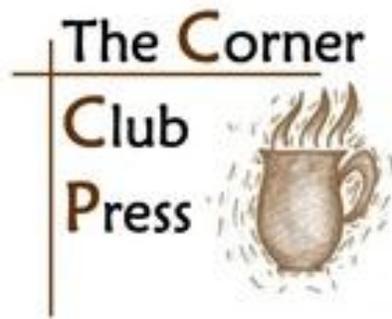


# The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction  
Converge





# The Corner Club Press

## October 2012

Volume II Issue VII

***Founder and Managing Editor***

Amber Forbes

***Poetry Editor and Co-Founder***

Mosby Barley and Daphne Maysonet

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the poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

# ***Letter from the Managing Editor***

Dear readers,

It's been an insane time trying to get this together. Dance, school, and work kept me busy, and the poetry editor was occupied with things of her own. Then the summer came, and we thought we'd have time, but lots of stressful events occurred that threw us off, and the poetry editor and I needed time to recuperate.

Unfortunately, Daphne Maysonet has had to resign, as she is currently busying herself with applying for graduate school and a wedding, among other exciting life events. We wish her well, and she will always be known as the co-founder of *The Corner Club Press*. Her name will never disappear from the pages of these issues, and she will always have a place with us should she decide to come back. I hope you feel the same way, dear readers.

In the meantime, I welcome our new poetry editor, Mosby Barley, on board, as well as our new fiction editors Robyn Ritchie and Thomas Weeks! Since the latter two have strong ties with Facebook, Mosby Barley will be introduced with a short bio preceding the delightful pieces we have chosen.

Also, I know issue 7 has taken much too long. Far too, too long. I was recently diagnosed with fibromyalgia and so have been struggling to find balance in my life with this illness—not that I haven't been struggling to find balance for the past year. I have been

doing as little as possible in my days due to finding myself so fatigued either at the end of the day or during the day period. In fact, my writing life has been severely stalled because I've been in either too much pain or too tired—even though I have a sixteen page outline for a planned novel at the ready. Ballet is really the only hobby I've extended energy toward since it helps to elevate my mood, while sometimes elevating my pain levels.

In spite of all this, there are no plans to abandon this project. The Corner Club Press will just have to work at a much slower pace, and I will have to limit my role overall. While I formatted some of this issue, Mosby Barley formatted the majority of this issue, and I can't thank him enough. He also worked on finding a new batch of poetry (he won't have to do this for issue 8).

Without Robyn and Mosby though, this issue just wouldn't exist because I'd find it difficult to find the energy. Thomas will be thanked in issue 8, considering he came on board after the fiction pieces had already been chosen for this issue.

Enjoy!

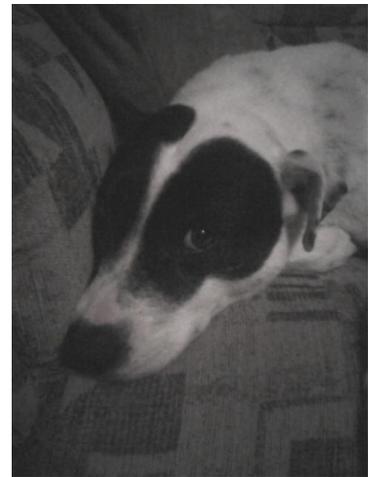
Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

***Founder and Managing Editor***

# *Mosby Barley*

Born in Marietta, Georgia, Mosby grew up and spent most of his life in Georgia. He earned his Associate's Degree at Northeast Alabama Community College in Rainsville, and his Bachelor's in English Creative Writing at Augusta State University in 2011. He is a fiction and poetry writer, previously published in the late *Oddville Press*. He is currently working on his first novel besides other creative projects of short stories and poems. Mosby is also a linguist and taught English in Brazil. He currently resides in Trenton, Georgia where he goes jogging with his dog while catching up on his reading of good literature all the while struggling to survive the economic slump. Mosby does not have a Facebook account because he is bored with social networks.



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## *A Mother's Gift of Good Seeds*



Theresa Abrenillo

He called her Barbry-Ann, bounced her on his knee,  
Was the oldest of ten, smart as she could be.  
She took pride in her work, no stranger to it,  
Whether cold, rain, or sun, she would just do it.

Climbed like a mountain goat; rocks, hills, cave, or tree,  
Driven to know all through curiosity.  
Learning was to be used. Be practical, they said.  
She hungered for much more, to know the unsaid.

Hard times cut schooling short, for two weeks she cried.  
It may not be formal but learning she'd find  
Through people, nature and books she sought things beyond  
Her humble life and chores, of family so fond.

She could cook, clean, and plant; was not lazy, sad, or mean;  
Washed clothes on the rubboard, loved her daddy's stories.  
She put hands in the soil, a joy never lost,  
Loved yellow colors of sunflowers and squash.

Time marches, a child grows, inventions bring change.  
Hard is still hard when life brings problems rearranged.  
Her knee does the bouncing, four children her own;  
Now she understands why Mama kept her home.

The world keeps on changing; a husband, a job,  
Children leave her nest, she feels a little robbed.  
Grandchildren come along, parents and spouse die,  
Living gets hard again, does not help to cry.

Now her name is Nanny, good health sneaks away,  
A monthly check shrinks the joy, she seeks God to say:  
I planted good seeds in them. Make them blossom well.  
Grant them content, love, and wisdom to excel.

# *Persimmons*



Stan McGee

Sweet lovedrops falling  
Into blankets of Autumn  
Tears of amber drip

# *Dandelion Daydreams*



Mariah Wilson

Dandelion daydreams  
are lemonade raindrops,  
chocolate filled kisses.  
They are rose colored rivers,  
yellow brick destinies.  
Dandelion daydreamers  
are summer sprinklers,  
flat rock skippers.  
Powerful like albino rhinos  
fragile like fairy wings.  
Scattered always,  
like dandelion fluff.

# *Grieving*



Mariah Wilson

Turpentine worn  
and bristle thin  
cracked handle,  
rainbow speckled.  
My brush leaves  
jagged strokes.

It fits perfectly  
as if it were one  
with my hand.  
Memories of lazy  
afternoons warm me.

My brush leaves  
jagged strokes.  
The new brush,  
smooth, soft, like snowflakes  
is twice as cold.

My brush leaves  
smooth soft strokes.  
But no lazy  
afternoon memories  
warm me.

# *Clouded Dreams*



Amanda Summerbell

October 14, 1983

The smoke choked Mia as she stumbled down the hall, holding her nightshirt over her nose. She heard Em's voice crying out, calling her name, wondering briefly if it was the smoke that made her sister's voice seem so distant, and began to reach out in desperation. As the smoke billowed through the second floor, her fingertips found Em's for a moment, then she was once again lost.

"Get out, Mia! Go!"

The stairs were suddenly in front of Mia, who grasped the railing firmly, giving one final thought to her parents and sister, Emily, before racing down, her shirt still covering her nose and head beginning to feel light. She had reached the foyer, fumbling in the smoky darkness for the lock, and felt rewarded when the crisp October night air filled her lungs.

She reached the yard and fell to her knees, sobbing as she waited for her family to emerge from the house. A fire truck sounded in the distance, much to her relief, but she sensed that it was too late. Too late for the house. Too late for her family.

As she looked up, watching for the truck to come up the hill, something in the side yard caught the corner of her eye. Though barely visible through the smoke, Mia found herself focusing as hard as she could on the tree house that her father had spent hours building for her just two years ago for her fourth birthday. As she

slowly stood, fighting the lightheadedness that she felt, she gasped at the realization that what stood on top of the tree house appeared to be a freakishly large winged creature, leering directly at her. She locked eyes with the creature just before her whole world blacked out and she hit the ground.

July 7, 2006

“After the fire, you were sent to live with your aunt?”

Mia nodded, starting to relax. She was in the office of Dr. Frank Patton, a local psychiatrist, and old friend of her father’s.

“Geraldine and her daughter, Kelly. Geraldine was my mom’s half sister. “

“Did you enjoy living with them?”

Mia’s eyes narrowed at the question. “No. It was horrendous. That woman had so much rage in her. I have no idea why. She loved to take it out on me, though.”

Silence ensued for a moment as Dr. Frank continued to take notes, then he asked, “How would she take it out on you?”

Mia fidgeted in her seat. “She would burn me with cigarettes sometimes. Or throw things at me. She had a damn good aim,” she answered, trying to joke. “I never understood WHY. I didn’t do anything to her, and I certainly couldn’t help my situation. She volunteered to take me so it’s not like I was dumped on her doorstep, for heaven’s sake. It’s like she just enjoyed torturing me.”

Dr. Frank’s eyes narrowed as he continued to jot down notes, then tossed his notebook on the desk, rubbing his palms together. “I can’t say as I don’t recall spending too much time with Geraldine. I met her once at a party that your parents hosted. She was quite pleasant.”

Mia nodded. "In an external setting she could be your best friend. She was always pleasant to others, especially men. My personal belief is that she was jealous of my mother, which caused her to be so awful to me."

"Interesting concept. That can be true, especially in the case of half-siblings," he replied. "However, even though rivalry between two people can be intense, it's hardly a motivation for burning one's child with a cigarette."

Mia shrugged. "Who's to know why she did what she did? She's dead now, so I can't ask her. All I know is, I never witnessed her doing any of that to Kelly. She even got Kelly to hit me."

Dr. Frank shook his head. "I wish I had known all of this before. I would have had you removed from that house immediately."

"What's done is done, Dr. Frank. I'm okay now."

But she knows that she is not okay, and can see in Frank's eyes that he knows it too.

\* \* \*

For Mia, the drive home was filled with thoughts of the most recent meeting with Frank. This had been her fourth session, and touching on the fire, as well as her childhood with Geraldine and Kelly, proved to be difficult. She found herself coming upon Maple Avenue, a sinking feeling in her stomach. Geraldine's house had been on Maple Avenue, just a few streets away from where Mia now resided, and Mia always resisted the urge to turn down that street, for fear of her memories flooding back. Now, she turned the wheel, slowing her Camry to avoid hitting parked cars on the narrow street as she came upon 855 Maple.

*Whoever resides there now had the good sense to paint the horrid guacamole green house white,* she mused, smiling, in spite of the dread that she felt. At what, she was not sure, until the strange phenomenon of déjà vu took over and Geraldine walked

out the front door. No, that's impossible -- Geraldine was dead. Upon a closer examination, she saw that it was, in fact, Kelly. She was the image of her mother as a teen, blond and quite large for her height. Mia watched cautiously as Kelly grabbed the newspaper, which had been tossed in the yard, and re-entered the house. *So she never left the house*, Mia thought, surprised.

Even a face lift on the house did not shake the growing fear that engulfed Mia as she drifted back twenty years ago, seeing Geraldine coming out of that very door after another one of her binge/purge sessions, wild-eyed.

"Where are you, Amelia?" she had called out angrily, tapping her feet as Mia emerged from the street where she had been sitting on the curb.

"Get your fat ass in the house and start cleaning. You don't have time to stand at the curb like a whore in heat!"

Mia saw herself trudge along, head lowered in a perpetual stance of defeat, and to her right was Geraldine with her eyes shining in perverted excitement at seeing her this way.

Walking along that hateful woman, about to reach the front door, she kicked out the back of Mia's legs and watched her tumble on the stone step, skinning both knees and the palms of her hands.

"Get up, stupid. Get in the house!"

Shaking loose from the nightmare of yesteryear, Mia realized that tears were falling freely down her face. Letting them fall, she glared once more at the house before peeling out carelessly.

\* \* \*

The next week, Mia sat in Frank's office, covering her depression with a brilliant smile.

"Have a seat, Mia. How are you?"

“Oh, you know...I’d say I’ve never felt better but you’d know I was lying,” she answered with a fake laugh. “I drove by Geraldine’s old house last week, on my way home from our session.”

The raising of his brows indicated that she had piqued his interest. “I commend you for that, Mia. That’s a huge step.”

“I can’t stand it, Frank. I feel hatred there. I cannot stand that house.”

Frank lowered his book, leaning back in the chair, thoughtfully.

“Houses cannot hate, Mia. Only the people within. Could you be feeling Geraldine’s hatred?”

“Possibly. She was all about hatred--for me and anyone else. That psycho would have spoken ill of Jesus himself,” she grunted. Frank’s lips twitched into a smile.

“You have your mother’s dry humor,” he recalled, losing himself in some unknown memory for a moment before snapping back to reality. “Why do you suppose she was so full of hate?”

“The bulimia, for one thing. It was the only way she could keep her weight down, so she hated attractive, skinny people. She constantly bitched about Kelly’s classmates...anyone who seemed to be privileged. She definitely hated Em, too. She used to...” Mia stalled for a moment, not allowing the dam to burst. “She would take pictures of Em, my photos. She would make me burn them in the fireplace. She would tell me over and over again that Em was a whore.”

Trying to keep these images at bay, she concentrated instead on the surroundings before her, becoming overly interested in Frank’s coffee table book, fidgeting through the pages. *No images, Mia--they’re just words. Words cannot hurt you*, she scolded herself silently under Frank Patton’s watchful eyes.

“Geraldine cannot hurt you anymore, Mia,” he said, softly.

“No, but she did enough of it when she was alive.”

“Yes, but you can break free from that damage. I see your nervousness--your fear, rise to the surface at the sound of her name.”

*Yes.*

“Don’t you realize, though, that Geraldine, and hundreds of others like her, prey on those who make them feel threatened? Whatever power she felt in you--that’s what she tried to destroy. She wanted to rob you of your spirit. Take from you what she herself was lacking.

“By giving into her sadistic games, by allowing your fear to cloud your spirit, you are giving Geraldine the upper hand. You need to break free, Mia.”

*Break free.*

“You have a very warm, gentle spirit. You are good, and determined. I can see the fight in you.”

*He can?*

“Try over the next few days to concentrate on a time that you might have stood up to Geraldine. Any occurrence, however small. That’s your ticket. The next time you pull up in front of the house, or begin to think of her, visualize that moment, over and over.”

“The bathroom, back when I was eight,” Mia responded, smiling.

“Tell me about it.”

Mia leaned her head back on the couch and slipped into the memory.

May 2, 1985

“Get out of bed, whore!”

Geraldine pulled on Mia’s ear, sending a searing pain through her head.

“What’s the big idea of lying in bed all morning when there’s work to be done?”

Dragging her to the bathroom, she shoved her down. "Clean this shithole of a bathroom! All your crap in here--clothes, make-up, all of it. Now!"

Geraldine shoved Mia again, this time causing her to fall and hit her head on the side of the pink bathtub. "Get to it. Learn a little something about hard work, Princess, so you don't turn out to be a whore like your sister."

Mia dodged the hot cigarette butt that Geraldine tossed directly at her, anger welling up inside. Suddenly, Mia brought her fist down on to the smoldering cigarette.

"But you fixed Em, didn't you?" she replied, calmly, watching Geraldine halt a moment as she was walked out the door.

"What did you say to me?" She bared her teeth like a wild animal, her thin lips curling unattractively over stained, crooked teeth.

"You fixed Em good. You fixed them all, didn't you?"

Their eyes locked, Geraldine appearing as though she had been struck, her stunned gaze turning to fear.

\* \* \*

Mia's dream had come again. The smoke plumed around her and she heard Em crying out. The once beautiful mahogany staircase now covered in smoke and flames licking at the hallway behind her as she stumbled down. Searching for her family was futile as smoke engulfed the entire area. She lunged out the door, took precious gulps of night air.

Creeping shadows of the night gave way to one as Mia became aware of the creature, perched on top of the tree house. No detail shone through, just darkness, and suddenly her eyes were transfixed in horror as the great creature began to change. It no longer appeared to her as a winged being but a human, someone evil.

Mia woke, drenched in sweat and struggling out of bed, her breath rapid at the onset of an anxiety attack. Just as she had so many times during Geraldine's beatings, she slowed her breathing as much as possible, making her way into the kitchen to fix a cup of tea.

This was the first dream of the creature in which it took a human form. Naturally as a child, she could have seen one thing and associated it with another, as so many children do. Or was her mind playing tricks so many years later?

\* \* \*

"Go ahead and have me committed, Dr. Frank," Mia mumbled. "I knew this was crazy."

"Oh, Mia." His tone bordered on chastising. "I am not going to have you committed because of a childhood memory. You sustained a severe trauma that night. Perhaps your six year old mind was trying to rationalize the tragic events, much like the Silver Bridge collapse back in 1967, right here in West Virginia. People swear that they saw the Mothman flying back and forth just moments before it happened."

"All the same, I know what I saw. It had wings and was all black. Perched on top of the tree house and staring at me."

"Could it have been a regular bird? Watching the fire?"

"It was something more, Dr. Frank. It was evil and I feel like it had something to do with the fire. And in my dream this time, it changed into a human."

She left the session, heading directly to the cemetery to see her family and feeling flattened, wondering if she should have divulged the details of the creature. Surely he thought her a raving lunatic.

Grayden Cemetery was quiet that day, enclosed within ornate stone walls that gave the site a medieval appearance. It pleased her to see the gorgeous array of

flowers thriving along the stone wall, donated in memory of the fallen by the Grayden Women's Club. There were sprays of reds, whites, purples, and yellows--all the colors of the rainbow, planted in strategic rows to give off an orderly vibrance.

Unlike most, whose visits to the dead lessened in adulthood, Mia had found herself taking flowers to her parents and sister at least once a month, if not more. In her childhood, Mia had come to Grayden Cemetery almost daily to escape Geraldine's wrath, finding solace in the changing of the seasons that she had witnessed within those walls, and struggling between her glee at the uniqueness that each season brought, and her despair at the knowledge that Em would not age with them.

"Hey, Em," she spoke aloud, laying a carnation on her gravestone. "How are you? How's mom and dad? I'm coming along slowly." She broke into laughter. "I've been visiting with Frank Patton and talking a lot about Psycho and The Bitch..." She smiled at her nicknames for Geraldine and Kelly. "I discovered that Kelly never left the house on Maple and wonder if I should confront her but I'm not sure that I'm ready for that step. Neither is Frank."

Touching the cold stone of Em's grave, she felt emotion well up and threaten to surface. "I miss you, Em. I think about you all the time. Between remembering the fire and Geraldine's abuse, I wonder when I'm going to just lose it."

The heat of the July day was stifling, even under the massive oak whose branches expanded over the years, shading the graves. "I keep dreaming about that creature. I saw it in a dream and remember back to that night when it stood there watching me. I know you guys didn't see it, but I feel like it made itself known to me on purpose."

As a child, Mia had been more self conscious about speaking at the gravesites and would constantly look around to make sure that she was alone before starting any

dialogue. Since that time she felt very comfortable carrying on a one-sided conversation. Had she taken the time to look around that day, she might have spotted the dark figure hidden behind another oak just two rows away, watching her.

“Now that I know Kelly is in the area, ready or not, I think I want to just see her. Ask her some questions,” Mia reasoned. “I’m not sure if it’s the right thing to do, but I just need a sign.”

Mia always imagined signs to work themselves in fabulous ways: bolts of lightning, fireworks, and having seen none of these, blew the grass and dirt from her pants as she stood and stretched. Turning to leave, she gasped in amazement at the small white dove perched atop the stone gate. It sat for just a moment before taking flight, and she knew that she had her sign.

\* \* \*

The challenge of seeing Kelly again was compounded by having to go back into the house on Maple Avenue. Mia chose a Tuesday evening to stop by, pulling up in front and taking a moment to control breathing, as was always the first sign of an anxiety attack. She knew, though, that the only way to accomplish this was to go forward without thinking.

She began to move toward the door as if her feet were being propelled by some strong force. Before she could knock, however, the door opened and she again had the feeling that she was looking at a ghost.

“What are you doing here?” Kelly demanded, her fat face growing red.

Mia was pleased to realize that what stood before her was no longer thin and pretty as she had been in her youth. What took her place was a large awkward, gawking hulk of a woman, almost comical in her bright floral t-shirt and green pants,

and Mia's fear began to dissipate, replaced by disgust at the thought that Kelly had piled on all the pounds that her mother purged into the toilet down the hall.

"What, no hello for your favorite cousin?" Mia asked. "Aren't you going to invite me in? At one time this was my home, too, you know."

Kelly's beady eyes narrowed and Mia can see that she was weighing her options before finally letting her inside.

The living room was filled with yard sale furniture.

"Well, I let you in. What do you want?"

"For starters, I want to know what the hell was wrong with your mother."

Kelly's eyes contorted into a hideous glare. "How dare you?"

"No, Kelly. How dare you? How could you both treat me the way you did? Knowing that I had lost my whole family? Subjecting me to such abuse?"

Her eyes rolled up and Mia braced herself for some explosion.

"I don't have anything to say to you, Mia. That part of our lives is over now. I've moved on, as should you."

This unnerved Mia, who felt that she was becoming unhinged as she pulled up her shirt, pointing to the top of her breast. "It's a little easier for you to get on with your life. You don't have to look at these every day," she said, exposing two scars from Geraldine's cigarette burns. "How can you act as though we just had a rough childhood, but now we're over it? Your psychotic mother burned me. She beat me constantly, telling me that I'd never amount to anything more than a whore. How is that okay? Why couldn't you try to help me, instead of joining in?"

Kelly rubbed her temples, beginning to pace the room. "You won't get the answers you seek from me. The one you need to talk to--"

"--is dead," Mia finished for her. "I missed my chance with her. You're the only one here to answer for her actions. I don't understand how you can still live in this

place.” She waved her hand in disgust. “Surely your memories of this dump aren’t much better than mine.”

Shrugging, Kelly replied, “Yes, my mom hated you. She was her happiest when she was unhappy. She made me who I am, Mia. I’m not proud of what I’ve done to you. Believe it or not, I was excited to have you come and live with us. She made me beat on you, yell at you. You know damn well that Geraldine was not a person you could tell no.”

There was painful truth in her words, Mia knew.

“Why the hell would she hate me?” Mia challenged. “I never did anything to her.”

Again, Kelly shrugged, sitting on the couch. “Have a seat.” She extended her hand to a blue loveseat across from her. Mia acquiesced.

“I think it was more directed at your mother, Mia. Truthfully, mom really had it out for her, though she never fully explained why. She would just say that Carlotta had been privileged...that she was gorgeous and got attention from boys. Popular.”

“That wasn’t my mother’s fault,” Mia pointed out. “From what I’ve been told, my grandmother always tried to reach out to Geraldine and treat her like she was her own daughter. No one treated her like a second-class citizen.”

“Then chalk it up to Geraldine fighting her own demons, I guess,” Kelly answered, her tone softening. “I hate how she was. She could have been so different!” she mused. “In the end, she just tried to destroy everyone. She certainly ruined us, didn’t she?”

Mia raised a brow. “She has not ruined me yet. Probably hasn’t ruined you, either, Kelly. I think Geraldine was just weak. She judged everyone because she couldn’t stand herself.”

Kelly nodded. “That’s true.”

A stillness came over the room then, as both women tried to think of what to say, when Kelly spoke up, her voice cracking. "Mia, for what it's worth, I really am sorry for everything. I've thought about you for years. Mom's treatment of you was atrocious, as was mine. I can never forgive myself for what I've done. I only hope that one day, you can find it in your heart to forgive me, though I know that's a lot to ask."

Mia felt hot tears stinging her eyes. "I forgive you, Kelly."

"I hope that one day, we might have a chance at a relationship. I wouldn't have dared approach you with that, but I'm so glad you came to see me," Kelly continued.

"It will take some time, Kelly. I can hardly sit here in this house right now without having flashbacks, so it will be a while before I come back. And I won't ever forgive Geraldine because she had no remorse, ever."

"Understandable," Kelly answered. "To tell you the truth, I have a time being here. With all the bad memories..." Her voice trailed off. "Mom was into some bad stuff, Mia."

Mia raised her brows. "Like drugs?"

"Nothing like that. I truly believe that she was involved in something bizarre. I think she was into Devil worship or something. She would often threaten me, especially if I didn't hit you or whatever...she would tell me that this monster was going to come and get me."

Mia was tempted to laugh but seeing the fear in Kelly's eyes made her stop. "Surely that didn't work on you for long, Kelly. Once you became a teenager she couldn't use that."

"Oh, Mia, but she meant it. I saw it! It was something real. Like a bird or something."

The hair on the back of Mia's neck stood on end. "You say you saw it?" Her voice cracked. In spite of her brave facade, she began to tremble.

"It was outside of my window a couple of times. In a tree. I don't even know what it was, but it had wings. Mom had this friend that she was crazy over and he was obsessed with birds. I feel like there was a correlation there somehow. He kept stuffed birds all over his house and would show us all the time."

"Who was this friend?" Mia asked, not needing an answer. She already knew.

"I can't remember his name...he was really good looking, though. I do know that he was some kind of shrink. Wait...was it Pat? Patton. That's it."

Mia's heart leapt in her throat. "Frank Patton?"

"That's it! He was super weird. Mom was enamored with him, though. I never understood why."

Mia stood, clutching her throat.

"Mia, what's wrong?"

"I've got to go, Kelly. I'll explain later."

She pulled the car out, her mind racing. *How could Dr. Frank be the monster? What was his motivation?* she thought, frightfully aware that she was speeding and slowing the car as she reached her destination, Frank Patton's office building.

Upon reaching the second floor, Mia noticed that the reception area was empty. A nagging voice in her head told her to turn and leave, but she became keenly aware of the distant sound of opera music behind his door, and her feet guided her in that direction.

The haunting melody grew louder as she cautiously turned the knob, trying not to make a sound. With trepidation she pushed through the door, and what she saw made her blink, as if by blinking, the image would prove not to be real. But it was so very real.

He was standing against the wall, donned in a black feathered costume from head to toe. Most frightening were his eyes--the warmth that she'd grown accustomed to was gone, replaced by an emptiness unlike anything she'd ever witnessed. It was as though she stood face to face with a shark's soulless black eyes that bore no emotion.

He seemed stunned for just a moment before grinning slowly, broadly, bearing his teeth.

She trembled. "Dr. Frank, what are you doing?"

Frank stepped into the open, spanning the wings of his costume, and Mia felt hot bile rising to her throat, willing herself to maintain control any way that she could.

"Don't you understand, Amelia?" he answered, his voice almost sing-song, covering her arms with gooseflesh.

Trembling, she nodded. "You were the creature I saw that night."

Again, he flashed the wicked grin before taking his place behind the mahogany desk.

"But why?"

"She never loved me. I begged, pleaded, but Carlotta continually resisted--said she loved that fool of a man, Perry. I could have given her the world. But she didn't need the world through my eyes, she said. Perry and her children were her world."

"You killed my family." Mia shook from a combination of fear and anger. "You set fire to our home. Watched it burn to the ground, knowing that you would be killing us all."

"But it didn't kill all of you," he answered. "You were not meant to make it out of that house."

This remark chilled Mia to the bone, who stepped back in horror.

"You saw me that night--we locked eyes, remember?"

She locked eyes with him again, the very action taking her back to that night for a brief, terrible moment.

“Your love for my mother clouded everything else? What about your friendship with my dad?”

“That fool,” he declared, his voice rising. “He had no idea what he had in Carlotta. She was a goddess. He never appreciated her enough. Yes, we’d been friends, Amelia, but when I started to see how unhappy she really was, I wanted to take her away from him.”

Mia sat on the couch--once again the patient and the psychiatrist, though there was nothing conventional about this visit.

“My mother was not unhappy,” she declared, uneasy at the sight of his hollow eyes flashing. “She and my father loved each other very much. Why you’ve deluded yourself into thinking that you were her savior, I will never understand.” She felt strength in her words. “In fact, for being such a smart man, you’re not very observant.”

He did not respond.

“How did you and Geraldine become acquainted? Do I have you to thank for her treatment of me?”

The smile once again spread across his face, and she felt a chill once again, wondering for a brief moment if she was seated with the Devil himself.

“Geraldine, yet another fool. She was nothing more than a woman scorned--in love with Perry for years. I believe she even confessed her love for him, but he resisted her advances. So we made a pact one day. We would end it all and never breathe a word of it to anyone.”

“What a disappointment for you both that I lived through the fire.”

“What you call disappointment, I prefer to see as an opportunity. What’s that old saying about when life serves you lemons? You, my dear, were the lemonade.”

Mia furrowed her brows in confusion. “I don’t understand. Are you saying that because I lived, Geraldine took me in so that she could abuse me?”

“Actually, I just wanted her to stage some sort of accident, but Geraldine wanted very badly to keep you and do with you what she wanted. She grew enraged every time she looked at you, Mia...you favored Carlotta so much. Eventually, though, she lost sight of our purpose and fell in love with me. At which point she became a liability.”

“So you killed her, too?” Mia asked, amazed that her own voice showed little emotion. Not one tear would be shed over that woman’s death. “Why didn’t you reveal this to me before now? Why did you start seeing me as a patient?”

Frank shrugged. “I waited for the right time. It was shortly after you left for college that I killed Geraldine. I had no reason to think that you’d come back to the area. Truly, I anticipated that you would travel as far away from this place as you could. Since you knew nothing, there was no need to be rid of you right away, so I simply didn’t stress about it. Once I knew you were in the area again, I kept watch over you. Each time you visited the cemetery, I was there. I made sure to call you and arrange dinner that night so that we could meet, of course, offering my services since I knew of your family’s untimely demise.”

“You know what amazes me, Frank? Even Geraldine moved on. She got over her love for my dad and started having feelings for you. You were the only one who couldn’t move on, even planning to come after me when the time was right. That makes you the sickest of all. Obsession is a bitch, Frank. Feeling an unhealthy, one-sided love for someone that wouldn’t give you a second glance.”

Suddenly Frank rose, screaming, “Shut up!”

He crossed the room in two strides, just as Mia jumped up and tried to move out of the way. His long, thin fingers grabbed her ankle, bringing her crashing to the floor with such force that she bit her tongue. In a second he was on top of her, his hand aiming for her throat.

“I may have botched it that night, but I will not make the same mistake twice,” he whispered. The force of his fingers tightening around Mia’s windpipe was tremendous. “You are going to die tonight, Amelia. It won’t be long now.” He spit, leaning down to look into her eyes.

Their eyes lock again for the very last time, before he straightened himself, and Mia witnessed the look of horror shadowing his face. As he released his grip, she rolled over, taking precious gulps of air, taking her back again to the night of the fire when she first escaped the house.

Frank uttered a strange, almost animalistic sound and jumped back, shrinking against the wall next to the couch. As Mia traced his gaze, he uttered, “Carlotta! It can’t be.”

A crawling mist had enveloped the doorway, and Mia, too, felt fear for just a moment. She watched, transfixed, as the mist came closer, hovering over Frank for mere moments. Turning, Mia watched as Frank grasped his chest, uttering a low moan, then quickly, the mist dissipated. He was dead.

## *Under the Worm Moon*



Walter Giersbach

Traffic on Route 2 whistled a steady *whoosh-whoosh*, except for the trucks that rumbled and motorcycles that roared. None of them infringed on Alex's state of mind. He almost didn't care if he hitched a ride east or had to hoof it forever. The moon overhead was obscenely full. The Naticks or Mahicans or any of the long-dead tribes would have called the orb a worm moon. It heralded the madness of March that celebrated the lustful return of earthworms and robins. Tonight, it was *his* moon!

He was heading home under this auspicious moon, and that's all that counted. Home to Karin in Boston. Karin once told him her name meant first moon or something like that in Hindu or Sanskrit. Who knows? Karin's ass formed two full moons. Her breasts were little moons. Her face shone moon-like. She had forgiven him. The dean at B.U. had also forgiven his indiscretion and would take him back to finish his sophomore year. It would help if Anna and his parents forgave him, but it was probably too late for that. Wasn't destiny always mixed up with destination?

The *whoosh-whoosh* died as a cloud slipped by the worm moon — the brightest moon of his life. A science-fiction moon that declared the universe was full of March promise.

People were basically forgiving, he decided, shrugging his windbreaker tighter and switching the hand in his pocket with the one to flag down a ride. Karin promised a welcome place to bunk till her roommate got back from a semester in

England. Even the cop in Stockbridge had understood when he caught Alex coming over Anna's back fence. Drove him to the edge of town after Alex explained the situation, and said, "Happy trails, kid."

Stockbridge to Boston. Not a long run. Indians walked it. The revolutionaries — Ethan Allen and his gang — commuted to ambush the British.

He continued walking backward, looking over his shoulder at the moon. The omen hung overhead, signaling that things would turn around now. Sometimes a road story unrolls by itself, but often they invite endings you never expect. Streets — in Stockbridge or Boston — just lie there in patterns, but roads propel a person away and invite adventure.

A car began to slow and blink its turn signal. Alex backed off the asphalt as it pulled to a stop next to him. Decent of the driver so Alex didn't have to run and catch up.

He started to say, "Thanks, Mister," anticipating the driver would then ask, "How far you going?" Then one thing would lead to another and the conclusion would make itself clear.

### Sincere Regrets

Instead, a familiar face leaned across the passenger seat and the window rolled down. It was Anna, wearing her husband's red crusher hat. Anna from Stockbridge.

"I thought you'd be hitching Route 2," she said. "That's what Henry said. After he saw you go out of our bedroom window. I told him our marriage was over." She lifted her arm, letting her hand float in supplication. "I need you, Alex. I trusted you with my love. Now, I can't live without it. Henry's gone back to Manchester. We can be together. Share a life."

It was tough to say what had to be declared. Anna was a good person, but not the right person. “I’m following the moon, Anna. Forgive me. What we had is done and over with. I have something — someone — waiting in Boston.”

She made a choking sound, like a cat with a hairball in its throat, and the hand dropped. Anna put the car in gear, made a U-turn in the road and headed west with the moon at her back.

### Dead End

Instead, a familiar face appeared across the passenger seat as the window was rolled down. Henry, Anna’s husband, glared at him.

“Thought you’d be hitching on Route 2,” he said. “That’s what Anna told me. After you went out my bedroom window.” He lifted his arm and pointed a black revolver at Alex. “I trusted you, Alex. Trusted you with my friendship. Trusted you alone with Anna. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice....” The gun went off and the bullet tore off Alex’s right ear in a splash of red.

“Shoot for the moon, you bastard.”

He wheeled the car around in the road, throwing gravel, and headed west.

### Inviting Road

Instead, a familiar face leaned across the passenger seat and the window was rolled down. His father smiled, tentatively, as though he might not be up to the task of reaching out to his son.

“Alex, I couldn’t let you go after the words we exchanged, about your lady friend at college. I know you want to go back to those folks, your friends in Boston.”

“Those folks are my future now, Pops. I’m going to ask if the college’ll renew my scholarship, after I get through probation.”

“If it’ll help, Alex, me and your Mom saved a little money. I said if I found you walking the road, I’d even drive you to Boston.”

It was the worm moon, full of spring promise that influenced Alex’s decision. “Well, maybe we can talk about it,” he told Pops. “In the car.”

## *Blood and Bones*



Walter Giersbach

The devil must've laughed the day Tony come up Mulberry from Canal, dirty and grinning like he'd won the World Series. "I walked the tunnels," he shouted, still three doors away. "Went two stops. Cool!" Old ladies turned to squint in a neighborhood where your business is everybody's business.

It was already 90 on the thermometer at Giordano's, soot rolling down the street, a dull sun shining like the end of the world. The day stretched timeless beyond a hazy horizon of emptiness until Tony got there. I needed to hear more because Tony was always two steps ahead of our gang — Vinnie, my cousin Sal, Richie, sometimes Franco.

"How cool?" I asked. Sweat was dripping down Tony's face and off his nose.

"You never seen stuff like this. It is so dark, the smell of dead things everywhere. It's a crypt down there." When Sal and Franco and some others arrived he told his adventure all over again.

We had all the time in the world. Classes were over until I went to high school in September. St. Anthony's was a month away and paradise was right here. Last winter was memories of Father Joseph telling our catechism class about the ninth level of purgatory — I loved that lake of frozen blood and guilt. But, for now the days in Little Italy boogied by in joy. Our gang had our rooftop beach, where we'd drink beer Vinnie swiped from his old man. At night, Mary Elizabeth Bracco might lie in my arms and forget she was going to be a nun. We felt the wind in our teeth

riding the bumpers of Second Avenue buses. And we had war when our Elizabeth Street team played basketball against the guys from the projects.

Tony's discovery of the tunnels added mystery. That Tony, what a character.

Next day, we had to check out his story, not because we didn't believe there was another world under the street, but because it was a novelty. Something alien.

Tony told Sal to distract the token seller while the rest of us jumped the turnstile and took off running. At the end of the platform we jumped on to the dark tracks, following Tony's white T shirt. My brain started to go crazy with excitement in this underworld. We passed abandoned stations, threw rocks against ghost cars everybody'd forgotten about, heard zombie people shuffling in the dark. I sniffed the stinky air, recognizing the smell that came up to our world through the sidewalk grates. But Tony didn't tell us what to do when we heard a train whistle, then saw its light like the bright eye of the devil behind us. He never said what it was like to have a train shoot down the tunnel pushing a hurricane of wind at you. I almost pissed my pants as I tried to disappear into the wall.

Crazy how my friends challenged death. They spit in death's eye, even when Mr. Mancini later that day explained you gotta stay off the third rail and watch out for the rail shoes that come in contact with the trains.

"Eight hundred volts of electric in the third rail," he said as we huddled on the street under the street light. "You'll be fried if even your little toe touches it." Mancini gave us a weird smile. "*Bam!*" His fist smacked his open palm. "You light up like a Christmas tree and your guts explode. You kids having fun yet?"

Mancini was one of the Moustache Petes who play dominos on Duane Street. "And watch out for alligators," he warned.

"Ain't no fuckin' alligators," Tony shot back, paying him no respect.

Mancini called Tony a wise guy. “When people come back from Coney Island, they got little gators. *Crocodilos*. Then, someone’s Mama says, ‘No gator in my house!’ She flushes it down the toilet. The toilet goes into the subway. So, the subway’s filled with gators.”

I never saw anything but rats, but I knew the red and white striped signs could kill if the third rail didn’t get you — kill you faster than an alligator. I seen those signs every time I looked out the train window. They warn subway workers there’s no clearance there when that train shoots down the track pushing its windstorm ahead of it, horn blaring, evil headlight shining on the worker. Those signs were blood-and-bones warnings.

We walked the tunnels the next day and the next. But going back had to wait when a basketball game was set up. There wasn’t nothing better than a good game. Nothing in the world like sinking a three-pointer in the playground and your buddies high five you. Then I’d look to make sure Mary Elizabeth was watching and make believe I was on the Knicks. After the game, I’d dig two bits out of my pocket for an egg cream or bottle of Dr. Brown’s soda at Giordano’s — maybe two bottles if Mary Elizabeth was there.

The big games were played in the park by the East River. They were the best because the Puerto Rican kids from the big, red-brick Baruch Houses usually lost. We went into each game knowing we were kings. This time the score ended 52 to 37. I shouted “Losers!” and the rest of our team chimed in.

“Why’d you call them losers?” Mary Elizabeth asked.

I stuck my nose in the air. “PRs are different than me and you. They got city housing while my old man and yours pay rent out of their own pockets. We ain’t welfare clients.”

“Maybe you’re all losers. You just don’t know it.” Then she walked off with her girlfriends, acting like she was the queen of Elizabeth Street.

“Now you gotta pay,” Tony crowed at the Spanish kids. “Losers gotta walk the tunnel.”

See, you gotta understand that, being Italian, we had honor. They had to pay us respect. Tony was a real character figuring how to get respect.

“No big thing,” a PR kid said. “I done it a million times.”

“Yeah.” Tony comes back. “But you gotta walk the A train line from Broadway over to High Street in Brooklyn. We’ll meet you there.” Then he lied. “I figger our best time was five and a half minutes. That’s so’s to be sure there ain’t no trains — but you better duck when a train comes — watch for the sign of blood and bones.”

The kids punched each other in the shoulders. Pussies, all of them.

“Let’s go...losers,” Tony called. He led our team off to the subway on Canal. “You comin’ or are you chicken?”

The guys from the projects followed, but I could see they weren’t happy with Tony telling them what to do. Not happy doing the tunnel.

We got off at Broadway-Nassau and Tony pointed. The tunnel looked like the mouth of Hell, yawning like an alligator. Tony might’ve been Father Joseph pointing that guy Dante on the road to Purgatory. Worse, there was no sound except our voices. It was Sunday afternoon — a weekend train schedule — and the platform was deserted. Weekends, you have to wait forever for a train. The guys from the projects jumped down on the tracks after our train left. Tony and us all shouted, “Get your ass in there!” and “You got five minutes!” and “You’re dead meat if you don’t run.”

They were sucked up by the darkness and everything got quiet again. Tony said, "Share a cab over to Brooklyn and wait for me. I'm going after the bums. Scare the crap out of them."

He showed us one of those aerosol cans you blow at football games to celebrate a touchdown or something. That was so funny. We couldn't believe Tony planned so far ahead and got one of those air horns. What a character.

We were still laughing when we left the cab in Brooklyn, slapping each other and punching the air.

The kids came out maybe ten minutes later. Nobody said nothing till this skinny kid pipes up, "So we made it, you *cabrón!* We made it!"

The others chimed in "Yeah, yeah." Then they ran for the street instead of crossing the platform to catch the next train north.

And we waited. Twenty minutes later still no Tony.

"Whaddya think?" my cousin Sal asked me.

"I think trouble." I knew it was trouble. Tony should've been 30 seconds behind them.

"I gotta go home," Vinnie piped up. "My Ma's gonna kill me if I'm late."

"Me too," a couple others agreed. They were hopping from one foot to the other like they hadda piss.

"You ain't gonna wait for Tony?" I demanded. "After all he done for you?"

"He's the one who always gets us in trouble," Sal muttered, the little prick. I always thought my cousin was a coward.

"I'm going up the track," I said.

"See ya later," Vinnie said, and the others muttered, "Later, man."

I walked in the dark for maybe ten minutes smelling rotten, wet things and believing old man Mancini's gators might be real. Instead, a train came through. I

ducked into a hidey hole to let it screech by, blasting soot into my eyes as I flattened myself and said a Hail Mary.

The red light of the train got smaller as I ran down the track, letting it lead me out of the darkness. My foot suddenly caught on something and I fell forward, knees and elbows getting cut up in the gravel. I reached out my hand and my fingers felt Tony's eyes and nose. He was curled up in the center of the tracks, lying in a pool of rain water. His T shirt was almost black from the soot and the burns and the train that had passed over him. He wasn't the Tony I knew anymore. This was Tony the zombie.

I held his cold head in my hands, feeling the grease and water he'd been lying in. I didn't think I could do any good breathing in his mouth and thumping his chest, like on TV. Nobody really dies on TV. Then I let the tears come because no one could see me cry.

Mothers shouldn't have to bury their sons. That's why I felt sorry for Mrs. DiBernardo, Tony's mother. When me and my folks went to the funeral parlor to pay our respects nobody could stop her wailing, "*Mi bambino!*" I felt ashamed for lying, telling her I didn't know why he did such a stupid thing. And I felt sorry for Tony, that nobody would really know what happened to get him fried like a potato chip. I was sorry for everybody in the world.

Tony was my friend — leastwise the only kid who stood up for me on the playground or shared his bottle of beer. And when a friend dies, you have to find out why. I said that to Sal out in the street and he told me to shut up.

"Nothing matters when someone's dead," he told me. "You just gotta make sure it ain't you dyin'." My cousin Sal can be a real coward prick.

For two or three days I hung around the projects on Columbia Street. Finally, I saw the skinny kid — the one who called me a *cabrón* — come running out the door and down the steps two at a time.

I grabbed his shirt collar and yanked him around. “What’d you do to my friend Tony? You guys killed him, you little bastard.”

The kid didn’t act like a smartass now, shrinking down, afraid I was going to hit him.

“I didn’t do nothing,” he said. “Your friend came outta the dark screaming and blowing the air horn. We ran. Man, did we run. Then Pepe or Julio turned and swung at him. Your friend stepped back, onto the third rail.”

I let go of him. I didn’t know what to say next. Something in my head told me you gotta love people even if you don’t like them. I knew what being scared is like. I’d been in the tunnels.

“*Cojones*,” the PR said. “He had a set of *cojones* too big for his own good.”

“I don’t talk Spanish. What’s that mean?”

“Balls. We heard your friend’s horn, that *hijo de puta*. We were runnin’ like everything ’cause we thought a train was comin’. An invisible ghost train.” The kid chewed his lip, turned his back and sat down on a bench.

“One minute everybody’s shouting and next thing the air’s full of electricity,” he said. “I never seen a dead person before.”

“Me neither.” I sat at the other end of his bench. “That Tony was a real character.”

What else was I supposed to do? What was the honorable thing? Light a goddamn candle and forget this horror show happened? I asked the kid his name.

“Arturo,” he said. He still couldn’t look me in the eye.

“Well, Artie,” I said, “we might be forming a new team if you want to meet me at the park tomorrow.”

“It’s okay?” he asked.

“We can make it okay.”

## *French Party*



Valery Petrovskiy

That evening she had French burst out of her after the second glass. It was more like kink of her mind than just getting drunk. Sure she wasn't apt to drinking, so I put her to bed, just to let her take breath. Because of the second glass, my role changed: instead of a "jeune premier" I turned out to be a "doctor", for she needed my aid. French was babbling out of her monotonous, and rambling, and beautiful, somewhat guttural and melodious at once. At a moment she was declaiming, and then came to whispering, I never saw wine to act so on a girl, and as far as I remember, the wine was not from France.

Sure, I wasn't ready to such an about-face, she'd better just vomit. My attempt to feel her pulse called forth a new surge of French; it was beyond my comprehension and scared me. A common occurrence was to treat her to some wine and get her laid. Then she was lying in my bed exposed and spoke non-stop in indefinite language: A Jeanne d'Arc on a silk bedspread! And I had a strange French party with her. When she came round I ordered a taxi.

The other day I felt unwell and didn't go to my shop in the morning. There was nothing pressing, and I had to stay in bed. I could allow myself to stay at home: the world wouldn't turn upside down. Then I was wrong, about noon my telephone rang: she didn't find me at the shop. I was pleased to hear she worried about me, and then it was time for me to be upset.

She happened to stay at home too, and she was speaking very slowly.

“Do you know what I’m doing?.. I’m taking medicine, swallowing down pills... One more is coming... I wish I eat them all... I had swallowed up half a pack...”

“Wait a bit, what a pack? What pills? Why, what’s up?”

“I’m just swallowing down pills... Nothing more...”

And I knew nothing but her phone number after the unfortunate party at my place. First I called police to locate her house by the number, and then I called for ambulance to her place. When I rang her back, the girl was out; her Mom said that she just went out of doors. In long three minutes she called me from a telephone booth, and in a quarter of an hour I was beside her. She was still holding a receiver, her fingers ice-cold. She was chilly while talking to her friend.

In a small pack of soporific that I took out of her pocket a few pills were left there. Perhaps, she could do without outside help still. We got her friend on the phone and called on her nearby. A dipper with manganese solution was ready and I made the girl to sip the potion - she had to have her stomach evacuated. It was unpleasant to watch, and the rose-colored slop didn’t look like the wine I’d treated to her. And this time she didn’t speak French.

From the kitchen her friend took the girl to a bathroom. Soon they were back and she felt better. Her complexion turned pink, and she spoke passably while we were taking strong tea. They said it was useful for her. She was sitting as if nothing had happened, then she wanted to sleep and I led her home. It was getting dark outside. The day happened to be a strange one: much of passion and so much tea, plus her Mom’s sleeping pills. I’d better had gone to work.

When the ambulance had arrived, her Mom thought it was a mean joke.

## *In the Beginning*



Leland Thoburn

And behold, God saw everything he had made, and he was bored. It wasn't his best; however, it also wasn't his worst. Pluto, now *that* had been a blunder. Planets, ecosystems, firmaments – once it had all been very interesting. No longer.

And thus it was that on the seventh day God felt puckish. He took it out on the beasts and God felt good. His work was done.

But for the animals, it was just the beginning.

\* \* \*

"This is outrageous," shrieked Rectalpecker Bird.

"What about me?" asked Horny Toad. "I'm a distinguished gentletoad, a toad of breeding and refinement. I haven't committed an indiscretion in...what's it been?"

"I'd say about twenty-two hours," replied Beelzebug.

"Thank you." Toad nodded gravely.

"Yeah man, like, who laid these names on us anyway?" demanded Morongutan.

Eden's plain was full of creatures of every kind. Less than twenty-four hours had passed since the Creation, and already the animals had a long list of grievances.

They had assembled to vent their frustration.

"Spots!" hissed Leopard. "Spots are so...yesterday."

"There wasn't any yesterday," said Owl.

"Hippo's making faces," cried Rhinoceros.

"Turn him around," said Giraffe.

“Wouldn’t make any difference,” huffed Rhinoceros.

“Oh Lord, we are so unworthy,” muttered Sheep, wandering about, oblivious to the surrounding turmoil.

Every animal was complaining about something. The din was finally silenced by the stately flapping of Condor’s enormous wings as it rose from the plain and settled in a nearby tree.

The scavengers, who had collected in a far corner of the plain, had elected Condor their spokescreature. Condor tucked its wings and turned to address the multitude.

“It is with great pride that I – we – announce today the formation of *Animals of Nature United in Sodality*.”

“You might want to reconsider that acronym, dude,” murmured Dog.

A chorus of lesser animals spoke up, all pleading to be accepted as members. Condor flapped its wings to command silence. “Okay, but no cats, and only scavengers can be founding members. The rest of you will be non-voting working members.”

The greater animals were not impressed. “Even a cowchip is paradise for a fly,” murmured Cow, to which Fly took immediate and loud umbrage.

There was some discontentment, but a consensus soon formed that a working membership in an organization that would not accept cats was better than no membership at all.

Cow turned to Condor. “What are you ANUSes...” Hushed giggles could be heard as Cow paused to smile. “What are you ANUSes trying to rectumfy?” Cow had made First Pun.

“Our purpose,” stated Condor, its voice intoning every word with the utmost gravity, “is to eradicate a terrible tyranny that is holding under its thumb the brave workers here assembled.”

The animals all looked at their forelimbs. Those with thumbs were the most concerned.

“A great injustice exists here in Eden.” Condor paused to scan the multitude. “Your work, your food, the very produce of your limbs is being taken by...” Here Condor paused for effect. “Corporate Eden!” it thundered, raising one wingtip and looking to the heavens.

The animals looked at each other in bewilderment. Chicken turned and scratched at the ground, pelting Condor with sand.

Condor bent over to glare at Chicken. “I would remind you, young lady, it takes a brood to raise a chick.”

“No it don’t. Just takes my fat ass.” Chicken turned away in disgust. “Idiot,” she muttered.

Condor waved it aside. “Surely you’ll admit to the value of redistribution of the wealth. Whereas some animals enjoy all that Eden has to offer, others, sadly, do not.”

“Who?” demanded Cow.

“Well, we scavengers for one,” said Condor.

“Nonsense,” snorted Cow. “You get to sample everything without having to work a lick to get it.”

“We want it fresh!” Condor was getting angry.

“Then you’ll have to hunt your own, like the rest of us!” roared Tiger.

Condor paused. “Never mind,” it pronounced, before flying down to rejoin the other scavengers.

The complaints again became a cacophony above which nothing else could be heard. Almost nothing.

“Who’s in charge here anyway?” asked Armadillo. Silence fell as the animals looked at each other. Cat looked at a rock.

“Cow?” suggested Gopher.

“It ain’t me, babe,” Cow spoke between bites of her cud.

“Oh Lord, we are so unworthy,” muttered Sheep.

“Sheep’s got a point. Let’s ask God,” suggested Coyote.

A shrill whistle split the air. It was Gorilla, facing the heavens with two fingers in its mouth. “Yo!” Gorilla shouted. “Yo, God!”

The clouds began to boil.

“Cool beans,” muttered Morongutan, staring unblinking into the heavens.

A face materialized in the clouds. “Yes?” The very word shattered the air and rumbled and echoed amongst the cliffs and mountains. Birds in flight fell, stunned, to the ground.

None of the animals dared speak. God became impatient. “Come, come. I’ve got places to create, people to motivate, things to do. You’ve only got three interventions and this is the first. Let’s get started.”

Sheep started bleating about how unworthy they all were, and how they had all sinned. God replied, “You haven’t had time enough to sin. Well, except maybe Cat. Anyway, I don’t want to hear about it. Just stop sinning.” This was too simple a solution for Sheep to accept, and it began to bleat even louder. God yearned for the silence of the lamb.

Morongutan stepped up. “Like, man, this ain’t cool. There’s animals who hate their names. There’s animals what don’t even know their own taxonomy. And then there’s Cat.” Morongutan pointed to Cat who was at that moment using Morongutan’s leg for a scratching post.

God spoke. “Stupid Cat. I knew he’d be more trouble than he was worth.”

Morongutan pleaded. “It’s not just Cat. We want someone in charge, someone who can tell us what to do, someone who can solve our problems.”

God looked down and shook His head. "If you relinquish your responsibility you'll also relinquish your freedom. It's both or neither."

"But without order we can't have freedom." It was Condor who was speaking on behalf of the scavengers.

"Devilshit!" thundered God, his blast blowing the feathers off the top of Condor's head.

"We can't be free if we're hungry," cried Cat.

"Is that Cat?" God roared. Cat hissed and arched its back. God loosed a thunderbolt as Cat ran behind Dog, who, unfortunately, caught the brunt of the blast.

"Isn't there some way we can get, like, a superior species or something to help us when you're not here?" Cow asked. All nodded in vigorous assent.

God thought about this for a moment before responding. "The problem is that you already possess all the characteristics of a superior species. You have awareness of self. You can talk. Some of you may someday learn to read and write and use power tools. If I give you what you ask, you'll have to lose those skills."

The animals huddled together. Soon, Tiger stepped forward. "We'll accept the loss of self-awareness and the read/write thing; however, the power tools and speech stay."

"I do not negotiate with things I create," roared God. By now the animals' desperation was driving them harder than their reason. "We accept your conditions," surrendered Tiger.

"Okay," God sighed. "But you'll be sorry." He gave the matter some thought. Clouds swirled. A lightning bolt shattered the silence. Then, in a cloud of dust and smoke, there appeared...a smirking man in a dark gray suit and a briefcase?

Cat hissed and spat.

“Oh shit,” muttered God as He smote the creature with one mighty blast.

“Damned lawyer. Not good. Not good at all...”

God pondered again. Then, He smiled. Clouds swirled, thunder rumbled, and the ground shook. The animals all hid their eyes and were awed.

The Sun shone through the rapidly dissolving clouds. A warmth settled on Eden unlike any the animals had known. Flowers bloomed. Spring flourished. The animals opened their eyes.

There, was Woman.

The animals were benumbed by her beauty, and, at that moment, each lost the gift of speech. Forever.

\* \* \*

It was as if the very strains of a harp filled the air when she walked. Her flaxen hair flowed down her back like a waterfall. Her smile radiated unbounded joy. Birds placed garlands in her hair, while the rest of the animals queued up in her wake to see whom she would favor. As she sat, they nestled nearby so she could stroke each of their heads in turn.

“You look unhappy. What’s the matter?” She was stroking Rectalpecker bird’s head and smiling sympathetically. Instinctively, she understood without the unfortunate bird saying a word, for she had the gift of telepathy. “Let’s see, what shall we call you? How about albatross? Yes, albatross. That’s a wonderful name, isn’t it? Sounds like Albert Ross. I knew a man named Albert Ross once...Oh wait, no I didn’t.”

Albatross was now content and flew to the sea where it lived happily the rest of its days.

Morongutan had crept up behind her and was picking at her hair. “Stop it,” she giggled, for the fingers of Morongutan tickled her scalp. “What’s your name?”

Morongutan uttered a guttural grunt that no one but Woman would have understood.

“Well, how about ‘Orangutan’ instead?” This delighted Orangutan, who clapped with glee and danced away to tell his friends.

Next, she renamed Beelzebug, “Ladybug.” Soon, Woman had solved all of the animals’ problems, and all were happy. All except for Horny Toad who had felt the entire scene beneath his dignity. No matter. For the first, and possibly the last, time, Eden was happy.

\* \* \*

One day, Shrew, who was walking with Vole, found something behind a bush. It was disease.

“Gross,” exclaimed Shrew. Vole agreed.

“What’ll we do with it?”

“Let’s get Cat. He’ll eat anything.”

Off they went to get Cat, but of course Cat only played with it. As a result, disease flourished in Eden.

Once again, the animals were unhappy.

They surrounded Woman. Some were coughing and sneezing. Some had watery eyes. Woman suffered with them, for she had been blessed with the gift of infinite empathy as well as the healer’s touch. She stayed up late, keeping them warm, smiling her motherly smile, and looking on them with great sympathy. When this was not enough, she made chicken soup, which displeased only Chicken.

But the animals’ faith in Woman had been shaken. How could something like disease exist in a world controlled by, blessed by, Woman? Had they not given up their voice, their freedoms, their responsibility, so she could take care of everything for them?

Discontent simmered. Woman became aware of every bitter feeling, every angry mood. She decided it was more than she could stand. She decided to ask for help.

“Yoo hoo,” she tittered, fluttering her hand while standing on the highest hilltop in Eden.

“Hey babe.” God appeared in the clouds, which were now white and serene.

“I’m getting kind of lonely here. And besides, you never told me about this disease thing. I need a break.”

God nodded. Soon, He and Woman were planning the characteristics of the creature He would provide to help govern the world, and for which this would be His second intervention.

Ultimately, they decided that there would be this creature called “Man”. Both understood that, while this creature would have great strength and endurance, he would also need great self-confidence to make full use of those assets. Therefore, Woman was going to have to hide for a few days, to let Man think that he was first on the scene. Next, Woman was going to have to abjure her remarkable powers, or at least the overt display of such, to let Man think himself the superior creature. Lastly – he wasn’t going to be pretty.

Woman steeled herself to what she knew was best. She spoke to all the animals so none would be surprised or frightened when “Man” appeared.

On the appointed day, Woman and all of the animals hid, crouching behind the rocks, bushes, and trees that surrounded Eden’s central plain. All eyes faced skyward.

High in the air, a dark spot appeared. Long before they could make out its shape, they could hear its screams. Limbs flailed as it fell to earth, crashing into the ground with a thunderous blast. Dust swirled where it had landed. A shape began to take form in the dust.

The first thing Woman noticed was his hair. He was covered in it. Next, she saw his dishevelment. This did not concern Woman. "I'll withhold judgment until he's had a chance to clean up." Little did she know how long that would be. What concerned her most, however, was the besotted look on his face. Soon, her greatest fears were confirmed.

Man dusted himself off. "God damn it, what happened?" No sooner had the words escaped his lips than a lightning bolt crashed from the heavens, missing him by inches.

Man jumped. "God damn..." This time he had no time to react. The lightning bolt hit him squarely in the chest.

Blackened and bewildered, Man arose, tamping out the fires that had started in the hairs on his chest. Man looked about cautiously.

"God..." he said cautiously, quickly jumping aside before a lightning bolt struck the spot where he had just stood.

Man looked briefly into the sky. Then, he sauntered over to a large tree that stood at the edge of the clearing. As he neared the tree, he began to whistle. Reaching the tree, he stopped and looked up. Then, he ducked behind the tree and shouted, "God damn it." Instantly, a lightning bolt of Biblical proportions split the tree, raining flaming embers everywhere.

Man peered from behind the now blackened stump, his own eyes the only white in an otherwise uniformly black mien. Man looked up.

"Motherf..." he said quickly, ducking behind the stump. Nothing happened.

With a satisfied smirk, Man emerged.

Cow shook its head. Even Cat hadn't needed to be struck more than twice.

Man looked around. Then, he broke wind, eructed, and scratched. The animals were shocked. What manner of beast was this? Woman smiled sadly and buried her

face in her hands. She now knew it was going to take all her skills to manage this thing called “Man”. She sighed and slipped away quietly into the brush.

Shortly thereafter, Woman revealed herself and the rest, as they say, is history. Almost.

\* \* \*

Woman had reached the end of her patience. This “Man” had no manners, no tenderness, very little reasoning ability, and he was never around except at night. Worst of all, she hadn’t had an uninterrupted night’s sleep since he arrived. She decided to use the last intervention.

“It’s me again.”

The Sun faded as clouds swirled overhead. A voice boomed.

“This is number three. You know that?” Woman nodded. God’s face appeared. “You look tired. Whazzup?”

“I just can’t...”

God interrupted. “I warned you. You said you wanted...”

Woman lost her temper. “Jesus Christ, would you just listen to me for a...”

“What did you say?” God commanded.

God had never spoken to Woman in anger before, and she was frightened.

Timidly, she said, “I only wanted you to...”

“No, that first part.”

“Jesus Christ...”

“Yeah, I like that. It’s got a nice ring to it. I got to remember to use that some day.

Okay, you were saying?”

“I just can’t go on like this any longer. He’s so...brutish. He’s like Gorilla but without the manners. And I have no idea what to call him.”

“I don’t give a damn...”

“Great idea! I’ll call him Adam. But what about his manners?”

“You asked for...”

Woman looked up, batted her eyelashes, and smiled coyly. It stopped God cold, as it would much lesser beings for the remainder of eternity.

“Oh, all right,” He sighed. “I’ll give you one modification. Choose carefully.”

Woman thought. She thought long, and she thought hard.

“Just make him love me,” she pleaded.

God frowned. “No can do, sweetheart.”

Woman stamped her foot. “Why not?”

“When I made him – and you, by the way – I gave him free will. It’s the only way I could avoid having to solve all the Goddamned little – oops, I shouldn’t say that – all the silly little problems people dream up. Whether he loves you or not, that’s up to him. And you.”

A tear trickled from Woman’s eye. “Can you at least help me get some sleep? Every night it’s ‘do you come here often?’ or ‘what’s your sign?’ Then he starts rubbing my back and...well, when he’s done, all he wants to do is talk. And don’t get me started on his breath.”

God smiled sympathetically. “That’s all part of ensuring the continuity of the species. It’s necessary. Trust me. But I can make it so he’s not so talkative.” God snapped his fingers. “Anything else?”

Woman shook her head sadly. “Bye,” she murmured, waving to God as He disappeared from the heavens. Woman knew that, now, God was finished. The future, whether for good or evil, was hers to manage. She sighed, for hers was truly a heavy burden. She turned and walked slowly back down to the plain of Eden.

The animals, sensing her mood, kept their distance. All except for Cat, who rubbed her leg before running away just as Woman reached down to pet it.

It was a dejected Woman who trudged out of the hills that afternoon. Reaching the plain, she sat. She was tired. She was sore. But she was also resolute. She swore that she would carry out her responsibilities to the best of her abilities. A grim look of determination etched her face as she raised her head. Then, she smiled.

For there, cleaned, groomed, and gazing tenderly – and holding a bunch of flowers (for he had been unable to find any chocolate) – stood Adam.

## *One of Them “Men from Mars”*



Molly N. Moss

Shadows are gathering between the houses of the subdivision. Low on the horizon the moon, nearly full, is already visible.

Mona stops still half a block from the driveway, her hand lightly touching the sutures. He is home, she knows. Their silver Honda Accord sits in their driveway. Lights are on in the kitchen, the family room, and Kate's bedroom. With any luck Shane is getting his sister to help him with his homework.

A deep breath, and she marches to the door and knocks. Her scalp prickles, but she does not turn to see the drapes pulled aside. She hears the chain rattle, the deadbolt thump. The door swings open and Rick's arm flies out to grab her and haul her inside, and a strangled shriek escapes her lips.

He's fumbling at his belt buckle and she runs into the kitchen, getting the table between them. “No, Rick! I couldn't help it, they took me!”

“Bitch.” He spits the word out as he doubles up the belt. “You got a nerve, up and leaving me like that. I'll make you sorry.” He lunges at her, the swinging belt whistling through the air.

She darts backward and circles the table away from him as he stalks her, her hands shaking as she pulls up her sweater. “Just look what they did to me! It isn't my fault, I swear!”

On her abdomen is a cut, a little less than an inch long, closed with a few stitches. It's a little below her navel, and to one side. She points to it with one trembling hand, her other hand shaking too as it holds up her sweater.

He hesitates, squinting at the short gash. "Mona, what the hell is *that* supposed to be?"

Everything depends on making him believe. Tears of terror overflow her eyes, burning her cheeks. "Aliens," she whispers, forcing herself to look at his face, not at the belt. A shudder runs through her. "They got me. When I was on the way to the grocery store, Rick. They froze me – and then – they did this to me – and other things."

She's shaking as she faces him across the table. Blurry through her tears she sees Kate in the kitchen doorway, her hands over her face, watching them between her fingers. A tear slides into Mona's mouth and she grimaces a moment at the salt taste. Rick is motionless, his face a blank, the doubled belt still in his grip.

"Aliens." Rick looks her directly in her eyes.

It's a risk, but she takes it. "*Oh, Rick!*" She hurls herself into his arms, burying her face in his undershirt. "Don't let them get me again. *Please...*"

Time seems to stand still. Finally she feels his muscles relax, his arms enfolding her.

"I'll kill them if they try!"

Over his shoulder, Mona sees Kate back silently out of the kitchen door, and then she catches a glimpse of Shane trailing behind her. At last, Mona herself can relax. She does, breathing a sigh of relief on to Rick's neck as he strokes her hair.

It's almost over. Rick's unborn third child is ashes in an incinerator in Illinois, and so is the embryo that took root for a while in one of her tubes. Tonight, when she's sure he's asleep, she'll hush Kate and Shane into the Accord and pack one fast

bag for the three of them. And then they'll go, and she prays she'll never set foot in Missouri again.

# *Playing Thief*



Robert P. Hansen

He must have had two Y chromosomes. That's the only way I can explain it. Men with two Y chromosomes make the worst criminals because they usually aren't bright enough to get away with their crimes. That's what one of my Psychology professors said, anyway. She was talking about a study that criticized another study for saying that men with two Y chromosomes tended to be violent criminals. That's not true, even though there seems to be a disproportionately high number of men with two Y chromosomes in prison. It's really because they do stupid things. I remember this because of the story my professor told us about one of them.

This guy wanted some money so he decided to steal an ATM machine. He wrapped a chain to the machine and hooked the chain to his bumper. He got in his truck, revved the motor, and promptly pulled his bumper off. Well, the bumper, chain, and license plate were still there when the police arrived, and it was easy for them to track down the would-be thief. The video was just the nail in his coffin, so to speak, and after viewing it, the Public Defender, once he stopped laughing, took the first deal the Prosecutor gave. So much for two Y chromosomes and the criminal mastermind.

OK, much of that last paragraph isn't really what the Professor told us, but the gist of it is. There was a bumper and video, I just ad-libbed the rest of it to help you understand what criminals with two Y chromosomes do. I know, because I ran into one in a Laundromat—or, rather, he ran into me.

It's a cheap Laundromat. I don't have a lot of money to spare on the better places. Too many student loans to pay back. It's only a few blocks from where I live, and I usually walk there, one load at a time. The front door scares the hell out of me; it's got one of those big swinging arms at the top, and one of the bolts is loose. Someday, it's going to fall and hit somebody in the head. I've left notes about it in the "Problems" box, but whoever owns the place doesn't seem to care. If it comes down on me, I'll sue. (I've even signed the notes and made dated copies for my records, just in case.) Even so, I always involuntarily duck when I walk in to the place.

It only has about a dozen washers and dryers. Most of the washers look like they've been there twenty years, but there are a few newer ones at the end of the row. I use them as much as possible, which is pretty much always because I do my laundry at midnight on Sundays. It's a good time to do laundry; no waiting. I also like the solitude. The few times others have come in, they've dropped their laundry in the washers, left, and came back to put them in the dryer. Usually, I'm gone before they get the second time.

The dryers are a bitch. Sometimes they work; sometimes they don't. I've left scorching notes about that, too, and they sometimes help and sometimes don't. The owner has a rather cold heart, I guess. And cold dryers.

There's not much to do while I wait for my laundry to wash and dry, so I always bring a book with me. The TV there doesn't have cable, and the reception of the local stations is pathetic. There's not much on at midnight on Sundays, anyway, so it doesn't matter. The video games, though, are another matter, and I usually put a dollar or two in the pinball machine before I get frustrated. I've never been very good at pinball.

There's a bulletin board by the door. I've read the flyers posted on it a few times. One about confidential testing for AIDS. Another about church meetings. Lost dogs or cats. The "approximate" run-time for the washers and dryers. Underneath the bulletin board is a little table that would feel at home in a junkyard. The magazines on it were probably *stolen* from a junkyard. I read part of one, once, and that was enough for me. After that, I started taking a book with me.

Well, this particular Sunday night, I had just put my clothes in to wash and returned to the novel I was reading. It was Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and I had finally gotten the knack of reading the pidgin prose of the narrator. He never uses "the" except in dialogue, and sometimes he uses an "Understood I" as a subject. If I hadn't read a lot of Heinlein's other books, I probably would have given up on this one after a few pages. Anyway, as I opened the book, I saw this guy out of the corner of my eye. He was walking toward the door beside the big window with "Suds Plus Laundry" painted on it. He had something black in his hand. The street light glinted off it. I got a bit nervous. I generally don't like being around people, which is why I do my laundry when I do. Well, he opens the door and –

No. The hinge above the door doesn't break; the arm does not fall and clonk him on the head. It would have simplified everything if it had, but that wasn't my luck. Instead, he opened the door, brandished a knife, and said the one cliché no one wants to hear: "Give me your money."

Well, that was a problem. I hadn't brought any more than what I needed for my laundry. All I had in my pocket was two dollars in quarters. And lint. Lint never goes away; it accumulates. Especially in the dryers they have at Suds Plus. Anyway, I must have looked dumb because he repeated it, more loudly, and stepped closer.

I shrugged, stood up, reached into my pocket, and handed him the few quarters I had left to dry my clothes.

He looked at them, scowled, and threw them on the floor. They clattered like a slot machines, and he demanded: "I said give me your money!"

By now, you can imagine how frightened I was. It was bad enough to be robbed, but to be called a liar, too? I looked helplessly at the quarters still rolling on the floor, waved my hand, and said, "That's all I have."

"What?" he growled, as he took another step toward me.

"Look," I said, shoving my hands in my pockets and pulling them inside-out. The only thing that clattered to the floor was my key ring. (The lint fell silently.) "Do you see any money?"

He opened his mouth to snarl something, and I half-screamed, "Look around you! Do you think anyone with money would come *here*?"

Something in my voice must have registered because he looked around for the first time and thought about what I said. Maybe my fear had sunk in, and maybe not. But what he did next baffles me to this day. He started toward the dryers with his knife, turned toward me, and snarled, "Get out of here!"

Well, I didn't need any more coaxing than that: I left. After I was out the door, I looked in through the window and saw him prying on the coin box of one of the dryers. Then I ran three blocks to the gas station and called the cops. I was standing on the corner, waiting, when they showed up about ten minutes later. I watched from across the street as they went inside. The thief turned, dropped his knife, and that was that. No fight, no fuss, he just dropped the knife and shrugged.

After they cuffed him, I crossed the street and went in. The police were busy with their prisoner, and I had my keys and three quarters in my hand before they stopped me. "That's evidence," one of them said, taking the quarters from me.

"No," I said, shaking my hand and pointing to the floor. "I dropped them when he came in. I need them to dry my clothes."

“No you don’t,” the thief said over his shoulder as they led him outside.

“Hand them over,” the cop said, opening an “evidence” bag.

“Fine,” I said, dropping the three quarters in the bag. “But I’m keeping my keys. If you take them, I can’t get back in my apartment.”

He thought for a moment, looked at the evidence around him, and said, “All right.”

Ah, the evidence around him. The thief had been busy. He had jimmed open some of the dryers, and his cache of quarters was scattered on the folding bench. The officer went over with his bag and started counting them. When he finished, I asked how much he’d gotten out of the machines, and the policeman shook his head. “A lousy twelve dollars,” he said, glancing back at the vandalized machines. “And he probably did a couple hundred dollars worth of damage in the process.”

Twelve dollars. A misdemeanor, I suppose. A slap on the wrist. Then the officer’s partner returned with his note pad and started asking me questions. Lots of questions. I gave a more complete statement at the station, later, but he wanted to get the basic facts from me while they were still fresh in my mind. When I got to the part when the thief threw my quarters on the floor, the buzzer for one of the dryers went off and we both jumped. The second one went off a few moments later, and I stared at them. Then I started laughing. After a few moments, the officer asked, “What’s so funny?”

I pointed at the dryers, unable to speak.

“What about them?”

“Those are mine,” I said.

“So?” he said, still not comprehending.

“My clothes were in the washers when I left.”

