

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge



Best of Poetry

Jake Syersak

Best of Fiction

Dorian Dawes

The Corner

Club

Press



The Corner Club Press

May 2011

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Managing Editor *Greg Tredore*
Fiction Editor *Amber Forbes*
Poetry Editor *Daphne Maysonet*

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Letter From the Fiction Editor

Shadows,

We are here for another glorious issue of *The Corner Club Press*. Spring is here, so we hope the cover art is a fitting image, and your poetry editor and I have just completed our spring semester and will start our summer classes shortly. But don't fear, for we'll still be reading submissions and preparing issue 3, which will come out July 15th, three days after my birthday.

Last issue received a little over a thousand downloads, and we hope this issue will receive even more. We decided to publish twenty-four pieces because of the increased influx of submissions, and have even published a piece that was written when the author was in high school, which inspires us to start something for teen writers. We haven't decided yet, but we have ideas all over the place at the moment. We know for certain they won't be included in the fifty-dollar prize.

Also, if you've noticed our spring-themed layout change we are also accepting donations for our literary magazine now. The poetry editor and I can't support the costs of the website, advertising, and everything else on our own salaries, so we'll hope you chip in something.

We've got great things in store for *The Corner Club Press*. Because of our number of downloads, it's a very real possibility we could start putting our magazine on e-readers in the future, though we want to bulk up our fan base even more. We'll keep you updated on this as we progress.

Lastly, it would all be great if you could fan me @AmberSkyeF on Twitter for *The Corner Club Press* updates. I originally had a Twitter for our magazine, but I didn't have enough time to sit there and try and gather more fans and followers. We also have a Facebook page we would love for you to 'Like' as well. Just type in *The Corner Club Press* in the search, and our logo should appear.

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

Founder and Fiction Editor

Letter From the Poetry Editor

Readers and Writers,

It is with pleasure that we at *The Corner Club Press* bring to you our second issue. As with our first issue, we received several works worth publication and were delighted to include many of them here in the magazine. We urge you to continue to submit for future issues.

As always, do not hesitate to encourage your fellow writers to submit to our publication, as we are thrilled to be able to read and introduce new writers into this industry. Whether it be through word of mouth or social networking, please share your experiences with *The Corner Club Press* with others.

Thank you and Happy Writing,

Daphne Maysonet
Co-Founder and Poetry Editor

Contents

May 2011

Poetry

Jake Syersak	<i>Age and Aged</i>	9
Laura LeHew	<i>The Geography of Transgression</i>	10
Marina Lee Sable	<i>Masks in the Attic</i>	11
Ray Busler	<i>Intellectual Lover</i>	12-13
Christina M. Matthews	<i>The Mistress</i>	14
Valentina Cano	<i>Bloody Sundays</i>	15
Robert Phelps	<i>Prayer</i>	16
Joel Ferdon	<i>Reading Granny's Journal</i>	17
Carla	<i>When God Awakens</i>	18-19
Kevin Heaton	<i>Happy Ashes</i>	20
Mosby Barley	<i>X's are for Kisses</i>	21
Rodney Nelson	<i>More Study</i>	22

Fiction

Dorian Dawes	<i>The Elder Gods</i>	28-50
Maria D'Alessandro	<i>One of Us</i>	51-72
Allen Kopp	<i>Fits and Fainting Spells</i>	73-82
Malachi King	<i>Falling Down a Well</i>	83-87
Keith G. Laufenberg	<i>Cain and Abel</i>	88-111
Nathaniel Tower	<i>Searching for the Right Name</i>	112-121
Robert Davis	<i>Belladonna Gardens</i>	122-146
Walter Giersbach	<i>Carl's Sense of Loss</i>	147-149
Kristie Mahoney	<i>Finger Painting</i>	151-156
Julian Adorney	<i>Flamboyant but Deadly</i>	158-166
Margaret Karmazin	<i>Meddling</i>	167-181
Jerry McKinney	<i>Paperwork</i>	182-185

Jake Syersak

Age and Aged

Silk butterflies
Bloated into O's by helium—
This child's eyes are feigning.

The age-concaved gearwork
Of apocalyptic fire
Forging—I see it in an old man's spine.

Fear: The formulae of age
And aged. The past
And future are clockwise tarantellas

Spinning toward a hopeful encore;
The applause of angels and demons
Incite rage in maestros—

But variation purposes the flesh to inflate,
To resist the dead opera,
The fear in pizzicato falling off a dusty violin—
The strings swell and live and then swell again

Jake Syersak a University of Washington graduate with a BA in English Literature currently living in Seattle, WA. I work at a bilingual (English/French) preschool and am currently applying to numerous MFA programs for fall 2011.

Laura LeHew

Geography of Transgression

I am a part of all that I have met.

~Alfred Lord Tennyson

introduction—
inhabits different sides of the same glass

she was a storm chaser
lightening let loose

thigh high deerskin boots
nobody needed scotch

there is something about surrender
the rust of old nails

if we tell the truth

the body undone
the falter

I've been waiting for this moment

Laura LeHew is an award winning poet with 300 poems appearing over 100 national and international journals and anthologies such as Alehouse, Filling Station, Gargoyle Magazine, The Line Up, Pank, Perceptions, and the 2010 edition of the Syracuse Cultural Workers' Women Artists Datebook. Her chapbook, Beauty, Tiger's Eye Press, 2009 is in its 3rd printing. Laura received her MFA in writing from the California College of the Arts, and was nominated for a Pushcart prize. She edits Uttered Chaos www.utteredchaos.org and was guest editor for The Medulla Review. Laura has one husband, seven cats Tessa, Mr. Socks, Baby, Dorian (yes he is grey), and the Army of Darkness (Raven, Shadow and Smoke) and never sleeps.

Marina Lee Sable

Masks in the Attic (James Ensor)

Under the auspices of the Salt Water Goddess
you rose dream-like up the stairs to welcome
a macabre carnival of dressed-up skeletons,
the curious objects of your obsession.

You found them in the attic where light
floated in like a phantom illuminating
a mad ensemble of skeletons, old clothes,
masks, the skull you kept on an easel.

In your illusory dreams, holiday crowds
turned into demons so you pared their faces
to bone, masked them up in your surreal land,
and silenced them in the soft pastels of death.

But when the demons surrounded you,
you reinvented yourself in grotesque masks,
became a fish, a bug, a crucified Christ,
while you flew alone in a fiery sky.

Marina Lee Sable's poems have appeared in The Pedestal Magazine, Strange Horizons, Strong Verse, Paper Crow, OG's Speculative Fiction, Basement Stories, Ghostlight, Fifth Di..., Illumen, Death Rattle, Cover of Darkness, and Shelter of Daylight.

Ray Busler

Intellectual Lover

It was not an affair
Of conversational flair.

Sundays?
Spent nuzzling.
Not New York Times puzzling.

She adored me, she said,
For not reading in bed.
She'd tried men with minds,
But preferred me instead.

If she mentioned Fitzgerald
It wasn't that fella,
But to have me get up
And switch on some Ella.

I pity the scholars
She'd tried and rejected.
Her mind they had courted
While the rest they neglected.
But please,
Don't write me off
As an oaf or a fool;
I've read a few books,
And I have been to school.

This lesson I learned
About dealing with Cupid;
If you major in love
You must minor in stupid.

Ray Busler's light verse.

If your mind she despises;
Your body she'd seize,
Then sell all your books
And hide those degrees.

Put into one sentence
My premise is this:
It's wise to be dumb
When the outcome is bliss.

Christina M. Matthews

The Mistress

The first night I see Orion, I'm with a married man.
I point to the navy sky, pricked with pinholes,
pricked with otherworldly emptiness and light.

Three white-blue stars steady the center of the
Hunter:
Orion's Belt, a string of pearls pulsing through the crisp
December night. Barefoot on the back porch,
I steady myself on two planks of wood,
my head tilted left and up.

I tell him: Orion was in love with Merope,
but she didn't want him. I tell him:
when Orion died, the gods, full of pity,
stuck him in the sky where tonight he rests,
unmoving in winter's blackness.

From the swirl of dark dust, I shift my eyes
to the swirl of this man's warm breath.
In clouds, in a curling mass in front of him,
he exhales his loneliness, inhales, exhales it again.
He cannot rid himself of longing. Not with me,
no, I can only breathe so much.

Valentina Cano

Bloody Sunday

You vibrate in tones of red,
shifting from blood
to sun-soaked sand
to tomato dripping onto the carpet.
If I could clasp you still
in my hands,
a bird panting in fright,
I think you'd deepen,
ripen like a dark piece of fruit.
But I can't hold you,
you squeeze in drops
down through my fingers,
splattering to the yawning floor.
Making puddles of crushed skin,
of rubbed raw flesh.
The smell of ground meat
clings to me
and I grip to you
in unending Sundays
that have the vague aftertaste
of old doors.

Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time she has either reading or writing. Her work has appeared in Exercise Bowler, Blinking Cursor, and many more. Her work will appear in the upcoming editions of A Handful of Dust, The Scarlet Sound, The Adroit Journal, Perceptions Literary Magazine, Welcome to Wherever, The Corner Club Press, Death Rattle, Danse Macabre, Subliminal Interiors, Generations Literary Journal and Perhaps I'm Wrong About the World. You can find her here: <http://coldbloodedlives.blogspot.com>

Robert Phelps

Prayer

I feel I must straighten my back formal for
presentation. I am
inadequate and under-dressed for this. I'm all runny
nose and irritated bowels and you must
parse my mumblings to make sense of me. I am a
Wrigley's wrapper stuck to a silver chalice.
I'm the fatigue of an afternoon drizzle to engulf a
desert.

A tiny child peers at me behind mother's skirt with her
little lips pout and I feel I should kneel in
her presence and do something like I saw in an old
movie about knights, to extend my sword, or
bow my head and sweep my mailed arm around my
mailed chest.

I'm like a redheaded kid at school, having crammed
all the right answers for the test, but with
crippled ignorance of their meaning.

Must I bring all my frauds into the mix? Is my impurity
part of the purity of the prayer?

My name is Robert Phelps. I'm a 70 year old Catholic priest living and working in a parish on the southern shore of Suffolk County on Long Island, New York. None of the four poems offered has ever been published nor offered. I've been writing since 1991, when I made a private retreat in a rain forest on Maui. I've had several poems published in various journals, such as The Evansville Review, The Nas-sau Review, Concrete Wolf, The Penwood Review, and Ruah.

Joel Ferdon

Reading Granny's Journals

I lit
A cigarette, Granny,
After I cracked open
Your journals, swept away
The lavender dust
And read in my
eight year old hand

"The Bad New's
My Granny has
Died."

I take a deep breath and inhale
The scent of your magenta pages.
They smell like hand stitched blankets
on pillow lined mattresses.

What I can remember I hold onto tight,
like your grip
On my hand wherever we would go
In that small California town
That beat and bruised me like a whipping
Post, but nothing felt like opening your

Pages to that place where as a child
I had left my sloppy mark nestled,
Writing my own obituary for you.

Joel Ferdon is a chain smoking, coffee slinging, poetry fiend. His poetry has been published in such places as Gloom Cupboard, Indigo Rising Magazine and soon Rusty Truck. He lives and writes in Charlotte, NC.

Carla Girtman

When God Awakens

The string theory suggests
We are a collective of thoughts random
Sliding through a sleeping Mind.
And nothing belongs to reality

As we know it.

Our dream world
Is fluid,
Changing,
Formed and formless.

Is this God's dream too?

Are we a glimmer of neurons
Flitting about
In the great Unconsciousness
As He lies asleep?

(Wherever it is He sleeps.)

Do we shapeshift our way
Through His thoughts
Leaving a message unremembered
Upon His awakening?

If He awakens.

What if genius
Is simple concentration
Of memories or

Carla lives in Central Florida with her family and three cats. Her work has been published in Clockwise Cat, Flashshot, and many more. Carla is currently working on two books Midnight Tarot: A Fool's Journey and Mermaids, Zombies, and Vampires – O My!

Reincarnation thoughts of
Deja vu?

What if war,
Pestilence
And famine
Are meaningless diversions

For boredom?

Will the Apocalypse
Be nothing more
Than a ray of sun peeping through
Catching us all
In a fiery retribution of morning?

What will happen
When God awakens?

Kevin Heaton

Happy Ashes

Tonight the ballroom hovers reminiscences.
Black widows pardon love interests,
and tailor them in bolts of silk.
Grandfather strokes toll, twelve times:
wraps salvation hands around midnight.
The viola handsaws harmony;
It's maple still praising the breeze;
daring the violin to spin Tupelo honey:
give it a whirl.
The mantle urn is empty;
her ashes pirouette giggles through candelabra
flickers.
Wispy gowns twirl to spinet rag.
Empty goblets phantom mortal feelings.
Latent toes tap patent leather to yellowed pine.
Ghosts waltz spent heartbeats into new souls.
Death comes a little down.

Kevin Heaton lives and writes in Aiken, South Carolina. His chapbook, "Postcards of Faith," is at: Victorian Violet Press. His new chapbook, "Measured Days," is available from: Heavy Hands Ink Press. His work has appeared in: Foliate Oak, Elimae, and many more. More of his work may be viewed at his website: <http://kevinheatonpoetry.webstarts.com/index.html>

Mosby Barley



X's are for Kisses

Xs are for kisses
not your nexus to your old
former missus
former girlfriend, former boyfriend
sickly sentimental
 just a hoax without the Os

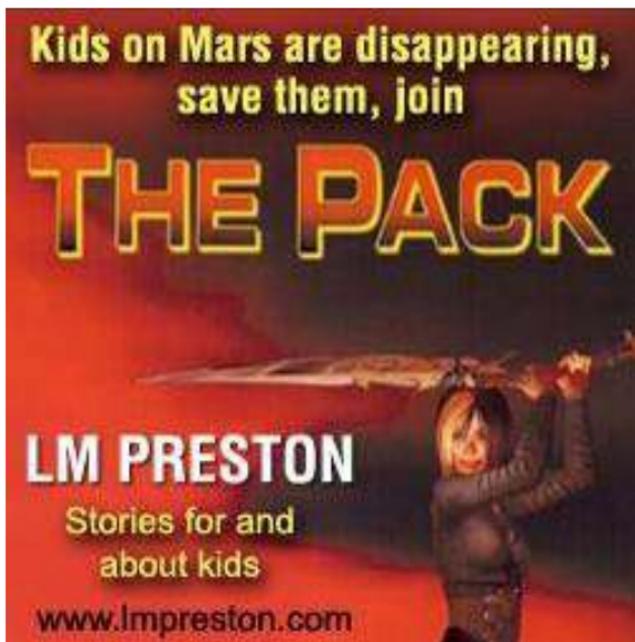
Mosby Barley is a senior English major with a Creative Writing track at Augusta State University.

Rodney Nelson

More Study

I saw a bird that would not
have been there
 preying
 white
 more
than twenty of it and each
in an own low wheeling scan
of the autumned earth among
the potholes of which I had
met a garter snake and a
muskrat
 hunter
 no gull
 with
dark neb hook the wing technique
of a peregrine
 bird that
would not have been wheeling out
over this brown wetland in
day warmth
 would have been in the
right migratory lane its
route from the nesting region
to the wintering
 I saw
a bird that would not have been
there had it known every-
thing I knew
 not have flaunted
its black wing patch
 I saw
 a
 bird
that may need more study

Rodney Nelson's work began to appear in mainstream journals long ago. See his page in the Poets & Writers directory: http://www.pw.org/content/rodney_nelson.



Blog: <http://lmpreston.blogspot.com>

Follow her on Twitter @LM_Preston

Books available at Amazon and all
bookstores:

Explorer X-Alpha

The Pack

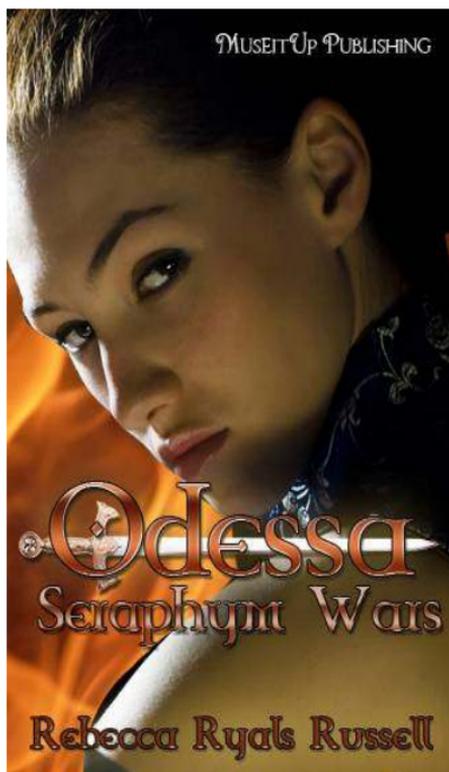
Bandits

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The Elder Gods

Dorian Dawes

The Elder Gods. Anyone who's anyone in "the scene" has heard of them. They're widely popular. In fact, it seems like they're everywhere now. Abaddon is the ubiquitous superstar; his pallid visage and sharp features can be seen on posters, popular internet blogs, etc. His image defines the band and their bleak sound that blasts sweetly from car radios and headphones. It all seems so fun, so thrilling to be singing about the end of the world, darkest demons, strangest nights when the stars align, but what if it's not just music? What if the wacky conservatives are right?

What if the rock and roll is sending us to hell? I can't say that without a bitter smile making its way over my lips. Oh, the irony.

You remember that gay kid that killed himself a few weeks ago? Might have seen his picture on the news. Crazy blonde hair, jagged eye-liner, black-painted lips; never surprises anyone when a kid like that decides the world's just a bit too much and hops on death's carriage a little early. Especially when they're gay.

Gothy faggots like to kill themselves, right? Too much of that Marilyn Manson pumping through their veins, too much of those bullies calling them names--it doesn't matter. There's always someone to blame. Someone, something. Always gotta be someone's fault, even though the death-decision belongs to the person who's six feet underground.

I met Jeremiah Baker the night of the murders. The last performance of the Elder Gods I ever got to watch, before the trial, before Abaddon became so fucking famous. We'd both had come, like the

small group of thirty kids around us--boys and girls in willowy black-clothes and theatrical make-up--for what we hoped would be the night of our lives.

It was.

Some exposition here, in that time, the Elder Gods didn't self-promote. That was the groupie's job, the fan's, the true believers in the band. Abaddon, Trish, Coi (pronounced like 'Koi,' you know, like the fish), and Thoth, the original members of the band, all believed that if the music was good enough, pure enough, it'd sell itself. They were naive and pretentious, but we loved them for it, and we did everything we could to keep the band, to keep the music that kept us awake at night, alive.

Everywhere we could, we talked about the music. Online in forums, blogs, pictures we could post of their beautiful likenesses, and artwork made by the more talented fans of the band, all to keep their name out there. We had this fear of seeing them drift so far into obscurity that they'd vanish forever, leaving nothing but fond memories and faded CD covers as proof that such magic ever existed.

The threat of losing them only seemed to grow every year. The amount of clubs willing to play their shows continued to lessen with Abaddon's stage antics growing more shocking and provocative with each concert they played. He was infamous for finding dead things on the road, and preserving them in their tour bus's ice-box, only to bring them out onstage, so he could eat them in front of his cheering audience. Everyone always wondered if he'd ever get sick from all that rotten meat, but we knew, our singer was invincible. He'd wash it all down with absinthe and cigarettes.

After nearly a year and a half of waiting, I finally saw fliers around my little college-town, fliers with a familiar, crudely-drawn Cthulhu-sigil. The online fan-site dedicated to the Elder Gods confirmed my suspicions.

They would be playing at a club not too far from my campus. I don't think I remember anything I was supposed to in my classes that day. The only thing I could do was stare at the clock and pray for the minutes to go by faster, thinking only of Abaddon, and Coi, and Trish, and Thoth. Especially of Abaddon and Thoth.

Coi and Trish, I'd always felt kind of sorry for. Trish, the only girl member of the band didn't do much besides play her keyboard and appear maudlin, and Coi just played his drums and hid behind those long bangs and fabulous hats of his. They weren't un-pretty (they were quite beautiful, actually), but they just kind of got forgotten when Abaddon and Thoth appeared. Always together, always so close to each other, and when they weren't, you could tell they wanted to be. Nobody missed the way Thoth licked his lips and tried in vain to concentrate on playing whenever Abaddon would strip down to nothing during a performance, and there was not a soul who could be convinced that all those kisses between them were mere theatrics. Throbbing erections don't tent vinyl pants for theatrics.

They were lovers, and not the kind of pretty, Japanese boy-band lovers that teenage girls obsess over. No, they could barely look at each other without that compulsive need to forget everything and fuck. Their heat added another kind of fuel to the already mesmerizing sound they put forth in their music, and alongside Abaddon's silver-haired sex appeal there was the added fire of a rock and roll romance.

Jeremiah was like me. He wanted to see the Elder Gods live, wanted to see Abaddon tear open a dead cat with his teeth, watch him dance in fake-blood and glitter, and hear the music of fabulous guitars and synths amidst songs of love and Lovecraftian horrors. He wanted to walk among the stars for one night, just one night.

When we talked after that show, I found out a few things about him. His story wasn't too dissimilar from mine. He'd grown up in a small

conservative community, the buckle of the bible-belt as some would call it. Raised to be a good Christian son, the son of a minister no less, and everywhere he went, he had a call of God on his life. Everyone expected him to follow in his daddy's footsteps and attend seminary school to become a preacher.

He broke a lot of hearts when he started wearing black eyeliner and kissing boys. I can only imagine how hard that was, how many scornful looks he'd had to endure, what it must have been like to meet people who used to greet you with smiles and kisses, who now tried to look away from you as quickly as possible, like you were something dirty. It must have hurt, being the only freak in a town full of pressed shirts and ties. But like many of us, he had the Elder Gods.

He could break into the communion wine and lie down on a mattress in his room while Abaddon sang sweet comfort to him, a voice like moonlight glinting off of bat-wings. Jeremiah could ride his bike to the cemetery back and forth, and ignore the hateful looks from people in cars, because the Elder Gods were in his headphones, telling him to ignore the world.

"It's gonna burn," he'd sing along with the band.

It'd taken a month of savings to get him to that show. The bus ticket from his little town cost him a pretty penny, but I can imagine how he saw it, worth anything just to get a glimpse of the band that he'd told me had saved his life.

The club they played was small, and I think I was one of the few who hadn't needed a fake i.d. to get in. There were others who couldn't fool the bouncer's and were turned away. Unlucky ones. Jeremiah was able to make it somehow, even though he'd looked so much younger than his seventeen years, eyes wide and brown and shining, like a child in that spindly, little body. He was someone who still saw magic, but

maybe that was just the atmosphere, the mystery and expectancy of the evening.

The houselights went down, and a low bass-note filled the air. There was a shaking of a tambourine, and a mood of drama was set. We cheered, and the bass began to thunder, thump-thumping loudly, and the drums went off, and the keyboard screamed. Our voices were one and we stomped and jumped, and the lights were still low, it was just the build-up, just the start. The music was nothing more than a rolling wave setting the tone for a storm.

When the music came to an abrupt halt, we knew to be silent. It was such a strain to keep our voices hushed though, especially when an indigo light shone on to the stage to the sound of tinkling wind-chimes. Abaddon emerged into that faint, blue glow. His black pants clung to him ever so tightly, and that black shirt he wore in shreds showed off all the nice bits of his torso, particularly that little line that ran from his pectorals to his abdomen, and those sharp hip-bones. So delectable. His white face was like a skull in the dark, but the prettiest skull that you ever did see, and the way he came into the light was done with such grace and skill. It was more like the darkness was a cloak he was throwing to the ground.

Abaddon held an open palm up to his face and began blowing towards the audience. Swirls of glitter flew from his hands and twirled around the smoke and lights. He was showering us with stardust. Abaddon gave a smile towards the mesh-clad Thoth that would have made a lesser man swoon. Thoth only raised his eyebrows and made a playful sound on his guitar. They were flirting.

The microphone seemed to melt into Abaddon's long slender fingers, like everything it desired in this whole world was to be held by his hand. His voice was breathy, full of soft-loving whispers, but it was the content of his words that kept us from breathing. The words that doomed

us all.

"My," he whispered, "you're all so beautiful."

For many of us, including Jeremiah Baker, this was the first time anyone had ever called us beautiful.

All his life, people had told Jeremiah everything he was meant to do, everything God had supposedly called him to. What a burden. To have to be special all the time, to be perfect. How lonely. Always being expected to save the world, to go forth and study and be vigilant while youth and life were robbed from him. And nobody ever called him beautiful. Nobody ever told him he could play the guitar well. Nobody ever told him the stories he wrote could bring tears to your eyes.

All they'd said was, "God's given you a gift. He's got a plan for your life."

Every bit of it, all designed for some mystical, cosmic plan. Many nights Jeremiah told me he'd cried, because he was so lonely. Many nights, he'd pleaded to nowhere: "Why me? Why does it have to be me?"

Abandoning the "call of God" on his life was the best thing for him. Because finally, someone, even if it was just a rock singer in his theatrics, had called him beautiful. Someone had looked him in the eyes and whispered the thought to the darkness.

Abaddon said it to all of us that night, and we all fell in love with him for it. I think in that moment had he told us all to rush outside and commit violent acts of murder, we would have, because we loved him. Because we were beautiful.

Looking back, I see how brilliant it all was. Abaddon had planned everything. Every action was perfectly executed, and it all started with lovely words that made some faggot-goth kids weep. Make a man feel

pretty, and he'll follow you to hell.

When Abaddon began to sing, it was like the whole world stopped. He could do anything with that voice of his, could make it as clear as glass and smoother than silk, and in an instant that voice could be as sinister as a butcher's knife and twice as sharp. His blood-splattered antics seemed twice as chilling that night, Thoth's mournful guitar melodies more maudlin and soulful than I'd ever remembered. Even Trish and Coi appeared overtaken by the music, her fingers seemed to dance over the synthesizers, and Coi's drums were possessed by primal powers.

I'll never forget the look on Jeremiah's face, and the reason we exchanged kisses at the end of that evening. He was the lucky one. The one who got to taste the lips of chaos, Abaddon's lush forbidden fruit.

Before the fame, Abaddon had a tradition at every one of the shows. At some point during the gig, usually right after he'd chewed the ears off a dead cat or something nasty like that, he'd take a swig of absinthe and smoke a cigarette. He'd ask for one from the audience. We all bought cigarettes, all hoping we'd be the lucky ones who'd offer a cig to our god of chaos.

Jeremiah was the one he picked that night. Jeremiah with his wildly done blonde hair in scattered strings and gelled-up curls, messy eyeliner running down the sides of his face, red lipstick smeared on and smudged. He could have been the poster-child for what it meant to be one of the boys wearing black, the way he looked that night, willowy and frail, but powerful with primal, chaotic energy. He was the essence of darkness and starlight. No wonder Abaddon had picked him.

And the Elder Gods' singer couldn't just take that cig from him. He had to put it in Jeremiah's mouth, and light it there, then get close to his face and exchange the cigarette between them like it was a kiss. The smoke swirled around their heads as Abaddon exhaled, then took

Jeremiah's face as if taking another hit, and the way they kissed made it appear as if Abaddon planned on sucking in Jeremiah too, lips, face, body, and all.

Abaddon pulled away from Jeremiah, leaving him stunned and in a moment of revelatory ecstasy. I tried to keep one eye on the lazily reclining rock-and-roll front man, and another on the willowy gothic child who was now swaying with his eyes closed. No doubt he was trying to savor everything about that moment so that he could repeatedly replay it in his mind for the rest of his life. Abaddon laughed. It was all a big joke to him. Thoth let out a scowling note that shrieked and whined.

There was more grief than sex tonight in their playing. All the sex was in Abaddon. I couldn't hear it at first. I was enjoying the passion of the performance too much, but after seeing that wild kiss, hearing the frustration in Thoth's fingers, I began to listen for it. Coi's drumming had taken on a funereal rhythm as the processions of death-bells ran through the blurbs and bleeps coming from Trish's synthesizer. They weren't in love with the music. The tears could not lie.

Maybe that's great for death-rock, gothic-crap. And when you're a faggot in black lip-liner chanting along the words to a fabulous cover of "Nerves," you don't really notice that something's wrong. Not until it's too late. We were in love with the theatrics.

It was more than theatrics, though. We were seeing the real thing. They glittered for us because Abaddon didn't pretend to bathe in the blood of animals; he showered himself with their insides. All of it verged on the real, and it was sick and profane and beautiful. Even their melancholy felt genuine.

I should have known they were playing their own requiem.

Somehow during the performance, I found myself standing close to the boy who had touched Abaddon's lips. Our eyes met, and we

bonded with a look. I took his little hands in mind and closed them in palms that were nearly twice the size of his. By the end of the night his narrow head was resting on my shoulder. We hardly knew each other then, but for the both of us, this night was special, and it called itself to be shared.

The lights faded, Abaddon bowed out, and then the Elder Gods had cleared the stage, some with surly expressions, but none more wronged and pained than Thoth. I think I saw the word "why" drip from his lips as he snatched his guitar from his shoulder and stormed back-stage. Abaddon seemed to be only shrugging in response. He blew a cruel kiss to us, the beloved audience as he disappeared behind that hated velvet curtain.

We waited in darkness and in silence. The energy left over from the performance left us breathless, hungrily panting for more. Jeremiah's grip on my hand tightened, and we knew. The night was not over. Not yet. There was still more to come. This was just the pause before the grand finale. Abaddon had one last special effect to elicit gasps and screams from his audience.

Somewhere, one of the strobe-lights flickered on. We could hear it going click-click-click-click-click-click, like a madman pounding away at a typewriter. Trish's voice came out in a scream.

"What are you doing?" we heard, and then a loud crash.

A male voice, Coi's. "Oh my god! Oh my god!"

And then Abaddon's gnarled rasp hollered into a microphone and created a chilling echo as his voice reverberated from the tiny club walls, "The Old Ones were, the Old Ones are, and the Old Ones will be. WILL BE."

"Jesus fuck!" came another cry.

There were all sorts of crashes and harsh insidious laughter in that microphone. More screams. We all had grins on our faces, all imagining it as some wonderful charade they'd rehearsed, just for this performance, just for this night.

"LISTEN NOW." Abaddon's voice was like a sinister chant, a ritual he was rehearsing, a prophecy read from ancient texts or channeled from alien-dimensions and God knows what else. "When the stars align and the great old ones arise from their slumber, they will come with fire and blood, to teach men to revel and kill again."

There was a long and pained cry, and then more panicked screams from beyond the curtain.

And we laughed. We fucking laughed, Jeremiah and I. This was all too cheesy to be real. This was a joke, right? It couldn't be anything but.

There's a thin line between comedy and murder and it's in the shape of a burial mound.

Ever see the movie *Psycho*? You should at least be familiar with the stabbing scene with Janet Leigh in the shower. Yeah, did you know they stabbed a grapefruit to get that horrifying squish-squish noise of the knife going into her chest? That's about as close as it gets. Like plunging a knife into a large melon, except that's not grapefruit juice spilling out, it's blood, and you've just hit the pulpy, beating heart.

Our smiles faded when we heard that sound. There was someone crying now, and I think I heard someone vomit. All of it played for us live here at the club.

Abaddon laughed again and said into his backstage microphone, "Blood will run the streets, and men will see THEM in their dreams. The great alien-horde, Olden Ones and Elder Gods, when the stars align."

Someone in the audience shrieked as something like blood seeped

out from beneath the velvet curtain and made a little trail along the stage. It hit a curve and began running off the stage to drip in scarlet puddles on the dance-floor.

There was a silver-haired blur and then Abaddon was perched on top of one of the speakers wearing a sadistic grin. We'd seen him covered in blood many times before, but even Jeremiah shivered in my embrace as we looked up at him, at the stark-white madness in his eyes. Abaddon was like a ghoul tonight as he sat up there; letting out that shrieking, high-pitched laughter; pale-skin illuminated in the blinding flash of that clicking strobe.

"My house is empty now!" he hollered loudly, and then the strobe-light went out for the final time.

The houselights came on, and he was gone. There was nothing, save for that puddle of blood running down the stage, and their instruments, abandoned to the night. Jeremiah applauded out of courtesy. Their grand finale left us chilled and wondering, hoping it was all just a show.

"Gotta be home right away?" I asked him as we emerged from that club, leaving the beautiful people behind. "I'm Ashley, by the way."

He shook his head. "My parents don't even know I'm here. I don't think they care anymore. Name's Jeremy."

What a sad response, I thought, but it suited my selfish needs. Whenever my eyes weren't on the band, they were on him. They were on his delicate throat with every enraptured breath he took. I enjoyed watching him enjoy himself. He was truly taken with the Elder Gods, with Abaddon, and like many of us, harbored not-so-secret sexual desires for the ghoulish singer. I got a voyeuristic kick from watching Jeremiah so aroused, and I felt that if I could just hold on to him for a little longer, that maybe the starlit wonder of the evening didn't have to end.

"Come home with me, then," I said, and then leaned forwards to whisper in his ear. "Everything you touch is glitter."

Those shiny, black-satin lips parted in an audible intake of breath, and I smiled. He was mine. I felt like such a predator, knowing he was probably younger, knowing I was like Abaddon, playing on his naive need to feel pretty, but I wanted him in my bed that night.

"Kiss me under the stars, Jeremy," I told him later, as we stood on the balcony of my apartment, clad in nothing but the same white sheet, feeling the cold of the wind and the night-air on our bare bodies. "Kiss me and make this night forever."

He giggled a bit, and then obeyed. His tongue curled around my lip-ring and tugged it, not hard, but with enough of a gentle pull to cause that sexual sting that I craved. Jeremiah was the perfect lover. He knew where to bite, where to pull, and then where to be gentle. His eye-lashes made butterfly kisses against my thighs.

Jeremiah, it's a crime that night was the first night anyone told you how beautiful you were. That I was the first boy you felt safe with, even though your deft hands betrayed years of experience. I really wish that night could have stretched on, an eternity of darkness with glittering stars in the sky and nothing but love, sex, and murder to taint our perfect world. You'd still be with me, and we'd never know good from evil.

We'd never know the theatrics from the cold and unforgiving sting of reality's embrace.

But time is cruel and the dawn came. I woke up to see Jeremiah sitting naked at the foot of my bed. He wore only an anxious look. The TV was on and I saw before my startled eyes footage of cops leading Abaddon away from that club, cuffs around his wrist. They shoved him into a police car.

ROCK SINGER MURDERS BAND.

Those were the headlines. That was the news.

Jeremiah kissed me, gave me his phone number and his email address and took the morning bus home. I didn't have classes that day so I kept my eyes peeled on the television, watching the extensive coverage of the story wherever I could find it. All the blogs that followed the Elder Gods were talking about it. So many fans were loudly attesting to Abaddon's innocence. They couldn't believe he'd kill his band, his friends, his lover.

I could. Those screams. The look on Thoth's face as they walked off-stage, the uneasy mood that entire performance had been played in. It was an atmosphere that could only culminate in murder, and the murder itself reeked of Abaddon's wild occult passions. The limbs of the band had been strewn around back-stage, blood drawn in elder sigils all over the walls and on the floor. The only body part missing was Thoth's head, sealing Abaddon's guilt in my heart. He always did say that Thoth had the prettiest head. I smoked a cigarette and sat on the toilet while I let all the information run through my lacerated brain.

The thing that I wanted to know was why. I could imagine all sorts of motives, each of them evidenced by a face made at that concert. The look of pain on Thoth's face as he watched his lover make out with a fan, the awkward grimaces passed between Coi and Trish. There'd been a quarrel. Harsh words had been spoken beforehand resulting in the grim energies, and eventually in murder.

But Abaddon was smart. He wouldn't just kill his band, not with such pomp and grandeur. Not unless he knew he could get away with it.

I kept watching the footage of him being led away. I pulled the video up on my computer and zoomed in on his face so I could look at his high forehead, those aristocratic cheekbones and gaunt features. That's when I saw it. His eyes. The calculating look on his face.

An idea formed in my head that began to augment itself over the course of the next few weeks. The trial and the story started to get more coverage, more coverage than I felt was necessary. That story spread almost supernaturally, and by the end of the month, everyone knew who Abaddon was and had a chance to become acquainted with the bleak rock-and-roll music of the Elder Gods.

What was funnier still was the trial kept getting delayed. Backed up in courts, for some odd reason. Abaddon stayed in jail, willingly, almost happily. He greeted interviewers with a charming smile, and a remorseful story of his dead friends.

"They were beautiful, and I loved them," he said during one interview, and his eyes shone. Even without all his makeup, he was still so very lovely, and to hear him talk, it was almost impossible to believe such a soft-spoken creature could do something so heinous, especially to people he loved so dearly.

But that was it. That was how I saw it, saw his evidenced guilt. If he was really so in love with his band, why were his tears so clean? What gave him the ability to be so calm in the face of trial for the murder of his band mates? It was near-sociopathic how calmly he talked about it all, so sure the truth would come out.

The jury wouldn't convict him though. He was becoming such a public figure, so loved and respected, almost pitied. A poet. A modern Byron, a modern Poe. Nobody it seemed but me would believe he killed them, well, besides Jeremiah. Jeremiah came over as frequently as he could. We'd listen to the Elder Gods on tape, smoke, drink, and talk about that night, that murder.

"Really think he did it?" he'd ask me.

"I think so," I'd say and pass the cig to him.

He'd take a puff of it and blow the cutest little smoke-ring. "Think

he'll get away with it?"

"If there's anyone who could get away with murder, it's him."

I loved it when Jeremiah came over. I wanted him so often to stay. Some cowardly part of me kept him from begging him to, but I think my eyes said it for me. *Don't leave. Be my boyfriend, be my lover, my husband. You don't have to go back to them. They don't love you like I do.* Every time he left my door, my hand held tightly on to his. It was always, *don't go*, even though my lips always said, "Good-bye," and never, *I love you*.

We were right, Abaddon was acquitted due to circumstantial evidence. The blood found on his face and hands was fake theatrical stuff. According to forensics, he hadn't touched the murder weapons, a large knife that had been used to stab them, and a hacksaw that had been used to sever their limbs. I remember watching the news and laughing.

"Son of a bitch did it," I said.

And wouldn't you know it, by the time he was released from prison, Abaddon was a household name. People were ready to hear new music from the Elder Gods. He was soon signed to a major record label and near-ready to create new music. That album came out almost overnight, within just a few short weeks of his release, actually.

Those records sold quick. Damn quick. I can't imagine how they wouldn't have with such a story behind their release.

"Yeah? Did you hear? This guy murdered his whole band. Everyone who played on their last album is dead."

What a way to make it to the top of the billboards.

I'll never forget the look on Jeremiah's face when he came over that day their new album came out. *Rodrigo's Lullabies*, it was called. He put it on in my apartment and we listened to it together and had our first

argument. He was so excited for it.

I hated it.

It wasn't the Elder Gods. It wasn't Abaddon, Thoth, Trish, and Coi. It was Abaddon and some in-house studio band. The magic was gone. The song that had the most soul out of any off the new record was a near-obligatory cover of "Paint it Black." I always thought that'd be a fitting song for them to cover, but I'd always hoped it'd be Thoth playing the guitars, not some faceless studio musician.

The worst thing about it was that it had all the style and inimitable sound of the Elder Gods. Even the bleak, dystopian themes were still present in the lyrics. But it was like someone had stolen all the life out of it. The new album bordered on self-parody.

One song in particular bothered me. Maybe it was because I couldn't stop thinking about the way Abaddon had so readily thrust his tongue down Jeremiah's throat. That look of pain and those howling notes coming out of Thoth's guitar. Track eight on the new record, "Let it burn" reminded me all of that chilling moment.

"Baby, I love the haunted look in your eyes,

Don't you know it sends me into shivers

When you shake a___nd quake with fear,

And nobody's gonna save you,

My dear."

And then the chorus:

"Love me, kiss me, fuck me,

And let, let it burn

Hate me, rape me, enslave me

But let, let it burn

Let the whole world burn

They're coming from beyond the stars

And it's all, gonna burn

You're better off dead when they come,

My love."

Those lyrics. I'd always imagined Abaddon making tongue-in-cheek references to Lovecraftian deities as a bit of a joke, satire on religion, you know, post-punk political stuff. But everything else in this song seemed to be about killing his lover, why he did it, and of course, the end. The end of everything. He really believed in it. Abaddon really believed the world--everything--was coming to an end.

A romantic might imagine that Abaddon killed Thoth to save him from the darkness to come.

I was no romantic.

Jeremiah was. He loved the new album. He loved that Abaddon had struck out on his own, and fully believed that the mad-creature had done what he'd done out of love. It made me sick to watch the rapture on his face as we listened to songs like "Let it Burn," and new renditions of "I am the Moth." Love songs laced in bleak, apocalyptic horror. I wanted to slap that lovesick look off his face.

We argued about it. Jeremiah in all his youthful, bratty ways told me I just couldn't understand the new depth of the lyrics. And then, he said something I'll never forget, icy words that became like a tight fist clenched around my heart.

"He's a prophet, Ashley."

I almost laughed. I couldn't believe the words I was hearing. "What

the fuck are you talking about?"

Jeremiah was so serious when he spoke. His hands were literally quivering at his sides. "The world, it's really ending. They're coming. The door is opening, and bits and pieces of them are beginning to slip into our world. It's already begun."

I sat down on my bed. "You really believe this shit don't you?"

His eyes were wide. He had this possessed look to him, and he began shaking. "I know it's true, because, they're in my dreams, Ashley. They're in my dreams, and they're horrible. When I close my eyes I can see them, all the time, and I can see him. He's always there. I feel his tongue in my throat and I'm scared, I'm so scared."

Tears were streaming down his face now. His face was burning red. Bits of yellow-green mucus snaked its way from his nostrils and coated the surface of his lips. I couldn't stand watching him like that.

I brought him down on the bed with me and held him in my arms. "I'm sorry, okay. Hey, it's all right."

"I don't want you to suffer," he whispered, sobbing into my shoulder, "but I don't know how to make them stop."

"Stop what?"

"Singing to me. They have such beautiful voices, and they're living in my ears."

"Who?" I asked. My own fingers started to shake.

He didn't answer, he only continued to cry. He seemed so very young, so very much in need of comfort. I didn't ask any more questions. I just held him tight, held him close.

Of all the times I should have begged him to stay...even writing this I feel heavy hands on my lungs, on my eyelids. I didn't know.

The Elder Gods announced their first worldwide tour, and everywhere you looked you could see Abaddon. It was almost like he was watching you from every poster, every album cover, with black eyes that hypnotized and black lips that wanted to eat you alive.

I kept in touch with the Elder Gods' fan-base, but not as much as I used to, I'd moved on to other bands. I'll never forget when I first saw the footage of the new band members. Ugly things. Short pallid creatures that were almost green with bulging eyes and drooping mouths. You couldn't quite put your finger on it, but you just had to look away. I can't even call them human.

And there were stories. Stories that they didn't speak, save for only in grunts and whistles. There were rumors that anyone who got near them smelt death and decay, the stench of something deep and old. Rotten, that's what they were. Rotted, fetid corpses that looked like fishermen. Mockeries of humanity. The kids ate it up of course, they loved it. Found it hilarious.

I found it depressing, and the more Jeremiah obsessed, the more painful it became. He bought tickets for their concert in Orlando. Spent all his money so the both of us could go.

He came to my door with them, with this wide, excited grin on his face.

I told him I wouldn't go. He begged. I refused. I said we could hang out if he wanted, but I wouldn't go. He said it was important. I wouldn't go. He started screaming at me, and I slammed the door in his face. I blasted music from my headphones so I could drown out the sound of his tiny fists bang-banging against my bedroom door.

After that, I didn't talk to him. He sent me email after email. He called my phone. He texted. But I couldn't, wouldn't look at them. It hurt too badly. I felt like I was losing him, and it was my fault. I hated the feel-

ing I got whenever I looked at his name on my computer screen.

And then it happened. The terrible day and the long, long night.

I got a call from his sister. She was going through the contacts on his phone, finding all his friends, giving them the news, and inviting them to the funeral. He'd slit his wrists in the bathtub. He'd been found wearing his favorite studded bracelet, and *Rodrigo's Lullabies* had been playing on repeat in the bathroom.

I went numb as soon as she hung up the phone. My cell slipped from my fingers and collapsed against the carpet. I looked at it, but didn't pick it up. I didn't move for what might as well have been an eternity. Just stood there, staring at the phone, but not looking at it. My eyes were inside of my head, looking back at every text I didn't answer, every instant-message that made me switch off my computer, and especially that night when I had slammed the door in his face and cut him out of my life.

Somehow, my shaky fingers found a cigarette, but couldn't manage to light it. I fumbled with the lighter several times before giving up entirely. I think I collapsed against the wall then and slid down it. My mouth opened in this ugly anguished expression, but no noise came out. My eyes were closed in pain, but I couldn't make any tears come. I could only hurt, could only feel the vacuum created by his death while my body fought the need to let it out.

Later, I was able to drag myself from my position on the floor to my computer. I logged into my e mail and found the last thing he'd ever sent me. He'd emailed me the day it happened. The last words anyone would ever have from him, he'd given to me, and I'd ignored them.

I wanted to die.

"Dear Ashley,

"You're one of the most beautiful men I've ever met. I think you're even lovelier than Abaddon, but I know you won't believe it. You're too humble to think that, too good.

"Whatever I did to upset you, to make you angry with me. I'm sorry. I've been so confused lately. Abaddon is all I've been able to think about, and I'm frightened of it. I close my eyes and he's there. He's in my dreams. And when I'm awake, all I can do to make the voices in my head stop is to blast that record at full-volume.

"I had a dream the other night and it scared the hell out of me. It was you, you were dying, and I held you in my arms and cried and tried to bring you back. But you wouldn't come back from where you'd gone, the dark had already taken you away. Thoth was there, with his trademark black ribbons in his hair, Trish with her pink death-hawk, and Coi with his fabulous top-hat. They took your body from me and said that there'd be more. There'd be a lot more death. A lot more death when THEY come.

"I know who THEY are. THEY are in my dreams as well. THEY are the ones who have been singing in my ears when I'm not listening to the Elder Gods. You'll see THEM too one day, if you live that long. THEY are coming.

"I couldn't stand the thought of you dying, and that's when I knew what had to be done. You see these thoughts, these pretty voices in my head are calling me to murder, and they're so lovely, so convincing when they say it too. They're the loveliest things you've ever seen, and they're mine. Beautiful monsters.

"And I hate THEM. Because THEY are evil. Because THEY want something from me I cannot give them.

"I will not give you over to them. As much as I love and hate them, I love you more. You were my only friend.

"So, to save you, and to save me, and to keep THEM from having you. I've come up with a plan, and it's a beautiful plan. It's the only way, so don't be angry with me. You cannot stop me. I've thought it through. I've figured it out. There's only one way to escape what's coming, only one way to avoid the horror that is to come. And it will come, and it will be horrible. The lyrics, the songs of death, pain, destruction, and decay, they pale in comparison to the shit that's coming. You've never seen anything like it, no one has, but I have. They've told me, because he kissed me. Because our lips touched and he passed the secrets to me. Such horrible secrets. Men will kill one another. I will kill you. Because THEY ask for it. These things. They're all at once ugly and shimmering and splendid and slimy and horrible and beautiful. THEY are nothing we've ever seen. THEY will rule us and then when we're no longer an amusement, we will be gone, no longer even a memory. We matter not to THEM.

"I'd like to see you one last time before the end. But I'm afraid too. Afraid that I'll give in to their songs, or afraid you'll stop me from doing what I have to. I have to escape the end. I have to escape what's coming. Maybe you'll join me. Maybe we'll meet on the other side of this madness. I hope so.

"I love you. I will love you even as my eyes close for the last time, even after they put me in the ground. My cold, dead heart will love you. Forever. Forever and always, even after the world ends.

"Goodbye."

The tears came then. I collapsed on to the bed, thinking only of the insanity that had possessed him, of love I should have given, and of his favorite band, the band that brought us together and tore us apart, the Elder Gods. For some reason, perhaps out of dedication to his memory, I put on that album I hated and listened to it. I put it on repeat. I memorized every lyric to every song.

It wouldn't bring him back though. Beautiful boy, it would never bring him back.

For his sake, even though I miss him, I'm glad for that.

Jeremiah was smart. He got out early. He got out before the murders really started to pile up. Surely you've seen the papers, surely you've seen the news. It's bad out there, isn't it? People. Ordinary people. They're rushing from their homes and strangling their neighbors in the streets. Unexplained acts of violence from otherwise sane, rational human beings. Everywhere, people are turning into monsters.

And I can only think of the words Jeremiah sent to me in that email. The words of beautiful, ugly creatures singing to provoke men to murder. The chaos he promised the world, that Abaddon forewarned us of early on.

The dreams we all have now. Don't lie. You've had them. You've seen THEM too. Their eyes are beautiful, aren't they? Ultraviolet colors, colors that can be found nowhere on this earth or in the skies, and shapes that we've never seen before. They're radiant, and abhorrent, but they have the loveliest voices.

Jeremy, you were right. I see him too. That gaunt face, those black lips, the aristocratic brow. Long fingernails for tearing and clawing; long teeth for biting and chewing. Abaddon. He's as close to one of THEM as a human can possibly get. He's their messenger on this earth. He's foretold their coming and laid out the red carpet for their welcome. You were right when you called him a prophet, and now I can't get him out of my head.

Oh, how you must have suffered.

I'm sorry.

The madness comes, the blackness, and then...oblivion.

We were optimistic. We were best friends. We were drunk and high. We sneaked into a mansion that overlooked the Hudson River and huddled together in the attic, watching the night in the Catskill Mountains, lit simultaneously by the constellations and blinking red lights. Nestled between our bodies were the ghosts of all the others, people who, dead or alive now, used to be with us but for various reasons have vanished. Four of us remained. Music bellowed from a dilapidated building on main campus, and a horn sounded from a barge on the river. The echoes reached us and then sunk down into the bay like water chestnuts in the mud.

Mary held a lamp close to her face; she looked so pretty and honest that we wanted to kiss her. Anaya startled us by shouting 'Security!' We darted down the winding staircase behind her. As we followed Mary, the light bounced, illuminating our eyes, red faces, bare shoulders, and feet. We crouched in the shadows and waited to hear the night guard's boots landing on the hardwood floor. We made our way into the night, hollering just to say that we'd been there, and then running toward the place where trees meet meadow.

* * *

"Party in the woods behind Braiding Hall," an anonymous male voice whispered to us.

There were markers leading the way along an overgrown railwaybed that led to the tree house above the bay. We tried not to think about that place, because if we did then we would have to think about Kathy Shoels, who we last saw climbing the tree house overlooking the

water. She had balanced on the rotting wood, her feet shaky, but her gaze steady. She died away from us, two winters ago on a family skiing vacation.

Someone with a sharp sense of smell would detect honeysuckle on the breeze, but all we could smell was the familiar mixture of pot and the sediments of the Hudson river. Bongs lit the wilderness like street-lamps leading the way to a bonfire. Tall reeds concealed our bodies. We could feel each other in the space between the overgrown foliage, but all we could see clearly were each other's eyes.

The circus began. There were clowns standing three meters tall, balancing on stilts. There were lions handing out raffle tickets, which read *Surrealist Circus 1999*, and on the back, in bold letters, *Beware the future*. We laughed at the inscription, but our laughter sounded like choking. Next, the drums began to echo through us, and it felt like we were having the same dream. In this dream we were running so fast that we sucked the air in greedily and huffed it back out in gusts. Our speed made us light, and we smiled because our feet were no longer touching the ground. Fire dominated our vision. We stared into the blaze, and our movements became slow and soothing. Our bodies were so close it was hard to know where one of us ended and another began.

Soon a horn sounded, and security found us in our chaos and told us to beat it, the show was over. They dumped buckets of water over the fire to squelch it. Instead of ending quietly and fading away, the flames turned to ashy splinters and gray smoke so thick we couldn't see more than a foot ahead of us.

Mary became lost in the smoke. She walked toward the open field, when she heard a familiar voice calling her name. Blindly, she ran to her friend in the clearing. He stood with some girls she didn't know. They were all laughing and slipping in the mud, and she realized they had been waiting for her. He swung her up out of the smoke, and we

caught a glimpse of her body, tan legs standing out beside white shorts and sneakers. For a moment she looked the way she did as a child, fly-away short hairs waving to us from behind, as she ran and leapt in near darkness.

"Mary!" we cried.

We were the insiders. We were the smiling faces and intertwined bodies of twenty-one-year-old girls. We lived in dorm rooms in adjoining buildings on the north end of campus. We ate together. We drank together. We got good grades. Sometimes we packed into vans in the middle of the night and drove to Washington, D.C., to stand in protests. Sometimes we would ride the train to NYC to party for the night. When we did we'd stay out all night and then get back on the train and return in the morning. We didn't believe in God or the President. We were anti-war and Pro-Choice. We were for gay rights and against hate crimes. We didn't believe in a collective heaven or hell. We knew that suffering was worsened by solitude, so we tried never to be alone.

Some of us were the leaders, like Anaya, and Emily Lyon, and some of us were not, like Arlo and Mary. Some of us were easy to get along with and then there were the others.

The outsiders were the girls and boys who attended our parties, shared tables with us at Jag, the cafeteria, and worked in our study groups. We liked most of them, but we had our limitations, like Liza Darling. Liza always seemed like she was just getting over being sick. Her face was thin with raised cheekbones, slanted jaws, and puffy lips. Her eyes were a warm shade of brown, but she kept them narrowed as if to say, *I'm not that easy*. Her hair was soft and red like the tail of a well-kept horse. Her voice was jarring; it rang with a youth she didn't otherwise seem to possess. Her father and brother both killed themselves. We knew she thought about suicide a lot. Even so, Liza was hard for us to like. She always had a way of hooking up with our boyfriends and exes

before we were done with them.

We were close to loving Liza, before she lost her mind. After she fucked Matthew, Emily Lyon's boyfriend, Emily started calling her a rabid animal. We flinched at this because we remembered a time when things were different. Freshman year we all used to cram into Anaya's room, Liza too, and take turns reading chapters of *Bridget Jones' Diary* out loud. Liza was at her best when she scrunched up her nose and said 'tits pervert'. We knew that Matthew wasn't important enough for us to stop liking Liza, but Emily Lyon was.

There was a period when we avoided her completely; she didn't seek us out either. It was after the blowout with Emily Lyon. Liza had retreated to her room with a bottle and an old razor. Mary's boyfriend at the time, Avi, found her and drove her to the hospital. She returned to school after two months, during which she had rested at home and 'become stabilized.' We didn't ever talk about that.

* * *

Since the beginning of our senior year Liza had been showing up at the borders of our lives again. She was sitting at our table a few days after the bonfire and she pointed out that Mary was missing from the group. We hadn't seen Mary since the party.

Liza said, "She must be missing, call the cops!"

We disregarded Liza's comment, but we did start looking through Mary's window, to see who she was with, to see if she was okay.

Mary was engaged to be married to a man who lived in another state. She hadn't started to wear the ring yet. Instead it was still sitting in a red box in the top drawer of her dresser. She looked at it sometimes and wore it when her fiancé, Joe, was visiting.

A new guy named Gabe lived next door to Mary. We recognized

Gabe as the one Mary ran off with a few nights before. Gabe and Mary shared a co-ed bathroom. We watched her getting ready to take a shower, applying lip gloss and tousling her hair. He told us later that he watched her too sometimes, in the shower, shaving her legs slowly, draping a towel across the frosted glass and pretending not to see him standing outside the door or in the next stall. When she cut herself with the razor he watched her hold her leg out of the water and press the fragile place with her thumb.

Gabe and Mary brushed their teeth together and listened while his roommate fucked his girlfriend in the shower. They laughed mostly, and she told us she couldn't remember what they said to each other, but she couldn't forget the tone of his voice. She was sweating constantly due to the heat and the tension of what she didn't do with him.

"When are we going to meet your new friend?" we asked.

"Which friend?" she said, and we were seething. How could she pretend we didn't know?

"He buys pot from my dealer," Emily Lyon said. "Gabe, right?"

"Where did you guys go after the party?" Anaya asked.

Mary said she didn't remember and quickly changed the subject.

* * *

The old building was flooding again. It's a good thing her bed was a loft and didn't touch the rain-soaked floorboards or the mouse shit that lined the corners of their rooms and the edges of their unlit desks. The wet floor and the rattling of the unsecured windows sent her knocking on his door late at night. He opened the door and let her into his bed. They laid together, and he began to grip her small body next to his. Without really *doing* anything, without speaking, it started slowly. She pressed herself into him and bit her tongue. He was on the outside and she was

on the inside facing the wall, closing her eyes as his hand slid under her shirt. Suddenly, she pried herself away, almost falling out of the bunk bed, saying 'Sorry', and stumbling into her room. When she laid down in her own bed she listened to the sounds of minor chords wafting into her room from a neighbor's stereo, and the angry stampede of raindrops on the roof. She was shaking, from what, excitement?

The next night we watched Mary and Gabe lying together in her bed, laughing at the proximity of their faces to the ceiling and the sounds of mice eating their crumbs.

He said, "Would you be jealous if I had sex with other people?" He was fidgeting as usual, leaning his knee up against the ceiling and then straightening it out again.

"What's stopping you?" she said.

He watched her with a smart grin.

"Can I have sex with you?"

"You're such a little shit."

"Then you won't be mad?"

"I'm tired, can you close the door behind you?" she said, pulling the sheets closer to her body, not wanting to get up, wanting sleep to come quickly. She did not want to think about him walking down two flights of stairs, unzipping his fly and putting his dick in someone else's mouth. She laid still, under the heat of the covers, until she heard his door open and shut and the creaking of his bed as he lowered himself on to the mattress. We didn't have to ask her about what we saw, she usually told us about these things afterward.

The next day someone suggested we go swimming. We didn't think it was safe but we went swimming anyway, in the Hudson River, between the uninhabited islands called Mayan and Turtle's Neck. Anaya

and Mary leapt off slippery rocks screaming and landing side by side in the deep pool, disappearing in the icy black water and then reappearing at the base of our toes, pinching and pulling us into the water. We left our clothes on the shore but we couldn't find them again when we emerged in a different place.

"It's the ghosts of Mayan Island, boy ghosts who took them!" we said. But we knew it was probably just Gabe who hid our clothes in the bushes behind the rocks.

We stayed until the forest was dark. We walked hand in hand, depending only on the glow of the moon and the whiteness of each other's eyes to navigate our way back to the trail.

There were ghosts on Mayan Island, we were sure of it. Native Americans were massacred in that place and we were walking in their decomposed bodies. We painted our faces with ash and poisonous red berries, that we found but didn't eat, and we sang wordless songs for the ghosts.

"Protect us," we said in our most spiritual voices. "Let us be unbroken!"

Gabe touched each of our faces and said, "You're crazy, crazy girls!"

Then he lifted Mary onto his back and ran ahead of us with Mary's screams lifting into the thick leaves. He tripped on a rock poking out from the ground and they fell into a pile of leaves and mud with his body over hers. He touched her hair and pressed himself over her laughing, and she struggled, also laughing. As we caught up to them Mary was crawling out from under him, muddied, an underground creature coming for us.

"Just a hug, can't I get just a little hug?" she said, holding out her slimy brown arms to us, pretending not to watch Gabe, who was smok-

ing now in the shade of an oak tree.

After Gabe went back to his dorm we sat together on a futon drinking whiskey, and Mary asked if we wanted to fuck Gabe because she said she couldn't.

Two nights later Arlo met Mary and Gabe in his room to watch a movie. The three sat up in his bunk watching a small screen. Arlo understood the plan. Pressing her back into the wall furthest from Mary and Gabe she didn't say a word. The last time she had sex was two months before, with her ex, Johnny. He was tall and skinny like Gabe, but he had an unruly Jew fro and skin so pale he could have been a vampire or a computer technician. Gabe was warmer, better looking and easier to get along with than Johnny, or Avi, or Mathew.

It stung Mary to climb down from Gabe's bed, watching her nervous friend, feeling Gabe's hand gently on her back. 'Eres una bromista,' he whispered.

"Good night," she said. There was a smile scrawled across her face.

"I'm not in love," she said, as she lay in semi darkness with her thigh leaning against the cool wall. The light from the street below filtered in through her blinds and created a shadow of her body on the wall. She tried to fall asleep before she would be able to hear the sounds through the wall they shared, of the man we shared. This was not easy for us but we tried to understand because, after all, we all wanted the same thing in the end.

Gabe was easy to like. His eyes were mischievous like those of a child who snatched his mom's purse and smoked a cigarette he found there. His hands were so eager that they'd have to be holding something, a pencil, a joint, a cup of coffee, just to keep from shaking. If it wasn't for the small gap in his front teeth he could have been on the

cover of a magazine. We all liked Gabe, except for Emily Lyon. She didn't trust many guys. She said you especially couldn't trust Latino guys.

To this Liza laughed and said, "That's not what Latino guys are for."

Liza was always trying to make us feel naive, especially about dying. She talked about dying as if it was a real possibility, at a time when the rest of us couldn't even imagine turning thirty.

Liza and Mary were in the same Shakespeare class our senior year. Mary was in her room studying for their midterm when Liza told Mary a story that was meant to scare her. It was about the night she found her brother.

"I thought it was another joke. When I realized that his feet weren't touching the ground, and his eyes couldn't change, and he didn't cry out 'gotcha' and punch me in the gut, that's when I knew that his whole life was a joke. A big fucking lie." When Mary didn't say anything, Liza smiled apologetically, but her pupils were black holes as she said, "Drowning is less dramatic, but more romantic than just hanging. And then of course, there's the chance you'll never find me."

Mary couldn't respond.

"Did I ever tell you that Avi said he loved me?" Liza said, breaking the silence.

Avi had been Mary's first college boyfriend. He wasn't a soul mate. He wasn't the kind of guy to say, 'I love you.' But he was the first person she ever had sex with.

Mary bit her tongue so hard she almost cried out. She confessed to us later that she was thinking, 'Why do I have to be nice to you? Why don't you finally kill yourself, if you want to so bad?' And then it was as if Liza really was one of us, she must have been able to read Mary's mind, because she said, "And you thought *I* was fucked up."

It was around this time that we began to lose control. We became friends with Gabe's roommate, who had been expelled from his two previous universities before coming to our school. He knew how to make the best 'found materials' water bong any of us had ever seen. He surprised us one night with his creation. He had stolen a number of tools from the backyards of professors and the science lab: a water hose, which he cut into four, eighteen inch pieces; wire, which he bended to fit around the filter; netting for the filter, and a soda bottle. The guys were beaming.

"I can't believe we didn't get caught," Gabe's roommate said.

"Just wait until you see it," Gabe said. His eyes traveled to each of our faces to see who was the most into it.

We giggled, and our hands were in our back pockets or touching our faces. All of a sudden we were running, chasing Gabe and his roommate into the woods behind Braiding Hall, but further, beyond the wild roses and barberry that scratched our shins and ankles. We stumbled over skunk cabbage, which gave off its promised odor, and we trampled the round golden faces of marsh marigolds. We felt the stinging nettles bursting against the backs of our knees, burning and aching until we splashed into the stream, cooling our bruises and cuts in the black water. It was getting dark under the hemlocks and spruce trees. We were ascending a hill when we saw a light ahead of us. There, between two hills, between two evergreens there was the most ridiculous sight.

A small fire was being stoked by a couple of hippy kids who looked like they'd never stoked a fire before in their lives. Further back from the bonfire a hammock was suspended between two oaks. On either side of the hammock stood a sofa for three and a loveseat. We recognized them as the furniture from the common space in one of the freshman dorms. We laughed, picturing Gabe and his roommate hauling the sofas out of the dorms during the night and then into the forest, through thorny

brambles, over hills and stream beds to this place, our place. The boys called it 'the fort.'

We took turns smoking from the homemade bong. We had never felt so secure in these woods. Then, we saw a reddish girl approaching us on the couch. She was small and flexible and she squeezed in between our bodies. We felt her silky hair and smelled her adrenaline (salty and mercurial) before we saw her eyes and her face. Liza.

"Do you really want to party?" she asked.

Anaya was inhaling from the bong next to Gabe, and their eyes were meeting over the smoke.

"What did you bring?" Mary said, her eyes darting from Gabe to Liza and back.

Liza produced a handful of shiny, colorfully wrapped chocolates.

"How much?" Emily said.

"What is it?" Mary said.

Liza shook her head at Emily as if to say, 'It's nothing.'

Gabe was the first to accept her offering. Then, Emily, Anaya, Arlo, and finally, Mary.

That was the night Gabe had sex with Anaya on the loveseat at the fort. That was the night we lost Mary in earnest.

We were not used to hallucinating, Mary especially. An undetermined amount of time went by when someone realized Mary was gone.

"Mary?" we called, looking behind the couch, examining the boys drinking beer and lurking by the fire.

"Don't panic," Emily said, easing herself up.

We wandered slowly through the darkness, toward the stream call-

ing Mary. We saw the frame of a short young woman, a statue rooted to a slab of rock on our side of the stream. Was it a ghost? Was it Mary? We checked our step, and we didn't call out to her. We didn't make a sound.

The figure was facing the stream, intently watching it. We followed her gaze into the water. There, in the stream, perched with one leg over either side of a log, was Mary. We realized then it was Liza watching Mary from the shore. Mary had her back turned to Liza and didn't appear to realize anyone else was there. Her back was convulsing erratically. We couldn't do anything except wait and watch Liza. Her head tilted to the side as if she was considering what to do next. As if there was no hurry. We almost leapt forward and rushed to Mary's side, but it was as if we couldn't move our legs.

Approaching with ease, Liza stepped from the wet leaves on to a stone, then to the log, speaking to Mary in a soothing tone. Mary wasn't angry or even surprised to see Liza. Liza sat behind her on the log and let her arms encircle Mary's. She didn't resist. Her sobbing ceased, and we retreated slowly into the forest, away from them.

We didn't talk about what transpired that night. When Liza joined us at the Jag it seemed like nothing had ever happened. Mary didn't look her in the eye. She talked about Anaya fucking Gabe, but she didn't refer to Liza's act of kindness.

From then on we took turns fucking Gabe. We didn't fuck him for more than a week or so at a time, and we never overlapped weeks. We didn't have threesomes or do anything immoral and we never fell in love. Gabe told each of us that we were beautiful and that he loved us in his own way. Sometimes he talked about Mary.

"Why doesn't she want me?" he said, when he was with each of us, and we told him that she was crazy. She was wrong. She was getting

married after graduation.

"That's a goddamned lie," he said. "It's sick. I think he's just some asshole she made up. There's some other reason she doesn't want me."

We removed his glasses and looked deeply into his eyes. We stood up on the bottom bunk so that we could fuck standing up; we hiked up our skirts and he couldn't resist us. When we came we were all thinking about her. It's something we had in common.

While we were eating a late dinner at the Jag, Liza had the nerve to sit at our table. We were discussing plans for a party we were having, and of course we had to invite her.

"Is Gabe coming?" Liza said.

"No, he's been sick with the flu," Mary said.

Liza tilted her head and looked down at Mary. There was a twinkle in her eye that she would get when she was about to say something nasty.

"You're so motherly," Liza said.

"Who, me?" Mary said.

"Just think about it, in our little group each of us stands for something," Liza began. And then, pointing to us one at a time she continued, "Anaya is confidence. Arlo is shyness. Emily Lion is pissed and territorial. But you, you are just what your name suggests, Mary. Pure and sweet. A good mother."

Mary didn't let her finish the word mother. "And what do you stand for Liza?" she said, when what she wanted to say was 'And you're the slut.'

"I think you all know what I am," said Liza. "Trouble."

* * *

Liza was in a confessional, conspiratorial mood that night. As the party wore down to the core crowd she told a story that we wouldn't easily forget.

"You want to know the best sex I've ever had? I worked in a library when I was a sophomore in high school, and I got to know the janitor. He was this big black guy in his thirties." While she was talking she was sitting behind one of the outsiders, her legs spread around his torso and her hands pressing down into his back.

"One day I hid in the supply closet waiting for the librarians to lock up. I was really nervous you know, I didn't know if he was coming soon and if there was maybe an alarm that would go off if I moved. I waited as the lights went out, one after another, until it was completely dark. I began to have second thoughts. That's when I would hear the keys rattling on his belt. *Don't be scared*, I'd say, not to surprise him. And he would laugh. He had this guttural laugh. That's how it would begin. He would make me take my clothes off, real slow, but he would keep his uniform on until I was laid out on a table, completely naked. Then he would press me down with one hand while the other worked on his own clothes. Finally, he would let me kiss him and wrap my legs around him. My favorite place to do it was propped up on the shelf in the section called *Oprah's Book Club*."

Only when she finished her story did she stop rubbing the boy's back and turn to look at Mary, who was washing the dishes.

"So, has everyone here had sex with Gabe, except for the guys I mean?" Liza said.

We all looked at each other quizzically.

"Mary's not having sex with Gabe. What about you, Liza?" Anaya said.

"Actually, I don't know what everyone sees in him. Although I guess it must be hot when he speaks to you in Spanish. How do you say, fuck me, please, in Spanish?" she said.

Emily rolled her eyes. Arlo looked down at her slacks. We were all waiting for what Mary would say. It was an unspoken rule, even though the insiders could have sex with Gabe, we didn't ever talk about what we did or didn't do with him.

"Too bad he's not a janitor or you might have a chance with him," Mary said to the dishes.

"It's too bad he couldn't make it tonight. Mary's less uptight when Gabe is here," Liza said, tilting her head and putting her arm around Arlo affectionately, or because she was losing her balance, we couldn't tell which.

"Everyone get out," Mary said, throwing her hands up, flinging soapy water into the air.

Reluctantly we left. Mary stared at the wall until she seemed to forget where she was, but the mirror found her and she shrieked. She looked *mean*. She called Joe and told him she was scared. Joe assured Mary that he would be there for her forever. She asked, "What about right now?"

We couldn't have known what Liza did when she went back to her dorm that night. We didn't bother to follow her because she wasn't one of us.

Liza haunted Mary's dreams. In her dream she was dancing with guys and girls, drinking and having fun, and Liza was watching with a knowing glare. She leaned into Mary so that Mary could feel Liza's breath on her neck. She whispered into Mary's ear. She sounded urgent, but Mary couldn't make out what she was saying.

* * *

The next evening we met at the Jag to discuss plans for Gabe's twenty-first birthday. We were all invited. Mary was too preoccupied to think about excluding Liza. At dinner we asked why she let Liza find out about the party, and she said, "I talked to Joe last night."

"Are you crying?"

"Something will come between us," she said.

It was then that we began to understand. Soon there wouldn't be parties in the woods or on rooftops, and there wouldn't be fields crowded with bodies and friendly smoke and someone calling our names. One day, we knew, we wouldn't exist in the same way.

* * *

We didn't see Mary right away because the bar was crowded. She spotted us first.

"Thank God you're here," Mary said, putting her beer down and hugging us. Her eyes were smiling, and her cheeks were red. She looked like herself. She was wearing one of those crazy outfits of hers, short skirt with leggings and bug eyed glasses.

"Happy birthday!" Liza said, and kissed Gabe on the cheek, awfully close to his mouth. Gabe laughed. Gabe was always laughing, always moving. We watched Mary's eyes narrow and twitch.

"Rematch?" he said to Mary and Liza, holding up three darts.

"What's she doing here again?" Mary asked, as we walked into the next room to the dart board. Liza was on Gabe's left and Mary was on his right. For the first time it occurred to us that Liza and Mary could be related. Their eyes turned downward at the edges and their lips were fleshy. They had both parted their hair down the center, and they were both not nearly as happy as they would have appeared, to an outsider.

The game was close. Mary finally won with triple eighteen. Gabe held up a glass to the winner and began what appeared to be a toast.

"I love this chick," he said.

"As you all know, I'm crazy about Mary. Ok, ok I know when we first met I just wanted to get in her pants, but after all this time I've gotten to really know her and I like her more and more each day."

"Aww," Liza interrupted.

"Thank you all for coming out tonight!" Gabe said, and threw a lanky arm around Mary's waist.

After a long night of drinking something changed in our stomachs and in our minds. Maybe it was just the alcohol working, but suddenly we had the feeling that something wasn't right. We looked to the one of us who was sober enough to drive, and her brow was furrowed too. She was watching Liza, who was taking shots of tequila and then slamming the glasses down on the bar. Mary was watching Liza with slanted eyes.

"I think we'd better get going," we said.

As we were saying our goodbyes and piling into the car the only ones who were still inside were Mary, Gabe, and Liza.

"Are you coming, Mary?" we asked.

"Of course," she answered, but her eyes were on Gabe, who was going outside to smoke a cigarette.

"He shouldn't drive," one of us said.

"And she certainly shouldn't," another added, nodding at Liza, who was sitting sleepily on a barstool with her legs spread so that we could see her pink underwear and narrow thighs. Mary took the last seat in the Jeep.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Anaya asked, but no one answered.

"You're not going to drive, are you?" we asked, turning to Gabe.

"It's no problem," he said.

Next, Anaya said to Gabe in Spanish, "Are you taking her (Liza) home with you?"

"No way," he replied emphatically in Spanish, so that Liza wouldn't be offended.

She asked one more time, and he responded 'not at all,' and laughed that sweet laugh we all knew so well, and shuffled his feet nonchalantly.

* * *

Mary put her head on Arlo's shoulder as we drove back to campus. She inhaled Arlo's scent, a mixture of shampoo and the Phillies we had smoked. She closed her eyes, almost relaxing. Even so, she couldn't help but think that Liza was right about something. The car came to a halt and we piled out.

"What are you going to do?" we asked Mary, as we walked her back to her dorm.

"About what?"

"Gabe."

"When we see you guys together..."

"I'm going to marry Joe."

"Mary, who are you kidding?" we said. We wanted to say 'You're crazy! Why do you have to be so special? Why do you have to get married to someone we don't even know? Who do you think you are?' But we didn't say those things because Mary was important to us.

"You're the ones who are sleeping with Gabe," Mary said.

"Not anymore."

"Then who is he sleeping with now, damn-it?" she said, more to herself than to us.

"He really loves you."

Mary squeezed our hands. "Good night," she said, and we kissed softly.

Mary went back to her room alone, and she didn't feel us lingering at the window. She imagined how it felt to have Gabe's arm wrapped around her, like it didn't belong, and that's what made it feel so good. She wanted to get up, but suddenly she couldn't. She couldn't move her legs; she couldn't even raise her head. At first she panicked, but then it passed. All she felt were the cool sheets against her forehead. Before she fell asleep she thought she could hear Liza. Her voice was laughing and shrieking at once, like when she was telling the story about fucking in the library. Mary couldn't help but think: *Liza is brave. She knows something the rest of us are afraid to admit.*

When we found out Liza fucked Gabe we were almost happy. Gabe laughed when he talked about her, he said she was wild, that she fought hard and cried. We told him not to call her again.

Things were never the same between us after that. When Liza came to the table we pretended she wasn't there. When she knocked on the door we turned out the light and pretended to be sleeping. When Mary asked what had happened we said,

"We didn't want you to find out, but we can't keep it a secret any longer. Liza fucked Gabe on his birthday."

What had come over us we didn't know.

Liza appeared at our sides as usual. She was there for everything.

She said, "Can I talk to Mary alone?"

We watched Mary, she looked like she was about to cry.

"What's the big deal?" she said. "You don't own Gabe, do you? What about Mary, do you own Mary too?"

We ignored her but she didn't go away.

She waited patiently and approached the door when she thought we had left, but we had not.

She got in Mary's face as Mary unlocked her door.

"What's the deal with your friends?" she said. "You know, they said it would be okay for me to go home with Gabe. They told me I should."

"You knew better," Mary said.

"I didn't want to go through with it," Liza said. "I thought we'd just make out or something, but he made me do it."

Mary didn't say anything. She was staring straight ahead.

"He's a real asshole, you know that?"

She closed the door on Liza.

"You think you're so special, Mary, but you're not!" Liza cried.

When Liza left, Mary began to cry.

She punched the wall that stood between her room and Gabe's and cried until she heard his key in the door.

She waited and counted to twenty. Her fingers closed. Her nails dug into her palms. She had her arm raised and her fist was drumming on his door, meeting the chipped paint, which flaked away. She saw his glad face. She hit him, again and again with clenched fists, to no effect. When he spoke his voice was so low that we couldn't understand.

"Is it true?"

He shook his head.

"Did you? Is it true?"

He spoke in slow words, making her understand, but we couldn't hear what he said, and she forgot as soon as she heard them. It was as if there was a sound much louder that was drowning him out.

"Do you feel better now? Do you feel better now that you've fucked them all?"

His face twisted into something that she had not seen before.

"You're the one who did this, not me," he said.

"Anyone but her. Anyone," she said.

"There wasn't anyone else," he said.

"I wish it were me." Her body went limp and she let him catch her because her feet and her legs and her arms couldn't be trusted.

* * *

We watched these things and more until we couldn't bear to watch any longer. We stood up shakily, bracing ourselves against the concrete wall, praying she couldn't see us, and skulking away as quietly as we could manage. Our legs were stiff, and our feet had blisters. We were covered in dust and hitchhikers. Suddenly, we felt old, tired. We wanted somebody to scoop us up, carry us home, and tuck us into our beds. We wanted to let ourselves fall asleep, not forever, but for a while. As we walked away from the windows, away from the door, we didn't speak. We didn't have to. The pavement was wet and grainy under our feet, and the lamps were beginning to glow and reflect little balls of artificial life into the bay. The paths along the river were muddy and nearly impassable at this time of year. The tide had gone out, and the water chestnuts were poking their thorny heads out of the mud, pressing their hollow bony shells into the balls of our feet through our flip flops. The wa-

ter chestnuts were an invasive plant; they multiplied by the thousands until they were growing across the entire surface of the water. They did not allow the sunlight to go beyond their fleshy tangled masses. Without light or oxygen everything below the surface perished.

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Fits and Fainting Spells

Mrs. Pilford despised Dr. Thigpen's waiting room; it was small and narrow with no windows and two rows of metal chairs facing each other. The floor was covered with green tiles and the walls painted the color of a cardboard box. The magazines were old and torn, some of them bearing ugly stains as if they had been used in the operating room during a very messy operation.

She made a face at the young Asian nurse to let her know she was there, *on time*, for her appointment and took a seat in an end chair next to an artificial tree with ancient cobwebs among its leaves. She was in no mood to sit and wait, and she hoped the doctor was not going to waste her time with some emergency or other that had nothing to do with her. Doctors seemed to think that patients had nothing better to do than sit and wait all day long. Such a thought made her harbor very ugly feelings toward Dr. Thigpen, who she had never liked anyway. He had broken red veins in his nose and was missing the end of his little finger on his right hand as if it had been lopped off by a small, vicious animal with razor-like teeth. She could see it happening.

She studied the NO SMOKING sign on the opposite wall on which somebody had written in block letters the word PUSSY. Her eyes inevitably came to rest on the couple sitting underneath the sign.

The man was pale, had no eyebrows to speak of, and wore round glasses. His hair was the same color as his skin and stood out all over his head like tiny quills. The glasses and hair—and the absence of eyebrows—made him look like a ventriloquist's dummy. The woman

leaned near to the ventriloquist's dummy and whispered in his ear behind her hand. She was a large-boned woman with a wide face and a profusion of dyed red hair piled on top of her enormous head. Her fingernails were painted red-brown to match her hair, and she wore gaudy rings on every finger except her thumbs. Mrs. Pilford immediately noticed the similarity between the woman and a circus clown.

Realizing after a minute that Mrs. Pilford was looking at her, the clown woman smiled and nodded. "How are you today?" she asked pleasantly, showing horse-like teeth and pink gums.

Mrs. Pilford nodded back and managed a tight little smile but didn't speak. The clown woman, she was sure, was a talker, and she didn't want to encourage her. She picked up a dog-eared copy of *Fishing World* magazine from which the cover had been removed, and pretended to be engrossed in its contents.

"We've been sitting here for almost an hour," the clown woman said with a little laugh, "and I'm starting to get slap happy from boredom."

"Who are you talking to?" the ventriloquist's dummy asked, as though coming out of a daze.

"Why, I was talking to this lady sitting right across from us who just came in," the clown woman said, pointing at Mrs. Pilford. The ventriloquist's dummy looked at her over the top of his glasses and bared his teeth as if with a sharp pain.

"Oh, *hello*," he said. "I didn't know we had company. Are you here to see the doctor, too?"

"I think Dr. Thigpen is just the *niciest* man, don't you?" said the clown woman. "He has the most *soothing* bedside manner. I think bedside manner is very important in a doctor, don't you? I mean, well, a doctor can go to school for years and years and learn everything there is

to learn, but if he doesn't have *bedside manner* he just isn't a very good doctor, is he?"

"Um," Mrs. Pilford said, which could have been taken for a yes or a no.

"My husband here has an enlarged heart," the clown woman said. "And he's only *sixty-two* years old! *Sixty-two* just isn't that old anymore, is it? I've heard, though, that if you have an enlarged heart there are certain things you can do to make it—your heart, I mean—go back to its normal size, so I guess an enlarged heart isn't as bad as some things. I mean, we're all going to end up with *something* that's going to make us die, aren't we? None of us can live forever."

"I haven't given it any thought," Mrs. Pilford said, eyes on magazine.

"What are you in for?"

She looked up for a moment, thinking about how to answer that question. She didn't want to tell the clown woman she had been having fainting spells at odd and inconvenient times, but she thought some kind of answer was warranted. "Time for a checkup," she said, which could mean anything. She said it with what she hoped was an air of finality to try to discourage the clown woman from asking more questions.

"It's always a good idea to keep a close watch on things, isn't it?" the clown woman said.

"That's how I knew I had an enlarged heart," the ventriloquist's dummy said. "It was just a routine physical exam. I didn't know there was anything at all wrong with my heart."

"And now he isn't able to work anymore," the clown woman said.

"I never felt better in my life," the ventriloquist's dummy said,

"and now they tell me if I keep on working I might die in harness like an old work mule."

"He's a high school teacher," the clown woman said, "or anyway he was before he quit. He taught biology and history. Now, you wouldn't think that being a teacher would be all that strenuous where it might kill you, but, believe me, some of those high school kids are holy *terrors*. They're as bad nowadays as Al Capone or Machine Gun Butch. They're nothing like we were when we were that age."

"I'll take Al Capone any day to a hormonal teenage floozy in a tight sweater or a pubescent, pimply-faced greaseball," the ventriloquist's dummy said. "They take everything right out of you. Take your heart, your soul, and your humanity. And, if putting up with those *animals* in the classroom isn't bad enough, you've got the school board watching over you every minute so they can find something to disapprove of."

"I think he's *glad* to have an enlarged heart so he doesn't have to put up with it anymore," the clown woman said.

"I'd rather die than go back to that."

"Now, me," the clown woman said, gasping for air, "I have *fits*. You can't put too fine a point on *that*. I've had fits most of my life, for as long as I can remember. The bad thing about it is I never know when I'm going to have a fit. One minute I'm fine and the next minute I'm in the middle of a fit. I take medicine for it, but that doesn't mean I won't have a *fit* any minute."

"Are you going to have one *now*?" the ventriloquist's dummy asked.

"Oh, you! Everything is a joke with you, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. Not to put too fine a point on it."

The Asian nurse came out of the inner door to the office and

looked around for a minute as if trying to find something she had misplaced. Mrs. Pilford hoped she was coming out to say the doctor was ready to see *her* now, but the nurse went back inside without saying a word, slamming the door behind her.

"What are these people doing?" the clown woman said. "If I have to sit here too much longer, I'm going to lose the ability to walk."

"The doctor must be taking a nap," the ventriloquist's dummy said. "There's no telling what those people do when you can't see them. He might be working crossword puzzles. He don't care how long we have to wait."

"Do you have children?" the clown woman asked Mrs. Pilford, changing conversational gears.

"Two," Mrs. Pilford said. "Grown."

"I have a grown son from a previous marriage," the clown woman said. "His name is Robin. He's paralyzed from the waist down. He was shot by a policeman in the execution of a crime."

"I'm not his father," the ventriloquist's dummy said.

"We're going to visit him when we're finished here. He's living in a home, but he's only twenty-seven. It seems funny to see him sitting there with old men in their eighties and nineties. I'd take him out of that place and take care of him myself if I didn't have fits all the time."

She began to cry, and the ventriloquist's dummy rolled his eyes and groaned.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Pilford said. She sympathized with the clown woman but she had her own troubles. Her own son was serving a ten-year stretch in state prison for kidnapping and extortion. Her daughter, who lived over a pizza parlor in a slum-ridden part of the city, had two children out of wedlock, with another on the way.

"What about *your* children?" the clown woman asked.

"My son lives in another state and travels in his work. I don't see him very often. My daughter is a college student, majoring in sociology."

"And I'll bet she makes good grades!" the clown woman said.

"Top of her class," Mrs. Pilford said. She felt a little guilty for lying, but the clown woman had no business asking her about her private life. It's something that *just isn't done*.

"Is your daughter married?" the clown woman asked.

"No," Mrs. Pilford said curtly, hoping to put the subject to rest.

"I'll bet she would just love to meet my nephew, Jackie."

"Oh, no!" the ventriloquist's dummy said, covering his face with his hands.

"He's a really sweet kid but so shy with girls. He lives with his mother—that's my sister—and he never goes anywhere or meets anybody. He's almost thirty and he's never even been with a girl. Isn't that terrible?"

"He's thirty-five," the ventriloquist's dummy said, "and how do you know he's never been with a girl? Did you ask him?"

"Do you think your daughter might be interested in meeting him?" the clown woman asked.

"Well," Mrs. Pilford said, "she's pretty busy with her schoolwork, and now she's working part time in a hospital. She doesn't have much time for socializing."

"She sounds *perfect!* I'll give you Jackie's phone number, and she can call him whenever she wants."

"Don't try to be a matchmaker for people you don't know," the ventriloquist's dummy said. "You need to stay out of other people's busi-

ness."

The clown woman opened her mouth to answer, but before she could get the words out the young Asian nurse opened the door a few inches and looked out into the waiting room. She was about to close the door again, when the clown woman saw her and called out to her.

"Oh, miss!"

"Yes?" the nurse said, as if surprised to discover anybody still there.

"What's keeping the doctor? We've been waiting for a long time. We had an appointment."

"Oh, meant to tell you. Doctor had to leave. Not feeling well. Caught a flu at hospital. Not be in for several days. Please call for next appointment."

"We've been sitting here all afternoon and we didn't see him leave."

"Left by own private entrance at back of building."

"Well, how about that guy?" the ventriloquist's dummy said. "The next time I see him, I'm going to have to restrain myself to keep from punching his face in."

"Very sorry," the Asian nurse said, and then she disappeared into the inner office to avoid further discussion.

Mrs. Pilford was starting to feel light-headed and weak as she left the doctor's office, no doubt from the frustration of not being able to see the doctor and from being asked probing questions by a stranger. She was just opening the door to get into her car, hoping she would be able to get home by herself, when the clown woman whistled to her from across the parking lot.

"Yoo-hoo!" the clown woman screeched. "We were just going for a cup of coffee. Would you care to joint us?"

"No, thank you," Mrs. Pilford said. "I've got to go home now."

"We were having such a pleasant conversation."

"I've got a headache and I think I'm going to be sick."

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she slumped over, did a rolling turn against the side of the car, and fell to the ground unconscious.

* * *

"Well, how do you like that?" the clown woman said. "The lengths to which some people will go to refuse an invitation!" She knelt on the ground beside Mrs. Pilford and looked into her face. "I think she might be dead. I don't think I ever saw anybody just drop dead like that before."

"If she's dead, it's probably because you talked her to death," the ventriloquist's dummy said.

The clown woman lightly slapped Mrs. Pilford's cheek. She fluttered her eyelids but remained unconscious.

"She's not dead," the ventriloquist's dummy said. "I can see her breathing. We'd better call somebody."

"Here, help me get her into the car," the clown woman said.

The clown woman went to her own car, an old blue Cadillac parked about thirty feet away, and pulled it around, stopping beside Mrs. Pilford's prone figure. Together she and the ventriloquist's dummy heaved Mrs. Pilford onto the back seat, head first, turning her on to her back. The ventriloquist's dummy threw her purse in with her, closed the door and got into the front seat. The clown woman jerked the car out of the doctor's office parking lot onto the highway.

"Where are we taking her?" the ventriloquist's dummy asked. "To the hospital?"

"No," the clown woman said. "Anybody could take her to the hospital. I have something better in mind."

"If you're planning on killing her you can count me out. I'm not going back to jail."

"No, I'm not going to kill her," the clown woman said. "We'll just have a little fun with her."

"Why do you want to do that? She seems like a nice enough woman."

"She's snooty. I don't like her. She thinks she's better than me."

"She is."

"She thinks her daughter is too good for Jackie."

"She is too good for him. Anybody would be."

"I'm going to teach her a lesson."

The clown woman drove down toward the river, past some abandoned brick buildings and over some railroad tracks, to a part of the city that was, for the most part, abandoned, except for a thriving bum population. They deposited the unconscious Mrs. Pilford on a bench not far from a pile of refuse, within sight of the river. She wouldn't freeze to death, since the weather wasn't cold enough, and a policeman would be sure to come along and spot her and, taking her for a drunk, offer her the assistance of the city.

The ventriloquist's dummy was going to leave Mrs. Pilford's purse with her, but the clown woman told him to keep it in the car. They would keep the money that was in the purse to compensate them for their wasted afternoon and throw everything else away. A woman like that

was sure to have some money.

* * *

When Mrs. Pilford came to, it was to a sound she didn't recognize—a sound like an oboe or the trumpeting of a distant elephant. She opened her eyes and sat up. She didn't recognize anything she saw, so she thought she must be dreaming. She leaned her back against the bench and looked out at the river. A barge was moving slowly upstream, against the current, blowing its horn in a fog that seemed to have come up from nowhere.

Allen Kopp lives in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, with his two cats, Tuffy and Cody. His fiction has appeared in Skive magazine, Midwest Literary Magazine, Superstition Review, Black Lantern Publishing, A Twist of Noir, Abandoned Towers magazine, Bartleby-Snopce, The Legendary, Danse Macabre magazine, Best Genre Short Stories Anthology #1, Berg Gasse 19, ISFN Publishing, Santa Fe Writers' Project Journal, and many others.

Coal-black horse. Snorting, pawing. Black-painted fence. Gathering storm clouds. Rain. Scared kid, apple in hand. Older brother yells something. Kid, frightened, thrusts apple forward. Horse teeth snatch it up and tear a piece of finger. Kid yelps. Brother points and laughs. Cradling his bloodied hand, the kid turns and runs.

That's all Charlie could remember. The scene played over and over. The horse became blacker, the storm clouds darker, and the horse's bite more painful. His brother's laugh echoed in his head. When Charlie realized he had fallen down the ancient well, he thought his brother was nearby and would rescue him. Now, nothing. Nothing but rain. Rain and pain. Charlie sucked his fingers.

The upper edge of the well was three feet beyond Charlie's reach. He had tried to grab it during the first twenty minutes, now he just sat in the mud. Thunder pounded into his ears from above, the brick walls capturing and holding the sound. Water trickled down the walls of the well, jumping from the crags, making little waterfalls in Charlie's little world.

He sat on several concrete blocks that had succumbed to the pull of time, falling off the walls and filling up the bottom of the ancient well. The water seeped between these and began accumulating underneath. Soon, Charlie's bottom was soaked. Then, his thighs. The water was rising quickly.

Charlie stood and screamed for his brother. He pounded the wall with a piece of brick. It crumbled. There was no response from

above.

He called out a few more times, his voice husky against the falling rain and growing thunder. Tears streamed down his face, mixing with the rain water. Hopeless.

Charlie sat again, mindless of the water. He felt under him for something else to bang the wall with, something louder, more substantial. Broken edges of concrete, bits of wood, various other articles. An insect began crawling up his arm. He swatted it away and kept searching. Doing anything was better than doing nothing.

Charlie remembered jumping over the well opening last summer. It became a dare to jump with their eyes closed. Charlie did it, but not before his brother called him a chicken, a sissy, and every other insult boys keep around for just the right occasions.

Last week, his brother had tried to push him into the well. They had been in a big fight—Charlie had told their mother about his brother stealing a bike—and Charlie wanted to make up. His brother agreed at first, then he tried to push Charlie down the old well for revenge. Revenge is sweetest when the victim doesn't know it's coming. Charlie's brother was an expert at revenge.

Once, when they were shooting birds with Charlie's pellet gun, his brother told him about the local tribe of Indians, Chippewa or Mohawks, who had been robbed by a local farmer. The farmer, his brother said, had taken the Indian's squaws and sold them up town for a profit, and the Indians wanted revenge.

"They came back, Charlie, the whole troop of them and killed him. They scalped him, Charlie. Do you know what that is?" Charlie didn't. "They grab your hair and chop it off, skin and all, 'till just the skull is left! You know what happened to him then, Charlie? They cut his body into pieces and threw it down the well!" Now his brother's voice replayed

itself in Charlie's mind. He shuddered at the thought of sharing this place with some farmer's chopped up body.

A snake fell in from above. Charlie grabbed at it and smashed its head with a rock. He thought he might be able to use its body as a sort of rope or something, so he stashed it under some blocks for safe keeping. He yelled some more and used the rock to pound the brick walls again.

The blood from his finger ran down to his elbow and his finger hurt something fierce. Every so often he popped it in his mouth. The blood tasted like a mixture of pennies and salt. He believed if he didn't keep the wound clean his finger would become infected and useless for climbing out. That was his only escape now, he reasoned.

The well began to fill up. The water table underground was increasing; the old well was often filled with water after a rain. Charlie had sunk many a rock into its watery depths in the hopes of killing some fish. Sometimes he used a fishing pole: it had the added possibility of pulling up treasure. He did find an old boot once, so he knew it worked.

Charlie's rock banged a hole in the wall, right into the hollow masonry block. Several pieces of brick cascaded down. His finger scraped on an edge and he dropped the stone. Sighing, he knelt down into the water to find his rock again. The idea came to him to knock holes in the masonry every so often for footholds. With enough holes he could climb out. He wished he'd thought of it sooner.

The rain pattered his head and a raucous blast of thunder sounded overhead.

Charlie's hand stretched under the water, now knee deep, and felt something round and slippery. He pulled in out of the water. It was a skull. The sky was getting dark, but a flash of lightning showed his fingers were deeply embedded in the eye sockets. He had never seen a skull

before. The lower jaw was missing and its nose was gone. Charlie shrieked.

With deep regret, he realized his brother had been right. It looked like the farmer got what he deserved. Charlie examined the skull with curiosity and set it up in the hole in the wall. It stared back at him, its buck teeth hanging over the edge of the red brick, accusing him, haunting him. Charlie turned the skull to face the wall. He didn't want to offend the farmer's spirit, but he couldn't be jeered at either.

"Charlie!" His brother's voice called from above. Charlie could see his outline against the flashes in the sky. His form also broke some of the downpour on Charlie's head and shoulders. "Charlie! I've been waiting for you to climb out. What have you been doing down there? Mom's going to be worried sick."

"Nothing. I'm just stuck!" Charlie yelled back. Another crash of lightning and thunder.

"I'll pull you up, but you gotta promise me you won't tell."

Charlie wasn't surprised at the catch. It was his brother's way. "Tell what?"

"You can't tell mom how you got in there."

Then Charlie remembered. He had been pushed. His brother had shoved him and he fell in. The horse had taken the apple, bit his finger, and Charlie ran. And his brother followed and pushed him in the well. His wicked, hateful brother.

"Why'd you push me?"

"I dunno. Are you gonna tell?"

"No. Hey, there's a skull down here. And a snake."

"Cool." Charlie's brother reached down, grabbed his hand, and

pulled. Charlie kicked his way up and pulled on the wet grass when he could reach it. Then he was out. He scrambled to his feet. The fat rain drops plastered the hair to his forehead. He eyed his brother.

"Why'd you push me in?"

"I told you. I dunno." He shrugged. "It was fun." His brother wasn't sorry, but he was looking at Charlie with a new air of respect. He said, "What'd you do down there the whole time? Was it scary?"

Charlie started walking in the direction of home. His brother followed at his heels. "No, I wasn't scared. I was digging a tunnel to our basement when you came back. I'da been there in a few hours."

"Cool. You found a skull?"

"Yeah. It had tomahawk marks all over it. Found some treasure too. Lotta coins and stuff. We'll get it later."

"Yeah, later." The boys passed the horse, its ebony hair glistening in the rain. The horse sneezed and stomped the ground. "Look, I'm sorry I pushed you."

"That's okay," Charlie said. "No biggie."

The brothers passed through a wheat field, muddy and fallow. The clouds broke apart in the eastern sky and the rain stopped. A black-bird swooped down, squawking at the boys. They broke into a run for the pellet gun, for revenge.

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Keith G. Laufenberg

Cain and Abel

- 1 -

THE BROTHERS

Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right.

—*Old Testament: Proverbs*, 20. 11.

So great is the strife between brothers.

—*Ovid, Metamorphoses*. Bk. i, l. 60.

The younger brother hath the more wit.

—*John Ray, English Proverbs*.

Cain and Abel McCain were brothers—Cain was nine years old and Abel was six—and their father was a Methodist minister, who preached the gospel of fire and brimstone and tolerated no foolishness from either of his two boys. Their mother was a kind and gentle woman who had died in the childbirth of her third child, who also perished. It was a Sunday and Abel, for the first time in his life, realized there were black people living nearby his home, just outside of Birmingham, Alabama. He was just coming out of church and noticed two little black boys playing alongside the road. They saw him chewing something and asked him if he had anything to eat. Well, little Abel had been given some candy by his Sunday School teacher and, knowing that it said to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' and to 'be kind to others,' little Abel took out all his candy and was sharing it with them when Cain came

upon the scene. He ran over to where the three toddlers were chewing on their candies and swatted the confectionaries right out of the black boys' hands. He turned then, not on them, but on his brother Abel—and barked, “Abe-bee, what the hail's wrong 'id jah. These here is niggahs, don't jah know that? Daddy ain't gone like you playin' wif niggahs eithah.”

Little Abe looked over at his two newly-found friends and saw the hurt looks on their faces and felt bad for them. He studied his older brother for a few seconds. “Why, what's smatter Cain? We're jus' playin' an', an-ah I, I was sharin' my candy wif dem—you know, like—like it says to do.”

Cain stared at his younger brother and a sneer alighted upon his face. “Like it says to do? Where it says to do that—Abel?”

“Why, in ah bible Cain, in ah bible,” Abel replied, smiling.

-2-

THE FATHER

No man is responsible for his father. That is entirely his mother's affair.

—Margaret Turnbull, *Alabaster Lamps*, p. 300.

Few fathers care for their sons, or at least, most of them care more for their money.

—Lord Chesterfield, *Letters*, 27 May, 1752.

Abraham McCain stared at his two sons and wondered how they could be so different, one so quick to pick up on the realities in life and the other so trusting and slow. Of course Cain was three years older than Abel and maybe that was what accounted for it, he couldn't be sure, but sure of one thing he could be and that was Abel had better not be caught again playing with who he had been caught playing with, or there'd be hell to pay. He sat opposite his six-year old now and smiled at

him. "Son you can see that nigras cain't be ah-soch-ated with, don't cha?"

Abel McCain didn't see but he looked at his father and nodded anyway and said what he knew was expected of him, what he had been taught to say. "Yes sir—I guess so?"

"Now son, you don't sound so sure about that. Now, I tol' you thay-yet you-uz right about doin' unto others as yah'd have 'em do you but lemme tell yah son, nigras is not like us. Don't jah know what it says about Sodom an' Go-more-ah in ah bible son?"

Little Abel knew nothing about Sodom and Gomorrah. "No sir."

"Well son, see they-uz sin-ahs, jus' sinnin' all night long in Sodom'n Go-more-ah and lemme tell yah son, the Lord, well he done smote 'em, he just smote 'em all—din' he Cain?"

Cain McCain—nine years old, smiled and nodded solemnly. "He sho' id Pappy—he smote all ah 'em niggahs."

Abel looked from his father to his brother and wondered what they were talking about. "Pappy ... ah—"

"Yes Abel?"

"What's smote?"

"Son, smote means that the good Lord done kilt 'em—he kilt 'em all."

"He did Pappy?"

"Yup and you know why he kilt them Sodom-mites? Cause they was so filthy and dirty and they-uz all sinners and Abe-bee?"

"Yes Pappy."

"Abe-bee, they-uz all nigras ... yup ... they was—"

"They was Pappy?"

"Yup Abe-bee, they sho-nuff was nigras—all ah 'em—dirty, filthy nigras!"

-3-

THE COMPANY

Thou shalt not steal; thou'lt never thus compete

Successfully in business. Cheat.

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil 's dictionary: The Decalogue revised*.

Their father died in 1905, at the age of fifty-five, of a massive heart attack, but not before he had taught both his boys all the necessary rudiments of southern hospitality, southern ways and southern connections, which in Birmingham, in the late nineteenth century, meant influential people and money or—to be more succinct—influential people *with* money. Now Birmingham, Alabama was one of the very few places on this planet where man had discovered that all three of the necessary ingredients needed to produce iron were all located in one spot, as coal, iron ore and lime all existed under the earth in Birmingham. And so it was that many entrepreneurs tried their hand at going into the steel mill business and the cast iron business, manufacturing the steel and iron needed in the everyday lives of a town's inhabitants—such as water pipes and their numerous valves and fittings, fire hydrants, fire trucks and on and on, almost ad infinitum.

Many had tried and many had failed but the McCain Brothers had been a success almost from the start. Both Cain and Abel McCain had known John Sanders from their very childhood, as—after all—he was a parishioner in their father's church, and he was also the president of a splendid university nearby, where both McCain boys graduated with engineering degrees and had had no trouble in raising the necessary

funds, or rather the necessary people with the necessary funds, in order to start their own foundry and make enough money to live in the splendor that the stockholders and board of trustees had for many years and that they had always known they would. Abel was named as the CEO and Cain was the president of the company—McCain Industries, Inc.—as successful a business as the town had, employing over a thousand men by 1905, the year of their father's death. Both of the brothers were members of the Ku Klux Klan, a necessity in Birmingham, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, for any businessman who wished to stay prosperous and in business. The McCain brothers' first and primary goal in life was to stay in business and to stay prosperous, and they competed viciously with every other foundry in town, running all of them but one—Tennessee Coal & Oil—or T.C.I.—either out of business or into such a state as to allow them to produce only on such a miniscule level as not to affect McCain Industries, in the least. They were also in cohorts with William 'Big Bill' Connors, the Chief of Police, who made sure that the 'convict lease' system was put to work, exclusively, for McCain Industries. The convict lease system was a system that used the convict 'black work-force' to mine coal, for the brothers' mines and work in their foundry, for almost nothing—and a literally strike-proof work-force. Then their only competition, T.C.I., was bought out—by U.S. Steel.

-4-

BIG STEEL

The greater the power the more dangerous the abuse.

—Edmund Burke, *Speech*, House of Commons, 7 Feb., 1771.

Power gradually extirpates from the mind every humane and gentle virtue.

—Burke, *A Vindication of Natural Society*.

The brothers stood transfixed, as their lawyer read to them

the account of the takeover, by U.S Steel, of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. They wanted to know how much J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie had paid for the company, and when they heard, both men almost had a simultaneous heart attack. "Tharty-fave mil-yun, Geez-zuz Wil-um, hail we'd ah paid thay-yet, shee-it, hail they own half the day-yum min-ull rats in Bah-min-ham."

"They do indeed Cain but you must understand that Teddy had a hand in this."

Cain McCain stared at his lawyer, William Benche, and then at his brother. "The President...the President of the You-naghted States—"

"Of course—Morgan's front men gave him a scare that he'd risk a stock market crash unless he allowed U.S. Steel to purchase T.C.I. and of course at their cut-throat price."

"What? Gates would never allow it?"

"Gates' syndicate was owned by a brokerage house on Wall Street."

"Shee-it and now ah guess we might's well roll over and play dead then, huh? I mean how the hail we gonna compete with the bastards?"

"I've got Buxley's word that they're going to hold production in Birmingham."

"What? Why would they do that? And, who's Buxley?"

"Cal Buxley, the corporation's Cee-E-Oh—he says Morgan and Carnegie jus' wanna make sure they own their nearest competitor. You know, they want their Pittsburgh and mid-western mills to do more business without thinkin' bout Birmingham. They're already layin' off a quarter of their employees and makin' production cuts that'll boost our revenue by at least fifteen percent. Boys, McCain Industries, Incorporated is

now the only big mill in town, except 'course for Big Steel but they ain't got our connections or our know-how—not down here—down here boys we're gonna be King!"

Cain McCain smiled at his brother, Abel, who smiled back, as he lit a stogie and held up his glass, as Cain poured himself and Benche a drink and raised his. There was enough ivory flashing to make a Tarzan movie when Cain proposed the toast, "Here's to McCain Industries and may we rule forever and ever."

Abel McCain smiled at his brother and, ever the minister's son, nodded and rasped, "Amen brother—Amen."

-5-

CAIN'S DREAM

If there were dreams to sell,
Merry and sad to tell,
And the crier rung his bell,

What would you buy?

—Thomas Lovell Beddoes, *Dream-Pedlary*.

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side.

— J.R. Lowell, *The Present Crisis*. St. 5.

Cain McCain tossed and turned in his bed and awoke suddenly. He sat up, and the silken sheet slid off his body. He wiped the sweat from his brow and stared straight ahead, wondering what the dream could mean—or if it even meant anything at all.

In the dream, McCain Industries' foundry was being melted down, in a huge blazing fire, the fire so hot that it could virtually melt the

steel mill into liquid, a molten mass of red-hot material flowing down upon Cain and Abel and their lawyer, who also held a quarter of the stock in the company, Cain and Abel holding fifty-one percent and the rest being held by private shareholders. It was coming at them at an abnormally fast rate of speed, and Cain searched the flat landscape for a mountain, a mountain he knew wasn't there, but he searched for it anyway, as the molten mass so resembled a conglomeration of lava, brimming over with steel beams and other various and assorted parts from their foundry, that he envisioned a volcano had erupted, from somewhere nearby. But, Birmingham, Alabama was as far away from a volcano as one could get and Cain, having grown up there, was well aware of this fact, even as he looked up and gasped at the molten mass almost upon him. Just as it enveloped him, Cain saw another foundry had already taken McCain Industries' place, a huge, even larger mill, and the sign identifying it was ten times larger than theirs had been: the seven letters were huge and emblazoned and he just made them out, U.S. STEEL, before springing awake.

He reached for the telephone and began to dial his brother's number, then glanced at his watch and slipped the phone back into its cradle. It was five a.m. and he didn't want to awaken Abel, whom he knew liked to sleep until eight or nine in the morning, whereas he was an early riser, usually getting up by no later than seven a.m. He walked to his bathroom and swished a handful of cold water on to his face, then towed it off. He dressed quickly and went downstairs to wake his servants—it was time, he now decided—because of this spur of the moment, frightful awakening, that they got up two hours ahead of him, instead of just one.

-6-

ABEL'S DREAM

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,

Why should I strive to set the crooked straight.

—William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise.* 'Apology.

Behold, this dreamer cometh.

—*Old Testament: Genesis*, xxxvii, 19.

Abel McCain tossed and turned in his bed and awoke suddenly. He sat up, and the silken sheet slid off his body. He wiped his brow and stared into space, wondering what the dream could mean, or if it meant anything at all.

In the dream, the men at McCain Industries were assembled in a large group, in the yard, just in front of the foundry's main office, with their families surrounding them, and were proposing to Cain and Abel ideas about a safer work-place and better pay, citing the numerous injuries and three deaths, all within the last year that had occurred in the foundry. They couldn't feed their families on the meager wages that McCain Industries paid them. They had taken a vote and wanted to unionize McCain Industries, saying it would mean a safer work-place and better working conditions for the men and more production for McCain Industries, as they would be willing to work harder if they could be allowed a living wage. Abel was just about to say that he was in favor of the unionization, when Cain sneered at the group of employees and hissed, "Ah you crazy? Why should we pay you anymore money when there's plenty ah men willin' to work in 'is town. Why, yah'll work the way we tale y'all tah work, or yah'll not work at all, huh Abel? Huh Wil-um ...?"

William Benche, standing next to Abel, nodded his assent, even as Abel couldn't bring himself to say a word, but it wouldn't matter a wit, for his brother turned towards the group of employees and barked, "Anybody wants to work, get to your station, anybody wants to unionize raise yah hand and step forward."

Jonathon Lee, an employee since the company had formed a

decade ago, raised his hand and stepped forward, then opened his mouth to say something, when Cain nodded to a group of men standing just behind him. A loud explosion greeted his signal.

Abel gasped when he saw what had happened—the men were all armed, with rifles and shotguns, and they had blown Jonathon Lee's body to smithereens. His wife and two small children began screaming and wailing, and suddenly, the place erupted in gunfire, as the employees scrambled for cover and were gunned down, along with their wives and children. Abel ran over to his brother and wailed, "Cain, Cain, what have you done?" and it was then that he woke up.

-7-

THE WOMAN

The woman Soul leadeth us Upward and on.

—Goethe, *Faust*, ii, 5 . (Bayard Taylor, tr.)

Ah, there's many a beam from the fountain of day

That, to reach us unclouded, must pass, on its way,

Through the soul of a woman.

—J.R. Lowell, *A Fable for Critics*, 1.1425.

Her name was Andrea Schaub and Abel McCain was struck by her openness and plain delight at playing with the small black children—after all this was Birmingham, Alabama and it was 1907. He had gone to church, for the first time in more than a few years, and knew that she was the daughter of the preacher, Daniel Schaub, a German immigrant who had known Abel's father but who preached a very different kind of Christianity. Whereas his father preached fire and brimstone and damnation for those sinners who didn't obey the scripture, Daniel Schaub preached forgiveness and redemption and the golden rule. He stood staring at the scene of the young woman and was caught off guard

when a voice reverberated inside his eardrum: "I say Abel—how are zoo this fine day?"

Abel McCain turned to see the preacher, Daniel Schaub, a few paces behind him, smiling and extending his hand. Abel shook it and smiled. "Ah, yah know how it is Preacher. Say, 'at's yah daughter, ain't it?"

"Sure is. Zoo know her?"

"Ah, no but do you think it's a good idea fah her to be, you know, playin' with the niggahs?"

"Vell, I don't see vy not—aftah all it doesn't say anyzang in zah bible zat black children should not be played viz, yah?"

"Well, ah, ah-er, I guess not, ah—"

"—I haven't seen zoo in a long while, yah, Abel?"

"Ah well, business, you know?"

"Yah-Yah biz-niz, sure but church zoo mus' not forget. Zoo mus' to look after zah soul too, zoo know? Ah, my daughter. An-dray-ah, do zoo know Abel McCain?"

"No, hello Mr. McCain, how are you? I am An-dray-ah."

"Andrea. Yes. Abel McCain." They shook hands, and the preacher smiled.

"So, I leave zoo two, I mus' to see my flock off." He hurried off to where several people were waiting for him.

Abel nodded at Andrea. "So, I ah, I didn't know that you, that ah-er, that the preacher had a, um, daughter?"

"Oh well, ah-er, well, I've been away at school."

"School—ah ... you mean college?"

"Yes. In Pennsylvania," she replied, smiling.

"Ah, Pennsylvania then—you're done then?"

"Yes, yes I am. I graduated in June."

"Ah, that's nice, real nice." Abel McCain stared at the young woman; he didn't know any female college graduates, in fact, he didn't know there was such a thing, until now, that is. A young black boy ran up to her and said, "Miz On-dray, Miz On-dray, we wanna pway some more."

Abel McCain, member of the local Ku Klux Klan, and not used to seeing black people, unless they were in convict garb or waiting on him or another white person, stared at the small boy and gasped slightly, a gesture not lost on Andrea Schaub. "Is anything wrong Mister McCain?"

"Ah-er-um, ah no, no I don't think so. Boy looks familiar, that's all."

"Oh? It's Joe Brown's son Joe Junior."

"Joe Brown?"

"Why yes, he's a tenant farmer for John Shelton."

"Ah." Abel was about to say something when a large black man, dressed in a pair of blue-jean bib-type overalls that most farmers wore, walked over and called to the boy, who ran toward the man and jumped into his arms. The man shook his head at the woman and stomped away, with his boy in tow. She turned towards Abel. "He doesn't think it's safe for me or his boy to be seen playing together."

"Maybe he's right."

"Oh, I mean you zink, ah-um think so. I try to get rid of my accent, you know?"

"Oh well, it's, it's ah, kinna different anyway, I kind ah like it myself."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, rah, I do, yeah." Abel McCain, twenty-nine years old and the CEO of a corporation that was the second biggest in the valley of blast furnaces that was Birmingham, and who had dated innumerable women in his short time on earth, was at a loss for words with this one and wondered idly if it was because she had as much formal education as he did. Then he shrugged his shoulders and smiled lopsidedly. "So, what do you do now? I mean, I guess you got a beau huh?"

"A beau ... a ...? Oh no, no—I help my father with the children—I'm a teacher you know?"

"Oh, oh really ... umm—how, ah, nice, yeah—yeah, well, you know, if, if ah, you'd ah maybe like to go out one night, why, well, that is, I know of some fine ah, night-spots, ah restaurants, you know, maybe have dinner with me. Ah, one night ...?" Andrea Schaub smiled coyly and studied Abel McCain's face, as he added, "You know my father was a preacher too?"

"Oh yes I know, my father knew him."

"Oh yeah, that's right he did, didn't he?"

"Yes."

Abel McCain stared at the woman for about thirty seconds before she said, once again, "Yes, Mister McCain."

"Ah, ah yes. You mean—"

"Yes, I would like very much to go out with you, one night maybe."

He said nothing but his smile told her he was glad she'd accepted his invitation.

BORN AGAIN

Why do you hasten to remove anything which hurts your eye, while if something affects your soul, you postpone the cure until next year?

—Horace, *Epistles*. Bk. I, epis. 2, 1 . 38.

We shall all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye.

—*New Testament: I Corinthians*, xv, 51 , 52.

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again

—*New Testament: John* 3:3

It was a huge wedding, anyone who was anyone in Birmingham, the Magic City, in 1907, attended, even several black families, as the Baptist Preacher, Daniel Schaub, the minister who performed the ceremony, and, not coincidentally, also the father of the bride, demanded that they be allowed to attend.

They were kept to their side of the church but, even still, several of the grooms' friends, movers and shakers all, and known, vicariously, throughout the Magic City as the Big Mill Mules, were all milling around, in the foyer, as the bride and groom left the church and made their way to the reception hall to be held in the grooms' own mansion, located just over Red Mountain, in Mountain Brook. It was so named because it was upwind of the smoke-spewing mills and built beside a clear-water spring brook; it was a fifty-room monstrosity, which in no way resembled a house that a single man lived alone in, with a half-dozen servants at his beck and call. The Big Mill Mules, all six of them, and all profiting handsomely through McCain Industries, stood like a wall and blocked the passage of any black person who attempted to usurp any white person at the wedding of their rightful place by going ahead of them, or even walking anywhere near them. Needn't they have worried, for there was-

n't a black man or woman in Birmingham—in 1907—who had not been made painfully aware of what their station in life was and how they must conduct themselves, if they wished to stay alive, in the Magic City. The Big Mill Mules congregated in the foyer and talked loud enough for most of the black families to hear, as Bret McGuire smiled at Cain McCain and barked, "Wha' ah all these nigras doin' hyah Cain? Has that Abe done changed that day-yum much? Why the hail he go to tha-yet Baptist Church 'cross the tracks any-day-yum-way?"

Cain McCain shrugged his shoulders—his brother had indeed changed since that fateful day, only three months in the past, when he had ventured into the Baptist church on the wrong side of town, across the railroad tracks and downwind of all the smoke-spitting furnaces. It was the woman who had changed him, Cain and the others were certain of it, for they all knew the woman was nothing but a nigger-loving do-gooder, who taught niggers in a school-room, across the tracks. And, as if that weren't bad enough, Abel had gone and got (re) baptized, telling Cain that he was born again, just like it said in the bible and he was a new man. Hell, Cain couldn't, for the life of him, understand this behavior from his younger brother; hadn't their Pa, a minister in his own right, baptized them both when they were kids, and hadn't he taught them right from wrong? And, as Cain well knew, by verse and chapter, as did all his Big Mill Mule associates, white was right and black was wrong and that's all there was to it. And then Abel telling him that he would no longer consent to being a member of the Ku Klux Klan and that he was going to do away with the convict-lease system and was also going to treat his mill employees better, give them a raise and lower their hours to only fifty or sixty a week. 'God, can you imagine that,' Cain could still remember thinking, 'now how the hell were they supposed to compete with U. S. Steel with that mentality?'

The bridegroom danced with the bride, as the band played on,

in the huge ballroom of Abel McCain's home. Most of the guests were sitting in groups of two and three, or more, and feasting on any of the numerous dishes that McCain's servants had prepared for the occasion. At one table, Cain McCain sat with John Shelton, Bret McGuire, Big Bill Connors, William Benche and Barry Chambliss, all members of the Klan, and all Big Mill Mules, living off of the sweat and labor of all the convict-slave-workers and mine and mill workers, mostly black, and all 'little mules,' in comparison. Big Bill Connors stared at Abel and his bride and barked, "Nace-lookin' gal yah know fellas, even if she e-yuz a Gaw-wah-dah-damn nigga-lovah—Ah mus' say."

"Yeah, but she's gone likely be the ruination ah us. Hail, Cal Buxley kept his word, for the furs' two months down hyah anyway, but now Big Steel's cookin' up they'ah fah'nuses and liable to steam-roll all ah us."

Bill Benche nodded at the speaker, John Shelton. "Yeah and we'd better be ready—is there been anymore ah that talk from Abel about shuttin' down our convict-lease, Cain?"

Cain McCain stared at his brother, on the dance-floor, and shook his head. "Yeah, unfortunately he says he means to go through with it. Hell, Big Steel 'ill eat us alive. The convict-lease is the only thing keepin' us competitive."

"Where the hail did he ever get that kind ah day-yum idea? As if I din' know?"

They all looked at the dancing couple, then at Cain, when he hissed, "Actually, he said it came to him in a dream."

The men all looked startled but only Bill Benche said anything. "A dream ...? Hell, Cain, didn't yah tell me somethin' about you havin' a dream about Big Steel swallowin' us up?"

"Yup, I sho' did Bill and I assure y'all that it seemed quite real,

quite real indeed. I'd say it was more of a nightmare than just a dream though."

Big Bill Connors smiled widely. "Hail Cain, Ah-ve had et dream, or night-may-ah. Ah thank we all have, huh fellas?"

The others all either grunted their assent or nodded thoughtfully, as a hush fell on to the crowd throughout the room when Daniel Schaub walked in. It wasn't so much that Schaub walked into the room that caused the stunned silence, it was *who* walked into the room with him.

-9-

INVITED

Prejudices, friend, are the kings of the vulgar herd.

—Voltaire, *Le Fanatisme*, ii, 4.

It is never too late to give up our prejudices.

—H.D. Thoreau, *Walden*. Ch. 1.

They strolled in, just like they'd been invited, about a dozen of them, straggling along behind Daniel Schaub, who was smiling widely and standing now alongside a wall, just to the rear of the band, watching his daughter dance with her husband. The dance finally ended, and the preacher walked forward to greet his daughter and son-in-law, who frowned when he saw all the Negroes now huddled together in a small group. Abel immediately glanced over to where he knew six of the biggest Big Mill Mules, including his only sibling, were sitting and knew, even before glimpsing their faces, they were all seething. He shook Daniel Schaub's outstretched palm, and Schaub kissed his daughter, then hugged her as Abel spied a Negro dressed in a suit and thought he recognized him. Then he saw a smaller replica of the man and remembered him from his first meeting at his bride's fathers' church. His wife stepped over to him now. "Oh, that's Joe Brown, you remember him hon', he vas

at our church when ve firs' met—he is a tenant farmer for Mr. John Shelton."

Abel shot a glance toward the Big Mill Mules' table again and saw John Shelton mouthing the word nigger. His wife nudged Abel's arm, and he inhaled and stepped toward Joe Brown. He extended his hand, and Joe Brown hesitated for about ten seconds before shaking it. Abel smiled and said, "Hello Mr. Brown, I'm Abel McCain."

Joe Brown nodded and smiled. "You does-in nah-membah me, does you Missah McCain, suh?"

Abel McCain shrugged his shoulders. "Sure I do, over a couple months ago, at the preacher's church." Joe Brown chuckled softly.

"Nosuh Missah McCain, I means when we-uz lil' boys. Me-un my brother Charlie, we-uz ovah by yo' daddy's church, hail could-din ah been but 'bout five yay's old-dun you done gabe us a hunk ah candy. But, but 'en yo' brother, he done slapped it out-in ah hands, Missah McCain suh."

Suddenly, a picture came to Abel's memory-bank, and he looked down at Joe Brown's son and remembered. "Gee'zuz," he said, and a smile alit on his face. "Well, my brother, well I'm really sorry, ah-er-um-ah..."

"Oh, 'at's don't mattah now suh. Hail, we ate all 'at candy anyways. When y'all left we got it and wash it off."

"Ah. You, ah, work for John Shelton then?"

"Ah, yessuh, I-is a sharecropper fo' 'im."

"Oh yeah ... ummm—well, how's your brother Charlie?"

"Oh, he's daid suh."

Abel McCain got a visual picture in his memory of a small black boy, dressed in cut-offs, no shirt and a humongous smile, especially when

he handed him some of his candy. "Gee-zuz, I'm sorry to hear that. How did he die?"

Joe Brown stared at Abel McCain and Abel saw the confused look on his face immediately, then what looked like embarrassment. Joe Brown looked over at Andrea Schaub, then at her father. It was the preacher who rasped, "He died from mining ore, Abel. He worked for T.C.I. for ten years and for W-yaw Bee-un-M for five years—his lungs were shot—he couldn't even breathe near the end."

Abel McCain blanched. W.B. & M. was a subsidiary of McCain Industries, owned solely by seven of the biggest Big Mill Mules in town, and they were all in the room, including Abel himself. He looked at Joe Brown, then his father-in-law and his wife. Did they know that he was one of the culprits who had had a hand in Charlie Brown's death? He glanced over at his brother's table. The other six Big Mill Mules responsible couldn't have cared less about a death in the mines; it happened every day and they considered it little more than they would the death of a mule, although, if truth be known, they thought more of the beast of burden than they did of a black man, and would, in fact, kill a black man faster than they would a mule, as many of them had in the past.

But, Abel McCain had changed. Like a moth that had become a butterfly, he was a new man, and he could no longer behave in the same manner as he had before. He knew there would be nightmares and he dreaded them. Suddenly, inexplicably, Abel McCain grabbed Joe Brown in a bear hug and apologized for not knowing. Then he let go of Brown, who was totally aghast at having a white man touch him so intimately, and immediately looked over at the table where the man, who owned the farm he was a sharecropper at, sat. Abel McCain followed his gaze and both men were surprised when they saw what neither had expected, for the table where six of the most powerful men in the Magic City had sat was now empty, empty except for an overturned

bottle of whiskey and glasses, as the table itself lay ignominiously on its side—scarred now and partly broken, from where Cain McCain had kicked it.

-10-

CAIN AND ABLE

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

—*Old Testament: Genesis, 4: 9, 10.*

Yet doth he live!" exclaims the impatient heir,

And sighs for sables which he must not wear.

—Byron, *Lara*. Canto I, st. 3.

Cain McCain held the rifle to his shoulder and pulled the trigger, causing two of his three hunting companions to smile when the eight-point buck went down, only his brother frowning, saying that it looked as if Cain had only wounded the stag. Abel hurried towards the buck to make sure it was dead. John Shelton watched him go, then took the occasion to turn toward Cain and William Benche, the four men being on Shelton's land, hunting. "Look at 'im run. Worried about ah day-yum deer; afraid it might suffer? What the hail's wrong with that day-yum brother ah your-in Cain?"

"Ah-eh, he was always a little strange but that day-yum woman's the one that really done 'im in. Dammit he's gone be the ruination of us all."

Shelton aimed his rifle towards where Abel was now bending down to check the deer's condition, and Cain pushed him aside.

"What are you thinkin' Johnny?"

"Be the easiest way."

"Right—and I'm his brother so I should be the one to do it."

Shelton smiled at William Benche—they had all talked about it but neither Benche nor Shelton had really meant to do it. That's why they were both totally shocked when Cain raised his weapon and fired, hitting his brother full in the chest. There was complete silence for a minute before Cain glared at his two partners in crime and boomed, "C'mon move it we need to get Abel to the hospital." When the duo hesitated, he bellowed, "C'mon—it's gotta look like a huntin' accident,"

* * *

William Benche nodded at Cain McCain and John Shelton. "It's perfectly legal Cain and they were married. She'll get his entire share; course what she does with it, well that's another thing altogether."

John Shelton scowled and exhaled a stream of noxious smoke from his nostrils. "Hail she'll give it to the niggahs, what the hail yah think she'll do wid it?"

"Why the hell'd we ever put twenty-six per cent in Abe's name anyway, Cain?"

"What the hell's the difference Bill—he was *my* brother? Hell, he was as good a man as any of us, before that damned woman. She, she brainwashed him—she, she *killed* him—as much as me."

William Benche glanced at John Shelton, who parted his lips in a facsimile of a smile, this one more the smile of a wolf before it attacks a helpless lamb. Shelton's ghastly smile widened when Benche patted Cain's shoulder and murmured, "Sure she did Cain, the bitch."

Cain McCain's head shot upward slowly and his eyes gleamed, as he growled, "You know our other foundry's just about finished."

The two others glanced at each other and Shelton nodded.

"Yeah, but we ain't got none ah the machinery in 'ere yet Cain. It's basically jus' a shell 'till we get her finished—and ah-er-um, well ..."

Cain McCain could see that Shelton knew what he was thinking, and when he looked to Benche, the lawyer was already nodding and said, "You mean strip the ol' foundry dry—take everything to the new one. Leave her with nothin' but a shell and no workers."

Cain nodded slowly and the trio agreed on their plan of action. Just as they were about to break up their meeting, William Benche exhaled a stream of noxious, bluish cigar smoke and then looked at the tip of the cigar, a habit they all knew meant he was about to say something, something that he had given considerable thought to. "You know fellas, there is one thing that we haven't considered."

Cain and Shelton eyeballed each other warily, as Benche barked, "Abel! I mean, after all he *is* still alive."

John Shelton smiled eerily. "He ain't moved fer the whole week. The doctors say there ain't a chance in a million he'll make it another day?"

Cain McCain looked at Shelton and then Benche and smiled. "And, and if he does, well then—its God will." Benche and Shelton exchanged bemused glances and they both turned them on Cain—the trio had all given up on God *and* his will a long time ago, about the same time when they had started imposing their own collective wills on the workers in their mines and mills and other subsidiaries, and Cain well-knew it. He threw up his hands and sputtered, "You heard the doctors Bill, he won't make it—he's got one chance in a mil-yun."

Shelton nodded and added his two cents worth, again. "He ain't got a chance in hell ah livin' Bill—not hardly a chance."

William Benche studied both his partners' faces and nodded, then his eyebrows tilted upward and his eyes narrowed, as he poked his

face into theirs. "Yes, but what if he does? *WHAT* if he *DOES*?"

* * *

They were packed inside the lawyer's office, and they were screaming, for the family of Cain McCain was contesting his last will and testament. He had been married three times but had claimed to have fathered only one child, although all his wives had contested that claim and the room was filled with many of these, those that claimed to be his offspring, their offspring, and their relatives, friends and acquaintances and even many of *their* offspring, along with any and all others who had even the remotest connection to the deceased, who had suffered a massive coronary that September morning in 1963 at the age of eighty-eight. For, although Cain McCain's coal mines and mills and his factories and foundries had the dubious distinction of having the worst accident and health record of any that had ever operated, they were all millions in the black, as the lawyers and accountants were trained in taking advantage of every law and every loophole in those laws to keep them that way. McCain's holdings were so vast and powerful that if the laws didn't suit him then he had them changed until they did suit him.

William Benche III sighed and stared at the motley crew that surrounded him, their lawyers and accountants shuffling the too innumerable papers and trying, unsuccessfully to keep them quiet. Why was he the executor of this madhouse estate anyway? Then, just as one of the alleged grandsons of the deceased pulled out a knife and attacked one of the alleged sisters of one of the alleged wives' alleged sons, it hit him and he smiled. Money; as his father, the deceased's lawyer and partner in many of his businesses, had taught him, there was money in it, big money and for William Benche III, as for everyone else inside the room at this time—money was their God and their life.

* * *

Across town, on this very day, another funeral was being held and it was a large one—absolutely huge. Andrea McCain couldn't believe that there was that many people who lived in Birmingham, much less knew her husband. But then, he *had* lived his whole life there and, after all, eighty-five years was a lot of living. A tear fell from her eye, as an elderly black man strode to the podium to deliver the eulogy.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Joe Brown Junior, course some ah y'all know me as Jay-Jay." A few people snickered, and those that knew the sixty-two-year-old attorney smiled. He removed his sunglasses—it was a hot day in September, even for Birmingham.

"Many of you know me—I am *that* A.C.L.U. lawyer," he said, amidst more laughter and smiles. "Yes, but what many of you may not have ever realized is that if it hadn't of been for Abel McCain I would not be *that* lawyer, for it was Abel who paid for my law school education and I, along with many others here today, would probably not even be alive today and there would be no A.C.L.U. or N.A.A.C.P., not in Birmingham, anyway. Yes and Abel McCain was the first, and only man in Birmingham, to give his employees equal shares in his company, which is now their company, and those that called him a Communist would be wrong and those that called him a Capitalist would be equally wrong for I tell you this as one who knew and you all should know it too, Abel McCain was a Christian, plain and simple and he was ready to join hands with Dr. Martin Luther King next week—as he just did just a few months ago—right here in Birmingham, and walk for everyone's rights. There are many others here today who know all about Abel McCain's good deeds and they were many—for he built a hospital for the poor and he helped build two churches and helped finance several others and the home over on Sixteenth, by the church, he was the one who ..."

Keith Laufenberg has been published in numerous literary magazines and journals, including, but not limited to: AIM Magazine; The Maryland Review; and has had 2 novels published: "Miami Rock" and "Semper-Fi-Do-or-Die", both in 2007.

Searching for the Right Name

When he told them his name, they had no choice but to believe him. After all, it was his name, and to lie about his name was to lie about who he was. Since they had never met him before, there really would be no reason for him to try to disguise who he was.

He could have told everyone he met a different name. They would have known no better, as long as he never encountered more than one at the same time. If two people he had met that day under two different names happened to discuss their daily encounters, they would have just chalked it up to coincidence.

"I met this very interesting man today," one would say.

"Oh yeah, me too," the other would respond in an attempt to show the other up.

"What was his name?" the first would say, now on the defensive.

"Bradley Billups."

"What was so interesting about him?"

"He's a railroad man. And he wears these really baggy pants. His hair was long, and his eyes were black. I'm not talking about the blacks of his eyes neither. I mean the colored part of his eyes was black."

"Well, what a co-inky-dink. I met a guy named David Dralley, and he was an oil driller. He had longish hair, baggyish pants, and blackish eyes. His eyes were the color of tar."

"It's a small world. So many people are alike."

The two men had no idea.

Most of the time, his first and last name started with the same let-

ter, but occasionally, especially if he met a lot of people in a given day, he would change things up slightly and become a B.D. instead of a B.B., or even a G.C. instead of a G.G. or C.C. It didn't really matter though. The name wasn't what lasted long. It was the legacy of his actions that truly mattered. He had quite the legacy.

His favorite name was Gary Grady. His favorite occupation was oil tycoon. His favorite hometown was Tallahassee. His favorite sports team was the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The way he saw it, it didn't matter what name he had or what job he possessed, so he might as well just go by whatever he wanted. He was the same person through and through, regardless of those limiting titles. So he simply avoided the limitations and called himself whatever he wanted at a given moment. He tried not to think of the name before he said it. He just said it.

His real name was Adam Zekiah. He stopped calling himself that when he was eleven years old. It was easy to stop. That was the same day his daddy killed his mother and he ran away from his home in Alma, Kansas. Hitchhiked all the way to Memphis. Almost four hundred miles, farther than any Zekiah ever traveled before. Of course, he didn't consider himself a Zekiah any more at that time.

The first name he introduced himself as was Adam Christ. He had been eleven, and he had just hitched a ride in a dirt-colored pickup truck driven by a man with long greasy hair and a week's worth of sharp hairs growing from his leathered skin. The man gruffly asked his name, those beard hairs menacingly pointing at him like a threatened porcupine, and he had to give him something. Being at an age where creativity and imagination had started to vanish, the boy was limited with his options for a surname.

"I'm Adam Ch....Chr....Christ," he had managed to mumble, his

small backpack of belongings clutched to his tiny waist.

The man snorted, the brown spit from his chewing tobacco spilling haphazardly on to the hairs below his lower lip. "You one a those Christians?" he had asked with another snort, this time controlling the exodus of tobacco.

The boy hadn't known what to say to this contemptuous man. He had anticipated the man would have admired his name, not scorned it. That was his first introduction to the real world, the world where not everybody believed in Jesus and tended gardens and picked blackberries during the spring. It had been one thing for his drunken father to have killed his loving mother, but to have entered a new world that was faithless and completely devoid of love was another thing altogether.

It was at that very instant, staring incredulously at the religionless man, spit clinging to his beard, that Adam Zekiah, a.k.a. Adam Christ, realized the evils of the world, causing something inside of him to snap. He reached his fumbling prepubescent hand into his backpack and removed the silver-barreled gun he had stolen from his daddy before he fled. He hadn't been sure at the time why he had taken it, but now he realized God had made him take it. Pointing it at the despicable man, it seemed that Jesus suddenly left him and was replaced by a soulless monster. The bearded man left an array of red stains and tiny bone chips plastered against the cracked window, his tobacco drool dripping out of the tilted head, the car rolling crooked off the road and into a ditch violently until it somehow rolled itself to a peaceful stop.

For a moment, Adam Zekiah felt ashamed as the salty tears stained his puffy red cheeks. Then it occurred to him the shame he felt was the result of the tears, not of the murder, and the boy decided from that day forward, he would be a man. That was the last day he ever called himself Adam Zekiah, or anything of the sort.

Gary Grady, now twenty-seven, pulled his rust-colored pickup into the town of Henderson, fifty-seven miles southeast of Nashville. The green sign declaring the city limits of the town proudly stood aside the highway, boasting its population of 1200. Gary Grady despised small towns, especially small towns close to big cities. Small towns were for the ignorant, isolated pockets of homogenous people that didn't want to expose themselves to the truths of the world. In small towns, everyone went to church, businesses were closed on Sundays, and people said "hello" to everyone they saw. They did these things because they didn't know any better. It had always been the way of life, and they weren't about to change something that didn't seem broken.

Even worse, in a small town, there was no hiding what you had done. One minor slipup and you were more or less banished from the region. They didn't physically force you out of course, but the glares they gave you, the discussions you heard behind your back, and the absence of that friendly "hello" made you leave. A life without the constant and familiar "hello" wasn't one that was really worth living, so you left town in search of a place where the people would say "hello" to you again.

They would do it to you even if you hadn't been the one in the wrong. If anyone in your family committed what they considered a sin, which was more or less everything except going to church and saying "hello"—although gossip and general hatred for those who had done something they deemed wrong were okay—then they gave you those same looks and stowed away that coveted "hello" that was part of the reason you had wanted to live in the Podunk place to begin with.

Gary Grady, or whatever he happened to call himself on a given day, had two basic missions. First, he wanted to meet as many people as he could, garnering their admiration and their "hello." He would stay in the town, talking about his grand experiences and big city feats until he

felt that everyone seemed to say “hello” or regard him in a special way. He could say the most outlandish things, and the small town folks would believe him because they didn’t know any better. Then he would complete the second task of his visit. He would brutally murder one unsuspecting victim, and then vanish into the night so quickly and unexpectedly the whole town likely thought he had either left on important business, or he had been a ghost that had swooped in and killed one of their own, bringing sin to the community. But they didn’t fret about the latter—it simply meant the sin was now gone and nothing was wrong except that a body needed to be buried. It was just a lesson not to trust strangers and to stay away from the big city and its evil ways.

From the moment he arrived in Henderson, the townsfolk—only people in small towns could call themselves something so idiotic—were completely infatuated with him. He became the centerpiece of the town, the biggest celebrity to ever actually spend the night. Many a celebrity had driven through on the way to Nashville, mostly musicians, but never had the town seen the likes of someone like Gary Grady, oil tycoon, request a bed for the night.

The owner of the seldom-used bed and breakfast, which was aptly named *The Weary Traveler*, was a young widow named Maudie Brown. She had been Maudie Wilkins in marriage, but the town had insisted she revert back to Brown so that everyone would be aware of her family and her availability. At twenty-three and childless, there was no reason for her to rely on a long life of widowhood.

She immediately took a liking to Mr. Grady, as she liked to call him, and she was thrilled when he informed her he would be staying a second night. She believed he wanted to stay to get to know her better, and she didn’t mind the prospect of leaving Henderson with this man. As a widow, she was very willing to be carried away from her small town by a wealthy man.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Grady?" she asked him before turning down his bed on the second night of his undetermined stay.

"Just your charming presence and hospitality is enough for me," he responded with a tip of his cap and gentle bow at the waist. "You've shown me quite the hospitality, and I intend to stay for the full week. We don't get this treatment in the big city. I'm glad my weary body was unable to drive through to Nashville the other night. It must have been fate leading me to this place and to you."

She could do nothing but blush at his comment, her brief stint as a married woman not at all having reduced her want for such words spoken from such a fine gentleman.

The way he presented himself, it seemed he had enough money to buy the town of Henderson and all its properties and businesses many times over. He did, in fact, have a great deal of wealth he had amassed mostly from burglaries committed after his murders. He carried his wealth around with him, for no bank would accept his money or his lack of name. He always left it in a satchel in the cab of his rust-colored truck, giving complete trust to the strangers of the small towns that likewise gave him their complete trust. He may very well have had enough money to purchase much of Henderson, but owning such a town served no purpose to him.

It was on the morning of his third day in Henderson, a Friday morning, that he decided Maudie Brown would be his victim from this particular town. There was nothing he could find wrong with her, and she did treat him in ways he had never before been treated, and that was precisely why he needed to kill her. She was the most innocent creature in all of Henderson, and her murder would have more impact than any other, especially since he planned to perform the deed on a Sunday. He would do it right before church. The town would notice her absence and come knocking on her door at the conclusion of the service. She would

not answer. They would burst down the door, knowing something had to be wrong for a woman to miss church *and* not answer her door. They would find her brutally murdered, possibly with her head cut off, and they would assume her soul would go to hell because she hadn't had the opportunity to redeem herself that morning. They would find no trace of Gary Grady, and they would assume it was he who had killed her, and they would send word to Tallahassee, where they thought he would soon return, that a man named Gary Grady, a famous oil tycoon who drove a rusty pickup and had long hair, was wanted for murder in the small town of Henderson, a town the authorities in Tallahassee would have never heard of before. In Tallahassee, they would wait for Gary Grady and his rusty pickup, but the man would never arrive.

On Friday and Saturday, Mr. Grady went about the town, exploring the local flavors, meeting new faces, purchasing worthless souvenir goods, all while escorting a blushing Maudie Brown, her arm in his, making all of the women in the town horrifically jealous, so jealous they thought of tarnishing Maudie's good name so he would drop her in favor of them and possibly take them to the big city where he would spoil them.

"Mr. Grady, how lovely to see you with Mrs. Wilkins," they would say, hoping that once he was aware of her past, he would trade her in for fresh meat. It was unclear what they desired most: his experience, his charm, his wealth, or his looks, all of which oozed with big city flair.

He would simply tip his hat to these comments and continue to carry this woman about in his arm, secretly laughing on the inside at their ridiculousness. Each passing moment made him realize even more the built-up evil tendencies of these small town folks. At times, he thought perhaps he should spare this woman and kill all of the others, but 1199 people was too many to kill, and he thought it more worthwhile to kill Maudie to show them how evil they had been. They needed to be

made aware of the true evils of the world. Going to church and saying "hello" did not make you good, especially if you only did these things because you didn't know any better and because everyone else did them. This was just ignorance, and Gary Grady thought that was the world's biggest evil. If only ignorance could be removed from the world, then maybe there could be some real good.

Before he went to bed on Saturday eve, he told Maudie this would be her last night with him as a guest.

"Going back to the big city?" she asked, probably hoping to extend their conversation and perhaps get him to take her to bed.

"Just need a change of pace. I don't feel there's much left for me to do here in Henderson." He looked at her deeply as he spoke, and she seemed to notice an emptiness in his black eyes, as if she were staring into the knothole of a tree.

"Oh, I see," she said, doing her best to convey her disappointment.

"There is one more thing I would like to do before I leave."

She perked up. "Oh, and what's that?"

"It involves you, but I can't tell you until morning. Now I am just tired and need sleep."

"Is there anything special I can do for your last meal in Henderson?"

"Why don't you just make whatever you would like to eat for our last meal?"

"I will give you my very best. Have a good rest, Mr. Grady. I look forward to tomorrow, although I will be sad to see you leave."

"Well, perhaps we can work something out so we don't have to

have you watch me leave."

She blushed and giggled before coolly saying, "Good night, Mr. Grady."

Church was at nine on Sunday morning. Breakfast was to be served at seven. He planned to dine with her and then murder her.

Gary Grady was surprised to see that Maudie wore her nightgown to breakfast.

"I hope you don't mind my appearance," she began, "but I didn't have time to get dressed before fixing breakfast. Perhaps I shall go to my bedroom and do that right now."

"Why don't you join me for breakfast, and then you may get dressed. What are we having?"

"Stuffed French toast."

They both ate ravenously, eagerly awaiting what they expected would happen next. Before she even finished her last bite or cleaned the table, she rose and said, "I think I'll go change now. You're welcome to follow me if you'd like."

He hadn't expected this, but it didn't alter his motive. He followed her indeed and made short work of her body before exiting the dwelling and hopping in the rust-colored pickup. On his way through town, he spotted many souls walking to church, hoping for salvation. He pitied them all. They were just a bunch of sheared sheep.

Driving away from Henderson in that rusty old pickup, he couldn't help but picture the woman and the nightgown and the blood. She had been a good woman.

At that moment, his cheeks became stained with salty tears for the first time in sixteen years; he had realized he was still Adam Zekiah, and he had ended up being exactly like his father.

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Belladonna Gardens was a strange community. Strange? Make that dark and spooky, and Geoffrey Mellon felt it grew darker and spookier almost every day. He ached to get into his car in the morning and take off for work, hated his return that evening to hear the horror tales spewed out by his two teenagers. "Dad, we've been here two weeks and we're treated like aliens," thirteen-year-old Michael griped. Stacey, fifteen, was equally distraught. "No one talks to us on the school bus. I can't get a peep or a smile out of any of the snotty nerds." Michael again: "Instead, they give us the finger." More from Stacey: "When I ratted to the bus driver, he said, 'Get a life, kid.'"

His wife was also bewildered, couldn't understand the unfriendly neighborhood and reminded Geoffrey that when they had moved into their last home the family next door greeted them with flowers; five minutes later the woman across the street knocked on the door with wine and cheese. "I don't expect the same friendly overtures," Janet said, "but maybe a wave or a honk as a car pulls out of its driveway. When I pass people on my morning jog, I feel invisible, a ghost, my big 'Hi!' and even bigger smile ignored." She locked eyes with Geoffrey. "I think we made a huge mistake moving here."

He shook his head. "Things will get better. You'll see." He crossed his fingers, hoped their decision to move to Belladonna had not been rash. They'd made up their minds to buy the house after seeing it just once, sold by the "virtual tour" of Belladonna Gardens on the Internet and the high-pressure saleswoman who made it sound like Shangri-la. Maybe they should have slowed down, read the home-owners by-laws,

strolled the tranquil streets, jawed with the families of lawyers, engineers and consultants who made Belladonna their home.

But it was love at first sight – no reason to play Sherlock Holmes. They treasured their castle. Who wouldn't? Geoffrey thought about it driving home from work in his brand-new Hummer at the start of the third week. A dream house: four bedrooms, like number of baths, more than 3,500 square feet of perfectly-laid-out rooms. Granted, the Belladonna Gardens homes all looked alike – Samesville – sporting identical gray paint and gray shutters and gray-paved driveways. Carbon-copy shrubbery, flowers bunched together on quarter-acre lots like a marine parade drill. But he accepted the trade-off and was sure Janet and the kids would come to love the place. He too.

Conformity was not a dirty word. Partly why they moved from the old development – to escape the disorder and chaos: a mini-world of anarchy, zoning and community rules non-existent, denizens doing anything they pleased. The Kellys next door painted their house a Kelly green, the Cohens on the other side added an ugly carport next to the one-car garage, and Sheldon left his blue-and-white Hanukkah display beam almost until the Fourth of July to compete with the Stewarts' six-months Christmas display

The neighbor across the street ignored a browned-out lawn and dying shrubs, Grambowski content to sit on the porch, or sometimes in his ten-year-old Cherokee parked in the driveway, sporting swim trunks, shirtless and shoeless, can of beer in one hand, cigar butt in the other, individualist extraordinaire.

Janet used to fuss about the old neighborhood and the old neighbors – *Good riddance* – though Geoffrey almost missed the disarray. He longed for Grambowski and wished he were his across-the-street buddy again, he and Ski swapping lies and sloshing down that over-quota can of suds. He grinned. No way for Grambowski to make the

scene here, the Belladonna commandos would run him out of town day one.

Geoffrey surveyed the lawn as he pulled into the driveway. Green paint couldn't have made the turf any greener, sprinklers controlled by the B.G.H.A. (Belladonna Gardens Homeowners Alliance) – and it seemed they were forever raining. And not one weed in that lawn. *Out, out, damn weed!* His eyes moved to the landscaping in front of the house. Shrubs and flowers planted and cared for by the landscaping crew merged brilliant reds and whites and blues. *Oh say can you see...* Actually, several residents flew Old Glory every day, and Geoffrey thought he heard taps sounding from a bugle one night. *I guess a few Republicans live here.*

He parked his new Hummer in the driveway (the garage filled with cartons of who-knows-what and who-knows-when he'd get them emptied) and entered through the front door, anticipating a nice cold one before grilling a steak on his fancy new grill. A notice Scotch-taped to the door stared at him: NO BARBECUES. Next to it a second notice, its bold headline: NO PARKING IN DRIVEWAYS. His eyes shot to a huge sign on the lawn. KEEP OFF THE GRASS.

Geoffrey felt his face heat up. He was ready to rip up the notes and relegate the sign to firewood. *I can't park in my own driveway? What the hell are driveways for? No barbecues? California and no cooking out? And if I want to walk on my grass, no bird brain's going to stop me.* Shortly after moving to Belladonna, he suspected they had strict rules. But this?

He read on. "It has been called to the attention of the B.G.H.A. that you own a grill. Barbecuing is absolutely forbidden in Belladonna Gardens. Suggest you read our Rules & Regulations, specifically Article VIII, Section 3, Item D. Barbecues are not tolerated. Persistence on the homeowner's part will mandate a \$200 fine for each violation, five mis-

demeanors and you're evicted."

Geoffrey winced, swung around and shouted to the California sky. "We'll see about that. Who in blazes do you people think you are?" He wondered if golf was allowed on the golf course. He greeted his family and read the notice to them, guessed by their long faces they had fresh problems – showing off his new Hummer relegated to the back burner.

"Want to hear what happened this morning?" a tearful Stacey asked. Geoffrey's face twisted as she prattled on. "Well, there are forty-eight seats on the school bus and forty-eight kids from Belladonna. Michael and I were in our places when two extra kids came on, and after a flood of back-and-forth-buzzing, the driver made us lam off." She took a Kleenex out of her pocket, wiped the tears and blew her nose. "He said they had priority."

"We hulked-out," Michael said, "but they kept dawgling us. So we texted Mom."

Janet nodded. "The Toyota mom had to pick them up."

"Do you know the name of the bus driver?" The veins in Geoffrey's forehead throbbed. "I'll have him fired. I'll sue the S.O.B."

Like a traffic cop, Janet raised her hand. "Now don't start making enemies, Geoffrey. You want to get the children in trouble?"

"Get me his name. I don't take that garbage from anybody."

Janet tried to change the subject. "Shall I cook the steak inside?"

"Absolutely not. I'm going to forget I ever heard about those barbecuing rules and regulations. Last time I noticed this is a goddamn free country."

Out he went to start his fire. Grilling his steaks, he thought about the problems festering. Was Janet right that they'd made a mistake buy-

ing into Belladonna? He shook his head and announced to the smoldering charcoal, "Everything's going to be just fine." He turned toward the house and pretended to address Janet, echoing, "Everything's going to be just fine."

Six minutes on each side, and he brought the medium-rare porterhouses inside, and the four of them dug in. Janet had prepared garlic-smashed potatoes, plus a Caesar salad to go with it; Heineken for the adults, unlimited Coke for the children. Geoffrey's mood had flipped 180 degrees. The meal couldn't have been better, and no one will know he barbecued outside.

Almost no one.

A knock on the door startled them, and he got up to find a little man on the porch, barely five-feet tall, a hundred pounds at most, geek mirror shades on his nose. Based on his size and funny glasses, he looked like a teenager, at best a college kid, but his blue double-breasted suit and thinning hair made Geoffrey suspect he was well into his thirties or forties. His angry eyes and crinkled brow flagged that he was unhappy about something, wasn't there to bring flowers or wine and cheese, or bid, "Howdy neighbors."

His raspy voice knifed the air. "That stench of steak and charcoal carried a country mile. I live just next door and it was unbearable." He held his nose. "Phew!"

Geoffrey rolled his eyes. *We thought it smelled pretty darn good.*

"You know you're breaking regulations?"

"No kidding?"

The little man shook his finger at the front door. "It's right there in the Belladonna Gardens Rules & Regulations." He must have thought he was Napoléon, Geoffrey waiting for him to tuck his hand in the inside

pocket of his suit jacket. "Couldn't help but observe," he went on, "that R&R posting on your door with a warning about barbecuing. It's a nasty they don't tolerate here. I assume you saw the notice?" Geoffrey ignored the question, and the visitor fired an even meaner one. "I assume you can read." Geoffrey still didn't answer, and the little guy puffed out his chest (which wasn't much of a puff). "Want me to go home and get my Smith & Wesson?"

Geoffrey normally doesn't hit little people, but was about to cold-cock the guy, or at least tell him to get lost. Instead, he decided to bend, to be nice to his new next-door neighbor. "Care to come in and join us, my friend – Steak and Heineken? We have plenty."

The answer was obviously no as the man scrunched up his bantam face as if offered rat poison – with a Milk of Magnesia chaser. Geoffrey held out his hand and sported his best smile. "I'm Geoffrey Mellon."

The little man didn't return the shake-hands gesture, nor offer his name, and clearly no smile, Geoffrey's arm left dangling in the air. Bona-par-te, who had already made his speech, waved good-bye and disappeared as abruptly as he had arrived.

"Nice neighbor," Janet said.

"I can't wait to meet the one on the other side."

As if on cue, the doorbell rang, and Geoffrey opened the door on a heavyset woman, with a cup in her hand and a Charlie Brown puss. She was around fifty, though made up to look thirty-something. She wore a basic-black dress, busting at the seams, that probably belonged to her little sister and was the right size about twenty pounds ago. She turned to display a huge head shot of Sarah Palin pasted on the back of her dress, which almost made Geoffrey upchuck. (Not his favorite personality.) Turning back around, she offered a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't smile. "Need a cup of sugar?" Getting no response, she announced, "I live next door. I'm widow Gilderbrand, lost my dear husband last month and

thought maybe you might need sugar in the house. But if you don't, and in need of flour instead, just say the word and I'll skirt back home and exchange this for a cup of flour – or two – if you're thinking of baking me a cake, my birthday in three weeks." She paused to catch her breath, the Charlie Brown mug still evident.

A bewildered Geoffrey didn't respond, and Janet, who had been in the kitchen, came to the rescue. Almost. "Hi, Mrs. Gildercutty. How sweet—"

"Name's Gilderbrand," she cut in. "That's with two d's, two r's and don't forget to dot the i. As I was telling your mister, I can change the sugar to flour if your little heart desires. Your call."

A long beat for the Mellons to digest that before Janet spoke up. "Oh, that won't be necessary. I don't bake. And we use Sweet'n Low."

The woman's eyes welled up, followed by a cloudburst of tears. "Rejecting my hospitality?" Just as quickly as she'd gone into her boohoo routine, she switched off the tears spigot, freckles twinkling, and turned witchlike. "Ingrates! Finks! Lousy liberals. Pooh on both of you!" Before Geoffrey and Janet were able to counter, she was gone. They exchanged glassy-eyed perplexed looks (*I guess we're not going to have her over for dinner*).

Later that evening they were reading and half-watching TV, Michael and Stacey in their rooms catching up on homework. For some reason, they only got Fox, both Fox stations, and a closed-circuit Belladonna Gardens channel, which aired elevator music with a picture of an elevator crowded with people, also photos of the community that included a group shot of members of the Board of Directors decked out in tuxedos and long gowns as if attending a charity ball. Geoffrey had called the cable company several times to complain about the missing channels and was told they'd look into it. They never did. And when he

called back, he was put on hold. *Hold Hold Hold*. Then *Bzzzzz*.

The doorbell rang, startling Geoffrey. *Three visitors in one night?* When he opened the door, he noted a couple standing statue-like on the porch. In contrast to the first neighbor, they loomed well over six feet, she the taller of the two, close to six-six. (He figured she must have been a basketball star in high school and college.) And in contrast to the heavy lady, they were both thin as two-by-fours. They were not young, judging by the Ben Franklins perched on their long noses and the gray hair with specks of white that dominated their manes. "May we have a few words?" they recited in perfect harmony.

Janet joined Geoffrey at the door, the children watching from the top of the stairs (balcony seats). Geoffrey gaped at the couple, waited for them to speak, but they merely gaped back, world-class eye-grabbers. Finally, words eked out of their mouths, again in chorus. "We're Mr. and Mrs. H."

They hardly appeared as Welcome Wagon people, didn't even look like Californians, based on their pasty complexions and semi-formal dress. He could be a mortician, with his black silk suit, white shirt and bland narrow tie. Geoffrey even thought he smelled like a funeral parlor – whatever that smell is. His deadpan face appeared void of laugh lines, probably never cracked a smile in his life.

The woman's navy-blue wool dress that almost reached the floor appeared as if she had owned it since junior high. It matched her 1950s hairdo. A pasted-on smile never left her face (she made up for her partner), and her strong perfumed deodorant didn't mix too well with her body odor. *Don't get so close, lady*.

The man was the designated spokesman. "Mrs. H and I co-chair the Belladonna Gardens indoctrination committee. We're here to share with you a few rules and regulations that make our community a model

place in which to live."

"A model place in which to live," parroted Mrs. H.

"Would you like to come in? I'll make coffee." Janet was obviously excited about entertaining neighbors, albeit weird neighbors, but they shook their heads, his face still expressionless, hers still cradling the chronic smile.

Geoffrey tried to play the gracious host. "How about an after-dinner drink?" His first notion was to offer them a beer but opted for a fancier libation. "I have a nice Spanish sherry I've been dying to open." He waved them in.

They didn't budge as if stuck in concrete. Like the previous visitors, they may have imagined they'd catch swine flu or some other strange disease if they ventured inside. Their heads swayed back and forth, robots at a Ping-Pong match. And when their oscillating heads came to a stop, they stared. And stared.

"We'll conduct our business out here," the man said as he turned to his co-chair, who did a cuckoo-clock nod. "And I suggest you get rid of that hard stuff. Belladonna Gardens is an alcohol-free community."

"A what?" Geoffrey thought he hadn't heard right. "A what?" he repeated, about to jump out of his skin or boot the booze cops out into the street.

Mr. H's reply was a matter-of-fact "We don't permit liquor here."

"Even that imitation beer, whatever they call it, is frowned upon," Mrs. H added. "Haven't you read the Belladonna Gardens Rules & Regulations?" Her face was pure pit bull – a six-and-a-half-foot pit bull.

Geoffrey tried to control his temper, which was about to erupt. He'd only glanced at the 300 page document and figured he'd get to it by the year 2050, if by then.

Janet was just as upset. "We can't have wine at dinner inside our own house?"

"Naughty...naughty. That's a no-no." Mrs. H shook her finger at them, playing the schoolmarm scolding her third-graders.

"Just as with cigarettes." Mr. H mimicked his wife's finger shaking. He was the principal.

"Well, we don't smoke," Geoffrey said, "so you don't have to worry about that." Then he raised his voice. "But no way am I giving up my evening cock—"

"Yes, you are." Mr. H raised *his* voice. "Now that you're Belladonna Gardens residents, you don't drink. Security will come by in the A.M. to cart away all alcoholic beverages. Unless you want to transfer the sauce to your car, drive at least twenty miles from Belladonna, and chug-a-lug to your heart's content. Right, Mrs. H?"

"Right, Mr. H."

"Have it at the curb by 6:00 A.M. tomorrow along with that fancy barbecue grill. Tonight was your final cook-out – and those are my final words."

Before Geoffrey was able to protest, Mrs. H assumed the floor. "Has anyone advised you about the dress code?"

"No. No one has advised us about the dress code."

"Men wear shirts and ties and jackets at all times, unless the temperature exceeds ninety-eight-point-six – and make certain jackets and pants match."

"White shirts."

"Thinny-thin ties."

"No bright colors."

"Navy blue or gray is nice. And, of course, black always works. "

"Laced style wing-tip shoes."

Geoffrey was about to foam at the mouth. "I'll wear whatever—"

Mr. H cut him off. "If you wish to reside here, you'll leave in the morning and return at night in proper Belladonna attire. Fifteen minutes before bedtime, you can change into your jammies." Geoffrey blinked as the mortician's eyes knifed through him and signaled his wife to take the floor.

She turned to Janet, her statuesque presence dwarfing her hostess's five-feet-four standing on her toes. "And you, little lady, plan on discarding all pants outfits." She pointed proudly to the simple tent dress that she wore. "We expect to see you in dresses, even in the confines of your own home." Her cat stare pierced more knifelike than her husband's.

The Mellons glared at the strange pair, who again reeled off the Belladonna dress code, Geoffrey detecting a drum roll somewhere in the distance.

He had enough. Too much. Out it came. "You can both go to hell."

A buzzer sounded and Mr. H. explained, almost smiling, "That goes off when the electronic system detects a four-letter word."

Geoffrey turned redder than a California beet. "What electronic system?" His bellow carried out into the street, through the whole block.

Mr. H's near-smile widened. "Every Belladonna home is wired and monitored to central command for naughty words. Five four-letter words in a month and we have to foreclose your home." His smile was about to fall off the side of his face.

Mrs. H threw in her two cents. "We have no choice. Read the

rules."

Geoffrey and Janet were speechless. He wished they'd disappear, but no such luck. Mr. H glanced at his watch. "Do trust we're able to cover everything tonight. As you may have noted in the R & R, lights out at nine, Saturdays at ten." When Mrs. H whispered something in his ear, he rechecked. "Oh yes, I forgot to tell you about your wife's red Japanese van and the yellow Mack truck you drive. We insist on U.S. of A. cars here, conventional models."

"It's not a Mack truck. It's a sports util—"

"Hosed-down and towel-dried daily," barged in Mrs. H. Geoffrey started to speak, but Mrs. H still had the floor. "And don't you dare park in the driveway." She shook her finger so hard, Geoffrey expected it to snap off. "Not for one cotton-pickin' minute."

Geoffrey stepped in. "What if I refuse to go along with your cockamamie rules?" He puffed out his chest, the little tough standing up to the town bullies.

Mrs. H screwed up her face. "Cockawhat?"

"Cockamamie. Crazy like a—"

"If you don't adhere to our rules, we tow away your vehicles." It was the funeral director's turn to cut him off.

"I'll call the fuzz."

Mrs. H coughed to get Geoffrey's attention, her head once more in the Ping-Pong mode. "The *fuzz* (obviously a new term for her, which she seemed fascinated using) have no jurisdiction in Belladonna Gardens, so don't waste your *cockamamie* (also new and fascinating) nickels calling them."

"We have our own security force," Mr. H injected. "Six men, three ladies, all ex-marines. Big sons-of-guns and heavily armed. Right Mrs. H?"

"Right, Mr. H." Her head again made like a cuckoo.

The undertaker cued his wife as though performing at a recital, and in unison they voiced, "Good night now," strutting out the door like marionettes, single file, lady first, of course.

A few minutes later, Geoffrey looked out the window to see if Mr. and Mrs. Weir do had left. They hadn't. They were letting air out of the Hummer's tires. He raced outside but the Halloween ghouls scattered to their Impala sedan. He shouted for them to stop as they sped off, dust churning in the driveway, gales of laughter spilling from the very-black four-door sedan.

Scurrying back in the house, he reached for the phone and dialed 911. Five minutes on hold, he finally got a live voice and screeched, "They've let the air out of my blooming tires."

"Say again?"

"They've flattened my tires."

"Is this an emergency? If not—"

"Of course, it's an emergency. The bastards just took off in their car laughing like hyenas."

"Hy-who?"

"Hyenas."

A long pause, then: "Address?"

"3211 Tranquility Lane."

"We have no record of any Tranquility Lanes."

"It's in Belladonna Gardens."

"We don't do Belladonna Gardens."

"You don't do Belladonna Gardens?"

"Hard of hearing, buddy?"

"Can you give me security's number there?"

"Unlisted."

"How do I get them?"

Bzzzzz.

Geoffrey slammed the receiver. "I'm going down to the guardhouse to raise a little hell."

Janet tried to talk him out of it. "Don't get upset, honey. It's not worth it. I'm tired of that Toyota minivan anyway. Chevy makes a pretty nice car these days. Besides, we ought to clear the garage for the cars."

"Well, I'm not giving up my new Hummer. I love that truck and won't put up with nut jobs letting air out of my tires." Then he turned on Janet, threw her a rattlesnake sneer. "Thanks to you, missy, we're stuck in this god-awful hole – with these god-awful people."

Geoffrey had struck a chord, an off-key chord, and Janet's normally pale complexion went raging red. "Don't blame this on me, mister. It was your job to check everything out. But you didn't take the trouble, did you?"

"Hold on. Your brainstorm that we move. You hated our old place. Ten years you didn't utter two words to my friend Grambowski – or his wife. I was happy to stay there and—"

"I know you were. If it was up to you, we'd rot in that dump until Morgan's Mortuary came to cart us away."

His sneer turned even more snakelike as he beelined it for the door. "Don't wait up for me. I may be a while."

He walked the half-mile to the guardhouse, first cutting across the

Keep-Off-The- Grass lawn, expected the long stroll to calm his nerves. He was wrong. When he got to the entrance gate, he was more fired up than ever, sweat pooling down his back, cheek muscles twitching, stomach dancing (*Where's my Mylanta?*) – and after telling the two guards (spiffed up in evening-dress blue and yellow braid) what happened, they didn't seem alarmed. Merely rolled their eyes at Geoffrey's ranting.

"Do you have proof of your accusations?" asked one of them, yawning in Geoffrey's face.

"They didn't slash your rubber," the other said.

"You just have to pump a little air into the tires."

"Any idiot can do it."

Geoffrey was ready to start swinging. Stopping him was the presence of the guard and his muscled 250-pound body. "Calling me an idiot?" he ventured.

No reply. Just a huge belly laugh from Mr. Muscle.

The other guard looked at his watch, and his face darkened. "Oh. Oh. Curfew time. You better hightail it back to your house *tout de suite* before we slap you with a big fat summons."

"My partner's not fooling."

"I'm not fooling."

Geoffrey locked eyes with the partner, who stared Geoffrey down. "Do I look like a fooler?"

The veins in Geoffrey's neck turned rope-thick, his shirt so wet he wanted to take it off and wring it out. "You're not going to do anything about it?"

"Don't you have a tire pump?"

Fire flared from Geoffrey's eyes.

"Get one. They come in handy." The guard giggled and saluted Geoffrey, his partner also giggled, but instead of a salute, he wiggled his hand at the tip of his nose.

The beaten warrior jogged home. When he reached his house, he was startled to find a man inserting a key in the front door lock. Was he at the wrong house? No, it was 3211 all right. Maybe the jerk was drunk or had amnesia and didn't know where he lived.

Geoffrey charged to the front door, an Olympic 100m sprinter going for the gold. "Who are you? What's going on?" he shouted.

The drunk or amnesiac – or house robber – was nonchalant in his reply. "Why I'm Philip P. Prestover, President of Belladonna Gardens Homeowners Alliance. And you are?"

"Who am I? I'm Geoffrey Mellon. This is my house. And if you don't get out of here pronto, I'm calling the—"

"Glad I caught you, sport. It's a little late, but I'm doing overtime tonight. Long overdue that you and I had a little tête-à-tête. I've heard one horror story after another about you and your little clan. Didn't find the reports at all pleasant. Not one tiny bit." He paused to let his words sink in. "Shall we go inside and take a load off? We'll use my master here."

He unlocked the door, entered the house, punched in the alarm code (how he knew the code, Geoffrey had no idea) and headed for the living room, Geoffrey trailing as though he were hypnotized, a sheep following its shepherd – who didn't smell like a shepherd, but reeked from a strong too-sweet cologne. *Take a bath in it, mister?*

Prestover pointed to the sofa as he plunked himself on Geoffrey's favorite club chair, like it was his chair, his house. "Please sit down."

Janet walked in, puzzle plastered across her pestered face, curi-

ous who belonged to the sharp scent of Royal Copenhagen (or whatever), what he was doing in Geoffrey's Archie Bunker chair, and why he was in their house so late in the evening.

Before Janet could speak, the uninvited guest introduced himself as if he were an old family friend, motioning that she sit down and join them. "I'm here to make sure no more rules are broken. If they are, my associates may have to take drastic measures." He cocked a cockeyed smile. "And they have bushels of harsh measures at their disposal." He wiped the smile off his face, crunched up his forehead and scratched his full mop of Brylcreamed jet-black hair, careful not to disturb a single strand.

Geoffrey couldn't believe this bird was real, trying to take over their house – take over their lives. He studied Prestover, a page out of the fashion pages of an early *Gentleman's Quarterly*. When he crossed his legs, he displayed long black socks held up by garters. Everything coordinated: three-piece blue herringbone suit, white-on-white silk shirt, rep tie, matching handkerchief flowing from his breast pocket and gold cuff links with a prominent PPP monogram. Geoffrey figured he came out of the womb fully dressed – in a short-pants Eton suit.

"I understand Mr. and Mrs. H. paid a visit here but you didn't even let them in your vestibule, much less your parlor." He made 'shame-shame,' rubbing his index fingers together.

"That's a lie," snapped Geoffrey. "They refused to come into the house. I specifically invited—"

"Hard to believe. The Hs make a point to check every room in every house in the

community. I'll send them back to take Polaroids tomorrow morning. Nineish."

Geoffrey shook his head so vigorously it created a breeze that

caused Prestover to sneeze. Several times. Forget about gesundheits as Geoffrey thundered on. "I don't want your Hs setting foot in my house again." He turned to Janet. "Don't let them in, sweetheart."

Prestover didn't seem bothered by Geoffrey's wrath. "They have their own key." He pointed a manicured finger at Janet. "Stay out of their way. I don't want a pretty little thing like you getting hurt." He smiled sweetly at her, and Geoffrey detected a hint of a leer.

His eyes snapped back to Geoffrey, sugar and molasses gone, as he glared at his "host's" outfit: faded jeans and an old polo shirt, smeared with sweat marks under the armpits. He sniffed and pretended he was about to pass out. "Don't let me ever again see you in such atrocious attire, like some kind of red radical – and sweating like a..." He turned to Janet. "And plan on giving away that non-becoming man-clothing to charity or to some poor unfortunate. Though I don't know who'd want them."

Fashion plate rose out of the club chair, again cracked his molasses smile, unmindful he had insulted the owners of the house he had invaded. "Very comfortable. Pity I don't have time for a snooze. Incidentally, I trust you've finally read the B.G.H.A. Rules & Regulations. The Hs informed me you hadn't as of last evening." Once more, the 'shame-shame' routine. "They'll administer a quiz, tomorrow: routine stuff, part oral, part essay, and très comprehensive. So bone up on our 122 Rules & Regulations. Flunk out and you're out of here – exiled to Siberia – or some such place."

A quick "Toodle-oo" and he was out the door, first stopping at the mirror in the foyer to comb his hair and straighten his tie – and squirt a shot of breath freshener in his mouth.

Geoffrey raced to the window to see if this alien from outer space planned to let more air out of the Hummer's tires, or puncture

them. Instead Prestover stared at the car, chalked the tires and shook his head, looked around at the property and made notes on an oversized clip board. He opened the door of his car, a 1958 blacker-than-night Edsel that appeared showroom new, stopped to resurvey the surroundings and scribbled a few more notations on his legal pad. He climbed into the classic lemon, and Geoffrey watched him soar away, a teenager competing in a drag race. *What happened to Belladonna's 8 mph speed limit?*

Geoffrey stared at Janet, and she stared back. "What are we going to do?" she said.

"We're not taking this lying down." He headed for the phone. "I'm calling the cops right now."

"Didn't you say they don't do Belladonna Gardens?"

"I'll call the FBI. Contact my Congressman. Have my lawyer sue the bejesus out of them." His sour scowl sweetened to a smile. "And I'll buy a gun. Yeah, I'll buy myself a little gun."

Janet's face stiffened. "You don't know how to use a gun."

"What's there to know? You put in bullets and pull the trigger." Janet scrunched up her face, and he smiled. "I'll join the NRA." When she scrunched her face again, he returned the face scrunch – in spades.

"All I know is I don't want you fooling with guns."

"All I know is I need a drink. I'm having one of those against-the-rules-and-regulations cocktails, a nice dry martini – very dry. You in?"

She hesitated, before a curt "In."

"No ice?"

A huge nod.

The next morning Geoffrey was startled to find the rose garden

that Janet had planted uprooted. He looked again. What happened to her Birds of Paradise?

He didn't have time to do anything about it and decided to tackle the problem after work. He jumped into her Sienna and roared away, glanced back at his flat-tired Hummer sitting in the driveway like a Baghdad casualty. *Poor baby!*

When Janet called him later, he sensed fresh trouble. She was bawling like a five-year old, so loud he had to hold the receiver a foot from his ear. "My garden has been destroyed. They painted graffiti all over your Hummer. Every half-hour they plant a new summons on the windshield. I called the AAA about the flat tires, but they said they never heard of Belladonna Gardens and cut me off." More sobbing as he moved the phone another foot away. "What are we going to do, Geoffrey?"

He didn't have the faintest idea, but spurted, "I'll be right home."

He stopped at Sears to pick up a tire pump, detoured to a local gun shop and bought a .38 Ruger, swung onto the freeway, and in just under an hour pulled into his driveway. The Hummer wasn't there, and he assumed Janet had somehow squeezed it into the garage. Maybe found a nice neighbor to pump the tires. He raised the door with his remote.

The garage was empty – except for the stacks of cartons and miscellaneous junk.

He raced into the house. "Where's my truck?"

Janet raised her hands in bewilderment.

He went to the front door, found a note hanging on the bell. He read it aloud, his voice shimmering like a worn 78 RPM. "Security informs us your lights were on until midnight last night, well past lights-out time. Don't let this happen again. We have confiscated your Mack and will do

the same with the Jap vehicle if you don't adhere to the Belladonna Gardens bylaws. Suggest you trade in both machines for standard American sedans. You have twenty-four hours. No vans, SUVs or sports cars, and you know what color. Humbly yours, Mr. & Mrs. H."

Geoffrey whipped out the community directory and searched for their listing. A bundle of Gs, a couple of Is, but not one individual under H. He dashed back outside and shouted as loud as he could. "Hs, where are you? Hs, I want my Hummer back." He sounded like a little kid whose bike had been stolen or someone had snatched his pack of Hubba Bubba.

Stacey and Michael got off the school bus (the driver allowing them to ride as standees) and, caught acting like a loony in front of his children, Geoffrey's face went purple, or some such color.

"What's going on?" Michael asked.

"Are you okay?" Stacey said.

"They swiped my truck, ripped out Mom's rose garden. I'm not going to let them get away with it." He tried to stay calm but out came, "Where are you, you dirty so-and-sos." His voice echoed through the whole block, and the perplexed Michael and Stacey sneaked into the house.

Janet came charging out. "Control yourself, Geoffrey. Come inside and cool off. The children are trying to make new friends, and you embarrassed them in front of the whole school bus."

He turned on her, cranked up his anger. "You and the kids taking their side? Have those rotten Tea Partiers brainwashed my family?" Suddenly he was a scientist who had just made the discovery of his life. *Aha!* "Yeah, the fuckers have jockeyed your brains."

"No one's been brainwashed and no one's taking anyone's side. It's time to call a truce to this crazy war. It was dumb of us not to get ap-

proval for the rose garden. And to plant the Birds of Paradise without permission. You, know-it-all-Jeff said, 'Don't worry.'" She did an about-face and marched back into the house.

It was almost as if he hadn't heard one word she said. He darted to the house next door, planted his finger on the bell. No answer. On the other side, no answer. Ditto across the street. "Where is everybody?" he screamed, "body... body...body..." reverberating like a wail in a carnny fun house.

A siren-screeching patrol car – a Ford Mustang convertible with its top down, circa 1970, laced with bumper stickers: EAT APPLE PIE, ADOPT A CHESHIRE CAT, NIXON-AGNEW – pulled into the driveway, and a hunky guard stepped out. He swung his billy club and flexed his World Gym biceps. "What's all this racket about?"

"Our flowers." Geoffrey pointed to the uprooted garden. "Just look. And they stole my brand-new Hummer."

The second guard, sitting at the wheel, clicked his tongue. "Pity," he said. "Pity," he repeated as he took out his handkerchief, wiped away a make-believe tear and blew his nose. So loud, probably heard six blocks away.

"All we know," announced the first guard, "is that you're disturbing the peace. No one disturbs the peace at Belladonna Gardens. Not on this kid's watch. And did these little ears detect profanity?" Getting no answer, he inched closer to Geoffrey, nose to nose. "I have my granny's picture in my wallet. Watch your fucking language." His garlic breath, blended with who-knows-what, almost made Geoffrey heave.

His partner jumped into the act. "I heard him say, 'Dirty so and so.'"

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding." He pointed his finger at Geoffrey. "Kindly come with me and my associate here."

"Where?"

"Our secret."

"Go shit in your hat."

As though an alarm had sounded, the second sentry sprang out of the little convertible, not even bothering to open the door. The first guard was a peanut compared to this brute, and his agility belied a near 300-pound frame. The ex-linebacker put away his hankie and held a forty-five in each hand (Geoffrey sorry he had left his new gun in the house). "We don't cotton to troublemakers here. Cuff him, Gus, and chuck the key."

Gus gestured that Geoffrey spread-eagle while he searched him and fastened a pair of handcuffs – and, sure enough, chucked the key.

Geoffrey cringed at the gun pointed at his head. "Call the National Guard!" he howled in the direction of the house. "And get Arnold on the horn."

A few minutes later his family paraded out single file. *The saints go marching in.* (Or out.) First, Michael, long hair gone, sloppy clothes also history, replaced by a white button-down shirt and thin tie, khaki pants and penny loafers. A preppie. Next came Stacey, garbed in the first skirt and blouse Geoffrey had seen her in since the first day of kindergarten. Finally, out strutted Janet. He hardly recognized her with her Doris Day hairdo and a shapeless down-to-her-ankles gray tent dress. *Who are these strange ones?*

Of course, it was his family, and he got down on his hands and knees like an urchin begging for pennies. "We've got to stop these tyrants, my people. They're trying to twist our lives to their right-wing ways. I take orders from no one." He rose, stuck out his chest. "I'm the general of 2311 Tranquility Lane." His eyes shot over to the two guards, yawning, though with 45s still trained on him. "I don't bow to rule makers and their Boy Scout notions, and I refuse to follow their silly regulations. Geoffrey Mellon is his own man and—" He stopped short when he realized no one was listening. Janet had cupped her ears with her hands, children the

same.

His family's response was not what he expected, especially the words that poured out of their mouths. "You should have obeyed the rules, Dad," Michael said. "Ever since I was a little kid, you preached obedience. Get with it, old man." Stacey shook her finger at him. "You always were a troublemaker. You're not my father anymore." She turned to her brother. "Let's bounce, Michael." She held her nose. "Something reeks here."

His eyes snapped to Janet for support – Janet, his loving wife of sixteen years. His number-one fan had to be rooting for him. Instead, he thought his hearing had crashed as she spouted, "You're a disgrace to Belladonna Gardens, a disappointment and humiliation to your family. You've let politics get the best of you. What's wrong with a nice bunch of conservative do-gooders?" She returned the rattlesnake sneer he had given her earlier. Signaled the guards. "Off with his head, fellows."

Gun barrels tickling his ear, the guards shoved him into the rear seat of the Mustang. It roared out of the driveway, siren full-blasting, horns honking from the convoy in back of them led by P.P. Prestover's Edsel, followed by the Hs' Malibu and a stream of pitch-black Fords and Chevys and an occasional Oldsmobile, U.S. of A. flags flapping in the wind as far as the eye could see.

* * *

No one took off Geoffrey's head. His ankles felt strange, though, hardly able to budge his feet. They were shackled, and he was in a dungeon, dining on bread and water and pistachio nuts. He thought he heard the Hs scolding him. "Watch the shells, Geoffrey!"

Janet and the children? He never heard from them again. He struggled to get up and hobbled over to his cell window, able to make out his house. Janet's Sienna, sporting fresh black paint and masking the Toyota insignia, was parked in the driveway. Next to it a showroom-new Edsel.

Robert Davis's short stories have been published in literary journals such as Rosebud, The Griffin and Boston Literary magazine.

Carl's Heightened Sense of Loss

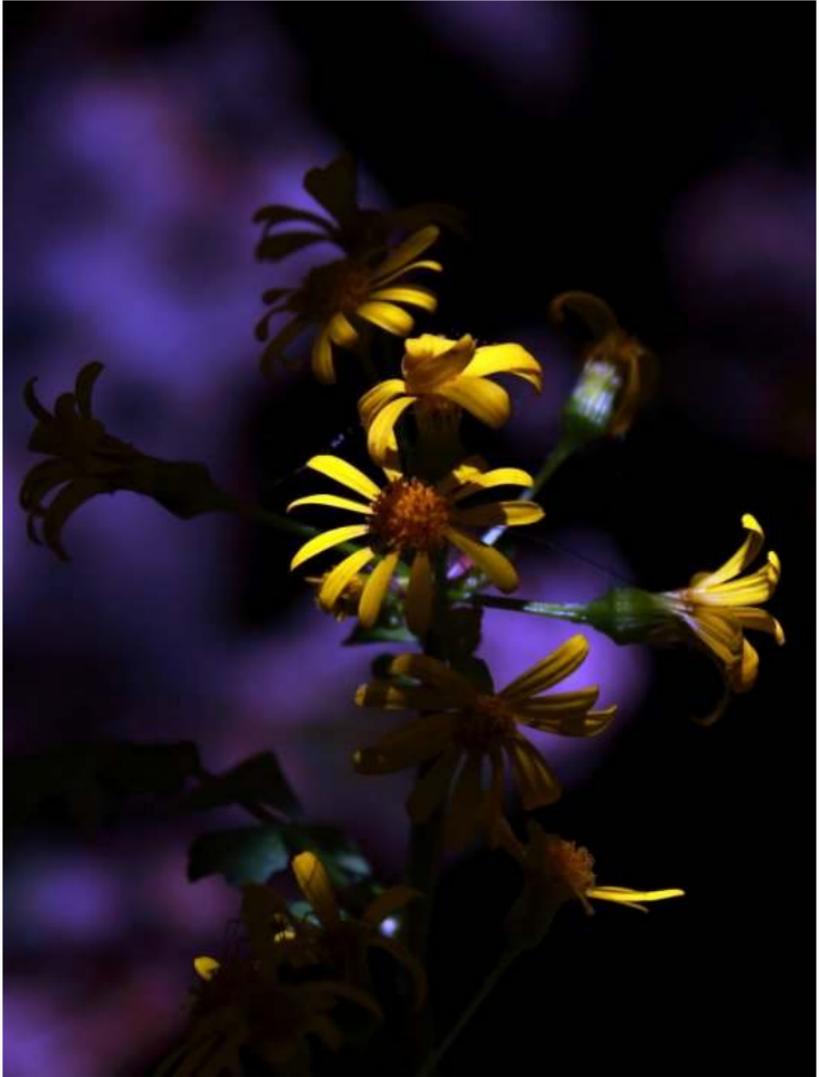
Teachers call me Carl in school. "Carl, get over here!" they scream. They don't know my secret name is Tiger. Sometimes, it's Carol. Being Carol is a defensive trick when the Schumacher brothers chase me and threaten me. I don't think of that though. Don't remember. It's easy to forget. I'm not so old I sift through memories the way people shuffle postcards they keep for no good reason. What I remember is discovering my dad's stash of pills and getting zonked. Then he whips me with his belt. I don't know whether the pain comes after an experience, or I discover new experiences because of the wounds. Mom takes off about the same time as our dentist, Dr. Gustafson, disappears. Then I get beaten more. By the Schumachers, as well as by my dad, who's angry at everything. I don't know why I'm always getting beat up, but drinking my dad's whiskey with Coke — sometimes smoking his pot — deadens the pain. It's good stuff, until I get to college and find better whiskey — and rum, tequila, gin, you name it. That's when I get married to Linda, but everyone is named Linda in those days. She's a good drinker and has a perfectly symmetrical vagina. A joy to behold, which she shaves twice a week. Truth is, Linda has a baby so her dad says we have to get married. St. Louis isn't to her liking, I think, because she takes off the way my mom disappeared with Dr. Gustafson. Leaves me with the baby. It isn't all bad at that time. Remember how everyone is getting rich then? My being a CPA in an accounting firm makes it possible to hire Marisol, a full-time nanny. She's a Cuban expatriate who sings in nightclubs, except now she's down to belting out *guajira* country music in bowling alleys. I'm busy building my 401(k), making loans, siphoning the company's odd change into a Bahamas account, and driving around in my

Porsche Carrera with Marisol. Enough financial security there for little Carl's education and my retirement. The baby isn't a baby anymore. He'll graduate in two years and go to an Ivy. Then little Carl runs away about the time the mob — an Asian mob in East St. Louis — breaks my leg. I loan money to office workers who spend their lunch hours buying cheap stocks and flipping houses. Accounting is such mundane work. I think the mobsters are angry because I pushed too far into their street-corner banking. I'm drinking a lot now, but I can't remember details very well. Being laid up in the hospital gives me an idea. I never think of myself as Carl anymore. I haunt the Saint Louis Art Museum and would rather explore events and objects that require sensitivity. Even the Tiger part is feminine, unlike lions, say, that are masculine. My boss doesn't care if I'm Carol when I get discharged in my new body. Doesn't matter anyway because he's indicted, the Feds perps walk him in front of the TV cameras, and the firm is dissolved. I get to collect unemployment. I can drink on government checks and shop at Nieman-Marcus, browse Nordstrom catalogs, read *Vogue* in coffee houses. Shopping helps to ease the sting of memory, which creeps into my thoughts more often. My leg still bothers me. Dr. Greg prescribes Percocet for it, but events get out of hand when we go drinking and partying. He wants a baby he can name after me, and I tell him he can call him "Carl" or her "Linda" or it "Tiger." They all sound good. Medicine today is really terrific, and the baby is doing well, but he likes Capt. Morgan rum when he's teething and that can upset a person's stomach. I think drinking may not be the greatest panacea, however. Dr. Greg loses his liver, which means essentially his life. The funeral is beautiful and ironic and celebratory, as most are. But I miss Dr. Greg's passion, our wild parties, his funny pills. Little Tiger soon develops a symbiotic relationship with my old nanny, Marisol. They develop their own TV show about people who disappear, except when they return for one episode, and they become celebrities. Wouldn't it be funny if they find my mother and wife? It's only a matter of time

now. Marisol's pregnant and I'll be a grandmother. Maybe that's why I return to the hospital. Depression and atrial fibrillation. Maybe it's also because I have an asymmetrical vagina and other mothers call me "pushy" at PTA meetings. Did I tell you medicine is really fantastic nowadays? A penis is a funny thing anyway, especially because my new one doesn't work as well as the last. A few weeks later I get my driver's license back as Carl. I'll need a new photo, however, because those guys in the mob really don't forget. Or is it because I opened a street bank again in East St. Louis? I can't remember. This beating is really bad. This morning I overhear the nurses say I'm not going to make it. Here I thought I'd made it all these years. A non-denominational minister comes by and asks if I have any regrets. I tell him I don't think so. Just a generalized sense of loss. But they're coming now to put a sheet over me and wheel me down the corridor. It's been interesting. I have to say that about life.

Walt Giersbach's fiction has appeared in Bewildering Stories, Big Pulp, Corner Club Press, Every Day Fiction, Everyday Weirdness, Gumshoe Review, Lunch Hour Stories, Mouth Full of Bullets, Mystery Authors, OG Short Fiction, Northwoods Journal, Paradigm Journal, Pif Magazine, Short Fiction World, Southern Fried Weirdness, The Short Humour Site and Written Word. He was 6th place winner of the 79th annual Writer's Digest writing competition in October 2011. Two volumes of short stories, Cruising the Green of Second Avenue, have been published by Wild Child (www.wildchildpublishing.com)

"Can You Find the Spider" by Amber Forbes



Dr. Avery smiled as he folded his hands over an open patient file. "Mr. and Mrs. Tate, I assure you that there is nothing wrong with your daughter."

Molly's therapist had been seeing her once a week for months because of her imaginary friends and strange behavior around the house, but as much as Mrs. Tate persisted, he could find nothing wrong. She was just an average five-year-old girl.

* * *

"James? Are you still home?" Anna Tate called up the stairs. No answer. "I guess not," she decided, heading off to the kitchen to finish making Molly's afternoon snack. James worked hard, but Anna wished he was home a lot more. He barely put his work down long enough to sit down with the family for a nice home-cooked dinner, which had her doubting his commitment as a father to Molly and a husband to her. She loved him deeply, but work was more family than them.

Anna hummed softly to herself as she set a sandwich on the table and went to the window to call Molly inside. She paused at the window and looked out into her fenced-in yard. She couldn't see Molly.

"Molly?" she called out as she opened the window. "Molly!"

Something moved behind her and Anna spun around, her heart racing. Molly was sitting at the table, taking a bite out of her sandwich. Anna let out a relieved breath and sat down across her daughter. Molly had been running off with her imaginary friends lately, and just last week

she found Molly digging a hole in the neighbor's yard up the street. Just a few days ago, she had been building a fort of sorts down in the basement. Both times she said her friends told her to do these things.

"Molly, you've got to let me know when you come inside, sweetie, so I know where you--" Her daughter looked up, then down at her hands. "What do you have all over your hands? Paint?"

"I'm sorry, Mommy," she said, looking down at her red hands.

"Let's get you washed up a little bit before you eat." Anna washed Molly's hands in the sink and then sat her back down in her chair.

"Okay honey, just finish up your snack and then you can go back outside if you want."

"I want to finish my present for Daddy."

"What present is that?"

"I'm painting him a picture," Molly said with a grin.

"Ah, so that's how you got paint all over your hands." Anna smiled back, taking Molly's dirty dishes and putting them into the sink.

"It's a heart!" Molly said, practically bouncing out of her seat with excitement. "I wanna finish it before he gets home."

"Alright, you better hurry up though. He'll be home when the long hand is pointed straight up and the short hand is pointed straight down," Anna said, pointing to the clock on the wall.

Molly looked at the clock, her eyes growing wide, and she hurried off to her room. Anna sighed, sitting down and watching her daughter run off. Molly was exhausting her, and if she disappeared one more time, she swore she would put a bell around the girl's neck.

Anna grabbed her laptop from the counter and sat down at the

table to reread what she had written earlier.

Greg sat on the edge of the railing and watched the tide rolling in from the sea—the waves crashing against the wgdjhe dhiehdie ggy-dyb ejdle hdeodhe ehdieo dehiow dheiw8493032jnkilj2jj jkl[]['a/?

Anna glared at the screen. Her daughter had written more than she had. Molly was always messing with her manuscripts. Her imaginary friends likely told her to do this little number. This manuscript was supposed to have been done two weeks prior, but was it? Of course not. Inspiration for this story had kind of gone out the window, so to speak, around the same time James started working late. She guessed she never really realized just how much of a muse his presence was.

"Wait!" she spoke to herself, erasing the nonsense her daughter had typed. "The window...that's perfect!" She finally had the ending she needed to complete the last novel of her series.

She hadn't really kept track of how long she had been typing for, but all of a sudden she was being jolted from her writing trance by Molly.

"Mommy, I ran out of red paint."

"It's okay, sweetie, we'll get you more tomorrow when we go to the store," Anna said, her eyes barely leaving the computer screen.

"But I have to finish this *today*," she whined, but Anna was already back in writing mode.

"We'll go soon, just let me finish this part." Molly left the room and came back some time later.

"Can we go now?" she asked. "Please? Daddy's going to be home soon."

Anna glanced up at the clock—a little less than three hours. Two if you counted that she needed to start making dinner around five.

"Alright Molly, go get your shoes on, I'm almost done." Anna heard Molly run off to find her shoes and the soft footsteps of her returning not a minute later.

"I'm coming, I'm coming..." Anna said, saving her file and standing up. "I just need to find my purse and car keys, then we can go."

Molly smiled, excited again.

"Okay, let's go—" The phone rang. Thinking it would be James, she answered it with, "Dinner will be ready at six." It's a great way to answer your husband who usually called to check in, but not the best way to answer your overly intrusive publisher who was in town on business and would love her dinner with a side of final manuscript that night. Anna wished it had been James.

"Sorry, Sheena... yes, it's almost done. I uh...yes, I can have it by tonight. Okay. See you at six." Anna hung up the phone, embarrassed she just told her publisher when dinner was, and flustered that she needed to finish this novel tonight. She looked down at her daughter and set her purse and keys aside.

"I'm sorry, Molly, but something's come up. We're having a guest for dinner and Mommy needs to do a little bit more work before he gets here. We'll go to the store first thing in the morning and I'll help you finish Daddy's present tomorrow."

Molly looked at Anna, her eyes welling up with tears as she took off toward her room, slamming her door behind her.

Anna sighed, hating that her daughter would be angry at her for the rest of the night because of this. She stared at the screen and watched the blinking line taunt her with the blank page she needed to fill. She sat there for a long moment before getting up and heading to Molly's room.

"Knock-knock," Anna said, tapping the door twice before opening. Molly was sitting on the floor next to her painted heart only halfway done, snipping at the edges with scissors. Anna frowned, feeling like a horrible mother. "Will you talk to me?" she asked, sitting down on the floor next to her daughter.

Molly shook her head. She avoided her mother's gaze, her eyes locked on the princess lamp on her dresser.

"I really, really want red paint..."

* * *

James set down his briefcase and hung up his coat, rubbing his sore neck absently as he made his way into the kitchen. "Anna? Sorry I'm late, there was crazy traffic and Larry needed me to stay late to help him finish up some paperwork."

Work drained him. It really did. But someone needed to pay the bills while Anna waited for her creativity to flow. He knew what he was getting into when he asked a writer to marry him, but times were harder now than they were back then, what with the recession and a child.

His usual routine of coming home, eating dinner and relaxing on the couch was disrupted by an empty kitchen. James looked around. Anna usually had dinner on the table by now. What was going on?

"Anna? Molly?" No answer. "Hmm, must be over at the neighbors."

James walked into the living room and pressed the play button on the answering machine. Seventeen new messages. Wow.

"Mr. and Mrs. Tate, this is Dr. Avery. We spoke the other day about your daughter. There's been a file mix-up and well, I really need to speak with you both as soon as possible. Please contact me at..."

James stopped listening. That's when he saw them. He followed

the trail of tiny footprints past the darkened windows to Molly's room and froze in the doorway. There sitting on the ground, finger-painting, was his daughter--covered in red. Beside her was the bloodied body of his wife.

"Anna!" He ran to her and knelt beside her, checking her breathing...heartbeat... nothing...

"Molly! What--" he looked up and saw Molly holding a pair of bloody scissors in one hand, a paintbrush in the other. He grabbed for the scissors and ripped them from her tiny grip. His heart was racing as he tried to stop the bleeding from his wife's chest. "What have you *done*?"

"Mommy wouldn't bring me to get red paint, Daddy...so I made some new red paint. I made this for you." Molly held up the sopping painting and made him take it. James looked down at the bleeding heart and let out a sob. He needed to call for an ambulance or something. 9-1-1.

"Do you like it Daddy? Do you like it?" He looked at her, but couldn't find the words. He vaguely remembered hearing the doorbell ring, but he couldn't move. He sat in a pool of his wife's blood, holding the scissors that had torn through her sweet flesh and couldn't move.

"Daddy?" Molly asked, her voice changing. She was looking first behind him and then him. "What did you do to Mommy?"

"Untitled" by Amber Forbes



Malicent burst through the door into Davis's round little study. Papers swirled in the sudden draft.

"You'll hang for this, Davis."

Davis steeled himself. *Don't cry.* Tears were for the weak.

"Nice of you to knock first, Malicent."

Malicent looked around and shrugged. Parchment lay scattered over the floor, blown off the neat stacks Davis had arranged them in. Ink still gleamed on their yellow surfaces.

"Bastards like you don't deserve a knock, Davis. I have evidence."

Something inside Davis hardened and died. He had known this day was coming.

"Sodomy with another man." Malicent's brown eyes were feverish. He held up a statement of witnesses. "Crime most horrific under Savonola's wise teachings."

Davis doubted the grim God of Justice's teachings had ever been wise, but he held his tongue. If he was smart, he could get out of this alive. If he was smart-mouthed, Malicent might just take the warhammer on his belt to Davis's head.

"I'll need the witness sheet," Davis said. "Who are my accusers?"

"Why, so you can hunt them down?"

"Look at me," Davis sighed. He was slim and short. His silk jerkin hung loose over a narrow chest. "You really think *I* could bring your wit-

ness to justice?"

"You're a Hellspawn. Gods alone know what powers the Underworld has vested in you."

"If I had supernatural powers, might I have struck you dead instead of letting you into my study?"

Malicent drew himself up. The gold thread in his coat gleamed in the light from a window.

"I am one of the Blessed of Justice. Your powers have no sway over me."

Davis groaned. Goddamn religion. He should have expected something like that from any system that pulled its theories out of theologians' collective asses.

"Surely if I had Underworld powers, I would have vanished in a puff of smoke the moment you entered my office?"

Malicent frowned, then shook his head like he was shaking off a fly.

"It's getting worse, Davis," he said roughly. "You know what we've been through the past summer. Grain turning up moldy, riots in the streets....that thrice-damned ninja alight on every tongue."

"You can't blame me for the actions of a serial killer."

"He's a servant of the Underworld, just as you are. Your kind bring the plague and the famine, and if this city is to be whole then you must not be a part of it."

Davis knew where Malicent's case was leading. As a sodomite, he would be excised from society like a gangrenous limb. He fingered the knife in his pocket. He had never been a skilled fighter, but Malicent was close enough for a child to hit with a good throw. If he killed the

preacher, there would be no proof of Davis's crimes except a flammable letter of witness.

No. Davis couldn't do that. Malicent had come to him in good faith, and he couldn't kill a man who had only come to talk. Even to save his life. He doubted the preacher had any such compunctions, but that was the difference between the bigots and the truly just.

Malicent glared at him, oblivious.

"I will bring you to court tomorrow. The Justices shall decide your guilt. Within the week you'll swing by a rope."

Davis nodded. Inside, he moaned and cried at the knowledge that he would be dead in a week, but walls slammed down around his soul and cut off the pain. He couldn't show weakness.

"Is that all?"

Malicent's eyes widened at the calm tone. They could have been discussing yesterday's ledgers.

"Yes, sodomite bastard. Enjoy your crimes before you die for them."

Davis almost laughed. "My lover was found dead two days ago. I doubt I could enjoy anything with a corpse."

"A deviant like yourself knows no bounds."

"None when you imagine me making love to you, I'm sure. If you don't mind, I have work to do."

"I've posted two servants of Justice to follow you. If you leave this house, they will know and they will find me."

Davis kept his face smooth. Malicent's red robes swirled as he spun and departed.

Davis picked up his papers and despaired. He had been on the

move for ten years, one step ahead of men like Malicent in a dozen nations. He felt old and tired and hopeless. Even if it meant his death, part of him wanted to just stop resisting.

He considered that for a moment, thinking about how nice it would be to simply relax into authority's hold. Then he growled. He hadn't survived ten years by giving up every time the servants of Savonola caught him. Let other men lie down for the fates. He would fight. Not for anybody else, not for his former lovers or for opponents of the oppressive Justice followers. For himself. Life was sweet, and he would claw his way out of worse scrapes to enjoy it.

How could he beat fate?

His mind spun. It would be easier if he were truly a servant of the Underworld. But the Underworld, like the supernatural powers of its servants, were aught but a myth created to manipulate men like Malicent.

If he was going to survive, he would have to rely on reality, not fantasy.

He had money saved, like he always did. Two years ago in Flasonia he had escaped by commandeering a ship to take him a continent away. But Malicent's order was less liked in Flasonia, and he had found captains willing to risk the ban on carrying a sodomite. Here, captains feared the iron grip of Savonola's followers.

Five years ago, he had dodged conviction by bribing the witnesses against him. That was impossible now. He didn't even know who they were.

Davis grinned as the sparks flared in his mind. When he was convicted, he would be publicly hung. There would be a crowd. If he could bribe certain citizens, if he could seed them into the crowd, they could start a riot that would end with his escape.

He gripped the edges of his wicker seat. That option was risk-laden. He couldn't know if his seeds would incite a riot, or simply keep his money. But he could make them take an oath before the gods to help him; not many men had the nads to break a pledge like that.

He couldn't know if they would successfully start a fracas, or if said fracas would end in his rescue. But he was out of options. And he had survived tougher scrapes through hazier gambles.

His knuckles whitened around the chair. How many gold coins did he have? Who would he need to bribe, and how soon could he meet them? His eyes gleamed as he plotted to once again dodge the fates.

* * *

Davis stepped into the cool night, closing Cornas' door behind him. Cornas had been the last of the men Davis had come to see, and the only one who agreed to start a riot to save the gay man from the noose.

It had cost most of Davis' fortune, but the benefit was worth the cost. Cornas was a powerful man. If he, his servants, and his private guards all attended Davis' execution and swarmed the stage, they could rescue him.

A breeze kicked up, and Davis smiled. He started walking down the cobblestone path. His leather shoes quieted his steps.

He was almost back at his home. If he could just get inside, he would probably be safe until his hanging.

"Halt, sodomite!"

Malicent's voice rang out. The red-robed preacher stepped out of the shadows a dozen feet from Davis. Gloved hands hefted his warhammer. A pair of muscled guards appeared behind him.

Davis cursed. They must have been waiting for him.

Axes gleamed in the guards' hands. Davis doubted they knew he planned to escape his execution—how could they?—but either way they had come to kill.

Despair threatened to flood Davis. Walls slammed down around his emotions, trying to stem the tide. *Focus*. If he kept his head, he could still get out of this alive. He drew his knife and lowered his hips.

Malicent fingered his warhammer. The preacher grinned. Davis groaned.

An object flashed through his vision. Something small and sharp. A throwing star. One of the guards roared and fell.

A black shape dropped from a nearby rooftop. It landed in a crouch on the ground. Black robes swathed what looked like a tall, lean man.

A sword flashed, and blood spouted from the other guard's arm. His axe dropped from useless fingers.

The first guard struggled to his feet. The black-clad man pirouetted and punched his throat. He gurgled and fell.

The remaining guard growled and kicked him. The mysterious fighter staggered. The guard raised his foot to stomp him into the stone. Davis watched, heart frozen in suspense. If the robed attacker died, Malicent and the other guard would kill Davis.

The black-clad warrior kicked the guard's leg out. Something snapped, and the guard crumpled. Davis's rescuer leaped to his feet.

Crack. Malicent's warhammer thudded into Davis's rescuer's ribs. Bones snapped, and the man collapsed.

Malicent advanced, wary. The black-clad fighter scrambled

backwards, trying to regain his footing. Malicent followed. His warhammer spun, keeping the man down.

Cold fear trickled down Davis's spine. If he tried to intervene, Malicent could kill him. But if he didn't, the preacher would butcher his rescuer.

Davis leapt forward. He buried his knife in the preacher's back. Soft flesh yielded under the blade. Malicent screamed. Davis hit the ground. He covered his eyes and scrambled back, praying to Gods Malicent wouldn't smash his skull like a melon.

A clatter jarred him from his terror. Not breathing, he opened his eyes and saw Malicent's warhammer in the road. The black-robed warrior was back on his feet. His fists connected, once and again. Malicent fell to the ground. The man reached down and snapped his neck.

Davis took in the carnage and drew back. *What the hell...?*

His rescuer drew himself up and let his cowl fall.

His face was beautiful, soft and delicate. Big brown eyes looked over the massacre like it was a tragedy.

Davis eyed the fallen, wide-eyed. "You're a hard man."

"Only for you," the stranger responded. He winked. "I like short and slim in a partner."

His voice was cultured. Those eyes stared at Davis. He was the sexiest man Davis had ever seen.

"Flarias, ninja of...well, wherever the hell I want, really." He slapped his chest in a nobleman's greeting. Davis followed suit.

"Davis, of...somewhere far away. What brought you here?"

"I follow the bastards in red." Flarias winked again. "I don't mind the killing, but it would be more fun if they weren't so militantly hetero."

They're not as attractive when they're trying to kill me."

Davis shook his head. His brain struggled to wrap itself around the sudden turn of events.

"They'll find the bodies...the authorities. They know Malicent and I weren't bosom buddies. They'll suspect me."

Flarias smiled. "Not if you're already gone. I have passage via ship to Oncania, if you'd like to join."

"Oncania? They're just as anti-*our-kind* as here."

"Yes, but a good deal worse at finding us. We can hide there for a few years, track the Reds, stay safe."

Flarias slid forward and kissed Davis. His mouth was soft and passionate. Davis closed his eyes.

Then he jerked away.

"We just met..."

Flarias shrugged apologetically. "I just killed three guys for a man I wouldn't know from the king. I've never been good at taking things slow."

Davis took a deep breath.

"It's a long journey to Oncania. We'll have plenty of time to get to know each other en route."

Flarias shrugged and gestured Davis to follow him.

"The ship's this way. It leaves tomorrow."

Davis nodded. His mind was still dazed, but as he emerged from his shock he found himself increasingly attracted to Flarias. The man was beautiful, and there was something undeniably attractive about his casual flair, his flamboyance and easy smile.

Davis grabbed his shoulder, and when Flarias spun, Davis kissed him. Hard. He basked in the man's scratchy stubble, the sweet taste of his mouth. When they broke away, Davis laughed.

"Or we can get to know each other right now."

Flarias growled playfully and kissed him.

Julian Adorney has been a writer since third grade, when his teacher made his class write a fantasy story apiece. He was hooked. Since then, most of his life has revolved around his writing: He's written short stories, taken writing workshops, and is an English major from University of Colorado at Boulder. When not writing, he enjoys hiking and getting together with friends. His fiction can be read at Untreed Reads Publishing ('Deals') Shadowcast Audio Anthology ('Souls & Snowboarding') and Gypsy Shadows Publishing ('Freedom').

Though Joan Nevens knew women who busied themselves with community organizations, she was not one of them. Bake and garden sales, monthly meetings with all their quibbling and social hierarchies were not for her. She couldn't see the point of spending two hours baking something, driving it to some destination and sitting in the cold or sun to sell it. Hours of labor that raised possibly ten bucks? Why not just write a check to the charity and be done with it?

Such an attitude did not promote what medical studies demand for living to very old age--volunteer work and close social ties. She was lacking in the latter, too, unless one counted phone conversations with friends, some of them house bound and others in far places. She had no family within four-hundred miles other than an estranged brother and a nephew who, though telephone friendly, was busy. Going out was a rare occasion since her Ben had died. Basically, since then, she had, if she were to admit the truth, just been waiting for her own death.

In her reading chair by the side window in her living room, she used a ruler to discreetly lift a slat in the blind. The Merrills appeared to be engaged in another drama. Evie Merrill, the hapless mother, was standing on her porch screaming at someone inside the house. Joan let the slat fall back into place and continued her self-analysis.

Women in her privileged (in comparison to most people's in the world) living conditions, often lasted into their late eighties and she was only sixty-five, yet why was it she felt as if she'd given up? She indulged in her little daily pleasures, yet no longer felt any engagement with the world. Who really cared if the library was able to purchase new books when one could download ebooks? What did it matter if new bulbs

were planted around the police station or a new theater group started in town? The world, she had by now surmised, was a never-changing illusion. TV news told the same story relentlessly: political factions out to destroy each other, men posturing and starting wars, lunatics shooting groups of strangers, men and now even women murdering their families instead of quietly knocking themselves off, nations forming and disbanding, celebrities going into rehab, then handing out advice they had no business giving. What was the point?

Was this clinical depression? Should she make an appointment? They'd just put her on antidepressants and every person she knew who took them 1. never got off, or 2. didn't get any saner. She sighed, so missing Ben. He was a wonderful distraction from the real bottom line of life. He'd been a wonderful man. Now there was nothing. They'd had no children. There was no one to check her into the nursing home once she lost her mind and bowel control and there was no one for her to pamper with gifts and cookies. Her nephew had no children.

God, she was bored.

A faint scream issued from next door, necessitating once again lifting the blind slat. Evie Merrills bolted off the porch and threw herself on to the grass, all very undignified, dressed as she was in a hiked-up nightgown. The daughter, Simone was her name, a very sophisticated name to be sure, sauntered down the porch steps as if nothing unusual was happening. Though Joan supposed that to Simone, from her own observation of the Merrills' family life, her mother's behavior was not noteworthy.

She twisted the ruler to prop up two slats in order to obtain a wider view. While Evie now lay inert as if playing dead, her underpants visible, Simone had worked her way to the walkway between the two houses and stopped by a rhododendron bush to root in a vest pocket. The pink vest was tight and stopped at Simone's tiny waist. Her long, dark blond hair hung sexily over one eye.

Joan remembered when the girl was eight or nine and used to stop over for iced tea and peanut butter cookies. Since then, their contact had been infrequent.

Now Simone was probably five foot six, and size four, her rib cage so small that Joan wondered how her lungs had room to expand. Joan mildly envied her figure. She herself had always been stocky, though at one time relatively thin and several men had expressed their admiration. Those days were long gone; the doctor always suggested that she try Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig.

Simone found what she was looking for, extracted what Joan perceived as a capsule, then popped it dry into her mouth and swallowed.

Joan stood up, dropping the ruler with a clatter. The girl was taking drugs! While that drama queen of a mother lay out there humiliating herself? She found herself shaking, which surprised her. It wasn't as if she wasn't acquainted with kids using drugs, being that she spent half her time watching television. But seeing it right in front of one's eyes was different from the impersonal reporting of strangers.

She felt a rush of hatred toward Evie, then tempered it. Clearly, if someone was displaying themselves in a ratty nightgown on the front lawn, it was likely that she was not all there. Or drunk. In which case, what kind of example was that to set the girl who was already engaging in her own self-abuse?

She stood up and walked to the front door. Should she go out there? Would she just be meddling? She remembered interfering old neighbors from her childhood and what people had said about them. But she opened the door and went out.

She found Simone still partly concealed behind the bush, probably letting whatever pill she took spread through her system.

"Is your mother okay, Simone?"

"Does she look okay?" snapped the girl. "She's drunk! That's

what she does, get wasted, freak and pass out. Soon as my father leaves, which he does about every three months, who can blame him? She'll lay out there till it's dark."

"It's a bit chilly," said Joan. "Pretty cold at night. Are you going to let her stay there?"

Simone gave Joan an arctic stare. "I don't care if she freezes!" She turned and headed to the street, pulling out her cell phone to punch in a number.

Joan hesitated, then walked to the prone and motionless Evie. Her bare legs were veiny in the back, lumpy in some places. Not a pretty sight.

"Evie?" Joan said, leaning over her.

Evie groaned, but did not move. Joan looked around, considering what to do, then walked onto their porch to knock on the door. Simone's brother Carl might be of help. Maybe, maybe not. He had mild Asperger's. Joan did not know him except for the occasional hello, but she'd heard about him from other neighbors. He was supposedly brilliant, but could be insulting. Joan had read about people with his affliction and hoped that she wouldn't take anything he said personally.

He answered the door immediately, as if he had been standing right inside it. He appeared interested and alert.

"Your mother might need an ambulance," she told him.

"I doubt it," he said. "She's done this before. After a while, she just gets up and takes a shower."

Joan studied him. He was shorter than his sister, stockier, and wore black rimmed glasses that looked right out of the 1960s. His plain white T-shirt and Levis were neat, his dark hair combed straight back. "You want to come in?" he asked, not looking her in the eye.

"Sure," she said. Something about him made her fall into a matter-of-fact state of mind.

"Your mother drinks too much, doesn't she?" she said.

"Yes," Carl said. "You want to come up to my room? I have animals you'll enjoy seeing."

"What kind of animals?" she asked. "I hope no tarantulas."

"No spiders," he said. "Do you have arachnophobia? Is that why you asked that question?"

"Yes, I rather do," she said, following him as if she were in ninth grade and visiting to study with him. They climbed the steps to his room. What was she doing? His mother was passed out in the front yard!

"You're not afraid of snakes, are you?" Carl asked, hesitating in the doorway. "Or gerbils? Or turtles? Or ants?"

"Not at all," she assured him.

He nodded and led her into the room, then waved his arm at his cages. "Let's start with Geraldine. She's a two year old corn snake. I feed her once a week or every ten days. I got her from Justin Sandover who was a senior last year. He went to college and couldn't keep her. You can hold her if you like, just for a minute."

The tour went on for fifteen minutes and Joan was not sure why she was allowing it. But she felt restful listening to Carl. His dry facts were hypnotizing and his turtle George adorable. She could see that what she had experienced from other teenage boys--a sullenness or lack of interest in anyone older than twenty with the exception of rock stars, was missing from this boy. So far he had not insulted her.

He set the lid back down on George's terrarium and said, "You're pretty old, aren't you? Do you think that most people get fat when they're your age?"

Wow. Joan swallowed her first reaction, which was to let him have it. Instead she decided to answer in his own dry terms. "I'm sixty-five, which isn't super old for American women in this century so far. Lately, people have been growing fatter and fatter, possibly due to the additives in food and lack of exercise. I'm about twenty-five pounds overweight, which probably isn't obese, but isn't very good."

He nodded, satisfied. "You're pretty nice," he said. Apparently, she had passed some test.

"Now, what's the deal with your mother?" she asked.

He sat down on his bed and opened a book on reptiles. "She and my father fight all the time because she drinks booze and he has a girlfriend. She gets weird for a few days, drinks a lot, then sleeps it off and makes a lot of food. I don't think Dad likes me. I wish he would stay away all the time. It's better when just my mom is here and he doesn't upset her. But Simone thinks she's nuts."

Joan nodded. "Is your sister very upset about it all?"

His face took on a closed expression. "She's not happy. I don't like it when Simone isn't happy." His right hand started to flap against his thigh.

Suddenly, a voice shrieked behind her. "What are you doing in my house? Who do you think you are? Get out!"

Joan swirled around, knocking her hand against the corner of Carl's desk. The pain was shocking. She stammered, "I-I was worried about you. I was about to call an ambulance!"

"Well, there's nothing to worry about," snapped Evie. She looked blowsy and her face was florid. "We don't need your help. That's the trouble with lonely old ladies--they have nothing to do but interfere."

The words slammed into Joan's gut. She pushed past the drunken woman and clomped down the stairs with the energy of someone much younger.

She heard Carl call out, "'Bye, Mrs. Nevens," then his mother speak sharply. "Did you invite her in here? I told you not to invite people in here! There's no reason for other people to know our business!"

Carl said, "I wanted to show her my animals."

As she left the house, Joan's energy dissipated and she felt drained of...of what? By the time she was in her own yard, she realized it was hope. And she had *liked* Carl. Was she now forbidden to speak to

him again?

She moved her chair away from the window and festered. "Let them rot," she said to her cat, Summer. "Old alchie, slob that she is." But she worried about the children in spite of her anger.

Two days later she was doing her e-mail when she heard a hesitant knock at the back door. There stood Simone, her expression sullen.

"Yes?" said Joan, wary now.

"Um, could I come in?" asked the girl.

Joan stood aside to let her pass.

Simone perched on the edge of a kitchen chair. She looked tired.

"I thought maybe you could tell me what the law is or something," she said.

"The law?" said Joan.

"Yeah, like if your mother isn't taking care of business. She'd kill me if she knew I was over here. She doesn't like you."

"So I gathered," said Joan. "What'd I ever do to her?"

Simone shrugged. "She just gets ideas in her head. She's delusional. I don't blame my father for leaving, but what're we supposed to do for money? How're we supposed to eat, pay the electricity, the cable? She has money to keep getting booze, but she sure isn't letting us have any! I don't need this when I'm trying to study for my SATs. And Carl has special classes to get to outside of school. I don't have my license yet. Dad was supposed to help me get it."

Joan breathed harder, trying to concentrate. She had no idea what to do about these things. How could she get Evie to straighten up when the woman wouldn't even speak to her? Should she supply the kids with money, but how much? Her income was reasonably generous, but fixed. If she let them stay with her, who was to say that drunken woman wouldn't show up and be violent? Joan had led a life free of drama, all that uproar messy people seemed to enjoy so much, no mat-

ter how much they whined about it.

"Well..." she said, hem-hawing. "Maybe someone at school would know what to do? A teacher or guidance counselor?"

"I hate the guidance counselor," snapped Simone. "And the psychologist is a perv. The only teacher I could talk to is out on maternity leave. I don't trust any of them. My friend asked her mother if we could stay with her for a while, but she said no. It was so embarrassing."

All Joan's former complaining now flashed through her mind - the loneliness, her feeling so useless, as if living were over. Yet now that life had come bursting back with all its complications, she wasn't sure she liked it. What she had yearned for were orderly, *pleasant* activities, not this ugly, needy *mess*.

Yet, the desperation on the girl's face, the same face that had been closed and sulky when she arrived--how could she turn that away? And that boy over there with his supposedly faulty brain, yet sweet, calm interest in things around him--who could let someone like that not have enough to eat?

"What do you want me to do?" she asked. "What exactly can I do? Considering how your mother feels about me?"

"I don't know," Simone said. "I've been calling Dad but he doesn't answer."

Suddenly, she convulsed, letting out a violent sob, but immediately pulled herself back into her stiff persona. Joan's hand shot out to touch the girl, but she thought better of it and pulled it back.

Simone stood up to go, her eyes hooded.

"Wait," said Joan as she darted to the dining room to fetch her handbag. She fished out what cash she had, forty dollars, and handed it over. "Get some stuff you need. I've got chili going in the crock pot. You and Carl come over and have some around five?"

The girl nodded, took the money and left. She seemed embarrassed.

When the two arrived for dinner, Carl was carrying a gym bag and his hamster cage. Joan eyed these warily. What this meant was pretty clear.

"You didn't bring the others," she said.

"They don't need to eat as often," he replied, looking at the floor.

Simone took Joan aside. "Please, Mrs. Nevens," she whispered. "I'll stay there and put up with her. But now she's threatening to kill herself. She got out some stupid little gun my dad bought her and was waving it around. Carl can't see stuff like that or he goes nuts. His bus hadn't come yet, so he missed it. She's asleep on the sofa now, so I took the gun. And then he and I went out the back."

"Where's the gun?" asked Joan. Her hands were trembling.

"It's in my purse," said Simone. "It's not loaded, I checked." She opened her bag.

"Wait!" said Joan. "Okay...come upstairs."

Simone told Carl to sit down, then followed Joan.

"Give it to me," Joan told her. "Now go back down. If someone asks you where it is, you can honestly say you don't know."

She slid it under her dresser. "I can't believe this is happening.

Back downstairs, she saw Carl's face was white and pinched. He sat stiffly on the sofa, both hands resting on top of the cage. Inside the hamsters rustled, which attracted the attention of the cat. "Watch Summer," she warned. "She might try to eat your friends. Why don't we keep that upstairs in a bedroom with the door shut?"

Though she did not usually experience mothering urges, Joan felt an odd inclination to protect the boy. She knew instinctively not to condescend. "Carl, I know that being here is upsetting for you. Tell me anything I can do to make you feel comfortable."

He didn't answer at first, just stared at the floor. Then he said, "She's crazy, she's crazy. People think I am but she is, not me."

"I believe you may be right," Joan said. "Though, the older I get,

the more I suspect that most people are crazy."

He said, "I don't like hot rooms. Do I have to sleep in a hot room? And I need to watch CSI tonight, then South Park. I watch South Park."

"All right," said Joan. "CSI and South Park it will be. And we can turn down the heat upstairs. How cold do you want it?"

"Sixty-four degrees," Carl said. "Exactly."

"Amazing," she said. "That's the temperature I prefer to sleep in too."

She helped him settle his things and the cage into the guest room.

They ate, though Carl had trouble with peppers in the chili and Simone felt it necessary to text someone three times during the meal. *I am not used to the rudeness of the current times*, Joan thought. The girl left as soon as her bowl was clean and Joan was not certain that she went home. This made her uneasy. Wouldn't Evie notice her son was missing? If Simone wasn't home to keep her under control, she might head over here.

The next day was Saturday and Carl, evidently, was to stay with her all day. Simone popped in at eight in the morning to drop off her laptop. "He'll keep busy on this. I brought some jello you can make. If you make it now, it'll be set by afternoon. He'll eat the whole bowl. Otherwise, regular ham sandwiches are fine. I've got a lot to do today."

"Wait!" said Joan, catching her arm as she went out the door. "What's going on over there?"

This was all more than she'd bargained for. What was the limit of helping a neighbor? Did other people put limits on what they did for others? Was Simone just using her to get out of taking care of her brother, to gain some time while Evie was out of it to go out with her friends? Joan watched the girl for signs of a suppressed smirk, or was she just being paranoid?

Simone stopped with a hint of exasperation. "Mrs. Nevens, my

mother is bipolar. It isn't just that she drinks too much. I need to find a ride to go see my dad. If he won't answer the phone, then I'll have to go get him. If I report all this to the school or whatever, they'll put Carl and me in foster homes. We'll run away before I let that happen, I mean it. You don't know what happens in those places!"

Joan suddenly felt the fool for suspecting the girl. "Go do what you need to do," she told her. "Do you need money?" She didn't have cash but could write her a check.

"I took some from her purse. I made her sign a check. It's the least she can do," snapped Simone. Then she looked guilty. "Well, she's sick, she can't help it."

"Doesn't she have medicine?" ventured Joan. "If she's bipolar, I mean?"

Simone hesitated. "Yeah, but...she doesn't take it. She starts to, then she stops."

"Here," Joan said, scribbling on a piece of paper. "It's my telephone number. Check in, okay?"

Simone took it without comment and left.

Joan turned back to Carl. He seemed quite occupied on the laptop.

"What are you looking up, if you don't mind my asking?" she said. She was thinking, *I need to go food shopping and I wanted to buy shoes, but would Carl go along? Wouldn't all that just upset him more, being out of his Asperger's routine?* She felt trapped.

Suddenly she longed for her former loneliness and uselessness. Life going on as usual, she thought ruefully. Always wanting what you don't have.

"I'm checking up on prime numbers," Carl said.

"What's a prime number?"

He explained and for a while, Joan forgot about the shopping. Other than crosswords, she'd done little in the past few years to expand

her mind. It was pleasant to listen to Carl explain things.

"Wanna see stuff about black holes?" he said.

She pulled up a chair and he didn't jerk away.

"Check this out," he said, as a web page opened to answers to questions people had posted about black holes. "This guy is thorough." He proceeded to click on various links so Joan could see some of the answers.

"Could the earth get sucked into one?" she said.

"I don't see why not," said Carl with satisfaction. "But let's see what he says."

The day passed with relative ease until Carl discovered that she had used ice to set his jello faster.

"No, no!" he shouted. "You're not supposed to set it with ice! You're supposed to let it set regularly. Now I can't eat it."

Her heart pounded and for a moment, she felt nauseated. No one had raised a voice to her for ages; she couldn't remember the last time. "Well," she said, "I guess I'll just eat it up then. If you won't, that is."

He watched her eat a bowl full, took one bite from his own, then upturned it onto the floor.

Shortly after, someone pounded on the front door. The pounding went on and on. It was obvious who it was. They heard Evie scream, "I know you're in there, you stole my children! I'm calling the police!"

Joan's hands were shaking. Carl looked at her, his eyes big. "It's her," he whispered. Then, "I'm sorry I spilled the jello, I'm sorry."

"The jello is the least of our worries," she told him.

They heard a scuffle outside, then nothing. But who knew where the woman had gone? Should she call the police herself in spite of Simone's reasons not to?

"I can't believe I've gotten myself into such a mess," Joan said aloud, not caring at this point if Carl heard her.

He set the laptop down and stood up. "A real mess," he said.

"We're in a real mess."

Joan had several thoughts that might or might not be crazy. What if Evie got so mad she set Joan's house on fire? What if she had another gun that Simone didn't know about? What if Joan got so upset she had a heart attack?

"I'm nervous," Carl said.

"Me too," she told him. "The doors are locked, but you know what? Let's go upstairs, okay? Bring your computer and we'll just hang out up there. We'll lock ourselves in."

He didn't fight her, but did as he was told. Once up there, they both fell asleep on her bed.

It was after five when the phone rang, Simone on the other end.

"Mrs. Nevens? I'm with my father. We're a couple miles from the house. He's going to have Mom committed, he says. She's got to get help and he's not going to put up with her refusal. I hate to ask you this, but could you keep Carl one more night? Is he freaking out?"

She didn't mention the tossed jello, which still lay in a lump on the living room floor. She supposed Summer had investigated it by now, though she wouldn't have eaten it, not jello.

"He's a little stressed, but not freaked out," she told the girl. "But your mother was pounding on my door. I didn't answer."

"Where is she now?"

Joan looked out her bedroom windows, but could see nothing. "I don't know."

"Is that Simone?" asked Carl behind her. His face was puffy from his nap.

She handed him the phone. Hearing his sister's voice made him smile.

Though exhausted from Carl's constant presence and wishing for the isolation she'd once so hated, she felt simultaneously a mildly cozy pleasure at the thought of company one more night. How long had it

been since someone else was in the house? Two years since her friend Connie, now passed away, had come for a three day stay? More than a year since her nephew had brought his new girlfriend? She realized that all she heard, most of the time, was a clock ticking or the TV. But now there was Carl's voice explaining black holes and prime numbers.

"Dad's back," he said, finished with his phone conversation. He seemed relieved, yet wary. She remembered the boy's ambivalence about his father.

"That's good," said Joan tentatively.

"Maybe," Carl said. "I missed my socializing lesson last week. And I want regular dinners again. Friday's supposed to be sausage pizza."

"What do you do at your socializing lesson?"

"Mrs. De Luca teaches me how to get along with people. What to say to them and stuff like that."

"I see. How's that going?"

"Okay. What are we having for dinner tonight?"

"Sausage pizza?"

"That's not Saturday night's dinner, but it's okay, I guess," he said.

Sunday morning, Simone appeared at the back door. She looked tired, but relaxed. "She's agreed to go into rehab," she said. "Dad is staying with us while she's gone and maybe when she comes home, I don't know."

She sat at the kitchen table and accepted a Diet Pepsi. "Once I get Carl back home, I'm going to sleep nine hours, I swear," she said. She was fishing for something in her jean pocket. When she pulled it out, Joan saw it was another capsule.

Alarmed, she asked, "What's that?"

Simone reached for her soda and gulped down the pill. "My allergy med. I'm a mess without it."

Joan's relief was palpable. She realized then that she cared

about the girl. And when Carl appeared in the kitchen doorway holding his hamster cage, she knew that he mattered too. These last three uncomfortable, even at times frightening, days had cracked open her world.

"Come on, Simone, I want to go home. I gotta feed George and I have my robotics project to work on."

Simone waved her hand at him. "Chill, kid," she said. "I need a break first."

Joan was honored that Simone considered being with her a break. She felt grateful, something she had not felt for quite some time.

Magaret Karmazin's credits include over one hundred stories published in literary and national magazines, including Rosebud, Chrysalis Reader, North Atlantic Review, Potomac Review, Confrontation, Absent Willow Review, Allegory, Pennsylvania Review and Wild Violet. Her stories are in The MacGuffin, Eureka Literary Magazine, Licking River Review and Words of Wisdom were nominated for Pushcart awards and Piper's Ash, Ltd. published a chapbook of my sci-fi, COSMIC WOMEN. She helped write the introduction for and have a story included in STILL GOING STRONG, stories in TEN TWISTED TALES, MOTA 9, ZERO GRAVITY and CIRCLING URANUS, and a novel, REPLACING FIONA, published by etreasurespublishing.com.

"Yeah, I tell you I found Jake that way," Chet proudly stated over the phone. Feet on the desk and swinging the chair to and fro Chet continued. "Mmmm hmmm, yeah, choked to death and a full sized stapler sticking right out of his ass. Must've pissed someone off big time."

He reached for his coffee and downed the last cold few drops. His eyes scanned the room until he found what he was looking for. Chet balled up a piece of paper and tossed it across the room, where it struck a thin, sickly-looking man straightening up a desk. Ernst looked over as Chet tapped his empty coffee mug with a pencil.

"Be a pal and get me some coffee, Ernst ... and oh ... cream, no sugar."

Ernst loped over and grabbed the mug and turned toward the coffee station.

"Yeah, PAL ... Personal Ass Licker. " Chet snickered in to the phone. A muffled laughter could be heard through the earpiece that rested against Chet's ear as he continued swaying in his chair. "You should see this guy, thin as a rail, and about as nerdy as they come."

Chet unfolded a paperclip and started bending it into a little wire piece of art. "I don't know, it seems he's been here forever. Doesn't do anything but gopher work. I don't think they pay him much, but he keeps showing up. Must be about fifty and still rides a bicycle to work every day. Not a nice modern bike either. Geez, I think he stole it off of the Flintstones."

Another round of laughter made Chet move the phone a little from his ear.

"The police have been here interviewing everyone for the last week." Chet listened intently as his eyes stared at his fingers bending the little wire. "No, no, nothing at all. They had me in the back office for at least an hour drilling me." He paused as he listened again. "Yeah, I think it was because I was next in line for his job. Between me and you, I'm glad he's gone 'cause it's a freakin' sweet job."

He jumped a little as Ernst set the coffee cup down on his desk. Chet looked up at Ernst and gave him a smug grin. "Thanks pal." Yet another round of muffled laughter could be heard earpiece as Ernst shuffled away.

"Had everyone in that back room for at least half an hour, except Ernst. He had only been in there a couple minutes before he came strolling back out. Jake had been a big guy."

Another pause. "You know the type, went to the gym every day before work and the smart bastard billed it all to the company, and they paid it! Do you believe that ballsy son of a bitch? Well, the cops figured it took at least two guys to handle ol' Jake. I know I wouldn't have wanted to fuck with him."

Chet looked over at Ernst, who had moved to straightening another desk.

"I've got a few more things I need to look into," Chet said, glancing up at the wall clock, "and damn, it's already almost six." Chet put his feet on the floor as he listened. "Mmmm hmmm, I'll be there in an hour, save me a seat. Later, dude."

Hanging up the phone, he looked over at Ernst. "Damn, everybody gone?"

Ernst stopped his paper shuffling and looked over to Chet. "Yes Sir, the place clears out at five mostly."

Up until two days ago, Chet would have been already perched on a bar stool at the sports pub with a cold beer by this time. "How late you stay?"

"About six, sir. That gives me time to clean up. Mother is coming by to pick me up, we're going out to dinner."

"Hey, do you think you could find another place to park your bike? It's kinda embarrassing chained out front like that. It looks like we are hiring the homeless."

Chet picked up his cup and took a swig, instantly spewing it back into the cup and getting a few drops on to his shirt.

"Son of a bitch!" Chet howled. "This is a Forzieri, god dammit! Thing cost me about two hundred bucks! It's Italian!"

Ernst came running over with a paper towel. Snatching it from Ernst's hands, Chet demanded, "Gimme that! What the fuck did you put sugar in my coffee for? I told you no sugar. No sugar! Are you fuckin' stupid? You better hope it doesn't stain. I'll make sure it comes out of your check!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I thought you said sugar," Ernst wheezed.

"Just get away from me, please! Why don't you get on your Yabba Dabba Doo bike and get the fuck out of here. We'll discuss if you have a job tomorrow with the higher-ups. Incompetent piece of shit!"

Ernst backed off, his shoulders stooped, and walked away.

Chet went to the water cooler, dampened the paper towel and dabbed the widening coffee spot. Then he decided to leave the stain to a professional. "Old Man Wong should be able to get this out." He chuckled lightly at the thought of Wong saying, "No ticky, no shirty."

Settling back at his desk, Chet reached into the basket on the corner and grabbed the short stack of papers. He began separating

them into three piles. "What do we need him around here for anyway?" he mumbled to himself. "Get rid of him and make everybody clean their own stations. Hell, they'll probably show me a little more respect for saving them money."

Picking up a stack, he tapped the edges until they lined up, then he clipped them together. Likewise with the second stack. As he tapped the third stack, he realized he was out of clips and looked over at the small gallery of wire art he had created over the course of the day. Reaching beside the basket for the stapler, he found it empty.

"Where the hell's the stapler?' Chet muttered.

"Right here," whispered a voice from behind him.

* * *

Ernst reached for the phone and called the police. He was distressed to find Chet this way. He would have to call Mom and tell her to cancel their dinner plans. She would be upset. Second time he had to cancel. He thought he heard her come in earlier, but that was before he found ... well, it wasn't his fault she was late again.

Jerry McKinney lives in Central Florida and found his love of writing only a year ago. He has written stories in Key Publications Vicious Trilogy and since then has been accepted into Netbound Publishings anthology I believe in Werewolves due out this spring. His other stories can be purchased through Amazon and Barnes & Nobles webpages as downloads for their readers. Expect a lot more ... It's gonna be a hell of a ride.

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