can still hear him counting down until the moment came: The "Underdog." I can still feel the beat of my heart quickening in pace; the smile on both of our faces after I saw him in front of me again. My dad is so cool.

When my parents were together, life was perfect. We spent so much time together; doing all kinds of things. We would go to the park, or the movies, or out to eat, or tons of other things. Even going to the store with my mom was an adventure. Where did those times go? Why did they have to get a divorce and ruin everything? Was it something I did? Was I too much of a burden on them? I could have gone down the slide without her help. I could have learned how to pump my legs so they could sit together instead of helping me. Now I know why. It was because they could.

When I was little, my brother was my best friend. He is three years older than me, so we were close. I used to hang out with him and his friends instead of my own. He would try to do the "Underdog" too, but he wasn't big enough yet. He would ask me to race him down the slides, even though he knew he was always going to win. He let me win sometimes, but the majority of wins went to him. Whenever we went to the park, I would get jealous of him because he could reach the monkey bars, and swing on his own. He could run faster than me. He could hide better than me. I still look up to my big brother. He didn't mind when I tagged along with him and his friends, though he claimed he did at the time. We both knew that our bond as brother and sister was different from most, and we liked that. My big brother is so awesome.

I sit here on this bench that wishes it was still bright yellow like it used to be. With the mulch underneath my feet, I gaze across the park. I look at the big blue slide, the green monkey bars that I could probably reach now without much effort, the swing set reduced to a single swing. I look back on all of the times I had at Hot Tot Park- and I wish I could get them all back. I wish I could go back to simpler times. Not a care in the world.

I look at my little seven year old sister sitting next to me. She wonders why I am so content sitting here, looking at this run-down old park. We could be doing so many other things, like shopping, or riding bikes. She may be seven, but she acts like she's fifteen. She loves going to the park, though, loves it a lot. The parks she goes to are much different than Hot Tot Park. These parks have fancy names, big bright green and red slides, swing sets with ten swings, hop scotch games, and instead of brown rocks, or even mulch, she gets rubber flooring decorated with many different colors. The familiar monkey bars are much more than just a straight set of bars at her park. They are windy and twisty and curvy, making it much more challenging. I would have given anything for that kind of a park when I was her age. No wonder she's bored at Hot Tot.

I look at my not-so-little sister, and remember when I was her age. All she cares about is her boyfriend of the week, or her spelling test coming up. Spelling tests. Do you remember those? I was so good at them. Spelling words like "cat" and "pencil", not "hemoglobin" or "thrombocytes." Simple words. Basic words. She sits next to me, adjusting her pink cotton skirt, looks up at me and smiles. I know that smile. Once, it appeared on my face. Somewhere deep within me, I know it's still there. The soft wind blows her hair, her tan skin feels the sun, and she grabs my hand.

"Sis?" she says softly, "What are you thinkin' about?"

"Oh, just about when I was your age and how fun life was."

She goes on to ask why I think life isn't fun after a certain point, why I can't make it fun. She may be seven, but she asks good questions. She makes me stop and think. Why? She's right. Why can't life be fun after the age of five or six? We have to make life what we want it to be, and if we are okay with disappointing those we love, then that's okay. If we want to right our wrongs, then we have to put forth the effort to do so. Our life is what we make it, and it's up to us to enjoy it while we can.

I remember the smells of the park, and I can smell the same scent just by touching my sister's hand. Dirty, dusty, dry but sweaty. The smells of childhood return as I look at my sister, touch her hand, and pat her on the back. The sweat on her back makes her shirt stick, and on her forehead, makes her hair wet.

A ladybug lands on my knee, and I pause. My sister goes to flick it off, but I quickly pull her finger away. The little creature takes tiny steps, wandering, clueless, with no destination in mind. Seeing the ladybug reminds me of being little again myself. I had no real direction or destination in life, not to my knowledge anyway. I didn't know which way to go, and the only way I got anywhere was if someone picked me up and took me there. I let the ladybug crawl onto my finger, and I hear my sister gasp in awe. Her breath escapes her, and her mouth drops open. I lift up the bug, and help it fly away gracefully, much as I have found myself doing lately. I've learned the art of taking little steps; I've found the grace that allows me to do little things on my own. Soon enough I will fly away with my newfound strength. Like a ladybug.

We decide that we should go because it is starting to get late. My sister is off and running as soon as she stands up. She has the energy and liveliness that I once had. She runs because she can. I stop and take a second to say goodbye. I do this because I can. Goodbye to Hot Tot Park. Goodbye to the swings and the slide that used to be. Goodbye to the monkey bars I continue to hate. Goodbye to the mulch that was once rocks. Goodbye to the half-yellow plastic bench. Goodbye to the sweaty, dusty, dirty park. Goodbye to childhood. I wish I could stay longer.

*I am here because I can be.*

*I have memories because I could.*

*I am moving on because I can.*

Kathryn Leetch

Glorious Indiana

Pacers magic.

Axl Rose.

Guns N Roses.

Hoosier pride.

I'd rather be in French Lick.

Small town.

Santa Claus Indiana.

Glorious Indiana yes it's true!

Doug Robbins

Nikki, The Great

It was such a cold night at the hotel. Steve always got the sense of sincere loneliness when he was at the hotel. Where else would he write his novels though? His wife was always bugging him to fuck her, and do other non-civil things to the point where he wanted to throw her out the window. Writing in hotels gave him a great sense of peace and clear-headedness, but always had the reclusive, depression following. He did his best to suffer through it.

He had been writing his new book *Boy, What a Life* for weeks. He worked diligently through the morning, sometimes skipping lunch and working until dinner. He felt that it was 'decent', that's the adjective he attached to it. He had successful books in the past that he was proud enough to call 'glorious' or some such word. This book just didn't deserve such a title, it wasn't anything people hadn't read before, and he realized this, but he didn't have enough inspiration to come up with any new, dazzling ideas. That's all he needed was a little inspiration.

He laid on the bed, staring blankly at the T.V. He didn't have a clue what the show was about but it numbed his mind pleasingly. He sipped at some whiskey on the nightstand next to him. What to do, what to do, He thought, maybe I should head down to the pool. He dismissed the idea quickly. There was a frantic knock at the door. He rushed to it quickly, getting light-headed on the way. He turned the knob and was greeted by a cute little lady.

"Hey!" She exclaimed, as if they knew each other prior.

"Um, hello" he said unenthusiastically.

"Can I come in?"

Something made him want to let her in. Her beauty consumed him automatically. She had thin, naturally blonde hair that complimented her small, precious face. Her body was thin, and her breasts were large. She wore a tight-fit plaid shirt and a small skirt that went well above her knees. It made her thighs appear curvaceous. Steve admired her tight, smooth skin that seemed perfect in the exaggerated moonlight.

"Well, I....suppose you can come in. What's your name again?"

She told him that her name was Nikki as she entered the threshold. Immediately, she walked to the bathroom. He sat on the side of the bed and lit himself a cigarette. He noticed that there was no sound from the bathroom door shutting. He stood up and walked a bit closer to the door to listen. He heard a fast, machine-like rubbing sound. He walked closer. The rubbing was fast and harsh. Curiosity kicked in and he peaked around the corner. Nikki was sitting on the toilet with her skirt at her knees, rubbing ferociously at her crotch.

In an interval between moaning, she said with no breath left, "Oooo, yeah?"

She let out a screech and pulled her skirt up.

"That was great!"



Steve was in complete awe of the situation, he hadn't ever met such an absurd, spontaneous woman. He realized automatically that she was crazy, but he had liked her style. Nikki ran to the bed and hopped on, bouncing on her knees.

"Wanna' watch T.V?" She had a bright smile plastered on her face.

"Um, Sure...I guess."

He sat on the bed, arched his legs, and grabbed his glass of whiskey. Nikki grabbed it from him and downed it (it was freshly poured.) Steve smiled despite his sadness over his glorious drink being wasted.

Steve was starting to warm up to the little lady. She mildly scared him though; there wasn't any telling what she would or would not do next. It was intimidating, but she was just what he needed for a little inspiration.

Nikki held the glass while watching T.V, after a minute or so of fiddling with it, she threw the glass across the room. It smashed on the piss-yellow wall and the shards sprinkled down. Steve didn't think much of it and continued watching the T.V. Without warning, she began masturbating again. She rubbed quickly, with a confident look of intent on her face. She looked as if she were handling a science project and was about to finish mixing the last ingredient to cure cancer. Steve looked over and enjoyed the show, ignoring the strangeness of the entire situation. This is a woman, he thought.

Nikki let out her usual screech and moan, and then she finished.

"Aren't you gonna' clap for me?"

Steve clapped and she hugged him. He struggled to push her off. Her hand that was used for self-pleasure continually touched his face.

"So, Whatta' ya' want ta' do?" She asked.

"I don't know, I'm kind of...busy."

"Doing what?" She's always so happy, he thought.

"I'm a writer, and I'm, kinda', ya' know, writing a book."

"Can I see it?"

He reached over to the nightstand and pulled over a stack of crumpled papers with his name on it. She began reading it, scanning every page. Suddenly, she got up and walked over to the nightstand. She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and threw it against the wall, next to the T.V. She walked over to the shattered glass and gently set the manuscript on the liquid. The whiskey seeped through the paper from the bottom and made a river across the front page. Steve made no attempt to stop her; he hated the story anyways but didn't have any good reason to scrap it before she came. She pulled a lighter out of her shirt, most likely from her bra, and lit the heap of papers on fire. For an unknown reason, Steve laughed heartily; Nikki joined in.

They lazed around for a while. She frequently poked and prodded him with her dangerously sharp heels. He was too drunk to get annoyed. She seemed like a sexual deviant but not once that night did she make any advance towards. He didn't mind the whole platonic thing but he thought it was moderately absurd that she didn't say anything about sex nor try to force him to perform oral sex on her, which seemed like the exact behavior she would attempt.

They slept back- to- back that night on the bed. Steve sweated out the toxins from his alcohol; she wiped it up with the sheets. During the night he heard a rustling around on the bed, he figured she was pleasing herself again. He woke up and felt the loneliness like the night before, he looked over to her side of the bed and she was absent, just the creases and depressions in the bed left from her petite, magnificent body.

Although it was nice to have someone to talk to, he didn't mind that she left. She left him physically, but mentally she was permanently stamped into his brain. Such an enigmatic person doesn't leave the brain (especially when they get their rocks off in your bathroom.)

Without thinking much about the night before, he picked up an extra pile of papers from the nightstand drawer and began writing a new book called Nikki. He whipped out his last cigarette, lit it with his Zippo, and began working on it. The words flowed quickly and he had plenty of ideas. He looked outside the window, it was a nice day maybe he would go for a walk, or see his wife. What a night, he thought.

Richard Shiers

To understand you

My head hurts, my shoulders hurt, in fact all of my body aches. I cannot trace it to a point of origin since it moves continuously through my body and it does not seem to even begin to dissipate. I sit on the armchair with my head in palms and keep thinking on what had just happened. I cannot get to the end of it. I have switched every facet of each side of the meaning given by your actions, your behavior, but all is in vain because I have not succeeded to understand you with all of my heavy reasoning. What has eluded me? Could it been something in tonality? Could it been in gesticulation or maybe in body language? I am unable to tell. In my mind, thousands upon thousands of analytical schemes are simultaneously running one more complicated than the other.

After more than an hour of intense analysis, with a pounding headache amplified by every rising thought, with the thousands of analytical schemes still running in the back of my brain and so far have not been solving anything, I give up. It is just temporary until this horrible headache passes. I lean my head backwards; parts of my mind are continuing to unwind the complex leads generated previously by the schemes. It feels as if my thoughts are escaping through the skull, here and there bouncing on each other.

Sitting like this after a while, when the brainstorm has quieted down to a significant degree, the image of your gesture along with what you have said flashes through my brain. And suddenly following it, without the need of any complicated analysis, the explanation comes into my mind. I finally understand you, sheesh how good it feels to have solved this puzzle too. What do you know? All I had to do to understand you was to remain calm and take things as they are.

Razvan Pit

## Buying a Stone

The four of us were returning to town at the end of a glorious, autumn day. My cousin John took the back roads, driving at about thirty with his foot poised over the brake. His wife Rose glanced anxiously into the tall, yellow corn. There they were in an empty soybean field, three deer grazing next to the tree line. John slowed right down.

“Those are yearlings,” my wife Susan whispered. “Beautiful.”

Rose turned to us from the front seat.

“In April I was coming home on the highway. Doing about sixty I guess. A doe ran out. She hit the wind shield and I rolled the car. Thank goodness for seat belts.”

John glanced over at her, but quickly returned to scanning the roadside.

“Look there.” he said. “Five more! One’s a buck.”

The stag led his harem across our path to concealment in a woodlot.

“Forty years. Forty years,” I said. “John, there were no deer when we were boys.”

“Oh, they’ve been around for a while now. More every year. And wild turkeys and coyotes. Farmers say wolves are taking the odd sheep and young pig. Hard to believe how things have changed.”

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The count was thirty-four by the time we reached Shishibes Lake. It was almost dark.

“Want to say hello to the old Chief?” John asked.

We pulled over next to the grassy, half acre memorial. Atop a ten-foot pedestal in the little park was a white limestone statue of Menomni (Wild Rice Gatherer). A carved Plains headdress fell to his heels. He gazed without expression into the southwest.

“No one remembers what a Potawatomi looked like,” Susan scorned.

“I always think he’s watching his people leave,” Rose said.

“Our great, great grandfather,” John said to me. “He was here then.”

“Militia must have driven them right past the farm gate.”

“Probably,” John said. Then, “I want to show you a grave.”

“Oh, honey,” Rose said. “It’s dark. They don’t want to go traipsing round a cemetery at night.”

“No – it’s alright,” I said.

Susan was a bit dubious but John had a flashlight.

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“My Mom and Dad are buried just over there.” John shone the light towards a huge maple. “But look at this.”

“Thomas Bear, 1859,” the clean, chiselled legend read. “Rest in the soil of thy birth.”

“Who’s that?” Susan asked. “Is he family?”

“Let your husband figure it out,” John said.

“Bear. Bear Clan? Shishibes Lake, Bear Clan?”

Rose smiled. “Good start.”

“1859? He must have been forced out in the Removal. But he came back.” I paused for a while till I understood. “He came back to die.”

“That’s what we think.”

“But the gravestone. The stone’s brand new.”

“The burial notice was in an old newspaper. The marker, wherever it was, is long gone so the Historical Society held a fundraiser. This plot was donated anonymously.”

“You and John donated the plot?”

“Well, yes,” Rose said.

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We looked at the headstone for a while after John switched off the light. The half moon cast waist-high shadows. Outside the cemetery, car headlights rounded the curve on the road into town.

Finally, I asked, “John, is this what you and Rose think I should do?”

“Well, yes. You had to leave, but you could come back now. If you wanted.”

Then he laughed. “Of course, it might be another hundred and fifty years before anyone buys you a stone.”

Ken Leland

Della in the Shadows

They were after her. They had been for a while. She wasn't crazy, just one of the few left, suspicious of everyone. Getting caught meant getting dragged to some dank basement. Drugged, a fat needle plunging into her arm. After its sting, they would turn her out, know her every move, her every thought, control her. And that frightened the hell out of her.

The buzzing when she picked up the phone. The strange cars parked outside. Reflections of men in store windows. Men in long coats with hats pulled low. In the mirrors of parked cars, behind newspapers, on park benches. They were watching. Waiting.

She took the only seat at the diner's counter, the truckers on either side looking harmless enough, one in denim, one in plaid, a ball cap on backwards. She ordered coffee. Behind her, a couple left a booth. An old man entered by the neon sign, a long coat, hat over gray hair. Taking the vacant seat, he buried his face in a menu. The coffee came, Della looking at the washroom sign, wondering if there was a back way out. Plaid and Denim ate soup, ate it low and loud, both busy with packets of crackers and sections of newspaper.

"Cream?" Denim offered, without raising his head.

"Pardon." It startled her.

"Cream?" Denim turned his face, liver-spotted but kind, soup puddles at the corners of his mouth.

"For your coffee." He smiled, jiggling the creamer with sausage fingers.

"Oh." Della blushed, taking it. "I'm sorry, yes, thank you."

"You foreign or something?"

"Yes, I'm sorry." Della poured, looking at the cream swirl round her coffee.

"Not a good place for being foreign," Denim said, shoveling soup.

"Not much of a place for coffee, either," Plaid said from her other side.

She turned and smiled at him.

"Hard to believe anyone would do such a thing to a pot of joe," Plaid said, "Best stick to the soup. Leek and potato's fair. Bean medley tomorrow. That is, if it agrees with you."

Denim threw in something about the meatloaf.

"Another time, I will," she said, looking from one to the other. "Thank you. Coffee's all I was after."

"If you do come back, go by today's special." Denim pointed at the menu board.

She nodded and sipped. Bitter, wholly wretched. She offered Plaid a tight smile.

“Told you so.” He scratched under the ball cap.

She forced another sip, pushed the cup away, glancing out the diner’s window. The waitress swung by with her carafe offering a top-up, Della declining, catching the old man in the carafe’s reflection. Looking her way. The waitress set down her tab.

“Got a word for skewered entree?”

“Pardon?”

“Five letters,” Denim said, frowning, tapping his pencil on the crossword.

“No, ah ... yes ... kabob,” she said.

“Kabob, that’s foreign, right?” He wrote in the answer, slid her tab in front of him, said it was on him.

Della thanked him, excusing herself, walking to the washroom, not daring to look at the old man in the booth, didn’t see him take out his phone, punch in numbers. Plaid finished his soup, laid his coins on the counter, said something to Denim and headed out the front to a panel van. Denim folded his paper, rose, resisting a belch, hand patting his belly, winking at the waitress, calling her by name.

They caught her there. The alley out back a dead end. Denim had her by an arm, Plaid backing up the van. Nothing friendly now. Struggling to break free got her slapped. Denim’s breath reeked of garlic, yellow teeth locked. His punch sent her to her knees.

“Scream if you want some more.” He grabbed a fistful of hair, jerking her back to her feet, tugged her to the van.

She kicked at his leg, not much behind it. It got her a slap, that blood taste in her mouth. Plaid got out of the van, catching her free arm, wrapping cord around her wrists, Denim shoving a gag past her teeth. She tried to break free, panic making her strong, the nightmare coming true. Tossed like a sack into the back of the van. Plaid got in, reached a burlap sack, trying to shove it over her head. She caught sight of the old man coming. His hand fishing in a pocket. Had to be going for the needle. She fought with her feet.

“Suppose I ask you boys to set her loose?” he said.

Plaid and Denim hesitated, looked at each other, hands pinning her tight.

“Looks like one old man to me,” Denim said.

“Picked the wrong alley, grampa,” Plaid said, getting out of the back, a jack handle in his hand, slapping it into his palm. A look on his face like he was going to enjoy this.

“Didn’t think so,” the old man said, pulled a .22 from his coat like he did it everyday and shot Plaid in the chest.

The fat man two-stepped back, dropping the handle, ball cap falling to the ground. The old man shot him again, between the brows this time, stepped by Plaid tumbling against the bumper, eyes turning to marbles.

“How about you, fats?” He trained the barrel on Denim.

Denim threw his sausage fingers wide. “You want her, take her.”

He duck-walked backwards through the van, got behind the wheel.

“Got no beef with you. Just let me drive out of he—”

The old man fired, Denim’s head knocked into the steering wheel. The horn blared. Della’s eyes were wild, uncomprehending. She watched the old man go around, pulled Denim’s head off the horn, dumped him to the ground. He pocketed the pistol, crawled through the van and slipped the gag from her mouth.

Untying her hands, he said, “We need to get gone.”

Hands trembling, rubbing where the cord bit, breath coming in jags. She looked at him.

“What do you want?”

“More will come.” He tugged her forward, set her on the passenger seat.

She opened the door and stepped out.

“If I wanted to hurt you ...” He let it sink in, got out his door, fished through Denim’s pockets. Getting back in, he stuck the key in the ignition, looking at her.

“We can talk later. I’m not going any—”

Her words were cut off by squealing tires, a black car blocking the alley. She jumped in and shut the door, looking at the van blocking their escape.

“What are we going to—”

Slamming his foot down, the old man twisted in his seat, the van bucking backwards, rear doors flapping. They smashed the car broadside, slamming it against the back of the diner, the two inside thrown around. The old man threw the shift into drive, slammed his foot on the pedal, backed out of the alley. The rear doors torn off. They didn’t slow for a long while after they left town. Della looked at him, his eyes darting to the rearview.

“I know you got questions, know you’re scared, too.”

“Just tell me where you’re taking me.”

“Got a place we’ll be safe.”

She eased back, trusting his words. The trees blurred by, the sun warm on her cheek. Long time since she noticed something like that.

Dietrich Kalteis

Fairytale

I hung upon a crook in the moon
spelling eternity for you with
shards of ice but the fall was
hard and I was unable to keep
dawn from breaking. The
next night I ripped the webbing
from a dream catcher showing
desperation in five clawed fingers,
vowing to obliterate every mean,
every deviation keeping you
from me. My neck stiffened
waiting for a star, but
I must have blinked, lacking
discipline. I wished instead on
the tail lights of an airplane winking
at me from above, suggestive of a
path. I followed until a bad leg swooned,
then made love to mirages in
the desert while my armor melted
into dust. Stroking a burning sun
I wished of you,
wished of you,
wished of you.
I returned home,
tearing out my hair to spin
into a tawny rope to fling
outside the window in case
the door should jam.

Amanda Wochele

Memories of Others

Stephen opened his eyes to the blank white ceiling. His gaze trailed down to the window with honey-gold curtains, then down to Teri, lying next to him. Stephen reached for a lock of her hair and toyed with it; her dark-brown hair broke through the bright monotony of an-all-too feminine apartment. He looked back at the room, frowning. He hated being too familiar with any one place; the sameness quickly turned into an unchanging bland normality.

Stephen got up, put his clothes on, and walked out of the bedroom and into the living room and kitchen area of the apartment. The striking blandness of the room wore on him as he imagined that a million other homes looked exactly the same. He walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge and grabbed the last two eggs. He opened up the bottom drawer, and was a bit disappointed to find a frying pan on his first try. He put the pan on the stove, and as he did he noticed a Russian doll on the counter. He walked over and picked it up. It was hand-carved, and hand-painted, depicting a smiling woman with dark gray hair and a light orange dress. Stephen opened up the first doll and pulled out the second, then the third, then the last. The smallest doll had dark black hair and a rosy red dress, and Stephen knew that this tiny doll was everything the mother doll should have been, but what she had lost with age. Stephen admired the doll and placed it in his pocket.

Stephen heard a gasp from right behind him. He spun around and saw Teri standing in the doorway. Stephen's brain froze; he knew no excuse would suffice.

"I was just fuming in the other room," she jerked her thumb back toward the room; a completely useless gesture for anyone who didn't have crippling brain damage, "because I thought you had run off."

Stephen felt the sweat beading on his face, and tried to force a smile, hoping that the look on his face was shock rather than guilt.

"Of course not; I was just making breakfast."

Stephen calmly turned around, cracked the eggs and let them fall onto the pan with a sizzle. Teri glided over to him, her eyes fixating on his face as if studying him. Stephen was sure she didn't suspect him of stealing by now, but he still didn't like how she was examining him.

She finally broke the silence, "I had heard people talk about you, and when you weren't lying next to me, I was pounding the bed because I was sure they were right, and you were the type to screw and leave. Yet here you are, making me bed and breakfast like a true gentleman. Were you going to serve it to me too?"

He poked at the eggs. "Yeah; I thought I could probably get lucky again."

She laughed.

"Is that a no?"

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Stephen parked his white pick-up in the driveway outside his one-story, brown-painted 70s homage he called home, glad to have made it out of his girlfriend's apartment without a major incident. He did get lucky again, though they never got around to having eggs; the last two had been left to burn.

Stephen walked up to his front door, keys in hand, and undid the first lock, then the second, then the third. He opened the door, walked inside, and immediately replaced the locks. He flipped on the light. The living room was filled with thousands of varied items, each stolen. Most of the items were things he didn't even have any use for; a thimble, an 1890s spoon, three crystal perfume bottles, coasters, a stolen mug filled with hundreds of pens from motels and offices. The items provided a living diary of everyone he had ever known or visited. It was more than that though. Stephen had been stealing from an early age; nothing big or expensive. He always felt good about instantly claiming ownership of something he hadn't had seconds before. But he didn't steal things because he wanted the things themselves. Each item brought back a memory, each piece of junk gave him a feeling of familiarity, a familiarity that he now had surrounded himself with. From the thousands of items cluttering each room to the garage, which was stuffed with so many random board game pieces, cross necklaces, coins and kitchenware that he had to park outside, each item was instantly recognized by how he had obtained it.

The only things in his living room that didn't contain a memory were the carpet, the plasma-screen TV and the coffee table. Those things which were too large to steal, he tried to get at garage sales, and he would never buy anything without getting some story out of it if he could. The tacky, pink-rose-on-white couch he had bought from an older couple who said that it was their own personal curse; an object they received when moving into their new house and which no one else would buy. The armchair had been owned by a man who claimed to have written hundreds of editorial articles for his local newspaper there, though he never said how many were accepted and published. Only the carpet, the coffee table and the TV remained just objects without meaning, because Stephen could never filch anything that large; he was a memory collector, not a thief. Stephen reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiny Russian doll. He put it on the mantle next to a plate with the image of Jesus on it he had stolen from a gas station in New Mexico. He hoped that his perfect doll wouldn't become the old lady like its mother anytime soon.

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Stephen made sure to keep only one of his locks bolted, and had moved nearly all of the clutter hurriedly into the garage. He sat on the couch with the TV on, but he was looking outside, waiting for Teri to arrive. Stephen had never had a woman come over to his house since he bought it two years ago. In the meantime he had earned his reputation, playing the field and running out just as things got serious. Stephen didn't think he felt any different about Teri. She was smarter than most of the women he slept with, but he didn't care about that. He couldn't figure out why he had agreed to have her over. Maybe it was because he had seen how angry she was when she thought he had run out, and for the first time he was forced to see the consequences of his actions. It could be that he was getting older, and was just naturally losing his rebellious alpha-male instinct. Or maybe he just wanted to get laid.

A knock at the door pulled him back to reality. He leapt across the room, took the briefest pause to collect himself, undid the one lock and opened the door.

“Hi,” they both said.

“Please,” he said, waving her in.

Teri walked in, her mouth dropping open as she smiled widely.

“Oh...my...god, this is...” Teri looked down at the couch and burst out laughing.

Stephen cocked his head and closed the door. “You don’t like?”

Teri ignored him and walked around, examining the much more sparsely decorated room.

“No, this place...” she turned back to him. “Is unique.”

Stephen rolled his eyes and smiled coyly, “‘Unique’, ‘special,’ all words that are supposed to be good things but mean ‘bad’.”

“No, no, no,” she kept laughing. When she finally stopped she turned back to him and said, “It has character.”

Stephen forced himself to keep smiling. He couldn’t help but think that thought now the room was completely without any character. Aside from the couch, everything in the room was bought in a store and could be found in a million other homes.

“Well, give me the tour!”

It was all Stephen could do to keep smiling. “Ok, well,” he walked past her. “This is the kitchen.” “It’s pretty cluttered.”

His gaze was drawn to the now-empty spaces and he couldn’t help but feel how empty it was. “Yeah, well maybe I am a master chef,” he said, regaining a bit of his stride, “and I’ve collected all this equipment, none of which you’re familiar with.”

Teri raised an eyebrow, “the last time you cooked-”

“Yeah, yeah, but only because you were distracting me in the best way,” he leaned in and tried to kiss her.

She pulled back. “Is this the door to the garage?”

A feeling of dread overcame him.

“Yeah-”

She reached for the doorknob.

“Don’t,” he said, trying to sound calm.

She turned around. “Why? Is this where you keep the bodies?”

She smiled, opened the door and flicked on the light.

“Oh god,” She said as she stepped inside.

Clocks, children’s toys, old computer parts, were stuffed into boxes that reached up to the ceiling.

“Oh my god...” she said again. She turned to him. “You’re a hoarder! Like those people on TV!”

“I don’t watch those shows,” he said, hoping his fake smile was contagious.

She walked around the boxes, sticking her fingers into one, pushing aside a wooden duck and pulling out a raggedy doll with button eyes and a pink dress.

“How did you ever come across all this junk?”

He winced at the word as he watched her examine his late aunt’s doll.

“The owners’ of this house, an old couple, left it to me.”

Teri gave him an unbelieving look. “You’re lying.”

“No shit,” he laughed and walked over to stand next to her. “They were an older couple, didn’t want to move off all their stuff. They said they would knock off five hundred dollars from the price if I kept the stuff.”

Teri raised an eyebrow. “And you did?”

“I thought I could sell all this stuff, make even more money. But then the economy went sour and I was left with all of this...” he shrugged. “Too many garage sales going on all the time; no one is going to buy even a tenth of all this stuff.”

“And you can’t throw this stuff away?” she said in that slow way as if pointing out the obvious to someone dumb enough to need it.

Stephen pulled out a pregnancy work-out video he had got as a gag gift for a friend and then found in the trash later.

“How could you ever throw this out?”

They both laughed. She put down the doll.

“Should I be forewarned about what else I will find in this house?”

He dropped the home pregnancy video and put his arms on her hips.

“Yeah, there’s a monster in my bedroom.”

She smiled, “Is he big?”

“Huge.”

She smiled, knowing she had walked into that. Stephen burst out laughing. He led her out of the garage, more glad than anything else that she hadn’t dug a little deeper in that same box and found her doll.

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Stephen awoke to the sound of a thud, and a whisper coming from the other room. He bolted upright, fully awake. Teri looked up at him, bleary-eyed.

“What is it?”

“Stay here.”

He threw on his pants and his shirt, and walked into the other room. He flicked on the light just in time to see two high school age kids carrying his TV into the kitchen and through the back door. They turned to him, freezing on the spot.

“Hey assholes, get the hell out!” Stephen yelled, hoping that was enough to scare off the dumb punks, and hoping again that they weren’t armed.

They looked at each other, then him. One of them actually grinned and laughed. He nodded toward the back door and they kept lugging the TV towards the back. Stephen ran across the room to the kid closest to him. The two dropped the TV with the unmistakable sound of the glass screen cracking. Stephen threw a punch but the kid was too fast. He ducked under it and threw himself at Stephen. The two stumbled backward until Stephen tripped and fell over on the coffee table. He struggled with the kid on top of him, the two both awkwardly trying to punch and grab each other. The other brute rushed over and started punching him in the face. Stephen frantically tried to block, only to have the second kid punching him in his unprotected stomach. His head felt heavy, and blood flew with every new punch. A deafening scream sounded from behind him. The beating stopped. Stephen couldn’t see through the blood, but he heard heavy footsteps fading away.

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Stephen was sitting on couch at the insistence of two police officers as he held a hand towel up to his still-bleeding forehead. He tried to give as best a description of the two punks as he could, but his head was still fuzzy. The police had asked him to check the rest of the house in case the two hooligans had tried to take anything else. Stephen looked into the kitchen. He pretended to peer into the garage and very quickly closed the door. Quite a few of those items were probably reported missing, and Stephen didn’t want to have to go to prison because someone else stole from him.

The two policemen did a quick tour of the backyard, looking for anything the two might have dropped before leaving. Teri sat next to Stephen, not looking at him.

“I want to go home.” She said.

Stephen didn’t say anything.

“Are you going to be ok?” she said, guilt clear in her voice.

Stephen nodded, feeling a spasm of pain shoot through his neck as he did.

“Do you want to come ba-”

He could hear the hesitation in her voice and said, “No, I’ll be fine...thanks.”

Teri got up and walked towards the door. Stephen was too prideful to just sit on the couch, the victim of two deadbeat kids. He stood up, walked over, opened the door, and saw her to her car. He watched as she drove away feeling for the first time, a sense of guilt; as if for the first time he tried to do the adult thing of maintaining a healthy relationship, but somehow he couldn’t pull it off.

Stephen trudged back to the house. He looked at the smashed TV and swore. He should have figured that three locks were worthless as long as there were windows and everyone could see your most valuable possessions. Fortunately, the punks had picked the back locks rather than breaking through the windows. Stephen would deal with his security problem and clean up the shattered TV in the morning.

He started to trudge back toward his room, when he looked down. Tiny flecks of barely visible blood leapt out at him from the carpet. As he looked at them, he remembered every punch across his face and began to guess which blow caused which blood-pattern. Minutes passed. Stephen couldn’t be sure which blows were which, and he constructed handfuls of potential beat-downs. Stephen looked around the room. He mentally placed each missing item back. As he did he felt how empty each one was in comparison, as each was just a stolen item, whose memories belonged to someone else. The coffee table where he had been so vividly beaten he could still feel every blow and the carpet, where even now his blood had dried, both lessened the meaning of the other items. All his other things were his desperate attempt to reach out of his own constant feeling of loneliness and touch the outside world, but now that world had come to him, and it felt like there was a black hole in the center of the room.

He felt an ache in his stomach and he forced himself to look away from the now-fascinating scene. He trudged toward his bedroom, peering over his shoulder one last time to get an alternate view of the scene. As he did he smiled as his carpet and the coffee table were more than objects. His last thought before going to bed was that he wished that a bit of blood had flown across the face of the old woman and perhaps restored some of her color.

Gary Girod

Goatboy

The farmer and his wife had been trying to have a baby for almost a year, without any luck, before they began to worry that they couldn't. She was made to drink a tea made from red clover, bury a chicken egg in the fireplace, and told both to ensure and abstain from having orgasms. They made love in lurid, obscure positions, and used drops of snake oil in almost all of their cooking. Still, with the exception of a four-week span that ended in miscarriage, she bled month after month.

The farmer was a tall, wiry man, strong in the hands and shoulders. He owned only a single book, a King James Bible bound in cowhide and from which he read aloud nightly, expecting his wife to sit by and listen, for she herself could not read. He was a full decade and a half older than she, a small and demure woman, the way he thought a woman ought to be. She had mud-colored hair that rested at the small of her back. The possibility of infertility was a great embarrassment to the farmer. It made him self-conscious about his age and virility next to his younger spouse.

The evening of the second miscarriage, the farmer stepped out on the porch and stood with his thumbs in the straps of his overalls, looking over the fields. The cows and the goats stood on the hilltop, grazing or lying down. The corn was high and rustled dryly in the wind. He breathed through his nose and puffed on a long pipe that had once been his father's, and wondered what his own son might be like, if he was ever to be. His eyes were tired. The sun was low and red on the hills.

They'd heard about the doctor in the mountains some years before, but he hadn't come to mind again until later that night. The farmer had remembered the doctor's name while his wife slept, curled up on her side. It was a long night, and he found little rest. He resolved to talk to her about it in the morning.

A few days later they stood outside a hut deep in the woods, nestled back in a grove of briars and overgrown willows. The roof was flat and made of a single sheet of corrugated tin. A dog chewed a twisted piece of metal.

"I'm scared," the farmer's wife said. She wrung her hands.

The farmer looked down at her. He nodded his head as if he understood and would say something but did not. The grove was quiet. He licked his palm and combed his hair with his hand. Then they went in.

The moon waxed and waned. It was winter. The wife's belly grew. She was sick often, and experienced pain in her belly and back almost daily. Her hair thinned. After only five months, she was told to remain in bed for the rest of the pregnancy. The farmer wondered if she would survive it.

But then, on a hot June day, almost two years after they had begun to try, the wife gave birth to a boy in their own home. They named him after the farmer's grandfather. The boy was healthy aside from a thin ridge of coarse white hair that grew along his spine, starting at the base of his neck. They shaved it off, and then the farmer was able, for the first time, to hold his son.

He looked at him proudly, and recognized his own knobby chin, the high, hard forehead. The boy didn't cry, but looked up at his father and around at the world with bright, curious eyes that were all his mother's. This child would grow into a strong and capable man, the farmer was sure of that.

They doted after him. A miracle. The wife nursed him and would look at him with nothing but wonder in her eyes. The man took him for walks about the property, showing him the fields that would always belong to their family, he and his son and then his son after that. As he talked he mutely fingered the white stubble on the boy's back.

As the boy aged, the hair on his spine grew back thicker and thicker. Eventually, after it started growing back two and then three times a day, they stopped trying to shave it off. The doctors didn't know what to make of it. Aside from his external appearance, they said, he seemed like a perfectly healthy boy.

They climbed through the hills. A cool wind amongst the trees. The leaves had changed color and were beginning to fall. The farmer led the way and his wife followed a few steps behind, carrying the baby and wrapped in several blankets. The boy was crying.

When they reached the doctor's hut the grove was overgrown with waist-high nettles and weeds. There was no sign of the dog that had been there and the roof had partially collapsed. The wife waited with their child while the farmer went up and peered through the window with his hands cupped around his eyes. Water dripped from the ceiling and he could see clumps of mold and mushrooms on the floor. Wildflowers grew between cracks in the boards. He saw several birds pecking near an old table. There was no sign of the doctor, he reported. Clearly, no one had lived here for some time.

The boy grew. He became a toddler. He was a difficult, argumentative child. As soon as he seemed able to he began to defy his parents. He threw violent tantrums and broke whatever was put in front of him. The wife, especially, looked exhausted. The farmer hit him regularly with his belt, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The boy had no friends. They felt guilty, reasoning that whatever sickness was lurking inside him must have come from somewhere within their own selves. The farmer barely slept anymore, wondering if the boy was his fault.

On the first day of fall, they went to sell their goods in the Dushore market. It was more than three miles from their farm to Dushore, and they traveled there only occasionally. Aside from the weekly church service, it was the only time any member of the family left the farm. The farmer took his son, who was just three now, and his wife stayed at the home. The air was still warm, but hard-edged, and smelled of the coming cold. The farmer looked off down the road. His eyes were deep and dark. Then he turned to regard his son.

The boy sat the bench beside him, his whole body jostling as the horses trotted. He was starting to grow long hairs beneath his chin, just a few, but enough to be noticed. The farmer thought they gave him the appearance of an elderly Chinese man, but had never said so. The boy crossed his feet beneath him, and the farmer caught sight of the shapeless leather shoes he wore. In the last months, the arches of his feet had begun to flatten and then widen, painfully. The boy would sit cross-legged on the floor, holding his feet and howling. They'd become so swollen and disfigured the farmer's wife had been forced to fashion him a few pairs of leather shoes that would stretch enough to fit. They were ugly, but they did the job. The boy's walk was even different now. He walked queerly, on the tips of his toes, as if he were a newborn deer. The farmer sighed and looked back down the road.

The market was already alive with noise when they arrived in town. They tied the horses to a hitching post and went about setting up their supplies. Goat's milk, eggs, and several blocks of soft cheeses made with thyme and rosemary. The farmer unfurled a white linen sheet in a motion that sounded like a thunderclap, and let it gently settle over the table where he smoothed out the creases with his wide hands. Then the boy helped him set out the crates of goods one by one. When he thought his father wasn't looking, he took a long swig from one of the milk tins and received a cuff on the ear. He cried. Without saying anything, the farmer put his arm around his son's shoulders and eventually he quieted.

They laid out samples of the cheese for folks to try, for the farmer's goats were some of the finest in the area, and the cheese they produced was rich and flavorful. They sold out of it quickly. Late in the afternoon, when the sun was beginning to approach the trees, the farmer began to pack up their stand. Only a few tins of milk and a single crate of eggs were left. It had been a good day. He set the tins and the crate in the cart and wrapped them in the linen sheet and then he hitched up the horses. He went to lift his son onto the bench but when he turned around the boy wasn't there. There was a moment of blind panic until he saw him.

The boy was sitting on the ground on the other side of the market, holding something in his lap. There was a circle of people beginning to form around him, pointing and whispering to one another. The farmer bounded over, elbowing his way through, and it wasn't until he was standing over him that he saw what the folks were so interested in. The boy had managed to catch a small bird, and as he held it close he was picking out small clumps of feathers. The bird was frantically struggling to get away, but the boy had his knees up and had pinned it securely against his stomach. Little uneven patches of pink showed through its feathers. Pinpricks of bright blood. The farmer smacked the bird out of his son's grip. It wobbled in the dust and eventually righted itself, but it was obvious that something in it could never be put right again.

The farmer yanked the boy up roughly by the wrist and marched toward the cart. The boy's gait was queer and slow next to his father's. Someone said something and the crowd laughed. The farmer let go of his son's hand and singled out the man who had spoken.

"What did you say?" the farmer demanded.

The man smirked. "I said he looks like a little goat, your son there."

The farmer snorted through his nose, like a bull. He started to walk away but had only gotten one step when he thought better of it. He spun and punched the man just below the eye. The man staggered for a moment and then he sank sideways to the ground. His eye was immediately dark and distended. The farmer lifted his son and carried him to the cart as the crowd rushed in to help the man. Several people shook their heads as they watched the farmer and his strange boy go, and all the while the little bird nearby was still flapping its bald wings and wheeling counterclockwise, trying but unable to lift itself off the ground.

They stopped going into town. White hair grew up the boy's arms and back. Soon he had a full goatee of pale stringy hair that grew like a spike beneath his chin. The farmer sat in his chair, the Bible in his lap. His wife came in from the kitchen drying her hands on a rag. The boy was playing in another room.

"I think I know what's happening," the farmer said.

His wife hurried into the room. "What?" Her voice was excited, but low.

"After we were in town, with the bird, it got worse, then it seemed to slow down, until... But then the hair on his face got worse."

"Until he hit you, remember? That happened the night he hit you."

"I don't understand."

"It's not an even or regular thing. It's happening in spurts, and I think they line up with how far away he is from this." He held up the Bible.

The wife covered her mouth. "Don't say that."

"It makes sense. The worse he behaves, the faster it happens."

"Like God's punishing him? But he's just a boy."

"I don't know that it's a punishment so much as an indication of the condition of his soul, his spiritual life. It's like a scale. The more he sins, the faster he turns into this...thing."

"Well, how do we stop it?"

"I don't know, the farmer said. But I aim to try."

Just then the boy walked in. The farmer picked up his Bible and began to read, while the boy played on the floor. Once, the boy had been expected to sit and listen with his mother, but from an early age he had resisted, crying and yelling and purposefully hitting his head against the wall until his parents allowed him to play again. Now, as the farmer read scripture to his wife, the boy smashed toy cars into one another loudly, accompanied by a variety of graphic sound effects. The mother prayed for his soul. The father watched him with unease.

It was afternoon. The sun was high and hot but there was a cool wind blowing that made it pleasant to be out of doors. The mother sat on the porch, mending the family's clothes. The boy was to be found in the field behind the house, where he was picking up fist-sized stones and throwing them as far as he could into the woods. Every so often, as one of them thunked through the leaves, birds sprung up in a cloud. He saw his father coming out of the corner of his eye. The farmer didn't say anything, just squatted nearby with his forearms resting on his knees, watching him, so the boy didn't stop throwing. He had launched four more rocks high into the trees before his father spoke.

"Hello son."

"Father."

Another stone skittered through the woods, making a sound like a live animal.

"Can I speak with you?"

"Sure."

The farmer rubbed his mouth.

"Your mother and I think we may know why this is happening to you."

"Why, what's happening?"

"Your...condition."

The boy made no indication that he had heard. He ducked his arm sideways and chucked a stone against the trunk of a pine.

"I don't know why, but things seem to happen after you've done something wrong. When you hit your mother or defy me. Do you understand?"

"You mean I'm bad?"

"No, of course not. You're a good boy. But for some reason, this happens when you sin. You have to be extra good, you understand?"

The boy nodded.

"And I'd like you to sit with your mother when I read. The Good Book has lessons for all of us on how to live a noble, honorable life, okay?"

"Yes Papa."

The farmer smiled and ruffled his hair and walked up toward the house. The boy watched him go a little ways and then went back to throwing stones.

Years passed. The boy made a considerable effort to behave, but as an adolescent, his condition only grew worse. His feet had not only completely changed into hooves, they had recently developed a cleft down the center. He had a full white beard and the hair had spread all down his arms, everything except for the palms of his hands.

“It’s happening faster, the farmer said one night. Have you noticed that?”

“I have,” his wife answered.

The farmer sighed. He slipped the straps of his overalls over his shoulders and stepped out into just his long johns. He crawled beneath the covers.

“Why’s he have to be this way? We were good. No reason we didn’t deserve a normal child,” he said.

“Don’t say that. He’s...”

“It’s true! He’s what? I love him, you know that. I love him enough to crack stones, but that doesn’t make him normal. Whatever’s happening, it’s not normal. One look at the way folks react to him ought to tell you that.”

“What other folks think isn’t everything.”

“I know that.”

The farmer turned to his side. He blew out the candle and they were in darkness. They lay in silence beside one another for some time.

Then the wife said, “I wish we’d never gone to that doctor. I can’t help thinking all this has something to do with...”

“I told you I don’t ever want to talk about that day again. We wanted a child, and we did something desperate. It’s over.”

“But...”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Once, he was gone for an entire night. His parents searched the house, the barn, and the surrounding fields and forest, but they could find not a single sign of him. The mother sank to her knees. She cried and cried. They’ve taken him, she sobbed. They’ve taken him and they’ll kill him. The farmer took his gun and checked it. He had mounted his horse and was preparing to go into town when he saw his son stumble out from the edge of the woods. They ran across the field and embraced him, checking to see if he was hurt. The farmer stopped. His expression changed. There was a strong reek of liquor. He grabbed his son’s face roughly and peered into his eyes, shaking him.

“Where were you, huh? Just what in the hell were you doing?”

“What is it?” the mother cried. She tugged at the farmer’s arm. “Stop it. What is it?”

The boy couldn’t stop laughing.

“Where were you?”

The farmer’s hand came down hard across his son’s face, and the laughter stopped immediately. He stared straight at his father and the look on his face was replaced by something dark, something colder.

“Look,” the wife said.

The boy’s ears were now covered over with coarse short hair, and while he was gone the tips of them had grown to a point.

The farmer found a well-worn stack of photographs in a rubber band under the boy’s bed. He shuffled through them and found they were pictures of women in varying stages of undress. A week later the boy stayed out all night and came home drunk again. It was the final straw. Something had to be done. The farmer boiled with rage. His wife convinced him to allow the boy to sleep it off. They would address it in the morning.

There was already a fire going when the boy crept downstairs. The farmer stood beside the fireplace, smoking a pipe and looking at a picture of his father. His wife sat with her head in her hands. The boy took a step back upstairs but his father, without looking up, called for him to come and sit down. The boy did so, sighing impatiently. The farmer looked at his son. The boy’s teeth were shovel-bent and his mouth protruded past his nose. There were two bone nubs poking through his hair and a ridge of coarse fur went down his forearms and hung from his elbows. He looked more like a goat now than a human, and the farmer wondered if, had he only seen him as a child, and then today, would he have been able to recognize his own son? The boy was squirming under his father’s gaze and finally he snapped.

“What?” he barked.

The farmer set the picture down. He shook his head.

“Your mother and I, he started to say, but his voice broke. Your mother and I, we can’t sit back and watch you do this to yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

“Is that what you call this?” The farmer threw his hand out in frustration, indicating his son.

“I’ve got it under control.”

“Drinking and cursing. Running away from your parents. I found these in your room.” He produced the stack of photographs and held them up with two fingers. “Disgusting.”

“You had no right to go through my things.”

“And you have no right to throw yourself to the dogs and expect us to sit by and watch. You were bought at a price. You have no idea what we went through to have you.”

The mother sobbed.

“I don’t care,” the boy said. “That was your choice. This is mine.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Yes I do.”

“No. You don’t.”

The boy stood up and glared at his father. Then he turned to the front door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Into town.”

“Oh no you’re not.”

The boy lunged. The farmer grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him backwards. They grappled for a moment and then both went to the floor. The mother stood and covered her mouth.

“Stop fighting him,” she yelled to her son. “Oh stop.”

The boy grabbed his father’s wrist and bit it until he drew blood. The farmer howled and let go and the boy sprang to his feet just for a moment. He sprinted back toward the back door, through the living room, but as he passed his mother she reached out and grabbed him. He was caught off guard, and stopped struggling for a long moment, looking up at her with slowly registering shock. The mother bit her lip and refused to meet his gaze. When the boy began squirming again, the father was there to help restrain him.

They lifted and carried him upstairs together, the boy writhing like a cut wire and howling in what the farmer assumed were tongues. They dropped him on the floor of an extra, sparsely furnished room and bolted it shut from the outside with chains and locks the farmer had installed himself in the middle of the night. The boy threw his body against the door, screeching, but it held. The mother ran downstairs. The farmer leaned against the wall, his hands on his hips, breathing heavily.

The next day the farmer stood over the kitchen sink, watching his animals in the field. The sun was red over the hills. He drank from a glass of water. His wife sat and pretended to read. Upstairs, the boy railed in fury, stomping and bellowing and running himself against the door. Pictures shifted and rattled on the walls.

For two days the boy's rage seemed to know no exhaustion. He didn't sleep. They slid plates of food under the door but immediately they could hear them clatter across the room. Then, on the third day, he stilled. There was no sound, only the ticking of a grandfather clock. The farmer looked at his wife and went upstairs to check on him.

The hallway upstairs was strangely quiet. The floorboards creaked under the farmer's boots. He looked at the door at the end of the hall. He wondered if the boy had jumped out a window until he heard shifting on the other side. He eased himself down to his knees, his head against the floor, and peered through the crack beneath the door. The boy was sitting still in the middle of the floor. The farmer stood up.

"Son?"

A long pause. A sigh.

"Yes?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"Are you hungry? Can I get you anything?"

"Just some water."

"Okay."

They removed the chains on the morning of the fourth day and opened the door, revealing a diminutive figure, his eyes sunken and dark. The boy stood uncertainly before the threshold, watching his parents. They motioned to him, smiling, and finally he came. The tiny family embracing in the creaky hallway, farmer and wife and their strange, bestial boy.

The farmer noticed a change in his son. It wasn't physical, he still looked the same, but his behavior was different. He was quieter, more muted. He kept his head down as he went about his chores, but he still went about doing them. Chores he hadn't even pretended to do for several years. Finally, the boy seemed to have realized the error of his ways and righted himself. Perhaps his quiet demeanor was owing to a gnawing sense of shame, the farmer thought. After all, hadn't he and his wife experienced the same thing? The only solution was to keep going, to raise up a sense of normalcy in the family that had never really been there. The prodigal son was returned.

Sundays they held a church service in the living room of their home and the boy, for the first time since he was old enough to decide, attended. The farmer read from his leather bound Bible and they recited several prayers and catechisms he had memorized. Finally, they sang Be Thou My Vision and the boy even tentatively sang along.

They watched for the beginning of physical change in their son. He was so devoted to acting with purity to be almost ascetic. He worked through the days, prayed with his father, and was in bed early. He asked to be locked in every night so as to avoid temptation. On Saturdays he fasted, and every Sunday he attended the makeshift church service with his parents. Eventually, he learned the songs and sang loudly and with zeal. Still, weeks passed, and his appearance had not begun to improve.

The farmer found his son going into the chicken hutch one morning to collect eggs. It was just past dawn, and the fog was heavy over the fields. He watched the boy. More than a boy now. He moved more like a man but looked like something else entirely. The ears sticking up, his face hidden under all that hair. He shook his head and followed the boy inside. His son looked up when he came in and nodded.

“Good morning son.”

“Morning.”

“They lay well?”

“Fair. Some laid, some didn’t.”

The farmer nodded. He was silent while the boy finished going in a circle about the hutch, reaching beneath each chicken in turn with his gnarled hand-hoof and gingerly placing any eggs he found in the basket. When he was finished they went outside.

“You know,” the farmer said, “I appreciate what you’ve been doing. The way you’ve been. You’ve really turned around.”

The boy was quiet. He looked at the ground. His father continued.

“I know we haven’t seen a physical difference yet, but we will. It’s starting. And either way, it’s made a world of difference to your mother and I. We’ve never been as proud of you as we are now. You see...”

“I can’t do it,” the boy cut in.

The farmer blinked at him. “What?”

“I can’t do this. Not forever. I’m not like you.”

“A life of holiness is never easy...”

“It’s an act to me. It doesn’t mean anything. And it’s too difficult. I can’t act one way when everything in my nature is pushing me in the opposite way.”

“It’s not your nature.”

“No, it is. I used to think maybe it wasn’t, but it is. I thought I was changing because of the way I was behaving, but I’ve always been this way, haven’t I?”

The farmer was silent. He looked away.

“That’s what I thought. This all started before I ever had a choice. I’m not in control of this. Whatever this animal is, it’s always been there, and now it’s just about out. I don’t know why, but that’s just the way it is. So you see Papa? I never had a choice.”

“No, it’s not the way you say. We can always change.”

“I’m not saying I won’t try. But I’m saying you’re asking me to fight my true nature, and I have nothing left to fight with.”

“You do. It’s...”

“I’m going into the house.”

He walked away, a strange human form ascending the hillside. His father called after him but he didn’t respond. A moment of frustration. He called again, saying that if the boy was so willing to give up he was no son of his. The figure paused, and then continued upward.

The next day the mother went to visit friends she had not seen in years. Since the boy had changed, it was as if a great weight had been lifted from her back. She had changed too. She left before noon, and told them she would be back by dinner time.

It was June, the month of the boy’s birth. The cows were made lazy by the heat, lying by in the fields swatting at flies with their tails. The goats bleated in the hold, and fattened bees droned amongst the flowers. The whole farm lay under a haze. It was a heat to distract and exhaust. The farmer had milked the cows and goats by dawn light, and checked the hutch for eggs. He kissed his wife goodbye and set about inspecting the fields in the afternoon. The corn was beginning to grow. It would be time to prune and fertilize the harvest soon. He would be happy to have the boy’s help for that.

He spent an hour tending the fields, turning the soil in places and cutting down crops that had failed to grow in others. He carried a hand sickle with him, swinging it in a low arc to cut down stalks, and then collecting them in a bundle that he threw over his shoulder. He thought about his son. Perhaps he had been too hard on him, not given him room to learn and grow on his own. His own father had been that way, strict to the point of overbearing, but the farmer had thrived in such an environment. He was strong. He was beginning to see how a weaker spirit, or one beset by circumstance, such as his son, might be crushed by it. He prayed, and resolved to talk to him that night.

Late in the afternoon, the farmer finished his work. He tied the bundle and slung it over his shoulder and stood looking over the fields, catching his breath. He passed a shirtsleeve over his sweaty brow. The sun was red on the hills.

When he stepped into the barn it took a long moment for his eyes to adjust. It was cold and dark. He saw dust mites floating in the slats of sunlight. He took one step further in and the first thing he noticed was the old sickle gone from the near wall. He hadn't touched it in years. Then he saw a figure coming out of the darkness, holding it above his shoulder and crossing the floor quickly, with purpose.

The instrument came down with a hard thwack against the farmer's midsection, knocking the air from his lungs and sending him sprawled across the dusty floor. It was dull after years of disuse, but its weight alone made it a formidable weapon. The farmer wheezed, laboring to draw a single breath. He tried to get up, and immediately felt the flat of the blade against the top of his neck. His skin went hot, and he thought he felt blood on his back. He rolled over, terrified, trying to hide his face behind his arms, and that was when he saw his son, looking more like some half goat creature born out of old Christian nightmare than his son. He was holding the sickle back over his head and had nothing but fire and malevolence in his eyes.

The wife got home later than she expected. It was evening, and the sun had already begun to set. She noticed that the barn door had been left open, and that lights were on in the house, but there was no sign of her husband or son. She called their names but there was no response. She walked around and through the house but it was empty and silent.

When she came out she saw that one of the goats had gotten out of the hold. It was standing at the top of the hill, seeming to watch her. She didn't recognize it, but she didn't know many of the animals they owned, not like her husband. They stood facing one another for some time, the woman and the goat, until the sun had set almost completely and they were both reduced to shadows, darkened shapes. She started to go after it, to capture it, but then the goat turned and bounded away over the hill. She ran after it, but when she reached the top of the hill and looked over the fields, it was gone.

Ty Russell

Her Beginning

Tonight is like the pinwheel my mother gave me at last year's county fair. Spinning because it can't be still, unrecognizably colorful, and mysterious in its cause for being. What is missing that made last September's big night out so memorable, though, is my mother's laughter. It just left with her.

"Emma," my Dad says, "Stay away from the tape."

Although he doesn't want to leave Mom, he walks around the front of what used to be my Dad's car to where my brother, Evan, and I are sitting.

"Listen," Dad calmly says, as he looks at us. "I need you both to go and sit in the cop car. Officer Ken will get you something to drink. I'll be over with you and soon as I can, and we'll go home. Okay?"

I nod, as I reach for Evan's hand. When we are walking, he asks me why all the people are standing around Mom. I know that he's only four and doesn't understand, but I still tell him that it's because she's dead. He holds tighter to my hand and follows behind as we walk to the car. Officer Ken hands us two sodas and a chocolate bar to share. Neither one of us is hungry, but I grab the candy and hand it to Evan.

"Did Mom die when we hit the bird?" I ask Officer Ken.

He looks confused, so I ask him again, "Officer Ken, did Mom die when we hit the bird?"

He focuses and takes a sip from his cup of coffee.

"Um," he says, as he clears his throat and wipes his mouth with his sleeves, "No, she didn't. Well, I mean, she did die because of the wreck, but she didn't die right away."

I stop him again. "Did she hurt for a long time?"

Officer Ken readjusts his position in the car and says, "Well—I—I'm not completely sure. I'd like to think not. She was able to speak for a few minutes."

He takes another sip, wanting to save this talk for my Dad to have with me.

"Did she say anything about me before she died?" I say.

Ignoring my question, Officer Ken tells us he has to get more coffee and asks if we want anything. Evan and I both shake our heads. I watch him, as he leaves the car and goes to talk to the other officers. I try to listen, but they are talking unusually low. I can only hear pieces of their conversation:

"Seen before."

"Man."

“Crazy.”

“Out of a fairy tale.”

None of it seems to be about my mother, and I don’t think it’s fair. I want to know how the bird caused us to crash and if Mom said anything about me before she died. Dad shouldn’t have taken us away from the car. We would have been fine. I hear a knock on the window nearest Evan. It’s Dad.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s go home. The cops say there is nothing else we can do tonight.”

What Dad says sounds programmed, but sometimes we can only say what we think we should say. I want to say what I want to say.

“Dad, did Mom say anything about me before she died?”

“We’ll talk about this when we get home. Your brother is tired. Right, buddy?”

Evan doesn’t agree, but he doesn’t disagree, either. Instead, he hugs Dad and cradles his head near Dad’s chest. Dad wraps his arms around Evan and picks him up.

We get home and nothing has changed. Everything is still in place. I think clothes should be scattered, and I hope to see dishes broken across the kitchen floor, creating shards of glass for me to walk on. But no, nothing has changed. What were things are now memories. Or is it too early for those? I can still smell Mom. Her scent of lilacs and cucumbers. Early summertime. That’s my Mom. I want to think of this as one of her business trips, where she is gone for a week and tonight she forgets to call.

Her sneakers are beside the door, and her hairbrush is lying on the kitchen counter. I remember Mom telling me to sit beside her and how she would teach me to brush my hair. I remember how she would place her palm against the crown of my head and coach me to brush “slowly.” The brush gave me barely visible dark red streaks the first time she helped me. She said she must have forgotten to clean it. I giggled because Mom never had red hair. Why would she clean it? She would compliment my steady perseverance, and joke how she should have taught me sooner. I would smile because I was embarrassed. I knew she didn’t mean it. I was four then. We were just becoming friends. I close my eyes and slide my hand over the wooden handle of her brush.

“Emma, there you are,” Dad says almost out of breath from rushing up and down the stairs to put Evan down for bed.

“What are you doing?” he asks. “Nothing,” I reply. “I was just remembering something.”

“Do you want to talk about it, honey?” Dad asks. “No,” I say as I wrap my arms around him and begin to cry.

Dad hugs me back and I hear him crying. For the first time since the accident, I feel something. I want to think that it’s Mom telling me that I’ll be okay, but I don’t. I feel like Mom has something that I need to know. And suddenly, I remember.

“Dad,” I say, stepping back from his embrace.

He wipes his eyes and sits down before he meets my attention. “Yes, Emma.”

“Did Mom say anything to you about me before she died?” I ask.

Dad looks across the room and spots what he needs. Slowly, he slides to the front of his bulky, blue chair and stands. At first he hesitates, but then he begins to walk across the room to Mom’s bookcase. He settles on his knees and reaches to the back. When he stands, he has an old brown book with a latch that looks older than Mom and Dad combined.

“I’ll tell you the last words your mother said to me,” Dad says.

I stand up to accept the book as he presents it to me.

“She said,” Dad says, “Don’t forget to tell Emma who she is.”

Confused, I quickly sit back down and look up at Dad, as he walks back over to his chair.

“Don’t forget to tell me who I am?” I ask.

“Yes, Emma.”

“What are you talking about, Dad? I know who I am,” I say laughing.

“Listen, Emma,” Dad says, “The wreck tonight. That wasn’t a bird that we hit.”

I get angry with Dad and tell him that I know it was a bird because I saw it. I hear nothing for the next few seconds. I see him becoming frustrated, but I don’t care. She was his wife, but she was also my Mom. I’m allowed to be angry for him telling me that I didn’t see what I know I saw. He just stares at me. I toss my book to the ground. It collapses. The old book’s spine almost rips, and awkward landing bends several of the pages.

“Emma!” Dad yells my name.

I don’t care what my mother wanted me to read. I don’t want to read it. He’s lying to me. I start crying.

“I know I saw a bird hit our car. I saw it pierce my mother’s skin. I saw her bleeding,” I emphatically tell Dad.

He looks at me. Instead of arguing, he gets up, walks to my book, and bends to get it for me again.

“Open it,” he says, as he hands it back to me. “I know you loved your mother. I loved her. She was my wife, Emma. I loved her more than you or anyone can imagine. I also know what you think you saw. Trust me. It wasn’t a bird. Did you see the body of a bird in the card, Emma? What you saw flew away. A bird would not have survived the impact or penetrated the shield. Your Mom and I knew this was coming. We just didn’t know when.”

Still crying, I look at Dad. I know he is telling the truth, but I don't want to believe him. I am sad, confused—even stupid. How could I not have noticed how the body of what I assumed was a bird was missing from the scene? I clutch the book in my hands and look down at it.

“So,” I say to Dad, “Who I am is inside this book?”

He shakes his head and says, “Yes. Everything you will ever need to know about yourself. It's in there.”

Dad gets up from his chair and comes over to where I'm sitting. He sits on the arm of my chair and pats my shoulder. He tells me,

“Go ahead. Open it. Just be prepared. You think your life changed a few hours ago, but now it's going to be completely different.”

I turn around to meet his gaze. I start to smile, but his expression discourages it.

“Read it aloud, Emma. It might help make everything more real,” he says.

I open the cover. Dust blasts everywhere—green, gold, pink—a cloud of color engulfs my body. A ball of wind jumps from the pages and pushes the dust along. First, I resist what is happening, but I can't stop the cloud, as it attacks my head and works its way quickly down my torso and to my toes. It tickles, but I refuse to laugh. I try to squeal, but I can't. Soon, I'm not even sure that I want to stop what is happening. It feels wonderful, as the dust clings to my body.

I shut the book and run to stand under the light in our living room. Emotionless, Dad watches me, as I bask in utter wonderment. I look in the mirror to watch my body transform. At first, I glitter like I've been glued with sequins, but soon, the dust settles into my pores. My glow fades, and I'm back to a human-like tone, only slightly more golden than I was.

“Um, Dad,” I say, “Did you know that was going to happen?”

I feel incredible—almost weightless.

“Emma, look down,” Dad says.

I take his advice and almost collapse at what I see. My feet aren't on the ground. I'm hovering at least three inches above the floor.

“Look in the mirror again,” he instructs me.

I scream.

“You're going to wake your brother, Emma. He doesn't need to know about this” Dad says.

I stop screaming, but I can't help but to continue gasps. I have wings. They are beautiful. They are the color of the dust. They shine beautifully in the light. I put my hand over my mouth and admire what is happening.

Dad stands beside me, and I look at him in the mirror. He still doesn't smile. Then, I remember. Mom died just a few hours ago. How could I have forgotten? If didn't die, I wouldn't be flying. I close my wings and plant my feet back on the ground. I sit down to read what—well, who—I am. Dad rejoins me.

"Read it aloud, Emma," Dad said again, "This time, let's finish reading the opening page. That will give you all the information you need for tonight."

I agreed and pulled back the cover again.

I begin to read, "To whomever now possess this gift, I equally congratulate and warn you of your current status, which may be a blessing to those who respect required fulfillments, but to those who neglect even the smallest of orders, it will be a terrible curse."

I stop reading and look at Dad. He looks back but nods, as an indicator for me to continue.

"Roughly, every thirty-five years, the queen of all fairies decides on a new Tooth Fairy—usually, this selection falls on the daughter of the past fairy."

I stop and sarcastically ask, "Mom was the Tooth Fairy?"

Dad looks at me.

"The childhood legend is, in fact, only partly true. Securing the first shed tooth of every child is the most important requirement of the Tooth Fairy. You must not only get the tooth, but you must leave a single dollar bill under the respective child's pillow. However, collecting successively shed teeth are not your responsibility. This task belongs to the child's parents or guardians. You must collect these teeth daily, either late at night or in the earliest of hours of the morning. Once you collect the teeth, you must hold them in your hand until they turn to dust. Due to your wings and other magical abilities, this process is easily accomplishable within an hour. If you fail, even once, you will grow violent and, consequently, kill. The desire to pound brains in an effort to secure teeth will overtake you. This is why many children fear the loss of the first tooth. Hundreds of thousands have been slain due to irresponsible Fairies. But do not fear, the amount of happiness, ability to fly, and response to the magic dust, will make your time as the Tooth Fairy well worth it. Teeth are now the key to your survival, and the survival of those around you. When your time is up, the queen will find you and pierce your heart with her sword. You will not suffer. Until then, you will be responsible for securing the first lost tooth of every child in your land."

I close the book and look at Dad.

"Are you kidding me? There is no way this is real. The Tooth Fairy. Come on," I tell Dad.

I stand up to walk to the mirror again. I reexamine myself. I look normal. My earlier Moments must have been hallucinations. I walk back to the kitchen and grab Mom's hairbrush. It is mine now. Mom used to tell me how she thought of her own mother every time she saw it.

"Dad, I'm going to sleep," I say, as I begin to walk up the stairs. Dad gets up and hurries to meet me.

“Emma,” he says, “You have to begin tonight. You’ve already been hit with the dust.”

“That’s not real. We’ve had a long day. We hit a bird, which caused us to crash, which caused Mom to die. Nothing in that book is real,” I say.

Growing frantic, Dad says, “Why else would I have the book? What about the bird not being anywhere near the crash site? How do you explain that, Emma? What about your Mom’s last words?”

“You are my father. Your responsibility as a parent is to help show me who I am. That’s what she meant. Be a good Dad. What she said was for you. Apply it to Evan and I. The book is just a book, and that stupid bird was probably obliterated,” I say, as I continue to march up the stairs. “I’m going to bed, Dad.”

“Emma, please don’t do this. What about your brother? What about me? You will kill us. You won’t be aware of what you are doing. Please!” Dad begs me.

He follows me up the stairs and continues to talk, but I ignore him. I forgive him for believing what I read aloud because I remember the day we’ve all had. I tell him that I love him. I promise him that everything will be okay. After only a short nap, I wake up to watch the clock. It hits midnight. I reach over to make sure Mom’s brush is still on the bedside table, and it is. When I pull my hand back inside the covers I feel something wet. The moon’s soft glow makes what I fear a reality. I call out, but no one answers.

Bradley Sides

Box-Kite

who you are
doesn't seem to matter
after all aren't you only
any joyous child on the yellow
grass of spring

who I am, too,
doesn't seem to matter
I am just an ununique
box-kite playing joyously
on the spring wind

you laugh and run;
I dip and turn on a current
you move, and I move,
between us a thread so fine
it's often missed, in the game of things,

according to the works
of the old sages:
I should double back
on the cord of our union; find some way
to escape into the open air

but then, when I breach the sun,
and the light breaches you
when I'm whirled here and there
on the bluster of your gravity;
the great mystery loses mastery

and liberty just
doesn't seem to matter

B.T. Joy

You Made A Bird From Rice-Paper

you made a bird from rice-paper
and embroidered pomegranate blooms

you painted a seascape, one year, veneered in light,
and the little boat idling on the lapping sun

you drew a naked man and a naked woman
and sculpted a face you could have loved

all this without opening the window; because
it was winter and frost pressed on the panes

all this brought on by more than longing; and guided
by less than memory

B.T. Joy

Fresh Out

This is what my life has come to. Playing monopoly on the back porch, the sun's heat bearing hard upon my back.

There's nothing really wrong with monopoly; it's very popular amongst boring people. But I'm not a boring person. Despite my advanced age of 59- I know, I'm practically a fossil- I still have wanderlust though.

My wife, Cornelia enjoys sitting on the back porch, on a scorching summer afternoon, and kicking my ass at Monopoly. She smiles as she moves her silver thimble and buys "Boardwalk". Of course she gets one of the best properties.

A flash of triumph lights up her ever-yellowing eyes. This is a thrill now for her now? She isn't the Cornelia I married almost forty years ago.

We used to speak of the adventures we would have in Fiji, Peru and Russia. Then we had kids. After they were born, we spoke of adventures in more demure places, places we would visit after they were grown, Versailles, Rome, and Brussels. Then the kids all went to college- four college tuitions doesn't exactly leave spare change for European getaways.

Cornelia squeals and pokes me, waking me up from my daydream. "Tony! You owe me money. You landed right on Boardwalk!"

I fork over a handful of bills in pastel colors- the same kind of colors we would have used if we had even gotten to partake in our daydreamed adventures.

"Don't be sore, there's always time for a comeback"

I roll my eyes. That's classic Cornelia. Always helpful, sweet and kind, always there to pick you up if you ever were to fall. I gaze around the backyard; no more swing sets, no kids laughing, and no cocktail parties. No, none of that anymore. That wasn't Cornelia. She wants to "relax" now.

I grunt in acknowledgement, she titters and rolls the dice.

The sun glints ghastly rays of silver into my eyes. I can already feel my skin puckering into sunburn. These games always do run long, now that the kids and our dreams are almost gone.

I have a sudden spark, a sudden idea, a sudden second chance "Cornelia, what do you think about going to the Grand Canyon?"

Cornelia looks at me, and then, back at the game board.

"You landed in Jail"

I look, and to my dismay, she's correct. My little silver top hat has landed in "Jail", and I'm fresh out of "get out of jail free" cards.

Tess Pfeifle

Curtain

i.

We've seen armchairs yarned in factories
as they take away great grandmother
with cancer of the lungs, a string of long
fluid woven into her assembly

apt for a tapestry, a long room
that is woven of her memorized thread of choice.

A Volta television swamp floats until breath emerges
gentleman like, heated from its length of rope nerve.
Six looping pythons in one belt

4:44, a tilted mirror and
a bookshelf.

ii.

A fragile, breakable exhale comes in
through a python repetition of half eyes.

The silk in my feeling
is spinning anchors –
one way spatial relations,

a low cloud stripes up sticks,
a life can be a lovely beginning.

A lewd, distracted light emerges,
I am resting the speaker to your velvet thigh
all rosemary arranged in radio, red language.

iii.

Theatrics doubled
when spoken to
fourteen mirrors

The radio has got to quit following people
into my secrets - I have seen the evidence of other shadows doubling
with these voices on the radio.

A four head of micron,
swallowing outer arm crazy springs.
Our life hair challenges them,

Marquis Sylvania, an albatross equilibrium. Harsh bone
puzzle hands twinkle down, to plant
a Hammond organ growing from the soil

(hours) plastic touching our childhood.

He can play very well,
his fingers ripe, his hands
potatoes,
a harm of fire towers
giving birth.
The year is reconsidered
from a palace in the rosemary

our mice neighbors twinkle fingers up
proposed leaf
long shapes in hand-assembly.

The shouting, undressing old pin point swing sets singing a shallow end of the swamp

our pearl necklace –
ink warped leaf fabric

somehow
diamond's
connected
rude shelters, but argyle (deceased) +program.

Four headed television rug
arcs to the necklace pillow butter, luminous
hallows inside letters chiseled of ice weave,

foam reflection –
lamp shade on lamp shade,
tan pillow case, mirror maze.

Zachary Hamilton

Victorian Secret Service

Smelling salts under noses, Victorians know nothing of the
Elements, striding into storms wearing suits of
Metal, calling down the lightning and
Eating up the cumulonimbus rain. They'll
Never get enough, those Victorian ladies want
It all, all the pearls and swine and rubies like children's eyes
Sliding through pale fingers and whittling
Away at the bones. No protection here, just
Laughing like the sound of small elephants in the
Long grass of some lost location, carrion in the
Wheat fields. Do they even grow wheat anymore? It's
Enough to make you sick sometimes
This world of nicotine patches and crumbling walls
Almost enough to send the Victorians out in a
Lake submarine, fish staring, mouths gaping just
Killing time until modernity takes hold
Again and we're pathetic as some fat hag with a
Bulb ready to be thrust into the unwilling Earth
Orchids or tulips, a sexual flower waiting
Underground to erupt color into the air in some worn
Thin imitation of a climax.

Ashley Dean

Double Lung Transplants Aren't For the Faint Hearted

I know a girl who wishes the transplant scars were transparent
opening up her chest to the universe like a Marvel comic
with dials and tubes all up and down her veins
like digital hideaways and trail backs doubling over each other
until she'd died all sixty-nine ways to Tuesday
which is almost as bad as the seventy-four ways to Thursday
and when I asked her if she'd met God
she said that she had
and still I did not believe.

Ashley Dean

To My Mother' Statue of Buddha above the Kitchen Sink

The ceramic reincarnation
does not smile gluttonously
or hold a drooping stomach like so many of its counterparts.
Instead, the arms are long and brown
like my mother's.
like hers,
the eyes are wide as bay leaves,
deep and aqueous as the Ganges.

My mother is not a Buddhist.
When I was a child
my mother would warn me
of leaving the house,
and the biting ticks in the tall grass outside,
and I would have nightmares
Of tiny black specks expanding on my skin
until I was eaten alive.
When I was older
my mother would warn me of love
and I would dream of something more terrible
devouring me from the inside.

When my mother washes the dishes with so much fervor,
I wonder if she regrets
Holding onto her worrying
for ticks or love or all the other consuming factors of life.
I can imagine then,
that she keeps the statue on the windowsill
for one reason:
So that when she looks up,
her hands, thin and flat like the Buddha's,
scrubbing away at layered disquietness,
And beholds the closed eyes
so similar to her own,
for a moment instead
she may feel as though
she is standing
in a pond of lotus flowers
and that she will never
be afraid again.

Jaya Misra

Ghosts

For Raj and Sheelvati Misra

Three opened cases of dentures;
Pearly eyes
Embedded in synthetic pink.
In the sheets, strands of hair,
Silver and curled, mercurial.
On the table, a letter from Texas,
Postmarked June, 1962,
The little boy handwriting tilted
On brittle paper:
Dear Daddy,
I miss you.
I hope you will remember to
Bring the car.
Don't forget.
Please come home soon.

In the darkness
The souls of objects flicker,
Blink, fall through the air.
The house hums with their sound.
They walk around
Mirroring the shapes they have left behind.
Their bright hands brush my cheeks.
In the moonlight
They burn vast as fields.
They descend,
And in the world they are born again.

Jaya Misra

Sebastien

A slight feeling of compression in Sebastien's chest and thighs and the drip-splunk drap of water against a window pane roused him from sleep. His mind lilted, tilted, swayed, tumbled, and then settled into a well-trodden rut of neither wakefulness nor dormancy. He couldn't recall where he had been the night before, or where he was now. A black nothingness, an emptiness, a vacuum, filled his mind.

As he tried to transmute the emptiness in his mind into vivid-living memory, he felt the splintery, rough sensation of wood pressing against his back. He opened his eyelids and found himself in a tiny unfinished basement, with a cement floor and walls made of grey cinderblocks. Other than an old cathode ray style television sitting in a particle board entertainment stand, the room was barren of furniture or other objects. The only source of illumination was a two pane basement window sunk into the ground, trimmed with white wood. It tossed a dull light into the room, mottled and flickering because of the rain sliding down the pane.

He turned his gaze from the room to his body. With alarm, he found himself naked and bound through various devices to a narrow plank of wood angled at forty five degrees to the floor. His upper body was firmly tied to the plank by a thick green towel that wrapped around him and the door, pinning his arms securely against his body and him securely against the door. Pinning the towel against him, and further constraining his movement was a yellow utility rope, tied round him so many times that he lost track when he tried to count. His lower thighs, knees, and calves were similarly bound, though with a dirty orange towel surrounded by rope, instead of a thick green one. The area from his lower abdomen to his upper thighs lay exposed.

Panicking, he crunched his abdominal muscles together and tried to raise his arms and legs. The wooden door upon which he lay creaked slightly, but his bindings held fast. He remained in the same immobile position, angled slightly up from the floor and exposed to the world. A sensation of tightness around his wrists and ankles suggested that his wrists and ankles were bound by twine. A downward glance confirmed this. He could not see his feet.

"I see that you're awake," echoed a female voice from behind him.

The tingle of an electrical signal passing through a synapse provided Sebastien with the impression that he had heard the voice before. He struggled to match the voice to a face in the labyrinth of his memory. Left, right, past the neatly trimmed hedges, under the tunnel with the rotting fish smell, he travelled in his mind. But he quickly became lost. He couldn't find the voice. Frustrated, he rapidly whipped his neck left and right in an attempt to view the person associated with the voice. The wooden board was too large. His field of vision was occupied completely by wood.

"Who are you? Where am I?"

"Don't you remember?" the female voice echoed again.

"No. I don't remember. I don't remember anything" Sebastien replied. His voice surged in the hope that he had discovered the answer, "Is this a prank? Does it have to do with my hockey team?"

“This is not a prank, Sebastien. I promise” the voice stated. There was silence.

“I can’t remember a damn thing. What is happening?” bellowed Sebastien, straining against his fastenings.

“Think about it for awhile. I’ll wait here.”

He listened intently for the hollow sound made by feet or shoes striking concrete. Silence. He heard nothing save the drip spelunk drap of water; the sound burrowed its way into his ears. She wasn’t leaving.

He considered the events of the past week of his life. It had been a typical week. He had stumbled to a morning lecture or three. He had tried without success to understand a variety of material foisted upon him: the finer points of Newtonian physics; Latin reflexive pronouns; the Krebs Cycle; and partial differential equations. Frustrated, he had gone to the gym to lift weights and attended hockey practice. At night he had visited one of the many watering holes dotting the perimeter of the university campus with his friends from his hockey team. He had tried on a few occasions to persuade a woman or two to return to his dorm room with him.

“Jennifer? Sarah?” he questioned into the empty air, summoning up the possible names of co-eds.

Hollow laughter reverberated back at him. “No. That’s not my name, Sebastien. Perhaps I haven’t been forceful enough. Maybe this will help you remember.” A gold coloured jacket fell to the cement floor in front of him. The jacket smelled of the subtle but unmistakable odour of leather. On the jacket’s left arm, a red felt number 4 was outlined with bright yellow stitching.

His hockey team jacket. He remembered his coach’s ridged hand and firm handshake as a senior hockey team member had slid the jacket over his shoulders. “Fits you well,” his coach had said, “enjoy tonight.” His face had beamed with a smile stretching from cheek to cheek. One of the upper classmen standing behind him had gently tousled his brown hair and declared, “don’t worry coach, we’ll take care of him tonight.”

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“No! I don’t know. The last thing I remember was my coach giving me my jacket on . . . I think Friday . . .”

He waited for a response but did not receive one.

“Perhaps this will assist,” the female voice echoed. A crackle of static yelped from the old cathode ray television in front of him. Its dark screen transformed into the salt and pepper static lurking in televisions.

“I think you’ll recognize yourself, Sebastien.” The salt and pepper disappeared from the television screen, replaced with dark moving images, imperceptible in the low lit basement. One of the dark moving images declared, “She’s out. Bring him in.” A woman lay naked on a tawny chesterfield, difficult to discern in the low lighting. Sebastien emerged from somewhere to the left of the camera’s vantage point, lurching, drunk –maybe bare assed. Another of the dark images declared, “go get her Sebastien.”

On the wooden plank, Sebastien looked away from the television screen. He had no desire to witness what happened next. He understood what had happened. Raucous male cheering, interspersed with the occasional grunt, sounded from the television screen. Sebastien closed his eyes.

“I remember,” Sebastien said.

C.T. Hart

Out of Lodi Ash, 1934: for Mother

In Lodi smoke rises burning
her young eyes. Tomato-worms heaped
child-high reeked as they
writhed in immolation. The
whole family toiling in
the fields, long days, hand-picking,
not fruit, but hornworms; prying off
well-camouflaged green-white
caterpillars tightly gripping
the scented vines they leach and
defoliate under the lens of the
San Joaquin Valley sun. Though their
horns look menacing tomato
worms are harmless except to
the plants. Still she hated touching
the wriggling, bucking, fattened
things. Worse yet the pangs of hunger
after a thieving partner, also
camouflaged, sells the farm out from
under her father. Maybe his
English wasn't good enough to know
a contract then. Maybe he was
too trusting. Still, he wasn't in
Sicily anymore but
America, maybe he let
down his guard. But he had to
wonder and feel the sting. How
exactly does a man steal the
livelihood of another
he has worked beside and with
whose family he has dined?
A bitter smoke rose from out the
ashes of agricultural
burnings in Lodi. And so, it
seems, did they.

Vincent Noto

Blocks of Couverture

Mid-morning sun flowed through the office window, casting a warm yellow line across the surface of Dr Barker's desk. It caught the back of his head and shoulders, making the tips of his curly grey hair glow. He was hunched forward, holding the phone receiver to his ear—in his other hand an uncapped pen bounced between two fingers.

He sighed, 'Still holding,' he said, covering the mouthpiece with his hand. His elbow bumped one of the several loose clusters of papers and manila folders on his desk. His computer was switched off. Post-it notes were stuck to the monitor. My eyes felt like fiberglass. I tried to focus by looking around the room—blue carpet, cream colored walls, the examination couch on my left. Behind us, near the door, stood a large bookshelf crammed with textbooks and journals, in the corner, a sink and a metal bin.

'Yes. This is Dr Geoff Barker.'

I turned back.

'I'm after a first trimester screening result.' He leaned back in his leather chair. There's a pause.

'Dani Jackson.' He gave them my date of birth and address. There was a much longer pause.

I looked at Mark for reassurance. His lips are thin. His jaws were clenched at a boxy angle and the collar of his red polo top was bent. Dr Barker jotted down some numbers on a pad of paper.

'Thank you.' He said, hanging up. 'Sorry about that.' I attempt a smile.

He leaned forward and clasped his hands, looking at me. 'Unfortunately your baby's nuchal fold translucency was a little thicker than average,' he said. My left hand started to tremble. I steadied it with my right. I sat, looking at Dr Barker, feeling them twitch in my lap.

'Do you understand what I mean by that?'

'It ...' I cleared my throat. 'It means the skin at the back of the baby's neck is too thick.'

'That's correct.' He glanced at the numbers on the pad of paper. 'Often it can occur in babies that turn out to be perfectly healthy and normal. But there is also a known association with fetal chromosomal anomalies.'

'So what's the risk?' Mark asked.

Dr Barker hesitated. He glanced at Mark but addressed me.

'As you may remember me explaining to you at your first antenatal visit, the results of the nuchal fold thickness are combined with the placental hormone levels blood test that you had done last week.'

I nodded, my tongue so dry it felt swollen.

'This enables an odds ratio to be calculated of the chances of your baby having Trisomy 21, more commonly known as Down syndrome, or Trisomy 13 or 18.'

He looked back down at the pad. I tried to read the numbers but it was too messy a scrawl. 'The risk of your baby having Trisomy 13 came back as one in 2400 and Trisomy 18 as one in 1150. That's slightly higher than average for your age but still very low.' I didn't want to hear what was right, I needed to know what was wrong. 'What about Down syndrome?' I said. He blinked, 'One in forty.' The shoulder line of his thin striped blue suit sagged slightly, as if somehow it was his fault. The trembling in my lap became stronger. Mark reached over and covered my hands with his own. The line of yellow sunshine on the table seemed to dull, creeping closer towards me—I felt a weird combination of relief and fear.

One in forty.
It could have been worse. It could have been worse.
It was still pretty bad.
'So what now?' I said.
Every action has its consequences. Every journey has its end.

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I don't really remember much about our drive back home. I think I cried a bit. But mostly I just sat there feeling numb. My fantasy world had collapsed. This morning I was Dani Jackson, thirty-six, in good health and have-to-work-at-it-but-still-reasonable shape—contentedly married to Mark, my dependable, handsome, hardworking husband. We lived in a large, quirky stone and timber house in the midst of a mountainous forest. And I loved my job, running a small but expanding artisan chocolate-making business. But, most important of all, after years of pain and chaos, I was finally pregnant, and we were going to become a family. I told you it was a fantasy world.

So here I am, Tuesday, Eight PM, about to have a shower—standing in the bathroom, staring in the mirror, at Dani Jackson, thirty-six. I am plain, bordering on ugly—creases deepening, cellulite spreading, crooked nose and blotchy skin—in a difficult-at-times eight-years-and-counting marriage to Mark Jackson, a thirty-eight year old short-tempered workaholic who's still studying and training because of unresolved issues and a tendency towards indecision. The house we live in is cold and dark, and expensive to run. And as for my business, no-one takes it seriously and I barely break even, and my dreams of becoming an in-demand maker of award-winning chocolate delights will almost certainly remain just a dream.

I look away from the pallid woman in the mirror who's standing there dressed only in her underwear. Turning on the tap, I splash water on my face and neck. A trickle runs down my cleavage, around my belly button, and stops at the bulge above the elastic of my briefs. I look down. I rub my hand over my skin. At least one dream came true. I can still see it clearly—our baby's tiny hands, as clear as the ultrasound image, little lines of light for fingers. I feel it, its legs kicking, and phantom sensations of its heart beating. In my mind the gentle sloping outline of its face begins to take shape.

Why did we wait so long? The woman in the mirror who won't meet my eye knows many reasons, some mentionable, some not. We got together when I was twenty-five, got married when I was twenty-eight—and having kids straight away wasn't on either of our horizons. But when I turned thirty, I started thinking. And the thinkings became maybes, and the maybes became like the face of a clock striking 12 with alarm bells. I told Mark and he said, "No, let's wait a little longer," and so we waited. Travel? "Let's wait a little longer." Career? "Let's wait a little longer." House deposit? "Let's wait a little longer"—until Mark's "a little longer" turned into one-big-stagnant-longer.

I peel off my underwear, turn on the shower and get in, feeling the pinpricks of hot water on my face. I think about how easy it is to ignore time. How easy it is to be in self-denial. How easy to fool yourself into believing that there's plenty of it left—until that one day when you finally wake up to yourself, and you're thirty-five, and you realize that your life to this point really hasn't added up to all that much. And then you start to panic. Perhaps there was a part of me that didn't mind. In a way, I'd enjoyed the solace of being the mundane childless thirty-something couple.

Eventually, though, I had to move on. I set things in motion—hurtling our lives towards an unknown destination. Unfortunately we were on separate tracks.

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I enter my office and gently draw the door shut behind me. In the dark space ahead, I feel my way to the desk and boot up the computer, waiting for the electronic wheezes and grunts to settle down. By the time I've finished googling Chorionic Villus Sampling, Amniocentesis, Chromosome Analysis and Down Syndrome, my headache is settling in, my shoulder's burn and the little clock on the corner of the screen says 2:13 a.m. I listen to the faint high-pitched hum of the monitor. Eventually the screensaver starts and the room darkens in fractions of blackness. Straightening up, I grip the mouse and google again. I find a website called YourPregnancyDotCom, 'We cover everything' the homepage boasts—above a photo of a cute dimply baby. I go to the forum section, registering under 'Confused36,' I click on the new topic button and type in 'Unhelpful Husband'. Underneath, in the dialogue box, I type,

: My husband's trying to bully me into having a CVS. What do I do?

I press Send and sit there, staring at the screen. It starts going hazy. I scrunch my eyes, rub them, roll them, and open them widely. I look at the mug of tea from the morning of the ultrasound, the four-day-old tea bag stiffly clinging to its side. I think about shutting down, when suddenly, ping,

: Re: Unhelpful Husband

I lean forward and squint. Who else would be up and on this website at this time of night? Someone tagged 'PixieBump' apparently. She hasn't minced words:

: Leave him :)

: I was being serious.

: So was I!

: Sounds like you're having a shitty time.

: Yes I am. Very shitty.

: Want to tell?

: We've been trying since the beginning of last year and it's been a long, long slog of ovulation calendars, healthy living, disappointing one-lined pregnancy tests and so many timed sperm deposits that I think even my husband was starting to lose interest. I had almost resigned myself to going down the IVF road when I finally found out I was pregnant. Got some bad news yesterday though – my first trimester test has come back as high risk for Down syndrome and my husband's pressuring me to have a CVS.

Several minutes pass. I look at my Koko Black wall calendar. I get up and flip it over to February. When I get back she's replied:

: Congratulations on being pregnant!! Sorry your husband's being an arsehole though. Ignore him. It's your choice not his. Men can't understand. They don't have the same bond with pregnancy that we do. Is this your first baby? How many weeks pregnant are you?

For a moment I'm tempted to crawl under the desk and unplug the computer. Instead I count backwards from thirty then type:

: Twelve weeks and five days. That's part of the problem. Mark wants me to have a CVS ASAP so we can have time to "think about our options" before I start to show.

: Men can be so tactful. Sounds like he knows what he wants. But what about you?

I pause.

: I don't know. To be honest I'm not sure if Mark definitely knows either. Unfortunately he's the sort of guy who can't tolerate uncertainty and it hurts me that he wants me to have a procedure that's a risk to our baby just so he can find out.

: It's hard when you're being pressured. BTW I know someone who had a CVS. It's kind of like an amnio isn't it?

: Yes. But the CVS can be done earlier (10 weeks instead of 15) and it carries twice the risk of causing a miscarriage. Probably because when the needle is stuck in, instead of sampling fluid from around the baby it actually takes a biopsy of the placenta.

It suddenly strikes me that I have no idea who I'm chatting to. I add another line before pressing Send.

: What about yourself? How many weeks are you? Do you have any kids?

: Just the one – Andrew. He's three. Plus current bump of course (24 weeks). Judging by the jumping it feels like she'll take after her hyperactive older brother. Speaking of which I'd better go and check on him. The playroom's gone quiet which usually = trouble.

: Playroom? Andrew must be hyperactive if he's up and playing this early in the morning!

The minutes tick by. I sit with only the whine of a mosquito at the window for company. Great. I've just met an online stranger who sounds friendly and now I've gone and insulted her by implying that her son should be on Ritalin. My momentary lift from the unexpected chat is ebbing away when her reply flashes onto the screen:

: Early in the morning! LOL. It's 3:45 in the afternoon sweetie. Where in the world (literally) are you? Found out why the playroom was so quiet – miracle of miracles the little man was asleep!

I choose my words more carefully this time:

: Glad to hear he's napping. I live on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia. What about you?

: St Albans, aka outer northern outskirts of London, England. Sounds like you should go and have a lie down. I can only imagine what horrible time of night it is down there.

I've been dismissed. With good intentions to be fair but dismissed nonetheless. I can't blame her. She must have better things to do. I'm wondering how to say goodbye in a casual yet grateful kind of way when she posts me a final message:

: BTW my email address is pwoodruff@yahoo.co.uk in case you ever want to chat or debrief about anything. It was great to meet you Confused36. Best of luck. And remember, the choice is up to you.

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Two days later I pulled into the car park overlooking the dam. Apart from a white Ford parked sideways near the entrance, no-one else was there. I drove past a set of splintery picnic benches and eventually parked behind a green metallic pump shed. I saw faded yellow lines, crumpled beer cans on the verge of grass growing through bitumen cracks—below, a crescent of still waters, beyond, a ragged horizon of trees, a distant plume of smoke.

When I got into the car this morning I sat there for ages. Windows wound down a few centimeters, keys in the ignition, garage door closed. Eventually I let go of the keys, opened the garage door and backed out of the driveway. As I shifted into first I was shaking so much I found it hard to steer.

Now, I sit here, engine off, ticking the gearstick and steering wheel. My hands start to cramp. I stretch them, looking at my indented palms—tracing the lifelines with my eyes. I think of Darryl, Nicky's older 'little' brother," and how fascinated he was with other people's hands—how he'd try and trick me by saying 'High Five.' He'd grab your hands and measure his stubby fingers against yours. How he always wanted to thumb-wrestle. How he was sometimes too rough.

I remember back to that summer between grades four and five, when Nicky and I were best friends. I remember the times we'd push her bed across the door to stop Darryl from coming in. I remember the way we'd keep quiet until the knocks and mushy-mouthed cries finally went away. Later we'd sneak out. Sometimes a Barbie was missing when we came back. She'd track him down. I'd follow. He'd always be in his same hiding spot, behind the stack of old pallets next to the packing shed. When he'd see us he'd grin and point at Barbie's chest and say 'Boobies,' while twisting open the plastic legs, saying 'Bum!' How loud he'd laugh, rivulets of snot followed by the dull-lidded hurt look on his face when she'd snatch it from his hands, hissing, 'Retard.' I sift through other memories, some vivid, some hazy.

I stare out at the glinting blue waters, watch the shadow of a cloud as it slowly passes over. The back of my throat tastes like rancid coleslaw. I power all the windows all the way down. Lean out. Spit. 'At first you don't realize how lucky you really are,' a blogger on a Down syndrome support group forum had said. 'You can't imagine how much joy and love they'll bring to your life. We thank God for trusting us with His wonderful gift'—I always heard an unspoken desperation in their words, something hidden in the background, like so many bedridden children quietly thinking, 'there's nothing under the bed, there's nothing under the bed, there nothing....'

I close my eyes and lean back against the headrest. If there is a God, and Down syndrome is so wonderful then how come we're not all born with it?

One in forty.

How convenient. How simple—the statistical chance of your life changing forever, all boiled down to a simple fraction. Last night, after Mark went to bed, I took the ultrasound photo – the one Kate seemed so reluctant to print out – off the fridge and went into my office. I kept holding the photo up to the monitor, comparing it to internet pictures of first trimester fetuses with Down syndrome. I don't remember falling asleep, but I do remember dreaming. When I woke up my face was in the keyboard, my legs were stiffly uncomfortable. I couldn't find the photo.

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I wake up, T-shirt stuck to my skin, the room slowly forms in the fragments of moonlight coming through the trees—chest of drawers, bookcase, cherry-wood chair in the corner, Mark's sleeping hump next to me. I pinch the skin at the base of my throat. I check the clock, it's three fifty-three. It was time to get on with the day. I started cleaning and cooking, and then Mark appears in the kitchen, with lopsided hair and scrumpled boxer shorts.

'Morning.'
'Morning.'

I see him raise an eyebrow at the bottle of corn syrup on the counter.

'I better go have my shower,' he says.
'OK Mark, I'm having mine when you leave for work.'

I spend the day working with chocolate confections. When he returns from work I'm in the middle of dipping truffles. I dunk one into the melted chocolate. Hold it under till it drowns.

'Hi.'
'Hi.'

His dark hair's flattened, the top button of his Baurbridge & Kay shirt undone, tie missing in action, smile a little forced. 'Someone's been busy,' he says, looking around the kitchen.

Almost every square inch of the benches and island top are covered with tray after tray of chocolates—shiny half globes of pralines, miniature gourmet cups, neat lines of logs in a variety of flavors, crispy clusters of brittle, decorated hand-dipped squares, and a plague of chocolate mice both brown and white. There's also the inevitable mess – a sink overflowing with moulds, spatulas, mixing blades and whisks and a pile of dirty bowls balancing precariously next to it.

‘Should we get take out tonight?’

‘It's Wednesday,’ I say, ‘We don't eat take out on Wednesdays.’

He stands there watching me while I dip ganache into melted chocolate. I drop the truffle into the topping pan and roll it back and forth in the cocoa. He keeps watching. I keep rolling, more and more aware of his eyes on me.

‘What!’ I glare at him.

The lines under his eyes are deep, the room behind him dim.

‘We need to talk about Friday.’

The cocoa powdering my hands starts to muddy.

‘Can't you see I'm busy?’

Another one of his pauses. He glances sideways, exhales slowly through his nose.

‘So you've made up your mind then.’

I pick up the tray of lemon mint squares, open the cupboard door beneath the island and slide the tray into the drying rack. I stay squatting for a second, admiring the neatly lined squares of chocolate, the thin slivers of sugared peel set diagonally across each one.

‘It's a one in forty chance for goodness sakes,’ he says behind me. ‘Don't I get a say in this too?’

My knees pop as I stand. I look my husband in the eyes. ‘You've already had your say.’

His words harden. ‘We haven't talked properly and you know it.’

I stare at him. He stares back. He turns and gestures to the couch. ‘Can we at least sit down?’

I hesitate.

‘Please?’

We go sit down, becoming two odd figures reflected in the darkness of the TV screen. I bring my feet up and twist around to face him cross-legged.

‘You brought me here, so speak.’

‘Okay then.’

‘If the baby has Down syndrome I think we should try again.’

‘Which means?’

‘You know what it means.’

My eyes start pulsing. ‘Say it then!’ I yell, slapping his face so hard that it hurts my hand. ‘Say it you coward!’

He recoils for a moment, as I turn to leave he catches the back of my smock. I claw at his fingers.

‘Abortion.’

I stop twisting his thumb.

‘There,’ he says. ‘I’ve said it. Now sit back down.’

‘Not until you let go of me.’

He does, slowly. I balance on the armrest of the couch, looking down at him. He’s sitting in my shade, shoulders slumped, head tilted down a fraction.

‘If the baby has Down syndrome, then yes, I would prefer if you had a termination.’

‘Abortion.’

‘Abortion. But I wouldn’t pressure you into having one.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

He looks up at me, eyes surprisingly white. ‘Have you really thought about it.? Have you thought about how hard it would be? I mean do you really think you could handle it?’

I hop off the couch. Fists clenched.

‘Of course I know it would be fucking hard. That doesn’t change the fact that it’s still our baby.’ I point at my belly. ‘It’s already in there, Mark. Don’t you feel anything for it, for God’s sake? It’s as much a part of you as it is of me!’

He leans forward and smothers his face in his hands. ‘I know.’ Voice muffled. ‘It’s just ...’ He looks up, bleary eyed. ‘A child with Down syndrome. I’m not sure if I could do it.’

I feel numb. This isn’t my husband.

‘Yes you can,’ I say. ‘If you have to you will.’

I stare at him defiantly. Out of my shade he’s different. It’s night now, and the glow from the kitchen lights illuminates the right side of his face Phantom of the Opera-like. The left side of his face is in darkness.

‘I think I know why you won’t have the CVS,’ he says softly. ‘It’s not the small risk of miscarrying that’s stopping you. I think you’d prefer not to know because if you did find out that the baby has Down syndrome, you’d want to terminate as well.’

It’s easier to get angry again than try and deny it. I go to the TV cabinet, pick up a DVD and throw it at him. It misses.

‘Fuck off!’ I scream. ‘That’s not the issue is it? The issue is you’ve never really wanted to be a father and you’re looking for an excuse to get out of it, again! Fine then. Fuck off. If you’re not going to be part of all this you can fuck off and leave.’

I stride into the kitchen and snatch the handset from its wall-mounted base.

‘What are you doing?’

My fingers are shaking so much I have to hang up and redial twice. She picks up on the fourth ring.

‘Hi Mum,’ I say. ‘Guess what. I’m pregnant!’

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Thursday February 10th  
13 weeks and six days  
183 days to go

*For Bub. Sorry I’ve taken so long.*

Suvi Mahonen

Paullula

Beautiful, beautiful,  
She is beautiful.  
Moon-crowned,  
Lily-clothed,  
A face of royalty,  
That Roman-like strength  
Of an unrivaled smile.

Maiden, fair, dark like woods,  
Sun-like radiance  
Of angel dances.  
Jet black hair like  
Moonless skies,  
And eyes like onyx,  
As soft as oceans.

Matchless face,  
Wrought with grace,  
Elegance of queens,  
Power of seas,  
Tranquility of birth.  
Unpolluted earth  
Is yet no match.

Steps like does  
'Midst broken beings,  
Ents and dwarves,  
Peasants; kings.  
To who is all such  
Beauty bestowed?  
Save to thee, carnation bloom.

Oh, beautiful one,  
Charm of royalty,  
Transcending all,  
Pinnacle of glory,  
All that is good.  
To thee this lay,  
Oh thou, fair queen.

DJ Rubirosa

## Wiener Dog

Dottie always ran past the big red and white house on the corner, the one with the mean dog that barked at her. Every morning and afternoon there it was, loose in the front yard, trotting toward her. This morning she hoped that maybe the dog wouldn't be there, but it was always there. And, sure enough, there it was waiting for her. She crossed the street but it made no difference. From across the street, it barked and barked and trotted and ran a little and then stopped and barked. Always it was barking, snarling, and growling. She could hear its growl pushing up from its stubby brown throat through its long brown snout and out through its shiny white teeth. She knew one day it would come after her. Its barking got louder and angrier every day and so each day she ran past the house faster and faster.

Chris, she thought, would find the dog funny. He got a ride to school, so he never saw it. She would see a glimpse of him in the red Suburban as it passed her. She always waved, but he never noticed. She wouldn't be nearly as afraid of the wiener dog if Chris were walking with her. He'd laugh at it and then she would too. Dottie had to admit it wasn't really a scary looking dog. It was, after all, a wiener dog. And who ever heard of a scary wiener dog? It didn't run so much as wobble, front to back, when it saw her. Chris would make fun of it and she wouldn't be scared anymore. Together they would laugh at it.

It was raining that morning. Dottie wore her shiny long red raincoat to school. She wore a new pair of rubber boots and, having run past the dog, she was now happy. She splashed through every puddle she could to test the boots' water-tightness. Sometimes she'd jump in because, well, you never knew, jumping in might make them leak. She didn't hesitate to jump right in to the very center. No leaks and no dog.

At recess the sun came out and everyone went outside. Dottie watched Chris and some other boys take turns throwing rocks at the side of the red brick school building. Chris was so cute. He had the blackest hair. He was clever too. He said funny things, so she'd sneak over to the group of kids that was always around him when he was talking and joking and she would laugh quietly from behind someone else. Chris was a great talker, but he wasn't very good at throwing rocks. He clearly thought throwing rocks was an interesting thing to do. Dottie was disappointed in him. Why did boys do things like rock throwing?

After they got tired of throwing rocks they started picking up gobs of mud and throwing those at each other. Dottie went over by the door of the building and waited for recess to be over. Mud tossing was even less interesting than throwing rocks. It was boring, and anyway, she'd get yelled at if she came home with mud on her clothes. When a gob whizzed past her ear, she knew she needed to get away. She looked around for Mrs. Kilgas and saw her talking to the other teachers. Scott was also waiting by the door so Dottie didn't immediately walk over to it. She didn't like Scott. He would chase the girls around and try to kiss them. That was worse than getting muddy. Dottie remained still until she was hit in the arm with a mud missile. She decided to risk Scott and try the door to see if she could get in the building. She didn't think the door would be open, but it was. No one was in the hallway so she went inside and into her classroom even though she wasn't supposed to.

Dottie pulled out a piece of paper and started writing a letter. The letter was to an advice column in Seventeen magazine. She knew she was a little young for the magazine, but she hoped the advice lady in there wouldn't mind and could tell her how to get Chris to notice her.

*Dear Seventeen,*

*I'm not seventeen yet, but I hope you can help me anyway. There's this boy I really like. I think he is so cute and funny. I think that sometimes he thinks I'm funny too because he laughs when I say something to him. I think he has very nice hair. It's so black and straight, like it's the opposite of mine which is curly and red. I hate my hair but I really like his. And I like when he smiles. But sometimes I don't like him as much, like today when he was throwing rocks. I don't know why boys like to do that, it is just not a good thing to do because*

*He could break a window*

*He could hit someone*

*He could throw out his shoulder or back or something*

*He could get in trouble if a teacher saw him*

*I like him and I don't want anything bad to happen to him, so I'm writing to you for help. I don't want him to throw rocks anymore. I think he is too smart to throw rocks. What can I do to make him quit throwing rocks and how can I make him like me back?*

*Thank you!*

*Dottie*

Dottie used a heart to dot her "I" because this was a letter about Chris and she hoped the advice lady would notice that she really liked him. Chris would never see this letter, so she felt safe. She folded it up really tiny and put it in the pocket of her red raincoat. She would try to mail it at home somehow, or maybe she'd keep it and put it in her jewelry box.

Recess finally ended and nobody noticed that she'd come in early except for maybe Scott, but the teacher wouldn't listen to him if he told, so Dottie wasn't worried. Scott whispered, "Oooh, I'm telling," as he passed by her desk, but she pretended she didn't hear him.

After Reading and Spelling and Art the school day finally ended. The sun was still out, but it was really humid. Dottie tied the arms of her raincoat around her throat for the walk home. It wasn't the easiest way to carry the coat, but this way she could pretend it was a cape, and she was Dottie Dynamite, superhero, savior of the suffering, friend to the friendless. Wearing her cape made her feel brave and fearless. Today when she reached the red and white house she didn't cross the street. In her cape with her confidence and her superpowers, the mean wiener dog wouldn't bark at her.

Dottie reached up and tightened the knot around her neck. She took a deep breath and slowed down. She focused her eyes on the long straight sidewalk in front of her. She passed the mean dog's yard, step by confident step. No barking. No growling. No dog. She was... past.

And then, just as she began to feel elated about her freedom and her bravery for walking through the dog's territory, she gasped as her throat was pulled tight. She spun around. There, at the end of her cape, was the furious brown sausage dog. Clamped on to her red raincoat, it was biting and growling and pulling with all of its compact wiener dog strength. She twisted around and pulled at her coat. She yelled and then she screamed. She was no longer aware of anything around her except for the dog pulling her in one direction and choking her as she tried to get away in any other direction. But the dog held on firmly. Dottie pulled and moved forward as though she were swimming in mud. She tugged at the knot at her throat as she slowly dragged her encumbered raincoat homeward. She couldn't get loose, but she yelled and dragged. She couldn't stop; to stop moving might allow the dog to bite her instead of just her coat.

Her salvation appeared in the form of a paperboy. He wheeled up next to her on his bike and jumped off, rolled up newspaper in hand. He began whacking the dog with the paper, yelling at it, as Dottie dragged and screamed. The dog let go at last and headed home. Dottie couldn't believe it was over. Her raincoat was ripped. Her throat hurt. The paperboy wanted her to come with him to tell the people in the house about their dog. But Dottie was too afraid. She thanked the paperboy and said she had to get home, had to, right now, she had to.

Dottie was still shaking and couldn't untie the arms of her coat. She pulled the loop over her head. She could see the holes and rips in the raincoat and didn't want to ever see it again. She knew that it could never be a cape now, nor would she ever be Dottie Dynamite. She didn't want it anymore. She decided she'd claim to have left it at school until her mother forgot about it. Then when she did remember, when it rained again, Dottie would claim that it was stolen. She knew her mother would think she'd lost it, but really, she just couldn't stand to look at it ever again.

Dottie took a right at the next block to get to the ballpark. When she reached a trash barrel, she threw the wadded up coat inside. The barrel was empty and black and her shiny red coat looked like dying embers deep inside. Dottie trudged home, worrying about her missing raincoat, afraid of what the wiener dog would do next time. She didn't know how she'd ever feel safe enough to pass the wiener dog house again. Not ever.

When she got home, she went straight up to her room so her mother wouldn't notice her raincoatlessness just yet. She lay on the bed and curled up into a tiny ball. She fell asleep and didn't wake until her mother called her down for dinner. They ate shepherd's pie, Dottie's favorite meal, but tonight she didn't build little mountains out of the potatoes and use bits of hamburger as tiny houses on the slopes. She just ate quietly and thought about her day. She remembered Chris throwing rocks, and remembered the letter she wrote about him, and remembered her walk home, and remembered the wiener dog, and remembered that the letter was still in the pocket of the raincoat and remembered she'd have to pass the mean dog's house again tomorrow on the way to school. She didn't remember moving from the kitchen table to the living room for TV and then to her bedroom. It seemed she was just suddenly there, in her nightgown, in her bed, in her room, bathed in the faint blue glow of her nightlight.

Dottie didn't think she slept at all. Still, one second ago it was dark and then suddenly her alarm clock was buzzing next to her ear. She pressed the snooze bar and sat upright, somehow wide awake and instantly anxious. She hated yesterday, but she preferred it to today. Today she would go to the baseball field and take her letter out of her raincoat pocket. She would run past the mean dog that she knew would finally bite her. She'd have no cape this time and he'd come running across the street with his short legs. He'd look funny, but she wouldn't laugh. She would just be standing there, petrified, waiting to feel his sharp white canines sink into that narrow place above her heel between her Achilles tendon and her ankle bones. The wiener dog would hamstring her and she wouldn't be able to get away. She hoped the paper boy would rescue her again today, but she knew that wouldn't happen.

Somehow she managed to put on her jeans and her yellow silk shirt with the Yorkies all over it. Maybe if wiener could see that she liked dogs he would leave her alone. Or maybe she could be sick and stay home, this just occurred to her. Yes, she'd be sick!

Dottie plodded down the stairs showing as little energy as she could. Her feet dragged across each step, her heels traced down the vertical rise of the stair. She slumped her shoulders and hung her head. She moved slowly at first and became increasingly paralyzed the further down she got. Her mother called her twice as she dragged herself down, and each time she whispered, pitifully, "I'm coming," and slowed even more. She let out several very large and long sighs. When she at last reached the living room she dragged her feet along as though she were caught in quicksand up to her shins.

Not for a second did her mother notice that Dottie was at death's door. No, her mother never even looked at her, as Dottie ate tiny globules of egg as if they were foul medicine. It was no use, it seemed, she'd have to try harder. Dottie sighed. And sighed again. And then again. At last her mother did notice and said, "Stop that, I'm trying to listen to the news." Dottie gave up and ate a piece of cold bacon with slightly more enthusiasm. Her fate was sealed; she might as well reconcile herself to it.

She walked toward school. She reached the house next to the red and white house. Being sneakier than she'd ever been before, she crossed the street right after a car passed. She stayed put and wasn't going to move until another car showed up. A blue Honda came along. Dottie waited until it reached her and ran. She ran with all her might to keep up with the car, to pass the ugly house, to avoid being seen by the evil wiener dog. The car outpaced her but she kept running and running and running and wanted to stop but she thought she heard the dog snuffling behind her so she kept running. She ran as fast as she could, and she turned at the next street to get to the ball park because the dog would never run that far after her. She ran and was finally going to slow down, but she just knew the dog was still following her. She passed the ball field and she ran down a street she hardly knew on the other side of the field. She ran in front of a silver truck but she didn't care, she barely noticed. She heard the truck honk but she was past it, it couldn't hit her now.

Dottie reached an empty grassy field and slowed at last. She stopped. Her head throbbed with each gasping breath she took. Then she heard squealing tires and a wet thump. Dottie looked back from the deep grass she stood in. A man got out of a red Toyota. He had long greasy looking blonde hair, a black shirt, and a pizza sign on the top of his car. He was bending over something in the street.

She stayed there in the tall grass and watched the long haired man in his ripped and faded t-shirt look down at the pavement at something, something he reached for, something he picked up, something he walked away with. She bent her knees and sunk down into the warm grass. He carried the dog, the mean wiener dog, the silent, brown limp dog and laid it in the grass. Then he crossed himself and turned around and got back into his red Toyota pizza mobile. Dottie now understood. He had hit the wiener dog with his car and then moved the dog to the grass where it couldn't be seen. And now he was just leaving it there.

Dottie hated the dog. But she wondered if the dog was okay. Because to be there, in the grass, in pain, a dog, an anything, well, it reminded her of last summer when she went to a farm. Her mother said there were kittens in the barn for her to play with. She went in and never found the kittens, but she did find an enormous pile of hay. She started climbing in it. She built herself a little house in the hay, a little Dottie-sized hole only she could fit in. The hay stuck her like tiny little knives all through her t-shirt and on her arms and legs and neck and face but she ignored that. She loved the sweet smell of the hay. She burrowed in it and hid like a mouse. She must have gone to sleep because the next thing she knew it was dark, and she heard her mother calling her, her voice high-pitched with worry. Dottie panicked and in her frantic thrashing she dug her way further into the hay at first. She struggled, yelling and then screaming to be found, until at last her mother found her and pulled her loose.

Who would find the wiener dog? How would anyone know where it was? Was the dog even still alive? Dottie sat in the tall grass that smelled a little like hay. She thought these anxious thoughts about the dog. She didn't forget how afraid the dog made her, how it barked and growled like it wanted to rip out her throat. But still, she didn't hear the dog growling now. She didn't hear it barking. But as she sat there quietly, she thought she heard it whine.

Dottie, with her heart racing, followed the tiny whimpering sound and came upon the dog. It was lying in the tall grass, curled up like a roly-poly. It was unable to bark at her, apparently in too much pain to move at all. Dottie pulled down a stalk of the grass and bent it back and forth to tear it loose. She reached over with the end of the grass, the tufted part, and brushed the dog's back with it. It didn't seem to notice; just stayed there, whimpering so quietly she wasn't sure she was really hearing it. She whispered, "It's okay, Wiener," but it didn't twitch an ear in her direction, didn't notice at all.

She left the dog there. Dottie went to school and hoped the dog would be okay, but quieter now, not wanting to chase her anymore. She carried the piece of grass with her, waving it around in the wind. She got to school and mostly forgot about the dog. She did all the school things. She went through Math and English and History. Lunch was fried fish, mushy green beans, Jell-o, carrot sticks and cookies and chocolate milk. She went to recess and became bored watching Chris take turns on the swing seeing who could get the highest. Chris never won. Scott chased her and other girls around and didn't manage to kiss anyone. She had Reading and Spelling and Music, since it was Wednesday. And then the final bell rang and Dottie didn't get up, not for ten minutes, not until Mrs. Kilgas told her to go home. She stood up and slowly gathered her spelling and math books. She had homework, even though she probably wouldn't do it, but she might.

She walked home slowly. She should have been happy not to have to worry about the wiener dog biting her, but she wasn't. She arrived home and sat in the living room watching TV and then ate dinner. It was funny; tonight her mother made hot dogs, split along the edge and stuffed with cheese. She loved these hot dogs. She ate two and a half and then she was full. She noticed it was dark outside and then she thought about the dog and wondered if he was hungry.

She got up and carried her dish to the sink. When she got there, she picked up the half a hot dog that was on her plate and slipped it into her pocket. Then she watched more TV and went to her room. She put the hot dog in her t-shirt drawer and changed for bed and slept very deeply.

The next morning she woke up ten minutes before the alarm went off. Her first thought was about the dog, she wondered again if he was hungry. And there, lying in her warm bed, she wondered if he was cold. She was nearly always cold when she got out of bed in the morning. She thought the dog must be cold. He must normally sleep inside at night. He had short hair, so how could he sleep outside at night in the cold? She knew he was hurt, she heard in his whimpering that he was hurt. He was cold and hungry and hurt.

Dottie got dressed for school. She was early getting downstairs, and ate a bowl of Rice Krispies before her mother even wandered in to the kitchen. She made an excuse about having to be at school earlier to finish a project in art class and provided way too much detail, until she could feel her words drifting farther and farther away from truth. She left the house early. She remembered to bring the half hot-dog with her. She walked to the baseball field and then beyond it. She reached the road where yesterday she ran from him, and yesterday he was hit by the car. She crossed the street. She was on the other side, in the edge of the grass. She didn't hear the wiener dog but she knew where he was, a little straight ahead and to the left, in that spot where the tall grass didn't look filled in. He wasn't whining. She thought maybe he'd gotten up in the night and walked home. She hoped he had. But she had to see for herself. Was he there?

Dottie barely moved. She shuffled her feet forward, so slowly, over to the spot she knew he was yesterday. She whistled, wanting him to make some kind of noise if he was there. If she had to choose what would happen next she'd pick him not being there, followed by him being there but not so bad off, and then him in various degrees of pain and injury, followed by what she didn't want, him there and dead, stiff from the cool night air.

She was close, about twenty strands of grass away, and she saw dark brown through the sandy weeds. So he was there. Now all she could hope was that he wasn't dead, that he was just recovering. The brown dog bits she could see through the grass seemed completely still. She just knew he was dead. The dog was dead and it was his own fault because he was mean and he was chasing her and some part of her wasn't sad, was actually happy about it. She was suddenly relieved that he was dead. She felt that she needed to see him dead, to really make sure, and then she'd feel safe at last.

And then she was there, right next to him. He didn't move at all, and she thought, no, she knew, he was dead, a dead dog. Still, she'd brought him something and she reached in her pocket and pulled out the half hot dog. Dottie kneeled, three feet away. She held out the hot dog, holding it as though maybe he'd bite that instead of her, even though he was dead. But she offered him the hot dog; she leaned forward and put it a few inches from his nose. And then she saw his side lift up



and his nose twitch. She leaned back, but didn't run away. The mean dog opened his mouth and his tongue slipped out.

So he wasn't dead. She left the hot dog next to his mouth, as close as she dared, and then she nudged it closer with her foot. It was now touching his hanging tongue, and she thought she saw his head shift toward it. But she knew she was going to be late for school if she didn't leave now. And honestly, she didn't like him, even if he was hurt. She got up and turned away from him and walked to school.

When she got there, waiting outside to be let in, she saw a couple of boys looking at her. They were snickering. Not that this surprised her all that much, but this time she didn't know why. Usually she knew it was because she spilled her milk from lunch on her pants or she'd answered a teacher's question strangely or she was chewing on her pen when it leaked on her lips and teeth. This time, though, she had no idea. She checked for the usual culprits. No, she looked okay. And she hadn't even spoken to anyone yet today, so there was no way that she had said something funny. She ignored them. When class finally started, maybe she noticed some looks from boys, but probably she didn't, she thought. And then it was lunch. Sitting at the table with her milk and Bisquick pizza, she remembered again the letter in her raincoat in the trash barrel at the ball park. She had forgotten to get it last night or even to look for it this morning. And for seconds, long long seconds, she wondered if the letter had been found, if that was why she was being stared at. But no, it couldn't be. Could it?

Still, lunch wasn't too weird. She thought she'd seen more glances, but mostly she didn't pay attention, instead wondering about him, the dog. Half a hot dog, even if it had a slit side with cheese in it, wasn't going to be enough for him. She wondered if dogs would eat pizza, even bad pizza, or peanut butter cookies. She took her napkin and put her leftovers in it and folded it up. Some of the boys were watching her. It didn't matter; she wrapped her food up like a present and then held on to it as she put her tray away, as she went to her desk even though lunch wasn't over. No one noticed. She put the napkin with food in it into her backpack. Her only important homework tonight was going to be taking this food to the wiener dog.

School passed for her. During recess, she found a quiet corner not too far from the door and she leaned against the brick wall and slid down it. She looked at the dirt near her feet and saw dusty pits dug out by ant lions to trap unsuspecting ants who wandered in to them. She dropped a tiny pebble in one. The dirt filled it up. She watched the ant lion toss the pebble away and dig out a new lair. She picked up an ant and dropped it into another funnel, but he climbed out, leaving the ant lion hungry. Then the bell rang and it was time for her to go in.

She could smell her packaged lunch leftovers for the rest of the afternoon. She couldn't concentrate on long division, she just wondered if the hot dog would be gone and she hoped he'd eat the pizza she was bringing him. She was only distracted from these thoughts when a triangle folded note came hurtling her way. It was just paper football, but she leaned over and picked it up and saw "Dottie" written on it. She leaned her math book up slightly and slowly, slowly, she opened up the paper. Inside it said this:

*Hi Dottie. Will you meet me after school by the swings?*

*Chris*

*PS. I think you are cute too.*

Chris wrote her this note. Chris wanted to talk to her. Chris thought she was cute. Dottie's face felt so warm. She slid the note between pages in her math book. She didn't know what she was looking at anymore. She just stared at the book and thought about after school, and thought about Chris. And then she wondered why he said that about her being cute too. Her being cute too, like he'd read her letter. Did he? She felt her heart actually flutter in her chest like a little moth beating its wings against a window. Chris knew she liked him and he might like her back. At least he didn't just hate her. He wanted to talk to her.

And then she smelled the pizza again. She thought about the dog. He must be so hungry. But part of her didn't want to go see the hurt dog, because even though he was alive this morning, he wasn't moving much and could be dead now. And how could she not wait for Chris when he wrote her a note? She would take Chris with her to see the dog! It would become their secret. The final bell rang. Dottie grabbed her backpack and walked to the door that led to the swings. She looked out the window and saw nobody. She quickly spun around and saw no one. It was just her and the empty swings and the food and a few blocks away, the sick mean hungry dog, all alone. And then she saw Chris. He was with a group of boys, walking to the swings.

Chris stopped and stood there, waiting for her, but he wasn't alone. All the boys were going to make fun of her. She couldn't trust him with the wiener dog. She couldn't trust anyone. She walked down the corridor, past her classroom, past her locker, past the administrative office to the double front doors. Dottie put out both her arms straight in front of her. Both of her hands reached for the exit bars on the double doors and she walked faster and faster and her hands grabbed the cold metal bars and pushed them out and the doors opened for her. The dog was waiting for her, he needed her. Dottie was in the sunlight, blinking with the brightness of it, with old pizza and peanut butter cookies and a place to go.

Lynn Beighley

## The Fence

I remember my smoke-filled lungs, my blood-smeared shirt, my shattered right arm. The jets that roared over the slums sounding like the end of the world. The tear-stained face of a small girl pressed tight against her dead mother. The lifeless bodies piled one atop the other on the debris. My father—clutching the RPG, pointing it up at the sky, screaming God is great, God is great! Then the sound. That one horrible, loud, grating sound that changed everything. His body, exploding from the inside out. The way his eyes went wide right before, the way he looked at me... Panic sticks in my throat like a knife. I gasp, flail my arms. I can't breathe. I'm going to die, I think. I'm going to die right now.

My eyes open to darkness.

"Shh," mother says from the side of the bed, stroking my dark hair. "Quiet, Asad. No more crying. Everything will be okay. Go back to sleep."

The Arabic sounds beautiful with its truth but that doesn't erase the horrible image.

"I can't, mama. I keep seeing him." The tears come fast; as usual, I am powerless to stop them. Sobs shake my entire body.

A strange thing happens: the moonlight streaming through the open window highlights a tear on mother's cheek. She almost never cries. Then the droplet falls to the ground and as soon as it has been there it is gone.

She lays a hand on my brow. "My sweet boy," she whispers. Her breath is soft and warm against my ear. "My sweet, sweet boy. I'm so sorry I cannot give you better." And then she kisses my cheek and cries against my small shoulder for the first time since father died.

She cries for a long time, and I let her. She has kept it all within her secret heart for too long, but now she is letting it out, and that is okay. That is alright. Then mother gets up to leave, eyes open and glistening with new water in the waning moonlight.

Sleep does not come.

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Years pass and father's death fades into time.

"Asad!"

I turn. It is Saad. A smile has enveloped his entire face and his wide dark eyes twinkle in the night. For a while we stand next to the fence smoking cigarettes. Through the tight links I can see the soldiers on the other side motioning to one another, staring at us with narrow eyes. But we are not terrorists. Tonight we are only teenagers.

"Come," says Saad. "They are waiting." His grin grows wider.

They are waiting. A smile flashes across my face then, too. I zip up my coat and run with him along the fence towards the girls, who are sitting atop a pickup truck drinking American beer, laughing. They have taken off their burqas. The white starlight gleams against the makeup smeared on their faces.

We jump into the truck's bed. I can feel my heart beating hard and fast in my chest. Tonight is the night, I think. For a moment a fleeting image of mother comes to mind. I shiver and cast the thought away; she is not here.

One of the girls drunkenly lays a hand against my chest. For a moment I think of lifting it away, but then she brushes my face with a trailing finger and a thousand small fires erupt all over my body. It is invigorating, magical, better than anything I've ever felt before. I smile as her soft warm lips brush mine.

But then I see father. I see him and hear the horrible grating sound that has haunted me forever and will never leave. Warm shame colors my cheeks. I zip up my coat and run faster than I've ever run before.

"Asad!" Saad screams, his voice high and mad with frustration. "Asad, what are you doing? Where are you going?"

The girl I was with sighs, but I don't care. I cannot disappoint father and I must watch over mother. It is very simple. If anything happened to her the shame would be too great. Saad and the girls say something else but it is not audible over my harsh breathing and the sound of my heart pounding against my ribs like an animal trying to escape its cage.

When I return the house is quiet. I lock the door and pace quietly into the room where mother sleeps. I can hear her soft breathing, and in the dark I can make out the outline of her chest moving up and down with each inhalation. She looks so alone in the bed, so lonely and fragile and desperate, but nothing can be done about it. Sighing, I crawl into my own bed and stare silently at the ceiling fan as it spins in its endless circles. As the fan's hum lulls me to sleep, I weep.

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More years pass. Saad is sitting in my room. He has brought something with him, hidden within the sack at his side.

"This will give us some...some adventure," he says, and laughs.

"What is it?" I ask. "Show me."

"Is your mother home?" he whispers.

"No."

"Well then," he says, his eyes bright. "Give me a second and I'll show you."

He winks, then reaches a dirty hand into the sack and hauls out something long and rounded and slender. Something unnatural. The effort he put into yanking the weapon out sends three grenades rolling out of the bag and into the corners of my room. My heart leaps into my throat.

“Get that out!” I scream. “Get that out!” I grab him by the shoulders and shake him. “Now!”

“What’s wrong? Are you insane?”

He says more but I don’t hear him. I just remember what happened to father and how horrible it all is and push him away.

“No, I am not insane. You are. Now leave—and leave this here with me. Don’t you dare take it with you.”

“It’s mine.”

My best friend grabs the shaft but I push him down and kick him hard. He is flailing on the ground like a fish out of water. Blood seeps down his cheek, but I don’t care. It is only a drop compared to how much will flow if he goes through with his horrible plan. The desperate thought comes: I must keep this from happening.

I grab the RPG and run towards the window. Maybe I can throw it out, I think. Maybe I can ruin it. Sunlight streams into the room, reflecting against the metallic shaft with such intensity that it nearly blinds me. My senses are at their peak; I can see each particle of dust, feel every bead of sweat crawling across my skin. Almost there. Saad’s hands claw at my ankle and I fall uselessly to the floor. No, I think. No. The weapon clangs against the wall.

“Thank God,” Saad says. “Mahmoud will kill me if something happens to this.” He paces towards the horrible thing.

“Give it to me!” I scream. “Don’t use this.” I lower my voice. “Don’t do it. It will destroy you. It will separate you from God. Don’t you see? There is nothing for you on that path. This conflict will continue and I know it’s unfair but you just have to accept it, Saad. Please don’t do this. Please don’t throw your life away. This is not coming from an enemy; this is coming from your best friend. Please. Do not exchange your reason for your anger, your peace for madness.”

Saad doesn’t listen. “Asad,” he says slowly, rising from the floor, picking up the grenades and the launcher, “we are not friends anymore.” His eyes are red from anger and his hands are shaking violently. “It seems that we never were.”

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That night the moonlight flows freely into my room, and even the thick blinds cannot keep it out. The light, in combination with the sharp anxiety that has haunted me since father’s death, makes it even harder to sleep than usual. I sigh. The low murmur of gunfire resounds in the distance. The group of fools Saad joined must have crossed the fence. Perhaps, I think, perhaps I have convinced him, though.

But then I hear the loud bang of an RPG, and then the sound I heard all those years ago— that horrible, grating, machine-like noise that cries out against all things human. And even though I try to push the thought away, in my secret heart I know what has happened. Saad is dead. He is as dead as father—and he died in the same way. Maybe he killed someone.

Years ago, the thought would have lent me comfort; but I have grown. I know now that there are young men just like me across that fence. There are people like Saad, of course—there always are; but there are people like me, too. There are other boys who have been forced to grow up all too soon.

That night, the cause of the sixty-year old conflict comes to me and it seems simpler than ever before: People do not understand, I think. They do not understand the pain that their hatred brings. Then I clutch myself, curl into a ball, and as I stare up at the ceiling fan—turning, turning, turning, always turning, spinning in the same endless way that it spun on the night of father's death—I weep.

Michael Shammas

Mr. Gandy's Dirty Finger

Jeff Daly was a well respected young man in the small town of Landchuck, Indiana. He was 25 and a Spanish teacher at Landchuck Community High School for the past two years. He was married to a nice and pretty girl named Nancy, also 25. They were both very happy.

Then one day in the teacher's lounge at the high school, Jeff met a beautiful young substitute teacher named Bridgette. Bridgette was 22, half white and half black, and very generously shaped. After hitting it off, Jeff and Bridgette began eating lunch together every day in the teacher's lounge.

As happy as Jeff was when he was with his wife, Nancy, he was even happier during the 30-45 minutes he spent during lunch with Bridgette on school days.

Bridgette was substituting for Mrs. Allen, the typing teacher, who was pregnant with a baby and would be out for a significant period of time.

Jeff's nice and pretty wife, Nancy, worked at a flower shop called Nice and Pretty Flowers. Jeff's 18 year old cousin, Melanie Toole, who was also pretty but not so nice, also worked at Nice and Pretty Flowers. One day, when Jeff got home from work, Nancy told him something about his cousin Melanie.

"Melanie is crazy," said Nancy. "She's with a different guy almost every night."

"Is that right?" said Jeff.

"That's right," said Nancy.

The next day at school, in the morning, Jeff saw something he didn't like to see. He saw Bridgette, his lunch girlfriend, flirting with the shop teacher, Mr. Gandy, over by the aquarium. Mr. Gandy was muscular and quiet, like a shy body builder. He had blond hair on his arms and, though quiet, was always up for dancing with girls.

That day at lunch, Bridgette did not eat with Jeff. Instead, she ate with Mr. Gandy. Jeff was upset. Usually, when he was upset about something, he would vent to his wife. However, he did not vent to his wife about how he was upset that the substitute teacher who he had a crush on was now eating lunch with a different man.

Jeff vented to no one.

Later that night, Nancy told Jeff some more things about his cousin Melanie. And then she made a request.

"Jeff, I think you should say something to Melanie. She is getting out of control."

"What should I say to her?"

"I don't know. But she looks up to you. I don't feel comfortable giving her advice, and anyway I don't think she would take it. But I think she would listen to you. Tell her not to cheapen herself. Let her know that there are guys like you out there, great guys who can be trusted."

"I'll talk to her," said Jeff.

That night Jeff called Melanie and asked her to meet him for lunch the next day at the high school teacher's lounge. He could get her in, he told her.

The next day Melanie met Jeff for lunch. Jeff was sitting at his usual table when Melanie approached.

"Hey, Jeff," said Melanie. "Who is that hot guy by the door?"

Jeff looked up at the door. There were two guys standing by the door. One guy was Mr. Needleknockers, the five foot two inch janitor, who smelled like turkey stuffing and who was built like a gym bag full of organs. The other guy had blond arms.

"That's Mr. Gandy," said Jeff. "The shop teacher."

"I would let him teach me some things in his shop," said Melanie.

"Melanie, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Then Bridgette the substitute came in through the door. Mr. Gandy put one of his fingers through one of her belt loops.

"He asked me for my phone number," said Melanie.

"Mr. Gandy?" said Jeff. "Did you give it to him?"

"Not yet."

"Are you going to?"

"I don't know. Do you think I should?"

Jeff thought about what his wife told him the night before. Then he looked at Bridgette the substitute. Then he looked at Mr. Gandy's dirty finger. Then he looked at Melanie.

"Yeah, I think you should."

Jesse Howell

Brook Song

you haunt me in shades of grey —
they come in October mostly and
sometimes in the winter as they
spiral their spectral forms from the
clouds; their arms as cold as the

memories of you that have grown
as dim as a broken lantern, I rip the
tails of shooting stars to shine their
incandescent lines simply to make
out the fading memories of the all

topography of all your faces' angles —
you are the white river stones, they
speak your name the loudest, they
lilt your form into being as singing
incoherent babbling of the brooks.

Linda Crate

Winter's Dance

winter pirouettes before me
with whispered words in the
teeth of zephyr I cannot discern —
you suggest that the cold is the
heart of the problem where I
belong; I cannot extricate myself
from the end without knowing
the beginning, I prefer the lilt
of reflective silence over the
dulcet towns of scarlet summer
whose skirts are always warm;
the deafening quiet untangles all
the worlds imprisoned in my head
more than the pretty distraction
of all the other visions of loveliness
that have the audacity to say they're
seasons and nothing more than this.

Linda Crate

Sea Monster

The bottom of the sea is not black, it is a dark teal color with some turquoise and chartreuse thrown in. It's cold, but somehow strangely comforting; like standing in front of the open refrigerator on a hot day. The dim light is not from the sun, but a mixture of luminescence from the strange life that exists there. The sheer power of bio luminescence wouldn't be enough to light up the bottom of the ocean, but I'm not sure how else to explain how I can see down there. The atmosphere is a cloudy, misty, silky texture that moves like the particles in a snow globe. Rocks peppered with bits of crustaceans, seaweed, and sea lichens scatter the bottom and in some places tall cliffs rise up towards air or deep chasms dip into depths at which it is truly black.

That far down, there is no sound. If one were to venture down, there would only be pressure on the ear drums, if you could theoretically withstand the pressure. There would be no merry sounds of bubbles escaping to the surface, or muffled tappings as little crabs scuttled across their mountain vistas. The emptiness of it would alarm anyone, regardless of whether you were claustrophobic or feared open spaces. It is both vast and closed in at once. One would walk soundlessly across the expanses, as small puffs of sand would expel upwards and outwards from a slow moving foot.

Most terrifying of all would be the occasional sighting of something larger and more complex than the typical invertebrates. Several feet of scales, spines, teeth, cartilage, and bulbous blinking eyes would slither and scuttle past, dipping down towards the darker colorless chasms. The water would feel even colder as these beasts pushed by; even the molecules of the water would shudder to be in contact with such hideousness that could only have been squeezed out from someone's abscessed pockets of their semiconscious. I know about this because I dream about it every night.

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The surreal landscape that exists far past where natural sunlight penetrates through the water frightens me, yet I am drawn to it as I sit in my kayak while the sun leaves it's partially cloudy sky to tuck in behind the mountains. It turns the cumulonimbus and the waves shades of pink and orange. The technicolored waves aren't very deceptive. I know that past their rainbow surface lie the vast and lonely expanses; they are all I've thought of for some time.

Looking down, I remember being curled up with Reid watching TV late one night. We had fought that day, and had made up mostly so we wouldn't go to bed fuming. Nothing was resolved. He fell asleep and I kept up in front of the glowing box. It was the discovery channel doing a piece on the sunken Titanic and the strange sea life that had found it hospitable. The little yellow mini subs, specially designed to withstand tons and tons of pressure whirled and sent out clicks like dolphins as they cast a greenish whitish glow over what could have been the surface of the moon.

At one point, the documentary, though mostly about the ocean life around the wreck spent some gratuitous time shelling out on the morose and romantic deaths that occurred almost a hundred years ago in another era, another culture. The sub passed through doorways, walkways, rooms. The one image that stuck with me was that of a pair of men's shoes, resting on the floor in such a way that one could imagine the feet, legs, body that had once been attached to them. The body had managed to sink with the ship and had rotted away, eaten slowly by small alien creatures, leaving the shoes untouched and in a relatively small state of decay.

I look down at myself, my sweatshirt, my jeans covering my legs, which disappear into the belly of the kayak. I am wearing rubber boots. If I found myself in darkness, with only brief brilliant bits of luminescence to light the way, and if my boots didn't float to the top, they too might rest where I would sink, as a reminder to anyone who found me. The only thing is, I'm in a kayak that I affectionately call the "Scuppy" and I am an average Jane from a small town in Alaska. There would be a brief search for me, and if my body did not wash up onto shore or wind up in a fishing net, my family would perhaps nail a small brass plaque on the lost at sea memorial near the harbor. Too many average Joes and Janes swim among the fishes and the beasts here. There's an unspoken protocol for those lost at sea. After about a year of being quietly whispered about they become part of the local lore, and then forgotten. The only one that is still widely remembered by the public to my knowledge is the brutal story about the young girl who was murdered. Her body was found stuck under the docks. Some say the trooper did it, others say it was a passing group of stoner hippies. And in any case, the story has probably changed and evolved overtime so that it no longer resembles anything close to what it used to be.

I pick up my paddle and round the point. It is called Tess Point, and according to Native legend, people who did bad things were rowed out in the strong canoes and lashed to the rocks that are only above water during low tide. Primal capital punishment. I don't know how true the story is. A white man who once attempted to ride a snow mobile across the inlet told me the story; not the most credible source. It sounds a lot like the Tigerlilly story from Peter Pan if you ask me.

However, it's an interesting tale, and about ten feet directly down from where I now paddle is the formidable rock. Were these stories to be true I imagine that there might be a few bones left from all of the abandoned; some trickling all the way down to the soft sand, landing in puffs, others catching in the cracks in the undersea cliffs. The bones of the dead Tlingets look up at me in my kayak and I think about feeling the water creep up past my waist, numbing my legs, past my chest, hands tied, feet tied. Would they have died of hypothermia and shock before their lungs filled with water? Probably depended on the season and the weather.

I realize that I have stopped paddling again, and wonder if I am being inappropriate in possibly making up stories about another culture for my own amusement. Amusement is not the right word though. Far from it; I'm trying to remember all deaths in the ocean, trying to understand what company I might hold. Perhaps the Chilkoot rowed their criminals and their embarrassments out to the rock, and perhaps they didn't.

My hands grip the paddle, my fingers refolding themselves over the aluminum shaft. I make my arms strong again and I move forward, with purpose. I am heading towards Takanaka bay, where there are the remnants of a cannery and an old barge is dead, gutted and rotting on the beach. The Chinese used to run the cannery, but then gave up on it like so many other fishery and cannery workers did back in the day. I don't know details or legends about this place. It is ghostly though, and as a child I would dig in the sand when Dad would take me and my brothers out to cruise the far beaches. I was looking for something, anything old that would be of value to me. Pieces of glass imprinted with letters or numbers, rusted tools. In my childish way I hoped that perhaps in some weather protected nook I would find an old book or a newspaper or a letter. A letter would be best. Though it would not be addressed to me, it would be for me. Of course I never found anything distinctive.

Once again I stop. I have come to an area in the ocean where the tides are mixing. Because of their different movements, I stay more or less in one place without having to steer. The sun is now nothing but a thin brilliant strip over the jagged far mountains, it's dragging the technicolor-ed clouds down with it, like a toddler pulling at a large sheet on a clothesline. Then with a silent clap, the slivered sun is gone and the sky is completely bathed in dusk. The colors are still there, but more muted, and the dark creeps in peacefully. The waves cup the sides of the kayak, making soft sucking and snapping noises. A few seagulls fly overhead and land nearby, curious as to what I'm doing. The air is cool but pleasant, and I can feel that my lips are chapped.

I had been busy boiling water during last summer's kayak trip when Reid went exploring on his own. The same ferry Reid and I had seen the day before happened upon his kayak a week later, empty except for his sleeping bag and a tarp, which had managed to stay clipped to the back of the flipped kayak.

Rowing around the coast, looking for Reid that night, I was frantic. I radioed in the coast guard after it became obvious that I had no idea where he was. I don't know why I didn't just jump in then. The last thing he had said to me was something along the lines of, "thanks for getting dinner started", with a smile. I had nothing else, not even a marriage proposal after four years together. We didn't even have a dog.

I am aware now that I had come out here intending to jump. I am not one who normally approves of suicide, and after a year of Reid being dead, I was adjusting well enough. But I cannot think of going in to work tomorrow. To the same restaurant, the same people. I cannot think of going back to my house, which suddenly, miles away, feels hostile. My diving equipment is in the back compartment of the kayak, and I wonder if I should have noticed last week when I put them back in their place after being repaired that the action was ominous and foreshadowing. With some difficult maneuvering I am able to pull out the bag which has my weighted belt in it and my ankle weights. I put both on and take my boots off. They would be too buoyant. The kayak is still in a pretty good position. I know from fishing out here hundreds of times with a depth-sounder that it is over four thousand feet deep here. This is the deepest fjord in North America.

I have not really thought about finding Reid at the bottom of the sea, among the beasts and bones and shoes safe from decay. For some reason I can't seem to comprehend that he would be there. I am not sure where else he would go, but I like to think that he lives on in something smaller and more personal. If I were dead and could inhabit where I wished, I would perhaps live in my favorite tea mug, or the strong birch tree in my yard. I am not sure where Reid would go, and so I assume he is walking the ocean floor, but I don't know how I will find him in the dark in that great expanse. After a whole year of missing him, after the minuets that I first realized that Reid was gone and the funeral and the empty bed and the anniversary of his death, I realize that this is what needs to be done. I cannot look at a wedding band on my finger or at growing children we might have had to remember what I know was the most legitimate thing in my existence. I have only the acknowledgment of the death. I want to be like the Indian women who threw themselves into fires for their dead husbands.

The weighted belt starts to press against me as if it were impatient and wants me out of the boat. Wearing all that lead reminds me of the lead apron at the dentist's office and with some bleak humor I wonder which would be a better place to be in; the dentist chair or alone on the ocean. The belt knows that there is only a thin plastic structure keeping it from utilizing gravity against my life, and becomes impatient. The flashing light from the buoy on Tess Point blinks out into the almost complete dark. I take a deep breath, trying to memorize what air in my lungs feels like. I think I am crying. Then I shift my weight, holding my hands out in front of me as I balance on my seat. I push up, and then I lose my balance. Rather than just recognizing this as what I want, my human survival instincts kick in and I fall back into the seat, probably bruising my right hip. I crouch, not moving, holding onto the sides. The breeze on my head is cold, and my ears feel too naked in the wind without a hat. I can hear the sounds of nature sharply. It is as if somewhere someone has turned up the volume knob.

The bottom is waiting patiently, like a huge purring cat laying near it's food dish. I think of the greens and blues and sparks of luminescence and the soft clouds of sand that I can see so vividly despite never having personally visited. I think of the quiet. I wonder if I am being selfish. I push the thought away from the forefront of my mind.

Then I jump. Not as gracefully as I planned, but I land feet first. The water is so cold that I gasp and my arms flail before I force myself with difficulty into a human torpedo, feet down. I wish I had something to steady myself and add to the downward torque. The moment doesn't happen in slow motion as I thought it might. I look up in time to see part of the moon shining through the first few inches of water. It's lost its smooth circular shape and wiggles like bad television reception. Then under a few feet, it's a dim beam, like a flashlight in the fog. And then it is dark, and I am dropping. I've pulled my feet together and my hands are at my sides. Gliding swiftly down towards my destination, I close my eyes because it hurts to keep them open and there is nothing to see anyway.

I am holding my breath instinctively. Now I am very scared of the bottom. I do not want to be alive when I hit bottom. I feel like a little kid again, too afraid to let my feet touch the floor when I get out of bed because the monsters might grab me. I am almost out of air anyway, and the pressure has made my ears hurt immensely. I am numb from cold, and the farther away from light and oxygen and warmth that I get, the more stricken I become. I am now sure I am crying but I can't physically tell. Suddenly there is a huge pain in my ears as the drums burst. It is the last great sensation I feel, because I am now drowning. I feel an ache in my chest as the lungs fill with water and reach bursting point. I wonder if Reid felt these same sensations, or if something else happened to him so that he was unconscious. I hope he had been unconscious.

Then my heart stops. I am dead. My body is still falling. I follow it. I cannot see it but I feel the water displaced by its movement. Things begin to materialize slowly, like audience members in the lights at the end of a theater production. The light surrounding me is grainy and a dark mossy tint. My body hits the sandy bottom, and for a moment stands as if I am about to go walking, due to the weight around my ankles. But then the heavier belt wins, and I slowly fall, the impact slow: a crash test dummy on the replay. My body is face down, one arm outstretched to the left. My face is obscured by the sand it lies in and my hair whorls out like a halo of kelp. For a long time I watch myself in the greenish glow, not moving. I notice my car keys, with the little float attached to them, are hovering over my body because the lanyard is clipped to my belt. It undulates with the small changes in current, a little marker.

Sometime later I see a movement in the sand. Then another. Two crabs, small ones, not like the large dungeness that people leave pots out for, creep their way towards my body and investigate. I turn my gaze away when I see one burrow into a space near my neck. It doesn't take long for nature to realize it's meal time.

As I look around, my eyes adjust. It is hard to see farther than twenty feet ahead of me. I am not sure how I am able to see in the first place, but then again, I am not sure why I am somehow conscious. I think that maybe this is a dream and decide to just go with it, for lack of any better options. I take a few steps, languid and smooth like a person in space. I dodge a small patch of seaweed; the feeling of seaweed on my legs always freaked me out. For some reason I can't swim, I can only walk slowly despite being apparently out of my body.

I walk for a long time. I am not sure how long. I run into very few things worth telling about, mostly small crustaceans and smaller fish. Once something larger passed above me, casting an amorphous and ambiguous shadow over me. I was afraid to look up. The thing didn't bother me. Maybe it couldn't see me. I wonder, as I walk, if I will find another person like myself. I doubt it though. There is no sign of human life anywhere, except for a few random bits of detritus too heavy to be carried by the tide: a rusted propeller, a hammer, twisted bits of indistinguishable metal. There are no shipwrecks or buried treasure chests sticking halfway out of the sand. It is only me, walking. I do not grow tired. I walk over silty dunes, over rocky formations, and avoid deep chasms by walking all the way around them.

Eventually, I find something. It must be days, even weeks, since I left my body behind with the crabs. While picking my way over some small, oblong rocks that slide as I move over them, I see something shiny. I almost move past it, since I am tired of finding stray quarters and old fishing lures. I decide to pick it up anyway.

It is a ring. A standard gold band, probably a man's wedding ring. I rub it to make it shine better. It probably fell off the side of a fishing boat recently; someone took it off while gutting a fish or while handling nets. I put it on my thumb, the only finger it will stay on, and even then it is loose. I feel bad that the man won't ever find his wedding ring. I hope his wife will understand and not be too upset at him.

It is now, only now after wandering for weeks, cold, tired, alone, forlorn, lonely, that I realize I have made a terrible mistake. Suddenly, as if I have never heard of the concept before, I think how amazing it would be to fall asleep. I walk to the end of the gravel plot to some softer sand, and lie down. My entire being sighs and flashes of the green luminescence blink as I think about how air feels. Inexplicably, more than anything I want to eat a plate of pancakes, stacked high and golden with ribbons of syrup flowing down the sides.

Maarit Hamilton

## The Silent Beckoning

I guess I never really thought about how precarious the existence of any living thing is, never truly realized with what a fragile grip we hold on to our residence in this realm. Without ever really knowing it, I considered myself and my family invincible beings. I assumed Mom and Dad and I would always be there for one another, forever. That is, until one summer day, when I saw something that shook me beyond words. It was a comparatively small event in the life of a man, but none the less profound in its repercussions, as are life's most pertinent moments.

My father had a modest lawn mower repair business he ran out of the garage behind our suburban ranch house, for which we were always receiving catalogs and parts and samples. The volume was much more than our mailbox could accommodate, so he got a sizable box at the post office.

Because I hadn't taken to sticking my head under lawn tractors, or having greasy fingers and bruised knuckles, my involvement in the "family" business was to collect the mail from the box every day. The post office was just up the street a few blocks, the walk usually pleasant, and provided me with some sense of involvement, except when it was raining, or snowing, or hot; then the task became burdensome, much more a chore than an effort of teamwork. Actually, I didn't mind the heat or cold, or even snow, but the rain was something altogether different. There's nothing worse than being soaked to the skin with cold rain and trying to walk in clothes that are practically glued to your flesh. It was a large price for small kid to pay, but Dad said responsibility is what made a man a man, and there was no arguing, and least not with Dad.

I was about fourteen or so, I think. I wasn't driving yet. It was a hot summer day, a few hours past noon, and I was making my daily trek over to the P.O. I was in rather a cheerful mood because I had been swimming for most of the morning in the pond back of our neighbor's house. I remember the heat, very distinctly. It was one of those days where it was so hot you could see the haze simmering above the blacktop, and feel the weight of the air every time you took a breath. I ducked into the shade every chance I could, to avoid the merciless sun's bake, but the utility company had just come along and done their summer pruning a few days before, so the pockets of relief were much diminished.

As I weaved through the heat, noting the dramatic restructuring of limb and foliage, which left the trees more subdued than barren, I almost felt sorry for the pollarded trees, stripped of their majestic free-form growth. The once tall and wide and boundless maples and sycamores seemed helpless, wilting, a reflection of my own situation. Choice had been made and executed on their behalf, as was mine.

I had planned to get the mail and jump right back in the water with Billy and Katie Bastow. On such a hot day I would attempt to shorten the journey by cutting the corner, slipping under a rickety post and rail fence that seemed fortified by the wisps of ivy that clung to its lengths, and make a beeline through Mrs. Black's yard, which lead to the alley alongside the post office. But old Mr. Black had sworn off all the neighborhood kids with his sweeping cane once his locally recognized, prize-winning vegetable garden got growing. Even if not caught in the act, but merely spotted in the attempt, the infraction would surely cause the grizzled gardener to call Dad and tarnish an otherwise perfect summer day, so I took the long way around the block. It was then that I came across the scene that would unnerve me more than the image of a cane-wielding Mr. Black.



Just beside a wide clump of crabgrass growing between the cracks in the weathered pavement, lay a baby bird. And when I say 'baby,' I mean just that. The creature was quite young and couldn't have been more than a day old. It was sprawled face-up on the bleached concrete, its limbs spreading, convulsing in a haunting spasm. It must have fallen from a nest in the cropped sycamore overhead, forced to confront a strange merciless world on the most unfair of terms. It made a pathetic sight, halting me in my tracks.

The fallen creature was a tiny, pinkish-red mass, having barely any distinguishing features; it had no feathers, or discernible wingspan, its head was minute, almost concave, its deep-set eyes tightly closed, as if clenched in defiance of death. The baby had never probably known the light of day, except for its cruelty. The fallen figure hardly looked like a bird, even when I squatted for a closer examination. I wouldn't have known what the little thing was, if it wasn't for the beak, the tiny blanched, yellow beak that flickered and opened and closed amid the squirming and throwing of roseate head from side to side. The baby's mouth stretched wide and long, as if to alert the world to its fate, but was strangely silent. Not one hint of a sound came from that gaping beak, and the absence of vocalization held me, for the twisting figure was like a bizarre pantomime, morbidly captivating. There were no visible traces of blood. I could not tell what, if any, wounds the tiny being had suffered in the fall, but it must have been in pain; the jerky body movements and heaving chest were evidence of some internal dysfunction. It was certainly baking in the sun, that much was obvious.

The sight of the helpless little being downright scared me. I didn't want to touch it, but felt the need to reach out, to give some comfort. All I could think of was what Mom had told me when we found the wounded squirrel in the back yard a few years before: that my touch would be certain death. I couldn't fully understand, but it was Mom's wisdom, and her words were as reliable as sunrise and not to be doubted.

A young squirrel had been attacked by our cat and pulled from its nest in the spruce behind our house. When I discovered the helpless creature, screeching in the grass, crying for its mother, I swatted Pebbles away and ran for Mom. I drug her to the scene, pleading to let me bring the critter in the house and nurse it back to health, but Mom said to leave it be because once an animal got touched by a human's scent, its mother wouldn't want it any more. I was ushered into the house with distractions of ice cream and soda and afternoon cartoons. When I looked out the next day, the squirrel was gone. I was never to know if Pebbles finished it off, or if its mother came back, or if Dad disposed of the unfortunate little thing. It had vanished, presumably to better circumstances. With this going through my head, I figured it was best not to touch the tiny almost-bird, not to be responsible for its death, to let fate have its way.

I pulled myself from the scene and carried on with my mission, lingering under the fan in the post office vestibule, hoping the mother bird would come and rescue her baby if no one was around. I expected to find the wounded thing gone when I passed again; the offense removed, just like the squirrel, and was saddened to find the little bird still there when I made the return trip. Its mother hadn't come, but I felt sure that it was only a matter of time before the rescue would be affected.

Abandoning my plans to return to the swimming pond, I spent the remainder of the afternoon in the sweltering heat, keeping the area around the fallen creature open for the mother's return; shoeing people away with frantic waves of arms, running to intercept those who might inadvertently have stepped on the helpless almost-bird. Sometimes I got closer, careful not to get too close as to spread my scent, and put the sun to my back in order to deliver a brief cascade of relief to the struggling baby. I thought of getting water or even milk, but Mom's words of caution still lingered heavily. My decision was to be as indirect in my aid as possible, to let nature take its course. Surely the Good Mother had provisions for such instances. Helpless babies were not left to die, not left to be tamed and broken, like defenseless trees. This was different. She would look after the newborn.

As the afternoon waned, I watched the relieving cover from the sun creep across the concrete. The little creature's movements became less frenzied as the hours passed; its breathing less labored, which I took as a sign that its pain was subsiding. The mother had not returned, but I had faith that darkness' cover would be the time for a clandestine rescue. It was when the baby was fully swathed in a blanket of shade that conscience allowed me to depart the scene and make my way home.

Dad was angry when I got home, but much more vocal than expected. He scolded me, not just for taking so long in getting the mail, but also for being irresponsible and neglectful of my duties, of not respecting the family business and the good life it provided. He sent me off without any supper before I could explain, saying I had better shape up because such careless behavior was not tolerated in senior high school, and would not be condoned while I lived under his roof.

"Summer," I heard his nicotine-stained voice grumble as the screen door closed, "was not a sanction for total inactivity."

I hadn't seen him so mad in a long while, his anger was frightening in its potency. I tromped out into the back yard and sat on the edge of the porch, watching the pale sunset reflected in the pond down the hill, thoughts of maimed sycamores and the fate of the tiny bird purged by more immediate concerns.

Mom brought out a hot dog and soda as the tip of the vermilion orb dipped into the hillsides. I looked to her for support, understanding, wanting her to stay and watch the day slip away, but neither of us had anything to say as she lay the plate down at my side. No words seemed fitting. As we both gazed out to the day's close, I didn't have to hear her tell me that tomorrow would be another day, her comforting smile all that was needed.

I crawled into bed, reflecting on how I would face Dad when the sun made an appearance the next morning; despondent over the fact that I had let him down, wondering what chances the new day would bring which might help me make up for my irresponsibility. The fleeting image of the fallen creature had just shot through my head when the door opened and a figure stepped into the moonbeams at the edge of the bed. It was Dad. He had come to say he was sorry. The heat and end of the month bill reckoning had put him on edge, he said in a voice heavy and sad. He had been waiting for checks in the mail and didn't mean to take his frustration out on me. He said he was thankful for my help, that I was an important part of the team. I offered a weary smile as he pinched my toes and allowed him to return to the dignity of the shadows, where fathers and sons didn't fight, and didn't see each other cry.

When I saw the haze of the morning sun creep through my blinds the following day, my first thought was of the tiny bird, how it must have been returned to its family and being nursed back to health, having a hearty breakfast with its brothers and sisters. I ran downstairs to a hurried breakfast, but was cautioned and scolded by Mom, who made me return upstairs to brush my teeth and put on a clean pair of underwear. It was at the completion of the routine that I was allowed to leave.

The morning heat was even more oppressive than the previous day, and I made for the fateful spot at a quick walk / half run combination, hoping to find the bird gone from the sweltering pavement. As the heat drew my breath away, my thoughts were that I wanted the tiny creature to be gone. Whether its mother came to the rescue during the night, or if someone scooped up the remains and threw them away; I just didn't want it to be there, helpless. I had resolved myself to do something if it remained. Help it, kill it, bury it; I wasn't sure what, but I was going to take some kind of action. I would not leave it to the sun's ruthlessness, even if it meant discounting Mom's wisdom.

My heart sank when I approached and saw it was still there, or rather, what was left. In the course of hours since my last passing, the little pink squirming mass of almost-bird had been reduced, by heat, predator, or both, to a blanched pile of bones, picked over by insects, the faint traces of crimson on the withered framework the only vestige of its frailness. The sight was wholly overpowering. I reeled, stepped back, breakfast making great protestations within my stomach. I turned away, but had to look again. No matter how I wished, hoped or prayed for it to be gone, the minuscule frame remained, half lost amid the cracks and creeping crabgrass. All vestiges of the life encased within and around the bones, all color had vanished; its beak alone retained the pale yellow hue it had had in the silent agony of existence. Everything else was a sallow almost-nothingness, sinking into total oblivion.

The repercussions were like a slap in the face. Nothing happened the way I had expected. The little creature did not find relief within this life. Its mother did not come to save it. Like the trees, the world had had its way in the end, and it didn't seem right. Dad had often said that life was unfair, but I didn't realize it could be so unrighteous. The Good Mother had abandoned her own child. I cursed the flies away and ran straight to the pond. I was relieved that Billy and Katie were nowhere in sight, for it was not a time I wanted to be among the living. I remembered the day trip to a sick aunt that had called them away, and was thankful for their absence. My knees gave way. I fell to the ground and lay in the baking sun alongside the placid basin, undeserving of comfort, mourning the life that spent so short, but so painful a time on a summer's day in which I laughed and swam and reveled in my freedom and youth. It didn't even take closing my eyes to imagine the bird's family, worried, mourning, sobbing over the departed offspring, and for me to wonder if my family would care if I disappeared, or even died. Would Mom and Dad seek me out if I were to go astray, or be thankful to have been relieved of their great responsibility? Surely, if I were helpless and in pain, they would move to my aid.

I lay, thinking, dreaming, wishing, wondering and regretting, the sun melting the hours into nothing. It was almost midday before I noticed how much time had gotten away. Vowing not to let inaction ever again disrupt my relationship with Dad, and to be the dutiful son I had pledged of myself, I moved to perform my designated chores.

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The oppressive heat and haze were a painful reenactment of the previous day. I couldn't bear to face the dreaded spot again, so I cut through Mr. Black's yard, unconcerned with the potential consequences, which seemed lighter in comparison than the remorse that bogged me. I couldn't pass the deathbed, didn't want to have to look at it again, and didn't want to face the product of my neglect and indecision.

The mail load was slight that day. I gathered the few letters and a boxed parcel, and thought to retrace my steps through the forbidden territory, when the sight of a vengeful Mr. Black peering from the bordering hedgerow, his cane undoubtedly at the ready, forced me to walk around the entire block to avoid the two dreaded obstacles.

Even though I managed to evade the spot, I couldn't purge the image of the tiny bird from my mind. No matter what I told myself or tried to envision, I saw the contracting pale yellow beak every time I closed my eyes. The tiny creature was reaching out, calling out, in the only way it knew how, to its mother, to me, to the world, to anything or anyone that would listen. But none of us opened ourselves.

Mom had been wrong. I couldn't wholly believe it was possible, but the dead bird was the undeniable proof. I cursed the superstition that induced my ineffectiveness, and kicked the ground as if to cause injury. Like the bird, to which the entire world was unreachable, I wanted to be as inaccessible and helpless. I avoided Dad by waiting until he was with a customer before depositing the mail on his workbench, and slipped out into the yard. I meandered through the drought-stunted cornfields and wound up back at the far side of the pond. I heard Mom's call for lunch, but did not return to the house. I could not even feel myself. I could not touch anything. Nothing could touch me, not even the sun.

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"Wake up, boy!" came a vigorous shake.

"Mom?"

I looked up, through squinted eyes, to the late afternoon light. With the sun to her back, Mom's head seemed to be enveloped by a lemon halo, though her expression was far from angelic.

"Why don't you come when I call, Timmy? Don't you know what time it is? I've been worried sick."

"I'm all right." I protested as she took me by the arm to lead up the hill.

"I wouldn't have let you come if I knew you were here all alone. I thought you were with the Bastows," she scolded, casting an angry look back at the pond. "It's a good thing your father's still bogged down with that chainsaw repair, or I would have sent him to get you, and then you'd think twice about not coming when I call."

"I fell asleep." I said weakly.

I was hustled in through the washroom and placed before the laundry sink.

“Dinner’s in five minutes. Go tell your father when you’re through.”

The whirlwind departed, leaving me to cope with my newfound tangibility. I stood, contemplating the soap, not wanting to wash her essence from my arm. I wasn’t hurt by her hard words, or angry, or ashamed. I was relieved. Mother did come to the rescue! I wasn’t left alone, forgotten. She did care.

I stood in the doorway of the shop and watched Dad in his work. He wore his minute silver-rimmed glasses, an intent look upon his moist face as he scrutinized a small part. His hand movements were concise. I had felt such a careful touch, knew what it meant. If Mom hadn’t have come for me, I knew he would have. I never really doubted. His mouth was beset with a wide smile when I entered and asked some questions about the saw he was reassembling. He responded in his slow, careful way, watching my reactions, compounding the answers so every part of the machine would have been explained if time had allowed. We stood talking until Mom called us in to dinner.

“The radio says there’s storm passing through.” Dad said hopefully, reaching for a second helping.

Rain meant lawns grew, mowers worked, mowers broke, and repairs were to be made.

“Don’t get your hopes up. Those weathermen are all full of hot air.” Mom scoffed with a wry smile.

“Let’s hope it actually does something this time. We could use a cool down, if nothing else.”

“Bah.”

“Man’s got a right to hope, ain’t he? We could sure use the rain. I’ve never seen the ground so dry. It’s like a damned desert.”

“Speaking of dessert,” Mom offered in typical cheerfulness at the thought of her own wit, “Who wants cantaloupe?”

Instead of bolting from the table at the end of the meal, I sat, watching them, seeing how they related to one another, studying the looks they passed, the touches. The aura of caring in the room captivated and buoyed me. I even offered to clear away the dishes just to be near them longer. The offer garnered a gasp of surprise from Mom, a round of applause from Dad. He saw my effort as being responsible; I just wanted to be thankful.

I made up my mind while placing the last of the silverware in the sink. Something had to be done, some effort, however slight, had to be made on behalf of the tiny bird. Though its brief time had been and unremarkable, I felt the need to honor its passing in some small way.

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“Dad, what do you do when you make a mistake?” I managed from under the mound of crumpled sheets as bedtime loomed.

The approaching storm brought with it cool breezes, which tossed the curtains playfully and chilled the room.

“You try to put things right, if you can.” the unhurried reply came, as Dad moved to lower the window.

“What if what you did can’t be fixed?” I probed, as the bed sank under the weight of newcomer.

“Then you learn, chalk it up to experience, try to do it better the next time.”

“What if there is something you could do, to make it just a bit better?”

“Is there something you should be telling me, Timmy?” his voice turned cautious. “Is that what doing the dishes was all about?”

“No, sir. I was just wondering—in case I did something.”

“There’s no sense worrying about mistakes you haven’t made. That’s what life’s all about: seeing what comes down the road, and reacting. The way a man reacts to a situation is what makes him a man.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, now more heavy thoughts.” Dad smiled as he rose. “You get yourself to sleep.”

The touch of his hand to my head was more comforting than the blankets.

“Good night, Tim.”

“Good night, Dad.”

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When I passed the spot the next morning, all traces of the tiny bird had vanished from the pavement. I had resolved myself during the night to remove the remains and bury them under the mimosa tree by the pond, as a constant reminder of what my inaction had wrought, but there was no evidence that a life had ended next to the expanding clump of crabgrass. Like the squirrel, nothing remained. Whether by the hand of man or fate, whatever had made the creature had unmade it in the same manner. I searched the area, but the entirety of the tiny mass was gone, its fragile bones must have washed away by the heavy rains heard during the night. I looked in the street for any small piece, the slightest remnant to take with me, but the damp gutter path along the curb leading to the sewer was an irrevocable, undignified destination.

I stepped away, conscious of the wetness on my face, but made no effort to remove the tears. I was frightened, truly chilled by the realization that all traces of a living being—any living being—could vanish within a matter of a few short hours, as if they never existed. It made me wonder what hope there was for my parents, for me, for the world. What if the world, as a great living entity, suddenly died? What if the Good Mother abandoned all of us? How long would it be before all traces of existence were washed away? How long before every tree, or animal or person was swept to nothingness? The potency of time rippled through my young mind.

Hot summer days have come and gone and come again, but I'll never forget the particular day the tiny almost-bird vanished. I lay in my bed that night, as I have many nights since, cupping my hands; closing my eyes, imagining the bird snuggled in my palms as I walk out to the pond. Replete with jet-black feathers and resplendent yellow beak, the creature is peaceful and still, not in pain, not at all. I am not taking it to be buried. I'm just holding it, and then it holds me, strokes my head, and watches me drift away into the clearest of blue skies.

John Riebow

## Flipper's First Date

Ed "Flipper" Grommet loved women. He loved all kinds of women. He loved blondes, brunettes, red heads, and silvery haired maidens. He loved tall women, he loved short women. He loved fat women, he loved skinny women. He loved women of all colors of the rainbow, whether they were sixteen or sixty. He loved the way they smelled, the way they walked, the way they carried themselves in conversation. He loved the crystal sound of a young girl's voice, and the rasp of an older one. He loved the way they would tuck their long hair behind their ears, or the way they'd shave their head so he could see the outline of their skulls. He loved the way their red lips left evidence of their presence on plastic straws and cigarette filters. He loved the way they wore their jeans, their shirts, their dresses, their shoes. He loved it when a girl wore a baseball cap. He loved seeing a group of women together, laughing. He loved the way they could cry when hearing about something sad. He loved to hear a pretty girl swear. He loved women. He loved all women. He couldn't help it; he was a ladies' man.

Of course, women weren't too enthralled with Ed. No matter what line he used, what cologne he wore, or how desperate the women looked, they all turned down his date proposals. He didn't understand it. He had it all. He was a smart guy. He had a job. His clothes were clean.

"Maybe it's my arms," Ed said one day, sitting in a lawn chair outside his tiny rent house.

"What arms, Ed?" Bob, his best friend asked.

He sat across from Ed, sipping on a green apple slushy, pausing occasionally to put a hand on his forehead, bracing himself against a brain freeze.

"Exactly," he said and flexed his fingers.

Ed had a condition known as phocomelia, a birth defect that caused him to be born without arms. Instead, fingers sprouted from his shoulders, each finger webbed, and flapping like little flippers. He was twenty-two years-old. He'd come to terms with his lack of arms, though his childhood nickname of "Flipper" still irked him. His lack of arms made things a bit harder, but nothing was impossible. He graduated from high school, moved out of his parents' house. He even had a job as a telemarketer. As far as Ed was concerned, he lived a pretty normal life.

"There's bound to be someone out there," Bob said, slurping from his slushy and grimacing, the straw sticking to his bottom lip. He clasped his forehead. "Oh no, it's a bad one," he said.

"Nope," Ed said, "there isn't. I've asked them all. No woman wants anything to do with me." He flapped his flippers and sighed. "I'm destined to be alone."

Bob's eyes were squeezed shut, riding out the last of the brain freeze. When it was over, he looked at his lifelong friend.

"You haven't asked everyone."

Ed nodded. "I've asked them all. Every woman in town. They've all turned me down."



“You haven’t asked everyone,” Bob repeated.

Ed flipped his fingers absently, “Who else is there?”

Bob slurped, swallowed, and wiped a green glob off his bottom lip.

“A new girl is moving in down the street from my parents’ house. Sorta pretty. Maybe twenty-five.”

“Really?” Ed asked excited, then his face fell. “Aw, who cares? What makes you think she’ll be any different than any of the other girls around here?”

Bob smiled around his straw. He looked up at his friend and said, “She’s blind.”

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Ed and Bob walked briskly down the sidewalk. Bob panted, walking double time to keep up with Ed’s pace. Ed’s flippers flapped as he walked.

“Okay,” Ed said, “You’re sure she’s blind?”

“Yep,” Bob panted, “Blind from birth. She’s never seen a thing in her life.”

“That’s fantastic!”

“Her house is right up here. There was a large two-story house sitting on a plush green lawn. A mover’s truck sat in front of it and a trio of men in gray uniforms packed furniture and cardboard boxes from the truck into the garage. A large porch stretched across the front of the house. Boxes were piled next to the door. And sitting on a swing suspended from the roof, sat the woman of Ed’s dreams.

“Look at her!” Ed said. She sat in a yellow sundress, a ribbon tied around the waist. She was neither too large nor too skinny, with thick brown hair sitting on top of her head. She wore a pair of dark glasses, and her face was spotted randomly with freckles. A soft spread of peach fuzz lay on her upper lip, and her arms were covered in dark hair. Her hands were clasped in her lap. Her feet, underneath the swing, were crossed at the ankles.

“Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?” Ed asked.

Bob nodded.

Ed and Bob walked toward the girl. They stood just below the steps, staring up at her in awe. A part of Ed reminded himself that this was his last chance. This was the last girl in the entire town. Nervously, his fingers waved. One of the movers caught sight of him and jabbed another one in the ribs, pointing.

“Are you going to say something?” the girl on the swing asked.

Ed turned on Bob, his mouth open, his eyes wide. He whispered, "You said she was blind!"

"I am," she said her face angled toward them. "But I heard your friend panting like a dog."

Ed leaned over and swatted at his friend's shoulder with his fingers. "Thanks a lot, Bob!"

"You walk too fast!" Bob said.

"You're not trying to rob me, are you?" the girl asked. Her forehead furled.

Ed looked back to the beauty on the swing and shook his head, "No, no, no!" he said. "I'm sorry. My name is Edward. My friend, Bob here, told me about a beautiful woman who moved onto this street and I had to see her for myself."

The girl smiled. "He did, huh?"

"He did," Ed agreed. "And he underestimated your beauty. You are by far the most gorgeous thing I have ever seen in my life."

The girl's smile widened. "That's sweet."

Ed turned to Bob and Bob gave him the thumbs up sign.

"Your name is Edward?"

"Yes, but you can call me Ed. Everyone does."

"Alright, Ed. My name is Ann."

"Oh, Ann!" Ed exclaimed. "What a perfect name! It just rolls off the tongue."

"And you must be Bob," Ann said to Bob.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Bob."

"It's nice to meet you," Ann said.

"You too."

"So," Ann said, "is there something I can help you guys with?"

Ed looked at Bob, and then took a step up onto the porch.

"Yes, Ann, yes! There is! I came by because, being that you're new in town, I was wondering if you'd be interested in allowing me to show you around –"

Bob jumped up and down, shaking his head wildly, waving his arms.

Ed corrected, "Er, I mean, not show you around. I mean, I could take you out somewhere. Maybe see a movie – "

Bob slapped his forehead.

"I mean, listen to a movie. I mean, maybe we could – "

"I like to dance," Ann interrupted. "Is there somewhere to dance in this town?"

Ed turned on his friend, his eyes wide, his heart stopped. "Dancing? Sure!" he said. "I know a great dance club!"

"Great!" Ann said. "When?"

"Um," Ed looked at Bob. He had never gotten this far with a woman before. Bob shrugged his shoulders. "Um, how about tomorrow?"

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, Ed," Ann said standing up from the swing.

Ed cocked his head at her. "How will you see --" but before he could ask (and a good thing, probably), she stepped inside.

The door shut. Ed turned around and walked up the street. Bob followed, jogging at times to keep up. When they made it to the end of the block, well beyond sight of Ann's house, Ed turned to Bob.

"Bob," he said. "She. Said. Yes."

Ed leapt into the air like a pogo stick, his fingers flapping like wings.

"She said yes, she said yes!"

He bounced around, flapping his fingers and then suddenly, he stopped.

"What is it, Ed?" Bob asked.

"Bob, she said yes."

"Yes, she did!"

"What am I going to do?"

Bob paused, his smile slowly melting. "What do you mean? You're going to go out with her."

"I've never gone out with someone before. What do I do? What do I wear? What do I -- Oh my god, what about my arms?"

"You don't have arms, Ed," Bob told him.

"I know that, Bob, I know I don't have arms! That's my point. What do I do when she realizes that I don't have arms?"

"Well, she's going to find out eventually. I'd just tell her. You should be honest about these things."

"No!" Ed shouted. "She can't find out!"

"You can't hide something like this," Bob said.

Ed's eyes opened wide, a smile spread over his face. "No! I can hide things from her for as long as I want. She's blind!"

"But, Ed," Bob said, "You said you would take her dancing. She is bound to find out."

Ed paced back and forth; if he had arms, he would have stroked his chin in contemplation, but since he did not, he simply stood there.

"I need to think, Bob. I need to think."

"I don't think it's a good idea to try to hide it," Bob said.

"What do you know? You have never dated a woman like Ann before." Ed paced back and forth, his flippers flapping. "I've got it!"

"What is it?"

"I will borrow your arms," Ed said.

Bob took a step back and glanced sideways at Ed. "What are you talking about?"

"Yes, Bob, I will borrow your arms at the dance,"

Bob shook his head, his eyes wide with fear. Ed saw this and nodded, "Yes, you will come with me on my date with Ann. You will be there. And as we dance, it will be you who puts your arms around her, and it will be you that holds her hand in the seat."

"But I thought it was supposed to be your date," Bob said.

"It will be my date. I will be there the entire time. I only need your arms, Bob. I will be there to get to know Ann. I will be there to walk with her. I will be there to kiss her goodnight."

"I don't know," Bob said.

"Trust me," Ed said, "I've got the whole thing figured out."

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Folks on the sidewalk stopped in their tracks as Ed and Bob came toward them. Ed walked quickly, assured, a little nervous, but ready to start his date. Bob walked directly behind him, careful as to not get his feet stepped on. The two men were strapped across the chest and stomach and around the legs, tethered together with about a dozen belts and bungee cords. Bob, being shorter than Ed, walked blindly with his face shoved into Ed's back, his arms held out in front of him like a zombie.

"This isn't going to work," Bob said.

"It's going to work, just keep quiet," Ed said.

"She's going to know that I'm here."

"She won't if you stay quiet."

"Ed, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Don't worry. We're turning left now. Onto her sidewalk, so shush."

They walked in unison toward her porch.

Ed muttered, "One, two, one, two, one, two, step up, step up, step up."

They stopped in front of her door. Ed stared at the white paint for a few moments, smiling dumbly at it.

"Bob," Ed said. "Can you please knock on the door?"

Blindly, Bob's arm reached out and rapped on the girl's door.

"Thank you, Bob."

"You're welcome, Ed."

There were several moments of silence, and then the door opened and Ed laid eyes on Ann.

"Ed?" she said.

She was wearing a red and white striped dress that was poofy in the shoulders and flared around the knees. She still wore her dark sunglasses over her eyes and in her hand was a red cane with a white tip.

"Good evening, Ann. You are looking more beautiful today than I remembered you being."

"You're sweet, Ed," Ann said. "And how are you tonight, Bob?"

Ed's eyes opened wide. Both of their breaths caught in their throats, and Ed finally had to step back on Bob's foot to get him to say anything.

"I'm good, Ann. How are you?"

"Wonderful."

"How did you know Bob was here, Ann?"

"I could hear Bob's breathing. He's a panther."

Ed frowned at this news and stamped his foot down on top of Bob's.

"Well, I, uh, was going to come alone, but Bob looked so pathetic sitting at home with nothing to do. So I said he could come along."

Bob sighed against Ed's back. "Yes, I'm very lonely."

"I hope you don't mind," Ed said.

Ann smiled. "Of course not. Shall we get started?"

"Of course," Ed said. "After you."

Bob held his arms out and brushed Ann's arms. She smiled, and walked ahead of him, tapping her cane against the porch and steps as she made her way down to the sidewalk.

"Did you bring a car?" she asked, her face upturned as though she was examining the roofs of the houses along the street.

"Actually," Ed said, "I thought we could walk. The club isn't too far."

"Sounds great," Ann said.

Ed smiled. The date had started, and despite the fact that she knew Bob was there, it had started well. With confidence, he strutted forward; Bob strapped behind him, and chatted with his girl.

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Ed (and Bob) walked Ann to a dance club known as The Pet Shop. The Pet Shop sat on the corner of the block and had its windows painted on the outside to resemble an animal shelter with sad looking puppies and kittens begging to be brought home. A neon beer sign ran above the windows. Ed tried to describe everything as best he could, but he was never sure if he was using words that would paint a picture of the scene in her mind. She said that she understood, but Ed wasn't convinced.

Inside, the music was already pumping. A loud, steady bass beat filled the air, rattling the beer glasses at the tables near the front and shaking Ed's heart in his chest. There weren't many people in the club yet, being so early in the evening. Past the bar and sitting area was the dance floor, a large hardwood platform in which pink, blue, and green lights scrolled over the three dancers already grooving. A long-haired deejay sat in a booth beyond the dance floor, holding a set of headphones to the side of his head and nodding his head to the beat.

"Nice," Ann shouted over the sound of the music.

"You should see it," Ed said.

Ed (and Bob) led Ann to one of the tables furthest from the dance floor, where the vibrations weren't quite as bad.

"Buy you a drink?" Ed asked.

Ann agreed, and so Ed (and Bob) walked to the bartender, a bleached blond with a goatee and a dangling dolphin earring.

"How's it going, m -- " the bartender stopped when he saw Ed with Bob's arms jutting out from underneath his flippers. "Men?"

"Good evening," Ed said, "can I get two beers?"

"Three," Bob said behind Ed's back.

"Two," Ed corrected.

"I want a beer, too," Bob insisted.

"You can't," Ed argued, "you only have two hands. How would we carry them?"

"Darn," Bob said.

Ed turned back to the bartender. "Two beers."

The bartender seemed hesitant at first, but produced two foam cups of beer, and slid them across to Bob's waiting hands sitting on the bar.

"That'll be five bucks," the bartender said.

Ed stood staring at the man, smiling. Bob held the beer, and the bartender waited.

"Five bucks," the bartender repeated.

"Bob!" Ed snapped.

"What?"

“Five dollars!”

“My hands are full!” Bob whined.

“Well, I wish I had hands! Or did you forget the reason you’re strapped to my back?”

Bob sighed and sat the cups of beer down on the bar, then fished into his own back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He produced a five and dropped it on the bar.

“No tip?” Ed asked. “I don’t want to look cheap.”

Bob sighed again, reached into his wallet and pulled out two singles.

“Here,” he said.

“Thanks,” said the bartender.

“Your welcome,” said Ed.

Bob shoved his wallet back into his pants and then grabbed the foam cups. They walked back to the table where Ann was sitting, her head bobbing to the music. She sat holding her cane in front of her, the lights from the dance floor washing over her face.

“Your drink, m’lady,” Ed said as Bob struggled to find Ann’s hand. Eventually, her hand brushed the cup and she was able to take it from him. Bob sat the other cup down. Ed watched Ann take a drink and wanted a sip from his own, but thought that Bob needed a moment to cool down.

“It’s good,” Ann said.

“Mmm, yes,” Ed said, staring down into the amber liquid.

“I like this song,” Ann said.

“Would you care to dance?” Ed asked.

“I’d love to,” Ann said.

The three of them stood up. Bob took Ann’s hand and they led her to the dance floor. The song was slow, and two other couples stood on the dance floor, wrapped up in each other’s arms, slowly swaying to the music.

Ed, Bob, and Ann stopped in the center of the dance floor, and Bob lifted Ann’s hands up and over Ed’s flippers. She laced her fingers around Ed’s neck. Ed leaned in close to her, and Bob put his hands on her hips. They began swaying then. Ann was smiling.

“This is so nice, Ed,” Ann said.

Ed smiled and blushed, and Ann leaned her head forward onto his chest. And Ann and Ed and Bob danced and danced.

They danced through one slow song, then a couple of fast ones. After a while, people began to fill the dance club, and more and more people saw the blind woman and the two men strapped together dancing. Bob saw their faces, his own face still smashed up against Ed's sweating back. Ann pretended not to notice, but Ed could feel her tensing up around him as they danced. After a dozen songs or so, Ann and Ed and Bob walked back to the table and ordered more beers. They drank (Ed began ordering beers with straws in them) and talked, but around them, they could still hear the taunts and jeers from some of the other dancers.

After three drinks, with Ann already getting tipsy, and after two guys walked by, pointed at Ed and Bob and called them "Siamese Twins," Ann asked, "Ed, do you have the time?"

"No," he said, "I don't wear a watch."

"Well," she said. "Would you be offended if I asked you to take me home early?"

"Oh," he said, his face falling. "I understand. Are you not having a good time, Ann?"

"I'm having a wonderful time. But it's getting late. And perhaps we could sit on my porch swing and chat without having to yell."

Ed smiled again. "That sounds lovely."

"What do you think, Bob?" Ann asked.

"Fine," Bob muttered.

And the three stood up from their table, Ann with her cane, and began walking back to her place.

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They sat on the porch swing for more than an hour talking. Ann swung slightly back and forth as Ed sat in Bob's lap and listened. She told them about going to college and moving east. She talked about her favorite flowers (irises) and how she was quite the accomplished flautist. Ed listened, loving Ann more and more with every word she uttered. As she spoke though, and as Bob sat with his hand on her knee, he began to think about the fact that he had yet to put one finger on her beautiful face. A part of him was becoming quite jealous of Bob, who sat underneath him, grunting when Ed shifted his weight, but who also got to hold Ann's hand. He began thinking about the texture of her dark hair, the way it would feel to run his webbed fingers through it. He thought about the shape of her hips, and the way Bob's hands had rested on them.

Ann yawned. "I want to thank you for asking me out tonight, Ed."

"Oh, Ann, the pleasure has been mine," Ed said.

“You know,” she said, “Oftentimes, men see that I’m blind and are afraid to get close to me. They’re afraid to ask me out.”

“Their loss is my gain.”

She yawned again. “You’re sweet.”

She leaned over. Ed bent his fingers down flat against his chest, and she rested her head on his shoulder. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, his heart pounding in his chest. She was so close to the truth! He waited, tense, to see if she would notice anything different about him, but she didn’t say anything. Instead, she began to breathe slower, deeper. In a few minutes, Ed realized that Ann had fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder.

He smiled. How had he ever been so lucky to find such an angel? And how was it that he was sitting in this porch swing next to her? He had to be the luckiest man in the entire world. He thought for just a moment of all of the other men in the world, those that were spending the evening alone or with someone who was far inferior to the pure being sitting beside him on the swing. His heart went out to those other men. Those poor other men who would always have to settle for less than the best.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ed watched his sleeping angel. And as he watched her, he couldn’t help himself any longer. He had to touch her. There was no better time. She was asleep now and wouldn’t notice if he just touched her cheek...

Slowly, holding his breath, he uncurled his webbed fingers, reached up, and brushed Ann’s chin. The tips of his fingers lightly caressed her lower lip, and then –

“WHAT WAS THAT!” Ann shouted, recoiling back from Ed.

“What?” Ed clambered out of the swing, pulling Bob, who was also dozing with him.

“Something touched me!” Ann said, wiping at her mouth, a look of utter disgust on her face.

Something, she had said.

“Ann, I’ve got to be going!” Ed blurted.

He wished his fingers were longer. He wanted nothing more than to rip the belts and cords tethering him to Bob and just run down the street, fleeing this house, this place. He felt like Frankenstein’s monster.

“You do?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve got to be going.”

Ann’s face fell. “Well, thank you for a wonderful evening.”

“You’re welcome,” Ed said, and he and Bob began walking toward the steps.

“No goodnight kiss?” Ann asked.

Ed stopped. He and Bob walked quickly back to the swing and Ed gave her a quick, dry peck beside the mouth.

“Good night, Ann.”

She frowned. “Good night, Ed.”

Ed and Bob hurried down the steps.

“Good night, Ann,” Bob said, as they hurried across the yard, his fingers already working at the belts cinching their chests together.

“Good night, Bob,” Ann said.

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Ed lived in a small house on Sycamore Street. The house was very old with yellow siding running up the walls, some of which was turning green over the years. The front door was nailed shut, so any visitors (and there weren't many) had to walk around the little dirt path around to the back of the house, which was crowded with pecan trees. The back door opened up onto a screened in porch/laundry room, where the day after his date with Ann, he stood at his washer, bending over, picking up one sleeveless shirt after another and dropping it into the front-loader washing machine.

He felt a little better about the date after a night's rest, but he still berated himself for thinking that he could possibly pull off being normal. A girl like Ann, Ed knew, deserved far more than a man with no arms. She deserved a normal man with two arms. She was so perfect, she perhaps even deserved a man with three arms – but definitely not someone with flippers. Despite the way he had ran away from her into the night, he thought that they had both had a good time. It was just a shame that they'd never be able to do it again. There was just no way he could keep dragging Bob around with him pretending to be his arms. And there was no way a girl like Ann could go for a guy like Ed. It was a nice idea, but it was time to get real, Ed thought.

And yet, as Ed was loading his washing machine and thinking about getting real, the most unrealistic thing happened. There was a knock at the screen door of his back porch/laundry room. Ed turned and saw Ann standing there, holding her cane in one hand, wearing a light blue dress with a big white bow tied in the front.

“Ann?” he said.

“Ed, are you home?”

“Yes, Ann,” he said and rushed over, pushing the door open with his foot. “Come in. How – ”

“Bob told me where you lived,” she interrupted. “I hope you don't mind that I came over uninvited.”

“Not at all,” Ed said.

“You ran off so quickly last night.”

“Yes, I had to get home. I, uh,” he couldn’t think. “I had to poop.”

“Oh,” Ann said and frowned.

“I’m better now,” Ed said.

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yes,” Ed said and nodded.

“I’ve brought you a gift,” Ann said.

She began fishing around in a pocket on the front of her dress. She smiled, and Ed couldn’t help but smile. It could brighten a room – even an old laundry room shrouded by the shadows of pecan trees.

“Oh, Ann, you shouldn’t have.”

“It’s a wristwatch,” she said pulling out a golden watch from her dress pocket.

“Oh, Ann, you really shouldn’t have,” Ed groaned.

“You said you didn’t have one,” Ann said. “I wanted to show you how much I enjoyed last night.”

“Ann, I – ”

“Here,” she said stepping toward him, waving her cane in front of her. “Let’s put it on.”

“No, I can’t,” Ed said, stepping backward, retreating across the laundry room until his butt collided with the dryer. Ann advanced on him.

“Oh come on,” she said.

“No, really, Ann I can’t.”

“It’s no big deal, Ed. Don’t be modest.” She walked toward him, holding the watch out at him with one hand and tapping her cane on the floor in front of her.

“I’m not being modest.”

“Then take the watch,” she said. She closed the distance between them until the white tip of her red cane tapped him on the shoe.

“I can’t because,” he sighed. He had reached the end of the line. “I have no arms.”

Ann paused for a moment, her head cocked to one side. Ed watched her calculate what she had just heard. He wished he could see her eyes behind those dark glasses, to see what kind of emotions they were conveying. Disgust? Fear?

Finally, Ann asked, "What did you do with them?"

"Nothing," Ed said, "I've never had any."

Her brow creased. "What about – "

"Those were Bob's arms."

"Why would – "

He interrupted again. "I have phocomelia."

Ann shook her head.

"I'm a thalidomide baby," Ed explained. "I was born without arms. Instead, I have... I have flippers," he said quickly.

"Flippers?"

"Well, they're fingers. But they come from my shoulders and they're webbed. They look like flippers. That's what people called me in high school. Flipper."

"But last night – "

"I was afraid you wouldn't want to go out with me if you knew about my flippers. I had Bob pretend to be my arms for you."

Ann stood in front of Ed, and though she hadn't the ability to see, Ed felt scrutinized. He watched her face, looking for any telltale expression.

Finally, she said, "I want to see."

"But, Ann," Ed said, "you're blind."

"Yes, I know that, Ed," she snapped. "I want to look at you with my hands."

Ed glanced around the room. He could try to slip out around her, but the laundry room was small, and he'd probably wind up knocking her down if he tried to escape. He remembered the way she had said that something had touched her face, and he didn't want to see that same look of disgust again. And yet...

"Okay," he said.

Ann dropped the watch back into her dress pocket. She let her cane fall to the floor, and reached up to place her hands on the top of Ed's head. He stood there and felt her fingers trace the contours of his head. Her fingers rolled over his forehead and over his eyes. Her thumbs ran across his eye lashes her fingers explored his temples, his ears. Then down over his cheeks. She felt his nose, his lips, and chin. Her hands ran down his neck. Then out over his shoulders. Ed took a deep breath as her hands slipped over his shoulders and felt the backs of the fingers that sprouted there. She ran her fingernails over the ridges, feeling the finger bones and the webbing between them. Her fingertips found his and then slid underneath and felt into what would have been, in other circumstances, considered his armpit.

"You're absolutely beautiful," she said softly.

"You're wrong," Ed said.

"No," Ann said, her hands came back to his fingers. "You are different from everyone else."

"That's what's wrong with me."

"No," Ann said, "I have seen so many people, and they are all the same. Two eyes, two ears, one nose. Two arms. But you're... you're different."

"I'm defective," Ed said.

"No," Ann corrected, "you're perfect."

Ed smiled. He could think of nothing to say.

"Would you like to see me?" Ann asked stepping closer to Ed. The distance between them was so small.

"I can see you, Ann," Ed said.

"No," she said, "See me the way I see you."

And he realized what she was saying. She reached up and removed her glasses, sliding them into the same pocket that she had dropped the watch. Her eyes were milky white.

Ed took a deep breath, and said, "I'd love to."

Ann closed her eyes. Ed turned a little and leaned forward, letting the fingers on his right side touch her cheek. He gently stroked her face, her lips. He stood on his tiptoes and brushed the hair back from her forehead and ran his fingers over her ears. He realized that it was the first time he had ever touched another person so intimately. He brushed her lower lip and she sighed, her shoulders rose and fell as she took deeper and deeper breaths. He ran his hand down her neck onto her shoulder. She licked her lips and reached out and touched his stomach.

"Tell me," she said, "are there any other missing body parts?"

Ed smiled, “No. Just my arms.”

Ann smiled, too, and stepped closer to him, so close that if they had had a belt and a bungee cord, they could have tethered themselves together.

“Good,” she said.

And Ann gave Ed a good looking over, and Ed did likewise for Ann. And though he had always considered himself something of a ladies’ man, after that day, Ed gave up all the other women, and devoted himself to Ann. And the two lived happily ever after.

Gregg Winkler

Somewhere In the Neighborhood of Love

She was teenage ugly, thin as a rail, wore thick glasses, had a posture like a deformed tree and psoriasis that at times looked like a half-fried pieces of bacon glued to her body. This skin disease she suffered, psoriasis, caused scabs and welts and rashes at the elbows, knees, and neck, causing her to constantly scratch like a nervous monkey, a monkey who never seemed to reach that itch. In this semi-tropical climate, she dressed in long sleeve shirts and tights and turtlenecks to hide her skin eruptions and scratching shame.

Always the constant scratching... so much so that at times I thought her itching was not only external but internal, an itch coming from a desire to relieve a devilish craving so deep, so unreachable that it hurt me to watch her scratch at skin so young and beautiful. Her skin, hidden from view, ashamed, buried in clothing....

Her brother, Randy Mattingly, was my best friend, and as such, I was forced to be kind to itchy-scratchy little sister, Brianna. She was a brat most times, but she just wanted our attentions. It's not like I went out of my way to befriend her, but neither did I taunt her. Randy constantly taunted and teased her, sibling rivalry in action 24/7. But he always made it up to her in ways I never understood.

I always rooted for Randy when they fought tooth and nail, but under it all I wanted them to stop, to make-up and get along like normal brothers and sisters should. But what did I know? I was an only child. They were far from normal. But it was love, brother - sister love. She made the effort to show love. She always tried to see the good in Randy, in me.

We lived in the same neighborhood, friends and neighbors to the end of time we told each other. However, we were neighbors of the back fence variety, with no roads directly connecting our houses. To reach Randy's house was a three-block trek, always under curious neighbor eyes, always passing in front of their well-manured gardens and stately homes on the cement sidewalk mazes of our suburban existence.

This circuitous sidewalk route did not hamper us, as Randy and I just knocked out boards of the adjacent fence and created a secret passageway hidden behind the trunk of a thick oak tree. Young boys are driven to stay in touch, to pass secrets, to exchange new finds and constantly reinforce boyhood friendship to form a strong bond that should last a lifetime.

Solid friendships never to be torn asunder... like brothers, like sisters... friends can and should be loved...

A boyhood friend--- every man has one and it is an essential part of growing up. Randy and I shared everything and almost every moment of our waking hours. Inseparable. Surf adventures, hiking till we dropped, camp outs in backyards, first drink of hard liquor, first smoke, first joint, first kisses---of girls that is- at the Golden State movie theatre, but, ha-ha, it was the same girl! We did everything together and always in some tribal manner, in some ancient connection between young men coming of age. But there was one thing I was ashamed of and hid from Randy and his younger sister Brianna.

Randy's mom---I was in love with her. I was in love with Rose Mattingly. It was a love that made me ache and lay awake nights in dreams and fantasies of her beauty. She was beautiful. She was perfect. She was my dream lover!

I didn't look at her as the mother of my best friend, but as a physical entity that slyly activated hormones I had yet to understand, reconcile and truly experience in full. I felt my boy-body change when thinking about her, when smelling her pass closely, and when she touched my shoulder or arm I felt my body buzz of an unknown electricity, in that over-activating place, between my legs.

An erection was more common than not, and one in her presence was embarrassing, not always hidden from her, and that in itself was invigorating and wonderful. In some odd way, I thought it was the first pulls of a true love happening to me. I wanted her to share in my joy. I couldn't help it... she smiled... she shared my joy in so many ways....

I called her ma'am and always helped her with anything she was doing, but I constantly fantasized about getting her alone whenever I came in proximity to her perfectly shaped female form. For at thirty- four, she still moved and lived in the body of a constantly giggling and exuberant seventeen-year-old ingénue delighting in her virginity.

These were not debased, degrading fantasies of a teenage boy coming up behind her and pulling off a sexy apron, whipping off a flimsy sundress and having my way. I wanted her in a four-poster bed, in a romantic place with the mood and music of love playing in the background, wanted to be in a long-term relationship and I wanted children by this woman. Oh, it was odd and queer and at times I had to tell myself to cool it, to shed these fantasies, knowing in my puritan mind that no boy wants to settle down at such a tender age with his best friend's mother.

Was this love normal? At fourteen, I had no idea what was normal. My masturbation fantasies always ended with her smiling crazy and screaming after an intense physical climax --- desire for her was far beyond my ability to comprehend love and romance or sex. It just was. Was I ashamed... yes! Did I care? No! I only wanted to look into her eyes while I lay upon her, inside her, discovering her....

Being embarrassed at my feeling for her at social situations, at back-yard barbeques and high school functions, I hid my desires, but constantly showered my affections on her, always hoping she would respond. Flowers, special gifts on holidays and always a complementing word on her appearance brought her smiles closer to me.

Skinny itchy-scratchy thing of a daughter Brianna saw it. She saw it from day one and I was so afraid she would reveal it to Rose. I was afraid of what she knew, fearing she would use it against me and tell her brother or her father.

One sunny summer day, at their pool, she lay down next to me and said: "Having a thing for my mom is alright---"

"---For Rose? What? Are you crazy? Thing---what thing for your mom? I nev---"

"---My mother is beautiful. Every guy who sees her goes gaga. Someday I'll be as beautiful, more beautiful, so she says. Hey, guys have crushes on teachers, movie stars, on the President's wife... why not on my mom?"

Brianna smiled to me in her innocent way; bright-green eyes, calm and honest and as sincere as usual. But she scratched constantly and it was a distraction... Was she toying with me? Was it a little girl ploy? There was something unnatural about her constant scratching.

Sometimes it got so bad her face turned a bright pink and wheezy breaths arose from her skinny, veined and elongated throat. At those times, she produced an inhaler, covertly applied it to her mouth, squeezing an atomized drug into her throat and then hid the devise, as if ashamed she couldn't breathe in life like the rest of us did so easily.

I was the only male she wore her tiny bikini in front of. Why did I have her trust? She was so skinny-shy in front of everyone else. I'd broken through... I was family. She trusted me implicitly. Now I think about it, I may have been her only friend, besides her brother.

"Mom will have to adopt you as her only son someday. I think Randy is sick... I think he may die."

"Sick? Why? You're joshing me. You just want him to stop teasing you all the time. You're lying. He won't die, cause you're a poop-pa sister... he'll live to taunt you till your old and gray," I teased and chuckled.

She laughed, but there was earnestness behind her oval face, a squint of fear in her eyes. Hers was her mother's eyes and I believed in her mother.

"Mom was crying, maybe even Dad, but hiding it from me yesterday as best they could, and all day they ... they pretended everything was normal, but everything was all wrong. Late last night, I heard them talking in their bed. They didn't know I heard them, but I hear everything through the heating vents in my room."

"Yeah, I know. I've listened to you in your bed."

"What do you mean? With Randy?"

"You're a girly-girl, with desires, dreaming of rock stars and famous surfers.... Never mind what I heard and why the hell would I hear Randy in there?" I teased, but worried about my best friend, I asked, "Randy is sick? Tell me what he's sick from or I'll toss you in the pool, skinny-scratchy-monkey, little sisty-ughler."

"Don't know, but in between their sobs I heard talk about Al's disease. Whatever Al has, Randy has. Said his muscles are going to get weaker and weaker...."

"Oh bullshit, Brianna! Who is Al? Maybe it's just the Al guy who's sick. Al, is he is one of our friends?"

I picked up her feather-light frame and tossed her in the pool. I was strong as an ox and Randy was stronger than me. Randy was my friend. Best friends do not die.

But God Dammed it, what she told me was true. It took three years for Randy to die, years that sucked all the vitality out of me, out of her, out of us all, years that wasted him away until we watched him take a last painful breath in a bed that had been our boyhood fort, a place of his dreams, a place in a home where as his best friend I sat for so many years in happiness and camaraderie. It was a final place of pillows and sheets and blankets that just saw his body grow weaker, and weaker, and smaller, and smaller, until one special human being disappeared into a childhood bed and never came back.

He just couldn't catch his breath and died on me... my best friend died on me.... Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis... and he died on her....

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Want me to tell you how rotten this fucking life can be? All the while, Rose had breast cancer growing in those perfect teats I craved and dreamed of and....

When God is mad, he punishes severely... but the young and perfect and wanting and needing and happy and the forward-life-yearning young are the people who suffer the collateral damage... for we must live on and on with perfect healthy bodies and hungry minds.

That day. That day Brianna found out about Rose... a day painted in me like a mordant oil of drab colors, hanging at the entrance to a mind of muted feelings, of a feeble rain, of a slick gloomy and wet sheen on a hard asphalt roadway outside our houses, of trees shedding leaves prematurely with suspended brittle branches near the top, spindly naked twig reaching out... transient ravens and crows and blackbirds weighing down thin branches....

A month after Randy was buried, Brianna and I walked home from school together, walking the long way around by Randy's cemetery plot for Brianna to place a single rose. Once home, we found her father Harold sitting out in the backyard, in the old and rusted swing set of yesterday's laughter, nurturing a bottle of Jack Daniels, crying in spurts and moaning like a hurt bear. We assumed it was grief over Randy, but inside we found Rose coddling a bottle of fancy liquor we both knew she loved, but the teetotaler in her prohibited. The fancy liquor was half gone and she was diluting the sweet taste of it with the raw and unruly taste of Tequila. Her body said resignation to a fate; her eyes simply said terror.

"I'm scared, but I don't know why" Brianna said, out of earshot of her mother.

A few moments later, when she looked into her mother's eyes, her youth seemed to leave her.

"We'll have dinner and we'll talk then," is all her mother said, and then she abruptly turned her solemn face back to the fireplace.

She was seemingly mesmerized, finding solace in the incorporeal glow of a small gas fire and a crackling fake log ignited within. Brianna, sitting next to her downtrodden mother was a study in melancholy---The young daughter sad without knowing why, yet fully alive in youth and sexuality, a mother in her prime, morose over something tragic, with her life and her love of life on the wane.

Brianna was all business as she made a dinner of Swedish meatballs, linguini, steamed broccoli and a salad, prepared in robotish abnormality, in movements of forced determination. During the preparation of dinner, she stopped more than once to gaze out at her torn-up and self-questioning father. He teetered in small movements; a constant back and forth in shallow swings on the old swing set. She held back tears, but murmured more than once,

"Life is so wrong, Mark. Help me be strong...."

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Her parents put on a front and tried to carry on the long established routine of dinner at the usual time, with the usual smiles and with the usual prayer. A place was always set for Randy, a gesture of remembrance and love...That tension in the air that night....During the meal her parents kept their eyes locked on each other, as if trying to form a joint psychic communication to transmit to Brianna the words that just wouldn't, couldn't articulate from strained lips and hearts.

"Just tell me what is fucking going on!" Brianna finally screamed in a direct confrontation towards her father.

Harold sank down in his dining room chair, hands to eyes, sobbed and tried to hide tears that now flowed beyond his control.

"Honey, I have a tumor in my breast---"

"---Mom, I knew something was---"

"---Wait, let me finish... it is inoperable---"

"---Mom---"

"---Damn it, Brianna, let her tell you what is happening!" Her father screamed. It was the first time I'd ever seen anger in the man.

"Brianna, it is inoperable. According to the doctors, to three doctors, I have less than six months to live."

I cried, but with tears held close to my chest. You'd have thought Brianna would have shrieked out in gasping sobs and in a fitful rage of screaming and crying. But she didn't. She remained quite and just scratched at her arms, then at her neck, then her legs. She seemed to shrink and tears formed in her eyes, but they did not fall.

Brianna could only look at me with loving eyes and the resigned tip of her smile. It was the same look I saw that day by the pool, the day she allowed me to love her mother unabashedly, the day she opened her self up to me, the day she and I bonded to become much more than neighbors and casual friends.

The emotional bond between Brianna and I was of the slow drying glue variety... a slow adhesion, slow in connecting, slow setting, a fragile bonding process... but now, at this moment, our eyes came together in a stable bond. We both somehow knew it was to be a life spent together. There was no one else for her if and when Rose died. Her father, Harold, was a pure work machine, a corporate appliance programmed to function as a workingman to provide for his family until their last dying breath. He was a man of 8 to 5, with an eternity of evening meals in taciturnity, of rustling and annoyed evening newspapers, of an early to bed and early to rise ethic, with two golf filled days on the weekends and an unrequited true love of twenty years ago that still lingered.

How many dying breaths can a man absorb before he must turn them away, tune them out of future existences and possibilities. I crumbled, withdrew into myself. Later, after I recovered, I stared over the now cold platter of Swedish meatballs into Brianna's eyes and imagined us as astronauts adrift in space, our tethers dangling far behind us, the air of life only available if we coupled up.

I looked up to the ceiling, closed my eyes and in a fantasy saw us coming together in the vast void of endless space and loneliness and separateness at a phenomenal rate of speed. Stars became streaks of light; the worlds of the pasts we knew grew distant; then I tethered up to her, sharing the last of our oxygen in our known universe... it was the only possible salvation for us. When I opened my eyes she was staring at me. She could only look at me because the pain of looking at her parents, on this last day, of the day that should have been a happy and familiar family routine day... it was far too brutal for such a fragile young woman.

She did finally look at her mother, then reached out and gripped her hand. Rose smiled, knowing Brianna had found the strength to carry on. On that day, in that instant, I saw Brianna Mattingly become a woman... the woman I now wanted more than anything else in the world.

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There are Greek tragedies that drag you down into complex thoughts of families and dynasties and wars and warriors... but we were only a microscopic family imbedded in the petri dish of the always-green suburbs. I infused myself onto the Mattingly family, as if part and parcel of it. I held on to them tight, my own family understanding and relinquishing me, as they were only distant participants in the life of a rebellious son that was always held at an acceptable distance. Such is life...

This is what my father said about the Mattingly's life and death curse and almost everything he encountered in his life.... Such is life. I let him live his life of such and such, for he was man devoted to my mother and I turned all my attentions and dreams and desire towards Brianna and what remained of her family.

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The details of a life dying are nothing but a downward spiral of events and moments and cries and forced unnatural laughter in drama's double duty persona, its masks and disguises. We become players on that stage, we become the audience of our loved one's deaths, to boo and hiss, or champion, or laugh inwardly at, or grieve beyond grief at the decent of the final curtain....

Rose died....

The death day is a solid entity of memory, but suffused with the suspended days and nights that mark that time from a expected, yet still chilling pronouncement of death, of a once ticking clock, now frozen... After death there is a presence that lingers in the air and won't let up until the burial day.

The burial day is the day of the ifs and the buts that are God-authorized to take leave of a soul, to allow a person's body and being to be gone forever... that is if a person knows what is good for them. There is a finality that truncates and severs all thoughts of redemption and reanimation at a funeral, after seeing the object of so much love, lowered into that brown, wet dirt, fringed by Astro-turf, in air permeated with wisps of melancholic, yet soothing pastoral background music. And there are flowers; the eternal symbol of femininity, of renewal and suddenly a new awareness was born in me of those thorns on the stem below the fragile beauty of a rose... Roses for a Rose, for a rose, a rose....

Steve Mckean

Initiation

I scrubbed an old shack's
bathroom ceiling so
cowboys like you
wouldn't get their hats
cobwebbed after feeding
cattle. I never could
eat without remembering
piles of dead roaches in the
bathtub, live rats
behind the toilet even
though you promised
a mountain horse-trail
picnic before sunset.
But you took your
steer-dented pickup
to your cousin's
down the dusk-dimmed
road while I watched
furry legs bubble up
sink drains and cursed
unbaled hay fields and
thick steak dinners.

Lindsay Hobbs

My Boogie Man

Boogie Men weren't supposed to be so mooney. Or at least that's what I'd heard. David wasn't exactly the typical Boogie Man and I don't suppose I was the typical scare, either. He sat cross-legged on the floor of my closet, underneath what was left of my hanging clothes, folding shirts that fell off the hangers.

"You don't have to do that," I said, taking a few dresses to my suitcase.

"I know. I want to. There's not much left around the room to pick at." He gestured to the empty walls with his claw and went back to busy work with the tiny things. "About time you cleaned this closet out. You're disgusting." His fur hung in his eyes.

I smiled. Everything in my drawers and all my knick-knacks were packed in boxes, ready to go to college with me. I would leave with my mom first thing in the morning. David wouldn't be coming.

"Do you want me to give the fur around your eyes a trim before bed tonight? You don't know what your next Scare will be like. He or she might not want to trim your hair."

He didn't answer.

"They certainly won't be as charming as I am."

He picked up a Pringle from under a loose sock. "Or as gross. It's a miracle I've stayed in your closet as long as I have." He said it to be funny, but his voice caught at the end.

He dropped the Pringle, turned, and burrowed into the closet with his back to me.

We'd both done well to avoid crying before today and I couldn't stand to see him like this. I crawled on my hands and knees to the closet.

"David, come out of there. I...I don't like this any more than you do. But you can't come to college with me. I'll have a roommate and," I took a breath, steeling myself, "this is best for both of us."

No reply.

"We can't have any real future together. You're not allowed to walk around in public and I don't want to stay inside for the rest of my life. People will wonder why I don't have friends over – because I'll make friends. I totally will. And what if..."

The air stood empty between us for a moment

"What if what?"

"What if...I don't know...what if another human actually wants to date me?"

He snarled.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like? Enjoying the company of your Boogie Man more than other people? I have no friends. None. This is my chance to make them. To change myself.”

I started to cry. He came out and crouched next to me, wrapping his hairy arms around my shoulders. He tucked my head under his chin and I inhaled. I never minded his smell. Kind of like a clean cat.

“These human friends – I get that you need them,” he said. “But you won’t like them as much as you like me.”

I nodded. “That’s part of the problem. I’ll never want to hang out with anyone else if you follow me everywhere. If you’re always there, I’ll choose you. We’ve talked about this...” And we had. There wasn’t anything else to say. We sat there in silence a few more minutes.

“Don’t forget the book you hide under your mattress and think I don’t know about,” he said.

I smiled into his arm. “What book?”

“Exactly.”

We got up and packed the rest of my room without saying another word. We stole glances at each other here and there, but they didn’t last long.

After we finished packing I trimmed the hair on his face, the scissors grazing the area around his eyes. I held the fur in my fingers, careful not to cut too close or break his skin. He bled. Most people didn’t know that about Boogie Men. They bled.

He took a shower to get all the loose hair off while I vacuumed the carpet. He came back into my room, toweling the fur on his chest, and smelled like soap.

I looked at the clock. “Mom will be home soon. You better get back in the closet.”

He watched me with sad eyes. “I’ll miss you.”

I wanted to say it back. But that would hurt and then I’d start crying and then he’d start crying and that’s all we needed – a crying girl and her Boogie Man.

“I’ll see you later tonight.”

That evening, I crawled into bed and pulled the covers down next to me, staring into the closet shadows. “You coming? One last time?” I tried to smile.

He bumped around in there and came out. “I’ll never forget my first night here. I did a great job scaring you.”

I made a noise in the back of my throat. “I was way too old to be scared of the Boogie Man. Don’t know what your agency was thinking.”

“I know. And you were my first scare. I was just a stupid kid, myself.” He laughed and crawled into bed behind me, nestling under the covers.

The memory played back in my mind. I’d come home after volleyball practice and heard a bumping in my closet followed by a series of oofs and grumbles. Instead of being scared like any normal girl, I decided to just take care of it, myself. My mom was still at work so I grabbed the baseball bat she kept behind the front door and beat on the closet, trying to sound as tough as I could.

“Whoever is in there – I have a gun and called the police. My mom will be home any second now (she wouldn’t). If you leave now, I’ll let you walk out of here. You perve,” I added for emphasis. Nothing happened.

“I’ll give you to the count of three and then start shooting. One, two -”

A muffled voice came from behind the door. “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” he said. “This is my first time. It’s a little harder than I thought it would be. And what did I just stick my claw in?”

Claw? I opened the closet and saw his furry feet jutting out from under a pile of clothes. Curious, I lowered the bat and took a wary step into the closet, shifting a row of dresses over on the rack. He sat there - this lumbering creature – repulsed by a red, gooey substance now stuck in his hair.

I gasped.

He offered me his claw. His eyebrows gathered together in question.

“Um...probably a fruit roll-up that fell out of my pants.”

He moved his clawed hand in and out of a fist, stretching the goo. “You ate half of it and put it in your jeans?”

“Yes. Now,” I raised the bat again, “What are you?”

“I’m...well...I’m your Boogie Man.”

We stared at each other.

“Boo?”

I giggled.

Now with him here, the night before we would leave each other, tears streamed down my face. “You were meant to be my Boogie Man.”

He put his face into my hair and positioned his body behind mine. I hugged his arm, putting his claw against my heart, and wiped the wet off my cheek.

When the sun came through the window in the morning and hit my face, I didn't feel him beside me and knew he'd gone. The light filled my room. Too bright, but it warmed my skin. Tears filled my eyes and fell softly down my cheeks. My mother called my name from down the hall.

"Be out in a minute," I said, still weeping. "I'm not quite ready."

Longing hit me in the chest and I clutched the pillow he slept on last night, inhaling his scent.

Clean cat and soap.

Harley May

Love You to Pieces

“Jesus Christ it’s cold out here”, I said to know one in particular. My companions were in no position to hear me hence I really didn’t expect them to respond. I stopped digging for a moment to warm my hands, they were beginning to feel like a couple of frozen steaks, at least I couldn’t feel the blisters that had formed and then popped in a brief flood of warm fluid. I couldn’t see well enough in the darkness, but I was quite sure they had started bleeding shortly thereafter. I reached into the pocket of my jacket and lit a cigarette, it took forever to get my lighter to work, it must have gotten wet. Naturally it had to be raining, that cold, dreary October rain that chills you all the way through the skeleton. I’d be damn lucky not to have pneumonia when this job was finished.

“Hey will you stop fuckin’ around and finish up for God’s sake I’m gettin’ wet out here.” I could swear I heard my wife Tina’s voice from somewhere in the vicinity, must have been the wind.

“It’s a little hard to dig in the goddamn rain,” I found myself shouting in response. “Not to mention its a little dark out here.”

I realized I probably shouldn’t be yelling and quickly scanned the area. Just the trees, there bony arms clung hopelessly to their remaining leaves. In the distance I could see the back of my in-laws’ house, hopefully the baby was still asleep. I wiped my watch on my sweatshirt and figured it to be about one A.M. With no light the glow in the dark hands were giving up the ghost. I would have to check in on him in a few minutes, he usually got a little hungry around two.

I resumed digging, the blade of the shovel piercing the soft earth. I really would have thought the wet ground would be easier to dig but it was worse. With each shovel full of dirt, half of the load would slosh back into the hole. I found myself standing in a hell of a mess as the hole got deeper. At least I didn’t have far to go, another foot or so would do it.

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The day had begun like so many others, with a six o’clock knee in the back.

“Get up and get the baby a bottle”, Tina bellowed as she pulled the blankets over her head. “And make me some coffee.”

With that I quickly rose, fed the baby, made her coffee. I even fed that ridiculous poodle, Fifi before leaving for work. I was twenty minutes into my forty minute commute and thoroughly enjoying the silence when the cell phone rang.

“Hi, Doug, it’s Carol.”

Carol is my mother in law, although most of the time she and Tina are more like twin sisters, that is to say they seem to share two halves of the same brain. They’re also both short, stout brunettes more willing to dish out shit than take any.

“Hi Ma” I replied as I narrowly avoided the semi that failed to realize I was currently in the lane he wanted. “What can I do for ya?” I hoped it would be something simple. “I just spoke to Tina and we decided tonight would be a good time for you to come over and dig out the trench around the pond. The hurricanes have made a real mess out back in the woods and obviously we don’t want the water getting up to the house. Unfortunately your father in-law can’t do it alone.”

“Listen, Carol, I’m sure it will be fine. The pond is a couple of hundred yards from the house and I have some homework to finish for class and a meeting. . .”

She couldn’t resist cutting me off, “Doug you know they’re calling for more rain this week and October is always a wet month anyway. Your family is your responsibility now and if you’re not finished school at this point in your life you’re just wasting everybody’s time and money, you’re thirty six for Christ’s sake. I’ll see you right after work.”

The phone went dead in my hand. “What the fuck?” I mumbled as I glanced at the GPS transponder mounted on the dash.

Tina had insisted on retrofitting the car with one so she could keep tabs on me, ostensibly for the purpose of tracking my fuel consumption. Just for kicks I decided today was a good day to get off of I95 one exit early. My cell rang about thirty seconds later.

“Where are you going?” Tina barked in my ear.

“Good morning Ho. How’s your morning so far?” I figured I would try to be nice.

“Well since you asked, the dog shit on the floor, and your demon-spawn son threw his breakfast on the floor. It’ll be here for you to clean up when you get home.”

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, “Do you think it’s a good idea to leave it on the floor? What if the baby tries to eat it?”

Little “D” was at the stage where everything went in his mouth with the notable exception of his food. At least he looked like me with the dark hair and light eyes. Hopefully he wouldn’t end up with my stocky physique.

“With the money you make I guess he’d better get used to it, huh? And don’t try to change the subject. Why did you get off at exit three? You know the most efficient route is to take exit four to Rt. 31. We don’t own an oil company you know.”

I could just picture her with her filthy Snoopy slippers propped up on the kitchen table. I wondered what kind of adult feels the need to wear such a thing.

“I needed a pack of smokes, you didn’t leave me any this. . .”

“I LEFT YOU TWO CIGARETTES!” She roared into the phone it was so loud the tiny speaker distorted in a cry for mercy. “We agreed you were going to quit.”

At this point she up-shifted into overdrive, “And I don’t appreciate you giving my mother an attitude, they don’t ask for help very often, so when you get home I want you to clean up this shit, get changed and get your fat ass over there to help. Got it? Goodbye.”

Mercifully she hung up on me. I swung into the Quick Check parking lot. I hated to spend the money to buy butts in Jersey, I really did, but what can ya do? When you’re out you’re out, I bought a carton. Fuck it.

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“I’m freezing my ass off” I whisper to myself.

I look down and realize my hole is probably four or five feet deep and pretty damn uniform if I do say so myself, and since no one else is talkin’ I guess that’s the bottom line, more or less. A quick glance at my watch tells me nothing, too dark. I figure I better go up and check on the baby. Just getting out of the hole is a chore and for a moment, as the wall begins to crumble in my hands, I wonder if I’m gonna be buried alive out here. Probably wouldn’t be that bad of a deal, but eventually I do get out. Making my way up the muddied path, the trees are reaching out, occasionally slapping me with their bony fingers the cobwebs caress my face, man I really hope those webs are vacant.

At long last I make it through to the patio out back with its multiple levels and hand laid stone, and glance up at the bedroom window. Little “D” loves to look out the blinds. At two years old he is infinitely curious as to the goings on out- doors. Nothing, he must still be asleep. Good. I make up a quick bottle. Sloshing through the house I make no effort to clean off my feet, in fact I ‘m taking a real pleasure in seeing my footprints, black as ink on the beige carpet. Carol was a compulsive cleaner. “Clean that ya rotten bitch.” I have to chuckle at the sound of my voice in the silence, it sounds oddly like someone else’s.

From the time he was an infant Little”D” had an odd way about him. We said he was an “old soul” because he would give us these little looks that seemed to say he had seen it all before. It was rather strange, to tell the truth. He rarely slept and when he did, just putting a blanket over him would cause him to sit up instantly, completely aware of your presence, no disorientation whatsoever. As I approached his room I peeked in through the door which was always left ajar.

“Ha da” he said through the darkness.

There was no way he could have seen me but as I peered in through the doorway I saw his tiny head staring right at me.

“Hey little guy, you’re supposed to be asleep.” I placed the bottle in the crib, “goodnight son, I’ll see you in the morning.”

I kissed the top of his head and turned to leave, I glanced back over my shoulder to see him looking back, a half grin on his face. “Ga Da” he mumbled past the bottle and lay back down.

I went out to the garage to check on my bundles, I had a duffle bag and two throw rugs to take care of. I grabbed the duffle, choosing it because of the handle, and started back through the woods. A quick glimpse over my shoulder confirmed my suspicion, Little "D" was staring out the window, the porch light illuminating his face like a maniacal jack o' lantern. I reached the hole and went back for the carpets. I arrived with the last of my luggage, so to speak, plopped to the ground and lit a smoke. I leaned back against a tree stump, the leaf of a nearby shrub licking my ear, much like our family dog would sometimes do. My heart was beating so hard it seemed like I could actually hear it, like the drums in a jungle movie, I wanted to doze but there was no time, I was already running late.

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"You're late." The minute I arrived home it started. "You should have been here fifteen minutes ago." She was pacing around the garage like a caged animal.

"There was traffic, you know traffic, when the road is occupied by too many cars the result is traffic."

I was disgusted, work had sucked, and I really didn't feel like listening to any more of this.

"Well you need to go upstairs and get the baby then we're gonna go."

I continued toward the door that connects to the family room. I noticed the handle of my floor jack lying on the concrete and paused to pick it up, I placed it on top of my shoulder.

"You don't have time to play with your tools, you play with your tools all day, probably fucking up everybody else's cars I'm sure."

She was chasing me to the door, bellowing all the way. I stopped, feeling a slight pressure in my hand as she ran into me, followed very slowly by a thud. I looked around to see her sitting on the floor holding her head; she really didn't look a bit out of place on the greasy garage floor. I was amazed for just a split second at the silence as she sat holding her head. I liked it, and I wanted more. Peace and quiet were just around the corner when Fifi began gnawing at my calf and growling incessantly, so I had to quiet him as well. A jack handle is a damn versatile tool, anywhere you need it, it will provide leverage. Up and down, a simple motion when you think about it, but you can't argue with results. Enjoying the quiet as I was, I disassembled the malfunctioning members of the household; an easy job really when you have the right tools, an air saw here a pry bar there and viola. I packed everything into the duffle bag and grabbed the baby. Then I drove over to the in-laws. Silently little "D" grinned in the rearview.

I let myself into the garage and grabbed a shovel off the wall. They must have been waiting for me because my father in-law appeared instantaneously in a black suit.

"Hey Doug," he extended his hand. "Glad you could make it. Listen I'm sorry I won't be able to help you out there but Carol forgot we're going to the symphony tonight, I hope. . ."

THWACK. a nice metallic thud. He must have been surprised, he sure looked it, all wide eyed and unblinking. I caught Carol at her dressing table; I used the cord from her hair dryer to quiet her. I rolled them up in carpets. Then I started digging.

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I squatted down to smooth the last of the dirt by hand, relishing the quiet, only the patter of the rain on the leaves and the sound of my hand on the mud to break the utter silence. It'll be at least a week before anybody misses them, I figured, hell it might even be longer. Nobody likes them. I went up to get some sleep; I really couldn't see a reason to go home. I paused just a moment to check on my son, not surprisingly he was staring right back at me.

"Goodad" he smiled.

"Good night son."

It's the funniest thing,, I swear I could feel him staring at me through the wall.

Ray Setters

Places We've Never Been

Today, I'm watching the T.V. like a time portal. It ebbs despite the newscast; through my memory. I'm thinking of you and I'm thinking for you.

It's like this, we never went to the carnival and I never won you a stuffed animal. We never walked in the rain and under trees taller than we could climb comfortably, watching as they caught the water. We never went to see a show we'd never see again, a band we'd never heard of in a place so unfamiliar to us it might as well have been a different realm. We never sat all night and talked, I never read your journal and you never read mine.

You didn't know everything about me. I let you see what I wanted you to see, the mask I wore was for protection; if you were to know everything at first you would have ran. Each fact was a seed carefully implanted at the start and it would grow to such a size that later when I was more comfortable I would uproot the plant and put the truth in. And you never would have been too upset, because it was for all the right reasons.

It was like we were a thousand miles away, or at least that's what you tried to make me think you believed. It was something we'd never grasp, us; it was like the sun and we'd be just as scorched if we would have reached. That's what you made me think, it would never be. But it was close enough, almost too close to be called far; but I ate your slippery explanation like an antidote though it was more like the poison.

I thought it'd be over, when I ended it. You thought so too, I suppose. And here I am, I'm pulling tight the vest and slipping the last button in. With every stroke, there is a nail in your coffin. I'm putting on my best black suit. Today I'm going to bury you.

There are two parts, and the first part is as good as the shovel. You breathe, you see her face, and you exhale. You feel her name slip off the tip of your tongue, where it sat behind every word. You wash your hands, and you scrub deep. When the air is gone, you can't remember why you've been sitting around so much.

The last part is when you get up and walk. You go to the closest beacon, the nearest haven for feeling good. And you never speak about her there again. It's the safe place now, it's the place where they don't know her name and they never will. And it's going down in you, her. It's sinking down somewhere deep where the sun doesn't reach anymore and when it hits the bottom you don't even hear a sound.

And, I go to switch off the T.V. I go to put on my shoes. Because, you know, it's all in my head. It's all everything I want with every breath and every thought; to be purged. And I am trying, I tried. It's there, the gas tank is full but there are no keys in the ignition.

Instead, I change the channel and the newscasters are saying your name instead of the forecast.

Tyler Anderson

Real Life

My name is Martin Spencer. You won't like me. You won't like my story.

I couldn't care less.

This isn't the line I'd use to pick up girls at a bar, of course. The line I'd use in that situation would be "Hey babe, you see that Bentley outside? It's mine, but the chauffeur won't let me drive it. Can I interest you in some Dom Perignon?"

Told you you wouldn't like me. But there are other reasons as well.

The first is that I'm just like you. Or at least I used to be. Midwestern town, middle-class school. Decent college. Morality. Family. The works. Eventually got out of college and went to work for a company. In my case it was a bank, which was logical since I'm an economist. But that's not the point. It could have been a cosmetics firm, or a teaching job, or the family hardware store or my own internet startup. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I was fairly well-to-do, unable to immediately pay off a complete mortgage or buy a yacht, but in no danger of starvation. Back then, I was you. Now, though, I could buy and sell you. I have bought and sold people just like you. And there's no use in telling me otherwise. Everyone has their price.

And there you are, rubbing your hands. You're probably thinking that I'm some sort of criminal mastermind who goes around buying and selling people. And, as soon as I finish this confession, you'll just call in the nearest cop and put me behind bars, smugly congratulating yourself and saying, "Let's see you use your money to get out of this one."

Well, sorry to disappoint you, but I've never, not once, broken the law of any country in which I've been.

So how?

I told you, I'm a banker. I have one client, and get paid five million dollars a year to make certain that he's happy. I attend maybe eight or nine meetings a year. And that's it. The rest of my time is mine to do with as I see fit. Oh, and to spend my money, of course.

And my story tells how I did it. But you can probably guess. It took hard work and sacrifice to make my fortune: I had to go to two meetings.

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Why the Popular Bank of Switzerland was based in Geneva, as opposed to Zurich, I could not say. Maybe they preferred a view of the lake and its enormous geyser to the medieval historic downtown at the end of the Bahnhofstrasse. Maybe they had a secret wish to be French. I don't know. What I do know is that Herr Zürbriggen looked German, and his English sounded German. I wouldn't have cared if he'd had a couple of extra heads and wore a pink tutu. A meeting with Zürbriggen meant that I was in. It was make-or-break time. And I had to make. This trip and this suit were too expensive to waste.

I was precisely two minutes early. He saw me precisely on time and informed me that I had ten minutes. So I told him the story of an African warlord who was controlling a major diamond-producing area and was doing his banking in the Caymans.

He wasn't particularly impressed, so I mentioned five hundred million dollars per annum and told him that his bank would have the man as a client by the end of the month if they made me happy. They made me happy, but they weren't silly about it: I would receive a bonus, enough money to live a life of extreme luxury, just as soon as those dollars had been rolling into the bank for five years. In the meantime, I would have to make do with only my five million in salary.

Oh, and I had to go negotiate things alone. They didn't like Africa. It was dangerous there.

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It was also humid. I quickly realized that the location of the blood diamond mines of Sierra Leone hadn't been chosen for its climate or the quality of its airport, which was just a couple of clapboard buildings and a three-story control tower with most of the glass shot out.

I suppose when you've got a lot of pretty rocks in the ground and poor people who are perfectly capable of, if not willing to, pull them out of the ground, you don't need to worry about the weather. Especially if you're the guy holding the guns.

Jimbo, the self-proclaimed warlord of this particular region, was the guy holding the guns. According to my research, he'd survived two civil wars, six assassination attempts and one aborted coup from within his own organization. He was more of a solid fixture than any of the neighboring governments by a large margin. His English sounded Jamaican and his armed guards were large and sweaty, but he didn't have me shot immediately. I was being given the chance to talk fast if I wanted to live. So I made my pitch, extremely conscious of one of the guards holding my arm in order to keep me from running.

He heard me out and then explained that the reason he was going to have me killed was that he'd tried taking his money to Switzerland and been turned down by two of the big banks, so I was clearly a fraud, out to take his money. And even if I wasn't, killing me would at least atone for the humiliation of the Swiss dismissal.

If he wasn't good enough for them, then shooting me might at least teach them some manners. There are some moments that define a man. This was mine. I feel that my life is defined by the fact that I was just like you, but now I'm rich beyond your dreams. And that moment was the one in which I earned my paycheck.

In a smelly, dingy hut on a torrid African day, I looked into the eyes of a man who'd killed more of his countrymen than I could count, and, holding his gaze, told him a ridiculous lie.

"The American government is studying the possibility of freezing and investigating all Cayman accounts. They might even invade like they did in Panama. I give it a fifty-fifty chance of happening. They're looking for terrorist money, of course, but I think they'll find you really interesting, don't you?"

If he'd had any information at all, I'd be dead. Too bad. I had put a price on my life, tossed the dice and won. But it could have gone either way.

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And now I'm free. I never have to worry about mortgages or car payments. Rent is a concept I don't even remember. And, with economic freedom comes the knowledge that the morality practiced by the middle classes is just a way to keep from going insane in their mediocre, cookie-cutter lives.

And don't kid yourself. I thought I was living a good life when I was poor, but now I know just how meaningless it was. And, in your heart, so do you. They say that money doesn't buy happiness. This might be true, but it does purchase the freedom to pursue it.

You don't like me. You say to yourself that it's because I knowingly contribute to slavery and genocide. But you forget that it would exist anyway, so long as people are willing to pay for products that engender it. I've broken no laws, and I'm not worried about anything. I'm just a banker. And you're just jealous.

Gustavo Bondoni

She Has...

She has a delicate rosy complexion -  
He dresses with a great deal of taste.  
If anyone inquires for us,  
say that we have gone to Mr. Querie's  
where we can be found  
the day before yesterday.  
Mapped from an historical point of view  
discoveries in lavish gold, silent silver -  
Bravo for the extended view  
the scripted globe in the horizon.  
Engraved renderings on the longitude of love  
projected on a fork-tailed mermaid -  
As on an island within a grotto  
sailing lazily towards the first edition.  
Praise crowns the landmark equator  
a graceful italic script, a waterway blue -  
On an eve with a tear in the moon invisible  
signs of the zodiac so finely tuned  
Eloquently drawn, lined with celestial borders  
pocket images overlooking optimism -  
Clarity of contemporary linens, silk edgings  
scarce yet desirable, hands interlocking.  
Embellished with five pairs of heartfelt thoughts  
they uncovered the spirit of landmarked surety -  
Scattered amidst a wilderness of reason  
soundings in and around a swirl of time  
while ushering in a maiden voyage  
they chartered a course  
of a most excellent sphere.  
At the waterfront treasure ships  
embraced their starry history of  
the tomorrows to come  
into and away....

Sherry Steiner

## America

you are a tree  
a fountainbleau  
of hypocrisy.  
forestalled in  
a foreskin  
of nobody's business -  
you drive me mad  
you drive me crazy.  
hail and farewell to  
arms, legs, lips and bellies  
full of plastic coated smiles  
and sugar daddy candies  
orchestrating  
some cantata originally composed  
for the King of Swing.  
hey are you flat out broke or what?  
redded, whited, blued.  
Flagged  
by a pale of  
somebody's indifference...

Sherry Steiner

## Please Direct Your Attention

Please direct your attention to the sign above my head that reads:

“Construction Site: Be Wary of Falling Objects.”

Sometimes when I shake my head too fast in a strong disagreeing sort of way things topple out of the window cut above my temple.

Cardboard boxes, rolled up carpets—the kind to cover the whole hardwood—scissors, sometimes all my hopes and dreams tied in one frayed knot.

Please direct your attention to the train tracks that are your life.

Are they rusted and littered with rocks? Can you step across them without falling?

I should not care about making you happy. Or you. Or some guy who walks to town every day.

Crazy outfit wearing, acid-eater. But I care. I care about your windowless heads and bells that I cannot hear. I am not a staple, little glint of metal that holds together the scribblings. Please direct your attention the mass of bodies that has accumulated by the side of the tracks. Somehow you’ve erected spikes without really trying.

This will not be good for the train either you know. But you know.

Brandi Capozzi

## The Wrath of the Lion Is the Wisdom of God\*

I tried memorizing my father's life, the morning he left for Texas, like some Baptists do The Bible. I sat atop a pile of kindling on the front porch; the sky a gross tinder, slathered with the bulging smokes of old cumulonimbus. Upon that heap, I recited what I could remember of the man: his life before me, then, what came after. In those touchstones that were my recollections of the man, his face always had the same mien: a venal countenance blurring whether anything had ever really been good.

For hours, I traced the mud of memory where his boot-prints showed in the slough: first, the toothless boy wearing a leather motorcycle jacket, searching street corners, left alone his first day of Kindergarten, then faced with his mother who came to walk him home three hours late with two apologies to serve as ample expiation; the bow-legged teenager who broke his collarbone in a back-yard football game; the Marine who met mom in a bowling alley, the evening before he leaves for a New Mexico Navajo reservation to learn the art of apothecary from a shaman. His legend dies there. Now, my sky is the color of umber, ferns and coal: a near onyx; a rodent left too long on the spit. The clouds wheeled out of their huddle, now whittled down to narrow ligatures, and framed the sky within crozzled borders. A hawk's siren bawled; the sky soon was bedighted with the outline of its slowly oscillating wings.

I watched the systole beat out across the sky, winking like candle smoke. The Stations soon followed, dying by diminishing degrees until they were but a susurrus in my mind and little was left of the man within me.

Meridians are imaginary tools employed by astronomers to measure and divide the Earth and Her systems. I am not a figment; my father told me, in various mutations on the theme, that it was my birth that divided his life into hemispheres, measuring his triumphs, and his failures. He thanked me often for reminding him how useless his life was destined to become.

Meridians don't move; I do.

My father taught me to ride a bike, throw a football, and fix an alternator; he showed me the rudiments of carpentry, how a septic tank works and the means to construct a retaining wall. As I formed out of his cobbling, I found a propinquity to Michelangelo did not exist within me: I built a fort while I was twelve years old; twenty minutes later, I received a tetanus shot after plunging my bare foot through one of about forty nail-points in the floor-boards. My aim was hardly true.

My errant precision also gives cause to replace the spark plugs and wires on a car that only necessitates its oil changed.

My father's nickname for me, which became my portmanteau while I was just thirteen years old, is "asshole."

Three days before he left for Texas, he called.

I said "Hello."

That is the last word I spoke to him for five months.



He said, “I was a great man – you think I’m a pile of shit because I lost the house and have no money, but let me tell you, before you, I was a great man. I did everything I could to make you like me. You just don’t give a fuck; you could care less whether I live or die. The man I was before you-” He paused, then, went on, “--I am what I am now because of you, asshole. Do you hear me? If I am a piece of shit, then it is because of you, pigfucker. You are a fucking plague. You shrunk me to nothing, asshole. You good for nothing sonovabitch.”

He execrated one last ‘fuck’ as he, undoubtedly, slammed the telephone down on the cradle. The distance of it, the echo and the muddled dissonance rang stagnant against my own breathing, throttling in my ear, sounded as if he was talking to someone else, other than his son.

Not me.

Perhaps, he was.

I went on for those five months; sifting through everything I could to thwart my notion that I had indeed cursed the man. The drought of that recanting ossified the man into something I could now see and touch, more animate than when I lived in the same house with he and my mother. It was as if, while I grew older, retracted myself into my own life, and gained distance from his tirades, our lives somehow tangled, as much as the bear’s survival is relieved against the hunter’s immitigable proclivity that conquest over his wilderness is remittance towards his humanity. My father and I talked only when I called mom or drove out to their house, but the man loomed over me as an albatross, though I gainsay ever having the desire to extirpate my father from my life – should he be a cross to bear, then let him be mine and mine alone. There is no other who should carry that stone.

He is my father and the child I was, ordained to his keep, now was the man who was to fortify him. I found neither tablets nor tacit covenant adumbrating this theory; my own life seemed to deign it as such for me.

Summer did pass into Autumn and it was Winter before I quit cobbling my father out of his gospels. The inky branches of Pin Oaks and Sugar Maples, dappled with a glaze of snow, stood loosed of all their leaves. A wind rattled about in the boughs. The snow swarmed about me like moths as I stepped through the ditch’s slough. It was a Saturday and my wife was at work, finishing up what redacting of correspondence the day before had not allowed. I needed cigarettes. My phone rang in my pocket and I lifted it out, hoping she was calling. I read the telephone number on the screen as he had given it to me: 216- Matt Bahr/Don Strock – Lou Groza/Vince Costello. Perhaps he envisioned it his ‘charm’ that he should recite telephone numbers in concord with retired Cleveland Browns’ jersey numbers. I remember our family’s first telephone number as being 216-Al Gross/Max Runager – Dick Schafrath/Dick Schafrath. He kept with him these jersey numbers of old Browns players as was his wont to eschew my mother’s three suicide attempts during the better seasons of weal.

Her first two suicide attempts were through an overdose of Synthroid, a medication prescribed to balance her levels of protein. The last, three years ago, was razor blades drug perpendicularly across her wrist. She hadn't the heart to plunge the blade that deep. I drove my mom to the hospital that morning, after wrapping each of her wrists wrapped in tourniquets made of Ace bandages. As we drove, she kept her head bowed; her body crumpled in the seat next to mine. A dot of blood stained the towelings like a stigmata or the meager hemorrhage of a beheaded titmouse. The thrums of her pule, chiming in tune to our trundling. She intoned an unceasing liturgy of "I'm sorry" as if she were canting to a God who was about to cauterize the sun and depart from it. My own road blurred. I wiped tears from her cheeks with my forefinger. I left my own. Her head lolled onto my shoulder. She wailed. I wrapped my free arm around her, then, drove blind.

I brought mom home two mornings later. She slept for hours and I sat in her bedside rocking chair while she did so, watching her. My father stayed in the basement through it all; I learned to stop hailing him after the first time I found my mother: you don't get a second chance to look up. I wondered why mom stayed with him; she had a better chance of survival if she got out on her own. The scar on each of her wrists healed into the shape of a cross. She quit saying her Rosary. She left my father and went to live with her brother, Anthony, in Newton Falls after my father hurled a chamber pot through the kitchen window, proclaiming, "You are fucking lucky you stepped out of my way."

My wife and I spent the following Christmas in Newton Falls, Ohio, an hour of drivetime into the east. Come Christmas Eve, while Sophia and Anthony slept on the living room floor, my mom, wrapped with an afghan and ensconced in a fauteuil she had skinned with foam padding and brown leather, broached the reason with me as to why she cut herself the last time.

"May I tell you something?"

"Anything."

She groped about in the darkness between us, the darkness that fell upon her.

"Do you mind if I turn the sound down?"

I nodded.

"I love Mario Lanza, but I can't think when he's singing, and I need to think right now."

"Ok."

"Ok."

Her eyes began to tear; her lips quivered. Lanza's vibrato dimmed and my mother's hands fell with the drift of feathers into the center of a shape on the afghan that looked like an axe-head. A crown of pale ringed her left finger. The cords of her metatarsals flexed in her feet.

"I answered the doorbell and a policeman was standing on the front porch. He took off his hat; I thought he was coming to tell us you died, Daniel. You weren't home – I didn't know what to think."

“I don’t know why, but I kept the storm door shut. What did I think he was going to do? I had no idea...I had no idea.”

My hands and feet went numb.

“He asked if I was Mrs. Marie Soris. Of course, I said ‘yes.’ He told me that a woman was reported missing to the Chillicothe police by her daughter. He told me this woman was evidently engaged – engaged, that’s how he put it – in a relationship with my husband. He told me the daughter found a suicide note that mentioned your father. He told me the woman was missing for fifty-two hours and they were concerned she might be ‘en route’ to our house.”

“Where was dad?”

She didn’t answer my question. She didn’t need to.

My mother went on to say the officer gave her his personal cell phone number. There was already a squad car scheduled to make routine checks on my parents’ house every thirty minutes.

“I didn’t even think to be upset about him having an affair; I was almost relieved that he had.”

My mother grew up Catholic; I kept to Buddhism. She told me it was a Friday that found the police on her doorstep in the morning, and her brother setting her bags in his Jeep that evening. She said she began that Friday as all other Friday mornings save for one: the day of my birth. She began to recite her rosaries as she always had: in the bathroom, beginning with marking upon her forehead the sign of the Cross; an Our Father on the first rose-bead, a Hail Mary on the next three rose-beads; then, she gave glory to The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, thereupon, she was to mark the Mystery, then give another Our Father.

She said, “Daniel, I could not for the life of me remember the Mystery. Whether it was The Agony, The Scourge, The Crown, I could not say. I had been offering rosary since I was confirmed, Daniel – why that day I did not have it in my mind, the Mystery, I still can’t say. It burns me, even now. Tuesdays and Fridays are always the Sorrows; I don’t know which Sorrow is today. I’ve lost it all. I can’t remember The Joyful, The Luminous, or The Glorious, either. Maybe that’s a good thing, but I don’t know. All I can say is, that day, I was happy I had the strength to leave. I’m sorry Daniel, so sorry, that I could not have had that strength for both of us and leave sooner. I will never...”

Again, her awful puling and into it I raised, then walked over to her, stooping to kiss her eyes, which were lidded by trembling veils of skin, as sheer as muslin. She touched the top of my crown. I sat at her feet. That night, we both were blind.

She told me the police called my father later that same Friday afternoon – before he threw the chamber pot, and before she had the resolve to walk away from him - to say the Highway Patrol found the woman. She was asleep in her car on I-271, just outside of Granger Township. In her possession was a pistol and directions to mom and dad’s house.

I crossed the highway and walked to the lee side of the convenient store. I let his phone-call go to voice mail, then retrieved it after lighting a cigarette. His message was brief, but decisive, "The Texas thing didn't work out so well. I'm in Tennessee. I need to stop by your house. I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

I bought a pack of his Marlboros along with my own Pall Malls.

My wife arrived home before I did. The pane of the sliding glass patio door was fogged with steam. I stepped down the cinder blocks, then bent to the concrete floor. I dumped my cigarette in the water-logged garbanzo bean can, full of floating tarred cigarette butts and two acorns. The snow throttled harder, then melted when it touched the concrete. The wind galled such a maelstrom, the trees bent in our front yard, bowed, and touched the earth. I crouched within the theatre of the retaining walls, erected on three sides, to stave off the sloping of earth's natural inclination. I unlaced my steel-toed boots and hulled my feet out of their hold. Under a folding chair I set them, and in my socks, I then stood and stepped to the door whereupon, with my forefinger, I etched "I love you" into the steam and knocked on the glass. The clatter of tin upon the linoleum and her laughter preceded her eyes that, through the dark of the living room, dilated, until they set between the borders of the warped chevron. Her cheeks swelled like the bladder of a football filling with air; the chestnut of her eyes softened. She unlocked the door. She slid it open with both hands upon the handle. "I missed you," she said. I put a foot through the threshold and she coiled herself around me, kissing my neck. Her soft mewling.

"Hi."

"Hi. Where were you?"

"I'm sorry. I thought I'd be back before you came home"

Her breath pooled around my nape and chilled me. She sat her chin on my shoulder, her hands clasped over my coccyx. In the corner of the room, a wicket of spider webs laced their silk. Taken together, they had the dimensions of a hornet's nest.

The warmth of her stoked my bones. I slipped my hand inside her sweater and traced the articulation of her tailbone through her skin.

She shivered, then giggled.

She stepped back and I followed. Reaching behind me with a free hand, I grabbed the door handle and sealed us off from the cold.

Her father's refurbished antique General Electric wood-cabinet radio played that afternoon's Ohio State football game. The amber glow of the shortwave dial shone below the spider webs.

She kissed me on the cheek, then looked at my feet. "Your socks are ridiculous. It's actually that you're wearing holes, connected by patches of wool."

"My feet stay warm. They must be doing something down there."

The essence of squash, mushrooms, peppers and onions wafted out of the kitchen. The boiling water warbled like pinnipeds.

I hung her father's wool coat in the closet, then walked into the kitchen.

"May I help you?"

"Nope. I'm just stirring this and waiting for the kettle to blow. How was your day?"

"Fine. Yours?"

"I worked on a Saturday," she raised an eyebrow and curled a half-grin at me, "so I think that says everything about how my day went."

My father came to our wedding last September alone, wearing cowboy boots and a red tie. I told him he looked good and healthy while lending my hand for him to shake. He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets, looked quizzically at me and said, "Are you fucking serious?"

He stayed through supper at our reception, and was the first to leave. He said Ohio State was playing USC in a half an hour and we offered no television for our guests. I apologized for our effrontery and impudence. He said, "It's alright."

Sophia and I finished her stew; leaving our dishes and glasses on the floor, we stretched out on the couch, turning on the television. We stayed through the night on the couch, she, lulled to sleep by my heartbeat which bled into her through the ear that lay upon my chest. Her hair smelled of persimmon and cloves; her pale fingers tucked under her chin. I wanted so to tell her about the old man and his impending visit. The television ran flickering scenes of a black and white film we hadn't been watching, but that I should become interested in it, when all I wanted was to sleep. I drifted into a last, latent remembrance of my father and wrapped my arms around my wife, praying I might find rest.

My father and I had spent that morning in the long ago chopping wood. The strata of fog was layered about us, thick and dense, like iron. The hilt of the ax bloomed such a semé of callous on my hand palms, I could not close my hands into a fist once we finished. I was thirteen years old. When we had enough firewood, the old man and I transferred our attention to the oil pan on his car. He gave me a tool-kit to hold, asking if I remembered each tool's name as he had termed them. I told him I did. He said, "When I ask for a crescent wrench, I better get a crescent wrench, asshole." He slipped under the car, mewling like a dog cursed with its ardor. I set the tools at my feet and stepped back.

With my feet, I slid him the tools as he asked for them; I was right every time. He was wrong in his calculations. He put a crescent wrench, socket wrench and hacksaw through the three windows in the garage; he broke the drywall with his fist. We drove out to the parts store, he, keeping to his "fucks," "shits" and "cunts" as my mother once kept her faith. En route the second time, he throttled with such fury and disdain, that, while driving the highway, he wrought his hand into a fist and began pummeling his temple with the shorn knuckles of his right hand. He steered the car with his left hand, swerving through the empty lanes of the road. I thanked him, silently, for having the mind to not alternate hands, as a skilled pugilist would. A vent opened in his skull skin; blood hemorrhaged from it. A poultice of oil and blood splattered on the windshield.

His face paled and his eyelids fluttered. I don't know why, but I slid to the floor mat and gripped the seatbelt. His foot sunk the accelerator and the car roared. I closed my eyes.

The claxon of a car-horn seared my mind as its squealing bloomed about my dad and me, then, died out. He set the car on the road-side. I watched him twist his body so he could look out the rear window, forgetting he was still buckled in to his seat. He thrust his fist between the headrests while his middle finger went rigid and snapped to attention. He yelled, "Mother fucker."

Sweat lathered his face; a bulb of spittle oozed down his lip. He turned back, then spotted me on the floor. His eyes narrowed. A spangle of teeth ruptured out from under his lip and sunk into his chin flesh; a crackle as they pushed through stubble.

"Nothing fucking happened. Why are you fucking cowering like that?. I never would have hurt you; if you tell your mother about this, then I'll have a fucking reason."

Mother, I remember the Sorrow.

After we woke the next morning, Sophia and I sat at the kitchen table, drinking tea. Her eyes peered out over the rim of the cup that blocked out her face; loose veins of steam lifted as if from séance.

"I'm not leaving here today."

"Just go on and I'll drive out later if I can."

"No," she said, "I won't do to that. You need me here today. I'll call them and say we had a change of plans."

"I don't want to do that, Sophia."

"That's fine, honey; you won't do it. I will."

Through the Christmas ferns he came: gaunt shouldered, tanned through to his weathervane trellis of a skeleton, elbows sharp and unhinged. A white t-shirt gone yellow, watermarked by sweat. His eyes were pale as cut bone. The bloat of his gut with soda and tar made him look malnourished. He trundled, in battered leather brogans that opened their stitch-work around the toes, through the glaze of snow and fieldstones in the yard. The smoke from his cigarette plumed alongside his skull like a shouldered sword. He stepped down the cinder blocks. The crunch of dead leaves underfoot.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

“I thought I could make it back from Columbus. I ran out of money in Chillicothe.”

“Ok.”

“Is that all?”

“Meaning what?”

“You sure are some kind of asshole. Do you want me to get down on my fucking knees and beg you for fifty bucks? Is that what you want?”

“I didn’t ask you to cadge for anything.”

“What the fuck? Speak like a god damn human being for once - fool yourself.”

He threw his cigarette on the concrete, hacking into his fist. The hiss of embers dying in the snow.

“Where’s your coat?”

“I was in fucking Texas, asshole. Do you think I needed a winter coat down there?”

I slipped my old field-coat off and passed it to him. He took it without a word.

“Where is she?” I stepped aside as I saw him peering through patio door. He lowered his head, stuffing his hands in his coat pockets.

“She doesn’t want see her old father-in-law?” he said, laughing as if he were a relict of vaudeville.

I didn’t answer.

“She was a lunatic. I had to come back.”

“Ok.”

“Do you want to know what she did?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I won’t brook your including me in talking about her.”

“You are a fuckin’ piece of work.”

“Mom’s fine by the way.”

“I didn’t ask”

“I know.”

Before he took out another cigarette, I pulled a one-hundred dollar bill, balled up like a hedge-hog, from my pants pocket, and stuffed it in the chest pocket of his coat.

Handing him the pack of Marlboros, I asked, “Do you need food?”

“No. You know the house was sold at auction?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I don’t know where I’m going now.”

Do any of us, I whispered to myself.

“What the fuck did you say, asshole?”

“Nothing.”

His right shoulder went into a spasm, then stilled. He balanced on his right foot, then stepped with his left. His little hand curled into a fist alongside his knee, the sclera healing into a jaundiced crimson.

He stopped and said, “I crucify myself everyday – everyday. I’ve failed at being a father, thanks to you; I’ve failed at being a husband, thanks to your mother. What else is there now for me? I gave up everything thanks to you and your mother. What can I return to right now? There is nothing, nothing about me that can defend against anything - nothing that I can do will set up defense against a life that is designed to kill me.”

“Life does that dad – it kills everyone.”

“Don’t you fucking dare lump yourself in with me, asshole.”

“I’m surely not; trust me, I’m not. My life is far different from yours, so too, will be my death.”

“You are a fucking asshole.”



“I take that as a compliment coming from you.”

His rage wore him. Sophia’s shadow fell upon the man and he looked past me.

“I was a Marine and a fucking great man before your mother fucked that up. I wanted to go and do something worthy of adulation with my life; instead, I married a bitch and fathered an asshole. You could do nothing like I showed you; you just fucked everything I gave you up. You two are plagues on me – absolute plagues.”

He was gone before I turned back around to face him.

The faint impression of his boot-prints in the yard, dimmed under the snow.

It is now seven moons of this year since we spoke last. I don’t know where my father sleeps; I don’t know if he sleeps at all. His phone number is disconnected. If he is in this world, I will never know. I can’t find him in my own face that is hirsute, overgrown with whiskers and unkempt hair. My eyes are my own. My hands are my own. My feet are my mother’s.

I will never know the hurt of a wife, the hurt of a woman trespassed against, but I understand the woe incurred upon one whose world entire is abandoned by he who avows to protect it. I understand why my mother quit her praying and Rosary canticles: God occupied myth in that moment as much as did Lot, Cain, and my father, who is Allen James Soris, Junior.

The awful liturgy that I retained from his vespers: my father is more a myth than Jonah and The Whale; Moses and his Ark; Cain and Abel; Lazarus, and the Four Horsemen. They dwell in artifact, emblem, and hyperbole, ostensibly, standing in for something that can not be measured and recounted within the dimensions of this environ, an ineffability that only parable may act as apt summation. If the life of that man is a myth, than what becomes of my life, of my mother’s life? Are we as much allegory and lore as he? Perhaps it is easier to make a fable out of our collected and joined lives, than assail myself in keeping to that tenet – he is my father – or ever asking the simple question to my mother: why?

Father, when we are drowning, we do not sprout gills; when we are falling, we do not sprout wings. Why do you stand as a meadowlark while the sky is on fire? Why do you crawl like a gudgeon when the rivers have all run dry? Why do you not gird against the fury with your gaunt shoulders, your sallow eyes, and bowed legs?

Why will you never trust that to be enough?

Now, I know why.

Alight off the Cross, old man. I could use the wood for the stove.

*\*lyric from William Blake’s The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Paul Skyrn

## Why Some Pumpkins Cry

Simone held her breath and tilted the baby blue candle so that the wax dripped out. It landed in an oozing trail just below the left eye on the freshly carved jack-o-lantern, and she blew on it to make it cool faster. When she felt satisfied, she tilted the candle again underneath the right eye before stepping back to admire her work.

The jack-o-lantern stared up at her through teary eyes, its crooked, gap-toothed smile now looking more like a grimace. Satisfied with the change in its appearance, Simone put the candle back inside the pumpkin from where she'd gotten it and turned around just in time to see her older sister, Elizabeth, step onto the porch.

"See my costume, Simone? The blood on my face looks real, doesn't it? Aunt Nora said I look too bloody for an eight-year-old, but Uncle Ralph said it's perfect. Don't you think it's scary?"

"The blood doesn't look real," Simone said. "It's too red."

"Blood is supposed to be red, Silly Simone. But you wouldn't know that because you're just a little kid. Why aren't you wearing your costume yet?"

"I don't want to go trick-or-treating as an angel again. It's no fun. I want to be scary like you."

"Well, you're only seven," Elizabeth said. "But maybe next year when you're eight like me, Aunt Nora will let you be a zombie too."

Simone didn't answer. Elizabeth kept glancing at the jack-o-lantern so Simone had to keep swaying from side to side to keep her older sister from seeing it. She knew Elizabeth would tell their aunt and then Simone would have to explain why she'd made it look like it was crying. She was tired of explaining why all the time. Like the time she'd taken a photo of herself and Elizabeth and painted on it.

"Why did you paint yourself blue, Simone?" Aunt Nora had asked. "Didn't you think you looked pretty enough?"

When she didn't answer right away, Elizabeth had chimed in. "And why did you paint me orange? I hate orange."

Unable to resist, Simone had whispered. "Because you want attention."

But she wished she hadn't said so because that only made them ask more questions. What made her think that Elizabeth wanted attention? Why did orange mean that? And if orange meant that Elizabeth wanted attention, then what did blue mean?

"Silly Simone, why do you keep moving like that?" Elizabeth asked. "Come on," she grabbed Simone's hand. "Let's go find your costume."

An hour later, Simone was wearing a white dress that came to her knees, white panty hose, a pair of white, see-through wings, and had a silver halo attached as a headband hovering above her head. Aunt Nora had used baby powder to make her face look “soft and pretty” and then applied some red lipstick. Simone couldn’t imagine a more ridiculous looking angel, and she said so too.

“But you look beautiful,” Aunt Nora said. “You should be more confident.”

“Angels don’t really look like this, you know,” Simone said.

“What makes you say that?”

Again with the questions. Simone turned away from the mirror. “I don’t know,” she mumbled. “I just don’t think so.”

Aunt Nora stared at her for a long moment before finally smiling. “You know, your mother once told me that angels looked like the clear blue sky.” Her smile faded a little. “She wasn’t the same person after your father left.”

Simone looked up at her aunt. “Is that why you ask so many questions?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes.” Simone nodded.

Aunt Nora knelt down and took Simone’s hands. “I’m sorry,” she said, and then added, “But even if you don’t look like a real angel, you still look like an angel to me.”

Simone’s face brightened and she gave her Aunt Nora a hug. Together, they went down stairs and got Elizabeth, and then the three of them got in the car to go trick-or-treating. Simone never really liked Halloween. She couldn’t figure out why she had to say “trick or treat” because when the people didn’t answer, she never played a trick on them. And even though Elizabeth wanted to, Aunt Nora wouldn’t let her.

They drove through town, zigzagging through streets, one block after the next. “Trick or treat,” they’d say, and smiling adults would throw Snickers, Milky Way, Three Muskateers, and M&Ms into their pillowcases. Elizabeth screamed for the car to go faster to the next block, and Simone just rolled her eyes.

When they reached the end of a long street, Aunt Nora pulled the car over. “Elizabeth, keep an eye on your little sister,” she said. “This road forms a U-shape, so you can go down this road, follow the bend around, and then I’ll pick you up at the end of the next road, OK?”

“All right, all right,” Elizabeth said, already stepping out of the car. “Come on, Simone. Hurry up.”

Elizabeth grabbed her hand and they ran to the first house. While they waited for the people to answer the door, Simone glanced down the road and saw that all the porch lights were lit except for one house way down at the end. After getting full-sized Hershey bars from an old lady, the ran to the next house, and then the next after that.

“Isn’t this great?” Elizabeth asked. “These people really give good candy.”

“Yeah,” Simone agreed and looked into her pillowcase to see at least five full-sized candy bars on the top.

So they continued down the street, getting either full or even king-sized chocolate bars from each of the houses until they came to the one whose porch light wasn’t turned on.

“Let’s just skip this one, Elizabeth,” Simone said. “They’re probably not there.”

“That’s why I wanna check,” Elizabeth replied, smiling through the fake stitches and blood on her face.

“No,” Simone insisted and grabbed her sister’s arm. “Please, Elizabeth?”

“Be quiet, Silly Simone,” Elizabeth said and jerked her arm away. “I’m older, I know what I’m doing. If you’re too scared, then just wait by the mailbox.”

Dropping her pillowcase on the ground, Simone crossed her arms over her chest while Elizabeth walked up the porch steps. She knocked but no one answered.

“I told you no one was home!”

Elizabeth turned around long enough to stick her tongue out at Simone and then knocked on the door again. This time when no answer came, Elizabeth stepped back from the door.

“Come on, let’s go,” Simone called.

“No,” Elizabeth said. “It’s trick or treat, and I didn’t get a treat.”

“But Aunt Nora said you weren’t allowed to play tricks.”

Elizabeth smiled once again. “But Aunt Nora’s waiting for us at the end of the road where she won’t be able to see.”

“I’ll tell!”

“No, you won’t, Silly Simone, or I’ll beat you up.”

Simone stood at the mailbox, not sure whether she wanted to pull her sister’s hair or cry, while Elizabeth tiptoed over to the neighbor’s house and stole one of the jack-o-lanterns off the porch. This, she carried back to the house where nobody was home.

“What are you going to do?” Simone asked.

“Just watch and see,” Elizabeth replied, and lifted the pumpkin over her head.

It slammed down on the wooden porch and burst into pieces with a sickening thud that Simone could barely hear over the sound of her big sister's laughing. She couldn't take it anymore.

"Elizabeth, you idiot! I'm telling Aunt Nora!"

Not waiting to see or hear her sister's response, Simone darted around the bend.

"Don't you dare!" Elizabeth shouted from behind her.

Already Simone could hear her sister's boots slamming off the gravel road behind her. Elizabeth had always been the fastest, so instead of running straight for the end of the road, Simone ran between some bushes in front of one of the houses and cut across the lawn to the backyard. She wouldn't go straight to Aunt Nora because Elizabeth would get there first and probably make up some story. All Simone really wanted to do was go home, and she knew that would take awhile. It was at least ten blocks, maybe more. Still, she had to be careful in case Elizabeth was still chasing her, so she ran through people's yards instead of going on the sidewalks.

Why did Elizabeth have to do that? It was just a pumpkin. It hadn't done anything to her. And what if the candle caught the porch on fire? Then they'd be in real trouble.

Simone ran past houses decorated with orange and purple lights. Some had fake spider webs on them, others had ghosts hanging from trees. And some were dark, undecorated, and uninviting. Her legs felt heavy, like she was running through water, but she kept going. Her street was just ahead.

When her house came into view, she saw that the porch light was still on and the jack-o-lantern still lit, but the driveway was empty. She figured that maybe Uncle Ralph had gone out looking for her and it made her feel a little sad. She'd been hoping he was still home so she could tell him what happened.

With nothing else to do, she sat on the porch next to her pumpkin, its baby blue tears still frozen in place, eternally dripping down the orange face. She knew how it felt. This was the worst Halloween she'd ever had. And she since she'd left her pillowcase on the side walk, she didn't even have any candy to show for it.

The minutes passed. Simone didn't have a watch, but she could see that the candle inside the pumpkin had gotten lower. When were they going to come home? She thought she could cry but she didn't really want to, so instead she lay down next to the jack-o-lantern and watched the candle inside flicker each time she breathed out. The candle had almost burnt itself out by the time someone came home. Simone lifted her head when she saw the headlights, and a moment later, Aunt Nora stepped out of the car. Elizabeth wasn't with her.

"Simone, thank God!" she said, running up the porch steps and pulling Simone into a hug. "We were so worried about you! Why did you run away?"

Simone clung to her aunt as tight as she could and didn't answer. But Aunt Nora pulled away after a minute or two.

“You know better than that.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Nora,” Simone said. “But Elizabeth was going to beat me up, so I ran home.”

“Why was Elizabeth going to beat you up? She told me you accidentally broke someone’s pumpkin.”

“That’s not true.” Simone’s indignation flared. “She broke the pumpkin and it wasn’t an accident. And then she said if I told she’d beat me up, so I ran away.”

Simone scooted away from her aunt and crossed her arms. She just knew this was going to happen. Elizabeth got away with everything.

“I see,” Aunt Nora said, and she really did look like she was thinking about it. “Come here, Simone.”

Simone hesitated.

“You’re not in trouble,” Aunt Nora reassured her. “I just want to talk to you and I don’t want to have to yell across the porch. Please?”

Reluctantly, Simone approached her aunt and sat down next to her, but for a long time, Aunt Nora didn’t say anything. She looked really sad though.

“I hate Halloween,” Simone admitted.

For some reason, that made Aunt Nora smile. “Your mother never liked it either. She said it was too silly.”

“Maybe that’s why I don’t like it either.”

Aunt Nora nodded and looked away. Her eyes fell on the pumpkin. “Did you do that?” she asked, tracing the tears with her index finger.

Simone nodded.

“Why?”

“Because the pumpkin’s sad,” Simone said.

“But it’s smiling,” Aunt Nora said. “How can you tell it’s sad?”

Simone looked away from her aunt’s curious eyes. “You’re asking too many questions again.”

This time Aunt Nora laughed. “Your mother used to tell me that too.”

“She did?”

“Yeah,” Aunt Nora said. “She used to call me Nosy Nora when we were little.”

“Like Elizabeth.”

“What do you mean?”

“She calls me Silly Simone sometimes.”

Aunt Nora patted Simone’s hand. “I’ll have to talk to her about that.”

“It’s all right,” Simone said. “I don’t mind. It makes her feel like the big sister.”

They fell into silence for a while, and Aunt Nora looked sad again. Simone wondered where Uncle Ralph and Elizabeth were, but she didn’t want to ask. Finally, Aunt Nora looked up again.

“Do you know why I ask you so many questions, Simone?”

“You wanna know why Mommy jumped.” Simone’s reply surprised herself. But as soon as she said it, she figured it was probably right.

Twin tears trailed down Aunt Nora’s face, almost the same way they did on the jack-o-lantern, and she pulled Simone into a hug.

“That’s true,” she whispered. She held Simone in a deep hug for a long time and didn’t let go until Simone started to fidget. When they separated, Aunt Nora held Simone’s shoulders and looked into her eyes.

“Please tell me why the pumpkin is crying.”

Simone looked at the waxy tears again as she thought about it, trying to figure out how to explain what she felt.

“It’s crying because someone took out its heart,” she heard herself say. “And it’s smiling because that’s what people expect.” She looked into her aunt’s teary eyes. “I think Mommy might’ve felt the same way when Daddy left.”

“Simone...” Aunt Nora said, crying freely now. But she didn’t get to finish her sentence because Uncle Ralph’s car pulled into the driveway and Elizabeth jumped out.

“There you are,” Elizabeth shouted and gave Simone a hug. “I knew you were OK.”

She handed Simone a pillowcase full of candy. “Uncle Ralph took me trick-or-treating some more, and I brought your pillowcase with me and got you more candy too.”

Simone smiled and Uncle Ralph lifted a finger. “What do you tell your sister, Simone.”

“Thank you for the candy, Elizabeth,” she said and gave her sister another hug, forgetting all about the smashed pumpkin.

Elizabeth grinned and ran in the house. “I’m gonna go count mine,” she said as the screen door crashed shut behind her.

Aunt Nora stood up and Uncle Ralph saw the tears on her face.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her.

Aunt Nora shook her head. “Nothing,” she said. “I was just thinking about something.” She gave Simone a wink on her way inside.

Alone on the porch again, Simone picked up her pillowcase full of candy and climbed to her feet. She glanced at the crying pumpkin, watching the shadows dance across the porch as the candle inside fluttered. She took a deep breath, bent down, and blew the candle out, before following her family inside.

Stephanie Kraner



## The Fine Curve of the Moon

Were it not for Peter's sudden slide away from himself, Maggie would have eluded the voices for the rest of her life. But when Peter was lost to her, and the scaffolding that they had erected together collapsed, her carefully constructed life, not strong enough to stand on its own, crumbled to dust.

She had forgotten about the voices when Peter first fell sick. She thought her fear was that of the faithful and devoted wife who sees her husband lying in bed and prays for his healing and well-being; that the dread sinking into her stomach was for his death, not for the silence that swirled around the room. But her apprehension was for herself. She knew, though she had forgotten, that the silence held memories, held voices, and when Peter's voice vanished, when he no longer held back the emptiness with his laughter and easy, endless talk, then it began to fill with the other voices.

The illness struck like an earthquake: he was talking and laughing when suddenly he dropped to his knees, then lay upon the ground, all curled around himself. At first the doctors thought he would recover, that he would slowly improve until one day he would get out of bed and resume his life as it had been. But though his body healed, he was no longer Peter: he was changed, altered, removed from her. Everything that made Peter, Peter, was taken from him, from her, and the little that remained was silent and staring. Sometimes she could see a glimmer of him; he might raise one hand in a familiar gesture, or quirk an eyebrow in just the same way he used to. But always it dropped away and he subsided again into a child who was a man, Peter who was not Peter. His face lay slack upon his skull: his eyes vacant. And he was silent. For years he had filled their lives with talking and laughter and noise. He had filled any room he entered with himself -- loud, laughing, big -- but now he didn't talk, didn't look at her. He just drifted, looking at things beyond the walls, staring at the stable, at the barn, gazing beyond the herd of cattle to something only he could see. All that was Peter had vanished and regardless of whether he had retreated behind a wall that neither he nor she could breach, or whether the waves of his illness had wiped clean the sands of his mind, there was no difference to her. She was neither wife nor widow, left alone in the great silence.

Even the farm, barn and fields and flocks visible from his bedroom window, failed to rouse him. When he bought it, several decades of farming by those who cared only for what could be raised for a profit had stripped the soil and left it little more than a delicate skin through which erupted, here and there, weeds, wiry and thin. Guided more by intuition and an affinity for growing things than by knowledge, he had slowly restored the land. All of the farm responded to his love: the earth grew black and rich; the crops bent toward him as he walked by, as flowers grow toward the sun; the cows gave more milk for him than for anyone else, and they lowed peacefully as he walked among them. He knew when to cut the wheat and how to prune the apple trees, just as he knew how to move his own hand to lift a glass of water. Without him, though, the crops withered and the livestock wasted. Perhaps they were mourning him. Perhaps they just weren't as well cared for without him. Perhaps both: the farm felt his absence keenly.

His absence cut her more sharply yet, for still more than the soil and the crops and the animals, his patient attention had restored her, half a lifetime ago. After their tragedy, he had been isolated by his own grief, stripped bare of any sense of her. But even more than the farm had, Maggie had once responded to his touch by growing in fertility, and his connection to her, still strong despite his sorrow, drew his attention irresistibly. When he looked at her a few months later, her skin had grown so thin that it seemed her spirit erupted through in scraggly patches, the wiry ropes of suffering pulsating about her. The change in her, the pain of her, shocked him from his mourning. He knew, even without her telling him, that something greater underlay her portion of their shared grief. He reached out to her with fingers that knew how to tend the frightened and the weak, and he worked to remove the great coils of pain that encircled her. She whispered to him, her voice thick and slow in her darkness, and he saw that the voices had come to her, that they came into the emptiness, the silence. He grasped her tightly, for she wanted to surrender to them, to walk off into that blackness. He realized that when the two of them spoke together, when they put away their reserve and reluctance to break the silence so newly laid upon their home, when they talked the voices fell silent. He dedicated himself to filling the emptiness with words, with laughter, with music, with anything that would protect her and hide her from them.

So the voices had receded, they had waned until not even the memory of their cries existed for her. But the fear remained, and the thinness of her skin: she shied from quiet and stillness, though she craved the peace of a room with no talk. As a child, she had loved to stand in the middle of the forest and feel the weight of that stillness pressing upon her, the breath of the trees filling her ears. But the woods frightened her now, though she did not know why. Or perhaps she thought she was simply too busy to seek them out, though she missed them and longed to return. It was a strange life; surrounded by words and thoughts and music while she felt herself overfull, unable to find her own thoughts, her own memories in the flood. She yearned for that emptiness and yet part of her knew that within it lay death. She could not have it, though she longed for it.

Had she allowed herself to remember the voices, she would have thought they had gone away for good, so completely had she and Peter locked them from her life. But when the first quiet echo surfaced after Peter finally fell silent, so too did some of the memories, and she knew that the ragged chorus would return to cry for her again.

They crept in around the edges, calling to her quietly. She might hear a whisper in the moment of stillness before she fell asleep, or a distant echo while she fed the chickens. In time they grew louder, bolder. They didn't scuttle around in the shadows but came and went as they pleased. There was nothing left that was untouched by their grasping fingers. She had nothing left of herself. She felt that everyone around her must hear those voices emanating from her like a miasma, a stench. They must hear her get up in the morning and go to bed at night, and when she walked through town, the voices preceded her and followed her and surrounded her, warning all those who would come close. Meals were made and clothes washed though she had no awareness of doing either. They were there every moment, calling for her, drawing her to them.

Her days and nights were filled with the calling and the crying and the unbridled wailing of children gripped by pain and fear. Children lost without their mother, a mother who could not come to them, who did not come, who now can never come to them. "Mommy, Mommy, please Mommy. I need you. Mommy, where are you? Mommy, help me. Mommy? Mommy!"

Three days before the wheat was to be harvested, Maggie was in her bedroom trying to sing. It used to be that she and Peter would spend most of their evenings singing together, his heavy baritone rumbling below her reedy soprano. They sang hymns mostly, and some other old songs they each learned in childhood. Maggie had tried to keep up the singing in the recent months, for she had found that singing and reciting great swaths from the Bible were the only way to block out the voices now that she had no one to talk with. But this evening the four walls seemed to press together and the light felt thin, filtered through the muslin curtains. Her lungs cried out for fresh air, air that had not been trapped in that one room for years, filling slowly with dust. She found herself on her feet, fumbling with the front door and then finally out, pelting down the path and across the lane as if she were pursued by something real. In the middle of the wheat field she paused, panting, when a sudden gust of wind struck her full in the face and stifled her breath. Her running had jogged loose her hair so that instead of being pinned tightly to her head it whipped and swirled around her, lifting above her like tongues of fire leaping about her head.

And everything stopped.

Even the voices were stilled for a moment, as if the wind held open a space for her where only she existed and where she could share in some of its freedom. In that time, she knew that she could not go on as she had been, and rather than hopelessness or despair, she instead felt the freedom of the wind settle peacefully upon her. The only way forward was through the voices. She could fight them no longer. If they wanted to drown her in their cries, then so be it.

She let her eyes close and allowed her mind to empty into silence. And the voices came.

The glistening wheat rustled quietly and filled the air with the warm scent of bread and grass. The voices began to sing and to cry and to call for her. They filled every corner, every instant of her being. They swirled around her, they rubbed against her, they filled her ears and her nose and her mouth and her eyes until she could no longer hear anything else, she could not speak or breathe or see. There was only the voices, the voices, the endlessly crying voices. And with the voices came the memories.

Spring was in the offing if they could just get through mud season. Most years it didn't bother her so much, but somehow the endless mud seemed to adhere even to her mind, pressing upon her and requiring her constant attention. It lay deep around the farm, with broad lakes of it all up the lane to the house. Winter had been a season of wet, heavy snow that melted to leave frosty, thick ridges of mud which only froze again under more heavy, wet snow. It had been a season of storms and blizzards, whole weeks when the snow fell too thickly for travel anywhere but the barn, and only then with one hand firmly clasped to the guide rope leading from the house door to the barn door. It had been a season of sickness; first one child began sniffing, and soon they all fell ill, sniffing and sneezing and coughing. No sooner had one recovered from her runny nose and sore throat than another developed chills and a fever. Now that the weather had warmed up and there was a break in all the illness, the children spent as much time outdoors as they could.

But that mud. The children loved it, of course. Even Susan, at twelve, could hardly pull herself away from it to come inside, even when her shoes and tights and skirts were caked with the yellow-gray water. Sarah and Jimmy abandoned themselves to it with the delight of the newly fledged chick, flying free after weeks confined in the small nest. She scolded and threatened and raged and pleaded, but to no avail. The children covered themselves in the cold mud within moments of going out the door to help with chores. She washed the steps, the porch, the front hall, their clothes, their shoes. She washed and washed, each day growing more and more frustrated. Not only because she dreaded another round of colds, but also because she loathed the endless and useless washing and cleaning. She tried to remember prior years. Surely they had not encrusted everything in their vicinity in mud last year. Before that, Jimmy would have been just two, too little to do much puddle-stomping without his mother holding his hand, and the girls certainly never covered themselves in mud, not since they were Jimmy's age. Susan was too old for it now, and even Sarah, at eight, usually avoided anything which might get her dirty. She hated to muss her dress or get dirt caked into her boots.

But not this season. And so Maggie, with the help of the children, scrubbed the interminable mud. One afternoon as he sat cleaning mud from the buttonholes of his sister's brown shoes, Jimmy began coughing. It was quiet, but drew her attention as much as a shout. He didn't complain when she tucked him into bed shortly after dinner, itself a sign that he was indeed sick. In the morning he remained in his bed where she brought him broth which he drank obediently. Though his forehead was warm, it was not hot, and though he coughed, he did not have the dreadful whoop she feared. But there were other illnesses that could steal in. Susan and Sarah had been forbidden to go near Jimmy, but they began coughing soon after him, despite her precautions.

The house fell still and silent for several days. She thought that at least she was done cleaning the ubiquitous mud and perhaps a bit of a cold for a few days would keep them from splashing back into the puddles when they recovered. The children lay docilely in their beds and Maggie tended them -- brought them broth and porridge and toast, sang to them, wiped their faces with a cool cloth.

In the darkness before the dawn of the fifth day, Jimmy began to call for her. It was a wild cry, loud and frightened. Though she rushed to him and held him in her arms, still he called for her. She rocked him, sang to him, but his distress remained. She could not convince him that she was with him. Discontented murmurs and restlessness from Susan and Sarah soon grew into cries and Maggie set herself on the girls' shared bed with Jimmy in her arms. She could neither calm nor comfort them, and soon she realized this and gave up. They did not know she was there; they were far too sick to be aware of anything.

She continued to nurse them the best she could, wiping their hot, sweaty faces with a cool cloth, spooning a few drops of broth into their mouths, and always singing lullabies, hoping the memories of peace and safety would reach them when she could not. But still they called for her, and their cries stung her. She could not sleep, she could not block out their voices long enough, even though she knew she must rest, she knew they did not know whether she was with them or not. She became dizzy and felt heavy-limbed and her hands seemed like they were made of cotton-wool. She could see the children finally sleeping silently, at peace after their hours of distress. But still the crying continued, buffeting her ears. "Mommy, Mommy. Please, Mommy. I need you Mommy. Mommy, where are you? Mommy, help me. Mommy? Mommy!"

She must have cried out herself, for Peter came to the door, brow furrowed. She slipped from her chair and fell to the floor.

When she woke, hours later, even days later, perhaps, the house was silent. It might simply have been that everyone else was sleeping, but the silence was deeper, heavier. There were footsteps in the hall, but slow and deliberate. Peter came into the room and sat on the chair beside her. A cup rattled onto the table near the bed and for a long time Peter sat still, his warm bulk filling the room. The scent of hay and grain and cattle clung to him and he seemed to carry the quiet barn with him.

Maggie opened her eyes once more, finding herself in the field of wheat. The wind had died and the air was perfectly still. She sat crouched within the wheat, her arms tightly wrapped around her knees like a child playing hide-and-seek, hiding from It. The stalks stood around her and remained silent. She lay back and looked at the sky through the opening in which she lay. Dark shadows of the wheat encircled her. Low over the horizon hung the moon. The stars she could no longer see in the lightening sky, save one or two toward the far horizon. But the fine curve of the moon remained suspended from the arch of the heavens like a single stem of thistledown resting in a spider's web.

Nothing had changed. When she went back inside Peter would still be silent and strange. The house too would still be silent. And she would still be alone. The dawn would break on this morning as it had on every morning before and would on every morning yet to come. Nothing had changed.

And yet as Maggie stood up and brushed bits of soil and wheat her skirts, she suddenly remembered how Susan would try to help Jimmy dust off his pants, though he wanted to do it himself. Sarah would giggle as Jimmy ran off, Susan giving chase and all of them shouting and chortling. Maggie laughed at the memory and walked lightly back to the house to begin her chores.

Adrienne Wood

## Farm Work

They are out there again today, from dawn until dusk, like always. The two ancient men, crusty, dried and brittle, they are beyond the age that their number of years on earth can be guessed from observation. Placed strategically in their webbed aluminum lawn chairs, they appear as gargoyles guarding the tarnished Airstream trailer from the onslaught of the natural world. Their efforts fail as vines and bushes obliterate all but the entrance and the hard packed patch of dirt where they keep vigil. A wilted pecan tree shades the gerontic stewards from the blazing Texas sun. Later in the year, when an occasional coastal wind finds its way across the savannah, the tree may be coerced into giving up a generous load of tiny native pecans. Today, its only purpose is shade.

"Well, boy, about time to cut the hay," states the smaller man, gazing across the field from under the edge of his sweat-stained fedora.

"Reckon so," the larger man replies.

He slowly stands putting his hands on his knees for support. He walks beyond the perimeter of the shade and places a gnarled hand to his forehead. The sunlight glistens on the mist of perspiration accenting the maroon and purple lesions on his bald pate. He surveys the uniformly tall stand of reedy grass covering the 40 acre field.

"Good crop this year. Might get three cuttings," he states.

"If it rains," says the father.

The son returns to his chair and settles back in, adjusting his weathered body to a position of least discomfort. The father pulls a small, flat bottle from among the folds of his oversized denim coveralls. He unscrews the black plastic cap, takes a small sip and passes it to his son. The son reaches with both hands. The fingers of his right hand encircle the bottle while he supports the bottom with the back of his left hand. The strange disease that is turning his body to stone has made it difficult to grip with any force. After repositioning his hands, he is able to get the bottle to his mouth for a drink. He passes the container of warm brown whisky back to his father who closes it and puts it away. Time passes quietly and with little discernable motion under the pecan tree. An old spaniel looking dog of questionable ancestry twitches in his sleep while lying in a depression at the base of the tree. His only functions are keeping renegade skunks out from under the trailer, disposing of the meager remains of the old men's dinner and providing comfortable accommodations to a large population of fleas. The dog raises his head and looks toward the meandering two lane blacktop road that passes by across the drainage ditch. Soon the neighbor boy rides his bicycle into view. He rides slowly, aimlessly. His eyes focused on the clover filled ditches that line the narrow lane.

Tommy had finished his morning chores hours before and he had a while until he needed to exercise the horses. His little brother and sister were building a hay fort from the bales of redtop cane in the barn. Tommy was too old for that nonsense, besides the hay made him itch. He decided to take a bike ride. His bike always seemed to have the same destination lately, down the road past Mr. Eli's place and right on the dirt road that was a shortcut over to the highway. On that road was a small lot of less than an acre. The widow Agnes Parsons had cut the lot from the back of her spread after her husband had passed many years ago. It was finally sold to a man from town.

Tommy didn't think anything of it until one day last fall when he happened by the lot and there was a family working to clear the brush, a dad, a mom and a young girl. He did a double take when he realized the girl was Tina. She was in his class at school. She wasn't wearing the frilly dresses and patent leather shoes she wore at school. She had on jeans, boots and a long sleeved denim shirt. Her wavy cotton-blond hair was tied up in a red bandana. She was mowing the grass - on a tractor! So now anytime he takes his bicycle out for a ride it seems to guide him toward this lot. Today he was still on the paved road when he heard a man's voice.

"Hey, boy, c'mere!" It was old Mr. Eli calling him. The father stood up from his chair, stretching, letting the rigor slip from his muscles. By the time he had walked to the edge of the shade, Tommy had wheeled his bicycle up the driveway and slammed on his coaster brake. Loose gravel skittered across the dust.

"Good morning Mr. Eli." Tommy said, leaning his bike against the old man's truck and removing his baseball cap.

"Mornin', boy. Tommy ain't it?" The withered man asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Your dad has the stables that butt up to the back half of my field, right?"

"Yes sir."

"Could you ask your dad to stop by? I'd like to ask him if he would be willing to bale my hay. Y'all have the equipment, don't you?"

"Yes sir. we have a windrow rake, a baler and a brand new sickle mower so the grass don't get beat up so bad like with a shredder. Problem is, Dad's got a full-time job now. He's working for Daddy Dow. He works six nights a week in the mag-cells - graveyard shift. He's not takin' on any outside farm work but maybe I can do it for you."

The old man looked a little surprised. "What are you, about nine?"

"I'm eleven, sir, be twelve next month. I baled our back pasture." Tommy lied, but only a little. He had cut and raked the field with the little Farmall 'C' but his dad had driven the big Case that pulled the baler.

"Well, I don't know. Ask your dad to call me. If he says it's okay with him, it's okay with me."

"Mr. Eli, that's Johnson grass, ain't it? My dad says you should just burn it off and plant some Coastal or alfalfa that's worth something."

"Well, boy, I appreciate the input but you can't kill off Johnson grass by burnin'. It grows underground like the Devil and, like the Devil, fire just makes it stronger." A slight grin cracked the old man's face.

"Well if you want it baled I'm sure I can do it. I'll have him let you know in the next day or so."

"Be quick about it. It's starting to head out so it's not going to grow any taller. If you do a good job you can bale my next cutting too. You don't have to worry about hauling it. I sell it in the field. Get me a price per bale."

"Yes sir!"

Tommy jumped on his bike and headed for home. He had forgotten all about Tina. As he approached his house he began to have second thoughts. He knew he could cut and rake the field. It was a clean field, no trees or stumps. The only problem was the baling. The little Farmall would not run the baler. The Case would but it did not have electric start. He had seen his dad with the crank shoved into the front of the tractor cranking and cussing and getting thrown in the dirt by the recoil. He knew there were tricks to starting it, priming the carburetor, adjusting the spark advance and even then sometimes the tired old machine refused to fire. He had helped his dad pull start it with a tow chain in the Spring when it had not been started for a while. It took them half a day to get it going.

Tommy had a lot to think about as he exercised the horses through the afternoon. He had to approach his dad about his offer to Mr. Eli. He was worried about his ability to get the Case started. He didn't have any idea what to charge for the job. He wanted to make sure and schedule the job so he would be doing the baling on the weekend. He wanted to be sure Tina saw him operating the huge Case tractor while baling 40 acres of hay. He decided he would wave to her nonchalantly as he made one of the many passes through the field across the street from her family's lot.

Tommy brushed out the mane and tail of the last mare of the day and fed all the horses. He entered the house and washed up just as his mom was setting the table for dinner. His dad was sitting at the head of the table, his usual spot, staring into a cup of black coffee. Tommy missed spending time with his dad but he realized his dad felt good about elevating his family's standard of living. Tommy took his regular seat at his dad's right hand. His brother and sister were creating a screaming ruckus in the adjoining living room.

"Dad, I got a job offer," Tommy said.

Dad's gaze shifted from his coffee to Tommy's eyes and stuck. Mom suddenly found a seat at the table. Even the noise in the next room diminished as if Tommy had crept into living color.

"Mr. Eli wants me to bale his hay. Actually, he wanted you to do it. I told him you were too busy," Tommy stated.



"Oh no, no, nope! Not a chance!" his mom interjected.

That's when Tommy knew he had a chance.

"Wait just a minute. Let the boy talk," Dad demanded.

"You know I can do it," Tommy spoke directly to his dad as mom glared and fidgeted. "The only thing I might need help with is getting the Case started and setting up the twine feed on the baler. You can go over that with me on your day off."

"This is a bad idea!" Tommy's mom hissed and stomped back toward the counter.

Dad just shook his head. "When does he want it done?"

Tommy saw a ray of hope. "The grass is headed out. I thought I could cut on Thursday, rake on Saturday and bale on Sunday."

Tommy's dad glanced toward the kitchen where mom was violently shredding lettuce with her bare hands.

"That might work. I'm off Sunday night so if I have to stay up to help you get the Case going I can sleep later. Once it's warmed up it's easy to start."

By this time Tommy's little brother and sister were standing by the table awestruck. Tommy's chest was about to explode.

"Can you let Mr. Eli know it's okay with you?"

"I'll stop by and talk to him on the way home from work in the morning. You make sure and do a good job and you could get more work out of it."

"Dad, I don't know how much to charge. He wants a price per bale." Tommy waited while his dad rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"I tell you what," his dad offered. "Why don't you take all the costs into consideration and come up with a number? Tell me what you come up with and I'll see if you're in the ballpark."

Tommy wolfed down his dinner while his mother continued to fume. He even let his little brother have the last pork chop without confrontation. He immediately excused himself to his room, eager to do math. The irony of this was lost on him in the excitement. He knew some of the costs such as gas and twine. He guessed at how many bales the 40 acres would produce. He had worked hauling hay the last couple of summers so he knew the thick stand would produce at least 600 bales. Most prairie hay brought in just under two dollars a bale in the field at 1968 prices. He would need at least 30 gallons of gas and six rolls of twine.

Tommy's dad was pulling on his steel-toed work boots. Tommy's mom had her arm slung across his shoulder. She smiled at Tommy as he came into the living room with his notebook paper covered in figures. It was encouraging to see that the tension had dissipated.

"Let's see what you came up with," Tommy's dad said, reaching for the paper.

He studied it for a few minutes. "Your costs look accurate, or close. I think you will get closer to 800 bales but it's better to figure on the short side. So, you really like Mr. Eli?"

"Well, I guess - he's okay. Why?"

"Well, son, according to this, you're working for free. You didn't figure in any labor."

Tommy suddenly felt like he was lost. Of course he wanted to make money, but how much? It would be three days of labor or more like two half days and one full day. He grabbed the paper from his dad and ran back to his room. He knew if he turned around he would see his dad and mom shaking their heads in amusement. Tommy finally figured that he would like to make 150 dollars. He felt greedy. That was a huge sum for a twelve year old boy to make. On the other hand if he were an adult it would be meager pay. He could do just as good a job as an adult, couldn't he? By the time he finished his calculations his dad was walking out the door. He handed the revision to his dad.

"I'll look at this. We can go over it in the morning," his dad said, neatly folding the paper and putting it in his shirt pocket.

Tommy stood silently by the door as his mom walked his dad to the truck and kissed him goodbye. When his mom entered the front door she looked at Tommy. Her wet eyes sparkled as she pulled him into a hug.

"You're growing up too fast," she said, her voice cracking. She released him and headed toward the kitchen.

The next morning Tommy was going through his routine automatically. His dad had stopped on his way home and informed Mr. Eli that is was okay if he wanted Tommy to bale his hay but other than that it was between Mr. Eli and Tommy. When he got home Tommy was waiting with chores completed.

"I looked over your figures. They look okay, pretty generous really. I stopped by and let Mr. Eli know that you have my blessing."

"Was he satisfied with the price?"

"We didn't discuss that. It's between you and him. I've got to get to bed. I'm pulling a twelve hour shift tonight."

Mr. Eli's son is named Bart. Everyone calls him that, the mailman, the barber, the widow Mrs. Parsons. According to Mr. Eli, even dogs call him Bart. When Tommy rode his bicycle into the driveway, Bart waved him over. Mr. Eli was nodding in the lawn chair, snoring grandly, a stream of spittle running down his drooping jaw. Bart motioned for Tommy to wait so Tommy took a seat on the rusted chrome bumper of Mr. Eli's old truck.

"Your dad stopped by this morning." Bart said. "He seemed confident in your ability to handle the job. You just have to get it passed my dad. He's skeptical."

Tommy just looked over at Mr. Eli and shrugged. "I was hoping to cut on Thursday, weather permitting. The dew should be dry by ten, I figure."

"Poppa!" Bart shouted. Mr. Eli started awake, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "Tommy's here."

Mr. Eli shifted the fedora back on his head and stared at Tommy through ice blue eyes as his brain caught up with his consciousness. He fished the flat bottle from his coveralls and took a sip then held the bottle out toward Tommy.

"No thanks, Mr. Eli. It's a little early for me."

Bart snickered under his breath and reached for the bottle. Mr. Eli snatched the bottle back and snorted. He replaced the cap and shoved it down into the folds of his garment.

"So,---- your old man seems to be under the impression that you are capable of handling my harvest."

"Yes sir."

"Well I don't know. You look a little wet behind the ears to me."

"I'll tell you what, sir. Give me the chance. I'll cut and bale your hay for thirty five cents a bale on the ground. That's a good price. If it don't suit you, you don't pay. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough." The old man stuck out his grizzled hand and Tommy shook it firmly.

"I'll cut it Thursday. We'll take a look at it on Saturday morning. If it's cured I'll bale it Sunday as soon as the dew dries."

"That's a workable schedule." Mr. Eli said.

Tommy straddled his bike and rode away but he didn't go straight home. He rode back toward his house but instead of turning down the driveway he continued on down the road past the pecan farm to where the trees grew close to the road allowing the branches to intertwine above. Between the Spanish moss and the wild grape vines the sun was almost totally blocked. It was as if dusk had come at midday. Only small dappled patches of sunlight filtered through the canopy. The road descended into a low area through a swampy marsh surrounding a natural pond. A baby alligator ambled across the lane, picking up its pace slightly upon seeing the approaching bicycle. This was a place Tommy felt was his own, his secret, where he was at peace.

Wednesday Tommy spent his free time attaching the sickle mower to the Farmall. He checked the oil, aired up the tires and topped off the fuel tank in anticipation of the next morning. The humidity was low for south Texas. It was still officially Spring but the brutal coastal heat was radiant in the still air. The rains had slowed so much that cracks were beginning to form in the heavy clay soil. He planned for an early start upon awakening. If he could even sleep.

"Tomorrow is the big day." His dad mentioned that night at dinner. "Don't forget, you have chores here before you leave. if your job runs late maybe your mom and brother can exercise the horses in the afternoon."

"I guess we could cover that," Mom grinned, "but don't make a habit of it."

"Thanks Mom. I won't."

"We are really proud of you, son." Dad smiled and handed Tommy the last chicken leg prompting an evil eye from his little brother.

Thursday started out smoothly. Tommy drove the tractor into the field just as the two old men were stationing themselves beneath the pecan tree. He waved at them. Bart waved back and Mr. Eli touched the brim of his fedora. Tommy lowered the mower to cutting height, pulled down the bill of his baseball cap and engaged the blade. The crop was so thick that he could only manage second gear. He began at the perimeter and worked inward. When he stopped for lunch around one o'clock he was disheartened to see how much of the field was left to cut. The afternoon went quicker as each pass grew shorter with the shrinking of the stand. By six p.m. he was done, dirty and exhausted. He was convinced he had made a horrible mistake taking on such a job. When he returned home there were two places set at the table. Tommy washed up and joined his dad for a late dinner.

"Tired?" His dad asked.

"Sore!" Tommy replied.

"Just wait 'til tomorrow."

"I'll be fine"

His dad just smiled and attacked another spare rib. As it turned out his dad was right. When Tommy tried to roll out of bed in the morning every muscle burned. His dad was just getting in from work and he gave Tommy a pat on the back. Tommy tried not to flinch, but failed.

"Keep moving," his dad said. "You'll work that soreness out in no time."

Turns out his dad was right again. By the time he finished his morning chores he was moving at a more or less normal pace. No free time today, though. Tommy spent late morning switching out the implements on the Farmall and cleaning and servicing the equipment. Everything was go for Saturday until early afternoon when a couple of thunderheads built up to the southeast. Tommy watched them with an unfamiliar trepidation. Usually he could care less about the weather but a storm could delay the job or ruin the crop completely. He stood outside watching the sky and paced. The sky grew dark and the wind picked up sending powerful gusts through the brittle limbs of the oak in the back yard. After only a light smattering of huge raindrops the storm dissipated. Tommy had rarely experienced such relief. He still needed to exercise the horses before dinner.

Saturday morning Tommy slept in until seven a.m. There was no hurry. The dew and residual rain had to be completely gone when he started raking. After his morning chores he fired up the Farmall and drove over to Mr. Eli's field. As he arrived, both of the old men were standing in the pasture kicking at the hay.

"Good afternoon," Mr. Eli said. "Sleep in?"

"Yep. No hurry, what with the rain last night."

"What rain?" Mr. Eli grinned. "I've made the ground wetter than that blowin' my nose."

"Does it look ready to rake?" Tommy asked, changing the subject.

"Looks okay to me. What do you think?"

"It's your hay."

"Rake it!" The old men headed back to their post by the trailer. The raking went much faster than the cutting. Tommy kicked the tractor into third gear and notched the throttle to full. Four hours later he was waving goodbye to Mr. Eli.

If ever a boy needed his father it was now. Tommy was out of his element. He had driven the Case while pulling the twenty one foot disc. He had no experience with the baler, a complicated contraption that was prone to malfunction. At dinner, Tommy had no appetite. He was pale and scared.

"How was your day? Did the raking go okay?" His dad asked.

"Really quick. Windrows are straight....but Dad? I've never run the baler."

"I guess you won't be able to say that after tomorrow."

"Yeah, I guess not." Tommy chose to let it pass.

In the silent edge of dawn when even the roosters question the day, Tommy stands face to face with the massive Case tractor. The cold steel crank pulls his right hand toward the black earth causing his shoulder to slump. He shoves the heavy crank, the key to life for the colossal machine, into the dark orifice below the grill. He opens the fuel cock, sets the choke and the spark advance as he has seen his dad do. He checks the transmission. It is in neutral. Back at the front of the iron behemoth, he engages the crank and slowly turns the engine to the top of a compression stroke. Every muscle in his body tenses as he throws all of his energy into the revolution of the crankshaft. Nothing. The crickets chirp. The cicadas tease the sunrise. Tommy takes a walk around the tractor, checks the ignition switch and turns it on. He returns to the crank. Once again his muscles tense. Once again the engine spins. An explosive report awakens the morning, throwing Tommy's limp body into the dust. The world is awake yet the tractor is silent. A pair of headlights illuminate the driveway. His dad is home. Quickly Tommy slides the crank into its orifice. Using the sum of his will he thrusts every morsel of energy into the crank.

The Case pops loudly falters and then catches, idling loudly through the open exhaust. Tommy climbs up into the seat of the tractor. Ancient levers control the antique beast. Tommy feels small atop the throbbing machine. A simple hook and eye hitch and spring locking driveshaft connect the baler to the tractor. The twine is threaded in the apparatus. Full rolls are in position for service. Tommy sees the decal, faded but legible, explaining how to thread the twine through the machine. He loads a half dozen extra rolls of twine into the cargo box and pulls the equipment out onto the driveway. He leaves the tractor idling and joins his father who has been observing from the fender of his truck. He notices the light flicker on in the kitchen window. The horizon is beginning its amber show.

"Looks like you have it under control," Tommy's dad remarks.

Two proud men survey the scene.

"No dew this morning," Tommy says. "I can get an early start."

"Let's grab a bite first."

The father and son enter the kitchen to the smell of coffee and bacon. After breakfast, Tommy rushes through his chores to the sound of the tractor calling. Before Bart and Mr. Eli exit the trailer Tommy has lined the baler up with the outermost windrow. Tommy climbs down from the tractor seat as Mr. Eli carefully steps down from the Airstream.

"I didn't expect you this early," Mr. Eli says.

"The ground is dry. I thought I would get an early start in case I run into some snags."

Old Mr. Eli seems to smile his approval but who can tell on a crusty face like his. Tommy mounts his perch atop the tractor and engages the PTO. The baler awakens, a monstrous iron lung breathing in grass and coughing out bales with a rhythmic mechanical pulse. Slowly the tandem mechanism lurches down the windrows spitting tight bales in its wake. As Tommy completes his second round he sees Mr. Eli dragging a sledge hammer and a yard sign to the corner of his property. The sign says simply "Hay for Sale".

It's about ten a.m. Tommy stops for a drink of water and to load the next rolls of twine. The bale counter is at 184. Four pickups, two with trailers, are parked at the entrance to the field. Tommy waves to several of his friends who are loading and hauling the hay. A couple of times during the morning, trucks are following the baler, loading the bales as soon as they are ejected. Every time Tommy passes the north side of the property, he checks the lot that Tina's family owns. As of eleven-thirty there is still no activity. No problem. Tommy estimates that he will bale over 800 bales by the time he completes the job. He is already planning what to do with his new wealth. After several hours of baling the sun is directly overhead in the cloudless sky. The shadows have disappeared. The rhythmic churning of the machine is becoming hypnotic. Tommy inches the tractor down the backbone of the endless hay snake while his mind wanders aimlessly to fishing the river with his little brother, spending some of his new wealth at the local skating rink and, of course, to Tina. There is still no sign of her family at the lot across the road. Suddenly a blaring truck horn brings him back to reality.

Looking behind, he sees over a half dozen broken bales strung out behind the baler. He stops the tractor and disengages the PTO. The pulsing of the baler slows until only the low rumble of the tractor breaks the silence. The pickup that had been following backs away and heads for the entrance. Tommy opens the access panel and finds a tangled wad of twine the size of a basketball. Pulling out his pocket knife, he begins cutting and ripping at the mess until he is down to nothing but metal. He rethreads the twine according to the decal and latches the cover. He climbs back on the tractor and engages the baler. It sounds normal so he begins to slowly move along the windrow. He watches behind as the first few bales exit the chute. They are tied up but look somehow crooked. When he checks them he finds that one of the strings is tighter than the other giving the bales an unnatural curve. Tommy shuts down the machine and pops the access panel open again. Everything looks normal. He reads the decal and notices an illegible paragraph with arrows pointing to some adjusting rods. He checks them and observes that the lock nut has backed off on one. He adjusts the rod back to where the rust indicates a previous setting and tightens the lock nut. After latching the door he cuts the strings on the misshapen bales and resumes baling. All goes well. He turns the baler around and repairs the broken bales then continues down the windrow. Soon another crew is in the field loading the bales as soon as they leave the chute.

As Tommy loops around the north side of the field he sees Tina standing at the driveway to her family's lot watching as he comes closer. She waves. He waves back. The next time he comes around Tina is standing at the edge of the field holding a blue plastic tumbler. Tommy shuts down the baler and dismounts. Tina meets him halfway across the field.

"You look like you could use some tea," she says.

Tina had not said that much to him the entire time he had known her.

"Thanks," he replies. "It's pretty hot out here. I need to finish this today so I'm working through lunch. I sure do appreciate the tea."

"Sure. You live around here?"

"See that big silver barn behind the pasture?"

"Yeah."

"My house is behind it."

"We might be neighbors soon. My parents want to build out here."

"That will be good. Not very many kids from our class live out this way. Jerry Sullivan and Arty live off the highway at the end of the road but that's a mile away."

"Yeah, I know them. Jerry's a little weird but Arty's okay."

"Jerry's alright too. He just likes everyone to think he's smarter than they are."

"That can get annoying."

"You just have to let it roll off of you."

"I guess."

"Well, hey, thanks for the tea. I better get back to work."

"Me, too. I'm helping Dad set some fence posts."

"That's hard work!"

"You're telling me! I'll see you. Holler if you want more tea. We have plenty."

"Thanks. See you later." Tommy floats back over to the tractor and begins making the slow circles again.

The western horizon is glowing a warm red when Tommy disengages the PTO and lets the baler slowly wind down. He pulls the contraption up to the front of the trailer where Mr. Eli and Bart lounge. Tommy looks at the field. Only a few dozen bales remain on the ground.

"What did we get?" Bart asked. Tommy checked the counter.

"Counter says 827 but I had to re-bale a few. Let's call it 800 even."

"You sure?"

"Works for me."

Mr. Eli pulls a wad of money from his coveralls and peels off 14 twenty dollar bills, handing them to Tommy. "Good job, son. We'll see you back in August if we get some decent rain in the meantime."

"Yes sir. Thank you."

"Hey Tommy," Bart hollers after him, "I think the little neighbor girl is sweet on you!"

Tommy just smiles and shakes his head hoping the darkness is masking the flush forming in his cheeks. He drives the tractor home and pulls it into the pasture. When he turns off the key the silence engulfs him bringing with it a level of exhaustion he has never experienced.

"Hungry?" Tommy's mom asks when she hears the screen door slam.

"Just a sandwich, I'm too tired to eat."

Tommy's dad is kicked back in his recliner reading a "Horse and Rider" magazine. "How'd you do?"

"Made 800 bales. What do I owe you? I used 6 rolls of twine plus what was in there and I'm pretty sure both tractors are almost out of gas."



"How about you cut and bale that ten acres in the back end of the pasture next month and we'll call it even."

Tommy grinned. "Sure, but I'll need some help putting it in the barn."

"That's what little brothers and sisters are for," his dad chuckled.

His little brother looks up from the coffee table where he is building a model car and gives him the evil eye.

Tony Burnett

## The Undine

There are certain small towns which to the majority of people are but pinprick dots carelessly sprinkled on maps; in the Hinterland, these forgotten dwellings hide behind ancient mounds or lie cupped in the palm of a valley, and fields stretch between them and the roaring main roads. To the casual traveler, passing through, these small towns may appear to be all alike for they blossom slowly and demurely, each unfolded petal shading a wonder, each layer suggestive of ineffable mysteries.

Such was the small town where my grandparents resided. I only ever experienced the place in those long and lazy summer months before the harvest where everything grew wildly and senselessly in chromatic abundance. The surrounding mounts and fields lounged in all their fecund exuberance below the hot gaze of the sun, offering their gaudy bodies to flocks of cows and sheep. This cornucopia of mad growth had silently invaded the town, its streets uneven because of the proud dandelions, credulous daisies and valiant stems of barley that nudged and pushed and shoved against the poor cobblestones. Shivering, bright green ryegrass and thistles adorned with purplish flower heads filled the spaces between the huddled houses, their flaking walls covered with the green tendrils of climbing plants. On the thatched roofs there sprouted grasses and young birches with the ambition of becoming grand forests; birds nestled there while below, in the dark, moist attics, there was a scurry of small, clawed paws. The boundary between nature and culture was nearly indistinguishable as if the latter were seeded by the first; the church and houses and fountains and street lamps grew naturally from the rich soil and were governed by the same subtle changes as the vegetation. Each day I would discover some new aspect about a certain corner of a house, or a slight difference of mood in the church tower from where the bells naturally blended in with the rustling foliage, the songs and fluttering of birds, the never silent crickets and croaking of frogs.

This blurred boundary gave the impression of a vastly larger town in which it was easy to get disorientated. I might saunter down one of the quaint cobblestone streets and find myself on a gravel path lined with tall and clustered shrubbery, and then, a little further ahead, the path would bend and suddenly become a street of cobble and wildflowers again. Other paths brought the daring explorer into scenes of utter wilderness scattered with lonely, ruined buildings whose roofs had long since caved in to be replaced by deciduous crowns, their grimy windows imprinted with the spectral faces of former inhabitants if not wholly reduced to gaping, dusky holes. And then, past the old vicarage, there was the path which led to the tabooed marl pit.

“Don’t go near the marl pit. People have drowned there,” my grandmother warned me again and again to which my grandfather would invariably nod gravely as if to say, “Listen to your grandmother, lad,” but at the same time giving me a knowing wink behind her back. Such admonishments only ignited my imagination, and no winks from my grandfather were needed for me to commit the crime of trespassing; for whenever my solitary ramblings brought me close to this path, it was as if the breeze changed and became an alluring whisper. And so, one breezy day of July, I jumped the low, sad-looking wooden gate that barred the path, setting forth like an outlawed explorer into terra incognitae.

Before long, the narrow path began to wind its way up a slight slope, bushes of blueberries, stinging nettles, hogweed and ferns gushing forth on each side. Near the end of the slope, the path led me straight to a wall of firs. Onwards I went, but not many feet inside the forest, where the shade was solemn and cool and filled with an orange-like odour, I halted; I had felt a chill, and it was not the chill of a breeze. A few shafts of sunlight penetrated the tree tops, and whenever a cloud passed the sun, the light would change in an uncomfortably suggestive way. It may have been pride or vanity, but I felt convinced it was too late to turn back; there was nothing to do but to make a dash for it and ignore the sportive movements of light and shadow. To my relief, what I had thought to be a forest turned out to be a mere archipelago of firs, or a coniferous screen beyond which the path continued down a steep slope to the banks of the fabled marl pit.

Simultaneously joyful of my discovery and conscious that I had broken a taboo, I halted on the top of that slope and surveyed the prospect before me. The chasmal, pear-shaped mouth of the marl pit brimmed with shimmering water. From its green fat-lipped banks, a few Black Alders sucked their nourishment while, at the far edge, a large, old White Willow leaned out over the mirroring water, its whitish beard trickling the surface. All was calm except for the chirping of crickets, the deep humming of zigzagging dragonflies, and the gentle lapping of water.

It was very tempting to proceed down the path, undress and dive straight into that wonder, and yet I felt somehow unprepared for such a momentous action. Besides, the sun was slowly, steadily setting in peach-orange and rust-red splendours, and the trees threw long shadows across the liquid surface, the wavering shadows of thin, elongated giants; day had turned to late afternoon, and, however reluctantly, I had to retrace my steps and return to my grandparents' house. It was not until late that evening, when I lay ruminating in the darkness of my small room, listening to the mice on the attic, that I realized that the marl pit was closer to the town proper than it seemed. The path had described a curve, leading from the vicarage to the sloping outskirts of the town where the firs effectively screened the marl pit from view. In some way, the marl pit was the town's true and inmost secret heart, and what I had seen was literally only the surface of a mystery beckoning to be penetrated. I had been, as it were, in the antechamber of something hitherto unknown, and I could barely wait for a new day to dawn.

As it happened, I was trickled awake by a fly in the very early hours of the morning. Eager to explore the marl pit further, I stole out of the house like a thief in reverse, my grandparents still lost beyond the gates of horn and ivory, and skidded salamander-like across the sleepy town. The sun had barely risen, and the hazy, pale blue sky, the first coat of paint on the emerging picture of the day, endowed everything with the porous quality of ephemeral daydreams, unfulfilled first loves and tip-of-the-tongues. This porousness was counterbalanced, though, by a density of odours; I breathed the dewy freshness of moist grass and leaves, and that strong fragrance of damp earth which perfectly balances the sweet and the rank. As I ventured down the narrow path which would transport me once again to the marl pit, I did my utmost not to disturb the numerous spider's webs which were suspended across the path, orbed death traps of silk fitted with tiny drops of dew. This time, the phalanx of firs who guarded the marl pit let me pass through their slender legs without further ado, and finally I descended down the slope of the marl pit and reached the edge of the water.

The sun was yet to rise above the trees surrounding most of the slumbering marl pit. Not a wind stirred the water, and the tiny insects which skirted the smooth veneer made but evanescent ripples. Some of the trees stood so close to the edge that parts of their roots were exposed between the soil and the water. A dragon fly buzzed past me like a levitating jewel. I kneeled and probed the water with my hand, but quickly withdrew it with a shock and a shudder. I had not imagined that the water would be so cold; it seemed to refuse my advances by its coldness. Feeling a bit dejected, and with goose bumps all over, I sunk down at the foot of an old tree. On the far side, the thickly foliated White Willow nodded to itself like a drowsy old man, oblivious to my presence. I wondered how deep the marl pit was as if with my thoughts alone I could sound its depths. I wondered too if there were any fish living in the marl pit and immediately thought of making a fishing rod. The dejection quickly vanished as I began to make plans for fashioning a fishing rod out of a bough, some fishing line, which I was sure I could find in my grandfather's shed, and a paper clip or something similar for a hook.

Meanwhile, the sun was climbing, but in that languid, lingering fashion that characterizes a July day. It was becoming hot too, and with the rise of temperature, time slowed down as if the hours were in no hurry to move forward but would rather lie coiled like a snake on a warm spot in the sun. On a July day, each moment strive towards an approximation of the eternal; and as time, ordinary time, loses all importance on such a day, thus I was unaware of its passing. Instead I noticed the way that the brown-green tones of the surface would change as the rising sun began to sprinkle the water with shimmering shreds of light, or the way the marl pit's entire face would change expression when a cloud passed the sun, sometimes sullen, sometimes jovial or teasing. Then, a breeze soughed through the undergrowth, and the surface rippled as if to answer this breezy call. That was the moment when I caught a glimpse of something shadowy beneath the surface where parts of the tree's thick knotty roots protruded from the soil and dived deep into the water. Kneeling I leaned forward and stretched out as far as possible while supporting my hands on the slippery roots.

Perhaps my probing thoughts really had emitted some kind of sonar, a pulsing telepathy of ethereal dream images, for they came back to me now; not quite as echoes but with a mellifluous murmur. At first, my intense gaze was met by my own undulating mirror image, but the murmur kept me peering, and eventually I glimpsed the shadowy shape once more. By slow gradations the surface cleared and the shadow took the shape of a water elemental floating on her back. She was naked, her breasts white as milk, the blood vessels showing through her translucent skin. She had her arms out to the sides, her long dark hair waving back and forth like an aura made of strips of cloth or rotten weeds moved by calm currents. No doubt, her face was of the same milky-grey whiteness as her breasts, but it was partly veiled by the long dark hair, and I only caught her features in fleeting glimpses: her purplish lips and gaping mouth suggested voluptuousness and wild hunger; her black eyes were yearning and longing. The overall desiderium of her features, coupled with those languishing murmurs that seemed to issue from both the water's surface and from everywhere around me, as if I heard the voice of the marl pit itself, made me want to reach out for her and join her in the deep.

However, just as I was about to make contact, I was startled by a voice from behind me and almost slipped. I got up, turned around and faced one of the local boys.

"What're you looking at?" he repeated.

I shrugged, wishing he would go away. But instead, when he advanced to have a look for himself, I told him it was nothing, “Just a fish but it’s gone now.”

And later, when I was left alone, she really was gone, withdrawn to the depths of the marl pit.

Thomas Stromsholt

## Harmonic Convergence

My father never blamed Yoko. "Sometimes two personalities are just too powerful to stay together long," he told me. At one time he'd thought that Lennon and McCartney would save the world, and on days when he was feeling gloomy he wore a pin that said "I want the Beatles to Come Together." They had been separated by forces beyond his ken.

He was a big man, my father. His muscles stretched the cotton of his black t-shirts. I thought that I'd look like him when I finished growing, and that everyone would be a little bit afraid of me the first time they met me. Mom said that his problem was that he got embarrassed too easily, but that wasn't it. He'd pass people on the street, people he'd known his entire life, and it was like they weren't there. He had a veil over him, and in 1987, when people started talking about the Harmonic Convergence on the radio, he hoped that the veil might lift. He stopped crying so much, although he still spent a lot of time in the basement. I went down to check up on him and he arranged eight pool balls on the green nap of the pool table for me, so that he could describe what would happen when the convergence began.

"See," he said, "the sun, moon, and six of the planets will all align. A perfect equilateral triangle."

"What happens when they align, Dad?"

He looked up at the cobwebs on the ceiling beams.

"A five year period of planetary cleansing."

Dad said that when the convergence began, the ancient Mayans would come back and special people would be able to recognize them. He thought that he would, and I hoped so. Or at least I hoped that in trying to recognize them, he'd break through the veil that separated him from other people. One time, he failed to recognize Dan Gross, who had been my best friend before puberty struck. We saw Dan sitting on a bench outside the grocery store and Dad thought that he was Denny Green, another childhood friend of mine who'd moved to Colorado. It's true that Dan and I hadn't played together for a long time. But Dan was dating Larissa Andersen, the girl who lived next door to us, the girl who was Paul McCartney to my John Lennon. That was a weird day, outside the grocery store. A thick layer of fog had obscured the parking lot, and the halogen lights were dim spots of blue on air that seemed like paste. Dad started asking Dan about Denver, and talking about mountain climbing. After awhile Dan looked amused and started answering his questions.

"Yeah, Denver's great, very sunny."

He kept giving me scornful, ironic glances, and I left my father and went to look for the car.

Larissa and I didn't write songs together, like Lennon and McCartney. But we were a great creative duo. When we starred together in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, I felt that her acting was done for me, as a challenge and a gift. I gave her tips in the choir room, which is what the school used for a Green Room. "When you say, 'We made up our minds then and there that if we could help other lonely old men to find that same peace, we would,' try to think of that little bluejay you found in your yard, the one that died after you brought it in and fed it with the dropper all night." When she said the line on stage, I saw her glance towards where I was watching from the wings. We looked out for each other.

Surviving high school was our main collaborative endeavor, and I was always there in the hallway so that Larissa could breathe on me, and I could tell her whether she needed a breath mint. One day, Larissa kissed me in the choir room. It had been a particularly bad day. I wasn't just in choir, I was also in jazz choir, and the night before Mr. Severid, the director, had asked me to sing a high C, and I couldn't. I'd been able to do it that morning, and Mr. Severid made fun of me.

"Have you had an operation?" he asked.

Everybody laughed. But the thing is, it really did feel like an operation. Puberty was as precise and merciless as a surgeon. So the next day in choir there I was, sitting on one of the metal chairs and watching Severid sort music as the other kids came in. Larissa saw me and she came over and sat in my lap, which was a surprising development.

"Are you feeling sad, Paulie?" she asked.

I nodded, because her saying it made me sad, made me want to cry.

"Would it help if I gave you a kiss?"

And she kissed my cheek. Such kindness! That's the way it was between Larissa and me.

Then her mother died. Our street went right up a steep hill, and all of our lawns slanted, but Larissa's parents had fixed this problem by putting in terraces, long porches full of earth for her mother to garden in. I wouldn't have called Larissa's mother fragile, despite her smallness, but when she was stung by a bee, that was all it took. Or maybe there were medical terms involved, reasons why she was predisposed to having the bee kill her. I don't know, I'm bad with those things. She was the first person I knew who had died, and I couldn't make sense of it. I sat on the couch in the TV room and tried to write a poem about it, jotting down all of the images that came into my head. "Cats on the windshield," I wrote, "playing with the dead." I saw the cut-outs of skeletons that we hung in the windows on Halloween, and the brass braids that connected their joints. "Mortuary puppets," I wrote, "the troubadours of loss." And bees, I saw bees, but against a blank space that could have been the sky on a cloudy day, and I saw fingers - Larissa's - stained with mulberry juice, and heard a little music box that she'd had when we were kids playing "Day Tripper." I wrote all of this down and when I was done I felt that I had created the perfect expression of grief, and I went to read it to my father. But somehow I didn't want to when I found him in the basement throwing darts at a dartboard. I could see from his eyes that the veil was across him, and that he was feeling Larissa's mother's death deeply. I thought that I might break him if I read the poem out loud.

In the weeks that followed I wished that Larissa's bedroom faced my own across our two yards. Both of us had bedrooms on the north sides of our respective houses, but if we hadn't we could have had one of those telephones made of tin cans and a piece of string. I imagined that phone as I lay on my bed. I imagined it stretching taut around the corner of my house as she pulled the can to her ear and I, from my end, whispered reassurances. I sometimes even said them out loud, into the dim, empty air of my bedroom. "You can use this someday, when you're a great actress," I'd say, and then I'd imagine her on the screen, tears in her eyes, and I'd be the only one who would know what she was really thinking about.

Dad, Mom, and I went to the memorial service and sat on the funeral home's tasteful wooden chairs. Larissa sat at the front with her father, who was dignified and gray, but so small that he looked like a boy in his Sunday suit. Dan Gross was there, sitting next to Larissa and holding her hand. He kept looking up into the corners of the room, as if he were inspecting the edges of the wallpaper. The minister made his speech and I wanted to walk up to the front and push Dan out of the way and sit down in Larissa's lap. I wanted to return the kiss she'd given me, to make things right for her. After the funeral she just stayed in her house. She wasn't in the summer play, which was *The Pirates of Penzance*, and at the dress rehearsal I looked at all of the girls in their white peasant blouses, all of Mabel's singing sisters, and none of them seemed real and urgent, like Larissa would have. Towards the middle of July, Larissa and Dan broke up. He stopped parking in her driveway and I didn't miss his brown pinto with the bumper sticker that said "swimmers do it with goggles on." About a month after that, her father remarried.

I first learned about it on August 16th, the day of the Harmonic Convergence. Mr. Johnson, my gym teacher, had been on the radio the night before, saying that he had Mayan blood and telling people what to expect when the convergence started. My father had listened avidly. He asked me a lot of questions about Mr. Johnson, who was thin and wore glasses and liked to make us play badminton. Then Dad said that he was going to sleep, and he lay down with "Let it Be" playing on the stereo, and Mom stayed up to watch TV and play solitaire, like she usually did.

I got up with Dad at dawn and we went out in the yard and faced the rising sun. Dad was shirtless, and the sunlight turned his skin as pale and yellow as an egg yolk. He began to sing, his stubbled jaw moving up and down. "Words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup / they slither while they pass, they slip away across the universe." Something rustled behind me, and I turned and saw Larissa digging through the trash cans that had been set out in the alley next to her family's garage. She was still in her sleeping outfit, gym shorts and a tie-dyed t-shirt, and I wondered for a moment if her scrabbling in the trash was some ritual, some way in which she'd decided to observe the Harmonic Convergence herself. She saw me and she waved me over. She didn't seem to see my father, or maybe it was just that she had no time to notice him, to process his ritual pose, to wonder about what he was doing. She was urgent when I came up to her. She gripped my arm and pulled me into the alley, so that the garage was between us and her house.

"Paul," she said, "you have to help me! You have to help me get Queenie out of the house!"

"Okay," I said, and she kissed me.

Just like that. I felt the skin on the side of her hand brush my brow as she lifted my hair, and then her lips were on my lips. They felt a little too big for me, too rounded and lush. It was a quick kiss, just a peck, but I didn't know what to do with my mouth.



Okay," she said, "I'll sneak back into my room and you go knock on the door. Tell her anything. Tell her there's a gas leak. No! Tell her you're collecting rummage, for the church bazaar! Get her to help you carry it out to the curb. And then I'll sneak out of my room and lock the door."

"But who's Queenie?" I asked.

"My stepmother. Never mind, I'll explain later."

I might not have gone through with it if she hadn't kissed me. That kiss seemed to require something of me, and as I walked around the house I touched my lips with my fingers and then held them in front of my face, as if I could see the kiss on them.

The Andersen's porch looked strange, and I realized that two big pots of geraniums had been replaced with concrete trolls, two small, squat shapes with long noses and ears that hung down to the stoop. The wreath of red berries was gone from the door, so that the green-painted wood looked naked. I pressed the doorbell and Queenie answered it. She had two long braids that were a color between blond and gray, like driftwood or old fences. She was tall but thin, and she folded herself downwards, which was condescending, somehow, and accusatory, as if my shortness forced her to warp her stature. She didn't say anything and I was so surprised by her that I said my line loudly and without much feeling.

"I'm collecting rummage for the church bazaar!"

She was eating a piece of toast, which she lifted from a porcelain plate and chewed as she stared at me. Then she shut the door in my face.

I went back around the house to Larissa's window. Behind me I could hear my father singing. "I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me." The sunlight was shining more fully and brightly on him. He was holding both hands out to it, either inviting or beseeching it. Larissa slid her window open and stared out at me.

"Sorry," I said.

"She didn't buy it?"

"She didn't say anything. She just shut the door. Is she really your stepmother?"

"That's what my dad says. I'd like to see a marriage license."

"You weren't at the wedding?"

"No. She just appeared. Last night."

"But it's only been three months."

She reached through the window and kissed me again. Her lips were robust. "You should come in."

I crawled through the window with Larissa tugging at my armpits, and I almost fell on her, but I was glad that I didn't. She moved away and stood by her dresser, fingering glass knickknacks. Her hair looked wonderfully uncombed, tangled in layers, but I could see that her fingers were shaking.

"What were you doing out by the trashcans?" I asked.

"She's been throwing it all away. All the stuff from my childhood. All the stuff that was my mother's. Or it's disappearing, at least. It wasn't in the trash. It's ruinous. I brought some of it in here," she waved at the knickknacks, "but the bowl's gone, the one I made her in sixth grade, and the sand painting of the sailboat from the bathroom."

"But who is she?"

"I don't know, Paul. Just someone he married."

She turned squarely to look at me and her hair hung down over her face. She stamped her foot on the floor.

"How could he do it, Paul, how could he just come home and tell me he's taken another wife, just like that, like he'd bought her at a store?"

I wanted to comfort her but her posture was both inviting and forbidding, and I could see that she couldn't decide on her mood.

"She's really weird," I said.

"Queenie! What kind of a name is Queenie?"

"I don't know."

"You think she's bad, though, right? I mean, she's obviously bad."

"Do you...do you think she might be a Mayan?"

"A what?"

"Nothing. It's just something my dad is doing. You know, trying to see the Mayans."

She didn't know what I was talking about, I could see that. She shook her head, once, as if trying to clear it, and took my hand.

"Come on."

Queenie was in the corner of the living room rummaging through a built-in cabinet. She was emptying it out onto the floor into an ever-widening circle of small objects. There were old packs of playing cards, seed catalogs, watercolor paints, frayed brushes, carved letter openers, soapstone figurines, embroidered pin cushions, an ivory comb, tin boxes with painted lids - all the objects that Larissa's mother had touched and held and oiled with her fingers. As Queenie dug in the cabinet she made a little snuffling noise.

"What are you doing?" Larissa screamed at her.

Queenie turned, the skin tight across her face, her sharp nose quivering.

"Making a place for myself, your new mother," she said in a voice that was practical and chastising and sweet.

Larissa tugged my hand and led me back down the hall, quickly, tersely, panting little sobs beneath her breath. She slammed the door of her bedroom behind us and threw herself down on the bed. She began to cry. I sat on the edge of the bed and patted her shoulder. After a moment she stopped crying and lay very still, paying attention to my pats as if trying to find some message in them, some kind of Morse Code. She turned on her side and grabbed the front of my shirt. She pulled me down to her. Her lips were covered with a layer of phlegm and tears. I tasted saltiness. She kissed me for a long time. Every time a sob rose along the ridge of her back she kissed me harder. When she stopped she lay against me, exhausted. I could feel her heart beating.

"Paulie," she said, and her voice sounded brined from the kissing, "we have to kill Queenie. She has to die. I know you think so. I know you think so, too."

"I...but...how?"

"How?" she asked herself.

She kissed me again, as if it helped her think. "We could be really filthy," she whispered to me.

"What would Queenie think of that, if she heard us groaning and moaning?"

Now I was afraid. "I don't have a condom," I said.

"It's all right."

She lifted my hand and put it on the outside of her shirt, over her breast. She kissed me again and I could hear my own breaths coming loudly through my nose.

"Come on."

I was frightened of her. I wanted to encourage her towards some other expression. This wasn't the thing we'd been making together, the thing we'd been collaborating on. I imagined Queenie standing right outside the door, maybe eating her piece of toast, maybe grinding it softly with her teeth. This was a drama that Larissa and Queenie were making between themselves, and I was...what? A prop? A bit part? But then, of course, there was that kiss in the choir room. We had always helped each other. Who was I to renege on our collaboration now, in her hour of need? I pushed her off of me and stood up.

"Okay," I said. "Okay, but I need a condom."

"Well, go get one. The convenience store on Ridge has a machine in the men's bathroom. That's where Dan used to get them."

I don't know why that made me feel ashamed. I looked down at the carpet.

"Okay. Will you stay here?"

She laughed. "I can't go anywhere, or Queenie will move the house."

I crossed the grass from her yard into my own. I knew what would happen next. We'd have sex and we'd kill Queenie. I even knew how we'd do it. We'd poison her with a mixture of arsenic, strychnine, and cyanide in elderberry wine, which is what the old ladies used in Arsenic and Old Lace. My father was still standing half-naked in the yard. He was trembling from having held his arms out for so long, and his voice was a little ragged. "Living is easy with eyes closed," he sang, "misunderstanding all you see." I went into the house to get some coins from my bedroom and passed my mother in the kitchen. She was standing at the counter, looking out at him through the window above the sink.

"He's glowing," she said.

She sounded worried. I looked out and saw that she was right. The egg yolk color of early dawn had intensified and deepened on his skin. I blinked my eyes to see if I could make the brightness go away.

"Mom..." I said.

"I don't know, Paulie. Is it the Harmonic Convergence?"

But then a cloud moved across the sun and we saw that it was just a trick of the light. Only, in that moment, I'd thought that maybe he was a Mayan himself, and a thought struck me all of a sudden - what if we were all, ourselves, the thing that we were looking for? I mean, Dad was the strangest person I knew. If he couldn't be a Mayan, then who could be? And maybe he was the only Mayan around. And if he really wanted to see one in another person, he never would. The sadness of it overwhelmed me. But Mom had already gone back to washing the dishes.

I went to the convenience store and locked myself in the men's bathroom so that I could study the condom machine. There were labels for the different types of condoms above the slots where they came out, and I saw that one of them depicted a condom as a rocket ship, shooting through the solar system. For some reason it was banded with rainbow stripes. But the picture on the cardboard was so faded that you could only just make out the different colors, and it looked so depleted of its original cheerfulness that I couldn't imagine buying it or any other condom. I went back to Larissa's and climbed through the window. Larissa was lying on her back, staring up into space. A dull, steady look had come over her, like she was in shock. I touched her shoulder and she grabbed my hand and started kissing it, rabid little kisses that stung my skin.

"I didn't get it," I told her.

She looked up at me. The fast, animal decision of those kisses was reversed. Her eyes turned hard.

"Look," I said, and tried to sit down on the bed.

She moved her body to block me.

"Look, we can't kill anybody. I mean, she's awfully bad, but she's a human being, right?"

"No she's not. She's a troll."

"Larissa..."

"A troll, a troll, a troll!"

Her hair was tangled across her head, like it was knotting itself with fury. She pushed up out of bed and went to a black boom box on her bookcase. She fumbled a cassette into it and turned the volume up. Then she came over to me and stood, poking me in the chest.

"You listen to me, Paul Whin, she's a troll, and don't you dare apologize for her. Don't you dare!"

"I'm not..."

"I always knew you were like a dumb kitten, but I thought I could depend on you. You're just a weirdo, like your father."

"Larissa..."

"It's over between us, whatever it is. Don't expect any more favors from me. Don't expect me to even talk to you. You disgust me."

I had my dignity. I drew myself up and said,

"Larissa, I'm sorry you feel that way."

But here's the truth. It broke my heart. Larissa was the only friend I really had. I climbed out the window and was halfway across the yard when I looked to the right, out towards the street, and saw Dan's pinto sitting there. He was staring at me out of the open window. When our eyes met he jumped out of the car and sprinted across the yard towards me.

This was the friend of my youth. This was the boy I'd played James Bond with and who had chewed the little plastic plugs on his squirt guns. This was the boy I'd accidentally hit with a baseball bat on a backswing when he'd been playing catcher and who had a scar across one eyebrow to show for it. This was the boy who I'd drawn comic books with, comic books that we'd sold for a nickel a piece so that we could blow our earnings on Kool Aid packets which we ate while sitting in a tree, licking the Kool Aid off of our wet fingers. As he came towards me, I saw that he was going to hit me.

"Dan?" my father said, "Dan Gross?"

Dan was so startled that he stopped abruptly, like a dog pointing. Dad was walking towards us across the lawn, still half-naked, still wearing only his pajama bottoms. The sun was out and playing its tricks again, so that it seemed to shine through him and make his clear eyes a startling blue.

"Dan," Dad said, "you look unhappy. Are you unhappy? What's wrong?"

I watched as Dad put his arms around Dan, who looked terrified. Then Dan gave a beaky, squawking sound, and started to cry.

"Larissa!" he cried. "Oh, Larissa!"

I looked back at Larissa's window, but it was empty. Music blared through it. Pink Floyd. I wondered how long Dan had been watching, how often he'd seen me come and go through that window that morning. Maybe he'd even followed me to the convenience store and guessed what my errand was. I wanted to tell him that we didn't do it, but Dad was walking with him, gently moving him towards our house.

He sat Dan down at the kitchen table and Mom gave him a water in the plastic beaker with the Beatles on it that Dad always drank from. Dan couldn't stop crying. He said that he'd been driving by her house every day, letting the pinto glide slowly in neutral, looking at the blank windows, the shuttered, stale darkness of the house, and knowing that Larissa was in there and that she didn't need him.

"She said her love was dead," he sobbed. "She said that to me. But shouldn't she need me now? I mean, I could comfort her. Who knows her better than I do?"

He let his shoulders do most of the crying for him. They shivered and shook.

"You poor boy," Dad said.

I watched him, and I could see that he was sad, but he wasn't crying. His sadness wasn't confused, but assured, like he knew what it was there for, and he sat next to Dan and folded his muscled hands on the table, and he said,

"That's right, cry it all out. This is what is meant by planetary cleansing."

Karl Stevens

## Converge

D.J. got low against the ridge with his rifle pushing down tall grass, and the coyote lined in the crosshairs a stone's throw downhill. One blue eye and one brown eye, she stood with her scrawny legs and matted gray and black shaggy fur. The animal looked in his direction; her slender nose sniffing the air. He closed his left eye to peer down the iron sights as she pawed at the ground and tore off bits of bird carcass, blood dripped off her white jaw. He took a shallow breath, let the air out slowly, and squeezed out two shots. Bark flaked off a tree, and with a quick convulsion and rippling fur, the coyote staggered out of view with a few loud yelps.

He pocketed the two hot shell casing, slung the rifle over his shoulder, and side stepped downhill. The area where he stood was in a small clearing, and the heat baked down as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. He pulled out a cigarette from his breast pocket and found a hole in the paper, ripped it in two at the base, pinched out the loose tobacco near the filter, and rolled the longer half back into the filter. He lit it, pulled the initial inhale and release, and then took a long solid drag. Blood had pooled where the coyote had stood with a thin red trail heading into the thick of the woods.

He walked softly and lifted his feet not to scuff the grass. The hickories and maples were spaced ten paces or so apart, and the ankle-biting brush was heavy along the blood trail. Around the thicket of briars and vines, he followed the trail farther downgrade. The toes on the coyote's paw prints were closer together than most dogs, and they were imprinted at an even gate. The tracks off the hind legs were less indented than the front, all her weight distributed to release pressure off the wound. He hadn't seen the bullet hole, but he knew he missed the kill shot and hit farther back near the hide of the animal. A long vine hung down a high tree branch, and the sun came down in patches through the leaves.

The wind snaked through the trees hissing the branches, and he scanned the trail: below him the tree line broke into a grassy opening, up to his right was the crest of a hill, and in front of him was an increase in grade that wrapped around the hillside. The blood on the grass heavier from the animal running herself to death, and it coagulated at spots of rest. She couldn't be far. He didn't know why the coyote was out during the day or away from her family, but his father wanted it done. She'd been creeping around the house at night, pawing at the chicken wire; moving between the fog. His father was vigilant in his watch. D.J. would observe him rap his cane against the wallpaper, flip the porch light on and off, and crack a window to grunt at the night and listen for movement. But his father always fell asleep in the armchair with his Panama hat tucked over his eyes, and he would count aloud in his sleep: one, two, three; four. He was counting coyote.

D.J.'s boots were brown and worn. A few holes exposing white material underneath, and one large hole at the seam revealing the white sock when he lifted the boot letting the hole expand. White rock salt residue, from the winters before, lined the sides, and dark brown water and dirt stains near the heel. He firmly planted his feet with each step. In his pack was a case of bullets, and he loaded the rifle by pulling out the bolt and locking the shells into the chamber. He crested a ridge and peered uphill to another ridge to his right or downhill toward the valley to his left. The cigarette had burned to the filter, and he rolled the cherry out of the ground, and he pocketed the filter next to the shell casings. The valley in front of him had telephone poles that came up and over the ridge. Their lines drooping and naked and buzzing. The sky a pale red through the trees, and a willow wept its branches down to his shoulders.



He marched through the ravine under the power lines, and the trail cut uphill to a clearing with a burned down brick house and a charred chimney intact and pointing straight up in the air, the rest of the place in rubble. The white mortar holding the bricks together was cracked but sturdy. He kicked a rock into the fireplace and it ricocheted back out and onto the grass. At the front of the fireplace were chunks and smaller pieces of stone hearth and ash. The blood trail ended here, and the coyote lied curled inside the three walls of the chimney. The animal was motionless, powerless; could've been a stuffed animal on the shelf of a store. Her mouth gaped, pale pink tongue unfolded across a thin set of jagged teeth; tongue tip dipped onto the cement floor. Her body haloed by wood ash. He tiptoed over the rubble and nudged the animal with the barrel of his rifle, and she didn't budge. He scooped up the ash in his palms and sprinkled the grains over her body, and he smoothed the fur around the ears and closed her eyes.

He sat down at the edge of the destruction and drank from a warm canteen. Putting the butt of the rifle flat against the outside of his hip, the barrel faced the northern hillside. The evening dimmed the sky, and the humidity sank with the sun. He sang in a baritone, "Amanda Lynn plays a mandolin./ The night sky is trembling./ Tomorrow's weight is dwindling./ And I am lost, again." The house was there a year ago, but one night, it went up in scorched earth. He knew the family, ran water down from his family's well to their house, and he had played with the boy living there for many years. He looked at the rubble: blackened bricks and torn wood panels, strewn household items and charred magazines, and an abstract pile of scattered objects like linoleum tile, lamps, and baseball cards. Artifacts of a life spent well and spent quick and never coming back. He lied in the grass, stayed silent as twilight turned full dark, and he counted stars until he fell asleep.

When he awoke, dawn had opened up in an orange haze, and his clothes were wet from dew. He peeled off his shirt, pants, socks, and boots and placed them on a broken wall of the razed house. The carcass had been picked over by numerous scavengers. When he got closer, he could see an exposed ribcage and large chunks of fur and flesh dropped around the body. A portion of the tongue was missing, and the eyes were gone. Several crows were making noise in a nearby tree branch, their stomachs probably puffed out on coyote meat. He pulled up his boxers and examined his own body, the farmer's tan a deep white on his chest and legs, yet the skin on his arms were pink.

His stomach grumbled as he scratched at his sunburned forehead, and he laughed for being passed over by the birds for an easier meal, one that didn't chew back. He chucked a stone at the birds, and they dispersed quickly, making a noisy spectacle, and the stone chipped bark off a high branch and then came down with a thud and a roll. His bare feet pressed into the soft, wet grass as he walked over to an area where the thicket met with a small clearing, and he knelt down to a bush and pulled out several wild blackberries and ate them raw. He plucked out more berries and consumed them, their taste bitter and sharp, and juice ran down his mouth and stained his fingers. He broke off the shoots and chewed them, and he collected the leaves off the plant and shoved them in his pocket for them to later be dried into tea leaves.

When his clothes dried out by the morning sun, he threw them back on and marched north, his worn boots digging in to the soft earth as he made a slight ascent. When he peaked the hill, he walked across an open field. He was close to the border of his father's land and the neighboring property. He could visualize in his mind's eye a house about a mile west. A quiet family of five, the kids in middle school. His father often would lend a hand when the neighbors needed help. City water didn't run out here, and he would bring water if needed or dig out a well or a stream to provide the water for others. If trees fell on the narrow road, his father would rummage out a chainsaw and clear the passage.

He was good with farming and gardening, and he'd help harvest if help was needed. D.J. considered selling some timber off his land to help make some extra money. He wondered if there were any minerals that he could sell the rights to. Maybe he'd sell everything: the acreage, the house, and even the damn soil. He assessed the land. The forest was lush and thick. A deadfall of hickories filled a ravine, and they probably fell over last winter.

Around here, people sought out a flat stretch of land among all of these rolling hills, and when that flat stretch was found, property lines were usually drawn up soon after. D.J. knelt through barbed wire that was strung up between wooden posts, and he walked around the bank of a pond to the flat stretch his father found and purchased twenty some years ago. As a boy, he helped lay the foundation, yet his father rifled over blueprints for weeks before breaking ground. D.J. stood and took the two story house in, and it was somehow alien, disfigured. The gray shingles on the roof, the white side paneling, the blue shutters, all of these things in order, but they seemed darker, worn.

He shook it off and went inside and found his father's things where they were left. The dining room table was covered in loose pages of The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. Several books on the hardwood floor, and he shuffled through them: some about space and time, nothingness and natural history, and transubstantiation and last rites. His father had stacks of nature magazines, books, and comic books on the china cabinet. Stationery for writing letters to his numerous correspondents. A silver letter opener in the shape of a dagger. The dining room had transformed into his study, and D.J. opened a cardboard box and piled in all the books, magazines, newspapers, and etcetera, stripped the room of its clutter. He taped the box up, wrote "Father's Things," and took it up to the attic. D.J. spent the day cleaning up the house, removing dust and dirt and putting his father's things in storage. It was two days after the funeral.

The house was empty, quiet. After the cleaning, most of the rooms were bare besides furniture. The living room was a recliner, couch, and plain glass coffee table where his father ate his meals. The dining room was a wooden table, blank-faced china cabinet, and an office chair. The kitchen was smooth countertops, an empty steel sink, and all the dishes and cooking utensils tucked away in cabinets and drawers. Both the bathrooms were just commode, shower, towel closet, and medicine cabinet with abandoned pill bottles and ointments. The master bedroom was an empty walk-in closet with forty wire hangers, king-sized bed stripped of sheets and covers, an empty bookcase, and a barren desk. The second bedroom was a twin-sized bed without sheets and a loan telescope pointing at a window. D.J.'s room was like it was before the funeral, a mess of clothes, CDs, and textbooks. He hadn't got to the basement, barns, or garage, and the attic was packed to capacity. The house was on forty-five acres of forest and meadow. His father had no will, but D.J. was left with the house and land which included two barns and a garden, twelve chickens, two horses, two goats, and a blind German Shepherd. He was left these things because he was next of kin after his mother, and his mother didn't want them. His brothers and sisters had long since left the state.

He stood in the upstairs hallway where the carpet was still pressed down in spots from absent cabinets, and the hallway was empty beside his rifle resting in the corner. He took in deep breaths as he pressed his hands into the artificial wood that covered the walls, and small particles of dust and hair floated past the beams of evening light coming from the windows. He shut his eyes tight and shook his head, and then he moved with large steps down the stairs and outside to the porch. He sat down on a chair as sweat mounted his forehead, and he tried to control the tightening of his chest and heart through breathing. The German Shepherd shuffled his paws, following D.J.'s vibrations as he rocked in his chair, and the dog put his head in D.J.'s lap. He petted the dog's skull, looked at the clouded gray eyes, and smoothed the fur around his spine. He put his head to the dog's head, and the animal whimpered and rolled on his back.

He peered down the long gravel driveway as a sedan cut the corner and made a crackling ascent up to the house, and he recognized the car to be Tsukiko Inoue's. She cut the engine, and it sputtered out and clanked hot under the hood. She got out of the car, pushed her sunglasses from the bridge of her nose up to her forehead, and gave him a slow wave. Her black hair flowered down to her shoulders, and she had a sun dress draped over her lean body. She smiled, bent over and hugged him, and then sat down on a chair.

"I just heard about Miller," she said.

She'd always called his father by his last name. Her Japanese accent had faded from its thickness, yet it was still stressed and jagged at points. Her inflection would singsong when she choked up.

"I'm sorry for your loss. I just got in from Pittsburgh."

He grunted under his breath, shrugged his shoulders, and lowered his head.

"Would you like to come in? I have a fridge full a food leftover from the wake. It'll spoil soon." She nodded.

He used the microwave to heat up pre-prepared plates of the dark meat of turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, and green beans. He then added to the plates warm rolls and deviled eggs. They sat down at the dining room table, and she pinched a slick egg between her fingers and took a small bite. He tried to scratch up conversation, but everything that he came up with fell flat in his mind. So they sat there in silence consuming their food soundlessly, politely wiping their mouths with napkins after each bite. She had a short forehead, thin bridge on her nose, and sharp eyes. She looked around the room with pursed lips.

“This looks so bare,” she said.

“You don’t like what I’ve done with the place?”

He looked down at his plate, and everything was spoiled green, rotten. He shook his head and the picked over food looked edible again, but he pushed the plate away from himself. His appetite had left the last couple days, and he could only stomach small amounts. She had finished her food, stood, and walked about the room. She had a dancer body, weightless, and moved like a sylph. The Inoues lived down the road a piece, and D.J. had known Tsukiko since early childhood. She didn’t know English when she first arrived, but they still roamed the woods together, their words just animal noises to each other. Her body had transformed over the years: she grew in height but not in weight, her nose and cheeks elongated, and her adult teeth filled out her face. Her small skeleton was agile and limber, and she lifted her body on her tiptoes and opened a high cabinet to find it empty.

“Out with the old...” he said.

“I feel like I’m in a furniture store with their fake dining room setups.”

“My fruit is not plastic, thank you.”

She closed the cabinet and turned to him, “You have fruit?”

“Well, it’s probably bad, actually. My, I didn’t buy it.”

“You doing alright?” She put a small palm on his shoulder.

“Fine,” he said with a quick nod. “Fine.” He bit deeply into his lower lip.

Darkness had set in as she made her way to her car, and he followed her out. The night air was muggy and full of sounds from crickets. As he stood beside her car, he could barely make out the woods around him from the moonlight, and she looked at him for several seconds before embracing him fully. She wrapped her arms tight around his shoulders, and she rested her head into the small dip of his chest. He rubbed the wings of her shoulder blades, and then she broke first and took his hands in hers.

“You take care of yourself, David.”

His hands felt cold as they parted from hers, and he watched as she got in the car and drove down the gravel drive. Her headlights illuminated the paved road below, and she edged out to make sure no one was coming before steering onto the road toward her house. Warmth spread and faded through his chest, and he crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. He finally managed his way back inside his house, and he ran laundry and made the bed in the master bedroom. The house creaked and made a hollow moan, and D.J. felt like the house was settling down deeper into the ground. The room was vacant minus the bed, and he sat down at the foot of it and looked out the window. His mind wandered about as he stretched out on his father's bed, and he kept thinking of all the things needing done. He pushed those out to the thought of Tsukiko, the places where their bodies touched felt like fire to him in memory, and he covered himself up and closed his eyes in an attempt to drift to sleep. His mind drifted from the darkness of his shut eyes to the dull, flushed colors of memory, and after hours of tossing and turning, he stood straight up out of bed.

He dressed and grabbed his pack, rifle, and industrial strength flashlight, and he made his way out into the night. At the spot that he'd shot the coyote, he marched over a waving hillside, and the landscape was changed by the darkness, transformed via visibility. The cloud covered moon offered little light, and he shot the beam of the flashlight through the woods. The night air breathed across the valleys, slid over stump-like hills, and whipped around trunks of trees. Branches swayed with the strong gusts, and the moisture in the air lifted like heat rising from soil. He was being stealthy, like before, and his boots would softly dig into the ground as he scaled a sharply slanted hill. His heart beat to the rhythm of his marching, blood pumping through thick and visibly blue veins, and he crested another hill to peer downgrade to a couple sweeping valleys with small streams and water run-offs. He clicked off the flashlight, and he lied down with a vantage point of the twin valleys below that crossed into each other but were separated by a high hill divide. In a stretch of flat surface in the left valley was the coyote family, and D.J. readied his rifle.

His heartbeat was up, breathing quick, and his hands were shaking. He closed his eyes to pace himself, looked inward, and took deep gulps of breath. He relaxed all his muscles and lied limply in the grass for several moments. Blades of grass moved against the small hairs of his arms, the wind blew over his body, and he reared his head to cradle the rifle against his shoulder and the ground. He clicked the light on, and the beam revealed the family of five coyotes. The animals looked toward the source of the light. He fired, each shot kicked against his shoulder, and the sound echoed. The animals took off in different directions, and D.J. reloaded, bolted the bullets in, and fired again. Sweat poured down his forehead and watered up in his palms, and he kept shooting, over and over, until his shoulder ached sharply. The animals were gone, but he kept sliding bullets into the chamber, locking them down, and sending them off below. The beam of light showed the ground kicked up, dirt blasting from entrance wounds, and grass and mud flipping in every direction. He stood and chucked the rifle, and it spun and crashed to the earth. D.J. collapsed to the ground. He didn't hit the coyotes, not one shot, but it was OK, they weren't the true killers. They were just the scavengers.

He'd seen the Panama hat first the week before, and it had blown several yards away, the brim was torn jaggedly. Clouds brushed slowly across the sky, and the sun was hidden most of late evening. He was gone a majority of the day busing tables, and he'd come home to hungry animals. The chickens and horses were uneasy and fidgeted when he came near, so he grabbed their feed from the outside crate and filled their bowls. The German Shepherd had his food bowl locked in his jaws, and D.J. grabbed some fresh water for the dog and then fed him. He whistled a tune from the radio, and after searching the house, he went to find his father in the barn. The barn was empty beside a few coiled blacksnakes his father kept there to fend off field mice. One snake had a bulge digesting in the pit of his stomach, and the animal propped its head up before stretching across the strewn straw. D.J. hiked over to the garden, his whistling strong and clear. The garden was cared for, and the only movement he could make out was from the billy goats chewing on sticks, his father leashed them to a brick and threw it over the brush pile letting them eat their way through. Then he saw the hat caught on a bush at the tree line, and the breeze waved the hat at him as he descended the hill toward the edge of the woods.

He picked up the Panama in his hands, turned it over a few times, and then he stepped into the shade of the trees. The coyotes came into view, and they were huddled down as if in group prayer. His whistling stopped as he focused in on the circle of animals, and he spotted a hand. He yelled at the coyotes, and they took off as far away as they could manage. He sprinted around the trunks and came up to the body of his father. Though he'd later find out from the coroner that his father passed from a weak heart during a peaceful stroll, D.J. collapsed to his knees and touched at his father's wounds at his thighs and side. His fingers pressed down softly on open flesh and bone, and his fingers came out red dipped. The man's salt shaded hair was mussed and muddy, the muscles in his face were loose and flabby, and his body was rigid. D.J. bit at the loose skin around his hand and popped his knuckles, and bent his ear down to his father's mouth and searched for breathing, finding none. He looked up through the branches at the graying sky, and then he looked back down at that lifeless body, that lifeless blood.

The body was mostly cold to the touch, but D.J. tilted his father's head back, opened his mouth, and put his mouth over his father's cold, blue lips. The man's chest expanded as D.J. blew air down his throat, and the chest collapsed quickly each time. He put one hand over the diaphragm, and then he put his other hand on top, lacing his fingers together. He straightened his arms and pushed down on the chest with force, the bones giving way underneath and popping on the first couple heaves. He pumped his hands down, counting aloud thirty times, and then gave two more rescue breaths before forcing down on the chest again and again. D.J. closed his mouth down and released all of his breath, his lungs emptied as another pair involuntarily inflated. He was trying to be his father's lungs, and his hands went numb trying to be his father's heart. The air smelled of salt and oranges, and the breeze licked through coldly, it carried in a fresh rain from the north. It was the beginning of summer.

Justin Crawford

## Five and Twenty

I am the man who stands there,  
At times alone, but never without a cause  
Life's challenges:  
Little blessings  
I am the man who breathes here  
I do so as anyone else does,  
only I like to take my time,  
holding each breath to the fullest

I am the man who dies and who is born  
I am him every day  
I play both parts,  
making sure to play them right

I am that man,  
the one who stands there,  
the one who breathes here,  
the one who dies and is born  
I am this man,  
that is what's most important  
While I see myself in everyone,  
I cherish the difference

James Noguera

## A Different Kind of Summer

They were at the summerhouse on the lake. Every year her father explained to her about the old well.

“You mustn’t climb up there or remove the cover. If you fall in, Sylvie, you can never, ever get out.”

The rounded, grey stones were surrounded by high weeds and briars. Once, she had seen a long black-silver snake slither around the base. Sylvie stayed far away from the well.

This summer, Sylvie’s mother would be commuting. She explained to her five year old daughter commuters take the train into the city to work during the week and return at the weekend to be with their cherished, delightful daughters. Sylvie’s lower lip trembled.

During the time they spent at the lake her father was forever writing. In years past, she and her mother had gone for hikes, picnicked in the woods and paddled around the lake. On rainy days, they baked spice cookies, blueberry cream scones and played cards and board games.

This year Sylvie had brought tons of books to read, pads of paper, colored pencils and crayons to “make art happen” as her father said - still she was alone most of the time. There were no other children to play with, and even though her father walked with her twice a day, “like the family dog” as she’d heard her mother say to him, Sylvie was most often listless and bored.

It seemed that her parents filled most weekends with arguments this summer. Often after a fight her mother would search her out, grab her hand and run with Sylvie down the hill to the lake. There they would swim in their shorts and tee shirts. Lying on the dock, they deciphered cloud configurations until their clothes dried.

Several nights when she was in bed and supposed to be fast asleep she heard them shouting at each other – her mother crying in their room afterward.

Sylvie woke one Sunday night when her parents were having a louder than usual argument. She heard her mother scream, “No!” Afterward it was quiet. Sylvie was beginning to dream again when she heard the screen door on the porch slam. Still half asleep, she got up and peeked out the window. It was quite dark, but she thought she saw her father carrying something over his shoulder in the direction of the old well.

Sylvie rubbed at her eyes. When she looked again, her father was gone and she could hear him pacing back and forth on the porch below her. She went to the top of the stairs and called out, “Daddy?”

Her father walked to the foot of the stairs and said, “Right here, Sylvie.”

“Where’s Mommy?”

“Why, she’s fallen asleep on the porch sofa. You get back in bed and we’ll be right up.”

Sylvie scuffed back to her room and crawled into her bed.

Sylvie Slept.

MaryAnne Kolton



Beth

Beth hoped she might finally be unhooked from the shame of her errant father and manipulative mother now that they were both dead, but she soon learned it didn't work that way. Her depression deepened and the tapes of “not good enough, never will be, just like your father” refused to be stilled. Barely audible, they swarmed like gnats around her head. The non-stop voices of her parents gave her headaches so violent that she was unable to complete the course work for the last semester of her business class. She failed to eat, lost too much weight and spent days in bed. She slept the hours away. Depression settled deep into the pores of her skin. At some point during the next three weeks when she crawled out of bed to go to the bathroom, Beth stood in front of the sink and risked a glance at the mirror. She was shocked by what she saw there. An emaciated woman of indeterminate age looked out at her. Filthy hair hanging from her head in clumps, face grey with grime, soiled, tattered pajamas hanging from a skeletal frame. Beth tilted her head and listened, startled by the near silence. The voices were so muted she was hardly able to make out what they were saying.

Enough, she said to herself. She pulled the pajamas from her body and ran the water in the tub, adding a good measure of bubble bath. Once the bathtub was almost full, she gathered a bar of soap, washcloth, shampoo and a razor. She stepped into the hot soapy bubbles. Beth slipped under the water and washed her hair at least three times. She drained some water out of the tub, and turned on the faucet to rinse her hair. As the tub filled again, she soaped her frail looking body, shaved her legs and underarms and gently washed her face. Then she lay back listening carefully.

Beth had been going to business school at night and working one of the checkout lines at the local grocery store, where she listlessly pushed produce and canned goods across a beeping scanner during the day. She lived in a studio apartment not even three blocks from the old house where she had grown up. It had been sold to a young family after her dad's death. Whenever Beth walked by on her way to work and saw the flower boxes filled with explosions of pink geraniums or blue and yellow petunias, the scampering little ones playing in the front yard and the mom sitting on the newly installed porch swing, sipping coffee and visiting with neighbors her eyes filled with tears and she wasn't sure why. She started taking a different route to work.

Beth had no real friends, no one to talk to. Her sisters and brothers had their own families now and she didn't keep in touch with them because they had all moved far away - besides they reminded her too much of her growing-up days. Her co-workers with were nice enough to her, but not a day went by when one of the people from the old neighborhood didn't come into the store. She imagined she heard them whispering behind their hands about her dad, her family and her broken marriage. She tried growing a tough, magenta, lobster-like shell to replace her skin, to keep their inaudible remarks from causing her pain. Meanwhile, the tape in her head containing the voices of her mom and dad grew louder. When she was at work, the tapes combined with what she perceived as the neighbors cruel murmurings assaulted her to the point where she often felt like throwing herself through the oversized plate glass window at the front of the store to get away from them. In the end, the panic attacks and the subsequent migraines left her no choice but to quit.

The words Beth recalled most often from childhood were admonitions, “Be quiet! Your dad is sleeping. If you wake your dad, you’ll be sorry. You know what your dad is like when you wake him up.”

Beth’s dad was usually pissed-off by the time he came downstairs for dinner. His hair stood out from his head at a dozen different angles and he had a dark stubble map of unshaven beard. He always went straight from the stairs to the kitchen cupboard where the liquor was kept and knocked back at least two shots of Scotch before coming into the dining room. Why did he have to drink before work? The Scotch seemed to obscure something. It was a hiding place of some sort and hung in the dining room like the grey haze of cigarette smoke over a room full of partygoers. Beth saw it capturing secrets in its lacy scrim.

Life was turned around in her house. Her father was going to work when most people were on their way home. Her father was a night shift foreman in the Belting Department at Goodrich. When they weren't in school, her mom had a tough time keeping five kids either outside or soft-spoken all day.

The worst part, as far as Beth was concerned, was that he hardly ever wore a shirt when he came to the table and that led to the nightly lecture, right after mealtime Grace, from her mom about propriety and decency etc. etc. The kids and her father heard it so often they just tuned it out, all except for Beth. Her mom kept bugging her about bringing friends home and said they’d be welcome to stay for dinner anytime. Did her mom really think she would ever ask anybody to come to her house for dinner? She was sure they would make fun of her and her family after seeing her dad’s hairy, man breasts at the dinner table. She couldn’t risk it. School was bad enough.

There were a couple men from work that her dad went out drinking with, every now and then, after a shift. One morning he didn't come home from work and her mom was not all that concerned until he didn't show up for dinner. She started calling around to see where he might be. Beth didn’t know who she was calling, but her mom got more angry than anxious with each conversation. They were all sent to bed early that night, even though it was summertime and still light out. Beth heard her mom pacing the rooms downstairs and smelled the smoke from the Camel cigarettes she lit one after another.

Around three in the morning, Beth woke when a car pulled up to the curb. The people inside were laughing and yelling. She went to her window and saw several men shove her dad and a strange woman in a peach silk dress out on the front lawn. The car took off fast, its tires squealing as it raced up the street. Porch lights blurred on at all the neighboring houses. The woman lay passed out on the grass. Beth's dad stood up and slurred, “Hey Carol, get the kids up and come on down here. I want you all to meet Ruth.”. Her mom slammed the windows shut and double locked the front and back doors.

Her dad went missing in action for about a week after that. The whispering at school - the school was only a block from her house and even the white wimpled nuns were talking about it - and between her mom and her mom's friends tormented Beth. The feelings she had of not being the same as the other kids fed on the whispers. She felt them growing like a large, plum-colored bruise on her forehead until Beth was sure everyone could see it. She sometimes cried herself to sleep at night wishing she didn't have to go to school and face the talking behind her back and the questioning looks. When she tried to talk to her mom about why her dad did the things he did her mother got angry with her.

"Your dad works hard to keep a roof over your head, food on the table and clothes on your back. Don't ever let me hear you disrespect him that way again!"

Some of her brother's pals did come for dinner. They enjoyed the spectacle of her Scotch infused father trying to get a forkful of food from his plate to his mouth when he'd had four or five shots rather than the usual two. But to snicker was to incur a look from her mom that could scorch paint off a car. Beth had been at other kids' houses for dinner and their dads were always dressed at mealtime and didn't drink before dinner. This disparity heightened her feelings of otherness, of somehow not being suitable in some way. She knew her family was unlike those of her friends, but she wasn't quite sure what made them so.

It was less harrowing for Beth when there was just family for dinner at her house. Her dad didn't seem to have any friends except the men he drank with. He did have four boisterous, roughhousing brothers all close in age. Sometimes on Sunday, the brothers would get together at their house and spend the afternoon in the back yard drinking beer, listening to the Indians game on the radio and jumping off the garage roof.

Beth was never sure how the roof jumping started or why. She thought it had something to do with seeing who could leap and land farthest away from the small concrete block garage. She did know that some of the neighbors called her mom to complain about the noise and the cursing. Beth sat on the front porch on Sundays or stayed in her room so she wouldn't be expected to answer the phone.

More than one Sunday was spent at the hospital Emergency Room waiting for a bone to be set and once her dad gave himself a black eye when he leaned too far over the beer cooler and flipped the lid up too fast. Beth grew to hate those Sundays.

When her dad came home after her mom locked him out, he was more short-tempered and combative than usual. If Beth or her siblings talked back or fought with each other her father would send one of them outside to cut a long, sturdy stalk from the forsythia bush in the front yard. He would peel the thin, mottled, brown bark from "the switch" as he called it and lace the back of the most obvious offender's legs with stinging red welts. Always high enough to be hidden by their shorts or dresses. He would keep the switch next to his chair as an implied threat. The switchings hurt, but as Beth got older she steeled herself and didn't cry. This made her dad switch her harder and longer than any of the others.

Her mother never intervened during these incidents unless her dad reached for his belt. She was unable to talk him out of using it, but she poured him a few drinks and he usually went to sleep before the punishment was meted out. Her dad's drinking seemed to be both the problem and the solution at the same time. Beth was never able to figure out how this worked. She was beginning to think her whole family was crazy. Did that mean she was crazy, too?

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When Beth moved on to high school, she joined the art club, the newspaper staff, anything that meant she didn't have to go home right after school. She was able to avoid dinner this way more often than not. High school also meant dating and when Beth first started going out, only the boys that no one else would go out with asked her. She expected this because her mother had told her many times she would never be a pretty girl, but she was smart, "thank goodness" and that would make up for it. Beth was shy and these dates were torture for her. She came home sweaty, sick to her stomach and exhausted. She was trying so hard to find a way to fit in, to be part of the crowd. Tim Dolan was nice-looking, two years older and had a stylish, robin's egg blue convertible with a white top. Beth met him when she was a senior and he asked her to dance when he stopped in at a Friday night mixer where she expected to spend most of the evening standing against the wall under the basketball backboard. She was shocked when he asked her to dance to all the songs after the first one and her heart was racing when he offered to drive her home after the dance. Tim was attracted to Beth's fragile, sensitive nature and her wistful prettiness.

Beth made sure she was always ready and waiting at the door when they started to go out on a regular basis. Never once did she allow him to meet her parents. Her mom would peek from behind the curtains or stand at the screen door to catch a glimpse of him. She badgered Beth to bring him in so she and her dad could meet him and when Beth ran out of excuses she just said, "No, mom. I don't want to." Tim took Beth to her prom and they went together for almost a year after that. Beth tried to explain about her family to Tim once or twice but he said it didn't matter. She was the one he loved.

He was very protective of Beth and gentle with her. She liked him more than any boy she had ever known, but his niceness made her not quite trust him for reasons that she didn't understand. He was an only child and his parents acted like they loved him and each other in a way that made Beth wonder if they were all just pretending.

When he asked her to marry him, Beth's mother said Tim was a real "catch" from a decent family and it was unlikely she'd ever get another chance like this. Beth was still puzzled by what seemed to her like contradictions and uncertainties. The idea of the two families ever becoming close or even casual friends was ridiculous, but because she felt Tim loved her and would protect her, Beth allowed herself to say yes.

Beth's wedding reception was an embarrassing fiasco. Her dad made a fool of himself, drunk, staggering around and pawing all the young women. Her mother sat stone faced at the parents' table resisting the Dolans efforts to make conversation with her. Tim's parents were so nice to Beth. Mr. and Mrs. Dolan both made a point of telling Beth she was the daughter they always wanted. Still it made Beth's stomach twist to think about what should have been one of the happiest days of her life.

Beth's next youngest sister married eighteen months later, and she couldn't stand to sit through what became a virtual replay of her own wedding. Her dad kept falling down when he tried to dance and spilled drinks on himself and other guests. Beth told Tim she had a migraine and asked if they could leave. She cried in the car and apologized over and over for her dad's behavior. Tim put his arm around her and pulled her closer. He told her she was a good wife and a good person. He said they didn't have to spend time with her family if it upset her. He wanted her to be happy. Beth thought maybe she had at last reached some sort of pinnacle and this was the point from which she might live happily ever after.

Her mom must have threatened something epic when Beth's youngest sister was about to be married. Her father was sober and charming - someone unknown to all of them - that day.

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After Beth's dad retired, he started using the two shots of Scotch to chase a few tablets of Valium several times a day. Beth and Tim lived in a duplex a few miles away and the other kids had all moved out by then, each of them anxious to try to live life without the thundercloud of their alcoholic father and increasingly inappropriate mother looming over them. On the uncommon occasions they were all together, their mother now talked openly in front of their dad about what a waste of space he was. He was usually too far-gone to respond.

"You are just like your father," was still the most gut-wrenching insult their mother could throw at any of them.

When Beth's mother died one sun-drenched May morning after a brutal three-month illness, her father came unraveled. Engulfed by long overdue guilt he spent most of each of the following days drinking, crying and relating horrifying events to whichever one of them was with him.

Tear soaked tales of a pregnant red head sent away by train, injuries incurred while escaping from married women's bedrooms and grocery money spent on a platinum blonde with big breasts. It was all too tawdry and too much. They began to stay away.

Her dad died in his sleep the day before Thanksgiving that same year. The siblings felt only relief. The memories of the shame and humiliation Beth had experienced throughout the years were a constant distraction as she now tried to live her life alone.

Although he tried to be patient and understanding, Beth had made her husband feel like he was coming unhinged with her groundless accusations of infidelity and her insistence that she would not live with a drunk like her father when he'd stopped for a beer with his friends after work. He became frustrated and demoralized and he left her on the day he realized there was no way for him to save her, but knew he had to make an effort to save himself.

She was divorced after less than three years of marriage. Another notch on the belt of my endless failures, Beth thought. She had not the faintest idea how to live with a loving man in a normal relationship.

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Beth had enough put by from her share of her parents' house that she was certain if she was just able to finish her business classes and find a job as a receptionist or a secretary she would be okay. A week or two went by before the tapes in her head got so deafening that she sometimes missed what the teacher was saying. The following week a student who had spoken to Beth on occasion mentioned how thin Beth was getting and hoped she was eating properly. Her papers that had been, without exception, returned to her marked with an A were now coming back with a B- or C and the noise in her head caused Beth to cry out or moan without even being aware she was doing so. The instructor stopped her after class one night and asked if Beth had thought about seeing a doctor.

As Beth soaked in the cooling bath water she could hear her parents' voices again, but the volume was manageable. She was so tired. Beth decided she would lay in the bath and rest until she found the energy to climb out of the tub, dry off and have something to eat. She was hungry. She closed her eyes and began to drift. The voices were getting much louder again. "Not good enough, never will be, never amount to anything, I told you so. . ." At least they can't say "just like your father" thought Beth as the voices boomed in her head. She watched the lavender scented bath water around her blush geranium red.

MaryAnne Kolton

All Smiles

Scott had been practicing, timing himself. He can do it all in under two minutes. He can't have her suspect a thing. It all needs to go smoothly. He smokes the cigarette down to the butt and lights another one. He never smoked a day in his life, but now at 44 he chains smokes. His wife doesn't know. He sneaks out the back when she is asleep and smokes until she calls for him. She always disliked smokers, said they were disgusting. He smokes now because he likes it and because he hates her. He smokes his cigarettes down to the butt, every time.

It has been 8 months since his wife was diagnosed with cancer. Bad luck, the doctor called it. She was only supposed to live for 6 months. He held off on the divorce partially out of pity, partially for the insurance. He was fine with taking care of her, knowing that she was dying. But the cancer is in remission now, it stopped spreading. Good luck, the doctor called it. Each day she was getting better, he could see it in her. It made him sick. She was supposed to die.

Two weeks ago Scott decided that he couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't watch his dreams die. The dreams that kept him going these last 8 months when she shouted for him to get things and not to forget to do that. God he hated her. She never shut up. He wanted to rip her eyes out every time he looked at them. He wanted them to be shut forever. He decided to kill her. Make it look like an accident. An overdose. The wrong combination of pills. It happened to people all the time. He was going to make sure it happened to his wife.

He timed himself, how long it took to get the right pills, crush them and put them in her food. It was a lot of work. He couldn't make a mistake. It had to be the right amount of pills, the amount she was prescribed. Any extra and it might look suspicious. He was going to give it to her after she took her pain killers. That way she would be relaxed and the food and poison would go down easy. Scott lit another smoke and thought it over again. Half way through his smoke he heard his wife call for him. Her voice made him shudder, made him hate his own name. He put out his smoke and went inside.

'Tonight,' he said to himself, 'I'll do it tonight.'

He went into the kitchen and poured a glass of iced tea. He sliced up some lemons and plunked them into the glass and carried it upstairs to his wife. When he got to their bedroom door he fixed his face to show a smile and walked in. His wife was sitting up in their bed holding onto the remote.

'Oh, thank you,' his wife smiled as he handed her the iced tea. 'I was just thinking that I would love some iced tea.' She opened up her arms to him and when he hugged her she whispered in his ear, 'you're the best.' He pulled away and kissed her forehead.

'I was thinking soup for supper tonight. Any requests' he asked her.

'Whatever is easiest for you,' she smiled and then added, 'will you eat with me tonight? You have been kind of distant lately.' She held her smile but Scott could see the concern hiding behind it.

'Of course I will,' he smiled wide, 'I'll get started right away.'

Scott held his smile until he had shut the door. He walked back down to the kitchen and grabbed a can of tomato soup. He chopped up some chives while the soup warmed up on the stove and then headed back upstairs.

‘Almost ready,’ he said.

‘Great, I am starving.’

‘Did you take your pills? I’ll get them for you.’

He went into the bathroom that adjoined their room. He quickly grabbed the bottles of pills that he needed for the soup. He stuffed them down his underwear and picked up the bottle of pain killers. He handed the bottle to his wife but she didn’t take them.

‘I don’t think I need them tonight. I am not in that much pain, and the doctor said to take them only when I needed to.’

Scott held his smile, ‘well that’s great.’ He turned around and left with the bottle in his hand. He cursed his wife for being difficult as he walked back down the stairs and into the kitchen. He pulled the pills out from in his pants and placed them on the counter. He opened each bottle and took out pills from each, including the pain killers. Sweat poured down his face as he crushed the pills into a fine dust, he worked fast. He grabbed two bowls and poured soup into both. In one he dumped the crushed up pills and topped both with chives. He placed the bowls on a tray and carried them up the stairs.

He rested the tray on his raised knee as he opened the door. He wasn’t ready for what he saw. His wife stood in the middle of their bedroom, naked. She had brushed back the little bit of hair that she hadn’t lost from chemo and put on some makeup.

‘It has been a while,’ she said to him.

She walked over to him and kissed his lips. He returned the kisses quickly.
‘Wow,’ was all he could say.

‘Put the soup down and come to bed.’

He froze for a second, not sure how to respond but then said, ‘how about after we eat? Huh,’ he smiled his biggest smile, ‘you should eat.’

He walked around his wife and put the tray on the bed and handed her a bowl. She smiled back to him, but he could see the hurt.

‘Mmm, smells good.’

Scott grabbed his bowl and started shovelling spoon loads of the soup into his mouth, ignoring the temperature.

His wife stared at him and asked, ‘isn’t that hot?’

He looked down at the half emptied bowl. Then it hit him, it hit him hard. He could feel the drugs already doing their job. His heart pounded in his chest, pumping the drugs even faster through his body. The bowl dropped from his hands and landed on the floor. He watched as the red of the soup spilled on the carpet. His vision went blurry. He grabbed for his chest. The last thing he heard before he heard no more was his wife screaming his name.

Lacy Lalonde

Exhumed

I dug up a body once. Not many people can say that. I always wanted to do something unequivocal in my life and I think this qualifies. I did it all by myself too. The idea came to me one night while I was watching one of those old mummy horror movies. I wasn't supposed to be up that late but sometimes I can't sleep. I started getting curious about those mummies and how they had managed to survive being buried all those years. I wondered about decomposition and whether or not worms do eat our bodies.

Everyone says that when you die your body becomes worm food. After a bit of online research I learned that the rate of decomposition depends on a number of factors, the big one being the type of earth a body is buried in and how high the salination levels are in the soil. The higher the moisture the faster the decay, the same goes for the salt. Mummies were buried in the desert. There really isn't much moisture or salt there so the body doesn't decay as fast. I learned that the rate of decomposition occurs much faster when the body is left exposed to the elements than underground, and it occurs even faster when the body decomposes underwater. The average person, being buried 6 feet underground inside a casket, can take about a year to be left just as a skeleton with teeth. It interested me so much that I had to see it for myself. The internet is great but nothing beats seeing it in the flesh, or the bone in this case.

The next day I went to the local museum to see if there might be any bodies on display. I didn't find any. I asked the two guys sitting behind the front desk if there were any bodies, in case I missed them. "It is not that kind of museum," one of the guys said.

"But isn't this a war museum," I asked.

"Yea," he said nodding his head.

"Well, don't people die in wars," I asked, nodding my head.

This time the other guy replied, "war museums don't showcase dead bodies, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

I left still feeling like a war museum should have dead bodies or at least pictures coloured pictures of them. I just really wanted to see a dead body, preferably one that was still decomposing. Maybe one that had been dug up by the police to help solve a cold case or an unsolved murder. With that in mind I decided to try out the local police station.

I waited in line for almost an hour before I got to talk to the police officer working the front desk. He didn't look very friendly but I had gone all this way, I had to ask.

"Are there any unsolved cases that need bodies to be dug up, and if there are could I go and watch?"

He didn't say anything for a minute and neither did I since I was the one who asked the question and it was his turn to talk.

"You want to watch a body being dug up," he asked me.

"Yea, is that possible?"

"No, it is not. You should go see a priest kid."

I didn't understand why I should see a priest but I did understand that I wasn't going to be able to watch a body being dug up to help solve a cold case.

“Try a funeral home,” he yelled at me as I was leaving.

I started to nod my head in agreement, “yea that’s a good idea.”

I thanked him and the next day I called my local funeral home and asked if I could stop by. My appointment was for 10 am.

The funeral director was a very nice man. I explained why I was there and he said that he understood and that it was perfectly natural for me to be curious about death. It felt nice to be understood. He took me to the place where they keep the dead bodies. It was like a big fridge. Everything was metal and cold. But there were no bodies inside because nobody had died and needed to be buried. Disappointed again, I thanked him and left. It seemed like I was never going to see a dead body.

That night I called up a friend and told him about the troubles I was having. He said that in some high schools kids get to dissect dead animals and that one time his dad got really drunk and dug up their dog in the back yard. He never got to see what the dog looked like, just his dad crying and clutching the little box that the dog was buried in. And there I found the solution to my problem. I was going to have to do it myself; I was going to have to dig up a body. I got off the phone with my friend and searched online for directions to the local cemetery. I decided to go there the next day to scope it out. But before then, I did some more research. I learned that it was customary for bodies to be buried 6 feet in the ground. There was no way I could dig that far down by myself, I was only 12. But I also learned that in older times people didn’t bury bodies as deep as they do today. I just needed to find an old grave.

The cemetery was huge. It seemed like it would be impossible to find an old grave in the sea of hundreds. I was going to have to check the dates on each one. The whole time I was walking through the cemetery I kept thinking about a joke my dad told me one time. We had just drove passed a cemetery when he said to me “how many dead people do you think are in there,” pointing out the window at all the graves.

“I don’t know,” I said and shrugged, “four hundred?”

Laughing, my dad said “no, they’re all dead!”

It’s a good joke. I plan on using it one day.

I was in search for the deadest people in the cemetery. The ones who had been buried the longest. After a while I learned to easily pick out the old headstones. They were usually cracked and discolored with moss growing on them. There weren’t a bunch of them but enough to choose from. Most of them were buried in the back of the cemetery, close to the tree line. When I reached the tree line and turned around to face the way I came in, I could no longer see the road, just the tips of a few houses. It was perfect. No one would be able to see me, especially if I went at night time. Out of the handful of old graves I picked the oldest one, it had a deep depression in the earth, and it seemed like a safe bet.

Wasting no time at all I headed for home so I could get ready to come back that night. I expected it was going to be really hard to see since the grave was so far from the street lights, I packed all the flashlights I could find, and my dad’s old lantern.

I couldn't wait. My curiosity of seeing a real live dead body mixed with the excitement of doing something very illegal had my senses on the run. I waited until my mom fell asleep, and then waited an hour after that to be sure she was really asleep. While waiting, I thoroughly checked all my supplies, testing each flashlight. Then I placed all of the items in my book bag in order of importance. Flashlights were on top, then a PB & J sandwich in case I got hungry. Next was a rain coat in case the weather turned bad, and lastly my dad's Polaroid camera to record my findings. I snuck out the patio door because it was quieter than the front. It led to the shed where my bike was, as well as the gardening tools. I chose the lightest shovel and tied a rope around each of the ends so it could be slung over my back like a bow. My back pack was heavy and it swung from side to side as I biked my way towards the cemetery. The gate to the cemetery was locked, I had to leave my bike and climb the fence. Once on the other side I pulled out a flashlight and made my way to the chosen grave. It was really dark and it only got darker the further I went. I couldn't see anything beyond the beam of my flashlight. I bumped into headstones constantly and once fell hard over a broken one. I landed on my face and scraped my knee. I realized then how foolish I was having not packed a first aid kit. This was a dangerous mission, I should have known better. I got up and as I walked I could feel blood trickling down the hairs on my leg, it tickled and hurt at the same time, but I pushed on.

I made my way to the old headstones. I must have shone the light on all of them a dozen times but I couldn't find the one I had selected the day before. It wasn't there. I walked around and around but couldn't find it. I should have marked it with something. Disappointed, but not defeated, I resolved to choose another. I found one, from what I could tell in the dark had a fair sized depression. The date on the headstone read 18??- 1854. It was hard to read in the dark. It wasn't as old as the other but it would do. I surrounded the grave with flashlights and my dad's old lantern, and set to digging.

I lifted off the layer of grass first. It took a while but once it was off I started to dig. It was slow going at first because of all the roots, something I hadn't expected. Every time I stuck the shovel into the earth it got snagged on a root. When the roots were too thick I had to pull out the shovel and try again in a different spot. It was slow work. I checked my watch periodically to gauge my progress, it wasn't good. I planned on having the body dug up and photographed by 3:00 am the latest. I knew then it wasn't going to happen that way. The best I could hope for was to finish before the sun came up and have time to fill the grave back in the best I could before the world woke up.

With the time deadline driving me I dug faster. Sweat poured down my face and I listened to myself grunt as I drove the shovel into the ground. My knee throbbed and it hurt when I bent my leg to pick up the dirt. But I didn't care.

When it seemed like all I had ever done was dig and all I would ever do was dig, I found something. I heard it before I saw it. It clinked against the shovel in a way that a rock doesn't. I chucked the shovel to the side and grabbed the closest flashlight. I scanned the toiled earth, moving it gently with my fingers trying not to rebury what I had uncovered. My hand brushed against something cold and small, I squeezed my fingers around it. I knew what it was before I saw it, a nail. My heart beat with excitement and I shone the light on it. It was only a few inches long with a flat top and square edges. It was a handmade nail, an old nail. Something that could have been used to close a coffin. I put the nail in my pocket and kept digging. I heard the clink again and reached down to find another one. This one still had a little bit of wood surrounding it. I

figured I was probably very close to the body by now and that the coffin wood had most likely decomposed. I worried that if I kept using the shovel I might damage the body. I got down on my knees and started to dig with my hands. I had to take the flashlights into the grave with me so I could get a good look at what I was doing. I was about a foot down. I flung handfuls of dirt behind me. I was in search for the prize, the skull. As I ran my hands through the dirt I started to feel little clumps of what I first thought were tiny rocks. I picked up one of the clumps and looked at it closely under the light. It was a dark brown, the color of the soil. Sand it had little hairs coming out of it. I shone light onto the spot I was digging and could see dozens of these little things, some were bigger than others. I grabbed a fair sized one and snapped it in half. Bone. Small bone fragments and the little hairs were fibers. I had found the skeleton, or part of it at least. I just hoped that the whole thing hadn't been reduced to small fragments of bone. That would be quite the disappointment.

I kept digging and whenever I found bigger fragments I put them aside the lantern by my head. I got excited again when I found a tooth, a front tooth. I turned it over in the palm of my hand, it was pretty big for a tooth, I put it with the bone fragments. Having found some teeth I figured I was probably straddling the chest area of this corpse. I checked my watch, 4:15 am. The sun would be up in under an hour, I didn't have much time. I needed to find something that resembled a human body soon. I dug faster, taking less care of the tiny bone fragments. I found more teeth and part of the jaw. But when I had dug down about another half foot I knew that I wouldn't find any more of the skull. It must have decomposed. I checked my watch again, 4:45. The sun hadn't broken through yet but its rays were lightening up the sky. I resigned myself to quit and start filling in the grave. I took pictures of the grave and then teeth and the piece of jaw bone. I waited for the pictures to produce and checked to make sure they came out good. I saw something in one of the photos. Something shiny. I put the picture down and looked for it with the flashlight; it was in the spot I had been sitting. I reached down and pulled it out. It was a necklace, a silver one, a locket. I rubbed the dirt off it and let it twirl in the light. It was beautiful.

Seeing the locket did something to me. It humanized the human corpse, gave it a history, a life. I realized that I had dug up the body of a woman and flung her bone fragments all over the grave. 'I am sorry,' I whispered. I took a photo of the necklace and then placed it back where I had found it. I put the bone fragments and teeth that I had collected back in the grave and set to reburying the woman.

By the time I was finished the sun was almost completely visible. My mom would be up soon but I didn't care. In the light of the day I could read clearly the name on the headstone, Abigail Smith, 1802 – 1854.

I left the cemetery that day different then when I had entered it. With my back pack on and shovel hung over my shoulders, I climbed the fence and rode my bike home thinking not of corpses and decomposition but of a woman named Abigail Smith. I had something new to research.

Lacy Lalonde

Unlucky

It was late, the road was dark and it was raining. Kate knew she shouldn't be speeding but she was already late and promised her husband she would be there.

She had to be there, her marriage depended on it.

She checked the clock; the reception had started ten minutes ago. She had less than twenty minutes before her husband was set to give his speech and she was almost a half hour away. If she was lucky the opening speaker might drag on giving her more time; but Kate knew better, she wasn't the lucky type.

She pressed harder on the gas pedal and the car lunged forward. She was glad she took her husband's car; it was much faster than hers.

The rain picked up, her wipers moved frantically across the windshield. She turned on the radio to drown out the sound of rain hitting the car. She thought about the last thing her husband had said to her.

'Look, you're either there or you're not, and if you're not', her husband raised his hands in exasperation and held them there for a moment before saying 'if you're not there then I know how much this marriage means to you.'

Kate walked up to her husband, 'I'll be there, I promise.' She smiled to reassure him and kissed his cheek. 'I'll even be early,' she added.

'I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have promised him anything.' She was always making promises that were impossible to keep. She slammed her hands down onto the wheel. Her heart was beating fast, she was scared. But it wasn't her fault, not entirely.

Kate was a surgeon. She had a surgery scheduled the same night as her husband's reception. She tried to explain that to him, he wouldn't listen; he didn't want to hear it. She knew that her job got in the way of a lot, especially their marriage. But it was her job and he knew what it entailed about before he had married her. Still, she tried. She wanted to be a good wife and a good surgeon. With her marriage on the line she wasn't sure that she would ever be able to make it work, but she was at least going to try.

She felt like she was making good time now, even the rain seemed to have eased up. She allowed herself to hope that maybe just for tonight luck would be on her side. Kate just wasn't the lucky type.

Her heart dropped. Red and blue lights flashed behind her accompanied by the familiar wail of a police siren. She was the only car in sight, they were meant for her.

She choked down the panic, took a deep breath, and pulled over.

'If it doesn't take too long I might be able to make it just before his speech ends. He wouldn't know that I wasn't there for the whole thing.'

She watched as the police car pulled up behind her. She checked herself over in the rear view mirror as the officer walked up alongside her car and knocked on the window. She took another deep breath and rolled down her window, letting the rain in. 'Hello Officer.'

'License and registration please.'

She couldn't see his face; the light from the flashlight was near blinding. 'Yea, sure.'

Kate reached over and opened the glove compartment; she fished around, knocking some stuff onto the floor of the car, until she felt the little black book where her husband kept his car papers. She handed them to the officer, along with her license.

'It's my husband's car,' she paused. 'He's actually the reason why I was going a bit fast. He's giving a speech tonight at the...'

The officer raised his hand to silence her, 'I am going to check these out, and then I am going to write you a ticket.'

She watched the officer walk back to his car. She could feel the rain on her face and knew her makeup was ruined. She rolled up the window and turned on the overhead light to see by. Her eyeliner had started to run down one side of her face; it looked like she had cried one big, black tear. The sight of it depressed her. She looked around for some tissue to clean herself up with. Instead of tissue Kate found a pair of red, lacy panties, lying amongst the contents of her husband's glove compartment.

She froze, and then shook her head.

'Those aren't mine.'

Lacy Lalonde

Big Brother

I was nine years old when my brother Nate drowned. That event changed my life forever. If only I'd done something to help him maybe things would have turned out different. Although what exactly I could have done I have no idea. I've been carrying the guilt and shame around with me for 30 years. No amount of therapy has managed to erase it.

The events of that day are etched in my mind like a scar, like a ghost that won't let me go. August 11th 1988, the picnic at Barnard Lake. I was 9 years old and Nate was 13. It was a perfect summer day; the kind of day artists' paint and poets write about. The lake was as blue as Nate's eyes. Everyone I knew was there. My big, noisy family, friends and neighbors along with families that belonged to our church. Kids and cousins were everywhere I looked— running, playing ball, and swimming— what a scene. Even a shy, bookish kid like I was then couldn't help having fun. The lake was filled with life. Little kids splashed in the shallows while the older ones swam out to the raft and, after sunning themselves, raced back to shore, a mass of flailing arms and joyful laughter. Nate always led the group. He was popular and so athletic. I couldn't swim with the big kids. I was caught between groups, not really part of either one. I watched Nate swim with a mixture of jealousy and longing. Slim as a girl he was and as graceful as a trout. He must have swum back and forth a half a dozen times that afternoon. Except that last time when the big kids swam back and Nate wasn't with them.

I was the first to notice that Nate was missing. I threw down my book and alerted our mother that something was wrong. At first she ignored me until I summoned enough urgency to attract her attention. "Mom, something's wrong. Nate's gone. Mom!"

"All right, Tom, Give me a minute."

Only when a girl yelled "There he is; there he is," did mother turn her head to look around. The girl pointed toward the raft. There was a smudge of pink and red 100 yards out in the water. It was Nate's red bathing suit his hand waving feebly. Then Nate stopped struggling and his exhausted body rolled over. He floated face down in the dead man's float. Mother screamed then, and that galvanized the crowd's attention on the drowning boy. I remember every detail still. I've revisited that day so often

How the dawning realization moved the adults to action—some to find a life preserver or a rope, some to swim out and grab the boy, some to look for a lifeguard or a doctor. Those who chose to swim churned the water like hippos. It was a far swim for the out of shape uncles and aunts. Nate had stopped struggling by then. It was obvious that no one was going to reach him in time. Then, like a miracle, out of the crowd, a man with a body of a swimmer jumped into the lake. With a few powerful strokes the stranger passes the herd of uncles and flies to Nate's side. Moving through the water with ease.

In seconds he reached Nate and turned him face up. The whole picnic crowded the shore to watch. They cheered as the swimmer drove for shore. With the practiced strokes of a lifeguard, the stranger brought Nate onto the sand and laid him down. He immediately began applying artificial respiration, alternately pumping Nate's chest and blowing into his mouth. The crowd formed a ring around the pair watching in silent anticipation of a miracle. I could hear our mother weeping softly.

But Nate did not revive. Not with the methodical pumping and breathing of the stranger and not with the oxygen masks and rescue gear of the firemen. It was all of no use to Nate. He would never swim again. When it was clear that Nate was gone, the stranger lifted his eyes to heaven and let out a long mournful wail, a sound so piercing it chills my heart to this day. Nate was dead. I wanted to wail like that stranger but I couldn't. I felt helpless, useless and sorry that I didn't do more to save him. The man stranger passed through the circle of onlookers and walked away, unnamed and unthanked.

Life without Nate was a trial for the whole family. He was clearly the favored son. I was weak and reclusive. I got on with my life as best I could and without even realizing it I set myself on a path that would make me what I am today. I put my mind to learning and honed it into a fine instrument. I mastered mathematics and quantum physics getting advanced degrees in both. I applied my inventive genius to creating a fortune. I developed several novel products and opened up new technologies. My patents alone were worth billions. My wealth provided the opportunity to devote myself to my twin obsessions—time travel and physical fitness.

I swam miles each day. Every house I acquired had both indoor and outdoor pools. After a while I was as fit and strong as an Olympic athlete. Making myself strong was an easier goal than figuring out how to travel in time but I had my billions and could afford to hire the best and the brightest. What we accomplished was nothing short of astounding. We succeeded in solving some of physics most impenetrable problems. It took tremendous energy to send an object forward in time, as the future is a dense wall of probability. Harnessing the energy of a large city would only advance an object a few seconds ahead. Besides, the future wasn't where I wanted to go.

The past had no such resistance. An object can roll down the past like a ball in a tube. It is far easier and cheaper to send an object back in time than ahead. The rules governing paradoxes prevent the past from being changed. I didn't care. My goal wasn't to change anything but to try. As soon as the mechanics of the machine were assembled, I over ruled my advisors and insisted on being sent back to August 11th 1988. It was my money after all.

The rest you know. I went back. I was the stranger. I saw the man who tried to save Nate but failed. I was that man; I tried to save him, I really did. I knew I couldn't but I had to try, didn't I. I had to, don't you see?

Harris Tobias

Beside The Pond of Memories

Throwing pebbles in the still waters
Of the dark pond, cornering round my memoirs
I found myself lost in the round ripples
Massaging the chords of my nostalgia
easing off with vanishing thoughts as the
thin waves disappear in the free thinking waters.
The soil bowl dug out in the gloomy mud
gulps the rain waters leaving me thirsty for
the days when my children will revive
my leaping, joyous days of upbringing.
All seems phony now and much more
heavy with wisdom and age.
Cracks on the shore of the pond too
drinks the flowing loam after the long summer.
My cracks stay still and drip in rain as
A herd of cows grazing in rice fields in monsoon
without the thoughts of the farmer with the stick.
My thoughts are weaved with greediness
To think of all those and all that I have lost forever
and a vain trial will sit here with an extinguished mind
till the clouds or lightning drives me from here,
nods me and pushes me into my present.

Sonnet Mondal

You've got to give a Little

ALL DAY I'm up and down elevators. I go to this meeting, I go to that meeting. These men gawk at me like starved dogs. I throw it in their faces—cross my legs, pick up a pen, whatever. Sometimes after a meeting has ended I'll linger in the room. I'll review my notes (the few I took just to throw away) and see what trivial things some man employs so he can trail behind me. He'll review his notes, check his cellphone, whatever. That's my life. Up and down elevators, in a meeting here, another there. It's exhausting.

It's 2:30 and I'm just trying to make it to the finish line. My office is on the nineteenth floor. I just met with these new faces Bruce and Amy from Implementation, and now I'm looking out my window at the city and across the Ohio River at Indiana. It's depressing. Not that the view would be any better but by now we were supposed to have been moved to the thirtieth floor with the rest of the department. That talk was going on before Thanksgiving and it's now July. Typical. From up here I see things most people don't. On Main Street traffic is stopped at a red light. Small figures of people move along the sidewalks. A train is crossing the river on that rusty bridge. The building across the street has a flat, grass rooftop on which there are two rectangular gardens of sorts, as if anything could even survive this drought. Far down the river a barge is pushing towards who-knows-where. It's close to the water tower near my condo.

I sit at my desk and check my email. There's nothing that demands any immediate attention, so I check my cellphone. Joseph will call soon. It's been almost two weeks since we spoke. Not that I'm into playing games, but he'll cave soon. It's only a matter of time before he comes crawling back. He must be going for a record now. In the past I had to put my other boyfriends on my blocked number list.

I'm grinning. I had old, bald-headed Bruce going. I had decided I should have some fun with him, considering I had to skip my bi-weekly bootcamp class at the gym. Sitting at the table, his eyeballs almost rolled out of his skull and into my cleavage, one of many places I'm definitely not lacking, and I am no fatty.

We met in the Seiko Room. It's a tuna-can of a conference room in our Plaza Building two blocks away. The building is trash but the walk isn't so bad. Even on hot days I like to get outside. The Plaza used to be some sort of clock factory when Abe Lincoln or someone like that was around, so they've cleverly named all the conference rooms after clock companies. Nick (I call him Nicky), a manager under me, told me that when he worked in that God-forsaken building, he called the Seiko Room the Psycho Room. He said before he came to Product, his leader would drill him and his teammates every morning at 9 a.m. He called them his 9 a.m. Inquisition Meetings, whatever that means—hilarious anyway. Nicky. God bless him. A few months ago he and his girlfriend got engaged, but I've seen him strut around in the company gym. I don't do that stuff. Don't get me wrong, I've sort of dated married men before, but I've learned it's not fair for some to have their cake and eat it too. I didn't get married for several reasons. For one, though, marriage is mostly only good for money, and I don't want any man getting his hands on mine.

In the meeting with Bruce and Amy, I'd shift my sitting, lean forward. Bruce's eyes followed my chest like a pendulum. Amy, on the other hand, is about my age, and I'll say this: She never had it. She wore very little foundation and only a hint of eye make-up. Her skin was way too pale and looked sickly under her dowdy, brown hair. And God! She wore two French braids that stopped just short of her nape. French braids. I thought maybe we would begin playing Barbie, then later jump some rope. How she got her job, I have no clue. I've interviewed dozens of people, and if a candidate ever came into my office wearing French braids, I'd immediately know the most worthless hour was underway. Amy. Poor girl. I'm not sure what she was going for, but whatever it was wasn't working. She's a pariah. She may think she's hot stuff working in Implementation, but I got news for her. She could never lead a team like I do. I know words like pariah (words most people don't know) because I was once a poet. Out of all the students in my middle and high schools, I was the best poet. I even won third place in the county's young author's contest. In college, I took a few English classes, but everyone knows there's no money in writing that stuff. I knew that if I ever wanted to write poetry, I'd just write it. I don't need a school to show me that. But anyway, I know a lot of words others don't. In meetings I'll sometimes say them just to throw people off. It's one of many ways I get my kicks. One word I use a lot in meetings is efficacious. Another is fruition. Some people know them but aren't comfortable using them. When I put them to work, eyeballs light up and behind those dumb sockets a brain eases knowing that everything is going to be all right. Cathy from Product is here.

The red light on my desk phone blinks, but that message can wait until tomorrow. Joseph doesn't have my work number anyway. Besides, he's usually booked until the late afternoon. He's a banker—or an adjuster or an advisor or something like that. It doesn't matter because like I said, I'm not into the marriage thing, but whatever he does keeps my VISA in my wallet when we go out, which is nice.

I look over my notes from my 10 a.m. I tear them out of the yellow legal pad, crumple them, and throw them away. I review my 12 p.m. Prospective meeting notes. Before I trash them I notice that my ladybug doodling has suffered, probably because I hadn't yet eaten lunch. I hate it when people schedule meetings at lunchtime.

Outside my door Nicky is sitting at his cubicle with his back towards me. He's working hard, plugging away on that keyboard. Mr. Somebody, God bless him. Some leaders close their office doors. Not me. I remember an onboarding course that gave great attention to being "approachable." That's a fine term, but I prefer "accessible." Open office doors are always welcoming, and fortunately, I've never had to have a closed-door discussion with someone under me. This is because I'm a good judge of character and my interview process is scrupulous. But it's not just that; I can weed out the losers solely by reviewing resumes. That adage to not judge a book by its cover is a joke. I judge and move on and always get the cream.

Bald-headed, tanned-tooth Bruce and eight-year-old hipster Amy have me thinking. Going in I wasn't sure what the meeting was about. Paula (that's my old hag of a leader) had delegated me to attend. She probably sent an email with agenda items, but I also probably didn't care to look. To be honest, most of whatever she does isn't all that important. And if the company wants to cut some top-heavy salaries, it would serve them well to look into her practices. She's been here for twenty-something years and you wouldn't believe the damage control I've had to play to save her ass. I'm convinced she's only working for insurance.

Anyway, going in I wasn't sure what the meeting was about. Paula had told me in passing that these two were from Corporate and were going to document our process. Despite Bruce's apparent perverseness and Amy's horrible genetics and bad taste, they were friendly. They were friendly all right, but sitting here watching Nicky type away, I realize what is happening. I'm not stupid. They introduced themselves. I said my name, gave them my infamous, limp-wristed handshake, and we all sat in our respective chairs. Bruce asked how long I had been with the company. I told him four years, smiled and held that smile as I turned my eyes to Amy.

"Yeah?" Bruce said, really excited knowing that the next half hour or more would be spent looking at me. "You've done quite a bit in such little time."

"This was my first job after I got my MBA," I said. "The company has been good to me."

"We're all fortunate," Amy said, then glanced at her manila folder on the table.

It was obvious that I intimidated her, but I'm not one to push people around, so in sincere declaration I told her I agreed.

Bruce continued talking and brought up my team's auditing process. He wanted to know how we could measure our analysts' work. Ha! I almost laughed. I've heard this junky verbiage spoken in every low caliber business class claiming to be the next Six Sigma. Just to nip it right there I leaned toward the glare on Bruce's head and said, "You can't measure it. Our audits aren't like those at the Service Center. They're deadline driven, not case-by-case driven."

Bruce continued to ramble something, and while he spoke Amy pulled a few sheets of paper from the manila folder. She slid them over the table to me.

Bruce asked me to give them a look. "Take a gander," he said like some sister-screwing hillbilly. "Can you verify that this is accurate?"

It was my team's process. I've seen a million of these stupid flowcharts, and this one in particular should've been very familiar because I wrote it a few years ago, but at that moment it wasn't completely memorable. I went over the pages slowly, as if I cared. If YES, go to BOX C. If NO, return to START. I hate these things, but I kept at, trying to not think about tonight's plans, what I would tell Joseph when he called. And I thought maybe I shouldn't call him Joseph. He never seemed to take to it.

Those process flowcharts bore me. I almost couldn't fake it. And sitting there in the Psycho Room, I was becoming stir-crazy. But I gave it another three or so minutes and slid them back to Amy. I told them that it looked about right, simply because I didn't intend to touch that crap again. Associates like Bruce and Amy consistently want to categorize and simplify. They like to scroll and click their little mouses and insert some four-word statement in a triangle that's supposed to capture an analyst's work functions and expectations. Sure, those charts are great if the State decides to audit us. At least we'll have some documentation, but what they don't document is the human element. And that's why I'm such a good boss. That's why I was such a good poet. I understand people. Bruce probably only has his bachelor's degree. And poor Amy, who just wants to make it in this world, is simply plain and super jealous of me. Bruce wasn't the only one looking

at my cleavage. And when I came into that conference room, she got a good look at my skirt and heels that click and clack throughout these buildings, demanding attention. If she has a graduate degree, it's most likely from some online joke-of-a-program that emphasizes process flowcharts. Other than a more few dumb questions from Amy and Bruce, little else happened. The meeting was brief, almost too brief, and I thought time management was especially an issue with these two when they insisted we have a few follow-up meetings to include IT. When I knew we were wrapping things up, I asked them what the deal was, what all of this was about.

In a rehearsed delivery, Bruce said, "This is an annual efficiency check to ensure the company's documentations are up-to-date. We're also trying to locate areas for opportunity."

Those sly dogs thought they could pull one over on me. I admit they were close. Annual efficiency check? Strange, I've been here four years and never had one. They did well, acting like they were there to ensure the process was current since I last wrote it, but considering the facts, that they are with Implementation and they want repeating follow-up meetings with IT, I know they are seeking to automate my team's work, cut some of the middle and lower weight when the company ought to simply fire Amy, write Bruce and Paula off, and promote me to Director. I already perform most of Paula's work.

Nicky continues plugging away at his keyboard. He stands to see the few analysts that report to him. He catches me watching him. I smile and turn my chair toward my computer screen, like I was in the middle of something. He sits, puts his earphones in, and begins working. Music use is at the discretion of management. Most leaders won't allow it, but I do because I don't see how it disrupts my team's productivity. I'd even argue it helps. Besides, it's just another bonus for those under me. They respect being treated like an adult.

I finish the rest of my chicken salad sandwich (on a croissant) that I had to stop eating to rush to the elevator and down the street to learn there were plans to lay off some of my team. No, they never said it. But why would they?

I go to the restroom to brush my teeth because no one likes a smile with chunks. Even if you look good, that is a definite disruption of beauty. It's bright in there and stinks and I leave wanting to gag thinking about all that airborne fecal matter. I'm concerned I could brush that stuff right into my gum line. But it had to be done, and it would be plain gross and inappropriate to do it in the breakroom. No one wants to see that stuff, spit and foam in the breakroom sink where the little Koreans and Indians wash their plates and chopsticks. They'll leave their dishes soaking in there for days. They have different ideas about sanitation, but nonetheless, there should be a policy about clutter and rice floating in bowls in the breakroom. I should put up a sign, but whoever manages this building might throw a fit.

such wonders as crawdads and tadpoles when she heard Grandma call. Something was wrong. The tone was different from when they called her for dinner, this sounded...scared.

Scrambling up the hill, her sneakers slipping in the loose dirt, stumbling and clawing with her hands she called out, "Here I am, Grandma!" Running toward the house, wiping her hands on her overalls she could barely see her grandmother through the tall field grass.

Strange, how her mind could now only recall snippets of the conversation with Grandma. An “accident,” she remembered her grandmother calling it. “Serious—chainsaw—your father.”

What she did remember vividly was the burial. There was the preacher, her grandparents, and the gravedigger. The pine casket rested in the open grave and at the conclusion of the service, her grandfather, looking handsome in his new Sears suit, picked up a clump of dirt, crumbled it and let the dirt fall onto the casket. “Let’s go,” he told her, taking her hand.

That night a terrible thunderstorm rolled through the Ohio River valley. She wasn’t sure if it was the fury of the storm or the thoughts of her father, cold in the ground, trying to dig his way out that prevented her from sleeping. It didn’t matter. She slipped into her grandparents’ room, curled up on the floor at the foot of their bed and fell asleep.

When she awoke, she was in the bed, wrapped in the bedsheet her grandparents used as a blanket during the summer months. Sunlight filled the room and she could hear her grandmother downstairs. She learned later that her grandfather had found her on the floor and put her into the bed. So it was that for the next two years the only place she felt comfortable enough to sleep was her grandparents’ bed. Then Grandma died.

She was buried next to Rachel’s father on an inappropriately beautiful summer day. They stayed at the gravesite until it was completely filled and before leaving, her grandfather planted daisies on either side of the headstone, grooming the dirt with his hands.

From that day forward it was just the two of them. Mom, a forbidden subject, had disappeared before Rachel turned one, so it was Grandpa who raised her through the transformation from little girl to young woman. “Thank you, Grandpa.”

His muffled response brought her back to the present. “Oh, sorry. Just reminiscing,” she explained. His fingers stopped, resting in the dirt. “Tired? I don’t imagine they let you work in those well-manicured gardens at the home. Pity. I remember how much you enjoyed working with your hands.”

They sat in silence, Rachel lighting a cigarette and enjoying the warmth of the sun on this late spring day. “I should have come for you sooner,” she said softly. “That group home was no place for you.” He was still and she wondered what he might be thinking.

Looking at the headstones she was struck by how faded her memories were of her father and grandmother and by the fact that she knew absolutely nothing about her Aunt Ellen, who died at age twelve and whom no one ever spoke.

Taking another draw on her cigarette she extinguished it against the headstone and dropped it in her pocket. “It’s nice up here, I see why you picked this spot.” Kneeling, she reached out, gently touching his fingers. They wriggled at her touch and she smiled.

“It must have been tough for you after Grandma died,” she acknowledged, “trying to raise me by yourself while dealing with the loss of your wife and son, so recently departed.” She shook her head. “The county wanted to take me away but they underestimated you. They didn’t know the strength of your determination, didn’t understand you had a plan.”

She sat back on her legs struggling to keep her emotions under control. “You made me who I am; taught me so much and you probably don’t even realize it. Thank you, Grandpa.”

Spying a four-leaf clover she plucked it, twirling it between her forefinger and thumb, admiring it. “My lucky day,” she said, “finding you after ten years. Oh don’t worry,” she said noticing his fingers stiffen, “you’ll never go back there. Not after all the trouble I went through to spring you,” she chuckled.

“Institutions are for the helpless and the insane,” she said a smile frozen on her face, “and you’re not helpless and I’m not insane.” She stood and stared down at him. “But you know that. You knew it when you were molesting me, but that didn’t stop you from telling people I was. All part of your plan,” Rachel said pacing now. “And it worked beautifully. They would have put me away had I not runaway,” she laughed.

“She’s troubled,” people said, “and the abuse self-inflicted. Who would ever suspect you, the kindly grandfather? Ah, you played the part so well.” She shook her head smiling. “I applaud you,” she said clapping her hands together. “Brilliant acting; another lesson you unknowingly taught me. Thank you, Grandpa.”

Peering at the rigid fingers poking through the grave she toed them—still no movement. “Then it’s done.” Sitting she relit her cigarette, took a long drag, held it and finally exhaled. “What a day,” she said looking at the sky. “So much work but so worth it. When you first realized who I was—the look on your face—priceless!” She ground out the tip of the cigarette against his fingers. “Thank you, Grandpa.”

Tom Gumbert

Cerulean Mosaic

In the midst of a heavenly garden sat a pair of bare-bodied lovers, an amorous couple surrounded by fertile green grass, exquisite flowers and small animals running back and forth around them. The woman's body was encircled by the strong arms of her beloved as they both faced the same direction, looking at the horizon to the enthralling colors of the rising sun. The beauty of the young woman was simply divine, her long golden hair slightly moved by the gentle breeze of spring.

"Adam," the alluring lady started saying, "I wish we could stay like this forever, staring at the rising sun, my body surrounded by your vigorous arms..." The woman closed her eyes and rested the side of her head against the man's chest, breathing quietly and peacefully. "I want this blissful existence to be without end."

"What could possibly disturb our blessed lives, my sweet?" the man asked, tightening his embrace, showing his affection to his beloved. "Our love will endure for all times."

A butterfly flew around them before resting its weary limbs on the woman's lustrous golden hair. The female goddess took some time to revel in the serenity of her surroundings, basking in the radiance of the sunlight. Moments later, her cerulean eyes met with those of her lover as she delved deep into his soul.

"Do you promise?" she simply asked, wanting her inamorato to reassure her that their love would be eternal.

"I promise," the man answered, his voice lost in the sound made by a sudden gust of wind.

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Tokyo, Japan, Tuesday April 24th, 2035

Bleu Heisashi woke up from her dream, her sky blue eyes looking at the ceiling of her room. She gently grabbed the border of her blanket with her pale and delicate hands and snuggled in the comfort of her soft mattress.

"I keep dreaming about that girl," the young maiden thought to herself, wondering why she kept having the same dream night after night. "And the dream always ends the same; eventually, the girl..."

Bleu continued to ponder, but her stream of thoughts was interrupted by the sudden sadness she felt for the girl in her dreams, knowing her sorrowful fate all too well.

"She dies..."

The blue-haired maiden slowly tossed her blanket aside and rose to her feet, knowing the duties of a seventeen year old girl were awaiting her. She had to prepare herself to go to school in the company of the person that mattered to her the most in the world, her childhood friend Ellis. It was not long before the two girls met on the porch of her house.

"Hi," Bleu told her friend, still groggy from a night of sleep.

"It's been a while..." her friend said with astonishment, sitting on the wooden planks of the porch, her upper body leaning backwards with the support of her hands resting on the ground. Her legs were dangling from the edge of the porch, her feet unable to reach the ground of the exterior garden. The young maiden was thinking about the past, about how she became Bleu's foster sister.

Bleu and Ellis had known each other since they were infants. The Lyonorr household was once located near the Heisashi residence in the rural regions of Western Tokyo, and both families became acquainted with one another through bonds of friendship shared by the parents. Bleu's father Ryunosuke Heisashi, her mother Azure, Ellis' father Lawton Lyonorr and her mother Siren, all four of them used to spend pleasurable moments frolicking in the prairies during their youth.

In time, the couples married, conceived children, and those children eventually became friends. Bleu became acquainted with the young Ellis while her brother Ryu Heisashi committed the mischievous acts of a young boy with his accomplice Gareth Lyonorr.

Both couples also shared a secret unknown to the world: both mothers were magic users. Each female child inherited the magical powers of their mother while each young boy took after their father's normal human heritage. Bleu was thus able to cast magic related to water and ice while Ellis could manipulate air currents.

One day, however, disaster struck the Lyonorr family precisely because of Siren Lyonorr's magical legacy. Races of magic users sometimes fight against one another as rival tribes normally do; Siren, being a Drainer, had been targeted by a group of Destroyers. The felons raided her household, setting it ablaze with fire and stealing her most valued possessions. In the chaos, Siren and Ellis had been separated from Lawton and Gareth.

Knowing the assailants only wanted to harm her and not necessarily her entire family, the mother instructed her daughter to run in the direction of the Heisashi residence and seek their protection; Siren then stayed behind and fought to give her loved ones enough time to escape.

Battered and confused, scared and drenched in the blood of her relatives, Ellis showed up at the front entrance of Bleu's home. The family opened their doors and took her in. The young girl has stayed with them ever since, becoming the sister Bleu never had.

Ryu, Bleu and Ellis were very close, closer than normal siblings. At some point, circumstances forced the three children to practically raise themselves. Bleu's mother caught an incurable illness and died from natural causes at a young age. Afterwards, the widowed Ryunosuke Heisashi found solace in his career, obtaining high-ranking diplomatic positions within the Japanese government and traveling all over the globe to attend to his duties. He never took time to stay with his offspring and raise them, and so the three children had to look out for one another.

In time, Ellis came to value Bleu as the most important person in her life. She also became quite fond of Ryu, although she never dared express those feelings to him. Even though she felt the way she did for her foster family, the lovely maiden deeply missed her real siblings, still believing they had not perished that fateful night. Months ago, she set off on a journey to travel around the world, looking for clues on the whereabouts of her family. She especially wanted to see her mother again, whose courage was the only reason she could still draw breath to this day.

Alas, during the wintry month of February, she returned to her foster home without having attained the goals she had set for herself. Nonetheless, she was still grateful for the unforgettable memories she acquired during her travels. She started attending the Orchid School of Magic again after her long absence from Japan, and had to catch up on many lessons. Fortunately for her, Bleu was a diligent student, and her help was simply invaluable to Ellis.

After a conversation with a focus on past events, the girls left the porch to prepare for school. While Bleu headed to the kitchen to prepare breakfast, Ellis walked towards a particular room of the house, where she knew her foster brother would be at this hour.

Standing at the entrance of that room, gently leaning her hands and chest against the doorway's wooden border, she quietly looked at the blue-haired teenage boy as he was undergoing his morning physical training. She simply smiled at the young man's determination as she saw him earnestly panting and sweating while doing push-ups, her eyes expressing affection and fondness.

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Sitting behind a wooden desk, the young maiden known as Prudence Elle Lonergan was quietly arranging her dark brown hair, contemplating the image reflected by the mirror in front of her. Holding a hairpin between her pressed lips, she folded her long hair and folded it again, then attached it with the silver ornament. She had been attending to such preparations for about an hour now, making sure her physical appearance was absolutely perfect for this day of school.

Her room was tidied, and her majestic bed, adorned on the sides with silk curtains sustained by vertical poles, was neatly arranged. One should not disregard the fact that she lived in Tokyo with the diligent assistance of an experienced family butler.

"Simply stunning," she said, looking into the mirror one last time after finishing her preparations, impressed with her own beauty. Not a single speck of dust could be found on the white blouse or black skirt that constituted her school uniform. She held the cross that stood at the end of her necklace in the palm of her right hand.

"Are you ready, madam?" resonated the aged voice of a distinguished man standing at the entrance of her room. Clad in black dress pants, a formal white shirt and white gloves, Prudence's butler stood upright with pride.

"As I will ever be," the heiress to the Lonergan legacy said, her eyes still not wandering away from the celestial vision of beauty reflected by her mirror.

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Orchid playfully put one foot in front of the other in succession on the edge of the sidewalk, awkwardly spreading her arms out to maintain her balance, her fingertips pointing towards the sky. Her manner of walking monopolized her attention wholly. She was really happy now that the sun was illuminating everything under the sky with its warm, brilliant light. Yusuke Ito, the young man she stayed with while attending school, was walking besides her on the street with the same aloof demeanor as usual.

"I can't really understand why you're so happy to go to school," the boy said between two yawns.

"Hum..." Orchid thought out loud as always while looking at the sky in search of a way to convey her feelings. "Well, every day I get to walk with you to school, and then I spend the whole day with my friends Hitomi and Gwen!" she finally answered with eyes closed and a wide grin drawn on her lips. "So... what's not to like about school?" she innocently wondered aloud.

Her concentration interrupted, her feet drifted away from their horizontal trajectory on the edge of the sidewalk; the young girl tripped, her body descending towards the ground. Fortunately, she fell in the direction of the young man, who caught her in his arms. The boy's hands resting on the lower part of her back, the red-haired maiden laid her head against Yusuke's chest and smiled with gratitude.

"Thank you," she told him, grateful she didn't fall to the ground and hurt herself. The two of them remained locked in that embrace for quite some time.

"Watch... watch where you're going, Orchid!" the young man finally exclaimed, blushing from embarrassment and shyness. He quickly removed his hands from her back, encouraging her to continue walking forward. "Here, we're almost there!"

The girl giggled and stroked her light red hair with one hand, happy to be in his company. Minutes later, they both walked in the direction of their respective schools after bidding each other farewell for the day. Yusuke's educational establishment, known as the Orchid School of Arts, was right in front of the young girl's own school, the two buildings separated only by a fence.

As the young man crossed the threshold of his school, he saw a dazzling young woman leaning her back against the fence, speaking to a young boy. A transparent pink mist surrounded her flesh as she smiled seductively to her interlocutor, her cell phone ready to note his phone number. Yusuke wondered whether she was truly a student of his school or rather a student of the school of magic, but did not give the matter a second thought and rushed into his academic building.

The lovely girl who was leaning against that fence was indeed a magic user, the wily temptress Amelia Whitfield. Every morning, she came early to the school across her own to talk a boy, one each day, into falling in love with her. Her method was simple and flawless: all she had to do was to cast a spell of bewitchment to captivate any young man who would look at her. Once that was done, she only had to choose a victim. Exciting the boy's senses, her target would fall for her without fail.

Today was no different; after talking to the person in front of her, he had agreed to give her his phone number and meet her after school. She reveled in the chase, in the passionate love story that unfolded after going out with these boys, once the school bell tolled one final time for the day. Often, she also found pleasure in breaking their heart, telling them they had no chance to begin with, making them realize the futility of their wretched existence. She loved to make them spend money on her, encouraging them to join her in her wild partying ways.

Amelia Whitfield came to Japan from her hometown of Toronto, in the Ontarian province of Canada. Living for sensual pleasures and thrills, she rapidly became acquainted with her city's nightlife near the famous Richmond street, easily persuading bouncers to let her in clubs without any further verifications. There she danced, flirted and drank to her heart's content.

The daughter of the chief financial officer of Power Corporation and the director of operations for Magna International Inc., the rich child was spoiled with expensive gifts and rapidly developed a playful personality. At first dissatisfied with her parents' decision to send her to Japan's Orchid School of Magic to improve her magical talents, she quickly warmed up to the idea of checking out Tokyo's dance club scene.

Her life abroad was one of lavishness. Every morning, she rode in the comfort of a sophisticated car driven by a chauffeur, and every night she slept in the quarters of an extravagant hotel, sometimes in the company of a lucky young man.

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"Go down!" echoed the angry voice of Claire Wright as she was returning a rubber ball into her opponent's court, as required by the rules of tennis.

The blond woman's form was simply splendid as she leapt to catch the ball with her racquet, her loose white t-shirt ruffled by the gentle breeze of spring. Her adversary could not run fast enough towards the net, in front of which Claire had sent the ball. The game thus ended with the American girl claiming victory.

"It's not fair, you're too fast Claire!" the loser of the match complained, panting from exertion.

"L-O-L," Claire clearly spelled out the letters of the acronym with amusement, "you're the one who's too slow!"

Underneath her intimidating demeanor, Claire was a simple young girl who loved to have fun with her classmates. Unlike the 'nouveau riche' family her friend Amelia Whitfield belonged to, the American girl was born into an old, powerful and respected family from Boston, Massachusetts. She had lived most of her childhood days in a mansion, under strict tutelage from relatives and servants. Claire was scarred from the hardships she endured as a child, hardships that molded her aggressive personality.

Once the young girl became aware of her parents' intention to send her off to Japan, she gave the idea no second thought and gladly packed her bags. Anywhere in the world would be better than... Than...

"Are you alright?" Claire's tennis playmate asked her, putting an end to her daydreaming.

"Yeah," the blond American woman simply said with a snort, "I was just thinking."

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It was finally noon, and students in the Orchid School of Arts gathered in the cafeteria to buy their lunch and eat. Narumi Endo patiently waited in a long line before it was her turn to choose the sandwich and vegetables she would savor today. She paid for her food and turned her back on the cashier, looking around for her usual lunch buddies. Finally spotting them, the black-haired Japanese girl rushed to their table, anxious to get something off her chest.

"Hey Yusuke," the girl started to ask one of her two companions while taking a seat in front of the boys, "who was that girl you were with this morning?"

"Huh?" Yusuke simply replied with surprise between two bites of his meal.

"Don't deny it, I saw you with a girl with light red hair, who is she?" she continued to question the young man unabashedly.

"Probably his mistress," the other boy sitting with them said while sipping his drink in his usual carefree manner.

"Shut up, Takashi!" Yusuke retorted, almost choking on his food and displaying more embarrassment than anger. "She's just a friend staying with the family while attending school, is all!"

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"Oh really?" asked a young blond Welsh girl who did not believe a word of the answer she had been given to her question.

"Really!" Orchid told her friend Gwen, closing her locker after removing from it textbooks for her afternoon classes. She looked at her friend intently, knowing she didn't believe her.

"You know I once had such a 'friend' back on the farm in Wales..." Gwen started telling Orchid before being interrupted by the approach of their friend Hitomi.

"What's going on?" Hitomi asked after joining them, wanting to be part of the conversation.

"Orchid has a boyfriend but she won't tell us," Gwen told Hitomi, giving her an amused look.

"Not true!" Orchid protested, but her words were lost in the laughter of her two friends.

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Takashi was simply bored from his late afternoon class. He was sitting on the edge of the classroom near the windows, and was more prone to looking at the beautiful weather outside than listening to the wise words of his History teacher.

Soon enough, a paper plane landed on his desk, abruptly ending his reverie. Frightened at first that he might become the center of the teacher's attention, he looked at the instructor, who had turned his back to the class to write on the board. Relieved, Takashi looked behind him, trying to find the source of the projectile.

It wasn't long before his eyes met with those of the culprit, his friend Narumi, who waved and smiled to him. She pointed in the direction of their friend Yusuke, who was diligently taking notes, listening to lessons of the Cold War once fought between the United States of America and the defunct Soviet Union.

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Hitomi was sitting in class, but her thoughts were not with her fellow classmates. Instead, she thought about her past, about her parents and siblings. She had been lucky enough to have been born into a conventional Japanese family with a brother, a sister and two loving parents. This was rare in modern day Japanese society, where the number of single-parent families had exploded in number.

Her family was normal in every aspect, except for their magical abilities. Hitomi's mother was able to cast Seduction magic while her father wielded Transfer magic. The parents' love had endured for many years, and their marriage yielded three healthy children. While Hitomi was the oldest of the three, all of them were destined to graduate from the prestigious Orchid School of Magic.

The young girl was brought back to reality by a scrap of paper put on her desk by her friend Gwen, who was sitting beside her. Hitomi glanced at the blond girl, who looked straight ahead and smiled, pretending not to have written that note. The Japanese maiden looked timidly at her teacher, hoping not to get caught reading what Gwen wrote. She then read the note, learning every gossipy detail her Welsh comrade had managed to extract from their friend Orchid.

Hitomi finally looked gleefully at the red-haired girl, who was listening earnestly to the words of the teacher while sitting in the front row as was her habit.

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Evening finally came, shrouding Tokyo in its cloak of darkness. Bleu's room was illuminated by the radiant light emitted by a lamp standing on the surface of a glass furniture. The blue-haired maiden was sitting behind her wooden desk, reading pages of a textbook as was requested by her teacher earlier today. Ellis was doing the same, sitting on her friend's bed. It was not long, however, before Bleu's foster sister groaned with frustration.

"I don't understand any of this!" Ellis exclaimed, complaining about the complexity of tonight's reading material. "History is so boring!" she said loudly with eyes wide open, letting her back fall on the surface of the bed, her long auburn hair flowing with the air as her body fell down.

"When it comes to History classes, it generally helps if you read the textbook in reverse order, from the end to the beginning," Bleu told her friend with a detached tone of voice, looking at her friend with her familiar cold blue eyes.

"What do you mean?" Ellis wondered, regaining her composure and sitting upright on the bed.

"Well," Bleu started explaining as she rose to her feet and borrowed Ellis' textbook, "History is a subject that's better understood if you look at it holistically." Sensing her friend was puzzled by her words, she quickly turned the pages of the book until she reached the final chapter. "You're trying to understand the subject matter by studying it chapter by chapter, part by part; I'm simply telling you to read through it and gain a better understanding of the actors."

"Let's try that with the races of magic users for instance, and their role in historical events. Let's talk more specifically about Seducers. Magic scholars such as Henry Wright have enumerated their possible actions throughout recent history, in particular during the Cold War, the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the 1949 Communist Revolution of China, and so on."

"If you understand the motives of Seducers by looking at their actions in recent History, then it's easier to understand why they acted the way they did during earlier times. You could say it's because History kind of repeats itself."

"I see," Ellis said with amazement, impressed by the words of her knowledgeable friend.

"So in hindsight, it's easy to comprehend the role those magic users had during the French Revolution of 1789, when the monarchy was abolished in favor of a republic," the blue-haired maiden continued her explanations while turning the pages of the textbook towards earlier chapters. "While some scholars have argued that Seducers and their evolved form, succubi, easily tempted royalty into doing their bidding, liberal democracies were ultimately seen as more conducive to their emancipation."

"Emancipation as the ultimate political goal of Seducers is a recurring theme throughout history. It has defined their stance for and against every major event that happened in the past."

"Also, surely you've heard of 'Les Précieuses', or preciousness, a trend in 17th century France mostly adopted by the female intellectual elite of Paris. Seducer influence was rampant in the creation of that trend. They always set the tone for what is or isn't acceptable in courtship and other matters of the heart."

"What about other races of magic users?" Ellis asked, her curiosity piqued by the way Bleu explained the subject.

"Destroyers have also had much influence on the evolution of mankind, their love for bloodshed easily recognizable through the many wars that characterize our History," Bleu told her friend factually.



"Many works of literature have also been written on such things as succubi, vampires or lycanthropes. No one knew for certain whether those legends were real or not until 20th century scholars looked into the matter, ascertaining the existence of those creatures as the evolved forms of the four magical races."

"Well, it's certainly easier to understand if you're the one explaining it!" Ellis exclaimed, relieved to finally make some sense of her readings. "But... let's change subjects!" she told Bleu with a wide grin drawn on her lips. "What were you studying before our improvised History lesson?" Ellis asked the blue-haired girl, pointing to the textbook on the young girl's desk.

"Oh that," Bleu said with a cold intonation, giving the textbook she had been browsing back to its owner and looking at the book her friend was referring to. "Magic channeling practicum..."

"Finally something concrete, hands-on!" Ellis cheerfully shouted. "I'll help you study, just tell me about what you've been reading!"

"Alright," Bleu simply said, clearing her throat and looking intently into the eyes of her lively friend, eyes that sparkled with enthusiasm. "As you know, there are several ways of channeling magic; one can draw runes, dance, chant the words of an incantation, and so on," she continued to explain, knowing she had captured Ellis' undivided attention.

"So?" Ellis abruptly interrupted her friend. "Go on, practice channeling a spell!" she encouraged her dumbfounded companion to jump into the hands-on part of the subject.

"O...kay..." Bleu said with a bit of doubt permeating her voice. She then awkwardly opened up her left hand with its palm facing the ceiling and drew something in thin air right above it with her right index finger.

Seconds later, a small sphere of water appeared on the palm of her left hand and grew in size until its shape and dimension stabilized. The orb, made of many different shades of blue, glowed with a light that illuminated the surface of the room's walls and ceiling. Speechless, Ellis looked at this beautiful spectacle, entranced by the mosaic of cerulean lights that unfolded in front of her. She slowly rose to her feet and tried to touch the blue sphere, but her friend stepped back and prevented her from doing so.

"Be careful!" Bleu quickly chided her foster sister. "This is no ordinary water."

Moments later, the aqueous sphere disappeared, and the room regained its normal colors. The young girls returned to their seats and resumed their studies, enjoying their mutual company and engaging in spirited conversations throughout the remainder of the night.

Gary Germeil

## Uprooted

I remember when sleep and rest were synonymous  
and I awoke each morning, or early afternoon,  
feeling like a freshly-watered plant  
with my shoots yawning toward the sun.

But you strolled by,  
saw opportunity,  
poured that potent drink.  
Flipped me, shook me from my flowerpot.  
Took what you wanted to take  
with palmate hands,  
sober hands.

I live on the ground now  
where I've been splayed atop the soil,  
where vetch braids itself across my stalks  
and ivy strangles my roots that ache  
for moisture, security  
in the damp layers of the earth.

Though I can be replanted,  
I am like a tree;  
what was done is visible  
in the knots,  
in the heartwood,  
in each misshapen growth ring.

Eileen Neary

## Willow

a soft tree dips in the breezes  
easing in the water its scaly leaves  
so sodden in demons that echo and trickle  
now wetter in this melting season  
it hushes along the skeletal reasons  
of that bony tree  
yielding and gentle  
slow and free  
to loosen up its dark root-feet  
and crawl toward that warming sea  
voices whisper they can foresee  
“do not go, you cannot swim- you are a tree”  
but ravens hatch no sympathy  
nor flies, or beaver's gnashing teeth  
nor moonlight on the ground beneath  
and easing in the water its saturated trunk:  
it knew it could not swim, and sunk.

Eileen Neary

## Something Strange On The Side Of the Road

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, James Franco and Breeze Frizell were having a conversation. The tone was playful.

"You're like such a crappy listener," Breeze was saying. "You're like a really good talker or whatever, but you're a crappy listener."

James Franco pauses.

"Uh, what were you saying? I wasn't listening," he says, laughs.

"I said you're a crappy listener," Breeze says, without laughing.

This James Franco is not the famous actor.

This James Franco was on his first date with Breeze Frizell. He had just picked her up at her house for the first time. He could not tell if she understood when people were joking or not.

"Right," he said. "I really am a pretty crappy listener. My hearing is great, but, you know, being a great hearer doesn't necessarily make you a good listener."

"You're cute. That's all that matters," Breeze said.

This Breeze Frizell IS the Panera Bread sandwich delivery girl in Hog, KY.

James and Breeze were in James' dad's Buick Park Avenue.

Breeze was dumbing herself down to try and make James like her more. She was seventeen. She looked like she was about twenty-six.

James was twenty-two and looked about seventeen. Neither knew the other's age. Yet.

They were cruising. They were on their way to Pig's Steakhouse. Mmmm.

Pig's Steakhouse was out on State Road 45, about ten miles out of Hog, KY in a sort of non-town called Swine, KY. Breeze suggested it. She said it was worth the drive. James had heard good things about it. His aunt Donna had told him just yesterday that she would rather drive a hundred miles to eat at Pig's than ever eat at Bob Evans again. Bob Evans was the only restaurant in Hog, except for Panera Bread. Then she said that she's sure that she will end up eating at Bob Evans again at some point, and probably liking it, but does James know what she means, it's like if you wanna eat out you almost HAVE to go to Bob Evans if you live in Hog. Aunt Donna, like many residents of Hog, was unaware that Panera Bread was a restaurant. Aunt Donna, like many residents of Hog, was slightly retarded.

James Franco was also slightly retarded. The actor, not this James Franco. This James Franco fancied himself to be a bit of a wit, much like the actor does. A very small bit.

Breeze Frizell was not retarded. She was a genius.

Aunt Donna was a high school music teacher. Last year she began having an affair with one of her students. She is currently having an affair with the same student.

Aunt Donna moved her lips when she read or counted, even when she wasn't reading or counting out loud. She was thirty-three years old. She had a wide face and eyes like fire and a voice like the ocean.

Tonight James and Breeze would see something strange on the side of the road.

James' dad's Buick Park Avenue whirled down SR 45. The windows were up. The air conditioner was on. It was hot outside, even at 6:49 pm, which is what time it was, but the air conditioner kept the riders cool.

"What kind of music do you like?" James said to Breeze.

"Just whatever people are listening to," said Breeze.

"But what kind do YOU like?"

"Oh my god, I just noticed your farmer's tan," Breeze pretended to be giddy. She chanted melodically, "You gotta farmer's tan. You gotta farmer's tan."

"I know. It's because I lay out in the sun in my T-shirt all day. I mean, my mom tells me not to, but I do it anyway."

"Oh my god, it was SO hot outside today."

James and Breeze met when Breeze delivered sandwiches to the bookstore next to where James works. James works at AutoZone. James knows nothing about cars. He got the job because the manager of AutoZone is a homosexual and finds James attractive. Most people, homosexual or otherwise, would consider James to be attractive.

Breeze finds James very attractive and desperately wants him to want to have sex with her. She is embarrassed about how smart she is and desperately fights urges to chat incessantly about what she learned earlier that day from a program about African fire ants on the Discovery Channel. Though she is a genius, she doesn't understand that there is no subject that she could ramble on about that would bore James Franco out of the desire to have sex with her. Breeze is a virgin. She is also home-schooled.

James had approached Breeze out of the blue one day as she was leaving the bookstore, delivery completed.

"Excuse me, miss..." he had squinted at her name tag, "...Breeze, is it?"

"Yes." Breeze was a bit disheveled from confusion caused by the stranger's interruption of her routine, but also taken aback by the handsomeness of James Franco.

"Uh, Breeze, huh? Is that a Biblical name?"

"Nope, I don't think so. I think my mom made it up, actually."

"Well, anyway, we're getting pretty hungry over here at AutoZone and I was just wondering when you were gonna bring our lunch over." James was smiling.

"Did you guys order something?" Breeze's humorlessness was a side effect of her confusion.

"No. Actually, I've spent all day trying to think of something clever to say to you. I see you deliver your food out here like every other day and I've always wanted to say something to you, but never knew how to go about it."

It was obvious that James, though good-looking, was pretty shy and fairly new at talking to girls.  
"Um."

"Actually, I know you don't know me or whatever, but would you maybe wanna get to know me over dinner or something, sometime? I'd like to get to know you, or whatever."

"Are you serious?"

"Sure, why not? I mean, you can say no if you want."

"Ok, I guess. Yeah, sure."

Breeze's agreeing to a date with James Franco was another side effect of her confusion.

In the car, James Franco noticed Breeze's cleavage. Her breasts were 'fabulous', as James' manager at AutoZone would say if he was talking about something else.

Breeze's friend Farrah, who goes to public school, was the one who suggested that Breeze act dumb to make James like her.

Farrah: "Don't be stupid and talk all that stuff about how to spell 'llama' and 'what's the capital of Asia' and all that stuff if you want this boy to like you. You have to be ACCESSIBLE... if you want him to access you."

Breeze: "I don't know if I want THAT."

Farrah: "YOU might not want it right away. But you definitely want HIM to want it right away. Look at your boobs."

Breeze: "Please, let's don't."

Farrah: "No they're like big... big... what's like a big fruit?"

Breeze: "Farrah-"

Farrah: "Not like watermelons, but..."

Breeze: "Cantaloup?"

Farrah: "Actually, no. They ARE like watermelons. Big beautiful flesh colored watermelons. Here, let me give you a shirt. All your shirts make you look like an old lady."

Breeze: "Thanks a lot."

Farrah: "You're lucky this guy saw you in your Panera uniform and not one of those grody outfits your mother probably knitted for you."

Breeze: "My mom is a great seamstress."

Farrah: "Your mom is gay."

Breeze and Farrah: (laughter)

Farrah: "Here. Wear this. He'll have a boner the whole time you guys are eating or whatever."

Breeze: (laughs) "That's disgusting."

Farrah: "How old is this guy, anyway?"

Breeze: "I'm not really sure."

"So, like, how old are you?" Breeze said.

"Twenty-two," said James Franco. "How old are you?"

Farrah: "Well, what if he's older? Could he be older?"

Breeze: "I guess he could be. He works at AutoZone."

Farrah: "You better not tell him you're seventeen."

"Me? I'm twenty. How old do I look, silly?"

"You look about twenty-six," James said, laughing.

"You're SUCH a meanie!"

Breeze gave James a series of playful punches of the arm. James watched as Breeze's watermelons jiggled in Farrah's shirt.

Farrah: "Don't let him take you to Bob Evans either."

Breeze: "If not there, where?"

Farrah: "Have him take you out to Pig's Steakhouse, out in Swine. It's worth the drive."

James Franco's aunt Donna was at Pig's Steakhouse when James and Breeze arrived. Apparently James asking her about the place had given her ideas. She was sitting in a poorly lit booth in the back of the main dining room. The room was about half full of people, happy people with forks full of bites of steak and other things. Aunt Donna was with a boy who would appear to be her son, if we did not know what we know about Aunt Donna, and if she wasn't playing footsies with him under the table.

The hostess sat James and Breeze at a table near Donna and her underaged companion. James noticed Donna as he and Breeze were beginning their descent into their respective chairs. He hesitated, looked at Donna in an effort to make eye contact.

"What's the matter?" Breeze said, turning around to look at whatever he was looking at.

"That's my aunt Donna over there."

Aunt Donna's companion's back was to James and Breeze, and the booth's chair back blocked him almost completely out of their sight. Aunt Donna did not notice James so did not make eye contact with him. James approached her table. Breeze followed, dumbly smiling.

"What's up, Donna?" James said.

Donna acted as though she was a student who had just been caught cheating on a test by a teacher.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Breeze stopped smiling, started frowning.

"You didn't scare me James," Aunt Donna said, composing herself. "I'm just hungry is all. Is this the girl? The one you were..."

"Derek?" Breeze said, looking at Aunt Donna's companion.

"...talking about?"

"Hey, Breeze," said Derek, wiping his hands on his jeans. "What's up?"

"Um, not much. Just eating some food, I guess," said Breeze.

"Yeah, me too," said Derek.

"Yeah. Donna, this is Breeze Frizell, the finest delivery girl Panera Bread has ever seen," said James.

"Pleased to meet you Breeze," said Donna.

"Um, hi... um, nice to, um, meet you, too," said Breeze.

"What do you deliver over at Panera?" said Aunt Donna.

"Um, sandwiches mostly," said Breeze.

"You drive a truck? Like a bread truck?" said Aunt Donna.

"Um, I drive a, um, Ford Contour."

"To deliver bread?" said Aunt Donna.

"Um, well, there's bread on the sandwiches."

"Well, that's nice," said Aunt Donna.

"Nice to see you, Donna," said James. James nodded at Derek and started away from the table.

"See ya, Breeze," said Derek.

"Um."



"It was nice to meet you Breeze," said Donna.

Breeze followed James away from the table.

Breeze was weird about seeing Derek because they had dated in middle school, essentially. For two years. From when Breeze was fourteen to when she was sixteen. From when Derek was twelve to when he was fourteen. He was fifteen now. It'd been a year since Breeze had seen Derek. Breeze had thought that she was in love with Derek when Derek had dumped her for a twelve year old basketball playing vixen who came from a broken home and who knew what a hand job was. Breeze still didn't know what a hand job was, even though her boobs were so big and she was a genius.

Breeze was flustered from seeing her ex but not so much as to lose her composure and forget her 'dumb' schtick. She used her genius to fight the urge to reveal her non-dumbness.

"Did you know that kid?" said James Franco, now seated across from Breeze at their table.

"Yeah, sorta."

"How do you know him?"

"I dunno. Just some kid."

Aunt Donna and Derek hurriedly rose from their booth and scuttled out the side door of the restaurant. Neither James or Breeze noticed.

"I mean, are you related to him? Is he a friend of yours? Are you not allowed to say?"

"I'm allowed to say whatever I want. I just don't wanna talk about him. He's just some douchy kid."

"You seemed to get pretty upset when you saw him."

Breeze paused for the briefest of moments, looked down, then back up at James and said, "You're so cute when you're serious. Oh my god, look at your cheeks! Dimples!"

And the stuff that happened at the Pig's Steakhouse wasn't even the strangest thing about that night for James Franco and Breeze Frizell. The strangest thing is what they saw on the side of the road when they were driving home.

Jesse Howell

## The Other Side (Of the Bridge)

Ishmael's father Samuel died when Ishmael was three. A heart attack in the middle of the night ended his brief fatherhood. He died in the bed he had slept in as a child, back at his family home in Milton, Nebraska during a family visit. The task of raising Ishmael fell to Ishmael's mother. Ishmael was a curious child, an adventurous child. Because he didn't have a father, he was also a boy easily drawn to the company of grown men. His insatiable curiosity didn't help either. His mother often berated him for this careless trust, but no matter how much she scolded him Ishmael couldn't help himself.

Ishmael was always a handful for his mother and by the time he was eight, she was tired. She had lost her job and as she tried to find work in a fractured economy, she couldn't take Ishmael with her across the country. Ishmael was sent off to Milton, to live with his paternal grandparents in his father's childhood home. Ishmael was less than pleased to waste his fall in a sleepy town, but he had no choice, for he was just a kid.

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It was morning on a school day and Ishmael was asleep in his bed, dreaming grand dreams. The sun had been up for hours, and it was time to wake up.

"Get up, kiddo," said his Grandma Jane, pulling away the blankets tucked under his arms. Ishmael opened his eyes and sat up. He yawned the sleep out of his mouth and rubbed it out of his eyes, then bounded forth and scurried for the breakfast table downstairs. Grandpa Mike was sitting at the table reading a newspaper. An empty seat waited for Ishmael, a bowl of corn flakes sat on the tabletop ready to be filled with milk.

"Welcome to the land of the living, sonny," Grandpa Mike said as he looked up from his newspaper. "Sleep well?"

Ishmael shrugged his shoulders in response. "I don't know. I guess."
"Excited for school?"

"It's fine." It was not.

"You make any friends at school yet?"

"Not really..." Ishmael didn't like the other kids at school in Milton. They were boring, loud. Grandpa Mike had once called some people 'gooks,' and Ishmael thought that the kids at school might be those too. He liked smart people, grown-up people, people who lived in big cities and wore fancy suits and slept on 'moneybeds,' as Grandma Jane would say. At the very least, he liked the sort of people who understood that Africa was not a country and that a zebra was not a horse. "Too bad," Grandpa Mike said, retreating from the subject and returning to his newspaper. Ishmael munched away on his corn flakes.

“Hmm, today’s All Soul’s Day,” Grandpa Mike said, relating the second page of the newspaper. “You know, the Day of the Dead. Better behave yourself at school ‘cause the dead’ll be watching.” Grandpa Mike made ghost noises, but Ishmael didn’t laugh. His grandparents were nice, but they couldn’t replace his mom, and he missed her dreadfully. It was hard to be happy without her around, no matter how hard Grandpa Mike tried to cheer him up.

“Right, Grandpa.... I’d better get ready for school.”

Ishmael left the kitchen, got ready and went to school. It was not fun, as usual.

After school that day, Ishmael didn’t go with the other kids in his class to play softball in the park. Had he been at home, he would’ve spent the afternoon with his few friends or his mother if she wasn’t working, but he wasn’t at home. Instead, he wandered down to Centennial Square – built by the town, but neglected by the townsfolk – to play imaginary games armed with nothing but a blue ball.

Centennial Square was dull. The grass was brittle and yellow, the cottonwood trees withered, the stream dried-up. All there was in way of decoration was a rickety old footbridge that used to cross the stream, but now was only a reminder of the years of sustained drought the town had suffered. The sounds of the rest of the town seemed to fade away in the Square; the smells of the bakery two blocks down dissipated as they passed through the cottonwood branches.

Ishmael liked the Square. It was private and quiet and had just the right amount of mystery to inspire his imagination to wondrous things. However, today Ishmael’s imagination was not up to the task of creating a fantasy world. It was content with making him a superhero and his blue ball a ball of ice.

And then the Grey Man arrived. He drove up to the Square in a grey convertible. The sound of the engine arrested Ishmael’s imagination momentarily, causing him to drop his blue ball, which rolled over towards the Grey Man’s car. The Grey Man exited his car and reached down to pick up Ishmael’s ball.

“This yours, son?” the Grey Man asked.

Ishmael could only nod in response; he was too busy staring at the Grey Man’s appearance: shiny grey leather shoes, the toes pointed; a grey suit with sharp lines, trimly fit; a grey silk shirt, no tie; a pair of grey sunglasses that he removed to reveal a pair of stunning grey pupils. The Grey Man smiled: flawless teeth – a charismatic smile. He was impossibly attractive.

“Here you go.” The Grey Man bounced the ball back to Ishmael who bent over to pick it up as it settled at his feet. As Ishmael removed his gaze from the Grey Man, he instantly forgot what the Grey Man looked like, as if the Grey Man’s face were but a fleeting dream. When he looked back, he remembered, and it was as if he had known the Grey Man’s face his entire life. Ishmael thought that if only his mom could meet a man who looked this good, she might finally be happy.

“What game were you playing?”

Ishmael hesitated answering at first, but figured that merely talking to this man would be harmless. “Just make-believe.”

“Ah, the best game of all.” The Grey Man paused and took in his surroundings. “This Square seems ideal for that kind of game.” He looked back at Ishmael. “What’s your name, son?” “Ishmael.”

“And, Ishmael, how old are you?” The Grey Man already knew the answer. “Eight.”

“Eight? Good age. Age where a boy figures out a lot about himself. You seem like a smart kid. You do well in school?” Ishmael nodded. “Good kid. School’s important. Got to do well so you can make enough money and drive a car like I do.” The Grey Man laughed, a strong bellowing laugh that reminded Ishmael of Errol Flynn’s laugh in the old Robin Hood movie. Ishmael smiled and the Grey Man moved closer. He knelt down and met Ishmael’s eyes at their level. “Have you ever seen magic?”

Ishmael had, at the circus and at a friend’s birthday party back home and occasionally from his grandpa. “Of course,” he said. The Grey Man reached behind Ishmael’s ear and produced a coin, the oldest trick in the book. “That’s nothing special. My grandpa can even do that.”

“Really? Your grandpa must be a clever fellow.”

Ishmael giggled. “He’s not really. He’s just silly, but he’s real nice.”

“That’s good. Grandpas should be nice. Though, I bet your grandpa can’t do what I’ll do next. You see that cottonwood tree over there?” The Grey Man pointed to the large cottonwood on the other side of the Square. Ishmael nodded. “Okay, close your eyes and count to three and I’ll make that tree disappear.”

Ishmael was too quick for this. He stared at the Grey Man incredulously. “I’m not dumb, mister.” “Come on, Ishmael. Trust me.” The Grey Man smiled his winning smile and Ishmael couldn’t resist. He closed his eyes.

One. Two. Three.

“Open your eyes, Ishmael.”

Ishmael did. The cottonwood tree wasn’t there. Ishmael blinked and the tree still wasn’t there. He was confused. He scratched his head and tried to remember where exactly the cottonwood tree had been. It was like trying to recall a memory from early childhood. It was like trying to remember his father’s voice. He couldn’t. He became upset, like his intelligence was being toyed with, like he was being patronized for being a child and that an adult would instantly understand the trick.

“How did you do that?”

“Magic,” the Grey Man simply said.

“Don’t think I’m stupid, mister! There’s no such thing as magic. Now how did you make the tree disappear?”

“I’m not lying to you, Ishmael. Magic. There’s magic everywhere. You just have to know where to look for it.”

“You just think I’m a dumb kid and won’t understand.”

“Of course not, Ishmael. You’re not dumb. And magic is real. You see that bridge right there?” Ishmael looked at the rickety footbridge in the centre of the Square, then back at the Grey Man.

“Did you know that that bridge is magic?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Honest-to-goodness. If you make a wish, hold your breath, and cross the bridge, your wish comes true.”

This was too good to be true. But the Grey Man had made the cottonwood tree disappear. Perhaps he was telling the truth.

“You telling the truth?”

“Yes.”

“You promise?”

“Promise.”

“Prove it.”

“Okay.” The Grey Man picked up Ishmael’s ball. “You don’t mind if I use this, do you, Ishmael? Good.” He walked over to the bridge and stopped. “Just watch.” He made a wish, held his breath, walked forward onto the bridge and tossed the ball across. It did not land on the ground on the other side.

“Where did the ball go?”

“What did I tell you, Ishmael? The bridge is magic. I wished for it to disappear and it did.” Ishmael didn’t know what to believe. He couldn’t see the ball, but it could’ve been just another magic trick. He was skeptical.

“How can I be sure you didn’t just do another magic trick?” Ishmael asked.

“Why don’t you try it out for yourself? I’m sure there’s some wish you want granted. Cross the bridge and see whether it comes true.”

Ishmael did have such a wish and he wanted it to come true more than anything. What was the risk? The Grey Man had been right about everything so far and he seemed nice. It's not like he was one of those creepy old men they talk about on the evening news. And even though his mother had warned him not to listen to older men, his habits got the better of him. He was going to try it. And anyways, he wasn't scared. Magic wasn't real, so what was there to worry about?

"Okay." Ishmael approached the bridge and stopped just short of it. He looked at the Grey Man.

"Good luck, Ishmael," the Grey Man said. "See you on the other side."

Ishmael turned away from the Grey Man, made a wish, took a deep breath, and walked across the bridge.

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Ishmael didn't think anything had happened when he arrived on the other side. It seemed to be the same bridge he had crossed over on and his wish was nowhere to be seen. He turned to berate the Grey Man for lying, but the Grey Man was gone. His car was gone. He must have driven off when Ishmael wasn't looking. The cottonwood tree he had made disappear was back, but now it was full of leaves, healthy and vibrant. His ball sat before its trunk. Or at least what he at first believed to be his ball. His ball was blue and this one was red. But it looked the same. Ishmael went and picked it up. It felt the same. He bounced it. It bounced the same. He concluded that it must be the same ball and that he must've confused the colors. Colors don't just change.

"Hey, you."

Ishmael looked up and saw a small boy, about his age, standing on the outside of the Square. The boy moved closer and Ishmael got a better look at him: black messy hair, tan skin.

"Did you just cross the bridge?" the boy asked Ishmael.

"Yeah...why?" Ishmael said.

"Aw, you got to bring a ball with you!" The boy raced over to Ishmael's side and snatched his ball away. "When I came over, I didn't get to bring a ball with me. You're lucky."

Ishmael thought this boy was strange. What was the big deal about a ball? Don't all boys have a ball?

"Wanna play catch?" The boy seemed excited by the prospect of playing with Ishmael's ball. Ishmael decided to humor him.

"Okay, I guess."

The boy ran a few paces away from Ishmael, turned, and tossed him the ball. They played catch for a while, each throw more intense than the last, each catch more heroic.

"What are you doing, Jim?"

Jim fumbled his catch and the ball fell to the ground. “What is it, George? Can’t you see that I’m playing catch?”

Ishmael turned and looked at George and thought he was looking at Jim. Only when he looked back at Jim did he realize that the two were twins. He then wondered which one was the evil twin. All twins have an evil twin – that’s just how things work.

“Yeah, I can see you’re playing catch!” George said. “But why are you playing catch? And who’re you playing it with?”

“Some new kid who crossed the bridge. Didn’t catch his name.”  
“A new kid?”

“Ishmael.” Ishmael felt the need to clarify his name. He didn’t like being called ‘the new kid.’ He got it enough at school and wouldn’t stand for it here.

“Well, we best bring Ishmael with us to the Festival,” George said to Jim.

“Yes!” Jim jumped excitedly and ran to George’s side. “You should be excited, Ishmael. The Festival’s the best. Only happens once a year so you know it’s good.”

Ishmael didn’t know there was a festival going on in Milton right now. He thought his grandparents would’ve let him know if there was, or that his school would have at least mentioned it. But perhaps these kids were from the outskirts and had some special festival of their own. He’d only been in Milton a few months and didn’t know every tradition the people here kept.

“Now come on,” Jim said to Ishmael. “You really don’t want to miss the Festival.”

Jim and George waited for Ishmael a moment before walking out of Centennial Square. Ishmael caught up to them and they left for the Festival grounds together.

“What’s this Festival, exactly?” Ishmael asked George or Jim. He had forgotten which one was which and didn’t know whom he was addressing.

“Well, it’s a big celebration type thing,” Jim said. “Happens every year on this day.”

“It commemorates our coming here,” George said. “At least, I think it does. Alice should be able to tell you more about it. We don’t know everything.”

“Who’s Alice?”

“You sure ask a lot of questions,” George said.

“Don’t be a jerk, George,” Jim said.

“I’m not a jerk, Jim,” George said. “Ishmael just asks a lot of questions. Nosey kid.”

Jim shoved George off the sidewalk. George shoved back, and a scuffle broke out between the two of them. Jim grabbed George by the hair and tugged hard. George retaliated with a kick to Jim's shin causing Jim to let go of his hair and run down the street to safety. By the time Jim stopped running, they were on the edge of town and had reached the Festival grounds.

In the field stood a giant circus tent. The orange and red stripes typical of the circus danced and glowed on the canvas. Its colors mesmerized Ishmael. The sounds of song and dance emanating from inside the tent called to him, luring him in like the ringing of an ice cream truck. Jim and George saw the look on Ishmael's face and led him inside.

There were thousands of people inside. From the outside it had not seemed like the tent could hold that many people, but once inside, the tent seemed to expand to the size of a football field – larger. There were rows of tables and chairs and people occupying them and lanterns lighting the room and fireworks going off and people singing and laughing and having a merry time. In the centre of the tent was a dance floor, around which circles of people in elaborate costumes decorated with flowers and skulls and wondrous head garments danced the danse macabre. The music flowed over and through Ishmael and compelled him to join the dance. Jim stopped him from doing so.

"It really gets you the first time you see it," he said. "Though you should probably learn the steps before you try to join the dance, or you'll just look silly."

"Come on, Ishmael," George said, moving out of the entryway and into the rows of tables. "Let's find Alice."

As they waded through the crowd of people and further into the tent, Ishmael wondered at the exact size of Milton. He hadn't known so many people lived here, but maybe it was a festival where other towns took part too. Still, hopefully he would see his grandparents and ask them why they hadn't told him about the Festival. Maybe it was all an elaborate surprise. He hoped so. At least that way they would have an excuse.

"I want to try to find my grandparents if I can," Ishmael said to George.

"How long have they been here?"

"Oh, forever," Ishmael said. "They're super old. They just live on the other side of town and I was hoping they'd be here."

George stopped and turned to Jim, muttering something that Ishmael couldn't hear. Jim nodded. "I don't think your grandparents are coming," George said as he turned to Ishmael.

"But don't worry. You'll probably see them soon enough, anyways," Jim said.

"Shut up!" George slapped Jim hard on the arm. "We'll let Alice explain things. She's better at it than us."

George continued walking further into the tent, Jim beside him and Ishmael in tow. Ishmael felt like asking what George had said to Jim, but decided it would be rude and didn't.



“Oh, I make sure to come to After-Milton every year for the Festival. It just can’t be missed,” Ishmael heard an elderly man say as they continued through the tent. After-Milton? He’d never heard anyone call it that before. The old man was probably just a little ‘cuckoo,’ as Grandma would say.

Something caught Ishmael’s attention and he wandered away from Jim and George. It was a magician – the second he had seen that day – or at least it seemed to be a magic show. An older man with long white hair stood on a platform before a crowd. Instead of a top hat and cape, the man wore a black and white skeleton outfit – the kind some kids had worn on Halloween the day before, only this one looked more authentic. The man was juggling lit torches, but Ishmael couldn’t see the torches, only the flames.

“...And finally, POOF!” the older man snuffed the flames out with his hands and the crowd burst into applause.

“Mr. Dravich is the best magician we’ve ever had in After-Milton,” the middle-aged woman standing next to Ishmael said. “He’s been here longer than most people can remember. All the more time to practice.” The old woman standing alongside nodded in agreement.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Dravich began again, his thick Russian accent cutting into his words like a knife into cabbage. “My final performance dis evening vill be extra special. I’ve verk on it for many years and finally ready to show you all it here tonight. I call it in my mother tongue, Forma-Lovkach.”

Everyone clapped, including Ishmael.

“And now ve begin.” Mr. Dravich removed the skull hat from his head, tossed it aside, kneeled and hid his face behind his hands. He began to chant in Russian, a mesmerizing chant, a terrifying chant, the kind of chant Ishmael equated with vampires and witchdoctors and spooky things in general. It sent a chill down his spine. The chanting got louder and Ishmael began to feel rumblings in the ground beneath him. It got louder and deeper until Mr. Dravich tore the hands away from his face and let loose a mighty roar. His face had become that of a Siberian tiger’s, the white fur bristling under the warm glow of the lanterns above. This was like no magic Ishmael had ever seen. Even the Grey Man’s tricks paled in comparison.

“There you are!” George pulled Ishmael away from the crowd.

“See, I told you he’d want to see Mr. Dravich’s show,” Jim said, poking out from behind George. “So, you were right! Big whoop! Ishmael this is Alice.” George spun Ishmael around and an eighteen-year-old girl with brilliant red hair was there to meet him.

“Hi, Ishmael, I’m Alice.”

“Hi,” was all Ishmael could mutter. He felt his cheeks heat up. He stood there frozen until Jim jabbed him in the ribs and he came to.

“How old are you, Ishmael?” Alice asked.

“Eight.”

“And you crossed the bridge earlier today?”

“Yeah, why?”

“How did it happen?”

How did he cross the bridge? Easily, he walked across it. Ishmael was beginning to worry that there was something wrong with these people. “I just walked across it holding my breath. This guy in a grey suit had told me it was magic and so I did what he said, even though I knew it wasn’t really magic. Magic isn’t real. That’s what my mom told me-” Ishmael stopped. He didn’t like the look on Alice’s face. He turned to George who shared the same sign of shock.

“What’s wrong?”

“Describe the man in the grey suit, Ishmael,” Alice said.

“I dunno.... He had a grey suit and shirt and sunglasses, and drove a fancy grey car. He did a few magic tricks that were really neat-”

“George, run and get Sam.”

George ran off at an alarming pace.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Jim asked, clearly as confused as Ishmael.

Alice turned to Jim. “Ishmael may not be dead.”

“What do you mean he may not be dead? He crossed the bridge! He must be!”

It took a moment for what they were saying to sink in. He was dead? He didn’t feel dead. He looked down at his hands. They still had color. He listened for his heart beat. It was still there, and beginning to race. He was confused and beginning to get real worried and his breaths were becoming shorter, more spastic. His head began to throb and he felt like he couldn’t breathe. He was hyperventilating.

“Calm down, Ishmael, breathe!” Alice caught Ishmael as he fell forward.

All Ishmael could say between breaths was: “I want my mom.” If only mom was here, she would make things better. She always made things better. But she wasn’t here. Ishmael began to cry and Alice cradled him on her shoulder.

“He’s definitely alive, Jim,” Alice said. “I can feel his heartbeat.” She turned to Ishmael: “Calm down, honey. Everything’s going to be fine.” She stroked his hair.

“I want my mommy! Please, get my mommy!”

“We’ll get her, Ishmael. We will. Now, please, just calm down.”

“What’s exactly happening here?”

“Sam, you made it-”

Ishmael didn’t hear the rest of what Alice said. He looked up when he heard Sam’s voice and instantly recognized the face: the brown eyes, long nose, and chestnut hair. The face jumped out from old photographs decorating his mantelpiece and from the scrapbook he kept under his bed. It was there in his hazy memories, memories that filled him with warmth and assurance and a strange glow in his chest. The face had calmed him and nursed him when he had tumbled down the stairs and was left crying on the floor. The face had encouraged him to take his first steps, swing his first bat, throw his first ball, color his first picture. The face caused Ishmael to forget his hyperventilation, forget his predicament. It made him feel like bumblebees were flying around inside his head, like the butterflies had escaped from his stomach and into his heart. It forced a smile onto his face. It made him happier than when he had learned to ride a bicycle, calmer than when his mom had rocked him to sleep after having the chicken pox, more excited than when he had arrived at Disneyland for the first time, and cry harder than he had ever cried before.

“Dad?” Ishmael said from between his tears of joy. He rushed forward and hugged his father as hard as an eight-year-old boy could hug a grown man.

Sam bent down and hugged Ishmael back. “Ishmael, what are you doing here?” Tears began to trickle down his pronounced cheekbones. Dead people can cry just as hard as living ones. Their hug seemed to last longer than time could tell.

Sam fought back his tears and turned to Alice.

“How did he get here?”

“The Grey Man tricked him into crossing the bridge,” she said. “Same thing that happened to me. Only he’s got the chance that I didn’t.”

“Right. It’s not sundown yet.”

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“We don’t have time to explain. We have to get you home, Ishmael. Before the sun goes down. Come on.”

“No, I’m not leaving you,” Ishmael said. “I made a wish and it came true. I wished to see you. The Grey Man was right. The bridge is magic!”

“It’s more than magic, Ishmael. It’s the border between life and death,” Alice said. She turned to Sam. “He deserves to know what happened to him.” She turned back to Ishmael: “This is After-Milton. All the people that have ever died in Milton ‘live’ here, for lack of a better word. The bridge is a portal between Milton and After-Milton. Usually the living can’t cross it-”

“But the Grey Man changed that,” Sam said. “He can manipulate things, change the rules.”  
“Who is he?” Ishmael said.

“He’s a trickster,” Alice said. “He’s infinitely fascinated by humans and likes meddling in their affairs. Seems most amused by life and death. I don’t think he understands them. He tricked you into After-Milton, and if you stay here past sundown, you can never go back.”  
“You mean I’ll die?” Ishmael was beginning to understand.

Alice nodded.

“Which is why we need to get you home, Ishmael,” Sam said. “It’ll be sundown right away. We have to go, now.”

Sam scooped Ishmael up into his arms and began to move towards the exit. Ishmael relaxed and let his dad support his weight and drifted into something like a dream, a state of contentment that only a child can have when in the arms of a father.

“Alice, you stay here.”

“Alright, Sam,” Alice called after him.

Sam carried Ishmael through the crowds of people, past the dancers of the danse macabre, past Mr. Dravich and his crowd of bedazzled spectators, past the tables and chairs and their occupants, and out of the Festival tent.

The sun was on its steady descent towards the horizon and Sam picked up his pace. He trotted back down the street upon which Ishmael and Jim and George had come to the Festival grounds. “You’ve really grown,” Sam said. “Your mom said that you would always be a short little scrawny kid, but I knew better. You’re like your old man.”

Ishmael smiled and nestled his head up against Sam’s chest.

They came into Centennial Square as the sun neared the horizon. Sam stopped just short of the bridge and let Ishmael down. He kneeled and stared into Ishmael’s eyes.

“Time to go, son.”

“But I don’t want to.” Ishmael hugged Sam hard and began to cry again. “My wish came true. I don’t want it to end so soon.”

“Ishmael, you’ve gotta be strong. You can’t stay here. You know you can’t. You’ve got a life to live, a mommy to see. My time ran out a while ago. Yours has just barely begun.”

“But I’m never going to see you again.”

“Yes, you will. Eventually. When you’re old and happy and you’ve had kids of your own and lived to see them grow up healthy and strong. When you’ve lived a life you can be satisfied with. I’ll still be here. I’ll always be here.”

Sam leaned forward and kissed Ishmael on the forehead. “I love you, Ishmael, but you’ve gotta go now.”

Ishmael removed his arms from around Sam's neck and wiped the warm tears from his face. His gaze dropped to the ground, his breaths deepened. He saw his ball resting on the grass and picked it up.

"Be a good boy." Sam rustled his son's hair and touched his son's face for the last time. Ishmael didn't want to leave. Every muscle in his body struggled against him. Every beat of his heart begged him to stay one moment longer. For the first time in his life, the moment was passing too quickly. If only the sun would stop in the sky. If only it was earlier in the day. If only he had never come here he would never have had to leave it so soon and live with the knowledge of what he was missing. But if he stayed, he would die. He understood that – finally. And he had a home waiting for him – a family waiting.

He thought of his grandparents, their concern reaching a fever pitch. He thought of his mother's face, her amber eyes, her curly black hair, her pointed nose, and her smile – her smile of pure love she always wore as she tucked him into bed. He wanted to stay with his father, but not at the expense of his mother. Never at the expense of mother. He had to go home.

With ball in hand, Ishmael turned towards the bridge. He blinked rapidly to fight back the tears filling his eyes. He looked at his father and captured the image in his mind – something he would remember forever. He could barely whisper, "Bye, Dad."

"Goodbye, son."

Ishmael turned away from his Dad, made a wish, took a deep breath, and walked across the bridge.

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The sun set. Ishmael looked around at Centennial Square. The cottonwood trees were once again withered, the grass once again yellow and brittle. He knew his dad was no longer standing on the other side of the bridge, but he dared to hope and turned to see him. Sam was not there.

"Ishmael!" Grandma Jane and Grandpa Mike raced over to Ishmael's side and scooped him up, both hugging and scolding him, as the grandparents of a missing child are wont to do.

"Where were you, my boy?" Grandpa Mike asked, concern flooding his voice.

"We were horribly worried you had gotten hurt," Grandma Jane said.

"Tomorrow after school, you're coming straight home."

"Okay, Grandma and Grandpa," Ishmael said. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry, son. Just please don't wander off again," Grandma Jane said, smothering him in a hug.

"Just where in heaven's name were you?"

Ishmael looked down at the red ball in his hand. He remembered Alice's hair, remembered the Festival tent and Mr. Dravich the shapeshifter and the Grey Man and the twins Jim and George. He looked at the bridge and remembered his dad's face right before he had crossed. He smiled. "I was with Dad."

Aren Bergstrom

Ride the Storm

It was the 14th of March, two days before spring break. An icy rain started just after dark. Inwood High School was quiet when basketball practice was over; only splat-clicks against the large picture window could be heard. The blinds were pulled up and the curtains drawn back. Two men watched the clouds. The teacher's lounge was empty except for Mel Tolson, the boys' basketball coach, and Dr. Charles Cassius, team doctor.

Coach Tolson didn't want the vacation. The Lions were on a tear and the interruption couldn't help. "You can't win if you don't play," he'd say. His other favorite tag line the players imitated in the locker room, a pencil stub in their mouths for the bobbing cigarette, "One hundred and ten percent!"

Humid air in the room smelled like whiteboard marker ink and stale tobacco. Dark grey sky started to grumble and distant lightning flashes lit the two men's faces as they sat at a long table. Their features changed with each strobe; sharp-edged black shadows cut new Bizzaro facets like a demented plastic surgeon. Coach Tolson crushed out his fourth and last cigarette, twisted the empty pack into a tight rope and put it into the lopsided, mustard-colored ceramic ashtray, a Special Ed student's gift from art class.

Doc wiped crumbs off the cold, smooth, table surface with his palm. Someone was always bringing cookies or brownies into the room, leaving temptations too close to him and his voracious sweet tooth. That's why he couldn't lose the forty pounds that was helping to clog the life out of his aortic arteries. He scooped luscious bits onto an extra leaflet that advertised: Faculty Meeting Friday—Indiana State Text Book Review. He was tempted to funnel them into his mouth. Doc was hungry. The men looked up when the door opened and a dripping, black licorice stick umbrella came through pulling a tall, lean woman, Jenifer Chichester, the history teacher.

Jenifer said as she walked in, "Sorry I'm late guys. Had to chat up Bert after class. Pretend things are normal. We have to at least try to keep him at ease while we think of what to do."

Doc said, "And what did Bert have to say?"

Coach said, "Same old stuff, I'll bet. The guy's a broken record. Cornered me again this morning." Coach Tolson made a hand pistol; slow motion pointed it toward his temple and stuck his tongue out like a panting Gargoyle. With the barrel he pushed his frameless glasses as if they had slipped down, even though they hadn't, and repeated the adjustment every few minutes just in case they had.

Coach Tolson made a high pitched voice, "We are educators. Responsible for teaching truth to these young minds with the best information we can from hundreds of years of human observations." The coach went back to his own voice. "Bert's position on the selection committee to pick the text for sciences in this state is a problem. People listen to him because he's written books and won a few dumb awards."

His voice went high again. "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

Jenifer stood up, "I'm not worried about their minds. Their very souls are in danger of being lost." The men nodded. Jenifer sat down. "It's going to be close. Too close."

Doc said, "Stolen."

Coach shook his head. "Every young soul in Indiana." He looked at Doc and then Jenifer. "What should we do?"

Doc said, "Same as any thief." They were quiet for a moment.

Coach said, "Maybe he'll croak from a heart attack."

Jenifer frowned. "But, he runs four miles on the school track every morning; gets a bottle of sports drink at the vending machine right outside the boy's locker room at six thirty, just like clockwork."

"Still, it could happen," Doc said. "There are chemicals that mimic a heart seizure." Jenifer and Coach stared at him.

Jenifer stood, folded her arms across her chest and stepped toward the window. The roiling sky drew a faraway look. She clasped her hands together, focused on the Coach and then Doc. She said,

*"God works in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm."*

A divine call had been issued and went through the still room with spirit. The air snapped.

Coach said, "I have the keys to the vending machine."

Doc stood up and said, "I'll see you about six tomorrow morning, Coach."

Jenifer pulled the umbrella off of the back of her chair. It dripped on her foot. "Goddam bumbershoot pissed on me." The men laughed. "God bless you guys. See you tomorrow."

Lee Landers

Archangel

Walking down the long main street
the hot summer night is falling on you
& there's a faded light in those windows
silver like mirrors but you pay it no eye

not when there's thunder far and away
a storm in the west, a road somewhere else
you dream, dream there's still a bus

your eyes are painted through with silver light!
no longer faded. This means it's time to go.

The stars fell toward you in single file
passed through your eyes and shredded you.
Here in pieces you crawl then walk
toward the mountain's shadow growing
one foot and then another.

Tony Colella

Service Station

Meredith—a gas station attendant in the Middle West—was to train the new employee William. Hearing the shrill whistle of Economy, his first responsibility in America had been heard and met with the vigor of a young man in his twenties. He felt confident and up to the challenge of his coming job duties. His final night off, he spent walking aimlessly through the meandering streets and parks, twisting and turning to the contours of the city-scape.

She was a Middle West girl through and through, somewhat timid yet winsome. Her air was full of common sense and a logical straightforwardness. In short, there was not a crooked bone in her body. With her fair complexion, hazel eyes, and wavy auburn hair, she could win over the meanest customer, if necessary. From behind the service counter, she was invulnerable with her quick hands, jaunty movements, and sprightly figure. She counted and gave change swiftly and accurately, the *raison d'être* for her position as a gas station attendant. Indeed, she was the queen of the service station. However, breaking in the newly-hired employee might prove trying on her somewhat limited patience.

He was a tough-minded fellow. Being from the Upper Peninsula, he knew the outdoors like the back of his hand. This would be his first city job as his family had moved to southern Wisconsin. So far, Milwaukee had been a blur of concrete on- and off-ramps, lonely industrial-looking buildings of red brick, and the gigantic baseball stadium on the way into town. He thought of his family's solitary house near Lake Superior, finding warm familiarity in Lake Michigan's view of the sky as it unfolds into the horizon. The sun was setting, and William was to make his way to the service station to work the night shift. This was his first night.

In entering the service station through a glass door swinging smoothly open, he saw Meredith behind the service counter. Her appearance was mildly daunting.

"I am here to work the overnight shift."

She looked at him closely, observing his serenity with a slight, inner surprise. She was used to shady characters working on the night shift. She was used to training criminals who could not find work anywhere else. William seemed the contrary.

"Put yer coat 'n' things in the back room, follow me."

They were both silent during the short walk to the back room.

"While we're here, let me explain a few things. The stock is kept in the room adjacent to this one." They were standing in the kitchen with two large metal sinks and curving faucets against the wall. Various cleaning supplies, tools, and a cupboard for the storage of bathroom supplies gave the room an unpleasant smell.

"It's a freezer, so don't go closing the door behind you 'cause, if ya do, it could lock up. If you do that while you're working alon'—need I say more?"

William shivered at the thought.

“Here ‘n the freezer are the breakfast san’wiches that you need to re-stock aroun’ four in the morning, before the morning rush of coffee-drinkers and early risers. Don’t forget. I’ll be helpin’ you the first three nights. But once you’re on your own, well, you’re on your own. Like I said, just don’ forget.”

“Is there a written-list of these responsibilities?”

“A what?”

“Is there a written-list of the responsibilities?”

She was illiterate.

“I don’t think it’s necessary.”

William did not understand why it was not necessary. Wouldn’t this be useful?

He assented as one must in a position below that of a superior of the work-a-day world of modern existence. Next, she led him back into the main area where stood the counter behind which he would work. The room had a kitchen area with hotdogs cooking on hot, metal pin rollers. Grease covered them.

Meredith continued, “It’s your responsibility to clean these rollers off with a wet rag. I’ll demonstrate. Hold the wet rag on each roller until it has completed a full rotation. Do this for each roller. There are about twenty of them, and it takes about ten minutes.”
William furrowed his brow in thinking about it.

Twenty minutes later, at the counter, both of them stood. A man entered.

“I’d like uh . . . two powerball tickets.”

William fumbled with the ticket dispenser.

“Uh . . . er . . . what kind of gambling tickets, Sir?”

“Two o’ dem dere powerball tickets.”

As the man fell into his natural accent, William understood more clearly but was still unable to help him. He looked up at Meredith who then stopped restocking the cigarettes. She helped the man fluidly, showing a learned ease. William thought that the man grumbled of the slow service under his breath as he left. Meredith looked at William.

“You’ve gotta long way to go. But, nevermind, you’ll get the hang of it.”

She went back to the cigarettes. William stood behind the counter. It was eleven thirty at night.

Near two in the morning, after only three more customers, Meredith announced that it was time to sweep. The square-tiled floor between the aisles of candy, potato chips, dental floss, and toilet paper collected dust during a day of work. She handed William a broom and a dust-pan. Without a thought, he briskly took the broom and began sweeping. His long figure stooped over the broom, its bristles scraping lightly over the floor. The dust-pan was lying in the corner, near the plastic-wrapped firewood. He swept with the long motion of his arms, his elbows bent, and his hands and fingers gripping the slanted, upright broom. Meredith stood in the aisle next to the one William was working in. He could see her over the medium-sized shelves. She saw him too. Bashfully, he immediately looked down. She kept looking at him; then, she leaned down to pick up a piece of scrap paper off the floor.

When she stood back up, she said, "I can finish sweeping if you like."

Three piles of dust mixed with miscellaneous garbage were lying at the end of the aisles near the edge of the room where the freezers hummed with lights glaring from behind the glass freezer doors.

"I can finish it."

Dantly, she came around the corner of the aisle, set on finishing what he had started. He too was set on finishing what he had started. Firmly, they were set on the same object. And they would not acquiesce. It had been decided, and it was their duty. She sat underneath him, looking up at his keen face, as he pushed the pile of dirt into the dustpan that she held in her hand. She scooped up the dirt with the delicate motion of her hand rooted in the push from her feminine shoulder and appropriately bent elbow. With care, she stood up, balancing her weight and arm and carried it to the garbage can. William stood watching her. He—he was proving to be quite a durable young fellow. And she—she was glowing in the splendor of her human work.

The testing of this durable young fellow came at about four o'clock in the morning. For a long, strenuous, and seemingly unending train of tasks awaited him. He had to empty the trash cans outside near the gas pumps, one of which began leaking through a tiny hole in the black plastic garbage bag as he dragged it to the dumpster behind the service station. It left a long trail of grime across the concrete foundation beneath which the car fuel was stored. The screech of tires pulled his attention away from his toss of the garbage bags into the dumpster and towards a semi-truck pulling up to the station. Attached to it was an oil tanker, the economic base of the service station.

As the trucker descended from the high perch of the driver side door of his semi-truck, he hollered, "T'sure is cold, ain' it? Y'oughta fin' a place real warm in'ere. I ain' ne seen such col' weather'in a long time."

He had a jaunty spring in his step, but his face was grim-like. Serious yet light-hearted, he continued,

"Y'oughta fin' a warm room in the station to keep warm. Hide away somewher' yer boss'll ne'er find ya."

William grinned warily at the middle aged man who was just under six feet tall, built real stocky. He wished to follow the wise trucker's advice but thought ill of it. To do so might cost him a pretty penny—his new livelihood.

The trucker stood in front of the young man in the brisk air of south central Wisconsin mornings. Next, he opened the vaults beneath the gas station that contained the fuel. His muscular arms smoothly controlled the heavy doors with a strength gained from years of experience in repeating the motion. He did not grimace, and he spoke to William.

"You new aroun' here? I ain't ne'er seen ya before. How do you find it, the work, I mean?"

"I dunno as o' yet. It ain't too easy. I gotta a long list o' tasks and haven't figured it out."

"You'll do a'right, I'm sure. Hold ona minute."

He engrossed himself in the attachment of the hose coming down from his truck to the tanks beneath the station. He connected the equipment together, and the sound of the rapid movement of liquid through a narrow passage swooshed. The hair on the trucker's arms stood on end in the cold. His jaw muscle twitched as he held it all steady. His demeanor was one of inner strength manifesting itself in the work. He did not swerve, nor budge in his work.

"Have you been a trucker a long time?" William asked hesitatingly.

"A long time, eh? You betcha. A long, long time—twenty three years," he answered slowly.

Steadily, he unhooked the first hose, then prepared the second for emptying into the tanks beneath the station. He hovered over his work, his hands gloved to protect them from the hurt of abrasion. His heart beat rhythmically. Like a pendulum, his body kept to the beat of the work. It was a humdrum morning.

Back inside the service station, William was now to brew the coffee, verify the arrival of the daily food shipment, and man the busy service station counter. A man he was proving himself to be, handling the cash deftly and with speed. Speed, the cornerstone of modern economy and its exploitation of intensified labor done by the human body in all of its senses—spiritually bereft at that—ran its course through the veins of William. He felt it pressing down on him. He felt it pushing in on him. He felt the sinewy grasp upon his thoracic plexus. His muscles tensed with the reverberation of the call of the industrial pursuit of his livelihood and, therefore, happiness. But what entitles him to happiness via his livelihood? To be sure, the poorest and scantiest means might feed the monkey. But is that all that is the human being?

As the shift ended, he looked at the clock on the wall. Eight o'clock. Walking outside into the fresh air, his eyes were blurry and would not easily focus. The concentration it took to focus on something within his field of vision was immense, giving him a headache. His shirt, ruffled and unkept, he wore crooked. Without a car, he began his three-mile trudge home. Barely seeing or

feeling anything as he lumbered home, his consciousness was elsewhere. The service station left his body buzzing with the lightning activity of mechanical livelihoods. Although, for the moment, he felt secure in his job. However, very soon the night shift would be upon him again in all of its automatic and mundane torpor. But first he returned home.

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“Where’ve ya been?” his baby sister Alvina howled out at him.

“Workin’ all night.”

“Mom’s been waitin’ for y’all mornin’.”

“I’m here now.”

“Oh, William,” his childish mother Kristine cooed, “I’ve been waitin’ for y’all mornin’. How’s the new job?”

“It’s alright, I guess,” William answered lethargically.

“I suppose you’re tir’d?” She stupidly asked. He did not answer her.

“Why don’tcha answer me?” She bitingly inquired.

“Of course I’m tir’d. I work’d all night.” He drew out the a and the l in the word all to emphasize his point.

“Well, off to bed with ya, then.” Without sufficient energy to respond, he stumbled through the corridor of their small house. The small house was divided into two floors. At the back entrance was the stairwell leading to the basement. Next to the kitchen, into which the back entrance led, were the stairs going up to the second floor where William and Alvina’s parents had their room. On the first floor were two bedrooms and a small bathroom. There was also a sun-room and a living room on the first floor. The front entrance opened into the living room.

When William awoke in the early afternoon, his legs hurt—both his thighs and his calves. In only a few hours, he would have to stand again for eight straight hours. Nestled amidst the smooth sheet and comfortable blanket, William winced at this thought. Not a fear, but a sort of angst arose in him. He could not describe it, nor could he find a reason for it. Thus, the angst of an approaching job duty. He felt a growing confidence in doing the work tasks, so why this gnawing sense of dread? From whence it came, he did not know. He could feel it—the outside mechanical world—fastening onto his inner blood flow, his inner workings. To help, he closed his eyes to fall back asleep. But no sleep came. His insides, his source of feeling, had become contorted. His sore muscles reflected the angst in rigid knots. Tap tap; his mother knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

“May I come in?”

“Come in.” As she entered, he opened his eyes and saw her in the muffled sunlight of the closed blinds.

“Are you hungry? I’ve made a beef stew for you to eat now and there should be plenty left for your lunch at work tonight.” He relaxed.

“I feel bound up, my muscles and nerves, Mom, this new job makes me tense.”

“It’s no easy task, working the night shift at a service station. Let me rub your back, William. It’s only temporary, you know that right?”

“I know, but at so little pay, it’s easy to think about leaving.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

“Yeah, better than nothing . . .” he trailed off. After relaxing him, Kristine made her way back into the kitchen.

William laid back down for a few moments before getting up, lingering on without the protection of a sheet or a blanket. He felt exposed without them. But under them, he felt nourished in his affective soul. It returned to him the strength that he needed to confront the modern click clack of the roaring economy’s rigid fist, pounding down on the unfortunate, the poor, and the hungry. He pulled on his work clothes from the night before and opened the door of his room.

“Been sleepin’?” Alvina took him from his inner thoughts as he made his way into the kitchen.

“I’m so hungry,” he brought his hand down to his stomach to reinstate the fact.

“Why’ve ya been sleepin’ all day?”

“Cuz I work all night long.”

“All night?”

“Yup . . . all night.”

“Why?”

“Because I must have a job.”

“What’s a job?” William smiled wickedly to her question.

“A job is duty. It’s what makes the world go round.”

“What makes the world go round? I don’t get it.” He laughed at her unintentional play on words.

“Money, that’s what makes the world go round.”

“Money?” William was starting to get annoyed. Her naïve questions irked him.

“Why don’tcha go ask mom about it. I’m hungry, I wanna eat without all your questions.” Alvina became angry,

“I hope your beef stew . . . I hope you choke on it.” Ignoring her caustic remark, he began to eat. “Just go ask mom and leave me alone.” Hurt, Alvina left the kitchen.

As the time arrived for William to leave for work, he sipped on a hot coffee while nosing through a book, Anna Karenina. He felt the deep love Tolstoy had in the marrow of his rattling bones for an agrarian lifestyle. His trunk of nerves in the stomach of his body awoke as he read. For William, reading was the emotional experience that feeds the gut with the spiritual nourishment of by gone epochs and dead men. In William, they were not dead. They lived again in his affective soul. But the beating of the drum of Business by the hands of the American god-king Money silenced them all as he entered the Service Station.

Andrew Hill



## Pyromaniacs, Bored and Young

Someone gave Randy a homemade blowtorch for his birthday. It was well constructed, looked almost commercial-grade: a steel frame--with straps so that it could be worn over one's shoulders--supported an oxygen tank and an acetylene tank side by side. Hoses ran from the tanks to the torch itself. Though I knew that he was taking a welding class, I was shocked to discover that someone had gifted Randy such a potentially dangerous toy. Randy talked a big game, but his biggest aspiration with metalwork was to create an enormous barbeque from a steel drum. Not only did his dreams of welding strike me as fleeting, but, and more importantly, Randy wasn't the most responsible guy on the face of the planet. For example, he had been in nearly a dozen car accidents. I'd been with him when he'd run into things, gotten stuck on high curbs, stalled in water far too deep for his tiny Civic. Because of an inherent strangeness that drove him to inexplicable acts, I never put anything past the guy. So, in my mind, giving Randy a blowtorch was tantamount to giving a small child a paper bag full of broken light bulbs--it was cruel precisely because he might choose to play with it. I remember that he walked into Hector's kitchen wearing the thing, goggles suctioned to his eye sockets, looking like Exterminator #2 from Naked Lunch. "You guys want to go try it out?" Randy was thrilled with his new toy.

"What the fuck are we gonna do with a blowtorch?" Hector demanded.

"Yeah, Randy," I said, "I don't want to end up in the hospital tonight."

When fire and Randy united, it was a combustible marriage. I wouldn't say that he was a firebug in the traditional sense: he wasn't compelled by some irresistible and internal force to set the world aflame, though I cannot say that he wasn't empowered by the witnessing of destruction. So, though his vandalistic tendencies were not compulsive, though they were not necessitated by some psychological drive against which Randy was powerless, they were nevertheless satisfying. Because this was the case, he dedicated himself to destructive vandalism of all kinds, considered them something akin to acts of recreation. And because of his eccentricities, because of a clear cut difference between him and other specimens of humankind, a difference that he'd been made aware of since emergence into cognitive thought, Randy had a grudge against civilization, and against our hometown of Petaluma. That said, if he got an opportunity to evacuate our little city and ignite one gigantic and celebratory bonfire, he wouldn't hesitate to strike that match. It was a weeknight and we were sitting around the counter in Hector's kitchen. I was on pills, opiates, and Hector and I were trading shots of tequila when Randy walked in. We knew that we'd probably be leaving the house, if for no other reason than to pacify Hector's father, Miguel, who didn't exactly approve of a bunch of teenagers sitting in his kitchen drinking every night--although he tolerated it.

"I'm fucking tired, dude," I complained.

"Well, this'll wake your ass up," Randy said.

"Seriously, Randy, what do you think we're going to do with a blowtorch?" Hector asked.

"We're gonna weld Corbit's gate shut."

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I groaned. “Besides, don’t you guys think you’ve fucked with Corbit enough?” Jim Corbit was a childhood friend of Hector and Randy’s. They’d turned his grief into a pastime.

“Man, he’s the perfect chump. We gotta do this,” Andy insisted.

Corbit lived with his folks, Mr. and Mrs. Corbit, in a nice home out in the Petaluma hills, off of Skillman Lane. There weren’t any street lights out there, and the sparse countryside development left acres of land between residences. I’d never been to his house, I didn’t know him socially, but Jim Corbit always struck me as a pretty standup person, if a bit of a dufus. Nevertheless, Hector and Randy were relentless in their persecution--and they considered him a friend.

We pulled off of the road and into the mouth of the driveway. The gate was closed and locked, and beyond it the driveway curved uphill for another two hundred yards or so. I viewed Corbit’s house silhouetted in moonlight and could discern no signs of waking life. There was enough of a gap between the gate and the main road that Randy’s car remained out of sight and provided some cover from any traffic that might happen to pass at that hour. A pronged latch held the gate in place on its frame. The latch itself wasn’t locked. Rather, the Corbits strung a chain through the slats of the gate and around the bar of the frame, a padlock held the chain closed, and traffic to or from the Corbit household was thereby discouraged.

“So what’s the big plan Randy?” I asked.

“I’m going to actually weld the links of the chain together so that it’s one continuous loop holding the gate closed. They’re gonna have to get bolt cutters down here to go to work tomorrow.”

“I wish I could see Corbit’s dad when he tries to unlock the fucker,” Hector chuckled. “Could you imagine them climbing the gate to get out of here?” Hector savored the image, “Corbit’s dad all decked out in his work clothes.”

Hector and I watched as Randy hauled the blow torch from the trunk of his car. He had dismantled the entire thing before putting it into the trunk, tanks of gas stored at opposite sides of the car. Any safety precautions taken by Randy were reassuring. He inserted the tanks into the steel frame, reattached the hoses and the torch itself, and began adjusting the pressures of the gas tanks, allowing a certain ratio of oxygen to acetylene. He then turned a few knobs at the base of the torch. The igniter consisted of two steel prongs and looked like a huge safety pin. At the free ends of the prongs were a disk of corrugated steel and a nub of flint. The apparatus created a spark. Randy ignited the torch, which burned orange red. As he continued to adjust the gas ratio, the flame grew, narrowed, and deepened in color to a hazy blue. He looked enchanted as he stared into that intense blade of flame, the blue reflecting the blue of his rapt irises. He was a Promethean supplicant.

Hector and I took our places beside Randy as he attacked first the pad lock, then the chain links themselves. When Randy was done, he stood back. “Well, gentlemen, what do you think?” We inspected the welding job. “Little sloppy, don’t you think?” Hector asked.

“Hey look, this isn’t precision welding.”

“Good God, Randy, I had my doubts.” I tugged at the chain. The weld was solid. “But you did it. Corbit’s definitely gonna need bolt cutters to get out of here tomorrow.”

“Goddamn right, he will,” Randy said.

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Petaluma Junior High is located on the edge of town. Skirted on the northern side by sparsely developed wilderness, flanked on the south by expansive fields, the school offered an expectation of privacy. The one thing we had to worry about was security guards: the junior high employed a security agency, and they sent one of their cars on a round through the junior high school campus several times a night. Lucky for us, since both entrances to the roundabout at the front of the school were visible from any exposed area on the campus proper, we’d be able to see security coming from a mile away. When we got to the junior high, Randy drove through the dirt lots at the side of campus. He pulled onto one of the paved walkways between classroom buildings so that the car wouldn’t be seen during a routine drive through.

“So what the fuck do you plan to do here?” Hector asked.

“We’re gonna burn through the change box of the pay phone,” Randy announced.

I groaned. “Oh, you’ve got to be shitting me Randy. That’ll take all night.”

The payphone was located at the front of the school, on the trespassing side of a chain link fence that marked the school’s entrance. Randy ignited the torch. Once he had the ideal flame, he got to work on the thick steel of the chrome coin box at the base of the payphone. It took an eternity for Randy to pierce the metal itself. Hector and I watched him work for what seemed like hours. Randy crouched, goggles affixed to his bony face, reflecting the fountain of sparks and flame that danced away from the point where heat and metal collided, and he looked mad in his intensity, a man consumed by a project demanding complete devotion. He refused to let us take turns at the blow torch, and when he got tired he turned off the flame, sat with us for a minute or two, shared a smoke, and then got back to work. Security drove by once while we were working. Randy extinguished the flame, and we all ran down into the quad, where we knelt behind a wall until the headlights had scrolled the empty space above us, and continued on their way.

When he was getting close to cutting the face off of the change box, Randy screamed for us. “Well boys, our hard work is about to pay off.” Moments later, a chunk of steel about three inches square fell to the ground. Because the change box was red hot, we had to wait for it to cool, anxiously hovering around it like a trinity of alchemists before a cauldron sure to produce gold. We could see the change glowing inside.

“You better not have fucked up the coins, Randy,” Hector said. He had gloves on, and was the first to reach into the box. “Ow, fuck, my Isotoners!!” The leather blistered on two fingers of the glove. “Fuck it,” Randy announced as he put the torch on his back and reignited the flame. He walked to the chain link gate at the front entrance of the school and began welding the hinges on the latch.

“Give ‘em a couple of surprises for the morning.”

“Oh man, that’s the best.” I was thrilled with Randy’s boredom. “That’s so fucked. How do you think they’re gonna get it open tomorrow?”

“The latch is gone. They’ll probably either hammer through the welding, you know, smash the hinge so hard that the weld breaks. But if the weld holds they’re going to have to break the prongs off the latch itself.”

I imagined the administrators, the adults who had suspended me, who had been my sworn nemeses in junior high, all standing around a welded gate, baffled. Imagining them getting onto the campus, seeing the face burned away from the pay phone's coin box, I was satisfied. Despite the fact that it was a destruction I partook in only as a witness, I felt as if I had accomplished something that night. A fleeting and strange mark, an annoyance, a hindrance, had been struck, and I laughed and laughed to think of its making. Indiscernible among time's millions and millions of fleeting little pranks, that evening's undertakings nevertheless had the potency to make me feel that I could exert some force upon the universe, and, though itself fleeting, I clung to that cherished moment of empowerment.

We smoked together while I counted the change at Hector’s kitchen counter.

“How much we get?” he asked.

“A little over forty bucks rolled,” I told him.

“Well, I know where beer’s coming from tomorrow.” Hector smiled, satisfied.

“Get a pint too, or a quart or something, whiskey,” I requested.

“Will do,” Hector promised.

“We getting together tomorrow then?” I asked Randy.

“Damn right.”

Josh Barlas

January

Even the vines
of winter squash
have died this winter.

Sinking in—
footsteps in a frozen
garden.

Graying skies.
So this is what the new
year is like.

Nathan Hunt

Migration

Sprinting in the grass,
the full-grown rabbits
trying to outrun the cold.

What mysterious country
are you going to?

The Canada Geese,
sailing as an arrow,
pointing straight south.

What do you know
of sunlight?

I move on again,
you stay again—
this is fall.

Better the parting now
than in a brighter season.

Nathan Hunt

New Neighbors

It was cold;
she carried out her baby
to make her introduction –
No smile, handshake, fruit cake –
“Is that your car?”
He nodded a nearly new grizzle grey
so she continued on to say,
“Don’t park it in front of our house.”

If their screen door could’ve slammed harder,
it would have, triumphant in its punctuation.

Never mind that the cars of all makes and models
have hid under the faux shelter of rusted hoop,
or that nowhere else is being backed into an impossibility;
any chance of a welcome to the neighborhood guest
was forfeited by a simple request
forced forth so commandingly.

The next evening, another neighbor,
awaiting a trailer of wood,
moved all three of their cars –
emptying out their driveway,
a Hyundai and two mini vans
peppered the new motherhomerenter’s
self-proclaimed side of the street.

And still, it seemed someone should warn her
about the high school football season situation.

Christopher Keller

A Typical

come home from biology and phys ed =
little math, seminal fluid, urethra jokes
and confiscating hockey sticks and a 4-iron.

these types of days need a drink, neat,
except that these days are so often
they'd be another name for alcoholism.

so instead there's books of poetry, one
is a posthumous collection and another
is a follow-up to critical acclaim – other than

how can acclaim be critical, the word
“fuck” is in both, and it's interesting
because one is poetic and one profane.

you can tell the young kid just laps up the word,
supposes it's edgy and rough and candid because
edgy canned poets use rough language with acclaim.

my girlfriend won't stop texting me about this
open mic night at some Presbyterian church –
I tell her I love her. I think I do.

Christopher Keller

300,000,000 Volts

Far out to sea
in fitful moonlight
an island
uncharted
uninhabited
insignificant
a spit of sand
a bit of coral
with one palm tree
the quintessential
cartoon metaphor
for an island.

But it's ringed in a
bioluminescence
whose dinoflagellate
authors sense
something's afoot.

On the horizon
is a blip of a storm
unnoticed
unrecorded
undetected
by radar
but bunched
and bristling
potent and
eruptive.

An anvil cloud hovers
a ground charge builds
the sea foam fizzes
palm fronds stand on end
all Warhol-Bride of Frankenstein.

The flashbang comes
with blinding release
fireflakes abound
the micro-organisms think
it's Independence Day.

R. A. Allen

The Demon Formerly Known as Malchik Vlad

Babushka wasn't always Babushka. She was once Dyevechka, a girl without a scarf living in the Pyotr orphanage of Tula. She thought that she must have had a better name at one time, but when she lived at the orphanage and then later with her tall, drunken Uncle Boris, they only ever called her "Dyevechka."

A large, square, brick building with peeling blue trim around the windows formed the Pyotr. Each window of the three stories had an inverted cross for a frame that always seemed to fall in Dyevechka's line of sight when she looked out at the grounds, no matter how tall she thought she'd grown. Old and flaky maples surrounded the Pyotr. Much of the bark had been carved into so often by neighborhood passersby that there was a ban against the kids playing anywhere near them. Mistress worried that these "unruly little scamps" would deface them further, when all the children wanted to do was climb them instead of wait in line to use the fifty year-old swing set. "Girls, away from the tree," said Mistress. "You three know better."

The girls did in fact know better, but had hoped that she wasn't watching. Dyevechka moved away from the large tree, stepping far out of the cool shade to make sure Mistress saw that she obeyed. Daria and Anya, however, were slower. Daria kicked the grass at the base of the maple for a moment before walking over to Dyevechka. Anya stayed and clawed at the bark.

"Anya," Mistress said. "I said away."

Mistress stepped out from the awning that covered the large green doors of the Pyotr and stalked to the three girls. She adjusted her bun as her baggy black dress whipped about her skinny frame. Dyevechka picked at her fingernails and urged Anya with her eyes to get away from the tree. When Mistress reached them she grabbed Anya by the collar and dragged her over to Dyevechka. Anya wrenched herself free and adjusted her shirt. She pulled it down and left her fingers clenching the edges.

"I always see you urchins out here," Mistress said. "Leave the trees alone or it's the spoon every morning for a month."

Dyevechka flushed and she found it difficult to look up into the woman's eyes. Instead, she examined Mistress' worn leather sandals and the turquoise toenail polish that was chipped off the big toe. Her tan feet were wrinkled and dried out at the heel, the skin cracking in large, white blotches.

"Play on the swing set like the rest." Mistress took a step closer and a whiff of orange peel and

sweat hit the girls. She pointed to the rusty swing where thirty other children stood in line. Dyevechka shook her head, still looking down. She noticed the dirt on her own sandals and wiped them on the back of her shin. A curl bounced against her temple.

Anya frowned. “There’s only one swing,” she said, “and there’re millions of us.”

The woman folded her arms and leaned forward. “I’m not here to argue with you girls.” Her voice rose in pitch and Dyevechka flinched. “You will treat your caretakers with respect and silence.” Dyevechka had a sudden urge to speak. She stopped herself, thinking of the orphanage’s wooden spoon and how her friends would be punished. The shade from the tree darkened Daria’s face and her straight black hair swung over her ears. Anya crossed her arms and pursed her lips. Dyevechka knew she was impersonating Mistress and picked at her fingernails some more.

“Don’t complain about the swing. You’re lucky to have it at all. And you’re allowed on the soccer field, too, you know.”

Dyevechka’s eyes widened. Even Anya was speechless. Mistress frowned and tugged at her tight bun.

“What?” she asked. “You don’t like the soccer field either? You’re a bit choosy for orphans.” “But—but the ram grazes over there, Mistress,” Dyevechka said. “We can’t go over there because the ram—”

Mistress leaned into her face. Her strong smell pressed around them. “The ram won’t harm you.” She laughed and Dyevechka thought it made her sound like a dog. “Now go—get away from the tree.”

Anya grabbed the other two by the hands and led them away toward the other children. “Let’s just go wait in line for the swing,” said Daria.

Anya whispered, “At least until Mistress isn’t watching anymore.”

The long line to the swing stretched over to the side of the Pyotr. Groups of three or four checkered it, punctuated by the occasional lonely, single child watching the lucky one whose turn it was cut high arcs through the air on the swing.

Dyevechka was still compelled to whisper when they reached it. “Is it possible Mistress doesn’t know about the ram?”

“I think she knows about it,” said Daria, “but it doesn’t sound like she believes in it like we do.” “Is that how far its influence has spread?” Dyevechka’s eyes widened. A demon possessed the ram, a demon which plagued the Pyotr and made it such a terrible place.

Every child at the Honorable Saint Pyotr’s Orphanage for the Neglected feared the demon ram. It poisoned their blood and made them the undesirables of Tula. It caused the townspeople to avoid them on Sundays when they walked holding hands down the street to the blue and white church. Most important, the ram terrorized the orphans by taking one from their ranks. Once Dyevechka heard that the ram ate the children, and another time that it simply sucked their souls out and hid their bodies in its brown, matted fur. Every so often when a child disappeared, the children called the demon by that child’s name. Currently they called it Evgeny after a tiny blond boy whom they hadn’t seen for some time.

“Aren’t the caretakers curious where Evgeny went? That was six months ago,” said Dyevechka. “They don’t seem worried at all. After he kicked the soccer ball into the vegetable garden and Mistress made him fetch it he just disappeared and they didn’t say a word. And what about Elena before him?”

Daria frowned and pinched her arm. “Stop it. You’re scaring me.”

Dyevechka waved her off. “It’s true, Dolly. You know it is. All Elena did was drop the tea pot in the dining hall.”

Daria’s lip trembled.

“The ram snatched her up that night and after that—”

“Stop talking, okay?” Anya said. “She’s scared.”

“He always takes one of us at night.” Dyevechka pursed her lips and fell silent.

She wanted to say that the demon ram grew eager for another. It had been a while since Evgeny disappeared, after all. She moved up in the line as children went through their turn on the swing. Behind the brick of the Pyotr stretched the grassy field and the vegetable patch that ran alongside it—Evgeny’s haunts. Dyevechka shivered and rubbed the goose bumps off her arms. None of the orphans ventured there of their own free will. Daria even cried when the caretakers forced them to play soccer.

“What’s wrong, crybabies?” asked a stout boy who had just come in line behind them.

Anya narrowed her eyes. “Shut up, Vlad. We’re not crybabies—you are.”

“Nah, she’s cryin’ all the time,” said Vlad, pointing at Daria.

Anya stepped forward and shook her fist. “Just you say that again, piggy, and I’ll punch your fat face.”

The boy scrunched his nose. “Bet you won’t,” he said. He stuck out his tongue and a greasy brown lock of hair fell into his eyes.

“Hey, get away from my brother.” A blonde girl stepped up behind Vlad and sneered at the three girls. A birthmark shaped like a half-moon protruded from her chin. “You touch him and I’ll pull your ugly hair out.”

Anya’s face flushed. “I’ll punch both of you in your guts, okay? Take it back, Vlad.”

“Take what back?” asked his sister. She flicked her hair back and then put her hand on her waist.

Vlad giggled and his chubby cheeks shook. “I said they’re crybabies, Nadia. Aren’t they?”

Nadia laughed, her yellow teeth showing beneath her dry lips. “Oh, definitely. Definitely crybabies.”

Anya shouted at them and Dyevechka grabbed her by the shoulders to stop her from attacking. “They’re dumb, Anya,” she said. “Don’t listen to them—they’re just stupid bullies.”

As she said this, Vlad bent over and tugged a handful of grass from the ground. He reached at Anya and shoved the grass into her back collar. Clumps of it flew into her hair but most of it fell in her shirt and out from its bottom. The back of her jeans caught a couple clumps and they inched their way inside her ill-fitting pants. Nadia sniggered. With a scream Anya turned around and launched herself at them, arms flailing. They fell to the ground in a cloud of dust.

“Anya, stop!” Dyevechka said. She picked at her fingernails.

Daria reached for Anya to pull her off Vlad, but a swinging elbow caught her face. She flew back and clutched at her jaw. Her brown eyes welled up with tears and she let out a whine.

“Oh, shush, Dolly. For goodness’ sake, don’t cry,” said Dyevechka.

All the noise attracted the other kids in line. They shoved each other out of the way to see the fight and cheered. Soon Mistress came running. A tall, redheaded boy tried separating them but Anya bit him.

Mistress pushed the kids out of the way and launched herself into the fray. She grabbed Anya first, reaching for the back of her dirty pink shirt. Her fingers clasped Anya’s collar and strands of her hair. Mistress lifted her from the ground and threw her to the side. “Stop it at once!”

Vlad scrambled to his feet before Mistress could grab him, knocking against his sister.

Anya said, “But he—”

“I don’t care,” said Mistress. “Get inside my office immediately.”

Tears filled Anya’s eyes. They trickled down her dusty face like dripping honey, smearing on her

cheeks and catching at the sides of her mouth.

As she ran off to the Pyotr, Vlad laughed. “Crybaby.”

“And you, Malchik Vlad, wait in the hall.”

She didn’t seem to notice the older Nadia, who scrambled behind the redhead.

Vlad looked from Mistress to all of the silent children that surrounded him and now he, too, looked close to tears. He trudged to the door.

“Playtime is over,” the woman said. She glanced at Dyevechka and Daria with narrow black eyes. “Inside. Now.”

The children made their way back in. The two girls walked side by side into the green front doors of the Pyotr and the fake cool of the inside air hit Dyevechka’s face. Nadia was laughing about Anya. When she glanced in at Mistress’ office she saw no sign of her friend, but in the hallway Vlad sat swinging his bare feet on a creaky wooden bench. When they passed with the others he stuck his tongue out again.

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Dyevechka and Daria found a table and waited to be served their dinner. The chatter of the other orphans in the dining hall made Anya’s absence noticeable. Dyevechka’s neighbor clanked his fork against his plate and slurped his tea. Finally their friend joined them. She scampered along the tiled and painted walls past the other children. Not many of the orphans looked up at her. Fights were common on the playground and their caretakers disciplined them often.

“What did she say to you?” asked Daria as Anya sat down beside her.

“She didn’t say anything,” Anya said. “She just whapped my hands with the spoon.” She reached for the teapot and poured herself a cupful, picking it up with dirty fingers that she hadn’t yet washed from playtime. There were red blotches on her skin and tiny purple spots were starting to form. When she finished pouring herself tea and mixing in sugar she put her hands in her lap and stroked the fresh bruises.

Dyevechka grimaced and took a bite of her ham. She was punished often, for she always talked out of turn in her classes. Last month, Mistress both whapped her and give her a stern talking-to. She rubbed the back of her own hands. One time Mistress was in such a foul mood that the bruises didn’t disappear for two weeks.

“Stupid bullies,” Anya whispered.

Dyevechka peered around Daria to where Vlad sat a few tables away. Anya turned around to see him and made a fish face. Vlad noticed that they were staring and leered. He sipped his raspberry

compote and some of the red juice dripped down his chin. When he put the cup down, a large pink ring stained around his lips and he grinned, raspberries clearly stuck in his teeth. “He’s so gross,” said Daria as she turned to her own food.

Dyevechka watched as Vlad stood up from his table and came up behind Anya and Daria. When Anya noticed him she turned around and clenched her purpled fists.

“What do you want, piggy?”

Vlad laughed and kissed her on the cheek. He did it so quickly that Dyevechka thought he just hit her with his face.

“Gross.” Anya swung at him but Vlad was too fast, bolting back to his seat. Anya whipped her body back to face the table. She blushed and stared at her plate a few moments before picking up her fork.

“He’s the worst,” she said.

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That night, thoughts of the demon ram flew through Dyevechka’s head. The kids in her room were all frightened of sleeping by the window because they thought that was how it snatched up children. It was her turn to risk it that night.

Braches swayed in front of the moon and Dyevechka jumped, her heart racing. The window’s painted blue trim glowed in the dim light of the stars. Aside from the regular breathing of the girls around her she thought she heard voices outside as well. Rather, she thought she heard one voice—Evgeny’s. She pulled the prickly blanket over her face and closed her eyes, trying to ignore it. She remembered Vlad calling them crybabies and held back her tears, but more than once she was sure she heard Evgeny say her name.

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The next morning Dyevechka walked down the hall to the stairs on her way to breakfast. There were fewer echoes in the stairwell than usual. Dyevechka wondered if she were mistaken about the day, for usually the halls and stairs were full at this time with pushy kids rushing to their oatmeal. She had slept so badly that she thought it was possible to forget. When she reached the cafeteria, she spotted Anya and Daria and grabbed a bowl so she could join them.

“Where is everyone?” she asked.

Anya shrugged. Dyevechka picked up her spoon and quickly finished her breakfast. “Excuse me,” she said to the dishwasher when she put her empty bowl on the counter, “isn’t it Friday?”

Anya and Daria walked up behind Dyevechka. The dishwasher tossed her towel on the bowl and

said, “It’s too early for games, girls. Get to your classes.”

They rushed off to mathematics. Voices echoed through the winding hallways and bounced off the tiled walls. When they entered, their teacher hadn’t arrived. Some orphans looked excited and one boy’s eyebrows were shot to his hairline. Another groaned and shook his head. One girl in the back said nothing and only stared out the window to the outer Pyotr property. When Dyevechka came in closer she realized it was Nadia.

“What’s going on?” Dyevechka asked the redheaded boy. “What’s happened?”

“You haven’t heard?” he said, turning fully to face her. “They say it must have happened sometime last night.”

“What? What happened?” asked Daria. Her dark eyes reddened.

The redhead leaned forward. He whispered, “Vlad is missing.”

Dyevechka’s jaw dropped.

Nadia was clutching her textbook. The three girls walked over to her. Anya’s eyes widened and Daria’s tears began to flow. Dyevechka peered out the window to see what they were looking at. The demon ram sat on the far end of the Pyotr orphanage property near the fruit patch that the cook grew for her compote. At that distance it looked more like a lumpy brown rock than anything else. The only exceptions were the large, knobby horns that jutted out of its skull and curved in a wide arc around its ears. She got the feeling that the demon’s dead marble eyes stared in their direction. Its head swiveled toward the Pyotr and it sniffed the air.

Their teacher’s arms were full of papers that fluttered as she walked into the room. “Sit, children. Why are you not already at your desks? Quiet down and get in your chairs.”

For the rest of the class period, Dyevechka could think only of Vlad and certainly nothing of mathematics. She did her exercises poorly and with an absent mind. She even dropped the chalk twice while writing them on the board. Their teacher noticed the odd behavior of her students but only inspected them curiously as they filed past her desk at the sound of the bell.

An entire day of classes passed this way for all the orphans in the Pyotr. On Fridays after dinner they were allowed an hour of playtime (to tire the urchins out, Mistress reasoned), and when the last bell chimed the children rushed for the green doors. Everyone wanted to talk about Vlad the bully-turned-demon and in the echoing hallways Dyevechka walked alongside two younger boys. One said, “Can you believe it?”

“I thought it might take him, you know,” replied the other.

She searched for Nadia among the older children. She rushed up behind a blonde girl, but when



she tugged at her sleeve, it was someone else. Dyevechka craned her neck looking but didn't find her.

Instead she saw Anya and Daria and the three girls darted out of the Pyotr together. They convened in the evening shadow cast by the goalpost closest to the building. Dyevechka was breathless and too fearful to blink. A terror always filled her chest when the demon ram took a child. It could have been her.

"Well, we have to find the truth," Anya said. Her eyes were wide.

"What do you mean?" said Dyevechka. "Find out what?"

"The truth," she said again. "We need to see if Vlad's really been taken."

Daria bit her knuckles.

"Oh, come on," said Anya. She placed her hand on Daria's shoulder. "We don't even have to get that close."

Daria shook her head, her black hair flying.

"We'll be fine. Yes, we will," Anya said. "We've got to help him if we can."

"Why?" asked Dyevechka. "He's always been so mean to us."

"Because, okay? We just do."

Daria moaned and Anya squeezed her shoulder. "If the ram's taken Vlad for his own then he won't want one of us so soon."

Daria looked at the dewing grass and a beetle crawled past her feet. "But I don't want to give it any ideas for next time. Why do we even have to see it?" she said. "We'll be able to hear him at night anyway."

"Don't be such a baby, Dolly," Anya said. "We can't know for sure that way." She looked to see if Mistress were around. She turned her gaze toward the back of the property but didn't see the ram either.

Dyevechka took a deep breath, picking at her fingernails and feeling a warm spurt of blood. "I'm pretty sure that it's Vlad, Anya. We haven't seen him all day and none of the teachers said anything about him being adopted or at the hospital—"

Anya put a finger up to her mouth. Dyevechka followed her line of sight and saw Mistress stalking the grounds behind them. She was leading their redheaded friend toward the orphanage by the ear. As soon as she was out of sight, Anya said, "Come on. This way."

She raced over to the brick building and followed its foundation to the other end of the property. Daria sniffled and followed her. Dyevechka hesitated, sucked at her bleeding finger, and then ran after them.

Terror flowed through her blood as she ran along the cold, trodden mud next to the Pyotr. She traced the brick wall with her fingers and ducked under the blue frames of the windows in case anyone were watching. The thrill of abandoning the playground was made sweeter by the sound of Mistress scolding the redhead on the other side of the Pyotr.

The setting sun cast its rays in shades of purple and pink that melted together in the sky. Its colors shone between the leaves of the maples. The sky contrasted sharply with the harsh, gray colors of the many twenty-story apartment buildings that surrounded them and the dull red of the Pyotr itself. Casting glances around her as she went, Dyevechka bolted from the shady brick wall and raced to follow the others as they went from tree to tree like animals seeking cover.

Moments later, Dyevechka bumped into the other girls when she reached the bush they hid behind. She had ran so quickly that for several minutes she only heard her own breathing. But she soon caught her breath and crouched down next to the others.

Before them was the vegetable garden—empty.

“What do we do now?” she whispered.

“If it’s not here we sh—should go back to the playground,” said Daria. Dyevechka strained to hear her.

“We could try over by the fruit patch,” Anya said.

Dyevechka started to say, “I’m not—” when crunching leaves and feet padding in the mud reached her ears. She locked eyes with Anya and the color drained from her face.

The sound stopped.

“Anya—” Daria whispered.

“Shush, Dolly.”

The silence continued and Dyevechka couldn’t bear it any longer. She stood and grabbed the bush for support and slowly peered around its prickly leaves. One of its branches cracked at her touch. A cry caught in her throat.

There stood the stout demon ram, facing them directly not five steps away. It stared without blinking with heavy, dead black eyes. Its lips parted and Dyevechka noticed with horror that a bright pink ring like smeared raspberries stained the pale skin around its lips. Its furry, brown legs

flexed as it took a step forward and its knobby horns gleamed in the evening sun.

“What’s the matter, crybabies?”

Melanie Greaver Cordova

## Thank You, Grandpa

“Goodness,” Rachel said watching his fingers work the dirt. She stared in wonder at the wriggling digits as they pawed and clawed and pushed and prodded through the rich topsoil of the family cemetery. “I haven’t seen you this energetic in years. Thank you, Grandpa,” she whispered.

The sight took her mind back twenty years. She was just six years old on that hot August day, exploring the woods around her grandparents’ farm in Inwood, Indiana, playing in the shallow creek and discovering such wonders as crawdads and tadpoles when she heard Grandma call. Something was wrong. The tone was different from when they called her for dinner, this sounded...scared.

Scrambling up the hill, her sneakers slipping in the loose dirt, stumbling and clawing with her hands she called out, “Here I am, Grandma!” Running toward the house, wiping her hands on her overalls she could barely see her grandmother through the tall field grass.

Strange, how her mind could now only recall snippets of the conversation with Grandma. An “accident,” she remembered her grandmother calling it. “Serious—chainsaw—your father.”

What she did remember vividly was the burial. There was the preacher, her grandparents, and the gravedigger. The pine casket rested in the open grave and at the conclusion of the service, her grandfather, looking handsome in his new Sears suit, picked up a clump of dirt, crumbled it and let the dirt fall onto the casket. “Let’s go,” he told her, taking her hand.

That night a terrible thunderstorm rolled through the Ohio River valley. She wasn’t sure if it was the fury of the storm or the thoughts of her father, cold in the ground, trying to dig his way out that prevented her from sleeping. It didn’t matter. She slipped into her grandparents’ room, curled up on the floor at the foot of their bed and fell asleep.

When she awoke, she was in the bed, wrapped in the bedsheet her grandparents used as a blanket during the summer months. Sunlight filled the room and she could hear her grandmother downstairs. She learned later that her grandfather had found her on the floor and put her into the bed. So it was that for the next two years the only place she felt comfortable enough to sleep was her grandparents’ bed. Then Grandma died.

She was buried next to Rachel’s father on an inappropriately beautiful summer day. They stayed at the gravesite until it was completely filled and before leaving, her grandfather planted daisies on either side of the headstone, grooming the dirt with his hands.

From that day forward it was just the two of them. Mom, a forbidden subject, had disappeared before Rachel turned one, so it was Grandpa who raised her through the transformation from little girl to young woman. “Thank you, Grandpa.”

His muffled response brought her back to the present. "Oh, sorry. Just reminiscing," she explained. His fingers stopped, resting in the dirt. "Tired? I don't imagine they let you work in those well-manicured gardens at the home. Pity. I remember how much you enjoyed working with your hands."

They sat in silence, Rachel lighting a cigarette and enjoying the warmth of the sun on this late spring day. "I should have come for you sooner," she said softly. "That group home was no place for you." He was still and she wondered what he might be thinking.

Looking at the headstones she was struck by how faded her memories were of her father and grandmother and by the fact that she knew absolutely nothing about her Aunt Ellen, who died at age twelve and whom no one ever spoke.

Taking another draw on her cigarette she extinguished it against the headstone and dropped it in her pocket. "It's nice up here, I see why you picked this spot." Kneeling, she reached out, gently touching his fingers. They wriggled at her touch and she smiled.

"It must have been tough for you after Grandma died," she acknowledged, "trying to raise me by yourself while dealing with the loss of your wife and son, so recently departed." She shook her head. "The county wanted to take me away but they underestimated you. They didn't know the strength of your determination, didn't understand you had a plan."

She sat back on her legs struggling to keep her emotions under control. "You made me who I am; taught me so much and you probably don't even realize it. Thank you, Grandpa."

Spying a four-leaf clover she plucked it, twirling it between her forefinger and thumb, admiring it. "My lucky day," she said, "finding you after ten years. Oh don't worry," she said noticing his fingers stiffen, "you'll never go back there. Not after all the trouble I went through to spring you," she chuckled.

"Institutions are for the helpless and the insane," she said a smile frozen on her face, "and you're not helpless and I'm not insane." She stood and stared down at him. "But you know that. You knew it when you were molesting me, but that didn't stop you from telling people I was. All part of your plan," Rachel said pacing now. "And it worked beautifully. They would have put me away had I not runaway," she laughed.

"She's troubled," people said, "and the abuse self-inflicted. Who would ever suspect you, the kindly grandfather? Ah, you played the part so well." She shook her head smiling. "I applaud you," she said clapping her hands together. "Brilliant acting; another lesson you unknowingly taught me. Thank you, Grandpa."

Peering at the rigid fingers poking through the grave she toed them—still no movement. “Then it’s done.” Sitting she relit her cigarette, took a long drag, held it and finally exhaled. “What a day,” she said looking at the sky. “So much work but so worth it. When you first realized who I was—the look on your face—priceless!” She ground out the tip of the cigarette against his fingers.

“Thank you, Grandpa.”

Tom Gumbert