

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

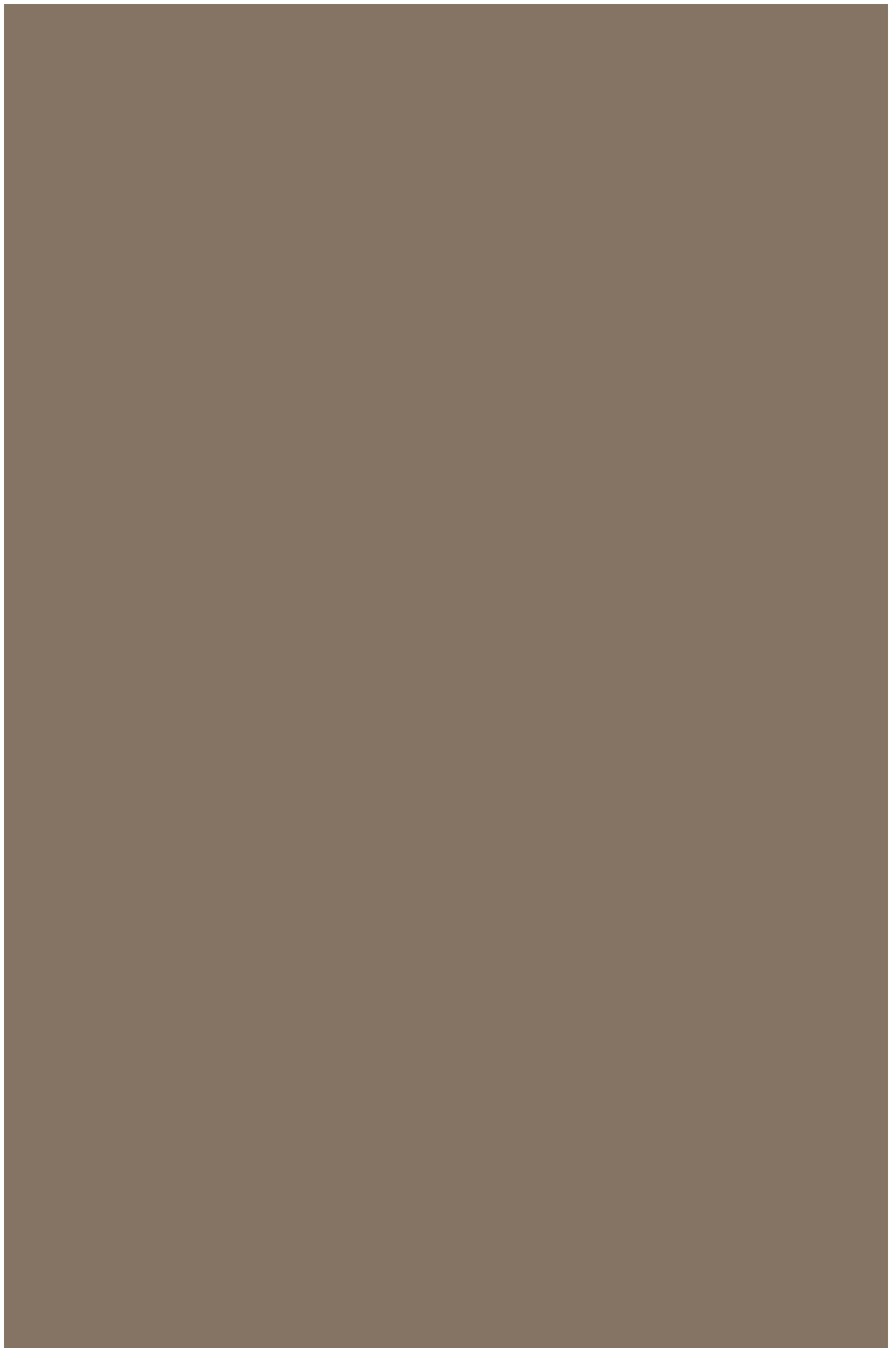


Best of Poetry

Lyn Lifshin

Best of Fiction

William Libaw



The Corner

Club

Press



The Corner Club Press

January 2012

Volume I • Issue VI

Managing Editor *Greg Tredore*
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Poetry Editor *Daphne Maysonet*

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poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Letter From the Editors

Dear shadows, who are our readers and writers,

First off, we would like to thank our three readers, Jake Syersak, Robyn Ritchie, and Becca Wilson, because without them this issue would be going out a lot later. They have really lightened our work load and have thus made us more competitive. We have fewer pieces than usual, but we hope these few will be nonetheless enjoyable.

Also, this is our anniversary issue, meaning we have been afloat for a full year! So next time around we'll be starting volume two. We want thank all of you for supporting us this past year. Here's to another year of The Corner Club Press!

Amber Forbes, Daphne Maysonet
Founders and Editors

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Lyn Lifshin

Sleeping with Lorca

It's not true, he never chose women.
I ought to know. It was Grenada and
the sun falling behind the Alhambra was
flaming lava. I could say I was
too but some things should be left unsaid.
But I remember his fingers on the buttons
at the back of my neck, my skin burned
as he fumbled with rhinestones and pearls.
I want you breathed into my neck though
perhaps he was whispering *Green,*
green I want you green. How little he
needed to impress me with his poems.
One English term paper with them and I
was naked, taken. It wouldn't matter if
he had a pot belly or stank of garlic.
My jeans were a puddle around my
knees. I was the gored bull, hypnotized
by moves I'd only imagined but never
believed would enter me. There's
more you might coax me to say but
for enough I can still smell the
green wind, that 5 o'clock in the afternoon
that would never be another time

Benjamin Schmitt

Tree

the tree
so kingly
holds court in the park
acorns dance spinning their exposed green
bottoms
delegations of squirrels bring it gifts
the saplings along the walkway offer jests
and drunken teenage ambassadors with orange hair and pierced nipples
sleep under its boughs

the tree
so priestly
these roots long, flowing robes
these branches point long rheumatic fingers
birds perch on heavenly pews
the light is filtered by stained glass windows of green
this is a cathedral of gnarled gargoyles
swaying in the sun

my tree
so heavy
despite the shedding of my dreams
what seed springs Mona Lisas and dictators?
for my bark has the texture of abuse
twigs sag with slaps, leaves eaten by words
longing for transubstantiation, I want to be
something useful;
a door or a table
a rifle or a book.

A graduate of Boise State University, Benjamin Schmitt was born in Columbia, Missouri. He currently resides in Seattle, Washington. Over the years he has worked a number of odd jobs including dishwasher. His work has been published in Pearl, The Evergreen Review, Poetry SuperHighway, The Fine Line, Danse Macabre, Otis Nebula, Poetry for the Masses, and Subliminal Interiors.

Marchell Dyon



Round

The moon is round tonight.

Rounder than a Gerber baby's laugh,

Rounder than a Hopi house,

Rounder than my once button belly,

Rounder than the whole wide indigo world,

Rounder than any other moon,

Tonight the moon is round.

Round is my mystical orb that was born to a yellow moon.

My love, cradled in my arms, snuggled and sleeping,

My child, my doll baby, my smiling Buddha,

My Christmas star

Marchell Dyon is from Chicago IL. She has taken various poetry workshops; she is eternally addicted to audio books, she is currently working on her first chapbook. Her work has appeared in Ouroboros Review, West Ward Quarterly, and Lily Review.

Valentina Cano

Classroom Violence

The rest of the room
trembled as he spoke.
Chairs and desks,
all full of days in the sunlight,
were submerged in an ice-cold lake.
The words dipped them
ever
downwards.
They tried to look back
up to where he was,
but all they could see
was a mouth,
shimmering, weaving,
through the water.

Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time either writing or reading. Her works have appeared in Exercise Bowler, Blinking Cursor and The Corner Club Press among many others. You can find her here: <http://coldbloodedlives.blogspot.com>

Alisha Escobedo

Spilled Milk

The milk spilled.
Rolled down the wrinkles of my dress
Before it sat comfortably on the ground,
Quiet splashes to ease the fall.

My knees explode with terror
And I am closer to the ground
On the nubs that once had legs connected.

Footsteps progress
I see those shoes that are so loved
Those decorated shoes
With tiny flowers placed carefully where dirt cannot find
them.

I wished that I had been so loved
Placed carefully in this world where dirt could not find me.
I became it instead.
Dirt of the unmentionable kind.
Filth as failure's disguise.
The grime that unmovingly sticks in the crevice of life.

"I cannot love you," spoke the voice which owned those
sacred shoes.

"I cannot love you because if our love had been that milk,
You have let it use you to catapult itself onto this filthy
floor,

And it has detached itself from our nurturing."

The voice hums the Canadian anthem
Full of pride for something it does not possess.
I wonder if those shoes have an anthem of their
own.

I wonder if I will regain my ability to stand
Or if my legs have forsaken me with this remorse
eternally.

It was not love.
It was only milk.
It was only milk.

The illogical wins, again
As the milk settles on the ground
Curdling amongst the dirt
And evaporating with the abandoned emotion.

Residing in her small hometown in Kansas, Alisha Escobedo is currently overcoming minor obstacles which have suddenly crippled her from pursuing old dreams, which never die. With plenty of time on her hands, as she works part-time as a cleaning technician for White Glove Cleaning Services, she has gained the motivation to continue forth in her adoration for writing. She is currently looking into schooling options to better discipline her writing techniques, as well as to form a career in the near future with her love for words.



I Wish...

The Witches of Desire: Book 1

Wren Emerson

could cost her everything. Her legacy as one of the most powerful witches the town has ever seen has made her enemies that have been waiting patiently for a chance to destroy her. Thistle needs to learn to use her powers to protect herself before they succeed.

Be careful what you wish for.

Thistle has a power unique even among the magic wielding witches of Desire. She can wish things into existence. At first she enjoys the freedom of having everything her heart desires, but she soon realizes that her power comes at a terrible price. She's losing her grip on her sanity at a time when she can't afford any weakness. Her enemies are closing in quickly, but she might not have the strength to save herself.

It's available at Amazon (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0050X8UJA/ref=s9_simh_gw_p351_do_i1?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKXoDER&pf_rd_s=center-2&pf_rd_r=114RN810E1XXVZ52TAG3&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=470938631&pf_rd_i=507846) and Barnes & Noble (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/i-wish-wren-emerson/1103662107?ean=2940013598713&itm=1&usri=wren%2bemerson>)

All she ever wanted was a chance to settle down in one place.

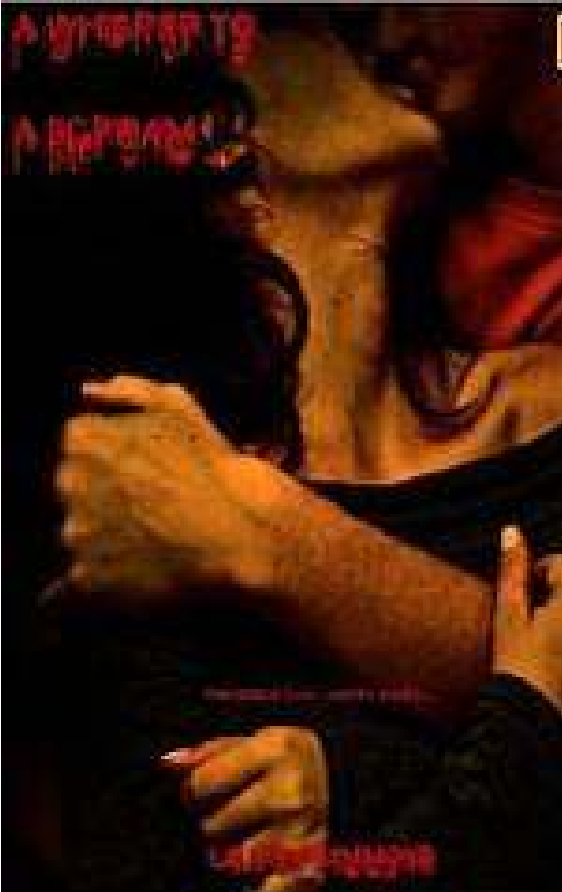
Thistle Nettlebottom knows her life isn't exactly normal. She travels the country with her secretive mother and bestselling author grandmother in a pink RV going from book signings to crazy research trips. She's never been to public school or had a boyfriend, but she can pick a lock and hotwire a car. One day the phone rings and they set a course to a tiny town that's not on any maps. Suddenly, Thistle finds her whole life changing.

She's finally found the home she's been searching for.

Thistle soon realizes that Desire isn't like other towns and she's not like other girls. The family she trusted has lied to her about everything her entire life and the things she doesn't know about herself

A Whisper to a Scream

Sometimes love *can* be. . . deadly.



Ellory Graham detested high school. She relished the fact that she was a rebel. A wild, carefree, type of girl. She basked in the glory of being the type of girl who stood up to authority. Unfortunately for her, her upfront, honest and bitchy nature always managed to land her in some kind of trouble.

Adam Jacobs was everything Ellory was not. Not only was he beautiful, but he was smart, artistic, and sweet. To almost every girl he seemed like the total package- that all around perfect guy. But in a town where nothing particularly interesting happens, and gossip seems like the only fun thing to do, sometimes those perfections become flaws. And it doesn't take long for Ellory to find out, even Adam has secrets.

But Adam's secrets, are the kind of secrets people die for...

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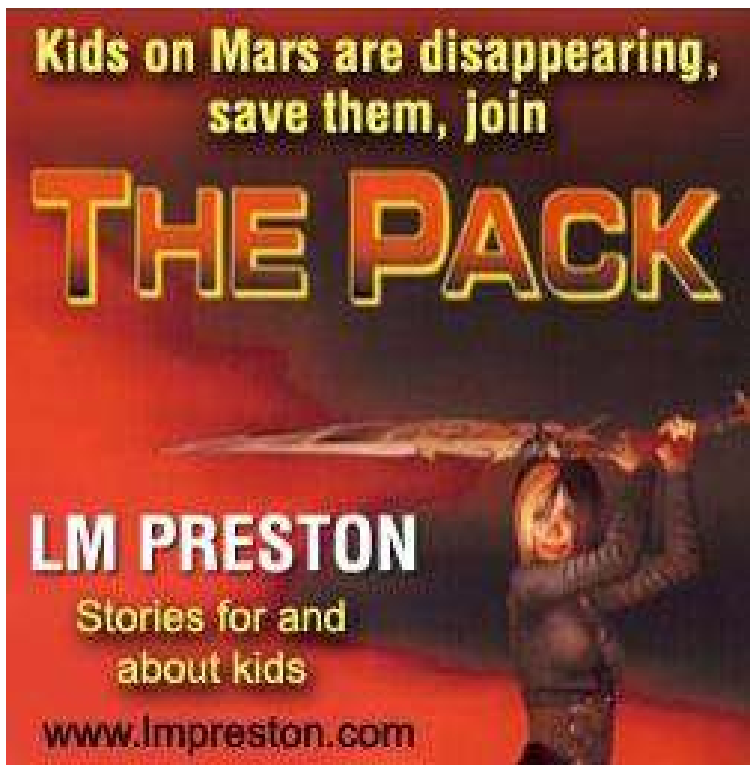
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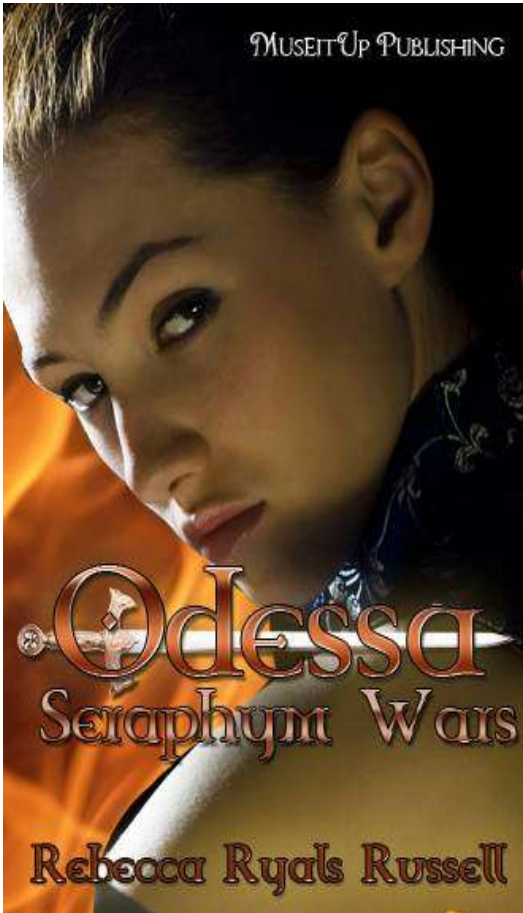
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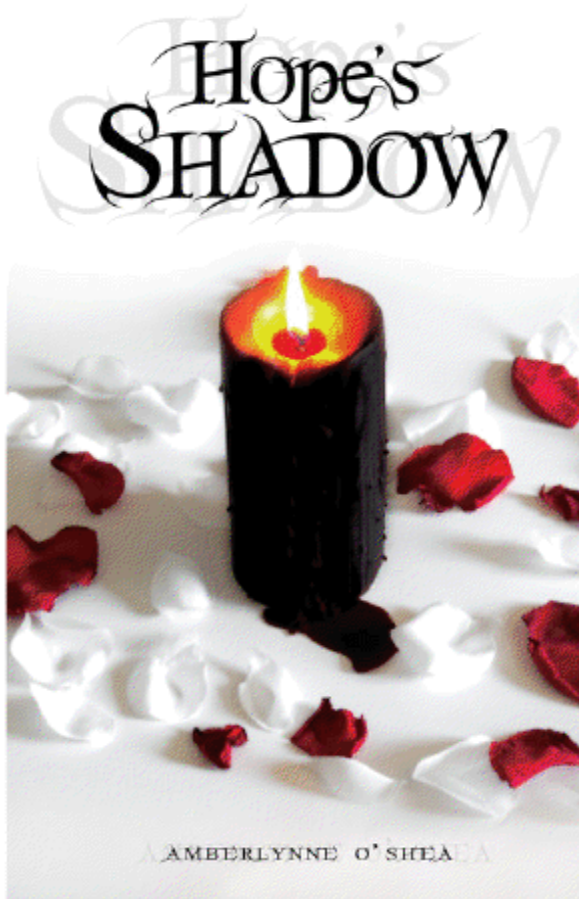


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The Jabberwock Mystery



William Libaw

While his wife slept in the bedroom, Fred Freeman was re-reading *The Annotated Alice*. About the fictional wonderland of Lewis Carroll, the book was put together by Martin Gardner. Freeman turned again to the piece of nonsense verse called "Jabberwocky," only to be interrupted by the quiet tapping on the apartment door. Their good friend, Ed Grant, had come by again to see Janie. After a couple minutes in the bedroom to see if she might wake up, Grant settled his short bulky body into a chair and agreed to a time-filling game of chess.

As they set up the board, Freeman said, "I might have grounds for an article about Carroll's 'Jabberwocky.' Maybe write it up and get it published somewhere. Remember how it goes?" Freeman started to read "Jabberwocky" aloud.

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws . . .

Grant interrupted, "Look, I'm spotting you only a lousy knight, you better concentrate on the game." Then he delivered the poem's second verse, using his memory and a quiet version of the full-bodied voice that helped earn him a living as an actor.

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch!

Returning to his conversational tone, Grant asked, "Why should anyone be interested in your nonsense about Lewis Carroll's nonsense? More important, why is it so hot here, the air-conditioner crap out? And what's with the really important thing around this place, Janie's condition?"

"Thank God her head continues to clear up," Freeman responded, "She's more talkative, but she still mostly sleeps. When she started to be awake more, she said she'd rather have the summer heat, so I turned off the air-conditioner."

Freeman's eyes turned to the chessboard as he said, "I can't beat you with only a knight, give me more, a few pawns, maybe a bishop. Anyway, my basic idea about Lewis Carroll's peculiar poetry is that *nobody writes meaningless nonsense*. 'Jabberwocky' must have a story hidden in it. I think it's really a young-man's adventure. He goes out to the world and encounters three creatures, the Jabberwock, the

Jubjub bird, and the Bandersnatch. I've got some ideas about those three. For starters, *I think they're women.*"

Freeman switched to recalling the past. "Taking a fresh look at Lewis Carroll reminds me of our old school days a couple decades ago. You know, when Janie and I were in college, reading all kinds of stuff, including 'Jabberwocky.' You were there too, of course"

Grant's fleshy neck and cheeks suddenly reddened. What got to him was Freeman's implication that he, Grant, was only incidental to those old school days with Janie. He opened his mouth, "What's your hodgepodge got to do with those days? That was when Janie and I were together. Yes?" Grant switched his irritation with Freeman to the present. "Here's a title for your future story: 'Well-baked Nut-cake Cut Into Half-baked Cookies!' A bit harsh? So skip my title, what journal would publish what you write? You're a high school teacher, not an academic."

Freeman replied calmly, "All that because I neglected your tender memories? So forgive me, Ed. As for getting in print, 'Jabberwocky' is familiar to lots of people. An article with something new about it could find a home in a magazine for ordinary readers. My article would point out that Lewis Carroll's fancy words, *Jabberwock*, *Jubjub bird*, and *Bandersnatch*, are more than inventions. *They refer to different kinds of women the hero encounters when he ventures out in the world.*"

A bit sheepish about his outburst, Grant replied, "If you didn't want my opinion about 'Jabberwocky,' why tell me to stay? I might be having real Sunday fun with a young woman who wants help getting into acting. Look, I happen to like Carroll's nonsense jabbering. I just don't see how making it a story, even one about a hero and his women, will do anything for you." Savoring each syllable, Grant quietly delivered the third verse:

He took his vorpal sword in hand:

Long time the manxome foe he sought—

So rested he by the Tumtum tree,

And stood awhile in thought.

Freeman was listening, which was all Grant needed to continue. But the phone interrupted them with a call from one of Janie's fellow teachers. When it ended, Grant went on to voice the fourth verse.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,

And burred as it came!

"See?" Freeman interjected. "See how the Jabberwock enters? As the main character besides the young hero? As for all three being women, just think about the writer, Lewis Carroll. We know he was really captivated by girls. Which is to say, Carroll enjoyed being with females who were not grown-ups."

When he saw Grant faking a shocked expression, Freeman paused and explained. "Relax, Ed, I'm not hinting at anything nasty. Carroll relished spending innocent time with girls like Alice, the Wonderland adventurer. But I suspect that he never had a deep relationship with an attractive adult woman."

Freeman went on, trying out some of his ideas on Ed Grant. "The

'Jabberwocky' poem might be a wishful fantasy of Carroll's, where the hero does what the writer himself never did in his own life. About the peculiar three being women, Ed, just listen about those names.

"Start with 'The Jubjub bird.' That's not a winged-creature, the English used *bird* as we use 'chick,' for a young woman. *Jubjub* itself is more than mere nonsense, it's also a variation on 'jug-jug,' which is the end of the game guys like you would like to play with young actress chicks. So then, who is the Jubjub bird? *She's a hot chick, that's who.*"

"Lots of chicks look hot, but they ain't necessarily so," Grant offered.

Freeman wouldn't get diverted. "In Carroll's time, men in his upper social class expected to encounter two different kinds of women, upper-class saints and lower-class sinners. The Jubjub bird was one of the latter, a young working-class woman who might put out for a monied man who treated her well. I suspect Carroll himself was uncomfortable with women like that. More broadly, *the sexuality of adult women* was what he didn't have to face with girls."

Like the teacher he was, but with a subject unsuitable for high school, Freeman stood up and pointed to the page in the book. "That brings us to the second woman, the *frumious Bandersnatch*. Martin Gardner's book suggests that *frumious* means 'furious and fuming.' Now think about the name, *Bandersnatch*. With "snatch," a word we no longer use, I think it refers to a woman whose sexual parts are *forbidden*. *Her snatch is banned*. Who might she be?"

Grant jumped in. "Good grief, a woman whose sexuality is off-limits? By golly, I've got it! Freud would say she's his Mommy, who Carroll had the hots for when he was little!"

Freeman ignored Grant's lightening of his lecture. "Too narrow. She's any woman with whom sex is likely to be out of the question.

Maybe it started with Carroll's mom, who got furious and started fuming when her little boy put his hands on her."

In his usual relaxed mode, Grant replied. "Aha! Now I get it. Sex! That's what will peddle your piece! Lord knows, TV commercials that show sexy women can sell anything. As for Lewis Carroll never scoring on women, how do you know that? Liking girls doesn't mean he didn't like women. I'm sure he had friends who were attractive ladies. A look at his ancient credit card records might show weekly buys of professional women. At the local *Rent A Hot Harlot*."

Without a pause or a smile, Freeman stayed with his theme. "Now for the main mystery, the Jabberwock. She was nothing like the easy-thrill Jubjub bird. Nor was she a Bandersnatch dame, whose legs couldn't be parted with a pry-bar. I haven't found any evidence thus far, but the Jabberwock had to be in the middle: not too easy with sex, not too difficult. I can't show it yet, but my hunch is the Jabberwock was much more than that. She was *the woman who might become the hero's love, his wife, his whole life!*"

That got to Grant. His mode of speaking changed. "Come off it, Fred! The Jabberwock ain't no woman, it's a beast that your hero ends up killing!"

Then Grant switched to what was really bothering him. "Never mind all that, why the hell are you making so much of 'Jabberwocky?'" He paused to catch Freeman's eye as he pointed a stabbing finger at the bedroom where Janie was sleeping. "Look, Fred, *it's scary about Janie!* Scares me, it's got to scare the hell out of you. Hard to face, but there's no escaping!"

Freeman remained composed. "Ed, you're not around enough to understand. I cook, clean up, I help Janie with everything. And there's still time left over, with no classes for me now in the summer. So I

fill time with this "Alice in Wonderland" book, that's all."

Seeing that Grant was still staring at him, Freeman said more. "As for what her doctor called 'a cerebrovascular accident' . . . God in Heaven, what can I do? Janie had a stroke! The doctor said it was high blood pressure. I admitted that it bothers me. So now, whenever I see him, he tells me she's getting better. Should I ask for proof that she won't get worse?"

They quietly resumed their chess game, which Ed Grant won, even though he gave up a knight and a bishop. Then Grant went again to see if Janie was awake. After a few minutes he came out, said she was still sleeping, and left their apartment.

Turned-off by Grant's fault-finding words, Freeman put down the Lewis Carroll book. He went back to trying to recall what he and Janie were talking about just before her stroke happened, a long couple of months ago. He stared at the wall without noticing the fresh wallpaper they had put up in this room in their Brooklyn walk-up apartment. His eyes passed over the small dinner table covered now with its new colorful tablecloth. But once again, he couldn't remember what they were talking about before the stroke hit her.

All he could recall was that it started in the restaurant, with Janie suddenly getting sick to her stomach and then falling to the floor. That was when he shouted, "Someone call an ambulance! My wife passed out! No, no, for God's sake she's not drunk, get help! Get help!"

* * *

Freeman gave up trying to remember, and went into the bedroom. Janie was still flat on her back in her thin summer pajamas, which were now much too large, as she had lost so much weight. He was glad to see she was awake and had some energy to talk.

Initially, she talked about Grant. "When he popped in. I was still

not up to talking, so I had an eye less than half-open on him." Her last words referred to the patch over her other eye, as her full vision had not come together.

"Ed was looking at me. Looking mostly at what is now my nearly flat chest. Same place he used to look long ago. When we were in college, although that was hardly the same body."

Janie looked up at her husband as she said, "I know it makes you uncomfortable if I talk about my long-ago time with Ed. But I'm indulging myself now, Fred, not you."

Pleased by what seemed almost a return to her old self, Freeman told her, whatever she said was okay with him. But it surprised him that Janie wanted to talk about long ago when she and Ed were a young couple. None of the three of them spoke about the time when Janie Correia and Ed Grant were together, and Fred Freeman was just someone they knew. They had that unspoken agreement for a few years now, ever since Janie spotted Grant doing a TV commercial. And then brought him back into the lives of Freeman and herself, to become no more and no less than a good friend to both of them.

Freeman told Janie about the phone call, that the caller wanted her help with teaching the children about art. Janie pointed to the Matisse pictures on the bedroom walls, and asked her husband to find some smaller ones through the internet, and send them to her fellow teacher with a note saying she would call to explain how she used them.

Freeman agreed to do all that. Then he said, "Why keep casting pearls to the young swine in art classes? Yeah, yeah, teachers have to keep kids occupied. But couldn't you let them do something easy, like using crayons, or mixing colors?"

Janie had enough energy to toss it right back at him, "How can you be so thick-headed about that, Fred? The swine are too old to mix

pigments. They're old enough to look at something besides TV."

Then she went back to Grant. "Two decades ago, when Ed's eyes kept turning to what he called my 'bosom,' it made me feel I had a hot body. Even after he and I got together, Ed still ogled that way. Though it turned out Well, the truth is this—in the bedroom, dear Ed was both a man and a mouse." Then, when she saw her husband smiling, "Fred, I'm not talking about anything physical. He was always timid, that was part of what was endearing about him. I know you won't say anything to him."

Freeman moved away from her topic without leaving it. "I was attracted to you before you were seeing Ed, but I was too sluggish to do anything about it. About sex, in those days I did more thinking than doing. With you, somehow it's what I was interested in all the time—as you know."

Janie said, "I know." Then, looking at him directly, "You've never changed, Fred."

Her look puzzled her husband for a moment. Then it sunk in. Janie wasn't talking about their years together, but about the last few weeks. He struggled for words, "I just wanted to hold you, Janie. I thought it wouldn't wake you. I know sex is something you have no interest in now. That's why . . ." He paused. Then, with relief, he realized Janie was not complaining, but just being her usual plainspoken outspoken self.

She continued with her long-ago time with Grant. "It was after Ed and I came to that jarring split-up. That sudden parting when Ed just bowed out. But I was still stuck on him. It wasn't 'til months passed that I found something that helped me get free.

"What I found was odd. You could call it a private nickname for Ed. Got it in the cafeteria one day. I happened to be standing with my

tray, looking for a spot. Just behind me was a table, where it turned out—my bum luck, I thought—Ed was sitting. I heard that ripe voice, which could only be him. He was with another guy, babbling between bites."

Now with a full smile on her pale face, Janie went on. "Ed was saying something I can repeat now without a giggle. They were talking about—guess what—women. Anyhow, it was Ed's punch line that gave me a nickname for him, one that helped me get unhooked. His words went like this: 'Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. But just between us, *what I really really like is a big red nipple!*'"

"The word that leaped into my head when I overheard that? *Titmouse!* It's actually the name of some bird. Ed was a different kind of a titmouse. Maybe little Eddie never got enough from that skinny mother who came to tell him I wasn't good enough for him. Anyway, it was that private nickname, *Titmouse*, that helped me free myself from Ed, way back then."

Freeman couldn't resist, "If he knew you overheard him saying that, he'd sure be embarrassed."

Janie smiled, "I told him, yes I did. Right here, maybe last time or two. Told him I heard those funny words of his. Popped his eyes wide open. He turned a dark pink. Then he recovered his usual easy-going presence. Said he still takes a bottle of warm milk to bed every night. Good old Ed."

* * *

Freeman went to prepare dinner, but stopped suddenly in the adjacent room on his way to the kitchen. His eyes had latched onto the sight of the two together, the wallpaper and the tablecloth.

He stood transfixed, his head flooded by the recollection of when, *before the stroke hit her*, he and Janie were in the restaurant. She

was talking about why she had bought both the wallpaper and the tablecloth a few weeks earlier. They were almost the same color, and they had a similar pattern, they reminded her of the wallpaper and tablecloth in Matisse's *The Red Room*, one of the pictures hanging in their bedroom for years.

All the details came back to Freeman now. Janie was explaining how she intended to take a picture of their own room that would show the new wallpaper and the new tablecloth together. She wanted to use it with a small copy of *The Red Room* for the art-class children in the coming school year.

Her words and his own came back. He had said, "Matisse made the color and the pattern almost the same. So? I never understood what that means, if anything."

Janie had come right back with, "My brainy dim-bulb husband. Forget about the pictures's meaning, Fred. This isn't science. Skip whatever the picture is about, experts argue about that. Apart from all that, it's just this: *I really like the picture*, I like to look at it. Like I liked your looks when I first saw you. And still do."

* * *

Back in the present, Freeman remained indifferent to the picture of *The Red Room*. However, he had recaptured what somehow meant a lot to him, *some lost moments of his life with Janie*. He relished the memory as he went to the kitchen to prepare a finger-food dinner, one that looked like breakfast and didn't tax his skills or hers.

On a tray, he brought Janie some cut-pieces of fresh sourdough-french-toast, and some slices of heated pre-cooked pork sausages. Along with that were some orange-flavored seedless prunes for both dessert and the roughage she needed. He had the same no-knife-and-fork dinner, but without the prunes. By the time they finished, he could

see that Janie was getting weary again. As he started to leave, he said, "Ring the bell when you want pills, your teeth brushed and all that, okay?"

She looked at him with her uncovered eye as she said, "How about sticking around for a while, Fred? Staying with me, like you used to when I was tired? You know, before all this stuff hit the fan."

He started to respond, "Sure. I can tell you more about the Jabberwock, or . . ."

She interrupted, "Now that my mind is clearing, I realize . . . Fred, I know now, I really do, you do everything for me these days. Feeding me, helping me in the bathroom, just everything. So it's not that I'm complaining. Yet sometimes I can't help feeling that what you do for me . . . Well, it's all duty now . . . it's duty ." Then she blurted it out, "Are you fed up? Fed up with all this stroke stuff?"

"No, no! How could I be?" He voiced his denial loudly, "You're everything, everything in the world to me."

Janie persisted, "But you don't stay with me. Like you used to whenever I was tired and trying to get a nap. Why not now?"

His voice dropped, "I don't know . . . somehow it's hard for me. I get so jumpy, when I'm doing nothing, just sitting."

She kept on, but with a different idea. "I know we've talked and talked about it, Fred, about all our high hopes, long ago. Maybe now it chews on you, chews you up. You know, that I was never able to have babies. Now, maybe I never will."

"Janie," he responded, "that's been hard for both of us. But you're everything to me. You always have been, . . ." He meant to go on and say . . . *you always will be everything* . . . but, somehow, he couldn't bring himself to speak of the uncertain future.

Janie's energy was fading away. She turned away from him. After silent moments, she started talking again. "Fred, there's something else." Her voice broke as she went on, "Fred, is it . . . *Fred, am I as good as gone? Is that it? Fred?*" She turned her watery-eyes to look at her husband with the uncovered one.

Since Janie's stroke, Freeman had been trying, trying endlessly to banish that thought. Now, when he heard his hidden fear voiced out loud, when that unspeakable idea came from Janie herself, it shivered him. Despite that or because of it, he reacted like an old-fashioned wooden message-recording machine. He played back an answer, an answer that he always gave to himself. "You know the doctor says your recovery is on target. You really are coming along. You shouldn't let yourself listen to negative thoughts like that."

His response went to her as what they were, mere words. Words that were nothing like the hugs with blubbering sobs that couldn't find their way out of him. Freeman couldn't release that wordless outpouring, *it would have spoken loudly that she might die, spoken like thunder and lightning speak of the flood that's coming.*

Weary though she was, Janie knew that she had pushed her husband hard, knew he was doing all he could. She waved to let him go. He made himself stay and sit—sit quietly if not calmly—as she dozed. After a few minutes, she woke enough to see his rangy body fidgeting endlessly in the chair. She waved him off a few more times, until he left.

* * *

Later, after helping his wife prepare for bed, Freeman could only plunge himself back into Carroll's "Jabberwocky." From the book's annotations, he picked some of the meanings provided for the nonsense words of the first verse. That first verse, which he saw as background for the main action that followed, had three kinds of characters in it. The

slithy toves, described as “slimy active lizards.” Next, the *mimsy borogoves*, depicted as “miserable shabby wingless parrots.” And finally, the *mome*, which turned out to be an older person, a “grave critic from home.” Using some of the book’s interpretations for the other words, he wrote down his revision of the verse.

‘Twas twilight, and the slimy active lizards
Did scratch and screw out holes in the wet
hillside.

All miserable were the shabby wingless parrots,
And the earnest critic from the elders’
home shrieked.

For Freeman, his rephrased version was far from nonsense. He saw Lewis Carroll as living in a world where the important people were all men, so it was likely that the lizards and parrots were males. *Unlike Carroll with women*, the lizards were active males, digging for what they wanted. In contrast, the parrots were passive unhappy males who could not fly. *The parrots were like Lewis Carroll*, inactive when he wasn’t lecturing and wasn’t writing about mathematics under his real name of Charles Dodgson, or when he wasn’t taking innocent delight in girls or creating his looking-glass world. As for the critic from home, he must be none other than *the hero’s father*. The father shouts warnings to his son about the risks when he encounters different kinds of women in the world.

Freeman then went on to seek a solution to *the central Jabberwock mystery*, the real nature of the supposed monster, the Jabberwock. At first, the book’s annotations of “excited discussion” for *jabber*, and “offspring” for *wock* seemed of no help. However, when he put the

words together, *excited talk about offspring*, that was when significant meaning showed up.

The Jabberwock must be a *young woman who talks eagerly about the children she can bring forth for the man she marries*. Freeman reasoned that the hero's father warns his son: Make sure you pick the right woman to become your wife. The cautions about the Jabberwock's jaws and claws did not mean that she is an ogre. Instead, for writer Lewis Carroll, the thought of committing himself to a woman, that made such a woman seem a frightening threat with a piercing voice from her jaws, and accusing fingers with long nails. Freeman wrote out his new-found explicit view of the second verse:

Be watchful of the woman you might want as your
wife, my son!

Her words might pierce, her nails might cut!

Beware of the sexy young tart, and shun

The woman who would deny you her
body!

Exhausted by the events of his day, Freeman took a sleeping pill and went to bed next to his wife.

* * *

It was two Sundays later when Ed Grant visited again. He noticed neither the open bedroom door nor the cool apartment as he announced to Freeman, "I made a sale! I pitched the idea of a new breakfast food. A mixed-cereal kid's breakfast to be called: 'Jabberwocky!' The whole gang will be there, from "Slithy Toves" to "Whiffing Burlbling Jabberwocks." Each kind with a different color, shape

and taste. Who'll do the TV ads? Wait 'til you hear me whiffle and burble!"

Grant went on to recite the "Jabberwocky." When he noticed that Freeman was hardly paying attention, that only prompted him to say, "Listen up, Fred. I'm on a roll." His troubled friend tried to listen as Grant recited the verse where the hero slays the Jabberwock.

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

Finally, Grant noticed the open bedroom door, and then realized that the room was now cool. It sank in abruptly: Something must be wrong with Janie! He turned to Freeman, "What, Fred, what? Tell me."

Something was indeed wrong. In his contained way, Freeman told Grant that *Janie had fallen victim to another stroke.* It took her back in the hospital. When she got a little better, she was taken to a place where they could provide the needed care. Freeman said he had to accept that. Summer was over and he was back teaching high school, so he couldn't take care of Janie full time.

Then Freeman found himself talking to Grant about his personal feelings. "Ed, I'm coming apart! When I was busy taking care of Janie, I was okay. When I got into figuring out the 'Jabberwocky,' time rushed by. Otherwise, I was nervous, fidgety. That's why I started with the sleeping pills. But all that was when Janie was here, when it was hard enough to fall asleep. Now, to be in bed without her is the pits. Dreaming or awake, crazy wild things race through my head. Like . . . God help me, like waking up in a sweat, thinking it was me who . . . Thinking I was somehow the reason for the new stroke."

Grant tried to comfort his friend. "Look, Fred, sometimes bad things happen . . . and seem like a mystery needing explanation. But stuff just happens. Then we think up a reason why. It's like rotting fruit falling from a tree, it just happens."

Ed Grant then went on about what he never spoke about. Went on without his usual light approach. "Look, *two decades ago, my mother came here*, came really to meet Janie. Then what? Then my life fell apart, my life with Janie. Was it cause and effect? I never thought it was. I still don't believe it was."

Grant could see that Freeman was hardly listening. But having started to talk about something he couldn't explain, he couldn't stop. "You think that I couldn't stand up to my mother, right? But I knew her, I knew she was shallow and self-centered, God rest her soul. When she first learned that Janie and I were living together, she told me that men don't marry that kind of a woman. When she came to meet Janie, it was more of the same. For all that, what I myself actually thought was something else. What I still think is that I was too young and immature, too nervous about getting married."

Freeman could hardly say that he still thought Grant needed his mother's approval to marry Janie. So all he said was, "That's old dead fruit, Ed. Still rotting, even after decades. For me, it's happening right

now. The stuff keeps dropping, inside my head."

* * *

When Grant left, Freeman had nowhere to go, nowhere but back to what was becoming his sanctuary, "Jabberwocky." He put himself into what he saw as Lewis Carroll's long-ago shoes. And stepped into a different world, a realm where a moneyed man expected that an upper-class wife would not have much interest in sexual activity. Classy ladies just let their husbands do what they had to, do it down there. After all, that was the way to have babies.

However, when such a man was about to acquire such a wife, she was young, and sexually attractive. So, when it seemed like she would agree to marry, her lustful husband-to-be pressed her to accept sexual interaction. Freeman saw that as the reason why, for Lewis Carroll, the hero *sexually conquered* the Jabberwock, the woman that he wanted for his wife. The so-called "sword" in the hero's hand was no weapon for killing a monster. It was none other than *his willie, upright to enable sexual entry*.

The hero seeks what's called "the manxome foe," but Gardner's book shows that *manxome* means "from Manx, Celtic for the Isle of Man." Thus, Freeman reasoned, Carroll was saying that the Jabberwock is *the foe of man-as-an-island*. What she wants is to bring the man she desires into the mainland of married life. She wants to become his wife and to bear his children. Just as clearly, for the young hero, having sex with a classy attractive woman he cares for, that will mark his intent to marry her and have a family.

Freeman got stuck when he came to Carroll's expression, "the Tumtum tree," where the hero pauses before his encounter with the Jabberwock. He couldn't figure out how to make sense of a *Tumtum tree*. Then the poem's earlier expression, "Bandersnatch," popped into his

head. In Freeman's view, *Bandersnatch* referred to a buried idea of a young boy, the idea of the banned sexual access to his mother and certain other women. But *Tumtum* was also a childish expression, so there could be a buried meaning for "the Tumtum tree."

Aha, Freeman said to himself, that expression refers to the young boy's ideas, but this time to *his ideas about himself*. "The Tumtum tree" amounts to *masked boasting by a half-grown male* about having an erection. Thus, when Carroll's hero lingers by *the Tumtum tree*, that means he pauses to erect his peepee into a big tree that reaches way up to his Tummy. All that guesswork let Freeman put together his distinctly novel version of the third verse:

He took his war-pal willie in hand:

Long time he sought the foe of man-as-an-
island-

So rested he with his tool erected,

And stood a while in thought.

Totally absorbed in his own anguish-free looking-glass world, Freeman went on to the fourth verse, where the Jabberwock finally comes on the scene. He asked himself, *why are her eyes aflame?* And answered: Because she's *hot to attract and marry the hero*, then give him children, that's why. Some of Martin Gardner's translations were helpful. For *uffish*, Freeman found the words "gruffish" and "roughish;" for *whiffling*, "evasive;" and for *burble*, "murmur" and "warble." Why does the evasive young-lady, the Jabberwock, let her presence be known by murmuring and warbling? Because she's right on the threshold, the very brink of sexual receptivity. It wasn't that she was hot to have sex, but she wants to captivate and capture the hero. *So if he seems likely to marry her*, she intends to give him sexual entry. The revised verse read with

much more of the significance that Freeman sought:

And, as in gruff rough thought he stood,
The wife he sought, with wedding-heat
aflame,
Came evasively through the wood,
And murmured and warbled as she came.

For Freeman, the next verse, the fifth one, *described sexual consummation*, the young man achieving carnal-knowledge of his wife-to-be. That union, however, was as the naive but imaginative Lewis Carroll must have conceived it. It did not show that Carroll had *real knowledge*, it showed his *boyish nineteenth century beliefs* about his presumed world of virile men.

Boy doesn't meet, fall in love with, and then take-to-bed girl he will want to keep forever. Instead, *boy treats girl as a sex object he wants to possess*. Intending to marry her, he goes immediately and assertively to score at her home base. Then, proud that he found and seduced the woman he would make his wife, the boyish hero dashes back home to tell dear old Dad. Freeman's imaginative new version of the fifth verse read like this:

He took her there and then! Thrust and thrust,
His war-pal willie went snicker-snack!
He left her dead-tired, and with her maidenhead
He galloped triumphantly back.

Freeman saw the next-to-last verse, the last one that needed decoding, as Lewis Carroll's satisfying conclusion to the adventure. The adventuring youth has successfully completed his rite of passage. The voice of the father joyfully welcomes the hero into nineteenth-century upper-class manhood, marriage and potential paternity.

"And hast thou taken thy life's wife?

Come to my arms, my beaming boy!

O fabulous day! Callooh! Callay!"

The father chuckled in his joy.

Freeman had now finished the basic core of his unique translation of "Jabberwocky." He still had to expand it with more detail, and then to find a place that would publish it. But he knew that an end was near, an end to what had become a diversion that saved him from despair about his wife's illness. So, rather than being satisfied with his success, he was ill-at-ease.

* * *

Two Sundays later, when Ed Grant came for a visit to the place where Janie was being cared for, she was asleep, as usual. In the reception room, Fred Freeman was trying to fill his time again with *The Annotated Alice*. When he saw Grant approaching, Freeman switched to his Jabberwock notes, hoping to use them to avoid talking about Janie.

He started, "Ed, let me read . . . Let me show you . . ." But he was overcome by feelings he couldn't handle. He stopped speaking. Then, almost in a whisper, he said, "She hardly wakes up . . . she recog-

nizes me, maybe."

Freeman stopped speaking and lowered his head. When his eyes spotted the notes in his hand, he slammed them to the floor and exclaimed, "All those months, instead of always being with her, what was I doing? Getting off on this Jabberwock junk!"

Ed Grant started to comfort his friend, but Freeman would have none of it. So Grant picked up Freeman's notes and read them between glances at Freeman.

When he finished reading, Grant scanned his friend's haggard face and spoke slowly, "Damned interesting, the ending. And the whole thing, it has the ring of psychological truth . . . it really does." Then, trying to get Freeman's attention back to the Jabberwock story, he went on, "I'm sure you know, Fred . . . Editors might say that what you've produced may be . . . it may be partly a deep look into Carroll's 'Jabberwocky.' And partly, well, partly your jabbering."

More calm now, Freeman responded. "I didn't make it up, Ed. Long ago, a man who liked girls but not women, he made it up."

Grant didn't respond, nor did Freeman say any more. The two of them just sat glumly, waiting for word that Janie was awake. But she didn't wake up; so after a while Grant left, to be followed later by Freeman.

* * *

It was on the next Saturday, six daily visits later, that they stopped Fred Freeman, intercepted him before he got to what had been Janie's room. That was when someone came to tell him what had happened. He heard no more than the beginning, "Mr. Freeman, we tried to reach you. We must tell you, your wife, she had another stroke. She's . . . The stroke, this time it ended her life. Allow us to offer our . . ."

Timeless stunned moments passed by Fred Freeman. Then he

lifted his eyes to the woman who faced him, and summoned a nod in response. He turned to go, then stopped and turned back. A word issued from his mouth, "Where?" When she told him where he could find his wife's body, he nodded again and departed.

Fred Freeman found his way to that place, then to his wife's body, empty now of the life that had lived within. He stood there, punch drunk, his head assaulted and battered by the bare-fisted question: *Hast thou taken thy wife's life, slain thy Jabberwock?*

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Three Generations

Wayne Scheer

Although I was only eight at my father's wake, I admired how my mother remained in control of her emotions. I had caught her crying in the hospital when she thought no one saw her and I heard her cry in the bathroom when we went home the night Dad died. But at the wake, she flitted from guest to guest, assuring them she felt fine, smiling as they reminisced about my dad.

"A good man," they all agreed.

"Tragic he died so young."

"If you and Emily ever need anything."

My mother nodded, and asked if she could get anyone something to eat or drink.

That evening, I tiptoed down the stairs to listen to her talking to her sister. "It's been a shock," Mom said. "But my concern now is for Emily. She and I will be fine."

Aunt Lindsay wanted us to move to Georgia, where Mom was from, and live with her and Uncle Warren. Mom wouldn't hear of it. "My life is here in St. Louis. Our life. We have to get on with it."

She sounded so confident, it made me feel better. But later that night, when I woke up from a bad dream, she said something I would never forget. "Life is filled with surprises, Emily. Just when you think you

know what's coming next, something unexpected happens. It's like watching a scary movie."

I remember crying when she said that. "But I don't want to see a scary movie. I want my daddy."

She let me cry for a while before whispering, "That's enough. We have to move on, honey."

When I looked up, I saw her eyes red, but no tears.

Now, thirty years later, I wonder about my mother's ability to control her emotions.

I think about what she passed on to me and what I might be passing on to my daughter.

* * *

Mom, I learned, was the kind of woman who had a knack for taking control of her life. Before she married, she had taught elementary school and quit when I was born. I suppose that would identify her as a stay-at-home mom, but I hardly remember her at home. She always had a meeting to attend or an emergency to take care of. She'd come home after I was in bed, lie down next to me and talk about her day--an argument she had with someone or a law that had to be changed. I liked that she treated me as a grown-up. She called me her confidant, long before I knew what the word meant, saying my father was far too concerned with the laws of nature to concern himself with the laws of man.

I remember my father often picking me up from school and taking me back to his office. I'd do my homework at his big wooden desk while he talked on the telephone, worked on his computer, or wrote on his blackboard.

It seemed strange how he had a blackboard in his office, like the

one in my classroom, but I wasn't allowed to touch it. He and someone he worked with--Professor Krugor--wrote numbers and letters on it and talked in what sounded like a foreign language. My father described it as "doing physics." He worked at a college, although I never saw him teach a class. His specialty was statistical mechanics and thermodynamics. I had no idea what that meant and still have only a vague notion. I remember when I was about twelve, telling a friend that my father would have won a Nobel Prize had he lived.

My mother seemed unimpressed with Dad's work. Soon after he died, she cleaned out his desk at home and put all his papers and folders into boxes. She called Professor Krugor and he came to our house and picked them up. I never saw the professor again, but I imagined him continuing Dad's work. For years, I kept track of Nobel Prize winners in physics, looking for Krugor's name. I wanted to make sure if he won, my dad got credit, too.

To Mom, it seemed like Dad existed in the distant past. She rarely mentioned him, but patiently answered every one of my questions about him and even put together a scrapbook of old photographs and other things she found of his. Although I thumbed through the book often, I never saw her look at it.

"That's the past," she'd say, with an audible sigh. "You can't move forward if you're looking backwards."

People expected my mother to return to teaching, but she said she needed a new career to match her new life. She found a job with a group of landscape architects. I never knew her to be interested in gardening--Dad always mowed the lawn--so when she told me what landscape architects did, I was surprised.

"Life is full of surprises," she reminded me.

I grew up normally enough, I suppose. I did well in school and Mom urged me to join after-school activities, from chorus to science club. I played soccer and basketball as well as the trumpet. "The more you experience, the more fun life will be." Mom repeated those words so often they became her personal mantra.

After the job with the landscape architects, she sold real estate, became a partner in a woman's clothing store and went back to school to become a chiropractor. Recently she had been taking flying lessons, so I prepared for another metamorphosis.

She had her share of what she referred to as "gentleman callers"-- Mom loved slipping into a vocabulary straight out of a Tennessee Williams play--but I never knew a man to sleep over.

I asked her once why she never remarried.

Her response was classic Mom. "Oh, honey. I did that already."

She seemed happy for me when I told her about Jack, whom I met my sophomore year in college. "Just don't get pregnant," was her motherly advice. "It reduces your options."

Jack and I married soon after we graduated. Our daughter, Kaitlin, was born a year later. I had been working in the lab of a pharmaceutical firm, but quit when the baby was born. Mom was supportive, although I always sensed disappointment. When she asked me if I intended to go back to work or have more children, I laughed. "Oh Mom, I did that already."

The truth is that although I enjoyed raising Kaitlin, part of me resented the time she demanded. I wasn't sure what else I wanted to do, but I feared I was missing out on something.

Jack had a good paying job in the art department of an advertising company. He doted on Kaitlin while I became involved in book

clubs and charity auctions and antiquing with my mother. Mom had become rather expert in Depression artifacts and traveled throughout the country buying and selling. On a long drive to rural Arkansas, she asked if I considered myself happy. I shrugged and said, "I guess you can call me a happily married woman."

"That's not what I asked, honey."

I changed the subject.

Jack and I did have a happy marriage. I mean, we fought now and then, but we enjoyed raising our daughter as a couple. Despite my trips with Mom, I was home most of the time and developed into a pretty good cook and homework tutor. Jack and I always went to PTA meetings and other school functions together. Without fail, he'd leave work early if Kaitlin had a concert or school play.

Wednesday was our date night. It started when Kaitlin was a baby, and we kept it religiously. Just two weeks past her tenth birthday, we went to a small restaurant we both liked. I loved the pecan-crusted trout, which I ordered with garlic mashed potatoes and French beans. Jack normally tried the special. Even if it included ingredients he didn't think he'd enjoy, like capers, he'd order it.

While we sipped a bottle of pinot grigio that he had ordered because he knew I liked it, he took my hands and in a voice sounding frighteningly like that of an oncologist informing a patient of an inoperable cancer, he said, "I've met someone else."

I thought he was joking, and started to smile, until I saw his eyes tear. Like a character in a bad novel, he was saying, "I didn't mean it to happen, but I fell in love."

I glared at him. I wanted to say, 'You mean you meant to fuck

her, but you didn't mean to like it so much?' I wanted to slap him and throw my wine in his face--that seems so satisfying in the movies. Instead, I thought of my mother telling me how life is like a scary movie and when you think all is calm, someone jumps out from behind a door. So I took a deep breath and returned to my trout, asking only one question.

"Does Charlie Fahr do divorce law?"

He looked at me, wiping away tears with the back of his hand. "Is that all you have to say?"

Of course that wasn't all, I thought. I wanted to ask whom he was sleeping with, was she better than me in bed? How could he throw away the past eleven years on some bimbo? How could he do this to Kaitlin and me? I wanted to scream and cry and kick my feet, but I refused to give him the satisfaction.

Except for the way my hand shook when I sipped my wine, we looked like two ordinary people enjoying dinner.

* * *

Joy, my best friend since high school, offered to help me cut off his balls.

"Shit happens," I said. "No use fighting it."

"You're strong," she said. "Maybe too strong. What you need is a good cry. Then we'll cut off his balls."

* * *

Jack moved in with his new love and we arranged for Kaitlin to live with me during the week and Jack on weekends. Jack agreed to pay my mortgage as long as Kaitlin lived with me. I got one car--the newer one--he got the other, and we split our savings evenly. Our lawyer--Charlie had referred us to a divorce attorney, saying it wasn't wise for a friend to be involved--claimed we acted like his first adult clients.

And except for me occasionally pounding my fists into Jack's pillow on nights I couldn't sleep, I adjusted. I had a daughter to care for.

* * *

Kaitlin missed her father. There were times she cried pathetically and the only way to calm her was to call Jack. He'd rush over and hold her in his arms and read to her. I'd watch them and wonder why I couldn't hold her like that and cry with her.

Mom, Kaitlin and I became a threesome. On weekends, we'd go on antiquing trips and create wonderful fantasies of what life had in store for Kaitlin. Mom always reminded her to live life as an adventure, expecting the unexpected.

Kaitlin grew stronger as we grew closer. By middle school, she began skipping weekends with her father.

Jack and I had an interesting exchange around that time. He said what he loved about Cheryl, his new wife, was that she showed emotion. "She isn't afraid to cry."

"You mean like a child," I said. "Like the way Kaitlin used to. You're a caretaker, Jack. That's what I once loved about you. But I've moved on and Kaitlin is growing up."

He stared at me and shook his head. "You don't understand, do you? You're just like your mother. And Kaitlin's just like you."

I felt like I had been slapped in the face, like there was something wrong with me. What was I doing to Kaitlin? Then I remembered he was the lying bastard who had cheated on us.

But it served no purpose to rehash all that, so I thanked him for being there for our daughter and walked him to the door. I wanted to cry and beat my fists on the wall, but Kaitlin was in the next room.

I didn't cry when my mother was diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer. After exploratory surgery showed that the malignancy had spread to her stomach lining and beyond, it seemed like a good time to let the tears flow. But Mom sat stoically, nodding and listening to the doctor. He offered a slim hope with further surgery and chemotherapy--about ten percent for another three years.

I tried to be positive for my mother. "One in ten chance of living longer," I told her. "If you had a one in ten chance of winning the lottery, I bet you'd feel pretty confident."

"This isn't the lottery, dear. It's my life. And I don't want to end it bald and nauseous."

She reacted to the doctor's news with her customary acceptance, followed by an eerie excitement. A week later, she called to say she had booked herself on a twenty-four day European cruise that would leave in three weeks. I didn't even know she had a passport.

She had always lived frugally, using Dad's life insurance money only for special needs, like when the roof needed replacement and my college tuition became due. Now, she seemed almost relieved. "For the first time in my life, money is no longer a concern."

"But, Mom," I tried pleading with her. "Your health. You need to talk with more doctors about chemo or other treatment."

"I don't have time for that," she said. "My life's taken a new turn."

Kaitlin was a senior in high school at the time. I sat her down and explained what we'd been told. I expected tears. Instead, she nodded, tightened her lips and asked how much time Grammy had left. I told her the doctor said without chemo, less than a year.

"Can I visit her right now?"

"Call first," I said.

She did, and when she came home she said, "Grammy's going to be all right."

I thought she was in denial. I tried explaining the situation as clearly as I could.

"I understand," she said. "Grammy will likely die within a year. But she's all right. She's looking forward to her cruise. She said her only regret is that she won't have time to learn to fly."

I called Jack later that night and asked if he thought Kaitlin's reaction was normal. "She's so calm, it's scary."

"I know," he said. "I've lived with it. It is scary."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to stamp my feet or scratch out his eyes.

"If this were a movie," he said, as if he had prepared this line for a long time, "and you and your mother were men, John Wayne or Clint Eastwood would have played you as heroes."

I never liked the John Wayne character. He always struck me as sad. So self-contained. So alone.

Of course, I said none of this to Jack.

* * *

Kaitlin and I didn't have time to grieve at my mother's wake. We were too busy making sure everyone had plenty to eat and drink. The guests recalled all she had done in her life, her adventures. They spoke of her as if she were an abstraction. Her friends admired her, but didn't know her very well.

That night, Kaitlin and I went through Mom's things--her papers and old photographs. In her closet, I found the scrapbook she had made of my

father's memories. I had completely forgotten about it. I was surprised how worn it was and that it smelled of my mother's perfume.

Tears filled my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. For the first time since I was a child, I cried. When I glanced at Kaitlin's face, I saw she was crying, too.

She never looked more beautiful.

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The Husband

Rebecca Bohn

I took a nap, and when I woke up, the dog that had been sleeping on my chest had become a husband.

I said, "Get off, you're heavy."

And while he sheepishly slunk to the floor, I asked him what he thought he was doing, being a husband when all I wanted was a dog. He kissed my foot and said that I needed a husband.

This was something that many had tried to tell me before, and I was not up for hearing about it. Not on a Saturday afternoon, when I had to fully wake up from my nap, make some coffee, and then putz around for a few hours before meeting Sammie for drinks down at Calico's, so we could watch all the cowboys come in, wearing their finest, most colorful shirts and tightest jeans. Which last part seemed like something to which a husband might take offense.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not a wife, so you'd better change back now."

"Could you be a wife for a little bit? Try it out?" His eyes were still brown and far too reminiscent of a cocker spaniel's.

I sighed. "Could I try it out tomorrow?"

"All day tomorrow?" he asked, wiggling.

"Just until after church."

He thought about this, and I could tell he wanted to say yes. Instead, he sat back on his haunches and said, "Until Monday morning. Sunday morning to Monday morning."

I considered. It was possible I'd have a hangover, and there was church, but afterwards was nothing except another nap and dinner and then Sunday night t.v. I didn't see why I couldn't have a husband around for that, so I agreed.

He raced to the other side of the room and back and was an ecstatic cocker spaniel again, and I patted his head and got up to make some coffee and didn't give any more thought to having a husband.

* * *

I came home at half-past two, holding my boots under my arms while I attempted to unlock the door. I cursed when the key missed; nobody around here ever got their house broken into, so why did I always lock my door?

It proved to be a larger undertaking than I could handle. I went around back and jimmed opened the kitchen window, which involved

less finesse and besides, there was already a piece of scrap wood under one edge. Boots flung inside, I bellied over the windowsill and knocked over the two-step ladder.

No matter how drunk I get, I will not go to sleep with my make-up on. In the bathroom, I turned the water on and scrubbed most of it off with a facecloth and some Pond's, the same stuff my mother had used and that we used in high school to get off all the thick stage make-up after we'd finished putting on a terrible but terribly earnest production of *The Crucible*. When I was done scrubbing, the facecloth looked suspiciously similar to the ones at the end of those play nights.

My jeans had to be jimmed off, and there was no scrap wood to help. I fell on the bed and viciously kicked free.

Lying there, huffing for breath, I decided I didn't care so much about my top, and I closed my eyes. The dog jumped up on the bed, and we fell asleep.

* * *

The roar of heathen, twenty-year-old engine woke me at nine-thirty. Good as any alarm. Jackson next door works Sundays at his cigarette shop, and he swears the on-the-way-to and after-church crowd buys more than any other group of people. I'm not quite sure what he does while everybody is actually *in* church, but the Presbyterians get a pretty late start on Sundays, so maybe they're the in-between-the-rest-

of-us crowd. I rubbed my face over my pillow, but stopped mid-groan when I heard the thump of other feet on the floor.

"Can I get you something?"

On occasion, I should probably admit, I like to have a beer. On Saturday nights, it's more like six or eight. And sometimes, I don't eat as well as I should. Maybe that all contributes to seeing things, which I do from time to time. It's a family trait. My grandmother used to see things. We don't say hallucinate. We see *things*.

Right now, I was seeing a husband.

Also, it could be an overactive imagination. Or possibly the pe-yote.

"Um..."

"We've got orange juice."

"Orange...?"

"Juice. Okay, I'll be right back." He darted away, but was back a second later. "You're not gonna leave, right?"

"Um..."

He was gone again. The husband.

I sat up fast, a mistake, since whatever had been left to ferment in my stomach sloshed halfway up my esophagus, not to mention the sudden headache. Putting my bare feet on the carpet, I listened. If I

heard nothing, it could all be put down to seeing things. Hell, maybe it was just a dream that hadn't properly closed the door on itself yet. I gritted my teeth and willed my brain to activate, to stop dreaming or –

The refrigerator door slammed shut, and someone was coming back. In a hurry. Probably with juice.

I might've brought someone home with me from Calico's. It's not my policy to do that; they tend to want to stay, but since I can't even keep the cactus in the yard from dying, and the dog is only still around because –

"Here you are. Orange juice."

There was orange juice in my coffee mug, being handed to me by someone earnest enough to get a supporting role in *The Crucible*.

I wondered what I should say. "*I usually have coffee first thing in the morning; the oj's just for the vodka.*" "*Were you serious about all that, yesterday?*" Or maybe, "*Do you need to go out?*"

He shifted from foot to foot. "I don't know how to make the coffee. Are you – are you upset? With me?"

"With you? No," I said, and took a gulp of juice to reassure him. "No, not at all."

"Oh, good." He smiled, hands in his pockets. His clothes were all brown, from his boots and corduroys to his shirt and vest.

"Well."

"So, don't we have to go somewhere?"

"Go somewhere?"

"On this day, every week, you go somewhere. In your good pants and shoes."

"Church."

"Church. Church." He seemed to be trying out the word. "Okay. Let's go to church."

"It's not... I don't think..."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Well, I'm not positive, but I kinda think you might be an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, or something like that."

That sort of statement might make most higher-functioning individuals upset in some way, but he just nodded.

"Oh. Well, all we can do is meet him and see what he says."

"I... That's not the way it works..." But he was already taking the mug and dragging me by the hand from the bed toward the bathroom.

The light hurt my eyes, and I stood there rubbing them while he got the water going. When I peered out between my fingers, he had the curtain open, smiling.

"Um, maybe you should wait outside the door."

"But I don't usually."

"Yeah, but I've got to pee and then, you know..."

"You've watched me while I pee."

"Yeah, but you were... not the way you are now and... Okay, just go wait outside. Don't you want some breakfast or something? Aren't you hungry?"

"Hungry?" He distinctly perked up at this, and as soon as he trotted off down the hall, I shut the door. No lock, but whatever. I really needed to pee. And shower. And I probably had fifteen minutes or so before we needed to leave.

The water was actually hot enough when I got in. Nice and steamy. Point for the husband.

He wasn't there when I pulled on my black poly-blend pants and flat black shoes, so I dropped the towel and put my bra on with one foot braced against the door. I was still buttoning my red and white print blouse when I found him in the kitchen.

No doubt about it: he was a husband. No other creature on earth but a teenage boy could make such a mess. And in the middle of what appeared to be a pantry explosion was my former dog. He looked up, hand in the box of Fruity Pebbles.

"These are great! And so are these! And these!"

"Fantastic. Glad you like everything. But now I've got to go to church--"

"I can't wait to go to church," he said earnestly. He was killing me. It's hard not to give things to somebody who looks like that. So hopeful. And pudgy, given that it was that same expression that I couldn't say no to when I was eating salisbury steak for dinner, or having a bowl of ice cream.

So five minutes later, we were in my Altima, and he was trying very hard not to hang his entire head out the window, I could tell. Instead, he put his nose close to the window, sometimes turning back around to smile at me. He thought the seat belt was restricting, but he stopped squirming when I explained that it's important in case we get into an accident, so that his face won't get planted in the windshield.

"How come you never made me wear it before?"

I didn't have an answer to that, so I shrugged, and he went back to secretly sniffing out the window and pretending that he wasn't really tasting the wind.

"Now look," I said as we pulled into the parking lot, bumping over the ruts. "You aren't to talk to anyone, got it?"

"But I like people."

"Yes, but I really don't, and besides, I don't want to have to explain who you are."

He nodded. "I can see that. You could tell them I'm your cousin from out of town."

"I could, but what if they ask where you're from?"

This stumped him, so he agreed to not say anything to anyone, and it wasn't until he's broken that agreement five minutes later and was talking to Mrs. Kipfer and actually shaking her hand that I realized his fingers were lightly stained pink and yellow and green. Fruity Pebbles, maybe some chocolate there on a thumb. When he leaned back over to me, just as Pastor Mike started talking up front, I whispered and pointed it out. He licked it off and thanked me.

I think Mrs. Kipfer was about to tell me what a nice young man I have, but she saw the enthusiasm with which he was licking his hands clean and put her purse on the other side of her wide hips. As if hand-lickers were also notorious purse-snatchers. I tried hard to be appalled by his behavior, but I didn't care for Mrs. Kipfer much at all, so I just picked up my song book and stood up to sing along with everybody else.

We got through church without much trouble, even though everybody noticed us, and he forgot to be human and avoid other people's gazes when it was clear they were trying to act as if they weren't really looking at him. The trouble is, all that smiling and yes, even a wave once

to a kid who openly stared over the back of his pew, made everyone think we're approachable.

If I ever have a real husband, I thought, he's going to be just as miserable as I am when in the presence of other folks. No one will ever want to approach us.

I tried to hurry us out the side door, but Belinda, Pastor Mike's wife, beat back the crowd to get to us first.

"Joanie! You brought someone to church." She said this to me, but her huge blue eyes were trained on the person next to me, who was already beaming with excitement. "And who is this?"

"Cousin," I said.

"Husband!" he said.

Faces swiveled, and before the muttering began, I said, "Haha. Old joke. Between us cousins."

"Oh." Belinda didn't look completely convinced, and I knew that an hour from now, the talk in the rec room would be all, "Did you see that slut Joanie's got a husband? Probably never divorced him, and she's been sleeping with anything with a belt buckle and a mustache all this time. What a shame. I wonder if he knows."

To minimize further damage to my already-battered reputation, I pulled him by the hand.

Belinda grabbed his other hand in her red-tipped claws. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

No! Don't say it!

Before I could think of a suitable, normal name, he said:

"Bailey."

"Bailey. That's nice. First or last?"

"Um, both?"

I groaned and forced a smile. "He's in a band. You know how rockers are with names. Cher. Madonna."

"Bailey," said Belinda, and there was a chorus of "Baileys" behind her.

Yanking hard on his hand, I led us through the door. "Yeah, I keep telling him that it's kinda soft for a rock star, but you know these kids. Come, Bailey." And dragging my idiotically smiling, waving husband away, I headed for the car.

* * *

Despite thinking that it was probably a good idea if we just went home and waited this thing out until tomorrow morning, I'm a creature of habit, and my habit is to stop by Tobacco Depot after church and buy a Pepsi from Jackson. I pulled up right outside the window, telling Bailey to stay in the car, I'll be right back. *Stay*. He whined about coming in, but I

told him I'd only be a minute, and I rolled down the window a few inches for him.

"Hey, Joanie." Jackson was sitting on a stool behind the counter, the paper open and folded to a Sudoku he was working on. Sunday's is the hardest one of the week, and it's the only one he does.

"Hey, Jackson." I grabbed a Pepsi from the small cooler at the back and came up front to lean on the counter. "How's business today?"

He made a face, black mustache pulling down. "Not bad, not bad. Who ya got in your car?"

I took a swig of Pepsi, and we both looked out at Bailey, smiling through the windshield. "My cousin. He's in a band."

"Oh yeah? I was in a band once."

"Were you? What kind of band?"

"Oh, you know. The kind that bangs on shit in somebody's mom's garage for an hour and then smokes some weed and goes to a party at somebody else's house." He nodded. "We were gonna be big." He filled in another number on the grid.

Bailey put his chin on the dash and looked sad.

"What'd you play?"

"Drums." The pen tapped softly on the counter. "Still got 'em, if

you want to hear.”

“I’m more into guitar.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “All the chicks are.”

People started coming in, and I had to move over a bit from time to time as Jackson put the cartons or packs on the counter, knowing what they wanted before they said, “Good morning, Jackson,” or “Hey, Jackson, what’s going on?” The cash register dinged, the buzzer announced with complete boredom whenever someone went in or out, and “Free Ride” played quietly on a radio on a shelf overhead. When it settled down again, I leaned on the counter and peered at his grid. Four more numbers filled in in-between customers.

“How do you do that?”

“You ask me every Sunday, Joanie. Why don’t you do it yourself?” He turned the paper towards me, but I pushed it back. I eyed Bailey, who’d given up trying to get my attention and was now watching the people pull up, get out, come in, and walk out again, their fingers already pulling a stick from a pack.

“You know,” he said, staring down at the grid, “drumming is a good way to get some aggression out.”

I looked at him, or rather, at the top of his head, black hair pulled back into a ponytail. “Do I seem like I need to get some aggression out?”

"Everybody does, sometimes." He wrote in a 5. "You could come over sometime. You don't need to know how to drum or anything."

"Just bang on shit?" I winked and took another swallow of Pepsi. "Maybe we could be in a band."

"Yeah... You'll have to sing, though. I can't sing for shit," he said quietly.

I wondered at that. He's got a real nice, low voice, the kind of voice that probably sounds *really* nice in a girl's ear in the dark, in the middle of the night.

The yellow cap on the bottle spun on and off, on and off, until I accidentally spun it right off on to the floor.

"Why doesn't he come in? Your cousin."

I bent down to retrieve the cap, hoping that my underwear didn't show over the waistband of my pants. "Oh, he's, uh, morally opposed to tobacco."

"One of them anti-tobacco extremists, huh? Wants to ban smoking in public places, that kind of thing?"

"Oh, yeah. You don't want to get him on the subject of smoking. 'Cancer sticks,' all that." I tucked hair behind my ear and noticed how he'd trimmed his mustache above his lip so that it followed the pale pink line almost perfectly. I didn't even realize I was staring until my eyes

floated idly up and met his, dark brown and with a kind of intensity that made me definitely think there's a time when a pair of drumsticks could come in handy.

I lost the cap to my Pepsi again.

"Joanie, you come by--"

A car door slammed, punctuating the tension, and we both started to speak, unnaturally fast.

"I've got a lot to do today, and--"

-- every Sunday, and I been meaning to tell you something--"

"It's just that, you know, my cousin--"

"I think you're real pretty, Joanie."

I didn't need a car door to punctuate this conversation anymore; we stopped – stopped talking, stopped breathing. Full stop. I stared at the top of his head again; what I could see of his face--the bridge of his nose, the tops of his ears--was red. He was drilling a hole through the newspaper page with his pen, white-knuckled fingers slowly twisting and driving the point through the paper.

Outside, I heard a familiar voice. Frowning, I turned.

Bailey. Standing on the sidewalk. Talking to complete strangers.

Hugging them.

I left the Pepsi on the counter and raced outside.

"What do you think you're doing?" said an understandably irate man, shoving Bailey away.

"Bailey! Get back in the car," I said, pushing him to the still-open door. "I'm very sorry," I said over my shoulder. "My cousin is a little..."

"I don't care what he is; he can't go around just grabbing people like that." His wife asked him if he had his wallet, and he patted himself down. "I could press charges, you know."

"Hey, Hector." Jackson stood in the doorway to his shop. "Why don't you come in and have a pack on me, all right?"

"Did you see what happened?" asked Hector, still patting himself down even though his wallet was in one hand. I bit my tongue trying not to say anything about someone touching themselves in public.

"Aw, I saw you getting a hug, that's all. It's nice to see some love in this world. Hey, hey, in fact," said Jackson, reaching out both arms, "why don't you come here and I'll hug you?"

The two men made a pantomime of hugging-and-not-wanting-to-be-hugged, and Hector's wife laughed, and I got behind the wheel of the Altima and, despite thinking that quietly slipping out of the parking lot would be a good idea, I hit the gas and squealed out.

After a solid five minutes of silence, Bailey said, "He wouldn't

shake my hand. Like in church.”

I glared through the windshield.

“I was just being friendly.”

I yanked the car onto the shoulder and slammed on the brakes.

“You,” I said, turning to face him, “don’t understand. You can’t just go around being... being friendly to people.”

“But I--”

“And didn’t I tell you to stay in the car?”

“But you were gone a long time!”

“Ten minutes, if that.”

“It felt like a long time,” he whispered, and I swear I thought he was going to cry. “I was lonely.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.” I put my head on the steering wheel and took a deep breath.

“I thought husbands were supposed to stay with their wives.”

“You’re not my husband!”

“I am today.” He crossed his arms and pushed back, hard, against the seat. “You’re not being a good wife.”

“I’m not--”

“You won’t let me talk to anyone, you won’t let me go where I

want to go, and you..." He stared at me accusingly. "You're not friendly at all."

"Oh, I'm friendly. In the right circumstances." I put the car back into gear. "As for the rest, well, sometimes, that's what it's like, being a husband."

"I don't think it is." He dropped his arms. "Why do you think I'm here?"

"Is this some sort of existential crisis? Because I gotta tell ya, you're a dog, and you're here to bark when someone comes to the door and stuff like that."

"I don't know what zen-stencil means, but this isn't about my dog-self."

"Your dog-self?"

"This is about you. I wouldn't be here like this if you didn't..." He struggled with the words. "I'm here because you need me."

I gripped the steering wheel so hard that I knew there'd be grooves in the fleshy underside of my hand when I let go. I struggled with the words. My entire adult life had been about independence, taking care of myself. I didn't need anyone. I certainly didn't need this, a pseudo-husband in brown corduroy pants and brown shirt who licked cereal bits from his hands in church. And hugged random strangers. And if anyone needed anything, it was Bailey. Attention, food, mostly atten-

tion.

If this was what real husbands were like, I'd just pass on the whole marriage thing, thank you very much.

"Maybe," I said calmly as I pulled into my driveway, "you're here because you need something."

He shrugged. "I don't think so. Hey, can you teach me how to drive?"

"That is not a good idea." The car door slammed behind me, but when I didn't hear a second slam, I turned around. He was sliding into the driver's seat, practically crackling with electric excitement.

"Out!" I yanked open the door, grabbing him by the shirt collar. "Out, out, out!"

He slunk away, pouting. "Jeez, it's not like I got into the garbage or anything."

* * *

There were pork chops in the freezer, for which I was thankful, as a trip to the grocery store with Bailey would've been an experience, to say the least. Between the hugging and the free food samples given out on Sunday afternoon, I imagined we would've been the talk of the town by the time we managed to check out – if we weren't already. Belinda wasn't only the pastor's wife, she was also the surest conduit from some-

thing you wanted to keep quiet to town gossip.

I also had frozen vegetables, two pints of ice cream, and a bottle of wine, so really, there wasn't any need for us to leave the house for the rest of the night.

He sat in front of the microwave, watching the chops go round and round, defrosting, his head moving slightly. When we finally got to frying them, I gave him the spatula with the express instructions not to move them around too much. I like a crispy brown edge on my chops. I put the vegetables in a pot with some water, poured some wine for myself and water for Bailey, and sat at the kitchen table. It was nice to have someone else doing the cooking, even if I had to watch and make sure it was done right. If I were going to have a husband – a real husband – someday, he'd have to be able to cook, or at least be amenable to taking direction.

Ho there. What was I thinking? The last time I'd thought about a wedding, I had a white towel wrapped around my skinny, flat-chested body and another on my head as a faux veil, and I'd taken one look in the mirror and decided that white wasn't my color. Soon after, I'd taken to wearing black from head to toe. Although I traded in my teenage fashion sense for a less strict uniform of tight jeans and colorful shirt when I was twenty, I'd held firmly to the concept of living life without a ring on my finger.

Which did not mean a life without male companionship. In small, frenetic doses. And generally, as I got older, only on Friday and Saturday nights, as my single, working girl self generally got in bed by ten. With a mystery novel and DJ Mark on 89.7, playing underground rock from my college years. I liked my routine, just as much as I liked playing the party girl on the weekends, drinking beers and shooting tequila and shaking off a week's worth of stress to the forgettable twanging of whatever country star was trying to pass for a rocker this year. If all that drinking and dancing led to a brief but fun few hours with a cowboy in a pick-up truck on some dusty, moon-bright road, that was even better.

Of course, having a husband meant sex on tap, essentially. Any night, not just weekends, especially if I'd run out of books to read.

I glanced at Bailey's rear end, slightly plump beneath the brown corduroys. A jolting thought occurred about what all this husband business might properly entail, and I chugged the rest of my wine.

Bailey looked up from giving the pork chops an appreciative sniff.

"Don't you think, as a husband, you should be mowing my lawn or fixing the cracks in the patio?" I said, moving my thoughts to the most mundane aspects of the position. "I mean, after dinner, of course."

Bailey knit luxurious, thick brown brows. "Husbands can cook, wives can mow the lawn." He cocked his head. "Do you hear that?"

I paused. Distant, not as loud as the roar of Jackson's truck, came

a rhythmic beat. I snapped up the window I'd crawled through the previous night and listened.

"What is that?"

"I'm not sure. I think... I think it's Jackson. Playing the drums."

"Drums," said Bailey. He deepened the word to a growl. "Drums. Drums."

I felt it too, an answering beat that began in my stomach and ended in my feet. Drums. Drums.

I looked down. Bailey's hands were over mine on the sill. Snatching them away, I said, "Hey, husband, you're burning dinner."

While he scurried to flip the chops out of the pan and turn off the burners, I listened at the open window. It did sound like he was working on some anger issues. The thumps were hard, deliberate; a smashing meant to be less like music, more like a statement. I felt an uneasy recognition, and I pushed it away.

"Come on," I said. "Put the food in a pan and let's go over."

Bailey dumped everything together into a baking dish, and I got the forks and covered the dish with foil. I grabbed the bottle of wine and some napkins, and we headed over.

The space between our houses is a no-man's land of dust and dirt and scrub grass. The closer Bailey and I got, the louder Jackson's

drumming sounded. I timed my steps to match the beat. Every step grew into a stamp. By the time we got to his garage, it felt like we were storming the place.

“Pork chops!” shouted Bailey, holding up the dish. Jackson faltered for a moment, regained the beat with a nod to us, and worked up to a crescendo of crashing, using every drum around him, even the cymbals, as he sped faster and faster towards some climax I couldn’t even imagine. I stopped breathing, my heart rat-a-tat-tatting in my chest, just a moment behind him, unable to see where it would go, where it would end. His hair, free of its usual ponytail, flung around him. I couldn’t see his face. A stick broke, and he threw it away and stood, hitting a drum with the remaining stick.

In the middle of a stroke, he stopped. The stick was poised, inches from the skin.

He looked up. “Hey.”

“Hey,” we said. Bailey put the dish on a wooden cabinet with no door and a plywood top, ripped off the foil and started to eat.

Jackson came around the kit and walked over. Sweat gleamed lightly on his face as he pulled back his hair and tied it. I held up the wine.

“Thanks, but I got beer.” He took a cold one out of an ancient, rust-flecked fridge, tossed it to Bailey and took another for himself. Realiz-

ing I had no glass, I shrugged, screwed off the top, and took a swig of wine.

Along with assorted odd tools and street signs, there were lawn chairs hanging on the walls of the garage. He took a few down and we ate in a tight circle, the cabinet between us. By the end, as we gnawed on the bones, the tension had gone completely out of him. His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled and joked with a confused Bailey about cigarettes.

The sun went down across the street, turning the run-down modular that belonged to the reclusive Mr. Keyes purple. A couple of kids rode their bikes, tearing by as they sat up off the seats, their shadows long and fast. The wine bottle, finally empty as the sky turned black, got a sparkler, and Bailey jumped off his chair and barked at it. Jackson had polished off a half-dozen beers and just laughed at him, to my relief. I took my shoes off and tucked my feet under me. Jackson went inside and came back with a blanket that he tossed on my lap and a pouch.

"Watch," he said to Bailey. And as he held flimsy paper between his fingers, he sprinkled in tobacco. Bailey sniffed the pouch, and I asked for a sniff, too. He held it under my nose, and I breathed deep the scent that I most associated with Jackson: pure, unfiltered tobacco. It was like standing in the smoke shop, only in the yellow light of the single bulb hanging over us in Jackson's garage, it seemed more intimate. He showed Bailey how to put in a filter, and then he rolled. With quick, sure

movements, he conjured a cigarette into his hand.

"Go on," he said. Bailey hesitated, and Jackson, misreading his uncertainty, said, "Hey, have you ever tried one? A good one?" When Bailey shook his head no, he said, "Then you should try it. Find out what it is you're so dead-set against."

He showed Bailey how to hold it next, then he lit it for him, instructing him as Bailey inhaled, choked, and bravely pressed on. A minute later, Bailey was taking peaceful puffs, a smile spreading over his face.

"This is awful! But also, I like it."

I covered my mouth with my hand and laughed quietly. Jackson laughed too, rolling another for himself. He didn't ask me if I wanted it, sitting down next to me and lighting it. He lifted his chin to blow out the smoke, and I watched the smoke pour upwards. The angle of his nose was like mine, dipping a little too low. He scratched at the tiny silver hoop in his ear, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. I smiled, then glanced away.

"So are you going to try the drums or what, Joanie?"

"What? Me? I don't know anything about playing the drums."

"Neither do I."

"Sure you do. I just watched you. You're... you're great."

"Never took a lesson in my life."

“No?”

“Nope. Just started hitting them.” He stood. “Come on. Try it. Maybe you’ll like it.”

He touched my back as I got up, a little push towards the drums. Barefoot on the cold and gritty cement, I walked over, feeling less sure by the second.

“I don’t think so, Jackson. I mean, I can’t even keep the beat when I’m listening to the radio in the car.”

Firm fingers settled me down on the chair. “Then make your own beat. Do whatever you like.”

There was a box with more sticks, and he handed me two. I gave a drum a light rap. Then another.

“Come on, Joanie. Hit it.” He watched as I gave the top of one drum a nice crack. A couple more smacks. The sticks felt weird in my hand. I wanted to tap them together, so I did before trying out a few fast taps. I quickly lost the rhythm, faltered and stopped.

Jackson got behind me, bending over so he could hold both my hands. “Now hit it.”

We did. A little harder. He squeezed my hands. “More, Joanie.” Beer breath wafted over my face, and it wasn’t half-bad.

He let go as I began to take off, hitting drums at random and

gradually getting into it. It made no sense to me; unlike Jackson's playing, mine sounded like Ode to a Construction Site. Still, he and Bailey were nodding their heads, smoking down the last of their hand-rolled cigarettes. Bailey smoked his too far and dropped it, singeing his fingers. I was totally, totally enjoying myself.

All at once, the light came on over the door across the street. I stopped, and in the well of silence, a door whined open and Mr. Keyes shouted, "Knock that racket off! I'm trying to watch CSI!"

Jackson gave an amiable wave. "Hey, Paul. Thanks for the peppers. They were good. Real hot."

Mr. Keyes started to say something, then shook his arm at us with admirable grumpiness and went back inside. The door slowly whined closed.

"You talk to him?" I said.

"Yeah, sure. He grows some nice poblanos and habaneros on his back porch. Sometimes he's got tomatoes. They're like, this big." He made a circle with his hands. "You should talk to him. Go over and say hi."

"You should," said Bailey, and to Jackson, "She only shakes hands in church. But it's okay to be friendly everywhere."

"It sure is."

"Hey, I'm friendly when the situation calls for it."

Jackson had meandered over to the "rolling station," as I thought of it, and he concentrated on sealing the tobacco pouch with deliberateness. "Like Saturday nights at Calico's?"

I didn't reply. For one, it was none of his business when or where I chose to be "friendly." And second – well, it kind of made me feel weird to think of Jackson knowing my weekend agenda. Like, did he hear my car pull in before Sunday's first light, the same way I heard his truck only hours later as he left for work?

"So what do you think of my playing?" I said, to change the subject and the general atmosphere, which had, in the space of a few seconds, altered dramatically. "Think I've got a career in a rock band?"

He sat down in a lawn chair, facing me, and stared hard. A cigarette burned its last in one hand. At last, he shook his head. "No, I don't think you do."

I hunched over a bit, the drumsticks between my knees. "But you still think I'm pretty?"

He nodded. "Yep."

In the door of the garage, a sparkler in each hand, Bailey lifted his arms to the night and shouted, "Rock and roll!" The "roll" trailed off into a soft howl that a coyote somewhere out in the desert returned with a yip. He cocked his head, turned at last to look at me, and I waved at

him.

“Go on,” I said. “Get.”

Jackson said nothing as Bailey dropped the sparklers and took off at a vigorous trot, disappearing behind Mr. Keyes's trailer, and that was the last I saw of the husband.

* * *

I must be getting old. When I woke up the next morning – late for work – there was a man in my bed, and an exhausted spaniel curled up outside the front door. This was not a state of affairs I'd have tolerated in years past. I put the dog inside, and when I left, Jackson was making them both scrambled eggs.

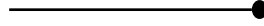
He didn't bring me orange juice; he didn't ask what we were going to do today. My shower was not running at the perfect temperature. And it turns out that Jackson is not especially friendly at eight a.m.

And I don't expect that he'll be sitting next to me at church next Sunday – a godsend, really, when you consider all the looks I'll be getting. First a bizarre cousin claiming to be my husband, next a tobacco-selling heathen with an earring.

But all things considered, it's not a bad place to be in. “Free Ride” came on the radio, and I rolled down the window and sniffed the air. By the time I got to work, I almost, kind of, a little bit, had the beat.

R.S. Bohn writes in a suburb outside of Detroit. She likes haikus, Boston cream donuts, and genre-crossing fic. She hasn't yet figured out how to turn her Pushcart Prize nomination into free beer, but she's working on it. You can find more of her writing at <http://rsbohn.blogspot.com>

Left



Rich Ives

Sorry.

No I'm not.

But it's like this. My father died. And my mother and my sister and I didn't. We grieved. We went through it. More or less as they say you do. Only something was left. Something wasn't right.

* * *

I wanted to clean the carpet. I did not want to clean the toaster oven. I didn't have the right attachment. The carpet was very dirty and the toaster oven was not.

Now the toaster oven is very clean and the carpet, well, the carpet isn't as dirty as I thought it was, but still, it's the underlying emotional meaning of the need I'm talking about.

I didn't have the right attachment.

* * *

My sister says, "It's about your father."

I can't seem to convince her it's not. It's really about my mother. Our mother.

She's a little distracted. She's having another baby. The seventh, I think. I don't know. I lose count because she lives across the country now, and every time I see her it's a different number.

I try to say something to her when I finally do call, but it's the

wrong tone of voice. It's slippery. I can't name what it is in it that makes it slippery, but my sister doesn't like it. She gets defensive for my mother, who isn't really listening.

* * *

The man who mows the lawn is here. His suspenders sparkle in the midday sun. Why is he mowing the lawn in the hottest part of the day? Why is he wearing suspenders and a long-sleeved shirt?

The mower starts on the first pull. The man begins whistling. He has an air of confidence without being puffed up, not at all.

* * *

Of course I'm left handed. But I do some things right handed. Some left-handed people act like right-handed people because of how they were raised. Doomed to be corrected by their own injustice to themselves in the name of accommodation until they forget they're correcting and it just seems correct. But they still know when they meet a lefty, and it reminds them.

* * *

"Let me make this crystal clear to you. Let me just say this slowly so you won't have any question about it in the future. Because I don't want to be misunderstood about this. I don't want anyone to think I mean something else when I don't. I don't want . . ."

"Just say it, Mom. Okay? Just say it."

"You won't pay attention. You never do unless I explain it."

"By the time you say it, I'll be too old to appreciate it."

"That's just like you to be sarcastic."

"Say it, Mom."

"No. You won't take it seriously now."

"Mom, I can't afford it. I just can't afford it."

"If you sold your books, you could afford it. They mean more to you than your own mother."

* * *

"Did you remember Little Lonny's birthday?"

"Mom, I don't do birthdays anymore. I don't give people things because I'm obligated to."

"Kids don't know any better. It makes them happy. Kids like uncles to give them things on their birthday. They don't know any better."

"You do, Mom. You do. This is about you making everyone do what you were taught."

"I had a happy childhood."

"You have a selective memory, Mom. Don't you remember anything bad happening when you were young?"

"I try to forget the bad things."

"How much of your life have you forgotten, Mom?"

Pause.

"Not enough."

* * *

I'm a realist. I do not desire a squeaky clean childhood. I don't even desire a "normal" one. Neither am I thankful for the one I had.

* * *

I don't give up. I don't know how. Some people admire that, but I think it's a flaw. It gets me in trouble. I like getting into trouble.

Finally, I had uncovered the truth. Several truths, actually. The problem was, I didn't know which uncovered truth was the one that could save me, and I didn't exactly understand what I could save myself from because the possibilities all looked equally grim.

* * *

This is not the story of my father's adventures in the war. That's an entirely different story. Don't get it mixed up with this one. And don't let my sister tell you that story. She thinks it's this story.

* * *

These are the things you should believe in: Birthdays. Power tools. Guided tours. Water Pick toothbrushes. Housing development beautification projects. Brussels sprouts. Pendleton shirts. Ceramic birds. Grandchildren. Mobile homes. Jesus Christ Our Only Begotten Son. Equity. Butter Brickle Ice Cream. Holly Hobby. Frozen foods. Scottish art. Memorial Day. Sublimation. Lead-free paint. Senior citizen discounts. Teddy Bears. Sanitation engineering. American-made automobiles. Purposeful disinclination.

* * *

There were two kinds of childhood my family had identified for consumption. I had neither one of them. I wish I believed such uniqueness carried a certain charm. It doesn't. It's just confusing.

* * *

So I said, "I give up," and my mother got quiet. She knew I didn't mean it. Knew I would never give up. She taught me that herself. So when we argued, it got dangerous. Saying "I give up" was merely a way of holding off the enemy while one was girding one's loins.

Silence is a preparation for battle.

The pants were used, but my mother liked the style and couldn't resist a bargain. She was quietly talking to herself by the men's pants rack while I was checking out picture frames. Did she think I wouldn't notice when she bought a pair of men's pants?

So I asked her.

"Oh, Butch wears this kind, and I thought I'd get them for him."

"Butch?"

"He's a friend of Margaret's, and he brought us some salmon. We barbecued it, and it tasted just wonderful."

Pause.

"He needed some pants."

So.

* * *

I remembered that my father had an abnormal desire to consume great quantities of horseradish. Great quantities.

* * *

Yes, Butch is the guy who came to mow the lawn in suspenders and a long-sleeved shirt during the hottest part of the day.

Butch is a very tall man.

I am not a tall man. Not a tall man at all.

So she gave Butch the pants.

* * *

And I saw the lawn-mowing man go in my mother's house and come out of my mother's house. Go in my mother's house and come out

of my mother's house.

* * *

Okay, so his name's Butch. I don't like calling him that. It's like some John Wayne thing. Audrey Hepburn never watched John Wayne mow her lawn.

Butch had to take down the plywood sheep with the fake wool jackets strapped to them with elastic in order to mow the lawn neatly, the way my mother liked. John Wayne with an armful of plywood sheep.

My mother the shepherdess.

It was a terrible thing indeed, a terrible thing indeed, when I saw that little Sheltie the annoying neighbors fawn over urinate on my mother's sheep. I remember that little squeeze-toy when I see Butch carrying an armful of wet wooly plywood sheep.

* * *

I'm no longer a wide man. I used to be a wide man. I'm not anymore. It's because I learned how to fast. I fasted very slowly and got narrow. I've broadened my horizons.

* * *

There's nothing to be sad about. That's what I tell myself. Even if the laughter's got a bite like cranberries squirting, after the gesture has already been committed to action.

Let us give thanks.

* * *

It's the condolences and the lingering of the shame that get to you. You can't help feeling its forgiveness. You've done something wrong, they've decided, but after all, you're his son, and you need forgiveness to right yourself. And then they expect you to flap yourself out

there, like a handkerchief about to be offered to a duty it's never accepted. An exceptionally unpleasant duty.

* * *

The "reception" is outdoors, the weather foolishly bright, the garden teeming. A proliferation of stems, green and crowded, eating shit every day and prospering. Open the gates of my hell. We've made this for them. We're all consumers. But there are too many out-of-work pin-setters, too many silk shirts named Marty or Buster, too many football phones hiding in dens across the city that tie these husbands together. And the wives are so accepting, find the men who won't grow up amusing, if not quite equal. Holes in the acceptance grid that have already been sealed by custom.

* * *

A life with no turns, accelerating faster and faster until the horizon itself becomes too sharp and cuts the life to a single moment without ever even touching it.

* * *

To "receive." It's a ceremony even the birds attend. Reception of the soothing nervous chatter of the chickadees, reception of the hummingbirds darting from flower to flower, and the oblivious swallows carrying the weight of the sky on their backs. We receive what we are given. And just down the garden's cobblestone street, a donkey cart piled high, hundreds of ground bones from the slaughterhouse, a fresh meal for the carefully shaped lawn.

* * *

Over there, next to the cloud-tent of a smile, at the children's table, I find the honesty of nervous laughter, the truth of contradictions. I think ahead to fall, and I begin turning the earth, which has been turning

me so much longer than I knew, and there, right there with the stinkbugs and worms, it is—a heaven right where my potatoes built it. I don't even have to move in, not yet. I can swallow what I take from their heaven for a while, until it swallows me and offers someone else a meal.

* * *

After the guests have gone, a wound of light leaking in from the window, open now. A piece of charcoal and two lemons perched beside the black cat on the porch step.

* * *

Each Thursday for months I dwell upon my father leaving. Each Friday I regulate my strokes, observing the therapy class at the Y, filled with lonely short-timers bobbing like baby ducks. Their odds aren't good, but there aren't any alligators here to drag them under, only the routine steady swallow of time that keeps my lid open, paddling over the same welcoming liquid that holds us up.

* * *

The clouds are moving so fast the last one stretches out thin and begins to fall apart. In order for leaving to have its meaning, you have to figure out where you've been. How wonderful not to die behind the winners, but just disappear in a beauty of falling.

Rich Ives has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. His writing has appeared in Verse, North American Review, Iowa Review, and many more. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from Bitter Oleander. In 2011 he has been nominated twice for Best of the Net.

The Writing Group

Ben Leib

John approached me at the Oscar party, an event held annually for the friends and employees of a little independent movie theater that I'd worked at years before. The fact that I was still attending these events more than seven years after quitting the job is an indication of just how stagnant life had become. I'd go and try to feel young amongst the teenage and college age generation of new employees, who I watched sipping their wine and not knowing how to *really* drink. I yelled at the television, wisecracking every thirty seconds, lambasting the Academy for their lamentable decisions that I could make better, and I hoped to entertain these kids who laughed with me but simultaneously felt a little put off by this slightly older, slightly louder version of one of them. I was a bad omen of things to come if I exemplified their own bright futures. Another year was passing.

I couldn't remember meeting or even seeing John before, though he'd been working at the theater for over three years and I'm sure he'd been to past Oscar parties. "Hey, you're the guy I see writing all the time downtown, right?" He was right. I'd become something of a

public hermit in recent years, having come to prefer the company of a computer screen to that of humanity. But, because I considered it embarrassingly unhealthy to sit at home and write all day long, getting paler and paler, retaining my ability for spoken language only because I chose to sing along with the dated and unhip music that I was into, I spent most of my time in cafes. I'd convinced myself that my brief hellos to baristas, my waves to passing acquaintances, that these fleeting moments of human contact constituted a social life, and I thereby justified guiltlessly perpetuating my own alienation.

"Yeah, it's probably me," I told John. "Why, are you a writer?" I already knew the answer to that question. By the way he approached me, I could tell that John was not only a writer, but that he was a special breed of writer: the kind who never wrote a word. I was one of this number at a certain point, when I was drunk all the time and would spend the moments before I fell asleep dreaming of how important and talented I was, how inevitably bound for fame. Since then I'd transformed into the hermit kind of writer, who is productive, but so self-focused, so ironically reflexive, so out of tune with all things human, that my destiny as a loser had become a passing inevitability that I'd come to accept passively.

John and I spoke for a couple of minutes. He told me how impressed he was with my dedication, told me that he wanted to know my secrets: How could I be so inspired? So disciplined? It was a mistake to

compliment me, for he was mentioning the only things that made me exceptional, and it was in my nature to be prideful despite the fact that I was unpublished and unread, and that I desperately clung to the order of my own life for the constant fear that my world might spiral out of control, disintegrating into homelessness or madness, or just plain loneliness. In his strange and awkward sycophancy, John constructed himself as the student and me as the teacher in a subtle way that I was too prideful to notice at the time.

“Do you want to exchange work?” I asked him. I was sure that he would stammer and clumsily dodge the question, as this had been my experience with everyone who I asked to trade stories with me in the past. People declare their intentions to help each other out, but then become so terrified by some nebulous form of competition—maybe they are less talented, maybe they are less productive—that they balk and allow their fears to inhibit them. I was done with fear. I was sick of it, though it was still pervasive, haunting my every thought and action. And, because I'd become brave enough to share my prose, I was desperately looking for some kind of guidance, and a good reader seemed impossible to come by. I had grown so desperate, in fact, that I'd taken to printing anonymous books of short stories and leaving them on café magazine racks, hoping that interested and equally anonymous parties might see fit to critique my work. It was a moderately successful enterprise, but, in a ratio of approximately ten to one, folks preferred to draw

dicks in the manuscripts than write critiques.

Because I thought I had his number, I was surprised when John said that, yes, he would love to exchange work. This was exciting. I'd fantasized about starting a little writing group: I'd be able to improve my craft, and would have an activity that I could point to and say, *see, I do have a social life.*

* * *

On the afternoon that we were scheduled to meet, John called me at a quarter to two, fifteen minutes before we were supposed to meet. "I'm running late, dude. Sorry, I'll be there soon." John came sauntering onto the sprawling patio, looking disheveled, affecting a hurried, out of breath urgency, at four PM. I was already growing to dislike John, but I was desperate.

"I'm always late," he explained, by way of preemptively justifying future tardiness. "Sorry dude, hope I didn't keep you from anything."

"It's fine," I lied. But I was furious. I considered it a great insult to be kept waiting for two hours. It was a way of saying, *your time is meaningless, you're a loser, and I know that you'll still be here whenever I arrive.*

During our meeting we discussed our writing. John seemed to scoff at the memoir-like emphasis of my own prose, though he hadn't read a thing that I'd written. "I don't know if this'll work," he informed me. "I mean, I kind of thought you were doing something different."

"Look man, take it easy, I read a lot, and I have a lot of opinions. I'm sure that we could help each other. Now, what exactly are you looking for?"

John described for me the novel that he was working on: It began as a short story that he'd written for class three years earlier, and had since spiraled into something longer, something more convoluted. He described to me how each section would be reflective of a different subjectivity, how some sections would jump from subjectivity to subjectivity haphazardly, but failed to describe how such a strategy would improve the narrative thrust of his work. Furthermore, beyond the short story that he had written three years earlier, John didn't know how to expand the work--he wanted to write a novel, but didn't have a novel's worth of story. That, in John's idealized vision of our little writing group, would be where I came in. "I don't really need critique on the writing itself," John informed me. "What I am really hoping for is just someone to brainstorm with, someone to help me find the direction that I can take this in."

"Look, how much have you got written so far?" I asked John.

"Forty pages are edited and ready to read."

"All right, why don't you email me what you've got, and I'll send you forty pages of my work, and then, say, by month's end, we'll get back in touch and set up a time to meet?"

* * *

I will not dwell on the prose itself. It would be presumptuous of me to lambast John's writing when I have experienced so few compliments affirming the quality of my own little stories. So let's say then that we were both unskilled amateurs, possessing a surplus of dreams but wanting in talent, where our proclivities should truly have been invested. I recognized this propensity in myself and did my best to combat it.

I guess I knew that John would be late again, he'd as much as promised me that during our first meeting, so it was unsurprising when I got a text message from him letting me know that he was running behind. After several more text messages, I found that I had been waiting for John for over an hour. In John's defense, I barely liked anybody, so he didn't stand much of a chance to begin with, but keeping me waiting for hours at a time ensured that we would never become friends. Finally, in his last text message, he wrote, "Sorry it's taking so long. I'll be leaving soon. Just waiting for my laundry to dry."

"I've got things to do," I wrote back. "Let's reschedule."

In reality, I believe that he was, like a first year undergraduate who arrives at class the moment it ends to turn in an assignment, frantically reading the forty pages I sent him, writing notes and trying to come up with something to say. I controlled my impulses, and, rather than tell him to fuck himself, I said that I was not angry, but that I had things to do and I couldn't spend my days waiting for him.

* * *

When John and I finally did meet up, we'd chosen his own house as a strategy to neutralize his propensity for lateness. The meeting went okay. John told me that he loved my work, which helped thaw the frostiness that I had come to feel for him. I listened patiently to his critique, which was good. But it was his enthusiasm that made me enjoy the experience, that, in retrospect, I found a bit sad, for I am so desperately wanting of praise, so in need of affirmation, that I will go to great lengths to seek it out, and I could recall with crisp detail every moment that someone had told me "I like this," or "this is readable."

I was kind to John as well. I did my best to fulfill his requests, and avoid a critique of the writing itself. I tried to help brainstorm ways that John could expand the word count of what was, in my opinion, a project that he should brush aside in favor of bigger and better things, and in that way I was not a good editor. But John, I was beginning to see, was a bit unstable, and I not only believed that he didn't want to hear how I truly felt about his work, but he wouldn't have taken the news well.

John, I discovered, didn't get along well with people. He rubbed them the wrong way. He had been fighting with his roommates because they couldn't keep the place clean enough, or didn't do whatever it was he expected them to do, and it led to animosity and resentment. John wanted the world to conform to his strange notions of its inherent workings, he narcissistically projected his own conceptions of rightness

onto a universe that he could not acknowledge was entirely out of his control, that operated according to its own mysterious dictates without the slightest concern for him. For example, he was looking for a new apartment because of his household frictions, and was in the process of sending out rental applications, but every time he was invited to an open house John would make up an excuse as to why he would be unable to attend and he would ask the landlords to set up a special appointment just for him. "That way," he explained, "I don't have to compete with a house full of people." I thought this strategy unwise because John was making himself burdensome before he even had a foot in the door, and, predictably, he was granted very few individual appointments with landlords, who, I imagine, were choosing their future tenants from the pool of those who attended their open houses.

Furthermore, John's strategies for composing fiction struck me as foolhardy, or, at best, misguided. He divulged an elaborate fantasy that, in whatever room he moved into, he would construct a simulation of the bedroom that his protagonist might have. He would buy her DVD collection, hang up the posters that she would have chosen: he would live her life, and therein might find inspiration. I thought these drastic measures for a man who hadn't written a new word in God knows how long. It seemed to me that John was trying to escape himself in some way, as if all he needed was a change of environment, a slight tweak in this or that aspect of his life, and then he would find inspiration. I'd lived through

those crazy excuses and could relate to John's mania, and I had come to find that, at least in my experience, the only way to write is to sit down and write. It's not easy, but I spent years experiencing a milder version of what John was going through, and, because I abhorred it about myself, I had little patience for it in him.

By the time we finished up at John's place, I had come to the conclusion that we would probably never meet again. I'd gotten what I could from him, namely, affirmation, and John was having me read a story that was three years old. I would never be able to impart the secret of productivity, because the truth was that I'd bartered my identity for my own reservoir of inspiration. I'd stopped drinking, stopped using drugs, stopped ripping and running, stopped (not by my own determination in this case) dating--I was celibate, sober, furiously unhappy, but I wrote over a thousand words a day because it was all I had left. How can one person impart such a thing to another? I wrote out of desperation and out of terror, for, without it, I would have nothing.

* * *

Nevertheless, I did meet with John one more time. He called me and suggested we hang out, maybe get dinner, play some pool, just to stay connected, you know, not to let things fall to the wayside. It was a way for John to keep in touch while he spent his time procrastinating. And maybe I am not giving human credit where it's deserved, for John also wanted to be friends. But, unfortunately, and as testament to the

coldness that I'd fallen prey to, I did not want to be John's friend. I wasn't so frosty that I would avoid his calls, and I was still human enough that I would do a favor for almost anybody who asked, because I still wanted to be available to people who felt a need for some support, an extra set of arms to move a couch, a ride to the airport, but as far as being a friend, a buddy, it wasn't going to happen. I didn't like John, and he was counted amongst the vast majority of humanity in that determination.

But, that said, I felt unnecessarily obligated to meet with him. I felt for John, for, though I had no lasting investment in our two-man writing group, I could see that he was lonely and lost, and I know that this world eats its lonely. I told him that I would be available on Friday, which was also a good day for him, and I told him to call me before noon and tell me where and when to meet him. I figured that I was compensating for John's compulsive lateness by allowing him to dictate when and where we met just hours before meeting.

Friday rolled around and John called a little before noon. "Let's meet at three o'clock at the 515." The meeting was set: a late lunch and some pool. Of course, at a quarter to three, John called to tell me he was running late. He mistakenly figured that since I'd given him room to schedule our meeting at any time of the day, I wouldn't mind if he ended up being an hour or two late. I told him to call me when he actually arrived at the 515. Sure enough he called at five o'clock, a predict-

able two hours after he'd promised to meet, to tell me that he'd arrived. "I'll be right there," I told him. I left the café I was sitting at, passed a little sidewalk sale at Logo's used bookstore, where I perused the selection a bit, bought a couple of books, then met John at five thirty. He seemed speechless when I showed up with my little shopping bag and the news that Logo's was having a sale.

So I had by now decided that this would be the last time I would ever meet with John, and, as it turned out, this public interaction with him only served to concretize my resolution. John was unkind and annoying to the wait staff: he was pushy, he asked too many questions, he wanted things for free that would clearly cost money, he made a point of announcing how long it took the bread to get the table. I was racking up justifications for my dislike. He was a horrible dinner partner; he wanted to share meals and then ate ninety percent of the food that came to the table.

Then it was off to Surf City Billiards to shoot some eight ball. And it was here, in the last hours of interaction that I would ever willingly have with John, that I really got to know him, for John, like all people who we allow ourselves to know even a little bit, was in possession of a lamentable and inescapable humanity that, though not likable or respectable, earned him a modicum of empathy that I had begrudged him up to that point.

John couldn't play pool, so I wondered why he'd suggested it as

an activity. I had spent my twenties in bar rooms, standing beneath the smoke-fogged, green hooded lamps that illuminated well-worn pool tables, and it was painful for me to play against him. "So, you found a place yet?" I asked.

"Well, it's complicated," he said. "Without a real income it's hard to know just what to write on the applications."

I interpreted this as an exaggeration. I assumed John meant, not that he was unemployed, but that his wages at the theater were so lamentably small that they barely constituted an income. I asked him whether or not his parents would be supplementing his rent, and suggested that he offer them up as cosigners so that renters could feel secure in the fact that they would be getting their monthly check. John seemed leery about this suggestion. He explained that he felt he was too old to be relying on his parents in this way, and that he was sure he'd find a job soon enough. Either that, or he might be forced to move back in with his folks.

"Shit man, what about the theater?" I asked. "I know that they don't pay much, but plenty of people get by without another job."

"Yeah, I got fired last week," John told me.

"Fired? But you've been working there for three years. What'd you do?" I circled the pool table, sinking ball after ball while John stood to the side holding his cue like it was made of lead.

"It's complicated. You haven't heard?"

"No man, who would tell me a thing like that?"

"I was working one night, and, do you know Esther?"

"Nope."

"Well, she was managing that night. I guess that I already have a hard time with her because she was promoted before me even though she got hired, like, a year after I did. But she's also totally passive aggressive. I don't think she's ever liked me. You know, like she nitpicks, like she's looking for the things I'm doing wrong?"

"Anyways, she was managing while I was working concessions, and she sees when I get into this fight--well, not a fight really--but when I got into this little confrontation with this customer. In my opinion, this lady wasn't being respectful, and I was just standing up for myself," John explained. I understood all about pushy customers, and, so far, I could relate. John continued, "The lady, she asked for a glass of water. So I gave her an empty cup and pointed out the drinking fountain. But she got upset because I didn't fill the cup for her. I tried to explain that the drinking fountain was the same water as the tap water that I'd fill the cup with, but I guess that she wanted ice too. She just wanted someone to be her servant, and she was being a total bitch. And, I know it's stupid, but it just escalated into this argument, and Esther overheard the entire thing."

"Did you ever fill her cup of water?"

"No, that lady was being a bitch. You see, and I guess that this

shouldn't be important in this situation, but it seemed like it was at the time, I'm having some problems these days. I'm seeing a couple of therapists every week, and my psychologist noticed that I have a hard time sticking up for myself. I feel like people take advantage of me a lot, but I always have a problem saying what I need, you know, telling people, *you can't treat me this way.*" I disagreed. From what John had told me about his experiences with housemates, about his experiences with landlords, from what I'd seen of his interaction with our waiter that afternoon, John had no problems telling people when they weren't doing what he wanted them to do. I came to the conclusion that John believed that the people around him were actually far more interested in him than was the case, that people were actively doing the things which annoyed him with the express intention of making his life difficult. "So my therapist suggested that when people are treating me badly, when I think people are walking all over me, I stick up for myself, I tell them I won't allow them speak to me like that. That's all I was doing with this lady. I was just doing what my therapist suggested. It's a part of my treatment."

"Yeah," I told him, "but that's your job. She's a customer, and, even if she is a bitch, which it sounds like she was, you still just have to deal with it and get her the cup of water. I doubt that your therapist told you to argue with customers."

"No, you're right, I should have filled the cup for her. But I don't

think I did anything wrong sticking up for myself. Anyways, Esther, my manager, she overheard everything, and, when it was all over, she asked me to talk to her in the projection booth for a minute. I knew that I was going to get into trouble, but the problem was she just refused to see my side of things too. She told me I couldn't ever talk to customers that way, but she couldn't see the lady was being a bitch. I tried to explain about my therapist, about how it's part of my treatment to stick up for myself, but she wouldn't hear any of it. She just kept saying, 'I don't care, you can't do that at work.' She always had to have the last word, and I just found myself getting so frustrated. I could tell that she wanted to get me riled up. She's never liked me, and she could see how upset I was getting."

"Esther didn't fire you right there, did she?"

"No. What happened was that she kind of got the last word and just walked away and left me standing there feeling so frustrated and angry. And I've got this thing, it's another thing I'm working on with my therapist, but when I get mad I just direct all that rage at myself. And sometimes I do stupid things, you know, I just want to hurt myself. So, after Esther walked away, I just let loose. I was so frustrated that I started screaming and cussing all this bad stuff. I started punching myself in the face, and just cussing because I was so frustrated, and I guess that I was being louder than I realized and Esther heard me. She walked back upstairs and saw me there, kind of freaking out. And that was what it took.

She told the boss about it, and apparently he told her to fire me. So, like four days later, they tell me that I don't have a job there anymore."

I was shocked. I imagined John punching himself in the face, imagined his fury, each blow a misdirected punishment, each blasphemy meant, not for himself, but for Esther, who had cut him uncomfortably down to size. John was an intense guy, but I had underestimated his mental instability. And, nevertheless, I could empathize. I have known that fury, and I have found ways to punish my own body as if it were the body of another. But I could also imagine Esther's fear as she walked in on that scene, as she witnessed John's violent impulses inwardly directed. "Of course they fired you, dude," I told him. "No one likes violence in the work place. They were right to fire you."

He took this summation in stride, ignored it in fact. "I still think I got a case," he said.

"You mean a lawsuit? Why on earth would the theater owe you money for acting crazy at work?"

"Because they didn't even take into consideration that I was in therapy, that I was only doing what my psychiatrist had told me to do."

No, I would never come to like John. We would never be buddies, and our writing group had seen its day (though he would continue to send me messages and updates implying that we were deeply entrenched in some mutual creative enterprise that was inevitably on its way to completion). And while John sinks deeper into his own personal

hell, when he makes the decision to move back in with his folks, when he finds that he has alienated the world, that his dreams are dusty and cob-webbed old edifices, hollow and uninhabited, while his keyboard sees more tears than fingerprints, I will be writing. So, in the end, I must thank John. He is my martyr, and I feel guiltily compelled to express gratitude for the story that he never deemed fit to write himself.

Ben Leib has spent the past twelve years as a waiter, a student (both undergraduate and graduate), and an alcoholic intravenous drug user, and each of these stations in life has brought him an equal amount of torment. Follow his current seafaring adventures at benleib.com.

The Empty Lot

Julie Meier

Timmy watched as two large men moved the sofa from the moving truck. A woman in a track suit pointed them to her front door. Their house looked just like every other house on the block – white picket fence and brick. It was a new neighborhood, Timmy and his family were the one of the first families to move in a year ago. They had been waiting for more houses to be built and families to move in that had kids around Timmy's age. He set down his toy airplane and asked, "Mom, are those the new neighbors?"

His mom turned off the vacuum cleaner and smoothed her dress. Looking out the window, she crossed her arms and raised her thin, pointy nose in the air. "Looks like it."

"Anyone I could play with?" There was a boy about his height playing with a toy airplane in his new front yard.

"John," Timmy's mom spoke to her husband in the office, "we're going over to meet the new neighbors tonight." She waited for his acknowledgment. "Timmy, want to help Mommy make a casserole for our new neighbors?" He knew better than to say no. "Can you tie this for Mommy?" The apron was green with orange flowers and she wore it every time she cooked. "Get out the baking dish and I will get us the ingredients."

Three short hours later Timmy's mom pulled his dad away from his desk. He had complained that he was not yet at a stopping point in his work, but Timmy's mom wanted to hear none of it – her casserole was

getting cold. As they walked across the street, Timmy's mom was trying to smooth his hair one last time. He thought he had done a good job combing it himself back at the house while she was putting on lipstick and his dad was putting on a nice tie. John, who was closer to the doorbell, pushed it with his stubby thumb. She brushed a dirt spec off of her husband's shoulder, just before the door opened.

"Hi." A teenage boy greeted them. The smell of smoke coming off of his black skull t-shirt burned Timmy's nose.

"Hello, we're your neighbors just across the street. We baked you a casserole." She extended the dish.

"Nice." Another teenage boy with blue hair swooped in and grabbed it. "What kind is it?"

"It is gluten free, fat free, all organic--"

"Gross," the two boys said.

"Don't be rude!" The woman in the track suit that Timmy recognized from earlier had made her way from the down the stairs. "That sounds lovely. Boys, go put it in the kitchen. We'll have it for dinner tonight." They both groaned. "My husband is out getting us light bulbs. But this," a much younger boy in the house had walked by concentrating on a portable video game, "is Alex. He'll be starting fifth grade in the fall." The boy was wearing grass-stained shorts and a baseball hat.

"Oh, what a coincidence, so is Timmy." John put his hand on Timmy's shoulder. "Maybe these two can hang out together sometime." Joanne cleared her throat.

"Yes, maybe. Well, we'd better let you get back to unpacking. Enjoy the casserole." The neighbor thanked them once again and the family headed back to their house. "It's bad enough that two sidewalks and a road is all that separates our family from theirs, but now you want Timmy to play with that boy?" She walked a little faster, her heels loudly clicking against the pavement.

"Of course. Why not? He's the first kid Timmy's age who has

moved into the neighborhood. He can't just be with you all day, bossing him around." John had lowered his voice so the neighbors wouldn't hear.

"Bossing him around? He loves helping his mommy." Timmy struggled to keep up with their pace and pretended like he couldn't hear them. "Besides, did you even get a good look at the boy? Dirt under his fingernails. And those older brothers, now they are just troublemakers."

By now they had reached their house and his parents seemed to notice him once again. John told her that he had work to do and left to go finish it in the office. His mom turned to him and crossed her arms. Bending down to Timmy's height, she told him that he was not allowed to play with the new neighbor.

He didn't understand why, but he did not argue with his mom. To Timmy, Alex looked like just another kid from school. They even had toy airplanes, even though he couldn't help but notice that Alex had a military plane while he had a commercial plane. Timmy thought it would be nice to play airplane with Alex. It would be a good change from playing alone.

When Alex showed up at his door the next day, Timmy was not sure what to say. "Come out and play with me," Alex demanded.

"Oh, I don't think I'm allowed to."

"Go on." His dad had come out of his office to grab a snack.

"You should be outside, playing with boys, not stuck in this house all day. Just don't go too far."

Excited, he grabbed his shiny toy plane that was neatly put away in the toy box in his room. Alex led them past his large garage and into his backyard. He pulled his toy plane from behind the tree. Its nose was crumpled and it was missing a wing. The paint was chipping off and the propellers were half broken. Timmy looked down at his plane. It was in such good condition that not even one sticker was peeling yet.

"Mayday, mayday, we have two planes going down!" Alex

threw his plane into the tree, breaking the nose off completely. He told Timmy to throw his into the tree. So Timmy slowly raised his arm, praying that it would stay intact, and gave it a light throw. It glided through the air before gently landing in a patch of mud. "That wasn't a crash. Do it again," he demanded. "Give it all you got! Right at that tree."

It was the first toy airplane he got. It was for his birthday a few years back. As he wound up his arm, he wondered if they would buy him a new one. Alex nodded, impatiently encouraging him to throw it. He had plenty of other airplanes. He released his arm, sending it soaring. It landed in the middle of the tree with a painful crunch. Alex was satisfied.

When Alex told Timmy that he was done playing with him that day, he gathered his broken plane and carefully carried it home, holding it lightly in his palms, hoping it would break no further. It had seen more action in a few hours than it had the entire time Timmy owned it. It went through the mud and through tree branches. It even landed in a couple of bushes. At first he thought maybe he could fix it, but eventually gave up on the idea.

He could not even bear putting it in his toy chest with his other flawless planes. Instead he placed it on the chair next to his tall bookshelf that was stuffed with books from his younger years and ones that were more age appropriate. His walls were lined with dinosaurs, the names of them labeled with decals. He had begged for dinosaurs, but his parents wanted it to be educational, so this was their compromise. His room was so neat and tidy that the broken plane stuck out like a sore thumb. He didn't want to be reminded of the plane's injury every time he went into his room, so he changed his mind and carried it to the garage.

He was trying to find a place to put it near his mother's organized boxes, when suddenly the garage door groaned and opened. Joanne was back from her book club. "Why is the butt of your jeans covered in dirt?" He tried to contort his body to get a good look at it. It had a light dusting of dirt, but he would not describe it as covered. He suddenly be-

came interested in studying the tiles of the kitchen floor. They were as white as those people's teeth on toothpaste commercials.

"I was outside playing plane crash with Alex." He could sense that his mom had her hands on her hips.

"Outside? Plane crash? With Alex?" She harshly pronounced each syllable, her voice becoming higher pitched with each one. "I don't even know where to begin. You know the rules."

"Dad told me I should." He put his hands in his pockets.

"And look what happened. Your clothes are dirty and I'll bet your plane is all beat up, isn't it?" He didn't answer her.

"Joanne." His dad had come from out of the office. "If Timmy wants to play with him, he should be allowed."

"I have to cook dinner." She put on her apron and pulled out a chopping board.

"You do this every time," he said in a lower voice, moving closer, hoping Timmy wouldn't hear. Timmy leaned against the wall and acted like he couldn't hear. "The boy needs friends. He needs to be a boy. He's nine years old. Do you know what normal nine year olds are doing? I don't want him growing up to be a dysfunctional man with some weird attachment to his mother." She pulled out an onion and started chopping it. He spoke a little louder, "And you guys get along, right Timmy?" Timmy nodded.

"Fine. He can play with Alex, but you'll see. It'll be a disaster."

Alex knocked on his door a few days later. "Play catch with me." He handed Timmy an old broken-in glove. He yelled goodbye to his mom who was polishing the furniture upstairs. He knew she wouldn't let company see her because she always polished in sweatpants. She yelled to him, reminding him of the rules. As they went over to Alex's yard, Timmy looked back at his house, noting that his mom was standing at the window upstairs, watching him. She lifted her eyebrows and pointed her finger, which was covered by the yellow rubber gloves she

was wearing, at him.

Timmy couldn't throw the ball very far or aim his mitt quite right to catch the ball. Every time he saw it hurling at his chest, he would move to the left and stick his right arm out, hoping to catch it. Alex tried to correct him; he had been playing t-ball and baseball for years now. He would dive for the ball each time Timmy threw it and it veered to the side or he would slide on his stomach each time the ball fell short. All of the white on Alex's shirt was now covered completely in one shade of brown. Timmy was impressed and complimented Alex on his skills. "You're really good."

"Yeah, I know. It's my favorite sport. My parents come to all of my games. It's the only time they aren't totally obsessed with my older brothers." He grunted as he threw the ball.

"Why?" Timmy missed the ball and jogged to pick it up.

"I don't know. They're badasses." Timmy gasped at his use of an inappropriate word. "They gave me this haircut." He rubbed his hand against his own short Mohawk. "They're always getting yelled at or grounded. My parents even caught them smoking. It was like I was invisible for a whole week."

"That must stink."

"Yeah, but it just means I have more time to do what I want to."

Timmy understood this. Since learning that Timmy was playing with Alex, Joanne had stopped asking him to help her cook dinner or even inviting his dad to watch Jeopardy with her in the evening. This left Timmy with time to ride his bike or read more books, which Timmy was sure were boring activities compared to what he imagined Alex doing with his freedom.

The ball whizzed just past his glove and bounced into the woods and disappeared down a brown mound.

"Dang it. Come help me get it." Alex jogged past him. Timmy froze. He had never been in the woods before. "Come on. Get over

here.”

First Timmy looked up at his house to see if his mom was watching. She may let him play with Alex, but if she ever caught him going in the woods he would be in big trouble. Seeing that she was not in the window and that her car was missing, he did as Alex commanded. As he got closer to the tree line, he remembered all of the educational television he watched about bears that lived in the woods. He slowly stepped into the shaded area, hoping he wouldn't run into any bears. Hearing a twig snap over to his left, he moved a little faster towards Alex, who was sliding down a hill to get the white ball. He too slid down the dirt hill on the left side of his hip, dirtying his pants. But when he stood up, he felt something crawling on his leg.

He looked down to see a small, black spider crawling up his shin. He let out a scream and began hopping up and down, with pleas to get it off. He tried shaking his leg like he was dancing the Hokey Pokey, but the spider would not budge. Alex came over and forcefully brushed it off. “Dude, relax.” He looked at Timmy as if he had three horns. “It's just a spider.” But it was more than that to Timmy. He could only think of what would happen if it had crawled up his shorts or even bit him. He knew he would have died.

Timmy had enough for one day, so he crawled back up the hill and told Alex he heard his parents calling him, even though he had heard no such thing. Shoulders slumped, he walked through the front door and took off his shoes. He dragged his feet into the kitchen to get a glass of water. His dad was already there. He set his “World's Best Boss” mug down on the counter.

“Your shorts are pretty dirty.”

“I went into the woods today.”

“That's my son,” he said, rubbing Timmy's hair. “Getting rough and dirty just like a little boy should.”

“Yeah, we had gone in to get Alex's baseball. We were playing

catch."

"I could not be more proud of you." Timmy wanted to tell him about the spider, but his mom walked through the door with armfuls of groceries. His dad helped her by taking one of the bags. Timmy went to grab a light bag from her, but she ripped it from his grasp.

"You're filthy. Why are your pants so dirty?"

"I was playing with Alex today." She placed the bags on the counter and raised her left eyebrow.

"Well go get those clothes in the wash. Then come help me with dinner. I only have so many hands, you know."

The next day, Alex was pounding on Timmy's door. He barely had it open before Alex shouted, "I found this awesome hill down the road. You have to come check it out with me. Grab your bike. Let's go." The boys pedaled farther and farther down the road, passing by neighbors' houses that looked identical to their own. They rode past the houses that had been built but had no one living in them yet. Finally they arrived at the rows of empty lots and pulled up to the first one. It was the same size as all the other lots, but had a steep hill at the back of it.

"My brothers and I used to ride down hills like this all the time at our old house." Timmy, on the other hand, had never seen a hill so tall.

"Except the ones we went down were a little steeper and had paths down them."

They both buckled their helmets and Timmy was wishing his had grabbed his elbow and knee pads before leaving the house. It was a dirt covered hill with a green patch of grass at the bottom. He started to notice all of the bumps and the rocks. Those were going to be hard to dodge. Yet Alex made it look so easy. He simply scooted off the edge and glided down the hill on his bike, going so fast that Timmy almost mistook the flame stickers on the side as real flames.

"Whoo! Timmy, get down here! Don't be such a scaredy-cat!" His friend saw the anxious look on his face and responded with a forceful,

“Just do it!”

He placed his sweaty palms on the handlebars. He couldn't feel his legs, but he forced them to push the small bike just enough to lurch forward off the edge. Immediately his heart sunk into his stomach. He felt like he was falling straight down, like on a broken elevator. His bike was shaking and his arms were like jell-o, trying to steer him safely down the path. He had no desire to scream out in joy. His throat had tensed and he noticed he hadn't been breathing. He was wishing to be at the bottom, when he saw it – a smooth, brown rock the size of his fist lying directly in the pathway of his bike's spinning tires.

He hit it and his bike immediately flipped. He landed on his back, rocks jabbing into his back, bruising it. He turned on his side, still sliding down the hill. He had been going too fast on the bike and the hill was too steep to stop him. The weight of the bike on his leg forced it to scrape along the dirt harder. Once he got the bike off, they both rolled down the remainder of the hill. He tried to slow himself down by digging his elbow into the dirt, but only slowed when he reach the bottom.

Tears formed in Timmy's eyes as he stumbled to his feet. Alex stood wide eyed and felt obligated to ask if he was alright. He started crying so hard that tears were streaming down his face and strange wailing sobs were coming from his mouth. After he calmed down enough to leave, he did. He left Alex behind to finish his thrilling rides down the hill. He began to resent his new friend as he looked at his leg. It had five long, deep scratches. His elbow was so badly wounded that blood was running down his forearm and off his finger. The bike had taken some damage too. The right handlebar was bent inward, now facing the seat, and the chain was dangling off.

His dad came out to meet him in the garage. Timmy figured he must have been watching him pathetically trudge up the driveway. “Rough day?” he asked his son, trying to cheer him up, only causing more tears. He heavily sighed. “Alright, let's get you inside. Don't worry

about the bike. We can fix it." He looked closer at his son's leg. "And those scratches too."

He made Timmy sit up on the counter while he got the antibacterial spray that isn't supposed to sting and some bandages. He told his son it was normal to get bumps and bruises. "You know when I was your age," he started, dabbing the scratch on Timmy's knee with a cotton ball, "I got this scratch on my elbow that was so bad that it got infected and had puss just oozing from it." Timmy's eyes widened. He wanted none of that. His dad took the antibacterial spray and shook the can. He sprayed on so much that it started to drip down Timmy's leg. "That'll dry. Anyway, I'm glad you're making friends. It gives you a little thicker skin, son."

He didn't want thicker skin. He wanted it to stay the way it was. He liked his life before. His dad slapped a band aid on his knee and Timmy winced in pain. He heard his dad's cell phone ring and his dad had to excuse himself; he said it was a very important call. Timmy went out to the garage and tried to fix his bike. He popped the dirty chain back on and used every bit of strength to get the handlebar straightened, which he gave up on doing after he realized it was not going to move. He took it out for a test spin in the garage. It was wobbly and he realized the tire was bent as well. There was no way he was going to be able to fix this bike so that it rode like it did before the hill.

It was damaged, just like his toy airplane that still sat on the shelf in the garage and his skin. And not to mention the way he will never forget the way that spider crawled up his leg. He got the shivers just thinking about it. Their friendship was not a friendship. Alex would always come over and demand that Timmy play with him. They never did anything Timmy wanted to. Most importantly, friends don't break all of their friends' stuff.

Alex rang the doorbell an hour later, finished with the hill finally.

"Hey, my brothers and I are going to set up a rope swing in the

woods. Come over and help us build it."

"No."

"What? Dude, come on. It's going to be awesome. Hurry up, get your shoes on."

"I said no." Timmy stayed rooted to the floor. "You ruin everything of mine and you don't even apologize for it. I don't want to play with you anymore."

"Whatever. I didn't want you to swing with us anyway. You'd probably just get scared and run home anyway."

Timmy slammed the door in Alex's face, causing his mom to come out from the living room and his dad to come from his office.

"Timmy, why did you slam the door?" his dad asked.

"And why do you have so many bandages on?" his mom added.

"He fell off his bike going down a hill today, Joanne, like a normal boy."

"And look what happened, John. He's hurt. We might have to take him to the hospital." They weren't even trying to keep their voices down this time.

"We don't have to take him to the hospital. You're being ridiculous."

"How do you know? His scratches might be infected with all that dirt, or maybe one was just a little too deep. You're not a doctor."

"I'm not playing with Alex anymore." Timmy interrupted their argument. Both turned to him as if he had popped out of thin air.

"What?" His dad furrowed his brow and sounded disappointed.

"I knew I would be right." His mom crossed her arms and held her head high.

"How could you side with your mom on this, son? You were having such a good time with your new friend." His dad sounded confused more than anything.

"I didn't side with mom, dad. I just didn't want to play with him

anymore. I'm old enough to make my own decisions. I don't need you guys doing it for me."

"Okay, Timmy." She sounded unconvinced that Timmy purposely did not side with her. She took him by the shoulder and guided him to the kitchen. "Now come help Mommy make dinner."

"No." He heard his dad holding back a laugh from the other side of the room.

"What? But you love helping Mommy."

"Like I said, I can make my own decisions. And like I chose not to play with Alex, I chose not to help you make dinner. I would rather go up to my room and play with my toy airplanes." He ran up the stairs, leaving his two parents rooted to the ground.

Julie Meier's fiction has not previously appeared in any Literary Journals or Magazines. She is currently a Junior at University of Maryland Baltimore County. She is an English Major with a Writing Minor focused in Creative Writing. This past fall she has been finishing up her fiction writing classes by taking the Advanced Fiction Course.

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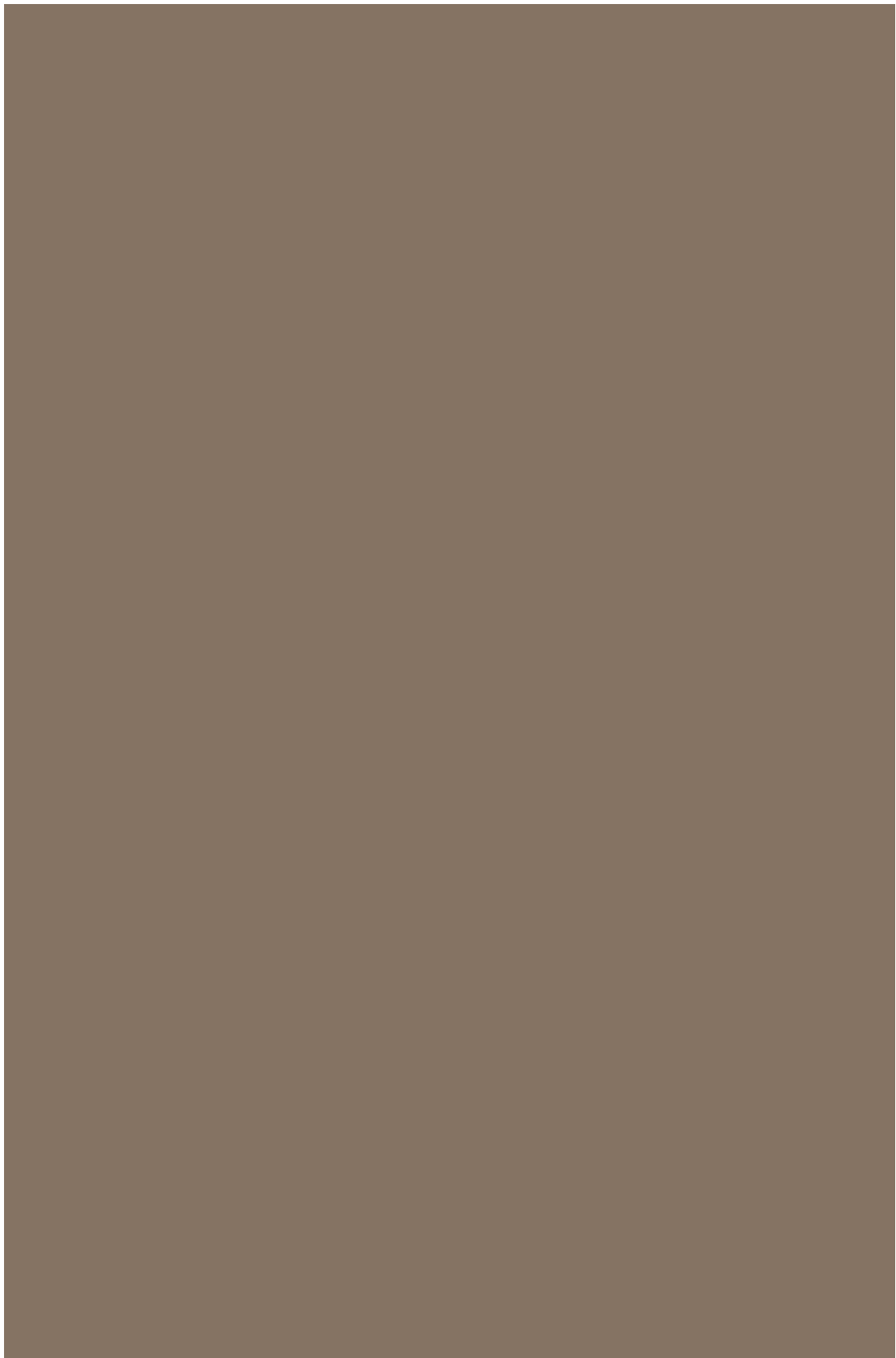
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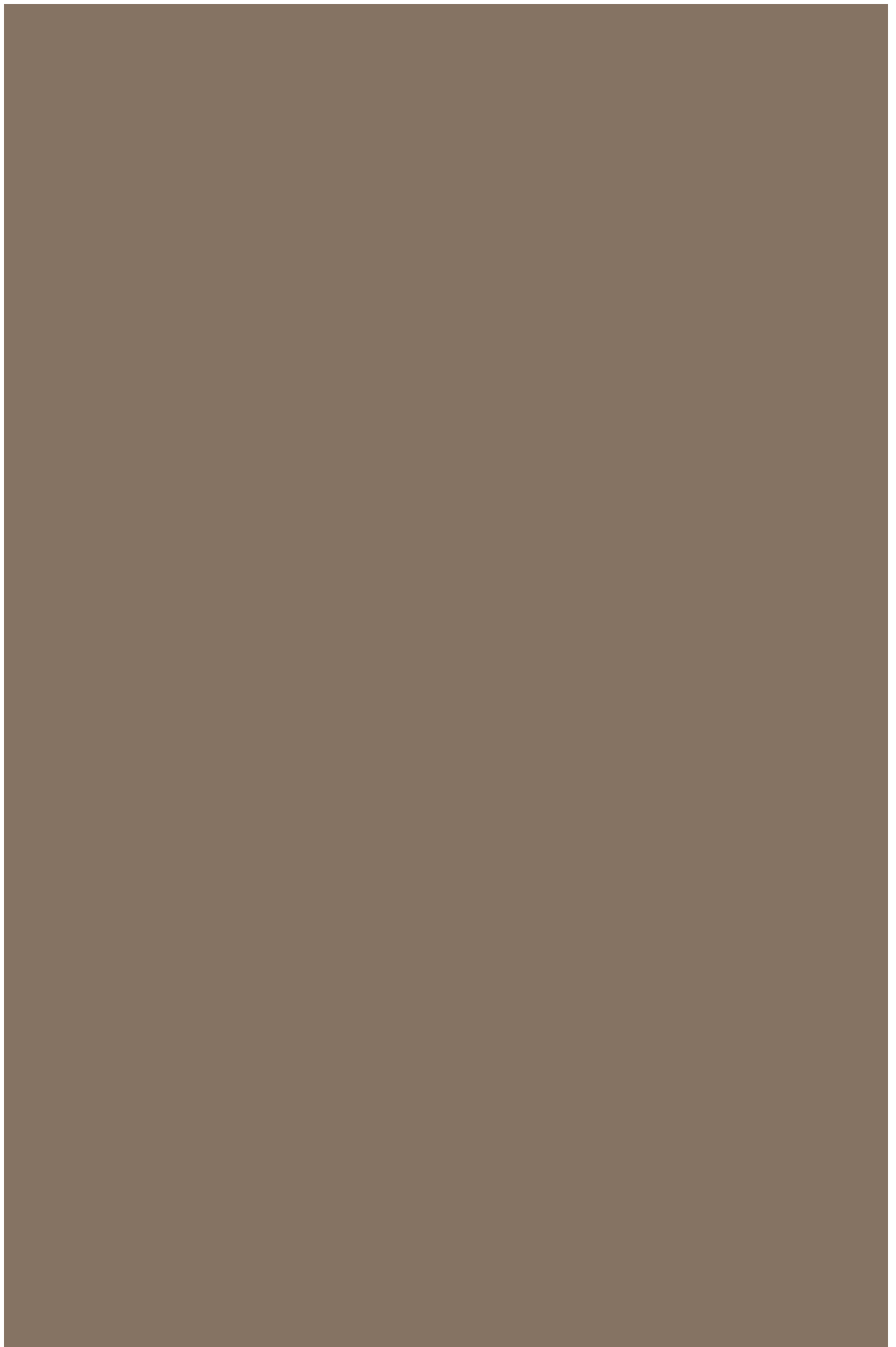
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